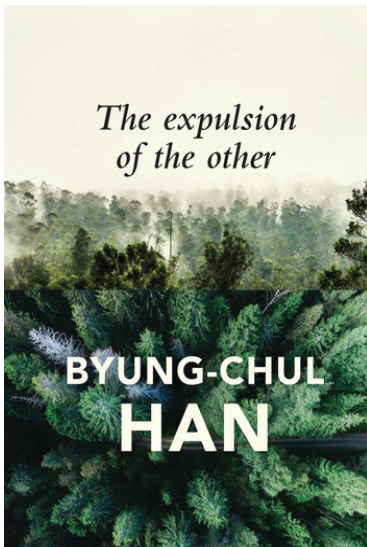


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Longing for the Hell of the Other: Review of Byung-Chul Han's, *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*



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If I had to choose an architectural style to represent the texts of Byung-Chul Han, it would be Brutalism. The simplicity of his style can strike one's mind with an unexpected gravity.

Born in Seoul in 1959, Han left high school to study metallurgy. A chemical explosion almost killed him at his family home. At the age of 26, he was headed to study in Germany without speaking the language. He earned a doctorate in philosophy in Freiburg in 1994 after studying German literature and Catholic theology. Since 2012, he teaches philosophy and cultural studies at the Universität der Künste (University of the Arts) in Berlin. His areas of interest are philosophy of the 18th, 19th and 20th century, ethics, social philosophy, phenomenology, cultural theory, aesthetics, religion, media theory, and intercultural philosophy. His

books have been appearing with a pretty obstinate consistency throughout his career, constituting a body of work of about 20 books translated into many languages.

The main framework of Han's work is situated around the critique of the consequences of late capitalism. Most of his texts are concerned with the altered state of the human subject in the fast-paced and technologically-determined epoch of neoliberalism. Each of his books, being rather short and essayistic, revolve around a specific facet of the general context of crisis such as sexuality, mental health, violence, freedom, technology, and popular culture. His books center around a singular term either constituted by him or elevated to a new meaning in the text. He became more widely recognized with the book *The Burnout Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015, *Die Müdigkeit Gesellschaft* in original) followed with book titles such as *The Transparency Society* (2015), *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (2017) *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering* (2017), *The Agony of Eros* (2017), *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects* (2017), and *Topology of Violence* (2018).

Brutalism as architecture—rooted ideologically in the ideas of socially progressive housing—attends to the massive and monolithic appearance of raw concrete, calling for clear demarcation and rough surfaces. Han's book *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today* (2018) follows a simple and clear style of both the language he uses and his reasoning. His main argument is based on the critique of contemporary culture defined by the traits of neoliberalism. His claim builds on the necessity of a dialectic relationship between the Self and the Other and its impossibility or rather non-existence in the

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neoliberal environment. Han writes, “The time in which there was such a thing as the Other is over. The Other as a secret, the Other as a temptation, the Other as eros, the Other as desire, the Other as hell and the Other as pain disappear. The negativity of the Other now gives way to the positivity of the Same.”

His opening paragraph bears witness to the traits known in Brutalism: uncluttered and sharp statements creating an opposition between past or missing and contemporary condition of the Self and the Other. Han’s sentences declare with sharpness and wit, ideas settle with gravity, swirling up affect, forging thick sensuousness.

The book is an aggregate of oppositions, based on the central assumption that the Self needs to encounter the negativity of the Other in order to be able to exist as a “social body.” The Self turns into a Selfsame that is in a constant state of self-destruction fueled by the violence of positivity. The boundaries have vanished and what used to be the Other is now indistinguishable and invisible, assimilated in the echo chambers of a self-destroying yet perpetually productive Selfsame.

The Expulsion of the Other is organized into twelve chapters that could be divided into three larger sections creating an arc from the assessment of the conflict and offering a possible solution. The first six chapters—1. The Terror of the Same, 2. The Violence of the Global and Terrorism, 3. The Terror of Authenticity, 4. Anxiety 5. Thresholds—create a thick description concentrating on the relationship between the Self and the Other. Han moves along a series of oppositions that express the character of the “self-enclosed individual” (using here Julie Wilson’s term). Oppositions between the Other and the Self(same) enfold alongside counterparts such as such as positivity vs. negativity; sight vs. insight; accumulation of information vs. knowledge;

correlation vs. understanding; calculation (as the repetition of the Same) vs. thought (that has access to the Other); accumulation of followers vs. encounter of the other person; gaplessness vs. proximity; attention vs. attentiveness.

The next chapters—6. Alienation, 7. Counterbody, 8. Gaze, 9. Voice, 10. The Language of the Other, 11. The Thinking of the Other—look more closely at the characteristics of the Other as the object that goes against the Self and offers resistance. The Self is constituted by the gaze of the Other. In this context, the language of the Other, containing attentive silence, is suppressed by the obesity of hypercommunication.

The final chapter—12. Listening—offers a possible way to attune (back) into the perceptual existence of the Other. Listening, according to Han, is an active gesture in “affirming the Other in their otherness.”

Throughout the book, Han references and examples other authors creating in this way a rich and layered texture of meanings. One of the most influential thinkers seems to be Heidegger, whose thoughts on the Being-in-the-world (German: *In-der-Welt-sein*) are central for the author. Alongside other thinkers, such as Vilem Flusser, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, each chapter relates to films, poems and other literary texts in order to develop his arguments.

Brutalist architecture engages the eye with its unfinished and rough surfaces, unusual shapes yet straight lines. The strength of Han’s text becomes its burden. His unadorned yet sensuous and in-depth engagement with the topic is fascinating. Still, the creeping doubt if listening might be able to offer redemption in a new phase of neoliberalism where it’s logic has invaded the mind.

Notes

1 Adrian Nathan West, “Media and Transparency: An Introduction to Byung-Chul Han in English,” Los Angeles Review of Books, September 14, 2017. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/media-and-transparency-an-introduction-to-byung-chul-han-in-english/>.

2 Byung-Chul Han, *Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*. (New York: Polity Press, 2018), 1.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 70.