Filozofski vestnik | Volume XL | Number 3 | 2019 | 221–240

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My Twentieth Century: *Zeitdiagnose* and Modern Art in Badiou, Sloterdijk, and Stiegler

In books written a short time after the turn of the millennium, and the transition of the 20th century into the 21st, the philosophers Alain Badiou, Peter Sloterdijk, and Bernard Stiegler offered three distinct, but interrelated anatomies of the 20th century or, as Badiou expressed it, simply "The Century." These included Badiou's *The Century*, Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life* and *What Happened in the Twentieth Century?*, and Stiegler's two-volume *Symbolic Misery* (I: *The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, II: *The Katastrophē of the Sensible*) and his related short book *Acting Out*. All three treatments are wide-ranging in the scope of their topics and speculative in their outlook, concerning our recently lapsed century that was marked by major political revolutions and wars, the violent clash of left-wing and right-wing mass political ideologies, and mass deaths from genocidal state regimes. Each of the authors are polymathic in their fields of reference, incorporating into their accounts of the 20th-century discussions of philosophy, literature, history, art, psychoanalysis, and religious thought.

It is, however, a more focused aspect of all three books that interests me in what follows: their argument for the central role of *art* and *aesthetics* in the political, economic, cultural, and artistic legacy of the twentieth century, and their corollary argument for the need to reconstruct and reorient our aesthetic understanding going forward into the post-20th-century future. In connection with these major issues, I will also highlight a third consideration that helps link their diagnosis of the 20th-century and their prognosis for the 21st: the changing relationship between the *subject* of aesthetic experience and the subject of collective politics. Although each construes differently the specific content and causes of the 20th century mutation in subjectivity, as well as its aesthetic dimensions, they notably share a common focus and general structure of their *Zeit*-diagnostic arguments and prognostic conclusions.

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Badiou, *The Century*

As his title indicates, Badiou seeks not just to take the 20th century as a period in time in which various events of significance took place, but rather also to understand it as an event itself that founds a new order of time, an "epoch" related to a specific collectively constituted subjectivity that prolongs the effects of this event over an extended period. He thus writes that he is seeking to "grasp 'the century' as a category of the century itself," or, in other words, "to evoke the meaning that the century held for its own actors."[1] "Our aim," he explains, "is not to judge the century as an objective datum, but rather to ask how it has come to be subjectivated."[2] How did the imagination of this century, as a new age, as a new regime of time and experience, itself become a protagonist of the political and aesthetic projects, revolutions, crimes, and tragic failures its decades encompass? How, in turn, might our contemporary understanding of and fidelity to—or our betrayal and abandonment of—"the Century" affect our own possible subjectivation, our potentialities for becoming in the new historico-political horizon of the 21st century?

Badiou sees the essential, defining impulse of the Century as its drive towards "creating a new man," including at the cost of violence and destruction of the remnants of the old. Humanity is itself treated as material with the plasticity to be given radically new form. Not accidentally, then, Badiou evokes the dismembered and reconfigured artforms of the 20th-century avant-gardes as the figural corollary of this larger project of giving new shape to humanity:

> [E]ach and every time, the project is so radical that in the course of its realization the singularity of human lives is not taken into account. There is nothing there but a *material*. A little like the way in which, for practitioners of modern art, sounds and forms, torn from their tonal or figurative harmony, were nothing but materials whose destination needed to be entirely recast. Or like the way formal signs, divested of any objective idealization, projected mathematics towards an automated completion. In this sense, the project of the new man is a project of rupture and foundation that sustains—within the domain of history and the

[1] Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Polity, Cambridge 2007, p. 6.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

> state—the same subjective tonality as the scientific, artistic and sexual ruptures of the beginning of the century.[3]

Informed by this sense of the plasticity and radical historicity of humanity, the projects of the Century strove to seize upon this material and remake it anew in the present.

Badiou calls this demand "the passion for the real,"[4] which he sees as the source of the Century's creativity and its evident capacity, as well, for lethal destruction and crime:

> There is a conviction, laden with pathos, that we are being summoned to the real of a beginning. The real, as all key players of the century recognize, is the source of both horror and enthusiasm, simultaneously lethal and creative.... Any conviction about the real advent of a new man is characterized by a steady indifference to its cost; this indifference legitimates the most violent means. If what is at stake is the new man, the man of the past may very well turn out to be nothing but disposable material.[5]

The end of the old and the creation of the new demanded "absolute" solutions that led through the path of violent purgations and purifications, with little regard for the mere raw "materials" of the real in the making, whether those were past conceptual, artistic, ideological, or living manifestations of humanity. Given this propensity towards a violent, destructive logic of purgation, how can the passion for the real become, as it evidently does for Badiou, an object of affirmation, or even a sort of ethical-political ideal whose definitive disappearance in the new century would be regrettable?

