

On the ‘psychic tourniquet’ strangling the Korean BwO

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***Abstract** Here I contribute to what I term critical postmedia studies in Korea. My intention is to theorize the “eruption” or flooding of media which has recently emerged as a central topic in the media context of Korea. From a critical post-media perspective, I am to diagnose and understand social and psychical phenomena such as the hikikomori syndrome that proliferate in the flooding media situation. In recent decades, Korea is a developed country which has experienced rapid social change due to the development of new technologies but the psychical effects of this are often under-explored. My intention therefore is to make some claims about the crisis of desire in the split country of Korea and stress the importance, relevance and legacy of Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy.*

***Keywords** Deleuze, Guattari, Stiegler, Han Byung-Chul, Berardi, hikikomori*

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1. Introduction

Depression may evolve into aggressiveness, violence, murder, tools for coming out of a depression, and preparing for final catastrophe, but there is not only one exit from the depression. There is another possibility. The other possibility is called resignation. The other possibility I call accepting the fact that the human story has exploded and we can no more live inside the dominant space of human history. We have to come out from that. We have to accept the idea that the only succeeding communities, only communities that go away from historical time can survive. (Berardi, “mass psychosis and depression”)

The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily. (Kafka, “Prometheus” 475)

We are facing a crisis again today — a period of critical transition that another upheaval, the digital revolution, has occasioned. (Han, “In the Swarm” 10)

American capitalism invented a new libidinal economy, a new organization of desire. Since desire is the engine that makes us live and moves us, since it deeply determines our behaviours, consumer capitalism hunts for any means of controlling it — in order to exploit it, just as oil reserves are exploited, until the resource is exhausted. (Stiegler, in Hubaut 349)

The schizoid Korean archipelago is an exotic, seductive conundrum. Not only is the Western media consumed with worries about the reclusive, paranoid, nuclear-armed north on the one hand and the jealous, quizzical infatuation with the seemingly sleepless,¹ exhausted,² workaholic population in the south on the other,³ but philosophers too love to obsess about Korea’s economic, political, social, psychical dimensions, its mental health issues, its transitional dynamics and rituals, its perversions, its explosive, vibrant, plastic culture. They describe Korea as a gleaming model of hyper-accelerant advanced industrial capitalism – and proclaim Korea’s dynamism and death drive is something they must understand. How do we understand the eruption of media in South Korea? They ask jealously: How did Korea nurture such a very

educated populace and one so rich in such a short time?⁴ The philosopher asks: What is her secret, her *jouissance*, “the *jouissance* of the repetition of the same in work, the same gesture, the same comings and goings in the factory” (Lyotard, “Libidinal Economy” 111), her mad enjoyment? Why do the Koreans work so hard beyond the pleasure principle? Secretly, the politicians whisper, how can we get our own population to emulate their masochistic compulsions while avoiding suicidal tendencies? Who are the Koreans going beyond and who is behind their successful soft power representations – transnational K-pop, global cinematic events like Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite*,⁵ Kim Ki-duk’s *Human, Space, Time and Human*, and Netflix dramas like *Squid Game*? Exceedingly so, perversely so, why are their children taught by robots (Palk, “Robot Teachers”)? Why do some young people wish to experience the death and the claustrophobia of a coffin (Michelson, “Korea’s Death Cafes”)? Why the obsession with plastic surgery (Lee, “Flesh of Democracy”)?⁶ In digital Korea, what has happened to the reserve army of labor, the surplus, the leftovers, the “*ing-yeo*” [잉여] — (Kim, “Being Surplus”), the “*sampo generation*”? Something has erupted in Korea and we must account for it.

In Korean-German philosopher Han Byung-Chul’s work we find illuminating contentions and explanations regarding the demise of the Foucauldian disciplinary society, the move to the “total management” of biological life, “the very animality of man” (Agamben, “Man and Animal” 77) and the transition to the achievement society. Is Korea the paragon of the perverted, control-obsessed achievement society? A country suffering from perseveration (Csikszentmihalyi and Hoopla, “Flow”) — that is the inappropriate and unintentional repetition of a response or behavior?⁷

A country on the brink, whose inhabitants live beyond desire, in a state of “profound boredom” (*Tiefe Langeweile*)? A country suggesting another end to the end of history (Kojève, “Hegel”). A country where desire and desiring-production has gone AWOL, because as a system it does not produce pleasure anymore, as Bernard Stiegler says (Lemmens, “Interview with Bernard Stiegler” 40).

In Han’s work we find a discussion about the loss of rituals and the destruction of transition. Transition, thresholds, and rituals are being replaced by “an accelerated

and seamless communication and production” (Han, “Disappearance of Rituals” 35). He writes, “the construction of the global is premised on the ruthless destruction of thresholds and transitions” (35). Korea becomes planetary – a vast, frictionless, gleaming, metallic, smooth space of capital – but on the proviso that thresholds and transitions disappear. Han writes about the fatigue society, which we can say is driven by a cybernetico-hymenopterous logic of production for production’s sake, that is, a society compelled to perform by a logic of the necromancer and the thaumaturge of self-exploitation *for any absurd purpose*. We are at liberty to exploit ourselves, to become self-driven slaves, to disavow the current state of things. For Han, freedom has taken on a violent sense with new technologies such as the smartphone turning the body into a productive force of self-exploitation: “Perpetrator and victim can no longer be distinguished. Such self-referentiality produces a paradoxical freedom that abruptly switches over to violence because of the compulsive structures dwelling within it. The psychic indispositions of achievement society are pathological manifestations of such a paradoxical freedom” (Han, “The Burnout Society” 11). There is little beyond this, little to transition to the unknown. The libidinal economy of this society is controlled through the decimation of *philia*.⁸ In such a society, the compulsion is to exploit the self to the point of exhaustion and depression⁹ and all the while we enjoy the hell, the “mad destruction” of the organic body (Lyotard, “Libidinal Economy” 111), the loss of identity, “the *jouissance* of anonymity”. In extremis, this leads to death from overwork – a phenomena called *karōshi* (過勞死) in Japan,¹⁰ *guolaosi* (過勞死) in Chinese, *gwarosa* (과로사) in South Korea,¹¹ or *kaam ka mara* (काम का मारा) – overburdened with work – in Hindi.

Han writes of *homo digitalis*, a species which inhabits a space not shared by others: “The digital inhabitants of the Net do not assemble. They lack the interiority of assembly that would bring forth a ‘we’. They form a gathering without assembly— a crowd without interiority, without a soul or spirit. Above all, they are isolated, scattered, *hikikomori*, recluse (引きこもり *hikikomori* – [히키코모리 *hikikomoli*] – sitting alone in front of a screen. Electronic media such as radio assemble human beings. In contrast, digital media isolate them” (Han, “In the Swarm” 11).

2. The Korean BwO

South Korea is the laboratory of the connective neohuman world. It is the ground zero of the world, a blueprint for the future of the planet. (Berardi, "Heroes" 186)

Like Han, Italian thinker Franco Berardi explores this aspect of mental health in his own critique of capitalism. He has a special focus on South Korea in which he describes South Korean youth as "the epitome of the contemporary condition of lonely togetherness, of shared isolation" ("Heroes" 73).

