

# On a Possible Passing from the Digital to the Symbolic

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“When I hear modern people complain of being lonely then I know what has happened. They have lost the cosmos.”

—D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*

“The whole question is this: is the passage possible, will it be possible with, or allowed by, the new mode of inscription and memoration that characterizes the new technologies? Do they not impose syntheses, and syntheses conceived still more intimately in the soul than any earlier technology has done?”

—J-F. Lyotard, “Logos and Techne, or Telegraphy”

Colonial history unfolds itself according to the necessity of survival and the contingency of events. It is a history of compromise and a history of afterwardness (*Nachträglichkeit*) in the Freudian sense. For the moderns, *historical consciousness* always arrives too late because of their *technological unconsciousness*. The lithograph *Road Surveying Interrupted in Singapore*, showing a tiger-attack during the colonial period in Singapore, which in a way has become the symbol of the exhibition *2 or 3 Tigers*, is the medium through which a historical anamnesis is called upon its viewers. The Chinese coolies, Malay and archipelagic Southeast Asian peasants, and Indian convict laborers, due to poverty and self-protection, actively engaged in the deforestation and killing of tigers.<sup>1</sup> It is the relation between symbols and anamnesis that this essay interrogates. At around the same time the number of tigers began to decline, the big cat was represented as a symbol of the romantic past and of national identity, and later on, as a trademark on numerous consumer goods.<sup>2</sup> As the world of symbols has rapidly transformed and symbols have ceased to be what they were, the relations of the world embedded in them have undergone non-qualitative changes. It is through different media, within new modes of inscription, that this history is preserved and a collective memory is produced, which conceals a hauntology of tigers, belonging to a past in which we no longer live.

It was the desire to preserve and retain these memories that gave us museums, collections, ethnography, and provided more and more digital tools for this same purpose. This desire comes out of the melancholia of modernity: witnessing the rapid disintegration of the symbolic world and the destruction

of cosmologies which were imaginary systems of order. If in ancient times eschatology meant the new cosmogony, and such an eschatology offered a new beginning, so modernization can be seen as the destruction without the new cosmogony, a constant adaptation to the orders of the modern world; a metaphysics without finality. Claude Lévi-Strauss, for this reason, in his *Tristes Tropiques* suggests calling his own discipline of anthropology *entropology*, as it is “the name of the discipline concerned with the study of the highest manifestations of this process of disintegration.”<sup>3</sup> The modern world is one that is becoming entropic due to disintegration of the symbolic, and we may want to call the current Anthropocene an Entropocene.

The disappearance of symbols is a significant phenomenon that we experience in the process of modernization. The history of the tiger in *2 or 3 Tigers* demonstrates this process and the melancholia that accompanied it. Consumerism causes the diminution of symbolic exchange; while in the technical system, signs replace symbols for the purposes of efficiency and autonomy; digital technology allows the integration of the two through the analysis of user behavior, predictive algorithms, etc. In this essay, I would like to reflect on the material support of the “tiger media,” in order to offer another polemic and an alternative reading of the transition between the digital and the symbolic. As the title of my essay indicates, I would like to reverse the order of the question, namely the preservation of the symbolic through the digital, as has been done in the name of digital heritage, and to look beyond the melancholia of modernity, to take in the view of the limits of the current globalization.<sup>4</sup> First let us clarify this relation: What is inside the transition from the symbolic to the digital? Are symbols reducible to the digital? Under what condition can we pass from the digital to the symbolic? In order to elaborate on this questioning, I would like first to present the relation between symbolization and technology as a contradiction.

### **Contradiction, Supplement, and Desymbolization**

What is meant by contradiction here? Technology is the support of memories, as cave painting, paper, notebook, computer, or what the philosophers, Jacques Derrida calls *supplement* or Bernard Stiegler calls *tertiary retention*. These traces allow us to access a past, one where I have never lived but nevertheless that belong to me. However, we must recognize that the development of technology is the very condition of the disappearance of symbols; for example, the formalization of written language leads to the obsolescence of other symbolic systems; institutionalization of religion leads to the abolition of rituals. The French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul has proposed that technological development is correlate to the process of desymbolization, because for him the faculty of symbolizing can only function in relation to nature, while technological systems are based on the control of signals and signs, which is more efficient than symbolic mediations, and this leads to a misery of the symbolic.

