Marinetti's provocative propaganda was a catalyst in the emergence of Futurism as the first, most vociferous, and, ultimately, most influential movement of the modernist avant-garde. Marinetti's very exuberance, however, has in many ways hindered a critical understanding of Futurist textual practices. His strident slogans glorifying war, demeaning woman, celebrating technology, and advocating the destruction of the past have generated reductionist interpretations of the movement's political and aesthetic ambitions. The ideological affinities between Fascism and Futurism have provoked facile condemnations of the movement, leading to an all-too-hasty dismissal of its historical and cultural significance. Analyses focusing on the politics of Futurism have often failed to address the complexities that the movement's aesthetic production presents. Conversely, the rediscovery of Futurism that began in the late 1960s (spurred on by a new wave of "neo-avant-garde" experimentation) has generally dissociated assessments of the movement's artistic achievements from ideological and political concerns.

The methodological dichotomizing of the political and the aesthetic circumvents a problem that is crucial to any understanding of Futurism: the relationship between apparently unrelated or divergent goals of the movement, such as its vanguardist rejection of literary tradition and its socio-political program of nationalist and masculinist revanche or empowerment. These issues, I believe, can best be explored by focusing on an overarching ideological construct in Futurist writings: a mythopoecia of individual and national regeneration which I call the "Futurist fiction of power." From this vantage point, we can chart isomorphic patterns and synergistic effects in Futurist strategies, ranging from the experimentation with "words in freedom" to the belligerent rhetoric of the manifestos.

At its inception, Futurism was a reaction against the fin-de-siècle malaise that took the form of a pervasive sense of a dislocation in the logical, causal relationship between past, present, and future. Marinetti's antidote to the ills of modern decadence is the formulation of a mythical new subjectivity that rejects the limits of
Cinzia Sartini Blum

history and empowers itself by appropriating the marvels of technology to create a utopian Futurist wonderland infused with primal life forces. This regenerative program incorporates irrationalist ideologemes like the Nietzschean notion of the Übermensch and the Sorelian idea of the revolutionary force of myth, combined with scientific theories of evolutionary perfectibility. Its founding myth is the (re)birth of a Futurist superuomo, predicated on the liquidation of the old rational, introspective, and sentimental “I,” and on a hyperbolic expansion of the New Man’s energy, intuition, imagination, and will to power.

The Futurist fiction of power is rooted in a number of philosophical sources, prominent among which is pragmatism. General definitions of pragmatism are hard to come by; many divergent, even conflicting points of view have been termed “pragmatic.” Nevertheless, cultural historians have identified a substantial core of ideas shared by many variants of pragmatic philosophy. In the words of Philip P. Wiener, “Common to this substantial core . . . is an opposition to the absolute separation of thought from action, of pure from applied science, of intuition or revelation from experience or experimental verification, of private interests from public concerns.” Within this framework of shared values, however, a considerable ideological distance separates the subjective individualism of William James from the scientific experimentalism of mathematical logicians and philosophical experimenters such as Charles S. Pierce and Giovanni Vailati.

Marinetti’s position is more akin to the psychological views of James than to the philosophy of science of Pierce and Vailati. An even more immediate precursor is the “magical” pragmatism enthusiastically advocated by Giovanni Papini in the Florentine journal Leonardo during the years 1903–1907. Papini locates the lowest common denominator of all pragmatist views in the plasticity or flexibility of theories and beliefs; that is, in the recognition of their purely instrumental value. Ignoring the criticism of James’s nominalism by Pierce, he lumps James and Pierce together as proponents of a theory of meaning that emphasizes the particular consequences of ideas in future practical experiences. He himself relies heavily on the Jamesian version of pragmatism, particularly its doctrine of Will to Believe. His own “magical” version, however, carries the romantic elements of James’s philosophy to an extreme, shifting the emphasis from internal psychological reality to the outside world, and affirming that in certain people the will has the magical power of transforming external things.

While rejecting all reductive definitions as “anti-pragmatic,” Papini in fact acknowledges that pragmatism can be viewed as “a collection of methods for expanding man’s power.” In this utilitarian perspective, power is the ultimate measure of the difference between pragmatism and positivism, the movement from which it derives and departs: the one fosters antiagnosticism and stands for empowerment, whereas the other leads to agnosticism and is synonymous with impotence. The pragmatist, according to Papini, scorns metaphysical questions not because they are too high, beyond the reach of human intelligence, as the positivist believes, but because they are senseless and stupid. In Papini’s words, “refusing to deal with them is not evidence of the impotence but of the power of
The connection between magical pragmatism and Marinetti's Futurist fiction of power is suggested by Papini himself. Notions such as the influence of will on belief and belief on reality are, he argues, likely to attract practical minds as well as poets and utopian thinkers. The former will find in pragmatism the theory of their contempt for impractical questions and their sympathy for everything that is clear, effective, and quick. The latter will be attracted by suggestive views which encourage imagination and hope of extraordinary things. In this fashion, concludes Papini, pragmatism is capable of reconciling opposites (LCI, 342).

In a similar manner, Futurism combines a penchant for outrageous utopian visions with a persistent interest in the practical, efficient aspects of modern life. Like Papini’s pragmatism, the Futurist fiction of power can be defined as a collection of strategies of empowerment. Power is the ultimate, shared goal of seemingly contradictory drives of destruction and creation, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, internationalism and nationalism, anarchic dispersion and totalizing condensation, projection toward the technological future and recuperation of primitive forces. This double movement reproduces, exposes, and even celebrates the intrinsically contradictory dynamics of progress, which Norbert Elias describes as a dialectic of expansion and contraction of bodies and the world.

