

Out of View of the Panopticon

Escaping Systems of Control

Jess Flarity

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a review of

Anti-Oculus: A Philosophy of Escape by Acid Horizon. Repeater

The New York City-based podcasting collective Acid Horizon's book features anarchist-leaning text ranging from informative musings on our present cyberpunk era to densely twisted lexical corridors lined with the thoughts of those like Jung, Deleuze, and Agamben.

The book is structurally messy: it is contained mostly under the field of philosophy, but it reminds me of a house where the contractors were swapped out during the construction process, resulting in a mishmash of several different styles. Some would argue that there is value in this kinetic type of organization, though it does make me wonder what the difference is between escaping and simply being lost.

It is most cohesive in its opening, which imagines the population of our cybernetic, First World as something like a fluid that occasionally boils over. The authors argue that the methods of protest people currently use are under a form of *thermostatic control*, hence, why police refer to calming down protesters as kettling.

To combat the methods of control from authoritarian forces such as the State, the book's main argument surrounds the idea of ocularity, or being able to identify all the ways that one might be observed. This form of self-consciousness eventually becomes its own identity that allows for a kind of conspiratorial thinking which can be organized outside of the focus of the panopticon of the Government and Big Tech. This movement is referred to as the Institute for the Recognition of Insurgent Subjectivities (I.R.I.S.).

In the second section, the book takes a sharp turn backwards in time, resulting in interesting ideas related to gender, disability theory, and racial identities as forms of resistance. Specifically, they cite the policing of gender related to inter-sex rights, make connections to the Nazi classification system for concentration camp inmates, summarize the troubled history of Haiti, and Foucault's ideas concerning deviance.

Disability theory here has a connection with gender theory in terms of Judith Butler's notion that both are a form of performance, and they refer to the ocularity of both these aspects as notions that want to be normalized or fixed as a method of state control.

While disability theory has been growing as a field since the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, there is still much work to do in terms of social organization and equity for people designated as disabled by the society. It was refreshing to see *Anti-Oculus* doing consciousness raising during these segments, as there is a longer section on a national disability advocacy group called ADAPT which successfully disrupted bus service in Denver in 1978 to protest a new fleet of buses not containing wheelchair lifts. This was a much-welcomed new learning on my part, and the inclusion helps demonstrate how disability theory intersects in meaningful ways with anti-capitalist principles.

The book's midpoint has the apt subheading, "Going Astray," where there is yet another tangent, and they argue that pastoral power, going back to pre-agrarian times, is the ultimate source of social control. There are more long meanderings on Michel Foucault's work here, specifically *Discipline and Punish* (1975), that muse over ideas related to

what is considered normal vs abnormal, and how technology has asserted itself as a form of bio-control. This does make sense when you think of people conforming on social media sites, which often reward groupthink behaviors. There are lots of references to sheep in this segment, but despite the over-worn metaphor, their arguments about the power of transgression are rewarding for those who like crawling down a philosophical rabbit hole.

The book's final chapter is the most daunting, catering towards deeply seasoned readers of ontological philosophy, as evidenced by its paradoxical title, "The Imageless Image." This is the fun house mirror room in the building that spires off from its tallest tower, inverting back on itself, as the writers attempt to tie all their discordant ideas to our technocratic present.

I interpret the manifesto ultimately boiling down to this statement: abnormality is good/ideal. Most anarchists would agree with this. The book references Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming-sorcerer as a way of finding truth in the sacred conspiracy as part of coming to this realization.

Deleuze and Guattari are most often associated with assemblage theory, which is a philosophical approach that states that everything in a society—people, systems, ideas—are all overlapping and constantly self-organizing. While neither philosopher ever identified as an anarchist, their work continues to inspire anarchist thinkers due to its flexibility and liberating qualities.

While some of the pseudo-mysticism of this section might inspire an occasional eye roll, in its final sentences the book asserts that the philosophers cannot put forth ideas that must be acted on by the people—the philosophers *are* the people.

As they state, "Philosophy cannot stand detached from the world, and any claim that it could is a false pretense that only functions to detach it from its own collaboration with the world as it currently is." This type of bold assertion is refreshing in our era of cheap talk, and the statement invites the reader to return to the book's more convoluted passages for a vigorous re-read.

After listening to a few episodes of the Acid Horizon podcast, I found the ideas put forth by this collective to be much more palatable for the ear when compared to my reader's eye (ironically). Perhaps this is because the production values on the podcast are excellent—Craig, Will, Adam, and all the others—have voices like late-night jazz DJs, and their voices sound like liquid gold.

As with other podcasts, I find myself zoning out after about eight minutes. Still, the occasional line or highlight pops out through the melodic wall of noise, such as, "highways are simultaneously modes of transport and systems of control." These moments resonate with the main anti-capitalist messages in *Anti-Oculus*.

So, who is this book for? Psychology or political science graduate students and garage philosophers are the most likely audiences who will resonate with the ideas here, especially those interested in disability theory, security, and systems of social control. Though this book exists outside the locus of academia, it is as well-referenced as any published research paper, and the footnotes for each section are extensive.

This leads to further reading, deeper understanding, and heightened awareness of how entrenched the panoptic viewpoint is rooted in our Cybercene Era, not only in its physical manifestations through technology, but in the greater systems of thought-organization itself as a kind of machine.

Anti-Oculus disrupts and challenges these notions, which makes it a welcome addition into the pantheon of anarchist-leaning philosophy, even if the building's hallways sometimes end without a doorway, and the stairs often have no handrails. It remains a structure worth exploring. After all, the panopticon cannot see you if you fall through a trap door that wasn't in the blueprints in the first place.

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