

INFINITE SCROLL

# THE INTERNET'S NEW FAVORITE PHILOSOPHER

*Byung-Chul Han, in treatises such as “The Burnout Society” and his latest, “The Crisis of Narration,” diagnoses the frenetic aimlessness of the digital age.*

By Kyle Chayka

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“The power to change one’s life comes from a paragraph, a lone remark,” James Salter wrote in his 1975 novel, “Light Years.” An encounter with

a single “slender” line of writing, as he put it, can send a reader spinning off on a new trajectory; her life becomes divided into a before and an after the moment of reading. For Kevin Maret, an undergraduate art student at the University of Idaho, that moment came while reading “In the Swarm: Digital Prospects,” a slim monograph by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han that was first published in English by M.I.T., in 2017. In May of 2023, while scrolling Instagram, Maret encountered a video gloss on Han’s work; Maret was intrigued enough that he borrowed “In the Swarm” from his university library. Han’s writing, polemical and aphoristic, spoke to Maret’s experience of growing up on social media, and crystallized for him the lack of control he felt regarding his relationship to the Internet. In a recent conversation, Maret pointed out a few of his favorite lines: “The occupants of the digital panopticon are not prisoners. Their element is illusory freedom. They feed the digital panopticon with information by exhibiting themselves and shining a light on every part of their lives.” He told me, of the book, “The first time I read it, I read it in two hours.”

Since then, Maret has kept “In the Swarm” out on library loan and carries it with him like a talisman. “I can put this in a jacket pocket if I walk down to the coffee shop or the field by my house,” he told me. He stocked up on other books by Han: “The Transparency Society,” “Saving Beauty,” and “The Agony of Eros,” which are all written in the same pamphletary format, somewhere between manifesto and essay, and mostly run under a hundred pages. Maret is part of a growing coterie of readers who have embraced Han as a kind of sage of the Internet era. Elizabeth Nakamura, a twentysomething art-gallery associate in San Francisco, had a similar conversion experience, during the early days of pandemic lockdown, after someone in a Discord chat suggested that she check out Han’s work. She downloaded “The Agony of Eros” from Libgen, a Web site that is known for pirated e-books. (She possesses Han’s books only in PDF form, like digital samizdat.) The monograph argues that the overexposure and self-aggrandizement encouraged by social media have killed the possibility of truly erotic experience, which requires an encounter with an other. “I’m like queening out reading this,” she told me, using Gen Z slang for effusive enjoyment—fangirling. “It’s a meme but not in the funny way—in the way that

it's sort of concise and easily disseminated. I can send this to my friends who aren't as into reading to help them think about something," she said. Like a Sartre for the age of screens, Han puts words to our prevailing condition of not-quite-hopeless digital despair.

Born in 1959 in South Korea, Han originally studied metallurgy in Seoul, to placate his parents, who wanted him to take up a practical discipline. When he was twenty-two, he moved to Germany; he pledged to continue his studies but switched to philosophy, with a focus on Martin Heidegger. In 1994, he got a Ph.D. from the University of Freiburg, and then began teaching phenomenology, aesthetics, and religion, eventually landing at Berlin University of the Arts. He has published steadily throughout the past two decades, but has shunned interviews and has rarely travelled outside of Germany. John Thompson, the director of Polity, an independent publisher in the United Kingdom that has put out fourteen of Han's books since 2017, told me the demand for his work has grown largely by word of mouth. "There has been this grassroots reception of Byung-Chul Han that has driven the demand, and it's not the conventional way of major review coverage," he said. Thompson continued, "He's like an engine. The ideas and the books are just flowing."

Han's breakout work was "The Burnout Society," originally published in German, in 2010. Nearly a decade before the writer Anne Helen Petersen tackled "millennial burnout," Han diagnosed what he called "the violence of positivity," deriving from "overproduction, overachievement, and overcommunication." We are so stimulated, chiefly by the Internet, that we paradoxically cannot feel or comprehend much of anything. One of the ironies of Han's writing is that it travels easily through the very channels that he despairs of. By condensing his ideas into brief, unadorned sentences, Han flatters the reader into almost feeling as though she has thought the thoughts herself. "The Burnout Society" and Han's other books now star in countless YouTube explainer videos and TikTok summaries. His ideas have particularly struck a chord with readers who deal in aesthetics—artists, curators, designers, and architects—even though Han has not quite been embraced by philosophy

academe. (An essay in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in 2017 cautiously labelled him “as good a candidate as any for philosopher of the moment.”) His work has been translated into more than a dozen languages. According to the Spanish newspaper *El País*, “The Burnout Society” has sold more than a hundred thousand copies across Latin America, Korea, Spain, and Italy. A museum director in Beijing told me, “The Chinese art world is obsessed with him.” Alberto Olmos, a well-known Spanish author and critic, described Han to me as a “wonderful DJ of philosophy,” spinning together references—Barthes, Baudrillard, Benjamin—in catchy new combinations. In 2023, in an interview with *Dazed Korea*, the K-pop star RM, from the band BTS, recommended “The Agony of Eros,” adding, “You might find yourself deeply frustrated because the book suggests that the love we are currently experiencing is not love.”

