

# Avant-Garde Europe in War: Wyndham Lewis, the Vorticist Shakespeare and the *Timon of Athens* Portfolio

Remedios Perni

Universidad de Alicante, Alicante, España

reme.perni@ua.es

This article examines the relationship between Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism movement and Shakespeare, focusing on Lewis's appropriation of Shakespeare's play *Timon of Athens* and its impact on Vorticism's visual aesthetics. In analysing Wyndham Lewis's avant-garde approach, this article contrasts it with other artistic movements of the time —namely, Futurism and Cubism— and explores Lewis's interest in the “automaton” and the “machine”, and how this fascination is linked to his reading of Shakespeare and his views on World War I. Overall, the paper demonstrates how Shakespeare's work played a significant role in the development of Vorticism's unique aesthetic vision during a time of great social and political upheaval.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare; *Timon of Athens*; Wyndham Lewis; vorticism; First World War.

Cómo citar este artículo (MLA): Perni, Remedios. “Avant-Garde Europe in War: Wyndham Lewis, the Vorticist Shakespeare and the *Timon of Athens* Portfolio”. *Literatura: teoría, historia, crítica*, vol. 26, núm. 1, 2024, págs. 284-310

Artículo original. Recibido: 09/04/23; aceptado: 12/09/2023. Publicado en línea: 01/01/2024.



### **La Europa de las vanguardias en guerra: Wyndham Lewis, el Shakespeare vorticista y el *portfolio de Timón de Atenas***

El presente artículo explora la relación entre el Vorticismo de Wyndham Lewis y la obra de Shakespeare, a través, principalmente, del impacto que *Timón de Atenas* tuvo en la estética visual de dicho movimiento de vanguardia. El análisis del enfoque vanguardista de Wyndham Lewis incluye la comparación con otros movimientos artísticos de la época, como el Futurismo y el Cubismo, y analiza el interés de Lewis por el “autómata” y la “máquina”, con el fin de revelar las formas en las que esta fascinación se entrecruza con su lectura de Shakespeare y su visión de la Primera Guerra Mundial. El objetivo principal de este artículo es mostrar cómo la obra de Shakespeare desempeñó un papel significativo en el desarrollo de la visión estética única del Vorticismo durante un periodo de gran agitación social y política.

*Palabras clave:* Shakespeare; *Timón de Atenas*; Wyndham Lewis; vorticismo; Primera Guerra Mundial.

### **Europa de vanguarda em guerra: Wyndham Lewis, o Vorticista Shakespeare e o *Timon of Athens Portfolio***

Este artigo examina a relação entre o movimento Vorticism de Wyndham Lewis e Shakespeare, com foco na apropriação de Lewis da peça *Timon de Atenas* de Shakespeare e seu impacto na estética visual do Vorticism. Ao analisar a abordagem vanguardista de Wyndham Lewis, este artigo a contrasta com outros movimentos artísticos da época, nomeadamente o Futurismo e o Cubismo, e explora o interesse de Lewis pelo “autômato” e pela “máquina” e como essa fascinação está relacionada com sua leitura de Shakespeare e suas opiniões sobre a Primeira Guerra Mundial. No geral, o artigo demonstra como a obra de Shakespeare desempenhou um papel significativo no desenvolvimento da visão estética única do Vorticism durante um período de grande agitação social e política.

*Palavras-chave:* Shakespeare; *Timon de Atenas*; Wyndham Lewis; vorticismo; Primeira Guerra Mundial.

## Introduction

WYNDHAM LEWIS FOUNDED VORTICISM WHEN the cultural centres of Europe (Paris, Berlin, and Rome) had already produced and exhibited *their* avant-garde movements, the most well-known and widespread of them being Cubism, Expressionism, and Futurism. Vorticism was thus born from the necessity of providing British cultural life with its own aesthetic vision with regards to the avant-garde. Although Vorticism was obviously related to Futurism and other artistic trends characterized by their fascination for the dynamics of urban society and technological development (as several derivations of Cubism also were), Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound vindicated the autonomy of what they called “the vortex” as being an idea partaking of distinctly English (or British, as we will see) history and aesthetics. Vorticism sought legitimacy by turning to Shakespeare, who, as Lewis pointed out, “reflected in his imagination a mysticism, madness and delicacy peculiar to the North” (Lewis, “Blast 1” 37). Shakespeare became one of the models for the Vorticists, as specified through the magazines they published: *Blast I: A Review of the Great English Vortex* (June 1914) and *Blast II* (July 1915), the “War Number”. Additionally, as the second, and indeed last, issue of *Blast* reveals, Vorticism cannot be understood without taking into consideration the influence of the *Zeitgeist* preceding and ensuing from the First World War (1914-1918). In this sense, Vorticism, as developed by Wyndham Lewis, has become relevant to the study of the role of Shakespeare in the Great War, mainly due to the way this author managed to conjugate both his passion for the Bard and his participation in the conflict. In this sense, the aesthetic (both visual and literary) and the political cannot be separated when analyzing Wyndham’s work because they in fact constitute a single vision of the world:

My life as an artist and my life as a soldier intertwine, in this unaffected narrative. I show, too, going from the particular to the general, how War and Art in those days mingled, the features of the latter as stern as —if not sterner than— the former. (Lewis, *Blast and Bombardiering* 63)

Taking these aspects into account, this paper studies the extent of Wyndham Lewis's appropriation of William Shakespeare, particularly through his visual interpretation of *Timon of Athens*. A seminal article in this respect was Paul Edwards's "Wyndham Lewis's *Timon of Athens* Portfolio: The Emergence of Vorticist Abstraction" (1998), and as such, my aim is to contribute to the discussion initiated by Edwards on how Shakespeare played a significant role in both Lewis's iconographical innovation and the very origins of Vorticism. As we will see, Shakespeare's tragic heroes were an important source of inspiration for Lewis's conceptualization of the modern subject, which he intended to translate into visual form through "the vortex". Shakespeare was present and indeed a key participant in the birth of the first British avant-garde movement, which the Great War also contributed to shape.

## Wyndham Lewis and Avant-Garde Europe

Before Wyndham Lewis established, together with his artist friends,<sup>1</sup> the basis of Vorticism with the publication of *Blast* in 1914, the rest of Europe had already provided the aesthetic frame within which this movement would be fixed. In fact, Wyndham Lewis was developing his painting style at the same time as he was becoming acquainted with Cubism (O'Keeffe 121). It is therefore possible to discern astonishing similarities between the multiple perspectives shaped by the square and straight lines of Cubism – see, for instance, any of the *Still Lives* by Juan Gris (figure 2), the paintings of George Braque or the analytical cubist period of Pablo Picasso – and those in *Slow Attack*, one of Lewis's drawings for *Blast II* (figures 1 and 2).

---

1 Lewis's associates in the Vorticist venture include Malcolm Arbuthnot, Lawrence Atkinson, David Bomberg, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Jacob Epstein, Frederick Etchells, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Cuthbert Hamilton, Christopher Nevinston, William Roberts, Edward Wadsworth, Jessica Dismorr, Helen Saunders, and Dorothy Shakespear, together with Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot who collaborated in the edition of *Blast*.



*Figure 1.* Juan Gris. *Botellas y cuchillo*. 1912. Oil painting.



*Slow Attack.*

Wyndham Lewis.

*Figure 2.* *Slow Attack*. Wyndham Lewis, 1914. Watercolour.

In both pictures, the palette has been simplified to monochromatic tones, the colour deliberately being kept low-key so as to diminish and harmonize the tensions inflected in the composition by its rupture with any possible naturalism. Straight lines, right angles and mute colours predominate over curves and organic textures in a completely different way to the traditional mimetic (or ‘realist’) painting that was ubiquitous prior to the breakthrough of the avant-gardes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The points of view from which the objects are presented (in figure 1, a still life with two bottles, a glass, a knife, and a plate, and, in figure 2, an abstract battlefield) are plural and unstable.

At the same time, there are also distinct differences between these images, which become more palpable when we examine their specific contexts. While Cubism can be considered as the source of formal inspiration for Vorticism, the themes and ideas inherent to the two movements are quite different (Bru 254-255). Whereas the former, in the hands of painters as Juan Gris, takes its particular philosophy of vision from quotidian interiors, still lifes, and simple objects, the latter devotes itself to the representation of bombastic themes: aerial views of cities (as Edward Wadsworth’s *New Castle* and *Cape of Good Hope* and Saunder’s *Island of Laputa*, both in *Blast II*); sophisticated machinery (Wadsworth’s *Radiation* and Dismorr’s *Engine*), and last but not least, the War (Lewis’s *Slow Attack* and *Plan of War*) (figures 10 & 12). Likewise, in *Blast II*, the “War Number”, several pictures were directly concerned with the conflict: *Combat* by Roberts, *War Engine* by Wadsworth and *One Way to the Trenches* by Nevinson, who also painted numerous large-scale paintings on the theme of war.<sup>3</sup>

---

2 Of course, this statement is an oversimplification of the development of the theoretical dimension of modern aesthetics. Cezanne had already shown the smooth compression of dynamic geometrical forms in space at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the rupture caused by Cubist forms has an intellectual motivation that I am not able to fully develop here.

3 At the outbreak of the First World War, Nevinson joined the Friends’ Ambulance Brigade with his father, and he developed an artistic work deeply rooted in the conflict, to the extent that he was appointed an official war artist. He adhered to both the aesthetics of Vorticism and Futurism, and was eventually excluded from the former.



*Figure 3.* Wyndham Lewis, *Before Antwerp*. 1915.



