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Context Collapse

Packet-Switching Grief

 I said goodbye to my father over a WhatsApp video call in October 2019. He was connected to a ventilator and they were about to pronounce him deceased in an east coast U.S. hospital, as I sat in my home in Ireland over 3,000 miles away. It all happened so suddenly; I was unable to get a flight in time to be there in person for this moment. We had chatted regularly over WhatsApp before that day. Weekly, we would communicate through glitched video and broken sound, sharing the ins and outs of our daily lives. These once magical tools of communication, now commonplace, have enabled us to develop a closeness despite our geographic distance. I never thought I would have to share such an intimate moment—a final goodbye—over livestreamed video.

There was something that felt not quite right about this experience, something inappropriate but also affectively provocative in the desire to connect. Many networked communications technologies are based on packet switching, which is a process of transmission where data is broken down into chunks or packets for more efficient transfer. Originally, it was developed as part of ARPANET, the precursor for the Internet, during the Cold War to decentralize transmissions of data (Baran 1964; Abbate 1999). In this instance, in addition to being the literal means of our connection, it also became a metaphor for my experience of grief, a grief so large it must be broken down into smaller packets to be processed. My poor Internet

connection meant that the video was blocky and glitched. I could see my father lying in the hospital bed, though the image translated into chunks of pixels that froze intermittently. At that moment, I felt even further away from him and my family, as the ability to stream over video through this obscured image highlighted our geographic separation (Hunter 2019). It was a sensory encounter of moving image that was also a technologically mediated significant life (and death) event. Finally, I switched to calling over our household landline so my voice was only broken up by cries rather than digital interference.

Not long after this experience, the world entered a period of collective change and grief with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Around the globe, people experienced parallel moments of drastic loss as systems altered in response to this novel form of the coronavirus. This pandemic has instigated a paradigm shift in public health policy, national governance, engagement with digital technologies, sensors and data collection, social and community development, and individual being. Starting in March 2020, restrictions were placed on geographic movement as it became common for governments around the globe to implement stay-in-place orders, since limiting person-to-person contact was found to be effective in stalling the spread of the virus. A general trend throughout this time was that group events that previously would take place in-person transitioned to livestreamed video. This included types of engagement from various social realms of activity, such as classes, lectures, and other forms of presentation; music, dance, theatre, and other performing arts; job interviews and work meetings; drinking sessions, quiz nights, and family gatherings; and the streaming of funerals and other collective rituals. Suddenly my personal experience of packet-switching grief became common place.

The Great Pivot

In short, when the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020, digital technologies provided the solution to our synchronous contact needs.

For years now, video livestreaming has enabled visual and aural communication while maintaining physical distancing. Though it did not become widespread until the 2010s, when increased access to web cameras, improved computer hardware, and higher Internet bandwidth enabled the necessary data sharing capacities for this type of communication, the desire to connect through real-time moving image existed in the shared imagination. The 1989 film *Back to the Future II*, set in the year 2015, shows video calls as a regular part of life. Unlike Hover Boards that never materialized as envisioned, technological developments during the twenty-first century, including the advent of the smartphone in 2007 and the capacity to connect to the Internet over cellular networks, have made the ability to communicate live through video omnipresent.

As a performance artist working with digital technologies, when the Covid-19 pandemic began I was intrigued by the capacities of livestreaming and how I could approach this mode of communication as an artistic medium. Livestreaming is appealing because of its real-time contact, the ability to connect with other human beings synchronously while in different locations. Even though video and performance are integral parts of my practice as an artist, I had yet to experiment with live broadcasting. During the first weeks of the pandemic, I watched other artists engage with streaming over social media through performances, informal studio visits to watch someone work on a painting or sculpture, or broadcasting conversations about what it means to produce art in the time of Covid-19, which Irish gallery director and filmmaker Matthew Nevin did in a series called "Matt's Chats" in response to the artistic and social isolation of that time (Nevin 2020). When I staged my first livestreamed performance in April 2020, I was excited about the possibilities. At this point, we had already been in lockdown for about a month. I was coping with our confined context through video—documenting features of my home environment that I otherwise would overlook on a daily basis: the way shadows changed throughout the day, time lapse footage of the garden, and anything that piqued my interest and seemed worth capturing. As I became more familiar with the

details of my immediate environment, I longed for the social connections the Internet brings. Livestreaming provided an option to present live performance work, forging a connection with those beyond the home while engaging in artistic activity.

