Of Technical Ensembles

Franziska Aigner

Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects (Univocal)*, C. Malaspina and J. Rogove (trans), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017; £26.99 paperback.

As is well known by now, the work of late French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (1924-1989) has been burdened by a somewhat difficult historical reception, both within France as well as internationally. Slowly supplemented by posthumously published philosophical fragments and lecture courses delivered at the Sorbonne, as well as interviews, and articles,[1] his principal work remained the twofold 1958 doctorate *L'Individuation à la lumiére des notions de forme et d'information* [*Individuation in light of notions of form and information; major thesis*] and *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* [*On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects; minor thesis*]. Whilst a partial, unofficial English translation of *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* by Ninian Mellamphy has been circulating since the late 1980s,[2] Simondon's thought was until recently mainly available to the Anglophone reader via the writings of Bernard Stiegler.[3] As both monographs and considerable secondary literature on Simondon have started to appear in English over the last decade, the only books still missing were the English translations of the primary texts themselves.[4] In April 2017, the first complete English translation of Simondon's *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* has been completed by Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove. Thus, fifty-nine years after its completion, the Anglophone world is at last able to read Simondon himself, at least his minor thesis. Considering that this work was conceived prior to the digital revolution and on the cusp of the cybernetisation of the world, we might well ask, what can *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* tell us about the technical world we live in today?

Simondon's approach to technics is lucid in its critique and unique in its inventive philosophical constructions. He rejects the accounts of technics provided by metaphysics, naturalistic discourse on labour and culture in general and declares them insufficient since they rely on the primitive schema of hylomorphism in order to do their bidding. Thus, at the core of Simondon's approach lies his critique of hylomorphism (*hyle* – ancient Greek for matter; *morphe* – ancient Greek for form), the philosophical doctrine of how matter, usually taken to be passive, takes on active form. Simondon shows how this supposed universal and logical schema of the genesis of being as the process of taking form is nothing but 'the transportation into philosophical thought of the technical operation reduced to work' (p248). On this basis, the main critique against hylomorphism is then that it essentially leaves the active centre of the technical operation obscure. Instead, it relies on the activity

1. *L'Invention dans les techniques. Cours et conférences (1965-1976), Cours sur la Perception (1964-1965), Imagination et invention (1965-1966), Communication et information: cours et conférences, Sur la technique, (1953-1983)*.

2. Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, N. Mellamphy (trans), London, University of Western Ontario, 1980. https://monoskop.org/images/2/20/Simondon_Gilbert_On_the_Mode_of_Existence_of_Technical_Objects_Part_I_alt.pdf>

3. see Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, G. Collins and R. Beardsworth (trans), Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998.

4. See Andrea Bardin, *Epistemology and Political Philosophy in Gilbert Simondon: Individuation, Technics, Social Systems*, Berlin, Springer, 2015; Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*. London, MIT Press, 2013; David Scott, *Gilbert Simondon's Psychic and Collective Individuation: A Critical Introduction and Guide*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014; Jean-Hugues Barthélémy, *Life and Technology: An Inquiry into and*

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of human labour to effectuate the link between the two terms of matter and form. However, while the worker surely prepares the clay in order for it to take on form, as in brickmaking for instance, it is nevertheless 'the clay that takes form according to the mould, not the worker who gives it its form' (p249). Consequently work, which considers technics as mere utensil and instrument, must then be left behind as onto-logical principle. By historically and socially situating and thereby relativising hylomorphism, Simondon's conceptual move was to replace this inaccurate onto-logical schema with a detailed account of technical operation, that is, an account of the onto-genesis of technics. However, Simondon not only critiqued and distanced himself from the naturalistic account of labour in order to think technics and becoming, he furthermore broadened the scope of his critique towards both the metaphysical tradition and culture more generally. Regarding metaphysics, the fact that thought is either too early (a priori) or too late (a posteriori) but never contemporary with a technical operation is pointed out by Simondon to mean that the metaphysical subject/object divide must be left behind as limits to knowledge in order to be able to account for and think with technical genesis. As regards culture, Simondon astutely claims that it 'has constituted itself as a defence system against technics; yet this defence presents itself as a defence of man, and presumes that technical objects do not contain a human reality within them' (p15). Taken as 'pure *assemblages of matter*, devoid of true signification, and merely presenting a utility' (p17), culture from ancient Greece until Simondon's time alike, presumes that the technical object contains no *Dasein* (being). This exclusion of technics from culture proper results in tensions and conflict as well as the loss of what he calls social homeostasis. Taking into account that culture, according to Simondon, is essentially regulatory, this means that technics must be considered 'an aspect of governed reality that is not represented in this regulating relation that is culture' (p162). The aim of Simondon's efforts in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* was nothing less than the resolution of this very conflict. The form of this endeavour is twofold: both an attempt to incorporate technics into culture by inquiring into the mode of existence of technical objects and an attempt to answer the question of how this technical reality can be known. But what does it mean to speak of technics as an aspect of 'governed reality'? Thinking from a Simondonian perspective, what is a technical reality?

Beyond Simondon, Lüneburg, Meson Press, 2015.

