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Author: Reyner Banham

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8: Futurism: the Foundation Manifesto

THE QUALITIES WHICH made Futurism a turning-point in the development of Modern theories of design were primarily ideological, and concerned with attitudes of mind, rather than formal or technical methods—though these attitudes of mind were often influential as vehicles in the transmission of formal and technical methods which were not, in the first place, of Futurist invention.

The new ideological orientation of the Futurists can be seen as early as the Foundation Manifesto, published in *Le Figaro*, 20 February 1909. This Manifesto was entirely the work of Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, the founder and continuous animator of the Futurist Movement. Though originally written in French (Marinetti was a graduate of the Sorbonne, in Letters) and only subsequently translated into Italian, it was apparently written in Milan, and is, certainly, substantially autobiographical.¹ It consists of three parts, not separately titled but different in structure and style. The first (or Prologue) is narrative, the second sets out a programme of action and beliefs in tabulated form, and the third is a reflective Epilogue.

The first and second sections are of the greatest interest in the present context, the Prologue in identifying Marinetti's state of mind and the social setting that enframed it, the second in formulating the Futurist attitude to various aesthetic and cultural problems.

The Prologue opens with a piece of *fin-de-siècle* stage-setting

We had been awake all night my friends and I, under the mosque-lamps whose filigree copper bowls were constellated like our very souls . . . we had trampled out our ancestral *ennui* on opulent turkey carpets, arguing to the limits of reasoning, and blackening innumerable sheets of paper with our frantic scribblings. . . .

In the middle of the next paragraph, the tone of voice begins to change

We were alone before the hostile stars . . . alone with the stokers who sweat

¹ The two best sources on early Futurism are the contributions of Paolo Buzzi and Benedetta Marinetti to the special issue of *Cahiers d'Art* devoted to Italian painting (Paris, 1950), and Libero di Libera's '*Antologia Futurista*' in *Civiltà delle Macchine* (Rome, March 1954).

before the satanic furnaces of great ships, alone with the black phantoms who ferret in the red-hot bellies of locomotives as they hurtle forward at insensate speeds. . . .

and then the change of tone is gathered up into two powerfully contrasted poetic images

We all started up, at the sound of a double-deck tram rumbling past, ablaze with multi-coloured lights, like a village in festival dress that the flooded Po tears from its banks and sweeps through gorges and rapids, down to the sea. But afterwards, the silence grew deeper, and we heard only the muttered devotions of the old canal and the creaking of the arthritic, ivy-bearded old palaces until—suddenly—we heard the roar of famished motor-cars beneath the windows.

These passages have a precise topographical location, which adds point to their superficial poetic meaning. The opening lines are not a pastiche of a decadent novel, but are a factual description of the interior of the Casa Marinetti, furnished with oriental bric-à-brac acquired by his parents during their stay in Alexandria (where Marinetti himself was born). The Casa stood in the via del Senato (it has since been pulled down) and backed on to the ancient *Naviglio* canal (an alleged work of Leonardo da Vinci, now abandoned) whose noise of waters was still a feature of the district, although it had ceased to be used for navigational purposes. The old palaces stood on its further bank. The tram would have passed down the via del Senato itself, and the contrast between an outmoded technology at the back of the house, and a new and visually stimulating one at the front must have made a very forcible impression on a person like Marinetti, already sensitive about the backward looking *borghese* culture of northern Italy and its contrast to the experimental and adventurous atmosphere of Paris, his other home.

The sense of the overriding of an old, tradition-bound technology, unchanged since the Renaissance, by a newer one without traditions was something which poets and philosophers of other European countries had already felt, and it had left its mark on their writings. The experience had in some cases been so gradual that, as in England, it had produced no cultural crisis (outside the 'Arts and Crafts' reaction) or had been preceded by other disturbances so radical—as in the case of France where the Encyclopedists had built much of the new technology into their work, and the Revolution had dominated other cultural changes—so radical that technology did not rank, of itself, as a major psychological impact.

But the scale of nineteenth-century technological developments had been both large, and remote. Apart from the introduction of gas-lighting, the appearance of the streets of most capital cities hardly altered between 1800 and 1880, after which the increasing use of buses and trams, and their subsequent mechanisation began to alter the urban pattern more rapidly. But the early growth of industry in the Black Country, for instance, made little difference to the daily, horse-drawn, flame-lit life of the English opinion-forming classes.

To a north-Italian, the impact was neither gradual nor remote, however. Though railways began to be built in Italy soon after 1850, they were in the centre or the south (Florence, Posilippo) and the large scale industrialisation of the north did not begin until after the *Risorgimento*.² Towns like Milan and Turin suddenly found themselves changed from princely or ducal capitals into subsidiaries of a revived Rome, but they also found themselves transformed into industrial centres. The existing aristocracy and intelligentsia of the north found its social foundations drastically altered (in contradistinction to the gradual shift of authority in, e.g. England) and the appearance of their towns dramatically altered at the same time—new tram replacing old canal. Furthermore these changes took place not in some remote province, but literally on the doorsteps of their ancestral palaces.