My own first encounter with Han was “Non-things,” which I found positioned prominently in the small-press section of an independent bookstore. I was drawn by its gnomic title and the postmodern collage on its cover: a photograph of skyscrapers seen from within a city, spliced with a photo of skyscrapers shot from above, turning the buildings into a geometric abstraction. In “Non-things,” Han argues that online we encounter a glut of information—i.e., non-things—that distracts us from having experiences with objects in the world: “The digital screen determines our experience of the world and shields us from reality.” The best way to read Han is similar to the best way of reading the Bible: flip through, find an evocative line, and proceed from there. Each sentence is a microcosm of the book, and each book is a microcosm of the oeuvre, thus the reader need not delve too deep to get the point. “The smartphone is a mobile labour camp in which we voluntarily intern ourselves,” Han writes in “Non-things.” Spicy! It is a koan to meditate upon, and a description that immediately makes one hate oneself for staring at a screen. I kept reading because I felt like I had to, in case Han might be able to offer me some salvation.

Han's latest book in English translation, "The Crisis of Narration," was published in the U.S. earlier this month. (Like comic books, the volumes seem to roll out one extended, episodic narrative; all of the Polity editions have similar cover designs, forming a coherent visual brand.) The book is about the decline of "storytelling," which in Han's argument is an endangered mode of establishing meaning in an age dominated by the bullet points and edited clips of content that we consume online. The book builds upon the argument of "Non-things," but, instead of lamenting a dearth of real-life objects, Han laments our ability to narrativize our "lived moments." "For digital platforms, data are more valuable than narratives. They do not want *narrative reflection*." Is this why my life as documented on Instagram doesn't actually add up to a unified whole, despite all the time and labor I've invested into curating my account? Han's concept of "information," the opposite of narration, which requires a kind of non-data-driven capacity for imagination, has something in common with "content," the catchall term that both describes and denatures twenty-first-century culture into so much undifferentiated mush. In "The Crisis of Narration," Han writes, "In digital late modernity, we conceal the nakedness—the absence of meaning in our lives—by constantly posting, liking, and sharing. The noise of communication and information is supposed to ensure that life's terrifying vacuity remains hidden."

To that, the Internet-addled brain simply wants to respond: "*Yas queen!!!* Byung-Chul Han, run me over with a truck." If you are a denizen of social media, to read Han is to feel both dragged and affirmed. His status as a kind of philosophy daddy to a younger generation is reinforced by the scant glimpses that readers get of his personal image. In photographs, he wears mainly shades of black, often with a broken-in but still elegant leather jacket and a thin scarf. His long hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and his skin glows like an influencer's. His telegenic quality belies his isolation from the media ecosystem. He is not on social platforms; he told *El País* in a rare interview that he writes three sentences a day and spends most of his time caring for his plants and playing Bach and Schumann on the piano. His aura of offlineness—we craven

online people might be tempted to call it a personal brand—seems to confirm that he has access to some wisdom that the rest of us lack.

Charles Pidgeon, a doctoral student in the University of Oxford's English faculty, who studies literature about the Internet, described Han's work as "kind of old-fashioned humanism: What are you taking from this? Something that should reorient your relationship to the world and to your own life." But he added that Han's digestible grand pronouncements don't always hold up to close scrutiny. "There are a lot of things you can pick holes at," Pidgeon told me. He pointed to "The Burnout Society" 's argument that humanity has shifted from an "immunological society," characterized by barriers, to a "neuronal society," characterized by boundlessness and frictionless circulation. Of course, the COVID pandemic signalled an extreme return to an immunologically organized world, which had not really gone away. "The kind of reductive clarity which is so important to how his writing functions is also part of the risk of it going very wrong," Pidgeon said.

In "The Crisis of Narration" especially, Han runs the risk of speaking with too much curmudgeonly distance from his subject matter. He rightly observes "the present hype around narratives," which might include the mania for "storytelling" in corporate marketing or the rampant popularity of TED talks. He argues that, though "stories" is a buzzword, we have lost a true, deeper capacity for narrative meaning-making. (Here he evokes the archetypal "fire around which humans gather to tell each other stories.") He describes posting on social media as "pornographic self-presentation or self-promotion"—which is fair enough. There is little in his writing, however, to acknowledge that digital spaces can also produce meaningful experiences, an oversight that, at this point in the twenty-first century, seems almost quaint. We don't read Han for a holistic orthodoxy; it's hard to blame a sixty-something-year-old for not grasping TikTok's paradoxical way of fostering both exploitative and emancipatory forms of expression. But he overlooks the way that social media enables self-narrativization, the construction and projection of a personal

identity, with a freedom that was never possible in the top-down hierarchy of traditional media. For many people, the Internet is the new campfire.

One has to wonder what Han makes of the way that his own ideas have flourished in the Internet information economy, within the avalanche of non-things. When we read about the Internet, we so often crave an answer or a solution: Is a technology *good* or *bad*? How can we escape it? Han is not in the business of offering solutions or bullet-pointed life hacks, but online his writing can be readily turned into convenient, digestible lessons. (One TikTok caption: “Byung-Chul Han and self optimization #capitalism #marxism #therapy.”) Han’s books “critique excess digital consumption but are also compatible with it,” Pidgeon told me. They can be used as “another fashionable or modish set of thoughts to be pushed through S.E.O. and imbibed in little chunks by people,” he added. “That’s the real trap of it. You can never be outside of the system that you’re trying to talk about.” But Han’s ardent, almost brutalist style is also designed to speak for itself, and in that sense it resists digital culture’s way of forcing a person to stand in for his creative output. Part of Han’s revelation to readers is that they do not have to be a persona. If Han posted his own TikTok videos, most commenters would probably just ask what brand of leather jacket he was wearing. (Honestly, I want to know that, too.) Perhaps we should take his writing as an incitement to live our own offline lives instead. Until we put his ideas into practice, though, his writing offers an aspirational symbol to tote around, to flip through, to explain to our friends. As Maret, the University of Idaho student, put it, “The Han Hive is activated.” ♦

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