

## Byung Chul Han

Exploring how neoliberalism has discovered the productive force of the psyche Byung-Chul Han, a star of German philosophy, continues his passionate critique of neoliberalism, trenchantly describing a regime of technological domination that, in contrast to Foucault's biopower, has discovered the productive force of the psyche. In the course of discussing all the facets of neoliberal psychopolitics fueling our contemporary crisis of freedom, Han elaborates an analytical framework that provides an original theory of Big Data and a lucid phenomenology of emotion. But this provocative essay proposes counter models too, presenting a wealth of ideas and surprising alternatives at every turn.

Transitamos por tiempos inciertos: a la par que sufrimos diversos desastres naturales asistimos a un ominoso medrar del estado de vigilancia, a un creciente malestar psíquico difícil de precisar, a una pérdida progresiva de sabiduría y saber-vivir, a una maquinización de lo humano que amenaza con hacerse absoluta, y a un ambiente mediático caracterizado por la manipulación y la sobresaturación de información. Es este un tiempo que clama por un diagnóstico y por un camino hacia adelante. Por ello es pertinente revisar la obra de Byung-Chul Han (de la cual este texto sirve como presentación), quien, a través de las categorías centrales de positividad y negatividad, propone un hilo conductor. Más allá del diagnóstico sombrío, los ensayos de este libro proponen prácticas y lineamientos en la política y la educación, encaminados a recuperar la escucha, la contemplación, la negatividad sin la cual la permanente aceleración de actividades e información del mundo moderno, inundado de positividad, amenaza con consumirnos.

Our competitive, service-oriented societies are taking a toll on the late-modern individual. Rather than improving life, multitasking, "user-friendly" technology, and the culture of convenience are producing disorders that range from depression to attention deficit disorder to borderline personality disorder. Byung-Chul Han interprets the spreading malaise as an inability to manage negative experiences in an age characterized by excessive positivity and the universal availability of people and goods. Stress and exhaustion are not just personal experiences, but social and historical phenomena as well. Denouncing a world in which every against-the-grain response can lead to further disempowerment, he draws on literature, philosophy, and the social and natural sciences to explore the stakes of sacrificing intermittent intellectual reflection for constant neural connection.

Beauty today is a paradox. The cult of beauty is ubiquitous but it has lost its transcendence and become little more than an aspect of consumerism, the aesthetic dimension of capitalism. The sublime and unsettling aspects of beauty have given way to corporeal pleasures and 'likes', resulting in a kind of 'pornography' of beauty. In this book, cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han reinvigorates aesthetic theory for our digital age. He interrogates our preoccupation with all things slick and smooth, from Jeff Koon's sculptures and the iPhone to Brazilian waxing. Reaching far deeper than our superficial reactions to viral videos and memes, Han reclaims beauty, showing how it manifests itself as truth, temptation and even disaster. This wide-ranging and profound exploration of beauty, encompassing ethical and political considerations as well as aesthetic, will appeal to all those interested in cultural and aesthetic theory, philosophy and digital media.

What we call growth today is in fact a tumorous growth, a cancerous proliferation which is disrupting the social organism. These tumours endlessly metastasize and grow with an inexplicable, deadly vitality. At a certain point this growth is no longer productive, but rather destructive. Capitalism passed this point long ago. Its destructive forces cause not only ecological and social catastrophes but also mental collapse. The destructive compulsion to perform combines self-affirmation and self-destruction in one. We optimize ourselves to death. Brutal competition ends in destruction. It produces an emotional coldness and indifference

towards others as well as towards one's own self. The devastating consequences of capitalism converge with the adoption of a death drive. Freud initially introduced the death drive hesitantly, but later he admitted that he 'couldn't think beyond it' as the idea of the death drive became increasingly central to his thought. The same is true for capitalism today: it is impossible to think about capitalism without considering the death drive. This new book by one of the most creative cultural theorists writing today will be of interest to a wide readership.

Power is a pervasive phenomenon yet there is little consensus on what it is and how it should be understood. In this book the cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han develops a fresh and original perspective on the nature of power, shedding new light on this key feature of social and political life. Power is commonly defined as a causal relation: an individual's power is the cause that produces a change of behaviour in someone else against the latter's will. Han rejects this view, arguing that power is better understood as a mediation between ego and alter which creates a complex array of reciprocal interdependencies. Power can also be exercised not only against the other but also within and through the other, and this involves a much higher degree of mediation. This perspective enables us to see that power and freedom are not opposed to one another but are manifestations of the same power, differing only in the degree of mediation. This highly original account of power will be of great interest to students and scholars of philosophy and of social, political and cultural theory, as well as to anyone seeking to understand the many ways in which power shapes our lives today.

