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# INDIVIDUALITY AND MASS PRODUCTION: *THE REVENGE FOR LOVE* (1937) AND THE GROTESQUE COMMODIFIED BODY

*David Cruickshank*

Lewis's employment of the body is both a controversial and a commonplace topic in critical responses to his work. Numerous studies on Lewis, by critics such as Timothy Materer, Kelly Anspaugh, Francesca Orestano, and Robert Chapman, have used the word "grotesque" to describe his satirical, unsettling depictions of the body in both his literature and painting.<sup>1</sup> Yet few critics explain how and why Lewis uses grotesque bodies, and those that do are in frequent disagreement as to whether Lewis's bodies are humorous or horrible.<sup>2</sup> *The Revenge for Love* (1937, henceforth *RL*) although it is not overtly a "bodily" work, nevertheless uses the body to explore the place of the individual (artist) in a shifting interwar society. *RL* follows communist revolutionary Percy Hardcaster, deformed while attempting to escape from a Spanish prison for producing communist propaganda, and his return to London where he meets the impoverished artist Victor Stamp and his partner Margot, who are inadvertently drawn into the intrigue of the London communists. Stamp's decision to give up a job forging van Gogh paintings prompts the fake communists to set him up as a pawn in a diversionary gunrunning operation in Spain. Margot follows Victor, and both apparently die attempting to escape to France.

Critics like Fredric Jameson argue that Lewis's individualist politics, as he expresses them in *RL*, are inherently fascist. Andrzej Gasiorek (2004, 96–97), providing one of the most comprehensive analyses of the grotesque in *RL*, goes so far as to argue that the novel's use of "grotesque modes enables it to mock the scientific jargon in which Marxist rhetoric is couched," degrading their utopian ideals with their instantiation in a debased revolutionary reality. However, I argue that reading the text as an explicitly anti-communist polemic misses the text's much greater concern with *capitalist* systems of control: specifically "mass" culture. Drawing on Paul Edwards's (1998, 130–31) idea that *RL* "is about the impotence of art reduced to a commodity, and the destructiveness of political ideals compromised by self-deception," I argue that *RL* is primarily concerned with the commodification of the *individual* (artist) by the capitalist system, and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of resisting or overthrowing such systems. Capitalism, Lewis argues, turns the very idea of revolution and newness into a product to be sold back to would-be revolutionaries that reinforces the system

they attack. As Joseph Conrad (1925, 90) argued, the masses are “perpetually duped by false appearances” of “whatever political illusion the future may hold”: a manufactured idea that commodifies individual identity, turning people into homogenized demographics.

While Lewis never directly refers to Conrad’s work, he aligns himself with Conrad’s ironizing of revolutionary “action” in a canceled section of a letter to H. G. Wells, where he claims that Wells writes of the

“power, ‘force’ and ‘action’ that has infected so many people today. You, if I may say so, could do this wonderfully well: so could Joseph Conrad. However I myself, am highly qualified to do it, also” (Rose 1963, 301n).

*RL* sheds light on Lewis’s own struggle to find a place for his art in what he saw as a society swayed by popular opinion, manipulated by advertisement, and “infected” by mass media with a mechanical speed and precision that demands the individual become a machine if they hope to compete (Jameson 1979, 4, 21). In *RL*, bodies are converted into assembly lines, cars, and cardboard cut-outs, showing the power that capitalist society possesses over our ability to self-express and self-govern even our own bodily reality. By controlling the body, all expressions of individuality come to be expressions of profit. How can an individual exist within a society dominated by mass production and mass appeal? I will explore how *RL* employs these grotesquely hybrid bodies to make visible this commodification, and what such commodification means for revolutionary action. Lewis’s bodies translate the invisible and inexpressible social pressures into a visual conversion of human into object, embodying this process to defamiliarize it.

We must first determine how Lewis understood and responded to the capitalist and communist ideals he explores throughout *RL*. Despite his repeated protestations in his 1937 autobiography *Blasting and Bombardiering*—contemporaneous with *RL*—that “I am not one of those who believe that either ‘communism’ or ‘fascism’ are in themselves the solution to anything” (16), that “you will look in vain for any propagandist lesson in it. It is as an artist I am writing” (18) and that the suspicion “that an infernal machine was hidden in the midst of the light-hearted mockery of my propaganda was to me fantastic” (115), he nevertheless makes his political stance on capitalism very clear: “

[the death of Gaudier-Brzeska] provoked a lesson of hatred for this soul-less machine, of big-wig money-government, and these masses of half dead people, for whom personal extinction is such a tiny step, out of half-living into no-living, so what does it matter?” (115).

This language of “big-wig money-government,” “soul-less machine,” and “masses” clearly links the ideals of capitalism with the grotesque themes of machine-human hybridization already employed by Lewis in *The Apes of God*

(1930) and *The Wild Body* (1927). Lewis equates the “soul-less machine” of “money-government” with the “masses of half dead people,” to suggest that society’s fixation on money has reduced humans to machines. Individuals are mass-reproduceable, identical, disposable tools of profit: mere unthinking bodies driven by economic demands. The capitalist system evidently entails for Lewis a loss of the individual self, which ceases to have “value” because, unlike the body, it cannot be easily mass-produced. Communism, on the other hand, is theorized by Lewis in a manner that makes it almost indistinguishable from fascism. In *Time and Western Man* (1927, henceforth *TWM*), Lewis states: “

My criticism of ‘democracy’, again, was of ‘democracy’ as it is understood today; and that it was based on the conviction that democracy is neither free, nor permits of freedom. If you must have it, however, it is better to organize unfreedom; so you get communism, another very elastic term, it appears” (1993, 117).