In answer to this obvious objection, Badiou introduces a distinction between two modes of negativity, which in turn inflect the passion for the real with alternative applications and implications. The first, he writes, "assumes destruction as such and undertakes the indefinite task of purification."[6] The second, in contrast, is what Badiou calls "the subtractive orientation," and suggests that

3 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
4 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
5 *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.
6 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

this latter is even in conflict with and critical of the former's unacceptable traits. Notably, Badiou turns to the practices of the artistic avant-garde to exemplify the subtractive mode, drawing upon the example of Malevich's painting *White on White* (1918), which inscribes a figured off-white, tilted white square within a lighter white square coterminous with the boundaries of the canvas.[7]

It would be a mistake, Badiou suggests, to interpret Malevich's work as heralding the destruction of painting, despite the clear distance it has gone in the direction of purification. Rather, through a rigorously applied process of subtraction, it has converged on a minimal difference that both gestures towards the merger of figure and support in the absolute and registers the irreducible reality of the difference between figure and support. It manifests this difference itself as real, and directs an almost fanatical passion towards making this difference come to presence: "[I]nstead of treating the real as identity, it is treated right away as a gap. The question of the real/semblance relation will not be resolved by a purification that would isolate the real, but by understanding that the gap itself is real. The white square is the moment when the minimal gap is fabricated."[8] Malevich's subtractive procedure models, then, another way of pursuing the passion for the real, "devoted to the construction of a minimal difference, to the delineation of its axiomatic,"[9] which is opposed to destruction. The question, then, becomes how to extend this subtractive model, by analogy, to other areas of application, including the political, in which the minimal difference can be disclosed as the manifestation of the real itself.

This leads to Badiou's other main line of argumentation, which characterizes the Century's crucial concern with form—indeed, with its accelerated experimental pursuit of formalization in all domains of existence, including the artistic, the political, the mathematical and conceptual, and the erotic.[10] At this level

7 Viewable at the website of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80385. See also Badiou's treatment of "the subtractive" in relation to mathematics in "On Subtraction," in *Conditions*, trans. Stephen Corcoran, Continuum, London 2009, pp. 113–128.

8 Badiou, *The Century*, p. 56.

9 *Ibid*.

10 In several works, Badiou has developed a four-fold conception of philosophy, related to four distinct conditions of truth: the artistic, the scientific, the political, and the amorous. See especially: Badiou, *Conditions*; *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bostells, Continuum, London 2009; *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz, State University

of abstraction, Badiou understands formalization as a means of negotiating a relationship between the finitude of forms (artistic, conceptual, political, etc.) and the infinite: "The infinite is not captured in form; it *transits through form*. If it is an event—if it is *what happens*—finite form can be equivalent to an infinite opening."[11] 20th-century procedures in art, politics, mathematics, and so on, are distinctive for having most fully taken on and taken in this logic as their immanent dynamic. Moreover, this logic provides a diagnostic for the so-called "failures" of the avant-garde, such as its excessive attempt to unify the fragmented and intrinsically differentiated real with a single poetic-political grasp, while still discerning what was ennobling and enduring in them: namely, the avant-garde's restless drive to formalize and reformalize the real as art. Thus, Badiou concludes:

> In its effective process, rather than in the declarations of the avant-gardes, twentieth-century art is marked by an enduring formal unease, a complete inability to uphold a doctrine of local arrangements, or even of macro-structures. Why? Because form constitutes the transit of being—form's immanent overcoming of its finitude—and not simply an abstract virtuality for a descent of the Ideal... Indeed, there can no longer be any established devices for the production of art. There is only the *multiplicity of formalizations*.[12]

He goes on to note that—

> [T]he century is marked by an unprecedented variability in its imperatives of construction and ornamentation, being enticed not by the slow historical movement of the equilibrium of forms, but by the urgency of this or that experimental formalization.[13]

This experimental dynamism of forms is, for Badiou, the essential feature of the 20th-century artistic avant-gardes, and is that which connects it analogically with other domains of formalization to which it nevertheless can never be reduced, but which can be seen retrospectively to manifest the structure of real

of New York Press, Albany, New York 1999; and *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013.

11 Badiou, *The Century*, p. 155.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

differences towards which the collective subjectivity of "the Century" directs its transformative passions.