Marinetti’s poetics of “destruction of syntax,” “imagination without strings,” “words in freedom” and “aeropoetry” attacks linguistic conventions to produce syntactic violence. The ultimate target is the old “I” of traditional literature: “We systematically destroy the literary I so that it may dissolve in the universal vibration, and we arrive at the point of expressing the infinitely minute and the excitations of molecules.” The epistemological implications of this stance are less iconoclastic than they might, at first, appear to be. The scattering of the self in the universe (brought about by the fast pace of modern life and mirrored by Futurist language) is presented as a means to a more powerful unity freed from the limits of human nature: “Triumph of our I over our Weight, with its treacherous plots to murder our speed and drag it into immobility’s ditch. Velocity = scattering + condensation of the I. All the distance covered by a body is condensed in that very body.” Destroying the “I” of passéist literature, the Futurist subject disseminates himself to penetrate the molecular life of matter. With the help of aeropoetry, he becomes a winged, mechanically propelled “super I,” capable of wielding power in the immense spaces revealed to twentieth-century consciousness by the totalizing—both detached and dominating—perspective of the airplane.

The destructive and constructive impetus of the fiction of power is driven by the transforming force of figurative language. The Marinettian self is configured metaphorically in the most grandiose terms—miracle-worker, space-conqueror, or armored fighting machine. Natural or societal obstacles to his limitless expansion are either eradicated (through a rhetoric of abjection) or mastered by way of assimilation: i.e., transformed into objects of desire and conquest. This destruction/construction is (re)produced by the discursive strategies of Marinetti’s
poetic revolution: the ellipsis of syntactic (hence logical) links; the accumulation of sensorial effects and bold imaginary associations. Conventional and experimental strategies converge to restore the writer’s power to represent and act upon reality. On the one hand, the esotericism of “words in freedom” revolutionizes the experience of lyric expression, reasserting control over the epistemological and referential realm: the fragmented, chaotic text conforms to and claims mastery over, the fragmented, chaotic world in which rational and historical links have failed to order meaning and stabilize identity. On the other hand, through their characteristic oratorical impetus and exalted epic tone, the manifestos display power of action in the sociopolitical realm, reclaiming the public function that art has lost in modern society. The Futurist affirms his role as armed prophet and guide of a new, powerful Italy, finding in patriotic war and modernity a cause for his rebellion and an inspiration for his art; hence Marinetti’s assimilation of propaganda and mass communication techniques. The Futurist manifestos were sent to Italian and foreign newspapers, with attached circular letters soliciting reviews and comments. Gift copies of the new books published by Marinetti’s press, Edizioni futuriste di “Poesia,” were also accompanied by fliers that offered suggestions for reviews and promised forthcoming volumes in exchange for free publicity. Indeed, only a small percentage of each new run was channeled onto the market. Most volumes were distributed free of charge to intellectuals, journalists, political and industrial leaders, and other potential supporters of the Futurist effort of national renewal.

From the beginning, the Futurist program transcended the literary realm in its efforts to orchestrate collective action, extend the agency of art beyond its traditional confines, and affirm the supremacy of Italian “genius.” Celebrating the multimedia creation of Futurist cinema in 1916, the Futurists described themselves as “disassembling and reassembling the universe according to [their] marvellous whims, to centuplicate the power of Italian creative genius and its absolute predominance in the world.” This statement echoes Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero’s 1915 manifesto, “Ricostruzione futurista dell’Universo” (“Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe”), which offered blueprints for mixed-media art and for the marriage of artistic and industrial worlds—perhaps Futurism’s most significant innovation, and most enduring legacy. However, the language of the 1916 manifesto also suggests a link between aesthetic revolution and virulent nationalism, bordering on imperialism. At the same time, it evokes infantile play and caprice, a child’s all-or-nothing attitude (“capricci” means both “whims” and “tantrums”).

“Ricostruzione futurista dell’Universo” offers insight into the connections between these two overlapping aspects of the Futurist “deconstruction and reconstruction” of the universe. One of the proposed examples of multimedia creation is the Futurist Toy (figures 1 and 2) aimed not only at stimulating the child’s laughter, elasticity, imagination, and sensibility, but also at inciting a pugnacious disposition by getting him accustomed “to physical courage, to fighting and to WAR.” Outrageously comical and dangerously aggressive, the
Figure 1 (above) and Figure 2 (below): Fortunato Depero, Futurist Toy. *Noi* (June-July 1923): 14. Biblioteca Nazionale, Rome.
toy is a miniature model of the Futurist style of action: a combination of ludicrous excess and violent fanaticism. As an adult, the Futurist child will continue to play his power games by transforming battle into an exciting sensual experience and by perverting love into a relationship of domination and annihilation.

Eros and violence are recurrently associated in Futurist texts. For instance, Marinetti’s autobiographical novel, *L’alcova d’acciaio* (*The Steel Alcove*), interweaves eroticized scenes of war and embattled scenes of love; events on the battlefield are described with a flourish of sexual imagery, while the heroic protagonist makes love with a “brutal vehemence” intended to counteract the debilitating effects of romantic love. The thematic and figurative interplay between “sexy” war and “bellicose” sex points to the emotional underpinnings of the Futurist fiction of power. Warfare, like sexual violence, allows for an empowering eruption of feeling: an explosion of boundaries which, paradoxically, is predicated on affirmation of difference (between “us” and “them,” the nation and the enemy, the subject and the object of desire).

