

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2018

Volume 44 Issue 2

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Living Automatically, Living Remotely: On the Contemporary Reduction of Experience and Decision-Making Spaces

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*To the memory of my father,
Alfonso Galindo Flores*

Abstract: Technology transforms human life and reduces the spaces of experience and decision making. This article proposes a brief phenomenology of this view of life, systematizes some arguments of contemporary philosophers who have diagnosed this situation by relating technology to capitalism and liberalism (Benjamin, Heidegger, Schmitt, Negri, Blumenberg) and others who have suggested ideas to compensate for it (Land, Agamben, Badiou, Gumbrecht). From this perspective, we finally offer alternatives to think about how to avoid the undesirable consequences of colonization by, and the determination of life by, technology.

Key words: experience, decision, technology, narratives, rituals

1. FROM HOME AUTOMATION TO AUTOMATIC CAR, THROUGH SIRI

In “15 Million Merits,” the second episode of the first season of the TV series *Black Mirror*, the allegory of a future world is presented in which individuals, held at installations where they are limited to producing energy by pedaling on stationary bicycles and surrounded by consumer technology, pornography, and trash TV, are fully integrated in a virtual environment. This environment is no longer just an extrinsic medium or instrument, but one that determines their goals and their own life, to the point that men and women are mere avatars and relate to each other as such in a pixelated environment.

The determination of the meaning of life by technology reaches a higher level of radicalism in the third episode of the series, “The Entire History of You.” People have a storage chip installed behind their ear for the images and sounds they pick up through their eyes and ears. This allows an absolute and permanently accessible memory of everything lived. This technological possibility would mean that our lives would be permanently conditioned by the past because it would not be possible to forget it. This would transform our identity, our sense of forgiveness, the promises we make, and other aspects of the way we live.

This dystopia describes, in an (at least for now) exaggerated form appropriate to fictive art, the life of most individuals in contemporary developed societies. The presence of technology in our life does not simply affect and condition it extrinsically, like an artificial limb that is added to it, leaving intact its nature, but transforms, determines, and produces such life as human life. Subordination or subsumption (using Marx’s terminology, to which I will return later) affects not only the labor force, but all dimensions of human being, giving them new meanings, new purposes, and a new “nature.” Our relationships, our desires, our fears and hopes, our expectations, our way of living and loving, our feelings, our work and our leisure, our language—absolutely everything has been substantially modified by technology. It has never been more evident that our mode of being is now technological. The key point is that technology, unlike what some authors have claimed, is not neutral. As I will argue later, technology is an essential ally of what we can generically call “liberal political culture,” in which, among other things, the parliamentary system and market capitalism converge.

The subsumption of our life by technology implies, among other things, a drastic transformation and reduction of the capacity (moments, spaces) of decision and experience, which becomes superfluous in the face of the automatic operation of processes. Increasingly, machines supply our need to make decisions and transform our way of experiencing so that it becomes unrecognizable. This automatic and impersonal functioning of life presides over our daily lives. Thus, in the domestic sphere robots are taking on an increasingly central role. These do not simply help and complement our action, but transform our way of being in the house and produce an essentially different life. Our refrigerators are programmed to detect deficiencies, to contact the supermarket and request missing products. Our garden irrigation systems measure nitrate and humidity levels and activate sprinklers automatically. We program in advance using our smartphones for activating

and controlling the temperature of domestic heating so that the house is warm when we arrive at night. Our washing machines detect the weight of our clothes and automatically manage the amount of detergent and fabric softener required, as well as the drying time depending on the fabric type. And we also program the stove, the microwave, the closure of the terrace awning according to wind and rain, and other factors. Shutters and lights, air conditioners, and music systems automatically turn on and off in accord with their detection of the presence or absence of individuals nearby.

Clothing and accessories, too, have become matters colonized by sensors connected to the Internet that are able to measure multiple parameters (body temperature, calories consumed, levels of substances in the body, meters walked, etc.) and that can activate the appropriate responses. The use of garments made of tissues capable of analyzing the state of our organism, and administering the appropriate dose of a prescribed drug through the skin, is increasingly widespread. The realm of intelligent fabrics is developing strongly. There are sensory fabrics with applications in home automation, aeronautics, and the automotive industry; others for the monitoring of physiological signals applied in telemedicine and for occupational safety: socks that promote the healing of the skin, antistress sheets, biocide and antiodor underwear, carpets for the control of video games, and even tissues that monitor respiratory rhythm, among others.

The so-called Internet of things (or “in things”) is a good example of the feedback between automatic life and remote communication of which the Internet consists. The concept, proposed by Kevin Ashton in 1999, refers to the connection between everyday objects and the Internet, through both identification devices placed on things and an address that is based on some of the existing protocols. This situation would allow computers to control their status and to activate responses regardless of human action, that is, from spontaneous decisions and interactions between the applications themselves in “the cloud.” In a sense, all objects would become intelligent insofar as they were self-organizing and capable of acting in the light of circumstances and without the concurrence of human decisions.

One of the main actions through which we exercise our belonging to society and our visibility in public space, driving a car, is also gearing up to deprive us of the leading role of decision making: the introduction of driverless cars, that is, of cars that run on autopilot, appears to be unstoppable. Furthermore, it is no longer necessary to know how to write well: self-correctors automatically correct our errata. The screen is a constant source of information that is

unsolicited and not decided upon: sophisticated banners and software agents constantly remind us of our profile and what our tastes and preferences are, offering us products we do not ask for. Moreover, machines have become our privileged and sometimes almost unique partners. This is demonstrated by applications such as Siri, an assistant with its own personality that advises and recommends services by adapting to the tastes of the user and that is able to perform actions for the user based on these tastes.

