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| **Review of Yuk Hui, *On The Existence of Digital Objects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 336 pages, £21.99** |

**Reviewed by Maria Dada**

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**Abstract**

Human made technical objects are constantly changing, taking on new forms that are appropriate to their epoch. Technical objects in the digital age are no exception. In fact, the digital object’s rate of change at the moment is one of rapid acceleration. Only a few years ago email went out of fashion only to be replaced by Facebook and Twitter. The digital form of the technical object is in full flux and yet neither philosophy nor engineering is able to grasp its ever-changing essence. Here lies the premise of Yuk Hui’s *On The Existence of Digital Objects* published by University of Minnesota Press in 2016. Hui is no stranger to the nuances of either technical or the natural object having studied both Computer Engineering at The University of Hong Kong and philosophy at Goldsmiths at the now defunct Culture Studies department where he met his mentor Bernard Stiegler who offers his views on the book in the preface. Evidence of Stiegler’s influence is seen in many parts of the book but most prominently in Hui’s choice of thinkers, Husserl, Simondon and Heidegger, three figures that feature repeatedly in Stiegler’s own work most notably the three volumes of *Technics and Time* (Stiegler, 2009).

**Review**

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Hui’s book aims to investigate digital objects, which represent what he defines after Simondon as the current mode of concretisation of the technical object. Concretisation, according to Simondon, is the tendency of the technical object towards a kind of perfection, its tendency towards a natural way of being that cannot in fact be attained. It is also the shape or the form of the technical object in its current epoch. The mode of concretisation of the technical object at the moment, according to Hui, is digital. In order to focus his attention on the digital object Hui attempts an almost Husserlian bracketing, epoché, of all other aspects of technics. In other words, in the interest of a particular philosophical impetus he proposes to limit the book to a narrow investigation of the digital object alone. What is a digital object? He explains, “By digital objects, I mean objects that take shape on a screen or hide in the back end of a computer program, composed of data and metadata regulated by structures or schemas” (Hui, 2016:1).

Hui lays out the master plan of the book in the carefully written introduction comprised of three parts. He begins with a discussion of the natural object—through Hume, Kant and Husserl—in part I. He then sails across with a take on the technical object via Heidegger and Simondon in part II and finally culminates with the digital object in part III.

In as early as part I of the introduction Hui’s knowledge of the history of philosophy appears extensive and impressive. The fact that he is writing an introduction does not hold him back from expanding on the philosophical history of the natural object through a detailed analysis of Aristotle’s subject and substance. He may bracket off medieval philosophy never to return to it again but he makes up for that by entering deeply into Hume’s system of relation which in his mind is the only theory of the object, prior to Heidegger, that sheds some light on the question of the digital object, albeit not entirely satisfying Hui’s concerns.

His interpretation of Hegel is also impressive yet it veers on the simplistic side especially his claim that Hegel sees the thingness of the object as the whole. A quick read of Hegel’s critique of Spinoza from either his history of philosophy lectures or the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) reveals that, according to Hegel, any philosopher that takes the natural object to be the whole will have to deal with the contradiction that the parts impose on such whole. However, in such a powerful historical and ambitious glossing Hui’s oversight can be easily forgotten. When it comes to his most highly regarded philosopher, Husserl, however, Hui appears a little more restrained. According to Hui, no one can possibly give an account of Husserl’s conception of the natural object and so he refrains from doing so. He concludes the first part with a claim that all philosophers up to and including Husserl are less interested in getting to the essence of the natural object but rather remain enamelled by how and whether an object can be known. Such reasoning consequently leads to an investigation into that which can know an object i.e. the structure of consciousness.

After concluding his discussion of the natural object Hui open up part II of the introduction with the technical object. He recounts that due to the sudden technical ruptures of the industrial revolution the question of the natural object, or of being in Heidegger’s terms, is forced to consider the question of technics in order to understand the changes that occur at that time. Hui’s omission of thinkers like Descartes however shows a slight lapse in his argument. Descartes’ musings on the relationship between automatons and the workings of the body in the essay *Animals are Machines* (2012) shows that the technical object as the machine made its debut into philosophy long before Heidegger made it the topic of his concern. Nonetheless, it can be said that the rise of clockwork technology merely forced Descartes to rethink the essence of extension and not the natural object as it did Heidegger. The technical object didn’t trouble Descartes notion of consciousness.

Hui then moves on from the natural and technical object to the digital object through the work of Leibniz and contemporary thinkers such as Gregory Chaitin, Edward Fredkin and their encounter with Luciano Floridi. In part III he reveals his method, one that is borrowed from Gaston Bachelard, a method of analysis according to orders of magnitude. He contrasts it with the method of abstraction employed in engineering. Engineering has ignored the existential nature or thingness of the digital object. However, it is this thingness that Hui wants to tackle. And since there is a reciprocal relationship between the artificial as computation and natural it is Hui’s hope that the unearthing of the digital object as a new type of materiality will disrupt some of the fundamental concepts of philosophy. He insists, however, that his agenda is political and he promises to reveal this political intent throughout the book.

