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***From Resistance to Invention in the Politics of the Impossible: Bernard Stiegler's Political Reading of Maurice Blanchot***

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***Abstract***

In Bernard Stiegler's *Automatic Society Volume 1: The Future of Work* 'the impossible' and 'the improbable' appear as explicit parts of his political project. In his philosophy of technology, the impossible highlights the structural incompleteness that technics imparts to human existence. This article will trace how Stiegler draws on the work of Maurice Blanchot to produce this conjunction between technics and indeterminacy, and explore its political ramifications. This will show that rather than being a recent aspect of Stiegler's work, the political use of the impossible brings Blanchot's subterranean influence to the fore. After briefly reconstructing Blanchot's understanding of language, impersonality, and writing, it will be shown that Stiegler shifts Blanchot's emphasis from the impossible to technical practices of the improbable. Stiegler follows an anthropological line where the experience of the impossible becomes a more general understanding of the experience of improbability through technical structures. Stiegler's reading of Blanchot is central in his break with the place of the impossible in the politics of resistance advocated by post-structuralism, allowing him to support a politics of invention which makes space for the improbable within a large scale politics of technicity, rather than privileging indeterminacy itself.

Keywords: Bernard Stiegler, Maurice Blanchot, The Impossible, Resistance, Invention

Word Count (references and endnotes inclusive): 10,131.

In Bernard Stiegler's recent *Automatic Society Volume 1: The Future of Work* the themes of 'the impossible' and 'the improbable' appear as explicit parts of his political project (Stiegler, 2016). In his overarching philosophy of technology these terms highlight the political importance of the structural incompleteness that technics imparts to human existence. Humanity is without essence, defined only by the historical variations of the technical supplements that form its environment. The establishment of any political future that occurs within this process of anthropogenesis relies on acknowledging the impossibility of any final form of the human. In *Automatic Society* Stiegler draws explicitly on the work of Maurice Blanchot to develop the impossible and the improbable in order to produce a conjunction between technics, indetermination and politics. Rather than this being a development in Stiegler's work, the political use of the concept of the impossible brings Blanchot's subterranean influence upon Stiegler to the fore. This article will trace the development of Blanchot's influence from its place in the *Technics and Time* series (Stiegler, 1998, 2009a, 2011a), to its political variation in Stiegler's recent work.

Until recently, the influence of Blanchot on Stiegler has gone relatively uncommented on in comparison to other, more pronounced influences on his work. Other accounts of this relationship have either simply noted its presence (Vesco, 2015, pp.91, 102), or focused on the more general place of Blanchot within the *Technics and Time* series (Watt, 2016). Our focus will be on how Blanchot underpins Stiegler's claim that the construction of a political future must make room for the impossible in the form of the improbable (Stiegler, 2016, p.243). This will be understood within the context of how Blanchot's understanding of writing influences Stiegler's philosophy of technics. After briefly reconstructing Blanchot's understanding of language, impersonality, and writing, we will see how these terms influence core concepts in Stiegler's philosophy; the default of origin, the co-constitution of the technical and the human, the dialogical relationship between the two, and that these relationships are possessed of two slopes, one towards homogeneity, and another towards transformation. In turn, we will see how Stiegler transforms Blanchot's work in two ways. First, along an anthropological line where the experience of the impossible through the practice of writing is transformed into a more

general understanding of the experience of indetermination through technical practices and rituals. Second, into a political understanding of the necessity of producing systemic conditions for such practices of the impossible, rather than privileging indeterminacy and singularity in themselves. In both of these transformations it will be shown that this is made possible by Stiegler's shift of focus from the general condition of the impossible to the specific practices of the improbable. We will see how Stiegler uses this to form a politics of *invention* founded in large scale political structures that foster the improbable, differentiating him from the post-structuralist commitment to *resistance* through appeal to impossibility itself, a position that Blanchot is pivotal in establishing.

Blanchot's influence on this trajectory in Stiegler's project is not as pronounced as some of the more prominent and well discussed figures that he refers to. These includes Jacques Derrida (Colony, 2011; Roberts, 2005; Ross, 2013; Turner 2016), André Leroi-Gourhan (Johnson, 2013), Martin Heidegger (Colony, 2010), and Gilbert Simondon (Barthélémy, 2012). Instead, Blanchot's influence lurks beneath the surface, emerging at key moments to indicate to the reader the presence of a voice that for the most part does not speak, but rather orchestrates the other voices that Stiegler draws upon. Despite this hidden role, Blanchot's voice announces the beginning of *Technics and Time* in an epigraph to the general introduction which foregrounds the perspective on the impossible we will be addressing:

Do you admit to this certainty: that we are at a turning point?

-If it is a certainty, then it is not a turning point. The fact of being part of the moment in which an epochal change (if there is one) comes about also takes hold of the certain knowledge that would wish to determine this change, making certainty as inappropriate as uncertainty. We are never less able to circumvent ourselves than at such a moment: the discreet force of the turning point is first and foremost that (Blanchot, cited in Stiegler, 1998, p.1).<sup>1</sup>

This citation has been analysed from the perspective of the notion of the epoch it deploys (Watt, 2016, pp.306–308), and in the context of Stiegler's understanding of the notion of real time (Wambacq & Buseyne, 2013, p.72). Two different themes will be pursued here. First, the periodic collapse of

certainty and uncertainty into something indeterminable or impossible, which Blanchot sees as one of the functions of writing and literature. Second, the *necessity* of this impossibility to the construction of a future, in that it reveals the possibility to transform, rather than merely naturalise, contingent technical systems. These two themes will lead us from the first volume of *Technics & Time* to the political adoption of impossibility in *Automatic Society*. Thus, while Blanchot's work underpins his own sense of politics (Blanchot, 1988; Hill, 2007; Hole, 2013; Iyer, 2004), of interest here how his philosophy of literature is transformed by Stiegler into a philosophy of technics, with its own political ramifications. We will, however, return to Blanchot's politics in order to show how these political ramifications form Stiegler's shift of focus from the impossible to the improbable.

