

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## GILBERT SIMONDON

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Gilbert Simondon (Saint-Étienne, 1924 – Palaiseau, 1989) is now recognized as one of the most important French philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Simondon was a student of Jean Hippolyte, Georges Canguilhem, Martial Guérout, Mikel Dufrenne, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. In 1958 he defended his doctoral dissertations, which will result in his most influential works: *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, appeared only posthumously in its complete form (2005), and *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, published right after Simondon's *soutenance*. He was then professor of General Psychology at the Sorbonne from 1963 to 1983 and remained apparently aloof from the great intellectual debate of those years. A reappraisal of his philosophy began only after his death, during the 1990s, also in the wake of his influence on authors such as Gilles Deleuze and, more recently, Bruno Latour, Bernard Stiegler, Isabelle Stengers.

Simondon's aesthetic perspective is mainly outlined in the pages of *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* and in some of his later writings and courses; the two volumes of *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, however, contain many aesthetic insights as well. For Simondon, the aesthetic attitude is a way of cultivating the relational and morphogenetic texture of reality within human culture. Aesthetics, thus, holds the power to reconnect culture with reality as a becoming whole, and therefore has an ontological as well as an epistemological value. The aesthetic domain has to do with the reunion of the "conditions of the possibility of knowledge" with the "causes of existence", as Simondon writes in a post-Kantian fashion (2020: 293). All this hints at a root-and-branch reform of human doing and of the so-far hegemonic conception of creative action in the direction of an ecological intertwinement of genesis and experience.

It is in this sense that in the modern age, as Simondon argues, aesthetics alludes to a reconciliation between the two domains of technology and sacrality, corresponding to the separated realms of means and ends. The aesthetic domain envisions a positive (i.e., creative) relationship between spirit and matter, forces and forms, by referring to the "open system of the complete nature" (Simondon 2014b: 121).

However, modern aesthetics is destined to remain a “concern of totality” (*ibidem*), insofar as it promises a reintegration of sense without never being able to realize it. Modern art is the greatest example of this aesthetic utopia. That is the reason why aesthetics, as an imperfect way of endowing reality with sense, will be overcome and replaced by other fields of human culture, such as philosophy.

This seemingly fatal criticism is not directed towards aesthetics *per se*, but rather towards its modern configuration. Simondon sees a rigid dialectic at the core of modernity, but does not intend it as a metaphysical constant (in a Hegelian sense): he rather acknowledges it as a historical structure to transcend from within. Aesthetics, then, must be overcome insofar as it carries the contradictions of modernity itself. This does not mean that the fundamental mode of human signification expressed by aesthetics must (or can) be transcended as well: in this sense, the trans-historical essence of aesthetics, or “aestheticity”, has a “post-aesthetic” destiny.

Simondon defines aestheticity as the power to situate subjects and objects in a common pattern of meaning, thus polarizing and specifying the forces of Being. Aestheticity does not pertain to objects as such, nor to a specific class of entities, but rather to spatiotemporal sectors of reality (or events) that become able to reorientate their subjective and objective terms and ground them in a life context. In this perspective, every artistic experience entails the participation in a genetic process affecting the terms involved. The concept of art, then, should not strictly refer to a domain of objects (the artworks) created by certain subjects (the artists) and perceived by other subjects (the spectators): it should rather be intended as regards its power to transmit and amplify meaning. An artwork always embodies a genetic event that remains active in the formed matter, and its power of appearance corresponds to the simultaneous generation of the active and the passive sides of this event. The *Mona Lisa*, for example, is its smile intended as such a subterranean movement in its figurative manifestation (Simondon 2012: 4).

Simondon’s view revolves around two elements that played a major part in post-war European aesthetics: experience and technology. The attention towards experience is to be intended as a post-phenomenological gesture, in the sense that we have explained above. The focus on technology, instead, is linked with an anti-idealistic interest towards the material and poietic features of the creative event. Aesthetics does not invite simple contemplation of a given entity, but constructive participation into reality. In the pages of *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, Simondon puts forward a radical reform of the notion of genesis, which, on the aesthetic level, leads to privilege the poietic cultivation of material potencies over the demiurgic molding of passive matter according to abstract representations. One has to “penetrate into the mold itself”, writes Simondon (2020: 30), and place oneself in the blind surface between matter and form, where genesis occurs, to become part of the formative process and grasp it in its normative autonomy.