The entire Futurist project is informed by the dynamics of eruption and consolidation; the drive to expand the self beyond natural and social boundaries exists simultaneously with the effort to bind and overcode individual and society. Both strategies share an ultimate aim: the totalizing affirmation of the self, as a response to the modern breakdown of rationalist/idealist notions of the autonomous, bounded subject. From this perspective, Marinetti’s misogynist aphorisms can be viewed as one incarnation of a pervasive discursive practice, and the most blatant manifestation of the centrality of sexual relations and gendered rhetoric in the fiction of power. Sexual difference shapes virtually all aspects of the imaginary relationship between the Futurist (male) subject and the (feminine) world of objects. Femininity is associated with the other that must be rejected or assimilated in the effort to affirm an all-powerful self.

In Marinetti’s pre-Futurist writings, woman’s body stands for the impossibility of the ideal and the imperfection of the real, and thus for the perpetual frustration of desire. Such frustration, often enacted in sadomasochistic erotic fantasies, results in destructive and self-destructive rebellion against both the unattainable ideal and a reality perceived to be intolerable: a violent, extroverted version of decadent “neurosis,” characterized by hyperbolic expenditure, rather than deliquescence, of vital forces. The difference between the decadents’ contemplative aestheticism and Marinetti’s frenzied activism is radically accentuated in the Futurist manifestos, where he programmatically reacts against the fin-de-siècle’s overwhelmingly pessimistic and disempowering view of civilization’s vulnerability to the destructive forces of nature and society. To counter such negativity, the Futurist leader advanced the formula of *arte-azione* (art in/as action)—a new principle of “mental hygiene,” ostentatiously assuming a “healthy” stance of creative expansion, and appropriating new, technological sources of power.

In Futurist poetics, the machine is celebrated as new inspiring muse, aesthetic model, and object of desire—a narcissistic object that allows for the rejection of
female "lack," mirroring man's ambition for supernatural power. The myth of a regenerating union between man and machine constitutes the supporting framework of the fiction of power: the first manifesto celebrates the rebirth of a new poet-hero in symbiosis with his fast car; the poetic revolution of the "Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista" ("Technical Manifesto of Futurist literature," 1912) is "dictated" by the whirling propeller of an airplane. Woman is programmatically spurned as the arch-enemy of Futurism's heroic program. The infamous precept of "disprezzo della donna" ("scorn for woman") in the 1909 manifesto ensues "naturally" from the resolution to embrace revolutionary, belligerent ideals. The utopian goal of creating a "multiplied," immortal superman entails the introjection of the machine's empowering qualities—energy, precision, discipline—and the expulsion (through projection onto a feminine or feminized other) of human frailties such as sensibility, sensuality, skepticism, and pessimism.

Woman, nevertheless, plays a crucial rhetorical and thematic role in Futurist writings. Femininity is deployed in abundance, as a means of demarcating the "other" against which the self (either as individual, avant-garde group, or nation) can be defined. It is associated with all that man has to eschew, subjugate, or contain in order to create form, meaning, and identity: perishable organic matter; the disruptive flow of desires, memories, and emotions; the enemies of the fatherland; the traditionalist individuals and institutions that hinder Futurism's rejuvenating action; and even new technological objects, such as the "fascinating" machine gun cited in Marinetti's "Manifesto tecnico" (TIF, 49), whose threatening alienness the poet domesticates and feminizes by embodying it in a familiar object of desire.

The binding function of such rhetorical strategies is particularly evident in one aspect of the Futurist experience that critics have neglected: the Futurists' efforts to refashion the body through clothes, grooming, personal hygiene, and diet. These were orchestrated systematically in the mid-1930s, when the Futurists created a national Federation of Energo-Naturist Groups and sought a leading role in the eugenics campaign promoted by the Fascist regime. Arnaldo Ginna defined the movement's goal as the evolution of man into a superuomo, to be achieved by expanding natural resources through technological means. The process of vital expansion, however, was to be contained within clearly demarcated borders of gender and race. Futurist Naturism disavowed other naturist movements, which advocated internationalism, pacifism, regressivism, and nudism. It differentiated itself from foreign "brands" by promoting patriotism, virility, individual heroism, the physical and spiritual perfecting of the race, the machine as a source of well-being, and war as a cosmic decongesting phenomenon.

In his inaugural speech at the 1934 National Congress of Naturism, Marinetti depicts the participants in nudist conferences as a zoo of "barking, mewing, roaring, and squeaking" animals. Since words are "modern clothes," he sneers, it follows that naked people must be unendowed with human language. Clothing, in other words, performs the indispensable function—shared by language—of
distinguishing “civilized” people from brutes, friends from foes, and men from women. Nudism, Marinetti claims, is antipatriotic, antiheroic, and antivirile. After all, men cannot fight when their most vulnerable parts are exposed. Furthermore, total lack of clothes produces “confused sexual ambiguity conducive to degeneration.” Accordingly, he chastises grooming practices such as short hair for women, which efface gender differences.

Marinetti’s complaints against nudism do not contradict his earlier attack on toilettite, the “sickening” female desire for luxurious outfits. By distracting men from authentic carnal pleasure, toilettite fosters effeminacy and pederasty. Both arguments suggest that the sexed specificity of the male and female body—the “natural” foundation of gender difference—is undermined by modern fads and social practices. Because the foundation is not solid enough to support the contours of identity and secure the limits of symbolic intelligibility, both nudity and excessive “artificiality” spell epistemological confusion. When the naked body is insuffciently coded, contemporary trends in makeup, apparel, coiffure, and tanning perilously scramble codes of gender and even race. Futurist efforts to avert such a danger reveal the convergent and intersecting trajectory of different vectors of power: homophobia, misogyny, and racism.

