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FORGET THE ENVIRONMENT, IMAGINE WITH MILIEU

Abstract

The paper juxtaposes an analysis of two terms: 'milieu' and 'environment'. As it can be seen in Serres' thought, the idea of 'environment' primarily points to the distinction from the individual and operates on the basis of isolationist approach. Conversely, the concept of 'milieu' displays the features of interconnectedness, entanglement and mediation. By projecting the biological understanding of symbiosis within a framework of Simondon's theory of imagination, I argue that 'milieu' can be conceptualized as both ontological and epistemological gateway for the inclusion of and the interaction with heterogeneity – the aspect that becomes important in critically revising the role of human exceptionalism and the anthropological relationship to other species. Subsequently, the relational and transitional potential of the milieu may be interpreted through the lens of the problem of symbiotic transitions that open the space for negotiation between interacting species.

1. Introduction

The concept of milieu has still not been sufficiently discussed within the context of environmental thinking. In what follows, I propose to juxtapose 'milieu' with 'environment' and to develop the ecocritical meaning of the former. Although 'environment' and 'milieu' are often understood as synonymous terms, notable conceptual differences exist between the two words. The idea of 'environment' primarily points to the distinction from the individual (what exists 'around' but also separate from the individual, not belonging to it), whereas the concept of 'milieu' displays the features of interconnectedness, entanglement and mediation. If 'environment' may be interpreted as an isolationist term based on separation, 'milieu' encompasses the semantics of relationships and connectivity.

Leo Spitzer showed that, in Old French, the term 'milieu' consistently conveyed the meaning of a 'middle' ('en miliu del pré'), which appears to align

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with its Latin etymon, 'medius locus' (Spitzer 1942: 169). Later on, defined by the humanist tendency to employ 'milieu' for the translation of 'medium' or 'aurea mediocritas', a connotation of 'intermediary' began to emerge during the Renaissance; and the term gradually acquired the meaning of "the midpoint between two extremes" (*ibidem*). The concept found its significance primarily in Newtonian mechanics, where it was used to explain the interaction between two physical objects at a distance. (Canguilhem (1952), Eng. tr. 2008: 99). Focusing on the reciprocal influence of bodies, one does not necessarily grasp that the field, produced between the two centers, also possesses a mediating (that is, a conditioning) effect.

The concept enters the biological context somewhat later, appearing in the research of Lamarck, Comte, Darwin, Uexküll, and others (*ibidem*: 98-99), while discussing the modes of mutual conditioning between the organism and the environment. The term permeated literature through Honoré de Balzac in 1842, particularly in the preface to *The Human Comedy*. Later, Hippolyte Taine adopted 'milieu' as a cornerstone of his analytic explanation of history, alongside race and moment. Influenced by Newton's considerations, the idea of 'milieu' comes to dominate the biological thinking of the 19th century. During this period, it was first and foremost understood as a liquid, in which an animal can move in a certain way – like a fish in water (*ibidem*: 100). For instance, Lamarck speaks of milieus in connection to fluids – the river, lake, or sea serves as the milieu for aquatic animals, creating the opportunity for swimming (*ibidem*). However, the specific nature of its relational role remained unexplored until due consideration is given to its participatory and active role in facilitating the movement of aquatic organisms.

Thereby, even in biology – under the influence of mechanistic interpretation – the milieu came to be considered only because centers of mutually influencing forces exist. Against these interpretations, one finds a tendency to overcome Newtonian heritage in biology by relying on a mathematical key (as in Auguste Comte (*ibidem*: 102-103) or by introducing a social and geographical element (as in Charles Darwin (*ibidem*: 104-106)). In his analysis, Canguilhem gradually discloses that a variety of the theories of 'milieu' – as problematic and insufficient as they may appear – enable to draw two important points: (1) the concept of 'milieu' is constitutively relational; (2) it encompasses elements that, initially appearing to elude the confines of representation, are not readily perceived or epistemologically articulated. 'Milieu' always undermines the surplus which cannot be fully determined. For this reason, I argue that 'milieu' presupposes the interactive modality of imagination.

