

From Vorticism to Fascism: An Interplay of Wyndham Lewis's Aesthetic Sense of Modernism under Fascism

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Abstract

The present paper examines Wyndham Lewis's pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of modernist aesthetics, particularly through his involvement with the Vorticist movement, and his later alignment with fascist ideas to amalgamate the relationship between art, politics, and ideology under Fascism. Exploring Wyndham Lewis's aesthetic sense of modernism under fascism presents a nuanced and complex narrative that intersects with both artistic innovation and political ideology. Despite his modernist roots, Lewis's aesthetic sense not only underwent a notable shift towards alignment with fascist ideology during the interwar period, but also evolved to accommodate the regime's ideological agenda, and also Fascism, with its emphasis on order, discipline, and national unity, appealed to Lewis as a potential antidote to what he perceived as the chaos and decadence of modern society. While still rooted in modernist principles, Lewis's work increasingly reflected themes of nationalism, militarism, and authoritarianism, aligning with fascist propaganda and the glorification of the state. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Lewis's incorporation of his aesthetic sense under fascism was not a wholesale abandonment of modernism but rather a synthesis of modernist techniques with fascist motifs and imagery. To this end, the present paper investigates Wyndham Lewis's aesthetic sense of modernism under fascism as a complex interplay between artistic innovation and political ideology. While Lewis's alignment with fascism marked a departure from his modernist roots, it also underscored the ways in which artistic expression can be influenced by broader social and political forces, raising questions about the relationship between art, ideology, and power.

Keywords: Wyndham Lewis, Fascism, Vorticism, Modernism, Aesthetic Sense

1. Introduction

Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957) was a pivotal figure in early 20th-century modernism, known for his influential role in the avant-garde movement of Vorticism. As a writer, painter, and critic, Lewis played a central role in shaping the movement's aesthetic and ideological foundations. His work, particularly through the Vorticist journal *Blast*, sought to establish a distinctly British response to the broader European avant-garde, drawing influence from Futurism while simultaneously rejecting its more chaotic elements.

To forcefully drive home this point, Vorticism, which emerged in London around 1914, was an aggressive and dynamic art movement that celebrated industrial modernity, energy, and abstraction. It was heavily influenced by the machine age, cubist fragmentation, and the writings of thinkers such as Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche. The movement sought to depict the

mechanized modern world in a style that emphasized sharp geometric forms, bold contrasts, and a sense of motion. Lewis, alongside figures like Ezra Pound and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, positioned Vorticism as an alternative to both the nostalgic sentimentality of the Edwardian era and the fluid dynamism of Italian Futurism.

In other terms, Lewis's *Blast*, published in two issues (June 1914 and July 1915), served as the manifesto and primary publication of Vorticism. It was characterized by its bold typography, striking visual layout, and a mix of polemical essays, poetry, and artwork. *Blast* attacked the conservatism of British society while also critiquing the excesses of other modernist movements. The first issue set the tone with its aggressive rejection ('Blasting') of traditional values and its endorsement ('Blessing') of the Vorticist spirit. The second issue, published amidst the backdrop of World War I, reflected a shift in tone as the realities of war disrupted the movement's momentum. Despite its brief existence, Vorticism significantly impacted modernist thought and aesthetics. The movement dissolved following the war, with many of its key figures, including Lewis, moving toward different artistic and literary pursuits. However, its legacy persisted, influencing later developments in abstraction, avant-garde literature, and visual arts.

While Wyndham Lewis's artistic and literary contributions to modernism were profound, his political engagement remains a contentious aspect of his legacy. In the interwar years, Lewis expressed admiration for authoritarian leadership and initially sympathized with fascist ideology, particularly in his writings from the 1930s. However, his views evolved over time, and he later distanced himself from fascism, criticizing its excesses and brutality. This ideological shift complicates interpretations of his work and raises questions about the intersections between aesthetics and politics in modernist thought.

This paper will explore Wyndham Lewis's contributions to Vorticism, analyzing his theoretical writings, artistic innovations, and the broader cultural and political contexts that shaped the movement. Furthermore, it will examine how Lewis's aesthetic sense of modernism evolved under fascist influences, considering his controversial political affiliations and their impact on his artistic and literary trajectory. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: *To what extent did Wyndham Lewis's engagement with fascist ideology shape his artistic and literary output, and how does this complicate his legacy within modernism?* By analyzing *Blast* and Lewis's later reflections on modernism, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of his work, its ideological underpinnings, and its place in the broader trajectory of 20th-century avant-garde movements.

2. Literature Review

Wyndham Lewis occupies a contentious space in the discourse of literary modernism and political ideology. His artistic and literary contributions, particularly in the context of Vorticism and its eventual entanglement with fascist ideologies, have sparked extensive scholarly debate. This literature review explores the existing scholarship that addresses the interplay between Lewis's aesthetic principles and his political engagements, specifically concentrating on the trajectory from Vorticism to his controversial associations with fascism.

