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THE USE OF AUDIO-VISUAL MEDIA IN ITALIAN FUTURIST THEATRE

GÜNTER BERGHAUS

The nineteenth century was a period of great changes in the physical and mental landscapes of Europe. A large number of new technologies and inventions, such as electric light, wireless telegraphy, motorcars, cinema, telephones etc., made a profound impact on the everyday life of most citizens in the industrialized world. The revolutionized means of transportation and the new modes of communication shook up people's conception of a linear time-space continuum and altered their cognitive mapping of the world.

By the 1880s, there was agreement amongst intellectuals and the common population that European society had undergone a profound transformation and that a truly modern civilization had come into existence. Artists and writers ushered in an extensive debate, on how this ›modern‹ world could be adequately reflected in their creations. Within a decade, Europe was rife with new schools and movements that rallied behind Rimbaud's call, »Il faut être absolument moderne« (»One has to be absolutely modern«) (Rimbaud: 116).

One of them was Futurism, founded in 1909 by the Italian poet and literary manager Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. It made a major contribution to twentieth-century avant-garde creativity through the ways in which it applied the most recent technological inventions to the fields of art and literature. Marinetti's articles, interviews and manifestos indicated that he took a great interest in the advances of science and technology, but also the underlying philosophical and aesthetic implications of the changing conceptions of energy, matter, time and space etc.

»Futurism is based on the complete renewal of human sensibility brought about by the great discoveries made by science. Anyone who today uses the telegraph, the telephone, and the gramophone, the train, the bicycle, the motorcycle, the automobile, the ocean liner, the airship, the airplane, the film theatre, the great daily newspaper (which synthesizes the daily events of the whole world), fails to recognize that these different forms of communication, of transport and information, have a far-reaching effect on their psyche« (Marinetti 2006: 120).

The whole history of Futurism was predicated on this ideas of employing the most recent discoveries and inventions in order to capture the »frenetic life of our great cities«, the modern »state of mind«, even »dynamic sensation itself« (Apollonio: 25, 27). Marinetti's reflections on the novel experience of the world by means of the telegraph, the telephone and the visual media of photography and cinema resulted in a new type of poetry, communicated in a free graphic style (see illustrations 1 and 2).

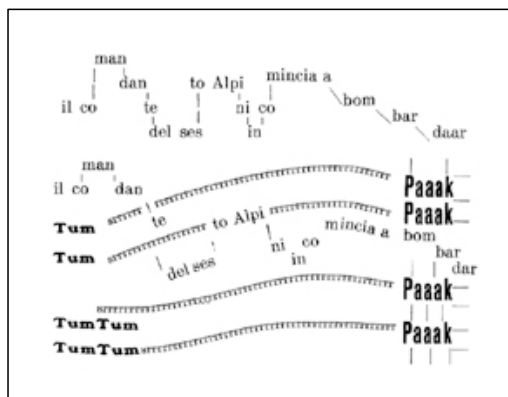


Illustration 1: Danza del Shrapnel; Excerpt from the Dance of the Shrapnel in Marinetti's »Manifesto of Futurist Dance« (L'Italia futurista of 8 July, 1917): »Slow, self-assured, carefree steps of the mountain troops who sing as they march beneath a canopy of continuous, relentless shells. The dancer will light a cigarette, while hidden voices will sing one of many war songs: »the commander of the sixth Alpine regiment is starting his cannonade ...«.



Illustration 2: An example of parole in libertà from Les Mots en liberté futuristes (1919).

In 1914, during one of his many stays in London, Marinetti also began to record his poetry on five 78 rpm discs,¹ a practice he was going to continue throughout the 1920s and 30s. In the field of theatre, Marinetti developed several new dramatic genres, designed to capture, »the many-hued, many-voiced tides of revolution in our modern capitals« (Marinetti 2006: 14). But he did not only write plays that *reflected* the modern, technologically based forms of communication: he also integrated them in his theatre performances. At the opening of a Futurist exhibition at the Doré Galleries in London, on 28 April 1914, Marinetti recited several passages from his novel ZANG TUMB TUMB. On the table in front of him he had a telephone, which he used to instruct his assistant, the painter Nevinson, in the adjacent room to supplement his recitation with appropriate sound accompaniment. This first recorded use of a telephone in a stage performance was followed a few weeks later, on 17 May 1914, by Marinetti declaiming his latest poetry via telephone from London to a Futurist performance that was taking place at the Sprovieri Gallery in Naples (Berghaus 1998: 172-175, 234-240).

