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| BLAST (1914-1915) |
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| *BLAST* was an early modernist little magazine edited by Wyndham Lewis in London. Not to be confused with Alexander Berkman’s San Francisco-based anarchist newspaper *The Blast* (1916-17), *BLAST* proclaimed the arrival of the English avant-garde movement Vorticism. *BLAST* ran for two volumes, appearing in July 1914 and July 1915, before the First World War forced it to end. The magazine’s two instalments represent a key example of pre-war avant-garde periodical culture, and are recognised as exemplifying, through the differing commitments of their various contributors, some of the overlapping alliances and antagonisms of London’s early modernist socio-cultural scene. Key contributions include Lewis’s play *Enemy of the Stars* (1914) and stories by Ford Madox Ford (‘The Saddest Story’, 1914) and Rebecca West (‘Indissoluble Matrimony’, 1914). In promoting Vorticism, *BLAST* championed an intellectual aesthetic based on contemplative detachment and foregrounded inter-subjective relations. Both volumes of *BLAST* were heavily illustrated, featuring visual contributions from Jessie Dismorr, Jacob Epstein, Frederick Etchells, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Spencer Gore, Cuthbert Hamilton, Jacob Kramer, Lewis himself, C. R. W. Nevinson, William Roberts, Helen Saunders, Dorothy Shakespear, and Edward Wadsworth. |
| *BLAST* was an early modernist little magazine edited by Wyndham Lewis in London. Not to be confused with Alexander Berkman’s San Francisco-based anarchist newspaper *The Blast* (1916-17), *BLAST* proclaimed the arrival of the English avant-garde movement Vorticism and made a minor celebrity of its editor. It was widely reviewed but also widely questioned. Some reviewers responded to *BLAST* enthusiastically, praising its brio; others, among them J. C. Squire, dismissed it as so many juvenile shenanigans. The experiments that fed into the magazine originated in the Rebel Art Centre, the venue financed by Kate Lechmere in which Vorticism was incubated under Lewis’s direction. For some commentators *BLAST* is itself the best example of Vorticism at work: communal yet committed to an individualist programme; dialogic yet boldly rhetorical; and organized by a controlling, central figure (Lewis) yet fragmented and at times assembled on the hoof. *BLAST* ran for two volumes, appearing in July 1914 and July 1915, before the First World War caused it to end.  The magazine’s two instalments represent a key example of pre-war avant-garde periodical culture, and are recognised as exemplifying, through the differing commitments of their various contributors, some of the overlapping alliances and antagonisms of London’s early modernist socio-cultural scene. In promoting Vorticism, *BLAST* championed an intellectual aesthetic based on contemplative detachment and foregrounded inter-subjective relations. Both volumes of *BLAST* were heavily illustrated, featuring visual contributions from Jessie Dismorr, Jacob Epstein, Frederick Etchells, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Spencer Gore, Cuthbert Hamilton, Jacob Kramer, Lewis himself, C. R. W. Nevinson, William Roberts, Helen Saunders (listed as ‘Sanders’), Dorothy Shakespear (listed as ‘Shakespeare’), and Edward Wadsworth.  The first volume, whose audacious pink cover has the word ‘BLAST’ written across it diagonally in capitals, includes Lewis’s Expressionist drama *Enemy of the Stars* (1914) and his obituary of the artist Spencer Gore (1878-1914); poems by Ezra Pound; Ford Madox Ford’s ‘The Saddest Story,’ which became the opening of *The Good Soldier* (1915); Rebecca West’s short story ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ (1914); Edward Wadsworth’s review of Wassily Kandinsky’s *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1911); and statements of Vorticist principles by Lewis, Pound, and Gaudier-Brzeska. The volume concludes pragmatically with advertisements for the little magazines *Poetry* and *The Egoist* (which serialized Lewis’s novel *Tarr* in 1916 and 1917), as well as for publications by John Lane and for *The Yellow Book*. The first volume also contains a supportive notice ‘To Suffragettes,’ whose combativeness is praised, and the famous ‘Blast’ and ‘Bless’ lists – inspired in part by Guillaume Apollinaire’s *L’Antitradition futuriste* (1913) – which teasingly present those individuals and tendencies the Vorticists, here mainly Lewis and Pound, deplored and admired. Reprimanded figures and phenomena include the lingering influence of a ‘vampiric’ Victorian England; a sensationalist, maudlin France; bohemian aesthetes and all those who take themselves too seriously, including pretentious professionals; guffawing, unironic humour; and the bourgeoisie. On the ‘approved’ side are England’s industrial prowess; hairdressers (a metaphorical stand-in for the Vorticist artist, who is meant to bring order to modernity’s unruliness); satire, especially as represented by such figures as Jonathan Swift and William Shakespeare; and the French Revolution. In between, it is suggested, sits the Vorticist, an acerbic, sagacious, polemically aggressive, and trans-valuative character who seeks through a geometric, specifically English art to register modernity’s effects upon the psyche without glorifying its industrial and mechanical excesses.  