

## Big Englander

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Paul Edwards

On his blog, Dr James Fox, the writer and presenter of the television series *British Masters*, speaks of his anger at having his nation's visual art sneered at by a French art historian he overheard in a canteen queue. He relished the chance of showing in a TV series that twentieth-century British art is actually something special: one of the high points of Western culture, as he claims in the series itself. Yes, why don't these foreigners appreciate our art? Why don't they recognize that there was a resurgence of a 'British' (or was it English, Scottish and Welsh?) painting during the century?

There's a clue in Craig Raine's infamous review of 'The Vorticists' exhibition. It is the British themselves who disparage their painting as a weak echo of major European innovations and can't conceive of it as having equal value. Who think that El Lissitzky ignores Vorticism in his survey of avant-garde movements because it is minor and insignificant rather than because Lissitzky's own work too embarrassingly derives from it. Raine wasn't alone; quite a few of the bored newspaper reviewers simply dismissed the exhibition, tossing in a few words of mild praise for one or two artists who happened to catch their attention. The transatlantic curators and other foreigners asked us puzzled questions: why don't the British value their achievement in art? I was so used to this situation myself that I couldn't really answer them. It certainly goes back to the francophile snobbery of Clive Bell, for whom it was virtually inconceivable that an English painter could match a Frenchman. Fox is right that our painters are not valued highly enough. But it was the Fundación Juan March in Madrid that mounted a huge Wyndham Lewis exhibition, not the Tate. Lewis was presented there as a major European artist and thinker in continuous dialogue with the international avant-garde, and he was received as such. And now a large Stanley Spencer exhibition is in prospect in Holland. Only the British themselves aren't persuaded (or the French, of course, but what can you expect?).

Will they be persuaded by Dr Fox? Or will they just agree with the *Radio Times* that Fox is now a heavyweight contender for TV's 'top art brain' because of his panache in 'brandishing the pickled brain of

*Big Englander*

fascist futurist Percy Wyndham Lewis' in the first episode? Of course, Fox's claims for British art in *British Masters* are so extravagant as to be virtually meaningless, and he hardly tried to justify them. What he really seemed to be arguing was that English painters (for it was only English art that he was talking about) engendered (where they did not reflect) a sense of national identity, bound up mainly with a sense of place, for the British in the troubled twentieth century. Any relationship with European modernism was treated mainly as a fortunate absence. English art was a peak of Western culture *because* it largely resisted the temptation to be modernist and European. The television programme didn't ever quite say this, but it was implicit in what Fox did say about abstraction, surrealism, and expressionism. Our lot were doing something 'much more interesting'.

In other words, this was in essentials a very traditional version of English separateness. Usually, it is true, our Romantic nature tradition and our poetic visionaries are seen as a bit too 'literary' and outside the major currents of European art history except during the Romantic period itself, and this is what makes our painting 'minor'. *British Masters* presents a more chauvinist version of the thesis. Our exceptionalism makes our art major, while European painting went off into a *cul-de-sac*. (Fog in English Channel: continent isolated.) And Fox certainly had the courage of his convictions; not only does this thesis sound a bit like Munnings, it actually involved the promotion of Munnings as a major artist. Curiously, the series began with an extravagant condemnation of Alma-Tadema (producer of 'bad art' and, in a characteristic piece of historical distortion, supposedly typical of Edwardian painting). Yet surely Alma-Tadema is a far more interesting artist than Munnings? His kitsch classical scenes, flooded with brilliant Technicolor Mediterranean light and laid out on the canvas with ingenious asymmetry, are the precursors of the kind of epic sword and sandals film-making that flourishes still (*Gladiator*, *Troy*). But just place a Munnings alongside a Stubbs and you will realize which is the real thing and which is an ideological fraud cooked up to flatter a complacent plutocracy. Or if that is all that Stubbs is too (politically speaking – and I don't think it is), at least it is plain to see that he comes at the vigorous beginning of this function rather than at its spiced-up fag-end, as Munnings does.

Not that the programme was simply reactionary: one of the 'masters' featured was William Coldstream, that great celebrant of dreary worthiness. No question of ideological obfuscation in his disenchanting

scenes of urban industrialism, where the role of labour in production is not occluded by any seductive façade but is itself supposed to be the chief attraction. But the kind of impartial enthusiasm that awards both Munnings and Coldstream top marks for their ‘Englishness’ and leaves it at that is a bit confusing. A desire to celebrate the range of styles and subjects on offer ends up looking like theoretical incoherence.

I am being unfair. Not much more than enthusiasm can be expected from an arts documentary these days and Dr Fox, despite his academic credentials, wasn’t elaborating an academic thesis but showing the public that there’s a tradition in English art that precedes the YBAs, achieved more, and should be celebrated rather than forgotten. Who wouldn’t agree with him? Lots of people, it would seem – but a series like this does contribute to a slow change in the public mindset. People who had never heard of Keith Vaughan will now pause a bit longer before his paintings in art galleries; curators might reconsider whether to take his works out of the cellar and put them on the wall. A simplified version of a neglected painter enters public consciousness as a new cultural meme.

