

YUK HUI, *Art and Cosmotechnics*, Minneapolis: University  
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«Indian and Chinese philosophies have tried not so much to dominate existence as to be the echo or the sounding board of our relationship to being. Western philosophy can learn from them to rediscover the relationship to being and the initial option which gave it birth, and to estimate the possibilities we have shut ourselves off from in becoming "Westerners" and perhaps reopen them» (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 139).

Writing a review can mean, in a way, proposing a peculiar reading of a book, bringing out the deep meaning of a cultural and philosophical operation and restoring, as far as possible, its essential structure. In this regard, to state from the outset my point of view – and thus the direction of my reading – I have decided to begin by quoting these few Merleau-Pontian lines, which I believe are very close to the spirit of Yuk Hui's text.

The resonance that I seem to find between the author of [Art and Cosmotechnics](#) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty is not limited to the appeal of tracing in non-European philosophies a fundamental questioning of Western philosophy, since they are the bearers of a concrete otherness, of new/ancient ways of experiencing and practising the so-called 'being'. What seems to me even more pertinent and more radical – especially concerning the operation undertaken in the text I am about to review – is the importance given to the question of the *sensible*, understood as the dynamic and metastable local ground of the operations of living beings.

Since it is not possible here to account for the complex apparatus by which Merleau-Ponty aims at what he defines the «ontological rehabilitation of the sensible» (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 167), it will suffice to recall how this aesthetic-ontological – and in a certain sense ontogenetic – stance operates in his philosophy as the fulcrum from which to reinterrogate the existential dimension of humanity as well as the crisis of its relationship with Being. Although such a juxtaposition is not explicitly justified by Yuk Hui's text, it seems to me that the two approaches resonate strongly precisely in terms of the need to rethink the sensible dimension of experience. In this respect, the title of the introduction to Hui's book is emblematic: *On the Education of Sensibility*.

Looking at *Art and Cosmotechnics* itself, it should be emphasised – as the author himself is keen to point out – that although the question of art is central, this is not an art history book. Following on from his two previous works – [The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics](#) and [Recursivity and Contingency](#) – the explicit aim of this book is to question and update the relationship between art and technology in our contemporary societies.

One of the philosophical foundations of this attempt is to be found in the concept of *cosmotechnics*, i.e. the concept that already in *The Question Concerning Technology in China* allowed the author to highlight the strong connection between the technical, cosmological and moral dimensions of human experience: *cosmotechnics* «means the unification between the cosmic order and the moral order through technical activities» (Hui

2016, 19). Following the genesis of technicity proposed by Simondon (2017) in *Part III* of his *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, the concept of *cosmotronics* is thus a useful tool to show the reciprocal implication of the technical dimension of experience and its reciprocal cosmological dimension. In other words, from the genesis of technicity, technology has always been accompanied by a cosmological and mythological dimension which determined the conditions under which it was invented and continues to permeate it, embodied in its exemplars, i.e. technical objects.

In this book, the sensible dimension becomes what is essential to interrogate and deepen our understanding of the cosmotecnical involvement of human experience in the world. Namely, to show how different techniques not only abstractly imply different cosmologies, but rather that both the technical and cosmological dimensions find in the sensible the concrete texture of their mutual structuring. Art – understood as the practice of the sensible – and aesthetics – not to be understood as an inferior faculty of cognition, but intended according to its own logic – thus delineate the field through which the book proposes to deepen the notion of *cosmotronics*, attempting to answer the question concerning the position of art in the field of knowledge and experience after the end of Western philosophy, as proclaimed by Martin Heidegger.

To answer this last point, the text is divided into three parts – not counting the long, dense and essential sixty-page introduction entitled *On the Education of Sensibility* – which are respectively called *World and Earth*, *Mountain and Water*, and *Art and Automation*. The first chapter of the book, as the title suggests, is a response to Heidegger's essay *On the Origin of the Work of Art*. Following Heidegger's reading of modern technology and his subsequent encounter with the painting of Cezanne and Klee, in this part, the author mainly poses the problem of the status of art after the end of philosophy. In the second chapter, he looks at traditional Chinese *shanshui* painting – which translates into English as 'mountain and water' – to find an implicit philosophy in it, unravelling a way of philosophising based on the logic of *xuan*, or *Daoist logic*. The last chapter, then, is devoted to an exploration of today's automatic technologies, to understand whether art – using *shanshui* painting as an example – can contribute to «reframing the enframing» (63), that is, to the transformation of the *Gestell*, the essence of modern technology.

