

Interview to Yuk Hui

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How do you approach the philosophy of technology?

The question is open. But first of all, I think we need to examine the relation between philosophy and technology. Personally, I am not impressed by the division of philosophy of technology, philosophy of nature, and then add whatever pleases one, philosophy of video games, philosophy of this and that, as the academicians do in order to mark his or her own territory. This is why I think it is important to return to the relation between technology and philosophy and on this point, I am convinced by Derrida and Stiegler, but also to a large extent, Heidegger, that technology is fundamental to any philosophical thinking since the beginning. For example, Heidegger, in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, has staged a play between the *Übergewalt des Seins* and the *Gewalt* of human technics as the opening question of metaphysics. With Derrida and Stiegler, it became clearer that the history of metaphysics represses (in the sense of Freud) the question of technology by setting up oppositions between *technē* and *logos*, *physis* and *nomos*. In Derrida, as we know, it is the question of the supplement, that is to say something technical, which introduces the other in the self as the possibility of destruction; and with Stiegler, he introduces the concept of tertiary retention in order to deconstruct phenomenology but also transcendental philosophy. On the other hand, I want to enlarge of the concept of technology since it is overloaded with traditional metaphysical prejudices, and that is why I also bring in the question of technology in China but also in other non-European cultures to formulate an agenda attempting to address some of our impasses today.

Simondon, Heidegger and Stiegler are pillars in the articulation of your book On the Existence of Digital Objects. Do you think that these philosophers with their differences and particularities can still say a lot to those who want to reflect on the relationship between the human and technology today?

Indeed, because philosophical reflections, and by that, I mean some thematic treatises, on technology is something new in comparison with the history of philosophy. The first book carries philosophy of technology in the title only appeared in the 19th century, written by Ernst Kapp, a Hegelian who fled to Texas after having published a book on despotism and freedom in Germany. Of course, there was also Marx and many other figures in the 20th century, but all these are still too young. Heidegger and Simondon are two very different thinkers, though it is sure that Simondon read Heidegger, but proba-

bly not vice versa. Heidegger, as I said earlier, opens the question concerning *Sein* and *technē*, and continues by reflecting on modern technology; Simondon is not a thinker of ontology, but rather ontogenesis, or we can also associate him with the Parisian circle of epistemology, including Bachelard, Canguilhem and others. Stiegler is someone who tried to mobilize both Heidegger and Simondon in order to tackle both the history of philosophy and the actual technological problems. Unfortunately, Steigler left too early, 68 is still too young for a philosopher.

In the public debate today, the question of technology is mainly about the scope of artificial intelligence. Sometimes this debate is sterile with extreme positions such as those criticised by Simondon in MEOT: technophobia or technophilia. In your opinion, is it possible to have a “machine psychologist” position also regarding digital objects and artificial intelligence in particular?

First of all, we must ask what it means by machine psychologist and machine psychology. Of course we cannot take it literally otherwise we would do the thing that Simondon against, as you remember that already in the opening of *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, Simondon said that he wants to demonstrate that the robot doesn't exist. A machine psychologist, or better a mechanologist, is someone who not only has the knowledge of machines, that is to say familiarity with its operation, but also the ability to understand the genesis of technicity, that is to say the relation between technological thought and other thought such as religious, aesthetic, philosophical and socio-political thought. If we take it seriously, Simondon was proposing a new way of doing philosophy and technology. That is why, I think, he was motivated to write a letter to Derrida on the occasion of the establishment of the Collège International de Philosophie, even though at the end he didn't send it out.

Several thinkers have noted a close link between the dynamics of digital social platforms and the emergence of populist and neo-reactionary tendencies in politics. At the same time, one can note the proliferation of progressive activist practices that claim to exploit the same platforms to build an alternative to such tendencies. Is it actually possible, in your opinion, to open up these networks to a deep, less impulsive political practice?

Indeed, and I do think it is very urgent to do it. Since long time, as you know, we are in a deep crisis of liberal democracy, which persisted since the first world war until now. We have to reformulate the relation between technology and politics, but more urgently technology and democracy. But in order to do so, we need to develop more rigorous methods to study technology and reflect on its future. In the past decades, the movements have been around open source, free software and so. However, these are not real

alternatives. They are alternative only in the sense that one doesn't have to pay, but they share the same or similar functionality, operation, but most importantly, all epistemological and ontological assumption as those commercial software. Today, when we talk about democracy, one thinks that we need to develop a better electronic voting system, for example quadratic voting, but this is not democracy at all (this doesn't mean that it is not useful). The real issue is that we need to democratize our technology. It is not to make Twitter or Facebook more democratic, but rather to explore technologies that are grounded on different sets of assumptions and knowledge.