It was this manifest and radical change-over to a technological society which animated the whole of Futurist thought, and it was the sense of sudden change which, in all probability, enabled them to exploit more quickly than other European intellectuals the new experiences which they had in common with the poets and painters of Paris, London, New York, Brussels and Berlin. For the Prologue to the Manifesto continues

We drew near to the snorting beasts and laid our hands on their burning breasts. Then I flung myself like a corpse on a bier across the seat of my machine, but sat up at once under the steering-wheel, poised like a guillotine blade against my stomach

and there follows a lengthy and highly-coloured description of an early-morning impromptu motor-race through the outer suburbs of Milan. The tone of this passage is very pro-automobile, and this is one of the earliest appreciations of the pleasures of motoring to appear in European literature. However, the pages that describe the car-race have a deeper significance than this. If the events described in the Prologue to the Manifesto took place in 1908, then they are events of a kind that could hardly have taken place ten years earlier—it is extremely doubtful if any group of young men in their twenties could have commanded, in 1898, a number of reliable automobiles at 5 a.m., and driven them themselves. The cultural importance of this situation is this: not only had the new technology invaded the street (trams, electric-lighting, lithographed posters) and the home (tele-

² At the time of the unification of Italy, the country's economy was primarily agrarian—and in 1910 it was still so. But the process of industrialisation in the north, which had begun with the introduction of steam power into textile factories in the 1860's was violently accelerated in the period of Futurism. Production of textiles trebled in the period between 1900 and 1912, the output of iron and steel rose from 300,000 metric tons to almost 1,000,000 metric tons in the same period, and other industries experienced comparable increases. At the same time, the creation of an automobile industry capable of producing machines that could hold their own in international competition gave industry a glow of psychological prestige that mere increase in quantity of established products could not have done.

phone, sewing machine, electric-lighting, fans, vacuum cleaners, etc.) but with the advent of the motor-car the poet, painter, intellectual, was no longer a passive recipient of technological experience, but could create it for himself. The command of vehicles of the order of 60 h.p. and upwards had hitherto been in the hands of professional specialists—engine drivers, ships' engineers and so forth. But the advent of the automobile brought such experiences and responsibilities within the scope of the rich amateur in the years immediately after 1900, and although experience of motoring was to leave its mark on much of the literature of the twentieth century no one was to treat it in so high and lyrical a strain as the Futurists, and none with so strong a sense of its being a new cultural factor, without poetic precedent. As Boccioni later phrased it³

The era of the great mechanised individuals has begun, and all the rest is Palaeontology . . . therefore we claim to be the primitives of a sensibility that has been completely overhauled.

No such precise form of words appears in the Foundation Manifesto, but it is implied in at least one place where Marinetti interrupts the wild flow of automotive rhetoric to say

Ours was no ideal love, lost in the soaring clouds, nor a cruel queen to whom we must offer our bodies contorted like Byzantine jewellery

and this, on the evidence of his later writings, is to be interpreted as a gibe at d'Annunzio, whose sensibility, the Futurists always claimed, had never been properly overhauled (though he too turned to automobilism in the next year). Any survival of nineteenth-century sensibility, whether symbolist or decadent, they regarded as improper to the changed situation of the new century, even though Marinetti himself was deeply indebted to such characteristic nineteenth-century figures as Whitman and Mallarmé for the growth of his own sensibility. Yet Whitman, whose work he knew in translation, could offer—as no European poet could at that time—a vision of a world of grandiose individuality, a world where machinery was an accepted part of life. Such a world was still, for a cultured European, an alien one, that could only be entered through a violent psychological change, such as Marinetti pantomimes at the end of the Prologue.

. . . I swung the car round in its own length, like a mad dog trying to bite its own tail, and there, wobbling towards me were two cyclists, as confusing as two equally convincing arguments, right in my line of travel. I pulled up so short that the car, to my disgust, looped into the ditch and came to rest with its wheels in the air.

O maternal ditch, brimming with muddy water—O factory drain! I gulped down your nourishing mud and remembered the black breasts of my Sudanese nurse. And yet, when I emerged, ragged and dripping from under the capsized car, I felt the hot iron of a delicious joy in my heart.

³ In his preface to the catalogue of the first exhibition of Futurist painting in Paris, 1912.

This is clearly to be taken as a mimic baptism in Jordan, an initiation—from the ground up—into the experiences and mental categories of the alien world of mechanical sensibility, for immediately after it comes

And so, face covered in good factory mud—plastered in swarf and slag, sweat and soot—bruised and in splints, but undaunted yet, we pronounce our fundamental will to all the live spirits of the world.

and then follow the tabulated propositions of the second section.

There are eleven of these propositions, declamatory in style, and not all of sufficient relevance to the present context to justify quotation at length. The first and second praise danger, energy, audacity, etc. the third contrasts the Futurist passion for movement and activity against 'Literature' (probably meaning d'Annunzio) which exalts repose, ecstasy and dreams. The fourth is the best known of all pieces of Futurist writing.