According to Lewis, communism is effectively Stalinism: “organized unfreedom.” It is difficult to determine Lewis’s “real” views on communism because his analysis stretches an already “very elastic term” by his own admission. This stretching of communism into an oppressive regime could be an ironic attack on its utopian revolutionary goals. However, his praise of the organized, mechanical and precise unfreedom of communism, compared with the façade of freedom provided by “democracy,” could very well be sincere: his (brief) praise of Hitler and frequent attacks on the “mindless masses” throughout his work and criticism suggest an infatuation with authoritarianism, with himself as the *authority*. Adding to this, Lewis states that “art is . . . one of the things that revolution is about, and cannot therefore itself be a revolution” (1993, 24).

This might explain Lewis’s strange preoccupation with communism, and especially Marxism, in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926, henceforth *ABR*), a text obsessed with social organization and revolution. Lewis seems to imply that art is the forefront of culture, producing new ways of looking at and interpreting the world, which are then taken up by governments that try, and often fail, to implement that way of understanding via politics and revolutions (1989, 20, 22–23). Marx’s opposition to Hegelianism, and his desire to see people have influence on the world instead of being abstracted from it, would have undoubtedly appealed to a discontented Lewis in its proposition of making politics and philosophy—and indeed art—instrumentalist.

This ambiguity—over the revolutionary potential of communism, its failure to implement its utopian ideals, and Lewis’s use of bodily grotesquery—appears overtly in *RL* via Margot’s encounter with the Spanish dwarf, a “terrible little figure of fun” who employs both horrible and humorous grotesques to simultaneously praise and blame communist

ideals (1991, 296; Gasiorek 2004, 94). Although dwarves have historically been associated with carnivals and comedy, Lewis likely first encountered imagery of dwarves in the grotesque paintings of Diego Velazquez, as well as those of Juan van der Hamen y León and Juan Carreño de Miranda Velasquez during his visit to the Prado in Spain in 1902 (Fletcher 1987, 147–48). As Wolfgang Kayser claims in *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (1957), the ultimate illustration of the unsettling power of the grotesque “can be experienced during a visit to the Prado far more strikingly” (1963, 17). In the Prado’s *Salón de Goya*, however, Lewis would have encountered visions of monsters, apocalyptic scenes, and deformed and mutilated beings: Goya depicts bodies with “distinctly ominous, nocturnal, and abysmal features that frighten and puzzle us” in Kayser’s words, and these unnerving bodies had a major impact on Lewis’s later art and literature, in his fascination with “the *shell*, the *pelt*, the physical behaviour of people.”<sup>3</sup> Kayser argues that the “grotesque fusion of human and non-human”—“masks,” “caricaturely distorted figures,” and “automata”—produces an unsettling ‘estranged world’ in which “instruments . . . overpower their makers” (1963, 16, 39, 183–84). Indeed, Lewis uses the example of a Spanish dwarf not only in *RL* but also to illustrate his conception of satire and the word “grotesque” itself in *Men Without Art* (1934, 111–13).

This dwarf, in a moment of abject horror, picks on Margot “to be his dramatic mother” (*RL*, 265). By invoking imagery of “birth” (*RL*, 266) to suggest that Margot has “repudiated her own offspring—because of its unorthodox anatomy,” the “comedy” of the dwarf’s body becomes permeated with abjection, in the implication that the dwarf—an alien being—is derived from her own flesh. Julia Kristeva traces all acts of repulsion and disgust back to a moment of “primal abjection”: the separation of the baby from the female body, which the baby rejects as not-self (1982, 12–13). Everything that provokes horror is thus a reminder of our assimilation back into the mother’s body. The dwarf, however, reverses this process, undermining the boundaries of Margot’s body by attempting to forcibly return to her womb, turning her into a “foreign girl” (*RL*, 266)—a “childless ‘hermit girl’ [who] had given birth to this joke”—in the process. The body of the dwarf is a category violation, for he is presented as simultaneously childlike and adult, unsettling identity and societal position as both superior or inferior, father or son, at once. The dwarf draws out Margot’s bodily fluids in abject fashion—“Tears! . . . the dwarf had, as it were, drawn blood” (*RL*, 267)—and “to her horror, she found herself *responding*” (*RL*, 268) “out of mechanical sympathy.” The grotesque multiplicity of the dwarf makes her body “mechanical,” responding instinctually, at odds with her logic and reason.

