

Arte sacra futurista: Fillia Between Conformity and Subversion

Adriana M. Baranello

Introduction

In the long list of ironies and paradoxes in Futurism, one of the most glaring is that a movement founded by rabble-rousing iconoclasts later produced ostensibly pious religious works in great quantity and a manifesto of sacred art. *Arte sacra futurista*, which allegedly emerged because of the Futurists' support for the fascist regime, does not fit neatly into any of the classifications or categories usually assigned to the movement. As a consequence, the *arte sacra futurista* remains mostly unexamined.¹ One of the most prominent Futurists to work in this unusual style was Fillia, a Turin-based Futurist from the period of *Secondo Futurismo*.

Born in Revello in 1904, Fillia (pseudonym of Luigi Colombo, 1904-1936) was the son of factory owner Domenico Colombo and actress Maria Sellina Fillia, whose liberal politics and lifestyle deeply influenced her son. The family moved to Turin in 1918, when the Colombo family's silk factory was forced to close for economic reasons.² Fillia was educated at a Franciscan school in Rovereto, and his earliest extant poem, dated to 1919, is explicitly religious.³ Fillia appears to have abandoned Catholicism by the time he emerged on the Futurist scene in 1923, perhaps due in part to his involvement with the Partito Comunista Italiana (PCI). In his early political and literary career, Fillia was an active member in the small group of Futurists who tried to align the movement with Antonio Gramsci and the PCI. Indeed, Fillia and two others are responsible for the only known work that explicitly attempted to combine Futurist style with communist ideology: *1+1+1=1 – Dinamite – Poesie Proletarie – Rosso + Nero*, a small pamphlet of revolutionary poetry.⁴ The short-lived alliance between Gramsci and the Futurists, over the objections of Amedeo Bordiga, even included Futurism's founder, F. T. Marinetti, who had severed his ties to Benito Mussolini and the nascent Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF), from 1919 until the two leaders' reconciliation in 1924. Fillia's "religiosity" reemerged only later, around 1930; however, non-Christian, mechano-mystic spirituality is a persistent theme in his writings from the early to mid-1920s. Despite the fact that Fillia's sacred paintings appear to be overtly religious and pious, records left by personal acquaintances and later critics alike have insisted on Fillia's extreme laicism and the utter secularism of his works.⁵

¹ The only substantial consideration of Futurist sacred art was the exhibition *Piety and Pragmatism* and its accompanying catalogue, curated by Massimo Duranti at the Estorick Gallery. Massimo Duranti, and Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, *Piety and Pragmatism: Spiritualism in Futurist Art = Arte Sacra Futurista* (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 2007). Even the otherwise groundbreaking and sophisticated show *Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, held this year at the Guggenheim, excludes Futurist sacred art. See Vivien Greene, ed., *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2014).

² Pierpaolo Bindolo and Anna Campanella, *Fillia artista rivellesse: il figlio di Atahualpa* (Revello: Editrice Nuova Stampa, 2003), 16.

³ This work is handwritten on paper in Fillia's "literary magazine." It is in the personal archives of Piera Gaudenzi, widow of Fillia's friend and fellow Futurist, Alf Gaudenzi.

⁴ Fillia's coauthors are known only by their surnames, Galeazzi and Pasquale. Nothing else is known about them. Alessandra Ottieri, *Fillia, un percorso futurista: da Dinamite al jazz-band* (Naples: Libreria Dante & Descartes, 1999), 11-12.

⁵ Enrico Crispolti, *Il secondo futurismo, Torino 1923-1938* (Turin: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1962), 17-18; Enrico Crispolti, *Fillia: fra immaginario meccanico e primordiale cosmico* [Cuneo, mostra in San Francesco, 14 maggio - 30 giugno 1988] (Milan: Mazzotta, 1988), 17.

This contradiction, then, raises a number of questions about Fillia's *arte sacra* paintings and about his later paintings more generally.

In this article, I will argue that Fillia's motivations were far more complex than the expression of genuine religious sentiment or frank pragmatism. Fillia's religious paintings produced in 1931-1933, while superficially conformist, demonstrate a heterodox reappropriation of Christian tropes for the purpose of articulating his alternative, Futurist spirituality. Though Fillia's works share paligenetic tendencies with the Church and with the rhetoric of the fascist state, they in fact offer an alternative to them, not implicit support, and they seek to undermine standard symbolic meanings and gestures.⁶ I will demonstrate that there is a strong link between form and content in Fillia's works and that his use of mathematical perspective in religious art in the Italian context is far more significant than is acknowledged in the broad return to order that occurred in Italy following World War I.

Futurism's political station and prestige in the late 1920s and early 1930s were precarious. Despite continuing efforts to secure official recognition as the state art of Italy, Futurism was increasingly marginalized, and the movement almost entirely withdrew from its political activities.⁷ To prevent complete marginalization, Marinetti and leading Futurists made a number of concessions that cut to the ideological heart of the movement and, when forced to adapt to the political and cultural climate, profoundly altered the movement's aesthetic.⁸ In 1924-1925, Fillia appeared to follow Marinetti's lead and to move toward accommodation with the fascist regime. Yet Fillia's idiosyncratic and highly original Futurism challenges the accuracy of this understanding, especially in light of his earlier manifestos, novels, and theater.

Along with varying degrees of figurative mimesis, an ordered visual field returned to Futurist art forcefully following World War I. In the 1920s, a domesticated Futurist aesthetic penetrated everyday life and mass culture more than ever, especially via advertising. Much of its limited commercial success may be attributed to the shift in Futurist aesthetics, and particularly to the development of *aeropittura* [aeropainting], an appealing, spectacular style of visual representation that sometimes literally, sometimes abstractly, attempted to transfer the experience of flight into a work of art. Flight was an obsession not limited to the technology-mad Futurists; it was a passion of the Italian populace in general.⁹ The depiction of the spectacle of

⁶ Roger Griffin, "Staging the Nation's Rebirth: The Politics and Aesthetics of Performance in the Context of Fascist Studies," in *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925-1945*, ed. Günter Berghaus (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996), 11-29. Fascist theatricality arises, as Griffin has argued, from a permutation of the myth that the nation needs to be saved from decadence, via revolutionary means. This is also one of the foundational notions of Futurism and a point of overlap between the two movements.

⁷ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence, R.I.: Berghahn Books, 1996), 219-35. Many Futurists were, of course, dedicated to the fascist movement, and many of the aesthetic and structural changes in Futurism were direct responses to the trauma of the first world war and to important changes in the membership rolls; however, as Günter Berghaus has demonstrated, the group as a whole adapted their political stances and their verbal and visual languages specifically to curry favor. See also George L. Mosse, "The Political Culture of Italian Futurism: A General Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2/3 (May 1, 1990): 253-68; Claudia Salaris, *Storia del futurismo: libri, giornali, manifesti* (Rome: Editori riuniti, 1985).

⁸ Duranti and Estorick, *Piety and Pragmatism*, 5-6.

⁹ Annamaria Andreoli and Giovanni Caprara, eds., *Volare! Futurismo, aviomania, tecnica e cultura italiana del volo, 1903-1940* (Rome: De Luca, 2003); Emily Braun, "Shock and Awe: Futurist *Aeropittura* and the Theories of Giulio Douhet," in *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2014), 279-83; Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 232; Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). The association of aeropainting, the major late Futurist pictorial style, with fascism and the number of Futurists who were committed

flight in Futurist art and poetry was a seamless extension of the cultural zeitgeist at the beginning of the 1930s, which viewed flight as a totalizing experience.¹⁰ The *arte sacra futurista* developed out of aeropainting and also tapped into the cultural zeitgeist. It mixed the public worship of aviators like Italo Balbo and Giulio Douhet with the socio-cultural and political consequences of the Vatican Concordat. Those factors plus a degree of genuinely re-emergent religious faith combined to play a significant role in the development of the *arte sacra*. The religious substratum of sorts that had arguably been lurking within Futurism since its inception came to the forefront of the movement's aesthetic preoccupations in this period. The resurgence of spiritual and religious themes in Futurist art under fascism was evidence of both cynical pragmatism in their fight for relevance and a confluence of interest in the spiritual.¹¹ The symbolic procedures elaborated by Futurist art in the 1920s and 1930s express a deep need for the transcendent. That being said, a drastic change of attitude toward religious themes is unlikely to have actually occurred on as widespread a level amongst the Futurists as it seems, and the idea that the development of religious themes in a "mature" Futurist movement was "inevitable" or "natural" is a suspect *a posteriori* assertion.¹²

After Mussolini called for the production of an art that was "both traditional and modern" in a 1926 speech,¹³ Futurist artists and authors were forced to confront tradition and not to demand its blanket dismissal, if they wanted to earn government commissions and admission to national exhibitions (including the Venice Biennial) from the fascist ministers of culture with whom their relationship was often contentious.¹⁴ Adopted from Marinetti's style of propagandistic publicity, Fillia's obsessive drive to keep Futurist art in the national conversation contributed significantly to what success the movement did have.¹⁵ The theme of flight, combined with a more mimetic approach in the work of artists such as Gerardo Dottori and Tullio Crali, was a part of a general return to order in Futurist art. Following these changes the fascist regime was, on occasion, willing to exploit Futurist art where it had not done so before. With Futurist authors and artists frequently attempting to work within the limits of what the regime would support, and within the stylistic parameters that would have commercial success, the embrace of the cultic (be it of the Duce, the nation, or the Madonna) emerged as one of the ways they could produce acceptable

fascists has led to broad assumptions about the movement's participants, save for a few notable outsiders like Vinicio Paladini and Ivo Panaggi, whose communist politics are well known. Umberto Carpi, *Bolscevico immaginista: comunismo e avanguardie artistiche nell'Italia degli anni Venti* (Naples: Liguori, 1981), 85-91; Umberto Carpi, *L'estrema avanguardia del Novecento* (Naples: Liguori, 1981); Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 216-23.

¹⁰ Braun, "Shock and Awe," 269-70.

¹¹ Braun, "Shock and Awe," 269-70; Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*; Enrico Crispolti, *Il secondo futurismo, Torino*; Claudia Salaris, *Artecrazia: l'avanguardia futurista negli anni del fascismo* (Scandicci [Italy]: Nuova Italia, 1992); Duranti and Estorick, *Piety and Pragmatism*, 21-22.

¹² Crispolti, *Il secondo futurismo, Torino 1923-1938*, 17-23. Similarly, Günter Berghaus challenges the idea that a major change in attitude regarding religious themes in a "mature" Futurist movement was necessary or natural. Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 246.

¹³ Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 232.

¹⁴ See Silvia Evangelisti, Marzio Pinottini, and Paolo Baldacci, *Fillia e l'avanguardia futurista negli anni del fascismo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1986); Fillia, *Lettere di Fillia a Tullio d'Albisola: 1929-1935* (Savona: Ed. Liguria, 1981); Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*; Salaris, *Storia del futurismo*.

¹⁵ Evangelisti et al., *Fillia e l'avanguardia futurista*; Salaris, *Storia del futurismo*. Both Evangelisti and Salaris highlight the frequency with which Fillia was involved in publicity and propaganda and how much work he put into promoting the movement.

art, regardless of their personal political or religious beliefs; nonetheless, many Futurists were indeed fervent supporters of the regime and many were genuinely religious.¹⁶

Aeropittura and the arte sacra futurista: a brief outline

Aeropittura was the major stylistic innovation to emerge in Futurism after 1925 and the most clearly unified trend in a movement that had become ideologically, aesthetically, and politically fragmented.¹⁷ One of the most significant developments in Italian painting during the *Ventennio*, *aeropittura* stands out against other major pictorial trends both in Italy and in the wider European milieu for its particular subject matter and its mix of realism and subjectivity.¹⁸ The style was meant, its manifesto claimed, to construct a new reality that was perpetually in motion and that reached “una nuova spiritualità plastica extraterrestre.”¹⁹ Like many other Futurist manifestos (especially the “Pittura futurista: Manifesto tecnico” published in 1911), the “Manifesto dell’aeropittura,” first published by Marinetti and Mino Somenzi in 1929, postdates the development of the style.²⁰ The manifesto served to give official recognition and a semblance of cohesiveness to a pictorial style that in many ways flew in the face of Futurist precedent. Flight offered Futurism a new mythology, a new constellation of symbols to explore. Most importantly for Fillia, given his demonstrated interest in the spiritual and psychological possibilities of Futurism, the idea of flight generated profound new questions about technology and its effects on the psyche.²¹ The totalizing spectacle and the idea of the *opera totale* had been part of the Futurist ethos from the beginning, and aeropainting gave this undertaking new life.