Canguilhem's stance paralleled the relationship between the organism and its milieu with the relationship between the parts and the whole of an organism (*ibidem*: 111). By noting that the individuality of living entities extends beyond the confines of their ectodermal boundaries, much like it transcends the boundaries of a single cell, Canguilhem argues that the biological association

between an organism and its milieu could be characterized as a "functional relationship", rendering their interaction inherently "a mobile one" (*ibidem*). This can be evidenced by the fact that the cell is both a milieu for intracellular elements and itself lives in an interior milieu, which is sometimes on the scale of the organ and sometimes of the organism, thus "the organism itself lives in a milieu that, in a certain fashion, is to the organism what the organism is to its components" (*ibidem*).

It is exactly this character of mobility which enables to change perspective and modify the function of any milieu that sets a premise for an eco-critical interpretation of this concept. As we shall see, by juxtaposing Michel Serres' rejection of the idea of environment with certain aspects of Gilbert Simondon's philosophy, my text considers 'milieu' as both ontological and epistemological gateway for the inclusion *of* and the interaction *with* heterogeneity—the aspect that becomes important in critically revising the role of human exceptionalism and the anthropological relationship to other species. Subsequently, the relational and transitional potential of the milieu may be interpreted through the lens of the problem of symbiotic transitions that open the space for negotiation between interacting species.

2. Forget the environment!

In Serres' study "Natural Contract" one finds an invitation to "forget the word environment" as "it assumes that we humans are at the center of a system of nature." (Serres 1995: 33) The proposal is elaborated by pointing to a cultivation of a certain change in perspective that aims to dissociate from the idea that recalls a bygone era of human narcissism, i.e. "the humanism that makes of us the exact midpoint or excellent culmination of all things" (*ibidem*). As Serres reminds us, "Earth existed without our unimaginable ancestors, could well exist today without us, will exist tomorrow or later still, without any of our possible descendants, whereas we cannot exist without it" (*ibidem*). In this respect, Serres solicitates the strategy of humbleness, i.e. placing things in the center, whereas humans should be left at the periphery, "or better still, things all around and us within them like parasites" (*ibidem*).

Indeed, the idea of "environment" risks to fall under the centralized logic of subordination—the most important things appear in the middle, while secondary ones are set aside, so they happen around, acquiring only peripherical roles. Subsequently, this disposition is not the matter of a formal architecture of relationships, it also conceals the latent privileging of the interests of the human subjects that place themselves in a central position in respect to the rest of the world. Environment then means that what is placed around the figure of *Anthropos*; however, in this conceptual model of the world, humans themselves are distilled from the environment: they are what environment is not,

without actual partaking in its creation. It is precisely this constellation which presupposes the mutual exclusion – of individuals and their surroundings – that philosophically argues in favor of an isolationist take. Thus, we imagine the idea of environment as not only peripherical, but also genetically and structurally separated from individuals; whereas humans appear as both being situated at the center, as well purified in their identity.

As one can see, in this case, philosophical underpinnings may result in the reductionist view that obscures the constitutive character that defines the mode individuals inter-relate with their surroundings. As Richard C. Lewontin pointed out, one cannot think about organism-environment interaction by reducing either of these elements into stable systems, as "there is no 'environment' in some independent and abstract sense" (Lewontin 1991: 70). Both organisms and environments constitute and entangled and interdependent duo that ground each other's existence, i.e. predispose relational epistemology and ontology:

> Just as there is no organism without an environment, there is no environment without an organism. Organisms do not experience environments. They create them. They construct their own environments out of the bits and pieces of the physical and biological world and they do so by their own activities (*ibidem*).

And although it has become widely accepted to recognize an evolutional value of this interaction, articulated for instance, in the idea of symbiogenesis—a term that links symbiosis of different biological individuals with their development, thus providing a trajectory of the origin of new tissues, organs, organisms (Margulis 1998: 8), it also poses a conceptual problem for cognitive procedures that would grant an access to the complex ontology of relations. Organisms live through relations, but it is almost impossible to comprehend them within a full complexity. Indeed, ontologically this brings forward an idea of creation and novelty as the prerequisite of survival through co-existence. Lynn Margulis described this in an eloquent passage:

> Symbiogenesis brings together unlike individuals to make large, more complex entities. Symbiogenetic life-forms are even more unlike than their unlikely "parents." "Individuals" permanently merge and regulate their reproduction. They generate new populations that become multiunit symbiotic new individuals. These become "new individuals" at larger, more inclusive levels of integration. Symbiosis is not a marginal or rare phenomenon. It is natural and common. We abide in a symbiotic world (*ibidem*).

