

Vitalist Modernism

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Faced with 'a queasy sickening feeling that all was not right', by the fin-de-siècle many Modernists in America, Australia, Britain, Canada and Europe expanded the field of art into raw nature, ethnic communities and tribal cultures as vitalisers of energy that could be emotionally and creatively liberating. Following theories of Vitalism by Henri Bergson, Hans Driesch, Alois Riegl and Friedrich Nietzsche, 'the vital state' ('l'élan vital') became widely engaged for its conception of life as a constant process of metamorphosis, impelled by the free flow of energies able to generate what Bergson called 'creative evolution'. Imbricated within Neo-Lamarckian ecological evolutionary theories, Vitalism was also embraced for being anti-rationalist and anti-mechanistic, particularly in its opposition to Thomas Huxley's conception of plants and animals as machines, and its reconception of them as inspiring organisms within unspoiled nature, perpetually mutating into increasingly complex species and solidarist colonies following the Transformist concept of 'life-force'.

Pitched against mechanistic productivity and repressive materialism, Vitalism spawned an expanding field of Modernist art in which artists embraced nature, intuition, instinct, spontaneity, chance, intense emotion, memory, unconscious states, uncanny vibrations, and a psychology of time. This pursuit was enhanced by the further expansion of art into Anthroposophy, Organicism, Supernaturalism, Magnetism, Eurhythmics, Freikorperkultur, Heliotherapy, Herbalism, Homeopathy, Naturopathy, Nudism, Theosophy and Vegetarianism, free dance plus regenerative new sports and physical cultures. The artists exploring this expanded field were doing so, as this session will reveal, within cultures as geopolitically widespread as Britain, China, France, Iceland, Oslo, Switzerland and the Soviet Union.

Speakers and Abstracts

The Manly Arts: Water sports and virility at the fin de siècle

Anthea Callen (University of Nottingham and Australian National University)

Outdoor water sports offered men legitimate opportunities for male bonding, for enhancing bodily fitness in strenuous physical action, and for the mutual pleasures of nakedness or semi-nudity. Further, the act of water bathing and associated rituals of hygiene themselves became increasingly legitimised – and controlled – in a bourgeois society keen to display its distinction from the 'great unwashed'. At this period, rowing and swimming became competitive sports that encouraged manly attributes while usefully channelling the male libido. As such, these sports belonged to the new health and hygiene movement aimed at regenerating French manhood and purifying the French nation. Indeed, these ambitions were echoed across Europe and North America to Australia and New Zealand. Modern medical discourses of hygiene and cleanliness penetrated not only the feminine *toilette* and the brothel, but also the world of virile male fitness.

Examining in this paper images ranging from Daumier's caricatures of *plein air* bathing through to Eakins' skulls men, the river scenes of Caillebotte and Cezanne, to Henry Scott Tuke's Cornish scenes of youths bathing and boating, and thence to the wider world of popular sporting Physical Culture, I shall demonstrate the conflicted meanings of water sports at the fin de siècle, and the key problematics of class, sex, gender and nationalism that their apparently idyllic portrayals raise.

The Vitalized Bodies of National Science: Edvard Munch's University of Oslo Murals

Patricia Berman (Wellesley College)

Between 1909 and 1916, Edvard Munch produced 11 murals for the University of Oslo that display as their centrepiece a five-part allegory of enlightenment represented by a vitalising sun and naked bodies awakening into and merging with the radiating light, and a sixth mural representing naked bodies coloured by spectral rays. Munch was one of a generation of Nordic artists who pictured bodies being 'vitalised' by sun, water, and exercise. Indeed, 'Vitalism' has been identified as a movement in the visual arts in the

Nordic countries as a branch of pan-European expressionism. As articulated by Norway's E Leonard Hasvold, a social reformist who embedded sea bathing into school curricula, by Denmark's bodybuilding advocate Jørgen Peter Müller, and others, open-air exercise built both muscles and social capacity through a popular Neo-Lamarckian eugenics. Norway had suffered a significant loss of its rural population in the mid-19th century through emigration to the USA, a declining birth rate, and relocation within the country to seek urban economic opportunity. A growing anxiety about its future was, in the words of Mattias Tydén, a 'breeding ground' for racial thought and eugenics. The 'Committee for Racial Hygiene' was established in Norway in 1908, preceded by a similar organisation in Denmark, and was followed, in 1909, by the establishment of the Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene. Norwegian scientists conducted extensive surveys of the national population, collecting bodily metrics in an attempt to identify an historical race.

