

**‘I have given myself up to the study of the State’:
Wyndham Lewis, Modernism, the Avant-garde, and the State**

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In his introduction to the recent *Cambridge Companion to Wyndham Lewis*,¹ Tyrus Miller describes the modernist painter, novelist, and critic Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957) as an embodiment of ‘the boundary crossing nature of the avant-garde’ (2016, p. 6). In Miller’s account, the avant-garde of the early twentieth century ‘tore apart the conventional boundaries between the various arts, between artistic and political activity, and between aesthetic works and conceptual discourse’ (2016 p. 6). The historical avant-garde—by which is meant the various groupings of artists of experimental artists and writers which emerged across Europe in the years prior to the First World War—can be broadly characterised by its vehement opposition to bourgeois society, and its conception of the potential of experimental art and literature to act as a catalyst for radical social change.

However, in the period immediately after the war, the European avant-garde was forced into a position, whereby, as Walter L. Adamson has suggested, ‘newly powerful movements such as Bolshevism and Fascism, the expanding might of capitalist industries [...] and the increasing concern of nation states with aesthetic matters, all forced modernists to reassess the strategy of ‘autonomous’ or ‘pure’ avant-garde’ modernism’ (2007, p. 4). As the figurehead, and chief theorist of the Vorticist group,² the British faction of the pre-war avant-garde, Lewis played a significant part in the initial stages of pre-war European avant-gardism. Following his service as an artillery officer in the war, Lewis turned his attentions more and more to writing satirical novels and works of social and cultural criticism. This article examines Lewis’s critical interventions into the debates which ensued in the aftermath of the First World War regarding the direction which postwar experimental arts should take. The central problem was, as Lewis would later suggest, that the First World War supplanted art as the catalyst for large-scale societal change.³ What was needed, then, was a reformulation of the avant-garde’s

¹ Wyndham Lewis has, until relatively recently, occupied a marginal position within studies of the art and literature of the early twentieth century. Fredric Jameson, writing in 1979, said of Lewis that he was, at that point, ‘surely the least read and most unfamiliar of the great modernists of his generation’ (1979, p. 1). Associating Lewis with a number of major literary figures from the period, such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce—all of whom Lewis had close and often fractious dealings with—Jameson states that Lewis was ‘a presence for his contemporaries, but we have forgotten their admiration for him’ (p. 2). In the years since Jameson’s path-breaking study of Lewis, however, there has been a gradual resurgence of interest in one of modernist culture’s most controversial, maligned, and misunderstood figures. Publications such as the aforementioned *Cambridge Companion*, edited by Tyrus Miller, and Edinburgh University’s 2015 publication *Wyndham Lewis: A Critical Guide*, edited by Andrzej Gašiorek and Nathan Waddell, point the way to Lewis’s belated acceptance into something close to the mainstream of academic literary discourse.

² The Vorticist collective included the painters Edward Wadsworth (1889-1949), David Bomberg (1890-1957), Helen Saunders (1885-1963), Jessica Dismorr (1885-1939), William Roberts (1895-1980) and Frederick Etchells (1886-1973), the sculptors Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915) and the poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972).

³ In *Blasting and Bombardiering*, his 1937 memoir of his experiences as both an artist and a soldier, Lewis asserts that avant-garde artists of the pre-war period had seen themselves as ‘the heralds of great social changes’, but that ultimately ‘the day was lost for art at Sarajevo’:

The great social changes necessitated by the altered conditions of life were not to come about, after all, rationally and peacefully. They were to come about “catastrophically” instead.... And the great social

understanding of its aims. I will focus on a key aspect of Lewis's critical writings during the interwar period—namely the points in his thinking where art and aspects of politics converge most strikingly, through his discussions of the relationship between the (modernist) artist and the state. My concern is with two specific texts—*The Caliph's Design*, a polemic written in 1919, in which Lewis advocates for the direct involvement of avant-garde visual artists in the redesigning of post-war society; and *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis's controversial 1926 work of social criticism, in which the avant-gardist interventionism of the earlier work has been replaced by a commitment to the autonomous character of the artist, and the necessity of a strong political state to allow to artist or intellectual to work unhindered. While these works offer contrasting position regarding artistic autonomy, what is consistent across both texts is Lewis's absolute commitment to the belief that the modern artist is a figure of immense value to society.