In anticipation of the broadcast, I posted a notification on my various social media accounts, making friends and followers aware of the upcoming performance. I wanted to include some of the videos I had been producing, so for the action, I decided to interact with a video projected onto tracing paper, creating a sort of shadow play that was reminiscent of what I had been documenting around my home. I began the performance, feeling the thrill of the live moment—a sensation I had not experienced in quite some time. There is a rush of adrenaline that accompanies this type of artistic production, where the uncertainty of outcome is intertwined through action, material, context, and witness. As I performed for the camera, breaking up the projected image with the shadows of flowers, I watched familiar names join my stream. Unlike the live performance scenarios in the gallery, where audience members attune to the presented actions for a period of time, I noticed that many of these people who had joined—friends and people I have performed for numerous times—soon left. Watching the playback from the performance, I saw that early on the stream froze, stuck on a single frame for several minutes. Even prior to that technical malfunction, I observed that my actions, which I valued for their subtlety, did not translate well onto the broadcast medium. Time and space are experienced differently through the framing of the camera and the screen—the performed actions that may have proved successful within a gallery context failed when presented as a livestream. Shooting the projected video, which created refracted bands of red, blue, and green when I observed it through my smartphone's screen, compressed poorly through Instagram's platform, appearing as muddy bands. I was disappointed, but also embarrassed at the poor quality of the attempt.

What was striking about the Covid-19 pandemic was not so much the general shift to streaming technologies as a means of synchro-

nous engagement, but the desire to mimic and replicate in-person interactions through technological channels. A term that was used a great deal at the onset of the pandemic was pivot, indicating a rapid change in direction while in motion. To pivot means to rotate or to turn, implying a shift in momentum, but not to stop. That is, digital technologies like livestreaming were engaged with in ways to retain motion during this period of great change. Such types of relations are invariably different, as livestreaming involves mediation by technical objects that create new milieux. Despite these differences, which can be felt through the phenomenological experiences of streaming, there is an ongoing sense of denial that is affiliated with livestreaming—as if the screen can simply take the place of other forms of person-to-person engagement. Stating these differences is not meant to treat livestreaming as an inferior means of communication. Instead, acknowledging how livestreaming is different brings attention to how we engage with these technologies, drawing out possibilities for new modes of connection and access, while also highlighting the forms of restriction and control that are mechanically feasible. It is these factors of difference that serve as the impetus for the current book: how can a study of livestreaming as an aesthetic and ethical encounter enable us to acknowledge the differences that livestreaming introduces to social engagement? How does this impact our relations through and with technical objects? How can we draw from these experiences in order to cultivate novel ecosystems with technologies?

Central to this approach is the understanding that livestreaming functions as a distinctive means of communication and artistic production informed through its technological parameters. Here livestreaming is treated phenomenologically, which is the approach Philip Auslander (2008b; 2012) uses in his extensive research pertaining to liveness and technology. Even though there are qualities of livestreaming that evoke in-person communication, other factors are different. Notwithstanding the ability to see a person's face and communicate in real time, the capacity to read body language is restricted to what can be captured with the camera and presented

through the screen. Attention is more focused, as the face is framed and isolated. In a most unusual twist, there is a capacity to view the self when communicating, drawing a heightened awareness to the presentation of self.

Such encounters are social, but also aesthetic and, as I will later discuss, ethical. Aesthetics, however, is not restricted to the production of art nor the stance of the artist. Instead, considering livestreaming as an aesthetic encounter is a means of drawing awareness to the perception of senses and a sharing of the sensible that is experienced through a sensitivity that highlights and forges relations between people, technology, and places. In addition, performance, like aesthetics, is not restricted to artistic contexts, but as Erving Goffman (1959) argued, constitutes our everyday actions and social interactions. Engaging with the philosophy of Gilbert Simondon, I argue that livestreamed internet broadcasts are performed aesthetic and ethical encounters that invite distinctive means of relating to others. Moreover, like the way a performance artist will take non-art materials and situations, transforming them through artistic gestures to become art works, so this book engages with livestreaming in art and non-art scenarios in a similar way through the lenses of aesthetics, ethics, performance theory, media studies, and philosophy.

Simondon, Technology, and Aesthetics

Noted for his influence on Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Bernard Stiegler, Brian Massumi, Bruno Latour, Elizabeth Grosz, Yuk Hui, and others, Gilbert Simondon is most recognized for his philosophy of technology. His supplementary doctoral thesis *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques (On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects)*, which was published soon after its completion in 1958, is considered his most influential work. In the past two decades, his theories regarding individuation and ontogenesis as a distinctive approach to ontology and epistemology, as articulated in his main doctoral thesis *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions*

de forme et de l'information (Individuation in Light of the Notions of Form and Information), have gained increased recognition in Francophone scholarship and beyond, as new translations of his texts from French into English expose this thinker's work to a growing audience. Increased interest in Simondon's philosophy beyond France have included anthologies explicating his particular conceptions of being and becoming, such as *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, edited by Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe, and Ashley Woodward (2012), as well as the translation of Muriel Combe's insightful introduction to his work, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (2013), and the collection of his lectures edited post-mortem by Nathalie Simondon, *Imagination et Invention* (2014), that has also been recently translated into English (Simondon 2022).

