

The crisis of narratives is also the crisis of the subject in community

A crise das narrativas é também a crise do sujeito em comunidade

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ABSTRACT

This is a review of the book *The Crisis of Narration* by philosopher Byung-Chul Han. In this book, released in Portuguese, in 2023 by Editora Vozes, the author discusses the disappearance of authentic narratives in modernity. For Han, the excess of information that comes with digital platforms leads to an unbridled consumption of “narratives” on social media, a phenomenon that causes individuals to lose their sense of community and empathy with each other.

Keywords: Crisis of narration, digital platforms, storytelling

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RESUMO

Este texto é uma resenha do livro *A crise da narração* do filósofo Byung-Chul Han. Nesta obra, lançada em 2023 pela Editora Vozes, o autor discorre sobre o desaparecimento das narrativas autênticas na modernidade. Para Han, o excesso de informações que surge com as plataformas digitais ocasiona um consumo desenfreado de “narrativas” em mídias sociais, fenômeno que leva os indivíduos a perderem o senso de comunidade e de empatia entre si.

Palavras-chave: Crise da narração, plataformas digitais, storytelling



BYUNG-CHUL HAN IS a philosopher and writer known for his objectivity. He is direct, straight to the point, and, generally, seeks to develop various arguments and reflections around a central issue in his works. In *The Crisis of Narration*, published in Brazil in 2023, could not be different. Han begins the preface by attesting to a “narrative crisis” (p. 9), anchored precisely in a period in which narratives are constantly being evoked in the currently prevailing discourses.

Modern societies have lost the ability to narrate and create narratives that offer significance, meaning, and guidance, weakening the bonds between people and institutions. The crisis of narration reveals, for Han, a crisis in the sense of community. True narratives are capable of giving meaning to specific moments of daily life, to the days of the year, to the relationships between subjects and environments, filling these spheres of life with symbolic charge. Narratives are symbolic techniques that transform the “being-in-the-world” (individualized subject) into a “being-at-home” (subject in community). Thus, we also attest to the transformative capacity of narrations. Rituals are narrated because narrative has a transformative function.

So why do narrations undergo a crisis in modernity? For Han, modernity, marked by its open, borderline, and transparent aesthetics, prevents narratives from being strengthened, since narratives are essentially “forms of concluding and closing off” (p. 12). It is precisely for conferring outcomes that narratives are capable of creating meanings, which are consolidated in the narrative closing.

Following this perspective, narratives create stories, while the late modernity aesthetics is anchored in a punctual and fragmented temporal idea. For Han, the media contained in digital platforms are not narratives, as they are produced and publicized in a digital spatiality that privileges opening and dissolving much more than closing. In his perception, the *stories* of social networks are the perfect examples of this case. Thus the storytelling would be the capitalist appropriation of narratives. It submits the narratives to consumption, filling the brands, products, services, and people with libidinal energy to be engaged and discharged in the form of consumption. The storytelling can be seen as the technique that creates affective bonds between people and consumer objects. At a certain point, the author refers to storytelling as “*storyselling*.”

From these points, Han discusses for ten chapters the consequences of the crisis of narratives and how this crisis is closely linked to the economic and technological expansion experienced by humanity in the last century. The philosopher opens a discussion on how constant speculation of Capital on technological innovations, especially media and of daily life, have affected the ways in which subjects in the Western world understand identity, time, and space.

Han argues about how the crisis of narratives, also driven by capitalism and the advertising market in the creation of superficial narratives – storyselling – weakens all solid and secular institutions, creating a general feeling of distrust and discredibility in democracy, in political subjects, in the press, etc. Consumption degrades the utter functioning of democratic institutions, and it can only be “reverted” by the rescue of narratives as theoretical-methodological instruments, but also as community devices.

In “From Narration to Information,” Han explains that the modern newspaper reader has lost the ability to linger on the news. This reader seeks only information, rather than stories. At this point Han makes a first distinction between information and narration, since the latter is present in news that covers an event “from afar” – as distance is its distinguishing mark, which information lacks. He rescues the Walter Benjamin’s concept of “aura,” which would be the trail of something that appears in the distance. The aura allows the visualization of something, without letting it be fully touched, shown, or exposed. It retains a sense of mystery, curiosity, and doubt. Information does not have aura as it is too transparent, too bare, too direct. They are embodied as data to be viewed, consumed, and passed on in droves. If there is a narrative crisis due to the flood of information we have access to today, there is also a journalistic crisis.

This crisis caused by the flood of information is also a crisis of reality, as we now live in a moment in which we access and interfere in reality through data. Data is just information. More than that, we are constantly seduced and summoned to provide information about ourselves, our customs, habits, tastes, and political opinions on digital platforms through consumption. There is a new regime of power that emerges from this and operates, no longer by the repression of individuals, but by the absolute exploitation of their freedom and, above all, their freedom to consume.

