

2015

Introduction to Bernard Stiegler interview 'Deconstruction and Aesthetics', December 2013

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Recommended Citation

Fitzpatrick, Noel (2015) "Introduction to Bernard Stiegler interview 'Deconstruction and Aesthetics', December 2013," *InPrint*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 4.

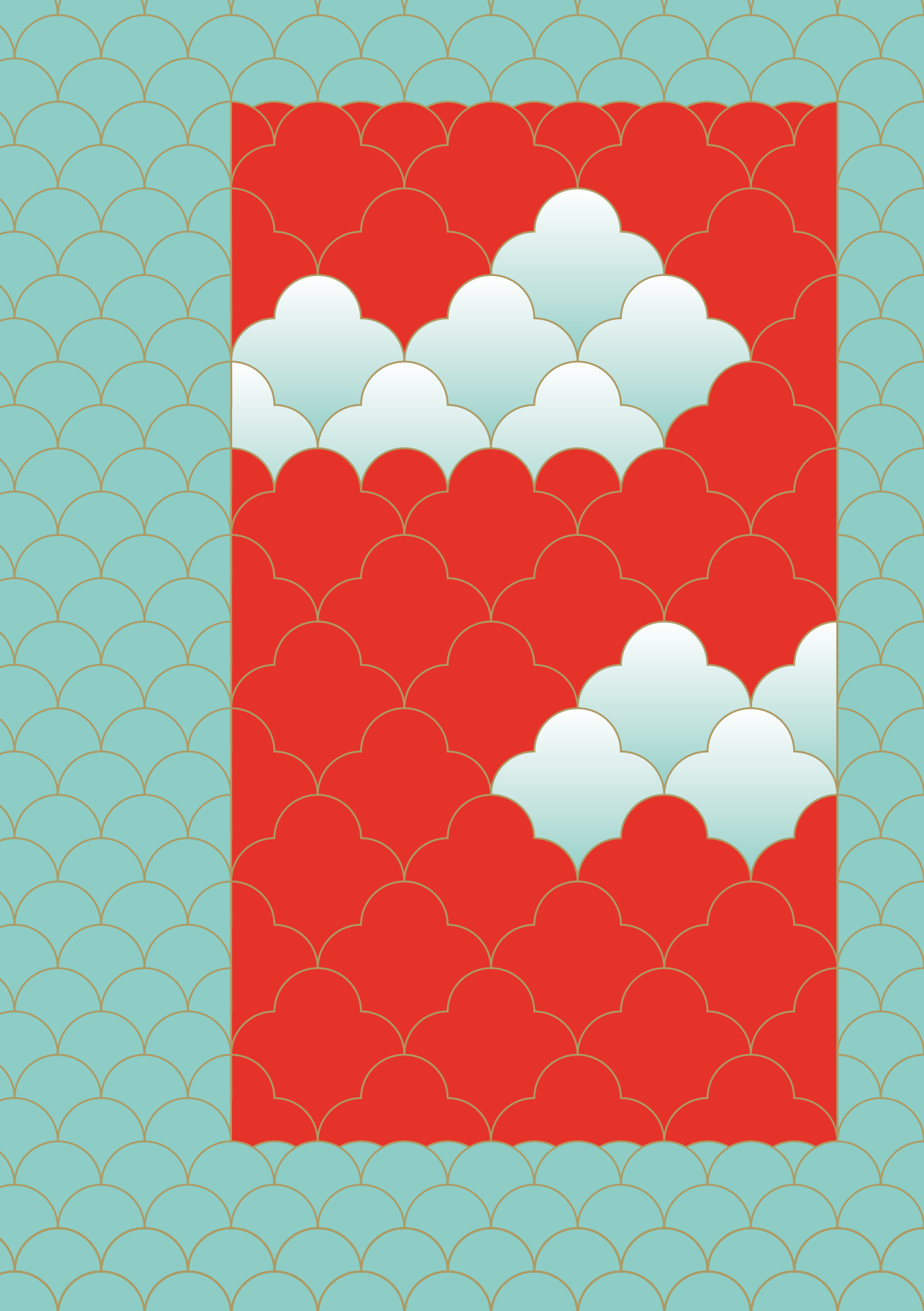
doi:10.21427/D7QT34

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/inp/vol3/iss1/4>

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Introduction to Bernard Stiegler interview 'Deconstruction and

