

# Inhuman Infancy: Lyotard's Critique of Development in an Age of Infantilization

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## Abstract

This article critically assesses Lyotard's notions of development and infancy. In *The Inhuman*, Lyotard opposes development as the name for contemporary capitalism and infancy as source of resistance. However, after Lyotard, Bernard Stiegler diagnoses our contemporary situation as infantilized. This implies that infancy is no longer opposed to development, but its accomplice. Stiegler therefore calls for a new maturity, which he primarily understands as responsibility and critical thinking. I argue that this remains one-sided, because Stiegler's inspiration—Kant's essay on Enlightenment—leads him to a primarily negative notion of infancy. Stiegler's call for maturity is valuable but must be supplemented with Lyotard's notion of infancy: infancy as potentiality and affectivity. Especially Lyotard's understanding of affectivity allows for thinking the source of those practices such as art and philosophy that do not immediately serve an external end, be it development's end of increasing performativity or Stiegler's end of maturity.

**Keywords:** Jean-François Lyotard; infancy; childhood; development; capitalism; Bernard Stiegler; potentiality; affectivity.

## Introduction

In the introduction of *The Inhuman*, Lyotard distinguishes two kinds of inhumanity: the inhumanity of development (a concept that primarily designates contemporary capitalism) and the inhumanity of infancy. He then raises two questions: “what remains, as politics, than the resistance to this [first] inhumanity?” and: “what else remains, with which to resist, than ... the other inhumanity?”<sup>1</sup> Infancy is for Lyotard not a stage of life, but a dimension of being human which remains throughout life.<sup>2</sup> As such, he views it as a source of resistance if we learn to reconnect with it. My main question in this article is: *is this understanding of infancy as source of resistance still relevant today?*

Bernard Stiegler, once a student of Lyotard, can be read as providing a first answer. He does not explicitly respond to Lyotard's notion of infancy as resistance but, by rethinking development as *infantilization*, he gives us arguments to problematize it. Stiegler writes that “the most immense question posed by the industrialization of the *pharmakon*” is “the future of childhood, and not only its future but its very *possibility*.”<sup>3</sup> His answer is clear: childhood has effectively come to an end. What takes its place is a widespread infantilization understood as the in-differentiation of infancy and maturity.<sup>4</sup>

By replacing infancy with infantilization, Stiegler implicitly rejects Lyotard's distinction of the two kinds of inhumanity. The infancy to which infantilization regresses is not a source of resistance, but fully in line with the inhumanity of development. When Stiegler writes of the inhuman, it is then always negatively,<sup>5</sup> and his *Taking Care* therefore calls for a new critical maturity rather than an anamnesis of infancy as Lyotard does.

Stiegler's call for maturity reveals something that Lyotard does not think. However, his account of infantilization turns against him. Since he insists that infantilization is widespread and that the infantilized cannot raise a new generation of critical thinkers, the very possibility of a critique of development becomes questionable and sometimes

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1 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 7.

2 See also: Jean-François Lyotard, “The Grip (Mainmise),” in *Political Writings* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1993), 148–58; *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982-1985* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993); “Emma: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis,” in *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh Silverman (London: Routledge, 2002), 23–45; *Readings in Infancy*, ed. Robert Harvey and Kiff Bamford (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

3 Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 122.

4 Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

5 For example: Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living; Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 184; *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, trans. Daniel Ross (Medford: Polity, 2019), 28.

seems reserved only for the lucky few.<sup>6</sup> I will argue that Lyotard's sensitive account of infancy reveals that it must not be overcome as much as possible, but cherished as a source of practices that are not immediately clear in their ends, be it development's end of efficiency or Stiegler's end of maturity.

## Lyotard on Development and Infancy

It is of course interesting that Lyotard's distinction of the two inhumans pits infancy *against* development. Is not the fact that infancy is still *developing* the primary character of infancy as such? As we will see, Lyotard argues precisely for what we can call an *undevelopable* and *ineducable* infancy. But let us first consider development.

Development is Lyotard's name for the system that is dominant in Western societies. It encompasses modes of production and modes of thinking. It directs ways of research and business, but also the paths art takes and the way artworks are received by audiences. Clearly then, the notion is very broad. I will elaborate some of its aspects that are relevant to my question on infancy and Stiegler's critique of infantilization.

First, development does not have any goal or end outside itself but only tends to more development, without end.<sup>7</sup> Second, it does so not only by growing from within over time, but also by integrating everything into its own dynamic. It turns what is obscure into transparency, what is slow into what is fast, and what is useless into utility.

That development tends towards more development is, according, to Lyotard<sup>8</sup> due to its internal dynamic. This is a tendency of complexification, or what Lyotard also calls with a term from thermodynamics *negentropy*. The description of this tendency as *inhuman* is not primarily a value-judgment. Rather: development is inhuman because "it seems to

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6 See especially *Taking Care* where Stiegler approvingly cites Kant who writes that "a few will always think for themselves" and that they will "spread the spirit of a rational appreciation for both their own worth and for each person's calling to think for himself" (40). For the impossibility of infantilized adults to educate the coming generation, see *Taking Care* (2) where Stiegler writes of recent developments that indicate "the weakness of a society that has become *structurally* incapable of educating its children...."

7 Lyotard problematizes this endlessness of development by referring to the death of the sun. And even if humans find a way to survive this, Ray Brassier notes the absolute end will come when "roughly one trillion, trillion years from now, the accelerating expansion of the universe will have disintegrated the fabric of matter itself..." Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 228.

