

Creative failure: Stiegler, psychoanalysis and the promise of a life worth living

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Abstract

The paper examines Stiegler's use of psychoanalytic concepts, focusing on how the proletarianised or blissfully numb mind may begin to work its way towards 'a life worth living'. The emphasis is on the *process* rather than the final outcome. Winnicott's concept of relationality and Lacan's concept of time in analysis can be aligned to the concept of pharmakon. Stiegler's autobiographical account *How I Became a Philosopher* (2009) and the initially 'stupid' hero of the *Lego Movie* (2014) are used as examples.

Key words

Stiegler, Lacan, Winnicott, acting out, pharmacology.

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The growing interest of the Anglophone world in Bernard Stiegler's work has been marked by the translation of several of his works, including *Care of the Youth and the Generations* (2010),¹ *What Makes Life Worth Living* (2013a),² *The Re-enchantment of the World: The Value of Spirit Against Industrial Populism* (2014c),³ and *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st century* (2015b)⁴. Stiegler has been described as an unorthodox Marxist⁵, a legatee of the Frankfurt School,⁶ deeply Heideggerian despite his critique of Heidegger⁷, and decidedly Derridean. The scope of his work is ambitious, trying 'to bring philosophy and cultural theory to bear on immediate social and political problems'.⁸ In this effort he is in dialogue with Husserl, Foucault, Deleuze, Heidegger, Simondon, Freud, Lacan, Winnicott and others.

The place of psychoanalysis in Stiegler's work is far from simple, as he espouses neither a clinical investigation of the psyche nor a psychoanalysis of politics and culture as practiced, for

¹ Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, translated by S. Barker, Stanford, Stanford University Press 2010. Hereafter *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*.

² Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, translated by D. Ross, London, Polity Press 2013a. Hereafter *What Makes Life Worth Living*.

³ Bernard Stiegler, *The Re-enchantment of the World: The Value of Spirit Against Industrial Populism*, translated by T. Arthur, London, Bloomsbury, 2014. Hereafter *The Re-enchantment of the World*.

⁴ Bernard Stiegler, *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century*, translated by D. Ross, London, Polity Press 2015.

⁵ John Hutnyk, 'Proletarianisation', *New Formations*, 77 (2012), p. 12.

⁶ Jeremy Gilbert and Ben Roberts, 'Editorial', *New Formations*, 77 (2010), pp. 5- 7.

⁷ Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida*, London, Polity Press 2011, p. 125.

⁸ Jeremy Gilbert and Ben Roberts, 'Editorial', *New Formations*, 77 (2012), p 6.

instance, by Lacanians or the Frankfurt School. Instead of that, he emplaces several psychoanalytic concepts, like desire, the Thing (object a) and the unconscious, in a broad Heideggerian phenomenology with Derridean and Deleuzian influences. Stiegler starts from the premise that contemporary capitalism spells psychic catastrophe, manifesting as despair, disengagement, disappointment and indifference, all resulting from the exclusion of individuals from decision-making processes and, more important perhaps, from the creative processes. In order to address the psychic effects of capitalism, he argues in favor of a new libidinal economy but departs from Marcuse's emphasis on the liberation of libido.⁹ Instead of that, he proposes to focus on objects, understanding their pharmacological properties, that is, their curative and poisonous properties. This is part of his wider pharmacological approach to cultural and political practices. In the *Re-enchantment of the World*, Stiegler proposes starting this process immediately, by engaging with mass-produced objects creatively, away from the canalisation of desire to predetermined paths, and with a view to jumpstarting the re-foundation of society.¹⁰

Engaging with the unconscious is part of this effort. Stiegler sees the unconscious largely as potentiality and argues that we must make it speak and consist. He does not, however, specify the cultural processes through which this could be achieved. In general terms, he aligns the unconscious to the Derridean 'neither in the world nor in consciousness'¹¹ and the Husserlian 'transcendental subject that can intuitively know',¹² suggesting that the life of the pharmakon begins 'behind consciousness'.¹³ It is at this point that he turns to Winnicott for further support for the *relational* qualities of the pharmacological approach. The first transitional object, the

⁹ Bernard Stiegler, *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism, Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 3*, translated by D. Ross, London, Polity Press 2014. Hereafter *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism*.

¹⁰ *The Re-enchantment of the World*, p. 44.

¹¹ *What Makes Life Worth Living*, p. 47.

¹² *What Makes Life Worth Living*, p. 46.

¹³ *What Makes Life Worth Living*, p. 48

mother' holding, he argues, is the first pharmakon, a quasi-origin¹⁴ for all objects and all things relational.¹⁵ The curative-destructive potency of all pharmaka harks back to this relationship. Again, it is the common object and our attitudes towards it that interest Stiegler, not the libido or the intricate workings of the drive, or the operations of the Lacanian object a.

It might not be an exaggeration to say that psychoanalysis 'inhabits' Stiegler's work as potentiality, though never developed into a fully articulated argument. At the same time, Stiegler invites Psychoanalysis to contribute to thinking new ways forward¹⁶ in the context of the ongoing catastrophe that is late capitalism. The present paper will try to explore more systematically some promising links between Stiegler's pharmacology and key elements of Winnicottian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. This will be done in the context of one of Stiegler's important questions, namely, 'what makes life worth living?'. The question stems from the thesis that, apart from disenchantment, capitalism breeds stupidity, broadly defined as life without knowledge, and the atrophy of the *noetic*, that is, the mental faculty of critical, abstract and creative thinking. Stiegler often characterises the combined effects of disengagement and stupidity as kenosis,¹⁷ the hollowing out of life. However, he also argues that stupidity might not a permanent state, but a 'fall' or regression which offers an opportunity for a new departure. In that sense, stupidity is said to be the pharmacological condition of knowledge.¹⁸

¹⁴ Quasi-origin because Stiegler challenges the fantasy of origin (Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time I, The Fault of Epimetheus*, translated by R. Beardsworth and G. Collins, Stanford, Stanford University Press 1998. Hereafter, *Technics and Time I*.

