

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



**Marinetti, Machine, and Superman: Or About the Destructiveness of Technology**

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**The New World**

Futurism was one of the so-called historical avant-garde movements. It was founded in 1909 by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) and ended, in practice, with his death in 1944. Futurism aimed to accomplish an all-encompassing “revolution”, not only in different forms of art, including literature, theatre and music, but also in politics, fashion, cuisine, mathematics, and in every other aspect of human life.

Marinetti intended to use Futurism to modernize art and society. Thus, one of the central features of the movement was the glorification of modernity, the main symbols of which included technology, the car, the aeroplane, and the big city. In Marinetti’s eyes Italy was a museum, a receptacle for the

monuments of the past, and thus incapable of creating anything new. The solution was drastic and unequivocal. The past, which was embodied in museums, historical monuments, and ancient Italian cities, was to be destroyed. The old world was to be replaced by a new Futurist world of steel and machines. As Marinetti wrote in the Foundation manifesto of 1909:

“11. We shall sing of great multitudes who are roused up by work, by pleasure, or by rebellion; of the many-hued, many-voiced tides of revolution in our modern capitals; of the pulsating, nightly ardour of arsenals and shipyards, ablaze with their violent electric moons; of railway stations, voraciously devouring smoke-belching serpents; of workshops hanging from the clouds by their twisted threads of smoke; of bridges which, like giant gymnasts, bstride the rivers, flashing in the sunlight like gleaming knives; of intrepid steamships that sniff out the horizon; of broad-breasted locomotives, champing on their wheels like enormous steel horses, bridled with pipes; and the lissom flight of the airplane, whose propeller flutters like a flag in the wind, seeming to applaud, like a crowd excited.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Man and Machine**

Marinetti's idolatry of modernity, which he called 'modernolatry', was based on the belief that technology had substantially improved the capacity of human beings. New forms of transportation, such as cars, trains and aeroplanes, and new means of communication, like newspapers and radio, had transcended the limitations of time and space. Humans were living in different places but in the same moment. This observation was transformed into the metaphorical statement that man had finally conquered infinity and became immortal.<sup>2</sup> As Marinetti wrote in the Founding manifesto: “Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the realms of the Absolute, for we have created infinite, omnipresent speed.”<sup>3</sup>

With technology, humans had finally gained full domination over the universe, and tamed the hostile natural world. Indeed, from an early stage, Nature in Marinetti's cosmology is characterized by aggressive, violent forces.<sup>4</sup> During his Futurist period this culminated in the figure of the Vulcan in the epic poem *L'Aeroplano del Papa* (1912) and the earthquake in the poem *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914). However, already in his pre-Futurist epic poem, *La Conquête des étoiles* (1902), the backdrop is formed by the monster-like 'Sovereign Sea', which has a spongy face, burning pupils and a mouth that opens like a plunger (*ventouse*). [71] In the 'crepuscular nightmare', when the Night 'dribbles the flows of shadow' and 'licks the light with his brown tongue', 'the Fatidic Mountain' vacillates like 'a cathedral constructed by Titans'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in the first Futurist novel, *Mafarka il futurista* (1910), Nature is energetic and violent, dominated by 'chaotic mountains' [37] and by a monster-like sea that has 'sparkling blue teeth' [37]. In the African sky a fierce Sun '[rides] bareback on its untameable black mare, convulsed with speed'.<sup>6</sup>

Respect, if not fear, towards the forces of Nature seems to be a fundamental element of Marinetti's ideology. In a conference entitled "The Necessity and Beauty of Violence" (1910), he spoke of 'the dark forces of Nature, ensnared in the nets and traps of chemical and mechanical formulas, and therefore enslaved by mankind.' However, man's control is not complete, nor necessarily enduring, and the risk persists that these enchained forces will one day 'wreak a terrible revenge, leaping at our throats, with all the impetuous savagery of mad dogs.'<sup>7</sup>

In order to control the "dark forces of Nature", humans needed technology. During the 1930s, when aviation made remarkable progress, the pilot was seen as the new Master of the Universe. In a newspaper article Marinetti wrote:

"The aviators have started a new era in the history of humanity. Dressed in asbestos, they are masters of motors, the power of which is divine. With their flights around the

earth, they have dwindled it, like a fresh, wrinkled orange to be squeezed and eaten with *delice*.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Man Like a Machine**

Nevertheless, technology was not only a tool of control and conquest, for Marinetti also envisioned a utopia of mechanised man. The idea of a machine-like, omniscient man had its roots in thinkers like Leonardo da Vinci, who had made analogies between the organic body and a mechanical system, Descartes, with his mechanical man, and Lamarck, who had presented the theory of transformation in *Philosophie zoologique* (1809). Subsequently Jacques Loeb (1859-1924) stated that “All living things are chemical machines.”<sup>9</sup>

