

Doctor Who* and the Terror of the Vorticists: popular fantasy and the cultural inheritance of *BLAST

Is this an act of supreme academic self-indulgence or does it represent a moment of critical synthesis so unbelievably sweet that it can surely only happen once in a lifetime? Perhaps it's both of these things, or – as is most likely the case – neither. But to be writing between such extreme coordinates of scholarly enthusiasm, between Wyndham Lewis and *Doctor Who*, is an opportunity that is, frankly, too good to miss. Given the perceived anti-popular temperament of Lewis's work – his satire of 'the herd' and antipathy to 'group rhythms' – it might seem perverse to trace lines of connection between the avant-garde insurgency of the Vorticist moment with which he is so closely associated and the mainstream endurance of the BBC's 50-year-old fantasy franchise. Even so, there are aesthetic, narrative and mythic correspondences which might prove to be more than simply coincidental, suggesting ways of reading the legacy of *BLAST* – and Lewis in particular – within the products of contemporary mass entertainment. The discussion that follows is consistent, in this respect, with the attempts by Paul Edwards, Michael Bracewell, and others, to discover links between Lewis's often belligerently elitist and antagonistic style and the edgier manifestations of pop music culture.

A useful wormhole between the worlds of Lewis and the worlds of the Doctor is signalled by the name of a guard from the planet Svartos in Ian Briggs' 1987 *Doctor Who* serial 'Dragonfire'. Sergeant McLuhan, whose coworkers in the Iceworld trading post include Bazin, Belazs, Kracauer and Pudovkin, effectively endorses the claims of her Canadian media theorist namesake to be, in Edwards' words, 'the first prophet of

Post-modernity'. Marshall McLuhan, who became a close acquaintance of Lewis during the 1940s and whose ideas, as they developed from this time, were profoundly indebted to him, seems to have anticipated some of the associative possibilities which are driving this paper. Making oblique reference to Vorticism at the start of his 1951 book *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan invoked Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'A Descent in the Maelstrom', deploying the image of a sailor who survives a whirlpool by 'studying' it as an allegory of his own critical methodology for understanding 'the very considerable currents and pressures set up around us today by the mechanical agencies of [the media]'. McLuhan liked this analysis so much that he used it again in *The Medium is the Massage* in 1967 – '[the mariner's] insight offers a possible strategem for understanding our predicament, our electrically-configured whirl' – and his repeated invocation of the metaphor of the vortex perhaps makes it a memetic inevitability that he should surface, eventually, as an ironic reference in *Doctor Who*. Like the leitmotifs which have threaded the story arcs of recent series of the television programme – the phrase 'Bad Wolf', for instance, or the crack in Amy Pond's wall – McLuhan becomes, seven years after his own death and thirty years after that of Lewis, the submerged current that draws the Enemy and the Doctor together.

The violent rhetorical energy with which the first issue of *Blast* addresses its readership gives its appeal to the vortex ('Long Live the Vortex!') an air of vital threat which is analagous to its representation in the *Doctor Who* story 'The Sound of Drums'. Discussing the character of his arch-enemy the Master – a distinctly Vorticist antagonist, I would argue – with his companions Martha Jones and Captain Jack Harness, the Doctor describes the primal encounter of his race, the Time Lords, with the maelstrom:

Children of Gallifrey, taken from their families at the age of eight, to enter the Academy. Some say that's where it all began, when he was a child. That's when The Master saw Eternity. As a novice, he was taken for initiation. He stood in front of the Untempered Schism. It's a gap in the fabric of reality, through which can be seen the whole of the vortex. You stand there, eight years old, staring at the raw power of time and space, just a child. Some would be inspired, some would run away, and some would go mad.

This is performed fantastical melodrama, of course, but then so is much of Vorticism, and the similarity of the language used here to that which characterises the manifestos in *Blast* is striking. 'The vortex is the point of maximum energy,' we discover in 'Vortex. Pound'. And then: 'All experience rushes into this vortex. All the energized past, all the past that is living and worthy to live.'

