Futurism and the Technological Imagination
Abstracts of Papers

Vera Castiglione, University of Bristol, UK: *A Futurist before Futurism: Émile Verhaeren and the Technological Epic*

The many correspondences between Verhaeren's œuvre and Futurist literature raise important questions regarding the origins and identity of Futurism. This chapter considers the place of Verhaeren's œuvre within the history of Futurism and suggests that the Futurists' perception of the movement's identity was in reality more far-ranging than is conventionally accepted. It argues for a critical re-engagement with the concept of 'Futurism', using an inclusive approach that would enable us to cover under one umbrella both Verhaeren's 'epiphanic' Futurism and Marinetti's 'programmatic' Futurism. This approach will ultimately allow us to make sense of the particular paradox of a Futurist literature that had made its breakthrough before Futurism was founded.

Prof. Emilio Gentile, Università "La Sapienza" di Roma, Italy: *Mario Morasso and Technology*

Since the Risorgimento, one of the central aims of Italian nationalism was the modernization of the country. The ruling liberal class saw in parliamentary democracy and industrial economy two key models of modernity. In those years that prepared Italy for the industrial revolution – which coincides with the age of imperialism and the beginning of a mass society – a new sense of nationalism saw the daylight: one that exalted modernism, but dissociated it from democracy and associated it with imperialism. Modernizing Italy meant intensifying industrialization in order to make the nation politically powerful. This new nationalism came into being before the birth of Futurism and anticipated some of its fundamental issues. Nationalism was the first effective manifestation of political modernism in Italy in as much as the term 'modernism' signifies an ideology, a culture and a movement that accepts modernization as a process of irreversible change. Consequently, it elaborated a coherent vision of modernity that promoted industrialization and technology as means of strengthening the country. Seen from this point of view, and in contradiction to common opinion, this new nationalism was not a conservative movement that was harking back to a distant past, but an absolutely modern one, looking forward towards the future. This modernist nationalism used tradition as a tool for mobilizing the masses and for giving them cohesion. It promoted cultural and political progress that would modernize the Italian Nation and enable her to face the challenges of the modern era.

Within this context, it is vital to understand how modernity was understood by the nationalist movement during the first years of the 20th century. Along with Enrico Corradini, one of the main theorists of modern nationalism was a sociologist Mario Morasso. His vision of modernity anticipated in several ways Futurist modernism. Morasso treated technology and the machine, together with war, as modern tools for the education of the nation and for imperialistic expansion. In this presentation I shall use several examples to elucidate the character of modernist nationalism, paying particular attention to the idea of war as the ultimate manifestation of modernity.

Roger Griffin, Oxford Brookes University, UK: *The Multiplication of Man: Futurism's Modernist Quest for Transcendence through Technology*

This paper seeks to locate the Futurists' cult of modern technology within recent theories of modernism that extend its remit to embrace the bid to regenerate history and renew the

spatial and temporal horizons of humanity within a wide range of spheres of cultural production and scientific, social and political activity.

Having sampled the ethos of this cult in key Futurist projects and manifestos, it then focuses on a radical revision of conventional predominantly artistic and aesthetic definitions of modernism by adding four main elements: a) the distinction between 'epiphanic' and 'programmatic' modernism; b) a 'primordialist' theory of modernism that relates its drive towards spiritual and social renewal (palingenesis) within humankind's instinctive reaction to liminoid historical conditions which produced revitalization movements throughout history; c) the recurring characteristics of modernist revitalization movements: i) the totalizing thrust of programmatic modernism which emphasises the permeability of the spheres in which the renewal is conceived as occurring; ii) a high level of syncretism as part of the 'maze-way resynthesis'; iii) a tendency to the ritualization of language and behaviour; iv) the presence of a *propheta* figure whose self-appointed mission is to lead the new elite into a new era of health and meaning; v) the temporalized, historicized nature of the utopia pursued.

The paper then considers the implications of this approach for understanding Futurism's technophilia as the product of a modernist movement which paradoxically sought to neutralize the nihilistic thrust of a disenchanting, disembedding process of secularization in which science and technocracy played such a central role by ruthlessly rooting out all traditional sources of transcendence. Instead it embraced, venerated, and aestheticized all technology associated with the increasing transformative power and speed of the modern world, including modern warfare. Technology was thereby semiotically recoded through the visionary power of art to become a vehicle of the world's resacralization in a Nietzschean spirit of creative destruction and immanentist transcendence.

Prof. Natalia Baschmakoff, University of Joensuu, Finland: *Organicizm vs Technicizm in Early Russian Futurism*

Rapid industrialization, expanding foreign investments and growing welfare brought Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century into the economy of Western Europe. The transformation from an agrarian to an urbanized nation occurred almost within one generation. The technological progress, which intensified urbanization, produced consumer goods and destroyed much of man's communication with nature; at the same time it introduced a new spirit of anxiety. A search for spiritual values, as well as a call for a new social and cultural awareness, revealed not only among artists, but also among the public at large reactions against the dehumanizing effects of these changes of the Russian society.

