

### The evolution of C.R.W Nevinson's vision of war.

Contextualising Christopher Nevinson's vision of war is a multi-faceted conundrum, the clarity of which is clouded by layers of personal, circumstantial, cultural, political and historical complexity. An array of contradictory clues serves only to remind that one is dealing with a paradoxical individual, painting amidst a political and cultural environment in a state of flux, set within the cacophony of a world at war. His vision of war, as evidenced by the works on display in the *Truth and Memory* exhibition, in many respects gives pictorial representation to Nevinson's own artistic journey as he wrestles with the conflict of his own personal development.

Nevinson's background hinted at anti-authoritarian pro-activity: his mother a leading suffragette and his father a writer and pacifist war journalist. This familiarised him with the subject of war from an influential age: "While quite young I knew the truth about many matters which were incomprehensible to the public, and I was trained in war long before my doomed generation."<sup>1</sup> His parent's nonconformity impacted upon him: "I was booed in the streets because our house looked different from the others"<sup>2</sup> and from an early age he was treated as an outcast, a mindset reinforced by his being born with a limp, and withdrawn from two schools prior to the age of 18. His formative years were blighted with ill health and being bullied. At the Slade between 1908 and 1912 he found solace amongst progressive artists such as Bomberg, Spencer and Nash. However, he was derided by his teacher Henry Tonks and was evicted from the Slade. Again, Nevinson became the isolated individual forced away from his pack.

Nevinson had been preoccupied with the works of Ingres and Turner and developed a style of academic draughtsmanship and accuracy influenced by impressionism, such as *The Railway Bridge, Charenton* from 1911 (Figure 1).



Figure 1

This he rejected after two years in Paris, where he met Modigliani, Picasso, Gertrude Stein, and most significantly Severini and Boccioni. This exposure to modernism inspired him, and upon his return to England he became involved with the avant-

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<sup>1</sup> Nevinson, C.R.W. *Paint and Prejudice*. Harcourt, Brace and Co, New York 1938 p.8

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* p.10

gardeists Percy Wyndham-Lewis, Clive Bell, Roger Fry and latterly the Futurist's leading protagonist: Filippo Marinetti.

In 1913 Nevinson, Lewis and Wadsworth founded the radical, modernist 'Rebel Art Centre', but Nevinson alienated himself from the rest of the group by issuing a manifesto, with Marinetti, on their behalf entitled 'Vital English Art' without their consent or knowledge. The manifesto mirrored the Futurist mission statement in its anarchic dismissal of academic, sentimental or traditional values, and championed a new 'English Art'<sup>3</sup> that mirrored the Futurist admiration of a virile, anti-sentimental view of modernity. They espoused the virtues of the city and war, which they deemed '*the world's only hygiene*' and militarism, patriotism, and the fight for freedom were causes worth dying for.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the end of 1913 Nevinson changed his style to reflect his Futurist preoccupations with mechanism, geometric form, industry, modernity, energy, speed and images of continuous movement or what the critic P. G. Konody referred to as 'kaleidoscopic puzzle pictures which endeavoured to introduce a dynamism into pictorial art.'<sup>5</sup> Henry Rutter, the art critic for the Sunday Times, called his *The Departure of the Train de Luxe* (1913) the "first English Futurist picture"<sup>6</sup> (Figure 2).

