

Retrieving the Lost Paths of Technology: Facing Technological Singularism through Anamnesis

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Abstract

Despite being one of the key figures in the philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century, Jean-François Lyotard's ideas have not yet been properly explored. This article will start from some of the main misunderstandings surrounding his thought on history and technology in order to propose a broad reflection on the interest that Lyotard's ideas still have for our present. To this end, some of the accelerationist interpretations of his work will be questioned.

Keywords: Jean-François Lyotard, postmodern, post-structuralism, accelerationism, philosophy of technology, philosophy of history

Since the publication of *La condition postmoderne* (1979), a book that analysed the condition of knowledge in the contemporary world, Jean-François Lyotard became one of the leading figures in the field of postmodern thought. This designation brought immediate acclaim, establishing him as one of the most frequently quoted philosophers globally. However, it also constrained the scope of his work by reducing it to this single label. The simplification of his thought has frequently resulted in his philosophy being reduced to a series of ideas attributed to a group of thinkers with whom he was not directly associated. The purpose of this article is twofold: on the one hand, to elucidate some of the misconceptions surrounding Lyotard's thought, and on the other, to demonstrate the enduring potentialities that can be discerned within his texts. To do so, I will focus on a very specific debate, the one related to the philosophy of technology, which confronts the accelerationist positions with others such as that of technodiversity. The order of exposition will be as follows: first, Lyotard will be freed from some of the prejudices and contradictions that cross some contemporary interpretations of his thought; from this new perspective, some of his positions on technology will be reinterpreted and, finally, Lyotard will be reinserted into contemporary debates on the philosophy of technology.

1. POST-MODERNITY OR POST-HISTORY

The contemporary reception of Lyotard's thought is characterised by a profound contradiction. Despite being frequently accused of espousing relativism and irrationalism, his reflections on postmodernity are frequently interpreted as analogous to those of other postmodern thinkers who come from a rationalist and modernist tradition, such as Frederic Jameson or Zygmunt Bauman. At the same time, his use of the postmodern seems to immediately distance him from his peers of the poststructuralist generation, as political theorist Alex Callinicos concludes through this imprecise statement:

It is necessary to distinguish between the philosophical theories developed between the 1950s and the 1970s and subsequently grouped together under the heading of 'poststructuralism' and their appropriation in the past decade in support of the claim that a postmodern epoch is emerging. The running has been made in this latter development primarily by North America philosophers, critics and social theorists, with the help of a couple of Parisian figures, Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, who appear, when beside Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault, as the *epigoni* of poststructuralism.¹

1 Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 5. For a more complex explanation of the phenomenon known as *French theory*, see François Cusset, *French Theory* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003) and Johannes Angermüller, *Why There Is No Poststructuralism in France* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

Although Lyotard is undoubtedly aligned with Derrida and Deleuze, his involvement in the postmodern debate has led him to be more commonly associated with Baudrillard, Lipovetsky, and Bauman. However, there is a notable difference between Lyotard and the latter thinkers: whereas for them history is constructed in a linear way, Lyotard's perspective is more nuanced. He never refers to postmodernism as an "ism", and his approach to postmodernity goes beyond its conventional understanding as a period that comes after modernity.² This misunderstanding resonates in the debate that confronts modernists with a Hegelian bias who assume that *chronos* is the sole measure of the passage of time, and those who defend alternative temporalities including *aion* or *kairos*. Similarly to Deleuze, who questions the uniqueness of time as *chronos* by saying:

Chronos is the present which alone exists. It makes of the past and future its two oriented dimensions, so that one goes always from the past to the future—but only to the degree that presents follow one another inside partial worlds or partial systems. Aion is the past-future, which is an infinite subdivision of the abstract moment endlessly decomposes itself in both directions at once and forever sidesteps for present. For no present can be fixed in a Universe which is taken to be the system of systems, or the abnormal set.³

Lyotard presents his scepticism by criticising the great meta-narratives of modernity, teleological continuities that reduce history to the development of a single principle of salvation: the revolution of the proletariat in the case of Marxism, the scientific overcoming of all the problems of our lives in the case of scientism, and perpetual peace in the case of the Enlightenment.⁴ However, he made a mistake that would haunt him throughout his life when he used the word 'postmodern' to express this abandonment of grand narratives, leading to the confusion that by postmodernity he was referring to something that happened after modernity, that is, after history as an evolutionary continuity. This is how the concept was received by most interpreters:

For post-history is a hollow concept—just like postmodernity, a term whose meaning is purely circumstantial, simply a placeholder to mark the period after modernism. The prefix "post-" with its exquisite ambiguity,

2 Lyotard has on numerous occasions denied his relationship with postmodernism, since the concept he has worked with is that of the postmodern, never an -ism. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Interviews and the Debates*, edited by Kiff Bamford (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 151. For a development of Lyotard's use of the concept of 'postmodern' see Niels Brügger, "What about the Postmodern? The Concept of the Postmodern in the Work of Lyotard," *Yale French Studies*, no. 99 (2001): 77–92.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 77.

4 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

has ultimately served simply to lump together multiple versions of that after, ranging from the critical theory of poststructuralism to some patently reactionary options.⁵

The misunderstanding was accentuated by the fact that when Lyotard coined the concept of 'postmodern' in philosophy, it already existed in literature, fine arts, and architecture.⁶ In this respect, Lyotard's aim was not so much to propose a new word as to *détourner* the preexisting meaning of the word. Venturi and Scott Brown articulated a poetics that allowed them to make free use of different architectural styles and to remix them at will, creating buildings that aspired to be out of time, liberated from the strict confines of what taste dictated could be employed. Lyotard did not intend to praise this style; on the contrary, his strong criticism of architectural eclecticism, as well as of the artistic expressions of what was postmodernism—such as trans-vanguardism and neo-expressionism—was evident throughout his life. By using this word, what Lyotard wanted to express was that, precisely, doubt with respect to the grand narratives was not something exclusive to the twentieth century, but something inherent to the plural development of history. This would become clearer some years later, when he stated the following:

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable. (...) The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*. This is why the work and the text can take on the properties of an event; it is also why they would arrive too late for their author, or, in what amounts to the same thing, why the work of making them would always begin too soon. *Post-modern* would

5 Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009), 12–13.

6 The contemporary use of the concept of postmodern is due to Ihab Hassan, who published his essay *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). From there, it would soon permeate other fields, such as the fine arts—Hassan organised a conference on postmodern performance in 1976, which Lyotard attended—and, especially, architecture, a field in which the publications by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972) and Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977) stand out. Lyotard was the first philosopher to use it systematically from 1979 onwards. The best explanation of the evolution of the concept remains that of the Marxist cultural critic Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998).

be understanding according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).⁷

The postmodern was not what came after the end of modernity—whether that end was its culmination or its abandonment—but a seditious vector that lived within it and projected new possible modernities. This had already been announced by Lyotard in 1973, when he stated that the transformations in history were not determined by the actions of leftist political groups, but by an underground movement capable of privileging intensity over intention.⁸ This does not mean that the only destiny of the ruptures proper to the postmodern moment is to contribute to the development of modernity. If this were the case, postmodernity would be merely a necessary milestone in the development of meta-narratives, whereas the aim is to undermine their strength through paralogy.⁹ The accent should not be placed on the rearticulation of the narrative, but on its disarticulation. This is the difference that Lyotard presents with respect to the rationalists who defend that postmodernity as an era is a consequence of modernity; in Lyotard's case, it is modernity that is born in spite of the inflexion presented by the postmodern:

Paralogy must be distinguished from innovation: the latter is under the command of the system, or at least used by it to improve its efficiency; the former is a move (the importance of which is often not recognized until later) played in the pragmatics of knowledge. The fact that it is in reality frequently, but not necessarily, the case that one is transformed into the other presents no difficulties for the hypothesis.¹⁰

The rupture of the 1970s did not open a new post-historical era, but upended history once again, forcing the emergence of new narratives that grew out of the cracks of the previous one. The problem is that Lyotard's complex reflection was framed at a moment when various authors were championing the end of history, proclaiming the same end of the grand narratives that Lyotard defended, but in a different form. The most famous

7 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982–1985*, trans. Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Pefanis, Virginia Spate, and Morgan Thomas (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 15.

8 Jean-François Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris: UGE 10/18, 1973), 318–319.

9 Paralogy could be define the exercise of producing an alteration or a difference within a codified system through reasoning that does not follow the established rules. As opposed to the work of the expert, who operates by homology, it is the artist—or the scientist who works as an artist—who disarticulates pre-existing consensus through the introduction of paralogies. Paradoxically, it is these contradictions or paralogies—not to be confused with the antithesis/negation of Fichte and Hegel—that often allow for the transformation and adaptation of a system but that does not mean that this is its objective. “Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy.” Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxv.