The details of what the Vorticist artist was meant to be, and the kind of art envisaged by the Vorticist aesthetic, emerge unpredictably throughout both volumes of the magazine. At the beginning of the first is an announcement (‘Long Live the Vortex!’) that defiantly outlines Vorticism’s objectives. Here we learn that Vorticism is to be artistically revolutionary, individualistic, committed to making new states of mind, metamorphic, anti-Establishment, and in conflict with ‘Marinetteism’ (Futurist technophilia). Lewis’s rhetoric declares that whereas the Futurist drools impulsively over fast-moving cars, for instance, the Vorticist rationally deliberates the significance of the automobile as a subject for modern art without gushing over its newness. After this statement come two Vorticist manifestos exploring, through innovative typography and occasionally esoteric language, the movement’s playful nuances, its Englishness, and its approving account of majestic industrial architecture. These sections of the magazine provide a gradually more detailed account of Vorticism’s opposition to Italian Futurism, a movement constructed throughout *BLAST* as an important precursor whose ideas nevertheless must be challenged.  Lewis’s essay-sequence ‘Vorteces [*sic*] and Notes’ stresses the inadequacy of imitative, as opposed to transformative, aesthetics, calling for an art distanced from non-representational abstraction, on the one hand, and sentimental naturalism or passive impressionism (a category that included Futurism, in Lewis’s view) on the other. ‘A Review of Contemporary Art,’ Lewis’s most important contribution to the second volume, continues the critique, differentiating Vorticism from Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism, and Impressionism on aesthetic and national grounds. Lewis acknowledges Picasso’s shaping influence upon modern art, applauds the dynamism of the Futurists, maps the connections between Cubism and Impressionism, and affirms Kandinsky’s achievements in pure abstraction, yet decries what he takes to be Cubism’s and Impressionism’s naturalism and derivativeness, criticizes Expressionism’s avoidance of ‘robust’ forms, and rejects Futurism as a ‘prison’ art that seeks merely to reproduce, rather than give new meanings to, reality. Vorticist art, we learn, is to be produced by contemplative, self-possessed individuals striving to deepen abstractionism and to make an art appropriate to the machine age.  This aesthetic programme materialized with varying degrees of consistency in the artworks themselves, not least because Vorticism brought into its orbit artists with distinct agendas from very different backgrounds. Moreover, it is now clear that the signifier ‘Vorticism’ only in certain respects united a constellation of men and women whose painting and writing often diverged from the ‘official’ Vorticist pronouncements made in *BLAST*. Those pronouncements invoked an inter- and multi-medial aesthetic. *BLAST*, like the Vorticism it promoted, amalgamated different artistic forms and practices under the banner of an evolving, though not always consistent, aesthetic agenda. Ford’s ‘The Saddest Story’ and West’s ‘Indissoluble Matrimony,’ for instance, sit awkwardly alongside Gaudier-Brzeska’s, Lewis’s, and Pound’s spikier offerings, and Ford’s and West’s inclusion in *BLAST* has been queried by critics. However we account for such differences, it is clear that Lewis used *BLAST* to explore inter-medial possibilities. Hence the inscrutableness of *Enemy of the Stars*, which problematizes its own conditions of performance, pushes linguistic referentiality to its limits, and investigates extremely complex philosophical subject matter; the play was, Lewis later noted, an attempt to show what Vorticist painting might look like in written form. *Enemy of the Stars* rejects the egoism of Max Stirner, against whom *BLAST* and Vorticism – and many of Lewis’s later publications, including *Time and Western Man* (1927) – are positioned, by having the character Arghol defenestrate Stirner’s *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum* (1844).  The play thus signals Lewis’s opposition to a non-obligational model of subjectivity in which human selves are subject to themselves alone. *Enemy of the Stars*, by contrast, assumes that human identity is necessarily relational, insists upon the shaping link between self and other, and suggests a dynamic model of inter-subjectivity opposed to Stirner’s monadic principles. Just as the first volume of *BLAST* subverts linear discourse so that its claims must be pieced together from its cultural reviews, manifestos, and artworks, *Enemy of the Stars* demands to be interpreted spatially. Consequently, the difficulties involved in reading the play reproduce Lewis’s devotion to, and *BLAST*’s account of, a detached, intellectually rigorous means of theorizing the self.  File: Blast.jpg  Blast  Source: Facsimile of the cover of the first volume of *Blast.