¹⁶ Walter L. Adamson, “How Avant-Gardes End—and Begin: Italian Futurism in Historical Perspective,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 855-74; Duranti and Estorick, *Piety and Pragmatism*, 35; Simona Cigliana, *Futurismo esoterico: Contributi per una storia dell’irrazionalismo italiano tra Otto e Novecento* (Naples: Liguori, 2002). Marinetti’s father was an amateur religious studies scholar, and his mother was very religious. A profound interest in the spiritual had been continually present in Giacomo Balla’s work, and Umberto Boccioni’s *Materia* (1912-1913), a massive portrait of his mother, is modeled on an enthroned Madonna. The upsurge of “religious” sentiment and spirituality were, to be sure, partly related to the trauma of the First World War, as evident for example from the pages of the wartime journal *L’Italia Futurista*. Benedetta Cappa, Marinetti’s wife and important Futurist in her own right, was also religious (a devout Waldensian) and deeply interested in spiritual themes. She became an important influence on Futurism from around 1918, when she and Marinetti met, and some of her aeropaintings of the 1930s are profoundly mystical. Marinetti himself eventually returned to the Catholic Church and in 1942 authored the “Aeropoema di Gesù,” evidence that the religious was actually never far off from his consciousness.

¹⁷ Berghaus notes that “aero” began to replace “futurista” in the language of the movement, which he posits as an attempt to make them appeal more to the public. Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 245-248. See also: Salaris, *Storia del futurismo*, 115-16.

¹⁸ Crispolti, *Il secondo futurismo Torino*, 15-19.

¹⁹ F. T. Marinetti, *Teoria e invenzione futurista* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1983), 195-201. Hereafter abbreviated TIF.

²⁰ Fillia, “Spiritualità aerea” in Enrico Crispolti, *Fillia: Fra immaginario meccanico e primordio cosmico* [Cuneo, mostra in San Francesco, 14 maggio - 30 giugno 1988] (Milan: Mazzotta, 1988), 77.

²¹ Giovanna Bonasegale, “L’estetica del volo: tra Futurismo e Aeropittura,” in Andreoli, Annamaria, and Gregory Alegi, *Volare! futurismo, aviomania, tecnica e cultura italiana del volo 1903-1940*: [Milan, Palazzo Reale, 12 settembre - 16 novembre 2003], Rome: De Luca, Ed. d’Arte. 2003. 172-73. While the experience of flight had been of interest to Futurism since at least 1912 (see Jeffrey Schnapp, “Propeller Talk,” *Modernism/Modernity* 1, no. 3 (1994): 153), it was not until the late 1920s that flight came to dominate Futurist discourse. This was, not coincidentally, the period in which aviation was capturing the public’s imagination. See also Andreoli and Caprara, *Volare!* For Fillia’s interest in the spiritual and psychological potential of art, see the series of manifesto reproduced in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 68-74.

The combination of the aeropictorial visual language and its typical themes—airplanes and flight mostly, but also boating, landscapes, and religious or fantastical scenes—met and mixed to heighten the synergy between content and form. *Aeropittura*, a still mostly figurative style, was also as close as most Futurists came to pictorial abstraction. The two artists whose work consistently went furthest toward abstraction in this period were Fillia and Enrico Prampolini, both of whom incorporated many elements of biomorphic abstraction into their works, perhaps inspired by their lengthy stays in Paris.²² Fillia and Prampolini's interpretations of aeropainting were far less literal than most of their Futurist companions and more likely to eliminate references to actual flight. Fillia and Prampolini's paintings cast the material experience of space and time into an abstracted, fantastical cosmos, where forms and figures float and disaggregate. These canvases evoke a more mystical "airiness" and a less literal experience of airplane flight. Commenting on Fillia's aeropaintings and sacred art in the preface to a 1946 retrospective, Prampolini accorded them a "cupa condizione di malinconia [che] assumeva effettivamente significato metafisico" ("a sharp state of melancholy [that] effectively assumed a metaphysical significance.")²³ This melancholic, metaphysical significance is inwardly focused; it transposes and transfigures the human subjects in Fillia's paintings during the ascent from the earthly plane to the cosmic. Of the Futurist artists active at the time, Giacomo Balla also employed a significant degree of abstraction in his paintings, as he had done in his stylized depictions of motion in the early 1910s and in his geometric color studies in the middle of that decade, although he returned to the figurative more regularly until the end of his career. Many of Balla's paintings from the 1920s and 1930s are semi-abstract or mostly abstract studies of shape and color, but they approach geometric abstraction from the direction of still life studies of flowers and gardens, not from an interest in flight.

Given the distance it maintained from abstraction, Futurist art during this period has been often dismissed as reactionary or regressive.²⁴ By the late 1920s, abstraction was indeed an established avant-garde art form, but its meanings and values remained hotly disputed despite the

²² Evangelisti, et al., *Fillia e l'avanguardia futurista*, 13-34, 100-39; Lisa Panzera, "Celestial Futurism and the "Parasurreal," in *Italian Futurism 1909-1944*, 326-29. By 1927, Fillia was traveling extensively and, in his role as vice-secretary of the Movimento Futurista, had taken on the responsibility of organizing Futurist exhibits all over Italy, France, and Germany. In particular, Fillia made three lengthy trips to Paris between 1928 and 1930, even staying for several months in 1930. Enrico Prampolini, with whom Fillia collaborated extensively, was well connected in the Paris and Munich art worlds, and he made a concerted effort to introduce any Futurist who made the trip to Paris to his Parisian circle. It was through Prampolini that Fillia became acquainted with the group of artists that would form *Cercle et Carré*. During Fillia's several months long stay in 1930, Fillia, Prampolini, and Luigi Russolo participated in the founding of *Cercle et Carré* along with Alberto Sartoris, the Italian architect who was a close collaborator of Fillia. All four Italians were included in the official membership rolls and featured in the group's first publications. *Cercle et Carré* was primarily dedicated to abstract art and rationalist architecture. This experience, which included collaborations with Ferdinand Léger, Wassilj Kandinsky, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and others, would exert a significant influence on Fillia's pictorial style to meaningful effect. Fillia took this opportunity to connect with the Rationalist school of architecture, which would become the main focus of his activities only two years later. This later shift into architecture and landscape architecture is a logical conclusion, given Fillia's earlier works. Throughout his writings, years before he involved himself in the international conversation on architecture, Fillia had already consistently framed his theories in terms of constructing a "new architecture."

²³ Cited in Crispolti, *Il secondo futurismo, Torino 1923-1938*, 155.

²⁴ Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 257. Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1997), 17. Both Poggi and Fer challenge this assumption, prominent in the works of Rosalind Krauss and Clement Greenberg, among others.

picture long painted on the international stage that excluded Futurism from the canon due to the movement's late Fascist politics in favor of abstraction and the historical avant-gardes such as German Expressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism that more directly led to abstraction. The art critic and historian Carl Einstein, writing for Georges Bataille's *Documents*, even went so far as to call mathematical abstraction a "puerile fantasy."²⁵ When the assumption of an inevitable progression from the early avant-gardes on to abstraction is problematized, a reconsideration of Fillia's works and, more generally, of figurative art in Italy during the *Ventennio* becomes possible.²⁶ Among Futurists too, the issue of abstraction was not one on which there was complete agreement. Of Fillia's paintings, Gerardo Dottori, who himself distinctly favored a more representational approach, wrote:

Fillia non esce dalla "realtà" visibile per cercare ritmi pittorici astratti, ma trasporta questa realtà, con tutto il suo peso, calore, colore in un'atmosfera che appare astratta a chi non è allenato al volo lirico della fantasia; ma rimane realtà visibile e palpabile per Fillia e per i futuristi che nella creazione dell'opera d'arte sanno innalzarsi al di sopra della vita e delle cose di tutti i giorni.

Fillia does not abandon visible "reality" in order to find abstract pictorial rhythms, but instead transports our reality with all of its weight, heat, and color into an atmosphere that appears abstract to those who are not accustomed to the lyric flight of fantasy, but remains a visible, palpable reality for Fillia and for those Futurists that in the creation of a work of art know how to lift themselves above the life of everyday things.²⁷

In essence, Dottori claimed a type of abstraction for Fillia's works based on the experience of the work, instead of on compositional style. Dottori also makes the (unsurprisingly) bold claim that Futurist artists did not need abstraction to "lift themselves above the lives of everyday things" as further justification for their stylistic choices.²⁸

In a post-mortem eulogy, Enrico Prampolini directly addresses Fillia's relationship with abstraction. He explains that the choice to remain within the figurative was an intentional one on Fillia's part, and one that Fillia made in the service of his personal agenda. In the same article, Prampolini also noted that Fillia was "matematicamente" certain that Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, Pablo Picasso and Ferdinand Léger were destined to be the "maestri in contrasti delle nuove future generazioni" [the uncontested masters of new, future generations], a prediction that was both prescient and self-serving.²⁹ This prediction is an axiomatic foretelling of the fact that these four are among those accorded highest importance in the modernist canon, and it creates a self-serving (and self-aggrandizing) implicit link between the parts of these four artists' styles exploited by Fillia himself. Fillia's later Futurist art was a mix of loose, biomorphic forms (like Kandinsky and Picasso in his post-Cubist style) and simple, hard-edged geometric shapes (like

²⁵ Fer, *On Abstract Art*, 1-2.

²⁶ Fer, *On Abstract Art*, 17.

²⁷ Gerardo Dottori, cited in Crispolti, *Il secondo futurismo*, 152.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Crispolti, *Fillia*, 15-16.

Mondrian and Léger). Furthermore, Mondrian and Léger were central figures in the development of Rationalism, a movement in which Fillia was heavily invested during 1933-1935.³⁰

The majority of Fillia's late paintings are executed in oil, on canvas, and although the figures are highly stylized, flat, and semi-abstract, they are crisply evocative of the European figurative religious tradition, betraying the desire to reintroduce the existential paradigm of the artist as an interpreter of spirituality and the desire to maintain the preciousness of the work.³¹ But, at the same time, Fillia produced his religious paintings in series, in an ironic echo of mechanical techniques of reproduction. The repetitiveness seen in the sacred paintings is also typical of Fillia's literary practice, wherein he often repeated motifs with slight variations, in order to subtly emphasize their importance and the destabilization of traditional meanings.

The late 1920s saw a contemporaneous shift in both Fillia and Prampolini's artwork, away from the geometric, fragmented, and intersecting planes typical of both artists' early paintings and early Futurist painting in general, to more fluid figuration. Both aeropainting and the *arte sacra futurista* were heavily invested in stylistic mechanisms, and the return to more ordered figurative works reopened the dialogue with a number of formal elements long shunned by Futurism, including linear perspective. In Prampolini and Fillia's hands, aeropainting abstracts away from reality to give pictorial expression to the conditions of what the Futurists saw as a new, transformative, and universal human experience. In their works, aeropainting assumes a meta-perspective vision (discussed further in the next section) and comes closest to letting go of "nostalgia terrestre."³² In this configuration, aeropainting was at its most successful and most revolutionary.³³ Writing about the style, Enrico Prampolini argued that fully letting go of this "terrestrial nostalgia" was the only way to overcome known horizons, approach the unknown, and give expression to the experience.³⁴ Prampolini insisted that aeropainting created a "lontananza spirituale" and a "nuova dimensione emotiva" in painting.³⁵ He then discounted the need for contact with objective reality in aeropainting, just as early Futurists had rejected positivist objectivity in favor of subjective experience.³⁶

Taken both literally and metaphorically, Prampolini's argument grants insights into both the stylistic and thematic choices made by Prampolini himself and by Fillia. Both artists sought to step out of the terrestrial sphere in order to explore existential questions about materiality and reality and their effects on the psyche. When Fillia began to explore aeropainting in the late

³⁰Anna Vallye, Christian Derouet, Maria Gough, Spyros Papapetros, and Jennifer Wild, *Léger: Modern Art and the Metropolis* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2013).

³¹In *Inventing Futurism*, Christine Poggi reads the use of oil on canvas as a return to the Renaissance altarpiece and portrait tradition by late Futurists and, therefore, as a kind of concession or regression. However, I disagree with the idea that it is *a priori* regressive, as the use of oil paint on canvas was never out of favor with the Futurists. Even many of the most important early Futurist works were on canvas. This points instead to the problematic nature of the Futurist campaign to "destroy the past", a paradoxical problem with the movement's foundational ideology. Most famously, Boccioni's *Dinamismo di un foot-baller* (1913) is painted on a canvas that was initially too small and onto which Boccioni added extra canvas on all four sides in order to complete the painting. Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, 234.

³²Enrico Prampolini, *Enrico Prampolini 1894-1956*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna [no date for exhibition]. (Rome: Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, 1961), 35.

³³Enrico Crispolti, *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo* (Turin: Assessorato per la Cultura, Musei Civici, 1980), 12.

³⁴Bonasegale "L'estetica del volo: tra Futurismo e Aeropittura" in Andreoli and Caprara, *Volare!*, 173. Crispolti, *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo*, 499.

³⁵Crispolti, *Fillia*, 15-16.

³⁶Enrico Prampolini in "L'Impero d'Italia" (18 maggio 1930) cited in Crispolti, *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo*, 499-500; Enrico Prampolini, *Mostra del pittore Enrico Prampolini* (Rome: Galleria di Roma, febbraio-marzo 1941).

