

THE POETICS OF THE FUTURIST STAGE MANIFESTOS

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I - Futurism

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The celebration of the first centenary of Futurism is coming very close. Indeed, the first Manifesto of Futurism was launched in Paris, by *Le Figaro*, on the 20th February 1909, and the following month in *Poesia*, the Italian magazine published in Milan. Long time to last for a movement which defiantly announced its firm belief in the principle of "transitoriness", and claimed: "The oldest of us is thirty: so we have at least a decade for finishing our work. When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the waste-basket like useless manuscripts – we want it to happen!" (Appolonio, 1973: 23).¹

The manifesto, being the futurist art-form *par excellence*, is itself *the message*: staking a claim against the past and tradition, and, at the same time, urging the creation of a dynamic and provocative art aware of its own limited "tempo" and inevitable destruction in the natural course of History.

The first Futurist manifesto, signed by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, although claiming to embody a collective voice, aimed to describe the main principles of the movement: the love of danger, energy and fearfulness; courage, audacity and revolt; the eulogy of aggressive action and the beauty of speed; the hymn to the man at the wheel; the glorification of war, "the world's only hygiene", militarism, patriotism; scorn for

woman; the destruction of museums, libraries, academies; the fight against moralism and feminism; the praise of the crowds at work in the modern industrial capitals and all the technological outcomes of industrial society: steamers and locomotives, electricity, factories, airplanes, etc.

A declared "anti-aestheticism", or maybe more appropriately, a "futurist realism" is at the core of this new poetics, which is based on a challenge to the traditional divorce between art and life, but also puts forward a strong mythification of the recent wonders of technology, and therefore endorses the polemic futurist "aestheticization of the real".²

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Probably the most crucial point of this first manifesto, responsible for its crude novelty, is, as I referred above, the awareness of the transitoriness of the very principles it proclaims: the belief (or the anxiety!) that in ten years time these same principles will be lying at the "doors of the academy" and will have the "strong odour of our decaying minds, which will already have been promised to the literary catacombs" (*Idem*, 23). Against them, from everywhere, "younger and stronger men will come (and one can hear echoes of Rimbaud's "lettre du voyant" in this disclaimer).³ But the "Futurists" will no longer be there. They will be "proudly" lighting a great fire with their own manifestos and books, which time had been transformed into "useless manuscripts".

The manifesto "Uccidiamo il Chiaro di Luna!", ("Let's Murder the Moonshine"), signed by Marinetti and published in the magazine *Poesia* during the months of August, September and October 1909 followed the former mentioned above. In April 1910, the manifestos "Contro Venezia Passatista" and the "Discorso Futurista ai Veneziani" followed the same lines of "Uccidiamo il Chiaro di Luna!", claiming against nostalgia, "passéism", and sentimentalism.⁴

In the following years, no art form was left untouched by this futurist "cry of rebellion": The "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters" in 1910, signed by Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla,

Severini; the "Manifesto of the Futurist Musicians", also in 1910, signed by Pratella; "Futurist Photodynamism", in 1911, by Bragaglia; the "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture", in 1912, by Boccioni; "Abstract Cinema – Chromatic Music", in 1912, by Bruno Corrà; the "Futurist Manifesto of Lust", in 1913, by Valentine de Saint-Point⁵ (the only recognised futurist woman to sign a manifesto, although Mina Loy also had flirted with the movement and the movement's leader, writing in 1914 a "Feminist Manifesto" challenging the sexual politics of Futurism); "The Art of Noises" in 1913, by Russolo; the "Manifesto of Futurist Architecture" in 1914, by Sant'Elia. Besides these, there are manifestos of Dance, Fashion, Publicity,⁶ Marriage, War, and of course, Theatre, which I will discuss further on.

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Marinetti's "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature" from 1912, which was followed by "Destruction of Syntax, Imagination without Strings, Words in Freedom", from 1913, is certainly the most crucial one in the context of literature. The influence of his *parolelibrismo* theory⁷ reached well beyond the futurist idiosyncratic borders (see, namely, Marjorie Perloff's revealing study "'Grammar in Use': Wittgenstein/ Gertrude Stein/ Marinetti", in her volume *Wittgenstein's Ladder*).⁸

