

# Wyndham Lewis's Universalism: The 'Vortex' and the 'Village'

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## Abstract

Canadian-born British artist Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957) was a co-founder of Vorticism (1914–1915), the only avant-garde art movement in England at the beginning of the 20th century, whose geometric designs and innovative conceptions shared major modernist tendencies typical of modernist projects. Modern England did not have avant-garde art movements that extended to large-scale urban planning and modern architecture, such as Cubism, Futurism, and De Stijl, as in other European countries; therefore, Lewis's tendencies at this time may be regarded as 'continental'. Interestingly, however, according to art historian Paul Edwards, Lewis's *The Caliph's Design* (1919) shows 'the aborted beginning of international Modernism in London' (Edwards 1986: 150). Indeed, the polarisation of his career evokes an orientation towards cultural community, as if it were a 'universalism', while revealing his innermost picture of the conflict between England and continental Europe.

With this background of Wyndham Lewis in mind, we will focus on three points in this paper. First, using the design of the Vorticist journal *Blast*, we will examine the concept of a 'vortex'. In *Blast*, Lewis and the Vorticists attempted to examine the human consciousness emerging in the new city through innovative design, and critique the environment in contemporary society. Second, we will analyse how this abstract concept is developed through *The Caliph's Design*. Third, we will consider Lewis's idea of cultural community, considering that the 'village' has received significant attention in Wyndham Lewis's political pamphlet, *Anglosaxony*. This concept subsequently influenced leading communication theorist Marshall McLuhan's (1911–1980) idea of the 'global village'.

**Keywords:** *Wyndham Lewis; Vorticism; Universalism; Abstraction; Modernism*

## Introduction

British artist Wyndham Lewis, born in Canada in 1882, is best known as a co-founder of Vorticism, the only British avant-garde art movement of the early 20th century. Founded and named by Ezra Pound in 1914 at the beginning of the First World War, Vorticism barely lasted until the end of the war. In general, Vorticism was often thought as an offshoot of Italian Futurism, both ideologically and figuratively, because both movements were prominent during the war, and there were similarities in painting methods and certain principal motifs such as machinery, the city, crowds, and battles. Indeed, like the Futurists, Lewis and the Vorticists' interests were not limited to literature and art but stretched to architecture and urban planning. If the geometric designs and innovative concepts expressed in Vorticism tended toward those typical to other European modernist projects such as Sant'Elia's 'Città Nuova' (1913–14), Tony Garnier's 'Une Cité Industrielle' (1918), and Le Corbusier's 'Une Ville Contemporaine' (1921–22), it would seem natural that Vorticism is understood as an international movement with continuity with Futurism

and other avant-garde art movements (1). Given that modern Britain had no large-scale movement like Cubism, Futurism, or De Stijl that extended to large-scale urban planning and architecture as in other European countries, the short-lived Vorticism has also been regarded as an ‘unfortunate abortive attempt’ that tossed away the rare opportunity it had to influence urban planning (2).

Such an understanding of Vorticism is superficial; its background is more complex. Scholar Alan Munton suggests that Lewis, the central figure of the movement, presented several shifts in thought, alternating politically from the left to the right, before returning to the left (3). He developed his orientation toward cultural community, or ‘universalism’ if you will, through his inner conflicts between his British identity and his continental European one, and between his identities as a Francophile and Germanophile in Britain. This paper addresses a foundational issue by clarifying that throughout his career Lewis’s basic attitude was one of ‘universalism’. To that end, I first examine Lewis’s design philosophy in terms of the common keyword ‘vortex’ as found in the two issues of the Vorticist journal *Blast* (1914 and 1915) and *The Caliph’s Design* (1919), both published around the time of the First World War. Next, I point to the foresight in Lewis’s social thinking and in his conception of the cultural community, which have so far gone unnoticed in the context of the universalism that leads him to the idea of ‘a village’.

### 1. ‘The Great English Vortex’ sprung up in the centre of London

The avant-garde *Blast* no. 1 (Fig.1) was, as its title suggests, full of radical discourse and progressive design. In it, Lewis’s ideal society was presented. The opening sentence of the magazine, ‘Long live the great art vortex sprung up in the centre of this town!’ (4), argues the need for the vortex and Vorticism to revitalise the centre, which was lacking in ‘art’ and ‘life’. Lewis stressed that ‘at the heart of the whirlpool is a great silent place where all the energy is concentrated, and that is where the vorticists are’ (5).

