Art (Italy)

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Summary

The article demonstrates the significance of the Great War for Italian Futurism: an aesthetic war, technological but above all revolutionary, from which, for the Italian avant-garde, a new society would have emerged. At this stage the machine - the supreme expression of modern industrial society - corresponds with the idea of a new man forged by it: heroic, strong, healthy. The complex problem of art and war is here understood as the other side, the most extreme, of the relationship between art and "politics". Futurism's hendiadys "art-life" and the antithetical "art for art" of Giorgio de Chirico and Alberto Savinio are analyzed here as emblems of another way of understanding art and the artist's role in society and as the first instances of the post-war return to order.

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"War is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means."[1]

Introduction

The Great War represented a decisive turning point – not only on the political level – but also in terms of culture, education and communication. In fact, two extraordinary phenomena flowed into it: on the one hand, the general mobilization of the population in a conflict which for the first time presented itself as total; on the other hand, this mobilization was made possible, justifiable and culturally possible, thanks to the arrival, already at that time, of the masses on the political scene. The Great War was therefore also management and control in terms of persuasion and consent.

In any case, the conflict was fought not only on the military front but also on the “internal” one: war-time industry and the press, the theatre and art proved equally decisive for the fate of the conflict. For the first time an extraordinary propaganda campaign was set in motion to ensure the mobilization of the population.[2]

Of central importance therefore were the production and circulation of images and imaginary ones, which nevertheless remained diversified. For example, the brutal reality of the military notebooks for a long time remained unknown to the civilians who stayed at home. They received the most aseptic photographs and images, filtered by the censorship of the military commanders. Far from the official rhetoric were the images by the artist-soldiers of prisoners, of the experience of hunger and the trenches. The protagonist of the desolate battlefields was often the barbed wire, the new effigy of this war: the soldier’s nightmare, the habitual place of death, it would leave its mark on the combatants of both sides – from Pietro Morando (1889-1980) and Alberto Helios Gagliardo (1893-1987), to Otto Dix (1891-1969), Félix Vallotton (1865-1925), László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) and Christopher Nevinson (1889-1946).[3]

However, here we are concerned with examining art, in relation to the Great War, from another perspective. Trying not to fall into what Ernst H. Gombrich (1909-2001) has called “physiognomic fallacy”[4] – that is, the perception by historians of paintings and painting styles as immediate expressions of existing phenomena – the analysis of artistic movements that precede and accompany the conflict must actually aim at increasing our knowledge about the *Zeitgeist*, which often turns out to be different from what seemed to be the historical evidence. In the Italian case, it is undoubtedly the Futurist movement that can best convey this “spirit of the age”, inasmuch as it dealt in depth – as the historical avant-garde *par excellence* which it was – with the war, often invoking it and somehow favouring it. Therefore, here, the main focus will be on Futurism. However, the article will also focus on the “other modernity” of Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), the emblem of another type of painting which, like the Futurists, originated in Italy and developed in different ways in Paris. De Chirico’s Metaphysics, created in 1910 in Florence,[5] subsequently developed in Paris and finally during the war and above all in the post-war period resulted in the return to order: for the artists, gathered around the magazine “Valori Plastici”, but also for defecting Futurists, certainly produced another modernity, different from the pre-war one.[6]

But de Chirico and Alberto Savinio (1891-1952) – until 1926 only a musician, critic and writer – are also considered here for the importance which they would have in the post-war *retour à l’ordre* in Italy, with a more disenchanted and in some ways more orthodox vision of the role

of the artist in society: a reflection that would have an impact on the European avant-garde after the experience of 1914-1918.[7] The thesis "art-life" by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), in short, is here contrasted with the "art for art's sake" of the Dioscuri, particularly peremptory in the post-war journal "Valori Plastici". But there is another aspect to be emphasized: the complex problem of art and war is understood as the other more extreme side of the relationship between art and "politics"; the "industrial war" is simply the acme of the bold Futurist proposal of seeing art as life:

words spoken in freedom, the analogic explosion, oratorical simultaneity are born and develop in an indissoluble conjunction with the aesthetic spectacle of the battle in the age of the violent and imperialistic capitalist-industrial development, in ways in which one can admire the timeliness, consistency and, often, anticipatory daring.[8]