1920s, then religious painting in 1930-31, his human figures and the landscapes they inhabited veered sharply in the direction of the spiritual and mystical, a tendency already evident in his poetry manifestos.³⁷ The tendencies toward spirituality and mysticism were amplified by the perspectival shift, in the move from earth-bound, geometric space constrained by the laws of Newtonian physics into a kind of cosmic dreamscape, in which the laws of physics and geometry cease to be absolute. The stylistic and theoretical development of the *arte sacra futurista* was directly dependent on the growth of aeropainting, because aeropainting both literally and figuratively permitted the shift in the Futurist artistic and ideological mindset toward the cosmic and the metaphysical.

The “Manifesto dell’arte sacra futurista,” published in 1931, served to give the style official sanction by movement leadership, just as the manifesto of aeropainting had done two years earlier.³⁸ And yet the sacred art manifesto gives no real indication of how this had already been or was to be henceforth accomplished. The text is mainly a list of several, somewhat defensive, justifications for the claim that Futurist artists possessed a singular ability to revolutionize sacred art. The manifesto is signed by Marinetti and Fillia, and although Fillia’s influence on it is demonstrable, as with most things closely associated with the Futurist leader, Marinetti is generally accorded full credit for authorship. Fillia’s role in both the development of Futurist sacred art and in the gestation of the manifesto has largely been under-acknowledged, and previous analyses have focused almost exclusively on Marinetti, Dottori, and Prampolini.³⁹ As close readings of the text and of a number of personal correspondences bear out, Fillia was a central participant in the manifesto’s publication and in the development of the pictorial conventions of the style, not just a cosignatory.⁴⁰

The manifesto is an odd, slapdash text, clearly thrown together hurriedly despite the years-long inception of its content (for Fillia).⁴¹ There are indications of its haphazard composition in both the text of the manifesto and in the conditions surrounding its publication. Originally published bearing only Marinetti’s signature, the manifesto was then hastily republished after only two weeks, adding Fillia’s signature, a condition that Massimo Duranti offers as evidence of Fillia’s co-authorial role.⁴² Still, Marinetti most likely contributed to the actual composition of the manifesto, yet in a 1931 letter written to Tullio d’Albisola (Tullio Mazzotti), Fillia claims that the impetus for its completion and publication was because of *his* (Fillia’s) repeated insistence. Fillia tells Mazzotti that he had been urging Marinetti to start work on the manifesto for “quite some time.”⁴³ In the same letter, Fillia reproduces a letter that he had recently sent to

³⁷ This is almost certainly due to the influence of Enrico Prampolini and due to Fillia’s direct exposure to the Paris-based avant-garde (most particularly to the artists and poets of Surrealist and Dada movements) during and following his stays in the French capital between 1928 and 1930. The qualities of estrangement and disquiet, reminiscent of Giorgio De Chirico and Alberto Savinio’s metaphysical paintings, that pervade Fillia’s later paintings is no doubt due in part to Fillia’s exposure to the Paris scene, but not solely attributable to it. Between 1928 and 1930, Fillia interacted directly with Kandinsky, and it is likely that Fillia’s ideas on the spiritual in art were influenced early on by Prampolini’s reading of Wassily Kandinsky’s treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*.

³⁸ Crispolti, *Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo*.

³⁹ Among the Futurists themselves, Gerardo Dottori was considered the first “spiritual Futurist,” a role for which he is given credit in the manifesto of sacred art, though he was never a signatory of it. Duranti and Estorick, *Piety and Pragmatism*, 27-30.

⁴⁰ Christine Poggi claims that Fillia was merely a later signatory of the manifesto, which is contradicted by Fillia’s letters and by the circumstances of the manifesto’s publication. Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, 258.

⁴¹ Fillia, “L’idolo meccanico,” *L’Impero* (Rome: luglio 1925), reproduced in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 71.

⁴² Duranti and Estorick, *Piety and Pragmatism*, 29.

⁴³ Fillia, *Lettere di Fillia a Tullio d’Albisola*, 65-67.

Marinetti, urgently pleading with the Futurist leader to get started on a manifesto of sacred art, as if needing to materially prove his claims and reinforce his feelings of urgency.⁴⁴ In a preceding newspaper article, Fillia had also already referred to a forthcoming manifesto on Futurist sacred art that would illustrate the first steps toward a new kind of spirituality “con precisione” (“with precision”).⁴⁵

Reinforcing the likelihood of Fillia’s involvement, many of the turns of phrase in the “Manifesto dell’arte sacra futurista” echo Marinettian bombast, but unlike the “Manifesto dell’aeropittura,” it does not contain any traces of free-word poetry, and it does not contain any of the battle metaphors or references back to the founding in 1909 that were persistent motifs in manifestos authored by the Futurist leader. The detailed, theoretical discussion of painting is also atypical of Marinetti’s writings. Marinetti was not even a signatory on most of the most important art manifestos published between 1911 and 1930, with notable exceptions being the “Manifesto dell’aeropittura” and “Il Tattilismo,” both of which had co-authors—Benedetta for the former and Mino Somenzi for the latter. The *tattilismo* manifesto does not discuss pictorial art at all. Moreover, many of the artists that the manifesto of sacred arts lists as masters of the style were both overall less important figures *and* from Fillia’s circle in Turin, inclusions unlikely to have been made by Marinetti, who was based in Rome after 1925.

Furthermore, the topic of Futurist spirituality was one on which Fillia had published multiple times by 1931. From the very beginning, Fillia’s work demonstrated his interest in the idea of Futurism as a spiritual movement, though not as an organized religion. Fillia’s numerous newspaper articles, reviews, prose works and poetry from the mid to late 1920s were rife with references to the spiritual. Of course, Marinetti’s manifesto “La nuova religione-morale della velocità,” which was one of the precedents for both Fillia’s manifestos and for the development of Futurist sacred art, established Futurist interest in appropriating the divine in 1916; however, it did not access the spiritual as Fillia’s later manifestos did.⁴⁶ Fillia’s manifestos on the spiritual in

⁴⁴ This is similar to an earlier episode wherein Fillia wrote a number of letters indicating that *he*—not Marinetti—was responsible for organizing and editing the 1925 anthology *I nuovi poeti futuristi*. See Adriana Baranello, *Fillia’s Futurism: Writing, Politics, Gender and Art in the Age of Fascism* (PhD. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2014), 105-09.

Fillia was also the person responsible for organizing the Futurist room at the 1932 exhibition of sacred art in La Spezia to which the manifesto makes reference at its end. Evangelisti, et al., *Fillia e l’avanguardia futurista*, 150-59.

⁴⁵ Fillia, “Spiritualità aerea,” *Oggi e Domani*, Rome, 4 novembre 1930, reproduced in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 77-78.

⁴⁶ Marinetti, *TIF*, 130-38. “Se pregare vuol dire comunicare con la divinità, correre a grande velocità è una preghiera. Santità della ruota e delle rotaie. Bisogna inginocchiarsi sulle rotaie per pregare la divina velocità. [...] Nostre sante sono la luce e le onde elettromagnetiche 3×10^{10} metri al secondo.

L’Ebbrezza delle grandi velocità in automobile non è che la gioia di sentirsi fusi con l’unica divinità. Gli sportsmen sono i primi catecumeni di questa religione. Prossima distruzione delle case e delle città, per formare dei grandi ritrovi di automobili e di aeroplani. [...] La benzina è divina. Estasi religiosa che ispirano le centocavalli. Gioia di passare dalla 3^a alla 4^a velocità. Gioia di premere l’acceleratore, pedale russante della musicale velocità. Schifo che ispirano le persone invischiare nel sonno. Ripugnanza che io provo a coricarmi la sera. Io prego ogni sera, la mia lampadina elettrica; poiché una velocità vi si agita furiosamente.”

(“If praying means communicating with the divine, then driving at great speed is a prayer. Sanctity of the wheel and the rails. It is necessary to kneel down on the rails to pray to divine velocity. [...] Our saints are light and the electromagnetic waves [that travel] 3×10^{10} meters per second.”)

(“The intoxication brought on by the great speed of a car is nothing other than the joy of feeling oneself fused with the only kind of divinity. Sportsmen are the first converts to this religion. Next comes the destruction of houses and cities to create the meeting-place of automobiles and airplanes [...] Gasoline is divine. Religious ecstasy inspires the power of one hundred horses. The joy of shifting from 3rd to 4th gear. The joy of pressing the accelerator, rumbling pedal of musical velocity. Disgust inspired by people who are trapped by sleep. I pray each night to my electric lamp, within which velocity furiously stirs.”)

Futurism offered a distinct alternative to Marinetti's materialist "religion of speed," though his vision was in dialogue with Marinetti's.⁴⁷ Interest in establishing Futurism as a "religion" had continued to percolate in the turbulent years between the publication of the "La nuova religione-morale della velocità" and 1922, when Fillia first emerged on the Futurist scene. The symbolic and allegorical significance of aeropainting for Fillia was related to his continuing insistence on the importance of the spiritual aspect of the work. For Fillia this spiritual aspect was fundamental to the full realization of Futurism's artistic potential and for communicating the psychological aspects of a work, in tandem with the experiential possibilities that art discloses in its process of world-making.

The theme of Futurist spirituality first appeared in Fillia's writings in his 1925 manifesto "L'idolo meccanico." The manifesto tied modern life to a new kind of spirituality that revealed itself in the fourth dimension (time) and conceived of Futurist spirituality as a man-made construct, not a divinely inspired force. Fillia's new god was specifically designated an idol—a hollow figurehead whose purpose was to give a recognizable shape to this new kind of Futurist spirituality by coopting established religious paradigms. As the title—"L'idolo meccanico"—suggests, Fillia explored the idea that the new god of the post-industrial era was the machine. Fillia's manifesto took some inspiration from Vinicio Paladini and Ivo Pannaggi's "Manifesto dell'arte meccanica futurista," which was, at its inception, a fully communist text that idolized the machine aesthetic of the proletariat.⁴⁸ The overlap is a reminder that Fillia's thinking on spirituality, on the machine god, and on the aesthetics of machine spirituality in many ways grew directly out of his experiences with the PCI in Turin and the work of these two prominent *futurbolscevisti*.

Fillia published another similarly titled manifesto, "L'idolo meccanico; Arte sacra meccanica; Manifesto Futurista" in 1926, undersigned by Pino Curtoni and Angelo Caligaris. This manifesto also tied the spiritual and the sacred to Marinetti's *religione della velocità* and supplanted religious tradition with new Futurist spirituality. The section "Arte sacra meccanica" states:

Noi crediamo che la MACCHINA (sintesi e velocità essenziale del presente, che supplirà o perfezionerà tutte le altre manifestazioni naturali) abbia in sé il principio motore della nuova sensibilità superiore ad ogni altra derivazione.

La "religione della velocità" e la "sensualità meccanica" indicano chiaramente i fattori spirituali che, al di sopra della semplice forma estetica, modificano fatalmente il nostro pensiero e i nostri sensi—afferriamo cioè che la MACCHINA annulla tutto il vecchio mondo spirituale ed umano per crearne un altro superumano e meccanico dove l'UOMO perde la propria superiorità individuale fondendosi con l'AMBIENTE.

⁴⁷ Marinetti, *TIF*, 130-38. For Fillia's manifestos, see: Enrico Crispolti, *Fillia*, 68-82; Walter L. Adamson, "Futurism, Mass Culture, and Women: The Reshaping of the Artistic Vocation, 1909-1920," *Modernism/modernity* 4, no. 1 (1997): 89-114. Fillia sought to bring into the fold of the avant-garde a wide sector of Italians who had never abandoned their religious beliefs and aspirations in spite of the hegemony of positivism, the secular state, and the secular inclination of a majority of the Italian intellectual elites. These elites, with a few exceptions, considered Christianity and the Catholic Church retrograde and pursued alternative forms of spirituality and Theosophy.

⁴⁸ Much of the revolutionary and proletarian nature of that text was eliminated when it was edited for publication in Prampolini's journal *Noi*. Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 197-208.

We believe that the MACHINE (synthesis and essential velocity of the present, that will compensate for or perfect every other natural manifestation) is, in itself, the principal motor of a new sensibility superior to any other that has a different origin.

The “religion of speed” and mechanical “sensuality” clearly indicate the spiritual elements that, above and beyond simple aesthetic form, fatally modify our thought and our senses—we affirm, that is, that the MACHINE completely annihilates the old spiritual and human worlds, in order to create another superhuman, mechanical one where MAN loses his individualistic superiority, and fuses with the ENVIRONMENT.⁴⁹

Then, in 1930, preceding the “Manifesto dell’Arte Sacra Futurista” by two years, Fillia published an article on the topic of Futurist spirituality titled “Spritualità aerea.” This later newspaper article *cum* manifesto discussed simultaneity, velocity, aerial perspective, and “I nuovi lirismi suggeriti dal volo” as the direct inspirations for and the moderators of his Futurist sensibilities that led to his first aeropaintings. But he did not intend just to express the emotions of those things, saying:

Intendo invece servirvi dell’“aereo” (che è la più perfetta visione della natura meccanica) per rendere lo spirito dell’epoca. Questi quadri cioè rompono nettamente il cerchio della realtà per indicare i misteri di una nuova spiritualità... [Le aeropitture s]i costruiscono per rendere l’Idea dell’uomo di fronte allo spirito della natura meccanica.

