# Synphronesis

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**Architecture as a practice and profession is seeking a role for its collaborative, synthetic, humanistic aptitudes in the face of the escalating dominance of technological influences. That role may be found by evolving into a "synphronetic" practice in which production and other actuated systems emerge from ethical systems. While drawing context from philosopher Bernard Stiegler's discussion of technology, his notion of hyper-control, and articulation of the concept of the pharmakon, this paper will arrive at a definition and discussion of "synphronesis" and speculate on the future role of the Architect as a humanistic technologist.**

These times are said to be the era of the Anthropocene, a term that Stiegler subscribes to in order to describe "the systemic and massively toxic character" of this contemporary condition.[1] For Stiegler that toxicity is characterized by automation - automation is the enemy, that which dehumanizes. Yet many today blindly or begrudgingly accept that automated (even autonomous) technology will lead to increasing automation of life and work, that computers, actuators, and sensors will eventually become embedded in everything, and that artificial intelligence will, one day, obviate much of current human culture. It is reasonable to be concerned that when technologies hold the power, the designers of such "smart" devices will hold a Machiavellian grip on society, further submitting society to a state Stiegler calls "hyper-control", in which generalized automation leads to proletarianization.[2]

But Stiegler also warns, "such negative protention is inherently performative and self-fulfilling" in that it undermines the will and thus any hope of agency or performance that might alter it.[3] Instead of such fearful visions Stiegler urges us to create what he refers to as a "pharmakon"[4] [5] (borrowing from Derrida's reading of Plato[6]), which is both a sort of therapy for the Anthropocene and a transitional object that eases the detachment from a malignant dependency (in this case, automation). To produce a pharmakon, to both to dismantle and ameliorate impending dystopia, then we must approach the future with a generative attitude of curiosity and optimism, encouraging the manifestation of the transitional object. Perhaps then, creating positive narratives is the beginning of creating tolerable realities.

With positive protentions (ideas and expressions) in mind, our current moment raises the questions, what role can architects play in ushering in a pharmakon? What is required of praxis in this new means of production? What should architectural educators study, explore, and teach to students to prepare them for such a world?

Architecture, which has always been multidisciplinary and thrives on new ideas of culture and practice, is well positioned to help create the pharmakon. Stiegler articulates one manifestation of the pharmakon which could emerge as an art of hyper-contro.l[7] In Automatic Society, Stiegler speculates that a "hermeneutic web" could arise to facilitate this art of hyper-control. The hermeneutic web would exist in parallel with the current, dogmatic, "semantic web"[8]. Semantic data networks, such as those embodying the current tools of architectural practice, are the medium of hyper-control which inescapably encourages automation, whereas the hermeneutic web would facilitate dis-automation (although the two would be inextricably linked). Stiegler conceives that such a counter-digital phenomenon would necessarily be multi-disciplinary and dependent on new ideas of language, social networks and communities; and that an art of hyper-control could facilitate dis-automatization by first taking on board the protentions of automation and reinventing them[9]. Thus, in order to dismantle the negative effects of automation, architecture should first master it's ideas and methods.

If architects are to challenge automation through mastery of its tools, it is promising that architecture researchers are heavily engaged in robotics, information management, and integrated technologies. Building Information Modelling is now ubiquitous in practice. BIM foregrounds the data manifestation of a building over its design representation, radically changing how we view buildings to be integrated information structures as much as they are material ones. A review of publications such as Advancing Wood Architecture (2017) or Robotic Fabrication in Architecture, Art and Design 2016 reveals a preponderance of (brilliant) work on fabrication, much of which comprises tooling, applications, and control systems for at-distance, robotic, and other automated making.

As automation and the technological integration of buildings increases, architects will continue to be called upon, less to describe and depict desired material manipulations that result in buildings, but instead will become more involved in articulating configurations of information that will inform systems of arranging space. Jenny Sabin describes this trend, with reference to precedents, as an architecture of "affordances"[10] that "operate, affect and interact as environments,

entities and beings"[11], emphasizing emergence and ecology over other prescriptive solutions of systems generation.

Architects rightly continue striving to gaining control of the technics of fabrication and the data structures of construction: doing so is extremely empowering for the profession and must be fully explored. However, without interrogating the psychosocial components that will inform future systems of cybernetically enhanced production, architects are in danger of becoming technicians, or worse, spectators to the process. If that happens, the proletarianization of architectural production will continue. So how should architects orient themselves to be agents of a pharmakon and not participate in a degenerating creep towards total automation?

John Von Neumann, one of the founders of cybernetics, urged that when designing systems, "always try to act so as to increase the number of choices".[12] He said, "let language and action ride on an underground river of ethics, and to see to it that one is not thrown off, so that ethics does not become explicit, and so that language does not degenerate into moralization."[13] In practical terms, designed systems should be versatile, contextual, and receptive so that the underlying values don't become dogmatic. In the context of designing architectural actuations (be they buildings, drawings, other representations, or spoken) this shift in process implies a move from the model of the architect whose main production perspective is expressing materiality, veracity, and compliance towards one whose practice is based on articulating contingency and possibility.

