

Futurism in Venice, Crisis and “la musica dell’avvenire,” 1924*

Harriet Boyd

La crise militaire est peut-être finie. La crise économique est visible dans tout sa force; mais la crise intellectuelle, plus subtile, et qui, par sa nature, même, prend les apparences les plus trompeuses.¹
(Paul Valéry, 1924)

The future of old media

Tucked away in the recesses of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice is a one-off Futurist periodical. The accumulated dust and lack of wear belie its significance. Entitled *Arabau Barù* (an idiosyncratic greeting used by the Venetian Futurists),² the periodical was produced in Venice by local activists Renzo Bertozzi and Paolo Foscari to generate publicity on the eve of a musico-theatrical event at the city’s Teatro Goldoni on January 25, 1924. The publication marks a neglected moment in Futurism’s history. Styled as a four-page broadsheet, it exhibits the black and red text and typography favored by the Futurists (see Figure 1). The title typeface suggests both velocity and auditory volume: “Arabau” rises from a small to large font, and the letters of “Barù” are distributed on various horizontal lines, as if to suggest their transcription on a musical stave. The edition’s subtitle reads “argomento dei futuristi veneziani esce quando vuole e può” (Exposition of the Venetian Futurists, appearing when it wants to and can); inscribed in a vortical shape that resembles the electronic loudspeaker, it too suggests its sonic realization. Slogans are scattered across the page: to the left is the play on words “Marciare, non marcire” (March, don’t rot), taken from the 1915 manifesto “Il teatro futurista sintetico;” this is mirrored by “Tutto il futurismo!?!” to the right.³

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¹ “The military crisis is perhaps over. The economic crisis is visible in all its force; but the intellectual crisis, which is more subtle, by its own nature, perhaps, takes on the most deceptive appearance.” Paul Valéry, “La crise de l’esprit (1918),” *Variété* 1 (1924): 15.

² The Venetian origins of the slogan have been contested by, for example, Tiziana Migliore, “Macchina di visione. Futuristi in Biennale,” in *Macchina di visione. Futuristi in Biennale. Scegli una stella, chiamala Futurismo, viaggerà*, eds. Tiziana Migliore and Beatrice Buscaroli (Venice: Marsilio, 2009), 25-117. She claims that the phrase came from the Romagna (36).

³ The statement in the manifesto, signed by F. T. Marinetti, Emilio Settemelli, and Bruno Corra, reads: “War—Futurism intensified obliges us to march and not rot (*marciare, non marcire*) in libraries and reading rooms. THEREFORE WE THINK THAT THE ONLY WAY TO INSPIRE ITALY WITH THE WARLIKE SPIRIT TODAY IS THROUGH THE THEATRE.” *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. and trans. Umbro Apollonio (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 183.



Fig. 1: *Arabau Barù 1* (1924), 1. © courtesy of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo—Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana. Further reproduction prohibited.

Advertising for the forthcoming Goldoni performance by *Il Nuovo Teatro Futurista*—the latest incarnation of Futurist theatrical experimentation—occupies most of the front page. The date, location, program, and protagonists are listed along various axes and in various shapes. Indeed the juxtaposition of texted vortices and diagrams suggests what we might call a sonic visuality: loudspeaker symbols frame writing throughout the document, and other text is arranged to suggest radiating waves.⁴ Upon turning the page, the reader is greeted with similar effects. Previously published texts are recycled, jostling with the newly written. On the inside

⁴ This visual aspect is something the periodical shares with other Futurist manifestos, which, as noted by Sara Iacobitti and Irene Morelli, are characterized by their “Aspetto grafico innovativo, di forte impatto comunicativo ed utilizzo dei mass-media: Marinetti, si è detto, è stato un precursore per l’approccio ai mezzi di comunicazione, utilizzando il manifesto come strumento di informazione capillare.” “I manifesti: forza e contraddizione del futurismo,” in *Futurismo e musica: una relazione non facile*, eds. Antonio Rostagno and Marco Stacca (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2010), 44.

leaf is the “Manifesto futurista ai Veneziani” (1910), signed by F. T. Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, and Luigi Russolo; beneath is a more extended piece by Marinetti, “Discorso futurista ai Veneziani.” The remainder of the document features a mixture of poetry, art, and reportage. The back page has advertisements for local businesses, each engaging with the Futurist theme: a “Bar americano” that sells “Bibite esotiche, fantastiche, futuriste;” a photography studio extols the Futurist’s contribution to the medium.⁵

Two items in the periodical stand out in particular. Both are located on the third page, and both make the latent aurality of the document explicit (see Figure 2). Top center is a Futurist poem in the style of “parole in libertà” (words set free), entitled “Caserma + Strada.” The poem articulates a series of distinctions: between silence (“Silennnnzio”) and noise on the one hand, and between onomatopoeia (“drin dirindin drindrinn”) and music (“la strada la strada che canta”) on the other. Again the iconography of loudspeakers and radiating patterns suggests dynamism and aural velocity. Even more significant is an enlarged text at the center of the page, one that articulates this iconography explicitly. Dedicated to the Venetian Futurist musician Giulio Salom, it outlines what “la musica dell’avvenire” (the music of the future) will be: “from radiotelegraphic waves emanates the music of the future [...] all the celestial symphonies are condensed in the magnificent and monstrous mouth of the loudspeaker [...] wires + antenna + lightning x long kisses in the clouds [...] speed.”⁶ The future of music resided in the new sounds and communicative means of the latest technologies; this was the year, after all, of the advent of national radio broadcasting.⁷



Fig. 2: *Arabau Barù* 1 (1924), 3. © courtesy of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo—Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana. Further reproduction prohibited.

⁵ Whether the adverts suggest local support for the Futurists (as Willard Bohn claims in *The Other Futurism: Futurist Activity in Venice, Padua and Verona* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004], 41) or a certain opportunism is another matter.

⁶ “[D]alle onde radiotelegrafiche si sprigiona la musica dell’avvenire [...] tutte le sinfonie celesti sono condensate nella bocca magnifica e mostruosa dell’altoparlante [...] fili + antenne + lampi x baci lunghi sulle nuvole [...] velocità.” *Arabau Barù*, 1:3.

⁷ A royal decree for the state’s use of radio had been issued in 1923. On August 27, 1924, the Unione Radiofonica Italiana (URI) was inaugurated in Rome; it began broadcasting regular news on October 6, 1924.

The periodical thus touches on key areas of Futurism that had survived into the mid-1920s: the boundaries between visibility and aural, writing and sound, silence and noise; the use of technology; the aesthetics of speed; and the notion of an art of the future. Rather than a break with previous decades, the 1920s can be seen as in many ways an intensification and refinement of earlier innovations, in addition to new preoccupations: from telephones, railroads, and wireless communication, to jazz, radio, and the gramophone.⁸ In the document's style and contents, *Arabau Barù* exhibits this increased pace, impact, and ephemerality of urban life.⁹ The periodical is part display object, part advertisement, part manifesto, and part newspaper. Such a multifaceted document was, in itself, nothing new.¹⁰ Rather, what is important is how an older medium—that of the *numero unico* periodical—was reframed and reinvented within Futurist discourse. These publicity outlets formed part of a wider attempt by the movement to exploit and control the media outlets that surrounded an event.

Starting from this seemingly peripheral, but in fact critical Futurist object, I want to begin here from a material history that grounds this moment in the press, periodicals, and other media that prescribed and discussed this Futurist event in Venice. I will argue an exemplary role for the Teatro Goldoni event, for this use of old and new media proved to be crucial both to the success and, paradoxically, to the eventual undermining of the movement. From this perspective I will then approach the supposedly more immaterial aspects of the performance—its reconfigurations of music and noise, sound and silence—and suggest that the event left material traces of an audible legacy. In focusing on one particular event and undertaking an archaeology of the media networks that surrounded it, I can also start to construct a localized history of an urban milieu of Futurist activity that is both typical and idiosyncratic.¹¹ Venice is fascinating here as a locale that

⁸ While the particular socio-political context of the postwar period changed aspects of Futurism's self-identity and artistic program, I would argue that there is no readily definable "secondo" Futurism. This is not to suggest that Futurism did not evolve, but rather that there are not two discernible phases divided by war. For an account of Futurism's various transformations, see Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 232-65. Although I would not go as far in emphasizing the rupture of war, I agree with Poggi's point that in the 1920s there was a turn to erotic desire and religion, love and sentiment that had been effaced in the pre-war period. The articles in a recent edition of *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* also try to move away from the division of Futurism into two periods, claiming that "This divide is a consequence of seeking to preserve early Futurism from the stain of its connection to the subsequent Fascist regime." Walter Adamson and Ernest Ialongo, "Introduction: Reconsidering Futurism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, no. 4 (2013): 391. Italy in the early 1920s was also witness to intensifying worker militancy and unrest, economic recession, rightwing coups, and fears of socialist revolution; for more on this, see Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁹ The Futurists themselves called the newspaper a "synthesis of a day in the world's life." See Marinetti's manifesto "Distruzione della sintassi—immaginazione senza fili—parole in libertà" (1913), reprinted in translation in Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, 96.

¹⁰ Renato Poggioli writes that such periodicals—ones that contained manifestos and slogans and had a relatively short run and circulation—were left over from romanticism. The subtle difference is that the avant-garde incarnation inhabited a relatively detached position in relation to society (they cajoled and attacked the public), whereas the nineteenth-century version sought to lead its readership from one step ahead. See Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald, rev. ed. (1968; repr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 21-23.

¹¹ An important intervention to break with the focus on more industrial centers is Adamson's *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Investigating the first two decades of the century, he argues that although Milanese futurism may have had the largest impact internationally, it was the Florentine avant-garde that had a greater impact in Italy (4); see also Bohn, *The Other Futurism*. The notion of "media archaeology" is discussed in Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds., *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). They

emphasized the contradictions and ambivalences at the center of the Futurist movement and of the postwar milieu. Although denounced by the Futurists as *passatista* in the same way as Rome and Florence were, Venice had its own particular significance by 1924 as a site of earlier Futurist insurgence and as a growing location of Fascist culture with the increasing prominence of the Biennale in cultural life. More importantly, straying off the beaten track of the industrial metropolises favored both by the Futurists and by later scholarship will direct our attention to a comparatively neglected moment in Futurist pursuits and to foreground some of its less-known figures.¹²

I will begin by suggesting that 1924 was a pivotal year for Futurism in the city, and that the movement itself was at that time entering a period of crisis—something foregrounded in this particular locale. The crisis was fuelled by the Biennale's renewed hostilities toward the movement, and the negotiations taking place with the increasingly powerful Fascists. In the second part of the article, I will return to the night at the Goldoni, presenting a detailed account of the performance and investigating how the noisiness of the auditorium intersected with the noisy works performed onstage. I consider how the discourse that surrounded this sonic aspect of the event—of noise and music, sound effects, and *la musica dell'avvenire*—was part of a broader crisis of musical language taking place in public debate. In turn, I will proceed with an account of how this exacerbation and manipulation of crisis was in fact taking place with regard to every aspect of the performance: from the state of contemporary theater and the relationship with new media to the broadening of sensory experience. Finally, I will argue that it was the manifold cultural crisis—a discourse that even inhabited Futurism's own precarious position—that fed the movement's rhetoric, both enabling its success and leading to its eventual undermining. In other words, as a chasm opened between what the movement proselytized and what it practiced, a series of contradictions at the heart of Italian Futurism were exposed: between aesthetics and event, old and new, music and noise, media enterprise and false advertising.

