

## **A Century of Futurism: Introduction**

**T**he Futurist movement marked a crucial rupture within European literature and art. For all its political and cultural contradictions, Italian Futurism called into question all aspects of literary and artistic production, from the sacrality and eternalness of the work of art to the privileged role of the artist and the passivity of the reader and the spectator. Yet, one hundred years after the publication in *Le Figaro* of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's founding manifesto, Futurism can still be considered an enigmatic and uncanny object. Although countless scholars have tirelessly examined the aesthetic, cultural, and social implications of Futurism's most radical and adventurous ideas and art practices, the most widespread habit — at least in the humanities — still remains that of cautiously approaching the movement as a pathological detour from mainstream literary communication and stylistic practices.

Futurism's shameless cult of war and Marinetti's sexism and alliance with Fascism have certainly not helped to disseminate or even garner sympathy for the artistic methods of this pioneering avant-garde movement. However, while scholars do not exclusively reduce Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy of life, Martin Heidegger's ontology, or Ezra Pound's literary achievements to their political beliefs, Futurism is still predominantly understood as a (crypto-)Fascist artistic ideology. Not surprisingly, as a result of this strategy of immunization from Futurism and the avant-gardes at large, whereas contemporary visual arts are consciously post-Dada, and contemporary classical music is overtly post-tonal, most contemporary literature and criticism proudly prolong the agony of nineteenth-century classical forms.

The essays collected in this volume question, from a multiplicity of perspectives, the common-sense reception of Futurism. Instead of merely assessing the chronological and stylistic borders of the movement, most texts cast light on fundamental stylistic, thematic, and theoretical aspects. Taken as a whole, they can be fruitfully read as attempts to move beyond a major limitation of modern Western culture, namely, the "xenophobia" towards the technical object, and the "opposition established between the cultural and the technical" (Simondon 9). In following these presuppositions, we have arranged the essays according to their proximity to four trajectories of Futurism: the relationship between art and violence, the affections and modifications of the body,

mechanical and biological machines, organic and inorganic matter.

The first section, “The Art of Violence,” allows us to revisit one of the most controversial *topoi* of both Futurist practice and the critical canon on the movement. We could have entitled it just as easily “The Violence of Art,” for in Futurism the relationship between the two terms of the syntagm — a possible articulation of that rethinking of the relationship of art and life that in his classical study Peter Bürger identified as the distinguishing trait of the avant-garde — was never simply one-way, and entailed a complex series of negotiations with numerous aesthetics and ideological movements of the turn of the century. It is in this perspective that Günter Berghaus re-examines Marinetti’s debt to the political currents of the early twentieth century — anarchism in particular — arguing that it was not the result of mere amateurish dabbling but of a serious engagement with the political debates of the day. The documents appended to Berghaus’s essay — the much-revised and corrected text of Marinetti’s conference “La necessità e bellezza della violenza,” never before published in its original form, and the reactions to it in both mainstream newspapers and in the anarchist press — help us understand more clearly the wide-ranging project of Futurism, which from the very beginning aimed at overcoming, in specific and practical terms, the distance between aesthetics and politics that had characterized aestheticism. Tracing the unfolding of the political thought of the founder of Futurism, Berghaus brings out the inherent ambiguity of the Marinettian notion of violence, indebted to Nietzschean and Bergsonian vitalism, but also closely related to the much more practical project of a violent revolution of the proletariat articulated by George Sorel. As the reports in the press demonstrate, in the early years of Futurism the reciprocal interest linking Futurists and anarchists led to a dialogue that was neither occasional nor fruitless. Take for instance nationalism, a question on which the positions of the two groups could not be more distant: even on this issue, there was ground for debate, for both Marinetti and his anarchist interlocutors were concerned with imagining future forms of community, rather than fall back upon history and tradition as the guarantors of social and political legitimacy.

