

Digitally mediated emotion: Simondon, affectivity and individuation

Introduction

This chapter explores the potential utility of framing emotion and digital activity as two strands of *individuation* (as opposed to distinct ontological entities). The concept of individuation is taken from the work of Gilbert Simondon, and facilitates a non-deterministic reading of the relational/s between bodies and technologies. Core to individuation is affectivity, which does not define an individual emotional reaction to external stimuli but denotes a mode of being (as an individual) in relation to collectivity. This troubles understandings of how we distinguish between the individual and collective, with affectivity central to what Simondon defines as *psychic individuation*. The concepts of affectivity and individuation speak directly to the reality of living in concert with a seemingly ever increasing amount of digital media. We leave a continual informational trace, which can then 'feed-forward'.¹ into future patterns of collective activity. This informational activity has led some to define an 'online self' or 'data double'.² The chapter concludes by suggesting the concept of individuation as of greater value as it reconfigures thinking about the processes at work in body-technology relations, as it directs us "to know the individual through individuation rather than individuation through the individual".³

Life as lines

At the time of writing there is a UK NHS (national health service) public health campaign to promote vaccinations against the flu. The campaign takes a hard-line stance, keenly communicating the dangers that the flu can present. Campaign posters include quotes such as "flu can kill", and encourages all those who are able to be vaccinated for free to do so. The headline of campaign materials is "flu can mean the end of the line", with an image of a heart rate monitor with the word flu embedded in it. Two things of interest are happening here. Firstly, an attempt to invoke fear amongst the general public as an act to motivate engagement with the vaccination program. Secondly, utilisation of a simple yet effective metaphor for human life, namely the line. This defines life as linear and subject to continuous movement. This speaks directly to the anthropologist Tim Ingold's conceptualisation of life as *lines*.⁴ To think of life emerging as multiple intersecting lines is to frame it as not defined according to a set of inherent properties that remain relatively stable over time, but rather as defining a process through which transformation can occur. Ingold is very keen to move away from an idea that spatial presence should be the defining identifier for 'things', towards an understanding of temporal transformation. For Ingold things, be them humans or non human objects, can only be defined through their temporal patterns of unfolding, which he conceptualises as lines. This is the life of the line, which the flu can end.

To conceptualise life as lines is to place ourselves analytically in the midst of intersecting strands of activity and movement, made up of a range of different elements. For instance, one's social media profile can be thought of as a line that moves from body through technology to other people. This is a non-representational theory of intersectionality, in which people as located individuals are not deemed to be communicating information about themselves *through* social media, but rather that digital activity forms lines of activity that intersect with other people's online behaviour. This is what Ingold would call a meshwork; multiple lines of activity intersecting or entangling, which form the experience of our social

worlds. As Ingold notes, “[W]hen everything tangles with everything else, the result is what I call a meshwork. To describe the meshwork is to start from the premise that every living being is a line or, better, a bundle of lines”.⁵ Theoretically this is a shift away from thinking of life as formed through interactions and communications between preformed entities. For Ingold temporality is key, not spatiality. Our traditional understanding of objects situated in the world that can communicate with one another, defined according to enduring spatial properties, is replaced with one that defines ‘things’ in terms of temporal lines. Movement, not stability, is of prime focus.

“The theory of the assemblage, then, will not help us. It is too static, and it fails to answer the question of how the entities of which it is composed actually fasten to each other.”⁶