It was Ezra Pound who recommended the metaphor of the vortex and came up with the word 'Vorticist', but Vorticism as an aesthetic – as a visual style and mode of literary address, as a radical pose and act of cultural provocation – has been correlated most often and most closely with Lewis (especially in commentaries *by* Lewis).¹ Within *Doctor Who*, the idea and image of the vortex has been present from the very beginning, but its invention – like that of so much in the series, particularly in its early years – is difficult to attribute. Insofar as it has tended to be associated directly, if retrospectively, with the title sequence that rippled across a nation's screens for the first time on the evening of Saturday 23rd November 1963, it is iconic of the show itself, central to its enduring *mise-en-scène*. The connection between these distinctive visuals and the experience of space-time travel was reinforced, or perhaps initiated,

towards the end of the opening episode, 'An Unearthly Child', when they recurred as imagery superimposed across the faces of the four main characters during the first televised flight of the TARDIS, refined to tight eddying spirals suggestive of Op Art. Although, at this point, there is no explicit naming of the vortex (this was to take almost a decade), it is unarguable that this is what the swirling lines and shapes soon came to represent, meshed with the extraordinary theme music developed by Delia Derbyshire and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop from Ron Grainer's original score. Verity Lambert, *Doctor Who*'s first producer, would later comment: 'I think it just looked so very strange and different from anything else. I just didn't want it to look like "time" – I wanted it to look familiar but odd, which is what the Doctor Who theme was.'²

Whether the 'theme' referred to by Lambert is the general narrative one or the more specific musical one, it is striking that the *Doctor Who* title sequence creates a kinking of the line between abstraction and representation. This is evident in David Butler's description of the original version as 'swirling clouds and abstract, symmetrical patterns, a pulsing animated Rorschach test'³ and it suggests an intriguing aesthetic parallel with the 'loosening of the ties between the language of painting and mimesis' that Edwards identifies in the geometries of Vorticist art.⁴ If we compare a representative selection of artwork from *Blast* – Lewis's *Slow Attack* and Edward Wadsworth's *A Short Flight* from the first issue, Dorothy Shakespeare's *Snow Scene* from the second – its black and white reproduction effectively adds to the visual anticipation of the *Doctor Who* title sequence. The most obvious difference (if we leave aside debates about medium specificity, genre, audience, cultural value, and so on) is between hard and soft lines, between diamond jaggedness and smoky drift, and this might be seen as indicating an essential division in attitudes to the treatment

of space and time. Lewis's dislike of hazy edges and flux – 'I hate movement that blurs the lines'⁵ – is formalised in the characteristic works of Vorticism and is apparently at odds with the vaporous contours of Norman Taylor's 'howlaround' effect for the *Doctor Who* titles, achieved by pointing a camera at its own monitor and later developed for broadcast by Bernard Lodge and Mervyn Pinfield.⁶ Interestingly, the basis of this technique – with light being broken, reflected, refracted, essentially feeding back on itself – is analogous to that employed by Alvin Langdon Coburn when producing his series of vortographs in the wake of Vorticism in 1917. The glassy sharpness of Coburn's kaleidoscopic images, however, only underlines the visual and perhaps semantic contrast.

The vortex of *Blast* is used to figure a distinctly polemical approach to questions of time, constituting an early strike by Lewis against the Bergsonian 'time-cult' he would come to associate with James Joyce and Gertrude Stein: 'We stand for the Reality of the Present – not for the sentimental Future, or the sacripant Past.' 'Our Vortex is not afraid of the Past : it has forgotten its existence.' 'With our Vortex the Present is the only active thing.' *Doctor Who* might seem to be the apotheosis of the popularised time-cult, with a fluid approach to physical reality manifested in the adventures of its hero and symbolised in the smoky undulations of its earliest title sequence. Original production notes for the show describe adventures 'through time, through space, and through matter' and its accumulated mythology thrives on tropes of unsettlement, continually flirting with what Frank Kermode famously called 'the sense of an ending', yet repeatedly refusing its consummation. This is most obvious in the brilliant expediency of regeneration, but it is also intrinsic to the tales of a hero whose state of 'perpetual crisis' offers 'dizzying perspectives upon the past and the future' and upon the nature of reality itself.⁷

