

Wyndham Lewis's Theory of Mass Culture

Charles Sumner
University of California, Berkeley

In *The Art of Being Ruled* Wyndham Lewis argues that modern masses are governed through media manipulation, and specifically through “the hypnotism of cinema, wireless, and press” (148). This argument motivates Lewis’s various criticisms of press freedom and mass cultural production, and these criticisms, in turn, are often cited as evidence of an authoritarian bias in his cultural and political orientations. Let us take one recent example from Hal Foster’s *Prosthetic Gods*.

The desire to embrace technology, to accelerate its transformation of bodies and psyches, is hardly bound to reactionary modernists or to the cultural politics of the right. At different times such figures as Antonio Gramsci, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin also advocated this embrace, in a “left-Fordist” position that can hardly be confused with the political posture of Marinetti or Lewis. The fundamental difference here is between a primarily Marxist project to *overcome* technological self-alienation dialectically and a potentially fascist desire to *elevate* this self-alienation into an absolute value of its own. The latter is a . . . form of ego armoring (this is the gist of “the new egos” proposed by Lewis before the war). (149)

Here and elsewhere, Foster aligns Lewis with Marinetti, a curious fact considering the several polemics Lewis wrote against Marinetti and Futurism generally. Moreover, Foster never considers the possibility that “ego armoring” might allow the average individual to resist the hypnotic spell of mass culture, thereby retaining a capacity to criticize and overcome technological self-alienation dialectically. If this is what Lewis is aiming at, then he is much more in line with Gramsci, Kracauer, and Benjamin than with Marinetti.

In this essay, I will piece together a general theory of mass culture from Lewis’s autobiographical and critical works. Along the way, I will link this theory with his impulse toward “ego armoring” in order to demonstrate that both are directed toward libertarian ends and are therefore not the products of an authoritarian who espouses the cultural politics of

the right.

I.

In order to understand Lewis's views on mass culture, we must acquaint ourselves with the socio-historical context in which they were formed and developed. In July 1914, he expressed an early contempt for English nationalism, personified as John Bull: "The national enemy of each country is its nationality, typified here by John Bull . . . We must kill John Bull with art! . . . I think we should kill him because he has triumphed too often, and it is up to us to do so. And no Bull can live for ever. It is time we had a new one" (*Creatures* 40). According to Lewis, nationalist sentiment in England denotes a deep conservatism that permeates all sectors of society. He further argues that avant-garde artists, and particularly the Vorticist group, must mount a full frontal assault on nationalism because its conservative impulse conditions the public to support aesthetic academicism. This assault was playfully orchestrated in the first issue of *Blast*: "BLAST years 1837 to 1900" (18). Lewis explains that here he "blasts" "the triumph of the commercial mind in England, Victorian 'liberalism,' the establishment of such apparently indestructible institutions as the English comic paper *Punch*, the Royal Academy, and so on . . ." (*Blasting* 42). In short, Lewis blasts those institutions and social processes that he considers to be nefariously *English*. The war with John Bull was short-lived, however, interrupted by the beginning of World War I. Lewis declared a truce with England and in March 1916 volunteered as a gunner in the Royal Artillery, but the awful nature of this experience ensured that the truce wouldn't last very long.

Whereas Lewis's pre-war criticism was directed primarily toward the aesthetic sphere, the suffering he witnessed on the Western Front widened the scope of his critical interests to include politics as well: "On the battlefields of France and Flanders I became curious, too, about how and why these bloodbaths occurred—the political mechanics of war. I acquired a knowledge of some of the intricacies of the power-game, and the usurious economics associated with war-making" (*Rude Assignment* 149). Lewis's political turn initiated a dialectic between society and individual within his critical thinking. This dialectic was not completely new: Lewis gave the individual's agon with society an aesthetic treatment in *Enemy of the Stars*, written and published before the War. But the plight of "poor 'Mankind' in his concrete form of the plain man—mutilated, bankrupt, and brutalized" prompted Lewis to employ the new dialectical model, which in turn clarified the collusion of commercialism and mass media manipulation (*Art of Being Ruled* 82). For example, Lewis's concern for the "concrete form of the plain man" prompted his argument against the liberal view that men in democratic societies had chosen to annihilate one another and that, given their *free* choice to do so, the war proved "Man" to be inherently aggressive.

