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Theatricality of Futurism. The Avant-garde as a Performative Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

Nel caso del Futurismo italiano, il ricorso al teatro, alla relazione tra palcoscenico e platea come metafora, crea più di un disorientamento. Pertanto, è giusto ribadire come l'equivoco di una supremazia del teatro, nel contesto dell'avanguardia italiana, generi un brillante paradosso il che, come si vedrà, conduce ad una rivalutazione, alla luce dei Performance Studies, della teatralità del movimento fondato da Marinetti.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Teatralità; Futurismo; Performance; Avanguardia; Manifesto*

In the case of Italian Futurism, the recursiveness to theatre, to the relationship between stage and audience as metaphor, creates more than one disorientation. Hence, it is fair to reiterate, how the misunderstanding of a theatre's supremacy, in the context of the Italian avant-garde, generates a brilliant paradox which leads to a revaluation, in the light of Performance Studies, of theatricality of movement founded by Marinetti.

KEYWORDS: *Theatricality; Futurism; Performance; Avant-garde; Manifesto*

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Futurism was born with an inestimable original sin.

It is a movement, in fact, which looks to the “theatrability”, rather than the “theatricality”, of existence, yet pays a very high price for the overflowing literacy of its founder, as well as, main exponent: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.

Since the *Manifesto of Futurist Playwrights* of 1911, the purely literary notion that Marinetti attributed to the theatre had been clarified: «Among all the literary forms, the one that can have a more immediate futurist significance is certainly the theatrical work».¹

On the one hand, Marinetti therefore claims a mainly literary instance of the movement, on the other the interest in the performative character, represented not only by the specific dedication to the theatre, seems to open this instance to the unexpected and multiform destiny of his totalitarian strategy.

It is therefore necessary to recover and emphasize the Schechner’s distinction between “is” performance and “as” performance² as the key to a more inclusive attention of Performance Studies to the variegated universe of the media arts, in which literature naturally has a significant specific weight.³

While it is true that practically anything can be studied as if it were a performance, this is eminently true of literature. In the controversy that characterizes the notion of literature on the contemporary side,⁴ an essential function seems to be played by the avant-gardes with the destabilizing charge reserved for the most banal

¹ F.T. MARINETTI, in L. DE MARIA, *Per conoscere Marinetti e il Futurismo*, Mondadori, Milano 1973, p. 30. In this regard, see the appropriate considerations by Tessari: «[...] it is clear that – for him – the 'theatrical' opus consists almost exclusively in mere “literary form”: that is, in a page of written drama that actors would then have to perform to the audience. Little or nothing seems to matter to him about the entire complex of stage technai, that is, about everything that constitutes the authentic essential autonomous language of the performance [...] Actually, Marinetti’s initial positions towards the theatre – if compared with those of the authentic great of the twentieth century scene – they are all still prisoners of the impasse which forces them to oscillate between a perception as clear as it is instrumental of the communicative force immanent in the performance, and a poetics of the drama still marked by old-fashioned literary criteria», R. TESSARI, *Teatro e avanguardie storicghe. Traiettorie dell'eresia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2005, pp. 60-61.

² «What is the difference between “is” performance and “as” performance? Certain events are performances and other events less so. There are limits to what “is” performance. But just about anything can be studied “as” performance», R. SCHECHNER, *Performance Studies. An Introduction*, Routledge, New York 2013, p. 38.

³ Cfr. in this regard the dossier recently published in the context of “focused” column of «Oblio» (XI, 42-43, 2021), edited by M. FUSILLO and D. TOMASELLO: *Performance Studies and literary criticism*, cit., pp. 12-127.

⁴ We allow ourselves to quote (also for the bibliographic references contemplated in it), for the examination of this topic, our *Playtelling. Performance narrative nell'Italia contemporanea*, Marsilio, Venezia 2021.

nomenclatures and the contents that mark their fortune. In this sense, Futurism confirms the rule, while at the same time representing a wonderful and problematic exception.

