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communication**

MESSAGING AS A TECHNICO-PROSTHETICAL  
DESIRING-MACHINE

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# Text Messages in immediate communication Messaging as a Technico-Prosthetical Desiring-Machine

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## Abstract

In this essay I will explore and relate Bernard Stiegler's notion of prosthesis, Gilbert Simondon's idea of technical object and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the desiring-machine through text messaging. Furthermore, I will extend the analysis to the anxiety generated by knowing when another person has read the message.

*Keywords:* text messaging, prosthesis, technical object, desiring-machine, anxiety

Just as Stiegler embarks on the task of "using the concept of concretization to describe the evolution of the technical system in general by considering the system itself as individual and object"(Stiegler 1998, p. 27) and if it is true that "it is through technics that the destiny of being unfolds, that is, technics is the history of being itself"(Stiegler 1998, p. 10) then exploring text messaging is imperative when trying to understand ourselves in this moment of history, since billions of messages are sent daily, thus becoming and essential technical object, in Simondon's sense, in our everyday lives. This essay is an exploration of the notion of text messages, and more precisely text messaging as an activity, in an attempt to assign to it Stiegler's notion of prosthesis, Simondon's of technical object and Deleuze and Guattari's of desiring-machine. This analysis will attempt to reveal how these three ideas

can be linked and in some cases even applied to the same situation and in this way relate this thinkers.

It is no longer news that text messages are an essential part of our lives. Ever since the introduction of the Short Message Service (SMS) as part of the services of mobile communications, text messages have been integral to the evolution of mobile communications. It was thanks to text messages that the first mobile networks grew so vast (Agar 2004) and later also because of text messaging via BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) that mobile phones began to attain their ubiquity, particularly amongst young people (Kasesniemi & Rautiainen 2002). More recently, WhatsApp Messenger has been the tool that has permeated the most worldwide and it is in third-world countries that it has shown the most growth reaching now over half a million active users every month (WhatsApp 2014). However, although SMS has lost some influence because of instant messaging services such as BBM or WhatsApp, it is through short messages, with either of these technologies, that people now widely and intensely communicate, sending and receiving billions of messages every day (Trenholm 2012). This is the reason why I will use this technology as the link through which we can jump from one theory to another, since it will also make us aware that these notions are not only theories but are also in effect in our everyday lives.

The definition Stiegler gives of prostheticity as "a putting-outside-the-self that is also putting-out-of-range-of-oneself" (Stiegler 1998, p. 146) can be applied to text messages. Nonetheless, I believe that it better fits the act of text messaging than messages themselves, or even messaging technology, because the process of sending a message puts us "outside" ourselves and, more importantly, "outside-of-the-range" of ourselves; when we send a text message the words, the content, the message itself, comes out of us and

outside, leaving us with nothing but loneliness and anxiety, again using Stiegler's terms, since "[a]nxiety isolates and thereby discloses the possible. Loneliness is not solipsism but being-in-the-world, which is, nevertheless, a not-being-at-home. The familiarity of the collapsing world becomes being-outside-oneself."(Stiegler 1998, p. 256) It is then clear that when we send a text message we are no more being-at-home since a part of us is now being-outside-the-self and being-in-the-world, which could mean the same thing in this context: it is being-outside-the-self because it is no longer in us and being-in-the-world because it now lives with others and in others that are in the world; the text message sent now becomes being-inside-the-self of another person or group of people leaving the sender only with this sense of loneliness and anxiety that Stiegler describes.

The activity of sending, and also receiving, text messages gives us the possibility of communicating ourselves in an immediate yet discontinuous manner. This flow of actions certainly resembles the evolution of technical objects as described by Simondon, since they do not happen in an absolutely continuous or discontinuous manner but "involve stages that are definable by the fact that they bring into being successive systems of coherence."(Simondon 1980, p. 21) In this case, the stages are clearly defined: one sends a message, receives confirmation of the message being delivered, receives confirmation of a message being read, and waits for a reply; when a reply comes, a new message is sent thus triggering the start of a new coherent system similar to the previous one but more evolved since it now also has the knowledge of the previous cycle. It may seem as though this system is in continuous movement but, as Simondon warns us, "[t]he actual evolution of technical objects does not happen in an absolutely continuous manner; it does not happen in an absolutely discontinuous manner either"(Simondon 1980, p. 21) and we can easily distinguish the

continuous-discontinuous fashion in which this technical object, the act of text messaging, is evolving.

