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In Motion

Futurism is dead without forward motion. Futurism is dead without speed. The Futurist movement stubbornly rejects its predecessors and focuses on what is here right now and how *we* can move forward. To its founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, there is no reason to look towards yesterday, because society already moves with enough velocity to push forward indefinitely; why waste time on yesterday when we have what we need to reach tomorrow?[1] Still, Marinetti does not completely discard the past, as he exploits long-understood aspects of human psychology in order to incite specific reactions from Futurist audiences. "The Manifesto of Futurism" encourages poets and artists alike to appeal to the audience's raw, "primordial" senses in the efforts of boosting enthusiasm for the movement's ideals.[2] And, so as to impact the largest possible audience, Futurism condenses much of this sensory appeal into theater, a particularly popular medium in Italy.[3] Futurist theater effectively translates the philosophies of the entire Futurist movement, but it risks inaccessibility because it is undeniably avant-garde, a deviation from anything and everything an audience may expect from usual plays and performances. Thus, the question arises: How does Futurist theater distinguish itself within the historical avant-garde so that its intended influence transcends other potential interpretations, and so that a Futurist play is not mistaken for mere artistic expression, other genres of avant-garde theater, or even nonsense?

Futurism screams, "EVERYTHING OF ANY VALUE IS THEATRICAL."[4] Yet, scholars agree that studies of the avant-garde tend to leave out Futurist theater while including paintings and other works from the Futurist movement.[5] This can be understood due to Futurist theater's explorations of theater and technologies that were far ahead of its time, and Futurism's association with Fascism. Fascist associations have tarnished the movement's reputation as a whole, but Futurist theater suffers the most because it is often discussed through its interpretations rather than the art itself.[6] Thus, I think it is wise to view Futurist theater separately from its political influences, and instead analyze *how* it achieves its particular political influence on the audience instead of *what* the political influence is that it achieves.

It is important to recognize the fundamental role of theater within Futurism, since the movement incorporates most mediums of artistic expression.[7] After Marinetti stopped working on his journal *Poesia* [*Poetry*], he declared that "poems, articles, and debates were no longer sufficient" (Rainey 5). After his six years with the journal, he felt that the work he published was unable to stimulate the Italian public's stagnant and commercial taste. Instead, he specifically cited theater as an ample medium for his emerging Futurist cause.[8] Furthermore, the importance of theater can be clearly seen in his manifesto, "The Futurist Synthetic Theater". Published in 1915, the manifesto declares the nuances of Futurist theater as well as theater's superiority over other mediums in its power to convey Futurist themes. The manifesto declares that theater is the only way to reach Italian audiences, particularly because a vast majority of Italians go to the theater while a minority read.[9] Additionally, as a live art, theater has the luxury to directly appeal to the audience's senses, without the need to translate visual or intellectual experiences into emotions. Paintings and poems only create illusions of various sensory experiences, while theater is interactive, in motion, listenable, and even in its most bizarre moments, understandable.

Futurism baffles me, and in response to its boyish violence I feel angry. This is perfect, because the Futurists would want me to be angry as much as I am courageous, nationalistic, and war-hungry.[10] Futurist theater is boyish, not only due to its "contempt for women,"[11] but also because of its youthful, passionate struggle. There is little to no consideration for logic, because these playwrights must achieve whatever their hearts desire against all odds. Thus, I believe there is a funny contradiction in the odd laws that govern Futurist theater, specifically in the concept of "primitivism." "The Futurist Synthetic Theater" specifically states, "*It's stupid* to pander to the primitivism of the crowd, which, in the last analysis, wants to see the bad guy lose and the good guy win" (Cardullo 203). Meanwhile, Innes argues that primitivism strongly represents avant-garde theater through two ostensibly contradictory but truly complementary characteristics: first, that avant-garde theater transforms the stage into a meta-theatrical lab for experiments, and second, that it focuses on psychology to both analyze the "roots" of theater and of prehistoric man.[12] To Innes, there is a direct correlation between the past and the future, balanced and represented in the present. Futurist theater rejects its own definition of "primitivism," which is related to the audience's experiences with the theater of their time. This is particularly relevant in Italy's rich theatrical environment. Yet, Innes' definition of "primitivism" seems apt to describe transgressions made by Futurist playwrights. Futurist playwrights are both adhering to and rejecting these two definitions of primitivism, which perhaps further demonstrates the boyishness, or rash naivety, of their theatrical plight.

Futurist theater is confusing because it makes sense. It intends to incite the audience, which is achieved though a contradictory duality. Innes defines this duality through his concept of "primitivism," wherein each Futurist theatrical piece has two intentions. Each play can arouse the audience though empathy, where an observer may identify with the play's messages of

transgression. Or, conversely, each play can arouse the audience through frustration and anger, where an observer may find him or herself completely lost and furious with the performance. By establishing an empathic connection with the observor, Futurist plays appeal to an experimental form of theater that toys with actor-audience relationships, as well as advancements in artistic expression.[13] By frustrating the spectator, Futurist plays appeal to the audience's primordial sensibilities, in which an observer's psyche is prodded instead of nurtured.[14] Either way, we are not allowed to be calm.