From the very beginning of the first chapter, the author intends to ascertain whether Heidegger's reflections on technology and its intimate relationship with art can have any efficacy when applied to contemporary technology, particularly concerning artificial intelligence: «Will art be able to reveal a truth that has been hidden in the calculative and planetary mode of modern thought?» (74). Art is thus seen as a field from which to discover new tools and processes to emancipate human experience from the planetary dimension of calculation and rationalisation promoted by European technological monoculturalism. To this end, the author states that the object of artistic practice and aesthetical experience is the *non-rational*, that is, a third dimension between the irrational and the rational. It is therefore the rationalisation of this non-rational dimension that is specific to artistic practice, an operation that does not produce a true discourse in the sense of formal logic, but rather what the author calls a *plane of consistency*.

Following Heidegger's interpretation, modern technology is thus seen as essentially detached from its own *ground*. This is due to its calculating and challenging essence [*Gestell*], in which the ground is objectified as a mere *standing reserve*. Art itself can be involved in this same process: since its essence is intimately linked to that of technology, art can lose its ground and become an object of capitalist consumerism, losing its function of leading to what Heidegger calls the Open, or what Merleau-Ponty would call the sensible. The author points out, however, that the purpose of modern art has always been to highlight, to make visible and sensible, a certain difference from what modern society has

imposed as ordinary according to its rigid rules of calculability. And it is precisely *depth*, as a dimension that goes beyond calculable space, that is seen as the figure of such artistic and sensible resistance: «Can we not say that this was the common task of modern art as a response to its epoch, namely against a destructive rationality self-evident in all domains of life, amplified by mechanization and industrialization?» (108).

The language of painting – considered by the author to introduce *shanshui* painting as an example of cosmotechnics in the second chapter – does not simply seek to illustrate an object, but instead to show its genesis. In this regard, art does not need to demonstrate its procedures, but rather, operating outside the realm of demonstration, seeks to figure what is not yet figural. However, this function of art is not limited to its specific domain. In this respect, its procedures, which have *intuition* as one of its main tools, should seek the dissolution of the intellectual stiffness that structures modern science and modern culture itself, as well as its technological and social developments. Intuition is thus understood, following Bergson and Simondon, as a precise method that philosophy shares with art. From this perspective, intuition must not be seen in opposition to intellect, instead, the two terms must be understood in terms of their mutual and dynamic relationship, thus opening the possibility of their profound communication and mutual information.

At the end of the first chapter, as an introduction to the transition to *shanshui* painting, another characteristic of art objects is made explicit. Art objects are the vectors from which a certain human community can establish itself, as they are the supports and symbols of a certain regime of sensibility: «A work of art speaks. It speaks to its people; to a community that identifies with the sensibility invoked by the work» (121). However, as the author points out, this sensibility should not be considered in a Kantian way as an *a priori* category of the intellect. Rather, it arises from the inner necessity of life itself and must be properly cultivated to develop. The sensible, understood from the point of view of the *unknown*, and the non-rational – and therefore not as purely calculable and computable sense-data – is thus described as a strongly characterising element of aesthetic experience.

The second chapter introduces the subject of *shanshui* painting by first presenting another fundamental element of the so-called non-rational, namely the *invisible*: «The invisible [...] belongs to the category of the non-rational [...] The invisible is absence, as opposed to presence, but doesn't mean inexistence. On the contrary, the invisible exists but cannot be seized as presence, precisely because it is not figural» (133). The invisible, then, is what the artist is constantly searching for in his or her pictorial practice. Indeed, following Klee's suggestion, the author emphasises that the artist's task is precisely to make visible – or rather to make sensible – a dimension that would otherwise remain hidden. *Shanshui* thus become an opportunity to test these preliminary reflections on art practice and experience, attempting to show how they can be useful in understanding and reconfiguring our contemporary conception of technology.