Before embarking on tracing the transformation of the philosophy of literature found in Blanchot into a theory of technicity, it is worth briefly sketching both thinker's political trajectories. It is widely acknowledged that Blanchot's politics were idiosyncratic. He began his career in the 1930s as a political journalist, editing and contributing to right-wing and nationalist publications, while criticising anti-Semitism and Nazism. During the war he joined the French resistance, and was later involved in the events of May 1968. These periods of activity are separated by little public intervention, and his writing is rarely explicitly political.<sup>ii</sup> Regardless of this, across his various forms of involvement Blanchot's politics has been characterised by identifying the potential for resistance that the impossible provides (Bruns, 1997, p.33).

Contrastingly, Stiegler has been constantly concerned with political questions, taking on the role of public intellectual in French political life. While his *Technics and Time* series, which details at length his philosophy of technology, only deals with politics obliquely, he has published several series of texts which deal with various issues pertaining to politics in the European and Anglo-American context. Most recently, *Automatic Society* attempts to come to terms with how increased automation is transforming both work and politics. Earlier texts include the two volumes of *Symbolic Misery* (Stiegler, 2014a, 2015a), which deal with the impact of aesthetic participation on politics, and the three volumes of *Disbelief and Discredit* (Stiegler, 2011b, 2013b, 2014b), which addresses the collapse of political belief into nihilism. Stiegler's texts investigate, in varying ways, the impact that technics has

on political life, and he tries to invent concepts by which to ameliorate the negative impact of consumerism upon politics. Stiegler's interventions are not solely textual, and his work as a founding member of the political group *Ars Industrialis*,<sup>iii</sup> director of the *Institut de recherche et d'innovation* at the Pompidou Centre, and his founding of a doctoral school dedicated to the notion of contributory research, all involve developing and promoting research that pursues the ideals that his writings develop. This leads to the key difference between Blanchot and Stiegler, based upon the shift of emphasis from the impossible to the improbable. Where Blanchot was concerned with *resisting* present conditions, Stiegler is actively involved in *inventing* new forms of practice. It will be concluded that this shift from resistance to invention characterises Stiegler's attempt to separate himself from the political legacy of post-structuralism through his reading of Blanchot, by establishing the need for an inventive, rather than resistant, subject of politics.

### ***Language, the Impersonal and Writing***

The significance of this shift in emphasis can be shown by reconstructing how Blanchot characterizes language as an impersonal field that precedes the subject, and how literature or writing taps into the impossible and indeterminable character of this field. Language, for Blanchot, is the result of a negation of the thing which it represents:

A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, 'This woman,' I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being-the very fact that it does not exist (Blanchot, 1995, p.322).

Naming requires negation in order to present something in language, an abstraction from the thing. Blanchot does not see this as logical negation, but rather a more radical form of negativity which asserts the centrality of death within language. Negation is imbued with a creativity irreducible to dialectical sublation, more radical than negativity within a logical system, as it cannot be recuperated

by, or re-integrated into, language as a totality (Haase & Large, 2001, p.43). Expanding on the above citation, Blanchot continues:

language does not kill anyone. But if this woman were not really capable of dying, if she were not threatened by death at every moment of her life, bound and joined to death by an essential bond, I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation, that deferred assassination which is what my language is (Blanchot, 1995, p.323).

The possibility of death, an unsurpassable limit to which no understanding can be tethered, inhabits language in its very operation, preventing the enclosure of negation within totality (Blanchot, 1995, p.324).

This force of negation is something the subject must inhabit. This forms two slopes of language. On the one hand, it is the very possibility of the subject's existence, an impersonal field of concepts that make communication possible. Yet, this field is impersonal, because language is predicated upon death, which cannot be fully experienced or encapsulated by the activities of the subject: 'our abstract language exerts upon us a constraint that separates us cruelly from ourselves – and yet we must answer for this abstraction' (Blanchot, 1993a, p.15). Escaping our grasp as a totality, language is nevertheless something which we *must* inhabit. Inhabiting language establishes a basis for communication, in which the subject that speaks attempts to cover over the negation at its heart:

We untiringly construct the world in order that the hidden dissolution, the universal corruption that governs what 'is' should be forgotten in favor of a clear and defined coherence of notions and objects, relations and forms (Blanchot, 1993a, p.33).

Language attempts to erase or master the negation of the thing, a pre-requisite of any concept. This is never successful; the two slopes of language, communication through the concept and the negation upon which this premised, exist simultaneously (Blanchot, 1995, pp.330, 338). We are put into communication by a language that we inhabit, but that is never total, for it has negation at its heart (Bruns, 1997, pp.45–49).

The ability to tap into the negative side of this duality within language is what Blanchot affirms as writing's power. For Blanchot, writing 'comes from no recognizable source, is without author or origin, and therefore always refers to something more original than itself' (Blanchot, 2000, p.10). This original reference point is the negation which forms the basis of communication, the medium through which writing operates. Language and writing are something which we inherit, in which we must speak through and exist within, but its origin is an impossibility that it cannot subsume or exhaust (Blanchot, 2003, p.205). Language refers to something that it cannot master, precisely because one speaks *through* negation (Blanchot, 1993a, p.35). This imparts to writing the possibility of affirming not merely communication, but the impossibility that underpins communication itself. Impossibility is not something exterior to language but an outside that is central to its functioning, yet irreducible to it: "impossibility" – that which escapes, without there being any means of escaping it – would be not the privilege of some exceptional experience, but behind each one' (Blanchot, 1993a, p.45). Within writing is the distinct potential for experiencing the impossible, something that is irreducible to any recuperation of negation by any dialectic or logical system. Also referred to as the neutral by Blanchot, this is something that is not just improbable, but irreducible to being itself (Blanchot, 1993a, p.76).

