

INTRODUCTION

In February 1943 the magazine *Autori e Scrittori* carried an article by the Futurist writer and journalist Mino Somenzi reporting the news that Mussolini had officially approved “the establishment, in Rome, of a National Gallery of Futurist Art and Aeropainting of War which, already boasting over one hundred works and located in temporary premises, will receive due attention following the war”. After soberly quoting these facts from a press release issued by the authoritative Stefani news agency – and mentioning a proposal from the Minister for National Education to establish two competitions for Futurist art and architecture that would be administered by the Royal Academy – Somenzi was no longer able to contain his glee, exclaiming: ‘That’s right, ladies and gentlemen, a National Gallery of Futurist Art!’ For Somenzi, the bestowal of such official favour not only represented a decisive slap in the face of those ‘inveterate [and] consistent enemies of the new in general and of Futurism in particular’, but also gave weight to his assertion that F. T. Marinetti’s movement, in existence for ‘more than a quarter of a century’ by this point, was ‘more alive than ever’.¹

Given that the project mentioned in this article never came to fruition and that, to all intents and purposes, the movement itself would expire along with its founder on 2 December 1944,²

¹ ‘La galleria nazionale d’arte futurista e aeropittura di guerra approvata dal Duce, sintetizzerà la poesia e tutte le arti italiane novatrici’ (Cra.3.17). Edited by Marinetti, *Autori e Scrittori* (1936-43) was the official mouthpiece of the National Union (*Sindacato*) of Authors and Writers, of which the Futurist leader was also Secretary. On the ‘National Gallery’ of Futurist art and the two prizes mentioned in Somenzi’s text, see below, Chapter Six. On ‘aeropainting of war’, see Chapter Four.

² Futurism has perhaps the most precisely defined lifespan of any artistic movement, having been officially ‘born’ on 20 February 1909 with the publication of Marinetti’s founding manifesto on the front page of *Le Figaro*. Inasmuch as certain artists maintained their commitment to Futurist aesthetics throughout their lives (see below, p. 5) it did experience something of an ‘afterlife’. However, as a cohesive *movement*,

Somenzi's analysis of the existing state of affairs might strike the reader as either unwittingly fallacious or else the cynical 'spin' of a professional public relations man.³ At any rate, considering that the period 1940-44 is easily the least studied of all Futurism's phases, it would certainly appear to be an assessment shared by few others. Indeed, for many commentators the very nature of the initiative presented by Somenzi as irrefutable evidence of Futurism's increased vitality at this time would in fact constitute the ultimate proof of its inexorable decline. As we shall see, the academic and critical consensus on the subject is that the cracks which had begun to weaken Futurism's avant-garde foundations toward the end of the inter-war years (if not earlier) were to widen alarmingly and be thrown into sharper relief than ever during the Forties. By this point, far from being *più vivo che mai*, the movement had become a shadow of its former self (or so it is alleged), greatly reduced in size and overwhelmingly characterised by one-dimensional, ethically reprehensible hackwork churned out by its remaining few artists, who had been willingly co-opted into – and consequently enervated by – the Fascist propaganda system. Accordingly, the very notion of such a 'gallery' (surely a euphemism for 'museum') bankrolled by a totalitarian regime, and focusing on imagery celebrating the military operations of Fascist Italy and its Nazi ally, would merely seem to confirm Futurism's creeping

Futurism cannot truthfully be said to have survived its founder and guiding light. As Mario Verdone has observed, during the post-war era it remained 'decisive in certain cases, but more in terms of the [...] repercussions of a closed phase than as a truly living and active cultural reality'. 'Per una storicizzazione: 1909-1944', in Mario Verdone, *Che cosa è il Futurismo* (Rome: Ubaldini, 1970), pp. 112-13 (p. 112).

³ In addition to Somenzi's proselytising activities on behalf of the Futurist movement, undertaken in his capacity as the editor of publications such as *Futurismo* (1932-33), *Sant'Elia* (1933-34) and *Artecrazia* (1934-39), he was briefly Head of Press and Propaganda for the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (Fascism's leisure organisation) during the early 1940s – a remarkable fact, given that Somenzi was Jewish. See Paola Pettenella's entry on Somenzi in Ezio Godoli, ed., *Il dizionario del futurismo*, 2 vols (Florence: Vallecchi; Rovereto: Mart, 2001), vol. 2, pp. 1093-97. See also Susan Thompson, 'Futurism, Fascism, and Mino Somenzi's Journals of the 1930s: *Futurismo*, *Sant'Elia*, and *Artecrazia*', in Vivien Greene, ed., *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2014), pp. 256-59.

conservatism⁴ and weary abandonment of any form of cultural antagonism, on the one hand, and reveal its artists' appalling lack of moral and political judgement, on the other.

