
***Blast* Magazine and the Cultivation of a Modernist Movement**

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Abstract

This essay assesses the relationship between Wyndham Lewis's modernist movement, Vorticism, and his literary magazine, *Blast*. Initially, John Carey's conception of modernism is queried, ultimately demonstrating that the nature of modernism is too nebulous to be captured as a single, homogenous group. Rather, it was comprised of a series of smaller movements. From here, the essay argues that modernist literary magazine culture embodies this conception of modernism. Analysis of *Blast* then highlights that its distinctive aesthetic served to differentiate it from other modernist movements, demonstrating the interdependency of modernist movements and their magazines. From here, comparison to contemporaneous modernist magazines *The Egoist* and *The Athenæum* demonstrates that this aesthetic differentiated *Blast* not only as Vorticist, but as a commercial product. This is then applied to Carey's arguments, ultimately highlighting that modernist movements were not wholly elitist, but instead that individual movements had a necessary, dynamic relationship with commercial culture.

Key Words

Wyndham Lewis, *Blast*, Vorticism, modernism, magazines

Blast (1914-15) was a two-volume modernist magazine founded and edited by Wyndham Lewis (Blast 1914; Blast 1915). In *Blast* Lewis established Vorticism, a subset of modernism, through a manifesto and the curation of the magazine's content. This essay will establish print magazine culture as a formative space which served as a means of consciously cultivating modernist movements. Specifically, it will highlight the symbiotic relationship between *Blast* and the movement it facilitated, wherein its print culture guided Lewis's conception of Vorticism. This analysis will be situated in a broader modernist context: John Carey argues that modernism consisted of 'a determined effort, on the part of the European intelligentsia, to exclude the masses from culture' (Carey 1992, 16-17). In doing so, Carey simultaneously collectivises the movement and ascribes it a motive: the exclusion of the lower classes. This conceptualises modernism as a primarily consistent movement, essentially underwriting it with a cohesive—if unconscious—strategy. In illuminating the impact print magazine culture exerted on Vorticism, this essay will demonstrate both the fallacy in failing to differentiate between subsets of modernism, as well as the implication that elitism in modernism was a static entity. Rather, this essay will argue that print magazine culture necessitated a dynamism of form, content and commerciality which meant modernism, too, had to be dynamic. No modernist magazine epitomises this more than *Blast*.

Definitions of modernism often focus on its experimental nature, its interest in individual perception; *fragmentary* is frequently applied. These attributes thread through contemporary descriptions. Walter Pater describes 'impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them'; Virginia Woolf asserts that 'for the moderns "that", the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology' (Pater 1873, 235; Woolf 1984, 162). These descriptions typify the intangible nature of a concept, and the difficulty in pinning down a definition for art characterised by novelty and difference. Consequently, retrospective attempts to extract a coherent movement are often self-consciously mired by the very nature of modernism, much as its proponents were. Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch typify this response, acknowledging that 'they [the modernists] could not easily be brought together under one

denominator,' before promptly attempting to do just that and collapse them, and their work, into a single group: 'the Modernist interpretation of the world is provisional, fragmentary'; 'the Modernists present their intellectual hypotheses in arguments' (Ibsch and Fokkema 1987, 2-4). Their argument bridges the typical reliance on the notion of a fragmentary mode with similar claims to Carey's. There persists a notion that modernism is this nebulous for a higher purpose: to exclude, to hypothesise, and ultimately to confer value on the art created. This creates the notion of a club, to whom such things are crystal clear, and the others, to whom such things are necessarily obscure. Yet to do so drastically simplifies things, first by collectivising, and secondly by ascribing a singular motive to this collective. This flattens out nuance, in a manner that can be productive (when it allows for broader definitions to be reached) and unproductive (when it does a disservice to the variety of work included under this homogenous title).

