

Towards other epistemologies of interface culture: the pertinence of emptiness-presence, and void for contemporary technology

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Abstract

This paper considers the pertinence of particular Sanskrit and Japanese concepts and terms in developing new epistemologies of inter-face culture: the significance of emptiness, of intervals, of pauses, of void for contemporary technological practice. It is part of an evolving discussion with regard epistemology by the author, developed through other articles, conference papers, and public lectures/presentations. These have focused on a number of related ideas: relational being, dependent origination, non-anthropocentric being, the being of a space, and the space of being. As readers here may be unfamiliar with the earlier texts, there may be some need here to re-introduce certain themes and ideas to assist flow of readership.

The essay considers a broader history of technology, and the notion of technological practice as ontological practice. It discusses relationships between science, technology, art, architecture, philosophy and ecology that were evolved through the discourses of Buddhism and Tantra. It considers the possibility of earlier ontological and epistemological activity as paradigms for contemporary practice.

The author discusses the nature of inter-active spectatorship which is crucial in such a discussion on inter-face: coining the term 'a-spectatorial' with current collaborator, Alok Nandi, to describe the in-habiting of space, the engendering of stillness, that they are aiming to engender in a current practical and theoretical research project.

Keywords

akasha, 'a-spectatorial', *ma*, *mu*, *pratiyasamutpada*-dependent origination, *sunyata*, Tantra.

Introduction

This essay considers the pertinence of *akasha*, *ma*, *mu*, *sunyata*, and *pratiyasamutpada*, as well as related philosophical ideas that originated in Asia, to evolve new epistemologies of inter-face culture. Here the significance of emptiness, of intervals, of pauses, of void is considered with regard contemporary technological practice. It discusses relationships between science, technology, art, architecture, philosophy and ecology that were evolved through the discourses of Buddhism and Tantra. The article considers the possibility of earlier technological activity as a potential paradigm for contemporary technological practice. This essay indicates a questioning of the apparent contemporary necessity of 'inhabiting' technology.

Akasha is a Sanskrit word that signifies a space that has presence, as well as other meanings, such as ether and sound. *Akasha* has correspondence to the Japanese term *ma*, which has multiple meanings and resonances, including space-time, an emptiness that has presence, place, space, interval, time, and pause. *Sunyata* in Sanskrit means void and has correspondence to the Japanese Zen term *mu* that also could be understood as void or nothingness. *Ma* has hundreds of compound meanings, one of which is for an idiot, *ma-nuke*. In the English language someone who is considered an idiot is sometimes termed, 'empty-headed'. Paradoxically, *ma-nuke* literally means someone who is too full, someone who has no space. The space or the space-time that I am considering may be a significant one in numerous ways, not least as a place of inter-action, of dialogue, re-generation, or rest. It could be the place between, a place of stillness that stimulates flow. It should be remembered that the Noh actor is metabolically most heightened when he is still.

The consideration of the pertinence and the significance of emptiness, of intervals, of pauses, of void for contemporary technological practice, is a part of an evolving discussion with regard epistemology developed by the author through other articles, conference papers, and public lectures/presentations. (Ajaykumar 2007a; 2007b; 2005a, 37-50; 2005b, 46-60; 2005c) As readers may be unfamiliar with the earlier texts, there may be some need here to present again certain themes and ideas to assist flow of readership.

Discussion with regard *akasha, ma, mu* and *sunyata* is of importance with regard the development of a broader history of Technology. Here I am concerned with an ongoing dialogue: a dialogue firstly between Buddhism and science, technology and art; and secondly, a related dialogue between Tantra and science, technology and art. While a number of studies, have written specifically about relationships with Buddhism and science, as I delineate below, discussion focused on Tantra has been limited.