*Figure 4.*

In its exploration of war, violence and technology, Vorticism departs from Cubism and becomes radically close to another artistic movement derived from it, Futurism. However, the relation between Vorticism and Futurism is also ambiguous and tense. Both Vorticism and Futurism manifest extremely similar formal and compositional styles, and they also share a common interest in their depiction of the mechanic, the urban and the violence of armed conflict. The striking similarities between *Before Antwerp*, the cover of *Blast II* designed by Wyndham Lewis in 1915, and the Italian futurist artist Severini's *Armoured train*, painted in the same year, show the conceptual proximity of Vorticism to Futurism (figures 3 and 4).<sup>4</sup>

Both Lewis and Severini depict a group of soldiers, crouching down together, side by side, as if constituting a single rigid, almost metallic block inside the trench or the train. Their uniforms are identical, with creases that emphasize the contrast between the lines of light and shadow. They hold their rifles in a cold severe attitude, pointing them at the battlefield (out of field) on the left of the composition in both images. The tank guns, located in the upper half of each, point at the enemy too, their forms echoing the bodies of the soldier, as if reaffirming them. The *Daily Express* (13<sup>th</sup> December, 1919) stated that “Wyndham Lewis endeavours to show the war in terms of energy in which the symbolism dominates, in which men lose their human form in action; chimneys wave and bend, and the very shells zigzag in lumps and masses across the sky.” The description can similarly be attributed to Severini's painting. In addition, both images allude to one of the best-known killing machines produced by Art History, the military faceless automatons painted by Goya in “The 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1808 in Madrid,” or “The Executions,” a century before the First World War (1814) (figure 5). But what in Goya appears as an inhuman killing machine brutalised by war and intended to attack defenseless men is softened both by Lewis and Severini in their works. The absence of the victims, hidden away out of field, contributes to downplaying the cruelty of the attacking soldiers, who look like professionals concentrated on their mission, in a way that makes these images a means of propaganda rather than a critique of war.

---

4 In fact, as was demonstrated by the exhibition at Tate Modern in London (12 June - 20 September 2009), which was simply titled *Futurism*, Vorticism has often been subsumed by Futurism and considered part of the same movement.





**Figure 5.** Francisco de Goya. *The 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1808 in Madrid, or “The Executions”*.

Wyndham Lewis, as the leader of Vorticism, would never accept a direct comparison with Futurism, not even in relation to the mechanical representation of war. According to Lewis, Vorticism is absolutely innovative, vanguardist and uniquely *British*; he believes that it proposes a completely different view on art and politics. As articulated in Lewis’s writings, Vorticism is a reaffirmation of the national sense of aesthetics; it fulfils the need for an exclusively British avant-garde movement within the context of a continent where all the modern cities are exhibiting their own new forms of art.

However, Vorticists do not state clearly whether their nationalism springs from ‘Englishness’ or ‘Britishness,’ terms that alternate in the diverse texts of *Blast*. Although the two issues are subtitled “Review of the Great *English* Vortex,” that is, the adjective *English* prevails (and is repeated throughout the texts), the term *British*, however, also appears quite often. In the manifesto published in *Blast I*, Lewis states: “Bless English humour” [...] and “bless the British grin” (Lewis, *Blast I* 26). Occasionally, in his writings, Lewis simply alludes to the “spirit of the North” as in “Bless SHAKESPEARE for his bitter NORTHERN Rhetoric of Humour” (24), a spirit whose existence, according to Lewis, comes from “an essential ethnicity” that precedes the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. He also believed Shakespeare was inspired by “the Age of Celtism” (Lewis, *The Lion and the*

*Fox* 52). In addition, Lewis constantly contrasts this “spirit” with that of France, which he describes as “sentimental gallic gush” (Lewis, *Blast* I 13); Germany, which “stands for Romance” and “should win no war against France or England” (Lewis, *Blast* II 5); and the romantic Futurist Italy, saying of the latter, “Futurism has its peculiar meaning, and even its country, Italy [...], Futurism is too much the art of Prisoners [...] Futurism and identification with the crowd is a huge hypocrisy” (Lewis, *Blast* II 38-39).<sup>5</sup>

In opposing the association of Vorticism with any other artistic regime, especially Futurism, Lewis proposes two main arguments: firstly, the rejection of the “time-philosophy,” as developed by Bergson —whose lectures Lewis attended at the Collège de France— and adopted (visually) by European artists (mostly the Futurists); and, secondly, the vorticist vindication of certain aspects of Classicism, a *Weltanschauung* with which Lewis does not want to break. Both are peculiarly united in Lewis’s aesthetic vision as a way to reaffirm the solidity of British nationalism in the chaos brought about by the Great War.

For Lewis, time-philosophers, whose theories were concerned with these notions as the creative dialectic evolution of culture and the notion of reality as a time-based structure,<sup>6</sup> are to blame for the chaotic fragmentation evident in the modern world (Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox*). Common sense —Lewis thinks— tells us that we do not perceive the world as a flux of time, that would involve a flashing series of disconnected and meaningless fragments, but rather we see pictures that are enduring and complete. Whatever the intensity of the movement and the disruption highlighted by a painting, the spectator perceives a certain unity in it. In this sense, Lewis is a passionate defender of the individual who is enabled to hold a certain

---

5 Italian Futurism is the movement that comes under the heaviest attack: “Futurism then, in its narrow sense and in the history of modern painting, a picturesque, superficial and romantic rebellion of young Milanese painters.” (Lewis, Wyndham, “The Melodrama of Modernity,” *Blast* I, 143). Lewis and the Vorticists, as good 20th-century avant-garde artists, often use some expressions simply to provoke the reader (and the viewer); they celebrate contradiction and enjoy showing their capacity for making their own ideals stumble over each other. It might be considered a proof of artistic freedom and political independence, although, as Freud would say, every joke has a grain of “truth.”

