

Transnational Imagi(ni)sm: Borealism and the Avant-Gardes

Sylvain Briens and Juliana Lopoukhine
Sorbonne University

Abstract

The emergence of the *Avant-gardes* at the turn of the twentieth century brought with it a transformation of the Nordic pastoral tradition, remodelled as resolutely modern poetics, which we propose to consider under the name *Boreal Imaginism*. We will examine different avant-garde movements, the fashioning of their names and their aesthetic projects, which will allow us to theorise *Boreal Imaginism* in a transnational perspective: Anglo-American *Imagism* theorised by Ezra Pound in his 1912 manifesto, as a poetic movement founded on the creation of images in the form of visual snapshots, epitomised by Wallace Stevens's poem "The Snow Man"; the Russian *Imagism* of the 1910s and 20s; the *Imaginisterna*, a group formed by Swedish artists C.O. Hultén, Max Walter Svanberg and Anders Österlin between 1945 and 1955; *Le Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus imaginiste* developed by the Danish artist Asger Jorn in 1954; and Christian Dotremont's "Imagineiges". At the intersection of these different avant-garde movements, the concept of a *Boreal Imagism* will allow us to theorise the reworking of traditional boreal tropes through an aesthetic experimentation that is resolutely modernist. In the context of the current debate on ecocriticism and nature writing, this article will seek to explore the possible lines of transmission between the historical avant-gardes and the post-WWII Nordic experimental movements.

Keywords

Bauhaus *imaginiste*, *boréalisme*, ecocriticism, imaginative geography, Imaginism, *Imaginsterna*, Imagism, *logoneiges*, nature writing, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Serguei Yesenin, C.O. Hultén, Max Walter Svanberg, Anders Österlin, Asger Jorn, Christian Dotremont

DOI

10.54432/scand/QLYT1970



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Let us begin *in medias res* with a piece of music for soprano composed in 1921 by Edgard Varèse. It sets to music a surrealist poem by the Mexican poet José Juan Tablada, written during the same period. The boreal metaphor, transposed to a ‘Varèsian’ musical universe, is created through dreamlike imagery: ‘*Les femmes aux gestes de madrepore ont des poils et des lèvres rouges d’orchidée. Les singes du Pôle sont albinos ambre et neige et sautent vêtus d’aurore boréale*’ (Lalitte 2003: 33) (The women with madreporite gestures have hair and lips that are red like orchids. The monkeys of the Pole are albino amber and snow and they jump clothed in aurora borealis).¹

One could interpret the vocal piece by Varèse as a sonorous transcription of the sensory and sensual experience conveyed by Tablada’s poem. Indeed, in her memoirs, Louise Varèse recalls her husband composing his music after having witnessed an *aurora borealis*, trying to capture the sounds that accompanied the movements of the Northern Lights (Varèse 1972: 100–1), associating his musical creative process with visual mediation (Lalitte 2003; Class 2022). The association of the avant-garde music of Varèse and of the surrealist poem of Tablada, in which the aesthetic is made up of a series of incongruous visual flashes, frictions between unexpected associations, and uncanny hypallages, does not explore the Northern Lights as a reservoir of images frozen in time, but rather emphasises the shock of ephemeral experience.

Indeed, what happens when the timeless, but nonetheless momentary, phenomenon of the Northern Lights, is reinterpreted by the avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century? Their purpose was to revisit, renew, and modernise the forms and subjects of fossilised traditional images and poetic tropes, and, according to the famous catchphrase of Ezra Pound, ‘make it new’ (Pound 1935). It is the transformation of a traditional Nordic pastoral (see Terry Gifford’s definition of the concept in *Pastoral*; Gifford 2019), remodelled into decidedly modern poetics, which we propose to explore in this article. Indeed, the Nordic pastoral as a canonical landscape has been the object of timeless curiosity and a source of inexhaustible inspiration for the arts. Yet different transnational avant-garde movements, which were also transartistic and transmedial in that they combined the sister arts poetry and painting, such as Swedish, Danish, Belgian and Russian *Imaginisms*, or American *Imagism*, have sought to refashion and renew the Nordic landscape. It was no longer the result of established aesthetics, but rather of dissonant, incongruous images, and shock.

In the light of those aesthetic projects, with their echoing names that resonate across national and cultural boundaries and point at potential, unexpected transmission lines and connexions, we propose to theorise the reworking of the Nordic pastoral under the name of *Boreal Imaginism*, and to interpret the resurgence of traditional boreal tropes within the context of a transnational modernist aesthetic experimentation. We offer to read *Boreal Imaginism* as an 'aesthetics of figuration', according to Philippe Descola (2021), as an invitation to think beyond the idea that the Nordic world is a pre-constructed totality, with its reservoir of clichéd images. Images, we argue, are the result of a constant invention by the avant-gardes as agency, and as a means to explore their iconoclastic power. They do not represent the world as much as they recreate it, and thus bring it forward into modernity.

