

## 'The Brutal Tap: Anti-Humanist Legacies in the American Counter-Culture'

PREWARNING – This will be quite a summary paper.

- I'm going to sketch an outline of a book project I'm researching about modernist legacies in the 1960s American literary Counterculture.
- So there won't be much in the way of close reading. Rather it'll be a general roundup of various significant countercultural writers whose thought and styles of writing have an unexpected heritage in early 20<sup>th</sup> century high modernism, followed by speculations about where that heritage leaves us today, particularly in relation to post-humanism

I want to start with a song [PLAY DYLAN'S 'DESOLATION ROW']:

Praise be to Nero's Neptune, the Titanic sails at dawn  
Everybody's shouting, "Which side are you on?!"  
And **Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot fighting in the captain's tower**  
While calypso singers laugh at them and fishermen hold flowers  
Between the windows of the sea where lovely mermaids flow  
And nobody has to think too much about Desolation Row

INTRO 1: Post-war American renaissance. Modernism doesn't fit the narrative.

- So that was Bob Dylan singing about Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot 'fighting in their captain's tower'. The year was 1965 and Pound and Eliot had a decade before been eclipsed in American avant-garde terms by a Beat movement in thrall to Walt Whitman, William Blake and the decadent French poetics of Arthur Rimbaud.
- Next to these consistently cited inspirations, Pound's *Cantos* and Eliot's *The Wasteland* were paid homage to in countercultural quarters but characterised as conservative and wilfully oblique.
- In Robert McCrum's words, English modernism (summed up by Pound in a Washington insane asylum) passed into a kind of 'premature posterity' during the 1950s, deemed historically important but wholly unsuited to the new American Renaissance.
- To literary experimenters who prized self-discovery above all else, and for whom political involvement generally meant the individual escaping social constraints, the 'men of 1914's direct protests against liberal democracy and Romantic weakness held dubious contemporary relevance.
- If Pound was the most obvious symbol of retrograde modernism – having pleaded insanity to the charge of treason for his pro-Mussolini radio broadcasts - Eliot was in his own way excluded from the emerging avant-garde conversation. His cult then critical success might have led him to be taught at the major universities, but he was jettisoned by Ginsberg as an American who had retreated into English fustiness:

'Eliot never solved the verse problem for us' Ginsberg declared 'because he went to England and wrote ultimately ... in basically an old style of Shakespearean blank

verse, written slightly adapted to (intelligent) modern speech. But he never solved the problem of how do you register American speech?"<sup>1</sup>

- The anti-Semitic slurs in much of Eliot's wartime poetry also made him suspect in a similar vein to Pound.
- As for their contemporary Wyndham Lewis, who had written enthusiastically about Hitler in the run up to 1940, the hectoring style that seemed original in the early century now appeared to the counterculture to be decidedly unpleasant, even old-fashioned.

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- Significantly, the poet and amateur philosopher T.E. Hulme – who was less famous but whose philosophy undergirded high modernism - had a mini-Renaissance at around this time. AS HIS BIOGRAPHER ROBERT FERGUSON PUTS IT 'By 1964 Hulme's ideas, in particular his definitions of the opposition of romanticism and classicism, had gained such widespread currency that they formed a natural part of the cultural frame of reference of the eponymous hero of Saul Bellow's influential novel *Herzog*' 6
- Hulme provides the foundation for my analysis today because that 'opposition of romanticism and classicism' led him to make high modernism's most explicit statements against conventional humanist assumptions.

## INTRO 2: Defining Anti-Humanism & Radical Conservatism

- In 1911, he conflated the 'Romantic' and 'humanist attitude' and attacked both together:

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When a sense of the reality of ... absolute values is lacking, you get a refusal to believe any longer in the **radical imperfection** of either Man or Nature. This develops logically into the belief that life is the source and measure of all values, and that man is fundamentally good. Instead, then, of/ Man (radically imperfect) ... apprehending ... Perfection, -/ you get the second term (now entirely misunderstood) illegitimately introduced inside the first [elipses and brackets Hulme's own]. This leads to a complete change in all values. **The problem of evil disappears, the conception of sin loses all meaning.**<sup>2</sup>

- This is the crux of the position I'll be exploring, one of violent reaction against the perceived vanity in believing that people are fundamentally good and perfectible.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ginsbergblog.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/tseliot.html>

<sup>2</sup> 'A Notebook,' p. 444.