In order to address this question and fully appreciate the scale and depth of Simondon's inquiry, an important translational issue needs to be addressed. In the first 1939 French translation of Heidegger's *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?* Henry Corbin translated Heidegger's *Dasein* (being) as *réalité humaine*.[5] Consequently, when Simondon employs the terms *réalité humaine* and *réalité technique* which Malaspina and Rogove have chosen to translate literally as 'technical reality' and 'human reality', Simondon refers to modes of being (*Dasein)*, rather than reality as a problem of quality. By employing this specific terminology and its philosophical history, Simondon aims to

5. Martin Heidegger, *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?* H. Corbin (trans) Paris, Gallimard, 1938.

emphasise that technical objects have being (*Dasein*), meaning that there is a technical mode of existence, which he calls *technicity*. At this point it should be clear that we are a long way from Heidegger's famous claim in *The Question Concerning Technology*, according to which 'the essence of technology is by no means anything technological' (p4). Simondon instead proposes that there is such a thing as technical being, which however only provisionally and partly manifests itself in the technical objects that we interact with in the world. 'Objects appear at a certain moment, but technicity precedes them and goes beyond them; technical objects result from an objectivation of technicity' (p176). Technicity must thus be thought as a power or potentiality in the proper sense, as the 'depository of a capacity to evolve' (p170). It is in the unfolding of that very power that Simondon's most explicit engagement with technical objects can be found.

Through an in-depth engagement with the histories and developments of concrete technical objects such as the anode, diode and triode, motors and turbines, Simondon aims to show that technicity manifests itself across three levels and according to an explicitly technical genesis, which he calls concretisation. The first level is called the technical element, which can be said to be the most concrete and multi-functional but infra-individual technical being that, when related to an associated milieu (both technical and geographical), becomes a technical individual. The individual, forming the second level of technical being, is capable of self-regulation and self-conditioning between its two terms according to what Simondon calls 'recurrent causality' rather than mechanism or finalism. It is here that Simondon's discussion of the explicitly technical mode of genesis, which he calls concretisation, can be found.

The third level is composed of a number of technical individuals forming an ensemble. Simondon's claim is that technicity in his time manifested itself most clearly on the level of the ensemble, designating the complexity and extension of an ensemble of technical individuals in their interaction with both the human and the world. As such, Simondon lays out an alternative to the cybernetic network sketched by Norbert Wiener, one of the few texts that Simondon explicitly engages with and profoundly critiques philosophically. Furthermore, technical ensembles for Simondon have an existential dimension, and it is for that reason that they pose a problem for thought. 'The technical ensemble cannot be grasped by intuition, for it cannot be considered a detached, abstract or manipulable object at man's disposal. Instead, it corresponds to an experience of existence and a situation, it is tied by reciprocal action with the subject' (p235). Thus while Simondon works towards the elaboration of a post-metaphysical, non-cybernetic and non-hylomorphic but nevertheless proper philosophical thought of technics, he at the same time points out the limits of this thought. The technical ensemble exists, he states, and as such it must be experienced in order to be understood in the sense of being a part of a technical ensemble in an existential sense. It

is for this reason that the second part of *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* approaches technics and its relation to the human. Differentiating between a minor and major relation to technics corresponding to child and adult, Simondon not only asks for technical thought but also for a technical culture and education. It is the third part which then finally discusses the role that technicity plays as part and parcel of Simondon's larger cosmological project. It is here that technicity is complemented with religion as one of two powers forming the mediating links between the human and the world in its unfolding as well as the role that philosophical thought must play in order to enable the convergence between the human and the world.

On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects is thus a truly multifaceted work. Engaging with the problem of technics on the level of ontogenesis, epistemology, theory of action, on the level of values and the social, it is Simondon's insightful formulation of the problem that technics poses for philosophy again and again since its inception in ancient Greece, that, from today's perspective, might well have been his most acute intervention. At the current historical juncture, where philosophy no longer seems to have a proper object, its function can be found in the totalising, analysing and interpretational work of engaging the objects of the sciences as well as their relation to one another. But it is this very work which is already being shared and partially supplemented with technical procedures in the form of algorithms. As such, technics once again appears as a threat to philosophy, which simply cannot seem to keep up with the speed of technological development, revealing yet another chapter in philosophy's age-old technophobia. Thus, despite being rooted in mid-twentieth-century science and pre-digital technology, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* has much to offer to the contemporary reader regarding the very relation between philosophy and technics. One could well argue that *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* was conceived to carry out a somewhat analogous function to aesthetic thought in Kant's critical project. Just as aesthetics in Kant was necessary to bridge the heterogeneous territories of nature and freedom, Simondon charges technics with the responsibility of converging the bifurcating domains of the human and the world. For this task however, technics is dependent on the help of nothing less than philosophy, since it is only philosophy, Simondon claims that can become aware of both the genetic and systematic structure of technicity. Dependent on at once shedding its attachments to hylomorphism and allowing its notion of form to be rethought from within information theory, Simondon admits that this very philosophical thought of technics is yet to be constituted, and one could perhaps add that this still holds until the present day.

In this sense, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* must be understood as a propaedeutic to a larger project still under way, which demands not only critique but equally a considerable amount of constructive philosophical labour, such as an account of a properly technical and thereby non-mechanical

as well as non-final causality, additional forms of modality, a thorough rethinking of the origins and operations of unity and totality and so on. Indeed, such a project demands nothing less than the reformulation of both origin and operation of most if not all philosophical categories as well as their relation to the ontogenetic. It is in this respect that the current English translation might at points present some issues. While beautifully conceived in general and successful in translating Simondon's densely technical writing and interdisciplinary terminology with impressive precision and ease, Simondon's struggle to draw out the specific being of technicity could have benefitted from a footnote to the specific historical lineage of the term *réalité technique* and its somewhat problematic position between a quality and a modality. Furthermore, by having opted for a non-systematic translation of *ensemble*, the English reader might struggle to systematically account for the different modes of totalisation at work in Simondon. Despite these terminological issues, the translation most certainly accomplishes a highly legible translation easily accessible for a diverse audience. A further issue, which lies beyond the scope of this translation to amend, pertains to the interrelation and interdependency of Simondon's major and minor thesis.