Touring in transition

The January performance at the Teatro Goldoni, directed by the actor-impresario Rodolfo De Angelis, formed part of a twenty-eight-city tour of the peninsula, one that began at the Teatro Trianon in Milan on January 11. The modernization of the railways and introduction of new modes of transport were enabling this trend for large-scale touring; companies such as Il Nuovo Teatro Futurista were able to undertake unprecedented tours into the further reaches of the peninsula, performing in different theaters night after night. The production was overseen—as always—by Marinetti, who was accompanied by the poet and writer Francesco Cangiullo, artists and scenographers Fortunato Depero and Enrico Prampolini, musicians Franco Casavola and Silvio Mix, and actors De Angelis and Diana Mac Gill. The program contained an assortment of the main genres of Futurist experimentation at this time: “Parole veloci,” mechanical ballets, provocative declamation, tactile and sensory dramas, and poetry readings.

claim that studying media often means focusing on the new and forgetting about the past, whereas “media archaeologists have begun to construct alternate histories of suppressed, neglected, and forgotten media” (3). They advocate a focus on the auditory, which they see as neglected by the focus on screen cultures and visuality.

¹² This need for a move away from the usual cities of focus and the “heroic” years of 1909-1915 is also advocated in Adamson and Ialongo, “Introduction: Reconsidering Futurism.”

The company's journey around the country was, as in Venice, often accompanied by one-off periodicals and pamphlets, some officially sponsored by the Futurists, others independently produced. These supplemented the general press coverage with additional related material (manifestos, discourses, event information) and provided forums for discussion. Yet Venice stood out within this well-publicized *tournée* for its weight of press material. Several months after *Arabau Barù*, a second Venetian periodical devoted to local Futurists was also inaugurated, one with a larger print run: *La Nuova Venezia* ran for eighteen issues between April 25, 1924 and September 14, 1925. Conceived as a successor to *Arabau Barù*, the review was also styled as a broadsheet newspaper and edited by Bertozzi and Foscari (although the latter left after the fourth issue). Part of the periodical's *raison d'être* was a show of support for the Futurists in the face of increasing antagonism from the city's Biennale. The conflict was coming to a head in 1924, as the art festival's conservative governing body—now including several prominent Fascists—excluded the avant-garde movement.¹³ Such media were thus used to critique the movement's increasing ostracization from cultural life and a defensive promotion of its agenda.

There was much to be trumpeted by the local Futurists, then, and much to be discussed and argued about in the city that year. This was also perhaps due to Venice's recent history with the movement. The city was not the type of noisy industrial center Il Nuovo Teatro Futurista typically celebrated, but it was nonetheless a sizeable Futurist stronghold. For over a decade Venice had been the object of Futurist ire, seen as exemplary of everything they were trying to expunge from the nation: dependent on tourism, locked in the past, anti-industrial, and quiet.¹⁴ The Futurist attack on the city had begun with the manifesto "Contro Venezia passatista" on April 27, 1910, launched from the Campanile in San Marco on July 8 that year.¹⁵ The manifesto attacked Venice as an emblem of the past, a place that existed as "a great nostalgic dream." The Futurists offered to awaken the city from its slumber, "to cure and cicatrize this magnificent, putrescent sore of the past" and "to prepare for the birth of an industrial and military Venice that will rule over the Adriatic Sea."¹⁶

Even for the Futurists, however, Venice as a city-showcase for contemporary art remained a highly desirable site for display. The events of summer 1910 were designed to coincide with an exhibition of Boccioni's paintings at Ca' Pesaro from July 16 to October 20. A Futurist *serata* was also held at La Fenice on August 1 to coincide with the exhibition. At the event, Marinetti delivered his lecture "Discorso futurista ai Veneziani" (later published in *Arabau Barù*), which articulated a Futurist vision of the city—of a Venice modernized with electric lighting and transport:

¹³ Although the Fascists did not officially take charge of the running of the Biennale until 1930, they quickly started to play a role in decision-making processes after coming to power in 1922.

¹⁴ Futurist rhetoric is again in this regard somewhat overstated; although not an industrial center to the degree of Milan or Turin, Venice still had sizeable industrial sites on the Giudecca and its port. There was even a growing discussion in the 1920s and 30s—led by the *gruppo veneziano*—on the need for resurgent industry in the city. For more on this, see Kate Ferris, *Everyday Life in Fascist Venice, 1929-40* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 18-51; see also footnote 16 below.

¹⁵ Official reports of the event by the Futurists speak of thousands of leaflets raining down on the huge crowd; however, I have failed to find any reference to the event in the local press.

¹⁶ "[U]n gran sogno nostalgico," "guarire e cicatrizzare questa putrescente piaga magnifica del passato" and "preparare la nascita di una Venezia industriale e militare che dominerà sul Mare Adriatico." See Marinetti, et al., "Manifesto futurista ai Veneziani" (1910), in *Arabau Barù*, 2. Industrialization and militarism would have a rather more complicated resonance in 1924 Venice. On the one hand, the city was intent on reasserting itself and looking to the future, having experienced action in the First World War. On the other hand, after the war, industry was being moved to Porto Marghera on the mainland, which dramatically increased in size as the 1920s progressed.

vogliamo ormai che le lampade elettriche dalle mille punte di luce taglino e strappino brutalmente le tue tenebre misteriose, ammaliani e persuasive! Il tuo Canal Grande diventerà fatalmente un gran porto mercantile. Treni e tram lanciati sulle grandi vie costruite sui tuoi canali finalmente colmati.¹⁷

(we wish now that the electric lamps of a thousand points of light would cut through and brutally tear at your mysterious darkness, so bewitching and persuasive! Your Grand Canal is destined to become a large trading port. Trains and trams will be launched on the major roads built on your canals finally filled in.)

The performance was advertised through various press networks: a special issue of the Futurist journal *Poesia* was published for dissemination in the city, containing the anti-Venice manifesto and related material. This media hype around the exhibition played a part in its undoing, as Tiziana Migliore writes:

[C]ompared to the forecasts fuelled by Futurist propaganda—riots, trumpets, and bells, a megaphone from the bell tower of San Marco, on the Grand Canal, and on the terrace of the Lido—the exhibition by Boccioni disappointed. The tone of the manifestos and the aggressiveness of Marinetti's denunciation had created an incandescent atmosphere of expectation, which had not then transformed into a real revolution.¹⁸

It was as if the Futurists' media efforts were in part designed to bring about the very things they were forecasting. That such events, perhaps inevitably, fell short meant that in the end the media hype began to surpass the actual events. A corresponding discrepancy emerged between Marinetti's reports and what was recounted in the press: while the former claimed that crowds spilled out of the theater and fought in the streets, many reporters stated that the auditorium had only been half full, and that the audience had simply dispersed at the end.

These tensions resurfaced postwar, with Futurist artists returning to exhibit their work in July 1919. The occasion led to a resurgence of the movement in the city, and a renewal of its engagement with the Biennale. Depero turned down invitations to exhibit in the mid-1920s, during which time—thanks to the influence of Bertozzi and Foscari—Prampolini exhibited works at the Grand Alberghi pavilion on the Venice Lido. Despite the 1924 hostilities with the Biennale, the Futurist artist Felice Casorati was granted a solo show that year. At odds with the conservative establishment that dominated institutions such as the Biennale, then, Marinetti sought to re-ingratiate himself with Mussolini after having moved away from the regime in

¹⁷ Marinetti, "Discorso futurista di Marinetti ai Veneziani," contained in Luciano Caruso, *Manifesti, proclami, interventi e documenti teorici del futurismo, 1909-1944*, Vol. 1 (Florence: SPES, 1980).

¹⁸ Migliore, "Macchina di visione. Futuristi in Biennale," 31.

1920.¹⁹ From 1924, it was the aesthetic arm of the movement that began to take prominence, eschewing statements of political ideology.²⁰ The reason for this vacillation between politics and aesthetics was in part expedient: with the increasingly controlling reach of the Fascist government, Marinetti wanted to retain a position in public life.²¹

Beyond the Venetian locale, 1924 witnessed a spate of broader Futurist activity, primarily in the form of manifestos and pamphlets—the majority of which were related to music and theater. Positioning themselves as inhabiting a transitional phase, the movement claimed to predict the art of the future and the path towards it.²² Such soothsaying was made possible by the culture of crisis and threat of stagnation that were a prominent feature of the postwar Italian public debate.²³ It was also a response to the threat of being sidelined in the musical sphere, a threat spurred in 1923 by the formation of the “Corporazione delle nuove musiche,” headed by Gabriele D’Annunzio, Gian Francesco Malipiero, and Alfredo Casella. Not only did this organization have influence with the Fascists, but the music it proposed and supported was very different from that being experimented with by the Futurists.²⁴

1924 was thus a year marked by uncertainty for the movement: in addition to antagonism from the cultural establishment, the increasingly fraught relationship with Fascism, and the threat of irrelevance in music culture, the tour’s stopover in Venice produced its own resonances. The bombastic rhetoric characterized by *la musica dell’avvenire* that dominated their press dispatches

¹⁹ Marinetti had founded the Partito Politico Futurista in early 1918; it had been incorporated into Mussolini’s Fasci di Combattimento in 1919. After disastrous results for both groups in the November 1919 elections, the Futurists broke away from the regime and flirted again with the far-Left. Antonio Gramsci even entered the debate on the political positioning of Futurism in the 1920s, claiming that the movement had achieved the revolutionary impetus in bourgeois culture the Marxist left should have possessed among the proletariat; see Gramsci, “Marinetti rivoluzionario?” *L’Ordine Nuovo*, January 5, 1921.

²⁰ One way of retaining some political identity was to style themselves as precursors to the Fascist regime; see, for example, Piero Gobetti, “Marinetti il precursore,” *Il Lavoro*, January 31, 1924. In particular, the Futurists stressed how Mussolini’s bombastic rhetoric and exploitation of cultural crisis was derived from their own habits and procedures; see Marinetti, “I diritti artistici propugnati dai futuristi italiani!,” *La Nuova Venezia* 1, no. 2 (April 1924): 2. Benedetto Croce also theorized the Futurists as precursors to the Fascists in his article “Futurismo e fascismo,” *La Critica*, March 1924. In his analysis, the way both groups asserted themselves was by taking advantage of a contemporary understanding of the moment as one of crisis. He discussed this further in “Fatti politici ... e interpretazioni storiche,” *La Stampa*, May 15, 1924. For more on Croce’s theorizing of a culture of crisis, see Axel Körner, “The Experience of Time as Crisis: On Croce’s and Benjamin’s Concept of History,” *Intellectual History Review* 21, no. 2 (2011): 151-69.

²¹ Scholars have recently started to emphasize Marinetti’s underlying Fascist allegiance, despite these vacillations. For a discussion of Marinetti as a “fervent Fascist” in the 1930s, see Ialongo, “Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: The Futurist as Fascist, 1929-37,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, no. 4 (2013): 393-418. 1924 also saw the Primo Congresso Futurista, which took place in Milan on November 23 and 24. The event was conceived as a massive media and publicity exercise, staged to enable the movement to reassert itself. Constant press releases and reports were dispatched; special edition periodicals styled as broadsheet newspapers were issued. Marinetti also released a new collection of his writings, entitled *Futurismo e fascismo* (Foligno: Franco Campitelli, 1924).