On the contrary, Lewis asserted that Man is not inherently aggressive, and moreover that, in a liberal democratic society, he is not free. In short, Lewis argued that profiteers used the press to manipulate the public and thus to incite war:

To describe the carnage of the war as *willed* by the majority of men, in some sadic excess, is so stupid that it is almost *too* stupid. If you tickle the sole of the foot of a sane man he temporarily loses his reason. When excited, confused, worked up, drugged, and shrieked at by the magnate and his press for a few weeks, "Mankind" (*Homo stultus*) becomes ferocious, that is all. (*Art of Being Ruled* 82)

The idea that profiteers pushed for war was in wide circulation, and I am not suggesting there is anything unique about it. It is worth noting, however, that this idea narrowed Lewis's critical attack, which was now mounted against commercial capitalism specifically rather than against a nationalist sentiment that celebrated and revered a range of social processes and institutions. In demonizing capitalism, Lewis could establish the binary of progressive art and mass culture: if mass culture, including the Press and later Radio and Cinema, is a means for the subordination of spiritual value by exchange value, progressive art could be posited as a corrective to this degradation. In this way, Lewis could argue that social advancement is contingent on cultural advancement and vice versa.

Before we can fully appreciate Lewis's argument for art's ability to counter the corrosive social effects of mass culture, we must understand the mechanisms by which, in his view, the latter forges the power of "hypnotism and mass suggestion."¹ We begin with the fact that this power is linked to the psychic affects produced by capitalist industrial *structures*. Lewis touches on this idea in *The Art of Being Ruled*:

Today the development of colossal industries has already driven off the field most of the crowd of small, ambitious men . . . The blocking up of the avenues by which the competitive instinct vented itself, and the crushing uniformity of fortune in which, in the salaried industrial armies of today, it has no play, is one of the circumstances that forces these energies back into the non-working life; with many of the more energetic small-scale competitive people, into crime; and with others—less energetic—into sport and "life" *tout court*, the social life. (143)

"Colossal industries" are structured hierarchically, so that there is a small class of technocrats who make decisions and a much larger class of tech-

nicians who execute them. The consciousness of the technocrat must be supple and wide-ranging in order to oversee the running of the outfit and to plan its advancement, but the consciousness of the technician must be narrowed and specialized in order to execute his small task within the larger structure.² The technician is not paid to think but to act mechanically. Thus his ego no longer mediates a wealth of external impressions in order to project back onto the environment a richness equal to what it takes in, but instead proceeds positivistically, merely measuring and recording the facts of a task assigned from on high. Consequently, the ego shrinks to a point and ambition declines or is re-routed to other areas such as crime, sport, or what Lewis calls the “social life.”

The sociology of criminal enterprise and sport fall outside the purview of this essay, but we should examine the concept of the “social life” because it names that process whereby the individual loses his subjectivity, clearing the way for the formation of “masses.” Generally speaking, the “social life” is a benign uniformity advertised by the Press and sanctioned by the claims of science:

Press suggestion hammers at this discomfited little man. “Don’t worry, Mr. Everyman: never worry! Life—so the scientists tell us—is a small mechanical affair, pleasure is the only reality. Competition and the cares of state and success are all very well. But for simple people like you and me a quiet, secure life is what we want, isn’t it? If your insurances are paid up, your ‘home’ bought, an aerial installed (the hire-purchase payments kept up), a week arranged for at Worthing or Southend, or if you are near a nice city park, with sand-pits for the kids, if you have a motor-bike, etc., etc.—well life is not so dusty! Pleasure, or the home-life, is the thing!” (*Art of Being Ruled* 143-44)

Here Lewis characterizes the Press as an advertising instrument that promotes consumption. The exhortation never to worry but to consume contributes to commodity fetishization, or the concealment of a relationship between producers which is immanent to the commodity itself. In the matrix of distribution and exchange, this social relationship appears as an impersonal relation between “things.” This false appearance, along with the absorption of spiritual and use value by exchange value, prevents the industrial technician from clearly understanding that his own degradation has a social origin and is therefore mutable. So rather than him critically challenging the existing social structure in the hope of altering it, any attempt to reduce his degradation will be undertaken within this structure and will therefore take the form of a struggle for greater purchasing power. In

this way he will increase his stake in a "social life" whose very possibility is contingent on the diminished ego demanded by colossal industry. In short, the oppressed technician will identify with his oppressor.