It is difficult to understand *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* in isolation, since it relies on the considerable conceptual work performed in his major thesis. How else can one make sense of Simondon's brief references to notions of transduction, information, individuation and the trans-individual, which *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* relies on to make its case while itself not explicitly dealing with? Thus, without access to the major thesis many a reader might be left puzzled. In this respect, one can only hope that the spell which has until now hindered Simondon in finding the readership his thought deserves will finally be broken and English translations of his other writings will follow swiftly. Only then can we truly take up the work that this impressive groundwork demands.

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On Expecting Relations

Jonathan Beever

Wendy Wheeler, *Expecting the Earth: Life, Culture, Biosemiotics*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2016, 276pp; £20.00, paperback.

Biosemiotics is the study of meaning making in living systems. It asks us to set aside a still-all-too-prevalent modernist conception of a cold dead mechanical universe and replace it with an overwhelmingly complex and emerging world of meaningful interaction and co-constitution. Wendy Wheeler's *Expecting the Earth* is a lens through which we get a glimpse of what that world looks like. Importantly, Wheeler's work is a work about the nature and breadth of relationships.

This book, Wheeler's second effort at understanding the implications of biosemiotics, is far more than a sophomore effort (p ix). As a formative leader of the growing and active biosemiotics community, Wheeler thoughtfully weaves together deep engagements with literature, philosophy, biology, and physics to share with readers the nature and developing implications of biosemiotics. From my perspective, biosemiotics is at the cutting edge of the explosion of thought about ecology – or, more fundamentally, relationships of interdependence. What Wheeler calls at various points 'ecological intertwining', 'being toward', 'the many possibilities of meaning', or, more simply, 'relationality' is the ecological metaphysic at the heart of twenty-first-century thinking. So, what is it, from the perspectives of biosemiotics, to relate, to interconnect, to be interdependent? Answers to fundamental questions like these are at stake in Wheeler's project, toward a thesis she describes as a 'semiotic ontology of relations' (p54).

And such answers, Wheeler allows us to see, demand richly diverse perspectives. Indeed, the biosemiotics community itself is almost wildly diverse. At the 2016 annual gathering, biosemiotics researchers presented work from fields ranging from computer and cognitive science to linguistics and digital poetry, and from animal behaviour and biology to philosophy of mind and neurology. The story we biosemioticians tell ourselves is that we are drawn together around the work of a short list of seminal figures and ideas – including the biology of Jacob von Uexkull, the semiotic project of Charles Sanders Peirce, the rich history of semiotic analyses coming out of the Tartu-Moscow school. Yet this historical account of our origins doesn't do justice to the universality of fundamental questions we share. Nor does it sufficiently explain the ways these questions continuously re-emerge around contemporary problems and perspectives. Indeed, this is one great strength of Wheeler's book: through it, she exhibits not only the intersections of disciplinary research but also and more importantly the key metaphysical,

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epistemic, and ethical concerns of biosemiotics. The structure of *Expecting the Earth* evidences these interdisciplinary and, as I see them, philosophical themes related to central questions about relations.

Throughout the book Wheeler seeks to re-emphasise the historical core of biosemiotic identity, pointing out new and overlooked connections between and to Peircean semiotics of meaning within biosemiotics' origin story. She draws not only from humanities and poetic literature – including the twentieth-century Irish poet Seamus Heaney's work – to help build those connections but also on the natural sciences. The difference theory of Gilles Deleuze, the theoretical biology of Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, the animal behavioural work of Mark Bekoff, the vital ontology of Eduardo Kohn, and the informatic individuation of French philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon help shape the story Wheeler weaves. In building these bridges between diverse projects and the core questions of biosemiotics inquiry, Wheeler both reaffirms the community of biosemiotics and reopens biosemiotics to engagement by a wider interdisciplinary audience.

If early chapters of the book orient us to biosemiotics as a nexus of interdisciplinary inquiry into the problem of a relational ontology, later chapters argue for that nexus as a central hub. On Wheeler's view, biosemiotics fundamentally shifts the field of inquiry from objects and materiality toward information and signs. It reorients human perspective away from a mechanical world of objects and toward a dynamic world of sign interpretation and creation. In this way, semiotics is a least common denominator of inquiry across all fields that seek to understand the nature and place of meaningful relationships. And Wheeler places us readers on the path of such relationships in a way that challenges basic assumptions about the way modern science has described the world and at the same time affirms some basic intuitions about how we semiotic animals live in it.

For example, when I sit across the kitchen table from my young son, I might see at least two objects before me. I might see, on one read, a mere body holding together chemical and mechanical components that work together in complex causal ways that, when taken together, produce actions and reactions that I identify as my son. This would be – albeit reductively – the view of the anatomist, the dietician, the biologist, the psychiatrist, the neurologist. This is the view of what Wheeler calls the 'machine genres' (p117) that defined and drove scientific inquiry in modernity. But, alternatively, I might look across that same kitchen table at that same child and see a reader – a project of becoming bound up at every instance and at every level within a rich world of interdependent signification, and held together by habit and repetition. This is the striving of Spinoza, the becoming of Margulis, the lines of flight of Deleuze, the new anthropology of Kohn and Abram, the operations of Simondon. Wheeler calls this process of semiotic interdependence, this process of becoming, 'structuration', the 'ongoing biological and cultural processes of possibilities' (pp149-50). This is the view of biosemiotics – that

life is sufficiently defined by semiosis. And of mechanism and structuration, it seems to me that we live in a world that cannot let go of the former but can no longer deny the latter.

