

**Wyndham Lewis -
'War' as a new subject-matter for Art**

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Abstract: It is interesting to observe that Vorticism has the same duration as the First World War: *Blast 1* was launched in 1914 and faded out in 1918, after the Vorticist exhibition in New York, in 1917. «Super-Krupp – or the War's End» (*Blast 2*) is an essay that focuses the war subject, in which Wyndham Lewis evidences what his opinion is: “As to Desirability, nobody but Marinetti, the Kaiser, and professional soldiers WANT War. And from that little list the Kaiser might have to be extracted” (Lewis, 1915: 14). His attitude, both as an artist and as an individual beyond a civilization, leads him to assert, in the manifesto “The Art and the Race”, that the universality of an artist walks on the ground of detachment from circumstantialities, in order to become a unique being integrating humanity. The enthusiasm (or blast) to search for a synthesis of all the arts that would result in a very desirable power counterforce was a credo of the avant-garde movements in Europe, and German Expressionism is not an exception. Avant-garde German and British soldier-artists were eventually at war with the same ontological *status quo*, in spite of having been in opposite trenches in the Front. In the case of Lewis writing and pictorial production from its inception to his final period – with a major focus on the First World War and the interwar period – satire has always been “the great Heaven of ideas” (Men without Art).

Keywords: Vorticism and Expressionism, Universality of the Avant-garde Soldier-Artists, Art as a counterforce to establishment, Detachment, Satire

*We are not only 'the last men of an epoch!' [...]
We are the first man of a Future that has not materialized.
We belong to a 'great age' that has not 'come off'.
We move too quickly for the world. We set too sharp a pace.*

(Wyndham Lewis, "A Review of Contemporary Art",
Blast 2, 1915)

As an avant-garde artist in the Front, Lewis has never stopped writing and painting, for instinct and resistance. At the end of the war Lewis discussed the topic of war art in his introduction to the catalogue for the *Guns* exhibition "The Men who will Paint Hell: Modern War as a Theme for the Artist", which appeared in the *Daily Express* for 10 February 1919, where he wrote that "this subject-matter is not war, which is as old as the chase or love; but modern war" (cf. Corbet, 1998: 2).

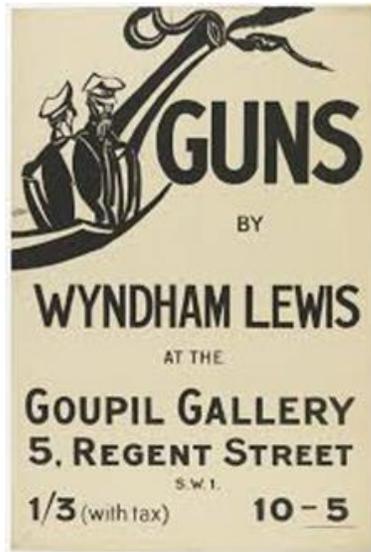


Fig. 1 – Poster for *Guns* Exhibition – Wyndham Lewis, 1910's

As David Peters Corbet observes, “Lewis “Modern War” connects to wider cultural subjects which concern us all” (*ibidem*): (1) The place of the individual ‘subject’ , torn and harassed by the violence of modernized aggression, (2) the ruinous impersonal technologisation of conflict, (3) the desire to investigate modern life through the medium of art.

In 1914 the vorticist movement made an explicit, explosive and satirical point on the established identities, mostly through literature and visual arts. The sociological motivation of Vorticism and Expressionism are quite similar, concerning both the use of individual inner force and the alternative aesthetical routing, which dismantles and distorts *praxis*: satirical internalisation of Vorticism and spiritualized internalisation of Expressionism turn out equally in privileged detachment. At the outbreak of War against Germany, Lewis “felt a sense of loss”, as Alan Munton explains;

It was the loss of an oppositional imaginative intelligence that once had material existence in certain works of art at a particular time. An adjunct of the works produced was the community of artists, envisaged as a functioning internationalism that would dispossess the Victorian ideal of the civic community. War frustrated Lewis desire for the terrestrial paradise. His writing – both satires and polemics – can be understood as an engagement with this loss. It is the conqueror’s attempt to dispose of what seemed to stand in the way of the desired. It is in his war art that he comes closest to successfully resisting these forces. By enclosing the gun, or the site of warfare, within the ambience of contemplation, Lewis controls, for a moment the violence within modernity that destroyed the expectation of transformation which he had conceived in the years before 1914. (Munton 1998: 36-7)

The impact that the war would have on people of the involved countries was unpredictable. Any way, it could be taken for granted that artists and writers would be scrutinised in the light of a new and revealing perspective, i.e. the soldier would substitute the rebel and bohemian artist and massive combat machinery was being prepared to confront men, its progenitors.

