Response to Paul Edwards

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Following the transmission of British Masters in July 2011, I was inundated with emails, letters and reviews both from critics and viewers. The responses varied wildly. Some correspondents passionately supported the series, while others passionately disagreed with it. My most severe critics, however, originated from the archipelago of Wyndham Lewis organizations, projects, publications and websites that are thankfully now in existence. Some of these criticisms have been so severe that I have here decided to jettison the cardinal rule of ‘ignoring one’s critics’ and to write a response to Paul Edwards’s erudite review of my series. What follows is probably best read as one-part apologia, one-part apology. In the first half I shall endeavour to defend myself against the broader criticisms levelled at the programmes by Paul Edwards. In the second half I shall concentrate on the first episode’s problematic sequence on Wyndham Lewis himself. But for all those who do not wish to read on (and I understand why), I will apologize now as well as later for any offence or distress that this series has caused within the Wyndham Lewis community.

Ironically, British Masters only ever intended to sing the praises of work by great artists like Lewis. We weren’t even very subtle in doing so, as Edwards has observed. The opening claim that twentieth-century British art was a high-point in European culture was regrettably hyperbolic; undermined rather than underpinned the arguments that followed. In part it was motivated by the desire to hook and provoke an audience whose attention had to be hard-earned and could easily be lost. But it was also a response to the equally ludicrous claims that have been made against British art (Vorticism included) for the best part of a century. The dismissal of British painting and sculpture as an inescapably ‘minor school’ is an old prejudice, although I don’t think anyone (bar A. A. Gill) still believes that British artists are innately inferior to their continental contemporaries. The prejudice is surely more a result of the way that twentieth-century art has been historicized, or more precisely, the way that modernism itself has been reformulated.

I should say straight away that I admire modernist art as much I despise narrow-minded nationalism. I am neither a reactionary nor a
chauvinist. But I do think it is time to challenge some of the orthodoxies that accompany the modernist project. Modernist narratives have long dominated the story of twentieth-century British art. But they are only part of that story, not even a representative part of it, and I confess that my series was absolutely an attempt to provide some kind of alternative to them. This is just one of the reasons why I chose to include such unfashionable figures as William Coldstream and Alfred Munnings. Because for all their differences (and believe it or not, I am on Coldstream’s side here), both artists tried to resist the unstoppable march of the modernist juggernaut. What’s more, they were two highly influential figures in twentieth-century British art – the former through the (continuing) influence of his teaching methods, and the latter through his public notoriety and institutional leverage. That one even has to justify their inclusion speaks of a world in which another kind of chauvinism – a modernist chauvinism – can still pass without criticism.

But if their juxtaposition at least excuses me from allegations of Toryism, it still amounts to what Edwards has called ‘theoretical incoherence’. This, I will not refute. However, I would say here that so many of the choices made in this series were dictated not by the needs of academic argument but by the needs of televisial entertainment – and many of them were not made by me. Seen from this perspective, Munnings – whether one likes him or not – offered an enormous amount of material to programme-makers: he was a bold and memorable character who would provoke discussion and disagreement; he provided a much-needed change of tone after the first episode’s sombre post-war start; his story could be told through distinctive and televisial locations (the gallops at Newmarket; his home in Dedham; the state rooms at the Royal Academy); and, in his disgraceful speech of 1949, he provided us with an utterly extraordinary slice of archive that any storyteller worth his salt would have been foolish to ignore.

In fact, countless inclusions, omissions and elisions were made for televisial rather than art-historical reasons. In the first episode, discussions of French Post-Impressionism and Italian Futurism were excluded not because we considered them unimportant but because it was feared they would overcomplicate and over-theorize a crucial early section in the series. In the second episode, a large sequence on the Mass-Observation movement (the reason Coldstream went to Bolton) was removed because it was believed to deflect attention from Coldstream’s own principles. And we chose to conclude the third
episode with Keith Vaughan not because he was the last great British painter of the century (he was patently not) but because his tragic story offered an evocative and ambivalent end to the series. I should add that in all episodes, abstract painting was generally avoided not because I did not admire it or because it does not have an important place in British art, but because my previous television programme (The Art of Cornwall) had dealt with British abstraction at such length (if not, alas, depth) that television executives wanted to avoid duplication.

