

‘Body, Text, Nation’

2018-2020

The ‘Body, Text, Nation’ seminar series, convened by Dr Zoe Roth and Dr Sam Bootle, aimed to foster discussions on the various ways in which these three terms might be related, and what the political and aesthetic consequences of this relationality might be. We brought together scholars working in a range of disciplines who explored topics such as: the textual representation of embodiment and the bodily metaphors of textuality; racialised aesthetics and their implications for national identity; and the political valences of bodies read as textual surfaces.

For many of our speakers, the question of bodily aesthetics was paramount. In her talk ‘Poetics of Detention: Framing the Refugee “Crisis”’, Prof **Debarati Sanyal** (Berkeley) argued that aesthetic figures may be more useful than historical paradigms to understand the operations of migrant detention at Europe’s borders. Similarly, Dr **Cécile Bishop** (NYU) argued for the value of thinking through the aesthetic in her talk ‘Photography, Race, and Invisibility: The Liberation of Paris, in Black and White’: the exclusion of colonial troops from photographs of the liberation of Paris should not merely be addressed as a historical lacuna, but should also be seen in terms of the complex aesthetic and symbolic work that whiteness and absent blackness perform in these images. Meanwhile, Dr **Dan Hartley** (Leeds) demonstrated how we might uncover an underground current of stylistics within the Marxist tradition from Marx to Barthes, and posited an independent theory of style as a foundational element of a larger Marxist poetics. Finally, Dr **James Rann** (Glasgow) discussed how Russian Futurists used clothes — both in their work and in their lives, both as metaphor and as material — to express their complex identities as poets and their utopian vision for language, culture and humanity itself.

Other talks explored the political valences of bodily representation within religious and national contexts. Dr **Claire White** (Cambridge) showed how Zola’s novel *Lourdes* (1894), with its focus on the interpretation of supposedly miraculous physical symptoms, was the subject of fierce debate between secularist and Catholic voices, setting the ideological stage for Zola’s later (and more famous) intervention in the Dreyfus Affair. Dr **Zoe Roth**’s (Durham) paper explored how antisemitic representations of the Jewish nose in fin-de-siècle Europe were shaped by not only a visual but also an olfactory register that imbued the physically ambiguous Jewish nose with a sense of racial essentialism. Prof **Michèle Lowrie** (Chicago) demonstrated how the dystopian vision of an Islamicised France offered by Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission* (2015) is encapsulated by the protagonist François, who represents an embodiment of France’s depraved soul political. Dr **David Evans** (St Andrews) demonstrated how Victor Hugo’s prolific textual output was depicted by other poets and critics in terms of metaphors of virility, creating a myth of inimitable masculinity that profoundly affected French poetry of the late nineteenth century.

The reception of medical and biological theories in literary and political discourse was the final strand of our series. Dr **Manon Mathias** (Glasgow) explored how French literature represented the theory of auto-intoxication, a discredited medical theory of the late nineteenth century, in the context of a new project on the notion of the gut-mind connection in French literature and medicine. Dr **Cat Moir** (Sydney) examined Friedrich Engels’ reception of Darwinian thought, showing that he rejected social Darwinism — which took as its principle ‘the survival of the fittest’ — in favour of a socialist Darwinism based on the alternative concept of ‘the correlation of growth’.

ABSTRACTS:

31 January 2018

Dr [Cécile Bishop](#) (NYU), 'Photography, Race, and Invisibility: The Liberation of Paris, in Black and White' (MLAC, ER1, A56, 5pm).

Photography has historically played a key role in legitimizing race. The perceived indexicality of the photographic medium has sustained the construction of race as an empirical fact, a regime of inner differences signified by observable exterior signs (Fusco 2003), constituting what Jacques Rancière called a 'distribution of the sensible'. This paper proposes to disrupt this regime of photographic and racial evidence through aesthetic experimentations and transformations. Dr Bishop's reflection focused on a corpus of photographs produced during the liberation of Paris in 1944. Although colonial troops formed the majority of Charles de Gaulle's Free French Army, the photographic record of these events only features white-looking soldiers. As recent historical research has revealed, this was no coincidence: France's British and American allies demanded explicitly that only white troops be included (Wieviorka 2014). The orchestrated absence of blackness from these images is all the more significant as the liberation of Paris was one of the most photographed events in the history of twentieth-century France and has been an iconic object of collective memory and national identification since 1945. Although photographs of the liberation of Paris have recently been subjected to meticulous historical scrutiny (Tambrun 2014), no one has examined the complex aesthetic and symbolic work that whiteness and absent blackness perform in these images. The responses to this erasure of blackness have consisted in unearthing alternative images that would demonstrate the contribution of black soldiers to the liberation. Despite its obvious rhetorical and political value, this approach leaves intact the modes of visualization and the alignment between photographic indexicality and race that presided over the exclusion of blackness from the representation of French national identity. This paper, by contrast, sought to demonstrate the value of thinking through the aesthetic, even beyond the sphere of representations usually understood as literary or artistic. Furthermore, by proposing her own form of aesthetic reflection on the images, Dr Bishop raised the question of the role of creativity in criticism – as well as its potential limits.

