

Light and Dynamism in Futurist Art and Scenography*

The realization of Futurist theories in art and on stage

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Futurism constituted a total movement that related to all aspects of life and the arts, especially to the visual and performance arts. Many Futurist artists created simultaneously in several media; they were the first to perceive dynamism and speed as the essence of modern existence and, therefore, as the main focus of their arts. By comparing their various manifestos we can detect certain central ideas:

- The simulation of dynamism;
- The inter-penetration of figures, objects, space and light;
- The creation of a 'state of mind', that is - a total experience for the spectator, by utilizing a multitude of artistic means to influence all the senses.

However, whereas the Futurists could express 'modernism' and 'dynamism' through modern subject matters, such as machines, electricity, cars or airplanes, they had difficulty in producing a visual image of dynamism, especially with static media like painting or sculpture, which can not realize movement. In the first phase of Futurism simulating movement was less problematic, because speed and dynamism were perceived as physical and optical phenomena, as was the case in the two manifestos on painting (1910). For example, in *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto*, signed by Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla and Severini, they say: "...On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibration, in their mad career. Thus a running horse has not four legs, but twenty, and their movements are triangular".²

Such perception of movement could be expressed through illusionary devices, inspired by Divisionism (Pointillism) and also by the relatively new



Fig. 1: Balla, *Girl Running on a Balcony*, 1912, Oil, 125X125 cm., Civica Galleria, Milano (Hulten 1986: 73)

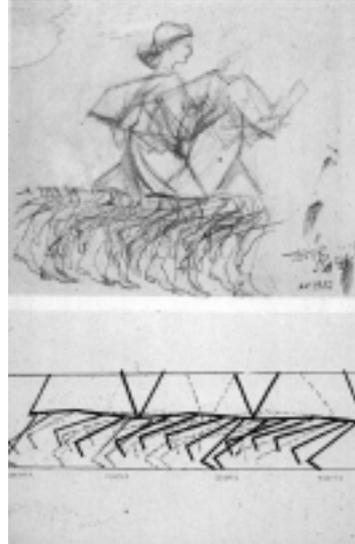


Fig. 2: Balla, *Girl Running on a Balcony*, 1912, Pencil and ink on paper, 24X26.5 cm., Private collection (Hulten 1986: 72)

medium of photography. In Balla's painting and study, *Girl Running on a Balcony*, 1912, (Figs. 1&2) we can detect the influence of Marey's Chronophotography, which analyzes the vectors of movement, as in *Study of a Human Movement* (fig. 3), 1886. At the same time, Balla's technique of simulating movement by overlapping images also resembles Futurist photography, as we can see in Bragaglia's *Image in Motion*, 1913. By changing the opening of the shutter, or by using photomontage, Bragaglia portrayed the object's movement as a continuous form, a sort of smear. A similar effect was achieved in several of Balla's paintings, like *The Hand of the Violinist*, 1912.

Up to 1911 the Futurists (except for Severini) were still unfamiliar with the innovations of the Cubists. Their declaration in the *Technical Manifesto* that painting cannot exist today without Divisionism,³ proves how provincial they were. Divisionism, which was created in 1880s, was *passé* – a style of the past and not of the Future. So too was their optical perception of dynamism; no wonder Gabo the Constructivist mocked them in his *Realist Manifesto*.

However, after the group had visited Paris in 1911 and had their first encounter with the Cubists and their modern perception of reality, the Futurists moved from optic phenomena to epistemology: dynamism became the essence of the object existing in Bergsonian time and space, both homogenous and

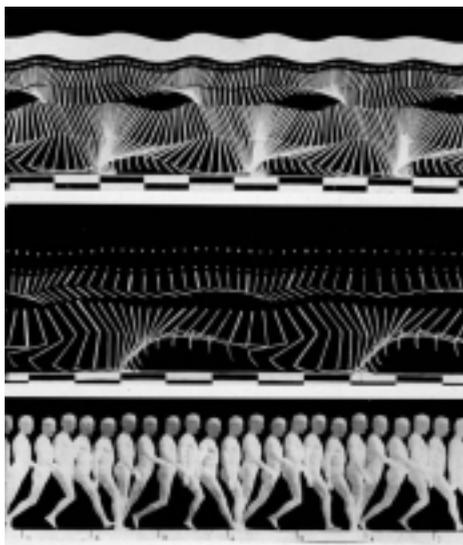


Fig. 3: Marey, *Chronophotography, Study of a Human Movement*, 1886
(Hulten 1986: 43)

heterogenous. This concept emphasized even more the problem of visual realization: how to represent the object's existence in *duration* - the abstract dimension of movement - and above all, how to realize the inter-penetration of figures, objects, space and light.

