

The Machinic Phylum

Editorial introduction to excerpt from Félix Guattari 'Balance program for desiring machines', in Seth Giddings (ed.) 2011. *The New Media & Technocultures Reader*. London: Routledge.

The questioning of clear and fixed distinctions between humans and technologies is a persistent theme across this book, from Haraway's cyborg to Latour's networks of humans and nonhumans. Wiener's cybernetic insistence on connections between animals (including humans) and machines links together the biological and the artificial (also Galison and Tomas). In this extract Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduce the most radical model of technoculture in this book, a model that in fact goes beyond 'techno-culture' per se, describing a world of technology and nature in which humans are not an equal or even necessarily a significant part.

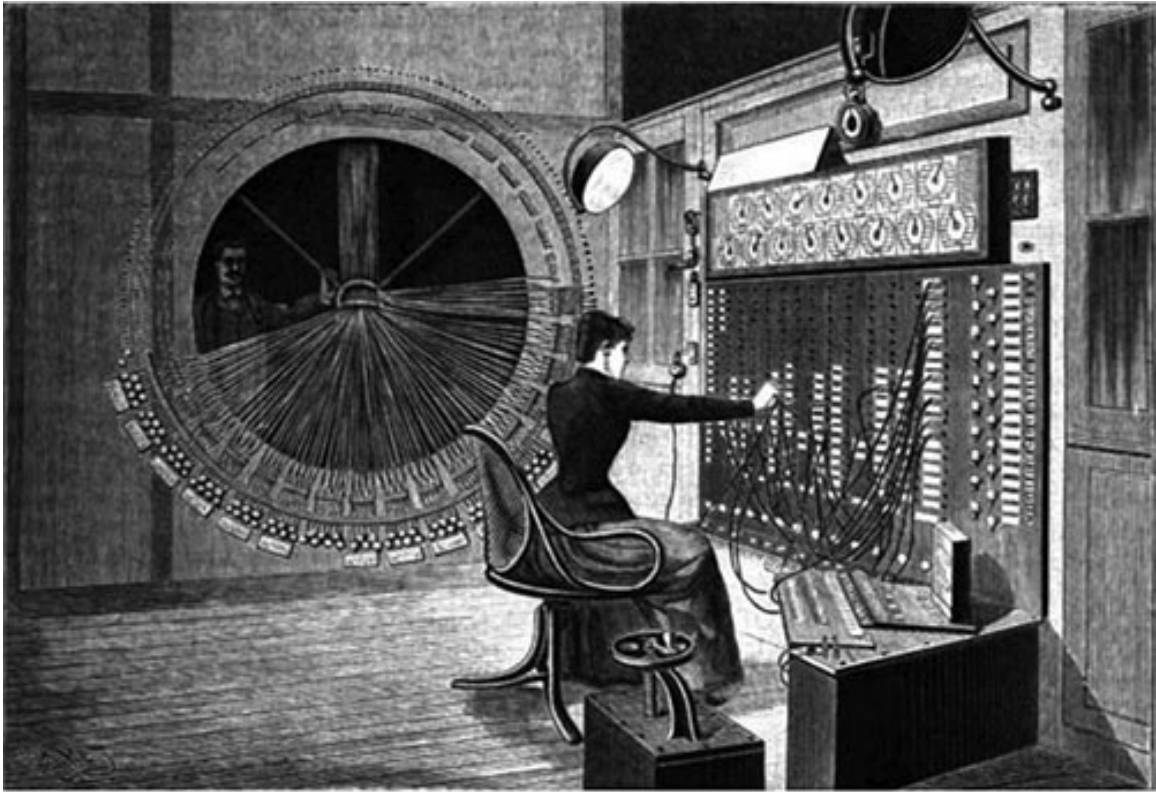
Guattari's collaboration with the philosopher Gilles Deleuze included two books, *Anti-Oedipus* (this extract is an afterword in the French edition of this book) and *A Thousand Plateaus*, that have influenced thought on technoculture and new media. Their concepts of the 'machinic phylum' and 'desiring machines' run through these books and are set out here. Like the books this article is a challenging read, but is full of energy, ideas, and examples from the history of technology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, art and films.

Before attempting to introduce the reader to these concepts, it might be helpful to pull out one of Guattari's recurring examples to help orient ourselves. In battle, Ancient Greek hoplite warriors would group together side by side into a phalanx, each soldier's shield also protecting his neighbour. Thus the men and their weapons become more than a set of individual warriors with their individual weapons, but rather an assemblage of people *and* weapons/tools in a larger technics of warfare. There are resonances here with Actor-Network Theory's insistence on the conjoined agencies of human and nonhuman actors (Latour). Importantly for Guattari and the notion of the machinic phylum however, is the fact that the hoplite phalanx was part of, and made possible by, the broader sociotechnical formation (or machine) of the Greek city-state. Deleuze and Guattari define a machine as (1) a systematic functional interrelation of parts, i.e., anything that *works*; and (2) these parts and wholes are at the same time the products of the machine's functioning.



So, any entity contained in the machinic phylum is always part of a larger machine, and composed of smaller ones. The term *phylum* is more commonly used as a broad biological classification, below that of 'kingdom' but above 'species'. Thus the animal kingdom is made up of phyla such as the arthropods, which includes spiders, scorpions, crustacea and insects. These are creatures that share a form or a set of characteristics (they are invertebrate, with segmented exoskeletons) but not the hereditary links or genotype of individual species. The *machinic* phylum, then, groups together organisms that share machinic characteristics. Though Guattari doesn't discuss it here, the desiring machines extend down to the molecular level of nature: think of DNA's coding of genetic information and its role in the manufacture of proteins and hence of biological life. The 'desire' of desiring machines is not then an individual human's yearning or lust for another or an object (the basis for psychoanalysis and much cultural theory), but the impulsion driving all levels of natural and artificial connections, production and reproduction: 'these are the machine processes underlying all things' (*New Media: a critical introduction*: 387). In this, Deleuze and Guattari are influenced by Marx's theories of production.

In another example Guattari describes the criss-crossing of distant voices and machine-generated sounds that are audible when a telephone connection fails. This soundscape indicates a technological environment functioning more or less autonomously, an emergent phenomenon not intended by human design and that goes well beyond any notion of technologies as tools or extensions of individual humans or even social groups.



This essay continues Deleuze and Guattari's sustained critique of psychoanalysis, and particularly the key Freudian concept of the Oedipus complex. Against psychoanalysis, therefore, Deleuze and Guattari maintain that desire is capable of constructing many more kinds of machines, not only Oedipal ones. However, the details of, and motivations for, this assault on psychoanalysis and psychiatry fall outside the scope of this Reader and so we have cut out some of the larger sections of this material. This of course does not do justice to Guattari's arguments and expertise, so we recommend that readers interested in learning more turn to their books cited above.

For a more detailed explanation of the machinic phylum and its application to cybernetic culture, see *New Media: a critical introduction*, pages 386-388. The concept has influenced the work of Manuel de Landa and is discussed in detail in his extract in Part one.