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Circulations entre les arts. Interroger l'intersémioticité

Resisting Intersemioticity: the Case of Wyndham Lewis

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In 1921 the painter and writer Wyndham Lewis launched the second of his three short-lived little magazines, *The Tyro, A Review of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*, the aim of which was to reinvigorate British art—to bring about a "Renaissance of Art" as Lewis put it—in the wake of the First World War. In the editorial of the first issue, Lewis felt it necessary to legitimise his dual artistic identity:

> The Editor of this paper is a painter. In addition to that you will see him starting a serial story in this number. During the Renaissance in Italy this duplication of activities was common enough, and no one was surprised to see a man chiselling words and stone alternately.[1]

Indeed, Lewis at this time had started producing what he called 'tyros' in both paint and words, and the first issue of *The Tyro* featured a rare example in his *œuvre* of a combination of drawing and dialogue in the shape of a kind of modernist cartoon, *Meeting between the Tyro, Mr Segando and Phillip* (1921)[2]. However, despite a degree of interweaving of semiotic codes within the pages of *The Tyro*, it is striking that in his editorial Lewis strives to keep these artistic practices distinct; indeed he places the emphasis on duality rather than synthesis. Although he practised 'scriptural' and pictorial inscription in parallel, acknowledging that "one form of expression must affect the other if they co-exist within the confines of one brain"[3], Lewis deliberately sought to keep his creative practices distinct. This short study traces the nature of Lewis's resistance to what we now call 'intersemioticity', understood as the mixing or merging of semiotic codes or the creation of hybrid forms of art—in 1934 he revealingly equated "hybrid forms" with "monstrosities"— and suggests why Lewis might have been so hostile to such practices.[4]

In the first decade or so of his career as a writer and painter, however, Lewis did make some gestures towards intersemiotic art forms, mainly in the form of visual works featuring representations of, or allusions to, other forms of art. His early work includes a number of paintings and drawings depicting dancers and dancing, such

1 "The Objects of this Paper", *The Tyro 1. A Review of the Arts of Painting Sculpture and Design, London, Egoist Press*, 1921, p.2.

2 Reproduced in Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis. Paintings and Drawings*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1971, plate 75, no. 470. The Tyro can be downloaded here from the Modernist Journals Project managed by Brown University and the University of Tulsa.

3 *Rude Assignment. An Intellectual Autobiography* (1950), ed. Toby Foshay, Santa Barbara, Black Sparrow, 1984, p.139.

as *Lovers* (1912), *Study for Kermesse* (1912), *Spanish Dance* (1914) and *Dancing Figures* (1914).[5] In 1912 and 1913 he produced illustrations for Shakespeare's play *Timon of Athens*. The first *Timon* works were a series of drawings executed using "a variant of Futurist technique", and they were followed by a starker series of designs in which textual and pictorial elements were integrated.[6] Although Lewis's *Timon* works would merit a study of their own, it is significant in the current context that "the project is Lewis's only major engagement with a literary text in his visual art".[7]

Lewis's next project was the Vorticist magazine *BLAST* (1914), of which he was editor. The first issue reproduced a pencil, pen and wash work Lewis called *Timon of Athens* (1913).[8] The Vorticist aesthetic credo eschewed illusionistic representation, and in his crusade to reform art and enlighten a recalcitrant public Lewis, just like some of his painter contemporaries, drew analogies between music and visual abstraction.[9] In a press interview given on the occasion of an exhibition of Vorticist paintings held in Brighton in 1913, Lewis asserted that painting "should be as much an abstract art as music."[10]His aim, he later recalled, was "to compose a symbolic language, which [he] could use to compose with exactly the way a musical composer does."[11] The titles he chose for some of his other Vorticist works—*Composition* (1913)*, Red Duet*

