

## 【Articles】

# Reclaiming the Aesthetic in the Foreign Language Arts

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## Abstract

This article explores the impact of digital technology on the experience of being in the world, and particularly on the experience of language learning in Japanese higher education. Working from the late philosopher Bernard Stiegler's broad conception of 'the aesthetic' as knowing how to live, it is argued that neoliberal economics and algorithmic technologies have anaesthetized individuals to the point of anxiety, apathy, loneliness, and disempowerment. In short, such forces have greatly hindered the human potential to become and to effect a social becoming, what Simondon called a 'transindividuation'. The article implicates the language learning industry in this immiseration, particularly in its obsession with quantification of proficiency and with its equation of the English language with 'success'. The article concludes with a call for an ontological turn in the foreign language arts, a renewed focus on the aesthetic and what Stiegler calls a 'life worth living'.

**Keywords:** *the foreign language arts, the aesthetic, techné, transindividuation, savoir-vivre, libidinal economies, tertiary memory, neoliberalism, Bernard Stiegler*

## Introduction

*A reality is established in which people flee their incomprehension by retreating ever further into the anaesthetic world of machines: To people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an*

*endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way . . .*

Walter Benjamin, *Poverty and Experience* (1933, p. 735)

For those of us old enough to know, it feels far, far different living in this age than living in the latter decades of the 20th century. This may seem an obvious enough assertion. Times change. Although humans are quite good at normalizing their new self-created habitats, the pace of technological development over the past couple of decades has left many of us, regardless of age, struggling to keep up with the changes. Douglas Rushkoff (2013) has called this condition ‘present shock’. However, the current anxiety over digital technology’s encroachment on our daily lives is countered by a steady reminder from industry experts that the aggravating kinks will be ironed out as the technology gets smarter. There is an assumption that the algorithms underlying AI will become better and better at solving problems and leave us humans to do what we truly enjoy. This is a dangerous assumption for a number of reasons, but most fundamentally for this one: the natural world, including us, does not operate according to machine algorithms. The natural world is based on a creative resistance to entropy. There is will, there is spirit, there is intention. And in the case of humans, there is desire to rise above the entropic forces of the machines we create.

There is no doubt that the most salient difference between humans and their animal counterparts is the ability to exteriorize themselves in technology, in organized inorganic matter. Other animals do not exhibit themselves in the world prosthetically: in cities, factories, art galleries, military installations, fast food chains, interstate freeways, classrooms, internet search engines, social media, political institutions, chatbots, and so on. The ancient Greek myth of the titan brothers Prometheus and Epimetheus illustrates a fundamental realization forever at the heart of our human consciousness: we are technical creatures. According to this myth, while the rest of the animal kingdom is bestowed with each-to-their-own innate abilities (the cheetah its speed, the chameleon its ability to change color, the bird its ability to fly, etc.), humans have been overlooked by the gods and are belatedly offered but one gift: fire—or in other words, the gift of technical know-how—*savoir-faire*—or in ancient Greek, *techné*. In short, we humans are what we can create, what we pass on to the next generation, and what we accumulate for our species over the long term. The late French philosopher Bernard Stiegler refers to this as an *epiphylogenesis* (a genesis of the species occurring outside the body) unique to humans. Our social and cultural memory is exteriorized through inscriptions, i.e., those technologies and artifacts which record the past and which enable humanity to maintain some sort of shared creative momentum, across generations, for continued vitality and transformation. The long-held progressive view of education is that institutions of learning are vital organs for such a curation of memory and, consequently, the facilitation of future possibilities (see, for example, Arendt, 2006 [1961]).

Through his reading of Plato, Stiegler views our ‘gift’ of *techné* as a *pharmakon*, i.e., both cure and poison. While *techné* provides the only mechanism for the uniquely human negentropic impulses toward becoming-other, for imagining possible futures and subsequently for the “feeling that life is worth living” (2013), it simultaneously contains the inherent possibility of leading humanity to states of uncontrollable disaffection and immiseration (2013; 2014a). This emphasis on the bifurcated nature of our technological existence, its simultaneously utopian and catastrophic possibilities, gives Stiegler’s philosophy a distinctly moral dimension that is evident in the vocabulary that pervades his corpus: *spirit*, *care*, *attention*, *belief*, *transformation* and a pronounced resistance against *malaise*, *disindividuation*, *misery*, *shock*, etc. It is a dimension of his work that brings an urgency, and arguably something of a utopian vision, to the subject of education (Bradley & Kennedy, 2021).