Aesthetics', December 2013 Noel Fitzpatrick The work of Bernard Stiegler has come to prominence over the last number of years in contemporary philosophy and media studies. His analysis of cinema in the three-volume *Technics and Time* (2002, 2004, 2008) has introduced his work to a wider audience, particularly in the English-speaking world. His philosophical revisiting of questions of technology and epistemology has led to the foundation of the 'Digital Studies Network,' an international network of leading academics from Universities across the world who are examining the impacts of digital technologies on epistemology and aesthetics.¹

1. See <http://digital-studies.org/wp/en/>

In the interview extract published here, Stiegler responds to questions related to aesthetics and the legacy of deconstruction. Although recently his work has explored more overtly political and social issues, in particular the extraordinary rise of the National Front in France, this interview explores issues directly related to aesthetics and politics. Aesthetics is understood by Stiegler in a very broad sense, as *aesthesis*, that is, as sense or as sensibility. This expanded notion of aesthetics is profoundly political, as politics and aesthetics both involve 'sharing' with the other either as a form of sensibility or as a form of the *polis* (political institutions).

The extract revisits and develops some of the central arguments in *De la misère symbolique* (On Symbolic Misery) where Stiegler sets out to give an 'organological' study of art, an investigation of the physical, technical and social organs of art works as they act as processes of mediation in the world.² Stiegler attempts to give an overview of the history of art and the philosophy of art in terms of this organology. The history of aesthetics, according to Stiegler, consists of a series of 'désajustements' (maladjustments) which can be analysed into three categories, the body and its physiology, artificial organs (technics, objects, tools, instruments, works of art), and social organization resulting from the articulation of artefacts and bodies. This organology is the starting point of the analysis for what he terms the impoverished contemporary aesthetics that has led to the symbolic misery in which we find ourselves.