For modernism is a whole made up of distinct, smaller movements. Print magazine culture typifies modernist culture, as it distinguishes and groups ideas and artists together into more tangible groups. Amanda Sigler argues that 'modernist "little magazines" ' provided a space which 'printed subversive or experimental literature unattractive to the popular press' (Sigler 2017, 422). This is useful in highlighting the way that modernist magazines were necessitated in part by a lack of other receptive space in the publishing industry, but also in noting the difficulties of discussing modernism without generalising. Even as Sigler pluralises magazine, implicitly noting that modernism was spread across different magazines and thus presumably varied, she returns to broad terms as opposed to referencing individual groups: 'modernist.' She describes them as a 'reaction against the commercial press,' a description which, much like Carey's, focuses on the imagery of a wave of new culture (Sigler 2017, 422). This wave sweeps away the very differences her argument initially eases out. If modernists were writing for, editing and publishing in different magazines, then it follows that these magazines were doing so differently. In this way, the print culture of these magazines typifies modernist culture: a noticeable grouping of art and artists made up of smaller microcosms.

Blast, and by extension Vorticism, is an example of such a microcosm. Konstantina Yiannakopoulou defines Vorticism as ‘deriving mainly from Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism,’ featuring a ‘vivid geometric style, which set apart their typography’ (Yiannakopoulou 2015). This builds on the image of modernism as consisting of distinct but interrelated groups to highlight that these groups evolved from and in response to one another. She also makes a direct link between Vorticism and the typography associated with it—typography used in *Blast*. Both editions of *Blast* utilise bold typography: the first edition features a vibrant pink cover, with ‘BLAST’ splashed across it in a bold, capitalised font (Blast 1914). This continues throughout, with bold titling used for both items implicitly coming from the editors, such as the manifesto, as well as to title individual submissions (Blast 1914; Blast 1915). The resultant impression is that of a seamless aesthetic that encompasses not just the definitions of the movement but also the art it collates. Thus, the aesthetic of *Blast*’s typography grounds Vorticism by providing a cohesion across its various elements, suggestive of a direct link between the object of the published magazine and the definition of Vorticism it conveyed, rather than simply between Vorticism and the magazine’s content. In contrast to *Blast*, for example, contemporaneous modernist magazines look far more reserved. Both *The Egoist* and *The Athenæum* feature small titles relegated to a minuscule margin, set above two columns of dense text (The Egoist; The Athenæum). Against these, *Blast*’s bold typography and looser typesetting stand out—relaxed and playful to the former’s gravity. *Blast* as a printed object emerges as a crucial element to understanding Vorticism, which is defined and differentiated by the magazine’s aesthetic.

Yet the sum of *Blast*, from typography to contents, exemplifies that it was used to cultivate Vorticism as a distinct theoretical movement alongside a distinct aesthetic. This is clear in the first edition’s manifesto, which reads as a philosophy for artists approaching their work: ‘we fight first on one side, then on the other, but always for the SAME cause [...] our cause is NO-MAN’S’ (Blast 1914, 30-1). By coining this philosophy a manifesto, *Blast* establishes an approach which can be used to define Vorticism. This creates a distinct group by developing a unique identifier through which works can become Vorticist as opposed to Cubist, for example. The editorial dynamics of *Blast* contribute to this. Overtly, *Blast* was

edited by Lewis—it is his name which appears on the covers as editor (Blast 1914; Blast 1915). Yet in the first edition are ‘signatures for the manifesto’ (Blast 1914). This prevents the manifesto from being read as the product of an individual by asserting a removed, collective authorial-editorial voice. Instead, *Blast* is implicitly the work of a collaborative: the Vorticists. Much like the typography which distinguished *Blast*, this collective voice underwrites the entire magazine, implicitly responsible for both specifically written content (like the manifesto) and the curation of submissions. Thus, the introduction of this list breathes life into the magazine by suggesting its editorial process to be more than an act of individual curation. In turn, this confers value on the editorial choices by turning them into a reflection of a greater movement. *Blast* is presented not as a self-published passion project, but an established Vorticist periodical, with a cohesive movement behind it. This demonstrates a manipulation of *Blast’s* paratext (Gerard 1997), to turn the abstract notion of Vorticism into a tangible reality. Vorticism becomes Vorticism because it is referred to in *Blast*: there was no brick and mortar meeting place, no literal school. *Blast* was the point of convergence. Vorticism depended upon *Blast* and the minutiae of print magazine culture in order to exist at all.

