

The Armoured Self, Un-becoming the Subject: Reading Julia Ducournau's *Titane* (2021) Via Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism

Abstract

In this paper, I explore what Lisa Tickner calls a 'dissentient position' in Modernism that assumes dehumanisation as a value of a new and brutal subjectivity and places the machine as a totemic deity. My understanding of this draws from the aesthetic language of Vorticism, particularly representations of women in the work of Wyndham Lewis. Moreover, I argue that this 'machinic-modernism' as Hal Foster describes it, which emerged in the early 20th century as a reaction to industrialised modernity, corporatisation, Taylorism, and Fordism, has a powerful and unacknowledged inheritor in the contemporary Palme d'Or winning film *Titane* (2021) written and directed by the auteur Julia Ducournau. I argue that the figure of Alexia in *Titane*, portrayed by actress and model Agathe Rousselle, is a celebration of dehumanisation that follows an anti-humanist path – sexually-combative femininity purged to become a hyper-masculine recruit, emerging as a biomechanical self – I claim that, while the modernism of Lewis and the creative intentions of Ducournau may have stemmed from different motivations, their utmost horizon for the subject and society is the same one, the swapping out of the tension of masculine and feminine for a machinic-self defined by ferocity, abjection, and trauma. I will also refer to the text *Filibusters in Barbary* from 1932 which is a reflective account of travels in North Africa including revealing attitudes of Lewis's regarding machines which are, in common with the themes of *Titane*, anthropomorphised and presented as magical, violent, more frightening than monsters, and as having replaced gods. Ducournau and Lewis are reactive to the same social forces and rebarbative to so-called bourgeois conceptions of femininity in favour of a subjectivity that exists in a highly stratified social organisation.

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Key Words: Julia Ducournau, *Titane* 2021, Wyndham Lewis, Vorticism, Machine Modernism.

Introduction

As the winner of the prized Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2021 the film *Titane*, (French for titanium), a horror/thriller by director Julia Ducournau, was met with much praise and condemnation from critics. The imagery of the film is challenging and frequently abstract; and its visuals and themes appear set to be debated by academics as they touch on gender, post-humanity, and violence in highly evocative ways. In that vein I will draw upon, and withdraw from, some of the assertions in Katarzyna Paszkiewicz's (2023) essay for the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. While I accept her assertion that *Titane* challenges attitudes based on normative 'narratives of freedom...or individualism'¹ (qualities I associate with classic humanist values); I reject the idea that the film 'makes space'² or celebrates an 'ethics of care'³. Instead, I see the film concluding with a tragi-heroic glorification of duty, an assertion of a masculine-inflected ethics, and generally being concerned throughout with iconicity and status; above reflexive inter-relationships based on communication and intimacy, which I see as key in an ethics of care.

Those themes listed above, gender, post-humanity etc., and the body-horror depicted in the film – bio-machinic transformations – have left some audiences 'repelled...bamboozled'⁴. The film is generally considered a work that 'constantly wriggles out of the grasp of all categorisation and description'⁵. In this paper, I will respond to that turbulence and suggest that the key themes of machinic post-humanity, personal aggressivity as transformative, and sexual combat, present in *Titane* (2021), as well as the impact of Julia Ducournau's film generally as 'genre defying', can be best understood as a rare, popular culture (film) iteration, of 'machinic modernism'⁶ (discussed below) where dehumanisation is taken as a central tenet and defining quality of a new and terrible subject. A subject that is rebarbative to the so-called, bourgeois individual.

Furthermore, I will make the case that Vorticism, and in particular the ideas and work of Wyndham Lewis, where 'life is combat'⁷, are ideally placed to illuminate the deeper meaning of the visually arresting horror in the film, as well as the film's relationship to normative concepts of subjectivity. This attests to the importance of Lewis's aesthetic language, which offers ways to see the dehumanising potential of modernity, its horror and its questionable, but nevertheless potent appeal. Regarding that appeal, in a discussion of Lewis's influences and aesthetics, Tickner explains Lewis is interested in a remaking, a

¹ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. "'I'm in Love with My Car': Revisiting the Aesthetics of Petroleum in Crash (1996), Death Proof (2007), and Titane (2021)," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 20 (2023) 1-41, p.34.

² Ibid p.34.

³ Ibid p.34.

⁴ Mark Kermode. "Titane Review – Agathe Rousselle is Extraordinary in Palme d'or-Winning Body Horror," *Guardian*, 26 Dec 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/dec/26/titane-review-julia-ducournau-palme-dor-cronenberg-agathe-rousselle>.

⁵ Clarisse Loughrey. "Titane is a Gnarly Ride that Oozes with Blood, Oil, and Semen – Review," *Independent*, 7 Jan 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/titane-review-plot-agathe-rousselle-b1981483.html>.

⁶ Hal Foster. *Prosthetic Gods*, (Cambridge, Mass. London, MIT Press, 2004), p.110.

⁷ Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse: Lewis, Painting, and Performance 1912-13," *Modernism/Modernity*, 4 (2) (1997), 67-120, p.92.

‘desirable dehumanisation’⁸ which emerges like an anomaly ‘from a particular dissentient conflictual position within...[modernism].’⁹ I suggest that such a position is present also in *Titane* (2021) and is, as Stevenson explains regarding Lewis’s attitude ‘a symptom of [returning] anti-sentimentalist fervour’¹⁰ where brutality replaces “‘comfort and amiableness”’¹¹ because people are seen to have been “‘indulged”’¹². Furthermore, that this phenomenon is ‘a rejection [of]...humanist positions’¹³ that can be understood to emphasize the ‘uniqueness of each individual’¹⁴ who has free will and the potential to ‘self-actualise’.¹⁵ There is a generally expected ‘optimism’ about the potential of the masses to be self-determining, creative, and rational in humanism¹⁶ which is rejected by Lewis, and I would argue is also rejected in *Titane*: where stronger individuals who are forged via physical pain and psychic trauma are capable of transformation.

The space of the nightclub as an alternative breeding ground for a new subject is essential to Lewis’s aesthetics;¹⁷ and as an incubating space for Alexia in *Titane*. In both cases the crucial addition of ‘combative dance’¹⁸ is linked to a desired otherness in those settings. Regarding ‘sociability connected to modernism’¹⁹ Lyon explains, these alternative spaces were ‘challenge[s] to...the fixed architecture of bourgeois associations.’²⁰ Furthermore, these were ‘spaces of un-becoming (of the “self”) and becoming (into otherness)’²¹. This positionality has a corresponding aesthetics in both the film and vorticist works looked at in this paper. The anti-sentimentalist/anti-humanist stance is self-styled by Lewis as a realist attitude regarding human beings, one that eschews (a perceived) reactive optimism – regarding technology, and the newness of modernity generally – and in place of a humanist approach, valorises instead armoured stasis, above the reflective interiority of perceived ‘weak’ attitudes, it celebrates predatory aggressiveness as an innate sign of superiority, and it favours hierarchy: where freedom is a result of one’s position in relation to others, rather than a causal outcome of personal physis agency.

⁸ Ibid p.100.

⁹ Ibid p.101.

¹⁰ Guy Stevenson. “Anti-Humanist Modernisms”, *Textual Practice*, 34(9) (2020), 1405-1622, p.1405.

¹¹ Wyndham Lewis cited in Ibid, p.1405.

¹² Wyndham Lewis cited in Ibid, p.1405.

¹³ Ibid, p.1406.

¹⁴ Saul Mcleod. “Humanistic Approach in Psychology (Humanism): Definition & Examples,” updated May 10, 2023, <https://simplypsychology.org/humanistic.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Andrew Copson. “What Is Humanism?,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism* (eds A. Copson and A.C. Grayling) (2015) 1-33, p.18-19.

¹⁷ Lisa Tickner. “The Popular Culture of Kermesse” p.68-69.

¹⁸ Ayla Lepine. “Dance, Theatre, and Performance – In Focus,” *Tate Research Publication*, updated 2017, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/the-deluge/dance-theatre-performance>.

¹⁹ Janet Lyon. “Gadže Modernism,” in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity. Modernism, modernity*, (eds L. Doyle and L. Winkiel) (2005), p.198.

²⁰ Ibid p.198.

²¹ Ibid p.198.

