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LIFE IS WHAT YOU FILL YOUR ATTENTION WITH – THE WAR FOR ATTENTION AND THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN THE WORK OF BERNARD STIEGLER¹

abstract

This contribution focuses on the topic of attention and sets forth the main points of Bernard Stiegler's analysis of the interplay between capitalist consumer society, the destruction of attention and the consequences for individual and collective life. We look at how current digital technologies in service of the needs of the market are a major factor in the destruction of attention and discuss two counterforces that do not destroy but form attention: education and meditation. If life is what you fill your attention with, then focusing or directing attention is one of the most valuable abilities for knowing how to live. Instead of letting our attention be hijacked by the market and the economic needs of neoliberal capitalism, being in charge of what happens to our attention may be a basic right that needs protection given the current conditions of the attention economy.

keywords

attention, Bernard Stiegler, (digital) technology, education, meditation, neoliberal capitalism

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1. Introduction In today's *attention economy* individuals' attention is the rarest and most crucial resource that companies chase to run successful business. In this type of economy, the supply of capital, labor and information is abundant whereas human attention is in shortage. Even though it is easy to start a business and to reach consumers, it is a challenge to get and hold consumers' attention – attention necessary to devote to the information available even before buying or consuming anything.

Apart from the physical and analogue world of ads, brands and commercials, the digital online world is the place per excellence where attention is competed for. However, and notwithstanding the idea of multitasking (which is a matter of switching attention not of increasing it), attention has its limits. "Telecommunications bandwidth is not a problem, but human bandwidth is" (Davenport & Beck, 2001, p. 2). Or in the famous words of Herbert Simon: "What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (Simon, 1971, pp. 40-41). For the organization of businesses and companies, the attention problem is one of efficiency, i.e. a matter of the efficient allocation of attention among the overabundance of information resources that might consume it.

For the mass of consumers, the problem is a different one: it is not just a matter of the efficient allocation of attention but primarily a matter of unhooking attention from everything that wants (or is designed) to capture attention, especially in the online world. For if attention is not unhooked, conscious time is consumed without us being able to determine how to allocate our attention resources. Before we know it, our scarce resource of attention is depleted and our behavior is modified in accordance with the goals of those who capture our attention. This modification of our behavior is not necessarily in line with decisions that we would want to make.

What we experience as "our life" is mostly the time we experience consciously. What we experience thus depends on what enters consciousness. Crucially, what enters consciousness is a function of attention processes. Therefore, who or what is in control of our attention is of utmost importance for how we experience our lives and what we make out of it.

This contribution focuses on the topic of attention and sets forth the main points of the analysis by Bernard Stiegler, a major contemporary philosopher of technology who analyses in several of his works the interplay between capitalist consumer society, the destruction of attention and the consequences for individual and collective life. The next section (section 2) describes what attention is from a philosophical point of view. In the third section, we look at

how current digital technologies in service of the needs of the market are a major factor in the destruction of attention, to such an extent that we may say that there is a war for attention going on. Next, two counterforces are discussed that do not destroy but form attention: education (section 4) and meditation (section 5). The aim is to formulate insights into both the destruction and the formation of attention under early 21st century conditions.

Bernard Stiegler's philosophical examination of attention (2010; 2014) clarifies that attention is much more than concentration or vigilance.¹ Attention is about desire, waiting, attending and caring. Attention is the result of education, of the formation of the individual as such. It is also an intergenerational relationship. In Stiegler's philosophy, attention ties together all these phenomena. This section sets out how it is possible that attention is so encompassing. Stiegler's view on attention is rooted in Edmund Husserl's account of the (temporal) structure of consciousness. In his phenomenological analysis of inner time-consciousness, Husserl (1991 [1966]) traces the origin of the temporal way in which objects appear to us. His phenomenological account is not just based on our subjective *experience* of time, but on the laws governing the experience of an object appearing in time. According to Husserl, each momentary phase of perceptual consciousness is a continuum made up of a now-consciousness (present impression) and a number of points representing what has just passed (retentions). The succession of these phases is in turn a continuum. Husserl distinguishes primary retentions (impressions) and secondary retentions (memories). A primary retention (or impression) is the presentation in consciousness of what is just past (e.g. the just passed notes when you are listening to a melody). A secondary retention (or memory) does not *present* but it *represents* the past (e.g. when you think back to that melody the next day). According to Stiegler, secondary retentions function as a filter for primary retentions because the secondary retentions that constitute one's memory select the primary retentions. As such, secondary retentions determine what appears in the flux of consciousness. Vice versa, primary retentions influence secondary retentions because they determine what constitutes a secondary retention. Linking primary with secondary retentions, consciousness is also able to anticipate or to project into the future. That forward stretch of consciousness is made up of so-called protentions. Stiegler (2010; 2014) emphasizes that attention is the result of the accumulation of primary and secondary retentions and the anticipation of protentions. Protentions draw out attention, but are themselves the result of retentions. "It is as an accumulation of experiences in what I have previously called secondary retentions that the horizons of anticipation are formed" (Stiegler, 2014, p. 65). Put in a nutshell: consciousness is a flux of backward (memory) and forward stretches (anticipation) and what we pay attention to is rooted in our past experience. Primary and secondary retentions are of the level of the individual and appear and disappear with the individual subject. In the wake of Jacques Derrida's analysis of Husserl's *On the Origin of Geometry* (Husserl, appendix to 1970 [1954]; Derrida, 1989 [1962]) and in addition to the notions of primary retention and secondary retention (or memory), Stiegler (1998) elaborates the notion of tertiary retention. As humans are mortal, the retentional finiteness of memory implies that the ability to remember is limited, finite and temporary. Tertiary retentions break through this limitation of memory because they are *external* memories. Tertiary retentions are externalized memory traces and they range from stone tools to contemporary technology.

