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Abstract

The opening contributions to this special edition on "The Truth of Stiegler" make the case that the more Bernard Stiegler develops his analysis of the catastrophic collapse of society, the further he risks departure from the philosophical rigour of his earliest ideas on the technical constitution of "intermittently not-inhuman" ("noetic") life. His diagnoses of the collapse of trust revolve around a critique of misplaced faith (*mécréance*) in computational capitalism's pursuit of certainty, but are arguably themselves undermined by Stiegler's dogmatic certainty in his own arguments. We can make more sense of the apparent inconsistency by extending Stiegler's ideas on exhaustion and the disintegration of the public sphere to show how a surfeit of certainty gives rise to a defensive posture that complicates his insistence of the therapeutic value of truth and openness.

Keywords

Canguilhem, Covid-19, certainty, exhaustion, intermittence, *mécréance*, noodiversity, philosophy, Stiegler, truth

Mécréance and the exhaustion of certainty

June 2020 saw the release of *Bifurcate: There Is No Alternative*, the work, cowritten with two dozen or so of the close collaborators Bernard Stiegler baptized the "Internation Collective," and several of whom—Alombert, Lindberg, Ross and myself—have contributed to this collection, too. He saw *Bifurcate* as laying out the blueprint for rebuilding a civilization in the midst of collapse. "It's the best book I've ever read!" Stiegler grandiosely told a confidante in the heady aftermath of its publication. Within two months, he would be dead, but not before submitting

what was seemingly the final piece of writing completed in his lifetime, a three-part essay for the French online newspaper *Mediapart*, published posthumously in September 2020. "Excess, Promises, Compromises" picks up where *Bifurcate* left off. It is unique not just for book-ending Stiegler's *oeuvre*, written off the back of a lockdown that reminded him of the stint in prison where his life in philosophy began (Stiegler 2020a), but also because it sets out the themes that preoccupied him at the end of his life.

The essay starts with the echo of a phrase habitually attributed to the historian Arnold Toynbee, but in fact added in a footnote by his editor, David Churchill Somervell: "a society does not ever die 'from natural causes,' but always dies from suicide or murder—and nearly always from the former" (Toynbee 1946: 273n). For Stiegler, Toynbee encapsulated the truth of what he had for the last several years called the "Entropocene," a polycrisis caused by the social organisation of technology around ever more exploitative forms of capitalism that are stripping us of vitality, leaving us too burned out to imagine an alternative. Covid-19, he argued, was a symptom of this Entropocene, insofar as both its etiology and management were rooted in "what was presented as knowledge but appears know to have been . . . finally exhausted over the last decade through having been dogmatized in the form of automatisms" (Stiegler 2020b: 8). Response to the pandemic was driven by habit, falling back on misplaced confidence in the failing plan A of short-termist technological solutionism. "[N]o one will *ever* know what would have happened if there had been no lockdown" (Stiegler 2020b: 9[illegible]and yet public health policy seems to have gone hand-in-hand with a broader culture of suppressing doubt and doubling down on doses of more of the same: more injunctions that citizens adapt to the demands placed on them by the environment, taking personal responsibility for institutional failings, irrespective of the cost to mental health; more reliance on the already-too-powerful, mega-platforms of digital technology; the heralding of vaccines as the promise of a return to business-as-usual, without paying heed to their status as *pharmaka* that, even notwithstanding unknown side-effects, would mask over and defer engagement with the true underlying social conditions of what Stiegler's daughter Barbara would later call a "syndemic" (Barbara Stiegler 2021; see also Stiegler and Alla 2022: 32).

Although perhaps less explicit than in works like Byung-chul Han's *Burnout Society* (2010) and Pascal Chabot's *Global Burnout* (2018), this language of exhaustion—of "being going badly, *being in a bad way*, itself exhausted (*un être allant mal*, étant mal, *lui-même épuisé*)" (Stiegler 2018: 21)—had become more pronounced in the later Stiegler's work. The

virus, too, was borne of that exhaustion, transmitted at break-neck speed by globalization. Its virulence was amplified by the emaciation of the social support systems that function as our extended immune system, and by the heightened susceptibility of bodies inflamed by poor living conditions and the non-communicable diseases of the neoliberal culture of work and consumerism, from heart disease and chronic stress to loneliness, cancer and diabetes (Moore 2021). Lockdown would, in turn, be followed by further rounds of austerity cuts.