4 *Men Without Art* (1934), ed. Seamus Cooney, Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow, 1987, p.26. In this article, my focus will not be on whether Lewis's pictorial practices influenced his literary work, but on his resistance in his critical writings to the idea of 'intersemiotic' forms of art. Indeed, Lewis's theoretical—and often polemical—pronouncements are not always commensurate with his artistic practices. The influence of Lewis's activity as a visual artist on his writing has been frequently analysed in Lewis criticism: see Reed Way Dasenbrock in *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis: Towards the Condition of Painting* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), Paul Edwards in *Wyndham Lewis. Painter and Writer* (New Haven and London, Yale UP, 2000), Thomas Kush in *Wyndham Lewis's Pictorial Integer* (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1981), Tom Normand *in Wyndham Lewis the Artist: Holding the Mirror up to Politics* (Cambridge, CUP, 1992) and David Wragg in *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain: Creating a Political Aesthetic* (Lampeter, Edwin Mellen, 2005). In his review of Lewis's 1918 novel Tarr, T. S. Eliot drew the following significant distinctions: "[Lewis's] prose must be judged quite independently of his painting, he must be allowed the hypothesis of a dual creative personality. It would be quite another thing, of course, to find in his writing the evidences of a draughtsman's training—the training to respond to an ocular impression with the motion of a line on paper", "Tarr", *The Egoist 5*, no. 8 (September 1918), p.105.It is the notion of a creative duality that is my focus in this study.

5 Lovers is reproduced in Walter Michel, Op.cit., plate 12, no. 74; Spanish Dance, plate 25, no. 172. See Edwards, Op.cit., for The Dancers (fig. 52, p.85); Study for Kermesse (fig. 48, p.80); Dancing Figures (fig. 73, p.123).

6 Paul Edwards, "From Great London Vortex to the Western Front (1900-1919), in *Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957)*, Madrid, Fundación Juan March, 2010, p.129. See Walter Michel, op.cit., plates 18 and 19, nos. 91, 92, 102.

7 Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis. Painter and Writer*, Op.cit., p.87. Edwards also points out that Lewis had previously embarked on a project on Paradise Lost but that nothing has survived of it. Edwards devotes some space to an analysis of the Timon of Athens project in *Ibid*., p.86-92, 114-17.

8 Reproduced in *Ibid*., fig. 82, p.131. Given Vorticism's celebrated rivalry with Futurism, Lewis's choice of title was clearly polemical: Marinetti would certainly have disapproved of such passéiste allusions to Shakespeare and classical antiquity.

9 In 1943 Lewis expounded on this early belief: "forms and colours could, like sounds, be arranged into compositions: compositions which would be a language for the eye of the same mathematical order as a sonata, a fugue [...] is for the ear" ("Abstract Art" (1943), Wyndham Lewis Collection, Division of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Cornell University Library, Box 2). Extracts from Kandinsky's Über das Geistige in der Kunst (1911) appeared in the first number of BLAST, translated by Edward Wadsworth. Musical terms employed include "timbre", "counterpoint", "melodic composition", "symphonic composition", *BLAST: Review of the Great English Vortex. No. 1* (1914), Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow, 2002, p.124-25.

10 "The Cubists of Camden Town", Brighton Herald, 20 December 1913 (quoted in Robert Upstone, "'The Cubist Room' and the Origins of Vorticism at Brighton in 1913", in *The Vorticists. Rebel Artists in London and New York*, 1914-1918, ed. Mark Antliff and Vivien Greene, London, Tate Publishing, 2010, p.28).

(1914), *Design for Red Duet* (1915)[12]—testify explicitly to this *rapprochement*. From the outset, however, Lewis took care to temper such analogies, observing that painting, "being a visual art, cannot be abstract in the same way as can music"[13].

If painting at the start of the 20th century required revolutionary treatment, according to Lewis, literature too was in need of wholesale renovation. Looking back at his Vorticist period in later life, Lewis claimed that "nothing was being written just then that seemed within a million leagues of the stark radicalism of the visuals"[14]. He explained that he had wanted to produce "a piece of writing worthy of the abstractist innovator"[15]. His Vorticist play, "Enemy of the Stars", also published in *BLAST*, constituted a radical break with what he later referred to as the "traditional wavelength" of English[16], as a brief excerpt shows:

> A visionary tree, not migratory: visions from within.
> A man with a headache lies in deliberate leaden inanimation. He isolates his body, floods it with phlegm, sucks up numbness to his brain.
> A soul wettest dough, doughest lead: a bullet. To drop down Eternity like a plummet.[17]

The play's abrupt paratactic style ensures, as Paul Edwards intimates, that "the experience of reading the text is a frustrating accumulation of blocks of resistant ideas and imagery"[18]. Remarking of Lewis's play that "readers must puzzle over these sentences as beholders must puzzle over Vorticist paintings", Reed Way Dasenbrock underlines the play's stylistic and hermeneutic affinities with Lewis's Vorticist abstractions, themselves composed of visual contradictions, jagged angles and multiple perspectives that make them hard to 'read' and resolve into coherent wholes[19]. The radically disruptive Vorticist aesthetic sought to transform both painting and literature, yet Lewis soon concluded that writing could never attain the "stark radicalism" of visual art.

