

# Futurist revivals

## Rita Wilson

Christopher Butler, *After the Wake: An Essay on the Contemporary Avant-Garde*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1980, pp. 177, £7.95.

*Il futurismo e le avanguardie*

Convegno Internazionale Sale Appollinee, Gran Teatro La Fenice, Venezia; 26–28 settembre 1986.

Sebastiano Vassalli, *L'alcova elettrica*, Torino: Einaudi, 1986.

Luciano De Maria, *La nascita dell'avanguardia*, Padova: Marsilio, 1986, pp. 220, lire 22.000.

Enrico Crispolti, *Storia e critica del futurismo*, Bari: Laterza, 1986, pp. xxiv + 381, lire 33.000.

Claudia Salaris, *Storia del futurismo*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1985, pp. 229, lire 16.500.

Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment. Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. xxiii + 128, 5 colour plates, 64 black & white figures.

An alliance, unconscious on the part of the artists involved, unites avant-garde minimalism and technocratic bureaucracy. The alliance, in one form or another, is of long standing. Baudelaire understood its nature more than a century ago. "This use of military metaphor", he wrote of the literary application of the word *avant-garde*, "signifies minds, not militant, but formed for discipline, that is, for conformity; minds born subservient, Belgian minds, who can only think collectively". (Quoted in Edward Mendelson: "Postmodern Vanguard" *London Review of Books* 16(3): Sept. 3–16, 1986, p. 9.)

The basic claim made by every avant-garde movement – that its artists offer real innovations, that they surpass the limits accepted by their predecessors – is central to Christopher Butler's advocacy (*After the Wake: An Essay on the Contemporary Avant-Garde*). He argues that in the 1950s radically new conventions for the language of art were developed by writers, musicians and painters, who wished to break away from modernism. This argument faces difficulties at the start, since each avant-garde proclaims its radical newness. The most time-honoured convention of the manifesto-writers is innovation. Butler quotes an artist who wants nothing to do with all the structures, values, feelings of the whole European tradition: "It suits me fine if that's all down the drain". This happens to be Frank Judd speaking in the late 1960s, but all that distinguishes it from Futurist manifestos fifty years earlier is its tone of *lumpen* disgruntlement. Allen Ginsberg's remark "there is nothing to be

learned from history any more. We're in science fiction now", differs only in vocabulary from claims made early this century for the new machine age.

In the 1920s and 1930s the term "Futurism" was loosely used to describe a wide variety of aggressively modern styles in art and literature. The word was in fact invented by F.T. Marinetti in 1910 for a movement, founded and led by himself, whose first and most vigorous phase was over by 1914. Futurism was the first deliberately organized, self-conscious "movement" of the twentieth century; it appealed to all those who were tired of Romanticism and Decadence and sentimentality and wanted something more vigorous and robust, more in keeping with the Machine Age.

One of the events which accompanied the Futurist exhibition in Venice in September 1986 was an international conference which examined the relationships between Futurism and avant-garde movements. The Conference was divided into three sessions: *The origins of Futurism; Futurism and contemporary avant-garde; Futurism and the avant-garde between two world wars*. Most of the international contributors stressed the far reaching influence exerted by Marinetti's initiative and thus highlighted the cosmopolitan spirit of the movement. Jean-Claude Marcadé explored the relationship between Italian and Russian Futurism, Folke Edwards discussed Barbarism, Darwinism and Futurism, Stanislas Zadora looked at Polish Futurism and Phil Mortens at Belgian Futurism, while Richard Cork and Louis Simpson examined Vorticism and Ezra Pound's relationship with Futurism.

Vittorio Strada identified three main symbolic outcomes of Russian futurism. Firstly, the politicization which took place after 1917 caused Futurism to become institutionalized and state-orientated; the revolution marked the transition from the "rebellious nihilism" of the early cubo-futurists to the rational "revolutionary constructivism", "from the laboratory to the piazza". This trend was reflected in industrialized art, which exalted in technology, in propaganda literature and in political activism. Majakovskij's suicide signaled its "organic and catastrophic" end. Secondly, for a brief period towards the end of the 1920s, the so called "absurdists" revived the scandalous themes of the early futurists, but with a desperately playful neoneihilism defying Lef's rational futurism. Thirdly, Boris Pasternak, after having been a part of the *Centrifugal group* (1913), exemplified the return to a more critical humanistic model. According to Strada the great Promethean futurist ambition was destined to remain crushed between the two poles of destruction and edification.