Logistical and financial considerations also played a very significant role in editorial decision-making. Many important artists were cut before, during or after filming because they could not be adequately squeezed into any of the fifty-nine minute programmes; large numbers of important pictures were removed from the final cut because copyright charges were prohibitive; and for pieces-to-camera, paintings in and around London (almost all in the Tate) were preferred because the costs involved in filming them were lower. Only once did we make a substantial journey to film paintings, and one of the two we filmed on that trip was by Wyndham Lewis. At the time of filming, The Crowd (1915) was on show in the Vorticist exhibition at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice. By this stage funds (as they always are with BBC Four productions) were perilously short, but the director and I considered the picture to be of such importance that we flew out alone, filmed it, and returned to London the very same day.

Let me now turn to the editorial style of the programmes. Throughout the series, as our methodological detractors have noted, biography was preferred to context, narrative was preferred to analysis, and when discussing artworks, meaning was prioritized over form. Many of these methods may appear to be unacceptably unacademic (indeed they are as far from my own academic principles as it is possible to get), but I would here remind all unimpressed art historians that British Masters was not an academic piece of work, nor was it even a comprehensive survey of twentieth-century British art. It was a television series, built around a series of biographies of artists. I accept that it doubtless deserves the art-historical criticism it has received. However, to judge a television programme by academic standards is like judging an academic work by the standards of television. They are different beasts altogether, as I have repeatedly learnt to my own frustration.
When I started in television I believed rather naïvely that I, somehow, would be ‘in charge’ of the programmes I presented. I soon discovered that this was not how things worked. In reality, television presenters (especially minor ones like me) are just one small part of a much larger collaborative process – one in which so many compromises are made between so many people for so many different reasons that it is ludicrous to speak of a single authorial voice lurking behind any finished product. And if there is a voice, it is absolutely not that of the presenter: the director takes charge of scripting, writing voice-over in post-production, shaping pieces-to-camera on the spot, and cutting unnecessary lines during editing; the editor fashions the mood, tone and music of the programme’s constituent sequences; the executive producer decides on the content of individual episodes and the ultimate thesis of an entire series; and the channel controller more often than not decides on the title that series will take. In this complicated world, there is not much room for the presenter’s views.

I would like to make clear that I am not complaining about this state of affairs. It is surely right that the production of television programmes should be left to programme-makers. If I had had my way, British Masters would have been a materialist social history of institutional change, consumption patterns and state funding in the twentieth-century British art-world. I would have been thoroughly proud of myself. But the series would have been watched by half a dozen people who if not already comatose, would have been sent that way by watching it – hardly licence-fee-payers’ money well-spent. For this reason I think it is admirable that factual documentaries should aspire to entertain as well as to inform. Sometimes, however, the desire to amuse, surprise and provoke can have regrettable consequences, and can lead to simplifications, inaccuracies, and errors of judgement. I believe, as I am sure all of this journal’s readers believe, that this is precisely what happened in our treatment of Wyndham Lewis. For this reason I want to use the remainder of this piece to respond to Paul Edwards’s criticisms of the sequence, and to apologize for it as well.

Edwards criticizes the programme’s misinterpretation of Lewis’s overall ambitions and individual works. He is completely right. Lewis did not want to transform Britain into a world governed by machines any more than he wanted to destroy Britain altogether with BLAST. The origin of these errors is complicated but I can assure readers that they did not arise from ignorance on my part. Even a brief watch of my
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(albeit truncated) discussion of The Crowd reveals, I hope, that I was thoroughly aware of Lewis’s ambivalence, if not antipathy, towards the mechanized world. Indeed his equivocal attitude towards machines was a crucial issue through which he distinguished himself from his Futurist contemporaries. The programme’s interpretive inconsistency was the inevitable product of collaborative voice-over writing. One of my own lines gets misremembered, a director records it, an editor crops it slightly to fit the cut, an executive asks for minor changes, and before you know it a handful of subtle tweaks can alter the meaning of a sentence altogether. This, I am afraid to say, happened throughout the series, and happens in all television programmes all of the time. It is common practice for presenters to end up recording voice-over that is not their own and that they have very little power to change. And that is what happened here.

There are other ways that a presenter’s own views can become lost in the chaos of production. This is precisely what happened in my interpretation of BLAST. Edwards presumes that my analysis of this remarkable document reveals either an ‘elementary refusal to read’ or a nefarious anti-Vorticist agenda. It was neither. I spent two hours in front of that publication, describing every single page in great detail, with blasts and blesses dealt with even-handedly and sympathetically. For brevity’s sake, that extended discussion had to be cut down to about a minute of script. Understandably the editor selected the most exciting and strident passages he could find, cutting them together in the most evocative fashion possible. The result, I hope people can accept, is tremendously powerful, but it does distort my own views. I will give one concrete example: in the line in which I claim that Lewis was ‘attacking England’ I was actually referring to the very first page of the manifesto, ‘Blast First (from politeness) England’, but this was presented as my summing up of the whole publication. Lewis, therefore, was not the only writer to have his ideas misrepresented here. But I can assure you that such editing was not motivated by any sinister agenda.