This is not to say that, as the title of Marinetti’s conference makes clear with its emphasis on “bellezza,” a serious attempt to think through the political implications of Futurism was incompatible with a certain aestheticization of violence — hence the possible double reading of its relationship with art. Indeed, this has been one of the commonplaces of Futurist studies at least since Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Work in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (here judiciously reassessed by Patrizio Ceccagnoli), and more often than not has served to justify the *a priori* moral judgment of critical examinations of the movement that we have discussed above. Certainly, the ambiguous relationship between violence and eroticism, *thanatos* and *eros*, that underlies much of aestheticism is not unknown to the Futurist movement. This aspect emerges clearly in Simona Cigliana’s study of an unjustly little known

novel by Bruno Corra, *Perché ho ucciso mia moglie*. This novel is notable, among other things, for bringing to the fore the difficulties and contradictions of that project of liberation from the shackles of human sentiments — the famous “scorn of women” of the first manifesto — that underlies much of the movement’s public discourse. And even in the case of the almost paradigmatically aggressive and hyper-virile impresario of Futurism, things may be more complicated than his rhetoric might suggest, as Leonardo Tondelli argues in his complex reading of Marinetti’s fascination with violent experiences, in particular those provided by the encounter with the machine. The strategies through which Marinetti stages a scene of violence — mythopoiesis, mimetic translation, memorialistic elaboration — can in fact be understood as ways to work through the shock of modernity, to give form and shape to its *Unheimlichkeit*.

Indeed, there is little doubt that Marinetti’s brash celebration of the advent of a new world of gleaming machines and armored bodies is also an attempt to impose some sort of control over the fascinatingly dreadful “maelstrom of modernity” (the expression is Marshall Berman’s) over the technological, social, and economic transformations that since the mid-nineteenth century traverse the whole of Europe and call into question traditional modes of social relations or of production. Modernity is simultaneously creative and destructive, as is suggested by the very first literary work to bear the tag of “Futurist” in its title, Marinetti’s *Mafarka le Futuriste* (1909), where the birth of the new man can occur only through the destruction of the titular hero, who fostered it. Thus, embracing a certain kind of change (for instance, technological innovation) may also serve to resist or at least master other kinds of change. This is nowhere more obvious than in the rich and provocative debate on gender roles, which was especially lively — not surprisingly — during the Great War. If on the one hand the war forced men to embrace once again their traditional function of warriors and protectors of the community, on the other it opened up new possibilities for women who were able, however briefly, to take up masculine roles in the social and economic sphere left vacant as a result of conscription. Not by chance, it is during this period that Marinetti writes *Come si seducono le donne* (1918), which seeks to contain and control this unstable situation, at least in the domain of sexual politics.

Lucia Re and Silvia Contarini both consider the complex intertwining of the war with the debate within the Futurist movement on gender relations. Re discusses how the works of Maria Ginanni and of other female futurists such as the painter Pierina Levi responded to the Marinettian dictum that “Space and Time died yesterday” by articulating a new mode of inhabiting space and time that went in the opposite direction from Marinetti’s celebration of speed. For Contarini, the war provided a (missed) opportunity for the Futurists, both men and women. Far from taking advantage of the destabilizing effects of the war on social roles and relations, the men fell back on the fundamentally conservative

values inherited from an otherwise much vituperated tradition, while the women failed to recognize the masculine values underlying their attempts at redefining female identity.

Contarini's essay also considers the contradictory discourse of corporality that characterizes the war-time writings of the Futurists, and of Marinetti in particular, in which the male body is transformed into a metallized, mechanical instrument, while the female body is re-consigned to the domain of nature, an animal form moved by lust and instinct. Here we open the second section of our volume, "Affected Bodies," which focuses precisely on the centrality of the body in the Futurist theoretical discourse and artistic practice. At the core of these essays lies the tension between a conception of the body as a site of experimentation and an anxiety towards its irrepressible desires (sex, hunger) and its drive towards death. Enrico Cesaretti examines the dove-tailing of sexual and alimentary imagery in Marinetti's erotic fiction from the late 1910s and the 1920s, observing how the rhetorical strategies mobilized by the writer in fact place bodily relations in a kind of liminal space between the organic and the inorganic. It is at moments like this, when he seems to be most concerned with the materiality and perishability of the biological body that Marinetti is in fact attempting to work through its limitations, to abstract it from the ravages of Time and the restrictions of Space. The opposition of life and death orients also Timothy Campbell's reading of Marinetti's founding manifesto of Futurism, which has its symbolic center in the scene of the death and resurrection of the Futurist subject through the mediation of the machine. Taking as his starting point the Foucaultian debate on biopolitics, Campbell notes that in fact what we have at work in the text is a triangulation among human, mechanical and animal, and that indeed for Marinetti technology is "profoundly productive for moving human beings towards a more animalized and hence more vital existence." It is the human —with the weight of its (cultural) history on its shoulders — that is doomed to obsolescence and death. In a very Nietzschean sense, the Futurist renewal must go through a renunciation of history in order to achieve the pure vitalism of animals or machines.