The political turmoil, which rose in Russia after the abortive revolution of 1905, was followed by a proliferation of utopian ideas and an explosion of experiments in all the arts. The aspirations that impregnated the Russian atmosphere in the pre-revolutionary decade were directed not only to liberate man from labour by developing technology, but also to reshape the human psyche. Russian modernists viewed art as a creative force destined to create life itself. The principle of fusing art and life into a creative act left a powerful imprint on the Russian culture. In short, the pre-revolutionary culture aspired to build a new holistic civilisation. Furthermore, along with new ideas, the economic growth promoted a network of rich patrons and enlarged the art and design consumer market.

European modernism from Vienna, Munich and Paris quickly affected the art milieu and Russia became a meeting-place for progressive aesthetic ideas: "from 1905 until 1910, movements in Russian art were intimately bound up with developments in other European centres". Wassily

Kandinsky, the brothers Burljuk, Marianne Werefkin, Alexei Jawlensky searched for new ways in art within the German "Der Blaue Reiter" movement. Russian artists wanted to enter the European modernist discourse.

As to the tasks of the new art, the position of the pre-revolutionary creative intelligentsia was ambiguous. Some – like Maxim Gorky – supported the principle of art's accessibility to everybody and to its social and educative functions, others – like the Symbolists, who joined the other epoch-making literary magazine "World of Art" (1898-1904) conceived art as a form of mystical experience. Kandinsky, being one of the World of Art authors, moved toward abstraction thanks to the aesthetic and philosophical culture of the group. His rejection of materialism in favour of the spiritual manifested itself especially in the essay "On the Spiritual in Art" (1911).

Although the culture of the Silver Age did not primarily answer to social commands, there were trends within it that were affected by social awareness. Early pre-revolutionary Futurism (1908-1914) was one of them. It opposed its ideals to the *petit-bourgeois* philistinism and generated extravagant visions of a total transformation of the world – if not the cosmos – through an aesthetic revolution. The two main currents of the early Futurism – the one in Saint Petersburg, the other in Moscow – worked together, but yet kept their own profiles. The first was oriented toward nature, the second toward an industrialized city. To reach its goals, Futurism proclaimed its hostility toward the art of the Establishment and resorted to provocative iconoclasm, bravery, exploration, action and aggression. It mainly borrowed its behaviour from the Italian Futurist movement.

Jessica Palmieri, Pratt Institute, NY, USA: *Marinetti, Marionettes, and the Machine Age*

The Italian Futurist exaltation of the future and the rejection of traditional artistic styles led to aggressive artistic experiments and new forms for expressing Futurist ideology. The Futurists sought formal and aesthetic equivalents to the sense perceptions, emotional experiences, and mental correlations of the Machine Age by utilizing the total range of available media, from propaganda and painting to music and cuisine. Ultimately, this Futurist experimentation led to the development of constructions – variously termed by the Futurists "plastic," "dynamic," or "kinetic" sculpture – which in turn shaped the Futurist Marionette Theater. Futurist experiments with Marionette Theater explored radical and truly forward-looking strategies such as the mechanization of actors' movements, the abolition of the actor, and the creation of the so-called *übermarionette*, a larger-than-life sized marionette. Particular emphasis will be placed on the works *Macchina Tipografica* (1914), Fortunato Depero's *Balli Plastici* (1918), and the "mechanical Futurist ballet" *Annicham del 3000* (1924). These examples reflect the Futurists' love of technological innovation as well as the anthropomorphic possibilities they found in the rise of machine culture. The Futurist appropriation of the marionette form will also be examined in light of the Futurists' socioeconomic concerns regarding labor and industry during the first half of the twentieth century.

Dr. Günter Berghaus, University of Bristol, UK: *Futurism and the Technological Imagination, Poised between Machine Cult and Machine Angst*

In this paper I shall present some of the proto-Futurist visions of life and art in the machine age and discuss how Marinetti experienced the first stages of industrialization in Italy. I shall survey Marinetti's theoretical writings on the topic of the machine and on a Futurist art and literature of the machine age. In the second part I shall assess to what degree the Futurist machine cult was tempered by an underlying machine angst. Thus a more complex and contradictory image of Futurist attitudes towards an industrialized society will emerge.

Dr. Serge Milan, Université de Nice, France: *Futurism and the New Human Sensibility*

The desire to renovate the form and content of arts and literature in order to make them suitable vehicles of expression in the new era of machines and metropolis is indeed a common, salient and original feature of Italian Futurism. This desire, however, is considered as inevitable by Futurist theorists as it is seen as a necessary consequence of the changes provoked in human beings by their new environment and their new way of life. On the other hand, Futurism also defines itself as an artistic movement whose goal is precisely to help renew not only human arts, but all human activities, surroundings, social life, as well as human beings themselves as a species and the entire universe, as they put it.