Insofar as Badiou offers a prescriptive orientation for 21st-century thought, art, and politics, it is the recovery and reinstatement of this experimental drive to formalize, so vividly instantiated by the artistic avant-gardes, and which defines the legacy of "the Century" that he is most at pains to hold onto. In his *Handbook to Inaesthetics*, which preceded by a few years *The Century*, Badiou suggests why he wants to perpetuate 20th-century art's demand for new forms. It is, he suggests, in evolving a rigorous set of new modes of formalization that art breaks free of traditional ways of conceiving of its relation to truth—its didactic subordination to an external truth, its romantic subordination to the subject, and the classical bracketing of its relation to truth in favor of its imaginary status—and comes into its own as an autonomous set of *procedures* for manifesting truth. This, in turn, affirms the reality of artworks and justifies the passion for the real being expressed through and in the formal practices of art:

> Art *itself* is a truth procedure. Or again: The philosophical identification of art falls under the category of truth. Art is a thought in which artworks are the Real (and not the effect). And this thought, or rather the truths that it activates, are irreducible to other truths—be they scientific, political, or amorous. This also means that art, as a singular regime of thought, is irreducible to philosophy. Immanence: Art is rigorously coextensive with the truths that it generates. Singularity: These truths are given nowhere else than in art.[14]

With reference to the mathematician Gödel, and his discovery of the limits of any given formalization, Badiou writes:

> He sees in [his demonstrations] a lesson of infinity, as well as the ransom of ignorance that must be paid every time knowledge is extorted from the real: to partake in a truth is also to measure that other truths exist, truths we do not yet partake in... Without ever being discouraged, one must invent other axioms, other logics, other ways of formalizing. The essence of thinking always resides in the power of forms.[15]

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[14] Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2005, p. 9.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 164.

It is in this power of forms, and fidelity to the Century's task of radical formalization, including in the truth procedures that art has still to explore and unfold, that Badiou finds resources for continuing struggle in the 21st century: "The century having come to an end, we have to make its wager ours, the wager on the univocity of the real against the equivocation of semblance. To declare anew… the war within thought which belonged to the century…: the war of formalization against interpretation."[16]

Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* and *What Happened in the 20th Century?*

Peter Sloterdijk's 2009 volume *You Must Change Your Life* is a wide-ranging study ostensibly addressed to a problem that has little evident relation to aesthetics, the "return of religion" in our putatively post-secular time. Sloterdijk will have none of this; not, however, because like Jürgen Habermas, he seeks to defend the project of an unfinished enlightenment against religion's renewed claims, but rather for another, seemingly paradoxical reason: "a return *to* religion is as impossible as a return *of* religion—for the simple reason that no 'religion' or 'religions' exist."[17]

What instead do exist, in Sloterdijk's view, both before and throughout modernity to the present day, are different regimens of spiritual and psychophysical training "that are more and less capable and worthy of propagation,"[18] *exercises* and practices which have never vanished, despite many mutations, and hence which cannot "return." These regimens are composed of bundles of bodily and mental practices by which human beings create for themselves "symbolic immune systems and ritual shells,"[19] constituents of our basic anthropological constitution through which we regulate our collective and individual intercourse with the world. Particularly important are the various "anthropotechnic" means by which human beings train themselves to experience a "vertical tension" occasioning self-transformation and self-transcendence. These techniques of provoking and responding to such vertical tension, as well as their modernization

16 *Ibid*.

17 Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, trans. Wieland Hoban, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 3.

18 *Ibid*.

19 *Ibid*.

and ramification into new areas of existence, Sloterdijk argues, are what call for the greatest attention in our investigation of the present age—an attention likely to be distracted by spurious "post-secularist" hypotheses either trumpeting or lamenting how "religion," after two-century-long slump, is at last recovering its lost spiritual productivity.

Sloterdijk's analysis is deeply indebted to his reading of Nietzsche on asceticism, though he also emphatically revises Nietzsche's negative evaluation in favor of a more affirmative stance towards the shaping, transformative power of ascetic practices. While Nietzsche, with his overt anti-Christian animus, tended to equate asceticism with a life-denying pathology, Sloterdijk argues that the real value of Nietzsche's arguments about asceticism lies in his recognition of their force as operators of self-willed anthropological change. Thus, he argues—

> a large number of the asceticisms to which [Nietzsche] referred polemically were precisely not expressions of life-denial and metaphysical servility; it was rather a matter of heroism in a spiritual disguise… With this find, Nietzsche stands… at the start of the modern, non-spiritualistic ascetologies along with their physio- and psychotechnic annexes, with dietologies and self-referential trainings, and hence all the forms of self-referential practicing and working on one's own vital form that I bring together in the term "anthropotechnics."[20]

