



On Centered and Non-Centered Organicism

Extracts from **Thorsten Botz-Bornstein**, *Organic Cinema, Film, Architecture, and the Work of Béla Tarr* (Berghahn 2017)

A large part of Western philosophy is fueled by a stimulating tension between descriptions of the world composed of clearly definable singularities on the one hand, and a unifying generality on the other. The dangers of organicism can also be found here. In Western philosophy, the organic has always had an ambiguous status, which is mainly due to the fact that individual elements need to be reflected against a totality, and that the word “totality” can have both positive and negative connotations. No matter how “total” the totality is supposed to be, the singularities should always remain clearly definable: in an all-encompassing “dark” totality we will simply be lost. In other words, the rooting of the empirical world in the world of the absolute should never bring about the total disappearance of the border between the natural and the supernatural order. If philosophy does not more than simply negate any differences within an abstractly established totality, it abandons ratio altogether and turns into mysticism. (Chapter 3, p. 51)

Organic Cinema

Also organic philosophy rejects the Socratic, dialectical scheme of thought. Therefore organic thinking very often finds itself on common ground with postmodern philosophies. The difference is that organic philosophy constantly attempts to reflect otherness against some kind of unity that it attempts not to lose sight of. Of course, the “paternalistic” dangers that postmodern thought and critical philosophy see in organic philosophies are not entirely unfounded. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly specify which kind of organicism is acceptable and which one is not. (Chapter 4, p. 64)

Because of its “fundamental” nature, organicism can easily be used by fundamentalist rhetoric. Strictly speaking, this is a strange state of affairs to say the least since organic models practiced in Gadamerian hermeneutics, for example, are explicitly designed to *avoid* extremism. (...) In general, the most important component of this kind of organicism is not the center but the equilibrium. Extremes are never beneficial for organic constellations as they tend to be conceived on the basis of abstract and transcendental criteria that are external to organic-hermeneutic reasoning. Utopian or puritan extremism, for example, normally arises in the realm of the non-organic abstract.

However, in some cases, even the organic metaphysician will become a fundamentalist. This happens mainly when she is no longer looking for an equilibrium establishing an *absent* center but desires to spell out a central notion, location, or concept *in concrete terms*. In those cases, the organicist search for a unifying structure can easily become the basis of religious or nationalist fanaticism. The main reason is that the existence of the organic will no longer be seen as a continuous development (in the spirit of a Bergsonian creative evolution), but rather as a deterministic and progressive pattern meant to develop toward a central idea that has been fixed beforehand. (...)

Contrary to what many people might believe, having a center is not necessarily a condition for the organic structure. The organic

constellation can also simply be declared extant without attempting to specify its center. The problem is that, often, organic constellations tend to be conceptualized in order to extract central terms like “God,” “essence” or “national style” from elements that do not necessarily contain such central notions. Organic structures defined by following the latter scheme are “universal” simply because they are based on central ideas. Approaches adhering to this tendency can also be called “compulsive organicisms.” Along such lines, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has traced the “national aestheticism” of the Nazis – who saw the state as an organic machine – to this compulsive interlinking of national identity and an organic concept of culture (Lacoue-Labarthe 1987).

There is another problem with the organic. The fusion or union of opposites as well as the contradictory overlapping of the part and the whole are bound to leave a certain number of things unexplained. This gives the organic a quasi-constant mystical ring. Paradoxically, the organic model, which merely affirms that some things cannot be explained, can then be used as an “explanation of everything.” This is how in fundamentalist thought, the *lack* of a center can so easily become a positive “central” notion. The circular avoidance of meaning and foundation can become a meaningful foundation in its own right. In critiques of religion, this fallacy is known as the “appeal to ignorance.” Since no one can “rationally” prove why the world exists, we *must* conclude that it has been created by God. God will be used as a rational foundation of those things that lack a foundation. Fundamentalist, centralized or universalizing organic discourses follow this scheme: since all we have in this world is an organic order that *transcends* reason, this order must be accepted as a *new form reason* equipped with its own center.

Uncentered Organicism

(...) An alternative organic approach emphasizes the existence of a freely evolving organic structure that does not universalize ideas about which it believes to have individual knowledge. This “uncentered”

approach can be called cosmic and must be opposed to the universal approach.

The difference between centered and uncentered organicisms can be rendered by drawing on the difference between Goethe's *Ur-Pflanze* (the archetypical plant) and modern gene technology. Both the *Ur-Pflanze* and the gene are supposed to grasp something "original" from which larger organisms could develop. However, Goethe's morphology is not supposed to "explain everything." Goethe did not believe essential secrets to be hidden inside the shapes of certain natural phenomena; he did not believe that the correct detection of these shapes will explain the generation of other shapes. Goethe never spoke as a physicist pretending to have found concrete causal links. Instead, he described shapes forming an organic whole and presented insights about similarities. This means that in the end, the *Ur-Pflanze*, the "original plant" does not exist *in reality* but can only be imagined (see Goethe 1817 on this) whereas the gene claims to be a *central* notion having the status of a fact. Here, Goethe acts very much like an organic philosopher analyzing nature. (Chapter 5, pp. 65-67)

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