

‘To show modernity its face in an honest glass’ - Lewis as self-conscious innovator.

My title is taken from Ezra Pound’s phrase in the section of *Blast 2* entitled ‘Chronicles.’ In it, Pound, the sculpture of whose head by Gaudier - Brzeska stands severely on the facing page, goes off on a slightly bizarre rant about how church bells are far more irritating than the nuisance caused by pubs. He then develops this theme of social unease by anatomising what he calls the “mincing jibber” with which the first issue of *Blast* was received by those he terms the ‘banderlog.’ This unusual word is used by Kipling in his *Jungle Book* stories, and derives from the Hindi words for the rhesus monkey, ‘badar’ and people, ‘log.’ Kipling portrays the monkey tribe/nation as chatterers and poseurs and hence Pound’s figurative use of it here to mean irresponsible chatterers. In Kipling, the monkeys delude themselves into thinking they are great simply by reiterating it. Like Pound’s better known ‘Make It New’ mantra, the burden of his message here is that people who object to the new-ness of *Blast* are sterile opponents of anything new – they are ‘enraged that the creation of ideas did not stop at the date of their birth.’¹ He then changes his animal metaphor, and dubs them *homo canis*, the dog who ‘snarls violently at the thought of there being ideas which he doesn’t know.’² The *homo canis*, however, with time, according to Pound, will ‘go out munching our ideas. Whining.’³ In the meantime, Pound reasserts *Blast’s* *raison d’être* as presenting the discords of modern “civilisation” --Pound uses scare quotes – fuelled by the extremes of emotion which the banderlog have long since ceased to be able to display. Vitality, it seems, lies in the hands of the iconoclastic artists whose work is celebrated in the pages of *Blast*. It is they who will make it new.

The reason for the negative reaction, then, to the first appearance of *Blast* is that it has ‘dared to show modernity its face in an honest glass.’⁴ That phrase might be applied to the wide range of work on display in *Blast 2*, particularly Lewis’s. The contents page of the War number is dominated by Lewis’s name. There are nineteen written items, not including the editorial, and three “designs” by Lewis altogether, so roughly half of the publication can be attributed to him. The work is varied and provocative, and captures a moment in Lewis’s

development where he was, I would contend, becoming the central figure in a vortex of artistic experiment, arguably expedited by the condition of war, with all the upheaval that entailed to the leading figures in the movement. The 'Notice to Public', presumably written by Lewis, evokes the transitory nature of artistic business at the time. Lewis apologises for being ill, for losing the addresses of subscribers in the move from Ormond Street, for the late publication of the current issue, and for not continuing with the serialisation of Mr Hueffer's novel 'The Saddest Story' since that has already been published in book form. The air of provisionality is caught in the announcement that 'the Review of the Great English Vortex may not always appear to date, but two further numbers will probably come out before next January.'⁵ This tentative prediction solidifies later, where Lewis boldly announces a series of items, mainly by himself and Pound, that will definitely be in the next issue – including both 'War Notes' and 'Notes from the Front' by himself. On the basis that 'we have subscribers in the Khyber Pass, and subscribers in Santa Fé'⁶ he asserts that 'the first stone in the structure of the world-wide reformation of taste has been securely laid.' To be sure, that last claim is at least at some level self-reflexively ironic, but nonetheless it indicates the scope of Lewis's ambition in *Blast* – an ambition that was not to be realised through the journal itself of course, but which sustained Lewis's creativity in the ensuing years. So it is legitimate, I would suggest, to take Pound at his word, and ask: how successful was *Blast 2* in continuing the mission identified by Pound as showing modernity its face in an honest glass?

The phrase used by Pound recalls, of course, Shakespeare's 'a mirror up to nature' and was probably meant to. The Renaissance idea that art should mirror life is a commonplace one, and one that the *homo canis* would no doubt subscribe to. What has changed in Lewis's world is, of course, the advent of war, and the perceived changes that new condition entails. As his Editorial states, '*Blast* finds itself surrounded by a multitude of other Blasts of all sizes and descriptions.'⁷ When Europe has 'disposed of its difficulties' Art must continue to ask new questions and present new beauties. In the meantime, it must deal with the exigencies of the present, and, if anything, *Blast 2* is even more startling in its confrontation with the modern than the first issue. The state of the war and the state of the contributors' lives at the time of the issue's publication is worth

