

Orwell's penultimate prophecies in *Coming Up For Air* (1939). A comparison with Byung-Chul Han's works

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«Time is out of joint.
Oh, curséd spite, that ever I was born
To set it right.»
Hamlet, William Shakesperare

Abstract: The striking similarities between the novel *Coming Up For Air* (1939) and Byung-Chul Han's books on present-day technological society is the object of this paper. Both, the English writer-journalist and the German philosopher, diagnosed and described the same illnesses. The paper focuses mainly on the problem of *Entzeitlichung*, the disappearance of time, and if and how it is possible to regain a contemplative look that prevents time from dissolving.

Keywords: George Orwell, *Coming Up For Air* Byung-Chul Han, Technological Society, Contemplation

Resumen: Las sorprendentes similitudes entre la novela *Coming Up For Air* (1939), de George Orwell y los libros de Byung-Chul Han sobre la actual sociedad tecnológica, son el objeto de este artículo. Tanto el escritor y periodista inglés como el filósofo alemán describen y diagnostican las mismas enfermedades. El artículo se centra principalmente en el problema de la *Entzeitlichung*, la disolución del tiempo, y sobre cómo y si es posible recuperar una mirada contemplativa que evite esta disolución.

Palabras clave: George Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, Byung-Chul Han, sociedad tecnológica, contemplación.

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Byung-Chul Han is a Korean professor who lives and teaches in Germany, where he took his degree in Philosophy and Theology and wrote his Phd. on Heidegger. Han writes brilliant books in German, never shying away from the possibilities of the language: as his admired Heidegger did, Han takes advantage of the flexibility of the German tongue and creates new words whenever he thinks it will help the expression of his ideas. And that is probably the first clash between these two writers to be discussed here: while Han uses a dense, sometimes technical language, Orwell always favored the plainest English he could find, especially in such a novel as *Coming Up for Air*, where he tries to portray the life and worries of a common man in the thirties. It is the contrast between these two styles that will hopefully make this paper helpful to the reader: Orwell can provide vivid, specific examples

to Han's sometimes abstract and not-so-easy-to-grasp doctrines; Han's doctrines give present day validity and philosophical relevance to an old book that was written in a digestible style, a book whose importance has been eclipsed by *Animal Farm* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but that also had the aim of analyzing the times and society it was written in. In fact, Byung-Chul Han's works make *Coming Up For Air* much more relevant in terms of understanding present-day society than the more famed classic novels for which Orwell is largely known.

Byung-Chul Han has been concerned with figuring out how the inception of the digital society, and the predominance of an individualistic, neoliberal worldview is changing western culture. In his *Psychopolitics*, Han used Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to explain that the Orwellian vision of a society of control had been overcome by reality: today, there is no need for a menacing *Big Brother* to make people renounce their private lives and make themselves useful and devoted to the needs of the collectivity: they do so voluntarily by the seduction of an economic system that beguiles them into constant communication, constant consumption of goods and services, and constant productivity. And all this is accomplished without the need of a permanent constrain and supervision of individual freedom, as Orwell saw and foresaw; quite the opposite, it is freely done under the subjective (albeit incorrect) belief that freedom consists precisely in this constant communication, consumption and productivity.

The subjective feeling of being free is actually enhanced by this constant communication with others and the individual pursuit of success and productivity. A *Big Brother* therefore is unnecessary, since everyone is trying to sell himself to others, and thanks to communication technology, everyone leaves a trail of data that makes control not only possible, but extremely easy. Data can be used, and are used, to keep seducing people into further communication, productivity and consumption. The system is more efficient than *Big Brother's*, and instead of resorting to lies and torture, it uses excess of information and emotional marketing¹.

Han's analysis may constitute a turning point in the way Orwell's works have been read. Thanks to Byung-Chul Han's books –as long as they succeed in gaining influence²– we may be facing a new period in which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becomes gradually less relevant, less appealing. And here's where *Coming Up for Air* comes into play. Even if *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* should lose their readability, we have *Coming Up for Air* to act as a warning for what society can do to the individual, as those two novels did during the second half of the last century. We have a literary milestone, that combined with Han's analysis, could become Orwell's novel for the twenty-first century³. The present paper (the first in a series of three) aims at making this tenet plausible.

¹ See "Der Freundlicher Big Brother", "The nice Big Brother", in Han (2014), p. 53-57. Since not all Han's works have been translated into English, we've decided to quote the german editions of his books, and offer, when it's the case, our own translation.

² A quick peep in Internet reveals that Byung-Chul Han has been translated to, besides English, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Turkish, Romanian and Catalan.

³ Retrospectively, at the sight of Byung-Chul Han's *Psychopolitics* and other titles, the absence of *Coming Up for Air*, in a book like Cushman, Rodden (2003): *George Orwell. Into the Twenty-First Century*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder-London, is now made more conspicuous. Obviously, 2003 was too early a year for the new model to have developed.

1. THE IMMUNOLOGICAL MODEL *VERSUS* THE NEUROLOGICAL MODEL

In *The Burnout Society*, Han introduces the idea that the past century could be described as the last of an immunological age. This means that societies were kept together by pointing at external common enemies; that medicine developed itself under the paradigm of invasion of germs; that social order was kept by means of prisons, iron curtains, barbed-wire, walls, asylums and the like. Existentialism, one of the most important philosophical schools of the twentieth century, was about drawing a line between the self and others, in hopes of reaching an *authentic existence*. One could add too, that philosophy of language, the other major school of the twentieth century, was also about drawing frontiers between the different uses of language, especially between science and superstition.

