The Aesthetic Representation of Political Thought: Italian Futurism as a Political Movement

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MHIS321 Twentieth Century Europe

‘All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.’

An exploration of the Italian Futurism movement from 1909-1923 highlights that they were a potent political movement which established a new mode of political expression through aesthetic principles. Using Abel’s definition of a political movement as a group of individuals operating to establish societal change through promotion of a common interest with distinct issues and ideologies, this paper will argue that the Italian Futurists constituted a political movement in their aim of creating a new role for intellectuals and art in Italian political life. In a context of disillusionment for Italian intellectual activity, the Futurists’ messages of Italian rebirth and renewal through aesthetic representations promoted modernization, and addressed the tensions that modernization caused through aesthetic conceptions of political ideologies. Secondly, use of the aesthetic elements of machines and technology to address social reorganization constituted both a new way of incorporating aesthetics into political discourse, and positioned art and aesthetics as modes of political expression. Finally, the Futurists’ preoccupation with creating a totalizing aesthetic representation of war through visual and verbal spectacle created a new role for art and aesthetics in political life. Therefore, because of its treatment of modernity through art, Futurism came to be a potent political movement through creating a new political role for intellectuals through aesthetic representations of political ideologies.

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The origins of the Futurist movement in Italy can be traced to the publication of *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* in Parisian magazine *Le Figaro* in 1909. The founder, Fillipo Tomasso Marinetti, born into a wealthy north Italian family, had been raised in Alexandria till he was seventeen. His literary career started in Paris, and his collaboration with the Theatre de l’ Oeuvre would lead to him developing *Poesia* with the help of his Milanese contacts. This mixture of Italian nationalism, and disillusionment with the artistic aims of the Paris and Italian sphere developed the Futurist movement. However, it was a minor traffic incident, recorded in Milan’s newspaper *Il Corriere della sera* on the 15th October 1908, that would later be endowed with legendary proportions in the first manifesto. Later, the painters Carlo Carra, Umberto Boccioni and Luigi Russolo, architect Antonio Sant’Elia, and composers such as Francesco Pratella joined the movement.

The publication of this first manifesto, followed by many others, is significant in the context of the early 20th century due to disillusionments amongst intellectuals regarding Italian politics. Italian unification in 1860-1861 gave intellectuals hope they would have opportunity to bring the realm of their ideas into direct contact with politics. Marchicelli has highlighted that the avant-garde artists thought of themselves as occupying a privileged position and hoped for a sense of political expression through their art. Yet instability and frequent changes in Italian government, especially after the fall of Francesco Crispi’s liberal government in 1896, affected democracy due to unrest, rioting, unemployment and martial law. These issues continued until Giolitti’s second government (1903-1905). Supported by the centre-left, his policy was neutralist, with less use of the police and more improvement of policy, yet failed to appease the Socialist Party. These factors showed that if intellectuals wanted to play a role in society, such a role would have to be newly defined. Therefore, Italian intellectuals found the cultural environment unsuitable for artistic innovation, and participation either in parliament or the socialist movement was a

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disappointing experience. These disillusioned intellectuals (including later members of the Futurists) expanded their ideas in London, Berlin, Munich and Paris. Within the greater European environment, these artists, writers and poets were exposed to Marxist, Nietzschean, Darwinist and Sorelist philosophies. The illiterate and backward population, slow process of industrialisation, regionalism, and parliamentary corruption and stagnancy contributed to the growing need for intellectuals to assert a new political identity.

In the context of Italian political stagnancy, the Futurists’ ideology surrounding Italian rebirth and renewal was intensified as a political movement in their addressing of the aesthetic elements of rebirth, renewal, new and old. Furthermore, the concern with the aesthetics of old and new reflect an internal tension with the impacts of modernity on society. The Manifesto of the Futurist Painters explicitly made this connection between Italian intellectual progress and decay: ‘Italy is still a land of the dead, an immense Pompeii of whitewashed sepulchres. Italy must be reborn, and its political resurgence is being followed by an intellectual resurgence.’ With this in mind, Rainey has highlighted how the minor traffic accident was recreated into a birth-scene of traumatic and emancipating modernity, heralding the start of this Futurist movement. In The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909, the narrator stretches out in this car ‘like a corpse in its coffin’, but then revives under the violent ministration of the steering wheel, ‘a guillotine blade that menaced (his) stomach.’ The illustration of an industrially-charged urban environment would figure in all other manifestos, and the violence described by Marinetti of the steering wheel resuscitates both car and driver from a death and decay. The fall, in its trauma, is described like a childbirth: ‘Maternal ditch, nearly full of muddy water… which reminded me of the sacred black breast of my Sudanese nurse.’ Evocation of a colourful memory from Marinetti’s childhood sets the scene for many futurist manifestos to come and implicitly proposes an Italian rebirth which will shake away perceived failures of the parliamentary...

