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**WYNDHAM LEWIS'S
CULTURAL CRITICISM AND THE INFRASTRUCTURES
OF PATRONAGE**

BY NATHAN O'DONNELL

Reviewed by Leon Betsworth, London College of Contemporary Art

What is the value and status of an artist and their his work in a changing world? It is a question whose answer Wyndham Lewis pursued in various ways throughout much of his life. It was an impassioned preoccupation, interrogating the professional and economic environment of the artist, culminating in a corpus of critical work that both inspired and provoked contemporaries. Undertaken over a period of more than forty years, Lewis's steadfast inquiry produced some of the most astute, incisive, far-reaching, sometimes confounding and exasperating but always interesting critical investigations into the nature and status of art and the artist in the twentieth century. The sheer scale of Lewis's critical output is a daunting testament that only a handful of Lewis scholars can claim to have come to grips with completely.

Ably picking through the trail of Lewis's dogged pursuit in his book *Wyndham Lewis's Cultural Criticism and the Infrastructures of Patronage* (2020),¹ Nathan O'Donnell (Research Fellow at the Irish Museum of Modern Art) pieces together and elucidates the complex contemporary contexts through which Lewis established and defended his respective critical positions. Assessing the work chronologically—from Lewis's earliest avant-garde salvos in *Blast* (1914–1915) and his two other editorial projects, *The Tyro* (1921–1922) and *The Enemy* (1927–1929), through *The Caliph's Design* (1919) and *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), to his work for the BBC and *The Listener* (1946–1951) as well as an array of other writings in papers, periodicals, and broadcasts—O'Donnell assembles a picture of the recalcitrant, adversarial firebrand, proffering up for us a diachronic image of the “critical Lewis,” as it were: a dynamic, shifting “portrait of the artist” revealed through his prodigious art and cultural criticism.

The first chapter, “Professionals and Amateurs: Bloomsbury, *Blast*, and *The Caliph's Design*,” establishes the crux around which Lewis's critical faculties were so often exercised. Revisiting the infamous split with Roger Fry, O'Donnell contextualizes Lewis's early art criticism through the rise of the ideology of professionalism and the new vilification of the amateur. Understanding the schism between the two men not as rooted in a frivolous squabble between

two irreconcilable personalities, as familiar accounts would have it, but rather as more significantly representing “two opposing accounts of the role of the professional” in English artistic society, O’Donnell suggests that the rift constituted a fundamental “contest for mastery of the professional terrain, and for control of the professional *market*” (22). It is here that O’Donnell introduces what he describes as “a wider chasm in English cultural life between a model of the professions predicated upon a traditional liberal-humanist ideal and one influenced by the more transparent, rationalized, and openly capitalist concepts of professionalism being imported at this time from the United States” (19). This antithetical chasm is a central contextualizing force throughout the book, and it is from within his early wrestling with it, and his concomitant assessments of Fry, Bell, and the “Chelso-Bloomsberries” as “irredeemable amateurs,” that O’Donnell traces Lewis’s subsequent philosophical and political development as well as his inimitable rebarbative style (22).

In chapter 2, “Art and Criticism in the Machine Age: *The Tyro*,” O’Donnell explores Lewis’s second editorial venture, *The Tyro* (1921–22), alongside what is the first extended critical examination of Lewis’s unfinished novel *The Life of a Tyro* (or “Hoodopip,” as the sixty typescript pages are titled), which Lewis intended to be a much larger satirical science fiction project. O’Donnell provides a fascinating and compelling reading of this extraordinary work in which Lewis postulates a future society of “Tyros” living in caste formation on a distant planet called “O” and whose lives are regimented by a nefarious militant elite.

Much ground is covered in this wide-ranging analysis, beginning with influences on Lewisian thought from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Georges Sorel, Syndicalism, and Henry Ford to the effects of postwar industrial reforms, particularly those advocated in F. W. Taylor’s 1911 publication *The Principles of Scientific Management*, and the devastating material effects of “Taylorism” on industrial workers. O’Donnell suggests that with his Tyros “Lewis was reflecting at a critical and satirical level upon the processes of industrial rationalization and the corporatization of state and business interests which had gathered pace in England during the war” (12). What O’Donnell astutely draws out here is the uneasy ambivalence of Lewis’s depiction of this rationalized world of the Tyro where “on the one hand Lewis seemed to celebrate their brutality” and, on the other, gives “an unmistakably menacing, nightmarish quality to their representation” (75). Indeed, as he points out, the prototype of a brutalized future found in the unfinished *The Life of a Tyro* anticipates the argument more thoroughly realized in Lewis’s later work *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), which postulates an authoritarian future society divided along occupational lines and ruled and regulated through a sophisticated propaganda machine.

