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Toward a pharmacodynamics of technology

Vincent Beaubois

Félix Guattari regularly insisted that his theory of the “machine” was not limited merely to “technical machines”: the “machinic” cannot be reduced to the “technical.” That notwithstanding, does Guattari’s “machinic” thought enable us to contemplate a philosophy of modern technology as it stands? What do technology and our ties to it mean for him? At first glance, his writings appear to treat modern technology ambiguously, variously as a source of alienation or as having emancipatory potential. For example, in *The Three Ecologies*, the “techno-scientific” developments of the end of the twentieth century are presented both as a “threat” and as a potential “remedy” to ecological problems.¹ Likewise, in an interview with Toni Negri, published in 1990 in the journal *Futur antérieur*,

Guattari appears to remain open about the possibilities of these technologies, despite Negri’s insistence on the dangers and dead-ends of a “planetary information age.”² This ambiguity must be considered at the “machinic” level of the production of subjectivities, particularly with regard to the production of what Guattari refers to as “capitalistic subjectivity.” By juxtaposing Guattari’s writings on the “machinic” with those he dedicated to “drugs,” we aim to shed light on the meaning of this “capitalistic subjectivity” and to show how Guattari’s philosophy employs a *pharmacodynamic* theory of technology, centered not on the question of *care* but rather on the implementation of risky practices involving adjustments, transactions, and existential experiments.

¹ Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Athlone, 2000 [1989]).

² Félix Guattari, “Au-delà du retour à zéro,” in *Qu’est-ce que l’écophilosophie?* (Saint-Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe: Lignes/IMEC, 2013), 289–301. **Translator’s note:** Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this article are our own.

The technical and the machinic

Guattari does not use the concept of the “machine” to reflect on the future of technology but rather to requalify the dynamics of desire³: desire should not be understood as a natural and impulsive libidinal energy within the individual—an energy awaiting a cultural order to sublimate itself—but as a force connecting partial objects to form an assemblage that gives rise to social forms and modes of subjectivation. But why use the word “machine” to describe this desiring dynamic? Because Guattari puts forward an original conception of the technical machine, conceived as an entity that is both *operational* and *open to the future*.⁴ A machine is not principally defined by its material structure but rather by its operational dimension, which embodies a particular *regime*. Moreover, a machine must always be conceived of *in operation*: this is the moment in which its various inert components enter into energetic relationships of exchange and synergy, giving rise to a specific operation or “dynamic scheme.” An engine is not a simple assemblage of alloys and polymers; it embodies a regulated operation involving the transformation of thermal energy into mechanical energy via the interactions of its various components. Moreover, this operation essentially “opens out,” in two dimensions:

3 This appeared to be the case from 1969 and the publication of the article “Machine and Structure,” which presented a critique of the Lacanian theory of desire: Félix Guattari, “Machine and Structure,” in *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics* (London: Penguin, 1984), 111–19.

4 In this sense, his conception of technical machines resonates very strongly with Gilbert Simondon’s thinking on machines as expounded in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017 [1958]), although Guattari never explicitly mentions this work.

– “ontogenetically,” connecting the operation with different external elements that both support its functioning and make it possible (“elements of the plan, of construction, social relationships which support these technologies, a stock of knowledge, economic relations”⁵). This is notably what occurs in the practices of machine maintenance, adjustment, and repair required by these different elements to secure the future functioning of the machine as a whole.

– “phylogenetically,” denoting a future for this framework through different generations of technological structures: “Technological machines are caught in a ‘phylum’ which is preceded by some machines and succeeded by others.”⁶

In summary, a technical machine is defined as a system of dynamic interrelations giving rise to an operation—one that always tends toward other elements (social, economic, mathematic, etc.) and that looks toward a future. It is thus in accordance with this machinic framework—the fruit of an analysis of technical machines—that Guattari requalifies the dynamics of desire. The concept of the “desiring-machine,” as expounded in *Anti-Oedipus*, illustrates Guattari’s understanding of the functioning of desire: the *objet petit a* is no longer treated as the *target desired* by a subject, but rather as a participant in the construction of a machinic assemblage that connects this object with other partial objects to open up new possibilities.