Take, for instance, Angelo Rognoni's *Education*, or *Insegnamento*. The play consists of five lines of dialogue that incite two probable responses. Either the audience feels frustratingly trapped with the problem presented by the play's message, or the audience feels frustrated at the inconceivability of the play's message. The play depicts an aging professor, who thrice recites the same boring lecture on Dante's greatness. The professor's demeanor changes over what is indicated as thirty years, so that his enthusiasm towards the subject and youth chronologically fades. Meanwhile, a pupil asks the simple question, "Why?" which reveals that the professor unquestionably follows his lesson word-for-word from what is printed. An observer will most likely interpret the play's message as a call to action against the monotony and stagnation of modern education. Clearly, the audience can easily reject this message, as it poses a polemic stance against something that the large population accepts: the canon. Nevertheless, both reactions to the play arise from similar types of emotions.

Please note that I am not trying to prove that Futurist theater has an effect on the audience, rather that Futurist theater is effective at instigating a particular response in the efforts of creating a new environment. In Futurism's case, the environment focuses on political and cultural upheaval. Regardless, all forms of theater stimulate their audiences in some way or

another, whether the play, production, or performance is good or bad. Futurist theater is *effective*. With the establishment of "The Variety Theater" in 1913, Marinetti laid out the grounds upon which all Futurist theater would explore.[15] The later development of synthetic plays, or *sintesi*, ironed out Futurism's avant-garde theater into an appetizing form. *Sintesi* evolved Futurist theater through the use of extreme brevity.[16] Later developments would be much less significant to the Futurist movement, such as "The Theater of Surprise" in 1921, which only complicated previous Futurist manifestos by implying a new "*anti*political attitude."[17] Nonetheless, many of Futurism's innovations were not directly political and pioneered new artistic forms of expression.

Futurist theater is particularly admirable for its adventurous, often impossible, usage of technology. This coincides with the movement's premise of creating a "rebellion against Italy's stagnant and *passéist* cultural malaise" (Dixon 48), as Futurists always pushed forwards, especially when they had to overcome great struggle.[18] Some Futurist plays directly evoke mechanical imagery, like Fillia's *Mechanical Sensuality*, or *Sensualità Meccanica*. Fillia utilizes elements of digital performance by replacing living actors with symbolic figures, specifically "The Spiral," "The Cube," and "The Machine." Fillia's characters are represented by human voices, but modern plays utilize animations and projections to completely replace actors.[19] Futurist plays also heavily depend on simultaneity and parallelism. For instance, Giacomo Balla's *Disconcerted States of Mind*, or *Sconcertazione di Stati d'Animo* features four moments of simultaneous action by four actors that recite different utterances and perform different movements, but all do so "together." Dixon states, "…the use of simultaneous, parallel action on stage…can equally be related to interactive theater forms and performance CD-ROMs which present the user with options on what to choose to focus on and follow" (49). Futurist

playwrights did not actually use this technology, since it wasn't invented yet, but the ideas they evoke in their plays resemble the qualities of modern-day machines and digital performances.

Even though Futurism's use of technology can be viewed as its own artistic innovation, it still serves an important role within the movement's exploration of the sensory, and therefore political directives.[20] Technology allows for plays to appeal to the audience's senses in a unique way, where the non-realist employment of theatrical sight and sound are able to transcend everyday experiences. Thus, a play can exploit an observer's senses to achieve a specific response. For instance, Marinetti's *A Landscape Heard,* or *Un Paesaggio Udito* has no actors nor dialogue, no characters, not even any designated visual element. Instead, the play consists only of sounds, which are repetitions of "lapping" and "crackling" until "the whistle of a blackbird" breaks through at the end. What kind of response might this play achieve? It may easily aggravate an observer, who may feel as if she or he had wasted 113 seconds. Meanwhile, the play does not convey any clear message. Perhaps then, Marinetti intends to bypass the audience's intellectual interpretation of the text and to instead focus on stimulating their senses. In this case, a natural sound breaks a seemingly never-ending onslaught of repetitive tension, which evokes rebellious attitudes against stagnation even though there is no dialogue. Futurist plays often reduced the number of actors and lines of dialogue to few or none,[21] in order to allow for these plays to prioritize sensory experiences and incite the audience directly. Yet, there is unseen aspect of *A Landscape Heard* that deepens the experience, which is the play's lack of a traditional plot structure or narrative.

