

## Studying frozen movement

Review of:

Spyros Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 400pp. + b/w illustrations, £35.00, ISBN-10: 0226645681; ISBN-13: 978-0226645681

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In his preface, Papapetros alerts the reader to the temptation of presuming that discourse precedes action. 'The book's method,' he writes, is 'in empathy with its subject' (xiii). He follows that by insisting that our relationship to objects has changed but the language we use to think about that relationship has not, and it is this contradiction that provokes him to write. This book is a finely detailed exploration of movement as depicted in static forms, that is, painting, drawings, and other media, as it was conceived during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The focus is fine tuned as well, centred on the scholar Aby Warburg, but there is a rather interesting cast of significant characters here in addition to the German art historian, taking this study well beyond Warburg. The author ropes in form-givers such as the cubist Fernand Léger, Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, and Salvador Dali, each given thorough treatment. Theorists such as Alois Riegl and Wilhelm Worringer play two of the more important roles. The number of minor characters is dizzying too, such as Paul Eluard, and the photographer known as Brassai, and there is considerable charm in the way Papapetros rummages around to find them. For example, the writer Herbert Read enters the script as an editor of another's work, but we linger over his own writing for a page or so. Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, even Vitruvius don't quite enter the stage but they hover nearby, referenced periodically throughout the book as benchmarks locating the narrative in a larger cognitive map. As the reader follows Papapetros's narrative of detail from one chapter to the next, each long and intricate, it feels as though the author is not covering new ground. Instead, he leads the reader to nooks and fissures in the terrain, filling in some of the empty spaces on the map. The associations that come from this sort of approach, and the many asides that often lead to an important nuance, do indeed provide the reader with a worthwhile experience.

It is a successful and interesting book, even engaging, largely because of the manner in which the narrative is presented. The research feels hefty, although with so many details and minor characters it feels at times that the author simply refused to make tough choices, presenting everything. And yet, presentation is handled with skill and no part of the book seems misplaced or extraneous. It all belongs. This is a study of an idea, or set of ideas, not really a study of people. The flow from one

section to another within a chapter follows not a particular individual nor a discrete idea, but an idea as it was carried and developed by a particular individual. This makes for a personal and absorbing narrative, as the reader comes to learn the predilections of Papapetros's characters as well as their influence on the ideas they grappled with. Despite such an evocative and appealing narrative, it is a demanding book. It is not quite for the general audience, and it seems unsuited to undergraduate courses; it is a graduate level read to be sure, as specialists would get the most out of its innumerable references, lateral moves, and asides that flirt with narrative changes. The idea, or ideas, apply most immediately to painting and the decorative arts in the modern period, but there is something here for a range of scholars in the humanities, including historians of science.

### Structure and Method

The book's title contains the two key terms of the narrative, animation and inorganic. Indeed, animation comprises the first part of the book, chapters one to three, while the inorganic is treated in the second part containing the last three chapters. There is an important third term, extension, but it permeates the entire work rather than earning its own section. The beauty of the book, and it is a beautiful book in a number of ways, including its graphic design, is that the narrative is a discussion of those ideas, passing from one personage to another, and one realm of cultural production to another, wending and subtly changing as it flows from one section of the book to another. Although the ideas are defined at the outset, the reader must be prepared to watch the concepts signified by those terms transform.

There is considerable blurring between the first two terms, animation and inorganic, and the reader soon learns that the two inform one another rhetorically and historically. Chapter 1 embarks the reader on an art historical study of 'accessories', the painted garments of Renaissance figures and the curvature of hair, for example, as rendered by the hand of Botticelli. This is followed by a rumination on the snake as a 'pneumatic impulse' in the modern psyche as observed in antique art and revived centuries later, as well as its many permutations as a legless and armless reptile. Even the 'decapitated frog' of European folklore (102) gets its own subheading and section. The narrative thus moves forward chronologically, and in retrograde as well, emulating in its form the cognitive exploration Papapetros undertakes. This structure might bedevil the reader seeking well-defined categories and periods, but it means that the book lives in the connections between historical figures and circumstances. Chapter 3 is titled 'The Afterlife of Crystals', a study of the interplay between art history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with biology, graphic design and film, allowing the author to transition from animation to the inorganic in preparation for a study of the crystal as a figure and a concept in art. Chapter 4 is devoted to the Cubist renderings of crystal-like figures in the paintings of Fernand Léger. Chapter 5 shifts the reader's attention from the

