

# Bertram Brooker

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*Bertram Brooker (1888-1955) was a multi-talented Canadian artist who broke new ground in advertising, film and visual art. In 1937, his achievements in literature were awarded with the first Governor General's Literary Award. His intermedia experiments are precursors of the interdisciplinary explorations of Marshall McLuhan.*

## BIOGRAPHY

*Like the alien played by David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Brooker sometimes seems to have fallen straight out of the prairie sky. Ironically, it is this quality of being out of joint with his own time and place that makes his work so prescient today.*

### The Man Who Fell to Earth: 1888-1920

A photograph of Bertram Brooker (1888-1955) shows him posing in front of a strange metallic construction, presumably of his own making. The structure's silver tubes and reflective balls look as though they could be a prop from a science fiction film directed by Ed Wood or James Whale. Yet the photo dates from 1910-11, and the scene is greater London, England. The sense of temporal and spatial dislocation that characterizes this image is consistent with the biography of its subject: an artist who—like the alien played by David Bowie in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*—seems to have fallen straight out of the prairie sky. Ironically, it is precisely this quality of being out of joint with his time and place which makes Brooker such a prescient figure today.

Brooker was born in Croydon, a working-class suburb of London, England, in 1888. As an adolescent, he was a voracious reader—saving his lunch money to purchase books after leaving school to support his family at the age of 13.<sup>1</sup> Although this marked the end of his formal education, the future artist compensated for his lack of schooling through an ambitious, life-long program of self-education that encompassed not only all the arts but also the sciences, philosophy and business.

In 1905, Brooker moved with his family to the Manitoban town of Portage la Prairie in search of a better climate for his asthmatic brother. He initially took up employment as a time keeper with the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway. After completing night courses, he qualified for clerical work. Growing up in a family with limited means, one of Brooker's earliest points of contact with the arts was singing in St Mary's Anglican choir in Portage la Prairie—an experience that likely contributed to his life-long interest in sound. In 1913, Brooker married Mary Aurilla Porter ("Rill"), whom he met in the choir.<sup>2</sup>

An important event in Brooker's early life was a 1910-11 return trip to London, England. Although it is difficult to establish a strict chronology, this episode roughly coincides with Brooker's earliest surviving drawings—sinuous, Art Nouveau designs of insect-like figures reminiscent of the butterfly monogram of James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). It was also during this period that Brooker began work as a journalist and graphic designer for the local paper in Portage la Prairie. His work as a reporter brought Brooker into contact with examples of modernism. Powerful drawings and gouaches from 1912-13 reveal an early awareness of Cubism, Futurism and other avant-garde movements, as both Joyce Zemans and Roald Nasgaard have noted. What has not been fully appreciated in previous accounts is the extent to which early drawings such as *Ultrahomo the Prophet* (1912) fuse modernist elements with popular sources to produce a highly personal style.

In 1912, Brooker moved to Neepawa, Manitoba, where he opened a cinema with his brother, The Neepawa Opera House. This exposure to film proved a powerful stimulus: Brooker was soon writing scenarios for silent films in the detective genre, several of which were purchased and produced by the Vitagraph Company of America—a Brooklyn-based studio that was the largest American film producer of its day. The series of “Lambert Chase” detective films adapted from scenarios by Brooker starred one of the leading actors of the period, Maurice Costello (1877-1950), and were directed by film innovator Van Dyke Brooke (1859-1921).

Joyce Zemans has convincingly argued that the personal belief system that Brooker developed by 1912—which he termed “Ultimatism”—is distinct from the recognized “isms” of modern art and philosophy. Ultimatism grew out of the artist's early interest in physics and the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) as well as the writings of modernist theatre designer Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966).<sup>3</sup> The common link which Brooker drew from these diverse sources was a belief in the ultimate unity of all phenomena grounded in the energy of matter itself.

Following the success of his film scenarios, Brooker intensified his work as a writer and graphic designer, producing a significant body of writing and graphic art for papers in Neepawa and, later, Winnipeg (where he moved in 1915). Articles and graphic designs by Brooker for the *Winnipeg Free Press* (then the *Manitoba Free Press*), notably his regular humour column, “Gasograms by ‘Honk,’” set the stage for the fusion of art and advertising characteristic of the artist's articles and graphic designs of the 1920s for *Marketing*.

### **Marketing Modernism: 1921-29**

In early 1921, Brooker moved with his family to Toronto to accept a position with *Marketing*, then the leading Canadian business magazine. From the start, Brooker's articles reveal a unique sensibility: references to Albert Einstein, Alfred North Whitehead, Henri Bergson, William Shakespeare and James Joyce rub shoulders with reports on the latest trends in American and British advertising. Brooker's account book reveals that during his years in Toronto he was very active as a copywriter and graphic designer, in addition to his voluminous output for *Marketing*. As Russell Johnston has discussed, Brooker's writings for *Marketing* can be divided into pieces that attempt to

apply the principles of literary criticism to advertising and those that make pioneering applications of statistics to market research.

Under the influence of then *Marketing* editor W.A. Lydiatt, whose newspaper directory, *Lydiatt's Book: What's What in Canadian Advertising*, was an influential source of data about Canadian markets, Brooker urged his peers to adopt new statistical instruments to describe the “average Canadian consumer” through a combination of census data and private surveys.<sup>4</sup> Brooker's work with statistics had important consequences for his art—especially his representation of the human figure—as I discuss at greater length in the Style, Technique and Theory section below. It is important to note here that while Brooker was interested in how numbers could describe behaviours, he recognized that statistics only ever capture a snapshot of an ever-evolving social organism. Moreover, Brooker's writings staunchly opposed a trend that was often coupled with statistics in advertising circles of the time: behaviourism. Behaviourism was a school of thought which sought to understand human psychology through observation of behaviours, rather than by describing interior psychological states. Behaviourism employed analogies between human behaviour and machines. Much of Brooker's writing on advertising can be seen as a reaction against the mechanism of behaviourist analyses that then dominated advertising journals. Brooker labelled the qualitative and aesthetic alternative to behaviourism that he promoted, “humanics.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1924, Brooker purchased *Marketing* from Lydiatt, assuming the dual role of editor and publisher until re-selling the magazine to Lydiatt at the close of 1927. The beginning of Brooker's tenure as editor roughly coincided with his becoming a member of the prestigious Arts and Letters Club in 1923: a meeting place for artists (including members of the Group of Seven) and leaders in the business community as well as faculty members of the University of Toronto. It was probably through his membership in the Arts and Letters Club that Brooker made contact with Lawren Harris (1885-1970) who, as Dennis Reid has noted, probably encouraged Brooker to intensify his visual art practice. Brooker's earliest surviving mature works in oil on canvas appear to date from 1924.<sup>6</sup> In 1923, Brooker claimed to have experienced a spiritual conversion while visiting the Lake of Bays in northern Ontario. While the experience of “unitude”<sup>7</sup> reported by Brooker has been repeatedly marshaled as evidence of his devotion to mystical literature, particularly Theosophy, it is more likely that it simply reinforced his own doctrine of Ulimatism: an idiosyncratic fusion of the artist's autodidactic readings in philosophy, physics and literature that endorsed the basic unity of all phenomena.

In 1927, under the sponsorship of Arthur Lismer (1885-1969) and Harris, Brooker mounted a display of his paintings at the Arts and Letters Club—the first solo exhibition of abstract art in Canada. Reaction to Brooker's brand of cubo-Futurism was decidedly unfavourable. His abstractions were out of step with both the popular wilderness aesthetic of the Group of Seven and the “return to order” that characterized much international art of the 1920s. Even Lismer and Lawren Harris abandoned their protégé amidst the fallout from this untimely presentation of a modernism for which Toronto's cultural elite was evidently unprepared. Somewhat counter intuitively, though Canadian fine art audiences were unreceptive to Brooker's abstract art, he made a good living selling non-objective designs for advertisements to major retailers such as Eaton's—printed in national dailies such as *The Globe* and *The Financial Post*—during the same period.

The later 1920s were also important for Brooker as a writer and critic. In 1928-30 he

wrote a regular column syndicated by the Southam newspaper chain called “The Seven Arts.” The column is a revealing document of shifting aesthetic positions and social values during the transition from a period of financial prosperity to one of economic depression. In 1929, Brooker edited an ambitious anthology of artistic developments from across Canada in all the artistic media entitled *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*. (A second volume was issued in 1936.) This anthology drew sharp criticism from socialist leader Frank Underhill (1889-1971), who viewed it as glorifying financial boom rather than art.<sup>8</sup>

Following the disappointment of his 1927 solo exhibition, Brooker continued to develop ever more bold and monumental abstractions until a serendipitous meeting with the Manitoban painter Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald (1890-1956) in the summer of 1929 stimulated a change of direction. It is notable that the inauguration of Brooker’s precisionist period roughly coincided with the stock market crash of 1929—an event that necessitated Brooker’s resumption of full-time employment in 1931, after working several years as a freelancer.