I have to make one thing clear at this point since it may appear that I am simply using one simple conversation via text messages to account for text messaging being a technical object and evolving in a continuous-discontinuous way, but the observation is scalable if we take into account all of the conversations happening through text messaging. We can see that taken as a whole these discontinuities happen in an almost continuous manner asymptotically approaching Simondon's description of evolution. The fact that text messaging can be described as a technical object should not come as a surprise to us since, according to Simondon, "[w]e are able to create technical beings because we have within ourselves an interplay of relationships and a matter-form association which is remarkably analogous to that which we establish in the technical object" (Simondon 1980, p. 66) and I believe there is nothing that resembles our relationships more than text messaging since it has, in fact, become a new kind of relationship altogether.

There is a third notion I want to put on the table to describe text messaging, that of the machine in Deleuze and Guattari's work, an idea best described in the opening lines of *Anti-Oedipus*:

It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have ever said *the id*. Everywhere *it* is machines —real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections. (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p. 1)

We can begin to imagine here how the notion of the machine can be ap-

plied to text messaging but it would be pointless to only describe it as a machine since for Deleuze and Guattari practically everything is a machine and thus I would accomplish nothing adding yet another instance to that very broad description. Therefore, I will argue that text messaging is specifically a desiring-machine and the first piece of evidence I will use is that "[d]esiring-machines are binary machines, obeying a binary law or set of rules governing associations: one machine is always coupled with another."(Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p. 5) It might not be self-evident how this definition fits with text messaging, especially after my having assigned it the characteristic of a prosthesis and of a technical object that now weigh heavily upon it but in fact it is clearer than expected for, as I wrote earlier, Simondon gives every technical object an evolution available only by "successive systems of coherence" and these systems here correspond to the coupling of a desiring machine, i.e. succession necessarily involves a coupling from the previous-state technical object to the latter one achieved in evolution. We could argue, for example, that text messaging is always coupled to the sender and the receiver and this binary association is essential for the flow of text messaging as a desiring-machine. We can just as easily find a relationship between Stiegler's prosthesis and the desiring-machines if we interpret coupling as the being-outside-of-oneself of the desiring-machines, which depend on associations for their being; this coupling puts the desiring-machine outside itself and thus becomes a prosthesis. An essential characteristic of desiring-machines is that they produce desire and "all desiring-production is, in and of itself, immediately consumption and consummation, and therefore, 'sensual pleasure.'" (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p. 18) Once more, we can find this characteristic in text messaging: every text message is only produced to be consumed by its receiver and receiving a text message gives us a certain satisfaction that could be equated to this "sensual pleasure"; in doing so, we confirm text messaging as a desiring-machine.

So far I have related the notions of prosthesis in Stiegler, technical object in Simondon and desiring-machine in Deleuze and Guattari through text messaging. However, it is not only the act of sending the message which is important, the gap between sending a message and receiving an answer, too, deserves its own analysis and can be seen as a prosthesis product of the technical evolution, perhaps even more so than text messaging itself, since "a 'prosthesis' does not supplement something, does not replace what would have been there before it and would have been lost: it is added" (Stiegler 1998, p. 152). Opposed to sending messages via a mobile phone, which could be seen as sending a letter or a telegram without any intermediaries (at least not human intermediaries), this gap is a completely new thing, a product of the new technologies that make text messaging possible.

A few hundred years ago, because it took so long for a sent message to be received, people would carry on with their daily activities without ever thinking of that message sent, except perhaps in the hope that this week a reply would come.. The mailman only came once a day, after all, as opposed to today's situation where you can receive an answer any time of the day or night. Hence, there existed no true expectation of a reply, or at least none that could make you cause anxiety (urgent messages such as sickness or a newborn might have been the exceptions). Now, every single text message sent is imbued with the possibility of immediacy and factual continuity in communication, resembling spoken communication; this is one of the reasons it is so anxiety-producing.

As an example, imagine that you are talking, literally *speaking* on the phone with someone (a situation in which you usually would expect immediate replies and a continuous flow of conversation) and every time you say some-

thing the other person takes more than a few seconds to reply. You have "sent" your message, you know the other person has received it — they heard you — and yet the receiver is taking a lot of time to give an answer, why? Is he not really paying attention to what you just said? Does he not care? Does he have more important things to do than talk to you? Why, in that case, did he agree on this conversation? You can easily introduce the same questions in text messaging, assuming for the last one that when a person has read your message he has passively "agreed" to take part in the conversation, or so would be our understanding. Now we are ready to discover the true prostheticity in the space between message and reply because "prostheticity also means nonaccomplishment, lack of being, that is, being-in-de-fault"(Stiegler 1998, p. 216) and in the moment when we know the other has seen our message we are most in-de-fault because we are not only outside-ourselves due to the message we sent, we are also missing the corresponding reply; we are in a state of complete anticipation and cannot forget that "(a)nticipation is prostheticity"(Stiegler 1998, p. 235) and this takes us back to the notion of anxiety and loneliness as a not-being-at-home during this gap.