¹⁵ *What Makes Life Worth Living*, p. 4.

¹⁶ Bernard Stiegler, 'Pharmacology of desire: drive-based capitalism and libidinal dis-economy', *New Formations*, 72(2) (2011) pp. 150-161.

¹⁷ *What Makes Life Worth Living*, p. 73.

¹⁸ Bernard Stiegler, 'Doing and saying stupid things in the 20th century: Bêtise and animality in Deleuze and Derrida', *Angelaki*, 18(1) (20013), p. 162. Hereafter 'Doing and Saying Stupid Things'.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, regression, stupidity, fall and the pharmacological approach to what makes life worth living should be addressed in tandem with another and equally important one: how does an individual who lives a disengaged life become relationally sensitive to the noetic and the world around them? How does the psyche re-connect with what does not *exist* but *consists*? In an autobiographical account included in *Acting Out* and entitled *How I became a philosopher*¹⁹, Stiegler shows stupidity to be an index of psychic breakdown wherein one is incapable of relating in a manner that would be considered wise, rewarding and social. In the same piece Stiegler recounts how he was able to reconnect with the world gradually, slowly and through serious effort. We will draw on this autobiographical account as one of our two examples for exploring the convergence between psychoanalysis and Stiegler's thought. Our emphasis will be on the *process* of reversing stupidity and on the concept of relationality, which is central to both Stiegler's work and psychoanalysis.

Of course different schools of psychoanalysis approach relationality, and the loss of relationality, differently. Within British Object Relations, for instance, Winnicott reworked the Kleinian emphasis on splitting, favoring joy and a pleasurable social experience as paramount to the fulfilled life.²⁰ Wilfred Bion,²¹ on the other hand, focused on the adverse effects of splitting as a situation in which division dominates the mind, thriving on the repudiation of the relational debt to others. Bion also advocated the development of a loving attitude moderated by gratitude. The loss of relationality in Lacanian terms has been considered as a state of 'fatherlessness', also known as the loss of symbolic efficacy due to the erosion of the Name of the Father.²²

To integrate the above psychoanalytic schools would be beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that for all schools the key to moving out of stupidity is to be able to tolerate the pain

¹⁹ Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*, translated by David Barison, Daniel Ross and Patrick Crogan, Stanford, Stanford University Press 2009. Henceforth *Acting Out*.

²⁰ Donald, W. Winnicott, *Playing and reality*, London & New York, Routledge 2005. Hereafter *Playing and Reality*.

²¹ Wilfred Bion, W. *Attention and interpretation*, Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield 2004.

²² Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London, Verso Press 1999.

and loneliness that come with the loss of imaginary omnipotence.²³ Paradoxically, it is this very loss that facilitates relational capacities. This is the field, we shall argue, in which the Stieglerian *noetic*, as abstract thought and pharmacological opposite of stupidity, may emerge like a Lacanian symbolic third, or a matrix of the psychic formations which evolve, hold, and may potentially offer an alternative to kenosis. How this is achieved in practice remains, for lack of a better term, a challenge. In the clinical setting André Green²⁴ calls this process the work of the negative. The term is serendipitously pharmacological as it encompasses both the forces of psychic stagnation and the movements that facilitate change.

Below we shall illustrate the convergence of the Stieglerian *pharmakon* and the psychoanalytic process of the rehabilitation of stupidity with two examples. The first, as already stated, is Stiegler's autobiographical *How I became a philosopher*, an account of the author's young years in prison, where he discovered 'the world', as he puts it, through the *meléte* (study) of philosophy. The second is *The Lego Movie*²⁵ and, in particular, its hero, Emmet, an ordinary construction worker who claims to never have had a thought of his own. On one level, the film is a child's heroic fantasy of rebellious trespass against the father. The film has a happy ending, predictably perhaps, as it is a product of commodified popular culture. On another level, the young hero's adventure constitutes a noetic construct, a bold imaginative play in the Winnicottian sense, carried out in a contained environment and aiming to repair the damaged relationship with the world. In that sense, what the child constructs is not very different from the noetic object (knowledge and a sense of self through study) gradually built by the young Stiegler in prison. Common to both examples is the (re)mobilisation of creativity and the (re)discovery of relationality outside the ordinary social milieu. Green observes that the delinquent mind – and the naive one, we might add – is in the throes of a struggle between dependence and

²³ Melanie Klein, *Love, Guild and Reparation, and Other Works 1946-1963*, New York, The Free Press 1975.

²⁴ André Green, *The Work of the Negative*, translated by Andrew Weller, London, Free Association Books 1999. Hereafter *The Work of the Negative*.

²⁵ *The Lego Movie*, Lord, P. and C. Miller (dirs.), USA 2014.

independence beset by the negative.²⁶ It is precisely this tension and the subsequent mobilisation of the negative that is vividly captured in both *The Lego Movie* and Stiegler's autobiography offering invaluable insight into the convergence between Stieglerian theory and Psychoanalysis.

Blissful ignorance, rigidity and happiness

In the *Lego Movie* Emmet is introduced as a nice but dim nobody who seems to have embraced the simplistic technocratic belief that one cannot do anything without written instructions: 'Instructions: How to fit in, have everyone like you, and always be happy'. Emmett illustrates the naive neoliberal assumption that everything has already been written down and there is nothing new to discover or do.²⁷ Denial is part of Emmet's relentlessly positive attitude. His favorite tune is 'Everything is awesome!', sung at the construction site as old neighborhoods are razed to the ground and, by extension, history is demolished. This creative destruction, a central dogma of capitalism, is reflected in the motto: 'It's not personal, it's business'. But none of these concern Emmet who is happy and pays no attention to what is happening around him. Emmet is happy not because he has asked himself what happiness means and given a thoughtful answer, but because he is not experiencing any negativity. He is addicted to upbeat television commercials which muffle the brief news that Lord Business, the deranged leader of the Lego World, intends 'to put the city to sleep'. Lack of attention, argues Stiegler, entraps the individual in a precarious timeless (synchronic) present, aggravated by drive-like repetitive routines.²⁸ Attention is the 'holding' of objects, and 'holding' is synonymous to desire.²⁹ Attention arrives before the object, in the same way Desire precedes any desire for a specific object. Lack of attention, then, spells the loss of the capacity to relate to one another on a profound level.³⁰ Emmet exhibits this lack of attention in his happiness: he hears but does not listen.