**2. What is attention?
Primary, secondary and tertiary retentions**

¹ See Lee (2019) for a short introduction to how Stiegler's account differs from Katherine Hayles' distinction between hyper and deep attention (Hayles, 2007). See also Stiegler's discussion of Hayles' distinction (Stiegler, 2010, especially pp. 77-83).

They are artificial and technical and through a process of accumulation over time they form the technical environment of man. This technical environment consisting of the accumulated tertiary retentions precedes the individual.

According to Stiegler (1998; 2010), tertiary retentions are constitutive and conditioning for primary and secondary retentions. Primary and secondary retentions, impressions and memories, belong to the order of the individual. Tertiary retentions not only transcend the individual but they also constitute and condition the human subject. They are of the order of the tradition or of the collective memory. On the individual level, the selectivity of perception shows that perception happens in function of what has already been, in function of memories or secondary retentions. Secondary retentions are in turn overdetermined by the system of tertiary retentions: our memories depend on the external memories in the technical environment. For Stiegler it means that the human condition is fundamentally a technological condition.

Tertiary retentions transcend the individual but in contrast to genetic information transmitted by the genes (phylogenetic) tertiary retentions are *epi*-phylogenetic. Tertiary retentions are of the order of tradition or the collective memory and are transmitted not by the genes but by the generations (Stiegler, 2014, p. 7). They consist of all that belongs to the human world and carries knowledge and skills. They are the materialization or the concretion of secondary retentions. However, and in contrast to secondary retentions, they do not disappear when the individual disappears. Tertiary retentions are the collective memory of generations. They form an intergenerational relationship and they are the source for new secondary retentions in the next generation's individual consciousness.

The transmission of memory is formative of the next generation's attention, constituting the retentions which then create protentions (Stiegler, 2010, p. 8). That is the reason why attention is the result of education or of the formation of the individual as such. That is also why attention is an intergenerational relationship.

Typical of Stiegler's philosophy is that tertiary retentions are *artificial* memories or memory *technics* or *mnemotechnics*. They range from the invention of writing to the printing press and contemporary information and communication technologies. Stiegler pleads for a recognition of the profound role of mnemotechnics (also called more broadly psychotechnics) in the constitution of human consciousness and subjectivity. His whole philosophy is an elaboration of the thesis that human consciousness is essentially *technically* constituted and conditioned because tertiary retentions are of a technical nature. That implies that attention is also constructed *technically* because secondary retentions are built on tertiary retentions which are the materializations of memories based on the use of technics (with writing as a prime example). The life of the mind has always been technically determined. Until recently, writing was central to the technical environment that defines spiritual life (spiritual in the sense of the French *esprit*). Since the Enlightenment, writing has been the technical condition for the emancipation of the citizen and has created a public space (Stiegler, 2010). Similarly, humans have always used attention technics to focus attention. Strategies for concentrating attention are thus not unique to our times, because the formation of attention requires that attention is concentrated or captured. All attention formation requires a technics for capturing attention (e.g. a book, but also education, as every teacher knows). Attention is something that originally can only exist because it is captured, directed and modulated – and that happens on the basis of technics (Lemmens, 2009, p. 90). Without technics, there is no human mind. Both the individual and the social formation of the subject happen on the basis of technics and attention is therefore always at once psychic and collective (Stiegler, 2010).

In today's technological environment digital technology and the internet have a central position. Individual life and society are more and more determined by digital information and communication technologies. Accordingly, the life of the mind is more and more determined

by what Stiegler calls *psychotechnologies*, i.e. technologies that condition and even constitute psychic life. Stiegler, however, points out that all technics can either foster or destroy the human mind.

The previous section presented the intimate relationship between consciousness, the interweaving of primary, secondary and tertiary retentions and attention. It was also pointed out that attention is intergenerationally formed because tertiary retentions are formative of secondary retentions or individual memories. Next, the technical nature of tertiary retentions – and thus of human consciousness and attention – was emphasized. Finally, it was mentioned that all technics can be either beneficial or detrimental to the human psyche. That remark is the point of departure of this section. More in particular, this section focuses on the detrimental effects that current-day digital information and communication technologies have on attention.

