

Cracks and crevices

Sebastian Truskolaski, *Adorno and the Ban on Images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). 232pp., £85.00 hb., £28.99 pb., 978 1 35012 920 7 hb., 978 1 35012 9 221 pb.



These notes are from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in C Minor, written between 1804 and 1808. Even listeners who do not read music can easily recognise the melody. It is so easy to understand and memorable, that, as a joke, in a season 16 episode of *The Simpsons* called 'The Seven Beer Snitch', the audience leaves after the first four notes are played, having heard 'the good part'. Theodor Adorno was opposed to those types of works. In his view, they represent an objective, rational and organised form that create an illusion of utopia, of natural harmony between the individual and the whole, which leads to the assimilation of the individual and thus also to their suffering, both physically and mentally.

While many studies have been conducted on the importance that Adorno attributed to breaking this kind of representation in music (after all, he dreamt of becoming a composer himself and wrote more essays about music than any other field), *Adorno and the Ban on Images* focuses on a matter whose significance has been largely overlooked: Adorno's criticism of images, or as Sebastian Truskolaski puts it, the image ban 'as a leitmotif in Adorno's thought'.

The book glides smoothly and clearly between Adorno's infamously difficult writings, his more and lesser-known works, his discussions of philosophy, art and politics, the critiques of his predecessors and dialogues with his acquaintances, and reconstructs Adorno's philosophy so that it answers what Truskolaski sees as the central challenge of modern philosophy: 'how to imagine a world beyond suffering and injustice, without simultaneously, betraying its vital impulse'. In order to answer this question, the book offers a rearrangement of Adorno's 'uneasily systematic anti-system around the notion of imagelessness', that is, around 'a thinking which resists representation'. This resistance is precisely what allows the kind of philosophy that Adorno wishes to practice: 'the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption',

as Adorno puts it in *Minima Moralia*.

The book sets out from the biblical story of Moses descending from Mount Sinai after receiving from God the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, only to find the Israelites worshiping a golden calf. Moses then smashes the tablets in anger, and commands in the name of God: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image'. Adorno's invocation of a biblical motif is rather surprising. Religion didn't play a major part in his upbringing, and, as Truskolaski points out, Adorno's understanding of Judaism and Christianity 'owes more to the acquaintance with Benjamin and Kierkegaard respectively, than it does to the Talmud or any catechism'.

Truskolaski nevertheless transforms Adorno's image ban into a 'potent philosophical device', which signals Adorno's commitment to a mode of philosophical critique 'which aims to hold open the possibility that things might yet be otherwise'. He suggests using the commandment against making images to short-circuit the historical dynamic outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is possible, in other words, 'to invoke the image ban – in its capacity as a philosophical-historical marker, rather than a theological edict – to formulate a critical theory of the present'.

For Adorno, this present included two world wars, the Holocaust and totalitarian regimes, as well as repressive features of everyday life under capitalism, in which the individual was more isolated than ever, alienated from nature, society and himself. It is the grave cost of the long-lasting struggle of man against nature depicted in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Human beings assert their place in the world through the mastery of nature, and by doing so denying their own ties to nature. This struggle 'must also be seen as the struggle against oneself'. The internalised sense of domination, in other words, returns as the calamitous revenge of repressed nature: the domination of human beings over each other.

As analysed in the book, this dialectics of human control over nature, which returns to it like a boomerang, was made possible by the asymmetry between subject

and the object, as subjects find different and more efficient ways to exploit objects. Truskolaski interprets and illustrates this issue, showing how, for Adorno, different theories of representation approached the relation between subjects and objects (be they political, grammatical or epistemological) in a way that only widens the asymmetry between them. In Lenin and Engels' views, for example, the 'external world' appears as a mere fact, a rigid system wherein humankind is 'limited to a mere mirroring of the factual'. This elevation of matter to an ontological invariant is used, in Adorno's view, to justify a political configuration where 'governmental terror machines entrench themselves as permanent institutions' thus 'mocking the theory they carry on their lips'. Kant's view is given as another example of the deterioration of the relation of subjects to objects. Kant's theory that the world appears before us as formed by our sensory and intellectual perceptions, so that the objects within it as they are in themselves are unknowable except through an extra-human perspective, which we have no access to, leads to a reification of the subject: 'Subject reduces the object to itself; subject swallows object, forgetting how much it is object itself'.

The book also restructures Adorno's critique of religious representations. Adorno addresses not only the attack of faith by reason in eighteenth-century Europe, but also the turn to religion out of a dissatisfaction with reason in 1950s West Germany, which he interprets as a 'false sense of consolation' and, ultimately, a 'capitalist cult religion', as Truskolaski puts it with a nod to Walter Benjamin. Religion designates what Freud has called a 'system of thought', and, in any case, for Adorno and Horkheimer, there can be no positive representation of 'the absolutely good'. For Truskolaski's Adorno, the yearning for transcendence is potentially emancipatory, but it too runs the danger of reverting into its opposite. The image ban might thus be read as an expression of the sense that something more may be possible.

