Futurism e-visited

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Abstract

The paper argues the centrality of Futurist aesthetics and philosophies to current performance work utilising computer technologies, and suggests that Futurism's legacy to 'digital performance' has been greatly underestimated. A close analysis of Futurist theatre manifestos reveals clear relationships between theatrical plans and practices separated by almost a century. These include fundamental principles of Futurist performance art such as alogicality, parallel action, photodynamism, luminous scenography, virtual actors, 'synthetic theatre' and the cult of the machine.

'Typist', Anton and Arturo Bragaglia (1911)

Introduction

The work of art is valuable only in so far as it is vibrated by the reflexes of the future.

André Breton

In the early twentieth century, the Italian Futurists worked towards a new synthesising and technological theatrical form, just as theatre practitioners using computer technologies are attempting today. Exalting 'the machine' and the new technologies of their day, the Futurists sought a multimedia convergence of artforms and the marriage of art with technology (see Berghaus, 1998; Kirby, 1971). In 1916, this *Gesamtkunstwerk* was afforded a mathematical formula, like a piece of computer code designed to activate a virtual event: what they termed 'synthetic theatre':

Painting + sculpture + plastic dynamism + words-in-freedom + composed noise [*intonarumori*] + architecture = synthetic theatre

(Marinetti et al, 2001:15)

Of course, the genealogy of theatre and performance using computer technologies, what I will generically term 'digital performance', can be traced back much farther than Futurism, as writers such as Oliver Grau (2003) have demonstrated. Theatre's close relationship with technology has a long lineage, as Michael J. Arndt observes succinctly:

Theatre has always used the cutting edge technology of the time to enhance the 'spectacle' of productions. From the early Deus ex machina, to the guild-produced Medieval pageant wagons, to the innovation of perspective painting and mechanical devices on Italian 16th Century stage sets, to the introduction of gas, and later electric, lighting effects, to the modern use of computer to control lighting, sound and set changes, technology has been used in ways that have created incredible visual and auditory effects. (1999: 66)

But experiments undertaken in the modernist avant-garde movements of the early 20th century have been the major source of historical reflection for writers contextualising the contemporary marriage between theatre and the computer (see, for example, Packer and Randall, 2001; Manovich, 2001). These histories have linked digital arts and performance to a vast and eclectic range of influences and precursors spanning all the major avant-garde movements, from Futurism and Constructivism to Expressionism, from Dada and Surrealism to Bauhaus. Futurism, the first great avant-garde movement of the 20th century, has thus been placed as 'just one on a long list' of historical predecessors. But,

as I will argue, theorists have unduly marginalised Futurism's influence and historical place. In hierarchical terms, Futurism sits very firmly at the top of the list. Digital performance's historical lineage is precisely and inextricably linked to the philosophies, aesthetics and practices of the Futurist movement.

(Un) PC

'Portrait of Marinetti', Tato (date unknown)

Although I will relate Futurism to the PC (personal computer), Futurism is certainly not PC in the other sense of the acronym (politically correct), and early Futurist rhetoric is particularly offensive to liberal sensibilities. In places, the first Futurist manifesto (1909) reads like the posturing taunts of drunken men spoiling for a fight, full of youthful machismo: 'the oldest of us is thirty', it brags, not once, but twice (Marinetti, 1996: 292, 293). Probably conscious of the negative impact it might have on his readers, in the first comprehensive study of Futurist performance in English, Michael Kirby (1971) chose not to include the first, and historically most important manifesto whilst including sixteen later, less 'offensive' ones in his appendix. It could be suggested that Kirby's exclusion of the first manifesto is justified on the grounds that it did not specifically address theatre. However, it has long been regarded as the most significant and quintessential manifesto of the movement, and its exclusion in Kirby's otherwise comprehensive study is therefore significant. Interestingly by contrast, it is the

only Futurist manifesto to be included in Michael Huxley and Noel Witts' collection of fifty essays, interviews and manifestos by seminal directors, choreographers and performance artists *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader* (1996).