The broader context in which current-day digital technologies have detrimental effects on the human psyche is the consumer society's reduction of citizens to consumers. The core process in the consumer society is that all energy is mobilized for production and consumption whereas the higher plane of ideals and spiritual culture ("spiritual" again in the sense of the French *esprit*) is destroyed. Life is reduced to the level of immediate satisfaction of drives, a situation typical of consumerism. In *cultural capitalism* even the higher plane of ideals and culture is annexed by neoliberal capitalism. In other words, in cultural capitalism, culture is put in service of the economy. What is new in *cultural capitalism* is that commodities are acquired because they offer a certain experience (of pleasure or meaning). This differs from the earlier version of capitalism in which commodities are acquired because they have intrinsic value or because they are useful or give the owner a certain status.

Stiegler (2010; 2011) observes that we live in societies in which marketing has become the central function of psychic and social development and even replaces traditional social regulation (which used to be intergenerational). The control of *culture* is at the heart of current consumerist capitalism, controlling the behavior of the masses (mass production of behavior). The computational nature of capitalism tends to eliminate all values not calculable on the market of economic exchange. Consciousness itself, in terms of attention, has become a commodity. Libidinal energy, i.e. the energy of desire, being exhausted both the formation of the individual and the society are under threat. Whereas drives are related to basic needs such as food and shelter, desire is the spiritual transformation of drives and is related to goals and ideals in the context of social life. The systematic exploitation of desire in the consumer society, however, tends to destroy desire. The result is that the subject is thrown back to the level of subsistence.

Stiegler calls the kind of society in which desire is exploited and exhausted 'irrational' because it precisely demotivates those who constitute the society. "(...) this control is an exploitation of libidinal energy that *exhausts* this energy, and it is in this way that the industrial model emerging from twentieth-century modernity reaches its limit (...)" (Stiegler, 2011, p. 26).

The cause of the destruction of both the individual and the society lies in the industrial exploitation of libidinal energy in an unlimited way. Put more simply, it is the reduction of the citizen (both psychically and collectively) to the status of pure consumer. People merely *subsist* in this kind of society, they do no longer *exist* in the sense of believing in a future, supported by symbolic activities (the higher plane of ideals and spiritual culture). In the consumer society, consumer behavior has been standardized and *culture* has become the means of *controlling* consumer behavior. According to Stiegler (2011), the consumer is the new proletarian figure, submitted to standardized behavioral models of consumption. Neoliberal capitalism implies the subjugation of the whole of society to the imperatives of

3. The destruction of attention

capital. The neoliberal society is a consumerist or even hyper-consumerist society in service of economic growth in which citizens are addressed exclusively as consumers (also when voting). Stiegler insists that this happens on the basis of technical apparatuses, more in particular on the basis of the *psychotechnologies* of the mass media, exploited in a systematic way by marketing and advertising (cf. also Lemmens, 2012a). Neoliberal capitalism deploys the possibility of information and communication technologies to promote consumption and to control the behavior of people. This control determines the behavior and life style of citizens in a way more profound than biopower as analyzed by Michel Foucault (and as something in hands of the state) (Foucault, 2008; 2009). “The primary role of bio-power in our time is not so much to turn people into obedient and efficient production machines, but to produce consumers. And in fact it is no longer about biopower, but about psychopower. Or more precisely, it is no longer so much about a power over the body and life, but about a power over the ‘soul’ (psyche), about an acquisition of consciousness or desire for the sake of consumption” (Lemmens, 2009, p. 88, our translation). In the above terms of technically based retentions: there is a systematic exploitation of the mnemotechnical system that is the basis of human consciousness, attention and culture. As explained above, this system of artificial memories or *mnemotechnics* is the condition of possibility of the formation of attention and human spiritual life. However, marketing deploys a technologically organized attention *control apparatus* that destroys attention itself.

Radio, film and television and later digital network technologies are deployed to capture the consciousness (and the desires) of people, both individually and collectively. The crucial factor in controlling behavior and in channeling or nudging the people towards (more) consumption is individuals’ attention. “Today, attention control via cultural and cognitive technologies (‘technologies of the *spirit [esprit]*’ those malignant spirits haunting the adult minor as apparatuses for capturing, forming, and deforming attention), has become the very heart of hyperindustrial society; however, it no longer relies on psychotechnics but on psychotechnological apparatuses whose devastation we see on TF1, Channel Y, and so on” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 22). Stiegler only observes what others (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013; Yeung, 2017; Zuboff, 2019) also observe: the capturing of the attention of the public is motivated by the business plans of companies. At the same time, Stiegler notices a shift from (psycho-)technics to (psycho-)technologies, the latter enabling the exploitation of human attention and desire on an unprecedented industrial scale.

The aim of this use of technologies is to adapt the behaviors and ways of living to what the market offers, i.e. to the output of capitalist industry (Lemmens, 2012b; Stiegler, 2009, p. 60). The control over attention by current digital technologies implies the control of our behavior. The notion of “algorithmic governmentality” (Rouvroy & Berns, 2013) is an extension of Foucault’s conception of power in terms of the ability to direct people’s behavior (*conduire des conduites*) without direct coercion or direct prohibition. Algorithmic governmentality is a form of *soft power*, an unobtrusive yet powerful way to direct behavior. Its current algorithmic nature refers to the phenomenon of big data and the use of statistical knowledge to anticipate the behavior of individuals and to relate it to a wealth of correlations (so-called profiles) obtained from data mining. That statistical knowledge is not accessible to the individual but it is nevertheless applied to the individual to infer knowledge or predictions about his or her preferences, intentions and propensities. On that basis, behavior is gently steered in the desired direction (read: in the direction of more consumption or in the direction of certain beliefs and opinions).