In this essay, Byung-Chul Han criticizes how the excess positivity of happiness forces us to negate any glimpse of pain and subjects us to a state of permanent anesthesia. Today we live in a society that has developed a phobia of pain, in which there is no longer room for suffering. This widespread fear is reflected both personally and socially, and even in politics. The neoliberal imperative be happy, which hides a demand for performance, tries to avoid any painful state and pushes us into a state of permanent anesthesia. As he reflects in *The Society of Tiredness*, Byung-Chul Han is part of the assumption that there has been a radical paradigm shift in the West. Premodern societies had a very intimate relationship with pain and death, which they faced with dignity and resignation. Today, however, the positivity of happiness surpasses the negativity of pain, and extends to the social sphere. By expelling from public life conflicts and controversies, which could lead to painful confrontations, a post-democracy is established, which is at heart a palliative democracy.

Untrammelled neoliberalism and the inexorable force of production have produced a 21st century crisis of community: a narcissistic cult of authenticity and mass turning-inward are among the pathologies engendered by it. We are individuals afloat in an atomised society, where the loss of the symbolic structures inherent in ritual behaviour has led to overdependence on the contingent to steer identity. Avoiding saccharine nostalgia for the rituals of the past, Han provides a genealogy of their disappearance as a means of diagnosing the pathologies of the present. He juxtaposes a community without communication – where the intensity of togetherness in silent recognition provides structure and meaning – to today's communication without community, which does away with collective feelings and leaves individuals exposed to exploitation and manipulation by neoliberal psycho-politics. The community that is invoked everywhere today is an atrophied and commoditized community that lacks the symbolic power to bind people together. For Han, it is only the mutual praxis of recognition borne by the ritualistic sharing of the symbolic between members of a community which creates the footholds of objectivity allowing us to make sense of time. This new book by one of the most creative cultural theorists writing today will be of interest to a wide readership. Transparency is the order of the day. It is a term, a slogan, that dominates public discourse about corruption and freedom of information. Considered crucial to democracy, it touches our political and economic lives as well as our private lives. Anyone can obtain information about anything. Everything—and everyone—has become transparent: unveiled or exposed by the

apparatuses that exert a kind of collective control over the post-capitalist world. Yet, transparency has a dark side that, ironically, has everything to do with a lack of mystery, shadow, and nuance. Behind the apparent accessibility of knowledge lies the disappearance of privacy, homogenization, and the collapse of trust. The anxiety to accumulate ever more information does not necessarily produce more knowledge or faith. Technology creates the illusion of total containment and the constant monitoring of information, but what we lack is adequate interpretation of the information. In this manifesto, Byung-Chul Han denounces transparency as a false ideal, the strongest and most pernicious of our contemporary mythologies.

One of today's most widely read philosophers considers the shift in violence from visible to invisible, from negativity to excess of positivity. Some things never disappear—violence, for example. Violence is ubiquitous and incessant but protean, varying its outward form according to the social constellation at hand. In *Topology of Violence*, the philosopher Byung-Chul Han considers the shift in violence from the visible to the invisible, from the frontal to the viral to the self-inflicted, from brute force to mediated force, from the real to the virtual. Violence, Han tells us, has gone from the negative—explosive, massive, and martial—to the positive, wielded without enmity or domination. This, he says, creates the false impression that violence has disappeared. Anonymized, desubjectified, systemic, violence conceals itself because it has become one with society. Han first investigates the macro-physical manifestations of violence, which take the form of negativity—developing from the tension between self and other, interior and exterior, friend and enemy. These manifestations include the archaic violence of sacrifice and blood, the mythical violence of jealous and vengeful gods, the deadly violence of the sovereign, the merciless violence of torture, the bloodless violence of the gas chamber, the viral violence of terrorism, and the verbal violence of hurtful language. He then examines the violence of positivity—the expression of an excess of positivity—which manifests itself as over-achievement, over-production, over-communication, hyper-attention, and hyperactivity. The violence of positivity, Han warns, could be even more disastrous than that of negativity. Infection, invasion, and infiltration have given way to infarction.