Lewis's analysis of the relationship between press advertisement and social conformity prefigures Adorno's critical schema of mass culture, and we can better understand Lewis on this point by turning to Adorno's more expository discourse: "Mimesis explains the enigmatically empty ecstasy of the fans in mass culture. Ecstasy is the motor of imitation. . . . Under the force of immense pressure the identity of the personality gives way, and since this identity itself already originates in pressure, this is felt as a liberation" (95). According to Adorno, the individual subject feels impotent vis-à-vis the colossal industrial structure that has clipped his ego and ambition. This sense of impotence is overcome by identifying with the industrial structure, and identification occurs through the consumption of its commodified products—a secular, capitalist version of the Eucharist. The ecstasy of consumption eradicates the critical faculty, thereby reifying consciousness and liquidating subjectivity, so that the individual mimes or approximates the condition of the dumb, reified commodity.

Here mimesis is a defensive reflex, wherein individuals learn to coordinate their intellects, emotions, and desires according to the dictate of the production deity. The ecstatic embrace of this coordination completes the individual's transformation into Lewis's Everyman; it feels like liberation because subjectivity no longer has to be protected from the commercial industrial power. Multiply Everyman by millions, and you now have fairly homogeneous, and thus easily governed, masses. The possibility for political exploitation of these masses is obvious. Moreover, Mr. Everyman can be counted on to defend his own exploitation; his identification with the capitalist social structure, combined with the increasing "living standard" he derives from it, makes any attempt at critical reasoning seem entirely *unreasonable*.

In Lewis's view, bourgeois art is a product of monopoly capital because it conforms to tastes determined by capital's pressure on the individual psyche. This aesthetic conformity reduces art to an affirmative consolation for psychic conformity. By providing consolation, art indirectly supports the claims of science and press suggestion exhorting Mr. Everyman to embrace his degradation:

Of course, "art" and "culture" are introduced as further baits usually into these exordiums. A *Keep off the grass* notice where the wielding of ambitions is concerned, or the great prizes of the world, that whole enclosed realm of "power" and government, warns Mr. Everyman of changed times. But he is recommended to approximate as nearly as

possible to a “gentleman of leisure” and cultured tastes—reduced to earning his living from nine to six every day. Never mind! He can be “cultivated” (and Mrs. Everyman can be “refined”) for the rest of the time! (*Art of Being Ruled* 144)

Like the home, aerial, annual vacation, and motorbike whose consumption facilitates identification with the production deity, “culture” is a commodity bought on the cheap, paid for with a clipped consciousness. But with the ego now shriveled to a meager little point, the individual can no longer engage culture in order to develop a richer imaginative and spiritual life; he can only possess it. Like any other commodity, culture is now seen by the individual as a product of his own alienated labor. Adorno clarifies this phenomenon in his analysis of the sociology of modern music: “The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert. He has literally “made” the success which he reifies and accepts as an objective criterion, without recognizing himself in it. But he has not “made” it by liking the concert, but rather by buying the ticket” (38).

In the absence of a strong ego that can ignite the spiritual power immanent to music, the latter is reduced to signifying the purchasing power of the concertgoer. If we set this idea in relation to Lewis’s Everyman, we see that the realm of culture is one in which the individual can literally spend the ambition which has been pent up and reified as capital, and the concert hall is transformed into the realm of the most conspicuous consumerism. The visual field of the hall lends consumption a specular quality which feeds the ego’s narcissism and magnifies it many times its normal size, thereby relieving work-induced alienation, and indeed, making it seem worthwhile. In this way, culture consumers contribute to the subordination of spiritual value by exchange value and thus perpetuate the degraded social structure.

But here we are talking about the commodification of bourgeois culture, and one might object that the latter has always been the special provenance of a moneyed elite. This potential objection points to the possibility that mass-produced art, in its binary opposition to traditional bourgeois culture, holds the potential for social critique. Lewis recognized that this idea had currency, but he argued in response that the possibility for critical expression in the Cinema was exploited by film producers precisely to pre-empt and neutralize it. He cites Charlie Chaplin’s early films as an example of this pre-emption:

The pathos of the Public is of a sentimental and also a naively selfish order. It is *its own* pathos and triumphs that it wishes to hear about. . . In this pathos of *the small*—so magnificently exploited

by Charlie Chaplin—the ordinary “revolutionary” motif for crowd consumption is not far to seek. The Keystone giants by whom, in his early films, he was always confronted, who *oppressed, misunderstood, and hunted* him, but whom he invariably overcame, were the symbols of authority and power. Chaplin is a great revolutionary propagandist. On the political side, the pity he awakens, and his peculiar appeal to the public, is that reserved for *the small man*. (*Time and Western Man* 64)

Like the bourgeois concertgoer, the moviegoer pays for the privilege of magnifying or puffing out his spiritually impoverished ego. Lewis argues that Chaplin exploits the selfish sentimentality of the masses, thereby inducing them to identify with his character and fooling them into believing that they routinely overcome the obstacles of modern life. In this way, Chaplin's revolutionary propaganda actually helps to reduce revolutionary fervor. Hence Lewis's belief that the Cinema, like the Press and Radio, is a tool used to keep people in line.

