

Futurist War Noises: Coping with the Sounds of the First World War

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It is widely acknowledged that “noise was Futurism’s contribution to music.”¹ In spite of this reality, it was not until quite recently that Futurist engagement with noise, as opposed to music, has received explicit scholarly attention.² The Futurists contributed to the debate on the music-noise dichotomy in two different ways: through the innovations of Luigi Russolo and Francesco Balilla Pratella in re-imagining noise as a kind of music, and secondly through the *parole in libertà* poems pioneered by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, which used onomatopoeia and distortion of syntax to bombard the reader-listener with the impression of noise. This article will focus on a sub-category of noise that has received little attention by scholars of Futurism: war noises. Although the movement had been interested in the nature of noise in general, and war noises in particular since 1911, it was during the years of Italy’s involvement in the First World War that such sounds assumed a greater significance for them. During their combat experiences, these noises would become an inescapable part of daily life, rather than a diverting and provocative artistic tool, as they had been pre-war, and were transformed into a matter of both physical and psychological survival. In the following discussion, I will examine the Futurists’ understanding and interpretation of war noises, focusing particularly on the figure of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and to a lesser extent on other Futurists, including Umberto Boccioni and Luigi Russolo.

To date, analyses of Futurist noise have been approached from the perspectives of music, sound studies, and Italian studies,³ and there has been minimal scholarly engagement with noise from a psychological point of view. Marinetti’s innovative experiments with “words-in-freedom” poems have usually been considered as “attempts to capture the spirit of battle as a liberating, invigorating experience.”⁴ Similarly, the focus on *parole in libertà* in his writings of the Great War has been interpreted as merely an aestheticization of the battle experience.⁵ His earliest forays into this area have also been dismissed by critics as “tiresome in [their] simplification and reduction of experience [leaving] him vulnerable to the charge of mere bombast.”⁶ These analyses overlook the role that the Futurists’ engagement with war noises played in constructing psychological defence

¹ Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (1977; repr. London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 111.

² See Christine Poggi, “The Futurist Noise Machine,” *The European Legacy: Towards New Paradigms* 14, no. 7 (2009): 821-40 and Wanda Strauven, “Futurist Images for Your Ear: Or, How to Listen to Visual Painting, Poetry, and Silent Cinema,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7, no. 3 (2009): 275-92.

³ See Barclay Brown, “The Noise Instruments of Luigi Russolo,” *Perspectives of New Music* 20, no. 2 (1982): 31-48; Giusi Baldissone, *Filippo Tommaso Marinetti* (1986; repr. Milan: Mursia, 2009), 170-81; Daniele Lombardi, *Il suono veloce: Futurismo e futurismi in musica* (Milan: Ricordi, 1996); Poggi; Douglas Kahn, “Noises of the Avant-Garde,” in *The Sounds Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 431-48.

⁴ John White, “Iconic and Indexical Elements in Italian Futurist Poetry: F. T. Marinetti’s ‘words-in-freedom,’” in *Signergy*, ed. Jac Conradie, et al. (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 2010), 137.

⁵ See Günter Berghaus, “Violence, War, Revolution: Marinetti’s Concept of a Futurist Cleanser for the World,” *Annali d’italianistica* 27 (2009): 23-43.

⁶ Marjorie Perloff, “The Great War and the European Avant-Garde,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 150.

mechanisms and coping strategies, which allowed them to successfully negotiate the stress of life in the trenches.

Although in the immediate post-war period, Futurist interest in war noises significantly diminished, they did not disappear completely from Futurist rhetoric. The topic reemerged in the 1930s, with the establishment of a new genre of poetry—"aeropoesia," which would communicate the experience and sensations of flying.⁷ In the Futurist banquets of the early 1930s, the noises of war planes also featured. Marinetti explained how the noise of the engines facilitated digestion and was a "specie di massaggio all'appetito."⁸ When the Second World War began, the "aeropoesia" compositions increasingly featured bombardments and military engagements, with a corresponding increase in the presence of war noises. However, very few "aeropoets" were actually pilots or had any flying experience, so these compositions were not eye-witness testimonials of battle experience as the free-word drawings in the First World War had been. Thus, they served primarily aesthetic and propagandistic purposes, and were less immediately related to wartime coping. Further research is required into the long-term effects of the Futurists' combat experiences and the extent to which noise-related battle trauma remained a psychological reality for them after the Great War, although this lies outside the scope of the current article.

The Beginning of Futurist Interest in War Noises (1911-1914)

Marinetti was the driving force behind the introduction of the topic of war noises into Futurist discourse following his exposure to combat zones as a war reporter during the Battle of Tripoli in 1911 and as an observer of the Battle of Adrianople of October 1912. Both experiences influenced the development of Futurist literature, as evidenced by the manifestos he was publishing at the same time. The May 1912 "Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista" stressed the need to introduce the elements of noise, weight, and smell into literature, as well as the necessity to liberate the word by destroying syntax and by abolishing adjectives, adverbs, and punctuation. His first practical experiments in this regard were published in the "Risposta alle obiezioni" of August 1912, entitled "Battaglia Peso + Odore," which displayed a modest use of bold typefaces, onomatopoeic sounds, and mathematical symbols instead of traditional punctuation. It is here that the first Futurist free-word war noises appeared, with phrases such as "100 metri mitragliatrici fucilate eruzioni violini ottone **pim pum pac pac tim tum** mitragliatrici **tataratatarata**."⁹ The "typographical revolution" that Marinetti subsequently launched as part of his 1913 manifesto on Futurist literature was much more ambitious in its attempts to overhaul the Italian literary tradition. His experiences in the Balkans in 1912 inspired his free-word novel, *Zang Tumb Tumb*, published in 1914, and were the most significant for the development of Futurist engagement with war noises.