6 See Bergson, Henri, *Time and Free Will*, London: Dover, 2001 (first published 1889). Other philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Aby Warburg, Carl Einstein and, later, Gilles Deleuze have also put forward sound arguments which question the traditional notions of Time so passionately defended by authors like Wyndham Lewis.

perspective of the world. In *Blast I*, he insists: “Blast presents an Art of Individuals” (9). As signalled by Sharon Stockton, Lewis “envisions a place for the subject” and “replaces time-philosophy with a philosophy of space and vision,” meaning that “individuals are guarantors of reality” (Stockton 494). In contrast, Futurists like Marinetti would emphasize the prevalence of movement and its defragmentation as an indication of the dissolution of time and space as it was thought of in the past, before the development of time-philosophy; they were particularly inspired by the introduction of mechanical force, such as the engine in a vehicle. This is something that Marinetti finds hugely fascinating, so much so that he highlights this idea in one of the best-known statements of his manifesto:

We declare that the splendour of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath ... a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace. (Marinetti 146-147)<sup>7</sup>

The controversy between Lewis and Marinetti becomes manifest in Lewis’s account of his brief encounter with the Italian artist after a lecture in Paris (*Blasting and Bombardiering*):

‘You are a futurist, Lewis!’ he shouted at me one day, as we were passing into a lavabo together, where he wanted to wash after a lecture where he had drenched himself in sweat.

‘No,’ I said. [...] [You] insist too much on the Machine. You’re always on about these driving-belts, you are always exploding about internal combustion. We’ve had machines here in England for a donkey’s years. They are no novelty to us.’ ‘You have never understood your machines! You have never known the ivresse of travelling at a kilometre a minute. Have you ever travelled at a kilometre a minute?’ [...] You see a thousand things instead of one thing.’

---

7 Marinetti’s *Futurist Manifesto* was published for the first time on 5 February 1909 in *La gazzetta dell’Emilia*, an article that was then reproduced in the French daily newspaper *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909. See Marinetti, Filippo Tomasso, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism”, reprinted in C. Harris and P. Wood, *Art in Theory 1900- 1990*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, 146-147.

I shrugged my shoulders –this was not the first time I had had this argument. ‘That’s just what I don’t want to see. I am not a futurist,’ I said. ‘I prefer *one* thing.’

‘There is no such a thing as one thing.’

‘There is if I wish to have it so. And I wish to have it so.’

‘You are a monist!’ he said at this, with a contemptuous glance, curling his lip.

‘All right. I am not a futurist anyway. Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes.’

At this quotation he broke into a hundred angry pieces.

‘And you “never weep” – I know, I know. Ah zut alors! What a thing to be an Englishman!’ (Lewis, 1937, 34-36)

As this fragment shows, Lewis’s despal of the Futurist fetish ideals (the machine, speed, movement, the multiple fragmentation of reality) is closely connected to his views on evolved English society that does not owe its avant-gardism to a sudden fascination with technology but to its own industrial tradition (steamships, trains, and many other types of machinery were all English inventions). Lewis’s love of Classicism accounts for this detachment from any avant-garde movement, other than Vorticism itself, and the longing for a (national) artistic tradition. In a very different fashion, Futurists reject the past as “necessarily inferior to the future. That is how we wish it to be. How could we acknowledge any merit in our most dangerous enemy: the past, gloomy prevaricator, execrable tutor” (Marinetti 146-147).

Futurists admired speed, technology, youth and violence, the car, the airplane and the industrial city, all that represented the technological triumph of humanity over nature. By contrast, Lewis sees the past as a missing promised land to which Britain must return to find the roots of its mentality and technological development. In *Blast I*, Lewis writes “our vortex is not afraid of the Past.” As Sharon Stockton notes, according to Lewis, “humanity has been slowly paralyzed since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and now languishes in the sleep of the machine” (499). In this sense, Lewis professes an ambivalent faith both in the existence of a stable glorious past and in a stable glorious centre or unity in the great individualist British mind, and the ideals of the (everlasting) past, individualism and the British mind easily merge in a unique figure, that of William Shakespeare.

## Shakespeare and the Vortex

The presence of Shakespeare in Lewis's writings is notable. He frequently mentions the bard in issues of the *Blast* and devotes one of his best-known works, *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (1927), to the analysis of the bard's tragic heroes. In the latter, Lewis celebrates the English Renaissance and validates Shakespeare's role in articulating not only the ideology of his own era but a lost ideology that the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he feels, must reintroduce. For Lewis, "the services that such a writer as Shakespeare renders a community in stabilizing its consciousness, and giving it that rallying ground of thought and illusion which it requires to survive, are immense" (*The Lion and the Fox* 12).