Stiegler (2013) frames this attention to possibility and transformation in the object relations theory of Donald Winnicott (1971), whose psychoanalysis focuses on the *transitional object*, that which enables the healthy psychosocial development of a child within a social ecosystem. However, Stiegler extends Winnicott’s *transitional space*, or *potential space* beyond child psychology to describe an environment of security in which a healthy *transindividuation*—a lifelong and indeterminate creation of both self and world—is allowed to thrive. This transitional or potential space does not represent any sort of necessarily delimiting deficiency, but, again, in Stiegler’s pharmacological sense, a default of the human condition to be *wanting* of something, of *needing* to overcome the slide toward entropy and meaninglessness. It is a *negentropic* impulse, constituting a space for the incalculable imaginary, a desire for “that *which does not exist*” (2013, p. 75) and “the play of *permanent revolution*” (Stiegler, 2011, p. 59). This paper asks to what extent the language learning industry, particularly its manifestation in higher education in Japan, has abandoned this space, and how this space might be reinhabited.

The incalculable imaginary is, of course, dependent on the state of individual and collective *desire*. Stiegler (2013) argues that the algorithms put to use by the monolithic neoliberal obsession with profit have dampened not only our shared *retentions* (i.e., the accumulation of memory), but also our *protentions*, our ability to imagine possible futures that are worth cultivating and caring about. Globalism, neoliberal capitalism, the attention economy, the ascendancy of the haves over the have-nots and that of AI over human cognition—these are all widely perceived as inevitable (e.g., Margaret Thatcher’s infamous neoliberal slogan “There is no alternative”). But just as absolutely no one yearned for an iPhone prior to its launch in 2007, these near-universal technological, economic, and cultural trends are not something that the broader public necessarily *desires*, but they are marketed to them by continually appealing to and feeding the basest *drives*. From a psychoanalytic point of view, such conditioning leads to a ‘symbolic misery’ marked not only by the loss of libidinal desire to the impulses of drive (i.e., momentary satisfaction without a long-term transindividuating

effect), but also by “the loss of participation in the production of symbols” (Stiegler, 2014a, p. 10). Walter Benjamin (see epigraph above) described this as an *anaesthetic*, a numbing of the senses, a deadening of the aesthetic. Fitzpatrick (2014) explains how in the current culture and attention economies “‘available brain time’ is bought and sold as a commodity” and “the principle role of the individual is as a consumer of commodities” (p. 120).

As will be discussed later, it has become abundantly clear that while foreign language education (particularly that of English) in Japan is increasingly thought of as a necessary endeavor for participation in the global *financial* economy, its role in what Stiegler terms ‘*libidinal* economies’ (2013)—i.e. the organization of individual and collective desire—is largely ignored. The question, then, is to what extent foreign language education becomes part of the circuitry that creates ‘positive protentions’, opening doors to the possibilities of incalculable and open futures of psychic, social, and cultural transindividuation; or to what extent it precludes such possibilities by becoming complicit in the economies of big data algorithms and the “automatized production of protentions” (Stiegler, 2014b, pp. 4–5). This article, therefore, attempts to apply this cultural critique to the language arts in Japanese universities, framing it as a crisis of the aesthetic.

## A Broader Definition of Aesthetics

It is first necessary to clear up any misunderstanding of the word *aesthetics* as used in this article. What is *not* meant here is the colloquial usage of aesthetics handed down through a centuries-long emphasis in Western philosophy, a usage roughly meaning the study of beauty and/or the ‘finer’ things in life, a usage that is “synonymous with art theory” (Highmore, 2010, p. 122). To understand the much more inclusive, and arguably undervalued, implications of the ancient Greek root word *aisthēsis*, it is instructive to contrast the aesthetic with its very opposite: the *anaesthetic*. In the epigraph at the beginning of this article, Benjamin is referring to a condition (already apparent in the early 20th century) brought on by the technologies of mass production, mass reproducibility, and mass calculability—a condition wherein Benjamin argues we become anesthetized, *put under* as it were, increasingly distanced from the senses and sensibilities that make life worth living. In other words, what we are increasingly facing is a crisis in the value of our human consciousness—individually, socially, and ecologically.