- It had its roots in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's nineteenth century assaults on the Enlightenment, reached an apex in Anglo-American literary thought as World War One approached and has a strong, increasingly popular expression today in works by twenty first century critics of humanism like the philosopher John Gray.
- It's connected but separate from the progressive anti-humanism that emerged with post-structuralism and the post-Marxist Frankfurt School in the 1950s and 1960s, what people usually mean when they talk about anti-humanism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Following Elizabeth Kuhn's recent work, I'm emphasizing high modernist's earlier, reactionary version to reconsider the genealogy of anti-humanism but also post-humanist theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Within Hulme's paradigm the Beats' then the Hippies' quest for individual enlightenment apparently repeats - in the mid twentieth century – the mistakes of the Romantics in the eighteenth and nineteenth.
- Hulme and the other 'Men of 1914' differed in their political beliefs and affiliations. They also disagreed philosophically about the power of political and social ideology to effect change - Ezra Pound's faith in the possibility of a new economic and political order rendering him in many ways humanistic as opposed to Hulme and T.S. Eliot who sought solace from the political and social in the absolute authority of religion.
- But they agreed wholeheartedly that a Romantic bastardization of absolute ethical and aesthetic truths had obfuscated the Western value scale. What I suggest is that the Beat inheritors of the Romantic tradition had a much clearer understanding of radical imperfection, of evil, and 'the conception of sin' than is generally acknowledged.
- They were on the one hand exemplary of the humanism Hulme describes – setting their stall by 'life [as] the source and measure of all values' – but, on the other, not as credulous about the possibilities therein than they first appear.
- As importantly and more complicatedly, their inheritance of a high modernist skepticism about progress meant they also unwittingly inherited some of the same reactionary political baggage – namely, a distrust of liberal democratic government, a patrician faith in their own clairvoyance as artists and a fatalistic, superior attitude towards the unconverted herd.

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#### PG 1: Marshall McLuhan & Ezra Pound

- I'll come on to the Beats and their successors shortly but there's a useful way into this lineage through the modernist scholar turned media theorist Marshall McLuhan, a sort of Modernist Priest at the heart of the Counterculture's Re-tribalizing Mission.
- In 1967, his idea of 'the global village' was so on trend that John Lennon & Yoko Ono requested a TV sit down.

- And yet in his writing and his television performances, he trod a line between rallying and admonishing the emerging youth movement, and between an optimistic vision of human progress and a pessimistic, religious belief in human imperfectability.
- McLuhan's appeal to the counter-culture lay in an apparently humanistic and Primitivist message: that "tribal" existence was more cooperative, socially harmonious and psychologically healthy than the detribalized existence ushered in by the invention of the alphabet – an idea that was carried over into the North American media studies community he helped inculcate.
- But this revolutionary vision was contradicted by a profound instinctive conservatism that can be traced back to his background first as a student of Wyndham Lewis' then as a mentee of Ezra Pound's in the 1950s.

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- As Richard Wassen put it in 1972 'Far from being some demon or angel of the contemporary Zeitgeist, McLuhan is so much a part of the earlier modernist tradition that a critique of his thought becomes finally a critique of that tradition' (Wassen, 1972: 567).
- In the 1930s – when he left his native Winnipeg to pursue a graduate degree at Cambridge - he came into contact with Lewis as well as Hilaire Belloc, both prominent & radical conservatives. He got to know Ezra Pound in the fifties through visits with Hugh Kenner to St. Elizabeth's.
- What he took from Lewis & Belloc was a simultaneous fascination with and scepticism about the sudden, rapid rise of popular culture and the role technology had in this.
- As Jessica Pressman summarizes in her *Digital Modernism* what he took from Pound was the Imagist principle of simultaneity – the juxtaposition of contrasting images to intensify effect and understanding – which he saw as a direct response to technological advancements.
- Through his proud debt to these modernists, and his celebration and denigration of the 'global village' he believed television was creating, McLuhan exemplifies a progressive/regressive paradox had in the 1960s counterculture.
- He delivered his remarks about the irrepressible march of technology in a voice that was on the line between optimism and extreme pessimism but also always gently amused, part of a very deliberate performance connected to that interest in Poundian simultaneity.
- As Norman Mailer put it in a TV debate with McLuhan, although the two of them diagnose many of the same problems – principally what Mailer calls the 'totalitarian principal present in this avalanche of over-information' – McLuhan appears to 'take a great kindly pleasure in outlining the lineaments of this electronic world'.