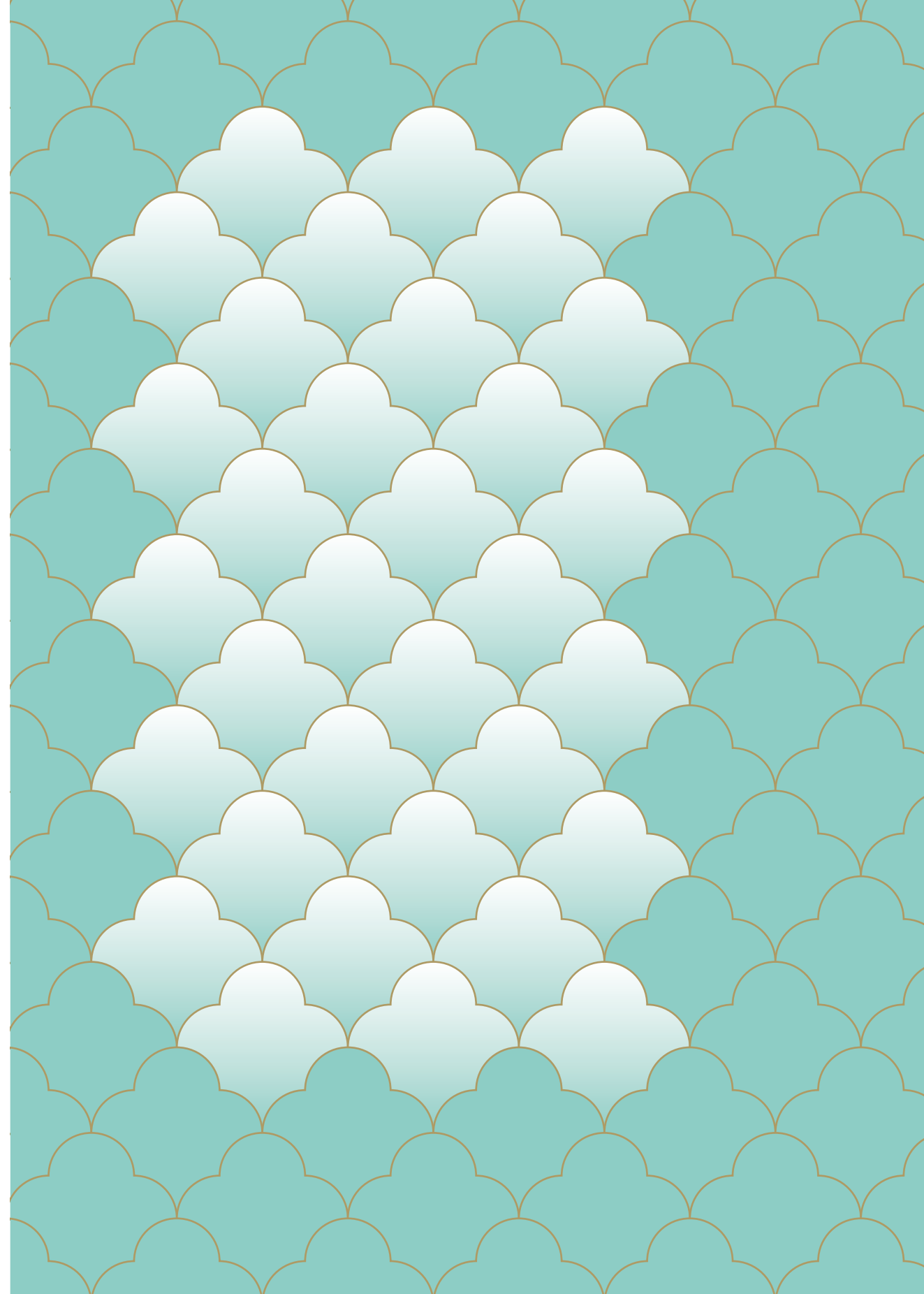
2. Translated as *Symbolic Misery, Volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 2014).