The Image Text: American *Imagism* and the Boreal Trope

The Anglo-American movement Imagism, led by the American poet Ezra Pound, was born between Paris and London at the beginning of the 1910's. In his manifesto written in 1912, Pound advocated the creation of images under the form of visual snapshots and defined the image as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' (Pound 1913: 200). *Imagism* then makes explicit the inextricable link between poetry and painting, visual art and poetic art, bound together in a fervent search for modernity. F. S. Flint explains the purpose pursued by the American *Imagists*:

They were not a revolutionary school; their only endeavor was to write in accordance with the best tradition, as they found it in the best writers of all time – in Sappho, Catullus, Villon. They seemed to be absolutely intolerant of all poetry that was not written in such endeavor, ignorance of the best tradition forming no excuse. (Flint 1913: 199).

In this regard, Wallace Stevens's *Imagist* poem 'The Snow Man', published in 1921 in *Poetry Magazine*, operates the reworking of the 'old theme' of the snowy landscape with its hackneyed tropes, as has been noted by one critic: 'when reading "The Snow Man", [...] preconceived notions about winter [...] must be suspended' (Mildenberg 2023: 55). In this poem, we observe the inextricable presence of visual and auditory dimensions, which associates poetry, painting, and music. The Imagist technique, nonetheless, recaptures

this 'wintry clarity of an ad nauseam repetition of old themes, an outdated poetic language and for making the world anew' (Mildenberg 2023: 55), through a modernity that no longer totals a harmonious panorama but operates rather through a sort of bursting into fragments. The poetics is using disjunction rather than conjunction, synecdoche rather than metaphors, numerous anacolutha and enjambments.

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The introduction of a paradoxical mediation by a receptive but depersonalised subjectivity, 'One must have a mind of winter', generates a synthesis which is neither objective, nor appropriable. The body which experiences the cold enables the sensory and aesthetic experience and becomes the medium of a series of visual flashes which permits no objectification, all the while de-familiarising the sensation through the synecdoche and grammatical ruptures that crush the totalising and objectifying potential of the landscape. The ambiguous title 'The Snow Man' deters attention away from the landscape itself towards a poetic persona, which never stabilises itself (as is exemplified by the play on the sonority 'The Snow Man' / Thus no man)¹¹. The title suggests the possibility of readings that are both metaphoric and literal, the coexistence of a traditional poetic subjectivity, and of a prosaic, incongruous object, the snowman.

Indeed, the poem writes itself through successive anaphoras like brushstrokes on the canvas and seems to create a playful snowball destined to form a snowman. The poem operates, nonetheless, in the opposite direction, going paradoxically from the profusion of images in the first verses to the nudity of a minimalist landscape. It finishes with an oxymoron, which associates the white page, the emptiness, to the pure presence of 'the nothing that is'. With Stevens, the Nordic landscape is interspersed with visual flashes, which are also sound details ('crusted with snow'), and at the same time remains paradoxically empty without ever becoming saturated, as he renews himself at each moment through a new figural short-lived creation, and new instantaneous text-images.

Juliette Utard has pointed at the polemical debate that opposed Wallace Stevens to Gaston Bachelard when the latter declared that the cold climate of the polar regions was hostile to poetic imagination:

il se trouve que l'imagination du froid est très pauvre. On s'en tire avec des raideurs et des blancheurs - neige et glace - on essaie par le métal de donner un abord froid. Bref, on rejoint vite les métaphores morales, sans trouver des images simples et directes. (Bachelard 1948 : 207).

(it turns out that the imagination of the cold is very poor. In the end it always comes down to stiffness and whiteness - snow and ice - through the use of metal we try to give it a cold outlook. In short, one quickly reaches moral metaphors, and fails to find simple and direct images.)

Wallace Stevens debunked this arbitrary assertion by answering that 'G. Bachelard is upside down. The greater part of the imaginative life of people is both created and enjoyed in polar circumstances (qtd by Utard 2018: 226). Juliette Utard has highlighted the increasing role played by the North and winter landscapes throughout Stevens's career as a poet, culminating in his last collection entitled *The Rock* (Utard 2018: 225-6). Mildenberg wrote that for Stevens, 'coldness is the starting point of creativity for the poet as well as the reader' (57). While it is true that Spring as a poetic theme and metaphor of renewal was used abundantly by other American modernist poets such as William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings and Pound, Bachelard's stance appears preposterous in the light of the brilliance, lushness, and creativity of 'The Snow Man' that could be deemed a perfect example of 'modernist borealism.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Russian *Imaginism* and the 'Image-Machine': from tradition to revolution

Another example that contradicts Bachelard's assertion radically is to be found, interestingly, around the same time in Russia, that is to say on the other end of the polarised literary and political world, with a movement whose sole name echoes Pound's *Imagism*. The poets Anatoly Marienhof, Vadim Shershenevich and Serguei Yesenin founded an original movement, *Imaginism*, in 1918, as a reaction to Italian Futurism, which emerged during the same period (Huttunen 2013: 64), and with the Russian Revolution as a background. Even though this Russian *Imaginism* was a lesser known and less influential movement than other avant-garde movements of the same period in Russia, such as the *acmeists* or the *symbolists*, the *Imaginist* manifesto of 1919 contained a powerful call to use metaphors and allegorical chains to challenge the relationship between the object and its traditional representations (Lanne 1995: 80). Here, the Imaginists claim: 'Oh you, hear in our works the free verse of images'^{iv} ('Декларация' [Manifesto of Imaginism] 1969: 91).