Ingold is keen to move away from the increasingly popular concept of assemblage, which is featured in many areas of social and cultural theory, including affect studies. The assemblage has been used to define a set of heterogeneous elements coming together in a systematic way to effect a particular phenomenon. For instance, Ringrose conceptualises young people’s social media activity in relation to gender and sexualized identities as an affective assemblage.⁷ Whilst Ingold has sympathy with the aims of the concept of assemblage, and its use in recent social cultural theory. He feels it is too spatial in its focus, and lacks a sense of temporal transformation. Indeed, it has been pointed out that use of the English translation ‘assemblage’ tends to lose the vitality of the original concept *agencement*, which includes a greater sense of movement and agency.⁸ Instead of an assemblage, Ingold considers the ‘whole’ as a “correspondence, not an assemblage, the elements of which are joined not ‘up’ but ‘with’.⁹ Ingold draws on the metaphor of a rope, which is constituted through the interweaving of individual intersecting threads. It is this interweaving that Ingold refers to when stating that “knotting is the fundamental principle of coherence”.¹⁰ Knotting, or interweaving, is what holds together lines that would otherwise be loose and formless. We can think of knowledge in this way, as much as material objects. Knotting lines are a valuable metaphor because they focus on temporal movement, rather than notions of fixity and stability. A considerable power though has developed for notions that attend to spatial, rather than temporal, metaphors. For instance, psychology has long developed into a discipline primarily concerned with conceptualising the ‘mind’ as a container, within which a number of cognitive factors exist that act as the “building blocks”¹¹ of thought and behaviour.

Sympathy and social media

Ingold directs us to evaluate the ways that living ‘with’ works (or doesn’t), and how multiple lines can come to *live with* in meaningful ways. Ingold borrows from the design theorist Lars Spuybroek, the idea that to live with involves a sympathy, a mutual feeling of how things come together as intersecting patterns of movement. The human body is a prime example of the successful development of sympathy to function effectively. This idea of sympathy, a collective awareness of how certain lines fit together as part of a meaningful whole, is a potentially novel perspective through which to consider living in contemporary digitally mediated society, in which multiple forms of data collide and entangle. This includes information largely identifiable as individual activity (e.g. social media posts) as

well as other data that feed off and (re)configure online worlds of connectivity (e.g. what happens when 'big' and 'small' data combine). Here, the outdated demarcation between 'real' and 'virtual' is proven fundamentally inadequate, through its frankly ridiculous theoretical simplicity. Meshworks captures notions of entanglement, movement and connection without requiring a theoretical distinction between human and digital in advance. Moreover, it provides a way of tracking how patterns of individuality and collectivity emerge in and as *infospheres*.¹² In the next section I develop this work through Simondon's concept of affectivity, to speak directly to the experience of living in infospheres, in which one exists simultaneously as 'one and more than one'.

Simondon and affectivity

"[i]t becomes possible to think of the relation that is interior and exterior to the individual as participation, without referring to new substances"¹³

"This same method may be used to explore affectivity and emotivity, which constitute the resonance of being in relation to itself, and which link the individuated being to the preindividual reality that is linked to it.....[T]he psychic is made of successive individuations that allow the being to resolve the problematic states that correspond to the permanent putting into communication of that which is larger and that which is smaller than it"¹⁴

Gilbert Simondon (1924-1989) was a key influence on philosophies of technology (e.g. Stiegler) as well as broader 20th Century post-structuralist thought (e.g. Deleuze). For Simondon the idea of the subject is an ontogenetic one in which the role of individuality and collectivity are seen to interweave the conditions through which subjects emerge. This means that sociality emerges through processes in which 'beings' are not conceived as pre-existing spatially distinct entities. This is what he means when talking of 'the individual as participation' in the quote above. Simondon's theory of affectivity defines experience as 'more than one', and as such, moves away from the traditional view of people as individual 'information processors' driven and controlled by internal cognitive processes. In its place he argued for an ontogenetic understanding of the formation of multiple inter-related *individuations*. For Simondon, *being* precedes the individual, which is why he framed being as *pre-individual*, a realm through which individual life emerges. This is akin to notions of the virtual in Deleuze's work.¹⁵ Of import here is a need to place "the individual into the system of reality in which the individuation occurs".¹⁶ This led Simondon to frame a need to "know the individual through individuation, rather than the individuation through the individual".¹⁷

