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Review of Enea Bianchi's *The Philosophy of Mario Perniola* (2022)¹

This engaging and erudite book does two things: it offers a comprehensive survey of the thought of the Italian aesthetician, philosopher, and media theorist Mario Perniola (1941–2018), and strikingly juxtaposes it with the lives and thought of three famous dandies, making a persuasive case that what Perniola devised over the course of his long career in fact amounts to a philosophical theory of, or grounding for, dandyism.

The book has a rhythmic structure. Each of its three parts introduces a cluster of Perniolan concepts, and then concludes with a chapter outlining the life, practice, and thought of a relevant figure from the history of dandyism, exemplifying those concepts. In the first part, we encounter Perniola's critique of what he calls the *meta-novel* – that is, a modern form of the novel in which the subject of the book is its own writing – and, spinning out from that, his critique of 'spontaneity' and 'authenticity'. From there we move through his upbeat take on Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum to the first part's culminating concepts, the expanded *epoché*, and the notion of *ritual without myth*.

Husserl's phenomenological *epoché* is the suspension of judgement concerning the signification of one's experiences, to focus analysis purely on the experiences themselves. Perniola takes this inherently limited practice and expands it to encompass action, and thereby the possibility of a way of life: one acts in a detached manner, suspending belief in oneself and the significance of one's actions. The repetition and pragmatic adaptation of ritual, detached from any mythic significance, both produces the desired detachment and provides a pattern for action – action whose motive may be aesthetic or political, but never derived from some 'capital T' Truth. Rather, through that suspension of self, one becomes open to the possibilities offered by the external world. This practice Bianchi finds modelled in the habits of George Bryan 'Beau' Brummell, the man most to blame for modern menswear, who through a painstaking, perfectionist dressing ritual "disappear[ed] in the folds of his clothes ... slowly becoming a simulacrum" and, in the process, what we would non-coincidentally call a fashion icon.

¹ Enea Bianchi, *The Philosophy of Mario Perniola* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

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The second part builds on this disappearance, exploring Perniola's concept of the *thing* and his attempt to use it to subvert the subject-object dichotomy in favour of a 'neutral dimension', in which one is a thing amongst things, a 'mirror' of one's surroundings, as well as exploring the notions of 'inorganic sexuality' and the 'transit' – one of the opaqueness concepts in the book. Here we also come across the Perniolan notion of *strategic beauty* – an orienting concept, almost a statement of purpose for Perniola as aesthetician. Strategic beauty rejects the universal and canonical in favour of the situationally appropriate, but always from a posture of challenge and discordance, rather than harmonisation. To this Bianchi adduces the life and works of Charles Baudelaire.

Finally, the third and shortest part sets out Perniola's changing theory of art in its relation to capitalism. We encounter the young Perniola, heavily influenced by the Situationists, decrying 'art' as a category separate from 'life', describing this as the alienation of the creative impulse, to be overcome through total revolution, to be lived "every hour and in every activity" (p. 163), thereby reconciling the opposition between art and life in a 'Hegelian-Marxist' manner. But the later Perniola – the mature Perniola, subject of most of this book – came to reject this, as failing "to consider the negative, contradictory and conflictual element to its very end" (p. 176). In place of this dialectic, he comes to think in terms of – and celebrate – *difference*, in the sense of asymmetric opposition between elements that fundamentally resist synthesis into a harmonious end state. An artwork, for the mature Perniola, achieves its value through its 'shadow' – that aspect of it that "resists and goes beyond [its] economic side" (p. 181). Bianchi argues that this precisely describes the artistic practice of his final dandy, Oscar Wilde, whose work, while commercially oriented, at the same time subverted the bourgeois values of their audience; in Wilde's writings he also identifies the kind of shift between organic and inorganic, subject and object, that Perniola expounds.

Bianchi has a great deal of ground to cover and does so in a book that remains refreshingly slim – 271 pages including index and front matter. This inevitably means the text has gaps. Many of Perniola's ideas are enlivened with examples – both Bianchi's and Perniola's own – drawn from widely dispersed areas of history and culture, centred on Europe and America but also reaching into Asia. The book is at its strongest and most persuasive when it delves into these specifics, and as a result, the chapters on the lives of the dandies are highlights. Correspondingly, it is at its weakest when its concepts go unexampled – the notion of 'transit' is the most notable case of this – or when the cases given are vague. Occasionally Bianchi slips into discussing complex social phenomena by way of opaque plural nouns, in a way that makes it unclear precisely what Perniola understands by them or what aspect thereof he has in mind. The one point at which this seriously undermines Bianchi's argument occurs in the discussion of 'modern media' and the simulacrum, in Chapter 2, in which he discusses Perniola's attempt to embrace the nature of mass media as producing simulacra, rejecting the dichotomy between the truth the media is supposed to present and the representations or misrepresentations it actually shows. Perniola's "claims that

understanding mass media images in oppositional terms (realism/falseness or original/copy) means remaining blind to the dimension that they can potentially open: the simulacrum” (p. 41) are initially set out in relation to the news media in quite a concrete way, but how this new, simulacrum-embracing approach is supposed to work is explained entirely by analogy to the Jesuits’ use of symbols, with no concrete link made back to the forms and functions of ‘modern media.’ This is a shame, as Perniola’s positions on this topic are, at first blush, extremely unconvincing. On his view, it is objectionably ‘metaphysical’ to think of media images as representations that can be accurate or misleading, setting up a dichotomy between ‘the realm of reality’ and ‘that of the copies.’ This Nietzschean move is all well and good when it concerns metaphysical realities that cannot in practice affect or be affected by us; it is much less compelling when made with regard to the people and events on the news, which are entirely capable of sending cops to your house, driving you out of public spaces, destroying the industry you work in, or burning your country down.

Fortunately, though, this element is not vital to the overarching picture Bianchi paints. His Perniola is a phenomenologist beyond phenomenology – undermining false dichotomies at the root of traditional phenomenology, between “seemingly opposed activities and attitudes, such as indifference/sensitivity, detachment/interest, suspension/participation and *epoché*/effectiveness” (p. 83) – not to mention ‘subject/object’ – by demonstrating experiences that violate them. By adducing the dandies to his project and his project to dandyism, Bianchi strengthens and enriches both.