In its rebellion against Italy's stagnant and 'passéist' cultural malaise, the first manifesto preached art as violence. It concluded that 'Art, in fact, can be nothing more but violence, cruelty, and injustice' (Marinetti, 1996: 293) in much the same way that Antonin Artaud would react in the face of French literary theatre some twenty years later. Its message and tone was destructive and reactionary, and denigrated women:

We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap. … Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man. … We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic and utilitarian cowardice. (Marinetti, 1996: 291)

'Mina Loy', Stephen Haweis (1909)

The Futurists' bullish aggression and marginalization of women led to the

disillusionment of many of its initial female followers, including Mina Loy. After writing a feminist Futurist manifesto and a number of important Futurist plays between 1913 and 1915, Loy left the movement and attacked its misogyny in her satirical play *The Pamperers* (1916). The messianic phallocentrism of the early days of the movement is summed up, perhaps unconsciously, in the final words of the manifesto: 'Erect on the summit of the world, once again we hurl defiance to the stars!' (Marinetti, 1996: 293). However, the often abhorrent first manifesto was also something of an aberration, as none of the subsequent manifestos contained overt misogyny, nor did they even approach the excessive aggression and right-wing political rhetoric of the first. Kirby is quick to point out that very few Futurist plays and performances 'were political in any way and none was explicitly Fascist' (1971: 5).

Whilst Futurist visual art still retains an important place in art history, Futurist performance has been largely neglected within theatre history, despite the fact that many of the most important Futurists manifestos specifically addressed theatre rather than visual art. Futurism's key founding figures, including its leader Marinetti, who was first-and-foremost a playwright, also devoted much of their energies to performance practice. The relative academic neglect of Futurist performance derives both from a distaste for the movement's associations with Fascism, and from a largely inaccurate but widely held belief that it was 'more manifesto than practice, more propaganda than actual production' (Goldberg, 1979: 11). In 1971, Kirby described Futurist Performance as being 'virtually unknown in the United States' (1971: 3), and as having been largely ignored or rejected, unlike Futurist visual art. This was the result of 'political thought, national bias, and historical change' (1971: 4), as well as differing academic approaches to the criticism of the two art forms. Visual art criticism concentrated on aesthetics whereas traditional theatre criticism at that time was largely concerned with interpretation, particularly political interpretation: 'what a piece *means* rather than what it *is*' (1971: 5, original italics). Thus, theatre criticism was ill-equipped to deal with the often abstracted nature of Futurist Performance, and dismissed plays and performances for political reasons.

Future Tense

But the first manifesto also included important and subsequently highly influential artistic philosophies, including the declaration that 'Time and Space died yesterday' (Marinetti, 1996: 291) a concept now commonly discussed in relation to the computer and cyberspace. Nicholas de Oliveira (et al) interprets this as meaning an end to the concept of 'rational, ordered space' within arts practice, and suggests that 'the Futurists' image of a dynamic, fragmented, alogical world

was essentially a theatrical one' (1994: 18). Futurism's pervasive theme of the dynamic exploration of time and space, as well its evangelical faith in high technology places it in a precise relationship with the recent developments in digital performance. There are uncanny artistic parallels and synchronicities between digital performance and Futurism which appear to operate in precise harmony, yet some eighty years apart. Art historian Giovanni Lista's description of Futurism, for example, involves direct associations with contemporary understandings of the computer as a convergence-machine and cyberspace as a site for new personal and cultural evolutions:

an anthropological project: a new vision of man faced with the world of machines, speed and technology … a permanent cultural revolution … introducing art in the everyday media, and … exalting the mythology of the new over the conformism inherent to traditions. ... Another task of Futurism was to bring art closer to life. The Futurists wanted to reformulate the myth of the total work of art, attuned with urban civilization and its vital, sensorial experience: words-in-freedom, music of noises, kinetic sculptures, mobile, sonorous and abstract plastic compositions, glass, iron and concrete architecture, art of motion, plastic dancing, abstract theater, tactilism, simultaneous games. … Futurism is above all a philosophy of becoming, that is expressed by an activism exalting history as progress and celebrating life as the constant evolution of being … a Futurist of today would be a fan of computer-generated images. (2001: 10)

'Polyphysiognomical Portrait of Umberto Bocciono',

Anton and Arturo Bragaglia (1913)

