Homo animalis, a Japanese Futurism
A Dialogue between Hiroki Azuma and Yuk Hui

HIROKI AZUMA AND YUK HUI

Abstract: In this dialogue, Hiroki Azuma discusses with Yuk Hui about the perception of technology in Japan after the defeat in the Second World War, from the Kyoto School to the postmodern critics, and the ambivalent conflicts between the modern and the tradition. The postmodern culture has a different signification in Japan than in the West as well as in other parts of Asia. Azuma documents the rise of the Otaku culture in Japan, and calls them "database animals," a thesis that he formulated through his reading of Alexandre Kojève's end of man and the absorption of the human subject into the technological world.

Key words: Otaku culture, database animals, end of the human, Japanese philosophy, futurism, cyberpunk

Yuk Hui: I remember when we first met in Hangzhou in 2016, I was asking you about the discourses around cities in Japan, and you were saying that Japan might not need this kind of discourse, since a high degree of automation has already been achieved there. And indeed, since the beginning of the twentieth century, Japan was a model for China and other Asian countries: in the eyes of Western historians, for example Oswald Spengler, it was a fault that the West exported its technology to Japan, and in the Russo-Japanese war, Japan showed that the student could now teach the teacher; not to mention that after the Second World War and until now, Japan has been the world leader in many areas, such as robotics. How did Japanese philosophy/thought digest this modernization process, especially modern technology?

Hiroki Azuma: Your question may be too gigantic. We have various styles of philosophy and thought in postwar Japan and it is difficult to find something simple in common in their attitudes toward technology and modernization. Maybe it is such diversity itself that I should mention in my answer.

However, on that premise, we can argue that the exaltation of technology is strong and prevailing in our society because it has long been linked to our unconscious nationalism. Since the defeat in WW2 and the collapse of empire, Japan has struggled to compensate for its loss of national pride with economic success. Technology was regarded as its mediator. Technology is essentially nationless. Toyota, Sony, or Nintendo are all internationally acclaimed companies. Nevertheless, its nationless products themselves are born from a specific nation: Japan. The postwar Japanese rebuilt their national pride upon this twisted and perverse logic.

We can find the same perversion in contemporary thought. One example is Japanese Postmodernism, or *New Academism*, which is a strange conglomerate of philosophical discourse and cultural movement that flourished in the 1980s. Its advocates claimed that Japan is the most postmodernized, hyper-mechanized and sci-fi-like country in the world, standing at the cutting edge of Hegelian world history, referring to the opposition between author-oriented human European civilization and simulation-oriented posthuman Japanese culture. Now, those claims turn out to be nothing but narcissistic overstatement.

Japan was politically castrated when it was defeated in war 75 years ago. And still is. Technology, or its image, has long functioned as its supplementation. Technology has been commonly considered to be politically neutral. However, its political neutrality itself has a strong political role in Japan.

YH: The Kyoto school philosophers were probably the only ones in Asia who reflected deeply on Western modernity. Can we identify a "philosophy of technology" in Kyoto School philosophy? Nishitani Keiji has heavily commented on technology, but I have the impression that he made no distinction between science and technology; Miki Kiyoshi also published a book in the 1930s titled *Philosophy of Technology*, but from what I have read, it is still very much from the perspective of a philosophy of culture, and based on the opposition between the mechanical machine and organic culture.

From the Kyoto school on, what is the dynamic between Japanese thought and technology?

HA: I do not have enough knowledge to answer your question.

I just remember one thing. The Kyoto School participated in a famous symposium titled *Overcoming of Modernity* in 1942. Many Japanese intellectuals joined the symposium and it is now criticized for the war-collaborative discourses of the participants. Kojin Karatani once pointed out their lack of interest in the United States. I believe this remark is close to your interest. The question of technology

would be that of America. It is misleading to explore the question of technology only in terms of an opposition between Europe and Asia or Japan. It needs America.