The syndemic offered a brief glimpse at what bifurcation might look like, with less work and a newfound respect for a society organized around care. The initial optimism that it would usher in change, however, soon gave way to a renewed obsession with certainty in the face of uncertainty, witnessed most recently in the seemingly inexorable rise of AI. Automated workers supposedly do not tire or get ill, at least not in the conventional sense of illness, while screen-based learning can, it is claimed, continue to function throughout perturbations in the local and global environment. Coronavirus created the space for what were dismissed as conspiracy theories to flourish around Big Pharma and Big Tech, accused of pushing untested but profitable cures over cheaper and better existing alternatives. "Excess, Compromise, Promises" refers, in particular, to the "Lancetgate" affair of June 2020, when the esteemed and peer-reviewed medical journal, *The Lancet*, was forced to retract a globally influential article on the dangers of treating Covid-19 with two such drugs, chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, argued on the basis of big data that proved to be of dubious origin and incompetently interpreted (Stiegler 2020b; 16). Within months, further controversies would arise over computational black-boxing, notably including over the reliability of voting machines, and the concomitant rise of political deepfakes. Stiegler's final published monographs, the two volumes of *Qu'appelle-t-on panser?* (*What Is Called Thinking Carefully?* 2018, 2020c), play on the homophony and etymology of *penser* (thinking) and *panser* (salving). Treated as something to be consumed, and not as a means for living better, he argues, contemporary science is perilously perceived as "that which does not salve—or which no longer salves (*qui ne panse pas—ou ce qui ne panse plus*)" (Stiegler 2020a: 94–5). For many, it has become less therapeutic than gorging on fake news that lends itself more readily to consumption.

Other so-called conspiracy theories rooted in or coinciding with the pandemic include a "Great Reset," based on technological automation at the hands of "techno-feudal" overlords and a further loss of faith in governments' ability and willingness to uphold their end of the social contract. The far-right similarly denounce the "great replacement" of Western culture, in a move

that Stiegler argued conflates white minoritization with the edging out of human participation in the creation of the world by invisibilized, automated digital content and decision-making, for which immigrants serve as the convenient scapegoats (Stiegler 2013). He predicted and glimpsed the onset of what he preferred to call "artificial stupidity" (Stiegler 2018: 100), the looming spread of generative artificial intelligence that would swoop in to take the place of our depleted executive function. But the full fallout of what the late Daniel Dennett (2024) called "counterfeit people" will be a further stage in the erosion of trust than Stiegler personally lived to see. As Anne Alombert argues in her contribution to this volume:

> The proliferation of visual materials that we cannot believe and which make it impossible to believe in any text and any image could lead to the elimination of the very possibility of reading and receiving (texts or images). Indeed, if we can no longer believe what we see or what we read, the digital publishing space may become a place of generalized disbelief [*mécréance*]. (ALOMBERT REF)

We find ourselves back in the position of René Descartes, plagued by his demon, desperately searching for truths to which we can anchor ourselves in the face of increasing loss of faith in the reliability of sense data. And yet this "*accumulation of reasons for doubt* in all domains," Stiegler suggests, culminates in "modern certitude thereby literally *collapsing*" (Stiegler 2020b: 7), to be replaced—as he puts it in the unpublished manuscript of *Technics and Time, 4*: *Faculties and Functions of Noesis in the Post-Truth*—by the "generalized feeling of the discredit of truth," "a regime of non-truth installed by a state of affairs that rejects the criteriology of truth" that he saw it as the duty of philosophy to provide (Stiegler nd: 47).

"Founded on certainty as a regime of truth establishing and legitimizing the mastery and possession of nature by man," modernity may have begun with the Cartesian c*ogito*. But Descartes understood that its pursuit could only take him so far, leading to God being brought back in as a guarantor of the surety of experience. No similar grasp of limits is on view across the contemporary world, which is marked by the dangerously "*blind certainty"* of "*purely computational* systems" that organize the global economy around "statistical and probabilistic elimination of the incalculable and the indeterminate" (Stiegler 2020b: 16–17). The claim is most straightforwardly read as a comment on the digital tools that strip out nuance for the purported

sake of efficiency, culminating in the threefold "proletarianization" of work, the senses, and thought.

Stiegler reworked Marx's concept of proletarianization to describe processes that externalize the decision-making of the "who" into the "what" of technology, without allowing for a reciprocal re-internalization of knowledge on the part of the "who"; where technologies, in other words, make us without allowing us to remake them in return. Susanna Lindberg uses her essay to reconstruct the development of this argument in Stiegler's early work on analogue technologies, upto and most notably cinema, where the temporal and perceptual flow of what she posits must be distinctly "mimetic" consciousness, comes to coincide with the flux of phono- and photographic objects. The production of sound and image allows both curative and toxic dimensions of the technological pharmakon to come to the fore. The imagination is liberated by "traumatypical" compositions demanding a work of interpretation on the part of the spectator that is analogous to the self-invention of the pianist who masters their instrument through practice. It can also be closed down, however, and habitually is, when saturated with stereotypical "dreams and desires that are fundamentally advertisements for industrial capitalism," the effect of which is to format us as passivified consumers, bereft of critical agency (LINDBERG).