By founding Vorticism and by producing *BLAST* Lewis clearly aimed to set in motion an invigorating artistic vortex, and the magazine contained reproductions of paintings, drawings and sculptures, in addition to manifestos, poems, stories, essays

11 "The Vita of Wyndham Lewis" (1949), Wyndham Lewis Collection, Cornell University Library, Box 47. The Vorticist manifesto "Be Thyself" exhorted: "You must be a duet in everything", *BLAST: Review of the Great English Vortex. No. 2* (1915), Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow, 2000, p.91.

12 Reproduced in Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis*, Op.cit., fig. 81, p.129; fig. 77, p.126; fig. 96, p.173.

13 Quoted in Robert Upstone, Op.cit., p.29.

14 *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, ed. W. K. Rose, London, Methuen, 1963, p.361.

15 *Ibid*., p.552.

16 *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), London, Calder, 1967, p.88.

17 *BLAST 1*, Op.cit., p.68.

18 *Wyndham Lewis. Painter and Writer*, Op.cit., p.142.

19 Op.cit., p.130.

and a play. Dasenbrock is right to claim that "Vorticism was conceived of as a movement across the arts and linking the arts from the beginning"[20]; in this respect the publication epitomised the revolutionary across-the-board aesthetic spirit that infused many artistic movements in the early twentieth century.[21] However, *BLAST*'s aim was to bring the arts together rather than merge them; indeed, the two issues of the magazine also contained a number of abstruse aphorisms that may be interpreted as hinting that semiotic codes needed to be kept distinct in order for a work of art to be successful:

> Art has a selfish trick of cutting the connections.[22]
> Our vortex insists on water-tight compartments.[23]
> You must talk with two tongues, if you do not wish to cause confusion.[24]

The Vorticist manifestos themselves are the only example in *BLAST* of intersemioticity in the sense of a synthesis or symbiosis of different semiotic codes. The disposition of the text on the page and the use of differently sized *sans serif* fonts add visual to verbal impact, the vehement modernity of the Vorticists' affirmations being reflected in their material inscription on the page.[25] As Karin Orchard has astutely put it, "the spectacular and imaginative typography [makes] of every page an abstract composition"[26]. By this token Lewis's Vorticist manifestos deserve to be called 'iconotexts'.

Vorticism succumbed during the First World War, many of the artists associated with it having been mobilised, and Lewis's attempts to resuscitate its vitality in the early twenties through projects such as *The Tyro* largely failed. From the mid-1920s his stance with regard to interactions between the arts became more hard-line—as his politics became more authoritarian. In *Time and Western Man*, his extensive 1927 critique of the current state of modern culture and society, Lewis declared himself sceptical about "reducing" plastic art to "terms of music"[27]. Indeed, he no longer regarded music as an appropriate analogy for revolution in the visual arts: having appropriated Oswald Spengler's distinction in *The Decline of the West* (1918) between "musical" and "plastic" civilisations, Lewis associated music with what he considered

20 *Ibid*., p.14.

21 François Noudelmann has pointed out that associations of writers and visual and plastic artists were typical of avant-garde little magazines. Such associations helped conquer new territory and effect far-reaching artistic innovation. See *Avant-gardes et modernité*, Paris, Hachette, 2000, p.46.

22 "Vortices and Notes: Futurism, Magic and Life", BLAST 1, Op.cit., p.133.

23 "Our Vortex", *BLAST 1*, Op.cit., p.147.

24 *BLAST 2*, Op.cit., p.91.

25 The two numbers of BLAST can be viewed here at the Modernist Journals Project.

26 "'A Laugh Like a Bomb': The History and Ideas of the Vorticists", in *BLAST. Vorticism 1914-1918*, ed. Paul Edwards, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, p.18.