A metaphor of the impact of war in artist’s lives and art is the Torso in Metal from “The Rock Drill” (1913-14). For this sculpture, Jacob Epstein originally set a plaster figure on top of pneumatic rock drill. This “machine-like robot, with a menacing attitude and

carrying within itself its progeny” – as we can read at the explanatory note of the sculpture at Tate Britan –, became a symbol of the new age. Following the carnage of the First World War, Epstein removed the drill, cut the figure down to half-length and changed its arms. This torso was cast in bronze, mutilated and deprived of its virility. The once threatening figure is now vulnerable and impotent, the victim of violence of modern life – both due the physical and metaphysical shock of the trenches and due to the struggle for existence and co-existence with the refinements of the intellect. That may explain why, “art became to be seen as a kind of ‘advanced guard’ for social progress as a whole” (Wood; Edwards: 187).



Fig. 2 - Jacob Epstein: Rock Drill, (1913-14, peça original)



Fig. 3 - Jacob Epstein: Rock Drill, (1916)

Wyndham Lewis's attitude - both as an artist and as an individual – encompassed by civilization, leads him to assert, in the manifesto “The Art and the Race” (*Blast 2* – War Number, 1915), that the universality of an artist walks on the ground of detachment from circumstantiality, in order to become a unique being integrating humanity.

The First World War puts in confront a whole range of individuals that art had already unified. Just to mention a few, whose work notoriously evidences contact points on what concerns ethic and aesthetic views, I recall names like Georg Trakl, Wyndham Lewis, Oskar Kokoscha, Franz Mark, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. From these four, Lewis and

Kokoschka did not die in combat in opposite trenches.



Fig.4-Kokoschka's Selfportrait, Der Sturm, 1910



Fig.5- Franz Marc's illustration for Else Lasker-Schüler's Poem Reconciliation [Versöhnung]

Published seven weeks before the Britain's entrance into the First World War, *BLAST* magazine also gives an alluring clairvoyance into the combative cultural disposition in London at the outbreak of war: It's all a matter of most delicate adjustment between voracity of art and digestive quality of life." (Lewis, *Blast* 1, 1914).



Fig. 6 - Blast 1, 1914



Fig. 7 - Blast 2, 1915

The two numbers of the magazine attack the aesthetic decaying ideas left over from the “the last days of the Victorian world of artificial peacefulness” (Materer, 1985: 3). Until then he remained and advanced painter, influenced to some extent by Futurist painters, but not interested in depicting machinery, cars in motion, or “the multi-coloured and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capital cities; [or] the nocturnal vibrations of arsenals and workshops beneath their violent electric moons” celebrated in the Futurist Manifesto.¹ Although he accepted the Futurist notion of the flux of modern life, Lewis rejects an immersion in it, thus “The Vorticist is at the maximum of his energy when stillest,” as we read in “Our Vortex”, in *Blast 1* (Lewis, 1914: 148), and it is at the still point of the Vortex that the Vorticist is settled. Such energy would generate a magnetic power over London as a cultural capital, attracting artists and intellectuals from the whole world, as happened with the *Der Sturm* circle.