How can the concept of technodiversity be used to criticise/review the way in which the geopolitical concept of a 'multipolar world order' and post-colonial thinking has been articulated?

Post-colonial thinking has rarely taken the question of technology into consideration, but only rhetoric and narratives; very often, it is trapped in the discourse of the nation state, which is the postcolonial reality. This is the reason for which in *Cosmotronics. The Question Concerning Technology in China*, I started with a critique of postcolonialism in order to explain the difference of my approach. The multipolar world order is more a post-static thinking, which sees the decline of the nation state and the need to formulate a new geopolitical order based on the so-called *Grossraum* – a concept developed by Carl Schmitt, and now appropriated by Alexander Dugin. The question of technology is dominant in this theory, as we can all see now, the technological war between the USA and China, but also EU, Russia and so. Technological sovereignty as well as digital sovereignty came to the fore in the previous decade, or more precisely after the Snowden affair in 2013, the Russian Duma passed a law to defend the country's digital sovereignty. However, it doesn't change the way technology is perceived and conceived in the politics. It is a technological cum economic competition which is accelerating and scaling up to planetary destruction, which will finally undo all the ecological measures put into practice so far.

My new book *Machine and Sovereignty* is dedicated to a critique of the nation state and the *Grossraum* by debating with Hegel and Schmitt. I wanted to develop a new methodology to study political philosophy precisely because the question of technology is absent in political philosophy. If we look at the work of, for example, Leo Strauss, you will find that the only thing he wrote about technology was a discussion on Heidegger. I tried to formulate what I call political epistemology in order to read Hegel and Schmitt, but also Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Bergson and many others. Political epistemology is closely related to what we can call political form, be that polis, empire, modern state or *Grossraum*, or maybe what Lewis Mumford called the megamachine. With the concept of technodiversity, I hope to provide an alternative way to think about the political forms in the 21st century.

In Cosmotronics your perspective seems to frame in the wake of Bernard Stiegler a certain continuity with the thought of Martin Heidegger, do you think that there is still a certain topicality in his thought and if so, how should temporality be investigated in the light of the works of Simondon and Leroi-Gourhan, which also hold and 'hold together' in your perspective as well as Stiegler's?

Bernard is heir to Derrida's deconstruction and the late Stiegler continues *deconstructing deconstruction*, which I believe is the fidelity to Derrida in so far fidelity means having faith on someone. His thought will only become more and more relevant in the epoch when philosophers are and will be forced to address the technological transformation. As you can already see in the previous World Philosophy Congress how many papers are dedicated to artificial intelligence and technology in general. The concept of cosmotronics is an attempt to enlarge the concept of technology—enlarge in the sense, first of all, as said earlier, it is a concept overloaded with traditional metaphysical prejudices, and secondly that “philosophy of technology” is too limited to the European tradition, for example, how could we understand Chinese technology in terms of Greek *technē* and its origin with Prometheus? Therefore, we will need to “retrieve” the concept of technology beyond Europe, retrieve in the sense of Heidegger, *wiederholen*, but not in relation to Being, since in the East, Being was not a central question in the beginning. This was the attempt of my book on *Cosmotronics. The Question Concerning Technology in China*. And I tried to extend it further in the book titled *Art and Cosmotronics*. With that, we can reflect from a new on the concept of world history, or in your sense, temporality. Stiegler and Derrida all drew from André Leroi-Gourhan for their own use, namely for the role of tertiary retention and supplement in the constitution of the human and its history. To me this is the merit of deconstruction, but also the limit of deconstruction, since the supplement points to a new positive science, which Derrida calls grammatology.

What difference could be drawn between the mode of existence of technical objects? In particular, is there something that characterises the technical digital object from the rest of technical production?