Pratella could be considered the father of Futurist music and noise-theory, but initially he showed no interest in exploring the nature of noise. The first Futurist music manifesto, the

⁷ On "aeropoesia," see Willard Bohn, "The Poetics of Flight: Futurist 'Aeropoesia,'" *MLN* 121, no. 1 (2006): 207-24. For examples of wartime "aeropoetry," see Gaetano Pattarozzi, ed., *Carlinga di aeropoeti futuristi in guerra* (Rome: Mediterraneo futurista, 1941) and Ennio De Concini, *Aeropoiesie futuriste di bombardamento* (Rome: Edizioni Futuriste di Poesia, 1941).

⁸ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Fillia, *La cucina futurista* (1932; repr. Rome: Banca Tiberina di Mutuo Soccorso, 1990), 81.

⁹ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Risposte alle obiezioni (1912)," in *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, ed. Luciano De Maria, 6th ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 2005), 61. Emphasis in the original.

“Manifesto dei musicisti futuristi,” issued on 11 January 1911, made no reference to modern, manmade noises or to war-related noise of any kind. Such a reference would only appear in his subsequent manifesto, “Manifesto tecnico della musica futurista” (March 1911), following the intervention of Marinetti: an inserted conclusion to Pratella’s manifesto, without the author’s consent.¹⁰ It now declared that it was necessary for Futurist music to “dare l’anima musicale delle folle, dei grandi cantieri industriali, dei treni, dei transatlantici, delle corazzate, degli automobili e degli aeroplani. Aggiungere ai grandi motivi centrali del poema musicale il dominio della Macchina ed il regno vittorioso della Elettricità.”¹¹ After this prompt from Marinetti, Pratella did experiment with the noises of war, most notably in his composition “La Guerra.”¹² However, it was Luigi Russolo who would be Futurism’s most important and influential theoretician on the relationship between noise and music. It is important to highlight the fact that the major impetuses towards the development of noise as an element of Futurist ideology came from Marinetti, who placed his *parole in libertà* firmly in the literary domain, and from Russolo, originally a Futurist painter, who had an interest in music, but was not a trained musician.

Luigi Russolo built on Marinetti’s *parole in libertà* in his manifesto, “L’arte dei rumori,” of March 1913. Although his principal focus was on the noises of the modern city, the phenomenon of war noises was also highlighted through references to Marinetti’s experiments. Russolo was open in acknowledging his debt to Marinetti in this regard, and in order to convey the “orchestra di una grande battaglia,”¹³ he published an extract from *Zang Tumb Tumb* in his manifesto.¹⁴ Thus, “the emphasis conferred on the fighting sounds of Marinetti’s combat *parole* situates militarism at the founding of Futurist noise.”¹⁵ Russolo also developed the now-renowned *intonarumori* machines, which corresponded to different categories of sounds, and had evocative names like “crepicatori,” “gorgogliatori,” “rombatori,” and “ronzatori.” The first “noise-tuner” concert took place in Milan in April 1914, with limited success, but a twelve-night run in London in June of the same year received a much more positive response. A planned tour of cities in Britain and Europe was cancelled as a result of the outbreak of the First World War.

Even if Russolo’s contributions to the Futurist *serate* are put to one side, noise was a fundamental element of early Futurist Theater. At virtually every one of their performances from 1910 to 1914, the sounds of boos, cheers, laughter and shouts from the audiences drowned out the sounds of the Futurist performers. While Marinetti at times objected to this unruly behavior, he had also been instrumental in promoting it when, in 1911, he had declared the Futurist pleasure in being booed.¹⁶ This desire to provoke the audience into action was of course not a feature unique to Futurist Theater. It had also been an essential element of Symbolist experiments in drama, most

¹⁰ Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991), 57, n. 4. This final sentence was a paraphrase of the last point of the first Futurist manifesto written by Marinetti in 1909.

¹¹ Francesco Balilla Pratella, “Manifesto tecnico della musica futurista,” Milan, 1911.

¹² This was a three-part composition for piano, composed in 1913. Its three parts were *L’aspettazione*, *La Battaglia* and *La Vittoria*. In an article for *La Gazzetta dello Sport* in January 1916, Marinetti recalled that it was played by a young officer on one occasion behind the front lines. See Marinetti, “Quinte e scene della campagna del Battaglione Lombardo Volontari Ciclisti sul lago di Garda e sull’Altissimo. Parte I,” *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, January 31, 1916.

