The Fascist-Futurist Challenge to Liberal Modernity

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Boccioni, Umberto. Elasticity (Elasticita), 1912. Accessed 20 August 2018.

In 2009, Italian Futurism celebrated its centenary, honored by galleries and museums worldwide. Books and articles commemorated the immense and

ongoing contributions of Futurism to modern art, while luxury car designers drew inspiration from Futurist sculpture.[1] In 2019, the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of Italian Fascism will likely be an occasion for somber reflection on the birth of a violent, authoritarian political movement that seized and held power in Italy for over two decades, inspired Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime, and continues to influence dictatorial regimes a century later. The founder of Futurism, poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, attended the first two conventions of Benito Mussolini's Fascist movement in March 1919 and May 1920.[2] The link between Marinetti and Mussolini is widely recognized but little understood. Both men were influenced by the irrationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the power of myth and political theater espoused by Georges Sorel.[3] Both advocated war as a path to national healing and strength for a fledgling and war-torn Italy. Scholars, perhaps too eagerly, tend to characterize Marinetti's interest in Fascist politics as a short-lived, opportunistic flirtation. In fact, Marinetti built his reputation as a poet and performer with an oeuvre that glorified graphic violence and incited riots.[4] He lent his high profile to organizing in favor of military intervention in Libya, where he worked as a journalist reporting grisly details with relish, and in World War I, where he twice volunteered to serve as a soldier.[5] Even at a glance, Marinetti's politics appear to align with Mussolini's well before the two men met after World War I. Perhaps, then, developing an understanding of the true nature and extent of the relationship between Marinetti's Futurism and Mussolini's Fascism requires further investigation.

Existing scholarship on the association of Futurism and Fascism tends to align with one of three schools of thought. One interpretation argues that the connection has been significantly exaggerated. In "Back to the Futurism," art writer Rosalind McKever decries the tendency of some art historians to avoid the Futurists due to their political affiliations. She addresses the Futurists primarily as artists, acknowledging their politics only to frame them as unimportant compared to Futurist contributions to modern art.[6] McKever's argument is weak in light of even a cursory examination of the numerous, politically charged manifestos the Futurists published beginning in 1909 and continuing through the early 1940s. Taking a different approach to the same conclusion, Ulrich Schmid, in "Style versus Ideology: Towards a Conceptualisation of Fascist Aesthetics," also suggests that Futurism's connections to Fascism have been overstated.[7] Schmid argues that Marinetti failed to ally his movement to Fascism, demonstrated by the fact that Mussolini never issued an official policy on the arts supporting Futurism. While this is true, official favor is not the sole indicator of alignment.

A second school of thought suggests that although Futurism and Fascism were indeed connected, the link was temporary and limited in scope. In “Politics as Art,” Anne Bowler argues that Futurism was inherently a political-artistic movement that cannot be assessed by just one of those criteria alone.[8] Bowler highlights the influence of and continuities with irrationalism within both movements, refuting their twin claims of a revolutionary break with the past. She credits Futurism with contributions to the ideological development of Fascism while arguing that Futurism’s embrace of the Fascist movement was significantly curtailed when Mussolini began to accommodate the party to the practical concerns of governing Italy. Valerio C. Ferme’s “Redefining the Aesthetics of Fascism: The Battle Between the Ancients and the Moderns Revisited” argues that although Futurism and Fascism had a number of significant points of contact, and despite Mussolini’s use of Futurist aesthetics, Futurism cannot be considered the only fascist art.[9] Other art movements sought official favor, and Ferme explains that the regime’s lack of a coherent policy on the arts reflected the generally amorphous nature of Fascism. He also suggests that the Futurists lost faith in Fascism to a significant degree after Mussolini gained power and embraced the Church, the monarchy, and the Roman past, which had initially been shared objects of derision for the two movements. Like Bowler, Ferme suggests Fascism’s pragmatic approach alienated the more idealistic Futurists.