"Some of the sintesi obviously made great demands on the ability of the audience to understand the new idiom" (Cardullo 193), and sometimes audiences could only comfortably latch onto sounds or images, elements that stimulated the senses. In Italian Futurist plays, plot

structures are usually ignored; Paolo Buzzi's *3nomial Voices Whirlpool Destruction,* or *3nomio Voci Gorgo Distruzione* is a pictorial instead of a textual script, so that actors have to interpret the image into action. Thus, there are two degrees of distortion from what Buzzi may have originally intended, which can either frustrate the audience with nonsense or distill the play's message into its purest form. Furthermore, Marinetti's *A Landscape Heard* features one line of stage directions that possibly serves to translate the sounds into a narrative. The unseen script is vital to decipher the performance, but the audience does not get to see the drawing, the stage directions, or really anything structural. The audience seeks associations with what they know, any familiar sounds, any physical bodies, or anything at all that can be understood based on previous knowledge. These plays focus on the challenge, the sensory experience, and the reaction to what the eyes see and what the ears hear in order to create meaning. Futurist playwrights succeed because they intend to put the audience through this struggle and change what and how theater means for the observer.[22]

Of course, it is very hard to avoid talking about the fascist influence, but Futurism's associations with Fascism shouldn't spoil the fun. Futurism is, in a way, about pure boyishness, "the beauty of speed," the "man at the steering wheel," the struggle for beauty, and the intention to shake with world with "work, pleasure, or rebellion."[23] Futurism is first and foremost about phenomenal experience. Sure, many of its characteristics were extreme enough to reasonably scare people away, particular female members. Still, Mina Loy wrote a feminist Futurist manifesto and several Futurist plays from 1913 to 1915.[24] Futurism's founding members limited the scope of the movement, but subsequent movements, such as Dada, Surrealism, and Expressionism broadened the spectrum.[25] Futurism is almost entirely gone, except for maybe a few theaters in New York or elsewhere, but I still feel something when I try to imagine what an

audience may have felt during Buzzi's *3nomial Voices Whirlpool Destruction*, or Balla's *Disconcerted States of Mind*. There is something very poignant there, and I get frustrated when I cannot fully understand it, but maybe that is just how it is meant to be.

Notes

[1] See the eighth declaration listed in Marinetti's "The Manifesto of Futurism".

[2] As listed above, see the sixth declaration. Furthermore, many declarations in the Manifesto state the various primitive characteristics that Futurism encourages.

[3] See "The Futurist Synthetic Theater", first page.

[4] "The Futurist Synthetic Theater", the second of eight declarations against the Techniques of Greek theater.

[5] See Kirby's introduction to *Futurist Performance*, as well as Dixon's chapter on "Futurism and the Early-Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde", where Futurism is "merely 'one on a long list,'" which has "marginalized its central position in the lineage of performance and technology" (47).

[6] See Kirby, pages four and five.

[7] The influence of Futurism is strongly felt in almost every area of performance, excluding dance (Kirby 152).

[8] The Futurist manifesto was written shortly after this statement. Marinetti was in a car accident prior to his change in career, and the accident is referenced in the manifesto as a source of inspiration.

[9] The specific statistic is stated as, "In fact, 90 percent of Italians of to the theater, whereas only 10 percent read books and reviews" (Rainey 204).

[10] See the declarations listed in Marinetti's "The Manifesto of Futurism". Every declaration is relevant here.

[11] As listed above, see the ninth declaration.

[12] Innes, *Avant-Garde Theatre: 1892-1992,* page eight, "The Cult of the Primitive".

[13] See Kirby, pages twenty-two to twenty-four. "The Variety Theater" opposed conventions of a "fourth wall" in favor of spatially and sensually interacting with the audience. His variety theater also utilized media that was considered out of place in "legitimate theater," like the use of motion pictures in order to further stimulate the audience.

[14] Avant-garde is usually hostile to "modern society and all the artistic forms that reflect its assumptions" (Innes 8).

[15] The full manifesto can be see in *Futurism: An Anthology,* pages 159 to 164.

[16] See Kirby, page forty-one.

[17] For more analysis, see the chapter on "The Theater of Surprise" from *Futurist Performance.* The actual manifesto can be seen in *Futurism: An Anthology*, pages 270 to 272.

[18] See the seventh declaration in "The Manifesto of Futurism".

[19] See Dixon, "Time for Virtual Actors", page fifty-five.

[20] This is relevant to Dixon's quote from art historian Giovanni Lista: "The Futurists wanted to reformulate the myth of the total work of art, attuned with urban civilization and its vital, sensorial experience…" (49).

[21] See Cardullo, pages 192 to 193.

[22] This is extrapolated from the "Conclusions" listed in "The Futurist Synthetic Theater". Furthermore, Cardullo writes, "While the success of the dramatists in achieving this ambition was varied, serious attempts were made to create a new theatrical idiom, and to work up the sensibilities of the audience in a new way" (194).

[23] From the declarations in "The Manifesto of Futurism", most of which are relevant here.

[24] For more information regarding aspects of Futurism that were less extreme, see page forty-eight of *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation.*

[25] See Dixon, "Dada, Surrealism, and Expression", pages sixty-seven to seventy-one.

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