Lewis's critical writings in the late 1920s and early 1930s operate within the paradigm identified above by Adamson. The series of critical books, which Lewis publishes in the period,⁴ seeks to address the apparent failure of the pre-war avant-garde through a diagnostic critique of the ideological underpinnings of the subsequent modernist aesthetic project of the post-war / interwar period—a project which Lewis understood to have wholly lost any of the claims it once may have had to intellectual independence and 'revolutionary' potential. Throughout these works Lewis repeatedly asserts his political impartiality. However, his methods of cultural criticism complicate this as his attempts to identify the political currents working below the surface of modernist cultural production, ultimately, entails the compromising of his a-political stance. Writing in 1950, he concedes: 'The State is not a subject suited to a philosophic mind.... It is much better to turn your back on the State, as a subject of speculation. In my own case, I have not followed this rule [...] I have given myself up to the study of the State' (1984, p. 66). Lewis justifies this immersion in the profane realm of political and social commentary by arguing that it was, at all times, an attempt to advocate for a potential social order in which 'learning and the arts were likely to fare best' (1984, p. 66) which motivated these political interventions.⁵

More than Just Picture Making: The Historical Avant-garde

In *The Theory of the Avant-garde* (1984), Peter Bürger argues that the avant-garde assault on the institution of art was an attempt to break the autonomous character of bourgeois art—its separation from everyday praxis—with a view to installing art at the centre of lived experience. The rejection of bourgeois morals and social codes, which Bürger sees as being exemplified by the aesthetic practices of Dada and Surrealism, entails a rejection of the institutionalised

changes which with such an uncouth violence started to get themselves born, in that tragical atmosphere, extinguished the arts which were to be their expression, and which had been their heralds (1882, p. 258).

⁴ *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926); *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (1927); *Time and Western Man* (1927); *Paleface* (1928); *The Diabolical Principle and the Dithyrambic Spectator* (1932); *Men Without Art* (1934).

⁵ For broader discussions of Lewis complex and problematic politics see: Munton, A. 2008. Wyndham Lewis: From Proudhon to Hitler (and back): the Strange Political Journey of Wyndham Lewis. In: J. Birkett and S. Smith, eds. *Right / Left / Right: Revolving Commitments: France and Britain 1929-1950*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. pp. 47-60; Munton, A. 2016. Lewis, Anarchism, and Socialism. In: T. Miller, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Wyndham Lewis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 100-112; Head, P. 2005. Lewis and "the Political", *Wyndham Lewis Annual*. XII. pp. 29-41; and Bridson, D. G. 1972. *The Filibuster: A Study of the Political Ideas of Wyndham Lewis*. London: Cassell.

status of art in society. Bürger states: ‘The avant-gardists proposed the sublation of art [...] Art was not simply to be destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be presented, albeit in changed form. The avant-gardist thus adopted an essential element of Aestheticism’ (1984, p. 49). The late nineteenth-century doctrine of ‘art-for-art’s-sake’, as espoused by the aestheticians, had argued for an art which functioned in isolation, concerned only with its own aesthetic value. As Peter Gay puts it, ‘Art, so this modern doctrine goes, serves no one but itself—not mammon, not God, not country, not bourgeois self-glorification, certainly not moral progress. It boasts its own standards, its own ideals and gratifications’ (2009, p. 53).⁶ As Bürger points out, similar to the avant-garde, the aesthetes had rejected the ‘means-ends rationality of everyday reality’ (1984, p. 49), but they had made the withdrawal of art from everyday life—its retreat into the ‘autonomy’ of aesthetic detachment and self-reference—the defining characteristic of their rebellion against bourgeois social codes. The avant-gardist approach differs in that, rather than seek to keep art in isolation, they strove for the initiation of a ‘new life praxis from the basis of art’ (Bürger, 1984, p. 49). While Bürger restricts his analysis to the examples of Surrealism and Dada, his concept of avant-garde praxis applies equally well to pre-war avant-gardist movements, such as Italian Futurism and Vorticism. Looking back in later life on his involvement in the pre-war avant-garde moment, Lewis observes:

It was, after all, a new civilisation that I—and a few other people—was making the blue prints for [...] A rough design for a new way of seeing for men who as yet were not there [...] I, like all the other people in Europe so engaged, felt it to be an important task. It was more than just picture making: one was manufacturing fresh eyes for people, and fresh souls to go with the eyes. That was the feeling. (1984, p. 135)

Towards a Modernist City—*The Caliph’s Design* (1919)