However, the transcendence of human limits is by no means characteristic only of Marinetti's *œuvre*. Paola Sica traces an alternative path towards the post-human, founded on the tradition of occultism and spiritualism, rather than on the fetishization of the artificial mechanism, in the works of the group of women writers who gathered around the Florentine journal *L'Italia futurista*, and in particular Irma Valeria. In a more playful and ironic spirit, the body could also become a privileged site in the grand project of "the Futurist reconstruction of the universe" invoked in a famous manifesto of 1915 by Balla and Depero, who were also and certainly not by chance closely involved in the development of a properly Futurist fashion. As Eugenia Paulicelli's detailed history of Futurist clothes design demonstrates, the Futurists understood the powerful symbolic and performative dimension of fashion. Indeed, in this as in so many of their

activities, they seem to presage our contemporary practices, from mass production to clothes as ephemeral objects to the use of experimental textiles.

The third section, on “Hard and Soft Machines,” includes essays that openly scrutinize Futurist technophilia. Borrowing ideas introduced by the French epistemologist Gilbert Simondon (1924-1989), we can describe this new sensibility as a reversal of the habitual connotations of Futurist art as a mimetic relation with technology and an apology of the machine. From this perspective, Futurism is not a worshipful representation of modern industrial technology, but a conscious and far-reaching invention of a productive connection with the world of technical objects. Therefore, whereas the traditional separation between technicity and culture leads to both aestheticism and “intemperant technicism,” the lived and experiential proximity with the material technologies of artistic communication devised by Futurism opens up a new ground for art production, overcoming the “misonicism,” “resentment,” and “ignorance” (Simondon 9) directed against technical objects:

Culture is unbalanced because, while it grants recognition to certain objects, for example all things aesthetic, and gives them their due place in the world of meanings, it banishes other objects, particularly things technical, into the unstructured world of things that have no meaning but do have a use, a utilitarian function. [...] This, of course, gives rise to an intemperant technicism that is nothing other than idolatry of the machine and, through such idolatry, by way of identification, it leads to a technocratic yearning for unconditional power.

(Simondon 10)

The astonishing intermediality displayed by Futurist artistic interventions, the complex experimental innovations in all fields of artistic production — theatre and literature, visual arts and music, architecture and cinema, fashion and radio broadcasting — the intensive or deadly fascination with mechanical and biological objects, can thus be approached as the by-product of Futurism’s ground-breaking “understanding of the nature of machines, of their mutual relationships and their relationships with man, and of the values involved in these relationships” (Simondon 13).

On the one hand, the texts by Samuele Pardini and Michael Syrimis are mainly concerned with phenomena of mechanization — hence the adjective “hard” — in relation to the aesthetics of speed and the comical. On the other hand, Paolo Valesio, Roberto Terrosi, and Alessio Lerro explore the literary, biological, and ontological dimensions of the Futurist engagement with the machine and the machinic. Even though these contributions do not share a common methodological and theoretical background, they reveal a significant feature of the contemporary discourse on technology and the avant-gardes: the appreciation of the manifold structures and implications of art and literature understood as technical objects.