²² Poggioli claims the avant-garde is characterized by this self-positioning between the present and the future; see Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 72.

²³ This culture of crisis is evident on every front, from social and cultural to economic and political crisis; the word “crisi” was ubiquitous in the mainstream and literary press in 1924. Reinhart Koselleck, in his more general theorization of the term, claims that a sudden proliferation suggests a perception of epochal change. Koselleck, “Crisis,” trans. Michaela Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): 358.

²⁴ The Corporazione espoused music in more traditional idioms and for standard orchestral instruments. More important, however, was that the official rhetoric of the group was notably subdued, going directly against the tone adopted by the Futurists; for more on this, see Guido Salvetti, *La nascita del novecento*, Vol. 10 (*Biblioteca di cultura musicale: storia della musica*) (Turin: EDT srl, 1991), 295-97.

was a means by which the movement sought to assert itself in a moment of quandary and crisis, amid a pervasive sense of concern that infiltrated the Futurists' own self-positioning.²⁵ But their maximalist outlook—the result of a postwar culture characterized by extremes—entailed a disavowal of all things upon which they were in fact most reliant: old technologies, media, and sounds.

These contemporary concerns had a particular musical purview, clustered as they were around a predicament at the heart of postwar Italian musical life: forging a path to the future amid the ruins of the past. On the one hand, the avant-garde exploitation of nationalist uncertainty saw outspoken rejections of German culture and heritage, such as Mix's statement that "it is time to stop the performance of works by dead authors (almost always Germans) who often bore and never interest because they do not correspond to the new sensibility of today [...] musical ruins that are much better kept in the libraries."²⁶ On the other hand, there was a specifically Futurist rejection of the burden of Italian history. This sounds forth in a report by a young Venetian on the first Futurist theatrical outing in Venice: "For us vigorous youths this heavy tradition, which has chained us down and to which we were subjected, has now come to an end [...] Under our eyes the classical repertoire is laid to ruins; the enormous heap of outdated, romantic trash tumbles down."²⁷ Crisis in 1924 was all about confronting the multifarious and troublesome pasts that jarred with the avant-garde nationalist visions for the postwar period.

A night at the Teatro Goldoni

A heavy police presence appeared at the doors of the Teatro Goldoni, searching those who entered and ready to arrest troublemakers. The audience was provoked by the Futurists before anything had taken place on stage: several seats were sold to multiple buyers, mistletoe was placed over others, and some even had glue smeared over them. By the time the protagonists came onstage, many in attendance were unseated and restless. Such antagonism had become common on the tour, prompting a predictable cycle of events. At the opening night in Milan, the performance had been forced to stop altogether when fighting broke out in the auditorium. "Then there was a commotion. Flying fists. There were widespread screams," one reporter noted, "In ran the police, arresting the most riotous."²⁸ There was disagreement among press reports, however, as to the level of mayhem the Futurists managed to achieve at each stopover. Descriptions of the night at the Goldoni differ: *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, for example, claimed that

²⁵ If the Futurists saw themselves as inhabiting a transitional moment, that is also how they exploited the contemporary rhetoric of crisis. Koselleck calls this a variant of the crisis concept, one that represents "a historically unique transition phase. It then coagulates into an epochal concept in that it indicates a critical transition period after which—if not everything, then much—will be different." Furthermore, this concept of crisis is often tied up with a "prognosis of the future." Koselleck, "Crisis," 371-72.

²⁶ "[C]he sia davvero l'ora di finirla con l'esecuzione di musiche di autori morti (quasi sempre tedeschi) che molto spesso annoiano e non interessano mai perché non rispondenti alla nuova sensibilità d'oggi [...] musiche ruderi che stanno assai meglio nelle biblioteche." Silvio Mix cited in Daniele Lombardi, *Il suono veloce: futurismo e futurismi in musica* (Milan: Ricordi, 1996), 86.

²⁷ Originally in [Unknown] Breda, "Il teatro futurista," *I pazzi*, February 22, 1915: 2; reprinted in translation in Günther Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 218.

²⁸ "Succede un parapiglia. Volano pugni. Da più parti si urla [...] Accorrono i carabinieri, si arresta il più riottoso." "Burrascosa serata futurista al Trianon," *Corriere della Sera*, January 11, 1924.

the event took place “with relative tranquility” before admitting that “A large-scale search warrant had been put in place to prevent any disorders that could occur.”²⁹

Despite these precautions, the police confiscated at the door various projectiles of organic material. *Il Gazzettino* went into detail:

Al bigoncio, fin dalle otto, doppio cordone di carabinieri per preventivo esame alle tasche di tutti quelli che entravano, signore escluse. Marinetti e compagni, ammaestrati dalle prove di Milano, Firenze, ecc., s'erano raccomandati alla Questura perché non entrassero in teatro [...] frutti di stagione. Le perquisizioni personali hanno dato questi risultati: trenta patate, quarantasette aranci, sette torsi di cavoli, e un numero non ben precisato di carote. Uno studente recava sotto il soprabito [...] una testa d'ariete. Furono sequestrate anche le stelle filanti e i coriandoli.³⁰

(Beginning at eight PM a double police cordon stood at the ticket office ready to examine the pockets of all those who came in, ladies excepted. Marinetti and his companions had learned from their experiences in Milan, Florence, etc. [...] and had called on the services of the police to prevent any fresh fruit being brought into the theatre. The body searches yielded these results: thirty potatoes, forty-seven oranges, seven cores of cabbage, and an unspecified number of carrots. A student bore under his overcoat [...] a ram's head. Streamers and confetti were also seized.)

Such accounts of audience behavior were a constant feature of the news reports, often commanding as much space as the actual events onstage.

Once the official performance got under way, the onstage sound was immediately absorbed by the cacophony that filled the auditorium. This, too, had been a feature of the tour since its opening night; in Milan,

scoppiò un applauso in tutta la sala e contemporaneamente squillò un suono roco di tromba d'automobile manovrata non si sa di dove. Questo suono seguì, a intervalli lungo tutta la serata.³¹

(as a round of applause reverberated through the auditorium, the blast of a car horn came from an unknown source. This sound continued at intervals throughout the evening.)

²⁹ “Con relativa tranquillità” and “Un largo servizio d'ordine era stato disposto per impedire che si verificassero disordini.” “Il nuovo teatro futurista al Goldoni,” *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, January 26, 1924.

³⁰ “La serata futurista al Teatro Goldoni,” *Il Gazzettino*, January 26, 1924.

³¹ “Burrascosa serata futurista al Trianon.”

The evening was thus “restless and noisy, but not aggressive and violent.”³² In his memoir, De Angelis recounted a typical night of the tour, giving a sense of the noise, performance, and at times violence that characterized each event:

Le comode poltrone dei teatri e i capaci palchi, in quelle sere, non ospitavano più docili spettatori in ansia di divertimento, ma energumeni inferociti e recalcitranti; mattacchioni in vena di sgangherate follie; passatisti sul piede di guerra; giovani futuristi risoluti e maneschi; goliardi decisi alle più sfrenate goliardie; venerandi inorriditi; signore pro e contro; oratori improvvisati e inascoltati; e guardie, carabinieri, commissari, dappertutto, impotenti a reprimere l’iradiddio che accompagnava la recitazione degli attori, fatta di invettive, lancio di proiettili, di grida, di interruzioni sonore, e di un vocio lacerante, assordante, sibilante, da perforare i timpani del più provetto sordo. Né tale stato di emergenza finiva con la rappresentazione. Il fluido della fisicofollia veniva propagato dalle folle, per le strade, nei caffè, nelle piazze, ovunque vi erano agglomerati di persone. Sicché la città ne rimaneva scossa sino all’alba.³³

(The comfortable chairs in the theatres and capacious boxes, on those evenings, no longer housed docile spectators expecting entertainment, but angry and recalcitrant thugs; pranksters in the mood for wild follies; traditionalists on the warpath; young Futurists resolute and ready with their fists; goliards decided on the wildest goliardery; the venerable horrified; ladies for and against; orators improvising and unheard; and guards, police officers, commissioners—everywhere—powerless to repress the pandemonium that accompanied the performances of the actors, made up of invectives, projectiles, shouts, sonic interruptions, and a piercing clamor, deafening, hissing, to perforate the eardrums of even the deafest. Nor did this state of emergency end with the performance. The mass hysteria [*fisicofollia*] continued as the crowds spilled out into the streets, in cafés, in the piazzas, wherever people were gathered. So the city was in upheaval until dawn.)

Sheer noisiness was to become a trope in descriptions of such events. In Bologna, for example, the performance “resulted in a couple of hours of hellish din. The noise, which began even before the show started, was intensified with sirens, car horns and the like, and culminated with the throwing of pans and abundant projectiles.”³⁴ Likewise in Turin, “the clamor of so many opposing voices created a deafening cacophony, assisted by ‘modern instruments’ that had been

³² “[I]nquieto e rumoroso ma non ancora aggressivo e violento.” Ibid.

³³ Rodolfo De Angelis, *Café-chantant: personaggi e interpreti* (Florence: La Casa Usher, 1984), 167-68. The degree to which the tension in the theater continued out on to the streets is hard to ascertain. Despite numerous claims of fights in the Venetian streets, surveys of the local press have provided little evidence.

³⁴ “[R]isolta in un paio d’ore di gazzarra infernale. Il baccano, cominciato anche prima che si iniziasse lo spettacolo, si è intensificato con sirene, trombe di automobili e simili ed ha culminato col lancio di alcuni tegami e di abbondanti proiettili.” “Gazzarra futurista a Bologna,” *Corriere della Sera*, January 15, 1924.

brought along, such as cowbells, claxons, car horns, and sirens,”³⁵ and in Trieste, “Last night, the performance descended into a din of whistles, cries, noises.”³⁶ By the time the company arrived in Venice, readers of the national press might have had an inkling of what lay in store. But noise levels were still one of the most noteworthy aspects of the performance. One Venetian reporter claimed that although there was relative quiet at the start, a certain degree of noise issued from the students in the gallery.³⁷ Another stated that the evening had been “three hours of uproar,” and that by the mid-point, “[t]he noises rise to the highest pitch.”³⁸

Such an unfolding of events had become routine in the course of Futurist theatrical development. The origins of Futurist theater lay in the *serata*, from which had emerged numerous incarnations. Each new theatrical experiment took a similar format: poetry and manifesto readings, plays, musical performance, and verbal provocation.³⁹ The evenings often resulted in organic material being thrown on stage, with fighting in the auditorium and occasionally even outside the theater afterwards. Within certain limits, such a reaction was part of the performance; while the Futurists wanted to animate the audience, being pelted with vegetables was another matter. The notion of theater as event was specifically meant to encourage active engagement by the audience. The first manifesto devoted to the theater, Marinetti’s “Il manifesto dei drammaturghi futuristi” (January 11, 1911), defined the old as antithetical to the new: pleasing the audience versus provoking hostility, theater as a social occasion versus theater as political activism. Yet this model of theater had historical precedents: in response to the sense of crisis within elite theatrical circles, Marinetti had sought inspiration from more popular domains such as the music-hall, variety show, and *café-chantant*.⁴⁰

Amid the noisy provocation a series of musical works was staged: a hymn, a quasi-symphony, and three ballets at the center.⁴¹ The opening ballet was Depero’s *Anihccam del 3000* (subtitled “Interpretazione riproduzione dei movimenti e rumori delle macchine,” Interpretation reproduction of the movements and noises of machines), with music by Casavola. It told the story of two locomotives entering a station platform before breaking into a dance of love for the Stationmaster. If earlier Futurisms had employed a hard-edged machine aesthetic, these later manifestations offered something more ambiguous; the locomotive protagonists may have

³⁵ “[S]ono tante le parole che allora si incrociano da generare un chiasso assordante [...] Qualcuno ha portato degli strumenti moderni, come campanacci, claxon e trombe d’automobili, sirene, ecc.” “La serata futurista alle Folies Bergère [sic],” *La Nazione*, January 18, 1924.

