

as much as of ideology and subjectivity. For Bewes, this has always been the promise of the novel – whether in the dialogic quality that Bakhtin praised in the works of Dostoyevsky or in the possibility of an ‘ultimate futility of man’ that the novel made visible to Lukács – though only recently has such a promise been actualised.

In a discourse (novel theory) obsessed with its own obsolescence, it will likely come as a surprise to encounter a book that not only refutes its object’s death but even suggests its apotheosis. If it is indeed an apotheosis, however, it is of a very particular sort, which is to say, it is only an apotheosis if one assumes that the escape from ideology at which Bewes says the novel is arriving is not in fact simply another version of it. Little in *Free Indirect* compels one to share this assumption. Its fantasy of fleeing subjectivity is perhaps most troubling when the book’s argument for a novelistic thought beyond the instantiation relation also insists that it be understood as a version of intersectionality, envisioned by Kimberlé Crenshaw as resistance to ‘static representations of people’s identities’. There is much to be contested in such a comparison. To suggest that an aesthetic practice or a mode of thought can autonomously achieve an ‘essence’ which somehow exists outside the histories that have produced such identities, even if in the speculative realm of a non-subjective literature. The most symptomatic version of this claim comes in an ‘interlude’ in which Bewes likens

the instantiation relation to the practice of ‘profiling’ – from racial profiling to the Cambridge Analytica case – without recognising that the objectification and ‘absolute heterogeneity’ with which he credits an escape from such practices can just as easily be seen as the historical outcome of their justification.

For anyone familiar with Bewes’ earlier work, it might come as a surprise that these problems are never posed in terms of reification, and further that the problematic of reification has all but disappeared from *Free Indirect*. As an earlier essay of Bewes’ attests, the instantiation relation is clearly a close relative of reification, one that lacks its cousin’s rigorous articulation of commodification and the division of labour. Without these historical reference points, *Free Indirect* must seek its escape from thought as conceptuality and schematisation rather than from the historical structures that produce it as such. Even so, the thought Bewes attributes to the novel intimates that provisional escape from commodification and instrumental reason whose last refuge Adorno located in the aesthetic realm. In such a reading, Bewes could be credited with an impressively innovative method of tracking down, albeit in an unrecognisable form, the utopian dimension of the novel, if not of art more generally. Since the novel’s utopian promise is not ‘inhabitable’, however, whatever hope it preserves is not for us.

Carson Welch

Who cares?

Boris Groys, *Philosophy of Care* (London and New York: Verso, 2022). 106pp., £9.99 hb., 978 1 83976 492 9

Boris Groys’ *Philosophy of Care* is comprised of twelve short, pithy sections that plot an abbreviated history of mainly Western philosophy from ancient to modern times. Also included are two diversions into Russian intellectual thought, Groys being an expert on Soviet-era art and literature, as well as a philosopher and media theorist. The course he steers from Socrates and Plato to Hegel, Nietzsche, Kojève and finally to Heidegger, while selective, is a familiar Western philosophical narrative of how the subject negotiates its relation to mortality and immortality through transcendent organising principles,

whether God, History, Being or the Future. But, in another sense, the course steered is strikingly unfamiliar given its reframing in terms of care and self-care and the question of health.

Groys’ use of the terms care and self-care is unrelated to their common parlance in current art theory and practice in which they infer specific historical lineages: respectively, socialist feminisms’ calls to revalue the contribution of social reproduction to labour power, and pedagogic well-being practices in activist struggles, e.g., the Black Panther Party in the 1960s/70s. However, since

at least 2016, self-care has become a kind of mantra for middle-class millennials and art workers in relation to increasingly competitive and exploitative forms of labour in neoliberal capitalism. Self-care has come to mean anything from spa treatments and gym work-outs to going for a walk. While Groys briefly refers to alternative therapies, diet and tai chi in his introduction, his philosophy of self-care seeks to transcend biopolitical systems of care, though he also acknowledges its reliance on their management of illness, death and the 'after-life'.

