

Futurist Scenography: From Revolutionary Theory to Practice

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A revolution, by definition, intends to destroy the existing and is, therefore, rejected by the establishment. The revolution initially draws its *raison d'être* from this repulsion, but with time it can either lose its influence and become esoteric, or succeed to such an extent that it destroys the adversary and becomes itself the establishment, and as such, it encourages a new revolution, *ad infinitum*. This is a paradoxical situation, because the power of the revolution to influence depends on its capacity to become the establishment.

Futurism was one of the most revolutionary movements in all the artistic media, developing new means of expression in all the arts, and exploring them systematically in its manifestos. However, as greatly as the Futurists were advanced in theory, they were not so in practice. The dialectic process between revolution and establishment in the Futurist theatre is therefore somewhat tricky. The Futurists were unable to implement most of their revolutionary ideas within the conventional theatre of the time: the plays, which were performed on conventional stages, lost many of their innovations because the space and the technical facilities were not suited to their needs. Moreover, some of their ideas, like abolishing the human actor, were never accepted by the conventional theatre, and were finally rejected. As the Futurists could not conquer the establishment, they had to find an alternative venue - that of

Performance Art, a new theatrical genre which later developed alongside the mainstream theatre and somewhat influenced it.

Although the Futurists also aspired to renovate the structure of the dramatic play and the theatrical event, I argue that their most important contribution was mainly in the audio-visual aspects of the show, and above all in the field of stage design - set, costume and lighting. It should be noted that they were not the first to realize the importance of the perceptual means, and many of their ideas could already be found in those of Appia and Craig. In general, it must be admitted, the Futurists were notorious appropriators, but they nonetheless managed to create something new out of others' ideas. They were the first to give the perceptual means priority over the text or the actor, and they were the first to create a systematic theory that dealt with all the aspects of these means.

One of the most important influences on the development of Futurist theatre was Alfred Jarry's play, *Ubu Roi*, written and staged in 1888 as a puppet show, and staged again in 1896 at the **Théâtre de l'Oeuvre** in Paris, this time with human actors. The play created a scandal because of its vulgarity and social criticism, but also because of the rough language and crude slapstick. Jarry shattered many of the conventions: he asked the actors to use pantomime, to speak in a special tone of voice, and to use masks and signs, which later became regular props in the theatre.

Influenced by Jarry, Marinetti wrote two plays: *Poupées Electriques* (in which he used human actors together with puppets) was mounted by the **Teatro Regio** in Turin, in January 1909, and *Roi Bombance*, which was staged, like *Ubu*, at the Parisian **Théâtre de l'Oeuvre**, in April 1909. However, although they generated a big reaction, their style and means of production were quite conventional. An original Futurist theatre had not yet developed. In fact, the real revolution in the Futurist theatre did not start on the stage but with the Futurist's evenings, the '*serate*' (soirées).

The '*serata*' was a gathering that could be held anywhere, not only in the theatre. It became an event that included different styles of performance, like '*Parole in Libertà*' (words in freedom) and 'Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation'. These evenings were the precursors to the 'happening', to 'live art', and even to the installations. It should be noted that contrary to the usual process in Futurism, in which written theory preceded the practice, the first evening occurred in 1910, before any manifesto on the theatre was written.¹

Marinetti wanted to eliminate the barriers between stage and audience, and therefore demanded a permanent interaction between the two. He used

every possible means to provoke the audience, like selling two tickets for one place or smearing the seats with glue. As a result, on occasion the event continued in the street, from whence it was moved to the police station, to the detention cell and finally to the court. This was the most desirable ending, since the court permitted an expansion of the meaning of the term 'stage', and it was also a sure way to gain publicity. It should be noted, however, that by turning the theatrical show into an 'event' the Futurists extracted it from its conventional setting; and, as it demanded a total change of space, it could not be realized on the existing stages. Indeed, later on, the Futurists realized that they had to deal with the architectural aspect of the theatre, as well as the structure of the play and the visual aspects of the show.