At the same time, Kristian Birkeland's laboratory at the University of Oslo created artificial and targeted electromagnetic rays, enabling an economic boom in energy production. In the previous decade, Fritjof Nansen had led an expedition to the North Pole, in part to make observations of the aurora borealis. In the first years of the 20th century, Norway, in the words of historian Robert Friedman, staked its international prestige on the science of aurora and electromagnetism. The convergence of medical solar therapies, the science of 'new rays' (the title of one of Munch's murals), and the burgeoning field of race anthropology and ethnology at the university provides a frame through which both Munch's paintings may be read, and the iconography of institutional educational modernism may be recuperated. In turn, the shaping of the idea of a distinctive 'Nordic' race was itself at stake. Drawing upon this constellation of conditions, the solarised bodies created by Munch and his contemporaries will be deciphered as both mirroring and magnifying these new sciences that were so profoundly important to the nation's modern identity.

Vitalism, Esotericism and Psychophysical Aesthetics in an Emerging Nation State

Benedikt Hjartarson (University of Iceland)

The paper will discuss the shaping of aesthetics as an important field of modern culture in Iceland, focusing on the period after the country gained sovereignty in 1918. Art and literature were attributed a key role in shaping a powerful, genuinely modern Icelandic culture. The main aim of that project was the moulding of the civilised Icelandic citizen and the paper will discuss the key models that came to play a role in that context. Of specific interest are the vitalist and esoteric notion of subjectivity dominant in cultural debates at the time, ranging from the pivotal role of Bergson's philosophy to William James's writings, Fechner's psychophysics, Haeckelian monism, psychic research (Myers, Kotik, Crookes, Lodge), theosophy (Leadbeater, Besant) and Neo-Lamarckism (Driesch, Winge). The links between vitalism, esotericism and modern aesthetics can indeed be seen as a common characteristic of the writings of the country's leading intellectuals in this period, as can be seen among others in the works of Guðmundur Finnbogason, Ágúst H Bjarnason, Björg C Þorláksson, Sigurður Nordal, Helgi Pjeturss and Þórbergur Þórðarson in the late 1910s and 1920s. The paper will argue that the concept of Icelandic culture that took shape in this period can only be properly described by taking into consideration the various notions of evolution, energy, telepathy, ethereal vibrations and psychic processes that circulated in these theories.

Dada Vitalism

Brandon Taylor (University of Southampton; Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford)

Intersections between the terms 'Dada' and 'vitalism' are numerous in the years around the end of the First World War – and by no means uniform. We look initially at what Theo van Doesburg termed 'neo-vitalism', in effect a Dada version of vitalism that consisted of enjoiners to discord, indifference, amorality, permanent and ongoing contradiction – a declaration of the world's bankruptcy as well as a confirmation of its energetic life. Such 'life' belonged to the work of art. Yet for him and others, very subtle philosophies of 'nature' underlay such exhortations, including those expressed in contemporary writings of biologists of the stature and importance of Jakob von Uexküll and Hans Driesch. Other artists close to van Doesburg, including Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp and Tristan Tzara, belong to this moment too. We review their different commitments to creating things that are 'here here here', but also 'nothing nothing nothing'.

Integumentary Abstraction: Arp's wood reliefs

Tessa Paneth-Pollak (Michigan State University)

The planar quality of Arp's Dada reliefs has prompted art historians to describe and photograph them frontally, like images. This paper attends to the overlooked lateral edges separating the reliefs from surrounding space. In keeping with Arp's somatic metaphors, I propose that these edges function like membranes or integuments, barriers between the inside and the outside of a body that both protect it from the external world and enable sensations of pressure and pain. As Arp subjects the wood panels of his reliefs to the saw, he models their differentiation from surrounding space on the boundaries of the organism. By conceiving of the painterly tableau as something that takes shape – or, like a body, individuates – in the negative space of *découpage* (cutting out), Arp pursues a project of abstraction that models itself upon the organic body's capacity to know through touch. The extremities of his reliefs seem, as a result, to satisfy Hugo Ball's 1916 vision for an organically responsive art that would '[f]orm ... a living organism that reacts to the slightest pressure.'

