

Study Guide for *Scintille Futuriste*
by Bonnie Jean Blackburn

Introduction to Italian Futurism

The Italian Futurist movement was primarily created and expanded by one man: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Born in 1876 to a very wealthy Italian attorney, Marinetti used his wealth, his Jesuit education, and his skills as a writer and poet to influence the media in Italy and France to promote his futuristic visions as if they were part of a vibrant cultural trend, when, in fact, he was still the only initial member of the movement. In 1909 he won converts to his cause by publishing an elaborately written manifesto entitled *Le Futurisme*. Its eleven key tenets are as follows:

1. We want to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness.
2. The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity and revolt.
3. Literature has up to now magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber. We want to exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist.
4. We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath ... a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.
5. We want to sing the man at the wheel, the ideal axis of which crosses the earth, itself hurled along its orbit.
6. The poet must spend himself with warmth, glamour and prodigality to increase the enthusiastic fervor of the primordial elements.
7. Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man.
8. We are on the extreme promontory of the centuries! What is the use of looking behind at the moment when we must open the mysterious shutters of the impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We are already living in the absolute, since we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.
9. We want to glorify war - the only cure for the world - militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman.
10. We want to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice.
11. We will sing of the great crowds agitated by work, pleasure and revolt; the multi-colored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals: the nocturnal vibration of the arsenals and the workshops beneath their violent electric moons: the gluttonous railway stations devouring smoking serpents; factories suspended from the clouds by the thread of their smoke; bridges with the leap of gymnasts flung across the diabolic cutlery of sunny rivers: adventurous steamers sniffing the horizon; great-breasted locomotives, puffing on the rails like enormous steel horses with long tubes for bridle, and the gliding flight of aeroplanes whose propeller sounds like the flapping of a flag and the applause of enthusiastic crowds.

From *Le Futurisme* by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Retrieved March 3, 2007 from <http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/T4PM/futurist-manifesto.html> (You can read the whole thing online.)

As a reflection of the burgeoning technologies that were revolutionizing the world, the Futurist movement was punctuated by a focused bias towards energy and speed—as primarily symbolized in the automobile. The Futurists exhibited repugnance towards anything backward looking—essentially decrying museums as obsolete graveyards of the cobwebbed, threadbare, and useless archaic ideological droppings of dead predecessors. Instead, Futurists were all about the future, novelty, change, velocity, cities, industry, and man’s triumphant subjugation of nature through technology. The Futurists tended towards a masculinization of culture and were generally misogynistic—associating the feminine more with nature and romanticism than with progress and technology. They also tended to glorify war—endorsing the notion that violence, cruelty, and injustice were energies at the true heart of artistic expression.

Futurists felt obligated to redefine art in entirely modern terms—to free it from traditional restraints. Ironically, the Futurists wrote multiple manifestos to describe what new art could and should be—thus recreating new canons of restraints. Their manifestos addressed art in every form—including music, painting, poetry, architecture, and drama.

In drama, the Futurists were initially bent on destroying the genres, plot formations, characterizations, and structures of traditional dramatic narratives. They went further than this by deconstructing the very language itself—eschewing scripts and even grammar and syntax. The dramatic texts often displayed sequences of images via strings of nouns without any verbs—the action being supplied instead by human movement. They often played with ideas about man being half man/half animal or half man/half machine. This led to broad experimentation with unnatural sonic techniques—guttural animal sounds and machine sounds—noises much like the imaginative sound effects young children employ during play. Always the emphasis was on creating something new, unusual, unseen or unheard of in the past.

The Futurists also wished to explode the usual convention of a separation between performer and audience. Actors were encouraged to provoke audience response by acting in exaggerated, sarcastic, grotesque, ironic, nonsensical, and foolish ways. Narrative structure and character arcs were largely jettisoned in favor of brief, sketch-like experiences that foreshadowed much of the offbeat, abstract performance art to come half a century later. It is to these roots that modern sketch groups, such as Monty Python at its most absurd, owe some genealogical homage.

The influence of the Italian Futurist eventually fed into and influenced the artistic avant-garde movements of Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Art Deco, and the Theater of The Absurd. Other notable “First Wave” Futurist contemporaries of Marinetti include the artists and anarchists Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà and Luigi Russolo.

Politically, Marinetti and many of his fellow Futurists were supporters of fascism. Marinetti himself assisted the National Fascist Party and Benito Mussolini during his rise to power in Italy in the early 1900s. This alliance may have proven too poisonous for the Futurist movement: it was said to have died at the time of Marinetti’s death in 1944, coincident with Italy’s defeat in World War II. However, Wikipedia notes that “a revival of sorts of the Futurist movement began in 1988 with the creation of the Neo-Futurist style of theatre in Chicago, which

utilizes Futurism's focus on speed and brevity to create a new form of immediate theatre. Currently, there are active Neo-Futurist troupes in Chicago and New York.”