Futurism's silence can be considered the most accurate expression of the modernist crisis. If Symbolism had attempted to salvage the failed relationship between *word* and *meaning*, Futurism ended this relationship, thus representing the final extreme in any discourse, the self-contesting voice, beyond which there is only the unnameable, which in turn represents the true voice of Modernism. An example is the case of Balla who after his 'great season' arrives at a hyper-figurative painting which can be defined as Kitsch being the apotheosis of meaning reaching the maximum degree of falsity.

During the conference many aspects of Italian Futurism were examined at great length. Such controversial material cannot fail to provoke widely diverg-

ing opinions. Previously Futurism was considered an example of provincial Italian culture but more recently the opposite position seems to have triumphed with strong evidence emerging of the international ties of this movement, its cosmopolitan spirit prevailing despite its proclaimed nationalism. Futurism seemed in effect to anticipate much subsequent literary experimentation.

From the outset Marinetti was intent on reaching as wide an audience as possible, and one of the most striking things about the Futurist movement is the speed with which its ideas were spread all over Europe. The Foundation Manifesto was published in Paris, on the front page of *Le Figaro* and was given, from the point of view of publicity and prestige, the best possible start in life. Thereafter Futurism was organized somewhat on the lines of a modern political campaign throughout Italy, with manifestos being published more or less simultaneously in Italian and French, soon translated into German, English, Spanish and Russian.

It is surprising, then, that in a review of Sebastiano Vassalli's *L'alcova elettrica* Enrico Baj once more judges Futurism as a phenomenon inexorably undermined by "provincialism", by "cultural narrowness and bigotry", operating in a "closed, ancient world besieged by pettiness and frustration". Vassalli has re-created the atmosphere of an old world Florence, hardly touched by modernism, as a backdrop for the grudges, arguments, practical jokes borne by Papini, Soffici, Tavolato, Palazzeschi and Marinetti. Vassalli creates a plane somewhere between history and fiction, basing his creation on certain documents which relate to the court case brought against *Lacerba* for offending public morals due to certain irreverent and "immoral" comments made by Tavolato in his "elogio della prostituzione". Vassalli elaborates on these factual documents by hypothesizing situations and inventing dialogue in crude Florentine dialect. It appears that Vassalli simply wished to re-create the atmosphere of a minor scurrilous episode for its humorous qualities. His characterizations vary from the improbable (Papini as an unlikely gangster in dark green sunglasses) to the idealistic (Campana viewed as the misunderstood genius surrounded by predatory colleagues). However, this is largely a work of fiction and when Baj uses it to draw conclusions about Futurism and accuses *Lacerba* of "provincialism" he raises a vexed and complex issue.

It cannot be denied that the cultural background of the Florentine group of Futurists is vastly different to that of the Milanese group: one is largely rural and agrarian the other modern and industrial. It is also true that Marinetti's conception of the movement is that of a cultural avant-garde organized according to modernist principles which would match those of a progressive technological society. It is equally true that Soffici was Apollinaire's main correspondent in Italy; he was responsible for introducing cubism to Italian artists and was himself the author of sophisticated "chimismi lirici", contributing to the growing reputation of *Lacerba*, which in turn became the first real avant-garde periodical, a model for many successive publications.

Baj's critical evaluation of Futurism is seriously challenged in Luciano De Maria's latest book, *La nascita dell'avanguardia*. De Maria recognizes the attempt, on the part of all the early avant-gardes, to establish new sensitivities

and sensibilities for a different anthropology, one that would take into account the new cultural phenomena, from the “language of rupture”, to the inclusion of technology in all artistic manifestations.