If symbiogenesis is to be regarded as the pivotal factor in the co-becoming of organisms, it is also important to concurrently consider the relational co-dependency between biotic and abiotic elements. In biology, the entanglement between inorganic place and life, is witnessed by proposing a specific concept – namely, the biotope. The latter term itself combines the Ancient Greek "bios" (meaning *life*) and "topos" (meaning *place*); it was coined by a German scientist Friedrich Dahl

in 1908 who used this term to indicate a concrete habitat in which a particular group of animal and plant species live. Understood primarily as a milieu suitable for living beings, the meaning of the concept gradually changed. As observed by marine scientists (Connor 1995: 30-46), the contemporary meaning is expressed by formula "Biotope = habitat + community," thus drawing together both the physical environment (habitat) and its distinctive assemblage of conspicuous species. (Dimitrakopoulos; Troumbis 2019: 359-365).

A habitat is defined according to geographical location, physiographic features and the physical and chemical environment (including salinity, wave exposure, strength of tidal streams, etc.), while community is described as "a group of organisms occurring in a particular environment, presumably interacting with each other and with the environment, and identifiable by means of ecological survey from other groups." (Hiscock; Tyler-Walters 2003: 3) Thus, a species has a certain habitat, but the group of species that share an ecosystem with that species in a geographic region, share a biotope. Today the notion of biotope, understood as "the milieu of life," became one of the fundamental tools to analyze the processes that keep together the living and non-living components of ecosystems.

However, this relational dimension of "life and place entanglement" must also be interpreted through the lens of genetic processes. For instance, James Lovelock pointed to the shifting role of oxygen in the course of evolution. Oxygen exhibits very toxic properties, displaying mutagenic and potentially carcinogenic effects, thereby imposing constraints on the longevity of living organisms (Lovelock 2000: 114). Towards the conclusion of the Archean era, the advent of even a small quantity of free oxygen would have catalyzed transformative effects on nascent ecosystems. According to Lovelock, the environmental chemistry would have undergone significant alterations, including heightened oxidation processes converting atmospheric nitrogen into nitrates and increased weathering of terrestrial rocks. Consequently, this alteration would have augmented the availability of hitherto limited nutrients, facilitating an expansion in the abundance of life (*ibidem*).

The contemporary prevalence of oxygen in the atmosphere must be primarily seen as the result of the proliferation of organisms capable of transforming this originally toxic substance into a potent metabolic accelerator. As Latour reminds us in the interpretation of Lovelock's work, oxygen exists not merely as an environmental component but as an "extended consequence" of an ongoing biological event, sustained to the present day through the prolific multiplication of organisms (Latour (2015), Eng tr. 2017: 105). Similarly, the Sun's involvement in the development of life has only been significant since the advent of photosynthesis – both phenomena emerge as outcomes of "historical events" with temporal boundaries restricted to the lifespan of the organisms perpetuating them; moreover, each of these events unfolds "new perspectives" for subsequent life forms (*ibidem*).

All in all, to understand life in the relational manner is not a simple task. It implies an attempt to build up an inclusive perspective that circumscribes both identity and heterogeneity. This is why the relationship of organism and environment is marked by a fundamental incommensurability that keeps their coupling in tension. In the tradition of the system theories, one finds the distinction between first-order and second-order systems theory, the latter providing the tools of explanation for "closure and the recursive selectivity that goes with it" (*ibidem*: 210), which, taking into consideration the fact, as Cary Wolfe suggests, "that any environment is always already exponentially more complex than any individual system", tends "to increase the differences that can make a difference in the organism's environment." (Wolfe 2023: 210)

Cognitively, however, this incommensurability may result in a simplification that was best described by Jakob Johann von Uexküll, who introduced the schema of the functional cycle, within which the relationship between subject and object is essentially addressed through the field of sensorimotor potential. By envisioning scenarios in which subjects are associated with either the same object or distinct objects through multiple functional cycles, one can gain, according to Uexküll, an understanding of "fundamental principle of the science of the environment" (Uexküll (1934), Eng. tr. 2010: 49). Accordingly, a well-known tick and mammal pair can be reduced to the three cycles that define their interconnection through biochemical and operational parameters. Hence: "The simple animal has a simple environment; the multiform animal has an environment just as richly articulated as it is" (*ibidem*: 50).