10 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 61.

examples are the theories of Arthur C. Danto on the end of art and Francis Fukuyama on the end of history, both positions influenced by Hegel and Kojève, and both confining their assertions to the strict frameworks of a Western world in which capitalism was finally imposing itself as humanity's sole episteme.¹¹ Thus, the first thing that can be affirmed in order to think about the place that Lyotard can occupy in contemporary philosophical reflection is that his announcement of the end of the great narratives cannot be assimilated to dialectical positions such as that of the end of history. This is so because, ultimately, for Lyotard there is no history that evolves in a convergent way, dialectically reconciling the differences and contradictions that appear through the different events. History is a divergent projection which never tends towards an end point, but disperses, opening new horizons at each break in the established narrative. This is why postmodernity cannot be a post-history: because there is no history, because there is no single narrative, but multiplicities that are projected towards unknown futures.

A similar confusion can be found in some contemporary readings of Lyotard that have taken place after the years of postmodern philosophy. I am referring to the recovery that some of the thinkers linked to accelerationism have made of some of his concepts since the late 1990s. As is well known, Iain Hamilton Grant's translation of Lyotard's *Économie libidinal* (1974, translated in 1993)¹² was enthusiastically received at the University of Warwick's Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), led by Sadie Plant and Nick Land, but also including Ray Brassier, Reza Negarestani, Mark Fisher, Kodwo Eshun and Robin Mackay, among others, including Grant himself. An example of this can be found in texts from that time, especially of Land¹³ and Plant,¹⁴ but also in the last lectures given by Fisher before his passing.¹⁵ What is interesting about the use that these thinkers make of Lyotard's philosophy is that they relate it to the acceleration of history, an approach similar to the one carried out by the members of Tiqqun magazine at the beginning of the 21st century—in this case, from a critical perspective.¹⁶ The conclusion they both reach is that Lyotard argues that we must accelerate to overcome the limits of our time: for the CCRU

11 The best-known works of these thinkers are Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992) and Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Such ideas are of course not exclusive to these thinkers, but find direct precedents in Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960) and Alain Touraine, *La société post-industrielle* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).

12 Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), published in English as Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

13 Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

14 Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

15 Mark Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures*, ed. Matt Colquhoun (London: Repeater Books, 2020).

16 Tiqqun, *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*, trans. Robert Hurley (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2020).

members, this leads to post-capitalist positions; for Tiqqun, it is a fallacy that is framed in the ideology of thermodynamics and entropy, a narrative that is inherently capitalist. Both are at least partially wrong. Lyotard's acceleration is not that of the means of production and the logic of the market, nor is it that of history. After all, to think of the advent of a post-capitalist era is to believe in the post-history of capitalism, a new meta-narrative that is not too different from those that Lyotard criticized throughout his life. Lyotard's acceleration is that of the libidinal band, and this does not correspond to the politics of acceleration. Once again, we find ourselves in a misunderstanding that comes from the concepts used by Lyotard: although acceleration intuitively leads us to the productive rhythms of capitalism, this is not the point. When Lyotard speaks of the libidinal band he is referring to a Moebius band that corresponds to the skin of the world, to the unique substance upon which everything else is erected. This libidinal band cannot be cut or separated, it can only be accelerated or slowed down. It is a monistic statement that has more to do with an ontological principle than with a historical-political reflection. How, then, does it come to be considered a political principle? To understand this, we must turn to the fragments of *Économie libidinale* that are quoted and studied in this context, such as the one entitled "Toute économie politique est libidinale," corresponding to chapter "Le désir nommé Marx."¹⁷ This text discusses several issues of interest in the book as a whole, such as the critique of idealistic nostalgia for a better past or the libidinal condition of late-capitalist workers. However, the key aspect that seems to serve as a spearhead for understanding acceleration from a political and historical perspective is the affirmation that there are intensities that do not inhabit the margins of the system, but rather its epicentre. This is how Benjamin Noys explains it:

If, as Lyotard put it, 'desire underlies capitalism too', then the result is that: 'there are errant forces in the signs of capital. Not in its margins as its marginals, but dissimulated in its most "nuclear," the most essential exchanges'. What the accelerationists affirm is the capitalist power of dissolution and fragmentation, which must always be taken one step further to break the fetters of capital itself. For Deleuze and Guattari the problem of capitalism is not that it deterritorialises, but that it does not deterritorialise enough.¹⁸

As in the case of postmodernity, the concept of acceleration appears as a tricky term in

17 Lyotard's texts that were discussed within the framework of the CCRU are "Energumen capitalism" (1972), "Desirevolution" (1973), and "Every political economy is a libidinal economy" (1974). Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, eds., *Accelerate. The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014).