As a matter of fact, Lewis's analysis of Shakespeare's characters can be seen as a celebration of a subjectivity to be recovered by the great individualists: leaders and artists like himself. In this sense, Paul Edwards has highlighted Lewis's sympathy for Timon of Athens and described his approach to this character as "a product of a self-identification" ("Wyndham Lewis y Timon de Atenas" 15). This is worthy of note because it might have had an impact on Lewis's conception of what being an artist means. As signaled by Julian Hanna, this conception was influenced by the notions of the "ego" and the "will" developed by Stirner, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche that were starting to gain currency in London at the time (25) and which—in Lewis's hands—lent support to the idea of the artist as an egoistic individualist. "[T]he Vorticist movement", Pound confirmed in August 1914, was "a movement of individuals, for individuals, for the protection of individuality" (Pound quoted by Hanna, 25). Shakespeare's heroes, especially Timon, are individuals who, while transcending the human, offer a vision of the world. In a way, Lewis appropriates Shakespeare for his account of what he considers to be the modern subject. By doing so, he reinvigorates issues that are certainly present in Shakespeare but not necessarily with the same emphasis and under the same premises as Lewis gives them since he frames and embeds Shakespeare in his own vision of the world.

Each of the figures of [Shakespeare's] tragedies, Timon, Lear, Coriolanus, are vast keys to unlock a giant's meditative fastness. It is because the scale of his mature creations is so superhuman that it has been possible

to describe them as standing aside from life, or as arabesques of unwieldy passion dispassionately projected. They are, it is true, immense shadows, rather than realities in a cheaply concrete sense; and their roar is muffled by the great lines that interpret it. And it is true that in this control of these creatures Shakespeare showed all the *sang froid* that we associate with the great technician, the tactical transference of the individual experience into a series of prepared puppets. But such puppets are born, not made, by a most painful gestation. It will be my business here to relate the spasms of these scowling and despairing monsters to a particular concrete figure, or to a mind experiencing things according to identifiable personal laws. (Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox* 13-14)

Lewis's enthusiasm for Shakespeare's colossi, which he depicts as "monsters of grandeur and simplicity" is clear here. Shakespeare can, then, be considered the foundation stone of Lewis's visual creation, both as inspiration for iconographic elements and for the conceptual basis of Vorticism, since it is Shakespeare who, through his tragic heroes, provides Lewis with the idea of perspective, a stable site of reference and energy, or in the Vorticists words: "a vortex." As a matter of fact, the basis of Vorticism is sustained by the artists' emphasis on the existence of a "point of maximum energy," a "point of stillness" to which all the main dynamic lines of a Vorticist composition are directed, as defined by Ezra Pound in his essay "Vortex," published in the first issue of *Blast* (1914). For Lewis, colossi as Lear and Timon become the central points in their respective tragedies, they (and their *point of view*) provide the *point of stillness*, as they attract and focus the audience's attention and arouse empathy, something of decisive importance for the meaning eventually assigned to the plot.

One might wonder whether this literary vision might have been extrapolated to the visual field by Lewis, and if so, how. Indeed, Lewis being a painter who wrote —and a writer who painted—, it is not unreasonable to think that his cognitive approach to both art forms shared a common conceptualisation of the world. Lewis's analysis of Shakespearean characters emphasizes their role as guides for the viewer's (or reader's) vision. The points of view of these main characters —their perspectives— are symbolic expressions of cultural cognitive structures that transcend the text. In the same way as perspective painting, the literary perspective the characters provide produces

ways of seeing the world that depend upon more profound formal codes of knowledge. As a matter of fact, perspective painting originated as an artificial convention of seeing, and the Renaissance way of seeing as a canon of representation. The same happens with the Baroque and subsequent ways of seeing: they define the history of how a culture represents, perceives and interprets the world.<sup>8</sup>

This topic has, indeed, been widely discussed, for example by Erwin Panofsky in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, published in 1927, the same year as Lewis's *The Lion and the Fox*, where he stated that perspective—or any other spatial configuration figures is a means to define spiritual content or a vision of the world. In other words, according to Panofsky, perspective is not merely a technique for understanding reality through art but a way of structuring and thinking it. In this sense, whereas in the linear perspective defined by Italian Renaissance artist Leon Battista Alberti in his *De Pictura* (1435) there is a clear specific vanishing point towards which all lines converge, presupposing and privileging the existence of a beholder from whom all these lines originate, the Baroque perspective introduces a more complex structural relation between viewer and work of art, between subject and object.

In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Gilles Deleuze examines the Baroque model of vision:

It is not exactly a point but a place, a position, a site, a 'linear focus', a line emanating from lines. To the degree it represents variation or inflection, it can be called point of view. Such is the basis of perspectivism, which does not mean a dependence in respect to a pre-given or defined subject; to the contrary, a subject will be what comes to the point of view, or rather what remains in the point of view. That is why the transformation of the object refers to a correlative transformation of the subject. (Deleuze 22-23)

The "great English Vortex," the avant-garde turning to the roots of the Shakespearean Renaissance, privileges the Baroque rather than the (Italian) Renaissance perspective. Specifically, as pointed out by Sharon Stockton,

---

8 An interesting insight into these ideas, and specifically into the iconographic relationships between literature and the visual arts in terms of perspective and point of view, is Thomas S. Acker, *The Baroque Vortex: Velázquez, Calderón, and Gracián under Philip IV*, Berna: Peter Lang, 2000.