Exposition of *Titane* 2021

Titane begins with a car crash that results in a young Alexia (Adèle Guigue) being injured and requiring a titanium plate to be grafted onto her skull, leaving a significant scar. Later, as an adult we see Alexia (Agathe Rousselle) working as a showgirl at a nightclub that incorporates a motor show; she appears to have minor celebrity status as a successful performer. After an impactful dance, as Alexia is going home, she is approached by a fan who declares love for her and forcibly kisses her, initially feigning cooperation she then kills the man with a metal hairpin. Alexia returns to her workplace after hours to clean herself off, and notices banging and revving sounds. On entering a large showroom Alexia is confronted with a Cadillac that is seemingly sentient; she gets into the car and has sex with it. It is revealed that Alexia, who still lives with her parents, has murdered people before, and is being pursued as a serial killer by the police. A pivotal event occurs at a house party that Alexia attends with a co-worker, and possible love interest, Justine (Garance Marillier). Discovering that she is pregnant, Alexia tries to use her hairpin to perform an abortion (which fails). Upon leaving the bathroom Alexia proceeds to kill Justine and several of her flatmates, although one witness escapes. Under pressure, Alexia sets fire to her parents' home and locks them in their bedroom, killing them also.

Throughout the film, we see that Alexia leaks motor oil, and a metal under-skin attempts to break through her surface appearance giving her a monstrous status. As Alexia is now on the run from the police, she takes on the persona of a missing person Adrien, cropping off her hair, taping down her breasts and belly, and most dramatically breaking her nose: to pass as male. Adrien was the missing son of a fire captain Vincent (Vincent Lindon), who accepts Alexia-Adrien as his lost child (refusing a DNA test) and begins to care for and integrate Alexia, as Adrien, into his life.

The film then follows Alexia as she joins her new would-be father as a firefighter, charting the tense interaction with Vincent's men, and the growing trust between Alexia and Vincent. Later, after gaining acceptance from the other recruits during a celebration, Alexia immediately 'others' herself in their eyes by dancing in a male guise: the way she once did as a showgirl. The scene ends with Vincent's disapproval, and Alexia again (when alone) has sex with a vehicle, this time a fire truck. Finally, Alexia's protruding belly is too great to hide, she begins to break down physically; and although she is accepted by Vincent – despite not being his son – she dies as she gives birth to a machinic child. Vincent holds the baby and states 'I'm here.'²²

Contentious Analogues

It is worth noting early on that I consider the film an auteured masterpiece, despite my ambivalent relation to its themes, and my contentious reading. Julia Ducournau has spoken openly about her 'queer vision'²³ (discussed later), which the film represents, and the

²² *Titane*, directed by Julia Ducournau, 2021; France/Belgium: Diaphana Distribution and O'Brother Distribution, 2021, Film.

²³ Rachel Handler. "Under Her Skin", *Vulture*, Oct 5, 2021, <https://www.vulture.com/2021/10/julia-ducournau-on-writing-titane-2021s-boldest-film.html>.

model, actor, and journalist Agathe Rousselle who plays the main protagonist Alexia, is an active feminist and progressive who co-founded the feminist magazine 'Peach' a female-led publication that boasts 'no male will have a say in the process of making Peach'²⁴. I therefore, accept that using Lewis, a contentious figure at the best of times – a noted anti-feminist and exponent of homophobic views, appears combative for the sake of sensationalism – that is not my intention. There are contradictions in the reception of *Titane* that echo contradictions in the reception of Lewis. The film has been described as triumphantly rejecting the idea of a woman as a 'designated victim';²⁵ but also, as being 'a deeply misogynist movie with a healthy side of transphobia.'²⁶ Volatility as to the possible meanings and actual outcomes of subverting traditional tropes of femininity are common to both Lewis and Ducournau.

Despite a strong anti-feminism from Lewis, Tickner explains the then strange appeal to female members of his audience. Tickner points out that Lewis's anti-feminism was popular among 'female patrons'²⁷ making the point that avant-gardism was fashionable and provided 'celebrity based not on birth, or wealth, or attainment, but on consumption and taste'²⁸. I conjecture Lewis offered a superiority based on the frank, brutal candidness of his imagery and subject matter. Tickner accounts for the counter-intuitive feminism that might have emerged from Lewis's aesthetic rejection of feminine-inflected arts and culture.

Lewis's implicit critique of art and sex – of the role of the body as an expressive instrument, of Bergsonian vitalism, of the salon colotte or Camden town nudes or feminine embodiments of Nature and Rhythm – might have been feminist but was in the end...compromised.²⁹

The point is that the iterations of femininity that Lewis vehemently rejected, including soft fleshiness, tenderness, and naturalistic representation – drawing on benevolent conceptions of nature – can be viewed as stereotypically bourgeois, limiting tropes that women may need to reject to be emancipated. Those qualities are certainly rejected in *Titane* (2021), and I would argue that Alexia (Agathe Rousselle) is an enigmatic figure who inhabits the space that Lewis saw as exclusively male: possessing imperious, machinic, and predatory qualities. However, while the rejected 'feminine' qualities should not limit women, their elimination in the subject of Alexia (and I suggest by proxy in the subject per se) only realises a willed dehumanisation, by way of hyper-masculinity, which replaces the sexual dichotomy of masculine and feminine with abjection and trauma.

²⁴ Marc Bonomelli. "'Peach', Le Magazine" updated 22 Sep, 2016, <https://www.lesinrocks.com/actu/peach-magazine-100-filles-63006-22-09-2016/>.

²⁵ Film Four. "Director Julia Ducournau and Cast on Their Award-Winning Film 'Titane' | film4, YouTube," uploaded 7 Jan, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Re-XqplH1Tg>.

²⁶ Jude Dry. "Cross Dressing and Car Fetishes: 'Titane' Twists Trans Tropes into Perverse, Lifeless Body Horror," *IndieWire*, 2 Oct 2021, <https://www.indiewire.com/2021/10/titane-body-horror-trans-transphobic-1234668724/>.

²⁷ Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse," p.70.

²⁸ Ibid p.71.

²⁹ Ibid p.102.

I will be comparing the figure of Alexia (Agathe Rousselle) to figurative works by Wyndham Lewis: *The Dancers* (Study for 'Kermesse') (c. 1912), *Smiling Woman Ascending a Stair* (c.1911), *Nude I* (1919), *Girl Reclining* (c.1919), *Praxitella* (1921), and *Tyro Madonna* (1921); as well as the sculpture *Rock Drill* (c. 1913–1915) by fellow vorticist and sculptor Jacob Epstein, taking account of Lewis's particular interpretation of that work from the second issue of the magazine *Blast* (1915). These visual works dated from between 1911 to 1921 and related texts of Lewis's from 1915 and 1921 specifically give me a sense of his ideas at this time. Those years are relevant since I will use a later text *Filibusters in Barbary* (1932) which serves to shed light on his prior 'mature'³⁰ period. Being eleven years later Lewis has, to lend Jacob Epstein's re-evaluative term, lessened his 'ardour for machinery'³¹ although not nearly as much as Epstein did (discussed later) and not in such a self-revelatory way – for Lewis, telling reflective insights are all projected onto the colonised land and peoples – rather there is an overtone of melancholy and a feeling of inevitability around the machine influence on people, who despite caveats, and for the sake of agency, must in his estimation align with machinery or become 'as dead as mutton.'³²

I will argue that there is not only a clear line that can be drawn from those modernist works to the imagery of *Titane*, 'a modernist scream of a movie'³³ but that there is also a renewed enthusiasm for the armoured, violent, and animalistic subject. That machinic/animalistic subject is an alternative to the contemporary bourgeois subject represented in *Titane* (2021) by Alexia's parents (Bertrand Bonello and Céline Carrère), defined by professional and personal respectability, and the alternative 'narcissistic'³⁴ young millennials and Generation Z individuals represented by Justine (Garance Marillier) and her flatmates, who Alexia brutally kills. Narcissism is a persistent stereotype associated with those younger groups,³⁵ and it is difficult not to see the perceived neediness and self-regard punished by Alexia as a satisfying, but morally questionable horror wish fulfilment.

I see those murders and the portrayal of the characters in those contexts as an authorial critique of Ducournau's directed at the liberal family unit, and the notion of loose friendship groups, that for many equal the family as a normative and stabilising social construct: In short, a critique of popular western contemporary social dynamics. What we see in *Titane* is that the militarised and regimented world of the firefighters, with their rugged patriarchal Captain (Vincent Lindon), is more authentic than both of those contemporary constructs. We also see that interpersonal relationship connections based on notions of straight or queer dynamics is superseded by the sexual appeal of machines, entities associated in the film with brutal power and trauma. The world of the firefighters is defined by violent action, strict hierarchy, and shared struggle. Despite an impactful scene where Alexia separates

³⁰ Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse," p. 80.

³¹ Jacob Epstein. *Let There Be Sculpture* (London, Michael Joseph, 1940), p. 56.