De Maria is one of the most renowned interpreters of Marinetti’s work and is personally responsible for re-awakening critical interest in Futurism in the 1960s with texts which are now considered classics (*Teoria e invenzione futurista* and *Marinetti e il futurismo*). In his latest book he addresses himself to the contemporary reader and proposes a vast typology of the *new*, extending from Marinetti through the entire spectrum of Futurists, including rebels and antagonists. The result is a gallery of portraits and moods in which, for example, Marinetti’s affirmation of the “*folia del divenire*” is linked to Nietzschean and evolutionary ideas; Boccioni, the ideological artist, is credited with “*delirio innovatore*” and his paintings are said to reflect “*l’estasi del moderno*”; the symbolist poet Lucini is portrayed as trying to unite innovation and tradition by a cautious, continuous transformation; the playful, pre-Dada work of Palazzeschi is praised while the poet himself is considered the great interpreter of the “*tradizione del nuovo*”.

The “symbolic gesture” of novelty and the precise *sense* of transformation, essential to modern life, leave open a series of complex and burning questions. De Maria is fully aware (as was Rimbaud – “*être absolument moderne*”) of their import. To what extent do extremization and provocative gestures contain the potential for change? Which parameters limit velocity? Is permanency a permissible concept for Futurism or is the *process* of becoming always an absolute value? What relationship exists between present and immanent? What is the present of Futurism? All of this naturally implies a new perception of Time. De Maria dedicates the long, fascinating essay on Palazzeschi to an evaluation of the dichotomy between time which is fixed in space, immobile, rigid, an eternal present with measurable geometric parameters (the oniric and erotic reign depicted in *Cavalli bianchi* and *Incendiari*) and the accelerated time of subversion, parody, irreverent levity of the future man of smoke. Even if Palazzeschi remains a difficult figure to place in the avant-garde movement, it is necessary for any textual analysis to examine the successive phases in his linguistic, syntactic and formal experimentation.

The notion of a crisis of language is not something entirely modern. However, it is a form of disturbance which runs deep in modern poetry; and many modern poets have taken their sense of chaos and crisis into further reaches. Thus many Expressionists and Dadaists argue that the new social order ignores all the fluid parts of personality, and that rationality, predictability, utilitarianism have “torn the potentiating centre out of language”. The modern poet is faced with such a deep division between social and literary discourse that he has to dismantle the structures of the conventional world and ‘explode’ language before he can create an adequate ‘verbal icon’ (Barthes). Conventional language is held to be *depotentiated*, *de-substantiated* and hollowed out, therefore its syntax and vocabulary are rejected as unserviceable for poetry.

With De Maria and others one can argue that:

1. Poetic communication *de-automatizes* the recipient's relation to society and to reality.
2. This takes place by means of *implicit thematization* of lingual and non-lingual codes.
3. Implicit thematization is attained by consequent utilization of elements which are redundant with respect to the current socio-cultural codes (*secondary sign formation*).
4. The information which these elements have in the poetic communication in question is determined by an *aesthetic code* which is developed in the recipient during the process of relating the constituent parts of the sign vehicle to each other.
5. The aesthetic code operates with various factors of the communication situation, thereby defining a superstructure which determines the aesthetic value of the communication.
6. This superstructure functions as a *model* for a segment of reality; it brings the recipient into contact with characteristics of reality which, in the non-aesthetic use of codes, usually remain hidden.
7. If rules belonging to the aesthetic code of a text are applied in other texts as well, then they lose their poetic function: a poetic technique becomes a mere element of literary style (de-poeticization secondary automatization).

Thus lingual art seen in this way cannot be accounted for by linguistics in its present state because the characteristic reduction of communication to the language in which it manifests itself cuts away the central aspects of poetic communication. De Maria emphasizes that only the texts determine the subversive capacity, the force of transformation because "non esiste *a priori* una sensibilità nuova e purificata indipendente dal lavoro sul materiale verbale nel caso della letteratura". Thus it is not surprising that De Maria insists on re-examining Marinetti's role, no longer to be seen solely as the organizer of the group and the movement, but as a writer (and Il Mulino's recent edition of Marinetti's *Taccuini* is a case in point). What emerges from Marinetti's writings is the evolutionary line joining symbolism and experimental research, a new way of communicating, as well as pre-Dadaist and Surrealist tendencies which De Maria uses to point out a possible relationship between "parole in libertà" and automatic writing.