With the spread of digital automation, technological self-invention recedes ever further into the background. We see this in the workplace, when asked to operate machines we do not understand, and which thereby effectively operate us instead: rule-following algorithms that deny insurance claims or deport "illegal aliens" on the basis of crude abstractions and incomplete data, or which identify "terrorists," despite the established limitations of AI identification, including, for instance, historical failures of facial recognition software to read the differences in non-caucasian faces (Najibi 2020). These forms of digital surveillance extend the practices of nineteenth-century Taylorism, from the beepers that keep Amazon warehouse workers constantly moving to collect items to an implausibly demanding schedule, to the webcams that track focus and time spent away from the keyboard. In both cases, the relentless pressure to perform combines with the alienating effect of not being trusted to function autonomously, inhibiting the potential of workers to think critically and creatively about what they are doing, and preventing them from contributing life-building "work" to what is otherwise merely "employment" (Stiegler 2016: 155–6). The threat of replacing us with robots only pushes us to become robots ourselves, mechanically absorbing long hours of precarious production, irrespective of the pressure it places

on less readily quantifiable mental and physical health. The automations of the workplace are moreover matched by those of the home, via algorithms that coax us through advertising-filled screens into compulsive consumption through the prescription of experience, while simultaneously surrendering what little remains of leisure time to the performance of unpaid labour, in the form of data supply for the very companies whose services we addictively consume. Technoscience becomes indistinguishable from capitalist exploitation, rendered complicit in the elimination of what is, at best, our "intermittent" capacity for "non-inhumanity" and the "noesis" that Stiegler identifies with mind and spirit, by automating bodies for the purpose of mindless labour. Through the accumulation of (big) data to make us visible and facilitate the predictive certainty of proletarianized behaviours, "certainty as a regime of truth" ends up exhausting us to the point that "humanity is destroying itself" (Stiegler 2020b: 3–4).

Faced with the absence of confidence in our collective ability to save ourselves, Stiegler raises the question of how to restore trust between, and the desire to bring about change in, people whose proletarianization has left them so vulnerable as to doubt everything, and who thereby find themselves unable to dream of a future worth living.

> Today, after the immense ordeal of *discredit* that began in the early twenty-first century, even before the conscious awareness of anthropic toxicity had arisen, anyone who *truly wants to face* the necessity of transforming this despair into hope, anyone who wants to *transform his or her own conviction* into a true *possibility of the realization* of a promising future beyond what appears to amount to a catastrophic becoming—and beyond the mere postures variously adopted here and there—anyone who wants to do any of this must *above all question the conditions of the reconstitution of credit,* after this absolute *mécréance*. (Stiegler 2020b: 7)

The quotation's language of discredit, credit and *mécréance* refers us back to Stiegler's second three-volume book series, *Mécréance et discrédit* (2004–6), where he developed the thesis—now among his most heavily criticized (see, for example, Nissen 2023: 101–4; Moore 2018; Beistegui 2013: 188–91)—that desire is not a given, but comes into existence only when biological "drives" are transformed, or "sublimated," by technological *pharmaka* and the norms governing their adoption. That series was translated into English as *Disbelief and Discredit* at the publisher's insistence, the archaic English forms of "misbelief" and "miscreancy" both

deemed[ii] unmarketable. The French *mécréance* is stronger than disbelief, even if it also incorporates it: less incredulity, surprise or lack of faith than misplaced faith, or false religious belief. Elsewhere, in discussion with Jean-Luc Nancy, Stiegler links it to the "ordeal of exhaustion" and, in particular, to consumer technologies' "exhaustive capture of desire," understood as a finite, exploitable resource, without which we lack the energy to keep going (Stiegler 2019: 327 [translation modified]).

The exhaustion of Bernard Stiegler?

The thinking of *mécréance* and faith has become, in some ways, the inadvertent theme of this special issue of *Philosophy Today* on Bernard Stiegler, and not just in relation to his own deployments of these concepts, as the false belief that present industrial models can save us. For, in spite of his still-growing reputation as perhaps the pre-eminent philosopher of the digital age, that is, of the intersection of technology and its organization by capitalism with arguably dramatic transformations in contemporary subjectivity, what if we have either misplaced faith, or failed to believe, in Stiegler, too? Looking at the hyperbolic, hyper-italicized language of "catastrophe," "immense ordeals" and "absolute"-ism, on view in the passage above and repeated emphatically, even histrionically, across so much of his work, are Stiegler's readers not at risk of both being put off by, and of falling prey to, a conspicuous but ultimately self-undermining force of enunciation, a doubling down on the seemingly blind certainty of his own positions?

There is nothing new in suspicions of a tendency to jump on the bandwagon of French philosophers, all-too-willfully identified as the messianic successors to Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and co. Stiegler is one of several contemporaries to have been chastised for an "*indifference* towards philosophical method" (Blok 2021: 412). But there are good reasons for wondering whether he is more susceptible than most to questions over the extent to which his work stands up to scrutiny; whether, behind all the seductive-repulsive technical jargon of his writings, there is enough to justify more than cultic adhesion to his ideas.