Simondon's philosophy is notable because of his emphasis on becoming, where individuals are not preformed, but experience ongoing phases of development through individuation. In his PhD thesis dedicated to Maurice Merleau Ponty, he critiques hylomorphism, which Aristotle describes as an individual emerging, with an idealized form (*morphe*) in union with matter (*hyle*). Instead, Simondon proposes the concept of ontogenesis, a term appropriated from biology, as an ontological alternative. Here, Simondon argues that individuals are not complete beings, but through processes of individuation (or becoming), an individual is formed through the unfolding of reality. As he states: "we would try to grasp ontogenesis in the whole unfolding of its reality and *to know the individual through individuation rather than individuation starting from the individual*" (emphasis in original, Simondon 2020, 3). Elizabeth Grosz elucidates: "being is at once pre-individual, individuating, and individuated; it becomes something, something emerges or erupts, but it leaves in its context or milieu a residue or excess that is the condition for future becomings" (Grosz 2012, 38). The pre-individual is not a fixed entity that predetermines how an individual comes into being, but is dynamic and supersaturated with potential, as processes of individuation influence through the forces

and relations that it gives rise to and acts upon. Relations are not limited to human beings or subjects and objects. Instead, relations include living and nonliving beings through a shared constitutive and constituted milieu, including technical objects. The milieu, which means "middle" in French, is the term Simondon uses in his native tongue to describe the situated existence of technology, where "Man [*sic*] finds himself linked to a universe experienced as a milieu" (Simondon 2016, 177). The continued use of the term milieu in English, rather than translating it to "environment," is significant, as it includes the material environment and the pre-environment, as well as the immaterial relations of "au milieu," or of being "in the middle."[1] Such nuances get lost in translation.

Writing and researching concurrently with cybernetics and systems theory in the mid-twentieth century, Simondon was influenced by this burgeoning field of study. At the same time, Simondon critiques cybernetics, and as Massumi (2012) observes, Simondon's work cannot be considered normative and technocratic. For instance, unlike Claude Shannon (1948) and Warren Weaver (1949), Simondon does not treat information and modes of transmission as dichotomous. He challenges a binary approach that distinguishes form (information) and matter (physical modes of transmission). Rather, he argues that both the content and means of transmission contribute to the transfer of information. Simondon (2016) describes how the technical object should not simply be treated as an instrument or tool–a means to an end–but instead constitutes a technical reality that is integral to human reality and culture, functioning as mediators between the world within which we exist and what we create. His attention to the material properties of technology also distinguishes him from other philosophers of technology, including Martin Heidegger. For instance, at the Lycée Descartes, where he taught in Tours, France from 1948 to 1955, Simondon brought technical objects to the classroom when substi-

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1. I am grateful for Noel Fitzpatrick for bringing this to my attention.

tute teaching physics classes, extending learning from theoretical insights to include material engagement (Chabot 2014). As Massumi notes, for Simondon, technological innovation is "a key theatre of thought materializing in matter becoming" (Massumi 2012, 20). Throughout his work, Simondon emphasizes the significance of the philosophy of technical objects, an "awareness of the nature of machines, of their mutual relations and of their relations with man [*sic*], and of the values implied in these relations" (Simondon 2016, 19). He calls for a study of technology through the technologist or the mechanologist, as sociology formalizes the study of human relations and psychology formalizes the study of the mind, which treats technical objects as mediators and shapers of human relations that go through their own processes of genesis and concretization. For Simondon, technical objects are involved in the constitution of cultures and situated within their cultural locality. Unlike aesthetic objects, they tend to be reduced to their utility functions. Humans engage with technical objects through rapport, or relations, with each informing the other through co-constitution. Simondon describes how technology, and specifically technicity as the cultural capacities of tools, "must never be considered an isolated reality, but as part of a system" (Simondon 2016, 170). This system entails relations of objects and nonobjects, living and nonliving beings, constituting its milieu as a realm of experience that leads to states of metastability through phases of being.

Simondon's acknowledgment of technicity in the shaping of human relations is a key factor in why Simondon is the primary interlocutor for this book. He offers a unique approach to aesthetics consistent with his "technical mentality." Simondon provides an in-depth discussion of aesthetics in the third section of *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, titled the "Essence of Technicity." Throughout this section, Simondon crafts a model of modes of thought, which is divided into phases. In this model, a phase is "not a temporal moment replaced by another," but similar to the phase ratio in physics, results from the splitting of two that exist in a system in relation to each other (Simondon 2016, 173). He dif-

ferentiates this model from a dialectical model, as there is no need for either succession or negation to fuel conceptions of progress. These phases, therefore, cannot exist in isolation, and therefore no phases contain complete truth or reality. Instead, phases are abstract and partial, existing as a relational system. Simondon describes how technicity arises from the phase shift of a "magical mode," the "unique, central, and original mode of being in the world" (Simondon 2016, 174). Aesthetics is the neutral point that sits at the splitting of magical unity into technics and religion, where "it is not a phase, but rather a permanent reminder of the rupture of unity of the magical mode of being, as well as a reminder of the search for future unity" (Simondon 2016, 174). Aesthetics exists at the cleave between the practical and the theoretical, the scientific and the ethical, imperfectly recalling this lost, magical unity. For Simondon, aesthetics is the way phenomena are experienced through sensation, as processes of becoming and relation.