One of modern man’s greatest losses is the faculty of symbolizing. This faculty did and could function only in relation to the natural environment. Symbolization, which helped man to survive in a hostile world, has become inadequate for the technological environment, in which it has no use.<sup>5</sup>

A few words are necessary about the etymology of symbol before moving on to further elaborate on desymbolization. The Greek word for symbol, *symbolos*, means encounter, the junction, *sym-* means together, and the verb *ballô* means to throw; *symbolos* is related to *diabolos*. *Diabolos* is from *dia-ballô*, to divide. *Diabolos* is *diable*, the devil. Therefore, one unites and the other separates. The snake in the Garden of Eden is the *diable* that separates. However, the symbol is by no means opposed to the *diable*, simply because unification is only possible when there is separation.<sup>6</sup> The Symbol tends to unite what is separated, while this separation is not simply a separation in distance, but rather between the *visible* and the *invisible*, the *sacred* and the *profane*. Symbolization is a process that creates association between humans and nature, gods, or spirits, through artificial objects, totems, figurines, and such. As Ellul illustrated, in certain civilizations it was forbidden to work on the ground with iron tools since nature was conceived as mother and iron tools were considered harmful to the mother. The symbol of the Earth as a mother figure is transcended when a technological system is adapted due to different cultural factors, such as war and famine. Symbols that were once mediated between different powers and were included in ritual practices are eliminated in the process of technological development. Desymbolization is thus a process of short-circuiting which brings forth an efficient and automatic technological system in exchange for the traditional values and forms of life.

Ellul's critique of desymbolization needs further explanation according to his development of the concept of the technical system, which was developed as a continuation of Gilbert Simondon's analysis of the evolution of technical objects from elements to individuals and then to ensembles in his 1958 *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. Unlike Simondon who tries to develop a new ontology of machines in light of the notion of information, Ellul proposes to understand the formation of the technical system through the new technologies of *data processing*.<sup>7</sup> I continue the analysis of Simondon and Ellul in my book *On the Existence of Digital Objects*,<sup>8</sup> and propose that technological progress could be understood as a general process of development and materialization of interobjective relations: from the abstract, meditative, and individual to the concrete, material, and systemic. Digital objects are simply data and schemes that define its media type (e.g. 3D objects or images) and modes of presentation. The materiality that we know as digital allows a finer *order of magnitude* to describe relations that were not possible to inscribe into analogue technologies. These objects are also logical statements and the technical system that we experience today: computers and all other devices constitute a world whose foundation is formal and logical, another type of symbol that Gottfried Leibniz named *characteristica universalis*.

Ellul's critique of desymbolization is foremost against the totalization of technical systems which we are witnessing today with digital technologies, big data analysis, smart cities, social media, etc. The symbols of rituals and the cosmos are replaced by new types of symbols in consumerist society. We see the same destiny with myths, as the Romanian historian and philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade claims, where myths were replaced by heroes such as Superman both in the mass media and in popular culture.<sup>9</sup> The contradiction that I have tried to present above is that the technological inscription of memory is born out of its own very act of destruction.<sup>10</sup> This is one source of the melancholia of the moderns. We will have to recognize that collective memory is a modern invention in face of the loss of the symbolic in everyday life. The

acceleration of technological development intensifies this melancholia, and the completion of the technical system leads to an “artificial symbolization” without nature. We may want to pay attention to the opposition between *nature* and *technics* on which Ellul is relying to explain the process of desymbolization, and we will come back to this point a bit later. In Ellul’s inquiry, nature and technics stand as two poles, leaning toward one pole means distancing from the other:

On the one hand, man’s inherent power of symbolizing is excluded; on the other hand, all consumption is symbolic. The technological system is a real universe, which constitutes itself as a symbolic system. With respect to nature, the symbolic universe was an imaginary universe, a superordinated reflection, entirely instituted by man in relation to this natural world. It enabled him to distance himself and differentiate himself from that reality, and at the same time to master reality through the mediation of the symbolic, which attributed an otherwise undifferentiated meaning to the world.<sup>11</sup>

Now, to further clarify this contradiction: technology’s support of symbols, while in the process of evolution into technical systems, gradually desymbolizes and forms its own efficiency and dynamics. The more effective and more precise the technological anamnesis is, the faster desymbolization is produced. This means that in this process, we can only talk about the transition from the symbolic to the digital, a process that constantly tries to preserve the traces of nature and the cosmos that are constantly escaping. For Ellul, the human being’s capacity of symbolization is rendered useless and consequently they are forced to escape symbolization through media like modern art and artificial symbolization.