27 *Time and Western Man* (1927), ed. Paul Edwards, Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow, 1993, p.186.

an unhealthy Bergsonian tendency towards merging and dissolution. Consequently, his critiques of the work of many of his literary peers frequently deployed musical terms when his analysis was hostile.For instance, Lewis claimed that Joyce's prose was that of a "songster" or a "crooner"[28], and described Gertrude Stein's experiments in *Composition as Explanation* (1926) as a "thick monotonous prose-song" and a "wearisome dirge"[29]. He elaborated further with regard to Stein:

> Her attempt to use words as though they were sounds purely or 'sound-symbols,' or as though their symbolism could be distorted or suppressed sufficiently to allow of a 'fugue' being made out of a few thousand of them, is a technical mistake, I believe. It is only doing what the musician has been doing for three centuries, but doing it poorly, because the instrument of speech on the one hand, and the verbal symbolism on the other, will not, in the case of words, yield such a purity of effect. [30]

Ezra Pound, according to Lewis, found himself in similar trouble in 1927. In his collaborations with the composer George Antheil (1900-59), Pound was producing "mixed work" and was "lost between one art and another"[31]. Lewis predicted that his erstwhile ally would eventually "abandon language in disgust" and convert to "pure music"[32].

Unlike many of his peers then, Lewis did not promote the breaking down of boundaries between the arts; in fact he was a harsh critic of "hybrid experiment"[33]—in other words, forms of intersemioticity—in the work of many of his peers from the mid 1920s. In what amounts to a near self-portrait—if the musical reference is excluded—he commended artistic polyvalence provided that the artist was able to maintain clear distinctions between his different artistic practices:

> Let us imagine a person so complexly talented that he could with equal effect express himself in musical composition, painting, sculpture or writing [...]. I think, then, that we should find that the person's writing would show little tendency to divest words of their symbolism, or to distort them, nor to do imitational or 'literary' music, nor to tell stories in paint. The rather shallow 'revolutionism' that consists in a partial merging of two or more arts would be spared him. He would achieve such a complete revolution every time he dropped from one of his accomplishments into the other, that he would have no incentive to hybrid experiment. He would be the purest possible artist in each of his arts. It is even

28 "Creative Literature" (1944), Wyndham Lewis Collection, Cornell University Library, Box 5.

29 *Time and Western Man*, Op.cit., p.59.

30 *Ibid*., p.111.

31 *Ibid.*, p.69, p.111. Lewis notably illustrates his disapproval of what he considers the passéiste tendency of Pound's poetry by drawing a comparison between Pound's "Canto XVII" and "a spirited salon-picture, gold-framed and romantically 'classical'", *Ibid*., p.71.

32 *Ibid*., p.186.

33 *Ibid*., p.112.

> quite possible to affirm that no artist with only one art in which to express himself, can keep that one art entirely intact and pure.[34]

The intersemiotic terms "literary music" and "telling stories in paint" are here clearly employed to designate inferior forms of art; for Lewis, artistic hybridity seems synonymous with contamination and dilution.

According to Lewis then, an artist needed to resist "technical compromise"[35] in order to achieve his full potential. In a lengthy essay of 1935, "Beginnings", in which he discussed the nature of artistic creativity, Lewis underlined the pragmatic dimension of his position. He argued that a distinction—or 'water-tightness'—between the two artistic practices of painting and writing was vital: "this double life, to be successful, has in truth to be thoroughgoingly *double*—one mode must not merge in, or encroach upon, the other"[36]. In his view, both William Blake and Dante Gabriel Rossetti failed to fulfil their potential in either writing or painting because "their two selves were upon too intimate terms with each other"[37].

Later in the same essay, Lewis recalled in some detail the genesis of his short story, "The Death of the Ankou" (1927). His retrospective account carefully foregrounded the necessary differentiation within his creative psyche between the pictorial and the 'scriptural', a differentiation which he claimed first made itself apparent while he was painting a blind Breton beggar back in the first decade of the 20th century:

> The 'short story' was the crystallization of *what I had to keep out of my consciousness while painting*. Otherwise, the painting would have been a bad painting. That is how I began to write in earnest. A lot of discarded matter collected there, as I was painting or drawing, in the back of my mind – in the back of my consciousness. As I squeezed out *everything* that smacked of literature from my vision of the beggar, it collected in the back of my mind. It imposed itself upon me as a complementary creation. [...] There has been no mixing of the *genres*. The waste product of every painting, when it is a painter's painting, makes the most highly selective and ideal material for the pure writer.[38]

If Lewis here draws a critical distinction between the pictorial and the 'scriptural', what he describes is also a dualistic creative dynamic. The siting of writing in the waste product of painting—in what gets displaced in order for an artist to be able to paint "as a painter"—is also a reminder that he regarded the pictorial as the primary

34 Loc. cit.

35 *Ibid*., p.38.