Orwell was, indisputably, a major immunological writer. As Michael Carter pointed out in 1985⁴, all Orwell's fictional works can be perfectly ascribed to the existentialist movement, although, curiously enough, Orwell himself was never interested in such a trend⁵. And Existentialism, as said previously, was highly immunological. Orwell's fictional main characters appear, at the beginning of the novels, trapped *in medias res*, and discover themselves striving for an identity and a kind of existence they can call their own. This authentic existence –the central topic of the existentialists– is invariably denied and made impossible by the influence of the others, of the society. This is especially clear in the case of Winston Smith, the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, living under the super-dictatorship of the *Big Brother*. Smith, though, has still preserved a blank space in his soul where the influence of society has not yet arrived. The preservation and enhancement of this space, against the violence of social environment, is the issue of the novel.

And it is this issue that is central again in *Coming Up for Air*, written almost ten years earlier. Leaving aside the setting of the story, the main difference between the two novels is the starting point of the main characters. While Winston Smith knows that not all of his soul has been occupied by the others, George Bowling, discovers one day that there is nothing left of his authentic self. It was drained out long time ago:

«There is something that's gone out of us in these twenty years since the war. It's a kind of vital juice that we've squirted away until there's nothing left».⁶

⁴Carter (1985), *George Orwell and the Problem of Authentic Existence*, Barnes and Noble, New Jersey.

⁵See Orwell (1948), *Letter to Frederick Warburg*: «I think Sartre is a bag of wind and I am going to give him a good boot [in his next review of Sartre's *Antisemitism*]». In Orwell (1945), *Review of Huis Clos...*, Orwell writes about this play: «The question is: what the devil is this all about?». It's quite clear that Orwell didn't understand Sartrean philosophy nor didn't he have a deep interest in it; a fact that makes Carter's book even more interesting.

⁶Orwell (1939), *Coming Up for Air*. From professor Davison's edition, *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, v.7, London, 1986, Secker and Warburg, p.177.

George Bowling is a middle-aged man, who was born in a village—a certain Lower Binfield, at the end of the nineteenth century—. A son to a seed tradesman, he grew happily in the free environment and the simplicity of the English countryside. When First World War broke out, he was already a young man and joined the army, and after the war, he married and settled down. He became an insurance salesman, and later on, an insurance inspector. He had two children and he rented a house at the recently developed suburbs. And, one day, the dullness and irrelevance of his own life is made crystal-clear to him by a simple look in the mirror. From that day on, Bowling tries to recover the intensity of feeling and joy, which was the predominant sentiment of his life prior to the war. And he does it by escaping to his native village, a trip that has to be done without the knowledge of wife and family, who would never understand or approve of it. The trip is useless: Lower Binfield has become a suburb, and there is nothing left of the atmosphere, the scenery and the people of his childhood.

The story, then, of *Coming Up for Air*, is the tale of how and if it is actually possible to recover the above mentioned kind of *vital juice*. *The Burnout Society*, together with the other Byung-Chul Han's books, is also about this loss and the possibility of reversing the situation.

All this makes *Coming Up for Air* even more tragic than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, because everything is lost from the beginning. The humoristic tone, the tragicomic way in which the story develops, makes it harder to see how desperate the book is. In *Coming Up for Air*, it is as if the individual Self had been replaced by a collective Self from the beginning. In a sense, the novel comes *after Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or at least, it should be read after it. Besides, as a novel, for this particular starting point, is somewhat scarier. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we are kept in our hopes until the end; here, we feel hopeless, after a few pages, as soon as we understand the main character's predicament and the futility of his purpose.

According to Han—who follows in this Heidegger and the existentialists—the self is actually established by the denial and resistance of what comes from outside. As long as one feels the *negativity* of what's outside him, one manages to be himself. *Negativity*, for Han, doesn't necessarily have a negative meaning. The excess of *negativity* (like the external pressure on Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s society) can kill the self: that's the central issue of the whole twentieth century. But the absence of *negativity* makes the Self impossible: that's the central issue of the twenty-first century, according to Byung-Chul Han. For *negativity* can, as well, be related to positive things, like the sense of wonder a kid experiences in discovering the natural environment where he lives (like George Bowling did as a child). *Negativity* is the discovery of what's different from you, of what's *other*. More commonly, it is the resistance of the things outside us—the fact that we cannot manipulate them, make them serve our purposes, and sometimes it is the fact that we can't actually reach them: like the young George Bowling, who one day discovered a hidden pond which was home to some huge fish, which he wasn't able to catch, owing to a lack of the right tools—. According to Han, present day society is designed in a way that makes these kind of experiences—which used to be natural and *negative*- especially difficult—. Everything is now at reach; there's always a way to get

what you need. Or at least, we are lead to believe so. According to Han, external resistance of *negativity* makes experience possible: the excess of *positivity*, on the contrary, makes everything a simple continuation of the self, a self which ends up being a void extension of the social environment (for Han, this is especially true in the digital society of the present day. Internet is pure *positivity*):

«Experience, as the irruption of the other, by virtue of its negativity, interrupts the imaginary narcissism. Positivity, which is inherent to digital reality, reduces the possibility of such experience. Positivity continues the same».⁷

According to Orwell, in *Coming Up for Air*, the excess of *positivity* (with no internet involved!), in the particular sense of social environment as something that doesn't need to be feared or resisted, began by the time George Bowling came back from the war.