Both Margot and the dwarf are compelled to perform a naturalist role that actually seems against their nature—an “organized unfreedom,” in Lewis’s words—which reveals nature itself to be nothing more than an act

or performance. Mother and child have no natural, biological existence; they are simply part of a system of call-and-response produced by socially determined behavioral roles. Margot must “belong to this system of roaring and spluttering bestial life of flesh and blood” that forces her body to “play her part” against her will: there can be “no escape,” for her body does not actually belong to her, but belongs to the “system” she must necessarily dwell within if she wishes to continue existing. The dwarf’s infiltration of Margot’s body, and his modification of her bodily appearance, bodily functions, and bodily movements to adapt them to his roleplay serves to *translate* social pressures into a physical deformation of the individual’s body, asking us to consider why we do not treat the loss of personal identity as equally absurd and horrible. Lewis marks on Margot and the dwarf’s combined body the inevitable loss of individuality caused by the imposition of bodily roles upon the individual by their relationship with other bodies. Lewis metaphorizes Victor’s conversion from artist to gunrunner, for the sham revolutionaries’ profit, in an unsettlingly bodily manner, physically manifesting the consequences of rule-by-crowd in a grotesque and unfamiliar form.

In addition to this evidently grotesque tradition, Lewis had discovered a different sort of grotesque tradition during his numerous “expeditions” throughout the European continent after having left the Slade School of Art.<sup>4</sup> In 1906, during one such excursion, he arrived in Munich to discover that “the pre-Lenten festivities, or *Fasching*” had begun (O’Keeffe 2000, 64, 66–67). He later arrived in the French town of Le Pouldu “during the boozy aftermath of a *pardon*” in 1907; according to Lewis (1908), “these fetes are essentially *orgies*.”<sup>5</sup> Lewis suggests that the peasant carnival combines both the religious and profane, inverting—and thus challenging—the established order. This “carnavalesque” style of grotesquery, first coined by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1984), is “filled with the spirit of carnival, liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying” (19). This laughter has “not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one” (11–12), undermining horror by turning it into a “gay monster” (151). Bakhtin links the grotesque with the use of the bodily “lower stratum” in medieval satire, which “digs a bodily grave for a new birth” (21). The grotesque body undermines reality, but also allows us “to bring forth something more and better” to replace it. Lewis and Bakhtin were not only near contemporaries; they were informed by similar contexts of Russian revolutionaries and a “Dostoevskian” tradition (Kaye 1999, 1; Meyers 1980, 16; Perrino 1995, 22, 17). Both consequently developed a philosophy of “*the laugh that magnified Falstaff till he grew to be a giant like Pantagruel*,” as Lewis calls it. In 1932, Hugh Gordon Porteus claimed of Lewis’s works that, like “*Rabelais* for example—not one person in ten thousand, possibly, is *capable* of responding” (184); Cyril Connolly, in his 1927 *New Statesman* review, claims the short story “*Sigismund* is a satire on race palmistry, in the best Pantagruelian manner,”

calling Lewis's theory of laughter a "religion of the grotesque" (1927, 358–59, 358).

Lewis was undoubtedly familiar with both the horrible and humorous traditions of the grotesque in literature and visual art, and actively participated in both. In contrast to Margot's horror, the dwarf appears to Victor and the Spaniards as a carnivalesque figure of fun, an "achondro-plastic monster . . . in full and flourishing health" (*RL*, 265) given "the freedom of Spain": a regenerative and all-encompassing body. Yet what they see in him is much the same as what terrifies Margot: his ability to change. The dwarf is "plastic" and thus easily changes shape, form, and role. For example, the dwarf's fooling and childlike behavior suggest a low status, but he is promoted above even "the Spanish officers" (*RL*, 267), whom he subjects to "a broadside of chaffing," "the obscene horseplay of medieval farce" (*RL*, 267) to which "none could object" (*RL*, 265). Once a child, he is now a general, "free to insult or to hector, having paid the price of extreme deformity."<sup>6</sup>

The dwarf defamiliarizes "the normal world, which it took off and insulted" and the idea of the normal citizen, for "it was not only they who had legs." The dwarf reveals the common, animalistic body of all mankind, behind the poses and roles of class and status, and the "deformities" of body and mind that mark us out as individuals. However, although the dwarf moves freely within the system, changing role and shape, the responses his body provokes simply reinforce that system of power and organization, rather than liberate him from it, which constitutes Lewis's primary problem with revolutionary reform. The bodily plasticity of the dwarf reveals the body is unique but changeable, able to move between roles and forms, but therefore easily molded by external forces.

This molding of the body into more "useful" forms is a critical point to Lewis's ambivalence over revolution. The body of Jack Cruze, for example, is "full of an animal life" (*RL*, 93), a "joke cracked by mother nature, the old witch" (*RL*, 94) comparable to "Falstaff" (*RL*, 93), "so natural as to be strange," "a fawn in schoolboy's clothing" (*RL*, 94). As the narrator points out:

"Every man's hand was against him in a sense: but . . . 'a little touch of nature makes the whole world kin'. The only trouble with old jack was that he was rather *more* than a touch. He was a proper handful" (*RL*, 94).