Modern man is torn apart: Symbolization remains so profoundly inscribed in him after millennia that it cannot be annulled. But all in all, it has been rendered gratuitous, ineffective. It is even blocked because the environment of man today is utterly unsusceptible to the necessity of that process. The results are: escape symbolization, as in modern art; artificial symbolization (bearing upon technology but perfectly useless and meaningless, as we shall see later on).<sup>12</sup>

As I have mentioned above, the critique of Ellul operates very much on the opposition between nature and technics. For my part, I have been trying to develop a new conceptualization of technics in order to overcome the opposition between nature and technics, which I call *cosmotechnics*. Let me give the preliminary definition of cosmotechnics, it means the unification of cosmic order and moral order through technical activities. If by modernity, we mean an epistemological and methodological rupture was produced, which leads to a reconceptualization of the relation between human and nonhuman, subject—object, culture—nature, and of geometrization, of all beings, as we can see in the work of the great modern thinkers such as Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, etc.,<sup>13</sup> then the notion of *cosmotechnics* hopes to negate this dualism by preserving and bringing back unity of figure and ground. It also aims to reopen the question concerning technology by going beyond the current discourse on technology which is either limited to the Greek notion of

*technē* or modern technology (whose essence is no longer *poiesis* or bringing-forth, but enframing [*Gestell*] according to Heidegger). However, cosmo-technics is not an obsolescent or nostalgic one; namely, it is not an effort to return to some original indigenous knowledge or cosmology, but rather a way of thinking that attempts to bridge the modern and tradition by providing a new framework. For my own part, I have tried to analyze cosmotechnical thinking characterized by the relation between *Qi* and *Dao* in Chinese philosophy in my recent book *The Question Concerning Technology in China*,<sup>14</sup> which I cannot elaborate here, but I would like to give an example from Simondon in one of his interviews, where the philosopher invokes a *co-naturality* between the cosmo-geographical milieu and the technological milieu, which seems to me will be a good example of the contemporary cosmotechnics:

Look at this TV antenna of television as it is [...] it is rigid but it is oriented; we see that it looks into the distance, and that it can receive (signals) from a transmitter far away. For me, it appears to be more than a symbol; it seems to represent a gesture of sorts, an almost magical power of intentionality, a contemporary form of magic. In this encounter between the highest place and the nodal point, which is the point of transmission of hyper-frequencies, there is a sort of 'co-naturality' between the human network and the natural geography of the region. It has a poetic dimension, as well as a dimension having to do with signification and the encounter between significations.<sup>15</sup>

It is probably not necessary to go into Simondon's speculative genesis of technicity,<sup>16</sup> which starts with a magic phase, and continues with constant bifurcation into practice and theory. It suffices here to mention that for Simondon, philosophical thinking should intervene to introduce a convergence which reattaches the figure to the ground, understood in the sense of Gestalt psychology. Desymbolization in this case means detachment of technological activities from the cosmos, the figure from the ground. Co-naturality is the moment when such a convergence or a unity of the ground-figure is realized.

### **Anamnesis, Sensibility, and Sensibilization**

Let us return to the opening statement, and the question that I raised concerning the reversal of this process. Allow me to present the question in this way: In what way is digitalization able to be reactive to these symbols instead of being reduced to mere nostalgia? Or in other words, can we imagine a technological anamnesis which allows us to go beyond memorization and into a new constellation? I feel somewhat intimidated in attempting to answer the question, but I can only repeat that my questioning represents a constant attempt to work through it. In fact, I must remind the reader that this question had already been raised by Jean-François Lyotard thirty years ago; but speculative as it is, the question rests in the shadow of the postmodern. I refer here to a talk titled "Logos and Technē or Telegraphy,"<sup>17</sup> which Lyotard presented to a workshop organized by Stiegler in 1986 at the IRCAM of the Centre Pompidou, a year after Lyotard's exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, and published later, in 1988, in a volume *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*.<sup>18</sup> In this text, Lyotard addresses the relation of technology and memory in terms of habit, memory, and anamnesis. He presents a key concept of Sigmund Freud, namely *Durcharbeiten*, to

characterize this third mode. *Durcharbeiten* is usually translated as *working through* in English or *perlaboration* in French, but here Lyotard translates it with another word *passage*, which in turn is translated into English as *passing*; so I retain the word *passing* here. The term *durcharbeiten* is used by Freud to describe a clinical practice that, unlike hypnosis, which aims to recover previous memory, helps the patient to pass into acting and to resist. Lyotard's central argument is to elaborate on a rather speculative question: Will new technology, instead of imposing a stronger synthesis than earlier technology, allow such a passing?