More specifically, Pardini analyzes the literary chronicle of a 1907 car race from Beijing to Paris, written by the journalist Luigi Barzini, drawing a “thematic map” of the influence of this text on Marinetti’s foundational manifesto. Through Barzini, the Futurist aesthetic of speed and the automobile is projected onto the geopolitical space-time of colonialism and modernity, East and West, cultural stillness and industrial acceleration. Another fundamental characteristic of Futurism, too often overlooked by scholars, is its comical, paradoxical, and self-ironical strategy of expression. In his text, Syrimis connects the “humorous component” of Futurism with Henri Bergson’s seminal essay on laughter. Accordingly, Marinetti’s novel *Mafarka*, his 1929 homage to Mussolini, and the manifesto on cinema and the film entitled *Vita futurista* are interpreted as instances of the intersections of the living and the mechanical, of self-parody and politicized mass culture.

William Burroughs’s experimental novel *The Soft Machine* is the centerpiece of Valesio’s “genealogia futurista delle fantasie tecnorivoluzionarie.” For both Marinetti and Burroughs, who share a Symbolist and Rimbauldian stylistic lineage, the ideal soft machine is a metamorphosable, eroticized, and technicized body. Through a close-reading of a variety of texts, all related to Marinetti’s visionary post-Symbolist prose, Valesio meditates on the molecular presence and destabilizing power of this bio-mechanical imagination, calling for a complete renewal of our approach to Futurism and for “uno studio propriamente marinettiano di Marinetti.”

One of the most discussed components of Italian Futurism is its aggressive anti-humanism. In his essay, Terrosi addresses the historical background of this epistemology, the “technological primitivism” of Marinetti and Depero, and its divergence from the technological aesthetics of Bauhaus, Surrealism, and Expressionism. As for the legacy of this machinic anti-humanism, Terrosi underlines the complex relations of “inversion, aversion, and convergence” between Futurist androids and the bio-mechanical creatures theorized by the contemporary artistic practitioners of the “post-human.” The most accurate description of the Futurist techno-aesthetics is therefore that of a “transito,” a paradoxical and “transhuman” assemblage of objectuality and subjectivity, an intersection of reification and the *homo faber*.

The conundrum of “representation,” as seen from the perspective of Heidegger’s philosophy of modernity, is the subject of Lerro’s text. Marinetti’s fascination with technology is thus interpreted as an instance of the Kantian poetics of the sublime, as an overcoming of the limitations of representation, aimed at articulating “il linguaggio nascosto della tecnologia.” The technical innovations of Marinetti’s poetic writing are the positive expression of this new language of the “unformed,” which challenges the rhetorical and cognitive categories of modernity.

The fourth section includes essays that thematize the paramount role assigned by the Futurists to matter. Beyond the key influences of Nietzsche’s

genealogical “animalism” and Bergson’s bio-metaphysical vitalism, these texts discuss several intersections of matter and writing, physiology and poetics, communication media and literary procedures. The title of this section, “The Life and Death of Matter,” points to an eventful paradigmatic shift accomplished by Futurism. While most Western intellectuals were embracing the traditional dualisms of matter and spirit, death and life, objective external states and subjective internal experiences, Futurism followed a radical vitalism and “positivistic mysticism,” subsuming all these terms under a paradoxical monism of matter. Because of this epistemology, organic and inorganic matter, life and death, and even the aesthetic extremes of realism and abstraction became internal polarities, inner divergences within the unified field of an exalted “spiritual materialism.”

The essays collected in this section can be approached as individual inquiries into this territory. While Fausto Curi concentrates on the stylistic implications of the replacement of literary subjectivity with a poetics of matter, Patrizio Ceccagnoli concretizes this movement, mapping the literary techniques — prosopopea, personification — through which Marinetti achieves an unprecedented lyrical expansion of the human. From a different perspective, Arndt Niebisch casts light on the “signal technology” implied by Marinetti’s poetics, discussing the neurological and communicative presuppositions of Futurist “cruel” approach to artistic production. The final two essays, by Janaya Lasker and Giovanni Lista, enlarge the focus of the volume towards the language of abstraction: Lasker proposes an intertextual reading of Benedetta’s *Le forze umane* against the backdrop of Mondrian’s Neoplasticism, while Lista reassesses the abstract style of Giacomo Balla’s late period. In both cases, the poetics of matter is directly translated into new codes of visual abstraction, which represents a significant, although often latent, tendency of Futurism.