When Simondon published *Du mode* in 1958, it was the beginning of cybernetics. It started in the 1940s in the USA, but it was only made known through Wiener's 1948 book *Cybernetics. Control or Communication in Machine and Animal*. Simondon was very much influenced by it, and I think this is very much underestimated, because the author's own editorial rhetoric but also his interpreters' intention to oppose Simondon and the cyberneticians. In reality, Simondon is a cybernetician, and probably one of the most important cyberneticians. Technical object, especially technical individual, was a concept informed by feedback loop and information, two key concepts of cybernetics. Si-

mondon translated the English word “feedback” in different confusing terms, such as «résonance interne», «contre-réaction», «récurrence de causalité», «causalité circulaire» without further indication. The technical individual as we are told is the technical object that possesses an associated *milieu*, that is to say, a feedback system which allows it to interact with the external environment, by integrating it as part of its own functioning. The significance of a technical individual is very diminished in the time of digital technology, all digital objects could be endowed with an algorithm, which allows it regulates interactions with the environment. But more significant, it allows the formation of what we might call *technical system* or *technological system* beyond the *technical ensemble* that Simondon described. Jacques Ellul was one of the first who tried to push it beyond Simondon’s thesis in his 1977 book *Le système technicien*, which was interestingly translated as *The Technological System* in English. Today we live in technical systems, for example, platforms, or even the digital system of the state – for example in the Netherlands, all interactions with the state departments are digitalized. Without a digital ID, it will be impossible to access to the banks, insurances, hospitals. In *Recursivity and Contingency*, I describe it as the “organizing inorganic” in contradistinction to the “organized inorganic” a term Stiegler adopted from Leroi-Gourhan to describe tools.

What kind of considerations did you draw from the philosophical reflection of the Greeks? What do you think of the question of pharmaka in Stiegler and do you read the question of pharmaka in the same way with Derrida, or are there differences?

There are many things, and probably too many things, I draw from the Greeks. Because to retrieve, again *wiederholen*, is also to repeat, to repeat what was said and not yet heard. In *Art and Cosmotechnics*, I was drawn to the interpretation of Greek tragedy and I couldn’t help responding to the question: why Greek tragedy didn’t appear in ancient China? Regarding your question about the *pharmakon*, it is for me it is also the question of the supplement. Writing is that which makes us remember but also makes us forget since with writing we don’t need to remember anything. When I asked my young students, how many of them remember their mother’s telephone number, only a few raised the hand, because most of them have it stored on their phone (and they no longer call by dialling numbers, of course). This is the logic of the supplement which grounds grammatology as a science. I follow the concept of *pharmakon* of Stiegler and Derrida. I found this concept very helpful to overcome the opposition of optimism and pessimism, technophile and technophobia. At the same time, I am interested in asking who the physician might be today. Philosophers have been since long time physicians of civilization, notably Nietzsche, Freud, etc. Pharmacology presupposes physicians, since it is the physicians who could provide the remedy and not the poison. My parents used to run a pharmacy of herbal medicine. When I was a kid, I tried to secretly taste some of these herbs and I was intoxicated, my face became swollen and numb. I learned my lesson, and

later I learned that it is not only the distinction between remedy and poison, but also a combination of poisonous herbs could also become remedy.

Heidegger defined cybernetics as the end and the completion of Western philosophy. In your text Recursivity and Contingency you take up this long-standing question again. I would like to ask you whether it makes sense to speak of an end of philosophy or anything else if, as Simondon stated, there is no absolute beginning. And if it is not the end of philosophy, can cybernetics if thought of as general allagmatics be the new threshold of philosophical becoming?

The question of absolute beginning is beyond us, when we want to trace it linearly. When Simondon asked if the diode is the absolute beginning of a lineage developed into triode, pentode and later transistors, he says that no, because one could always trace something before diode, for example, the irreversibility of electric current. This question was answered different in Derrida, since there is a default of origin, namely a simple origin is not thinkable. Such an origin is always already the being at work of the supplement. However, I think we need to understand what Heidegger calls end of philosophy in a different way. This was what I tried to do in my book *Recursivity and Contingency*. The claim that Western philosophy and metaphysics come to an end in cybernetics is too abrupt since it needs a demonstration, which Heidegger didn't provide. However, it is reasonable to think that it means that a certain condition of philosophizing came to an end. Now, this is an epistemological question, in the sense that philosophical thinking under a certain epistemological condition comes to an end, and a different epistemological condition is needed for thinking to continue. My argument is that the organic (in contradistinction to mechanic, namely Cartesian mechanism) condition of philosophizing imposed by Kant, especially his *Critique of Judgement* has come to an end in cybernetics. Cybernetics is a philosophical claim which states that the opposition between mechanism and vitalism is overcome since a cybernetic machine is capable of assimilating the behaviour of organism through feedback. This is clearly stated by Heidegger already in the 1930s in his *Black Notebook*: "It might very well still take a considerable time to recognize that the 'organism' and the 'organic' present themselves as the mechanistic-technological 'triumph' of modernity over the domain of growth, 'nature.' (Heidegger, GA94)" This is why instead of moving to what Heidegger calls thinking, I prefer asking what is the new condition of philosophizing today?