The whole question is this: is the passage possible, will it be possible with, or allowed by, the new mode of inscription and memoration that characterizes the new technologies? Do they not impose syntheses, and syntheses conceived still more intimately in the soul than any earlier technology has done?<sup>19</sup>

Lyotard was uncertain of a definitive answer, if not even the question itself. He concludes his text by saying: "I'll stop on this vague hope, which is too dialectical to take seriously. All this remains to be thought out, tried out." Let me try to suggest another reading in order to make intelligible Lyotard's question and its relation to our own inquiry. Lyotard is questioning if the new technologies, let's say digital technologies of our day, provide excellent tools and mediums for retaining traces and archiving, will they be able to give us another historical *sensibility*, and hence allow us to *sensibilize*. The postmodern for Lyotard presents a new sensibility, which was the theme of his 1979 *Post-modern Condition* and the main discourse of his 1985 exhibition *Les Immatériaux*; the role of art, and here this exhibition in particular, is the means of sensibilization. This sensibilization is not only to make felt a passing but also to hint at one. How can we make sense of this passing? Where does it pass to? It is worth paying attention to an extremely intriguing passage in the same place, in which Lyotard invokes the Japanese monk Dōgen Zenji (1200–1253), and which has troubled me for many years, in order to go beyond the mere exoticism. Lyotard attempted to compare what he means by anamnesis with what Dōgen calls "a clear mirror" in *Shōbōgenzō*, the classic of Zen Buddhism. I will quote at length the comment from Lyotard, in order to make clear why Lyotard sees in it a new form of anamnesis other than memorization:

It makes sense to try to recall something (let's call it something) which has not been inscribed if the inscription of this something broke the support of the writing or the memory. I am borrowing this metaphor of the mirror from one of the treatises of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, the *Zenki*, there can be a presence that the mirror cannot reflect, but that breaks it into smithereens. A foreigner or a Chinese can come before the mirror and their image appears in it. But if what Dōgen calls 'a clear mirror' faces the mirror, then 'everything will break into smithereens'. And Dōgen goes on to make this clear: 'Do not imagine that there is first the time in which the breaking has not yet happened, nor that there is then the time in which everything breaks. There is just the breaking.' So there is a breaking presence which is never inscribed nor memorable. It does not appear. It is not a forgotten inscription, it doesn't have its place and time on the support of inscriptions, in the reflecting mirror.<sup>20</sup>

Why mention Dōgen, a thirteenth-century Japanese Monk here? This passage, from memory to “clear mirror,” for Lyotard, is a challenge to modern technology, but at the same time a hope that the new technical system will allow an anamnesis which is fragmented and open, instead of being closed, totalized, and submitted to synthesis. How can technology produce a rupture through the negation of itself? It is for this reason that Lyotard thought the question was too “dialectical.” But will it be possible to reread Lyotard’s question without following a Hegelian dialectic? Is it possible to see Lyotard’s reference to Eastern thinking as a non-dialectical passing? Lyotard hopes to find a passing demonstrated by Eastern thinking that will allow a move beyond the limit of modernity and the means of inscription and synthesis, but what happens in this passing? Lyotard wrote “I am not sure that the West—the philosophical West—has succeeded in thinking this, by the very fact of its technological vocation. Plato, perhaps, when he tries to think *agathon* beyond essence. Freud perhaps when he tries to think primary repression. But both always threatening to fall back into the technologists.”<sup>21</sup> Lyotard is not strictly speaking an expert in Eastern thinking, but if the East wants to respond to the limit of modernity and postmodernity, in what way can we reaccess its tradition under the digital condition?

Lyotard’s speculative question will remain obscure if we restrict it to either an interpretation of Zen Buddhism or Freudian psychoanalysis, since it will inevitably return us to the question of the “I” or the “non-I.”<sup>22</sup> I propose to reformulate in a way that such a passing is only possible when an outside of the techno-logos is admitted and allows the symbolic to re-emerge from the new constellation. *This outside is the cosmos*. The question of cosmology re-entered contemporary theory through the so called “ontological turn” in Anthropology, in which anthropologists such as Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, among others demonstrate and propose a plurality of cosmologies and natures, and a move from a *multiculturalism* to a *multinaturalism*. The return to cosmology and nature seems to be searching for the outside of the techno-logos, for a new mode of existence. However, a mere admission is powerless, for it has to be willed according to its own historical necessity. In *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, I tried to show that it is necessary but not sufficient to retrieve this force from traditional metaphysics and ontologies; instead, one will have to reinvent tradition and to reappropriate modern technology, initially by introducing a plurality of epistemologies and constituting a new *episteme* in the sense of Foucault. This passing is a *returning to itself in order to move beyond itself*.<sup>23</sup> This reconstitution of the episteme is what I understand as the discovery of “sensibility” and the project of “sensibilization.” I tend to believe that Lyotard wanted to demonstrate an epochal sensibility and therefore to sensitize the post-modern through the medium of art and new technologies; such sensibility, seems to Lyotard, to be able to give a new framework to techno-logos, to illuminate the possibilities opened up by the new technological *epochē* in the sense of phenomenology. This means that technics should become cosmo-technics again. I would like to suggest that it is only through such a reinvention of *cosmotechnical thinking* that we can attempt to pass from the digital to the symbolic, as well as to redirect the current Entropocene.