Keith Tuma’s assertion that ‘*Blast* marks a moment [...] when it did not occur to avant-gardists to pit their work against popular culture’ is useful in illuminating that these efforts to cultivate a distinct magazine and movement necessitated a distinctive cultural positioning (Tuma 1987, 403). Tuma alludes to a democratic approach at odds with Carey’s insistence on conscious elitism, illustrating that *Blast* was further differentiated from a collective modernist movement by its cultural engagement. This rings true of the ‘Blast’ and ‘Bless’ lists, where the Vorticists divide between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’. These lists are openly satirical, with the paradoxical blessing and blasting of the same things and the juxtaposition of high and low cultural references forming the basis of humour. Blasted are the Post Office, Henri Bergson, the British Academy and cod-liver oil (Blast 1914, 21). Blessed are the Salvation Army, the Pope, James Joyce, and castor oil (Blast 1914, 28). This leaves the impression of conscious editorial choices—these lists are curated, presenting a specific tone of humour. Even where the humour comes from the contrast of culture, neither is given

explicit preference; *Blast* punches both up and down. It should be noted that these lists sit before the bulk of content, and so carefully suggest that the following curated works form a church equally as broad. Essentially, this plays into the image of Vorticism, marketing it as encompassing everything—and so, presumably, appealing to everyone. This is not theorising, but image selling.

This distinctive collapse of culture provides a further example of how integrated Vorticism was with print magazine culture. Paige Reynolds argues that ‘because they embraced promotional culture, the Vorticists could present in *Blast* not only a native aesthetic ahead of its time but also a practical means of disseminating their cultural agenda to the public’ (Reynolds 2000, 257). Reynolds illuminates the way that *Blast’s* aesthetic differentiated and established Vorticism whilst simultaneously functioning on a commercial level. The emergence of an aesthetic which also served as a convenient marketing opportunity begs the question: would *Blast* have utilised a bold aesthetic were it not also a useful adoption of promotional culture? It seems unlikely. One need only assess the other modernist magazines, *The Egoist* and *The Athenæum*, to gather the extent to which *Blast’s* appearance differentiates it from its peers. Where *Blast’s* covers are bold, a shocking pink for the first edition and featuring Lewis’s own, striking *Before Antwerp* for the second (Blast 1914; Blast 1915), theirs are covered in dense text, the titles appearing in only a marginally larger font. *Blast* looks radically different, with an unmatched, eye-catching vividity. It is easy to overlook, when establishing *Blast* as the site of the Vorticist movement, that it remained a commercial product. The view that the appropriation of a commercial aesthetic was aimed at differentiating *Blast* as a commercial product are bolstered by advertisements placed for *Blast* which mirror this attention-grabbing tactic. An advertisement placed in *The Egoist* on the 1 April 1914 features *Blast’s* distinctive typography, only amplified by it sitting alongside *The Egoist’s* comparatively bland typescript. It makes divisive, and hyperbolic, claims: ‘No Pornography. NO Old Pulp. END OF THE CHRISTIAN ERA’ (The Egoist 1914, 140). Reynolds argues that the advertisement placed in *The Egoist* ‘invoked the sensational language, the telegraphic messages, and the outlandish promises of commercial advertising,’ and this certainly rings true (Reynolds 2000, 238). Whilst hyperbolic to the

point of satire, *Blast's* commercial aesthetic remained commercial: a sales pitch, an attempt to steer the consumer towards this particular modernist magazine. Yet, as Yiannakopoulou has argued, this commerciality became the Vorticist aesthetic.