³⁶ “Iersera, lo spettacolo si risolse soltanto in una gazzarra di fischi, di grida, di frastuoni.” “Teatri—Politeama,” *L’Osservatore Triestino*, January 21, 1924.

³⁷ “Il nuovo teatro futurista al Goldoni.”

³⁸ “Tre ore di gazzarra” and “Il baccano sale al più alto diapason.” “La serata futurista al Teatro Goldoni.”

³⁹ The first was “Il teatro di varietà” (1913), seen as arising out of the stagnation and crisis of *fin-de-siècle* Italian theater; signed by Marinetti, originally published in *Lacerba* (October 1, 1913), reprinted in Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, 126-31. The next was “Il teatro futurista sintetico” (1915), which sought to condense theatrical narratives into short and concise dramas lasting only a few minutes. Conceived as a touring theater, it emphasized improvisation and intuition; signed by Marinetti, Settemelli, and Corra, originally published by Istituto Editoriale Italiano (Milan, 1915), reprinted in Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, 183-96. The third incarnation was *Il Teatro della Sorpresa*, of which the offshoot was *Il Nuovo Teatro Futurista*. The focus was on speed and brevity for the purposes of surprise; see Marinetti and Francesco Cangiullo, “Il manifesto del Teatro della sorpresa,” originally published in Milan (October 11, 1921), reprinted in *Sipario* 2, no. 2 (1967): 10, 74.

⁴⁰ There is also a more transnational line of influence here: in drawing inspiration from the *café-chantant* (also a highly politicized genre), for example, Italian Futurism was again exhibiting a relationship to the Russian avant-garde.

⁴¹ Both by Mix, the “hymn” was entitled *L’inno futurista* and the “symphony” *Bianco e rosso*.

portrayed machines come to life, but the life they lived was one of love and sentiment.⁴² A conversation of onomatopoeic nonsense language started up between the three main characters.⁴³ Depero composed a “Canzone rumorista” for insertion into the ballet, comprising a series of onomatopoeic vocal sounds: “HOPOTÒM TRO-TRO-TRO/ HAPATÀM TRA-TRA-TRA/ HUPÙTUM TRU-TRU-TRU.”⁴⁴ The sounds were punctuated by the noises of an automobile engine and the whistling of a piccolo; noise thus represented the machine. Depero’s locomotive aesthetic was characterized by a relationship between noise, movement, and visual mechanicity: “I adore the locomotive [...] The noise is a sharp blade ready to cut. The eyes are gyrating projectors with deeply penetrating rays. Elastic hands communicate the music of a new sensibility. Straight lines, curves and circles, perfect geometries of serrated, cogged and crenellated elements mirror the precise and infinite rhythms of the universe.”⁴⁵

The few surviving photographs of the production show the locomotives dancing before a blank backdrop (see Figure 3). Meager scenery was necessitated by the budget and the portability required for touring.⁴⁶ The same year, Depero had also sketched designs (a model was built the following year) for his own noise-making machine, the “Complesso plastico motorumorista.” Merging chemicals and fumes with accordions, castanets, and barrel organs, the machine was an image both of industry and of popular-folk signifiers.

⁴² This idea of the protagonists of the theater of the future as both mechanically mass produced and individualized is a precursor to the Fascist theatrical spectacles that were to emerge in the 1930s—above all, *18BL*; see Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18BL and the Theatre of Masses for Masses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁴³ Although the score and libretto are lost, parts of the work can be pieced together from surviving fragments and detailed descriptions by both the Futurists and the press.

⁴⁴ The full text is reprinted in Mario Verdone, ed., *Teatro italiano d'avanguardia: drammi e sintesi futuriste* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1970), 68.

⁴⁵ Originally published in Fortunato Depero, “W la macchina e lo stile d'acciaio,” in Depero, *Libro macchina imbullonato* (Florence, Salimbeni 1978), 65-66; reprinted in translation in Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944*, 470.

⁴⁶ Depero had mooted the notion of humanized locomotives the previous year, in the *Veglia Futurista* of 1923, and was soon conceiving a ballet for them (*Corteo di locomotive* and *Anihccam il macchinosauro del 3000*, outlined in his notes, *Studi per il Teatro Magico Depero*); see the publicity pamphlet for the *Veglia*, *La veglia organizzata dal gruppo futurista trentino alla casa d'arte Depero si ripete* (February 13, 1923), held at the Casa Depero, Rovereto. See also Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944*, 471.

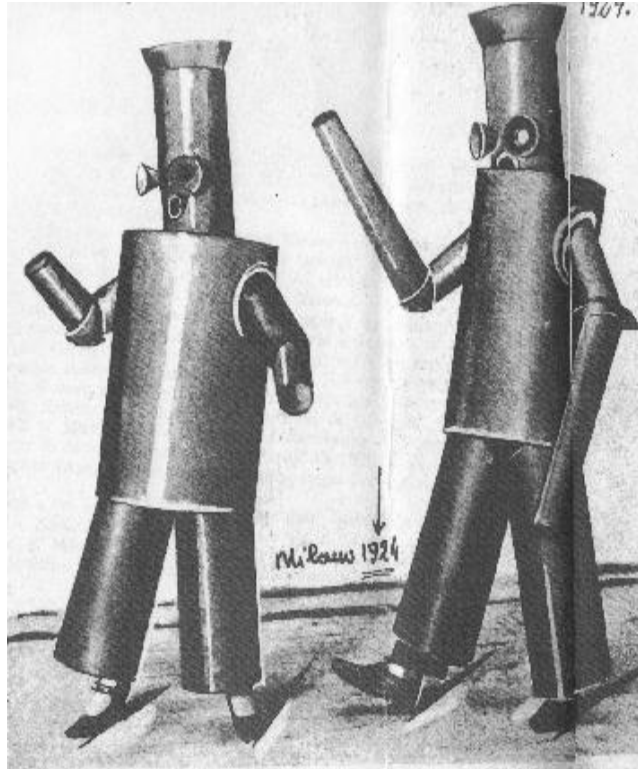


Fig. 3: Depero, *Anihccam del 3000* (1924). © courtesy of Casa Depero, of Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto.

The other ballets employed similar themes. *Psicologia delle macchine* by Prampolini, with music by Mix, had already enjoyed numerous performances, having premiered at Milan's Teatro Odeon in 1923. Prampolini's perspective on the machine was more equivocal than Depero's: two photographs show tribal-style masks against a Cubistic jungle background (see Figure 4). If the stated intention was a more humanoid machine, along the lines of Depero's anthropomorphized locomotives, the costuming suggested a pre-industrial Other. These somewhat contradictory perspectives on the early twentieth-century machine increasingly characterized the Futurisms that emerged after the war. *Macchinolatria* was an aspect of Futurist thought undergoing endless rewriting, and 1924 witnessed further revision of the aesthetic. Prampolini had issued a rewritten version of Vinicio Paladini and Ivo Pannaggi's "Manifesto dell'arte meccanica futurista" (originally published in *La Nuova Lacerba*, 20 June 1922). Crafted by the two architects of recent *modernolatria*, the 1922 version had been accompanied by illustrations that encapsulated different strands of an earlier Futurist aesthetic: a "man-machine" entitled *Proletario* by Paladini, and an industrial landscape, *Composizione meccanica*, by Pannaggi. Their Marxist vision of the machine, as that which "has marked a period of revolution in the economic structure of society," was radically rewritten by Prampolini.⁴⁷ The revised manifesto, which appeared in a 1924 special edition of the Futurist magazine *Noi*, presented a

⁴⁷ "[H]a segnato un periodo di rivoluzione nella struttura economica della società." Vinicio Paladini, "Estetica meccanica," *Noi* II, 1, no. 2 (May 1923): 2.

magical, surreal version of mechanicity.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the emphasis now lay in the mode of representation, regardless of whether the objects portrayed were somewhat old.⁴⁹

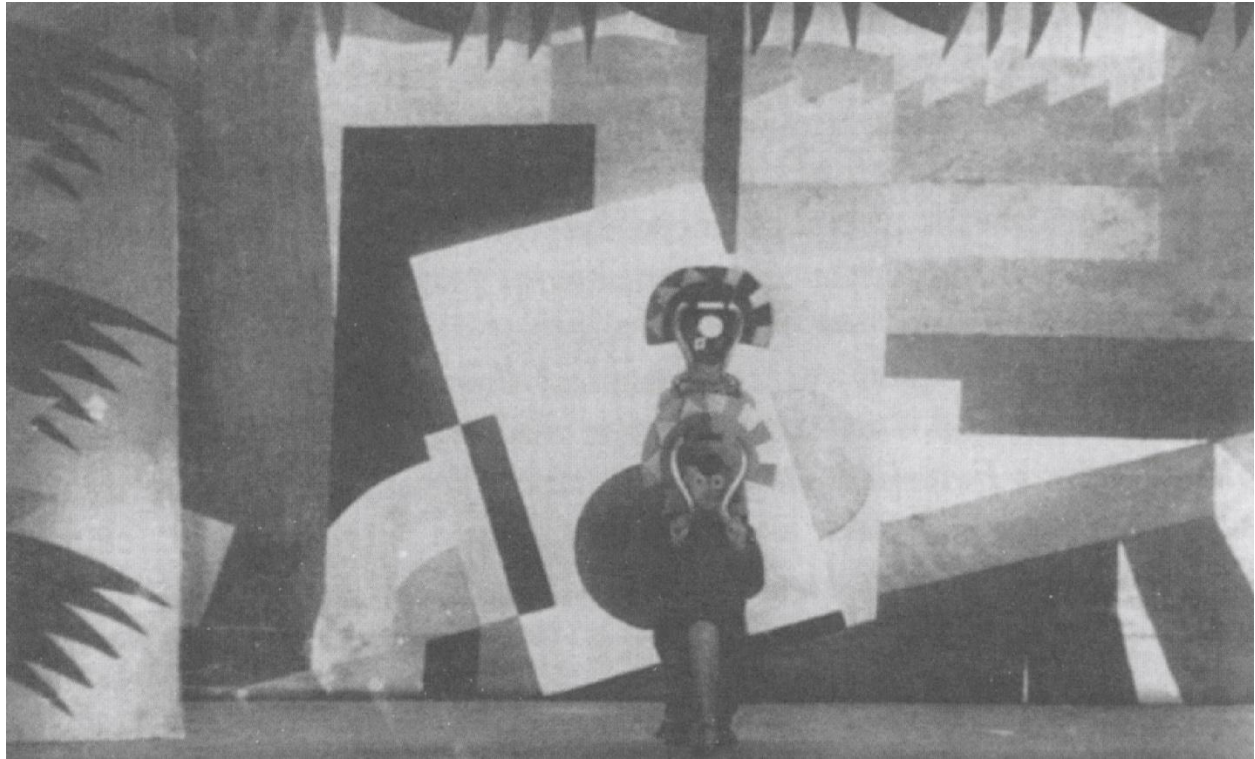


Fig. 4: Enrico Prampolini, *Psicologia delle macchine* (1924). © courtesy of CRDAV, Rome's Visual Arts Research and Documentation Center at the MACRO Contemporary Art Museum, Enrico Prampolini Archive.

