

# **Evaluate how effective the Imperial War Museum's Wyndham Lewis exhibition is in showcasing his place within modernism**

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The Modernist movement was perhaps summarised best by one of its key players, Ezra Pound, with his famous command to 'make it new.' After industrial revolution, a new generation of writers, artists and actors began challenging the pre-established norms of Victorian morality, creating work which sought to "modify if not overturn existing modes and subjects of representation...to express the new sensibilities of their time: in a compressed, condensed, complex literature of the city, of industry and technology, war, machinery and speed" (Childs, 2017 ed., pp.3-4), to name but a few. Wyndham Lewis was a key figure in this movement, referred to retrospectively as 'Modernism'. Lewis's public alignment with fascism in his 1931 book *Hitler*, which expressed sympathy with the dictator and the Nazi movement, never truly left public consciousness, thus Lewis is infrequently discussed in the literary canon compared to other modernist writers. Indeed, the presence of the exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, "rather than, say, Tate Britain, might be seen as a reflection of his still problematic status" (Hudson, 2017). The exhibition, this essay argues, goes some way towards highlighting Lewis's engagement with themes and styles of the Modernist period, and in situating him in the movement as a whole, but its tendency to focus on his visual art alone and the necessity of creating a narrative in order to commercialise the exhibition means it fails to truly capture the essence of Lewis as a Modernist figure.

Arguably Lewis's most significant contribution to the Modernist period was his attempt to found a new movement, Vorticism, launched by Lewis with the publication of his magazine *Blast*. Pound (1914) described Vorticism as "art before it has spread itself into flaccidity, into elaboration and secondary applications;" art or literature must centre around one intense idea or feeling, much like a vortex swirls around a central point. The Imperial War Museum exhibition alludes to Lewis's intentions with his creation of the Vorticist movement, perhaps most notably with the display of Lewis's most centrally Vorticist painting *The Crowd*. The caption alongside this painting says that it is "often paired with Lewis's literary account of the behaviour of crowds in London at the outbreak of the First World War," (Imperial War Museum North, 2017) but does not display the work. Because of its lack of engagement with Lewis's literary work, the exhibition fails to delve fully into what the Vorticist movement was intended to represent. Lewis's manifesto writings, a popular form in the pre-War modernist period, are more indicative of this.

In his Manifesto of Vorticism, published in *Blast* in 1914, Lewis directly attacks Marinetti and the Italian futurist movement, condemning “Mr Marinetti’s limited imagination,” (Lewis, 1914, in Rainey, 2005, p.202) and stating “We have made it quite clear that there is nothing Chauvinistic or picturesquely patriotic about our contentions,” (Lewis, 1914, in Rainey, 2005, p.203) an attack on the patriotic claims of the futurist movement. Many argue that the launch of the Vorticist movement was simply a response to Marinetti’s Futurism. Lewis’s use of the manifesto form, argues Puchner (2010), is an attempt to satirise the genre following the publication of Marinetti’s *Futurist Manifesto* in 1909, though this cannot be seen as altogether successful as “even as it satirises some aspects of the manifesto, *Blast* ‘participates in the bad-mannered mode of speech that characterises this genre.’” (Putner, p.56, in Mao & Walkowitz, 2010) An example of this can be found in Lewis’s *Long Live the Vortex!*, where clear disdain for the audience emulates from the line “But it is nothing to do with the People.” (Lewis, 1914).

In essence, the irony of Lewis’s attempt to satirise a genre whilst partaking in the very thing he claimed to loathe is indicative of the Vorticist movement. As Potter (2006, p.65) explains: “despite Lewis and Pound’s protestations to the contrary, the typography and violence of *Blast* owes much to the manifestos of Marinetti’s Italian Futurists.” Though the Imperial War Museum’s exhibition touches on Vorticism’s birth as a rejection of Futurism, it is only through analysis of Lewis’s manifesto writings that the complexity of the relationship between Futurism and Vorticism can be truly understood. Furthermore, the exhibition lords Vorticism as “Britain’s only true avant-garde movement,” (Imperial War Museum North, 2017), and emphasises the movement as groundbreaking. When considering Vorticism within the Modernist movement as a whole, however, this seems to border on hyperbole. The outbreak of the First World War effectively killed the movement, as Lewis and “his fellow avant-gardists had been the prophets of a new society that had died stillborn.” (Gasiovek, in Coleman, Milligan & O’Donnell, 2017, p.33). The tendency of the exhibition to brush over Vorticism’s flaws: its relationship with existing movements such as Futurism, and its failure to make a true impact, calls into question its true representation of Lewis’ place within the arc of Modernism.

More broadly, the Imperial War Museum’s exhibition seems to pit Lewis in a kind of binary opposition against his fellow modernists, for example citing the lasting feud between “Lewis and the influential Fry and his close associates at the Bloomsbury Group.” Though it is clear that Lewis was a contentious figure among the modernist world, and the exhibition must reflect this, again the relationship between Lewis and his creative output and other modernists and art movements appears more complex than the exhibition denotes. When considering modernism as a whole movement, it is important to note that all were underpinned by the same aim: “to discover order in the face of disorder [...] to ensure themselves, and artists in general, a more important place in the world.”

(Williams, 2007, p.3). With this in mind, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that the boundaries between artistic movements at the time are constantly transgressed.

