

REVIEWS

Geoff Boucher. *Adorno Reframed*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013, 166 pp. ISBN 978-1-84885-947-0

In the series 'Contemporary Thinkers Reframed' it is now Theodor W. Adorno's turn. Geoff Boucher states in the preface that his reframing is not just a presentation for newcomers, but is also an attempt to re-examine 'Adorno as a utopian thinker rather than a bleak pessimist' (p. ix). This is a worthy ambition. Boucher's move is to read Adorno's philosophy and aesthetics as a parallel development to the Expressionism advanced in the years between the First and the Second World War and the Abstract Expressionism of the period after the First World War. One of Boucher's introductory examples of Expressionist art is Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. But whereas the film shows a dystopian cityscape and a clash between workers and capitalists, its harmonious maxim – 'the heart is the mediator between the mind and the hand' – together with the film's reconciliatory ending, neither of which Boucher mentions, makes it an uneasy fit with Adorno's insistence that art for the sake of Utopia avoids its depiction.

In Chapter One, Adorno's defence of modernism is situated in its historical context – namely, the debate with Georg Lukács. Boucher gives a clear account of the major differences between the two thinkers: the position of totality which Adorno questions and Lukács embraces; Adorno's critique of the transformation of realist art to standardized convention and Lukács's ahistorical understanding of realism; and, finally, Adorno's use of Freudian notions like sublimation and Lukács's dismissal of psychoanalysis. Boucher's discussion of the theory of sublimation does not, however, take Adorno's criticism of it into account. Adorno is of course careful to point out that sublimation is not repression but a preservation of needs in a mediated way, but he does not embrace the theory of sublimation completely. In fact, he criticizes Freud's understanding of sublimation in art for ending up in an adaption to the reality principle, and thus leaving no room for critique.¹ Boucher's reading of Adorno's concept of mimesis is also somewhat one-sided. While rightly claiming the concept of mimesis as fundamental both for Adorno's negative dialectics and for his aesthetics, Boucher's stress on mimesis being about the subject imitating the object '*as a thing*' (p. 60, emphasis in original) misses a great deal of the radicalness of Adorno's views. As Adorno points out, for instance, in the aesthetics lectures of 1958–59, a mimetic comportment is one where the object imitated is not

¹ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 12. German original: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 25.

regarded as a thing/object opposed to a subject in the traditional philosophical way, but as a corporeal and unique individual entity with which we are affined.²

Chapter Two focuses on Adorno's conception of modernist art. Boucher follows the polemical opposition Adorno stages, in *Philosophy of New Music*, between the progressive Schoenberg and the regressive Stravinsky, and applies this schema to painting by opposing Wassily Kandinsky to Emil Nolde in the same manner. Boucher thus interprets Kandinsky's abstract paintings as a counterpart to Schoenberg's atonal compositions in their combining of 'rational construction and spontaneous expressivity' (p. 83). This is contrasted with the nostalgia for a past unharmed by the alienation in modern capitalist society conveyed by Nolde's paintings, which are characterized by Boucher as uniting 'spontaneous naturalness and archaic ritual' (p. 90) in a highly problematic manner reminiscent of Stravinsky's music. Boucher presents this opposition as 'rationalization' versus 'authenticity', thus neglecting that Adorno does not use 'authenticity' as a wholly pejorative concept comparable to 'regression', not even in *Philosophy of New Music*, but rather as a concept containing self-reflexivity.³

Chapter Three focuses on *Aesthetic Theory*, and relies heavily, as Boucher himself states in the beginning of the chapter, on Zuidervaart's *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*.⁴ Boucher's own contribution is a reading of *Aesthetic Theory* in the context of Anselm Kiefer's Neo-Expressionist artworks. The motive for Boucher's reading is Kiefer's return to figurative painting, and Boucher wants to challenge what in his opinion is 'two common, related misreadings of Adorno's position' (p. 95). These two misreadings are attributed to Benjamin Buchloh, and in both cases Conceptual Art is regarded as the only possible critical form of art after Abstract Expressionism. Boucher is of course right in pointing out, or picking up Susan Buck-Morss's illumination, that Adorno's invoking of *Bilderverbot* is a ban on explicit depiction of reconciliation and not on figuration per se. Boucher gives a detailed analysis of Kiefer's monumental landscape painting *Himmel auf Erden* (1998–2004), and convincingly argues for its capacity to give voice to the victims of a rationalization gone awry.

In Chapter Four, Boucher gives a good account of both the strengths and the weaknesses in Adorno's position when discussing challenges to it from chiefly three areas: postmodernism, feminism, and the linguistic turn in philosophy. Here

² See Theodor W. Adorno, *Nachgelassene Schriften: Vorlesungen*, vol. 3, *Ästhetik (1958/59)*, ed. Eberhard Ortland (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009), 70.

³ For an illuminating account of Adorno's use of the concept of authenticity (*Authentizität*), see Max Paddison, 'Authenticity and Failure in Adorno's Aesthetics of Music', in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 198–221.

⁴ Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

Boucher also balances some of his previously rather categorical claims, for example, he mentions Adorno's re-evaluation of Stravinsky in the essay 'Stravinsky: A Dialectical Portrait', where Adorno actually sees critical potential in Stravinsky's music. Boucher also discusses Adorno's use, in *Aesthetic Theory*, of 'authentic art' for art with truth content, even though Boucher maintains his argument from Chapter 2 and claims that "'authenticity" (i.e. a nostalgic regression to supposed naturalness) is different from authentic art' (p. 136). The chapter ends by rightly noting that Adorno's recognition of how central an ecological balance is for human flourishing makes him acutely relevant to our times.

Curiously, Boucher's reference to *Aesthetic Theory* goes to Christian Lenhardt's criticized translation from 1984 (although the name of the translator does not appear in the list of references). A closer look at the quotations and page references, however, reveals that it is in fact Robert Hullot-Kentor's far superior translation from 1997 that Boucher refers to. The mix-up is of course a setback for reader-friendliness.

As an introduction to Adorno's aesthetics, Boucher's book is satisfactory. In most cases it gives an adequate account of Adorno's most important ideas, and some valuable clues to his relevance today. The emphasis on painting makes for the book's most original contribution to the extensive literature on Adorno, even though Bernstein's *Against Voluptuous Bodies* provides, in my opinion, the best Adornian analysis of an art Adorno himself did not write much about.⁵

Boucher's focus is on the relationship between art and society in Adorno's aesthetics (in line with Zuidervaat and many others) and he stresses Adorno's view on the hermetic quality of the artwork as a result of its opposition to exchange society. Such a focus, however, overlooks the fact that the unintelligibility of artworks is just as much connected to art's crucial relation to nature and natural beauty. Adorno's great advantage is that he connects these relationships: the intensified exploitation of nature in science at large (including identity thinking) is in line with capitalism's expansion, and artworks protest against the disappearance of the possibility of regarding anything as an end in itself by simultaneously, in a difficult balancing act, proposing that they are just that (ends in themselves) but not quite (because it is not possible under current conditions). There are glimpses of this wider perspective in Boucher's work, but I would have liked to see it more thoroughly elaborated.

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⁵ J. M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).