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A Study of Wyndham Lewis's *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939) in the Light of Literary Modernism and Politics

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Abstract

The present research delves into Wyndham Lewis's political writings *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939) through the critical viewpoint of Leon Surette to magnify modernism and its intersections with politics. Surette's analytical approach stresses the ambivalent feelings and apparent contradictions in Lewis's involvement with fascism, totalitarianism, and the broader political context of the interwar period (1918-1939). By examining these polemical and disputatious works through Surette's lens, this research paper seeks to unravel how Lewis's literary modernism wrestle with the political realities of his time, especially the peak and trough of Adolf Hitler and the allure of authoritarianism. In this fashion, *Hitler* (1931) portrays Lewis's sophisticated mind and often contentious position, amalgamating modernist techniques with a problematic portrayal of Hitler as both a political figure and a modernist symbol. In contrast, *The Hitler Cult* (1939) manifests a marked change in Lewis's perspective, moving from ambivalence to a more explicit conviction of the Nazi movement and the potential dangers of cult-like political extremism. In the end, this paper argues that *Hitler* and *The Hitler Cult* provide a nuanced and often contradictory exploration of the intersection between literary modernism and politics.

Keywords: Wyndham Lewis, Hitler, The Hitler Cult, Literary Modernism and Politics

1. Introdcution

A multifaceted English-Canadian artist, writer, political commentator, and cultural provocateur Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957) played an indispensable role in the early twentieth-century modernism and modernist movement. Notorious for his diverse contributions, Lewis was perfectly willing to depict himself as a radical, polemical advocate of avant-garde modernism, especially in his reflections on the influential London-based modernist art movement, Vorticism, in 1914. Although Lewis initially aligned himself with short-lived modernist movement, especially Vorticism, his standpoint on modernism transformed radically over time. He became renowned for his critical stance toward various aspects of the movement, including avant-gardism, critiques of modernism and Politics, theories of satire, anarchism, visual arts, literature, and broader cultural criticism. In 1914, he launched *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex*, a magazine introducing Vorticism with a manifesto criticizing Victorian ideals. The contributors included American poet Ezra Pound, French-born sculptor Jacob Epstein, and French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. Lewis's pieces in *Blast* show Imagist poetry's influence, and his bold, dramatic typography and graphic design bear similarities to Italian Futurism, which celebrated speed and machinery.

During World War I, Lewis served as an artillery officer and later as a war artist, producing impactful paintings like *A Battery Shelled* (1919), which, while representational, reflects Vorticism's angularity. His first novel, *Tarr*, written in 1915, was published in 1918. After the war, Lewis gained prominence as a writer but continued painting, focusing on portraits and abstract watercolors. Working in isolation until 1926, he began publishing a series of influential books, including *The Art of Being Ruled* (political theory), *Time and Western Man* (a critique of modern art's subjectivity), *The Lion and the Fox* (a study of Shakespeare and Machiavelli), and *The Wild Body* (stories and essays on satire). His satirical novel *The Apes of God* (1930) caused a stir in literary circles for its sharp criticism of affluent dilettantes. To make matters complicated, the 1930s were challenging for Lewis. Despite creating some of his best-known paintings, such as *The Surrender of Barcelona* (1936) and a portrait of T.S. Eliot (1938), and publishing notable works—including *Men Without Art* (1934), *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), and *The Revenge for Love* (1937)—he faced severe financial issues by the decade's end. Two libel suits in 1932 had made publishers cautious, and his support of fascism had alienated many.

In this fashion, Wyndham Lewis's political-based writings *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939) are significant yet controversial that offer a unique interplay between literary modernism and political critique. Written during a period of intense political tension, these polemical works reflect Lewis's complex involvement with fascism, totalitarian regimes, and the rise and fall of Adolf Hitler. Through an amalgamation of modernist aesthetics, irony, and political commentary, Lewis's portrayal of Hitler shows a deeply ambivalent stand that both critiques and, at times, appears to sympathize with authoritarian power and political system. This paper aims to investigate these works through the lens of literary modernism, examining how Lewis's artistic techniques and methods serve as both a reflection of and a reaction to the turbulent politics of the interwar period.

