The things that tether us to Earth: A review of Byung-Chul Han's *Non-things*

Taylor Hood

Taylor is a Scottish writer, naturalist and artist with degrees in literature and conservation, as well as professional experience in ecological consultancy and scientific editing. His research interests include the relationship between ecocentrism and fantasy literature (especially in the works of Lord Dunsany and JRR Tolkien), and the importance of valuing heritage, beauty and wonder in modernity. He is an Associate Editor of *The Ecological Citizen*.

Keywords: ecological living; societal change; values; worldviews
Citation: Hood T (2025) The things that tether us to Earth: A review of Byung-Chul Han's *Non-things*. *The Ecological Citizen* **8**(2): 193–6.

A review of: Byung-Chul Han (2022) *Non-things: Upheaval in the lifeworld*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

"Who suspects that things have lives of their own? Who feels threatened or enchanted by things?" asks Byung-Chul Han in *Non-things* (p. 52). Although this book is not framed from an ecocentric perspective, I will argue that its emphasis on embodied connections and tangible experiences significantly enriches the conversation surrounding ecocentric living.[1]

Like Han's other works (such as *The Burnout Society* [2015] and *Capitalism and the Death Drive* [2021]), *Non-things* challenges neoliberalism and late-stage capitalism, but it stands apart by channelling this critique through the philosophical concepts of thing and non-thing. According to the author, Earth "consists of things that take on a permanent form and provide a stable environment for dwelling", yet our transition to the ethereal infosphere "*de-reifies* the world by *informatizing* it" (p. 1; all emphasis in the original). Drawing on Heidegger, Han argues that our detachment arises when we forsake our ontological status as a striving animal who "gains access to the environment by way of the hand" in favour of exchanging information with digital "*informatons*" designed to minimize resistance in our daily experience (p. 3). Our devices, along with our obsession with data, seemingly render existence accessible and controllable to us, erasing life's mystery and unpredictability. In this way, our concern for the future is fading because we can no longer create coherent stories or find meaning in our place on Earth.

Han's assessment places us squarely within the disenchanted domain of the Megamachine and its domination through capital, the state, and technoscience, which diminishes enchantment in the name of progress (see Curry [2019]). In digital societies, he argues, the smartphone, selfie and AI are instruments of this system since the choosing finger (*digitus*) replaces the acting hand, granting the illusion of autonomy yet binding us further to the infosphere. The smartphone, the author's *bête noire*, exemplifies this duality precisely because it "*places* the world" at our fingertips while eroding community as we busy ourselves online (p. 21). Relatedly, selfies illustrate a shift whereby selfhood becomes externalized and commodified, eliminating privacy and blinding us to others. And now, with artificial intelligence, powered by big data, our thought patterns risk becoming further untethered from reality as we kowtow to algorithmic processes. By stifling attentiveness and creativity, artificial intelligence does not allow us to "move, beyond what is given, to *untrodden paths*" or envision "a *new world*" (p. 43). Surrendering our human capacities to the technologies meant to enhance them, we edge closer to a future where our tools determine not just how we live, but who we are.

Just as nature-flattening infrastructure, blinding lights and grating noise disrupt the lifeways of most wildlife taxa, we humans are also losing our sense of orientation in societies driven by totalizing consumption and communication. Even when we unplug from social media and the latest apps, we face a physical reality that increasingly resembles the infosphere's monotonous flattening of existence. We are losing the passion to envision a healed world because it is no longer at the forefront of our minds. In architecture, for example, the desire for machine-like efficiency akin to our smooth digital devices has given us rows of unadorned buildings indifferent to beauty, especially that inspired by natural forms. This matters because, according to Han, "[t]he decorative and the ornamental are characteristic of things. They are life's way of telling us that life is about more than mere functioning" (p. 23). Meanwhile, the only messages we are given to dwell upon are those contained in gaudy advertisements, which "block out things, pollute them. Junk information and communication destroy the silent landscape, the discreet language of things" (p. 80). No wonder many feel disconnected from Earth, our only home.

The major section of the book, entitled "Views of Things", explores our changing perception of reality. Han laments that the material world has lost its defiant character: "We are no longer maltreated by things" (p. 46). This state was once better depicted in media, like Chapman films or the contrast between modern Mickey Mouse and the protean environment he struggled against in the old cartoons. Today, we see only the obedient surface of things, though they possess hidden lives and agendas, as in old stories such as Addison's "The Adventures of a Shilling" (1710). Han contends that processes of modernity replace things' inner warmth and integrity with a "[m]echanical coldness" (p. 51) that keeps us from encountering "an independent *counterpart*, *mutuality*, a *Thou*" (p. 53). He effectively highlights this disconnect by contrasting Odradek, the mysterious spool of thread from Kafka's "The Cares of a Family Man" (1919),

with Amazon's Alexa, a device embodying our ghostly age of "*gapless*, digital communication [that] destroys both nearness and distance" and thus genuine relationality (p. 55). Reconnecting with the world, this book tells us, means avoiding instrumentalism and objectification.