In general, technology already makes it possible for artificial intelligence (AI) to organize humans. The reason is that there is so much data about each of us (when we accept the licensing terms of a smartphone application, we hand over our data in exchange for using that application) and so much ability to process and identify correlations using algorithms, which can be used to predict our tastes and behavior and, to this extent, condition and guide them. And this is done not by other individuals, but by the devices themselves equipped with AI. That is, information and data explain themselves, self-interpret, and discover cause-effect relationships on their own. And big companies make decisions without knowing why. Thus, eighty percent of exchange transactions are decided by AI. And almost all the decisions of the electricity grid are taken by AI, which locates in real time who needs energy. The human species is evolving in convergence with technology, to the point that it could almost be said that individuals are directed to become cells of a larger organism endowed with its own logic, opaque to ourselves as our consciousness is to our bodily cells.

This loss of the leading role of the decision maker is an indication and a cause of a distance between everyday gestures (basically moving fingers or hands to touch screens) and the results that this generates, which implies a drastic transformation of experience because it is unmanageable by the imagination. Thus, for example, the human mind is unable to take responsibility for the link that can exist between typing a phone number on a smartphone and civil wars for control of the coltan mine that devastate the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda; or between the gesture of turning on a personal computer and the microprocessor assembly lines in Taiwan; or, in short, between the operation of any of our electronic devices, filled with electrodes and microchips, and work in graphite holdings in China or Brazil, and other such cases.

This anti-intuitive and difficult-to-imagine link is analogous to the link between our behavior as consumers and the behavior of capital markets. Contemporary capitalism is increasingly abstract, purely speculative and

financial. This does not mean, as we shall later verify, that it lacks a link with actual work, but that this link is concealed, hidden, and that material work has been affected by technology to the point that its nature has radically changed. New computer technologies have transformed productive processes radicalizing the deterritorialization of the capitalist system. It is not only that the capitalist system tends to lead to globalization, which abolishes frontiers, but, increasingly, that there are more jobs that are carried out at a distance, on the net, online, remotely, and beyond all contact (except typing, looking at the screen and, at most, being seen on it).

2. FROM THE “ALL-SEEING EYE” TO THE DRONE; FROM THE PANOPTICON TO SOCIAL NETWORKS

In an article entitled “The All-Seeing Eye,” published in 1948,¹ René Guénon described a symbol common to both Christianity and Freemasonry, which consists of a triangle in which there is an eye called “the all-seeing eye.” It is a frontal eye that sees everything in the perfect simultaneity of the eternal present. Guénon emphasized his double sense of omnipresence and providence. In parallel, Christian iconography has emphasized various dimensions of God’s being (goodness, sovereignty, justice, etc.). One of them has been God’s ability to see everything (omnivision), the basis of providence. Nothing escapes the sight and will of God.

The ideal of full vision in the service of surveillance and control of behavior reached its clearest expression in the Enlightenment, with the Panopticon of Bentham. The operation of this device was inspired by the model of the eye from which nothing escapes. We owe the most sophisticated and fertile philosophical analysis of the Panopticon to Michel Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish*, he refers its meaning to the disciplinary character of time, which is defined by this new way of seeing. According to Foucault, the Panopticon is a symbol and a cause of the organizing principles of the disciplines and a model of the strategies of control of bodies of the enlightened society. Its objective was to achieve economical surveillance, that is, the most effective surveillance from a single point. The prisoner is seen, but he does not see the inside of the watch-tower and, therefore, does not know if he is being watched, being subjected to a state of continuous surveillance that runs automatically. The decisive thing is that thorough checking of the operations of the body and the imposition of docility and submission are constituents of habits and,

¹ René Guénon, “The All-Seeing Eye,” in *Symbols of Sacred Science*, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 422–25.

consequently, of human ways of being.² In other words, the watchful eye of the Panopticon is neither objective nor neutral, but a constituent of the individuals under guard.

Foucault's analysis allows us to understand the essence of the urban landscape as an area of collective surveillance; in cities everything seems ready for production, exchange, and consumption, but also for humans' control and regulation of each other. This principle has reached an extreme degree of efficiency and sophistication owing to contemporary technological development. Two devices stand out because both guarantee at the same time maximum vision and visibility: drones and social networks.

The drone exemplifies paradigmatically the synthesis of the ideals of God's all-seeing ability (omnivision and omnivisibility) with those of action at a distance. Compared to video-surveillance cameras, which are increasing in our cities, the drone incorporates mobility. In this sense, it adds to the attributes of divinity (omniscience, omnipotence, invulnerability) the attribute of ubiquity: the drone sees everything and is everywhere. To these capacities is added the following threat, no less: the drone, as God, watches from above.

According to Benjamin Noys, the drone possesses theological and metaphysical dimensions that imply the desires for transcendence and for destruction that define the Western imagination. Without considering these dimensions it is not possible to understand the essence of the drone. These dimensions, which transcend the functions of surveillance and punishment, have to do with the ability of the drone to construct and legislate a world and to alter the conception of the human. Noys alludes to Adorno's *Minima Moralia* to argue that the new technologies of death call into question Hegel's philosophy of history because they demonstrate that the spirit of the world is embodied in machines without a subject, in robots, whereas in Hegel's philosophy of history the spirit of the world is embodied in individuals. Thus we enter into a new era of modernity in which vehicles without pilots and automatic weapons show and represent the nullity and dispensability of the subject and, to that extent, of reason itself. On the horizon you can see the dream (or nightmare) of the completely automatic drone, without a pilot, making decisions based on algorithms. Obviously, this raises issues of imputation and responsibility.³

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 195–228.