### **A Brave Voice: 1929-1955**

In 1931 Brooker joined the prestigious advertising firm of J.J. Gibbons as head of the first media and research department in Canada.<sup>9</sup> However, these were not happy years for the artist. According to his son, Victor, Brooker’s time at the firm ended not long after it began when an argument erupted after the artist found himself the subject of workplace bullying.<sup>10</sup> In 1934, Brooker found a more congenial situation at MacLaren Advertising, whose President, Jack MacLaren (1896-1988)—a member of Canada’s first sketch-comedy troupe, The Dumbells, and a fellow painter—was more sympathetic to Brooker’s artistic inclinations.<sup>11</sup> In the years following his move to MacLaren—where he retired as Vice-President in the year of his death—Brooker kept a lower public profile. Even so, in 1937 his literary work was honoured with the first Governor General’s Award for Fiction (then the Lord Tweedsmuir Award). Although Brooker’s later years were largely spent outside the public eye, he continued to maintain an active and experimental visual art practice and to develop a probing critical voice. His later visual art oscillated between realism and abstraction and multiple modernist styles with astonishing ease. The late, unpublished manuscript, *The Brave Voices* (ca. 1954), attests to a restless mind and an unflagging project of self-education. At the time of his death in Toronto in 1955, Brooker was a respected member of the Canadian advertising, art and literary communities. Yet, the overall trajectory of his career seemed to elude critical appraisal. As always, Brooker seemed out of step with his time and place.

### **STYLE, TECHNIQUE AND THEORY**

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*mirrors his life-long project of self-directed study across the disciplines.*

### **1909-1923: Modernism, Graphic Design, Theatre, Film**

The sheer diversity of styles, techniques and media that define Brooker's protean career can present a barrier to comprehensive evaluation of his achievement. The zigzagging trajectory of Brooker's visual art mirrors his life-long project of autodidactic exploration. Some of his earliest drawings (preserved today in the archives of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa) illustrate themes from a 1912 play which he also penned, *Cassandra*.<sup>12</sup> *The Last End*, *The Next Beyond*, *Ultrahomo the Prophet*—all based on *Cassandra*—attest to the artist's astonishingly early development of a personal style fusing elements of European modernism with graphic techniques gleaned from his professional experience as a commercial artist.

As he later claimed, Brooker was self-taught. However, contrary to his frequently-cited claim in a 1949 lecture, he was already an accomplished and successful graphic artist who had experimented with a nearly encyclopedic range of modernist styles for over a decade when he joined the Arts and Letters Club and met Lawren Harris in 1923. In fact, his earliest surviving visual art appears to date from his years in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, and consists of stylized designs of insect-like figures recalling the butterfly monogram of James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). From the start, Brooker displayed remarkable talent as a draftsman. Drawings from approximately 1909 through 1913 record a developing mastery of line and composition: the defining elements of his mature production, as both Joyce Zemans and Roald Nasgaard have observed.

The pivotal event in these years was a return trip to England to visit family during the 1910-11 holiday season. Although no definitive evidence of contact with the English avant garde during this voyage has emerged to-date, works from the artist's subsequent years in Neepawa—from 1912 to 1913—disclose a familiarity with British and European modernisms. The 1913 Armory show has been suggested as a possible source for Brooker's knowledge of modernism, through his work as a journalist at that time. However, a photograph dating from Brooker's 1910-11 voyage to Croydon, England shows him standing beside a sculpture, presumably of his own design, consisting of metallic tubes and balls that recalls the cubo-Futurist work of Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), Edward Wadsworth (1889-1941) and David Bomberg (1890-1957) in its pre-Vorticist phase. Another explanation for Brooker's knowledge of developments in British modernism may be found in his subsequent claim to have purchased books (of which he owned many) direct from Britain. Whatever the precise sources of his early art, Brooker's years in Neepawa (1912-13) and Winnipeg (1915-20) through his early years in Toronto (1921-23) are marked by an adventurous and increasingly masterful exploration of modernist styles.

This immersion in fine art took place in tandem with Brooker's developing practice as a graphic artist. Drawings surviving from as early as 1912-13 reveal Brooker at work on imaginative designs for commercial trademarks and elements of newspaper layout. Works from 1913-15 such as *The Romance of Trademarks* and *Reznor* combine the artist's growing command of graphic design with his curiosity about modernist

experimentation into buzzing collages of motifs appropriated from the world of popular culture. Some of these works anticipate the subsequent practice of American proto-Pop artist Stuart Davis (1892-1964).

Another point of contact with the world of popular culture during these formative years came through Brooker's work as a scenarist for the Vitagraph Company of America—the largest film production company in the United States of its day. In 1912-13, Brooker wrote at least half a dozen scenarios for silent films in the detective genre that were produced by the Brooklyn-based Vitagraph under the supervision of leading director Van Dyke Brooke (1859-1921). Starring celebrity actor Maurice Costello (1877-1950), the series of films based on Brooker's scenarios fused Arthur Conan Doyle with the emergent vocabulary of Classical Hollywood Cinema associated with D.W. Griffith. Brooker would have encountered the work of Griffith and other film innovators as the operator of a motion picture theatre in Neepawa, which he founded in partnership with his brother. Unfortunately, only three of Brooker's films are believed to have survived: *The Adventure of the Italian Model* (1912), *The Adventure of the Thumb Print* (1912) and *The Mystery of the Stolen Jewels* (1913).<sup>13</sup> *The Adventure of the Thumb Print* makes innovative use of close-up cinematography (with which Vitagraph artists such as director Van Dyke Brooke and company founder James Stuart Blackton (1875-1941)—also thought to have participated in the production of films based on Brooker's scenarios—are variously credited with pioneering).<sup>14</sup> Although certainly not the first example of a narrative film to employ close camera techniques, it is significant that Brooker's scenario for *The Adventure of the Thumb Print*—preserved today at the University of Manitoba—created opportunities for the filming of objects at close range through its emphasis on forensic details such as the thumbprint of the title. Vitagraph's distribution of this film to both North American and European audiences (being the first American film production company to establish a European distribution office) implicates Brooker's prescient interest in the depiction of visual details in the popularization of close-up cinematography. Significantly, the close-up depiction of objects would be a recurring motif in mature paintings by Brooker from 1929 and after, which frequently foreground isolated objects as if photographed, or filmed, at close range.<sup>15</sup>

### 1924-1928: A New 'Ratio' of the Census/Senses

Brooker would later claim that 1927 marked the beginning of his self-training as an artist. However, it is clear from the foregoing section that—far from “plung[ing] into painting in 1927 without any knowledge of drawing or of pigments”—Brooker was already widely recognized as a competent draftsman through the publication of his graphic design work in leading Canadian newspapers and was, moreover, thoroughly familiar by that time with many of the 'isms' of modern art.<sup>16</sup> Evidence suggests that 1924 may have marked the beginning of Brooker's serious engagement with oil painting (though it should be noted that at least one oil on board located today in the Brooker estate is believed to be an example of juvenilia).<sup>17</sup>

As Joyce Zemans has convincingly argued, the sources of Brooker's art likely differed from the Theosophical beliefs which fuelled the art of Lawren Harris (1885-1970) and the Group of Seven.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, Dennis Reid is probably correct in arguing that the

artist's exposure to Harris and other members and associates of the Group at the prestigious Arts and Letters Club in Toronto—a nexus of artists, scholars and businessmen, of which Brooker became a member in 1923—was an important stimulus for the artist's renewed exploration of oil painting in the mid-1920s.

Another possible impetus for Brooker's abstract paintings of the mid- to late-1920s was his contact with the art of Britain. A regular column by John C. Kirkwood published in *Marketing* during Brooker's tenure as editor and publisher—"Kirkwood's Letter from London"—reported on the latest developments in advertising design in England. Kirkwood's reports on the work of Edward McKnight Kauffer (1890-1954) and other designers loosely classifiable as Vorticist may explain the strong affinities between Brooker's painting of the years 1924-29 and that of Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), Edward Wadsworth (1889-1941), David Bomberg (1890-1957) and other artists associated with Vorticism.

A final influence ca. 1924 would have come via the regular business trips which Brooker is known to have made to New York and other American cities from at least the late nineteen teens. Brooker followed artistic trends in New York and acquired artworks for his personal collection on visits there. One figure deserving of particular attention in this connection is Thomas Wilfred (1889-1968), inventor of the "colour organ." Wilfred's *Clavilux*, as he dubbed his invention, was a modified keyboard that projected shifting compositions of mobile colour. Wilfred's experiments in "visual music" appealed to Brooker, who had been fascinated by musical phenomena since singing in a local church choir as a youth in Portage la Prairie. Although he never learned to play an instrument, in the 1920s Brooker joined the prestigious Mendelssohn choir in Toronto, and many of his works from that decade bear the names of classical composers and genres of classical music as titles (e.g., *Chorale (Bach)* (ca. 1927), *Fugue* (1930), *Poulenc* (ca. 1933) and *Toccata* (1927)).