With this end in view, *Hitler* (1931) marks one of Lewis's most controversial engagements with political ideology, presenting a figure who is not merely a dictator but also a complex symbol of modernity's discontents. At the time of its publication, the book was seen as provocative, as it was written before the full extent of Nazi atrocities became known, and Lewis's portrayal of Hitler is characterized by a combination of critique and ambivalence. Through fragmented narrative, satirical tones, and modernist irony, Lewis challenges conventional biographical and political writing, positioning Hitler as a symptom of broader societal anxieties. This modernist approach reflects the wider concerns of the movement, particularly its preoccupation with the breakdown of traditional structures and the search for new forms of expression in an increasingly chaotic world.

By the time Lewis published *The Hitler Cult* on 7 December 1939, just three months after Germany's invasion to Poland, his perspective had altered significantly. This oeuvre acts as a more direct assessment of the Nazi regime and the cult of personality crowding around Hitler. Lewis dissects the mechanisms of Nazi propaganda and the hazardous allure of charismatic leadership, using modernist techniques to highlight the absurdity and dangers of political extremism. The movement from the ambivalent portrayal in *Hitler* (1931) to the outright condemnation in *The Hitler Cult* (1939) illustrates the transformative political landscape of the 1930s and Lewis's growing disenchantment with fascist ideologies. This transformation also portrays the broader modernist struggle to reconcile artistic innovation with political reality, particularly as the world approached the brink of World War I and II.

According to this perspective, the detailed analysis of these polemical and disputatious works highlights the inherent tensions within modernist literature when exposing any confrontation with authoritarianism. Lewis's portrayal of Hitler expressing oscillation between critique and admiration, disclosing the allure of power and the dangers of ideological extremism. By scrutinizing these texts, this study seeks to illuminate the paths in which modernist aesthetics intersect with political commentary, offering a nuanced understanding of how artists like Lewis wrestled with the moral and ideological challenges of their epoch. To put it in a nutshell, *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939) stand as testament to the complex relationship between literary modernism and politics, reflecting both the power of artistic innovation and the profound ethical dilemmas faced by writers in the face of rising totalitarianism.

2. Literature Review

Wyndham Lewis's *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939) have been analyzed extensively, especially in the context of literary modernism and politics. These works represent Lewis's complex correlation with fascism and his evolving stance on authoritarianism, making them challenging yet indispensable texts within the study of modernist literature. Through the lens of Leon Surette, a scholar known for his nuanced examination of modernist writers' engagements with politics, this literature review explores how Lewis's works intersect with the political ideologies of their time and the broader modernist movement.

Viewed through the lens of literary modernism and politics, Leon Surette's critical perspective offers a comprehensive framework for understanding Lewis's works, emphasizing the ambivalence and contradictions inherent in his portrayal of Hitler and fascist ideology. Surette argues that Lewis's *Hitler* (1931) cannot be easily categorized as a simple endorsement or condemnation of Hitler; rather, it reflects the complexities of Lewis's modernist aesthetic and his critical view of contemporary politics. In this respect, Lewis repeatedly embraces Hitler as a man of the people. Far from being a sinister adversary or outsider, this approachable figure is portrayed as untainted by the schemes of elitist groups (Sherry, 1993), as he mentions; 'Hitler is a very new type of Nationalist in Germany. The people who follow him know that the Junker-spirit plays no part in his eloquent workman's evangile' an also 'Hitler is a sort of inspired and eloquent Everyman' (Wyndham Lewis, 1931). In this work, Lewis employs modernist techniques such as irony, satire, and fragmentation to portray Hitler not only as a political figure but also as a symbol of the broader disintegration of modern society. Surette's analysis highlights how Lewis's depiction of Hitler serves

both as a critique of democratic failures and as an exploration of the allure of strong, authoritarian leadership in a time of societal crisis. As it is stated;

> Anything that Wyndham Lewis writes is likely to prove fantastic and bizarre to the verge of lunacy. But his mind is as keen as it is cranky, and as capacious as capricious. The Art of Being Ruled is a type of book, which has become fairly numerous of late. It belongs to the failure-of-democracy series. It is not "An analysis of the structure of modern society," as its jacket alleges, though it shows the impact of industrialism on political thought.(Surette, 2011, p. 105)