A necessary component of such a system may be collaboration. In manufacturing industries there exists a kind of an autonomous self-organizing network called a holonic system. These simple artificial intelligence constructs are used in applications such as adaptable production lines. Each node of production in a holonic system is called a holon (from the greek for 'whole') and is capable of reconfiguring itself to account for changes in other nodes.[14]

The holonic system, as a culture of holons, is characterized by a distributed control paradigm, with a balance of heterarchical and hierarchical organizational structures. Instead of an entirely rigid hierarchy, task specific control is created through collaboration of holons.[15] For example, in an industrial production environment, various machines (holons) might be assigned manufacturing tasks specific to their capabilities. Each is aware of the others through sensor networks, forming a new cohesive whole – a transformation of identity that Stiegler would call a transindividuation.[16] If one of the holons malfunctions the others can become aware and adapt the process, by retasking and taking up the job of the malfunctioning unit.

In such systems ethics can be conceptualized as a practical matter, of steering, not just a theoretical one, of judging. The system works to maintain the intent of the collective value system, rather than merely carry out task based instructions. The technics of such a system are not only organized, but in a holosystemic sense, become what might be termed synphronetic - (phronetic: intersection of values and knowledge; syn: together, mutual) that is to say, a collaborative "reason capable of action".[17]

Economic geographer Bent Flyvberg uses the term phronesis to describe a process of inquiry in the social sciences that brings about positive change.[18] Phronesis, for Flyvberg, is a kind of information that has a clear knowledge-to-action relationship, such as research that induces policy change. Phronetic knowledge is analogous to ethics in that it does not compel action, but induces it by revealing a desirable condition. Thus, Synphronesis as the collective discovery and enactment of such reason, is a concept that helps to articulate an ethical design system.

The current processes of design and construction are already slices of that which is valued, albeit actuated at an arboreal (if not entirely geologic) pace. As architecture now strives for a more versatile role in production, it may continue to move away from representation as its core deliverable and beyond BIM (with its focus on limits and definitions). Architecture can aspire to becoming an art of hyper-control, critically facilitating articulations of systems that can both facilitate dis-automation and from which heterotopic holosys can also emerge.

Design of an advanced synphronetic system requires not just rules for how the system must function, but an idea of what it is for a system to function. Developing the capacity of discourse to support such systems can lead architecture to address the ethics of production, both in terms of the conventional sense of values and in a more Nicomachean sense: of their application. From ethical systems effective actuated systems can arise, automated or otherwise. By engaging in such a mode of production, architects can aspire to make more versatile, adaptable, pertinently synphronetic spaces.

To proceed towards the synphronetic pharmakon must the Architect eschew automation? Certainly not, if the pharmakon is to rely on the mastery of hyper-control then automation may be the ideal mechanism for approaching it. But, as agent-based systems begin to permeate the media, tools, and very products of architecture, Architects must insist on embuing them synphronetic qualities, which include and champion human values among their parameters and heuristics. In doing, so architecture might yet become the art of hyper-control.

## ENDNOTES

1 Bernard Stiegler, “The Anthropocene and Neganthropology,” trans. Daniel Ross, (lecture transcipt, Canterbury, UK, November, 2014), 2, https://www.academia.edu/12693668/Bernard_Stiegler_The_Anthropocene_and_Neganthropology_2014_

2 Bernard Stiegler, Colette Tron, “Ars and Organological Inventions in Societies of Hyper-Control,” trans. Daniel Ross, Leonardo, 49, no. 5 (October, 2016) 480 - 484, https://www.academia.edu/12693641/Bernard_Stiegler_Ars_and_Organological_Inventions_in_Societies_of_Hyper-Control_2016_

3 Stiegler, 2014, 3.

4 Ibid, 2.

5 Stiegler, 2016, 481.

6 Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University Press, 1981), 95.

7 Stiegler, 2016, 480.

8 Bernard Stiegler, “70. From the semantic web to the hermeneutic web”, in *Automatic Society: The Future of Work*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambirdge UK, Polity Press, 2016), 168.

9 Ibid, 167-169.

10 Jenny Sabin “Architectural Affordances and Crisis,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 69, no. 1 (2017): 63.

11 Ibid, 70.

12 Heinz Von Foerster, “Ethics and Second Order Cybernetics,” *SEHR*, 4, no. 2 (1998): 6.

13 Ibid, 6.

14 Vicente Botti, Adriana Giret , “Holonic Manufacturing Systems” in *ANEMONA - A Multi-agent Methodology for Holonic Manufacturing Systems* (London, UK, Springer, 2008), 10.

15 Ibid, 8.

16 Stiegler, 2014, 20.

17 Flyvbjerg, Bent, “Why Mass Media Matter and How to Work with Them: Phronesis and Megaprojects” in *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis*, ed. Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman, and Sanford Schram (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 95.

18 Ibid, 95-121.