8 The ascription of this claim to Lyotard's position is difficult. The critique of development does seem to be Lyotard's, although the conceptualization in terms of energy, entropy and complexification seems to be inadequate. Probably, what is required is a non-metaphysical account in terms of phrases rather than in terms of energy.

belong to the human domain neither by its aims nor its origins.”<sup>9</sup> It is older than humanity and will probably outlive humanity as well. Massimiliano Simons rightly notes that the problem for Lyotard is therefore not capitalism as such, because development is not caused by capitalism; it is the other way around.<sup>10</sup> He quotes from Lyotard's *The Inhuman* to justify his claim: “Capital must be seen not only as a major figure in human history, but also as the effect, observable on the earth, of a cosmic process of complexification.”

Development has as its goal more development, and this means for Lyotard a tendency towards more control and registration. In order to be taken up in the developmental process, something must be calculated. Otherwise, it is unclear if something actually contributes to development, or if it is rather a regression. “Any piece of data becomes useful (exploitable, operational) once it can be translated into information,” writes Lyotard in *The Inhuman*.<sup>11</sup>

With these reflections on data, Lyotard again reveals his prescience.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary companies, but governments as well, are measuring more and more, and technology today allows for all this data to be transformed into useful information. Of course, the most significant development in the last decennia is the transformation of a lot of the infrastructure of our lives to digital infrastructure, specifically the internet. Everything that occurs online is measured. The data is collected and sold off by “data brokers” to companies that have all sorts of aims, except furthering justice.<sup>13</sup>

Lyotard, still inspired by Marx after burying his Marxist past,<sup>14</sup> sees this as fundamentally a problem of time. In line with Marx's argument, Lyotard claims that what is exchanged on the markets is substantialized time. For Marx, this is because all surplus value ultimately relies on abstract labour time.<sup>15</sup> Lyotard seems to agree with this basic analysis,<sup>16</sup> but he also focuses on the role of time in development itself. Development—especially in its recent figuration: capitalism—seeks to control the flow of time by taking everything

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9 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 64.

10 Massimiliano Simons, “Jean-François Lyotard and Postmodern Technoscience,” *Philosophy & Technology* 35, no. 2 (June 2022): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-022-00517-3>.

11 *The Inhuman*, 50.

12 Ashley Woodward, *Lyotard and the Inhuman Condition: Reflections on Nihilism, Information and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 43.

13 Carissa Véliz, *Privacy Is Power: Why and How You Should Take Back Control of Your Data* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2021), ch. 1.

14 Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), appendix.

15 See the analysis of the commodity and value in: *Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1954), <http://archive.org/details/capitalvol1>.

16 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) esp. 244–255. When referring to this book, the numbers indicate the sections rather than page numbers.

as equalized time. What Lyotard is criticizing in his accounts of development is then, I would argue, first and foremost a mode of temporality, a way of being in time.

This is the source of Lyotard's critique of the imperative to save time. Saving time means going fast, and "to go fast is to forget fast, to retain only the information that is useful afterwards."<sup>17</sup> And in line with the development toward more development, we are going faster and faster. Circulation of resources and energy must increase in order to increase growth. Anything that is necessarily slow, and this includes practices of experimentation, art and thought, has to give way.

In more general terms, development's tendency of imposing performativity and saving time in all domains jumps over the heterogeneity of different domains, with their different ends and manners. Lyotard has, especially in *The Differend*, defended an account of human life in terms of phrases that follow different sets of rules (regimens) in view of different ends (genres). This means that the domain of economy can only impose its regimens and genre on other domains at the cost of wronging them.<sup>18</sup> An example is evaluating art works solely in terms of their money value on the markets. This wrongs the genre of aesthetics that judges art in view of the beautiful and the sublime. Development ignores this heterogeneity and imposes only the end of gaining time, and Lyotard rhetorically asks: "Is this a universally valid end?"<sup>19</sup>

In line with saving time by turning everything efficient, Lyotard claims that development diminishes the future as that which comes to you, as event or as what Lyotard calls the "Arrive-t-il?" in *The Differend*. Lyotard's inspiration for this analysis is Heidegger's notion of *Gestell*, which also describes a worldview that takes things as at our disposal for use.<sup>20</sup> This makes everything present, and therefore diminishes what Heidegger calls a proper futurity. In English, the connection with a *coming* is strange, but in both German (*Zukunft*) and French (*avenir*) the word for future connotes that which is to come.

Lyotard thinks futurity as the possibility of events. An event is what happens, and not what is made or engineered. It expropriates the mind, testifying to an essential passivity.<sup>21</sup> But contrary to a thought that seeks to do justice to this alterity and passivity, the developmental mode of dealing with events says: "Nothing must happen but what is announced, and everything that is announced must happen."<sup>22</sup> Insofar as there is something *new*, it must

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17 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 3.

18 Capital is what gives the economic genre its political hegemony (Lyotard, *The Differend*, 200).

19 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, 59.

20 Lyotard explicitly mentions Heidegger's notion in: Lyotard, *The Differend*, 200; see also: Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 69.

21 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 59.