On February 5th, 1912, five months after their first visit to Paris, the Futurists returned to exhibit in Gallery Bernheim Jeune. This was a typical Futurist impertinence: not only did they use the Cubists' style, but they also exhibited their own works in the Cubists' stronghold, explaining in the introduction to their catalog, *The Exhibitors to the Public* (1912), why they were better than the Cubists.⁴ The Paris exhibition proved indeed that Cubism had given them a new artistic language to realize many of their aims. For example, Boccioni's *The Street Enters the House*, 1911, (Fig. 4) manifests what they had declared in *The Exhibitors to the Public*: "In painting a person on a balcony, seen from inside the room, we do not limit the scene to what the square frame of the window renders visible; but we try to render the sum total of visual sensations which the person on the balcony has experienced... This implies the simultaneousness of the ambient and therefore the dislocation and dismemberment of objects, the scattering and fusion of details..."⁵

If the Futurists were eventually able to create in their paintings an illusion of inter-penetration and dynamism, they could not do so in their sculptures.



Fig. 4: Boccioni, *The Street Enters the House*, 1911, Oil, 100X100 cm., Hanover Kunstmuseum (Hulten 1986: 123)

With paint or pencil we can create an illusion of transparency, opacity, light, shadow, volume, depth etc. But sculpture is a very concrete medium; with the traditional materials – stone, bronze or wood - we can not achieve transparency or dynamism. The inter-penetration of light that Boccioni could achieve in his painting *Materia*, 1912, he could not achieve in his sculpture *Head+House+Light*, 1912 (Fig.5). This lost sculpture, which was made of plaster and other materials, could not realize movement. The beams of light, which are supposed to be of no substance, were concretized by using strips of wood, and therefore could not realize the inter-penetration of light. Although I find it to be one of the most interesting early modern sculptures, from a Futuristic point of view it was a failure.

Only kinetic sculpture made of transparent materials could have achieved some of the Futurists' aims. But, unfortunately, the Futurists preceded their time, and their innovations lay primarily in their theories, since most of their ideas were more revolutionary than the techniques available. Since they did not possess the sophisticated multi-media that we have today, and since the realization of dynamism and movement can be better achieved by acting in three-dimensional space, I argue here that in their own time the stage was the most suitable Futurist arena. Furthermore, one of their most desired aims, a total sensual experience, is more effectively achieved through the audio-visual medium of performance. Not all the Futurists' ideas for a dynamic stage could



Fig. 5: Boccioni, *Head+House+Light*, 1911-1912, Lost (*Boccioni a Milano*, Milano 1982: 247)

be fully supported by the machinery available at the time, but since light can create the illusion of movement and transformation, stage lighting became one of their most advanced solutions. Light was even meant to substitute for the actor, as we shall see later.

Color, light and sound became very important elements in the Variety Show, with particular emphasis on their synthesis. The Variety 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*).⁶ Marinetti wanted to shatter 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 shows, however, were to be nothing like any of them, but a combination that would create something different, to include marionettes, mechanical scenery and props, noise, sound, and “all the new significations of lights”.⁷

All the visual means were incorporated into the ‘Sintesi’, which was another form of Futurist performance, first discussed in the manifesto *Futurist Synthetic Theatre* (1915), signed by Marinetti, Settimelli and Corra.⁸ 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'.⁹ 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* (1916) – 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.¹⁰ 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. Therefore this kind of abstract performance continued to develop outside the establishment, as a genre in itself.