Yeung (2017) discusses the phenomenon in terms of “hypernudge” or the influencing of choice behavior in the context of big data. Hypernudge techniques push us “in the right direction” and are used to shape individual decision-making in the interests of commercial

big data tycoons. While governments and citizens have so far mainly been concerned about privacy, Yeung also points to the erosion of our capacity for democratic participation and the misleading and non-transparent nature of hypernudge techniques. Both algorithmic governmentality and hypernudge are forms of psychopower and presuppose that the attention of people is captured by digital technologies.

In summary, psychopower conditions the mind and desires of people for the purpose of consumption and adaptation to the capitalist production apparatus. The true market is therefore consciousness itself because the access to the consciousness and attention of the people determines all other markets. Consciousness (or available conscious time and attention) is the most important commodity as it is the *metamarket* that gives access to all other markets (Lemmens, 2009, p. 89). Attention is therefore the commodity most searched for and marketing is the most important instrument of the hyperindustrial producer (Stiegler, 2015; Rossouw, 2015, p. 187). That is the reason why digital technologies are massively designed and employed: to capture consciousness channeling it towards more consumption. As such, psychopower technologies take massive control of our behavior (see also the notion of hypernudge, Yeung, 2017; algorithmic governmentality, Rouvroy & Berns, 2013). Psychopower technologies control the mental activities of individuals by capturing consumer attention and causing consumers to adopt new psychomotor behaviors that help form the markets of current neoliberal capitalism. Consciousness, or attention, is reduced to commodity, to “available brain time” which is maximally exploited, leading to systemic stupidity in the information age (cf. also Fitzpatrick, 2020). Stiegler adopts the phrase “available brain time” from the CEO of the French television channel TF1 Patrick Le Lay, who announced the following from the business perspective of TF1: “[...] in the end, TF1’s job is helping Coca-Cola, for example, sell its product. What we sell to Coca-Cola is *available human brain time*. This is where permanent change is located. Nothing is more difficult than getting access to it: we must always be on the lookout for popular programs, follow trends, surf on tendencies, all in a context in which information is speeding up, getting diversified and trivialized” (cited in Stiegler, 2010, p. 196, fn. 34 by the translator, emphasis in original). Because attention is captured by psychotechnologies exploited on an industrial scale, attention can no longer be cultivated and focused on consistence. In Stiegler’s work, the term “consistence” refers to the order of ideals and the symbolic but is – in line with his philosophy – itself technically conditioned (cf. the notion of tertiary retention). Without consistence human existence shrinks back to the mere condition of subsistence, a condition of symbolic misery (Stiegler, 2014; 2015). Symbolic misery is the loss of participation in symbolic production, especially the formation of ideas and ideals, which are the basis of spiritual culture (cf. Lemmens, 2014a, p. 24). What distinguishes human existence from mere subsistence is precisely the capability of having goals or ideals, reasons and motives to live for that are beyond competition and consumption and that belong to the order of consistence. Humans cannot live as humans without investing in a future they can desire, without ideals or “objects of consistence” (Lemmens, 2012a, p. 6). When human existence shrinks back to subsistence, all that is left is consumer behavior. The shrinking back of human existence to subsistence is also noticeable in the fact that the time of leisure is now also controlled by culture and programming industries (roughly, the products of cultural capitalism and the media). Section 4 explores this into greater detail.

The reduction of human existence to subsistence leads to what Stiegler calls the proletarianization of citizens, not only as worker-employee but also as consumer. The lives of people are controlled and modulated by management and marketing techniques. Those management and marketing techniques determine the lives of people to such an extent that they are increasingly relieved of inventing and shaping their own ways of life and tend to

lose the ability to shape existence themselves in a free and autonomous way (Stiegler, 2011). The result is a reduction of existence to labor and consumption (cf. supra the reduction of existence to subsistence; see also Lemmens, 2012a). In a nutshell, people lose their knowledge of how to exist or how to live (*savoir-vivre*). Consciousness, attention, desire, time – all dimensions of existence are annexed by production or consumption for the purpose of capital accumulation. Unfortunately, what is taken is at the same time destroyed and the spiritual world is annexed by the world of economy.