²⁶ *The Work of the Negative*, p. 138.

²⁷ Henry Giroux, 'The terror of neoliberalism; rethinking the significance of cultural politics', *College Literature*, 32(1) (2005), pp. 1-19.

²⁸ *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 52

²⁹ *Technics and Time I* p. 101.

³⁰ *What Makes Life Worth Living*, p.70.

The young Stiegler in his cell reports a similar indifference to the world, not unrestrained happiness but stupor: incarceration exacerbates the feeling of being at odds with the world, ‘like a fish out of water’.³¹ In Winnicottian terms, this attitude belies a rigidity which, in turn, reveals a reduction of the ability to tolerate, much less to enjoy the fluctuations in experience.³² For relational psychoanalysts, the ability to tolerate is considered the ‘healthy’ norm, whilst rigidity denies multiplicity and represses awareness of desire as plural. Further, rigidity emanates from a failure of the holding environment. When the holding environment is successful, it affords a capacity to face and shape the uncanny without retreating from it.³³ Thus, experiencing a nourishing holding environment facilitates movement between rigidity and tolerance, unintegration and integration.

The relationship between rigidity and tolerance in psychoanalysis helps us to delineate the *pharmakon* as a *relational* remedy. In a relational psychoanalytic context, we could say that Stieglerian stupidity, or the diminishing of the noetic, arises from the negation of the thinking capacities necessary for increased engagement in the fullness of life.³⁴ Some analysts would describe this kind of withdrawal from engagement as comparable to a fear of finding that what one is able to accomplish is not as beautiful as what had been imagined.³⁵ The problem is not simply private or personal. Relationality cannot just be ‘discovered’ inside the individual psyche but needs to be cultivated with the other(s), with the milieu, as Stiegler would call it. Thus, the *pharmakon* that ‘works’ does not simply ‘cure’ individual disenchantment; it problematises the

³¹ *Acting Out*, p. 14.

³² Michael Eigen, *The Electrified Tightrope*, London, Karnac Books 2004. Hereafter *The Electrified Tightrope*.

³³ Andreas Gianannakoulas, ‘Creative processes and artistic creation’, in Gennaro Saragnano & Christian Seulin (eds.), *Playing and reality revisited: A new look at Winnicott’s classic work*, London, Karnac Books 2015, pp. 63-72.

³⁴ James, S. Grotstein, *A beam of intense darkness: Wilfred Bion’s legacy to psychoanalysis*, London, Karnac Books 2007.

³⁵ *The electrified tightrope*.

neoliberal atomised concept of individuation. In this context, Stiegler does indeed converge with psychoanalytic thinkers like Winnicott, especially when he argues that attention and care must today be cultivated as a relational manner between generations, evoking the adult-child dyad.³⁶

Not thinking, just acting (out)

But how does one make the first move out of stupidity? Stupidity, which is not lack of education but a state of mind dominated by reactive forces,³⁷ is characterised by Stiegler as a regression (lowering or baseness) in relation to the solemnity of the thought-process.³⁸ This regression, this falling, is an integral part of the process of thinking, a ‘passion’ or an ‘accident’ which could result in the re-animation of becoming. Let us say that the first move out of stupidity is always aporetic, like a call in the Heideggerian sense,³⁹ to which one does not yet know how respond.

In the *Lego Movie* Emmett experiences falling literally, when he begins to fall through the cracks of the building site (the capitalist edifice) in which he works, at the very moment he questions the police orders to ‘report anything suspicious’. The floor subsides and he ends up several levels below, into a world he did not know existed. Emmett is approached by a resistance group, who inform him that Lord Business, intends to destroy the Lego world with his mighty weapon, *The Kragle*, a tube of Krazy Glue with which he plans to glue all the pieces into a fixed design. The resistance fighters tell Emmett that he is able to help stop Lord Business. Worse, he discovers an unfamiliar object affixed to his back (the glue cap as we will eventually learn), the Piece of

³⁶ *Taking Care of Youth*.

³⁷ ‘Doing and saying stupid things’, p. 161.

³⁸ ‘Doing and saying stupid things’, p. 162.

³⁹ In Heidegger the ‘call’ is related to both ‘a lack of acquaintance with the world’ (p. 187) and wanting to know (*eidenai*) in relation to being consumed by anxiety-concern (p. 216). The call engenders the potentiality of being-to-understanding (p. 326). See Martin Heidegger, Martin. (2001). *Being and Time*, translated by John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford, Blackwell Press 2001.

Resistance sought by the rebels⁴⁰ i. Wyldstyle, the female rebel who rescued him, expresses her admiration for his creative ideas and promising potential. Emmett is confused and replies: 'I never have any ideas.' We see, at this point, that on the level of consciousness, negativity manifests itself as a 'no' to skill and knowledge, at the bottom of which lies the ontological fear of being truly *nothing*. The simple mind, the brutalised mind, will have to respond to this challenge by trying to find their place in a 'different' world.

In *How I became a philosopher*, the imprisoned young delinquent experiences a comparable sense of dissociation from his surroundings, a strangeness he perceives as coming 'from outside'.⁴¹ The projection of strangeness outwards veils anxiety. Anxiety, as Lacan reminds us, always comes from inside. Lacan values anxiety for opening up a sense of being in the direction of 'that which is not'.⁴² Stiegler draws attention to the transformative potential of such affect, when, as he puts it, life problematises itself, resulting 'in a decoupling between perception and action'.⁴³ This decoupling is obliquely linked by Stiegler to the possibility of turning anxiety or vague discontent into radical transformative action. 'To act', he writes, 'means to behave *differently*, otherwise than merely a reaction'.⁴⁴ Yet Stiegler characterises action/doing at such a point as 'acting out' and 'passage to the act',⁴⁵ using the two terms almost interchangeably and blurring the line between 'behaving differently', that is, in full consciousness of the effects of one's acts, and 'acting out' in the psychoanalytic sense, which usually refers to aggressive behavior directed towards the self or

⁴⁰ Towards the end of the film, the viewer finds out that the animated story exists within a story not of plastic toys, but of human characters. Emmet's adventure is a child's imaginative play with his father's extensive Lego collection. The father, who did not want the boy to alter the set, had earlier threatened to glue it to a permanent shape. Emmet's adventure is a relational call to the father to abandon his inflexible stance.