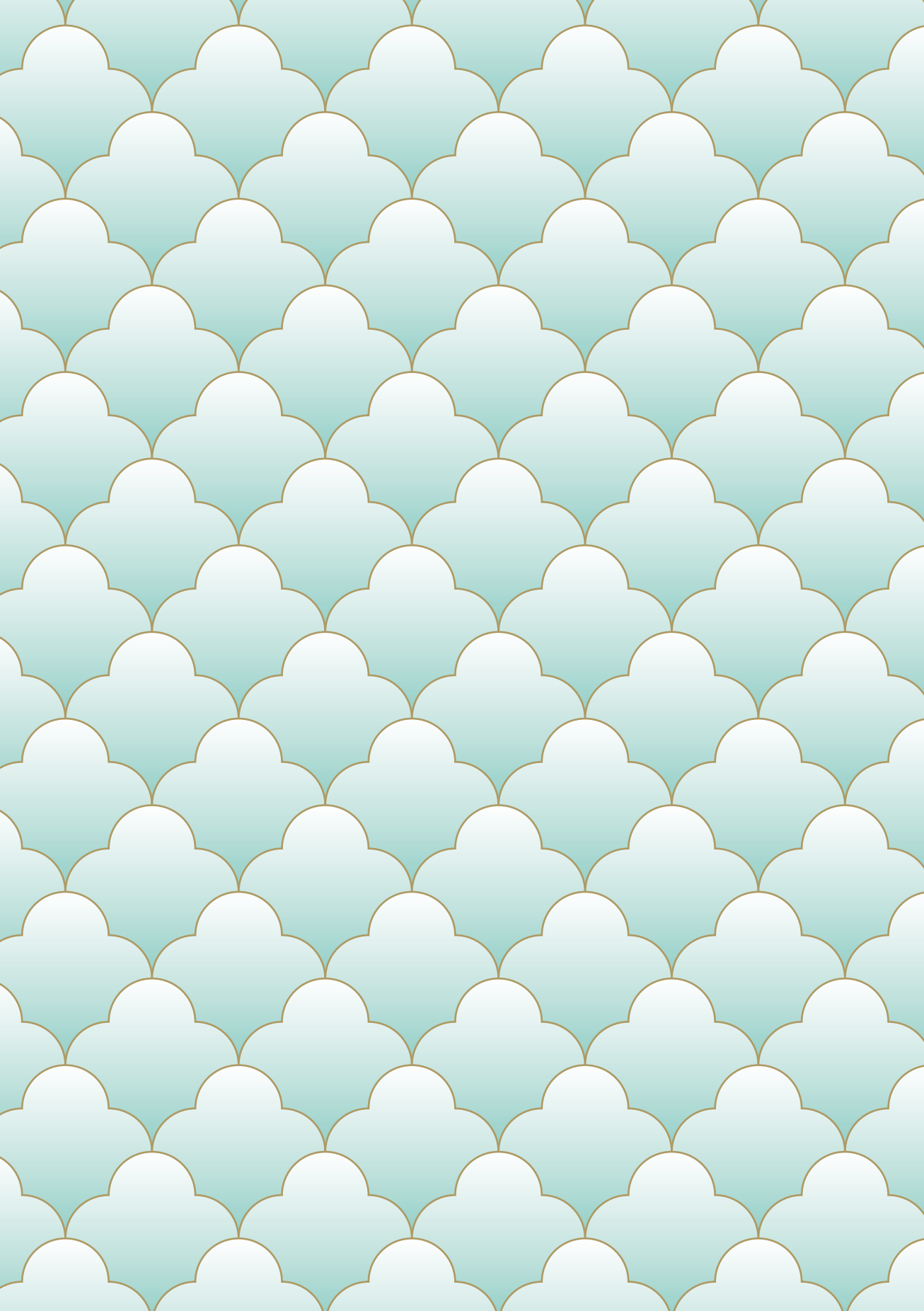
In *De la misère symbolique*, Stiegler expands his original analysis of technics in *Technics and Time* to include the state of contemporary art

and philosophy. He concludes that both contribute to the construction of symbolic misery. In order to overcome this, Stiegler calls for a deconstruction of deconstruction and a reappraisal of indeterminacy. This indeterminacy, he argues, is evident in the legacy of post-structuralist thinking, and therefore it is necessary to reappraise the rejection of 'grand narratives' by Jean-François Lyotard but also to revisit the project of deconstruction itself.³ Incidentally, it should be noted that Derrida himself equally called for a deconstruction of deconstruction, to avoid the construction of sedimented processes, which unfortunately have become manifest in certain fields that have adopted 'deconstructive' techniques without, it could be argued, a full understanding of the philosophical project of deconstruction. Stiegler, therefore, revisits a key text, a turning point, in the work of Derrida. In his essay 'La pharmacie de Platon', Derrida shifts from questions of grammatology (scepticism towards scientific objectivity) turns to the question of deconstructions (dismantling central notions of meaning). The dismantling of the term *pharmakon* in Plato's dialogue *The Phaedrus* highlights the semantic contradictions in language, where the same term can be understood as both cure and poison. Writing, for example, is a *pharmakon* because it leads one both to forget and enables one to remember. This leads Stiegler to the development of an understanding of technology as a *pharmakon*. For Stiegler, however, Derrida has under-emphasised the curative or therapeutic possibilities of the *pharmakon*. The mobilization of such a therapeutics has become Stiegler's central concern in more recent publications such as *De la Pharmacologie Positive : Ce qui fait que la vie vaut la peine d'être vecue* (On Positive Pharmacology: What Makes Life Worth Living) of 2010 and *Pharmacologie du Front National* (Pharmacology of the National Front) of 2012.

