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BEYOND THE DIGITAL SWARM? BYUNG-CHUL HAN'S CRITICAL MEDIA PESSIMISM

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Byung-Chul Han and digital media

The work of the Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han has recently received increasing attention in media studies, particularly in continental Europe and the Spanish-speaking world. With his two first books appearing in English translation (by Erik Butler) in 2015, and five more in 2017 alone, his thinking can be expected to become more widely received among English-speaking scholars.

Han was born in Soeul, Korea, where he first studied engineering, accommodating his father's wish to become an engineer. In Germany Han studied Philosophy, German literature, and theology in Freiburg and Munich. He obtained his PhD in 1994 with a thesis on *Stimmung* (mood) in Heidegger and taught at Basel and Karlsruhe before becoming a professor at the Berlin University of Art in 2012.

Han is among the most widely read cultural theorists in Germany, with his books addressing aspects of culture with an undeniable currency and part of many people's everyday experience, ranging from the dilemmas of life under neoliberalism to the crisis of freedom, from the pressures of permanent engagement to the disappearance of eroticism, from the rise of psycho power to new forms of exploitation. His minimalist style (manifest both in simplicity and clarity in writing, as well as in the small size of most of his books) are other factors that have combined to secure him a wide readership; indeed, the brevity and plainness of his writing make him a very different writer than fellow-Germans like Adorno, Bloch, or Heidegger, feared by many readers for the heaviness and sometimes obscurity of their language. But Han's writing is also beset by a what appears to be a certain repetitiveness. He gives the same questions many different variations across his publications, something readers looking for information, or even lines of argument leading to clear-cut conclusions or constructive alternatives might find challenging. Yet not of these characteristics of Han's writing are coincidence, the are manifestations of a rootedness in Buddhist aesthetics and ethics, they are a practice of the *art of lingering*, itself the title of one his books (2017e).

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the contributions of Han's thinking to critical theories of digital communication networks. A review of Han's work on digital communication must start with the recognition that only the smaller part of this work is explicitly on media, whereas the larger part other aspects of contemporary culture that are, however, often relevant *to* understanding digital media in as much as these are also a product of contemporary culture. Digital media, in addition to be an object in themselves, are often seen as enhancing already existing, and usually problematic, cultural phenomena.
Rooted in continental philosophy (with Heidegger and Hegel figuring prominently) as well as east Asian philosophy, a large part of Han's philosophical writings concerns aesthetics (2014, 2016a, 2016b), political philosophy (2005a, 2005b, 2014), and east Asian philosophy (2002a, 2007, 2011), although his popular (and best-selling and translated) books are more concerned with a cultural criticism, including media criticism, that draws on philosophical as well as literary sources (rather than being itself of a philosophical nature). As Alain Badiou writes in his foreword to *The Agony of the Eros* (2017d), Han's work proves "utterly absorbing because of its unlikely combination of philosophical rigor and a wealth of far-ranging sources" (Badiou 2017, p. viii).
Han began to write for a larger audience in the late 1990s, when he also began to have an influence in the art theory discourse (Tollmann, 2011), and with his 2013 *Digitale Rationalität und das Ende des kommunikativen Handelns* ("digital rationality and the end of communicative action," 2013b, as yet untranslated) he presented the first book on media and communication.

Digital media audiences: the disempowered swarm

While the study of mediated communication has long worked with a mass society concept of an digitally networked and mobile communication has encouraged adoption of a cybernetic model of active users, sometimes centering on the concept of the swarm. The swarm has tended to be associated with "intelligence" and "autonomy," Examples of such a positive application of the structural model of the swarm include its use in mediated activism (tactical media) and social movement media (Holmes, 2007; Sauter 2014, Sützl 2015), but it has also been key in recent media theories that have undertaken a crossover between biology and media technologies (Parikka 2010, Thacker 2011).