Lewis draws attention here to the dual power of the natural body: it "makes the whole world kin" in its reduction of all human categories to animal, instinctual ones, but in doing so it makes the body "so natural as to be strange" (*RL*, 94) in its collectivist impersonality, as with the "natural" mechanical imagery Lewis employs in *Apes*. The "fawn in schoolboy's clothing" is a comical image but also hints at an impersonation of humanity: that we—the masses—are all animals, tamed and trained by unseen masters to wear clothes and believe we

are individuals because of it. Social structures are revealed as artificial façades that conceal true animal mindlessness, but they are nevertheless very real and necessary to human communal life.

This is also Lewis's criticism of the London Communists: "big untidy gentlemen, of Public School type" (*RL*, 162), and their "imperfectly powdered ladies, their grinning, donnish highbrow Molls—oh, so much more snobbish than any duchess!" Victor and Margot "were not their sort in politics"; their "class of Communism" (*RL*, 162) is supported by "rich business fathers or foxy little doctors as dads," which "oppressed one like the helmet of a policeman." Revolution is sold as an amusement to the bourgeois citizens it attacks, perhaps echoing the themes found in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907). The falseness of the "sham Communist[s]" (*RL*, 196) is not that they are *communists*, but that they are *shams*. Victor claims "do you suppose that these people are *real*?" while Margot senses that "these vivid likenesses of life only existed in her dreaming mind." The world of revolutionary politics appears "shadowy and floating," a fanciful idealization of revolution that has only a "phantom" (*RL*, 163) body: an "infection" as Lewis terms it in his letter. This communist revolution has no material reality, and thus no instantiation in the world. Victor's body is converted into an unsettling "ghost-person," a "shadow-person." This concern with the "unreal" body of the communists is in stark contrast to the visceral reality of the dwarf, a "horrible" visual "hallucination" (*RL*, 268) of the material effects of communism as implementation, and not utopian ideal. The word "hallucination" suggests something unreal yet perceivable, detectable with our senses but not there; a "brutal invasion of the external plane by the internal plane" (*RL*, 288). The idea of communism fails in its implementation, Lewis suggests, because it is an idea that has no reality, for it has been converted into a mass-produced amusement for the consumption of the bourgeoisie.

At this point, it is important to discuss Lewis's interest in "masses": mass production, mass democracy, mass opinion, mass culture. There were many contemporary concerns over the power of crowds and their leaders to dictate minds and governments on a dangerous scale. The Russian Revolution, and later the Spanish Civil War, sparked renewed interest in populist movements, while the First World War's enormous casualties provoked concerns about the power of mass production to convert the individual into something disposable (Pick 1989, 231). As Richard Cork suggests, after "Verdun and the Somme, artists began to develop an understandable obsession" with "mechanical weaponry's capacity for unlimited slaughter" (1994, 10). However, fears over the power of the crowd had permeated the turn of the twentieth century too, chief among them Gustave Le Bon's ironically popular work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895). In it, he claims:



“To-day the claims of the masses . . . amount to nothing less than a determination to utterly destroy society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to that primitive communism which was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilisation” (15).

His work is permeated with fears of regression and degeneration, claiming that “crowds display a singularly inferior mentality . . . they appear to be guided by those mysterious forces which the ancients denominated destiny, nature, or providence” (2012, 8). Lewis refers to Le Bon multiple times in *ABR* and, as such, we might employ him as a useful means of analyzing Lewis’s anxieties surrounding the idea of crowds and popular culture (*ABR*, 192, 120). For example, Lewis’s presentation of the dwarf as a “horrible hallucination” (*RL*, 268) resembles Le Bon’s explanation of crowd behavior through “collective hallucinations,” further stressing the connection between the dwarf’s impersonal and changeable body, and the collective mass-body of revolutionary movements, in which the individual’s body is made equally impersonal and changeable, deformed to suit the needs of the crowd’s “leader” (Lewis 2012, 41).

Lewis expresses a similar sentiment in his midwar work “The Crowd Master” (1914), published in the second and final issue of *BLAST* and left uncompleted, which represented a turning point in Lewis’s views of the individual’s position within society. The narrator states: “The Married Man is the Symbol of the Crowd: his function is to set one going. At the altar he embraces Death” (94): to join the crowd is thus to lose oneself to literal pack mentality. He attacks popular culture’s ability to manufacture and distribute ideas, manipulating the masses for warfare, which appears “like a great New Fashion” (98). Mass production, mass culture, and mass mobilization are all interchangeable means by which the individual is converted into a tool for other people’s uses.

This helps explain Lewis’s conflation of communism and fascism as the same sort of government: he sees both as requiring the subsuming of the individual to mass movements, in which there is no place for independent action. It is too simple to argue that Lewis is merely satirizing communism and revolution from a fascist perspective. Lewis, as “The Enemy” of everyone, presents himself as averse to populist movements in general for their ability to subsume the self to the demands of the “other,” such that the individual’s body is controlled externally and so reduced to savage, mechanical mindlessness as Le Bon feared. In Lewis’s discussion of democracy, communism and revolution in *ABR*—which he terms his “criticism of ‘democracy’” in *TWM*—he in fact (semi-ironically) advocates for communism, not fascism, as a counter for the chaotic “frenzied evolutionary war of the machines,” in which “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” (*ABR*, 23). Lewis here makes the connection between the capitalist mass-production of perpetually

new consumer goods, and the mass production of new and revolutionary ideologies, both for consumption by the masses. Revolution has thus become a popular commodity, a “great New Fashion.” Lewis argues that we are sold new ways of looking at the world in the same way that we are sold any other commodity: each a necessary upgrade to an old, outdated, and insufficient model, but which is itself equally replaceable and disposable once a new and “better” product can be easily produced. Lewis suggests ideology, thought, and individual expression itself have become commodities to be mass-produced and sold, a process of commodification by which living people are organized and converted into a source of profit.

