

Trolling the Enlightenment: Lewis, Marinetti & the Modernist precedent for America's Alt-Right

I. INTRO.

- In 2017, the American Alt Right styles itself as a contemporary counter-culture. It is, in the words of Richard Spencer – its architect & chief disseminator – ‘the only new show in town’, a gob of spit in the face of the ‘lame goofball, equal rights shtick’ that has been the mainstream position for the best part of fifty years.

- From Spencer, who has basically given white supremacy a hipster haircut and dressed it in chinos, to flamboyant professional internet troll Milo Yiannopoulos, a disparate group of angry young men have risen to fame in the last two years by attacking what they call the ‘tyranny of the left’ and selling themselves as true crusaders for freedom of speech in an age stymied by political correctness.

- They are, they say, the scourge of an establishment glutted on the tired identity politics of the 1960s and distracted in their privilege from real, pressing social issues.

- Today I want to explore a precedent for this cultural turn in the European avant-gardes of the early 20th century.

- A lot has been made of the parallels between the 1930s and the present day: an economic crash followed by a retreat to political extremes; the resurgence of the far right & the far left; a bewildered liberal elite sensing they’re on ‘the wrong side of history’

While there’s an obvious danger of exaggerating these parallels in the interest of a good story, and of jumping to sensational hasty conclusions about the onset of new fascist dawn, what is clear is that Trump’s election last year brought to the fore a new kind of alternative anti-liberal politics whose tone & methods have something in common with the conservative avant-garde manifesto writers of the early 20th century.

- At the same time as acknowledging major differences between their politics, I want to compare both the larger rejection of enlightenment certitudes connecting these two cultural moments and to think about similarities between their tactics of provocation.

- In particular I want to think about the activity of trolling – using politically incorrect statements pointedly to gain attention and to rile & to ridicule opponents – in relation to what Wyndham Lewis was doing with his Blast manifesto of 1914, and Filippo Marinetti with Futurism a couple of years before.

- Most of us who continue to read Lewis (and Marinetti) do so for the difficult questions these iconoclasts posed. We argue, generally speaking, that their forays into fascist politics bely complex political identities, that their value lies in the innovations they brought to art, the challenges to authority their satire posed but also what they tell us about avant-garde aesthetics and totalitarian politics in their time and beyond.
- Consider how these arguments for studying difficult, politically reactionary modernism are affected by the example of new alternative conservative voices – a group who present themselves as similar exposers of ‘inconvenient truths’, who cite the same anti-humanist sources as Anglo-American & Italian high modernist: Socrates, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Max Ernst.

II. SUBVERTING 1960S IMAGERY, POSTURES AND TACTICS.

- By his own account, the most famous internet troll practicing today is a man called Milo Yiannopolos

(SLIDE MILO)

- Kicked off twitter in 2016 for comparing a black actress to a ‘dude’ and re-tweeting various racist responses from his followers, Yianopolis’ mantra is that the liberal left are out of control, that the right to not be offended is ludicrous & that the best way to demonstrate this is to speak as offensively as possible (always in line with what he believes but often in exaggeratedly bad taste).
 - This naturally garnered a lot of media attention and has led to his appearance on countless talk shows under the caption ‘hate peddler or champion of free speech’
 - Crucially, in between rants against feminism and the threat of Islam, YIANOPPOLOS invokes left wing countercultural figures like Lenny Bruce – the 1960s comedian who’s usually credited with founding what we now call ‘alternative comedy’, a man who used subversive, often absurdist stand-up routines to promote civil rights and freedom of speech for all.
- (SLIDE. LENNY BRUCE)
- That appropriation of traditionally left-wing positions, icons and aesthetics by new young conservatives is part of what I’ll be considering today.

- An openly gay man, Yianopolos furiously rejects attempts by QUOTE UNQUOTES ‘the fake news’ to align him with the ‘alt right’, a label invented to bring white supremacy up-to-date with the social media age by calling to mind both a counter-cultural spirit & the ‘alt’ key on the keyboard.