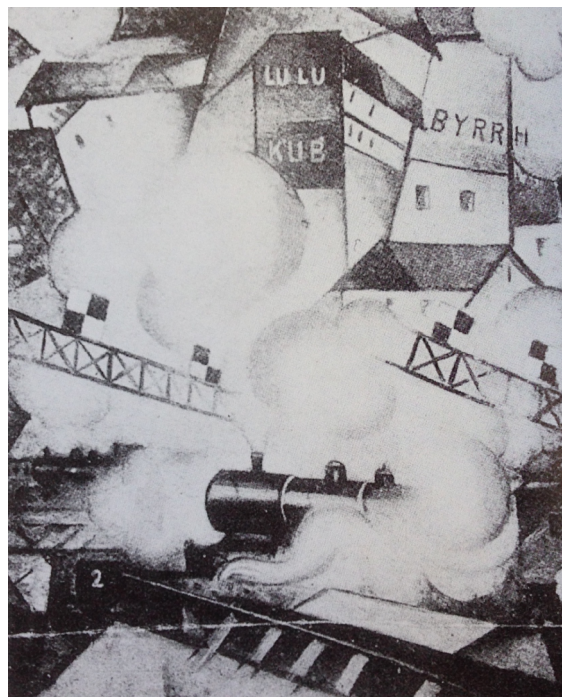


Figure 2

The following year in August 1914 England was at war, and on 13<sup>th</sup> November, before the full scale of the horror of the war had been realised at home, Nevinson left

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<sup>3</sup> F.P. Marinetti and C.R.W. Nevinson cited in Walsh, Michael *C.R.W. Nevinson – This Cult of Violence*. Yale University Press, 2002 p. 77-78

<sup>4</sup> Filippo Marinetti. *Futurist Manifesto* (Le Figaro 1909)

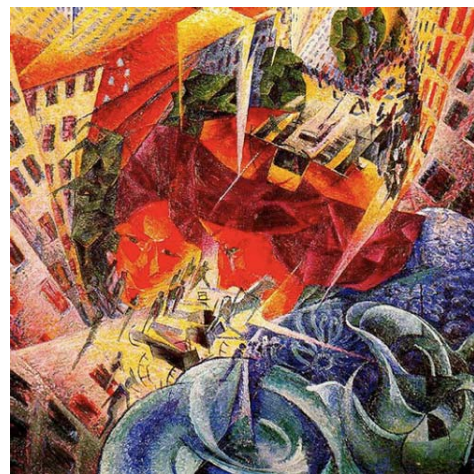
<sup>5</sup> Konody. P. G. Introductory essay in *Modern War Paintings by C.R.W. Nevinson*. Grant Richards Ltd, London 1917 p 18

<sup>6</sup> Walsh, Michael. *Apollo*, February 2005, "Vital English art: futurism and the vortex of London 1910–14" cited on [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank\\_Rutter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Rutter)

for the continent to join voluntarily as a mechanic and driver with the Friends' Ambulance Unit. His arrival in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Mons, coupled with the commencement of hostilities in Ypres, was a baptism of fire as he arrived to assist in a makeshift hospital called "The Shambles". With over 3000 injured men to tend, Nevinson equated the experience to being "born into a nightmare" and full of sights "so revolting that man seldom conceives them in his mind. None who were there can ever forget the horror and the hopelessness of that sight."<sup>7</sup>

Having switched from ambulance driving to nursing and in contrast to the insensitivities inherent in the Futurist ethos, it is worth noting that Nevinson was "much liked by the wounded for his sympathies."<sup>8</sup> This observation on his father's behalf hints that Nevinson experienced during this period a conflict between the demands of his Futurist artistic calling, and his own humanity. Returning home in January 1915, he set about establishing his reputation with a series of exhibitions of modernist paintings at the galleries of Goupil and Dore, and The Friday Club. He returned to active service, joining the Royal Army Medical Corps as an orderly at Wandsworth Hospital where he came into contact with shell-shocked and war-traumatised patients. He was discharged from service in early 1916, again due to chronic ill-health.

Nevinson held a show at the Leicester Galleries in September 1916, some works from which now form part of the *Truth and Memory* show at the Imperial War Museum. Four of the earliest works: *Ypres After the First Bombardment*, *Bursting Shell*, *Column on the March* and *Marching Men* (Figures 3, 5, 7 and 9 respectively), were executed in 1914 or early 1915. Adjacent are works by the Futurists Boccioni, Balla, and Carra (Figures 4, 6, 8 and 10), from which it is evident that initially Nevinson was fully engaged with the Futurist preoccupation with geometric form, modern technology, and the dynamism, destruction and energy of war. The unifying motion of the impersonal body of men in *Column on the March* and the destruction deployed in the other two works reminded the British public that this was the first war being fought from the ground, sea and air, and that all individual heroism was now subordinated to man and machine in unison.