I would like to underline that the expressive force of the Futurist poetics is emphasized by a "typographical revolution" (different, as Marinetti stresses, from Mallarmé's "static ideal" of the empty page, silences and blank spaces), which is intended to create a harmony between futurist style and thought and the empty page where the typographical characters are printed, expressing the velocity of stars, clouds, aeroplanes, trains, waves, explosives, molecules, atoms, etc. To enhance that *physi- cality* of the words on the page, different types of ink, different typefaces, blank spaces and capital letters should be used. And Marinetti adds in a style recalling Mayakovsky's *Slap in the Face of Public Taste*: "I want to grasp them [ideas/sensations] brutally and hurl them in the reader's face" (Apollonio, 1973:105).⁹

II - The Poetics of the Futurist Stage Manifestos

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The theatre is one of the areas which received particular attention from Futurism, which was however long neglected in the study of Futurism, and only recently is developing, due to a growing interest in the area of performance and performance studies.¹⁰ The stage was however a field where the Futurists invested a lot of their energy and imagination, being by definition an area open to experimentalism and new conceptualizations in the intersection of the arts, overlapping namely the textual and the visual (design, architecture, costume, ...). The early Futurist Stage manifestos were mainly written between 1913 and 1915, even though throughout the 1920s and even the 1930s new manifestos continued to be published (e.g. Casavola's "Théâtre des Instants Dilatés", 1925; Depero's "Théâtre Plastique", 1919 and his "Théâtre Magique", 1927; Marinetti and Cangiullo's "Théâtre de la Surprise", 1921; Prampolini's "L' Atmosphère scénique futuriste", 1924; Marinetti's "Théâtre total pour les masses", 1933).¹¹

Before the advent of Futurism, Marinetti had published two plays. Both were written in French and under the influence of French post-symbolism. The first, *Le Roi Bombance*,¹² published in 1905, is the story of a collective rebellion in the form of a satirical tragedy, grotesquely built around a gastronomic metaphor à la Rabelais. In 1909 he published his second play, *Les Poupées Électriques*, in a style similar to the first, but situating its drama no longer within collective History, but within the private sphere, under the influence of Ibsen whose theatre had recently been introduced in Italy. Nevertheless, this play, as the title suggests, is already full of the disturbing presence of automata and machines that will people the futurist scenarios. (Fig. I)

The theatrical activity of the Futurists started in 1910 with their *serate futuriste* (Fig. II), tumultuous happenings where art and politics were often discussed together, mani-

festos and proclamations were read, poems were recited, futurist music was played and bizarre dialogues were performed, all in an atmosphere of agitation and provocation, often inviting insults from the public, which the Futurists gladly reciprocated.

The first futurist manifesto of the Theatre, "The Variety Theatre" (1913)¹³, had its origin in these "serate". In this first manifesto, the Music-Hall was iconized as the model of the Futurist Theatre. Being essentially a theatre of surprise, imagination and fantasy, with its roots in actuality, the Music-Hall provided the Futurists with the best source of inspiration. From it Futurism borrowed caricature and the comic, the surprise-effect, the paraphernalia of lights, sounds and dynamic movements, an anti-conventional culture based on improvisation, the grotesque and the absurd.

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As Marinetti says in the "Variety Theatre Manifesto":

The Variety Theatre, being a profitable show-window for countless inventive forces, naturally generates what I call the Futurist marvellous, produced by modern mechanics. (...) The Variety Theatre offers the healthiest of all spectacles in its dynamism of form and colour (simultaneous movement of jugglers, ballerinas, gymnasts, colourful riding masters, spiral cyclones of dancers spinning on the points of their feet). (...) The Variety Theatre is alone in seeking the audience's collaboration. It doesn't remain static like a stupid voyeur, but joins noisily in the action, in the singing, accompanying the orchestra, communicating with the actors in surprising actions and bizarre dialogues (Apollonio, 1973: 126-7).

Besides, as Marinetti adds, the conventional theatre exalts the inner life, meditation, "monotonous crises of conscience", "stupid analysis of feelings", in a word, "psychology"; in contrast, the "Variety Theatre" prefers: "action, heroism, life in the open air, dexterity, the authority of instinct and intuition.. To psychology it opposes (...) "body-madness" (*Idem*, 129).

Finally, Futurism wants to transform the "Variety Theatre" into a theatre of "Amazement, Record-Setting and Body-Madness" (De Maria, 1968: 76).

In 1915, Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli and Bruno Corrà published the manifesto of "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre". This one starts by situating the need (both socially and politically) for a futurist Theatre:

War - Futurism intensified - obliges us to march and not to rot [*marciare, non marcire*] in libraries and reading rooms. Therefore we think that the only way to inspire Italy with the warlike spirit today is through the theatre (Apollonio, 1973: 183).