Brooker is known to have attended performances by Wilfred in both New York and Toronto and to have dined with the inventor on at least one occasion.<sup>19</sup> Wilfred's system of visual music suggests analogies with the spectral palette and musical subject matter of Brooker's paintings of the 1920s—although it must be emphasized that Brooker characteristically rejected one-to-one correspondences between specific colours and tones promoted by Theosophists such as Wilfred's associate, Claude Bragdon (1866-1946).<sup>20</sup> Like Wilfred, Brooker was inspired by the formal structure of classical music to develop an abstract visual language. However, unlike the flat projections of Wilfred, Brooker's paintings screen spectral colour harmonies onto volumetric, cubo-Futurist forms suggestive of British Vorticism.

Brooker's interest in synaesthetic relationships between visual and auditory phenomena—the possibility that sounds may suggest certain colours or forms, and vice versa—may also reflect his interest in developing synaesthetic advertising strategies to engage consumers, as reflected in a series of articles for *Marketing* which the artist-advertiser published in the mid- to late-1920s. Articles such as "Help the Prospect to Visualize What the Product Does" (1928), "Hoist the Sales" (1929), and "Aggressive Advertising, Merchandising Under Way for Philco Radio" (1930) explore the problem of visualizing the auditory properties of the new medium of radio through print media.<sup>21</sup> Such texts may also document Brooker's attempt to apply Wilfred's "visual music" to concrete problems in advertising. There is a strong correspondence between the

synaesthetic techniques deployed by Brooker in his visual art and graphic designs from this period.

Early oil paintings such as *Untitled (Landscape)*, a work probably dating from 1924, display a bold use of line and command of composition that echoes the artist's established practice as a commercial artist while infusing elements of modernist experimentation and philosophical subject matter consistent with his earlier writings for the theatre ca. 1912-13. In *Untitled (Landscape)*, mysterious aquatic phenomena emanate bands of turquoise and violet lines against a surrounding field of streamlined trees and vaguely anthropomorphic forms, arranged so as to achieve an effect of decorative patterning. This work may respond to the spiritual "conversion" which Brooker claimed to have experienced in 1923 while visiting the Lake of Bays in northern Ontario.<sup>22</sup> Whatever the subject of this work, it is representative of Brooker's early production in oil in its simplified massing of forms and linear application of paint in broad, largely unmodified areas of spectral colour. In their near-abstraction, the aquatic zones in this work also presage the style of Brooker's abstract paintings leading up to his 1927 exhibition at the Arts and Letters Club—the first solo exhibition of abstract art in Canada—and in the years immediately following the disappointing reception of that event.

Brooker's abstract canvases of the 1920s have, I think mistakenly, been closely identified with the Theosophical interests of Lawren Harris and the Group of Seven. The eerily featureless bodies which populate several of these works suggest another interpretation. The idealized human figures that appear in works such as *Dawn of Man* (ca. 1927), *Endless Dawn* (1927) and *Green Movement* (ca. 1927) prompt analogies with the notion of an "average man" popularized by Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet (1796-1874). Like Quetelet's representations of the human body, Brooker's figures embody a composite or mean of diverse body types and even genders. This streamlining of personal attributes parallels Brooker's pioneering work (at least in Canada) in the application of statistics to problems in marketing during the same period. Brooker exploited the pages of *Marketing* to promote an image of "the average Canadian consumer" derived from census and survey data. Situated amidst multicolour environments suggestive of Wilfred's colour organ projections, the abstracted figures that populate Brooker's abstract canvases of 1924-29 may respond to the same thematic treated by the artist in articles for *Marketing* that attempt to envision a synaesthetic consumer adapted to the multi-sensory environments generated by new electronic media such as radio.<sup>23</sup> Brooker's combination of formal abstraction and synaesthesia in his visual art of the 1920s coincides with the conjunction of statistical streamlining and synaesthetic communication which he developed in his advertising writings to promote a conception of the consumer as a reconstructed sensorium capable of digesting commercial messages via multiple sensory channels—and therefore multiple *media*—simultaneously. This synaesthetic representation of the body sets the stage for the writings of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), who likewise argued that electronic media produce a reintegration of the senses.



### 1929-1955: Realism, Organicism and Bergsonian Critique

The negative reception which greeted Brooker's 1927 Arts and Letters Club solo exhibition of abstract paintings did not deter the artist from pursuing ever more complex and monumental experiments in a cubo-Futurist or Vorticist style for another two years. In 1931, the artist's unique contributions to abstract painting were honoured with a retrospective at the University of Toronto's Hart House. Rather than cementing Brooker's reputation as Canada's leading modernist painter however, the early 1930s marked a decisive turning point in Brooker's art: a meeting with the Manitoban artist Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald (1890-1956) on a visit to Winnipeg in the summer of 1929 sparked a new body of work in a precisionist style recalling the clean lines and even facture of Americans Charles Sheeler (1883-1965) and Charles Demuth (1883-1935). But the subdued palette and domestic subject matter favoured by Brooker in his realist work of the 1930s and thereafter more closely aligns his production with the work of FitzGerald. Brooker maintained a steady correspondence with the Winnipeg artist until his death and continued to visit with him for extended periods during summer vacations with family in Manitoba.

It is tempting to view Brooker's realist art of the 1930s as a retreat from the radicalism of the preceding decade. Certainly, his shift in stylistic direction roughly coincided with his return to full-time employment after several years as a freelancer in the face of economic uncertainty following the stock market crash of 1929. However, in both major canvases such as *Blue Nude* (1937) and *Entombment* (1937) as well as in more experimental works that he did not exhibit publicly, such as *Umbrella Tree* (1950) and *Garden Shapes 2* (ca. 1951), Brooker kept up the voracious experimentation with avant garde styles which had characterized his art from the early nineteen-teens.

The 1930s saw Brooker taking risks in his representation of the figure which became the subject of public controversy when a nude exhibited by the artist at the annual Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) at the Art Gallery of Ontario (then the Art Gallery of Toronto) was removed by an offended member of the Hanging Committee.<sup>24</sup> Responding to allegations of obscenity in his 1931 essay, "Nudes and Prudes," Brooker staunchly defended sensuality as legitimate subject matter for art.<sup>25</sup>

The common link between the realist or precisionist and more abstract modes in which Brooker practiced his art in tandem from 1929 until his death is an organicism derived from his reading of French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and other vitalist thinkers. Bergson argued that Western representations of space distort and repress humanity's primary experience of time, as what he termed "duration": the non-rational flux of phenomena that underlies stable identities. For Bergson and his followers, the world has wrongly been represented by Western metaphysics as a collection of bodies situated in an abstract, spatial container that can be described with reference to fixed units of measure and mechanical laws. For Bergson, by contrast, the world is a qualitative continuum of intensities that is primarily apprehended through the power of intuition, and only secondarily understood through geometrical models and logical relationships which, he argued, have been developed to solve pragmatic problems of accounting and administration. Bergson's writings are marked by a strongly critical thrust. His writings warn of the dangers associated with spatial models when they become a question of unthinking "habit." So long as we remain conscious that geometry and logic are merely

practical aids, we remain open to a direct experience of the world as flux. However, Western societies have long succumbed to the error of mistaking spatial models for reality: a misrecognition with devastating psychological, somatic and social consequences.

In place of the static and mechanical picture of the cosmos promoted by Newtonian physics, Bergson urged the adoption of an “intuitional” method dependant on empathetic communication between subjects and objects for accurate knowledge of the nature of things. It is this model of communication that infuses Brooker’s work in both realist and semi-abstract modes from 1929 onwards. References to Bergson appear as early as 1924 in Brooker’s advertising writings.<sup>26</sup> However, it is likely that his initial contact with Bergson’s ideas came through British artists and writers working in a Bergsonist idiom, such as Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) and John Middleton Murry (1889-1957), who figure prominently in Brooker’s advertising textbook *Copy Technique in Advertising* (1930). It would appear that Brooker’s familiarity with the philosophy of flux espoused by Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) (and adapted by contemporary artists and writers) was initially harnessed in the service of a Futurist or Vorticist celebration of flux as capitalist and technological progress (for which he was roundly criticized by socialist leader Frank Underhill (1889-1971) following the 1929 stock market crash).<sup>27</sup> Artworks from after the crisis of 1929, on the other hand, register a newfound social consciousness as Brooker’s writings reveal an increasing interest in the critical dimension of Bergson’s writings as a meditation on the limits of geometric models and the redemptive possibilities of empathic communication.