Even though the Anglo-American *Imagists* preceded the Russians when it came to focusing on poetic images, the Russians, too, valued the image for itself, not as a reservoir of symbols, as in *symbolism* which emerged during the same period, but rather in the sense of the metaphor. They 'proclaimed the primacy of the image' (Struve 2020 [1970]: 29), which Sergei Yesenin illustrated as early as 1913 at the age of 18, six years before the *Imaginist* manifesto, in his poem 'The Birch Tree', which is somewhat reminiscent of Stevens's 1921 poem 'The Snow Man'. Yesenin's, however, is much less experimental in the choice of images to express the beauty of a snowy landscape and his country boy's nostalgia for the country of Riazan in the midst of the modern city and of growing industrialisation, his spontaneous sense of nature and celebration of the Russian landscape (Struve 2020 [1970]: 27), which echoes Stevens's use of the American pastoral in his poetry.

The white birch tree
Under my window
Became covered with snow
Exactly silver coloured

On the downy branches

Sheathed in snow
Dangling tassels
Form a white fringe.

And the birch-tree stands
In a dream-like silence
And the snow-flakes are burning
In a golden fire.

And the sunset, lazily
Circling round
Sprinkles the branches
With new silver.^v

In 1920, seven years after 'The Birch Tree', Yesenin published a fetchingly modern poem which begins precisely by calling to the gaze of viewer, before it presents a vividly striking scene that is no longer simply about nature. It appears as the expression of his fear of a brutal, powerful modernity, in the emblematic form of a train, that quintessential icon of modernity, in the guise of a metal beast crossing the immense white steppes of Russia, thus illustrating Marshall Berman's declaration that 'To be fully modern is to be anti-modern' (1999: 14):

Have you seen
Running through the steppe
Hidden by the lake mists,
Blowing through its iron nostril
On the iron legs, the train?

Faced with the intensity of the image, it appears that Bachelard couldn't have been more wrong when he wrote about the poverty of the imagination of the cold and the failure to create 'direct images' in the Imagist fashion – especially when he wrote about the artificiality of the use of metal to create a cold atmosphere. Even though Yesenin's poem is a clear protest against the threat posed to nature by the mad pursuit of technological speed, the powerful metaphor of the heated racing metal beast, which contrasts violently with the cold and still whiteness of the snow, is compelling.^{vi} While explicitly criticising modernity through the content of the poem, the image it uses to achieve such criticism is paradoxically modern. As Abberley et. al write in their recent volume *Modern British Nature Writing, 1789–2020*:

Land Lines, 'twentieth-century country writing [...] is of a piece with the modernity it often seems so eager to denounce' (2022: 137).

As an echo of Pound's 'moving-image', Yesenin created the concept of the 'image-machine', which consisted of random combinations of words and was also Dadaïst in spirit (Huttunen 2013: 64). Yesenin declared: 'Only the image spread in a work like naphthalene saves it from the moths of time' (qtd by Struve 2020[1970]: 29). While using incongruous metaphors as the material that builds modernity and turns it into the main principle of the *poiein*, understood as the conscious process of poetic fabrication, he claims that 'the image is the armour of the verse, the breastplate of the painting' (qtd by Struve 2020[1970]: 29).

Furthermore, Vadim Shershenevich proposes the idea of a 'catalogue of images' in which the poet deletes the entire verb and thus requires the active participation of the reader who has to guess, or replace, the missing word by using their imagination – an aesthetic experimentation inspired by Walt Whitman or by Sergei Eisenstein (Huttunen 2013: 65). In their manifesto-like declaration, the Russian *Imaginity* established that the rhythm and the construction of images (by analogy, parallelism, comparison, opposition) enable the artist to investigate the poetic language (Nilsson 1986: 285). Some experimentation such as writing sentences without verbs are included in a larger attempt to claim modernity though the deconstruction of the syntax (Nilsson 1986: 285).^{vii}

The movement, which ended in 1925 at the death of Yesenin, gave rise to various poetry journals, among which *Imaginity*, that is to say, in Russian, *the Imaginists*. In that respect, it is worth noticing that the Russians too chose a term derived from the Latin: a label turned not towards the Russian language, but towards Western Europe and Paris, just like the original name of American *Imagism* was in fact 'Imagisme' with an 'e', as a homage to the French avant-gardes. The Russian *Imaginity*, who, like the American writers that emigrated to Paris in order to re-vivify American literature they thought was 'moribund', were born in a cultural periphery, seem to have chosen to subscribe to a network of European avant-gardes. Until the totalitarian hardening of the new regime in the 1920's put an end to the effervescence and the desire for aesthetic, intellectual, and political modernity, the *Imaginity* created an intricate combination of the traditional pastoral idyll contained in the large expanses of Russian territory to an insatiable thirst for modernity.

The Swedish *Imaginisterna*: in search of ‘progressive’ shock

If we keep following the track of the etymology at work in the names that these twentieth-century avant-garde movements found for themselves, the Swedish *Imaginisterna* is another occurrence: a group of painters this time, formed in 1945 in Malmö after the dissolution of the short-lived avant-garde group *Minotaur* (Noheden 2019: 797). The *Imaginisterna* consisted of Swedish artists such as C. O. Hultén, Stig Lindqvist, Mac Walter Svandberg and Anders Österlin, later joined by Gösta Kriland and Gudrun Åhlberg (Millroth 2008: 46; Noheden 2019: 796). In the wake of the *Minotaur* movement, they claimed a surrealist heritage and advocated the central role of images, their power of action and their ability to arouse emotion (Forshage n.d.: 10; 35).