«The post-war success dope had caught me, more or less. You remember the line of talk. Pep, punch, grit, sand. Get on or get out. There's plenty of room at the top. You can't keep a good man down. And the ads in the magazines about the chap that the boss clapped on the shoulder, and the keen-jawed executive who's pulling down the big dough and attributes his success to so and so's correspondence course. It's funny how we swallowed it, even blokes like me to whom it hadn't the smallest application.»⁸

For Han, in the burn out society, this line of talk, that Orwell restricted to the roaring twenties, has resurrected and become the official tune of the present-day society:

«The society of the 21st century is no longer a society of discipline, but a society of performance [...]. The projects, the enterprises and motivation take the place of prohibition, mandate and law [...] there is not a gap between duty and ability, but a continuity».⁹

The change from an immunological model to a neurological one consists in the fact that the individual has ceased to see his social environment as a potential enemy from whom he must protect himself, in order to preserve his freedom. Now, in the neurological model, the individual has come to believe that being free consists in developing all his potentialities in the social field: the more he com-

⁷Han (2013): p.35: «Aufgrund ihrer Negativität unterbricht die Erfahrung als Einbruch des *Anderen* die imaginäre Selbstbespiegelung, Die Positivität, die dem Digitalen innewohnen, reduziert die Möglichkeit einer solchen Erfahrung. Sie setzt das Gleiche fort».

⁸Orwell (1939), p.136

⁹Han (2010), p.19-21: «Die Gesellschaft des 21. Jahrhunderts ist nicht mehr die Disziplinargesellschaft, sondern eine Leistungsgesellschaft [...] An die Stelle von Verbot, Gebot oder Gesetz treten Projekt, Initiative und Motivation...besteht zwischen dem Sollen und dem Können kein Bruch, sondern eine Kontinuität».

municates, expands and performs, the freer he becomes. The perspective would appall any existentialist: the change consists in swallowing all social lies; in renouncing, from the beginning, the simple possibility of an authentic existence.

3. THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE “IN-BETWEEN” TIME¹⁰

The pressure towards work and productivity, according to Han, has moved, in the turning of the century, from an external *locus* to an internal one. The disciplinary model is abandoned in favor of a norm that induces the individual to personal initiative, that obligates him to become himself¹¹. In the burn out society, it is not the state or the boss, but any given individual, who demands himself full performance. Little by little, life becomes a meaningless, eternal frenzy. Time slips away from everyone's hands. According to George Bowling, no one finds time to do the things he cares about:

«Why? Because that's how things happen. Because in this life we lead -I don't mean human life in general, I mean life in this particular age and this particular country -we don't do the things we want to do. It isn't because we're always working. Even a farm hand or a Jew tailor isn't always working. It's because there's some devil in us that drives us to and fro on everlasting idiocies. There's time for everything except the things worth doing. Think of something you really care about. Then add hour to hour and calculate the fraction of your life that you've actually spent doing it. And then calculate the time you've spent on things like shaving, riding to and fro on buses, waiting in railway junctions, swapping dirty stories and reading the newspapers».¹²

To Orwell, it is not simply work that prevents us from finding the time for doing what we really enjoy: it's some devil in us that forces us to stay connected with the social environment -from taking the train, to swapping dirty stories, to reading the newspapers: all of which we do today for longer hours and more efficiently through cars, planes and the Internet. One can say the burn out society started, at least in England, at some point during the twenties and thirties of the last century. And Orwell was there to establish a diagnosis.

Orwell is suggesting, moreover, that everything in life has become a *species of job*. It is true that we are not constantly working, says Orwell, but we find it very difficult to do something that is indisputably, absolutely different from work, adds

¹⁰Han (2010), p. 43: «Wir leben heute in einer Welt, die sehr arm ist an Unterbrechungen, arm an Zwischen und Zwischen-Zeiten», «Today, we live in a world that is poor in Interruptions, poor in in-between and Between-times».

¹¹The stress on personal initiative (and failure) is the origin of depression. Cf. HAN (2010), p. 22: «Der Depressive ist nicht voll auf der Höhe, er ist erschöpft von der Anstrengung, er selbst werden zu müssen», «The depressed is not up to the task, he is exhausted from the obligation to become himself.»

¹²Orwell (1939), *Op. Cit.*, p.82

Byung-Chul Han. Everything that we do becomes a form of production, and it becomes harder and harder to find an activity that is utterly unproductive. In Byung-Chul Han's words, it seems impossible to find:

«a form of life that is no longer a form of production, but something completely unproductive».¹³

This utterly unproductive activity, so difficult to preserve, is, in *Coming Up for Air*, fishing. Bowling says that

«[...] when I look back through my life I can't honestly say that anything I've ever done has given me quite such a kick as fishing. Everything else has been a bit of a flop in comparison, even women. I don't set up to be one of those men that don't care about women. I've spent plenty of time chasing them, and I would even now if I had the chance. Still, if you gave me the choice of having any woman you care to name, but I mean any woman, or catching a ten-pound carp, the carp would win every time. And the other confession is that after I was sixteen I never fished again.»¹⁴

Fishing is, in fact, the driving force of the narrative in *Coming Up For Air*. The memory of the ponds where Bowling used to spend his time as a child, together with the thought of the fish that he couldn't catch, and the general feeling of anticipation and peace in which the activity developed, is what sets Bowling into visiting his old village. In the novel, he had only tried once to go fishing before, but was scorned by his wife and children, who couldn't understand how a serious grown man could even think of wasting time on such a pointless enterprise. That's the reason why Bowling has to hide his excursion to Lower Binfield from his family. Fishing is, for Bowling, the act of coming up for air, like those turtles who breathe out of the surface to sink again afterwards; fishing is the in-between time no one can find these days.

4. ACTIVITY AS PASSIVITY

The fact that the in-between times disappear makes it more difficult to establish a difference between working and not working. Han adds to the idea the fact that work has been *ludified*¹⁵ in order to increase productivity. Work, nowadays, demands from the individual a very different sort of presence in the social envi-

¹³ Han (2014), p.72: «[...] von einer *Lebensform*, die keine *Produktionsform* mehr ist, ja von *etwas ganz Unproduktivem*».