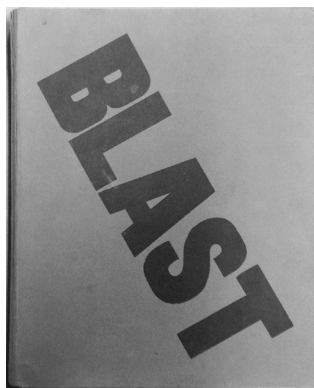


Figure 1: Vorticist avant-garde magazine *Blast* no. 1 1914



Figure 2: *I Manifesti del Futurismo* 1914

*Blast* proposed an ideal society led by artists sensitive to the creative energy of the vortex, with the intention of eventually spreading this energy to the general public. In the early 1910s, when Lewis witnessed the outbreak of the First World War, civilisation was overflowing with works of art simplified by deliberate primitivism and geometric abstraction—as represented by post-impressionism including Cubism—and functional industrial products required by modern lifestyles. Lewis felt that no vortex was to be found there. Consequently, he and other Vorticists sought to bring the real world of the vortex to light using the artist’s plastic language of abstraction

(while still following the modernism of the times). In this section, I compare the composition of Vorticist designs and paintings, which emphasised the vortex, with those of their modernist contemporaries, such as Futurists and Cubists, to delineate their characteristics.

Michael E. Leveridge, a grandson of the founder of 'Leveridge & Co.', which printed *Blast*, noted that 'the cover's diagonally-placed title in very large sans serif type resembles the cover designed by Ardengo Soffici for *I Manifesti del Futurismo* (Fig. 2) in 1914' (6). When comparing the two designs, the similarities are obvious, i.e., slanted titles and bold gothic typeface; however, sans serif type, rarely seen in the Futurist manifesto, is used for the full text of the Vorticist manifesto published in *Blast*. The difference in design between the two movements becomes decisive when comparing the cover typography of the futurist poem *Zang Tumb Tumb* (Fig. 3) with that of *Blast*. The diagonal line featuring 'TUUUMB TUUUUM...' printed on the cover clearly reproduces the battle sound rising in the sky at Adrianople, where Futurism founder Marinetti heard it (7). That is, Marinetti's 'Word-in-Freedom' is essentially a soundscape of what he heard or longed to hear on the battlefield. In contrast, the arrangement of the text in *Blast*, contrary to its title, does not rely on onomatopoeia or mimetic words, and the words on the page are arranged in a grid without curves, have nothing to do with any subject's sense of them, and are used as pure design elements without representativeness. Typefaces with serif ornaments were excluded from the design in *Blast's* pages, and layouts with automatically set letter spacing were used. Design without the subject's viewpoint was born in Vorticism's pursuit of completely abstract forms. It is assumed that the composition of *Blast's* 'Bless England' and 'Blast Humour' were inspired by the design of newspaper advertisements—typical mass media from the same era—with its blanks and strings of text in blocks (8).



Figure 3: F. T. Marinetti, *Zang Tumb Tumb: Adrianopoli ottobre 1912 parole in libertà*, 1912

This chained combination and layout, with the objective perspective, presents a way of perceiving such texts in the modern age, when many events, including those involving nature, human beings, and art, are controllable by science and technology, as discussed in Lewis's 'The New Egos', wherein he describes the characteristics of the modern citizens. In the modern city environment, his statements that 'the isolated human figure of most ancient Art is an anachronism' and that 'individual demarcations are confused and interests dispersed' (9) describe the inter-communicable situation of people who have lost their boundaries in urban environments created by technological progress. Lewis describes this situation of mechanical relations that fail to recognise the distinctiveness of individuals as 'dehumanization'—'the chief diagnostic of the modern world' (10). He argues that the boundary-clearing consciousness emerging in the new city is a characteristic of the modern individual, 'the New Egos' (indicated in the plural).

Naturally, Lewis's paintings, produced in parallel with his magazine designs, also depict 'dehumanization'. *Vorticist Composition* (1914) depicts an urban landscape with sloping architectural forms on either side. The two buildings contain multiple overlapping frames and stair-like forms; simultaneously, they can be viewed as a single whole building made of geometric forms, which represents the human body. The body enclosed in architecture became one of the assembly motifs Lewis frequently relied on in the late 1910s. His *Abstract Composition III* (1914–15) presents a visual paradigm of the phenomenon of the modern citizen equipped with the technology to control reproduction in the modern city. The abstraction expressed in these two works is not the multi-perspective division of the screen we see in Cubism or Futurism. The rectangular forms created by the architectural elements and frames are neither Cubism's deconstructions of space nor Futurism's introductions of time. In discussing Lewis during Vorticism, art historian Paul Edwards observed that Vorticist design does not mimetically represent phenomena but does provide visual paradigms of 'the needs and functions of a person inside a technologised urban environment' (11). Vorticism's geometric abstraction, while still indicating a material position, is not representative of three-dimensional space but is rather a drawing made by a draftsman.