The name *Imaginisterna* (‘the Imaginists’) was offered by Stig Lindqvist to formally distinguish the movement from *Surrealism* (Noheden 2019: 797). It took its etymological root from the Latin word *Imaginatio*, ‘Imagination and creation. The creative imagination’ (C O Hultén, Gösta Kriland, Bertil Lundberg, Anders Österlin. ‘Den falska Svanbergrollen’, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 15.08.79, qtd by Eriksson 2004)^{viii}. When Lindqvist explained the choice of the term “*Imaginists*”, he did in fact acknowledge that it was a play on the name of the original American *Imagism* of 1916 (Noheden 2019: 797). Surprisingly, there is no established reference to the Russian movement to be found in any of the writings by the Swedish *Imaginisterna* of the 1940’s. Is it because the Russian *Imaginists* failed to become known outside the Russian artistic and literary circles? Or because the Russian revolution and subsequent terror stifled its expansion and creative surge, as was the case with many other Russian avant-garde movements? In any case, the absence of any reference to a Russian heritage, or debt towards their short-lived poetic homonym created at the turn of the century, is surprising, given that the names of the two movements, twenty-seven years apart, are the same, and that their geographical anchorages are relatively close.

However, the Swedish painters of the 1940’s might have come across Yesenin’s 1917 poem ‘Transformation’ when it was published by the Finnish avant-garde journal *Quosego* in 1928 (*Quosego* No3 1928). Besides, the Finnish writer Henry Parland, who grew up in Saint Petersburg and was fluent in Russian, introduced various aspects of the Russian aesthetic experiments, such as Futurism, Formalism or Imaginism, to a Swedish-speaking audience in Finland: he wrote an article on Russian avant-garde formalism entitled ‘The Modernist Poem from a Formalist Perspective’ (Den modernistiska dikten ur

formalistisk synpunkt) in 1929, published posthumously in *Återsken* 1932 (Stam 2019: 688); several essays on the topic of the Soviet cinema; and a text entitled 'On recent literary movements in Finland' (Om de senaste litterära rörelserna i Finland) (Parland 1970: 145) in which he compared Russian *Imagism* with Finnish *Expressionism* (Hellman et al. 2017: 78). In that respect, it appears as a reasonable assumption that the Russian *Imagists*, which have been called by critics 'a school with no tomorrow' (Struve 2020[1970]: 139), left a heritage after all, despite it being unacknowledged or, until now, overlooked. The fact that twenty-seven years after their Russian counterparts the Swedish *Imagists* actually managed to come up with the same name to refer to similar aesthetic questions, transposed to the visual arts this time, would be too striking a coincidence.

The *Imagist* manifesto, 'Declarations on *Imagism* in three phases' (*Deklarationer om imagism i tre utvecklingsfaser*), published in Sweden between 1949 and 1952, puts forward the free and revolutionary nature of art when imagination is placed at the heart of artistic creation. In this perspective, their art uses the 'progressive' effect of shock, which opposed the *Imagisterna* to the Parisian Surrealists of the interwar period: the Swedish painters of the 1940's, in fact, advocate a shock that, paradoxically, is no longer instantaneous, but introduced gradually and continuously (Svanberg 1979: 8; Noheden 2019: 797). For instance, this 'progressive shock' effect is epitomised by the staging of eroticism contained in the details of a scene, which the viewer only perceives gradually after a progressive visual contact with the painting. For instance, the work entitled 'A Day in the Brittle Shop' (En dag i den spröda butiken, Gouache 1959) shows several anthropomorphic female bodies that are part human and part artefacts. Their gendered bodily attributes are highly sexualised, and their interactions carry an incongruously erotic dimension that famously attracted the attention of André Breton when he visited Svanberg's exhibition in Paris. Breton went as far as to call those paintings 'subversive(s)' or even 'scabrous' (Breton 1954).^{ix} Beyond the simple goal of imitating the object, their artistic gesture aimed at reducing the essentialising dimension of representation by focusing on its figurative dimension.

Some of the *Imagist* painters did in fact take the Nordic winter landscape as an artistic subject, as for instance in Gudrun Ahlberg's oil painting *Drömlandskap* (1950, Dream landscape) in which the painter uses the traditional boreal imagery as a metaphor for the unconscious. Indeed, the aim of the Swedish *Imagists* was to depart from the referential function of representation. It led them to

overthrow the traditional representations of reality, such as the Nordic pastoral, in order to create a free and revolutionary art. In that sense, their version of a Nordic *Imaginism* cannot be fully considered as an instance of what we have called “*Boreal Imaginism*”, although they can indeed be regarded as the heirs and artistic counterparts of the American *Imagist* and Russian *Imagist* poets, notably through a similar interest in the treatment of images and of their powerful effects.