* Image available at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/2-8-12_blastpink.jpg>  The second volume of *BLAST* – the ‘War Number’ – differs from the first in several regards, most obviously by running to two thirds of the original’s length. Nevertheless in the 1915 volume Lewis reasserted the idealism of its forerunner by stressing the transformative, potentially utopian temperament of Vorticist activity. He retained his belief, urged in disjointed sections of argument in the first volume, that art should demonstrate how life might be improved, yet in ‘A Review of Contemporary Art’ resisted aesthetic programmes in which the artist had to be ‘useful’, in the sense of providing a service that could easily be assimilated by market forces. Lewis knew that such a position was difficult to defend against the backdrop of a war that was mobilizing and slaughtering so many of his contemporaries. However, he stressed the functionalism of a non-utilitarian art insofar as it might provide critical perspectives on modernity. He also showed in such pieces as ‘The God of Sport and Blood,’ ‘Constantinople Our Star,’ ‘Mr. Shaw’s Effect on my Friend,’ and ‘A Super-Krupp – Or War’s End’ that little magazines can contribute meaningfully to public debate. For Lewis, as for many others, the outbreak of war proved that civilization was a veneer behind which dark urges reside; the second volume of *Blast* denounces militarism (imperial Germany and imperial England alike) and underscores the individual sorrows caused by war for all combatants and their families. Indeed, like the Ford of such texts as *When Blood is their Argument* (1915) and *Between St. Dennis and St. George* (1915), the Lewis of 1915 was anything but naively focused on art to the exclusion of the social world. On the contrary, he envisaged an aesthetic approach that would help people better understand and possibly transform their surroundings, something that was to torture him when he realised in the midst of the First World War that it was more than likely to lead in time to a Second.  Whereas the first volume of *BLAST* can legitimately be considered a modernist artefact in its own right, its radical posturing and pluralism reflecting an idiosyncratic English avant-gardism, the second volume is more conventionally discursive. It contains numerous contributions by Lewis (including several essays on contemporary art and the first part of his story ‘The Crowd-Master’) along with poems by T. S. Eliot, Ford, Dismorr, Pound, and Saunders. Again, the volume concludes on a practical note with advertisements for books by Pound, for publications by John Lane, and for the first volume of *BLAST*. Gone are the remarkable manifestos of 1914, however, although there are a small set of ‘Blasts and Blesses,’ a ‘Vortex Gaudier-Brzeska,’ and Lewis’s ‘Vortex “Be Thyself”’, in which he reiterates Vorticism’s commitment to relational models of selfhood. The typography remains distinctive, as does the rhetoric of the essays, but as Lewis acknowledged in his ‘Editorial’ the volume is restrained stylistically. This shift in tone was largely a product of the First World War. The conflict had altered public attitudes to avant-garde activity and, more importantly for *BLAST*, caused the death of Gaudier-Brzeska not many weeks before the ‘War Number’ was published. An obituary notice for him signalled the war’s effect upon the avant-gardes more directly than anything else in the volume. Indeed, whereas the first volume’s audacious front cover heralded an avant-garde unafraid of the art world’s ideological entrenchment, the front cover of the ‘War Number’ – this time a whitish-cream colour, which is sometimes reproduced in dark brown for certain copies of the Black Sparrow Press facsimile copy – features Lewis’s ‘Before Antwerp,’ a black-and-white illustration of mechanized soldiers that signals all too clearly the dehumanizing consequences of industrial conflict upon human bodies.   Art- and literary-historical accounts of *Blast* have prioritized the first instalment, despite the fact that the second contains many useful insights into the ways in which avant-gardists responded ‘in the moment’to the First World War. Both instalments feature some of the earliest iterations of ideas Lewis would articulate at greater length in subsequent years, in particular in *The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where Is Your Vortex?* (1919), a key extension of Lewis’s pre-war and wartime writings. Vorticism as a whole was formed by several figures (among them such comparatively obscure names as Malcolm Arbuthnot, Lawrence Atkinson, and Cuthbert Hamilton) and is notable for including some of the best women artists and writers of the time (Dismorr, Saunders, and West). *BLAST* reflects this diversity. However, despite increasing critical interest in such figures and their role across the networks of modernism, *BLAST*’s most innovative offerings are by general critical consent almost certainly Lewis’s. *Enemy of the Stars* in particular represents one of the most challenging texts of early modernist literature, and the first volume’s manifestos, which were more or less solely written by Lewis, are among the most stimulating artistic appropriations of political discourse in the modernist canon. The influence of *BLAST* on later writers can be traced in Marshall McLuhan’s *COUNTERBLAST* (1954), which extends the Vorticist journal’s typographical experiments in response to the age of electronic information, and Mick Sheridan’s *BAST* (2011), which comically adapts the rhetoric and typography of *Blast* to a specifically Welsh context. A ‘third’ volume of *BLAST* (in reality a collection of scholarly essays edited by Seamus Cooney, rather than the third volume of the magazine Lewis briefly projected after the First World War) was published by Black Sparrow Press in 1984. |
| Further reading:  (Antliff and Klein)  (Edwards)  (Gąsiorek)  (Gąsiorek, The 'Little Magazine' as Weapon: BLAST (1914-15))  (Greenwood)  (Leveridge)  (Munton)  (Wees) |