In this respect, even for classical Chinese paintings, the fundamental assumption remains that of *making perceptible what is otherwise imperceptible*. In this case, what is manifested in the pictorial operation is the logic of Dao. Here, the author tries to show and overcome the cultural prejudice according to which Chinese thought and philosophy are essentially based on an original harmony, that is, free from any form of opposition. In contrast, Hui shows that in Laozi's *Dao De Jing* one can already find the oppositions that form the basis of the Chinese philosophical tradition. In this perspective, it is not the absence of opposition as a logical element that distinguishes Chinese thought from Western thought, but rather how they are differently presented and logically articulated. Thus, *Daoist logic* is identified as a logic of *oppositional continuity*, in contrast to Western logic – called *Tragist logic* – which is articulated as a logic of *oppositional discontinuity*. In Daoist thought, the two oppositional principles of *yin* and *yang* – which are also present in the term *shanshui*, in that *shan* is translated as 'mountain' and manifests the hardness of *yang*,

while *shui* is translated as ‘water’ and thus indicates the softness and flexibility of *yin* – are always co-present in their interrelation and recursiveness. In this regard, their tense relationship underlies the dynamism of the *shanshui* paintings and the *Dao* they embody.

Between *yin* and *yang*, as well as between another pair of opposites, *you* and *wu* – translated respectively as ‘being’ and ‘nothingness’ – there is a third element: *xuan*, commonly translated as ‘mystery’, but also as the colour black, darkness or depth. This element is the one that precisely relates the opposite polarities and must be seen as the genetic centre from which Daoist logic itself can be understood. Daoist logic is thus seen as essentially based on the logic of *xuan*, a logic of oppositional continuity in which the relationship is the genetic centre between the opposite poles. However, these polarities are not to be understood purely as generated by *xuan* as a middle term, but rather as mutually co-articulated through it, arranging themselves in a genetic, reciprocal, and thus recursive immanence to each other. Returning to the question of sensibility, on the base of this assumption the author suggests how painting practice must be radically rethought. In fact, following the logic of *xuan*, the reciprocal relationship between the opposites at play in artistic practice cannot be conceived in terms of the ilemorphic scheme, i.e. as the imposition of forms on inert matter. In this respect, the act of painting, although it must necessarily pass through the practice and study of forms, is not resolved in it, but rather consists of «facilitating a flow of energy, stroke, and force. [...] When one is capable of managing the flow instead of the form, one also acquires the ability to react to contingencies, depending on the propensity of things» (173).

Hence, by critically considering Simondon's reflections on aesthetic thought and the genesis of technicality in *Part III* of *On the Mode of Existence of the Technical Object*, Hui proposes to understand *shanshui* painting as a *key point* [*point-clée*] of reality, i.e. a point through which the relationship between the cosmic dimension and the properly human dimension of existence becomes concrete. On this occasion, an interesting criticism that Hui addresses to Simondon aims to explain the role that aesthetic experience plays in human life and in the forming process of the technical network with which humans structure their world. While for Simondon the work of art seems to function only as a reminder of the magical unity prior to the division produced by the advent of technology, according to Hui this position can and must be developed to show how the aesthetic experience of the work of art always has the potential to liberate a primordial and ancestral type of experience – a profound contact with the sensible and the unknown, with the non-rational and the invisible. This criticism then serves the author to show how the aesthetic object condenses within itself a non-rational and sensible dimension that can establish a shared sensibility that allows the institution of a collectivity according to a common *resonance* [*gan ying*] that transcends the merely perceptible dimension of the given artistic object. Thus, at the end of the second chapter, using the concept of *heart* [*xin*] proposed by the Chinese philosopher Mou Zongsan, Hui defines this *resonance* as that peculiar kind of intuition which, although not entirely unrelated to the five senses, is structured recursively between and through them.

Finally, the third chapter is devoted to further exploration of *shanshui* painting, Daoist logic and their implications for a rethinking of the role and status of art in the modern technological world. It begins with the consideration of the current state of science and technology concerning the main heir of the cybernetic paradigm: artificial intelligence. Therefore, the author aims to define the social and existential role that art can play in the face of contemporary technological evolution. To do so, Hui juxtaposes the concept of *episteme*, defined as the sensible conditions under which knowledge becomes possible in a given epoch, with the modern *ideology of transparency* promoted by techno-science, i.e. the myth that human beings can technically reduce the world to an entirely calculable entity: «techno-scientific development can only accelerate mystification if it fails to find a

mirror with which to look at itself and awaken from the fantasy that it is destined to be the conqueror of the universe» (211). And it is precisely a reframing of the essence of modern technology that plays a key role in understanding and repositioning humanity in the cosmos. What is needed is to rethink the impact of technology on human sensibility, i.e. to understand how technology is not only produced by humans, but also affects their existence, changing them or, more dramatically, *disorienting* them. This means, above all, that human beings lose their sense of belonging to a specific place: their intimate contact with *heart*, i.e. the feeling of the whole cosmos.