In the next chapter, “‘I Am Planning a Small Review’: *The Enemy and the General Strike*,” O’Donnell chronicles Lewis’s developing critical-political

position as it was borne out and consolidated in his third editorial venture, *The Enemy* (1927–29), and the associated publication project, the Arthur Press. O'Donnell identifies a distinct political reorientation in Lewis's polemic after 1926. Picking up on Lewis's disavowal of the previous years to 1918 as "waste," O'Donnell cites the 1926 General Strike as marking both the end of an era (Lewis's postwar "sickness") and the completion of his "political education" (106). What O'Donnell does well by this marker is thoroughly examine Lewis's retractions and revisions of previously held critical positions as presented in *The Art of Being Ruled*; he highlights in stark relief the extent of Lewis's political and philosophical journey to this point. Documented herein also are the shifting parameters of what Lewis considered "revolutionary" in art and society as his suspicions about the fashionable avant-garde emerged. Reading the "Appendix" to Lewis's long critical essay "The Revolutionary Simpleton" (1927), O'Donnell argues that the protofascistic elements of *The Art of Being Ruled* ought not to be conflated with Lewis's later engagements with Hitlerite fascism but rather understood as marking "the end of a particular variant of Lewis's utopianism" and his previous indifference to the economic and material realities of the "mass- or herd-animal man" (136–37).

The final two chapters look at Lewis's shifting engagement with art institutions and other professional groupings responsible for promoting art and supporting artists in England. The economic realities of the post-slump 1930s and what O'Donnell calls Lewis's "more pragmatic approach to art criticism" is the subject of the fourth chapter, "Public Money Is Private Money': Paying for the Arts in the 1930s." In a period of declining opportunities for artists (not least for himself), O'Donnell finds Lewis focusing his attention more keenly on the limited and limiting infrastructures of patronage and the role they play in determining the kinds of art produced in society. Through a series of essays, published outside of specialized art publications, on architecture and design, as well as several radio and television appearances, O'Donnell contends that as Lewis continued his political reorientation, he began to "cautiously cultivate" a new interest in the "human scale in art." O'Donnell identifies a burgeoning liberalism in Lewis's criticism, quite contrary to his earlier championing of the aesthetics of the machine and, indeed, the currents of the time.

Despite the politically charged fervor of the 1930s and the appearance of clusters of engagé artists, poets, and writers, O'Donnell finds that Lewis's "faith in the 'individualism' of the artist and the autonomy of the artwork were irreconcilable with such collectivized activities" (143). Lewis was now, O'Donnell says, "focused on the personalized and imprecise, what he called 'the scribble' as opposed to the streamlined aesthetic of a mechanized late capitalist society. The work of the individual artist—the brushstroke and the sketch—came to seem to him far more valuable than the hard linear precision that had been the object of Vorticism" (145). Throughout the chapter, O'Donnell

demonstrates the value of his approach in accounting for and explicating Lewis's shifting politics via his criticism rather than, say, through his reactionary pamphleteering of the period. O'Donnell argues persuasively, for instance, that Lewis's political reorientation ought to be understood as more complex than a "left-right-left" progression and that, further, "elements of Lewis's humanism are in fact inextricable from his growing interest in Hitlerite fascism" (164).

The fifth and final chapter, "The Best in the Worst of All Possible Worlds': Lewis and the Institutions," looks at Lewis's long-standing and constructive relationship with the BBC and his art criticism in *The Listener*. It is here that O'Donnell finds Lewis at his most exacting and penetrating—interrogating the postwar economic and professional environment for the working artist, as well as mounting enthusiastic encomiums for a talented crop of new painters in postwar London. The Lewis portrayed here is a vital and necessary voice. In a particularly fascinating piece of analysis on Lewis's criticism of the newly created Arts Council, O'Donnell not only draws out unexpected (and unacknowledged) parallels and sympathies that Lewis shared with certain Bloomsbury acolytes (John Maynard Keynes in particular); he also shows that Lewis's reservations about such state-led schemes were prophetic, incisive, pertinent, and still relevant to the operations of the council today. Ultimately, O'Donnell boldly argues that this later criticism "provides a key for reading the whole body of Lewis's work, and portrays, as against the popular figure of the malicious reactionary, a very different Wyndham Lewis" (186).

For scholars new to Wyndham Lewis, O'Donnell's book provides a useful critical Baedeker to the scope, complexity, and cultural contexts of Lewisian thought while adding nuance and forging new pathways of understanding by bringing unpublished archival material to light and providing new readings for those scholars more familiar with the artist. This is a valuable and highly recommended resource that lays the ground for future assessments of Wyndham Lewis's complex body of critical work.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Nathan O'Donnell, *Wyndham Lewis's Cultural Criticism and the Infrastructures of Patronage* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 264 pages.