Asger Jorn’s *Imagist Bauhaus*: towards an aesthetics of *Détournement*

One easily understands that this reworking and empowerment of images by the Swedish *Imagists* could have been a source of inspiration for other artists who were working towards a Scandinavian de-territorialisation of the *avant-gardes* traditionally concentrated in Paris. The Danish artist Asger Jorn was closely interested in Nordic reactions to Parisian Surrealism and founded the CoBrA movement in the 1940’s (Jamet 2020), which, in turn, served as a harbinger of the Swedish *Imagisterna*, who attached themselves to CoBrA in 1949 (Forshage n.d.: 36).

The CoBrA artistic process became the foundation of a new movement created in 1953 by Asger Jorn: *Le Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus imaginateur* (Jamet 2020: 80). Its program involved stripping the image of all utilitarian function and referred explicitly to the first historical *Bauhaus* of the interwar period. It was also a reaction to its reappropriation by the director of the *Hochschule für Gestaltung*, Max Bill, which Jorn interpreted as abusive (Ørum 2016: 28; Jamet 2020: 60). At the heart of the controversy, we find there once again the question of the image. Outraged by the utilitarian vision of the object defended by Bill, Jorn instead claimed the power of imagination in the process of artistic creation and embraced *Imagisterna*’s programmatic quest for ‘progressive shock’ (Jamet 2020: 130). This is exemplified in the very syntactic structure of this emblematic quote: ‘La véritable valeur artistique d’une image est celle qui est dans la fascination du spectateur qui ne sait pas d’où ça vient, quand ça a été fait, et par qui, et rien du tout, et rien que l’objet en soi lui ouvre des horizons’ (Jorn 2001: 372) (The true artistic value of an image is that which is in the fascination of the viewer who does not know where it came from, when it was made, and by whom, and nothing at all, and nothing but the object itself opens up horizons for him.)

In his work *Fin de Copenhague* (1957), published by the *Bauhaus* [sic] *imaginiste*, Jorn uses a provocative iconography to denounce the limits of the different discourses concerning urbanism. Here he hijacks publicity slogans or maps of urbanisation to turn them into works of art (Jorn & Debord 2001[1957]); Jamet 2020: 226) in the wake of the *readymades* by Marcel Duchamp. He thereby affirms the supremacy of the image over the text and implements it conclusively in his painting *Af den stumme myte, opus 4* (Of the mute myth) inspired by the work of the Danish writer Johs. V. Jensen, who invented a new literary genre called *Myte* (myth): a short text articulated to an image representing daily life, which rewrites an ancient narrative by giving it a modern form (Henriques 1938). As a result, in the title of his painting, Jorn reappropriates, the 'myth' as it was created by Jensen but declares it 'mute' ('stum') this time, emphasising the idea that its power is more figural than discursive. Through this claim, he erases the text to the benefit of the image, thus combining ethics and aesthetics to bring the image to the foreground.

Jorn's goal was to posit Nordic art on the European cultural map (Jamet 2018: 234) by showing that it contributed to the development of a global culture: indeed, he founded the Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism (Skandinavisk Institut for Sammenlignende Vandalisme) in 1961, with the explicit goal of combining forms of Nordic traditional popular art and archaeology, with various avant-garde movements of the early post-war period, such as *Imaginism*. With this ambitious and hybrid project, Jorn too seeks to establish a dialogue between traditional representations of the North and artistic experimental movements. The boreal dimension of Asger Jorn's programme appears in the appropriation of the concept of the 'barbarian' in the terminology used by Jorn: 'teuthoniques' (sic), 'barbarisk' and 'vandalismer' (Jamet 2018: 237). This time, the term 'Boreal' is replaced by 'barbarian'. The *Boreal Bauhaus Imaginism* could be thus defined by this 'barbarian' posture, in which the North is not an unwritten page silenced by the Southern cultural domination, but rather an artistic space with its own production of images and representations, which would be akin to Walter Benjamin's 1933 use of the idea of a 'positive' 'barbarism' to theorise modernity and modernism in the arts (Benjamin 2005: 735), or to what Ernst Bloch, in 1938, defined as an expressionistic 'barbaric art', whose 'ultimate goal was humane' (Bloch 1977: 24).

The title of one of Jorn's painting *Im Anfang war das Bild* (1965; In the beginning was the image) summarises in a manifesto-like way the artist's aim to tighten the links between text and images, notably in

the exploration of collage and *détournement* (Jorn 2001: 214). In that sense, Jorn's 'barbaric' *détournement*, with its ironic use of the biblical phrasing, subversively defines a boreal creative space in which the image comes before the word, and reinvents a new historiography of the North at odds with the idyllic Nordic pastoral (Jamet 2018: 248).

Writing the Nordic pastoral on the Ground: The "Imagineiges" of Dotremont

The Belgian artist Christian Dotremont, who, together with Jorn, co-founded the trinational CoBrA movement, contributed to giving a new surge to the movement by travelling to the Far North of Scandinavia. Convinced that CoBrA could be considered a Nordic extension of Surrealism, he claimed the development of a 'Nordic Surrealism' through an aesthetic appropriation of the Nordic landscape (Jauzion-Graverolles 2008: 405–6). By naming his autobiography 'Mémoires d'un imaginiste' (Memoirs of an Imaginist) in the middle of the 1960's, Dotremont placed himself within the double scope of the Swedish *Imaginisterna* and of Jorn's *Bauhaus imaginiste* (Dotremont 1998 [1963]). His iconic invention resided in the 'logogrammes de neige' (snow logograms) or *logoneige*, which he traced all along his wandering on the great snowy stretch with a sleigh. Dotremont used a *portmanteau* to refer to his *logoneiges*, and baptised them 'imagineige', in reference to the *Imaginists* (Dotremont 1998 [1963]):

Il m'arrive donc d'avoir le sentiment, quand je trace un logogramme, d'être un Lapon en traîneau rapide sur la page blanche, et de saluer la nature comme au passage, par la forme même de mon cri ou de mon chant ou des deux tout ensemble. En tout cas, si la Laponie n'existait pas, je ne ferais pas de logogrammes, je ne ferais rien du tout. (Dotremont 1998 [1985]: 21).