Central philosophical and stylistic elements of Futurist Performance such as plastic dynamism, 'compression, simultaneity and the involvement of the audience' (Kirby, 1971: 49) accord with core notions within digital performance. The concept of the *alogical*, which Kirby asserts to be the single most important aspect of Futurist performance, has clear correspondences with non-linear computer paradigms and hypermedia structures. Futurist innovations in the use of simultaneous, parallel action on stage (which borrowed cinematic techniques) can equally be related to multimedia theatre forms and performance CD-ROMs which presents the user with options on what to choose to focus on and follow. Marinetti's *Simultaneity* (*Simultaneià*) (1915) featured two separate narratives being played out simultaneously, and for *The Communicating Vases* (*I Vasi Communicanti*) (1916) partitions separated different action taking place in three unrelated locations. In both plays, the barriers between these distinct 'worlds' are eventually shattered as characters cross the marked boundaries and invade the other spaces (Kirby, 1971: 47). Other performances played with notions of (nihilistic) existential choices between alternatives, as in Corra and Settimelli's *Faced with the Infinite* (*Davanti all'Infinito*), in which the philosopher protagonist dispassionately weighs up whether to read the newspaper or to shoot himself, and finally opts for the latter.

It is worth reflecting that Futurist thought lay many of the foundations of what today we understand as a postmodern aesthetic, melding high and low art to become 'art without a pedestal or a fig leaf … art that is hyperbolically-vulgar … [and] mechanically –exact' (Kozintsov, 1975: 97). Marinetti's manifesto *The Variety Theatre* (1913) describes an artistic philosophy closely akin to the contemporary postmodern sensibility, proposing a theatre that acts as a synthesising crucible. This crucible is fiercely deconstructive:

an ironic decomposition of all the worn-out prototypes … [revealing] the necessity of complication … the fatality of the lie and the contradiction … It whimsically mechanizes sentiment, disparages and tramples down … every unhealthy idealism. Instead, the Variety Theatre gives a feeling and a taste for easy, light and ironic loves. … The Variety Theatre destroys the Solemn, the Sacred, the Serious and the Sublime in Art with a capital A. It cooperates in the Futurist destruction of immortal masterworks, plagiarizing them, parodying them, making them look commonplace by stripping them of their solemn apparatus as if they were mere *attractions*. (1971: 180-183, original italics)

Time to Dynamically Divide

'Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash', Giacomo Balla (1912)

The Futurist principle of 'divisionism' and its corollary in painting 'the divided brushstroke' reflects the binary and multi-tasking paradigms of computer technologies. Techniques applied in Futurist painting and photography to the depiction of motion in relation to time have exact parallels with digital motion effects and multiple-imaging techniques employed in digital performance, most commonly in dance works. In many Futurist paintings different stages through the progress of movement are combined to create a blurred and dynamic expression of motion. The walking dog in Giacomo Balla's painting *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912) is depicted in a flurry of movement. Its wagging tail is painted in nine separate positions of movement, its hind legs comprise seven discernible leg shapes amidst a blur of other brushstrokes, and its front legs are completely indistinct, a swirling, barely decipherable form.

This aesthetic, revealing the 'force lines' of movement, was also employed in Futurist photography (known as 'chronophotography' or 'photographic dynamism'), most notably by the Italian brothers Anton Giulio and Arturo Bragaglia. For numerous startling photographs, they exposed the negative for a number of seconds to capture in sharp focus the still start and end positions of a complete human movement, but to blur the motion in-between. The temporal movement is thus captured and tracked across the space of the photograph, and human faces and bodies appear to liquify, like ghostly phantoms.

'Change of Position', Anton Bragaglia (1911)

Today, the stroboscopic movement effects and the visual dissolving of bodily forms associated with Futurist aesthetics are commonly applied in digital performance, as seen, for example, in the prismatic effects of shattering bodies in Bud Blumenthal's *Les Entrailles de Narcisse* (2001) and 4D Art's *Anima* (2002). But significantly, these divisionist effects (which were also evident in Cubism which predated Futurism) are now brought onto stage in dynamic temporal form, rather than as still chronophotographs or paintings. Digital performance extends the divisionist aesthetic in theatrical, continuous time, capturing what Lista describes as 'the action of energy in the midst of matter … an extreme vision of reality where everything is merely a transition of energy' (2001: 61).