Whereas we have posited a difference between bourgeois art and mass-produced media such as the Press, Radio, and Cinema, we should underscore the fact that both fall into the realm of mass culture. That is, each promotes social standardization by disseminating prescribed attitudes which in turn diminish the possibility for spontaneous, individual action. For instance, bourgeois music, no less than the films of Charlie Chaplin, promotes a kind of complacent superiority. The concertgoer feels superior for the simple fact of having the wealth to attend the concert; and Chaplin's fans feel superior because they see themselves, through the figure of Chaplin, overcoming obstacles put in their way by the bourgeoisie. Moreover, the commodification of these attitudes renders them exchangeable across social strata, so that whatever critical currency Cinema held for mass audiences could be appropriated by the bourgeoisie; and that held by music could be appropriated by the lower and middle classes. On the one hand, radio and sound recording made it easier to turn music into a commodity suitable for mass consumption, thereby eradicating the exclusivity of this particular art form and leaving it dependent on commercial market forces. On the other hand, bourgeois audiences could join the lower classes in celebrating “rebellious” cultural figures like Charlie Chaplin. This celebration commodified Chaplin's personality and reduced him to a harmless movie star. In turn, this commodification defused Chaplin's revolutionary fervor and neutralized its critical possibility by rendering it fashionable. Indeed, Lewis repeatedly attacks what he calls the “High Bohemia of the Revolutionary Rich” that has “absorbed and is degrading the revolutionary impulse of the West” (*Time*

and *Western Man* 41). Once revolutionary ideals are rendered common by the auspices of fashion, they become one more cultural commodity.

Lewis cites Diaghileff's Russian Ballet as an example of the cultural commodification of revolutionary or rebellious impulses, and there are boundless examples of this phenomenon recognizable to more contemporary audiences. For example, James Dean's cool demeanor in *Rebel Without a Cause* made "rebellion" so fashionable in the 1950s that the only way for American youths to be radical or rebellious was in fact to be un-radical, thereby preventing authentic critique of dominant social structures and categories. As another example we could cite the appropriation of hip-hop culture by white suburban youths. From the late eighties to the mid-nineties rap music was a powerful medium of social protest, but with the majority of this music now bought by and packaged for white suburbia, its main focus has shifted from protest to a glorification of consumer culture.

Thus mass culture's power of hypnotism and suggestion is entangled in a complicated relationship with technology and capitalist class structures. But there are two factors common to any particular form taken by this relationship: first, a defining agency always rests on the side of commercial interest. As Lewis remarks, "Responsibility for the Majority Public must in the first place be laid at the door of monopoly-capital and mass-production" (*Rude Assignment* 23). Second, the primary goal of this relationship, regardless of the form it takes, is the flattery of the masses (16-17). Flattery can mean many things in the context of a relationship to the masses, but its primary feature is to give them a false sense of sovereignty. Lewis dubs this feature of the relationship the "What the Public Wants" principle (*Art of Being Ruled* 79-83). Essentially, this principle suggests that consumers believe their demand drives production, whereas we have seen that producers actually create and package attitudes and standards which compel consumers to demand what has already been produced. Thus "What the Public Wants" is what advertising executives tell them to want.

The public resists this schema of mass culture because it doesn't want to be told that it is not the agent of cultural and consumer standards. And commercial executives resist this schema because they don't want to be exposed as masters who pull the puppet strings. Moreover, the economy of culture is seamlessly woven into the myth of democracy, so that if these executives are criticized for the low standards they foist upon the Public, they can retort, "It is the Public that decides." Given these circumstances, any critic of these low cultural standards is marginalized and written off as a "highbrow": "The flattery of the 'sovereign people' by politicians tended to erect bad taste, or no taste, into a position where it became above criticism: and, as I have remarked, the word 'highbrow' was coined slightly and damagingly to describe those who persisted in employing their critical faculties" (*Rude Assignment* 16-17).