As Parikka points out, swarms, lacking an overarching principle of unity, remain politically ambivalent (Parikka 2010, pp. 47-48). Han sees the "digital swarm," users interacting with each other in a network, as the successor of the mass, but rather than considering the politics of the swarm as merely ambivalent, he sees in it neither intelligence nor the possibility of political action. According to Han, while masses require a loss of individual identity in forming a collective, a swarm is incapable of forming a collective voice and remains limited to producing noise (however trending that noise may be). The structural properties of the swarm itself make it impossible that it ever forms a "we." Swarms merely amount to a politically sterile *Ansammlung* (accumulation), and never become an *Versammlung* (an association or assembly). Swarms form fleeting patterns and not enduring formations, and consequently, unlike the marching masses that have been able to form effective political movements, no

political energy wells up from the volatile multi-directional movements of swarms, there is power in masses, but not in swarms (p. 12).

A related thesis regarding the internet refers to the type of public created by it. Here, Han argues that the Web (he implicitly refers to Web 2.0) does not constitute public space at all, and that therefore no Habermasian discourse is possible in it. But unlike Eli Pariser's thesis of the filter bubble and personalization (Pariser 2012), Han believes that its deterioration is due to a centrifugal power of dispersal, not to a narrowing of a user's horizon by a filter bubble. This centrifugal power is the result of the very isolation and individualization that users undergo in a swarm, failing forever to form a collective "we" capable of communicative action. (2014b, p. 9) Instead, information is produced in and communicated to private spaces (p. 12). As a result, citizens inhabit an "opinion society" that no longer has a use for ideology, and ideological institutions such as traditional political parties disintegrate. Han asks whether the Web, where no discursive rationality can exist, might model a "pre-communicative, pre-discursive rationality" that might even generate more justice and more democracy than Habermasian communicative rationality (2013b, p. 19). In order for this to be possible, a paradigm shift towards a "digital materialism" needs to occur (p. 19), where rationality is no longer established through communication, and there is perhaps no rationality at all.

Demediatization: from representation to copresentation

According to Han, when digital networks—unlike traditional mass media—do not generate a public, and when the "windows on a computer communicate with other windows" then "media such as blogs, Twitter and facebook demediatize communication." (2017b, p. 16). Digital media do away with representation, which gives way to "presence, or copresentation." A political system such as representative democracy will suffer from this erosion of representation that such media drive. Han names the German pirate party as an example for this development. While digital media do away with the professional journalist in the strong sense, they equally undermine the position of the politician and eventually the political process itself: the flattening of temporal experience into an extended presence and the drive towards transparency, according to Han, makes the future, the time of the political disappear: "transparency is ruled by presence and the present tense" (2017b, p. 18). But politics, as a strategic action, needs intransparent spaces, where "dissonant opinions or unusual ideas" can be voiced safely.

Han's criticism of the "digital swarm" is of interest in terms of understanding the "public sphere" (or lack thereof) in digital media, and any possibility of effective protest or dissent that does not immediately enhance the conditions against which it is directed. However, in his criticism of transparency, Han does not consider another subject that he has written on, power, and that the distribution of transparency in a political system is a result of power: the former eastern German state, for example, had a population transparent in relation to an intransparent government. It is not transparency per se that is the problem, but how and by whom it is controlled. Because Han does not consider that, it is easy for him to overlook that this question of control and distribution is also crucial in digital media, where a great deal of opacity exists in media corporations (for example, the secrecy around source codes and algorithms, McKelvey 2014), who can

therefore operate strategically, while transparency is required from users. Han applies Foucault's panopticon to both people and government, so that is transparency makes it impossible for a government to govern (given constant and real time media scrutiny and the risk of whistleblowing) and for citizens to exercise their freedom in a democratic and meaningful way (given their lack of privacy).

This would point to an erosion of the political itself through a generalization of transparency in contemporary culture, a development that Han sees as aided by the digital media. Han addresses it in his critique of neoliberalism, a recurrent theme in many of Han's books, under the title of psycho power (2014b, 2017b).

Neoliberalism and the erosion of alterity

Taking issue with Foucault's attempt to describe biopolitics as the politics of neoliberalism, Han considers neoliberalism as a mutant form of capitalism no longer primarily concerned with biological, somatic, bodily realities. (2014b, p. 39) In order to increase productivity, neoliberalism does not seek to overcome bodily resistance, but it instead optimizes psychological and mental processes. Bodily disciplining yields to mental optimization. The body is released from the immediate production process and becomes the object of aesthetic and health optimization.