The approach to temporality in *Doctor Who* is, in fact, more Lewisian than its initial tagline of ‘an adventure in space and time’ might imply. In only the sixth story of the series, when the Doctor’s history teacher companion, Barbara Wright, states her aim of ending the Aztec practice of human sacrifice, he is unequivocal in his repudiation of such a scheme: ‘You can’t rewrite history! Not one line!’ The same phrase is repeated, almost verbatim, by the character of River Song over 40 years later when the Doctor himself suggests that ‘time can be rewritten’. Although *Doctor Who* plays with these hard lines repeatedly, inevitably it might be said – and in the 2011 story ‘The Wedding of River Song’ presents a situation of ultimate temporal flux (‘All of history happening at once’) – it is clear that one of its most prominent recurring motifs and conceptual challenges is the tension between flux and fixity in the experience of time. Remembering Verity Lambert’s enigmatic insistence that she didn’t want the title sequence to ‘look like “time”’, it seems reasonable to infer that its visual approximation of the space-time vortex – symmetrical but skewed, linear but indistinct – is emblematic of this tension.

The ramifying light distortions produced by the howlaround method remained the essence of the *Doctor Who* titles until 1974. The leading actor’s face was added to the mix during the tenure of Patrick Troughton in 1967 and colourisation took place to coincide with the beginning of the Jon Pertwee era in 1970. For the final season of that actor’s tenure, however, a shift to the slit-scan technique pioneered for the Star Gate section of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) produced a title sequence that has tended to be referred to as the ‘time tunnel’. For some, perhaps, it is only at this point that the vortex is explicitly represented in the show, and the sense of travelling into and through a tunnel is certainly foregrounded here. One consequence of this is to emphasise the curious uncertainty of field in the previous versions, which

on a depthless plane nevertheless succeeded in evoking a sense of competing kinetic forces, vertical, horizontal, diagonal, cyclical, inward, outward. There is a parallel here with the collapsing planes of many Vorticist (or proto-Vorticist) artworks, such as Lewis's *Timon of Athens*, William Roberts' *Religion* and Cuthbert Hamilton's *Group*, all from *Blast 1*, and Helen Sa(u)nders *Atlantic City* and Frederick Etchell's *Hyde Park*, from *Blast 2*. The correspondences in this respect are not exclusively with Vorticist techniques, of course, and credible examples might be found within Cubism and Futurism, whether Italian or Russian. Even so, the paradoxes of the Great English Vortex – 'the immobile rythm [sic] of its swiftness', 'THE POINT ONE AND INDIVISIBLE!' – seem peculiarly apposite as foreshadowings of the great British televisual vortex.

The slit-scan version of the *Doctor Who* title sequence, incorporating a distinct diamond-shaped logo, is more decidedly a vortex and comes closer to the 'sharply defined, crystalline abstractions' of Vorticism which Paul O'Keeffe contrasts with the works of the Italian Futurists.⁸ Indeed, the design replicates formal elements which are apparent in specific pieces of Vorticist work, such as the Errata page emblem from the first *Blast* (possibly, probably, maybe, perhaps designed by Helen Saunders) and the photographic detail of Lewis's decoration for the Countess of Drogheda's house. Mention of this particular and peculiar aspect of Lewis's corpus brings to mind an unhappy similarity between the products of Vorticism and the early canon of *Doctor Who*, which is the fact that so much of both bodies of work has been lost. Edwards laments that 'great losses of [Vorticism's] most important works mean that we shall never be able to assess them fully',⁹ while the destruction of many Hartnell and Troughton episodes of *Doctor Who* by the BBC in the 1970s continues to haunt both the programme's fans (and, latterly, the corporation itself), and confers an almost

mythic status to certain lost stories. Ironically, perhaps, this sad erosion of material might disclose a useful perspective on the comparison at the heart of this paper and ensure that this is not just an exercise in spotting supposed visual similarities between two otherwise incongruent cultural texts.