The auratic emanations of objects and bodies found in works by Brooker as formally diverse as *Growth* (1936) and *Kneeling Figure* (1940) coincide with Bergson’s description of bodies and objects as situated in a nonlinear temporal continuum, or “durée.” According to Bergson in his influential aesthetic treatise, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), this temporal bond between bodies and objects can be regained by the beholder of the work of art through a process of empathic “entering into” the object represented.<sup>28</sup>

The cubist lattice employed by Brooker in many works from the later decades of his career suggests analogies with Bergson’s notion that, in contrast to the non-rational power of intuition, the human body acts as a “centre of action”<sup>29</sup> that prepares movements by furnishing a “sketch”<sup>30</sup> of possible action even before motion becomes actual. According to Bergson, this virtual sketch is the basis for conventional spatial models, which develop through habituation of action. Works by Brooker such as *Three Figures* (1937) and *Kneeling Figure* (1940) depict the body in a permanent state of readiness for action by enmeshing the figure in a virtual scaffolding of potential movements—represented as abstract lines. This scheme coincides with Bergson’s descriptions of the body, movement and spatial models. Brooker’s use of techniques of modernist abstraction to represent the Bergsonian thematic of motion as virtual “becoming” (as opposed to the static “being” enshrined in classical Western philosophy) is consistent with Cubist artists’ engagement with Bergson through non-perspectival and non-Euclidean strategies of *passage* analyzed by Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton.<sup>31</sup>

On a more basic level, Brooker’s interest in Bergson’s theories during the 1930s and after is legible in the artist’s growing predilection for organic motifs. The artist’s almost obsessive depiction of plant life, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, attests to an

engagement with the theory of “creative evolution” described by Bergson in his popular text of the same name. According to Bergson, evolution does not occur as the random process of selection described by Charles Darwin, but rather as creative adaptation. Bergson argued that both plant and animal species maintain a capacity to access the collective memory of previous generations through the power of intuition. Individual human memory thus acts as a virtual storehouse for the accumulated memories of earlier animal, and even plant, species. In complementary fashion, more primitive species contain the plan of future adaptations *virtually*. This virtual plan of subsequent adaptation resembles the previously-mentioned Bergsonian notion of the plan of action, or “sketch,” furnished by the individual body prior to actualization of physical movements. Brooker’s familiarity with these theories is recorded in numerous notes for his late, unpublished manuscript, *The Brave Voices* (ca. 1954). A Bergsonian conception of the organism as a locus of creative evolution in which the plan of past and future adaptation exists as a virtual sketch is clear from numerous late paintings by Brooker such as *Ovalescence* (ca. 1954), *Thick Stem* (1951) and *White Motion* (ca. 1950), which depict plant forms enmeshed in abstract patterns of lines, or else shot through with animal organs or human body parts.

Several of Brooker’s works representing plant-animal analogies from the 1930s and 1940s suggest a familiarity with the contemporaneous work of British Surrealists such as Paul Nash (1889-1946) and Graham Sutherland (1903-1980), with whom Brooker exhibited at the 1938 Canadian National Exhibition. A 1973 interview with Brooker’s long-time friend Harry Adaskin (1901-1994) confirms that the work of Nash in particular was the object of Brooker’s interest in these years.<sup>32</sup> In addition to exhibitions of British art in Toronto during the interwar years, Brooker could have followed the organicist concerns of Nash and Sutherland through their work in advertising, notably the celebrated lorry bill campaign produced by Shell Oil under the direction of Jack Beddington. The embryonic character of the forms favoured by Nash and Sutherland in their commercial designs of the 1930s parallels Brooker’s Bergsonian interest in depicting plants and animals in a permanent state of creative adaptation or metamorphosis.

In several canvases dating from the late 1940s through 1955, Brooker experimented with new techniques of paint application for the first time since adopting a precisionist style in 1929. Most of these works were not exhibited publicly, and many remain in an unfinished state. Nonetheless, they present a fascinating record of the spirit of tireless curiosity and experimentation that animated the artist to the very end. In works such as *Umbrella Tree* (1950), Brooker abandoned his signature measured and thin application of paint to experiment with the more expressive possibilities of the palette knife. In other works, such as *Garden Shapes 2* (ca. 1951), the artist employed the brush to develop a thickly-textured surface of swirling marks that may have responded to the contemporaneous Abstract Expressionism of a younger generation of Automatistes in Quebec. For the first time since the Vorticist canvases of the 1920s, Brooker’s work of the 1950s verges on the completely abstract. However, these late abstractions are executed in an expressive style and depict organic motifs that are alien to the earlier work, reflecting as they do the artist’s knowledge of British Surrealism and his intensified study of Bergson.

Complementing the artist’s engagement with the notion of creative evolution as virtual

becoming, another Bergsonian thematic that dominated roughly the final decade of Brooker's career was a critique of spatial models in favour of a time- and sound-based paradigm. This thread is particularly evident in *Swing of Time* (1954). Painted just one year prior to the artist's death, *Swing of Time* depicts a range of instruments employed to measure the passage of time: hour glass, sundial, clock, etc. These tools of Western, "spatial" temporality are set against a formless, suggestively organic ground. The contrast between technologies employed to produce and enforce dominant understandings of temporality in the West (as linear and uniform), and the intuitive and multiple temporalities of the body which *endures*, speaks to a Bergsonian critique of the psychological violence wrought by geometrical models in Western societies.

The critical possibilities of temporality conceived as *duration* disclosed by *Swing of Time* and other late works by Brooker is complemented by the artist's exploration of oral traditions—beginning with *Copy Technique* in 1930, and culminating in his unfinished and unpublished *The Brave Voices* (ca. 1954)—as a counterpoint to the linear and spatial conception of language enshrined in print media, including traditional advertising copy. This dichotomy between static advertising media and the flux of experience is visible in the late canvas, *Silver Log* (1952), in which a pile of newsprint appears to dissolve in the dialogical rhythms of nature. Brooker's critique of spatial models must also be read as a critique of modernity. His manuscript, *The Brave Voices*, warns of the possibility of a Third World War, which he attributes to the unchecked growth of spatial models deployed in the service of domination. A dystopian view of contemporary technologies is also evident in the late canvas *Machine World* (1950), in which the specter of a military-industrial complex threatens the techno-utopia of post-war North American society.

Brooker's Bergsonian critique of spatial models and technologies, notably print media, in favour of sound- and time-based alternatives resonates with the contemporaneous writings of Canadian media theorists Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952) and Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980). Judith Stamps and Richard Cavell<sup>33</sup> have both argued that in the early 1950s, both Innis and McLuhan became anxious that linear and geometric attitudes derived from print technologies were superseding the oral traditions underlying democratic institutions. Whether Brooker was aware of these homegrown critiques (or possibly influenced both Innis and McLuhan, albeit indirectly), has proven impossible to establish. However, there is evidence that all three participated in a common milieu that was informed by a reading against the grain of Canadian-born artist, author and critic Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), whose monumental 1927 text *Time and Western Man* (to which Brooker made reference as early as 1927),<sup>34</sup> inverts Bergson's argument to promote a *spatial* understanding of experience, but retains the terms of reference of the French philosopher's critique intact. Whatever the sources or impact of Brooker's late visual art and writings on the critical potential of sound and time as alternatives to the dominant (linear and geometrical) institutions of Western society, it is clear that his Bergsonian concerns from this period align his late production with the group of figures collectively identified as the Toronto School of Communication.<sup>35</sup>

## SIGNIFICANCE AND KEY ISSUES

*There is growing recognition of Brooker both within Canada and internationally. Brooker's "discrepant abstraction" is increasingly celebrated as a powerful and specifically Canadian response to the avant-garde movements of Europe as well as the culture industry of the United States. Even so, many areas of investigation remain unresolved.*

There is growing recognition of Brooker both within Canada and, albeit to a lesser extent, internationally. Brooker's "discrepant abstraction"—to employ a phrase coined by art historian Kobena Mercer to describe modernist projects that developed outside of, yet in dialogue with, the art of imperial centres—is increasingly celebrated as a powerful and specifically Canadian response to the avant-garde movements of Europe and the culture industry of the United States. Yet, the sheer complexity of the artist's production has, to-date, thwarted comprehensive study of his multimedia practice. Consequently, many areas of investigation remain unresolved.

The revival of interest in Brooker dates from Dennis Reid's 1973 exhibition of the artist's work at the National Gallery of Canada. Through its emphasis on the visionary abstract paintings of the 1920s, Reid's exhibition succeeded in establishing Brooker as a leading Canadian modernist. However, Reid's exhibition was also responsible for positioning the artist in a particular light that has, I think, thwarted adequate study of his achievements since 1973. Reid's exhibition catalogue portrays Brooker as a mystic in the mould of Lawren Harris (1885-1970) and other members of the then-fashionable Theosophical Society. This interpretation has fuelled subsequent studies of Brooker by Ann Davis<sup>36</sup> and Gregory Betts<sup>37</sup> that reinforce a Theosophical analysis while adding new information about Brooker's interest in Walt Whitman and William Blake (for which there is ample documentation, unlike his purported Theosophical views).

