

Futurist Cinema / Cubism and Futurism

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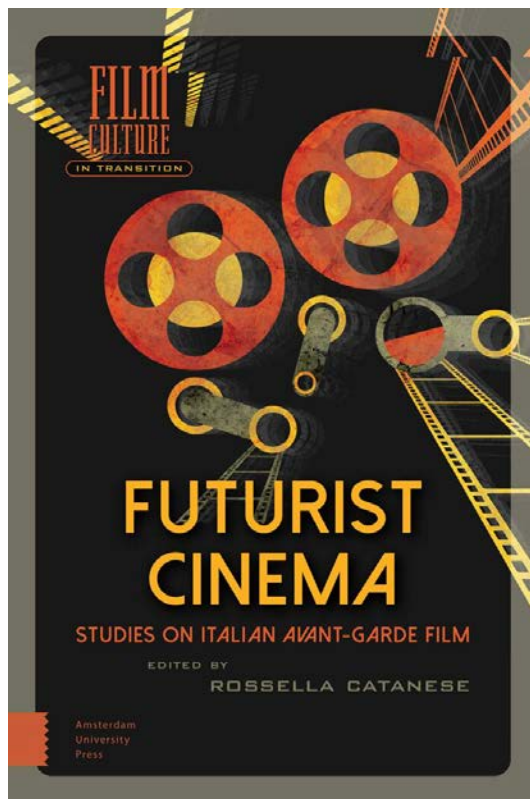
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The advent of cinema coincided with the birth of Italian Futurism. The emerging medium seemed perfectly suited to the concerns of a movement promoting new aesthetics and modes of perception, fascinated with the sensation of speed and the dynamism of modern life. However, the film output of Futurism was very limited, with several works lost and many more not moving beyond concept or screenplay stage. Thus the intersection of Futurism and cinema exists primarily on paper, providing a valuable insight into how avant-garde artists at the beginning of the twentieth century responded to this form of expression. Key here is *The Futurist Cinema* (Marinetti et al., 1916), devoted exclusively to the art of the moving picture and described by Rondolino as ‘a fundamental text for the history of the avant-gardes in cinema’ (1987, p. 450). Ideas on film are also present in other manifestos produced within the movement: *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* (1912), *The Variety Theatre* (1913), *The Futurist Synthetic Theatre* (1915), and *The New Religion – Morality of Speed* (1916) [1]. *Futurist Cinema: Studies on Italian Avant-Garde Film* edited by Rossella Catanese and R. Bruce Elders’ *Cubism and Futurism: Spiritual Machines and the Cinematic Effect*, both published in 2018, aim to address the scarcity of English-language publications concerned with the Italian movement’s relationship with film.[2] Catanese’s ground-breaking and much anticipated compendium is devoted exclusively to Futurist cinema, while Elders’ book is part of a series of volumes.

Futurist Cinema: Studies on Italian Avant-Garde Film features essays mainly by authors of Italian background who introduce to English-language discourse a number of sources previously available only in Italian. The main aims of the publication are to introduce the reader to the movement as well as examine the significance of Futurist cinema through analyses of the films and texts. These aims are reflected in the book’s three sections: the first, mapping the theoretical landscape; the second, analysing case studies; and the

third, providing an indispensable filmography and chronology. The essays also demonstrate the influence of Italian Futurism on other arts and contemporaneous avant-garde movements. Since many of the works discussed were ultimately unrealised or in some cases produced, but now lost, the contributors frequently draw on expertise from the area of media archaeology to analyse the complex conceptual trail behind these Futurist film projects. Meticulously edited by Rossella Catanese, this collection brings together a range of cohesive and complementary perspectives. It constitutes a solid contribution to the study of Futurism and film and an indispensable tool for scholars researching this field.



