

Acts of Use from Gestell to Gelassenheit: Calculative Thinking and Exploratory Doing

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This paper addresses the implications of open-ended instances of use and non-instrumental person–thing interactions. Central to the argument is an analysis of Heideggerian work on technology and particularly of the notions of Gestell [enframing] and Gelassenheit [releasement]. These name respectively modern technology’s inherent danger – a totalising ‘unconcealment’ of the world as mere resources to be exploited – and a possible gateway from it – in the form of an open mode of thinking, void of calculative demands towards what is encountered. Suggesting that a possible transition from Gestell to Gelassenheit needs not be intended as an exclusively metaphysical shift, as some have argued, it will then be considered how a different way of thinking could be prepared and assisted by a different way of acting, of doing. Such radical modification would crucially require questioning the very notion of use and its hazy relation to functionality. The paper ultimately makes a case for modes of interacting with artefacts through acts of use as ends in themselves, transcending teleological explanations and not exhausted in utilitarian functionalism. It is proposed that a possible prototype for this type of inherently ludic exploratory doing might be found in the activities of French revolutionary group Situationist International.

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Agency: masters and slaves

Understanding artefacts as *performative*, as theorised by design historian and critic Damon Taylor (Taylor, 2011, p. i), as a much more

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complex reality than a mere stream of inert, ever-compliant utility tools, consequently puts into question the alleged agency of human actants within the mechanics of everyday life. The intention to move beyond the problematic humanist rhetoric of the intentional, self-constituting human subject has been central to the study of person-thing interactions within the fields of material culture studies and philosophy of technology as well as, of course, STS. Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) has been a prime example of such theoretical effort. Artefacts, Latour rightly notes, 'might authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on' (Latour, 2005, p. 72). This way, the very concept of agency can be said to be somewhat shattered and made *social* – 'an association between entities' (ibidem, p. 65), some human some non-human – thus ceasing to be conceived as a *property* of a subject. Building on these theories, what follows will firstly make a case for rejecting an understanding of agency, in relation to objects, as positioned on a linear spectrum, oscillating between two polarities: on one hand, the absolute mastery of humans over instruments at their utter disposal; on the other, a gloomy dictatorship of things over supposedly passive users, slaves at the mercy of their own tools. It is instead claimed that these two allegedly opposite perspectives are far more entangled than one might assume and by no means mutually exclusive. Therefore, simply framing the issue as a matter of *degrees* of agency, on a hypothetical continuum ranging from 'complete control' to 'complete subjugation' is perhaps inadequate. It is instead proposed, as counterintuitive as it might sound, that dichotomising these two aspects is deceptive because, more often than not, we might well be both masters *and* slaves simultaneously. The construction of this argument will mostly hinge upon a reading of Heidegger's work on technology and will pave the way for a discussion on thinking and acting in relation to technology and artefacts. This will then lead to a consideration of how we might imagine, and indeed devise, alternative ways of encountering and, more generally, *being* with things when constructing acts of use as a form of exploratory playful behaviour. The paper will conclude by looking at the activity of French revolutionary group Situationist International, in order to discuss the potential implications and political relevance of everyday ludic experience.

Revealing: *Gestell*

In 1954 German philosopher Martin Heidegger first published the seminal essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, which had the intent of uncovering no less than the *essence* of technology. The first thing that must be noted is that Heidegger's analysis is not primarily concerned with technological *things* in and of themselves. Indeed, he claims:

'Technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology [...] the essence of technology is by no means anything technological.'
(Heidegger, 1977 [1954], p. 4)