One of the main arguments of Stiegler’s later work echoes Benjamin’s concern, that our own current technologies—while undoubtedly expanding human potential—also threaten humanity with a general crisis of *savoir-vivre* (‘knowing how to live’), a proletarianization (i.e., immiseration) of human sensibility. In setting up his thesis of ‘symbolic misery’ (2014a), Stiegler traces the word aesthetics (again, *aisthēsis*) to its origin in Greek antiquity and ascribes it “its widest sense, where *aisthēsis* means sensory perception, and where the ques-

tion of aesthetics is, therefore, that of feeling and sensibility in general” (2014, p. 1). This framing of aesthetics has ample resonance in the philosophical canon, from Dewey (e.g. *Art as Experience*, 2019 [1934]) through to a more recent philosophy of ‘everyday aesthetics’ that encapsulates the entirety, whether positive or negative, of seemingly mundane sensory experience (e.g., washing dishes, commuting to work, doing homework, killing time on TikTok) and seeks to defamiliarize this familiarity. For a solid overview of this tradition, see Saito (2021), but for this section I wish to focus on (in addition to Stiegler) two mid 20th-century thinkers who, through their own very different interpretations of techné, describe the modern technological milieu and its impact on the aesthetic, and ‘becoming other’ most saliently: Gilbert Simondon and Günther Anders.

Relatively unknown in his own lifetime, Simondon’s thought posthumously (firstly through Deleuze and later through Stiegler) came to have significant influence in the philosophy of technology, particularly regarding the concept of *individuation*. Simondon’s highly complex and oft discussed theory of individuation can roughly be thought of as the processes by which a person becomes individuated—i.e., differentiated from others—processes that occur relationally within one’s *Umwelt* (one’s world of engagement). Thus, we are always in an incalculable process of ‘becoming other’ through our social experience. The term ‘socialization’, more common in the social sciences, has some overlap with the concept of individuation, although the former could be read to be more programmatic in its connotation.

The connection between individuation and the aesthetic is this: Individuation is dependent on larger ecological (including sociocultural) wholes—i.e., it is relational—while the aesthetic serves as the primordial nexus in which shared meaning is created. As Lemke (2015) succinctly puts it, “We do not make sense without the integration of *feeling*” (p. 600, italics mine). Lemke, building on von Uexküll’s notions of *Umwelt*, argues that just as meaning-making (semiosis) is not merely confined to what happens within the brain but is distributed, situated, active, and culturally specific, so also is the aesthetic (or feeling). Or in Simondon’s articulation:

The aesthetic impression implies the feeling of the complete perfection of an act, a perfection that objectively gives it a radiance and an authority by which it becomes a noteworthy point of lived reality, a knot of experienced [*éprouvée*] reality. This act becomes a noteworthy point of the network of human life inserted into the world; from this noteworthy point to others a superior kinship is created that reconstitutes an analogue of the magical network of the universe. (MEOT p. 180 [cited in Michaud, 2012, p. 124])

The aesthetic, then, is characterized as a unifying and *transindividuating* (fostering a becoming-other through and with a community) force that lends resonant form and signification to

shared experience.

The aesthetic is also necessarily nested in a body of memory that extends across generations, carried on from the past, interpreted, sifted, and curated for the cultivation of possible futures. Simondon posits that the aesthetic impulse thus “aims at restoring continuities” (Michaud, 2012, p. 124) through “the gesture of placing, inscribing, inserting a mark in the natural or technical or religious world” (ibid. p. 125). Stiegler argues that in an algorithmic milieu where “aesthetic conditioning . . . has replaced aesthetic experience” (2014, p. 3), maintaining this throughline requires care, vigilance, and concerted action. He calls for a transformation of desire—through a disciplined cultivation of thought, critique, and dialogue—in order to produce what he refers to as ‘long circuits’ of knowledge and memory that are able to sustain infinite, intergenerational transindividuation (Stiegler, 2015; 2013). By ‘long circuits’ Stiegler here means the perpetual carrying forward of accumulated aesthetic memory. These long circuits of desire can be ‘short-circuited’ when dominant ideas in a society are not created through sharing and dialogue but rather through individuals submitting to them (Stiegler, 2013). In essence, the algorithmic ecologies that we are immersed keep us clicking and scrolling in subservience to the industries that thrive on data harvesting. In education, students are in danger of being treated with the logic that, in Kate Crawford’s summation, “you shall know them by their metadata” (2021, p. 185).