Serres' argument, which centers on the imperative of forgetting the word 'environment,' becomes more evident in the given context. In the opening pages of "Natural Contract" one finds a brief examining of Goya's "Fight with Cudgels", which portrays a desolate setting and features two individuals battling knee-deep in mud. For Serres, this painting refers to the dynamics of hierarchical positioning between figures and their background, exemplifying the way the anthropocentric gaze remains locked in the *Gestalt* of human forms, without a capability to focus on the actual milieu of the scene. Indeed, concentrating on the antagonism of fighting contenders, one is unable to shift the gaze to "the marsh into which the struggle is sinking." (Serres 1995: 1).

Understanding the ontology of 'environment' requires then to modify the imagination of relations that are not given within the regime of simplifying schematics of *homo sapiens* – or any other species. This kind of imagination aims at exceeding the cycles of cognition that prevent from considering the complexity of the environment and integrating the differences that can make a difference. If Umwelt is frequently envisioned as a soap bubble – a metaphor that rather attests to the overlay of potentialities in the common world – an

ecological move from epistemology to ontology points to a gradual openness, escaping the entrapment of soap bubbles and imagining the possibilities that emerge from heterogeneity and complexity of the environment.

This is why Serres' relinquishment of the concept of 'environment' may be construed as the rejection of the "heading imposed by Descartes's philosophy" (*ibidem*: 34), necessitating overcoming of the isolationist imaginary of subject and object. Serres also provided a clear proposal of this re-orientation: former parasites – i.e. humans on the body of Earth – are compelled to become symbiotic entities through the analysis of what constitutes the living conditions of their existence, of what exceeds the horizon of their interests. If the humans thrived due to asymmetrical role on the body of its host – planet Earth – the future of survival lies in renegotiation of their relationalities. Otherwise put, parasitic humanity must learn the lecture of the transformation of practices: "This is history's bifurcation: either death or symbiosis" (*ibidem*).

From the very outset, symbiosis was described in terms of both heterogeneity and intensity of relationship – namely the togetherness of those who significantly differ in their individual existence (de Bary 1879: 5). The beings that enter into this mutually conditioning interaction should not be alike. Hence, the project of their cooperation is never pre-given in a harmonious manner – the participants of this endeavor may discover the way of co-existence or they may equally fail. On the other hand, it is namely the domain of difference that presupposes the potentiality of this relationship.

What we learn from symbiosis is that it should not be conceived as a peaceful and naïve coexistence, but a constant process of negotiation. The case of lichens, a perfect example of a relational being, may set a very useful paradigm here. In fact, the concept of symbiosis gained its importance by analyzing their identities (Frank 1877: 123-200); biologically, this species is a composite organism or symbiotic individual composed of active cooperation between at least two components – a fungus and a green alga or cyanobacteria. However, their association may be described as mutualism, commensalism, and parasitism (Richardson 1999: 641-650).

There is a tendency to operate under a straightforward binary system which categorizes the entities either into 'parasites' or 'mutualists' – the distinction that focuses on immediate positive or negative impacts that a certain species experiences on its fitness during interactions (Drew, Stevens, King 2021: 623-638; Mathis, Bronstein 2020: 167-189). However, it is essential to recognize that these terms signify extremes on a continuum, and the type of interactions between a host and symbiont can dynamically shift along this spectrum. Driven by changes in the environment and ecology of the interacting species or communities, "these transitions occur as the relative benefits and costs to each species in the relationship strengthen or weaken across ecological or evolutionary time" (Drew, Stevens, King 2021: 623), resulting in fluctuations that determine the mutualistic or parasitic character of the symbiotic association. "At the center of

the continuum sit commensals, which benefit from the interaction with hosts, but do not cause a detectable cost" (*ibidem*).