In fact, Groys' ultimate quest in this treatise on self-care is to tease out the possibilities of the 'after-life' in a post-historical secular era. He begins by making a distinction between the living physical body and the symbolic body. Both bodies involve care. The physical body is tended to by the medical profession. Individuals also take care of themselves without any guarantee that the medical or alternative treatments they opt for will enable good health. The symbolic body is administered by archives, documents and images, all of which preserve its material 'after-life'. However, self-care in Groys' philosophical meditation goes beyond administrative maintenance. It is equivalent to self-assertion, an aggressive form of self-sovereignty that attempts to disengage from and transcend the institutions which, in maintaining functional health, repress the true life of the individual. The philosopher, who is in effect the main character of this little book, seeks freedom.

Beginning with Socrates, Groys examines how in the ancient Western world sovereign self-care was assured by the eternal gaze of divinity. This guarantee allows Socrates to take up the meta-position of contemplation of the soul. Rejecting personal self-interest, Socrates prepares for death in a contemplative mode that avoids struggle and competition. In a familiar reading of Plato's story of the cave in *The Republic*, Groys recounts how the philosopher, in moving out of the darkness towards the eternal light of truth, performs a fearless act of self-assertion in the face of death. To become truly fearless, 'the subject of self-care has to insist on the validity of his or her personal evidence – even against the judgement of the Church or the scientific community'. Although Groys uses the feminine pronoun here, the philosophical discourse of negation that he engages with in this book has an exclusively male patrilineage.

Rather than the soul, Hegel contemplates History,

'here understood as a process of revealing freedom as the essence of human subjectivity'. For Hegel, the terror unleashed by the French revolution signals the end of history when 'the human spirit will establish its own law'. However, in the post-revolutionary state, this ideal is dethroned by 'reasonable institutions' who suppress self-sovereignty by administering to the preservation of life. In secular post-revolutionary society, the after-life is maintained by the museum, the archive, libraries and monuments, with public institutions taking on the 'divine' role of caretaker responsible for the distribution of care between physical and symbolic bodies. In Groys' narrative, the physical body comes off as weak in its dependence on biopolitical systems of care to maintain its health and extend its life. He cites Canguilhem's notion that illness is a lack of biological confidence. As opposed to this exhausted body, the subject of self-care is one whose vital energies resist longevity and mere survival in a push for 'great health'. Nietzsche is the exemplar here, his striving for 'great health' being directed towards the afterlife, the future generations that would come to read his books. Surmounting his often ill psycho-physiological body, Nietzsche invests in the immortal life of the symbolic body and the promise of eternal return.

While Groys continuously oscillates between this *uber* form of self-care and the biopolitical management of care, his emphasis on self-sovereignty intimates that his sympathies lie with the philosopher's sacrificial investment in the immortal life of the symbolic body at the expense of the mortal one. Therefore, it was puzzling when, later in book, he accuses Hannah Arendt, the only female philosopher who gets a look in, of being nostalgic for a time of great men of genius when he had seemed to be advocating for such singularity. Had I been mistaken? An online interview affirmed my initial view: 'As I write in my book, to be healthy means not to fear being ill. If I protect myself from an illness, that means that I am already ill. That is an actual ground for rejecting the masks, vaccination, etc.'

There are further baffling moments when the dialectic between self-care and care begins to slacken and blur, while still being maintained. Claiming that in the post-historical state, everyone is recognised to the same degree, not as equals, but as consumers, Groys asserts that the philosopher as sage is the only one not interested

in consumption. '[T]he emergence of the sage signals the transcending of the opposition between care and self-care, the sage finds satisfaction in the anonymous work of care knowing it will continue in the future'. The philosopher as sage works like a machine. However, the modern opposition between the human as machine and the human as animal reinstalls the dialectic: while the system of care works to sustain the health of its workers, for man as animal, self-sovereignty, not longevity and survival, is the supreme value. The idea of animal self-sovereignty leads to a meditation on Bataille, whose desire for expenditure through an excess of energy can be viewed as a reaction to the heterogeneity of the crowd. Once everyone, in theory at least, has a voice, how does the philosopher assert his singularity over and above the repetitive and consumerist rituals of everyday life?