To pause for a moment: I am emphasizing the relationship between these two terms—aesthetics and individuation—in an attempt to describe a particular crisis of spirit brought on by our current milieu of constant connectivity, distraction, and manipulation, i.e., “*the trickery of machines at work in the depths of the human soul*” (Müller, 2016, p. 3). This crisis affects not only how we live and *feel* our everyday lives, but also how we learn, how we remember, and therefore how we create possible futures for ourselves, our descendants, and the planet. It is a crisis many decades in the making, but with the exponential spread of artificial intelligence technologies, its severity is becoming ever more pronounced and alarming. We now spend a great deal of our lives—and arguably the most consequential hours of the day—online, eyes glued to a screen of one kind or another, interacting with a manufactured simulacrum that has for all practical purposes come to eclipse our natural interactions. What effects can we expect to be visited on us? And are we at all concerned? Have we become inured to the alarm bells rung by—to name but a few—Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1940s (‘culture industries’), Marcuse in the 1960s (*One Dimensional Man*), Postman in the 1980s (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*), Deleuze in the 1990s (‘societies of control’), Rushkoff in the digital age (*Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*). All of these ideas are in popular circulation. And yet the severity of our crisis leaves many of us unfazed.

Our numbness or apathy might be better understood through the thought of the philosopher and critical theorist Günther Anders, whose highly unusual work has enjoyed something of a revival of late. Coincidentally a cousin of Walter Benjamin and married to



Hannah Arendt (both referenced in this paper), Anders had a significant influence on the Frankfurt School, though he was never a member. What sets Anders apart from other philosophers of technology is his preoccupation with “the normative power of technology” (Liessmann, 2014, p. 75). We have, for example, become anaesthetized to the act of swiping up, down, left, right on the prosthetic device we carry with us day and night: the smartphone. We are also increasingly numb to our physical surroundings, as what happens on our hand-held screens unrelentingly demands our attention.

Anders is particularly known for his idea of ‘Promethean shame’ or, later, “a Promethean slope or gradient’ (*prometheisches Gefälle*), a growing rift between our technologically mediated ability to collectively influence the world and our individual capacity to feel, and to emotively apprehend, what we are doing” (Müller, 2016, p. 12). While Simondon (and Stiegler) focus most of the blame of this condition on higher manipulative powers (industry, capitalism, society, media, etc.), and thereby suggest a certain degree of optimism for overcoming it, Anders takes a more pessimistic view. Anders posits that humans actually *prefer* the numbness of our artificiality. We *want* to blot out our natural selves, as our innate lack is too uncomfortable to live with. As Babich puts it:

What we much rather want to be instead, and there is always an instead, is the machine: perfectible, replaceable, immortal . . . our desire is to be manufactured, to be fabricated, to be a product, maybe one with serial numbers, perhaps an ISBN, quite such that we can market and upgrade ourselves. (Babich, 2022, p. 29)

Anders argues that increasingly intelligent and capable technologies do not merely remind us of our own human limitations, they at the same time distance us—in increasingly profound ways—from the tasks they do for us (Müller, 2016). Let’s take ChatGPT as an example. Not only does it confront us with the fact that we are nowhere close to competing with its information processing capabilities, we also begin to lose interest in the acts of researching, thinking, and writing. Likewise, GPS navigation technologies have decimated the experience of orienting oneself within the physical world and, as recent research strongly suggests, actually leads to a shrinking of the brain’s hippocampus (Dahmani & Bohbot, 2020). Perhaps more alarming, the ‘intelligent’ algorithms used in popular social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, are having devastating effects on the mental health of teenagers (see Haidt, 2024), whose *savoir-vivre* (knowing how to *live*) seems to be eroded by anxiety, loneliness, alienation, and hopelessness.

As the following section will illustrate, this self-anaesthetizing force also underlies much of the language learning industry. Besides acknowledging the obvious nihilistic and short-circuiting environments that machine translation services such as Google Translate foster (e.g., reduced desire to learn and to know), we must also look at the top-down narratives,

agendas and practices that anaesthetize the processes of learning and becoming.

## Language Learning Industries/Culture Industries

Having spent their formative years surrounded by the cultural apparatuses that ‘sell’ English in all its ambivalent allure, and after at least six years of being taught English as a necessary requirement for entrance to university, Japanese students who manage to matriculate into university arrive with a wide range of understandably conflicting attitudes and motivations toward English. It is obviously outside the scope of this article to discuss them all. Nor will this article attempt to explore the so-called ‘effectiveness’ (or not) of various language pedagogies, or more broadly the relative ‘proficiency’ of Japanese as speakers of foreign languages. What is more important is to recognize the power of the social *imaginary* (Castoriadis, 1998 [1975]), particularly society’s shared *feeling* of future possibility, purpose, and transformation. This is, per Stiegler, a question of libido—of desire—and of individuation. For this, we might begin by evaluating how the ineluctable ubiquity of foreign languages (particularly English) in public life is framed within government and institutional goals and initiatives, and how such discourses enable or disable potential for a healthy transindividuation of the person and society.