- Significantly, that ambivalence was also indicative of a larger ambivalence in intellectual discussion of the counterculture.
- In Theodore Roszack's 1967 book *The Making of the Counterculture* (which is credited with coining the term), you can hear a version of the same, an attraction to the force that compels the youth but an equal disappointment at their lack of intellectual seriousness, which leads him to forebode that it will all end in tears. In an update of what T.E. Hulme called the 'spilt religion' of Romanticism, Roszack implies a sort of spilt Freudianism in the Counterculture, the misapplication of fruitful but complex theories by minds ill-equipped for the task.
- Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, two younger, hipper and more famous documenters of the hippie movement, were for different reasons torn about it; Wolfe's *Electric Koolaid Acid Test* mirroring McLuhan's marriage of enthusiasm and wry intellectual remove and Thompson's *Hell's Angels* the brutal power dynamics that held together an ostensibly liberating frontier myth.

#### PG 2: Jack Kerouac & Allen Ginsberg's Transcendentalist Gloom

- Although the Beats – cited by Ken Kesey as forefathers of his psychedelic mission – are regularly and often rightly accused of being philosophically naive, their self-conscious conception of an avant-garde renaissance to rival Emerson and Whitman's also depended on a more serious and politically contradictory philosophical pessimism.
- Like McLuhan's 'above the fray' attitude, that pessimism was partly gleaned from the anti-humanist atmosphere that pervades early twentieth century modernist texts.
- Kerouac was uninterested in the academicism and concrete particulars of high modernist poetry – a group, he said who 'always trying to make themselves sound clever' - but he took much of his philosophical language from the same milieu and the same sources.
- Crucially, in Kerouac's novel *Visions of Cody* as well as Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*, we see the paradoxical influence of Oswald Spengler, a German apocalyptic historian popular in the 1910s, on theories otherwise predicated on humanity's perfectibility.

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- As John Tytell's puts it the Beats' faith in self – even societal - liberation through art was always tempered by 'a Spenglerian expectation of the total breakdown of Western culture.'<sup>3</sup>
- Indeed, throughout their works Kerouac and Ginsberg's identified with the word 'fellaheen' – Spengler's suspect term for non-Western peasant – which

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<sup>3</sup> John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976),: P. 9

is indicative of a fatalistic and socially conservative social attitude at odds with their professed politics

- Their more obvious link to modernist anti-humanist ideas and language is through the outlaw aesthetics of French writers like Jean Genet, Louis-Ferdinand Celine (both descended from Rimbaud and also Walt Whitman but also susceptible to same retrogressive politics as Pound, Lewis and Eliot).
- But as Leslie Fielder points out, they put those ideas into a hard-boiled American vernacular that syncretizes modernist tropes and combines conflicting registers (optimistic and fatalistic, reverent and irreverent, progressive and regressive, humanist and anti-humanist), responding to America's later delayed crisis of modernity.

PG 3: 'I do not believe there is any such thing as human nature' and 'us': Burroughs' Immodest Proposal.

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- William Burroughs, the Beat Generation third principal player, provides evidence of the group's more direct engagement with modernist anti-humanism.
- Burroughs' deadpan reportage on his life as a heroin addict, and his hallucinatory allegories of state violence, are in many ways an extension of the anti-sentimentalist, anti-humanist trend Wyndham Lewis suggested had gripped English letters in the Edwardian period.