For Stiegler, at the core of questions of aesthetics is the role of technics and technologies in artistic and cultural production. It is here, I would argue, that his work has a key interest for us as academics involved in research and teaching in visual and performing arts. His philosophical inquiry gives a framework for understanding the relationship between technics and artefacts as forms of mediation in the world. In Stiegler's genealogical approach, technological development is seen as part and parcel

3. For a complete analysis of this legacy of indeterminacy see *Etats de Choc, Betise et Savoir du XXIeme siècle*, (Paris: Mille et une nuit, 2012)





of hominisation. We are technology and technology is us. The subtle nature of his analysis brings to the fore two key elements in relation to technics and contemporary digital culture: one is the nature of temporal objects, which is a central tenet to his analysis of cinema; the second is the notion of epiphylogenesis, which, put simply, is the genealogy of the technical prostheses necessary for human existence. Epiphylogenesis is the genetic heritage of the prosthesis itself. It is both a genetic memory and a cultural technical memory of the objects themselves. Our prosthetic reliance is what Stiegler refers to as the original fault, *le défaut de l'origine* or *le défaut qu'il faut*, the fault or lack which is necessary for us to be human. To oversimplify the subtle nature of his analysis, we could say that this lack leads to the development of exterior forms of reliance, or prostheses.

In more detail, epiphylogenesis is, for Stiegler, the process of production of what he has termed tertiary retention. Here, Stiegler expands on a distinction that Edmund Husserl makes between primary retention (perception) and secondary retention (imagination).⁴ For example, in music a melody is made up of primary retention and secondary retention, the 'now' of the musical object, is the note present as a note and not just a sound. The note retains the note which precedes it. The primary retention belongs to the present of perception and the secondary retention belongs to recollection of the past melody. I rehear the melody I heard earlier by remembering it, and it constitutes the past of my consciousness. Husserl's distinction between primary and secondary retention is problematic for Stiegler. He suggests that with the advent of technologies of reproduction a tertiary retention is possible, a support for the prosthetic exteriorization of memory. For example, the invention of the phonograph enables the memory to be exteriorized and repeated. Before the invention of phonography, it was impossible to hear the same melody twice in succession. Yet the phonograph enables the exact repetition of the same melody over and again. This poses another question in relation to the ability to understand music. Before the phonograph in order to play the melody it was necessary to read music. With the development of reproducibility the listener can listen without being able to read music. Stiegler has developed elsewhere the consequences of the advent of mechanical reproducibility on the listener or the viewer,

4. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970)

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where the processes of categorization and annotation are lost, leading to the loss of the amateur.

The philosophical revisiting of technology and aesthetics by Bernard Stiegler is highly opportune, at a time when new processes of mediation in the world, from the computational analysis of language to Facebook, have such profound effects upon our modes of being in the world. The ubiquitous nature of these technologies has led to an unquestioning perception of their neutrality. Yet the analysis of Google, for example, demonstrates that our modes of reading and writing have been affected toxically by the monetization of linguistic computational models.⁵ The challenge today is to try to come to an understanding of how these technologies inform and influence modes of knowledge construction and modes of cultural production. This can only be done by questioning and coming to understand these technologies themselves. By revisiting Stiegler's central concerns in relation to aesthetics and deconstruction, it is hoped that we can contribute to a wider debate about the relationship between technics and cultural production.

5. See Frederic Kaplan and Warren Sacks, 'Langue, écriture et automatisme: les software studies face au capitalisme linguistique', <http://digital-studies.org/wp/frederic-kaplan-et-warren-sack-02122014/>