Instead, I intend to make use of the “airplane” (which is the most perfect vision of mechanical nature) to render the spirit of the age. These paintings, that is to say, sharply break with the sphere of reality to reveal the mysteries of a new type of spirituality... Aeropaintings are constructed in such a way as to render the Idea of man confronted with the spirit of mechanical nature.⁵⁰

Referencing his earlier manifestos, Fillia emphasizes:

Fin dal 1925 parlai di “idoli meccanici” come necessità di superare in arte lo sfruttamento delle macchine per avvicinarsi ad esse con intendimenti spirituali.

Since 1925, I have spoken of "mechanical idols" as a necessity so that art may overcome the exploitation of machines and instead approach them with spiritual intent.⁵¹

So for Fillia, aeropainting finally offered the techniques he needed to pictorially express his vision of Futurist spirituality—a vision that was explicitly divergent from the old spiritual order and that completed the spiritual development of the Futurist movement.

⁴⁹ Fillia, A.C. Caligaris, and Pino Curtoni, “L’idolo meccanico; Arte sacra meccanica; Manifesto futurista,” *La Fiamma*, Torino. 2 maggio 1926, reprinted in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 73

⁵⁰ Fillia, “Spritualità aerea,” reprinted in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 77-78.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 77-78.

An art that was “both traditional and modern”

Aeropainting relies on a complex hybrid of perspective methods to achieve its particular view from above, and it mixes classical notions of perspective with the Futurist vortex model to powerful effect. ‘Perspective’ is a loaded term in the context of the visual arts and especially in the context of painting in Italy. The use of mathematical (linear) perspective was first used in Classical Antiquity and was later “rediscovered” by Filippo Brunelleschi, then developed further both technically and theoretically during the Renaissance. Notably, it was not a concept referenced with any frequency by Umberto Boccioni in his manifestos on art written in the early 1910s, at the height of Futurism’s “destructive” phase, even to express his condemnations of realism in painting. Yet, rational, linear perspective is embedded into the Italian artistic consciousness, like the topics of religion and the spiritual, thus in the early years of the Futurist movement, it was actively rejected and replaced by willful and fanciful distortions.⁵² But, like Catholicism, linear perspective in the arts was a force with which the Futurists were forced to reckon in the end.

Though linear perspective remained imperfect in its ability to transpose reality on to the canvas (for example, distortion at the edges of the canvas was a problem), it was utterly rational. Early Futurist art was intent on creating an artistic style that was the complete, intentional antithesis of this careful, rationally constructed pictorial space in form, intent, and meaning. Instead, its disruptive style stressed the Futurist preoccupation with dynamic subjectivity and chaotic action. Futurist dynamism obliterated linear perspective, because it was at complete odds with Futurist interest in movement and temporality. Linear perspective requires a stationary, non-moving viewer, and the system only works if the viewer is at eye level with the vanishing point. Viewing a work that is constructed using linear perspective implies both physical and temporal stasis. In paintings on religious themes, the temporal aspect passes beyond the static into the eternal.

In *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Erwin Panofsky argued that the development of perspective—which he traced from Classical Antiquity through the Baroque period—was both a pictorial and symbolic gesture wherein the objective and subjective are inseparable given that the difference is reducible to a question of emphasis. In his conclusion, Panofsky argued that the ordering of visual phenomena, the mathematizing of visual space, is both that which evaporates the “true being” of the seen and the “anchoring of the spirit idea of form”: he called it a “peculiar carrying over of artistic objectivity into the domain of the phenomenal.”⁵³ Panofsky argued that perspective walls off the realm of the magical from being literally present in religious art and becomes a filter for the divine presence. Through this symbolic pictorial form, the supernatural is allowed to enter natural, visual space because it is converted into a psychological

⁵² This is evident, for example, in many of Boccioni’s works that represent unconscious or dream-like states. Particularly salient examples are *La strada entra nella casa* (1911) and the multiple versions of his *Stati d’animo* series (1911). On the general condition in Italy on this topic, see David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁵³ Panofsky, *Perspective*, 71-72.

experience. This then allows the beholder to internalize the supernatural and for the supernatural to be directly experienced by the beholder.⁵⁴

Though it is atypical to view Futurism through the lens of Renaissance and Baroque art historical scholarship, Panofsky's argument is illuminating for Fillia's works because of Fillia's established interest in the psychological and spiritual possibilities of the work and more broadly for the "problem" of the *arte sacra futurista*. Perspective, according to Panofsky, is not only related to the religious and the spiritual in art, but it also forms their foundation on both metaphysical and pictorial levels. Panofsky's argument speaks directly to the symbolic processes occurring in late Futurist art, because the need to reestablish order, articulated by Depero and Balla in their 1915 manifesto "Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo," included the reestablishment of the ordered pictorial environment. The displacement of perspective in 1911 was discursively tied to the rejection of the sacred and part of the Futurists' destructive impulse, so the return to order became an access point for the return of the sacred.

The return of perspective and the return of figuration coincided with the return of religious imagery across artistic styles and movements among Italian artists. As early as 1916, Severini painted a portrait of his wife nursing their eldest daughter, titled *Maternità*, reminiscent of a *Madonna Lactans*. Carlo Carrà, in his post-Futurist phase, produced metaphysical paintings such as *Le figlie di Loth* (1919), which were not only religious in subject but reassumed the burden of the history of Italian religious art by reopening the dialogue with Giotto, as did Depero's menacing scenes populated by puppets and toys from the late 1910s and 1920s. Felice Casorati produced his portrait of Silvana Cenni in 1922, echoing Piero della Francesca's enthroned Madonnas. Similarly, Casorati's 1923 *Meriggio* visually cites Andrea Mantegna's *Cristo morto* (c. 1480), a masterwork of perspective and foreshortening. In the same appropriative manner that fascism attempted to exploit and transform rituals and religious sentiment, these paintings transfer the locus of the sacred into modern secular life, in this case into the domestic sphere, a site that fascism sought to control.

The reverse symbolic process—where the pillaging of sacred imagery and ritual by the secular state or the secular artist—reinforces the underlying associations between perspective and the sacred. Employing religious rituals and imagery for secular purposes draws attention to them and exploits their associations to validate their secular meanings and use. That the symbolic and spiritual are at work and are tied to the process of ordering helps to clarify the reasons for the development of aeropainting and for Futurism's return to the sacred and spiritual. That being said, in Fillia's case, the manifestation of the sacred is the machine god, not the Christian. This followed the spirit of early Futurism's machine worship, if not its materialist letter.

The association between pictorial perspective and religious art ties the technical aspects of Fillia's art to his efforts to articulate his interpretation of the sacred, with which he had been grappling for several years. His earliest attempts to reintegrate psychological and spiritual themes into his artwork had relied entirely on the use of color, which at the time he considered the structural foundation of all painting. When that proved unsatisfactory, however, he was forced to seek out other pictorial methods.⁵⁵ Early Futurist art succeeded in disrupting the continuity between past and present and in creating the paradigm of the avant-garde artistic movement, but because they resisted the slippage into full abstraction, Futurist artists and poets had few other choices except to return toward pictorial order. The return to order brought the

⁵⁴ Ibid, 71-72.

⁵⁵ Fillia, "Alfabeto spiritual," reproduced in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 69-71.

return of perspective with it across Italian art, not just to Futurism. The “Manifesto dell’aeropittura” claims:

1. le prospettive mutevoli del volo costituiscono una realtà assolutamente nuova e che nulla ha di comune con la realtà tradizionalmente costituita dalle prospettive terrestri;

[...]

7. ogni aeropittura contiene simultaneamente il doppio movimento dell’aeroplano e della mano del pittore che muove la matita, pennello o diffusore;

8. il quadro o complesso plastico di aeropittura deve essere policentrico.⁵⁶

1. flight’s mutable perspectives constitute an entirely new reality and have nothing in common with reality as it is traditionally constituted by earthbound perspective;

[...]

7. every aeropainting simultaneously contains the tandem movement of the airplane and of the painter’s hand moving the pencil, pen or diffusor;

8. the picture or plastic construct of an aeropainting must be polycentric.

This position diverges from early Futurist art, which demanded that the viewer be placed “nel centro del quadro.” In the earlier Futurist perspectival construct, the point of view and vanishing point were not dependent on the painter’s relationship to the scene, but instead dependent on the painting itself, and the painting’s ability to draw the viewer into it, almost in a literal, physical sense.⁵⁷ The distance from standard perspective that the *aeropittori* claimed to maintain was premised on the idea that the perspectival construct in aeropainting could be understood to have many horizon lines and multiple vanishing points all of which were inherently unstable and continuously shifting based on the movement of the airplane and the changing position of the artist relative to the ground below. Of his personal understanding of aeropictorial perspective, Fillia said:

Le sensazioni di velocità dovevano logicamente essere le prime a interessare la fantasia dell’artista che vedeva nell’aeroplano la possibilità di afferrare una serie di paesaggi e di orizzonti ignoti, con altre prospettive ed altri fonti liriche.

⁵⁶ Marinetti, *TIF*, 198-99.

⁵⁷ Umberto Boccioni, et al., “La Pittura futurista: Manifesto tecnico,” in *Per conoscere Marinetti e il futurismo*, ed. Luciano De Maria (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1981), 23-26.

“La costruzione dei quadri è stupidamente tradizionale. I pittori ci hanno sempre mostrato cose e persone poste davanti a noi. Noi porremo lo spettatore nel centro del quadro.

Come in tutti i campi del pensiero umano alle immobili oscurità del dogma è subentrata la illuminata ricerca individuale, così bisogna che nell’arte nostra sia sostituita alla tradizione accademica una vivificante corrente di libertà individuale.”

(“The organization of paintings is stupidly traditional. Painters have always shown us things and people in front of us. We will put the spectator at the center of the painting.

As in all areas of human thought the light of individual research has penetrated the rigid obscureness of dogma thus it is necessary that our art substitute an enlivening current of individual liberty in place of academic tradition.”)

Logically, the sensations of speed had to be the first to capture the fantasy of the artist who saw, in airplanes, the possibility of capturing a series of unknown landscapes and horizons by means of different perspectives and different sources of lyricism.⁵⁸

In the context of the manifesto, Fillia clearly meant to use ‘perspective’ and ‘horizons’ in both the pictorial and metaphorical senses of the words. Physical and psychological experiences meet and meld in his understanding of perspective’s effect on the viewer, and later in “Spiritualità aerea,” he argued that expanding the viewers’ consciousness would lead to their recognition of the spiritual power of the work.

Aeropainting combines these visual and ideological modes—the Renaissance and the Futurist—forming a modernist hybrid that attempted to be simultaneously objective and subjective, and grounded in the modernist experience. The “Manifesto dell’aeropittura” claimed that its new type of perspective had no relationship to standard ideas of perspective formulated when standing on the ground. Aeropainting returns the point of view to the artist and allows the viewers to share the artist’s subjectivity, instead of dragging them into a vortex independent of the artist’s perspective. While still at the physical center of the painting, experiencing the movement around them, the viewers are no longer pulled into a maelstrom that swirls around them; they are now moving with the artist and the artist controls the perspectival locus. Aeropainting takes the Futurist artistic directive to “place the viewer at the center of the painting” and shifts the painting’s core up into the cockpit of the airplane into the pilot’s hand, or in Fillia and Prampolini’s case, out of “real” space and time into abstract, atemporal cosmos.⁵⁹

When aeropainting’s style was combined with the thematic content of the *arte sacra futurista*, Fillia was able to expand the ways in which he could construct a pictorial environment that would have his intended effect on the viewer. In several of his manifestos, Fillia had articulated the belief that a painting was experienced both intellectually and psychologically. With the development of aeropainting, the formal structures of the painting capable of shaping the viewer’s psychological experience of the painting again included the perspectival construct.⁶⁰ Fillia emphasized that:

La possibilità di una realizzazione materialistica completa, con tutta la sua importanza e la sua concezione tecnica, permette uno sviluppo spirituale molto più grande, verso gli orizzonti luminosi della sensibilità futurista. [...] [I]l nuovo mezzo rappresentativo deve essere formato di alte capacità creative e non di semplici grandiosità costruttive ed estetiche.

L’unione del soggetto e dell’ambiente, come realtà dinamica, genera un’architettura di piani plastici che si sviluppa al di fuori dei limiti di una cornice per un proprio organismo definitivo, tipicamente simile ad una macchina, perché formato di elementi diversi ma indispensabili al suo funzionamento espressivo. Annullamento perciò delle parti inutili: come, ad esempio, in una macchina da cucire, nessuno ravvisa la forma dell’albero nella tavola di legno ma vede un

⁵⁸ Fillia, “Spiritualità aerea,” in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 77.

⁵⁹ Umberto Boccioni, et al., “La pittura futurista: manifesto tecnico,” in De Maria, *Per conoscere Marinetti e il futurismo*, 23-26; Braun, “Shock and Awe,” 269.