The Futurist War as Gesamtkunstwerk

Trained in the Symbolist culture of the late 19th century, which was deeply imbued with the Wagnerian theory of "the total work of art", Filippo Tommaso Marinetti accepted and redeveloped the concept in *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* published in Paris in 1909 in "Le Figaro". The Futurist project was driven from the outset by an acute political consciousness: that of having a strong revolutionary action in the field of artistic creation. It was precisely in this role, attributed to art, that there was one of the most obvious points of contact between Futurism and the theory developed by Richard Wagner (1813-1883) about the mid-19th century. Through a deep reflection on the historical degeneration of art starting from the failure of Greek tragedy, Wagner attributed a "conservative" role to the art of the Greeks, since it was a particularly valid expression of public consciousness. Hence the exhortation not to restore it, conceiving, on the contrary, "real art" as a revolution – that is, finding its own essence and existence "only in contrast with the prevailing general state of affairs".[9]

The utopian Wagnerian project of replacing the "selfish" paths undertaken by each of the arts with a "total work of the future"[10] was deprived, in Futurism, of any messianic projections and based on a desire for concrete intervention in the public sphere.[11] The social unrest, of which Marinetti was the main but not the only instigator in his group, was the operational model in revolutionary syndicalism and anarchist propaganda: a trait that made the Futurist initiative unique in the Italian artistic scene, where there was a clear lack of a strong artistic modernity endowed with self-awareness. It was Georges Sorel (1847-1922) – destined to have much more influence in Italy than in France[12] – who stimulated the taste for danger and for

Marinetti's struggle. "*La guerre révèle l'idéal, crèe l'épopée, retrempe les nations amollies, éprouve les races, communique à tout, dans la Société, le mouvement, la vie, la flame*".[13] Ideas that were evidently developed in Futurism's proclamations starting from the first Manifesto: "We wish to glorify war – the sole cleanser of the world – militarism, patriotism, the destructive act of the libertarian, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman".[14] Contempt for women is put on the same plane as war; here the real goal of Futurism was to present itself as a movement capable of achieving an "anthropological revolution to create the 'heroic citizen' educated to be courageous and able to love risk, danger, and the struggle".[15] A *new man* who should be moulded and conceived by presenting art with a total function, able to touch all the spheres of the life of the individual – ranging from the visual to the plastic arts, from the theatre, to architecture, literature, the cinema and even cuisine. "Long before the birth of fascism, Futurism urged the necessity of overcoming the barriers between culture and politics by means of a symbiosis between culture and life …designed to reawaken the intellectual and moral energies of the Italians".[16] Like many avant-garde European artists, the Futurists were evoking "a purely imaginary war that they hoped would lead humanity toward a purer and more modern world".[17]

Speed – the real counterpart of the machine, its indissoluble function – buries time and space; the movement creates a dynamic, an "absolute", which removes the usual categories of thought and all references of life.[18] The taste for speed further stimulated the pleasure in experiencing danger, fighting and in the war which, seen in various forms – literary, political, ideal, patriotic – was interpreted as a transformation of reality through conquest, aggression, deployment of energy.[19]

It was above all with the Libyan campaign – for which the Futurist leader wrote *La battaglia di Tripoli*, published in 1911 in instalments in the French daily newspaper "L'Intransigeant" – that the war became the supreme expression of a mechanized culture, a real initiation for heroic men heading towards the formation of a future society. In fact, there was enthusiastic appreciation for the purely technical and modern aspects, with its mass impact, of a war in which the plane was added for the first time as an instrument of death.