³ Benjamin Noys, "Drone Metaphysics," *Culture Machine*, no. 16 (2005): 1–22.

Omnivision and omnivisibility have almost reached perfection with social networks, supported by devices that have a huge capacity to produce vision and visibility. Much has been written about life being exposed to social networks. Here, I will only highlight two unique features which have to do with automatic life and life at a distance. For one, it can be affirmed that, on many occasions, individuals do not use social networks, but are used by them; that is, they do not always exercise control over them, but suffer from them. In social networks it is easy to become an object of analysis, comments, contemplation, scrutiny, and the induction of desires. This contributes to erasing the distinction between the public and the private: social networks constitute a species of agora in which private and seemingly secret gestures can take on a public dimension.

The other characteristic refers to the effects of the transformation of habits. Many of our relationships are mediated by a touch screen. We interact and communicate with people who are at a distance, but are looking at or typing on a screen. We access much content and can see and hear almost anything we want, but on the screen. One of the major symbols of this transition is probably the displacement of books on paper by e-books; and also the replacement of traditional games with digital and virtual games. In a sense, the enhancement of sight and hearing is concomitant with the de-potentialization of touch, taste, and smell. We attend to a different way (neither better nor worse) of experiencing others and the relationship between communication and space.

3. LOSS OF EXPERIENCE, NEUTRALITY, ABSTRACTION, AND SUBSUMPTION: CATEGORIES FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL GENEALOGY OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY, CAPITALISM, AND LIBERALISM

In this section I intend to elevate to concepts the brief phenomenology of the presence of technology in our lives that I have presented. If I had to coin expressions to synthetically apprehend this presence, I would propose “automatic life” and “life at a distance.” We automatically and remotely live out many of our experiences for most of the day. Both leisure and work are increasingly done through a screen and consist more and more of something that happens on a screen. This massive presence of technology substantially affects humankind’s way of being. During the first third of the twentieth century, and from then onwards, there were many diagnoses of the consequences of the development of technology for life in general and for human life. Many of these diagnoses linked the development of technology and its

colonization of all areas of life with the parallel development of capitalism. Moreover, they considered that technology and capitalism conditioned and fed each other, that is, that technological development was a factor in the development of capitalism, and vice versa.

One of the first philosophers to connect the effects of technological development to the loss of experience was Walter Benjamin. Adopting a Kantian perspective, he identified two historical causes of loss of experience: the world war, which produced such profound and rapid changes that are impossible to assimilate and share, and technology, whose disproportionate development prevents its integration into the human world, which ends up being colonized and transformed by it into an anonymous world, isolated and saturated with signs which do not favor the communication of experiences between generations.⁴ Benjamin associated the ability to experience and to narrate when he linked the loss of experience to the end of the narrative understood as oral transmission based on one's own life, a forger of community and an inexhaustible source of teaching that demands the calm and attention of the listener. The reason for the end of the capacity to narrate is the disappearance of the concept of eternity and the consequent transformation of the concept of death and the sense of time. This transformation entails the disappearance of the legitimating ancestral authority of narration because the narrator purports to tell the histories that have been received from the ancestors.⁵ A consequence is the replacement of experience with mere shock, which is received passively and is nonshareable, which has become the generalized way of life of the masses enhanced by the technical means of production and the apparatuses that flood daily life. It is meaningless to appeal to subjectivity because this life leads to reflex behavior. From this diagnosis, Benjamin's therapeutic proposal was to expand the concept of experience by integrating and articulating individual and collective memory. In his view, only this will allow the shock to become experience by being referred to the continuity of the community in a diachronic and synchronic sense. It is significant that Benjamin, who was always critical of myth, referred to the cults and their

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 731-36. See also Gabriel Amengual, "Pérdida de la experiencia y ruptura de la tradición. La experiencia en el pensamiento de Walter Benjamin," in *Ruptura de la tradición. Estudios sobre Walter Benjamin y Martin Heidegger*, ed. G. Amengual et al. (Madrid: Trotta, 2008), 29-59.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 83-110.

ceremonies as a paradigmatic mediation to extend experience by their ability to renew and articulate individual and collective memory.⁶

A few years later, Martin Heidegger elevated the critique of technology to the ontological plane. In his view, technology represents a violence infringing on the natural rhythm of *physis*, a provocation of Being with potentially catastrophic consequences. In the lecture “What Are Poets For?,” he argues that calculation, markets, and technical dominion of the earth dissolve the human from the human being and the character of thing from things.⁷ And in his well-known “Die Frage nach der Technik,” modern technology is interpreted as a device of imposition on nature in order to reveal her as a simple set of controllable and measurable energy processes. It is a destiny before which human action (that is, politics) cannot do anything. Heidegger is opposed to the development of technology and he professes to access a more initial truth, an access that moves toward a more original unveiling that would be given in and through poetic action.⁸ This diagnosis was a sign of the traumatic postwar context and was in the service of his understanding: in view of the results of the conjunction of technology and the *Wille zur Macht*, the advent of emancipation cannot come from rational action.

Heidegger’s position illuminates by contrast the diagnosis made by another Nazi before the Great War. Carl Schmitt also criticized technology, but not because he considered it an expression of the violence of the will (and, in this measure, of politics), but because of its heterogeneity to it. In an early text on Catholicism he confronted the idea of modern political and economic thought, which he considered akin to technology. In his view, their development leads societies to the absence of purpose and to absolutization of the privacy of interests.⁹ Schmitt regarded modernity as a period lacking an objective foundation for the constitution of a sovereign order and, to that extent, the modern will of the technical mastery of reality is for him a symptom of a Promethean nihilism, a product of the immanence of the epoch and a sign of decoupling with the land. In this sense, the aim of modernity would be to neutralize conflict and secure an order based on accepted values. Since Romanticism, technology and economics have united and have eclipsed all

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, 155–200.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 87–90.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Garland, 1977), 3–35.

⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 25–28.

other spheres of action. The goal of such a reductive evolution is to neutralize conflict by identifying a new, more neutral sphere of sense that emerges as a new mediation in the face of which the figure of the decision is unnecessary. Technology and economics seem to have realized the modern yearning for objectivity and rationality; the desire for a complete, rational, and transparent neutralization of conflict. Such a pre-eminence of these spheres of action affects the state, which is reduced to a neutral and technical body, impotent and lacking in legitimacy or sovereignty.¹⁰ Schmitt argued that technology, capitalist economy, and liberal parliamentarism were manifestations of a single spirit that craves neutrality, that is, that seeks the resolution of conflicts through mechanisms that make any decision unnecessary.

In a certain sense, it is possible to affirm that this linkage of technology with capitalism and liberalism has its origin in Marx. Marx had used the term “subsumption” to grasp the relationship of labor to capital in the context of the capitalist system. In his view, the colonization of the different spheres of action by the capitalist *ratio* tends to integrate, surpass, subordinate, transcend, and/or subsume bodily social relationships (force, labor) in processes and abstract results that are producers of realities which are also abstract, such as commodities or values. He distinguished between a formal or incomplete subsumption by which the labor process is integrated into capital and becomes the instrument of creation of surplus value (the form is modified, but not the materiality of the labor process), and a real subsumption, by which capital reaches a complete mystification and the productive forces of labor appear as a productive force of capital.¹¹ This implies a transformation of the work process itself owing to technology (fixed capital): the machine dominates the worker and not vice versa. With real or material subsumption, the fetishism of capital is reinforced, since the social productive forces of labor present themselves as a preexisting reality independent on the will of the worker and of living labor, which are subordinated to them.

The Fordist-Taylorist model of workers’ domination by the machine, which implies a real subsumption, has now largely been overcome. The so-called

¹⁰ Carl Schmitt, “La época de la neutralidad,” in *Estudios Políticos* (Madrid: Cultura Española, 1941), 15, 23–24.

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: New Left Review, 1976); Marx, “Formal and Real Subsumption of Labour under Capital,” in *Economic Manuscripts of 1861–63*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/economic/ch37.htm>, accessed Jan. 25, 2017. On this issue, see Nicolás Pagura, “El concepto de ‘subsunción’ como clave para la interpretación del lugar del trabajo en el capitalismo actual,” <http://www.catedras.fsoc.uba.ar/heler/16.12.08pagura.htm>, accessed Jan. 25, 2017.

post-Fordist models transform the worker into an individual borrower of a service and reinforce the abstract character of work (that is, as a merely surplus producer). Among other characteristics, new technologies (personal computers, smartphones, etc.) allow the workday to be extended to encompass all day and any place, blurring the difference between personal life and working life. This implies a real subsumption of the whole life of individuals to capital, blurring the difference between life and work. Individuals become a sophisticated piece of the productive system and their capabilities can no longer be developed independently of capital. The automation of work brought about by technology does not diminish the necessary individual working time nor does it create the possibility of an independent communicative sphere (as Gorz argues),¹² but turns individuals into automatons: both producing and consuming (in an outsourced economy consumption is a factor of production and therefore of production of surplus value). This shows that the objective of capital is not to reduce working time, but to increase surplus value. For this reason the whole of life is subsumed to capital, and the value of use subsumed in the exchange. In other words, technology allows the whole of life to be colonized by the logic of labor and capital. There is not an outside capital, and all social production of value through language and cooperation is subsumed into capital, which appropriates it and transforms individuals into part of the machine, into machines properly. Real subsumption creates the illusion that capital reproduces itself independently of labor, but what happens is that this (the social force of labor) is materially subsumed in capital and appears as the force of capital.

Antonio Negri assumes this Marxist diagnosis but maintains that the linguistic, cooperative, and imaginative capacities of the current workforce develop autonomously and independently of capital. That is to say: in a certain sense (at least in their liberating potentiality), those capacities are an uncontaminated outside. He and Michael Hardt have argued that in the present period of development of capitalism, the subsumption of the force of production (that is, of labor) in capitalist relations has made it possible to overcome contradictions and to extend the immaterial job, and has given rise to (or better: has brought forth) a new subjectivity other than the proletariat of societies of sovereignty and discipline, and it is akin to the present society of communication: the multitude. This means that force not only creates goods alienated in capital, but also raises social relations and life, that is, it visualizes the multitude as a new biopolitical class. This would not be incompatible

¹² André Gorz, *Adiós al proletariado (más allá del socialismo)* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 1989).

with real subsumption, but, on the contrary, a consequence of its passage. By virtue of this, external mechanisms of regulation and discipline give way (and this is an indication and a cause of the decline of nation-states) to a controlled society in which such mechanisms become immanent in the private or social field (“society”) and are democratized by penetrating all bodies and social relationships. Negri and Hardt call this transit the passage from the disciplinary sovereignty of the people to the biopolitical empire of the multitude, which is governed with the instruments of the capitalist system and within the social relationships of real subsumption. Technological development is a determinant of this qualitative leap to subordination, in which capital no longer absorbs something external to it, but something internal.¹³