The idea of an omniscient, immortal cyborg is present in Marinetti from the inception of Futurism. In the first Futurist novel, *Mafarka the Futurist* (1909), the hero, Mafarka, creates a son, Gazurmah, by a fusion of man and machine:

“On the other hand, you can announce to everyone that I have become the crafter of mechanic birds!... You are laughing?... Ha! You don’t understand?... I craft and give birth to my son, a huge and invincible bird who has big, flexible wings, made for embracing the stars!... // Nothing has power over him... Neither the kicks of the storm nor the whips of the wind!... He is down there, in the bottom of the gulf and you can see him... For thirty days, as my work goes on, I have never doubted that I would make a son of him, a son truly worth my soul.... Infinity is his!”<sup>10</sup>

In the manifesto “Extended man and the Kingdom of the Machine” (1910), Marinetti further developed his utopia, with the requirement of “the imminent, inevitable identification of man with his motorcar”. The final result was a non-human being free of the “moral anguish, goodness,

affection, and love” that, according to Marinetti, were “the singular corrosive poison”. The ideal being was, instead, cruel, omniscient, and combative.<sup>11</sup>

Marinetti’s advocacy of the extended man was a consequence of his pessimistic vision of the modern world. In the conference “The Necessity and Beauty of Violence” (1910), he stated that “by virtue of the lightning development of science and the marvellous conquest of speed, both on the earth and in the sky, with life having become ever more tragic and the ideal of an idyllic rural serenity having departed forever, the human heart must now become ever more accustomed to imminent danger.”<sup>12</sup> Not only did Marinetti hold a bleak view of modernization, but his idea of the international politics was anything but peaceful. Instead it was characterized by a social Darwinian battle between nations in which only the fittest could survive. Technology was a necessary, indeed vital, tool for ruling over both Nature and nations. In addition, technological progress was necessary for a country that wished to be important on the international stage. In the same conference he claimed:

”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.”<sup>13</sup>

This “march of victory over competing races” is not to be taken metaphorically, for Marinetti’s ideology, and the entire Futurist programme, was based on an extreme form of patriotism according to which love of the fatherland was the highest of values.<sup>14</sup> This kind of religious devotion to the fatherland was the answer to the spiritual crisis of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century caused by the lack of values in newly emerged mass society. In 1915 Marinetti wrote that “the word ITALY must dominate over the word ‘freedom’”.<sup>15</sup> Citizens needed to sacrifice themselves completely to the Fatherland. From this point of view, individual freedom was secondary.

Marinetti's patriotism explains his urge to modernize the country, and it also explains the reason for his glorification of war as "the sole cleanser of the world".<sup>16</sup> Since the beginning of his literary career, it was clear to Marinetti that there would be war between nations, and for that reason he claimed that "Italy must always maintain within itself a dual passion for either a possible proletarian revolution or an even more likely patriotic war."<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, he was right, and not only once: after the First World War Marinetti published several theoretical works in which he repeated his conviction about future war as an inevitable consequence of the precarious international situation.<sup>18</sup>

The battlefield was the place where the extended man was to emerge. In the novel *L'Alcova d'acciaio* (The Alcove of Steel, 1921), the presence of gas transforms the trenches into "a chemical laboratory full of mad scientists".<sup>19</sup> The divinization of the human being through technology takes place, as the soldier becomes a "mechanical superman" who with his gas mask presents the "most original profile of a diver submerged in a sea of asphyxiating and lachrymal gas" [24].<sup>20</sup>

### **The Kingdom of the Extended Man**

Metaphorically speaking, Marinetti's vision of the extended man and the metallized environment were both realized (in part) by Fascism. Mussolini did indeed modernize the country with railways, industry, and even with several programmes to urbanize the population. In the totalitarian state which Italy became in the 1930s, the wholesale indoctrination of the Italian people with the Fascist *credo* was intended to give them at least some of the qualities of Marinetti's mechanical man, not least in order for them to become virtuous soldiers for the coming wars.<sup>21</sup>

Futurism has been identified with Fascism on many occasions, which is not so farfetched. Futurists participated in the foundation of the Fascist movement in 1919, and Marinetti was member of the Fascist party from 1922 until his death in 1944. He also held an important position in the cultural life of the regime, as he was a member of the Italian Academy since 1929, the regime's official war

propagandist, and president of the writers' trade union. Nevertheless, Futurism never became the official art of Fascism.<sup>22</sup>