The proposal for this collection on "The Truth of Stiegler" came originally from Jean-Hugues Barthélémy, who, when he approached Pieter Lemmens and me to come on board as co-editors, spoke longingly—as he does here, too—of the rigour of Bernard Stiegler's *Technics and Time* series, and of the desire to see Stiegler engaged with seriously on a specifically

philosophical level. Yet the very expression of that desire points to the prospect that something had gone from his later works, where the interrogative style and obsessive self-questioning we have come to expect of philosophical writing is increasingly replaced, in the words of David-François Sebbah, with an "almost oracular tone" and "a certainty that, over time, will become more and more prophetic" (REF SEBBAH). The early Stiegler of *Technics and Time* worked through arguments patiently, securing himself against readings of Husserl, Heidegger and Freud, among others, before drawing out the implications of their work further than they themselves had been able to see. His increasingly political later offerings, by contrast, "entangle" and oscillate rapidly between "'sight' of the complex tangle of the age" and the plethora of sources he deemed necessary "to illuminate it" (SEBBAH REF), without really settling on either—without, that is to say, underpinning his positions with careful textual hermeneutics, or with the depth of empirical evidence needed to provide support for what has been read as his "catastrophism," an accusation he went on fervently to deny in a penultimate monograph, *Qu'appelle-t-on panser? 1* (2018), unironically subtitled *L'Immense régression*.

Barthélémy regrettably had to step back as co-editor, but not without providing an essay that takes us to the heart of the problem he wanted to explore across the volume. In a reading that contrasts his own "post-Wittgensteinian" inheritance of Gilbert Simondon with the post-Nietzscho-Freudian Simondon of Stiegler, Barthélémy explains how, for the latter, objects of thought, or ideation, begin as objects of desire, "idealized before being conceptualized," in a way that implicitly reintroduces an ontological "cut" between the technical (human) beings deemed capable of desire and therefore reason, and other animals who are not. Rather than pursue and attempt to resolve this residual anthropocentrism, the later Stiegler takes as given and catechistically repeats the starting premise of a distinctly "exosomatic" form of life whose externalization in the cumulative culture of technics functions as the condition of possibility of interiority, which is to say, of a life of the (desiring) mind. In the absence of a more thoroughgoing reinterrogation of his premises, Stiegler's work from around 2010 onwards, Barthélémy argues, is marked by a litany of neologisms never elevated to the status of fully fledged concepts, and which therefore remain at the level of objects of desire, sustained by referring readers back to (equally skeletal) discussions elsewhere, or as promises to be returned to in the many named future works that never saw the light of day. Stiegler's reworking of negentropy as "neganthropy" and (Nietzschean) theory of the "value of value" is cited as a case in point, left "at the programmatic stage, for lack of an architectonics" (BARTHELEMY).

Pertaining to a new organization of technics around care, a "neganthropology" is needed, Stiegler claims, to generate the desire and motivation to lift ourselves beyond the "*absolutely desperate* character" of the Entropocene and towards the "Neganthropocene" (Stiegler 2016: 434). The latter is explicitly formulated as no more than an object of desire, a quasi-causal "dream" of "the improbable as such," with "no chance of being realized," except in the form of a "miracle" requiring the "producing the impossible"—and an "unconditional belief" that it could still happen (2016: 427, 434).

Like Persephone, in the myth adopted early on by Stiegler and analyzed at the close of this volume by Yuk Hui, the former saw himself as "responsible for *elevating* fallen souls from the underworld" (REF HUI), preaching the gospel of our originary default—of the abandonment of *esprit* to existence only through technics—, in order to sustain that dream; at the risk of hubris, inseparable from madness, to awaken our senses through a higher truth we'd mostly rather not receive. We get an instructively comparable, quasi-religious, undertaking from Peter Lemmens, writing, here, on the transformative spiritual experience opened up by the carefully prepared and ritualistically administered *pharmaka* that are psychedelic drugs. Conscious of just how "far-out," "heretical" and "blasphemous" his adventures in the ontology of the suprasensible may seem to contemporary philosophers of materialism (perhaps including Stiegler), Lemmens points to the attested therapeutic power of ayahuasca and other "entheogens" to break us out of stereotypical, perseverative patterns of thought, wondering what similar experiences might have done to "decondition" Stiegler's own thinking—and what role they might play, in turn, in bringing about the Neganthropocene (REF LEMMENS).

Bigger questions for Stiegler are also implicitly at work in Lemmens's argument. According to UCSF's Robin Carhart-Harris, referenced by Lemmens and perhaps the world's foremost psychopharmacologist, the fundamental neurological activity at work in the experience of altered states revolves around "regression" to a "primitive or primary state of consciousness" that precedes and is moreover excluded by systems of "entropy suppression," which have evolved to minimize the "*surprise* and *uncertainty* (ie., entropy)" that would result from the destabilizing incursion of suppressed experience into "normal waking consciousness" (Carhart-Harris, Nutt, *et al.* 2014: 7). His ensuing "entropic brain hypothesis" argues for the therapeutic value and "revitalizing effect" on "mainstream" modes of psychoanalytic, psychological and psychiatric treatment, of short-circuiting these systems; of introducing entropy, in other words, into the relatively closed conscious states of "healthy, adult, modern humans" (Carhart-Harris,

Nutt, *et al.* 2014: 17, 2). What might this mean for the Stieglerian hierarchy of values, with its dogmatic assertions of the need to create anti-anthropy, for instance, by regulating against our mindless consumption of algorithmically governed digital media?