Scintille Futuriste

The 2007 CSULB University Players production of *Scintille Futuriste* is conceived, adapted, translated, and directed by guest artist Sandro Carotti, co-founder of Florence, Italy's Zauberteatro. In a discussion with Mr. Carotti, he discussed how Italian Futurism acted as an early catalyst for many later artistic movements. Futurist influences have continued to echo in diverse media, appearing in the work of D.H. Lawrence, in Ayn Rand's objectivism, in Japanese manga and anime, and in the cyberpunk ethos displayed in films like *Blade Runner*. It can even be said to have rippled out into currently relevant trends as diverse as beat poetry and reality television. Mr. Carotti goes as far as asserting that the rhythmic speed and visual punch of today's entire advertising culture—including billboards, magazine ads, and TV commercials that tell a product-driven story in 30 seconds—are derivative of Futurist ideals.

In *Scintille Futuriste*, Mr. Carotti has woven the work of several Italian Futurists and Futurist scholars together. Some of the original authors include Mario Verdone, whom Carotti once met in Paris, Umberto Boccioni, Bruno Corra, Emilio Settimelli, sound pioneer Luigi Russolo, and Filippo Marinetti himself.

Mr. Carotti's vision seems to be one that encourages us to approach this work from a place of *tabula rasa* openness, keeping minds and senses open in a way reminiscent of the naturally liberated way young children play together—even children who cannot speak each other's languages, even children who may have been raised by wolves, or trees, or artists.

Other helpful terms for class discussion:

Dadaism “a cultural movement that began in neutral Zürich, Switzerland, during World War I and peaked from 1916 to 1920... [Dadaism] concentrated its anti war politic through a rejection of the prevailing standards in art through anti-art cultural works... According to its proponents, Dada was not art—it was "anti-art". Dada sought to fight art with art. For everything that art stood for, Dada was to represent the opposite. Where art was concerned with aesthetics, Dada ignored aesthetics. If art were to have at least an implicit or latent message, Dada strove to have no meaning—interpretation of Dada is dependent entirely on the viewer. If art is to appeal to sensibilities, Dada is to offend...” As explanation for its emergence, art historians suggest: “Reason and logic had led people into the horrors of war; the only route to salvation was to reject logic and embrace anarchy and the irrational.”

Theater of the Absurd: “In practice, The Theatre of the Absurd departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated theatrical conventions. Time, place and identity are ambiguous and fluid, and even basic causality frequently breaks down. Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dream-like, or even nightmare-like moods.”

Source for terms: Wikipedia

Suggested Essay Writing Prompts

1. In 1913, Luigi Russolo, an avowed Futurist, built a strange noise-making instrument called “intonarumori,” which created scandal when performed with a chorus of howling, cackling, and gurgling men. Today Russolo has been called a “grandfather of modern sound culture.” Reflect on the use of sound in *Scintille Futuriste*. What techniques does the director and the cast use to create unusual sonic experiences? What impact does sound have on the meaning of the play and the audience experience throughout? Do you consider this use of sound futuristic? Explain your responses.
2. Futurist scholar Kim Scarborough summarized Italian Futurism as follows:
“Futurism was an international art movement founded in Italy in 1909. It was (and is) a refreshing contrast to the weepy sentimentalism of Romanticism. The Futurists loved speed, noise, machines, pollution, and cities; they embraced the exciting new world that was then upon them rather than hypocritically enjoying the modern world’s comforts while loudly denouncing the forces that made them possible. Fearing and attacking technology has become almost second nature to many people today; the Futurist manifestos show us an alternative philosophy.” (Retrieved March 4, 2007 from <http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/>)

In this statement, Scarborough points out the contrast between the Romanticists’ idealization of nature and the Futurists’ idealization of technology. Where do you stand between these two viewpoints—are you more of a romantic or more of a futurist? Does this play offer any reconciliation between the two? In your argument, respond to Scarborough’s statement that people tend to fear and attack technology: what evidence can you find to support or refute this statement in our culture? What did you observe in *Scintille Futuriste* that displayed the Futurists’ idealization of technology? In what way do people act hypocritically today—embracing technology privately while criticizing it in public?

3. The Italian painter and sculptor Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916) wrote the Manifesto of Futurist Painters in 1910 in which he vowed:
“We will fight with all our might the fanatical, senseless and snobbish religion of the past, a religion encouraged by the vicious existence of museums. We rebel against that spineless worshiping of old canvases, old statues and old bric-a-brac, against everything which is filthy and worm-ridden and corroded by time. We consider the habitual contempt for everything which is young, new and burning with life to be unjust and even criminal.” (Retrieved March 3, 2007 from <http://www.unknown.nu/futurism/painters.html>)

What is your response to the Futurists’ hatred of museums, doctrines, and all things “past”? What value is there in such a position? What is lost? Is there a need for a similar artistic revolution in theater today? If so, what would be your artistic manifesto? What specific articles would your manifesto contain and why? Offer explanations/support for your assertions.