If the concept of “machine” serves above all to rethink the concept of “desire” beyond

5 Félix Guattari, “On Machines,” trans. Vivian Constantinopoulos, *JPVA* 6 (1995 [1993]): 8.

6 Guattari, “On Machines,” 9.

the psychoanalytic understanding propounded by Freud, can we still learn something about “technical machines” in their own right from Guattari’s thought? Although technology may seem to be merely borrowed territory, we must nevertheless be minded of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “theorems of deterritorialization” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, in particular the fifth of these theorems: “deterritorialization is always double, because it implies the coexistence of a major variable and a minor variable in simultaneous becoming.”⁷ Deterritorialization is “double” in the sense that it is always *bi-directional*: if, in Guattari’s philosophy of desire, the “technical machine” deterritorializes, no longer functioning according to its own (technological) code but rather contaminating the issue of desire, this necessarily implies that “desire” deterritorializes on the technical field. To put it another way, if the technical machine deterritorializes the classic notion of “desire,” we must necessarily consider that the desiring logic in turn contaminates the notion of the technical machine, thus calling for a new philosophy of technology.

Capitalistic subjectivities

The notion of “capitalistic subjectivity” makes it possible to identify this contamination of industrial technology by the question of desire. We must remember that Guattari’s definition of “subjectivity” is very broad: “Subjectivity is the raw material of the human species; it is what enables individual life, collective life, and life itself.”⁸ Subjectivity therefore does not denote a substance that qualifies the subject’s

identity but rather an informational process that modulates the subject depending on the assemblages they enter into. In this sense, the capitalist and productivist system does not simply produce material infrastructures and consumer goods; it also shapes what Guattari calls a “dominant subjectivity” that affects us all: “It is important to recognize that individuated subjectivity has become the object of a kind of industrial production.”⁹

To understand the specificity of this “dominant subjectivity,” which Guattari also refers to as “capitalistic subjectivity,” we must analyze it in terms of both its own desiring economy and its relationship to the future: “Capitalistic subjectivity, as modulated by operators of all natures and sizes, is manufactured to protect existence against the intrusion of events that may disturb and disrupt it.”¹⁰ How does this subjectivity guard against singularities that may “disrupt” and therefore transform it? Quite simply, by functioning as a “system of redundancies,” which favors the repetition of established things (norms, orders, behaviors, etc.): desire is consummated in a repeated projection that makes it possible to abolish any awareness of the passage of time and the singularities that accompany it. It is about establishing (oneself in) an *eternal present*.

This type of subjectivity is also explored in detail by Guattari in connection with a field that is apparently quite separate from questions of capitalism and industry: his writings on “drugs,” in which he describes the subjectivity of users of psychoactive substances in a substantially analogous manner. Indeed, the analogy between psychotropic drugs and the

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 [1980]), 306.

⁸ Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écophilosophie?* (Saint-Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe: Lignes/IMEC, 2013), 332.

⁹ Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écophilosophie?*, 217.

¹⁰ Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écophilosophie?*, 358–59.

“capitalistic subjectivity” of the mass-media era is clearly emphasized: “Capitalistic subjectivity seeks to gain power by controlling and neutralizing the maximum number of existential refrains. It is *intoxicated with and anaesthetized* by a collective feeling of pseudo-eternity.”¹¹

This subjectivity therefore implies an ambivalent relationship to time: it enables the establishment of a personal time while simultaneously annihilating any relationship to otherness that might produce a possible bifurcation of this time, or in other words, the implementation of a future. Indeed, on the one hand, the repetitive act inscribes the subject in a redundancy enabling them to anchor a sense of existence:

“In the binary rhythm of rock music [always associated with “machinic junkies” in Guattari’s writings], these take the forms of repetitive statements that work to give us back a relationship to time, so that we feel we exist somewhere, in some place.”¹²

But, on the other hand, this repetition isolates, cutting the subject off from the presence of the world and the otherness that shapes it, as we see in Guattari’s consideration of “television” as a form of “drug”:

“Television ends up functioning as a hypnotic drug, cutting the subject off from their environment, contributing to the dissolution of family and social relationships, which are already stretched to breaking point, and diminishing the role of reading and writing in favor of more superficial cultural and informative elements associated with “short memory.”¹³

“Television is deployed in a euphoric climate of eternity.”¹⁴

This dominant subjectivity is therefore characterized by practices that produce existential territories, albeit territories that end up going around in circles to the point of rendering impossible any opening out toward a possible transformation. This “compulsive” subjectivity is thus characterized by a suspension of the world, a form of existential *epoché*, which is not aimed at knowledge of the world (as in Husserl), but rather at escape from the problematic industrial conditions of our relationship to it. To understand how this form of subjectivity ought to push us to reconsider our relationship to the world—starting with the industrial technological system that mediates this relationship—we must take a closer look at Guattari’s analysis of users of “drugs.”