Futurist Cinema opens and closes with a general overview, providing a wider context to the works discussed throughout the volume. In the first chapter, Giovanni Lista outlines the Futurist notion of cinema as separate from ‘the logical system of the phenomenal world’ (p. 1) and distinguished by anti-nar-

rative aesthetics which celebrate the image. Lista discusses some of the common themes of Futurism: object, mythology, and the metropolis. Lista's valuable introduction is complemented by practical facts and dates encompassed in the final section of the book. In 'Chronology' Fernando Maramai places the significant artworks, texts, and events of Italian Futurism against a wider historical and cultural background. Maramai delineates not only political and social transformations, but also artistic milestones from the period 1900 to 1944. Marcello Seregini, in turn, compiles a much-needed Futurist filmography from the birth of cinema to 1939, the year which, the author claims, 'can be considered as the ideal conclusion of the Futurist trajectory in cinema' (p. 241). Along with films conventionally regarded as Futurist, Seregini discusses those that inspired the Futurists, visually or narratively, or those that were themselves under the movement's own strong influence (from *La danse serpentine de Loie Fuller* [1893-98] to Deslaw's *La Mode en Parade* [1932]).

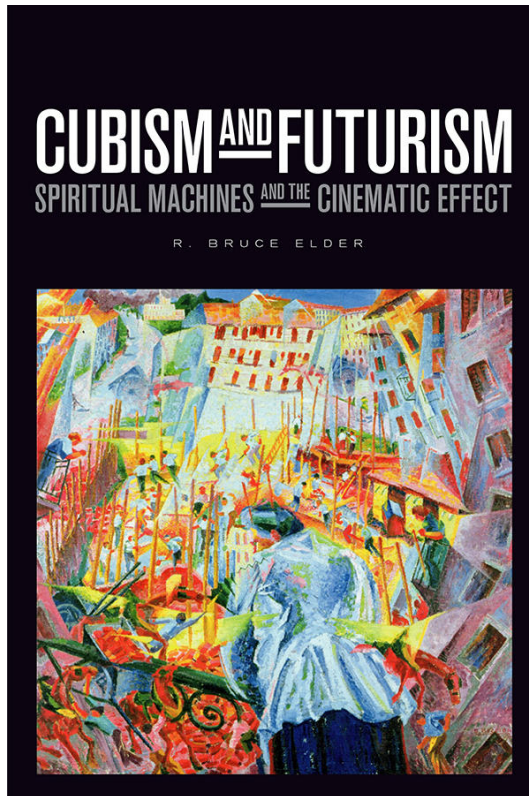
The middle section of the volume is understandably dominated by contributions addressing the writings of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the founding figure of the movement, who was demonstrably fascinated with the emerging medium of cinema. In the tellingly titled 'Film Aesthetics without Films' Sabine Schrader contrasts Marinetti's praise of the emerging medium with the ultimately peripheral place of film in the Futurist body of work. Correspondingly, Antonio Saccoccio analyses the influence of the new language of cinema on the texts of Marinetti and Umberto Boccioni. Valentina Valente juxtaposes *The Futurist Cinema* manifesto with texts by the Ginanni-Corradini brothers and the film *Vita futurista / Futurist Life* (Arnaldo Ginna, 1916), certainly the most important film produced within the movement, now declared lost. Paulo Bertetto moves to an investigation of the influence of Italian Futurism on Soviet art, claiming that 'the Soviet avant-garde is most openly a Marinettian movement, in spite of the radical ideological divergence' (p. 38). Bertetto links the works of Marinetti and Luigi Russolo with those of Sergei Eisenstein. Several essays focus on more specific aspects of Futurism: Wanda Strauven revisits Marinetti's 'Tattilismo' or 'Art of Touch' while Giancarlo Carpi scrutinises the aesthetic category of 'cuteness' in Futurist cinema, literature, and visual arts.

The section intriguingly titled 'Daily Filmed Exercises Designed to Free Us from Logic' consists of chronologically organised case studies of individual films and screenplays. The texts reconstruct the history of these projects and clarify possible controversies surrounding them, often with reference to