14 Ibid.
15 Oestereicher, “Fascism and the Intellectuals: The Case of Italian Futurism,” p. 525.
democracy. Such metaphors of happy childhood memories conflated with the trauma of childbirth address the nuances of dislocation by modernity. Thus, in the context of regionalism, illiteracy and an agriculturally dependant society, the Futurists viewed the Italian rebirth as possibly traumatic, but necessary.

While Cottom has argued that futurism’s integrity as a political movement may have been compromised because of its specific focus on the very past it disavowed, it is arguable that in reproducing and then discarding images of the past, Futurist works have a potent political power and successfully address the nuances and tensions that modernisation causes.

The anxiety and displacement of leaving behind the old can be seen in the Futurist’s fascination with the newly developed automobiles, trains and trams. An example is Boccioni’s triptych, States of Mind: The Farewells, Those who go, Those who stay (Fig.1). In his depiction of a train station, Boccioni has included blurred lines denoting a sense of speed engulfing embracing couples saying goodbye to each other. In their reconfiguring of the European metropolis, trams fractured senses of space and time in their unforeseen speed, disrupted tradition rhythms. In Boccioni’s triptych, the sense of leaving behind those who are spectators of this new development rather than participants evokes a sense of sadness juxtaposed with the sense

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22 Poggi, Inventing Futurism, p. 20.
of speed and power. Marinetti may have claimed: ‘we stand on the last promontory of the centuries!...why should we look back over our shoulders, when we intended to breach the mysterious doors of the Impossible?,’ but it was the looking towards the aesthetic elements of the past and inverting them through language of organic decay, vegetation, stagnancy and age that heightened the political potency of the Futurist manifestos. This constituted a powerful, persuasive and aesthetic challenge to the traditional artistic forms in favour of a newly reconfigured society.

The Futurists’ attempt to carve out a new political role for intellectuals was strengthened due to their elevation of machine principles, applied to the reorganisation of the state. Their use of aesthetic elements in the promotion of societal reorganisation, borrowing from machine and technology elements, provided them with a new dimension of political expression. Before Futurism, the machine was viewed as something external to man, but the Futurists promoted an intimate alliance between man and machine by conflating mechanic metaphors with organic and domestic language. In this sense, Futurism departs from Cubism in its celebration of mechanics and machine principles, despite borrowing from Cubism’s language and techniques of movement, dislocation and dismemberment.

The glorification of metropolitan and urban experiences was at the centre of their reorganisation principles due to influences from novelists Emile Verhaeren and Emile Zola, as well as regionalism in Italy and the divide in industrialisation between the North and the South. Hewitt highlights that in their depictions of Italy, the Futurists have named the State as a body, and the project of their politics is the liberation and renewal of the state body. It can be said that the centrality of technology in the Futurists’ oeuvre is representative of a desire for order, organisation and a vehicle of human and state liberation. The application of machine principles in Sant’Elia’s architectural works, and in Futurist Architecture

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23 Ibid., p. 21.
30 Ibid., pp. 146-147.
highlights how in their ideology of social reorganisation, the Futurists utilised aesthetic elements of machine principles and conceived a reorganisation of the urban environment. Sant’Elia wrote: ‘we must invent and rebuild our Futurist city like an immense and tumultuous shipyard...the Futurist house like a gigantic machine.’\textsuperscript{31} The language evokes a sense of mechanical utopia, and attaches to the previously discussed thematic concern of discarding any tradition. Importantly, Sant’Elia domesticates Futurist architecture by saying ‘Futurist house’ and adds aesthetic consideration by qualifying it as ‘everywhere dynamic.’ The Futurist house is likened to an ‘immense shipyard’, and a ‘gigantic machine’ which reveals a reproduction with the aesthetic elements of industrial modernity. The rebuilding of the Futurist utopian city was held to be detached from any historical stylistic tradition, ‘gleaning every benefit of science and technology.’\textsuperscript{32} Sant’Elia’s argument for a new attitude to architecture, unmarred by notions of tradition or history was founded on a central belief that each generation would build its own style of metropolis.\textsuperscript{33} Echoing a sense of impermanence, similar to Le Corbusier, Sant’Elia’s ‘Futurist city’ evoked the hope in \textit{Founding and Manifesto of Futurism} that each Italian generation would move ahead.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, p. 199.
\textsuperscript{33} Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozolla, \textit{Futurism} (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993): p. 130.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 130.
Alongside the built environment, the Futurists’ treatment of urban populations also reveals the implementation of machine principles and social reorganisation. In particular, Umberto Boccioni’s work highlights the influence of Socialism on social reorganisation within the built environment and the impact technology has on the crowd. Boccioni’s *Riot in the Galleria* (Fig.2) and *The City Rises* (Fig.3) depict crowds within an urban setting, and portray a sense of collective action. The *City Rises*, in its depiction of labourers in the periphery of Milan, can be interpreted as portraying a sense of will to power of the male Italian crowd. the latter is a Divisionist work with the red horse dissolving due to its own energy whilst the twisting figures of the workmen are both sympathetic and celebratory. The sympathetic depiction of the crowd of labourers seems draws from Socialist and Marxist principles in the depiction of them as a mobile and colourful mass.