There are, therefore, two forms of speech or writing, both supported by one and the same language: 'One is the speech of the universe, tending toward unity and helping to accomplish the whole; the other, the speech of writing, bears a relation of infinity and strangeness' (Blanchot, 1993a, p.78). This is where the impersonal finds its full significance. The writer, as subject, is formed in language, but as writer, they dissolve this subjectivity within the impersonality of this field, stepping outside of the role of language in constructing a world, moving towards the impossible (Blanchot, 1995, pp.315–317). Yet this impossibility can never be reached by the writer, but must be constantly approached by passing from language as communication to the negativity at its centre. Writing of the book, the work that is the product of writing and the basis of literature, Blanchot states: '[t]he book that collects the mind thus collects an extreme capacity for rupture, a limitless anxiety, one that the book cannot contain' (Blanchot, 2003, pp.234–235). Writing reveals the impermanence of language by pushing its limits towards negativity. This work of writing is never finished, however, precisely because the



impossibility that it moves towards is not a full, plenary outside of language, but its very condition. As such, the negative cannot be encapsulated or reduced to language, but only approached through writing.

Blanchot is indebted to Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegel for his translation of negativity into death as an absolute, unrecoverable negation, which can help clarify the importance of the impossible in relation to both negativity and possibility. In Kojève's words, for Hegel, 'conceptual understanding of empirical reality is equivalent to a murder' (Kojève, 1969, p.140). Negativity becomes tied to the *annihilation*, rather than dialectical progression, of the world and our understanding of it (Stoekl, 2006, p.42). This also characterises Blanchot's understanding of work, which he derives from *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Blanchot, 1995, p.303). For Blanchot the literary work is the only mode through which the writer exists, but this work itself arises out of *nothing* (negativity), and does not exist until the writer begins writing. The passage Blanchot cites from Hegel to form this understanding is as follows:

An individual cannot know what he [really] is until he has made himself a reality through action. However, this seems to imply that he cannot determine the End of his action until he has carried it out; but at the same time, since he is a conscious individual, he must have the action in front of him beforehand as entirely his own, i.e., as an End (Hegel, 1977, p.240)

For Hegel this paradox marks a dialectical relation between the individual and their ends that is mediated by the negativity at the beginning of the act. Here, negativity is a condition of the *possibility* of individual ends. Blanchot radicalises this relation between negativity and possibility by attesting to the failure of this movement between negation and the possible, precisely because negation relies on something that cannot be incorporated into a logical system of possibility: *the impossible*. While the negative can be subsumed within the thought of the possible, the impossible is 'a thought not allowing itself to be thought in the mode of appropriative comprehension' (Blanchot, 1993a, p.43). Impossibility is not simply the improbable or that which negates the probable: it inhabits the negative in such a way that negation *itself* cannot be comprehended in full. This is precisely why the work does

not simply unfold an idea, but that this idea is made possible by the essential incompleteness that impossibility gives to it (Bruns, 1997, pp.40–42; Iyer, 2004, pp.35–42).

This constantly unfinished *work* of writing, the work of literature, has a threefold significance. Language's origin is the impossible, but this origin is a *non-origin*, an origin that can never come to light or be reduced to the concept. Language cannot name what it lacks (Blanchot, 1995, p.328). The writer does not contact this impossibility through their own genius, but rather, '[t]he writer only finds himself, only realises himself, through his work; before his work exists, not only does he not know who he is, but he is nothing' (Blanchot, 1995, p.303). One is only a writer when writing, but this is not a purely subjective leap into an impersonal field to encounter the impossible. Instead, it is what Michel Foucault referred to as a 'power of dissimulation', that subjectivity of the writer is given up in the act of writing (Foucault, 1987, p.57). The writer is compelled to work by the act of writing itself, which has always already begun due to language's character as an impersonal field within which the writer exists: 'one writes only if one reaches that instant which nevertheless one can only approach in the space opened by the movement of writing. To write, one has to write already' (Blanchot, 1989, p.176). Lastly, this is not a purely negative or pejorative encounter with an origin that is irreducible to representation in language. Instead, Blanchot asks the question: 'how does rebeginning – the non-origin of all that begins – found a beginning?' (Blanchot, 1993a, p.249). His answer is that language that touches or speaks of this impossible origin is 'prophetic', not in the sense of proscribing a future, but rather in testifying to a future that is irreducible to the current conditions of the possible. This 'forces whoever is listening to tear himself away from his own present in order to come to himself as someone who is not yet' (Blanchot, 2000, pp.14–15). What Blanchot testifies to is that in literature, writing, and speech there exists a dual tendency. The creation of a world of communication from negation, which itself rests upon the power of the impossible to suspend these relations, pointing towards something utterly inconceivable.

***Blanchot's Influence on Stiegler's Philosophy of Technics***

This marks the significance of the epigraph to *Technics and Time* which Stiegler takes from *The Infinite Conversation*. We do not know when we are at a turning point, precisely because we cannot reduce to a single concept the moment at which certainty breaks into this impersonal and impossible negation. Yet, we must begin from *somewhere*. This moment is experienced from *within* a particular field, rather than as a pure experience of the origin of language. For Blanchot, this impossibility of experience of negation is the origin of the work (be this literature, poetry or art), but can only be experienced through the beginning the production of the work itself (Blanchot, 1989, p.171). Stiegler's emphasis on this point through the use of the citation from the *Infinite Conversation* at the beginning of *Technics and Time*, marks the importance of these two themes for his work. The indetermination of a turning point always arises from the determination of particular context, and the process of working *through* that context. The negation of being that is expressed through the work of writing is transformed by Stiegler into the very condition of the human being in general, as a lack of essence that can only be experienced through technicity, which both forms and transforms human existence.