Groys tracks the development of what he calls the 'divinised public' in Kojève's philosophy. Kojève's way out of the deadlock of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, in which the two are locked in a cyclical battle, is to assert that history is moved by the individual desire for public recognition. Rather than corporeal desires or desire as negation, the desire for the desire of the other – a very Lacanian idea – forms the modern basis of self-sovereignty. Considerable attention is given to the motif of care in Heidegger's *Being and Time* and the self-assertion of *Dasein* / *Isness*. The conflict between institutional care and self-care is repeated here. While modern *dasein* is imprisoned and controlled by technology and institutions, self-care is resistance to 'becoming a thing in the world controlled by others'. As might be expected from a philosopher-/art critic, Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935-6) makes an appearance here. The contrast between authentic existence and mere things is mapped onto the revelation of the truth of peasant life inferred in Van Gogh's infamous painting of his shoes and the cleaning of mere objects by a 'charwoman'. The aristocratic form of self-care is always premised on there being invisible others who maintain the labour of life in domestic and related public spheres. Though Groys makes a u-turn here and reconfigures Heidegger's 'charwoman' as performing a modern mode of self-care in the museum: her maintenance reveals the truth of avant-garde art objects as 'things that present themselves as they are to the gaze of the spectator'. What outside the sphere of art is a mere commodity, e.g., Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913),

in being contemplated as art, acquires an 'after-life', a form of immortality.

From here out, the aim of Groys' meditations becomes clearer. A diversion on the philosopher Nikolay Fedorov, who was part of the Russian cosmism movement, delivers the idea of a radical museumification of life, i.e., that all the people who ever lived should be placed in museums to preserve their immortality. Museum conservation becomes the technology of eternal life, the charwoman, its (Socratic) medium. As opposed to Foucault's critique of biopower which Groys defines as partial and limited, this would be total biopower in which everything is absorbed by care. That this is the only reference to Foucault, who spent most of his time exploring care of the self from ancient to modern times, is a glaring omission. Perhaps Foucault's work might have opened up too many questions about the relational field of self-care practices, whereas Groys' objective is to ascertain the health risks of immortality.

The most ubiquitous absorption of everything into care occurs in the online presentation of the self, which Groys terms self-design, a concept he has been writing about since 2008 in various essays in *e-flux*. Revamped as a form of self-care, self-design functions as a protection against the heterogeneity of contemporary life. Designing itself to be liked by a social gaze that has supplanted God and eternal gaze, the symbolic body performs a form of mimicry that protects the real body that lies behind it. At first it seems as if Groys is advocating this as a form of communal self-care, but then he posits that the prison-house of being trapped in cycles of self-design needs to be escaped. Asking what are the revolutionary conditions that could effect such an escape, he moves into a final meditation on physician and philosopher Alexander Bogdanov.

Unlike most of the cryptic book which assumes some familiarity with Western philosophy, here Groys gives a more detailed explanation of Bogdanov's notion of how all societies operate according to cycles of egression and depression: the former being authoritarian centralised forms of social organisation; the latter, dispersed forms which Bogdanov describes as skeletal. Self-design is a form of skeletal protection. But rather than the multiplicity of self-design resulting in greater flexibility, the societal skeleton becomes 'even more inflexible and ossified'. This, Groys infers, is where 'we' are now, the only

escape from which would be a highly centralised, egressive, revolutionary moment. Here Groys seems to diverge from the singularity of self-sovereignty, suggesting that this revolution could involve patients taking power over the system of medical degression and transforming it in their own interests for their own health.

However, the health Groys has in mind does not stem from the collective empowerment of patients. He instead concludes by recounting a short story by Bogdanov, 'Immortality Day' (1912), about an immortal scientist called Fride who, bored with endless repetition, chooses to be burnt at the stake to regain mortality. Groys' interpretation is that this death fails to lead him out of the prison of degressive repetitions. By contrast, Bogdanov himself died, Groys claims, in a truly egressive manner: convinced of the potential of blood transfusions to enable immortality, he gave his blood to an ill young woman,

saving her life, while ending his. This strange conclusion is both allegory and summary of Groys' notion that sovereign self-care involves a sacrifice of life oriented towards a future after-life.

Given Groys' approach, it is not surprising that, as well as a lack of engagement with Foucault, he does not mention feminist philosophies of care, such as Carol Gilligan or JC Tronto. An image of society as a complex relational field in which care-givers and receivers negotiate the conflicts between dependence and independence, vulnerability and power, is the antithesis of self-sovereignty and contemplation of the after-life. Ultimately, while a provocative and sometimes brilliant revamping of Western philosophy in terms of care and self-care, especially in relation to the internet, the unmarked sovereign self is universal Man and 'great health' is his universal Truth.

Maria Walsh