Surette's insights are particularly valuable in understanding how *The Hitler Cult* (1939) represents a shift in Lewis's political engagement. As opposed to the ambivalent attitudes observed in *Hitler* (1931), *The Hitler Cult* suggests a more straightforward and explicit critique of Nazi ideology and the potential threats of political cultism and the personality cult. Surette's work casts light on Lewis's increasing disenchantment with fascism and his growing recognition of the devastating effects/consequences of totalitarian regimes. In this text, Lewis separates himself from the existing mythos surrounding Hitler and critiques the cult-like devotion that paved the way for the Nazi rise to power. Surette's analysis accentuates how Lewis underwent a dramatic transformation not only by the changing political landscape of the 1930s but also by his own separation from earlier modernist ideals and advocacy. In his broader exploration of literary modernist views, Surette sets Lewis alongside other modernist writers who wrestled with the political crises of their own era, such as Ezra Pound, Paul de man and T.S. Eliot. Surette points that, like these contemporaries, Lewis's involvement with fascism is fraught with claims and counterclaims and reflects the wider modernist endeavor to reconcile artistic innovation with the political realities of the time. Lewis's use of modernist techniques and methods—such as fragmented narrative, ambiguous/unclear features, and a satirical tone—serves as a means of both critiquing and involving with the authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies that were remolding Europe. As Surette pinpoints that,

> Such a duple schema does not map very well onto the alignment of literary modernists, none of whom were Communists, and of whom only Pound was a Fascist, although Wyndham Lewis was notoriously sympathetic to the Nazis in the early going. Yeats, Law rence, Joyce, and Eliot are a different matter. Largely because they were clearly not Communists, they remain under recurrent suspicion. It is my hope that this survey of the ideological landscape of the period will help to clear up some of the ambiguities concerning the political affiliation of modernism caused by a too vigorous application of a simple dual good-guy/bad-guy schema. (Surette, 1994, p. 174)

Surette's approach to Lewis accentuates the significance of enlightening these works not merely as political tracts but as intricate artistic responses to the cultural and ideological crises of the interwar period. In other words, in *The Hitler Cult*, Lewis repeatedly pinpoints his misjudgment of Hitler's appearance and personality, but does so indirectly and defensively. Through cynical jabs and comments at various aspects of Hitler's image, from his eyes to the way others perceive him, Lewis is ultimately critiquing his own visual advocacy with the *Führer*—a fixation vividly recalled in the frontispiece of Hitler (Sherry, 1993).

3. Theoretical Framework

The current article of Wyndham Lewis's *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939) through the lens of Leon Surette provides a critical theoretical framework that combines literary modernism with political analysis. Leon Surette, a distinguished scholar of modernist literature, particularly emphasizes the intersection of aesthetic experimentation and political ideology in the works of early 20th-century writers. His unorthodox approach, adopted on his oeuvre *Dreams of a Totalitarian Utopia: Literary Modernism and Politics* (2011), is instrumental in understanding the complexities of Lewis's engagement with fascism, authoritarianism, and the broader political landscape of the interwar period. This framework helps to dissect how Lewis's modernist techniques and political views are intertwined, revealing the deeper ambivalences and contradictions in his portrayal of Hitler and Nazi ideology.

Surette's critical lens stems from a profound understanding of literary modernism, portrayed by its experimental forms, fragmented writings, and refutation of traditional literary norms and principles. Modernism, as articulated by Surette, is not solely an artistic movement but a reaction to the widespread political, and socio-cultural disruptions of the early 20th century. Lewis, as a valued modernist, employed these experimental techniques to engage with contemporary political ideologies, particularly fascism. Surette's theoretical method highlights how Lewis's modernist aesthetics—marked by irony, satire, and narrative fragmentation—are organized to explore the sophistication of totalitarianism and the seductive power of authoritarian figures like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.

According to Surette, modernist literature often grapples with the moral ambiguities of its time, reflecting both a fascination with and a critique of contemporary politics (Surette, 2011). In Lewis's *Hitler* (1931), Surette identifies a work that is not a straightforward endorsement of fascism but a complex interrogation of the cultural and political forces that gave rise to Hitler. Lewis's use of irony and satirical tone serves to undermine traditional heroic narratives, presenting Hitler as a figure emblematic of modern anxieties about leadership, mass movements, and the fragility of democratic institutions. Surette's framework emphasizes that Lewis's portrayal of Hitler is deeply embedded in the modernist tradition of questioning established truths and exploring the psychological underpinnings of political phenomena. With this end in view, Surette asserts that in *The Hitler Cult* (1939), Lewis withdraws his support for Hitler, explaining that his previous sympathies stemmed from an attraction to Nazi economic policies. He describes his earlier stance in Hitler as driven by a kind of mischievous political provocation (Surette, 1999):