While following Stiegler in his critique of Foucault, Han takes issue with Stiegler's emphasis on the role of television as a neoliberal psycho-technology. In Han's view, Stiegler does not honor the fundamentally different communication structure of the internet and of social media. However, according to Han, neoliberalism makes massive use of digital media and it does so because the neoliberal political model is not that of biopolitics but of psycho-politics. Neoliberalism completely usurps what Foucault calls the technolgies of the self. "Neoliberalism's technique of rule ensures that the individual voluntarily manages itself in ways that it maps the power context, while interpreting it as freedom. Self-optimization and subjection, freedom and exploitation fall together in one." (2014b, p. 42) "It is not the suppression of freedom that maximizes productivity and efficiency, but its exploitation." (2016c, p. 25)

"Liking" and the violence of positivity

In *Topologie der Gewalt* (2012), Han describes digitally mediated culture as one where positivity dominates in such a way that it constitutes its own violence. Because (in contrast to Baudrillard's immunological model of conflict) the violence of positivity knows no negative form, that would infiltrate, infect or invade one's body or psyche (2012, p. 87), and because it is exhaustive rather than exclusive, it is not accessible to direct perception. (2015b, p.16-17). In fact, missing negativity leads to its own pathologies, including "bulimia, binge watching and binge eating," (p. 25) all of which are symptoms of a post-viral violence, the violence of positivity against which no immunological response can be applied. Illnesses such as depression, ADHD, and borderline personality are not "infections, but infarctions." (2015b, p. 1)
Further, according to Han, the lack of negative thresholds in digital media causes an excess of information incapable of informing and sustaining prolonged discourse. By the same token, radical otherness, as a phenomenon of negativity, and eventually

experience itself—dependent on distinction—become less and less possible. Where Hegel's phenomenology of the spirit is a phenomenology of pain, the phenomenology of the digital is a phenomenology of "liking" (2013b, p. 70), of replacing difference with pleasant variety. Digital communication as practiced on social media, according to Han, creates a "chain reaction of likeness" (2015b, p. 2), it "prolongs the same" (2017a, p. 22) and opens an "inferno of the same" (2015c, p. 2), a "terror" and "proliferation" of the same. But it is this inferno that communication reaches its highest velocity because it no longer is challenged by any negative thresholds of negativity, any forces of resistance that would stand in its way. The faster and more effortless digital communication circuits function, the more user data and informational capital they generate. Sameness, it could be concluded, is a perfect business model for big data digital media.

Communication media as the form of neoliberal power

Across many of his media writings Han also argues that the lack of negative thresholds renders digital dissent a-political by limiting it to the ephemeral. This political neutrality is itself an economic opportunity exploited by the digital industry: positivity can be economized, whereas the expression of negativity cannot. This would explain why user engagement must be a top priority of every online business: negative behaviors such as absence or passivity do not yield any data. Neoliberal power, Han concludes, therefore takes on the "the form of a communication medium" and "consists to increase the likelihood of the 'yes' vis-à-vis the possibility of the 'no." (2013b, p. 11). Saying no in public—protesting—in those circumstances takes the form of a short-lived "indignation" that never develops into an effective public discourse. Protest movements such as the Spanish *indignados* and the German *Wutbürger* ("enraged citizens") might be considered expressions of this development, eventually benefitting those populist political groups that move into the void left by the traditional parties (as in the cases of AfD and Pegida in Germany; Dempsey 2011, Lutz 2016).

Given that theory, in as much as it implies selection, is also a phenomenon that works with negativity, (2015b, p. 6), Han argues that theoretical work, which always implies a determination what is or what has to be, is being made redundant by the big data industry and data driven neo-positivist scholarship. Here, the data themselves perform the any modeling function, without being able to perform the discriminating excluding function of theoretical work. Why-questions—critical questions—seem outdated and ideological in the face of data-based positive statements of what is (2013b, p. 99). "For Anderson, theory is a construct—an auxiliary instance that compensates for a lack of information. If enough data are available, no theory is needed." (2017a, p. 75)

Big data and transparency

Beyond this erosion of theory that could follow from the rise of big data, the massive amounts of data allow the prediction of behaviors and this is represents one of the ways in which the power of a neoliberal, post-democratic politics takes on the form of communication media. Han describes Big Data as generating a new surveillance apparatus, one that is different from Bentham's panopticon: it is more insidious and more efficient. While the panopticon model it still bound by a perspectival optics that cannot avoid dead angles, the digital surveillance of big data is non-perspectival and

therefore eliminates this dead angle. As a consequence, the gaze of big data surveillance can penetrate the psyche itself (2014b , p. 78), and forms part of the psychopower of neoliberalism.