22 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, 90.

at least be anticipated. It must lead to the desired effect of more efficiency and better performance. This is why *innovation* is such an offensive term for Lyotard: innovation is the production of the new only in order to improve performativity. Innovation requires investment, which projects upon the future a return that is not yet here but already taken into account in advance. Ashley Woodward summarizes this neatly: "Capital thus appears as a technology of time aimed at controlling probabilities."<sup>23</sup>

If there is anything of a future within development, it is a future that is expected and predictable. Lyotard therefore sees little reason to believe that a source of resistance can be found in this first inhumanity. This is even more the case because today more development does not mean more rigid structures and explicit coercion, but more flexibility and domination by means of seduction.<sup>24</sup>

This means that development and its current figuration in capitalism is not something external. As we have seen, its source is the cosmic tendency of complexification itself. Inevitably, inside of each of us then is also a little capitalist desiring profit and wealth. As Lyotard writes in *The Inhuman*, "the desire for profit and wealth is no doubt no other than this process [of negentropy] itself, working upon the nervous centres of the human brain and experienced directly by the human body."<sup>25</sup>

But besides a little capitalist, there is inside us also an infant child. Again, we can frame this opposition in terms of time: whereas development—the first inhuman—imposes saving and gaining time, the second inhuman of infancy rather calls for a slowing down which inevitably results in what for development can only mean losing time.<sup>26</sup> But why does Lyotard turn to infancy in the first place?

Infancy reveals that humans are not reasonable and "useful" from the start. Every human being begins helpless, unable to speak and reason, unable to make and innovate. Infancy confronts us with our "initial delay in humanity."<sup>27</sup> But this formulation is still too teleological, as if the goal of infancy is to become maturity. This is for Lyotard not so evident: what this jumps over is precisely a difference that is more radical, "a senseless difference."<sup>28</sup> In fact, this difference is unoblatable: "That it always remains for the adult

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23 Woodward, *Lyotard and the Inhuman Condition*, 52.

24 Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2017). However, it seems the regime of explicit discipline and punishment is on the rise again. Thanks to one of the reviewers for bringing this to my attention.

25 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 71.

26 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 3.

27 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 4.

28 Compare Deleuze and Guattari: "it is as though, independent of the evolution carrying them toward adulthood, there were room in the child for other becomings...". Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 273.

to free himself or herself from the obscure savageness of childhood by bringing about its promise [of becoming human,]—that is precisely the condition of humankind.”<sup>29</sup>

The difference between infancy and adulthood is understood here by Lyotard as difference between an openness or indeterminacy on the one hand, and forms and institutions on the other. The perhaps old-fashioned term *formation* can be useful here. Infancy is the state before formation. It is not yet (predominantly) formed, which means that infancy has the potentiality for a variety of forms. But distinct in Lyotard’s understanding of this potentiality is that this is not just potentiality for specific forms.

In Stiegler’s theory this seems to be the case, as Van der Heiden claims: “for him, the *défaut*, the particular desire of the human, is generated by or in the encounter with the *techné*... In a certain sense this is true: the child only starts to speak when spoken to. Yet, the potentiality of the infant to speak also exceeds the actual languages to which it is exposed and into which it is educated.”<sup>30</sup> When Lyotard claims that infancy remains, he understands this as this excess. It is not just the remaining potential to learn a new language for example, it is a potential that transgresses established forms and meanings.<sup>31</sup>

But Lyotard himself already saw some problems with this notion of infancy. Development’s seemingly limitless tendency towards optimization must mean that eventually it will encroach upon infancy as well, and Lyotard indeed writes that “children are not allowed enough time for infancy.”<sup>32</sup> What happens when we take this remark seriously, and consider that their potentiality is immediately appropriated by the system of development?

This is what Stiegler does. A number of his works are motivated by his diagnosis of a profound infantilization of adults, combined with an adultification of children. Therefore, I will present Stiegler’s arguments for claiming that infancy is in the context of infantilization part and parcel of development, and for claiming that we need a new narrative, which Stiegler finds in a renewed call for Enlightenment.

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29 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 4.

30 Gert-Jan van der Heiden, “Technology and Formation: Stiegler on Event and Self-Care,” *Kilikya Felsefe Dergisi/Cilicia Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2015): 55.

31 Van der Heiden provides in his text an elaborate critique of Stiegler’s work, also by means of Lyotard. He focuses on Stiegler’s notion of *défaut* and potentiality, whereas I focus here on affectivity and infantilisation. See also his: Van der Heiden, “Technology and Childhood: On a Double Debt of the Human,” in *Humanism*, ed. Günter Figal, International Yearbook for Hermeneutics 15 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 16–34.

32 Lyotard, *Readings in Infancy*, 56.

## Stiegler's Critique of Infantilization

Like Lyotard, Stiegler frames the problems of our time as a problem of time. Lyotard already argued that the end of development is saving time, and that this means that everything must be able to be equated under the header of a general time. Stiegler seems to agree when he poses the issue in terms of the age of the attention economy, or rather "*attention dis-economy*," because it is "above all an age of the dissipation and destruction of attention."<sup>33</sup> Attention is destroyed when it is captured not in order to train it, but to lead it from one short-lived pleasure to another. What it comes down to, and here Stiegler formulates the problem in terms of time, is that "the industries capture [people] as 'available brain time'..."<sup>34</sup> The ultimate resource for today's development (what Stiegler calls consumerism) is, as in Lyotard, time, which development turns into abstract time.