Somenzi's assertion was undoubtedly something of an exaggeration. However, my incorporation of his claim into the title of this thesis should not be interpreted as ironic, but as deliberately provocative, signalling my intention to challenge the prevailing negative image of this period and to highlight its manifold artistic merits. If the movement cannot accurately be said to have been 'more alive than ever' during this phase, it was certainly far less moribund than one would imagine from reading much of the secondary literature on the subject, and its products are largely undeserving of the marginalisation and denigration they have suffered over the years. In terms of cultural politics alone, the period is *at least* as fascinating as any other phase of Futurism, and from almost every other point of view it is the one that most urgently requires re-evaluation.

My fascination with this contentious subject initially developed out of an interest in the post-war careers of artists such as Enzo Benedetto, Tullio Crali and Renato Di Bosso, who continued to affirm and uphold the principles of their movement long after the death of its leader, believing them to be eternally valid.⁵ Indeed, the present thesis was originally intended merely to be the introductory chapter of a study focusing on the subject of *il futurismo dopo il futurismo*.

⁴ The Futurist leader had been made an *Accademico d'Italia* in 1929.

⁵ In 1967 Benedetto launched his 'Futurism Today' initiative with a manifesto stating, among other things: 'Futurism is – first and foremost – an *Idea* [...] a mode of thinking that is alive and always relevant in any era: in 1910, in 1920, in 1940, in 1960 and beyond'. *Futurismo oggi* (Rome: Arteviva, 1967), [p. 2]; original emphasis. Crali – one of the artists who adhered to Benedetto's programme – continued to create works exploring Futurist aesthetics until shortly before his death in 2000; his influence was also instrumental in encouraging Di Bosso out of retirement in the late 1960s. See Tullio Crali, 'Una vita per il Futurismo. Tra scossoni e vuoti d'aria alla ricerca di quota', in Claudio Rebeschini, ed., *Crali aeropittore futurista*, exh. cat. (Milan: Electa, 1994), pp. 143-267 (pp. 219-20).

However, in the course of my research I became increasingly drawn to the dark, dramatic period under examination here, and the correspondingly intense works forged in its crucible. I recalled how, on the rare occasions I had seen them exhibited, the sombre power of such images had exerted an undeniable magnetism that made Giacomo Balla's whimsical studies of scurrying dachshunds, or Gino Severini's cabaret dancers – depicted in the artist's equivocal Cubo-Futurist style – seem somewhat frivolous and trivial by comparison, not only from an iconographical point of view but also in terms of their disengagement from Futurism's altogether wider, more complex, set of cultural and socio-political concerns.

As my interest in these works increased, so did my puzzlement over the neglect and / or vilification to which they were routinely subjected in the critical literature on Futurism.

Naturally, I fully appreciated how the politically sensitive nature of the material – and views concerning the 'proper' relationship between art and power – might have predisposed those working outside the sphere of Futurist studies to a negative judgement. However, as a long-time student of this most controversial of movements, I was surprised by the extent to which these factors also seemed to have discouraged experts in the field from wrestling with the issues raised by late Futurism, from undertaking any serious, objective analysis of the period, and from attempting to resolve or make sense of its apparent contradictions. The 'difficult' character of 1940s Futurism even appeared to have blinded writers as eminent as Günter Berghaus to the evident quality and interest of the work itself – although at times I suspected that on some deeper level it was precisely an *awareness* of Futurism's continuing vibrancy that led scholars to shy away from the topic, perhaps fearful of the implications of acknowledging a truth so thorny and inconvenient. In certain cases I even began to doubt whether those who disregarded this phase had actually viewed the paintings or read the poetry they dismissed so summarily, given that their consideration of such work was often minimal in the extreme, their criticisms oddly misplaced, and their overall evaluation of the period seemingly based more on its toxic political

reputation than on any close, first-hand study of the aesthetic qualities or formal characteristics of its individual products.⁶

