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Dehumanization or Communication: A Design for a ‘Global Village’

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Abstract

‘Dehumanisation is the chief symptom of the Modern World’ (‘The New Egos’, p.141). This phrase is attributed to Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), a leading figure of Vorticism, the British avant-garde art movement. It appeared in *Blast No. 1*, published in 1914. Lewis practiced geometric abstraction as pursued by the avant-garde groups of his contemporaries. Moreover, at the beginning of the 20th century, he predicted the advent of a new world in which complex sensory media and machines would dominate humanity. In a modern society where machines undertake labour, there is no need for human bodies; ‘machinery went straight to nature and eliminated the middleman, Man’ (*Diabolical Principle*, p.162). In *Blast*, mechanised humans were described as ‘dehumanized’ and visualised in insect-or robot-like forms. Lewis’s prediction about this future humanity—referred to as New Egos—being governed alongside animated machines by an elite hierarchy and ultimately merging seems like something out of a science fiction novel. However, this dystopia has partially been realised in the 21st century. Nevertheless, Lewis’s prescience has remained buried and unnoticed in the history of modern and contemporary art and design for a long time. This paper examines Lewis’s conception of new urban design from the 1910s to the 1950s regarding both his graphic and literary works and crystallises their emergent ideas. Examining specific examples will reveal that his ideas are linked to the negative aspects of contemporary digitally connected society, culminating in his own use of sarcasm and satire.

Keywords: *Dehumanization; Wyndham Lewis; Communication Media; Vorticism; Marshall McLuhan*

Introduction

Vorticism—the first British avant-garde art movement—is often associated with two key individuals. The first is the American-born poet Ezra Pound, and the other is Wyndham Lewis. In 1914, a magazine titled *Blast* was launched as this movement’s journal (1). In it, their manifesto and several of Lewis’articles were published. In one article, Lewis noted, ‘Dehumanization is a major symptom of the modern world’(2). While Pound primarily focused on literary pursuits with a brief foray into music, Lewis dedicated himself to painting and writing until he struggled with blindness in his later years. While Lewis’painting career has been largely overlooked, we aim to illuminate both facets of his creativity. Moreover, we explore whether these aspects still impact our interpretation of his works today.

Dehumanization as a symptom

The dehumanizing highlighted by Lewis was reiterated in an essay titled ‘Inferior Religion’, which appeared in *Wild Body*, a collection of short stories published in 1927. There, he wrote:

The fascinating imbecility of the creaking men machines, that some little restaurant or fishing-boat works, was the original subject of these studies... The boat's tackle and dirty little shell, or the hotel and its technique of hospitality, keeping the limbs of the men and women involved in a monotonous rhythm from morning till night, that was the occupational background... The wheel at Carisbrooke imposes a set of movements upon the donkey inside it, in drawing water from the well, that it is easy to grasp. But in the case of a hotel or fishing-boat, for instance, the complexity of the rhythmic scheme is so great that it passes as open and untrammelled life (3).

Here, Lewis compared people to a donkey forced to walk in an infinite orbit of large wheels to draw water from a well. In addition, he indicated that in the case of the man-machines, this infinite orbit was so complex that no one realised it was a closed and constrictive system.

Lewis saw this public ignorance as partly caused by the media, implying the mass communication media in the contemporary sense. In the late 1920s, he stated that ‘these democratic masses could be governed without a hitch by suggestion and hypnotism — Press, Wireless, Cinema’ (4). This peculiar attitude against the media from which Lewis drew this diagnosis was often misleading. His 1931 pamphlet entitled *Hitler* was viewed as a blatant appeasement to Nazi Germany. Hence, Lewis and his writings have been publicly alienated and ignored since the 1930s.

In recent years, Lewis’s career as a painter has returned to the spotlight, with a major retrospective exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2008 and Madrid in 2010. In 2017, an exhibition entitled ‘Wyndham Lewis — Life, Art, War’ was held at the Imperial War Museum in Manchester. In parallel with these trends, during a 2011 international conference on Marshall McLuhan, the influence of Lewis — who relocated to North America during World War II — on the young McLuhan was highlighted. This observation prompted a reassessment of Lewis’s achievements. During the conference, it was noted that McLuhan’s ‘global village’ builds upon Lewis’s idea of a ‘big village’. Moreover, the Oxford University Press is currently in the process of publishing the comprehensive works of Wyndham Lewis. This recent revival of Lewis will enable us to observe an overall picture of his activities. This paper aims to expand upon existing speculations regarding the concept of ‘design’, contributing to a contemporary understanding with broad implications.