- He argues that these rebranded & reinvigorated white supremacists hate him even more than they hate liberals for his homosexuality & for the damage he causes by association.

- Now this is true up to a point but is used very deliberately to avoid accounting both for his personal links to the alt-right & the wavelength and audience he shares with that movement.

- Milo & the alt right channel the same antipathy towards what they call 'sjw''s (social justice warriors), are equally supportive of Donald Trump's shift of the political conversation away from the suffering of minorities and towards the protection of white American incomes and values, and couch their arguments in exactly the same rhetoric of a new power than needs truth spoken to it:

(VIDEO 'You're not speaking Truth to Power anymore. We are')

- If Milo conjures the icons of comedians like Lenny Bruce & also Joan Rivers, the 'alt-right' have their own equally puzzling line in 1960s-inspired aesthetics.

- Many of the memes that did the rounds in the run up to Trump's election were ironic takes on the psychedelic imagery that pervaded during the summer of love:

- In the same vein, they borrow much of their terminology from slacker culture and from films, music and comic books that have their heritage in the 1960s hippie lexicon.
- Red-pilling, an alt-right word for disabusing opponents of their liberal biases, comes from cult Sci-Fi film The Matrix, but can be traced directly back to the use 60s rock groups & writers made of Alice in Wonderland.
- Pepe the Frog, a character made famous last year when Trump re-tweeted him, comes originally from harmless comic about stoner students watching TV and pranking one another. By superimposing Hitler moustaches & SS uniforms onto him, young internet savvy kids concocted a way of marrying the apparently innocuous with genuine taboo.

(PEPE SLIDE)

- I'll come back to this, but Slavoj Zizek has made some interesting points about this new absurdist turn as a symptom of the right having inherited 'the worst excesses of the left' in the form postmodernist trickery.

- The glaring difference between someone like Yianopolos and the comedian Lenny Bruce is that Bruce's routine was designed to punch up whereas Milo quite emphatically aims his fists down.

- Bruce used absurdist comedy to expose establishment hypocrisies, and that's why Milo seeks an affinity with him. But the hypocrisies the 60s comedian was pointing out were those that led to the oppression of minority groups – homosexuals, women, Jews like himself.
- If Milo claims to be attacking privilege because feminism & the protection of Muslims are established & privileged positions, he (at best ignorantly at worst wilfully) misses the point.
- Not about who he is 'offending' – to be offended plays into his hands - but about the historical precedent for where this kind of rhetoric leads. It's not offense he needs to account for but the emotions he's channeling and encouraging. Freedom to what end?
- The Provocative Right Wing response to concerns about 'hate speech' is that the West is paranoid, delusional and immature to assume that Nazi Germany could happen again. THOSE BATTLES, SAYS MILO, ARE WON FOR GOOD. Bound up with the imagery of 'waking up' by taking a 'red pill' is the idea that fear of a repeat of the Holocaust is something maliciously programmed into children so they will remain enslaved to liberal fallacies.
- QUESTIONED ON THE NAZI SALUTES RAISED AT HIS RALLIES, RICHARD SPENCER PAYS LIP SERVICE TO THIS ARGUMENT TOO, SAYING THEY'RE PERFORMED IN THE SERVICE OF 'EXUBERANT IRONY' AND SMILING PATRONISINGLY AS THE FLABBERGASTED INTERVIEWER ATTEMPTS TO ARGUE BACK.
- Stop worrying about where this language leads, they all say, and think instead of the damage caused by not being able to say what you think or feel.
- Hard as it is to stomach, there is something to this – particularly in relation to the backlash against political correctness that influenced Trump's election and Britain's vote to leave Europe.
- As Zizek and others have pointed out, it's imperative now to consider why movements so ostentatiously opposed to conventional liberal identity politics have succeeded. And it's particularly important to weigh concerns about gender and racial equality against the material issues facing those who feel left behind by such arguments. This would take a whole other paper to cover properly. KICK IN THE PANTS TO MORAL CUSTODIANS.