On the one hand, Vorticism, as articulated in *Blast* (1914-1915), was a short-lived but impactful avant-garde movement that sought to capture the dynamism and chaos of the modern world. Scholars like Paul Edwards (2000) emphasizes Lewis's role in shaping Vorticism as a uniquely British response to Futurism. Unlike its Italian counterpart, Vorticism embraced fragmentation and abstraction without fully glorifying technology and industrialization. In fact, Edwards argues that Lewis's Vorticist philosophy was grounded in a commitment to order amidst chaos, a theme that persisted in his later works. Similarly, Humphreys identifies the movement's aesthetic as a rebellion against Victorian sentimentalism, situating Lewis as a pioneer of modernist experimentation. However, critics like Tyrus Miller (2009) suggest that the inherent authoritarian tendencies within Vorticism's call for discipline and structure foreshadowed Lewis's later political inclinations.

On the other hand, Lewis's engagement with fascism, particularly in *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939), has been the subject of significant controversy. Scholars remain divided over whether Lewis was a fascist sympathizer or an opportunist critiquing modern political extremism. David Ayers contends that Lewis's writings on Hitler reflect a naïve and ill-informed attempt to reconcile fascism with his modernist ideals. According to Ayers, Lewis's fascination with authoritarian figures stemmed from his belief in the artist as a visionary leader, a notion that blurred the line between aesthetic autonomy and political ideology (Ayers & Hanna, 1992). In contrast, Paul O'Keeffe argues that Lewis's later works, such as *The Hitler Cult*, represent a clear disavowal of fascism and its cult of personality, highlighting the complexity and evolution of his political thought (O'Keeffe, 2015). Moreover, Mark Antliff situates Lewis within a broader context of modernist engagements with fascism, noting that his flirtation with authoritarian ideologies was not unique but rather indicative of the broader tensions between modernism and modernity. Antliff's analysis underscores how Lewis's aesthetic principles—emphasizing abstraction, hierarchy, and control—resonated with certain aspects of fascist ideology, even as he remained critical of its populist excesses (Antliff, 2002).

In this fashion, the relationship between Lewis's aesthetic theories and his political writings is a recurring theme in the scholarship. Fredric Jameson identifies a "modernist paradox" in Lewis's works, where his commitment to artistic autonomy conflicted with his engagement in political discourses. Jameson suggests that Lewis's aesthetic vision of a controlled, hierarchical order was inherently political, reflecting his ambivalence toward democratic and collectivist ideals (Jameson, 1981). Furthermore, Jeffrey Meyers similarly highlights this tension, arguing that Lewis's political writings were an extension of his aesthetic principles. Meyers contends that Lewis viewed fascism as a means to preserve individualism and artistic integrity in an increasingly mechanized and homogenized world (Meyers, 1980).

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws upon key concepts in modernist aesthetics, political ideology, and the intersection of art and power. Wyndham Lewis's evolution from a Vorticist avant-gardist to a controversial figure associated with fascist ideology provides a rich case study for examining the interplay between artistic innovation and political engagement. This section outlines the primary theoretical lenses and critical perspectives employed in analyzing Lewis's works.

The concept of aesthetic autonomy, as articulated by theorists like Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg, is central to understanding Lewis's Vorticist philosophy. Vorticism's emphasis on abstraction, formal innovation, and detachment from traditional narrative structures reflects modernism's broader commitment to the autonomy of art. Adorno's critique of art's commodification in capitalist societies provides a lens for analyzing Lewis's insistence on art's separation from mass culture and political populism. In this fashion, Fredric Jameson's notion of the "political unconscious" further informs this analysis, suggesting that modernist texts are imbued with ideological contradictions that reflect their historical moment. Applying Jameson's framework allows for an exploration of how Lewis's aesthetic ideals both resist and echo the authoritarian tendencies that characterize his later political writings (Jameson, 1982).

The assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we undertake just such a final analysis and explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts. It projects a rival hermeneutic to those already enumerated; but it does so, as we shall see, not so much by repudiating their findings as by arguing its ultimate philosophical and methodological priority over more specialized interpretive codes whose insights are strategically limited as much by their own situational origins as by the narrow or local ways in which they construe or construct their objects of study. (Jameson, 1982, p. 5)

For this reason, the theoretical framework for this study integrates modernist aesthetics, political theory, and cultural critique to examine the intricate relationship between Wyndham Lewis's artistic vision and his engagement with fascist ideology. By situating Lewis within the broader context of modernism's entanglement with authoritarian politics, this framework provides a comprehensive basis for analyzing the continuities and tensions in his works. The study aims to contribute to ongoing debates about the role of art and literature in negotiating the boundaries between aesthetic innovation and political ideology.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Political Philosophy of Fascism (Hitlerism)