The '*serate*' permitted the desired interaction between the performers and the audience. A typical evening, which was named afterward *The Battle of Florence*, took place in December 1913, at **Teatro Verdi** in Florence. The minute Marinetti started his declamation, the audience began to throw rotten vegetables and even spaghetti at the stage. When Marinetti said, teasingly: 'I feel like a glorious Italian battleship in the Dardanelles, but the strong Turks aim badly',² his eye was suddenly struck by a potato. While his friends ran to help him, Carrà shouted to the crowd: 'Throw an idea instead of potatoes, idiots!' Cangiullo, with a table-leg in his hand was ready to hit back at the attackers, but was calmed by Marinetti.³ Not all the evenings, however, finished so calmly.

Parole in Libertà (words in freedom) turned the '*serate*' into a more organized and complex event, which included several perceptual means. It started as a new method of writing poetry - not only oral but also visual - of words and scribbling with no meaning and no connection, but with a rhythm or onomatopoeic association. *Piedigrotta*, a performance named satirically after a Neapolitan song festival, was written as *Words in Freedom* by Cangiullo and performed at the **Sprovieri Gallery** in Rome, on March 29 and April 5, 1914. The gallery was lit by red light, and decorated with paintings by Balla, Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo and Severini. Cangiullo played the piano, and Balla and Marinetti joined him in the declamation, accompanied by noises of homemade musical instruments. The evening reached its climax with a procession.⁴

A few days later, on April 13, 1914, another procession, a funereal one, inaugurated an international exhibition at the same gallery. Balla, 'disguised as a sacristan',⁵ led the procession, striking a large cowbell with a paintbrush, and chanted mournfully in a nasal voice. He was followed by two dwarfs with their heads covered with enormous black tubes with holes for the eyes and nose. On their shoulders they carried the 'body' of the '*passatista*' critic (*passé*

persons), while Cangiullo played the out-of-tune piano. In order to overcome the smell of the "dead" body, Marinetti ask the audience to join him in smoking a cigarette.⁶

During these evenings Marinetti developed the manifesto 'Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation' that was written in 1914, but published only in 1916. It instructs on how to declaim in a certain rhythm, by moving all the members of the body, accompanied by music and noises. In fact, this kind of declamation was already being practiced at the first 'serate'.

Several parts of Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tumb* were performed as suggested in 'Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation' in April 1914, at the **Dore Gallery** in London. It was written as a poem of words in freedom, about the Balkan war, and was also called *Onomatopoeic Artillery*. Marinetti posed as the Turkish admiral, firing his machine gun by banging with a hammer, and giving orders to the artillery by phone. The painter Nevison stood in the other room, next to the artillery, that is - the huge drums, and received the orders. The gallery walls were covered with blank sheets of paper, on which Marinetti doodled while declaiming, running from wall to wall, with the public following him.⁷ This was the first time when the set was created during the show, and the act of drawing became the most dynamic part of the performance.

The 'serate' developed to produce another genre of performance - 'the variety'. This was based on a popular type of entertainment, but was renewed and reshaped by Marinetti in 1913, in his manifesto 'The Variety Theatre' (also called 'Caffè Concerto').⁸ Marinetti wanted to destroy the serenity and sublimity of the theatre and convert it into sheer enjoyment, by combining several numbers and several means of expression, as found in the cafe-concert, the music-hall, the cabaret, the night-club and the circus. His variety, however, were to be nothing like any of them, but a combination that would create something different, with what he called a new futurist sensibility. This futuristic 'marvelous' was to be comprised of different acts, sketches and ballets, and include marionettes, mechanical scenery and props, noise, sound, and 'all the new significations of lights'.⁹