18 Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 5. The quotations from *Économie libidinale* included by Noys belong to the sections "Il n'y a pas de région subversive" and "Toute économie politique est libidinale," from the chapter "Le désir nommé Marx."

Lyotard's thought as a whole. It is not a matter of accelerating the productive rhythms of capitalism, nor of accelerating emotions and affections, but of accelerating the libidinal band, a poetic way of referring to the deconstruction of given structures in order to multiply the intensities that dwell within them. Noys' statement on the reception of Lyotard in the accelerationist context explains the misunderstanding perfectly: without being untrue, it is excessive to relate Lyotard to a kind of overcoming of capitalism by harnessing its power of dissolution and fragmentation. That Lyotard recognised these aspects does not mean that he thought of them as tools for overcoming capitalism—his denial of symbolic exchange as a pre-capitalist period also prevents us from relating him to any form of post-capitalism, at least in a post-historical sense.

Having clarified Lyotard's position with respect to history, postmodernity, and acceleration, we can now approach his philosophy of technology.

2. SINGULARISM OR PLURALISM

In 1987, Lyotard gave a groundbreaking lecture at the University of Siegen (Germany) entitled "Si l'on peut penser sans corps." The text was collected in his book *L'Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (1988), and although it was not initially received as one of the book's major contributions, time has placed it at the heart of the contemporary debates on posthumanism and transhumanism.¹⁹ The main idea of the text consisted of a dialogue between two characters, one male and one female, in which they expressed different opinions and reflections on the solar explosion that will take place in 4.5 billion years' time, causing the disappearance of human beings and, with them, of thought. While He considers that humanity must begin to prepare for the migration of its brains to a new medium other than the body, She wonders whether we will be able to think and feel without a body. Her conclusion is that the only way to make that migration will be to give body [*donner du corps*] to the new medium, to make it something more than a mere receptacle.²⁰ Although this dialogue could be understood as a narrative exploration of what Lyotard himself defined as *différend*: "A case of differend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom."²¹ Some thinkers such as

19 *L'Inhumain* is the book in which Lyotard has dealt most extensively with the philosophy of technology, something that has been acknowledged in recent texts on the subject, such as Massimiliano Simons, "Jean-François Lyotard and Postmodern Technoscience," *Philosophy & Technology* 35, no. 2 (2022) and Matthias Braun and Darian Meacham, "A Plea for (In)Human-centred AI", *Philosophy & Technology* 37, no. 3 (2024): 97.

20 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 8-23.

21 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 9.

Brassier draw his attention on the male character and his Promethean aspiration:

[T]hought must be weaned from its organic habitat and transplanted to some alternative support system in order to ensure its survival after the destruction of its terrestrial shelter. Lyotard's protagonist suggests that this weaning process, which would provide cognitive software with a hardware that could continue to operate independently of the conditions of life on earth—ensuring the survival of morphological complexity by replacing its material substrate—has been underway ever since life emerged on earth.²²

Even recognizing that Lyotard does not opt for either position, Brassier follows the male character and develops the hypothesis that the object and meaning of technology is strictly limited to the strategies that humanity has developed for its survival: "'Technology' names the set of evolutionary strategies bent on ensuring that the negentropic momentum underway on earth these last few billion years will not be eradicated by the imminent entropic tidal wave of extinction."²³ As a former member of the CCRU, his approach to Lyotard's thought is permeated by some of the accelerationist excesses that also appeared in the work of his peers. As we have already seen, this does not mean that Lyotard's thought is reducible to this perspective: just as the acceleration of the libidinal band does not imply the acceleration of history and the overcoming of capitalist modes of production, his reflection on the explosion of the sun cannot be reduced to a new eschatology in which the aim is to avoid the death of thought. While it is true that Lyotard himself has stated that this is not a new meta-narrative,²⁴ what is striking about this fable about the solar explosion is that—as Brassier points out—it reduces technology to a single function (the survival of the human species), annulling its symbolic richness and its capacity to construct other possible futures. This is obscure, and to understand how it fits into Lyotard's thought as a whole, we must turn to other texts.