¹³ Luigi Russolo, “L’arte dei rumori (1913),” in *L’arte dei rumori* (Milan: Edizioni futuriste di Poesia, 1916), 13.

¹⁴ As mentioned above, although *Zang Tumb Tumb* was only published in 1914, Marinetti had been performing extracts from it in Rome and Berlin a month before Russolo’s manifesto was launched. See Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 375, n. 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶ On the Futurist *serate* (1910-1914), see Günter Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 85-155.

famously Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896), whose first word was "merdre" (a corruption of "merde"), causing a riot to break out in the theater.¹⁷

At these performances, Marinetti frequently declaimed extracts from *Zang Tumb Tumb*. He also delivered his *parole in libertà* all over Europe and astounded audiences with his vocal representation of the sounds of modern, mechanical warfare. The title *Zang Tumb Tumb* itself, "enacts in temporal succession the explosive firing of an artillery shell, its detonation upon impact, and the reverberations that followed."¹⁸ As Jane Sharp has pointed out, "even the title of this collection of *parole in libertà* depends upon its auditory expressiveness in order to signify its meaning."¹⁹ In a recent article, Wanda Strauven provided an important reminder that *parole in libertà* "should also and especially be *heard*, or listened to, as vocal compositions,"²⁰ as they were designed to be publicly declaimed, just as *Zang Tumb Tumb* had been.

As Roman Jakobson observed in the 1920s, Marinetti's *parole in libertà* were bound up with his need to communicate his war experiences, initially those in Libya and the Balkans in 1911 and 1912, and then later his experiences in the Great War.²¹ It is undeniable that Marinetti had a thirst for war and combat, which would remain with him until his death in 1944. His aggressive declamations of his war experiences before 1914 can be interpreted, I believe, as an example of sublimation, a psychological process which channels "potentially maladaptive feelings or impulses into socially acceptable behavior."²² Concentrating their desire for belligerence into their theater performances and *parole in libertà* was a similar strategy for the Futurists, and particularly for Marinetti. When the Great War broke out, it can be argued that both the interventionist crisis and the war itself offered them opportunities to channel their violent impulses into pro-war demonstrations and actual combat. The Futurists indeed made explicit reference to the connection between their pre-war theater and their experiences in the trenches. A drawing on this subject, entitled "I futuristi dalla ribalta alla trincea," by Roberto Iras Baldessari, appeared on the front cover of the periodical *Roma Futurista* on November 20, 1918.

¹⁷ In 1905, Marinetti wrote the play *Le Roi Bombance* (first performed in 1909), which was inspired by *Ubu Roi*. It was similarly provocative in its graphic scenes of cannibalism and regurgitation, and frequent instances of farting and burping. See Günter Berghaus, *The Genesis of Futurism: Marinetti's Early Career and Writings, 1899-1909* (Leeds: Society for Italian Studies, 1995), 58-72 and 82-92. On the first production and performance of *Ubu Roi* see Henri Béhar, *Jarry, le monstre e la marionette* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1985), 87-103 and Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years. The Arts in France 1885-1918. Alfred Jarry, Henri Rousseau, Erik Satie, Guillaume Apollinaire* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 158-63. On the relationship between *Ubu roi* and *Le Roi Bombance*, see Brunella Eruli, "Da un re all'altro: Jarry e Marinetti," *Franco-Italica: Serie Storico-Letteraria* 1 (1992): 145-60.

¹⁸ Poggi, "The Futurist Noise Machine," 826.

¹⁹ Jane Sharp, "Sounds, Noises, and Smells: Sensory Experience in Futurist Art," in *The Futurist Imagination: Word and Image in Italian Futurist Painting, Drawing, Collage and Free-Word Poetry*, ed. Anne Coffin Hanson (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1983), 19.

²⁰ Strauven, 277. Emphasis in the original. Marinetti stressed the need for a new kind of declaimer-performer who would do justice to his vision of *parole in libertà*. See Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Distruzione della sintassi, Immaginazione senza fili, Parole in libertà," 1913, in De Maria, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, 65-80 and "La Declamazione dinamica e sinottica," 1916, in De Maria, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, 122-29.

²¹ Roman Jakobson, quoted in White, "Iconic and Indexical Elements in Italian Futurist Poetry," 137.

²² American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 757. Henceforth referred to as the DSM-IV.

The Futurists in the Trenches (1915-1918)

Apart from Marinetti, other Futurists received their first taste of modern warfare and war noises only when they volunteered for active service in the First World War. As generations of historians have demonstrated, the Great War was unprecedentedly violent and overwhelming in terms of the aural bombardment soldiers and officers experienced. The First World War has been considered a turning point in the history of the landscape of sound “because of the unceasing, obsessive, and to contemporaries, intolerable, omnipresence of noise.”²³ This “symphony of the front”—the overwhelming assault on soldiers’ auditory sensations that occurred in the trenches during the First World War—is well documented in the historiography of the conflict.²⁴ As Robert Graves commented, “You couldn’t; you can’t communicate noise. Noise never stopped for one moment—ever.”²⁵ In line with the experiences of other soldiers, the Futurist sensorial experience of the First World War was dominated by the auditory. Luigi Russolo concluded in his 1916 work, *L’arte dei rumori*, inspired by his time in combat with the Alpine soldiers in 1915, that “nella guerra moderna meccanica e metallica l’elemento visivo è quasi nullo; infiniti invece sono il senso, il significato e l’espressione dei rumori.”²⁶ Similarly, in 1917, the painter Anselmo Bucci described the war as invisible, stating that “è arcinoto che questa guerra plasticamente, graficamente *non esiste*: è dramma musicale, non è spettacolo.”²⁷