Transparency is therefore a “neoliberal dispositive” (2012a, p. 19) with the simple purpose of turning everything outward, where it can take on a positive form of information and generate economic value. It is in the outward sphere that it can become information, a positive form whose lack of interiority allows it to circulate regardless of context. The circulation of information can therefore be accelerated at will, with secrets or otherness representing obstacles to circulation and being subject to dismantlement.

The type of society thus created Han calls society of transparency, and in it, democracy becomes a *Zuschauerdemokratie,* a spectator democracy of citizens turned consumers. The demand for transparency, in Han’s view, is does not concern political decision-making processes (that no consumer would be interested in), but it is a scandal-mongering demand for unmasking, revealing, and exposing the behaviors of politicians (2012a, p. 21). Users reveal information about themselves voluntarily, without being forced to do so, making data protection laws (which a government that might wrest data from citizens against their will or without their knowledge) irrelevant. When freedom is the vehicle of exploitation, the result is a crisis of freedom itself.

Big data, according to Han, thus represents *Herrschaftswissen,* a type of knowledge serving the exercise of rule. Each dispositive and each technique of rule produces its own devotional objects that materialize and stabilize the ruling system, and in the case of neoliberalism, the chief devotional object is the smartphone. “An object of subjectification, it functions like a rosary […] a *like* is a digital amen […] by clicking ‘like’ we subject ourselves to the digital power context” (2012a, p. 23). Once there, in the inferno of sameness, it is also impossible to experience the other as the other. “We tap, swipe, or flick the other away so that our own mirror image will appear instead.” (2017a, p. 25)

We use smartphones also for play, and to Han, this general erosion of alterity is also present in gamification (2014b, p. 70). Play is no longer the other of work, but becomes part of a process of subjectification where the non-productive disappears. This disappearance is not experienced as a loss because games are fun. However, games function with a time structure of immediate success and reward, things that need time to mature cannot be gamified. Gamification works against time-consuming (but necessary) processes such as dealing with conflict (2016c, p. 35)

Buddhist critique of positivity

A recurring subject in Han’s writing is his criticism of excessive positivity in western culture, manifest in social media and its “liking” culture, as well as in the culture of neoliberalism and its performance-oriented “I can do it” attitude. Negative thresholds that would interfere with the smooth and rapid circulation of digital data are not part of the dominant neoliberal reality. This criticism is already present in Han’s two main philosophical points of reference, Hegel and Heidegger, but even more so to Han’s

writings on eastern philosophy. The positivity of western conceptual thinking as well as scientific methods stands in stark contrast to Buddhist notions such as “religion without god,” “emptiness,” “dwelling nowhere,” “nobody” (all chapter titles in Han’s book on Zen Buddhism, 2002a). Negativity here does not signal a lack, a condition to be remedied or exploited, but rather a mediation of being in the sense of the shared being that Heidegger (and Jean-Luc Nancy after him) calls being-with, (German *mit-sein*) and Buddhism simply refers to as *Freundlichkeit* (amicability). Consequently, the emptiness od Buddhism “de-internalizes the I into a *rei amicae* that opens itself like a guest house,” Han writes (2002a, p. 115). By contrast, substance, to Han *the* basic concept of western thought, signals the identity and sameness of beings, a drive of beings towards themselves, “substance is filled with itself, with its own” (p. 44). Han shows how this friendly Buddhist nihilism, the de-interorization that never becomes pure externalization has its parallels, but also its opposites, in the thinking of Hegel, Leibniz, Heidegger, and other master thinkers who struggle with the nature and limitations of the western idea of the self. Hegel, for instance, represents a thinking of absolute self always poised against another equally seeking to position him/herself as absolute self. He calls this “archaic hostility” (2002a, p. 117) In the contemporary context, Han therefore differentiates between friendliness as a communicative form that seeks to overcome this archaic hostility, resulting in people helping each other in self-presentation or self-expression, and an “archaic friendliness” that draws pleasure form an absence of self, of selflessness (not to be understood in a moral sense, p. 119).