Lewis’s experiences in the war did not immediately diminish the utopian element in his avant-gardist thinking; rather, Lewis returns from the Western Front with an intensified belief in art’s potential to bring about the renovation of society. However, problematically, it is through the state that Lewis begins to discern the best means to realise the integration of avant-garde or modernist aesthetic principles into everyday life. In 1919, he publishes *The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where is Your Vortex?*, an exuberant critique of the state of visual avant-gardism after the First World War. While much of the book is concerned with critiques of the practices of the cubists in Paris and the artists affiliated with the Bloomsbury group in London, at its core, *The Caliph’s Design* is an impassioned appeal to the artists of the period to, as he puts it, take art ‘out of the studio and into life somehow’ (1986, p. 12). Lewis criticises what he sees as the ‘listlessness and dilettantism’ (1986, p. 12) of the studio-based experiments of the cubists, arguing that their continued reliance on still-life painting (*natures-mortes*) by Picasso and Juan Gris—with bowls of fruit, guitars and so on as the subject of the majority of their paintings—has failed to capitalise on abstraction’s initial revolutionary potential. Rather than expand the parameters of their work, the cubists have, Lewis asserts, become ‘desiccated in a pocket of inorganic experimentation’ (1986, p. 12).⁷

⁶ James McNeil Whistler for instance, writing in 1878, asserted: ‘Art should be independent of all clap-trap—should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like. All these have no kind of concern with it; and that is why I insist on calling my works “arrangements” and “harmonies”’ (2015, pp. 127-128).

⁷ This had been an aspect of Lewis’s criticisms of Picasso et al. as early as the second number of the vorticist journal *BLAST* (1915), where Lewis argues that Picasso ‘founds his invention on the posed model, or the posed

Lewis begins *The Caliph's Design* with a parable concerning an Eastern despot—the titular caliph—who wakes up one morning and, being ‘extremely dissatisfied with the shape of my city’ (1986, p. 19), draws up a plan for a new city. He orders his chief engineer and chief architect, on pain of death, to take his plan—‘a little vorticist effort’ (1986, p. 19)—and make them a reality within one month. The parable ends with the completion of the work, and we are told that ‘within a month a strange street transfigured the heart of that cultivated city’ (1986, p. 19). What Lewis suggests in this parable, and the polemic which follows it, is that the modern artist, struggling to find a way out of the apparent impasse which the avant-garde had reached, is to strive to apply modernist aesthetics directly to the ‘form-content’ of society. Thus, the vorticist artist re-emerges as a kind of urban planner:

What I propose is that as much attention might be given...to the masses and entire form-content of life as has been given by the Nature-morte school to the objects on a table. If architecture and every related...art were affected and woken up, the same thing would be accomplished on a big scale as is at present attempted on a small scale...And a nobility and cohesion would be attained that under present conditions it is difficult to visualise. Most people grasping at such a notion have stopped short at some Utopian picture (Lewis, 1986, p. 108).

Lewis’s polemic is unashamedly utopian and deserves to be appreciated, at one level, as an honest appeal, on the part of an artist, for an art which is socially engaged, and also as fervent appeal for experimental art’s acceptance by society.⁸ However, Lewis’s suggestion has a distinctly paternalistic hue and, as is generally the case with utopian thinking, his vision of an engaged, or interventionist avant-garde, inevitably runs into the problem of political power. Political apathy is singled out by Lewis as an impediment to his programme: ‘Do politicians understand so little the influence of the Scene of Life, or the effect of Nature, that they can be so indifferent to the capital of a wealthy and powerful community?’ (1986, p. 28). He suggests that if the politician—a more imaginative Cecil Rhodes (1986, p. 28)—was aesthetically aware, then ‘in the weight of a rhetoric of buildings, or in the subtler ways of beauty signifying the delights and rewards of success won by toil and adventure, in a thousand ways the imagination of the multitude could be captured and fixed’ (1986, p. 28). All too easily aesthetics and the appreciation of the imaginative potential of art shades into something coercive, with modernist aesthetics seemingly functioning as a means to ‘capture’ and ‘fix’ the thought processes of the general public.

With this in mind, Andrzej Gašiorek observes that Lewis’s version of interventionist modernism is partly driven by the conviction that ‘people escape entrapment in animality or mechanism through the *technē* of civilization’ (2004, p. 36). As Lewis understands it, the average individual’s life is lived largely exterior to themselves; they are sensory beings

Nature-Morte, using models almost to the extent of the Impressionist’ (1969, p. 65). These practices are dismissed as ‘an absurdity and [a] sign of relaxed initiative’ (1969, p. 65).

