

# MINIMAL AUTONOMIES

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*Oliver Haslam*

Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2019, 232pp; \$24.95 paperback, \$89.95 cloth.

Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* explores art's relationship to both the contemporary capitalist market and its own commodity form. The result is a book that convincingly argues for an aesthetic autonomy that is both plausible and political. Brown begins by foregrounding a question posed by György Lukács: "Works of art exist – how are they possible?" before defining in detail the status of the commodity in relation to the market. Brown places art within this context, arguing that autonomy may be achieved through the deployment of internal forms that require interpretative attention and through an internal suspension of the commodity form. For Brown, such autonomy is unavoidably political, as he explains that 'under contemporary conditions, the assertion of aesthetic autonomy is in itself, a political assertion. (A minimal one, to be sure.)' (p33). Brown's distinction of the 'minimal' here is crucial to his argument: if a work is overtly political then it will be valorised into a commodifiable point of view, whereas 'the production of the unvalorisable lodges a "foreign body" at capitalism's ideological weak point' (p151). Brown demonstrates how the commodification of art is an unavoidable fact, but it is from precisely this market position that autonomy is achievable. Art objects are capable of achieving autonomy when they acknowledge their unavoidable relationship to a market and when they subsequently subvert this relationship through an internal formal logic rather than through external expectations such as explicit and potentially commodifiable political content: 'a work's assertion of autonomy is the claim that its form is self-legislating. Nothing more' (p182). Through a revisiting of influential critiques such as Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' and modernist and postmodernist debates regarding artistic autonomy and form, Brown interrogates the nuances of art's relationship to a contemporary market.

Brown begins by constructing a dense theoretical framework, building on the work of Marx, Hegel, Adorno and Jameson in order to contextualise art's existence within contemporary capitalism. From this base, he systematically demonstrates moments of autonomy within an eclectic collection of case studies spanning the mediums of film, photography, sculpture, painting, prose, music and popular television. A chapter on the subject of film and photography brings into dialogue the photography of Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall with Alejandro Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014), and Nic Pizzolatto's

popular television show *True Detective* (2014) to reveal how formal, medium-specific, decisions create autonomy. Another insightful chapter considers the sculptures of Charles Ray in relation to Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005). Significant critical insights are proffered through Brown's particularly astute analyses of citation and historicism formally inherited within studio albums by the Brazilian musician Caetano Veloso and The White Stripes. When discussing the medium of television, Brown reveals how David Simon's *The Wire* negotiates its relationship with genre and unavoidable market expectations internally by moving within the structure of an established genre whilst also internally suspending such obligations by, for example, refusing 'network televisual grammar' and through the insistence of a boxy 4:3 aspect ratio (p169). Far from being exhaustive, these brief chapter descriptions are produced here to highlight the argumentative complexity of an analysis that brings together considerations of Marxism, historicism, genre and form, allowing for the convincing identification of autonomy within an array of artistic works and mediums. Such a breadth of case studies should also be taken here as indicative of the well-evidenced reliability of Brown's primary assertions of art's autonomy.

In chapter two, Brown offers Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) as an example of a text failing to hold as a work due to the novel making 'claims at the level of the sentence that it has no interest in sustaining as a work' (p95). Although this example adequately illustrates Brown's wider argument for autonomy in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, this critique feels slightly underdeveloped. The inclusion of further negative examples would have been a beneficial addition here to strengthen the distinctions between merely stylistic elevation and an autonomous exploitation and overcoming of formal constraints. Regardless, this is a thorough and valuable commentary on the contemporary position of art within capitalism. *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* is essential reading for researchers and students with an interest in contemporary art in relation to the market, and for those interested in Marxist approaches to contemporary aesthetic form.

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# EPOCHAL ECOPOETICS

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David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 164pp; \$23 paperback, \$93 cloth.

In his latest monograph, *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*, David Farrier pursues inclusive approaches to epochal thinking, calling for a reappraisal of disciplinary boundaries in light of the Anthropocene (p3). His contribution to this, from the field of literary studies, is a close analysis of poetry, that seeks to demonstrate the ways in which poetry can ‘model an Anthropocenic perspective’ (p5). Reflecting upon the scalar, systemic, and temporal challenges associated with the Anthropocene-as-concept, Farrier argues that poetry performs ‘work’ akin to the Anthropocene’s manifestation as an ‘intellectual shortcut’ for a wealth of competing scientific and ecocritical narratives, by regularly compressing and expanding vast amounts of meaning, and shifting the focus and scale of our gaze (pp4-5). For Farrier, these functions of poetry are necessary tools through which we might visualise the ‘knotted’, unthinkable structures that characterise the Anthropocene and climate change, to help us navigate our increasingly fraught relationship with the world around us (p128).

*Anthropocene Poetics* communicates this argument in three parts, each guided by a set of theoretical frameworks familiar to scholars of the environmental humanities. These frameworks, it should be noted, do not align entirely faithfully to the ecocritical buzzwords that comprise the book’s subtitle, more closely exploring “thick time”, capitalist world-ecology, and kin-making, in turn. This incongruity is largely admissible, however, given the wide range of both scholarship and poetry that the book grapples with in its relatively short page span. A wealth of varied texts – as disparate as Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Sandpiper’ (1962) and Christian Bok’s *Xenotext* (2015) – widen the aperture of the work to include a broad definition of both poetry and poetics. Farrier’s relaxed traversal between art, theory, and poetry offers insight into more than he claims will be tackled in his introduction; the book does not only address the ways poetry might model an Anthropocenic perspective but delineates, too, how an Anthropocenic perspective is intrinsically poetic. Building on Karen Barad, Farrier stresses that eco-poetic criticism must be reflexive in its approaches to imagining the epoch: ‘if our goal is to think the social and the natural together’, he writes, ‘we need a method that does so “without defining the one against the other”’, and respects their status ‘as mutually transformative entities’ (p70).

Acknowledging this, then, as one of the book’s great strengths, I would have

liked to see a little more dialogue between each chapter of *Anthropocene Poetics*, to reconcile the overlaps and tensions that exist between the overarching themes guiding Farrier's argument. If each chapter is designed to represent an 'untying' of one strand of entangled Anthropocenic relations, a subsequent acknowledgement of the implications that deep time, capitalist world-ecology, and kin-making have upon each other in the context of poetics would have been welcome in an extended conclusion – especially if, as Farrier hopes, literature and its criticism are to 'point us toward a careful retying' of these knots (p128). These are relatively minor critiques, however, of an excellent book. As it stands *Anthropocene Poetics* is a timely and innovative addition to the wealth of recent publications on ecopoetics, that leaves open an ample number of avenues for further exploration.

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