In Lewis's literary work evidence of this can be found, again, in his *Manifesto*, in which he says "Beyond Action and Reaction we would establish ourselves." (Lewis, 1914, in Rainey, 2005, p.201). This technique of setting an individual between worlds appears reminiscent of the flâneur, who can "see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet remain hidden from the world," (Baudelaire, 2010 ed., p.9) a figure popular in the work of poets of the Imagist and Surrealist movements. In his paintings, too, Lewis draws on influences of Cubists such as Picasso, and while the exhibition touches on these influences, it seems to compartmentalise the Modernist movement in a way which ignores the true fluidity of the period. By portraying Lewis as he would probably have wanted: as part of an independent movement, at odds with other concurrent art movements of the period, the Imperial War Museum's exhibition fails to recognise the transgressive nature of creative output at the time, as artists of the period strived towards the common goal of representing modern life.

One such aspect of modernity that artists struggled to conceptualise was the advancement in machine technology. Modernists saw it necessary to scrutinise technology, as "to accept the machine age was uncritically was to subordinate individuals to the technology that was supposed to serve them and to produce a society that was inattentive to questions of purpose and meaning." (Gasiovek, in Coleman, Milligan & O'Donnell, 2017, p.24). Again, the Imperial War Museum does demonstrate how Lewis engaged with technology, in particularly through his war paintings. A prevalent example of this is the Museum's treatment of Lewis's 'A Battery Shelled' (1919); the comment displayed alongside the painting notes the almost machine-like portrayal of the central soldiers, as modern life produced technology with "the tendency of the 'natural' to become mechanism, and of technology to become a form of life." (Armstrong, 2003, p.1). This ensures that the exhibition critically engages with Lewis and his fellow Modernists' fascination with technology, though further reference to his literary work would perhaps have helped to accentuate this. *Long Live the Vortex!*, for example, with its line "We don't want to go on about making a hullo-balloo about motor cars, anymore than about knives and forks, elephants or gas-pipes," (Lewis, 1914) highlights the prominence of technology in the foreground of the Modernist mind (as well as, once again, mocking Marinetti's Futurist movement).

One important criticism of Lewis's work, and indeed of the Modernist movement as a whole, is of its elitist and exclusionary undertones. The Imperial War Museum exhibition touches briefly on this, but again, fails to satisfactorily explore what is one of the major criticisms of the Modernist period. Because "modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion," (Huyssan, 1986, p.7) it had "an anxiety of contamination from its other: an increasingly

consuming and engulfing mass culture.” (Huyssan, 1986, p.7). The Modernist movement’s repulsion at mass culture, therefore, by default, lead it susceptible to criticisms of elitism. Of all of Lewis’s work, the one which perhaps demonstrates the most glaring elitism is his *Blast* lists, one of which was projected onto the exhibition wall, ‘blasting’ or ‘blessing’ various things from the Post Office to Charlie Chaplin. The irony of these lists, in which Vorticists condemned “figures and institutions that the Vorticists disdained because of their association with bourgeois art, culture and practice,” (Reynolds, 2000, p.249) is that the idea of a group attempting to dictate positive from negative seems a bourgeois act within itself. The paradox of the quest to blast elitism whilst refusing to engage with populist culture is laid bare within Lewis’s *Manifesto*: powerful exclusionary language such as “We only want Humour if it has fought like Tragedy” (Lewis, 1914, in Rainey, 2005, p.202) reveals the irony of the ingrained elitism within the Modernist movement as a whole. While the Imperial War Museum display touches on this, it does not foreground the issues surrounding elitism which stem from Lewis’s lists and other literary works.

Arguably, the most notable success of the Imperial War Museum’s Wyndham Lewis exhibition is born from its chronological nature. Because of its need to entertain, as well as inform, the exhibition creates a narrative of Lewis’ life, from his early experiments with Modernist movements, to his work during the war, and his eventual fascist sympathies. This narrative mirrors the oeuvre of the lives of many Modernists, perhaps even the movement as a whole. The exhibition engages with the debate around Lewis’ true political stance; analysis of his body of literary work as a whole reveals the reductive nature of labelling Lewis a fascist, as “Lewis wrote about fascism differently at different stages in his career, welcoming it with caution at some moments while rejecting it without hesitation at others.” (Waddell, in Miller, 2016, p.87) The exhibition certainly succeeds in exploring this line of debate, though more critical engagement with his later pieces of literature in order to illustrate this would have created a better-rounded picture of Lewis’ life, and the fascist question which overshadows the Modernist movement more generally.

To conclude, the Imperial War Museum’s Wyndham Lewis exhibition, while providing a fundamental grounding towards the understanding of Lewis’s work, does not extend far enough to allow the visitor a true insight into his place within the Modernist movement. As Ayers (2004, p.57) notes: “Lewis’s intellectual world was a complex one which only increased in complexity with the passage of time,” and the museum exhibition, perhaps due to its commercial need to appeal universally, takes a simplistic view which is not reflective of such complexity. Modernism is a complex movement, rich with transgression between both the boundaries of specific art movements, and the limits of traditional forms. Further engagement with Lewis’s literary work, with particular focus on his use of satire in his manifesto writings, would have created a broader picture of his ideology and place within the Modernist canon. By confining Lewis’s work to a chronological arc,

though this does neatly reflect the trajectory of the movement as a whole, the exhibition loses the very essence of the exciting fluidity of modern life that Lewis and his peers attempted to reflect.

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