Negri and Hardt refer to emancipation of a collective subject: the multitude. The multitude constitutes an autonomous and pure force which is the a priori of all production and which is capable of taking control of the processes of machine metamorphosis. It is composed of all the figures of the current social production and its most clear index is immaterial work in the form of social networks based on communication and affective relations. The multitude’s resistance is exercised in immanent processes of an ontological character and with no identity or unity. Negri and Hardt’s argument is very abstract and counterfactual, but we could exemplify these processes by pointing out events such as spontaneous manifestations, the increase of communicative flows, the growth of cooperativism, and so on. However, all examples are inadequate. The only thing that is clear is that the liberation is referred to ontological events devoid of mediations and which do not depend on any human will, since the multitude is a diffuse set of singularities.¹⁴ In other words, there is no mediation (that is, clear and recognizable procedures) for the global emancipatory situation because it is already happening; it is a form of political organization and a political project whose possibility, spurred on by the contradictions of capitalism, becomes effective in the present. One consequence is that there is no place for the individual subject, for his action and his decision. These are referred to the event of the multitude, which is not a collective subject but an unrepresentable and counterfactual ontological reality, a set of relations and a workforce formed by new technologies and expressed in the biopolitical network.

¹³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 35–38, 230–49, 305–8.

¹⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 87–90, 121–24, 222–25, 360–87.

In short, new technologies of communication have radically transformed and uprooted the economy, money, leisure, science, devices of domination, and the state itself. Real subsumption has reached a point of no return and has no alternative. Individuals seem to have lost all prominence, seem to have been dissolved into the flow of algorithms, of automatic reactions, of abstract procedures, of remote control, of remote action, of virtual relationships, of online contact, of disembodiment, and other such phenomena. Is it reversible? Is there an outside? Is it possible to think of an emancipatory historical action? What would its conditions be? Is there at least some compensation?

4. ACCELERATION, USE, MILITANCY, PRESENCE, LATENCY: SUGGESTIONS FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE COLONIZATION OF LIFE BY TECHNOLOGY

The brief phenomenology of the presence of technology in our lives and the philosophical genealogy of the relations between technology, capitalism, and liberalism that I have proposed using arguments from various philosophers are in the service of the thesis that, in a certain sense and to a large extent, we live automatically and at a distance, and this implies a loss of experience and spaces for decision making.

The issue of how to deal with the impoverishing, depersonalizing, alienating, and nihilistic consequences which the massive presence of technology in human life supposedly produces in the context of contemporary societies is not new. This issue was a concern to a number of German thinkers who, from the 1930s to the 1960s, identified the need to reinforce the subjective dimensions of European citizens in order to resist the demands of the accelerated capitalist industrial society, whose technical-scientific *arkhē* dissolved, according to them, the traditional cultural legacy.

Hans Blumenberg belongs to that context. In his view, the danger of technology in the life of men stems from the fact that, like science, it monopolizes the hope and expectations that humans can aspire to (or that can be attributed to them). Technology dissolves the need for a unitary sense (of world or life) by offering a set of particularities that can be solved with its competition, that is, technically. In this sense, it produces an emptying of the meaning that exists in the world of life, that is, in the set of prereflexive and unquestionable experiences, certainties, and evidence that gives meaning to everything that

is affirmed and enables communication itself. Technology proves the contingency of this world of life and determines it.¹⁵

This colonization of the world of life by technology (in the jargon of Habermas, we would say by “systemic rationality”) has today reached its highest degree so far. My position is that the total subsumption of human life is irreversible and, therefore, to suggest we can escape from it is meaningless and merely leads to melancholy. Moreover, this subsumption is neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but has both positive and negative elements. These must be identified, with the awareness that such identification cannot claim to be objective and neutral, but only coherent with a way of life that self-sustains and self-legitimizes critically, comparatively, and permanently as a source of joy and happiness.

In order to argue this position, I will gather arguments from various contemporary philosophers who have at least indirectly alluded to this question. I will mention some of them and some of their ideas by classifying them into two large groups: those whose suggestions presuppose or demand the maintenance of a traditional (or approximately traditional) concept of subject and those who propose alternatives that imply liquidating or overcoming the whole (concept of) subject.

To begin, then: There is a set of arguments with a family resemblance that Benjamin Noys has called “accelerationism.” Such arguments acknowledge the eroding consequences of life brought about by the technification and productivity of capitalism, but, contrary to traditional humanist solutions and alternatives, they propose the increase of such speed and acceleration, the increase of abstraction, technification, productivity, and consumerism with the aim of radicalizing its dehumanizing, uprooting, and deterritorializing power, with the purpose of sinking it completely and definitely, and thus reach a posthuman state. The main theoretical source of this acceleration is the Marxist thesis that it is possible to combat capitalism by accelerating its contradictions. Behind this thesis lies a teleological premise: that the development of productive forces will bring an implosion of capitalism and a liberation which will consist of the integration-dissolution of man into constant capital, that is, into the machine, so that a posthuman state will be reached.¹⁶

¹⁵ Hans Blumenberg, “The Life-World and the Concept of Reality,” in *Life-World and Consciousness: Essays for Aron Gurwitsch*, ed. L. Embree (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 425–28.

¹⁶ Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), ix–xi, 5–11; Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 13–23, 36–62.