The term "highbrow" is loaded with ambivalence, suggesting a combination of aggression and embarrassment within anyone who uses it as a rhetorical weapon of castigation. For example, it is a mark of aggression used by an embarrassed public to deflect reflection on its degraded condition, and by angry commercial agents to deflect their guilt for rendering spiritual value subordinate to exchange value. This combination of guilt and aggression generates a kind of social inertia which silences critical or dissenting voices.

The thinker or the artist can no longer, it is affirmed, be permitted "to dissociate himself from the community." This may be paraphrased as follows: no *unofficial*, or private, or outside criticism (such as Mr. Shaw or Mr. Wells indulged in—or Voltaire, or Rousseau, or Tolstoy) is to be tolerated. . . Such type of thinking, by whatever name it may go, is merely fascism. So it is a curious fact that those disinclined for the stooge's role as outlined above will often find themselves misnamed "fascist" by these advocates of absolutist power-doctrines for the West, who themselves answer far better to that description. (*Rude Assignment* 81)

Here we return to the issue that began this essay. If Lewis is perceived to hold a fascination with power and authority, it is partly because he wishes to decentralize power and re-route it through channels that flow across the social fabric. He can only do that by spending his critical and artistic energies in ways that seem hostile to public standards, standards actually derived from a ruling elite. So in a sense Lewis *is* authoritarian; for any deviation from a standard poses a challenge to it, and no challenge worth the name comes without a minimal degree of force. But in general, he flexes his critical muscle in order to increase the average individual's sovereignty, not to diminish it.

II.

To be sure, this characterization of Lewis's socio-critical doctrine as libertarian must be balanced against his support for Hitler in 1931. But before I try to strike this balance, let me state three facts regarding Lewis's first book on Hitler. First, there can be no apologies made for Lewis's terrible, misguided judgment. Whether he was merely neutral in his account, as he himself suggests, or whether he gives Hitler favorable treatment, the fact remains that even neutrality cannot be pardoned or overlooked. Second, Lewis's legacy as a "fascist" is due largely to this unfortunate book. Third, Lewis's criticism of mass manipulation in his own country actually informed his misguided judgment of Hitler.

Consequently, critics have tended either to disregard his social criticism or demonize it as fascistic, right-wing theory. This reaction is certainly understandable, and yet there is nothing “fascist” about Lewis’s social criticism—and particularly about his analyses of mass culture—as we have so far explored it. How is this contradiction possible?

We can best answer this question by recasting certain elements of Lewis’s social criticism in psychoanalytic terms. In liberal democracies, identification with all-powerful commercial interests demands a liquidation of subjectivity, but at the same time it allows one to overcome the sense of impotence felt in the face of these interests. This process can be described as an economic version of the Oedipal situation, wherein the infant’s fear of castration by the father leads him to repress his desire for the mother and to identify with the menacing paternal authority.³ In fact, Herbert Marcuse has shown that the notion of the Oedipus complex—predicated on a struggle with the father—is rendered obsolete by the confluence of technical and economic forces that Lewis critiques in liberal democratic societies:

Now this situation, in which the ego and superego were formed in the struggle with the father as the paradigmatic representative of the reality principle—this situation is historical: it came to an end with the changes in industrial society which took shape in the inter-war period. I enumerate some of the familiar features: transition from free to organized competition, concentration of power in the hands of an omni-present technical, cultural, and political administration, self-propelling mass production and consumption, subjection of previously private, asocial dimensions of existence to methodical indoctrination, manipulation, control. (46)

Technological advances have spawned a mass media apparatus that can more efficiently disseminate cultural and social standards than the father ever could. Consequently, social administration—the internalization of external authority as a superego and the definition of the reality principle—occurs less and less in the family unit and more and more in the public sphere. The setting of cultural and social standards by a centralized commercial and political authority levels individuality and creates easily governed masses. And just as in the Oedipal situation, submission to commercial and political authority is unconscious, hidden by the democratic notion of “What the Public Wants.” Lewis believes that this concealment is tantamount to mass manipulation, and the element of manipulation marks the crucial difference for him between the social

situation in Nazi Germany and that in liberal democratic nations. In the latter, commercial and political agents use the media in order to make repressive rule appear as sovereignty, or in order to rule by illusion, whereas in Germany Hitler's tyranny is transparent. Put differently, Hitler is the authority figure who menaces the German masses with the prospect of castration. These masses submit to and then internalize his authority, thereby identifying with it, and securing for themselves a sense of power:

Under the circumstances, why throw up your hands in horror, Mr. Democrat, when confronted with Mussolini, Pilsudski or Hitler. If those gentlemen are typical of the community out of which they rise to the position of supreme authority (more or less), that should be enough for you—unadulterated democracy being quite impossible. But in Germany's case a real political novelty has come about: the German Nation has the chance at present of *voting* for its future tyrant. Perhaps the German People are today nearer to true democracy, who knows, than any European nation has ever been at all. The English, at least, have never had such an opportunity. (*Hitler* 195)

Lewis argues that Hitler offered no illusions about the fact that if elected Chancellor he would centralize power and rule as a "tyrant." And he believed that the average individual would fare better under open tyranny than under false sovereignty, or covert tyranny. For when tyranny is transparent, the individual has a true sense of what his possibilities are; but when it is concealed, as in liberal democracies, he is fooled into believing that servitude is actually freedom and will thus never be able to truly determine his best interests. In this respect, Lewis's view of Hitler is consistent with the libertarian spirit, or concern for individual freedom, which guided his criticism of the political economy in England and the United States. And if we take Lewis's criticism to its logical extreme, we come to the following conclusion: given that the centralization of power is an essential feature of fascism, liberal democracies are more fascistic than their fascist counterparts.

Of course, Lewis was wrong, and he later admitted that Hitler was more guilty of illusion-spinning than his liberal democratic contemporaries: "I have written two books about Hitler, one when he first appeared on the scene, seventeen years ago (in 1930) before he came to power and revealed what a lunatic he was . . ." (*Rude Awakening* 84). The operative word here is "revealed." Lewis was himself duped by Hitler, but the trickery to which he succumbed is different in kind from that suffered by liberal democratic

masses. Lewis was inexplicably fooled into believing that Hitler had no intention of fooling anyone. Consequently, he proved himself as naïve as anyone else, and his critique of public naïveté ought to be turned against him. But turning Lewis's socio-critical principles against him requires that we adopt them, and we cannot call them "fascist" without applying that label equally to ourselves.

My point is not to defend Lewis by detouring through his relationship with Hitler. Rather, I have tried to demonstrate that in Lewis's mind, the problem was with the way he applied his socio-critical principles to National Socialism and not with the principles themselves. And in fact, his contempt for mass manipulation in his own country blinded him to this same phenomenon in Germany. For when Lewis states, "the German Nation has the chance at present of *voting* for its future tyrant," he is really saying "at least Hitler is not you, Mr. Tyrannical Democrat." In short, he mediates the critique of liberal democratic authority through the figure of Hitler in order to re-create and master the Oedipal situation: by supporting a tyrant who menaces authority figures in his own country, he demonstrates that he won't submit to them. And as the above quotation illustrates, the puerile fantasy of Oedipal mastery is underscored by an ironic posture that, on this occasion, was ill-chosen. Whether or not Lewis deserves the label "fascist" for this episode, his support for National Socialism was conditioned by contempt for insidious social practices in his own country, and is therefore much more complicated than it appears.

III.

Lewis's view of the socially corrosive effects of mass culture explain his support for Hitler; he didn't believe that Hitler was engaged in mass media manipulation. This may seem ridiculous now given our knowledge of how fascist regimes aestheticized their political programs and effectively used the media to disseminate their propaganda, but it was not evident to Lewis in 1930 and 1931. And indeed we can speculate that if the Nazis's aestheticization of their political machine had been evident to Lewis, he would have tempered his support or even refused it altogether.⁴ As early as 1914, he was writing polemics against the convergence of "life" and "art" as practiced by the Futurists, and politics is surely a central form of "life."⁵ Moreover, in his second book on Hitler—*The Hitler Cult and How it Will End*—Lewis attributes to the pageantry of National Socialism a dialectic between progressive social spirit and barbarism, arguing that this political aestheticization exemplifies the barbarity Hitler pretends to abhor:

Floodlight all your *own* performances, surround yourself with a barbaric symbolism, conjure up a torch-lit scene in which to hold your million-headed corroborees—copy the technique of the

Reinhardt Mysteries—such things *do* smack of the barbaric; it will unquestionably disqualify you for the role of guardian of the European order against the hosts of outer barbarity. (63)

This passage is of course a description of the Nuremberg rallies; like Benjamin's celebrated criticism in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," it denounces the fascistic impulse to press aesthetic practices into the service of a ritualized politics.⁶ Lewis continues his criticism by describing Hitler as a calculating Hollywood magnate and "a talking box to be *seen* as well as to be *heard*" (*Hitler Cult* 114, 37). Essentially, Lewis argued against the convergence of art and life because he wanted to produce discursively an aesthetic sphere that, in its opposition to "life," could criticize and modify it. These aesthetic criticisms would be directed primarily at those forms of life adulterated by mass culture. In order to understand how these criticisms work, we must consider Lewis's conception of progressive art.