³² Wyndham Lewis. *Filibusters in Barbary*, New York: Robert M. McBride & Company, 1932, p. 294.

³³ Owen Gleiberman. "Titane' Review: A Modernist Scream of a Movie That Feels Like Nothing You've Ever Seen Before," *Variety*, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/film/reviews/titane-review-cannes-1235006332/>.

³⁴ Eddy Ng, and Jasmine McGinnis Johnson. "Millennials: who are they, how are they different, and why should we care?" In *The Multi-Generational and Aging Workforce* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), 121-137, p.124

³⁵ Hamed Haddouche and Christine Salomone. "Generation Z and the tourist experience: tourist stories and use of social networks" *Journal of Tourism Futures*, 4 (1) (2018): 69-79, p.77.

herself from the other men (described below), it is with the firefighters that she appears to be the most comfortable.

Rousselle climbs atop a fire truck and does an erotic dance for her fellow firefighters, who have just been knocking into one another on the ground in a hypermasculine mosh pit. To Ducournau, the scene represents what she describes as her “queer vision of the world,” one that “had to transpire in my mise-en-scène with light, with angles. Not just the script. It’s also how you portray and deconstruct gender stereotypes.”³⁶

In the scene, Alexia is in the guise of Adrien and the sight of the male seeming, and otherwise morose and insular Adrien moving and gesturing like a professional stripper ends the celebration. That scene is impactful and undermines the juvenile machismo of the gathered young men by presenting an overtly abject contraction of male heterosexual desires object – the subjected female body – with the form of the desiring male, usually in the position of empowered voyeur, nevertheless this apparent ‘queer vision’ is undermined as a positive project, outlook, or moral of the film, when taken as a part of the whole narrative.

Firstly, Adrien’s dancing can be seen as a closed symbolic circuit, defined by phallic potency. Adrien’s femininity in the performance is defined by the sexual combat of the former persona Alexia, who possesses a male-inflected aggressive femininity (a form of femininity which is itself only a response to the male gaze’s most violent injunctions to be fuckable); and one we have already seen associated with death. It is that order of femininity, rather than any real alternative to overt and dehumanising sexual dynamics, that is interrupting the machismo of the men, leaving the scene as an entirely phallocentric spectacle. Secondly, Vincent’s patriarchal intervention in the scene which effectively ends it. He enters taking account of the spectacle, he looks directly at Alexia disapprovingly before leaving. Alexia is impacted by this; she looks worried and stops dancing. Effectively she has found a new paternal authority, whom she does not wish to disappoint. Lastly, by the time this scene occurs we have already seen Alexia’s failed coupling with another woman, Justine (Marillier) who becomes, first a victim of Alexia’s sexual violence (she is bitten and roughly handled by Alexia) and is finally killed with Alexia’s lethal hairpin. Therefore, while I can accept the display of gender as a construction in *Titane*, which is one tenet of queer theory, I would suggest that this moment in the film on which the ‘queer vision’³⁷ rests only reinforces the hierarchy that the fire-fighters exist within: Vincent and Adrien above their subordinates. I am taking Julia Ducournau’s self-described ‘queer vision of the world’³⁸ as a description which implies a morally positive (in the normative sense) effort to break down stereotypes and gender norms; that reading is at best limited and possibly superficial. This paper is an attempt to join up historical precedents with the film, to reveal it as a celebration of un-becoming, armoured aggression, and stratified dynamics. I hope to have established enough

³⁶ Rachel Handler. “Under Her Skin.”

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

doubt regarding Ducournau's conscious intentionality to allow my interpretation room to offer an alternative reading.

Languages of Un-becoming

Lewis created a visual lexicon which describes forces of modernity that are less optimistic than those celebrated in other modernisms (and in humanism), forces which are violent and persistently working on the human body. Vorticist aesthetics do not simply express a form of impactful visual combinations in ways that can be seen as aggressive or jarring, to sensibilities that prefer naturalistic rendering: they make violent dehumanisation visible. Modernity changes the physicality, and the psychic states of human beings, and Lewis is attuned to those forces. While there is powerful ambivalence in Lewis's perceived attitudes to those forces, seeking to make dehumanisation into a positive value for example, or 'embrace of animal mechanisms',³⁹ nevertheless I suggest the vorticist register of painting, drawing, and sculpture makes visible the tension between the body, the mind, and modernity.

For Tickner this attitude also betrays a need to distance from, 'diluted naturalisms, symbolisms and impressionism.'⁴⁰ These are seen as bourgeois, and since symbolism took nature and religion, and impressionism, nature and the everyday (changes in light, shadow and temporality) we get a sense of what will be disavowed in Lewis's visual oeuvre. Foster explains that 'returns to the figure'⁴¹ in modernism were commonly conciliatory reactions against fragmentation in the physical world and representationally, in 'cubism above all.'⁴² However, Lewis and Vorticism took another route, described as 'machinic modernisms' serving to 'make over'⁴³ the body. Lewis's aesthetics respond to 'upheavals'⁴⁴ (the de-centring of humanity due to the Copernican turn, and World War One are mentioned).

Most notably, Lewis rejected the 'time mind',⁴⁵ which refers to the idea of complex interiority. Foster (2004) observes Lewis's thoughts regarding soft, malleable interiors, he is thinking of subjectivity, in this case Sigmund Freud's 'jellyfish'⁴⁶ (as Lewis described the bourgeois notion of meaningful interiority) being 'baked through',⁴⁷ Foster informs us 'he [Lewis] insists that the baking be total, the crust complete.'⁴⁸

I suggest there is a shared aesthetic sensibility between Ducournau and Lewis, that rests on Lewis's Tyro works explored in writing, drawing, and painting. A Tyro can be understood as an elemental creature or monster, Lewis readily embraces the monstrous aspect of the elemental, which is a concentrated powerful entity, '*Tyro.—An elementary person; an

³⁹ Guy Stevenson. "Anti-Humanist Modernisms," p.1416.

⁴⁰ Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse" p. 95.

⁴¹ Hal Foster. *Prosthetic Gods*, p. 110.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid p. 144.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Elemental, in short'.⁴⁹ That aspect highlights, impact and interruption, elementals are considered 'a supernatural entity or force thought to be physically manifested by occult means.'⁵⁰ The concept of the Tyro appears early in Lewis's career and is linked to dance by Tickner who sees Lewis's *Kermesse* (1912) as an early template for the Tyros; Lewis's activity in some part is focused on contributing to the breeding grounds for the 'new subject'⁵¹ (his images adorned avant-garde night spots). The connection between *Kermesse* and Tyros is fleetingly made by Tickner, she refers to 'tyro-like dentistry'⁵². Stevenson explains that anti-humanism has 'recourse to the body over the mind'⁵³ (2020:1408) this is reflected in Lewis's semi-abstract figurative aesthetics discussed above and in the presentation of Alexia in *Titane* where the combination of flesh and metal 'makes over the body'⁵⁴.

Ducournau has stated "'Every time I make a shot, I try to make it like a painting,'"⁵⁵ more fundamentally there is a key link in Lewis's and Ducournau's response to 'the mechanization of modern life in general – due to the shift to Taylorist and Fordist manufacturing'⁵⁶ as Paszkiewicz describes regarding *Titane*. 'Frederick Taylor, who rethought the worker and saw this worker, not as a human but as a machine.'⁵⁷ Those forces are key for Lewis, for example, Nathan O'Donnell's exposition of Lewis's unpublished fiction 'Hoodopip' (1924-1925), which chronicles the Tyro caste system, sees a relation to 'corporatisation' and 'industrial rationalisation'⁵⁸ (78). The Tyro is linked directly to both Taylorism and Fordism in O'Donnell⁵⁹ the motivation for the works is as O'Donnell puts it, the effects on subjectivity due to 'the ideological transformation of mass-industrial modernity'⁶⁰.

Moreover, the response to these forces from both creatives is to use monstrosity as a clarion call to an audience frustrated with mainstream morality. Ducournau emphasises her interest in monstrosity as representative of personal transformation linked with trauma and childhood.⁶¹ Alexia's predatory behaviour (casual murder for example), and metal-reconfiguring, as well as her coupling with machines, make her monstrous: this also makes her powerful. Lewis's Tyro figures are also monsters described by Lewis as 'powerful' with 'abominable nature[s]'.⁶² It is revealing relative to the social purpose of Lewis's Tyros to

⁴⁹ Wyndham Lewis. "Note on Tyros," *The Tyro: A Review of The Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*, 01 Jan 1921, p.2.

⁵⁰ Oxford English Dictionary. "Definition of elemental in English" updated 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/elemental>.