⁸ Lewis suggests that, aside from the benefits which the advanced arts could potentially offer to post-war society, their social inclusion would result in a legitimization of the arts, which had, up to that point, not been forthcoming: [W]hen I say that I should like a completely transfigured world, it is not because I want to look at it. It is you who would look at it. It would be your *spirit* that would benefit by this exhilarating spectacle. I should merely benefit, I and other painters like me, by no longer finding ourselves in the position of freaks, the queer wild-men of cubes, the terrible futurists, or any other rubbish that the yellow press invents to amuse the nerves of its readers. (1986, p. 39)

essentially, with a seemingly negligible interior life: ‘He can only live through others, outside himself. He, in a sense, *is* the houses, the railings, the bunting or absence of bunting. His beauty and justification is in a superficial exterior life. His health is there’ (1986, p. 30). As far as Lewis is concerned the ‘man in the street’ is, by and large, docile and easily satisfied by whatever spectacle is offered to him, no matter how banal: ‘Give him a fine, well-fed type of life, a bit of dashing and swanky, suitably clothed, with glamour and adventure about it, to look at, and he is gladdened, if his stomach is not too empty’ (1986, p. 30). The solution then, is to offer the public something more:

[B]eyond the obvious policy of not having a mean and indolent surrounding for the capital of what sets out to be an “Empire,” simply for human life at all, or what sets out to be human life—to increase gusto and belief in that life—it is of the first importance that the senses should be directed into such channels, appealed to in such ways, that this state of mind of relish, fullness and exultation should obtain. (1986, p. 30)

Elsewhere Lewis argues that ‘the greatest art, has in its power to influence everybody’, so that ‘a man might be unacquainted with the very existence of a certain movement in art, yet his life would be modified directly if the street [he] walked down took a certain shape, at the dictates of an architect under the spell of that modern movement’ (1922, p. 5). Lewis was not unique in arguing for for a radical fusion of modernist aesthetics and architectural practice. For example, in the same year that *The Caliph’s Design* appeared the German architect, and founder of the Bauhaus School, Walter Gropis (1883-1969) published the ‘Programme of the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar,’ wherein he asserts:

The ultimate aim of all visual arts is the complete building! To embellish buildings was once the noblest function of the fine arts.... Today the arts exist in isolation, from which they can be rescued only through the conscious, cooperative effort of craftsmen. Architects, painters, and sculptors must recognize anew and learn to grasp the composite character of a building both as an entity and in its separate parts. Only then will their work be imbued with the architectonic spirit that it has lost as ‘salon art’ (1995, p. 435).

As the art critic Robert Hughes has observed, behind the compulsion towards applying newly developed modernist aesthetics to urban planning—driven by the conviction that this would lead to the improvement of society—there was a ‘Nietzschean, Romantic idea of the architect as the supreme articulator of social effort, a Master Builder beyond politics and (almost literally) a messiah’ (1991, 117). Hughes cites Gropius, who had stated: ‘There are no architects today, we are all of us merely preparing the way for him who will once again deserve the name of architect, for that means Lord of Art, who will build gardens out of the deserts and pile wonders up to the sky’ (qtd in Hughes, 1991, 117). While, for the most part, less grandiose in his rhetoric Lewis too envisions the coming of a new kind of aesthetically enlightened, and intellectually powerful planner, a “creative architect, or a man with some new power in his craft, and concerned with the aesthetic as well as the practical needs of the mass sensibility of his time’ (1986, p. 43).⁹

⁹ See also, Klein, S. W. 2010. Modernist Babylons: Utopian Aesthetics and Urban Spectacle in D. W. Griffith and Wyndham Lewis. *Modernist Cultures*. Volume 5, Issue 1. pp. 9-29.

Returning to *The Caliph's Design* in 1952, Lewis reflects on his dream of a modernist metropolis, stating: 'The haphazard manner in which everything struggles and drifts into existence filled me with impatience. I would have had a city born by fiat, as if out the brain of a god, or someone with god-like power' (1984, p. 169). He concedes that he was 'vaguely conscious' that the central thesis of *The Caliph's Design* was not altogether realistic, but asserts the sincerity of his convictions: '[H]ad I possessed the power I should certainly have torn down the whole of London—or at least the centre of the city. Upon its ruins would have risen a bright, new, and an enchanting capital. I am as convinced as ever today that it a great pity I had not the power' (1984, p. 169).