Glenn Williams's study of the role of music in Brooker's abstract canvases of the 1920s has been productive in shifting the orientation of the small but growing literature devoted to Brooker.<sup>38</sup> Studies by Betts<sup>39</sup> and Willmott<sup>40</sup> that situate Brooker within the social and political context of a rapidly modernizing Canada have also been invaluable. However, it was the 1989 symposium resulting in a special, Brooker-themed issue of the journal *Provincial Essays* that opened the door to a more adequate understanding of the artist. Joyce Zemans's essay, "First Fruits," in particular, was instrumental in wresting Brooker from the Theosophical framework that had consistently been applied to his work until that point, and in suggesting new possibilities for interpretation—notably the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859-1941).<sup>41</sup>

My own work on Brooker has been instrumental in developing the consequences of Zemans's argument by uncovering concrete evidence of the artist's Bergsonian commitments in his advertising writings and unpublished, philosophical manuscripts as well as the sources of this thematic in the Bergson-inspired literature of British modernists such as Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) and John Middleton Murry (1889-1957).<sup>42</sup> I have also deepened the connections between Brooker and media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) previously noted by Willmott and Betts as well as

Richard Cavell, in addition to suggesting new parallels with the critical writings of McLuhan's colleague, Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952).<sup>43</sup> Finally, I have positioned Brooker's use of statistics to describe the "average" contours and synaesthetic capacities of the streamlined bodies portrayed in his abstract art of the 1920s as the fountainhead of interrelated traditions of Canadian information art and art-and-business projects that include the subsequent efforts of artists' groups such as the N.E. Thing Co. and General Idea.<sup>44</sup>

Outstanding areas for investigation include the full extent and nature of British influence on Brooker's art—from Vorticism to interwar Surrealism—and, in particular, the impact of British Bergsonists on Brooker and his Canadian peers. When, exactly, did Brooker become aware of developments in British modernism, and through what channels did he keep abreast of these developments? To what extent was an interest in the art of Britain shared by fellow artists in Canada? How prevalent was a Bergsonian orientation among artists, writers and thinkers in pre-World War II Canada? To what extent did a British and specifically Bergsonist influence distinguish the discrepant abstraction of Brooker and other Canadians from avant garde figures in the United States?

Canadian historical art has been labelled "wildercentric"<sup>45</sup> for its preoccupation with images of unpopulated landscape. Brooker's controversial nudes speak to a counter-tradition which takes the figure and, in particular, the sensory capacities of the body as its principle subject. To what extent do Brooker's sensual images of the naked body speak to the sensory and synaesthetic concerns which he articulated in his advertising writings? How do Brooker's interests in the sensory capacities of the body and the body's ability to provoke viewers connect with the subsequent interests of Canadian artists such as the N.E. Thing Co., which re-interpreted the arts as "Sensitivity Information"?

## 10 ESSENTIAL WORKS

*Ultrahomo the Prophet*, 1912, Robert McLaughlin Gallery

In its fusion of modernism, commercial design and philosophical subject matter, this early drawing is representative of an astonishing body of work dating from Brooker's fertile years in Neepawa, Manitoba, ca. 1912-14. The artist's sinuous, Art Nouveau-like line and cubistic fragmentation of the body in *Ultrahomo the Prophet* suggests an awareness of avant garde styles pre-dating the 1913 Armoury Show. Joyce Zemans was the first to note that some of the artist's early sketches—preserved today in the Robert McLaughlin Gallery—likely responded to specific works from the Chicago installation of the Armoury Show.<sup>46</sup> Unlike those studies, *Ultrahomo* attests to Brooker's early development of a personal style out of a synthesis of modernist and vernacular sources. We can securely date this work to 1912 on the basis of the artist's own dating of another work featuring the same figure (also at Robert McLaughlin) as well as Anton Wagner's dating of the play—authored by Brooker—upon which it is based, *Cassandra* (1912).<sup>47</sup>

Wagner describes *Cassandra* as a "Psychodrama" in the tradition of George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).<sup>48</sup> The play is a vehicle for the philosophical ideas that Brooker was then developing into a personal doctrine, which he termed "Ultimatism."<sup>49</sup> In the play,

Cassandra is the orphaned daughter of Professor Graffspiel, whose magnum opus, *Universal Evolution*, was in progress at the time of his death. Cassandra is at work on a text of her own, “The Next Beyond”—which is also the title of another, entirely abstract, work by Brooker dating from 1912. The protagonist of “The Next Beyond,” Ultrahomo, is modelled on Friedrich Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. The play pits Cassandra’s intellectual vision of the eventual product of the evolutionary process as an “unsexed and fleshless soul” against the sensuality and passion espoused by her seducer, painter Rutherby Quintze (Brooker’s alter ego).<sup>50</sup>

As embodiments of evolutionary principles professed by Cassandra and her late father, the embryonic features of Ultrahomo—his blastoderm-like eyes—document Brooker’s precocious interest in contemporary developments in biology as well as philosophical debates sparked by evolutionary theory. These are themes to which his organicist works of the 1930s-50s return, only refracted through the lens of Henri Bergson’s theory of “creative evolution” rather than Nietzsche’s Overman.

*Untitled (Landscape)*, ca. 1924, Private Collection

*Untitled (Landscape)* is perhaps the earliest surviving work executed in oil on canvas dating from the period of Brooker’s visionary abstract production of the 1920s. Although Brooker is known to have experimented with oil prior to moving to Toronto in 1921, the vast majority of works dating from before 1924 are drawings and watercolours. Dennis Reid has suggested that Brooker’s ambitious abstractions of the 1920s were stimulated by his contact with Lawren Harris (1885-1970) and other members of the Group of Seven at the prestigious Arts and Letters Club, which he joined in 1923. While the creative ferment of the Arts and Letters Club undoubtedly contributed to Brooker’s abstract experiments, his interest in the “visual music” experiments of Thomas Wilfred (1889-1968)—whose *Clavilux* organ projected compositions of coloured light—was another influence (though it must be stressed that Brooker explicitly rejected the Theosophically-inspired, one-to-one correspondences between hue and pitch espoused by Wilfred’s associate, Claude Bragdon (1866-1946)). Perhaps the most significant influence on Brooker’s creative production during the 1920s was the spiritual experience which he reported in the summer of 1923 while visiting the community of Dwight on Lake of Bays in northern Ontario. *Untitled (Landscape)* may be a symbolic representation of this event.

The painting portrays mysterious aquatic phenomena emanating bands of turquoise and violet lines against a surrounding field of streamlined trees and vaguely anthropomorphic forms, arranged so as to achieve an effect of decorative patterning. Whatever the subject of this work, its simplified massing of form and linear application of paint in broad, largely unmodified areas of spectral colour single it out as an important precursor to Brooker’s fully abstract work of the late 1920s. The abstract style in which Brooker represents the aquatic zones, in particular, anticipates the completely abstract style of works from only a few years later. *Untitled (Landscape)* underlines that Brooker’s dialogue with modernism was always filtered through his idiosyncratic belief system as well as personal experiences that reflect his Canadian situation.

*Green Movement, 1927, Art Gallery of Ontario*

*Green Movement* is one of the most striking works from Brooker's abstract period of the 1920s. Like formally similar works with musical titles such as *Chorale (Bach)* (ca. 1927) and *Toccata* (1927), the spectral palette of *Green Movement* was likely inspired by the experiments in "visual music" of New York-based inventor Thomas Wilfred (1889-1968), whose *Clavilux* colour organ projected shifting compositions of coloured light. Brooker is known to have attended performances by Wilfred in both New York and Toronto and to have made personal contact with the inventor. Brooker's writings indicate that while enthusiastic about the formal possibilities of Wilfred's experiments, he was also skeptical of the Theosophically-inspired system of one-to-one correspondences between specific colours and musical tones promoted by the inventor's associate Claude Bragdon (1866-1946).<sup>51</sup>

What distinguishes *Green Movement* from contemporary experiments by Brooker exploring formal analogies between colour and music is its abstracted representation of the body and, in particular, bodily motion. The streamlined chorus line of *Green Movement* suggests analogies between the formal concerns of Brooker's abstract paintings and ideas which he explored in his day job as a market analyst. The abstracted women's legs of *Green Movement* are strikingly similar to the design of an ad for Kayser hosiery nylons analyzed by Brooker in his 1929 textbook, *Layout Technique in Advertising*. Much as Brooker's advertising writings of the 1920s are concerned with portraying an active consumer and with transforming the advertisement itself from a static representation of inert goods into a dynamic object of desire—ideas which reflect his contemporaneous reading of philosophers of "flux" such as Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947)—*Green Movement* turns the static ideal celebrated by formalist critics such as Roger Fry (1866-1934) on its head. The advertisement, according to Brooker, should not be "dead things put up in cartons at so much a dozen," but "living states of mind or activities of the body."<sup>52</sup> In *Green Movement* Brooker portrays the body in motion and, in turn, aims to activate the viewer. This active relationship with the viewer likely reflects the influence of the "empathic" aesthetics of Henri Bergson (1859-1941), who viewed the artist (and, in turn, the viewer) as engaging in a process of sympathetic "entering into"<sup>53</sup> the object depicted. It is likely that Brooker's knowledge of Bergson's aesthetics was acquired indirectly (although we know that he read Bergson during the mid-1920s from his published references to the French philosopher beginning in 1924). Brooker's *Copy Technique in Advertising* (1930), a compilation of his advertising writings from the 1920s, analyzes representations of "direct communication" in the writings of former Bergsonists, including Walter de la Mare (1873-1956) and John Middleton Murry (1889-1957).

