

## To Measure Futurism

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*I culturali lavoreranno probabilmente su questa mia intuitiva improvvisazione.*

*Io certo non lavorai sui loro molti scritti dedicati al tasso.*

--F. T. Marinetti (1933)

I will admit that being a scholar of a movement, Futurism, that denounced the likes of me—i.e. scholars, intellectuals, professors—as the embodiment of *passatismo*, or, more specifically, as those “whose wish it is to drown the irrepressible energies of our youth in their stinking, subterranean sewers,” has never bothered me too much (Marinetti 1910, 83). The likes of me (may I say *of us?*), have responded to the futurists’ vitriolic attack against museums, libraries and all forms of European intellectual culture with all manner of sensitive historicizations, subtle contextualizations, weighty analyses, and creative theorizations. And yet the sting of a sneaky suspicion that in so doing we have never fully engaged with the charge that Marinetti and company have levied against us, has not really subsided. Is there a way to measure Futurism on its own grounds? That is, to evaluate, from the vantage point of our being in the temporal future, what was *futurist* in Futurism? I believe such an operation is possible if we orient ourselves towards the intellectual pole that Futurism seemed to reject, and focus our attention on its own scholarly contributions, those works in which Futurism sought to indicate a futurist way forward for humanist knowledge-production and criticism. These are the *misurazioni* teatrali and the *commemorazioni in avanti* of non-futurist authors published by Marinetti in the 1930s, along with the *collaudi* of futurist poets, theorized only in 1938, but, in practice, present from the beginning of the movement in the form of prefaces written by Marinetti to futurist poetic collections. What I hope to accomplish here is a synthetic *misurazione* of Futurism as an intellectual movement, one that, faithful to its futurist model, will be aimed at highlighting its intellectual “surprises” with a view toward isolating what was “futurist”—in a general sense—in Futurism—in the historical meaning of the word.

*Punto 10: “Noi vogliamo distruggere i musei, le biblioteche, le accademie di ogni specie.”* Thus Marinetti announced one element of the futurist creed that identified it for decades as a movement characterized by an instinct for destruction, war, and violent confrontation like no other avant-garde of the time or since (Marinetti, 1909, 21). So uncompromising was this futurist “struggle against the professorial passion for the past,” that it led Marinetti to reject even “Nietzsche’s ideals and doctrines,” for, according to Marinetti, he was “one of the fiercest defenders of the beauty and greatness of the past,” and his Superman “was a product of the Greek imagination, spawned from the three great stinking corpses of Apollo, Mars, and Bacchus” (1910, 81). This desecrating misreading of the principal philosopher of modernism is important for it demonstrates a very early awareness on Marinetti’s part of the label of “Neo-Nietzscheans” that critics had already

reserved for the futurists. To Nietzsche's superman Marinetti thus opposed the futurist *multiplied man*:

The Man extended by his own labors, the enemy of books, friend of personal experience, pupil of the Machine, relentless cultivator of his own will, clear in the flesh of his own inspiration, endowed with the feline power of scenting out, with the ability to make split-second judgments, possessing those instincts typical of the wild—intuition, cunning, and boldness. (1910, 81)

Passages like this one have supported readings which see futurist anti-intellectualism, its anti-rationalism and its vehement attacks on all forms of knowledge-production as rooted in the world of magic, occult and spiritualist practices. In particular, Simona Cigliana's path-breaking *Futurismo esoterico* has highlighted specific textual connections between Futurism's early idolatry of analogy, its later *sintetismo intuitivo*, and ultimate *spiritualismo materialistico*, with the world of the magic and the occult, Steiner's theosophy, and plain old *spiritismo* (Cigliana 1996, 173-196). This way, futurist anti-intellectualism has also been marked as inimical or indifferent to "real" science, thereby drawing a direct line of connection between the explicit condemnation of the humanist-*passatista* and an implied rejection of the scientist-*rationalist* married to analysis and the so-called "scientific method." Except that it is hard to find a single word among the thousands written by Marinetti to prove that Futurism saw itself as a representative of "Art" and an enemy of "Science." In fact, there is ample evidence to think that the contrary is closer to the truth.

