

Field Philosophy Final Assessment
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Reflections on Field philosophy

Fields

Field philosophy is a recent methodology of research that aims to merge philosophical practice with fieldwork. Beyond attempting to dust down the practice, field philosophy seeks enlarging the production of knowledge to voices that have been silent - or silenced - in the West for long (Buchanan et al., 2018, 383). Going to “the field” and immersing oneself in a specific environment is the starting point of this methodology. This practice requires a particular sensitivity to the environment to “let oneself be influenced and shaped by [the] field”, and the human and non-human agents composing it (Buchanan et al., 2018, 387). Over a three-week course supervised by Dr Jeff Diamanti and enabled by the Netherlands Institute of Cultural Analysis (NICA), I was given the opportunity to explore three “fields”: a swamp located in the protected nature reserve of Naardermeer, the dunes near Castricum and finally, the logistical area of IJmuiden.

Participants were asked to critically reflect on those spaces and their constituents while immersing in them. It was telling to notice that all three fields are protected. The swamp and the dune area are nature reserves that are protected to preserve their ecosystem. While the port in IJmuiden constitutes a large technological system that requires protection against potential threats – or catastrophes – to its functioning such as unauthorised public access to sensible areas. Each in their own way, those fields both allow and restrict. Paths are delineated and signs influence behaviours. In fact, they remind us that technology is omnipresent.

The characterisation of these areas as “fields” informs us regarding the relationship humans may have with the spaces they inhabit, and it appears that a certain objectivation results from it. In this way, a distinction is not easily drawn between

material spaces such as a swamp, a forest or a library, and virtual spaces such as a website or a “map” in a first-person shooter for example. Indeed, it may prove interesting to reflect on the similarities and differences of those two sorts of spaces. As an object, a “field” implies an entry and an exit to it. In the case of our three experiences the entry and exit were even ritualised by notably time discipline and transportation requirements. The fields required specific and similar actions, experiences, rituals, to be accessed and exited such as commuting by train or car, meeting at a certain time with the same community of fieldworkers. Similarly, accessing a specific website, a platform or a specific FPS virtual space requires a series of prerequisites and actions. First, it is enabled by a large technological system involving infrastructures and socio-economic relations. They constitute the hidden face of the virtual spaces we access daily. One cannot hear the noise produced by servers or feel the heat of machines computing our clicks. There is an aesthetic distance between this imperceptible structure and the perceptible elements composing the interface taking the form of sounds and images.

Episteme(s)

Field philosophy, thus, aims to enlarge the domain of voices contributing to the production of knowledge. In *The Order of Things* (1992), Michel Foucault develops his concept of *episteme* which refers to historically specific systems of knowledge and power that shape and govern a particular period of a society. Epistemes determine how knowledge is produced and therefore, what can be known. They are the frame delimiting the constitution of knowledge. Western contemporary society can be characterised by the calculability and the rationalisation of all things. The cybernetic logic that understands the world as systems emerged in Occident and spread across the planet by way of globalisation and international competition. The omnipresence of Western digital technology and its logic illustrates well the management of society as a system where behaviours and desires are rendered translatable into quantifiable and manipulable data, constituting what we may call a digital episteme. The same applies to the management of spaces understood as ecologies. Although this phenomenon of datafication takes its roots well before the advent of these technologies (Hacking, 2015), it is with them that it reaches its full potential today. The collection, analysis, and manipulation of such data enable a serious power of pre-emption that make a leap

further in the process of cybernetisation of human and non-human organisms (Hui, 2019). For example, modern humans' relationship with the weather has drastically changed since. Humans living in a modern and technologically mediated milieu hold the future in the palm of their hands. Weather forecast applications tell us precisely when rain will fall and wind will blow, and we pre-emptively modify our behaviour in consequence: before the phenomenon occurs. Also, our relationship with the environment has radically changed. My great grandmother could foresee rainfall when her knee arthrosis was causing her pain or when the birds would fly low. In contrast, my generation seems to increasingly experience the world mediated through technologies that, what is more, are built on this principle of rational calculability. Various kinds of soundscapes are accessible easily on sound and video platforms. Now, some parts of formerly global sensitive experiences can be singled out and made an orthothetic product that is, a product that can be copied and reproduced identically. A forest soundscape on YouTube can be played and paused at any time and place. There is therefore a phenomenon of desacralisation and desymbolisation of the environment due to its objectivation, in totality or in part.