The Modernist State: *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926)

In 1926, Lewis begins his critique of interwar society and culture with the publication of *The Art of Being Ruled*. This is Lewis's first explicitly political work, and is arguably one of the few, if not the only, examples of what could be classified as 'high modernist political theory'.¹⁰ In the course of a lengthy, occasionally convoluted analysis of post-war European democracy, Lewis draws from a wide array of sources—mostly works by socialist thinkers such as Marx, Georges Sorel, Charles Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Karl Kautsky¹¹—as he anatomises the social changes occurring across western society. Throughout the book, Lewis adopts various positions on issues, including consumerism, feminism, state propaganda, and censorship, only to seemingly revise them in subsequent chapters or abruptly adopt apparently opposing views. Masses of lengthy quotations from various sources are deployed in the service of the competing arguments, which Lewis canvasses in a performance of erudition which rivals Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. Space does not permit me to give even a partial account of the scope of Lewis critique of 1920s Western democracy. Rather, I shall restrict myself to aspects of the work which deal directly with the place of the artist within a political state.

In *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis extends his earlier vision of a society enriched by the principles of modern art beyond *The Caliph's Design's* parameters of visual modernism, to encompass intellectual activity in its broadest sense. He makes clear the partisan nature of his argument: 'That when I am speaking of the intellectual I evidently experience no shame (reflecting on the compromising nature of my own occupation), that I do not pretend to be a "plain blunt man" is true [...] men owe everything they can ever hope to have to an 'intellectual' of one sort or another' (1989, p. 373). He continues: 'I claim further that the intellectual is the only person in the world who is not a potential "capitalist," because his "capital" is something that cannot be bartered. What he deals in, even when it gives him power, gives him no money' (p. 373). This idealistic, and ultimately rather forlorn conception of the

¹⁰ In an essay in a recent edition of *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*, Christopher Fear argues persuasively for recognizing *The Art of Being Ruled* as an important work of "'critical" political philosophy' (2015, p. 84).

Reed Way Dasenbrock, in the afterword to the 1989 edition of *The Art of Being Ruled*, suggests that the work can be best understood by 'recognizing that it is a modernist work, dense, allusive, and difficult, constructed on principles closer to those of *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* in its shifts in register and its use of montage or juxtaposition than those of a conventional treatise on politics and society' (1989, p. 436). The obvious problem with such an approach to writing works of criticism, as Dasenbrock remarks of *The Art of Being Ruled*, is that these are not works of poetry, and as such, a degree of clarity is required of these works which would not be expected of a creative work (1989, p. 436). Of the difficulties inherent in Lewis formal approaches, Dasenbrock observes that 'it really is remarkably difficult for most of the book to define Lewis's position on the issues he is discussing. He constantly judges phenomena he discusses, but does so from a shifting perspective' (1989, p. 436).

¹¹ Lewis also engages with the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Paul Leroy-Beaulieu and Bertrand Russell.

intellectual, is at the core of Lewis's subsequent assault on modernist culture in the major critical works of the period, such as *Time and Western Man* (1927). The problem in Lewis's thinking on the importance of art and the artist is that it entails a dialectic between, on the one hand, his ardent belief in the emancipatory power of culture (and its instrumental use), and, on the other, his pessimistic understanding of the inevitability of political power. Elsewhere, he remarks: 'Socially, the modern age is like being in an immense building full of a radioactive something we call "power." It is malignant, this kind of power, and we are all slightly cancered' (1984, p. 180).

Lewis holds a Hobbesian, Aristotelian acceptance of the political state as a means of maintaining social order, and, ultimately, for making cultural production possible:

[S]ince man is a feeble creature he is obliged to associate himself with a strong band or group of his own kind. Whether you call it a 'contract' or a 'compact' or leave that out he must subscribe to the rules obtaining in his particular society. Further, he can only attain to 'civilised' status—have libraries, laboratories, studios, concert-halls, and theatres, if he has the good fortune to belong to a large and complex society—subject to its laws. (1984, p. 63)