In 1914, Bruno Corra and Emilio Settimelli published *Pesi misure e prezzi del genio artistico – Manifesto futurista* (Corra and Settimelli 1914, 135-150). This manifesto sought to tear down the boundary between intellectual and artistic activity by pointing out that "Art is a cerebral secretion capable of exact calibration" (149), and that "intuition is no more than rapid and fragmentary reasoning" (148) On this basis Corra and Settimelli proposed to replace the critical languages connected to the realms of aesthetics (the beautiful) and subjectivity (inspiration) in the evaluation of any work of art, with "futurist measurements" aimed at "calculating the quantity and quality of cerebral energy necessary to produce [it]" (147). These *misurazioni*, in turn, would be based on specific formulas that would allow the futurist *misuratore* "to analyze the work of art into the individual discoveries of relationships of which it consists," in order to determine, objectively, its "rarity" and, hence, its price in a market that they wanted to be regulated by laws for "the commerce of genius" (147). The authors triumphantly ended by announcing that Futurism was now ready to "burst into the laboratories and schools of *passéist* science" (150) The fact that this did not happen and that much of this manifesto rested on propositions that point in the direction of a Lombrosian source of inspiration, and an esoteric understanding of "energy," should not blind us to the fact that Corra and Settimelli proposed two momentarily fruitful propositions about Futurism as a whole (Cigliana 1996, 186). First, by equating the value of any "intellectual creation" solely with its "rarity," that is, its newness, that is, "the quantity of energy necessary to discover

affinities and establish relationships between a given number of elements previously foreign one to the other,” *Pesi e misure* put the activity of the measurer on a creative par with that of the artist who was to be the subject of the measurement. Both the artist and the critic are involved in the same never-ending activity of “innovation” and “application” of “nervous energy,” which “in the act of applying itself to a cerebral task, finds before itself a combination of elements arranged in a particular order...and can only discover affinities and establish relationships between them” (145). Second, the idea that “that there is no essential difference between a brain and a machine” except for one of complexity, pointed in the direction of a further crossing of boundaries between humanist and scientific understandings of nature and the world: the world of *tecne* belonged to the human sphere of “intellectual creation,” and so did its laboratories, scientific methodologies, and rational calculations (136).

In 1927, fifteen years after Corra and Settimelli’s manifesto, Marinetti published the first *misurazione*, along with a new theoretical statement that explicitly referred to the “invention” of the futurist measurement by Corra and Settimelli, and translated their 1914 ideas into a critical formula for literary and theatrical reviews (1927, 235). For Marinetti, the *misuratore* would need to first create “watertight separations between the *author, the conception of the work of art, its plot, execution, setting, and audience*” and, then, to “explicitly overvalue its creative originality in a specific section dedicated to surprise effects” (236). Thus, after years of manifestoes invoking a wealth of poetic and aesthetic principles that went from analogy to simultaneity to “words in freedom,” in 1927 Marinetti reaffirmed the performative principle of the *trovata* or “surprise effect” as the sole measure of the *rarietà* and therefore of the value of any work of art, *not just futurist creations*. In fact, although the 1927 article in *La fiera letteraria* mentioned *misurazione* as a futurist form of criticism applicable to both literary and theatrical works, Marinetti published fifty-five theatrical measurements in Emilio Settimelli’s *Impero*, and only two literary ones in *La fiera*.<sup>1</sup> This disproportion between theatrical and literary efforts calls our attention to how faithful Marinetti had remained to a shift that Futurism had made between 1913 and 1914. In those years, the encounter with young Florentine playwrights like Corra and Settimelli had helped transform Futurism from a mostly literary and painterly movement to one that saw in the reform of theatrical performance the privileged tool for the futurist reconstruction of the artistic universe, and in the “synthesis” the conceptual *trait d’union* among all futurist artistic expressions.<sup>2</sup> In the *Manifesto del teatro sintetico* (1915), Marinetti, Corra and Settimelli (1915, 205) had explicitly attributed the maturity of a futurist sensibility to the endorsement of the variety theater (Marinetti 1913) and the theorization of art as “cerebral activity” in “Weights, Measures and Prices” (Corra and Settimelli 1914). What this meant was that Futurism had finally landed on the “ABSOLUTE VALUE OF NOVELTY” as the sole principle for the production and measurement of any artistic endeavor, and that the specifically futurist quality of modern novelty was to be found in its “synthetic” nature, intended here as

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<sup>1</sup> All of them are reproduced in F. T. Marinetti, *Misurazioni* (1990) Faithful to the principles enunciated in the 1927 article, all *misurazioni teatrali* were very brief and subdivided into the above-mentioned categories. Among them, we may single out two reviews of Pirandello’s plays: the tragedy *Diana e la tuda* and the comedy *L’amica delle mogli* (1990, 164-66, 182-4).