Wyndham Lewis's outstanding versatility as a highly polemical avant-garde advocate of fascism and modernism in the literary canon, Wyndham Lewis, a politically isolated figure, attempted to rectify his faux pas; absolving himself by 1939 as the next European war (World War II) was increasingly inevitable, publishing in that same year two works meant to give him the plausible deniability from his past (his account of Hitler and the events, and environment) that he desperately sought. The former was the complete repudiation of *Hitler* (1931), which marked the beginning of his tarnished reputation's decline, entitled *The Hitler Cult* (1939), and the latter a satire on antisemitism entitled *The Jews, Are They Human?* (1939). However, many critics and skeptics assert that there exists a causal link between Lewis's political views and his literary output. Lewis is depicted as propagating fascist-based ideology and politicizing all aspects of reality, while also integrating the aesthetic concepts and values of Modernism. His discussions of Hitler, Mussolini, and Fascism, as well as the political themes in his scholarly works from 1931 to 1939, underscore his deep engagement with political scholarship, particularly within the realm of Modernism. This aspect of his thought is pivotal, as Lewis possessed the intellectual capacity for detached and dispassionate analysis of society. He denoted this intellectual endeavor as 'the politics of the intellect', separate from the realm of power politics. Through his intellectual pursuits, Lewis played a role in shaping ideological presumptions and delineating human potential, thereby impacting political and social transformation when the political framework accommodated such potentials (Munton, 1976).

This is substantiated by the fact that Lewis's political evolution, as depicted in *The Diabolical Principle*, published in his journal *The Enemy* in early 1929, showcased his intense opposition to communism and communists until 1937, denouncing it and aiming at the destruction of what he saw as a decaying societal structure—Western Civilization (Lewis, 1931a, p. 18). This stance often targeted leftist intellectuals, leading to his coining of the term "Left wings" in works like *Left Wings over Europe* in 1936 (Munton, 2006), and despite his critical stance, Lewis acknowledged himself as "the most broadminded 'leftwinger' in England" in his 1937 work *Blasting and Bombardiering* (p. 321). By 1930, Britain was facing economic hardships, leading to political polarization, with the Communist Party gaining traction at one end and Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists rising at the other (Miller, 1999, p. 74). It can be safe to assume that Lewis's political views, described as a mix of communism, fascism, and monarchism with a hint of anarchism (Lewis, 1931a, p. 70), were influenced by the socio-political climate of the mid-1920s, where revolutionary art and thought aligned with revolutionary politics or idealism:

The transition from one set of values to a more scientifically accurate one which the Communist wishes to effect in the minds of the majority, has already been effected in the minds of a minority. So all popular revolutions, of whatever nature, have always, before they occurred, virtually existed in the consciousness and behaviour of a minority, and often, visibly, in phalansteries and colonies. The merely political revolutionary is thus, for the most part, an interpreter only of a creative mind. [...] That sort of revolutionary idealism, in the world of the War and of Postwar, would be strangely unreal. (Lewis, 1931a, p. 75)

From Lewis's political standpoint, the Hitler *Bewegung*, the so-called German National Socialism, or Hitlerism, should be at the disposal of the intelligent Anglo-Saxon due largely to the comprehensive description of this important element in global events both to permeate the powerful machine of the methodical German consciousness and to set up more imposing waves of an emotional intensity by The Dritte Reich and The Weimar Republic, aiming at quelling revolutionary forces from both ends of the political spectrum. In elucidating the doctrine of Hitlerism, which is founded on the three concepts of soil, race, and culture, it is noteworthy to mention that his 'doctrine' is the restoration of majority rule in Germany to fulfill the hopes and aspirations for the future. Adolf Hitler, portrayed as a 'man of the people'— '*Mann aus dem Volke*,' was the typical German soldier whose feelings of nationalism, racism and antisemitism were deeply embedded in his personality. Hitler's belief in the necessity of struggle is encapsulated in his statement: "Those who want to live, let them fight, and those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle do not deserve to live." (Hitler, 1992, p. 210) To expand upon and market these ideas, Hitler, a truly socialist prophet, believed that people could be segregated into a hierarchy of different races and ethnic groups, where some races were superior and others were inferior.

In this regard, drastic proposals directed against the Jews were prioritized by the Hitlerist Programme where a nationwide, centrally directed, violent wave of anti-Semitism reached its zenith in Nazi Germany (Lewis, 1931b, p. 35). This historical connection underscores the inherent link between anti-Semitism and right-wing ideologies, with Nazism representing the extreme manifestation of this correlation (Frisch, 2019, p. 24).