Towards a broader History of Technology and Technological Practice

A discussion of the relationship between science, technology, art, philosophy dates not from the twentieth century as some would think, but could be charted back at least two thousand years. While Heidegger has discussed poignantly how technology (*techne/tekhne*) was perceived in Ancient Greece, my concern is to discuss the Tantra that emerged in ancient South Asia, as part of a contribution to a history of technology, and a history of technological practice, 'technological' here in the Heideggerian sense. For those not familiar with Tantra, it should be explained that one could conceive Tantra as an integrated approach of science, technology, philosophy, ecology, architecture, and art, to explore 'being'. Tantra profoundly influenced Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. Tantra places value in all phenomenal activity. While today it is generally discussed in religious and artistic contexts, its contribution to a history of science and technology is generally overlooked. At the same time Tantra evades dogma and totalitarian definition and rather suggests a personal approach to 'a way of tantra': a personal dynamic relationship with all other phenomena.

Tantra's earliest tangible manifestation was as architectural form with rock cut edifices at Ajanta, Ellora and numerous other sites in South Asia, constructed from the first millennium B.C.E. At the time of Ellora constructions, which began later than those at Ajanta, Tantra could be considered science and technology at 'the cutting edge' as much as it was 'cutting edge' art, architecture, and philosophy. These edifices are significant feats both of engineering as well as of architecture. In the edifices of Ellora, the voids created in the humanly constructed caves were considered a part of the totality of the sculpture, a sculpture that came into being at the moment of spectatorial inter-action. At this space-time the physical void and the ontological void correspond. Ultimately the architecture at Ellora is defined as not the built edifice only, but rather a dynamic interaction of spectator journeying through a humanly constructed structure in relation to surrounding landscape. The architecture is a being that exists in dynamic inter-relation.

This space in consideration could be a space of presencing beyond the residue of the art object and the technological modus operandi. While these ideas originated in some shape or form in South Asia more than two thousand years ago, they resonate with contemporary ideas such as that of Marcel Duchamp who wrote:

My art would be that of living: each second, each breadth is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral. It is a sort of constant euphoria.(Baas and Jacob, 2004)

Another example of integrated epistemology in this period in South Asia is reflection on particles. While particle physics is considered today one of the latest avenues of physics, most of the rational schools of philosophy in South Asia, whether Tantra, Hindu, Buddhist or Jain, discussed the nature of elementary particles. The Dalai Lama, one of the foremost contemporary teachers of Buddhism in Tibet, a Buddhism heavily influenced by Tantra, discusses a Buddhist view of particles as follows:

All the elements in our present universe, even down to a microscopic level, can be traced back we believe, to an origin, an initial point where all the elements of the material world are condensed into what are technically known as "space particles." These particles, in turn, are the state, which is the result of the disintegration of previous universe. So there is a constant cycle, in which the universe evolves and disintegrates, and then comes back again into being. (Rinpoche 2002, 94)

While the details of the ideas of ancient rational schools of philosophy would be considered no longer scientifically valid, they were advanced for their time, and one can chart resonances with modern physics. What is more significant is that in Tantra both science and philosophy were considered integral to a holistic epistemology. Indicative of this is the fact that certain ancient Hindu temples have had at their centre not elaborate sculptures or deities but empty spaces housing only a book of mathematics. The mathematical attempt to understand the universe was considered equally as a philosophical research. I want to clarify here that I am not thinking today of Tantra or Buddhism as a science, nor am I thinking of this science as advanced in comparison to contemporary practice. The history of Tantra and of knowledge is one where at one time it may have been possible for individuals to be polymaths, mastering several disciplines - sciences, philosophy, art, technology. Today the extent of knowledge and information in each discipline and sub-discipline is so great that specialisation is an imperative. However what may be possible is mutual cross-fertilization. While the contemporary physicist Fritjof Capra has charted correspondences, thirty years ago, between ideas in quantum physics and those contained in Hindu, Daoist, and Buddhist philosophical ideas, (Capra 1992) others have been undertaking similar enquiries. Physicist Vic Mansfield has suggested some comprehension of modern physics assists in a more profound understanding of Buddhism; and some understanding of Buddhism could assist in the development of physics research. The physicist Amit Goswami goes further, believing that "all the paradoxes and anomalies of quantum physics can be resolved if we base science on the metaphysical assumption that consciousness not matter is the ground of all being." (Goswami 2001, xi) The ongoing dialogue between Buddhism and science is being developed today also through a number of neurological studies on the effects of meditation on the brain with specific regard to both Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. (Austin 1999; Harrington and Zajonc 2006)