The Futurists used the mechanical eye of the camera to suggest a new view of the world, a mechanical one, able to observe and preserve time and space in a way beyond normal human capabilities. In the computer age, the same philosophy is at play, but the new digital eye enables the visions and predictions of the Futurist theatre to be fully realised, and with relative ease. Thus, the once idealistic and grandiose plans of designer Fortunato Depero in *ca.* 1916 have become commonplace reality through ubiquitous software applications such as Adobe's *Photoshop* and *AfterEffects*:

A single figure, too, can become the protagonist of plastic-magic phenomena:

enlargement of the eyes and various illuminations of them. Decompositions of the figure and the deformation of it, even until its absolute transformation; e.g., a dancing ballerina who continually accelerates, transforming herself into a floral vortex … Everything turns-disappears-reappears, multiplies and breaks, pulverizes and overturns, trembles and transforms into a cosmic machine that is life. (1971: 207-208)

'Photodynamic Portrait of a Woman', Arturo Bragaglia (ca. 1924)

Depero's image of the violently accelerating, spinning ballerina recalls Tony Brown's installation *Two Machines for Feeling* (1986) which juxtaposes a *Metropolis*-style cyborg robot with a projection of a porcelain ballerina in a plexiglass box. The contrast between the heavy mechanical movements of the robot and the delicacy of the small, rotating, virtual ballerina is marked. The ballerina is mounted on a cyclotron, and whirls in increasingly blurring and mutating circles as the speed is accelerated. Despite the brittle fragility of the porcelain dancer in comparison to the metal robot, its centrifugal movement is far more frenetic and violent. As Brown puts it 'narrative continuity in information society can only be assured by a violent speeding up of the dynamo' (quoted in Kroker, 1992: 24).

Arthur Kroker undertakes a fascinating analysis of the piece in relation to what he considers to be the 'cold' cybernetic theories of Paul Virilio, who places the technologized, 'disappeared' body in 'a twilight zone between inertia and a violent psychosis of speed' (1992: 25). Kroker interprets the sculptural

installation as exposing the interior world of virtual technologies, and its fundamental mirror-reversals and space shifts. *Two Machines for Feeling* constitutes a Virilio-like discourse on technology since it is 'a perfect simulacra of a culture modelled on pure speed' (1992: 23) and presents a postmodern semiology of the body as 'war machine'. The parallels with Futurism's obsessions with speed and war, encapsulated in the first manifesto, echo clearly once again. For Kroker, 'everything here plays at the edge of the ecstasy of speed and the detritus of inertia; a psychoanalysis of war machines where "fascination turns into psychosis" … and we are ideologically positioned as inert observers of the spectacle of velocity in ruins' (1992: 24).

Manifesto Time

There have been no major 'manifestos' for digital performance, but the numerous Futurist theatre manifestos between 1909 and 1920 could stand in for them, almost without revision except for simple word substitutions such as 'digital' replacing 'electric'. For historians of the lineage of digital performance, reading through the Futurist theatre manifestos is a strange and spine-tingling experience: akin to one of those movie scenes where a mysterious and improbably prophetic antique book is discovered in the attic.

In Italy, *The Futurist Synthetic Theatre* manifesto (1915) announces an 'entirely new', mechanical theatre, and in Russia, the *Eccentrism* (aka *Eccentric Theatre*) manifesto (1921) opens with a plea to the actor to 'forget about emotions and celebrate the machine' (Kozintsov, 1975: 95). It goes on to propose a 'mechanically exact' theatre where the author is an 'inventor-improvisor' and the actor is 'mechanized movement'. Yuri Annenkov's manifestos describe a theatre embodying 'mechanic elasticity, vibrations of the human body that you do not recognize, lines of multicolored luminous rays' (quoted in Dèak, 1975: 91). In his 1921 manifesto *The Theatre to the End* Annenkov also reconfigured the creative role of the director as a conductor of technology rather than a director of human actors, in line with new understandings of the director's role within recent digital performance practice:

The master of the new theatre will have a conception of the theatre completely different from that of the contemporary playwright, director, stage designer. Only the mechanical and the electric will be the creative ones in the new liberated theatre. Chronometer and metronome are going to be on the directorial table of the master of the theatre. (quoted in Dèak, 1975: 91)