Secondly, the essence of technology cannot be fully exhausted in its instrumentality, in it being an *instrumentum* (ibidem, p. 5) – i.e. a means to an end. Again, while this is indeed true for how technological *things* are encountered, it still does not identify the essence that permeates them. If this were the case, the will to assert our agency, taming technology through enhanced mastery, would be all that is required to us. Rather, such essence – that does imply instrumentality – has to be grasped as a particular 'way of revealing' [*Das Entbergen*] (ibidem, pp. 11–12). Understood in this way, technology's fundamental instrumentality is actually grounded in *causality*, intended as causing the coming to presence of something, as bringing something out of concealment. What is at stake, what is being 'unconcealed' through technological mediation, Heidegger argues, is the very world of which we are part. Crucially, then, the mode of revealing that is characteristic of technology consists in presenting the whole world as a mere stockpile of resources that human beings are encouraged to summon and exploit. This way, everything everywhere is reduced to 'standing-reserve' [*Bestand*] (ibidem, p. 17) through a process that Heidegger calls *Gestell*: 'enframing'. Technology's essence can thus be understood as the setting in motion of a constant instrumental demand that extends to the totality of the existent. An ever-quantifying way of *thinking* about the world as nothing but an endless series of in-order-to utility tools. Not exclusively technological things then, but the entire world – ourselves included, if we think about the concept of 'human resources', for instance – thus becomes revealed as a means to an end. *Everything* is enframed, everything is in question.

This seemingly inescapable, pure utilitarianism lays bare the paradox mentioned earlier in regards to the master-slave dichotomy. According to Heidegger, we are enslaved precisely through an insatiable will to absolute mastery of the world, through a 'single way of revealing' (Heidegger, 1977

[1954], p. 32). That is, our very obsession with mastery *is itself* a form of somewhat covert slavery to technological things. As Heidegger himself explicitly notes elsewhere, ‘man’s unconditional mastery over the earth, and the execution of this will, harbor within themselves that subjugation to technology’ (Heidegger, 1993 [1981], p. 14).

Thinking: *Gelassenheit*

What we begin to see is that the chief concern in Heidegger’s critique of technology is the emergence of an alienating and profoundly impoverishing mode of *thinking* – and therefore *being* in – the world we inhabit. Which of course begs the question: can an alternative to such thinking be developed and, if so, what would that be? Heidegger directly addressed these questions a few years later, in 1959, by formulating the concept of *Gelassenheit* (Heidegger, 1969 [1959]). The argument here primarily hinges upon the opposition between ‘calculative thinking’ – i.e. what we have seen to emerge through *Gestell* – and what Heidegger calls ‘meditative thinking’ (ibidem). Thinking that is ‘meditative’, Heidegger claims, is precisely what could enable us to overcome the reifying disclosure of the world that is proper of enframing. This is because such thinking, being radically stripped of instrumental demands towards the world that is encountered, instead remains meditatively ‘open to its content, open to what is given’ (ibidem, pp. 24–25). Before we proceed any further, it should be noted that the frequent and potentially equivocal use throughout this paper of the term ‘meditative’ [*besinnliche* – which might alternatively be rendered as ‘contemplative’] shall not be mistakenly linked to popular meditation practices such as that of ‘mindfulness’. That being said, engaging in the openness of this mode of thinking entails an attitude of *Gelassenheit*, often rendered in English as *releasement*. What is, then, that thinking must be released from, so to speak, for it to be open to its content and therefore meditative? Heidegger’s rather cryptic response is that thinking must be rid of and disentangled from *willing*. One could perhaps say that what he has in mind here is a thinking that would be primarily concerned with itself as an undirected exploratory process, rather than with the *result* of such process. Metaphorically speaking, a similar difference might be said to exist between walking in order to reach a destination and walking as strolling, as intentionally purpose-free wandering. Still, what makes the above assertion profoundly counterintuitive is that, of course, to relinquish willful thinking – giving way to what Heidegger calls ‘non-willing’, or sometimes ‘letting-be’ –

surely requires an effort in itself: that is, to willingly renounce willing (ibidem, p.59). This admittedly abstruse argument has inevitably resulted in diverging interpretations.

Firstly, the notions of non-willing and releasement must not lead to the hasty conclusion that what Heidegger urges is a delusional form of reactionary pseudo-primitivism and unlikely return to a pre-technological age (cf. Agamben, 2009; Dreyfus and Spinoza, 2003). Indeed, Heidegger explicitly concedes that '[i]t would be foolish to attack technology blindly' (ibidem, p. 53). On the contrary, he proposes,

'[w]e can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us' (ibidem, p. 54).