In the 1970s, Deleuze and Guattari alluded to this accelerationist strategy in *The Anti-Oedipus*.¹⁷ And in the 1990s, Nick Land and colleagues at the University of Warwick linked this thesis to certain literature and music that reflected the accelerationist-capitalist ideal of human-machine integration. Land based his thesis on the idea that the state has humanistic residues and its regulatory action does not accelerate capitalism and therefore curbs its dehumanizing and solvent potential (of the bourgeois ego and, in this measure, of itself). His proposal is to take the “machinic” revolution (i.e., relating to machine, robotic, and so on), deterritorialization and the market, and elements of the capitalist system (especially a neoliberal one) to their extreme. The objective is that the acceleration of flows causes the productive forces to surpass all control and penetrate human life to dematerialize the bodies, which is achieved by integrating variable capital (manual labor) into constant capital (machines). Liberation refers to the arrival of a state in which decisions are made by nonhuman, impersonal agents (microbiotic particles, data flows, machines, etc.). Land does not conceive the “machinic” as a transcendent reality opposed to social relations, but as a reality that integrates, dissolves, and deterritorializes them in a process that transcends any anthropomorphic stage.¹⁸

In another way, the remission of *the liberation* of man to the liberation of *man* is also defended by Giorgio Agamben. Criticism of the instrumental ratio is a central objective in his thought. His work can be understood as a denunciation of the loss of experience in the modern world and an effort to find places for a type of experience that is not submitted to the means-ends ratio. In his view, modern man (and an even more contemporary man) is incapable of having and transmitting experiences. And the cause is not only wars, but mere daily life in a big city, where there is an accumulation of events without any translation of it into experience. Such experience is not mere “knowledge,” but a story “of” and “with” authority. From these premises, he suggests a theory of experience as a prelinguistic and therefore presubjective reality. This presupposes that the constitution of the subject “in” and “by” language also constitutes the expropriation of that experience.¹⁹ In other

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 239.

¹⁸ Nick Land, “Machinic Desire,” *Textual Practice* 7, no. 3 (1993): 471–82; Land, “Making It with Death: Remarks on Thanatos and Desiring Production” and “Circuitries,” in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, ed. R. Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2013), 261–87 and 289–318.

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso Books, 2007), 5–10, 65–72.

words, the loss of experience is an essential event and a consequence of Western anthropogenic devices, whose nature is sovereign and biopolitical.

But Agamben does not propose the recovery of childhood as a historical object; he rather refers experience to the fact that language is not the totality of the human, but that childhood is the transcendental homeland of history. This thesis is the basis for postulating a life beyond sovereignty and biopolitics—a life that renders justice to the potential character of man, that is, a life that renounces all concrete forms of life to be limited to being only *that way* apart from all property or form, a life that remains in potentiality. In his view, the messianic life described by Paul involves the rejection of all property (including identity), which would be replaced by its mere use, and the emancipation of every form-of-life in favor of maintaining one's own power intact. Agamben sees this way of life exemplified in the Franciscan *usus pauper*.²⁰

Along with these arguments, which suggest getting free of the biopolitical devices of instrumental reason by abandoning the concept of subject, there are others that claim the centrality of decision making and the need to find new forms, new times, and new places for it to occur, as well as experiencing one's own body. It should be emphasized that in this case the objective is not to recover a notion of substantial subjectivity. On the contrary, experiences happen and occur to the subjects evidencing their lack of foundation and deconstructing them. Experiences and decisions are not, therefore, events that immunize the subject, but, on the contrary, they ex-pose him, they dis-pose him.

A philosopher who stands out for his claim about the subjective decision (properly, a constituent of subjectivity) is Alain Badiou. From a complex development of ontology as a mathematical discourse on being, and of phenomenology as a logical discourse about appearance (change, event), he claims a (notion of) subjectivity that constitutes itself by constituting the truth of the event that exceeds it, that is, by intervening in a situation by affirming an inconsistency in it (that is, an event), being faithful to it and transforming it. Thus, truth is neither discovery nor *adaequatio*, but a production supported by a fidelity through which subjects are constituted and situations are transformed; that is, truth is the constitution of the consequences of an event. In other words,

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 4–15, 25–28, 60–72; Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 12–17, 60–63, 125–50; Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the "Letter to the Romans"* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 30–33, 42–45; Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 5–8, 75–78, 85–116, 145–65.

truth relates to the particularity of a situation in which an event happens owing to the faithful decision of a subject who is constituted as such by it.²¹

According to Badiou, the current representative democracy, which is supported by the ideologies of the universalism of equivalence (monetary and legalistic) and democratic materialism, implies the end of politics and is at the service of capitalist domination. He sets in opposition to this the communist substantive egalitarianism and the exceptionality of the subject. One consequence is that politics has to deal with the fidelity and the decision of the subject, and this means that it is not a means, but an affirmation, and that it has to do more with finalist areas than with the instrumental *ratio*. If the existing situation is the law of the market and capital-parliamentarism, which dictates its own necessity and inevitability, that is, the impossibility of any alternative (the end of history), politics is the affirmation of the possibility of such an alternative, an undeductible and improbable reality, absolutely heterogeneous to technology.²²

The last author I will mention is Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. He also stands out for having diagnosed a loss of experience in the life of contemporary cities and for having defended the need to identify spaces to experience our corporality. In his view, the contemporary globalized world has inherited the great pathology of accelerated modernity, namely, the devaluation of the body as a constituent part of subjectivity. The Cartesian cogito is proof of the privilege granted to thought as the principle (*arkhē*) of subjectivity and seat of self-affirmation of the human being. And the Enlightenment gave birth to the sphere of politics as the principal result of human action understood as a transforming agent of the world: political institutions and public space in general would be the principal products of a culture based on interpretation. For the modern and contemporary Western subject, the world is an interpretable matter, an occasion for the production of knowledge by transcending its mere phenomenal surface. This implies underestimating the materiality of the signifier or expression in the face of the spirituality of meaning. It also implies making the temporal dimension, not the spatial dimension, the basic

²¹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 13–31, 66–69, 420–32, 536–41; *Breve tratado de ontología transitoria* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2002), 114, 153–69 (English version: *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005]).