(Sometimes I have the feeling, when I draw a logogram, that I am a Sámi on a fast sled on the white page, and that I am greeting nature as if in passing, by the very form of my cry or my song or both together. In any case, if Lapland didn't exist, I wouldn't make logograms, I wouldn't do anything at all.)

Following the metaphor of the white page as the site of artistic creation, ‘Lapland’ becomes the site that welcomes an experimental project whose intention is to ‘sing [the Far North] on the white desert of paper’ (Dotremont 1998 [1985]: 429)*.

By inscribing a *Boreal Imaginism* that is at once visual and poetic on the snowy ground itself (Walecka-Garbalinska 2015: 49), Dotremont explores a new status for the image as being both part of a landscape and a signifier in itself. In the artistic vision of Dotremont, the whole Nordic territory in turn becomes a canvas ready to welcome his creative process. He then operates an *artialisation* of the landscape; that is to say, a displacement of landscape into the domain of art by the double movement of an ‘aesthetic act’ (‘acte esthétique’) and of a ‘thought act’ (‘acte de pensée’) (Avocat 1984: 14). The Nordic landscape is then transformed and sublimated: the graphemes inscribed by the *logoneiges* onto the materiality of the landscape transform the Nordic pastoral into an avant-garde spectacle and performance, a visual space both semiotic and figural, both pictorial and scriptural.

In that respect, Dotremont’s aesthetic gesture bears some similarities with the poetic projects of *Imagism*, as Pound and Stevens were themselves very much inspired by the visual arts. As in Stevens’s poem, his *Imagineiges* use the white landscape as a page dedicated to poetic writing, or a canvas destined for painting. Dotremont could be interpreted as mixing the recognisable tropes of the Nordic pastoral with something that could also be read as close to the American pastoral; indeed, his *logoneiges* can be read not only as a fetching and unusual type of Nordic nature writing, but also as a European rewriting of the modern ‘restoration of the American pastoral’ (Rumeau 2019: 350). More specifically, he shared a common source of inspiration with the Scandinavian poetic avant-garde of the 1930s: Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (Lundkvist 1932). Therefore, his *Boreal Imaginism* can be considered as the heir of poetic *Imaginism* translated into visual arts. In that perspective, Dotremont’s *Boreal Imaginism* might be seen as the heir of the *Imagists’* work with the poetic image, through its precision and sobriety, its play on emotion and incongruous ambiguity, its beauty and dissonance.

Conclusion: Towards an *Imaginist Borealism*

The concept of *Borealism*, which as it has been redefined in recent years by French-language research, has opened new aesthetic and

ethical perspectives in the analysis of the discourse on the North and has invited critics to rethink the North as a figural and metaphorical space (Briens 2018). In that sense, *Imagism* and *Imaginism* can be considered as *Borealist* expressions of the avant-gardes, whether artistic or poetic, whether they emanate from Scandinavian artists or not.

By confronting a memorable and timeless landscape and the discussions that construct it, by substituting the instantaneousness and immediacy of the image and its transformative power, the *Imaginist* avant-gardes update the limits of the discourses on the North when it comes to accounting for shock as an aesthetic emotion. What the transnational and transmedial movements appear to have in common might be their shared interest for the Nordic landscape as a spectacular scenery. Their experimental aesthetics work through short-lived sensorial and emotional effects which affect vision and imagination through the use of setting, scene and performance.

What French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman calls ‘faits d’affect’ (Huberman 2023) might then apply to these *avant-garde* gestures while at the same time remaining in dialogue with traditional Nordic and wintery landscapes with their share of hackneyed tropes and images. The work of the avant-gardes appears as a ceaseless recreation of the *Boreal* landscape, through a de-familiarising of the traditional images of the spectacular North. The Nordic pastoral is reinvented in turn through an imperious search for modernity. If the images thus formed make it possible to represent the idyllic pastoral of the North, what the artists perceive out of the immensity and beauty of its landscapes, as well as the aesthetic emotion aroused by them, is through the paradoxical appeal to experimental processes that advocate diversion, provocation, or even iconoclasm. They are an invitation to explore a subversive, and therefore political, form of art in which the discourse on the North, explored through the boreal pastoral (Stevens, Yessenin, Åhlberg, Dotremont) or a Nordic mythologising tradition (Jorn), is reinvested in order to shed, in return, uncompromising modernity over it.