YH: Yes, at that time, the West means primarily Europe. It was my plan to go back to "overcoming modernity" with a symposium in Tokyo, but unfortunately it has to be suspended due to the pandemic. When we revisit this symposium, and from the materials that I have gathered, those participants were not only philosophers and historians, there also included writers and composers, who want to overcome modernity and rethink tradition. No matter how problematic the outcome may have been, the gesture remains important. And the melancholia created by the rupture between the modern and the tradition is still haunting. I think Karatani is right in saying that the United States was in many ways considered to be a New Europe. In postmodern Japan, I guess the influence of North America is stronger than that of Europe, probably Jameson is more influential than Lyotard, and, from the eyes of non-Japanese, this is something also closely related to cyberpunk, not to mention that William Gibson's *Neuromancer* has Tokyo Bay as its background. The competition to be the most modernized and most postmodernized is indeed a nationalist gesture, but it was also driven by a futurist and progressivist idea of humanity, which seems to me only to make it even more melancholic (for me personally, when I look at China today). How do you see this rupture today and does it play a role in your own philosophy?

HA: You said about a "rupture" between modernization and tradition. It was of course very serious in Japan. Many intellectuals eagerly discussed how to harmonize them until a few decades ago. However, the issue now seems to have become outdated in Japan. Japan is now modernized in every corner of the country. Most people just accept it. They begin to forget the conflicts that the earlier generations confronted.

One example is the Sanrizuka Struggle in the 1970s. It was a civil movement against the construction of Narita International Airport. Its plan provoked strong objections because the airport site included some villages and was decided without any local farmers' consent. It was very harsh and violent, and led to some deaths.

You can easily find some movies that recorded farmers and leftist students fighting with the riot police in bloody clashes. The scenes were reported globally and gathered a wide attention. It was the rupture. But now, it is almost forgotten even in Japan. Narita Airport opened in 1978. Since then, local communities have transformed into comfort suburbs which financially rely on tax revenues from the airport and now no objection appears against its new expansion plan.

Today, many Japanese feel more at home surrounded with commercial capitalistic products than they do living in traditional villages. A suburban modernized landscape with wide motorways, shopping malls, and convenience stores

is depicted as *typically Japanese* in manga or anime imagination. The rupture you mentioned, for better or worse, seems already to have been sutured.

You took cyberpunk as an example. It is well known that Gibson had never visited Tokyo when he wrote *Neuromancer*. Gibson's Japan is only a reflection of his Orientalism while postmodern Japan ironically welcomed it. In reality, away from cyberpunk's illusion, at least for me who has been living for nearly fifty years in Tokyo, Japan is not such a futurist or progressivist country.

I rather believe that the real problem in contemporary Japan lies not in the rupture itself, but in the fact that the melancholia you mentioned has not been sufficiently produced and realized. I found such a lack of melancholia or conflict in the life of otaku. That is why I called them *database animals*. They have overcome the conflict between modernization and tradition in a sense. However, it was not in the way that the Kyoto school envisioned.

YH: In the West, since the nineteenth century, a consciousness of technology has arisen, for example in anthropology (Ernst Kapp), and in economics (Marx), all Hegelians, though without surprise since Hegel is the thinker of "exteriorization." But technology seems to gain its ontological importance in Heidegger, and later in Derrida and his school (notably Stiegler and others). In your own writing, from your early writings on Derrida (on the postal and ontological), you were already very conscious of the importance of technology in philosophical discourse; and later in your writings on otaku and database animal in which you also engaged with Kojève's end of history, and Lyotard's end of grand narratives, among others, you were closely observing the impacts of digital technology. And to my knowledge, you were one of the few Asian philosophers who developed an original thought on technology. How do you see the relationship between philosophy and technology in your own development, and what is the dynamic of such a relationship in your own trajectory?

HA: Sure, I published a book on Derrida twenty years ago. But my interpretation of Derrida was far removed from its standard reading in academia. Even for me, it is difficult to explain how it is related to my later and more vernacular books such as *Otaku* or *General Will 2.0*.

My interest in the question of technology is connected to that of animals. I did not mention it much in my book on Derrida because many of his reflections on animals were not yet published 20 years ago. Nevertheless, I then already believed that his concept of writing (*écriture*) should be examined as a philosophical tool to deconstruct the border between humans and animals. This is one of the reasons why I later chose the word "animal" as a key concept in my book *Otaku*. Its original title in Japanese was *The Animalizing Postmodernity*. As I mentioned above, in this book I described Japanese otakus (nerds) as *database animals*. This neologism refers both to Derridean philosophy and Alexandre Kojève's famous

remark on American animality and Japanese snobbism in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.