canvas to depictions in print and image of ‘malicious houses’, an exploration of German architecture and film in the early twentieth century. This may seem an eclectic mixture of venues and media, and it is, but the author handles them well. This is a book that lives in subtleties, and seems to begin over and over as the author takes a fresh look at concepts already explored. The sixth chapter is titled ‘Daphne’s Legacy’, and begins with this improbable scenario:

If only architectural history books were more like issues of *Minotaure*. Imagine a page spread that on one half displays the Renaissance forests of ‘Ucello, lunar painter’, and on the other the winter trees of Brassai’s photograph of Place Dauphine at night. The same volume would ideally be illustrated by the crystals, coral, and aragonites of André Breton’s ‘convulsive beauty’, followed by the nymphs of Paul Eluard’s ‘the most beautiful *cartes postales*’. Moving in similar diagonal lines, the architecture of this book is equally divided between the crystal and the nymph, the forest and the metropolis. Such epistemological division becomes the frame through which the ancient figure of Daphne – the woman who transformed into a tree – reappears in modernity and in the course of this narrative. (263)

This is the sort of paragraph one might expect at the start of the book, not two-thirds in. Papapetros employs a reflexive approach to constructing his narrative, and we see the kernel of the whole embodied in each chapter. This makes the book easily fragmented; a chapter assigned here another assigned there, which perhaps might render itself useful in a graduate school seminar.

The risk here is that a careless reader may feel that the narrative is repetitive or fragmented, but Papapetros characterizes this approach as an additive method, calling it a ‘diagonal line’. The theme of animation (and its permutations *anima*, *animism*, *animatism*, *animate*) and the inorganic recur, but with each recurrence the terms subtly change and we explore a slightly different past, and an altered narrative. The method is inspired by Aby Warburg himself, his ‘accessory working method’, which for Papapetros means assembling a book by adding each chapter as an ‘appendage’ as he carefully ‘stitches together’ a ‘mosaic’. Metaphors pile on top of one another, they don’t quite mix, and yet each is slightly transparent so the one below can still resonate through. The author’s deliberate juggling of metaphor reinforces the point, but the result is coherent, and given the author’s methodological premise, this is almost, but not quite, disappointing. Hardly, the effect is rather engrossing. Given the close readings of manuscript and life, adopting Warburg’s method here smacks of being a little too close to the subject (the hostage empathizing with the kidnapper, or the actor forgetting his real identity while on stage). This intimacy is charming, however, and Papapetros has the skill to infect the reader with his own enthusiasm for the subject.

## Animation

To explore the problem of animation, Papapetros takes as his starting point German art history in the early days of the late nineteenth century. Warburg's study of Quattrocento depictions of hair and clothing are his prime examples for the external form of animation, or the 'external simulation of movement' as depicted in inanimate objects and by the renderings of such objects. This is where the careful study of curvature, colour, tone has been important, whether it be of a Botticelli or a motif evoking the meandering of a snake, becomes interesting for Papapetros. He studies how Warburg and others have worked with those forms, exploring the attitudes contextualizing those studies as well as the outcomes.