21 February 2018

Dr [Dan Hartley](#) (University of Leeds), '[The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics](#)' (MLAC, ER1, A56, 5pm).

In this session, Daniel Hartley presented the main arguments of his book, *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (Brill: 2017). The book develops a Marxist theory of literary style through an immanent critique of the work of Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson. The talk began by delineating the historical and conceptual preconditions for the emergence of a 'politics of style,' uncovering an underground current of stylistics within the Marxist tradition from Marx to Barthes. The second part set out what Williams, Eagleton and Jameson have written on style, demonstrating how this came to figure in their overall intellectual and political projects. The third part delineated an independent theory of style and framed it as a foundational element of a potentially larger Marxist poetics. The talk concluded with some brief remarks on what such a theory of style may offer current debates on "world literature".

2 May 2018

Dr [Zoë Roth](#) (Durham), 'When is a Jewish Nose like Pornography' (MLAC, ER153, 12pm).

This presentation explored the role that smell plays in the aesthetic perception of Jewish racial difference, symbolized by the supposedly 'Jewish' nose. Rather than revisiting the way the 'Jewish' nose had been represented visually, the paper treats the Jewish nose in terms of its aesthetic and perceptual properties – the way that it smells rather than looks. It thus challenges the usual emphasis on the disputed visibility of the Jewish nose to consider instead the nose as an organ that perceives smells. Smell, Roth argues, simultaneously reinforces and destabilizes racial categories. Examining a series of photographic works including Man Ray's portrait of Proust on his deathbed and Marcel Duchamp's photographs as *Rose Sélavy*, this presentation broadens the racial sensorium by paying attention to the ambiguous role smell plays in interpreting and recognizing racial difference. This intervention makes a claim for what Roth terms 'olfactory aesthetics', that is to say, a critical approach to race that would rely not on semiotic analyses of visual materials, but on the intuitions afforded by odour.

24 May 2018

Professor [Debarati Sanyal](#) (Berkeley), 'Poetics of Detention: Framing the Refugee "Crisis"', (MLAC, ER142, 6pm).

This talk considered recent media representations of illegalized migrants through the tropes of bare life, racialized swarms, and disembodied data. How do such representations of the European refugee 'crisis' challenge historical paradigms of racialized violence such as slavery, the Holocaust and colonialism? With the assistance of technologies of surveillance and control such as biometrics (fingerprint databanks, retinal scans, bone density tests) humanitarian and securitarian optics converge to produce asylum seekers as expropriated bodies and risky personhoods who are detained for their protection. Professor Sanyal's talk suggested that aesthetic figures may be more useful than historical paradigms to understand the operations of migrant detention

at Europe's borders. She discussed two documentary shorts on detention that give experimental form to the transformation of refugees into readable bodies. How does the mediation of personhood and embodiment by the technology of detention put pressure on the representational mandates of humanitarianism and human rights? How can experimental visual works help reimagine personhood, rights and agency, from within the conditions of detention, as tactical forms of emergence, disappearance, or persistence?

24 January 2019

Dr [David Evans](#) (University of St Andrews), 'Corrupting the Body Poetic: Poetry, Masculinity and Nation in 19th-Century France' (MLAC, ER142, 5-7pm).

Victor Hugo bestrode the landscape of 19th-century French verse like a colossus, enjoying a legendary reputation for his robust physical constitution as well as a prodigious, quasi-logorrhoeic output. The hyper-masculinity of Hugo's fertile poetic persona inspired reactions in subsequent generations of young male poets ranging from awe and envy to hilarity and even impotence. In this paper I argue that from Baudelaire onwards we see poets such as Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Corbière and Laforgue exploring questions of poetics through metaphors and images of sexual dysfunction such as sterility and frigidity, or through textual performances of non-normative sexuality. While much literary criticism, such as that of Leconte de Lisle, used the language of virility as a marker of poetic quality, the Decadent and Symbolist generation talked of their work in terms of bodily fragility or pathology such as asthma, anaemia, neurosis or decay, speech impediments, or the resolution to remain a child. The formal innovations of post-Romantic French poetry may thus be seen as textual incarnations of bodily imperfection – irregular verse, prose poetry, free verse – in contrast to the regular forms of tradition. These new forms thus allowed young male poets to overcome the impotence to which Hugo seemed to have condemned them, and a monolithic national poetry evolved, or dissolved, into a plurality of diverse, imperfect voices.

18 February 2019

Dr [Manon Mathias](#) (University of Glasgow), 'The Gut-Mind Connection in French Medicine and Literature: the Case of Autointoxication' (MLAC, ER157, 12-1pm).

This talk examined autointoxication, a discredited medical theory from the late nineteenth century, and its relevance to nineteenth-century French literature. Before it fell from grace in the mid-twentieth century, the theory of autointoxication enjoyed widespread acceptance both amongst physicians and the general public worldwide. The theory was particularly important to contemporary literature in its suggestion of a link between the digestive and the psychiatric, with prominent writers such as Hugo and Huysmans exploring this connection in various ways in their literary works.