El filósofo Byung-Chul Han dirige ahora su mirada crítica hacia las nuevas técnicas de poder del capitalismo neoliberal, que dan acceso a la esfera de la psique, convirtiéndola en su mayor fuerza de producción. La psicopolítica es, según Han, aquel sistema de dominación que, en lugar de emplear el poder opresor, utiliza un poder seductor, inteligente (smart), que consigue que los hombres se sometan por sí mismos al entramado de dominación. En este sistema, el sujeto sometido no es consciente de su sometimiento. La eficacia del psicopoder radica en que el individuo se cree libre, cuando en realidad es el sistema el que está explotando su libertad. La psicopolítica se sirve del Big Data el cual, como un Big Brother digital, se apodera de los datos que los individuos le entregan de forma efusiva y voluntaria. Esta herramienta permite hacer pronósticos sobre el comportamiento de las personas y condicionarlas a un nivel prerreflexivo. La expresión libre y la hipercomunicación que se difunden por la red se convierten en control y vigilancia totales, conduciendo a una auténtica crisis de la libertad. Según Byung-Chul Han, este poder inteligente podría detectar incluso patrones de comportamiento del inconsciente colectivo que otorgarían a la psicopolítica un control ilimitado. Nuestro futuro dependerá de que seamos capaces de servirnos de lo inservible, de la singularidad no cuantificable y de la idiotez -dice incluso- de quien no participa ni comparte. (Fuente: Herder).

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fear of death, which has become increasingly visible again. Everywhere, the prolongation of life at any cost is the preeminent value, and we are prepared to sacrifice everything that makes life worth living for the sake of survival. This trenchant analysis of our contemporary societies by one of the most original cultural critics of our time will be of interest to a wide readership.

A philosopher considers entertainment, in all its totalizing variety—infotainment, edutainment, servotainment—and traces the notion through Kant, Zen Buddhism, Heidegger, Kafka, and Rauschenberg. In *Good Entertainment*, Byung-Chul Han examines the notion of entertainment—its contemporary ubiquity, and its philosophical genealogy. Entertainment today, in all its totalizing variety, has an apparently infinite capacity for incorporation: infotainment, edutainment, servotainment, confrontainment. Entertainment is held up as a new paradigm, even a new credo for being—and yet, in the West, it has had inescapably negative connotations. Han traces Western ideas of entertainment, considering, among other things, the scandal that arose from the first performance of Bach's *Saint Matthew's Passion* (deemed too beautiful, not serious enough); Kant's idea of morality as duty and the entertainment value of moralistic literature; Heidegger's idea of the thinker as a man of pain; Kafka's hunger artist and the art of negativity, which takes pleasure in annihilation; and Robert Rauschenberg's refusal of the transcendent. The history of the West, Han tells us, is a passion narrative, and passion appears as a killjoy. Achievement is the new formula for passion, and play is subordinated to production, gamified. And yet, he argues, at their core, passion and entertainment are not entirely different. The pure meaninglessness of entertainment is adjacent to the pure meaning of passion. The fool's smile resembles the pain-racked visage of *Homo doloris*. In *Good Entertainment*, Han explores this paradox.

Tracing the thread of “decreation” in Chinese thought, from constantly changing classical masterpieces to fake cell phones that are better than the original. *Shanzhai* is a Chinese neologism that means “fake,” originally coined to describe knock-off cell phones marketed under such names as *Nokir* and *Samsing*. These cell phones were not crude forgeries but multifunctional, stylish, and as good as or better than the originals. *Shanzhai* has since spread into other parts of Chinese life, with *shanzhai* books, *shanzhai* politicians, *shanzhai* stars. There is a *shanzhai* Harry Potter: *Harry Potter and the Porcelain Doll*, in which Harry takes on his nemesis *Yandomort*. In the West, this would be seen as piracy, or even desecration, but in Chinese culture, originals are continually transformed—deconstructed. In this volume in the *Untimely Meditations* series, Byung-Chul Han traces the thread of deconstruction, or “decreation,” in Chinese thought, from ancient masterpieces that invite inscription and transcription to Maoism—“a kind a *shanzhai* Marxism,” Han writes. Han discusses the Chinese concepts of *quan*, or law, which literally means the weight that slides back and forth on a scale, radically different from Western notions of absoluteness; *zhen ji*, or original, determined not by an act of creation but by unending process; *xian zhan*, or seals of leisure, affixed by collectors and part of the picture's composition; *fuzhi*, or copy, a replica of equal value to the original; and *shanzhai*. The Far East, Han writes, is not familiar with such “pre-deconstructive” factors as original or identity. Far Eastern thought begins with deconstruction.