⁴¹ *Acting Out*, p. 135.

⁴² Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, translated by A. Price, London, Polity Press 2004, p. 69. Hereafter *Anxiety*.

⁴³ 'Doing and saying stupid things', p. 168.

⁴⁴ 'Doing and saying stupid things', p. 169.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

the other when the patient fails to recognise the real source of (unconscious) wishes and phantasies.⁴⁶ In that sense, the Stieglerian passage to the act resonates with both transformative action and reaction, bound together into a *becoming* which is not yet supported by conscious or critical thought. Acting out, then, might be a beautiful, indispensable failure, a falling that will eventually, in time, fall into place, like the Freudian ‘*Wo Es war soll Ich werden*’ (Where Id was, there shall Ego be) or the ‘figure eight of destiny’ in which the subject emerges as the cause of its own trajectory.⁴⁷

At the begging of this section we proposed that the first move out of stupidity is always aporetic. Let us not now clarify this statement by saying that a stupid act is always a good start. Emmett illustrates this point with his behavior; when asked to urgently replace the broken axle of the chariot, on which he and others escape, by attaching a wheel to something that spins, he sees no other way of doing this but by attaching his own head to the wheel. What happens there is far more subtle than a laugh. Emmett becomes ‘it’, the axle, the real (objet a) lynchpin in the scene, the absence of which would mean death. This is stupid action but action that has at least taken place, as opposed to a refusal to engage with (the anxiety of) nothingness. An instruction has been issued and obeyed, but the response is given on the level of one’s own interpretation without expecting to be given further details about how to proceed. Creativity arises at that point and, with it, the symbolic potential for interpretation (hermeneia).

We can locate an equivalent development in Stiegler’s autobiographical narrative, as the young prisoner gradually discovers philosophical books. Stiegler aligns the lengthy and laborious process of learning by hypomnesis, that is, by familiarising himself with the philosophical canon, to anamnesis, remembering in the Platonic sense. Hypomnesis allows him to address his ‘forgetting’ – ignorance and stupidity qua baseness of thought rather than repressed knowledge –

⁴⁶ Jean Laplanche, Jean Paul Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, translated by D. Nicholson-Smith, London, Karnac Books 1988, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Slavoj Žižek, ‘The truth arises from misrecognition’. In Ellie Ragland-Sullivan E. and Mark Bracher (eds.), *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, London: Routledge 1991. pp. 188-225.

whilst (re)building a substantial noetic reservoir out of the ‘forgotten’ (ignored) one.⁴⁸ Acquiring knowledge in isolation, then, constitutes the first timid response to the fall and anxiety of one’s own, while engaging with the Other, the abstract philosophical community one discovers in one’s books. In that sense, not knowing but already doing something (learning through *meléte*), inaugurates duration and time, carrying the promise of a second moment, in the future, a potential passing through to interpretation (*hermeneia*).

We can draw close parallels between the progressive and indeed laborious passage from stupidity to interpretation in Stiegler, first with Lacan and then with Winnicott. For Lacan, this important passage is experienced in the long clinical encounter between the analyst and the analysand as a movement from knowledge (*savoir*) to truth articulated as lack (1970: 15).⁴⁹ Lacan is not interested in the unconscious as repressed knowledge. Instead of that, he is interested in the unthinkable behind the unconscious the Real, or the *hole* in the chain of vigilance⁵⁰ – like the one, we might say, through which Emmett falls or the one in which the prisoner finds himself. Lacan looks beyond unconscious knowledge and negation (e.g. linguistic denial) for the lack at the level of being produced in language, ‘a flaw the being (*l’etant*) produces from being said (*se de sire*).⁵¹ He plays with the words *faut* (fault) and *falsus* (false), weaving them together with the passage of time, the duration of the analytic process (as *faut du temps*).⁵² The analyst, he says, supports the ‘*faut du temp*’ for a long time, and this allows analysis to become a process of verification of being.⁵³ ‘False’, in this context, is not so much the un-true as the ‘something’ which has failed to emerge in language. The analytic process is the length of time required ‘to link the false less to the true that refutes it than to there having to be

⁴⁸ Acting Out, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Radiophonie*, translated by J.W. Stone. <http://www.lacanianworks.net/?p=330> (Accessed October 2017), p. 17 Hereafter *Radiophonie*.

⁵⁰ *Radiophonie*, p. 16.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Radiophonie*, p. 17.

⁵³ Ibid.

time to make *a trace of what has failed* to establish itself from the start'.⁵⁴ Psychoanalytic interpretation, then, makes the most of false and falling: 'It is precisely as *falsa*, let us say *fallen*, that an interpretation operates from being to the side, that is, where being is made, it is from some false liaison' (ibid).⁵⁵

Relating the Lacanian theorisation of the psychoanalytic passing of time to the Stieglerian acting out we could argue that the pharmakon indeed arises behind consciousness as the difference between acting without knowing, a necessarily 'false' move, and what is coming into being in the duration of analysis. The curative and destructive aspects of the pharmakon, then, hark back to the elusive Lacanian *object a*, the loss for which is nothing else but the productive failure which initiates and sustains the search for the difference between falsehood and truth.