Traditional theatre had become totally obsolete, because it did not respond to the demands of the new times and the new public:

We condemn the whole contemporary theatre because it is too prolix, analytic, pedantically psychological, explanatory, diluted, finicking, static, as full of prohibitions as a police station. (...) In other words it is a pacifist, neutralist theatre, the antithesis of the fierce, overwhelming, synthesizing velocity of the war (*Idem*, 183-4).

In total opposition to this "passéist" theatre, the futurist will be, summing up: "synthetic, atechanical, dynamic, simultaneous, autonomous, alogical and unreal" (*Idem*, 184; 194; 195).

The first of these prerogatives of the young Futurist Theatre meant that it ought to be, as the manifesto states, brief: "To compress in a few minutes, into a few words and gestures, innumerable situations, sensibilities, ideas, sensations, facts and symbols" (*Idem*, 184).

This particular theatre would not be subject to a traditional technique of representation, *mimesis*, the aims of which are, above all, to make its public believe in the verisimilitude of

the plot. The struggle of traditional theatre against "theatricality" itself is absurd, since:

- (...) life itself (which consists of actions vastly more awkward, uniform, and predictable than those that unfold in the world of art) is for the most part antitheatrical and even in this offers innumerable possibilities for the stage. EVERYTHING OF ANY VALUE IS THEATRICAL (*Idem*, 193).

To emphasize the benefits of theatricality, the manifesto develops a series of arguments against verisimilitude, on the grounds that "talent and worth have little to do with it", and life itself is not logical: "reality throbs around us, bombards us with squalls of fragments of inter-connected events, mortised and tenoned together, confused, mixed up, chaotic" (*Idem*, 194).

The Futurist Theatre will be born of improvisation and intuition, "suggestive and revealing actuality": "Our Futurist theatre jeers at Shakespeare but pays attention to the gossip of actors, is put to sleep by a line from Ibsen but is inspired by red or green reflections from the stalls" (*Idem*, 195).

The dynamism of this theatre will be achieved "through the interpenetration of different atmospheres and times", which means that while in the traditional theatre many important, dynamic events, (e.g. a death or a murder), do not happen on the stage, but are simply narrated, the futurist theatre puts all actions on the stage, performing them simultaneously regardless of real time by creating interpenetrating ambiances.

According to the manifesto, the Futurist Theatre is a product of the new futurist sensibility: "Our frenzied passion for real, swift, elegant, complicated, cynical, muscular, fugitive, Futurist life" (Apollonio, 1973:195).

Hence, instead of traditional theatrical forms, the Futurists wanted to offer instead the "many forms of the futurist theatre":

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(...) lines written in free-words, simultaneity, interpenetration, the short, acted-out poem, the dramatized sensation, comic dialogue, the negative act, the reechoing line, "extra-logical" discussion, synthetic deformation, the scientific outburst that clears the air (*Idem*, 196).

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The "Futurist Theatre" will, thus, thrill its audience and make it forget the monotony of daily life, through "a labyrinth of sensations imprinted on the most exacerbated originality and combined in unpredictable ways" (*Idem*, 195). The aim of this theatre is to create between the stage and the crowd "a current of confidence rather than respectfulness", and to "instill in the audience the dynamic vivacity of a new Futurist Theatricality" (*Idem*, 196).

Instead of a "prolix", "analytic", "static", "explanatory" space, the theatre will be "a gymnasium" where the crowds will be trained to live and cope with the "swift, dangerous enthusiasms" (*Idem*, 195) of these futurist years.

The "Futurist Stage Manifesto" which Enrico Prampolini published in 1915, is basically a technical manifesto encouraging the creation of a "dynamic stage" in opposition to the "static stage of the past". It is full of instructions on practical matters related to the building of a futurist scenery, the use of lights, the creation of a different stage scene that will produce the desired "unforeseen dynamic effects". Representation of "reality" is not at stake in futurist stage creation. Prampolini insists that the unnecessary preoccupation with realism only diminishes the intensity of the performance and decreases its emotional potential. One should use abstractions to interpret reality. As examples, he gives the banning of realistically painted scenery, in favour of "colourless electromechanical architectural" structures, "enlivened by chromatic emanations from a source of light" (*Idem*, 201). Lights will be arranged in accordance with the spirit of the action staged; the structures on stage will move, "letting loose metallic arms and overturning the sculptural planes" (*Ibidem*),

producing noises and lit by an exuberance of light and shade. These are the fundamental principles for the creation of the "highest point of expression" on the stage, where the actors will produce "unforeseen dynamic effects" which traditional theatre, only concerned with the representation of reality, ignores. Prampolini ends his manifesto with the following words, a sort of summary of the manifesto:

Let us create the stage (...) Let us reverse the roles. Instead of the illuminated stage let us create the stage that illuminates: expressive light radiating with great emotional intensity the colours appropriate to the action on stage
(*Idem*, 201-2).