Although Serres does not analyze the scientific taxonomy of parasitic or mutualistic phases and the manner of their transitions, the principle of symbiosis that defines his approach to the idea of natural contract echoes the possibility to change the role of a certain species along the aforementioned continuum. Indeed, this process should be incorporated into our cultural domain as a revised notorious formula "Back to nature, then!" (Serres 1995: 38) This time, the invitation should not be conceived as an abandonment of the social but rather as an inquiry into its closure and purity – a clear sign of the domination of the interests of parasites. By proposing to introduce a supplementing 'natural contract' – which is best characterized by symbiosis and which advocates for a paradigm shift in our interaction with the 'milieu' of things and beings – Serres defines its features through admiration, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect over notions of mastery and possession (*ibidem*). Symbiosis becomes a guiding thread that helps to solve an ongoing and possible conflict through the acknowledgement and respect of the rights of the participants:

> The parasite takes all and gives nothing; the host gives all and takes nothing. Rights of mastery and property come down to parasitism. Conversely, rights of symbiosis are defined by reciprocity: however much nature gives man, man must give that much back to nature, now a legal subject (*ibidem*).

4. The meaning of ecology

However, the lesson of symbiosis is not an obvious one. In order to respond with respect and admiration, in order to cultivate reciprocity, one must learn the needs of the partner in negotiation. The relations that constitute a variety of other species' interest must be made important, analyzed and, consequently reimagined within the horizon of human actions. In this sense, ecology is always a matter of the revision of species' practices that, for the sake of its own interest, sets the limits for its domination in the long run. I find very significant that, by developing the idea of the 'ecology of practices', Isabelle Stengers reactivates the philosophical meaning of the concept of 'milieu':

> An ecology of practices may be an instance of what Gilles Deleuze called 'thinking par le milieu', using the French double meaning of milieu, both the middle and the surroundings or habitat. 'Through the middle' would mean without grounding definitions or an ideal horizon. 'With the surroundings' would mean that no theory gives you the power to disentangle something from its particular surroundings, that is, to go beyond the particular towards something we would be able to recognise and grasp in spite of particular appearances (Stengers 2005: 187).

Here, subject already finds itself in the middle as well as operates through the middle, without the preconceived schematics that could be organized on the basis of the grid of 'grounding definition'. The milieu offers the scene of the particular and the singular, appearing as the bundle of relationalities that acquire the role of an agency in the process of becoming. In this sense, thinking and imagining mean entering into the relations that are displayed in the concreteness of environmental domain. Perhaps, alongside with the inclination to the 'thinking par le milieu," we must seriously consider the strategy that could be formulated as the 'imagining par le milieu"—as a response that aims to envision the complexity of relationships that should be considered following the framework of ecological problems.

Hence, the question regarding "imagining par le milieu" paves the way to a particular meaning of ecology. It seems altogether fitting to recall the cybernetic approach by Gregory Bateson who suggested to interpret the idea of survival in a relational manner, i.e. as the inseparable entanglement of the individual and its environment. By criticizing Darwin's focus on the competition at the level of a particular species or a family line, Bateson noted that "if the organism ends up destroying its environment, it has in fact destroyed itself", and, hence, provided a formula for a critical take on ecology: "The unit of survival is not the breeding organism, or the family line, or the society. The unit of survival is a flexible organism-in-its-environment" (Bateson 1972: 457-458).

One may note that in English-speaking contexts, the idea of the environment can acquire a meaning similar to the French concept of 'milieu'—a relational domain that integrates individual existence with its surroundings. In fact, such is the understanding of environment by Gregory Bateson. Alternatively, it can be also explored through the paradigm of environmental aesthetics, as conceptualized by Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson. Carlson contrasts the object and landscape models of natural aesthetics, which tend to distort nature, with environmental appreciation. This appreciation emphasizes a more integrated and experiential approach, "viewing the environment as a seamless unity of organisms, perceptions, and places". Carlson's model advocates for immersion in nature, aiming to obliterate traditional dichotomies "such as subject and object", and ultimately reduce the distance "between ourselves and nature" to the smallest possible degree (Carlson 2000: 6-7).