archival materials. This part of the book opens with Denis Lotti's analysis of a film anticipating Futurist ideas: Enrico Novelli's humorous science fiction love story *Un matrimonio interplanetario / Marriage on the Moon* (1910). Rossella Catanese's first text centres on *Vita futurista*, while her second contribution examines *Velocita* (known in French as *Vitesse*), a 1930 film directed collectively by Pippo Oriani, Tina Cordero, and Guido Martina. This avant-garde production, overturning mainstream bourgeois drama clichés and linking to the Futurist drama of objects, contains intertextual references to Futurist painting and avant-garde French cinema. Lucia Re goes on to detail the discourse around *Thaïs* (Anton Giulio Bragaglia, 1916), the only fully preserved Futurist feature film, which subverts early models of stardom and inscribes itself in the tradition of metacinema. Complementary here is Elisa Uffreduzzi's exploration of the connection between the *Manifesto of Futurist Dance* (Marinetti, 1917) and choreographed sequences in *Vita futurista* and *Thaïs*. Discussing *Velocita* (1917/1918), Marinetti's only cinematographic script, Carolina Fernandez Castrillo explores the imaginative design of an innovative communication system based on the idea of immediacy. The last chapter in this section, 'From science to marvellous' by Francesca Veneziano, probes the relationship between Futurism and science. Veneziano investigates links between Etienne-Jules Marey's chronophotography, Anton Giulio Bragaglia's photodynamism, and Marinetti's texts on cinema.

In contrast to *Futurist Cinema*, R. Bruce Elders' *Cubism and Futurism* is not a study of specific cases but rather an attempt to clarify a much wider background against which the titular movements were cast. Here the aim is to establish the wider context of the early twentieth century Futurist and Cubist movements rather than the deep analysis of one movement (Italian Futurism) favoured by the previously discussed volume. This ambitious, heavily footnoted monograph (667 pages) is part of a larger project, one of three volumes exploring the early intellectual reception of cinema by artists, philosophers, and cultural theorists. While the majority of scholarship in this area tends to focus on how 1920s arts and theories influenced cinema (cf. the abundance of publications on Surrealism and Expressionism in cinema), these publications take the opposite view illuminating the impact of film on avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century. The first volume in the series, *Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-garde art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century* (2008), traces the emergence of abstract art and the significant role of cinema in its development. The book was followed by *DADA*,

Surrealism and the Cinematic Effect (2013) which explores how film was regarded by the artists associated with the movements detailed in the title. The latest addition to the series compares the parallel development of Futurism and Cubism. Elders establishes not only the differences between the movements but also the shared similarities: both were, in the author's opinion, born on the cusp of a fundamental change in worldview caused by the rise of theories about electromagnetism. These shifts brought about a crisis of both sensual and rational cognition, transforming the conception of the human place in the world as well as the idea of what a work of art is.



Cubism and Futurism: Spiritual Machines and the Cinematic Effect is divided into three parts. 'Modernism and the Visual Arts', the section opening the volume, engages extensively with a broad range of ideas from the domains of history, philosophy, culture, and art of the early twentieth century. Here Elders examines such topics as the shift from the concept of absolute to relative time and space and from the notion of reality as composed of (nearly) unchanging

objects to that of interacting fields of energy. Elders identifies topics he deems essential to developing an understanding of the Cubists and Futurist programs: the anti-representational tendencies of that period and the perception of an encounter with an artwork as an immediate, now-experience preceding objective awareness. The author also probes the manner in which topics such as the human nervous system and the anxiety of urban life – ‘a sensibility stimulated by the technologies of movement and speed’ (p. 140) – inspired a range of avant-garde artists. Against this background, Elders seeks to establish the claim that cinema, as a light-based art of an electromagnetic rather than mechanical nature, was emblematic of this age. Film is here considered key to shaping new ideas about art and reality, a force which ‘became a model for thinking about broader scientific or cultural change’ (p. 581). Cinema’s ability to ‘reflect the postmodern dynamics of vision’ (p. 147) was also crucial to the rise of both Cubist and Futurist art, the author proposes.

The second section of the volume moves to an investigation of how Cubism developed against the background of a broader transition from a mechanical to electromagnetic conception of reality – in other words, against the context of the shift from the world of Descartes to the world of Tesla. Elders claims that the crisis of perception during this time of urbanisation stemmed from the acceleration of the pace of change to the point which exceeded human ability to absorb reality. This, in turn, contributed to a heightened interest in the mechanics of visual perception as well as the rise of photography, chronophotography, and film. The crisis of vision also played a major role in the rise of Cubism’s attempt to convey the dynamic processes linked with perception by synthesising various points of view on one object. This section details the different phases of the development of the movement. The main focus, however, is on Fernand Leger; although the artist has never been a core member of the Cubist circle, his paintings share numerous features with those of Picasso, Braque, and Gris. Elders describes Leger’s films as rejecting narrative cohesion and focusing purely on images, with the object-fragment assuming the central place. Leger’s interest in the reconfiguration of the human body and its treatment as just another object is evident in *Ballet Mecanique* (1924) (its extensive, 130 pages long shot-by-shot analysis is available on the publisher’s website as an online appendix to the book). The author additionally elaborates on the crucial role of Dudley Murphy and George Antheil in the creation of the film.