Wheeler wants us to see the whole living world in light of this implicit conflict between machine and interpretation, between information and sign. And she structures the book to open us up to that structuration, step by step. The focus of chapter 3 is on the organism, read to us as readers of many possibilities of meaning (p130), the 'tinkerers and bodgers' (p136) who cobble together worlds of experience from available semiotic resources. Wheeler describes organismal nature as poetic – driven by metaphor, chance, and meaning making (pp140-3) and constituted by these semiotic relations. From the complex human animal to the simple tick, from the largest mammals to the tiniest microorganisms, organisms are defined by these semiotic relationships.

On Wheeler's biosemiotics view, complex living systems too share the same semiotic natures as individual organisms. Chapter 4 follows Margulis and Sagan's call from the fringe of biology in the 1980s and argues that the Earth itself *becomes* in the same way as my son does – by a growing capacity for meanings (p149) and a realisation of that capacity in the relations that co-constitute it. Structuration is to the organism as eco-structuration is to the Earth with which it dwells. In Chapter 5, Wheeler draws back away from biosemiotics analysis of 'nature' to make the case that human culture, too, is semiotic. Culture, like nature, is made of signs, interpretations and meanings (p186). It is the direct result of the semiotic nature of the human animal – if organisms were merely machines acting blindly in thrall to unmediated triggers in the world, they would leave behind merely a cold causal world. The rich poesis of culture is dependent upon organisms being readers, choosers, and interpreters (p195), as opposed to non-living objects hidebound with habit. Each organism is, to borrow a phrase from Wheeler that she in turn borrows from poet Ted Hughes, a *thought fox*, a 'creature of poesis, constantly on the lookout for signs, a maker of meanings' (p198). This creatively complex picture of the world as fundamentally semiotic is meant to lead the reader to a place where they can return to the core of biosemiotics: the nature of relationality.

The title of Wheeler's book draws forth the theme of the final chapter: expectation. If sign relations (semiotics) are the persistent structural components of the world and living organisms the agents of structuration, then the world is a world of relations. The human being, the semiotic animal capable of not only using but understanding signs as such, finds that semiotic relations play constitutive roles across the culture/nature distinction. Semiosis is, then, a process of expecting and to understand the world ecologically means we must understand what it is to *expect the Earth*. Life and organisms are co-constituted by this complex web of semiotic relations. Understanding Wheeler's biosemiotic take on a relational ontology implies that we see mind as process and part of nature, that we overcome the nature/culture

distinction, that we recognise selves of all different kinds (p230), and that we see boundaries between the self and other as 'semiotically porous' (p242).

As an intellectual project beyond its content, Wheeler's book also works to bridge gaps: in a world in which the humanities are faced with a critical attitude by some who seek to reduce academic pursuits to mere economic efficacy, this book is one clear example of the unyielding importance of the humanities in dialogue with other fields like biology and ecology. The work of both the sciences and the humanities is the work of careful analysis, thoughtful observation, and ongoing pursuit of new ways of understanding the worlds that co-constitute us. As Wheeler artfully notes, 'meaning is made from the ceaseless play of a mind that is a connoisseur of magical coincidence, and determined to make something out of it' (p199). Thus, the poet and humanist play centrally important roles in interdisciplinary collaboration with scientists all seeking to understand the world and the human being's place within it. They alone have cultivated the skill of that connoisseur, sharing the world with us in new ways, seeing things in new lights – thought foxes in the henhouse of habit.

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Hack and Yack

Martin Paul Eve

Berry, David M and Anders Fagerjord, eds. *Digital Humanities: Knowledge and Critique in a Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017)

In early 2014, Matthew Kirschenbaum published an essay entitled 'What Is "Digital Humanities", and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things about It?'[1] Punning on the title of a 1979 article on stylistics by Stanley Fish, Kirschenbaum's piece joins the growing roster of essays and books that reflexively seek to define the still-emerging intersection of digital tools, methods, and approaches with humanistic study.[2] The latest to join the line-up of texts that are aimed at those who might have heard things – terrible, or otherwise – about the digital humanities and who might want to know more is David M. Berry and Anders Fagerjord's *Digital Humanities: Knowledge and Critique in a Digital Age*.

Indeed, this book sits within a distinctive generic space. As the authors note, 'this book will not teach you how to create a relational database or program an advanced algorithm'. On the other hand, the work will not teach 'how to interpret archaeological findings or a Victorian novel, either' (p8). Instead, *Digital Humanities* aims to survey the histories, eruptions, and epistemic contexts within which its eponymous field – if 'DH' can even be called a field – has sprung.[3]

Certainly, Berry and Fagerjord are not the first to explore this meta-terrain.[4] However, as a clearly articulated, accurate, and concisely critical introduction, this book is exemplary. Within a relatively short page count, *Digital Humanities* manages to span the genealogies of DH; the epistemic nuances of 'computational thinking'; the implications of computational modelling and archives; the institution-wide infrastructural changes of which DH forms a part; ideas of digital methods and tools; interface criticism; and their perceived future need for a 'critical' digital humanities.

This breadth is an admirable trait, but it does also present a structural challenge. For it is not always clear to me at whom this volume is aimed. While the work purports to be 'an essential book for students and researchers' I wondered whether, for instance, the discussion of mark-up schemas, such as TEI, on page thirty should have first defined what a mark-up language is and does. Certainly, this would be redundant if the book is aimed at those with a technical background (as I have). However, if it is to be an introductory volume, then even a short glossary would, I think, have been helpful.

On the other hand, for someone who wanted to get their head quickly around the scholarly literature, the different sub-groups, and the politics of DH, this work is an excellent primer. It concisely lays out the different

1. Matthew Kirschenbaum, 'What is "Digital Humanities", and why are they saying such terrible things about it?', *Differences*, 25.1, 2014, pp46-43.

2. Stanley E. Fish, 'What is stylistics and why are they saying such terrible things about it?-Part II', *Boundary 2*, 8.1, 1979, p129. https://doi.org/10.2307/303144.