If naked nature and mystifying artifice were equally to be rejected, what was the Futurists’ fashion statement? Extant pictures show Marinetti and his companions in formal, markedly bourgeois outfits, which attest to their rejection of the traditional bohemian look and their desire to demonstrate, through refined elegance, the seriousness and success of the Futurist enterprise. In his chronicle of the tumultuous Futurist evenings, Francesco Cangiullo recalls that the performers, in their tailcoats, frock coats, and tuxedos, gazed with Olympian calm and dignity at the cackling audiences they had provoked (figure 3). The only colorful, bold accents in their formal attire were the vests and ties of Fortunato Depero, Pippo Rizzo, and Balla, as seen, for example, in photographs from 1924 (figures 4 and 5).

At the same time, the Futurists carried out bold experiments in fashion design. Their first, and most famous, invention was the “antineutral suit” described and designed by Balla in his 1914 manifesto (figures 6–9). The colorful, asymmetrical, comfortable suit was intended to transform men’s apparel into a performative, proselytistic stimulant, producing an activistic, agonistic, nationalistic “mood” and behavior. Cangiullo wore the only antineutral suit ever tailored at a 1914 interventionist manifestation in Rome. It was made from white, red, and green flannel, and topped with a tricolor cap. In his memoirs, Cangiullo compares his emergence from the “shell” of his coat to the unfurling of a “humanized” flag.

Futurist design shared the artistic and practical goals of earlier and contemporary experiments, such as Henry Van de Velde’s and Sonia Delaunay’s attempts to wed art and fashion by harmonizing clothes with the modern environment and with the changing style of figurative art. Comfort and aesthetics are prominent concerns in Balla’s project. However, most of the arguments he
Figure 3. Umberto Boccioni, *A Futurist Soirée*. Caricature of the “Futurist evening” at the theater Politeama Garibaldi, Treviso, 2 June 1911. Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
Figure 4. Marinetti and Depero in Milan, January 1924 (in Giovanni Lista, *Futurismo e fotografia* [Milan: Muthipla Edizioni, 1979], 103).
Figure 5. Group Photo on the Occasion of the First Futurist Conference, 23 November 1924. Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
**IL VESTITO ANTINEUTRALE**

Manifesto futurista

Glorifichiamo la guerra, sola igiene del mondo.

**MARINETTI.**

1° Manifesto del Futurismo - 20 Febbraio 1910

Viva Asinari di Bernezzo!

**MARINETTI.**

(1° Serata futurista - Teatro Lirico, Milano, Febbraio 1910)

L’umanità si vestì sempre di *quiete*, di *paura*, di *cautela* o d’*indecisione*, portò sempre il lutto, o il povere, o il mantello. Il corpo dell’uomo fu sempre dimmuto da sbanature e da tinte *neutre*, avvilito dal nervo, soffocato da sintomi, imprigionato da panneggiamenti.

Finché oggi gli uomini usurano abiti di colori e forme statiche, cioè drappeggiati, solenni, gravi, inermi e sacerdotali. Erano espressioni di timidezza, di malinconia e di *schiavitù*, negazione della vita muscolare, che soffocava in un passatismo anti-igienico di stoffe troppo pesanti e di mezzo tinte tiepide, effeminate o decadenti. Tonalità e ritmi di *pace desolante*, funeraria e deprimente.

**OGGI vogliamo abolire:**

2. Tutte le tinte e le foggie pedanti, professorali e teutoniche. I disegni a righe, a quadrati, a *puntini diplomatici*.
3. I vestiti da lutto, immensi e inadatti per i berecci. Le morti eroiche non devono essere comitive, ma ricordate con vestiti rossi.
4. L’equilibrio *mediorientista*, il cosiddetto *equilibrio mediocristico*, che frenano il passo e rallentano il passo.
5. La simmetria nel taglio, le linee *statiche*, che stancano, deprimono, contristano, legano i muscoli; l’uniformità di gusci risvolti e tutte le cinquechiarate. I bottini inutili. I colletti e i polsini inamidati.

Noi futuristi vogliamo liberare la nostra razza da ogni *neutralità*, dall’indecisione paurosa e quietista, dal pessimismo negatore e dall’inercia portato dal paralibero e dalla *indecisio*

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**Figure 6.** Giacomo Balla, “The Antineutral Suit: Futurist Manifesto,” 11 September 1914. Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
nostalgica, romantica e rammollente. Noi vogliamo colorare l’Italia di audacia e di rischio futurista, dare finalmente agli italiani degli abiti bellicosi e giocondi.

Gli abiti futuristi saranno dunque:
1. **Aggressivi**, tali da moltiplicare il coraggio dei forti e da sconvolgere la sensibilità dei deboli.

2. **Agilizzanti**, cioè tali da aumentare la flessuosità del corpo e da favorirne lo slancio nella lotta, nel passo di corsa o di carica.

3. **Dinamici**, pei disegni e i colori dinamici delle stoffe, (triangoli, coni, spirali, elissi, circoli) che ispirino l’amore del pericolo, della velocità e dell’assalto, l’odio della pace e dell’immobilità.

4. **Semplici e comodi**, cioè fusi a mettersi e a toglierli, che ben si prestino per piantare il fucile, guardare i fiumi e lanciarsi a moto.