Returning to Barthélémy and Sebbah, for all Stiegler's seemingly unwaverable certainty in the veracity of his own ideas, neither proposes to deny him the status of "philosopher." That identification is nonetheless complicated by Lemmens, Hui, and, placed between them in the collection, Madeleine Chalmers. Like Hui, Chalmers turns to the fragments we have of one of Stiegler's unpublished draft monographs, *On Mystagogy*, to argue that Stiegler-the-philosopher is inseparable from Stiegler the "mystagogue." The term might initially sound pejorative—it was Immanuel Kant, after all, who so sharply distinguished the practice of philosophical "critique" from that of initiation into cultic practices of the revelation of mysterious truths. For Stiegler, however, the opposition between the two is not so clear-cut. Philosophy, religion and art all "strive towards" interpretation of what is ultimately "the unknowable object of desire," differentiated by the "idioms" in which they speak (CHALMERS), though sharing the anti-anthropic struggle against lapsing back into the "mystification" of believing those objects to be already out there in the world, and graspable (HUI). The teacher, or cult-initiator, can do this only by remaining a student, only by putting in place technical practices for mutual reinvention, or "transindividuation," through which student and teacher alike can be reawakened by the work(s) onto which they open one another.

Another Kantian distinction brings itself to bear, here: that between the "enthusiast"—following Stiegler, we might say "amateur"—who feels "astonishment almost amounting to terror" when dulled and proletarianized senses are shocked back into life by the sublime (Kant 2007: 99 [269]), and the "maniacal," deluded "fanatic" who proceeds from that experience to believe themselves able to translate instantiable metaphysical truths into the world (2007: 102, 105; Kant 2011: 57). Returning to Heidegger's "fulfillment of metaphysics" in another posthumously published paper, "The Ordeal of Truth," Stiegler argues that this is precisely the delusion of capitalism *qua* the "*hegemony of calculation and finitization whose effect is to annihilate every object of desire* (that is, every *infinitized* object)"; which works, in other words, to inhibit the withdrawal of the mysterious, or incalculable, from presence (Stiegler 2022: 274). But does he himself teeter towards fanaticism? As Dan Ross demonstrates in his chapter, this strict division between the empirical and the transcendental is one that Stegler sought to overturn from the outset of his philosophical career, while nonetheless preserving the corresponding

distinction, also addressed here by Barthélémy, between "fact" and "right." The technologies through which we interface with the world constitute the "atranscendental" possibilities of thought, action and experience, with the singular interpretative perspective of a given individual ("*idios*") composed from the "idiotextual" interweaving, or what Chalmers calls the "bricolage," of biological, psychological and cultural memories, whether directly lived or inherited through processes of adoption. The singularity of these perspectives is what is at stake in Barthélémy's references to Stiegler's "Nietzscheanism," and technical objects like works of art and texts are the conditions of glimpsing something better, lifting us up to imagine futures that have yet to be created—but, crucially, they cannot be conflated with those futures, as objects of desire that are ends in themselves. The "philistinism" of computational capitalism lies, in part, in that conflation—in "liquidating final causalities" and taking automation as an end-in-itself, without due consideration of that for the sake of which—the values, or "consistences," for which we are doing the automating (Stiegler n.d.: 189). By working with statistical averages that eliminate nuance, promoting the most popular over that with the most potential to elevate, it also homogenizes our capacity for protention, to the detriment of our ability to desire a break with the present, and hence to the point that we cannot envisage a future at all.

Intermittent vitality

Back in the 1970s, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari described life as a revolutionary force of desiring-production, which would be unleashed if only we could overturn the social organizations, ultimately capitalism, that have prevented its actualization (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 28, 126–7). Stiegler, by contrast, argues that desire is not a default or underlying state of life, but comes into being (or "consistency") only when sublimated into existence: only when we impose ritualized norms and behaviours designed to stave off immediate gratification, forcing us to channel ("sublimate") our libidinal energies into "work." He defines work not as paid labour (*emploi*), but as the simultaneous construction of self and world, the use of technical objects to shape the world around us and internalize the experience of mastering them in the form of new knowledge and *savoir-vivre*. Work is inherently bound up with desire because it involves the building of futures towards which we project ourselves, and which, individually or collectively, we "exosomatic," or technically constituted, animals long to inhabit. And desire, understood as the highest expression of the "noetic" life of the exosomatic mind, is accordingly both fragile and

precarious, in need of careful cultivation to prevent its regression into the lazy automation of habitual, instinctualized ("drive-governed") behaviours.

