

2. Simondon as a Neo-Scholastic?

Interview with John Durham Peters *

About John Durham Peters

*John Durham Peters is Maria Rosa Menocal Professor of English and of Film & Media Studies at Yale University. Peters has been a creative force in media studies for many years and his thinking continues to influence academic environments throughout the world. His book *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago, 2015) was an attempt to rethink the concept of media by including weather, dolphins and fire to the infrastructural landscape of digital communications and climate change. His new book, in cooperation with Kenneth Cmiel, is called *Promiscuous Knowledge: Information, Image, and Other Truth Games in History* (Chicago, 2020).*

Johan Fredrikzon: In your opinion, is there currently a renewed interest in Simondon? Or is it a very small local phenomenon here at Yale University?

John Durham Peters: The choice of words – ”renewed” – is interesting. I don't know if there ever was a great interest in Simondon. I think a lot of people respected his early work in the late fifties and the sixties, but it is people like Gilles Deleuze we

* Johan Fredrikzon spent one and a half years as a visiting research assistant at the Film and Media Studies Program at Yale University 2018/2019. Some months before he arrived, a two-day workshop on Simondon was held by the Yale-Düsseldorf Working Group on Philosophy and Media, titled *Modes of Technical Objects*, with scholars from the US and Germany. Fredrikzon decided to engage a few of the workshop participants for this special issue of *Sensorium*, with the purpose to discuss perspectives on Simondon as a theoretical instrument for thinking technology, how the French philosopher matters in their work, and why there seems to be a revival in the interest in the writing of Simondon these days. On behalf of the *Sensorium journal*, the interviewer would like to thank the three interviewees for their generous participation.

can thank for interest in the following decades. Simondon disappeared toward the end of his lifetime, partly due to mental illness. I don't know what kind of psychiatric condition it was, but I don't think the seventies and eighties were very productive, and he died at sixty-five in 1989. There is a memoir online written by his daughter, who puts a positive spin on it but he seems to have struggled.

The reason I say this, is that – perhaps this is your next question – why Simondon? Obviously, he is a subtle theorist of technology who is *not* Heidegger. And with Heidegger you always have to do a toxicology report, if you can forgive me the metaphor. You have to figure out how much poison there is with his genius. Not just because of his Nazism and his Anti-Semitism but just because of the idiosyncrasy of his project, the obscurity of his language, the kind of poor personal judgement that he seems to have shown throughout his life together with his astonishing speculative imagination.

JF: And the hordes of Heideggerians you have to consider...

JDP: Yes. But there are a lot of Heideggerians who welcome Simondon. I was surprised to discover a very flattering citation to Simondon in Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* from 1964.

JF: Simondon wants to bring technology on as a subject of philosophy. As does Heidegger. Are they similar in that respect?

JDP: That is true. If you want to theorize Being you have to theorize ontology and perhaps also technology, which is a pretty radical idea. Thus, the questions of *physis* and *techné* is important in Heidegger's "Question concerning technology". I am hearing a related distinction a lot these days, the *grown* and *the made*. Heidegger says that *physis*, or the grown, is that which comes into being on its own whereas *techné* comes into being by means of means. It needs an instrument. It needs some kind of "maker", an artificer.

JF: A coming together of elements.

JDP: Exactly. And remember that the word technology is famously tangled in English, in a way that does not really exist either in French or in German – *Technik* in German and *technique* in French express instead a productive ambiguity.* I think that is one reason both Heidegger and Simondon seem refreshing. They are always interested in the "sweet spot" where technology and technique converge.

JF: Simondon seems to be talking about technology as a way of understanding.

* In his book *Marvelous Clouds*, Peters gives a definition of the contrast between *technology* and *technique*: Technology has a durable base, whereas technique does not. Dolphins, for example, have technique but no technology.

JDP: When I was a beginning doctoral student, we did an exercise to find a concept that could be researched – and I told my professor that my concept was technology. He said: "Sorry, you can't do that, technology is not a concept, it is a field of study." In 1861 when M.I.T. – Massachusetts Institute of Technology was named – technology meant the study of the industrial arts, engineering. It didn't mean devices and gadgets.