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In the Winter of 1926, *The Little Review* published a special issue dedicated to the "Avant-garde Theatre", where the concepts and definitions we have just briefly summarized were reviewed by some of their original defendants and executors, and more recent formulations were brought into the debate. There, in an article called "The Magnetic Theatre and the Futuristic Scenic Atmosphere", Prampolini reviews the principles of what he calls his "scenic system", not without first pointing out that they had proved their success in actual technical experiments before the audience in many European capitals (Fig. II). He starts by putting in parallel the scenic representations of the past, which he calls mere "suggestions of the real", and the "new" (futuristic) plastic representations of magic and unreal scenic constructions" (Prampolini, 1926: 102). He dismisses "scenography" as the traditional art of stage representation, a description of apparent reality, and a real fiction of the visual world. He proposes instead the creation of the "futurist scenic dynamism", the true essence of theatrical action (Fig. III).

The main futurist aesthetic principles, dynamism, simultaneity and the unity of action between man and his environment are also the key for the futurist theatre as a "liv-

ing scenic synthesis". On the other hand, Prampolini adds, the technique of the traditional theatre, ignoring these principles, created a dualism between "man, the dynamic element, and his environment (the static element)" (*Idem*, 103). Prampolini claims that the Futurists have not only proclaimed but also achieved this "scenic unity" by "interpenetrating the human and the environmental elements in a living scenic synthesis of theatrical action" (*Ibidem*).

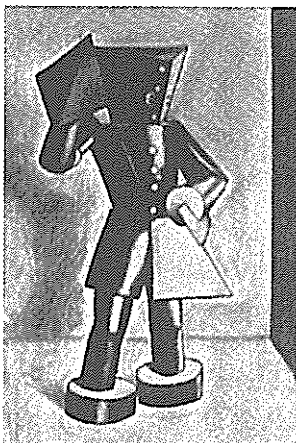
These principles imply that the Futurist Theatre will give a great deal of attention to the creation of a futurist stage and, as Prampolini had already warned poets and writers in his "Futurist Stage Manifesto", the participation of painters and architects in the setting of a play was absolutely essential. In this article, "The Magnetic Theatre and the Futuristic Scenic Atmosphere", he accomplishes it. Instead of scenography, the Futurist Theatre will use: "sceno-synthesis", "sceno-plastic" and "sceno-dynamic" elements.¹⁴

The concept of a "poly-dimensional scenic space" is, according to Prampolini, essential for the creation of a Futurist Theatre. In his opinion, the traditional scenic-arc of the traditional theatre, as well as the flat, horizontal surface of its stage, no longer cope with the "technical and aesthetical requirements of the new spirit in the theatre": they limit the development of theatrical action, making it the slave of the scenic picture frame and of the visual angle of fixed perspective. Hence, Prampolini's theory claims that with the abolition of the proscenium arc and the traditional stage surface, new technical possibilities are opened up for theatrical action:

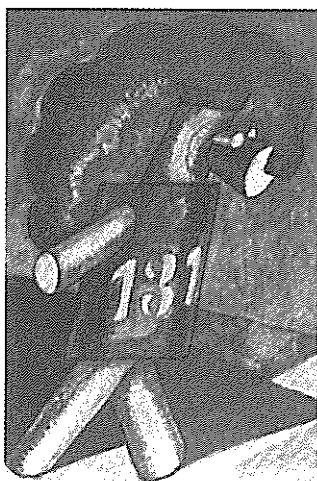
By dividing the horizontal surface by new vertical oblique and polydimensional elements, by forcing the cubic resistance of the "scenic arc" by the spheric expansion of plastic planes moving rhythmically in space, we arrive at the creation of a polydimensional and futuristic scenic space (*Idem*, 104).