The internal form of animation, that 'inner liveliness' so important to Austrian and German art historians such as Alois Riegl and Wilhelm Worringer, two important characters in this narrative, comprise the second pole of Papapetros' work. Riegl endeavoured to craft a coherent trajectory of ornament from antiquity through the medieval and the arabesque, and Papapetros' interest is not so much in the contour of that constructed path but the desire by Moderns to create it and to 'see' it realized as a formal history. Riegl's study of the vegetal and organic inspiration of ornament serves a means of exploring Worringer's emendations of Riegl's work, contradicting it by seeing not the organic within the curvature of forms but the mechanical or the 'superorganic'. Papapetros gives us a variety of conceptual movements, from the 'pneumatic' of continuous motion to the static of valves and nodes creating an erratic progression where barriers and breaks stimulate movement rather than obstructing it. (134) Following Riegl and Worringer we explore animation of abstract forms, or we see how the author's cast of characters explored the potential for movement in such forms. Movement thus becomes not merely a concrete turn of the brush on a canvas, but a visual motif mediating the modern's relationship to the machine age and its industrial objects. It becomes metaphorical and very nearly disappears altogether as mere concept.

There are some pitfalls here. The enthusiasm for his subject matter leads the author to instil the two principal ideas of the book with a persona of their own. This false sense of agency, a stance that subverts the mission of exploring its constructed nature, is used to gloss over conceptual details as the lens of narrative shifts from, say, abstract painting to Albrecht Durer's line drawings. The book's introductory example, an all too brief case study of the power of animation on the human body, offers an alarming example of how the author makes implicit and yet wild assumptions. Here Papapetros relates an episode in Japan in 1997 when children were reportedly seized by convulsions or suffered less severe symptoms as they watched the animated cartoon Pokémon. The author's strength is his broad and yet minute knowledge of his subjects but those subjects are in Western Europe, the fin de siècle, and the elaborate conversations about art and aesthetics at that time. The computer age is roped into the story without question, and except for the Pokémon anecdote the author is untroubled by the complexity of multiple cultural and

aesthetic histories. To Japan we sally forth with Papapetros to watch him extend his lens geographically and temporally. The care with which he explores Warburg and his work is absent in this facile case study where local historical and visual trajectories are subsumed by those Papapetros brings to Japan. Papapetros may not really be interested in the physiological details or causes of 'optically stimulated epilepsy', his concern is rooted more in the 'hysteria' about the episode as captured and disseminated by the press. It leaves open the discourse about media and static representations of movement. Presumably the language, visual or otherwise, that we employ to handle movement expresses an understanding of and reaction to movement in real space and time. That is why Papapetros involves the reader tangentially on a discourse about the machine and industry during the modern period, but the lived or physical influence on the body is left without scrutiny. It may be asking too much of an art historian to account for the physics and psychiatry of kinetics on the human psyche, but this visit to Japan at the turn of the twenty-first century demonstrates just how far this meandering narrative can wander.

### **Inorganic**

What is inorganic, or in-organic as Papapetros occasionally inflects the term, is easier to grasp than animation and its permutations. Simply put, it is inanimate matter (or should we say, un-animated), but of course that is wrong. It is the stuff of the world that has no agency, no inner life, is not alive. Not to suggest this term is treated in a simple way. It also refers to depictions of un-alive matter. The author dives into the word and rummages through its early twentieth century life, guiding the reader through a conceptual exploration leading to and beyond the constructions of Worringer, Léger, and even Federico Fellini. The inorganic is just as central as the animated, for it is the arrested columns upon which the curved and the curlicued are carved, the gestures of movement and liveliness fabricated by an animism of form. It is not merely the crystals, or crystal nudes of Léger's *Nudes in the Forest*, it is also Ernst Haeckel's mineral crystals and other material substances. The term is investigated not for its etymology, or not for that alone, but for the larger attitudes that made sense of it at the time. Papapetros insists that Haeckel's mineral substances do not seem very in-organic, for they possess memory, or its sensation, and should therefore be categorized as having a soul.