Color, light and sound became very important elements in the variety show, with particular emphasis on their synthesis. This was influenced by Wagner's theory of the '*Gesamtkunstwerk*' (total artwork), which aims at synthesizing all the aspects of a show.¹⁰ However, the idea of synthesis between light and sound originated from the popular theory of Synesthesia, that the stimulation of one sense, like sight, can stimulate another sense, like hearing. This theory was already fully developed in 1910, in Kandinsky's book *On the Spiritual in Art*, in

which he argued that color can create a sensation of sound and vice versa, and that both can evoke physical reactions and psychological associations. The Russian composer Scriabin believed the same, and for his music *Prometheus* (1911) he constructed an organ that projected colors on a screen in accordance with the music. Influenced by Synesthesia, Prampolini, the most famous Futurist stage designer, wrote in 1913 his manifesto 'Cromafonia', subtitled 'The Color of Sound'.¹¹

New forms and means of performance were thus developed in the 'serate' and the 'variety show': dynamic interaction between the actors, the audio-visual means and the audience, and synthesis between several theatrical genres.

Up to 1915 many manifestos were written on various aspects of the performance. However, apart from a few general remarks, none of them include any serious and substantial reference to the scenography or stage design, except for Prampolini's above mentioned manifesto 'The Color of Sound'. The other authors of the manifestos came mostly from the fields of poetry, literature and music, and had no real visual concept of the theatre. Prampolini, on the other hand, was one of the most important stage designers in Italy, as well as a dramatist, stage director and a noted painter. He designed sets and costumes for over 130 shows, and was the first to relate systematically to scenography and stage design in the theatre, in his manifesto of March 1915, 'Futurist Scenography and Choreography', republished in April-May 1915 under the title 'Futurist Scenography'.¹² The most important innovations, which were developed through the Futurists' performances and expressed mostly in Prampolini's manifestoes, were in the field of stage lighting and mechanized set, costume and actor.

Futurist revolution in stage lighting:

In his 1915 manifesto, 'The Futurist Scenography', Prampolini claimed that the light and set 'can arouse in the spectator such emotional values that neither the poet's words nor the actor's gestures can evoke.'¹³ Therefore, he contended, both the human actor and the marionette would eventually disappear from the stage and the future actors would be the 'vibrations, luminous forms (produced by electric currents and colored gases)'.¹⁴ In the same manifesto he argued that the set should illuminate the stage as much as it should be lit, and that it should not be painted, but colored by the lights. And indeed, in his play *Santa Velocità* (Sacred Speed, 1928) the set itself was colorless, and lit with changing colored lights.¹⁵ Montalti, in his 1920 manifesto, 'For a New Theatre "Electric-Vibrating-Luminous"', even suggests that the stage should look like

an enormous black room, with the backcloth comprising projection screen, combined with many electric lamps of all colors and tonality.¹⁶

In 1909, Craig had already conducted experiments with lights at the **Arena Goldoni** in Florence, striving to create an abstract synthesis of movement, sound and lights. One of the first artists to do so, however, was the dancer Loei Fuller, who conquered the European stage at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. For example, in *Le Lys* (1897), **Théâtre de Folies Bergères**, Paris, or in *Le Papillon*, **Théâtre de Bouffes Parisiens**, Fuller created 'dancing paintings' - abstract and dynamic forms of light and colors - by moving her body and the abundance of fabric that made up her dress and shawl.¹⁷ The dynamic forms were lit with colored light from all directions, including lights from beneath the stage that were reflected through the transparent floor.¹⁸ Thus Fuller created a new genre of show - a Ballet of Lights - which was later developed in the Futurist theatre and also in the Bauhaus, in the Light Play and in the ballets of Schlemmer and Kandinsky.

Up until then the traditional function of lights had been to illuminate, to define, to emphasize and to create an atmosphere. With the Futurists, light also became an actor - an active part of the set. But above all it was also a solution to the Futurist ideal of a dynamic stage: the mechanization of the moving and ever changing set was technically problematic, but stage lighting could create the illusion of movement and transformation.