The question of technology and that of animals were both structurally repressed under the anthropocentrism and/or phonocentrism of European philosophy. As Derrida clarified, European philosophers traditionally placed technology as a threat to human nature. On the other hand, as Derrida also pointed out, they traditionally tried to divide humans and non-humans as clearly as possible. One example is Heidegger. His entire philosophy was organized on the clear division of *Dasein* as humans and *Seiendes* as things like stones. However, an animal should be placed in-between. Heidegger gave no philosophical place for animals. I cannot go into further discussions here, but I believe both repressions of technology and animals are essentially connected.

How can we draw a clear borderline between humans and animals, if technology cannot only be applied by humans but by animals? How should we philosophize about animals, if they can be armed with advanced technology and behave like humans? These questions are what I was trying to explore in my book *Otaku*. Otakus are of course biologically humans. However, they no longer live within European humanity-oriented society. They no longer read literature, no longer respect history, no longer participate in politics in a traditional sense. They have developed their own sophisticated forms of communication applying advanced digital technology without any resort to transcendental values. I found there an important clue for the analysis of our future.

We could also develop a similar argument on artificial intelligence. AI is nothing other than an animal armed with technology but without human nature.

YH: I think in the twentieth century with the rise of a philosophical anthropology or anthropological philosophy, there is an increasing awareness of the role of the symbolic world. As you mentioned before, Heidegger in *Fundamental Problems of Metaphysics* said a human being has world, a lizard is poor in world, and a stone has no world. There is a distinction to be made between the *Lebenswelt* (if we follow the late Husserl) and Jakob von Uexküll's *Umwelt*. We also see the same statement in Heidegger's "opponent," Ernst Cassirer, who says that the human being is an *animal symbolicum*, because it is through symbols that self-knowing is possible. Cassirer also claims that non-human animals are poor at, or even without, self-knowing. So, the end of history and the return to the animal according to Alexander Kojève is for me rather a controversial thesis, but if I understand correctly, what you are saying is probably more radical, and more interesting. Technology, instead of enlarging the gap between humans and animals, actually forces us to review the way that this distinction has been made in philosophy. The richness of the symbolic world (of literature, religion, etc.) is reduced and transformed into a world manipulated by electronic signals,

and the animal which we are could be programmed according to cybernetic principles as all other animals are; however, instead of being passive, they have also developed communicative models and a rather different symbolic world. Could you elaborate more on the question of the animal-human distinction and how you would integrate AI in your discourse (in relation to the annihilation of human nature)?

HA: I agree. In the twentieth century, many European philosophers elaborated their definition of humans in terms of the availability of symbols. They believed that humans can use symbols but that animals cannot. I doubt this division itself.

I mentioned the Derridean concept of writing. It was of great importance in his criticism of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The latter theory strictly separates the symbolic (*symbolique*) from the imaginary (*imaginaire*) and defines a human (*sujet*) by their entry into the symbolic. Derrida's concept of writing can be interpreted as traversing the borderline between the two. This is because writing can be both a symbol and an image at the same time. A writing or a trace can be understood as a symbol when it is decipherable according to a specific code. It will be an image when not. However, the borderline between the decipherable and the indecipherable is vague in reality. I believe both of us easily understand this vagueness for we are living in the Chinese character-based civilization. We both know thousands of Chinese characters but there must remain countless characters that neither you nor I know (though I guess you may know more characters than me, given that I am Japanese). We can recognize that they are letters even though we cannot read them. They are symbols that are not decipherable. More curiously, they will not be completely indecipherable. Sometimes we can guess their meanings or sounds without any code, merely from their imagery forms. They exist between symbols and images.

There expands a wide range of writing or trace between the symbolic and the imaginary in our human communication. This philosophical reflection on writing is closely related to the question of AI. It no longer makes sense to ask whether it is a symbol or an image that AI is processing. The distinction between the two is now reduced to the level of feature extraction performed by neural networks after the innovation of deep learning.