36 "Beginnings", *in Wyndham Lewis, Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society 1914-1956*, ed. Paul Edwards, Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow, 1989, p.263. Lewis stressed duality in this essay, referring to a "double-birth", "a twin brother in another art" and "tandem-talents", *Ibid*., p.262, p.265.

37 *Ibid*., p.263.

38 *Ibid*., p.266.

and, perhaps, the primal artistic impulse. Lewis claimed the eye was his "specialised organ"[39], described himself as a "philosopher of the eye"[40], and repeatedly warned his readers that his arguments were deployed "from the position of the plastic or the visual intelligence"[41]. The visual work of art thus sat at the pinnacle of Lewis's hierarchy of the arts.

Lewis's writing is full of attempts to define the principal distinctive properties of the different arts, and he firmly believed that each type of art possessed "its own local and proper philosophy"[42]. He insisted that such distinctions needed to be maintained in an age characterised in his view by flux. Painting's principal asset, for example, was the creation of "a sort of death and silence in the middle of life".[43] Moreover, Lewis was intrigued by what he called the "psychology of the different arts"[44] and their respective effects on the perceiver. Suggesting that many people were "repelled" by the "coldness of the picture", he argued:

> The coldest musician [...] cannot help interfering with your body, and cannot leave you so cold as a great painter can. As you listen to music you find yourself dashing, gliding or perambulating about: you are hurried hither and thither, however rhythmically; your legs, your larynx, your heart are interfered with as much as is the membrane of your ear. Whereas looking at Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* would cause you as little disturbance of that sort as looking at a kettle or the Bank of England.[45]

This phenomenological approach meant that Lewis considered music an "emotional" and a "time" object and the plastic or visual work of art an "intellectual object"[46]. Moreover, what he conceived of as the "aloof" and "unemotional"[47] nature

39 *Time and Western Man*, op.cit., p.134.

40 *Ibid*., p.392.

41 *Ibid*., p.xix. Such provisos form a veritable leitmotif in Lewis's critical writing: "whatever I, for my part, say, can be traced back to an organ; [...] the eye. It is in the service of the things of vision that my ideas are mobilized" (*Ibid*., p.134). The terrible irony is that Lewis lost his sight due to a pituitary tumour and spent the last six years of his life in blindness. He had to relinquish his position as art critic for The Listener although he managed to continue writing novels and criticism throughout his final years.

42 "The Credentials of the Painter" (1922), *Creatures of Habit...,* Op.cit., p.66.

43 *Ibid*., p.69.

44 *Time and Western Man*, Op.cit., p.112.

45 "The Credentials of the Painter" (1922*), Creatures of Habit...,* Op.cit., p.70. Lewis returns to such distinctions in other texts: "If a painter makes a picture of a nightingale people stand and stare at it coldly. It is a silent nightingale. Could he cause notes to pour out of the bird's lengthy beak, why then the painter's cold and silent object would seem to throb with life: the gallery would be packed to suffocation, everyone would be in ecstasies", "Lecture on Visual Arts" (1943-44), Wyndham Lewis Collection, Cornell University Library, Box 19.

46 *Time and Western Man*, op.cit., p.171. James G. Mansell has recently pointed out that Lewis's "debates about the relative qualities of literature, music and painting were about more than aesthetics: they were about the relationship between sense perception and the intellect, for which the arts acted as a mode of expression", "Sound and the Cultural Politics of Time in the Avant-Garde: Wyndham Lewis's Critique of Bergsonism", *in Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, ed. Andrzej Gasiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker and Nathan Waddell, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, p.125.

47 "The Credentials of the Painter" (1922), *Creatures of Habit...,* Op.cit., p.71.

of painting led him to foresee a gloomy future for this art compared with music and literature. In later life, for instance, Lewis thought of oil-paintings as "a kind of dead-fish, that do not endear themselves to people, in the way a book can, or a piece of music"[48].