3. Alan Liu, 'Is digital humanities a field? – An answer from the point of view of language', *Journal of Siberian Federal University, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7, 2013, pp1546-52.

4. See, for just a selection, *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, ed. by Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman, New York, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013; Steven E. Jones, *The Emergence of the Digital Humanities*, New York, Routledge, 2014; *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, ed. by Susan Schreibman, Raymond George Siemens, and John Unsworth, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 2016; *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, eds. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016; Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia, 'Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of

Digital Humanities', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2016 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberal-tools-archives-political-history-digital-humanities/> [accessed 29 May 2016].

historical groupings but also the challenging political contexts within which DH has grown. For instance, need to know what 'hack vs yack' means? This book has you covered. The work is also, I felt, mostly fair on the political challenges of the digital humanities. Many figures have, for instance, warned of the entanglement of DH within paradigms of neoliberalisation of the humanities. Berry and Fagerjord do not shy from this debate; they express the concerns fairly and call for a greater critical stance within their own fields. This is not a book to proselytize, even while it details the exciting possibilities that digital research work could bring to the humanities.

It is, of course, practically a rule in academic book reviewing that one must find something with which to disagree in the book one is reviewing. Also as usual, this relates to my own sub-area of interest. For, if I were to pick out one area on which to train a slightly more critical gaze, it would probably be the authors' discussion of open access on pages 114-7. I found it curious that, at this point, the citation of preceding work on the subject became much thinner than I would have liked. For instance, there was no citation of either Peter Suber or John Willinsky. I also believe that some, such as David Golumbia, will take issue with Berry and Fagerjord's assertion that an engagement with open access 'may also be important for digital humanities to contest attacks on its perceived neoliberalism' (p116). Certainly, I stand with Berry and Fagerjord on this, but this is not representative of all thought on the matter.

In all, though, *Digital Humanities: Knowledge and Critique* is a book for our time. It comes just as another wave of assault on 'critical' approaches in literary studies rolls over us and asks us to consider what it means to unreflexively adopt digital approaches amid humanist thinking.[5] The work and the authors value computational thinking so long as it is not at the expense of the centuries of humanistic tradition on which it could build. The work thinks about its subject at both the institutional and the personal research level; it is an important book for those 'on the ground' doing the research and for university managers who must implement the research architectures that will allow the digital humanities to thrive. While I earlier expressed my qualms about the sometimes deep-end plunges of the material, I would recommend this volume to any newcomer who wanted a fair and true institutional history of the digital humanities. At the same time, many old dogs could also learn a few tricks from this work; a benignly deceptive introductory overview that also serves as a guiding critical compass for the future of the digital humanities.

5. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015.

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Placing the Self

Griselda Pollock

Janet Wolff, *Austerity Baby*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, 262pp.

In her fascinating study of the 'art of personal memoir' titled *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian Gornick writes:

> Out of the raw material of a writer's own undisguised being a narrator is fashioned whose existence on the page is integral to the tale being told. The narrator becomes a persona. Its tone of voice, its angle of vision, the rhythm of its sentences, what it selects to observe and what to ignore are chosen to serve the subject yet at the same time the ways the narrator – or the persona – sees things is, to the largest degrees, the thing being seen.[1]

Gornick admits that the fashioning of a persona out of an undisguised self is profoundly challenging while being absolutely crucial to a memoir. 'It is the instrument of illumination. Without it there is neither subject nor story'. Reading this might make one tremble, or at least hesitate, before the writing of a memoir. All the more when, in so doing, the narrator has undertaken the writing as a form of creative writing and a creation of a form that is, therefore, the persona the writing is creating.

Paradoxically, Janet Wolff names her latest book, *Austerity Baby,* an 'oblique memoir' and tells us it is a story told through others' stories and stories of others.[2] This clearly plans to avoid anything that might be called undisguised. Perhaps on first reading, we might be perplexed to discover how much we will find out about an extended family of discovered relatives, architects, Manchester, political activists, artists who are women, houses, chemistry, stamp collecting and how little of the anticipated chronology of the author's own life and work.

Janet Wolff offers us a project that aims to write a memoir, and thus to write in the first person, but not to conform in any way to the conventions of disclosure that are associated with predictable tropes of my birth, my childhood, my coming of age, my education, my work, love, friends, health, and achievements or disappointments. What is the substance of lives that do not conform to the models of the 'great man'– those whose biographies Leslie Stephen, father of the novelist Virginia Woolf created the Dictionary of National Biography to record and celebrate? Indeed, in her own fragmentary memoir writings, posthumously collected into *Moments of Being* (1976),

1. Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, New York; Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001, p7.

2. This brings to mind a more psychoanalytically oriented work of indirect autobiographical reflection by feminist and post-Holocaust literary scholar Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want: Reading and Sexual Difference*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Felman argues that women do not have an autobiography as yet. The missing autobiography can become a story, however, through 'the bond of reading', and through the 'story of the Other, the story read by other women, the story of other women, the story of women told by others.(p14)'.

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Virginia Woolf was as clearly thinking about the form for writing any life in the genre of life writing as she was in the innovative forms of her own novels. Her probing of what it is it to *be*, in or across time, is very different from the formal ordering of the sequences of a life emplotted by gendered and class and raced norms that acquire the authority of the rules of the genre. Janet Wolff is asking that question and definitely refuting any idea that chronology or conventional narration of a past can reveal who we are or any moment of being and becoming. She makes a virtue of a retrospect undertaken to discover what could not have been understood without the journey of writing with and across other lives, some researched, some found in formal memoirs, some discovered in unofficial fragments of private archives.

