

**BORIS GROYS (2012) INTRODUCTION TO
ANTIPHILOSOPHY. TRANS. D. FERNBACH.
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What is the opposite of philosophy? Is it the ignorant disavowal of knowledge? Is it the passionate embrace of faith? Is it subjective, contingent action in the absence of universal structures of meaning? Is it the Internet? All of this, none of this, and more, answers Boris Groys, an art and media theorist who currently holds the position of Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University. Groys is perhaps best known in the English-speaking academy as the author of *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1992), as well as the more recent *Art Power* (2008) and *The Communist Postscript* (2009), in which he argues, in provocative and counter-intuitive ways, for the formative ideological role of art and language under the conditions of historical communism and contemporary capitalism. In his latest book, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, Groys widens his sights to take in the recent history of Western philosophising which, he argues, is characterised by a turn from truth and critique to choice and command. Presented as a series of 'benevolently descriptive' engagements with an idiosyncratic assortment of possible anti-philosophers (xxii), this collection of essays flits across the landscape of 20th century philosophy and critical theory in pursuit of the antiphilosophy of the title: an attitude-cum-method that Groys presents as analogical to the Dada's 'anti-art.' For, just as artists such as Marcel Duchamp sought to disrupt the institutions of the art world through the introduction of everyday objects into the gallery space, the anti-philosopher welcomes ordinary experiences into philosophical practice in order to ultimately bring that practice into question (viii). The exact manifestations of anti-philosophy take on different forms – art, literature, religion, personal identity, electronic media or angst – in different contexts, but what they hold in common is an alleged opposition to philosophy as usual in favour of new forms of knowledge.

In execution, however, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* is much less coherent than such a synopsis might suggest. Held together by what functions in practice as a fairly loose connecting thread, this collection often strays wide of the central argument of antiphilosophy for long stretches, choosing instead to revel in digressions, diversions and down-right departures. This is not to suggest that the book's stated thesis is misleading, but rather that the concept of antiphilosophy permits a great deal of conceptual leeway. Consequently, antiphilosophy does not weigh so heavily upon the author's mind as to directly and explicitly inform every page (or, a skeptic might suggest, every chapter) and, as a consequence, the reader is often left to consider for themselves how a given intervention might be understood in those terms. *Introduction to Antiphilosophy's* inconsistency is in no doubt partly a consequence of the book's genesis as a collection of essays 'written at different times, for different purposes, in different languages' (vii): an approach to publishing in translation which seems to echo those conference panels invariably composed of the papers which would not fit elsewhere. If one were in a generous mood, this could be considered an intellectual collage that enacts one of the central tenets of Groys' antiphilosophy, whereby the production of objects and texts gives way to their curation (xiii). A less generous interpretation might suggest that – as fascinating as Groys' post-hoc rationale of antiphilosophy might be – it lacks the over-arching explanatory power to impose a singular narrative upon this diverse collection. This is by no means to dismiss *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, though: simply to note that the coherence of the volume is more a product of its binding than any consistent theme. Thus, what one is left with is less the steady exposition of a new way of thought evoked by the idea of an 'introduction' and more an assemblage of astute, incisive theoretical and philosophical essays that, although they might lack the common thread promised by antiphilosophy, certainly return time and time again to a set of broad but persistent themes: immortality and repetition; the social role of art, literature and mass culture; the distinction between religion, theology and philosophy as systems of knowledge; and the constant revelation of the biographical, psychological and social existence of intellectuals.

Organised largely with reference to particular authors, Groys' intellectual itinerary encompasses an extensive range of themes and figures that span the centuries from Søren Kierkegaard to Marshall McLuhan and that run the gamut from the well-known to the less familiar to the unanticipated. As one might expect, there are several usual suspects, such as Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Nietzsche and

Jacques Derrida, who exist at the ill-defined border of philosophy and critical theory. However, alongside the more familiar characters, Groys' collection also plays host to several thinkers whose names and work are largely absent from contemporary discussion. Thus, in addition to Benjamin on capitalist reproduction, Martin Heidegger on the art of the future, and Kierkegaard on infinite despair, Groys also (re)introduces Leo Shestov on biographical trauma as the basis of philosophy, Alexandre Kojève as the original evangelist of the Hegelian end of history, and Ernst Jünger on technological immortality. While there is no question that such authors and their work will already be familiar to some readers, it is in addressing such figures that *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* draws closest to the promised introductions of its title as Groys proffers another new path through the tangled tradition of critical thought. One of the most pleasant consequences of this collection, therefore, is a new perspective on the underlying dialogues and movements of the continental philosophical tradition, especially as they speak to contemporary concerns in critical and cultural theory. What is perhaps even more surprising, though, is the extension of this tradition through the inclusion of New World theorists such as art critic Clement Greenburg and media scholar Marshall McLuhan, who are seamlessly integrated into the discussion amongst the colossi of Continental philosophy. McLuhan, in particular, stands newly revealed as a successor to Nietzsche and Benjamin as he takes a central role in Groys' closing essays, in dialogue with Gotthold Lessing's *Laocoon* and Richard Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as Groys considers whether the Internet should be considered 'hot' or 'cool' (212-7). The overall impression of *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, then, is of a generous, unapologetically incomplete and at times unwieldy assortment of political, aesthetic and ethical commentary.