The idea of aesthetic experience as a participation in the genetic event is also at the center of Simondon’s most famous aesthetic writing, titled *On Techno-Aesthetics* (1982). Aesthetics and technology, as Simondon argues, can be placed in a “continuous spectrum” (Simondon 2012: 3) insofar as – for example – a technical object is capable of orientating a portion of environment, that is of reticulating a habitable cosmos, like a windmill does with the surrounding countryside. Similarly, when the user uses an

instrument, he/she enters a pathic experience in which he/she affects and is affected at the same time. The object here is a simple medium of an autonomous event of meaning that activates contextual relations. To transmit and amplify meaning means to express a pre-individual *milieu*, in this case a cultural *milieu*, made of virtual usage patterns, sensory-motor and perception schemes, and traces of tacit knowledge. These are the “genetic essences” of a culture, or the primary elements of the cultural transmission of sense.

In his course on *Imagination and Invention* (1965-66) Simondon had ascribed these “genetic essences” to the concept of image, understood in a non-strictly representationalist sense. Images, for Simondon, are the morphogenetic basins of individual experience: they precede and structure subjectivity as such, and therefore have their own ontological status. An image forms wherever a “problematic is solved” within reality, that is to say wherever a new compatibility between ontological planes is invented. Simondon gives the example of a rock blocking the way to a traveler who is not able to move it. In time, other travelers gather in front of the rock and the problematic situation increases in tension. Finally, a new meaning emerges: the travelers come up with (or “invent”) a solution, for example a collective effort to move the rock. Here the solution is a result of different but convergent tensions, and the imaginative process triggers a communication between ontological levels (individual and collective, physical and cultural...) by manifesting different images, intended as energetic and operative patterns capable of orientating behaviors.

In this sense, an image acts as the context of meaning for the individual action and as the source of every orientation, deviation, and invention. What the individual retains and transmits is not a representation, but rather a dynamic trace and an ethical landscape that “contains virtually all the spectrum of possible situations in relation to a determinate being; it is in advance the exhaustive synthesis of concrete relations” (Simondon 2014a: 252). Thus, the tropism of the simplest organism is an act of imagination and invention as much as the most complex production of human technology. Regardless of whether it produces an objectual result, the imaginative act corresponds to the discovery of new axiomatics in the sense of an “exploration, manipulation, and preliminary organization of a territory” (Simondon 2014a: 151).

Simondon’s aesthetics – which includes his theory of aestheticity, his poietics, and his theory of imagination – shows important similarities with coeval phenomenological aesthetics such as Mikel Dufrenne’s and Dino Formaggio’s. At least to some degree, both Dufrenne and Formaggio have underlined the ontological status of aesthetic experience and the importance of poietics and technology for the understanding of art. Dufrenne, for example, offered an exemplary definition of aesthetic experience as trans-subjective and trans-objective: “Meaning has a being – meaning is being – which precedes both the object in which it is manifested and the subject to whom it is manifested and which appeals to the solidarity of subject and object to be actualized. [...] In any event, we must admit that man is an episode of this dialectic and not the creator of meaning” (Dufrenne 1973: 547). Formaggio’s understanding of the poietic process as well is enlightening if read next to Simondon’s claims, for example when he describes a “knowing-doing” capable of “ulteriorizing reality”, that is of creatively participating to an ontological texture of pure relations (Formaggio 1988: 106-110). Simondon’s poietics seems inspired by

various other coeval French authors, such as René Passeron and Étienne Souriau. It also anticipates and exerts an influence on today's neo-materialist sensibilities, especially through the mediation of Gilles Deleuze's works.

So far, the debate around Simondonian aesthetics has been mainly reserved to experts, but the growing attention towards his philosophy in general might inspire a wider interest. Among the few interpreters, Ludovic Duhem (2008, 2013) has dedicated his efforts to Simondon's aesthetics and poietics, pointing out their many philosophical implications and suggesting the notion of "aesthetic individuation". Other interpreters have underlined the topical relevance of Simondon's theory: Yves Michaud (2013), for example, linked it to the idea of "aesthetic salience"; Anne Sauvagnargues (2016) analyzed the common traits with the aesthetic views of Deleuze and Guattari. This last effort in particular cast light on the relevance of Simondon's aesthetics within the so-called "French theory". Special attention has also been devoted to the techno-aesthetics hypothesis (Duhem 2010; Carrozzini 2011; Guchet 2018), to the theory of image (Duhem 2014; Alloa 2015), and to the theory of imagination (Sabolius 2019).

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