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Admiring *Autonomy*

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**Fabio Akcelrud Durão,
"Admiring Autonomy"¹**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss3/3>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.3 (2020)**

Special Issue: **A Symposium on Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*. Edited by Mathias Nilges.**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss3/>>

¹ This response article profited from a discussion with the Modsquad and Lost Causa study groups at the University of Victoria. I would like to thank Amy Tang and Mark Zion for organizing it.

Fabio Akcelrud DURÃO**Admiring *Autonomy***

In the composition of a review, the question of distance is no less important than in any other act of interpretation. When disagreement is too great, verging on the absurd, when it involves the most basic assumptions and otherwise unquestionable points of departure, the reviewer's task must be that of constructing a common ground, bridging what otherwise would prove to be irreconcilable positions.² This is of course much more easily said than done, for as a rule the reasonable and sober, well-balanced stance is precisely the least effective way to mediate opposites: it most likely ends up being unsatisfactory to both. As in so many other instances, the solution is to proceed from the extremes; and since distance is naturally connected to affect, writing must strive to convert the latter from an impediment into a tool of discovery. The stylization of anger, so well done by critics like Robert Hullot-Kentor (e.g., in several of his reviews and in some essays of *Things Beyond Resemblance*), can be a useful *modus operandi* to mobilize to one's favor that which, untamed, would only lead to a sheer refusal.

Irony, sarcasm and parody, exaggeration, tongue-in-cheek, deadpan, *reductio ad absurdum* are some of the artifices allowing one to engage utterly contrary arguments from and against themselves. But the same holds true for the opposite problem, for when the book to be reviewed is too close and agreement proves to be too strong, a neutralizing effect can also take place. Simple paraphrase is tedious, and few speech acts are as paralyzing as praise, for through it the object extolled becomes immobilized, its contradictions flattened, its movement arrested. In order to escape this, a possible strategy is that of stylizing admiration, which leads to an inverse movement, not of speaking with the adversary's tongue, but of bringing the work to oneself and accommodating it, commenting and highlighting, exploring ideas and developing potentialities it seems not to be aware of. (N.B.: in this case, naming the affect is already part of the process of taming it). As for which of the two is more productive, anger or admiration, let the reader decide for herself.

Autonomy is so much concerned with the interpretation of artworks as they constitute themselves as such, that it fails to fully unpack the main implication from its own findings, namely that autonomy is not only the precondition for the work to stand on its own but a vehicle for the production of new knowledge: in its most emphatic form, a kind of knowledge that could not be obtained otherwise.

But we should properly start by recuperating the old meaning of the word, that connected to astonishment and perplexity in view of something strange (in Latin, *mirari*: "to wonder," from *mirus*: "wonderful," the same root as in "miracle"). For someone from the outside, in my case Brazil, the lengths to which *Autonomy* goes to articulate its grounding claim appear strangely puzzling. Why would one need to drop so much ink (or exercise so much his fingertips on the keyboard), just to argue that objects composed according to their own internal logic, i.e. art, are more interesting and gratifying than those subjected to the exterior imperative to please in order to sell? Or that form and not immediate content is the most determining aspect of any artistic object and aesthetic experience? Apart from everything else, *Autonomy* can be read as a testimony to the pitiful state of the current theoretical debate in Anglo-American academia, a debate that seems able to progress only by regressing.

One consequence of this, which significantly increases the difficulty of Nicholas Brown's task, is that the categories he would need to dispose of in order to carry out his project swiftly and smoothly are not available anymore. Whatever meaning the concept of "work" might have had in the past, as something in any way whatsoever distinct from the quotidian flux salable items, has disappeared. In spite of Barthes, its replacement by "text" was not fully conscious or programmatic, but rather advanced in tandem with the spirit of our time—very much in the same way that academics at large started to use "canon" for "tradition" without really noticing it.³ Something similar applies to the notion of "meaning,"

² This became a particularly acute problem in the current Brazilian political situation, marked as it is by a government that gives vent to such preposterous ideas that until now could only appear in the lowest of bad taste comedies. One example among many is Reuters, "Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro Shocks with 'Golden Shower' Tweet."

³ The pragmatics of academic concepts in the neoliberal university should be studied more. "Paradigm," for instance, is always used with the qualifier "new" and is always something positive. As such its real function is that of advertisement for one's theory.

which after the structuralist turn (which in spite of all possible changes continues to this day) acquired a technical sense, the pairing of signifier to signified, however flexible the conjunction is supposed to be. Meaning thus became separated from anything qualitative; its opposite ceased to be the barbarous, absurd, or mad, to disappear in the semiotic universe of gradation, of either more or less meaning. Most noticeably in the case of intertextuality, the presupposition seems to be that the more meaning (links, references, allusions, dialogues etc.) the better—meaning as a result becoming meaningless.