Thanks to (or despite?) all the work of Wyndham Lewis scholars over the last thirty years or so, the various exhibitions of his work, and the contributions of what Lewis called vulgarizers, Lewis, unlike Vaughan or Coldstream, does have a presence among cultured folk and already exists as a meme. ‘Wyndham Lewis: imitator of Futurism; extremely unpleasant man with repulsive fascist and racist views; but surprisingly good painter. Had a ridiculously inflated ambition to be a writer and intellectual.’ It was up to the programme-makers either to justify this, complicate it, or refute it. Instead, they piggy-backed on it so completely that it looked as if they didn’t really know anything about Lewis. Or if they did, preferred to play safe and stick to a story that kept them clear of charges of approving the badness of a bad man. For, depressingly, Lewis came out as a ‘bad man’ who was a ‘great painter’ – which is at least a much higher valuation than usual. And we didn’t only get Dr Fox’s voice; a small extract from an interview with Graham Lane gave an alternative view, even if not as strong an alternative as it should have been. Graham’s diligent refutation of the myths about Lewis, which included reading a fascinating letter from Sir Nicholas Waterhouse to Froanna after Lewis’s death, ended up on the cutting room floor. There was no Lewis as a great writer and intellectual,

*Big Englander*

philosopher, or critic. And as far as the programme was concerned, he went out of existence in 1915.

The signs were bad from the start, when Lewis was introduced as ‘a young devotee of Sickert’ who, on his return to London from his continental travels, was ‘entranced by its towering buildings’ (shot of glass office-buildings at night). What buildings would these have been? And if they actually existed in 1908 why was Lewis calling for the beginning of an inventive modernist architecture in London in 1919? A pardonable elision, maybe, and if the inaccuracies that followed had remained on this level it would hardly have mattered; Fox expressed real enthusiasm for Lewis’s work from 1912 to 1915, and to some extent showed why he valued it so highly. But what the programme said about Lewis himself was (depending on your temperament) laughably melodramatic, seriously misleading, or perniciously hateful. Apparently Lewis wanted ‘a new society, governed by machines’ and he had ‘a dream of a mechanical world order’. On the contrary, Lewis believed that modernity (including machines) was bringing about a transformation in human consciousness and that art should be changed so that it reflected this. Modernization was happening, and it should, first, be recognized in art, and second, be used not to create the ‘mechanical dystopia’ we were told Lewis wished to turn Britain into, but to enlarge the possibilities of human life. This may have been a questionable artistic ambition, but it was the ambition he had for his paintings and polemics of the time, and it involved far more scepticism about the effects of mechanism than Futurist enthusiasm did. Lewis was well aware of the dangers to our humanity of mechanizing ourselves: ‘The danger, as it would appear at present [...] is evidently that we should become overpowered by our creation, and become as mechanical as a tremendous insect world, all our awakened reason entirely disappeared’ (CD 74-76). Lewis’s view was, in fact, virtually the opposite of the one attributed to him in the programme.

Fox must have been aware of this, especially as he described so eloquently the figures in the *Thébaïde* plate from the *Timon of Athens* portfolio: ‘violent, robotic humanoids are trapped in an angular wilderness’. The drawing shows Timon raging at his tragic downfall. It bears a great deal of commentary, but one thing that is absolutely precluded by this tragic context is the statement in the programme that, though it looks ‘like a nightmare’, it actually represents Lewis’s ideal: ‘Wyndham Lewis’s dream of a mechanical world order’. Fortunately,

this distortion was largely absent from Fox's comments as he stood in front of *The Crowd*; he sensed its critical power and presented it not as a representation of Lewis's supposed social ideal but a constation or prophetic diagnosis.

It was in the characterization of *BLAST* that the misrepresentation was particularly damaging. The magazine was presented as a relic accessible only through murky library microfilm readers (whereas it is available in vivid facsimile, and has been for more than twenty years – and, of course, originals survive). Fox read for us some of the memorable phrases: 'Bless England, industrial island machine, pyramidal workshop, its apex at Shetland, discharging itself on the sea') but incomprehensibly commented that 'every single word is Wyndham Lewis taking up his assault against Britain' and that 'he's really attacking England'. It seemed as if he could not understand what he was reading. And what of the (omitted) next line? 'Bless cold, magnanimous, delicate, gauche, fanciful, stupid Englishmen?' The Vorticist manifesto, in the spirit of this elementary refusal to read, was 'a vitriolic and incoherent rant' that 'stinks' of Lewis's personality – and according to *British Masters* it would be difficult for a personality to stink much more than Lewis's. Actually *BLAST* is (to say the least) no more incoherent than any other avant-garde manifesto. It is playful, jokey, and inventive, deliberately deploying its self-contradictions strategically (balancing a 'blast' for English humour with a 'bless humour' on another page). The only 'vitriol' from Lewis in it is directed at Roger Fry. Surely it is obvious to anyone that the presence of balancing 'blesses' meant that something other than a vitriolic 'assault against Britain' was happening in this manifesto. A quick glance at some of the other texts by Lewis in the magazine would have confirmed this. But the programme was locked into a sensational narrative that took precedence over intellectual conscience – or so it seemed to me.

