In The Decadence of Industrial Democracies Bernard Stiegler presents a singular take on the culture industry in the hyper-industrial age and offers a radical understanding of technological and cultural change. Stiegler applies his philosophical approach developed in Technics and Time to the Americanized culture industry at the heart of industrial democracies. Echoing the Frankfurt School, he describes the willingness of consumer citizens to trade leisure time for consumptive habits. This entails the technological externalization and rationalization of leisure, and undermines capitalism’s reasons for existence. Consumers cede the capacity to imagine a different future as they are integrated into the markets of a globalizing culture industry. Certainly these observations are familiar territory to students of culture. However, Stiegler reminds us that the current American monopoly on consumer technology does not have to continue in its current form. Stiegler calls for people, in particular those within the European Union, to reclaim their culture through individuation as the process of becoming oneself by imagining a different future. While Stiegler is ambiguous about how individuation takes place, he proposes that we go beyond acts of resistance in order to combat the grammatizing tendency of hyper-industrial cultural capitalism. This requires the reorganization, or transvaluation, of the composition of technology and culture and the composition of doing and thinking (tekhne and logos) towards new forms of individuation.

Individuation and grammatization are trends in technological and social change that are engaged in complex constitutive relations. Stiegler advocates for the composition

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1 Grammatization is borrowed from Sylvian Auroux and refers to “The technological condition (in the sense that it is always technical and logical) of all knowledge, and which begins with its exteriorization… To grammatize means, according to Auroux, to discretize in order to isolate the gramme, that is, those constitutive and finitely numbered elements that together form a system” (Stiegler 172).
of these two tendencies, rather than a political project that intends for one tendency to win out over the other. Stiegler, following Gilbert Simondon, employs the concept of individuation to designate the process by which an I and a We are produced in relation to one another. Individuation is a “metastable equilibrium,” a form of becoming that changes and is never final (Stiegler 28). It relies on a shared history made concrete in technological apparatuses or hypomnemata; the technologies such as writing that record memories and, in Foucault’s use of the term, specifically, those recorded memories that pertain to the production and care of the self. For instance, Stiegler argues for a European project of rebirth that redirects Europe’s historical proliferation of recorded memories in literature, art and legal institutions toward a new cultural and political individuation. The culture industry, with its origins in the US, has contributed to the accumulation of hypomnemata and their subjection to the logic of capital. As such, new political projects must employ the technologies and content of the culture industry toward new forms of community: “Politics is above all the motivation and organization of a psychic and collective individuation process, and… in our epoch this process is produced essentially via information and communication technologies” (Stiegler 17).

Individuation always encounters the counter-tendency of grammatization which refers to the externalization of any formal system. The obvious example of grammatization is the process by which speech is externalized and reduced to discrete units within the technical system of the phonetic alphabet. However, grammatization should not be limited to systems of graphemes. For Stiegler, grammatization also encompasses the externalization and rationalization of production in machinery and leisure in the communication technologies of the culture industry. On one hand, grammatization works as a Derridian supplement, cognitively and corporally archiving intergenerational memory and providing the preindividuated funds for new forms of individuation. On the other hand, the proliferation of hypomnemata in technical systems of grammatization has been disarticulated from cultural change and has subjected culture to techno-logical imperatives leading to cultural disindividuation. This second effect is consonant with contemporary technologies that turn everything, even libidinal desires, into standing reserves for exploitation. The subjection of production and consumption to grammatization “has the effect of producing a standardization and a formalization, submitting everything that it formalizes to calculability” (Stiegler 38-9). As such, new political projects must take up the task of rearticulating the composition of grammatization and individuation.

The culture industry has generalized the process of grammatization, superseding the opposition of classes in Marxist accounts, and so Stiegler calls for different forms of political intervention. For Marx, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are defined by their positions within relations of production. For Stiegler, following Simondon, the
externalization and mechanization of the productive capacities of the worker, rather than one's position within the relations of production, is the central feature of proletarianization in the sphere of production: “Thus the reality of proletarianization is, more than pauperization, the worker's loss of knowledge, the worker tending to become unskilled pure labor force - and lacking any motive to work beyond the need to subsist” (Stiegler 62). He characterizes proletarianization as “the retreat of the hand understood as the retreat of the corporeal organ of fabrication, to be replaced by the machine” (Stiegler 146).

The ascendancy of marketing and the culture industry extends the process of proletarianization into the sphere of consumption and leisure: “Just as the proletarianization of the worker is the rationalization of subsistence such that it ends in a pure becoming-commodity of labor force, that is, of the body, so too the proletarianization of consumers is the rationalization of existence as the becoming commodity of consciousness” (Stiegler 63). This echoes arguments made by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer whom Stiegler praises for being “the first to understand that the culture industries form a system within industry in general, the function of which consists in fabricating and controlling consumer behavior” (Stiegler 108). Following Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry thesis, Stiegler contends that leisure in capitalist society resembles mechanized work practices and thus erases the ability for an individual to engage in leisure time altogether. The culture industry aims to make the “singularities” of cultural products “comparable and categorizable by transforming them into empty particularities” (Stiegler 126). In a word, producing difference but prohibiting against individuation. Stiegler’s argument differs, however, by positing that the technical and mnemonic resources of the culture industry provide the basis for a cultural politics of memory. Further, the grammatizing process of the culture industry is unsustainable in that it undermines its own reason for existence.