So Heidegger published his "Question" lecture in 1954, Simondon four years later, and Simondon seems to be a response to Heidegger's work. But I really don't know how influenced he was. My very simplified definition is: Heidegger + Norbert Wiener = Simondon. Which is not entirely fair. But Heidegger clearly knows something about cybernetics. He talks about it, of course, in the *Der Spiegel*-interview from 1966. Simondon really worked through cybernetics. He tried to figure out what it means to have a system which is indifferent to biology and machines, that deals with the completely radical insight of Wiener: "the ontological flattening" between machine, animal, human. The crazy idea I floated in our Simondon-workshop was that he is a neo-scholastic.

JF: Why neo-scholastic?

JDP: I'm out on the limb here as no Simondon expert – but it is a kind of classic cliché about post war France that you are either a communist or a Christian. Simondon is not a communist. I do not know if he is a Christian or not, but he is certainly sympathetic to medieval modes of thought about systematizing ontology and meta-stability. With Simondon there seems to be a kind of love of neo-Thomist abstraction. I'm not going to make a strong argument about this.

JF: Sounds interesting. A neo-scholastic and a neo-Aristotelian.

JDP: Neo-scholastic and a neo-Aristotelian are probably the same thing. Neo-scholastic is a subset of neo-Aristotelian because there are so many ways to be neo-Aristotelian: You can make the argument that Hegel is a neo-Aristotelian, Marx is a neo-Aristotelian, John Dewey is a neo-Aristotelian, Hannah Arendt is a neo-Aristotelian, Heidegger is a neo-Aristotelian, but they are all quite different. Scholastic is a much more specific version. In the mid-twentieth century you had this florescence of neo-Thomist thinkers, many of them French. Jacques Meritain, most famously, who had a huge influence on McLuhan – I think of McLuhan as being a neo-Thomist. McLuhan will basically say this at various points, for example in an essay on Thomas Aquinas and James Joyce: Thomism gives you a potential of the world as an intelligible totality, much like James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake*: a vision of

the world as a knowable whole. For Simondon as well, the world is always intelligible on some level. There are breakdowns, meta-stability, systemic potentials for breakdowns, but there is not the existential haze of humans willfully imposing meaning on something which is inherently meaningless. It is Aristotelian in the sense that nature has a structure which in some ways corresponds to the structure of understanding. For a scholastic, that homology is due to God, of course. I'm not sure that Simondon goes that far, but the processes by which nature works and the processes by which technology works are analogous.

JF: Right. For one thing, that seems like an ambition that environmental studies tried to move away from in the eighties, which is to say that the ecological system is not all harmony. But sure, intelligibility and harmony is not necessarily the same thing.

JDP: One way to think about it is that Simondon is not a Nietzschean – Nietzsche is obviously not a neo-scholastic. Simondon is not a Derridean, although you could find similarities, but he does not particularly think about discourse and power. Simondon has a confidence in science, that it has the power to explicate the universe at some level.

JF: Simondon also – to build on what you said before – has a sort of aesthetic framework. He does not just want to grant technology a more reasonable spot in the history of philosophy, he is also expressing – I can only think of it in aesthetic terms – a vision of sorts. Like he is saying: We should find a theory of the evolution of technical objects. As undergraduates, we have learned to think of people that aestheticize technology as a warning sign.

JDP: The classic Walter Benjamin line: Critical theory says you are a fascist if you aestheticize technology.

JF: More or less. So where does that leave us, if we grant that Simondon harbors ideas of this kind?

JDP: Interesting question. For McLuhan the intelligibility of the universe is very much a question of beauty. Because order is beautiful. *Cosmos* gives us *cosmetic*. In ancient Greek *cosmos* doesn't just mean order, it means beauty. But McLuhan clearly has sympathies with fascist aesthetics, literally, he has sympathies for people like Wyndham Lewis or Ezra Pound, who were both explicit fascists. But there are ways in which you could uphold the vision of cosmic beauty without being a fascist. And for me, the way you do that, is by being an evolutionist.