Japan’s education policymakers have for decades now unabashedly linked English language policy goals with the demands of economic globalization. Principally, the Japanese government’s push for a more communicative approach to language pedagogy is explicitly focused on national economic interests (Yonezawa, 2014), but not on the attributes of self-reflection, criticism, empathy, or openness that need accompany the transformative processes inherent in becoming a more global-minded citizen (Aspinall, 2011; Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011). English is presented as primarily an instrument of economic growth, and as such the government’s policy is oriented toward individuals who are already gifted with greater foreign language proficiency, or who have the financial resources to meet the quantified targets as determined by MEXT, the top universities (who generally set the pedagogical direction for other schools to follow), cram schools, and the language testing industry.

Although language teaching professionals, including many in Japan, have since the late 1990s been heavily influenced by the ideals of a so-called ‘social turn’ in language pedagogy (Block, 2003)—i.e. an effort to situate “the learner as a whole person, not a grammar production unit” (Van Lier, 2004, p. 223)—EFL as a pedagogical discipline has in practice nonetheless struggled to counter the expectations of anxious students and their caretakers, the economic goals of concerned commercial and bureaucratic entities, and the survival instincts of a cram school industry whose clientele is rapidly shrinking due to demographic changes—all of whom demand quantifiable results. Just as the algorithms of AI preclude open futures of possibility in favor of pure calculability, the language teaching industry has



followed the neoliberal agenda of (in Stiegler's words) replacing "the power to decide with the power to calculate" (2020). We can see this evidenced, for example, in the seemingly inescapable tendency, for a variety of self-serving ends, to conveniently partition the creation of meaning—*semiosis*—in foreign language pedagogy into distinct and empirically measurable modes (e.g. listening, speaking, reading and writing), divisions which by and large define language curriculum design in Japanese universities as well as the channels that feed into to this apex. Toh characterizes the 'professionalism' of EFL as a practice of "reductionism and control" (2016, p. 54), what Freire would include in "the praxis of domination" (2000 [1970], p. 126), that which in Japan is especially regulated through the watchful eye of high-stakes language tests (Toh, 2016; McNamara & Roever, 2006) such as TOEIC, Eiken, IELTS, and GTEC. Even current discussions about Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)—a movement supposedly modeled on a more holistic view of meaning-making—have, in Japan, foundered in clearly articulating a *raison d'être* for such an approach beyond that of affording elite students the '21st-century competencies' necessary for assimilation into the global network of neoliberal affluence (see Ikeda, 2016; 2015). CLIL has, for the moment at least, been reduced to merely another intellectually fashionable manifestation of language pedagogy as an industry of calculable outcomes.

Stiegler (2014) characterizes the current state of the university as a failure to effectively combat the "cultural hegemony over retentional apparatuses" (p. 60)—i.e. a short-circuiting of psychosocial memory—that contributes to an anaesthetized self that is unable "to project itself into a world which has become for it an *unworld*" (p. 62). In other words, the individual self loses its sense of connection to the collective whole, which leads to a *dis-individuation*. Indeed, among new Japanese employees aged 18 to 26, the percent who do *not* wish to work abroad rose from 28.7% in 2004 to 58.7% in 2013 (Yonezawa, 2014, p. 46). That the majority of university students seem to lose their purpose and motivation for studying English after passing the university entrance examination (Matsuda, 2011) further corroborates this point. English language education is widely perceived (and correctly) as primarily an index of an individual's value in an abstract global economy, but not so much as a mechanism for libidinal transformation, or as a path toward a life more *worth living*. The vast majority of Japanese, students or not, are keenly aware of the disparity between educational policy ideals and the reality of English use in personal and professional life (Kubota, 2011; Seargeant, 2009). Although university students tend to accept the government's emphasis on regarding English as a necessary tool for participation in the globalized economy *in the abstract*, they see globalization as something that can be opted out of (Morita, 2013), a process that belongs to someone else (Burgess, 2013). Ironically, the Japanese government's concern about this disconnect, what it terms "inward-looking attitudes", is one of its rationales for an increased effort to foster "global human resources" within the university (Yonezawa, 2014, p. 46), an arguably desperate measure to inject into the system more of what immiserated it in the first

place.