The question of “drugs”

The originality of Guattari’s thinking on drugs lies in the fact that he took the drug user’s subjectivity to be the dominant form of subjectivity, our “normalized subjectivity,”¹⁵ as opposed to a marginal or anticonformist one. Our relationship to drugs constitutes the basis of our industrial subjectivity, making us “normopaths” (to borrow Jean Oury’s term).¹⁶ For Guattari, a critique of this addictive capitalistic subjectivity therefore would not consist in advocating an existential asceticism or an angelic detoxification free of any compulsive refrain: it is not a matter of denying or eradicating either the drug or the addict within us,

¹¹ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 50, our emphasis.

¹² Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écologie?*, 458.

¹³ Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écologie?*, 432.

¹⁴ Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écologie?*, 446.

¹⁵ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 33.

¹⁶ Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que l’écologie?*, 133.

but rather of taking one's place in a problematic way within this particular desiring economy.

It must also be emphasized that Guattari's definition of "drugs" is extremely broad, encompassing—in addition to certain psychoactive substances—any system of redundancy via which subjects transform their subjective data to create an existential territory for themselves and cut themselves off from their external environment:

"We must begin by enlarging the definition of drugs. In my view, all the mechanisms producing a "machinic" subjectivity, everything that contributes to provide a sensation of belonging to something, of being somewhere, along with the sensation of forgetting oneself, are "drugs."¹⁷

Thus, the issue of "drugs" is not limited simply to the consumption of psychoactive substances, but rather it denotes a certain way of being worked on through repetition. In Guattari's writings, the term "drug" denotes both a way of understanding oneself and a way of cutting oneself off from a certain type of relationship to time and to the other. In this sense, he rejects the artificial opposition (introduced by the penal system) between "hard" and "soft" drugs:

"The distinction between hard and soft drugs is ultimately quite artificial. It seems poorly founded in clinical terms. We find hard users of soft drugs and soft users of hard drugs."¹⁸

¹⁷ Félix Guattari, "Machinic Junkies," in *Soft Subversions: Texts and Interviews 1977–1985* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 158.

¹⁸ Guattari, "Les drogues signifiantes," in *La Révolution moléculaire* (Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2012), 344.

Drugs have less to do with "substances" and more to do with the industrial organization of a desire that "hardens" our relationship to things. The problem does not lie in particular molecules or practices that are "hard" in themselves, but rather in a *hardening* of these uses:

"Our entire society is drugged; it "hardens" its drugs, increasingly associating them with a taste for catastrophe, an apocalyptic drive. There is nothing more to say, nothing more to do! All that remains is to follow the movement!"¹⁹

As this last extract shows, this hardening is not unrelated to the ecological impasse we are living through and the sense of technological catastrophe that permeates the current era. Indeed, this framework for addiction should guide our understanding of the transversality of the ecological question in *The Three Ecologies*: mental addictions in our obsessions and compulsions; social addictions in our mass-media societies focused on current events and celebrity; environmental addictions in our extractivist and energy dependencies. Each of these dimensions implies both a desiring-production force forming the basis of our lives and the production of a rupture with regard to the future of our mental, social, and environmental systems.

A pharmacodynamics of technology

Thinking about our relationship to technology ultimately obliges us to take a closer look at what makes up the vital economy of these ostracized members of society who define themselves in France as "*personnes utilisatrices de drogues*" (PUDs) (people who use drugs)²⁰:

¹⁹ Guattari, "Les drogues signifiantes," 346.

²⁰ Anon., "Nous sommes des Personnes Utilisatrices de Drogues (PUD)," *Fanzine de Psychoactif* 5 (2022): 20.

in order to understand the drug addict within us, we must turn to those who have become experts in the field. It is no longer a question of reducing these people to legal or clinical categories such as “substance user” or “drug addict,” but rather of observing their pragmatic mode of subjectivation.

Ethnographic studies of PUDs along with discussion forums used by such groups²¹ show in particular that, on the whole, these individuals have nothing in common with the tragic image (as portrayed in the media) of the marginal and desocialized drug addict, or the *junkie* living only for their next dose: PUDs are generally integrated into society through professional and associative activities, as well as their relationships with family and friends. This is particularly clear from the ethnologist Astrid Fontaine’s book *Double vie: les drogues et le travail* (Double Life: Drugs and Work), which follows the paths of various PUDs who are not marginalized owing to their professional integration.²² For these people, drug use does not represent the total abandonment of self in a compulsive frenzy but rather a field of ongoing construction and negotiation between the use of these molecules and other impulses of life: they continuously evaluate the doses taken, the effects obtained, and the duration of the experience in order to regulate it, keep risks under control, and preserve a space outside of drugs. The French website psychoactif.org represents an inexhaustible source of information about drug use and in

particular on how to reduce the associated risks. In its online forums, PUDs take a *pharmacodynamic* approach to their practices. Pharmacodynamics is concerned with the effect of an active substance on an organism: What are the effects of different doses? What are the interactions with other daily practices (meals, sleep)? What are the interactions with the organism? What is the role of metabolism? What changes in sensations are brought about (*body load* and *body high*)? What is the potential for *craving* (the desire to take another dose following a decrease in the effects of the previous dose)? What are the interactions with other substances? What are the side effects and how long do they last? Etc.