Nevertheless, in the 1930s, the artist, writer and polymath Wyndham Lewis navigated a turbulent political profession with the dubious aspects of political vision and persisted in his forceful advocacy of what is termed "radical appeasement," trying to assuage their vengeful wrath by retracting his earlier embrace of both fascism and National Socialism by publishing the pro-Hebrew *The Jews, are They Human?* (1939), *The Hitler Cult* (1939), and *Anglosaxony: A League that works* (1941), in which Lewis's overall assessments of Adolf Hitler varied profoundly in the late 1930s once coming irrevocably to view fascists, and the Nazis in particular, as "the most efficient exponents of machine-age barbarism." (Waddell, 2016, p. 89) By this time, he unequivocally revoked his earlier support for Hitler, seeking to amend the views he had expressed in his earlier work *Hitler* (1931), and to renunciate/retract his 1930s pro-Hitler sentiments and a deeply rooted anti-Semitism. This transitional phase, marked by support for Hitler, signified a shift from a position of practical nationalism to a stance embracing internationalism (Edwards, 2000, p. 479), which ultimately led to his exile in 1939 (Meyers, 2021, p. 247). Lewis believed that the English would fare better in shaping the future than the Germans, finding solace in the comparative shortcomings of Hitler's Germany: "The mere thought of Hitler's Germany reconciles one, does it not, to our ramshackle civilization" (Lewis, 1939, p. 241). Indeed, in *The Hitler Cult* (1939), penned after the Munich Conference, Lewis sharply criticized Hitler's inclination towards war over peace, drawing from *Mein Kampf* to portray Hitler as a fervent proponent of the "principle of force." (Lewis, 1939, pp. 72-73) Also, he vilified Hitler's aggression against fascism, anti-Semitism, *Lebensraum* (territorial expansionism), personality cult, and suppression of art, literature, and culture, concluding that such Nazi ideologies inevitably led to inhumanities (Lewis, 1939, p. 64). Yet Lewis, in the broadest sense, was the quintessential progressive artist and his draw to Hitlerism, and the championship of fascism sought more deeply into novelty to maintain a belief-sustained sense of 'reality' as an aesthetic discipline, and paradoxically claimed that this was the necessity for a reciprocal relationship— "If you do not understand the *Judenfrage*, you have not understood Hitlerism. Without the Jewish question Hitlerism would not exist." (Lewis, 1939, p. 16)

To vividly demonstrate Wyndham Lewis's episode overburdened by political strife, religious riot, corruption and the absence of social infrastructure during the First World War and the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), not only did he express a consistent interest of political initiation in anarchism, inspired by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's theories of decentralization and syndicalism, which critiqued hierarchical structures in politics and employment, but also this period also saw the creation of some of his most enigmatic paintings and writings, notably *The Surrender of Barcelona*, also known as *The Siege of Barcelona* (1934–1937). Lewis's engagement with Spain extended to his novel *The Revenge for Love* (1937) and his polemic *Count Your Dead – They are Alive!* (1937), reflecting the complexities of the Spanish Civil War (Munton, 2005, p. 248). In the fascist view, the Spanish Civil War was a complex and highly polarized conflict fought in Spain between the Republicans, who were a coalition of left-leaning and anti-fascist forces, and the Nationalists, led by a Spanish military leader and right-wing politician, General Francisco Franco and composed mainly of conservative, monarchist, and fascist forces. While the Republican side consisted of a coalition of leftist, liberal, and communist forces, including the International Brigades, volunteers from various countries who joined the fight against fascism, such as communists, socialists, anarchists, and other anti-fascist groups, the Nationalist side, led by General Francisco Franco, was composed of conservative, monarchist, and fascist forces, and frequently received support from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, which provided troops, military equipment, and air support. In 1937, the town of Guernica was bombed by German and Italian air forces in support of Franco's Nationalists. The bombing, immortalized in Pablo Picasso's the most moving and powerful anti-war painting *Guernica*, symbolized the brutality of modern warfare. As Wyndham Lewis in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937) gazes out upon the political scene and highlights that there is a constant battle in the struggle for power and dominance marked by ideological conflict, geopolitical rivalries, and global upheaval between communism and fascism,

We see two hostile ideologies contending for the mastery of the world—Communism and Fascism. Both advance their policies (they cannot do otherwise) in a paralysing atmosphere of martial law. And the constraints, the pseudo-religious intensity, of these systems, do not lend themselves to the relaxations of the senses, nor to the detached delights of the intellect, what—ever else may be claimed for them. (pp. 250-251)