Do you know Charles Hartshorne? Hartshorne is a Peircean, he edited Peirce's papers, the first round in the 1920s and 1930s. He was also a world class ornithologist. He wrote a really interesting book about bird song, *Born to Sing: An Interpretation and World Survey of Bird Song* (Indiana Univ Press, 1974/1992), which I just love because it is about a minimal unit of a technical object – a bird song –, which is at once art/*techne* and involved in the evolutionary process.

JF: What about Simondon's concept of essentialism? Should we worry about that?

JDP: It is called scholasticism. *Essentia*.

JF: To me, part of this reads "open ended", but then part of it seems to suggest some sort of essence to which technology is striving. Simondon does not use the word "fulfilment" or "completion", but he expresses similar ideas: "this object has now reached this individualized state, it is on its way to an even better stage where it won't have to be ordered around or managed by man". According to this reading of Simondon, we have to "liberate" – this is also the wrong term – technical objects from being slaves of humanity by means of evolutionary process, reach higher stages of being where they will be, in a sense, "free". This would be equivalent of their true nature.

JDP: This is also maybe where he could be seen as a Marxist...

JF: Yes, in a way.

JDP: His critique of *hylomorphism** is Marxist. Simondon argues that matter is not dominated by ideas. He almost sounds like John Dewey when he says that hylomorphism arises out of a slave society and that we need to understand that these doctrines have a kind of social "stain" or a social infrastructure to them. It is a program not of liberating the servers, but the machines of our labor. They are in need of liberation too.

JF: I think his thought is very interesting and fresh, certainly in mid 20th century. But also potentially problematic.

JDP: Is not essence for Simondon provisional? It is very different from a kind of scholastic essence that is eternal and unchangeable.

JF: But what is essence if it does not have those qualities?

JDP: It can be historical.

JF: It sounds like something Ian Hacking would say.

* Hylomorphism: The doctrine that physical objects result from the combination of matter and form. From hypo- 'matter' + Greek *morphē* 'form'.

JDP: Like Ian Hacking would say, or what Marx and Hegel would say. Marx tries to decapitate Hegel. Hegel tries to decapitate Aristotle. Even Aristotle – to be fair to him – has a very dynamic sense of essence. Things are coming into being. It is easy to try to platonize Aristotle and make him sound fixed. For Simondon, there is not *one* vacuum tube, *one* steam engine, which is going to be the ultimate engine.

JF: Maybe the problem lies in the translation.

JDP: The question of essence is a classic in a Marxist philosophy of history. Marx says that communism is the riddle of history solved. And Hegel says that history will come to an end. What does that mean? Do things stop happening? Obviously, they cannot: it does not make any sense. Could we just say that Simondon has drunk the post war Kool-Aid of believing that automation is the ultimate telos of labor? Many people believed this. Marcuse believed it, Isaac Asimov believed it. People of very different political orientation thought work was going to be made obsolete. And I think Simondon must be seen as part of this stream of thought. Hannah Arendt said something similar in the *Human Condition* in 1958, the same year the *On the Mode...* was published. John Kenneth Galbraith also, the liberal economist. It is amazing to see the consensus among different minded people.

JF: I wonder if philosophers of artificial intelligence are interested in Simondon, people on the intellectual side of Kurzweil.

JDP: Certainly in Germany. For six years I served as a member of the board of the IKKM, Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie, at the Bauhaus Universität in Weimar, and went there every year. Weimar is a great place to pick up on trends, as Bernhard Siegert once noted, a person who is himself pushing Simondon as a forgotten philosopher of technology. Michael Cuntz, who was at our Simondon conference, translated *On the mode..* into German,* because there was so much interest.

JF: Like you said: he is not Heidegger.

JDP: You don't have to detox.

JF: Would you say that the concept of "cultural techniques" by Siegert partly builds on ideas by Simondon?

JDP: I do not want to be too reductive to my friends at Weimar, but I see cultural techniques as essentially penance for Kittlerian exaggeration.

JF: I do too. But not only that.