In fact, engaging with and reflecting wider contemporary artistic trends – as well as building on its own aesthetic innovations – the movement appeared to have been far from lifeless during the war years, to my eyes. Whilst Mussolini's government provided financial assistance to Futurism, this did not appear to have been on a conditional basis: artists were not 'bought' by the regime in the sense of having to adhere to a set of officially-approved aesthetic guidelines in return for support. In reality, such guidelines never existed – Fascism continuing to tolerate a surprisingly pluralistic art scene even after the late 1930s, when the debate over the proper role of culture in society had been more passionate, and more polarised, than ever before.⁷ As a consequence, any notion of the Futurists having been compelled to 'dumb down' their work in order to benefit from government subsidies appeared intrinsically problematic. The movement's fascination with aerial bombardments – the source of so much outrage and controversy – seemed in no way unexpected, in fact quite the opposite. World War Two was, after all, a truly apocalyptic conflict of the kind not only foreseen but eagerly anticipated by the first generation of Futurist artists.⁸ Such interests appear highly objectionable today; they nevertheless remain indicative of the fundamental continuity and consistency of Futurist concerns going into the 1940s, rather than reflecting any significant ideological or aesthetic reorientation on the part of

⁶ And indeed, I am personally aware of one such case; an author – who shall remain nameless – has admitted to me that he simply 'nicked' the negative evaluation of this concluding phase contained in Berghaus's 1996 study *Futurism and Politics* for his own text, rather than investigate the subject for himself.

⁷ On Fascism's cultural politics – and Futurism's relationship with the regime – during these years, see Chapters Two, Three and Six, below.

⁸ 'We Futurists, Balla and Depero, will construct millions of metallic animals for the vastest war [...] which will undoubtedly follow the current marvellous little human conflagration'. Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero, 'Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe' (1915), in Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos* (Boston: MFA, 2001), pp. 197-200 (p. 200).

Marinetti's group. As such, they cannot be adduced as evidence of the movement's loss of direction at this time, or presented as constituting a betrayal of its principles. Finally, some of the ideas being investigated toward the end of this concluding phase were, to my mind, among the most exciting to have been formulated by the Futurists for many years, containing a flash of the movement's old clairvoyance in the way they sought to establish and explore the artistic conventions of an as yet embryonic post-war civilisation. In this sense, there seemed to be some fatal connection between the impending crisis that was about to befall Italy – sweeping away the prevailing culture of which Futurism was itself a part – and this reawakening of the movement's original 'futurist' zeal that made Somenzi's aforementioned claim seem curiously prescient.

Raising important questions about how we evaluate the worth of artworks generally, and highlighting inconsistencies in Futurist scholarship more specifically, this was a subject that practically cried out for further investigation. Gradually, the idea for a thesis took shape that would not simply chronicle the era and provide an analysis of the works themselves (although this return to primary sources would be of fundamental importance, for the reasons stated above) but that would also use the period's most emblematic images and writings as a lens through which to examine some of the misconceptions surrounding late Futurism and enable them to be challenged: something that accounts for the strong foundation of historiographical revisionism which underpins my entire text. Such, then, are the aims of this dissertation.

For the most part this investigation of Futurism's final phase takes the form of an 'internal enquiry', approaching the movement at this time on its own terms, and weighing its products and actions against *Futurism's* stated aims and objectives, rather than the values of latter-day commentators with agendas of their own. Certainly, it would be difficult to evaluate the movement's vibrancy or avant-garde character at this time solely by reference to the inflexible

criteria set out in the writings of aesthetic theorists such as Renato Poggioli or Clement Greenberg. Insufficiently elastic to take account of the complexities of life-lived, these appear particularly inadequate in helping us understand the motivations of men such as Marinetti – one of those ‘really sinister and uncommon fellows’ insightfully described by Wyndham Lewis, whose *genuinely* ‘unconventional’ sensibilities confound the more stereotypical notions of the avant-garde spirit evidently still entertained by many.⁹ The (abstract) logic of such ‘arrogant dogmatism in the name of non-existent authorities’¹⁰ fails to take into account the (concrete) aesthetic and ideological priorities of individual movements – or the local contexts out of which they emerge and to which they react – but simply imposes its own, rejecting anything that does not conform to its preconceived value system. The particular character of late Futurism’s thematic interests may well conflict with received wisdom concerning the nature of ‘progressive’ cultural movements, as might its political affiliations. Yet the limitations of any theory that would deny avant-garde status to the experimental poetry of Carlo Belloli on this basis – or be used to dismantle the many other works of equally demonstrable formal interest and artistic worth created during this period – will, I trust, be self-evident.