Derzeit vollzieht sich unbemerkt ein Paradigmenwechsel. Die Gesellschaft der Negativität weicht einer Gesellschaft, die von einem Übermaß an Positivität beherrscht ist. Ausgehend

von diesem Paradigmenwechsel zeichnet Han die pathologische Landschaft der heutigen Gesellschaft, zu der neuronale Erkrankungen wie Depression, Aufmerksamkeitsdefizitsyndrom, Borderline oder Burnout gehören. Sie sind keine Infektionen, sondern Infarkte, die nicht durch die Negativität des immunologisch Anderen, sondern durch ein Übermaß an Positivität bedingt sind. So entziehen sie sich jeder immunologischen Technik der Prophylaxe und Abwehr. Hans Analyse mündet am Ende in die Vision einer Gesellschaft, die er in beabsichtigter Ambivalenz 'Müdigkeitsgesellschaft' nennt.

La pérdida irrevocable que provoca la muerte es para nosotros causa de horror. Sin embargo, más allá de esta visión aterradora, la reflexión sobre la muerte encuentra su expresión en una retórica singular que la multiplica y la convierte en un fenómeno, en una manifestación e incluso en una experiencia viva. Byung-Chul Han nos describe la muerte en su caleidoscópica variedad al hilo de sus lecturas de Adorno, Heidegger, Derrida, Lévinas, Kafka y Handke. En este sentido, el presente libro desarrolla una aproximación paso a paso a la muerte, haciendo audible su lenguaje, que no deja de resonar e interpelar a lo largo de la vida. Así, se nos descubre la muerte como creadora de espacios habitables para la existencia mortal del ser humano.

An argument that love requires the courage to accept self-negation for the sake of discovering the Other. Byung-Chul Han is one of the most widely read philosophers in Europe today, a member of the new generation of German thinkers that includes Markus Gabriel and Armen Avanessian. In *The Agony of Eros*, a bestseller in Germany, Han considers the threat to love and desire in today's society. For Han, love requires the courage to accept self-negation for the sake of discovering the Other. In a world of fetishized individualism and technologically mediated social interaction, it is the Other that is eradicated, not the self. In today's increasingly narcissistic society, we have come to look for love and desire within the "inferno of the same." Han offers a survey of the threats to Eros, drawing on a wide range of sources—Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Michel Foucault (providing a scathing critique of Foucault's valorization of power), Martin Buber, Hegel, Baudrillard, Flaubert, Barthes, Plato, and others. Han considers the "pornographication" of society, and shows how pornography profanes eros; addresses capitalism's leveling of essential differences; and discusses the politics of eros in today's "burnout society." To be dead to love, Han argues, is to be dead to thought itself. Concise in its expression but unsparing in its insight, *The Agony of Eros* is an important and provocative entry in Han's ongoing analysis of contemporary society. This remarkable essay, an intellectual experience of the first order, affords one of the best ways to gain full awareness of and join in one of the most pressing struggles of the day: the defense, that is to say—as Rimbaud desired it—the "reinvention" of love. —from the foreword by Alain Badiou

In this original work, Byung-chul Han turns gardening into an art where you can exercise meditation and reflect on beauty, life, and worship. In gardening, this power of life can be appreciated and learned. Gardening then becomes an art where meditation and prayer are exercised in a commitment to the recovery of the original unity between cultivation and worship.

The days of the Other are over in this age of excessive communication, information and consumption. What used to be the Other, be it as friend, as Eros or as hell, is now indistinguishable from the self in our narcissistic desire to assimilate everything and everyone until there are no boundaries left. The result is a 'terror of the Same', lives in which we no longer pursue knowledge, insight and experience but are instead reduced to the echo chambers and illusory encounters offered by social media. In extreme cases, this feeling of disorientation and senselessness is compensated through self-harm, or even harming others through acts of terrorism. Byung-Chul Han argues that our times are characterized not by external repression but by an internal depression, whereby the destructive pressure comes not

from the Other but from the self. It is only by returning to a society of listeners and lovers, by acknowledging and desiring the Other, that we can seek to overcome the isolation and suffering caused by this crushing process of total assimilation.

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