

Spirals

In this elegantly written and beautifully illustrated book, Nico Israel reveals how spirals are at the heart of the most significant literature and visual art of the twentieth century. Juxtaposing the work of writers and artists including W. B. Yeats and Vladimir Tatlin, James Joyce and Marcel Duchamp, and Samuel Beckett and Robert Smithson he argues that spirals provide a crucial frame for understanding the mutual involvement of modernity, history, and geopolitics, complicating the spatio-temporal logic of literary and artistic genres and of scholarly disciplines. The book takes the spiral not only as its topic but as its method. Drawing on the writings of Walter Benjamin and Alain Badiou, Israel theorizes a way of reading spirals, responding to their dual-directionality as well as their affective power. The sensations associated with spirals; flying, falling, drowning, being smothered reflect the anxieties of limits tested or breached, and Israel charts these limits as they widen from the local to the global and recoil back. Chapters mix literary and art history to explore 'pataphysics, Futurism, Vorticism, Dada and Surrealism, "Concentrisme," minimalism, and entropic earth art; a coda considers the work of novelist W. G. Sebald and contemporary artist William Kentridge. In *Spirals*, Israel offers a refreshingly original approach to the history of modernism and its aftermaths, one that gives modernist studies, comparative literature, and art criticism an important new spin.

The introduction describes the contours of the book's argument about the centrality of spirals in twentieth century literature and art and articulates its method, grounded in Walter Benjamin's conception of "image" (sometimes called dialectical image or thought image). I also describe the interventions the book makes in *New Modernist Studies*, *Comparative Literature*, and twentieth-century Art History scholarship. [Keywords: Walter Benjamin, image, dialectical image, *New Modernist Studies*, comparative literature, October school of Art History.] Chapter 1 traces a two-thousand year history of the spiral from ancient Greek geometry through Dante Alighieri, Leonardo da Vinci, and Athanasius Kircher and on to the mathematical speculations of René Descartes and the botanical-narratological theories of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Special attention in the chapter is paid to three nineteenth-century German philosophers, GWF Hegel, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, each of whom draws on the spiral to articulate a theory of history or of circulation; the chapter concludes by exploring how Benjamin, through a mode of reading that itself draws heavily on spirals, reworks the central conceptions of this triumvirate of thinkers. [Keywords: history of the spiral, René Descartes, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, GWF Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin.] Chapter 2 establishes the crucial connection between spirals, vanguardist anti-aesthetic practices, and early twentieth-century geopolitics, adumbrating a mini-history of the spiral from the turn of the twentieth century through to the European artistic climate around the beginning of the Great War. The chapter begins with a brief analysis of Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* and novel, *The Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll*, Pataphysician; proceeds with a detailed exploration of Italian Futurism (the writings of F. T. Marinetti; the paintings of Giacomo Balla and Carlo Carrà; and the sculptures, paintings and writings of Umberto Boccioni); and concludes with a new interpretation of the literary and visual texts comprising the Vorticist publication *Blast* (Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska). [Keywords: spirals, anti-aesthetic, geopolitics, Alfred Jarry, pataphysics, Italian Futurism, Vorticism.] In the third chapter of *Spirals* I look closely at two spirals produced and frequently revised in the 1917-1925 period, both heavily impacted by the First World War and its subsequent national and international independence struggles: Yeats's occult system that he outlined in his book *A Vision* and Tatlin's never-built Monument to the Third International, two of high modernism's most earnestly designed and most totalizing, towering spiral structures. Yeats's and Tatlin's nearly simultaneous but utterly politically opposed spiral projects, when viewed together, complicate familiar modernist presumptions about the politics of totality and internationalism. [keywords: Yeats, *A Vision*, Tatlin, constructivism, Monument to the Third International, totality, internationalism.] Chapter 4 pairs James Joyce's writing of the early 1920s to the late

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