The first key influence that Blanchot has on Stiegler is the notion of an origin that must be experienced, but cannot be experienced in itself. This is foundational for the concept of the default of origin. Humanity is characterised by a lack of essence or characteristics apart from its use of technical objects. The human does not exist outside of its technical supports, which means this default must continually unfold through the history of technical objects, without exhausting this originary condition. Humanity has no essence other than this supplementary or prosthetic being (Stiegler, 1998, pp.172–173). This concept is introduced in the first volume of *Technics and Time*, as the *aporia* through which the origin of the human must be thought. Humanity's origin is aporetic because we can only think it from the perspective of a technically structured context. This historical perspective prevents the reduction of the origin to a particular temporal moment, as it is always understood from within a technical, impersonal field. The default is that which must be experienced, through technics, but can never be reduced to experience.<sup>iv</sup> Stiegler makes references to Blanchot to conceive of this origin as something that must be experienced yet cannot be encapsulated. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot refers to the origin of experience as 'frightfully ancient, lost in the night of time. It is the origin which always

precedes us and is always given before us, for it is the approach of what allows us to depart' (Blanchot, 1989, p.229). For Stiegler, the absence of essence in the technical condition leads to the consideration of this origin: '[t]he question is the origin, the principle, the most ancient, "the frightfully ancient," Blanchot would say' (Stiegler, 1998, p.108).<sup>v</sup> Elsewhere, Stiegler refers to this frightfully ancient condition of the origin as the 'absolute past, towards that which accumulated memory sends us' (Stiegler, 2009b, p.68). All accumulated memory, as technics, is that through which the origin is experienced, not *as* the origin, but as its constant putting to work in technical objects. Technics structures human existence, while constantly pointing towards the impossibility of reducing this existence to any final form.

It is worth noting here the specificity of what Stiegler means when he refers to technics. He does not simply regard it as technology, but rather something fundamental about human existence that makes technology possible. It is foundational for human experience: '[a]ll human action has something to do with *tekhnē*' (Stiegler, 1998, p.94). Technics refers to the gestures and tools which form human experience. Crucially, these techniques are *forms of memory*. In addition to biological memory (genetic), and the memory of the individual subject (epigenetic), technics forms a third form of memory which Stiegler terms epiphylogenetic. This is a form of exteriorised memory, which enables the individual to pass on its experience beyond death to other individuals. This does not mean that the interior functions of psychic individual are merely externalised in technical objects; interior and exterior co-constitute each other in 'an ordinary complex in which the two terms, far from being opposed, compose with one another' (Stiegler, 1998, p.152). Technical memory is the very condition of the human, as an impersonal field of memories in which individuals are produced. Forming human capacities, technics refer to the various forms of memory, gesture and techniques which form the envelope in which the human is formed across time. We cannot reduce this relationship to a single moment of origin because we conceive of this origin from *within* this complex, opening up this impersonal field to its transformation by participation within it.

Blanchot's image of the writer being written by the act of writing takes on a particular significance for Stiegler here. The work creates the writer, there is no writer without the work: '[t]he writer only finds

himself, only realizes himself, through his work; before his work exists, not only does he not know who he is, but he is nothing' (Blanchot, 1995, p.303). For Stiegler the human is nothing outside of its immersion within a particular technical system. In a passage where Stiegler comments extensively on the above citation from Blanchot, we find that '[w]hat is true of the person who writes is true of humanity in general *qua* an organism that invents and produces. This question of writing is nothing but a radicalization of that of the memory of the human' (Stiegler, 1998, pp.264–265). Technics, as an extension of writing, is the work which humanity participates in, producing itself in an ongoing process of anthropogenesis. For Blanchot, writing is connected to work and to history in a constant process of transformation:

if we see work as the force of history, the force that transforms man while it transforms the world...what is a writer doing when he writes? Everything a man does when he works, but to an outstanding degree. The writer, too, produces something – a work in the highest sense of the word....[w]hen he writes, his starting point is a certain state of language, a certain form of culture, certain books, and also certain objective elements – ink, paper, printing presses (Blanchot, 1995, pp.313–314).

Participating in the work of writing does not merely manipulate the slope of language that tends towards communication, pointing it towards negation. More importantly, it uses this negation to transform the system of language itself. The conclusion Stiegler draws from this passage is that '[t]o work is to forget the self, to let one's other be-but an other who is not a self, nor one's own, but quite other....This other is at the heart of the idiom' (Stiegler, 1998, p.265). By participating in the system of technical traces formed of the memory of others, one transforms this system, as it has no 'neutral' version by which one can come to know it. Not only does the writer lose themselves in language in the act of writing, all human action is predicated upon the double sense of technics, and that immersing oneself in this work opens up the impossible.

Writing is considered as one particular technique by Stiegler, rather than a general term through which to understand the process of differentiation. It is one, historical form in which the default of origin is expressed in technics. The impersonal field which Blanchot attributes to language and the form of

work that writing represents are re-articulated in a process of historical differentiation. The impersonal is transformed according to the particular technical objects that constitute it. What Stiegler argues, beyond Blanchot, is that the impersonal is a question of *technics* rather than merely writing and language. Stiegler refers to a passage in Blanchot's essay 'The Beast of Lascaux', from which this interpretation can be understood clearly:

the impersonal knowledge of the book...does not ask to be guaranteed by the thought of any one person, since this is never true and can never constitute itself as truth only a world inhabited by all and by virtue of such a world. *Any such body of knowledge is bound to the development of technology in all its forms, and it treats speech, and writing, as technology* (Blanchot, 2000, p.9).<sup>vi</sup>

We have seen one element presented here already, that the impersonal knowledge of the impossible only arises *through* language. But Stiegler emphasizes Blanchot's reference to technology: 'impersonalization...belongs to a history of the gaze in which the book constitutes a specific "stage"...[a]n impersonal knowledge, an authority without an author, inheres in writing as technics' (Stiegler, 2009a, p.132). Technics structures the existence of human groups, constituting the forms that the impersonal field takes. One might argue that Blanchot's editing of instances of the term 'speech' to 'writing' in the republication of his older texts in collected form around the 1970's, in what Derrida identifies as general recognition of the logocentric problems of speech, is continued by Stiegler's further translation of writing to technics (Derrida, 1998, pp.61-2).<sup>vii</sup> Where Blanchot refers to writing and language as founded on negation, Stiegler refers to all forms of human technicity as containing the impossible default of origin within it. Taking on this frightful origin and making it the condition of technics as a pre-individual, impersonal field means that the process of human history 'must be as interminable as the future is improbable' (Stiegler, 2009a, p.132).

