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## Timothy Wientzen, *Automatic: Literary Modernism and the Politics of Reflex*

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**AUTOMATIC:  
LITERARY MODERNISM AND THE  
POLITICS OF REFLEX  
by Timothy Wientzen**

*Reviewed by Matthew Purvis, Independent Researcher*

Developed from his dissertation, *Automatic: Literary Modernism and the Politics of Reflex*<sup>1</sup> was authored by Timothy Wientzen, an associate professor of English Literature at Skidmore University. Wientzen's text is divided into five chapters bookended by an introduction and afterword. Opening with a genealogical account, the book offers a highly condensed history of the development of reflex and automaticity as a 'cognitive phenomenon' from Descartes until the twentieth century (19). It was in the late nineteenth century that reflex became something approaching a scientific paradigm. Stimulus could be comprehended as not merely physical but cultural, and the environment could be conceptualized as a form of engineering (20). Environment and milieu became privileged concepts for recognizing how individuals were formed and, Wientzen asserts, this found quick artistic translation.

Each subsequent chapter focuses on the work of a specific modernist author (D.H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Rebecca West, and Samuel Beckett), situating them within a range of their contemporaneous sociological and biological discourses. The book is staked around two basic claims. The first, that 'reflex plays a decisive role in configuring the political dimensions of literary modernism' (4); the second, that 'modernist literature mediated and responded to a twentieth-century public sphere understood to be increasingly geared toward automatic behaviors' (8).

Wientzen's general narrative tries to sort out how 'categories of automaticity' could function as part of a shared language across disciplines and fields, from avant-garde literature to the work of Pavlov and public relations theory, to the sociology of Marcel Mauss and Norbert Elias, among others (4). This concentration, he contends, allows his work to operate as something of a counter to bids to understand modernism in terms of the mind, particularly under the influence of psychoanalytic modeling. Instead, what he concentrates on is notions of the unconscious foreign to the Freudian.

According to Wientzen, some modernists treated habit as the baggage to be jettisoned for a proper understanding of modernity to emerge (34). Their attempts to think this through often 'founder' but in ways that can be 'generative' (40).

Modernist literature was often tied to the disruption of habit and rote perception by defamiliarization and other strategies (35). Such formal strategies are loosely contextualized in light of extended enfranchisement and the acceleration of technology which was met by intensified interest in human machinery. For artists and theorists alike, part of this interest included the re-evaluation of the limits and plausibility of concepts about liberal democracy and rationality.

In the paradox of a society that outwardly celebrated individualism while concentrating on uniformity, a stress on the environment meant that modern social life was conceived of as necessarily automatic, with environmental conditioning triumphing over rationalism. Everyday life could no longer be regarded as politically neutral because it was constantly being conditioned. Mass modernity and automaticity were identified (33). As a result, people appeared as automata in the grooves of culture. The appeal of the notion of reflex often had less to do with its value as science *per se*, than its political implications (27). For thinkers like Carl Schmitt, politics were being re-conceptualized not as battles between subjects but as the battle over the tools to construct them (27). This demanded new models, as ideology ceased to be a matter of consciousness and culture was promoted as a way of creating new models for being (29-30). With Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony and Edward Bernays' on propaganda, a stress on reflex and the control of unpredictable social factors and actors became pivotal to conceptualizations of the political.

By the turn of the twentieth-century, a materialist understanding of human beings as automatons had reached something approaching an orthodoxy, both in scientific and, to a lesser degree, in artistic circles (41). Vitalist philosophy emerged as a reaction against this dogmatism. It was Henri Bergson in philosophy and Georges Sorel in political thought who constructed a diagnostic vocabulary that would be called upon and adapted, by everyone from T.E. Hulme, to Lawrence, to Lewis. Bergson appealed to those who looked for 'diagnoses of the spiritual consequences on materialist thought' (47). Memory, time, intuition, and consciousness would be put forward as models intended to battle the 'spatialization' associated with scientific or rational intellection and concepts. Intuition in particular could be regarded as a form of thinking that inverts habit (49). From the vitalist matrix would come the idea that the authentic self is the one that does not think (55). In artistic terms, this meant the creation of characters in allotropic terms, the central concern of Wientzen's chapter on Lawrence and his relationship with the vitalist politics in light of the thought of Sorel. All of this sets the stage for Lewis.

Wientzen contends that it was the rejection of vitalism that ultimately proved more important for literary culture than its embrace (72). If, for Hulme, Bergson would be rejected for failing to come to terms with the distinction between the divine and life, for Lewis, vitalism remained only another humanism, and so only another mode of enslaving 'the intelligent to the affective nature'

(73). It is in part for this reason that Lewis holds a central place in *Automatic*. Lewis opens the first chapter, frames the final, and has one of his own. It is in his engagement with Lewis that Wientzen discovers the most direct address to his central concerns. Given his criticisms of some of the other writers discussed, Lewis also appears in discussions of their work.