Therefore, rather than seeing a dichotomy between communism and fascism as Gasiorek argues, what emerges from *ABR* is instead a dichotomy between “rule by the masses” and “rule over the masses.” For Lewis, capitalism is the ultimate example of “rule by the masses”: because capitalism must maximize profit, and the most profit comes from appealing to the largest number of people, what the majority want thus determines all production, culture, and value. Capital thus organizes all bodies to produce for the lowest common denominator *and* to be as homogenous as possible, in order to maximize the “value” of a given individual. The artist must appeal to everyone if they are to make enough money to live, which consequently homogenizes art, eliminates individual expression, and renders artistic revolution, the new, and anything that deviates from the norm, unprofitable and thus inexpressible. Lewis argues this process does not occur under either communism or fascism because the masses are respectively “organized” or “ruled,” rather than appealed to, by the state.

This is expressed very directly in *RL* when Victor, desperate for money and unable to find buyers for his paintings, is forced to become a forger of van Gogh paintings for Freddie Salmon and Abershaw, two of the London “communists” profiting from the violence in Spain via gunrunning. Notably, this scene functions as a satire not only of the falseness of revolutionaries but of the capitalist system as well:

For a number of weeks now Stamp had been at work on these counterfeit pictures. He had formulas, by this time, for everything. . . . Why Stamp had a bandage over his ear was because, when they first talked the matter over, they had decided to do a bandaged portrait of the mad master. That would make identification easier. Half the likeness was there, ready-made, once you have the famous bandage over the famous ear. Everyone seeing the familiar square woodenness of these gauche likenesses, and then the famous bandage, would say “Van Gogh!” as soon as they clapped eyes on it. “Look,” they would cry, “where he has cut off his ear!” (*RL*, 226–27)

Salmon had several experts in his pocket who could be relied on, the moment the piece was completed, to cover it with their authority in the

market. Indeed, it was destined for the collection of a specific American, who already had absorbed half a dozen spurious canvases signed “Vincent,” which would almost certainly be joined by Tristy’s little contraption. Three thousand bucks was as good as added to Salmon’s bank balance, for what he planned he planned well. (*RL*, 228)

Forgery is configured as a microcosm of capitalism, which mass produces inferior copies of famous, individual works to appease crowds who look only for “identification”: the “famous bandage over the famous ear.” The brand-name of “half a dozen spurious canvases signed ‘Vincent’” reduces the unique experience of a van Gogh painting to a signature and a severed ear, easily mass-producible symbols and formulas that fail to grasp either van Gogh’s original work or his artistic self-expression, but which can poorly substitute both and turn a profit of “three thousand bucks” from a “specific American.” The word “absorbed,” signifying abject slime and sludge, draws attention to the alien mindlessness of capitalist systems. Individual art is “absorbed” into the system of mass media all too easily, in an entirely inhuman manner, recalling primitive single-celled organisms engulfing their prey. The “specific American” becomes paradoxically nonspecific: an amorphous, nameless, and faceless mass that stands in for the impersonality of art as a consumer industry.

The need for profit in art turns living humans into cheap, mass-(re) producible objects that obscure or destroy the uniqueness of the original. And in this mindless reproduction of other people’s individuality, Victor and the other forgers are also denied their individual expression. Victor’s fellow forger Isaac Whol “turned out with exemplary neatness forgery after forgery” (*RL*, 229), “human material” reduced to a “perfect, reliable machine.” The forger-artists are converted into tools of mass reproduction in this “fake-masterpiece factory” (*RL*, 226). By reducing individuality to something physically reproducible, and thus profitable, commodification paradoxically destroys the human individuality it is selling. To Salmon, Victor is a “*crétin*” because he does not reproduce exact copies, expressing individuality rather than conformity. Salmon is identified only as a “businessman” (*RL*, 229–30), a “benefactor” who sees only “big money” in his “bank balance” for reducing artists to laborers in his “factory.” Salmon is configured in the same manner as Lady Fredigonde is in *The Apes of God*, as one of the art patron “Apes” who reduce the artist to a mere popular culture reproduction machine, not someone capable of capturing and responding to the mechanical reality they are subjected to. Salmon even has “a really enormous false bottom to his face” (*RL*, 231). This “bogus jaw” renders him equally as mass-produced and fake as the forgeries he commissions, embodying both the false speech at the heart of revolution, and the oppressive mass-falsification of capitalism. Lewis’s interest in “false bottoms” here—and elsewhere in *The Childermass* (1928) and “The Human Age” series—suggests

that revolution is not an end in itself, but merely a surface-level façade disguising a much deeper system of capitalist commodification and deception.

