Martin Crowley (University of Cambridge)

Martin is Reader in Modern French Thought and Culture at Cambridge, and has published books on Robert Antelme and Marguerite Duras, and more recently, essays on Jean-Luc Nancy and Bernard Stiegler. He is currently working on the question of hybrid or distributed agency, in particular the political possibilities offered by approaches to this question in the work of Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Bernard Stiegler, and Catherine Malabou; this is part of a wider project on French and Francophone philosophy and contemporary geopolitics.

'Bernard Stiegler’s Automatic Politics’

Abstract:
In the first volume of his La Société automatique (2015), Bernard Stiegler considers the social and philosophical implications of the predicted imminent increase in the proportion of labour undertaken by automata. The aim of this paper is to provide an account of Stiegler’s analyses, to situate these in the context of his philosophy more broadly, and to draw out their implications for an understanding of politics in what a widespread shorthand likes to refer to as the age of the machines.

For Stiegler, the interpenetration of human and technical forms of life is nothing new. Developing the work of André Leroi-Gourhan and Gilbert Simondon, Stiegler sees these forms as coming into existence through transductive processes of mutual constitution. The social and political questions posed by particular technologies are consequently to be understood as questions of adoption: the human beings of a given era are formed in relation to their technical objects, but can subsequently shape this relation by adopting these objects as either beneficial or harmful, in an immanent process of recursive self-fashioning.

It is in these terms that La Société automatique analyses the predicted explosion of automation. For Stiegler, the social stakes of this development concern the definition of work and the link between work and remuneration; the political challenge is accordingly to foster the adoption of emergent technical forms in such a way as to provide a beneficial solution to these social questions. The politics of automation at work here needs to be taken beyond the question of adoption, however, into regions which Stiegler does not explore. For the mutual constitution of the human and the technical may imply a potentially more problematic reconceptualization of effective political agency: not as a possibility belonging to one of these forms only, but rather as distributed across the transductive relations through which the forms emerge. Arguing nevertheless against the purely descriptive, post hoc accounts of such composite processes offered by a Jane Bennett or a Bruno Latour, the paper will seek to determine how the trenchant quality of political agency as Stiegler configures it can be maintained within such an understanding of its processual distribution; it will engage this problem with specific reference to the role of algorithmically-generated news feeds in the production of ‘post-truth’ politics.