Bibliography

- Abberley, W., C. Alt, D. Higgins, G. Huggan and P. Marland. (2022). *Modern British Nature Writing, 1789–2020: Land Lines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Avocat, C. (1984). 'Essai de mise au point d'une méthode d'étude des paysages'. In *Lire le paysage, lire les paysages*. C. Avocat (Ed.), Paris : CIEREC.
- Bachelard, G. (1948). *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté*. Paris: Librairie José Corti.
- Hellman, B., T. Huttunen, T. Klapuri and L. Piispa. (2017). 'Finlandssvenskarna som förmedlare av rysk kultur på 1920- och 30-talen'. *Finsk Tidskrift* 3-4. Tema: Litteratur. Föreningen Granskaren.
- Benjamin, W. (2005 [1933]). 'Experience and Poverty'. In *Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 2. 1931-1934*. Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Berman, M. (1999 [1982]). *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Bloch, E. (1977 [1938]). 'Discussing Expressionism'. *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso, 16-27.
- Breton, A. (1954). 'Hommage à Max Walter Svanberg'. *Medium. Communication surréaliste* #3 (May) : 2. Accessible at : https://ateljesvanberg.se/mws_hyllning1_fr.php
- Briens, S. (2018). 'Boréalisme. Pour un atlas sensible du Nord.' *Boréalisme, Etudes germaniques* No 2 : 151-76.
- Class, O. (2022). 'Convergences lumière-acoustique dans la musique spectrale. Impact sonore et visuel de l'aurore boréale chez Varèse et Saariaho'. *Imaginaire du Nord dans les arts. Deshima* No 16 : 25-41.
- Descola, P. (2021). *Les Formes du visible. Une anthropologie de la figuration*. Paris: Seuil.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2023). *Brouillards de peines et de désirs. Fait d'affect 1*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
- Dotremont, C. (1980 [1968]). 'J'écris, donc je crée'. In *Traces*. Bruxelles: J. Antoine.
- Dotremont C. (1998 [1985]). 'Sur les îles'. In *Commencements lapons. Œuvres poétiques complètes de Christian Dotremont*. M. Sicard (ed.). Paris: Mercure de France.
- Dotremont, C. (1998 [1963]). 'Mémoires d'un imaginiste'. In *Œuvres poétiques complètes de Christian Dotremont*. M. Sicard (ed.). Paris: Mercure de France.
- Eriksson, L. (2004). 'Fantasi och skapande. Skapande fantasi.' *Konkret om Imaginisterna. Rooke Time* No 45 (June). Accessible at: <http://rooke.se/rooketime45.shtml>

- Flint, F. S. (1913). 'Imagisme'. *Poetry*. Vol.1, Nr. 6: 198–200.
- Forshage, M. (n.d.). 'Towards the History of Surrealism Boreal – a reasoned chronology in three parts of surrealist initiatives and some parallels in Sweden (with outlooks to its neighbouring countries)'. Accessible at: https://www.academia.edu/7386870/Towards_the_History_of_Surrealism_Boreal_a_reasoned_chronology_in_three_parts_of_surrealist_initiatives_and_some_parallels_in_Sweden_with_outlooks_to_its_neighboring_countries_part_1_1924_1950
- Gifford, T. (2019 [2004]). *Pastoral*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Henriques, A. (1938). *Johannes V. Jensen som Mytedigter*. Copenhagen: Hirschsprung.
- Huttunen, T. (2013). 'Montage in Russian imaginism: Poetry, theatre and theory'. *Sign Systems Studies* 41(2/3): 63–73.
- Jamet, R. (2018). 'Asger Jorn et l'Institut Scandinave de Vandalisme Comparé. La création d'un boréalisme endogène'. *Boréalisme 2.0. Etudes Germaniques* 290/2: 233–53.
- Jamet, R. (2020). *Pourquoi faire groupe ? : stratégies, créations et réflexions dans l'œuvre réticulaire d'Asger Jorn*. Thèse soutenue le 11-01-2021 à l'Université Paris-Sorbonne.
- Jorn, A. (1959). 'Peinture détournée'. In *Vingt peintures modifiées par Asger Jorn*. Catalogue, Exposition. Paris: Galerie Rive Gauche.
- Jorn, A. (1972). 'À plus d'un titre". In *Études et surprises*. Paris: Editions Atelier Clot.
- Jorn, A. (2001). *Discours aux pingouins et autres écrits*. Marie-Anne Sichère (ed.). Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts.
- Jorn, A. and D. Guy (2001 [1957]). *Fin de Copenhague, Contributions à l'histoire de l'Internationale Situationniste et son temps*. Paris: Editions Allia.
- Lalitte, P. (2003). 'La métaphore boréale chez Varèse'. In *Iannis Xenakis, Gérard Grisey: La métaphore lumineuse*. Makis Solomos (ed.). Paris: L'Harmattan, pp: 29–45.
- Lanne J-C. (1995). 'Xlebnikov et l'imaginisme'. *Revue des études slaves*, tome 67, fascicule 1, 65–81. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/slave.1995.6242>.
- Lundkvist, A. (1932). *Atlantvind*. Stockholm: Bonniers,
- Mildenberg, A. (2023). 'The Reader in/of Stevens'. In: *Wallace Stevens in Theory*. Ed. Thomas Gould and Ian Tan. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 42–63.
- Millroth, T. (2008). *CO Hultén*. Stockholm: Signum.
- Nilsson, N. Å. (1986). 'L'acméisme et l'imaginisme russes'. In *Les Avant-gardes littéraires au XXe siècle: Volume I: Histoire*.