De Maria's book is a determined effort to describe all the facets of a multi-faceted phenomenon and to reveal a global ideology in which literary activism co-exists with political aestheticizing. Futurism, born from "un atto di volontarismo estremo" is the first European movement to be situated at the crossroads between multi-expressionism and an attempt at total transformation. There is no doubt in De Maria's mind as to the centrality of this experience.

It is on this very centrality that Crispolti bases his essays, now collected in a single volume, *Storia e critica del futurismo*. Crispolti is an art critic and his writings complement De Maria's more "literary contributions". Although

Crispoliti uses an historiographical approach which spans the chronology of Futurism from its inception to the late manifestations in the 1940s, he does not fall into the trap of merely listing facts without interpreting them, which, according to Antonio Porta, places many such studies in an innocuous historical-academic limbo. Crispolti makes some very precise choices, the most central of which is to avoid viewing Futurism as a movement in which there is a cultural hegemony of painting over other types of art (*boccioncentrismo*) or in which single personalities dominate (*marinetticentrismo*). He stresses that the force of the movement lies in its globality, its creative activism, which was never completely extinguished despite its decline after 1916. The most persuasive pages of Crispolti's book are dedicated to "la ricostruzione futurista dell'universo", at the centre of which Crispolti places the 1915 Manifesto by Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero (*The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe*), to be seen as an indication of the progressive broadening of Futurist interests from literary invention to more dynamic syntheses in other areas. The Manifesto explains Balla's concept of "plastic complexes", which was both the culmination of Boccioni's experiments in sculpture and the beginning of the mechanical preoccupations of the postwar "second generation" Futurists. The single plane of the canvas did not allow Balla the suggestion of the dynamic volume of speed in depth. Therefore, he felt the need to construct the first dynamic plastic complex with wires, cardboard planes, cloth and tissue paper.

One example of the broadening interests in poetry is the extension beyond symbolist synaesthesia to the "mineralizzazione della parola" and the use of phonic, graphic and kinetic elements leading to a reversal of psychology and the establishment of a real "stilistica della materia". Take the tendency to write *word-objects*, a phenomenon which is evident in the Futurist free-word paintings ("tavole parolibere"). In these "paintings" linguistic signs are arranged typographically and visually to elicit a "vocal response" from the reader. Marinetti's formula of "typographic revolution" (an attempt to express different ideas simultaneously) and "freedom of expression" are now familiar to most readers, but perhaps it is worth reiterating that the subversion of the horizontal/vertical word alignment, the exploitation of blank spaces, and the use of iconic forms, are all attempts to mimic the material/plastic qualities of reality. Marinetti himself states that "free orthography and typography express the facial mimicry and gesticulation of the narrator". It was the refusal of traditional symbols and myths, but inevitably other myths arose out of these innovative techniques.

In his vast overview Crispolti painstakingly points out contradictions and anomalies in the movement, reconstructing and explaining them with philological and historical accuracy. These range from the cultural (links with Symbolism and post-Impressionism) to the political: here Crispolti points out the need to demystify certain clichés and re-examine Futurism's relationship with Fascism, a point raised by Marjorie Perloff and convincingly argued in the first chapter of her new book, *The Futurist Moment*. Both Crispolti and Perloff see the equation Futurism = Fascism as a simplification, and it is noted that recent studies have traced the left-wing, anarcho-syndacalistic ori-

gins of Italian Futurism, its anti-clericalism, anti-monarchism, its opposition to the liberal bourgeoisie.

The desire to escape any sort of rigidity, the stubborn search for “plastic dynamism” capable of communicating the dynamic, simultaneous, noisy expression of universal vibration were for Balla and Depero and many of the Futurists a way of dissolving the static outlines of form, of opposing the supremacy of reason. As Claudia Salaris also notes, it was the new myth of the modern world, a circularity which unites opposites.