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- Against a culture in which 'men had become guys of sentiment', Lewis wrote 'the brutal tap was turned on'.
- Where earlier American writers like Henry Miller had used the brutal rhetoric of their high modernist predecessors not only to critique humanist hypocrisy but push for utopian improvements, Burroughs promoted an even more radical upheaval.
- Declaring 'I do not believe there is any such thing as human nature' he intensified Miller's irreverently brutal rhetoric for a post-war age, developing a form of satire that was mercilessly intolerant of benevolent reform yet precariously hitched to the utopian ideals of Transcendentalism.
- The result was a saddling of progressivism and disgusted but elated fatalism that had significant effects on the literary culture that followed.
- Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch* is akin in many ways to Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. It appropriates, plays with and makes fun of the same early modernist tropes to arrive at its own more extreme – and more complex – version of the anti-humanist reversal.
- Like Wyndham Lewis, Burroughs produced Swiftian satires on the inhumanity of professedly humane social attitudes.

- He was, however, responding a different definition of humanism than high modernist's in the 1910s and 20s.
- On the surface Burroughs – and even Kerouac and Ginsberg's - opposition to humanism in the Cold War period meant writing against the rationalistic technocratic systems of government that had emerged after 1945.
- For Pound and his fellow London-based modernists T.E. Hulme and Wyndham Lewis - writing before, during and in the aftermath of World War One - it meant scorning progressive liberal agendas in favor of absolute religious or fascist value systems.
- The modernist attraction to fascism – which was anti-humanistic in the sense that it promoted gnostic faith over Enlightenment reason but humanistic in its assumption of the human race's perfectibility – has important implications for a countercultural movement caught in a similar conundrum.
- They were, as Theodore Roszak points out, derided by liberal commentators as 'Pretty Little Fascists' whose conception of progress through mystical experience rather than rational scientific advances denoted political totalitarianism.
- And yet they presented themselves – like the Post-Structuralists and the Frankfurt School – as progressive in their rejection of an Enlightenment rationale that had given rise to technocracy, and the larger violence of Cold War Era Surveillance and State Control.
- Writing in 1967, Roszak claims that the youth counterculture has followed the Beats by engaging in 'a remarkable defection from the long-standing tradition of skeptical, secular intellectuality which has served as the prime vehicle for three hundred years of scientific and technical work in the West.' In its place they offer paradigms gleaned from esoteric religious and mystical texts and the use of psychedelic drugs (141-2).

CONCLUSION: Implications for American existentialism, from the 1960s to the present day.

- So, I started by talking about Bob Dylan who pictured Pound and Eliot 'fighting in their Captain's Tower's. This, I suggested was a mark of high modernism having arrived at an unsettling, 'premature posterity' in the sixties, historically important but at best formally anachronistic, at worst politically embarrassing.
- But Dylan's singing about them in this way always suggested something more. He was, in his fatalism, his ear for snatches of everyday image and conversation, and his interest in juxtaposing those snatches to shock and surprise, very much an inheritor of a high modernist aesthetic. He seems to be wryly acknowledging this even in his take down of them.
- What I have tried to do is connect these two periods in terms of a philosophical position that has both aesthetic and political implications – in other words to get beyond the question of style and also valid but well worn criticisms of the Counterculture's retrogressive identity politics.

- Where it has its explicit heritage in Romanticism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and provocative French aesthetics in the 20<sup>th</sup>, the less explored link to high modernism reveals something more intellectually complex and politically contradictory about their writing.
- By reading the Beats and the American literary counterculture in terms of early century arguments against humanism it's possible to understand both as in fact anti-Romantic and anti-humanistic, counter-intuitively elitist and skeptical not only in their marginalization of minority groups but in the very challenge they raised to the establishment.
- It's also possible to put writers ordinarily confined to their period into a twenty-first-century critical context.
- To understand this strand of post-Second World War experimental American writing as a continuation of high modernism is to think about its aesthetics and politics in relation to current cultural and philosophical theories not only of anti-humanism but also *post*-humanism.
- Ordinarily regarded as descendants of progressive arguments against humanism made after 1945, influential posthumanist theorists like Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayle and Cary Wolfe have an earlier I suggest less acknowledged heritage in the anti-humanism of Eliot, Hulme and Pound and an intriguing connection to the counterculture through William Burroughs and founding media theorist Marshall McLuhan.
- The anti-humanist link between the 'Men of 1914' and the counterculture opens a new angle on that lineage, and enables a reconsideration of twenty-first century post-humanist thinking's political implications.
- If they are motivated by anti-neo-liberal class and gender politics, critics like Hayle, Haraway and Wolfe also identify many of the same issues with humanism as Hulme, Eliot and Lewis did in the 1910s and 20s.
- Like these modernists, they are skeptical of the liberal humanist faith in mankind's perfectibility, but they use the imminence of a post-human world to entertain the possibility of genuine progress.
- From Haraway's 1984 *Cyborg Manifesto* onwards, the realization of humanity's relative insignificance in the lifespan of the planet and the expectation of our increased reliance on artificial intelligence have been used to reassert progressive ideas about gender and animal rights.
- Just as John Gray sees the humanist belief in a perfect endpoint as a repetition of Christianity's redemption myth, post-humanist visions of a fairer and more equal society can be read as a reconstitution of exactly the delusional impulses it critiques in Humanism.
- Likewise, the explicit challenges Beat writers raised against technocratic definitions of progress and their implicit challenges to the totem of human perfectibility.
- From more obvious precursors like William Burroughs' Swiftian satires on the inhumanity of professedly humane social attitudes and Marshall McLuhan's ambivalent pronouncements on a new technologically enabled 'Global Village', to the encrypted fatalism of Ginsberg and Kerouac's visions of generational transcendence, the counterculture was an important but

