



The Promise of Total Automation Introduction by Anne Faucheret

Our contemporary culture is unbalanced because, while it grants recognition to certain objects, for example to things aesthetic, and gives them their due place in the world of meanings, it banishes other objects, particularly things technical, into the unstructured world of things that have no meaning but do have a use, a utilitarian function ...

Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, 1958

If motorized machines constituted the second age of the technical machine, cybernetic and informational machines form a third age that reconstructs a generalised regime of subjection: recurrent and reversible 'humans-machines systems' replace the old nonrecurring and nonreversible relations of subjection between the two elements; the relation between human and machine is based on internal, mutual communication, and no longer on usage or action.

In the organic composition of capital, variable capital defines a regime of subjection of the worker (human surplus value), the principal framework of which is the business or factory. But with automation comes a progressive increase in the proportion of constant capital; we then see a new kind of enslavement: at the same time the work regime changes, surplus value becomes machinic, and the framework expands to all of society. It could also be said that a small amount of subjectification took us away from machinic enslavement, but a large amount brings us back to it.

G. Deleuze / F. Guattari, *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie II*, 1980

After all, we create the technology. Yet, as our century shows, we are never fully in charge of what we create, and technology, by its very nature, produces its effects through automation. Automation holds a mighty attraction. It can deliver so many good things. But it also has a darker side. Sometimes technology seems to be in charge, dictating the conditions under which we live and forcing us to choose among uneasy alternatives when we feel least prepared to choose.

Michael Heim, *Heidegger and Computers*, 1990

Objectivity and subjectivity are not opposed, they grow together, and they grow irreversibly together. The challenge of our philosophy, social theory, and morality is to invent political institutions that can absorb this much history, this huge spiralling movement, this destiny, this fate ... At the very least, I hope to have convinced you that, if our challenge is to be met, it will not be met by considering artifacts as things. They deserve better. They deserved to be housed in our intellectual culture as full-fledged social actors.

They mediate our actions?

No they are us.

Bruno Latour, *On Technical Mediation, in Common Knowledge*, 1994

Ever since the arrival of cybernetics we have entered into the new territory of the technological condition, which is where the process of experiencing the world and constructing sense now takes place. The nature of this new territory gradually becomes clearer precisely through its groundlessness: as a regime of sense that exposes the originary technicity of sense, that constantly merges human and non-human actors, that operates before the difference between subject and object, that is endlessly prosthetic and supplementary, that is immanent rather than transcendental, and that is to an unheard-of degree distributed and indeed ecotechnological.

Erich Hörl, *The Technological Condition*, in *Parrhesia*, 2015

We urgently need art today because it can be reconfigured to play a productive role in the reconciliation of human and machine subjectivities. We need art because it is only through art that we might be able to find a nontrivial cybernetic system for reestablishing a shared inhuman ethical foundation. This work cannot be automated and relegated exclusively either to humans or to machines. We ought to fully employ art, before our excessive humanism destroys the possibility of emergence of an ethical AI. We ought to teach our machines how to make and understand art and how its production is crucial in the social process of co-individuation.

Mohammad Salemy, *Art after the machine*, 2015

Today: Technological Dependency and the Magic of the Machine

The digital era is the continuation, reorganisation and acceleration of the technological system, based on automation, information and control, that was set up centuries ago with, among other things, the invention of the telegraph or the radio.

Today, we are constantly connected and we need to cultivate our desire to connect. However, not only humans are linked via internet, but machines and things also communicate with each other and with their environment. This autonomy of technological devices, as well as the disappearance of their technological look, bring them closer to ritual artefacts, charged with meaning. Whether we want it or not, they begin to live a life of their own. To a certain degree, even the technical system as a whole has become an almost autonomous global power.

Humans have always projected magic and the supernatural into machines and technological objects, beyond the energy, knowledge and skillfulness they injected into their creations, reconfiguring the relations between humans, the perceived world and what is beyond. Technology has always been regarded as both the instrument of reason leading to linear progress and the prism through which the chaos, the occult and the irrational of the world can be achieved or glimpsed. Franz Anton Mesmer invented devices to canalize the animal magnetism he sensed flowing between all animated and inanimate objects. Thomas Edison worked on a device he called a “spirit phone” which would allow the living to communicate with the dead. Nikolai Fedorov developed the “common task” project, speculating on the creation of technological, social and political conditions under which all humans who have ever lived could be resurrected. Besides, history has shown that unintended, unintentional and internal dynamics characterise technological developments.

After the development of cybernetics a shift occurred as modern technology hit human culture with the force of an invasion: it revved up communication with radio and television; it gave nations the radar apparatus and armed them with anti-aircraft missiles, and arsenals of nuclear weapons; and it offered the first options for computing the entire environment. It consecrated technology as a way to rationalise and normalise the world, economically and politically. All technologies are supposed to converge on the same goal: the enhancement of the liberal subject. Today, technology is primarily used as an instrument for capitalistic rationalising

logic. We can hardly escape this logic, since we are permanently reinforcing it by using technological devices. How could this happen? How have technical infrastructures, hardware and software – and with them the social and legal infrastructures – been co-opted by one ideology? How has it come about that we are totally dependent on technology but are still unable to figure out what the challenges and consequences it brings to society are? Then again, it's no use to regard technology as mankind's worst enemy, having its own abstract will and directing humans towards its own mysterious goals or as mankind's best friend, carrying out the technological, political, social and moral enhancement of the whole world. Critical glitches are embedded in the system, disruptions and new usages can appear: there is potential for change.

