

Poetry and Technology in Marinetti's Futurist Manifestos

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Abstract

The Avant-garde literary movements accomplished a wide combination of artistic and scientific principles, exploiting aesthetically the aspects of technological world. Thus, the Futurist manifestos are landmarks for a new model of technophilic sensibility. The aim of this study is to demonstrate the way in which elements of the technological universe are comprised in the discourse of Marinetti's futurist manifestos, implicitly giving rise to a new aesthetics. The new means of transportations (the automobile, the dirigible, the airplane) and the means for transmitting information (the telegraph, the radio) radically modify the perception of time and space, creating an aesthetics of simultaneity.

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Literature is recurrently modified by the universe of technological discoveries, and it tries to comprise them in different literary forms. The pioneers, who fiercely ceased to make the distinction between art and science, had been the European avant-garde artists at the beginning of the 20th century, who were magnetized by the myth of speed and of automobile, by the poetry of the telegraph and of the cinema, by the sparkling exhibitions of the urban life. The new form of art disregarded and disrespected the passeism of the romantic paradigm belonging to the 19th century, and brought art to the dynamic territory of life. But signs for this change appeared in the 19th century have been spotted in *Le chants modernes*, written by Maxime Du Camp in 1855, the French author suggesting other artists to pay attention to their age that brought forward the force of electricity and steam, photography and electroplating. The avant-garde literary movements (especially Futurism, Cubism and Constructivism) are opened towards the technical world due to their desire to empower aesthetically the surrounding material world, and due to their sense of bewildering the expectations of the bourgeois public. The quote of Lautréamont in *The Songs of Maldoror*, "as beautiful as a chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table", came to define the new aesthetics of the time. Rejecting the artistic images based on *similitude*, the avant-garde artists mingled displays of reality apparently irreconcilable in original artistic expressions. Of all the avant-garde movements, Futurism was positive about the influence of the new peaks modern technology had reached, reinforcing what was later called the *futurist technolatriy*. Even though in the meanwhile, the culture of the world tested many artistic forms even more shocking for the expectations of an omnipresent upper crust, the Futurist manifestos will incessantly bear the innocence of the initial rebellion, the melodrama and the dynamism of the statements. By fixing as their landmark the myth of eternal novelty and compressing the fluidity of time until it reaches the form of simultaneity, the Futurists provide an authentic theoretical background to the other

avant-garde movements as well. This fact was also reinstated by Renato Poggioli in *The Theory of Avantgarde*, depicting Futurism as "a significant symptom of a broader and deeper state of mind."¹ Aiming at tearing down the rusty monuments of upper class culture, the Futurists fought against it through new forms of literature, theatre, cinema, photography, choreography, architecture, sculpture, gastronomy. Thus, the artists surrounding Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla, Carlo Carrà, Gino Severini etc. came up with a series of manifestos that revolutionised the cultural environment. Their insightful ideas were inherited by the Neo-avantgarde generations of artists during and after the Second World War, who fruitfully exploited the cohabitation of art with technology.

This paper does not aim at depicting the chronology of the movement, its impact on Europe, or the political affinities of its representatives. There are numerous studies in this way, with minute historical facts, with cultural and aesthetic data², many of them explicitly rendering the way in which the effects of the Industrial Revolution (in Italy or in France) marked the Futurist movement. And the different attitudes of Futurism towards technology, springing from *machine cult* to *machine angst*, are minutely depicted by one of the mainstream researchers in this field, Günter Berghaus³. Being rather more interested in technology as a functional pretext for a new literary doctrine, and perceiving the manifestos as a dialogue venue for aesthetics and technology, the aim of this study is to demonstrate the way in which elements of the technological universe are comprised in the discourse of Marinetti's futurist manifestos, implicitly giving rise to a new aesthetics. The connection between literature and technology (*literature about technology*, *literature as technology*, and *literature by means of technology*), and the issues generated by their differences are presented by Eric Vos in a well known study⁴. Even though Eric Vos addresses these forms at the level of particular artistic phenomena after the Second World War, I reckon the operational typology conforms to Marinetti's futurist manifestos as well. My analysis will be based particularly on *literature about technology*, emphasizing the technological discoveries that are introduced into the literary realm of Marinetti's futurist manifestos, on *literature as technology*, pointing out, as Eric Vos put it, "a poetics based upon technological concepts"⁵, but also on *literature by means of technology*, comprising here elements of graphic experiments, a common technique for futurists, so that "aspects of industrial/technological production of a work merge with its semiotic function"⁶. The distinction made among the three types of relations cannot and will not be inflexible, the practice of the text allowing the transposition from one category to another. I have selected Marinetti's manifestos and not his strictly literary texts, if such a dissociation is possible, due to the fact that any manifesto is not only a declarative act, but also a discourse-model built on the currently stated principles. In *Culture of Technology* (MIT Press, 1983), Arnold Pacey distinguishes three aspects of technology: the organisational aspect, the technical and the cultural one. Nevertheless, in this paper the term *technology* will mostly be referred to its second meaning, that relates to the theoretical concepts, the instrumentation and mechanisms of the technological universe. The fact that the Futurists' manifestos have been considered the most valuable part of their creation, opposed to the flamboyant discursive poems of the same Marinetti or Aldo Palazzeschi, that it could be a consequence of surpassing technology as literary subject and its transformation in a guiding aesthetic principle; inherently, we have to deal with an evolution of the