Even though ‘competence’ or ‘proficiency’ as measured by tests have been a priority in English language instruction in Japan for many decades now, this focus has only been strengthened by an increased consternation in government and industry that Japan is seen to be lagging in global economic competitiveness (Yonezawa, 2014), particularly as its world-wide GDP ranking has fallen from second to fourth place over the past decade and a half. And nowhere is the use of English proficiency as a gatekeeper of inclusion or exclusion from participation in this economic race more evident than in the education ministry’s various recent initiatives to ‘internationalize’ Japanese higher education, most notably The Top Global University Project, or Global 30 for short. The root of this government initiative (funded from 2014 to 2023) was the long-running preoccupation among those in power (since at least the Meiji Era) with rankings—of prestige, status and economic power—vis-à-vis the mirror of the outside world, particularly the West, and more particularly the English-speaking West. According to the highly influential *Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings* (2023), 57 of the world’s 100 highest-ranked universities are to be found in just four Anglophone countries (the USA, 40; the UK, 9; Australia, 5; and Canada, 3). (The entire continent of Asia meanwhile is represented by only 20 schools, and Japan—the second largest economy in Asia—by 5.) It is no wonder then, as Piller (2016) argues, that education planners come to associate academic superiority with English. The late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, notably, made explicit and repeated mention of his goal to improve Japanese universities’ worldwide ranking through English language education (Taylor, 2014). The Global 30 program became the cornerstone of this effort. It was established as a block of government grants to 37 selected universities to implement English as a medium of instruction (EMI) with the intent to promote international exchanges with universities in “strategically important countries and regions” (MEXT, 2017, p. 13), to nurture ‘human resources’ who can meet the joint goals of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and MEXT (Yonezawa, 2014). It was designed to be an educational agenda built on attention to competition, to supply and demand, what Stiegler calls “the commodification of knowledge” (2015, p. 169). Regardless of the relative ‘successes’ or ‘failures’ of these initiatives in higher education (see Toh, 2016; Aspinall, 2011), foreign language education incorporated into such a knowledge industry remains inherently nihilistic. It presents not a mechanism for incalculable possibility, for imagination and empathy, for long-term transindividuation, or for critical participation in the industries that have become the profit-driven producers and caretakers of social memory. Rather, it perpetuates the short-term ‘fix’, replicating the machinery of self-interest, addiction, envy and misery—‘short-circuiting’ the possibilities for change and the creation of a sustainable culture.

As Giroux (2015; 2014; 2011) has noted, neoliberal ideology has presented itself in stark opposition to critical pedagogy and the utopian possibilities of education—the con-

certed and limitless drive for agency, creative participation, challenge to power and social change. Dewey voiced this educational ideal as “a widening and deepening of conscious life—a more intense, disciplined, and expanding realization of meanings” (2004 [1916], p. 344). Education for Dewey was not simply a preparation for the utilitarian necessities of the economic order, but the essence of a life lived, a never-ending process of re-imagination, i.e. an *aesthetic* endeavor. In a similar vein, Stiegler (2015) reminds us that the origin of philosophy, in Plato, is rooted in the question of education, conceived as a disciplined and yet therapeutic struggle with the implications of a technically exteriorized social memory. Stiegler, then, sees the academy as a necessary caretaker of social memory against the dis-individuating forces of neoliberal economics:

... the ‘market’ dissolves social structures and psychic apparatus, and subjects the evolution of the global technological system to the exclusively adaptive and speculative imperatives of an economy of carelessness and neglect. This leads to generalized disinvestment and renders impossible the curative adoption of contemporary pharmaka ... This ‘Market’ is inherently a process of disindividuation, that is, a process that destroys all institutions and discredits every form of authority—recognizing the violence of the law but not its symbolic force, which one calls its authority. (Stiegler, 2015, p. 184)

Here we can get a hint of Stiegler’s pairing of the aesthetic (the psychosocial organization of the symbolic) and the political (see also Stiegler, 2014). It is my contention that the foreign language learning industry in Japan, as well as many who engage in language pedagogy here, have overlooked this crucial political aspect. For as language learning has an aesthetic dimension (again, in that it is a sensate experience), it involves the libido (desire), and therefore it is subject to political forces (i.e., who or what regulates that desire).