The capture of "brain time" has resulted in a shift from democracy to consumerism. Where democratic education seeks to train and cultivate *desire*, consumerism exploits the *drives*. Stiegler warns that this will lead people to quite literally have no idea: access to the realm of ideas requires the long and slow training of attention. Again, the diagnosis is very close to Lyotard's, who writes in *The Differend* that: "Humans will thereby no longer feel even sorrow before the incommensurability between realities and Ideas, since they will lose their capacity to have Ideas."<sup>35</sup> What Lyotard predicted in the 80s has for Stiegler become reality in the 2000s.

Stiegler also rephrases the problem of development into a problem of maturity and childhood, but in a way that is diametrically opposed to Lyotard's. The key term for Stiegler is *infantilization*: the systematic treatment of adults as children, a process he also designates with related terms such as "regression" and "minoritization."<sup>36</sup> These tendencies are driven by consumerism and addictive media and Stiegler claims that "this consumerism is itself based on the liquidation of maturity through the *systemic generalization of minority*..."<sup>37</sup> In *Taking Care*, addictive media still primarily means television. But in his still untranslated *L'Immense régression*, Stiegler has updated his analysis of infantilization to the media platforms of our time.<sup>38</sup> Central in both works is that due to infantilization, both childhood and maturity come to an end.

If infancy is nowadays already co-opted by development, Lyotard's distinction between

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33 Stiegler, *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 152.

34 Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 38.

35 Lyotard, *The Differend*, 260.

36 Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*.

37 Stiegler, *States of Shock*, 3.

38 Bernard Stiegler, *L'Immense régression, Qu'appelle-t-on panser?* (Paris: Les liens qui libèrent, 2018).



the two inhumans no longer makes sense. This is reflected in Stiegler's works by his use of the term *inhuman* solely in a negative sense. The inhuman is *only* development; there is no second inhumanity in Lyotard's sense. Stiegler therefore calls for a becoming not-inhuman, which he understands as not becoming unjust.<sup>39</sup> Lyotard's echoes of Adorno's and Apollinaire's calls to "become inhuman" cannot be a bigger contrast.<sup>40</sup>

So what does Stiegler propose in order to fight infantilization?<sup>41</sup> Unsurprisingly, considering that Stiegler's term for the problem is *infantilization*, he calls for a new maturity. It is only by reconnecting with the Enlightenment values lauded by Kant that we can resist the infantilizing psychopower of companies and governments, and that we can work on the invention of new ways of living that strengthen the long circuits of desire and the investments in and attachments to objects that, in doing so, become worthy of protection and admiration.<sup>42</sup>

Maturity as Stiegler understands it is characterized primarily by taking responsibility (which is foremost responsibility for the next generations) and training critical thinking. Stiegler criticizes Lyotard precisely on misunderstanding responsibility as hallmark of maturity. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard calls for multiplying responsibilities by being flexible and adaptive. But Stiegler rightly argues that, in hindsight, Lyotard was here stricken by "a terrible blindness." This has not at all led to the promotion of justice. Rather, it led to a "systemic dilution of responsibility."<sup>43</sup> Flexibility and adaptivity are fully in line with the demands of development, and we have already seen that the end of development is not justice or freedom, but rather its own extension and intensification.

Stiegler on the other hand essentially proposes a new grand narrative, able to unite people (yet not under a stable identity),<sup>44</sup> so that they can form a front against the psychopower of industries in what he calls "the battle for intelligence." Referring to Jules Ferry and the concept of nation as unity, he proposes uniting in a common project that aims at the realization of reason in the future. This can only be a project of desire, not of the drives that seek immediate satisfaction. As ultimate end, this task is endless: it is a "perpetually renewed manufacturing of unity."<sup>45</sup> But taking part in and taking care of this common project

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39 Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, 27–28.

40 for example: Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 2.

41 Stiegler's works are infused with a rhetoric of battles and war. I have already referred to the "battle for intelligence," but see for a more general description the introduction to *Symbolic Misery 2* where Stiegler writes that "it is a matter of honing weapons" and that his books are "intended to assist in conflicts" primarily by "identifying the forces, tendencies, processes and energies against which it is pertinent to fight." Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery 2: The Katastrophê of the Sensible*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 2.

42 Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*.

43 Stiegler, *States of Shock*, 100.

44 Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 60–61.

45 Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 61.

can only be done when attention is trained to focus on the long circuits of desire rather than the short-circuiting of the drives.

I believe Stiegler makes a crucial point here. Lyotard pays hardly any attention to the merits of the training of attention and of structured reasoning. And indeed, when we consider how today the call to indulge in your drives and remain infantile no longer comes primarily from the avant-garde of artists and thinkers,<sup>46</sup> but from the marketing departments of multinational companies, Lyotard's notion of infancy seems one-sided at best. Infancy as the only thing "with which to resist," as Lyotard writes in *The Inhuman*,<sup>47</sup> can no longer simply be affirmed. But does this mean that this notion has lost all relevance today? I will claim the contrary, by first arguing that Stiegler's maturity replaces one one-sidedness with another, following up with an argument that Lyotard's notion of infancy is precisely what is lacking in Stiegler's one-sided call for a new maturity as the sole solution.