Pace Kant, with his attempt to separate out right (dispassionate duty) from fact, preventing the contamination of the empirical by the transcendental, Stiegler's key insight, here, is that the same (atranscendental) technologies through which we make and energize ourselves can also take hold of, proletarianize and exhaust us, forcing us to adapt to their imperatives without affording us any role in their—and our—creation. Building on his mentor, Jacques Derrida, Stiegler argues that technical conditions of possibility, *qua pharmakon*, the cure that is also the poison, are also thus simultaneously conditions of the impossibility of the life of the mind, or spirit. The potential for bifurcation that elevates us above the default state of "inhuman being" (*l'êtrinhumain*) and onto what Deleuze and Guattari termed the plane of consistency is only ever glimpsed "intermittently" (Stiegler 2010: 170,180)—that is to say, when we use our tools to create a quasi-causal agency that wrests us out of unthinking and unproductive habits, before readjusting our behaviours around new habits that will, in time, become equally unthought. Noetic vitality is thus the exception to the general tendency of regression towards entropy, or the dissipation of energy available for work into the exhausted state where, cut off from the revitalization of different stimuli, we lose the capacity to desire and create an alternative. In the absence of that capacity, we are locked into an interminable present of uncritical repetition, habitually recoursing to stereotypical patterns of thought and action without consideration of the circumstances to which we are responding. Truth, too, is intermittent, in this sense: knowledge is first and foremost context-specific and local, valuable only insofar as it is therapeutic (Stiegler nd: 267), and devalued once its bifurcatory potential gives way to universalized, dogmatic certainties. That is the situation we find ourselves in now, though we continue to deny it, telling ourselves, albeit with little, or misplaced, faith, that there is still time for "business as usual" at the very moment we most urgently need to bifurcate. If the pandemic tells us anything, it is that we face a stark choice between embracing our own intermittence, or a society that is only intermittently functional.

We can see humanity's self-destruction already underway, and not just through the amplified impact of Covid on bodies broken by the working habits of a burned-out society. There is an additional way of reading the link Stiegler makes between computational systems and the elimination of intermittence, and that is through social media's use of algorithms to create what Chalmers here calls "hyper-diachronized" echo chambers by filtering out opposing viewpoints

(CHALMERS), presenting users only with more of what they want to hear—or, which amounts to the same, with opposition so bombastic as to re-entrench us in the adamant insistence on the correctness of our own positions. Apart from superficial allusions to his work on individuation and its subsequent influence on Gilbert Simondon (Stiegler 2018: 97, 162), Stiegler rarely refers to the work of Carl Jung. But what the philosopher analyses as this proletarianized state of "anthropy" strongly recalls what the Swiss psychoanalyst termed "psychological entropy," referring to the "dulling of affect" that coincides with loss of, or withdrawal from, contact with the outside environment (Jung 1970: 26). Algorithmically engineered internet filter bubbles become an extension of this logic, reducing encounters with the external world to a mirror image of the safe spaces into which we retreat to escape the violations of whatever we perceive as offensive. The resultant narrowing of environmental stimulus around a single source is habitually seen in the case of addicts, who end up becoming stimulated only by their drug of choice.

When our senses and tools can no longer interpret the nuance and singularity of our surroundings, the mind shifts towards a thermodynamically closed system, no longer afforded the prospect of what Stiegler describes as the "traumatic" but crucially revitalizing encounter with the unknown. This is the kind of "awakening" (or *anamnesis*) experienced in the traumatypes of art, which shakes us out of our stereotypical modes of thought and experience. In the "struggle against entropy," what we need is a shock, he argues, but it needs to come less in the form of an anxiety-amplifying "reverse shock doctrine," being jerked into action only once it is too late, by hitting rock bottom, than in a transformation of the way we create knowledge (Stiegler 2020b: 18–19). Stiegler's proposed "alternative shock doctrine" consists in a call for "noodiversification," a recreation of the variety in thought he deemed as "indispensable to social life" as biodiversity is to the "vitality of organisms" (Stiegler 2005: 64), and just as threatened. The term refers not only to the diversification of ways of thinking, but moreover to the ability of "amateurs" to master the tools, the phenomenotechnical instruments, through which we both think and experience the world in its technological mediation: a new methodology of participatory, contributive research, where people harness the technologies at their disposal not just for consumption, but for analyzing and rebuilding their lifeworlds. This mastery, in turn, paves the way for a new "regime" of, or "*change in era of truth*" (Stiegler n.d.: 57), understood not as (a Hegelian) absolute, but in relation to its "function" as "care": "*truth* as *the power to bifurcate possessed by a system that, without this knowledge, would be bound to close*" (nd: 38, 182). It will take noodiversity, Stiegler argues, to open up the impasse of a paralyzed political

imagination, recreate trust, or "credit," and the "guarantee" our "resilience in the face of all kinds of entropic dysregulation" (Stiegler 2020b: 15, 18).

The cultivation of noodiversity is inseparable from the figure of the amateur, whose desire to participate Stiegler has praised as the point of departure for bifurcation, the source of the *philia* that underpins the "mutual trust" binding society together (Stiegler 2020b: 1; see also, for example, Stiegler 2016: 203–4). In an age of post-truth, with its rejection of the "*criteriology of truth* that theory is supposed to provide" (Stiegler nd: 47), however, how can we tell which amateurs are doing the critical work of "research," creating vitality and democratizing knowledge by challenging the hegemonic discourse, and who is merely drunk on information and automated by the drip-feed of familiar and reassuring, anxiolytic shots of confirmation-bias-reinforcing dopamine, pushed in our direction by algorithms pitching to cash in on our insecurities? Evidence abounds that accusations of conspiracy theorization have long been used to silence legitimate concerns and enquiries into the operations of power (deHaven-Smith 2013). For every Bellingcat, the highly successful group of "citizen journalists" specializing in open-source intelligence, there is also a parodically extreme Flat Earth Society, propagating planoterrestrialist fantasies of a cornered planet, or poring over video footage in search of election tampering. Like the flat Earthers, with their endless "proofs" and conferences, don't the proponents of hydroxychloroquine embody the spirit of citizen-led science, of the public participating in research?