## **2. Architects! Where is your Vortex?**

Lewis's *The Caliph's Design*, published just after the First World War, continues the idea of the vortex, as the pamphlet's subtitle 'Architects! Where is your Vortex?' suggests. This booklet problematises the situation of the modern city, which *Blast* presented as a graphic image, in more concrete terms of social space. Of course, the Vorticists rejected a direct fusion of life and art, denying the Futurist desire to intervene in real life and turn artworks or art-making into action. Why, then, did Lewis conceive of an ideal city plan and how did he try to realise it? Let us look again at the urban situation as Lewis saw it.

The modern town-dweller of our civilization [...] sees multitude, and infinite variety of means of life, a world and elements he controls. Impersonality becomes a disease with him. [...] the frontier's [sic] interpenetrate, individual demarcations are confused and interests dispersed (12).

*Blast* portrayed urban environments transformed by advanced technology and the urban dwellers who inhabit such environments. These urban spaces were rife with artefacts produced without regard to aesthetics, such as 'trivial ornamentation, mirrors, cheap marble tables, silly spacing, etc.' (13). Therefore, *Blast* called for an appeal to consciousness, an awareness of the vortex toward bringing vigour to a world devoid of aesthetics. In this way, unlike the Futurists, Lewis did not directly appeal to the general public by participating in political and economic activities; rather, he proposed his own way of looking at the world through art, presenting 'a template for how modern life might be revived if it were to take its cue from abstract art' (14).

To realise Vorticism's revolutionary aim of vividly 'reviving life', it required an environment where new art could productively intervene in the social sphere. Hence, in 'Bull Sounds', an essay in *The Caliph's Design*, Lewis states, '[We] desire equity and meekness in human relations, fight violence, and strive for formal beauty, significance, etc., in the systems and aspects of life' (15), suggesting that the goal of the pamphlet was to give form and purpose to social rather than individual existence. To realise such a society, the model of a centralised 'caliph' and a revolution by artists was envisioned. Lewis later shared the following reflection:

The biggest visual fact, *the City*, was my starting point. The haphazard manner in which everything struggled and drifted into existence filled me with impatience. I would have had a

city born by fiat, as if out of the brain of a god, or someone with a god-like power; in my parable of the Caliph's Design issuing from the decree of a despot (16).

Despite his ideal artist-centred society, Lewis did not advocate that painting and sculpture should lead urban reform but rather promoted an architecture-led reconstruction that he described as comprising 'this strange absentee, this shadow, this ghost of the great trinity consisting of sculpture, painting, and architecture' (17). The parable of the Caliph, which demands that the blueprints for the new city be completed in just one night, offers a perspective on the creativity of the architects and engineers who elevate the Caliph's designs to feasible drawings in an aesthetic order. Lewis goes on to state:

I should like to see the entire city rebuilt on a more conscious pattern. But this would automatically happen should an architect of genius turn up who would invent an architecture for our time and climate that was also a creative and fertilising art form (18).

In this way, it was proposed that the making of an environment suitable for a revolution by the avant-garde should be left in the hands of architects.

### 3. *Anglosaxony: Abstraction and Universalism*

I now examine how universalism, Lewis's basic attitude, can be read in his urban planning, as confirmed through a series of discussions in political essays he wrote a few years after his Vorticism experiments.

In his essay *Anglosaxony* (1941), he cites several cities and peoples as examples of universalism. For example, in New York City, the world's greatest melting pot,

Abie's Irish Rose [Irish women married to Jews] jostles the yellow blossoms of Cathay [the yellow-skinned Chinese girls], where the Cuban lives cheek by jowl with the Croatian, with the African mass lying at the bottom of the pot, dark and apparently unmeltable (19).

This description of the jumbled ethnicity of Lewis's actual experience overlaps with the scenes of the disorderly spread of artefacts lacking aesthetic consideration in the same period described in *Blast* and *The Caliph's Design*. Just as the artist himself could not intervene in society in the disorderly environment of the city, and thus did not give any order to the real space, in New York, '[the Anglo-Saxon] has not quite made up his mind to take the plunge, and melt into something abstract and international, something universal' (20). From this statement, we can infer that in Lewis, the 'universal' coexists with the 'abstract and international'.

Excluded from society, the avant-gardists sought a place on the picture plane rather than in the contemporary city. For example, in Vorticist paintings, the position and ideas of the objects were recorded, and the objects were shown in various phases. In *The Crowd* (1915), the figure in the lower left corner represents the French flag, a symbol of liberty, equality, and fraternity, while the two figures in the centre represent the red flag of communism. On the picture plane, there are layers of exterior walls like a city fortress and what looks like a revolt of the crowd: the painting was originally titled *Revolution*. This seems partly representative of the real world, where the 'riot' and the geometric structures of the 'modern industrial city', each belonging to a different phase, are abstracted and synthesised in the painting, which 'interfuses and iridises with heterogeneous qualities' (21). Lewis's 'universality' refers to this visual paradigm of abstraction.