Negativity as a friendly space would be the opposite of what occurs on some social media, where friending is not a de-interorization, not a withdrawal from the own self, but the opposite: the self grows, as an individualized self, with every new “friend,” post, share, like etc., That is why one can be a YouTube star, for example, why social media are important branding tools, and why consensus can be effortlessly by popularity.

Conclusions

Han’s work on has been compared to first generation Frankfurt School scholars for its media pessimism (Dow 2015, p. 305) and dismissed as “apocalyptic” (Dow 2015, p. 310) or as “pop philosophy” (Piegsa, 2015). My own reading results in a more complex picture.

Han’s theorems on media are philosophically grounded, and they focus on and examine problems in the media that have also been problems of philosophy (alterity, being, and power). In doing so, his criticism remains connected, throughout his work, to a radical critique of neoliberalism and the way digital media support the neoliberal agendas of performance-oriented subjectification and post-democratic de-politization. Identifying the criticism of digital communication with a criticism of neoliberal power is what makes Han’s thinking different from media pessimists who have followed the lineage of cultural critics such as Neil Postman, e.g. Nicholas Carr. Han’s criticism remains rooted in a critique of power that is a critique of capital, but also of the technics of capital.
Han opens up a path of critical enquiry that may challenge an increasingly dominant approach to digital media research as mere analysis. Through its critique of neoliberal power, it may help identifying the limits to sustained critical discourses that exist within

social media. Han's writings are a plea for the rehabilitation of hypotheses and modelling vis-à-vis pattern recognition based on large amounts of data, and as such they contain a vindication of a type of work that has their home in academic research and theorizing rather than in analytical lab work).

Furthermore, Han's engagement with the question of alterity may inform both research on online social relations as well as the significance of digital media in the formation of polities. In fact, the question of alterity, and the various angles form which Han tackles it is a core question to mediated communication and the extent to which otherness is behind this concern with positivity. Han shows that the ways in which we study digital media in the west is often itself driven by positivity and has a hard time separating itself from the neoliberal mainstream. Digital data themselves contain no critical element; critical thinking, on the other hand, depends on an acknowledgement and an embracing of negative phenomena of alterity. It makes it possible to understand extreme online phenomena such as hate speech and cyberattacks as part of a dialectical process of hyper-positivity.

A second potentially interesting contribution is the relationship between the power model of neoliberalism and the drive for positivity. This could be part of a better understanding of the type of power the internet gives rise too, where we are now beginning to see that the equation between empowerment and online access is too simple, and that digital communication is one modality in which neoliberal power operates, taking on the forms of ease and convenience, never alienating the entrepreneur-user, the customer-citizen.

Han may be among the foremost thinkers who have brought eastern philosophies in a dialogue with western thinking in ways that go beyond mere interculturality. The roots that some of his thought has in Buddhist thinking are strong and real, and he brings eastern and continental philosophies in a dialogue that may help disentangle the study of digital media from the values and assumptions that guided the Californian technology pioneers. These values survive in dominant media corporations such as Google and facebook. Where Han is the most "eastern" in his writing, he is a strong position to contribute to a real critique of power in digital media that rather than simply generating more data. Absence, emptiness, forgetting, nowhereness etc. could be added to a list of critical terms in media studies.

Han's thinking is most doubtful where it takes on a nostalgic or idealistic form, often expressed in phrases like "no more" or "no longer," or "today …" presenting changes in digital technology as a lamentable deterioration of culture. There are also times when he seems to get carried away by poetry for example, and even when he states (Gresser, 2015) that there can be no solutions (German *Lösungen*), only redemption (*Erlösung*). In the context of Zen Buddhism and the ways in which it seeks to overcome the limits of conceptual thought this is probably acceptable, but it marks a line where his thinking risks losing relevance to scholarship.

To complete this initial and cursory review of Han's work and its relevance to the study of digital media, it is necessary to read his popular and translated short books in conjunction with his more extensive and rigorous philosophical works (2002, 2005a,

2005b, 2012, 2011, 2014b), and in particular his works on eastern philosophy. That these works are currently not available in English presents limit to a wider critical use of Han's thinking in media studies, although one that is extraneous to the arguments presented in the work itself.

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