The outbreak of the conflict strengthened, in the Futurists, their muscular and emotional adherence to the war, "space-time recreation",[20] but also constituted the confirmation of their insights and of Italy's forthcoming transformation:

Aggressive, dynamic Futurism is today being fully realized in the great World War that it alone foresaw and glorified before it broke out. This present war is the finest Futurist poem

that has materialized up to now. Futurism, to be precise, signaled the outbreak of war in art, through the invention of the Futurist *serata* (the most effective sort of propaganda so far as courage is concerned).[21]

War is “an immense Futurist exhibition of aggressive, dynamic canvases, one we wish to engage in so as to reveal our qualities”: the plastic dynamism, the pluritonal music, the Art of Noise, the Words-in-Freedom, the Theatre of Essential Brevity, the Futurist architecture “are the natural artistic expressions of this Futurist hour.”[22] After all, Paroliberismo itself (the stylistically free use of words) arose as a mimesis of the noise and the scenography of the war while the synthetic theatre – launched around the beginning of 1915 – would have a central role in the political battle in favour of the war.[23]

But, it was the artists’ first-person participation in the conflict which supremely expressed the Futurist *Gesamtkunstwerk*: it had the ability to reunite the individual arts in a total work of art – which was the war itself – and, as was already the case for Wagner but without the contemplative and monumental model, of central importance to him, transmitted to the spectator (-soldier), through an aesthetic experience of the first order, the ferment of progress necessary for the future society.

We Futurists…affirm the continuous perfection and endless progress of humankind, both physiological and intellectual, as absolute principles of Futurism. We consider the hypothesis of the friendly unification of peoples to be outmoded and utterly dispensable, and we see for the world only one form of purgation, and that is the war[24].

It was not by chance that in March 1915 the manifesto *Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo* was signed by Giacomo Balla (1871-1958) and Fortunato Depero (1892-1960): it reaffirmed the palingenetic strength of Futurism at the very moment when Italy was about to go to war.[25]

The Steel Machine

In 1914, after the outbreak of the conflict, the Futurists were “among the very first interventionists” and perhaps “the first to organize street demonstrations demanding intervention against Austria and Germany”.[26] As early as September of that year there were interventionist demonstrations in Milan organized by Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), Armando Mazza (1884-1964), Ugo Piatti (1888-1953), Luigi Russolo (1885-1947), who were arrested. The five then symbolically launched from the “Milan cell,” the leaflet-posters *Sintesi futurista della guerra* which depicted a large wedge in which were

placed the names of the nations opposed to the “traditionalism” of Austria and Germany. The wedge, at whose summit there was Futurism, was similar to what El Lissitzky (1890-1941) would conceive to represent the army of the reds against “the whites”. There followed interventionist speeches by Marinetti in various Italian cities and in December, in Rome, during the demonstration with Balla, Depero, Marinetti, the Neapolitan poet Francesco Cangiullo (1884-1977) wore the “anti-neutral clothing” designed by Balla.[27] Also in the capital in March 1915, Bruno Corra (1892-1976), Marinetti, Balla, Emilio Settimelli (1891-1954) and Benito Mussolini (1883-1945), who participated in the Futurist initiatives, were arrested.

Between May and December 1915 Boccioni, Achille Funi (1890-1972), Marinetti, Piatti, Russolo, Antonio Sant’Elia (1888-1916) and Mario Sironi (1885-1961) enlisted in the Lombard Volunteer Cyclists Battalion which, after a period in Gallarate, reached the front in the area of Lake Garda.[28] Depero was a volunteer in the infantry on the Col di Lana. The Futurists lived through the first period of the war with enthusiasm, sometimes like a real war-party. These are the words that Boccioni wrote from the front towards the end of October 1915:

I have marched up to twenty hours without eating, drinking or sleeping. Terrible! A real storm of grenades and shrapnel rained down on us unceasingly. Beautiful! The fallen were dragged away without a word… There were fits of crying …But in all the volunteers there was a demonstration of magnificent courage![29]

In *Guerrapittura* Carlo Carrà (1881-1966) sees patriotism as “an extension of the ego”;[30] for the artist the war does not appear like an obstacle, but an incentive to creativity – namely it will create a strong passion for what is ephemeral, new, rapid.