I have written elsewhere of the enigma and paradox that constantly unsettle the sharp, hard lines and pure, resistant surfaces of Lewis's simplified reputation,¹⁰ and the same playfully elusive tendencies are, not surprisingly, evident within the brash carnival of Vorticism. A comparable character of unsettlement is, I would argue, at the heart of the cultural distinctness and popular success of *Doctor Who*, a science fiction series that is arguably not science fiction at all – or no more so than, say, *Enemy of the Stars* or *The Childermass* – with a hero as mutable and anti-heroic as Lewis's alter ego The Enemy or the characters of Ned and Launcelot Nidwit in his disastrous, deadly dull but strangely fascinating *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* Both the Lewisian and Whovian modes are, I would suggest, in their different ways, shaded by the Menippean spirit of contradiction and doubleness outlined by Julia Kristeva (after Mikhail Bakhtin). So, just as Edwards writes of 'the deliberate inconsistency' and 'multiplicity of hermeneutics' in Vorticism, so Kim Newman notes that 'Inconsistency was built into the format [of *Doctor Who*] from the outset' and Tulloch and Alvarado point to the 'constant displacement of the hermeneutic code by the proairetic' in the series.¹¹

A childrens' programme that was never made by the Children's Department at the BBC (and certainly never aimed exclusively at children), a key mythic strategy of *Doctor Who* from the outset was to estrange and defamiliarise, to be – in Verity Lambert's words – 'familiar but odd': 'Let me get this straight,' says the science teacher Ian Chesterton, shortly after stumbling through the doors of the TARDIS in

the first episode. ‘A thing that looks like a police box, standing in a junkyard – it can move anywhere in time and space.’ The tones and textures of Vorticism, too, are energised by an odd familiarity, an edgy, uncanny friction between the banal and the outrageous: ‘BLAST SPORT’, BLESS the HAIRDRESSER’. The bitter fact that the fabric of both Vorticism and early *Doctor Who* has been subject to the corrosive effects of cultural change – in plain terms, time passing – results in an intensification of their aura, an impression that they are might be at their most powerful when least visible, tangible or defined.¹²

Some have lamented what they perceive to be the more orthodox later styles (both visual and literary) of Lewis. Julian Symons, for instance, compares the eye-driven singularity of the early writing with the ‘commonplace’ prose style of the later novels.¹³ In the world of *Doctor Who* studies,¹⁴ on the other hand, it is often noted how the sudden replacement of Bernard Lodge’s much-loved ‘time tunnel’ title sequence with Sid Sutton’s ‘star field’ sequence on John Nathan-Turner’s arrival as producer in 1980 was greeted with dismay by many fans. Miles Booy has written of ‘time tunnel anxiety’ and, for some, this radical change of signature imagery marked the beginning of the end for the classic series. Viewers who had grown up with the show became enemies of the stars not so much on aesthetic grounds (although these were important too) but on thematic ones. Sutton’s visuals were slick, sparkly, state of the art, and just too damned literal for many tastes. Alongside an equally provocative new version of the adored theme music, they seemed to lack the unsettling strangeness and restless indefinability of both the howlaround and slit-scan versions. Booy has provided a persuasive alternative reading of the star field sequence, calling it ‘a more complex arrangement than was given credit for at the time’, but it is hard to ignore a sense that the titles had stopped being the ‘piece of abstract art’ that Alan

McKee has celebrated, ‘a non-representational distillation of the programme to follow’.¹⁵ Or to put it another way, they had lost not only their vortex but their vorticism.