remembering. Lewis, having boldly announced his 'notes from the front' for the next issue of *Blast* had at that time only just recovered from a dose of venereal disease, and had yet to enlist – indeed, he did not see action until two years later after spending much of 1916 in training camps. Pound was in the middle of his London years, and, like Eliot, never likely to take any physical part in the conflict; Ford Madox Ford was writing propaganda for the war office, and would not enlist until the following year, so his poem 'The Old Houses of Flanders', whilst obviously evocative of the destruction of European cultural heritage, was not based on observation – as must have been the case with Lewis's startling image 'Before Antwerp' used on the cover; Jessica Dismoor was on her way to work as a nurse in France; Helen Saunders's appearance in *Blast 2* was probably the peak of her career, which declined sharply after the war. Of course, the most poignant reference to the war is the added note after Gaudier-Brzeska's lines from the trenches. This embeds the war in the journal in a prominent way, and gives the writing and the images a context. In July 1915, the war had been fought for nearly a year, and the dreadful realities of the conflict were becoming known. The battles of the Western Front, including those at Ypres where so many perished, and where gas was used for the first time, had concluded two months before the publication of *Blast 2*. The first German airship raid on London had occurred in May of that year. Modern reality was, manifestly, changing. In confronting the 'actual discords' of modern society at its most discordant – that is, the condition of war – *Blast 2* presents itself as a chronicler of the new reality, and Lewis, as the prime mover and contributor, as the artist to 'show modernity its face.' So, I want now to look at some examples of the work published in *Blast 2* through that lens, to discern how the publication offered a new perspective on the material world that was being shaped on the battlefields of Europe.

Jodie Greenwood's illuminating chapter in *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*⁸ suggests that Lewis's ambition, his drive to become a figure like, say, Marinetti, gave him a desire to produce, in Norman Mailer's term 'an advertisement for himself.' Greenwood makes the point that Lewis's desire to establish his own camp in the spaces between the various European "-isms" is what drives his prodigious artistic energy at this stage in his career (and it is noticeable how the squabbles about Vorticism stem from Lewis's proprietorial

claim to the name). She mentions the huge range of influences, philosophical and artistic, that he invokes and then almost simultaneously rejects, making his writing and his stance equivocal, and the position of *Blast* at once loudly proclaiming its existence, and also camouflaged by its curious aesthetic. It certainly created confusion among contemporary reviewers, and, although Greenwood is specifically referring to the original *Blast*, the general air of bemusement which characterised many of the responses might be said to apply also to the War Number. The difference, of course, is that the context is now war, and one way or another most of the pieces in the volume address the urgency of the conflict, thus 'showing modernity its face.'

I want to look at some of the items that Lewis presents us with here, and to ask the question about how far these pieces live up to the characterisation offered by Pound, of offering a glass up to the new world of violence and disruption. Were the offerings of the new *Blast* a continuation of the shock tactics of the first number, or do they represent a darker turn in Lewis's – and his contributors' – artistic vision? This is, after all, the War Number: its sombre cover and portentous subtitle announce it as something that will be of grave substance. Certainly, this issue of *Blast* seems to have been Lewis's response to war, but also, perhaps, an attempt to secure some notoriety before disappearing to the front, with all its attendant uncertainties.

One aspect of Vorticism and the prevailing aesthetic in the years preceding *Blast* was that the avant-garde (itself a term derived from military use, of course) was defining itself in combative terms. Pound's observation that 'those artists who do not show strife in their work are uninteresting'⁹ sets the tone for the approach of Lewis. Pound's pronouncements on contemporary aesthetics underline this: 'The artist recognises his life in terms of the Tahiytian savage... He must live by craft or violence. His gods are violent gods.'¹⁰ As Lewis himself put it in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, 'war and art in those days mingled – the features of the latter as stern as the former.'¹¹ What distinguishes Lewis from the Futurists in this respect, however, is that, despite the bellicose rhetoric, Lewis did not embrace war as, for example, T.E. Hulme did. Rather, he saw it as inevitable, given human nature, and regrettable. Regarding his painting 'The Plan of War', painted six months before hostilities commenced, Lewis wrote that he

was depressed by his prophetic touch, and in a phrase reminiscent of Pound's , that 'as an artist, one is always holding a mirror up to politics without knowing it.'¹² He continues, looking back as the Second World War approached: 'I wish I could get away from war. Writing about war may be the best way to shake the accursed thing off, by putting it in its place, as an unseemly joke.'¹³

How then, might that attitude be discerned in operation in the pages of *Blast 2*? The most obvious place to start is the 'War Notes' , five short pieces gathered at the front of the publication. In 'The God of Sport and Blood' Lewis anticipates Orwell's line about sport between nations being war carried out by other means when he writes ' sport and blood are inseparable...they are the rich manure all our vitality battens on.'¹⁴ The peculiarly English response to the war, characterised by Lewis as an 'unseemly joke' is present in this section, which continues with Lewis musing on 'Constantinople Our Star', which must be won by the Russians, so that 'an entirely new type of Englishman, in the person of our poet, would be introduced to the amazed Oriental.'¹⁵ This whimsy then develops into a disquisition on English humour, described as a 'perpetual, soft, self-indulgent (often maudlin) hysteria' that has 'weakened the brain of Britain more than any drug could. Jokes should be taxed like opium in China.'¹⁶ This bi-polar mood swing is strikingly noticeable: the war seems to be reflected simultaneously as comedy and tragedy in Lewis's vision.