From this brief description of the poetics of the futurist stage, within the global context of Futurism, I hope to have shown how its "future anterior" (to use Kristeva's timely phrase)¹⁵, in paradoxical complicity with the rightwing politics of the movement, was generally felt as a "risky practice" (Kristeva, 1982: 34) and a threat to contemporary establishment aesthetics, overall grounded on immobility and *passéism*, to use one of Futurism's catchphrases. The futurist aim of restoring the "full expressive power and purity of the word" (as expressed in Marinetti's 1913 manifesto, "Destruction of Syntax, Imagination without Strings, Words in Freedom"), regardless of its logical order in the sentence and grammatical rules, and the emphasis on the sensual, instinctive, intuitive and primitive nature of writing, the belief in the "simultaneous poly expression of the word", the *parole in libertà*, as well as the desire to "animalize, vegetalize, mineralize, electrify or liquify" writing, rather than "humanize nature" (Apollonio, 1973: 98-100), is nonetheless a challenging and progressive force that reached towards the future. <<

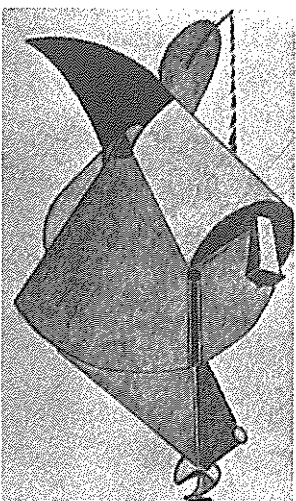
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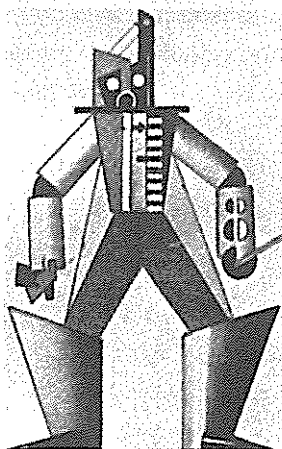
Pannaggi, costume porté par Ikar pour le Ballet mécanique futuriste (1922).



Destero, costume des locomotives pour le ballet mécanique Anierham du 3000 (1924).



rampolini, costume pour un ballet futuriste (1924).



Pannaggi, costume d'un Condamné pour L'Anaoisse des Machines (1926).

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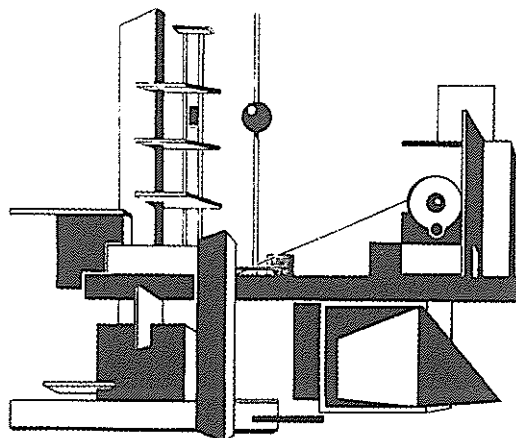
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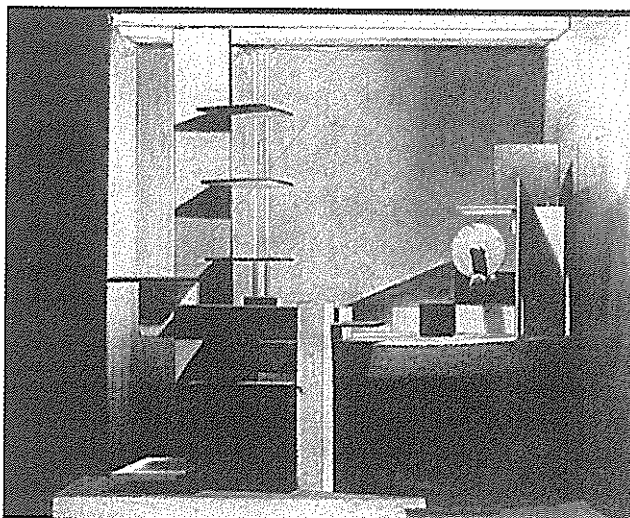
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5 Filiberto Mateldi: Marinetti at a Futurist serata (1921)

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Prampolini, projet pour le *Théâtre Magnétique* et maquette construite (bois, plâtre, métal) exposée aux Arts Décoratifs à Paris en 1925.



NOTES

[1] In this essay I will be quoting from the anthology *Futurist Manifestos*, edited by Apollonio, Umbro (1973). The English translation in the case of the first Futurist Manifesto is by R. W. Flint. The original Italian version is quoted from *F.T. Marinetti. Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*, edited by Luciano De Maria (1968).

[2] See in this context Walter Benjamin's well known anathema against Futurism's "aestheticization of politics", as discussed in the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, (ed.), (1979).