As the smoky vortex of the title sequence faded into the opening moments of ‘An Unearthly Child’ back in 1963, they revealed a policeman with a torch patrolling a foggy London street and the gates of a junkyard – I.M. FOREMAN – which swung open to admit the viewer. In this junkyard the TARDIS and its mysterious owner would be encountered for the first time, and the setting seems significant, enabling the peculiar mixture of familiarity and oddness that would establish the tone of the series: muddled relics and discarded remnants, an ultra-futuristic concept hidden in an environment primed with a spirit of elegy and nostalgia, the space-age clashing with the antique. Although Vorticism set itself against the antique and the nostalgic, it nevertheless delighted in a clash of registers which is tellingly in evidence in the dramatic enactment of *Enemy of the Stars*. The ‘BLEAK CIRCUS’ of Lewis’s play – described not as a junkyard but a ‘wheelwright’s yard’ – will eventually, in the 1932 version, begin to seem like an uncanny, mock-epic foreshadowing:

Once a figure-yard, of the statuary’s trade, there are still the fragments of granite cupids, and a torso of a horse which has lost its ears and lips. Here are the hoops for sport of nurseling giants – the axes of splintered radii, fascies of spokes. A refuse of chariots – the lumber-place of obsolete equipages, for fashion and for industry.

Here Lewis invents a location that resembles the foundational *mise-en-scene* of the *Doctor Who* series, one that informs its ‘steampunk sensibility’ as identified by

Newman¹⁶ and that has been given explicit expression most recently in Neil Gaiman's well-received episode 'The Doctor's Wife' (2011). It is tempting, at this point, to allow the analysis to run away with me: to find the 'BLEAK CIRCUS' perpetuated, for instance, in *Doctor Who* stories such as 'The Celestial Toymaker' from 1965 or 'The Greatest Show in the Galaxy' from 1988, or to see in Lewis's description of the audience looking down into the scene of *Enemy of the Stars* 'AS THOUGH IT WERE A HUT ROLLED HALF ON ITS BACK, DOOR UPWARDS, CHARACTERS GIDDILY MOUNTING IN ITS OPENING' an anticipation of several scenes in *Doctor Who* in which the TARDIS lands on its side and characters climb vertically from its upward-facing doors. It would be appealing, too, to glimpse in the quarries, sandpits and gleaming citadels so beloved of classic *Doctor Who*, resonances of the celestial desert and Magnetic City of Lewis's *Human Age* series. Tempting, appealing, but beyond the scope of what is possible or, no doubt, advisable in the current paper. To continue speculating at speed, and in a restricted space, would be to risk seeing significance in the fact that the writer of the first ever *Doctor Who* story had the same surname as the inventor of the vortograph – and there is surely no significance in such coincidences at all.

There is a fondly remembered scene in the *Doctor Who* story 'Dragonfire', mentioned earlier in this paper, in which an Iceworld guard asks the Doctor the following question: 'Tell me, what are *your* views on the assertion that the semiotic thickness of a performed text varies according to the redundancy of auxiliary performance codes?'¹⁷ The line is an ironic paraphrase of an analysis in Tulloch and Alvarado's *Unfolding Text*, the first book-length critical study of the television series, and it is positioned as a warning to any academic who might be tempted to read too much into this popular cultural artefact or, worse still, kill the cherished object with

what James Chapman has since referred to as ‘the impenetrable critical language of high theory’: ‘The Doctor may have conquered Daleks, Cybermen and Ice Warriors, but would he survive an encounter with Foucault, Derrida or Deleuze?’¹⁸ With this in mind, is it reasonable to contemplate an encounter between the Doctor and Wyndham Lewis? My witness in this respect is Matt Hills who, responding to Chapman, has recommended ‘the adventure of thinking a little differently about [a] favourite TV series’, advice which I hope might apply equally to a favourite artistic movement and its prime mover.¹⁹