The guns of the Western Front effectively silenced the flamboyant blitz of the Vorticist manifesto. Nevertheless, the two issues of *Blast* provided a platform for some of the most significant figures in the development of British High Modernism, whose attitude at the time was:

1. Beyond Action and Reaction we would establish ourselves.
2. We start from opposite statements of a chosen world. Set up violent structure of adolescent clearness between two extremes.
3. We discharge ourselves on both sides.
4. We fight first on one side, then on the other, but always for the SAME cause, which is neither side or both sides and ours. (*Blast 1*: 30)

In *Blast 2 – War Number*, Lewis writes *War Notes*, which include “The God of Sport and Blood”, where he clearly shows his concern with avant-garde artists as a counterforce to governments : “A fact not generally known in England, is that the Kaiser, long before he entered into war with Great Britain, had declared merciless war on Cubism and Expressionism” (*Blast 2*: 9). Another War Note is “The European War and Great

Communities”; once again he declares indignation beyond the command of the active power forces:

[...] Every person who says YES, or every person who says JA, is involved in the primitive death-struggle at a word posted on a window, when some alleged synthetic need of these huge organizations demands it. (*ibidem*: 15)

In “Artists and War”, also in Blast 2, he conveys preoccupation with the struggle for existence of artists on a daily basis in the Edwardian society: “The Public should not allow its men of art to die of starvation during the war, of course [...]. But as the English Public lets its artists starve in peace time, there is really nothing to be said” (*ibidem*: 23). Moreover, *Blast* manifestos actually envisioned a new social function for art. In the ebullience of war, *Blast 1* conveys a strong pulse to refraction and conflict which was going on at a national level. After the outbreak of the Great War, *Blast 2* vehicles a preview of eminent peace, a reflexive atmosphere about ethics and aesthetics. In both, another sort of latitude of perspectives and attitude is felt.

In *Blasting and Bombardiering*, Lewis reflects about the moment he gave up the resistance to his epoch, though always from a detached perspective:

In art I was a condotiere: in art as in war I was extremely light hearted. I was very *sans façon* about art. It seemed to me a capital game, at which I was singularly good. I must therefore apologize for my attitude as an artist, as well as for my attitude as a soldier. It was not satisfactory: it calls for some apology. [...] My disinvolture [sic] in the temple of art, like my disinvolture [sic] upon the field of battle – the later tempered by a natural courtesy where shell-fire was concerned [...] (Lewis 1937: 20).

It was in BLAST 1 that Lewis wrote the abstractionist play *Enemy of the Stars* – in his words a “dream-play”, a “plunge into the soul” that projected visions from inside, not outside, even though the main characters are described as gladiators who came to save Mankind rescuing Personality. Even though the Advertisement of the play says “It is packed with posterity silent and expectant” (*Enemy of the Stars*: 55), *Enemy of the Stars* has been

considered to be possibly “unperformable”. In fact, it has been performed twice: once, in the 60’s, with Lewis’s cover of *Count Your Dead, they are Alive! Or a new War in the making (1937)*, as a scenario; and recently, presented by Students from Bath Spa University, at the Blast Conference 2014. Its scenario consists on a mural outlining the sense of wreckage and void brought about by the Great War. A giant megaphone based on the vortex which appears throughout the first manifesto; a storm cone warning of cold blasts from the North. This was a metaphorical device for the Vorticists, who saw their movement as a North European riposte to the overtly to the Italian Fututists - the Southern influence on the avant-garde at the time. The cone here emits specially created blasts of 'noise/music'.

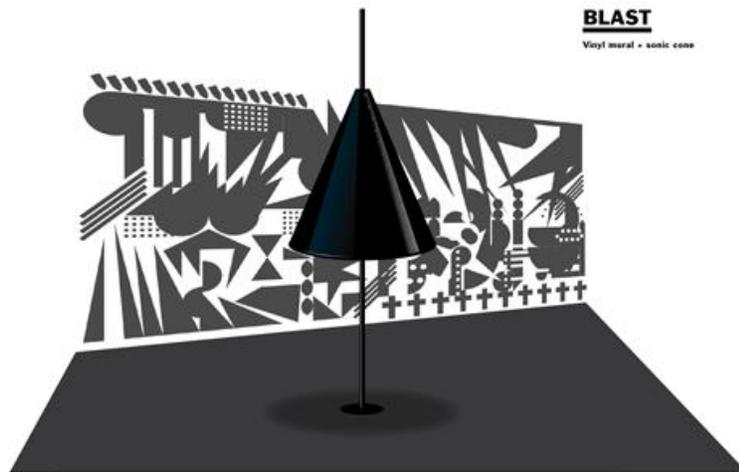


Fig. 8 - A two-part installation by Paul Minott, stage for *Enemy of the Stars*, 2014.