In 1916, he contributed to the first Futurist film, VITA FUTURISTA, which combined elements of painting, sculpture, theatre, music, and poetry (Berghaus 2000: 398-421). As such, it was an expression of the *plurisensibilità futurista* (Futurist Multisensibility) and produced what in a manifesto was called »a synthesis of life at its most typical and most significant« (Marinetti 2006: 183). When the film was first presented, on 28 January 1917, at the Teatro Niccolini in Florence, it formed part of a programme of Futurist plays performed by the company of Ines Masi and

1 To date, none of the actual disks from the 1910s have been traced, but several of his later recordings have been re-issued on compact disks.

Giulio Ricci. Such a combination of cinema and theatre was exactly what Marinetti had advocated in the *Variety Theatre Manifesto* of 1913 (Marinetti 2006: 185-192). It took Marinetti a few years before an *integrated* use of these media could be considered. The inspiration for this came from Russia and Germany, but also from the development of two other audiovisual media, radio and television.

The invention of wireless telegraphy and radio signalling was of fundamental importance for Marinetti's theory of »wireless imagination« that formed the basis of his literary reform programme of 1912. The Italian government had regulated its radio communication services in a law of 1910 and had placed it under strict State control (Monteleone). In 1924, the first public radio station was installed. Marinetti was amongst the first writers to compose dramas for this new media and became a regular contributor to its programmes. On 18 May 1926, he made his first radio broadcast, delivering a talk on Futurism on Brazilian Rádio Meyrink Veiga. The same year, the Futurists published a radio journal, *L'antenna*, followed, in 1929, by the first volume in the Edizioni radiofuturiste *Electron* and the founding of a group called »Radiofuturismo«. On 20 December 1931, the first Futurist radio drama, TUM-TUM by Pino Masnata, was broadcast by the National radio service EIAR, followed, on 19 January 1933, by Marinetti's VIOLETTA AND THE AEROPLANES.



Illustration 3: Titlepage of the radio journal, *L'antenna*.



Illustration 4: Marinetti at Radio Trieste, from *Radio Corriere*, April 1932, p. 9.

As far as the development of an Italian television service was concerned, EIAR was encouraged by the first public demonstrations of a mechanical television apparatus in England (1926) and the USA (1927) to set up their own television laboratory in Milan in 1928. On 9 February 1929, the semi-Futurist newspaper *L'impero* published an article on »The Progress of Television«, which predicted that within a few years there would be as many television sets in Italy as there were already telephones and radios. In the following months, the *Corriere della sera* reported on the first televised theatre show by the BBC in London, and on a televised performance of a Montmartre singer in Paris. Marinetti was clearly aware of these events, as in the *Manifesto of Futurist Cuisine*, published in 1930, he referred to that »immense network of long and short waves that Italian genius [i.e. the radio pioneer Guglielmo Marconi] has flung over the oceans and continents, [and] those land-

scapes of color, form and sound with which radio-television circumnavigates the Earth» (Marinetti 2006: 396).

Also in Italy, the era of television was now approaching (Grasso). In July 1931, the government gave EIAR the go-ahead to open a service in radiophotography and radiotelevision in Rome, Milan and Turin. A year later, in 1932, Marinetti published his first concrete suggestions for an integrated use of these media in a *teatro aero radiotelevisivo*. This Theatre of the Skies Enhanced by Radio and Television was going to be performed by specially prepared aeroplanes in the following manner:

1. Huge panels of *aeropoetry* and screens for television will be hung from special airplanes flying close to the audience and transmit the aerial drama performed high up in the sky by other aeroplanes, which because of their distance would otherwise be difficult to follow.
2. On the ground, special loudspeakers mounted on vehicles camouflaged in a novel way will argue and bicker in their support for one or other of the planes acting up in the sky. When the gambling crowd has placed its bets on the outcome of the aerial drama, the loudspeakers will announce details of the bets to the gamblers in that vast arena.
3. This arrangement will provide a dynamic spectacle of aircraft moving at different speeds and at changing altitudes, and a complementary spectacle in which the machines emit a changing display of coloured smokes (Marinetti 2006: 408-409).