*Green Movement* is also significant for the parallels which it suggests between Brooker's streamlined representations of the body in his visual art and his promotion of a statistical definition of an "average" consumer in his marketing writings. In articles such as "A Statistical Picture of the Average Canadian Consumer" (1924), Brooker promoted American techniques for analyzing markets on the basis of statistics derived from a mix of government census data and private surveys. Similarly, the superimposition of body parts (themselves abstracted according to an ideal defined by the marketer's toolbox) in *Green Movement* literalizes the process by which the market analyst constructs a portrait



of the consumer as a statistical “mean”—by plotting individual profiles against a curve representing the average.

*Sounds Assembling, 1928, Winnipeg Art Gallery*

*Sounds Assembling* is Brooker’s most iconic work. It marks the culmination of his exploration of abstraction in the 1920s under the influence of Thomas Wilfred’s colour organ experiments and poet William Blake’s conception of synaesthetic experience as a form of sensory intelligence. Glenn Williams has suggested that the interlocking spaces and dissonant colour harmonies of *Sounds Assembling* “could represent a type of pictorial musical score or interior view of musical structure and form.”<sup>54</sup> *Sounds Assembling* is arguably the most powerful of Brooker’s many attempts to visualize acoustic phenomena, a project that encompassed commercial designs (such as the 1930 advertisement for Reliance Engravers, “Silvertones”) as well as both representational and entirely abstract works of visual art.

Richard Cavell has interpreted *Sounds Assembling* as a “spatialization of the sonic,”<sup>55</sup> which he identifies as a precursor to Marshall McLuhan’s (1911-1980) descriptions of the hybrid, “acoustic space” generated by electronic media. It is also possible to interpret Brooker’s life-long investigation of musical motifs in his visual art as articulating a synaesthetic alternative to the modernist ideal of optical experience purged of non-visual associations. In light of Cavell’s reading of *Sounds Assembling* as a proto-McLuhanesque fusion of the auditory and the visual, the alternative vision of modernism embodied by this work clears a path for the “sound-based paradigm” which Judith Stamps has unearthed in the work of McLuhan and his colleague Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952). Like Innis and McLuhan, Brooker’s deployment of synaesthetic and especially sound-based tropes in his visual art was a calculated critique of the mind-body dualism enshrined in modernity’s celebration of reason and measure—values associated with a disembodied and static optics.

*Face and Breasts, 1930, The University Club of Toronto*

*Face and Breasts* is a unique document of Brooker’s fusion of modernist abstraction and popular culture. A pen and ink drawing that showcases the artist’s skilled draftsmanship, *Face and Breasts* features an idealized likeness of film actress Greta Garbo fractured by superimposed details of women’s torsos. Brooker’s transformation of the screen actress’s iconic face into a cubist collage underlines the ambivalent nature of his dialogue with both high modernism and the entertainment industries of advertising and film. In this work, Brooker embraces a synthesis of high and low culture that sets him apart from modernist appeals to “autonomy”—the supposed independence of the work of art from all claims of *interest*—that were then gaining ground. In its recycling of the iconography of popular film as well as its showcasing of graphic skills which the artist honed through his work as a commercial artist, Brooker’s challenge to the elitist values of formalism also reflects the artist’s dual identities as modernist iconoclast and leading participant in the emerging culture industry.

The cinematic imagery of *Face and Breasts* invites interpretation of Brooker's incorporation of cubist conventions of fragmentation and superimposition in his visual art as referencing film techniques such as montage. Given Brooker's participation in the film industry during the nineteen teens as an author of photoplays produced by the Brooklyn-based Vitagraph Company of America, it is unsurprising to find an ongoing dialogue with film in his mature visual art.

*Face and Breasts* also occupies an important place within Brooker's representations of the body. In 1931, a nude by Brooker was notoriously removed from the annual exhibition of the O.S.A. at the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario) following allegations of obscenity. The artist's 1931 essay "Nudes and Prudes" mounted a vigorous defence of sensuality and sex—taboo subjects in early twentieth-century Toronto. With its montage of naked body parts, no work more forcefully conveys the artist's belief in the erotic as legitimate subject matter for art than *Face and Breasts*. The drawing not only attests to the gulf dividing Brooker's aesthetic position from the social values of contemporary Toronto audiences, its break with both the classical conventions of the academic nude and formalist values of disinterested autonomy underscores the influence exerted by popular entertainment—with its emphasis on the sensational and the spectacular—on his art.

#### *Swing of Time, 1954, Brooker Estate*

*Swing of Time* is a powerful expression of the philosophical concerns that dominated Brooker's final years. Painted just one year prior to the artist's death, *Swing of Time* is a Bergsonian *memento mori* that portrays an array of instruments employed to measure the passage of time: clock, hour glass, sundial. These devices are set against an amorphous, flesh-coloured ground. This contrast between conventional technologies of measurement and the organic rhythms of the body speaks to the Bergson-inspired critique of "spatial" bias in Western thought which preoccupied Brooker in the 1950s.

Brooker's advertising writings reveal a knowledge of the French philosopher dating from at least the mid-1920s. However, it was the literary writings of former Bergsonists such as John Middleton Murry (1889-1957) as well as followers of Bergson such as Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) who fuelled the artist's search for a qualitative alternative to then-dominant, quantitative approaches to advertising in the 1920s. The artist's notes for a late, unpublished manuscript entitled *The Brave Voices* (ca. 1954) reveals an intensified interest in Bergson in the early 1950s. These notes focus on the French philosopher's privileging of qualitative intensity over traditional Western values of reason and measure. Brooker's unpublished notes echo Bergson's commentary on the distorting influence of Western technologies of measurement that substitute a geometric and linear understanding of time for the intuitive experience of "duration" privileged by the French thinker. Brooker shared Bergson's suspicion of tools that represent time in spatial terms.

In *Swing of Time* Brooker gives visual expression to the themes he was developing in *The Brave Voices*: the "flux" of the background undermines the linear perception of time enforced by the technologies represented in the foreground. Moreover, the multiplicity of times implied by the picture's proliferation of time-keeping devices suggests a

Bergsonian understanding of time as non-linear duration.

*Umbrella Tree, ca. 1950, Brooker Estate*

The disturbing face that emerges from the foliage of Brooker's late study *Umbrella Tree* speaks to the central place of philosopher Henri Bergson's notion of "creative evolution" in the artist's work of the 1940s and 1950s. The French thinker's most popular text—and the one that exerted the greatest influence on modernist movements from Futurism to Vorticism—*Creative Evolution* (1907), proposed that evolution does not occur as the random process of selection described by Charles Darwin but, rather, as creative adaptation. In Bergson's reworking of evolutionary theory, the genetic drift of future generations exists as a virtual "plan" available to members of a given species through the power of intuition. In complementary fashion, past adaptations remain accessible to present organisms through inherited "race memory," which acts as a virtual storehouse of creative action. *Umbrella Tree* appears to depict the enduring, virtual identity of flora and fauna within the continuum of creative evolution described by Bergson. This painted study is representative of Brooker's Bergsonian depictions of evolution as non-linear transformation throughout the 1940s and 50s.

*Umbrella Tree* is also representative of Brooker's late exploration of new techniques of paint application. The artist's use of palette knife to produce a highly-textured surface in *Umbrella Tree* marks a radical departure from the even and spare facture of Brooker's signature precisionist canvases of the 1930s. The adventurous technique of *Umbrella Tree* and other late works—many of which were not exhibited during the artist's lifetime—speak to Brooker's undiminished curiosity about avant garde developments such as Abstract Expressionism and the Automatistes in later years.

*Recluse, 1939, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts*

Echoing Anna Hudson's placement of Brooker at the forefront of a "socially-conscious modern movement of painting in Canada" during the 1930s, Gregory Betts has explored the social concerns of the artist-advertiser's works of short fiction. Betts argues that "his characters are distinctly ill-suited to handle the unique pressures of modernity."<sup>56</sup> For instance, in *Mrs. Hungerford's Milk*—a story first published in 1936 in the socialist magazine *The Canadian Forum*—Joe Snell refuses to upgrade his farm equipment in the face of increased competition resulting from technological modernization.