²² Alain Badiou, ¿Se puede pensar la política? (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1990), 45, 56; *Reflexiones sobre nuestro tiempo: Interrogantes acerca de la ética, la política y la experiencia de lo inhumano* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Cifrado, 2006), 31–33; *De un desastre oscuro. Sobre el fin de la verdad de Estado* (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 2006), 43–45; *Compendio de metapolítica* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2009), 67–69 (English version: *Metapolitics* [New York: Verso Books, 2005]).

structure of subjectivity, of the knowing subject's activity. The consequence of this vision or attitude (which Gumbrecht calls "metaphysics") has been the orientation of the knowing subject to the past or to the future, as well as the possibility of forming and technifying (that is, denying) the body—in short, the negation (of experience) of the present and of the body. New technologies of global communication (of information and of capital) have made it possible to intensify this culture that gives privilege to meaning and purely empty utopias (the infinite circulation in the virtual network), at the expense of the dimensions of desire, corporality, and physical contact, among others.

From this diagnosis, Gumbrecht claims a culture of presence (that is, of bodily contact) against the primacy of the culture of meaning and interpretation that has been imposed in the West. He does not deny meaning, but rather conceives experience, especially aesthetics, as an oscillation or interference between effects of presence and effects of meaning. And he identifies poetry as a paradigm of such oscillation. More specifically, he proposes a compensation for the alluded-to modern pathologies by implementation rituals that affirm the present owing to experiences of celebration that have no objective other than themselves; for example, the practice of sport and attendance at sporting events, visits to museums, and so on. These are experiences whose value does not come from their link with the past or the future, nor do they seek to reconcile or articulate thought with the body, but to keep all the simultaneities within reach.²³ Behind this argument is the conviction that in all experience there are latent elements that determine the way in which reality is experienced, and this requires abandoning the idea that experience is a transparent and controllable reality for the consciousness. On the contrary, latency is an indication and a factor that reality always exceeds the content of its presence and, therefore, is also an indication of the finitude of the experience imposed by the temporal dimension of consciousness. Latency and finitude are insurmountable conditions of our experience.²⁴

²³ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 25–28. In the field of contemporary philosophy, the person who has stood out by questioning the meaning (of meaning) and claiming contact and exposure is Jean-Luc Nancy. See *A Finite Thinking* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

²⁴ See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); José Luis Villacañas, "Latencia. La elaboración de la vivencia originaria," *Dianoia* 76 (2016): 3–28.

5. BEYOND THE INSTRUMENTAL RATIO: REFLEXIVITY, NARRATION, SHARING, RITUALITY

I have used the categories of acceleration, use, militancy, presence, and latency to allude to ideas and arguments present in works of various contemporary philosophers that can contribute to thinking up strategies to cope with the colonization and overdetermination of our lives by technology. Such colonization and overdetermination entail, among others, negative and impoverishing consequences: a life (in a certain sense) lived remotely and automatically, in which spaces and moments for experience and for decision making are reduced. This real subsumption of life involves leaving the horizon of expectations, hopes, and decisions in the hands of technology. It also implies the stifling of unforeseen possibilities, decisions, doubts, and questions by referring to devices that do not admit unforeseen possibilities, decisions, doubts, and questions. What is imposed then is a decadent life in which the erratic character of man (who is a rooted and foreign being at the same time) is replaced by an unproductive, self-destructive, and fictional errancy. This is dominated by a feverish and nonsensical movement that is merely a simulation of emptiness under a fiction of autonomy, a mere variation of a single way of relating to others and to things: consumption.²⁵

However, it must be postulated that such vacuum and suffocation cannot be total. Or, rather, it is necessary to live as if they might not or need not exist. This means opting for forms of life in which certain human dimensions cannot be dispensed with. Or even better, in which we do not want to dispense with them and, especially, with the clash and tension between the meanings provided by them and the area of contingency and finitude.

Certainly, the abstraction that is proper to technology and capitalism is irreversible, so the resistance to its totalization must be considered from this perspective. This requires renouncing alternatives that idealize a return to primitivism, or traditionalist or localist strategies, or idealizations of animality, and the like.²⁶ Any such bet is merely theoretical and more abstract and counterfactual even than the domain it intends to fight with.

Similarly, it is unthinkable (nor, to this extent, does it seem possible to propose it as an alternative) to appeal to a type of experience that is not

²⁵ See Luis Sáez, *Ser errático. Una ontología crítica de la sociedad* (Madrid: Trotta, 2009), chaps. 1, 2, and 6.1.

²⁶ As, in a sense, it is inferred from Vanessa Lemm, *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy: Culture, Politics and the Animality of the Human Being* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

mediated by concepts, that is a “pre-” or “para-” linguistic experience. Our linguistic condition is irreversible. The paradox is that the mastery of sophisticated concepts, in addition to an exercised emotional intelligence and an education of sensitivity, constitute the insuperable mediation to access experience and be able to be affected by it; that is, in order for the experience, not mere scientific knowledge, to become a source of legitimacy and guidance. Experience is not concepts, but these give us the measure of that experience, and without them there is no experience. In other words, experience must be articulated in concepts. Language is our insurmountable horizon, even if it is to be questioned and transcended by an unpredictable event. Experience is not just language, but it is also language. This means that it is transmissible, apprehended by memory and anchored in tradition. As Koselleck argues, experience is a present past in which rational elaboration and unconscious forms of behavior merge.²⁷

It is a mistake and a vain goal to pretend to offer a catalog of virgin experiences or procedures to increase the scope of decision making. Rather it happens that decisions are not taken, but they happen to us; experiences are not made, but they make us, they happen to us. It is not possible to address them nor provoke them. This is an index and a factor of their questioning of subjective identity. For this reason, to diagnose a loss of experience and a reduction of decision-making spaces and, at the same time, to claim both, does not mean to propose a return to an idea and a *praxis* of substantive personal identity, but rather the opposite.