In their early weeks at the front lines, however, both Marinetti and Boccioni were consumed not by war noises, but by the silences of war, which indicated that there were no advances or bombardments under way. The frustration they felt regarding the absence of war noises was clearly expressed by them in their letters to friends on the home front. While serving near the shores of Lake Garda with the Lombard Battalion of Volunteer Cyclists and Motorists in October 1915, Marinetti expressed his impatience, writing in a letter, “Sono al *Fronte* [...] *Fronte pensoso che aspetta*. Sotto cannoni italiani e davanti a cannoni austriaci *che non parlano!!!!*”²⁸ Around the same period, Boccioni had similar complaints about the lack of progress in battle, expressed explicitly in terms of the absence of war noises. He wrote, “Sono stato in trincea per ora silenziosa come quella dei tedeschi davanti a noi. [...] Tutta la notte i fasci luminosi dei riflettori nostri percorrono il cielo traendo delle visioni di notte guerresca bellissima. Tutto però tace. Quando avverrà l’avanzata?”²⁹ The yearning for cannon fire and bombardments, and their

²³ Ludovic Tournès, “The Landscape of Sound in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries [review article],” *Contemporary European History* 13 (2004): 497.

²⁴ The term “symphony of the front” appears in Glenn Watkins, *Proof through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 61. On noise in the First World War, see Eric Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 123-31; Antonio Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli Italiani* (Milan: RCS, 1998), 37-42; and Gibelli, *L’officina della guerra: La Grande Guerra e le trasformazioni del mondo mentale*, 3rd ed. (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007), 164-79.

²⁵ Robert Graves, “The Great Years of Their Lives,” interview with Leslie Smith. *The Listener* 86 (15 July 1971): 74.

²⁶ Russolo, *L’arte dei rumori*, 43.

²⁷ In Luigi Angelini, “Disegni di guerra (Il pittore Anselmo Bucci),” *Emporium* 46, no. 272 (August 1917): 107.

²⁸ Letter from Marinetti to Mario Carli, October 1915. In Mario Carli and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Lettere futuriste tra arte e politica*, ed. Claudia Salaris (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1989), 44. Emphasis in the original.

²⁹ Letter from Boccioni to G. Callegari, 10 September 1915, in *Archivi del futurismo (vol. 1)*, ed. Maria Drudi Gambillo and Teresa Fiori (Rome: De Luca, 1958), 362-63.

reluctance, or even their inability perhaps, to engage with silence underlines the centrality of noise to their imagined war.³⁰

Once combat proper began, however, Futurist descriptions of the war in diaries, letters and creative production were dominated by references to the nature of the noise that surrounded them. The Futurists communicated this experience of aural overload in the trenches through the use of Futurist literary techniques, namely *parole in libertà*. This was the primary method the Futurists employed in both processing the experience of the aural bombardment for themselves, and in conveying it to those not at the front. As Russolo wrote in 1916,

La guerra moderna non può essere espressa liricamente, se non con l'istrumentazione rumoristica delle 'parole in libertà' futuriste e musicalmente con gli Intonarumori. [...] I poeti futuristi [...] sono i soli che rendono colle parole in libertà l'essenza rumoristica delle battaglie d'oggi.³¹

Similarly, in December 1916, Paolo Buzzi commented that “la guerra è rumore” and should be communicated through *parole in libertà*.³² Three years previously, Marinetti had already provided similar advice about the efficacy of words-in-freedom techniques in conveying war experiences. In the manifesto “Distruzione della sintassi, Immaginazione senza fili, Parole in libertà,” published on May 11, 1913, Marinetti asked the reader to imagine a friend who is retelling a dramatic experience, be it revolution, war, shipwreck, or an earthquake. Instinctively, Marinetti argued, he will begin:

col distruggere brutalmente la sintassi nel parlare. Non perderà tempo a costruire i periodi. S'infischierà della punteggiatura e dell'aggettivazione. Disprezzerà cesellature e sfumature di linguaggio, e in fretta vi getterà affannosamente nei nervi le sue sensazioni visive, *auditive*, olfattive.³³

Thus, according to Marinetti, the appropriate manner for a Futurist to deal with an overwhelming experience, including war, was through “words in freedom.”