The concomitant shift from psychotechnics to psychotechnologies is an important one. “It is this industrial exploitation of the (now predominantly digital) ‘technologies of the mind’ by the psychopower of capital that is chiefly responsible for the deep social, spiritual and political crisis in which we find ourselves embroiled at the moment (and which is the actual root cause of the current financial and economic crisis). In fact, it destroys the libidinal energy and therefore our ‘spiritual life’ and the critical attention for ourselves, for others, and for the world as the expressions of this energy” (Lemmens, 2012b, p. 51). The whole of our technical milieu is annexed by the psychotechnologies of marketing, management and entertainment industry. Stiegler says our technical milieu is *intoxicated* by commercial and marketing psychotechnologies. Whereas psychotechnics traditionally serves *care* (of the individual and the collective) the transformation into psychotechnologies has implemented an attitude of “I don’t give a damn” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 41). The previously unknown technology of power that marketing is, leads to subjects reduced to consumers and not in charge of their very life. Marketing psychopower creates a colossal regression, according to Stiegler, and leads to a massive irresponsibility because it infantilizes adults and cuts the intergenerational bond. On the first pages of *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (2010), Stiegler presents responsibility as a learnt social competency. Society is responsible for transmitting responsibility to the next generation. The name for transmitting responsibility is *education* (Stiegler, 2010, pp. 1-2, pp. 42-43; see also section 4 for the issue of education). Irresponsibility is the reduction of critical consciousness to a mere brain deprived of consciousness. “In order to be made available to marketing imperatives, the brain must early on be literally deprived of consciousness in the sense that the creation of synaptic circuits responsible for the attention formation resulting in ‘consciousness’ is blocked by the channeling of attention toward the programming industry’s objects” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 72). That people – consumers – are stripped of critical consciousness amounts to saying that they are stripped of consciousness itself. From Stiegler’s perspective on what consciousness is (cf. the interweaving of primary, secondary and tertiary retentions) this regression implies a colossal deficit of attention, “[...] a *global attention deficit disorder*, stemming directly from the proliferation of psychotechnologies that no political power can now control” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 57).

Stiegler contrasts this situation with the Enlightenment thought that promotes maturity and critical consciousness. Consumption is intensified by capturing attention, and at the cost of widespread irresponsibility, resulting into the opposite of what we inherited from the Enlightenment. This goes hand in hand with the destruction of the social or the intergenerational bond. “The cognitive faculty – what we call reason – is the only solid link between the psychic and the social, in that it is passed through the succession of generations transformed and sublimated by disciplinary learning; this process constitutes knowledge. Informational saturation, on the other hand, desocializes the consumer of that information” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 184). Knowledge and understanding must be psychically assimilated and made one’s own (one’s own *self*) while information is merchandise made to be consumed – and therefore disposable.

Of course, it is possible for neoliberal capitalism to control (and proletarianize) the human mind and human desire because the psyche and attention, or human culture, have always

had (and also originally have) a technical basis. The spirit has always been controlled on the basis of psychotechnics. However, in contemporary hyperindustrial societies, the control over attention by current digital technologies happens on a unseen scale and with disastrous consequences. There is no public authority nowadays that can “arbitrate the conflict between psychopower and the attention *diversion*, on the one hand, and attention *formation* as the psychic and social faculty of responsibility, on the other” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 53, emphasis original). The result is a battle or even a war for attention. The education of young people stands at the heart of this battle.

According to Stiegler, the mass media and so-called programming industries (e.g. television in the second half of the 20th century) have ruined public education systems and training programs instituted in France in the 1880s, leading to psychological and social disaster. The programming industries replace the programming institutes of public education. Their goal is “complete control of the behavior-formation programs regulating social groups, indeed their removal from the public education system and their adaptation to immediate market needs” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 58). The programming industries destroy the attention needed to obtain knowledge and they deform or destruct the individual that education has constructed. “The work of forming attention undertaken by the family, the school, the totality of teaching and cultural institutions, and all the apparatuses of ‘spiritual value’ (beginning with academic apparatuses) is systematically undone in the effort to produce a consumer stripped of the ability to be autonomous either morally or cognitively [...]” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 184). Even worse, the goal of the programming industries would be to destroy the programming institutes themselves or any public structure that obstructs the dominance of the market (Lemmens, 2009, p. 93). The war between programming industries and programming institutions is ongoing. Whereas educational institutes have always been the centers where culture is transmitted to the next generation, digital media are almost exclusively dominated by marketing. In sum, there is a clash between the programming institutes and the programming industries or between the school and the market, the latter trying to capture and channel attention towards consumption.

Stiegler, however, seems to have a strong belief in the possibilities and the role of the state, the public education system (the programming institutions) and a new politics as counterforces to the programming industries and the psychopolitics that emerges from these industries. Nonetheless, the situation is critical because the reconstruction of attention has to happen in a time in which attention is not only exploited but also being destroyed (cf. Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 349). That means that before we can fight back, attention should be cured or healed. Stiegler’s remedy lies in (a restoration of) education and a new form of *otium* of the people. This section therefore frames Stiegler’s belief in education or the school as emancipatory discipline in the broader context of a new *otium* of the people. When discussing the spiritual world (still in the sense of the French *esprit*) Stiegler also uses the (German) term *Bildung* or the (Latin) term *otium*. *Otium* can be translated as “leisure” but has a meaning that predates the industrialization of the time not devoted to its counterpart *negotium* or the world of economy and its calculus. The modern form of leisure starts in the beginning of the 20th century with the program and culture industries and the invention of the consumer. This modern form of leisure effaces the difference between *otium* and *negotium* – *otium* now being the extension of *negotium* and *negotium* absorbing the spiritual or consistence (Rossouw, 2015, p. 189; Stiegler, 2011, chapter 3).

