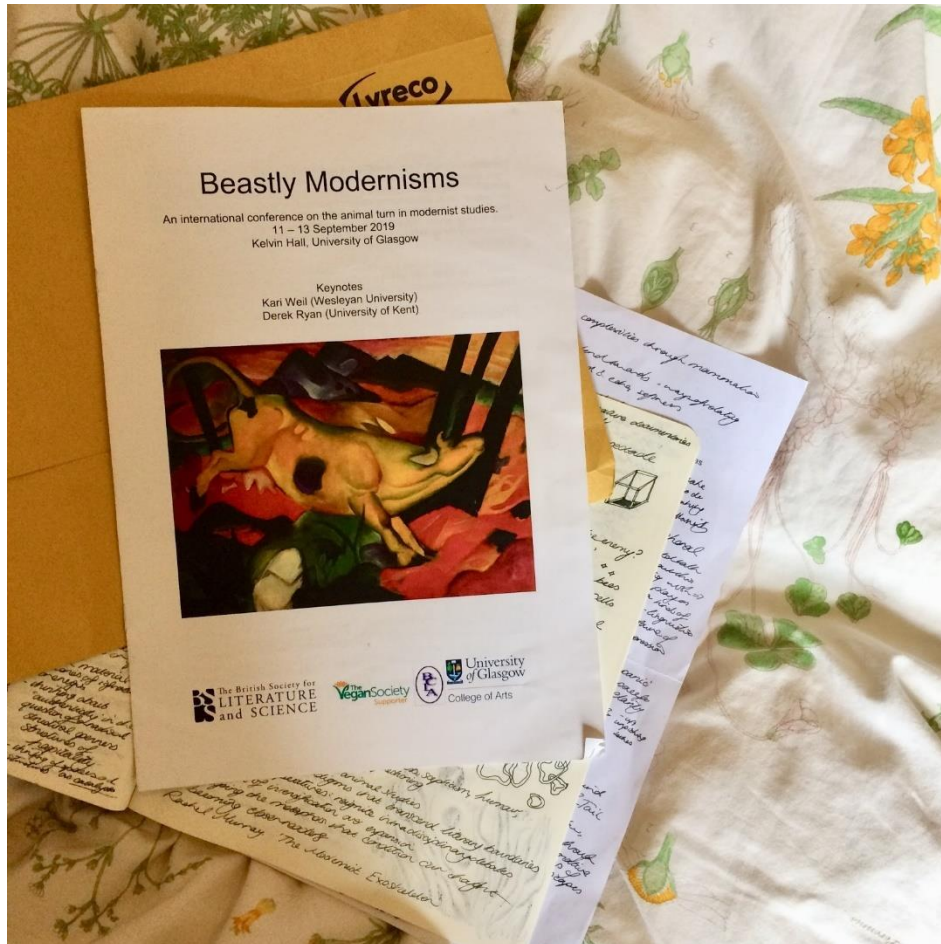


Conference Report: Beastly Modernisms 2019 University of Glasgow, Thursday 12 – Friday 13 September, 2019



A BEASTLY WELCOME

'I want to think about what it means to give a beastly welcome,' Peter Adkins begins, introducing our first key note, Derek Ryan (University of Kent). Giving a beastly welcome, it turns out, is an ethical approach to scholarship that holds openness, scepticism, humour and questioning. It involves prising open the jaws of one discipline to let the planktonic matters of others drift through, nourishing and encouraging richer conversations. It is something, maybe, that 'just happens' when you bring a certain number of enthusiastic, cutting-edge scholars together for two days, forming something like a zoology of fugitive, moving thought.

Beastly Modernisms 2019, a conference held at the University of Glasgow on 12-13 September, aimed for this symbiotic approach to literary studies. Organised by PhD candidates whose work traverses the realms of animal studies, modernism and the environmental humanities — Peter Adkins (University of Kent), Saskia McCracken (University

of Glasgow), Maria Sledmere (University of Glasgow) and Caitlin Stobie (University of Leeds) — the event quickly grew from a planned symposium to international conference, with guest speakers flying in from Paris, America, Poland, Russia and beyond. Such is the appetite for a more beastly scholarship, whose commodious bounds proliferate in animate metaphors, puns and sightlines of future critical thought.



Keynote: Kari Weil

ANIMALS AND MODERNISM IN GLASGOW

Recent work on animals, animacies and modernism includes books by Carrie Rohman, Caroline Hovanec, Dererk Ryan, Roni Grén, Kari Weil and Mel Y. Chen. No conference to date has centred on animal studies and modernism, and Glasgow felt like an ideal location for bringing a twist of the avant-garde, of creative-critical openness, to the traditional conference setting. Not only are the Scottish Network of Modernist Studies (SNoMS) and the British Animal Studies Network (BASN) based in Glasgow, but the city is also home to a vibrant, ecology-focused arts scene — from the [Sculpture & Environmental Art BA](#) at the Glasgow School of Art to [A+E Collective](#) and the [Glasgow Animal Studies Reading Group](#).