However, both works celebrate the energy of the urban crowd: the crowds in both paintings appear connected via a radiant light and polyphonic colour. It is arguable that the urban crowd receives its most political treatment in Luigi Russolo’s painting *The Revolt* (Fig.4). Russolo’s crowd is male, and invincible, and is contrasted from *Riot*, and the bright red and

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36 Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, p. 44.
37 Ibid., p. 82.
orange lines allow the viewer to follow the direction of the crowd’s aggression.\textsuperscript{38} Importantly, \textit{The Revolt} can be interpreted as an illustration of the Futurist reorganisation principle, seen in Sant’Elia’s \textit{Futurist Architecture}, and takes on a mechanical collective identity.\textsuperscript{39} In the context of the view that the Italian masses were backward, led by an inept and corrupt parliament, this reorganisation of the city and the crowd by the Futurists represented a political goal of societal reorganisation through aesthetic principles..\textsuperscript{40}

The Futurists’ promotion of violence and war is arguably the most concrete political ideology they espouse through their manifestos and artworks. Through novel representations of violence and war, they constituted a potent and dynamic new mode of political movement. This emphasis strengthens the totalising political potency of the movement through the use of aesthetic representation of political ideology. Sharkey and Dombrovski highlight that the body of work produced by the Futurists is a ‘poetic correlative’ relevant to a state of perpetual strife and aggression.\textsuperscript{41} This use of Marxist historiography is useful in its argument that all futurist representation of violence translates to a ‘struggle’ because it is both a passive expression of the class situation, and an active strategy to improve the class position.\textsuperscript{42} The aesthetisation of politics found its ultimate expression in the icons of war, violence and Fascist politics.\textsuperscript{43} Through the use of spectacle, the introduction of aesthetics into political language has the effect of strengthening political discourse by supplying artistic justification and gratification.\textsuperscript{44} In \textit{The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism}, Marinetti’s claim that the Futurists intend to glorify war as the ‘only hygiene of the world’ highlights the thematic preoccupation of the Futurists with the aesthetisation of war: they intend to glorify ‘militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture

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\caption{Luigi Russolo, \textit{The Revolt} (1911). Taken from the Tate Modern Exhibition on Futurism.}
\end{figure}

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\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid., p. 50.
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of anarchists, beautiful ideas worth dying for."\textsuperscript{45} Georges Sorel’s doctrine of political violence, conflated with the philosophy of direct and destructive action pursuant to Anarchism would inform the Futurists’ exultation of war.\textsuperscript{46} Ialongo has argued that this theme of violence connects to Futurism’s later connection with Fascism, alongside influences of Sorelism and anarchism.\textsuperscript{47} The Italian government’s membership of the Triple Alliance at the start of the World War I led to Italy remaining neutral, but this did not satisfy the bellicose ideologies of the Futurists, and they, along with other intellectual groups, saw the war as a chance to unify Italy as a national community.\textsuperscript{48} Sharkey discusses how Marinetti’s 1910 speech, ’The Beauty and Necessity of Violence’, evokes Sorel’s Reflections on violence.\textsuperscript{49} Sorelism, and Nietzschean thought influenced the futurist call to war, which can be seen in manifestos such as \textit{The Futurist Synthetic Theatre} not only focussed on the aesthetics of war but also notions of a will to power, the \textit{ubermensch} and direct action: ’...using our art to prepare the Italian sensibility for the great hour of maximum danger...war, which is futurism intensified – demands that we march and not moulder.’\textsuperscript{50} In \textit{The Futurist Cinema}, war was to ‘satisfy all national aspirations’, and multiply ‘the innovative power of the Italian race.’\textsuperscript{51} Although Appollonio has commented on the Futurist predilection of using colourful polemic, it is precisely this ‘verbal spectacle’ that contributed