As others have already noted, Stiegler's extreme insistence on urgency combined with his references to Jules Ferry—who was not only, as Stiegler positions him, a forerunner of public education, but also a vehement imperialist who called on the 'superior races' to civilize the 'inferior' ones—sits uneasy with the task of promoting intelligence and reason.<sup>48</sup> It seems that precisely due to the urgency to act, Stiegler cannot resist the phantasy of a *total* plan for countering infantilization. His sense of urgency borders on fatalism, for example when he writes that "care is completely destroyed" and that the destruction of attention we are witnessing is "unprecedented."<sup>49</sup> This fatalism is nuanced in other places, for example in *States of Shock* where Stiegler writes of the fact of infantilization: "there is an alternative to this fact."<sup>50</sup> However, Stiegler's insistence on immediate urgency remains. While I do not fully agree with Emile Bojesen that Stiegler is totalitarian, his characterization of Stiegler's proposals as "impositional" makes sense.<sup>51</sup>

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46 Especially the surrealists—including the aforementioned Apollinaire—succeeded in creating new meanings for art by taking children and childhood as inspiration, see David Hopkins's fascinating *Dark Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

47 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 7.

48 Peter Gratton, "Taking Care of Youth and the Generations," *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, 2010, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/taking-care-of-youth-and-the-generations/>.

49 Even though Stiegler consistently argues for the fundamentally pharmacological character of the human being's relation with technology—which would rather lead to a conclusion that the relation with technology has always been one of ambiguity and risk, both constituting the human and opening the human to the possibility of its own destruction—he also consistently claims that our contemporary situation is entirely "unprecedented." Bennington rightly argues that this reintroduces the model of *catastrophe* into Stiegler's thought, notwithstanding Stiegler's own criticism of it in Rousseau (in *Technics and Time*). See: Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 162–79.

50 Stiegler, *States of Shock*, 3.

51 Emile Bojesen, "Educational Resistance," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 55, no. 5 (16 April 2023): 562–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1927702>.

This is not only a consequence of Stiegler's sense of urgency. It is his understanding of childhood which necessitates it as well. Influenced by Kant's essay on Enlightenment, Stiegler understands childhood as first and foremost a negativity. This is clear in his understanding of childhood as *a default of origin*, which Stiegler emphasizes is more an absence than a lack.<sup>52</sup> This absence is required to think the difference that is at the root of the human's pharmacology, which is why Stiegler playfully writes of "*le défaut qu'il faut*." But even though he notes this necessity of the default, it remains formulated entirely in negative terms. Any potentiality of infancy is for Stiegler then immediately a potentiality of and via specific technics, as we have seen in Van der Heiden's argument discussed in the previous section. This means that in *Taking Care*, the minority to which infantilization regresses is characterized by a lack of responsibility, a lack of critical thought, a lack of deep attention resulting in attention deficit disorder, and a lack of individuation. For the most part then, when Stiegler writes of childhood, it is characterized solely as the negation of maturity.<sup>53</sup>

But, as I have argued elsewhere, there is also a second notion of childhood operative in Stiegler's works.<sup>54</sup> This is a childhood not opposed to maturity and a mature life of the mind, but constitutive of it in a positive sense, primarily as play. Taking up mature responsibility is taking responsibility for the next generations, and this turns out to mean engaging in play with the younger generation. A maturity that excludes "the age of play"—which is how Stiegler defines childhood in an interview<sup>55</sup>—is not mature at all.

Even though infantilization may seem catastrophic and disastrous in Stiegler's thought, the human is characterized by an *essential possibility of infantilization*. In Stiegler's words: "we can never become *completely* mature ..."<sup>56</sup> This means that even in the maturity that Stiegler calls for as the proper end of the human, infancy will remain. And of course, the

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52 Throughout *What Makes Life Worth Living*.

53 Operative here is a parallelism between childhood as origin of the individual and the *default qu'il faut* as origin of the human as such, a parallelism which Stiegler elaborates primarily via a reading of Winnicott (but see also the very peculiar reference to recapitulation theory in *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. George Collins and Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 140). I believe this, combined with the influence of Kant's essay on Enlightenment, leads to Stiegler's difficulties in thinking a positive notion of childhood. A similar structure is at work in related thinkers such as Peter Sloterdijk and Dany-Robert Dufour, specifically their concept of *neoteny* (which is also how Stiegler sometimes calls the *default qu'il faut*). It is probable then, that Sloterdijk and Dufour also run into similar difficulties, but I have not yet researched this in sufficient detail. I hope to work on this argument in future research.

54 Daan Keij, "Immature Adults and Playing Children: On Bernard Stiegler's Critique of Infantilization," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 40, no. 1 (February 2021): 67–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09742-9>.

55 Anna Kouppanou, "'...Einstein's Most Rational Dimension of Noetic Life and the Teddy Bear...' An Interview with Bernard Stiegler on Childhood, Education and the Digital," *Studies in Philosophy and Education: An International Journal* 35, no. 3 (2016): 244, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-015-9504-1>.

56 Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 87.

*proper-ty* of this maturity becomes problematic when it can never be fully actualized as such—which means this property is only ever actual in an incomplete, that is improper, way.

In the next section, I will argue that it is in supplementing a notion of maturity as responsibility and critical thinking that Lyotard's account of infancy reveals its current relevance. Stiegler rightfully sees the regression of responsibility and critical thought, but like a pendulum his proposals swing to a new one-sidedness. Lyotard's account of the remainders of infancy as radical vulnerability, potentiality and affectivity must not be forgotten if we want to truly think the human as not only mature, but as a specific *composition* of infancy and maturity.

