

## Stone to Screen: Psychopolitics, Amulets, and Psychohacking

The attention traps of our mono-handhelds have become mythological to the user. Drawing from paradoxical stories of international connectivity, information-rich platforms, networked knowledge, and 20th-century utopian dreams, we attempt to act out these ways of living, online, for single-modal black boxes to index. These lived paradoxes have developed in us certain digital malaise from scan-reading and incomplete memories, to hyper-FOMO and over-medicated diagnoses. Offline forward movements represent moments of collapse where users no longer see the rewards of Platform and Surveillance Capitalism. Yet in the UK, telecoms companies push to reinforce their dominant position in global economics and communications, reproducing dreams of IoT smart cities that expand the fibre optic pipeline that will further define our attention economy. The Internet, the idea of what we knew it to be, is no longer being built for us, but built from our digital native maladies.

Ten years ago, in 2014, Byung-Chul Han produced *Psycho-Politics*, a text that foreshadows our current digital-physical landscape. Transitioning from Foucault and Deleuze's disciplinary society — controlling through force, confinement and obedience — Han describes the role of psychopolitics. As opposed to the top-down control of the Panopticons of disciplinary society, a new discrete power recontextualizes the freedom of online activities as a means to control and outsource its surveillance to its inmates<sup>1</sup> While the control was once from physical spaces of confinement that coerce, psychopolitics produces the entrepreneur of the self, the achievement-subject exploits themselves without limits ultimately internalising a relentless mode of production. Han explains that "the freedom of Can generates even more coercion than the disciplinarian Should."<sup>2</sup> A top-down declaration of Should has a limitation, it's exact and "issues commandments and prohibitions."<sup>3</sup> While the Can, playing off an illusion of freedom, has no limit — all responsibility and possibility is put onto the individual within the framework of the Can. The psyche, the mind, is under attack. It operates at high capacity to enhance performance, and the contemporary side effects are psychological ailments. The individual within the Can of neoliberalism, arms open to embrace the other, offers themselves with full transparency to the apparatus of the digital. I, too, have come here to enjoy the fruits of technology.

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"It seems that the soul<sup>4</sup> too, in the same way, loses itself in itself when shaken and disturbed, unless it is given something to grasp onto; and so we must always provide it with an object to butt up against and to act upon."

Michel de Montaigne, *Essays, Book I.*

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<sup>1</sup> Han, "Psychopolitics," 8.

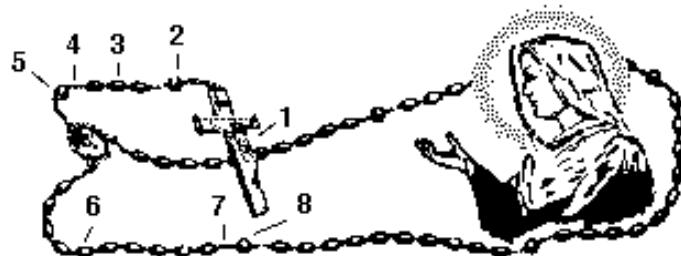
<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>4</sup> 'soul' here includes all aspects of the human personality not strictly corporeal

Before I left Canada in 2022, my best friend gave me his wooden rosary. It was a sweet gesture, holding this worn out wooden necklace of beads and white thread — it felt like a grand departure. He would later describe to me the process of praying with this historical object, that I'd forget. However, it's been stuck in my bag ever since, moving around with me and silently holding me in a position of awe.

This rosary, used in the Catholic Church, is a tool for prayer. With variations of beads notating important stories in the Catholic Church, it offers a long moment to connect with distinct episodes in the life and death of Jesus from the Annunciation to the Ascension and beyond. There are twenty mysteries that are meditated on during the process of using a rosary, and many steps to its prayers. Often sitting in solitude, one would “proceed slowly, pausing at times.”<sup>5</sup> The prayers “follow one another, mostly identical, but with some variations, producing a hypnotic, reparative sound.”<sup>6</sup> Described in *You have to enter the scene*, these prayers can last up to 40 minutes. The ritual can be a rigorous and sterile practice that ultimately brings healing and connection to the important figure that the Virgin Mary has created for Catholics. Sitting down, quiet, the thumbs move forward, counting each step and producing a phrase as they go. Their eyes shut to speak silently and to listen back, alone in the world for a moment before producing complex mental images of Gospel scenes — encountering a virtual space to engage with their mind’s symbols of hope and love.