¹⁴ Orwell (1939), p.82

¹⁵ Han (2014), p.69: «Um mehr Produktivität zu generieren, eignet sich der Kapitalismus der Emotion auch das Spiel an, das eigentlich das *Andere der Arbeit* wäre. Er gamifiziert die Lebens- und Arbeitswelt: «In order to generate more productivity, Capitalism takes emotion and game, that should be, properly speaking, the opposite of work. It ludifies work and life».

ronment from the one that was needed in the discipline times. Back then, one could sink his identity in the social mass and lose himself. That was some kind of curse (it was called *alienation*), but it was also possible to recover oneself in the non-work time. Productivity implied the disappearance of the self, but it was possible to recover it. Today, one is kept active, and is forced to drive his attention towards chasing opportunities: life becomes a constant tension, it becomes a game in which one is permanently in search of ways of improving and selling himself¹⁶. Orwell put it this way:

«I was down among the realities of modern life. And what are the realities of modern life? Well, the chief one is an everlasting, frantic struggle to sell things. With most people it takes the form of selling themselves –that’s to say, getting the job and keeping it».¹⁷

Competition, the fear of being professionally left behind, or set aside, makes life a hunting game in which taking a pause is dangerous. One cannot afford the luxury of disappearing in work; one has to try to be noticed all the time. One has to sell himself constantly: not only is working necessary, but also publicly showing the work one is doing. In the process, one loses the self by trying to sell it: the Self dies of too much exposure. And what is worse: due to the hunter mentality, one is deprived of a free, unselfish view over things. Precisely when that kind of attention is impossible, one also loses the ability of not-responding to *stimulae*¹⁸. A hyper-active, multitasking person is someone who’s at great trouble to say no, to step back, to really look at things:

«Why don’t people, instead of the idiocies they do spend their time in, just walk round looking at things?»¹⁹

...asks himself George Bowling at some point in the novel. The result of the whole process is a subjective feeling of working a lot, and at the same time, of

¹⁶Han (2010), p.34: «Arendts Beschreibungen des modernen *animal laborans* entsprechen nicht den Beobachtungen, die wir in der heutigen Leistungsgesellschaft machen können. Das spätmoderne *animal laborans* gibt seine Individualität oder sein Ego überhaupt nicht preis, um arbeitend im anonymen Lebensprozess der Gattung aufzugehen». «Arendt’s descriptions of the modern *animal laborans* don’t match what we can observe in today’s society of performance. The late modern *animal laborans* doesn’t give up his individuality or his Ego to dissolve himself in the process of the species.» Today’s work consists in promoting himself as much as anyone can.

¹⁷Orwell (1939), p.132

¹⁸Cf. Han (2010), p.42: «dass die hyperaktive Verschärfung der Aktivität diese in eine Hyperpassivität umschlagen lässt, in der man widerstandlos jedem Impuls und Reiz folgt... Es ist eine Illusion zu glauben, je aktiver man werde, desto freier sei man», « [the dialectics of of activity imply that] the sharpening of the hyperactivity falls into a hyper passivity, in which one is left without the ability to resist every impulse and stimulus [...] it’s an illusion to believe that the more active one becomes, the freer one is», and Han (2013), p.59: «Die Informationsjäger sind ungeduldig und ohne Scheu. Sie lauern, statt zu ‘warten’. Sie greifen zu, statt die Dinge reifen zu lassen... Die totale Gegenwart ist ihre Zeitlichkeit», «The information-hunters are impatient and without shyness. They are on the lookout, instead of waiting. They grab instead of letting things ripen [...] Their experience of time is a total present.»

¹⁹Orwell (1939),p.173

doing less things. Because real action implies patience, distance, pause. Real action implies real attention, and full attention is the opposite of an instant response to a *stimulus*. Patience, distance and pause are the key elements of, for example, fishing, or any other subjectively meaningful action. These actions are also the opposite of buying things on impulse.

In such a mental state, if one finally finds a moment to pause and reflect, he may end up saying:

«When I look back I realize that my active life, if I ever had one, ended when I was sixteen».²⁰

It is important to notice that, by the time George Bowling makes that claim, a claim that summarizes the whole novel, and perhaps, many of our lives, he has fought in a war, been wounded, returned to the army, won a war, looked for a job, found one, gotten married (an event he later describes as “*something that happens to us*”²¹), rented a house and had two children. Sixteen was the age at which he went fishing for the last time, paradoxically enough, and that was the last thing he ever did. From then on, “They” got him.

Fishing, for Bowling, was the *negativity* that helped him become an individual, when he was a kid; as he grew old, society provided him with the *positivity* that set him doing things all the time. By the time he reached forty, and partly because he wasn’t really a competitive person, Bowling entered a mood that went beyond the simple mid-life crisis. The depressive mood he was in came from having been deprived of himself, of having lost himself through activity. His sinking into depression is also ours.

5. THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TIME

Han refers to the present-day experience of time with the word “*discrony*”, an experience “opposed to” to time (see above). He also uses “*de-temporalization*”:

«The de-temporalization makes any narrative tension disappear. The narrated time collapses into a mere chronology of events»²².

Byung-Chul Han is more concerned in describing the disappearance of time in the present world than Orwell was in *Coming Up for Air*, where we will find better descriptions of how time *felt* back then. According to Han, the experience of present-day de-temporalization is reinforced by the intensive use of Internet, where the information seems to belong to a *time of the not-dead*²³. Digitalization makes time

²⁰Orwell (1939),p.135

²¹Orwell (1939),p.140

²²Han(2009), p.32: «Die Entzeitlichung bringt jede narrative Spannung zum Verschwinden. Die erzählte Zeit zerfällt zu einer blossen Chronologie der Ereignisse».

