Latin American Cosmotechnics?
A Conversation with Yuk Hui
Part I: Antinomy of the Universal

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AG/HE: In recent years you’ve been putting forward the notion of ‘cosmotechnics’ as a philosophical term. As we understand it, the concept aims to bring together the anthropological universal of technics with particular moral and cosmological orders. This rather general characterization aims to get particularized within specific contexts. You’ve shown, for example, how it operates in relation to Chinese thought as it was intertwined with the Western intervention, one which ended up producing a dynamic of modernization instead of modernity. Given the particularity of the analysis in the case of China, for this issue of Technophany, “Local Futures,” we are opening a conversation for what Latin American cosmotechnics can be. We are curious about the criteria for the particularization of cosmotechnics; for instance, when approaching particular contexts, are the limits of cosmotechnics given by a geopolitical territory or demarcated by geographical delimitations? And following this, what are the criteria of individuation of a particular cosmology? If we put it polemically, why isn’t cosmotechnics just an abstract concept that can be instantiated in any particular cosmology or geopolitical context to question our relation to memory and the past? In plain words, what would you say is the difference between cosmotechnics and multiculturalism or postcolonialism?

YH: Cosmotechnics is a term I coined in order to reopen the question of technology. Re-opening here means to question the concept of technics that we have accepted and taken for granted. This acceptance presupposes two universal concepts. Firstly, the concept of humanity according to which humans as a species and the relation between humans and technology is subsumed under the rubric of hominization, for example, technics as the externalization of memory and the liberation of organs; secondly, the universal concept of techno-logos, a conception of technological progress that implies a progress of rationality, and the assumption that such a progress is absolute, meaning it is unidirectional. There are technologies in every civilization but are they necessarily also of the nature of techno-logos, namely carrying the same philosophical weight as it is understood in the West? This is a question that I raised, and I also want to ask what might be the consequences of this questioning. The above assumptions are not false, they are correct in their own way. It is undeniable that technology is essential for hominization, it is also irrefutable that technology thinks in terms of geometry and algebra. However, something remains yet untouched in this way of understanding technology. Maybe we can put it in a more schematic way, which I call the antinomy of the universality of technology:
Thesis: Technology is anthropologically universal since it is the externalization of memory and the liberation of bodily organs.

Antithesis: Technology is not anthropologically universal since it is also enabled and limited by cosmologies.

As we all know, the Kantian antinomy means that each of the theses when isolated seems correct, but when both of them are brought together there is an immediate contradiction. I think this antinomy has yet to be resolved, and that we will need a new approach to it. This approach aims to broaden the concept of technology as well as enlarge the imagination of technology. This is why I coined the term cosmotechnics: to solve this antinomy. Only unlike Kant, who solves his antinomies in the Critique of Pure Reason by analytically separating noumenon from phenomenon, I am trying to resolve it by synthetically reconstructing a concept. I took China as an example to show that there have been different technological thoughts, which do not share the same origin as Greek *technē*, and which cannot be subsumed under techno-logos. The biochemist and sinologist Joseph Needham raised a haunting question, namely by asking why modern science and technology wasn’t developed in China and India, while at the same time showing that there was a huge amount of scientific and technological development in China before the 16th century. Echoing Needham’s investigation, there have been significant inquiries that have compared technological development in different regions of the world in order to show that, for example, one particular region is more advanced in paper making or metallurgy than another. However, this is a distortion of Needham’s question, which in fact suggests that one cannot compare Chinese science and technology directly with that of the West since they are based on different forms of thinking. In this sense, how can one re-articulate these differences? This is the task of cosmotechnics. I want to show how this could be thought historically, and demonstrate that the antithesis is nothing insignificant for the understanding of technology. However, China is for me only one example; cosmotechnics in Latin America employ different concepts and different relations between concepts, this is beyond my own undertaking.

The project of cosmotechnics is a project of decolonization. Modernization brought forward two temporal dimensions: on the one hand, a simultaneity, characterized by the synchronization and homogenization of knowledge through technological means; on the other hand, consequently, the development of knowledge according to an internal necessity, namely progress. Modernization *qua* globalization is a process of synchronization which converges different historical times to a single global axis of time and prioritizes specific kinds of knowledge as major productive force. Today, we have accepted all these concepts as if they are the only truth. In order to proceed, we need to fragment the present, not to go back to the past since this is not possible, but rather to develop different trajectories towards the future.