All Marinetti's proclamations and the main manifestos exhibit an iconoclastic vein that does not discount any rank or affiliation, yet the obsessive reaffirmation of the literary coat of arms contradicts the substance of these intentions, but does not escape its form which was and remains literary in any case.

Which implications does this contradiction entail?

First of all, that the "is" performance and "as" performance dichotomy must, in the case of Futurism, be reviewed to the extent of a deconstruction of every possible calembour.

It is evident, that is, that for Futurism, which patriotically never uses the term performance (on whose etymological implications it is necessary to refer to the decisive pages of Piermario Vescovo),⁵ everything "is" performance in a sense that does not allow the *excusatio non petita* of some attenuated similarity ("as" performance) and everything is, at the same time, literature.

This has been true since the first *Manifesto* of 1909, in which the passage from the meditative fixity of the literary author's usual pose to his craving for a disruptive and furious praxis in no way undermines the *sine qua non* of a literary horizon within which to place the futurist feats: «Until today, literature exalted thoughtful immobility, ecstasy and sleep. We want to exalt the aggressive movement, the feverish insomnia, the running step, the somersault, the slap and the punch».

On the other hand, this claim finds a further support on the ground of an insistent interpellation of audience who, mimicking the scene of a "Futurist evening", or rather of the most explosive moment of Marinetti's performative verve,⁶ traces its most usual origin in the written page:

Does this outrage you? Are you booing me?... Raise your voice!... I have not heard the insult! Harder! What? Ambitious?... Certainly! We are ambitious, because we don't want to rub ourselves against your fetid fleeces, o stinking, mud-colored flock, channeled in the ancient roads of the Earth!⁷

⁵ P. VESCOVO, *Par-fournir, per-formare*, in D. TOMASELLO, P. VESCOVO, *La performance controversa. Tra vocazione rituale e vocazione teatrale*, Cue Press, Imola 2021, pp. 31 ssg.

⁶ Cfr. M. MUSELLA, *Serate futuriste. Gli «strepitosi vagiti» dello spettacolo d'avanguardia italiano*, Diana, Milano 2019, p. 15: «The great hall soon became a battlefield. Fists and stick blows: countless battles and fights in the stalls and in the gallery. Police intervention, arrests, ladies passed out amidst the confusion and indescribable bustle of the crowd. At the exit, a procession of several thousand people formed behind the futurists and accompanied them for a long time through the city. The battle continued in the streets, shouting: Long live futurism! Long live Marinetti!».

⁷ *Uccidiamo il chiaro di luna, Manifesti futuristi*, in L. DE MARIA, *Per conoscere Marinetti*, cit., p. 46.

Marinetti claims unprecedented spaces for the action of the literary artist, but is aware of the supremacy of the word and the strength of its agency.⁸

It is a performative word, the futurist one, precisely because it doesn't necessarily imply a material scene, a dramaturgy.

After all, it is also in the context of this poetic word's performative function that the diatribe between "paroliberisti" and "versoliberisti" is inscribed, illustrating the sense of a profound divarication, destined to leave profound aftermaths (not only in Southern Italy) between pro-Marinetti and anti-Marinetti positions.

This antagonism measures the "blatant" character of every futurist invention, precisely in the sense of finding a meaning that can never, under any circumstances, escape the trial by fire of a mental and very concrete stage.

In this sense, the recurrence of the theatre, of the relationship between stage and audience as a metaphor, creates more than one disorientation. Hence, it is fair to reiterate it, the misunderstanding of a supremacy of the theater in the congeries of the Italian avant-garde. A misunderstanding, among others, spread precisely by Marinetti himself, starting from the inexhaustible workshop of his Manifestos until, in the mature season of Marinetti's theatrical commitment, in the *Synthetic Futurist Theatre* (1915), the inclination for the stage certainly seems to prevail: «Most of our works have been written in the theatre. The theatrical environment is for us an inexhaustible reservoir of inspirations [...]».⁹

Yet, in the same context, the futurist leader finds the opportunity to reiterate, in front of the traditionalist counterpart of the moment, the way his own commitment takes shape: «The traditionalist theatre is the literary form that most forces the author's genius to deform and to decrease [...]».¹⁰

It is still the "literary form" that dictates the law, extending its dominion definitively also to theatrical militancy.