⁵¹ Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of *Kermesse*" p. 104.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Guy Stevenson. "Anti-Humanist Modernisms," p.1408.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Rachel Handler. "*Under Her Skin*."

⁵⁶ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. "'I'm in Love with My Car,'" p.4.

⁵⁷ Jeanne Willette. "Jacob Epstein: Taylorism and Masculinity on the Eve of the Great War," uploaded Feb 19, 2016, <https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/jacob-epstein-1880-1959-and-the-rock-drill/>.

⁵⁸ Nathan O'Donnell. *Wyndham Lewis's Cultural Criticism and the Infrastructures of Patronage* (Oxford University Press, 2020), p.78.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 78-90

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 88.

⁶¹ Rachel Handler. "*Under Her Skin*".

⁶² Wyndham Lewis. "Note on Tyros," p.2.

consider the Tyro in relation to the typical dictionary definition of the term, since Lewis seeks to play off these and extend it with his own meanings.

'A Tyro: one who is just starting to learn or do something.'⁶³ Lewis began to develop his ideas in relation to the Tyro while inhabiting and contributing to the ambience of the Alhambra, a night club where he imbibed the atmosphere, 'the artist of the modern movement is a savage ...this enormous, jangling, journalistic, fairy desert of modern life serves him as nature did more technically primitive man.'⁶⁴ Tickner also has Lewis drawing on the 'Dance of the Apaches' based on a concept of sexual combat and 'gleaming mechanical'⁶⁵ masculinity. This dehumanisation is desired and enacted by Lewis to become a 'contemporary manifestation of an atavistic masculinity.'⁶⁶

The Tyro grin appearing in images like *A Reading of Ovid* (1920-21) and *A self-portrait, Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* (1921) is linked to trauma and awareness of absurdity 'as Lewis puts it, the expression of the same "ineffable cheerfulness" of the British Tommy, commanded to "stick it" – "the throb of this slang alone would suffice" – on this planet, as he had been during the war.'⁶⁷ An informative work on the Tyro project is an earlier image *Smiling Woman Ascending a Stair* (c.1911) which contains the characteristic grin. The image shows a geometrically vorticised female form with a 'demonic grin'⁶⁸ that produces a 'subtle menace.'⁶⁹ I draw a comparison to Alexia's face which also has menace, and specifically tyro-like qualities, a 'canine aggression of cannibalism,'⁷⁰ as Quema describes Tyros. Alexia's face is functional as a defensive shield and a weapon. Regarding the weaponisation of her mouth, Alexia bites the nipple of her co-worker Justine in an act of sexual aggression that disrupts their potential coupling. While the smile as a forced, defensive front is displayed by Alexia during a selfie requested by the fan she later kills, we see her face straight on through the camera, her intense stare undermines the grin; once the image is taken, we see the smile drop away leaving a disgusted expression.

A further shared aesthetic between Ducournau and Lewis is somewhat more abstract and lies in the treatment of the car in *Titane*, and the machine more generally by Lewis. Paszkiewicz explains that '*Titane*'s focus is on [the] often strikingly immobile automobile,'⁷¹ on the concentrated energy of the crash over movement, with a particular anti-romantic preference for 'deadly collisions rather than open roads and... unknown horizons.'⁷² This emphasis is analogous with one major difference between Futurism – otherwise an

⁶³ Collins Dictionary. "Definition of 'tyro'" updated 2019, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/tyro>.

⁶⁴ Lewis cited in Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse" p.79.

⁶⁵ Ibid p.87

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Nathan O'Donnell. *Wyndham Lewis's Cultural Criticism and the Infrastructures of Patronage*, p. 77.

⁶⁸ Mark Jones. "Wyndham Lewis: Life, art, war, Albion Magazine Online: Exploring Englishness" updated 2018, <http://www.albionmagazineonline.org/albion-winter-2018-art-wyndham-lewis-life-art-war.html>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Anne Quema. *The Agon of Modernism: Wyndham Lewis's Allegories, Aesthetics, and Politics* (Bucknell University Press, 1999), p.108.

⁷¹ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. "'I'm in Love with My Car,'" p.3.

⁷² Ibid p. 8.

influence on Vorticism – and vorticist aesthetics, it concerns Lewis’s view that Futurism was overly ‘romantic’, especially regarding ‘automobilism’ and was mere ‘Impressionism up-to-date’⁷³ because of Marinetti ‘fetishizing time, while... [Lewis] lauded “Classism,” which emphasised the hard-edged forms of space.’⁷⁴ In Vorticism this is visually evident in the way that the intersected blur between forms in Futurism (often indicating movement/speed) is excised, and form is instead shown in static but dynamic segments. Furthermore, as Tickner explains regarding another influence on Vorticism ‘[in] contrast with cubism proper the manner of intersection is rendered violent.’⁷⁵ This is a core principle that inspired the movements name ‘[The vortex was] that point in the cyclone where energy cuts into space and imparts form to it ... the pattern of angles and geometric lines which is formed by our vortex in the existing chaos.’⁷⁶ In *Titane* sound and close images of body horror have the effect of a violent ‘intersection,’⁷⁷ the camera frequently focuses on bodily violence, and a strong soundscape heightens the tension to create a visceral experience for the viewer. In Lewis and Ducournau the iconicity of machines over romantic ideas of agency is evident.

Metal Madonna

In *Titane* the qualities of atavism discussed above concerning masculinity are possessed by Alexia. When we first see Alexia, she is on her way to a nightclub/car showroom, where she dances in an overtly aggressive way on top of cars as loud music plays, and people drink and take in the spectacle (see fig1). Her presentation in that scene is highly machinic, Alexia is conflated with the Cadillac as a curvilinear surface, a pairing of primally charged entities. Those primal forces come through in her movements, sexual, violent – learned by heart and reproduced mechanically – and through the emphasis on her tight athletic outline (which recurs several times in the film). There is a strong sense of agency rendered by her powerful intent ‘she looks challengingly at the camera’⁷⁸ she is no mere showgirl but an iconic presence. Alexia’s legs sharply jut in and out, they arc in circular motions, the strength of her body overall is clear (Rousselle received dance and fight training in preparation for the role⁷⁹) as she easily supports her torso while undulating. Paszkiewicz states that Alexia’s relationship with the audience in the nightclub concerns the ‘idolatrous worship of cars’⁸⁰ and that it makes Alexia ‘resemble a sacred icon.’⁸¹ I will argue the icon is an alternative Madonna replete with a machine holy spirit (or higher power), and a bio-mechanical messianic offspring.

⁷³ Wyndham Lewis. “The Melodrama of Modernism,” *Blast Number No 1*, June 20, 1915, p. 143.

⁷⁴ Scott W. Klein. *The Fictions of James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis: Monsters of Nature and Design* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.42.

⁷⁵ Lisa Tickner. “The Popular Culture of Kermesse” p.104.

⁷⁶ Archie Henderson. “Pound’s Strelets Interview (1915),” *Paideuma*, 11(3): 473–486 (1982), p 478.

⁷⁷ Lisa Tickner. “The Popular Culture of Kermesse” p.104.

⁷⁸ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. ““I’m in Love with My Car,”” p.19.

⁷⁹ Lynn Hirschberg. “With ‘Titane,’ director Julia Ducournau Births a New Genre,” *W Magazine*, Oct 13, 2021. <https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/julia-ducournau-titane-interview> (accessed: March 7, 2023).

⁸⁰ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. ““I’m in Love with My Car,”” p. 4.

⁸¹ *Ibid* p. 32.



Fig. 1. Still from *Titane* 2021, Kazak Productions/Frakas Productions. Photograph by Carole Bethuel. Lifestyle pictures/Alamy Stock Photo.

On seeing this scene, I was reminded of several of Lewis's depictions of machinic femininity, which led me to the interpretation of Alexia above, as if Lewis's works had been a direct influence on the choice of Rousselle as a physical presence, and on the aggression and menace in her provocative performance. While there is no evidence for that, the images are strikingly relevant depictions of women that do much of what Ducournau and Rousselle have done with Alexia, albeit in a moving rather than static medium.