7 March 2019

Dr [Claire White](#) (University of Cambridge), 'The Affair before the Affair: Zola and The Lourdes Scandal', ER146, 4-6pm.

On 11 February 1898, Zola arrived at the Cour d'Assises de la Seine for the opening of his trial for libel, following the publication of his excoriating open letter, 'J'accuse'. This public event also marked, to the very day, the fortieth anniversary of the Virgin Mary's first apparition at Lourdes before the fourteen-year-old shepherdess, Bernadette Soubirous. Such conspicuous timing gave Zola's Catholic detractors every reason to believe in divine retribution. According to the Assumptionist daily newspaper *La Croix*, this curious coincidence of dates sealed the connection between profanation and punishment: 'M. Zola, le blasphémateur de la Vierge Immaculée, celui qui a méconnu ses bienfaits, est accablé de honte en Cour d'assises.' For the newspaper's hostile readers, Zola's novel *Lourdes* (1894) had launched a slanderous, and unforgivable, attack on the Catholic faith; and it remained, accordingly, a touchstone in anti-Dreyfusard discourse as a shorthand for the writer's 'bad faith'. Indeed, the extraordinary series of refutations and counter-refutations that followed the novel's publication cast a range of protagonists into polarised ideological positions that would still be in place at the time of Zola's intervention in the Dreyfus Affair. This paper revisited some of those responses to *Lourdes*: clerical and medical publications, press articles, and readers' letters. In doing so, it sought to reconstruct a set of debates that turned – as the Dreyfus Affair also would – on questions of authenticity, fakes, proofs, and counter-proofs. Might the furore Zola's *Lourdes* provoked best be understood as a dress-rehearsal for the scandal of the century?

14 March 2019

Prof. [Michèle Lowrie](#) (University of Chicago), 'The Empire to Come: Houellebecq, *Soumission*' (MLAC, ER146, 4-6pm).

In the satiric vision of *Soumission*'s dystopian nightmare, France will succumb in the 2022 election to a Muslim Brotherhood takeover. All political foes unite to keep Marine Le Pen from assuming the presidency. François, the novel's everyman *français* antihero, personifies the corruption of France's premier Enlightenment institution, the university, which itself stands for the failure of values in the French Republic. Through his unreliable narrator, who is blind to the palimpsests of history, Houellebecq tells the classic story over again: France, herself not whole, re-enacts once more the Fall of the Roman Republic. The Empire to

come, as in ancient Rome, will put an end to civil war not by ushering in a new Golden Age, New Republic, or City of God, but rather at the price of a decadent Oriental tyranny. Not so much a symbol of the body politic as the embodiment of France's depraved soul political, François reveals through his conversion to Islam not that France has fallen into degradation, but was always perverse to begin with.

19 March 2019

Dr [Cat Moir](#) (University of Sydney), 'Living Gregoriously: Engels' Reception of Darwin and his Critique of Social Darwinism' (MLAC, ER1, A56, 5-7pm).

This paper examined Friedrich Engels' reception of Darwin's theory of evolution and his related critique of social Darwinism in his writings of the 1870s and 1880s. Through a close contextualised reading of the essay 'Anteil der Arbeit in der Menschwerdung der Affen', Dr Moir argued that Engels constructed his labour theory of culture on the basis of Darwin's 'law of the correlation of growth'. Engels' reading of evolutionary theory produced a socialist Darwinism that was distinct from the social Darwinism of the time, which derived a vision of human society from the alternative evolutionary principle of the 'survival of the fittest'. It was Engels' emphasis on labour in the process of human evolution which in turn formed the basis of his critique of social Darwinism. The paper is part of a larger project, *The Biogenesis of the German Left, 1800-1933*, which examines the impact of the life sciences on the liberal, radical and feminist left in Germany from the emergence of 'biology' as a scientific discourse to the rise of the Nazi biological state.

27 January 2020

Dr [James Rann](#) (University of Glasgow), 'Dressing Left: Fashion, Poetry & Revolution in the Russian Avant-Garde', (MLAC, ER1 A29, 5pm).

After exploding onto the Russia's literary scene in 1913, the Futurists became famous for experimental modernist poetry, provocative stunts and, latterly, a willingness to conflate their own artistic rebellion with the political revolutions of 1917. One thread, as yet unpulled, that links these three aspects of Futurist identity was their relationship to costume, clothes and fashion. This talk will investigate the ways in which key Futurists like Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh used clothes — both in their work and in their lives, both as metaphor and as material — as a way of expressing their complex identities as poets and their utopian vision for language, culture and even humanity itself. The talk will show what was distinctive and, indeed, revolutionary about Futurist fashion not only by locating it in the context of Russian debates about self-identity and temporality but also showing its overlaps with and divergences from the clothes discourse of material-minded modernists elsewhere in Europe and its intersection with questions of gender, race and sexuality. Ultimately, I will argue that the Futurists dressed not for the job they had — bohemian wordsmiths — but the job they wanted — agents of total eschatological transformation.