5. **Igienici**, cioè tagliati in modo che ogni punto della pelle possa respirare nelle lunghe marce e nelle salite faticose.


7. **Illuminanti.** Stoffe fosforescanti, che possono accendere la tenebrosità in un’assemblea di paurosi, spandere luce intorno quando pioggia, e correggere il grigio del crepuscolo nelle vie e nei nervi.

8. **Volitivi.** Disegni e colori violenti, imperiosi e impetuosi come comandi sul campo di battaglia.

9. **Asimmetrici.** Per esempio, l’estremità delle maniche e il davanti della giacca saranno a destra rotondi, a sinistra quadrati. Genuini controattacchi di linea.

10. **Di breve durata**, per rinnovare incessantemente il godimento e l’animazione irrituente del corpo.

11. **Variabili**, per mezzo dei modificanti (applicazioni di stoffa, di ampiezza, spessori, disegni e colori diversi) da disporre quando si voglia e dove si voglia, su qualsiasi punto del vestito, mediante bottoni pneumatici. Ognuno può così inventare ad ogni momento un nuovo vestito. Il modificante sarà propotente, urtante, tonante, decisivo, guerresco, ecc.

Il cappello futurista sarà asimmetrico e di colori aggressivi e festosi. Le scarpe futuriste saranno dinamiche, diverse l’una dall’altra, per forma e per colore, atte a prendere allegramente a calci tutti i neutralisti.

**Sarà brutalmente esclusa l’unione del giallo col nero.**

Si pensa e si agisce come si veste. Poiché la neutralità è la sintesi di tutti i
Si pensa e si agisce come si veste. Poiché la neutralità è la sintesi di tutti i

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**Figure 7.** Giacomo Balla, “The Antineutral Suit: Futurist Manifesto,” 11 September 1914. Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
passatismi, noi futuristi sbandieriamo oggi questi vestiti antineutrali, cioè testosamente bellicosi.

Soltanto i podagrosi ci disapproveranno.

Tutto il giovine italiano riconoscerà in noi, che li portiamo, le sue viventi bandiere futu-

riste per la nostra grande guerra, necessaria, URGENTE.

Se il Governo non deporti il suo vestito pas-
satista di punta e di indecisione, noi raddop-
pieremo. CENTUPLICHEREMO IL ROSSO del tricolore che vestiamo.

MILANO, 11 Settembre 1914.

Giacomo Balla
pittore futurista

Figure 8. Giacomo Balla, “The Antineutral Suit: Futurist Manifesto,” 11 September 1914. Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
Vestito rosso in un solo pezzo del pittore futurista Carrà.

Vestito bianco - rosso - verde del pittore e scultore futurista Boccioni. (Sera)

Maglione verde e giacca rossa e bianca del rumorista futurista Russolo, volontario ciclista.

Giacomo Balla
pittore futurista

DIREZIONE DEL MOVIMENTO FUTURISTA:
Corso Venezia, 61 - MILANO

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Figure 9. Giacomo Balla, “The Antineutral Suit: Futurist Manifesto,” 11 September 1914. Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
advanced in his manifesto (apparently under Marinetti’s influence) touch on the political and visually symbolic issues of patriotism, interventionism, and aggressive dynamism. The “antineutral suit” is not merely an artistic creation, a cultural by-product, or an expression of personal tastes and attitudes; rather, it is a means for fashioning a new self and world. As suggested by Marinetti’s attack on nudism, clothing constitutes a crucial layer in the process of symbolic sedimentation that demarcates and sustains the sexed contours of identity and the limits of bodily intelligibility. The Futurist discourse on fashion anticipates later views on the semantic and social function of clothes. Furthermore, when looked at in light of contemporary biological, anthropological, and medical disquisitions on woman’s natural inferiority to man, the Futurists’ concern with the ideological overdeterminations of gender divisions acquires unexpected progressive overtones. One might say that their understanding of the performative, constructive force of symbolic systems anticipates postmodern theories on the discursive construction of the subject—in particular, a non-deterministic constructivism that stipulates the constitutive function and mobilizing, transforming potential of discourse. The differences, of course, are crucial and obvious. Rejecting autonomous subjectivity and the heterosexual matrix, today’s progressive constructivism welcomes the loss of epistemological certainty as, in Judith Butler’s words, “initiating new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter”—a subversive reterritorialization of gender and sexuality. The Futurists’ concern with the modern epistemological crisis bespeaks very different political aims; their refashioning of the symbolic is an attempt to reconsolidate the undermined foundation of gender difference and, ultimately, to redemarcate the borders of autonomous subjectivity.

Volt’s 1920 “Manifesto della moda femminile” (“Manifesto of Women’s Fashion”) highlights the role of gender difference in Futurist efforts to reterritorialize the body and the world. In the Futurist “system of fashion,” clothes identify man as a living flag and woman as the natural territory or material of male desire. Women’s fashion, proclaims Volt, “should not hide but enhance develop exaggerate the gulfs and promontories of the feminine peninsula.” Futurist artists will “graft [their] art’s most aggressive lines and loudest colors onto the feminine silhouette”; they will “glorify woman’s flesh in a frenzy of spirals and triangles” and “go so far as to sculpt woman’s astral body with the chisel of an exasperated geometry.” Among the extant examples of Futurist design, a sketch by Tullio Crali best illustrates Volt’s prescriptions (figure 10).