We can see, then, that the alternative relation to technology that Heidegger is describing is not the form of total rejection that philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek, for instance, seems to find in the concept of *Gelassenheit* (Verbeek, 2011, p. 71). Rather, the term names a way of being at once immersed in yet unshackled by technology and technological things, a comportment of releasement *toward*, not *from* things (Heidegger, 1969 [1959], p. 54) [*Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*]. That is, Heidegger's releasement is a relationship with technology, albeit a different and freed one.

A second matter of controversy is that, again contrarily to what Verbeek appears to infer, Heidegger's proposition is not meant to encourage a form of mindless quietism or abstracted passivity. Not only must one *will* non-willing, as mentioned above. Also, one must not intend the process of releasement, as Verbeek does, as a purely metaphysical undertaking whereby thinking differently *alone* would suffice (Verbeek, 2011, p. 72). Granted, Heidegger's ultimate focus is indeed on the mode of thinking that could allow a richer dimension of revealing. Nevertheless, we shall see that this does not undermine the importance that acting, and therefore potential bodily person-thing engagements, has in Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*.

Acting: practical *a priori*

In order to understand the sometime downplayed role that *acting* can hold within Heidegger's framework, we should now turn to Reiner Schürmann's book *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (1987 [1982]). Particularly throughout a chapter eloquently titled *Acting, the Condition for Thinking*, Schürmann discusses something that will be extremely useful to the present discussion: namely, what he calls a

‘practical a priori’ (Schürmann, 1987 [1982], p. 236). He notes that, in Heidegger, thinking is ‘made dependent upon a practical condition’ and ‘does not arise without preparation’ (ibidem, p. 235). When looking at the opening of *Being and Time*, for instance, one finds the two following questions and answers:

‘Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word ‘being’? Not at all. [...] But are we nowadays even perplexed at our inability to understand the expression ‘Being’? Not at all.’ (Heidegger, 2015 [1927], p. 19).

What Schürmann argues is that, while the first query concerns a purely philosophical issue, the second one ‘is no longer cognitive [...]. It is not even philosophical anymore’ (Schürmann, 1987 [1982], p. 237). Rather, he continues, this second question points to a type of *comportment*. That is, a ‘*practical modification of existence*’ (ibidem, p. 238 [my italic]) through a pre-philosophical *perplexity* that must be awoken as necessary condition of possibility in order to then confront the first, essentially philosophical question. This holds true for releasement as well: ‘[t]o understand releasement, one must be released’ (ibidem, p. 236).

A transformed practical *a priori*, intended as a preparatory exercise, would arguably need to retain the traits proper of the transformed mode of thinking it aims to lead to, and indeed mirror it. Such practice would then be, as it were, a form of ‘meditative practice’, of contemplative doing not underpinned by instrumental demands. A ‘non-willing practice’ concerned with itself as an *open* process. If such a ‘released practice’ – a released practical *a priori* – is to be conceptualised, we shall begin to consider what this would mean in terms of the actual ‘unavoidable use of technical devices’ (Heidegger, 1969 [1959], p. 54). Indeed, the practice discussed here is one revolving around encounters with artefacts, around those ‘acts of use’ that Heidegger acknowledges to be inevitable and through which a freed relationship between persons and things might be established. How are we, then, to understand and reimagine these acts of use according to a posture of *Gelassenheit*?

Using: play

It would now seem appropriate to focus our attention onto the very notion of *use* as such, and to do so through a critical lens, in order to first disentangle it from dogmatic rhetoric. ‘Use’ colloquially names an action of a

subject onto an 'object', in a way that is *functional* to the achievement of an end goal. This way, the *use* of some-thing, presented as an act that is operated in order to arrive at a result, essentially identifies an act that is given legitimacy through something external to it: its purpose, its *telos*, its *function*. Thus understood, the artefact encountered inevitably remains confined to the status of 'tool', of in-order-to device. Consequently, its most important in-use feature would appear to be its efficient function-*ing*, its usefulness, in a pragmatic sense, in enabling the fulfilment of a plan. The apprehension of *use* described here seems to confirm the reach of the calculative thinking that Heidegger takes issue with and, conversely, how glaringly at odds it is with the non-willing and radically open-ended relationship with technology that he advocates.