Crispoliti draws numerous conclusions and highlights many diverse aspects of Futurism: to quote but a few, his comments on photodynamism stress the “eventicità del gesto” as opposed to the instantaneousness of the snapshot; the renewal of urban space is praised; intricate relationships between Futurism and other movements of the Twenties and Thirties are revealed and evaluated. These all form a mosaic of tendencies, groups, alignments, which is further developed in Claudia Salaris’s long essay, *Storia del futurismo*. In her preface Salaris states her intention of reconstructing the entire “Futurist adventure” by means of a complete bibliographical catalogue, and then proceeds to embark on a labyrinthine journey covering the years 1909 to 1944. She traverses difficult terrain using hard facts rather than speculative theories as her guide and succeeds in gathering an enormous quantity of bibliographical material, much of it previously unpublished or difficult to access. She exposes the often detrimental role of publicity campaigns on culture while praising the modern cultural industry. Equal weight is given to her “visual” descriptions of the object-book, pamphlets, Manifestos and issues of *Poesia*. Space is also dedicated to Futurist evenings, exhibitions, spectacles, politics, the role of woman – in a very well documented section – and culminates in a map of Futurism in Italy and the world. Salaris has produced a scholarly work which clearly shows that although Futurism may have been the “great missed opportunity” it nevertheless provided fertile ground for critical debate well into the 1980s.

This is particularly evident in Marjorie Perloff’s reconstruction of the *Futurist moment*. She finds in this period a precedent for Postmodern attempts to free language and artistic forms from traditional restrictions. In her preface Perloff explicitly states her belief in the validity of the revolutionary elements of the Futurist movement and applauds its production of a “remarkable rapprochement between avant-garde aesthetic, radical politics and popular culture”. She goes on to point out the inevitability of the revival of Futurist art forms such as collage, manifesto, sound and visual poetry in the last two decades. In fact her book is itself a kind of collage of literary and artistic manifestations of the pre-World War I period. Marjorie Perloff provides the reader with a vivid introduction to the central concerns of this period through her detailed analysis of *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France*, by Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay, a seven-foot-high-poem-painting. Perloff demonstrates that this work embodies the Futurists’ radical defiance of poetic norms in its conflation of the visual and the verbal. A revealing insight is provided by the observation that Delaunay’s paintings *undermine* the meanings of the verbal text instead of illustrating

them. Thus while Cendrars's words express aggressive nationalism, Delaunay's sunnier, more positive illustrations draw out the international side of Futurism. In this way one of the fundamental dichotomies of the Futurist movement is exemplified.

In her second chapter, collage in all its forms is examined. Although a distinction can be made between "parole in libertà" and collage it is evident that Marinetti has taken into account the visual and spatial elements in the concept of collage and has absorbed them into his descriptions of "parole in libertà". In her overview of different critical reactions and treatments of the phenomenon of collage, Perloff stresses this is not an example of a "disordered illogical universe (begetting) a disordered illogical art". On the contrary many of these poets and artists were trained as mathematicians or natural scientists and regarded art not as an "imitation of sensible reality, but as a kind of model building". The interrelationships between the collage works of the *avant-guerre* and the contemporary works are also considered at some length. Such generic rupture is considered symptomatic of the new "technopoetics" of the twentieth century.

The chapters dealing with Futurist innovations in manifestos, the Russian Futurist artist's book and Ezra Pound's experiments in the *Blast* years look at other forms of rupture: for example of genre, of medium, and of verse-prose distinction. Perhaps the most evident of these forms is that of *zaum* (transrational) language, that is, language that "undermines or ignores the conventional meanings of a given word, thus allowing its sound to generate its own range of significations, or, in its more extreme form, the invention of new words based purely on sound".

Finally, the author traces the presence/absence of the Eiffel Tower in *avant-guerre* poems and paintings to its Futurist analogues in the "anti-monuments" of Robert Smithson's photographs. She compares Cendrars's *poème élastique, Tour*, to Barthes's essay *La Tour Eiffel*, noting how in both versions the tower is the "emblem of an illusory presence" and the symbol of subversion as well as being an image of sexual duality, its very invention an act of rupture. Smithson's use of collage and manifesto in his "performative" art works, such as his photographic essay *The Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, demonstrates distinctly the Futurist influence. According to Smithson, the language of rupture characteristic of the *avant-guerre* has re-appeared as "the dialectics of site and nonsite . . . where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other".

All the above readings examine the functions of the avant-garde within the larger culture and in general these works recover a crucial moment that has been slighted for decades. Futurism can no longer be considered an "antiquated modernist sect" but rather a vital current with continuing repercussions and manifestations in the arts today.