A MENAGERIE OF PERSPECTIVES

The conference came together from a shared feeling that ‘the animal question’ was at a critical point within modernist scholarship, and that it deserved a platform of its own. With funding secured from The British Society for Literature and Science, The Vegan Society, British Comparative Literature Association, and the University of Glasgow’s College of Arts, we were able to explore what this question of modernism’s ‘beasts’ might entail.

We were delighted that delegates and speakers responded so readily to the spirit of the theme. There were panels on Bugs and Beasties, Modernist Empathies, Waste and Trash Animals, Surreal Creatures, Joycean Beasts, Animal Ethics and Marine Life — to name a few. Papers were given on myriad themes of a spirited, beastly nature: the multiple ‘lives’ of nature documentary (Amy Cutler), modernism’s telluric depths (Cathryn Setz), cosmic cats (Molly Gilroy), animal artists (Kirsten Strom), the queer and comic nonhuman (Maureen O’Connor) and modernist jellyfish (Rachel Murray). Throughout the conference, our speakers challenged us to think of modernism not just in archival or literary-historical terms but also as a mobilising set of cultural and critical tendencies, with unique questions to ask continuously of language, ontology and coexistence.

It was especially heartening to see a mix of creative, critical and multidisciplinary approaches to academic conference papers. We had practicing artists, photographers and filmmakers in attendance, sharing their work but also engaging in vital ethical and aesthetic discussion around the context of that work’s production and reception, in tandem with animals, humans and the more-than-human. Martin Pover, for instance, gave a talk on photographing zoos as ‘theatres of the wild,’ and Rosie Roberts, a recent graduate of the inaugural Masters in Art Writing programme at the Glasgow School of Art, screened her film *Pan* and took part in a lively Q&A which saw rich reflections on reparative filmmaking, precarity, the ‘choral I’, the importance of play and the significance of ‘the everyday’ in questions of ecology and what we might call (in resistance to the human-animal distinction) beastly intimacies.

