

Wyndham Lewis: Life, Art, War and the Uber-Modernist

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The contemporary novelist, Will Self, in promoting the Imperial War Museum North's exhibition "Wyndham Lewis, Life, Art, War", states that Lewis is "like other Modernist artists but even more so" (Imperial War Museums, 2017). The primary aim of the exhibition appears to be a desire to show "some of the most powerful images of World War I" (Hudson, M, 2017). However, visiting the exhibition allows the perceptive viewer to place Lewis as an 'Uber-Modernist'. During his lifetime, there are few Modernist movements that he did not critique. The criticisms of artistic movements, philosophies and artists were often made using the most vitriolic language. In spite of this, Lewis adopted ideas from across the Modernist spectrum re-appropriating these in his own style. Many of these Modernist ideas are evident across the work on display at the exhibition.

Although the exhibition recognised Lewis as an artist working across genres – he was a prolific writer and painter – the majority of his literary work was encased in a glass display. However, the projection of some text onto one of the walls provided a glimpse into the way in which Lewis expressed his anxieties through his writing. The projected text uses the same Grotesque 9 typeface used in the Vorticist journal *Blast*. Indeed, it is through the publication of *Blast* in 1914 that Wyndham Lewis, as the leader of the Vorticists, announced himself onto the Avant-Garde art scene in England (Rylands, 2010, p. 15).

Contained within the journal were a number of formal and thematic features that are evident across Modernism. For example, the kaleidoscopic way in which the text was presented throughout the journal gives a sense of fragmentation. One of the strongest examples of this is in a piece entitled "Bless England!" in the first edition. In this piece, the font size varies throughout. The line lengths are inconsistent and at times, solid black lines separate the writing, all of these elements give the text a very fragmentary look. To define Modernism by any single theme can prove futile because Modernist artists were reacting to numerous socio-political events of their time. Among these were Einstein's Theory of Relativity, which fed the notion that, time and space do not exist in the traditionally understood way. Politically, there was the emergence of the Democratic, Marxist and

Communist movements. All of these anxieties gave rise to a feeling of rebellion and revolt (Edwards, 2000, p. 15). The upheaval created by this led to a sense of fragmentation and fracture in society which is evident throughout much of Modernist art. James Joyce and T.S Eliot are iconic figures within Literary Modernism. One of the dominant themes contained within their high modernist work is the theme of fragmentation (Gasiorek, 2015, p. 373 and p. 386). Both writers use a fragmentary structure to reflect the “decay and fragmentation of Western Culture” (Williams, 1992, p. 311). The fact that Lewis expressed this notion through the formal features of his writing before Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land* places him firmly alongside these canonical Modernist artists.

The idea of fragmentation is evident across the visual Modernist arts as well as the literary ones. Cubism, one of the most influential movements in Western art (Chilvers, 2004, p. 184) was using “dislocation and fragmentation of form” (Chilvers, 2004, p. 102). Lewis, however, did not feel Cubism was radical enough, not only did he feel it was still bound by the “ancien régime of aestheticism” (Foshay, 1992, p. 8) but it was “obsessed with domesticity [...] ignor[ing] the modern technological world” (Bru, 2015, p. 23). Lewis’s 1913 painting, *Timon of Athens Act V* is an example of how Lewis combines the fragmentary form of the Cubists together with the anxieties of the modern technological world. In the painting, the praying human figure is distributed around the picture in machine-like forms. These mechanised forms together with the barely discernable praying figure give the white background an ambiguous meaning. At times, the white paper appears to belong to the figure and at other times, it belongs to the empty background of the geometric lines. Here man and machine have become one. This particular painting shows how Lewis’s ideas around fragmentation merged with the anxieties surrounding the technological advances of the time.

The Vorticists were not alone in addressing the technological anxieties at the turn of the century. The Futurists, led by Filippo Marinetti saw the advances in technology as a new beauty, which would ultimately replace the old institutions (Marinetti, 2005, p. 5). Lewis set Vorticism up against Marinetti’s Futurism. Both movements were allied by their fascination with the dynamism of the mechanical but Lewis found Marinetti’s love for cars and speed as overly sentimental (Caws, 2001, p. 338). He stated in “Long Live The Vortex”, a poem in the first edition of *Blast*, that “Automobilism (Marinettism) bores us” before going on to state that celebrating the speed of a car is akin to making a “hullo-bulloo” over knives and forks (Cited in Black, 2015, p.160). Lewis also rejected the stylistic methods and aesthetics of Futurism likening it to Cubism in being too representative of the “real”. Lewis felt that Futurism’s ideals, like Cubism’s, were out-dated (Black, 2015, p. 160).

In spite of all these criticisms of Cubism and Futurism there is little doubt that these movements influenced Lewis's art. Edwards (2000) states that Lewis produced "cubo-futurist" work (p. 11). Not only did Vorticism and Futurism share thematic features but they also shared formal attributes: both movements, like a large number of Avant-Garde movements of the time, produced a Manifesto. In fact, Futurism was one of the first Modernist movements to do so. Caws (2001) calls the Futurist manifesto the "grandfather of the rest" (p. xxii). Lewis, in his typical "Modernist-but-even-more-so" style produced several. Through the production of a Manifesto, a new art movement was able to announce its presence in a radical and energizing way (Caws, 2001, p. xxi). The manifesto positions itself between the past and the future thus providing a link between "the accomplished and the potential". According to Mary Caws (2001) a typical Modernist manifesto is "noisy in its appearance" "like a typographic alarm" or a rebellious yell (p. xx-xxi). Caws confirms Lewis's position as an Uber-Modernist when she states:

"The 'Vorticist Manifesto', with its pages of invective BLASTing this and that and its opposite pages of BLESSing, is a perfect example of a manifest and noisy appearance" (Caws, 2001, p. 338).