A third and more recent view argues that indeed Futurism, and Marinetti in particular, became ever more closely aligned with Fascism over time. In his 2013 article “Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: the Futurist as Fascist, 1929-1937,” Ernest Ialongo suggests Marinetti only grew more emphatically and “fervent[ly] Fascist,” as Mussolini described him, through the 1920s and 1930s.[10] Contrary to the common argument that Marinetti and Futurism grew away from Fascism, Ialongo emphasizes strong parallels between Futurist trends and Fascist developments, such as the emergence of Aeropittura in 1929 as Italy built up its Royal Air Force and Arte Sacra Futurista in 1931 as Marinetti finally embraced the Church long after Mussolini had.[11] Ialongo also traces Marinetti’s various non-art efforts in support of the regime and its goals, such as traveling as a spokesperson and diplomat, writing in support of Mussolini and Fascism, recruiting for the imperialist Ethiopian War, and even fighting in Ethiopia at age 58. Despite being an outlier in the literature, or perhaps because of this, Ialongo’s appraisal of the decades-long relationship between Futurism and Fascism is compelling.

Ialongo’s thesis invites further analysis of points of contact between the two movements. Both Italian Fascism and Italian Futurism framed themselves as a

revolutionary break with the past. In 1909, the Futurists announced that "time and space died yesterday."[12] In 1914, Mussolini declared "that which existed yesterday is dead."[13] Futurism has, for all its ideological hostility toward liberal modernity, been granted a qualified position of acceptance, while Fascism is placed outside the bounds of modernity. As Ialongo describes, Futurism anticipated and influenced the emergence of Fascism and later tailored its own innovations to Mussolini's policies. Futurism was indeed modernist, and the political movement it helped birth and buttress for the better part of three decades was as well. Futurism and Fascism represented an alternative vision of modernity that emerged from irrationalism rather than rationalism.[14] Fascist-Futurist modernity venerated speed and spontaneity, idealized a youthful and aggressive masculinity, and exalted war as the path to national betterment.

Invigorated by technological advancement, Fascist-Futurist modernity embraced speed aesthetically and translated this into an affirmation of ideological spontaneity. Speaking at the headquarters of the Motor Transport Company in January 1923, Mussolini "[sang] the praises of speed, in this epoch of speed."[15] He told those assembled that his "government of speed" would "get rid of all that is stagnant in our national life."[16] Mussolini's words echoed Marinetti's faith in the "beauty of speed" to root out the "ancestral lethargy" that afflicted Italy, as he had forecast in the founding manifesto of Futurism in 1909.[17] The often frantic pacing of Marinetti's writing demonstrated his adherence to the aesthetics of speed, and his devotion is mostly clearly expressed in his 1916 manifesto "The New Religion-Morality of Speed."[18] In this manifesto, Marinetti expounds a modern morality based on the virtue of velocity. In his typically bombastic style, he conjures an image of the "pedantic" Danube River forsaking its meandering course to instead run in a straight line at 300 kilometers per hour, embodying Futurist perfection through speed and efficiency.[19]

The Fascist-Futurist fetishization of speed correlated directly with its preference for spontaneity. Mussolini often described himself and his party as action-oriented, and he was open about the "spontaneous and inevitable," "practical rather than theoretical" nature of his movement when he co-wrote an overview of its history and tenets in "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism" in 1932.[20] Mussolini freely admits in the article that he had "no specific doctrinal attitude" in mind at the outset of building the Fascist movement, which suggests that spontaneity was indeed one of the founding tenets of Fascism. Ten years earlier, in his first speech in Chamber as prime minister, Mussolini demonstrated his contempt for theory and embrace of spontaneity by ending his speech, "Before arriving here, we were asked on all

sides for a programme. It is not, alas! programmes that are wanting in Italy, but men to carry them out."[21] Likewise, Marinetti and his Futurists tasked themselves with returning spontaneity to the creation of art. Marinetti's "words-in-freedom" style of writing, as outlined in "Destruction of Syntax – Radio Imagination – Words-in-Freedom" in 1913, rejects syntax, punctuation, and grammar as hindrances to the spontaneity necessary to authentic literary expression.[22] The preponderance of manifestos and other renderings of Futurist thought and intent suggests their claim to spontaneity was more aspirational than Mussolini's, but the value they placed on it is clear.