On the one hand is one pole with an "extreme degree of individualization," and on the other is "the ultimate immaterial cabling of the collective mind" (193). In Korean urban life, the BwO is "a smiling, lonely monad," "perfectly insulated and perfectly wired" (193). Everything functions, and the Korean organism becomes "a smooth interface of the flow". This is an apt critical description of the processual schizophrenia not only in Korea but in other advanced industrial societies. Berardi's critical intervention becomes clearer when we read it through Deleuze and Guattari's language. The Korean organism, as Berardi calls it, flows smoothly but at what cost to the BwO? To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, there is no crowned anarchy for the Korea BwO if it remains at the level of the organs, locked into the organism whose flows only anchor it in this world and no other:

We come to the gradual realization that the BwO is not at all the opposite of the organs. The organs are not its enemies. The enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism. (Deleuze and Guattari, "A Thousand Plateaus" 158)

Digital platforms produce a cognitive mutation that includes a propensity for autism and desensitization to the presence of the other, and fatally, to suicide. Mental suffering is normalized in a system driven by the exploitation of precarious, cognitive work. Advanced industrial societies like Japan and Korea can be viewed as archetypical cases because they are precarious, "haunted by depression, loneliness and suicide" (Berardi "And" 86). Discerning widespread stress, competition, a sense of meaninglessness and swelling compulsion disorders, Berardi finds this mutation not only in Japan but across the planet. He cites Japan's neighbor South Korea as a striking case where digitization has

deeply affected the psychology of its inhabitants. He suggests a causal connection between connectivity and suicide and writes that addiction to portable technologies is a coping strategy whence confronted with environmental and existential trauma and stress:

Even if I want to avoid deterministic causation, I'm obliged to underline this significant point: three of these highly suicide-prone countries (Japan, Finland and South Korea) have a high connectivity rate. Is there a link between high connectivity and suicide? (Berardi, "And" 88)

As a result of my research on the psychological effects of the technological evolution I have to answer: yes, there is a link between connectivity and social proxemics, there is a link between connectivity and dis-empathy, there is a link between connectivity, precarization of labour and de-solidarization. There is a link between connectivity and suicide. (89)

In the place where the connectivity rate is the highest in the world, the city of Seoul, I was impressed by the amount of street walkers who gazed at the screen of the smartphone all the time, apparently driven by trans-mental signals. I also noticed a sort of inattention to the surrounding physical landscape. Then I discovered that Korea is number one in the world as far as concerns the suicide rate. (244)

Others too have picked up on the link between the economic world and the mental health of young people. In his *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher notes that mental health has become "the paradigm case" of how capitalist realism operates. Mental health under capitalism becomes "a natural fact," an inevitable and accepted outcome. Fisher asks important questions about the growing number of cases of mental illness among young people:

I want to argue that it is necessary to reframe the growing problem of stress (and distress) in capitalist societies. Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast privatization of stress that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? (19)

For myself, I am interested in the nature of the hikikomori, the social recluse and the withdrawing into oneself as a survival strategy in the Korean context.¹² The word hikikomori derives from the Japanese verb *hiki*, which means to pull back, and *komoru*, which means to come into (Saitō, “Hikikomori”; Zielenziger, “Shutting Out the Sun”). The diagnosis of hikikomori shows similarities with “major depression, modern-type depression, internet addiction, and/or autism spectrum disorder (ASD)” (Kato, “Psychiatric Conditions”). The reality of hikikomori life is increasingly found across generations and all classes. Noting the global dimension to the severe form of pathological social withdrawal, Choi claims: “Hikikomori was first reported in Japan, but is a worldwide phenomenon that occurs not only in Asian cultures such as South Korea, India, Hong Kong, and China, but also in Australia, Europe (Spain, France, Italy), the United States, and Canada” (Choi “Hikikomori outside Japan” 26).¹³

Moreover, Choi predicts that in Korea the hikikomori problem will become exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic: “Currently, COVID-19 is expected to increase the Hikikomori phenomenon worldwide, and it has not been known what will change the Hikikomori phenomenon due to the quarantine policy or cultural characteristics of each country” (27). I believe it is important to understand the emergence of the hikikomori phenomenon in the Korean context and to appreciate why it is no longer a culturally-bound, that is a solely Japanese, issue, but a medical and societal issue which has its own pandemic proportions. Does the explosion of the hikikomori phenomenon somehow reveal the current flow or cessation of Korean youth?¹⁴ Does the eruption of media run in tandem with the explosion of mental illness?

3. The Disaster of Desire

For me, the social recluse is the disaster of desire. It is the dirty secret of advanced industrial societies. It is the excrescence from the disaster of the libidinal economy of desire, which pervades advanced industrial societies. Since I have friends, students and colleagues in the phenomenal country of South Korea, I feel compelled to ask questions about this. What explosive or irruptive or disruptive concepts are available to rethink the question of desire in Korean society? How is desire imperilled by burnout, fatigue, addiction, Internet intoxication, stress, anxiety, shame and guilt?

[A] blind and catastrophic fear can seize the most developed human society and lead it to set up systems of subjection and enslavement bringing it closer to societies of hymenoptera (production for production's sake, systematic segregation, generalized gulags...). (Guattari, "Machinic Unconscious" 128)

What is the vision of our society then? It is easy to rattle off a description of what we have become: Societies of drones, of control, of domination; cybernetic, virtual, automatic; societies of non-relation, subjection; societies without empathy and care, missing a super ego; excrescent, perverse, perseverative societies; 'remote-controlled' societies (Guattari, "Three Ecologies" 38–39). But why is it so blasé to describe advanced industrial societies this way? What therapeutic practices are available to the social recluse (eundoonhyeong oiteollie · 은둔형 외톨이 · reclusive loner) in the Korean context? And to what extent does the sedentary territory of the hikikomori grant us exemplary access to the fundamental shifts in affectivity produced and commanded by technology in the Korean context?

It is commonplace to see perseverative cycles and stimming activities of repetition everywhere. People are constantly pressing buttons, constantly doing tasks — editing photos, checking email, checking on your children's whereabouts, messaging, checking for latest train or bus information, for film or restaurant reviews, constantly organising one's diary – intentionally making ourselves busy, an obligation to be occupied — multitasking. We look at the screen to avoid eye contact or the possibility of contact as a whole. We simply exist without disinhibition. This everyday reflection led me to the question of multitasking and it is here where I am going to commingle the thoughts on Han, French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, Russian thinker Alexander Kojève and Japanese cultural theorist Azuma Hiroki. I am going to try and say something philosophical about multitasking.

4. Shallow Boredom to Deep Boredom at the End of History: Criticism of Han Byung-Chul, Alexandre Kojève, and Bernard Stiegler

There is something curious mentioned by Han about multitasking in *The Burnout Society*, an enquiry into the nature of multitasking. Han says that multitasking is nothing special for humans. It does not represent civilizational progress. We

cannot transition to a new civilization through it. A little odd perhaps, but multitasking is what wild animals do. Multitasking is not an everyday concern as Heidegger says but rather animal life, bare life as such.¹⁵ Simultaneously feeding the young and watching for predators is a form of multitasking. It is worthwhile giving the quote in full:

The attitude toward time and environment known as “multitasking” does not represent civilizational progress. Human beings in the late-modern society of work and information are not the only ones capable of multitasking. Rather, such an aptitude amounts to regression. Multitasking is commonplace among wild animals. It is an attentive technique indispensable for survival in the wilderness. (Han, “The Burnout Society” 12)

Han says the regressive aptitude of multitasking also takes place in video game play. It produces a “broad but flat mode of attention” (13) similar to “the vigilance of a wild animal” (13). Is this flat mode of attention boredom as such? This regressive aptitude of multitasking also produces anti-social forms of behaviour such as bullying which is said to be rife in the Japanese school system.

Not just multitasking but also activities such as video games produce a broad but flat mode of attention. Recent social developments and the structural change of wakefulness are bringing human society deeper and deeper into the wilderness. For example, bullying has achieved pandemic dimensions. Concern for the good life, which also includes life as a member of the community, is yielding more and more to the simple concern for survival. (13)

The image of this multitasking animal made me think of the intellectual lineage from Hegel’s 1809 book *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kojève’s introduction and anthropocentric reading of that work in the 1930s, Francis Fukuyama’s interpretation of Kojève, and Azuma Hiroki’s interpretation of the so-called snobbery thesis in Kojève (2009)¹⁶ which has particular relevance for Japan. The latter in particular is (in)famous for his animalization thesis on the otaku generation and their archival fever for the database, for minor narratives (see Bradley, “Otaku Becoming-overman”). This made me think of the following perverse questions: What can multitasking mean at the end of history? Can one be a multitasker at the end of history? Does this multitasking or mode of boredom somehow reveal the open (Agamben, “Man and Animal”)?¹⁷ Can I be bored to

death by multitasking? Can I perform multitasking in the manner of the Japanese snob, can it be a pure gratuitous activity? This is important because if I can be bored to death by multitasking then I would introduce the negative, it would reveal the opening of the being of Dasein. In some ways this is what Han is arguing for and finds in his interpretation of Hegel. Negativity can be a form of transition. Unemployed negativity would be the open wound in the Hegelian system.¹⁸ But alas in our societies we have an excess of positivity, Han says. More questions emerge from this: Is multitasking a shallow or deep form of boredom and from it can we get to a deep form of attention? A deep form of attention is important for Han because this is how we transition to a new civilization, one that is concerned with deep contemplation, one that is not premised on idle, stupid, idiotic ways of passing the time, like the wild animal at the end of history. There is a therapeutic aspect to this because the idiotic affirms the exterior, and the other, the incommunicable, the anomolous, may serve as a mode of resistance (Prozorov).¹⁹ A new civilisation premised on otium, leisure and laziness, on living and playing like a philosopher, homo ludens, and not like the wild animal, not like animal laborans.²⁰