The synthesis between all the aspects of a show was influenced by Wagner's theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork)¹¹ and 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, in 1913 Prampolini wrote his manifesto *Cromafonia*, subtitled *The Color of Sound*.¹²

By 1915 many manifestos had been written on various aspects of performance. However, apart from a few general remarks, none of them included any serious or substantial reference to scenography or stage design, except for Prampolini's *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*,¹³ Prampolini claimed that light and set "can arouse in the spectator such emotional values that neither the poet's words nor the actor's gestures can evoke".¹⁴ 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)."¹⁵ In the same manifesto Prampolini claimed: "Instead of illuminated stage, let's create

the illuminating stage".¹⁶ He also argued that stage 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.¹⁷

I believe that the most important and revolutionary idea lay in Prampolini's 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 communicates subconsciously with the spectators, through the use of shapes, colors, movement and light that create a 'state of mind'. This notion, that there is a direct and subconscious communication between the stage and the audience, can be traced 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 difficult, since one cannot recreate the experience of these past performances, not even partially, as they are not documented on video or film.

Prampolini claims that words and gestures alone can not create such a 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. He 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 plays that enable the designer to use all his means and powers of expression.

I would like to emphasize that the Futurists were not the first to realize the importance of perceptual means, and many of their ideas could already be found in those of Appia and Craig. 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 light. 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 main influences on the development of the Futurists' stage lighting was the dancer Loie Fuller, who took the European stage by storm at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. For example, in her dances *Le Lys* (1897, Théâtre de Folies Bergères, Paris), or *Le Papillon* (1912, Théâtre de Bouffes Parisiens), Fuller created 'dancing painting' (*tableau dancé*). The so-called 'paintings' were comprised of arabesque and abstract moving forms of light and colors, which were created by moving the abundance of fabric that



Fig. 6: Malevich, Sketches for costumes, *Victory Over the Sun*, 1913 (Tarkka 1989: 78-79)

made up her dress and shawl.¹⁸ The changing forms were lit with colored light from all directions, including lights from beneath the stage that were reflected through the transparent floor.¹⁹ Thus Fuller was the first to create a new genre of show – a Ballet of Lights.²⁰

The first to implement the new function of light were the Russian Futurists, in the ‘opera’ *Victory over the Sun*, which was performed on December 3rd and 5th, 1913, at the Luna Park Theatre, St. Petersburg. I don’t wish to get into the argument of whether Russian Futurism was influenced by the Italians or developed independently,²¹ but I believe that no one will argue the fact that *Victory over the Sun* was a *tour de force* of new techniques of stage lighting. The libretto of the ‘opera’ was written by the poet/theorist Alexei Kruchenykh, the music was by the musician/painter Mikhail Matyushin, and the set and costume were by the painter Kazimir Malevich. I won’t tell the tale of the opera here, because it is both long complicated. As one of its contemporary witnesses said: “We all understood that the battle had begun, but no one was really sure who was fighting and against what”.²²

The production suffered from a low budget and not enough preparation time, and Malevich could not realize in detail all his plans for set and costume, the latter of which were made of cardboard. However, the Luna Park Theatre was equipped with ultra modern lighting equipment,²³ and was one of the first theatres to have spot-lights.²⁴ The light was used to express the new futurist language of ‘Zaum’, which means ‘beyond-mind’. Kruchenykh described



Fig. 7: Malevich, Stage design, *Victory Over the Sun*, 1913, Reconstruction, 1987-1988, Finland (Tarkka 1989: 76)

'Zaum' as "chopped up words, half words and their whimsical intricate combination."²⁵ Malevich aimed to achieve the same fragmentation by breaking up the forms and the space with effects of light: The set and the costumes were painted as if they were constructed of many geometrical parts, each in another shape and color. (Figs. 6-7) Thus, every time an identical color of the set and the costume clashed, that part of the body disintegrated into the set and disappeared. By using spot-lights Malevich could reveal only small parts of the body or the set, and by using alternating colored filters on the projectors he could change the colors of costumes and set components, or even blacken some - by a combination of adding or subtracting colors.

One of the Russian Futurists, Benedikt Livshitz, described the lighting: "Bodies were broken up by the beams of light, they alternately lost arms, legs, head, because for Malevich they were only geometric bodies yielding not only to decomposition into elements, but also to complete disintegration in the pictorial space".²⁶

Whereas the lighting of *Victory over the Sun* was innovative, it was not a new genre of show - not a real Ballet of Lights. The first to create a true 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, had 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 (Fig. 8).²⁷



Fig. 8: Balla, Sketch for stage, *Feu d'artifice*, 1915, Tempera on paper, 15.9X19.5 cm., Museo teatrale alla Scala, Milan (Hulten 1986: 106)

Some of the abstract forms were made of solid wood covered with cloth and then painted. Some smaller forms were made of constructions 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 (Figs. 9–10). 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 per minute (!).