III. MARINETTI & LEWIS: BLASTING ENLIGHTENMENT CERTAINTIES

- Coming now to early twentieth century modernism - to Wyndham Lewis and Filippo Marinetti - I want to think first about crossovers between the kind of language these writers were using and the language of this latest crop of right wing counter-culturalists.
- I should make clear that the movements differ on fundamental levels: in the first place Lewis' London-based Vorticists & the Italian Futurists who influenced them were creative writers & artists rather than political activists

- As Lewis puts it in his autobiography *Blasting and Bombardeering*, he followed Marinetti in using political rhetoric to promote innovations in art and culture. This was, he says 'Art behaving as if it were Politics', meaning that unlike a Milo or a Richard Spencer's pronouncements, the politics espoused in Futurist and Vorticist manifestos should be read first in terms of the politics of art.

- THERE'S also an obvious educational and intellectual disparity to take into account. When Lewis, Ezra Pound or their philosopher ally T.E.Hulme express their disdain for 'progressive' thought, they demonstrate both a long view of history and a serious consideration of diverse political philosophical positions that is absent from anything I've read or heard from the Alt Right.

- Nonetheless, the 'Men of 1914' and their predecessors in Italy based their rebellions on a similarly anti-Enlightenment impulse to the youth movements emerging in America today. They were equally scathing about what they saw as the liberal democratic consensus and a set of egalitarian political ideals they characterized as dangerously utopian.

- As Michael Levenson has pointed out in his *Genealogy of Modernism*, Lewis' Vorticist manifesto *Blast 1* was the culmination of an ostentatious turn in 1913 – by Lewis, Pound their ally T.E. Hulme but also the elder novelist Ford Maddox Hueffer, who looked out for these youngsters in 1910s London – against the dominant assumption that art was necessarily a 'humanist' activity, that poets, painters, sculptors had a duty to further the human project by effecting social change, indeed that social change through art and politics was even possible.

- To Lewis it was the revolutionary artist's responsibility to speak honestly and without sentiment, to repair the damage done by a glut of 'awfully nice' practitioners who had populated first the Victorian then the Edwardian landscape.

- For Pound it was a question of redrafting the contract between artist and public: 'so long a humanist,' had fed humanity 'out of his hand and the arts have grown dull and complacent, like a slightly uxorious spouse'.

- Pound and Lewis both dabbled in the 'progressive' ideas they attacked – Pound in Guild Socialism then emphatically with the redistributive programme of Social Credit Theory and Lewis with Proudhonian Anarchism and Marxism – but they based their modernising mission as young men on clearing the road of unserviceable notions of collective human perfectibility.

- As Lewis puts it in *Blast*, 'we believe in no perfectibility except our own'

- Artistically this meant a hard, austere and classical revolt against the post-Romantic weakening of thought – the privileging of the 'small, dry image' over what Hulme called the Romantic interest in the infinite. Philosophically it meant looking to but not swallowing wholesale the challenges Nietzsche,

Alan Sorel & even Henri Bergson had made to the Enlightenment-originating faith in gradual progress through scientific and moral advancement.

- Politically, it meant an attack on the liberal assumption that mass participatory democracy was necessarily a desirable aim. Like Literary Romanticism, democracy is presented in much of Pound, Lewis and Hulme's 1910s writings as an opiate, a trick played on the 'slack-minded' masses.