<https://rosarycenter.org/how-to-pray-the-rosary>

Ultimately, although the rosary exists as a variety of forms and materials, variations in knots, beads, and usage, there is a parallel between the material structure of this worship device, its physical system, and the structures of worship itself.<sup>7</sup> As you move through the beads, counting each one, you're brought to a specific utterance, saying, image and physical posture. The device is a mnemonic one – allowing the user to produce a repeated action on demand of memory. Its repetition highlights the formulaic rigidity, quantification through numerating each prayer like an abacus, and its sensuality creating a “resonance between the rhythm [of its prayer] … and the body.”<sup>8</sup>

Objects, such as paintings, rosaries, books or buildings, offer an opportunity of connection between an ideology of an institution and the individual. Han describes that “every dispositive – every technology or technique of domination – brings forth characteristic devotional objects that are employed in order to subjugate.”<sup>9</sup> Certain objects materialise and stabilise institutions and dominions. The theologian Ernst Troeltsch speaks of these items as “devotional objects that fascinate the imagination of the

<sup>5</sup> Paternò, “You have to enter the scene’ Ritual imagination and memory in the Catholic rosary,” 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Leone, “Petition and Repetition: On the Semiotic Philosophy of Prayer,” 650.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Han, “Psychopolitics,” 2.

people.”<sup>10</sup> The abilities of these devotional objects can establish the rule of institutions through their users’ physical actions becoming “habitual and anchoring to the body.”<sup>11</sup> Han speaks specifically about the rosary as a devotional object in this sense. As a tangible item, creating habits and reciting from memory, it embeds itself not only as an object with our body, but connects to the soul: our character and personality.

For Han, quoting Barthes, a sense of touch demystifies and removes a sense of awe. Sight is magical. The “truly beautiful cannot be touched.”<sup>12</sup> It demands a distance between us and the mystical. Without physical contact the phenomenon could simply be a façade, broken down or a projection of light not really materialised as an object with volume. In this we wonder about its reality. A mirage in front of us, classically in the desert, brings with it a sense of despair — hydration far off in the distance, perpetually in front of us, seeking our attention.

The touch-screen, a demystifying agent, “sublates the negativity of the other.”<sup>13</sup> It “de-auratizes and renders profane”<sup>14</sup> what is touched on the screen. Within neoliberalism, Han’s critique of the smartphone produces a smooth and additive experience of the world. As the world becomes demystified through the smartphone, the Can of psychopolitics claims its devotional object as the mono-handheld. The project of the self is uploaded online and backed up to the cloud as it prepares itself for maximum interoperability.

“The smartphone is the main information of our time. It not only makes many things superfluous but also de-reifies the world by reducing it to information. The material aspect of the smartphone recedes, and information takes its place; the materiality of the smartphone is not perceived in its own right. Smartphones do not really differ in their appearance. We look *through them* into the infosphere. An analogue watch also provides us with information regarding time, but it is not an information; it is a thing, even an *adornment*. Its material aspect is central to it.”

Byung-Chul Han, *Non-Things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld*, 22.

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Amuletic adornments or talismans are other devotional objects, yet with purpose and meaning much broader than the rosary. The talisman or amulet, a carved stone on a string, a ring, or item embedded in a personal architecture, is traditionally known to be an equippable object that protects, heals or offers a portal to the Gods. It’s a material possessed by someone which either averts displeasing

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<sup>10</sup> Han, “Non-Things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld,” 24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

results, or obtains pleasing ones, through systems that are beyond the natural laws of the Enlightenment.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, during the periods of the Anglo-Saxons, spiritual practices had an emphatic culture of objects that identified as amulets or talismans. Rope tied in specific knots hung in homes protecting one from fire<sup>16</sup>, linen pouches of coriander seeds to help child birth<sup>17</sup>, hexagonal quartz to blind the evil eye<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, in the Early Byzantine Empire, practices with amulets against demonic forces “were as familiar as cooking, working, playing games or bringing up children.”<sup>19</sup> A practice ingrained in the everyday. A notion of fear, or anxiety, however silent among these belief systems, the object created a solace surrounding their lives. Activities built around the placement of these items, ritualised practise, would have been a common occurrence that brought a touch point to render the anxieties larger than your natural conditions as graspable, and one that would develop meaning within the everyday.<sup>20</sup>