And so, there is supposed to be another possibility to rethink the subject's coercive gaze, its exploitation of objects, and its positive representations, which only reinforce the damaged life. 'Such a relation between subject and object is not set in stone', but in order to change it, we must reject certain modes of representation, as well as the systems they prop up, and at the same time change our perspective, our standpoint. Instead of try-

ing to represent an external object, be it nature or God, we think the possibility of social transformation from within, through the 'rifts and crevices' of damaged life, or – as Adorno puts it in 'Notes on Kafka' – through the 'cracks and deformations of the modern age'. This will be the standpoint of redemption.

Adorno's goal, as Truskolaski interprets it, is thus to find a different way of thinking, and the image ban is a 'strategic, provisional figure for the kind of thinking that Adorno has in mind'. This point, too, is convincingly demonstrated throughout the book. It is a type of thinking that rejects 'representational thinking', a thinking that thinks thought 'against itself'. This rejection is precisely where Adorno's utopian dimension is realised, as this un-representation, or negative representation, manages best to express the aforementioned 'rifts and crevices' of damaged life. It manages to intimate 'what *ought* to be: a world free from domination, coercion and suffering'.

One of the quotes most identified with Adorno appears at the end of his essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society', where he claims: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. This is a statement he would later retract. 'Perennial suffering', he says in *Negative Dialectics*, 'has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream.' Adorno goes on to formulate a 'new categorical imperative': 'to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen'. In order to represent suffering, or 'the voice of the victim', as Adorno puts it in one of his lectures in 1958, one must ban positive representations of what is to take its place. As Truskolaski puts it: 'Presenting what *is* in such a way that it yields what *ought* to be is the basic movement of Adorno's thinking'.

Works of art, as shown in the book, must follow this guideline. Art is perceived by Adorno as a kind of immanent overturning of ideology, which is viewed as 'untruth' or 'false consciousness' forced from the top down, expressing the attempt of the powers-that-be to justify the capitalist mode of production in order to maintain the existing social order. Art 'manifests' and 'criticises' this ideology of untruth from within, if it manages to present what *is* in such a way that it yields what *ought* to be. That is, art, in its status as an independent cognitive action, is ascribed a principled oppositional task in relation to the contemporary social being. Being autonomous, it em-

bodies opposition to reality and negation of the existing social situation. ‘The profound force of resistance’ that Adorno ascribes to certain artistic renditions lies in their particular ability to ‘negatively intimate an “imageless image of Utopia” as something beautiful’.

Much criticism of Adorno, much of it justified, is that his theory remains a mere theory without providing ways for action, and, moreover, that his theory thwarts the possibility of action. When asked in an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, three months before his death, ‘But how would one go about changing societal totality without individual action?’, he replied: ‘I do not know. I can only analyze relentlessly what is. In the process, I am reproached in the following manner: “If you criticize, you have to say how to do better”, but I consider this a bourgeois prejudice.’ Truskolaski is of course aware of this criticism, and cites Adorno’s words from ‘Marginalia on Theory and Praxis’ where he identifies the division between thought and action with the separation of subject and object. ‘Just as the division of subject and object cannot be revoked immediately by a decree of thought, so too an immediate unity of theory and praxis is hardly possible: it would imitate the false

identity of subject and object and would perpetuate the principle of domination that posits identity and that a true praxis must oppose.’

Truskolaski’s book offers, on behalf of Adorno, another answer to this critique, an answer that is a kind of compromise between passive theory and active action: active thinking. As opposed to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in C Minor, Arnold Schoenberg’s music is given by Adorno as an example of a music that manages to dismantle the sense of cohesion and organicity in Western classical music, thus representing the continuing suffering. Adorno’s admiration for the composer stems from Schoenberg being able to shatter the familiar experience, the pleasant melody, and demand the listener’s active participation. It ‘requires the listener to spontaneously compose his inner movement and demands of him not contemplation but praxis.’ Adorno’s image ban, as the book shows, does exactly this: it requires from us an active way of approaching and thinking about nature, images, representations, and thus serves as a philosophical critique ‘which aims to hold open the possibility that things might yet be otherwise’.

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Witchcraft as praxis

Jack Z. Bratich, *On Microfascism: Gender, War, and Death* (Philadelphia: Common Notions, 2022). 240pp., \$20 pb., 978 1 94217 349 6

Unacquainted readers may think that ‘microfascism’ is perhaps analogous to contemporary terms such as ‘micro-aggression’: the prefix ‘micro’ implying a simple reduction in scale and scope for actions representing larger systems. But *microfascism is not just small fascism*. If fascism is a certain arrangement and organisation of material, political and social institutions, microfascism is relegated to the realm of subjectivity. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s exploration of the idea, Bratich gives three main characteristics of microfascism: ‘1) it takes place “before” but really *in excess* of the state; 2) it exists in minds but moreover in desires, bodies and practices; and 3) it is composed in culture to create individual and collective actions with their own specific fascist results’. Mi-

crofascism does nevertheless have common traits with its ideological namesake. The driving philosophical motor behind both fascism and microfascism is the same: palingenetic restoration/renewal – or, in other words, ‘the continuous revival and return of the “original”’ – and eliminationism.

In a fascist framework, these terms can be grasped with basic examples. One could equate palingenetic restoration/renewal to the obsession with enabling the ‘Aryan race’ to thrive through military power and geographical living space. Palingenetic eliminationism can be understood as the attitude Nazi Germany would have towards various groups that were deemed antagonistic toward Aryan flourishing: Jews, Roma, the disabled, com-