In the next section, 'A Super-Krupp – or War's End' Lewis evokes the commonly heard phrase 'the war to end all wars' and comes, once again prophetically, to the conclusion that 'we will have to try again in 20 or 30 years,' gloomily concluding that '[p]erpetual war may well be our next civilisation.'¹⁷ These sober observations are then undercut by whimsical semi-comic evocations of a "*Nineteen Eight-Four*" style permanent war: 'Everything will be done down below in future, or up above. Tubes shall be run from the principal concentration camps inland.'¹⁸At the end, he returns to the mood of dark contemplation:

There is a tragedy of decay and death at the end of all human lives. It is all a matter of adjustment to Tragedy – a matter almost of taste – where to place the tragedy, like where to place the blackness in a picture. But this is perhaps rather consolation rather than anything else. And it would be no consolation for the people this war has crushed with grief.¹⁹

Lewis's reference to the placing of blackness in a picture highlights the visual aspect of *Blast 2*. Lewis's hand is everywhere, of course, in the designs and images that are scattered through the pages. Equally prominent, though, is the work of some of his Vorticist allies. Owen Hatherley refers to the 'propulsive rectilinear geometry'²⁰ of such works as Dismoor's 'The Engine'. Etchells's 'Progression' and Helen Saunders's 'Atlantic City.' These works, and others reproduced in the pages of *Blast 2* can certainly be claimed as examples of art that shows modernity its face. Hatherley also makes the important point that the relatively crude two-tone starkness of what he anachronistically calls *Blast's* 'xeroxed ferocities'²¹ seems suitably primitive, evoking a world reduced, literally, to black and white.

Again and again, when one examines the component parts of *Blast 2*, the reader encounters the paradox of advanced civilisation being reduced to literal and metaphorical rubble. In Ford Madox Ford's 'The Old Houses of Flanders'

The high white shoulders of the gables
Slouch together for a consultation
Slant drunkenly over in the lea of the flaming cathedrals.
They are no more, the old houses of Flanders.²²

That note of poignant regret in the face of overwhelming destruction has its visual counterpart in Lewis's cover image 'Before Antwerp.' Lewis's Vorticist reduction of the man-made landscape to stark diagonals, populated by human figures who have been metamorphosed into machines, provides the essential mood of *Blast 2*. Even so, that touch of humour remains: Lewis demands a Parliamentary Bill to forbid 'ANY IMAGE OR RECOGNISABLE SHAPE TO BE STUCK UP IN ANY PUBLIC PLACE'²³ as part of the perpetual war against representative art.

In Jessie Dismoor's poem 'Monologue' the speaker's self-examination is performed in terms that suggest bloody conflict, so what is intimately personal becomes public and political:

In pursuit of shapes my eyes dilate and bulge. Finest instruments of
touch, they refuse to blink their pressure of objects.
They dismember live anatomies innocently.
They run around the polished rim of rivers.
With risk they press against the cut edges of rocks and pricking pinnacles.

Pampered appetites and curiosities become blood drops, their hot
mouths yell war.²⁴

Helen Saunders, too, combines the personal and the military. She presents a startling vision of bodies in mud, obviously suggestive of the trenches, in a nightmarish scene:

I try to open my eyes a little
A crowd of india-rubber-like shapes swarm through the narrow chinks.
They swell and shrink, merge into one another like an ashen
kaleidoscope!
My eyes are shut down again.
A giant cloud like a black bladder with holes in it hovers overhead.²⁵

The realities of mechanized war is visualised by this non-combatant in vivid, disturbing terms, with the looming image of the zeppelin presiding over the Bosch-like scene.