### Affectivity and the Thing

Even though the notion of infancy as resistance, as elaborated in the first section, has become problematic after considering Stiegler's critique of infantilization, it nonetheless points to something that Stiegler's call for maturity, elaborated in the second section, cannot accommodate. Seeing infancy as only a lack of all that is positive, he cannot but want to escape it as much as possible.

Consider how different Lyotard reacts to Kant's essay on Enlightenment. He also notes that for Kant, "if childhood persists after childhood, it is 'laziness and cowardice.'" But rather than affirming this, Lyotard takes issue with this negative understanding: "By childhood, I do not only mean, as the rationalists would have it, an age deprived of reason. I mean this condition of being *affected* although we don't have the means—language and representation—of naming, identifying, reproducing, and recognizing what affects us."<sup>57</sup> With this notion of affectivity, Lyotard points to a dimension that, I would argue, is not thought properly in Stiegler's work. So not only is Stiegler's account necessary to supplement Lyotard; it is also the other way around.

Interestingly, we can follow cues from Stiegler. In *States of Shock*, Stiegler not only criticizes Lyotard's work but also suggests a more adequate direction. To think anamnesis, the working-through which Lyotard associates with bearing witness to the differend with infancy, Stiegler asks: "Would it not be necessary here to return to Lacan and to the question of the Thing—*das Ding*?"<sup>58</sup> It is truly remarkable that Stiegler ignores the fact that this is precisely Lyotard's route. Stiegler must have been aware of the work Lyotard has done in elaborating his own interpretation of this notion, so why he does not mention

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<sup>57</sup> Lyotard, "The Grip (Mainmise)," 149.

<sup>58</sup> Stiegler, *States of Shock*, 98.

it remains a mystery.

But Stiegler is right: the notion of the Thing is fruitful. In his own work, he has not succeeded in elaborating this in detail, although we can find some first leads in his “genealogy of the sensible” in *Symbolic Misery 2*. There, Stiegler points to an excess of sensibility in impressions that lead via what he terms “traumatic retention” to artistic expression.<sup>59</sup> However, Stiegler shifts his focus quickly to organology (as throughout his work) which leads his attention to the different and changing milieus of the sensible. Moreover, where he writes of the unconscious it is formulated mostly in terms of libido as energy, which also shifts the focus away from affectivity.

Lyotard on the other hand elaborated “the condition of being *affected*, although we don’t have the means—language and representation—of naming, identifying, reproducing, and recognizing what affects us” as infancy.<sup>60</sup> He distinguishes affects that can at least partially be represented,<sup>61</sup> from affects that can be seen as limit-cases of affect since they are not even felt at all. These latter affects wherein something has touched us but without signaling itself are what Lyotard terms “unconscious affects.” Lyotard elaborates this by means of a reading of Freud, primarily in *Heidegger and ‘the jews’*: “It is thus a shock, since it ‘affects’ a system, but a shock of which the shocked is unaware, and which the apparatus (the mind) cannot register in accordance with and in its internal physics; a shock by which it is not affected.”<sup>62</sup>

Crucially, that this affect is not experienced or registered consciously does not mean that it does not have any effect. In the metaphor of *Heidegger and ‘the jews’*: the affect deposits a quantity of energy and this haunts the mind unknowingly. In an interview with Richard Beardsworth, Lyotard links this to infancy:

The human child takes two years to begin to speak. This is a huge zone, constituting a delay which explains, perhaps ... that something is going to happen, that something will have happened in this dumb zone where the child nevertheless hears, hears a music. Something is going to happen that cannot be marked, because it cannot be symbolized (yet) in a language. This presents the occasion for an affective mass to gather

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59 Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery 2: The Katastrophē of the Sensible*, 84. Many thanks to one of the reviewers for pointing out this book and the notions of traumatic retention and traumatype. I hope to elaborate on this in more detail in future work.

60 Lyotard, “The Grip (Mainmise),” 149.

61 In *Emma*, Lyotard writes: “quality and address are still, or already, what is in affect, albeit remotely, part of the representative, of articulated language and of time” “Emma: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis”, 32, translation modified.

62 Lyotard, *Heidegger and ‘the Jews’*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 12.

which will remain in attendance of its expression.<sup>63</sup>

I believe we see here how Lyotard understands the genesis of the Thing as that which resists the mind's desire for transparency. But as we have seen, for Lyotard, infancy is not chronologically limited to our stage of life before we learn how to speak. There remains an affectivity for that which we cannot put into words or other representations.

But of course, not every affect hits equally 'deeply.' I think this is why Lyotard writes:

And what makes an encounter with a word, odor, place, book, or face into an event is not its newness when compared to other 'events.' It is its very value as initiation. You learn this only later. It opened a wound in sensibility. You know this because it has since reopened and will reopen again, marking out the rhythm of a secret and perhaps unknown temporality. That wound led into an unknown world, though without ever making it known. Such initiation initiates to nothing, it just begins.<sup>64</sup>

This affect that opens a wound in sensibility is constitutive of initiation, which I understand as the bringing about of a break with what is. Reason, even if understood pharmacologically as Stiegler does, is perhaps *necessary* to bring this to the end of a desire for ideas rather than a short-circuiting of the drives, but it is not of itself *sufficient*. What must be thought is a site where "it hits you." Infantile affect institutes a break, opening up existing structures and habits. And Lyotard's phrasing suggests it opens up ways of seeing as well.