Even in the dramaturgical field, therefore, there is no element that leads one to suppose the overcoming of an acclaimed centrality of the text, however resized, if it is true that in the new theatre's program it is considered «[...] stupid to write a hundred pages where one would suffice»,¹¹ and, in fact, to the extent of the so-called moments, the futurist syntheses do not intend to escape, except in some sporadic cases, the iron logic of the most tested plots and a perfectly calibrated writing. It is

⁸ The obligatory reference here is to A. GELL, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon, Oxford 1998, but also, of course, J. L. AUSTIN, *How to Do Things with Words*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1962.

⁹ F. T. MARINETTI, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, a cura di L. DE. MARIA, Mondadori, Milano 1968, p. 103.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 101.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 102.

therefore true that, once again, in a scheme of rather hackneyed contradictions, almost in spite of Marinetti's repeated proclamations, Futurist theatrical writing seems committed to exorcising the conventionalisms of current dramaturgy rather than actually breaking ties with the confused congeries of teatrological notions that inhabit the stage culture of the early twentieth century in Italy.¹²

It is no coincidence that Gordon Craig, who in «The Mask» combines skepticism and irony, judges Marinettian intentions with a very wise distrust: «[...] our hope is what the futurists tell us to hope. But they do not hope: they limit themselves to making declarations».¹³

Craig's lightning intuition hits the spot. All Futurism is explained, or could be, by an irrepressible impetus to the declaration of intent. This, however, far from being a limit, is the specific virtue of the movement. Indeed, it can be said that Futurism itself was designed on the possibility of this limit, on the performative resources of a word projected in an optative way towards the dream of action. An absolute action because it is free from any link with reality, entrusted to that process indicated as "liberated embodied simulation" by Hanna Wojciehowski and Vittorio Gallese:

Perhaps because in aesthetic experience we can temporarily suspend our grip on the world of our daily occupations. We liberate new energies and put them into the service of a new dimension that, paradoxically, can be more vivid than prosaic reality. The aesthetic experience of art works, more than a suspension of disbelief, can be thus interpreted as a sort of "liberated embodied simulation". When reading a novel, looking at a visual art work, or attending a theatrical play or a movie, our

¹² The thesis remains awaiting further verification, albeit fortunate, according to which «the futurist theatricality initiated in the shows between 1910 and 1915 arose naturally from a conception 'unscriptural' of the scenic text, which was in fact breaking all ties with the habits and grandmothers of "drama" above all "bourgeois"», A. BARSOTTI, *Futurismo e avanguardia italiana tra le due guerre*, Bulzoni, Roma 1990, p. 18. Nor does it seem plausible to define «anti-literary» (U. ARTIOLI, *La scena e la dynamis. Immaginario e struttura nelle sintesi futuriste*, Pàtron, Padova 1975), in the glimpse of '15-'17, the theatrical writing of the Italian avant-garde. In this context, one is rather tempted to agree with Tessari's position according to which «Futurist syntheses [...] are certainly not capable of realizing a radical aesthetic alternative (nor of being competitive on a practical level) to the linguistic coherence that in any case it distinguishes the different outcomes of the cinematographic screenplay and of the drama of normal consumption. It is no coincidence that the only novelty factor destined to establish itself in the national theater between 1910 and 1920, springs not from outside, but from within the standardization system that had been perfecting itself in those years [...] After all, even Marinetti and Cangiallo, in 1921, will try – a little pathetically – to gain credit as precursors of innovative thrusts that are as less sensational as they are more successful than those that the first Futurism prided itself on pursuing: "If today there is a young Italian theater with mixtures serious-comic-grotesque, unreal characters in real environments, simultaneity and interpenetration of time and space, we owe it to our Synthetic Theatre"», R. TESSARI, *Teatro e avanguardie storiche*, cit., p. 70.