The evidence of Futurist soldiers who fought during the First World War is that they followed Marinetti's advice. The Futurist journal, *L'Italia Futurista*, published between June 1916 and February 1918, featured a page of *parole in libertà* drawings in almost every issue. Many of these drawings had been executed by Futurists in the war zones who identified themselves as “futurista al fronte.” Lesser-known Futurists, such as Vieri Nannetti, Vann'Anto (pseudonym of Giovanni Antonio Di Giacomo), Jamar 14 (pseudonym of Piero Gigli) and Luca Labozzetta, all

³⁰ The one exception to this is the free-word poem “Con Boccioni a Dosso Casina” published in *L'Italia Futurista* in August 1916. It features the words “silenzio quasi totale” four times and shows an unusually contemplative side to Marinetti. On the absence of silence in Marinetti's war writings, see Selena Daly, “‘The Futurist mountains’: F.T. Marinetti's Experiences of Mountain Combat in the First World War,” *Modern Italy* 18 (2013): forthcoming.

³¹ Russolo, *L'arte dei rumori*, 44.

³² Paolo Buzzi, “I giovani poeti e la guerra,” *L'Italia Futurista*, December 1, 1916.

³³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Distruzione della sintassi,” in De Maria, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, 70; emphasis mine.

penned drawings, which followed the Futurist pattern of conveying war noises through complex typography and layout.³⁴ However, the war writings of Marinetti and Boccioni are most striking in this regard. Their early wartime letters and notebook/diary entries demonstrate that their aural perception of the war was being passed through a filter provided by their familiarity with Futurist music and the previous work on war noises. While Boccioni was impatiently awaiting the beginning of battle at Dosso Casina in autumn 1915, he wrote that “Occorre che sulle montagne che ci dominano venga ultimato il piazzamento dei grossi pezzi e poi zang, tum, tum e noi andremo avanti!”³⁵ It is clear from Boccioni’s mention of “zang tum tum” that his expectations of battle had been influenced by his reading of Marinetti’s text of the previous year. Boccioni described the same experience in his diary in similar terms: “Capitano Cattaneo malgrado ordine ritirata ricordando Buzzi dice a Marinetti e a me ‘avanti voi,’ andiamo. Zuiii Zuiii Tan Tan. Palle da tutte le parti. Volontari a terra calmi sparano Pan Pan secchi vuoti.”³⁶ Similarly, in a letter to Pratella, Marinetti attempted to relate his description of battle and war noise to Futurist music. He described the:

Battaglia ferocissima con balzi violenti cadenze infinite, ritmi grandiosi, ritorni furenti brutali, martellamenti selvaggi, che mi ricordavano la tua grande sinfonia futurista al Costanzi. Non si può descrivere. Tenterò io, ma temo di non poter dare l’intero concerto *intricatissimo e semplice*.³⁷

Marinetti’s entries in his private notebooks from the war feature very frequent references to the principles of *parole in libertà*. Some of the many examples include the following:

silenzio rotto dai pum-poom ziuziuziumm paak ping”; “Tapum Tum Tum Taac Skiiangkrakrang”; “Colpo di partenza / Pumvvu BBA BBA / Cannonata fra le case / Colpo di partenza / PUMBUBABA / PUUMvvvuBAABA”; “luungo luuuuuungo roooooOOOOONZIO di aeroplani tatatata TUM TUM SCRABRUUUUNBRUN BOMBE.”³⁸

The fact that Boccioni and Marinetti also used *parole in libertà* in their diaries, which were not for public consumption, suggests that this had become a central part of their war experience.

³⁴ See Vieri Nannetti, “Piccolo Posti,” *L’Italia Futurista*, June 15, 1916, 3; Vann’Antò, “Trincea,” *L’Italia Futurista*, August 10, 1916, 3; Jamar 14, “Ferita + ospedale + etisia,” *L’Italia Futurista*, August 12, 1917, 3; Luca Labozzetta, “Trincea,” *L’Italia Futurista*, August 26, 1917, 3.

³⁵ Letter from Boccioni to G. Callegari, September 10, 1915, in Drudi Gambillo, *Archivi del futurismo*, 362-63.

³⁶ Boccioni, “Diario di guerra,” October 19, 1915, in Umberto Boccioni, *Gli scritti editi e inediti*, ed. Zeno Birolli (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971), 315.

³⁷ Marinetti to Pratella, May 25, 1917, in Drudi Gambillo, *Archivi del futurismo*, 376. Marinetti refers to the presentation by Pratella of his “Inno alla vita” at the Teatro Costanzi, Rome on February 21, 1913; emphasis in the original.

³⁸ Marinetti, *Taccuini, 1915-1921*, ed. Alberto Bertoni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987), 18 (October 26-27, 1915), 46 (Feb 22, 1917), 57 (March 4, 1917), 135 (September 30, 1917).

When considered in psychological terms, the consistency with which the Futurists interpreted their experiences of war noises using *parole in libertà* can be interpreted as a defense mechanism employed at the front in order to cope with the extremity of the situations unfolding around them. “Coping” can be defined as a “response aimed at diminishing the physical, emotional, and psychological burden that is linked to stressful life events.”³⁹ The DSM-IV defines defense mechanisms as “automatic psychological processes that protect the individual against anxiety and from the awareness of internal or external dangers or stressors.”⁴⁰ The DSM-IV also provides a defensive functioning scale, which categorizes defense mechanisms in five levels, beginning from healthy coping strategies and ending with pathological, psychotic responses to stressful situations. All of the strategies that the Futurists employed to deal with life in the trenches can be classified in the first or second levels (high adaptive or mental inhibition levels).⁴¹ This places their responses at the mature end of the spectrum, indicating a mentally stable and psychologically healthy way of facing potentially traumatic situations.