In *Anglosaxony*, in discussing 'something universal' in the political sphere, Lewis found it in the parliamentary democratic system—right in the middle of authoritarianism and anarchism—and

he envisioned a situation where various heterogeneous qualities and forces of different phases were synthesised under this tendency. In these situations, where a paradigm is given, the word used is ‘God’, not ‘Caliph’: ‘Why not have the great Architect of this universe for a Fuehrer? Is God not concrete enough—too abstract?’ (22).

## Conclusion

As we have seen, *The Caliph’s Design*, which describes the concept of rebuilding the city, can be analysed from the aspects of empty and quiet space and abstraction promoted by the Vorticism of the 1910s. The empty and quiet space indicates that the position of Vorticist abstraction, which is important in explaining Lewis’s idea, involved universality.

This universality was also, he argued, characteristic of Anglo-Saxon ethnicity, symbolised by the ‘sea’ and ‘waves’. *Anglosaxony* was a defence of Lewis’s book endorsing Hitler, published in 1931, which drew criticism from the British public. It was therefore necessary to discuss democracy from an English point of view to clearly distinguish his position from totalitarianism, fascism, and communism on the one hand, and anarchism on the other. This was his reason for dealing with parliamentary democracy. Lewis saw ‘universality’ as characteristic of the English temperament, represented by the ocean: far-reaching, ubiquitous, international, and democratic, as opposed to the German temperament, symbolised by the land. The British were both separated from and connected to the rest of the world by the sea. These topographical features make them the ‘universal seaman’ (23) with the temperament of ‘a drunken buoy, rolling lustily about on the tide’s unsteady floor’ (24):

It is a problem of the abstract attitude of the people who employ that sea-power, the problem of people abstracted or removed from the general, terrestrial community of men inhabiting an outer void (namely, the oceans, and their islands, great and small), and approaching all the problems of life and politics in too detached and high-handed—also too un-real, or unrealist—a way (25).

The Anglo-Saxons described in the New York of *Anglosaxony* were probably the Vorticists of twenty years later, static and unable to integrate into society. In that case, the vortex was to be found in the place of the artist who was located away from the masses. Shortly after *Anglosaxony*, Lewis’s universalism would lead to his conception of the entire globe as ‘one big village’ (26), to be followed by McLuhan’s communication theory and concept of the ‘global village’.

## Notes

1. Paul Edwards, “Afterword,” in *The Caliph’s Design*, by Wyndham Lewis (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), 149–150.
2. Edwards, “Afterword,” 150.
3. Alan Munton, “Wyndham Lewis: From Proudhon to Hitler (and Back): The Strange Political Journey of Wyndham Lewis,” *E-rea* [En ligne], 4.2 | octobre 15, 2006, accessed October 28, 2021, <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/220>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.220>
4. Wyndham Lewis (presumably), “Long Live the Vortex!,” *Blast*, no. 1 (June 1914): 7.
5. Violet Hunt, *I Have This To Say* (New York: AMS Press, 1926), 211.

6. Michael E. Leveridge, "The Printing of BLAST," *Wyndham Lewis Annual VII* (2000): 21.
7. William C. Wees, *Vorticism and the English Avant-garde* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 172.
8. Advertisement "SHORT SEA ROUTE," *Manchester Guardian*, June 24, 1913.
9. Wyndham Lewis, "The New Egos," *Blast*, no. 1 (June 1914): 141.
10. Lewis, "The New Egos," 141.
11. Paul Edwards, "Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism: A Strange Synthesis," *The Vorticists* (London: Tate, 2010), 41.
12. Lewis, "The New Egos," 141.
13. Lewis, "The Improvement of Life," *Blast*, no. 1 (June 1914):146.
14. Andrezej Gasiorek, "'Architecture or Revolution?': Le Corbusier and Wyndham Lewis," in *Geographies of Modernism*, eds. Andrew Thacker, Peter Brooker (London: Routledge, 2005): 137.
15. Lewis, *The Caliph's Design*, 25.
16. Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984[1950]): 169.
17. Lewis, *The Caliph's Design*, 10.
18. Lewis, *The Caliph's Design*, 33–4.
19. Lewis, *Anglosaxony: A League That Works* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1941), 67–8.
20. Lewis, *Anglosaxony*, 68.
21. Edwards, "Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism," 41.
22. Lewis, *Anglosaxony*, 65; As for 'unseen power', also in another text, '[o]nly with a transcendent God is it possible to secure a true individualism.' Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984[1929]): 434.
23. Lewis, *Anglosaxony*, 58.
24. Lewis, *Anglosaxony*, 50.
25. Lewis, *Anglosaxony*, 58.
26. Paul Tiessen, "Literary Modernists, Canadian Moviegoers and the New Yorker Lobby: Reframing McLuhan in Annie Hall," in *McLuhan's Global Village Today: Transatlantic Perspectives*, eds. Carmen Birkle et al. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014): 149.

## **Author Biography**

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