Janet Wolff 's book is formed out of ten essays rather than chapters. Each has its own beautiful shape leading the reader from its opening gambit through a wandering exploration of unexpected elements associationally rather than logically linked to an often unexpectedly elegant reconnection with the starting point. The titles of the essays – Atlantic Moves, Provincial Matters, Aliens, Colour, Austerity Baby, Tante Leonie, Houses and Barns, Philately and Chemistry, Spinster and Annuniciation – are thus not descriptive.

In 1986 Janet Wolff left a position at the University of Leeds and initially took leave to work outside academe for a while before making a transatlantic move to the United States in conditions of radical financial precarity and professional uncertainty. In 2006 she returned to the city of her birth, Manchester. Over the years of her residence in the US, acquiring a green card as 'resident alien' in that peculiarly disturbing legal formulation of the American immigration codes, Janet Wolff changed academic direction from sociology to art history, and lived and taught in Northern California, Rochester in upstate New York and finally in Manhattan at Columbia University. During that period she wrote a series of studies of art, modernism, difference, and before alienness, engaging with feminist, Jewish and visual cultural studies as well as consistently arguing for a rapprochement between the humanities and the 'sociological imagination'.

Trained in a tradition of European sociology, and making the sociology of culture her initial academic focus – her *Social Production of Art* remains a benchmark text for both sociology and art history – Janet Wolff, the academic, has constantly examined the positives and negatives of various tendencies within both sociology and the humanities when they are at their most exclusionary of each other. Her published work and teaching has consistently advocated an understanding of structural dimensions of cultural practice and experience while refusing the double abstraction of either sociological or cultural theory as a final arbiter. What could be said to mediate between the theoretical turn in cultural studies and the submission to theoretical modelling and quantitative analysis in sociology is the ethnographic. Her academic writings have always, therefore, been characterised by attentiveness to the textures of lived, often individual, experience, which, in effect, favour story

telling as a critical form of knowledge. Hers is, therefore, not surprisingly an ethnographic rather than an autobiographical memoir.

Austerity Baby can be read as a distillation of the life-time search for ways of writing that are not *life-writing* as a distinct sub-genre of the literary, but as an extended modelling of the author's re-vision of the sociological imagination at the intersection with an extended concept of the cultural. Janet Wolff was studying sociology at the University of Birmingham in the 1960s while Richard Hoggart was creating the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (which she regularly visited to attend lectures). In 1985, she herself spearheaded the foundation of a Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds in response to the need for the inter- and trans-disciplinary space outside the policed boundaries of the academic disciplines from which the escapees came to form this Centre (still in existence but now housed in a School of Fine Art and History of Art).

Thus expectations that this collection of relating essays would place Janet Wolff on view 'undisguised' in terms of revelations of a private world of feelings, relations, and personalities will be confounded. What makes for fascinating reading of the essays over all is a quite different thesis revealed, not propounded, by the writing. That thesis could be concerned with the themes identified on the book's jacket: exile and displacement, lives (and deaths) under the Third Reich, mother-daughter and sibling relationships, the generational transmission of trauma, transatlantic reflections, and the struggle for creative expression. While all of these are indeed part of the backbone of the writing, they could be considered the 'ready-mades' of existing cultural theory and writing genres, notably those influenced by feminist and postcolonial, post-Holocaust sensibilities. In this book, I suggest that they function instead as conversational contexts for weaving a singular path of one woman's experience, offering us what we might call an examined life, but one not analysed through the psychoanalytical or philosophical lens, an enriched sociological questioning of where any one of us fits into that which precedes us, hence is partially unknown to us, and also ultimately fascinates us because it may hold some keys to what we became by unknowingly living out, in part, these pre-shaping forces of family, history and place.

Biographical exploration with its psychological and more penetrating psychoanalytical concept of subjectivity focuses either on the individual set against a social and historical background or on the subject's inner world, its phantasmatic version of the external world of parental figures and cultural laws. Drawing on neither, Janet Wolff is experimentally proposing a way of writing about a person and some elements of her world that locate the subjectivity in the writer and the writing and not as the object being written. This is not to say that she never uses the first-person pronoun, or never tells the reader things of a personal nature. Take for instance the opening chapter that starts with the departure from England for the United States, a move that, the writer declares, saved her life. England is accused of potentially

killing her. It was by chance that the requirement of a physical examination in the US led to a diagnosis of cancer, not a deadly one in itself, but serious enough if not treated because it might have spread. This discovery leads to the question: could the cancer have been the effect of growing up in Manchester so close to the nuclear plant at Sellafield? There follows a digression into the effects of a nuclear power station on health in the region. Leaving the UK literally saved her life. This reads extremely dramatically.

At different points in the following essays, returning to this key traumatic event, the author does revise her reading of the cancer's cause, pondering whether the cancer was not to be blamed on an England she had to leave, but on the stresses of her new life and its attendant financial and personal insecurities as she had dared to leave the existing fabric of a social and professional life behind. In the final chapter she returns to this episode once again to follow a trail of associations from the way invasive cancerous growth within the body has been imagined by others: friends who also had cancer or those who have written formally about living with cancer. For some women, she finds, a perverse equation is made between a growing life form, a pregnancy, and a death-bearing growth, a connection that facilitates sometimes acceptance of the organic invader as part of life itself.