Less professional and negotium and more the amateur and otium (Hyett), but lest we forget, the philosopher cannot be at the end of history. There is no transition to philosophy after the end of history. There is no place or time for thinking at the end of history. There is no time for consciousness or consciousness of time at the end of history. Nowadays, it appears we multitask because we are bored to death. We are afraid to suspend the thread between the animal and the human. We have become addicted to multitasking. We love our deadly repetitions. One wonders if we too are at the end of history, living and thinking like pigs, like wild animals, like adult beasts, living in the “inertia of cyber-cattle” as Gilles Chatelet says (120).²¹

This I think we can read as the excess of positivity in Han’s argot. What is this excess of positivity vis-à-vis the unemployed negativity of Bataille? The open wound that is my being. We know that Kojève discusses the animal in his introductory lectures on Hegel. He is concerned with the becoming-animal of Man at the end of history. And we know that he dithers on the question of the final state of history. Does it lead to the rebarbarization of Japan or the Japanization of the world? We have this quote from Kojève about the adult beast which serves to inform my argument:

If Man becomes an animal again, his arts, his loves, and his play must also become purely "natural" again. Hence it would have to be admitted that after the end of History, men would construct their edifices and worlds of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts. (Kojève, "Hegel" 159)

Indulge in love like adult beasts? I will pursue this in a moment when I return to Han's work on the agony of eros but first let me offer some thoughts on Bernard Stiegler's philosophy. Stiegler too discusses the question of multitasking in *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (2010). In that book Stiegler tries to account for the attention mutation which leads to attention and hyperactivity disorders, to information fatigue. The multitasking attention of young people for Stiegler is associated with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) - (74). Such a disorder like ADHD even in its most "vigilant" mode, Stiegler says, is "a form of attention without consciousness, a characteristic of wild animals" (78). Stiegler writes in a manner much like Han:

The animal nervous system, whose priority is to provide a defense against predators in the fight for life and the instinct for survival, also "multitasks," or, more precisely, as informatics would have it, must be capable of managing "background tasks." A grazing animal, for example, a stag (a forest herbivore), is vigilant at the same time that it grazes, first with regard to the possible proximity of predators; it can, moreover, even while grazing and protecting itself, also protect its young, as well as its grazing mate, who is herself protecting her young. (78)

Multitasking is without consciousness. What does this mean? Contra Kojève, surely to be without consciousness means the impossibility of art and love at the end of history. Indeed, Kojève recognizes this problem and replaces the focus on what makes us happy with what makes us content. We can make links not only to Kojève but also Guattari, who talks about the refrain or a deadly form of the ritournelle when one is sat in front of the TV screen for a prolonged period of time and becomes entombed in funk, zombie-like. Stiegler describes this form of hyper-attention as a "floating listening" (78) – which we can say is something quite different from the quiet viewing (meditative thinking, the thoughtful

staying-with, the lingering thinking-after) and the act of lingering affirmed by Heidegger and Han respectively. For Stiegler, we can become deleteriously addicted to multitasking. And this is where Han and Stiegler share the same view, for Han argues that the addicted animal laborans is a listless, depressed soul – zombie-like, a sleepwalker, the *Muselmanner*, the inmate of a concentration camp:

People who suffer from depression, bipolar disorder, or burnout syndrome develop the symptoms displayed by the *Muselmanner* in concentration camps. *Muselmanner* are emaciated prisoners lacking all vigor who, like people with acute depression, have become entirely apathetic and can no longer even recognize physical cold or the orders given by guards. One cannot help but suspect that the late-modern animal laborans with neuronal disturbances would have been a *Muselmann*, too – albeit well fed and probably obese. (Han, “The Burnout Society” 19)

What becomes of happiness and satisfaction in the liquidation of desire? Are we happy when we multitask or satisfied to the point of inertia? If we are unhappily satisfied, do we not become like wild animals? Do we disappear as Man as such? What do we transition to or erupt towards? Is the annihilation of Man definitive? Again, what is this multitasking animal without consciousness? Can the adult animal, the adult beast, love, that is, love and care for the other, go over to the other, transition to the other, be or incited to passion?

I am arguing that the animalized Man may very well carry out an empty, ritualistic form of multitasking. The animalized Man suffers a solipsistic, solitary tiredness. The otaku becomes this animalized Man (Bradley, “Otaku Becoming-overman”). Love is not love for the other but a perverted love, solipsistic love found in role playing games, simulation games, virtual eros, *moé* (萌え) – that is the affection, adoration, devotion, and excitement one feels towards characters that appear in manga, anime, and video games. However, again, the animalization thesis says that Man is without consciousness. He is realized in the object. Strictly speaking, self-consciousness is no more, and without self-consciousness surely there is neither art nor love. There is the incapacity of the negative. There is no creativity. Action must be empty. The post-human way of life is form without value. Here, both Kojève’s snobbery thesis and Azuma’s animalization thesis demonstrate this point. Snobbery, form without content, ritual as such, exists so the Japanese can pass time and not get bored at the end of history. Han picks up on this and claims

Japan is the “coming realm of ritual” (Han, “Disappearance of Rituals” 59). The Japanese can multitask and not be bored. There is no struggle for life, but rather the suspension of struggle via the ceremonial. We should not forget that the animal cannot become bored because it is poor in world, (Weltarmut) fundamentally deprived of world, according to Heidegger (1995). And no animal can be a snob. Only Man can be bored and can experience “profound boredom” as Heidegger describes (1995). Han notes the importance of Japan in Kojève’s treatment of the end of history:

Japan foreshadows that coming ritual society, a society which can do without truth, without transcendence – a thoroughly aestheticized society in which beautiful semblance will have taken the place of religion. (Han, “Disappearance of Rituals” 59)

In such a state, my question is how to pass from 1) a shallow sense of attention to a deep sense of attention in the first instance and 2) from a shallow to deep form of boredom in the next. This is important because it says something about the role of philosophy and the role of friendship.

5. **F(M): [Ex=(O+Pp)→Vcm→Vcm/1]²²**

Let me return to Han. Han describes society as one suffering weariness and transparency. Citizens compulsively compete in this post-disciplinary achievement society. Burnout, fatigue, exhaustion are common maladies. Through self-exploitation, we are overexposed to ourselves, cut off from relation to the other. Depression, hyperactivity, personality disorders ensue. Self-exploitation produces fatigue and depression but not alienation, as self-consciousness is necessitated for alienation. We suffer an excess of positivity and a deficit of negativity. Han wants us to embrace the thresholds which can transition to negativity. This is so because the sense of negativity would allow us to relate to the other, would allow us to love, would allow us to transition to the unfamiliar, and would allow us not to be bored and to live again:

Thresholds and transitions are zones of mystery, uncertainty, transformation, death, and fear, but also of yearning, hope, and expectation. Their negativity constitutes the topology of passion. (Han, “The Transparency Society” 32)

This sense of love is an openness which brings something incomprehensible or incomparable into the world, which we can say helps us to transition to the other, to go over to the other. And Han looks to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit to find this sense of the negative. Hegel points to the relationship of spirit to death and its tarrying with the negative and in *Agony of Eros* Han interprets this as follows, thinking love as a dialectical relay between openness and closure, as the wound "inflicted by the Other's negativity" which must be affirmed and healed. At odds with Bataille's sense of the open wound, for Han, the wound of the other must be healed, the negativity of the other must be sublimated.²³

The dialectic itself is a movement of closing, opening, and closing again. The Spirit would bleed to death from the wounds inflicted by the Other's negativity, were it not capable of reaching a conclusion. Not every end amounts to violence. Peace is concluded. Friendship is an end unto itself. Love is an absolute end unto itself. It is absolute because it presupposes death, the surrender of the self.