It becomes clear that *Blast* represents a merged commercial and modernist culture. Both can be seen to guide the emergence of Vorticism as a movement. This infusion of the commercial directly negates views of modernism as any sort of cohesive whole by highlighting the fact that modernism was disseminated through a commercial publishing practice: a whole plethora of independent magazines, vying for readership. Even when heavily theoretical and experimental, these magazines need readers. Without readers, the movements are not conceived of in the minds of anyone except the artists themselves. This establishes a necessary culture of cross-pollination, succinctly articulated by Andreas Huyssen: 'mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of modernism' (Huyssen 1986, 47). Vorticism in particular takes this inherent subtext, draws out its paradoxes and inflates them, and makes them the defining hallmarks Vorticism. This is traceable throughout *Blast*, in the 'Blast' and 'Bless' lists, which conflate the high and the low, and in the manifesto, which makes such overtly paradoxical claims (Blast 1914, 21;30-1). Even when expressing their philosophy for creation, the Vorticists fall back on the inconsistencies of their motive, and the grey area that results, wherein art and things can be high and low culture, good and bad, blessed and blasted in turn.

It should not be forgotten, however, that whilst *Blast* and Vorticism were informed by mass culture and commercialism, the magazine retained a degree of intellectualism. The single advert they placed was in fellow modernist magazine *The Egoist*; the phrase preaching to the converted comes to mind. Rather than a concentrated attempt to reach the masses, then, *Blast's* commercial leanings and reference to mass culture were intended to differentiate and promote it *within modernist culture*. For example, the satirical inflation of paradoxical statements in *Blast*, as in the 'Blast' and 'Bless' lists, whilst reflecting mass culture, retain a sense of play (Blast 1914, 21;30-1). Mass culture is not criticised, but it is not championed either. Understood in this context, Tuma's argument that *Blast* does not seek to pit high and low cultures against one another is complicated (Tuma 1987, 403). For

Blast is not simply a collapse of these two cultures, as he argues, but rather a playful exploration of the differences between them. This extends to its commercial practice. The bold covers and advert were intended to draw in readers, yes, but a wholly commercial venture seeking broad readership would have cast its net rather wider than a single advert. There thus emerges the sense that this commercial, mass culture aesthetic was an exploration of a new aesthetic as much as it was a promotional tool. *Blast* toes a line between elitist cultural curation and an accessible, commercial appearance, and it is at the interplay between these two tones that the crux of Vorticism truly sits. It is neither wholly commercial or elitist: it is all the places these things collide and contrast.

Blast's interplay between commercial publishing and cultural exploration illustrates a dynamism to modernism that collective definitions fail to capture. Moreover, it demonstrates the dependence of modernist movements on print magazine culture. *Blast* in particular represents a unique degree of cross-pollination, wherein the hallmarks of commercial practice guide the development of the movement. This development is key to understanding Vorticism: it was an evolving movement. Even within its two issues, it was not the same: the hot pink cover gives way to an equally bold but neutral toned second edition (*Blast* 1914; *Blast* 1915). This deconstructs attempts to characterise modernism as a cohesive movement with a static motive, as Vorticism's adoption of commercial practices and 'low' cultural references responded and adapted as Lewis sought to differentiate it as a magazine and a movement. Additionally, it destabilises notions of modernism as wholly elitist, whilst simultaneously highlighting the fact that *Blast's* engagement with commercial practice should not be mistaken for its approval of it. This means that Vorticism does not counter sweeping definitions of modernism: many elements of *Blast* are elusive, hard to pin down. These elements are also intellectual. One needs to comprehend *Blast* as both leaning into commercial culture and satirising it to grasp its entirety—an accessible movement this was not. This specificity illustrates that to understand *Blast* is to understand Vorticism, rather than to understand 'modernism', the work of disparate artists working in the same time period. Vorticism was played out in the curation of *Blast's* content, the development of a removed editorial-author voice, in its typography and design. In a very real sense,

Vorticism was its most lucid in those pages. Without them, Vorticism was an idea. By printing it, lacing it though the very components of the magazine, it was transformed into a movement, while magazine culture simultaneously leaked back into Vorticism, transforming it in turn.

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