⁶⁰ Braun, “Shock and Awe,” 269.

elemento indispensabile, così lo spettatore in un quadro futurista non deve cercare la realtà visiva già conosciuta ma il contenuto nuovo del complesso costruito.

The possibility of a complete material rendering, with all of its importance and its technical conception, allows for much greater spiritual development, toward the luminous horizons of futurist sensibility. [...] The new method of representation must be made with the utmost creative skill, and not be mere constructive and esthetic grandiosities.

The union of the subject and its environment into a dynamic reality generates an architectural structure made of sculpted planes that develop beyond the limits of the frame and creates its own definitive organism, usually one that is similar to a machine, since it is made of separate elements that are nonetheless indispensable to its expressive function. Useless parts are eliminated, as for example in a sewing machine. No one sees the tree within the wooden table, but instead they see an indispensable part. In the same manner, when viewing a Futurist painting, the spectator must not look for familiar visible reality, but rather seek the new construct.⁶¹

So, for Fillia, there was a fundamental spiritual aspect in both the creation of a pictorial field and in the conditions of the work's physical existence; these two qualities, he stressed, were inextricable from one another. He contended that the complete material realization of a painting was dependent on the conditions of its coming into being; therefore, as Panofsky argued, the subjective is inseparable from whatever objective qualities a painting possesses. The conditions of the painting's creation determine the spiritual aspect of the work, and as it develops, it "approaches the luminous horizons of the Futurist sensibility."⁶²

Similarly, Fillia's insistence on the union of the painting's subject and the pictorial environment was already present in his earliest works for the stage. In those works, he used the stage sets and costumes to integrate the actors with their environment and the audience with the spectacle. Just as the lighting and sets he designed pushed through the fourth wall, aestheticizing and altering the space occupied by the audience, Fillia's later theories on painting with their emphasis on creating a viewer-enveloping, architecturally constructed environment symbolically brought the pictorial space also beyond the limits of the frame, into the third and fourth dimensions. On many occasions, Fillia emphasized the idea of architecture and the built environment in painting. He conceived of the picture field as the same kind of constructed environment with the same kind of psychological impact as a building, constructed in three dimensions.

Fillia further argued in "L'idolo meccanico" that the fruit of this process—the completed painting—is usually similar to a machine because both are devoid of superfluous parts. The successful painting, like the functioning car, airplane, or factory machinery, would be composed of synergistic elements. While distinct from the entirety of the functional system as each individual part is in an engine, these pictorial elements are fundamental to the work's expressive function and so harmoniously integrated into it that they lose their independent existence and objectness. On one level, the completed artwork is an image of known, unique objects; on another, it is a singular object where the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, its

⁶¹ Fillia, "L'idolo meccanico," reproduced in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 71.

⁶² *Ibid.*

coming into being determined by the artist's will to create.⁶³ Fillia's theories are a Futurist, mechano-spiritual version of Panofsky's argument that painting bridges the physical world and the phenomenal filtered through the artist's interpretation.

Fillia's mechano-religious iconography

Though Fillia and Prampolini's interpretations of aeropainting shared significant stylistic similarities, by 1931 their thematic interests had diverged. Prampolini's cerebral, metaphysical aeropainting may have opened the door to Futurist transcendentalism, but he never tackled religious subject matter.⁶⁴ Religious imagery did, however, take hold of Fillia's painterly imagination at the end of the 1920s, and it dominated the paintings he produced in 1931-1932. The first documented evidence of Fillia's religious paintings dates to an exhibition in March of 1931, though it is most likely that he began work on some of the paintings in 1930.⁶⁵ The emergence of Christian themes and imagery followed closely on Fillia's 1930 sojourn in Paris and the probable influence of Gino Severini, and others with whom he interacted.

Severini had, at the time, just completed fresco cycles in the cathedrals of Semsales (1926) and La Roche (1928) in Switzerland.⁶⁶ In the early 1930s, Severini also concluded mosaic cycles in the cathedral of Cortona and in the Palazzo delle Poste e Telegrafi in Alessandria, Italy. Mostly unable to win government commissions, Futurist artists received them for the decoration of only three of the many new post offices constructed between 1933 and 1935.⁶⁷ Fillia and Prampolini were responsible for the mosaics titled *Le Comunicazioni*, in the clock tower of the La Spezia post office in 1933-1934, and Benedetta for a series of monumental paintings that hang in the council chamber in Palermo's new post office (*Sintesi delle comunicazioni aeree*, 1933-1934). Prampolini later designed murals for EUR in Rome, but not until 1942, and for the Mostra delle Terre d'Oltremare in Naples in 1943. Though there were other Futurist artists besides Severini who also decorated churches, Fillia's altarpiece-style paintings were never used in any cultic capacity.⁶⁸ Fillia's one success at obtaining a commission from the Church was for the frescos that adorned the interior of a cathedral designed by Alberto Sartoris in Lortrier, Switzerland.⁶⁹ However, this was likely only made possible thanks to Fillia's close friendship with Sartoris, and Fillia's letters do not contain any evidence that he actively sought any other such commissions.

⁶³ These ideas may show the influence of Martin Heidegger, and especially his analysis of Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* (1886). Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

⁶⁴ Duranti and Estorick, *Piety and Pragmatism*, 30. For more on Prampolini's spiritualism as it is tied to color theories, see: Günter Berghaus, "A Theatre of Image, Sound and Motion: On Synaesthesia and the Idea of a Total Work of Art," *MuK Maske und Kothurn: Internationale Beiträge zur Theaterwissenschaft* 32, no. 1-2 (1986): 7-28. For more on Fillia's use of color theory, see: Adriana Baranello, "Poetry Made Image and Images Made Poetry: Fillia's Verbal and Visual Self-Portraiture," *La Fusta* 21 (Fall 2013).

⁶⁵ Crispolti, *Fillia*, 44-45.

⁶⁶ Evangelisti, et al., *Fillia e l'avanguardia futurista negli anni del fascismo*, 144.

⁶⁷ Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 238; Romy Golan, "Slow Time: Futurist Murals," in *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2014), 317-20. The Alessandria project was one of only a few such projects granted to the Futurists. The group had little success overall at winning these state commissions.

⁶⁸ Salaris, *Artecrazia*, 157.

⁶⁹ Duranti and Estorick, *Piety and Pragmatism*, 29. I have been unable, at this time, to locate any illustrations of these works, nor information on whether or not they still exist.

Even though the development of the *arte sacra futurista* followed quickly on the heels of the Lateran Pacts and the push for a style of painting that was “both traditional and modern,” it was never granted recognition by the Church, just as Futurism never achieved the status of official state art.⁷⁰ Just prior to the Lateran Pacts, on 28 October 1928, Pope Pius XI released a statement declaring that in Futurist paintings “il sacro non sembra richiamare e far presente se non perché lo sfigurano fino alla caricatura, e bene spesso fino a vera e propria profanazione.”⁷¹ Futurist paintings, he argued, did not provide vessels for God’s presence; therefore, they were unacceptable and unusable. Despite (and perhaps also because of) the strength of official Church objections that Futurist sacred art was extravagant and irreconcilable with Christian iconography, several Futurist artists pursued religious themes with gusto, and this did not stop the ambitious Fillia and his fellow Futurists from attempting to “renew” sacred art, and to exhibit their works to the public. In a 1931 Padua exhibition, marking the 700th anniversary of the death of St. Anthony, the Futurists did succeed in having a number of works exhibited.⁷² Fillia’s two nearly identical portraits of the saint (Fig. 1 illustrates one)⁷³ were likely produced to increase the chances that he would have works accepted into the exhibition, which he ultimately did, though this was perhaps the only time his paintings were recognized by the Church.

⁷⁰ Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 232.

⁷¹ Cited in Salaris, *Artecrazia*, 157.

⁷² Duranti and Estorick, *Piety and Pragmatism*, 29.

⁷³ Image in Duranti and Estorick, *Piety and Pragmatism*, 56.



Fig. 1: *S. Antonio da Padova*, probably 1931, oil on canvas, 125x100 cm. Galleria d'Arte il Vicolo, Genoa

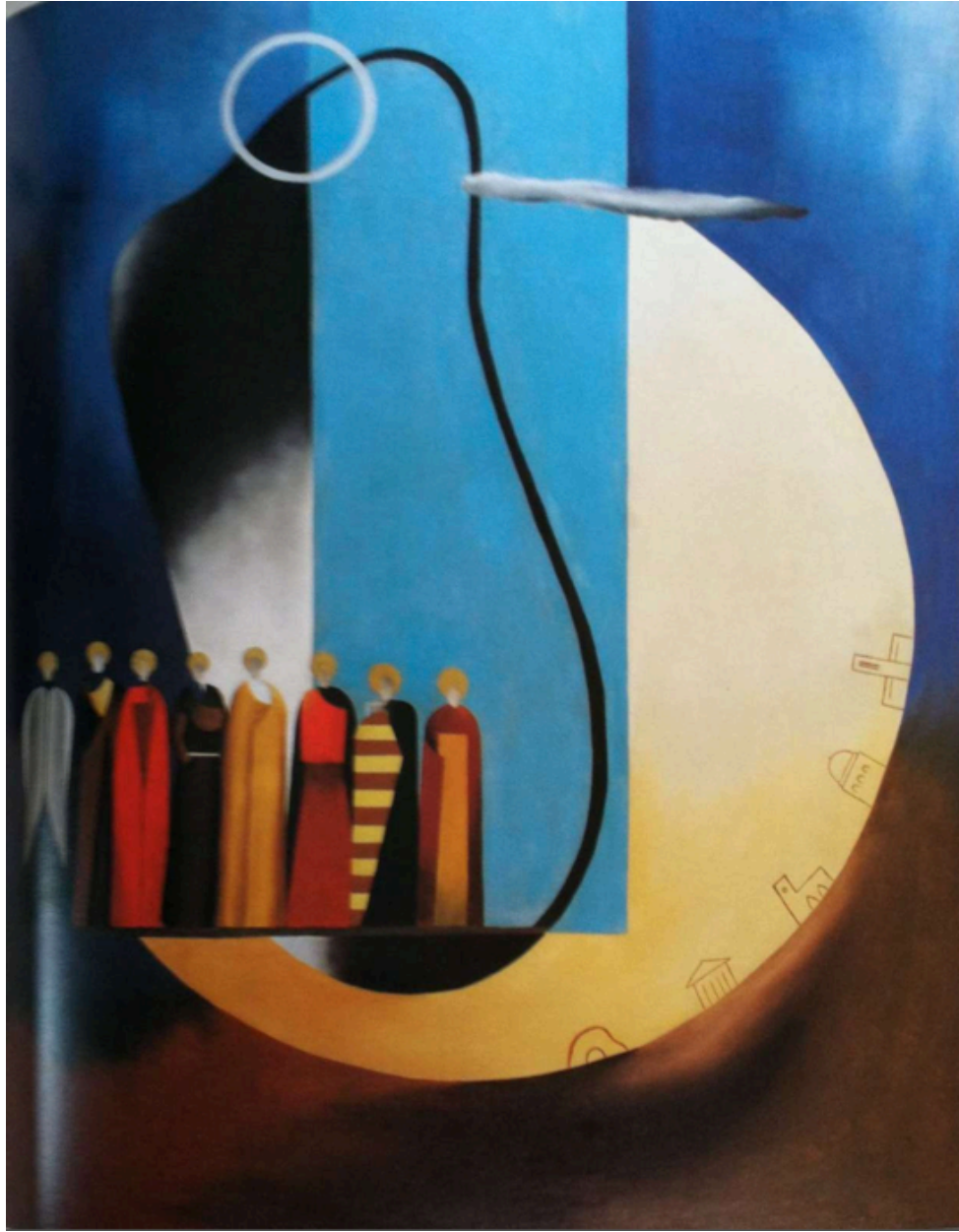


Fig. 2: *L'Eternità*, 1934, oil on canvas, 125x100 cm. Galleria d'Arte il Vicolo, Genoa



Fig. 3: *Natività – Morte – Eternità*, 1931, oil on canvas, 115x136 cm. Galleria Narciso, Turin

Fillia's two paintings *L'eternità* (Fig. 2)⁷⁴ and *Natività – Morte – Eternità* (Fig. 3)⁷⁵, which have been much written about—insofar as any painting of Fillia's has been much written about—are large paintings (each more than 2'x3') that mimic the format of a painted altarpiece, as did most of Fillia's religious paintings. The only feature of both paintings that has attracted any substantive commentary is the series of architectural schematics representing the varying architectural styles of churches. The schematics in both paintings have been widely assumed to represent Christian architecture and the evolution of church architecture from the time of Christ to an endpoint in the Futurist-style church.⁷⁶ This is certainly a reasonable assumption, and partly true, as Futurism's greatest ambition, after all, was to remake the world and to fully aestheticize every aspect of life in Futurist style. Yet in each case, there are models that can, due to the

⁷⁴ Image in Duranti and Estorick. *Piety and Pragmatism*, 61.