The function played by the joint sensual appeal of woman and consumer art in Marinetti’s 1940 “Poesia simultanea della moda italiana” (“Simultaneous Poetry of Italian Fashion”) further illustrates the ideological underpinnings and political ramifications of the Futurist discourse on fashion. In this text, Marinetti invokes an alliance between fantasy and sensuality for the purpose of creating a perpetual feast for the senses. The alliance is enacted in the realm of women’s fashion: fantastic, capricious styles display Futurism’s originality and patriotism. “No comfort no reasonability no logic,” declares Marinetti, “but glory to the arbitrary whimsical and fantastic, which know how to idealize the neck breasts waist hips
Figure 10. Tullio Crali, *Sketch for an Evening Gown*, 1931 (reprinted from Enrico Crispolti, *Il futurismo e la moda* [Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1986]). Collection La Rosa, Rome.
so that they can strum a carnival tune on man’s tense nerves.” Anything goes, provided it is “made in Italy,” and is “favorable to woman’s feline softness”; nothing less than national/male identity, the mainstay of Marinetti’s fiction of power, is at stake when it comes to feminine apparel: “No more short hair slimy fashion of the Northern seas mortified by asexual fogs to confuse the sexes and derail the male wheels from the track that can sting the pale chastity of the sky.”

Fashion is seen as providing sexual stimulations capable of defending men against gender confusion and foreign influence. The two dangers are conflated; sexual perversion becomes identified with the degen(d)erated foreign “look.” Besides positing an explicit connection between aesthetics, sexual politics, and national supremacy, the poem also shows how an art of evasion, even at the level of spectacle or pleasure, can lend itself to political power. The following scene enacts the link between the Futurist carnivalesque feast of the senses and the spectacular “happenings” of mass consent staged by the Fascist regime:

To create the excitement of cheering crowds beneath Palazzo Venezia, a massive line up of helmets and shining black umbrellas under the rotating projection of a nickel rain wrap woman in orange velvet coiling under the head-dress of a single emerald feather

Everybody’s eyes will be captivated by this woman dressed in a living mood of sky enhanced by the triangles of air force squadrons.

Feminine apparel and virile military display are combined to tailor mass consent and enthusiasm in a dazzling, multimedia spectacle of modern life in a modern nation. It might be objected that the glamorous costume depicted above does not conform to the rustic, “wholesome” styles of clothing displayed in Fascist iconography and in the popular festivities choreographed by the regime at the time of the poem’s publication (1940). According to the so-called “return to traditions” policy, regime-sponsored festivals aimed at revamping folk customs and thereby defended sound rural values against the degenerating effects of modern life. Such displays conformed to the ideal of healthy, prolific, self-sacrificing woman celebrated by the demographic campaign. The regime’s program in support of the fledgling national fashion, however, staged modern, luxurious interludes which, by contrast, point to a classist plot in the Fascist spectacles of Italianità (Italianess)—both the pastoral of folk customs and the morality play of the “demographic” woman. Furthermore, the Marinettian goals of diversion and patriotic display are essentially consonant with the cultural strategies with which Fascism stabilized its rule.

The escapist aestheticism illustrated by “Poesia simultanea della moda italiana” is a prominent feature of later Futurist texts. It often serves an explicitly political function in providing artistic legitimization for the regime’s autarchic policies. However, desire for aesthetic transcendence, combined with thirst for totalizing assimilation of the real, is a driving impetus in the Futurist fiction of power from the beginning. In one of his first manifestos, “Distanza della sintassi—Immaginazione
senza fili—Parole in libertà” (“Destruction of syntax—Wireless imagination—Words in freedom,” 1913), Marinetti describes the miraculous power of art in religious terms. “Discarding all the stupid definitions and confused verbalisms of professors,” he ascribes to lyricism the “extraordinary,” Christly faculty of “intoxicating oneself with life, of filling life with the inebriation of oneself. The faculty of changing to wine the muddy water of life that engulfs and runs through us.” The violence that the Futurists celebrated and enacted, particularly in the “heroic” phase of the movement, bears witness to the most disquieting implications of the will to mastery conveyed by the above image. Rejecting the inescapable “muddiness” of the real in favor of impossible, totalizing aspirations may afford consolatory evasion but may also result in intoxication with violence. The artificially inflated sense of self and bursting of boundaries opens the door to explosive aggression against the other.

Futurism’s rhetoric of violence is the most obvious manifestation of the aggressive potential inherent in its vision. Marinetti brashly glorifies war, preaches destruction of the past, and revels in scenarios of conflict, from the theater of military operations to the battlefield of Futurist performances (or serate futuriste). Futurist “actions,” with conflict as their governing premise, sought to turn rhetoric into reality. On the page, meanwhile, “formal violence” is enacted by means of suppressive and expansive mechanisms. Marinetti’s “destruction of syntax” produces a fragmented, chaotic text that conforms to, and claims mastery over, the fragmentation and chaos of the modern world. The obliteration of syntax and logical links allows expressive force to expand “without strings,” through a frenzied semiosis of sensorial effects and imaginary associations. The resulting explosion of imaginative energy stretches the boundaries of the subject to encompass the whole universe. Art, writes Marinetti, is a “prolongation of the forest of our veins, which spreads, outside the body, over the infinity of space and time.” At the same time, the transfiguring force of language annihilates or assimilates the limits of the real (“chang[es] into wine the muddy water of life”).