Firstly, *Girl Reclining* (c.1919) is a black chalk life drawing by Lewis of a naked recumbent woman. The dynamic positioning – on a diagonal, upward from left to right – implies movement despite her lying pose as the eye is encouraged by strong intent dark lines to follow the form from the tip of her feet straight up to the head. Her outline is solid like moulded sheet metal and the bones of her elbows protrude like cast engineering parts from her smooth surface. Like Alexia, Lewis's *Girl Reclining* has powerful solid thighs that sit at the centre of his image, both creatives invite us to appreciate their female representations as perfect surfaces. Similarly, as an evolution of femininity toward greater biomechanical qualities, *Nude I* (1919) is another female form, this time coloured by a blue-grey wash – that seems to reference shining metal – with a more robotic seeming head due to greater simplification. The robotic female has protruding, red-coloured nipples, and the centrality of the buttocks render that image as sexually machinic. Both of Lewis's works show women displaying their bodies in ways that are echoed by Alexia as she poses and dances on the Cadillac; they also do so while conflating, in my opinion, car-like or at least machine-like curves and lines into the female form.

In *The Dancers* (Study for 'Kermesse') (1912) there is a greater resonance with Alexia's gesticulation, during her dancing 'rapid movement of bodies or machines... [a] radically

mechanized alternative to Matisse's graceful, flowing paintings of dancers.⁸² The study was for a large painting that adorned an avant-garde night club, now lost.⁸³ The image shows three figures in dramatic poses that were likened negatively to battling insects by critics,⁸⁴ a comparison that touches on, perhaps accidentally, the exoskeletal armouring of insects which was attractive to Lewis.⁸⁵ The study (and lost painting) was inspired by the 'Danse des Apaches' which had its origins in the 'Parisian underclass.'⁸⁶ Tickner informs us the dance involved sexual aggression and was opposed to 'bourgeois concepts of love... [it was rather] Illicit, sadistic, explicit, vengeful and wildly disruptive.'⁸⁷ Moreover, I suggest there is a similar intentionality in drawing on overt and aggressive sexualised dance in both *Titane* and for Lewis, Tickner explains, 'the work is partly about...[a] self-conscious restaging of modern sexualities...one in flight from...bourgeois proprieties and in pursuit of an emancipated...sexual identity.'⁸⁸ While of course Ducournau's 'queer vision'⁸⁹ which is also a 'self-conscious restaging'⁹⁰ of sexuality, dependant on – like Lewis – 'something sparer, harder and more directly figural as sexual combat'⁹¹ is not something we think Lewis would have sanctioned, being suspicious as he was of 'sexual ambiguity'⁹² and opposed to 'covert homosexuality.'⁹³ However, I suggest that since both these motivations, Lewis's and Ducournau's, involve a rejection of the same values, traditional tropes of femininity such as gentleness, tenderness, 'fleshiness,' feminine 'spontaneity' or 'self-absorption,'⁹⁴ as Tickner describes Lewis's anathemas, we might credibly claim on a deeper level they achieve the same thing: a rejection of reflexive interiority in the name of physical action, a desired dehumanisation via aggressivity, and an embrace of machinic modernism. The difference, if it is significant, is that in Ducournau the emphasis is on a female starting point moving to bio-mechanical post-humanity, and for Lewis, the driving agent would be male. In both cases what has been called feminine is replaced with a surface hardness that takes its energy from animal/machinic sexual desire and trauma to realise a perversely abject form.

In *Tyro Madonna* (1921) we see a totemic and highly sexualised, image of a woman worshipped by an attendant male, as the men ogle and obsess over Alexia in the club, the epitome of their subculture. The two forms of Lewis's image are defined by their sexual role. The male figure has a large phallic protuberance, while the 'Madonna' appears as if in cross-section with a corresponding cavity at her core. Described as 'explicit,'⁹⁵ and as being a part

⁸² Pericles Lewis. "Primitivists and modernizers," in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 64–94, p. 85.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse" p. 104.

⁸⁵ Rachel Murray. *Modernist Exoskeleton: Insects, War, Literary Form* (Edinburgh University Press 2022), p. 24.

⁸⁶ Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse" p. 85.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid p. 87.

⁸⁹ Rachel Handler. "Under Her Skin."

⁹⁰ Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse" p.87.

⁹¹ Ibid p. 108.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid p. 106.

⁹⁵ Michael Miller. "Wyndham Lewis's 'Figures.'" *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 80, no. 4 (1993): 174–79, p.175.

of a 'holy family'⁹⁶ *Tyro Madonna* shows the dynamic between the sexes in a world defined by machinic modernism. I would draw a comparison to Žižek's discussion of idealising in the medieval court regarding the function of iconic people 'the Lady indicates the abstraction that pertains to a cold, distanced, inhuman partner – by no means a warm, compassionate, understanding fellow-creature.'⁹⁷ For Žižek this removal to an ideal plane (as Paul Edwards has described Lewis's representation)⁹⁸ is a form of dehumanisation and a function of power. Alexia's status as a machinic Madonna is not simply due to her sex and totemic representation, but as the chosen vessel of a higher power. In two key scenes she has sex with vehicles becoming pregnant by the Cadillac 'the camera lingers on engine parts shot like sweaty appendages.'⁹⁹ I interpret the sentient vehicles (the Cadillac and fire truck) as monstrous mechanomorphic representations of industrialised modernism – social forces, as embodied things – those beings makeover Alexia by way of brutal violence, that first splices her anatomy with theirs, her cranial titanium plate, and then with machinic sex: making her complicit in the pregnancy and what those forces represent in terms of remaking. As a result, Alexia becomes an abject/idealised icon of a new order.

Embracing Trauma, Punishing Bourgeois Authority

Regarding the initial trauma, the violent car crash and subsequent prosthesis, we see a young Alexia in the back of her father's car, Alexia appears to be demanding an authoritative intervention from her father, there is an implication of his weakness as he attempts to ignore her contentious humming (that mimics the car engine) and her kicking at his seat, compounded first by turning up the music that is playing on the car radio, and later by his loss of temper that precedes the crash. It is worth considering the music that plays during the episode, 'Wayfaring Stranger' performed by David Eugene Edwards¹⁰⁰ is a traditional Christian folk song; and seems to both establish Alexia's father's middle of the road 'Western' attitude, it belongs to his world – contrasting with all other music in the film – while an ironic reading could see the song announcing Alexia as something new, in search of a better paternal authority, which she finds later in Vincent.

I'm going there to see my father,

I'm going there no more to roam¹⁰¹

The song references Psalm 39:12, Psalm 119:19 and Corinthians 3:18¹⁰² passages which mention the 'alien' status of the narrator and the notion of being transformed by a higher power. As Alexia's father turns to scold her, he loses control of the car and crashes. Alexia is

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Slavoj Žižek. *The Fragile Absolute: Or why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London, Verso, 2000), p.34.

⁹⁸ Paul Edwards. *Wyndham Lewis Painter and Writer* (Yale University Press, 2000), p. 264.

⁹⁹ Brian Eggert. "Titane, Deep Focus Review," *Deep Focus Review*, 13 July 2021

<https://deepfocusreview.com/reviews/titane/>.

¹⁰⁰ TVmasterNS. "16 Horsepower wayfaring stranger," Jun 11, 2009, video, 02:56,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HY3sj5ICHmo>.

¹⁰¹ "Wayfaring Stranger," Hymnary.org. Calvin University, last updated 2022,

https://hymnary.org/text/i_am_a_poor_wayfaring_stranger.

¹⁰² Ibid.

severely injured, and graphic scenes show us a titanium plate being grafted to her skull by doctors, leaving a large scar on her head. In the case of Alexia, the higher power that transforms her is not her father, a fellow victim of the crash, or the Christian father, but the car. The machine answers her call, and after recovering in the hospital she passes her parents by indifferently to embrace it, first following her hands over its form and then kissing it.

We then see Alexia as an adult wearing her hair up so her scar is on show. The scar is a sign of trauma but worn as a badge of honour, emblematic of her ferocity as well as her pain, and its display as she walks to her first performance makes her violent trauma a self-willed aspect of her identity by linking her visibly to that violence for the viewer. In a similar vein, Alexia is also wearing a jacket emblazoned with a roaring lion, showing its teeth adding to her predatory presentation.

Alexia lives in her parent's home which is modern and tastefully decorated with typically scene-setting bourgeois arrangements of books, plants, and ornaments. The relationships in that space with her parents, but her father in particular, are remote and strained; there is a clear disconnect as both Alexia and her father prepare and eat breakfast without communicating, and he is loathed to touch her when Alexia's mother asks for him to examine her due to abdominal pains. The scenes in Alexia's family home tell us that bourgeois life is stilted, unable to process or acknowledge powerful urges or emotions, a site of suppression that lacks intensity.

Other than a clear contrast between her parents and their world, Alexia's subjectivity is shown to us through action: sexually aggressive dance, and violence. There are no interior scenes of memory in the film, no long speeches to show us Alexia/Adrien's inner thoughts, no declarations or spoken exchanges at length: that form of naturalism for outlining a character is eschewed. Alexia speaks minimally, her presentation is centred on her physicality, her glaring stare, combative dance and two graphic scenes of animalistic sex with vehicles.