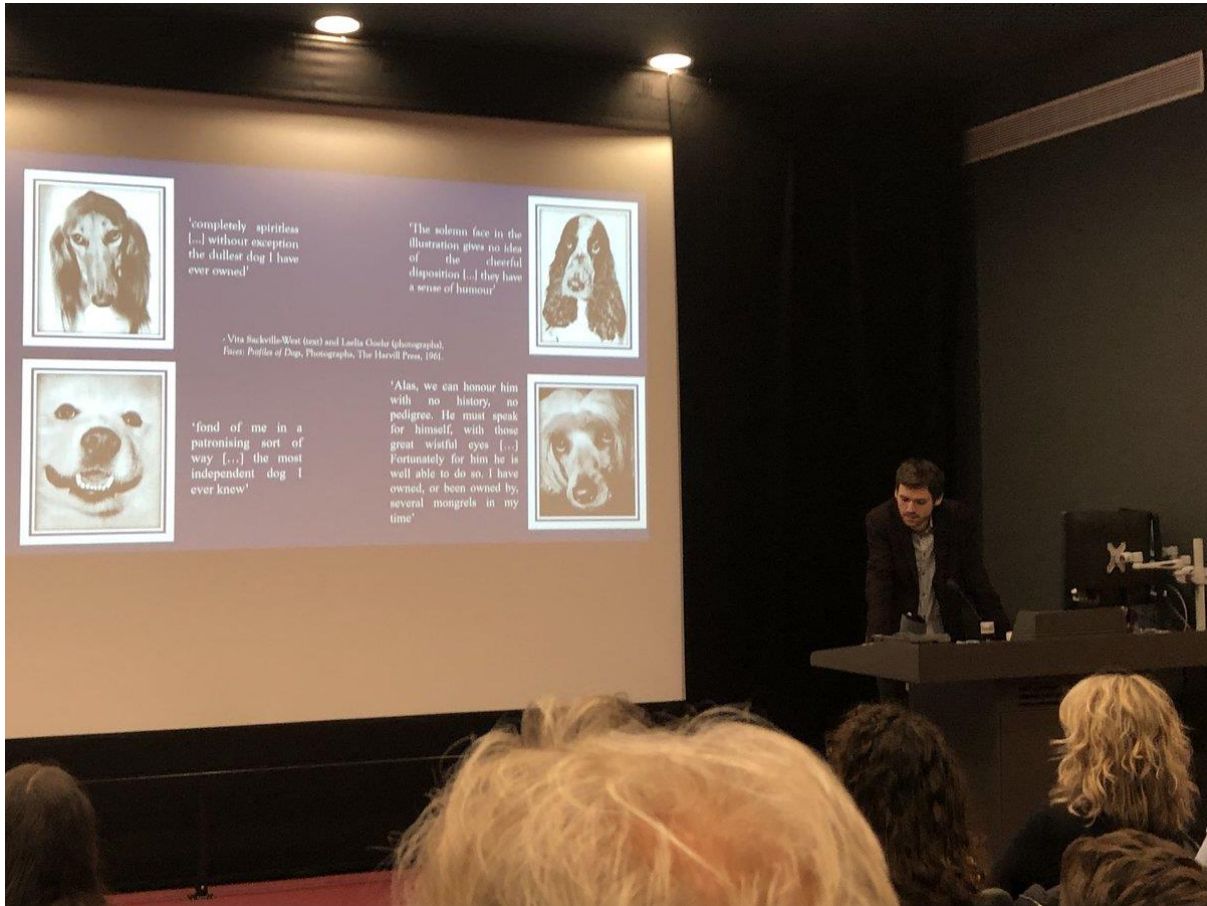


Poet: Colin Herd

BEASTLY POETRY

A crucial part of the conference was the Beastly Poetry night, hosted (quite appropriately) at the Butterfly and Pig bar in Glasgow. The audience formed a mix of conference delegates, friends, family and familiar faces from the city's wide-ranging literary scene. Our readers, some of whom were invited and others who applied as part of our 'open mic' part of the evening, were: Jelle Cauwenberghs, Alexandra Grunberg, Eva Isherwood-Wallace, Miranda Cichy, Jane Hartshorn, Daisy Lafarge, Callie Gardner, Jane Goldman, and Colin Herd. The packed-out room was testament to the Glasgow poetry scene but also an indication that modernism and its beastly entrails is alive and well 'in the present': a question of constant reinvention, playful citation, diverse registers and formal experiment. From Cichy's poetry of avian extinction to Hartshorn's mythic, visceral femininity, Goldman's biting, canine aesthetics to Lafarge's wasps, stinging 'with pagan abandon,' and Herd's anthropomorphised and tenderly-

loved 'Laplaplaplaplaplap Top', the poets challenged what might be a beast and what might be modern, and how we can begin to address that in the question of lyric relationality and speech itself.



Keynote: Derek Ryan. Image credit: Katherine Ebury

BEASTS OF THE AVANT-GARDE

We were extremely lucky to have two keynotes whose work has been essential to the emergence and development of our field, hive, habitat, tropics or indeed ocean of study (there was indeed a distinctly transatlantic, borderless and porous flavour to many of the talks). Derek Ryan concluded day one with 'Beastly Bloomsbury' which argued that the animal turn in modernist studies 'demands new readings of the most familiar modernist texts', becoming close readers of the metaphors that structure animality, hierarchy and difference, noticing aspects of 'the animal' which elude human understanding. Kicking off day two, keynote Kari Weil (Wesleyan University) gave a vivid talk on animal magnetism: 'the force that one animal body can have one another'. By moving through recent art (Berlinde de Bruyckere), French feminist philosophy and ideas from poststructuralism, Weil's talk questioned the boundaries, entanglements and representations at stake in animal relationality. She considered the force

of spectatorship, of contact and touch, memory, narrative and trauma, as well as the alien qualities within language itself that rub against our animal being.



Hunterian butterflies. Image Credit: Rebecca Varley-Winter

A BEASTLY ETHOS

One recurring theme throughout the conference was that of 'mastery'. Following Sarah Wood in her book *Without Mastery: Reading and Other Forces* (2014), we ask what would a textuality or poetics without mastery look like? The papers of *Beastly Modernism 2019* go some way to answering this question, or at the very least opening it up. Perhaps to be a beastly modernist requires something of a surrender of sovereignty, a recognition of the animal within ourselves (sated, happily, by the university's delicious vegan catering and the hospitality of the Centre for Contemporary Arts, where our dinner was held on Friday) and an embrace of mobility, curiosity, fluctuation within thought, a shifting, plural, contaminated 'I' that bears its beastly echoes. To listen, share and challenge our familiar critical habitus.

Some delegates had the pleasure of a tour around the Hunterian's Special Collections, facilitated by zoology curator Maggie Reilly. And so the conference began with this notion of the gaze and the touch: of what it means to look at what is held and preserved, to think through archiving and curation within the critical force of our own work. It was clear to us that many exciting conversations were happening throughout the breaks and Q&A sessions, and delegates commented positively on the approachability of our speakers. We hope, then, that this might be something of what a 'beastly welcome' entails, and who knows what tracks, turns and paths of flight might happen next...

By Maria Sledmere