Some of these ideas can already be found, in an embryonic state, in the manifesto, *A Theatre of the Skies*, by the Futurist aviator Fedele Azari, first launched in a propaganda flight over Milan in April 1919 (Berghaus 1998: 487-490). Here, the aeroplane was treated like a character and was shown to perform dances, dramas, operas and pantomimes high up in the air. Like any good theatrical performer it was costumed, moved in an expressive fashion, and spoke or sung with other characters by means of loudspeakers. Following these »pantomimes of aeroplanes camouflaged as big-bellied bankers, suave Don Juans or as tutu-clad ballerinas [...] performed at the airport of Busto Arsizio« (Marinetti 1969: 177, 247), the first plays for an aerial theatre were written by Marinetti and several of his colleagues.

The Futurist Aviators' Club in Milan carried out a number of experiments, some of which were presented at the Prima Giornata Aerosportiva in Rome in November 1930. By that time, the development of powerful loudspeakers endowed the aeroplanes with a »voice« and enhanced the dramatic complexity of the plot by introducing dialogues and poetic recitations. At the Giornata Aerosportiva of 8 December 1931, Marinetti presented at Taliedo airport an experiment with an aeroplane, »which had on board a loudspeaker, appropriately modified to produce sounds of up to 1,600,000 volts [...] to emit musical numbers and short propaganda speeches« (Anon). It is likely that these experiments made Marinetti realize that the display in the vast theatre of the skies was not always easy to follow. He therefore seized upon the opportunity to complement and amplify the spectacle by electronic means on huge television screens, just as we are still doing nowadays at rock concerts and football matches.

The culmination of all these ideas and experiments was Marinetti's Total Theatre Manifesto of 1933, which foresaw the introduction of cinema, radio and television as complements to the theatrical means of communication in a truly multi-media spectacle.

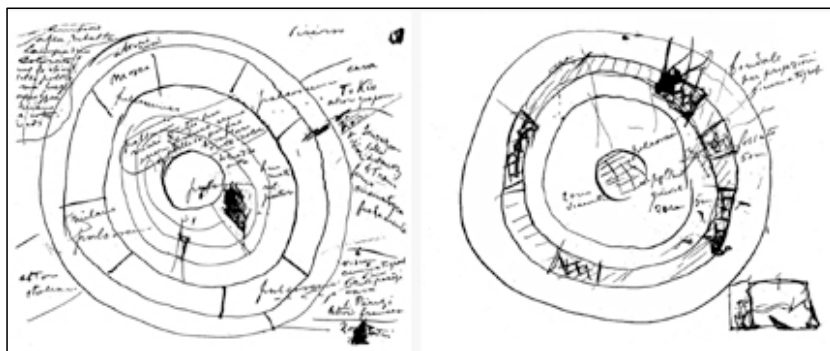


Illustration 5: Two drawings from the manuscript of Marinetti's manifesto, Il teatro totale

The ground plan of this theatre was round and contained several stages: one was like a circular platform surrounding the whole of the stalls area which, in its turn, was surrounded by a trench filled with water deep enough to swim in. A second stage was placed in the middle of the stalls. Around this central stage, every member of the audience had a revolving seat and a little table to eat from. Small groups of spectators were provided with a radio, and a television screen to get close-up views. To give them further possibilities to experience the spectacle, they were encouraged to move about in the theatre:

»The spectators can ... engage in the chance adventures of a journey, participate in the nautical actions unfolding in the trench. Or they can exit, using specially made elevators, into the brightly lit basement for refreshments or a moment of relaxation. Thus, having behaved and performed like actors, and, like dispersed troupes, having speedily communicated with each other with their radio-telephones, they can return to their seats and tables« (Marinetti 2006: 504-505).