Once again inspired by Benjamin and his essay *Experience and poverty*, Han follows up with the chapter “The Poverty of Experience” to explain how the crisis of narratives is also a crisis of experiences. But how? In his view, experiences are traditionally narrated and presuppose continuity to pass on certain wisdom or knowledge through narratives. In the lack of narratives, there is no wisdom, only problem-solving techniques (p. 33).

In the chapter “The Narrated Life,” Han shows how the idea of happiness is related to the idea of redemption, because both arise together in the closure of a marked historical time (a narrative/an experience). If we are constantly in contact with a current, punctual, and fragmented idea of time, we are not capable to give rise to happiness. Such atrophy of time in modernity

prevents the rescue of the past and causes the crisis of narratives. Here, the author resorts to Marcel Proust's ideas of muscular atrophy as well as Martin Heidegger's temporal atrophy.

These feelings of fragmented time and of being alone in the world, hallmarks of modernity, decentralize the subject in such a way that they can no longer claim a self-identity. No narrative makes sense to that subject. Without narrative anchoring and external guidance, the individual turns to itself and starts to give a greater emphasis to "the self." Temporal atrophy leads us to an inability to narrate our lives, further intensified by digital spatialities and temporalities, which, devoid of true narrative anchors and mediated almost entirely by information, allow the subject to access narratives only through consumption. On digital platforms, there is no narration, only the accumulation of information materialized in entertainment, media, products, and services.

A life without narration is also a "bare life," which is the title of the next chapter. In this segment, Han's argument is very close to the ideas found in his other books, such as *The Transparency Society* (2012) and *The Burnout Society* (2015). For the author, when narratives fail and are unable to provide significance and symbolic meaning for things, especially for objects, they become "bare" of significance, empty of meaning. Notice that narratives give the facts of life an almost undeniable meaning that gains more and more strength and meaning over the years with the practices of narration. In modernity, if things, events, situations, and objects lack meaning, we come to see and live a life increasingly poor of meanings. We search for meanings in the information and narratives of Capital, in the storytelling of digital platforms.

If there are no strong narratives that anchor us in the world, we turn to ourselves and begin an intense process of self-production. For Han, selfies and the practices of spectacularization of everyday life on social networks are examples of this. Modernity evokes a constant self-bareness, not only physical, but also financial, affective, cultural, sexual, etc. This transparency of information is completely opposed to the veiling and concealment essential for narration.

The excess of information leads to the computerization of the world, a stage of rationalization of humanity even more advanced than that described by Max Weber. For Han, the digitization of realities dissolves everything into data and information – which cannot be narrated, only calculated and explained. This causal relation becomes imperative and leads individuals to what he calls the "disenchantment of the world," the title of the fifth

chapter. We have lost the ability to be enchanted by things, to see magic and playfulness in the world. “Information is the endpoint of atrophied language” (Han, 2023, p. 84).

The excessive digitization of the world – disenchantment – also leads us to a continuous and progressive distancing from reality as it is. When we access the world only through smartphone screens and social media platforms, we come into contact with a reduced and cropped reality that can be easily put aside with a single click on the smartphone screen. Reality loses the ability to shock us, to affect us deeply – instead, we start to react with buttons of *like* or *dislike*. Reactions become mechanical, automatic, and devoid of a more critical and lasting reflection. For Han, this excessive digitization causes the sense of community to erode.

Without the possibility of coming together as a community, the neoliberal narrative of performance puts us in the position of “entrepreneur of his own self,” creating a feeling of competitiveness among all. A social cohesion to create a “We” is lacking and, instead, we sink into a narrative that constantly promotes the individual self-actualization of subjects. In an authentic narrative community there is no excessive and noisy communication, which is characteristic of the digital age. Instead, a quiet harmony that unites everyone in a feeling of empathy with others.

In “Theory as Narrative,” the author argues that theories must be essentially narrative. In a world increasingly taken over by Big Data, the processes of collecting, storing, and analyzing data are getting closer and closer to scientific studies. But, according to Han, Big Data does not explain anything, it only makes correlations between one piece of information and another. Theories, on the other hand, create conceptual connections between things, explain how and why they behave the way they do. They offer a closure that locks things into a conceptual framework. In this way, theories are very close to narratives.

In the following chapters, “Narrative as Healing” and “Narrative Community,” Han argues that the resumption of narratives can be the answer to a more empathetic and harmonious society, in tune with the needs of all. For him, the support of authentic narratives, such as psychoanalysis, the reduction of excessive consumption and the use of digital platforms can restore the sense of community in modern society. In this sense, it is also possible to infer that the academic and scientific community must act in this process. Scientists should avoid accessing knowledge through data, preferring theories. And if theories have the capacity to narrate, researchers can get involved in a movement that aims to restore authentic narratives for the strengthening of communities. ■

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