> I was, above all, glad the stupid French chauvinists were about to have their noses rubbed in their handiwork. And the views on finance of Herr Feder* were not without a certain appeal—they reminded me of our Major Doug- las... . The idea of a 'credit crank' being let loose in the second greatest industrial country in the world recommended itself to me. That would brighten things up! I thought Europe had asked for that, too. (Wyndham Lewis, 1939, p. 27)

Furthermore, Surette's analysis of *The Hitler Cult* (1939) reveals a shift in Lewis's engagement with fascism. By 1939, Lewis's critique had become more direct and explicit, targeting the dangers of political cultism and the manipulative power of propaganda. Through Surette's lens, Lewis's later work is understood as a response to the increasing visibility of Nazi atrocities and the growing disillusionment with totalitarian regimes. Surette's framework highlights how Lewis's modernist techniques—such as narrative disruption and satirical critique—are used to deconstruct the mythos surrounding Hitler and expose the perils of unchecked charismatic authority. This approach positions Lewis not as an apologist for fascism but as a modernist artist grappling with the ethical and political complexities of his time. As Surette claims that,

> That trauma suffered by capitalist democracies made the authoritarian ideology of fascism/Nazism seem attractive to many ordinary citizens, as well as to intellectuals like Lewis, Eliot, and Pound – all of whom feared the judgment of the ordinary citizen. All three were also essentially internationalist in sentiment, and hence were predisposed to reject the nationalism and xenophobia that characterized fascism/Nazism. (Surette, 2011, pp. 276-277)

In applying Surette's lens to *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939), this theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of reading Lewis's works as complex, multifaceted texts that resist straightforward political categorization. Surette's approach allows for a nuanced interpretation of how Lewis's modernist strategies function both as a critique of and a reaction to the political crises of his time. By exploring the interplay between modernist aesthetics and political commentary, Surette's framework provides a deeper understanding of Lewis's literary endeavors as part of the broader struggle within modernism to navigate the ethical challenges posed by the rise of authoritarianism.

4. Discussion

Wyndham Lewis's political narratives, *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939) manifests a complex interplay between literary modernism and political commentary that echoes the wider political upheaval of the interwar period. These works are not only literary manifestation but also political-based texts that engage with the rise of fascism and the figure of Adolf Hitler, showcasing Lewis's transformative political stance and his complicated relationship with modernist aesthetics. The core idea of these works in the light of literary modernism and politics divulges the multifaceted nature of Lewis's involvement with contemporary ideologies and philosophical issues, demonstrating both his critical insights and the problematic aspects of his political flirtations.

To this extent, Wyndham Lewis's political trajectory, marked by his boundless enthusiasm, has long been a subject of debate, particularly regarding whether his right-wing stance was inherently extreme or became more reprehensible with the rise of Fascism in the 1930s. The release of his uncritical book *Hitler* (1931) is often cited as evidence of his controversial political inclinations, especially his belief that Hitler was "a Man of Peace who will help quash Bolshevism" (Wyndham Lewis, 1931), whose policies could prevent another world war. This work reflects Lewis's increasing alignment with Nazi propaganda during the fluctuating tides of fascism. As noted by Whittier-Ferguson (2013), Lewis's turn to fascism and admiration for Hitler are symptomatic of a deeper discontent with Western civilization (Whittier-Ferguson, 2013). In fact, in *Hitler* (1931), Lewis attempts to grapple with the figure of Hitler at a time when the future Nazi leader was on the cusp of gaining significant political power. The polemical narratives amalgamate elements of biography, political analysis, and socio-cultural criticism, positioning Hitler as both a symptom and a motivator of the ideological turmoil gripping Europe. Lewis's manifestation of Hitler is pinpointed by ambivalence; he portrays Adolf Hitler as a charismatic yet deeply flawed leader whose rise reflects the broader fiasco of Weimar Germany. This ambivalent attitude towards Hitlerism is a hallmark of modernist literature, which often resists clear moral judgments and instead represents complicated, often contradictory elements that embody the anxieties of their time.