Stiegler analyses the school as the traditional apparatus for the formation of critical

4. Remedies for cure: education and a new *otium* of the people

attention.² As already mentioned, the different forms of attention that oppose each other in this battle have always been constituted by psychotechnics. That means that the history of humanity has always been a permanent battle for the psyche and that this war has always been waged on the basis of psychotechnics and attention technics (from rituals over printed books to digital technologies) (Lemmens, 2009, p. 90). The current *psychotechnologies* that control attention to the benefit of the market have to be transformed into *nootchnologies*,³ i.e. technologies that form a new kind of critical attention, both individually and socially, and that foster responsibility (Stiegler, 2010, p. 51). *Nootchnologies* are emancipatory technics of the psyche that foster autonomous and critical thinking. Stiegler also pleads for the translation of *psychopolitics*, i.e. politics that regulates psychotechnologies, into a *noopolitics*, i.e. a politics that not only limits and regulates psychotechnologies but also transforms the current technologies with their poisonous effects into a remedy. In other words, a *noopolitics* transforms psychotechnologies producing stupidity into nootechnologies producing a new, collective intelligence. All technics, and mnemo- or psychotechnics in particular, have the character of a *pharmakon*, i.e. they can either support or undermine the human soul.⁴

Stiegler does not call for an immediate struggle “against the disastrous effects of the savage use of psychotechnologies by the programming industries as they destroy attention and consciousness” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 179). What is needed first is *metacare*, i.e. a psychopolitics that shapes care, or a politics of techniques of the psyche. Education is a good example of metacare. “Truthfully, education is [...] in fact a *metacare*, not care of the body nor even of numbers of bodies but of what have for centuries been called ‘souls,’ whose collectivity constitutes a spirit” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 177). The programming institutions in general are for Stiegler “the sole guarantors of a system of care worthy of the name and the supporters of the battle for intelligence” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 191). Stiegler thus seems to put his hope in the state or institutions financed by the state and the reformings that can be effectuated by (state) institutions. Those reformings will be based on reclaiming technologies and using them to the benefit of attention and care. Thus, instead of political resistance and action, the politics needed should have the character of a therapy for society (cf. Lemmens, 2014b). However, as the ownership or the control of digital network technologies seems to be a crucial factor in this, it is not clear how Stiegler could effectuate a therapy for society without a battle for the ownership or at least a political appropriation of psycho- (or noo-)technologies.

What is clear, however, is that Stiegler’s sociotherapy has to detoxify the human psyche and to transform the poison of psychotechnologies into the medicine of nootechnologies. Sociotherapy is the conception of “a new age of the formation of care and attention for facing the care-lessness of a global consumer” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 180). The formation of care and attention would lead to the development of a planetary consciousness because “[T]o take care also means to pay attention, first paying attention to taking and maintaining care of oneself, then of those close to us, then of their friends – and thus, by projection, of *everyone* (...)” (Stiegler, 2010, p. 179).

Even though a detailed picture of the relationship between technologies, care and attention is not offered by Stiegler, it is telling that he wrote the preface for the French translation (2015) of a book on peer-to-peer economy by Michel Bauwens and Jean Lievens. The book pleads for a new distributed and decentralized economic model and highlights the role of technology in the making of a new society that fits well with Stiegler’s notion of a sociotherapy.

2 For an analysis of how this compares to Foucault’s analysis of the school, cf. Lemmens (2009).

3 “Noo-” relates to noetic, which refers in Stiegler philosophy and following Aristotle’s tripartition of the soul, to the spiritual over and above the sensory and the nutritive.

4 For the notion of *pharmakon*, cf. Derrida’s (1972) analysis of Plato’s condemnation of writing as a *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus*. Stiegler was a pupil of Derrida.

The importance of education as a counterforce to the destruction of attention is better understood in the broader frame of *otium*. As mentioned above, *otium* is free time or time not devoted to activities related to business and subsistence. That free time is time for activities related to education, intellectual work and spiritual contemplation (e.g. reading, writing, meditation, prayer, ...). For Stiegler, it has to be cultivated through disciplines or practices that cultivate attention, that facilitate community, commemorate tradition and thus open up (hope for) a future (Rossouw, 2015, p. 195). In brief, culture is the development of intellectual faculties and it is the content of the *otium*. In principle, it is open to all and intimately related to consistence or the formation of ideas and ideals. As such, it counteracts the shriveling of existence into subsistence. That Stiegler understands *otium* in terms of discipline is important. A discipline is the repetition of exercises that forms the discipline (cf. also Rossouw, 2015). Stiegler reverts to the old Greek term *melete* for this. *Melete* refers to care and attention, practice and exercise. We come back to *melete* in the next section.

Intellectuals, scientists, artists, philosophers and other “spiritual” people are the elite troops in the constitution of a new *otium* of the people (Stiegler, 2015) but it also is a state affair, i.e. of a state characterized by participatory democracy and the political appropriation of psychotechnologies (transformed into nootechnologies). Those nootechnologies would support the creative and intellectual activities of the elite troops. How exactly technology plays a role in the spiritual upliftment and the emancipation or the socialization of the people is not elaborated by Stiegler (and is not the subject of this paper) but Stiegler mentions peer-2-peer examples such as Wikipedia and opensource software (for more on this, cf. Bauwens and Lievens, 2015).