This thesis does not intend to offer an exhaustive analysis of every aspect of Futurist activity engaged in by the various groups and individuals affiliated with the movement between 1940 and 1944, scattered throughout the length and breadth of Italy. However, it does provide a

⁹ ‘Ezra [Pound] was already attributing to those he liked proclivities which he was persuaded must accompany the revolutionary intellect. And he had been told that I was a “rebel”. That I was, undoubtedly: but it did not occur to him that I might not be a *conventional* rebel, for Pound was *all* for convention, as he was all rebellion. It has not to this day, I think, occurred to Ezra Pound that the authentic revolutionary (not the revolutionary when everybody else is revolutionary, but the really sinister and uncommon fellow) will rebel against everything – not least rebellion.’ *Blasting and Bombardiering*, rev. edn (London: John Calder; New York: Riverrun, 1982), pp. 271-72; original emphasis.

¹⁰ Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settimelli, ‘Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius – Futurist Manifesto’ (1914), in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, cit., pp. 135-50 (p. 135).

broad overview of Futurism's key developments, personalities and thematic preoccupations at this time by way of illustrating the movement's continuing vitality. Painting and poetry – once again constituting the two most important spheres of Futurist creativity – are naturally subjected to an altogether more detailed consideration. Neither does it constitute a political history of Futurism in the 1940s in the conventional sense of the term. However, the impact of ideological issues on the works produced at this time – and on their subsequent reception – was and remains such that politics and aesthetics are inextricably interwoven throughout the entire thesis. Nor does it deal in any depth with more tightly-focused issues such as Futurist attitudes to gender roles in wartime Italy, or religious motifs in Marinetti's late writings. Fascinating as these topics are, they are outside the remit of the present text and demand dedicated theses of their own.¹¹ As stated, my aim here is really that of tackling, head on, the major obstacles to a balanced appraisal of the Futurist art and literature of these years, of addressing some of the more persistent myths concerning it, and of limning its character.

In pointing up the artistic worth of such work, I certainly do not intend to make an apologia for the political choices of Marinetti and his followers at this time. My acknowledgement of the power and presence of Futurist *aeropitture di guerra* in no way reflects an indifference to the brutality of the acts they depict, just as surely as Marianne W. Martin's appreciation of the 'artistic strength [...] intensity and interest'¹² of Severini's earlier depictions of armoured trains and firing cannons does not betoken a callous disregard on her part for the senseless and grotesque slaughter of millions during World War One.

¹¹ Both topics have been considered at some length by Marja Härmänmaa in her *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza. F. T. Marinetti e l'idea dell'uomo nuovo fascista (1929-1944)* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2000). The latter issue has also been addressed by Cinzia Sartini Blum in her *The Other Modernism: F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), as well as by Claudia Salaris. See the latter's essay 'Il futurismo e il sacro', in F. T. Marinetti, *L'aeropoema di Gesù* (c. 1943-44) (Montepulciano: Editori del Grifo, 1991), pp. 79-102.

¹² *Futurist Art and Theory 1909-1915* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 198.

The structure of the thesis breaks down as follows: Chapter One provides an analytical and largely factual account of the critical literature on 1940s Futurist art and poetry, addressing what has been said so far about the subject – and, equally significantly, what has *not* been said – with the aim of characterising the received view of the period. The second half of the chapter considers how a more detailed, objective and open-minded reading or examination of the material might enable us to challenge some of the assumptions identified in the preceding historiographical overview, and help bring into focus this period's own distinctive character.

The second, 'scene-setting', chapter situates Futurism of the 1940s in the broader context of Italy's contemporary cultural scene and political climate, as well as exploring the various developments within the movement itself – particularly the varied evolution of 'aeropictorial' aesthetics. Also considered is Futurism's alliance with abstract artists in response to those attacks against the avant-garde carried out by Fascism's conservative wing in the late 1930s.