<sup>7</sup> Nevinson, C.R.W. *Paint and Prejudice*. p.99

<sup>8</sup> Nevinson, H.W. *Journals* e.618/4, 23 December 1914 cited in Walsh, Michael *C.R.W. Nevinson – This Cult of Violence* p.97

Figure 3

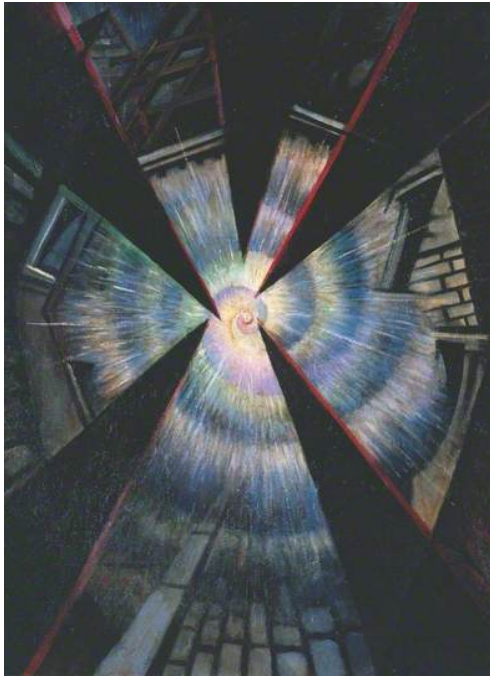


Figure 4

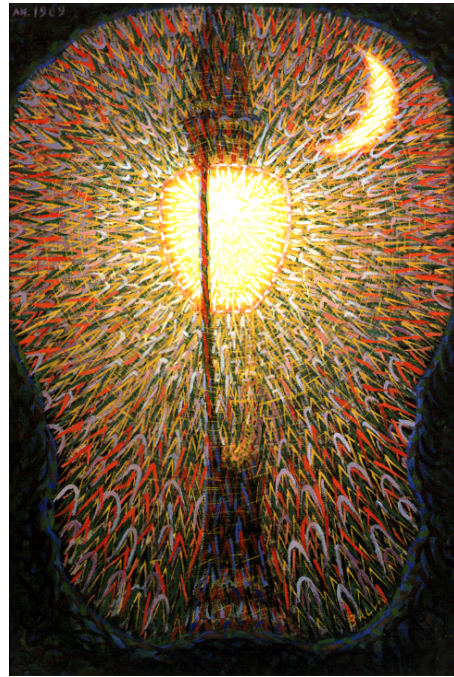


Figure 5

Figure 6



Figure 7

Figure 8



Figure 9

Figure 10

“To me the soldier was going to be dominated by the machine.”<sup>9</sup> This theme was conveyed in his other work from 1915 entitled *La Mitrailleuse* (Figure 10), which conveys via a harshness of line, tone, geometric composition and content, the grim reality of the war being fought with the eponymous French machine-gun dominating the canvas and the men within it, to become a singularly ruthless unit of destruction.



Figure 11

The show at the Leicester Gallery confirmed, in the eyes of leading critics like Frank Rutter, P. G. Konody, and Charles Hind; artistic peers like Walter Sickert and Muirhead Bone; and leading military and political figures such as General Ian Hamilton and C. F. G. Masterman, that Nevinson was the leading English war artist of his generation. Sickert described *La Mitrailleuse* as “the most authoritative and concentrated utterance on the war in the history of painting.”<sup>10</sup> The show represented the zenith of his artistic career from a critical and commercial perspective. However, whilst the works show an association with the Futurists, there is also a further dimension in evidence, which was to become more apparent in his later works: a realism and sensitivity to the plight of those affected by the conflict, that Konody mooted showed Nevinson’s use of his art towards fulfilling a more didactic, informative and social function.<sup>11</sup> The universal appeal of Nevinson’s work in the