From a Winnicottian perspective, the pharmakon takes on a slightly different complexion. We argue that acting out already enacts the desire for a relational holding, albeit 'clumsily'. As indicated in the introduction, for Winnicott integration and dis-integration exist, or should exist, alongside one other. Integration is never settled and accomplished; instead of that, it constitutes a reversible assemblage of parts that are used to respond creatively to the environment. For the openness of integration to be privileged, a certain degree of stability of the holding environment is necessary.⁵⁶ Inversely, dis-integration is created by demands that foreclose creative uncertainty, resulting in lost contact with the unintegrated parts of the self. Winnicott uses fascism as an extreme example of such foreclosure, describing it as a failure to appreciate uncertainty in a creative and developmental process.⁵⁷ To act out, then, is to awaken to possibilities, to engage with the kind of failure that Winnicott labels 'catastrophe' and is said to

⁵⁴ Ibid, emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Adam Phillips, *Winnicott*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press 1988.

⁵⁷ Donald, W. Winnicott, 'Communicating and not communicating leading to a study of certain opposites'. In *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. New York: International Universities Press 1963, pp. 179-192.

create an unthinkable agony⁵⁸ in which it is possible to feel chained like Prometheus without having journeyed anywhere. Becoming in a relational sense, through learning and creative engagement, constitutes a re-organisation of time and space which chimes with integration and dis-integration. Stupidity, argues Stiegler, is neither ground nor individual but *a relation* in which individuation brings ground to surface without giving it form.⁵⁹ The challenge, then, is to individuate with the milieu whilst learning to give form, creating, for example, by using the signifier (language), instead of screaming or being inarticulate.

Creative failure

In this section we elaborate on the Lacanian and Winnicottian resonances of Stiegler's relational view of individuation quoted above. To put it simply, we ask: if psychic stagnation is lack of movement, how do things move beyond the first step? What kind of structural change or change in the milieu ought to take place? Further, if psychic stagnation (stupidity) is formlessness what does 'to give form' mean?

At this point it is necessary to turn briefly to Derrida and the notion of *différance*, in order to get a better understanding of Stiegler's approach to form, structure and movement-change. In *Positions* (2002), Derrida advocates shifting our attention from the transcendental signifier to transformation and communication as 'transmission charged with making pass, from one subject to another'.⁶⁰ Derrida reminds his audience that he does not favor decisive ruptures or unequivocal epistemological breaks,⁶¹ but *différance* as the systematic *play* of difference, of the traces of differences, and 'of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other'.⁶² In this conceptualisation, 'the activity or productivity connoted by the *a* of *différance*

⁵⁸ Winnicott cited in Michael Eigen, *Toxic nourishment*, London, Karnac Books 1999.

⁵⁹ 'Doing and saying stupid things', p. 162.

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass, London, Continuum 2002, p. 23.

Hereafter *Positions*.

⁶¹ *Positions*, p. 24.

⁶² *Positions*, p. 27.

refers to the generative *movement* in the play of differences'.⁶³ The latter, adds Derrida, are neither fallen from the sky nor inscribed once and for all in a closed system, a static structure that a synchronic and taxonomic operation could exhaust: Differences are the effects of transformations, and from this vantage the theme of *différance* is incompatible with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric motif in the concept of structure'.⁶⁴ By the same token, nothing – no present and in-different being – precedes *différance* and spacing: 'there is no subject who is agent, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*'.⁶⁵

Stiegler aligns the notion of *différance* to individuation qua spacing and movement-change. According to Lash, the latter chimes with but does not quite coincide with the psychoanalytic conceptualisation of the subject as split over the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, further defined not in terms of plenitude but of lack and multiplicity.⁶⁶ As Lash points out, the precise nature of the relationship between a subject and the technical system remains a challenge in Stiegler's theory. For Lash the challenge lies on the level of experience, and in the difference between structure as topology and infinite time, and structure in technical terms, as a set of generative rules (as opposed to regulative rules). Lash makes his argument with reference to Philip K. Dick's prose and in relation to effacing the distinction between experience and non-experience,⁶⁷ and, following that, experiencing of the Real not as void but as plenitude.⁶⁸

A slightly different approach can be advanced at this point. Drawing on all major psychoanalytic strands, Green argues that psychic change is the work of the negative. It harks back to the loss of unity with the maternal body and the transformation of this absence to desire and language-word-

⁶³ Ibid, emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *Positions*, p.28

⁶⁶ Scott Lash, 'Experience, time and the religious: from classical subject to the technological system'. *New Formations*, 79 (2013), p. 116. Hereafter, 'Experience, time and the religious'.

⁶⁷ 'Experience, time and the religious', p. 118.

⁶⁸ 'Experience, time and the religious', p. 121.

representation. It connects libidinal *movement*, a basic component of the drive, to the irreducible difference – we might as well call it ‘différence’ – between unconscious representations, perception and consciousness. At the same time, the work of the negative is said to inhabit the difference between nothing and no-thing, ‘the difference between what is dead and what has not been born, i.e. the aporia of that which, by expressing itself as ‘nothing’, makes this ‘nothing’ exist, which would otherwise be inconceivable – makes it palpable, brings it forth’.⁶⁹ Green further describes the work of the negative as ‘imagining a way forward when destruction threatens’,⁷⁰ a definition that chimes with Stiegler’s belief in finding a way forward in contemporary capitalism-catastrophe.

It is from the resonances of no-thing on the level of being, with the unconscious and language that acting-doing proceeds. Something important is accomplished in the process: representation as the separation of *a thing* from *nothing* (*the dread of living*). It applies, equally to Emmett, and the young prisoner. We rejoin Emmett, Wyldstyle and one of the rebel elders, Vitruvius, in Cloud Cuckoo Land, where an assembly of all Lego masters and resistance fighters is about to take place. As Emmett gets ready to address the assembled characters, the place is invaded by Lord Business’s police. Chased by their enemies, Emmett and friends take to a submarine, which soon begins to disintegrate. Emmet is asked to do something immediately but, still afraid to trust his abilities, he wants to be told what to do. Vitruvius insists: ‘embrace it’, always giving the ‘wrong’ answer, so that the signifier coming from him never quite addresses Emmet’s demand. In this uncertain opening Emmet fashions a design deemed plain, if not ridiculous, but sturdy enough to save those onboard from being engulfed by the sea. On dry land, and becoming aware of his creative capacities, he utilises his rote construction worker knowledge in order to build a plain looking spaceship for the rebels to enter the city unnoticed. From then on Emmett is able to build and invent. He even asks for markers and papers to make some plans. Of course he will fail again and again and his eventual capture will lead to a direct confrontation with Lord Business, but not before the ‘stupid’ little man has acquired a modicum of faith in his creative skills. This will eventually allow Emmet to separate himself from the glue top affixed to his back

⁶⁹ The Work of the Negative, p. 16.