⁷⁵ Image in Duranti and Estorick. *Piety and Pragmatism*, 56.

⁷⁶ See Marzio Pinottini and Marida Faussone, ed., *Sensibilità futurista: Fillia, l'avanguardia inquieta* (Turin: Piazza, 2004), 117.

simplicity and generic nature of the outlines, be interpreted more broadly as belonging to a variety of religions.

In *Natività*, just above and to the right of the cross's top arm, there is the outline of a building that resembles a Greek Orthodox style church (Fig. 4). But this structure, with its hexagonal base and dome, could also be interpreted as a Judaic or Islamic temple, perhaps even as the Dome of the Rock, which is also a hexagon-shaped prayer house topped by a dome. There is a second similar, non-specific architectural elevation to the right of the cross. The generic domed temple is repeated in the series of elevations in *L'eternità* (Fig. 5). Then, another image featured in *L'eternità*, second from the bottom (Fig. 6), is an image of what appears more like a columned Roman or Greek temple, the Pantheon perhaps, than it does a Christian church.



Fig. 4: Detail of
Natività—Morte—Eternità



Fig. 5: Detail of
L'eternità

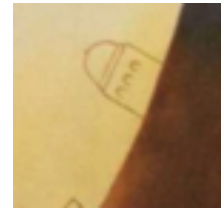


Fig. 6: Detail of
L'Eternità

The multiple ambiguities in this group of Fillia's paintings points to these being universal models, meant to evoke a variety of types of holy buildings, instead of a series of expressly Catholic churches.

The central images in both of these paintings have gone unanalyzed. Fillia's paintings have been simultaneously understood (and thus avoided) as problematic in the context of Futurism, and apparently assumed to be unproblematic Catholic imagery. In fact, the central images in all of Fillia's sacred paintings are troublesome. In the same way that the architectural elevations in *L'eternità* are non-specific, the eight figures that stand in the shadow of the dematerialized, silhouette of a swaddled infant—presumably, but not assuredly Christ—are dressed in a variety of religious (or more accurately *pseudo*-religious) robes and are crowned with haloes. It is clear that these figures are meant to evoke church fathers and saints, but again, none of them may be definitively identified. The fourth figure from the left is associable with, but not guaranteed to be, St. Francis of Assisi or St. Anthony of Padua, given its dark-colored robe with the large, dark-colored cowl and the light-colored rope belt typical to the Franciscan order. The rest of the figures are harder or impossible to identify because their robes do not resemble common iconographies for any of the major orders or primary saints and martyrs. Like the church buildings in this painting and in *Natività – Morte – Eternità*, the figures are schematic, non-specific, and unidentifiable, yet the type of figure to which they allude is clear. They are indeed still spiritual leaders, but of a Futurist faith.

Like the architectural elevations and the eight spiritual fathers in *L'eternità*, the allegorical rendering of the infant savior represents the material foundations of transcendent, dematerialized Futurist spirituality, its savior come to carry Italy into modernity, to establish and teach the *religione della velocità*. The idea of rebirth or palingenesis signaled by the infant “Christ” was shared between Christianity and Futurism—and by fascism—despite Marinetti's provocative

early manifestos that defy spirituality in favor of absolute materiality.⁷⁷ Simultaneously, the empty silhouette of the infant Christ represents the emptiness of Christian belief in the face of modernity and a promise for the shape of a new religion. The power of these images lies in the fact that semiotic stability has been undermined and their meaning reassigned. No longer in a position to define an entirely new linguistic, visual, and theoretical language due to socio-political and economic factors, Fillia fell back onto heavily coded Christian symbols to express and construct his Futurist spirituality in an easily legible way.⁷⁸

Presenting intentionally generic models is typical of Fillia's work. In works dating from 1923 through 1927, such as *Sensualità—Teatro d'eccezione* and *La morte della donna: Romanzo a novelle collegate*, Fillia used a similar method in his most aggressively ideological written works. This is most notable in the 1923 play *Sensualità*, in which Fillia names his speaking characters simply Lui, Lei, and Donna. The play narrates Fillia's vision of the proletarian revolution and what he believed to be the parallel destruction of strict gender codes and of paralyzing sentimentalism and romantic love. Likewise, in *La morte della donna*, published in 1925, the narrator is called only "Scrittore" and his interlocutor "Signora." The last of the Scrittore's stories, "Il mondo di domani," is set in an indefinite, far future, after Fillia's revolution, and each person is only called by the letters "M." for *maschio* and "F." for *femmina*, plus a number. Combined with the broad spirituality explored in Fillia's manifestos, the non-specificity of the figures in his sacred paintings implies an interest in a universal kind of spirituality that has only been made possible and available through technology and progress, and the worship thereof. The iterative use of this narratological structure and the deliberate anonymity of these figures gestures toward a practical appropriation of the Catholic visual idiom, not toward the rediscovery of genuine faith.

Fillia's religious paintings are also permeated by various expressions of the same dualities that first appear in his literary works. He expressed a radical brand of gender politics based on the discontinuity and struggle between the asexual mind and the gendered, sexual body.⁷⁹ This duality forms the ideological underpinnings on which his earlier written works, such as *Sensualità*, are built, and it returns over and over throughout Fillia's paintings, most notably in his portraits of male and female nudes (see below). Various philosophical and religious dualisms are persistent in Fillia's works, especially the mind/body duality. Fillia began his exploration of the mind/body duality in *Sensualità* and completes its exploration in "Il mondo di domani," the last of the short stories told by the narrator of *La morte della donna*. *L'uomo senza sesso* published in 1927 is Fillia's story of his ideal Futurist man and Futurist savior; however, the "genderless man" is, first and foremost, a woman. She is the first person to reject socially constructed gender norms and live a life where her asexual mind overcomes the needs and desires of her sexual body and emotional sentimentality. The consistency makes these symbolic structures recursive, which is to say self-amplifying and self-reinforcing. Granted, the use of the mind/body duality in Fillia's novels and poetry demonstrates how his early communist ideology and radical gender politics were colored by Catholic rhetorical and symbolic codes; in this use, however, Fillia strips away any overt dependence on Christianity.

The idea of the eternal battle between good and evil, further demonstrates Fillia's interest in dualism as a structural metaphor that he could exploit in his paintings. This theological structure is visually transposed onto most of Fillia's religious paintings to varying degrees. Fillia produced

⁷⁷ Roger Griffin, "Staging the Nation's Rebirth," 11-29.

⁷⁸ Walter L. Adamson, "How Avant-Gardes End—and Begin," 855-74.

⁷⁹ Baranello, *Fillia's Futurism*, 34-102.

two paintings of *La città di Dio* (Fig. 7⁸⁰ illustrates one version of several) ostensibly illustrating themes taken from Augustine of Hippo's *City of God*, a theological work built on duality. In *The City of God*, Augustine conceives of history as a fight for supremacy between the City of Man and the City of God, leading to the inevitable victory of the latter. Earthly physical reality, absolute matter, is separate from and subordinate to the cosmic, spiritual order of the heavens in this system. The conflict between the cities of man and God is grounded in the battle between good and evil, an allegory in Augustine's faith that arises from his former devotion to Manichaeism.⁸¹ Manichaeism taught that a struggle existed between a spiritual world of light (good) and a material world of darkness (evil). In the ongoing battle between these forces, light is gradually returned from materiality to spirit. *The City of God* is an unusual subject for a painting. Even fresco cycles of the life of the saint are not particularly common, and *The City of God* is a theme that does not appear in any other Futurist sacred art outside of Fillia's works, whereas images from the life of Christ are frequent.

⁸⁰ Image in Duranti and Estorick. *Piety and Pragmatism*, 56.

⁸¹ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods and intro. Thomas Merton (New York: Modern Library, 1950).

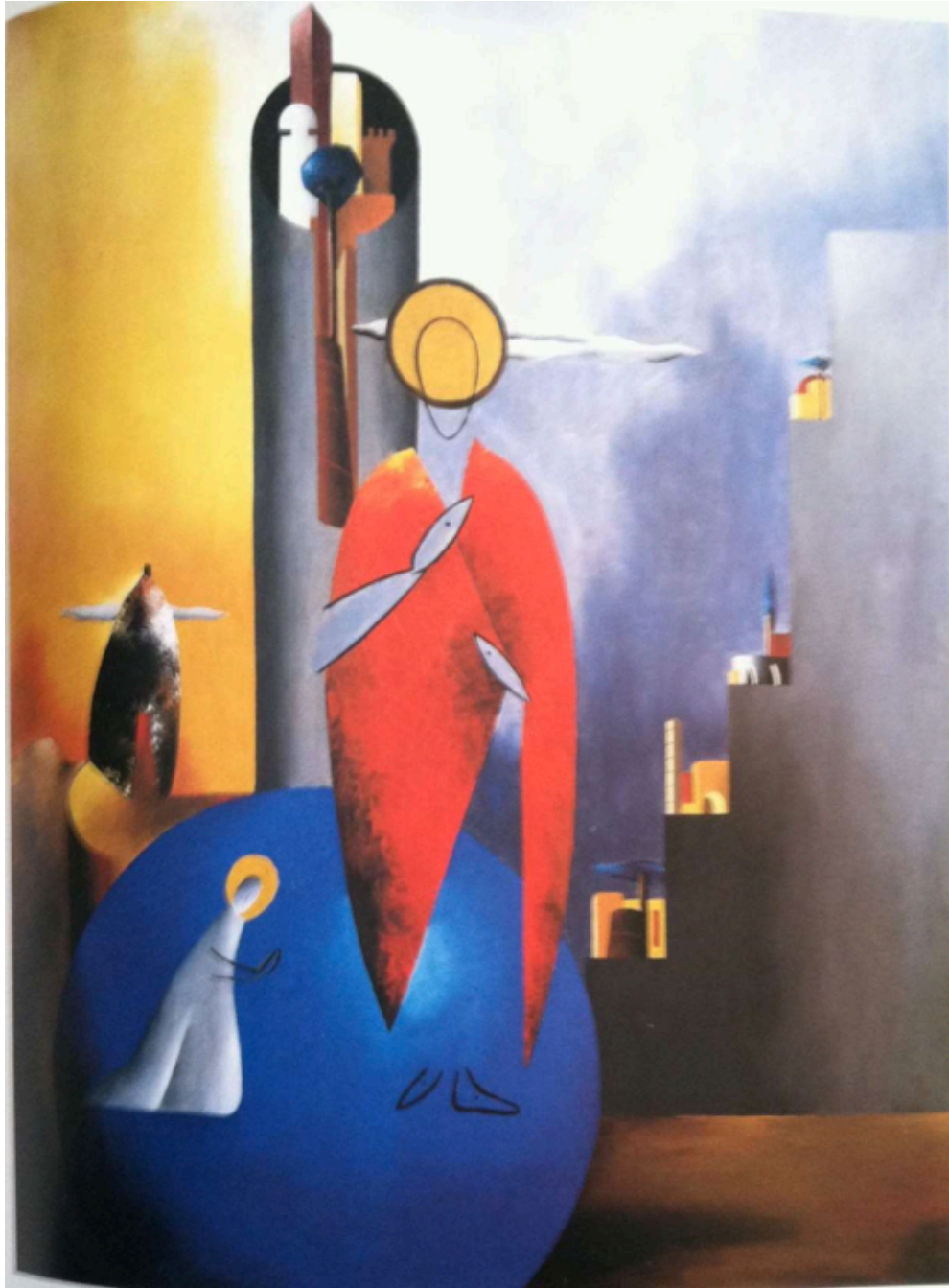


Fig. 7: *La città di Dio*, 1931, oil on canvas, 125.5x100 cm. Galleria Narciso, Turin

The translation of philosophy into image is accomplished using spatial logic within the pictorial field, which relies on a mix of ordered and warped perspective. The result is a pictorial field that contains no middle ground, only foreground and background. This recalls Renaissance altarpieces and frescos (for example, Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* [1423] or Benozzo Gozzoli's *Chapel of the Magi* [1459-61]) executed before artists had developed a way to portray a pictorial middle ground, a technical problem resolved in the High Renaissance (for example, in Raphael's *School of Athens* [1509]). Fillia's choice of the more stylized, less

naturalistic spatial arrangement demonstrates intentional archaizing. His style is a direct challenge to the altarpiece tradition, and an effort to surpass it. This is consistent with long-standing Futurist practice. The “improvement” of Classical or Renaissance models was a typical Futurist rhetorical gesture. One of the most prominent examples is Boccioni’s *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* (1913), an obvious challenge to the Nike of Samothrace, vilified by Marinetti in the “Founding and Manifesto.”

