

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## On Bernard Stiegler's Confinement

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The being of humankind is to be outside itself. In order to make up for the fault of Epimetheus, Prometheus gives humans the present of putting them outside themselves.

Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1* (1998)

One of the last articles published by the philosopher Bernard Stiegler (1952-2020) appeared in *Le Monde* 19 April 2020. Titled 'Turning Confinement into the Freedom to Create an Experience' and translated by Daniel Ross, the article reflects on the time of Covid-19 and recollects Stiegler's reading practices during his five years in Saint Michel Prison in Toulouse, France. Known now for his post-deconstructive philosophy of technology and memory in the *Technics and Time* series, Stiegler's numerous obituaries emphasize the biographical narrative of a leftist bank robber turned philosopher and public intellectual, citing his account of this period in the early 1980s in *Acting Out* (2009a). This experience of reading in isolation influenced his study with Jacques Derrida and would come to inform his account of prosthetic (or posthuman) being, that is, an account of the human that exists 'outside itself' in the material technics of culture and that transmits its memory by way of this exteriorization (1998: 193). In what follows, I contextualize Stiegler's short *Le Monde* piece through his 'prison *melete*' and consider what transformative openings this posthumanism may offer in contemporary spaces of isolation.

Stiegler's philosophical anthropology can be distinguished from other posthumanisms precisely through this account of reading in isolation. Rather than transcending the human in a false liberation (or false destruction), Stiegler invites his readers deeper into the processes that have historically shaped the experience of interiority. In *Taking Care of Youth and the*

*Generations* (2010), for instance, he revisits a conversation with N. Katherine Hayles concerning the reorganization of attention in contemporary reading and education. Whereas ‘deep attention’ focuses on a specific object, ‘hyperattention’ favors surface and speed, and threatens to eclipse the entire historical transmission of human cultural memory as a mere preface to machine learning (73). This concern with education is buttressed by his major work on cultural memory in the *Technics and Time* series, and by his critique of digital capitalism as the ‘proletarianization’ of cognitive labor in a series of lectures titled, *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (2009b). For Stiegler, individuation does not imply techno-determinism but its opposite: the ability of the reader to make use of *retention* so as to enable the articulation of desire to projects of *protention*, in the anticipation of a future.

Stiegler’s piece invites us to think through spaces of voluntary and involuntary isolation with a concern for the future. On the one hand, it addresses false isolation in the midst of society (e.g. ‘distance’ workers who rely on ‘essential’ workers). On the other, he speaks to the alienation that accompanies isolation from oneself, in demotivating labor or in communicative technologies whose object lies wholly ‘outside’ the subject. These two dimensions spatially converge in confinement, and particularly in Covid-19 discourses that promote social distancing as a time of increased productivity. This inducement to production is a form of cruel optimism, a structure of feeling that Lauren Berlant (2011) links to the thwarting of future-oriented attachments in neoliberal culture. The presumed subject of the pandemic is often the middle-class individual (sometimes parent) able to work from home on account of their communicative labor and technology, rather than the essential worker whose bodily integrity is exposed in the transport of goods and services. These narratives quickly become a genre of the isolated individual carrying social baggage to their deserted island, in short a kind of Robinsonade. Against this, Stiegler’s wager is that these moments of collective isolation can be transformed to create a different kind of surplus through cultivating practices of attention and care beyond the drive to endlessly produce.

As communicative, precarious, and essential work converge to accelerate new organizations of platform consumption, the critique of the Robinsonade genre may help unpack contemporary experiences of isolation and social space. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx famously criticizes Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* for its use by eighteenth-century economists as an ahistorical invention, and an idealized naturalistic account of man in isolation (1973: 83). ‘The human being is in the most literal sense a ζῷον πολιτικόν [political animal], not merely a gregarious animal,’ Marx writes, ‘but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society. Production by an isolated individual outside society,’ he continues, ‘is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other’ (84). Marx’s account of the human as a being that is constituted through social production informs Stiegler’s philosophy of reading and writing in post-industrial societies. Likewise, the inclusion of Friday into this ensemble of relations means turning to spaces of official exclusion. The intensifying Covid-19 outbreaks in U.S. prisons underscore the prison as a critical space for understanding collective isolation today and for rethinking the production of subjectivity.

Stiegler's description of incarceration as a means of destructive individuation is especially relevant in the United States which maintains the world's highest rate of incarceration. The contradiction of physical exposure and mental isolation is likewise compounded by the need for intellectual resources and rehabilitation programs. The so-called 'school-to-prison pipeline' exists in poor, minority communities, in which disciplinary logics result in lifetimes of punitive institutionalization. This also results in the creation of cheap labor reserves, such as the use of prisoners to fight wildfires, in an industry designed to extract public funds. Wardens often manipulate gangs as a means to exercise decentralized control through racial segregation. To speak of prisons today in terms other than their principled *abolition* seems perverse (Davis 2003). Stiegler himself describes confinement as a 'social pathology.' He writes that '*very few* prisoners benefit from their period of confinement.' However, Stiegler also believes that his confinement helped him develop practices of attention to textual culture that might be adapted to other situations of 'necessary' isolation with the aim of transforming society:

Confinement (for reasons of imprisonment, health or during war) is a kind of social pathology, and when it is necessary we should strive to turn it into the freedom to create an experience – which can bring extraordinary surprises bearing a salvatory potential for bifurcation, and engender what Canguilhem calls a normativity – that is, the invention of a new way of living. But just like illness, this experience can destroy, annihilate, kill: this possibility is the price of admission. (Stiegler 2020: 3)