Yet Lewis, as a modernist artist, classified revolutionary politics under a centralizing Marxism and a decentralizing anarchism to amalgamate this antithetical political and economic structure of federalism with an intense debate of postwar European society. As a matter of fact, he expressed a clear preference for Proudhon over Marx, seeing Proudhon's emphasis on individualism as more conducive to artistic production (Lewis, 1939, p. 22), which is part of his endeavor to theorize the socio-political circumstances most favorable to the production of art with a third key term: individualism. Lewis's political views, according to Alan Munton in *Lewis, Anarchism, and Socialism* (2016), coined three terms: "anarchic" individualism defines the most intense interpersonal relationships; "anarchist" mutualism conveys the most effective political structure; and "Marxism" differs from these by having a centralizing and potentially authoritarian structure that may nevertheless be the source of a planned creativity.' (p. 103) As Lewis is broadly skeptical about Marx and Marxism, he characterizes the term "ideology" to portray a political belief or theory, but an active political and cultural power that modifies or restructures society by its use of global hegemonic powers in order to inculcate fixed ideas or principles into social class as dominant (Munton, 2016, p. 103). What stimulates Lewis to apply "ideology" or world-view and technical processes in *Time and Western Man* (1927) is to explore the role of ideology in shaping modernist literature, particularly in his interpretation of James Joyce's "Ulysses" as a text shaped by ideological forces:

Strictly speaking, he has none at all, no special point of view, or none worth mentioning. It is such people that the creative intelligence fecundates and uses; and at present that intelligence is political, and its stimuli are masked ideologies. He is only a tool, an instrument, in short. That is why such a sensitive medium as Joyce, working in such a period, requires the attention of the independent critic. (p. 88)

To cast further light on acceptable forms between anarchism and centralization under communism, Marxism, or fascism, Lewis's notorious remarks on political activity or his long failure to identify the threat of Hitler may have changed his mind for a variety of reasons to envisage an active relationship between liberty and authority (Munton, 2016, p. 106). As expressed in "Blasting and Bombardiering" (1937), Lewis rejected the notion that communism or fascism alone offered solutions, indicating a nuanced understanding of political complexities: "In 1937 everybody's talking about 'communism' versus 'fascism'. I am not one of those who believe that either 'communism' or 'fascism' are in themselves solutions of anything." (p. 22) In such views, Lewis's works served as reflections of his own social and cultural milieu, illustrating his own philosophical and political views ('to show how war, art, civil war, strikes and *coup d'etats* dovetail into each other,'). To take a prime example, in *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* (1937) he hinted at a potential shift towards communism as a solution, albeit in a relatively moderate manner: "The solution to which we are being driven by our acquiescence in present events, is Communism." (p. 81) Despite associating classicism with fascism in *Hitler* (1931), Lewis's admiration for fascist regimes, particularly the German variant, was evident and he exhibited his 'truest ideological allegiances.' (Phillips, 2011) However, just before World War II, he almost completely renounced his earlier views on fascism, likening it to democracy as a mass movement, and considered himself an uncommitted apolitical person with a full of contradictions/paradoxes between fascism and communism:

In a period of such obsessing political controversy as the present, I believe that I am that strange animal, the individual without any 'politics' at all. You will find neither the politics of communism nor those of the militant Right here. How, then, can I include politics at all in my debate? you may ask. I can discuss them only on the ideal plane evidently. In a platonic commonwealth I should be a politician, for then politics would be identical with my deepest interests. Here they are not. Here I could not be a politician without ceasing to be other things which their profession would contradict. (Lewis, 1927, p. 116)

This is substantiated by the widespread consensus across various political ideologies—ranging from communism to liberalism to fascism—that the war was a result of underlying political, socio-economic, and cultural factors. Throughout *Left Wings over Europe: or, How to make a war about nothing* (1936), Lewis underlines the necessity of recognizing the true character/identity of fascism and insists that the endeavor being made to present such wide recognition can effect war. In fact, Lewis asserts that if war does break out, it would be the fault of the League of Nations and the Extreme Left, predicting that France would likely initiate conflict against Germany, prompting German efforts to rearm in self-defense (Maes-Jelinek, 2013). German rearmament/remilitarization (*Aufrüstung*), a violation of the Treaty of Versailles, took place between 1918 and 1939, with Hitler publicly announcing his intentions to rebuild the German military by reinstating conscription and expanding the air force in March 1935. He justified these actions as defensive measures, assuring other world leaders of Germany's desire for peace: "The principal effect of every war is to destroy the flower of the nation. Germany needs peace and desires peace." (Shirer, 1991, p. 253) Despite promising to limit the heaviest arms suited for aggression, such as artillery and tanks (p. 254), Hitler's rhetoric ultimately served as a prelude to war:

Whoever lights the torch of war in Europe can wish for nothing but chaos. We, however, live in the firm conviction that in our time will be fulfilled not the decline but the renaissance of the West. That Germany may make an imperishable contribution to this great work is our proud hope and our unshakable belief. (p. 254)