The consequence of this reading of Blanchot is that there is no human outside of the work as a body of impersonal memory; there is no humanity outside of technics. By transposing his theory of literature onto technicity Stiegler claims that it concerns the human as a form of work. This is central to Stiegler's reading of Blanchot, but is found buried in a note in volume two of *Technics and Time*. Here Stiegler states that he is concerned with:

the question of the human qua invention, or, as Blanchot says, of (the) work. The first human's tool is already and essentially memory: the memory of human gestures – bequeathed to others beyond any individual life. Thus, to go beyond a single life (animal memory) is to enter into death (Stiegler, 2011a, p.256 n.46).

The impossibility of possibility that the anticipation of death signifies in Blanchot is experienced only from within a particular technical system. Anticipation of death is the source of technics, as memory supports that transmit memory beyond the death of the individual subject, but technics is also the condition of the anticipation of death, as the determined field through which the experience of the indeterminate is experienced. This is established primarily through a reading of Heidegger (Stiegler, 1998, pp.239–278), but reaches full significance in the consideration of Stiegler's use of Blanchot. The technical invention of the human is structured around the impossibility of closure, which arises from the question of the *origin* as the perpetual experience of the impossibility of finality within human life. The default of origin is the question of a past that is irreducible to any empirically verifiable event, an origin that must be repeated within a technical structure for it to be thinkable. It is this concept, propped up by reference to Blanchot, that is present across Stiegler's work, from the first volume of *Technics and Time* (Stiegler, 1998, p.108) to *Automatic Society* (Stiegler, 2016, p.115). Whereas for Blanchot it is the 'literary space that alone enables this encounter, the transitional space of reading and writing', for Stiegler this is transformed into a technical space, of which it is impossible to finally locate an origin (Stiegler, 2012a, p.71).

Consequently, this displacement of the origin via the impersonal structure of technics means the impossible must always occur *through* the technical. Technics structures human existence by situating humans within technical systems, but these organisations harbour the impossible and the incalculable

within them. Determination is the condition of indetermination; it is only by way of the passage through the impersonal technical milieu that structures our existence that it is possible to create something new, placing the issue of reproducibility and technicization as *primary* (Stiegler, 1998, p.219; Derrida & Stiegler, 2002, p.89). Human existence is characterised by the relationships formed by the passing on of externalised and impersonal knowledges, and how they are transformed in the process. (Stiegler, 2014c, p.99, 2015b, p.216). Transmission of experience *demand*s a dialogical and never exact repetition as it cannot be reduced to a neutral substratum. This refuses both the solution of the problem of the origin, and the finality of concepts or particular modes of existence.

It is this constant re-interpretation of how the origin is put into existence in technical supports that Stiegler turns to in his conceptions of politics. This is reliant upon his more general understanding of technics as a *pharmakon*. Drawing on Plato's *Phaedrus* and Derrida's reading of this in 'Plato's Pharmacy' (Derrida, 1981), Stiegler conceives of technicity as both a poison and a cure. In Stiegler's reading, for Plato, via Socrates, writing is designated as merely an aid to memory, rather than a form of memory itself, and as such raises the question of its distinction from philosophical thought proper in order to prevent it weakening the capacity for philosophy (Stiegler, 2013a, p.25; Plato, 1997, p.551 274e-275a). In Derrida's deconstruction of this argument, by tracing the polyvalence of the term '*pharmakon*' throughout the dialogue (a single term for cure, drug, and potion), he argues that writing is both the condition of memory and also that which can weaken it. Stiegler develops Derrida's argument from one regarding the place of writing as 'arche-writing', or the condition of differentiation that underpins all logical systematicity, to a logic of differentiation that can only be experienced through *specific* technical objects. Technics is curative in that it can engender autonomy through the transformation of a shared technical system, and forms the basis of the creation of practices and institutions which foster critical engagement. Despite their ability to form critical rationality, as *pharmaka*, technical objects can externalise social practice and individual capacities without the opportunity for critical re-interiorisation and transformation (Stiegler, 2013a, pp.116–117). The *pharmakon* is that which mediates the relationship to the default, in that it provides the opportunity



for the singularisation of the technical, impersonal field, while also containing a tendency towards preventing this process.

The slant that the reading of Blanchot adds to this understanding of the *pharmakon* is that its two tendencies correspond to the two slopes of language, situating a positive and negative tendency within each. The slope that tends towards communication is pharmacologically curative in that technics forms a world within which dialogical, social interaction can take place (Stiegler, 2013a, p.20). Equally, this slope can induce a levelling process by which externalised forms of memory are not re-internalised, reducing the activities of the individual to communication without singularisation and transformation (Stiegler, 2013a, p.53). The slope that tends towards the impossible can be pharmacologically positive, in that it dis-connects and disindividuates a particular technical system, providing a perspective from which to transform it. Equally, this disindividuation can engender an impossibility to create *new* social circuits from these technical contexts, engendering a form of diachronisation without return. The challenge of the impossible that underpins the technical, is to navigate these pharmacological tendencies in order to induce process of dis-individuation and re-individuation, a process of work within which all are potentially included (Barker, 2013).