What might account for Lewis's insistence on maintaining such clear distinctions between the arts? In the first place, as a self-proclaimed advocate of "distinctness in everything"[49], Lewis was more interested in identifying differences than seeking out similarities. His a(nta)gonistic personality meant that he spent a lifetime marking himself off from others, plotting boundaries, drawing-up battle-lines, entrenching differences and creating enemies. Even more significant, though, are Lewis's dialogical way of thinking, his dualistic conception of creativity and his metaphysical and aesthetic preferences.[50] Throughout his long career, Lewis expressed an intense dislike of indistinctness and flux, phenomena which he diagnosed as some of the principal symptoms of modernity, where "frontiers interpenetrate, [and] individual demarcations are confused"[51]. Significantly, Lewis defined the modernism he rejected as promulgating "doctrines of mixing and merging"[52]; in his view the "arch mistake" was to "allow the magical word 'art' to effect a fusion between things that would otherwise be discriminated"[53].

In his critical writings then, Lewis often sought to define limits and boundaries that he felt, for both pragmatic and aesthetic reasons, should not be transgressed. Take, for example, this point made in his 1922 "Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in Our Time": "successful expression occurs exactly at the point where, should this uniqueness be diminished any further, it would lose in force as human expression"[54]. For Lewis, intersemiotic artistic practices seemed to induce just such 'losses of force'. A little earlier in the same text, Lewis speculated on what would happen if one were to mix together the "traces and virtues" of Calderon de la Barca, Voltaire and Plotinus. Although one might expect such a mixture to entail "no

48 "The Artist and Society" (c.1948), Wyndham Lewis Collection, Cornell University Library, Box 3. Lewis was acutely conscious of the effects of technological developments on the fate of the arts and felt that that painting was fatally handicapped in an era which had seen the birth of new media such as radio: "You can broadcast music—you can broadcast a play or poem or essay: YOU CANNOT BROADCAST A PICTURE", *Ibid*.

49 *Time and Western Man*, Op.cit., p.562.

50 A retrospective childhood anecdote is also revealing with regard to Lewis's segregation of the arts: "My mother and father's principal way of spending their time at the period of my birth was the same as mine is now: my mother painting pictures of the farmhouse in which we lived, my father writing books inside it", "The Vita of Wyndham Lewis" (1949), Wyndham Lewis Collection, Cornell University Library, Box 47.

51 *BLAST 1*, Op.cit., p.141.

52 *Time and Western Man*, Op.cit., p.561.

53 *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock, Santa Rosa, Black Sparrow, 1989, p.389. In 1927 Lewis contrasted his position with Bergson's thus: "As much as [Bergson] enjoys the sight of things 'penetrating' and 'merging', do we enjoy the opposite picture of them standing apart—the wind blowing between them, and the air circulating freely in and out of them", Time and Western Man, op.cit., p.416.

54 "Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in Our Time", *The Tyro 2, A Review of the Arts of Painting Sculpture and Design*, 1922. p.34.

further need of any one of the three", Lewis argued that "a synthesis of their prowess would be less stimulating for us than one really lively specimen of such a distinguished triad. Amalgamated, they would be a pale shadow of their separate selves".[55] Such a perceived threat to the "one really lively specimen" and the "separate self" also seems to inform Lewis's stance with regard to the segregation of the arts: the artist's vocation, in his view, is to take his art to what we could term its own semiological limit, beyond which point it risks losing its 'expressive force'. It is perhaps in this way that Lewis's 1939 description of himself as having a "dual personality" as a "Revolutionary" and a "Traditionalist"[56] can be understood: traditionalist in his attachment to the maintenance of boundaries in the arts yet revolutionary in his will to radically transform the arts *within* their respective constraints. As Paul Edwards has pointed out Lewis was always sceptical about ideas of transcendence, and it was in his view while operating within "the physical difficulties that our circumscribed extension and capacity entail" that true value—artistic or otherwise—was revealed.[57] An artist thus had to display his revolutionary colours within the (traditional) confines of the art in which he was working, hence the resolutely painterly Vorticism.[58]

Lewis's claim that being a painter and a writer was being "bi-lingual"is also significant.[59] The Vorticist painter asserted that one had to speak two tongues in order to avoid confusion.[60] Lewis excoriated Stein and the Paris-based little magazine *transition* for attempting to manufacture a "universal tongue", scornfully dubbing it a "volapuk"[61]. For Lewis, Stein and her acolytes were mistakenly trying to do in one art what was the prerogative of another; it was after all the painter who was "the most internationalist of all artists, his sign language being universal"[62].

Finally, what could thus be dubbed Lewis's anti-intersemioticity is undoubtedly—and also perhaps paradoxically—a consequence of his practising as both a writer

55 *Ibid*., p.30.