In Sloterdijk's view, however, Nietzsche's discovery is in turn dependent on a prior objective modernization in the spectrum of asceticisms themselves, which he characterizes under the dual aspect of the "despiritualization of asceticisms" and the "informalization of spirituality." The former he sees characterized most clearly in the vast twentieth-century expansion of athletics, sport, exercise, and other forms of physical "training"; the latter is exemplified for him by popular music, which offers spiritual intensities, affects, and experiences on a mass, democratic basis and without a formal spiritual framework, covering "the lives of contemporary individuals with unpredictable flashes of spiritual emergency."[21]

You Must Change Your Life is a sprawling, speculative book, and, having set out in summary the merest outline of its sweeping argument, I will not pursue

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

further its many ramifying lines of inquiry. Instead, I will note that Sloterdijk's book takes its title from a work of art about a work of art, which suggests that the aesthetic is entangled in its arguments. "You must change your life" comes from the final line of a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo" from his 1908 *New Poems*, which derives from a modern aesthetic encounter the "vertical tension" that Sloterdijk sees as immanent in anthropotechnic practices. In Rilke poem, the artwork, the torso-fragment of Apollo, issues its silent demand to the viewer to transcend one's existing state, to become different than one is. Implicitly then too, Rilke's artwork, his poem, derives its own aesthetic power and modernistic "newness," its intensely charged temporal difference from the archaic fragment, from its effective channeling from poet to reader of the overwhelming demand made upon his by the historical otherness of the work of art. If the encounter with the sculpture represents a somatized relation with an archaic force of the numinous, its sheer power is nonetheless mitigated by its descent from the ritual into the aesthetic, safely enframed by the modern museum's institutional space and sober behavioral protocols. Yet the sculpture's overpowering entraining of the poet's vision becomes, in turn, a figural equivalent of the poet's equally intense, equally disciplined enchainment of poetic lines and words through which, finally, the reader's fascinated attention and surprise at the last line will be imposed: "You must change your life." The shock of the poet's (and subordinately, the reader's) aesthetic encounter with this sudden imposing power is presented as paradigmatic for the vertical tension that seizes us and tears us from our settledness in daily habit and habitation. Following Sloterdijk's line of thought, aesthetic defamiliarization, which the Russian formalists saw as constitutive of literary and artistic efficacy, might be thought of not simply as a practice pertaining to the modern arts, but as an exemplary instance in the historical repertoire of anthropotechnic means by which human beings confer upon themselves new shapes and higher forms.

I would suggest that Sloterdijk's anthropotechnical arguments offer an especially fruitful way of thinking about modernist and avant-garde art practices—with their emphasis on formal innovation, their cultivation of semantic difficulty to the threshold of nonsense, and their fascination with transgression and power—in a broader philosophical ambit. Indeed, we might consider as corollary in their implications Badiou's emphasis on experimental formalizations and Sloterdijk's focus on experimental anthropotechnics. Both point towards an infinitization of the "human-all-too-human" through the discipline of formalized

thought regimens, for which the creation of avant-garde artworks may also be a paradigmatic instance. If modernist works pursue a unique constellation of formal, rhetorical, and semantic elements in order to defamiliarize our experience of them, they also, Sloterdijk implies, may turn to us and address us with a demand to change ourselves with an equivalent degree of radicality. "Artistedom," Sloterdijk writes, "is the somatization of the improbable."[22] It "is subversion from above, it *super*verts the existing" (125). We may recall here the Ad Reinhardt art cartoon in which a man points to a modern artwork mockingly and asks "Ha Ha What does that represent?"—only to find the painting angrily turning back to the spectator and asking, "What do you represent?". If an abstract painting or sculpture presents us with a space, it also, as Reinhardt points out, pronounces to a viewer attuned to its implicit address: "You, Sir, are a space, too." Each work, tacitly, offers itself as a highly specific training module in a different mode of experience, a different way of life. They invite their viewers, listeners, and readers to a new set of "complications, facilitations, narrowings, widenings, inclinations, disinclinations, lowerings, raisings,"[23] entreating them to "work on themselves and make examples of themselves,"[24] that they might be able to increasingly discover themselves the self-made inhabitants of "a multi-disciplinary and multi-virtuosic world with expanding limits of ability."[25]

With this more general background established by our reading of *You Must Change Your Life*, we can deal more briefly with *What Happened in the 20th Century?*, whose title essay (subtitled "Towards a Critique of Extremist Reason") is the most pertinent in the collection for our theme, because it directly addresses the arguments of Badiou's *The Century*. We can summarize Sloterdijk's approach here as accepting Badiou's basic assertion that "the Century" was indeed characterized by a "passion for the real," but going on to offer revisionary perspectives on both the nature of the real at issue and the modalities of the passions involved. Moreover, Sloterdijk draws a distinctive picture, rooted in a novel conception of a new metabolic relationship of modern humanity with the energy sources of nature, of the socio-historical context in which the modern

22 *Ibid*., p. 123.