In its simplest form, the belief systems of the time brought with it the realities of the amulet. Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer, who influenced the early progress of modern studies in comparative religion and mythology, elaborates on certain beliefs and natural laws of the time that follow under two categories. One being that like produces like, or that an effect will resemble its cause; while the second being that when one thing is in contact with another each will continue to influence one another after departing.<sup>21</sup> In both cases, a medium between two objects acts as an influencing agent, an ether, similarly in modern science, through a space that appears to be empty and causes effect.<sup>22</sup> This style of magic was conducted often with the aspiration of homoeopathic remedies by the individual or a community member that devised amulets via these laws. This process included a sense of “creating the illusion that you control reality.”<sup>23</sup> Through its meaning and importance, and by virtue of its physicality of an object that lasts throughout time, “the knowledge of each generation gravitates to the next” and belief and meaning of these objects continue.<sup>24</sup> As devotional objects, amulets and talismans were only partly associated with Christian or institutional frameworks, and often being attributed to personal or communal beliefs. They were attached to alternative narratives or folk religious discourse of the time, and because they were less systematic and absent from any formal institution, the beliefs and meaning of objects were based on a greater degree of personal and local interpretation.<sup>25</sup> Fighting off disease, seeking fortune, and accompanying oneself in whatever came in the after life was attached to found objects and a hope that the world could be relied on and lived in. These physical objects commonly equipped, discussed and openly practised with, allowed an opportunity for culture to make sense of the world around them. Quelling contextual anxieties that came with the time, and offering moments of peace and control in a world of complexities and disturbance.

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<sup>15</sup> Hildburgh, “Psychology Underlying the Employment of Amulets in Europe,” 231.

<sup>16</sup> Meaney, “Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones,” 16.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, “Objects in Context, Objects in Use: Material Spatiality in Late Antiquity,” 297.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Fraser, “The Golden Bough,” 20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, “Aeschylus and Athens,” 11.

<sup>24</sup> Hildburgh, “Psychology Underlying the Employment of Amulets in Europe,” 234.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, “Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark,” 12.

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"Great is the force of herbs, but greater far  
The virtues that in stones inherent are  
For in the stone implanted mother earth  
Eternal force, unfading, at its birth.  
Shortlived the herb, it quickly fades away,  
And but in life its potency bears sway;  
When past its prime it dry and withered lies:  
And what help find we in a thing that dies?  
Plants as the source of death and health we own,  
But scarce canst thou find mischief in a stone."

King, *The Natural History, Ancient and Modern, of Precious Stones and Gems, and of the Precious Metals*, 386.



Mies van der Rohe, *Resor House project, Jackson Hole, Wyoming (Interior perspective of living room [view through north glass wall])* c. 1937-41.

“Central to the work of Mies van der Rohe, one of the pioneers of Modernist architecture, is the idea that the less we see of a window frame, the more the world outside merges with the inside. The narrower the frame, the more real the thing behind the glass becomes.”

Heine, *The iPhone - A Design for the World in Our Hands.*

Although the tactility of the phone was such an important feature in the early 2000s, when the iPhone came out in 2007 its simplicity came with a quick decline in tactility. Touch tone keys, T9 texting and 2-inch screens were soon surpassed by the universality of the app store that brought with it a smaller and smaller bezel. The phone became less of a device for calling, and more of a foil towards applications that could be embedded into a digital fabric we lived in. And, as the physicality of our devices changed, so did our belief systems around them.

Today we experience the changing of our realities through our handhelds and the list of our digital malaise continues to expand the longer we stay connected to predatory platforms. While before these effects were immediate, and something we could note as memeable, now, the prolonged exposure to the mega-platforms have created something like the arc in our back from being on 12-inch laptops. FOMO is no longer a meme from 2014, but a part of everyday life. Memory gaps form as we continue to offload capacity to broken search engines. The way we read, reported years ago, has become fast pass scanning, looking for keywords, attributed to new ways of connecting data and hyperlinks. The technologies we use have become opportunities for psychopolitics to spur: holes for the many ways excessive freedom can leer into the mind. What becomes our passed down amulets and folklore to control the reality amongst us? The solace of the mind is busy with networked ideologies, and we need an object to butt up against.