Narrow, efficiency-obsessed understandings of functionality have been largely disputed (see, amongst many others: Adorno, 1979; Dunne and Raby, 2001; Taylor, 2011). A first liberating step, for both practitioners and design scholars, has been that of challenging the allegedly inescapable coupling of functionality with practical utility that had dominated mainstream design discourses. However, a second and even more resilient binary can perhaps be put into question now: namely, the coupling of functionality with use. Indeed, function intended as an inferred plan of action, or a 'script' (Akrich, 1992), regardless of what that plan would entail, clearly still betrays a *willing*, a calculative demand towards the artefact encountered. As Theodora Vardouli notes, however, 'there is little consensus about how the concepts of function and use relate to each other' (Vardouli, 2015, p. 1), hence the frequent assumption that the two are in fact inextricably co-dependent. Such assumption appears to be very much present in most of the practical work at which I was hinting above too, as a critique of utilitarian functionalism and rejection of efficiency has often resulted in the unfortunate removal of these projects from the sphere of everyday use and bodily action, favouring instead the highly curated settings of galleries or museums.

It is through the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben that we can instead begin to entertain a more radical understanding of *use*, as he confronts the difficulty of decoupling use and function in his book *The Use of Bodies* (2015). When discussing the Aristotelian distinction between 'productive instruments and instruments of use (which produce nothing except their use)' (Agamben, 2015, p. 12), Agamben acknowledges that

'[w]e are so accustomed to thinking of use and instrumentality as a function of an external goal that it is not easy for us to understand a dimension of use entirely independent of an end' (ibidem, p. 12).

Agamben's recourse to Aristotle provides yet another interesting insight only a few pages later, when he presents a similar distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*: while the former is defined by the presence of an external end (a *telos*), the latter is a mode of acting that 'is in itself the end' (ibidem, p. 21). Further, Agamben finds in Lucretius an analogous theorisation of use as 'completely emancipated from every relation to a predetermined end [...] beyond every teleology' (ibidem, p. 51). Here, through a fascinating reflection on the use that living beings make of their own body parts, it is suggested that the function of some-thing (a limb, in this case) is *created* through use, rather than being what guides it. This way, function can be understood as an elusive yet *distinct* stage within a process of use.

What Agamben offers through his analysis is the invaluable possibility to isolate a form of self-sufficient, radically autonomous use from the function that would otherwise eventually emerge through it (cf. Agamben, 2005, p. 64 for a similar argument). Appropriating a recurrent phrasing in Agamben's work, it could be said that, this way, function would be 'rendered inoperative' (e.g. see Agamben, 2015, p. 30). We can see how this operation points precisely to the type of 'willing non-willing' that we have sought to identify throughout. That is, the tainting emergence of function could be resolutely neutralised, or perhaps *indefinitely postponed*, through a form of *critical use* that is ceaselessly and creatively reinvented: a use that, as Vardouli notes, is ever-unfolding and spontaneously improvisational (Vardouli, 2015, p. 14). The seemingly daunting task of conceiving a form of use that is disinterested, open-ended, creative, spontaneous, actually names something as mundane as our ubiquitous interaction with technology: that is, *play*.

This assertion, however, should be treated with caution, for it could easily lead to deceiving conclusions, as the enframing of calculative thinking is always potentially at work. Firstly, the ludic engagement with artefacts that is proposed here shall not be understood as a *game*. This delicate distinction has been accurately described by Taylor. Games, he observes, 'contain a (usually explicit) script [...] whereas play can be said to be much broader and open' (Taylor, 2011, p. 151). Further, play 'can be the *suspension* of goal-directed activity [...]. Play can be for play's sake' (Matthews, Stienstra and Djajadiningrat, cited in Taylor, 2011, p. 151). The

practice of play – or a playful practical *a priori* – can therefore be intended as an undirected process whereby one gets willingly lost in a ‘delight internal to the act’ (Agamben, 2015, p. 51).