Although this conference has often been treated as if it were the only one in which Lyotard has dealt with the explosion of the sun, this approach must be framed within a set of texts that he devoted to the philosophy of technology.²⁵ One of them would be "Logos

22 Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 225.

23 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 225.

24 Lyotard asserted that only metanarratives are those whose protagonist is humanity. In this case, it is entropy that guides the course of history, preventing any kind of emancipation—that is what separates the fable from the metanarrative. Jean-François Lyotard, "A Postmodern Fable," in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

25 Ashley Woodward has identified a series of seven texts where Lyotard addresses the subject of the solar explosion, including "Si l'on peut penser sans corps." Ashley Woodward, *Lyotard and the Inhuman Condition: Reflections on Nihilism, Informations, and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 38. Of course, those are not the only ones in which he approached the philosophy of technology.

et tekhnè, ou la télégraphie,” a transcript of a lecture that was commissioned by Bernard Stiegler in 1986 where it is directly pointed out that: “technology is not, and probably never has been, a means for an end that would be science.”²⁶ This already challenges Brassier’s interpretation, extending the symbolic relevance of the technology beyond its function as a negentropic tool to survive the solar explosion. In a way, the narrative Brassier constructs about technology suspends contingency in favour of the absolute necessity of the end of the world. Although it is a speculative resource that seeks to think beyond anthropocentric limits, this exercise reproduces an interpretation of history that is still traversed by a single subject: a humanity that must develop tools to survive the catastrophe. In the face of this perspective, Lyotard himself interpreted his own fable in a different way in his text “Une fable postmoderne” contained in *Moralités postmodernes* (1991).²⁷ If in “Si l’on peut penser sans corps” this narrative had been exposed from the testimonies of two characters, in this new approach the form followed is that of a text commentary. This is very interesting for several reasons, but the main one is that the difference between the fable and the commentary allows for a pluralizing of the meanings offered, a strategy that enables Lyotard to subtract veracity from the fable in order to understand it as a speculative resource. First, the fable is presented: “The Sun is going to explode. The entire solar system, including the little planet Earth, will be transformed into a giant nova. Four and a half billion solar years have elapsed since the time this fable was told. The end of history has already been foreseen since that time.”²⁸ Afterwards, it is discussed and reflected upon:

The human species is not the hero of the fable. It is a complex form of organizing energy. Like the other forms, it is undoubtedly transitory. Other, more complex forms may appear that will win out over it. [...] The fable we heard is a narrative, of course, but the history it recounts offers none of the principal traits of historicity. [...] For us today, the future the fable recounts in the past tense (not by chance) is not an object of hope. Hope is what belongs to a subject of history who promises him/herself—or to whom has been promised—a final perfection.²⁹

It is unclear if Brassier is aware of this text, but he does not mention it in his reflection on the solar explosion—perhaps because his rearticulation of Prometheism implies a return to human *praxis* that does not rhyme with Lyotard’s own interpretation of his fable. What is clear is that (a) Lyotard questions the historicist reading of his own account and, considering also the statements he himself offers at the beginning of the text commissioned by Stiegler, (b) he strips technology of any historical dimension in a

26 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 47.

27 Jean-François Lyotard, “A Postmodern Fable.”

28 Lyotard, “A Postmodern Fable,” 83.

29 Lyotard, “A Postmodern Fable,” 93, 98–99.

teleological sense, recognizing and contesting technologism as a new meta-narrative that promises the technical salvation of humanity. What is important in the fable is not the migration of bodies, but the questioning of anthropocentrism, the evidence that we are not the epicentre of the cosmic narrative. However, Lyotard's reflection on technology does not stop there, in the critique of the utilitarian condition of technological developments. There is also in his thought a positive and constructive approach to the development of technologies, and now that we have dispelled some misunderstandings, we can address it. In a public conversation he had with Kenneth Frampton at the 1987 ICA conference, where they discussed architecture and the body, Lyotard challenged Frampton's treatment of the body as a universal through concrete attention to the new types of prosthetic body, those derived from transformations in the field of medicine:

Kenneth Frampton links his thinking to a phenomenological and even Heideggerian tradition. This means he introduces the idea of a body space which is not functional. What is this non-functional space, and what is a non-functional body? [...] In the current situation, the body is a technological object. And object of technical operations the number and scope of which will increase in the years ahead. Think of bio-medicine, bio-engineering, all imaginable prostheses, genetic surgery. Ten days ago I was involved in a discussion with a bio-medic who was saying among other things that in 15 years it will not be necessary for a women to bear their children: the whole period of gestation could take place in vitro. [...] My question is the following: the body is to my mind an essential site of resistance, because with the body there is love, a certain presence of the past, a capacity to reflect, *singularity*—if this body is attacked, by techno-science, then that site of resistance can be attacked. What is the unconscious of a child engendered *in vitro*? What is its relationship with the mother, and with the father? The mediatization of the body makes me ask the following question of Kenneth Frampton: can we still base ourselves on a phenomenology or an ontology of the body to designate one of the principal functions or destinations of architecture today?³⁰

Far from approaching the development of technology as a catastrophe, his concern is reminiscent of that of the female character in his 1987 text. One cannot think without a body, so our concern must be to *donner du corps* to the prostheses that become our bodies. The body is not a transcendental entity, it can be transformed, it will be transformed, it is being transformed. What we have to do is to understand these transformations in a complex way, fighting to maintain the difference in the face of any homogenizing project.

30 Jean-François Lyotard, "Response to Kenneth Frampton," in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *ICA Documents 4* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986), 92–93.

This approach to technology is very similar to the one that Stiegler would defend when using the concept of *pharmakon*, directly inspired by Derrida: that which is remedy and poison at the same time.³¹ Just as technology is the primary means of establishing a society of control, it can also be used to enhance difference. But for this it is essential to rework the technique itself, to reconfigure it, to strip it of what it has been said to be and to try to explore other possible approaches. In the same way that there is not a single body, but many, there is not one technique, but many. It is in relation to this reflection that the central concept of what concerns us here, anamnesis, appears.

3. ANAMNESIS OF TECHNOLOGY

One of the most important notions in Lyotard's thought is the concept of anamnesis. In contrast to the traditional uses of this word, those of Plato and Freud, his approach is more polyhedral and seeks, once again, to *détourner* its usual meaning in favour of other meanings. For Plato, anamnesis is the process of knowing by remembering, an idea that was embedded in his theory of the sensible world and the intelligible world, according to which souls are incarnated in bodies and must recover lost knowledge. For Freud, it was no longer matter of remembering past lives, but the memorial recognition of trauma, a central part of psychoanalytic therapy.³² Although Lyotard initially did not subscribe to these considerations, expressing himself critically about this idea, throughout the 1980s he appropriated this concept to make it his own. This is how it became one of the pillars of his thought, going from being a word related to the passive memory of something past that pre-exists, to being a sort of re-actualization or re-elaboration of something forgotten that emerges in a new form from an immemorial time. In Lyotard's words:

By the term 'immemorial', I try to express another time, where what is past maintains the presence of the past, where the *forgotten* remains *unforgettable* precisely *because* it is forgotten. This is what I mean by anamnesis as opposed to memory. In the time set out by concept and will, the project is only the 'projection' of present consequences on the future (as in 'futurology'). This kind of projection forbids the event; it

31 Derrida worked on the concept of *pharmakon* in "La pharmacie de Platon" (1968), a text contained in Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972). Stiegler recovered this notion in order to reflect on technology in Bernard Stiegler, *Ce qui fait que la vie vaut la peine d'être vécue, de la pharmacologie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

32 The concept of anamnesis in relation to those of Plato and Freud is explained in Yuk Hui, "Anamnesis and Re-orientation: A Discourse on Matter and Time," in *30 Years After Les Immatériaux: Art, Science, and Theory* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2015). Broeckmann returned to this question in Andreas Broeckmann, "The Anamnesis of Matter: Lyotard and the *Immatériaux*," in Martin Bartelmus and Friederike Danebrock, eds., *Therapie der Dinge? Materialität und Psychoanalyse in Literatur, Film und bildender Kunst* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2023).

prepares, preconceives, controls it in advance. This is the time of the Pentagon, the FBI, Security, the time of Empire. By contrast, what I call anamnesis is the opposite of genealogy, understood as a return to 'origins' (always projected *backward*). Anamnesis works over the remains that are still there, present, hidden near to us. And with regard to what is *not yet there*, the still to come (*l'à-venir*), it is not a matter of the future as such (which shares the Latin root, *fuit*, meaning it *has been*) but that which is still awaited with incertitude: hoped for, feared, surprising, in any case *unexpected*.³³