This reflection curiously enables Wolff to introduce her reflections on a series of paintings of the Annunciation that she has loved. She was not drawn to them for theological content, but rather loved them as paintings of rooms, of women reading and ultimately, via a reference to feminist art historian, Linda Nochlin, the possibility of the Virgin saying 'No, thanks' to the annunciation angel. 'Leave me be, to read and be myself, in this my space, rather than giving over my body as a mere space to incubate your plan for the future and for history'. (This is my ad-libbing.) The idea of an offer – taken up or refused – leads back to a letter offering the author a place at the School of Contemporary Dance in London for which she auditioned while doing her PhD at Birmingham University on hermeneutics in sociology, a link that is sustained by the theme of the chapter: creativity imagined as a kind of freedom versus a sense of a selfdisciplined habit of remaining always 'within the lines' (the reference is to a child's colouring exercise). This is an oblique reflection on the author as a self, tangential in its revelation of a discontent, or perhaps an uncertainty that led her to up and leave country, family, job and professional identity and move to the States, or rather to 'America', itself a cultural fiction of a British childhood in the 1950s and 1960s. Was this movement away escape, self-imposed exile, a temporary migration or a gesture to save her life in a very different way by finding it outside the lines that had been created by excellence in doing expected things?

So it seems that the core event of leaving and changing then turns out to have been a dis*place*ment that alone could make one place, Manchester, finally the place she can live a life she wants, involving creative writing. She calls that city home in the end, having started the book by projecting its

dangerous proximity to nuclear poison that possibly put her life at risk.

The 'journey out' (Virginia Woolf 's novel is the reference) and the return make creative writing possible, a creative writing outside the lines of the very genre selected as much as outside of academic production. Not conforming to its expectations, writing has become an alternative to physically being away from home. Whatever needed to be found in order not only to know, but to be oneself more comfortably occurs in the writing. Writing in this unique hybrid mode allows Janet Wolff to trace several journeys, of her maternal family back to the great wave of Jewish migration from Europe to Manchester in the nineteenth century, of her father's almost solitary escape to Manchester as a refugee from Nazi Germany (he was later able to rescue his parents), and then of the extended travels of those paternal relatives in Germany, some of whom did also manage to escape and some of whom were trapped and died of starvation or were cruelly murdered in the Shoah. To meet these histories, Janet Wolff had to travel to encounters in the United States, and across Europe, to work with discovered family archives. She concludes with a postscript about one indirect meeting with a long-lived cousin now living in France, a cousin earlier discovered in a family photograph of a reunion in 1953 but most curiously rediscovered again on a German TV programme about a Jewish cemetery at Busenberg, the original town which we meet repeatedly across her memoir as a town from which her father's family and many relatives came.

I personally recall meeting Janet at a conference on art and education in Berlin in 1993 when she was taking a day to go to Oranienburg where her father had worked in the 1930s and to Sachsenhausen, the concentration camp beyond. I did not know at the time of her intention to write. But her pilgrimage made sense in the context of the early 1990s when so many Jewish intellectuals I knew were, seemingly quite by chance, but clearly under the changing conditions of cultural identity studies at the time, retracing their European histories from which they had been distanced by forced migrations since the later nineteenth century and worse during the twentieth. Later, we shared our interests in the writings of Arthur Koestler and Anna Seghers about those Jewish refugees seeking to escape Occupied France around 1940-41, and shared information about the French concentration camp at Gurs. My interest related to the book I was writing on the German Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon (1917-1943), an inmate of Gurs who was not rescued and was, like Janet Wolff 's Tante Leonie, murdered on arrival in Auschwitz one year later than Tante Leonie.

The chill of this statement permeates what we might name the co-central chapter, Chapter 6, 'Tante Leonie' set beside Chapter 5 'Austerity Baby' – what the author's mother wrote of her new infant in a Baby Book, the record of her birth and early years. Tante Leonie (of Busenberg) was the aunt of Janet Wolff 's father, Arthur. There are surviving photographs of Leonie Kahn, née Schwarz in 1891, and others document her life up to 1939. But the most

poignant archive was discovered in the United States to which her daughter had managed to escape. Eri and her mother Leonie corresponded through the years of separation until 1942. Eri's daughter Paulette shared these mostly handwritten letters with Janet Wolff who had them transcribed and translated. Leonie Kahn and her husband Sigmund were amongst a unique transport of Jewish people sent from Baden-Baden, Germany to the camp of Gurs in France. There Sigmund Kahn died within months from the appalling conditions, while she remained there for a year, before being released to go to Marseilles to a camp from which the inmates tried to find a passage out.

She lived there for almost a year before it is discovered, in the records of transports from the South of France to Drancy, the holding camp in Paris and thence to Auschwitz, that she was deported on 16 September to her immediate death on arrival on 19 September 1942. The journeys to uncovering the full story of Tante Leonie, after whom the author's youngest sister may have been named, are both part of a cultural moment of deepening understanding of the long-term effects and affects of trauma within the context of expanding Holocaust commemoration. The writing of them is also a memorial act to an older woman, part of a familial network of which this author and her sisters were deprived by the horrors perpetrated by the Third Reich. Furthermore, that writing is an oblique reflection on the potential meaning of such knowledge of Leonie's fate on the author's father, and hence on his eldest daughter and her relation to a man marked by a mourning that was not fully spoken until his daughter's generation acknowledged the effects of 'living with the Holocaust' on their own lives. Janet Wolff draws here on the work of writers such as sociologist and journalist Anne Karpf whose book *The War After: Living with the Holocaust* appeared in 1996 helping to establish the understanding of transmitted trauma creating a subjective condition that has been named 'the second generation'.[3]

