

## **Partiality, Obliqueness, Reticence: Some Thoughts on Life, Death, and (the Failures of) Representation**

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### **Abstract**

In the spirit of the stated topic, “Angel of the New,” this article addresses the question of the modern—in art, politics, and social thought—in terms deriving from Benjamin’s, and subsequently Adorno’s, experience of art in its fullest truth claims in the face of catastrophe. The article explores a certain contemporary questioning of the limits of representation and the truth-value of representations, above all art works. Making reference to Agamben and the notion of “bare life” as a key figure of modern bio-politics, it addresses several contemporary issues at the limits of aesthetic, conceptual, and political “representation” (though shying away from a full engagement with contemporary political theory proper and its concerns): death, the sublime, catastrophe. Beginning with *modern* changes in the understanding of death (and life) and the role of technology, instrumental rational control, and economic reason, in the formation of modern society, it discusses the catastrophic limit cases of Hiroshima and Auschwitz, arguing ultimately that a modernist commitment to art truth, even with respect to the most difficult human events, is necessary still today, despite a seeming movement beyond the modern in the reigning cultural dominant.

### **Keywords**

representation, Adorno, technology, Heidegger, Auschwitz, modernist aesthetics