The impossible plays a central role in Stiegler's work, particularly in *Automatic Society*, because it allows him to conceive of a way in which the tendency towards transformation created by the default of origin can be differentiated by plurality of technical systems and pharmacological problems. This focus on the relationship between specific pharmacological objects and their relation to the impossible allows a distinction to be made between Stiegler's use of the impossible and the improbable. He is concerned with moments of improbability that are underpinned by the impossible, rather than a theorisation of the impossible itself. Stiegler initially refers to the improbable as a law of indetermination insofar as it underpins all fact: 'there *can always be an exception...* to the *majority* of facts, even to the *vast majority* of facts, that is, to virtually all of them, an exception that *invalidates them in law*....This is what...we will call, alongside Yves Bonnefoy and Maurice Blanchot, the *improbable*' (Stiegler, 2016, pp.2–3). Stiegler's reference to Bonnefoy here is with regards to

Blanchot's own discussion of the improbable in light of his poetry (Blanchot, 1993a, pp.41–43). This discussion of Bonnefoy by Blanchot is beyond our purposes here, but we can understand Stiegler's use of the improbable without this detail. Its importance is that Stiegler is concerned with how any technically supported system of fact relies upon the indetermination of the consistencies it supports. Any determined technical system is the condition of the indeterminacy of law, and can be re-interpreted and transformed through work. This duality between fact and law is used by Stiegler to argue that it is only law, as a fictional projection from a particular state of fact, that maintains the unity of any political project.

What is significant in this first mention of the improbable with reference to Blanchot is the absence of the impossible, whereas this appears later on in a crucial passage of *Automatic Society*. Stiegler introduces *both* the impossible and the improbable to explain how what he calls algorithmic governmentality attempts to eliminate the impossible conditions of probability that Blanchot sees as beyond calculation.<sup>viii</sup> This form of governance is characterised by the use of automated technologies to pre-empt and calculate all aspects of life, adapting markets and products in order to pre-empt, and thus render predictable, human behaviour. Stiegler's critique is that:

the digital technology of power appears to be invincible, because the power of the algorithmic systems seems to be *literally and structurally imperturbable* –β imperturbable *by the improbable*, which must be understood in a sense that does not simply refer to what mathematical calculation and modelling cannot *prove*, that is, certify beyond what would be merely probable, but in the sense of what always escapes any calculation, any probability and demonstration (Stiegler, 2016, pp.115-16).

Improbability is mobilised in a critique of technologies that disavow the structural role that the impossible plays in human life. Hence, 'algorithmic governmentality disintegrates in advance any intermittence, and therefore liquidates the impossible (unpredictable and unanticipatable) possibility of the improbable' (Stiegler, 2016, p.116). This section has a wider consequence for our reading of Stiegler's work in the context of Blanchot, in that it reveals that Stiegler is more concerned with the *improbable* than the *impossible*. Improbability arises for Stiegler because the default that underpins

the technical milieu we exist in renders it unperceivable, necessary, and contingent all at the same time. Improbability refers to the intermittent moments where the impossibility at the heart of technics, represented by the default of origin, is revealed. For Blanchot ‘impossibility is nothing other than the mark of what we so readily call experience, for there is experience in the strict sense only where something radically other is in play’ (Blanchot, 1993a, p.46). Stiegler’s shift towards the improbable is a result of his claim that we only experience impossibility *through* a particular technical system. Consequently, it would be accurate to say that Stiegler is more explicitly concerned with a politics of the *improbable*, but this is more productively rendered as a politics of the *impossible* to emphasise the influence Blanchot has on making the former position thinkable. That is, a politics of the impossible focuses on the specific practices of the improbable by which probability and impossibility meet.

Stiegler’s focus on the improbable directs our attention to how he taps into a latent anthropological tendency within Blanchot. This is particularly evident with regards to the sacred. For Stiegler, the impossible only arises from concrete, determined technical practices of the improbable, which the indeterminate suspends and transforms through participation. As Kevin Hart has argued, this power derives from Blanchot’s transformation of the divine into the sacred as the impossible. One must ‘call the sacred a condition of impossibility: it interrupts any attempt to freeze the present and render it permanent’ (Hart, 2004, p.100). In the context of Hölderlin’s poetry, Blanchot writes of the sacred that it concerns the ‘[i]mpossible, the reconciliation of the Sacred with speech demanded that the poet’s existence come nearest to nonexistence’ (Blanchot, 1995, p.131). For Stiegler, this irreconcilability of the sacred with present speech is only possible through the *support* of the sacred through ritual. The sacred exists because it arises from a technically supported pre-individual fund of language, and that the concepts which organize this language are subject to the law of the impossible. In Christianity, for example, ‘such practices...affirm that it is only in this world, and through this way of living, that it is possible to confirm, precisely, the eternity of love and...the love of God’ (Stiegler, 2013b, p.111). While his reference to Christianity on this point has led some commentators to interpret Stiegler’s politics in terms of Christian liturgy (Du Toit & Loubser, 2016; Roussow, 2016), he should be seen to be making a more general point about the indetermination of belief and its reliance upon techniques.

The sacred refers, for Stiegler, to the practices which support the *consistence* of ideas beyond purely religious practice. It is these sacred objects that are consistencies, that direct communication, and are always dialogical and irreducible to presence. This emphasis on supports pushes Stiegler towards a stronger consideration of the improbable, which is incorporated *within* a system of possibility, rather than the impossible itself.