In the essay "Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change," Lewis meditates extensively on the notion of "progress." For him "progress" has three essential characteristics: first, it is "a new factor in life, *without which life* would have very much deteriorated from conditions when this particular invention was not necessary" (155); second, it denotes a change in value, or of one's orientation—desires, intellect, emotions, etc.—in the world (153); third, it stands in direct opposition to fashion (153). Any notion of an advanced or progressive art must meet these three criteria.

Given these strictures, it is clear how Lewis differentiates mass culture from advanced art: the latter transgresses the standards erected by the former. That is, advanced art must transgress the low cultural standards of mass culture which have been reified as principles of fashion. This transgression puts special emphasis on the dialectic of maker and artwork: the artist must possess a spontaneous consciousness not totally in the grip of reified cultural standards. As a writer and painter, Lewis must objectify this spontaneity within his compositions and paintings so that it can be absorbed by the reader and viewer. In its break from pre-existing cultural forms, this spontaneity is essentially a criticism of these forms and the social relations sedimented within them. One such relation is the taste of audiences. For Lewis, bad taste falls on the side of fashion and concomitant standardization, whereas good taste falls on the side of an avant-garde that raises the critical faculty to the level of form, or style: "For art is only manner, it is only style" (*Rude Assignment* 16, 81; *Blasting* 262). Thus we see that artistic forces of production can alter artistic relations of production. By challenging the taste of audiences with new compositional techniques, such as those Lewis developed during his Vorticist period, he believed he could force them into a moment of critical self-reflection: "Yet the artist is, in any society, by no

means its least valuable citizen. Without him the world ceases to see itself and to reflect" (*Blasting* 262). These ideas account for Lewis's conception of art's social function, and his belief that social advancement is contingent on cultural advancement and vice versa.

Now this is a very tidy aesthetic theory, but it is beset by an insurmountable contradiction: if fashion and standardization are socially corrosive, then no truly avant-garde movement can be successful in the sense of enjoying a *mass* following. For if it enjoyed such a following, it would be posited as a cultural standard and thus rendered *fashionable*; and we have seen that for Lewis fashion neutralizes all critical possibility. This dilemma points to another similarity between Lewis and Adorno, for whom "nonconformity" is a criterion of correct consciousness: as Susan Buck-Morss points out in her study of *Negative Dialectics*, the very logic of a nonconformist consciousness "meant that only a minority could possess it" (84). The question this dilemma raises for Buck-Morss regarding Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy applies equally to Lewis: to whom was Lewis actually speaking in his critical and artistic work?

To be sure, Lewis was aware of this immanent contradiction, evidenced by the fact that he takes it as the subject matter for his first (and some would say only) Vorticist literary work, *Enemy of the Stars*. This play was published in the first issue of *Blast* and consists primarily of a dialogue between the characters Arghol and Hanp. In the course of the dialogue, Arghol manifests a desire to combat social manipulation and to preserve his individuality, concerns central to Lewis's thinking on mass culture. Furthermore, Arghol is referred to as "a gladiator who has come to fight a ghost, Humanity" (61). Here Lewis uses the concept of "Humanity" to designate a species given to *inhumane* behavior. We extrapolate this notion from the description of Hanp: "His criminal instinct of intemperate bilious heart, [is] put at service of unknown Humanity, our King . . ." (59).⁷ Humanity's *inhumanity* has already forced Arghol to flee it; he has retreated from Berlin to his uncle's wheelwright yard 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle. Yet Arghol cannot completely escape and is now poised in opposition to Hanp, whom the playbill further advertises as possessing "BLACK BOURGEOIS ASPIRATIONS" (61). Thus Arghol's agon with Hanp can be characterized as a struggle against the standards of a bourgeois social order. This agon generates the expressive fervor of cultural and social revolution, but not, I should add, political revolution.⁸