Stiegler's issue, in principle, is less with the seemingly incommensurable divergence of opinions into a polemical dialogue of the deaf—the so-called "culture wars"—than with the digital platforms that exploitatively flatter their users to encourage them to stay online, indulging the reduction of truth to a matter of consumer choice. There are still no easy answers to this question, however, and Stiegler, who sees truth as having value to the extent that it is therapeutic—whose argument perhaps rests on the unspoken assumption that truth is ultimately more curative than falsehood—, does not rule out the therapeutic value of untruths. At the time of his death, he still outwardly advocated the promise of participatory research and of reinventing our "decisively compromised" institutions of certification around the incorporation of a fractured public who no longer have, or indeed never had, "access to [modern] certitude and its processes of certification" (Stiegler 2020b: 9, 2). His enthusiasm was nonetheless contingent on citizens' willingness to "consult the opinions of experts" (2020b: 20), which they are not always willing (or able) to do.

The gamble, or leap of faith, he takes is that participation will be enough to generate a virtuous circle of desire, trust and mutual healing. But even here, his avowed "unconditional belief" that this could bring about the "impossible" bifurcation of society, discussed in the previous section, blurs into the double bind of markets that preach risk as a condition of investment, but, for want of a "horizon of credit," have "*denied*" the academic and scientific communities any profession of "uncertainty and indeterminacy" in the claims they make (Stiegler 2020b: 14). Privately, in bouts of despairing resignation, he wearily dismissed as a failure his own experiments in the creation of "territoires laboratoires," most notably the Plaine Commune Contributive Learning Territory, designed to bring families, businesses and community groups together to work with academics on matters of specifically local concern. Unsurprisingly and perhaps not unfairly, the fault was said to lie elsewhere: in inadequate funding, the short-termist electoral pressures on involved politicians and a lack of suitable projects, rather than, say, the under-conceptualization of an ambition that, as Barthélémy suggests, struggled to elevate itself beyond an object of desire. Plaine Commune's most visible project remains the "contributive clinic" run by the child psychiatrist Marie-Claude Bossière, set up to mitigate the impact of excessive screen time on the development of young children. For all Stiegler's lofty dreams of decentralizing the architecture of digital society, among the clinic's more notable achievements is the establishment of a local babysitting network, set up in response to the realization of just how far carers' exhaustion factors into the outsourcing of parenting to the tablets and TV recently described elsewhere as technologies of "childcare automation" (Hester and Srnicek 2023: 44).

Exhaustion and schismogenesis

At the heart of Stiegler's invocation of noodiversity is a theoretical commitment to openness, to staving off the psychological entropy that comes from minds being cut off from alternative sources of stimulus. The theory perhaps sits awkwardly with his own later practice, that is, with the rhetorical performance of certainty, the charge of the "oracular tone" levelled against him here by Sebbah, but which Stiegler equally decried in computational capitalism. Perhaps we can square that away through reference to the philosopher-mystagogue's own exhaustion, and to a faltering confidence in his own contribution?

In one of Stiegler's most oft-repeated illustrations, Gregory Bateson wrote of the alcoholic that their drinking is experienced as an essential part of an inviolable identity that would be surrendered were they to stop or change their mind. Surrendering the truths on which we've staked ourselves becomes the unimaginable final straw, necessitating a whole new identity for those who feel like they have nothing but the one they already cling to—and for whom that clinging moreover becomes a coping mechanism, an act of resilience, against the pressures that threaten to overwhelm them (Bateson 2000; see also Stiegler 2014: 90). Bound up with "rage and shame," "pride," Bateson argues, becomes inextricable from "schismogenesis," or the birth of division—be it between the alcoholic and spouse, opposing ends of the internet, or a philosopher and their audience (Bateson 2000: 326). As Stiegler saw, at least in the case of the modern paradigm of certitude, what looks like the entitlement of insisting on absolute certainty as the supposed precondition of our willingness to sacrifice self-interest, should really thus be understood as an avatar for exhaustion. If people of all political persuasions—and, indeed, systems of social organization—resort to the hermeneutics of doubt to refuse nuance and any space for interpretation, it is in no small part because we are already pushed to adapt past the point of tolerability.