1. See Miles Alexander Powell, "People in Peril, Environments at Risk: Coolies, Tigers, and Colonial Singapore's Ecology of Poverty," *Environment and History*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2016), pp. 455–82.
2. Powell, "People in Peril, Environments at Risk," p. 480.
3. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman. New York: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 414.
4. See Yuk Hui, "On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries," *e-flux journal*, no. 81 (April 2017) [online]([www.e-flux.com/journal/81/125815/on-the-unhappy-consciousness-of-neoreactionaries/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/125815/on-the-unhappy-consciousness-of-neoreactionaries/)).
5. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological system*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel. London: Continuum, 1980, p. 40.
6. See Bernard Stiegler, *Philosopher par accident: Entretien avec Élie During*. Paris: Édition Galilée, 2004, chapter 3; the English translation by Benoît Dillet will be published by Edinburgh University Press in 2017.
7. For an analysis of the relationship between Ellul and Simondon, please see Yuk Hui, "Technological System and the Problem of Desymbolization," in Helena Mateus Jerónimo et al. (eds), *Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21st Century*. Dordrecht, et al.: Springer, 2013, pp. 73–82.
8. Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
9. Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1963, pp. 226–35.
10. A similar paradox is presented in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates retells the conversation between the Egyptian God Theuth, inventor of writing and the King, Thamus. Thamus reproached Theuth's avocation that writing can assist anamnesis; on the contrary, according to Thamus, writing is what conditions forgetting, since with writing, we no longer have any need to remember by heart. Technics as a means of *anamnesis* or *mnemotechnics* is also the source of *hypomnesis*. Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler's pharmacology attempts to bypass the duality of anamnesis and hypomnesis, Stiegler for his part aims for a *passing* which is a psychic and collective individuation in the sense of Simondon, whereas I attempt to develop an interpretation of Part III of Simondon's *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* concerning the relation between the cosmos and technicity, which is another type of passing, or *passage*.
11. Ellul, *The Technological system*, p. 177.
12. Ellul, *The Technological system*, p. 40.
13. Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016, pp. 203–8.
14. In this volume I attempted to trace technological thought in Chinese philosophy according to the dynamics of the relation between *Qi* (meaning tools or utensils) and *Dao*, situating it in three periods, pre-Qin philosophy, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, and modernization following the two Opium Wars.
15. Gilbert Simondon, "Entretien sur la méchanologie," *Revue de synthèse*, vol. 130/6, no. 1 (2009), pp. 103–32, here p. 111.
16. See Gilbert Simondon, "The Genesis of Technicity," *e-flux journal*, no. 82 (May 2017) [online]([www.e-flux.com/journal/82/133160/the-genesis-of-technicity/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/82/133160/the-genesis-of-technicity/)).
17. Jean-François Lyotard, "Logos and Techne, or Telegraphy," in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1992, pp. 47–57.
18. The collection appeared in 1988 published by Édition Galilée; the English translation was published by Stanford University Press in 1992.
19. Lyotard, "Logos and Techne, or Telegraphy," p. 57.
20. Lyotard, "Logos and Techne, or Telegraphy," p. 55.
21. Lyotard, "Logos and Techne, or Telegraphy," p. 55.
22. However, this return to the "I" or the "We" is still very important and it allows us to conceive a new program of psychic and collective individuation, which Stiegler himself has systematically demonstrated through his reading of Freud and Simondon. See Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Daniel Ross. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.
23. There is no space here to elaborate on this point since it is very delicate. However, it is by no means a proposal to substantialize tradition or to return to any cultural purity or authenticity—which according to me was the mistake of the Kyoto School and its fanaticism—but rather to abstract from traditional thinking the essential element to think beyond the opposition between the modern and the traditional, without which we will be unable to develop a new world history, which still relies on an intuitive linearity of the pre-modern—modern (plural or multiple modernity)—post-modern. This proposal for a new world history is the objective of Part II of my *The Question Concerning Technology in China*.

## 2 or 3 Tigers

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