As an absolute end, love passes through death. Although one dies in the Other, this death is followed by a return to oneself. The reconciled return to oneself out of the Other means anything but violent appropriation of the Other; wrongly, this has been declared the main figure of Hegelian thought. Rather it is the gift of the Other – preceded by the surrender, the giving up, of one's own self.

In this way, I think Han is close to Catherine Malabou's thesis on the wounded subject (2012) when she claims that the wounded subject is unable to connect a conclusion to an emotion and is thus left unable to decide as a result. From a neuroscientific point of view (Malabou, "The New Wounded"), when faced with multiple choices if we cannot attach an emotion or affect to a choice, we cannot make a decision even if we reason consistently and thoroughly about the pros and cons of this or that position. In his language, Han makes a similar point arguing the depressive-narcissistic subject has "no capacity for conclusion" (22-23). This is central for Han as he is looking to find a way to affirm the agony of eros, passion as such, to show how eros is tied to the Logos as such. Simply, without negativity we cannot love. And the excess of positivity is no solution to this crisis of love. Wild animals or adult beasts cannot love. Put simply, they are poor in world. There is no essential disruption (*wesenhafte Erschütterung*) as Heidegger says. There is no wonder.²⁴

In the enclosure within ourselves, in our deadly cycle of ipseity, or the “worm in man” as Wilhelm Reich says, we suffer narcissism and self-reference – a deadly repetition, a compulsive addiction. This leads to a loss of eros, a loss of desire, a loss of relation to the other, a loss of relation to uniqueness,²⁵ a loss of relation to the not-self. Pornography and exhibitionism replace love and desire. The faciality of the selfie celebrates self-reference, but conceals the wounds, addictions, self-loathing, insecurities, emptiness and narcissism that lie beneath. In *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, Han explains this in the following way

Selfie addiction has its roots not in self-love but in narcissistic self-reference. A selfie is the beautiful, smooth surface of an emptied, wholly insecure self. Today, in order to escape torturous emptiness, one reaches either for the razor blade or for the smartphone. Selfies are smooth surfaces that, at least for a moment, present the empty self in a favourable light. But when we turn them over we find them covered in bleeding wounds. Thus, wounds are the reverse side of selfies. (Han and Steuer, “Capitalism” 48)

The depressive, achievement-subject is wounded by “an internalized war” (Han, “Psychopolitics” 11). Love becomes simulation, *moé*. One both googles oneself unconscious and “goggles oneself unconscious” (Han, “Expulsion of the Other” 2). This leads to the allo-control of desire and the disavowal of deliberative, conscious, self-regarding, and decision-making. We are willingly steered away from desiring otherwise, desiring difference as such, by a post-bio-political psychopolitics: “Digital psychopolitics is taking over the social behavior of the masses by laying hold of, and steering, the unconscious logic that governs them” (Han, “Psychopolitics” 80). Again, this returns us to the animalization thesis promulgated by Kojève and popularized by Azuma Hiroki, the latter who we can say is writing a “post-coital” retrospective on database animalization (Groys, “Antiphilosophy” 158).²⁶ For Han, the agony of eros leads to the agony of thought because without the desire for the other, there is no possibility of philosophy as such. Logos without eros would be abstract, empty thought. A thought without conclusion. Without Logos we are left with pornographication, gamification, simulation which survive autopoietically at the end of history. The impenetrable and inescapable ring-world (Umwelt) or filter-bubble of the self-obsessed subject. An Umwelt turned Umwelt (*immonde*). The remainder is the eruption of media, the irruption of psychic woes, societal

disruption, and the perversion and pornification of our transparent selves. Again, form without content. This returns us to the snobbery thesis, empty ritualization and the wild animal which multitasks at the end of history.

Logos without eros becomes the adult beast of Kojève – the animalized Man – but more than this, for Stiegler, it turns into the hideous beast (*la bête immonde*) - (2012, p. 48). Let me explain Stiegler's point here. Drives whence untied from desire, whence left unsublimated, signify a disaster for society, the end of the social as such, and lead in extremis to the “eruption” of violence, to the destruction of society.²⁷ In ashes is the mad jouissance of a society collapsed by the satisfaction of the drives. Stiegler writes: “When desublimation liquidates the super-ego, desire gives itself new figures. But it then becomes the hideous beast [la bête immonde] of all abominations, liberating that which takes the form of negative sublimation” (48). This is the uncontrollable becoming of the 24/7 society²⁸ of hyper-control. In his grave assessment, one suspects Stiegler would agree with Han that we must look for something beyond mere survival and the expression of the drives or instincts:

We are living in a time of lovelessness (*désamour*): the time of a libidinal economy that is constituted in such a way that, with capitalism having put desire at the centre of its energy, this economy has led to the ruin of desire, to the unchaining of its drives, and to the liquidation of *philia* and more generally of this love that the noetic souls have for each other and for the objects of their world. (Stiegler, “Proletarianization of Sensibility” 12)

This something would be for Stiegler the society of care, the rejoining of severed transindividuation circuits. Love is that which forges new links between the generations:

It's through love that the end of psychic and collective individuation is formed. As the first and preliminary condition of this individuation, love is that which needs to be maintained through care, through those practices of care that make possible the access to consistencies that exist on the plane of the extra-ordinary. (Stiegler, “Proletarianization of Sensibility” 13)

At its most miserable, in this 24/7 society of hyper-control, we find mere individuals, aggregations, the disindividuated and disintegrated; a swarm society of

desublimated souls; a surveillance society “preventing both sleeping and dreaming”²⁹ (Stiegler, 2018, 176) – the collapse of the distinction between otium and negotium - a veritable dystopic vision of mass-produced behaviour, steered by the mechanization of the emotions, the disintegration of the dream world and the harnessing of attention: a vision which even George Orwell would struggle to surpass.³⁰ This is where society is reduced to barely functioning bare life. A doping society with a good heartbeat signalling “vital functions” but little else. Han writes: “The inner logic of achievement society dictates its evolution into a doping society. Life reduced to bare, vital functioning is life to be kept healthy unconditionally” (Han, “The Burnout Society” 51). In this hyper-positive achievement society, in Han’s language, the psychic effects of media-flooding erupt when the achievement-subject is no longer able to achieve. This is the schizo in breakdown, the “limp rag forced into autistic behaviour” as Deleuze and Guattari say (“Anti-Oedipus” 5). Here, the excess of positivity acting upon the Korean socius may be what R. D. Laing called the “psychic tourniquet” (Laing, “Divided Self” 133) that is, a mental process which stops the flow of desire, which constricts and compresses desire to the point of spreading “existential gangrene” across the Korean BwO.

My argument has been to stress the importance of desire, to note what has happened to desire through the depletion of libidinal energy, and how desire is affected by states of fatigue and exhaustion and the absence of eros. Here, Han’s psychopolitics of capitalism (“Psychopolitics”) offers a comprehensive and critical treatment of digital technologies whence read alongside Stiegler’s pharmacological analysis of the digital revolution but it is Deleuze and Guattari who still have something to say.