The foreground in Fillia’s *City of God* is the astral plane “fatto di puro cielo,” and there is a far-off city, isolated in a tower.⁸² Based on the size and placement, the concrete, earthly sphere represented by the solidity and weight of the buildings in their high tower and *trompe l’oeil* three-dimensionality is far distant, but protruding into the cosmic space, appearing both in front of and behind the figures in the foreground in a surreal warping of space-time. This metaphorically represents the limited interconnectedness of the spheres of the spiritual and material and places them in a hierarchical order. In both paintings, the two-dimensional rendering of both the third and fourth dimensions foregrounds dematerialized and sacred cosmic space.⁸³ In contrast to the foreground’s cosmic space-time, the distant cities are solid, blocky, and opaque, but out of focus, as if they are in some way incomprehensible or unreachable. The sphere of the divine (“the magical” as Panofsky called it) surrounds the realm of the “real.” It exists outside of historical time in eternal time and space, and it surrounds the realm of the real in its the high tower. The real protrudes into the eternal, but the city’s wall, its three-dimensionality, mediates the access to the divine presence. The high tower that encloses the earthly city that appears in both *La città di Dio* and *Divinità della vita aerea* (Fig. 9) is a literal realization of Panofsky’s metaphor, only depicted from the reverse direction, that is, from the point of view of the eternal, not of the real.

Fillia’s own ideas of spirituality were similarly structured to Augustine’s, and because *The City of God* provides such useful narrative and allegorical structures, the image provided a mold to give form to Fillia’s spiritual machine “theology.” The repeated emphasis on the primacy of the spirit over the body in Fillia’s writings echoes Augustine’s worldview, wherein the divine is triumphant over the worldly; in the painting, it is expressed by placing the bodiless Christ at the front of the picture plane, closest to the viewer. In both cases, the disembodied spirit is sacred and sacralized within a totalizing cosmic order. The triumphant Christ in the painting, identifiable by the stigmata on his hands and feet, ruler of the City of God, is disembodied, existing only as a skeletal or metal framework, or perhaps as a marionette. Fillia’s divine rulers are faceless and even bodiless, with only their robes—resembling the exoskeleton of an insect or pieces of armor more than they do cloth—taking on any degree of solidity, marking the body as the earthly raiment of the spirit.

Marionettes were integral to Fillia’s theoretical writings and are linked to the important teaching function of toys and games emphasized in “La ricostruzione futurista dell’universo.” That manifesto, written by Balla and Depero in 1915, argued that Futurist toys and games would teach children to have agile minds and be courageous. Adults would also benefit from them, because playing with games and toys would keep them young, tireless, and intuitive. Several short poems that Fillia published in *I nuovi poeti futuristi* (1925) are grouped under the title “Giocattoli” and are dedicated to Depero, Balla, and Prampolini. Each poem is structured around an allegorical marionette that articulates various Futurist concepts. Fillia also repeatedly used the

⁸² Marinetti, *TIF*, 201-05.

⁸³ For more on Futurism and the fourth dimension, see Mark Antliff, “The Fourth Dimension and Futurism: A Politicized Space,” *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 4 (2000): 720-33.

marionette in his theater and in his manifestos to represent spiritual states and as semi-abstract renderings of his man-machine hybrid.

The four nearly identical versions of *L'Adorazione* (Fig. 8 illustrates one example) that were painted in 1931-32 again demonstrate the mechanization of the savior-figure.⁸⁴ In this painting, both the Virgin and Christ have been reduced to minimal signifiers, and Christ is again replaced with a red orb. The Virgin wears black, the color of mourning and also the symbolic color of anarchy, not the blue she would typically wear. Following Catholic tradition, placing the cross and Mount Golgotha in an image of the Adoration foreshadows Christ's death and rebirth. But the figures are again mere semiotic placeholders. The image contains the promise of rebirth and renewal, but again, of a Futurist savior not a Christian one.

⁸⁴ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fillia_L%27Adorazione_1931.jpg.



Fig. 8: *L'Adorazione*, 1931, oil on canvas, 78.5x64cm. Private Collection, Milan

The combination of the immateriality of the sacred body with the hollowness of a mechanical body renders Fillia's imagery problematic for the dogmatic beliefs of the Catholic Church, because, according to Catholic theology, Christ is equally corporeal and human as he is divine. Dismissing the importance of the physical body of Christ refutes the doctrine of reincarnation, because the fleshly body no longer matters, or never mattered at all. The

disembodied spirit of the machine god then carries echoes of Fillia's sexual and gender politics into his sacred paintings.

Divinità della vita aerea (Fig. 9) is the key that unlocks Fillia's system of symbols.⁸⁵ It is the linchpin in his efforts to use Christian symbolism and allegory to facilitate his explorations into the psychology and metaphysics of Futurism and to articulate his Futurist spirituality. The repetition of Augustine's dichotomous world structure is present in this painting, too, in the intersections of the cosmic and earthly planes (the former represented by the floating "platform" on which the figures stand, the latter by the realistically rendered cylindrical tower enclosing its tiny city), which overlap and intersect even more chaotically than the cities of man and God in *La città di Dio*. Though the tower-city appears to be in front of the group of figures, its buildings are very small, as though they are far distant. The base of the metal tower seems to exist in front of the figure group, but the top of the tower is behind the group. The formal characteristics that define the "human" figures carry over from Fillia's theater and poetry. The use of color also extends from his earlier written and painted works.

⁸⁵ Image in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 54.



Figure 8: *Divinità della vita aerea*, 1933-34, oil on canvas, 201x160cm. Private Collection, Turin

The three main colors used in the painting are red, blue, and yellow. In 1925, Fillia established a personal symbolic color system (an “alfabeto spirituale”) that assigned meanings to colors, which he claimed were different from the meanings they were traditionally accorded and which he declared were truer to the nature of each color.⁸⁶ Blue is “*sogno—illusione—speranza—ecc.*” [dream—illusion—hope—etc]; red is “*creazione—forza—dominio—intelligenza—ecc.*” [creation—force—dominance—intelligence—etc]; yellow stands for “*elettricità—civiltà—ecc.*” [electricity—civilization—etc]. Black has a “valore primitivo” [primitive value] and is defined as “il non creato su cui si svolge la pittura” [the void out of which the painting develops]; and white has a “valore nullo” [null value] and is defined as

⁸⁶ Crispolti, *Fillia*, 70.

“*virginità—miticismo—religione—ignoranza—menzogna—ecc.*” [virginity—mysticism—religion—ignorance—lies—etc].⁸⁷ The red ground on which the scene is built represents the foundations of Fillia’s ideal society, characterized by creativity and intelligence. Yellow, connoting electricity and civilization, implies that Fillia’s savior would die on the altar of technology and be resurrected by it. To be resurrected this way meant resurrection at the hand of man, just as Mafarka created his god-son Gazurmah who was brought to life and made divine by Mafarka’s mortal hand in Marinetti’s *Mafarka le futuriste*. The steel-grey priest figure, whose blue heart represents hopes and dreams, is clearly robotic in part or in whole, and seemingly male. This assumption, however, is undercut by Fillia’s habit of specifically costuming his male and female figures in gender neutral clothes, signaling a kind of genderless and androgynous ambiguity as the ideal state of the human spirit. This was again especially overt in Fillia’s 1923 play, *Sensualità—Teatro d’eccezione*, and in the ninth (“Il sesso di metallo”) and tenth (“Il mondo di domani”) short stories in *La morte della donna*. Moreover, in the play, the presence of a colored circle over the heart signified the allegiances and degree of transcendence achieved by each character.

The brown sheet with its inscribed figure foregrounds the Turin context of Fillia’s visual metaphor. It is his Futurist version of the Shroud of Turin, a divine touch relic. But instead of Christ, the savior in Fillia’s image appears to be a nude female and merged with a machine, an airplane. The yellow cross and its realistically rendered red orb are the protrusion into physical space of the machine god’s spirit. This material yet simultaneously incorporeal machine god emerges from the divine image inscribed on the shroud. On a literal level, the woman-airplane figure overlaying the crucifix represents an airplane, as does the cross itself, the Futurist mechanical divinity *par excellence*; the orb functions as a stand-in for the material body of a Christ-like savior. On a metaphysical level, the overlap becomes an analogy for the differences between Christian salvation and Futurist. The transcendence offered by this machine god is thus both literal and spiritual. High above the ground, the empty shell of the machine god offers up its revelations.

This tau-cross shaped airplane mimics the cross worn by the Franciscan order, and in numerous examples of Fillia’s landscapes and aeropaintings on non-religious subjects, this form of the cross reappears, very often in red, very often combined with yellow. Fillia’s use of red is a conspicuous feature of his paintings. He uses the color much more than any other later Futurist, except perhaps Balla; however, Balla’s use of red was entirely within the context of the *tricolore*. The only other Futurist painting that makes such an overt symbolic use of red is Carlo Carrà’s *Funerale dell’anarchico Galli* (1913), and in that painting, the red and black are associated with anarchism and violence. While I hesitate to argue that Fillia was a crypto-communist in 1931, it is clear that communism’s symbolic visual language continued to influence Fillia’s and was used alongside the symbolic visual language of the Catholic Church. To be sure, the extent of my claim is that Fillia continued, with noteworthy consistency, to use the color vocabulary he defined when communism *was* an influence on him and that the use of red and yellow are discursively linked to the upending of the established order.

Mechanizing the holy family and the patriarchs also flattens difference, thus rejecting the rigidly structured gender codes of Christianity and the assumption that the savior is male. The machine is capable of mechanical, asexual reproduction, thus the differentiation between male and female becomes immaterial. The degendering of the body, begun in *Sensualità—Teatro d’eccezione* and further elaborated in *La morte della donna*, is in a way brought to fruition in

⁸⁷ Crispolti, *Fillia*, 70.

Fillia's religious paintings. Like a less deformed version of Marinetti's Mafarka and Mafarka's monstrous offspring Gazurmah, or like Enif Robert's surgically degenerated body, Fillia's mechanical deity and its earthly, mortal parentage reject the laws of biology and the dictates of religious doctrine. Disrupted symbolic meaning and the defiance of categorization are represented by the blurred gendering of bodies demonstrated by the mechanized bodies of Christ and the Virgin. Fillia's Holy Family defies the rigid structures of organized religion and destabilizes the established symbolic order.⁸⁸

Clues that Fillia had continued to be interested in issues of gender, sexuality, and the body even at this late stage are evident in his contemporaneously painted nudes, which transform the human body through the filter of metaphysical mysticism and semi-abstraction. Contrary to any generalizing, and to some degree defying both traditional and feminist critiques of the nude, the (de)gendered body matters as much, or perhaps more accurately *as little*, in these paintings as it does in Fillia's prose and theater, and is just as ideologically charged.⁸⁹ Fillia had a mostly divergent take on issues of sex and gender, and his position on these topics is just as much at stake in these paintings as it had been in the early 1920s.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ F. T. Marinetti, *Mafarka le futuriste: Romen africain* (Paris: E. Sansot, 1909); F. T. Marinetti and Signora Enif Robert, *Un ventre di donna, Romenzo chirurgico* (Milan: Facchi, 1919). Jessica Strom has previously read these images in the context of Marinetti and Robert's earlier works, though my interpretation differs. Jessica Strom, "Elements of the Divine in Futurist Art and Literature," *Carte Italiane* 2, no. 6 (2010): 49-68.

⁸⁹ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992). In feminist art historical scholarship, the question of the female nude as an elevated subject of art is revealed as a means of containment, control, and possession, not one of Platonic forms nor one of higher intellectual ideals. In short, the nude represents the patriarchal need to exert control over the body and, more specifically, control of and over the female body. This is especially true after the male nude fell out of favor in the 19th century.

⁹⁰ Baranello, *Fillia's Futurism*, 34-102, 162-223.



