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Hui, Yuk, Machine and Sovereignty: For a Planetary Thinking. *University of Minnesota Press, 2024, 368 p. ISBN: 978–1–5179–1741–8*

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Machines, Spirits, and Planetary Futures: Reading Theological Echoes in Yuk Hui's Political Vision

Introduction: What's at Stake in Planetary Thinking?

Yuk Hui's ambitious trilogy concludes with what might be called a "political manifesto for the technological age." In *Machine and Sovereignty*, Hui argues that we can no longer separate politics

from technology — our digital infrastructures, global supply chains, and algorithmic systems fundamentally shape how we imagine sovereignty, freedom, and world order.

What struck me while reading this work was how often Hui's analysis seemed to brush against theological territory, even when theology appeared far from his concerns. This isn't because Hui is secretly religious or because his arguments require theological foundations. Rather, many of the problems he addresses — sovereignty, historical direction, mediation between individual and collective, ultimate reconciliation — have deep theological genealogies that continue to shape how we think about them today.

Let me be clear about my approach here. When I point to "theological echoes" in Hui's work, I'm not claiming he consciously draws on religious sources or that his arguments depend on theological premises. Instead, I'm suggesting that placing his analysis in conversation with theological traditions — both Christian and Confucian — can help us better understand what's at stake in his vision of planetary thinking.

The Secular-Theological Boundary: Why It Matters

Hui builds on Carl Schmitt's famous insight that modern political concepts are "secularized theological concepts." But whereas Schmitt focuses on how words like "sovereign" carry forward religious meanings, Hui is more interested in how technological systems now perform functions that theology once provided — grounding authority, organizing collective life, and orienting us toward the future.

This shift from theological to technological grounding raises fascinating questions. If technology displaces God as the source of political order, what happens to questions of ultimate meaning and value? Can technological systems provide the kind of orientation that religious traditions once offered? Hui doesn't answer these questions directly, but his analysis makes them unavoidable.

Throughout this essay, I'll mark my interpretive moves clearly:

- **(Hui's explicit claims)** when I'm describing arguments Hui himself makes
- **(My interpretation)** when I'm drawing theological parallels that Hui doesn't explicitly endorse

This distinction matters because I want to engage seriously with Hui's own project while also exploring its broader implications.

Hegel's World-Spirit: Secular Eschatology or Something Else?

(Hui's explicit claims) Hui finds in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* an early model of planetary thinking. For Hegel, the modern state embodies a kind of organic logic — different parts working together toward the realization of freedom. Hui appreciates this vision of historical development as more than mere contingency, but he also notes its limits: Hegel's organic state remains bounded by national borders and can't adequately address genuine exteriority.

(My interpretation) The theological resonances here are hard to miss. Hegel's vision of Spirit realizing itself through history bears striking similarities to Christian eschatology — the movement toward ultimate reconciliation, the internalization of what was once external, the progressive realization of freedom. The difference, of course, is that Hegel's Spirit is thoroughly immanent rather than transcendent.

What's particularly interesting is how Hui contrasts this Western model with Chinese cosmology. **(Hui's explicit claims)** He draws on the concept of *tianxia* ("all under heaven") — a vision of political order that's already planetary in scope, imagining nested spheres of authority radiating outward from a center that encompasses the entire world.

This comparison suggests that different civilizations have developed different ways of thinking about planetary order, each with its own theological or cosmological foundations. The question for our technological age is whether we can develop forms of planetary thinking that honor this diversity rather than imposing a single model.

Schmitt's Sovereign Decision: From God to Algorithm?

(Hui's explicit claims) Hui reconstructs Schmitt's argument that sovereignty is fundamentally about the power to decide on the exception — to determine when normal rules no longer apply. But he's particularly interested in how new technologies (air power, digital networks, algorithmic systems) are undermining the classical forms of territorial sovereignty that Schmitt described.

(My interpretation) Schmitt's sovereign operates according to a fundamentally theological logic — creating order through decision, like God creating the world *ex nihilo*. What happens when this sovereign function gets distributed across technological networks? Do algorithms become our new gods, or do they represent something qualitatively different?

Hui doesn't frame the question in theological terms, but his analysis suggests that we're witnessing a fundamental transformation in how authority operates. The challenge is to understand this transformation without either demonizing technology or treating it as salvific.

Technology as Mediation: The Question of Incarnation

(Hui's explicit claims) Drawing on Bernard Stiegler and Gilbert Simondon, Hui argues that technics is not external to human existence but constitutive of it. We are "organological" beings — our organs evolve in relationship with technical objects. Memory, anticipation, and intelligence are all exteriorized through technical means and then reinteriorized in transformed ways.

(My interpretation) This account of technical mediation bears striking structural similarities to the logic of Incarnation in Christian theology. Just as the Word becomes flesh to mediate between divine and human natures, technology mediates between individual and collective, local and global, body and world. Both involve a kind of exteriorization that enables new forms of interiority.

I want to be careful here. I'm not suggesting that Hui is developing a crypto-Christology or that technology literally embodies divine logos. Rather, I'm pointing to a structural parallel that might help us understand the depth of Hui's mediation thesis. Both the Incarnation and technics involve fundamental questions about the relationship between transcendence and immanence, interior and exterior, particular and universal.

The Transhumanist Temptation: Technology as False God?

(Hui's explicit claims) Hui is deeply critical of transhumanist and ecomodernist projects that promise technological salvation — whether through artificial intelligence, genetic enhancement, or planetary engineering. He calls these "Promethean" fantasies that mistake technological power for ultimate control over nature and history.

(My interpretation) This critique has obvious theological dimensions. The desire to become "like God" through technological mastery echoes the fundamental structure of what Christian theology calls sin — the confusion of creature with Creator. Hui doesn't use this language, but his analysis of technological hubris follows a similar pattern.