As such, the connection of the sacred back to ritual demonstrates that in Stiegler's use of Blanchot it is only through particular practices of 'writing', or technics, that communication and its transformation can be established. Dialogical communication occurs around particular ideal objects or consistencies, which can never be reduced to a final understanding, but still require a synchronic milieu to occur within (Stiegler, 2010b, p.5). Ritual support of the sacred thus derives from processes of trans-individuation, and mark the moments where consistence is transformed; moments of *improbability* that rely on a constitutive *impossibility* (Stiegler, 2015c, p.72).<sup>ix</sup> Rather than focusing on the impossible as the sacred, Stiegler's concern is with the *different* ways in which consistencies are cultivated, and therefore accounting for how this impossible basis of communication is supported in varying societies, groups and organisations (Stiegler, 2010c, p.180, 2012b, p.3). All ideas and concepts are supported by these processes of collective existence, 'spanning the life of a society, inscribing "cosmic rhythms" in it through symbolic rituals' (Stiegler, 2011a, p.216). There is no society, no filiation without the of adoption of these shared consistences, but equally this cannot be considered as a homogenization, as the impossible is what creates the 'link between synchronization and exception relative to the *We*, the diachronization and exception of the *I*' (Stiegler, 2011a, p.100). The impossible is the very condition of shared communication, as in Blanchot, but also that which mobilises it. The significance of this anthropology of the impossible is its pharmacological extension. This charts the way in which the approach towards the impossible represented by the sacred can be reduced to dogma which synchronises without criticism, and dis-individuates without re-connection with social existence. The pharmacological character of technics prevents the possibility of upholding the impossible within the determined. The determined and the undetermined are combined in a critique of

the *pharmakon*: only pharmacologically curative practices make space for the impossible. Or in other words, the power to disautomate the automatic, synchronic practices that constitute any coupling between the human and the technical (Stiegler, 2016, pp.69–72). It is this focus on the milieu of *specific* practices that directs Stiegler's attention to the improbable over the impossible.

The specific, anthropological context and practice in question in *Automatic Society* is the rise of automation in the Western world, and its consequences for the notions of work, employment and culture. As noted above, Stiegler argues that the rise of automated technologies and the prediction of social behaviours through algorithms reduces life to a series of calculable outcomes. This eradicates the space for the impossible, precisely because it *cannot* be reduced to any logical system or set of possibilities. It is important to note that Stiegler is *not* opposing calculation and the impossible, for indetermination is only possible from within a particular, technically determined impersonal field of possibility. Instead, he is arguing pharmacologically: there are synchronic practices that make space for the impossibility of the diachronic, and there are synchronic practices which eradicate this space, and forms of diachrony that do not allow the possibility for re-socialisation in new forms of synchrony. This possibility is not an aberration, but arises through the default of origin itself: '[t]he default is the *pharmakon*, which is the origin of the relation (which Blanchot ultimately tried to think in terms of the relation without relation), as this impossible and improbable possibility that is the originary default of origin' (Stiegler, 2016, p.119). What is a question of the status of writing and literature in Blanchot, becomes tied to a general understanding of indeterminacy within technics, mobilised within a critique of calculation in the contemporary.

This is most clear in Stiegler's distinction between *work* and *employment*. Work, in the manner that Blanchot understands it, is a practice of the improbable which the intermittently puts the impossible into movement. Participation in work is not merely the exchange of time and labour for remuneration, but an encounter with indetermination, reached through not just writing, but the engagement with

techniques more broadly understood. The notion of work as labour is what Stiegler refers to as employment, which can be reduced to the calculation of inputs, outputs and profits which are the domain of the determined and the probable. The distinction between work and employment lies in the dissolution of certainty that work implies, in the possibility for the critique and construction of *new* forms of knowledge through the engagement with the pre-individual field of technicity. In this regard, Stiegler actively tries to rethinking the concept of critique beyond the frame of metaphysics, taking it as a form of invention that draws on and transforms existing materials (Stiegler, 2010a, p.15). Work, as this practice of the impossible, is in some form the condition of all social existence (Stiegler, 2016, pp.173–177). Stiegler’s concern is that today the dual tendency towards increasing automation of employment, which diminishes work, and the replacement of employment by automation, requires the re-thinking of economics in order to put contribution, rather than profit, at its centre. This notion of contribution, as the transformation of synchronic, pre-individual and impersonal systems of knowledge, is indebted to Blanchot’s notion of the impossible. This debt is articulated through a focus upon the specific practices of the improbable in which the impossible comes to light.

### ***Impossibility, Resistance, and Invention***

It is not our aim to consider this notion of economics in full, but it serves as an example of how Stiegler’s use of Blanchot underpins his more general political project.<sup>x</sup> This is one that attempts to reconcile two apparently contradictory aims. On the one hand, the need to make space for the indeterminacy of the default of origin, in order to allow the construction of a future as the establishment of a state of law from a particular state of fact. On the other, that the very construction of this space requires a broad ranging and overarching approach to politics, which is industrial in scope. It is this tension that makes clear the shift in focus from impossibility to improbability, for Stiegler fights the romantic tendency to associate the impossible *itself* with any political goal. In conclusion, we can note three ramifications of the above discussion of Stiegler’s adoption of Blanchot’s work. The first is philosophical, and regards a renewed interest in the notion of the negative. This arises from the extension of the role of the negative in Blanchot’s underpinning of the dialogical nature of coexistence.

The second is that Stiegler's use of the impossible creates a gap between Blanchot's own resistance centred politics and Stiegler's focus on invention, the latter being more closely related to the improbable. The third concerns this relationship between improbability and impossibility as it applies to Stiegler's response to post-structuralism, which implicates Blanchot's notion of impossibility within systemic forms of political action.

First, while Stiegler states that in his thought reason is non-dialectical, and that we must distinguish unification (as a movement or process where tendencies are composed) from dialectical totalisation, there is a role for the negative to play in the influence that Blanchot has on Stiegler (Stiegler, 2015b, p.101). This can be noted in that Stiegler sees the significance of Hegelian dialectics in its positing of the process of spirit and of individuation as a process by which the subject finds its constitution in a movement *outside itself* (Stiegler, 2015b, pp.106–107). The subject can only become itself by internalising the system of technical objects, but without exhausting the possibilities of this impersonal field. By interpreting the dialectic as a process that is un-totalisable, or un-sublatable, Stiegler sees in dialectical reasoning the beginnings of a *pharmacological negativity* (Stiegler, 2015b, p.129). If Stiegler's understanding of technicity is derived from Blanchot, then there is a role for the negative in the *pharmakon*, not as dialectical necessity, but as the process by which the subject is ineluctably put outside of itself with which it must come to terms with. It is this negativity that is the basis of the impossible collapse of certainty into something new, or the pharmacological eradication of capacities. Negation is not dialectical, but either inventive or destructive of invention. Stiegler's reading of Blanchot signals a reconsideration of the negative beyond its rejection more broadly by the milieu of 20<sup>th</sup> century French thought that Stiegler emerges from, by reconsidering the impossibility that mobilises it yet cannot be reduced to it (Noys, 2010).