23 *Ibid*., p. 161.

24 *Ibid*., p. 110.

25 *Ibid*., p. 15. I have developed this argument concerning the exemplary role of neo-avant-garde works and practices in Tyrus Miller, *Singular Examples: Artistic Politics and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 2009.

passion for the real played out. First, Sloterdijk emphasizes that the characteristic feature of 20th-century reality was complexity, and that "the dominant discourses and actions of the epoch were engaged in a furious struggle against the emergence of complexity."[26] It was, Sloterdijk argues, this confrontation with complexity that impelled the tendency towards extremism evident in 20th-century thought and action:

> It must be emphasized that the Medusean extremisms of that era all possessed the character of fundamentalisms of simplification—including even the fundamentalism of militancy and the myth of a "new beginning" through revolution, that bitter and proud attitude of a radical break with the given world... Wherever manifestations of the extreme were encountered in the course of the twentieth century, there was always an uprising against complexity, that is, against the formal law of the real as conceived in contemporary terms. To be sure, this uprising was carried out entirely in the name of the real itself, of which all camps had formed extremely reductionist concepts.[27]

In one respect, Badiou's conception of the real as discontinuous and fragmented would appear consonant with Sloterdijk's assertation of a fundamental condition of complexity. However, in contrasting the destructive mode of avant-garde formalization, from which Badiou takes critical distance, to a "subtractive" mode of formalization that reveals minimal differences as the very structure of the real, which he affirms, Badiou reduces the response to complexity to two opposed forms of reductive asceticism, but does not question that the Century's imperative is ascetic as such. Sloterdijk will, however, reopen this closed loop of ascetic reduction, in favor of an ethics, aesthetics, and politics of abundance, which he sees as the authentic bases of the 20th century's novel possibilities for humanity. He does this in connection with his other basic conceptual move, which is to overturn the metaphorical implications of "radicalism," which, he argues, are laden with the spirit of gravity, going to ground and plumbing the hidden roots that determine the phenomena of the surface.

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[26] Peter Sloterdijk, *What Happened in the 20th Century?*, trans. Christopher Turner, Polity Press, Cambridge 2018, p. 57.

[27] Sloterdijk, *What Happened in the 20th Century?*, pp. 57–58.

But in contrast, as already suggested by his exposition of spiritual acrobatism in *You Must Change Your Life* as the characteristic modern impulse towards an anti-gravitational elevation, Sloterdijk asserts that the real that provokes the defining passion of the 20th century is rather an unrooted, groundless, aerial reality that rejects the implications of the radical and fundamental. As he summarizes:

> [M]odernity can only be understood as the epoch of a struggle for a new definition of the meaning of reality. In contrast to the polemical ontologies that dominated twentieth-century discourse, I attempt to show that the main event of this age consisted in Western civilization's breaking free from the dogmatism of gravity... [T]he actualization of the real primarily manifests itself in a passion for antigravity—only this... will put us in a position to understand the meaning and the progression of the clashes over the real on their own terms.[28]

This view implies, then, a far more critical attitude towards—and a rhetorical "overturning" of the tropes of—20th-century radicalism than does Badiou's attempt, via the critical distinction of destructive and subtractive reduction, to rescue and redeem the Century's dynamic essence. Thus, Sloterdik's invocation of a "critique of extremist reason" in his essay's subtitle, which he explicates as a "critique of gravitation": "Critique can only really begin at all as a critique of gravitation—but this presupposes that thinking renounce its dogmatic opportunism vis-à-vis the real as basal power from below and freely shift to the midpoint between weighty tendencies and antigravity ones."[29]

Sloterdijk concludes his essay with a speculative history and contemporary context in which the anti-gravitational habits of modern thought, impelled by unsustainably wasteful expenditures of fossil fuels, are sublated into a new metabolic order in which the "worker of nature," especially the generous expenditures of the sun are taken into account. Sloterdijk makes two predictions with respect to this post-fossil fuel condition. First, a realignment of the time-horizon of human experience towards the solar cyclical time of annual renewal and away from the unbounded linear time of human explosion powered by fossil fuel combustion:

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

> The solar system inevitably poses a revaluation of the revaluation of all values—and, as the turn toward current solar energy is putting an end to the frenzied consumption of past solar energy, we could speak of a partial return to the "old values"; for all old values were derived from the imperative of managing energy that could be renewed over the yearly cycle. Hence their deep connection to the categories of stability, necessity, and lack.[30]