Conceived as part of *otium*, education is a combination of culture and *Bildung* (in the Enlightenment sense). Education is attention formation. However, the renewal of the educational system requires that the symbolic milieu in which we all live – children and parents – is no longer a systematic obstacle to this (Stiegler, 2010, p. 54). Unfortunately, the destruction of attention has resulted in the impossibility of education because *everyone* (including artists, professors, writers, scientists, ...) who should deliver the elements of a new *otium* of the people is affected by the destruction of attention or consciousness (Stiegler, 2010, p. 55). The socially configured system of care as a kind of attention that was developed in the educational system in France in the 19th century can no longer be adopted. That can also be formulated in terms of tertiary retentions. Tertiary retentions are the external inscription of secondary retentions, which hold the primary retentions. “It is tertiary retention which is, arguably, the most relevant for the question of education today. The question of education, therefore, is posed within Bernard Stiegler’s work through the disruption to attention and attentional processes which are caused by digital tertiary retentions. [...] The process of exploiting our attentional being in the world has led to the destruction of the very forms of attention that are being harvested” (Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 349). User profiles are, after all, the result of an individual’s attention and are subsequently exploited to nudge the behavior of the people (cf. Rouvroy & Berns, 2013; Yeung, 2017).

Stiegler seems to set his hopes on state institutions or institutes supported by the state, such as public education. This may sound as if there is little that individuals can do on their own to restore attention formation. Today, however, many people turn to meditation as another discipline of attention based on repeated practice. The last section explores how meditation could contribute to Stiegler’s new *otium* of the people. Or rather, it shows how meditation practices, traditionally part of *otium*, also offer a contemporary answer to the destruction of attention.

5. Remedies for cure: meditation and restoring the awareness of consciousness

Meditation is a practice that Stiegler does not explore as an answer to the destruction of attention. Yet meditation is part of the practices that (traditionally) belong to *otium*. Meditation is discussed by Michel Foucault in the context of technologies of the self (Foucault, 1986; 1988) and Stiegler discusses Foucault's technologies of the self at length in *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (2010). According to Foucault, technologies of the self "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Technologies of the self are about taking care of one's self and encompass a broad range of practices and disciplines (praying, reading, meditation, writing, ..). Stiegler focuses on writing as technique of the self and thus also as care of the self. He focuses on Foucault's *écriture de soi* (Foucault, 1983) or the writing down of one's actions and thoughts as part of the art of governing oneself. His preference for writing probably stems from the concept of tertiary retentions with writing as a prime example. Of course, meditation traditions have their own written sources and philosophies, which are externalized, but the core of meditation is the practice that one discovers by oneself, often under guidance of a master with whom one enters into dialogue. Since meditation is primarily an (embodied) practice it does not sit very well with Stiegler's notion of tertiary retention, which is an externalization based on the model of writing. For Stiegler, attention that is focused is based on writing and text whereas a distributed kind of attention occurs, e.g., during the motor activity of walking as a technology of the self. In contrast to "literate" and focused attention, this kind of attention can lead to daydreaming and accidental thoughts or remembrances (cf. Stiegler, 2010, pp. 80-81). Stiegler does not explicitly comment on the position or role of meditation practices in this matter of attention. Nonetheless, we can infer its position and role from a number of elements that are present in his writings.

Stiegler connects paying attention with waiting (*attendre*). The translator, Stephen Barker, specifies that waiting is precisely the act of *inaction*. "(...) as the act of inaction and as anticipation *attente* [waiting] is itself infinite, in that as a condition it is not reliant on any *end to waiting: waiting is*" (Stiegler, 2010, p. 213, footnote 5 by the translator). Inaction is an essential part of meditation which is explicitly not goal-directed (i.e. the goal is not to attain a state of relaxation or any alternative state of consciousness). Moreover, there is a close link between meditation and discipline. Stiegler discusses this close link in the context of Foucault's techniques of the self. The Greek *melete* is the muse of meditation and the term is derived from the verb *meletao*, which means "to take care of something" but also "to exercise", "to prepare oneself for something", and thus it refers to a kind of training. Stiegler, in the wake of Foucault, considers this as the ancient meaning of the term *discipline*, such that *melete*, meditation and discipline are intimately interconnected.

The essence of proletarianization (cf. section 3) is the loss of knowledge (*savoir*). Next to *savoir faire* or knowing how to do something and *savoir théorique* or theoretical knowledge, the lost knowledge is also knowing how to live (*savoir-vivre*). But as Lemmens (2012a) correctly remarks, it is also the loss of the sense or the awareness that one is a knowing and thinking being that relates to the world and gives meaning to it. As this sections aims to explain, meditation plays a crucial role precisely in training this awareness. Moreover, meditation is a discipline that trains the practitioner in *not reacting*, i.e. in interrupting the chain between stimulus and response. It does so by restoring awareness of subjectivity itself such that reactivity is counteracted and consciously responding becomes possible. The ability to counteract reactivity is important from the point of view where attention, care and responsibility are interwoven. The ability to *respond* in a conscious way and to pay attention to our own reactivity (instead of to *react*) is exactly what psychotechnics in service of the market

tries to circumvent, stimulating preconscious reactions and canceling out the subject between stimulus (marketed commodities) and response (consumption) (cf. also Rouvroy & Berns, 2013; Yeung, 2017).