Chapter Three offers a more focused examination of the political dimensions of Futurist activity during the Forties, distinguishing between the various forms this took, as well as considering the movement's ambiguous response to the rise of anti-Semitism in Italy after the passing of the Racial Laws in 1938.

Chapter Four deals in detail with the visual language of Futurist war painting, its relation to propaganda imagery, and its expression of the movement's long-standing aesthetic and thematic interests. More specifically, it challenges the notion that a bland realism characterised the style of the many contributors to this genre, and identifies similarities between their work and that of other contemporary artists whose post-war reputations remain intact. The imagery of certain individuals such as Crali, Tato (Guglielmo Sansoni) and Sante Monachesi is pulled out for even more detailed examination in terms of style, intention and relation to their first-hand

experiences of warfare.

Chapter Five focuses on the renewal of poetic language – the most important sphere of Futurist research between 1943 and 1944 – and analyses the work of the principal practitioners. The final part of the chapter returns to the argument that the 1940s witnessed something of a rebirth of Futurism's original impulses, noting how this is more apparent in the literary sphere than that of the visual arts. It also argues that the interest of Futurism's new poetic techniques does not reside solely in their formal qualities, and that the content of those works created in accordance with their principles is equally significant, possessing striking new ideological dimensions, and a rarely acknowledged expressive power and emotional resonance.

Chapter Six explores the character of Futurism's relationship with the Fascist regime at this time, one generally considered to have been determined by the pernicious influence within Italy of Nazism's ideas concerning cultural politics. Throughout the 1940s, we are often told, Futurism's existence was tolerated provided it satisfied the retrogressive demands of official culture. However, far from being ostracised or repressed, Futurism enjoyed a not inconsiderable degree of official support during this concluding phase, something manifested in a variety of ways including – but not limited to – financial assistance given to the movement's artists and writers through the Ministry of Popular Culture. Crucially, this was not contingent upon Futurism's political acquiescence (the movement's own ideological principles already being aligned with those of Fascism, broadly speaking) or its relinquishment of artistic liberty. It is argued that following the relatively peaceful inter-war years – when the regime had emphasised the values of order and tradition, resulting in the dominance of the Novecento group – Futurism's long-established enthusiasm for dynamic images of industrialised warfare was more attuned to Fascist requirements than perhaps ever before, and that Somenzi's assertion as to the increased status and renewed relevance of Futurism must therefore also be interpreted in this light.

By way of a conclusion, the final chapter considers a number of the ‘utopian’ scenarios conceived of at this time by the movement’s figures, and their identification of potential lines of post-war artistic enquiry. A timeline chronicles the key events of these years – both in terms of developments in the political sphere and within Futurism itself – while an appendix provides translations of the most important theoretical statements from the period in addition to a small selection of poetic works. None of these documents are currently available elsewhere in English.

All translations from the Italian are my own; in the case of volumes with parallel texts I have used the translations provided unless otherwise indicated. When translating primary sources I have naturally sought to be as faithful to the tone and form of the original as possible, even in those cases where this has resulted in a certain inelegance of expression. (Not every Futurist manifesto was a literary masterpiece!) Accordingly, where a text has deliberately dispensed with punctuation and capitalisation my translation has done likewise; where it has used them haphazardly, this too has been replicated. However, straightforward typographical errors and other obvious mistakes affecting interpretation have been corrected.¹³ Information concerning the referencing of archival material and other sources can be found in the bibliography.

¹³ In terms of those texts gathered together in the appendix, examples of such errors include the evidently incorrect use of *reclamazione* in place of *declamazione* in that section of the ‘Musical Words’ manifesto concerning public poetry recitals (point 4, line 5), and the misspelling of ‘Messerschmitt’ (‘Messerschimdt’) in Ennio De Concini’s poem ‘Bombardment of London’. Additionally, the names ‘Thayath’ and ‘Verossi’ have been corrected to ‘Thayaht’ and ‘Verossi’ in the manifesto ‘Aeropainting of Bombardments’, and a closing quotation mark has been added at the end of the same text. Finally, ‘Wadsworth’, ‘Dore’ and ‘Becstein’ have been altered to ‘Wadsworth’, ‘Doré’ and ‘Bechstein’ in the manifesto ‘Plastic Illusionism of War’.