As a result, various works such as the one of Tim Ingold (2015) could be considered as attempts to delineate a new episteme, a new framework of knowledge production. This new framework denotes as it does not seem to be grounded in the domain of pure rationality, unlike the universal modern episteme which rests on calculability, demonstrability, and the search for rational truth. In the *Life of Lines*, Tim Ingold redefines meteorology as the study of atmospheric phenomena. **The atmosphere finding its essence in the union of the environment and sentiment or the cosmic and the affective** (Ingold, 2015, 79). He is interested in the experienced feeling of weather instead of its measured aspect. He thinks of air not in its rationalised and recordable form but in its felt form, only in relation to the feeling subject. A bridge seems possible to be drawn between Tim Ingold's attempt and Yuk Hui's concept of an epistemology of the non-rational. This inherently contradictory concept refers to things that cannot be known as such. The beautiful, the sublime, love or God pertain to the realm of the non-rational. They cannot be demonstrated although they may invoke a sense of truth: a non-rational truth. As Hui argues, "for a painter, the beautiful exists, but cannot be reduced to an object depicted in a painting" (Hui, 2021, 123). Thus, it seems that non-rational truth can be brought forth by *technē*. Although, the Greek word refers both to

arts and technics. Non-rational truth has been analysed as being potentially brought forth by artworks, following Heidegger's work on painters Cézanne and Klee (Hui, 2021, 125). Can the same be said about modern technologies? As Hui puts it, "can modern technology after cybernetics have the function of *Hervorbringen*", *poiesis* or the unconcealment of Being?

Milieu

Interestingly, the notion of milieu was first related to mechanical science. Canguilhem traces back the history of the pluri-disciplinary use of the term and tells us that the mechanical meaning of milieu comes from d'Alembert and Diderot's *Encyclopaedia*, which was then used in biology with Lamarck to refer to the relationship between the living and its environment (Canguilhem, 2001, 7). According to him, the term milieu used by French mechanists served to characterise what Newton called "fluid" whose archetype was luminous ether. This "fluid" served as "the vehicle of action at a distance" and, as a result, "is the intermediary between two bodies" or their "milieu" (Canguilhem, 2001, 8). Therefore, the milieu is not exterior to the individual but complementary. Thus, a milieu should not be understood as mere physical environment that we can see, touch and smell. A milieu is also what lies in-between individuals and comprises, at least for a part of humanity, virtual elements. And the mode of sensibility afforded by the virtual seems very different from the one offered by Nature. In *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, Yuk hui proposes to redefine Foucault's concept of episteme as "the sensible condition under which knowledge is produced" (Hui, 2016, 280). We are thus led to wonder what mode of sensibility pertains to, and is allowed by, the virtual

Understood in this way, a milieu constituting a field of study necessarily influences and shapes its constituents, just like the constituents shapes the field. Simondon's theory of individuation understands the milieu as co-constitutive of the individual. They form a "symbol" from the Greek σύμβολον meaning "what unites" (vs. diabolos – "what separates") (Simondon, 2017, 64). For him, an individual is never constituted and static. Instead, it is continuously individuating that is, resolving internal tensions that emerge between pre-individual potentialities and the milieu to reach what he calls a "metastable state" (Simondon, 2017). Here, metastability designates a transitional

status that may shift into another phase when a new individuation process is triggered. As co-constitutive of individuation, the milieu becomes “associated”. Bernard Stiegler draws upon Simondon’s concept to introduce the possibility of “dissociation” of the technical milieu. According to him, a technical milieu is “dissociated” if it does not contribute to one’s individuation that is, if the individual cannot act on its milieu. The example of the evolution from television to digital media and the internet is telling. At the birth of television there were only a few channels available, creating a highly top-down power relation between producers and consumers of symbols. On the other hand, the age of the internet has made the production of content largely available and led to the emergence of a new category of “prosumers”. By being able to participate in the elaboration of their cultural and symbolic landscape, prosumers seem theoretically more “associated” to their milieu.