A similar thematic is evident in *The Recluse*. Painted at the close of the decade-long Great Depression, *Recluse* depicts a down-and-out or vagabond, who turns defiantly to confront the viewer. The drab clothing of the gaunt figure in the foreground contrasts sharply with the iconography of progress that dominates the background: a receding line of telephone poles that seems to represent all the benefits of modernity that have been denied the "recluse." The canvas is a powerful expression of the critique of modernity that would increasingly preoccupy Brooker through the 1940s and 50s as his thoughts turned more and more to the limits of technological progress under the influence of French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941). The work is also significant as a subtle

fusion of the artist's precisionist and abstract styles—the realism of the figure in subtle counterpoint to the cubistic fragmentation of his environment.

*“Our Tame Cartoonist predicts what the race will look like a few generations hence if eye-mindedness is carried much further,” 1925, Marketing*

This 1925 cartoon by Brooker accompanied an article published in *Marketing* magazine by Charles W. Stokes on the untapped advertising potential of the non-visual senses, “Selling Via All Fives Senses.”<sup>57</sup> More than any other single image or text, this cartoon speaks to the close connections between Brooker's concurrent experiments in art and advertising. Complementing Stokes's critique of conventional advertising's focus on the visual, Brooker ponders the long-term effects of this optical stress in his comic bust of a businessman with exaggerated, bug-like eyes. While the accompanying article is by Stokes, the subject of Brooker's cartoon is consistent with the synaesthetic concerns that he was pursuing in articles for *Marketing* throughout the 1920s, in which he attempted to “‘auditionize’ unheard sounds in the same way that [traditional advertising] ‘visualizes’ unseen sights.”<sup>58</sup> These experiments in synaesthetic advertising coincided with the artist's adaptation of Thomas Wilfred's notion of “visual music” in his contemporaneous abstract canvases.

Like his advertising writings for *Marketing*, Brooker's abstract art of the 1920s explored analogies between sound and sight. This dialogue between the worlds of art and advertising also extended to adventurous commercial designs such as a 1930 advertisement for the Toronto-based firm of Reliance Engravers, which employed a pattern of overlapping, concentric rings to emphasize the auditory overtones of the advertised product: a new printing process evocatively termed “Silvertones.” Interestingly, while Brooker's 1927 solo exhibition of abstract canvases at the Arts and Letters Club in Toronto was a flop with Canadian cultural elites, the artist-advertiser's wholly abstract commercial designs appear to have enjoyed considerable success with popular audiences and retailers during the same period. Advertisements by Brooker employing modernist abstraction to explore the same synaesthetic concerns as his visual art would have been seen by thousands of Canadians through their reproduction in *Marketing* magazine as well as dailies such as *The Globe* and *Financial Post*. Indeed, Brooker's commercial designs may have represented many Canadians' first point of contact with visual modernism.

“Our Tame Cartoonist” reprises the evolutionary concerns of Brooker's 1912 drawing *Ultrahomo the Prophet* as well as the play on which it was based (also by Brooker), *Cassandra* (1912). Like *Ultrahomo*, “Our Tame Cartoonist” focuses its exploration of the effects of evolution on the physical constitution of the eye. This emphasis on the organ of vision as symbolic of evolutionary process in general may reflect the influence of French philosopher Henri Bergson's popular text, *Creative Evolution* (1907). In that work, Bergson famously compares the eyes of various species to show how—in his anti-Darwinian reading of evolutionary process—they all answer a shared problem (how to register light) through diverse strategies of creative adaptation. Brooker's comic framing of this problem strengthens a Bergsonian interpretation. Significantly, the artist-advertiser made references to Bergson's influential essay on the comic, “Laughter,” in a 1924

article for *Marketing*.<sup>59</sup>

“Our Tame Cartoonist” is also important as a precursor to the writings of Canadian media theorists Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952) and Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), who explored the economic and physiological effects of technological stress on the body.<sup>60</sup> Like Brooker, both Innis and McLuhan were particularly concerned with what they termed the visual “bias” of print media in modern Western societies. Brooker’s notion of the “eye-mindedness” imposed by print advertising, portrayed with comic relish in “Our Tame Cartoonist,” sets the stage for the critique of visual bias subsequently mounted by Innis and McLuhan. Like McLuhan, Brooker framed his understanding of media bias in sensory terms: an unbalancing of the sensorium, as poet William Blake (1757-1827) (a mutual influence on Brooker and McLuhan) would have it. Brooker’s cartoon is evidence of the existence of a sensory media culture in Toronto pre-dating McLuhan’s writings by several decades.<sup>61</sup>

*Energy is Eternal Delight—Blake, 1927, The Canadian Forum*

In his youth, Brooker developed an idiosyncratic theory of gravitation which he submitted to the Royal Society that described the cosmos as a flux of atomic particles animated by an affective force which he termed “desire,” struggling to reach “ONE GOAL.”<sup>62</sup> The basic outlines of this early flirtation with physics continued to inform the personal doctrine that Brooker developed by 1912, which he termed “Ultimatism,” as well as expressive drawings of atomic particles which he produced throughout the nineteen teens and twenties. Anton Wagner has discussed the continued centrality of the artist’s gravitational paradigm in the 1930 manuscript, “Biography of a Mind,” in which Brooker outlines his belief that atomic particles possess a forms of consciousness: “‘There is no life and death in the accepted sense,’ states Brooker, but merely “new atomic arrangements.”<sup>63</sup> Brooker’s advertising writings of the 1920s also speak to an ongoing engagement with contemporary developments in physics. In the pages of *Marketing* magazine the artist-advertiser repeatedly proposed that the theories of Einstein could serve as the basis for new approaches to advertising. An undated proposal by Brooker for an advertisement to be based on the “the pattern in the construction of every atom of matter”<sup>64</sup> helps us to frame graphic designs by the artist-advertiser from the late 1920s featuring vivid patterns of particles resembling *Energy is Eternal Delight—Blake*.

Brooker’s affective understanding of physics was influenced by the writings of poet William Blake (1757-1827), who opposed the mechanistic vision of the cosmos promoted by Isaac Newton with his own representations of the universe as abstract “powers.” *Energy is Eternal Delight—Blake* gives graphic expression to Brooker’s creative fusion of Blake and modern physics, a hybrid of art and science that set the stage for Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s interdisciplinary writings of the 1950s and 60s. Like Brooker before him, McLuhan was fascinated by the potential of matter itself to act as a carrier for the circulation of mass affect.

## KEY EXHIBITIONS

*Bertram Brooker*, The Arts & Letters Club, Toronto, 1927.

*Drawings By Bertram Brooker*, The Art Gallery of Toronto, Toronto, 1929.

*Bertram Brooker, Abstractions*, Hart House Sketch Room, University of Toronto, Toronto, 1931.

*Bertram Brooker*, Hart House Art Gallery, University of Toronto, Toronto, 1937.

*Bertram Brooker*, Hart House Art Gallery, University of Toronto, Toronto, 1942.

*Bertram Brooker*, The Arts & Letters Club, Toronto, 1947.

*Bertram Brooker*, Hart House Art Gallery, University of Toronto, Toronto, 1949.

*Bertram Brooker, O.S.A. (1885 [sic.] - 1955)*, The Ontario Society of Artists, The Art Gallery of Toronto, Toronto, 1956.

*Bertram Brooker*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1973 (national tour 1973).

*It's Alive! Bertram Brooker and Vitalism*, Art Gallery of Windsor, 2009 (tour 2009-2011).

## WRITINGS BY THE ARTIST

1. "Blake (Address Given at Hart House Sketch Club)." University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, box 10, folder 13. 1927.

This early address sheds light on the sources of Brooker's abstract paintings of the 1920s in the visionary writings of William Blake (1757-1827) as well as Canadian psychiatrist Richard Maurice Bucke's (1837-1902) notion of "cosmic consciousness."

2. *Copy Technique in Advertising, Including a System of Copy Synthesis, a Classification of Copy Sources, and a Section on Copy Construction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1930.

*Copy Technique in Advertising* is Brooker's most ambitious statement on advertising. Richard Cavell (2002) has identified its interdisciplinary analysis of art and advertising as a precursor to Marshall McLuhan's (1911-1980) pioneering work of cultural studies, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951).

3. "Idolaters of Brevity." *The Sewanee Review* 39, no. 3, Jul.-Sept. 1931: 263-68.

As Lauder (2012) has discussed, this journal article reveals Brooker engaged with themes

later taken up by Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952) and Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), notably the impact of the daily press on cultural production and social behaviours.

4. "Nudes and Prudes." In *Open House*, eds. Wilfred Reeves and William Arthur Deacon. Ottawa: Graphic Publishers, 1931.

Brooker's rebuttal to the charges of obscenity that accompanied the removal of one of his nudes from the 1931 O.S.A. exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto, this spirited defence of sexuality as legitimate subject matter for art is indispensable for an understanding of his approach to the nude.

5. "The Brave Voices." University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, box 5 folder 1-4. ca. 1954.

This late, unpublished manuscript reveals Brooker's deepening exploration of the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859-1941) in the 1940s and 1950s.

## CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Dennis Reid. *Bertram Brooker*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1973.