Media effect and counter-media

We must remember that before the Second World War, when Lewis was primarily active, the word ‘media’ was used almost exclusively as the plural of ‘medium’. It is generally understood that McLuhan initially used the word ‘media’ to designate communication channels in the late 1950s. Examining the juxtaposition of ‘Press, Wireless, and Cinema’ in Lewis’s earlier quote, considering that ‘wireless’ referred to ‘radio’ in the early 20th century in the UK, it’s evident that Lewis was addressing what we now instantly associate with the term ‘mass media’.

We have already highlighted El Lissitzky’s reference to the magazine *Blast* in several articles (5). Moreover, it is almost certain that Kurt Schwitters was influenced by *Blast* when he designed his magazine, *Merz*. However, as Lewis recounted in later years, *Blast* itself was published to counter the propaganda of the Italian Futurists adopting the same manner they used:

In that futurist future of which Marinetti ranted, there would be no place for the civilized arts... Anyhow, I did, even in 1913, have glimpses of a ‘world without art’ — of a barren world, such as

is all round us now. And I did, at the time, go into action myself against this philosophy of action-for-action's sake (6).

Futurism is heavily criticised and accused of false novelty in *Blast*: 'Futurism, as preached by Marinetti, is largely Impressionism up-to-date. To this is added his Automobilism and Nietzsche stunt' (7). If we observe the page layout of *Blast*, it becomes evident that it is a pastiche of the advertisements prevalent in the newspapers of that era. The magazine cleverly appropriates the Futurist propaganda format with even greater pretence. Notably, its content constitutes a sharp critique of Futurism.

Closely examining Lewis's criticisms in *Blast* within their proper context will reveal what Lewis was anxious about Futurism and what he prepared for it. Continuing the previous quote, he denounces Futurism: 'Futurism ... is a picturesque, superficial and romantic rebellion of young Milanese painters against the Academism which surrounded them'. For Lewis, who himself had studied Bergson, the Futurist understanding of Bergsonian philosophy was one-sided in that it emphasised only the former of the binary opposition that Bergson explained as follows:

[W]e have to do with two different kinds of reality, the one heterogeneous, that of sensible qualities, the other homogeneous, namely space. This latter, clearly conceived by the human intellect, enables us to use clean-cut distinctions, to count, to abstract, and perhaps also to speak (8).

Of course, it was the latter reality that was important to Lewis, who was a painter and a writer simultaneously. Nevertheless, as Lewis saw it, the Futurists emphasised the former reality to mobilise them for war. Lewis wrote in *Blast*: 'A civilized savage, in a desert-city, surrounded by very simple objects and restricted number of beings, reduces his Great Art down to the simple black human bullet' (9). Hence, according to Lewis, the true work of the Futurists was not in poems or paintings, but in the masses transformed into munitions or war-machines through Marinetti's agitation, limited to their senses and reactions.

In his 1915 painting *The Crowd*, Lewis sought to portray gathered masses as diminutive insects alongside onlookers on the same canvas to highlight the perilous nature of the situation (10). In the foreground at the lower left of this painting, several figures are depicted under the French flag, one looking up to the upper right. They first look at the insect-like people who, under the influence of the Second Enclosure Movement, were liberated from the feudal system. However, as they march under the red flags, they are re-organised and eventually turn into a power source trapped in the wheel at Carisbrooke Castle in the upper right corner of the canvas. This painting communicates that for Lewis, there was no distinction between the right and the left concerning the mobilisation of the oblivious mechanised masses. In the 1918-1919 war painting *A Battery Shelled*, the contrast between the masses transformed into munitions and the onlookers is heightened by presenting the latter in a more naturalistic style (11).

From architecture/urban design to communication media

Despite Lewis's criticism of Futurism's agitation, his fears materialised as the First World War erupted shortly after the release of the first issue of *Blast*. The Vorticists and many of their associates served in the army; hence, *Blast* ended its brief run after publishing only a second issue titled 'War Number' in 1915. When Lewis returned to London following the war, he saw the Bloomsbury Group and other intellectuals, many of whose members remained in London under the guise of conscientious objectors, advertising 'new art' or 'amateurism' for their own benefit.