If one is aware of some of the principles contained within Lewis's manifestos then the *pièce de résistance* of the exhibition *A Battery Shelled* (1919) proves insightful. Richard Slocombe, the curator of the exhibition, describes this painting as Lewis's "most important war painting" (Slocombe, 2017, p. 42). The huge, oil on canvas painting shows the German shelling of a British artillery. In the picture, Lewis represents the British soldiers as "insect-like, scuttling for cover" and the German soldiers are given "naturalistic" facial expressions conveying a sense of disengagement and indifference to the chaos before them (Slocombe, 2017, p. 42). Through this picture, neither side in the conflict are represented positively. In Manifesto I, the Vorticists seem eager to present themselves as adopting neutral positions whilst using military language. They "discharge" themselves on both sides, and "fight" for "neither side" or "both sides". As well as this, the Vorticists claim "Mercenaries" are "the best troops" (Caws, 2001, p. 342-343). Mercenaries have no national allegiance, the soldiers in *A Battery Shelled* do, which is why they are not represented positively. This kind of ambivalence in the painting "provoked hostility in the press and parliament" (Slocombe, 2017, p. 42) leading to it being removed from the Imperial War Museum and into the Tate Gallery shortly after its original display.

The non-sentimental detachment shown in *A Battery Shelled* can also be seen in Lewis's critique of modernist movements like Surrealism. Having seen how Lewis responded to some of the early Modernist movements – Futurism and Cubism – it is also worth understanding how he responded to some of the later Modernist movements such as Surrealism. Andre Breton launched Surrealism in 1924 with the publication of a manifesto. Breton was heavily influenced by Freud's work with free association, dream analysis, and the unconscious (Rainey, 2005, p. 717). The Surrealists aimed to transcend the conscious mind which, they believed, would lead to a rejection of rational or conventional thought thereby liberating the imagination. Their fascination with dreams often gave their work a dream-like appearance which is evident in one of Lewis's final paintings: *Inferno*.

Inferno, presented in a dream-like Surrealist fashion, seems to be a re-working of the Renaissance master Luca Signorelli's *The Damned Cast into Hell* however, in Lewis's painting the damned appear to be toppling into the inferno of their own accord (Slocombe, 2017, p. 73). To add to the macabre mood, many of the figures have joyous expressions. One particular figure, at the bottom of the canvas, appears to be in a state of bliss. These expressions coupled with the automatic way in which the figures are toppling into the inferno presents a vision of humanity being "[...] 'Hell-bent' on its own destruction" (Imperial War Museums, 2017). In this painting, Lewis's engagement with Modernist themes and forms is most apparent: formally, it uses Surrealism's dream-like aesthetics whilst addressing the thematic political concerns of the time. Having witnessed the horrors of World War I first-hand, the tensions created by the rise of political extremes such as Fascism and Communism seemed like an inclination towards self-destruction of the human race, the notion of which had been discussed by Freud in his 1920 work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The fact that World War II broke out two years after Lewis completed the painting proves how Lewis was very much in tune with the world that the Modernists were inhabiting.

Lewis's engagement with Surrealism follows a similar pattern to his engagement with other art movements. Like Futurism and Cubism prior to the war, Lewis's adoption of Surrealist techniques did not mean that he was in agreement with the ideals of the movement itself. Surrealism suggested that through the merging of dream and reality the mind could raise itself to a higher state of consciousness. These ideas produced artistic practices such as automatic writing; resulting in the type of anti-aesthetic art that Surrealism and Dadaism were generating. Lewis, on the other hand, felt that the suspension of human cognition destroyed the individual's ability to think critically resulting in art that was bereft of meaning within the modern world (Gasiorek, 2016, p. 40). He stated, "I would rather have the least man that

thinks, than the average man that squats and drums and drums, with ‘sightless,’ ‘soulless’ eyes” (cited in Gasiorek, 2016, p. 41). To add to these concerns Lewis was concerned by the implicit ideological underpinnings of movements such as Dada and Surrealism (Gasiorek, 2016, p.40).

Lewis’s work shows a cultural critique exposing the workings of ideology across the Modernist spectrum. His constant rejection of the dogmatic and sentimental ideologies that crept into some of the artistic movements is something that echoes throughout his work. Few Modernist movements or artists escaped his criticism¹. Lewis felt that this type of attachment to artistic movements diluted the “revolutionary impulse” in their art. He felt that “a new, and if necessary shattering criticism of ‘modernity’” (Lewis cited in Gasiorek, 2016, p. 36) was needed to re-ignite the scepticism that was supposed to be the hallmark and motivation of Modernist art.

It is the never-ending scepticism, the perpetual challenging of Modernist movements and the ‘making new’ of Modernist ideas leads to Will Self referring to Lewis as being “like other Modernist artists but even more so” (Imperial War Museums, 2017). As for the exhibition showcasing Lewis’s place within Modernism, there is no doubt that by displaying such an array of Lewis’s work the exhibition is able to showcase Modernist techniques and themes that he adopted during the course of his life. However, by failing to engage with his literature in a meaningful way there is a danger that through the exhibition Lewis comes across as an impersonator rather than an innovator. Therefore, the exhibition, whilst placing Lewis within the wider context of Modernism, falls short of placing him as the Uber-Modernist that he clearly was.

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¹Gasiorek (2016) states that: “In such books as *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), *Time and Western Man* (1927), *Paleface* (1929), and *Men without Art* (1934) he engaged with the work of Sherwood Anderson, Irving Babbitt, Julien Benda, Henri Bergson, Charlie Chaplin, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Gustave Flaubert, Ernest Hemingway, T. E. Hulme, Henry James, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Alain Locke, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, Oswald Spengler, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf (p. 34).”

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