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Saw it Coming. Futurism, Vorticism and the Prescience of H.G. Wells

ON THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS BIRTH, H.G. WELLS CONTINUES TO INSPIRE.

17/06/2016 Michael Eden Features, Society



This year marks the anniversary of H.G. Wells' birth 150 years ago and 70 years since his death in 1946.

Wells was hugely influential on science fiction and is often cited along with Jules Verne as the father of the genre, his works explored technology and the sciences as well as morality and religion and he has directly influenced scores of writers and film makers including Ridley Scott but it's the unrealised potential of Wells position as a futurist and the missed opportunity of a greater link with the visual arts that I want to explore here.

The Futurism of the Left

Futurism in these two movements was either a brash celebration of technology (Marinetti) or a hard edged attitude to the masses and tradition (Lewis) Both groups might have benefited from either a friendly or antagonistic relationship with H.G. Wells who was a little older and politically left leaning, such as the relationship the Surrealists enjoyed later with Freud and his writing on psychoanalysis.

Wells was perfectly equipped to enrich and broaden the horizons of each movement, subjecting as he did technology and social change to criticism and celebration while maintaining a strong optimistic belief in socialism. He was well ahead of his time in exploring the 'integral accident' (Paul Virilio, 1999) In works such as *The Invisible Man*, and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and his formal understanding of science might have offered greater detail to the artists' enthusiasms. Since both Marinetti and Lewis were politically right wing and since both regretted their initial enthusiasm for Fascism, they may have also benefited from greater exposure to Wells's politics.

Futurism: 1909-1945	Futurism is an avant-garde movement founded in Milan in 1909 by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Marinetti launched the movement in his Futurist Manifesto, which he published for the first time on 5 February 1909 in La gazetta dell'Emilia.	Representative Artists: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti Giacomo Balla Umberto Boccioni Carlo Carrà Gino Severini
Vorticism: 1914-1918	Vorticism was a short lived modernist movement in British art and poetry of the early 20th century, partly inspired by Cubism. The movement was announced in 1914 in the first issue of <i>BLAST</i> , which contained its manifesto.	Richard Aldington, Malcolm Arberghop, Lawrence Atkinson, Jessica Dismore, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Cuthbert Hamilton, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, William Roberts, Helen Saunders, Edward Wadsworth

There is circumstantial evidence to suggest that Marinetti was influenced by Wells in his work, *The Untameables* (as investigated by Maria Teresa Chialant¹). For Lewis, Wells was a familiar figure in London's literary circles (Ford Maddox Ford linked both men, as did Rebecca West). Lewis had received a letter of praise from Wells regarding the novel *Childermas* which Lewis then put on hold, only to reply years later. The missed opportunity of a truly international Futurism with Wells providing the soul is an alternative future worth exploring.

H.G. Wells managed to explore the themes and implications of Nietzsche's ideas and the growing expectations (and numbers) of the popular masses without losing faith in positive projects²:

I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?
All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment...
Behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not. Dispensers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so let them go.
Once the sin against God was the greatest sin; but God died, and these sinners died with him. To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing, and to esteem the entrails of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth...
What is the greatest experience you can have? It is the hour of the great contempt. The hour when your happiness, too, arouses your disgust, and even your reason and your virtue.
The hour when you say, 'What matters my happiness? It is poverty and filth and wretched contentment. But my happiness ought to justify existence itself.'
The hour when you say, 'What matters my reason? Does it crave knowledge as the lion his food? It is poverty and filth and wretched contentment.'
The hour when you say, 'What matters my virtue? As yet it has not made me rage. How weary I am of my good and my evil! All that is poverty and filth and wretched contentment.'
"Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss...
What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under...
"I say unto you: one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star. I say unto you: you still have chaos in yourselves

— from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.3,4,5, Walter Kaufmann transl.

Wells explores these themes most notably in *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *When the Sleeper Wakes* (serialised between 1898 and 1899) and *A Modern Utopia* (1905). Another installment of this series will examine the process.

Read On: Part Two

- The Reception of H.G. Wells in Europe* edited by Patrick Parrinder, John S. Partington
- The rejection of altruism is often interpreted as a confrontation between the old warrior master and new 'Christian Master' Nietzsche himself encouraged this, however it's worth noting that Marx also rejected altruism and spoke of a world where you might, 'do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic,' The great man of capitalism is the master that Nietzsche criticized along with the herd.



Friends as Enemies and Enemies as Friends... (Wyndham Lewis)
21/11/2016
In "Art"



Futurism, Vorticism and the Prescience of H.G. Wells (Part Two)
27/06/2016
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07/08/2018
In "Art"

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About Michael Eden > 77 Articles

Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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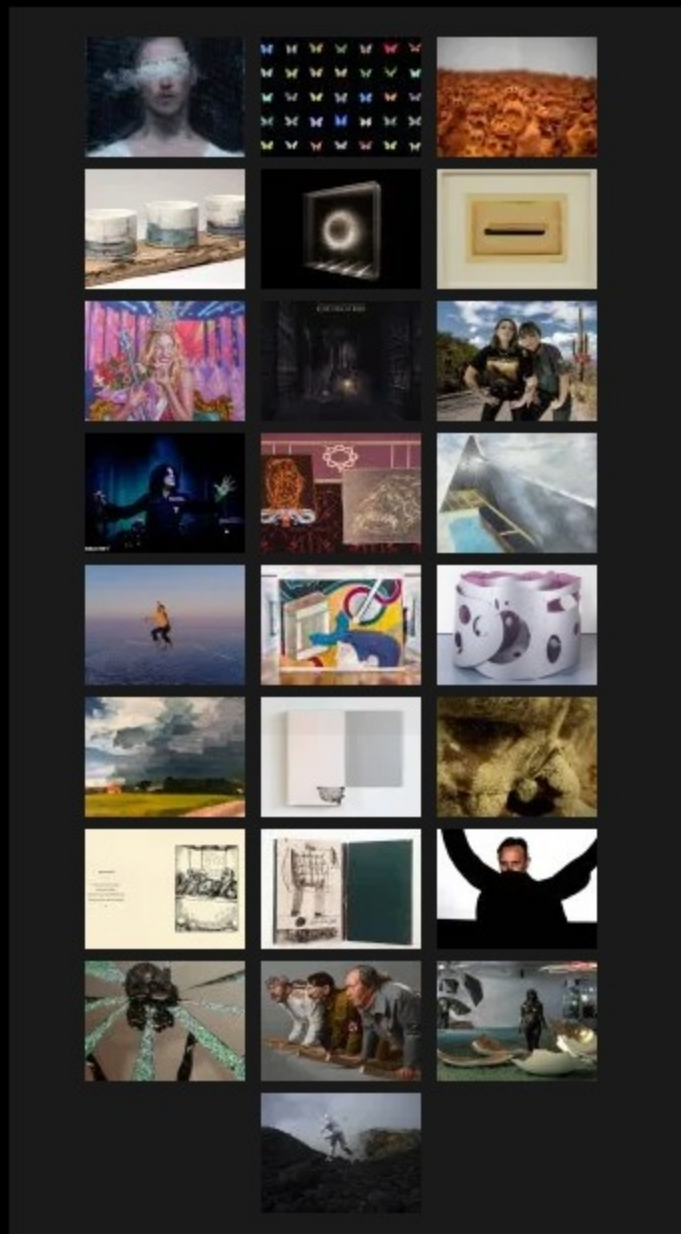
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