The third section turns to Futurism and dovetails with a range of issues discussed in greater detail as case studies by Catanese’s volume. Elders considers

Futurism more progressive than Cubism: while the latter movement was slightly sceptical about new ideas and 'possessed by a nostalgia for the real' (p. 580), the former 'embraced completely the emerging view of reality' (p. 9). Crucially, according to the author, 'Futurist art was widely understood as having cinematic character' (p. 420). Recurrent themes in the writings of the Futurists included the notion of cinema as a medium unburdened by tradition, as a form of expression with a diminished anthropocentric focus, and as an art able to convey the dynamism of contemporary perception (Elders notes that 'in this period, except for dance, film was the only art committed to composing dynamic forms' [p. 538]). Consequently, the Futurists suggested ways in which cinema could reform painting, music, and literature. This section contains brief outlines of individual cinematic projects: *Velocità*, *Vita futurista*, and *Thaïs* (in *Futurist Cinema* these are discussed as case studies by, respectively, Catanese, Re, and Fernandez Castillo). Elders also mentions Bragaglia's other films described as 'quasi-Futurist productions' (p. 543), all released in 1917: *Il mio cadavere / My Corpse*, *Perfido incanto / The Wicked Enchantment*, and *Un dramma nell'Olimpo / An Olympian drama*. The author probes a kaleidoscopic variety of Futurist practices linked with film: *sintesi teatrale / theatrical synthesis*, a compact and dense form of Futurist theatre is here compared with cinematic collage; *serata futurista / Futurist evenings* intended to shock the audience by combining different art forms, including film; Luigi Russolo and his sonic art; Bragaglia's photodynamic images reproducing the sensation of motion; and Futurist interest in synaesthesia, which 'became a prominent theme of the Futurist conception of cinema' (p. 556). With regards to the last notion, Elders considers Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra's theory and practice along with the works of Carlo Carra which attempted to make painting multisensory.

Futurist Cinema and *Cubism and Futurism* offer much needed contributions to the study of film and 1920s avant-garde art. It is also worth noting the timely nature of both publications, coming amid renewed interest in the movement in recent years, a fact highlighted by the authors themselves. Elders points to the contemporary feel of Futurism, especially with regards to its discussion of the interstices of technology, science, and art as well as its desire 'to alert people to the blows that were about to rain down on 20th and 21st century cultures' (p. 5). Similarly, Catanese's collection emphasises the enduring legacy of the Italian movement, particularly its anticipation of Marshall McLuhan's theories of the 1960s and its link with contemporary experimental film and video practices. Examples cited here include Paolo Gioli's

Face Caught in the Dark (2009), Thomas Hirschhorn's *Touching Reality* (2012), and contemporary touchscreen interfaces. The books differ in their methodological approaches. Elders' volume has a more broad-reaching scope and is densely packed with an occasionally bewildering array of insights into the wider context of the movement (not only Futurism, but also Cubism). The selection of case studies featured in Catanese's edited volume solidify the canon of Futurist film; this book is destined to become a go-to for anyone discussing the movement in the context of cinema. Read in relation to each other, these two publications provide complementary perspectives into this research field and, despite important differences in emphasis, open multiple avenues for further discussions.

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Notes

- [1] English translations of the above are available, for example, in *Futurists Manifestos* edited by U. Apollonio (2009) or Marinetti's *Selected Writings* (1977).
- [2] English-language research is scattered across shorter publications discussing photography (Lindvall 2003), painting (Aiken 1981), theatre (Lista 2013), music (Strauven 2009a), popular entertainment (Brunetta 2009), and multimedia art (Fernandez Castrillo 2013). Considerable attention has been paid to Marinetti (Strauven 2006, 2009b), Bragaglia (Tisdall & Bozzolla 1975, 1977; Marcus 1996; Re 2008), and the Ginanni Corradini brothers (Kirby 1986; Berghaus & Verdone 2000; Rees 2011).