The *parole in libertà* used in the Futurists’ diaries, letters and free-word drawings described above all make use of two defense mechanisms, both of which are categorized in the second level of the defensive functioning scale. The first of these mechanisms is “intellectualization” defined as “excessive use of abstract thinking or the making of generalizations to control or minimize disturbing feelings.”⁴² The second is “isolation of affect” which is defined as the “separation of ideas from the feelings originally associated with them [where] the individual loses touch with the feelings associated with a given idea (e.g. a traumatic event) while remaining aware of the cognitive elements of it (e.g. description of details).”⁴³ The employment of *parole in libertà* in the descriptions of their war experiences may be considered a manifestation of both of these processes. The Futurists distanced themselves from the reality of the trench experience by filtering it through Futurist rhetoric. In the context of British and German soldiers, Alexander Watson has argued that, “By imposing an imagined structure and order on the frightening and unpredictable environment in which they operated, soldiers made it seem less chaotic and threatening and provided themselves with a sense of security and empowerment crucial for mental health.”⁴⁴

The structure and order that Watson was referring to were in the form of positive illusions, humor and religion; while for the Futurists, the “imagined structure” was Futurism itself. Eric Leed has written about the link between the constant noise in the trenches and instances of mental breakdown, arguing that:

For the vast majority of Europeans who fought in the war, noise meant nothing but chaos; it caused nothing but fear, stupefaction, and dull resignation. Precisely because there was no cultural convention to call forth an appropriate switch of the soldier’s “inner state” during the transition from order to noise during the war, the

³⁹ C. R. Snyder and Beth L. Dinoff, “Coping: Where Have You Been?” in *Coping: The Psychology of What Works*, ed. C. R. Snyder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

⁴⁰ American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-IV*, 751.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 751-52

⁴² *Ibid.*, 756.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 756.

⁴⁴ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 107.

barrage most often effected a transition into neurosis, breakdown, or mental disorder.⁴⁵

In contrast to the picture Leed paints, the Futurists, because of their pre-war exposure to war noises, did possess a “cultural convention” that could be employed in order to interpret the chaos of noise. By intellectualizing their experiences and by not addressing the emotions stirred up by the bombardments, the Futurists were able to construct meaning from the chaos of the noise of the bombardments, by interpreting them according to Futurist codes. Studies of twenty-first century soldiers in Israel and Iraq have demonstrated that processes of mental preparation and benefit finding are strongly associated with lower levels of distress and fewer instances of post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴⁶ The Futurist use of *parole in libertà* can be viewed in similar terms, in that they helped shield the Futurists from the more extreme psychological disorders that afflicted so many of the men who fought in the trenches of the Great War. It must also be noted, of course, that the Futurists were interventionists and believed in the righteousness of the war as the “fourth war of the Risorgimento.” Since 1909, Marinetti had praised war as “la sola igiene del mondo,” and his fundamentally bellicose spirit remained intact not only throughout the war, but beyond.⁴⁷ The Futurists clung onto these beliefs as they faced difficult times in the war zones, and it can be argued that the process of intellectualization was particularly effective because of the Futurists’ firm belief in the validity of the war cause.

In the 1920s, Walter Benjamin, following Freud in the analysis of the nature of defense mechanisms, wrote that “the more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely are they to have a traumatic effect.”⁴⁸ One method to reduce the potentially harmful nature of such shocks was, according to Benjamin, to assign “to an incident a precise point in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents.”⁴⁹ According to Karl Heinz Böhrer, Ernst Jünger’s interest in photography was designed to do exactly that—to “ward off potentially traumatic shocks of fear and horror by freezing them at the level of conscious perception before their full emotional impact is felt.”⁵⁰ The Futurists’ use of *parole in libertà* techniques fulfills, I would argue, a similar function to Jünger’s photography, by isolating the perception of the experience at the cerebral level, without allowing it to filter down into the sphere of emotional awareness.

In discussing war noises, one must examine not only mechanical noises but also human-generated sounds, particularly those produced by injured or dying men. In this context, a different

⁴⁵ Leed, *No Man’s Land*, 131.

⁴⁶ Ora Gilbar, et al., “Coping, Mastery, Stress Appraisals, Mental Preparation, and Unit Cohesion Predicting Distress and Performance: A Longitudinal Study of Soldiers Undertaking Evacuation Tasks,” *Anxiety, Stress and Coping* 23, no. 5 (2010): 547-62; Michael D. Wood, et al., “Benefit Finding at War: A Matter of Time,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 25 (2012): 307-14.

⁴⁷ On the relationship between Futurism, war and nationalism see Edoardo Sanguineti, “La guerra futurista,” in *Ideologia e linguaggio* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1970), 38-43; Emilio Gentile, “Il futurismo e la politica. Dal nazionalismo modernista al fascismo (1909-1920),” in *Futurismo, cultura e politica*, ed. Renzo De Felice (Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1988), 105-59; George Mosse, “Futurismo e cultura politica in Europa: Una prospettiva globale,” in De Felice, *Futurismo*, 13-31.