The horror at the heart of *RL* is that Victor's revolutionary spirit is itself commodified, converted from a human desire for freedom into a valuable slogan:

“an animal amongst men. . . . For better or for worse these broad and hostile shoulders belonged to nature, with her big impulsive responses, with her violent freedom, with her animal directness: unconservative, illogical, and true to her elemental self. He subscribed therefore to the larger scheme” (*RL*, 236).

Victor is an “animal,” like Cruz, who must express his individuality with “animal directness.” Notably, Victor “belonged to nature.” “Nature” is merged with capitalist systems, made “unconservative” and “illogical,” with “impulsive response” that more closely describe the automatic, mindless absorption of art by the “American.” The “her” pronouns of this passage present him as totally submissive to the control of external, mechanical forces. It is “*her* violent freedom” (emphasis mine), not Victor's, that is described here; he is a slave to his own ideals, which are themselves not his own, but systematic. He has “subscribed” to “the larger scheme,” as if revolution were merely a magazine subscription—his revolutionary spirit is expressed only in transactional, consumerist language, incorporated as part of the system that controls his body to extract profit. Even as Victor takes his forgery and “put[s his] foot through it!” (*RL*, 239) in an assertion of individuality that “this is a lousy job, . . . and that just about expresses my feelings about it” (*RL*, 240), this act of self-expression is itself exploited by Abershaw, who thinks he “can find him a type of work that he will like even less” (*RL*, 245). Victor's desire for action allows him and Margot to be tricked into a fake gunrunning operation, and killed, to secure Salmon and Abershaw's profit. Forgery thus acts as a physical metaphor for the way in which capitalism eliminates individuals through commodifying them. In this factory, identities are physically and visually converted into mass-reproducible symbols that can be advertised and sold back to people, who consequently identify themselves in, and through, the products they buy. The “familiar square woodenness of these gauche likenesses” render identity inseparable from the commodities that must be bought to support and express it, reducing the individual to merely a source of profit, either by mass reproducing their own identity until it ceases to be “their own,” or by laboring to mindlessly reproduce other people's identities, losing their own in the process.

In Jameson's words, in Lewis's earlier works “for a brief moment, indeed, the mechanical stands as the figure for the collective” (1979, 106–7). I argue that this is not a “brief moment”: the mechanized body is a frequent metaphor used by Lewis to express his disgust at capitalist mass-production, connecting

the aforementioned “half-dead masses” with a “mass” production that strips people of individuality by endlessly reproducing them until they are crowds in themselves. When Victor and Margot attempt to flee to France in the car, this all-encompassing, mass-produced body is made literal and visually affronting:

Above all she detested this charging beast, that muscular machine. Pounding beneath her, it carried her forward, she knew, by means of unceasing explosions. Very well. But in this act she must co-operate. To devour miles and to eat up minutes, in gulp after gulp, use must be made of *her* organs, so it seemed, as well as its own. Under her feet she had a time-eating and space-guzzling automaton, rather than a hackneyed means of transport, however horridly high-powered. . . . Victor and this brute were in collusion, he had deceived her for its sake! She disliked its psychological habits even more than its physiological habits, which was saying quite a lot, the latter being disagreeable enough in all conscience. (*RL*, 314)

The car becomes a “charging beast, that muscular machine,” “pounding beneath her” as it “devour[s] miles and eat[s] up minutes, gulp after gulp” using “*her* organs, so it seemed, as well as its own.” Not only does the car come alive, given a living body of “muscles” and “organs” as a “space-guzzling automaton,” it also begins to “devour” Margot, fusing her with the machine, which dehumanizes and overpowers her, the “instruments . . . overpower[ing] their makers” to use Kayser’s terms (1963, 39, 183–84). By converting the car into an all-consuming, falsifying monster, the text inverts the reader’s conventional relationship with machines to expose how machinery controls and limits our means of expression.

This phenomenon also “turned him [Stamp] back” (*RL*, 314) into “this stranger called Stamp,” the primal “original” yet “foreign Stamp.” The rush of scientific progress, hurtling into the future at automobile speeds, is in fact revealed as a regression. When Victor emerges, he is “not quite himself, of course, but a passable imitation.” The imposition of mechanical movements upon Victor has killed and replaced him with a primitive reproduction. He is a forgery of free will and personality, disguising an unthinking “automaton” replica, just as Fritz Lang’s 1927 film *Metropolis* features an automaton stealing a living woman’s appearance, and killing her, to reproduce a dead woman. Incredible advances in technology are used in the service of violence and barbarism inflicted upon the human body, as they were during the First World War and soon would be again. Such commodification—exploiting revolutionary ideals to make individuals into reproducible (and disposable) parts of a social machine—causes the destruction of individuality, originality, and *difference*. These machines are capable of mass producing not only the human body but reality itself:

Meanwhile trees, rocks, and telegraph-poles stood up dizzily before her and crashed down behind. They were held up stiffly in front of her astonished eyes, then snatched savagely out of the picture. Like a card-world, clacked cinematographically through its static permutations by the ill-bred fingers of a powerful conjurer, everything stood upon end and then fell flat. He showed you a tree—a cardboard tree. Fix your eye upon this! He said. Then with a crash it vanished. Similarly with a segment of cliff. Similarly with a telegraph-pole. (*RL*, 314)

