



Wyndham Lewis And The Philosophy Of Art In Early Modernist Britain: Creating A Political Aesthetic (Studies in Art History)

David A. Wragg

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This study offers a reconsideration of Wyndham Lewis's work up to the 1930s, based on a wide-ranging engagement with theories of modernity and modernism, against a "background" of Enlightenment thought. The author, David Peters Corbett, Reader in History of Art, University of York. There was a time not so long past when it was possible to read the whole of the book-length critical literature on Wyndham Lewis in a week or ten days. As late as 1978 there was no bibliography of the writings, no biography, and little scholarship that did more than sketch the beginnings of an understanding of Lewis's literary output, his thinking about art and society, and his historical importance. The situation was even less developed for Lewis's visual art. Walter Michel's "Wyndham Lewis of 1971" was and remains an important achievement, but it was a lonely monument. There was a story current that if one ordered certain of the more arcane Lewis items at the British Library, one's slip was returned with 'destroyed by enemy action' marked on it. Perhaps the story is apocryphal, but at the time it seemed to possess a strong symbolic rightness. Lewis's own action as 'the Enemy' of the 1920s and 30s, his voluminous discursive writing in politics, aesthetics, sociology and philosophy, and in what we would now call cultural studies, and his apparent determination to reject not only his literary and artistic peers but the entire culture, ensured that he appeared in books, articles and degree courses, if at all, as a quirky and marginal figure. From 1979, when Frederic Jameson's "Fables of Aggression: The Modernist as Fascist" appeared as the first book-length study by a major and influential critic, this situation began rapidly to change. From being a figure on the margins Lewis came to seem increasingly central to new readings of modernism and its complexities as work in both literature and art history perceived Lewis anew as a major figure whose career and work occupied a place at the centre of our understanding of the art and literature of the early twentieth century. The culmination of this burst of research and publication - which included the scholarly editions of Lewis's works published by Black Sparrow press in California, Alan Munton's edition of the Complete Poems and Plays (1979), two biographies, and a host of literary critical studies - has been the exceptional work of research and interpretation contained in Paul Edwards's "Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer" (2000). Edwards's profound Lewis scholarship allowed him to provide a synoptic but detailed account of Lewis's entire oeuvre, which it would be hard to imagine bettered. In the wake of this book's appearance - when it was partnered by Paul O'Keeffe's excellent biography (also 2000) - there is now a feeling that Lewis has no further need for detailed explications of his ideas, theories and attitudes. He is now established, the groundwork has been meticulously done, and the seriousness and importance of his work can be assumed. The way is clear for studies of Lewis that investigate his relationship to specific issues, or which concentrate on particular elements in his work. David Wragg's substantial and scrupulously argued study of Lewis in relation to 'Enlightenment' and the concepts of rationality and the avant-garde is the first book to fulfil the promise of that possibility. Wragg's study takes a set of issues that are central to the understanding of modernity and literary and artistic modernism and situates Lewis's work at their heart. The Lewis who emerges from his productive context is a thinker, writer and visual artist whose oeuvre might 'form part of a critical manual on "enlightened" behaviour' (Chapter 6), and whose diagnoses of the world of modernity have continued relevance both for our understanding of his time and for our own analyses of our own lives and experience as citizens of enlightenment. Lewis is situated anew in the context of one of the most profound and compelling debates about modernity and modern life, and in that context he thrives. In undertaking this positioning and

working through the discussion in precise detail, David Wragg's book marks a new and productive departure for studies of Lewis.

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