manifesto, which is not any longer only a programmatic text, but also an independent aesthetic creation. Due to the fact that Marinetti's manifestos are mostly iterative, we have not intended to address them all through, but only the ones that give us coherent information about the relationships between literature and technology.

The literary manifesto is not a simple programmatic act, it is a result of the paradigm shifts, an act that foresees and brings up the spiritual flow of a generation. The manifesto is not just a text; it is a component of a complex cultural network. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, one can notice a combination of art and science, recorded and amplified by the avant-garde movements that assert a different type of sensibility. The social phenomenon of popularization of science also explains this inclusion of the technological realm into the elitist literary field. Marinetti's manifestos entangle a kind of rhetoric that reaches for the unusual, to draw out humanity from its sweet romantic cosiness and associate it to the engine of century taken over by speed. While the classic aesthetics has considered the *proportion*, the *harmony* of the constituent parts and the *static* as the beauty spring, Marinetti states, on the contrary, the *contrast*, *disharmony* or *dynamism* as the generator of beauty. Futurism brings forward the elating rhythm of modernism, and the phrase that defines best the Futurist attitude is that of Giovanni Lista: *art-vie-action*. In this context, the Futurist manifestos will surpass everything by breaching the boundaries of predictable communication, altering language on all levels. The appeal to the technical terms will initially be a concrete way to tear down the canonical language, avoiding lexical and stylistic coherence of programmatic texts, proving that humanity reached a new age: that of *Machine* and *Mobility* (Günter Berghaus). Treating technology as a poetical theme, Marinetti is once again revolutionary. The elements that constitute the futurist technological realm are joined together by Marinetti himself, in his 1913 manifesto, *Destruction of Syntax. Imagination without strings. Words in Freedom*:

Futurism is grounded in the complete renewal of human sensibility brought about by the great discoveries of science. Those people who today make use of the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the train, the bicycle, the motorcycle, the automobile, the ocean liner, the dirigible, the aeroplane, the cinema, the great newspaper (synthesis of a day in the world's life) do not realize that these various means of communication, transportation and information have a decisive influence on their psyches.⁷

Marinetti's first text, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, published in *Le Figaro* on the 20th of February 1909, most evidently the act of the futurism rise, combines the strengths of the programme together with its vision. Fuelled by the fire of an "electric heart", turning a car accident into a revelation, the Futurists suggest another hallmark for beauty: the beauty of speed. The cultural studies that treat the impact and the symbolism of the automobile myth in the 20th century start their journey right from the linking of this means of locomotion to the feeling of freedom, to the recognition of personal autonomy. More than just a means of transportation, the automobile represents the sign of a technological victory against the natural environment man once feared of. This new means of locomotion quickly becomes an aesthetic object, replacing the old idols: "racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath—a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the *Victory*

of *Samothrace*.⁸ In this respect, the previous association of the two icons Marinetti had been inspired by a proto-futurist, Mario Morasso, whose merits had not been mentioned by the author of the famous manifestos.