- [Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages IV].
Jean Weisgerber (Ed.), 275-286. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.1075/chlel.iv.37nil>
- Noheden, K. (2019). 'Expo Aleby, 1949 – Wilhelm Freddie, Gösta Kriland and Surrealist Magic Art in Stockholm'. In *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1925-1950*. B. Hjartarson, A. Kollnitz, P. Stounbjerg, and T. Ørum (eds.). Leiden: Brill Rodopi, pp. 793-807.
- Hennig, R., A-K. Jonasson, and P. Degerman (eds.) (2018). *Nordic Narratives of Nature and the Environment. Ecocritical Approaches to Northern European Literatures and Cultures*. Reinhard Hennig, Anna-Karin Jonasson, Peter Degerman (Ed.). Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Parland, H. (1932). *Atersken*. Helsingfors: Söderström
- Parland, H. (1970). *Säginteannat*. Samlad prosa 2, Helsingfors: Söderström.
- Pound, E. (1913). 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste'. *Poetry*. Vol.1, Nr. 6:200-206.
- Pound, E. (1935). *Make it New*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rumeau, D. (2019). *Fortunes de Walt Whitman : Enjeux d'une reception transatlantique*. Paris: Classiques Garnier.
- Stam, P. (2019). "'The Clearance Sale of Ideals" – Henry Parland and Finland-Swedish Literary Modernism, 1928-1930'. In *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1925-1950*. B. Hjartarson, A. Kollnitz, P. Stounbjerg, T. Ørum (eds.). Leiden: Brill Rodopi , 713-729.
- Struve, Nikita (2020[1970]). *Anthologie de la poésie russe. La renaissance du XXème siècle*. 3rd edition. Paris: Ymca-Press.
- Svanberg, M. W. (1979). 'Dokumentation över utvecklingen in i den mångtydigt blommande och progressivt chockande imaginismen'. E. Högestätt and I. Claeson (eds.). Malmö: Malmö Konsthall.
- Utard, J. (2018). *Wallace Stevens, une poétique du fini*. Paris: Champion.
- Varèse, L. (1927). *A Looking-Glass Diary*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Walecka-Garbalinska, M. (2015). 'Le boréalisme identitaire et esthétique de Christian Dotremont'. *Nordiques*: 45-58. DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.4000/nordiques.4530>
- Whitman, W. (1881-82). 'To a Locomotive in Winter'. *Leaves of Grass*. Boston: James R. Osgood and Company.

Ørum, T. (2019). 'The Post-War Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries'. In *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1950-1975*. T. Ørum and J. Olsson (eds.). Leiden: Brill Rodopi, pp. 1-46.

"Декларация" [manifesto of Imaginism]. In *Литературные манифесты I: от символизма к Октябрю*, М., Munchen: Wilhelm Fink, 1969 [1929].

i Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the authors.

ii We are indebted to Juliette Utard for pointing this out.

iii Although recent ecocriticism has argued that 'it would be a [...] mistake to see twentieth-century [...] nature writing, with some notable exceptions, as *modernist* in inspiration' because 'features of most of the conventional (non-fictional) nature writing from the Modern period are its relative lack of formal experimentation, its predominantly anti-cosmopolitan sensibility and its tendency to shy away from interiority, the dizzyingly perspectivist exploration of human and, in some cases, nonhuman subjective worlds' (Abberley et al. 2022: 133), it still appears possible to read this poem as a form of modernist 'nature writing' because of its theme and setting, and its engagement with modes of experimentation on form.

iv 'О вы, слышите в наших произведениях верлибр образов'.

v Берёза

Белая берёза
Под моим окном
Принакрылась снегом,
Точно серебром.

На пушистых ветках
Снежную каймой
Распустились кисти
Белой бахромой.

И стоит берёза
В сонной тишине,
И горят снежинки
В золотом огне.

А заря, лениво
Обходя кругом,
Обсыпает ветки
Новым серебром.

vi The theme of the metal steam engine traversing snowy expanses and its poetic treatment is strikingly reminiscent of Walt Whitman's 1876 poem 'To a Locomotive in Winter', thus pointing at possible overlooked connections

between the American pastoral theme and poetic representations of Russian geographic immensity.

vii It is notable that experimentation on the constraints of grammar was also pursued during the same period by American poets such as e. e. cummings and Gertrude Stein.

viii *'Fantasi och skapande. Skapande fantasi.'*

ix *'Svanberg il faut le dire, nous fait les honneurs d'un monde qui n'est autre que celui du "scabreux", au sens le plus subversif du terme. J'ai toujours pensé, pour ma part, qu'un certain scabreux, circonscrit au plan érotique, dont nous nous extasions dans certains rêves au point d'en garder la plus cruelle nostalgie au réveil, est tout ce qui a pu donner à l'homme l'idée des paradis.'* (Svanberg, it must be said, honors us with a world that is none other than that of the 'scabrous', in the most subversive sense of the term. I have always thought, for my part, that a certain scabrousness, circumscribed to the erotic level, which we are so delighted with in certain dreams that we feel the cruellest nostalgia for it when we wake up, is all that could give man the idea of paradises.)

x *'chanter [l'Extrême-Nord] sur le désert blanc du papier'.*