The condition for any change—or in Stiegler's terms: any *invention*—whatsoever is the opening up of existing structures. And I believe we can locate here a profound difference between Stiegler and Lyotard. Woodward summarizes this difference ("in short, and simplifying") as a difference in how they value the binding of the drives. Stiegler values binding the drives and investing in durable objects—ultimately those objects without end that are the ideas of reason—while Lyotard values their unbinding that leads to a break with existing meanings and structures.<sup>65</sup>

The possibility of radical events that open up existing ways of seeing requires a thought of infancy as a dimension of life that remains, in adulthood as well. It is not enough to think maturity as not-total; the immaturity that remains must be positively thought as a dimension of affectivity that goes beyond—or perhaps more precise: *before*—technologically

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63 Richard Beardsworth, "Freud, Energy and Chance: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard," *Teknema*, no. 5 (1999), <http://tekhnama.free.fr/5Beardsworth.html>.

64 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, 90–91.

65 Woodward, *Lyotard and the Inhuman Condition*, 101.

mediated representations and objects. This is a consequence of understanding infancy as not exclusively constituted pharmacologically.

The suspension or possible innovation of meaning is then not only grounded in the *différance* Stiegler thinks between the human and the human supplement of technics. Van der Heiden writes: “the *différance* of the past handed down as writing and the horizon of meaning in which it is appropriated ... is also the margin or the play that allows for something new to announce itself within this horizon of meaning.”<sup>66</sup> This conception allows us to think meaning as open-ended and fundamentally incomplete, and thus that something new can announce itself, but not yet where the new comes from.

With infancy as radical affectivity, Lyotard points to a different open-endedness. This results from the mismatch between articulated meaning and infancy rather than writing: “Discourse does not appear to be able to support for long an unarticulated and unargued remnant remaining outside of its grasp.”<sup>67</sup> Confronted with this inarticulate remnant, the mind seeks to bring it to transparency, that is, to articulate it.

Lyotard is not always clear on this, but I believe the demand that ultimately spurs those practices that both Lyotard and Stiegler deem essential to what makes life worth living—science, art, philosophy—does not come from the Thing as such.<sup>68</sup> In *Emma*, Lyotard clarifies: “the pure childhood phrase-affect itself cannot involve a demand. ... A demand is an expectation of linking.”<sup>69</sup> The demand for linkage pertains to articulated phrases, those phrases that were the object of investigation of *The Differend*. But affect is *inarticulate*.<sup>70</sup>

The demand only comes about when the mind tries to enter into relation with the Thing, and to give it a place. It is only then that this squatter and clandestine guest reveals that it is there.<sup>71</sup> I deliberately use this phrasing to signify that the Thing does not reveal *itself*, but only *that it is*. Its obscurity, resulting from affects that are fundamentally unrepresentable, is unsublatable.

Its stubborn obscurity functions for Lyotard as explanation for the drive to writing, thinking and other practices of making. He writes in *Emma*: “the silent ‘presence’ of the affect ... demands of articulated language an endless series of stagings, novels, tragedies,

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66 Heiden, “Technology and Formation,” 58.

67 Lyotard, “The Affect-Phrase (from a Supplement to The Differend),” in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, ed. Keith Crome and James Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 106.

68 Lyotard writes of an obligation and a debt to the Thing in: *Readings in Infancy*, 44–45.

69 Jean-François Lyotard, “Emma,” in *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge), 39.

70 Lyotard, “The Affect-Phrase (from a Supplement to The Differend).”

71 see: Claire Nouvet, “The Inarticulate Affect: Lyotard and Psychoanalytic Testimony,” *Discourse* 25, no. 1 (2003): 239.

epics, an accumulation and linking of articulated phrases which are contradictory, undecidable ...in order to relieve adult language of the impossible task of getting even with the 'nothing' of childhood 'affect'."<sup>72</sup> The word *exigency* names this well. Exigency is the feeling of necessity, of the 'I cannot but do this.' But since ultimately the attempt is to do justice to the Thing, to affect, this cannot but fail.

Lyotard sees this process at work in Freud's Rat Man case. During transference in the analysis, Freud was affected many times in transgressive ways. He writes in his journal of all kinds of horrible, frightful and wonderful phantasies of sex and murder.<sup>73</sup> These affects having been amassed in the Thing, Freud struggles to do full justice to what has occurred. This struggle is, as Lyotard rightly notes, the struggle of "a Flaubert, of a Beckett."<sup>74</sup> Freud cannot but continue on, working through the affects and the "singular beauties" of the case and trying to write them down, even though he simultaneously sees he betrays them. He writes: "Unfortunately this paper in turn is becoming too bulky. It just pours out of me, and even so it's inadequate, incomplete and therefore untrue."<sup>75</sup> Precisely in this excessive accumulation, we can find a testimony to that which resists being written, in writing.<sup>76</sup> The Thing is not inscribed, but circumscribed.