In this analysis, it is argued that no radical changes in social, economic, or cultural structures were necessary to achieve lasting peace; rather, peace could be achieved by abandoning nationalist rivalries and recognizing legitimate national aspirations. Extreme conservatives such as Maurras, Mussolini, and Hitler exacerbated national rivalries by asserting the superiority of their own societies and cultures, often glorifying armed conflict as heroic defense or glorious conquest (Surette, 2011, p. 92). In this fashion, the emergence of fascism as an offshoot of socialism in Europe—and generally equated with its Russian counterpart, Sovietism (Bridson, 2013, p. 20)—prompted Lewis to narrate political commentaries of the existing political power in comparison with democratic systems, whose administration officials claimed to represent as a viable

alternative, 'while in fact comprehensively and surreptitiously exploiting their citizens.' (Waddell, 2016, p. 88) Fascism's rise to power was facilitated in part by preceding campaigns for Communist dictatorship, which divided working-class movements and paved the way for fascist rule (Lewis, 1936, p. 68). Nazi doctrine and communist doctrine, in some respects, are akin to each other, as the *Manchester Guardian* (a 'Left Wing' British daily newspaper) characterized the society in Germany as 'a classless society' due largely to the 'authoritarianism of the government of Germany.' But according to Lewis, 'the undeniable benefits of such an 'authoritarian' regime as that of Hitler or Mussolini can be secured without anyone being aware of the change!' (p. 62) He comments on the fact that fascism is a social revolution in contradistinction to a war as the Popular Front (French: *Front Populaire*) and the socialists in England widely regard it as the beginning of a 'world revolution' going into action, i.e., a fascist war. In a general sense, Wyndham Lewis remarks that the denunciation of the Holy War against dictatorship is "not against all dictatorship; only against 'fascist' dictatorship" in order to adduce facts or reasons for the 'danger' and 'menace' of a 'fascist' regime to make war in which the Anglosaxony countries displayed the demented hostility. To resuscitate this preconceived notion of fascism, the principle of dictatorship, or of 'despotism' is meant to concentrate in the hands of one 'Despot', or 'tyrant' as much power as possible (p. 276).

In broad strokes, Wyndham Lewis' theory of a global conspiracy of capital, largely attributed to Jewish influence and direction, as outlined in *The Doom of Youth* (1932), critiques the elevation of youth as a unique value, replacing class struggle with age conflict to politicize youth agitation, economics, and politics. This ideology divides the world into two opposing parties: the old and the young. The youth community in the Anglo-Saxon world is depicted as politically manipulated, with "youth-politics" signifying the management of education and propaganda for the masses (p. 265). Lewis details two forms of capital: individualistic "Conservatism" and the more international or imperialist "Labour," which he associates with dictator-mindedness akin to figures like Lenin, Hitler, and Mussolini (Constable, 2013, p. 7). The book portrays the Nazis as a third force, undesirable to either form of capitalism, despite employing similar strategies for political gain. Lewis critiques both the old-style capitalism, which fosters mediocrity, and the new style, which imposes oppressive dictatorship on individuals (Lewis, 1932, p. 86). There is a need for a reciprocal relationship between these forms of capitalism, with the newer radical capitalism destabilizing European societies while the old-style capitalism, represented by figures like Baldwin and Ford, advocates for anti-capitalist industrialism (Constable, 2013, p. 8). The ideological confrontation between these two forms is more pronounced in Germany, where Hitlerism is viewed as a kind of revolutionary capitalism, while the English situation is perceived differently.

Even the principles themselves are not quite the same – and whereas in England the clever citizen would be very slightly disposed in favour of the dictator-minded, the same clever citizen in Germany, it is quite possible, might mildly prefer the passion and energy – the fine dictator-mindedness – of the Hitlerists. It is possible. (Lewis, 1932, p. 34)

With this end in view, this quote suggests that political preferences are shaped by national contexts, cultural dispositions, and societal attitudes rather than by absolute principles. Lewis contrasts England and Germany, implying that even individuals with similar intelligence and discernment might lean towards different political ideologies based on their environment. In England, the "clever citizen" is described as being only "very slightly disposed" towards authoritarianism, suggesting a general skepticism toward dictatorship. This reflects a British political tradition that values constitutional government, individual liberty, and a restrained approach to power. In contrast, the same type of person in Germany might be more inclined toward the "passion and energy" of Hitlerism, appreciating its forceful leadership and dynamism. According to this perspective, the phrase "fine dictator-mindedness" is particularly striking. It suggests that dictatorship could be viewed as an admirable trait under certain conditions—perhaps as a symbol of strength, decisiveness, and national revival. The author's use of "It is possible" twice adds a speculative tone, indicating that these inclinations are not absolute but rather tendencies shaped by cultural and historical factors.