misunderstood intermediary stage in the evolution of twentieth century anti-humanist thinking.

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## NORMAN MAILER

### PG 4: Norman Mailer's Philosophy of Hip. Kierkegaard. Existentialism

- In work by Norman Mailer, you see an often ham-fisted attempt to put that rebellion in philosophical terms, and specifically in terms of what he called a 'religious existentialism'.
- Mailer – who styled himself as a 'philosopher of hip' and championed Burroughs as well as Henry Miller – developed this position from his reading of the proto-existentialist Soren Kierkegaard. Sourcing Kierkegaard, he believed that a religious or spiritual adjustment of Sartre's atheistic existentialism could enable America's post-war generation to engage with the unprecedented social changes they faced.
- Such a position has important implications for the Beats – themselves regularly associated with Sartre, Camus and Kierkegaard.
- It rests on the possibility of getting beyond good and evil through an affirmation rather than denial of God's existence.
- As he put it: 'Kierkegaard taught us, or tried to teach us, that at the moment we're feeling most saintly, we may in fact be evil. And that moment when we think we're most evil and finally corrupt we may, in fact, in the eyes of God, be saintly'
- Mailer took this as permission to contradict himself with impunity, to 'offer a statement of absolute certainty equally founded on the inability to verify it'.
- If the categories of sin and saintliness were indecipherable from one another and a person couldn't ever truly know whether his or her position was good or bad then the very concept of conviction was thrown into question.
- In a perverse way this is Mailer's manifestation of the humanist/anti-humanist paradox in McLuhan's work.
- In their TV appearances together, they demonstrate a shared abhorrence of moral indignation that places them both in a conservatively pragmatic tradition.
- It's an intriguing relationship made explicit by McLuhan when he quotes Edmund Burke on the French Revolution, saying "I do not know how to draw up an indictment against a whole people"

(QUESTIONS:

1. How did an apparently contradictory pessimism about human progress inform the inability to acknowledge male or white privilege?
2. How did the individual author's bid for freedom through a marginalized, 'primitive' existence, translate in terms of an attitude to involuntarily marginalized groups?
3. Where did the fantasy of returning to tribal life – and the reality of 'dropping out' from society - leave writers in relation to the tribes they romanticized?
4. Furthermore, how did they relate first to the young, disaffected and predominantly middle class tribe their works addressed and second to the majority group whose culture they were countering?)

### SPILT FREUDIANISM

If T.E. Hulme dismissed the 'Romantic/Humanist Attitude' as 'Spilt Religion', commentators like McLuhan, Roszack & Wolfe looked at Beat Generation as proponents of what we might call 'Spilt Freudianism'.