3. Anne Karpf, *The War After; Living with the Holocaust*, London, Mandarin Press, 1996.

The tracing of the outlines of a portrait of Arthur Wolff might also be said to be one heart of this memoir. Lodged in documents, tracked by visits to places he once knew, explorations of the life lived in the detention camps on the Isle of Man to which German aliens (most of whom were Jewish refugees) were confined at the outbreak of war, information gleaned from sources such as drawings and other memoirs, Janet Wolff the writer seeks to draw a picture of her father while revealing how profoundly difficult it is to do so. What do we know, or can we understand of the person rather than the function? How old do we have to be and what do we have to have done to bring our own experience imaginatively to the bare outlines we will have, as children, about another person, who happened to become our mother or father? Is it only through this strange journeying at once away from 'home' and to many elsewheres where Janet Wolff gathered the scattered threads of a Jewish family dispersed under the force of a historical atrocity that the very possibility of knowledge of both self and its formative others around her can come into focus in a unique mode of writing? It is against the chapter on

Arthur Wolff, 'Chemistry and Philately' that I wrote in my reading notes 'a brilliant piece of writing' for the long digression into both topics (notably her father's stamp collection from his home province in Germany) winding their way through art (the artist Kurt Schwitters was one of the internees on the Isle of Man) back to a letter written by daughter Eri to her mother, Tante Leonie in 1942. This one was undelivered and returned to sender, either because it arrived too late, or, more likely, because it was posted *without stamps*. Nothing could make the dreadful poignancy of absence more vivid than arriving at this ending to the essay, read well after the one bearing her name.

One final element of this project stands out. It is also a book about women, written without advertising the effects of both feminist transformation and continued interrogation of what indeed the word and the subjectivity it references mean. *Austerity Baby* is a series of portraits – portraits of her own women contemporaries being the hook that captured Janet Wolff's interest in Kathleen McEnery, an American painter who lived in Rochester and the subject of the second chapter on living in and the cultural life of provincial cities, Rochester/Manchester. Eleanor Rathbone features for a variety of reasons and becomes the topic of ambivalent political responses as she was admired by the author's father for her strong support of rescue and the refugees while holding deeply problematic views on women's destinies.

The penultimate chapter is titled 'Spinster'. In its course Kathleen McEnery's portraits reappear, family stories of the unmarried aunts are traced, single women in novels are explored, the sociological issue of 'surplus' women created by mass slaughter of men during world wars is documented. It ends with a discussion of some of those women who, after both wars, dedicated themselves to education and thus were encountered by the young Janet Wolff in her grammar school days. These women who studied at Oxford and Cambridge for degrees they were never awarded were products of the radical women's movements of the nineteenth century when women demanded the right to education and employment as much as the right to vote. They are remembered by their pupils by their names as *Miss* X or *Miss* Y. Side by side with the gentle and painful stories of an extended European now often American Jewish family are these portraits, culled from obituaries and retirement eulogies, of educated British women of an earlier era of women's struggle, of a feminism that is still unfinished business. As a school leaver in the early 1960s, Janet Wolff avows her probable incredulity at the report of a happy woman who has remained single and who did not choose or had no opportunity to have a child. Looking back from her own retirement from a life in education, rich in relationships, friendships and powerful bonds with family and notably her sisters, what is she asking herself, and more importantly, her readers at this point to think about in terms of a singular life of one woman of the later twentieth century and the second decade of the current one?

For me it points to one of the deepest elements of this book and its place in a literature of women inspired by the long history of feminist reflection.

That point is that we have only just begun to find out what it is anyone of us is, not as women in some lumpen collective sense or as Woman in that abstract theoretical sense, but in the complex formations of sexuality, gender, social formation, ethnicity, capacity, incapacity, ambition and restriction through the telling of stories to each other and the world. Some have done this through probing self-analysis by means of the conventions of psychoanalysis or psycho-biography. Others have in effect written their own stories onto the pages of their academic analysis of the stories, thoughts and images of others. Janet Wolff's experiment in creative writing offers its singular contribution to this arena through what feels most comfortable for her: a subtle reframing of the ethnographic combination of the singular case and the social pattern.

It is without doubt cool in its prose style, and not given to any sins of our compulsively self-exposing Facebook culture. Its depth is to be read in the affects that emerge in the reader attentive to what comes into view precisely as the shapes created by what is not, cannot, be told. I am left with the impression of a suggestive reticence, a reticence that frustrates what has to be admitted is my own curiosity. Yet that is also the mark of a deeper register of understanding what it is to write, forge words, create literary forms, shape sequences, manage repeats, build structures, in the light of feminist, sociological and cultural theories of the self, the subject, the family, place, trauma, memory, illness, migration and the possibility of finding a place to be. Vivian Gornick insisted that writing a memoir is creating a persona, who is the subject and the story:

> To achieve it, the writer …undergoes an apprenticeship as soul searching as any undergone by a novelist or poet: the twin struggle to know not only why one is speaking but *who* is speaking.[4]

4. Gornick, The Situation and the Story p.8

Perhaps that is the point of writing a memoir, not to *tell* but to *find* 'who' one is. This leads me finally to Hannah Arendt and her thesis that 'who' one is can only be discovered politically, that is through disclosure to others in a context of their shared disclosure (which is not at all the same as exposure).[5] Far from, therefore, siting her work on the private side of the typical divide between fact and fiction, public and private, sociology and literature, the deeply sociological cultural writer Janet Wolff performs an Arendtian move in which a set of stories of others, actual and fictional, invoke Arendt's 'political sphere' in which the lineaments of her singularity, her 'who'-ness becomes legible, probably as importantly to the author herself as to the readers moved by the text to think much more deeply about what is a lived, and examined, but not completely self-understood life whose living space extends through times and spaces heavy with dark histories and enlightened by often precarious but vital political transformations, of which feminist rethinking of women's lives remain so crucial.

5. I am drawing on Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* trans. Paul A. Kottman, London, Routledge, 2000; Olivia Guaraldo, *Storylines: Politics, History and Narrative from an Arendtian Perspective*, Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä Press, 2003, and Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt; Life is a Narrative*, Frank Collins (trans), Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2001.

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