A logical corollary to Fascist-Futurist modernity's fascination with speed and spontaneity is its cult of youth and aggression. Mussolini frequently praised youth and called for the modernization and renewal of Italy.[23] Speaking about the impending 1921 elections, he berated the "old men of the old Italy," who must make way for the youthful Fascists.[24] In "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism," Mussolini argued that Fascism aimed to "combat every retrograde idea" and replace it with his vision of modernity.[25] The Futurists took Mussolini's disdain for the "old men of the old Italy" to a characteristic extreme. From its founding, Futurism demanded the destruction of libraries, universities, museums, and academies, describing them as graveyards littering the Italian landscape.[26] Marinetti condemned "useless admiration" for the past and even invited younger artists to destroy the efforts of the Futurists when they eventually aged into obsolescence.[27] In his 1915 manifesto on "The Futurist Political Movement," Marinetti rejected the "cult of old people," demanding an Italy whose politics emanate from energy, pride, and virility.[28]

"Virility" dominated the hypermasculine rhetoric of Fascist-Futurist modernity.[29] Despite their shared vocabulary, however, the construction of masculinity in Fascism and Futurism differed somewhat. Both idealized a brash, youthful aggression that privileged violent hypermasculinity over other expressions of gender. Mussolini clung to traditional patriarchal gender roles and did little to upset the status quo. In a 1914 speech advocating Italian entry into World War I, he invoked conventional gendered calls to action, imploring Italian men to honor their responsibilities to their "mother" Italy and to defend their women against Austria.[30] In 1923, Mussolini painted himself as a benevolent patriarch who had "given" women the vote as part of his program of so-called universal suffrage (it should be noted that women could vote only in municipal elections until after World War II).[31] Conversely, Marinetti and his Futurists wished to abolish romantic love and femininity altogether, despising the mollifying effects of love, familial connection, and sentimentality. This was a key tenet of the Futurist worldview, colorfully and

directly espoused in a number of manifestos, including 1909's "Let's Murder the Moonlight!," 1910's "Futurism and Woman," 1912's "Manifesto of the Futurist Woman (Response to F.T. Marinetti)," and 1913's "Futurist Manifesto of Lust," among others.[32] Some Futurists supported feminism and women's suffrage, while others railed against these trappings of liberal modernity, but arguments on both sides emanated from their disdain for femininity. Futurists who advocated women's suffrage and feminism thought a move toward gender equality would speed the destruction of femininity, romance, and the family, and those opposed feared it would do the opposite.[33] Although Fascist and Futurist expressions of masculinity differed in this important way, ultimately, Fascist-Futurist modernity was unified in its elevation of violent hypermasculinity.

The glorification of war and violence was arguably the most stable point of contact between Fascism and Futurism. The aggressive young men of Fascist-Futurism lived in a world that grew increasingly accessible – and thus increasingly conquerable – through the technological advancements of a world obsessed with speed. Railroads, airplanes, automobiles, and telephones made the world smaller and more united, and the shrinking globe offered Fascist-Futurist modernity improved opportunities for imperialist expansion.[34] Advancements in weaponry created new avenues for destruction and violence. As Ialongo elucidates, Marinetti supported Mussolini's imperialist ambitions in a variety of ways, even seeking his express permission to serve in the Ethiopian War at nearly 60 years old.[35] Violent language and explicit calls for war permeate Fascist-Futurist rhetoric. Marinetti's founding manifesto – his "manifesto of burning and overwhelming violence" – announces the Futurist intention to "glorify war – the only hygiene of the world," and his metaphorical imagery is likewise militaristic as he depicts "facing an army of enemy stars."[36] Inviting future generations of artists to wage war on the Futurists when they have grown old, Marinetti explains that "[a]rt, in fact, can be nothing if not violence, cruelty, and injustice."[37] Although the language of nationalism is woven into virtually all Futurist writing, in "The Futurist Political Movement," Marinetti explicitly praises nationalism and expansionism, condemns pacifism, and elevates "Italy absolutely above all else."[38] Continuous calls to destroy, to abolish, to wage war, to tear down, to set fire, to dominate, and otherwise inflict violence suffuse Futurist writing.

Mussolini's glorification of violence and war was rarely as poetically bombastic as that of the Futurists, but the sentiment was the same. Calling upon Italy to enter World War I in 1914, he reminded those assembled that "neutrals have never dominated events," and that indeed "it is blood which moves the wheels

of history!"[39] At the Fascist convention in March 1919, Mussolini decried those who had rejected the war after seeing its costs, arguing that war must be "either wholly accepted or wholly rejected."[40] He reminded his Fascist party that they had "willed" the war and that wars of territorial expansion are necessary for any nation seeking "economic and spiritual expansion."[41] Speaking on the creation of Fascism in 1921, Mussolini claimed that although violence is necessary, Fascism does not make "an aesthetic of violence."[42] He immediately invalidates his claim, however, stating that violence must have an "aristocratic" character and "surgical" style. In 1918, he had referred to soldiers as a new "aristocracy" destined to replace democracy, suggesting he had indeed long attributed certain aesthetic attributes to war and violence.[43] Defining the Fascist doctrine in 1932, Mussolini echoed earlier Futurist writings when he rejected pacifism as cowardice, framed life as the struggle for conquest, and described empire-building as fundamental.[44]