⁷⁰ The Work of the Negative, p. 185.

whilst addressing the nothing qua evanescence, disappearance and the void within. Making the word double, as Lacan would say,⁷¹ starts with resonance, as opposed to dissonance. This is *différance* as play between movement and form. This is the *pharmakon* as relational play of movement and form. Plenitude, or the slim promise of it, must always be grounded in the ability to tolerate catastrophe.

We could further argue that the curative aspect of the Stieglerian *pharmakon* arises with the ability to embrace failure, in so far as the latter affirms continuing engagement and faith in the ability to represent, to give form. To put it in a ludic way, *creative failure is the pharmacological double of creative destruction*, the latter so dear to capitalism. Drawing on Bion, Eigen writes that creativity fluctuates, flickers and often breaks down. Creative life entails cultivating faith in breakdown and recovery.⁷² Extrapolating from this position, we could argue that being able to create and fail is the pharmacological beginning of engagement against kenosis, the essence of engaging with object differently. By the same token, embracing stupidity is equivalent to accepting *relational failure* and the incessant play of integration and disintegration. In that sense, one does not need to know everything in order to create. One does not have to wait in order to know before acting. ‘Acting’ means being to withstand failure.

A further detail should be added at this point. In his account of psychic change, Green draws attention to the fact that the psychoanalytic subject always remains divided between consciousness and the unconscious, affirmation and denial, presence and absence, investment and disinvestment.⁷³ Going beyond the criterion of consciousness, which in philosophy and politics necessitates ‘making present to oneself’, makes it possible to judge what exists as a division between knowledge and structure, that is, between ‘what is to be known and what makes knowledge possible’.⁷⁴ The containing structure, emphasises Green, is not always perceptible. It

⁷¹ Radiophonie, p. 17

⁷² Michael Eigen, *The psychotic core*, Northvale, New Jersey, Jason Aronson 1986.

⁷³ The Work of the Negative, p. 214.

⁷⁴ The Work of the Negative, p. 212.

can be deduced but it well may remain ‘an aporia of the symbolic matrices of thought’.⁷⁵ Very often, progress and structural change can only be inferred by changes in the use of objects.

Echoing Green on the (im)possibility of directly observing structural change, Stiegler allows us to surmise that there will be moments when the structure is or will be ‘objectified’ and understood. The milieu, as that ‘which is structurally forgotten’⁷⁶ must be ‘remembered’ and come into existence, to the extent that an internal re-organisation always has repercussion for the ego and consciousness. Such a conceptualisation of transformation is definitely more sensitive to the use objects than any psychoanalytic formulation of subjectivity and culture focusing on the drive or the Real. The concept of negativity, we might add, as a pharmacological concept, encompasses both the adverse effects of defenses and disengagement and the psychic energy required to achieve structural change, to get things moving again.

Let us (re)turn to Stiegler’s autobiography at the point where he describes his changing attitude to the world, starting with connecting with the ‘old masters’ (Aristotle, Marx, Saussure, Wittgenstein), and redefining the balance between what comes ‘from the outside’ as structured knowledge and the ‘inside’ (unconscious knowledge plus the inertia of ignorance). As an intellectual pursuit, philosophy allows him to redefine the relationship between self (inside) and space (outside): ‘[philosophy] 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’.⁷⁷ The young philosopher continues: ‘I no longer lived in the world, but rather in the absence of the world’⁷⁸. A transformation soon takes place: ‘I found first an absence of world, this “learnèd lack”, which, as such (a lack) is rather a *fault* [défaut] and a *necessity* [il faut], that which *gives* and *gives place*, rather than what “lacks place”. The lack, in this case, is the inability to know how to live this

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Acting Out, p. 14

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Acting Out, p. 17.

absence and in this absence; it does not know how to find the learning necessitated by default, *that is, to invent it*.⁷⁹

Winnicott writes that distinctions are found in waiting, in solitude and silence, and privileges a healthy use of non-communication,⁸⁰ adding that one must be able to differentiate solitude from silence as a distress signal. To be alone with someone allows another to concentrate on a task. Such capacities are consistent with the idea that one begins in an unselfconscious manner.⁸¹ Aligning Stiegler to Winnicott we could argue that relationality is fostered in solitude. It chimes with attention and being able to focus (give attention to) and think, developing the noetic qua abstract thinking. This is directly related to dealing with the inevitability of suffering and the capacity to imagine solutions to expectations created. Essentially, it provides a way of handling the uncertainty in the facticity of the other, as thinking is equal to becoming aware of separation from the object, whilst suffering maintains its presence.⁸²

The dimension of space is inherent in this move: the space of thought and loneliness (prison) creates a generating matrix of the psychic formations which are able to evolve. In the analytic situation the path of thought (abstract thinking) emerges as a third.⁸³ In culture, we could propose, the noetic (thought) must emerge *like* a third. The various levels of this complex experience re-com-pose the ontological question (being no one) with reality. A statement with a clear Winnicottian quality follows in Stiegler's autobiographical account: 'In fact I was able to *hold* – and continue to have a place – though constituting and reconstituting daily the artificial locality of my writing and reading'.⁸⁴ What 'holds' is also 'held'. It acquires exteriority and noetic permanence – now as representation. Stiegler calls the outcome of this slow process *being building*. Discovering being-building, being and time resonate with the constitution of the world

⁷⁹ Acting Out, p. 23, emphasis in the original.

⁸⁰ Winnicott.