In the first Futurist generation, with particular emphasis in the war period, the technocratic idea of Futurism therefore appears strongly linked to a technological vision of the machine. In fact, it is on this emblem of modern industrial society that the new man is forged “multiplied”, that is, mechanically constructed. This is what Marinetti states in *Extended Man and the Kingdom of the Machine* when, after having extolled the love “of the machine – that love we first saw lighting up the faces of engine drivers, scorched and filthy with coal dust though they were” foreshadows “the imminent, inevitable identification of man with his motorcar, so as to facilitate and perfect an unending exchange of intuitions, rhythms, instincts, and metallic discipline, absolutely unknown to the majority and only guessed at by the brightest spirits”. Naturally “this nonhuman, mechanical species, built for constant speed will…be cruel, omniscient and warlike”.[31]

An idea which in Marinetti grew stronger during the conflict, from a reading of the novel

L'alcova d'acciaio written between 1919 and 1920 – a triumphal account of the last year of the war, from the aftermath of the Piave counter-offensive up to the Battle of Vittorio Veneto. The protagonist is the armoured car "74", Lieutenant Marinetti's lover, naturally "with an iron, in fact steel, constitution, a wonderful sensitivity, but armoured", able to "offend" and "kill", while "it is very difficult to wound her mortally".[32] In that school of life that was the war and anticipating, in a really pioneering way, the new man imagined by Fascism in the 1930s, the Futurist leader did not fail to exalt "the inevitable massacre of most of those young muscular and healthy young men who knew by then how to gloss their warlike instincts with new ideals".[33]

But Marinetti's enthusiasm was not unanimous. With regard to *L'alcova d'acciaio* Mario Isnenghi refers to a rare harmony between the external world and internal needs.[34] Between 1916 and 1917 Sant'Elia died, Russolo and Marinetti were wounded, while Boccioni lost his life because of a fall from a horse. These were his words shortly before his death:

I will emerge from this experience with a contempt for everything that is not art …Everything I see… is a game compared to a brushstroke, a melodious verse, a just harmony. Everything, in comparison with that, is a matter of mechanics, of habit, of patience, of memory. There is only art.[35]

Carrà, like Funi and Sironi, would leave Futurism: following his own personal path, he would try once again to find a balance between art and tradition, between nature and art. With the publication in 1916 of the *Parlata su Giotto* Carrà had, in fact, started a process of nullifying dynamism and form, but still in the path of the avant-garde: Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Paolo Uccello were the tutelary deities of his very original change. It was an intense period that led Carrà to have a fruitful relationship with de Chirico and Metaphysics. Having met in Ferrara in March 1917, and both being admitted to a military hospital, the two artists established a strong relationship that would develop around the periodical "Valori Plastici".[36]

But there also remained traces of the conflict in the generation which continued to define itself as Futurist: the war had not been that "liberating and fantastic game" from which there would have come a political reality aiming at "progress".[37] Futurism had to take into account the new world which had emerged from the war, but also had to deal with a crisis of inevitable growth, a planned depletion. The new generation that grew together with Fascism would develop the technocratic parlance, becoming part of the great European period of the "mechanical age".[38] Substantially devoid of its technological and aggressive wartime associations, the machine would be part of the translation of new cosmogonic realities,

especially starting from the “aero-painting” of Enrico Prampolini (1894-1956) and the Turin group led by Luigi “Fillia” Colombo (1904-1936).[39] Until the mid-1930s – Futurism’s imperialistic and warmongering change coincided with Italy’s aggression in Ethiopia – for the “second Futurism” and Fascism building the new man would have the aim, which had not been implemented because it was at odds with other intrinsic elements, of creating a new ruling class: on a non-materialistic but almost transcendental basis, and certainly organic, functional and spiritual.[40]

The “Other Modernity” and the Return to Order

The outbreak of war in early August 1914, in which no one had seriously believed, struck the world of culture and the arts of Paris like a “devastating earthquake”. A world of alternative characters, “not concerned with the concepts of homeland or belonging or even worse race.” A world of international fugitives reunited for decades in Montmartre or Montparnasse, creating an extraordinary intellectual experience. De Chirico and Savinio were also in the French capital and, when it became clear that Italy was going to be on the side of the Entente, they understood that their period as fugitives and stateless persons had ended and that the cherished homeland was coming down from the pedestal of the poetic ideal to become reality.[41] Taking advantage of a law enacted at the time of Italy’s entry into the war in May 1915, which granted an amnesty to all those who presented themselves spontaneously, the two brothers returned to Italy: France could no longer accept the deserters of an allied country.