For Hui, then, returning to art and the sensible means repositioning intuition in the system of knowledge and rehabilitating reason from its *carnal* roots, thus breaking the hierarchy with which modernity has bound sensibility to the lowest rung of knowledge. The repositioning of intuition, however, must not be seen as a purely abstract and conceptual operation that simply produces a new categorisation of knowledge. What is needed is a rethinking of the *place* from which intuition becomes possible, articulated, and structured. In this regard, the author proposes, in his latest foray into *shanshui* painting, to investigate the concept of *basho* developed by the Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida.

The concept of *basho*, generally translated into English as ‘place’, ‘locality’, is thus used in the sense of *field of consciousness*: a field of mirroring, recursiveness and continuous self-adjustment in which subject and object jointly emerge. In this respect, *basho*, understood as *that which contains*, is not only the field in which intuition can occur but also the ground that deeply conditions its structuring. This notion is crucial for Hui’s operation since *locality* is that without which there can be neither an experience of the work of art – in this case, the *shanshui* paintings – nor a concrete education of sensibility. It should also be stressed that the locality identified by *basho* is not to be understood as closed and completely isolated from its outside. Rather, it must be conceived as a continuous and fruitful relationship of mutual exchange with its surroundings. The experience of the work of art and its proper *basho*, thus becomes for Hui a useful conceptual tool for understanding – also and above all outside the specific domains of art – our belonging to a peculiar sensible ground. This operation thus becomes even more important to conceive modern technology according to its figurative status, thus relocating it on the ground of the sensibility on and through which it is structured.

The final part of the book therefore calls for a genuine aesthetic and epistemic revolution, fostered by an augmentation of sensibility producible through aesthetic experience – not to be confused, as the author notes, with the transhumanist effort to produce a quantitative intensification of the five senses. Hence, the task of art must be to take seriously the process of education to sensibility and to orient aesthetic research towards the production of new epistemes and new frameworks appropriate to the relocation of technological experience in the everyday life of human beings. Art bears witness in everyday life to the overflow of the sensible, that is, to the resistance of the incalculable and unknowable element that presides over any technological structuring of experience. Its revolutionary potential must therefore be played out in contingency, in the texture of politics and techno-science, developing not as a unitary whole – which would nullify its effort to break the dominant monotechnologism – but *fragmentarily*, that is, according to alternative possibilities to the prevailing one. In this respect, such an epistemic-aesthetic revolution, aiming at the ontological rehabilitation of sensible experience, is always and only achievable from specific places and histories.

In conclusion, it can be said that the ontological and cosmotechnical operation proposed by Yuk Hui in his book *Art and Cosmotechnics* provides some essential conceptual tools for structuring and articulating a concrete proposal for the revision and reconsideration of Western knowledge and culture, which today is regrettably dominated by its – all too often

– rigid descriptive and methodological models. From this point of view, and alongside a certain reinterpretation of French phenomenology – in this case that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but also that of Michel Henry, Henry Maldiney and Mikel Dufrenne –, Hui seems to overcome the empirical tendencies characteristic of an increasingly widespread post-phenomenological approach to technology and to bring the transcendental, phenomenological and genetic dimensions of technical and aesthetic experience back to the centre of the debate profoundly and innovatively.

In an epoch full of new technologies, digital screens and smart cities, the greatest risk for thought and sensibility is that the normative power of technology will surreptitiously impose more and more parameters and norms of behaviour adjusted to it. Art and aesthetic experience thus seem capable of offering an alternative model to the unfolding of knowledge and its practices, i.e. a metastable and becoming paradigm. It is therefore from this revolutionary epistemic programme that sensibility – whether human or non-human – can be ontologically rehabilitated, including in its process both the imaginary and the sentimental dimension with which it is always imbued.

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