In *The Variety Theatre* (1913) Marinetti foreshadows current conceptions of digital performance as being 'lucky in having no tradition, no masters, no dogma … fed by swift actuality … [able] to invent new elements of astonishment … fantastic pregnancies that give birth to objects and weird mechanisms.' (1971: 179–181) Enrico Prampolini's manifesto, *Futurist Scenography* (1915) conjures an even more precise premonition, describing luminous stages and virtual bodies, exactly what we see, almost a century later, in digital theatre:

The stage will no longer be a colored backdrop but a *colorless electromechanical architecture, powerfully vitalized by chromatic emanations from a luminous source.* … From these will arise vacant abandonments, exultant, luminous corporealities … Instead of the illuminated stage, let's create the *illuminating stage: luminous expression that will irradiate the colors demanded by the theatrical action with all its emotional power. …* In the totally realizable epoch of Futurism we shall see the luminous dynamic architectures of the stage emanate from chromatic incandescences that, climbing tragically or showing themselves voluptuously, will inevitably arouse new sensations and emotional values in the spectator. Vibrations, luminous forms (produced by electric currents and colored gases) will wriggle and writhe dynamically, and these authentic actor-gases of an unknown theatre will have to replace living actors. (1975: 204-5, original italics)
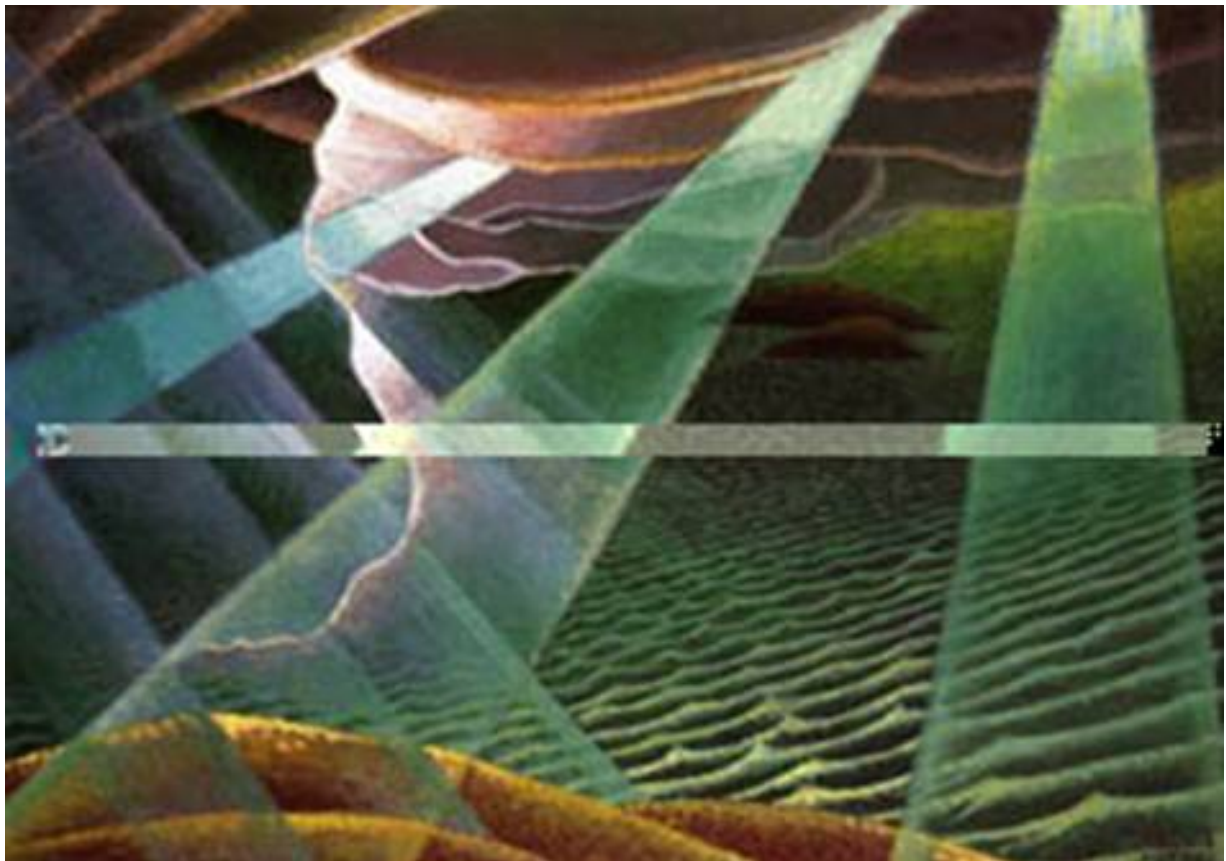
'Tempesto sur Lago', Gerardo Dottori (1938)