Accompanying this global value shift are specific implications for aesthetics and culture, both high and low, which Sloterdijk characterizes as "expressionism" and "the romanticism of explosion," which equate freedom and self-realization with untrammeled release of energy:

> The conditions for the ebullient expressionism of wastefulness in current mass culture will increasingly disappear.[31] It seems probable that from the vantage point of future "soft" technologies, the romanticism of explosion—or, more generally speaking, the psychological, aesthetic, and political derivatives of the sudden release of energy—will be judged in retrospect as the expressive world of a mass-culturally globalized energy fascism.[32]

In his use of the term "expressionism" and his hardly-veiled evocation of futurism, linked as is well know to the historical manifestation of fascism, Sloterdijk conjures the 20th-century aesthetic avant-gardism that Badiou seeks to redeem, as well as the industrial mass culture criticized on other terms by Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse. As he sums up the slogan for a new aesthetic to make tangibly experienceable a world reshaped by a politics, economy, and ethics of the sun: "For the time being, 'high' and 'low' will follow the maxim '*Après nous le solaire*.'"[33]

Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery*

Bernard Stiegler's specific diagnosis of the 20th century derives from his much broader speculative philosophical anthropology, articulated over several differ-

30 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
31 *Ibid.*
32 *Ibid.*
33 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

ent books, most prominently the multivolume *Technics and Time* studies,[34] of the technical structures of "retention." Stiegler has focused on various means of registering memory and their implications for individual and collective temporal experience, insofar as they inflect memorial trace-making, preservation and storage of experiences as memory, and potentialities for reanimation of retained traces and the anticipatory projection of emergent futures. Technics of retention—including various forms of artifacts, writing, and registration in photographic and electronic media—have, he argues, structured human experience, individuation, and community in variable ways throughout human history, from anthropogenesis up to the contemporary "hyperindustrial" epoch. The 20th century, however, constitutes an inflection point in this human development, because of the implications of certain technological media and their capacity to organize temporal experiences themselves as an industrially planned and produced and mass-consumed commodity. This is particularly the object of an almost manifesto-like presentation in the two volumes of his series *Symbolic Misery*, which draws out this argument in detail. It is on this specific part of Stiegler's larger anthropological narrative of memorial technics, and on the particular implications he draws for art and aesthetic experience in the 21st century, that I thus focus my discussion.

Before considering Stiegler's analysis of the 20th century shift in retentional technics and temporal experience, however, I must briefly recount in outline his general argument about the structure of retention. Most importantly, drawing upon Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of time-consciousness (and also on Jacques Derrida's critical interrogation of it), Stiegler distinguishes three orders of retention: primary, secondary, and tertiary. "Primary retention" refers to the way that perception itself requires preservation of previous moments of perception and anticipation of emerging perceptions in order to create continuity in consciousness of any perceived object. Perceptual experience in this sense already requires a more complex temporality than pure presence; memory and expectation are integral to the very possibility of experiencing the presence of objects that persist through a series of lapsing and emerging presents. "Secondary

[34] See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998; *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation*, trans. Stephen Barker, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009; *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans. Stephen Barker, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011.

retention" allows what we conventionally think of as memory—recall of past moments of experience that interpenetrate with and inflect the experience of the present. This "recall" or "memory," however, is not just oriented towards the past; it also affects our anticipation of what is emerging in the present, enriching perception with the contents of the recalled memory and allowing the apparent iteration of a perception to be, in fact, different than and new in comparison with the previous primary experience. Stiegler's innovation (following Derrida's insistence on the grammatological dissemination of philosophical constructs such as "perception," "consciousness," and "memory") is to focus on a third "tertiary" order of retention that is exteriorized in material objects and media. Tertiary retention" is "supplementary" and "prosthetic" in relation to primary and secondary retention, yet, as Derrida's grammatological critique of Husserl already suggested decades ago, it is also always already there at the origin, as the index of an originary "fault" or insufficiency of primary and secondary retention. Primary and secondary retention, while seemingly the objects of tertiary retention's artificial (technical) reproduction and storage capacities, are in fact dependent upon and conditioned by the historical situation of tertiary rententional technics.