²³Han (2013), p. 46: «Leben wir heute nicht in einer Zeit *Des Untoten*, in der nicht nur das *Geborenein*, sondern

freeze, not letting things become old, or, still worse, not letting things be born or die²⁴. There is actually no such thing as time in the digital reality, and it becomes completely unsuitable for human existence. Internet is an ever-growing pile of endless bits of information with no landmarks. It is more of an ocean than of a continent, an endless sea where it is impossible to draw lines²⁵. With no time-marks, time cannot gravitate²⁶, and it spreads in all directions at the same time. Time is no more a line nor a circle that people could use as a riverbed for channeling their existence. Time has disappeared, regardless of the time-lines in our accounts. The result is that our lives become a chronology with no events.

To Han, what is lacking in our present perception of time is purpose, and subsequently, narration. In modernity, the cultural elites thought the world to be marching to some higher ground: through progress or through revolution, there was a definite sense of direction. There was a narrative, a starting and a final point. This sense of direction kept time bound, and it was made to follow a certain pace. For Han, speed in which time marches doesn't make any difference (quite the opposite case of H. Rosa, a German philosopher with whom Han argues²⁷); it is the lack of purpose, typical of post-modern times, and not the acceleration of the events, that provides the feeling of the disappearance of time.

But besides narration and purpose, there is another way by which time feels real. It is the conception of time as a cycle. Some of Han's writings seem to suggest that, if a suitable experience of time has to be met, the linear experience of time, that has disappeared, can only be substituted by a cyclic one²⁸. Han is indirectly saying that the mere accumulation of life events which, even if they are different all the time, only produces *sameness*. The events of one's own life become

auch das *Sterben* unmöglich geworden ist?», «Aren't we living in a time of the *not-dead*, in which not only the *being born* but also the *dying* have become impossible?»

²⁴Han (2009), p.9: «Es ist schwer, zu sterben in einer Welt, in der Schluss und Abschluss einem end- und richtungslosen Fortlauf, einem permanenten Unfertigkeitsein und Neubeginn gewichen sind, in einer Welt also, in der das Leben sich nicht zu einem Gebilde, zu einer Ganzheit abschliesst. So reißt der Lebenslauf zur Unzeit ab», «It's difficult to die in a world in which ending and conclusion have been replaced by an endless, aimless run, a permanent non-conclusion, an ever-new beginning, in a world, then, in which life does not conclude as a structure, as a unit. Thus, one's vital path is untimely interrupted.»

²⁵Han (2013), p. 68: «Das digitale Medium gleicht dagegen jenem 'Meer', in das sich 'keine festen Linien eingraben' lassen», «The digital medium resembles, on the contrary, that 'Sea' where 'no fixed lines' could be engraved».

²⁶Han (2009), p. 68: «Sein und Zeit' liegt die zeitbedingte Einsicht zugrunde, dass der Verlust einer geschichtlichen Bedeutsamkeit die Zeit zu einer sich beschleunigenden Abfolge für isolierte Ereignisse zerfallen lässt, dass die Zeit aufgrund einer fehlenden Gravitation oder Verankerung im Sinn halt- und ziellos fortstürzt», «'Being in Time' expostulates a conception determined by his time, in which the loss of historical meaning makes time collapse into an ever-accelerated series of events isolated from one another; it makes time, due to the lack of gravitation or anchorage in meaning, fall without possibility of stopping or reaching a goal».

²⁷Han himself quotes Rosa, H.: *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2005. In Han (2009), p. 12

²⁸Han (2009), p. 98: cf. Han's quotation of Heideggers' *Holzwege*: «Auf seinem Pfad begegnen sich der Wintersturm und der Ernttag, treffen sich das regsam Erregende des Frühjars und das gelassene Sterben des Herbstes, erblicken einander das Spiel der Jugend und die Weisheit des Alters. Doch in einem einzigen Einklang, dessen Echo der Feldweg schweigsam mit sich *hin und her trägt*, ist alles *verbeitet*», «In his path, the winter storm touches the harvest day, the quick and lively of the Spring meets the peaceful death of Autumn, the playfulness of the youth looks in the eye of the wisdom of old age. But everything is *calmed* by a common clamor, whose echo the path *carries* in silence *back and forth*»

meaningless information. It's the piling up that produces repetition: all the events are the same, are at the same level, even if they're different from one another. The cycle, quite the opposite case, provides not repetition, but duration. There are special events that come back again and again, and there are times of preparation for these events. Time lasts, because there are frames and time-marks that repeat themselves. Circularity, to put it the way Orwell did, produces eternity. When George Bowling reflects on how people experienced time when he was a child, he reaches the conclusion that, back then, people thought that the way they lived was good and wasn't meant to change:

«The old English order of life couldn't change. For ever and ever decent God-fearing women would cook Yorkshire pudding and apple dumplings on enormous coal ranges, wear woolen underwear-clothes and sleep on feathers, make plum jam in July and pickles in October, and read Hilda's Home Companion in the afternoons, with the flies buzzing round, in a sort of cosy little underworld of stewed tea, bad legs and happy endings. I don't say that either Father and Mother was quite the same to the end. They were a little bit shaken, and sometimes a little dispirited. But at least they never lived to know that everything they'd believed in was just so much junk. They lived at the end of an epoch, when everything was dissolving into a sort of ghastly flux, and they didn't know it. They thought it was eternity. You couldn't blame them. That was what it felt like.»²⁹

Orwell describes the time “*before the war*” as a time of “*not being in a hurry and not being frightened*”³⁰. It was a time when “*civilisation seem(ed) to stand on its four legs like an elephant*”, a time when people didn't “*feel the ground they stood on shifting under their feet*”³¹. This could be a perfect description, though less philosophical than Han's, of how time is experienced today: there is a strong sense of instability. Time doesn't last anymore, there is no duration. Time has become a “*sort of ghastly flux*”, something with no pace or order, with no land- or time-marks. Being frightened and in a hurry are the main traits of the society of performance: we need to be alert all the time no to miss opportunities (it doesn't matter if we are selling or buying), and to be quick when they come; we have to be permanently *online* to make sure we can still compete, we have to be ready to change and adapt when the new trend comes. Nothing is stable; there is nothing to hold on to.