Although one might argue that the framing of foreign-ness and foreign languages in Japan represents a kind of therapeutic *pharmakon*—a cure and poison—such an argument would have to overlook the issue of the individual’s self-investment in this machinery of resistance and desire, in other words this person’s *anamnesis* (i.e. self-remembered) capacity for *care*, or for *attention* to that which is worth caring about. However, foreign languages in Japan, as techné, are by and large positioned to be neither enablers nor recipients of this capacity. They have instead been historically placed as objects of manipulation by the state and by industry, objects of a drive for consumption, for something that is different, new, desirable—or, conversely, as a reminder of the glaring contrasts between Japan and non-Japan—but not necessarily as enabling of long-term, sustainable transindividuation. That is, these programmatic positionings of foreign languages are not sociohistorically robust enough to support widespread *autopoietic* (self-creating and sustainable) engagement from the population into which they are transplanted. Foreign languages are widely conceived as

something brought from the outside, a forced contact that has been, and continues to be, “ideologically regulated” (Sergeant, 2009, p. 70), a regulation that constantly pits desire against anxiety. This occurs through the mechanisms of both consumer culture (theme parks, t-shirts, magazines, television, cram schools and language schools, etc.) and the micromanagement of language education, particularly its emphasis on quantification of proficiency. In this sense, mainstream English language education is unwittingly part of the machinery that exploits the short-term drives, but does little to promote a healthy libidinal ecology wherein there is possibility for sustainable processes of psychosocial transindividuation.

### Conclusion: Toward an Aesthetics of Memory

Young people today are increasingly in danger of falling into a comfortably numb resignation to a planetary status quo—a resignation to the apparently unstoppable momentum of dominant economic, technological, social, and political movements; more specifically, a resignation to the seeming inevitabilities of global neoliberalism, the unrelenting distractions of the digital screen, and a world bereft of alternative futures or utopian visions. The current milieu is ushering society into a wasteland of its own making, one historically unparalleled in psychosocial desolation, a landscape in which humanity—especially the young—can find neither belonging nor contribution nor growth. The wanderers of this landscape are, in short, lacking *futural hope*.

Occupationally, the vast majority of us now face a lifetime being regarded as ‘human resources’ in service to the unfeeling machinery of economic growth. In most of the industrialized world, the bottom line—financial profitability—knows best, or at least better than its citizens do. In China, this principle has taken an even more sinister form: a state-controlled ‘Social Credit System’ is now well established, in which big data algorithms assess not only the economic potential of an individual, but also their sociopolitical pliancy. In either model, our knowing how to do/make (*savoir-faire*) and how to live (*savoir-vivre*) are increasingly being outsourced to the screens into which we invest our souls hour after hour, as the algorithmic forces behind these mirages have also come to *know* and to *calculate* better than we do.

As has been discussed, Stiegler frames these problems against the very essence of our humanity and collective culturing: our technicity (*techné*) and historicity. What we do and how we live are inextricably positioned between the accumulations of our shared memory (past retentions) and our ability to imagine and move toward a shared future that is sustainable and worth investing in. These are, ultimately, issues of *knowing* and of *making*. Stiegler’s later work emphasizes the making of worlds, the creation of futures. Our technologies situate us temporally in an eternal moment of incompleteness, in a forever *becoming*. Stiegler argues,

however, that the current epoch presents technological innovation at such a pace that we are unable to comprehend what it is making of us. Our technical becoming is outracing our cultural becoming, leading to hopelessness, loneliness, and alienation. We are at great risk of being dis-individuated—incapable of understanding our place in the world. In such a lonely wilderness, millennials (especially) are left to seek recognition and acceptance (and a dopamine hit) in tweets, Instagram posts, and TikTok videos. But these digital inscriptions leave nothing for a future becoming. They are ephemera in search of immediate response, and in that respect empty of significance.

Rather than succumbing to the abject pessimism of Günther Anders' assertion that humans actually desire to be replaced and to be anaesthetized, this article is premised on a conviction (after Plato) that it is through education that there must be a radical return to first principles, a recognition of the technical and historical groundings of human culture, i.e., the “play of the world” (Stiegler, 2011, p. 59). Within this framework, education is tasked with nothing less than to be the *caretaker* of tertiary memory. ‘Taking care’ is a long-term project of cultivating possible, incalculable futures that are worth living in and that are worth contributing to. Henry Giroux characterizes higher education in the current neoliberal era as antithetical to such a vision. Instead, it is a “dead zone” where “the future replicates the present in an endless cycle” (2014, p. 31). What is needed is a protentional and contributory view of higher education, one in which both educators and students are part of a trans-generational project toward social semiosis, of co-creation of meaning, a return to the roots of our negentropic spirit, what the biologists Maturana and Varela termed our natural impulse toward “bringing forth a world” (1998, p. 27).

What I have attempted to do in this article is to offer a future-looking vision of the liberal and language arts in Japanese higher education as a means for *bringing forth worlds* through ecologies of contribution (Stiegler, 2015). This involves a re-examination of how we view 1) individuals who are learning *and doing things* in new languages, and 2) the purpose of language arts education in general.