From the perspective of the car, “trees, rocks, and telephone poles” are “held up stiffly . . . then snatched savagely out of the picture” “cinematographically.” In *TWM*, Lewis claims “these democratic masses could be governed without a hitch by suggestion and hypnotism—Press, Wireless, Cinema”; for Lewis, mass media is an extension of commodification from the body to the mind, a way of profiting from thoughts and feelings by mass-producing symbols people can “identify” with. This intimately weds their identity with the capitalist system by turning it into nothing more than a set of reproducible objects. As Sara Darius argues, for figures like Maeterlinck, Marinetti, and Proust, the “inanimate becomes animate; the immobile becomes mobile” through the automobile’s speed, allowing mankind to control the movement of space and time (2001, 110–14). In *RL*, however, mechanization produces “a card-world” of “static permutations” that “stood up on end and then fell flat.” The repetition of “similarly” here reinforces the homogenization of reality through its conversion into a movie set: a “cardboard tree,” “similarly with a segment of cliff,” “similarly with a telegraph pole” turn the world into something that can be packed up, sold, and reassembled to meet the various ideological demands of the cinema’s massive audiences.

Lewis thus suggests revolution is impossible because it is *profitable*: it can be printed on T-shirts, turned into movies, exploited by advertising to “fix your eyes upon” products, and thus normalized as part of everyday society, destroying its revolutionary potential. In *ABR*, Lewis even claims that “‘revolutionary’ dogma [is] daily manufactured in tons by the swarming staff specially trained for that work”; resistance is commodified and turned into a profitable symbol, perpetuating the commodification of individuality it supposedly attacks. To visualize this idea, we might also turn to Lewis’s paintings, such as *The Crowd (Revolution)* (1915) (figure 1) and the later *The Surrender of Barcelona* (1934–37) (figure 2). Speaking of *The Crowd*, Paul Edwards notes the “circular treadmills . . . where their fellows toil in unchanging routine” (2000, 134). These were likely inspired by the “wheel at Carisbrooke [which] imposes a set of movements upon the donkey inside it” (*WB*, 149), which Lewis mentions in “Inferior Religions,” equating the “imposition” of “a set of movements” on a mindless laboring animal with capitalism’s control of the individual’s body, as

we previously saw in the “fake masterpiece factory.” Although the geometric figures of the painting carry red flags reminiscent of communist revolutionaries, the shape of this united mass takes on the appearance of girders or scaffolding, as if they are holding up, or blending into, the buildings that surround them and enslave their fellows. This is opposed to the imagery of Lewis’s contemporary Luigi Russolo’s futurist painting *The Revolt* (1911). According to Cork, Russolo demonstrates the futurist “unstoppable ‘lines of force’ carving through [the city’s] nocturnal streets”; a wedge of people smashing the buildings with their wildly opposed shapes and colors (Cork 1994, 16). Lewis departs from such depictions of revolution overthrowing machines and buildings. Instead, his revolutionaries *become* them (Normand 1989, 10–18). Both the crowd and the observer are tricked into imposing the structures of control they overthrow on their own bodies.

Lewis’s *Surrender of Barcelona* (1934–37), produced around the same time as *RL*, demonstrates that these images were still part of Lewis’s consciousness at the time. In *Barcelona*, the helmets of the knights are faceless: the individuality of the conquerors is suppressed by their military uniform. Lewis’s figures are dehumanized and rendered mechanical. The painting leads the eye downward with its long, vertical lines produced by spears, banners, and lances, and the buildings creating a seamless transitional movement between the towers at the top, and the armored and faceless knights who dominate the lower quarter. Between these two extremes, the victorious figures move upward into the city and slowly disappear from view, devoured by the geometry of the buildings just as the car “devours” Margot and incorporates her organs into its own. Like *The Crowd*, the banners proclaiming victory over the city merge with the forms of the buildings: they too are subsumed by its architecture, reproducing the forms they conquer. This is an expression of the complicated distinction Lewis draws between the material “surface” of things, “the shell, the pelt,” and the visual façades that obscure it.

Lewis had already called for a degradation of sight in 1922, claiming “the eye, in itself, is a stupid organ, or shall we say a stolid one,” and in his words, “we are all, in a sense even, so thoroughly hidden from each other because we see each other. It is more difficult to exercise our imagination when the eye is operating” (1922, 36–37). We accept unquestioningly what the eye sees as normal, and this is precisely why Lewis turned to the grotesque as a means to cut through and defamiliarize the visual world. Lewis uses this grotesque bodily imagery, both on canvas and in his literature, to translate the invisible and inexpressible commodification of identity into something visually affronting and strange, manifesting the “architecture” behind revolution—the structures that enable it and society to exist—by embodying it in unfamiliar flesh. Indeed, in the center of “Barcelona,” brown and almost unrecognizable, is a hanged man, rendered invisible by the more vibrant shapes and colors surrounding him,

which engage with and draw the eye away far more readily. As with Victor and Margot, Lewis suggests that this is the fate of the individual within the crowd: lost among banners and slogans, obscured by visual propaganda and façades. Although its aims may be utopian, revolution is incorporated into the system it attacks, and the revolutionary individual is exploited, killed, and forgotten by the masses. Lewis is not anti-communist, but anti-revolutionary because, in his words, revolutionary ideology “disguises the squalor of the capitalist factory beneath the epileptic rhetoric of action” (*ABR*, 140). This façade of affirmative action can be manufactured and sold to revolutionaries, just as the image of van Gogh’s “famous ear” is endlessly reproduced and sold to art collectors. Commodification turns revolution into merely another demographic.