What's particularly valuable about Hui's approach is how he contrasts transhumanist singularity with his vision of "technodiversity." Instead of one technological future that subsumes all others, he calls for multiple technological trajectories that respect different forms of life and thought. This vision resembles what we might call a "technological Pentecost" — a multiplication of technical languages rather than their reduction to a single code.

Organology and Theological Anthropology: East and West

(Hui's explicit claims) Hui's concept of organology suggests that human evolution is irreducibly technical. Our organs are not fixed by nature but develop in relationship with technical objects. This leads to his call for "technodiversity" — the idea that different technical cultures should develop different forms of human-technical coevolution.

(My interpretation) This vision resonates with theological anthropologies in both Christian and Confucian traditions that emphasize human becoming rather than static human nature. Eastern Christian concepts of *theosis* (deification) similarly envision human nature as dynamic, capable of transformation through relationship with divine grace. Confucian traditions of self-cultivation likewise see human development as an ongoing process of refinement through practice and learning.

The parallel isn't exact, but both theological and organological visions reject fixed essences in favor of relational becoming. Both also recognize that this becoming can take multiple forms — different paths of spiritual development, different trajectories of technical evolution.

Planetary Synchronization: The Problem of Timing

(Hui's explicit claims) One of the most challenging aspects of planetary thinking concerns the problem of coordination. Global logistical networks seek real-time synchronization but repeatedly fail — supply chain disruptions, communication breakdowns, systemic crashes. Hui interprets these failures as revealing the fundamental contingency of planetary order.

(My interpretation) This structure of attempted coordination and inevitable delay bears a striking resemblance to eschatological temporality in Christian theology. The Kingdom of God is "already"

present in fragmentary form but "not yet" fully realized. Christian existence is shaped by this temporal tension, living in hope of a fulfillment that cannot be achieved through human effort alone.

Hui's planetary thinking operates according to a similar temporal logic. Planetary coordination is both necessary and impossible, both urgent and perpetually deferred. We must act as if planetary transformation is possible while recognizing that its full realization exceeds our grasp.

The Normative Question: Why Should We Want Diversity?

Here we encounter one of the most challenging aspects of Hui's project. **(Hui's explicit claims)** His justification for technodiversity is primarily functional rather than metaphysical. Technical systems tend toward disequilibrium and collapse when they become too homogeneous. Diversity is therefore a practical imperative for maintaining system resilience, not a transcendent value guaranteed by divine providence.

This functional approach has both strengths and weaknesses. The strength lies in avoiding metaphysical commitments that might be difficult to defend in pluralistic contexts. The weakness lies in the difficulty of motivating political action based purely on functional considerations. Why should anyone care about system resilience unless they already value the forms of life those systems support?

(My interpretation) Theological traditions offer resources for thinking about diversity as intrinsically valuable —whether through Trinitarian models of unity-in-difference, Pauline visions of "many gifts, one body," or Confucian appreciations of complementary virtues. These resources don't resolve the normative questions Hui faces, but they suggest ways of thinking about diversity that go beyond mere functionality.

Critical Questions and Productive Tensions

Engaging with Hui's work through theological lenses reveals several productive tensions that merit further exploration:

The Technology-Transcendence Question: If technology displaces traditional sources of transcendence, how do we think about ultimate meaning and value? Hui's functional approach provides important insights, but it may not fully address existential and spiritual dimensions of human existence.

The Diversity-Unity Problem: Hui's call for technodiversity is compelling, but how do we maintain meaningful communication and cooperation across different technical cultures? Theological traditions have wrestled with similar questions about unity and plurality for centuries.

The Agency-Structure Tension: If technological systems shape political possibilities as deeply as Hui suggests, what room remains for human agency and democratic deliberation? This is both a political and a theological question about the relationship between freedom and determination.

The Local-Global Challenge: How do we honor particular cultural traditions while addressing genuinely planetary challenges? Hui's engagement with Chinese cosmology provides one model, but the challenge of cross-cultural dialogue remains formidable.

Toward Theo-Technodiversity: A Tentative Conclusion

My exploration of theological resonances in Hui's work is not intended as criticism but as appreciation. Hui has produced a remarkably sophisticated analysis of planetary thinking that opens new possibilities for political and technological reflection. The theological echoes I've traced don't diminish his achievement; they help us see its full significance.

The relationship between secular and theological thinking proves more complex than either simple opposition or easy synthesis. Hui's work demonstrates how thoroughly secular analysis can generate insights that resonate with theological traditions without being reducible to them. These resonances point to perennial human concerns about sovereignty, mediation, historical meaning, and ultimate ends that neither purely secular nor purely theological approaches can fully exhaust.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of Hui's planetary thinking lies not in resolving these tensions but in showing how they might be productive. His vision of technodiversity, his critique of technological hubris, and his account of organological becoming all suggest ways of living with complexity rather than reducing it to simple formulas.

(My interpretation) This points toward what we might call "theo-technodiversity" — a planetary vision that brings technological and theological resources into dialogue without collapsing them into each other. Such a vision would honor both the functional

insights of organological analysis and the existential depth of religious traditions.

Whether Hui's planetary thinking can sustain the political transformations it envisions remains an open question. But his work provides invaluable resources for anyone seeking to understand how we might think and act planetarily in an age of technological transformation. The theological resonances I've explored don't provide easy answers, but they help us see more clearly what's at stake in the attempt.

In our current moment—facing climate crisis, technological disruption, and global inequality—we need forms of thinking that are both rigorously analytical and capable of inspiring hope and action. Hui's contribution lies in showing how such thinking might proceed, even as he leaves many questions unanswered. The theological conversations I've initiated here are offered in the same spirit: as resources for thinking more deeply about the planetary futures we're creating.