George Bowling states that back then, people actually worked harder. Life was harsh, people died younger: there was no public system to protect anyone from poverty or illness; and despite that, people felt more secure. There was “*a feeling of continuity*”³². Orwell, in describing his childhood through Bowling's, really takes the trouble of not idealizing the period. There was hardship, public morals were too strict and it was easy to fall from social grace. For example, a shopkeeper

²⁹Orwell (1939), p.112

³⁰Orwell (1939), p.107

³¹Orwell (1939), p.111

³²Orwell (1939), p.110

could go bankrupt and die of starvation for not being allowed to show his poverty, nor ask for help; for a girl, to have child outside marriage, meant instant and perpetual social disgrace³³. But anyhow, the times were better, even if there was no bathroom at home and one had to break the ice in his morning basin. Moreover, people lived a “*dull, sluggish, vegetal kind of life*”³⁴, with too much candor and ignorance of what was happening outside their little world. If it was a better world than ours was only because the day-to-day perception of time was different: it had not become a “*ghastly flux*”. *Discrony* had not yet arrived.

6. THE RIGHT PACE OF TIME *COMING UP FOR AIR* AND *DUFT DE ZEIT* [*SCENT OF TIME*]

Orwell uses a strong simile to convey the general sentiment of stability and that particular sense of time that was lost thereafter:

«So far as meals and so forth went, ours was one of those houses where everything goes like clockwork. Or no, not like a clockwork, which suggests something mechanical. It was more like some kind of natural process. You knew that breakfast would be on the table tomorrow morning much in the same way as you knew the sun would rise.»³⁵

It's very interesting how Orwell -or rather George Bowling- corrects himself in making the comparison: time (or the events) didn't go like clockwork, but instead, like the rising of the sun. It was a natural process; it was as if the events followed the right pace. It would be difficult to find a better expression to the philosophical idea that there is a difference between time in real things and the additive, void and numerical notion of time in clocks (and how often we are confused about the two meanings): this second type is an abstraction that doesn't take place. It's merely theoretical. It is something that has been extracted from reality and set in an independent field, in another world, separate from where events happen. Or better said: it's been set nowhere. This lack of space or place for time, and a procedure to make it take place again is something Han tries to express in a meditation upon an incense clock: A Chinese invention, substantially different from the other primitive, better-known kinds, such as sand- and water clocks:

«incense as medium of time-measuring differs in many ways from water or sand. Time, that has a scent, doesn't leak or run. And nothing is emptied. The scent of incense, on the contrary, fills the space. In giving space to time, space grants time the appearance of duration».³⁶

³³Orwell (1939), *ibid.*

³⁴Orwell (1939), p.176

³⁵Orwell (1939), p.50

³⁶Han (2009), p.61: «Der Weihrauch als Medium der Zeitmessung unterscheidet sich in vieler Hinsicht vom Wasser oder vom Sand. Die Zeit, die duftet, verfließt oder verrinnt nicht. Und nichts entleert sich. Der Duft

In Orwell, what made time real was its connection with relevant events that repeated themselves, preferably those attached to necessity, that will happen every day, like eating. These events gave 'space' to time, they made time take place. They were landmarks for time and kept time going at its right pace. In Han's example, the procedure by which time is made real is somewhat different. The more the incense burns, the more filled the room is with its scent. Sense of time and sense of place grow together; '*verräumlichen*', the colonization of space by time, has become real. For Han, the scent of incense, because of its peculiar sensorial quality, stops time from running away, which is unavoidable with sand or water, to the effect that time stays, as a scent stays, and duration is achieved.

The feeling of duration is also not easy to express directly, or at least, it could be difficult for anyone less skilled than Orwell, who always chose the right words. In *Coming Up For Air*, when he reflects on how it felt to be a child in the time before the arrival of the performance society, he says there was the power of longing for things that was afterwards lost by age, and also there was...

«the feeling that time stretches out and out in front of you and that whatever you're doing you could go on forever».³⁷

The stretching out of time, or duration, is by no means the same as losing track of time. To lose track of time is compatible with duration, but they are actually different. There are activities, like gambling or like surfing the Net, in which one often loses track of time. But that's because time runs faster. In a way, such activities are a hopeless defense from the passing of time, a useless try at filling something that is void. In a sense, they are only *pastimes*, things devised to make time passing unfelt. Quite the opposite case, in duration experiences, such as fishing for little George Bowling, time actually felt, subjectively, to go slower. It stretched out. Fishing was a way of earning time, of making time stay in the field of events, where it belonged before it was extracted from them and kidnapped by the clock.

Experiences of duration are also related to those activities in which one communicates with matter, those in which someone skillfully makes something for oneself:

«I used to watch Mother rolling pastry. There's always a fascination in watching anybody do a job which he really understands. Watch a woman –a woman who really knows how to cook, I mean -rolling dough. She's got a peculiar, solemn, indrawn air, a satisfied kind of air, like a priestess celebrating a sacred rite. And in her own mind, of course, that's exactly what she is. Mother had thick, pink, strong forearms which were generally mottled with flour. When she was cooking, all her movements were wonderfully precise and firm».³⁸

des Weihrauchs füllt vielmehr den Raum. Ja er verräumlicht die Zeit, gibt dieser dadurch den Schein einer Dauer».