The distance between de Chirico and Savinio – with the transnational world they represented – and the “modernist avant-garde”, whose anti-academic and anti-conformist freedom they defended, therefore, concerns the war. More generally, the artist’s “indiscriminate activism”,[42] the political role within society, was alien to them. Moreover, if the aim of the avant-garde was to “revolutionize forms”, that is, to renew the common way of seeing the object through a stylistic process, metaphysical art – after 1917 having defined itself a school or movement led by de Chirico – was based on an in-depth theoretical and philosophical investigation of the meaning of the signs and the methods of visual communication. It is in the symbolist roots, though denied, that the thought of the Dioscuri and their world of reference have to be contextualized – a fact that perhaps helps one to understand better their way of relating to the war, but above all their way of conceiving art and the artist’s role in society.

“*L’époque du symbolisme est celle d’un doute profond portant sur la capacité de la société occidentale à créer comme par le passé ses propres cadres conceptuels*.” Even the concept

of progress was questionable:[43] that is, symbolism should be placed in the broader crisis of society and the State that began towards the end of the 19th century in which, very briefly, determinism gave way to relativity. Like Romanticism – of which it might seem like a final epiphany – symbolism had its heroes, but they all belonged to the sphere of thought or art and no longer that of action: the leading figures were Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and the aforementioned Wagner.[44]

The thought that innervated symbolism oscillated between pessimism and the initiation search for a verb or an art which embodied the totality of the cosmos – a fluctuation between the marvelous and the bitter, enchantment and the anguish which increased prior to the First World War. As in the case of Max Klinger (1857-1920) or Alfred Kubin (1877-1959): it is not surprising that symbolism could present premonitory aspects which made it a pinnacle of Western culture before the devastation of the ideologies of the 20th century.

But symbolism was also the myth to which artists, distancing themselves from current and single events, did not give a historical significance. Distant heirs of Stoic pantheism, they cast a glance at the world in search of the immanent. It was primarily Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), but also Klinger and Kubin who influenced de Chirico's painting. For the latter and for Savinio the world was a mystery that was worth interpreting with music, literature, painting. In this sense they considered themselves the last heirs of symbolism and of its crowning glory, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. But in the sense intended by Wagner, the two brothers aimed at the "discovery of the absolute, metaphysical essence of the world, the thing itself".[45]

It was de Chirico who created between 1909 and 1918 the new images of modern melancholy; conferred a metaphorical expression on the enigma of that time and translated all this with a language in which the symbol lost its link with meaning.

The war years – though the process had already started earlier – led, in the Italian art world, to the conviction and practice of art removed from experimentalism and the easy satisfactions of taste. The polemic against the avant-gardes was based on the consideration that artistic action had been "reduced to a mere capacity for an immediate and superficial intervention in events which would impoverish art and its tools".[46] The crisis was not only due to the overcoming of the war and the problems it had posed; it was also a search for what was "new" which would be able to guarantee a social recomposition that would give everyone a role and would assign duties and functions to the figure of the artist. This was the opinion of the writers who theorized on "Valori Plastici", the Roman periodical, directed by Mario Broglio (1891-1948), which came into being in 1918, while the conflict was still raging,

and was among the first events in Italy of the *rappel à l'ordre* and included among its collaborators de Chirico, Savinio, but also Carrà and Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964). Hence the result: art had to direct "its appeal of definition of functions and production", not to regimes, to politics, but in a statuesque image, which was then the "nation", certainly abstract and generic, which had been discussed a great deal during the war and in the post-war period.[47]