6. Three Metamorphoses: i) worm-in-man, ii) mole-serpent, iii) wild, hideous animal (*la bête immonde*)

What kind of animal are we becoming faced with the “diabolical intelligence” of hyper-capitalism and the “chaosmic plunge” towards abolition (Guattari, “Chaosmosis” 90)? It seems we have passed from Reich’s worm-in-man (*Character Analysis*) to Deleuze’s mole and serpent (*Postscript*) and onwards towards Han’s wild animal. The idea of the worm-in-man is described by the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich as parasitical and cancerous. It rises when we crawl into ourselves, when desire is not fully expressed. In Deleuze and Guattari’s language this takes place when the desiring machines break down and the BwO

curls into itself. The worm-in-man festers when the self and its body close off the world and plunge and spiral into itself. In this way hikikomori can be understood as the worm-in-man and can be read as a processual schizophrenia, a diminishing of self-awareness, a disturbance of ipseity. In his day, Reich was right to ask why there was so much narcissism, self-harm, and love for the worm-in-man. Yet, this worm-in-man seems to have metamorphosed into the serpent after first passing through the subterranean species of the mole. The serpent is a different kind of animal than the mole as Deleuze explains in *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, in which Deleuze finds it curious that young people desire constant training and constant improvement and constant performance valorization. In post-disciplinary societies, Deleuze explains the difference between the mole and the serpent in terms of the yearning for training:

The old monetary mole is the animal of the space of enclosure, but the serpent is that of the societies of control. We have passed from one animal to the other, from the mole to the serpent, in the system under which we live, but also in our manner of living and in our relations with others. The disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network. Everywhere surfing has already replaced the older sports. (*Postscript 7*)

And in terms of this self-promotion and self-improvement, Deleuze asks where this desire comes from. He famously warns us that it comes from outside – the “coils of a serpent are even more complex than the burrows of a molehill” (Deleuze, *Postscript 7*).³¹ But there is a third metamorphosis. Han notes the difference between mole and the serpent, describing the mole as the laborer and the serpent as entrepreneur. The latter is “the animal of the neoliberal regime” (Han, “In the Swarm” 18) as the capitalist system switches from the mole-model to the snake-model to generate “more productivity” (18). And then we get to Han’s wild animal – the wild animal that is the multitasker par excellence, the animal that performs tasks unconsciously in a constant relay between consumptive attention and deep distraction.

7. A Word of Caution

I remain resistant to the idea of transcendental mindfulness, to somehow finding in Buddhism a solution to the crisis of the achievement subject (Han, “Zen

Buddhism”). This is what Han leans toward. While I cannot see how mindfulness can be the path from a “flat mode of attention” to deep attention, I agree with Han who claims forms of negativity such as “hesitation, pausing, boredom, waiting, or rage” (*Topology of Violence* 117) can be constructive and can put into question society’s increasing positivity.³² He seems to follow Heidegger on this.

Simply, for Han, not all forms of negativity are destructive. Moreover, boredom is important here as I think it is time to get deeply, fatally bored – and therefore deeply critical – with the universal homogenous state. Indeed, this is Francis Fukuyama’s parting salvo at the end of his book *The End of History*. He says perhaps “this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again” (16). Sadly, Han’s work while thought-provoking does not resolve the question of how the multitasking depressive acts formally without content. How does the depressive disavow the reality of its own self-exploitation? There is no fundamental explanation as to how capitalism produces such disastrous forms of subjectivity. To answer this we need a new pedagogy of lingering, of deep boredom, of quiet attunement and quiet viewing, a new *vita contemplativa*. But this demands a philosophy that is something more than a form of deep, contemplative attention. Perhaps philosophy must go down Han’s route and become a form of deep, contemplative inattention. Perhaps then the withdrawal into philosophical idiocy and stupidity might be a way to find the self’s relation to itself, or as Han says of idiocy, it is a sort of withdrawing, of pulling away into silence, of disconnecting, of unplugging. A little less action and a little bit more thinking.

However, we need to delve deeper and fall fatally into the Stimmung of “profound boredom” to search for possibilities of action, to disenchant and burst asunder the fetters of the achievement society. So perhaps less *stimming* and more *Stimmung*. A critique of the excess of the positive must account for the liberatory negativity of the schizo — its *Zerrissenheit* or torn-to-pieces-hood, its *diremption* or schizzed spirit. We need to account for the whirring, *stimming*, agitated, excesses of neuro-atypicals, hikikomori, the profoundly lonely.

8. Han contra Deleuze/Stiegler contra Han

Han is critical of the “romanticized and idealized” schizo image produced by Deleuze and Guattari (Han, “Topology of Violence” 116) and insists the BwO has become decrepit, overrun with metastases and infarction, which we can say is

like Reich's worm-in-man or the "hypertrophy of inner life" in Hegel.³³ Han writes: "The endless conjunction celebrated by Deleuze is ultimately destructive. It leads to a cancerous proliferation of the same, even to the hell of the same" ("Disappearance of Rituals" 34). In the time and space of hyperculture,³⁴ schizophrenic deterritorialization and lines of flight lead not to the negative but to the "rhizomatic proliferation of the same, to accumulation of the positive" (116). On this account, Deleuze and Guattari are in effect writing a glorious paean to capitalism. And again, Han says "freed from all negativity, the schizomachine produces the violence of positivity" (117). Berardi too discusses the connection between rhizomatic effects, violence and explosion, noting the deleterious consequences: "The rhizomatic whirlwind of the networked experience drags the unconscious, which Freud defines as *Innere Ausland* (the intimate foreign land), out of itself, externalising it to the point of a psychotic explosion" (Berardi, "Third Unconscious" x). This again is the hideous beast (*la bête immonde*) of Bernard Stiegler.

In *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism: Disbelief and Discredit* (2014), Stiegler discusses Boltanski and Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005). Interestingly, he cites Boltanski and Chiapello's discussion on the effects of 1968 and the new spirit of capitalism which has seemingly emerged since those tumultuous events. It is here that we see similarities between Boltanski and Chiapello's work on multitasking and Han Byung-Chul's criticism of Deleuze and Guattari's celebration of the rhizomatic image of thought. It is worth citing Boltanski and Chiapello on this point as they claim that the new spirit demands "rhizomorphic capacity," "multitasking...conviviality, openness" and so on:

The qualities that are guarantees of success in this new spirit – autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphic capacity, multitasking..., conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts – these are taken directly from the repertoire of May 1968. (Boltanski and Chiapello, "New Spirit of Capitalism" 97).

They note "a profound transformation" not only in the organization of work but in techniques of work such as "multitasking, self-control, development of autonomy" and "external flexibility" (218). Boltanski and Chiapello and Han

Byung-Chul are in conversation here. Yet reflecting upon their argument Stiegler disagrees and contends it is not so much a new spirit of capitalism as a lost one. Rather, what has emerged since 1968 is “the reign of spiritual misery,” which he describes as a process of desublimation, the liquidation of the spirit, the exhaustion of desire and the libido, the loss of the power of socialization, the unleashing of drive-based tendencies through the liquidation of the super-ego and the unbinding of desire from sublimation, and the corresponding decomposition of pleasure. For Stiegler, the liquidation of belief by capitalism signifies the liquidation of desire as such (*Lost Spirit of Capitalism* 12).

Disindividuation is a desubjectivation that affects social forms as much as the psychic subject, and as such it generates disbelief, miscreance discredit, demotivation and irrationality. (13)

For Stiegler desublimation means the power of transindividuation, the power to constitute a ‘we’, is imperilled(14), which again is precisely the idiosyncratic definition of the swarm society in Han Byung-Chul’s work. The consequences of desublimation are “explosive,” Stiegler claims, for if we are unable to produce motives to individuate, what ensues are acts of negative sublimation, the loss of collective individuation (16), and ultimately uncontrollable societies. The consequences of desublimation are not only “explosive” but perverse, as perversion as such is “decomposition” (53). And for Stiegler, the decomposition of libido is “the plague” of uncontrollable societies. (78). Daniel Ross puts the point well regarding the conspicuous nature of this tendency: “Today, irrational passions do not seem to be lurking beneath the surface but can be found right out in the open, and immense civilizational wars of the spirit appear more likely than ever” (Ross, “Psychopolitical Anaphylaxis” 68).