Speed does not only play a central role for their creed, it also has a mystical function. The religion of speed preached by Marinetti in *The New Religion-Morality of Speed* (1916) brings forward the idea of burning the slowness, for being a creation of restrictive Christian morals that deliberately pushes away man from “lustful excesses”. Placing the human being in the middle of flamboyant mecano-morph articulations, Marinetti proposed a new way of mystical experience. The idols are different, the light and the electromagnetic waves, high speed corpuscles, the priests of the new religion are the sportsmen, and the religious feeling is everywhere one can sense the spirit of speed: in trains, in stations, in radiotelegraphic stations, on the battle fields. The transcendent world is replaced by the technical one, and the human being is linked to a different rhythm of life. And the words and poetry itself will adopt the rhythm of the factories, of the automobiles, of the aeroplanes. Most notable in this respect, the flight is the sign of body defeating gravity, and aeropainting and aeropoetry mark the success of an aesthetics that combined artistic perspectives with the technological principles. The representations of the human being will follow the blueprint of a technophilic universe, because Marinetti suggests another type of a human being, *l'uomo meccanico dalle parti cambiabili*, the man who will have parts that can be changed. This mechanical man, a protocyborg, will be the product of the liaison between the human and the machine, without fearing death. The man multiplied by the machine is the sign that *regnum animale* has been surpassed, thus starting, as the Italian mentor foretold, the *mechanic regnum*. Helped by mechanical equipment, man becomes super-man, and it is not coincidence the fact that one of Marinetti's models was Nietzsche. The new artist will trade his romantic pose of the wild and travelling poet for a new series of attributes: philosopher, sportsman, engineer, politician etc. Thus, the *literary I* will be sacrificed on the chassis of the perfect machine, because the psychology of the human being must be replaced with the lyrical obsession of matter. As poetic material, matter will be engineered according to the laws of Physics: “its forces of compression, dilation, cohesion, and disaggregation, its crowds of massed molecules and whirling electrons”⁹.

Raised in Egypt, Marinetti was fascinated by the contact he established with the European civilizations, astonished by the industrialization displays, thus, wishing to name Futurism Electricism. The mentioning in his manifestos of the passion for the urban settings is a reminiscence of the symbolist early writings of Marinetti. The glamorous mechanisms of steel, the entertaining exhibitions of the gargantuan plant-cities become the Futurists' preferred images. In his *Manifesto*, paragraph 11, the futurist mentor abandons the rigour of a manifesto (if the Futurists postulate for it), creating an authentic fragment of *poetry about technology*:

We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives;

adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon; deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing; and the sleek flight of planes whose propellers chatter in the wind like banners and seem to cheer like an enthusiastic crowd.¹⁰

The poetry of the future ought to discard the idyllic nature and the abyssal feelings, focusing on the perpetuum movement of the big cities. Associated with “the lyrical initiative of electricity” the European metropolis demonstrates that it is high time for a new mythology, that of the technological progress.

In his manifestos, Marinetti is not only lured by idea of revolutionising the themes of literature, but he connects them with the thought of typographic revolution. The graphic experiments, like the ones with the word “to smoke”, defy the distinction between text and image, fitting in a more ample context of picto-poetry or the avant-garde caligrams. Faithful to the principle of simultaneity, Marinetti plays with the letters' size and shape, with musical and mathematical symbols, with different ink colours, in order to trigger an explosion of the senses for the reader, a series of rapid sensations. Thus, the monotonous text page, the linear lyrism are brought to life, and words' force of expression is doubled. A new type of reading is born, a reading that is dynamic, iconic, that sets in motion a person's senses. Such reactions cannot be triggered unless one uses words in freedom, words that create interpretation chains, words that could be rearranged in a poetical table of Mendeleev. In the same context of tearing apart the traditional representations of a literary or objectual reality, one cannot overlook Marinetti's experiment in 1932, who put together a series of poems in a book made of iron. The awkward volume that most certainly triggered a physical experience of reading had been realized by Tullio d'Albisola in his workshop Lito-latta in Savona. This aesthetic product is a consequence of the attention that Marinetti gave to the matter and whose virtues he praised in *The Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*.

Illustrative for the way in which technology takes part in building a new aesthetics are the manifestos like *Destruction of Syntax*, *Imagination without strings*, *Words in Freedom*, *The Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* or *Geometric and Mechanical Splendour and the Numerical Sensibility*. The new means of transmitting information, especially the telegraph and the radio, changed Marinetti's conception on literary communication, because the words in freedom are “the daughters of machine aesthetics”. In the article written in 1933 together with Pino Masnata, *The Futurist Radio Manifesto*, Marinetti defines the radio as “a synthesis of infinite simultaneous actions”. The obsession of simultaneity, which is obvious in mostly all of his manifestos, repeats the pattern according to which the radio waves themselves are emitted and received. The connection (theoretically) of humankind to the same electromagnetic pole determines a modification of perception regarding space and time. Simplifying excessively, even the way Futurism was propagated, as an avant-garde movement that succeeded in reaching simultaneously the receivers from many European countries, including Romania, repeats the pattern of radio wave dispersion. At the same time, many of the emitted waves, just like the futurist messages, get lost in the air, not being able to reach a receiver to process the message, or the environment it reaches might alter its initial quality. There are different European versions of Futurism, many of them (Russian, Romanian) mixing Marinetti's ideas with their national particular phenomena.