Fascist-Futurist modernity sought greatness as a vast Italian empire, as a means to excise their humiliation as the small agrarian nation-state that had once been the heart of the Roman Empire. Warfare offered the means for conquest, and the thrilling imagery of speed and technological modernization, the rhetoric of violent masculinity, and the glorification of war aimed, as Mussolini said plainly in 1914, "to create that state of mind which will impose war upon the country."[45] As Schmid argues, Fascism's ill-defined ideological basis was reified by its aesthetic trappings, and Bowler rightly points out that Futurism did not truly exist outside of its politics. The marriage of Fascism and Futurism was not seamless, but it was complete. It incorporated elements of both movements, creating an amalgamation that ultimately proved indissoluble. Although Fascist-Futurist modernity died with its co-founders in the winter and spring of 1944-1945, it represented a uniquely irrationalist challenge to the legacy of the Enlightenment in the first half of the twentieth century.

Endnotes

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16. Mussolini and Di San Severino, “The Government of Speed: Speech at Motor Transport Company, 19th January 1923,” 234.

17. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” 51.

18. F.T. Marinetti, “The New Religion-Morality of Speed,” in Futurism: An Anthology. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009: 224.

19. Marinetti, “The New Religion-Morality of Speed,” 225.

20. Benito Mussolini and trans. Jane Soames, “The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism.” The Political Quarterly 4, no. 3 (July 1933): 342, 356.

21. Mussolini and Di San Severino, “A New Cromwell in Parliament: Speech in Chamber, 16th November 1922,” 209.

22. F.T. Marinetti, “Destruction of Syntax – Radio Imagination – Words-in-Freedom,” in Futurism: An Anthology. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009: 143-151.

23. Mussolini and Di San Severino, “The Fatal Victory: Speech at Teatro Comunale of Bologna, 24th May 1918,” 39-40; Mussolini and Di San Severino, “The Tasks of Fascismo: Speech at Politeama Rossetti at Trieste, 20th September 1920,” 115; Mussolini and Di San Severino, “How Fascismo was Created: Its Evolution and Essence: Speech at Teatro Comunale of Bologna, 3rd April 1921,” 134; Mussolini and Di San Severino, “The Government of Speed: Speech at Motor Transport Company, 19th January 1923,” 234.

24. Mussolini and Di San Severino, “How Fascismo was Created: Its Evolution and Essence: Speech at Teatro Comunale of Bologna, 3rd April 1921,” 140-141.

25. Mussolini and Soames, “The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism,” 343.

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27. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” 53.

28. F.T. Marinetti, “The Futurist Political Movement,” in Futurism: An Anthology. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009: 216, 218.

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33. F.T. Marinetti, “Contempt for Woman,” in Futurism: An Anthology. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009: 88-89; De Saint-Point, “Manifesto of the Futurist Woman (Response to F.T. Marinetti),” 111.

34. Kern, 213, 232.

35. Ialongo, 393-418.

36. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” 49, 51, 52.

37. Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” 53.

38. Marinetti, “The Futurist Political Movement,” 216, 218.

39. Mussolini and Di San Severino, “For the Liberty of Humanity and Future of Italy: Speech at Scuole Mazza, Parma, 13th December 1914,” 14.

40. Mussolini and Di San Severino, “The Three Declarations at the First Fascista Meeting: Speech at Milan, 23rd March 1919,” 88.

41. Mussolini and Di San Severino, “The Three Declarations at the First Fascista Meeting: Speech at Milan, 23rd March 1919,” 89-90.

42. Mussolini and Di San Severino, “How Fascismo was Created: Its Evolution and Essence: Speech at Teatro Comunale of Bologna, 3rd April 1921,” 138.

43. Mussolini and Di San Severino. “The Fatal Victory: Speech at Teatro Comunale of Bologna, 24th May 1918,” 40-41.

44. Benito Mussolini and trans. Jane Soames, “The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism.” The Political Quarterly 4, no. 3 (July 1933): 344, 345, 356.

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