4. We declare that the splendour of the world has been enriched by a new beauty—the beauty of speed. A racing car with its bonnet draped with exhaust-pipes like fire-breathing serpents—a roaring racing car, rattling along like a machine gun, is more beautiful than the winged victory of Samothrace.

And this exaltation of the spectacle of turbulent, noisy motion above the contemplation of silent Classical repose, is followed by an exaltation of the dynamic experience of automobilism.

5. We will hymn the man at the steering wheel, whose ideal axis passes through the centre of the earth, whirling round on its orbit.

Succeeding propositions praise speed, announce the annihilation of space and time, and praise war as the cleanser of society (something for which later critics have never forgiven the Futurists, but which remains understandable when it is remembered that with Italian populations around the northern Adriatic still *Irredenti*, the *Risorgimento* remained a war that was still in progress for many Italian patriots)⁴ as the cleanser of society from the adiposities of an unadventurous *borghese* peace, attacked also in the tenth proposition.

10. We will destroy all museums and libraries, and academies of all sorts; we will battle against moralism, feminism, and all vile opportunism and utilitarianism

This was a proposition on which he later had second thoughts, for while the hostility to academies and the past remained, feminism (of a sort) was later built into the Futurist programme as (a), the epitome of a new kind of unromantic woman, in opposition to d'Annunzio's heroines, and (b), as something which would break up liberal parliamentarism (and thus 'vile

⁴ Many Futurist manifestations had political intentions—or at least acquired them—particularly in Trieste and Venice, where the sense of *Italia Irredenta* was, understandably, still highly inflamed. This strain in Futurist thought led, logically, to demands for intervention in the War, and less logically, though understandably given the dynamics of politics, to Futurist participation in Fascist uprisings after 1918.

opportunism and utilitarianism') as soon as women had the right to vote. The eleventh proposition concludes this sequence with an apotheosis of the urban and mechanised setting of Futurist life.

11. We will sing of the stirring of great crowds—workers, pleasure-seekers, rioters—and the confused sea of colour and sound as revolution sweeps through a modern metropolis. We will sing the midnight fervour of arsenals and shipyards blazing with electric moons; insatiable stations swallowing the smoking serpents of their trains; factories hung from the clouds by the twisted threads of their smoke; bridges flashing like knives in the sun, giant gymnasts that leap over rivers; adventurous steamers that scent the horizon; deep-chested locomotives that paw the ground with their wheels, like stallions harnessed with steel tubing; the easy flight of aeroplanes, their propellers beating the wind like banners, with a sound like the applause of a mighty crowd.

Though many of these images are derived from nineteenth-century sources (the locomotive, for instance, from Whitman and Huysmans,⁵) many could be nothing but new, particularly the aeroplane, since practicable aircraft had existed in Europe only since 1906. But, in any case, such a concatenation of mechanistic images seems to be without precedent in European literature at the time, and the emphasis on motion and disorder is in strong contrast to the static and monumental aspects of engineering which seem to have been admired by German writers of the same period.⁶ The third section of the Manifesto, which is in the nature of a personal apologia has little to add to the position already taken up—except to add a rather pathetic note on the youth of the Marinetti circle

The oldest among us is only thirty, and we have therefore at least ten years in which to do our work

and to couple with it the first intimation of that sense of transience which was to become a regular motif in Futurist thought. A sense of transience in which the ageing of human beings is linked to the obsolescence of their technical equipment. Marinetti envisages a younger generation, more truly Futurist than his own that would find him, and his friends

squatting fearfully by our aeroplanes . . . and all, exasperated by our daring, will rush to kill us, driven by hatred made more implacable by the extent to which their hearts are filled with love and admiration.

This is something more than the routine Romantic contempt for old men, just as the whole Manifesto is more than the provincial juvenilia which it is

⁵ Huysman's enthusiasm for locomotives became a by-word and was still a subject for comment in the Twenties—Le Corbusier used it as a point of reference in a potted history of locomotives in *Urbanisme* (see chapter 18). For aircraft there was not, and could not be, any comparable tradition of enthusiasm. The first demonstrably successful European machine was the Voisin *Canard* flown by Santos Dumont in 1906 near Paris. However, any widespread eye-witness experience of aircraft, such as Marinetti must have enjoyed in order to write a passage so conspicuously different from H. G. Wells's imaginative projections of aviation, must have waited on the Wright Brothers' European tour of 1908.

⁶ See the opinions of Muthesius, Gropius and others quoted in chapter 5.

commonly made out to be. As will be seen, simply by being a young man, by being both a cosmopolitan intellectual by training and a provincial patriot by disposition, Marinetti was able to give a widespread feeling of disgust with the old and craving for the new, a positive orientation and a point of attachment in the world of fact; Marinetti ordered his generation into the street with his Manifestoes, in order to revolutionise their culture, just as the political Manifestoes from which he took over the literary form had ordered men into the street to revolutionise their politics.