\textsuperscript{46} Bowler, “Politics as Art,” p. 768.
\textsuperscript{48} Christopher Duggan, \textit{A Concise History of Italy} (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1994): p. 189.
\textsuperscript{49} Sharkey and Dombrovski, “Revolution, Myth and Mythical Politics,” p. 240.
\textsuperscript{50} F.T. Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli, Bruno Corra, “The Futurist Synthetic Theatre (1915),” \textit{Futurism: An Anthology}, p. 204.
to the political status of Futurist discourse. the new way of advocating political violence through aesthetic representation was to transpose metaphors of struggle, violence and war into a totalising representation through art. Examining Futurist war paintings produced in response to the First World War reveals a concern with violence, struggle and war. Gino Severini’s Armoured Train in Action (Fig.5) and Canon en Action (Fig.6) highlight the tensions and reactionary nature of the Futurists’ call to war. Armoured Train highlights a sense of masculine bellicosity as well as a sense of usurpation by machine. The men are faceless, taking aim simultaneously, and bright colours towards the left of the painting highlight the power and violence of collective militarism. However, at the same time, they appear imprisoned inside the giant metallic body of the train and are dwarfed by the clean lines of the train in contrast to the fractured men. Poggi describes this as a juxtaposition of ‘abstract organic forms’ against the metallic forms and the detail given to each rivet that grapples with the tension against modernity. Canon en Action similarly represents soldiers as passive and mute in contrast to the vibrant lines and colours surrounding the tank and the dynamic directions. In the glorification of the aesthetic elements of war, technology and violence, the artworks address a totalising representation of modern warfare.

54 Poggi, Inventing Futurism, p. 176.  
55 Ibid., p. 178.
The manifesto format also highlights an aesthetic preoccupation with representing and promoting war. Marinetti, in a letter to painter Henry Maassen, highlighted that in order to create a manifesto it required ‘de la violence et de la precision’, which also evokes Ezra Pound’s theory of ‘words as machines’. Perloff writes that after the French revolution, the manifesto was a medium for expressing antagonism against the ruling class, or existing state of affairs. Carra’s wartime painting, *Interventionist Demonstration (Free-word Painting)* (Fig.7) is similar to Robert Delauney’s aim of providing a new vantage point in his artwork such as *The Red Tower*. The use of the slogan ‘Trieste Italiana Milano’ against fragments of Futurist manifestos, political pamphlets and advertisements for hygiene products can be interpreted as an attempt at a totalising aesthetic representation of war via promotion of war and violence, especially because Trieste was not in Italian territory at the start of World War I. Perloff refers to the juxtaposition of words alongside brightly coloured circular vortex as ‘visual overkill’. However, as Bowler argues, the visual cacophony in the wartime paintings attempt to create a new revolutionary art form and thus create a new political role for intellectuals in Italian society. Their 1923 manifesto titled *The Italian Empire (To Benito Mussolini – Head of the New Italy)* privileges art and aesthetic conceptualisations of war by celebrating Mussolini’s Italy as: ‘hostile to a monarchy that has been anti-artistic.’ Rather, the Futurists celebrate Fascism as ‘preparing an empire of genius, art, force, unequalism,

58 Ibid., p. 82.
61 Bowler, “Politics as Art,” p. 765.
62 F.T. Marinetti, Mario Carlo, Emilio Settimelli, “The Italian Empire (To Benito Mussolini – Head of the New Italy) (1923),” *Futurism: An Anthology*, p. 274.
beauty, mind, elegance, originality, colour, fantasy." Thus, the focus on spectacle such as the new art forms such as evoking the vantage point of an aviator, or the use of vocal cacophony and collage is an attempt at revolutionary reform as well as a totalising representation of the elements of war.

The Italian Futurists’ attempt to create a new political role for intellectuals in political life focussed on the use of aesthetic representations of notions of Italian rebirth, renewal, social reorganisation, and war, and fulfils Abel’s definition of a political movement as a group attempting to establish a societal change. In their focus on aesthetic representations, Futurism’s political goals were made clear through the use of verbal and visual spectacle. Futurists’ goal of Italian rebirth and the trauma of rebirth highlighted their political ideology of Italian nationalism, whilst their promotion of machine principles applied itself to social reorganisation. Finally, their aggressive promotion of war offered a totalising aesthetic representation of war. Through collective influences of European philosophes as well as disillusionment caused by Italian political life, the Futurists thus constituted a potent political movement.

Bibliography

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63 Ibid.
64 Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, p. 52.


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