Computers and Current Technology

What are the possibilities for mutual cross-fertilization in relation to computer based art? Technological practice in Tantric terms is considered an ontological practice. Tantra suggests the sacredness of all phenomena. It influenced and was influenced by other philosophic systems such as Buddhism, in which there are several schools which emphasise the principle that all phenomena reveal the true entity of life: the ultimate reality. If all phenomena are considered sacred, can one develop a relationship with computers that perceives them not as dissimilar to popularly conceived 'items' of nature, such as trees, mountains, rivers? If one adopts such an approach to contemporary technology, would one engender changes in contemporary technological processes as well as in hardware as well as in the inter-face? Such a point of view depends not primarily on the creation of objects of technology but on the nature of spectatorship. One has to un-think and rethink subject-object dynamics, and begin to engender processes that inter-relate and enmesh the two. At the same time such a thinking and practice also undermines differentiation of computer technologies from

other technological practices and processes.

As previously discussed (Ajaykumar 2005a) the cyber-designer Michael Heim believes the technology and technological practice of cyberspace may ultimately also be a *modus operandus* to engender similar ontological centres or, using the term coined by Zen teacher Daisetz Suzuki, 'psychospheres'. (Heim 2002, 286-291): spheres to explore the psyche, to manifest being. *Cha-no-yu*, perhaps best understood as *chado*, 'the way of tea', is influenced by Zen Buddhism, with many tea masters being highly trained in Zen. For example Soshitsu Sen XV, the fifteenth head of the Urasenke School of Tea, trained as a Zen Buddhist monk for more than thirty years. Like the rock cut edifices at Ellora, *cha-no-yu* could be thought of as a multi-media experience. As at Ellora, it is a kinaesthetic experience beginning with a walk through a garden or *roji* as integral to its experience and presencing. The garden creates a *ma* of interval, a distancing from the world of the everyday with the world of the tea hut and the partaking of tea. *Chado* is also a multi-sensory experience involving, taste, sight, touch, smell, and hearing. Most importantly, as an art, *cha-no-yu* is underpinned by 'conviviality' - it comes into being in a moment of social inter-action. Heim correlates four principle qualities of *cha-no-yu* (Japanese, trans: hot water for tea), commonly known as the tea ceremony, with features of cyberspace. He suggests that the dynamics of *chado* may be a guide for developing a sense of place. The four features are *wa* (Japanese, trans: harmony), *kei* (Japanese, trans: respect), *sei* (Japanese, trans: purity) and *jaku* (Japanese, trans: serenity). For Heim, each relates to pertinent virtual design issues that currently need to be addressed. *Wa* refers to systematic coherence, currently lacking in the Web. *Kei* refers to respect of materials used and of the presence of other people. For Heim distance is crucial in engendering respect and he believes that the telepresence of the web in part erodes this respect. *Sei* manifests in the minimalisms of the tea ceremony, corresponding to the emptiness and minimalism of cyberspace. As Heim acknowledges, the emptiness of cyberspace is increasingly being filled by things such as junk mail. It is a place that is too full seemingly, that has no space, which precludes *jaku* (serenity). This corresponds to the ever-increasing filling of space in concrete environments. As cyberspace increasingly seems to have a sense of materiality, perhaps the crucial imperative is to develop individual ability to find a relationality in a conceived space between. The nature of spectatorship, the nature of such experientiality has to change. In such a jungle, whether actual or virtual, is it possible to engender a clearing, an empty space, resonant with what Heidegger calls a *lichtung*, to enable such presencing? A pivotal idea of Buddhism is crucial here, which is *pratiyasamutpada*, usually translated from Sanskrit as 'dependent origination'. *pratiyasamutpada*, has however several renderings in English, which help its comprehension: 'conditioned genesis', 'dependent co-arising', 'interdependent arising'; *pratiyasamutpada* expresses the idea that no thing or person exists in isolation and is continuously existing in relation with all other sentient and insentient beings in the universe. Emphasis shifts away from individual self to relational being. This crucially impacts on how one conceives the interface. Corresponding with *akasha*, the term *kyo* in Japanese Buddhism is used to signify the inter-relation of all phenomena through sound and vibration. Such an idea is critical when considering spectatorship, and how we may describe and define art. The art here is one that is ephemeral and exists nowhere. Rather it comes into being only in a space of temporary interaction, a cyber-caesura, between human (artist and spectator), possible art object, and a wider landscape: a landscape that is social, cultural, and topographic. Here we may move toward a different sense of ecology. This relational being may be thought of as a perpetual presencing: *ekaksana* in Sanskrit. While here, unlike *chado*, the social interaction may not be directly with another human being, it is an interaction with other phenomena, all of which in the Tantric, and Buddhist sense are sacred. Here we have perhaps a non-anthropocentric sense of a space of being, and a 'being of a space'.

