

# The Irreducible Self: Liberation in the Aesthetic and the Art of Linging

## I. Conscious States in Space and Time

A violent love or a deep melancholy takes possession of our soul: here we feel a thousand different elements which...permeate one another without any precise outlines... We distort them as soon as we...set them out...in...time or space... A moment ago each of them was borrowing an indefinable color from its surroundings: now we have it colorless, and ready to accept a name. The feeling itself is a being which lives and develops... it lives because the duration in which it develops is feduthe 63333333se

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*precise outlines*. Just as conscious states are averse to the fixed and dispassionate nature of language, real duration—the duration lived by consciousness—is antithetical to the sequentiality of standardized time. Just as we err to regard conscious states as externalized rather than as pure quality, so too are we in error when we divide duration into distinct moments. We wrest pure duration, which is heterogeneous, into the uniform linearity of homogeneous duration, or clock time. As Bergson writes, “by spreading out time in space, we have caused the feeling to lose its life and its colour. Hence we axe now”.<sup>2</sup> The verb *axe*

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qualitative fulfillment we seek can be secured by sheer quantity, so we accelerate in order to maximize experience within the confines of our lifetime, but acceleration erodes the very possibility of meaningful conclusion. This rapid and reductive mode of being, this *hyperkinesia of everyday life*, reinforces what Han terms *inauthentic existence*, but what could easily be called the Bergsonian surface self.

In identifying the inclination to halve the duration of an impression, Bergson both anticipates and cautions against the acceleration of time. He arrests our greedy impulse for plenitude with the declaration that a feeling is qualitatively changed, made *poorer*, when we carve away at its duration. Bergson directs us below the shadow life: below lifeless symbols and homogenous duration, below quantified multiplicity and the self of well-defined states. When we revive the depths, we can dwell and reflect. In so doing, we subvert the social self and bulwark against acceleration.

Han continues in this tradition; he rejects our fixation on immediate enjoyment and locates a redemptive possibility in duration. We see this in his treatment of beauty: beauty is not fleeting brilliance, but temporally thick, can only be appreciated in duration and with contemplation. If devoid of duration, it becomes mere momentary allure. To flit along the surface denies the self the time and space required to appreciate the beautiful and the profound.

Thus the experiencing self must reconstitute a time that resists acceleration. The capacity to direct time requires a *constancy of the self*, built upon a sense of *authentic historicity*, according to Han, wherein that which has passed does not disappear, but constitutes the self's understanding of its own present. Here, we rediscover and re-inhabit duration. When we dwell in duration, which is continuous, our experience also finds continuity. It coheres rather than fragmenting with atomization. Duration becomes the place for forming *holds* within the slipstream of time, *holds* that enable the self to *linger*, to contemplate, to connect. According to Han, "only through intense

relationships do things become real in the first place".<sup>6</sup> These relationships—whether between two individuals, or between the interior self and the exterior event, between being and space—form the connective tissue to vivify a life. Rather than seek to flood our lives with a succession of present points, we ought to orient ourselves toward fully inhabiting the path between.

This *path between*, which Han also calls the *meantime*, creates in the atomized individual a feeling of restlessness and anxiety. Humans are no longer comfortable in the transition; we seek the instantaneous and the simultaneous. This simultaneity destroys the distance between *here* and *there*. We no longer progress *toward a there*, we have only an ever-optimized and total *here*. Bergson, too, related simultaneity to the external present, but Han introduces modern technology into the temporal crisis. His account seems in keeping with Bergson, though, as he sets out the internet as a place for *surfing* and *browsing*, forms of undirected movement that have no path. The internet, instantaneous and simultaneous, collapses time and space. It lacks continuity, transition, or history and therefore lacks development. The user leaps from one page to the next, clicking link after link, whizzing from one present Now to another.

The internet offers seemingly boundless information, but information is not knowledge. When Han distinguishes information, *empty of time*, from knowledge, I hear an echo of Bergson. Information is but the surface facsimile of knowledge, commoditized into the commonplace of public domain. We conceive of information on the internet as that which is stored, that which can be accessed, so, we've spatialized it. It has become *thing*, not *process*. Knowledge, however, recalls the orchestra's symphony: it is greater than mere data. Knowledge, like beauty, resists reduction to constitutive elements.

I conceive of Han's acceleration as a metaphoric skimming upon water's surface, where technology provides an evolving selection of boats capable of reaching increasing speeds. We

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<sup>6</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time*, 47

mistake information for knowledge, ephemeral allure for beauty, immediate enjoyment for joy, quantity of experience for quality, so we skim ever-faster to try to find fulfillment. We hardly appreciate the surface of the water, to say nothing of our perception of all that lies below.

#### IV. Art as Redemption

But the greater number of emotions are instinct with a thousand sensations, feelings or ideas which pervade them: each one is then a state unique of its kind and indefinable, and it seems that we should have to re-live the life of the subject who experiences it if we wished to grasp it in its original complexity. Yet the artist aims at giving us a share in this emotion, so rich, so personal, so novel, and at enabling us to experience what he cannot make us understand.<sup>7</sup>

If it seems we are to be abandoned, left to our own little egos, awash in a fraught but necessary

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countenance the terror of self-discovery then disclose fundamental self in all its vulnerability. It is this radical departure from surface selfhood to which we've so acclimated that displaces the audience, that seizes us, effects us. Here, Bergson writes, our soul might be *lulled into self-forgetfulness*<sup>9</sup> as though an artist might break the barrier of distinct selves. In art, *being* is stared down, grappled with. We resist time itself. Art provides an expansive heterogeneous alternative to the successive point-like present.

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