<sup>9</sup> Nevinson, C.R.W. *Paint and Prejudice*. p.107

<sup>10</sup> Konody. p 23

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p 21

exhibition stemmed from his ability to merge avant-garde modernism and the merciless, industrialised and dehumanising effect of war with a humanitarian sensitivity to the plight of those directly involved. There was a realism conveying the tragedy of war, as well as engendering propagandist sympathy for the role of the Allied forces suffering in the conflict. Harries observes that ‘because Nevinson had taken neither Cubism nor Futurism to extremes, his pictures remained intelligible and unthreatening to the layman.’<sup>12</sup> Servicemen who visited the show were moved by the true-to-life depictions of the images.<sup>13</sup> Thus paintings such as *A Taube* (Figure 12), and *The Doctor* (Figure 13), hinted at a tension between two seemingly opposite ends of an artistic spectrum at odds with his Futurist abstraction.



Figure 12



Figure 13

Paul Gough points to Nevinson’s claim to apply to each work an approach that is in keeping with the subject matter, and that artistic technique needs to be malleable to allow it to adapt to the multifarious dynamics of war. Gough also contends that the shifts in style may have been a response to the competition posed by the emerging medium of film. With its editorial ability to manipulate composition, time, emphasis and space, and its eye-catching realism and continuous motion, it may well have precipitated the ‘story within a painting’ format that Nevinson began to adopt.<sup>14</sup> This is evidenced by the ‘rolling narrative’ sequential format of his 1917 National War Aims Committee commissioned works depicting ‘Britain’s Efforts and Ideals’: *Acetylene Welding* (Figure 14), *Banking at 4000 feet* (Figure 15) and *Swooping down on a Taube* (Figure 16), which introduced a form of ‘war drama’ unfurling in front of the viewer.

<sup>12</sup> Harries, Meirion & Susie. *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century*. Michael Joseph, IWM and Tate 1983 p 39

<sup>13</sup> Walsh, Michael C.R. *W. Nevinson – This Cult of Violence*. p.141

<sup>14</sup> Gough, Paul. *A Terrible Beauty: British Artists in the First World War*. Sansom & Co, Bristol 2010 p.108



Figure 14

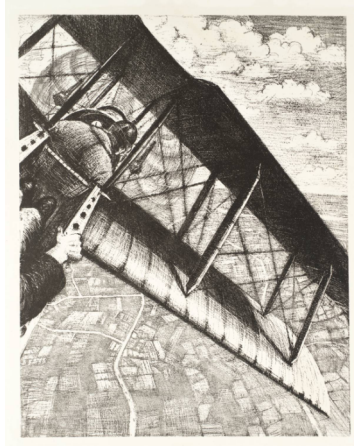


Figure 15



Figure 16

These lithographs were produced after Nevinson had been enlisted as an official war artist and were cinematic in their treatment of propagandist content. They represented a pictorial equivalent to the newsreel format of filmed propaganda for home cinema consumption. Konody quotes a visiting soldier to the Leicester Galleries: “these pictures tell you more about the war than any of the photographs and reproductions of drawings which fill our illustrated journals.”<sup>15</sup> These competitive pressures brought into play by cinema and film possibly also contributed to his deployment of multi-panelled works on an epic scale in later years such as *The Roads of France* (Figure 17).