So, what am I saying in this critical adventure? That the great writers of classic *Doctor Who* – Antony Coburn (the writer of that first story and then of no others), Terry Nation, Robert Holmes, Malcolm Hulke, Terrance Dicks – had all read *Enemy of the Stars* and *The Childermass*? That Lewis, if he had lived another ten years, would –Gaiman-like – have contributed scripts to this series about a time-travelling alien? Well, the former is unknowable (although it is possible, probable even, that some of the *Doctor Who* writers had heard the BBC’s Third Programme dramatisations of *The Human Age* in 1955 and might have visited the Tate Gallery retrospective during the following summer) and the latter is a fantasy, but this is not the point. The point is that some of things that Lewis was picking up on in the early 20th century, and some of the ways in which he was representing them, anticipated themes and treatments that would be developed through the extended cultural narrative of *Doctor Who*, from 1963 onwards. Lewis, though a visionary artist who displays many of the concerns and characteristics of the best science fiction, did not write (or paint) in the genre. That said, Fredric Jameson and others, have noted his affinities with aspects of it, and Martin Puchner has written recently that *Enemy of the Stars*

creates estrangement by confronting us with a different type of strangeness. Instead of introducing us to a neatly laid-out alternative world, whose laws and creatures we slowly get to know, we find ourselves in a confusing space composed of objects and creatures lifted from our world but subject to unfathomable rules and reasons. We do not have to learn a new language, as is sometimes the case in classical and newer science fiction. Instead we have to figure out how Lewis deploys our own, just as we have to figure out how he deploys humans and stage props that may seem familiar for a moment before we must acknowledge their strangeness.²⁰

It is usual to classify *Doctor Who* as science fiction but it has often been observed that it sits uneasily in the category, and this analytical *précis* of Lewis's remarkable proto-Beckettian play might almost be an analytical *précis* of this remarkable production of the BBC. The clues, I think, are in the vortex.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZ1kRxgKft4>

¹ ‘Vorticism, in fact, was what I, personally, did, and said, at a certain period.’
Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism (exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery, 1956), p. 3.
Quoted Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis*, p. 443, Edwards, p. 101, and O’Keeffe, p.
619. ‘But there is a tendency to speak as though V were a doctrine adopted by a
considerable company. I am afraid that this is an illusion. I say this regretfully,
because in the past I expended a good deal of energy in order to create the impression
that a multitude existed where there was in fact not much more than a very vigorous
One.’ (*Creatures of Habit*, pp. 381-2).

² Tulloch and Alvarado, p. 21. Quoted in Robb, p. 39.

³ Butler, p. 26.

⁴ Edwards, p. 102.

⁵ Lewis, B&B, pp. 37-8; O’Keeffe, p. 153.

⁶ These ramifying light distortions, which would remain the essence of the *Doctor
Who* titles until 1974, are analagous, in some respects, to the vortographic images
produced by Alvin Langdon Coburn in the wake of Vorticism. Coburn

⁷ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), p. 179.

⁸ O’Keeffe, p. 153

⁹ Edwards, p. 100.

¹⁰ See Phillips...

¹¹ Edwards, p. 137; Newman, p. 21; Tulloch and Alvarado, p. 28.

¹² Walter Benjamin

¹³ Symons, ed., *The Essential Wyndham Lewis*, p. 363.

¹⁴ Matt Hills, *New Dimensions*

¹⁵ Booy; Alan McKee in Butler, p. 233

¹⁶ Newman, p. 16.

¹⁷ Tulloch and Alvarado, p. 249; *Dragonfire*, p. 59.

¹⁸ Chapman, pp. vii-viii.

¹⁹ Hills, *Triumph of a Time Lord*, p. 3.

²⁰ Martin Puchner, ‘World and Stage in *Enemy of the Stars*’, in Mark Antliff and Scott
W. Klein, eds., *Vorticism: New Perspectives*. Oxford and NY: OUP, 2013, p. 232.