The third and final ballet of the night, Prampolini and Casavola's *La danza dell'elica*, incorporated the emerging Futurist trope of aero-aesthetics.⁵⁰ A single protagonist was costumed as a huge silver airplane propeller. The brief plot consisted of four segments: the preparation for the flight (*Allegro ma non troppo*), take-off (*Allegro vivo*), sensation of flying (second part of *Allegro vivo*), and propeller shattering (*Più mosso* and *Presto*). As with the other ballets, the practical limitations of being on tour meant a reduced scenography (the same backdrop was

⁴⁸ In Depero's defense of his new mechanistic vision, *Il nuovo fantastico*, delivered at the 1924 Congresso, he also drew a distinction between everyday reality and the possibility of a mechanical aesthetic which sought to "elevate and transform matter into ideality, velocity, spiritual joy and magic" (quoted in translation in Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944*, 470). Franco Casavola's book *Avviamento alla pazzia* (Milan: Edizione Futuriste di Poesia, 1924) was also representative of this, containing short poems on the joy of fantasy and transcending reason.

⁴⁹ The designs for the 1924 ballets exemplified this lack of concern for using older ideas and materials: the scenery and mechanized protagonists echoed modernistic tics from earlier decades of the century. Depero's own designs for Stravinsky's *Le rossignol* (1917), and fellow Futurist Giacomo Balla's staging for Stravinsky's *Feu d'artifice* (1917), had employed similar devices.

⁵⁰ The *danza* was scored for violin, clarinet, piccolo, timpani, and wind machine. A cymbal was originally scored for the sound of the propeller shattering, but Casavola said that it could be replaced by a metal sheet—which it was for the Venice performance.

employed for *Psicologia delle macchine*).⁵¹ Again sound effects were used to heighten the sensory experience. A metal sheet suggested the shattering of the propeller and a wind machine evoked the soundscape of being airborne. In addition there was the noise of an internal combustion engine. A few reporters—perhaps sensationalizing—claimed that petrol fumes were released into the auditorium to create a fully immersive sensory experience.

Noise and sound effects were thus central to the efficacy of productions that were otherwise somewhat meager. As theater critic and Puccini librettist Renato Simoni wrote a few years earlier of such auditory devices: “noise as an expression and as a representation of the environment not visible to the audience, the noise that is a voice of confused distant crowds or maybe even of things, if you want to overcome the real, that can add effects, be they musical or terrifying, to a theatrical work.”⁵² These effects, combined with the ambient noise of the auditorium, were to create the Futurist sonic event. At one level the focus was thus shifted from the works onstage to the importance of the theater as a site of activism. Yet at the same time, the somewhat traditional features of this noisy event—a hotly anticipated local premiere, the orchestral ballets, a night at the theater—jarred with the uncompromising outline of musical progress elsewhere scripted by the Futurists. In other words, the performance and the contemporary debates it fed into exposed contradictions at the heart of the Futurists’ vision of *la musica dell’avvenire*, as well as a more deep-seated contradiction of the avant-garde: effacing aesthetics in favor of the event, while exploiting the media to give ever-more powerful voice to their own aesthetic purpose.

Le crisi musicali

Noise was thus an aspect of the performance both elicited and controlled. There were two fields: the noise effects contained in the musical works and the noisiness of the auditorium. While enhancing the effect of what was onstage, both also contributed to its undoing. If the Futurists sought to counter the critics’ interest more in sheer noisiness than in what was happening onstage by emphasizing the importance of the event that strategy jarred with the rhetorical emphasis being given to a new musical aesthetics. Music still bore the weight of tradition: it was for the stage and to be listened to attentively. This gap between Futurist music and the aesthetic of noise had been evident from the earliest manifestos. Whereas trained musicians such as Francesco Balilla Pratella were proposing a renovation of existing musical systems, it was visual artists such as Russolo who were advocating a total overhaul of music by aestheticizing the noises of everyday life.

⁵¹ The rather primitive backdrops jarred with recent Futurist proselytizing: in “Manifesto della scenografia futurista” (1915), Enrico Prampolini had written, “What will be completely new in the theatre as a result of our innovations is the *banning of painted scenery*. The stage will no longer have a colored back-drop, *but a colorless electromechanical architectural structure, enlivened by chromatic emanations from a source of light*, produced by electric reflectors with colored filters arranged and coordinated in accordance with the spirit of the action on stage.” Emphasis in original. Reprinted in translation in Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifesto*, 201.

⁵² “Che il rumore come espressione e come rappresentazione dell’ambiente non visibile agli spettatori, il rumore che è voce di confuse folle lontane o magari anche delle cose, se si vuole superare il reale, possa aggiungere qualche effetto o musicale o terrifico a un’opera teatrale.” Renato Simoni, “Verbalismo e ‘rumori interni,’” originally “*Il tamburo di fuoco* di F. T. Marinetti” (June 6, 1922), reprinted in Giuseppe Bartolucci, ed., “I futuristi secondo la critica,” *Sipario* 2, no. 2 (1967): 18.

Theorizing noise in relation to the specific locale of the early-twentieth-century metropolis had been a theme since the first manifestos. The city was depicted as a noisy hubbub, created by industrial modernity: “the mighty noise of the huge double-decker trams that rumbled by outside,” the “roar of automobiles” were hallmark sounds of Marinetti’s 1909 manifesto.⁵³ Noise was the auditory utterance of technology and mechanization. These new auditory experiences of everyday life called for the aestheticization of sounds that reflected them. The search for novel timbres had first been theorized in Russolo’s manifesto “L’arte dei rumori” (1913).⁵⁴ In the same mode as *Arabau Barù’s musica dell’avvenire*, Russolo wrote of the need to use the latest technology in eradicating the past and forging a new musical language. The solution he proposed was noise generators—*intonarumori*—with which he claimed that, “You can thus with new timbres entirely create the enharmonic system that will undoubtedly be the musical system of the future.”⁵⁵ Futurist noise, then, was enabled by the specifics of the early twentieth-century machine.⁵⁶

Being hyper-aware of their own noisy moment, however, also limited the continuing import of such theorizations: though representative of Futurism’s first context, the situation of mechanical labor was rather different by 1924. The genres employed may have shown an obvious debt to tradition from the outset, but even the noise effects were growing old by this point. In an article of 1919, Russolo wrote again of “l’arte dei rumori,” noting how his earlier experiments with noise had been quickly accepted by the public, thus requiring the invention of ever-new sounds in order to surprise.⁵⁷ Wind machines and metal sheets had long been employed for ambient sound effects; and although *intonarumori* were used by Il Nuovo Teatro Futurista, they were placed within the orchestra, jarring with the Futurist rejection of traditional timbres. As if to suggest that the music of the tour was not as shocking and avant-garde as people had feared, many critics went out of their way to emphasize how well the music was received. In Venice, while *Anihccam* had elicited a mixed response of “Shouts, whistles, and even applause,”⁵⁸ *Psicologia delle macchine* had been “applauded by most of the audience.”⁵⁹ At the Rome performance, one reviewer stated that,

⁵³ Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism (1909),” reprinted in translation Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, 19-20.

⁵⁴ The emphasis on sound in the Futurists’ commentary on modernity led to proposals for the reordering of the sensorium. Russolo wrote that the ear was the sense organ for navigating the modern city. A second manifesto, “I rumori di guerra,” published in *L’arte dei rumori* (1916), focused on theorizing the sounds of modern warfare. Here, too, Russolo argued for the primacy of listening: in the midst of war it was the ear that oriented, rather than the eye.

⁵⁵ “Si può così con timbri nuovi realizzare completamente il sistema enarmonico che sarà indubbiamente il sistema musicale dell’avvenire,” quoted in Maria Zanovello Russolo, *Russolo: l’uomo, l’artista* (Milan: Corticelli, 1958), 62.

⁵⁶ For more on the connection between noise and the machine in Futurist aesthetics, see Iacobitti and Morelli, “I manifesti: forza e contraddizione del futurismo.”

⁵⁷ This perhaps explains why the manifestos on music and noise were subject to endless rewriting and revision; see Luigi Russolo, “L’arte dei rumori: nuova voluttà acustica,” *Dinamo* 1, no. 4 (May 1919), reprinted in Caruso, *Manifesti, proclami, interventi e documenti teorici del futurismo, 1909-1944*, Vol. 1.

⁵⁸ “Urli, fischi, e anche applausi,” “La serata futurista al Teatro Goldoni.”

⁵⁹ “[A]pplaudito da gran parte del pubblico,” “Il nuovo teatro futurista al Goldoni.”

I due balletti, uno di Prampolini e Mix, l'altro di Depero e Casavola, mi sembrarono pienamente riusciti. Sono divertenti. Nel secondo è notevole la musica.⁶⁰

(The two ballets, one by Prampolini and Mix, the other by Depero and Casavola, seemed to me to succeed fully. They are enjoyable. In the second the music is remarkable.)

Another critic in Rome was rather more probing: he reported that *La danza dell'elica* was less futuristic than Debussy, and that “the public contributed to increasing the phonic effect of the piece by imitating the internal combustion engines.”⁶¹ Likewise the instrumental works on the program “did not raise any eyebrows,” primarily because they were not as avant-garde as had been promised by the publicity material.⁶² In Rome as in Venice, it was left to the audience to make the event, and to make it appropriately noisy.

If there was nothing inherently problematic about the music not being particularly new—the onus was on the event, after all—then the Futurists’ undoing came instead from the hype and expectation that had been generated in the media prior to the performance. This contrast between expectation and the reality of the performance was exacerbated by the movement’s musical futurology that year. *Arabau Barù* was not the only such mouthpiece; 1924 also witnessed a sudden proliferation of Futurist manifestos preoccupied with the direction of musical language.⁶³ One such document, by Casavola, dealt with the theme explicitly: entitled “La musica dell’avvenire” and first published in *L’Ambrosiano*, the piece was both a critique of the traditionalist tendencies of modern music and a statement about where progress could be found. Attacking Debussy, Strauss, and Stravinsky for remaining trapped within the confines of old forms, Casavola offered a vision of future music based on wholly new relationships between rhythm, melody, and harmony. Realized through the ambiguous concepts of simultaneity, improvisation, and individuality, such music was to reorder and re-stimulate the sensorium, challenging the experiences that were becoming standard with new media:

⁶⁰ Ettore Romagnoli, [Untitled], *L’Ambrosiano*, January 12, 1924.

⁶¹ “*La danza dell’elica*, del maestro Casavola, a base di *tuff-tuff*, accompagnati dai movimenti di una *chauffeuse* ballerina è apparsa meno futurista di qualche pagina di Debussy; e direi che il pubblico ha contribuito ad accrescere l’effetto fonico del pezzo con imitazione dei motori a scoppio.” A. C., “La serata futurista al Margherita,” *Il Messaggero*, January 21, 1924.

⁶² “[N]on hanno suscitato eccessivo scalpore.” Ibid.