In line with the ideas developed in the previous sections, Lyotardian anamnesis is a pluralizing force that diversifies the possible paths of history. Instead of recovering something that has already been, as an eternal return of the same, anamnesis proposes a reimagining of the past as a new vector of the future. In my view, it is this notion that should underpin a Lyotardian philosophy of technology which goes beyond the eschatological mythology that he develops in the series of texts concerning the explosion of the sun. Since he never used anamnesis to approach the philosophy of technique, the exercise we will have to carry out in this last section is to draw an analogy between the use of this notion to think about art and the possible use we can make of it to think about technology. In other words, we need to undertake an anamnesis or a reworking of the very notion of anamnesis in order to find in Lyotard a philosophy of technology that is in keeping with our times and also with the timeless spirit of his thought.

The first artist to whom Lyotard devotes a monographic text in relation to the concept of anamnesis is Valerio Adami, although years later he would also use it to approach the work of Bracha L. Ettinger. In the first case, we are dealing with a figurative painter who works with and transforms the classical themes of the European artistic tradition—examples of this are his paintings *Orfeo e Eurydice* (1975) or *Edipo e la Sfinge* (1979).³⁴ In the second case, she is a semi-figurative artist working on trauma and personal and collective memory—interestingly, she also returns to traditional motifs from the European tradition, some of which are common to those that Adami deals with: an example is his series of

33 Lyotard, *The Interviews and the Debates*, 157–158.

34 The text was titled "Anamnèse du visible, ou : la franchise." It was published in Alfred Pacquement, *Adami: Catalogue d'Exposition* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985), but many of his ideas shaped the chapters "La franchise" et "L'anamnèse," in *Que Peindre?* (1987). Jean-François Lyotard, *Que Peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren / What to Paint? Adami, Arakawa, Buren* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012).

paintings entitled *Eurydice*, on which he has been working since the 1990s.³⁵ Even though anamnesis as re-elaboration is a transversal principle in Lyotard's philosophy of art, which occasionally appears in relation to the work of artists who have little to do with the previous ones,³⁶ it is very significant that the two monographic texts in which he develops these ideas are about narrative artists who do not absolutely avoid representation altogether. The reason—or one of the possible reasons—is to be found in this fragment:

I have always thought there is a kind of sanctity—I am using big words here—in the simplest line on a blank sheet of paper. There is something very... it has a kind of ontological dimension, and I think you are helping me understand that by saying it is already narration. And indeed, in some ways, it is like the origin of all speech. It is as if speech were beginning. There is a guy drawing a line, it doesn't mean anything, etc... it means a thousand things, and speech is launched by that. We can make thousands of phrases of all kinds out of it that are not just of the order of interpretation, but are even more matrix-based than that.³⁷

This text comes from a conversation between Lyotard and the artist René Guiffrey, and what it suggests is that the line—of the drawing, but perhaps also of the letter— is not just a repetition of the pre-existing narrative, but has the matrical power to produce new realities. This is the power of the line in Adami and Ettinger's work, according to Lyotard: by anamnesis of pre-existing motifs, they can draw new lines and produce new realities, projecting different futures from an immemorial past that allows us to reinvent the imaginaries of the present—in this case, the known and reproduced iconography of *Eurydice*.

The same thing that Lyotard proposes in relation to art can be understood or used for technology. Initially, we saw that the philosophy of technology that can be drawn from Lyotard's thought seemed to be limited to the problem of the solar explosion; however, this perspective held a singularistic view of history, as if it were a unified narrative: all

35 The reader should know that there are several versions of the text that Lyotard dedicated to Bracha L. Ettinger. Although this issue deserves a more detailed analysis, we refer to the collection by Herman Parret, which includes two texts on Ettinger: Jean-François Lyotard, *Textes dispersés II: artistes contemporains / Miscellaneous Texts II: Contemporary Artists*, edited by Herman Parret (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012).

36 Although the concept of anamnesis is also used by Lyotard to refer to the work of artists such as René Guiffrey or Daniel Buren, its use is punctual and he never dedicated to them a monographic text orbiting around this idea.