Now in 2025, I've found amuletic devices of my own, creating them through the effects, shapes and systems of the material itself. Phones, made of rare earth metals, polymers, glass, ceramics, composites and silicon, have embedded in them historical beliefs and materials with stories. There's a break in this passed down history of materials that can't be so easily brought back. Yet, following the long tradition of amuletic device creation and belief, I've held onto certain phones as ways to procure a feeling or effect. The universal smart phone is packed with contradictory ideologies arranged in a complex network. Switching between these worlds, systems and belief frameworks create anxieties and confusion amongst our tools. The compound effects of psychopolitical-freedom have developed their own system, a system that builds on top of the neoliberal structure described by Han. By breaking these down, hacking psychopolitics, creating disconnections and unique histories of personal technologies of our own, creating communities around them, and developing talismans with specific stories and meaning, the world around us can become more malleable and devisable. Like the talismans of local folklore, the phone can create history again, creating spaces of solace and a nuanced understanding of the systems around us.

In the age of psychopolitics, we need to be psychohackers. The amulet for previous generations, from time immemorial, has been an object that gives profound meaning in people's lives, and provided solutions to their worries and illnesses. Our sickness has become psychological through our

contemporary context of neoliberalism and being subject to the Can of freedom. Psychohacking is a way of setting up frameworks within our contemporary moment to develop communities, systems of rewards, new futures and solace in the age of heavy online traffic and malaise. Through DIY recontextualisation of technologies that abstract and toy with our Platform Capitalism condition of the 21st century, the psychohacker attempts to dodge the digital malaise of psychopolitics.

“Everything sprawls and proliferates. Stillness is a phenomenon of negativity. It is exclusive, whereas noise is the result of permissive, extensive, excessive communication.”

Byung-Chul Han, *Non-Things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld*, 78.

Similar to the Anglo-Saxons living in England, a breaking up of ideologies into many tools and objects can offer a space to diversify beliefs. Localised communities with historical beliefs and alternative devotional objects with specific functions can embed a type of solace in the world. A simplified tool rejects proliferation and claims stillness through its necessary action of one. Singular use objects can connect a focused place for ideology and belief systems to root and develop history and community. This offers a way to pursue the Can of networked thinking and psychopolitics be curbed by constraints within a sprawling system of freedom.

Focusing in on the bezel of the phone, it's characteristic features can allow a space to find restrained systems worth exploring. The bezel of a phone can be different from others before the 2020s, and the apps that we load into each bezel can be different too. The habitual action of having multiple phones, multiple windows to view the world, brings barriers, negates and divides the sprawl of the Can in neoliberalism. Each app on a smartphone represents a certain mode of communication, attention trap and consumption, etc., that needs attention to understand and work within. Each app includes its own specific set of rules, ways of conducting oneself, ways of economy: it's own physics.<sup>26</sup> The dia-phone, an extensive collection of personal phones connecting and disconnecting to each other through arranged systems, has become a way to criticise and re-contextualise the predatory platforms that we exist in. Setting up phones with specific app “builds”, restrictions and removing the universality of the smartphone to specific tasks creates a divide between the incessant attention that drives economies online and a space for us to breath and deliberately act — a space to criticise the platforms and build new belief systems. One android for banking, calendar, and health apps, another for Whatsapp and maps, and another for Discord, notes and Substack, maybe a phone just for notes, another phone for just Instagram (and one more for video game emulators). It's beyond a “productivity hack” that is marketed towards abhorrent levels of personal production, and more a method of combating the predatory behaviours of platforms, quelling the Can, while still reaping, or creating space for, our own rewards.

The psychohacker, every day, every hour, waking up, getting back from work, going out, seeing a film, meeting with friends, having a tea, operates within a system of local-global, linear-networked thinking. A sliding scale that dips in and out of contemporary platforms. Hiding away in the seams of apps to then reveal themselves in moments of bliss and moments of burn-out.

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<sup>26</sup> Lil Internet and Joshua Cittarella, “Lil Internet on the Physics of Social Media.”