Lewis illness in 1915 may have saved his life because it delayed his early enlistment and service at the front. In March 1916, he volunteered as a gunner in Royal Garrison Artillery. At West camp, in Weymouth Dorset, Lewis trains cadets. In camp writes *The Bull Gun* - reminiscent in its language and atmosphere of the war number of *Blast*. In this essay, the audience who passively observes the war, the army and warfare are satirized through the image of bull-fight. The soldiers are caught in the machinery of war, instruments without free will, abused by hypocritical politicians and those on the home front:

It is only a pity that the steel cannot be pitted against the steel, instead of goring such multitudes of gladiators. The crowds of crepe in the auditorium, instead of white mantillas, make it too heavy, indigestibly German heavy, a spectacle for even a decent super-God. (Lewis 1931: 195)

In July he is posted to 183 Siege Battery. In August, he is in Horsham, on firing course and becomes acting Sergeant. Late in 1916, he goes to the Artillery Cadet School, Exeter, studies trigonometry and ballistics. He is commissioned as Second Lieutenant.

When he did enlist in March 1916, Pound became his agent and general adviser (Lewis used to call him “poet and impresario”). He arranged for Lewis novel *Tarr*² to be serialized in *The Egoist* and helped to catalogue Lewis paintings and drawings and then sold many of them to John Quinn³. To understand the multifunctional process Lewis had to go through when he was in the front, both as an artist, a writer, a provider for his children, etc, I recommend Timothy Materer ‘s edition of *The Letters of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis*. Just to illustrate this, I can quote an excerpt of a letter he sent Pound in 1916, from the 183. Seige Battery, Westham Camp:

Dear Pound. As I consume sufficient excretion here, why not a little more? [...] to talk about money except from some secure elevation, transfers me to a boggy plane. = Descend with me, Poet, to my miniature personal, military hell for a second = [...]. (Materer 1985: 50)

Pound ‘s reply was: “This is a very great evil and an exceeding carelessness in the Cosmos” (*ibid.*: 51).

In 1917, Lewis arrives to the Franco-Belgian Border, in June he is involved in bombardment preceding attack on Messines Ridge. In May, June and July, “Imaginary Letters” appear in *Little Review*, written at the front in hospital near Boulogne where Lewis was treated for trench fever. In July, He sends Pound 10 drawings, completed in the hospital. In August, he rejoins 330 Battery attached to Royal Navy at Nieuport. He writes the story “The King of the Trenches” – in which captain Polderdick has lost his sanity and turned in a kind of military clown, provoking the enemy with unnecessary fire. Later the story is included in the second edition (1967) his first Self-biography *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937). In September, the serial publication of the novel *Tarr* begins in *The*

Egoist magazine. In the same month T.E. Hulme is killed at Nieuport. Still in September “Inferior Religions” appears in *Little Review* and during the Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele), “Catleman’s Spring-Mate” and the play *The Ideal Giant* appears in the *Little Review*.

The Ideal Giant metaphorically deals with the role of the artist. It incorporates a central paradigm of the Lewisian philosophy of ‘The Enemy’ – how Lewis entitled himself. Lewis considers that artists may become destructive if they participate in social life. This play is written while he is in the war and is published in the *Little Review*, in May, 1918. The play has three scenes and the action takes place in 1914, at a particularly international and elitist restaurant:

In the Restaurant Gambetta in German London, in October, 1914; Belgian ‘refugees’ have found it out in numbers. The Restaurant is French; an Austrian keeps it. A Russian wood-painting of a Virgin and Child gives the German cultured touch. (Lewis 1978: 120-3, with some elisions in the text)

The *melting-pot* atmosphere of the restaurant overwhelms the circumstantial logic of the emerging war and evidences that Lewis’s transcendence favorite fighting spot is Humor.

On 12 December, Wyndham Lewis is officially seconded War Artist and since then he executed a large number of war paintings and drawings. This was a promotion which spared him the considerable privations, and the terrors of life as a gunner and gunnery officer. Like other commissioned artists it became his duty to create a visual document of the war, where abstractionism is embodied by a high visual Definition. Once again Lewis was representing the essence and not the concept of war.