According to that narrative Lewis was driven by a megalomaniacal ambition to 'turn Britain into his own mechanical dystopia'. It was a 'diabolical plot dreamed up by one of the most poisonous minds of the twentieth century'. This puts Lewis way beyond the 'unsuccessful rapist' category (but Hemingway's vengeful phrase was, predictably, thrown in for good measure). It puts him in the Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot class, and, sure enough, we learned that Lewis was a 'misogynist, fascist and anti-semite who had the dubious honour of writing the first biography of Hitler'. He had, in fact, 'a twisted mind'. I do not need to rebut this

*Big Englander*

narrative for readers of the *Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*. I suppose I had better say that I do not accept it, but that I do see the need for a simplified black and white picture of Lewis's work and personality in a brief section of a documentary. But it needs to be black and white, not just black, and it would be more accurate to say that Lewis was these things *but* (incomprehensibly, if you like) he was also their opposite. So:

'Lewis was a misogynist (gynophobe, actually), *but* he produced some of the most beautiful and sympathetic portraits of women ever made. He was an anti-semite (actually not in the systematic sense the term implies, but casually and, for the culture of Britain in the time, in no way exceptionally, alas). *But* following *Kristallnacht* in 1938, he composed an attack on anti-semitism and called for the admission of Jewish refugees into Britain. During the twenties he thought Bolshevism and Fascism were more up-to-date than liberal democracy, and through much of the thirties he persisted in thinking Hitler was a "man of peace". But he loved the "rootless Elysium" of cosmopolitan New York and proposed it as a model for a global culture that would be an antidote to European nationalism. And *Tarr* (published in 1918) contains one of the most prophetic and perceptive critiques of the forces in German culture that Hitler exploited and exemplified.'

This is not as snappy as the story presented in the programme, but its paradoxes would not be difficult to put across to a TV audience, and it would have the advantage of being a lot closer to the truth. The danger of the narrative we were given, on the other hand, is that it makes Lewis into a creature who is less than human. Lewis becomes a figure about whom we are licensed, therefore, to say and think whatever we want, just as Alan Munton has pointed out in his survey of academic criticism of Lewis.<sup>1</sup>

And so, to the accompaniment of lurid music, Lewis's bisected brain was held up to the camera by Fox and called 'a suitably gruesome relic of a very gruesome man'. It is 'suitable' that this man should have suffered a tumour in his brain, that is now held up like a trophy because the poisonous narrative that has been constructed demands it, presumably. Nowadays the human remains held in museums as anthropological specimens are treated with respect, and in some cases repatriated for proper disposal according to the rites of the cultures

from which they were removed. But because of his supposed opinions and personality, Wyndham Lewis cannot be worthy of such respect, and no recognition, either, needs to be afforded to the stoicism with which he faced the extinction of his sight and the gradual loss of other aspects of consciousness over the last ten years of his life while he continued his lifelong dedication to the arts of human expression.

But it is our own humanity that is undermined when these things are not recognized. Whether this disgusting scene was the idea of the producer, director, or Fox himself I don't know. Maybe they all got carried away. It was up to the custodians of this medical specimen in the Pathology Museum at Imperial College Medical School to make sure it did not go ahead, but they failed in their ethical duty both to the dead and to the living.

As I have said, the programme was only interested in Lewis's painting up to 1915. The First World War was the next stopping-off point, so he was obviously no longer relevant, as Paul Nash and Stanley Spencer took over. Lewis had his ten minutes of fame and was heard of no more in this or the subsequent programmes. That he was one of the greatest champions of British art and its capacity to produce work as valuable as that of its European counterparts went unnoticed. And his own later work was ignored.

A small sample of Lewis's painting was taken seriously in *British Masters* and was, in a way, celebrated and appreciated. But Lewis's views were misrepresented in a way that impeded an understanding of what is actually happening in his painting, and his personality was poisonously vilified with disturbing relish. And we never really found out what made English painting of the twentieth century into such a cultural peak. However, to make high claims for Lewis's painting and for other British art was not intrinsically ridiculous, as TV reviewers like A. A. Gill have ignorantly assumed. Graham Lane's description of the work of the YBAs as 'cold mutton' in comparison with the still vibrant avant-garde achievement of Lewis was also a moment to savour.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Munton in "Imputing Noxiousness": Aggression and Mutilation in Recent Lewis Criticism', *Wyndham Lewis Annual* IV (1997): 5-20.