The author's take on the inorganic is thus swayed by the power of the machine and its influence on virtually every aspect of culture in the late nineteenth century. Inspired by Worringer's investigations, as well as by the works of Salvador Dali and a host of other twentieth century characters who played with transgressive images, those of the organic and inorganic exchanging places or pushing and influencing one another, Papapetros reminds us of the 'mesmerizing' and often erotic potential of industrial objects. The rotating arm of the turbine, the rumble and speed of the automobile, the ponderous and lacklustre pace of the ocean liner, not to mention the ascent of the airplane, although inorganic, emit sound, give off heat,

glow, and move. Cold, metallic, yet mimicking life, harbouring a 'covert agency' that inspired and framed the way objects and human relationships to those objects were understood. The intellectual and artistic culture absorbing this reality is the subject of the book, an attempt to scrutinize how this reality bent relations between the animate and inanimate, or at least seemed to. Distinctions blur as the magnetism of the organic, or its rules of behaviour, seem to control the behaviour of inorganic matter. Léger's crystal-like fingers touch a cylindrical trunk and the tree seems to bend away, not elastically but like an elbow or a metallic hinge. In Papapetros' telling, the organic figures of both human and tree seem inorganic, and yet the inorganic has inherent organic quality, an inner life of liveliness.

The author imparts a fascination for his subject, and this enthusiasm alone makes for a good read. We learn for example that Aby Warburg returned to his dissertation long after its completion, appending notes and new theses to the document. It is this kind of close examination of the subject's process and not just the published works and their sequence that allows Papapetros to construct an argument. It is convincing, even absorbing, to explore the intellectual and emotional life of Warburg tagging along with the author. We read about the doodles on manuscripts and in the margins of books in personal libraries, as well as small gestures exchanged between student and advisor. An anecdote derived from one of Warburg's letters describing how August Schmarsow smiled upon hearing his student describe his dissertation topic, becomes the frame for an important fragment in the first chapter. Papapetros tells us that a smile has multiple readings, and the diligent reader soon learns that the slight curvature that makes for an enigmatic smile is the underlying theme of the chapter, focusing as it does on Warburg's careful cataloguing of curlicues in Renaissance painting. This is a consistent rhetorical style in Papapetros' book, formal traits morph into theme, sometimes by way of etymological inquiry. Take the reference to the decapitated frog, for example. It serves another purpose for Papapetros, as it was the expression used by Aby Warburg when he described his own lecture he gave in 1923, forbidding its subsequent publication. Minute details operate as conceptual hinges allowing the author to turn the reader from one direction to another.

Papapetros marshals impressive investigative skill in pursuit of the twisting and cyclical narrative, and the details are essential for comprehending this framework. Big ideas are easy to lose in the details his narrative, but the route is interesting and certainly worthwhile. In Chapter Four, for example, after propping Léger's painting before the reader and drawing attention to the crystalline and the animated character of figures and trees, he pauses to consider the title of the painting. It appeared as *Nudes in a Landscape* in the earliest reviews but today is *Nudes in the Forest*. Papapetros presents an extended excerpt from a letter penned by the painter to his agent ten years after the canvas was first exhibited, to point out that the original title was *Nude model in a landscape*. From the singular 'model' to the plural 'nudes', and from the general 'landscape' to the specific 'forest', we have a transformation or transference of meaning, but Papapetros works carefully to note

the ambiguity of the first term. 'But what if we consider that model not only in iconographic terms', he asks, 'but also as a methodological pattern? What if we take not only the three nudes but Léger's entire painting as model?' (163) A model can be a test, a projection; human and the inorganic sciences, anthropology and psychology in one and mineralogy and the geometry of inorganic shapes in the other, can share the same frame. Here, 'frame' is both literal in the art historical sense, and analogous, a discourse, and it is always the latter that provides Papapetros with the most mileage. The book is at its best when the author investigates such details.

The lines drawn between the living and the inanimate are bulwarks of positivist science, and Papapetros offers a magnetic study exploring how that divide was itself alive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He trammels familiar territory, some of it well worn, and yet constructs a narrative that enlivens an understanding of his principal characters and the ideas they worked with.

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