The schizophrenic process it would seem has lost its diabolical, destructive, transformative dimension. Indeed, this observation resonates with the homogeneous patterning of K-pop/drama culture. The perpetual repetition of the same for whatever positive purpose is indeed disastrous. However, on the question of the possibility of the line of flight, I think Han Byung-Chul misses the point regarding the politics of withdrawal in Deleuze and Guattari and it is Stiegler who provides a corrective reading (Bradley, “Use and Misuse”). Stiegler, in an interview with Gerard Moore, invokes Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the lines of flight, describing it positively as “a reasoned practice,” and suggesting that we need lines of flight in the form of a withdrawal from “addictive media”

(Hesselberth and de Bloois, “Politics of Withdrawal” 169). Here the line of flight carries along with it a therapeutic and pharmacological prescription. It is not the action of disconnection nor the expression of the Luddite but a therapeutic relation with technologies (170), with exteriority as such, with alterity as such, a point entirely missed by Han. It is for this reason that Han misunderstands the transformative, metamorphic nature of the line of flight because it is entirely applicable to hikikomori and their struggle to form a relation to the outside and to the Other. It is always a question of the becoming of the hikikomori, not the *being* of miserable states. In some ways it is Stiegler rather than Han who fully understands the gravity of the situation regarding technology’s pernicious effects on reason as such. Stiegler (“Dreams and Nightmares”) emphasizes the “(mis)calculated loss of reason” which emerges from the “disruptive divorce of computational understanding and reason”. Indeed, Moore finds in Stiegler’s reading of Deleuze’s concept of quasi-causality the act of creation of an externality “from which one can wrest oneself out of entrapment in a locked present” (173) – which is, I claim, what Han’s project is all about. And Stiegler stresses that the question is how to transform anxiety, stress, fatalism, nihilism into a line of flight, or in his argot, how to manufacture “new molecules for intoxicating oneself differently” (Hesselberth & de Bloois, “Politics of Withdrawal” 179).

Contra Han Byung-Chul, we can say that the line of flight beautifully captures the possibility of transition, of explosion, of rupture, of pure becoming. Its connection to the rhizome, to experimentation and creation carries with it both negative capacity and possibility. Or as Deleuze and Guattari say in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome.” (Deleuze and Guattari, “Anti-Oedipus” 9). We thus need an alternative libidinal economy of desire, to counter the short-circuiting of societal relations. We need new techniques to counter desublimation, to counter the loss of spiritual and symbolic misery and to counter the reign of stupidity. We need to struggle against the lowering of spiritual value in the time of the Capitalocene (Moore, “Use and Misuse”) and to find ways to embrace the “contagious potential of becoming other”: “We must reclaim molecularity as a limit. The absolute limit of capitalism must be shifted back from planetary death to becoming-other,” as Massumi says (“Guide” 140). The line of flight then is not the irresponsible line of flight or escape without responsibility but a line connected with becoming-other, with bifurcation, with the open system. This may be to put the planetary,

its becoming-other, back into its correct errancy, its correct orbit, its true wandering path.

And so I insist we must affirm the destructive, explosive, eruptive and transitional nature of desire – its pure possibility – for otherwise we remain like ensnared wild animals, entirely captivated by the capitalist mode of production, consumption and exchange, which is to say, that mode of diabolical capitalism, accelerative production which nurtures not allo-exploitation but auto-exploitation, and as such, depletes libidinal energies, exhausts the mind, and confounds the negative, that is, the capacity to say no to the rhymelessness and reasonlessness of capitalism's paranoid, depressive and suicidal functioning.

Acknowledgements

The paper is an extension of the invited workshop presentation entitled ‘The transition from shallow boredom to deep boredom that emerged at the end of history: Criticism of Han Byung-Chul, Alexandre Kojève, and Bernard Stiegler’ which was given at Global Academy for Future Civilisations, Kyung Hee University, South Korea, on April 22, 2022. The workshop was entitled “On Transition”.

This research (or publication) was supported by the 2022 Korean Studies Grant Program of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2022-R-005).

“이 연구는 2022 년도 한국학중앙연구원 해외한국학지원사업의 지원에 의하여 수행되었음 (AKS-2022-R-005).”

The project is entitled: Towards Critical Post-Media Studies: Research on the Eruption of Media in South Korea.

Notes

¹ Hadjimatheou, C. (April 6, 2022). South Korea: Why so many struggle to sleep. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60703300>

² Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, we heard the familiar obsession of the Western media with the Asian propensity towards death-from-overwork: “South Koreans have become the latest country to legislate against the phenomenon of “gwarosa” or “death by overwork”. Among OECD countries, South Koreans work more hours per week on average than all but one other country, and almost 50% more than famously industrious Germany. The Week (Nov 6, 2018): ‘*Gwarosa*’: why Koreans are working themselves to death. <https://www.theweek.co.uk/97569/gwarosa-why-koreans-are-working-themselves-to-death>

³ In the 2010s, the Korean media made much of the sampo generation [삼포세대], that is, that generation with precarious jobs, loan payments, and who postpone love, marriage, and childbirth as a consequence. The sampo sedae is the “generation of three giving-ups” - giving up dating, marriage, and children. The phenomena is similar to the satori generation in Japan, that is the generation which is apathetic about money, the rat race, and forming relationships.

⁴ See Bradley, and Lee, “On the Lumpen-Precariat-to-Come”

⁵ See Cole, Bradley, and Lee, “A Pedagogy of the Parasite”

⁶ Lee writes brilliantly about the passion for managing one’s appearance “better for human capital” (211-212). Lee writes: “With the hyper-competition for jobs, the ocular-centrism of “lookism” constitutes the core of the ideological consensus that all people must develop their values by managing their corporeality. Appearance becomes a central issue in competition, even though everyone has already acquired sufficient qualifications for finding a job. Appearance is essential with this depthless materialism” (215-216). Lee explains that capitalism in South Korea collapses differences of body and soul into exact equivalence. It imposes equality among difference: “The Korean situation reveals the essence of capitalist materialism as such, which totalizes differences like body and soul into an integrated unity. This materialism is nothing less than the imposition of the equality among differences. Individuals should regard themselves as equal entities according to capitalist materialism” (216). The existential and psychic dynamic of this demands the disavowal of one’s own pleasure and desire. You should pretend to enjoy to survive, even though the neoliberal egalitarianism of pleasure is impossible: “If you want to be a winner, you must link your desire to the capitalist market. Otherwise, you will be extinct in the process of competition. The neoliberal egalitarianism is another facet of the pleasure principle, the modern imperative to enjoy yourself. For this reason, you should pretend to enjoy yourself, even though you cannot. Self-enjoyment is the source of capitalist consumerism’s energy, and “enjoy yourself is the order of the unconscious – always excessive, but less than nothing” (222).

⁷Csikszentmihalyi calls this form of repetition “*psychic entropy*” and contrasts it with “the vitalising, ‘transcendent’ happiness of ‘flow’, or immersion in a self-contained and autotelic world of one’s own making, oblivious to the distractions of competing external stimuli” (Stiegler & Internation Collective 221). What resonates with Han’s sense of the achievement society is that Csikszentmihalyi claims “zones of calm focus” such as watching TV can become addictive and entropically so “in the midst of bewildering transformation” (221) – which for Han would be the stress and anxiety of accelerative capitalism. See Stiegler and Internation Collective’s *Bifurcate: There Is No Alternative*.

⁸Stiegler claims: “*Philia* is the sublime form of desire as common affect that grounds social ties, civility, and all the forms of *savoir vivre*. The challenge that we face is to restore *philia*, adherence to society” (Hubaut 346).

⁹We should note the distinction that Deleuze makes between tiredness and exhaustion (maximum degree of fatigue). To exhaust means to exhaust all possibilities. While the tired can no longer realize, the exhausted can no longer *possibilitate* (Deleuze, “Exhausted” 3). One exhausts that which is not realized through the possible. In his interpretation of the Beckettian formula of Bartleby, Deleuze says one can be tired *by something*, but exhausted *by nothing* (4). What does it mean to exhaust the possible? Deleuze says only the exhausted can exhaust the possible. To do this one must renounce “all need, preference, goal or signification” (5). We can understand the sense of exhaustion as pertaining to language and the relation to the other: “Tiredness affects action in all its states, whereas exhaustion only relates to the amnesic witness” (6). At stake then is the question of the exhaustion of language: “To exhaust words, one must relate them to the Others who pronounce them – or rather, emit them, secrete them – following the flows that alternately intermingle and become distinct” (7). Exhaustion therefore is a tired struggle against excessive communication, and pre-formatted thoughts. The exhaustion exhausts the possibilities and the imaginary in such models of communication. This brings Han close to Deleuze on the question of silence: “And sometimes this will occur in silence, by means of an ordinary silence, at the moment when the voices seem to have died” (Deleuze, “Exhausted” 9). Exhaustion raises the problem of the limits of language and the question of the impossible. It is not a matter of realizing the impossible but of exhausting the possible. Out of the exhausted possible is a transformation: “The exhausted self or larval subject is a transformational machine; it contains the genetic elements of a new system and a different agency, but ‘under conditions yet to be determined’” (Wasser 133). “[E]xhaustion allows no lying down and, when night falls, remains sitting at the table, empty head in captive hands” (6). While lying down is to recuperate, exhaustion is sitting in a chair and thinking too much and without recuperation.

