Italian Futurism and a programme for cultural renovation

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“Italian Futurism and a programme for cultural renovation”

For the rest of the world Italy represents a country of remarkable cultural and historical monuments, masterpieces of European art, beautiful old cities, and storage of past knowledge conserved in famous libraries. However, in the eyes of the young generation the glorious past could also represent a burden. It might create the impression that nobody could ever add anything to the artistic patrimony created by Michelangelo or Botticelli, to the scientific discoveries of Leonardo or Galilei, or to the literary tradition of Petrarca, Foscolo or Leopardi. This is how Marinetti considered the situation at the beginning of the 20th century.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876 -1944) was born in 1876 in Alexandria (Egypt). He graduated with his baccalaureat in Paris (France) in 1893. After the bachelor’s degree he came to his fatherland for the very first time to study law in Genoa, where he earned a Master’s degree in 1899. Marinetti’s vivid biography is peppered with wars. In 1915-1919 he participated in the First World War, and in 1935 he participated in the Ethiopian war. In 1942 he volunteered to fight on the Soviet front at the age of 66 years. Regardless of
his early polemics towards the traditional institutions, including family, in 1923 Marinetti married Benedetta Cappa (1897-1977). The marriage lasted until Marinetti’s death; three daughters were born into the union: Vittoria, Ala, and Luce. His nomination as a member of the Academy of Italy founded by Mussolini in 1929 was yet another evidence of the changes of Futurism that occurred after the First World War. It was also an indication of the special position that Futurism held in Mussolini’s Italy. In 1919, right after the First World War, Marinetti participated with other futurists in the founding of fascism. Even though Marinetti detached himself from Mussolini after the foundation of the Fascist party in 1920, the separation was relatively short. When King Vittorio Emanuele III nominated Mussolini Prime Minister of Italy in 1922, Marinetti reconciled with him and collaborated closely with the regime until the end. In addition to being one of the first academics, he was also the regime’s official war propagandist and president of the writers’ trade union. At the end of the Second World War when the Allies were conquering Italy step by step, as he was a devoted fascist, Marinetti followed Mussolini to the Republic of Salò in 1943, where he finally died in 1944 in the small town of Bellagio, by lake Como.

Marinetti was a cosmopolitan man. Having spent many years abroad before finally coming to Italy for the very first time, he had fully understood how obsolete and peripheral Italy’s cultural life was at the turn of the century. The new artistic and literary inventions that gained favor in Central Europe were ignored in Italy in the name of time-honoured national traditions. During the period 1895 – 1907 Marinetti’s brother and both his parents died. As a consequence Marinetti inherited a considerable fortune that enabled him to become a promoter and a generous sponsor of the arts and literature.

In addition to acting as a promoter of cultural life, Marinetti was also a highly prolific writer. His literary production consists of tens of manifestoes, several novels and short stories, theatre plays, poems, social and political writings, and a cook book. Nevertheless, history mainly remembers him as a founder of Futurism. Together with Cubism, Surrealism and Dada, Futurism is one of the so-called historical avant-garde movements. Still, what makes it different from the others is the vastness of its revolutionary
programme. Futurism was not only an artistic movement, but aimed at an all-encompassing revolution in arts, society, politics, and even aimed at reforming the human being.

The Futurists expressed their ideas explicitly in the numerous manifestoes they wrote and published during the five decades the movement existed. After the founding manifesto in 1909, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà and Luigi Russolo published the Manifesto of the Futurist painters in 1910. In 1911 Balilla Pratella published the Manifesto of the Futurist musicians, and in 1912 Valentine de Saint Point issued the Manifesto of the Futurist woman. Later other manifestoes in literature, arts, architecture, politics, ceramics, cuisine, and even mathematics followed.

The history of Futurism can roughly be divided into two parts. The first "heroic Futurism" (1909-1915) was avant-gardist, antagonist, and especially painters like Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà and Gino Severini guaranteed its high artistic value. The so-called second "second" futurism (1915-1944) that followed the First World War was, in many ways, different. The world was drastically changed by the war, but as Marinetti refused to reconsider his ideas, the result was an anachronistic movement. The close collaboration with the Fascist regime transformed the almost anarchist Futurism into a conformist movement. And finally, instead of a restricted group of internationally important artists, during the second phase of the movement's history Marinetti, by guaranteeing economic support, ever more eagerly recruited into Futurism hundreds of young artists whose name history has by now rightly forgotten.

The very basis of Futurism was the realization that technological development had created a completely new world, and had opened the most glorious period of human history. The worship of the contemporary world, the enthusiasm towards development and technology postulated the unreserved scorn of the past. Pär Bergman has given the blameless definition according to which "Futurism represents the modern human's most aggressive reaction to everything that is not part of his own time". All that Futurism was against, was baptized by Marinetti as "passatismo". "Passatismo" connoted history and the past in general, literary and artistic tradition, other political parties and especially the rising socialism, the Catholic Church and the Pope, cultural and social institutions such as museums, academies, libraries, marriage, and family,
and of course the masterpieces of Italian art. The only solution was to destroy them in order to make space for the brave new world of machines and machine-like men of whom all the kindness and feelings as well as other traces of humanity would have to be abolished.

The most salient characteristic of the modern world was speed produced by modern machines, new means of transport and communications, such as trains, cars and wireless telegraphy. The new world where "everything was moving fast" was also a superficial world where there was neither time nor reason for any kind of analysis or thinking. Whereas cubism brought into visual arts multiple points of view, Futurism represented speed. A salient example of a study of movement is Umberto Boccioni’s (1882 – 1916) sculpture "Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio" (1913). Also the Futurist cityscapes, instead of architectural monuments or scenes of city life are full of action and agitation, as for instance Carlo Carrà’s (1881-1966) “I funerali dell’anarchico Galli (The funerals of the anarchic Galli, 1910-1911)”, or Boccioni’s “La città che sale” (The city raises, 1910).