- What Hulme meant by 'spilt religion' was a condition through which humanity has not freed itself from oppression by throwing off faith in God, but rather condemned itself to confusion and uncertainty because it invests the same faith in its own capacity for self-determination.
- To his mind, in a post-religious, Romantic world, the precepts of religion – 'right and proper in their own sphere' – are carried over into a new sphere to which they are entirely unsuited. Using the analogy of a treacle pot, he suggests the Romantics have turned religion upside down and spilt its ideas over the 'dinner table'.
- Rather than clarifying 'human experience', Romantic thinkers 'falsify and blur' what were once its 'clear outlines'.
- Now Theodore Roszack says something similar in relation to rigorous psychoanalytical thought and the counterculture.
- One moment he champions America's newly, sexually and psychologically 'healthy spirit'; the next he laments a growing tendency to 'reduce it in their ignorance to an esoteric collection of peer-group symbols and slogans, vaguely daring and ultimately trivial' (147).
- The same goes for Wolfe's critique of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters – who are searching for 'It' but can never explain what 'It' means. He's 'could point out in the most persuasive way how mundane character traits and minor hassles around Perry Lane fit into the richest, most complex metaphor of life ever devised, namely, Freud's'

### EXISTENTIALISM

- Existentialism.
- Their debt to Sartre, his existentialist contemporary Albert Camus and – most importantly – Sartre's religious predecessor Soren Kierkegaard, situates them in an Enlightenment tradition of progress for both individual and species through self-willed action.

- And yet it also aligns them with a philosophy that rejected Kantian notions of morality as the product of reason. Like the Existentialists, like Kierkegaard and indeed Nietzsche, they measured life – and progress - according to the individual's fullness of experience in each moment, a method that privileged instinct over reason and presupposed good and evil as frequently indistinguishable from one another.
- In some respects, the Beats can be read alongside these Existentialist attempts to realign rather than supplant the ethics of humanism.

#### ANTI-HUMANISM/INHUMANISM/POSTHUMANISM

- Aaron Jaffe: 'Inhumanism isn't necessarily synonymous with anti-humanism. Instead it's better understood as an unsettled antagonism tangled up within humanism'
- Richard Grusin. Talks about the non-human turn as distinct from the post-

#### MAILER

- Controversial 1957 essay 'The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster', in which Mailer more than half seriously celebrates violence as a purgatorial means of human psychological evolution, yet another mutation of the anti-humanist reversal we see in Miller and Burroughs' work.

#### POST HUMANIST EXTRAS

- John Gray's warning against the post-humanist assumption that digital technological advancement can and will lead to social advancement and the trans-humanist belief that it will constitute an evolutionary leap forward for the better.
- 'To think that science can transform the human lot is to believe in magic' Gray writes, since 'time retorts to the illusions of humanism with the reality: frail, deranged, undelivered humanity' (123).
- As Henry Mead (NOD) points out, Gray's ideas about liberal humanism's self-delusions are uncannily close in spirit and rationale to Hulme's of the 1910s, which brings the question of early century anti-humanist modernism up to date with its contemporary relation.  
Likewise, the explicit challenges Beat writers raised against technocratic definitions of progress and their implicit challenges to the totem of human perfectibility.

#### MCLUHAN EXTRAS

- McLuhan was convinced, as he put it in a letter to Pound that Pound's *Cantos* were 'the first and only serious use of the great technical possibilities of the cinematograph'.

- Such simultaneous presentation of contrasting and apparently unrelated material gave him the confidence to produce his own 'theory of everything'. Here's Wasson again:

Through ... Pound ... McLuhan had discovered a technique for flooding all the past into the present: that is, to a way of presenting historical pattern, change, or development concisely, by means of metaphorical analogy, and precisely, by way of allusion "not as ornament" but as "means of making available total energy of any previous situation or culture.

#### POST-HUMANISM

- A reinstatement of the poststructuralist notion that Western man is a faulty ideological construct, post-humanism seeks a less anthropocentric understanding of the world.
- It argues – roughly speaking - for the expansion of philosophical and cultural enquiry beyond simply human subjectivity, and for the development of a new ethics that frames progress both in terms of non-human life and our imminent evolution through cybernetics.

#### LEWIS

- In *CounterBlast* – which was McLuhan's 1950s updating of Lewis' 1914 Vorticist Manifesto – he says he is continuing that early modernist project by taking up Lewis' concern with QUOTES 'accelerated media change as a kind of massacre of the innocents' END QUOTES.