Wientzen's discussion of Lewis is constructed primarily through readings of *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) and *The Childermass* (1928). Refusing to write him off as 'paranoid' (84), Wientzen commends Lewis's 'acute diagnosis of the problems that the politics of reflex posed' (75). He interprets him as regarding behaviorism as 'pernicious' but basically correct (82). Similarly, he sees his work as mirroring that of public relations theorists on the manipulation of the populace by invisible forces. Like them, Lewis's work is taken as part of a critique of liberal political thought when the advent of mass media seemed to reveal how fundamentally misguided it was (89). Mass media is conceptualized as a form of education and capitalism as an 'educationalist' state (83-84). Creatively, Wientzen contextualizes Lewis within the educationalist tendencies of the British state, such as the British Documentary Film Movement, John Grierson, and the advocacy for propaganda in order to keep democracy functional.

For Lewis, however, the democratizing tendencies of the mass media tended to collapse into their opposite (87). With the 'will' conditioned by media manipulation, democracy functioned merely as a system of habit and voting was degraded into a 'farce' with individual autonomy 'poisoned' by invisible forces (90). An illusory individualism, Lewis recognized, would be central to much of modernist art practice and would be exemplary in 'fashion', providing a faux uniqueness to what was only a flux of conditioning. This applied not only to style, but to opinion (92).

Hidden manipulators would be a central concern of Lewis. If there was no evident will at work in the mass culture, he would seek the 'hidden cables' that tied modernist art to the system of manipulation (87). But it would not be the exposure of interests behind the scenes of mass suggestion but their symptoms that would be his focus, as the emphasis on reflex becomes the problem itself (92, 97). This was fitting given that it was with aesthetics rather than cultural critique that the solution to the problem was seen to reside (93). With Lewis there is a great stress on surface, to the point of promoting uncertainty regarding the difference between humans and machines (98-99). Wientzen treats *The Childermass* as exemplary of Lewis' attempt to probe this problem. He reads the novel as a study of characters who are determined by a pseudo-environment and the contingent identities they adopt to suit the needs of relationships, leaving them to appear as clichés and poseurs. Without the depth of realist characters, they appear as the environment (97). Superficiality provided the best way to show the constitution of modernity.

Wientzen's text is engaging, focused, and straightforwardly written. Each chapter is structured around a conceptual précis derived from the authors' work, which is then applied to their literary works. It does not rely on extensive foreknowledge of the texts discussed, and the chapters flow and build logically from one to the next. The book also suggests some different avenues that could be fruitfully taken up in future studies. A study more rooted in the material culture of the artists than in the conceptual frameworks that they were reacting to and deploying could add many fascinating layers. It is one thing to discuss automaticity, but it would be quite another to document it in practice and flesh out a discursive form that would adequately describe literary historical development in accord with such a model.

The book also has a significant shortcoming in its reading of Lewis. While the author frequently alludes to the central importance of form, discussions of a formal variety are limited. In regard to Lewis, it is his lack of traditional realism and complex, often alienating way of dealing with stimulus that is highlighted (101). As Wientzen interprets it, modernist art may then serve as a sign that people can escape their conditioning (104). However, his analysis is primarily conceptual and thematic, with the aesthetic assumptions and experiments of the authors receiving short shrift. This is nowhere more evident than in the discussions of Lewis, for whom automaticity had consequences that were profoundly formal. Partially this is due to Wientzen not engaging with the polemics of *Men Without Art* or *Time and Western Man*, which complicated the artistic implications and possibilities of the automaton. It also bears mention that given Wientzen's concentration on affect, Lewis' adamant contention that the behaviorist model was almost perfectly comedic is curiously ignored.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the overwhelmingly comic aspect of automaticity is ignored. Lewis' concept of non-moral satire is particularly important for understanding this, both for his own approach to writing and interpretation of modernism broadly.<sup>3</sup>

This lack of comedic sensibility is even more pressing in terms of Wientzen's afterword on the 'predictable irrationalism' (173) of contemporary 'surveillance capitalism' as a 'realization of the behaviorist social agenda' (180), which calls to Lewis once again as it tries to apply its cumulative argument to an analysis of the last decade of electioneering in America, an account curiously devoid of the hilarity that it would have undoubtedly held for Lewis.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Timothy Wientzen, *Automatic: Literary Modernism and the Politics of Reflex* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2021); 272 pages.
- 2 Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 351.
- 3 Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987), 85-93.