**AG/HE:** We have found your proposal to rethink the unilaterality of technology very helpful to look critically at the hegemonic discourse both from tech companies and from philosophy regarding what technology is. We wonder, however, if the term cosmotechnics doesn’t reproduce the antinomy at a different level: on the one hand if the Chinese case works as an example of the kind of analysis one can produce when looking at particular contexts, it has a universal scope so it can be recognized in plural contexts; on the other hand, however, what constitutes a cosmology is so particular in each case, that it is hard to see how the particular analysis you have carried out regarding Chinese history and mythology can be reproduced in a different context. While working on this special issue, we have been
confronted precisely with many aspects constituting the Latin American context making us wonder if it is even possible, as you have done in the case of China, to approach a particular ancestry or mythology looking for the grounds of our contemporary understanding of technology. Two main aspects seem to us to be relevant to consider when looking at the Latin American context: historical time which can’t be understood as linearity given the fragmentation produced by coloniality; and the multiplicity of cosmologies and languages with their particular historical lines of development, all of which are crossed by the colonial intervention. These aspects make it impossible to find something like a “core myth” or a narrative of the origin of technology. Mythology is not constituted by the views of indigenous populations, although they are part of the reality constituting what today is labeled as “Latin America”, since there are other constituting myths, like national identity—in the case of Mexico under the narrative of the “essence of the mexican” or “the mixed race”—and although they are not immediately constitutive narratives of the understanding of technology, they cross paths with it. In Leopoldo Zea’s understanding of technology, for example, we find these national characterizations in his characterization of technology as the motor of modern industrialization; he even characterizes the different technological developments according to the character of the people belonging to different nations. So, we wonder, how can we localize or determine the cosmological or mythological provenance or ground that can give way to a cosmotechnics, in a region whose vast and diverse cosmologies have been relegated to the periphery, syncretically modified or totally obliterated?

YH: I don’t see it as an antinomy because there is no universal cosmotechnics. As you can understand, this is precisely what I want to problematize. If there were such a thing, then I would be just replacing the term technics with cosmotechnics. This would mean that I have done nothing useful at all. Of course, you cannot use the Chinese philosophical vocabularies to describe the technics outside of China because these derive from different cosmotechnics. The face and the hands, language and technics, are interrelated but irreducible. That which expressively characterizes the evolution of the human species is the face and the hands. Evolution is driven by the necessity to adapt to the environment—and we have to remind ourselves that human beings are much weaker than other animals in terms of the capacity for adaptation; while it is also because of this weakness that they have to adopt objects in order to transform their environment. Therefore, we also have a man-made environment composed of symbols and artifacts. If there is a universal scope, then it is difference; or in other words, difference is the universal; if we emphasize difference, then it is no longer a question of searching for essence but rather how to negotiate for the common.

Mythology is always a default because when asking about the origin of the human being or the world, one can go on and on, but one cannot find an answer. There is a default of origin which is filled out by mythology. Our aim is to show that, if in the West, one can develop a historical view on the development from mythology to philosophy, and that the concept of technology is also identifiable in this passage, then this narrative is not applicable outside of European culture. When you are looking for an original and ultimate mythology in a highly diverse region such as Latin America, you will of course be disappointed that there might be no one single origin. And because there is no ultimate origin, like the point of emanation, one finds multiplicity. However this diversity is not simply cultural identity, but diversity of knowledge and diversity of ways of life. One doesn’t have to trace all these mythologies in order to prove that they were one; on the contrary, one can always start with these mythologies and see how they evolved, and how they are replaced by the new knowledge one acquired throughout history. And it is in these evolutionary processes that one finds the refined relation between language and technics, which is no longer reducible to the face and the hands.
What I was trying to do in the example of China is not to find a myth that defines China or ‘Chineseness’, not only because China is a fabricated concept—there are 56 ethnic groups in China, but because the systems of philosophy that I discussed (Confucianism and Daoism) are only limited to the Han ethnic group. There are many others that I don’t have sufficient knowledge of to make any claim about. There is, for example, Tibetan medicine which is as sophisticated as other systems of medical knowledge; and this system of knowledge is related to its cosmology and its mythology. I understand that when one goes into ethnology or into the question of culture, one cannot easily avoid asking what defines the characteristics of this people and this culture. However, this is not the aim of cosmotechnics. Some European thinkers misunderstood it as a culturalist or traditionalist approach and claimed that transcultural exchange is more appropriate. But what does “transcultural exchange” mean? Isn’t colonization also a transcultural exchange, and aren’t such transcultural exchanges possible thanks to colonization? It is true that colonization is a fact, and we are departing from such a fact towards the future, but it doesn’t mean that we have to accept it as the standpoint from which we judge this world. Through the exploration of cosmotechnics, our interest is to understand the meaning of technodiversity and how to radically open up such diversity in the epoch when the technological world is dominated by a very limited vision and epistemology which doesn’t respect locality, including the environment and the local way of life. Again, this doesn’t mean that we want to maintain and defend a national character or a tradition; the opposite is true: how can we transform tradition and at the same time how could tradition—in the form of knowledge—transform technologies? This is what I call the individuation of thinking and which I developed in Art and Cosmotechnics (2021).