And yet, the retrograde character of contemporary theory and the accompanying absence of an adequate set of conceptual instruments ironically prove to be positive factor here, because they oblige Brown to start from scratch and spell out a consistent and detailed justification for what was before invisible as a question, outside the horizon of inquiry simply because it was taken for granted. This is carried out in the introduction of *Autonomy* (1-39), which by means of a detailed reading of Marx's *Capital* slowly and meticulously grounds the work of art as the determinate and unemphatic other of the commodity. Such grounding is a pathbreaking one, which deserves to be emphasized: the privileged status of art is reached through an analysis of the immanent movement of capital rigorously without an appeal to anything transcendent in the artifact, not talent, genius or inspiration – notions still very much alive in cultural industry both as contents and part of advertising material.

The central opposition here is one between art as something in itself, something self-regulated and commodities as entities for others. What underpins this distinction is the concept of intention: to construct something so that it can stand on its own, in opposition to articulating elements to cater for the consumers' imagined liking. One must call attention to the significance of this recuperation of intention, for this concept has become one of the privileged punching bags of (post) structuralism, not only condemned as a romantic residue, but also denounced as complicit with humanism and all that was supposed to come with it.⁴ Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that its suppression was one of the founding gestures of what became literary theory as we know it. But intention in *Autonomy* should not be confused with matters of content; it does not relate to the specific nature of the author's previous experience; nor is it supposed to transparently translate a compositional plan into an aesthetic object. Intention means rather the disposition to engage directly with the artifact in the process of composition according to the logic of its own gradual coming into being. Once you write the first word on paper or the screen, the second is necessarily affected by it, and often in foreseen ways. Of course, a preliminary sense of the finished thing may be present (but not necessarily) from the start, but no work emerges without the marks of its making.

If concerns about the market do not interfere as an a-priori in the composition (i.e. if it is not under real subsumption to capital), if the artifact is not conceived as a commodity in the first place, if the intention is to produce a thing standing on its own and following its internal articulations, then the work on the artistic material will stage a confrontation with social contents. It is a construction to the second degree, because since any aesthetic raw material is always already socially pre-formed, any aesthetic question will in one way or another engage social matters. Intention does not obviously guarantee that the work will be successful, but without it, society's centripetal force will most likely convert the artifact into a commodity;⁵ nor can success be ascertained immediately, for critical thinking is needed as an additional, posterior layer that exposes the work's truth, something *Autonomy* performs so admirably. But before dwelling on the relationship between art and knowledge as unfolded in Brown's readings, a few words on another conceptual breakthrough are in order.

Bourdieu's concept of a restricted field was forged in a demystifying spirit: art does not mirror reality (nor the more interesting opposite, as aestheticism would have it), for art is regulated by an environment of its own, in which a host of agents besides artists are active, such as museums and their staffs (e.g. think how guards affect the contemplation of artistic pieces), curators, presses, newspaper critics, academic commentators, and different degrees of rich people. The pointing finger of the French sociologist is not a solitary one, however; a similar accusation can be found in the well-known *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, by Peter Bürger, which vehemently claimed that the avant-gardes questioned art as an institution, so that any movement failing to do so would look suspicious as alienated, a potential sellout. So it is that the indictment of artistic institutions became first critically dominant and eventually

⁴ Just as Brown, I too read Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp's "Against Theory" (1982) in the past and failed to "see the force of their account of 'theory' when I first encountered it because I thought one could remain agnostic about intention without sacrificing any of the insights of what I thought of as 'theory'" (*Autonomy* 185 n16).

⁵ This is in fact relevant: the social naturalization of the commodity form goes so deep psychologically and in intersubjective relations that for all its contradictory character it exerts a gravitational force. Artists must then devise strategies to make intention possible, which now emerges more as a breaking away from than as a sheer decision. The classic panic of the white page is imbued here of a new social truth.

a commonplace. Brown reverses the valences here: it is not a question of denying the existence of these instances, nor of all the regrettable characteristics apparently endemic to them such as competition, favoritism or pampering the wealthy etc.; it is instead important to realize that whatever ills may be associated with museums, they are outweighed by the role institutions play protecting art from the market. Indeed his argument reaches beyond the sphere of art and becomes fundamental also for the defense of the public university, which is so commonly attacked as an "ideological state apparatus" by those who fancy themselves on the left. As Brown lets us surmise, if a total destruction of the restricted field is unlikely, since it is functional for the world of commodities at least as a reference, it can still be reduced to a minimum; and even if its expansion (museums and free public universities for all) is no surrogate for the revolution, it is still something worth struggling for.