Drifting: things

A possible prototype for such fundamentally unplanned and exploratory activity could perhaps be identified in the work of French revolutionary group Situationist International (SI hereafter). Although the SI was officially active only between 1957 and 1972, their rich legacy remains highly influential across several fields, from art and architecture to cultural and political theory. The SI devised a unitary programme intended to counter the dramatically alienated practice of everyday life in modern society, advocating its radical alteration through the deliberate ‘construction of *situations*’ (cf. Knabb, 2006). Such *situations* essentially involved tactics for experimental comportment, often enacted by members of the group. Interestingly, as Tom Bunyard notes, ‘[c]onstructed situations [...] were deliberately designed so as to include chance elements’, which ‘were held to render lived experience potentially ludic’ (Bunyard, Forthcoming). This way, he continues, ‘[l]ife, as realised art, would become akin to play’ (ibidem). Central to this work was, on one hand, a fierce criticism of modernist functionalism and ‘urbanistic hyper-planning’ (McDonough, 2009, p. 20) as well as, on the other hand, an attempt to reignite an element of spontaneous creativity and adventurousness within daily existence. One notable *situationist* technique is that of the *dérive*, French for ‘drift’. *Dérives* ‘entailed ‘drifting’ through the city, [...] following no prior plan other than the whims and desires provoked by the local ambiances’ (Bunyard, Forthcoming).

This technique, ultimately intended to afford a condition permanent play [*jeu permanent*] through an incessant ‘succession of new fields of chance’ (Bunyard, 2011, p.74), retains a number of obvious similarities to the form of critical use that was described earlier on. Firstly, it might not be much of a stretch to understand the strategic and therefore agenda-driven nature of *dérives* as somewhat akin to Heidegger’s resolve for ‘non-willing’. Secondly, we can certainly see a clear parallel with the ‘openness’ of *Gelassenheit*, as those who engage in *dérives* ‘drop [...] their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attraction of the terrain and the encounters they find there’ (Knabb, 2006, p. 62). Importantly, this points to a shift in the relation to what is encountered: that

is, it could be argued that the SI played *with* – more so than *through* – the city.

Despite their interest in artworks and architecture, the SI strangely neglected the realm of everyday use–objects. However, if we were to conceptualise a released practice in relation to technology as a form of *dérive*, the artefacts encountered through such practice would best be regarded as ‘drifting companions’ or ‘comrades’, rather than toys as ‘instruments of play’. This would suggest an understanding of use as an experience grounded in a form of deep mutuality between user and ‘used’, the implications of which I have in part addressed elsewhere (Chapman and Marmont, Forthcoming). Although leading to very different conclusions, this form of mutuality is also remarkably reminiscent of Russian constructivist Alexander Rodchenko’s appeal for artefacts to cease being ‘mournful slaves’ and being instead intended as ‘comrades’ (Kiaer, 1996, p.3)

This being said, what can be understood through Situationist work much more explicitly than through Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit*, is the overt political relevance inherent in this ‘playful–constructive behaviour’ (Knabb, 2006, p. 62), as well as in the artefacts involved in it. The *performativity* of such artefacts would ultimately consist in the *recruitment* – the ‘interpellation’, in Althusserian terms (cf. Taylor, 2011, p. 54) – of a particular breed of user: a ‘dissident user’ that embraces the subversive power of play while refusing to relegate it to leisure time. This militantly playful practice could be instead interwoven with the very fabric of mundane activity and everyday encounters with artefacts, rather than separated from it as an ‘exceptional *intermezzo*’ (Huizinga, 1949, p. 9). The hope, then, is that an increasing portion of our relationship with things, with technology, could thus be deliberately transformed into a contemplative exercise, an *exploratory doing* that does not need to arrive anywhere specific. Turned, as beautifully put by Schürmann, ‘into a groundless play without why’ (Schürmann, 1987 [1982], p. 243).

Ultimately, what has been presented in this paper is an effort to introduce additional operational coordinates to already rich debates around the ‘thick imbroglio’ (Latour, 2005, p. 46) that is the realm of human acting. In particular, this study has intended to restate, more or less explicitly, the profoundly political and tactical implications that a certain approach to the issue begets.

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