Stiegler proposes reading as a way to transform isolation into an experiential freedom. He recounts his methods in *Acting Out*. In the morning, he would begin with 'Mallarmé [...] a poem, or reading and rereading a prose text, usually for half an hour, not so as to learn it by heart but to *understand* it.' Here, understanding is not limited to literal meaning, but *verstehen* in the German sense, referring to a mode of attention which gives the senses over to the words on the page as something other in order to produce a difference in oneself. He explains that these readings would then inspire 'prolonged writing exercises in different modes.' These modes then 'came to form veritable reading methods, which consisted in a process by which the texts read were catalogued, then transformed into commentaries, and finally consisted of writing, in which these remains of the world were reassembled' (2009a: 20). In the isolation that suspends the normal relationship with the world, these textual remnants are revealed to be prostheses that produce the bifurcations of human experience into interiority and exteriority. In the tangible absence of the world, 'thinking through the written word' through writing exercises becomes, for Stiegler, a way of exploring the technics that sustain these worldly relations.

In his isolation, Stiegler feels the exteriority of the world removed from the space of confinement, which likewise allows him to isolate written language as a technics with its own material history. It is no accident, he suggests, that Plato's *Phaedrus* is set in a space outside the city, and is the source of Derrida's analysis of writing as a *pharmakon* (an object that is both poison and cure). Reading becomes a phenomenological practice for Stiegler that draws

attention to the ‘silence out of which a voice arises’ in the midst of democratic and technical life (2009a: 20). Submersion in the written word allows him to attain a proper distance. His preferred metaphor is a creature that inhabits two environments: the flying fish.

[P]hilosophy consisted of considering the milieu while being able to extract oneself from it, in the same way as a flying fish can leave the water: intermittently. In this extraction, or abstraction, the milieu is brought into view, which is to say, also, *here, taken hold of; and like a wall, by default*, as the condition of passage from the potential of the intellectual soul to its act, to its *for itself*. From then on, I could not claim that I was in my cell like a fish in water, but, *in that cell*, where I had been rendered radically deficient in the *vital milieu of the intellectual soul, the world, as the framework of artifacts forming relations sustaining social relations*, I had perhaps a chance to consider this world as does a fish flying, above its element--an elementary milieu totally constituted by supplements, where the element, in other words, is *always lacking*. (Stiegler 2009a: 15)

This ‘flying fish’ metaphor carries Stiegler’s reading across various milieus, addressing society, then language, and ultimately technology. He does with the help of modernist texts that highlight the formal constraints of the medium on meaning. Two lines by Mallarmé hang above his table: ‘On no fruits here does my hunger feast / but finds in their learned lack the self-same taste’ (17). As these texts support his effort to practice freedom in isolation, it could be argued that this experiential freedom is an allegory of late modernism. As a creature of multiple milieus, Stiegler’s account is thus a refusal of contemporary posthumanisms that seek to displace the human in theoretical terms at the very moment in which capitalism (digital, carceral, geological, surveillance) is attempting to accomplish this in fact.

One such technology, the Blue Room, has been introduced by the Oregon Department of Corrections. It made the list of *Time* magazine’s top innovations of 2014 and highlights a potential future for isolation. The Blue Room is a space of solitary confinement illuminated with blue light, in which video images of natural environments are projected on the wall to calm individuals who are classified as aggravated. While the blue light produces a calming effect, the video displays environmental places, species, and ecological temporalities radically different than the space of the prison. It aims to deflate internal tensions by drawing the incarcerated subject out of themselves by way of a cinematic, virtual projection. In one sense, it represents a humane reform of solitary confinement. In another, it is a symptom of damaged life, whereby our evolutionary desire to be in multisensory connection with the world of human and nonhuman others is transformed into the means of assimilating subjectivity to conditions of isolation through affective containment.

This future can be contrasted with the one evident in the popularity of prison reading programs. Where they exist, they illustrate that reading offers precisely what Stiegler calls ‘the freedom to create an experience’ or a new normativity. Similar experiences were, for example, described to me by fellow participants in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange program at Oregon State Penitentiary. This program brings incarcerated and non-incarcerated students together to create a space of introspection and exchange by suspending the sense of confinement

produced by the prison walls. We read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, along with Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy written during his wartime imprisonment by the Nazis (Shankman 2013). In contrast to the Blue Room's false reconciliation with the outside, this collective reading produced internal differences in the participants which became the shared basis of anonymous solidarities and ethical commitments.

Stiegler closes his *Le Monde* piece with thoughts on Greta Thunberg, writing that 'the Thunberg generation is creating an experience of confinement on that biospheric scale that characterizes the end of the Anthropocene era in which we all feel trapped, and in which we are trying to live, ever closer to despair' (2020: 4). This despairing confinement, he infers, is the 'pharmacological' condition out of which 'a sublime form of energy' may yet emerge. Similarly, his recent dialogue with Achille Mbembe (2019) critically examines the rationalities governing global life and death, what Mbembe describes as the ambivalent 'becoming Black of the world,' in the Anthropocene. As the planet enters into a period of temporal isolation from its supposedly 'normal' course of existence, and as diverse forms of life are sentenced despite vast inequalities in responsibility, what we will do with the uneven geographic and cultural experiences of isolation will define how future generations live together. For Stiegler, transformation of production at every level of society calls for practices of creative attention modeled on reading. Through such practices collective individuations might emerge to counter the catastrophic sense of isolation with new spaces of care.

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