But while it is not possible to program or produce experiences, it is possible to prevent them, to obstruct them. Such obstruction is what happens in the immunized life that we seek with the neutrality of technology. In other words, there are fewer and fewer experiences and less possibility of making decisions because we immunize ourselves from them. In everyday life there is less room for surprises and for the need to decide. As we have seen, technology colonizes and overdetermines the rest of the discourses, seeking and helping individuals to settle down with protocols that render decision making superfluous and that exclude all unpredictability, that is, all experience.

Nevertheless, the realities of human life are today, as always, inevitable and universal: birth, friendship, love, breeding, aging, illness, death, and so on. There is never a lack of historical events to experience; what is missing

²⁷ See Reinhart Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories,” in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255–76.

is of another order. On one hand, there is a lack of education of the sensibility, aptitude, and attitude to make experience, to produce it, to develop it, to constitute it; what is lacking are metanarratives (those so reviled by proponents of *pensiero debole!*) “from” and “to” the experience. On the other hand, instrumental *ratio* dominates everything. It is necessary to implement places and moments to interrupt the instrumental *ratio*, that is, the means-ends *ratio*. Both are transcendental conditions of experience and they are related, although this may seem paradoxical.

With respect to the first condition, it is necessary to revitalize the virtuous circle existing between authority’s tradition and the authority of tradition. This cannot be done without the contribution of modern and contemporary criticism. But the work of critical reception cannot mean giving up the fertility of myths and inherited rituals as a framework for integrating (individually and communally), sharing (with the present and the ancestors), and transmitting the events and experiences of everyday life. Without such a prior framework, there is no experience but only trauma and impoverishment of reality and of oneself. Cult expands experience because it articulates the elements of the individual memory with those of the collective memory, which renews and updates. Whichever way one looks at it, inherited stories, narratives, and rituals are necessary to assimilate events and these should not destroy us but rather reinforce our identity (a critical identity, exposed), and contribute to our coexistence. The reason is that only such narratives and rituals (and this includes everything from plastic arts to family meals at weekends, from the beginning and end of academic ceremonies, to the rituals of the legal order, from the customs to celebrate the transition to adulthood, to the various liturgies [or nonreligious gatherings] to welcome the newborn in the community, and similar examples) allow us to link our present events with past generations, individual memory and diachronic collective memory. Science and technology do not allow this intergenerational articulation, but only a synchronous linkage (also necessary).

In order to have experiences it is not enough to consume experiences and novelties; it is necessary to have a reflection that elaborates as memories and expectations the latent conditions of all experience. Faced with the accelerated time of a hypertechnified society, experience requires a work of subjectivity incompatible with passivity and the surrender of autonomy. If we want the accelerated flow of messages around us to have a meaning that transcends its mere ephemeral circulation, reflection is necessary—not a self-absorbed and solipsistic reflection, but one that is exercised through the

narrative oriented to being shared and the reflection stimulated and developed by the ritual, which is a concentrated community memory that guides and enriches expectations.

For this reason, one cannot live without a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) that is nourished by a renewed and critical reception of the inherited myths and its inseparable rituals. It is not a question of returning to “live in the myth,” but a “work on myth,” an endless reception of them that prevents their function being occupied exclusively by the instrumental *ratio* of technology, which, although necessary for life, is structurally presentistic, merely pragmatic, accelerated, changing, and contemporary in its meaning-giving function. In addition, the *ratio* of technology is inexorably nihilistic, concealing human finitude and totalizing any expectation other than the affirmation and consumption of itself.

This condition is inseparable from another that may seem contradictory to it. From the previous condition it is inferred that it is not enough to increase the intensity or quantity of novelties; rather, it is necessary to have renewed contexts of meaning accredited in its legitimacy and ability to induce the integration, sharing, verbalization, relativization, and so on of events, in order to send such novelties to those contexts. But to interrupt the interruption of experience, it is also necessary to have another way of contact not mediated by the existing concepts and purposes; that is, it is necessary to relate to the world in a different way than through the mediation of sense and meaning. In short: we must overcome the dialectic means-ends, the logic of the instrumental *ratio*, in order to simply be exposed, dis-posed. This suggestion presupposes that indications and factors of experience are, among others, the following: limited control over things and events in the world; passivity and surprise; unprogrammability and unreproducibility of the experience; questioning of individual reconciliation and identity; personal transformation; boredom; play; and gratuity.

That there is no contradiction between the two conditions is shown by taking note of cult (narration and ceremony, liturgy), since this, while it links us with collective memory, concentrates and fixes our attention on the act itself, subtracting it from the dialectic means-ends. Cults are a pure ancestral gesture that turn our participation into pure renewed gesture, experience.

Similarly, the relationship between the “linguistic production” of experience and its relationship to the event is demonstrated by the fact that only narrative, which redesigns or refigures time, allows us to contemplate history

as an event, that is, as a contingent reality. The unpredictability and contingency of the consequences of an action are proof of the meaning of what is experience and event, namely, possibility and freedom. Hence the greater intensity of the experience of the defeated, who have experienced that things have not happened as they expected and desired.