According to Stiegler, singularity is the desire of libido, and in our societies of control the culture industry is primarily involved in controlling and exploiting libidinal energy. The culture industry is at the heart of the shift from disciplinary society to “societies of control” - a Deleuzian term that describes the “advent of very advanced control technologies emerging from digitization, and converging in a computational system of globally integrated production and consumption” (Stiegler 5). Stiegler contends that in societies of control “it is not merely a matter of making the population into a production machine… it is a matter of making it into a consumer market, and the training involved becomes that of consumer behavior” (Stiegler 81). The society of control is concerned with the exploitation of libidinal energy on a voluntary rather than coercive basis. Herbert Marcuse famously sketched the relationship between the
culture industry and libido. His concept of repressive desublimation describes the way in which capitalism induces individuals to perceive their desires as consonant with those experiences made instantly available by the culture industry, thus reducing the necessity of sublimation and the domain of libido (Marcuse 76). For Stiegler, singularity is the object and desire of the libido which in turn directs all consumption and in hyper-industrial capitalism: “the principle motive has become capturing and harnessing the flows of libidinal energies and the only way to harness them is to make them standardized, in effect disrupting and destroying these flows. As such, the implementation of this goal becomes self-destructive” (Stiegler 150). It is the exhaustion of libidinal energy in a society that “demotivates those who constitute it” that Stiegler calls “the decadence of industrial democracies” (Stiegler 30).

Stiegler calls for “combating” the overwhelming tendency of grammatization in hyper-industrial cultural capitalism by deploying hypomnemata toward new forms of individuation. Rather than an opposition wherein one tendency wins out, combat must take into consideration the composition of grammatization and individuation. That is, collective political projects are not possible without drawing on cultural resources that are externalized in formal systems. Stiegler’s approach to combat is rooted in a critique of Marxist class struggle.

For Stiegler, the weakness of Marxism is its understanding of “class struggle as the possible and necessary elimination of one tendency of the exteriorization process in which social life consists by another, contrary tendency” (Stiegler 52). This oppositional thinking that pits the working class against the forces of capital serves to reproduce relations of production and remains “reactive in the Nietzchean sense” (Stiegler 52-53). First, class conflict assumes empirical class positions that, according to Stiegler, have been rendered untenable by the process of generalized proletarianization in all sectors of society. Second, Marxist class struggle attempts to pit one force against another, which can reproduce rather than overcome existing conditions.


__Repressive desublimation is the process by which libidinal (instinctual and sexual) desires are liberalized and transformed into socially useful and acceptable activities which reinforce rather than challenge the status quo.__

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which advocates for the openness of liberal markets to permit future justice and the entrance of the Other, Stiegler sees the market as a site of domination and reification that needs to be swept up in a radical cultural politics (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 212). In *Decadence* Stiegler goes a step further calling for a direct intervention, potentially involving the state, in the technologies of the culture industry: “this would thus be a combat against [for instance] all television, which is always either totally or partially financed by advertising, and this is what it is a matter of changing” (Stiegler 157). Sinnerbrink further notes Stiegler’s “materialist reinscription of the logic of diff érance into the history of technical supplements.” Stiegler posits technology as an original support for human existence and argues for the composition of consciousness and technics (*logos* and *tekhne*).

In the section “Wanting to Believe: In the Hands of the Intellect,” Stiegler makes it clear that combat is, at its heart, cultural individuation that requires technology as a supplement and a weapon. In his account *logos* and *tekhne* are different tendencies within a composition: the composition of the intellect and the hand in “the hands of the intellect.” He transvalues the two sides of the composition: first, the intellect or *logos* is able to act: “the intellect has some hands [and] having hands, here, means being able to do something” (Stiegler 132). Second, the hand or *tekhne* is able to act, but is also a libidinal drive that seeks singularity: it “remains nevertheless the flesh that desires to desire—and that calls forth the will that wants to want, and wants to be able to believe, and to be able to want to believe” (Stiegler 162). In addition to reversing the valence of these terms, Stiegler takes up Nietzsche’s concept of the will as a vital element of combat. Individuation requires a will to believe: politics is a leap forward without knowing what a new phase of individuation will bring.

*Decadence* brings Stiegler’s philosophy of technology to bear on important questions regarding media and culture. He draws on a number of philosophical strains of thought to produce a distinctive account of the culture industry and the irrationality of industrial societies. This work raises important questions about the efficacy of Marxist understandings of class struggle, because of the general process of proletarianization and the tendency for oppositional politics to reinforce rather than overcome existing conditions. Further, Stiegler avoids some of the more complacent and celebratory offshoots from Derrida with his call to combat. However, Stiegler’s approach cannot assign the task of social change to a specific group as the process of change is concomitant with the individuation of that agent. That is, individuation is the process by which change is enacted and the process by which the agent of that change is brought into being. Stiegler avoids the historical problem of assigning agency to particular groups such as the working class, intellectuals or students, but this leaves the question of agency open and susceptible to capture by more insidious forms of the state and class domination. Further, in terms of strategy, Stiegler leaves
it to others to consider how specific digital technologies may serve as supplements
to individuation. Still, *Decadence* includes a powerful reimagining of our contempo-
rary relation to technology and the types of combat which would work through the
tendencies of industrial capitalism rather than reproducing persistent oppositions.

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