³⁷Orwell (1939), p.75

³⁸ Orwell (1939), p.49

Rites, in general, are called upon to reflect eternity, especially religious rites. The rite we're presented with in this passage of *Coming Up For Air* has more to do with making time stay in the field of events. Like Han says in commenting on certain passages of Proust, the scent of time is a scent of immanence³⁹. It couldn't be any other way. It's easy to see that when Orwell talks of eternity, he doesn't mean the connection of our present time with time of an immaculate mythical moment of the past; or even less is Orwell referring to the future (Orwell always despised and feared the prospect of mechanization and efficiency which was the meaning of socialism for many⁴⁰). All Orwell talks about is making life more real, to preserve activities that produce duration: not of making Heaven on Earth, but Earth on Earth⁴¹. So back to the example in the last quotation, it was the spectacle of the firmness and precision on his mother's movements, it was her direct contact with and mastery over matter, that made her rolling of the dough something worth watching. It was something that produced duration. Again, the way Orwell describes it, it is the opposite of something mechanical; it was more of a natural process. The tragedy of modern man, made conspicuous by George Orwell and a thinker like Byung-Chul Han, is that he has decided to live in this nowhere called 'abstract time'. Besides, after decades of search of efficiency, boosted now by the digital tools, he has also decided to deprive himself of doing anything for himself.

That raises the question of how and if duration experiences -that in *Coming Up for Air* belong almost invariably to the past, to memory- could become a part of our daily perception of time, since, as George Bowling so much regrets, it would seem that the way time was experienced "before the war" is never coming back. We are subjects of performance: if we are to live in this world, we need to kill in ourselves -up to a certain extent- those experiences of duration that are incompatible with productivity and consumption. Orwell stresses the fact that experiences of contemplation are somehow ridiculous, or inadequate in the present world. Not only must George Bowling hide his failed exploits from his wife and kids: even in the middle of ecstasy, of a fully achieved contemplation experience, Bowling cannot get rid of the feeling of being in the middle of something that can't be publicly displayed. It's the famous passage of the collecting of flowers. Spring has come. Bowling drives his car, on his way to some work appointment, in the countryside. He pulls aside to look at the scenery. He strolls around a little bit, and starts gathering primroses. He stops by a small fire some tramp has left burning. And then...

«What I felt was so unusual nowadays that to say it sounds like foolishness. I felt happy... Curiously enough, the thing that had suddenly convinced me

³⁹ Han (2009), p.48: «Proust Strategie der Dauer lässt die *Zeit* duften. Sie setzt voraus, dass man geschichtlich existiert, dass man einen *Lebenslauf* hat. Ihr Duft ist ein Duft der *Immanenz*», «Proust's strategy of duration lets time exhale its scent. Time supposes that one exists historically, that one has a life history. Its scent is that of *immanence*.»

⁴⁰See the second half of Orwell (1937): *The Road to Wigan Pier*, where he discusses the topic.

⁴¹I take the expression "build the Earth on Earth" from the German philosopher Odo Marquard, from his "Apologie des Zufälligen" ("In defense of the Accidental"), see bibliography, Marquard (1986).

that life was worth living, more than the primroses or the young buds on the hedge, was the bit of fire near the gate... There's something about it, a kind of intensity, a vibration... It's a feeling inside you, a kind of peaceful feeling, and yet it's like a flame... all the while the sort of feeling of wonder, the peculiar flame inside you. It's the only thing worth having, and we don't want it».⁴²

After a while, though, George Bowling hears a car coming close, and realizes how ridiculous a fat man like him, with a bunch of primroses in his hand, can look in anyone's eyes. So he decides to throw the flowers away and pretend he had stop to urinate -the best admissible reason he can think of.

But it is more interestingly to see, is how Orwell -through Bowling- reflects upon experiences of duration, of fullness of time and being. Because, however beautiful and rewarding such experiences are, Bowling sees it clearly that...

«I'm not suggesting that the whole humanity could spend the whole of their lives wandering round picking primroses and so forth. I know perfectly well we've got to work».⁴³

meaning that in the end, that there must be a way of making both experiences of time compatible: contemplation or sense of wonder on the one hand, and competitiveness and efficiency on the other.

A quick look at the rest of Orwell's fictional work shows that, in every book of fiction Orwell wrote the main character, at some point or another, falls into a sort of rapture, more or less intense, as the one mentioned above. And in the same way, the experience will be aborted externally or by some uncomfortable thought⁴⁴. Even in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston Smith travels from time to time to the Golden Country, an imaginary paradise with all the traits of the English countryside Orwell loved, away from the Big Brother, where he can feel secure. It is also well known how affectionate Orwell was to escape from the cities as much as he could, how even he, at least once, was willing to put his health at great risk in exchange of living away from civilization.

Does this mean that Orwell thought our society of performance to be a lost case? Have we no other choice than getting away from it as often as we can? Is the contemplation of nature the only way available to compensate for the waste of energy, of “*vital juice*”⁴⁵?

⁴²Orwell (1939), p.171-173

⁴³Orwell (1939), p.173

⁴⁴See, for example, Orwell (1935), *A Clergyman's Daughter*, where the main character falls into religious scruples as soon as she is aware of her rapture: «She checked herself instantly, and drew back. What was she doing? Was it God she was worshipping, or was only the Earth?» (p.56); see also, *Keep The Aspidistra Flying*, Orwell (1936), when the main characters stop enjoying their walk in the forests as soon as they feel hungry (p.136). In the case of Flory, *Burmese Days* protagonist (See Orwell (1934)), it's the feeling alone that overcomes his rapture (pp.55-57).