The *experience* of being 'more than one', in relation to the reality of 'carrying part of future collectives', creates an affective tension which cannot be resolved solely at the individual level. The feeling of being partially collective is anxiety provoking, due to the difficulty of understanding the collective element of one's being, which has not yet emerged, it is a future happening. This means that emotional activity cannot be easily captured, identified or manipulated. We are not made to feel *by* digital technologies, we feel *with* them. Therefore, we need to consider conditions of emergence, which means not starting with a notion of actualised emotional states 'within' individuals, but rather to look at the contextual conditions within which emotional activity unfolds. However, the environmental 'half' of the experience is not easily identifiable, and as such, involves being affected by an unknown

realm outside of immediate perception. Consequently, it is not possible to name or identify affectivity in a straightforward manner. Indeed, it is an experience that is not easily put into words. This though does not mean it can be detached from the “specific materiality of human bodies”¹⁸; a theoretical move made in much affect studies work on technologies. In a sense, it follows Bergson’s idea of claiming affect to have a definite human element, but without relying on reductionism to do so.¹⁹ Moreover, the emergence of actualised emotional activity does not exhaust pre-individuation. This is because, as Simondon notes, “that which individuation makes appear is not only the individual, but also the pair individual-environment”.²⁰ Even when an individual actualises from pre-individuation it does not stop being partially collective. All individual bodies (human and non-human) carry something of future collectives with them, so are always potentialised for new individuations.²¹ This is why Simondon thought of being as ‘more than one’, because a complete individual is never fundamentally disconnected from wider collective activity, either in the present or future.

Simondon’s concept of individuation does not rely on a pre-figured distinction between subject and object but rather focuses on them as parts of multi-layered processes, through which individual and collective life emerge.²² Crucially, this means that analytic focus shifts from talking about digital media as objects encroaching on psychological life, to processes of individuation that culminate in meta-stable individuations. This resonates with Mark Hansen’s point “that media impact the general sensibility of the world prior to and as a condition for impacting human experience”.²³ Digital media play an increasingly active role in conditioning the environmental contexts of psychological life. Media act as the environmental ‘side’ of the ‘more than one’ reality of subjective life. Therefore, emotions are becoming *with* digital media rather than being controlled and dominated *by* them. This is a useful conceptual development because it provides a new perspective to digital media analysis in relation to affect and emotion. We see that living with digital media is by definition *affective*. Simondon’s concept of affectivity does not lose a notion of an individual psychological emotional experience at work. Indeed, it relies on it, albeit one that does not appoint a stable internal identity as productive of emotional activity. For Simondon, affectivity is fundamentally psycho-social.

Becoming with digital media

The argument of this chapter is that the pre-individual realms of modern societies are increasingly digitally mediated. Affectivity defines experience as always-already individual and social. These cannot be separated, meaning that all life is social.²⁴ We are *leaky bodies* in relation to data with our porous bodies in continual transformation through moving in and through lines of affective individuation.²⁵ These form into meshworks of entangled lines of body, data and technology. Simondon’s concept of affectivity captures the experience of being ‘more than one’.²⁶ Ingold’s concept of lines focuses on movement and transformation through the *speed*²⁷ of meshworks of bodies and data, affectivity focuses attention on the psychological part of such events. This is not about an individual emotional cognitive process but rather a broader way of becoming as part of systems of reality that are multi-layered, spatially and temporally. No one can *see* the future lines of individuation one’s data will become. Some may ‘feed forward’²⁸ into recognizable future patterns of activity. Others may contribute to information societies in ways we will never know or see. To return to the example of the NHS flu campaign stating that the illness can be the end of the line. On the face of it, this makes sense. However, in relation to living in heavily digitally mediated worlds, it is possible to think that a philosophy of individuation and affectivity opens up the idea that even when the biological body stops moving, informational activity will continue

to shape future collectives and meshworks. This is an age when people have to consider their digital legacy, which in itself, will no doubt be an increasingly affecting experience.

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