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, in a contemporaneous but posthumously published manuscript entitled “Non più critiche ma misurazioni,” Marinetti had rewritten the full text of the article in *La fiera letteraria* omitting only the section regarding the literary measurements (Marinetti 1990, 22).

brevity and speed of communication (Marinetti 1913). Indeed, reading the fifty-seven “*misurazioni sintetiche*” published by Marinetti between 1926 and 1928, one is struck by their resemblance with the synthetic format of contemporary blogs and wikipedia entries, but this anticipatory trait is not what made these *misurazioni* the measure of what is futurist in Futurism. This futurist value reposed instead in replacing the traditional, nineteenth-century idealist-Marxist idea of dialectical “synthesis,” with the idea of “synthesis” as the common denominator between the cerebral activity of art-criticism and that of art-making. Synthesis, in fact, was the quintessential quality of the modern critical knowledge produced by Marinetti, but also the most important aesthetic value that Marinetti highlighted in the second product of futurist critical science: the ten *commemorazioni in avanti* (forward-looking commemorations) of great Italian masters that F. T. Marinetti produced between 1930 and 1939 (D’Ambrosio 1999).

Searching for the “*lezione futurista*” in the poets he commemorated, Marinetti’s forward-looking commemorations clarify better than any manifesto the idea that *Futurismo* and *passatismo* are qualities of art and knowledge-production in all times, and thus provide a compendium of the essential futurist qualities of a work of art (D’Ambrosio 1999, 13). So, in Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* Marinetti finds the first “teachings of *Art-Life*,” “simultaneity,” and “synthesis” itself; and in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme* “a bit of aeropoetry,” but also a mature “aesthetic of warmongering forces” (ibid., 62, 65, and 85; my translation). Along with Tasso and Ariosto, Marinetti will commemorate the entire Pantheon of Italian classics, from Dante to Leopardi, and thence to Verga, Pirandello and D’Annunzio. Yet, it is in the commemoration of a less likely “classic” contemporary, the Neapolitan dialect poet and song-writer Salvatore Di Giacomo, that we find the most surprising of forward-looking commemorations. Here Marinetti declares that “*passéist* is only the poet who takes on an incandescent matter only to be dwarfed and consumed by it” (ibid., 91; my translation). Di Giacomo is the contrary of a *passatista* since he had been able to “transfigure the ascending sentimentality” of Naples into “synthesis” and even “paroliberismo” *ante litteram* (ibid., 92; my translation). Marinetti admits openly that one would not expect a futurist like him to exalt the expression of sentiment, musicality, lyricism, and even “the indispensable value of the colorful; that is of the images, the metaphors, the analogies and the painterly surfaces of words aimed at transfiguring reality,” that he attributes to Di Giacomo’s dialect poetry and songs (ibid., 92 and 95; my translation). But he insists nonetheless that even the detested “moonlit nights” in Di Giacomo’s songs are futurist simply because none “resembles another” (95; my translation). In other words, in this commemoration Marinetti comes close to a full-fledged valorization of that Neapolitan picturesque that Boccioni had denounced as the quintessential enemy of futurist aesthetics in his 1916 *Manifesto* directed to Southern Italian Painters (1916). Yet, for this very reason, the forward-looking commemoration of Di Giacomo points to the second meaning mobilized by Futurism in the term “synthesis”: the organic and biological one associated with phenomena like vegetal photosynthesis. In this second organic sense, the futurist idea of synthesis highlighted by the forward-looking commemorations reveals the depth of Marinetti’s love affair with Naples and a southern Italian modernity quite unlike the machine-centric one with which Futurism is commonly associated (Fogu 2008). In Naples, Marinetti had met forms of popular culture like the *Teatro di varietà* that for the first time made him realize that there existed realities that were “futurist” without having