Attending to the vitalism of Arp's abstraction offers us a new model for thinking about modernist abstraction in relation to the world and the organic body. In a period when cell theory was reshaping ideas about the integrity and boundedness of the organism, Arp's reliefs offer to reconfigure the individual human ego whom painting has traditionally mirrored. Guided by Canguilhem's notion that 'The history of the concept of the cell is inseparable from the history of the concept of the individual,' I argue that Arp's reliefs aim to remodel, in miniature, the boundaries of the body and psyche as they model the paradoxes of becoming an individual through infraction and of becoming bounded through violation.

Bergson and Surrealism: 'A haunting melody of life's entwinement with matter'

Donna Roberts (University of Essex; Independent Scholar)

The connection between Surrealism and Bergson's ideas has received relatively little critical scrutiny. While conspicuous, given a general accord regarding a rejection of positivism and a sense of the limits of scientific knowledge, the reasons for this oversight might be identified in terms of the vicissitudes of Bergson's reputation and the historical shifts in the critical focus on his work.

By the time André Breton had published his *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), Bergson's philosophical star was waning, and it is most likely that the association of Bergsonism with the deeply conservative 'spiritualism' lingering over from the previous decade largely determined Breton's circumspection towards ties with the philosopher. Furthermore, it is only since the growing absorption of Gilles Deleuze's reappraisal of Bergson's significance – as well as the deeper critical facilitation of evolutionary theory within philosophy and the humanities at large – that Bergson's philosophically and politically redeemed writings can be seen more clearly to relate to certain key principles of Surrealism: most notably, a vital affirmation of life in all its complexity and excess. This paper will explore the ways in which a post-Deleuzian reading of Bergson might open up a clearer picture of the relations between the philosopher of the *élan vital* and an intellectual movement that, perhaps more than any in the modernist era, embraced the radically transformative possibilities of an open-ended, spontaneously creative principle of life and art.

Vitalist Chinese Modernism

Craig Clunas (University of Oxford)

In 1915, the translation of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* into Chinese expanded the global reach of this work, already familiar to Chinese intellectuals from an even earlier translation into Japanese. And in 1922–23 Hans Driesch himself spent an entire year lecturing in China, where his work was the focus of intense interest and debate. Ideas of 'vital spirit' and 'Vitalism' as intrinsically Chinese, in contrast to a sterile and mechanistic Europe, were rapidly developed by Chinese intellectuals of the newly founded Republic, eager to argue that such an understanding of existence had already existed in China for centuries if not millennia. At the same time, artists and art historians of Republican China rapidly connected the thought of Bergson and Driesch with premodern Chinese artistic theory, in particular with the newly

prominent 'Six Laws' of the 6th-century writer Xie He. In doing so they argued that Chinese modernity, and a modern Chinese art, could found itself on indigenous sources. But the advanced western thought on which they drew was itself deeply engaged with what was seen in late 19th-century Europe as 'oriental' wisdom, and the key texts were products less of an indigenous essence than of a long series of acts of translation and appropriation between writers in Chinese, Japanese, French and English. This paper will look at this 'echo-chamber' of mutual appropriation, and argue for the necessity of seeing Vitalism as a historically situated phenomenon with a truly global reach.

A Sort of Vitalism: Soviet Darwinism as a means to regenerate the wounded in World War Two

Pat Simpson (University of Hertfordshire)

This paper speculatively explores the vitalist implications of the propagandistic visual presentations about Darwinism and natural history given to wounded Soviet soldiers and grieving widows during World War Two, by the Directors of the Darwin Museum (Moscow) and their son, Rudi. Post-war, as a reward for such activities, these individuals were all given medals extolling their patriotism and contributions to the defence of Moscow against the Nazi invaders. Apparently, the Soviet government regarded their activities as having been politically and ideologically significant.

As Aleksandr Vucinich has argued, vitalism and neo-vitalism in their more metaphysically orientated forms seem to have held no real interest for Russian experimental bio-scientists and natural historians. This was to carry on into the Soviet period. Yet, as Vucinich has also argued, the blurring of boundaries within Russian (and later Soviet) scientific thought, between Darwin's notion of the 'struggle for existence' and, apparently, Lamarckian ideas on the inheritability of acquired characteristics and the action of will, allowed for a vitalist element to continue to exist in Soviet Darwinism. My argument will suggest that both the impetus towards the wartime activities of the Moscow Darwin Museum, and the accolades awarded by the Soviet government, may relate to a non-metaphysical element of vitalism, buried deep inside the Russian and Soviet construct of Darwinism, and increasingly entrenched during Trofim Lysenko's rise to power.