

A photograph of a beach at sunset. The sky is a pale, hazy yellow. The water is calm, reflecting the sky and the silhouettes of people and a dog standing on the shore. The silhouettes are dark against the lighter background.

*The disappearance
of rituals*

An aerial photograph of a sandy beach. Several people are scattered across the sand, some sitting and some standing. The sand is a warm, golden-brown color.

**BYUNG-CHUL
HAN**

The Disappearance of Rituals

Byung-Chul Han

The Disappearance of Rituals

A Topology of the Present

Translated by Daniel Steuer

polity

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PRELIMINARY REMARK

The present essay is not animated by a desire to return to ritual. Rather, rituals serve as a background against which our present times may be seen to stand out more clearly. Avoiding nostalgia, I sketch a genealogy of their disappearance, a disappearance which, however, I do not interpret as an emancipatory process. Along the way, the pathologies of the present day will become visible, most of all the erosion of community. At the same time, I offer reflections on different forms of life that might be able to free our society from its collective narcissism.

1

The Compulsion of Production

Rituals are symbolic acts. They represent, and pass on, the values and orders on which a community is based. They bring forth a *community without communication*; today, however, *communication without community* prevails. Rituals are constituted by *symbolic perception*. Symbol (Greek: *symbolon*) originally referred to the sign of recognition between guest-friends (*tessera hospitalis*). One guest-friend broke a clay tablet in two, kept one half for himself and gave the other half to another as a sign of guest-friendship. Thus, a symbol serves the purpose of recognition. This recognition is a particular form of repetition:

But what is recognition? It is surely not merely a question of seeing something for the second time. Nor does it imply a whole series of encounters. Recognition

means knowing something as that with which we are already acquainted. The unique process by which man 'makes himself at home in the world', to use a Hegelian phrase, is constituted by the fact that every act of recognition of something has already been liberated from our first contingent apprehension of it and is then raised into ideality. This is something that we are all familiar with. Recognition always implies that we have come to know something more authentically than we were able to do when caught up in our first encounter with it. Recognition elicits the permanent from the transient.¹

Symbolic perception, as recognition, is a perception of the permanent: the world is shorn of its contingency and acquires durability. Today, the world is symbol-poor. Data and information do not possess symbolic force and so do not allow for recognition. Those images and metaphors which found meaning and community, and stabilize life, are lost in symbolic emptiness. The experience of duration diminishes, and contingency dramatically proliferates.

We can define rituals as *symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world*. They transform being-in-the-world into a *being-at-home*. They turn the world into a reliable place. They are to time what a home is to space: they render time *habitable*. They even make it *accessible*, like a house. They structure time, furnish it. In his novel *Citadelle*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry describes rituals as *temporal techniques of making oneself at home in the world*:

And our immemorial rites are in Time what the dwelling is in Space. For it is well that the years should not

seem to wear us away and disperse us like a handful of sand; rather they should fulfill us. It is meet that Time should be a building-up. Thus I go from one feast day to another, from anniversary to anniversary, from harvestide to harvestide as, when a child, I made my way from the Hall of Council to the rest room within my father's palace, where every footstep had a meaning.²

Today, time lacks a solid structure. It is not a house but an erratic stream. It disintegrates into a mere sequence of point-like presences; it rushes off. There is nothing to provide time with any *bold* [Halt]. Time that rushes off is not *habitable*.

Rituals stabilize life. To paraphrase Antoine Saint-Exupéry, we may say: *rituals are in life what things are in space*. For Hannah Arendt it is the *durability of things* that gives them their 'relative independence from men'. They 'have the function of stabilizing human life'. Their 'objectivity lies in the fact that . . . men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table'.³ In life, things serve as stabilizing resting points. Rituals serve the same purpose. Through their *self-sameness*, their *repetitiveness*, they stabilize life. They make life *last* [haltbar]. The contemporary compulsion to produce robs things of their endurance [Haltbarkeit]: it intentionally erodes duration in order to increase production, to force more consumption. *Lingering*, however, presupposes things that *endure*. If things are merely used up and consumed, there can be no lingering. And the same compulsion of production destabilizes life by undermining what is *enduring in life*. Thus, despite the fact that life

expectancy is increasing, production is destroying *life's endurance*.

A smartphone is not a 'thing' in Arendt's sense. It lacks the very self-sameness that stabilizes life. It is also not a particularly enduring object. It differs from a thing like a table, which confronts me in its self-sameness. The content displayed on a smartphone, which demands our constant attention, is anything but self-same; the quick succession of bits of content displayed on a smartphone makes any *lingering* impossible. The restlessness inherent in the apparatus makes it a non-thing. The way in which people reach for their smartphones is also compulsive. But things should not compel us in this way.

Forms of ritual, such as manners, make possible both beautiful behaviour among humans and a beautiful, gentle treatment of things. In a ritual context, things are not consumed or used up [verbraucht] but *used* [gebraucht]. Thus, they can also become *old*. Under the compulsion of production, by contrast, we behave towards things, even towards the world, as consumers rather than as users. In return, they *consume us*. Relentless consumption surrounds us with disappearance, thus destabilizing life. Ritual practices ensure that we treat not only other people but also things in beautiful ways, that there is an affinity between us and other people as well as things:

Mass teaches the priests to handle things in beautiful ways: the gentle holding of the chalice and the Host, the slow cleaning of the receptacles, the turning of the book's pages. And the result of the beautiful handling of things: a spirit-lifting gaiety.⁴