Feeling

Taking a step back and focusing only on the feeling in relation to a milieu seems indeed to be a rare experience for highly technologically mediated subjects nowadays. The experiential meaning of presence, time and space seems to have changed with the evolution of the technological milieu. Memories taking the forms of notes, pictures or videos are everywhere and close to hand. The ecological apocalypse as an unavoidable future is already announced and even consumable on Netflix. The present, finally, is increasingly lived as mediated online. Digital objects captured from all sorts of environments and phenomena intertwine. They are “tele-graphiable” or can be “written at a distance”. Meaning that they are removed from their specific context (i.e. cultural, original time and space) of production (Lyotard, 1991, 50). Past, present and future are now different. They are felt differently due to the environment, or the milieu, in which people live that is more than ever technological. The linearity of time is indeed challenged. How much of what occupies our consciousness every day is either recorded or recordable? A reflection in the mirror. The snapshot of a dream. Sight and hearing are overstimulated senses in the age of hypermodern technology. Imported fruits lack the taste of childhood memories and recognisable smells are mostly artificial in the city. Images of matter are scarcely represented and so do not constitute our imagination. Imagination lacks *openness*, it lacks “meditation on matter” to take Bachelard’s term (1983, 2). Matter is absent from contemporary imagination.

Certainly, at least in part, because it cannot be reproduced technologically like an image or a sound can. Stiegler draws upon Husserl's phenomenology of time consciousness involving retentions and protentions and contends his conclusions to assert that perception and imagination form a transductive relation: perception requires imagination in order to be and imagination always proceeds from perception. Bachelard seems to go in the same direction as the first part of Stiegler's claim when he states that:

Dreams come before contemplation. Before becoming a conscious sight, every landscape is an oneiric experience. **Only those scenes that have already appeared in dreams can be viewed with an aesthetic passion** (1983, 4).

Although, he omits recognising the supposedly determining power of perception pointed out by Stiegler. But if imagination is limited by the extent of perceptions, is there still space for creativity in a world dominated by images? Is contemporary art condemned to reproduce or twist, consciously or not, perceptions of the past? And similarly, is modern technology bound to enable only this kind of sensibility? Can our dreams as reflections of our consciousness getting to know itself not escape this perceptual prison?

Sensibilising

In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze dedicates a chapter to what he calls **"the image of thought"** (2001). He questions the beginning of philosophy, about the trunk of philosophical thought. According to him, the history of Western philosophy starts with several subjective and implicit presuppositions serving as fundamental premisses that are often based on common sense or good sense. They are what he calls **"images of thought"**. Thought is thus caught in a cycle of repetition, of recognition where the new is not different. **Difference**, he claims, **"calls forth forces in thought which are not the forces of recognition, today or tomorrow, but the powers of a completely other model, from an unrecognised and unrecognisable *terra incognita*"** (Deleuze, 2001, 136). How does this difference come forth? For Deleuze, it is the result of an *encounter*. **The object of encounter is not an object of recognition, but can "only be sensed"** (2001, 139). The object of recognition can be seen, touched, remembered, imagined, or conceived.

Thus, he distinguishes between **sensibility pertaining to recognition** whose object can be experienced other than by sense and attained by other faculties, and **sensibility pertaining to this object of encounter**. He adds: **“It is not a quality but a sign. It is not a sensible being but a being of the sensible. It is not the given but that by which the given is given. It is therefore in a certain sense the imperceptible”** (Deleuze, 2001, 140). It is imperceptible from the point of view of recognition, that is, from an empirical exercise of the senses. This encounter seems therefore to constitute true difference as opposed to mere repetition. It is the true beginning of thought. He continues saying that **“in an encounter, what forces sensation and that which can only be sensed are one and the same thing”** and adds that it is **“the contingency of the encounter which guarantees the necessity of that which it forces to be thought”** (Deleuze, 2001, 144-145). **The phenomenon of encounter therefore seems to require a contingency of experience. It requires opening one’s soul to the contingencies of the world in order to move it.** However, experiences allowed by more and more technologies as media (i.e. where technologies are the medium mediating the world and the sensing subject) seem to exhaust contingencies due to the **increasing determination of the faculties of the mind and behaviours**, as Yuk Hui argued in *Recursivity and Contingency* (2019).

In the contemporary context of technological omnipresence and universality, it appears fruitful therefore to expand the character of sensibility advocated by field philosophy to **“objects of encounter”** that go beyond the recognition of empirical senses and that is attentive to the imperceptible: **to what can only be sensed**. As a result, we are led to wonder whether digital technologies, that constitute great memory, perception, and imagination tools, may enable us to sensitize (Hui, 2017, 6). The relationship humans hold with technology is firstly empirical. As a result, Field philosophy appears to be a promising methodology to tackle the question of modern technology and potentially open new doors towards the constitution of new epistemes in a desired technologically pluralistic world.

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