¹⁰ See Araki’s “Death due to overwork”.

¹¹See Batheja’s piece for the Times of India titled, “Beware of the workplace devil known as Karoshi or Guolaosi!”

“[S]ocial withdrawal is hardly exclusive to Japan. Cases have been reported from countries as varied as France, Korea, and Oman. Psychiatrists surveyed from Australia, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and the United States indicated

that *hikikomori* syndrome is seen in their countries.” Kim says, in her 2018 article “Hikikomori: Japan’s Name for a Global Crisis”.

¹²See also Pozza *et al* in “The ‘Hikikomori’ syndrome”

See also Lee, Seo, & Choi, in “Psychopathological Characteristics of Social Withdrawal (Hikikomori) in the Korean Adolescent”

See Babe in “They couldn’t go outside for years”

¹³ It is here that I disagree with Wilson because it is shown that the *hikikomori* syndrome is not just a question of technological addiction but mental illness. It can be discerned across all generations and classes. Wilson’s definition of the *hikikomori* as “middle-class Japanese youths who have withdrawn from all conventional social contact to indulge exclusively computer-based interactions” (Wilson 392) is thus in need of expansion.

¹⁴The author recognises that a multimodal approach involving research in education, social sciences, philosophy and medical sciences is needed to fully comprehend the problem and he has made effort to explore this approach in recent research (Bradley, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2022a) and forthcoming work (Bradley, “Schizoanalysis and Asia”, 2022c).

¹⁵ The issue of the possibility of tasks at the end of history is also explored by Giorgio Agamben in his book *The Open*. Citing Heidegger’s *Hölderlin’s Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine,”* Agamben contends there are no new tasks at the end of history. Heidegger writes: “Temples, images, and customs are no longer capable of taking on the historical vocation of a people in order to compel it in a new task” (cited in Agamben, “Man and Animal” 75). Agamben claims, even in hindsight, even while reflecting on the 20th century’s experience of Nazism, fascism, the world wars, Russian communism, even reflecting on the fact that the 20th century was humanity’s bloodiest, in the end, there are no new historical tasks: “Today, at a distance of nearly seventy years, it is clear for anyone who is not in absolutely bad faith that there are no longer historical tasks that can be taken on by, or even simply assigned to, men” (76). There is no destiny for a people. There is but the alignment of the rest of the world with the World Spirit of European civilization. What has taken its place of the task is the management of biological life, the management of the very animality of man: “Faced with this eclipse, the only task that still seems to retain some seriousness is the assumption of the burden – and the “total management” - of biological life, that is, of the very animality of man” (77). Agamben turns to Foucault’s thesis on biopower and claims Kojève’s missed the historic changes in the management of life: “Kojève, however, privileges the aspect of negation and death in the relation between man and the anthropophorous animal, and he seems not to see the process by which, on the contrary, man (or the State for him) in modernity begins to care for his own animal life, and by which natural life becomes the stakes in what Foucault called biopower” (12). Agamben concludes: “The total humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man” (77).

¹⁶ In the second edition of the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, in a footnote added to the footnote in the first edition, Kojève introduces the Japanese snobbery thesis (the snobbery found in Noh theatre, the tea ceremony, ikebana etc., during the Edo period

[1603-1868] of Japan's seclusion from the world), adding another twist to the fate of man's becoming animal. Kojève's conversion is brought about following a trip to Japan in 1959 after which he realizes the Japanese offer another path in posthistory.

¹⁷ Captivation as *Stimmung* or fundamental attunement never opens itself to a world. As such it is without possibility. To be held captive means to be outside of the possibility that beings could be either disclosed or closed off. Resistance to alterity, resistance to going over to the other is a kind of self-captivation. As such, this is where Han and Heidegger can be read together. It is a question the deprivation of the possibility of openness, an openness with without concealment. Openness as the "openness of the open," as aletheia, unconcealment. There is no question of possibility in the disruption inherent in the essence of the animal, no possibility of ecstatically being drawn outside of itself in a fundamental and disruptive exposure. No exposure without disconcealment. Boredom brings Dasein and the animal into close proximity, to the level of animal captivity.

¹⁸ Questioning the closed nature of Hegel's system, Bataille poses the quandary that if action ('doing') is negativity, does negativity disappear completely or rest in an "unemployed" state. His life he says refutes Hegel's closed system: "I imagine that my life—or, better yet, its aborting, the open wound that is my life—constitutes all by itself the refutation of Hegel's closed system" (Botting and Wilson 296).

¹⁹ Here it is instructive to mention Deleuze who has his own definition of philosophy as the creation of concepts. The philosopher is neither concerned with contemplation, nor reflection or communication and Deleuze goes so far as to say that the philosopher becomes farcical when he contemplates. The contemplative philosopher toys with *la betise* – stupidity. And we don't laugh along with the philosopher when he becomes contemplative. "The philosopher who reflects doesn't make us laugh, but is even stupider because no one needs a philosopher in order to reflect... To believe that philosophy is a reflexion on anything is to despise it all, to despise both philosophy and what philosophy is supposed to reflect on."

See Deleuze and Parnet's *Abécédaire*. also see Deleuze, Boutang, and Parnet's *Gilles Deleuze from A to Z*.

We can say from this that contemplation is the bad habit of the philosopher.

²⁰ "The obliteration of the difference and hierarchy between otium and negotium - i.e. between existence and subsistence - leads to a general proletarianization. This loss of know-how, of knowledge of how to live and be, corresponds to a process of massive homogenization of behaviours, from which no one can escape, given the advent of mass consumption" (Stiegler in Hubaut 346).

²¹ The farmhouse is packed with grazing cows, wild stag, and "conscious sheep resigned to the slaughterhouse" (Agamben, "Man and Animal" 8). Nothing is open to concealment: "Not even the lark sees the open" says Heidegger. In *Infocracy*, Han describes the transformation of docile bodies in information regimes and surveillance capitalism which reduces human beings to mere "consumer cattle that provide data" (1). Under the disciplinary regime, humans are drilled to become *labouring cattle*: "They are not bearers of data and information; they are bearers of energy. Under a disciplinary regime, human

beings are drilled to become labouring cattle” (2). Domination functions smoothly as we communicate ourselves to death through self-exploitation.

More than this intoxication with streams of data makes the “labouring cattle” docile and manipulable: “Someone who is addicted to porn or gaming will not revolt against the rules page” (49).

²² Definition of self-exploitation: F (M) = Market context; Ex = Exploitation; O = Worker; Pp = Production process; Vcm = Exchange value of merchandise. 1 represents the producer who keeps the exchange value of what is produced. 1 represents the owner of the means of production. As the production is sold to market, it is a commodity.