A look back: Abstract Machines, Technological Objects and Posthuman Subjects

As technology slowly invaded the real and its representation, new philosophical developments increasingly put the Western tradition into question. It would be better to envision technology not as a mere tool, but more as a structure: that humans are created by technology as much as they have created it. Our individuation has always been closely linked to the *tekhnai*, and our capacity to perceive and understand this world depends on the apparatuses of the current technical system.

Moreover, as technical objects now even bypass subjects altogether, it is necessary to acknowledge that the modes of experience, of cognition, of labour, and of control have drastically changed and that we have to think of technology beyond the separation between subjects and objects. We can no longer separate the active subject, who gives form and meaning, who works on the machine, who transforms the world, from the passive or material object, which is formless and senseless. In this constellation, other uses and visions for technology and for technical objects are possible. We have to think and act in new terms, in our daily life as well as in our political imagination.

Gilbert Simondon, affirmed in 1956 that the machines surrounding us are cultural objects not only characterised by their instrumental value, but by their capacity to produce sense. Incorporating the technical objects into the traditional world of meaning, Simondon was looking for a specific mode of existence for them, identifying interconnections rather than opposed essences (i.e. object/subject). He was also describing the transformation from “closed machines” to “open machines”, that is, technical ensembles or machine networks, constituting a society of technical objects where humans are included as interpreters. Simondon's appeal was followed by a number of artists and philosophers in the next decades.

In 1980, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari quoted Simondon to identify the machinistic dimension of capitalism in their book *Mille Plateaux*. For them, not only technical machines, but also social, economic and aesthetic ones are at work in the capitalist system, operating at the core of the human subjectivity to subject and enslave. Thus, subjectivity has to be reinvented as something not specifically human but associative – bringing together human groups, socio-economic machines and informational machines – to resist the hardening of an apparatus in the exclusive service of power.

Artistic praxis is a privileged territory for new types of individuation. The artists in the show adopt the notion of a posthuman community, consisting of interdependent objects, technologies and beings, as the point of departure for their investigations about desire, affect and imagination, about aesthetics, ethics, knowledge transmission and political responsibility. At the heart of their creative process lies a “distributed agency of vibrant matter” (Jane Bennett), a “structural coupling of the human and technics (Bernard Stiegler) or a critical “profanation” of an apparatus (Giorgio

Agamben). They try to think beyond the usual dichotomies of body/soul, matter/mind, subject/object, individual/environment, outer space/earth, and rationality/chaos. The encounters in the exhibition space are encounters between the people involved and composite bodies – consisting of so-called human as well as non-human composites. Production machines, technical objects, images and artworks populate the space, coming from the archaeology of the digital age as well as from fantasies of a technological future. They create a space of indeterminacy where the relations between things precedes fixed identities. These encounters are the milestones of an investigation of the condition of the subjects, of the objects and of their agency in technocratic capitalism.

The Automated Future: Ubiquity and Control

Capitalist engineers and scientists have a dream of a fluid and transparent world. In this world, all chipped objects, with no distinction whatsoever (money, commodities, labour, the earth or the human body) must operate on and through each other without a subjective moment, without a controlling human agent. Manual as well as intellectual labour have been completely delegated to “open machines”. Past and future coalesces in the present.

This is the dream of capital and this dream is partly becoming reality. Not only is this happening in the automated production and circulation of commodities but moreover in the constitution of the so-called “Internet of Things” as well as the extension of data mining technology. Open machines are doing what we want them to do for us, but, at the same time, are gathering, computing and sending data without us knowing. All of our devices and appliances will soon join the network, communicating with us and each other, driven by the technology industry and business interests. They participate in the mapping of a parallel world, performing a total ubiquity of humans, animals and things, an absolute moment of simultaneity of time and space.

The central activity of the system becomes that of control performance. The central activity of the individual becomes repetitive enactments of predicted scenarios. Automation reigns over production and behaviours. The promises of individual freedoms stand in contrast to forms of cybernetic control and modulation of social behaviour.

How did the technical system in which we live become what it is? Does the increasing automation bring an obstacle to the free individuation of the subject, to humanity’s political and emotional agency? What about a subject no longer in need of labour, no longer in need of responsibility and self-reflexivity, living in an over-monitored and loving environment? Have objects, originally designed to satisfy our desires, by now enslaved us – or will they enslave us in the end? Or: Do they simply open new ways of thinking, creating and configuring things culturally, politically and socially that we have yet to explore? Will the faith in “things” and technical objects constitute an authentic and emancipative rupture with the anthropocentric and capitalist tradition, or will it only reinforce this for the sake of capital, and the few; for the sake of the data-colonisation of mind and space?

The “promise of total automation” was the battlecry of Fordism, the techno-medial apparatus its weapon. Production, communication, control and body-enhancements were its goals. In the show, automation, improvisation and a sense of wonder are not opposed but sustain each other, so as to nurture radical imagination and to challenge a political ecology of things.

Let us be at the same time humanists and machinists, at the same time intersubjective and interobjective!