⁶³ In 1924 alone were released: Casavola, “Le atmosfere cromatiche della musica” (1924); “Le versioni scenico-plastiche della musica” (1924); and “La musica dell’avvenire” (1924). Casavola also wrote “La musica illustrata” in 1924, as well as three theater manifestos: “Teatro degli istanti dilatati,” “Teatro immaginario,” and “Piccolo teatro.” See also Casavola, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, and A. A. Luciani, “Le sintesi visive della musica” (1924). Mix also test-ran three manifestos—the *Questioni musicali*—at the 1924 Primo congresso futurista, which were published posthumously: “I. Verso le nuove forme dell’arte musicale” (August 19, 1926); “II. Le possibilità di rinnovamento della musica” (September 10, 1926); and “III. L’avvenire della musica orchestrale (Le possibilità d’oggi e nel futuro)” (September 26, 1926).

La musica è soprattutto movimento. I nostri ritmi devono essere decisi, insistenti, di netto disegno; ciascuno corrisponda ad un movimento fisiologico, meccanico, di precisa accentuazione, che è necessario sfondo ad ogni ideazione musicale.⁶⁴

(Music is above all movement. Our rhythms are to be determined, insistent, of clear design: each corresponding to a physiological, mechanical movement, of precise accentuation—that is the necessary background for every musical conception.)

The two proposals of *la musica dell'avvenire* in 1924 were thus emblematic of the murky nexus between noise and music, straddling the divided Futurist work on sound that year. Whereas Casavola was concerned with the fundamentals of musical composition, *Arabau Barù* spoke of an electrical noise and the auditory detritus of modern communication; yet both carved out uncompromising positions within their respective fields.

If—to judge from the tour of Il Nuovo Teatro Futurista—the Futurists were just as interested in ballets, hymns, and symphonies as in the music of radio waves, wires, and electricity, why did they employ such obstinate rhetoric in the surrounding discourse? When they sought to infiltrate local and national media outlets with press releases and manifestos, why did they frame the material in such uncompromising terms? The postwar period was characterized by pessimistic diagnoses such as Gian Francesco Malipiero's pronouncement, that "The future of music is closely related to the uncertainties that progress initiates for humankind: what will music mean to a man who goes to sip a cup of coffee on the moon, just for a change of air and distraction?"⁶⁵ Conversely, Mix proceeded with the bombastic assertion that "enharmonic polychromaticism" was "the future of music and one of its boundless possibilities of renewal."⁶⁶

I want to suggest here that these two features surrounding the performance—the bombastic rhetoric of a musical future and the exploitation of the media—were part of the same preoccupation: that of taking charge amid a perceived crisis of musical language.⁶⁷ Italian musical debate in the 1920s was dominated by a concern with the current state of music culture and the perceived lack of compositional direction. Futurist rhetoric sought to offer certainty amid this contemporary perception of crisis, while simultaneously inhabiting an unstable, precarious position—adrift from the present, but not yet in the future. The atmosphere of uncertainty was what enabled the Futurists to assert power and articulate their futurology; such an avant-garde

⁶⁴ Casavola, "La musica dell'avvenire," *L'Ambrosiano*, January 12, 1924.

⁶⁵ "L'avvenire della musica è strettamente legato alle incognite che il progresso prepara all'umanità; che cosa potrà rappresentare la musica a un uomo che va sorbire una tazza di caffè sulla luna, tanto per cambiare aria e distrarsi?" Gian Francesco Malipiero, in *Malipiero e le nuove forme della musica europea*, ed. Luigi Pestalozza (Reggio Emilia: Edizioni Unicopli, 1982), 198-99.

⁶⁶ "[P]olichromaticismo enarmonico" and "l'avvenire della musica e una delle sue nuove possibilità sconfinite di rinnovamento." Mix, "III. L'avvenire della musica orchestrale (Le possibilità d'oggi e nel futuro)," in *La musica futurista: ricerche e documenti*, ed. Stefano Bianchi (Florence: Libreria musicale italiana, 1995), 231.

⁶⁷ The relationship between the avant-garde and crisis has been much theorized. See in particular Matei Calinescu, who wrote of "the avant-garde's long and almost incestuous association with both the idea and the praxis of cultural crisis." *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 123-24. Poggioli's concept of the "agonistic moment" of the avant-garde—its uncompromising position as regards the present reality and the past—is of a moment arising directly from a culture of crisis (and thus giving rise to the importance of proselytizing the future); see Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 65-67.

vision of being in transition, theorist Renato Poggioli notes, is the “favorite myth of an apocalyptic and crisis-ridden era.”⁶⁸

The notion of *la musica dell'avvenire* was itself old by 1924, having previously been identified with the writings of Wagner in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁹ As was becoming customary among the Futurists, however, they refashioned the concept in response to the postwar milieu, eliminating any reference to its previous existence. The movement's reinvention of the concept exploited the perceived crisis following pronouncements of the death of Italian opera. Although such a sense of crisis also had a long nineteenth-century history (it had begun to accompany the later stages of Verdi's career, for one thing), 1924 was perceived as being a climactic moment on account of the ailing health of Puccini, supposedly the genre's last figure, who was to die later in the year.⁷⁰ Public discourse focused on the consciousness of manifold musical crises: losing supremacy in the field of opera to other countries such as Germany and France, and failing to find an alternative language to counteract that decline.⁷¹

The 1920s saw a number of books published on “le crisi musicali.” In a review of Adriano Lualdi's *Viaggio musicale in Europa* (1929), Massimo Bontempelli weighed in: drawing a comparison with Giannotto Bastianelli's *La crisi musicale europea* (1912), he asked whether the various musical crises that had characterized the first part of the century in Italy shared a common origin. Despite his initial dismissal that “In art there exists no crisis,” he went on to suggest that the differences lay in genre: the current crisis was not one of operatic music, as “the old spectacle is long dead.”⁷² Instead, instrumental music was the topic of crisis. Yet even here Bontempelli retained a degree of optimism. Such calls, he suggested, were unfounded; there was much to suggest a recent flourishing in Europe. If there was anxiety in Italy, it was perhaps because the country had yet to recapture the glory of its musical past:

E in Italia? L'Italia in crisi? Sentiamo piangerne, e magari rimpiangerne e invidiare l'Ottocento strumentale tedesco. Ma l'Italia sta alla testa della musica

⁶⁸ Poggioli sees this positioning within a transitional state as inherent in the futurist tendencies of the avant-garde more generally (*Ibid.*, 72).

⁶⁹ While the first formulations of the concept date from the early 1850s, it was Wagner's use and analysis in his essay “La musique de l'avenir” (1860) that had brought the phrase to greater prominence. The concept encapsulated two contemporary preoccupations: technical innovation, and the aesthetic experience of modernity. For more on the nineteenth-century incarnation of the concept, see Körner, “Music of the Future: Italian Theatres and the European Experience of Modernity between Unification and World War One,” *European History Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2011): 189-212, and Francesca Vella, “Verdi's *Don Carlo* as Monument,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 25, no. 1 (2013): 75-103.

⁷⁰ For more on the discussion of the death of opera and Puccini in the first part of the century, see Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷¹ For more on the crisis of musical language in 1920s Italy, see Lombardi, *Il suono veloce*, 83-92. The Futurists had co-opted this rhetoric of crisis for their own ends since the earliest manifestos. Francesco Balilla Pratella had long lamented the lack of an Italian counterpart to Elgar, Sibelius, and Mussorgsky; see his 1910 “Manifesto dei musicisti futuristi,” reprinted in translation in Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, 31-37; and Balilla Pratella, “Musica avanguardista e futurista europea (28 March 1919),” *Dinamo* 1, no. 4 (May 1919), reprinted in Caruso, *Manifesti, proclami, interventi e documenti teorici del futurismo, 1909-1944*, Vol 1.

⁷² “Nell'arte non esistono crisi” and “il vecchio spettacolo è ben morto.” Massimo Bontempelli, “Le crisi musicali,” (September 1929), reprinted in Roberto Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel novecento*, Vol. 3 (Busto Arsizio: Bramante Editrice, 1985), 1619-20.

strumentale europea, e già da parecchi anni: quasi ha riacquisito la posizione di egemonia che ebbe ai tempi di Monteverdi e di Vivaldi.⁷³

(And in Italy? Italy in crisis? We hear people mourn for it and even pine for it, and to envy nineteenth-century German instrumental music. But Italy is now at the forefront of European instrumental music, and has been for several years: it has almost regained the position of hegemony it had at the time of Monteverdi and Vivaldi.)

Furthermore, Bontempelli added, where Italy did not have supremacy, such as in avant-garde music, it was because advancement in that field was not desired.

Others held more pessimistic views. One G. Eotti wrote that “the problem of music culture” from the perspective of its “social effectiveness”—while a concern across much of postwar Europe—was being debated with particular fervor in Italy.⁷⁴ Contrary to Bontempelli, Eotti argued that at the center was “the subject of modern music,” which was “undoubtedly one of the most important factors for the future social order of the nation.”⁷⁵ The relationship between music and nationalism was crucial: the critic claimed that programs had been for too long filled with foreign musical modernism, with no space reserved for indigenous composers. Italian musicians were deemed to have been too preoccupied with exporting their work abroad, and the public too hospitable to foreign works. The issue of Italy’s future music was tied up with the future of the nation. It was this concern with the lack of an emerging national musical direction that the Futurists deliberately exploited, their rhetoric being one of providing a truly *Italian* path to the musical future.⁷⁶

Musical crisis thus directly implicated broader questions of national identity and allegiance. The lack of consensus among critics as to what exactly was in crisis, and how to provide certitude, demonstrates how pervasive the perception of uncertainty was. First and foremost, Italy was seen as lacking the distinctive national styles of other European cultures. The most identifiable tradition was that of opera, but many shared Bontempelli’s prognosis concerning its obsolescence. The problematic issue of Italian musical nationalism was only heightened by the aftermath of war.⁷⁷ Eotti, for example, had written in 1921 that “The Italian people, then, who with great exhaustion emerge from the grave consequence of war, are those who first re-establish their own moral capacity, who reactivate the old and the new artistic heritage and resolutely oppose renewed attempts at ‘foreign infiltration’ of their own authentic

⁷³ Ibid., 1620.

⁷⁴ “[S]i dibattono con giustificata preoccupazione intorno alla problema della cultura musicale” and “efficacia sociale.” G. Eotti, “La rinascita musicale italiana e la diffusione della musica moderna,” *Musica* 15, no. 5 (March 1, 1921), reprinted in Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel novecento*, Vol. 3, 1587-89, here 1587.

⁷⁵ “[A] proposito della musica moderna” and “senza dubbio uno dei più importanti fattori per il futuro assetto sociale della Nazione.” Ibid., 1588.

⁷⁶ Again, Futurism’s maximalist rhetoric shaded contrary pictures: despite its heightened nationalism, the movement formed part of transnational cultural conduits and avant-garde trends.

⁷⁷ Broader questions of national and European identities were being reignited in the week leading up to the Goldoni performance with the death of Lenin on January 21, 1924, an event much remarked on in the Italian (and Venetian) press. January 1924 also saw a more local political crisis: the annexation of Fiume as a result of the Treaty of Rome (January 27, 1924).

musical forces.”⁷⁸ Such protectionist concerns were a broader preoccupation of the interwar period. Although *la patria* had been of crucial significance to Futurism since its founding, it was the political chaos of the war’s aftermath that led to the movement’s heightened nationalism.⁷⁹ As the composer Giacomo Orefice put it:

Ed è perciò che il *nazionalismo*, piccolo nucleo prima della guerra, battagliero ma isolato, ha invaso oggi ogni campo della vita nazionale. È perciò che in musica tutti siamo oggi *nazionalisti*.⁸⁰

(And so it is that *nationalism*, a small nucleus before the war, combative but isolated, has now invaded every sphere of national life. That is why in music today we are all *nationalists*.)