[3] "Verranno contro di noi, i nostri successori; verranno di lontano, da ogni parte, (...) e fiutando caninamente, alle porte delle accademie, il buon odore delle nostre menti in putrefazione, già promesse alle catacombe delle biblioteche" (De Maria, 1968:112).

[4] As the manifesto itself claims: "Quando gridammo: Uccidiamo il Chiaro di Luna! pensavamo a voi, Veneziani, pensavamo a te, Veneziafradicia di romanticismo.(...) Siamo stanchi di avventure erotiche, di lussuria, di sentimentalismo e di nostalgia!" (De Maria, 1968:230).

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[5] Valentine de Saint-Point, urged by Marinetti, published in 1912 the "Manifesto della Donna Futurista" (in conformity with the principles of the movement), and in 1913, "Il Teatro della Donna", outside the reach of the movement and aimed as a criticism to its *macho* principles. See in this context, Salaris, Claudia (1982); and Macedo, Ana Gabriela (1998).

[6] In this context see Salaris, Claudia (1986).

[7] According to Marinetti, the *Words in Freedom* would produce:

condensed metaphors. Telegraphic images. Maximum vibrations. Modes of thought. Closed or open forms of movement. Compressed analogies. Colour balances. Dimensions, weights, measures, and the speed of sensibility, minus the concentric circles that the word produces. Restful moments of intuition. Movements in two, three, four, five different rhythms. The analytic, explanatory poles that sustain the bundle of intuitive strings (Apollonio, 1973:100).

[8] Perloff, Marjorie (1996): 83-112. Amongst other important reference works in this context see Perloff, Marjorie (1986), Drucker, Johanna (1994) and Orban, Clara (1997).

[9] In the Introduction to his book *Gli Indomabili* (1922), Marinetti describes what he means by the "parolibero" style: "Le parole in libertà orchestrano i colori, i rumori e i suoni, combinano i materiali delle lingue e dei dialetti, le formole aritmetiche e geometriche, i segni musicali, le parole vecchie, deformate o nuove, i gridi degli animali, delle belve e dei motori" (De Maria, 1968: 342). [The words in freedom orchestrate colours, noises and sounds, combine the material of languages and dialects, arithmetical and geometric formulae, musical signs, outdated, distorted and new words, the cries of animals, beasts and engines]. (My translation).

[10] See Berghaus, Günter (1995), (1998) and (2005). Among earlier works, see Lista, Giovanni (1976) and Salaris, Claudia (1996).

[11] For detailed information on these, see Lista, Giovanni (1973) and (1976). A discussion of the influence of the futurist stage manifestos in Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist play "Enemy of the Stars" (1914) can be found in Macedo, Ana Gabriela (1989: 303- 309).

[12] Based on Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1894), performed for the first time in 1896 at the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre*, in Paris, where it caused one of the greatest scandals in French theatre history. For a detailed analysis of the impact of the play, see Berghaus, Günter (2005).

[13] "Le Music-Hall", published in *Lacerba*, 1 October 1913.

[14] "(...) predominance of the chromatic element – intervention of architecture as a geometric element of linear synthesis (...) chromatic abstraction; predominance of the plastic element, intervention of architecture, not as a picture-like fiction of perspective, but as a living, plastic reality, a constructive organism; (...) plastic abstraction; volume; predominance of the architectonic element of space; intervention of rhythmical movement, as a dynamic element necessary to the unity and to the simultaneous development of the environment and of the theatrical action; abolition of painted scene; luminous architecture of chromatic spaces; poly-dimensional and poly-expressive scenic action; dynamic abstraction; space" (*Idem*, 104).

[15] In *La Révolution du Langage Poétique* (1974), Kristeva defines Futurism as a "future anterior of language" which, while it is characterized by "ambiguity" and "negativity" in relation both to ideology and language, truly announces a "littérature à venir" (Kristeva, 1974: 367). Later on, in *Polylogue* (1977), the author reiterates the same concept, and concretely focuses on the discourse of Futurism in this context, in a section entitled "The Futurists's Future" (English translation in *Desire in Language*, 1982, pp. 23-35). Here she states: "Thus, the irruption within the order of language of the anteriority of language evokes a later time, that is, a forever. (...) Although (...) poetic language's future anterior is an impossible, 'aristocratic' and 'elitist' demand, it is nonetheless the only signifying strategy allowing the speaking animal to shift the limits of its enclosure" (Kristeva, 1982: 32-33).

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