Edwards also comments unsympathetically on the director’s decision to film BLAST in microfilm rather than hard-copy. At first I too was unconvinced by his decision (I wished to use an original in the British Library), but he assured me that the digital format would recreate much of the text’s original vitality and would cut together well with scenes of city streets and lights. I now believe that he was thoroughly vindicated on this front. He captured the radicalism of BLAST with an
electrifying energy that would have been impossible on the page itself. And this tone was something that ran through all of the Lewis section: motorcars, electric lights and office buildings were not used literally to illustrate pre-war London, as Edwards suggests, but to evoke the spirit of modernity out of which Vorticism came. At the same time, science-fiction music was deployed not to present Lewis as 'less than human' but to indicate the cutting-edge quality of his ideas. In all cases the director's sole ambition was to reinforce the ground-breaking nature of Lewis's contribution, and to make him appear as modern to a twenty-first century audience as he was a hundred years earlier.

Many will agree, however, that the most unfortunate sequence of the programme took place in the Pathology Museum, and I accept that my characterization of Lewis there was deeply unfair. As Edwards has conceded, none of the provocative claims I made about Lewis (misogynist, fascist, anti-Semite) were demonstrably false. Nevertheless my inability to substantiate those provocative assertions, or more importantly to qualify them, was such a dramatic simplification of Lewis's views that it effectively became an inaccuracy. Television, as Edwards understands, rarely allows for exceptionally nuanced discussion – at least not in the three lines we had to introduce a singularly complicated individual. The programme-makers, however, felt that it was necessary at least to confront the controversies that continue to bedevil Lewis, and in adhering to this journalistic trope we were by no means alone. But I am an academic, and my standards should be higher, and in retrospect I regret making any claims that could not be robustly supported. That is my fault, and I apologize for it.

My greatest regret of all however is the tastelessness of that particular sequence. I do not recall how the decision to film Lewis's brain was made, although I am sure it was inspired by the illustration and extended discussion of the specimen in Paul O'Keefe's biography. I was in the United States on research leave while those editorial decisions were taken and consequently had very little to do with them. Moreover, I claim no responsibility for the tone of the sequence as a whole (errie music; sinister lighting; photographic montage); as the presenter I simply turned up at the location and delivered my piece-to-camera. I do confess that it felt wrong at the time, and I should not have agreed to do it. This was a major error of judgement, born out of inexperience, a hurried schedule, and the pressure the whole production was under to provoke, surprise, and thrill its viewers at every turn. It
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certainly did provoke and surprise them, but it was also deeply distasteful, and I shall regret my involvement in that sequence for a long time.

Nevertheless, I must now turn from apology back to apologia. Because that one sequence has caused some critics to lose sight of the many good things that were said about Lewis in the programme. I described him as ‘a great artist’ and a ‘genius’; I described his 1912 pictures as a ‘blistering series of breakthrough works’; I described BLAST as ‘a work of art in its own right’; I described Vorticism as ‘producing some of the most radical artworks ever made’ (rare praise indeed); and I described The Crowd as ‘the greatest Vorticist painting of them all’, a ‘very special picture’, and ‘truly prophetic’ in so many ways. Now one may fairly ridicule these statements for their hyperbole (so difficult to avoid in television, alas), but one can hardly condemn them for being unfair to Lewis. Indeed, as Edwards himself admits, the programme made a ‘much higher valuation than usual’ of Lewis’s output. ‘Bad man’ but ‘great artist’: readers may disagree with one of these two conclusions, but by being unequivocal about both, my programme was as much for Lewis as it was against him.

This brings me to my conclusion. I know that many readers feel that British Masters did significant damage to Lewis’s reputation, and I can understand why they think that. To those individuals, I once again apologize. However, based on my own modest evidence-base, I would profoundly disagree with this evaluation. In the month following the transmission of the series I received dozens of emails and letters from viewers who had been inspired by what they had seen of Lewis’s work on the television. Many asked me for book recommendations; some went to the Vorticist exhibition at the Tate simply to learn more about him and his contemporaries; and several said that our programme had finally convinced them that early British modernism was worthy of the attention we had lavished on it. I say this not to promote myself, but simply to state that for all of our failures, we did emphatically support what so many important scholars have been arguing for years: that Lewis was a genuinely original and important artist, and as good as anyone of his generation. So while the series may not have encouraged viewers to admire Lewis the man, I genuinely do think it encouraged them to admire his magnificent work.