Fig. 10: *Riposo / Costruzione umana*, 1930, oil on canvas, 32.5x45 cm. Private Collection, Turin

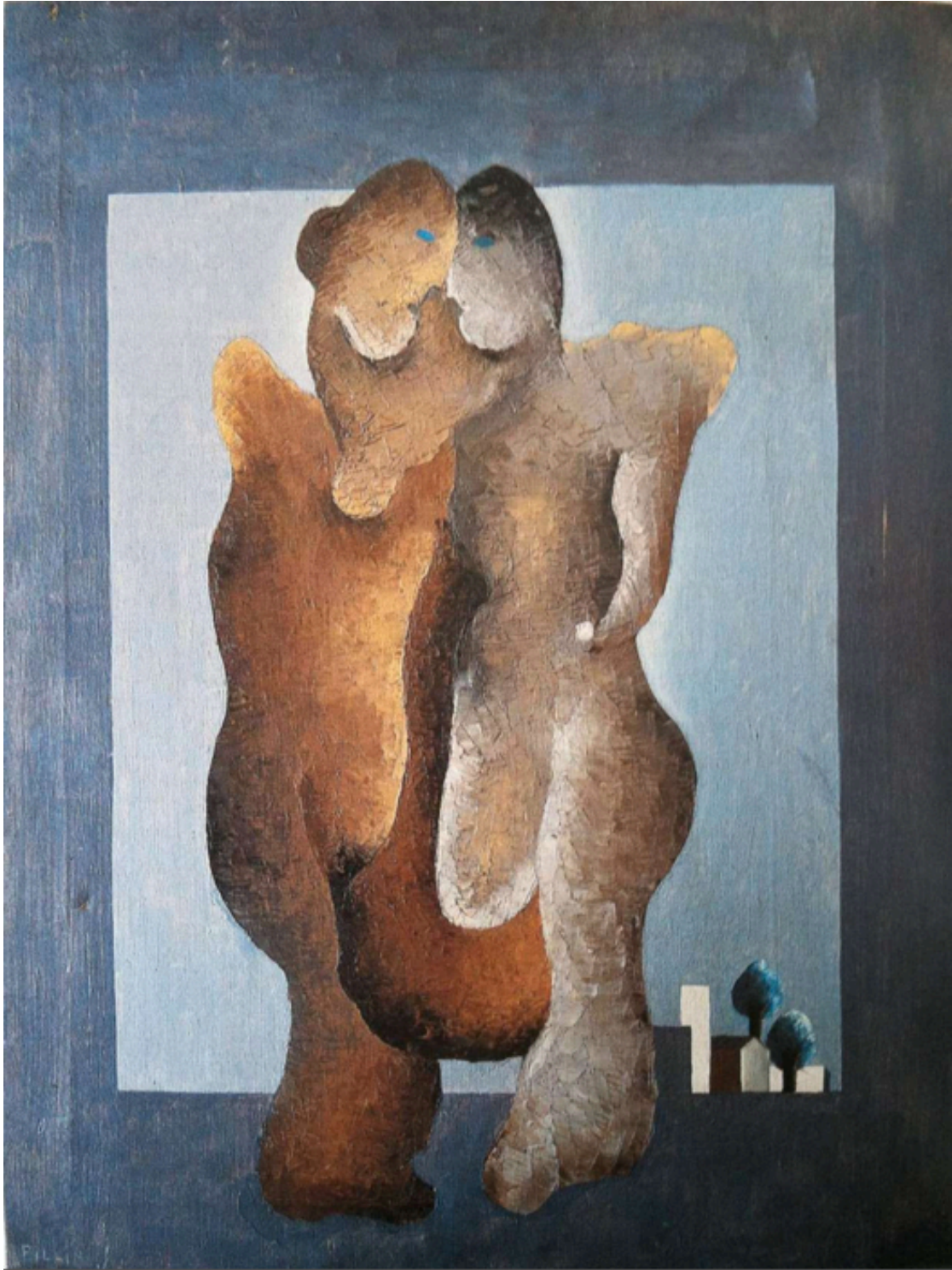


Fig. 11: *Gli innamorati*, 1930, oil on canvas, 65x50cm. Rome, Galleria d'Arte Moderna del Comune

Even more so than by the concealing costumes worn by the characters in his earlier theatrical works and the figures in *Divinità della vita aerea*, the gender of Fillia's nudes is defined by incidental reference to sexual characteristics, a round circle for a breast or perhaps

long hair to indicate the female form, the outline of a pectoral muscle or the barest indication of external genitals for the male form. Frequently the only meaningful differentiation of the figures in these paintings is in the size and colors of their bodies. The “male” bodies are usually larger and darker colored. Where previously gender was hidden, here it is directly physically minimized. Fillia’s nude figures become progressively more sexually androgynous from one to the next—in direct opposition to the fascist regime’s continuing efforts to retrench traditional understandings of gender and sexuality, to restrict women to the role of housewife and mother, and to remove what little social, political, and economic capital she had gained in the forty years between unification and the *Ventennio*.⁹¹

Like Fillia’s savior figure, whose spirit is untethered from and held above its physical raiment of both flesh and cloth, his nude figures translate insubstantiality and instability combined with contradictory, elemental physicality onto the canvas. In paintings like *Riposo* (Fig. 10)⁹² and *Gli innamorati* (Fig. 11)⁹³, the male and female bodies appear almost conjoined: caught in the process either of merging with or separating from each other. They are depicted in earth tones, evoking Adam’s creation from the mud and Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib. The first was made from earth, the second from the first.⁹⁴ The nude figures foreground the tension between immateriality and weighty monumentality of the figure’s bodies. They are at once spirit and shadow, ghosts of a future yet to come to pass, but at the same time they are made of the plasmatic, primordial sludge that was the origin the cosmos, in defiance of a literal interpretation of the Genesis myth.⁹⁵

Their duality mimics the mind/body duality of Fillia’s *uomo senza sesso*, responsive to the physical needs and desires of the body, but mentally and spiritually unchained from them. Fillia’s bodies—male or female—are barely contained by their boundaries, as if they could succumb to entropy and dissolve back into the earth, allowing their psyches to rejoin the electric currents of the universe in which they had been congealed. The transitional state of the material body and its non-containment of primordial matter is a threat to the religious and symbolic order, as is the existence of these bodies on the margins of categorization; they upend the construction of standard symbolic meaning.⁹⁶

Conclusions

In the context of Fillia’s early poetry and theater, his religious paintings communicate very different meanings than would a reading that follows standard religious imagery and symbolism. Fillia used many easily identifiable yet abstracted Christological structures to give form and

⁹¹ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Clark, *The Nude*, 4-7; Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). It is notable that Fillia also utilized the male nude, the depiction of which had fallen out of favor during the 19th century and ceded pride of place to the female nude as the ideal painterly subject; nevertheless, the male nude remained secondary in Fillia’s works. Only fascism’s cult of masculinity and the cult of the Duce extensively reinvigorated the use of the monumental, heroic male nude in the first half of the 20th century (most notably by Mario Sironi). Resisting the image of the hyper-masculinized ideal fascist male, Fillia’s male nudes are as ambiguous as his female nudes.

⁹² Image in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 31.

⁹³ Image in Crispolti, *Fillia*, 38.

⁹⁴ Genesis 2:7-23.

⁹⁵ Fillia repeatedly demonstrated his interest in and knowledge of contemporary scientific research, including into the nature of time, and the age and origins of the universe. See Baranello, *Fillia’s Futurism*, 103-161.

⁹⁶ Mary Douglas, *Mary Douglas: Collected Works* (London: Routledge, 2003), 9.

comprehensibility to his system of symbols and beliefs, but ultimately did not advocate the resurgence of Christianity. These tropes, rituals, and allusions carry layers of allegorical meaning that, when intentionally distorted and undermined, reflect a wider disruption/corruption of meaning. Fillia interweaves these symbols into those more typical of Futurist ideology in order to articulate his vision of Futurist spirituality in a way that facilitated legibility for the viewer, particularly the Italian viewer. Late Futurism repeatedly coupled technology and spiritualism, and Fillia was adept at it, having exploited this paradigm for years prior to its use in his religious paintings.⁹⁷

Based on the nature of the Vatican's objections, the interdiction against Fillia's art was likely to have been directly related to the way in which he portrayed religious figures. Enrico Crispolti has claimed that Fillia's religious paintings are fundamentally lay in character and that this was part of the Church's motives for rejecting his Futurist art, though he never articulated why. The reason is that Fillia's paintings act to dematerialize religious bodies and to merge them with the atmosphere, thereby distancing them from their corporeality; what corporeality he leaves them is a machine-made shell. This is problematic in a dogmatic system that is based on the incarnate existence of its messiah and on the physical existence and physical suffering of its saints and martyrs, but it is wholly consistent with the theories of aeropainting wherein speed is correlated to disappearance.⁹⁸ In Fillia's paintings, physical disappearance becomes metaphysical when the dematerialization or dissolution of the physical body is linked to the emptying out of meaning. The process mimics the leap that aeropainting makes from mathematical perspective into metaperspective. The flatness of abstracted cosmic space is destabilized by the objects rendered in realistic perspective, underscoring the artificiality of both the visual and ideological constructs. Furthermore, associating God with the machine and with technology implies a man-made origin for the godhead, and it places human innovation on par with the divine. Fillia's works do not recognize established hierarchical order or a qualitative difference in truth-value between his mechanical idols and the Christian God. In the late Futurist hierarchy of meaning, spirit and the machine are given equal power to order and reveal. The auratic and cultic facets of the technological are retained for the realm of art, but only when the machine truly becomes god. Fillia merged the aesthetics the *religione della velocità*, which posited the factory as a sacred space of modernity, with the remnants of the sacred and the auratic represented in the painted altarpiece or religious icon.

The rejection of the physical body, of rigidly gendered difference, and of aestheticized mass rituals are an implicit, discursive challenge to Christian mythology. Fillia's empty-faced god serves as a mirror, a reflection in the glass that exposes and critiques the absence of meaning. Fillia's unstable bodies in cosmic, aeropictorial space evaporate the materiality of the holy body into a seen manifestation only, into a simulacrum—into a machine: a construct and a placeholder. For Fillia, the *corpus mysticum* went from concrete to abstract and on to existential and metaphysical obliteration. Where the materiality of the dead body gave existential meaning to the Christian salvation narrative, and to fascist political life, Fillia's paintings offer an alternative to both.⁹⁹ He proposed a different kind of Modernist spirituality: a Futurist one built on the *religione della velocità*.

⁹⁷ Panzera, "Celestial Futurism," 327.

⁹⁸ Romy Golan, "Slow Time," 319-20.

⁹⁹ Laura Wittman, *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Modern Mourning, and the Reinvention of the Mystical Body* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 9.

Questions concerning the nature of the physical body versus the spirit and their links to each other are shared preoccupations between these paintings and Fillia's written works—on the one hand, they question the nature of human form and of the mind-body complex, on the other hand, they question the reality of the divine made human. Fillia moved both the human and the divine into a universe of otherworldly abstraction, but he anchored the slippage into the non-figurative with schematized forms that are the skeletons of real objects. The often commented-upon tension between weightiness and dematerialization is the visual manifestation of Fillia's complex vision of human nature. Fillia's dematerialization of the human body and disembodiment of Catholic holy figures (especially of Christ and the Virgin Mary) are, on one level, a symptom of the Modernist condition. Their immateriality symbolically represents the emptying out of meaning, the reduction of the sacred to a façade and to a performance. Marinetti, himself, declared, “[s]i è svuotato il divino.”¹⁰⁰ God (and indeed the whole concept of God) has indeed been emptied out. It has been shorn of its concreteness and has reverted to an abstraction.¹⁰¹ God became a mere mechanism with which to shape or channel new forms of worship.¹⁰² For Futurism, the “mechanism of worship” is both literal and metaphorical. Their metaphorical mechanism was *macchinolatria*, worship of a secular mechanized “god,” and their concrete mechanism in this period is a mechanical, deified object.

The rejection of the divine presence contributes further to the feeling of emptiness or melancholy that has been observed in these paintings. The implicit inadequacy or lack of divine presence is inherent in this secular divinity's existence, in the figure of the machine-made god, whose objectness and laity are emblematic of its status as the pinnacle of human achievement. This god is an idol, a stand-in for immaterial spirituality. In Fillia's paintings, the distancing and dematerialization of “the divine” and of the body partake in the artist's particular vision of Futurist spirituality and the ideal society.

The divine is radically separate from the human: distant and beyond earthly reach. The cities of man, enclosed within their far distant tower walls, cannot fully access the Futurist spiritual realm, and the technological gods that should have substituted both the Christian divine and the cult of the fascist state remain only partially formed ideas, because they cannot be freed from the framework of established symbols needed for comprehensibility. Fillia, as Panofsky said, aggressively brings religious symbolism into the painted image, in order to close off the realm of the Christian magical and open the realm of the psychological and spiritual in Futurism. What was previously seen as the manifestation of the Christian divine in the ordering of the visual field, Fillia exploited as a way to use that same visual ordering to challenge Christianity. The divine presence of the Christian God is stripped away, and the symbols of God's presences are used to substitute the Futurist god in its place.

The primal urges and the atavism of ancient cultures, in Fillia's world-building, evolved into the *uomo senza sesso* through the religion of speed and the relentless drive of progress. The *uomo senza sesso* with “his” preternatural spiritual balance has morphed into an almost “postmodern spiritually alienated angelesque form” in the astral figures of Fillia's later paintings.¹⁰³ Airplanes literally mimic an angel in flight, both in form, because they offer

¹⁰⁰ Marinetti, *TIF*, 131.

¹⁰¹ Mikhail Epstein, *Russian Spirituality and the Secularization of Culture*, trans. Maria Barabtarlo ([USA]: Franc-Tireur, 2011), 358.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Epstein, *Russian Spirituality and the Secularization of Culture*, 370-72; Göran Therborn, “After Dialectics,” *New Left Review* II, no. 43 (February 2007): 63-114. D'Annunzio had already compared the shadow of an airplane to a cross, already connecting flight and Christianity in 1909. Braun, “Shock and Awe,” 270.

mankind its wings, and in spirit because of the experiential intoxication of flight. The experience of flight, the new sensations for the metalized body, became a transcendent experience.¹⁰⁴ In place of his early radical and communist cries to action, Fillia's late works are characterized by a sense of emptiness waiting to be filled. The mechanized mind and body existing in a machine universe should have fulfilled the promises of Fillia's visions for the future, but in the end, failed to do so.

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¹⁰⁴ Braun, "Shock and Awe," 270.

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