In his 1919 pamphlet entitled *The Caliph's Design*, Lewis presented a distinctive worldview

through art, distancing himself from both Futurists and certain British intellectuals who urged public involvement in political or social causes (12). The subtitle ‘Architects! Where is your Vortex?’ indicates its connection to ongoing Vorticist explorations.

In 1914, Lewis and other Vorticists raised public awareness of the vortical dynamism of its own latent energy. Lewis felt that the urban environment of the time was the primary reason for the failure of Vorticism, as it buried their art among various other modern art styles. Hence, he purported that architects, as the ultimate designers of the urban environment, were needed to achieve this goal, and wrote *The Caliph's Design*. In his 1934 essay ‘The Plain Home-Builder’, Lewis recalled that:

Vorticism was a movement initiated by a group of painters, but it was aimed essentially at an *architectural* reform... My pamphlet entitled *Architects, where is your Vortex?* (written a couple of years after the war) demonstrates this fact sufficiently plainly even in its title. And what I, as a vorticist, was saying to the architect was: ‘Produce a *shell* more in conformity with the age in which we live! If you do not do so, it will be in vain for us to produce pictures of a new and contemporary nature (13).’

Thus, Lewis’s interest seems to have shifted from individual artworks to the environment in which they were placed. However, the urban planning he advocated for in *The Caliph's Design* was not feasible. As mentioned earlier, Lewis sought to realise two realities of the world simultaneously in his artistic expression. One was a primordial and heterogeneous reality of sensible qualities, and the other a homogeneous reality called ‘space’ conceived by the human intellect. A three-dimensional building that encompasses these two realities at the same time cannot be realised, even with the help of a good architect. Moreover, even if such a structure could be constructed, an autocratic caliph amassing enough power to dominate an entire city was implausible within the framework of British parliamentary democracy. As a result, after 1926, Lewis almost abandoned painting and devoted himself to writing. Finally, in 1931, he published his infamous work, *Hitler*.

In August 1937, Lewis revisited Berlin for the first time since 1931. It is plausible that he might have heard about the Degenerate Art exhibition opening in Munich in July of that year. Disappointed mainly by its anti-Semitic policies, Lewis left Nazi Germany. After returning to London, he soon fled to Canada to avoid the war. There, he saw the people of North America, free from their origins, gathering like rootless plants. In his 1949 book *America and Cosmic Man*, Lewis summarised his experience as follows:

I am quite serious when I say that this is what heaven must be like—agreeably inhuman, naturally; a rootless, irresponsible city..., where the spirit is released from all the too-close contacts with other people..., but where everything is superficially fraternal (14).

Conclusion

In Lewis’s 1941 pamphlet published in Canada, he introduced the concept of a ‘rootless’ existence to characterise maritime nations like the UK and the United States, contrasting it with the German fixation on ‘Lebensraum’ or living space. Nevertheless, such a mode of existence was already remarked on in the first issue of *Blast*: ‘The human form still runs, like wave, through the texture or body of existence, and therefore of art... THE ACTUAL HUMAN BODY BECOMES OF LESS IMPORTANCE EVERY DAY’ (15). In his 1919 book, he wrote:

As already his body in no way indicates the scope of his personal existence ... it cannot more in pictorial art be used as his effective delimitation or sign. But that is not to say that a piece of cheese or a coal scuttle can. There is inorganic world an organism that is his; and which, as much

as his partially superseded body, is in a position of mastery and higher significance over the cheese and saucepan (16).

Lewis's positive reinterpretation of this 'rootless' mode of existence was based on his experience in North America, where he witnessed the development of various media (especially media in McLuhan's sense). It is unquestionable that this experience also led Lewis to the concept of the 'big village'; consider Lewis's often quoted words in *America and Cosmic Man*: '...the earth has become one big village, with telephones laid on from one end to the other, and air transport, both speedy and safe' (17). A space where people with rootless temperaments could talk and meet across distances, but never fueled by artificial causes, was the heaven Lewis dreamed of.