Machinic Femininity, Iconicity in Form

Regarding *Titane* (2021) film critic Jonathan Romney makes a casual association of Alexia's portrayal by Agathe Rousselle to the angular and dynamic aesthetics of Vorticism 'this is a wildly arresting creation, not least because of newcomer Rousselle, laser-eyed and androgynous with an angular facial geometry that's positively Vorticist.'¹⁰³ Those references to 'laser-eyed...angular'¹⁰⁴ are recognitions of violence rendered in physical form. A misanthropic thrust is evident in the physical superiority of Alexia, she is sexually aggressive, hard-bodied, assertive, and dynamic; compared to the physically and psychologically soft individuals that she punishes for our entertainment. Romney has used Vorticism previously

¹⁰³ Jonathan Romney. "Titane, Phantasmagorical French body horror" *UNCUT*, 31 Dec 2021, <https://www.uncut.co.uk/reviews/film-reviews/titane-136211/>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

as a descriptor linked to masculinity and angular accents, to refer to the English actor Tilda Swinton.

She could be a living installation piece: pale composed face, short hair swept back in a boyish flop, and wearing a gleaming white Vivienne Westwood blouse that's all angles and flaps, so that she resembles a Vorticist portrait or a complex piece of origami.¹⁰⁵

Praxitella (1921) by Lewis is almost certainly what Romney has in mind with both these comparisons of angular femininity. The passing link to Japanese aesthetics that he makes (origami), also touches on a more serious and direct comparison by Lewis scholar Paul Edwards concerning Lewis's influences. Edwards regards the well-known 'portrait of Minamoto no Yoritomo' (the first shogun of the Kamakura shogunate of Japan) by Takanobu as a direct influence on *Praxitella*.¹⁰⁶ Takanobu's image (13th century) employs the flat hierarchical forms of representation that Lewis also drew upon when looking to the western canon. Andrew Johnson¹⁰⁷ for example argues for the relevance of the 14th-century Italian master Duccio di Bouninsegna, for Lewis in particular, the images *Christ and the Woman of Samaria at the Well* (1310-11), and to Uccello's – *The Battle of San Romano* (c. 1435–1460) as influential on his aesthetic strategies. Johnson sees Lewis proclaim, 'the philosophy of the eye' using 'shallow space'¹⁰⁸ where 'people [are] reduced to objects, activity [is] expressed as objectified shapes.'¹⁰⁹ The use of shallow space, the flattening effect, can be seen as a form of dehumanisation, albeit an idealised one, for example in Takanobu's image of the shogun the leader is presented as an iconic, impassive figure, Edwards explains regarding Lewis's practice, this is a general strategy of Lewis's which 'removes its objects to an ideal plane'¹¹⁰ a habit of representation that has been called elsewhere 'affectless or disembodied.'¹¹¹

The angular geometry of the shogun's robes, which account for almost all of his form is extended in Lewis's *Praxitella* (1921) to include the woman's face and hands, any hint of naturalism banished, the lines of her features, head and sharp cheekbones reflects the light as tempered steel might, the metallic aspect of her appearance is supported by her colouring, a blue chrome effect instead of flesh tones combined with the angles of the face makes *Praxitella* machinic. *Praxitella* can be considered a form that clearly shows us the titanium *thing* always threatening to break through from under the naturalistic surface of

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Romney. "Tilda Swinton: 'I'm not interested in acting skills', The Independent," *Independent Digital News and Media*, 30 Nov 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/tilda-swinton-i-m-not-interested-in-acting-skills-1038275.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Edwards. "A Dark Insect Swarming": Wyndham Lewis and Nature," *立命館言語文化研究*, 26 (3), (2015): 25 – 42, p. 26.

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Johnson. "Making vorticism: the emerging art of Wyndham Lewis, 1908-1915" (PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London 2014). See also, Andrew Johnson. "An Analysis of *The Crowd* (1914-15): Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism and its Art-Historical Antecedents," *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* 7 (2016): 175-213.

¹⁰⁸ Andrew Johnson. "Making vorticism," p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 23.

¹¹⁰ Paul Edwards. *Wyndham Lewis Painter and Writer*, p. 264.

¹¹¹ Guy Stevenson. "Anti-Humanist Modernisms," p. 1406.

Alexia's human skin throughout *Titane* (2021). Agathe Rousselle like *Praxitella* has a long slim face, high cheekbones, defined extremities, such as a long distinct nasal ridge, and naturally pursed lips that do not extend much beyond her nostrils (again like the painting). The physical appearance of Rousselle was key in Ducournau's choice of lead "Agatha has a look that is absolutely transformative, depending on where you put the camera and the angles and the light...her face is fascinating."¹¹² Romney is suggesting that Ducournau in casting Rousselle is interested in the moulded chrome-like planes and angles that the actress's face naturally possesses. If that were the case, I would propose that Ducournau had in mind motor-vehicle design that Alexia is conflated with in the film, which to link back to Romney's (2021) casual comparison, defines the abstract representation of femininity in vorticism. I would therefore argue that the first layer of dehumanisation in Ducournau's presentation of Alexia begins with the choice of Agathe Rousselle, whose particular beauty has the potential (in the context of the exaggeration of the characters presentation in the film), to be a machinic femininity, contrasted to naturalistic iterations. I suggest that machinic femininity is a first step in *Titane* to un-becoming a contemporary bourgeois subjectivity.

Dynamic Bodies Enigmatic and Fatal

Finally, I will draw a comparison of the form of the heavily pregnant Alexia, in her increasingly failing guise as Adrien, to the vorticist sculpture *Rock Drill* (1913) by Jacob Epstein. At the end of *Titane* Alexia, no longer able to hide her pregnancy, combines the masculine seeming outline – muscularity, shorn hair – with an obviously female enceinte body. This is Alexia's peek androgyny which proceeds the final breaking through of her inner metal, and the birth of her strangely bio-mechanical baby. The purpose of the comparison to Epstein's sculpture is to consider the forces acting on the body, and the future implied at the close of *Titane*.

Rock Drill (1913) was produced during, what Epstein describes as, a short-lived 'ardour for machinery.'¹¹³ It includes an actual industrial rock drill mounted with a strikingly androgynous machinic figure. That figure is morbidly impressive, described by Lewis in the magazine *Blast* as 'one of the best things he [Epstein] has done. The nerve-like figure perched on the machinery, with its straining to one purpose, is a vivid illustration of the greatest function of life.'¹¹⁴ This sculpture has a shared genealogy with both Alexia and Lewis's Tyros, binding together all three manifestations of post-humanity as reactions to the same historical forces: *Rock Drill* is linked to Taylorism and mass industrialised modernity, and informed by Epstein's time as a worker with heavy machinery.¹¹⁵ Following the

¹¹² Ducournau cited in Joe McGovern. "Why 'Titane' Director Auditioned Both Men and Women for the Film's Lead Role," *Yahoo! Entertainment*, Dec 20, 2021, https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/why-titane-director-auditioned-both-203004915.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAANsnVtcJCRgi57woofJzRiU6OZ_iKqqCTN-S0zM0B6QQuzMoTgjhKIMGu8MjwgdsR3kNUPUVd7dxuXqJOGair9X2MOBjnCqvLIOcElq5VtFHKhRdARUzTZWYm mcS6499_QW_RjOGjV58decoatdq7LrHCFCNfNCtzWTI73tnZ-UH.

¹¹³ Jacob Epstein. *Let There Be Sculpture*, p. 56.

¹¹⁴ Wyndham Lewis. "The London Group 1915," *Blast Number 2*, July 1915, p.78.

¹¹⁵ Jeanne Willette. "Jacob Epstein: Taylorism and Masculinity on the Eve of the Great War."

outbreak of World War I and the death of fellow vorticist Henri Gaudier-Breszka Epstein's attitude to his work altered.