In an attempt to fulfil his promises and rattle philosophy’s conceptual framework Hui divides the book into six chapters. The first chapter appears to continue Gilbert Simondon’s project. Simondon’s book *On The Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (hereafter MEOT) delineates the technical object through a method he refers to as individualisation. Simondon is adamant that while matter, living beings, and psychic collective beings can be apprehended through the non-substantialist metaphysics of individuation, technical objects can only be grasped through the method of individualisation. However, Hui refuses to limit the technical object to individualisation. His intent is to go further than Simondon and individuate the digital object, a feat he leaves to the second chapter of the book. The reasons for this endeavour are as he claims political, “I would like to emphasise that I consider it [writing MEOT] to be central to the political agenda of Simondon” (Hui, 2016:16). Hui believes that Heidegger is the philosopher who holds the key to understanding relations in a way that will allow him to go beyond Simondon and make the individuation of the digital object possible. For this reason, he, early on, attempts to differentiate his own methods from another Heideggerian thinker of relations, Graham Harman and his Object-Oriented Ontology.

The difference between individuation and individualisation in Hui’s view is that individualisation corresponds to the genesis and evolution of ontologies, mark-up language, meta-structures of the computational object and the object’s formal structure as defined by computer engineers. Individuation, on the other hand, corresponds to Ontology with a capital o, the self-manifestation of the thing, its thingness. The thinker that is able to bring Heidegger and Simondon together in such a manner is Bachelard whose order of magnitude is central to Hui’s method. Orders of magnitude are a means to view different modes of existence from different perspectives. Bachelard contrasts his method with the Cartesian subject, which is only able to see things from the perspective of extension. It is from the perspective of different orders of magnitude that Hui can differentiate, as he does in the second chapter, between ontologies found in computer science and the Ontology of philosophy. Each mode of existence, Ontology vs. ontologies, individuation vs. individualisation, represents a different order of magnitude for Hui. However, he insists that despite their difference the orders of magnitude are related. The task of the third chapter is to show what this relationship looks like.

In order to attempt an individuation of the digital object Hui, consequently, with the help of Bachelard, Simondon and Heidegger, develops a new relational method. The main conclusion that he wants to draw out is that the digital object is not a mere philosophical concept but rather a new kind of materiality. It is also less zeros and ones and more the material capacity to process data. Following on from this, chapters three and four develop a material theory of relation, which allows Hui to move away from objects as mere representations. It also allows him to move from objects to systems. Once the individuation of the digital object is made possible through Hui’s new relational method the digital technical system can be thought in relation to social and economic systems as they all converge. Hui here is merely completing Simondon’s project. He is adamant that Simondon would have done the same had it not been for his inability “to anticipate the arrival of the network age” (Hui, 2016:27) in the 1950s.

In chapter three Hui is particularly close to his mentor Bernard Stiegler almost repeating him exactly with his ideas around tertiary retention. The fourth chapter, on the other hand, is dedicated to Hui’s concept of interobjectivity again with the help of Simondon. Chapter five is dedicated to Husserl and Logic, as is expected of a chapter on Husserl, quite technical, however, its argument is essential in leading Hui into his most important sixth chapter. In this seminal chapter Hui takes his mentor Stiegler’s notion of tertiary retention back to Husserl and then back again into the digital objects. He concludes that contrary to the technical the digital constitutes a different kind of temporality. Digital objects are not objects of cultural memory like the technical object they are, on the other hand, objects of future orientation. Consequently, they are not objects of tertiary retention but rather tertiary protension. Here lies the pivotal moment of the book, the moment that outlines its contribution to both philosophy and the study of technics. At this point the reader is rewarded for their perseverance through the history of philosophy, the intricacies of html mark-up.

From the beginning Hui assures the reader that such a detailed analysis of the thingness of digital object holds political relevance. The discussion may prove lengthy but the reader will be rewarded. In order to capture the thingness of the digital object Hui needs to bracket out much of the stuff that relates to it. While such an epoché allows him to focus his argument it also somewhat hinders it. In the first instance Hui seems to immediately bracket any relationship the digital object has to the physical. He does, however, admit that a relationship exists and promises to address the issue. His promise is left unfulfilled throughout the book.

Another unfulfilled promise is Hui’s allusion to some form of political intent extracted directly from Simondon’s own political project. In view of this, however, his analysis of Simondon’s politics or even his notion of alienation is quite sparse. The only semblance of a political project we see is an idea for a reimagining of Facebook, which brings to mind failed social media networks such as Ello and Google+. The problem is that the political impetus, which is evident in Simondon’s concept of alienation, cannot be abstracted from a discussion of the physical. Hui knows this as he claims, “humans now have to adapt to the rhythm of the technical system, not only physiologically and materially, as Marx described, but also cognitively (making-present)” (Hui, 2016:244) yet he fails to do anything about it. The physical is, of course, central to Simondon’s notion of the technical object. In *On The Mode of Existence of Technical* *Objects* he defines the associated milieu as the bringing together of the technical and geographical milieu. In the individuation book, he states clearly that alienation arises when culture fails to include the technical milieu in its attempt to solve the problems posed by the organic milieu. Such a bringing together or convergence does not ignore the physical, as does Hui. In the end the reader follows a remarkable exegesis that ends a little flat.

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**Book Cover**



**Biographical summary**

Maria Dada is Research Fellow at the Digital Anthropology Lab at University of The Arts London and a PhD Student at Durham University writing on *The Critique of Digital Reason*.  She graduated with an MA from the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy.  She also holds a BSc in Computing and Communication Arts from the Lebanese American University in Beirut.

She has presented numerous papers at conferences including a paper at LCCT on Artificial Intelligence, at The Passionate Dis-attachments conference in Toronto on The History of Automatons and at the University of West of England workshop on A Deep History of Technology.

She is also a co-founding active member of the organisation [Again] [www.againagainagainagain.com](http://www.againagainagainagain.com/" \t "_blank)

Autonomy [www.autonomyinstitute.org](http://www.autonomyinstitute.org)

Contact: m.dada@arts.ac.uk