been invented by Futurism. In the “Variety theatre” (Marinetti 1913), he had in fact identified the principle of the “surprise effect,” that he would soon elaborate with Corra and Settimelli in the “Manifesto del teatro sintetico” (1915). This was a momentous realization for Marinetti, which played a crucial role in pushing Futurism towards the pole of Neapolitan theatricality and “gesticulation”—as he put it in the commemoration—and away from the more rarefied atmosphere of Florentine *paroliberismo* (Fogu 2008, 29). Conversely, the histrionic and bombastic element in Futurism that repelled Ardengo Soffici and Giovanni Papini, and that led to the abrupt ending of *Lacerba*, made the movement quite popular with an older generation of Neapolitan comics, playwrights, and poets: from Di Giacomo himself to Edoardo Scarpetta and Ettore Petrolini. Di Giacomo, Scarpetta, and Petrolini, along with the younger, self-appointed futurist Francesco Cangiullo, recognized immediately the figure of the jester in Marinetti, and followed his irreverent posture with the same ironic sympathy they nourished for the Neapolitan *pernacchio* (Fogu 2008, 32). The “synthetic commemoration” of Di Giacomo, therefore, recognized that it was in conjunction with its encounter with Naples, its volcano, and the petrified lava of the island of Capri, that Futurism had been able to transfigure nature into a modernist paradigm of “synthesis” identified with “surprise effects.” No wonder that in the idea of forward-looking commemorations, and especially in the commemoration of Salvatore Di Giacomo, we still hear the echo of the “surprise” that Naples itself proved to be for the sophisticated poet “born in Alexandria of Egypt from a Milanese mother” who declared himself to be “Neapolitan at heart” (D’Ambrosio 1999, 93)

After the *misurazioni* and the *commemorazioni in avanti* the final element comprising the activity of Marinetti-the-critic are the numerous “prefaces” that he wrote for collections of futurist poets and that in 1938 he explicitly named *collaudi*, that is, “tests,” in the sense one tests an automobile before putting it on the market (Viazzi 1977, 149). Compared to the theoretical statements of the 1910s, such as the *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura* or *Immaginazione senza fili, parole in libertà*, Marinetti’s *collaudi* are surprising for the absence of almost any reference to analogism, or esoteric theories of matter—the cardinal principles of the futurist revolution in poetic language. The idea of a *collaudo* points exclusively toward a conception of the poetic text as a “literary machine” that needs to be tested, and thus certified as a futurist vehicle. It was to be a trial just like that given any FIAT car on the rooftop track of the *lingotto*, with the key difference that the futurist test was aimed at fixing the commodity value of every single poem, that is, its conditions of originality, in terms of the surprises it contained for the reader-customer and, hence, its differences from all previous futurist models (Viazzi 1977, 9). While rejecting the fetishistic preciousness of symbolist poetry, the political economy of the futurist sign did not endorse the seriality of fashion and machine reproduction either, as one might imagine it would.<sup>3</sup> Each futurist work of art was supposed to aspire, as Corra and Settimelli put it in 1914, to “invent[ing] a new form of art...in which the most diverse means of expression would be found mixed in accordance to a new measure and scale” (Viazzi 1977, 146; my translation). That this was to remain so throughout the history of the movement can be best appreciated in the *collaudo* of the *Testi-poemi murali*” (Mural Poem Texts) by Carlo Belloli, written by Marinetti few months before his

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<sup>3</sup> For a classic discussion of the differences between symbolist and futurist relations to traditional economic theory see Hewitt (1993).

death (279-80; my translation). Here Marinetti had little to say about the visual texture of Belloli's "poesia da parete" (wall poetry), because the visualization of poetry had been a trademark of much futurist poetry for decades (279; my translation). What he highlighted was the fact that Belloli transformed "poetry" itself "into the idea of a word, that is, into an architecturally serial poem-text" (180; my translation). In this respect, for Marinetti, Belloli's poem made "the exaltation of machines feel like...an archeology of the avant-garde," so much was the linguistic material of this poem "anti-analogical, trans-discursive, a-syntactical" (180; my translation). This way, Marinetti concludes:

Belloli's poem-text foreshadows the language of words-signs belonging to the communicational network of the mathematical civilization that is on the horizon, and that will identify itself with an absolute essentiality of discourse, gestures, and emotions. (180; my translation)

Although Marinetti does not even mention the term, we find here the third and final meaning associated with futurist "synthesis," that is, the purely machine-made as opposed to the natural and organic, like the synthetic materials Ryon and Lanital that Marinetti would celebrate in his own poetry (Schnapp 1997). Developing Corra and Settimelli's equation of brain and machine under the sign of "intellectual creation," in the 1930s Marinetti would sing the praises of autarchic machines that created synthetic fibers. Taking the measurement-synthesis *qua* brevity-speed of communication, together with the forward-looking-commemoration-synthesis as organic transfiguration, and with the idea of poetry as synthetic production of textual machines projected by the *collaudi*, one cannot escape the impression that in Marinetti's intellectual work there emerge the fore-shadowings of a revolution in language of a different nature than the one identified with mere *modernolatria*. What we are witnessing is akin to a wholesale liquidation of any and all aesthetic traits of linguistic activity—including "futurist" ones—in favor of a synthetic idea—in all three senses of the word explicated above—of communication. From this perspective, Futurism looks much closer to the cybernetics of our information age than to occultism from which the movement certainly derived part of its inspiration.

I am surely not to the first one to infer a strong connection between futurist poetics and the advent of digital technology, but as my discussion of the forward-looking commemorations suggests the mechanistic metaphor is reductive (Schnapp 1994 and 1997). Reading Marinetti's *Misurazioni*, *Commemorazioni*, and *Collaudi* together one is struck by their greater resonance with the world of the life sciences than that of physics. They suggest that the futurist idea of "synthesis"—while rooted in the idolatry of the machine, and the alchemic references to the power of fire, volcanoes and incandescent matter—was in fact akin to a *poetic eugenics*. In other words, the concept of "synthesis" was an aesthetic analog to the eugenic theories developed in contemporaneous life sciences, with the key difference that Futurism proposed a *positive eugenics* entirely opposite to the *negative eugenics* characterizing the scientific preoccupation about the infection of races or the hereditary character of imbecility. Despite its destructive ethos and pronouncements, Futurism was primarily concerned with the synthetic production of new art-species, and, in this key respect it anticipated more the discovery of DNA than

that of the computer. In fact, from the perspective developed by Jeremy Rifkin in *The Biotech Century*, Futurism can be related to a paradigmatic shift from an alchemic to what he calls an “algenic” conception of nature and science, which he sees as taking place in the mid 1950s with two contemporaneous and intertwined events: the discovery of DNA and the development of cybernetics (1999, 12). For Rifkin, looking back at scientific development from the perspective of contemporary biotechnology, no substantial difference exists between the sixteenth-century alchemist and the early twentieth-century biologist or chemist. Both were involved in “burning matter extracted from the earth to transform it into new forms,” their common goal being that of helping humanity to become “perfect” (118). *Algenia* names instead a post-alchemic philosophical perspective associated with the reduction of all living things to a basic biological material, DNA, that can be extracted, manipulated, recombined, and reprogrammed in an infinite number of ways to “produce new forms of life” (119). Is it not an aesthetic *algenia* that point 6 of the *Founding Manifesto* invokes when it calls for the poet to “swell the enthusiastic fervor of primordial elements” (Marinetti 1909, 21)?

The “futurist” kernel of *futurist* intellectual culture may have consisted in giving aesthetic form to the co-dependence of biotechnology and information technology that we see today encoded in the definition of DNA as a “binary code language,” and in the biological definition of cybernetics as the science that theorizes the programming of machine behavior in relation to changing environments in order to obtain new machine-behaviors (Rifkin 1999, 132). This “feed-back” relationship between machine- and biological languages was expressed at all levels of futurist poetics and above all in Futurism’s oscillation between “propeller talk” on the one hand, and words conceived as poetic DNA, on the other (Schnapp 1994). From this futurist perspective, we do not need to wait for the full-scale development of DNA-wired computers under experimentation at Brown University, to confirm a positive *misuarazione* of futurist *misurazioni* for their surprising anticipation of a scientific paradigm still decades in the future.

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