The first to create a ballet of light was Balla, for Stravinsky's *Feu d'Artifice* (Fireworks). It was directed by Ansermet and produced by Diaghilev's **Ballet Russe**, on April 12, 1917, at the **Teatro Constanzi** in Rome. This "ballet", however, has no dancers, only the "choreography" of set and lights, which were all designed and staged by Balla. The set was a three-dimensional enlargement of Balla's paintings.¹⁹ Some of the abstract forms were made of solid wood covered with cloth and then painted. Some smaller forms were made of construction covered with translucent cloth, painted in all colors and patterns, and concealing light projectors.

The black backdrop was illuminated in places by rays of red light. The set and the auditorium were lit from many directions. At times all the lights went off except for those inside the translucent constructions, which looked as if they were floating in the air. Shadow too had an important role, and there were at least two cues for shadow projectors, probably comprising various shapes of shades that partially covered some of the lights to create silhouettes. Balla installed the keyboard in the prompter box, so that he could watch and listen while operating the lights. He planned 49 settings, but as some of them

were repeated, he probably had over fifty cues. The piece lasted only 5 minutes, which means that there were about ten changes of lights every minute (!).

Mechanized actor, costume and set

Balla's light ballet realized one of Prampolini's ideas, to abolish the human actor. Craig had already suggested another way to abolish the actor, when he claimed, in his article 'Actor and the "Ubermarionette"', *Mask* 1, April 1908, that the human actor is not to be trusted in transmitting the ideas of the director. As a subjective element, the actor brings to the stage his own interpretations and personality, and therefore he should be replaced with a marionette. The Futurists, however, preferred the marionettes for another reason: they wished to integrate the actors with the mechanized set, but since eventually most of the time the parts were played by real actors, they dehumanized them by mechanical movements and mechanical costumes, which blended in with the mechanical stage. This can be seen, for example, from Depero's designs for *Plastic Dances*, 1918.

Some of Depero's notes and costume designs show how the costumes were planned to function, probably with wire constructions hidden in them. They also concealed tiny lamps that were intended to shine through the translucent cloth. The costume could be opened or closed, like a fan or accordion, by the actor lifting his hand or clicking his heels. Unfortunately, Depero did not realize most of his ideas, and for those that were realized, we have no evidence (like film or video) to show how they functioned. However, we can see how they might have functioned, in the film *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (Stephen Elliot, Australia, 1994). In the final act, the "girls" change the appearance of their costumes by moving their hands or shoulders, thus opening fan-like sleeves or a necklace. At the finale they use their costumes to construct a silhouette of **Sydney Opera House**. The Futurists' ideas would thus still appear to be relevant today

The most problematic part of the Futurists' ideas was the dynamic set. Their ideal of a dynamic and ever changing set was technically impossible, partly because of the mechanization problem, but mostly because no material exists that can change and move by itself, nor can the objects inter-penetrate (as can be done in painting). Moreover, it was not enough simply to introduce more advanced techniques to the existing stage, as the space in the conventional theatre was not suitable for realization of their ideas.

In 1924 Prampolini wrote another manifesto, 'Futurist Scenic Atmosphere',²⁰ in which he defined three stages in the evolution of the Futurist scenic technique:

- 1) Scenosynthesis: the conventional concept of the theatre, of a two-dimensional scenic environment. The architecture, predominant in chromatic elements, is flat and linear, and the theatrical action takes place on two planes.
- 2) Scenoplastics: the Futurist concept of the theatre, of a three-dimensional scenic environment. The architecture is dynamic and plastic, the stage is abolished and the theatrical action takes place on three planes.
- 3) Scenodynamics: the more advanced Futurist concept of the theatre, of a four-dimensional scenic environment. The architecture is spatial, dynamic, coloured and integrates lights. Simultaneous development between the theatrical action and environment by elimination of the proscenium arch.