In a reversal of his 1919 plea for aesthetic engagement, in *The Art of Being Ruled* Lewis argues for the necessity of intellectual independence; autonomy, essentially. The autonomy of the artist, Lewis argues, is 'not a snobbish withdrawal' but rather a 'going aside for the purposes of work' (1986, p. 373). The artist and other intellectuals—scientists, philosophers and so on—must be at a remove from the 'crowd' in order to work for its benefit. Lewis suggests that with the seemingly inevitable collapse of liberal democracy, and its replacement with some form of authoritarianism, coming from either the Right or the Left (Lewis sees little difference between the two), there is an opportunity for the intellectual to finally be afforded the social status he deserves. Dismissing liberal-democratic conceptions of liberty as 'manufactured with words', Lewis argues that the average citizen in a western democracy is far from free (1986, p. 324), and ultimately reaches the profoundly problematic that an authoritarian system—'state despotism', as he terms it—would ultimately lead to the enrichment of the lives of the general public as:

the very absolute nature of their material loss, once the despotism had been imposed on them would persuade people to cease from seeking always outside themselves objects of happiness. They would be thrown back on 'their own resources,' and discover, it is hoped, their own reality. The truly childish objects of the contemporary European's desires, all the toys provided for the spoilt, softened, democratic mind, could not fail to give place to truer satisfactions. (1986, p. 324)

He suggests that, under such an authoritarian regime, the inequalities of the class system could, potentially, be replaced with a caste system based on intellectual ability. Lewis asserts that this could 'no doubt ensue from the more rigid establishment of vocational tests [...] this caste system would be entirely built on faculties or gifts, not on what we roughly call "character"; and certainly animal physique would become negligible' (1986, p. 325). Crucially, from Lewis's perspective, such a system would solve the problem faced by the artist in a society which, he had come to believe, had lost its respect for the arts. 'In the social revolution', he states, 'nothing is done' for the artist or intellectual, and 'it is no doubt the great mass of pseudo-

artists, writers, and so forth who discredit it' (1986 p. 373). Egalitarianism, he suggests—and here, one could say, he is being quintessentially 'modernist' in his anxiety over the perceived ramifications of mass democracy—has had a detrimental effect on 'the intelligence' (1986, p. 373). The arts and sciences suffer 'automatically in consequence of the attack on all authority, advantage, or privilege [...] It is our own brain we are attacking' (1986 p. 373).

Thus, Lewis arrives at his assertion that society, and the artist, would benefit from a system—which, it ought to be said, Lewis only vaguely defines—that would allow its intellectuals to work autonomously whilst at the same time affording them a high degree of social authority. Harking back to the 'primitive "democratic" picture of the intellectual leader living a life simply among the people, with admirable simplicity and without fuss' (1986 p. 374), Lewis asserts that the intellectual ought to be something comparable to Plato's philosopher king, who represents at his best the great unworldly element in the world' (p. 373). 'The life of the intelligence', he goes on to say, 'is the very incarnation of freedom: where it is dogmatic and harsh it is impure; where it is too political it is impure: its disciplines are less arbitrary and less *political* than those of religion: and it is the most inveterate enemy of unjust despotic power' (1986 p. 374). The paradox in Lewis's vision is that, in order for the modernist artist / intellectual to achieve autonomy, and the freedom to work a-politically, a strong, anti-democratic state is needed. Lewis can argue, seemingly without irony, that for intellectual activity to be 'the very incarnation of freedom' (1986, p. 374), or, if you like, for the modernist artist to be creative, and thus potentially enrich society, that society must give up much of its own freedom.

I began this essay with Tyrus Miller's description of Lewis as an embodiment of the avant-garde's radicalism in the ways in which it merged multiple practices and modes of discourse. He is also, I would add, a living encapsulation of Marshall Berman's well known observation that 'to be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction.... It is to be both revolutionary and conservative' (2010, p. 13). For Berman, to experience modernity is to be 'alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure' whilst simultaneously experiencing an anxiety about the potentially 'nihilistic depths to which many adventures lead' (2010, p. 13). For Lewis the twentieth century presented the arts with an opportunity to be meaningfully involved in the creation of a new social order. Such a view, when it is subsequently combined with a fear that artist may in fact stand to lose a great deal, ultimately pushes Lewis's thought into objectionable areas. Lewis's career, particularly with regard to his cultural theory, not only embodies all that is inventive and transgressive about modernism and the avant-garde, but also its most enduringly problematic elements—those areas of modernist discourse where utopian aesthetics interact, or indeed collide, with political realities. 'How do we *not* think of the state', Lewis asked towards the end of his life, 'when it shakes about under our feet, and is no longer able to hold at bay the primitive chaos, man's dread of which is its most obvious, if not its only, excuse for existing' (1984, p. 69).

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