Figure 17

Nevinson switched to State patronage in June 1917, returning to France the following month as an official war artist. The war had escalated, most significantly after the Battle of the Somme in July 1916, which saw 57,000 British soldiers die in one day alone. World opinion, and the neutrality of American opinion, was crucial to sway in establishing German guilt and a mandate for the allied forces. A political shift was also afoot. In December 1916, Lloyd George became Prime Minister and implemented a complex propaganda infrastructure. Until that point it had been a makeshift arrangement under the control of the Foreign Office, and C.F. Masterman at Wellington House, which encompassed art on a modest scale. However tensions existed between the War Office and the Foreign Office, and George introduced the Department of Information, under Lord Beaverbrook, which oversaw intelligence,

<sup>15</sup> Konody. p 20

technical issues, administration and literature/art. This restructuring produced the British War Memorials Committee, which increased the budget for pictorial representations that serviced propagandist magazines such as *War Illustrated*, *British Artists at the Front* and *War Pictorial*. The circulation of the latter alone was increased to 700,000 per month. This increased demand for war artists to produce realistic depictions of the war effort funded by a nationalist and propaganda driven agenda.

Nevinson returned to the front for 4 weeks in July 1917, as the forces were preparing for the Passchendaele offensive, and upon his return prepared for a second Leicester Galleries show in March 1918, some of which are also displayed in the *Truth and Memory* exhibition. Three in particular demonstrate that Nevinson dramatically changed his style. *A Group of Soldiers* (Figure 18), *Nerves of the Army* (Figure 19), and *Paths of Glory* (Figure 20), were greeted with disappointment and represented a rejection of his abstract and Futurist modernism, in favour of a muted realist intensity, reduced to a mud khaki-grey palette that focused on the suffering and contribution of the soldiers.



Figure 18



Figure 19





Figure 20

This realism brought controversy via the censor: the former was deemed an unworthy depiction of the British Army, and *Paths of Glory*, its title heavily loaded with irony, was banned from the exhibition due to its depressing, unheroic subject matter which was branded bad for morale. Nevinson showed it anyway, except with a strip of paper marked 'censored' covering the 'offending' bodies.

Why did Nevinson change his style so much for this exhibition? Harries moots that as the war unfurled he lost 'all belief or interest in the beauty of strife', and that due to his experiences he had been diverted to the individual engagement and human consequences of war as opposed to the standardised and mechanised. The war in truth was largely a war of static attrition with little speed, colour and excitement, and Harries concludes that Nevinson's later vision of war coincided with a change in his interests and how he chose to represent them.<sup>16</sup> As rebellious anti-authoritarian Nevinson would not have welcomed greater agendas of propaganda and national morale to service above his own artistic calling. Futurism was also essentially a young man's anarchic preoccupation and by 1918 Nevinson nearly thirty and dogged by the realities of his war experiences and chronic ill health to dampen his youthful energy. Perhaps, like the nation, he had become war-weary and the second show signalled the wilful severing of his link to the avant-garde. Gough, again referring to *The Roads of France* (Figure 17), points towards the monumental logistics exercise required as being of increasing interest to the artist's vision of war, citing Nevinson himself, who contended that his second show 'attempted to synthesise all the human activity and to record the prodigious organisation of our army.'<sup>17</sup> This being so, as Michael Walsh

<sup>16</sup> Harries, Meirion & Susie. *The War Artists*. p.40

<sup>17</sup> Gough, Paul. *A Terrible Beauty* p.111

argues, perhaps Nevinson had simply and paradoxically turned to embrace the conservative establishment that he had so ardently previously fought.<sup>18</sup>

Nevinson was an intelligent and complex character who had suffered physically and mentally as a child at the hands of his own sickly constitution, unorthodox parenting, and an appallingly unforgiving regime of systematic abuse at school. He developed, in my view, layer upon layer of self-protection with which he created a seemingly arrogant and outspoken anti-authoritarian rebel rallying against convention, that he unwittingly used to make his mark in a fast changing and combative world. His wartime works, as typified by those on display in the *Truth and Memory* exhibition are in one respect an artistic journey through the changing cultural and political environment of a world in turmoil. But on another perhaps they are a beautiful and touching pictorial representation of a sensitive, creative and troubled child, repairing himself through the humanitarian carnage of war.

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<sup>18</sup> Walsh, Michael *C.R.W.Nevinson*. p.207

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## **Images**

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