The contact with the new means of locomotion, especially the airplane, offers a different perspective on spatial proportions. The futurist mentor promotes the elimination of details, the unmediated correlation of realities, due to the fact that words must fly, disperse. It is not a random matter that the revelations about the breaking of the laws of syntax, mentioned at the beginning of *The Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, take place during an airplane flight. Eradication of syntax refers to a fluidization of the verb, i.e. using the verb in its infinitive form, removing adverbial and adjectival ornaments, the ones that burden the sentence and drag it into the swamp of plasticity, or by removing punctuation, the one that censures the liberty of the creator and the reader. Since any adjective means “a stopping, a reflection”, it will be eliminated because it slows down the rhythm of the sentence. The epic speed will replace the minute analysis, and the need for concision will adopt the model of the economical telegraphic communication. Words in freedom, without strings, simplify the relation between the reader and the author, but it also gives to the creative imagination a new way to realize artistic images. Marinetti considers that imagination without strings represents “the absolute freedom of images or analogies, expressed with unhampered words and with no connecting strings of syntax and with no punctuation”¹¹. This type of imagination gives matter the opportunity to rehabilitate poetically, by changing the purpose: the poetic style will no longer humanize matter, it will finally adopt the attributes of matter and have the ability to *animalize, vegetize, mineralize, electrify, or liquefy* the human.

The image of an enormous global community connected through electrical wires and radio emphasizes the worldwide character of the utopian futurist project. Individuality gets meaning only if it is integrated in the network, and cosmopolitanism brings down the national borders. And the idea of the global village, theorised by Marshall McLuhan in *Gutenberg Galaxy*, is also to be found in the same manifesto mentioning the destruction of syntax. Connected to the new technology of broadcasting information “The single man, therefore, must communicate with every people on earth. He must feel himself to be the axis, judge, and motor of the explored and unexplored infinite.”¹² Marinetti's futurist scenarios foresee the contemporary images of the virtual hipertext, or of the global visual network, offering hints about the alteration of the traditional representations for time and space, or about the notion of identity, with its mixture of solidity and fluidity.

Marinetti's manifestos represent a quixotic and utopian age of the technological imagination. Even though, 100 years later, his texts discomfort some through his emphatic and redundant rhetoric, they advance an extraordinary mentality evidence for the beginning of a technologically based aesthetics.

Notes

¹ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avantgarde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald, New York: Harper and Row, 1968, p.69

² Some of the researchers with notable books about the Futurism are Giovanni Lista, Claudia Salaris, Merjorie Perloff, Gunter Berhaus, Christine Poggi etc.

³ Especially in the study *Futurism and the Technological Imagination Poised between Machine Cult and Machine Angst*, in vol. *Futurism and Technological Imagination*, edited by Günter Berghaus, Editions Rodopi B V, Amsterdam-New York, 2009, on <http://books.google.ro/>

⁴ Vos, Eric, *Interactive fiction; Scilit; Das Gedich Als Gebrauchsgegenstand; Littérature potentielle – Four Views on Literature and Technology*, in *Avant-Garde and Technology*, edited by Leigh Landy, Editions Rodopi, 1992, p. 41-65

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42

⁷ Concerning the corpus of texts, I studied the Italian electronic edition of Marinetti's manifestos, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *I manifesti del futurismo*, E-book#28144, 2009, and also the Romanian edition, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Manifestele futurismului*, translation, introduction and notes by Emilia David Drogoreanu, Art Publishing House, 2009. The English version of the quotations from the manifestos *Destruction of Syntax. Imagination without strings. Words in Freedom and The Founding and the Manifesto of Futurism*, it is reproduced from <http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, accesed on the 23rd of November, 2010.

⁹ *Ibid.*, accesed on the 23rd of November 2010.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, accesed on the 18th of November 2010.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, accesed on the 23rd of November 2010.

¹² *Ibid.*, accesed on the 23 of November 2010.

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