⁸¹ *Playing and Reality*.

⁸² The Work of the Negative, p. 147.

⁸³ The Work of the Negative, p. 148

⁸⁴ Action Out, p. 26, emphasis added.

in its absence.⁸⁵ Being building and brick building constitute signifying practices of creative intent, which, we might add, frame and are framed by, hold and are held by, the negative, by absence and what *does not exist but insists*. Emmett and the young philosopher converge on transforming horrible nothingness – me as nothing – into a play of significance and insignificance which is always mindful of the third, the a-significance of total elimination.⁸⁶ They have both experienced death – existence that had almost given way to nihilation,⁸⁷ being abject, dropping off, falling – and then learning to invent anew, in order to live out their lack transformed/ represented as a cause and a lost object.

Eventually the young Stiegler will be able to hold the thought of the inside and the outside qua pharmacological aspects of the same noetic object (his emerging thought), alongside the remainder (himself as object a) that must be excluded from representation in order to come into being. Stiegler call this ‘the experience of the remains that framed me and that in the end I am’⁸⁸ in which ‘space appeared to me, however, to constitute *time* or, rather to reconstitute it, in a kind of ordinary *après coup*’.⁸⁹ To take up the Lacanian thread again, the time that is incarceration makes way for a timely interpretation to ‘fall off’ from the scene linking lack and loss to the capacity to desire. This is how the philosopher indicates transformation on the level of language, when the fear of death, me-as-nothing, turns into no-thing. Prison, we could argue, constitutes a simultaneity, *a plane of consistence*⁹⁰ which com-poses change as always yet to come and not yet

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Acting Out, p. 29.

⁸⁷ The Work of the Negative, p. 45.

⁸⁸ Acting Out, p. 27.

⁸⁹ Acting Put, p. 30.

⁹⁰ The plane of consistence comprises of: infinity, as opposed to finitude and finite objects (with Heideggerian and Derridean connotations); desire as opposed to mere satisfaction; belief and faith, as opposed to disengagement and nihilism, and all the things that ‘do not exist’ but *compose* the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘noetic’ (Bernard Stiegler, ‘Pharmacology of desire: drive-based capitalism and libidinal dis-economy’, *New Formations*, 72(2) (2011), pp. 150-161). It also evokes the Deleuzian plane of consistence; the symbolic-cohesive aspects of the Lacanian Other;

structure; the junction of the internal and the external; diachrony and temporalisation; absence, presence and their negative (which always chimes with the Derridean trace). The latter, we might add, that which does not exit but in-sits, includes the remains that one is and wants to preserve, the being (of) abjection and the object a, which the young man can now contemplate without being destroyed.⁹¹ Being able to contemplate presence and absence, think-being, then, chimes with signifying practices and constitutes frameworks in which one enacts substitution and reciprocity-recognition. Towards the end of the autobiographical account, and in a turn of phrase which brings Stiegler closer to Winnicott than Lacan, the philosopher comments that once he had he thought the world was insignificant because he had not loved it.⁹² The re-activation of the world via the intermediary of ideality, the eidos in the Hurrelian idiom, leads to a new libidinal economy, in which the capacity to love signals an un-defended openness of 'being fragile and fallible'.⁹³

Surviving catastrophe and kenosis in (relentless) capitalism

In this section we offer some concluding remarks on the convergence between Stiegler and psychoanalysis, drawing on the pharmacological process of moving from stupidity to individuation through the engagement with objects and the milieu. Stiegler, as we said at the beginning, is not interested in the clinical resolution of individual crisis (cure). His perspective is socio-cultural and his main objective is how to theorise and effect change in the context of late capitalism. Stiegler turns to psychoanalysis for the concept of relationality, which Winnicott develops with reference to the parent-child dyad. Stiegler then envisages inter-generational and parental care as a form of play and the enhancement of phantasia (imagination)⁹⁴ capable of countering the effects of inattention and stupidity. Play, be it caring interaction with the other or

the Freudian super-ego qua human propensity for higher accomplishments and abstract thought, and the Heideggerian *being in the world* (What Makes Life Worth Living).

⁹¹ Acting Put, p. 27.

⁹² Acting Out, p. 28.

⁹³ Acting Out, p. 34.

⁹⁴ Care of Youth, p. 15.

the imaginative use of objects, should take place in a safe, nourishing environment, equivalent of the Winnicottian transitional space. Of course things are not guaranteed to work. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the engagement with objects is not always creative, the recourse to culture is not always unproblematic and *sublimation*, the psychoanalytic equivalent to the canalisation of desire towards creative outlets, is not a guaranteed result.⁹⁵ Yet hope arises from the fact that relationality is inherently ‘human’ and pharmacological, and can always give rise to the opposite of inertia and failure, just as regressive stupidity can be the precursor of knowledge. We could therefore say, a bit figuratively perhaps, that psychoanalytic relationality is seen by Stiegler as the inherent psych-social mode of engagement which ‘predates’ capitalist indifference.

Elsewhere, Stiegler uses the world ‘intermittently’⁹⁶ to describe the passage of knowledge to reason in the process of individuation. We should take this world seriously. The fractured relationship between know-how and creativity demonstrated in *The Lego Movie* illustrates a continued need to situate humane thinking within relational life. The struggle that concerns Stiegler is political-cultural and suggests a way of life that gives credence to imagination and creativity, a general propensity to foster change rather than radical breaks. The former cannot occur out of the blue. Play and trust must be created as ‘the thing that does not exist’. In this act two need to be present, not simply mummy or daddy but the Other as person and face in the Levinasian and Deleuzian sense. The young Stiegler in prison doesn’t need this witnessing - but isn’t this why he needs to write, to relate his story, to feel witnessed and therefore real? The boy behind Emmett in the *Lego Movie* is ‘lucky’ enough because his father ‘recognises’ his scream-play for what it is, a relational call, but some other brutalised (neoliberal) parent might not be even able to supply such otherness.