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 161.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 99, based on arguments made by Karl Heinz Böhrer, *Die Aesthetik des Schreckens—Die pessimistische Romantik und Ernst Jüngers Frühwerk* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1978), 190-200.

defense mechanism was at work for the Futurists in order to guard themselves against severe mental trauma or breakdown. The Futurists engaged in a process of suppression, where the individual copes “by intentionally avoiding thinking about disturbing problems, wishes, feelings, or experiences.”⁵¹ The letters and diary entries of Futurists at the front feature very few references to the sounds of dying and injured men that they certainly would have heard. Suppression, in this case the deliberate avoidance of considering human war noises, can be observed in the attitudes of Boccioni, Russolo and Marinetti. This attitude is a logical progression of pre-war Futurist dictates about the need to “distruggere nella letteratura l’<io>, cioè tutta la psicologia,”⁵² and the Futurist fascination for modern machinery in all its forms—cars, trains, planes, and most importantly the experience of speed. Suppression is placed on the first level of the defensive functioning scale, indicating that it is a highly adaptive and mature response to stressors. It is a healthier response than the better-known mechanism of repression (level two) because suppression is a deliberate process, while repression is generally performed on an unconscious level.

Indifference towards the dead and fascination with the beauty of combat is a striking element of Boccioni, Russolo and Marinetti’s war writings. One of the few references Boccioni made to the war dead is expressed in the following way: “Una vera tempesta di granate e shrapnel ci sono piovute addosso senza tregua. Bellissimo! I caduti venivano trascinati carponi senza una parola, e avanti sempre lentamente a balzi inesorabilmente!”⁵³ Luigi Russolo displayed a similar attitude in his 1916 book, *L’arte dei rumori*. He devoted one of his eleven chapters specifically to war noises, stating that the war had given him the opportunity to analyze war noises in detail and to focus on the “meravigliosa e tragica sinfonia di guerra!”⁵⁴ In this chapter, however, Russolo made no reference to human-generated noise of any kind, and it does not appear to feature in any way in his consideration of the gamut of noises at the front lines. The lack of acknowledgement of the presence of injured and dying men on the battlefields is absolutely indicative of the conscious implementation of a process of suppression.

With regard to Marinetti at the front, John White has written that:

inevitably, given the dehumanized nature of much mechanical combat from the First World War onwards, Marinetti’s battle-experience was intimately bound up with impressions of inanimate sounds (the noise of bombs, mortars, grenades, machine-guns, aeroplanes, etc.), although, revealingly, seldom the sounds of men dying.⁵⁵

As I have argued with regard to Boccioni and Russolo above, I propose that this absence of the sounds of men dying is an indicator of suppression at work. In the case of Marinetti, an examination of his pre-war manifestos makes it clear that his was a conscious decision to ignore human sounds. In the 1914 manifesto “Lo splendore geometrico e meccanico e la sensibilità numerica,” Marinetti wrote that he first experienced this “geometric splendor” on the bridge of a dreadnought, an experience which, for Futurists, was “centomila volte più interessante della

⁵¹ American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-IV*, 757.

⁵² Marinetti, “Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista,” in De Maria, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, 50.

⁵³ Boccioni, *Lettere futuriste*, 149.

⁵⁴ Russolo, *L’arte dei rumori*, 44.

⁵⁵ White, “Iconic and Indexical Elements in Italian Futurist Poetry,” 137.

psicologia dell'uomo, con le sue combinazioni limitate.”⁵⁶ While Marinetti acknowledged that “le grandi collettività umane, mare di facce e di braccia urlanti, possono talvolta darci una leggiera emozione,” he stated a clear Futurist preference for “la grande solidarietà dei motori preoccupati, zelanti e accaniti.”⁵⁷ Marinetti went on to confirm the Futurist lack of interest in human suffering during war, writing:

Vengono naturalmente abolite le antiche proporzioni [...] del racconto, secondo le quali per esempio i lamenti e i dolori di un ferito in battaglia avevano una importanza esageratissima in confronto degli strumenti di distruzione, delle posizioni strategiche e delle condizioni atmosferiche.⁵⁸

War Noises in the Post-War Period (1918-1924)

The immediate post-war period was a particularly successful period for Marinetti's literary ambitions. His “self-help” manual *Come si seducono le donne* (1917) was a bestseller, and he followed this up with the “lived novel,” *L'alcova d'acciaio*, in 1921, which focused on his experiences in the final months of the Great War, and the collection of short stories *Gli amori futuristi* followed in 1922. As Cinzia Sartini Blum has pointed out, “by recuperating conventional syntax and narrative structures and by moving into a popular thematic field [social-erotic literature], Marinetti tailored his cultural product to the demands of the market,”⁵⁹ and thus his wartime experiments with *parole in libertà* were left behind.⁶⁰ Although these post-war texts still celebrated the violence of battle, the focus on war noises was significantly reduced, as Marinetti concentrated increasingly on the “female question” and on the recording of his relationships with women. It has been argued that the socio-erotic writings of the post-war years were the embodiment of a different kind of defense mechanism, not against the immediate threat of death in the trenches but “against the decaying structure of gender domination—a complex reaction to the myriad changes in gender roles and power relations that threatened male identity in modern society.”⁶¹ If Marinetti's focus on the communication of war noises was, at least in part, a conscious defense mechanism during his time in the trenches, it is logical that once he was removed from this environment, his reliance on this strategy decreased, as it had outlived its immediate usefulness.