I made and mounted a machine-like robot, visored, menacing, and carrying within it its progeny, protectively ensconced. Here is the armed sinister figure of today and tomorrow. No humanity, only the terrible Frankenstein's monster we have made ourselves into.¹¹⁶

Like Alexia, that figure is carrying a machinic 'progeny' (Alexia's child is seen to incorporate a metal spine and other patches of metal). Lewis's idea of the Tyro as a kernel from man may be a clue as to what Alexia's child is, something trying to burst forth at the surface, which represents ever greater concentrations of toughness, this interpretation is in total opposition to the idea that 'Ducournau is interested in... bodily vulnerability.'¹¹⁷ I suggest instead that Ducournau is interested in the force of will that she imagines as an innate quality that allows subjects like Alexia and Vincent to remake their unruly flesh and forge new selves at the surface. I see Alexia as giving birth to a true version of herself: Lewis describes the Tyro as 'more royal than the king'¹¹⁸ Edwards explains 'more royal than the king' translates the French phrase. Here it means "more like us than we ourselves are,"¹¹⁹ and Ducournau states that our initial image of Alexia (as clearly female and sexualised) at the opening of the film is false '[and] does not align with the truth of the character.'¹²⁰ I suggest Ducournau's statement implies that the definitive version of Alexia is one following self-violence, communion with machines, and designation of a new patriarchal leader: Alexia becomes a conduit for a new subject made over by machines.

Paszkievicz focuses on the idea of intimacy as present in *Titane*¹²¹ and while there is limited intimacy between Alexia and Vincent, defined by physical proximity, dancing, and fighting, there is no significant spoken exchange between them. Vincent does persist in attempting to communicate with Alexia; but what truly defines their relationship, is the mutual desire to play specific roles in relation to one another: iconicity over intimacy. For Vincent this is sense of paternal duty that defines him (linked to his personal trauma and grief for a lost child), for Alexia this is first pragmatic (evading the authorities), and then something she also desires – we witness her return to Vincent's home after a bus ride as Adrien, where she sees a woman harassed by men – we are left to feel that Alexia prefers life with the firefighters where she has status in a strict hierarchy, it has been made clear to the recruits that their Fire Captain is God and Adrien (Alexia) is his heir. Vincent states, having discovered that Alexia is not Adrien, 'I don't care who you are. You're my son. You'll always be my son, whoever you are.'¹²² That is not intimacy, while it is certainly a supportive,

¹¹⁶ Epstein cited in Graham Walker. *Neurones, Art and Morality* (Leicestershire: Matador Press, 2019), p.164.

¹¹⁷ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. "'I'm in Love with My Car,'" p.3.

¹¹⁸ Edwards, Paul. *Wyndham Lewis Painter and Writer* (Yale University Press, 2000), p. 558.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ "Press Notes for Titane," Box. Neon Films, uploaded Sep 16, 2021, <https://neon.app.box.com/s/re50abi08k3tm3rv4jmpkfn1ylcqb0yb/file/860529065992>.

¹²¹ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. "'I'm in Love with My Car,'" p.24

¹²² *Titane*, directed by Julia Ducournau (2021; France/Belgium: Diaphana Distribution and O'Brother Distribution, 2021), Film.

perhaps even an ethical gesture, it is also a denial of the actual subject in the name of the iconic roles father and son. As the basis for inter-subjective intimacy it is highly limited, not least as immediately following the disclosure of her real identity – where communication might happen – Alexia dies.

There are two key ideas being renounced in *Titane*, and in the vorticist aesthetics discussed. Firstly, the ideals I have referred to loosely as humanist and romantic, centred on the concept of a complex interiority, and self-directed reflexive individuality. For Lewis and Ducey, people are shown hopelessly (even sadistically) linked to sexual and aggressive drives, remaking is painful and physical, not a matter of interior becoming, but of revelation, of what was always already there. Alexia's humming along with the car engine before the crash which denies her father's choice of music is an indication of that. Secondly, ideas of femininity and the feminine are disavowed – and for very similar reasons, because it is seen as a form of weakness – the starting point for positioning femininity as weak, may have an initially different focus, for Lewis a growing set of qualities that makes society weak by diminishing men, making them sentimental; for Ducey a set of bourgeois expectations that women are bound by, positioning them as sexual objects. However, the result is an echo of previous iterations of misanthropic anger 'the brutal tap was turned on. For fifty years it will be the thing to be brutal.'¹²³ That femininity and humanistic concepts of self, as clusters of ideas, should become entangled is explained somewhat by Tickner who describes two 'axis'¹²⁴ of modernism, one masculine, mechanical, abstract, engineered; and secondly, one she credits to Peter Wollen, Bakst-Poiret-Matisse, and Fauvism, this 'alternative trajectory'¹²⁵ for Tickner is not fully repressed but certainly marginalized in modernism.

[That marginalised position] portray buxom women as the source of natural fecundity: the allegorical embodiment of Bergson's élan vital. Lewis's figures are more demonic than euthymic-scarcely fecund, 'natural' or easily symbolic.¹²⁶

A course of anti-humanism, anti-femininity, that includes an embrace of brutality and abjection, is neither an escape from patriarchy nor a defence of it; rather it is a vain attempt to both give in to dehumanising machinic modernity – seen as an inevitable set of overwhelming forces – and to retain a hierarchy that rewards its most loyal agents with status: at the top of a stratified organisation of recruits.

I have stressed the function of Alexia and the firefighters as recruits, this is a key term applied to Lewis's Tyros and as Ducey's recruits are her means for critiquing societal values the comparison to Lewis is compelling.

The figures are Lewis's means for waging war in the world of art by means of art, the gigantic monsters who created the cyclopean wall of the War replaced by the grotesque and naive beginners left in their place. The word "tyro," indeed, derives

¹²³ Guy Stevenson. "Anti-Humanist Modernisms," p. 1405.

¹²⁴ Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse" p. 111.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

etymologically from the Medieval Latin *tiro*, which means a “beginning soldier” or “recruit.”¹²⁷

Of course, this is no coincidence of etymology as Lewis’s referring to the publication *The Tyro* as a ‘rallying spot’¹²⁸ for like-minded creatives attests to.

A New Machine World Already in Decline?

Acknowledging Ducournau’s desire for an overhaul of the ‘normative ways of society’¹²⁹ Paszkievicz suggests that ‘before we can think that “another world is possible,” some “unworlding” ...needs to be done’¹³⁰ reflecting that the apocalyptic and monstrous gestures in *Tinane* may be a prelude to new society beyond existing gender categories. In Lewis’s account of the North African settlements and cities he visited a manner of ‘unworlding’ was unfolding, whereby colonial and generally capitalist forces were taking hold of the older native cultures (themselves patriarchal and stratified). I suggest that Lewis’s account of Barbary might give us a pause for caution in relation to enthusiastically embracing any newness based on the machine forces that *Titane* and Paszkievicz’s other examples represent.

In *Filibusters in Barbary* (1932) Lewis is traveling mainly by car in north Africa in what he refers to as a violent and problematic interaction with machines, consisting of a ‘tit-for-tat savagery.’¹³¹ The car and his camera, which he casually sexualises as a ‘fit mate’¹³² for the former, are simultaneously the tools that make possible his travels and recording of his journey, while also being anthropomorphised as faulty fellow travellers. Those resented and problematic machines also serve to make Lewis a colonial spectacle for natives¹³³ in which he, and moreover the car, are receivers of apparent ‘awe’¹³⁴ from locals. As Paszkievicz observes ‘the car...associated with phallic masculinity...and white patriarchal power’¹³⁵ is very much, along with the machine generally, and despite Lewis’s amusing frustrations with his tools, fulfilling its colonial role in Lewis’s account of his travels. The use of machines gives Lewis, and the colonial soldiers (in this case the French) power and Lewis speculates about the gravid qualities of machines, for example how easily a city could be ‘run up’¹³⁶ due to a ‘highly-evolved industrial technique’¹³⁷ corresponding to ‘white colonial fantasies of control’¹³⁸ that concern Paszkievicz’s reading of the car and are at the heart of what she argues *Titane* subverts. However, Lewis retains a strong ambivalence to the ‘Machine Age’

¹²⁷ Scott W. Klein. “The Tyro: An Introduction,” Modernist Journals Project, 2008, <https://modjourn.org/the-tyro-an-introduction/>.

¹²⁸ Wyndham Lewis. “The Objects of This Paper,” *The Tyro: A Review of The Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*, 01 Jan 1921, p. 2.

¹²⁹ Katarzyna Paszkievicz. ““I’m in Love with My Car,”” p. 33.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Wyndham Lewis. *Filibusters in Barbary*, p. 207.

¹³² Ibid, p. 221.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 155.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 220-221.

¹³⁵ Katarzyna Paszkievicz. ““I’m in Love with My Car,”” p. 15.