Lewis is attracted to the non-classical aspects of Shakespeare, especially to his subversion of time to create a spatial spectacle concentrated on the subject. Lewis lauds Shakespeare's drama because its forces of "disintegration, negation and chaos" result in the illusion of drama (Stockton 506).<sup>9</sup> As Stockton says of Shakespeare:

His is a drama, according to Lewis, of externality, space, and ungoverned individuality as well as the violent conflicts that characterize these three qualities. Shakespeare achieves "truth" by portraying colossal individuals whose violently distinct personalities are capable of moving through time while maintaining their stable integrity. (1993, 29)

This conception of moving "through time" while preserving stable integrity can also be related to Deleuze's reflection on perspectivism:

Perspectivism amounts to a relativism, but not the relativism we take for granted. It is not a variation of truth according to the subject, but the condition in which the truth of a variation appears to the subject. This is the very idea of Baroque perspective. (Deleuze, 1992, 21)

In other words, Baroque perspective —as in Pound and in Lewis's Vortex— assumes the pre-eminence of a given truth but this truth varies, does not remain static. In consequence, it does not presuppose a subject located in a specific point; instead, the subject is affected by a plural infinite set of lines, which transforms their vision, thereby subverting subjectivity itself. The point of view, that is, the multiplicity of lines, replaces the centre of the figure or configuration. "The most famous example" —Deleuze points out— "is that of the conic sections, where the point of the cone is the point of view to which the circle, the ellipse, the parabola and the hyperbola are related as so many variants that follow the incline of the section that is

---

9 Indeed, one of the most criticized aspects of Shakespearean drama since the Neoclassic appraisal of the Aristotelian strictures was Shakespeare's use of the unity of time. In 1668, Dryden wrote the following words in his famous *Essay of Dramatic Poesie*: "If you consider the Historical plays of Shakespeare, they are rather so many chronicles of kings, or the business many times of thirty or forty years, cramp't into representation of two hours and a half, which is not to imitate or paint Nature, but rather to draw her in miniature, to take her little; to look upon her through the wrong end of perspective".



planned” (Deleuze 21). An examination of some of the illustrations that Lewis devoted to *Timon of Athens* may illuminate how Lewis set about the vortex in connection to the Baroque point of view.

### ***Timon of Athens as a Prelude to Vorticism***

By 1912, Lewis had embarked on a Shakespeare project, a series of drawings that were designed to accompany an edition of *Timon of Athens*, that would turn out to be his major breakthrough in creating a recognizably Vorticist style (Edward 86; Hanna 24). In his biography of Lewis, Paul O’Keeffe states that Marjorie W. Tripp, a partner at Evelyn Benmar & Co. Ltd, accepted Lewis’s drawings for publication, saying that Lewis was “a genius” and paying him 20 pounds in advance (116-117). This is how, before other well-known avant-garde authors as T.S. Eliot had published on Shakespeare, “Lewis succeeded in getting a commission to illustrate *Timon of Athens*, a portfolio consisting of sixteen powerful designs (six watercolour and ten black and white plates) to accompany a folio edition of Shakespeare’s famous play” (Morato 194).

Six of the *Timon* series illustrations were included in Roger Fry’s *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* in Grafton Galleries, from October to December of 1912 (two years before Vorticism had its manifesto published). What is more, to satisfy public demand, a limited number of them were published, without the Shakespearian text, by the Cube Press in December 1913 and distributed by Max Goschen (14). As Moelwyn Merchant notes, Lewis’s work did not simply illustrate Shakespeare’s play but showed what an artist’s manipulation can achieve with the raw material provided by the poet’s texts (Merchant 175-177). I would like to prove Merchant’s words right and show how Lewis managed to translate the notion of the “Baroque Vortex”, discussed above, into visual material by analyzing one of his *Timon* illustrations (figure 6).

At first sight, there seems no great resemblance between Wyndham Lewis’s drawing for the third act of *Timon of Athens* (figure 6) and Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (or *Doubting Thomas*, 1601-1602) (figure 7), but they each represent a first approach to, respectively, the vorticist composition and the Baroque *point of view*. When looking at them closely, one can see they do have some points in common. Both images contain an indefinite

number of lines that juxtapose and lead to a central point, creating that “place or linear focus” described by Deleuze.

In Caravaggio's painting, the group of four men direct their attention to Jesus's wound being penetrated by Thomas's finger. In a correlative gesture the gaze of the viewer, inevitably shocked by the broken skin and the gaping wound, also rests on the surgical detail. The lines of the composition do not converge in a concrete Euclidean vanishing point; instead, the postures of the characters, and their gazes, make the centripetal movement (Thomas's finger, Jesus's guiding hand, etc.) direct attention to the wound and the area around it. This is the composition of “the concentrated diamond”, as explained by Howard Hibbard (quoted in Bal 31).



*Figure 6.*



Figure 7.