The diminishing importance of war noises in Futurist, and particularly in Marinettian, rhetoric at this time is also due to the dramatic shifts both in Futurism and in Marinetti's life in the post-war period. In the years 1918-1920, Futurism went through a major upheaval as it attempted to enter into the political arena, by launching a political party and by aligning itself with

⁵⁶ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Lo splendore geometrico e meccanico e la sensibilità numerica,” *Lacerba*, March 15, 1914, 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism: F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 89.

⁶⁰ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *8 Anime in una bomba* (1919) is the one exception in this regard. See De Maria, 6th edn, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, 791-918.

⁶¹ Blum, *The Other Modernism*, 81, and 79-104.

Mussolini's newly formed Fascist party. These endeavors resulted in a disastrous election performance in November 1919, and six months later, Marinetti resigned from the *Fasci di Combattimento* and retreated back into artistic pursuits, removing Futurism from the political domain of parties and elections.⁶² There was thus an urgent need to re-invent Futurism as a primarily artistic and cultural movement. One of the methods he employed to achieve this aim was the invention of tactilism, a systematic education of one's sense of touch. Marinetti's first reflection on the topic was published in January 1921. Barbara Spackman has noted that Marinetti had been influenced in his invention of tactilism by Benedetta Cappa (whom he would marry in 1923) and her knowledge of Maria Montessori's educational methods.⁶³ Berghaus has considered Marinetti's engagement with tactilism as a kind of "mid-life crisis" and suggested that this love affair with Benedetta "purged him of his primitive machismo and made him rediscover the gentle, compassionate and empathetic sides in himself."⁶⁴

It was only in a follow-up manifesto on tactilism in 1924, however, that Marinetti linked this new innovation to his war experiences. In the second manifesto, he claimed that these forays into tactilism had been inspired by his time in the trenches:

Una notte dell'inverno 1917, scendevo tastoni nel sotterraneo buio di una batteria di bombarde per raggiungere senza candela il mio giaciglio. Mi preoccupavo di non urtare ma urtavo baionette, gavette e teste di soldati dormenti. Mi coricai, ma non dormii, ossessionato dalle sensazioni tattili che avevo provate e catalogate. Quella notte per la prima volta pensai ad un'arte tattile.⁶⁵

The image of war presented in this memory, focusing on sleeping soldiers and presenting a tranquil atmosphere, is far removed from the sentiments he communicated in letters and his diary during the war itself. This memory of the birth of tactilism is surely a revisionist stance on his part. Spackman has noted this, writing that the version presented in the 1924 manifesto is "quite manifestly a founding myth."⁶⁶ The evidence of Marinetti's war diaries and letters shows that his interest in tactile sensation was negligible during the war. This "founding myth" was important, however, as Marinetti claimed that a re-education of the sense of touch would help heal "la malattia del dopo-guerra."⁶⁷ He counseled other artists and thinkers to intensify "le comunicazioni e le fusioni degli esseri umani" and to destroy "le distanze e le barriere che li separano nell'amore e nell'amicizia."⁶⁸ Tactilism was a way for Marinetti to distance himself from his wartime rhetoric, which had celebrated the destruction and violent orchestra of battle. The indifference towards

⁶² See Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction 1909-1944* (Providence: Berghahn, 1996), 110-55.

⁶³ Barbara Spackman, "Touching the Future: Marinetti's Haptic Aesthetic," in *Beyond Futurism: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Writer. For the Centennial Anniversary of the Italian Avant-Garde*, eds. Gino Tellini and Paolo Valesio (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2011), 167.

⁶⁴ Berghaus, "Marinetti's Volte-Face of 1920: Occultism, Tactilism and *Gli indomabili*," in Tellini and Valesio, *Beyond Futurism*, 67.

⁶⁵ Marinetti, "Tattilismo (1924)," in De Maria, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, 175. On the importance of touch in the First World War, see Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶⁶ Spackman, "Touching the Future," 167.

⁶⁷ Marinetti, "Il Tattilismo (1921)," in De Maria, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, 161.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

human suffering that had been central to wartime *parole in libertà* disappeared. Employing “words-in-freedom” techniques at the front lines had sustained the Futurists, and had assisted them in coping with the overwhelming nature of battle, by allowing them to derive meaning from the aural chaos and by facilitating their disengagement from the human toll of war. Although *parole in libertà* had played an important role in the Futurists’ ability to cope with noise in the trenches, in the post-war climate, this attitude was jettisoned in favor of the gentler and more intimate sense of touch, and the comfort it could offer to a society in crisis.

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