4.2. Wyndham Lewis and the Aesthetic Sense of Modernism

The crux of the matter lies in Lewis's evolving cultural and political outlook, which leaned increasingly conservative, expressing apprehensions about the decline of contemporary culture and the erosion of traditional moral values in the aftermath of World War I. Consequently, his critiques of Vorticism extended beyond modernist art to encompass broader societal transformations in various guises. Indeed, this innovative approach to Vorticism is tangible in BLAST's references to the synthetic and universal character of art, the impact of cultural shifts on society, diverse interdisciplinary aesthetics, and the clearance of the violent and boisterous rhetoric that inhere in modernity, technology and modern life. That is to say, Lewis and his fellow avant-gardists fulminated in various aspects of modernism, including what he considered the self-indulgence and lack of discipline in contemporary literature and art. Moreover, he advocated for a revival of conventional and orderly artistic expressions to serve as a reflective lens for future generations, positing that Vorticism provided a "rough design for a way of seeing for men who as yet were not there." (Lewis, 1950, p. 125) While Lewis was part of the avant-garde scene during the 1920s and 1930s, he developed a genuine ambivalence toward this modernist art during the BLAST phase, learning to appreciate certain aspects of avant-garde experimentation and to embrace more traditional forms of artistic expression. Hence, Wyndham Lewis's critique of modernism and his evolving mindset were part of his broader shift and revolutionary impulse toward socio-cultural conservatism and his concerns about the direction of Western civilization (A. Gasiorek, 2016).

Furthermore, Lewis acquiesced in his provocative polemical and unfounded notion/conception of human subjectivity of the modernisms, the importance of autonomous critical thought as essential to human empowerment, underpinned by both primal instincts and the mechanization facilitated by civilization's technological advancements, both to represent a misguided direction

for the arts in the interwar period and to sustain our revolutionary impulse. By the mid-1920s, Lewis phased in modernism in England to present a good exemplification of vitalist and irrationalist doctrines as emancipatory, yet in reality, they were deeply regressive. The underlying “ideology of modernism” was meant to forge a creative aesthetic that could regenerate not only art but also the entire world, as Lewis in *Time and Western Man* (1927) discusses the impact of modernism on art, literature, and philosophy; “There is nothing for it today, if you have an appetite for the beautiful, but to create new beauty. You can no longer nourish yourself upon the Past; its stock is exhausted; the Past is nowhere a reality.” (p. 81) In this respect, Modernism’s failure in post-war England marks a turning point in Lewis’s thinking, which is partly responsible for Lewis’s shift from Vorticist dreaming to ideology critique and satire. As he claimed his own earlier commitments, ‘A rigorous restatement is required [...] of the whole “revolutionary” position; nowhere more than in my peculiar province—art and literature. For me to undertake that statement must involve me also in a restatement of my personal position.’ (p. 458) In fact, Lewis explored the tensions between tradition and innovation in the context of cultural and artistic production, whose critiques of modernism and avant-garde in Western civilization are diametrically opposed and are perceived both as the decadence of an originally innovative cultural force and as the negative influences of mass culture, consumerism, and loss of values. Although Lewis was initially associated with the early stages of modernist movements, particularly Vorticism, his strongly-held views began to make the transition from modernism to counter-modernism. By the 1920s and 1930s, Wyndham Lewis’s intellectual and artistic trajectory underwent a notable shift over the course of his career, and then he firmly distanced himself from certain aspects of modernism or from mainstream modernist circles and embraced more conservative and anti-modernist positions. In this respect, he criticized what he perceived as the excesses of contemporary art and literature and advocated for a more disciplined and hierarchical cultural order. Therefore, Wyndham Lewis’s transition from modernism to anti-modernism was influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including his traumatic wartime experiences (World War I) and violence, changing political-based proclivities or ideologies, and broader shifts in intellectual and cultural currents during the early twentieth century.

In addition to his visual art, Lewis’s attitude toward technology was often characterized by an anti-romantic stance (the rejection idealized, romantic views of the past), and yet Lewis seemed to rely heavily on the dynamic and harsh realities of the modern, and industrialized world which were attainable by experiences during World War I and subsequently its technological innovations impacted upon his artistic and literary output. His paintings and writings often featured images of the aesthetics of the machine age and industrial landscapes as a symbol of modernity/technology and a source of inspiration for artistic expression. Lewis, a prolific writer, in *Tarr* (1918) and *The Apes of God* (1930), explored the dehumanizing effects of modernity, industrialization, the negative aspects of mass culture, and the challenges posed by technological advancements. However, he delved into the cultural and aesthetic changes influenced by technology in visual art and literature, providing clear insights into the impacts of technological advancements and managing the intricate interplay between technology and the cultural shifts occurring during his era:

Revolution, as we understand it today, is in origin a purely technical process. It is because our lives are so attached to and involved with the evolution of our machines that we have grown to see and feel everything in revolutionary terms, just as once the natural mood was conservative. We instinctively repose on the future rather than the past, though this may not yet be generally realized. Instead of the static circle of the rotation of the crops, or the infinitely slow progress of handiwork, we are in the midst of the frenzied evolutionary war of the machines. This affects our view of everything; our life, its objects and uses, love, health, friendship, politics: even art to a certain extent, but with less conviction. (Lewis, 1926, p. 23)