In the manifesto "Distruzione della sintassi – Immaginazione senza fili – Parole in libertà" (Destruction of Syntax, wireless imagination, words in freedom, 1913) Marinetti delineated a new telegraphic writing style for the Futurist literature. Among other things, the target was to represent reality in an objective way without any kind of deeper analysis. Words were “liberated”. Thus, the tenses were banned, and the verbs were used in the infinitive. Similarly the punctuation marks were abolished; metaphors and analogies were cultivated in order to enrich the image of reality, mathematical signs and onomatopoeic words synthesized the writer’s message, as also visual poetry in which drawing completed the written text.

Marinetti’s sound poem entitle Zang Tumb Tumb (1912) is an account of the Battle of Adrianople in the First Balkan War in 1912-1913, which he witnessed as a reporter. In addition to the war, Marinetti also dedicates lines to the city of Messina that was devastated by an earthquake in 1908, and that he reports according to the new telegraphic style:

"Messina improvisation rehearsal of a city that is about to go on stage indifference of the author sugars and joys of the atmosphere swing of serenades (3 baritones, 2 tenors) chilly
The enthusiasm about the modern world culminated in the Futurist machine idolatry. Marinetti assigned a new social role for arts and artists. He demanded them to descend from the ivory tower to the "piazza", in order to be in contact with modern reality. Also, the arts must glorify technology, the new divinity, and be inspired by it. "Machine idolatry" in a different form was a constant feature of Futurism. Among the most clarifying examples are, for instance, Fortunato Depero's (1892-1960) “Motociclista, solido in velocità" (A solid motorcyclist in speed, 1923), or Tullio Crali’s (1910-2000) "Incuneandosi nell'abitato" (Diving in the city, 1939). Machine idolatry made its way also to literature, for instance in Paolo Buzzi's (1874-1959) Gli aeroplani (1909, The Airplanes); Corrado Govoni’s (1884-1965): Poesie elettriche (1911, Electric Poems); Luciano Folgore’s (1888-1960) Il canto dei motori (1912, The Canto of the Motors).

The most tragic point of the Futurist cultural programme was the glorification of the war as the “world’s only hygiene”, or “the red holiday of the genius”. War occupied a central position both in Futurism and in Marinetti’s life as he fought in three different wars. War also sealed the destiny of Futurism. After the Second World War Futurism was rightly identified with Fascism, and this led to a decades-long silence and ignorance of the movement – unfortunately also of its artistic innovations.

All in all, the anatomy of the Futurist cultural renovation consisted in a farewell to humanism in every sense of the word. The Futurist programme exalted technology, machines, and sketched a mechanical superman that was supposed one day to replace the weak and sentimental human being. The overall destruction of the evidence of the past and of the contemporary institutions culminated in the brutal glorification of war. Thus, in the Futurist aggression there was no place for any kind of serenity, peace or harmony. Still, the reasons for such a programme were perhaps more tragic than the programme itself.

Marinetti was a nationalist who dreamed of Italy becoming a politically powerful, and culturally important country. According to him, Italy was a slave of her magnificent past, a museum in which it was impossible
to produce anything modern and in which there was no place for the young generations. For this reason
the country must be modernized in a drastic way. As he wrote in the Futurist Manifesto:

“It is from Italy that we launch through the world this violently upsetting incendiary
manifesto of ours. With it, today, we establish Futurism, because we want to free this land
from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, ciceroni and antiquarians. For too
long has Italy been a dealer in second-hand clothes. We mean to free her from the
numberless museums that cover her like so many graveyards.” [Marinetti, The Futurist
Manifesto, 1909]

Plus, behind his machine idolatry lay the (alas! so true) consciousness that only a technologically advanced
modern country could be important on the international level. In a lecture of 1910 he stated the following:

“You don’t need me to tell you that Patriotism means above everything else fortifying
national industry and commerce and intensifying the development of our intrinsic qualities
as a race in the forward march of our victory over competing races.” [Marinetti: "The
Necessity and Beauty of Violence", 1910]

And last but not least, his aggression was the consequence of his scepticism towards the international
situation:

“Italy must always maintain within itself a dual passion for either a possible proletarian
revolution or an even more likely patriotic war.” [Marinetti, “The Necessity and Beauty of
Violence”, 1910]

The problem in reconsidering Futurism is that Marinetti has quite often been taken literally. He was not a
lunatic who actually wanted to destroy the old Italian cities – as his correspondence and diaries during the
Second World War well demonstrate. Instead, his way of expression is to be taken as a new style and
discourse suitable for a new modern era. Exaggerated and shocking rhetorical devices aimed at capturing
attention to himself, to his ideas and to his movement, and this insight undoubtedly made of him a model of a modern “public figure”.

In addition to this, it is good to recognize that Marinetti was in many other ways ahead of his time. He preached the annihilation of time and space by modern means of transport and communication, and thus over 100 years before the Internet and cell phones he had understood the spatial and temporal simultaneity produced by technology. Futurist cuisine, in which each dish is a work of art, has several counterpoints in the so-called nouveau cuisine. Marinetti’s linguistic renovation with the use of mathematical signs among others is in use in today’s sms texts. Yet when it comes to the aggressiveness, regardless of the perennial tensions in international politics, hopefully we don’t need another Futurist cultural programme.