Up until then the traditional function of lights had been to illuminate, to define, to emphasize and to create an atmosphere. But with Fuller and then Balla, light also became an actor and an active part of the set, and above all it was also a solution to the Futurist ideal of a dynamic stage and the inter-penetration of forms. Light can move, change, create moods and form shapes that can even inter-penetrate. Whereas light posed a problem to the sculptors, it offered salvation for the Futurist theatre.

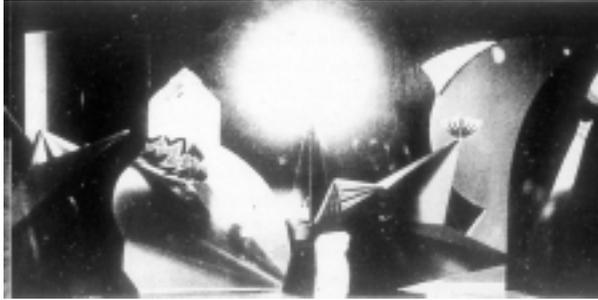


Fig. 9: Balla, *Feu d'artifice*, 1917, Musée de Strasbourg (Kirby 1971: 84)

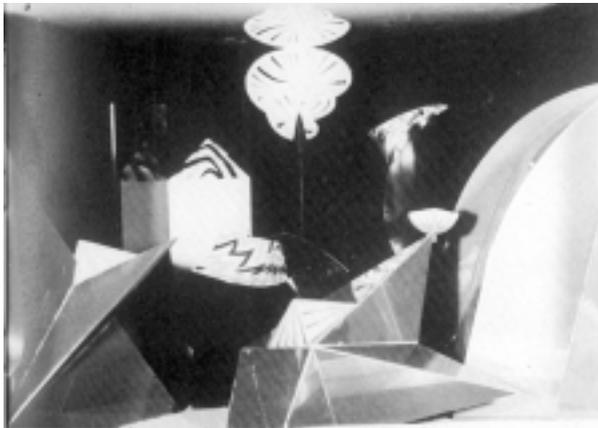


Fig. 10: Balla, *Feu d'artifice*, 1917, Musée de Strasbourg (Goldberg 1996: 25)

Eventually, only a few of the Futurists' innovations were implemented. 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. The main significance of the Futurists, however, lay in their having transformed the Performance into a theatrical medium in its own right, and as such, it influenced many avant-garde performances. But it is 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 now be seen at work.

Notes

* The first version was published in: *Scenography International*, 5 (2002), "Tradition and Innovation" (<http://www.lboro.ac.uk>).

1. Apollonio 1973: 28.

2. *Ibid.*: 29.
3. *Ibid.*: 45-50.
4. *Ibid.*: 47.
5. Kirby 1971: 179-186 (Marinetti, 'The Variety Theatre').
6. *Ibid.*: 180.
7. *Ibid.*: 196-202
8. *Ibid.*: 42.
9. *Ibid.*: 59, 278-279.
10. Kirby 1969: xvi-xxi.
11. Lista 1989: 297; Kirby 1971: 100.
12. Kirby: 203-206 (Prampolini's 'Futurist Scenography').
13. *Ibid.*: 204.
14. *Ibid.*: 206.
15. *Ibid.*: 205
16. *Ibid.*: 86.
17. Lista 1989: 43.
18. For more on the influence of Fuller on the Futurists, see *Ibid.*: 292-297.
19. The Ballet of Lights did not influence only the Futurists, but was also later developed in the Bauhaus: in the Light Play and in the ballets of Schlemmer and Kandinsky.
20. For an elaboration on that subject, see: Douglas 1974: 229-239.
21. Tarkka 1989: 78.
22. *Ibid.*: 77.
23. Compton 1976: 580.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. Hulten: 1986; 106-107. The sketches are in Milan, Museo Teatrale alla Scala.

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