In the vast array of Marinetti’s poetological innovations, Curi highlights the role played by the “ortografia e tipografia libere espressive,” “auto-illustrazioni,” “analogie diseguate,” and “declamazione sinottica.” By transforming the acoustic signifier into a visual signifier, typography becomes a productive art; inversely, the performative power of “declamazione sinottica” intensifies the sonority of language. The combination of these two procedures multiplies the linguistic signs of literature into a “sin-fonia” of acoustic and visual elements that give voice to the complexity of matter, beyond the traditional borders of a silent and aniconic subjective rhetoric. Similarly, the continuous oscillations between the human and the non-human, “l’io e la materia,” typical of Marinetti’s prose, are studied by Ceccagnoli as symptoms of a profound anthropomorphism. Instead of opposing a reified humankind to the creativity of the machine, the “lyrical Marinetti” amplifies the human with the help of the rhetorical devices of “personificazione” and “prosopopea.” A close reading of Marinetti’s works, including the unpublished “aeroromanzo” *Venezianella e Studentaccio*, allows Ceccagnoli to argue against a famous

remark by Erich Fromm, taken up by many critics: whereas, in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Fromm discusses literary Futurism as an instance of “necrophilia” — that is, an aggressive disposition against life, coupled with a fascination with technology — Ceccagnoli interprets Marinetti’s lyricism as a poetic vitalism sustained by a skilful and hypertrophic anthropomorphic imagination.

Following Timothy Campbell’s study of the relationships between wireless communication and Futurist writing (*Wireless Writing*), and building on contemporary theories of communication technology, Niebish interprets Marinetti’s “media aesthetics” as a signal technology aimed at replacing the rules of language with the “distress of the nervous system.” Accordingly, Marinetti’s theatre and radio plays are seen as exhibitions of an “impaired or disturbed speech,” which in turn is considered the most appropriate expression of the short-circuit between neurology and electrical communication. Also, with a significant detour, the aggressive strategies for conveying signals adopted by the Futurists are traced back to the general features of media technology in the early twentieth century.

Crude naturalism, typographical and verbal experimentalism, and performative anti-aestheticism are not the exclusive paths taken by the Futurist avant-garde. In her contribution, Lasker proposes a direct intertextual connection between Benedetta’s experimental novel *Le forze umane* and Mondrian’s writings (*Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*), and the texts published in the Dutch avant-garde journal *De Stijl* between 1917 and 1920. As a result, Lasker provides a detailed reading of Benedetta’s novel as a recreation, both structural and thematic, of Mondrian’s theory of abstraction: “Benedetta puts Mondrian’s art theory, Neoplasticism, into literary practice.”

Benedetta studied painting with Giacomo Balla, and regularly frequented his atelier in Rome. This thread, which leads to abstraction and the formal languages of matter, has led us to place Lista’s text at the conclusion of the volume. Mixing personal recollections and art historical observations, Lista examines Balla’s work after 1945, proposing to disentangle his contribution to art both from a reductionist engagement with Fascist ideology and a straightforward formalist connection with abstractism. Although Balla’s critical acclamation in the 1950s was narrowly related to his role as “pioniere dell’astrattismo,” Lista presents a far more complex image of Balla, which takes into account his distance from the “cold” and systematic conceptions of Kandinsky and Mondrian. From this perspective, Balla’s explicitly political drawings published in the Fascist journal *L’Impero* are considered by Lista as fundamental documents, essential for penetrating his “sensibilità pittorica.”

Lista’s essay also allows us to make one final, conclusive observation. All too often Futurism is bracketed by two dates: the 1909 of its foundation that initiatives such as this volume celebrate and Marinetti’s death in 1944. However, it would be extremely reductive to identify Futurism with the life of



its founder. As the case of Balla demonstrates, for certain artists Futurism was prolonged, in new and interesting ways, well into the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps most importantly, as several other essays collected here suggest, many of the problems that Futurism attempted to address — from the effects of new forms of communication on aesthetics to the new role of the public in the world of mass media; from how technology pushes and shifts the boundaries of the human to how it transforms our relationship with time and space — remain essential and cogent in our own twenty-first century. In that sense, the anniversary of its foundation should remind us that Futurism crucially contributed to shaping the modernity that we still inhabit.

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