Gasiorek argues that “*The Revenge for Love* is deeply hostile to socialist politics in general and to revolutionary politics in particular” (2004, 91). In contrast, however, Jameson argues “the doomed lovers of *The Revenge for Love* wish for nothing better than to be left alone” like “the aging Lewis himself, longing for a world stilled of the conflicts of the political” (1979, 37). But Lewis’s approach to communism, and his very clear attacks on capitalist democracy, undermine these claims. Gasiorek states that “the natural was ‘real,’ the revolutionary ‘unreal’” in *RL*, but through the car, the fake masterpiece factory, and his art, Lewis suggests that “the natural” is itself merely a fabrication of capital, as all “social” ideas are (Gasiorek 2004, 91). Margot, toward the end of the novel, says “nature” (*RL*, 275) is a “sunny dream . . . too sunny altogether,” “too artless,” “too empty.” Capital, in its quest for more, reveals reality itself as something unreal, like the “cinematographically” real trees, cliffs and telegraph poles, produced by social norms. New developments in art and industry return people to that primal, mindless and automatic world of nature, and the painful-satiric bodies Lewis employs reveal capitalism as a form of “grotesque time,” in which past and future merge, social progress becomes stagnation and degeneration, and “New Fashions” return us to the savage and mindless past, “before the dawn of civilisation” in Le Bon’s terms. Primal, “real” nature was always something artificial and mechanical for Lewis, from *The Wild Body* to *Apes*, and capitalist mass-productive society is merely a reproduction of this fact in a “new,” or rather disguised, form. As Lewis complains, “it costs a lot to be an artist in Great Britain”: to represent reality is to compete with films and novels that can reshape reality into a better, more interesting, and more profitable truth (1992, 7). His grotesque bodies show the need for revolution in the tragic image of Margot and Victor penniless, unable to express their individuality without losing it to mass appeal and mass reproduction, but they also show revolution’s impossibility in fulfilling its goals, by turning Victor and Margot into a mere “decoy-duck” (*RL*, 330) for profit (Materer 1976, 122). Lewis’s hostility is directed toward a capitalist system that constrains individuals by making them into reproducible, disposable objects.



*RL*'s grotesquery performs a conversion of idea into form in its use of the body. The machine-hybrids, false communists, and unsettlingly grotesque dwarves contained within the text physically and visually embody Lewis's more abstract criticisms of mass culture, revolution, and the mechanization of reality. The text itself draws attention to this fact in Victor's own transformation into a "symbol" (*RL*, 318). Victor is "*the symbolic man*," a "hunted symbol . . . and men were out with their shotguns to shoot it up" (*RL*, 318). Victor's bodily existence is commodified, a symbol like van Gogh's signature and ear. In being commodified, Victor loses all specific identity, becoming simply "*the symbolic man*," a conversion of idea into physical, bodily form that can be violently hunted down and killed. Yet, in becoming a symbol, Lewis allows Victor's body to metaphorically replace the abstract idea of capitalist commodification with a *real*, physical transformation of human into machine, product and profit that is unfamiliar and affronting to the eye. This is a productive means for analyzing the effect of the grotesque body as a way to "see symbols" in flesh, bypassing "stolid" vision, and remains all the more important today for decoding how corporations continue to exploit minority, queer, and other non-normative identities. Bodies in Lewis's work and art are both the site of oppression and revelation, for they force the reader to recognize the loss of individuality under capitalism by metaphorizing this as a grotesque conversion of human into machine, defamiliarizing our capitalist society that has normalized its transformation of people into products as a perfectly natural and everyday occurrence. Lewis's bodies, in both art and literature, embody the real but unseen violence capitalism visits upon individual identity.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 For examples of analyses of Lewis that employ the grotesque, see Materer (1976, 39–40); Chapman (1973, 55); Orestano (2001, 170–71, 173); Anspaugh (1995, 129, 132).
- 2 For more discussion of the historical "splitting" of the tradition of the grotesque into "Bakhtinian" humour and "Kayserian" horror, see Chao (2010, 169); and Harpham (1982, xvi).
- 3 See Rose (1963, 191); Lewis (2004, 157); O’Keeffe (2000, 46). See O’Keeffe (2000); Meyers (1980), for more detailed descriptions of Lewis’s early life and career.
- 4 Wyndham Lewis, "AM autobiographical fragment," August 17, 1908, Wyndham Lewis collection, #4612, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, box 3, folder 13; see also O’Keeffe (2000, 88).
- 5 See also the "Feast of Fools" tradition described by Bakhtin (1984, 426).