This space of time goes beyond anticipation and prosthesis, it is also "*Elpis* ... (the anticipation of) the future ... which is being-toward-death"(Stiegler 1998, p. 197-198) and it is only natural that developers would try to get rid of this feeling, of this since it is part of the nature of human beings to try to forget our mortality and we attempt always to make these prostheses less visible to ourselves. There are two ways in which programmers try to reduce the visibility of this prosthetic gap: first, they make it possible for the sender to know when the other person is typing a message; second, they allow them to know when the other person has already seen a sent message. These attempts not only fail to conceal the being-toward-death in this gap,

they exacerbate it. Knowing that others have received a message but have yet not replied to us — and it may take a long while before they do — makes us even more aware, more anxious, because the answer is no longer simply outside-the-self but also in the other self; we expect the other to understand that, in sending a message, we have put ourselves out-of-range-of-oneself, and can only be returned to it by their reply. It is not until this happens, not until we receive a message in response to one sent, that we can forget this ever-present *elpis* and completely return to "being-together" — at least until we depart from this state again by sending a reply. I believe this cycle clearly represents what Stiegler meant when he wrote "[b]eing-together is constantly threatened by its own activity." (Stiegler 1998, p. 213)

The gap can also be described in terms of Deleuze and Guattari if we can conceive of this anxiety and anticipation as a result of "desire on the side of acquisition" which "make[s] desire an idealistic (dialectical, nihilistic) conception, which causes us to look upon it as primarily a lack: a lack of an object, a lack of a real object" (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p. 25) this object being, of course, the answer we are waiting for, the reply to our text message. This opens up a new possibility in our analysis to introduce the notion of the signifier and also assign it to this gap because "the sign of desire [the reply] is never signifying" (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p. 110) and this space in which we anxiously await the coming of an answer becomes a symbol for that answer much in the same way that "[t]he signifier is the sign that has become a sign of the sign, the despotic sign having replaced the territorial sign, having crossed the threshold of deterritorialization; *the signifier is merely the deterritorialized sign itself*" (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p. 206). Moreover, we can view text messages as not only symbols but "elements of the signifier as distinguishing units [which] are regulated by 'coded gaps' that the signifier overcodes in its turn" (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p. 242)

making clear beyond any doubt that this gap is as essential to text messaging as the signifier is to the desiring-machines; this further strengthens both the notion of text messaging as a desiring machine and the relationship between desiring-machines and Stiegler's prosthesis.

It would be necessary now to use Simondon's theory and apply it to this gap, and we can reach for the notion of technical object as a device to aid us in this task. How this gap has appeared, and how it has thus far evolved, can be described by the evolution of a device in Simondon:

When a new device appears in the evolving series, it will last only if it becomes part of a systematic and plurifunctional convergence. The new device is the state of its own possibility. It is in this way that the geographical world and the world of already existing technical objects are made to interrelate in an organic concretization that is defined in terms of its relational function."

(Simondon 1980, p. 60)

Nevertheless we must be careful not to define this gap only as a function of the sent message and the received one because Simondon warns us that "[t]he technical object exists not only by virtue of its functioning in exterior devices ...but by virtue of phenomena of which it is, itself, the centre,"(Simondon 1980, p. 41) and so we must understand the gap in and of itself if we want to succeed in relating this gap to a technical object. There is a feeling that this gap produces, a feeling not produced by either message that encompasses it: a feeling of loneliness and anxiety, but also of alienation as "a rupture between background and forms in psychic life. It occurs when the associated milieu no longer effectively regulates the dynamism of forms"(Simondon 1980, p. 65). Anxiety is caused by a rupture between sender and receiver made evident because of the fantasy of immediacy and continuity that underlying text messaging which is broken by the delay; an

illusion shattered by the wait and the not happening of the reply, triggered in and by this gap.

I have finally been able to relate the whole text messaging to the ideas of these three authors and thus revealed certain relationships between their theories. Though the influence of the theorists one another is evident, for example in Stiegler's extensively quotations from and analysis of Simondon's work in the first part of *Technics and Time* or the fact that in Deleuze's review of "*L'individu et sa genese physico-biologique*", he gives great praise to Simondon's work, I used exclusively one work of each author to try and make this connection as concrete as possible.

Although in its conception this essay was to be an attempt to analyse Stiegler's ideas and try to relate them to Spinoza by going through Simondon first, then Deleuze and Guattari, the restriction in words and time proved this to be an impossible task. However, although it would require extraordinary efforts, I believe it would still be possible to relate Stiegler and Spinoza in a congruent way.

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