In a similar vein, Lewis's approach to Hitler is informed by his modernist background, particularly his use of irony and satire. These literary techniques allow Lewis to critique the messianic aura surrounding Hitler while simultaneously highlighting the allure that such figures hold for a disillusioned populace. The distorted, often fragmented style of *Hitler* (1931) reelects the socio-political instability of the epoch, mirroring the modernist tendency to grasp the fractured nature of contemporary experience. However, Lewis's enthusiasm about fascist ideas and his occasional advocacy for Hitler's anti-communist/anti-liberalist stance complicate the text, clouding the issue between critique and endorsement. This duality and ambivalence in Lewis's narratives highlight the broader challenges faced by modernist writers who searched to engage with contemporary political matters without fully aligning themselves with any particular ideological differences. Despite his attempts to resist the growing futurist and avant-garde movements of the late 20th century, Lewis's complex and often contradictory personality frequently connected his radical modernist ideologies with the unifying doctrine of fascism. Alan Munton highlights that the publication of *Hitler* (1931) led to increased scrutiny of Lewis's broader political narratives, many of which, particularly his works from the 1930s, are viewed as objectionable and racially charged (Munton, 2006). These controversial texts, including *The Hitler Cult* (1939), represent the second phase of Lewis's political engagement, characterized by polemical defenses that challenge the notion that his work was consistently embedded with right-wing ideologies regarding Anglo-German relations. In the fascist view, the term "proto-fascist" is often used to describe Lewis's alignment with Fascism, grounded in his earlier

works like *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), a political theory text, and *Time and Western Man* (1927), which critiques modernist subjectivity and flux. These writings made Lewis's political arguments more concrete, linking his perspectives to the philosophical, political, and artistic consequences of World War I. Fredric Jameson contends that Lewis's "fascism" should be viewed as a protest against the reified experience of alienated social life (Jameson, 1981), framing modernists like Lewis as "proto-fascists" or as an inevitable part of conservative political thought:

> Protofascism may be characterized as a shifting strategy of class alliances whereby an initially strong populist and anticapitalist impulse is gradually readapted to the ideological habits of a petty bourgeoisie, which can itself be displaced when, with the consolidation of the fascist state, effective power passes back into the hands of big business.(Jameson, 1981, p. 15)

In retrospect, in November 1930, Wyndham Lewis visited Germany, just two months after the Nazi party's significant electoral success, winning over six million votes and becoming the second-largest party in the Reichstag (their vote share had jumped from 2.6 percent in May 1928 to 18.3 percent in September 1930). His observations on Adolf Hitler were initially published as articles in *Time and Tide* in January and February 1931 and later expanded into his book *Hitler* (1931). This work, which can be seen as a panegyric to fascism and the "Hitlerites," portrayed Hitler as a "man of peace" and a master organizer, arguing that his followers were primarily defending themselves against communist violence. Lewis's account captures the tense atmosphere of Germany, especially in the vibrant yet uneasy city of Berlin. In *Hitler* (1931), Lewis employs his characteristic wit and humor to dissect a nation on the verge of what he calls "the most bloodless revolution on record" (Wyndham Lewis, 1936). He suggests that his support for Nazism was driven by political pragmatism rather than philosophical conviction, implying that, in the prevailing "emergency conditions," Hitler might be the most suitable leader for Germany(Wyndham Lewis, 1931). He emphasizes that his endorsement of Nazism was a calculated political stance, reflecting the complex and volatile political landscape of early 1930s Germany.

According to this perspective, David Ayers notes that Wyndham Lewis attributes the mythologizing of Hitler to the mass media, arguing that it serves to secure the racial and psychological identity of individuals by degrading consciousness in the interest of established power (Ayers & Hanna, 1992). Lewis explores key elements of the Nazi movement, including its racial ideologies, methods of proselytization, economic policies, and the Führer-centered hierarchy, with the aim of making Nazism understandable to the average Briton (Lafferty, 2009). In *Hitler* (1931), Lewis, in other terms, seeks to clarify the value of Hitler's long-term strategic policies for Europe and criticizes the British government for failing to acknowledge Germany's legitimate claims to rearmament (Trubowitz, 2016). A significant portion of the book is dedicated to explaining National Socialist doctrines, particularly *Blutsgefühl*, or "Blood-feeling"—the mystical sense of belonging that all Germans should feel (Michael & Doerr, 2002), which was one of the political foundations of National Socialism. Lewis portrays Hitler as an undeniably great and authentic personality and supports this view by quoting from a typical Nazi article: "Der Nationalsozialismus predigt das Zeitalter des Blutes. *Aus dem Blutsgefühl heraus soll sich ein neuer Wille zum Nationalismus und Sozialismus gebaren, aus dem bewussten Blutsgefühl"* ("National Socialism teaches the Age of Blood. Out of the blood-feeling, a new will to Nationalism and to Socialism shall be born. Out of the conscious blood-feeling") (Wyndham Lewis, 1931). The philosophical dogma of *Blutsgefühl* aims to unify people of the same ethnic group and cultural tradition through a shared sense of bodily solidarity and deep social interest. As Surette laments the fact that