²³ In Rick Dolphijn’s *The Philosophy of Matter: A Meditation* (2021), we find an extended treatise on cracks and wounds which Dolphijn admits to conflating at times. Yet in turning to Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami (村上春樹) to make sense of the pre-existent wound, Dolphijn provides an excellent heuristic for appreciating Hegel’s original non-existent wound, the site of *anoriginal* heterogeneity, *anoriginal* impurity, *anoriginal* différance, *anoriginal* conflict (Benjamin, 2005). This improves and informs the understanding of Han’s sense of the negative. Dolphijn quotes Murakami in *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (色彩を持たない多崎つくると、彼の巡礼の年) and claims that the wound precedes all forms of harmony. The quotation from Murakami is worth citing here:

One heart is not connected to another through harmony alone. They are, instead, linked deeply through their wounds. Pain linked to pain, fragility to fragility. There is no silence without a cry of grief, no forgiveness without bloodshed, no acceptance without a passage through acute loss. That is what lies at the root of true harmony. (Murakami 259)

Every bond is always broken. There is no pristine health or uncracked origin. One does not return to some state of perfection. And it is here that Dolphijn shows us a possible resonance between Murakami and Hegel and the connection with Han. Dolphijn claims the wounds do not heal but one must persevere *in* and *on* the wound. One must embody it. One must persevere and live the wound *beautifully*. Love would be such a wound. But Dolphijn says it is Deleuze and Guattari who help us to develop this sense of woundedness through their geophilosophy (1994). And in his philosophy of matter Dolphijn argues cracks and wounds are opportunities to redevelop life: to improve the way of the world, to love in a different way.

Furthermore, we find nuances sense of the wound and cut and senses more consistent with Han’s overall thesis in the chapter ‘Torturous Emptiness’ of *Capitalism and the Death Drive* (Han and Steuer, “Capitalism”) in which Han notes how actual physical self-harm has become a widespread, poisonous addiction: “Self-harm, in the form of cutting, has become a widespread phenomenon among today’s youth. Millions of young people in Germany injure themselves. Inflicting wounds on oneself provides a deep sense of relief. The usual method is to cut one’s arm with a razor blade. Cutting is becoming a real form of addiction” (43). He asks the important question how self-harm can be understood alongside the narcissism that “increasingly characterizes the contemporary individual?”

(43). His answer is that self-harmers who suffer from depression and anxiety disorders are “tortured by feelings of guilt, shame and low self-esteem” (43). Cutting is what gives a respite from “persistent inner emptiness” (43). He explains further: “Cutting clearly seems to be a desperate attempt to feel oneself again, to restore a feeling of self. The body sheds red tears. I bleed therefore I am” (44). Cutting is “a desperate attempt at feeling one’s own body again” (46). Han asks after the origin of the “torturous feeling of emptiness” and finds it emerges from a perverted form of narcissism, which he distinguishes from self: “The subject of self-love distances itself from others. It maintains clear borders that distinguish between ‘me’ and ‘not me’. In the case of a narcissistic self-relation, by contrast, others are distorted until the self can recognize itself in them. The narcissistic subject perceives the world as something that, in various ways, resembles itself... The fateful consequence of this is that the other disappears” (44).

Han’s philosophical reflections have some support in medical research. Kim *et al.* (“Nonsuicidal Self-injury”), commenting on nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI), observe: “Just a decade ago, self-injury was regarded as a dramatic gesture by immature individuals who would seek the attention of others or fail to regulate their own emotions. At present, NSSI is not simply an attempt to attract attention or suicide, but a consequence of a variety of individual-specific functions.” And, “[v]ulnerable individuals may initiate NSSI when they have difficulty coping with internal and external environments.” They define NSSI as: “Nonsuicidal self-injury is deliberate and repetitive self-harming behaviours aimed at the destruction of one’s own body tissues or organs. NSSI manifests as a wide variety of behavioural patterns. Typical NSSI behaviours include cutting or carving the skin, burning the skin or deliberately fracturing one’s bones. Sometimes self-injurious behaviours are easily hidden or passed off as accidents, such as lip biting, hitting the edge of furniture or falling.”

²⁴ We need to account for the loss of “wonder,” the resistance to the “pure openness to the extraordinary” (Johnston and Malabou 17) – the disenchantment of the world and ontological wonder or *Thaumazein* (θαυμάζειν), the crisis in the basic disposition or fundamental mood of wonder or *Erstaunen* (Heidegger). We need to account for how alterity loses its extraordinary nature, and why nothing interrupts the self’s relation to itself, its self-identity. Malabou writes: “People who are indifferent to wonder and surprise are in that sense locked in themselves, unable for this reason to perceive the uncanniness of the world” (17). We lack “openness to the unknown or the unfamiliar” and she puzzles over the profound estrangement from wonder: “wonder can only mean the way in which the soul is touched or moved by itself, a kind of emotion of the self for itself. Of course, it involves surprise and openness to the unknown or the unfamiliar, but these feelings are caught in a loop that ties the soul to itself” (22).

²⁵ “Desire is a symbolic space that translates a relation to uniqueness. The object it strives for is always incomparably unique, irreducible to quantitative modes of measurement. This is the order of the incalculable, the incomparable, the incommensurable. This is true of the object of love but also of desire’s sublimated objects, which are social objects - language, religion, family, the law, works of art, and so on” (Stiegler in Hubaut 346).

²⁶ “For Kojève thought is posthistorical because it is post-coital” (Groys, “Antiphilosophy” 158).

²⁷ Han and Stiegler have differing senses of narcissism. The latter discerns the destruction of a "primordial narcissism" through the libidinal exploitation of marketing. It is argued that "primordial narcissism" is necessary for both self-regarding and other-regarding care and without its maintenance psychic, existential, and symbolic misery ensue, with mass murder and suicide extreme, *catastrophic* consequences. That is why, Stiegler argues, desire must be reconnected with the drives, and the drives must be sublimated into circuits of desire, away from the compulsions of consumption (See Stiegler, "Symbolic Misery"; and also Crary 51-52).

²⁸ Crary, in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*

²⁹ Stiegler expresses concern over the loss of the ability to dream as the noetic dream as such is the font of human freedom. Freedom is premised on the dream as the condition of the faculty of knowing. The dream is the source of negentropic bifurcation, resistance and creation beyond the status quo. Stiegler criticises not only the reticular disruptive society of hyper-control, but platform capitalism and Big Data for the loss in the ability to dream.

³⁰ For me, Han's analysis of Agamben's bare life concept is heuristic to explaining the ending of Orwell's *1984*. We know that Winston and Julia are not killed by Big Brother for their sexual resistance and shared mutual love but Big Brother instead surveils them, controls them and returns them as shocked and traumatized subjects to the workforce – to work until their last breath. They remain both undead and unliving, no longer capable of love: they become pure proletarians, devoid of the knowledge of love and desire. At our most dystopic we can say that they become the achievement-subject: "Their life equals that of the undead. They are too alive to die, and too dead to live" (Han, "Capitalism and the Death Drive" 51).

³¹ Stiegler ("Dreams and Nightmares") quite rightly writes of the serpent as being the symbol of the pharmakon in Greece, that is, in his language the symbol of technics and also the symbol of tragedy. For the serpent reflects the ambiguity of the use of drugs, which can harm or heal. The pharmakon is thus at once drug, medicine and poison. The symbol of the serpent, intertwined with the bowl or staff, is a symbol of medicine. Indeed, the Rod of Asclepius, a serpent-entwined rod, associated with Asclepius' attributes as a healer, and the Bowl of Hygieia, who was a Greek Goddess of health and hygiene, are contemporary symbols of pharmacy and healthcare.

³² See also Kokubun's *Ethics of Leisure and Boredom* and Chiba's *Don't Move too Much*. In several respects, Han is writing a very different form of critique from Chiba. While both are concerned with separation, isolation and solitude, Chiba embraces a perverse, fashionable, teenage, angst-ridden, and dark reading of Deleuze, rejecting, in some ways like Andrew Culp's *Dark Deleuze*, a joyful affirmative critique to explore perverted idiosyncratic modes of negativity, non-relation, disconnection, and indifference (vacuoles of non-communication in Deleuze's language). Thus, Chiba's work gives philosophical expression to the sad, marooned, selfish and narcissistic characters one finds in Murakami Haruki's novels. There is no room for politics in his work and the contours of a political life are entirely absent. Indeed, his concepts read very much like Baudrillard's thesis on the simulacra and while interpreted by him as a means to resist

the overconnected society or excessive connectedness, they offer no alternative vision or political compass. Such concepts are precisely at odds with Han Byung-Chul's desperately affirmative philosophical stance.

³³ “Infection, invasion, and infiltration—which are characteristic of the violence of negativity—now give way to infarction” (Han, “Topology of Violence” viii). Infarction means tissue death or necrosis.

³⁴ See Han in *Hyperculture: Culture and Globalisation*

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