Guattari encourages us to use this same model to consider the relationship to technology, giving rise to a *pharmacodynamics of technology*. This pharmacodynamics cannot be reduced to a simple “pharmacology.” In 2009, the notion of a “pharmacology” of technology became a central axis of Bernard Stiegler’s philosophy.²³ Stiegler uses “pharmacology” to imply an analysis of technical organs and the organizations that constitute them in terms of the *pharmakon*, as both remedy and poison. A technology, as a *pharmakon*, is a *producer* of new circuits of transindividuation (i.e., of psychosocial individuation: the way in which an “I” is always individuated by individuating a “we” via a shared practice), *destroying* older circuits of transindividuation (just as writing produces a new culture of writing and memory, destroying oral memorization practices

available at: https://www.psychoactif.org/blogs/Edito-Nous-sommes-des-Personnes-Utilisatrices-de-Drogues-PUD_6832_1.html.

²¹ In particular, in France, the forum psychoactif.org.

²² Astrid Fontaine, *Double vie: les drogues et le travail* (Paris: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2006).

²³ See in particular Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010 [2009]); and Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013 [2010]).

and a particular embodiment of ideas, according to Derrida's analysis of Plato²⁴.)

Nevertheless, for Stiegler, this “pharmacology” of technology is exclusively expounded in relation to the question of how to “take care” of both our desiring powers and the technological power shaping this desire. In keeping with a Freudian understanding of desire, this “care” is only carried out in order to realize the goal of “sublimation”: it is about defending technological uses that sublimate “drives” in order to produce a culture of “spirit,” while at the same time denouncing any usage that responds only to the “drive-based” dimension of our desire.

A Guattarian pharmacodynamics of technology looks quite different. First of all, for Guattari, no distinction can be drawn between *drive* and *desire*, “between an (undifferentiated) drive-based chaos and the (differentiated) symbolic order,”²⁵ desire being a constructive force acting via encounter (with an external object) and assemblage, this construction enabling the production of *possibilities* (which may be as reactionary and drive-based as they are emancipatory). Our thinking about technology must be guided by the following consideration: At a time when we are dangerously dependent on the flows of energy and information that structure our machines, how can we envisage our status as “people who use technology”? Only via a pharmacodynamics of technologies—exploring their limits, the extent of their mental and physical contamination, the way they are metabolized in our living environments, the effects of their use

and *non-use*—can we effect a critique of our technological environment, no longer with the primary aim of “care” in mind, but instead focusing on *risky experimentation*, much in the same way as a PUD in everyday life.

Indeed, for PUDs, their drug use is “experimental,” in the sense that it is not regulated by any transcendent knowledge and is always subject to *risk* (non-linear effects of a dosage change, unusual physical reaction, etc.). Today's technological developments put us in a similar experimental situation, whether as designers or users: the rapid pace of technological change makes it difficult to anticipate the mental, social, and environmental effects of our technology use and its supporting infrastructures. We are bathing in an *experimental unconscious* over which we have little influence. Being open to a pharmacodynamics of technology does not call for an idealistic denial of contemporary technologies; rather, it requires that we recognize the experimental nature of our uses and the importance of adopting policies aimed at “harm reduction”—a term at the heart of the work carried out by the CAARUD support centers for drug users in France,²⁶ where the aim is not to eradicate drugs but to learn how to live with them.

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²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Plato's Pharmacy,” in *Post-Structuralism, Deconstruction, and Post-Modernism* (n.p., 1972), 429–50.

²⁵ Maurizio Lazzarato, “Some ‘Misunderstandings’ on Desire,” trans. Benoît Dillet, *La Deleuziana* 6 (2017): 52.

²⁶ Centres d'Accueil et d'Accompagnement à la Réduction des risques pour Usagers de Drogues (CAARUD) (Care and Support Centers for Harm Reduction for Drug Users).

Vincent Beaubois is a lecturer in philosophy at Paris Nanterre University. His research interests include issues pertaining to technology, material cultures, contemporary philosophy, and creative gestures.

Abstract

We propose a reading of Félix Guattari's works on the production of "capitalistic subjectivity" in conjunction with his writings on "drugs" in order to explore our industrial technological ties. From this juxtaposition emerges the outline of an original philosophy of technology centered on "risky experimentation," which we refer to as the "pharmacodynamics" of technology, by analogy with the practices of "people who use drugs."