Second, Stiegler conjoins the more abstract notions of undecidability and indetermination with a focus on the anthropological determinants of these processes. This allows us to return to the difference between the politics of Blanchot and Stiegler. The latter's contextualisation of the impossible within the improbable requires focusing on how the relationship between humanity and technics produces

different spaces for practices of indeterminacy, and how these practices fit into a particular pharmacological context. This leads to Stiegler to advocate a politics of invention, centred on developing new social practices, technologies and policies to facilitate the practice of the improbable. Where Stiegler *grounds* his political thought in the impossible, the later Blanchot makes the impossible and its resistance to the present the *goal* to be pursued. Writing of the events of May 1968 Blanchot refers to the barricading of the Sorbonne as ‘an “exemplary act”’ precisely because it made space for action that ‘goes beyond itself while coming from very far away, superseding itself and in an instant, with a shattering suddenness, exploding its limits’ (Blanchot, 1993b, pp.98–99). In other words, a form of action not constrained by the law of the possible. In contrast to this politics of *resistance*, Stiegler’s politics seeks to *invent* practices of the improbable from within structural limits. Politics should not affirm indeterminacy, singularity, or the impossible *in themselves*, but must be tied to the project of both critiquing and producing synchronic institutions and practices which make room for impossibility through their practice of the improbable.

Third, Stiegler’s reading of Blanchot forms part of his critical relationship with the post-structuralist tradition that he both utilises and breaks from (Stiegler, 2013c, 2013d). For post-structuralism, Blanchot plays a significant role in consolidating the importance of singularity and dissimulation over large scale systematic politics (Deleuze, 2006, p.8).<sup>xi</sup> Instead, for Stiegler the impossible is a condition of politics but it is not a good in itself. This is precisely why he advocates invention over resistance for focusing on the impossible alone leads to a ‘*renunciation of invention*’ (Stiegler, 2016, p.177). Careful consideration of how the impossible arises from the specific pharmacological tendencies of the technical is required in order to ensure the descent into the impersonal can be tethered to pharmacologically curative social practices. Considering the role of the impossible within practices of the improbable prevents these states of fact from being naturalised, and reveals the contingency of human existence at the same time as providing a way of transforming it through an engagement with, rather than a rejection of, technics. Political thought must attempt to subsist within this tension between the negation inherent in the impossible, and the systematicity needed to cultivate it. It is the focus on this tension that shifts Stiegler from the impossible to the improbable.



In the context of European and Anglo-American politics this requires taking into account the role that the culture industry, automation, and the transformation of employment has upon the *possibility* for the practice of the impossible that Stiegler identifies with the improbable. Systemic transformation of political, educational, and social structures is required in order to allow the development of practices of the improbable that harbour the impossible. The time for the impossible must be *produced* to guarantee any viable future political project. The agent of this politics of the impossible, in contrast to the resisting subject that post-structuralism develops from Blanchot, is a subject that partakes in inventing structures that condition practices of the impossible. In Stiegler's work, this takes place through diverse programs that include supporting a form of Universal Basic Income and founding a doctoral school to promote contributory research. Crucially, this engagement takes place in a dialogue with, rather than a rejection of, existing structures of political power in France. While it is a question worth posing, what is at stake here is not whether this constitutes a reformism (Bunyard, 2012). Rather, it is that Stiegler's attempt to break with post-structuralism occurs within his reading of Blanchot, and his codification of the exigency of the impossible within structures of the improbable. For Stiegler, the technical condition demands that the agent of the future is no longer to be found in the fragmentary and unforeseen resistances of the present, but in the deliberate invention of structures that contain this impossibility within practices of the improbable.

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<sup>i</sup> The translation in the first volume of *Technics and Time* differs slightly to the translated version of Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation*, which reads:

Will you allow as a certainty that we are at a turning point?

- If it is a certainty it is not a turning. The fact of our belonging to this moment at which a change of epoch, if there is one, is being accomplished also takes hold of the certain knowledge that would want to determine it, making both certainty and uncertainty inappropriate. Never are we less able to get around ourselves than at such a moment, and the discrete force of the turning point lies first in this (Blanchot, 1993a, p.264).

<sup>ii</sup> Exceptions include the anonymously authored pamphlets distributed during May 1968, and the later work *The Unavowable Community* (Blanchot, 1988).

<sup>iii</sup> See: <http://arsindustrialis.org>.

<sup>iv</sup> The English translation of *Technics and Time* renders Stigler's use of the term *défaut* as default in order to capture the polyvalent sense he attributes it with (lack, defect, mistake, failure), and to distinguish it from the use of the concept of lack in 20<sup>th</sup> century French thought. See the translators note in *The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stiegler, 1998, p.280 n.12).

<sup>v</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>vi</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>vii</sup> I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this reference to my attention.

<sup>viii</sup> Stiegler takes this term from the work of Thomas Berns and Antoinette Rouvroy (2013).

<sup>ix</sup> While there is not room to expand on this here, Stiegler's understanding of the value of the sacred also draws upon George Bataille's notions of expenditure and general economy (Stiegler, 2016, p.21).

<sup>x</sup> See *For a New Critique of Political Economy* for Stiegler's most extensive engagement with economics (2010a).

<sup>xi</sup> It is within this disagreement with post-structuralism that Stiegler develops his understanding of ideology (Turner, 2017).

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