Geoffrey Bennington has argued that this is therefore the ground for experiment and invention. Even though testimony cannot but fail—recall Lyotard's infamous "The witness is a traitor"<sup>77</sup>—it can "fail better" in seeking new ways to write that which cannot be written.<sup>78</sup> This entire dimension of affect, of the Thing, and of practices of bearing witness, are I believe then also constitutive of what Stiegler seeks to think as "the feeling that life is worth living."<sup>79</sup> What is therefore required is both Stiegler's new maturity that takes responsibility for the next generation, training their attention for ideas of reason, but also Lyotard's slow and inefficient anamnesis of infantile affects. In line with Lyotard's insistent defense of heterogeneity, we must maintain that these are separate domains,<sup>80</sup> and critical maturity in Stiegler's sense cannot accommodate them both.

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72 Lyotard, "Emma," 43.

73 See: Lyotard, *Readings in Infancy*, 102.

74 Lyotard, *Readings in Infancy*, 101.

75 Quoted in: Lyotard, *Readings in Infancy*, 101.

76 See: Lyotard, *Readings in Infancy*, 1.

77 This is the final phrase of Lyotard, *The Inhuman*.

78 Julie Gaillard and Mark Stoholski, "Impious Thinking: An Interview with Geoffrey Bennington," in *Traversals of Affect: On Jean-François Lyotard*, ed. Julie Gaillard, Mark Stoholski, and Claire Nouvet (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 270.

79 Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living*.

80 Lyotard distinguishes these as the task of the intellectual and the task of the philosopher in: Francis Guibal and Jacob Rogozinski, *Témoigner du différend: quand phraser ne se peut : autour de Jean-François Lyotard* (Paris: Osiris, 1989); See also the distinction of two Others in: Jean-François Lyotard, "Anamnesis: Of the Visible," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (1 February 2004): 107–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276404040483>.



## Conclusion

In this article I have argued for the enduring relevance of Lyotard's philosophy of infancy. I began by sketching how Lyotard posits infancy as a source of resistance against the tendency of development: development towards more development. This requires efficient circulation of resources and energy. Contrary to the demands of speed and efficiency, Lyotard positions infancy as slow anamnesis and repeated working-through.

In the second section this opposition was problematized by means of arguments from the work of Bernard Stiegler. Stiegler argues in numerous works that our contemporary situation is characterized not just by development, but by *infantilization*. Infantilization is understood as the destruction of maturity, and thereby as the in-differentiation of the generations. In this context, infancy is anything but resistance; it is the minority to which we regress to fulfill the demands of the system of development. Stiegler therefore argues that it is only by getting out of this condition of minority and infancy that we can resist.

Stiegler thus calls for a new maturity. Young minds must learn to sublimate their infancy into the long circuits of the life of the mind. This results in "a battle for intelligence," because companies and governments alike rather seek to short-circuit the young minds, trapping them in the insatiable renewed drives for repeated satisfactions. To counter this tendency, youth requires training on how to care for the world, and that can only happen by leading their minds into the realm of ideas: 'objects' that by definition cannot be consumed.

These arguments are important in today's society. Critical thinking is indeed going down the drain, with studies showing that fewer children are able to actually understand what they are reading and to reflect on it. This requires remedy, and Stiegler sees the right way forward by claiming that institutions of education must recapture attention in order to support children's entry into the long circuits of reason. Lyotard also sees these dangers, but at times he shows a kind of disdain for reason that prevents him from fully realizing them.

However, in the third section I argued that this does not mean that his philosophy of infancy has been surpassed by the times. Both Lyotard and Stiegler see something important, but the full scope of the issue only comes in view when we combine aspects of their thinking. Stiegler sees that something of a feeling is required, an exigency, but his theory does not allow him to fully conceptualize this.

Lyotard's thought of infancy not only as default, nor only as potentiality, but foremost as affectivity, allows for a conceptualization of this dimension of feeling. Moreover, it reveals that central to the feeling of exigency is a dimension of existence that is absolutely unmasterable. This dimension cannot be trained by reasoning and "deep attention" alone;

rather, it requires the ascesis of reason. It requires “free-floating attention,” as Lyotard writes with reference to the practice of the psychoanalyst.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, what this reveals is then that “saving childhood and even infancy” cannot be programmed by the knowing generation of adults.<sup>82</sup> The event of affect cannot be triggered. At most, favorable conditions can be fostered. But ultimately, the event occurs of itself, shaking up the infancy that remains with us.<sup>83</sup>

My conclusion is then that resistance to development should paradoxically consist of both the training and the ascesis of reason. Deep attention and critical thinking is required to learn from tradition—both the one in which we are born and those of others—but sensibility to affect and the Thing must also be cultivated to make room for eruptions from that which will forever be before all tradition.

Lyotard writes in *Survivor* that responding to the demand that springs from the missed encounter between the mind and the Thing requires “loneliness.”<sup>84</sup> But in the same text, he also notes that there is a possible tradition of infancy. This tradition, which we can perhaps term an *atradition* or *intradition* is not really worked out in detail. But I believe that in times where the breakdown of the mind also results in the breakdown of ecology understood in the sense not only of the environment but also of the *social* ecology, a *sharing of infancy* must be conceptualized as a necessary counterpart to renewed efforts in the sharing of ideas in the setting of education. A sharing of infancy that is the sharing of a joy and wonder, but also of a melancholy, that are presupposed in all the infinite efforts of the life of the mind. How exactly such a sharing must be thought remains a task for future research.

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81 Lyotard, “The Affect-Phrase (from a Supplement to The Differend),” 108.

82 See: Stiegler, *States of Shock*, 153.

83 See “Anima Minima” in: Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

84 Lyotard, *Readings in Infancy*, 59.

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