Re-establishing a connection with the world whilst accessing the thing that consists, is a long and arduous process akin to the Lacanian psychoanalytic journey, a transition from being trapped in the negative to mobilising negativity so as to effect the separation of (a) thing from no-thing. As

⁹⁵ *The Work of the Negative*, p. 254.

⁹⁶ ‘Doing and Saying Stupid Things’, p. 161.

part of this the process, Stiegler argues in favor of making the unconscious *speak and consist*. His conceptualisation of duration and time bears similarities to the passage of time in Lacanian analysis where truth emerges from the Real, once it gains (symbolic) form. We could therefore propose that, as a higher function, the Stieglerian *noetic* is essentially co-extensive with the successful work of the negative which constitutes the *différance* between *no-thing and nothing*, whilst bringing forth what does *not exist but consists*. The psychoanalytic concept of negativity, much broader in scope than regression, might be a closer match to Stiegler's vision of producing a new libidinal economy.

Can a wider cultural strategy be extrapolated from the above? Stiegler regularly labels capitalism a catastrophe. Psychoanalysis facilitates dealing with catastrophe, not only one that has taken place but also one that should have taken place. This is what makes life worth living: recognising a disaster and moving on, integrating. Neoliberalism produces repetitive (non)thinking and stupidity, resulting in being unable to dream in the technocratic milieu. The capacity for *frustration tolerance* is related to a decision to modify frustration. Such a proactive decision – which starts with objects – is the beginning of a capacity for thinking. Such modification is importantly disruptive: in facilitating reorganisation and progression it disturbs the status quo.⁹⁷ This is perhaps the junction at which *acting out* in the Stieglerian sense, just doing at times, will eventually find its way in the path of creativity, modification, and unimpeded openness. In the fight against destructive capitalism, the pharmakon is the very *process* of becoming and holding, starting behind consciousness as the enacted and, indeed, acted-out desire to be held and contained, the absence of which exacerbates stupidity, splitting, aggression, disaffection, inertia, and the loss of the meaning of life. The route from kenosis to a life worth living is relational and involves engagement with others. Does it work? There is no definitive answer to that, as Green reminds us, other than openness as a psychic disposition and indeed, as Stiegler puts it, faith in

⁹⁷ James M. Herzog, *Father Hunger: Explorations with Adults and Children*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press 2001; Terry, A. Kupers, *Revisioning Men's Lives: Gender, Intimacy, and Power*, New York, NY: The Guilford Press 1993.

the future and in being creative. In that sense, the best response to the creative destruction of capitalism is creative failure, not merely as repetition of failure (to fail and fail again) but as an ability to withstand frustration and disengagement.

Tolerance, openness and creativity relate to the use of objects, which Stiegler privileges much more than the Frankfurt School or other contemporary theorists who focus on the drive. For Stiegler objects can be concrete, technical and noetic. The life of the object as suggested by Stiegler ties psychoanalysis to culture as an open question. According to Green, enjoying the rich life of objects implies and inheres the ability to share the erotic beauty of objects and to sustain vitality.⁹⁸ This is very different from the operation of the death drive which serves a *disobjectalising* function, unbinding and resulting in the withdrawal of investment. To enjoy objects – not to consume then in a fetishist way – means to love life. Inversely, succumbing to the void and the lack of thought, which are prevalent today, constitute an omnipotent withdrawal and a denial of *the object*, aiming to blot out the lack of satisfaction by creating the illusion of having lost nothing.⁹⁹ It is in this very psychoanalytic sense, we argue, that the Stieglerian emphasis on the object can be understood as a life affirmative attitude and a possible strategy of re-enchantment.

Finally, let us think this life affirmative attitude in the context of the happy ending of the Lego Movie. Towards the end of the film, the real life father understands the meaning of the son's imaginative play, relents, and changes his attitude towards his son. For relational analysts like Winnicott, the chronic and nightmarish loss of acceptance and stability facilitates the creation of a false self that may be subsequently rewarded for masquerading as an 'authentically' engaged creative self. The self creates a false or armor, and if fortunate, is now faced with work to find a hospitable environment so that such defensive rigidity could be outgrown while in conflict with a desire to deny the need for such work.¹⁰⁰ If a parental figure cannot offer this milieu, then collective action of care must fill into the void, turning the traumatised relational ground between

⁹⁸ The Work of the Negative.

⁹⁹ The Work of the Negative, pp. 76-78.

¹⁰⁰ Paying and Reality.

citizens in varied neighborhoods and social positions, into the sort of *witnessing* required to begin to associate to what is dissociated. This kind of socio-political action is not about the mother or the father but a civic responsibility. Traumatised children mostly grow up knowing only pseudo knowledge that reactively avoids reflection. Such children may never tolerate taking leave of their own rigidity, and may never be heard. The perpetual blindness made possible by pseudo knowledge and defensive denial that is part of the false self fabric has much in common with what Layton has called the normative unconscious¹⁰¹ in the neoliberal context, an internalised facilitator that passively accepts or naturalises social inequalities among categories such as race and gender. ‘Holding’ and re-activating the long circuits of desire, then, primarily implies a relational gesture which synthesises care (*besorgen*)¹⁰² and attention. To put it differently, what does not exist, and, in fact, lacks in modern capitalism is holding-relationality. If stupidity is *relational*, then holding must become its pharmacological double, the doubling of structure required to bring about not just another shift but structural change.¹⁰³ This is perhaps the best way of envisaging the future benefits of Stiegler’s call for change on all levels, and for care between generations and in all fields, including the cultural and the political. Care and living an affected life may not precipitate a revolution but certainly make life worth living.

¹⁰¹ Lynne Layton, ‘Who’s responsible? Our mutual implication in each other’s suffering’, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 19(2) (2009), pp. 105-120.

¹⁰² Sorge (care), *besorgen* (concern) and *fürsorge* (solicitude) are interrelated concepts. All three modes have ‘*concern*’ in common. Stiegler does not elaborate how faithfully we should adhere to Heidegger’s definitions of *sorge* and rather uses care as a *relational* priority with emphasis on becoming.

¹⁰³ *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 57.