¹³ G. CRAIG, in G. ISOLA, G. PEDULLÀ, *Gordon Craig in Italia*, Bulzoni, Roma 1993, p. 129.

embodied simulation becomes liberated, that is, it is freed from the burden of modeling our actual presence in daily life. We look at art from a safe distance from which our being open to the world is magnified. In a sense, to appreciate art means leaving the world behind in order to grasp it more fully.

Through an immersive state in which our attention is focused on the narrated virtual world, we can fully deploy our simulative resources, letting our defensive guard against daily reality slip for a while.¹⁴

What is Futurism, as Palazzeschi intuited,¹⁵ if not a performative machine totally consecrated, in the name of the future, to an exemption from the authentic reality of the Italian society of the time?

And what are the Futurist Manifestos, if not the attempt to place the entire celebration of a palingenetic vision of Marinetti in the grandiloquent lyricism of the proclamation?

The leader of the movement believes, literally, in the power of the word, he considers it more desirable and reliable than any concrete implementation, any practice, any ideology (so much so that, when put to the test of facts, the political adventure of Futurism will dissolve half-heartedly, reluctantly, and sometimes with open hostility, in fascism). However, paradoxical as it may seem, what is more performative than all this?

That is, of a word that sees its boundaries progressively dilated in the name of an energy that only does not need an interpreter to verify it, but, almost anticipating Austin's assumption,¹⁶ rejects it as a forbidding manner.

This dizzying escalation, in which literature is the definitive form of every Marinettian invention, culminates in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* (1912), in which the word becomes an icon, a pure performative vehicle, an «image» and therefore a manifesto:

In a poem like the “parolibera” one, everything is manifest. The programmatically futurist concept of Manifesto which constitutes the key, immediately explicating

¹⁴ H. WOJCIEHOWSKI, V. GALLESE, *How Stories Make Us Feel: Toward an Embodied Narratology*, in «California Italian Studies», 2 (1), 2011, p. 17.

¹⁵ «Futurism could only be born in Italy / a country that looks to the past / in the most absolute and exclusive way / and where only the past is topical. / This is why futurism is current today / because futurism is also past», A. PALAZZESCHI, *Il futurismo*, in *Via delle cento stelle*, Mondadori, Milano 1972; now in Id., *Tutte le poesie*, a cura di A. Dei, Mondadori, Milano 2002, p. 836.

¹⁶ «[A] performative utterance will [. . .] be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. [. . .] Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of etiologies of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. Our performative utterances [. . .] are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances», J. L. AUSTIN, *How to Do Things with Words*, cit., p. 22.

and extroverted, of Marinetti's theory, becomes the only adjectival connotation of a literature devoid of adjectives and connoting motifs. It must therefore be admitted that a manifest literature springs from the generational culture of the avant-garde, the culture of manifestos. It is not, mind you, a play on words, but the evidence of an expressive module that makes the care of the surface, the formal character of the table, its content and its creed. However, this thrust is soon destined to run out, to be consumed, to burn in the blaze of the same fire that helped to start.¹⁷

The "theatricality" of futurism is the result of an "expansive" vocation of the literary word which goes beyond the prerogatives of the page to become body and action, despite the awareness that the decisive performative instance, among the initiatives of the Italian avant-garde, would have been destined for the paradox of an ephemeral impulse, without sufficiently effective consequences.

¹⁷ D. TOMASELLO, *Il futurismo letterario. Storia e geografia dell'avanguardia italiana*, Sinestesie, Avelino 2015, p. 77.