37 The full conversation can be found in the Lyotard archives of the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet, JFL 408, 17. Translation by the author.

of humanity is part of this destiny, regardless of what any individual human wants.³⁸ The clues that we have found throughout the article have led us in a different direction, finding other relevant aspects to think about technology and the story of the end of humanity from a different perspective, one in which technology is not just the tool we have to prevent our extinction. If we cease to understand that the history of technological development is unique and begin to think of technical devices from their lineages, as Simondon proposed,³⁹ it is possible that the history that seems absolute will begin to reveal itself as broad and open as that of the arts. What I mean is that the technological wars—especially the Space Race of 20th century—have made us believe that developments were waiting to be discovered by one of the World's great powers. But there are other possible stories about technology that do not involve a grand narrative of emancipation or survival, just as there are other possible technologies that can produce new stories.

It is very difficult to give an example that does not oversimplify the possibilities of this proposal, but perhaps the field of communication can give us some clues to these alternative potentials. In most parts of the world, our way of communicating has been reduced to a set of expressions that seemed to stand out for their efficiency: the letter, which later became the email or text message, the phone call, and recently the hybrid of both, the audio message. All these processes have been centralised by a series of companies that codify our way of communicating through a set of signs that encapsulate and simplify the semiotic complexity of our world, such as emojis, signs that we have not produced as users, but that have been imposed on us by the powers that govern the media. In this context, I cannot help but think of all the alternative forms of communication that have fallen by the wayside and that can still inspire others, such as the smoke signals of the Native Americans and Australian Aborigines, or the *silbo gomero*, a language used in the Canary Islands that consists of the use of whistles and allows people to understand each other from a distance of five kilometres. Many of these endangered or forgotten techniques of communication even offer lessons for our present and future concerns, such

38 Technological singularism shares many similarities with what was called technological determinism—in fact, singularism is fully in line with the first definition of this determinism given in Sally Wyatt, “Technological Determinism Is Dead; Long Live Technological Determinism,” in Edward J. Hackett, Olga Amsterdamska, Michael Lynch and Judy Wajcman, eds., *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2008), 165–180, and Allan Dafoe, “On Technological Determinism: A Typology, Scope Conditions, and a Mechanism,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 40, no. 6 (2015), according to which the evolution of technology would be autonomous from the social context in which it develops. In this case, the contribution of the concept of anamnesis to the debate is not only a challenge to this particular kind of determinism—as is the case with actor-network theory (ANT) and social construction of technology (SCOT)—but also a theoretical tool to think about the past and the future of technology in a different way. The re-elaboration of unrealised pasts is a way of producing other futures, of incorporating other becomings that are beyond the possible technologies that can occur within the framework of a society traversed by singularism.

39 See Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Éditions Aubier-Montaigne, 1958).

as interspecies dialogue. This is the case of the sounds used by Portuguese shepherds to communicate with their sheep, as studied by the artist Alexandre Delmar.⁴⁰ And the same could be said of many other techniques and crafts, as well as devices and gadgets.

In recent years, this perspective has gained relevance under the umbrella of cosmotechnics and technodiversity, two concepts that aim to go beyond technological singularism and relate different epistemologies to different considerations of the technique.⁴¹ Undoubtedly, I consider that Lyotard should be reinserted in contemporary thought from this perspective. Recognizing his contribution to the thought of difference can help us to find in the whole of his texts some keys that allow us to navigate contemporaneity in a different way. In this case, the concept of anamnesis gives us a different framework for approaching history and the teleology of development, allowing us to think that those tools, processes, and reflections on technique that have been swept away by progress still have something to offer our present. It is not a matter of nostalgia for what has been lost; precisely, its contribution lies in the fact that anamnesis does not have to be a mere remembering, since it implies the active reelaboration of that which has been relegated to being outside of time and history. It is also a very powerful tool for building a new world from the peripheries, from the spaces whose techniques and epistemologies have been overwhelmed by the progress of Western modernity, since it allows us to show that there are still many roads of technique and history that have never been travelled. Thinking from the past that has been forgotten to reimagine other futures that are not contemplated in our present, that is the idea. We still have time to retrace these lost paths of technology in order to resist the homogenizing empire of technological singularism.

40 About the project, see Alexandre Delmar, “A Fala das Cabras e dos Pastores”: <https://alexandre-delmar.com/acto-vii>

41 These concepts have been developed in Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Cambridge: Urbanomic, 2006) and Yuk Hui and Pieter Lemmens, eds., *Cosmotechnics: For a Renewed Concept of Technology in the Anthropocene* (New York: Routledge, 2021), among other texts by these authors.

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