These two complementary aspects of what could first appear as a conceptual circle have been stressed by many important manifestos and articles of the movement and particularly by its founder, F.T. Marinetti, and one of its leading artists, Umberto Boccioni, who solved this paradox using the romantic notion of sensibility (*sensibilità*), redefining and spreading it. The Futurist *sensibilità* therefore plays a central role in the movement's propaganda which attempts to prescribe the new arts as well as a new mankind. Our aim is to study this notion and show how it allowed the first avant-garde movement to link conceptually aesthetics to gnoseology, physiology and ethics, and in doing so, to propound a broad and utopian anthropological project.

Matteo D'Ambrosio, Universita di Napoli Federico II, Italy: *From Futurism to Electronic Literature, to the Neo-Avant-Gardes*

As Walter Benjamin has stated, many times, in the history of arts, an artist, or a movement, or a tendency have tried to obtain creative results which at that moment where impossible; they will be reached only later, thanks to more sophisticated devices. The avant-garde has often desired more and more complex media and languages, that at the time where not still available. F. T. Marinetti too, in his Manifestoes, prefigures several times radically innovating textual models and composition strategies.

The electronic literature, born in 1959, is spreading slowly but progressively, especially thanks to its development in the hypertextual field; the concomitant, gradual disappearance of traditional literary forms favours the progressive institutionalization

of a real "electronic canon"; the precedents of electronic literature will belong to it; between them, many creative results of the Futurist aesthetics have to be included. The perception of their importance is especially due to diverse tendencies of neo-avant-gardes (Concrete and Visual Poetry, Sound Poetry, Videopoetry), which recovered, developed and modified them.

The paper will elucidate how two trends are, at the present time, prevailing in the historiography and the criticism of artistic and literary avant-gardes.   The first one inserts, between the precedents of electronic literature, examples of trans-linguistic and post-verbal research, but ignores Futurism. G. Landow (*Hypertext 2.0*, 1997), for example, declares that also the tradition of literary forms of more stressed experimentalism converges in hypertextual field, and quotes Joyce, Queneau, Saporta; Christiane Paul (*Digital Art*, 2003), on the contrary, limits herself to underline the connections with Dadaism, Fluxus and Conceptual Art.

The second part trend singles out Futurism as a precedent of electronic literature: J. Drucker (*The Visible World*, 1994) reminds the «nearly proto-electronic and cybernetic» Marinetti's sensibility; B. Lennon (*Screening a Digital Visual Poetics*, 2000) his «kinetic adumbration of a "dematerialized", "wireless", or "electronic" medium». But this trend ignores that various tendencies of neo-avant-gardes have been protagonists of a process of continuity and development. The paper will remind their links with Futurism, not yet adequately singled out and evaluated. Futurism is now on air, but thanks to the neo-avant-gardes, which preferred to ignore their debts, their belongings to a long tradition; and criticism, often, did the same.

Dr. Pierpaolo Antonello, Unversity of Cambridge, UK: *Beyond Futurism: Bruno Munari's Useless Machines*

This paper discusses Bruno Munari's understanding of the relationship between art and technology in the light of his early collaboration with the Futurist movement. It explores the legacy and influence of Futurist experimentation in Munari's œuvre, his progressive distancing from the Futurist aesthetics and the more encompassing integration of his art with other aesthetic trends in Europe at the time. In particular, the paper focuses on the epistemological implications of Munari' 'useless machines'. It examines the artist's departure from the main thrust of Futurist 'technolatry' towards a broader understanding of technology, which questioned any dualistic separation between nature and technology, between the artificial and the natural

Dr. Marja Härmänmaa, University of Helsinki: *The Futurist Naturist Movement*

This paper is concerned with the relationship between Futurism and Nature and the representation of the latter in the works of F.T. Marinetti. Initially, Futurism's glorification of technology and the modern city entailed a complete rupture of the relationship between humankind and organic Nature, a relationship that had been central in nineteenth century philosophy and literature. Futurism abandoned the myth

of Pan, which symbolized the cult of Nature and was based on a concept of cyclical time, and adopted the one of Prometheus (the civilizing power) and of Ulysses (the heroic force) – which operated with a linear conception of history and emphasized the idea of progress. Marinetti replaced the bucolic landscape of mountains, rivers, fields and sea with an ultra-modern cityscape of steel and concrete. But did this really mean that there was no place for organic Nature in the Futurist world view? This paper suggests that Marinetti's conception endorsed the idea of Nature as an enemy that needed to be tamed and controlled by humankind.