In the two volumes of *Symbolic Misery* and their precursory essay "To Love, To Love Me, To Love Us" in *Acting Out*, Stiegler offers a diagnosis of the 20th century as the period of the increasing industrial organization of tertiary retention and the proffering of industrially standardized and synchronized temporal experiences, such as films, television, and recorded music, for sale and consumption on a mass scale. Despite the couching of his argument in the theoretical idiom of phenomenology and French post-structuralism, as well as French theories of technics including Gilbert Simondon and André Leroi-Gourhan, Stiegler's discussion reprises in a striking way the "cultural industry" hypothesis advanced by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the mid-20th century. Adorno in many of his writings, along with Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, did not criticize the industrial products of culture for their artistic shortcomings, which were at most a symptom. More fundamentally, he berued their effects on aesthetic experience as a key means by which individuation was secured in bourgeois societies. As the industrial production and standardization of consumable cultural commodities intensified, he believed, the more rigid the underlying schemata of *possible* aesthetic experiences became and the less such experiences could help to constitute any coherent, individuated ensemble of

personal judgments, memories, and pleasures. Moreover, Adorno saw this disintegration of the individuated subject as, at least in part, a subordination of its lived experiential time to an externalized, industrialized temporality: the economic rhythms of novelty and obsolescence, the synchronized and accelerating cycles of fashion in advanced consumer societies.

With his long anthropological view of retentional techniques, Stiegler strongly concurs with this basic diagnosis of the culture industry's temporal colonization of the individual. Thus, for instance, he writes:

> Television tends to annihilate the diversity of individual secondary retentions, so that the singularity of points of view on images collapses. It is television's vocation to synchronize individual temporalities of consciousnesses belonging to bodies, the behaviours of which it is matter of controlling with a view to *accentuating their massively consumerist expectations*.[35]

Stiegler characterizes the socio-economic and aesthetic tendencies of which television is a vector and an example as "hyperindustrial," namely, "an extension of calculation beyond the sphere of production along with a correlative extension of industrial domains."[36] Stiegler finds in this dynamic an immanent contradiction, insofar as the hyperindustrial drive to synchronize consumption blocks the individuation process by which both individual subjects and cohesive forms of intersubjective sociality are constituted. Both individual and society suffer from a dangerous impoverishment of affective bonds:

> [H]yper-industrialization brings about a new figure of the individual. But, and this is the paradox of my title ("Allegory of the Anthill"), it is a *figure of the individual that finds itself disfigured* insomuch as the hyper-industrial generalization of calculation *creates an obstacle* to the *processes of individuation*, which alone make the individual possible.[37]

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35 Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, trans. Barnaby Norman, Polity Press, Cambridge 2014, p. 88.

36 *Ibid*., p. 47.

37 *Ibid*., p. *Epoch*, 48. See also, on this point, "To Love, To Love Me, To Love Us: From September 11 to April 21," in Stiegler, *Acting Out*, trans. David Barison, Daniel Ross, and Patrick Crogan, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2009, pp. 37–82.

Again, in a partial reprise of Adorno's socio-psychoanalytic theory of the subject in late capitalist society, Stiegler turns to Freudian theory to explicate hyperindustrial society's attack on the individual subject. He focuses on the role that "industrialized temporal objects"—the typical products of culture industry—play in undermining of that individuated time in which the narcissistic self experiences its own cohesion through ongoing affective, libidinally invested interactions with others. With the loss of such diachronic syncopations between self and other in favor of externally synchronized temporalities—the standardized times of broadcasts and experiential objects such as films and musical recordings—the individual threatens to fragment and disappear.

The experience of art therefore takes on an extraordinary importance in this situation, because, he writes:

> Art in general is that which seeks to temporalize differently, so that the time of consciousness of the *I*, supported by the unconscious ground of its incarnated memory, is always diachronic. It liberates through its affirmation the narcissistic unexpected of consciousness's singularity, which can be projected in a *we* through the intermediary of the *screen that every work of art represents*.[38]

Yet the 20th century, he goes on to explicate in discussions of Alain Renais, Joseph Beuys, and Andy Warhol, is also a threshold in which art is incorporated into the dynamics of hyper-industrialization and its powers to encourage diachronic individuation are imperiled. "In the twentieth century," Stiegler writes:

> the integration of mnemotechnics in the sphere of audiovisual production as the most important vector for the constitution of markets, with alphanumeric technology as the new techno-logical condition of any production device, led to art's functional reintegration into the functional life of globalized capitalism—which turns over an ever increasing proportion of its revenue to the aesthetic conditioning of the consumer masses.[39]

[38] Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, p. 91.

[39] Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume 2: The Katastrophē of the Sensible*, trans. Barnaby Norman, Polity Press, Cambridge 2015, p. 158.