> We should bear in mind that although Nazi anti-Semitism was open and violent, Hitler was still only the leader of a minority party as Lewis wrote. He did not become chancellor until 30 January 1933. The infamous Nuremberg Racial Laws were not enacted until 1935, and the extreme violence of *Kristallnacht* was still seven years in the future when Lewis wrote *Hitler*. Inexcusable as Lewis's toleration of Nazi anti-Semitism is, he could not have foreseen the brutality against Jews that was to come– still less the Final Solution. (Surette, 2011, p. 212)

To forcefully drive home this point, with the launch of *The Hitler Cult* (1939), Lewis's point of view had shifted, commenting more strongly critical and snide remarks to fascism and the personality cult surrounding Hitler. In this satirical work, Lewis scrutinizes the mechanisms of propaganda and the psychological and manipulative strategies employed by the Nazi regime and authorities to maintain control over the masses. *The Hitler Cult* (1939) acts as a more explicit condemnation of the dangers imposed by the system of totalitarianism, portraying Lewis's growing disenchantment with fascist ideology/philosophy and his recognition of its destructive potential. The divergent views from *Hitler* to *The Hitler Cult* suggests a wider transformation in Lewis's political views, as he becomes fully informed of the moral implications and the detrimental side effects of the Nazi regime's actions.

According to the *Führerprinzip* (Leadership Principle; In effect, all were to obey Hitler without question.) ideology, the cult of personality of Adolf Hitler was an integral part to accomplishing Nazi political aims and objectives and served as the foundational basis of political authority in Nazi Germany (1933–1945). This cult of personality was strengthened by relentless determination of Nazi propaganda and bolstered by Hitler's successes in resolving Germany's economic crises, alleviating the large-scale unemployment, remilitarizing in flagrant defiance of the Treaty of Versailles, and reorganizing Germany's dominance in Europe during the Great Depression. This elevation of Hitler became a crucial aspect of Nazi control, as he promised decisive action and a vision of reconstruction, famously proclaiming the need "to seize the big bull of Finance by the horns, and to take a chance for the sake of freedom" (Wyndham Lewis, 1931). Lewis noted, "Germany is now National Socialist: and National Socialism is Herr Hitler. The National Socialist régime could not survive him, and would not have come into being without him" (Wyndham Lewis, 1939). In practice, "the Führer's word is above all written law," with state policies, regulations, and public directives designed to adhere to this principle at all societal levels, including executive, judicial, and

legislative powers. The Leader Principle created an authoritarian structure with power concentrated at the top, demanding absolute obedience to a visionary leader—characteristic of political fascism. Within this framework, Nazi ideology portrayed Hitler as a charismatic demagogue who personified and molded the German people, as a heroic figure capable of saving Germany, and as a formidable defender against its adversaries. As Ian Kershaw observes, Hitler was viewed as a figurehead who embodied the collective identity and aspirations of the German nation.

> Hitler stood for at least some things they [German people] admired, and for many had become the symbol and embodiment of the national revival which the Third Reich had in many respects been perceived to accomplish. He had evoked in extreme measure and focused upon himself many irrational, but none the less real and strong, feelings of selfless devotion, sacrifice, and passionate commitment to a national ideal—emotions which had developed enormous, elemental force during and after the First World War. (Kershaw, 1987, p. 171)

In the light of such considerations, the transition between these two works also reflects a broader modernist concern with the power of mass media and the manipulation of public perception. In *The Hitler Cult* (1939), Lewis criticizes the ways in which the spreading of political propaganda and the government propaganda machine erect a heroic narrative around Hitler, transforming him into a quasi-mythical iconic figure. This critique closely aligns with modernist anguish about the inhumane effects of mass culture and the alienation of individual agency in the face of dominant ideological forces. Lewis's scrutiny of Hitler as both a media creation and a real political threat underlines the modernist anxieties with the blurred vision between reality and representation, truth and illusion. To put it into perspective, Lewis's involvement with Hitler and fascism can also be observed as part of a wider modernist exploration of leadership, authority, and the psychological appeal of outstanding political figures of his time. In both *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939), Lewis delves into the charismatic dynamics of authority, considering how leaders like Adolf Hitler misuse societal fears and paranoia and disenchantment to galvanize national support/opinion. This exploration is deeply interconnected with modernism's pursuit in the psychological dimensions of human behavior and evil deeds, as Lewis probes the motivations behind both Hitler's rise and the willingness of ordinary people to support such a leader. Through his modernist lens, Lewis portrays Hitler not simply as a political figure but as a cultural phenomenon emblematic of deeper societal anxieties.