First of all, there must be a resistance against an industry that views learners as little more than consumers. There must be a renewed focus on the learner as a whole person, a person who feels and lives and has something to contribute to the world. With rare exception, the field of language learning motivation has been an exercise in statistical prediction of observable learner behavior. It is primarily the study of cause and effect. Overall there has been a tendency to view language learning and use as discrete from what is being done, what is being created, and what is being carried forward through the very *experience of being* in a new language. Ema Ushioda's (2009) “person-in-context relational view of motivation” provides an ontological counterbalance to the positivist establishment in language learning research. Hers is a ‘teleological’ view of motivation, a shift away from linear cause and effect characterizations of what make an ideal or typical learner. She promotes:

... a focus on real persons, rather than on learners as theoretical abstractions; a focus on the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives and intentions; a focus on the interaction between the self-reflective intentional agent, and the fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro- and macro- contexts in which the person is embedded, moves, and is inherently part of. (Ushioda, 2009, p. 220)

Ushioda argues that traditional dichotomies between internal (the “learner-as-computer”) and external (context or culture as a “pre-existing, stable, independent background variable” [p. 218]) leads to a tendency of viewing one of the two as objectified by the other. Her rejection of this fallacy thereby promotes a relational, or ecological, view that socio-cultural and socio-historically situated processes are mutually constitutive with the complexities of self. This is a recognition of the processes of transindividuation, of the individual becoming other and opening future possibility in concert with the communities they inhabit.

Second, practitioners in the language arts would do well to recognize that the end goal of their practice need not be ‘fluency’ or ‘communication skills’ or any other type of measurable ‘proficiency’. In fact, there need not be a fixed end goal at all. As this article has argued, the focus on raw calculability lies at the heart of the dis-individuating algorithms of an industry driven by profit. Ronald Barnett, one of the preeminent scholars in the philosophy of higher education, has proposed a reimagining of the university as it relates to the world, arguing that in a world that is changing faster than we are able to keep up with, the teaching of skills has become largely moot (2018; 2004). Rather, he argues for an “ontological turn” (Barnett, 2004, p. 247) in the university, a focus on what it *feels* like to be in the world:

Now, what we are witnessing is a new kind of world order in which the changes are characteristically internal. They are primarily to do with how individuals understand themselves, with their sense of identity (or lack of it), with their being in the world; this is a world order which is characterized by ontological dispositions. (2004, p. 248)

We can here associate Barnett’s promotion of an ontological turn with this article’s sense of the aesthetic. In Barnett’s view, it is the university’s role to enable individuals “to *prosper* amid supercomplexity” (2004, p. 252, italics mine), to aim for “the transformation of human being” (ibid., p. 257). This is nothing less than a dedication to fostering a shared world that is sustainable and enabling, to opening incalculable futures through the inscription of tertiary memory, and to lives that are worth living.

This article has attempted to reframe the underlying purposes for language education, arguing for an ontological emphasis on the aesthetic—that which is actively experienced and



felt by the individual and the surrounding community—rather than on the dictates of the language learning industry. In upcoming work, I intend to illustrate more concretely how this ‘aesthetic turn’ might be put into action in the language classroom. This will include examples of how the experience of the language classroom can be a catalyst for personal and social development, particularly through the implementation of peer ethnography collaboration, journaling, and the curation of community culture. What is most at issue, however, is the dynamic that transpires in the classroom involving more than simply language learning, but the cultivation of a shared tertiary memory and a more liveable, ethical, and sustainable world.

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### Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a group research grant from Nihon University, College of Commerce for a project titled 英語教育における理論と実践.

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## 要旨

この記事では、デジタルテクノロジーが世界の中で存在する経験、特に日本の高等教育における言語学習の経験に与える影響を探る。哲学者の故ベルナール・スティグレールの生き方を知るという「the aesthetic」という広範な概念に基づいて、新自由主義とアルゴリズム技術が不安、無関心、孤独、無力感に至るまで個人を麻痺させてきたと主張されている。要するに、そのような力はシモンドンが「transindividuation」と呼んだ社会的形成への人間の潜在力、および社会的形成に影響を与える可能性を大きく妨げているのである。この記事は、語学学習業界がこの閉塞感に陥っていること、特に習熟度の数値化と英語の「成功」の方程式への執着を示唆している。この記事は、言語教育における存在論的な転換、「the aesthetic」とスティグレールの言うところの「生きる価値のある人生」への新たな焦点の呼びかけで締めくくられている。