Aesthetic and Ethical Encounter

In this relational model, Simondon does not treat technical and aesthetic objects as mutually exclusive. Instead, technical objects have the capacity to evoke aesthetic encounters and aesthetics, according to Yves Michaud, "return[ing] us to the heart of technicity" (Michaud 2012, 122). Simondon defines the aesthetic object as:

> the extension of the natural or human world that remains integrated within the reality that bears it; it is an outstanding point in a universe; this point is the result of an elaboration and benefits from technicity; but it is not arbitrarily placed in the world; it represents the world and focalizes its ground forces and qualities, like a religious mediator; it keeps itself in an intermediary state between pure objectivity and subjectivity (Simondon 2016, 199).

The aesthetic object does not need to be an art object or art work in the traditional sense, such as a sculpture or painting; any thing and any experience has the capacity to evoke an aesthetic encounter. Emphasis is placed on the encounter involving the object, the sur-

rounding world, and human gesture, as opposed to just the object itself or the subject's response to it. As an encounter, aesthetics is inherently relational. Technical objects have the capacity to function as aesthetic objects, where its aesthetic qualities manifest when "it extends the world and becomes integrated into it" (Simondon 2016, 197). It is not simply the technical object that instigates this aesthetic experience, but instead it is the technical object in operation that provokes the aesthetic encounter. Such an approach does not reduce aesthetics to form, as Immanuel Kant (2000) proposes in his definition of aesthetic judgement where the subject is disinterested and the object is autonomous. Instead, aesthetics for Simondon emphasizes the *experience* that is affiliated with the aesthetic object, acknowledging its physicality and how it is engaged.

In conjunction with the growing attention to his philosophy more generally, Simondon's approach to aesthetics is also receiving increased interest, though not to the same degree of consideration as his philosophies of technology and individuation. Even Simondon has underestimated the significance of aesthetics, arguing that aesthetics is inferior to philosophy, as aesthetics "refracts aspects of reality, but it does not reflect them" (Simondon 2016, 243). However, Yuk Hui contests Simondon's diminishment of aesthetics as being limited in "expression and communication" when compared to philosophy, arguing that instead "the challenge is not to abandon aesthetic thinking for philosophical thinking, but rather to renew a relation between them" (Hui 2021, 189). Such an approach for Hui does *not* involve developing "a particular techno-aesthetics of virtual reality or machine learning as a solution to the actual problem of technological development" (Hui 2021, 189), which is why this book is not simply a techno-aesthetics of livestreaming. Instead, I am proposing how livestreaming is a performed encounter, with performance understood in the broad sense of the term as a means of doing and interacting, extending beyond the context of artistic production, building upon Simondon's thinking, as I cultivate relations of aesthetics and philosophy that include implications for ethics and politics.

For Simondon, individual beings, both living and physical or nonliving, are relational and incomplete. Throughout his oeuvre, he emphasizes how beings experience processes of differentiation, challenging presumptions regarding form and matter, the psychological and the social, nature and technology. Such relations are wrought with tensions as the "state of the living being is like a problem to be solved, to which the individual becomes the solution through successive assemblages of structures and functions" (Simondon 2020, 226). Simondon describes how individuals and collectives emerge in response to disparation, or the incompatabilities that drive individuation through the need to act to resolve tensions as processes of becoming. In this book, ethics, therefore, are not assessed in terms of virtue, but as a relational ethics of care drawing from feminist and race theory, including the work of María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), Ruha Benjamin (2022), and Kathleen Lynch (2022). María Puig de la Bellacasa emphasizes how ethics of care "cannot be about a realm of normative moral obligations but rather about thick, impure, involvement in a world where the question of how to care needs to be posed" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 6). As such, ethics are not fixed, but involve hands-on and ongoing processes that entail speculative thinking about what is possible. Moreover, livestreaming functions as an ethical encounter, as well as aesthetic, through techno-social relations that constitute new patterns of being-together as becoming that are complex, ambivalent, and situated, yet also vital for transformation. Treated in such a way, livestreaming exceeds quantifying and calculating metrics, challenges emphasis on content generation, invites paying attention to what typically is not noticed, values the unique phenomenologies of liveness that the medium produces, and introduces new means of social engagement that counter the potentially destructive capacities of automation.