- That trick, Lewis mused and Pound unreservedly believed, would be best done away with through clear-headed fascist rule.
- Today's Trump-supporting alt-righters use exactly this language of opiates and trickery to write off the dangerous distraction they see represented in Identity politics.
- Undergraduates in philosophy and English Literature rather than serious men of letters, Milo Yiannopolos and Richard Spencer draw reductively on Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and an anti-Kantian tradition to argue the futility of aiming to redress class, race and gender inequality.
- It's lame 'goofball, equal rights bullshit', Spencer says, that ignores inarguable differences between groups and results in a deluded revisionist reading of history and contemporary society.
- In Milo Yiannopolos' view the Frankfurt School's post-1945 extension of Marxist ideology to culture is to blame for sixty years of victim-centred thinking in which individual difference, and the individual's responsibility for him or herself have been damagingly ignored.
- Both Spencer and Yiannopolis echo the high modernists' disapproval of Marxist class politics as an artificial and cynically divisive means of control; Yiannopolis repeating Lewis' argument in 'The Art of Being Ruled' that 'the best way to keep people down is to subdivide and subdivide' and Spencer arguing in more extreme terms for an emphasis on race and culture over class as a natural basis of shared identity.
- Crucially, though, despite Ezra Pound's infamous anti-Semitic radio broadcasts during World War Two, and Lewis' pre-War praise for the 'everyman' Hitler, they differ from Spencer in particular by their understanding that race – in Lewis' words – was as much a 'red herring' as class.
- Milo echoes Lewis in his anti-Marxist rhetoric. The red herring of class (Milo: 'different people's lives suck for a bunch of different reasons. The progressive Left has constructed entire university departments just to parse that sentence'). The red herring of race.

IV. SKANDALONS AND TROLLS. SHOCK TACTICS & SATIRE. 'The Pleasure of Being Booed'/'Art of Being Ruled'

- In the 1910s as today, ostentatiously anti-rational method (one that exaggerates & self-contradicts to offend and keep the opposition on its toes) is used to defend what Yionopolos calls 'the pillars of western civilization', and specifically the tradition of 'classical liberal humanism' (21).
- His trolling, he says, is intended to protect society from the 'the New Left''s attempt to 'deconstruct' these pillars. Lewis, Pound and Hulme's was intended safeguard against corrupt, war-mongering governmental & banking institutions, the 'smearing of difference' represented by socialism, and journalistic & artistic institutions who kept the masses mired in mediocrity.
- This use of provocatively anti-rational methodology in the name of Western reason is connected to an overlooked irony in Lewis that also has a bearing for the Alt Right – namely that for all his attacks on the 'cult of childhood' in Western civilisation, his methods of provocation originated in and remained for most of his career of a destructively childish bent.
- Likewise, the Trolls of the Alt Right expend a great deal of energy winding up a liberal enemy they characterise as oversensitive, whining and obsessed with 'feelings rather than facts' but do so in a manner that refuses rational grownup conversation.
- From memes that make nasty & crude light of Anti-Semitism

(SLIDE. PEPE 'FEELS GOOD')

to the practise of Red-pilling – which I mentioned before and which involves 'triggering' liberals with the aim of exposing the arbitrariness of offense – the Alt Right very deliberately play up to their adolescent status in public discussion.

- This has the advantage of appealing to Millenials while confirming their opponents as out of touch, old, lame, unable to get with it.
- Unlike their libertarian or neo NAZI forbears, this new generation are drawing on age old avant-garde battle tactics to antagonise their opponents, create spectacle and win supporters who might otherwise have been turned off by their unforgiving political messages.
- As Milo puts it in *Dangerous* - his recent biography cum strategy manual - modern countercultural' anti liberalism relies on 'the art of the troll', 'The ideal troll baits the target into a trap, from which there is no escape without public embarrassment. It is an art, beyond the grasp

of mere mortals. It is part trickery and part viciousness' MILO, Dangerous (p.2)