Reid's exhibition catalogue establishes Brooker as a leading modernist in Canada on the basis of his visionary abstract canvases of the 1920s. Reid puts forward a Theosophical interpretation of Brooker's work and situates him as a disciple of Lawren Harris. This text is indispensable to an understanding of subsequent Brooker studies.

Joyce Zemans. "First Fruits: The World and Spirit Paintings." *Provincial Essays*, no. 7, 1989: 19.

Zemans's article refutes Reid's Theosophical interpretation of Brooker on the basis of a groundbreaking analysis of primary documents, notably unpublished writings and sketches from the nineteen teens and twenties which reveal that the artist was driven by a deeply personal fusion of artistic, philosophical and scientific sources.

Glenn Williams. "Translating Music into Visual Form: The Influence of Music in the Work of Bertram Brooker." *RACAR* 37, nos. 1/2, 2000: 113.

Williams's article analyzes musical analogies in Brooker's abstract canvases of the 1920s.

Gregory Betts. "Introduction." In *The Wrong World*, ed. Gregory Betts. Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2009.

Betts contextualizes Brooker's literary output within the social effects of rapid modernization in early twentieth-century Canada.

Adam Lauder. "It's Alive!: Bertram Brooker and Vitalism." In *The Logic of Nature, the Romance of Space: Elements of Canadian Modernist Painting*, ed. Cassandra Getty. Windsor, ON; Oshawa, ON: Art Gallery of Windsor; The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2010, 81-105.

Lauder explores Bergsonian themes found in both Brooker's visual art and his commercial production.

Adam Lauder. "Bertram Brooker and the Toronto School of Communication." *TOPIA*, no. 27, 2012: 67-110.

Lauder situates Brooker's advertising writings—particularly his articles on the synaesthetic potential of print media for *Marketing* in the mid- and late-1920s—in relation to the media theory of Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952) and Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980).

## **WHERE TO SEE HIS WORK**

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal.

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg.

## **FOOTNOTES**

1. Bertram Brooker, "Self-portrait, an experiment in Autobiography," 1937, University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, 2.
2. Thomas R. Lee, 1956, "Bertram Brooker 1888–1955," *Canadian Art* 13(3): 287–91.
3. Joyce Zemans, "First Fruits: The World and Spirit Paintings," *Provincial Essays*, no. 7 (1989): 19.
4. Bertram Brooker, "A Statistical Picture of the Average Canadian Consumer," *Marketing* 20, no. 12 (1924): 394–96, 438.
5. Richard Surrey [Bertram Brooker], *Copy Technique in Advertising, Including a System of Copy Synthesis, a Classification of Copy Sources, and a Section on Copy Construction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1930), 78.



6. Zemans, "First Fruits," 36n41.
7. Bertram Brooker, "I Have Uttered Arches," in *Sounds Assembling: The Poetry of Bertram Brooker*, ed. Birk Sproxton (1926; Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1980), 28.
8. Frank Underhill, review of *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*, 1936, ed. Bertram Brooker, *The Canadian Forum* (December 1936): 27.
9. Russell Johnston, *Selling Themselves: The Emergence of Canadian Advertising* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 210.
10. Victor Brooker, Victor Brooker to Birk Sproxton and David Arnason, October 9, 1974, Letter, Brooker Estate, 3.
11. Gregory Betts, "Introduction," in *The Wrong World*, ed. Gregory Betts (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2009), xxii.
12. Anton Wagner, "'God Crucified Upside Down': The Search for Dramatic Form and Meaning," *Provincial Essays*, no. 7 (1989): 46.
13. Adam Lauder, "It's Alive!: Bertram Brooker and Vitalism," in *The Logic of Nature, the Romance of Space: Elements of Canadian Modernist Painting*, ed. Cassandra Getty (Windsor, ON; Oshawa, ON: Art Gallery of Windsor; The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2010), 104n93.
14. Bertram Brooker, "The Censorship of Photoplays," *The Photoplay Author* (April 1913):1; Richard Abel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), 681.
15. Adam Lauder, "It's Alive!," 97.
16. Bertram Brooker, "Painting Verbs," in *Sounds Assembling: The Poetry of Bertram Brooker*, ed. Birk Sproxton (1949; Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1980), 35.
17. Zemans, "First Fruits," 36n41.
18. Zemans, "First Fruits," 19.
19. Glenn Williams, "Translating Music into Visual Form: The Influence of Music in the Work of Bertram Brooker," *RACAR* 37, nos. 1/2 (2000): 113.
20. Williams, "Translating Music into Visual Form," 120.
21. Philip E. Spane, "Aggressive Advertising, Merchandising Under Way for Philco Radio," *Marketing* 33, no.5 (1930): 101–03; Richard Surrey [Bertram Brooker], "Help the Prospect to Visualize What the Product Does," *Marketing* 29, no.5 (1928): 131–32; Mark E. Ting [Bertram Brooker], "Hoist the Sales," *Marketing* 30, no. 7 (1929): 212. See also: Adam Lauder, "Bertram Brooker and the Toronto School of Communication," *TOPIA*, no. 27 (2012): 67-110.
22. Zemans, "First Fruits," 20.
23. Lauder, "Bertram Brooker and the Toronto School of Communication," 97.
24. "'Nudes in Landscape' Causes Art Dispute," *The Toronto Daily Star* (March 7, 1931): 1-2.
25. Bertram Brooker, "Nudes and Prudes," in *Open House*, eds. Wilfred Reeves and William Arthur Deacon (Ottawa: Graphic Publishers, 1931), 93-106.
26. Brooker's published references to Bergson are found in the following texts: Philip E. Spane, "Make Advertising Believable," *Marketing* 28, no. 3 (1928): 75–76, 96; Richard Surrey [Bertram Brooker], "Making Orders Flow Downhill," *Printers' Ink* 126, no. 8 (1924): 3–8; Richard Surrey [Bertram Brooker], *Copy Technique in Advertising, Including a System of Copy Synthesis, a Classification of Copy Sources, and a Section on Copy Construction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1930).

27. Underhill, review of *Yearbook of the Arts in Canada*, 27.
28. Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T.E. Hulme (1903; New York: G.P. Putnam, 1912), 1.
29. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (1896; New York: Zone, 1988), 20.
30. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 107.
31. Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, *Cubism and Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001).
32. Harry Adaskin, "Charles Hill Interview with Harry Adaskin," November 18, 1973, <http://cybermuseum.gallery.ca/cybermuseum/servlet/imageserver?src=DO91-1000&ext=x.pdf> (accessed May 21, 2012).
33. Richard Cavell, *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural geography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Judith Stamps, *Unthinking Modernity: Innis, McLuhan, and the Frankfurt School* (Montreal; Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).
34. Bertram Brooker, "Blake," 1927, University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, box 10, folder 13.
35. Lauder, "Bertram Brooker and the Toronto School of Communication," 67-110.
36. Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting 1920-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
37. Gregory Betts, "The Destroyer": Modernism and Mystical Revolution in Bertram Brooker. Dissertation, York University, 2005.
38. Williams, "Translating Music into Visual Form," 67-110.
39. Betts, "Introduction," xi-xlix.
40. Glenn Willmott, *Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).
41. Zemans, "First Fruits," 30.
42. Adam Lauder, "It's Alive!," 81-105.
43. Lauder, "Bertram Brooker and the Toronto School of Communication," 67-110.
44. Adam Lauder, "'Trade Routes of the Mind': A Brief History of Information Art in Canada," in *H& IT ON*, ed. Adam Lauder (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2012), forthcoming.
45. John O'Brian, "Wild Art History," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal; Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 21.
46. Zemans, "First Fruits," 18.
47. Wagner, "'God Crucified Upside Down,'" 46.
48. Wagner, "'God Crucified Upside Down,'" 46.
49. Zemans, "First Fruits," 19.
50. Wagner, "'God Crucified Upside Down,'" 46.
51. Williams, "Translating Music into Visual Form," 120.
52. Brooker, *Copy Technique in Advertising*, 21.
53. Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1.
54. Williams, "Translating Music into Visual Form," 119.
55. Cavell, *McLuhan in Space*, 15.
56. Betts, "Introduction," xxx; Anna Hudson, "Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters, 1933-1950," Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1997, 33.
57. Charles W. Stokes, "Selling Via All Five Senses," *Marketing* 23, no. 12 (1925): 353,

364.

58. Mark E. Ting [Bertram Brooker], "Hoist the Sales," *Marketing* 30, no. 7 (1929): 212.

59. Surrey [Brooker], "Making Orders Flow Downhill," 3-8.

60. Lauder, "Bertram Brooker and the Toronto School of Communication," 67-110.

61. Lauder, "Bertram Brooker and the Toronto School of Communication," 67-110.

62. Wagner, "'God Crucified Upside Down,'" 45.

63. Wagner, "'God Crucified Upside Down,'" 45.

64. Bertram Brooker, "Memo re P a t t e r n i n E v e r y t h i n g," ca. 1928, Brooker Estate.