Lewis suggested that in *Enemy of Stars* he wanted to keep pace with the revolution in the visual arts by giving words and syntax an abstract treatment, unmooring them from their referential quality so as to create a kind of linguistic and emotional plasticity (*Rude Assignment* 139). The formal revolution enabled by this advance in forces of artistic production underscores the revolutionary potential of the play's subject matter. How-

ever, when the ideals of socio-cultural revolution are posited in order to preserve individualism, these ideals cannot find adequate aesthetic expression because, according to Lewis, they will be frustrated by a dependence on representation, a *social* phenomenon that precludes revolutionary individualism. For example, when individualism is posited as artistic, social, or philosophical doctrine, it is paradoxically obliterated: "And the delights and proud assertions of seeking 'the personal' can be undertaken on one big, crowded track, laid down in any of a hundred text-books, with the certainty that every one else will be seeing it at the same time and in the same place and in identically the same manner" (*Art of Being Ruled* 150). Arghol echoes this dilemma in lamenting that his individualism is always performed for-an-Other: "He had ventured in his solitude and failed. Arghol he had imagined left in the city.—Suddenly he had discovered Arghol who had followed him, in Hanp. Always a deux!" (80). In his retreat, the social being signified by "Arghol" has followed in the form of Hanp, suggesting that Hanp's character embodies one aspect of Arghol's conflicting psychological forces. Arghol's discovery further suggests that his divestiture of the social self is undertaken in bad faith, as if to win increased recognition from an Other and thus to strengthen his social self. At one point he remarks, "I do not feel clean enough to die, or to make it worthwhile killing myself" (70). His point is plain: suicide would indeed remove him from the contest of bad faith, but even this removal is an egotistic ploy for the admiration of an Other. In short, there is no escape from social dependence because any attempt at escape is always socially mediated.

Similarly, advanced forces of artistic production lose their revolutionary potential once avant-gardism, or artistic revolution, becomes the artistic status quo. Thus Lewis rejected literary Vorticism in his 1932 revision of the play, sacrificing semantic abstraction to a more traditional narrative technique. This sacrifice suggests that when the category of "advancement" becomes fashionable, its critical potential is neutralized. As a result, even advanced artworks are *passé* and reduced to the level of mass culture.

IV.

Lewis is a self-styled Enemy, and there is no doubting that Arghol—the Enemy of the Stars—is a mouthpiece for his creator. Arghol equates the integrity of the "self" with *sui generis* uniqueness; and Lewis advocates recalcitrant individualism, untainted by the forces of political and cultural administration. But in advocating this position, Lewis necessarily becomes a sort of social administrator; and anyone who *follows* the philosophy of individualism cannot lay claim to individuality, for he would be too much like its exponent. In order to protect himself from this administrative function, Lewis adopted the Enemy persona, critiquing not only the agents of political and cultural administration, but also his own critical prescriptions. The

Enemy revolts not only against the status quo, but also against revolution. Consequently, the Enemy is indeed a political and artistic administrator, but only to the degree that he can break the grip of prescribed consciousness, hammered in place by pre-existing political and cultural standards. And he will negate himself once this grip is broken, so that one is never too comfortable with his leadership. But insofar as this discomfort is the burden of critical consciousness and the possibility of true self-possession, it is surely a virtue.

Notes

1. Henceforth the term “art” is shorthand for progressive art, and even more precisely for an avant-garde art that raises the critical faculty to the level of form. This point will be developed later in the essay.
2. For a thorough treatment of this idea see Goldmann 51-88.
3. Actually, this “economic” version of the Oedipal situation is inverted. In the classic psychoanalytic situation, the infant’s identification with the father marks its entry into subjectivity; whereas identification with commercial production marks a loss of subjectivity. Both processes, however, describe an imaginary conflict through which a “social self” is mediated and developed.
4. The following passage from the first book on Hitler demonstrates Lewis’ limited awareness of the Nazi “aesthetic”:

Any average national-socialist *Sturmabteilung* is made up of young men who, were it not for the superior allurements of this religion of Hitler’s—with its banners, its military discipline, its elevated idealism and dreams of a *Dritte Reich*, its martyrdoms, its *Horst Wessel Song*—would be equally fanatical adepts of the religion of Moscow and of Marx. (*Hitler* 10)

5. See “Futurism, Magic and Life” and “Life is the Important Thing!” in *Blast* (132, 129).
6. Benjamin writes, “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values” (241).
7. See also in *Blast*, “The New Egos”: “Dehumanization is the chief diagnostic of the modern world” (141).
8. Again, it is worth underscoring the fact that Lewis definitively separates political revolution from socio-cultural revolution:

It is absolutely necessary to make an absolute distinction between (1) *political* revolution (and

further political revolution of a certain hard and fast orthodox contemporary brand) and (2) on the other hand, all thought and activity that is certainly revolutionary, and so disturbing to the comfortable average, but not committed to any particular *political* doctrine—that is to say any practical programme of change. (*Enemy* 74).

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