Lewis’s artistic and written endeavors were a direct response to the ever-changing evolving cultural, technological, and social milieu of his time. To capture the essence of modernity, Lewis launched “Blast,” a magazine associated with Vorticism, as a platform to explore modern culture and the various facets of modern life, which were heavily influenced by the events of the First World War and the challenges faced during wartime Britain. Reflecting the documentary nature of his wartime commissions, Lewis occasionally veered toward a more figurative style, as seen in his *A Battery Shelled series* (1919), representing the violence of war and human suffering, (‘the geometrics are filled to make an impressive, legible work, yet geometrics they remain. The muddy ground, several of the figures, and even, astonishingly, the smoke of the explosions, are ‘geometrics’’) (Farrington, 1980, p. 10) and *A Canadian Gun-Pit* (1918), depicting the harsh realities of modern warfare and the impact of technology on the battlefield. In February 1919, Lewis held a one-man exhibition in London, entitled “Guns” at the Goupil Gallery, where he endeavored to articulate his war experience with the principles claimed by Vorticism. Reflecting on the subject of war art in the aftermath of the war, Lewis emphasized the distinction between ancient and modern warfare in his introduction to the catalogue for the Guns exhibition, asserting that the latter was a unique phenomenon, “The Men who will Paint Hell: Modern War as a Theme for the Artist”, which was published in the *Daily Express* for 10 February 1919, wherein he stated that “this subject-matter is not war, which is as old as the chase or love; but modern war.” (Corbett, 1998) By means of disciplined thinking and a structured approach to artistic expression, Lewis valued intellectual rigor and reason for the complexities of the modern world and subsequently, the cultures of modernity, collectively contributing to the depiction of the machine age on the cusp of avant-garde movements. In retrospect, in the catalogue to the Vorticist Exhibition that opened at the Doré Galleries (London, Courtauld Institute of Art) on 10 June 1915, just before publication of the ‘War Number’, Lewis viewed through the lens of German culture in wartime, using it as a way of justifying forms of art that might not be expressly ‘popular’:

Germany, had she not an array of great artists, musicians and philosophers to point to, would be much more vulnerable to the attacks that her truculent methods of warfare call forth on all hands. England, as a civilising power,

cannot make herself too strong in those ideal ways in which Germany traditionally excels. (O'Donnell, 2020, p. 38)

In this fashion, in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), a book of profound insight and stinging polemic, Lewis approaches the many facets of culture and cultural theories by means of the prism of politics towards revolutionary movements such as socialism, anarchism and fascism. While he associated with socialist and anarchist ideas and ideologies early in his career, his later leanings toward fascist sympathies and anti-democratic views marked a significant departure from his earlier positions. During the 1930s, Lewis scrutinized the social function of art in the post-war period, seeking to transform and 'envisage a society in which the arts had no meaningful role to play because of the power of the culture industry.' In this regard, Tyrus Miller in 'No-man's Land: Wyndham Lewis and Cultural Revolution' (2005) emphasizes that 'in the notion of cultural revolution, culture is assigned an essential, active agency in the revolutionary transformation of collective and individual life [...]. Culture, to be effective, must become unitary, monumental, and totalizing.' (pp. 13-14) Lewis's political evolution (from the onset of the First World War until the early 1930s) mirrored the turbulent period of the twentieth century, or a period of revolutionary vision with its upheavals, wars, and ideological conflicts and creeds. More abstractly, it can be stated that *The Art of Being Ruled* is a sophisticated theory of culture of modernity whose characteristic features are both 'to think through the idea of revolution and to consider the role it plays in contemporary life via an examination of the interpenetration of the macroscopic forces of social change with the microscopic scenarios of domestic economies and lived experience.' (A. Gasiorek, Reeve-Tucker, A., & Waddell, N. (Eds.). 2016, p. 194)

5. Conclusion

The exploration of Wyndham Lewis's journey from Vorticism to his controversial engagement with fascism reveals the complexities of modernist aesthetics intertwined with political ideology. Lewis's early contributions to Vorticism established him as a key figure in British avant-garde movements, positioning him as a radical innovator of form, energy, and abstraction. However, his later political affiliations and ideological inclinations complicate his legacy, challenging straightforward interpretations of his work.

While Lewis's initial admiration for authoritarian leadership suggests a troubling alignment with fascist ideology, his later disavowal of fascism and critiques of totalitarian regimes reflect an evolving political stance. This study highlights the necessity of contextualizing Lewis's aesthetic principles within broader historical and political frameworks, recognizing both the artistic brilliance and ideological contradictions embedded in his career.

Ultimately, Lewis's trajectory underscores the broader tensions between modernism and political ideology in the early 20th century. His work serves as a critical case study in understanding how avant-garde movements can both resist and, at times, become entangled in authoritarian discourses. By reassessing Lewis's artistic and literary contributions alongside his ideological engagements, this research sheds light on the ongoing debates regarding the intersections of art, politics, and historical memory in modernist studies.

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