Reforming the culture of labour both in the workplace and at home to reinstate the intermittence of noetic life, to eliminate the exhaustions of "employment" and the constant, disruptive, demands of adaptation become an additional priority in overturning the hold of fake news. The element of "compromise" in "Excess, Compromise, Promises" thus refers to the need for a "historic compromise between capital and labour" to recognize the role of the former, with its insistence on output and efficiency, in the production of entropy, and the knock-on impact of this on rising levels of *mécréance* and "compromised" trust in the institutions that organize society (Stiegler 2020b: 21, 9). In *Technics and Time, 4*, Stiegler writes of a breakdown in the "compromise of stereotypes and traumatypes" (Stiegler n.d.: 208), configured in terms of a surfeit of stereotypy, which is to say, of the homogeneity of thought and of obsessional calculation that leaves no space for the "*incalculable*" and "utterly unexpected," because of the way that "traumatypes are contained, retained and 'protained' by stereotypes" that seal off the prospect of bifurcation (nd: 207–8). One wonders, nonetheless, whether such a diagnosis doesn't misconstrue the bigger picture Stiegler is trying to convey; whether the issue at hand is not also one of the unleashing of traumatypes too powerful to be reined in, in the form of untrammelled technological "disruption"—not to mention ecological turmoil—that is bound up with his

despair. The vision of a world so traumatized by collapse that the promise of miraculous bifurcation becomes just another "noble lie," attempting to assert itself over of other a plethora of less noble therapeutic fictions, is far from unimaginable. Indeed, Stiegler's lamentation of the containment of the intermittent, controlled, traumatypy made possible by the liberation of the imagination, follows on immediately from allusions to stress that has become chronic: the "short-circuiting" of the "retentional systems that ensured the synchronization of complex exorganisms as public power," or the disintegration of institutions of education and democracy—we should add of public health to this, too—that generate the organizational norms of society, which we internalize in the form of stereotypes, the shared experience and expectations that bind communities together (nd: 206). The erosion of these norm-generating institutions, the neoliberal abandonment of people to fend for themselves, amounts to the erosion of what Peter Sloterdijk calls the "immunological spheres" that shield us from the excessive forces of society, "solidaristic and symbolic systems" that provide "security of worldview" and whose "collapse is tantamount to collective death" (Sloterdijk 2013: 449). Their loss instantiates a literal "narrowing (*rétrécissement*) in the margin of tolerance for the environment's inconstancies" that Georges Canguilhem identifies with the loss of health (Canguilhem 1991: 199). The challenge, for Canguilhem and Stiegler alike, is not simply to "adapt" to an ever-receding vital milieu, but to be "normative, capable of following new norms of life" by using our "technical plasticity," the tools through which we overturn the physiological limits of the human organism, to create environments in which we can flourish (1991: 199–200).

Stiegler quotes from the same passage of Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological* (1966)—on the "power and temptation to fall sick"—in his final article for Mediapart (Stiegler 2020b: 15–16; Canguilhem 1991: 200), where it is interwoven with references to Alfred North Whitehead's *The Function of Reason* (1929). The combination of the two repeats a tendency found across his later writings on the determination of truth by its therapeutic value and potential to bring about bifurcation (see also, for example, Stiegler n.d.: 74; Stiegler 2020c: 195–6). For Whitehead, reason functions not as an instrument of resignation, that is, to facilitate our adaptation to hostile environments, but as a "counter-agency" seeking rather to attack them, moving in an "upward trend" away from "slow, prolonged decay" and toward the art of "living well" and "living better" (Whitehead 1929: 18–20). Casting our minds back to the increasingly stereotypical Stiegler of his final decade, we might note Whitehead's assertion that the "antithesis of Reason" is "Fatigue," which constitutes a "relapse" into "mere repetition," divested

of the "impulse toward novelty" (1929: 18). Canguilhem writes similarly of the "sick person in his obses-sive and often exhausting maintenance of the only norms of life within which he feels almost normal, that is, in a position to use and dominate his own environment" (Canguilhem 1991: 189). Exhaustion to the point of sickness underpins a tendency to double-down on the familiar and reassuring, but it comes at the price of erring: "[t]o be sick is to have been made false," Canguilhem goes on. That is by no means to say that an exhausted Stiegler became wrong, even if he became perhaps less able to initiate bifurcation, above all from himself. As the quotation continues, it means "to be false, not in the sense of a counterfeit banknote (*faux billet*) or a traitor (*faux frère*), but in the sense of a wrinkle (*faux pli*) or a botched rhyme (*vers faux*)" (1991: 276 [translation modified]). The Stiegler we are left with is less a counterfeit or simulacral philosopher than a discordant voice who erred beyond philosophy "proper," for better and for worse, to generate a vitality he acknowledged himself could only ever be intermittent. In his wake, renewing and sustaining faith in the therapeutic value of his ideas will require us to surrender certainties to which the philosopher-mystagogue himself clung.

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[i] The French version of the essay, "Démesure, promesses, compromis," is published in three parts on blogs.mediapart.fr, starting here: https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/les-invites-de-mediapart/article/050920/demesure-promesses-compromis-13-par-bernard-stiegler (last accessed February 27, 2024). Page numbers for references here are taken from the draft translation by Daniel Ross, available on academia.edu: https://www.academia.edu/114658930/Bernard_Stiegler_Excess_Promises_Compromises_2020_

[ii] Private correspondence between the author and John Thompson of Polity Press.