But such a state of crisis, as always, could give rise to a new creativity: “Crisis, therefore, of *nationalism*, which, however, must be resolved—it is good to speak clearly, and most loudly proclaim—not the *renunciation* of nationalism, which would be impossible and absurd, but the formation of a *new nationalism* that complies with those rudimentary criteria, that the history of the evolution of modern music and the most basic sense of practical expediency suggest.”⁸¹ The Futurists’ exploitation of the contemporary crisis of musical style was thus intertwined with a crisis of national identity. The proclamation of an autochthonous music of the future became their rhetorical launch-pad: amid the fraught debates preoccupying much of the press, the Futurists sought to provide a voice of certainty and direction—even if that meant proclaiming a more extreme position than their artistic practice could deliver.

Old genres and new media

Considered in this way, a similar process can be seen taking place with the most obvious relics of the past: the use of theater and ballet as springboards for the music of the future. These traditional genres enjoyed a surprising resurgence in 1920s Futurism. Focusing on ballet and

⁷⁸ “Il popolo italiano, dunque, che con maggior fatica esce dalle gravi conseguenze della guerra, è quello che per primo ristabilisce la propria efficienza morale, che riattiva il vecchio ed il nuovo patrimonio artistico e contrappone decisamente le proprie autentiche forze musicali ai rinnovati tentativi d’infiltrazione straniera.” Eotti, “La rinascita musicale italiana,” 1587.

⁷⁹ These were the conditions that enabled the rise of Fascism. For more on Futurism’s impetus from interwar crisis, see Anna Barsotti, *Futurismo e avanguardia nel teatro italiano fra le due guerre* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1990), 78-79. This exploitation of crisis was also a reincarnation of Futurism’s originary moment, which has been seen as “critically related to the larger social and political crisis of Italy” characterizing the *fin-de-siècle*. See Anne Bowler, “Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism,” *Theatre and Society* 20, no. 6 (December 1991): 763-64.

⁸⁰ Giacomo Orefice, “La crisi del nazionalismo musicale,” *Rivista musicale italiana* 2 (1917): 300-315, reprinted in Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel novecento*, Vol. 3, 1566-73, here 1566.

⁸¹ “Crisi, dunque, del *nazionalismo*; la quale, però, deve risolversi—è bene intenderci chiaramente, e proclamarlo ben alto—non già nella *rinuncia* al nazionalismo, il che sarebbe impossibile e assurdo, ma nella formazione di un *nuovo nazionalismo* conforme a quei criteri rudimentali, che la storia dell’evoluzione musicale moderna e il senso più elementare di opportunità pratica ci suggeriscono.” *Ibid.*, 1572.

theater offered a relatively neutral space, providing a response to ubiquitous discussion of the death of opera, as well as to Wagnerian hegemony. Furthermore, these genres were seen as relatively free from an entrenched national heritage: the new nationalism needed to be unmoored from past preoccupations. In the heightened sense of national allegiance outlined above, the theater was viewed as a genre strongly in need of a nationalist redress. Inscribing this lack of an Italianate tradition, the Futurist Bruno Corra wrote that:

Abbiamo sempre amato il teatro, malgrado tutti i suoi impacci, perché esso porta, comunque, la nostra creazione artistica al contatto immediato e brutale con la folla. Questa preferenza d'indole artistica si aggiunge ad una ragione nazionale. Non esiste un teatro di prosa *italiana*. Dipendiamo dall'estero.⁸²

(We have always loved the theatre, in spite of all its encumbrances, because it brings our artistic creations into immediate and even brutal contact with the crowd. There is, however, a national purpose besides this artistic preference: there is no *Italian* prose theatre. We depend on works from abroad.)

The theater also afforded the possibility of creating a total work of art, one that reordered the senses.⁸³ As an aesthetic movement first and foremost, the Futurists believed in the importance of a multidimensional, immersive, and multi-sensory experience to activate a political awakening in the spectator.⁸⁴ The emphasis was thus on disturbance and surprise; musical improvisation, gesture, dance, and *parole in libertà* offered ways of achieving this. The theater provided possibilities for bringing these various aspects together in a way that other, older genres and even some recent media—such as the radio—could not. At the same time the Futurists sought to engage with the new sensory experiences mass media were providing, incorporating aspects into the more traditional genres on which they focused.⁸⁵

A snapshot of the broader debate on contemporary Italian theater can again be found in a book review. Writing on Luigi Tonelli's *Il teatro italiano dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, critic Guido Ruberti repeated the author's question: "Does an Italian theatre exist?" Underpinning both book and review is a sense of anxiety. As Ruberti put it, "Does there not seem something

⁸² Corra, "Creare il teatro italiano," *L'Italia futurista* 1, no. 12 (December 15, 1916); reprinted in Caruso, *Manifesti, proclami, interventi e documenti teorici del futurismo, 1909-1944*, Vol. 1.

⁸³ This was also the reincarnation of an earlier concept—the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—again derived from Wagner. The need to do away with Wagner's legacy, while also appropriating and refashioning many of his ideas, is continually present in Futurist discussion. The modern city had earlier provided the Futurist possibility for immersive synaesthesia; see Russolo, "L'arte dei rumori;" Marinetti, "Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo;" and Antonio Sant'Elia, "Manifesto dell'architettura futurista" (July 11, 1914), reprinted in translation in Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, 160-71.

⁸⁴ A series of recent articles by Mix had addressed the need to shake the apathy of both composers and the public. See, for example, Mix, "Musica d'oggi," *Firenze Futurista* 1, no. 1 (March 26, 1922), and "Ora basta!," *Firenze Futurista* 1, no. 2 (May 26, 1922); both reprinted in Bianchi, ed., *La musica futurista*, 221-22 and 222-23.

⁸⁵ The Futurists addressed the new media more directly elsewhere: see Marinetti et al., "Il manifesto del cinema futurista" (1916), reprinted in translation in Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, 207-18; and Marinetti and Pino Masnata, "La radia" (or "Manifesto della radio"), *Gazzetta del Popolo*, September 22, 1933.

disconcerting, even if Tonelli believes that he can give it [the question] an affirmative answer?”⁸⁶ The history of Italian theater was one of loss, of nostalgia for a national tradition. This perspective was shared by another article on crisis released in January that year: an interview with the famous Italian actress Irma Gramatica, published in *Corriere della sera*.⁸⁷ Both she and the interviewer shared a sense of the stagnation and decline of the Italian theatrical establishment. Correspondingly, they suggested that there was no cohesive vision of where future projects might head. The only contemporary avenue of work mentioned was that of modernist theater, which Gramatica dismissed for its intellectualism.

The seemingly surprising fact that theatrical renewal was taking place among the avant-garde and modernists was greeted with more attention elsewhere. Alfredo Casella, in an extended piece a year later, reflected on this unexpected phenomenon. He began by outlining the “curious” fact that until recently the so-called “avant-garde” had spoken of the theater with disgust, holding a pessimistic outlook regarding the genre’s future. And yet,

Oggi invece il problema teatrale musicale è ben diversamente considerato dai giovani musicisti italiani. Si potrebbe anzi affermare che esso costituisce la loro principale preoccupazione. Da ogni parte, si sente parlare di nuove opere già pronte alla pubblicazione, o per lo meno già in piena creazione.⁸⁸

(Today, however, the issue of musical theatre is seen very differently by young Italian musicians. One might even say that it is their main concern. On every side there is talk of new works already set for publication, or at least already immersed in the process of creation.)

What is more, Casella also saw this resurgence as arising from cultural crisis: “such a theatrical revival is nothing if not a result of the clarifying tendency that now invades almost the whole of Europe, which is reacting with great violence against the final residues of the huge romantic crisis and against the damage caused by Wagnerism.”⁸⁹ But if “the great post-romantic crisis [was] coming to an end,” even Casella could not hide his surprise at “the renewed passion that currently animates our young musicians with respect to the demanding problem of theatre, until yesterday considered pessimistically, even with contempt—and which today underlies our musical renaissance.”⁹⁰ There might have been hope for the future of the genre, but there was also widespread uncertainty as to what form theatrical regeneration should take. For Casella, the way out of this predicament was music theater that focused on the music first and foremost (he even claimed Verdi’s *Falstaff* as a model). The genre also had to become fully representative of

⁸⁶ “Non vi sembra tutto ciò sconsolante, anche se il Tonelli ritiene di poter dare ad essa una risposta affermativa?” Guido Ruberti, “Esiste un teatro italiano?” *Il Giornale d’Italia*, January 9, 1924.

⁸⁷ “La crisi del teatro: l’opinione di Irma Gramatica,” *Corriere della Sera*, January 17, 1924.

⁸⁸ Alfredo Casella, “Riabilitazione del teatro musicale in Italia,” *Musica d’Oggi* 12, December 12, 1925.

⁸⁹ “[S]imile rinascita teatrale altro non è, se non un risultato della tendenza chiarificatrice che ormai invade quasi tutta l’Europa, reagendo con grande violenza contro gli estremi residui della enorme crisi romantica e contro i danni prodotti dal wagnerismo.” *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ “Credo quindi che la grande crisi post-romantica stia per finire” and “dalla rinnovata passione cioè che anima presentemente i giovani musicisti nostri nei riguardi dell’arduo problema teatrale, sino a ieri considerato sia con pessimismo sia persino con disprezzo, ed oggi invece base di tutta la rinascita musicale nostra.” *Ibid.*

modern life, properly competitive with the exciting sensations emerging media such as cinema were eliciting.⁹¹

This predicament—of the need to engage with the experiences of new media and to go beyond them—was increasingly entering the heart of the Futurists' vision of theater. With Italy becoming a country of mass media, the experiences it afforded could not be ignored. Crucial to the Futurists' foothold in public discourse was their rhetoric of a future that combined these new sensory and aesthetic experiences, even if it reincorporated them within a more traditional genre.⁹² The movement turned current anxieties about cinema and radio into the necessity for competition between old and new (even if what resulted was something more symbiotic).⁹³ The Futurist preoccupation with speed and kinetic energy in the writings on music and theater fed directly into this desire: "We are convinced that mechanically, by force of brevity, we can achieve an entirely new theatre perfectly in tune with our swift and laconic Futurist sensibility. Our acts can also be moments [*atti—attimi*] only a few seconds long. With this essential and synthetic brevity the theatre can bear and even overcome competition from the *cinema*."⁹⁴

The *sintesi* that characterized the theater of surprise were proposed to "win the race with cinematography."⁹⁵ Depero too had written a few years earlier of a scenography of movement and agility that matched the visual experience of the cinema. After asking "Why does cinematography triumph?" despite still being "a simple succession of black-and-white photographs," he provided the answer: "It wins because it is fast, because it moves and transforms rapidly. Cinematography is varied and rich, improvised and surprising [...] It is necessary to add to the theatre everything that is suggested by cinematography."⁹⁶ A 1924 special edition of *Noi*, dedicated to "teatro e scena futurista," focused on the threat posed by new media. More specifically, renewal of the theater again required addressing the problems presented by the increasing dominance of the cinema.⁹⁷

A new focus in the debate on cinema was emerging in the early 1920s. With the imminent arrival of commercially viable sound film, theorists' and artists' attention was drawn to the relationship between sound and the moving image. Among Futurists in particular, there was concern as to what the advent of such a medium would mean for more traditional genres such as music theater. Casavola's music manifestos of 1924 investigated the nature of this relationship explicitly; he envisioned a music theater that both addressed and moved beyond the specific problems posed by music accompanying film. For Casavola, the issue with music on film was

⁹¹ As Casella puts it, "la nuova musica italiana si troverà pronta a realizzare un teatro musicale veramente consono alla vita odierna." Ibid.