On 1 January 1918, he arrives at Canadian Headquarters, to draw gun emplacements. The he returns to London and works on his two commissioned paintings *A Canadian Gun Pit* and *A Battery Shelled*.



Fig. 9 – Wyndham Lewis's *A Battery Shelled*, 1919.

Abstractionism emerges with the eminence of war. As war shakes every necessity of abstraction from daily life, the intention of establishing rupture both socially and aesthetically was ironically being materialized. The need to feel normality was coming back. But Normality had changed: it turned out to be looked from inside and from outside simultaneously. In “Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in our time”, Lewis asserts:

The function of the artist being to show you the world, only a realer one that you would see, unaided, the delicate point in his task is to keep as near you as possible, at the same time as getting as far away as our faculties will stretch. [...] He, ideally, must not take any of the acquired practical information of daily life with him, to the point from which his observations are made. Any of the fever of combat [...] would impair the equilibrium of his instrument. (Lewis 1922)

As a matter of fact, Lewis war pictures confirm this conviction, he – by the way – had already stated in *Blast 2- War Number*, in “A Review of Contemporary Art”: “The eyes are animals and bask in an absurd contentment everywhere” (Lewis 1915: 44). Now, the detached observer who had written “The Men who painted Hell: Modern War as a Theme for the Artist” paints the backstage of the theatre of war and its showmen. Soldiers are shown as actors and spectators as in his novel *Tarr* – completed in the period after the outbreak of war. In *Tarr* all of life seems to be staged, like in a comedy of masks and roles. Only those unhappy few who, like the German art student Kreisler, cannot master their

parts end tragically, as Lewis's satirical non-human characters, the Tyros, detect:

It is a nightmare, staged in a menagerie. The psycho-analysts with their jungle of the unconscious, and monsters tipsy with libido, have made a kind of Barnum and Bailey for the educated. But people do not apply this sensational picture as they could do with advantage. Our social life is so automatic that the actors are often totally unaware of their participation in the activities about which we are talking. The world is in the strictest sense asleep, with rare intervals and spots of awareness. (Lewis 1909-27: 366-7)

The stage atmosphere is retained in "The Soldier of Humor", which Lewis wrote during his army training. The Soldier of Humor will from now on "show" himself "manoeuvring in the heart of reality (*ibidem*: 19) and he presents himself like this: "*Vom Vater hab' ich die Statur*" [I get my statur from my father]. It must be from my mother that I get the *Lust zu fabulieren* [taste for telling stories] (*ibidem*: 18).

'The Soldier of Humor' is one of the Tyros developed in the stories of the *Wild Body* and he says: "I know much more about myself than people generally do. For instance I am aware that I am a Barbarian. By rights I should be paddling about in an oracle. My body is large, white and save. But all the fierceness has become transformed into *Laughter*" (*ibidem*: 17).

A "Laugh like a bomb" is the new beauty of this non-human observers of Mankind, moving in the arena of satire – "the great heaven of ideas" (Men without art). After all they are "simple shapes", "little monuments of logic" just reaffirming Lewis's point of view; he who had named himself "The Enemy": The human personality, I thought, should be left alone, just as it is in its pristine freshness [...] (Lewis, 1950: 125). Such a brechtian remoteness allows the contemplation of human failed strategies and transforms his mentors in *clowns*, who stroll in the anesthetic intermittence of the world order in force.

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NOTES

¹ 'Initial Manifesto of Futurism', 1912: 3. The Manifesto was originally published in French (Marinetti was bilingual and his previous reputation was as a French poet) in *Le Figaro* (20 February 1909).

² Tarr embodies Vorticism's double commitment to destruction and creation, satirizing those who engage in a masquerade of life (Tarr – Lewis's Proto Self, as an art student in Paris, the would-be vorticist detached observer versus the German student Otto Kreisler, too involved with immediate circumstances).

³ John Quinn (1870–1924) was a second generation [Irish-American](#) corporate lawyer in New York, who for a time was an important patron of major figures of [post-impressionism](#) and literary [modernism](#), and collector in particular of original manuscripts.