However, Lewis's works also reveal the limitations and contradictions inherent in his political engagement. His initial fascination with Hitler's anti-establishment stance and his later critiques of the Nazi regime highlight the complexities of aligning modernist aesthetics with clear political positions. Lewis's writings often resist easy categorization, oscillating between critique and complicity in ways that mirror the broader tensions within modernism itself. This ambiguity has led to a contentious critical reception, with some scholars condemning Lewis's perceived fascist sympathies while others argue for a more nuanced reading that acknowledges the complexities of his political and artistic motivations. This is substantiated by the fact that Wyndham Lewis, throughout the 1930s, experienced a turbulent political journey, marked by controversial political views, and consistently advocated for what has been called "radical appeasement," attempting to mitigate the repercussions of his earlier support for both fascism and National Socialism. In his 1939 publication *The Hitler Cult*, Lewis significantly altered his earlier perspective on Adolf Hitler. By the late 1930s, he began to see fascists, especially the Nazis, as "the most efficient exponents of machine-age barbarism" (Waddell, 2016). In this work, Lewis recanted his prior support for Hitler, revising the ideas he had carelessly expressed in *Hitler* (1931), and distancing himself from the pro-Hitler stance and anti-Semitic views of the 1930s. He shifted "from a position of pragmatic nationalism […] to a position of internationalism" (Edwards, 2000). As Jeffrey Meyers noted, "Lewis's support of Hitler in 1930 led, indirectly but inexorably, to his exile in 1939" (Meyers, 2021), with Lewis later admitting that the English would handle the future better than the Germans: "The mere thought of Hitler's Germany reconciles one, does it not, to our ramshackle civilization" (Wyndham Lewis, 1939). As Leon Surette believes;

> Only Lewis commented directly on The Great Illusion, praising it in *The Hitler Cult* (242) even though he had explicitly rejected Angell's arguments against war in *Left Wings over Europe* (1936): "I am not on the side of the Angels (either Norman or otherwise) – definitely" (19–20). In 1936, Angell was recommending a robust response to German and Italian belligerence, while Lewis was recommending appeasement. Three years later, when he wrote *The Hitler Cult,* war had broken out and Lewis was anxious to disassociate himself from his previous pacifist arguments. Lewis had erroneously concluded that arguments like Angell's exaggerated the belligerent intentions of Mussolini and Hitler, playing into the hands of the armament industries. Only Hitler's invasion of Poland convinced Lewis of his error – so far as Mussolini and Hitler were concerned.(Surette, 2011, p. 15)

In other terms, in *The Hitler Cult* (1939), written after the Munich Conference, Lewis launched a sharp critique of Adolf Hitler. He portrayed the Führer as a fervent war-monger, using *Mein Kampf* to argue that Hitler was a misguided follower of the "principle of force." Lewis highlighted Hitler's misplaced adoration for war, recounting how the dictator "sank down upon his knees to thank Heaven for the beautiful war that Providence had provided for him" in 1914, despite his earlier despair of "ever having a war in such a rotten time" (Wyndham Lewis, 1939). Lewis condemned Hitler's wars on art, literature, and culture, his personality cult, and the pursuit of *Lebensraum* (territorial expansion), concluding that "all such ways of thinking as those propagated by the Nazis do involve inhumanities" (Wyndham Lewis, 1939). Despite these criticisms, Lewis's fascination with Hitlerism and fascism was tied to his broader pursuit of novelty in art and politics, as a means of grounding his aesthetic vision in what he perceived as reality. He paradoxically acknowledged the centrality of anti-Semitism to Nazism, stating, "If you do not understand the *Judenfrage*, you have not understood Hitlerism. Without the Jewish question Hitlerism would not exist" (Wyndham Lewis, 1939). Lewis even noted that it would be "impossible to run a nationalist movement in Germany without including a rather strong line of anti-Semitism" (Wyndham Lewis, 1939).