Ultimately, however, the recognition that any struggle against the loss of individuation entails a recapture of the aesthetic terrain on which advanced capitalism has, as Stiegler puts it, waged "aesthetic war" against individual diachrony, art may be reinvested with the emancipatory energies that were the legacy of the 20th-century avant-gardes.[40] In a passage that distantly, but distinctly echoes Walter Benjamin's famous call for the politicization of art in the face of the fascist aestheticization of politics, Stiegler concludes his volumes with a call to arms for an art that acknowledges its role in the fight for a new political economy:

> [J]ust when the sensible has become the pre-eminent front in what, as an aesthetic war of an economic nature, is ultimately a temporal war (a confrontation of calculation and singularities in the epoch of mnemotechnologies integrated into production), artistic and spiritual questions have become questions of political economy. It is only by being aware of this, by being prepared in this way, that the struggle can begin.[41]

Conclusion

In their examinations of the 20th century, the three philosophers considered here diverge significantly in their overall diagnoses and in the accent they lay upon different features of the period. Badiou seeks to extract the kernel of heroic, experimental formalization as the essential trait of "the Century," while rescuing avant-garde forms (in politics as well as art) from the violence of purification and purgation that often accompanied 20th-century thought and action. Sloterdijk sees the 20th century as disclosing a hidden "anti-gravitational" essence of long-standing human dreams of abundance and freedom from necessity—most notably brought to their culmination in the mass utopias of communism and late capitalist consumerism, but also expressed through increasingly differentiated forms of spiritual and physical discipline as loosening the naturally given earth-boundedness of human existence. In turn, Sloterdijk perceives in this anti-gravitational dynamic a potential pivot upon which to reverse the ecological destruction that has been, up to now, the heavy cost of growing abundance. Stiegler considers the industrial production and standardization of external-

40 See, on this point, the essays in *Aesthetic Revolutions and Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, ed. Aleš Erjavec, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina 2015.

41 Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume 2: The Katastrophē of the Sensible*, p. 175.

ized, technically objectified memory—"tertiary retention"—as the decisive and distinctive feature of the 20th century. This standardization and the proliferation of industrially produced "temporal objects" such as films and recorded music, he contends, threaten the very fabric of human experience and the capacity to find meaning in the self and the world.

Can we, however, also discover congruence and complementarity between these divergent diagnoses of the 20th century? I would like to suggest that the answer is, yes, in three ways. First, it is notable that all three treat the 20th century not simply as an ordinary historical span of years, or even as an epoch in the ordinary sense of a meaningful ensemble of large-scale historical patterns over a certain period of time. Rather, it appears in each as an *anthropological* threshold, which, having been crossed, reveals the "human" itself to have been radically altered. For each, the 21st century is a moment of danger in which we look back from the other side of that threshold of human being and take stock of whither we have arrived. Second, notably, in none of the three is there any entertainment of the argument for "the end of art," first advanced by Hegel in the 19th century and reprised in the wake of late 20th-century postmodernism and contemporary art, most notably by Arthur C. Danto.[42] The "end of art" thesis does not, of course, signify that art is not being produced; it is contended rather that art no longer represents the vector of any truth that would lend its development a coherent historical direction and boundaries, a "philosophical history," one might say, that it expresses. Badiou argues, in contrast, that art has only, since passing through "the Century," fully come into its own as a truth procedure unconstrained by external didactic or romantic criteria. Sloterdijk evokes a still more grand vision of art's relation to truth, in a telling metaphor: art's solar turn, its tropism towards a post-Platonic sun of energic generosity. Stiegler, too, places art in the complex of truth that emerges out of an ex-static structure of time articulated through the interaction of primary, secondary, and tertiary retentions. The artist, in the present day, must be a "pioneer of individuation," because the practice of art offers the most important counterweight to the culture industry's expropriation of the temporal structure within which truth may

[42] See, for example, Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998; and Arthur C. Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense", *History and Theory* 37 (4/1998): pp. 127–143. *Cf*. in a more art critical vein, David Joselit, *After Art,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 2012.

occur and become humanly effective. Lastly, each takes the exploration of art's relation to truth as the nodal point for a reflection on the broader role of "the aesthetic" in the contemporary world. Badiou, admittedly, conceives of their relation disjunctively: art is "inaesthetic" in its autonomy as a formalized truth procedure that cannot be reduced to a set of effect on the sensible. In contrast, both Sloterdijk and Stiegler evoke what Stiegler calls the "*katastrophē* of the sensible"—its fateful overturning or reversal—that pivots, to a substantial degree, on the practice of art. The destiny of the sensible in a new disposition of the aesthetic is decisive in the not-yet fulfilled meaning of the *katastrophē* of which we are in the midst: whether, in other words, it will prove a "catastrophic" disaster or the emergence of a more hopeful human future.