¹³⁶ Wyndham Lewis. *Filibusters in Barbary*, p. 96.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Katarzyna Paszkievicz. ““I’m in Love with My Car,”” p. 10.

wondering if the machine will be 'put in its place'¹³⁹ and latter stating 'the machine is a magic that should make those that handle it more afraid than they are; for machines are far more terrifying than djinns.'¹⁴⁰ Like Paszkiewicz, Lewis is concerned with the 'Petrol Age'¹⁴¹ and his mercurial descriptions of observed prostitution, poverty, and wealth imbalance coupled with accounts of stopping at makeshift 'Petrol-tin Town[s]'¹⁴² are dystopian, partly due to his own detachment. Lewis compares the tin towns to Western slums using the terms 'sub-city'¹⁴³ and 'shack-town'¹⁴⁴ combined with his accounts of running out of petrol and stopping at a military post for repairs¹⁴⁵ this gives some of Lewis's descriptions the feeling of being in 'post-apocalyptic wasteland where petrol and water are scarce,'¹⁴⁶ it is fitting that the real space experienced through a colonial framework should appear like the unreal film spaces discussed by Paszkiewicz, where colonial projections and fantasies are played out.

Referring to locals being potentially transformed 'capitalized and modernized'¹⁴⁷ by machines Lewis gives what I consider a strangely, though wholly unintentional, description of himself and his own activities in the 1920s evidenced by the visual works I have discussed, describing a 'hostile Magician of the Machine'¹⁴⁸ that might intervene to prevent the locals being culturally and politically finished 'as dead as mutton'¹⁴⁹ which he states is a 'rather sad destiny'¹⁵⁰ this goes to the core of his ambivalence and to what I will argue is in the end a fated attitude expressed in the work of Lewis and in Ducournau. Machines are the new gods, power however unpalatable is with them, and our choice is threefold: be destroyed, be transformed, or be dominated.

What I am suggesting is that by anticipating the desire from society for a supposedly less illusory, more animal, and machinic femininity in his visual works of the 1920s, the 'hostile Magician of the Machine' (Lewis) is effectively highlighting how machine modernism, as cause and destiny of the new subject, has already co-opted *Titane's* 'punk' 'queer' spectacle to a much older 20th century strategy of willed dehumanization as an adaptation to industrial modernity.

Conclusion

I suggest that *Titane* is as Vorticist a film as it is possible to be without its makers knowing it, with a totemic and fetishized 'Tyro Madonna' as the protagonist, whose inner kernel of self is gradually realised at the surface, destroying previous personas: each of which brought Alexia a step closer to what – in the films internal logic – she always was, the

¹³⁹ Wyndham Lewis. *Filibusters in Barbary*, p. 67.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 294.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 143.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 90 and p.92.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 90.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 207.

¹⁴⁶ Katarzyna Paszkiewicz. "'I'm in Love with My Car,'" p. 16.

¹⁴⁷ Wyndham Lewis. *Filibusters in Barbary*, p. 294.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

mechanomorphic producer of a new 'seed' of humanity: an analogous function to Lewis's Tyros.

Every child has its figures of a constantly renewed mythology. The intelligent, hardened, and fertile crust of mankind produces a maturer fruit of the same kind. It has been rather barren of late. Here are a few large seeds.¹⁵¹

At the beginning of the film, Alexia possesses a physical form adapted for sexual combat, incubating predatory killer instinct, all of which is comparable with a vorticist representation of femininity, particularly Lewis's. Gradually Alexia removes her femininity to become 'Adrien' via a willed self-violence, a 'desirable dehumanisation'¹⁵² moving through the Tyro 'recruit'¹⁵³ phase within the hyper-masculine world of the firefighters, to finally throw off humanity as we know it, providing us with a new seed (her machinic child). Alexia embraces a machine-self, beyond gender. A self that like the *Rock Drill* (c. 1913–1915) carries within it, its machine progeny, and represents a fated and brutal future. There is the real possibility of love from Vincent (Lindon) for Alexia's child, he states 'I'm here'¹⁵⁴ at the end of the film. That new paternity though, is one I can only assume will exist in a hierarchical, semi-militarised form of organisation that is morbidly preferable in the film's logic to the stale and weak existence of Alexia's parents and contemporaries, whom she has previously killed.

Discussing Lewis and his influence on 20th-century creatives, Stevenson emphasises the move away from faith in appealing to the complex internal psychology of individuals 'artists posited the corrupt modern world as in need of remaking according not to utopian ideals of new psychological, social and emotional engagement but a network of historically reliable coordinates for truth and virtue.'¹⁵⁵ I have characterised this as a clear anti-humanism in Durrineau and Lewis. In Lewis, we see an adapted classicism interested in idealising forms of representation, and the medieval use of shallow space. In *Titane* these coordinates are similarly atavistic and totemic (innate animal and machine power, violence as agency), and later there are religious connotations. Towards the end of the film the song 'Wayfaring Stranger' appears again in a contemporary cover by Lisa Abbot accompanying Adrien's disturbing dancing. This re-presentation of the song seems to confirm the alien status of Alexia, and to hammer home the messianic theme: a section of the 'St. Matthew Passion' by Bach plays over the finale. To make an additional link to Lewis's early 20th century period – other than the previously established reaction to Taylorism and Fordism – an additional historic coordinate is the First World War. Durrineau has said 'the only movie that inspired *Titane* was 1917'¹⁵⁶ a film famous for its portrayal of the battles of World War I, specifically the 'city that is burning in "1917"'¹⁵⁷ as a result, the outdoor scenes in *Titane* show nature

¹⁵¹ Lewis, Wyndham. "Note on Tyros," p. 2.

¹⁵² Lisa Tickner. "The Popular Culture of Kermesse" p.100.

¹⁵³ Scott W. Klein. "The Tyro: An Introduction."

¹⁵⁴ *Titane*, directed by Julia Durrineau.

¹⁵⁵ Guy Stevenson. "Anti-Humanist Modernisms," p. 1415.

¹⁵⁶ Lynn Hirschberg. "With 'Titane,' Director Julia Durrineau Births a New Genre," *W Magazine*, Oct. 13, 2021, <https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/julia-durrineau-titane-interview> (Accessed: March 7, 2023).

¹⁵⁷ Olsen, Mark. "'Titane' Director Julia Durrineau Explains How She Crafted The Year's Wildest Film," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 5, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-10-05/titane-explained-julia-durrineau>.

as apocalyptic, and the association to the war makes the choice of firefighters clear, they are similarly hierarchically organised recruits, on a war footing: ready for violence and likely to be traumatised.

In understanding Durcournau's *Titane* via Lewis and vorticist aesthetics I do not seek to deride an exceptionally realised film, or to scandalise a 'high' modernist art movement with a sexually explicit genre movie. Rather, I hope to draw out the amoral celebration the film makes through the anti-bourgeois and misanthropic figure of Alexia; and in turn, to demonstrate the relevance of vorticist aesthetics, and Lewis's ideas in particular, to an understanding of contemporary ideology.

The anti-humanist celebration in Durcournau's *Titane* is no more progressive for giving her monster a female outline than Lewis's Tyros, since both are phallogocentric entities doing away with so-called traditionally feminine tropes *as if* that were always the problem. Describing cars as masculine in the worst ways, Durcournau stated 'I wanted to reverse that idea by having the car be under the power of a female.'¹⁵⁸ Such reversals are fundamentally compromised as representing anything new '[giving] birth to a new humanity'¹⁵⁹ as the director has claimed the machinic child could be seen. This is because the swapping out of male for female misunderstands where the power was, with the machine as embodying colossal abstract forces.

I suggest we should be careful not to embrace such anti-humanism since it is simply a fetishization of trauma and abjection that I understand as sadistic, fatal, and nihilistic. Regarding sadism, it is through Alexia, that the audience can vicariously punish our contemporary sins of softness, self-regard, and respectable dullness; this makes *Titane* to my mind a sadomasochistic viewing experience, akin to appreciating the vorticist figuration of Lewis, and embodying something – in the figure of Durcournau – of his enemy persona. Regarding fatalistic qualities, even in the curated picture planes of Durcournau's film universe, where Alexia can make her impact, she dies having succumbed to her sexual proclivity for machines. Sex kills her: thus life, positive action, or interruption – via sex and birth – is rendered as death. Regarding nihilism, to my mind, this is the most subjective point I make here, since I recognise that it is possible to see the child that Alexia births before dying as possessing a potentially positive, or at least uncertain, potentiality that offers us an alternative to the positions critiqued in the film. However, as aforementioned, I am unable to imagine the sympathetic but nevertheless painfully melancholy, and dutiful patriarch Vincent, combining with Alexia's machinic offspring to bring about anything other than a hierarchical machine future: where sensual sexual intimacy between subjects, and a reflexive interiority, is replaced by brutal sex acts and a morbid action-based morality.

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¹⁵⁸ Lynn Hirschberg. "With 'Titane,' Director Julia Ducournau Births a New Genre."

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

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