On the other hand, this unity remains impossible and poses the challenge to environmental imagination. In cybernetics, it was envisioned as the search of a circular paradigm that may enable the parallelism between the mental and the natural, enabling to extend the field of ecology beyond the domain of bio and geosciences: "Ecology, in the widest sense, turns out to be the study of the interaction and survival of ideas and programs (i.e., differences, complexes of differences, etc.) in circuits" (Bateson 1972: 340). Departing from Bateson ideas, Félix Guattari developed the conceptual revision of the background of ecology, by claiming that one could not tackle industrial pollution or other en-

vironmental concerns without framing them at the core of intersection of three registers – the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity (Guattari (1989), Eng tr. 2000: 28). Otherwise put, the idea of three ecologies aims to individuate and scrutinize the modalities which enable us to see the points of intersection between the mental, the social and the natural.

Hence, the concept of ecology refers to the examination of relational ontologies that aim to denote the moments of co-belonging that require a particular work of imagination. This strategy is in tune with Latour's proposal to juxtapose "modernization" with the idea of "ecology." Departing from the premises of Actor-Network-Theory, he claims that the choice lies "between modernizing and ecologizing" (Latour (2012), Eng tr. 2013: 8); actually, this stance orientates at the inquiry into the modes of existence. Commenting on his work, Michael Norton labelled Latour's project through the unity of ontology and ecology. In this view, the consideration of "modes of existence" means "to inquire both into the existence of things (and, thus, to do ontology) and into all the relations into which things enter, as well as the behaviors and values they exhibit, in order to exist. In this sense, then, ontology is ecology" (Norton 2013: 2).

Without explicitly referring to the context of ecology, Gilbert Simondon developed the relational interpretation which grants a pivotal role to the concept of 'milieu'; he argued against strict determinations that pre-define the ontology of the individual, claiming the productive incompleteness of beings, both in spatial and temporal terms. In fact, since in this theory every individual is to be conceived only as a stage in the process of individuation, the individual should be understood primarily "as a relative reality", which presupposes "a pre-individual reality" and which is not exhausted during and persists even after individuation. This is why "what individuation manifests is not merely the individual but the individual-milieu coupling" (Simondon (1964), Eng tr. 2020: 3).

In Simondon's framework, milieu is regarded namely in the context of pre-individual reality, partaking in the constitution of individual—it is so because of potentialities that far from being forfeited, endure throughout the individuation process. Consequently, potentiality is not to be conceived solely within the realm of individual substance; its efficacy and ontological impact manifest through the relational modality of milieu. Otherwise put, it is namely within the milieu that the domains of potentiality exercise the relational mode of being that enables to address the individual in both genetic and developmental manner. Relations partake in the ontogenesis:

> Relation is a modality of being; it is simultaneous with respect to the terms whose existence it guarantees. A relation must be grasped as a relation in being, a relation of being, a manner of being, and not a simple rapport between two terms that could be adequately known via concepts because they would have an effectively prior, separate existence (*ibidem*: 12).

Isolationist take, relying on the constituted and detached being, is unable to account to the modality in which "the associated milieu is the complement of the individual relative to the original whole" (*ibidem*: 51). Resonating Bateson's proposal to consider the unit of survival as the organism-in-its-environment, Simondon pairs the individual with its associated milieu into ontogenetic paradigm.

There is another crucial aspect of this perspective: the dimension of heterogeneity. In thinking of this dimension with respect to individuation, Simondon employs the concept of potential energy; as we know from classical physics, it designates a type of energy stored in a body or a system of bodies that is based on their mutual position or state. Thus, it is precisely the being in relation that is the ground of the existence of potential energy; moreover, philosophically put, this relationship is bound to the non-coincidence of beings. The potentiality of energy is intricately associated with the relational aspects of heterogeneity and the imbalance concerning another energy substrate: "The capacity for an energy to be potential is strictly linked to the presence of a heterogeneity, i.e. of dissymmetry relative to another energetic support" (*ibidem*: 55).

Hence, this necessity of the heterogeneous relation is the very condition of individuation and it is precisely what brings forth the processes of change. Since the individual is incomplete—the incorporation of heterogeneity into the program of development determines what and how it can become. It could be claimed that it is exactly for this reason that no being is homogenous, but can always discover a relation with otherness, thereby disclosing its potentiality beyond its individual selfhood. In this perspective, it becomes possible both to conceive change and to address the heterogeneity—through the domain of associated milieu, the energetic potentials of the system are incorporated as structures, antagonisms become compatible and the internal conflict of the system is resolved (*ibidem*: 54). It is not accidental, I would like to argue, that Simondon proposes a theory of imagination that, through the concept of milieu, enables to exercise the ultimate meaning of ecology: to establish the modalities of inter-relation with heterogeneities.

