Byung-Chul Han and Contemporary Culture (online, 19 Mar 27)

Online, Mar 19, 2027
Deadline: Jan 18, 2027

James Mackay

Byung-Chul Han's slim volumes of philosophy now circulate widely in English, with more than twenty books translated since 2015. These books offer a cosmopolitan account of a digital age in which technology allows power to seduce rather than repress, and in which contemplation and even idleness become essential for the survival of love and community. His accounts of burnout, transparency, psychopolitics, the "infocracy," the disappearance of ritual and of things, the loss or expulsion of the other, the necessity of shared time, and the crisis of narration have also travelled far beyond academic philosophy.

Yet within English-language critical theory his work, which seems to have a high degree of relevance to contemporary cultural objects and movements, has received comparatively little sustained application. The immediate aim of this symposium, then, is to put Han's concepts to work as diagnostic tools: our focus is less on his philosophy in the abstract than on what it can do when brought to bear on specific cultural objects, texts and practices. Here we follow Deleuze's remark that a theory "is exactly like a box of tools… It must be useful. It must function," and indeed Han's own pronouncement in The Agony of Eros that theory is "an essential decision that causes the world to appear […] in a wholly different light."

We welcome contributions from across the humanities and social sciences, including literary studies (print and digital), cultural studies, media and communication studies, film and television, games studies, theology, visual culture and art history, design, and more. Papers will as standard be 15 minutes, though we are prepared to be flexible in terms of length and format.

We are delighted that Professor Steven Knepper will be the keynote speaker for this symposium. Professor Knepper is, among his other achievements, co-author of Byung-Chul Han (Polity, 2024), the only full-length critical introduction to Han's work.

Depending on the number and quality of responses, and the range of subjects covered, the aim is for this symposium to result in publication, either a focused journal special issue or a broader collection of essays with a university press. Scholars at any stage of their career are very welcome to submit.

Possible topics

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Burnout and the achievement-subject in fiction, film, art or games
- Psychopolitics and the shaping of subjectivity by platforms, apps or other technologies of mediation
- Storyselling in social media influencer personae, autofiction, and other forms of self-presentation
- Counterexamples: digital practices that sustain ritual, contemplation and/or community
- The Crisis of Narration applied to fiction, journalism or online culture
- The shitstorm/swarm as mode of digital communication
- Non-things: smartphones, digital artworks, e-books, Instapoems, text on screen more broadly
- The aesthetics of the smooth in art and design
- Generative AI and cultural production as technology of control (Infocracy, Non-Things)
- Datafication's assault on subjectivity
- The defence of love/eros in the achievement society
- Ritual and play as cultural practices under pressure
- Boredom, contemplation and the vita contemplativa as manifested in cultural objects
- Shanzhai: copying and translation in globalised culture
- Han as a writer – essayistic form, brevity and/or readability as tactic

How to submit

Please send the following to j.mackay@euc.ac.cy by Monday 18 January 2027:

- an abstract of 250–300 words, including the title
- a brief bio-note of no more than 100 words

Papers should be given in English. There is no fee for attendance. For any questions, please contact the organiser at j.mackay@euc.ac.cy.

Reference:
CFP: Byung-Chul Han and Contemporary Culture (online, 19 Mar 27). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 26, 2026 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/54742>.