In Rome, the return to the order restored the atmosphere of a timeless painting that followed in the path of an Italian tradition, in which history and contemporaneity were replaced by the museum and the Platonic idea of the classic. For Fabio Benzi, De Chirico's paintings of this period are "the greatest and highest achievements of an imminent and monumental classicism".[48] The periodical, which would cease publishing in 1922, was undoubtedly the most active return to order in Italy also at the international level: it was, for example, very successful in the German world, communicating, more generally, with periodicals ("De Stijl", "L'Esprit Nouveau"), galleries (*Der Sturm*), movements such as *Bauhaus* and the artists that would be formed in the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.[49]

Conclusion

The call to pure art and to overcoming the political nature of art would not have the result hoped for by de Chirico.[50] Above all Futurism which, in the three and a half years from Italy's entry into the war until the cessation of hostilities, went through a period of an enforced break, during which the view and the organization of the movement were completely redesigned. The participants in the war, including Marinetti, were forced into total artistic inactivity and to remain far from the major cultural centres; Futurism was also shaken by the defections of Carrà, Ardengo Soffici (1879-1964) and Gino Severini (1883-1966), as well as by the above-mentioned deaths of Boccioni and Sant'Elia. There were attempts to reconstitute a press organ – "La Balza futurista", "Vela Latina", "Italia Futurista", "Roma Futurista", "Noi" – whose instability was revealed by the short and often irregular output.[51] Even in the instability of the war situation, Marinetti was always present in several sheets but, apparently, most of the drafting responsibility was entrusted to individual Futurists. In these circumstances of "particular freedom", associated with the tendency of the leader of the Futurist movement open to the most disparate stimuli, there loomed a significant cross between Futurism and "the only European avant-garde really operating in those years of war-time conflagration, Dadaism".[52]

The end of the Great War marked the full return to activity of Marinetti and his movement which, affected like the European avant-gardes by the "return to order" after the war,[53]

presented itself enhanced with new elements proposing, as has been mentioned, innovative aesthetic parameters. Futurism continued, that is, its forward march arriving at a new concept of modernity which, if on the one hand it appeared to be without a solution of continuity with the first Futurist period, in fact it explicitly gathered its heritage, on the other hand it came to terms with the main symbol of modernity, science, with a different perspective (and state of mind).[54] Extremely important in order to understand the new Futurist generation and its link with the Fascist regime is the movement's adherence to the "new" *Zeitgeist*: "These twenty years of work", as Fillia put it, "have created a consciousness in the young generations in harmony with their time – the triumph of the Futurist principles has mitigated the need for that controversial intransigence which was necessary, in the hostile pre-war environment."[55] Italy was experiencing a new period inaugurated by Fascism and with a renewed awareness the Futurists no longer felt so strongly the need to challenge and ridicule reality, aiming at building and not destroying order. The movement therefore continued its avant-garde battle but not with the original perspective of opposing the (liberal) system but calling for and supporting the Fascist State.[56]

The same thing happened to the other-symbolic movement of the return to Italian order, the *Novecento*: born in 1922 under the aegis of the art critic Margherita Grassini Sarfatti (1880-1961) and made up of figures from different experiences and artistic currents, it reconnected with the great Renaissance lesson proposing a new artistic language precisely from the experience of the avant-garde. The basis of *Novecento's* classicism, of which Mario Sironi was perhaps the greatest representative, was tradition, the past reinterpreted in a modern way, the Italian genius of Giotto, the Renaissance and its harmonic compositions. Another difference with "Valori Plastici" was the artist's claim of having a "political" role. *Novecento* was born together with Fascism and, like Futurism, but also like Carrà, with its own personal approach, would support the regime. Past, present and future: it was a question of a reinterpretation of the spirit of the time within which the triad tradition-revolution-innovation would be deployed. The Futurist and *Novecento* polarities, reabsorbed by Fascism, would have accomplished this step: it would be in the name of art and through art that Futurism and *Novecento* contributed to the legitimization of the Fascist State.

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