Thanks to the Internet and more advanced air transportation, we are closer to heaven today than Lewis ever dreamed of. Nevertheless, social media is once again fueling excessive sympathy towards a handful of 'influencers' and fostering nationalistic behaviour among the younger generation; Lewis may have been wrong in his predictions, but his negotiations with the media offer us at least two lessons. On the one hand, if Lissitzky or Schwitters genuinely viewed Blast's design as progressive, it suggests that parody might be less effective against the media. Instead, embracing the satire found in Lewis's literary works or visual compositions could be more effective. As seen in Lewis's paintings, these may prompt individuals to view themselves with detachment.

On the other hand, one might posit that architecture and urban planning have diminished in effectiveness. Following Lewis's approach, it becomes essential to differentiate between communication and transportation media. A thorough analysis of their channel compositions and their impacts on individuals is warranted. Here again, a 'detached' viewpoint is needed for this examination. McLuhan noticed this when he wrote in his 1969 book, *Counterblast*: 'Any medium, by dilating sense to fill the whole field, creates the necessary conditions of hypnosis in that area. This explains why at no time has any culture been aware of the effect of its media on its overall association, not even retrospectively' (18). However, considering Lewis's achievements, we must go beyond McLuhan's distinction between 'hot' and 'cool' media. We must explore the number and nature of media senders and receivers, scrutinise the nature and configuration of their channels and messages, and consequently interrupt these communication media (19).

Notes

1. The magazine is available on: "Modernis Journals Project," accessed Feb 12, 2024, <https://modjourn.org/journal/blast/>.
2. Wyndham Lewis, "The New Egos," in *Blast*, no.1, reprinted & edited by B. Morrow (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 2002), 141.
3. Wyndham Lewis, *The Wild Body* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 232-33.
4. Wyndham Lewis, "Appendix to Book One" in *Time and Western Man*, reprinted & edited by P. Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1993), 117.
5. Mariko Kaname, "The Development of the British Avant-Garde and Print Media in the Early 20th Century: In Reference to Vorticism," in *The Proceedings of 10+1 International Committee for Design History and Studies* (ICDHS Barcelona, 2018), 73-76.
6. Wyndham Lewis, *Anglosaxony: A League that Works* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1941), 46-7.

7. Wyndham Lewis, “The Melodrama of Modernity,” in *Blast*, no.1, 143.
8. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F. L. Pogson, (London: George Allen; New York: Macmillan, 1912), 97.
9. Wyndham Lewis, “The New Egos,” in *Blast*, no.1, 141.
10. The image is available on: “Tate,” accessed Feb 12, 2024,
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lewis-the-crowd-t00689>.
11. The image is available on: “Imperial War Museum,” accessed Feb 12, 2024,
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/16688>.
12. Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1986).
13. Wyndham Lewis, “Plain Home-Builder: Where is Your Vorticist?,” in *Wyndham Lewis on Art: Collected writings 1913-1956*, edited by Walter Michel & C. J. Fox (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 278.
14. Wyndham Lewis, *America and Cosmic Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1949), 167.
15. Wyndham Lewis, “The New Egos,” in *Blast*, no.1, 141.
16. Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design*, op.cit. 78.
17. Wyndham Lewis, *America and Cosmic Man*, 21.
18. Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast* (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1970), 23.
19. On Lewis's interruption in communication media such as telephone, see Wyndham Lewis, “What it feels like to be an enemy,” in *Wyndham Lewis on Art: Collected Writings 1913-1956*, edited by Walter Michel & C. J. Fox (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969), 267.

Author Biographies

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Mariko Kaname is a Professor at Atom University, specialising in Aesthetics. She and Shigeru Maeda are currently engaged in a research project on ‘Wyndham Lewis’s Thoughts on Media’, supported by a JSPS KAKENHI Grant, Number JP19K00137. This paper is part of the report on the results of this project. Her Japanese translation with explanatory comments of Lewis’s pamphlet, *The Caliph's Design*, will be published by SuiseiSha in 2024.

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Shigeru Maeda is a Professor of Aesthetics and Film Studies at Kyoto Seika University. He translated Lewis’s pamphlet, *Anglosaxony: A League that Works* into Japanese, and the translation with a detailed commentary was published in three instalments in the *Journal of Kyoto Seika University* (2019, 2020, 2021).