Metaphorical transfiguration is an especially effective device for amplifying the territory of the self and occupying that of the other. The subject figuratively incorporates empowering objects (as in the mythical construct of metallized and mechanized man), erecting a rigid and impermeable boundary or armor that channels affective energy into a struggle against a feminine or feminized other. Thus, violence is intrinsically woven into the gendered configuration of the self-world relationship in the Futurist fiction of power. The domain of subjective experience (be it artistic representation or imperialist expansion) is recurrently encoded as female, while woman is figured dualistically as the quintessential, forever unattainable object of desire (to be rejected or assimilated) and as the arch-enemy of self-expansion (to be destroyed).

Rhetorical strategies of suppression, expansion, and transfiguration engender insidious forms of discursive violence. Far from being confined to the order of language, the “violence of rhetoric” insinuates itself into the matrix of history and social practice, particularly the “reality” of gender. Semiotic theory teaches us
that the construction of human subjectivity in language relies upon and (re)produces an asymmetrical, polarized, antagonistic configuration of sexual difference, which shapes virtually all aspects of social meaning, experience, and reality. Violence in rhetoric may assert itself in less conspicuous forms than those at which the Futurists excelled. It is, nonetheless, a palpable force in discourses of domination ranging from scientific rationality to philosophical idealism—spheres of understanding/intelligibility ostensibly unrelated to Futurism’s excesses of imagination. In calling attention to the more subtle and insidious configurations of violence in Futurist texts, my aim is to suggest that the semiotic forces driving the Futurist fiction of power are embedded in the signifying practices of our cultural past and continue to affect our historical present. Unquestioned and unchallenged, they may serve to generate an exclusionary politics of the future.

Notes

All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.


4. The original reads: “una collezione di metodi per aumentare la potenza dell’uomo” (LCI, 335; emphasis in original).

5. The original reads: “il non volersene occupare non è prova d’impotenza ma di potenza della nostra mente” (LCI, 339; emphasis in original).


7. Three major phases can be distinguished in the evolution of the Futurist poetics: verso libero (free verse, 1909-12), paroliberoismo (words in freedom, 1912-31), and aeropoesia (aeropoetry, 1931-44). With few exceptions (the most significant being Zang Tumb Tumb, 1914), the poetics of paroliberoismo was not consistently applied by Marinetti: it appears to be particularly “diluted” in the texts after 1920, where the restoration of syntax is conspicuous.


10. In order to advertise the movement’s international resonance, Futurist periodicals quoted some of the responses thus solicited. The penultimate issue of Poesia (April-May-June-July 1909), for instance, contained a selection of some 9,500 letters and articles for and against the founding manifesto. Many foreign newspapers and journals reported the launching of Futurism. Claudia Salaris (Marinetti editore
[Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990], 84-85) lists publications in France, Germany, Spain, Greece, the United States, Latin America, Japan, and Russia. France, in particular, was "flooded" with fliers of the first manifesto. The responses published in Poesia came from aristocratic and academic circles, and from intellectuals linked to Marinetti's pre-Futurist experience (like Paul Adam and Henri Bataille).

11. Ibid., 167.

12. The original reads: "Scomponiamo e ricomponiamo così l'Universo secondo i nostri meravigliosi capricci, per centuplicare la potenza del genio creatore italiano e il suo predominio assoluto nel mondo" (F. T. Marinetti, Bruno Corra, E. Settimelli, Arnaldo Ginna, G. Balla, and Remo Chiti, "La cinematografia futurista" ["Futurist Cinematography," 1916], in TIF, 144; emphasis in original).


14. The playful, farcical side to the Futurist style of action is exemplified by the 1910 Venetian prank in which Marinetti, strategically positioned in the Clock Tower of Piazza San Marco, showered the Sunday crowd with fliers of his manifesto against passeist Venice, while declaiming it through a megaphone; the other side is displayed by the 1912 fist fight at the Florentine café Gibube Rosse, one of many brawls the Futurists sparked in their aggressive, bristling proselytism. Pranks and scuffles were staple ingredients of the volcanic Futurist evenings; see Francesco Cangiullo, Le serate futuriste: Romanzo storico vissuto (Naples: Ed. Tirrena, 1930).

15. F. T. Marinetti, L'alcova d'acciaio (Milan: Serra e Riva Editori, 1985), 184-85. Marinetti had first enlisted as a volunteer in the Battaglione Lombardo Volontari Ciclisti. After attending the artillary school, he went to the front and was wounded. He later passed to a bomber unit and finally to a unit of armored cars. The novel was first published in 1921 (Milan: Vitagliano) and presumably composed between 1918 and 1920.


17. Fillia [Luigi Colombo], "Il naturismo futurista e la mostra del futurismo in Piemonte," Stile futurista (November 1935): 11-12. This self-glorifying review of the Naturist Exhibit in Piedmont (Turin, October 1935) highlights the political stakes of the movement. Fillia's description of the fourteen showrooms illustrates how the Futurist program for a Naturist system of life (based on exercise, an energetic and predominantly vegetarian diet, and a rational, hygienic restructuring of both urban space and rural economy) was in harmony with the pronatalist, colonialist, and autarchic policies of the regime.


19. The original reads: "una confusa ambiguità sessuale favorevole alla degenerazione" (ibid.).

20. F. T. Marinetti, "Contro il lusso femminile" ("Against Feminine Extravagance," 1920): "This morbid mania destroys the fascination of woman's body just as the use of nudity in brothels does." The original reads: "La mania morbosa del lusso annienta il fascino del corpo della donna quanto l'uso della nudità nei bordelli" (TIF, 547).