* *Die Existenzweise technischer Objekte; Die Existenzweise technischer Objekte* (Diaphanes, 2012)

JDP: Not only. It is partly the polemical thing about the "sogennanten Menschen" [so-called people]. Kittler systematically hated sociology and Bernhard Siegert still has his guard up. But he really likes anthropology – if you see it as a neo-Hegelian question of "Was ist ein Mensch?" [what is man?]. A conference in Weimar had this title, "Was wäre der Mensch?" [what would man be?].

JF: Speaking of anthropology: did not Claude Lévi-Strauss take part in bringing cybernetics to France?

JDP: Levi-Strauss wrote a great essay called *The mathematics of man* [1954], and once lived in the same apartment building as Claude Shannon in New York City, according to Erich Hörl. It is not clear that they met, but Hörl has it that a neighbor told Levi-Strauss that someone else in the building was trying to build an artificial brain. There are many of these links. Benoit Mandelbrot seems to have been Wiener's intellectual broker in France. And Jean Hyppolite, Foucault's teacher, was totally into cybernetics. For someone like Lacan, cybernetics is absolutely essential for figuring out what he is doing. How do you count to one, how do you count to two? He says most people cannot count to two. He is thinking in terms of set theory. And Jakobson, clearly, is important.

JF: He was in New York, was he not?

JDP: Yes, during the 1940s, but moved to Harvard in 1949. Lily Kay, *Who Wrote the Book of Life?* (Stanford Univ Press, 1999) has got some really good stuff on Jakobson and Levi-Strauss from a DNA angle.

JF: And Foucault was much more into cybernetics than people would grant.

JDP: Absolutely. His 1966 essay *Message ou bruit** on medical practice uses the language of information theory and code. Every Kittlerian can see the cybernetics in Foucault.

JF: I find that a lot of these people in France do not want to talk about cybernetics, even though it is very central for their thinking.

JDP: This is described in *The zero and the one* by Jérôme Segal. It is 900 pages about cybernetics in 50s and 60s in France.[†] He has got everybody in there, among them The *Bourbaki* group, where Simone Weil's brother is a member. They are five or six loosely connected authors who publish revolutionary stuff on mathematics under the name Nicolas Bourbaki, who does not exist. And they are rethinking set theory,

* Lecture by Foucault, 22 October, 1966.

† *Le Zéro et le Un. Histoire de la notion scientifique d'information au 20e siècle*, Éditions Syllepse, 2003.

for example. Bernard Geoghegan is also unearthing the French connection to cybernetics.

JF: You mentioned McLuhan before. Simondon and McLuhan seem to be working with different ideas of ecology: McLuhan sees meaning, content, errors and messages as crucial, whereas Simondon worries not so much about those things. Do they have a concept of ecology that is more or less similar or not?

JDP: That is a great question. I do not know, is my answer. But when I read "ecology" in McLuhan I often think it is metaphorical. When I read "ecology" in Innis I think he knows something about beavers and trees – he in other words expresses a much more environmentally informed sense of ecology. McLuhan is normative. Simondon seems much more aligned with system theory. You can have a "multi final" outcome in the ecological system of Simondon. McLuhan's ecology is actually much more a "pathology" than an "ecology", because he is interested in systems that stress out or get overloaded. Which is not foreign to ecology – there is all kinds of extinction, overload, and eutrophication and bad feedback loops –, but this is different. There was a great talk at a recent conference in Toronto about the influence of Hans Selye, who was an émigré doctor and leading theorist of stress teaching in Montreal, who McLuhan either knew or talked to. It is very clear that McLuhan thinks that media are *stress-inducing*.

JF: Simondon does not worry about mass media.

JDP: Well, he has a nice essay about cinema which I thought was really smart. Although Francesco Casetti, department chair at Film and Media Studies Program here at Yale, says he was pretty much drawing upon Georges Sadoul – the standard textbook French cinema theorist in the 1950s. I thought he said some really interesting things about "massification": What does it mean to have one message going to many people? It is not as sustained as in McLuhan, by any means, but it is not fair to say that Simondon does not engage with mass media.