⁴⁵Orwell (1939), p.177

7. TWO THINGS AT THE SAME TIME

A first reading of *Some Thoughts on the Common Toad*⁴⁶ could make us think so. Certainly a few orwellian researchers have pointed in that direction⁴⁷: we must return to nature in order to find new foundation for our sense of liberty (Piers H.G. Stephens), or, since we really can't, the same way George Bowling couldn't (Muñoz), we are left to admire Orwell's insights once more; we might as well try to preserve the few patches of nature we have left and, finally, regret the opportunity we missed to do things differently at some point during the last century.

But the article Orwell wrote for *Tribune* in 1946 allows, it seems to me, a subtler reading, a less pessimistic one. It's an idea that's present all along the piece, but surfaces especially in a couple of paragraphs like these:

«Even in the most sordid street the coming of the Spring will register itself by some sign or other, if it is only a brighter blue between the chimney pots or the vivid green of an elder sprouting o a blitzed site. Indeed it is remarkable how Nature goes on existing unofficially, as it were, in the very heart of London [...]».

«The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it».⁴⁸

Although Orwell's criticism in the article is directed towards the political orthodoxies of time, it applies perfectly to the present day. Today, natural phenomena still exist unofficially, offline; the sun still rises in total indifference to what men are doing on earth. What Orwell is saying, in the end, is that we don't really necessarily need to escape the urban environment to try to live among ponds and white poplars. It's enough if we are able *to know, to not forget*, that there are always two things going on at the same time. There's the random foolishness we might be chasing in any particular moment, and then there's the eternal circle of the earth around the sun, with its manifestations like the sprouts on blitzed sites. It's important to bear in mind that those signs don't have to belong to nature, strictly speaking: for many, the mere existence of old posts in a field⁴⁹, for example, or any

⁴⁶Orwell (1946), p. 239

⁴⁷See, for example, Piers H.G. Stephens (2004), *Nature and Human Liberty: The Golden Country in George Orwell's 1984 and an Alternative Conception of Human Freedom*, or the unpublished Muñoz Albadalejo, José (2015): *Sobre el concepto de Golden Country en la obra de George Orwell: un estudio comparativo entre Subir a por aire y Mil novecientos ochenta y cuatro*.

⁴⁸Orwell (1946), p.240

⁴⁹See Hulin (1993). The French professor Michel Hulin discusses and quotes several testimonies of duration experiences, which, after an attentive reading, turn out to be very similar to what Orwell describes in *Coming Up for Air*. Hulin, for example, quotes the English writer John Cooper Powys, who, in his *Autobiography*, talks about his connection with "posts" and "windmills" in a way that reminds the reader of George Bowling and the "connection" he feels with the fire near the gate.

other sign of the unstoppable passing of the time, is enough to start this particular consciousness Orwell's talking about.

In fact, the sole memories of childhood, the love for objects of the past – like the coral in glass in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can set out this consciousness, the sense of duration we've discussed above.

Two things going on simultaneously, or still better, two kinds of time running simultaneously: on the one hand, an arrhythmical, accelerated, accumulative and, in the end, meaningless time in which we have chosen to sink our existence, and, on the other hand, time at its right pace, that we can see through the cycles of nature, as Orwell always favored, or by many other hidden signs of duration.

8. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Before Byung-Chul Han did, the burn-out society had been already described by Orwell. As far back as almost eighty years ago, the foundations of a new –and wrong– way of being in the world were already set. Internet, we can claim now at the sight of *Coming Up for Air*, has only taken things further. Soon after the end of the first world war, if we are to believe what George Orwell says, there was already a pressure to perform, to produce and consume, and people acted in accordance to that pressure hoping to be *empowered*. Internet has only taken this process to higher level -now it's possible (or inevitable?) to expose and sell every single detail of one's work and personal life-, and, as a result, every individual has become weaker in front of the collectivity than in more private times. Today, not a Big Brother, but everyone, is watching everyone else. Besides, the process by which reality is liquefied, by which it becomes less solid, was also dully noted by Orwell. And especially, the process by which time dissolves itself into a “ghastly flux” (Orwell) has become quite evident today, as Byung-Chul Han shows in his *Duft der Zeit* [Scent of Time].

But the signs of duration that George Bowling was able to find around him by then, have not been suppressed. They are still out there.

And so, although *Coming Up for Air*, like every novel Orwell wrote⁵⁰, doesn't have a happy ending, it leaves some hints of how it is possible to regain the lost consciousness of duration. Even more that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there are, in the novel, some signs of hope. Even if the main character finds out that the town of his happy days has been erased from the face of the Earth, he is reminded of those peaceful times and places by present-day events, that had, somehow, resisted social transformations. These signs are, in the first place, natural signs, but there are others: virtually any forgotten object that has been left out of the system, or any object that, exhaling the scent of time, echoes meaningful, personal events of the past.

⁵⁰*Keep the Aspidistra Flying* could be considered an exception, since the main character seems to come into terms with the “money-god” society he's been rejecting all along the novel, when he decides to take the job in a company he despises, to be able to provide for his future child. Michel Carter, though, considers this an excuse Gordon Comstock puts to sink himself into an inauthentic existence.

Orwell proposed in *Some Thoughts On the Common Toad* that we should cling to these signs in order to avoid the self's dissolution in the collective political noise of his time. We could say that, today, we should cling to those signs to protect the self from the collective productive/consumptive hyper-activity of our times. The signs of duration can act as, following Byung-Chul Han's words, time's anchorage or gravitation in meaning⁵¹: they represent something to hold on to when we feel time slipping away because of our way of life. Together with natural signs, they are the things that can set time right and give us our sense of wonder back. Provided that we want it.

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⁵¹See note 34: «[the loss of historical meaning] makes time, due to the lack of gravitation or anchorage in meaning, fall without possibility of stopping or reaching a goal» Han (2009), p. 68.

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