Lewis's illustration also involves four men, although the abstract quality of the lines makes it difficult to discern them. In the upper left corner, Timon is lifting his fist in rage, a gesture that has become a visual convention in Lewis's iconography. The other three men, on the right, are the creditor's servants, who are calling in their debts (3.4. 73-95).<sup>10</sup> The composition is not as balanced as Caravaggio's; nonetheless, the diagonals locate the point of view around Timon's fist, tense in the upper left corner, defying one of the basic rules of harmonious composition. Since volumes are heavier on the left side, distributing the main elements in the upper left causes a sensation of unbalance and unsteadiness. It invites the viewer to contemplate what is taking place there, and, consequently, creates a perspective that was thought of only after Baroque aesthetics did the same.

A more obvious resemblance to the Baroque, as far as texture, materiality and colour are concerned can be perceived in another of Lewis's interpretations of "The creditors", also included in the portfolio published in 1913 (figure 8). On this occasion, he seems to mingle different scenes of the play at once,

<sup>10</sup> All textual references to *Timon of Athens* come from Anthony Dawson (ed.), William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, London: Bloomsbury, 2008.

since in the central part of the painting there are two men holding bills (as in Act III), while a lady, apparently dressed as an Amazon, dances (as in Act I) just above them. Timon is sitting down on the right, as if observing the scene uncomfortably. The folds in their togas reinforce the folds in the composition, an infinite series of curvatures and inflections are enclosed in the painting from a single *point of view*. There is a certain violence in the accumulation of bodies around the tired Timon, and also in the way these bodies are distorted by broken diagonals and the rigid cloth they are encased in. Behind this party, Lewis has depicted a battle, the guests metamorphose into soldiers destroying their host's lodging.

Body violence also dominates Lewis's drawings for Act V [figures 9 and 10], which is even more tragic than those just mentioned since it presents Timon's definite and terrible fall into disgrace, extreme misery, madness and death. In these last illustrations, the tragic hero captures all the viewer's attention: he is alone and tortured within a storm of centripetal lines.



**Figure 8.** Wyndham Lewis, *Timon of Athens, The Creditors*. 1913.



**Figure 9.** Wyndham Lewis, *Timon of Athens*. 1913.



**Figure 10.** Wyndham Lewis, *Timon of Athens*. 1913.

The *Timon of Athens* portfolio, as can be seen, prefigured the aesthetics and politics of *Blast* in many ways. Even the ‘innovative’ design of the magazine cover, with its avant-garde use of typography, has a precedent in the *Timon* illustrations (figures 4, 9, 10). Concerning the eventual conceptualization of Vorticism from 1914 onwards, compositions similar to those mentioned above are developed, with the difference that forms become more abstract, machine-like and dehumanized. The theme of the ‘battle’ becomes absolutely central in the prelude to the Great War, but it had already appeared in connection with images such as the creditors harassing Timon and the fall of Timon (figures 8, 9, 10). In actual fact, in three consecutive pages of *Blast I*, Lewis integrates one of his visual interpretations of the play (figure 12) between two other works not directly related to *Timon* but to War. These two pictures are entitled *Plan of War* and *Slow Attack* (figures 11 and 13), and they harmonise so much with the drawing of the Vorticist Timon as to form a unique triptych.



Figure 11. Wyndham Lewis, *Plan of War*. 1913.



*Figure 12.* Wyndham Lewis, *Timon of Athens*. 1913.



*Figure 13.* Wyndham Lewis, *Slow Attack*. 1913.

Here, Timon is transformed into a horrendous machine rolling out its tanks on a battlefield, his disgraced body becomes an abstract engine whose only human trace seems to be the chiaroscuro of his old toga. Nature gives way to the automaton, the living machine.

Lewis, by having his work endorsed by Shakespeare and the classic (Baroque) perspective, creates a new specifically British aesthetic language to envisage the bellicose environment he is living in. In this vision of the world, goaded by war, visual forms acquire a specific symbolic dimension. The Vortex is supported by a belief in a centripetal point of view that, according to Lewis's later writing on Shakespeare's colossi in *The Lion and the Fox*, can be attributed to the modern individualist. Just as Timon endured a battle against the cruel forces of nature and society, the modern subject needs to undergo a war. In a way, this vision of the mechanization of humanity is not without a critical dimension, but Lewis's position is certainly not unproblematic for the present-day reader.<sup>11</sup> He tried to introduce social criticism in his work. However, he failed to do so due to his intermittent, dialectical, often contradictory, and very much regretted fascination with fascism. At the same time as he (visually) describes horrendous mechanical monsters, he idealizes the violent moment being endured by Europe, which he sees as a source of inspiration for enforcing a decisive change in the artistic field. In 1921, he wrote:

No time has ever been more carefully demarcated from the one it succeeds than the time we have entered on has been by the Great War of 1914-1918. It is built solidly behind us. All the conflicts and changes of the last ten years, intellectual and other, are terribly symbolised by it [...] So we, then, are the creatures of a new state of human life, as different from Nineteenth Century

---

11 There is an ongoing debate over Lewis's association with fascism throughout the various stages of his literary and artistic career. David Cottington has summarized the problematic side of this career in a very conclusive way: "Wyndham Lewis and the poet Ezra Pound led the founding of 'Vorticism', a cross-disciplinary 'ism' grounded in a muscular, jingoistic English patriotism (although Lewis was born in Canada and Pound was American) and celebration of the hard, machine forms of modern industries and cities. Self-consciously and quarrelsomely avant-gardist, both men moved steadily further to the political right in the inter-war decades, arriving eventually at support for Hitler." See David Cottington, *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 183.