⁹² That new media were viewed (at least initially) with a sense of threat by many Futurist musicians and artists perhaps displays an inherent conservatism on their part, but it also shows how transformative such media were perceived as being.

⁹³ These anxieties were focused on how new media would affect more traditional genres, and the "identity crisis" that surrounded "emergent media." For more on the relationship between crisis and new media, see Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree, *New Media, 1740-1914* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), xii. Rick Altman also talks about the identity crisis of media; see "Crisis Historiography," in Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 15-26.

⁹⁴ Marinetti, Settemelli, and Corra, "Il teatro sintetico futurista," reprinted in translation in Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos*, 184.

⁹⁵ Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944*, 80.

⁹⁶ Depero, "Notes on the Theatre," in Michael Kirby, *Futurist Performance*, trans. Victoria Nes Kirby (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1971), 209.

⁹⁷ For more on this, see Paolo Fossati, *La realtà attrezzata: scena e spettacolo dei futuristi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 173-74.

that sound ended up subservient to the visual: what was seen on the screen immediately dominated and absorbed the viewer's attention. Theatrical renewal thus lay in making the music, if not superior, then at least equal to the visual aspect—a reordering of the sensorium that reflected the Futurist experience of modernity articulated elsewhere.⁹⁸

This sensory reordering was a further area of Futurist preoccupation in 1924, one tied up with work on music and theater, as well as the crisis of new media and their threat to older genres. The preoccupation was twofold: the senses were seen on the one hand to have been stultified by the weight of the past, while on the other having been transformed by new mass entertainments.⁹⁹ This contradictory concern had instilled a perceived crisis of the senses that pervaded discussion that year. The need for the reinvigoration of modes of perception had long been at the center of Futurist musical aesthetics: much of the work on noise was concerned with the reorientation required by modern sound culture, namely of war and the city. It was the particular qualities of such recent experience that had, after all, required a new musical art that both reflected and challenged these experiences; as Russolo had written:

Ma i nostri sensi, che soffrono nel ricevere un'emozione violenta a cui non siamo abituati, quasi non avvertono, d'altra parte, ciò che sono troppo abituati a sentire. Ed è per questo che, nella musica moderna, la ricerca di timbri e di coloriti orchestrali conseguiti mediante le più strane e artificiose dissonanze, è ormai diventata una preoccupazione dominante e costante.¹⁰⁰

(Our senses, which suffer when they experience violent emotions to which they are not accustomed, almost seem, on the other hand, not to notice sensations with which they are too familiar. And that is why, in modern music, the search for timbres and orchestral colors, achieved through the strangest and most unnatural dissonances, has become a dominant and constant preoccupation.)

Thus again the same procedure we have already encountered was taking place: contemporary crises of the stagnation of theater, the threat posed by new media, and the disorder of the senses were exploited by the Futurists and co-opted into their unyielding rhetoric.

Advertising old Futurism

In every aspect of the Venetian performance and its surrounding discourse, then, the Futurists were exacerbating contemporary perceptions of crisis. By 1924, musical language, opera, theater, emergent media, the senses, national identity, political ideology, and society were surrounded and enmeshed in fraught debates of crisis and anxiety. If public discourse was characterized by

⁹⁸ Casavola, "Le versioni scenico-plastiche della musica (Manifesto futurista)," in Marinetti, ed., *Il futurismo: rivista sintetica illustrata* 10 (1924), reprinted in Bianchi, *La musica futurista*, 239-40.

⁹⁹ For a theoretical and literature-based account of a technologically-mediated crisis of the senses, see Sara Danus, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁰ Russolo, "L'arte dei rumori: nuova voluttà acustica."

this deep and all-pervasive concern, it was perhaps partly a result of the broader cultural crisis of the postwar period: everything was perceived to be heightened, with a maximalist rhetoric evident in every sphere of discussion. Furthermore, this was intensified by the Venetian setting: a locale with its own reverberations of Futurism's troubled past and present, and an embodiment of the movement's mutual disdain for and attachment to the old.

Paradoxically, however, it was this culture that not only enabled the Futurists' continuation, but also resulted in the movement's decline. To gain a foothold in discourse, they had to exploit media outlets to a greater degree than ever before. The primary means employed—manifestos, periodicals, and press releases—may have been rather old by 1924, but their exploitation to an unprecedented degree made them the foremost media of the twentieth-century avant-garde. One contemporary critic had claimed that it was this “mania for advertising” that had enabled Futurism to survive for fifteen years.¹⁰¹ But if the performances were preceded by huge advertising campaigns—or what the historian Giovanni Antonucci calls “exaggerated marketing hype”—that extolled their futurology and renewal from cultural crisis, when such events finally came to pass they were, perhaps inevitably, a disappointment.¹⁰²

The result was an increasing discrepancy between theory and practice—between, if you will, text and act. If the performances could no longer support the weight of the surrounding media hype, a deeper gap was opening up between the uncompromising vision stated in the advertising and the increasingly old spectacle happening on stage. Such events became “artworlds” in the fullest sense: collaborative exercises that extended even to audience reaction, with the noted deficiencies of what happened onstage offset by theoretical foreshadowing devised to ally foreseen concerns.¹⁰³ For if the Futurists still saw themselves as inhabiting a phase of transition toward the future, contemporary critics were surprised by how reliant on the past they were. From the use of theater and ballet, to the concepts of *la musica dell'avvenire* and the total work of art, every aspect of the performance had its own resonant heritage.¹⁰⁴ Even the movement's continual effacement and rewriting of the past could not escape connections to historical precedents.

Furthermore, Futurism itself was increasingly being seen as old and irrelevant. As one contemporary critic, Marco Praga, claimed:

Sapevo, andandoci, che cosa, press'a poco, ci avrei veduto ed ascoltato; perché, se in vent'anni, non si è diffusa la comprensione nel pubblico e non si è accresciuto il favor popolare pure la produzione futurista non si è modificata, né ha trovato

¹⁰¹ “[M]ania di réclame.” Romagnoli, “In hilaritate tristis (January 11, 1924),” in *In platea: critiche drammatiche dell'anno 1923* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1924); reprinted in *Sipario* 2, no. 2 (1967): 14.

¹⁰² Giovanni Antonucci, *Lo spettacolo futurista in Italia* (Rome: Nuova Universale Studium, 1974), 67.

¹⁰³ The notion of “artworlds” here comes from Arthur Danto's idea of the “atmosphere of art theory.” See Danto, “The Artworld,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (October 15, 1964): 571-84. For Howard Becker's “network of people” involved, see Becker, *Art Worlds*, rev. ed. (1982; repr. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁴ Antonucci suggests that such a reliance on the past might have been a way of trying to forge a relationship with the masses (however ambivalent that relationship might be): “Il teatro futurista, a differenza di quello dada e surrealista, agisce sui palcoscenici tradizionali, utilizza interpreti popolari proprio nel repertorio da esso contestato.” *Lo spettacolo futurista in Italia*, 8.

manifestazioni nuove o più significative o più espressive. Futurista sì, ma statica anzichenò.¹⁰⁵

(I knew, going there, what—more or less—I would have seen and heard; for if in twenty years, the audience’s understanding has not enlarged and popular favor has not increased—still the Futurist production has not changed nor has it found new events that are more meaningful or more expressive. Futurist, yes, but somewhat static.)

This led Praga to a critique of the individual aspects of the performance: “The music of today is discordant notes and dissonances, the screeching and humming that made an impression on us some ten years ago; the paintings are always blue diamonds and green triangles, red pentagons and yellow circles, that we have long admired; and the synthetic dramas are pretty much [...] the ones we already acclaimed from the outset.”¹⁰⁶ Just as Russolo foretold, what had first surprised quickly became convention.¹⁰⁷ Other critics and artists were also declaring Futurism moribund by the mid-1920s. That the public could still react violently was primarily because of verbal provocation and heightened expectation generated by the Futurists’ manipulation of the press.

The movement’s method of negotiating cultural crisis thus entailed a disavowal of all they were in fact most reliant on. The heightened degree of contemporary anxiety and explosion of press networks called for a more extreme rhetoric and its unprecedented dissemination. At the same time, however, Futurist artistic practice was failing to evolve and adapt. Their notion of *la musica dell’avvenire* was being undone by the movement’s reinvention as a media enterprise and the exploitation of the culture of crisis. If this culture was prompting the Futurists’ intense preoccupation with everything that they were trying to disavow, that preoccupation in turn showed the movement to be part of the very tendency it was trying to critique.¹⁰⁸

The performance at the Goldoni thus presents a microcosm of the predicament of this moment in Futurism’s history. The provocation between the movement and the audience may have become a repetitive and increasingly predictable event, but it also played out deeper contemporary tensions. The event challenged conceptual divides between older genres and mass media, technology, and aesthetics, while simultaneously and paradoxically exposing these as the contradictions at the heart of the movement. These ambivalences and contradictions were

¹⁰⁵ Marco Praga, “Gli ultimi capolavori futuristi (January 29, 1923),” in Praga, *Cronache teatrali 1924* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1925); reprinted in Bartolucci, “I futuristi secondo la critica,” 20.

¹⁰⁶ “Le musiche di oggi sono le stonature e le dissonanze, gli stridori e i mugolî che ci impressionarono or fanno dieci anni; le pitture sono sempre le losanghe azzurre e i triangoli verdi i pentagoni rossi e i cerchi gialli che ammiriamo da gran tempo: e i drammi sintetici, suppergiù [...] sono quelli che abbiamo già applauditi sin dagli esordi.” Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Bürger also points out that the avant-garde’s emphasis on shock entails a short-lived efficacy: “Nothing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock; by its very nature, it is a unique experience. As a result of repetition, it changes fundamentally: there is such a thing as expected shock.” He notes that “expected shock” is often generated by the press. See Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, rev. ed. (1974; repr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 81. Furthermore, the Futurists’ focus on the aesthetic, as well as ageing and forming convention, signify its failure to unite the art and life praxis—Bürger’s key critique of the avant-garde.

¹⁰⁸ Calinescu also suggests that this aspect of avant-garde practice resulted in their undoing: “both modernity and the avant-garde have displayed an extraordinary imagination of crisis; and they have jointly succeeded in creating a complex, often ironic and self-ironic sensitivity for crisis, which seems to be both their ultimate achievement and their nemesis.” Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 147.

heightened by the Venetian locale: a city whose preoccupation with the future could never be performed at the expense of the past, a museum of Italy's heritage as well as a contested space for modernist display, Venice was itself a catalyst for the complex cultural negotiations of the postwar period. In a time when past and future were increasingly seen as irreconcilable, when renewal from cultural crisis meant disavowal of the old in favor of the new, Venice afforded an apposite platform for Futurism's inherent contradictions: above all, of forging a path to *la musica dell'avvenire* while betraying a love of the old.

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