The third phase could be explained by Prampolini's intended project of the Magnetic Theatre. The project was never realized but the model gained a medal at the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris, in 1925. The magnetic theatre is meant to be a three-dimensional construction, erected in the middle of the theatre hall, like a huge machine, including platforms. Each element can move up and down and to the sides, with rotating and shifting movements, and thus create dynamic scenery and lighting. However, Prampolini does not explain the exact relations between stage and audience.²¹

Marinetti, in a way, answered this question in his project 'Total Theatre' in 1933. He described a ring-stage surrounded by a circular space that contained many more stages, placed in between the seats, which could move or turn around. An apparatus, probably similar to Prampolini's magnetic theatre, would stand in the middle of the central stage and simulate the movements of the sun and the moon.²² It should be noted that already in 1921, the constructivist Tatlin had suggested, in his model of the 'Monument to the 3rd International', more complicated movements based on the constellations.

I believe that the most important and revolutionary idea lay in the conclusion of Prampolini's 'Futurist Scenography' (1915). Prampolini made a distinction between the traditional scenography, which he called 'objective', and the Futurists' scenography, which he called 'subjective'. The latter is created by a synthesis of all the expressive means, which together turn the Futurist stage into an abstract entity. This entity is intended to communicate subconsciously with the spectators, through the use of shapes, colors, movement and light, to create a certain state of mind - a sense that one is in the middle of the scene. Words and gestures alone can not create such state of mind; only the stage designer, with his perceptual means and understanding, can create an equivalent world, which is as important as the play itself. Prampolini thus

concludes that the stage designer is an artist, and not merely an executor of the director's wishes, and therefore the playwright should write special plays that enable the designer to use all his means and powers of expression!

We may trace the notion that there is a direct and subconscious communication between the stage and the audience, to the influence of Freud, who at that time was already known in Italy and whose theories were stirring up great interest. However, it should be noted that the Futurists' emphasis on such a total experience makes research extremely problematic, since we cannot recreate the experience of these past performances, not even partially, as we can do today by using video or film.

Synthesis of all the visual components

All the visual means previously mentioned were incorporated into the '*sintesi*', which was the third form of performance created by the futurists. The '*sintesi*' were first discussed in the manifesto 'Futurist Synthetic Theatre' (1915), signed by Marinetti, Settimelli and Corra.²³ They were composed mostly of one-act plays, and aimed to create a new type of theatrical form by breaking down the traditional structure of both the written play and the show, such as the Whole of Shakespeare to a single act.²⁴ One of Marinetti's plays, *Communicating Vases*, 1916, showed three simultaneous actions in three separate spaces, till they broke the barriers and entered each other's space.²⁵ Dessy had a similar approach in his play *Waiting*, which was printed in two parallel columns, each describing a young man pacing nervously, looking at his watch and waiting for a girl, but nobody comes.²⁶ There are many more examples, but I have chosen these particular ones because of the association they give with some of Beckett's plays. Marinetti's *Communicating Vases*, reminds me of Beckett's *Play*, (1963) - a one act play enacted by three human heads protruding from three identical urns. Dessy's *Waiting* is a play without words, like Beckett's *Act without Words* (1957) and deals with waiting - the main occupation of Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Beckett's emphasis on the visual aspects of the stage, his instructions regarding the gestures and movements of the actors and the tone and tempo of their speech resemble the instructions of the 'Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation' and many other ideas of the Futurists.

Some of the '*sintesi*' developed into very abstract performances, based mostly on the set, lighting and props, with no human actors. For example, the four "characters" in Depero's play *Colors* - gray, red, white and black - were four cardboard objects, each with a different color and geometric shape, all moved by invisible strings, like giant puppets.²⁷ The established theatre, however,

was unable to accept such forms of performance, which abolish all humanity. A theatre with no words, no human drama and no actor could not exist. This kind of abstract performance could not survive within the establishment, and thus it continued to develop outside the theatre, as a genre in itself.