As is almost inevitably the case with such a collection, each reader will find their own favourites as a function of their own prejudices and priorities. Readers approaching from the perspective of cultural studies and cultural theory, especially those concerned with theory arising out of the Frankfurt School, will probably gain the most from chapters on Benjamin, Jünger and Heidegger, as well as the final chapters on participatory art and media theory. Not only do these essays showcase the ease with which Groys weaves together multiple threads of critical, art and cultural theory, but also the fluency with which he enters into and recasts long-standing debates in unforeseen ways. Forgoing the turgid and mystifying language that often impedes such matters (a state of affairs which surely owes as

much to the translation of David Fernbach as it does to the original writing), Groys cuts to the core of these discussions in clear, elegant, even sometimes conversational prose (or as close as one can get in such matters). In doing so, he identifies what it is about these discussions that made them so pertinent, so interesting in the first instance. Moreover, although *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* presumes a fairly developed prior acquaintance with the broad range of the names, concepts and essays – from Mikhail Bakhtin to Andy Warhol, Constructivism to Gnosticism – that form the basic materials of critical and cultural theory, Groys is a reliable guide through the thick tangle of allusions and references. In most instances, he takes care to explain enough to ensure a more casual reader should be able to remain abreast of his central arguments and, more particularly, identify the manner in which he challenges critical orthodoxy and unearths new possibilities in old discussions.

For example, Groys' chapter on Benjamin returns to long-standing debates regarding the Frankfurt School's contrasting roles as philosopher and theologian, but does so in light of a new and idiosyncratic notion of how that distinction might be understood: the philosopher is engaged in an endless search for a future truth that cannot be possessed, whereas the theologian seeks to remember and reproduce an already revealed truth (92-3). Groys positions Benjamin, who 'was above all a thinker of remembrance and reproduction,' squarely in the theological camp (94). As with his own angel of history, this version of Benjamin is always orientated towards the past, and perceives modernity as an era of truth lost through capitalist reproduction, rather than produced through Avant-Garde progress. Drawing on similar arguments to those developed in *The Communist Postscript*, Groys, speaking through Benjamin, thus declares capitalism to be the ultimate theological entity: an endlessly-reproductive and reproducing cult that operates in total silence, which is to say that it does not legitimate itself through words, only numbers (97). Existing beyond discourse, capitalism cannot therefore be challenged through a philosophical language of truth, because truth is irrelevant to its functioning. However, in a twist worthy of a short story, Groys closes his essay with an argument for the continued possibility of critique via an attack on the most canonical of Benjaminian concepts: the aura, and the withering thereof. For having founded a terrifying vision of all-encompassing theological capitalism on Benjamin's notion of reproduction, Groys asks 'to what extent is a copy really a copy, rather than something quite different?' (101). The 'diasporic' nature of the copy – the fact that it occupies a different context than the

original – renders it something different, something new and therefore something that can take on an aura of its own and thereby inform continued philosophical critique. Groys thus speaks first through and then against Benjamin to articulate a new conception of capitalism: he uses Benjamin as a raw material by which to build up and tear down his own account of the critical role of language and culture under the market conditions of contemporary capitalism.

The structure of this argument, even in summary, gives a strong sense of the overall rhythm of this book, which repeatedly turns to a revelatory structure. In many instances, the effect is productively jarring – Heidegger’s belief that the work of art spoke to the future is re-articulated as a mystification of formalism, now compromised by the progressive role of the art museum (61-5); Derrida’s defence of the literary archive is re-articulated as a narcissistic celebration of intellectual elites (82-7); Jünger’s desire for a collective, conformist worker’s state is re-articulated as a unique, aesthetic experience that finds its echoes in Malevich and contemporary Hollywood (140-3). Yet I often found myself wishing that Groys had begun, rather than ended his essays, with these provocations. As fascinating as these late-breaking interventions are, the fact that they are only presented in conclusion means that they remain largely exploratory and under-developed: this is a shame as they are frequently the most productive sections of the various essays. What also goes unaddressed is the wider context of Groys’ readings, which, at their most insular, lack any connection or indeed justification in terms of broader social concerns. His explanation of Kierkegaard, which opens the volume, is intriguing as a re-telling of the philosopher’s method of radical self-doubt in terms of Dadaism, but lacks explanation of how or why such a reading might inform other, more immediate conversations. Similarly, while Groys’ denunciation of Derrida’s reading of nuclear war is entertaining as an example of bare-knuckles scholarship, the reasons for the essay’s republication is left unclear. Hence, though they remain interesting illustrations of scholarly argument, such chapters do not draw the sweeping, powerful connections or proffer the unexpected, but compelling insights which characterise Groys’ most stimulating work.

In his opening remarks regarding the affinity between antiphilosophy and anti-art, Groys notes that while anti-art may have initially threatened the radical repudiation of art, in practice, anti-art was surprisingly easy to integrate into artistic institutions and traditions (viii). This observation is presented as a mollification to those who might regard antiphilosophy as a threat – do not worry,

antiphilosophy has come to rescue, not bury, philosophy. Like anti-art before it, anti-philosophy is not destined to refute that which came before, but rather mark the next stage of its development. However, there is an important distinction to be made here. Anti-art emerged as an aggressive, egregious assault against the artistic powers that be, and was only later inducted into the gallery space. In contrast, Groys presents antiphilosophy as a continuation and evolution of philosophy in a new epistemological environment almost from the moment of its very inception. This is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of antiphilosophy, for having presented his argument in this way, Groys effectively disperses any radical potential that may have been assigned to this interpretive act: the premature capitulation of antiphilosophy robs it of its promise to unsettle existing intellectual arrangements. What one is therefore left with is a series of interesting, enlightening and productive interventions into ongoing theoretical debates. What is not realised, however, is the radical, potentially scandalous, intervention insinuated by the title, the preface and indeed the figure of Groys himself. In the wash, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* is more 'introduction' than 'antiphilosophy,' though not really much of either: it is a volume of mature, erudite commentary that unfortunately never descends into the intellectual mischief and mayhem to which it pretends.

References

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