Prampolini's vision of a new luminous stage filled with luminous forms that replace living actors is the epitome of the digital performance project. The concept of a luminous stage is of course inherent in the phosphor computer screen itself, the site of the genesis of creativity for digital performance works, and the 'stage' interface for online performance. It is also manifest in the bright projection screens surrounding actors and dancers in digital theatre settings; in immersive performance installations; and in the miniature dual screens of 3D head-mounted display systems used in Virtual Reality performances.

Prampolini's stage designs developed and implemented many of the ideas of Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia towards kinetic set design. These are now being re-conceptualised and synthetically fashioned within the computer, as seen in Mark Reaney's kinetic three-dimensional VR scenography in productions such as *The Adding Machine* (1995) and *Machinal* (1999). Futurism's dynamic scenography pushed to the foreground what had been placed traditionally in the background, often overwhelming the human figures on stage. Julie Schmid (2002) notes the difficulty in differentiating dialogue from the extensive stage and scenic directions in plays such as Mina Loy's *Collision* (1915), in which 'dwarfed by scenography made up of colliding planes, light, mountains and city scapes, the sole character, Man, becomes incidental.'

Time for Virtual Actors

Prampolini's description of the replacement of living actors by luminous forms (1971: 205) is a commonplace in digital performance, through digitally replicated and manipulated human forms, and graphical figures, characters and avatars. Yacov Sharir combines *LifeForms* and *Poser* software to choreograph beautiful virtual dancers which defy gravity to float, pivot and fly through dramatically coloured and rendered three-dimensional virtual spaces. Susan Broadhurst's *Blue Bloodshot Flowers* (2001) features a live performer interacting with an advanced AI avatar in the form of a luminous human head, whose actions and reactions are independent of any real-time human manipulation, and cannot be predicted from performance to performance as 'he' progressively learns and evolves.
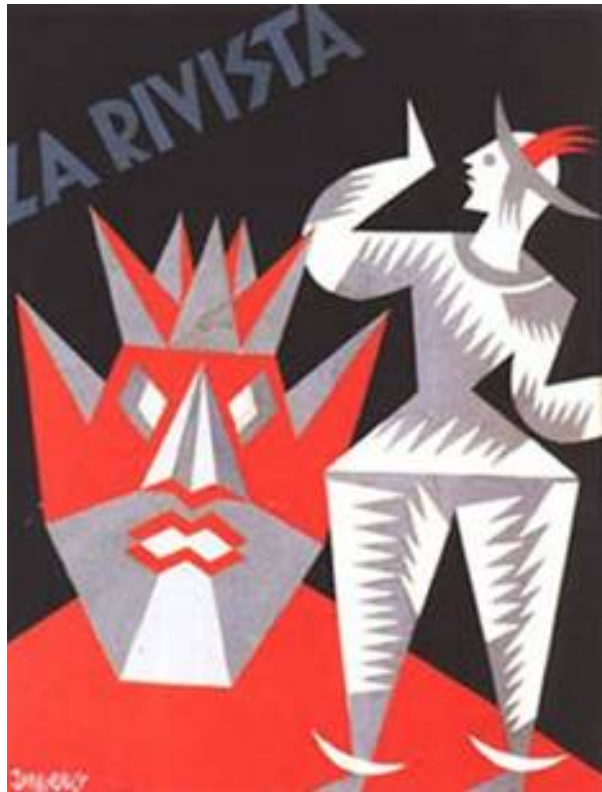
Cover design for 'La Rivista',

Fortunato Depero (1925)

Prampolini's *Futurist Scenography'* manifesto suggests that 'in the final synthesis, human actors will no longer be tolerated' (1971: 206). This is a prophesy to which many may be sceptical given the unique qualities of the live performer within a 'real' space, and performance's history of change to compete and survive against the non-live dramatic forms of cinema and television. But recorded media has already demonstrated its ability to digitally create artificial human performers or 'synthesbians' which are rendered so realistically that they are now visually indistinguishable from human ones.