What's more, notwithstanding the publication of *The Hitler Cult* in 1939, in which Wyndham Lewis renounced his former admiration for Hitler and his politics, his reputation never fully recovered from the political missteps and controversies associated with his openly praiseworthy *Hitler* (1931). Lewis's political errors and heresies left an indelible stain on his legacy. From a fascist perspective, Lewis remained an isolated figure throughout the 1930s, facing financial difficulties and grappling with the impending threat of another war (Miller, 1999). W. H. Auden's widely shared opinion of Lewis as "that lonely old volcano of the Right" (Wyndham Lewis, 2020) encapsulated the prevailing view of him at the time. In effect, Lewis's political theory, described as "authoritarian intellectualism," stemmed from his insistence on the primacy of individual experience. This manifested in two distinct forms: the politics of figures like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, and the politics of his fiction, which offered a sustained critique of fascism and cultural politics in interwar society. As he wrote toward the end of *The Hitler Cult* (1939), "I have had my eyes fixed upon the political scene now for six years without intermission. My conclusions today differ, not unnaturally, from those arrived at earlier" (Wyndham Lewis, 1939). At the opposite extreme, Surette challenges a claim that;

> *The Hitler Cult*, then, does not represent any real change of political position on Lewis's part. His critique of the Western democracies remains the same – that they are in dire need of a radical overhaul that would involve a departure from the legacy of nineteenth century: capitalism, democracy, and nationalism. (Surette, 2011, p. 269)

In the broadest and most schematic sense, Lewis believed that Hitler would initiate a shift from centralized, authoritarian world control in the 1920s, to decentralized national governments in the 1930s, and eventually toward cosmopolitanism in the 1940s and 1950s—opposing fascism and "the vanity of regional isolationism" (Waddell, 2016, p. 89). Lewis envisioned a system where authority would stem from a creative center, protecting both those who wanted to align with the collective and those who sought to preserve their individualism. For Lewis, "politics," as a category, was a corrupting influence on art, literature, philosophy, and criticism, undermining true creativity and progress. In *Time and Western Man* (1927), he intended to critique the growing disillusionment with political ideology, particularly its impact on art. He argued that politics had infiltrated every sphere, including art, and his goal was to strip these political influences away: "In stepping directly into the world of art, we shall fall upon a great deal of politics, too, as elsewhere, or the reflection of politics. To attempt to get rid of these politics, or shadow politics, is one of my reasons for undertaking this difficult analysis" (Wyndham Lewis, 1927). As Lewis continues to criticize politicians, claiming they are just as lacking in training and intelligence as artists, because these fields require minimal intelligence and little formal training. According to this perspective, both domains are imbued with individuals who, unable to thrive elsewhere, find an outlet or refuge in politics or art. This vision represents these fields not as noble pursuits, but as places that attract "human throw-outs"—people who, whether through inability or lack of fit, culminate in outside the mainstream paths of success. (Wyndham Lewis, 1939, p. 66)

5. Conclusion

Wyndham Lewis's *Hitler* (1931) and *The Hitler Cult* (1939) functions as complex and controversial works to his engagement with both literary modernism and the turbulent political domain of the early twentieth century. Lewis, a polymath who initially founded modernist movements such as Vorticism, navigated a shifting political terrain that saw his fascination with fascist ideas, culminating in his notorious support of Adolf Hitler in *Hitler* (1931). However, his political outlook transformed significantly by the late 1930s, as evidenced in *The Hitler Cult*, where Lewis denounced much of his earlier support for fascism and Hitler, criticizing their totalitarianism, anti-Semitism, and barbarism.

Through the lens of literary modernism and politics, Lewis's narratives manifest both the avant-garde's experimentation with form and its involvement with the socio-political conflict of the time. His mindful journey, marked by some very radical ideas on individualism, authority, and culture, mirrored the wider modernist critique of Western civilization and the crises it confronted in the interwar period. The political ramifications of his ideas, however, complicate his legacy. His early enthusiasm for Adolf Hitler, rooted in a belief in authoritarian solutions to societal disorder, severely damaged his reputation, despite his later attempts at political revision and repentance in *The Hitler Cult* (1939). Therefore, Lewis's political and literary trajectory illustrates the perils of ideological entanglement in modernist thought. His work serves as a cautionary tale about the intersection of aesthetics and politics, showing how modernist experimentation could intersect dangerously with reactionary and authoritarian ideas. While his later disavowal of fascism highlights his capacity for reflection and change, Lewis's legacy remains marked by his controversial foray into political extremism, offering valuable insights into the complex relationship between literary modernism and the politics of the time.

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