- Cut back to 1921 and Filippo Marinetti - a man whose every absurdist stunt was recorded as widely and with the same mixture of outrage and irritation as Milo's - can be heard telling his followers something very similar.
- The futurist, he says - by which he means the artist politician journalist or poet - aims not for the crowd's applause but explicitly for the 'Pleasure of being booed'. QUOTE.
- It's an early century avant-garde idea that carried over into sixties performance (Iggy Pop) and went overground with punk rock in the 1970s.
- To watch Milo deal with mainstream media interviewers or angry liberal protesters at his shows is to witness someone who understands very well and in basic terms the publicity to be gained from having an audience lose their rag with you.
- Statements like 'feminism is a sociopathic cancer' or recently - in Australia - 'let's stop pandering to a culture whose greatest musical achievement amounts to a big stick' are akin in many ways to Marinetti's 'we glorify war, the great hygiene of the world'.
- They accurately convey the speaker's general political impulse but in lurid technicolor, throwing the unamused, outraged listener off balance and looking - to those already onside or just attracted to anarchy - like an overly earnest oldster who doesn't get the joke
- By dressing violent ideas in prankish clothing, Marinetti in 1913 and Milo in 2017 set their opponents up to be the fall guys in their farce. This might not be so worrying if - as Milo points out - the President of the United States were not engaged in an equivalent tactic. QUOTE from Milo

- An opponent of Futurism even as he stole from it, Lewis was also more interested in that farce for its own sake rather than a larger political objective.
- His Blast Manifesto of course plays consistently with the reader's expectations of a genuine political position, blasting hairdressers alongside the bishop of London, blessing and blasting the same things about London simultaneously.
(NEW SLIDE. BLAST)
- But it is very expressly an anarchic cultural atmosphere that he's after rather than the real war Marinetti and his cohorts hoped to achieve.
- He takes aim at the sanctimony of established artistic, political and social institutions and attitudes.

- He sets up the same oppositions of new, with it and able to take a joke vs. past it and too old to understand, but the only side he is winning his readers over to is the side of the Vorticist artist.
- In a sense that comes from an intuition Lewis shared with Witkacy and many of the late modernist or postmodernist writers they pre-empted - that history, being the story of the farcical human animal, was necessarily itself an endless series of farces.
- I'm reminded here of Jan Kot who quotes Marx on Hegel to talk about Witkacy: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."
- Lewis addresses Marx and farce from a markedly different angle in *Blasting and Bombardeering*. In one of his rare genuinely very funny moments, he reflects on the various comedy characters occupying the world stage in 1937: 'The function of Karl Marx – this has never been properly understood – is that of the Marx Brothers; to disrupt – but comically, of course, since human life could not be serious if it tried. Mussolini is a most resourceful entertainer, who was obviously born to make a fool of John Bull. And obviously Haile Selassie was born for the same purpose. Mr Eden is Trilby. What he sings when diplomatically entranced enrages Herr Hitler; and as to Stalin he unquestionably was thought up to cover with ridicule my Highbrow colleagues' 16
- If it's difficult to forgive Lewis' enthusiasm for Hitler in the early 30s, his later abnegation of that position on the grounds that " also has a grain of truth to it.

So I want to finish by returning to an idea I floated at the start - namely that these alt right provocateurs and the President they support are successfully employing exactly the postmodernist moral relativism conservatives have traditionally attacked the left for. They're seizing on the deconstructionist spirit that energised so much left leaning theory after 1945 and that in fact had its roots in avant-gardes like Lewis' and Marinetti's and using it very concertedly to attract a younger, internet savvy demographic, one whose irreverence for authority makes them easy pickings. Of course the new version of the counterculture is interested not in the nuances deconstructionism suggests but in the possibilities it affords to instate a new authoritarian version of the truth. I'm not sure what we can learn from the link between these and the young modernists who dabbled in right wing countercultural politics before except to say that outrage now - as then - was the desired effect and it's most certainly not going to work against the Alt Right. If these guys are the successors to an early

century modernising energy they are cut-price successors, and they need to be taken on and picked apart seriously and unemotionally for that. The culture that Spencer and Yianopolos say they're countering – of political correctness, race & gender equality - is one that grew partly in response to horror at the tragedy of Auschwitz. Their use of Anti-Semitism in the name of taboo breaking is a sinister reminder of the rebellious impulse that foreshadowed tragedy in Nazi Germany. It is also a warning to take this new adaptation of youth rebellion seriously and to consider new, original and perhaps equally radical ways of tackling it.