These tables were fitted with tactile and odoriferous, moving belts, an idea taken over from the Tactile Theatre, which Marinetti had described in the manifesto of 1921, *Tactilism: A Futurist Manifesto*:

»We shall have theatres specifically designed for Tactilism. The audience will place their hands on long, tactile conveyor belts which will produce tactile sensations that have different rhythms. One will also be able to mount these panels on turntables and operate them to the accompaniment of music and lights« (Marinetti 2006: 374).

The great circular stage was divided into lots of smaller stages that could be separated one from another by movable perpendicular walls. The different complementary and contradictory actions of a single Futurist drama would take place on these various stages, all at the same time. This drama was conceived as an expression of the simultaneously occurring events in human life or in major historical upheavals. High up in the theatre, an electric sun and moon was moving on metal tracks, as the plays required, through the orbit of the cupola, complemented by a careful simulation of starlight.

The principle of simultaneity of action was strongly enhanced by the use of cinematic installations. From the trench around the outer circular stage, film projectors would throw a succession of moving images onto a great tilted cyclorama spanning cross the theatre dome. Also animated aeropaintings and aeropoems would be projected onto it. Another array of film projectors, positioned beneath the auditorium, would cast all possible combinations of the fantastic or the realistic onto a large cyclorama surrounding the outer stage. Marinetti writes:

»Presented, in this way, with the illusion of the speed of the great international communication networks, the spectator in this simultaneous, all-embracing theatre will witness not only the dramatic synthesis of a city, but sometimes even a dramatic synthesis of the whole world. [...] In our simultaneous, multi-scenic theatre, the spectator has [...] almost become a collaborator of the actor, and has thus moved to the centre of the dramatic action« (Marinetti 2006: 405).

At the end of the text, Marinetti announced: »A company has already been set up in Milan, for the construction of the great Futurist theatre, with capital amounting to 500.000 lire« (Marinetti 2006: 407). As my research has shown, in 1926, Marinetti did indeed begin to seek public funding for the erection of an ultra-modern and technically advanced, permanent Futurist theatre in Milan. In 1927, he submitted a Memorandum to the Duce, in which he outlined the shortcomings of the existing theatre and acting profession and how these could be overcome in a playhouse, a State acting school, as well as a new type of conservatoire for directors, stage designers and theatre technicians. Mussolini was sympathetically inclined towards the project and had it carefully assessed by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finances, who eventually turned it down for financial reasons. (Berghaus 1996: 284; Berghaus 1998: 540-541).

Summary

Marinetti's interest in the advances of science and technology caused him from an early age to recognize the historical significance of the mass media and the new technologies of communication. His writings are not only full of profound reflections on fundamental issues such as time, space, energy, matter and their impact on the human psyche; he also, in a more specific manner, developed a Futurist aesthetic that successively incorporated the new technologies of the telegraph, the cinema, the radio, the television and applied them to different artistic media. The Futurist techniques of fragmentation, simultaneity, collage and polymaterialism allowed the juxtaposition and merging of different media in one work of art.

In the field of theatre, the Futurists reduced the significance of the spoken word and human actor and instead produced purely visual spectacles carried out by robots and machines in a kinetic, luminescent and sound producing architecture. This inspired Marinetti to go a stage further and to incorporate the other senses of smell, taste and tactile sensation. Thus, the idea of a Futurist Total Work of Art was born.

In the 1920s and 30s, Marinetti theorized on and experimented with various types of total theatre. On the one hand there were his explorations of how the different senses could be synaesthetically correlated to arrive at a total experience of theatre – e.g. in his tactile theatre and culinary theatre experiments. On the other hand there were the attempts to integrate new media technologies into the Futurist

mechanical theatre. For more than ten years Marinetti pursued his concept of a Futurist Theatre of the Skies enhanced by radio and television. But his most complex and Utopian project was that of a Total Theatre formulated in the early 1930s.

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