England, say, as the Renaissance was from the Middle Ages. (Lewis, “The Children” 162-163)

Lewis sees the Great War as a source of change for the modern subject. In the same way as the English Renaissance (Shakespeare) brought about a new vision of the world, the post-War might be the ideal moment for a new (intellectual) life. Lewis idealizes the necessity of conflict to the extent of making it part of an aesthetic vision. For Lewis, the tensions of *Timon of Athens* become a source of inspiration for conceptualizing the conflict. It provides him with a model of the individual —of the modern subject— as someone who has to face violence and death to be reborn from ashes. In a similar way to Alcibiades at the end of *Timon*, Lewis seems to send out a cry of “make war breed peace” (5.4. 83).

These notes and contemplations have aimed to show how Vorticism, Shakespeare and the Great War combined in Lewis’s artistic thinking and how Shakespeare played a crucial role in the origin of Vorticism. Lewis’s reading of one of Shakespeare’s tragedies, and his need to imagine it, endowed him with an artistic conception of human conflict that he would use later to visually depict the trenches and battles of the war. Shakespeare is therefore in the “Vortex,” in the centripetal space of the first British-born avant-garde movement.

## Works cited

- Acker, Thomas. *The Baroque Vortex: Velázquez, Calderón, and Gracián under Philip IV*. Peter Lang, 2000.
- Bal, Mieke. *Quoting Caravaggio*. The University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will*. Dover, 2001. (Originally published in 1889).
- Bru, Sacha. *The European Avant-Gardes, 1905-1935: A Portable Guide*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
- Cottington, David. *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Daily Express. 13<sup>th</sup> December, 1919.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Translated by Tom Conley, University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

- Edwards, Paul, editor. *Wyndham Lewis, Time and Western Mind*. Black Sparrow Press, 1993. (Originally published in 1927).
- . “Wyndham Lewis y Timón de Atenas.” *Timon of Athens / Timón de Atenas*, edited by Ángel-Luis Pujante and Salvador Oliva, Fundación Joan March, 2010, págs. 13-21.
- Hanna, Julian. “Vorticism and Avant-Gardism.” *Wyndham Lewis: A Critical Guide*, edited by Andrzej Gasiorek and Nathan Waddell, Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
- Lewis, Wyndham. editor. *Blast*, issue 1. Bodley Head, 1914.
- . *Blast*, issue 2. Bodley Head, 1915.
- Lewis, Wyndham. *Blasting and Bombardiering: Autobiography (1914-1926)*. Calderbooks, 1937.
- . “The Children of the New Epoch.” *The Tyro* 1; reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900- 1990*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwell, 2003. (Originally published in 1921).
- . *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare*. Methuen, 1996. (Originally published in 1927).
- . *Timon of Athens*. The Cube Press, 1913.
- Marinetti, Filippo Tomasso. “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism.” *Art in Theory 1900- 1990*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Blackwell, 2003.
- Merchant, Moelwyn. *Shakespeare and the Artist*. Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Morató, Yolanda. “*Timon of Athens*, Redux. Shakespeare’s impact on Wyndham Lewis.” *Ensayos sobre Shakespeare*, edited by José Luis Oncins, et al., Universidad de Extremadura, 2010.
- O’Keeffe, Paul. *Some sort of Genius. A Life of Wyndham Lewis*. Jonathan Cape, 2000.
- Panofsky, Erwin. *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Zone Books, 1991. (Originally published in 1927).
- Shakespeare, William. *Timon of Athens*, edited by Anthony Dawson, Bloomsbury, 2008.
- . *Timón de Atenas / Timon of Athens*, translated and edited by Ángel-Luis Pujante and Salvador Oliva, Fundación Juan March, 2010.
- Stockton, Sharon. “Aesthetics, Politics, and the Staging of the World: Wyndham Lewis and the Renaissance.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 42, no. 4, Winter 1996.

### **About the author**

Remedios Perni is an Associate Professor at the department of English Philology of the University of Alicante, Spain. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Murcia, where she graduated both in Art History and English Studies. Her research pays attention to the connections between Shakespeare's works and the visual arts, focusing on the survival of characters as Ophelia and Lucrece in the visual culture at present. She is also interested in politically engaged appropriations of Shakespeare. Perni has published on the role of Ophelia in the history of madness, melancholia and photography (a chapter in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, Palgrave), and Shakespeare in the digital world (*Shakespeare Quarterly* Vol. 67). She is also a critical theory translator of books, having translated into Spanish books by Elaine Showalter, W. J. T. Mitchell and Mieke Bal, among others.