Mauro Montalti's 1920 Futurist scenario for the adaptation of Leonid Andreyev's *The Life of Man* (1971: 223 –4) replaces actors with representative shapes composed of points and rows of coloured lights, which rhythmically darken and light up, rotate, form nebulas, and disintegrate. Precisely the same concept has been undertaken (almost certainly without knowledge of Montalti's little-known scenario) by artists such as David Saltz, whose interpretation of Samuel Beckett's *Quad* (1996) replaces the four actors with a computer-programmed grid of coloured LED lights (see Saltz, 1999); and by Australian group *Company in Space*. In their dance-theatre performance *Incarnate* (2001) a projected digital graphical effect is used to materialise and rotate the outline of a female body shape composed of points of luminous coloured lights. The circular lights move

busily and rotate to expand and contract the size of the figure, to change its body positions and (extending the performance's recurrent images of stars) to disintegrate and re-materialise the luminous body like the exploding nebulae.

It is a precise articulation of Montalti's unrealized idea for *The Life of Man*, which was the first production concept he offered in his proposals for what he termed 'The Electric-Vibrating-Luminous Theatre'. This is not to suggest any untoward plagiarism, but rather the significance of the quintessential parallels between the Futurists' ideas and those of the new digital performance 'avant-garde'. Comparing Montalti's scenario with *Incarnate* reveals very closely interlinked aesthetic concepts and strategies. In particular, this concerns the representation of the human body as a site for dynamic metamorphoses through technological intervention. In both examples, the body's cycle of materialization, dematerialization and rematerialization is articulated by way of a dynamic transformation of shimmering, star-like coloured lights. The visual symbolism of the flickering lights amidst darkness evokes a belief in the technologically-mutating human body in its spiritualized and ethereal form. This is a prevalent theme of many digital performance works, and is akin to Depero's notion of the disappearing-reappearing body as 'cosmic machine' (1971: 208).

'Costume Meccanico and Maschere',

Fortunato Depero (1948)

Prampolini's manifesto also addresses the Futurist Theatre's concern with interactivity, a central tenet of digital culture, and he suggests that 'the audience will perhaps become the actor as well' (1971: 206). This is echoed in Marinetti's 'The Variety Theatre Manifesto' (1913) where he declares that the Futurist Theatre 'is alone in seeking the audience's collaboration. It doesn't remain static like a stupid *voyeur*, but joins noisily in the action … communicating with the actors' (1971: 181).

Futurist Performance's central position in the history of interactivity is little recognised, and a revision of this is long overdue. The Futurists produced a long succession of interactive plays and performance events (called *serate* and *sintesi*) which called on the physical involvement of the audience. These include Bruno Cora and Emilio Settimelli's *Gray + Red + Violet + Orange* (1921) which included an actor turning on an audience member and accusing him of murder, and Cangiullo's *Lights! (Luce!)* (1919) which takes place in complete darkness. The performers are 'plants' in the auditorium and provoke the audience to demand that the lights be put on; once the audience is mobilised to do so and their shouting reaches a climax, the lights illuminate the stage, and the curtain suddenly falls to signify the end. These performances were also historically significant as early examples of Live Art since they rejected 'fourth wall' conventions and involved non-narrative and often task-based actions by performers being 'themselves' rather than representing characters.

Machine Time

Costume designed by Ivo Pannaggi

for a ballet by M. Michailov (ca. 1919)

Most fundamentally of all, the centrality of the *machine* links Futurism to digital performance. In the *Manifesto of Futurist Playwrights* (1911) the 20 signatories including Marinetti declared that it was 'necessary to introduce into theatre the feeling of the domination of the machine' (quoted in Kirby, 1971: 27). This sensibility has equally found expression in much digital performance theory and practice, and the machine itself has increasingly and explicitly taken centre-stage in robot performances, including the extraordinary multiple robot productions of Chico McMurtrie's *Amorphic Robot Works* and Mark Pauline's *Survival Research Labs*. Early notions of human robots and cyborgic conjunctions of flesh and metal appear within a number of Futurist manifestos, including Ivo Pannaggi and Vinici Paladini's *Manifesto of Futurist Mechanical Art* (1922):