In part the reasons for this are to be found in the regime's tolerance. Italian Fascism never had a strict art policy, because for Mussolini "[e]very art done in Fascist Italy [was] Fascist".<sup>23</sup>

Consequently, many different movements continued to thrive, and artistic life in Italy was exceptionally diverse. The important international and national exhibitions of the time give a good idea of the different artistic currents that flourished in Mussolini's Italy. Futurist art was well represented in all of these exhibitions, including the Venice Biennales, the Quadriennale of Rome, the Exhibition of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fascist Revolution of 1932, and the Universal Exhibition of Rome that was supposed to take place in 1942.<sup>24</sup>

The popularity of Futurist art in these official Fascist exhibitions is logical, as better than any other artistic movement of the period, it was able to convey the idea of a modern, technologically advanced country. Moreover, it transmitted the ideal of the extended man, which Marinetti had already presented before the First World War. It was an ideal that Mussolini must also have found appealing.

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<sup>1</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Critical Writings*, ed. by Günter Berghaus (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006), 14.

<sup>2</sup> For Marinetti's conception of time, see Marja Härmänmaa: "Time and Space Died Yesterday - F. T. Marinetti's ideas about 'time' and 'tradition'," in *CD Rom of the Proceedings of the 6th International Conference of ISSEI, Twentieth Century European Narratives: Tradition & Innovation*, 2001

<sup>3</sup> F.T. Marinetti, *Critical Writings*, 14.

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<sup>4</sup> For Marinetti's idea about Nature, see Marja Härmänmaa, "Futurism and Nature: The Death of the Great Pan?," in *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, ed. by Günter Berghaus (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2009), 337-360.

<sup>5</sup> F.T. Marinetti, *Scritti francesi*, ed. by Pasquale A. Jannini (Milano: Mondadori, 1983), 92-93.

<sup>6</sup> F.T. Marinetti, *Mafarka the Futurist: An African Novel* (London: Middlesex University Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>7</sup> F.T. Marinetti, "Necessity and Beauty of Violence", in *Critical Writings*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> F.T. Marinetti: "L'Arte futurista italiana", *Aeropittura arte sacra futuriste: Mostra organizzata dalla Casa d'Arte della Spezia novembre-dicembre 1932* (Terni: Casa d'Arte La Spezia), 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Ingo Bartsch: "L'uomo meccanizzato nell'ideologia del futurismo", in *Futurismo, 1909-1944. Arte, architettura, spettacolo, grafica, letteratura...* Ed. by Enrico Crispolti (Milano: Mazzotta, 2001), 27; Marja Härmänmaa, *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza: F.T. Marinetti e l'idea dell'uomo nuovo fascista, 1929-1944* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2000), 280-285.

<sup>10</sup> F.T. Marinetti, *Mafarka the Futurist*, 137.

<sup>11</sup> F.T. Marinetti, "Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine", in *Critical Writings*, 86.

<sup>12</sup> F.T. Marinetti, "The Necessity and Beauty of Violence", in *Critical Writings*, 64.

<sup>13</sup> F.T. Marinetti, "The Necessity and Beauty of Violence", in *Critical Writings*, 421.

<sup>14</sup> For Marinetti's patriotism, see Härmänmaa, *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza*; Emilio Gentile, "Il futurism e la politica. Dal nazionalismo modernista al fascism", in *Futurismo, cultura e politica*, ed. by Renzo De Felice (Torino: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1988), 105-160.

<sup>15</sup> Marinetti: *Guerra sola igiene del mondo* (1915). In *TIF*, 336.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance, F.T. Marinetti, *Critical Writings*, 53-54.

<sup>17</sup> F.T. Marinetti, "The Necessity and Beauty of Violence", 65.



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<sup>18</sup> See for instance, F.T. Marinetti, *Futurismo e fascismo* (1924), in *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, ed. by Luciano De Maria (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), 498.

<sup>19</sup> Marinetti, F.T.: *L'Alcova d'acciaio. Romanzo vissuto* (1921) (Firenze: Vallecchi, 2004), 24.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, 'diver' was an important motive in Enrico Prampolini's works in the 1930s. In addition, the same idea of a metalized human body and mechanical man is to be found in the manifesto "L'Estetica futurista della Guerra" that Marinetti published in 1935. See Härmänmaa, *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza*, 220.

<sup>21</sup> For modernism, modernity and Fascism, see Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Houndmill and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> For Marinetti's involvement in the Fascist State, see Härmänmaa, *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza*.

<sup>23</sup> Benito Mussolini, "Alla mostra del Novecento" *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 27.3.1923.

<sup>24</sup> See the catalogues of the exhibitions.