In Han's analysis, things and the spheres in which they exist, quite separate from our own when they wish to be, are enriching, but they can also be perilous. I suggest that his thinking aligns well with the original significance of *faërie*, defined as "the mythworld itself, which is everything outside of our control. Faërie is an old name for the world of nonhumans that surrounds, feeds and (sometimes) tolerates us all" (Bringhurst, 1995: 16). In modernity, humans rarely encounter *faërie* because the more-than-human world – a realm with which *faërie* is cognate – has been marginalized. Weberian processes of domination and rationalization have not only destroyed wilderness areas but also diminished the quality of wildness. Enchantment, being a relational, immanent and uncontrollable moment of wonder, shares an affinity with wildness, as both are rooted in the autonomous natural world (Curry, 2021). Yet, while the planet remains fundamentally unmasterable and always capable of offering enchantment, most of us fail to recognize this state. We move swiftly and safely along, unchallenged but also untouched by nonhuman others.

As the manifold consequences of ecocide can attest to, human dominion comes at the cost of depriving ourselves of life's gifts. To reclaim these blessings, Han urges us to be present, but we seldom permit ourselves to do so because "*presence* requires *exposure, vulnerability*" (p. 57). It has never been more important to adopt a lifestyle centred around care, listening, rituals and repetition, creating stability and meaning over time. The author upholds *The Little Prince* (1943) as an exemplar of this way of being. In Saint-Exupéry's cherished narrative, actions such as tending to a rose or visiting a friend speak to the important bonds that make others unique and irreplaceable.

Han argues that our subservience to the infosphere and our desire for complete control may break these vital bonds. He worries that "*humans will abolish themselves in order to posit themselves as the absolute*", since we have too strong an innate tendency to "soar up towards the un-thinged, the unconditioned" (p. 72). Later, in seemingly contradictory remarks, he objects to a world in which we have "abolished all transcendence, all vertical order, that demands stillness. The vertical gives way to the horizontal. Nothing *rises*. Nothing *becomes deeper*" (p. 78). In this context, however, the author is addressing the loss of stillness in society due to our distraction with sprawling data streams. Crucially, in our most contemplative and wondrous moments, especially when dwelling upon nature, we are not dealing with world-denying transcendence, whether this is felt as a rising or a deepening. This is the case because such experiences can only ever remain fixed on Earth, originating from lateral (horizontal) connections – relationships and the differences that facilitate them.

The exploration of relationality and the other in *Non-things* is compelling, but it leaves important connections unexplored. For instance, the philosophy

of things has significant parallels to contemporary animism, which sees the world as potentially comprised of persons (Harvey, 2013). Additionally, the discourse on enchantment – by presenting the issue in more concrete, ecological terms – further elucidates Han's concern that modernity has rejected an awareness of the living Earth. The author does not engage deeply with these ideas or with ecological discourse more broadly. Indeed, his book is only weakly involved with environmental concerns, and foundational issues like anthropocentrism's denial of animality (Challenger, 2021) are entirely absent. However, Han does provide some tantalizing conclusions, suggesting that "sustainability alone will not be enough" to heal the Earth and that "ecology must be preceded by a new ontology of matter, one that views it as something that lives" (p. 96).[2] These statements are welcome, though they may leave informed readers wanting more.

Ultimately, while Han's book exhibits limited engagement with green studies generally, this is also a strength. By steering clear of conventional academic frameworks, it avoids common but unproductive perspectives and attitudes, such as prioritizing human social justice or endorsing anti-nature theory. Instead, in its eclectic and humane fashion, this work focuses on what truly matters: relationships, presence and wildness.

Reading *Non-things* reminds us of the dangers of severing ties to things since they give our lives meaning. The book points the way forward by suggesting that we must return to positive physical participation on Earth, surrounding ourselves and interacting with things while respecting their separateness. To go through life tethered to things, grounded by the history and memory they establish, is to walk *with* the Earth, rather than trampling over it or seeking to transcend it altogether.

Notes

1 For a more detailed examination of Han's book, see Hood (2023).

2 Han argues that a "re-romanticization of the world would presuppose its re-materialization" (p. 96), invoking Bennett (2010) in support. For a nuanced exploration of how forced re-romanticization can undermine enchantment, as well as Bennett's technophilia and instrumentalization of the experience, see Curry (2021).

References

Bennett J (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, USA.

Bringhurst R (1995) Introduction. In: Kane A, ed. *The Dreamer Awakes*. Broadview Press, Peterborough, CA, USA: 11–18.

Challenger M (2021) *How to be Animal: A new history of what it means to be human*. Canongate Books, Edinburgh, UK.

Curry P (2019) *Enchantment: Wonder in modern life*. Floris Books, Edinburgh, UK.

Curry P (2021) The experience of enchantment and the sense of wonder. *Green Letters* **25**: 115–29.

Harvey G, ed. (2013) *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*. Routledge, Edinburgh, UK.

Hood T (2023) *Non-things: Upheaval in the lifeworld* – Book review. YouTube. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFzz37OppuI (accessed February 2025).