European philosophers defined humanity as symbolic communication. I believe it is in a place where the symbolic and the imaginary cannot be distinguished that humanity emerges. Thus, my definition of the human must include someone/something who will be categorized as an "animal" according to the traditional European definition. This is why I wrote about database animals. The question of otaku is that of animals. In the same way, the question of Chinese characters or artificial intelligence should be examined as that of animals. This does not mean that Japanese otakus, Chinese characters or artificial intelligence are beyond hu-

manity. It rather means that thinking about them can expand the boundaries of the European understanding of humanity.

Derrida criticized the limit of European philosophy as phonocentrism, which means the exclusion of writing. He proposed an idea for a new human science called *grammatology* in the 1970s. He failed in its elaboration as a science but his proposal itself is promising because it aimed at a new kind of analysis of our humanity beyond the separation between the symbolic and the imaginary—that is, beyond the separation between humans and animals. I believe that this is the philosophy we need in the twenty-first century.

YH: If we can say that, since Aristotle, the human has been defined as the political and social animal capable of *logos*, this distinction is also the foundation of philosophy, in a way that is also fundamental to the modern political thought of Hobbes, Rousseau and others; and if I can caricature it in this way, instead of saying that *homo sapiens* will become *homo deus*, which supposes a progress of the *logos*, you are saying that they are returned to an animality, *homo animalis*, equipped with technology. What are the implications of this for philosophy, for politics, and for their futures?

HA: Are you asking about the political implications of my philosophy? It is a difficult question.

I published a book entitled *A Philosophy of the Tourist* in Japanese 3 years ago (already translated into Korean and currently being translated into Chinese). In it, I discussed Carl Schmitt's political theory, which is notorious for its definition of the political as consisting in an act of ontological distinction between friends and enemies. It is a very simple theory. But it is still attractive in the popular political imagination and even getting more and more influential in our contemporary world. I believe it is urgent to invent a new concept of the political beyond such a distinction. This is the key question of my book.

This question is closely related to the issue of writing I just mentioned. A symbol is either decipherable or indecipherable. This means that symbols necessarily divide their receivers into two groups: ones who can decipher given symbols and the others who cannot. For example, the sound *hana* means "flower" in Japanese. Those who know Japanese can decipher it and the others who don't cannot. It also means the number one in Korean. Those who know Korean can decipher it and the others who don't cannot. There is no room in between the decipherable and the indecipherable nor in between two languages: Japanese and Korean. This proposition directly comes from Saussure's assertion that a word's sound (image) and its meaning (symbol) should be separately considered and each should be examined in terms of its own system of difference. This separation may be linguistically useful. However, I believe it is this separation between a sound and

a meaning that also functions as a non-ontological (that is, sociological) basis of the Schmittian theory separating friends and enemies.

As I said before, the situation is entirely different in the case of Chinese characters. Japanese and Koreans can decipher the same character but with different sounds. Besides, they can also use the same character with slightly different meanings according to their different history of reception of Chinese culture. Japanese, Koreans and Chinese can communicate with characters but with many possible misunderstandings. Characters or writings cannot be enclosed in a singular system of difference and can connect different groups of people, but its *transdecipherability* does not ensure the accuracy of their communication.

I believe this will be a clue with which to reexamine the concept of hospitality. Many philosophers are discussing it in order to criticize Schmittian concept of the political. However, as Derrida clarified again, the concept of hospitality itself is very difficult to formulate philosophically. It requires an experience of paradox. It is beyond *logos*. It is beyond legal correctness. This means that we need a new theory of communication beyond the separation between friends and enemies, or between the decipherable and the indecipherable. This is why we have to overcome a definition of humans that relies on the symbolic distinction.

The symbolic, or *logos*, necessarily divides us into friends and enemies. Writings, or the use of animality, can make the in-between boundaries possible. I referred to Rousseau's concept of pity, Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance, and Richard Rorty's theory of solidarity as examples of the use of animality in my book *A Philosophy of the Tourist*.

You said *homo animalis*. Yes, I find hope in *homo animalis* rather than *homo deus*. *Homo deus* may lead us to the singularity, that is, to the final goal of Judeo-Christian eschatological world history, while *homo animalis* affirms the diversity of worlds and histories and connects them with imaginative technologies. Technology should be animalistic, not divine.

Hiroki Azuma, Genron
Yuk Hui, City University of Hong Kong

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