The second part of *Autonomy* comprises four chapters, which offer sophisticated and compelling readings of a number of works from different genres, both unequivocally artistic and not so much so. Brown's talent to be comfortable both in close textual readings and in abstract and speculative thought and analysis is indeed quite rare, and his ability to mediate different objects, establishing internal connections in otherwise discrepant universes of meaning, something he already carried out in *Utopian Generations* (2005), is here raised to a higher level. Unless one finds blunders in them, detailed immanent analyses are hard to comment on task, being perhaps more congenial to the classroom than to a short review (more than discrediting the review such resistance speaks well for immanent deciphering and attention to details); nonetheless, two general observations can be developed here. The first one is that *Autonomy* is so much concerned with the interpretation of artworks as they constitute themselves as such,⁶ that it fails to fully unpack the main implication from its own findings, namely that autonomy is not only the precondition for the work to stand on its own, or for the emergence of strong pleasure on the part of the recipient (since the object was not made for me), but a vehicle for the production of new knowledge, in its most emphatic form a kind of knowledge that could not be obtained otherwise.

Each of the four chapters of the book scrutinizes one single structuring compositional procedure that, by allowing the work to stand on its own, results in its autonomy. The first one investigates, in film and photography, "successful attempts to fold the appropriative line from artworks to audience into the immanent structure of the work" (45); the second, devoted to the novel, approaches the question of experience and its subsumption into meaning in what is characterized as the ruse of the work "by which contradictory intentions resolve [...] by way of an ironizing of ends external to the logic of the work" (82); the third analyses the role of gestural-citational strategy in music as a way of achieving autonomy while coping with market segregation; the fourth, finally, examines the logic whereby a TV program can become autonomous by turning generic regulation as a means of individuation. The point here is that each of these formal compositional principles, which only become operational after painstaking interpretation, has a cognitive content of its own, which remains to be explored. To take one example: in his reading of Jeff Wall's *Morning Cleaning*, Brown argues that the picture "models the concept of totality. Alejandro [the cleaner] inhabits not a world but a standpoint; the tourist who will shortly enter the space likewise inhabits not a world but a standpoint. While actual or potential bodies occupy these standpoints, these standpoints cannot be reduced to bodies" (66-67). This means that while the picture is one, it projects two exclusive ways of seeing it: apart from the picture itself, there is no way to unify these positions, no possible overarching synthesis or amalgamation. The political consequences deriving from this are as rich as obvious. In sum, for every single formal dispositive described in *Autonomy* one could think of a corresponding piece of knowledge about society.

The second question deserving mention here concerns the works interpreted by Brown, not as individual instances of successful autonomization, but rather when considered as a coherent set. As he remarks, "[t]he ensemble is intended as a rough sketch of what a system of the arts would look like if it were oriented toward the problem that the anonymous market, both the real and the projected horizon of interpretation, poses for meaning" (27). Such new system of the arts would have at least one admirable feature. In a late essay, Adorno notes a new phenomenon he calls "die Verfransung der Künste," which could be translated as the in-fringe-ment of the arts, a historical aesthetic process whereby the artistic system starts to decompose ("Fränse" is "fringe"), leading to promiscuous approximation and mixing of the different artistic genres.⁷ As artforms encroach on the space of others, not to generate a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but by following the development of their own internal logic,

⁶ In *Modernism and Coherence* (2008) I argue that autonomy is present on both ends of the artistic process, both as a precondition for composition and as a result achieved with help of interpretation. That autonomy is not given but reached through rigorous analysis raises the question of the status of criticism and its role in the discovery of meaning.

⁷ For a more detailed discussion see Eichel; Brunkhorst; and Durão ("As artes").

their common character as aesthetic language (*Sprachcharakter*) becomes apparent, as does the contradiction between art and culture industry. It is tempting to read *Autonomy* as evincing a further step in this dynamic. Each chapter of the book starts with the analysis of a work in a given medium, while the main interpretation is carried out regarding a different one, thus naturally drawing them closer and suggesting that the compositional procedures identified could be productively used in other artistic genres. But more than that, the more or less established boundaries separating emphatic art from just entertainment are not respected, for not only is the case that supposed instances of the former are debunked, as the later Coetze and postmodern stylistics in general, but also the specimens of the latter, such as *The Wire*, are vindicated as artworks.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of *Autonomy* lies in the perspective it opens for a genuinely critical assessment of contemporary aesthetics by eschewing two common positions. Traditionalists (for they still exist) are invested in a strong concept of art and try to protect it from what they consider, with more reason than it is normally acknowledged, to be the invasions of mass culture; as a result, they tend to adopt a defensive and insulated behavior that responds with silence to a great deal of what is socially representative. Culture-studies-oriented approaches, on the other hand, advocate an all-inclusive stance, which speaks for what is trending, what is being talked about, but by surrendering effective distinctions and setting the stakes so low they close the door to the experience of what would be extraordinary and cognitively fruitful; worse still, in the most pronounced cases theoretical discourse becomes indistinguishable from the advertisement campaigns of the objects they should be investigating. Brown's talent to interpret immanently the most diverse aesthetic mediums opens new ground: by relentlessly refusing to abandon a strong notion of art and by judiciously incorporating works of high social impact, *Autonomy* lets one imagine what true progress in research in aesthetics would look like, and how critical thinking can be revitalized by joining readings of relevance and scope. This is quite enough reason for admiration.

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