
Gilbert Simondon

Milieus, Techniques, Aesthetics

Introduction to *Inflexions* Issue 5

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Gilbert Simondon: Milieus, Techniques, Aesthetics is intended as a precursor to the forthcoming English translations of his work on technical objects and individuation. We seek to elicit the necessary tools to think through his creative approach to the relationship between the becoming of technology, living organisms and aesthetics with respect to material and lived intensities. While Simondon's oeuvre tends towards a philosophy of technical objects and individuation, its relevance to artistic practice or *aesthetics in action* have yet to be fully explored.

Simondon's constructive and operational grasp radically transforms the traditional teleological, structural and functional approach to technology by recentering the problem within an operational and relational approach. Whereas a functional approach emphasizes structures after their process of formation as well as their corresponding functionings, an operational undertaking privileges the formative processes at play in the genesis of forms. Emerging forms, by this account, cannot be deduced from pre-given forms. In other words, technological functionings cannot be explained by the forms to which they are related, and conversely. A functioning is an effect rather than a correspondence or an explanation. Simondon argues for the becoming of technical objects and individuals to be understood in terms of a concretization or individuation

emerging from a preindividual field of relation. The technical object or individual is not a concretization in the sense that it instantiates an abstract object. Rather, it is a novel emergence from the preindividual, whose tensions it resolves in its mode of being. In the process, it potentializes an “associated milieu,” which acts as a connective force maintaining the solidarity of its subsequent operations as a constituted being.

Further, Simondon situates technology in relation to magical, religious, aesthetic and philosophical thought. These domains are not in causal continuity with one another, but participate in a complex set of relationalities that enable the emergence of a heterogeneous unity in movement enveloping the totality of all modes in virtue of a process of reticulation, or networking, effected by aesthetics. The modes of thought are therefore not juxtaposed – fused or confused – but given all at once in their genetic or formative processes. More precisely, technical and religious thought results from the unfolding of magical thought. Magical thought is a primitive unity, a plurality of modes of existence, a living and linking relation between humans and the world that precedes the distinction between subjects and objects. An aesthetic engagement recalls the rupture of the magical state of primitive unity, and in so doing brings the potential for reticulating it anew, enabling the emergence of a future unity. Aesthetics, Simondon warns us, does not unfold. Rather, it operates horizontally, and maintains the function of totality in a field of reality that tends to diverge through specialization. In other words, it facilitates the unification of heterogeneous domains – disciplines, modes of thought, etc. – by allowing them to get networked back together. Aesthetics constitutes a remarkable point carrying the trace of a unity from which a new unity can be reticulated/networked. Aesthetics is therefore never determined; it is a tendency carrying the power of reticulation. Aesthetics enables an engagement with the magical state, while negotiating the vast milieus of its creation. Thus, art is conceptualized as a meaningful reaction to the loss of signification generated by the divergent unfolding that split the magical unity. Art works recapture something of the feeling of the primitive unity as their own aesthetic feeling, but they do not reconstitute the primitive unity.

While it is the technical object that Simondon privileges in his work, he conceptualizes it as an allagmatic theory: a theory of operations. The operations in question do not only reside in the individuation of the technical object. Their interlinkages connect all aspects of human endeavour. Simondon guides us in thinking through how an isomorphism between operational relations between domains of emergence – as opposed to structural relations between constituted forms – valorizes the objective conditions of a processual and relational approach to the becoming of technique. This is how energetic milieus are entangled in processes of potentialization that improvise connections and carry implicit forms/virtual motifs. What we see as a “work of art” then, is a snapshot of an intensive and ongoing process of concretization and individuation. We are thus far removed from the traditional domain of representational art.

Simondon’s contribution is perhaps best actualized in works of art that emerge within the intertwining of sciences and technology. We have invited artists, practitioners and thinkers to present rigorous contributions to the region of practices that straddle technoscientific investigation and creation. In each of the papers presented in this issue, the work is in the potential individuation as revealed through an action: an active artistic engagement through the questioning of material concretization. These investigations are potentialized patterns and motifs of aesthetic engagement: a cycle, if you will, of pre-individuated with the individuated, of the abstract with the concrete. It is in the discourse that is presented here, we hope, that both the terms aesthetic and technique have the possibility of a radical redistribution of meaning as is suggested in his term the techno-aesthetic.