56 *Wyndham Lewis on Art. Collected Writings 1913-56*, ed. Walter Michel and C. J. Fox, New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1969, p.339.

57 "Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in Our Time", Op.cit., p.25. Edwards emphasizes that Lewis regarded art as "an exploration of our limited human condition rather than as a vehicle for transcendence of that condition" (*Wyndham Lewis. Painter and Writer*, Op.cit., p.109).

58 Dasenbrock points out that Vorticism "refuses to 'come out of the canvas'. [...] Its works are in traditional media. The Vorticists painted, sculpted, and drew. They sought to preserve the distinction between art and non-art; they did not paste things together or put urinals in exhibitions, activities that seemed to break down this distinction", Op.cit., p.76.

59 "For a person like myself to both write and paint is being bi-lingual, that is all", "The Vita of Wyndham Lewis" (1949), Wyndham Lewis Collection, Cornell University Library, Box 47.

60 *BLAST 2*, Op.cit., p.91.

61 "The Diabolical Principle", *The Enemy Number 3: A Review of Art and Literature* (1929), ed. David Peters Corbett, Santa Barbara, Black Sparrow, 1994, p.12.

62 "Towards an Earth Culture or the Eclectic Culture of the Transition" (1946), in *Creatures of Habit...,* Op.cit., p.335. "I myself, in art, speak a VOLAPUC", claimed Lewis ("Lecture notes", Wyndham Lewis Collection, Cornell University Library, Box 19). It was because words always "represent[ed] human speech in some form" that Lewis considered the "silent canvas [to be] their master" (*Time and Western Man*, op.cit., p.61).

and a visual artist. This made him acutely aware of the differences between the arts and enabled him to see exactly what distinguished each artistic code. As Dasenbrock has put it, "[Lewis's'] ability to cross the boundaries between the arts enabled him, not to eliminate those boundaries, but to see precisely where they should be drawn"[63]. Lewis was hostile to the compromising of the properties specific to each semiotic code with characteristics intrinsic to another and critical of the erosion of identity he felt was brought about by intersemiotic practices. What may be seen by some as cross-fertilisation and enrichment, Lewis tended to think of as contamination and dilution, as said earlier.[64]

For Lewis then, the integrity—and even the survival—of the arts depended to a great extent on the maintenance of boundaries between them; the properties they lacked in relation to one another contributed to their specificity and helped ensure their vitality. Such differences were quite simply *critical*. Practices such as hybridisation would, Lewis believed, erode the boundaries between art and life and contribute to the disappearance of art or, as he put it succinctly in 1934, to the emergence of a world of "Men Without Art"[65]. In a late unpublished lecture, Lewis reiterated his conviction that the arts were defined by the properties they each lacked in relation to one other, that each art had its own intrinsic form of reticence, and that a clear distinction between art and life was vital. His assertion can also be read as an implicit critique of intersemioticity:

> The visual artist knows that his material is incomplete. His picture is going to be a silent film as it were. The wind does not sing in the boughs of his trees. His people do not speak. But all the arts are incomplete in this way. There are no eyes in the music of Beethoven. The only complete thing (1) visible (2) full of sound (3) replete with movement is a man or a woman. And they are not art. They are a portion of the chaos. ART is something else.[66]

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63 Op.cit., p.15-16.

64 Daniel Schenker has described Lewis's resistance to interferences between the arts as "an almost Levitical passion, as if the mixing of the milk and the meat of art would destroy the delicate binary opposition that defines the purity of both", Op.cit., p.106. Lewis himself conceded that his dual identity as a painter and a writer meant that his position regarding the differences between the arts was somewhat hard-line and that he did not "make allowance enough for the itch, so often found in the writer, to do a little painting in words or to play the musician", *Time and Western Man*, Op.cit., p.112.

65 This was the title of a collection of essays Lewis published in 1934. Looking back at Futurism in 1927, Lewis criticised the Italian movement's tendency to erode the distinction between art and life: "One of the tasks [Marinetti] set [his fellow Futurists] was to start making statues that could open and shut their eyes, and even move their limbs and trunks about, or wag their heads. The step from that to a living creature is a small one", *Time and Western Man*, Op.cit., p.204.

66 "Lecture on Art ordering Nature" (1944), Wyndham Lewis Collection, Cornell University Library, Box 25.

PLAN

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