Afterword

My particular concern in examining ideas such as dependent origination and relational being is

thinking about their value in negotiating not just physical space but cyberspace: the need for emptiness in computer design and technology, design of and for cyberspace, the need to rethink inter-faces. Increasingly also the spatial domains of physical space and cyberspace are intermingling and enmeshing, to the extent that in future we will not make distinction as humans experience and journey through either realm.

A current nascent collaboration with Brussels based media artist Alok b. Nandi, entitled *akasha ma mu sunyata*, (*a_m_m_s*), is a practical tele-epistemological research to investigate such themes; and probe the possibilities of engendering such interfaces, intervals, spectatorial or 'a-spectatorial' spaces of being, and a being or 'non-being' of a space. This would take place through the creation of interventions in diverse contexts; through conception and design of installations in contemporary galleries as well as in landscapes and environmental contexts; through accumulating traces in publications, books and blogs: using computer technologies as much as elemental processes, and involving kinaesthetic journeys through space-time. 'A-spectatorial' here means a re-envisioning of spectatorship: one that is not about 'looking at' but about inhabiting a space. This conceptual approach allows a re-exploration of the notions of stillness and presence, and the relation between body, time and space.

In the *a_m_m_s* project, the defining and refining of the artists' particular collaborative tele-epistemological process - the engineering of a *ma* of process of working - is as much the research and the outcome as the construction of a gallery installation. The collaborators envisage this to involve a research process of working 'at a distance', rarely physically meeting; and including deliberate intervals, absences, pauses, and spaces between our telematic conversation.

This process could allow the collaborators to question the apparent contemporary necessity of 'inhabiting' technology.

While I have mentioned mutual cross-fertilisation, on the whole I have discussed how ideas of Tantra and Buddhism may inform science, technology, computer art, and interface design. It should be noted that I do not consider historical concepts of Tantra and Buddhism to be absolute truths. Rather I see both as evolving epistemological processes that are informed by scientific and other academic processes. James Lovelock's Gaia theory (Lovelock 2000), Lynn Margulis' evolution of the notion of symbiogenesis (Margulis 1993), Candace Pert's findings with regard neuropeptides (Pert 1997), and Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's conception of auto-poiesis (Maturana and Varela 1980), provoke further speculation on notions of relational being, relational self, and non-anthropocentric being. There is not the time and space to discuss this further here. A subject for a future paper.

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Biographical Notes

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- Spectatorship, play, and co-creativity;
- The sculpting of space and interrogation of notions of 'non-anthropocentric being', 'relational being', 'the being of a space'.
- Dynamics between science, art, architecture, technology, philosophy, and ecology: reflecting on relations between human and environment.

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