Today it is the MACHINE which distinguishes our epoch. … mechanical sense which determines the atmosphere of our sensibility. … We feel mechanically and we feel made of steel: we too are machines, we too are mechanized by the

we feel made of steel, we too are machines, we too are mechanized by the

atmosphere that we breathe … this is the new necessity and the basis of the new aesthetic. (2003)

In 1918, Fedele Azari performed 'Futurist Aerial Theatre', looping, spinning, somersaulting and diving in an aircraft with a customised hood and exhaust that increased the resonance and sonority of what Azari calls its 'voice'. In his manifesto, Azari compares flight to a grandiose and superior form of dance, and predates McLuhan by discussing the aeroplane as an 'extension of man'. Flight performance, he says, precisely expresses the aviator's mind and 'rhythm of desire … given the absolute identification between the pilot and his airplane, which becomes like an extension of his body: his bones, tendons, muscles, and nerves extend into longerons and metallic wire' (1971: 219). Theatre performances such as Balla's *Printing Press (Macchina Tipografica)* (1914) depicted human personifications of machines, and mechanical ballets such as Franco Casavola's *Machine of 3000 (Machina del 3000)* (1924), designed by Depero, featured dancers in robotic, tubular metallic costumes.

Fillia's *Mechanical Sensuality (Sensualità Meccanica)* (1927) epitomises the Futurist obsession with the machine, and the mystical status in which it was held. The stage is dominated by five planes of vibrating metallic sheets, placed in perspective. Three voices representing Spirit (a red spiral), Matter (a white cube) and Action (three coloured geometric figures representing a machine) describe how:

men have been engrossed by mechanical expansion. Necessity constructed from sensual spirit, the enrichment of the environment … Everything is geometrical – lucid – indispensable: splendour of the artificial sex that has speed in place of beauty … the world drinks the oxygen of machines for its insatiable lungs and sings more strongly! … it is necessary to liberate ourselves from TIME, ascend, ascend, ascend, ASCEND! (Fillia, 1971: 287-288).

Future-Perfect

'Radio Fire Up', Fortunato Depero (1926)

The type of liberatory ascension Fillia evokes was never fully realised in the Futurist theatre of his time, but the computer may offer a way to enable it in ours. Central concepts and practices within contemporary digital performance constitute not merely a lineage which can be traced back to Futurism, but fundamentally *encapsulate and extend* the Futurist project.

The Futurist movement emerged at a directly comparable period of technological change and contingent cultural and sociological transformation as the so-called 'digital revolution'. Futurism was born out of a faith in and fascination with significant, life-changing 'new technologies' which all emerged and converged around the same time: film, automobiles, aeroplanes, and perhaps most importantly of all, electricity. One might imagine that these technological transformations were even more seismic in their effects on people than those associated with computers. The effect must also have been different. Mechanical innovations were all 'out there'. Walking in the street was a new experience: there were suddenly electric street lights, loud, speeding automobiles, and airplanes in the sky. Human excitement at these innovations was projected outwards. By contrast, the digital transformation is all '*in* there', visibly changing little in the outside world, and taking people's attention away from it, into a small screen, and further into themselves. The projection of human excitement and creativity takes an opposite trajectory: inwards.

The introversion of the computer paradigm may offer a clue as to why there are no manifestos for digital performance, in contrast to the scores there were for Futurist performance. Digital performance artists generally lack the aggressive, extrovert bravado of the Futurists, their fiery rhetoric and grandiose claims. But they are on an uncannily parallel path. And unlike their aesthetic ancestors, they may ultimately realise the Futurist performance vision laid down, and largely forgotten, almost a century ago.

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Recent online articles of interest to BST readers include:

"Metal Gender". *CTHEORY,* Vol. 26, Nos. 1-2 (Article 128), 2003. http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=384

which argues that Artificial Lifeforms and cyborgic prostheses have their own unique gender.

"Absent Fiends: Internet Theatre, Posthuman Bodies and the Interactive Void". *Performance Arts International*, 'Presence' special online issue, 2003. http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/epai/presencesite/index.html which analyses a series of interactive Internet performances created by *The Chameleons Group*.