5. Compossibility: Imagine with the Milieu

In his *Imagination and Invention*, Simondon puts forth a genetic interpretation of image which circulates within the cycle of the organism and its milieu. Providing a stage for a mutual relationality of inclusion, images are described as "parasites or a surplus, they are like secondary monads, sometimes inhabiting the subject, other times leaving it" (Simondon (1965-1966), tr. en. 2022: 9). Simondon clearly opposes the Sartrean interpretation of imagination, which remains locked in the mentality "imaging consciousness," (Sartre (1940), tr. en. 2004: 5-7) detached from perception and has no contact with the milieu of an individual.

In Simondon's view, images are never complete, they transform themselves in contact with what surrounds them and by evolving in 4 phases. Firstly, they enable to anticipate the adaptation available in a given milieu, hence functioning not as a mere responsivity to stimuli, but rather as a creative proposal to interact with changing and not fully determined environmental conditions (Simondon (1965-1966), tr. en. 2022: 29-61). Secondly, operating as "structural and functional subsets" of organized psychic activity (*ibidem*: 18), they undermine the perception and ensure the connection with the milieu through action (*ibidem*: 63-91). Thirdly, images go through a phase of recollection-symbolization, where they get organized and schematized in such a way, that a new *milieu*, similar to, yet structurally different from, the external one is formed. In other words, symbolization paves way for invention to happen (*ibidem*: 93-137). Finally, a change within the organization of the system of images occurs by producing a predisposition to face milieu with new anticipations. Invention actualizes an implicit drive to overcome an individual as contained within its own limits (*ibidem*: 139-183).

Among many important points that this interpretation suggests[1], it also provides a few interesting passages dedicated to the idea of compossibility. Simondon observes that, in the perceptual processes of both animals and humans, there exists an imaginative component that enables the exploration of alternative experiences. Compossibilities could be described as a mechanism for learning that coordinates the acts of perception of living organisms so that they can test contradictory possibilities (Simondon 1965-1966, Eng. tr. 2022: 65). This process resembles a negotiation, wherein pre-programmed behavioral patterns undergo critical examination, namely within a "system of compossibility", allowing for the tolerance of contradictory meanings and incorporation of heterogeneity, which carried out through "the broad compatibility of images that do not entail a logic of the excluded middle" (*ibidem*: 72). Because of that, learning becomes possible, as the logic of danger and survival is accompanied by the logic of curiosity and invention.

It is noteworthy that Simondon avoids using the more traditional term 'possibility,' frequently used by the philosophers of imagination, such as Husserl, Sartre, and Kant. The concept of possibility is rooted in detachment, established by subjectivity, where possibilities are products of individual minds projecting them onto the world. In contrast, the notion of compossibility inherently carries a relational meaning. Compossibilities represent the possibilities of coexistence and togetherness.

[1] See a longer analysis of this theory in Sabolius, K. 2019, *Traversing Life and Thought: Gilbert Simondon's Theory of Cyclic Imagination*, "Social Imaginaries", 5(2): 37-57.

6. Conclusions

The concept of 'milieu' conveys a sense of interconnectedness and can be seen as an alternative to the abstract and isolationist notion of environment. Drawing from Simondon's understanding of cyclic imagination, the moment of entangled existence takes on a distinct character of relational possibility – what was termed as compossibility. Compossibilities move beyond abstraction by activating the utmost concreteness of the milieu, which is expressed through a dense and rich image aiming to encompass otherness and maintain connection with all the agencies that constitute this relational milieu.

In the realm of ecocritical concerns, compossibility highlights the overlapping nature of potential fields that integrate various beings, setting the stage for heterogeneities to converge. Indeed, this can be viewed as a prerequisite for a sociobiological project of symbiosis, as proposed in Serres' "Natural Contract". To imagine with the milieu, then, involves an ecocritical exploration and intensification of overlapping possibilities among all entities engaged in relation.[2]

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