What happens in many forms of meditation is that one is no longer primarily occupied with the objects toward which consciousness is directed but becomes aware of consciousness itself.⁵ What happens in the process of proletarianization is that consciousness is constantly bombarded with objects (often digital ones) that call for attention, diverting consciousness from being aware of itself. The result is that the constant occupation with contents or “desired” objects weakens the ability to become aware of consciousness or subjectivity itself. This weakening of awareness is necessary in order to be a present-day (hyper-)consumer. To step back from the objects or contents that are presented to us is a necessary condition to come to critical reflection because this step back opens up the space to transform reactions into responses. What is exercised in meditation is non-reactivity as “a sustained refusal to actively pursue [whatever may occur within or outside oneself], i.e. to react to it cognitively or practically” (Fasching, 2008, p. 464). All intentional activity comes to a halt, and “one is simply conscious without doing much else” (Fasching, 2008, p. 465). The key point of being “simply conscious without doing much else” is that “one does not allow anything to distract consciousness from itself” (Fasching, 2008, p. 465), exactly the opposite of the unrelenting distractions set up by present-day psychotechnologies.

During meditation, the mind time and again begins to occupy itself with something that affects it. The exercise is to notice this affection and the distraction of the mind and to return to the awareness of consciousness itself “until the affective power of the stimuli gradually diminishes” (Fasching, 2008, p. 469). Non-reactivity thus means that we consciously notice that we are affected and that we have drifted away with what affects us (a thought, an emotion, a desire, ...). When we notice that, we can return to a state of awareness in which we are no longer carried away by that which affects us but stay present and aware of this presence. To be affected by something and subsequently to be occupied by it (i.e. to be distracted by something, to desire it, to be curious about it, to evaluate it, to make plans, etc.) belongs to the nature of the human mind. To make full circle, that is precisely also the reason why psychotechnologies can so easily capture our attention.

What consequences could the practice of meditation have for daily life? And more in particular, how could it counteract the poisonous effects of psychotechnologies? Even though the practice of meditation itself is not goal-directed, it does not imply that there is no ultimate aim in meditation. Persistent practice transforms the everyday way of experiencing the world. “The daily object-experience is re-structured. [...] I am there not only as one who is active (who perceives, thinks, desires) but also as the very being of activity (of perceiving, thinking, desiring) itself, which is essentially non-activity in each and every moment of acting” (Fasching, 2008, p. 480). This “very being of activity” is the same as being present to the subjective presence we are in the world. It is awareness itself, a presence to oneself as a conscious, knowing and acting being in the world. As such, presence is a necessary element in the training of non-reactivity or in the ability to interrupt the chain between stimulus and response by restoring awareness of subjectivity itself. It is exactly this ability that is under threat by the exploitation of our attention processes by current-day psychotechnologies that poison the technical milieu. Training this ability is training attention and is taking care

⁵ We refer here to non-ideational forms of meditation. In ideational meditation, the meditator focuses on an idea and pursues a certain intellectual activity (see also Fontana, 2007). In non-ideational meditation, one does not have an object-directed state of mind.

of oneself. Meditation is therefore an act of de-proletarianization, it is the cultivation of attention itself, in an act of self-care but also in an act of responsibility for what is non-self.

6. Conclusion Our point of departure was Stiegler's description of attention rooted in the interweaving of retentions and protentions and the role of psychotechnologies in the destruction of attention. Stiegler, not unlike many others, highlights how current digital technologies in service of the needs of the market are a major factor in the destruction of attention to such an extent that we may say that there is a war for attention going on. That war for attention is part of the battle between the programming institutions and the programming industries. Whereas the latter destroy attention, the programming institutions form attention. Educational institutes are part of this counterforce to attention destruction, but await a context of sociotherapy in which the psychotechnologies with their poisonous effects are turned into emancipatory, politically and democratically appropriated nootechnologies. Stiegler seems to put his hopes on the state and institutions financed by the state. At the same time, the elite troops that should provide the necessary elements for a new *otium* of the people are also affected by the destruction of attention. The last section discussed meditation as a second kind of counterforce. Even though Stiegler does not explicitly discuss the position and role of meditation, there are a number of elements in Stiegler's exposition that lead to a view on meditation as an important means in the formation of attention and thus the process of de-proletarianization.

If life is what you fill your attention with, then focusing or directing attention is one of the most valuable abilities for knowing how to live. Instead of letting our attention be hijacked by the market and the economic needs of neoliberal capitalism, being in charge of what happens to our attention is not only a basic need for a human existence that transcends subsistence but maybe also a basic right that needs protection given the current conditions of the attention economy.

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