21. Marinetti and Ginna's Naturist manifesto combats tanning because it "paints" a semblance of health on the body's surface and, most importantly, because it blurs racial differences. Futurist Naturism, by contrast, promotes "the true strengthening of the white race against the imposing exterior imitation by the coarseness of other races and by their skin colored with seeming strength (example: artificial African-Asian tanning of the skin)." The original reads: "il vero rafforzamento della razza bianca contro l'imponente imitazione esteriore della rozzezza di altre razze e delle loro epidermì colorate di apparente forza (esempio: brunitura africano-asiatica artificiale della pelle)" (Marinetti and Ginna, "Il naturismo futurista," 11). Like other apparently frivolous battles fought by the Futurists, upon closer scrutiny such an attack on tanning proves to be a very serious move, converging on the objective of the pronatalist campaign. It should be noted that alarm over, and policies enacted to counter, demographic decline were a broad European phenomenon, fostered by anxieties about the decline of the West in the face of perceived advances by non-white peoples.


24. Balla's manifesto first appeared in French as "Le vêtement masculin futuriste: Manifeste" ("Futurist Manifesto of Men's Clothing"). It was printed in a flier in Milan by the Direzione del Movimento futurista and was dated May 20, 1914. The revised Italian version, entitled "Il vestito antineutrale: Manifesto


27. The original reads: “Le nuove forme non dovranno nascondere, ma accentuare, sviluppare esagerare i golfi e i promontori della penisola femminile.... Noi innesteremo sulle silhouette femminili le linee più aggressive e i colori più squillanti dei nostri quadri futuristi. Glorificheremo la carne della donna in una frenesia di spirali e di triangoli. Arriveremo a scolpire il corpo astrale della donna collo scalpello di una geometria esasperata!” (Volt [Vincenzo Fani-Ciotti], “Manifesto della moda femminile,” Roma Futurista 3.72 [29 February 1920]; rpt in Crispolti, 115).

28. The original reads: “Niente comodità niente ragionevolezza niente logica ma gloria all’arbitrio al capriccio e alla fantasia che sanno idealizzare collo petto vita fianchi e ne strimpellano carnevalescamente i nervi tesi dell’uomo” (TIF, 1187).

29. The first original reads: “Tutte le novità sgargianti e cesellatrici purché siano d’impronta italiana e favorevoli alla soavità felina della donna.” The second original reads: “Non più i capelli corti viscida moda dei mari nordici mortificati da nebbie asessuali per confondere i sessi e deviare le maschic ruote fuor dalla rotaia che sa punger la pallida castità del cielo” (TIF, 1188-89).

30. The original reads:

Per creare uno stato d’animo giocondo di folla acclamante sotto Palazzo Venezia grande quadrato d’elmetti allineati e lucidi ombrelli neri sotto il girante proiettore di pioggia al nichelio fasciate la donna di velluto arancione spiralicamente fi sotto l’acconciatura d’una unica penna verde smeraldo

Rapirà tutti gli sguardi la donna vestita con uno stato d’animo vivente di cielo triangolato da squadriglie d’aeroplani (TIF, 1187; emphasis added).

31. Marshall Berman (All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity [New York: Touchstone, 1982]) underlines the captivating power of the dazzling pageantry of military life and fashion in “pastoral modernism”: “There is an important body of modernist writing, often by the most serious writers, that sounds a great deal like advertising copy. This writing sees the whole spiritual adventure of modernity incarnated in the latest fashion, the latest machine, or—and here it gets sinister—the latest model regiments.... Armies on parade, from Baudelaire’s time to our own, play a central role in the pastoral vision of modernity: glittering hardware, gaudy colors, flowing lines, fast and graceful movements, modernity without tears” (137).

32. On the “return to traditions” policy, see Victoria de Grazia, The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 202-14. It is important to note, as de Grazia points out, that the regime was willing and able to assimilate a wide spectrum of “cultures” in the process of forming a single dominant culture: from “the verities of elitist practitioners of the old high culture,” to “the technological utopias of the Futurists,” to “the stock of folk traditions of precapitalist Italy.” Because of the cultural background of Fascist officials, however, and because of the regime’s eagerness to gain cultural legitimacy, Fascist cultural institutions gradually rejected avant-gardism “in favor of positions that might receive the support of traditional academic culture.” They espoused the class-defined divisions between “high” and “low” culture and “the traditional intellectual elite’s disdain for the popularization of culture” (187).

33. In the 1930s, through its Ente Nazionale Moda (National Fashion Bureau), the regime attempted to reconcile the demographic policy and the campaign for national fashion by instructing fashion designers and the women’s press to showcase short, plump models. Such directives had no significant impact on women’s tastes as witnessed by fashion magazines. These magazines, however, reflected and contributed to construct the Fascist ideal of the woman of the upper classes—frivolous, elegant, and unconcerned with serious issues, unlike the plain, self-sacrificing “normal” woman devoted to the well-being of her family. Significantly, during the same period (1934), Fascist law deprived women of the right to compete for public posts. See Natalia Aspesi, Il lusso e l’autarchia (Milan: Rizzoli, 1982), 36-40, 43-51.

34. The original reads: “Scartando oratutte le stupide definizioni e tutti i confusi verbalismi dei professori, io vi dichiaro che il lirismo è la facoltà rassicurante di inebriarsi della vita e di inebriarsi di noi stessi. La facoltà di cambiare in vino l’acqua torbida dela vita che ci avvolge e ci attraversa)” (TIF, 70; emphasis in original).
35. The original reads: “prolungamento della foresta delle nostre vene, che si effonde, fuori dal corpo, nell’infinito dello spazio e del tempo” (Marinetti, “Manifesto tecnico,” in TIF, 54; emphasis in original).