Surely, though, the most visceral and affecting piece in the issue is the despatch from the trenches of someone who was very much an active participant – Gaudier-Brzeska. He isolates the key point, about the dehumanising power of warfare, and, advancing Dismoor's and Saunders's ideas, reduces emotional agency to the play of lines in space:

I SHALL DERIVE MY EMOTIONS SOLELY FROM THE ARRANGEMENT OF SURFACES. I shall present my emotions by the arrangement of surfaces, the planes and the lines by which they are defined.²⁶

He seems himself to be reduced to a machine or an automaton, and in a bitterly ironic (doubly so, since it is the last thing he wrote) bleak encapsulation of humanity, says that war 'TAKES AWAY FROM THE MASSES NUMBERS UPON NUMBERS OF UNIMPORTANT UNITS.'²⁷

Gaudier-Brzeska's piece is perhaps the most obviously pertinent when we consider Pound's line about showing modernity its face. If modernity means, as it must in 1915, the advent of mass mechanized warfare, then Gaudier-Brzeska's despatch from the front certainly does hold up the glass, and show the truth. But *Blast 2* really belongs to Wyndham Lewis: he is responsible for more than half the content, after all. And that note of existential despair that is sounded by several of the contributors is also there in Lewis. he does, in his cover, and in

some other pieces, address the state of civilisation in its new mode, but he also maintains the ludic and disruptive tone that characterised the first issue of *Blast*. The lists of “Blasts” and “Blesses” is not as lengthy, but it is as quirkily idiosyncratic. Lewis, by this time the father of two children, blasts birth control, and blesses ‘War Babies.’ In his other pieces, particularly ‘Vortex No. 1: Be Thyself’, the playfulness is apparent throughout. Starting with a denial of individual selfhood – ‘You must talk with two tongues’ and ‘You must be a duet in everything’²⁸– he goes on to make the by now familiar Vorticist equation of man and machine: ‘Any machine you like – but become mechanical by fundamental dual repetition.’²⁹ For Lewis, *Blast 2* represents the continuation of the distinctive identity he had begun to build in the previous number, but the war, as it had to, interrupts this process, and imposes itself on his career. Later, in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, he writes that the war robbed him of four years when, ‘almost overnight, I had achieved the necessary notoriety to establish myself in London as a painter.’³⁰

So, to some extent, *Blast 2* is valedictory, both in an obvious way, as it was the final edition, but also as a farewell to the bohemian status quo of the pre-war period. *Blast* has had a bad press since 1919, when Sturge Moore wrote that ‘*Blast* is worth nothing – Lewis has a stack of them in his studio and I fear we shall sell hardly anything.’³¹ Lewis, as war took over his life, became, as he characterised it, ‘one of the first men of a future that has not materialised.’ *Blast 2*, then, is to some extent a dead end. But one hundred years later, it seems a powerful and shocking response to the new world that was being shaped on the battlefields of Europe. In that respect, it surely is, as Pound suggested, an attempt to ‘show modernity its face in an honest glass.’

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- ¹ Ezra Pound, 'Chronicles' in Wyndham Lewis (ed.), *Blast* 2, 85-86, 85
- ² Ibid., 85
- ³ Ibid., 86
- ⁴ Ibid., 85
- ⁵ Wyndham Lewis, 'Notice to Public' in *Blast* 2, 7.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Lewis, *Blast*, 5-6, 5.
- ⁸ Jodie Greenwood, 'The Crisis of the System: *Blast*'s reception' in Andrzej Gasiorek et al (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) 77-94.
- ⁹ Ezra Pound, 'The New Sculpture' in *The Egoist*, February 16th, 1914, 67-68, 68.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), 67.
- ¹² Ibid., 4.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Lewis, 'The God of Sport and Blood' in *Blast* 2, 9-10, 9.
- ¹⁵ Lewis, 'Constantinople Our Star', in *Blast* 2, 11.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Lewis, 'A Super-Krupp – or War's End' in *Blast* 2, 13-14, 13.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 14.
- ²⁰ Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (Winchester: O Books, 2008), 25.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ford Madox Ford (Hueffer), 'The Old Houses of Flanders', in *Blast* 2, 37.
- ²³ Lewis, 'A Review of Contemporary Art' in *Blast* 2, 38-37, 47.
- ²⁴ Jessie Dismoor, 'Monologue' in *Blast* 2, 65.
- ²⁵ Helen Saunders, 'A Vision of Mud', in *Blast* 2, 73-74, 73.
- ²⁶ Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, 'Vortex Gaudier-Brzeska (Written from the Trenches)' in *Blast* 2, 33-34, 34.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 33.
- ²⁸ Lewis, 'Wyndham Lewis Vortex No. 1 Art Vortex. Be Thyself' in *Blast* 2, 91.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, 212.
- ³¹ letter from Sturge Moore to his wife, quoted by David Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 46.