By the 1920s most of the Futurists' ideas were already introduced into the established European theatre, which continued to perform the less abstract '*sintesi*'. However, only a few of their innovations were implemented. Since the theatre groups toured throughout the country and played in all kinds of theatre halls, this restricted the number of props they could use and precluded any complicated set or lighting. Consequently, the '*sintesi*', which were intended to be the most revolutionary theatrical form, had to be staged at conventional theatres, using the traditional stage and props already there. Thus the revolutionary Futurist theatre, which was performing within the mainstream theatre, became institutionalized, and at the same time lost many of his innovations.

The main significance of the Futurists, however, lay in having institutionalized the 'performance' and transformed it into a theatrical medium in its own right. As such, it influenced many avant-garde performances, like certain dances in Diaghilev's **Ballet Russe**, for example *Parade* by Cocteau and Picasso (1917), and certain productions by the **Ballet Suédois**, like *The Creation of the World* (1923) by Darius Mihaud, Léger and Börlin. But above all, as a genre of performance developed outside the established theatre, the Futurists' innovations later infiltrated the avant-garde theatrical groups. We cannot discuss the Dadaist, Surrealist and Constructivist theatre, or even some of Beckett's scenes, without understanding the sources provided by the Futurists.

As mentioned before, the Futurists' innovations lay primarily in their theories, since most of their ideas on lighting and stage design were more advanced than their techniques. Only today, with the development of modern technical means, especially in computers, film, video, and all sorts of virtual reality, can some of the futurist ideas truly be seen at work; but even now they are used mostly in performances such as rock concerts, and held outside the conventional theatre.

Notes

1. C. Tisdall & A. Bozzolla, *Futurism*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1985; 91.
2. M. Kirby, *Futurist Performances*. New York: Dutton, 1971; 14
3. *Ibid.*; 14-6 (Based on the description of Francesco Cangiullo, in his book *La*

- Battaglia di Firenze*, 1967).
4. *Ibid.*; 29-30, and Tisdall & Bozzolla, *Futurism*; 103.
 5. Tisdall & Bozzolla, *Futurism*; 103.
 6. *Ibid.*, and Kirby, *Futurist Performances*; 29-30.
 7. *Ibid.*; 30-32 and Tisdall & Bozzolla, *Futurism*; 103-4.
 8. F. T. Marinetti, 'The Variety Theatre'. In E.T. Kirby, *Futurist Performances*; 179-186.
 9. *Ibid.*; 180.
 10. E. T. Kirby (ed.) *Total Theatre*. New York: Dutton 7 Co., 1969; xvi-xxi.
 11. G. Lista, *La Scène Futuriste*. Paris: Edition du CNRS, 1989; 297 and Kirby, *Futurist Performances*; 100.
 12. See Prampolini's 'Futurist Scenography'. *Ibid.*; 203-6.
 13. Kirby, *Futurist Performances*; 204.
 14. *Ibid.*; 206.
 15. *Ibid.*; 86.
 16. *Ibid.*; 222-24.
 17. Lista, *La Scène Futuriste*; 43.
 18. For more on the influence of Fuller on the Futurists, see *ibid.*; 292-97.
 19. The sketches are in Milan, Museo Teatrale alla Scala. See: P. Hulten, *Futurismo & Futurismi* (Exh. Cat., Palazzo Grassi, Venice). Milan: Bompiani, 1986; 106-7.
 20. See Prampolini's 'Futurist Scenic Atmosphere'. *Ibid.*; 225-31
 21. *Ibid.*; 86-9. For more on the above manifesto and on the magnetic theatre, see in Lista, *La Scène Futuriste*; 297-305
 22. Kirby, *Futurist Performances*; 89-90.
 23. *Ibid.*; 196-202
 24. *Ibid.*; 42.
 25. *Ibid.*; 47.
 26. *Ibid.*; 284-5
 27. *Ibid.*; 59, 278-9.