4. Discuss your experience of opposing energies or symbols in the play. These could include masculine and feminine, light and dark, sound and silence, war and peace, past and future, etc. Does the movement of Futurism, as reflected in this work, provide reconciliation or transcendence of these opposites? Or is it merely reflective of revolution for the sake of revolution, regardless of history and tradition? Give examples from the play to support your exploration and conclusions about the value of the Futurist movement.

Addendum: For those who are interested, here is an excellent article about Luigi Russolo, and his forays into Futuristic sound.

Bring Da Noise: A Brief Survey of Sound Art

by Kenneth Goldsmith

The Futurist Moment: Howlers, Exploders, Crumplers, Hissers, and Scrapers

Published: March 1, 2004

In the midst of an art opening at a Paris gallery in 1902, ambient music was born. Erik Satie and his cronies, after begging everyone in the gallery to ignore them, broke out into what they called Furniture Music—that is, background music—music as wallpaper, music to be purposely not listened to. The patrons of the gallery, thrilled to see musicians performing in their midst, ceased talking and politely watched, despite Satie's frantic efforts to get them to pay no attention. Cut to 1913, the year that the literary critic Marjorie Perloff calls "The Futurist Moment." Across Europe, the avant-garde is peaking in its most extreme forms. Painting, sculpture, performance, poetry, dance and sound works are all pushing the limits. Let's listen in to what was happening around that crucial moment.

In Russia, the experiments of Velemir Khlebnikov (1885-1922) and Aleksey Kruchenykh (1886-1968) were among the first to abstract language in a way that we would term "concrete" today (i.e. it's more important how the words sound than what they mean). They even invented a name for it, *zaum*, which like its later incarnation, Dada, was shorthand for a "transrational" language. Listening to these poems, you'll hear invented words, neologisms, fragments; in short, the whole of what came to be later known as "sound poetry" is contained in these pioneering works.

In Italy, the Futurists were working along similar lines. Futurist ringleader F.T. Marinetti (1876-1944) invented the concept of *parole in liberta*, which roughly translates into "words in freedom." Marinetti's scope included the page as well as the sound; he did some of the first typographical experiments—words floating around on the page, freed from the "tyranny" of the paragraph, stanza, or line. In a recording of his most famous poem, "Bombardamento di Adrianapoli," (1926) we can hear Marinetti actually performing the sounds of the battlefield with his mouth: machine guns rattle and canons boom. The score for the piece, from which Marinetti reads, is a stunning graphic work, with letters of different sizes, all flying around the page.

Another important Futurist was Luigi Russolo, whose 1913 manifesto, *The Art of Noises*, opened the possibilities of incorporating "noise" into music. In it he claimed, "We enjoy creating mental orchestrations of crashing down of metal shop blinds, slamming doors, the hubbub and shuffle of crowds, the variety of din from the stations, railways, iron foundries, spinning mills, printing works, electric power stations and underground railways." His *Awakening of a City* (*Risveglio di una citta*, 1914) was played on a battalion of noise machines that he called *intonorumori*, designed by Russolo himself to mimetic industrial sounds. There were 27 different types of instruments, each producing a different racket. They had great names: "howlers," "exploders," "crumplers," "hissers," and "scrapers." There's a famous photo of Russolo and his assistant Piatti standing amidst a roomful of *intonorumori*: boxes of varying sizes, each fitted

with a huge conical metal speaker. From the looks of it, you had to crank a handle - not unlike a Victrola - in order to get it to make a sound. Russolo's work would prove to be essential; without him, the likes of John Cage, Pierre Schaeffer, Edgard Varèse or Nine Inch Nails wouldn't be possible.

George Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique*, written in 1925 to accompany an abstract silent film by the artist Fernand Leger was also key in terms of admitting extra-musical sounds into music. The raucous score -- which included a pianola, two or more pianos, three xylophones, four bass drums, tamtam, siren, a battery of electric bells, and three airplane propellers -- caused a riot during its Paris premiere. American composers such as Charles Ives and Edgard Varèse were also hammering out new ways of thinking about sound, a movement which spread like wildfire across the Americas to include composers like Silvestre Revueltas in Mexico, Amadeo Roldan in Cuba, and Carlos Chavez in Mexico. So powerful was the work of these artists that they occasionally appear in concert-hall repertoire around the world.

There's a wonderful recording of Marie Osmond reciting Hugo Ball's sound poem "Karawane" (1916) made in the early '80s for a segment of the television show *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. While she doesn't do a great job with it (try Canadian Christian Bök's for the definitive version), it's a reminder of how this stuff is never too far below the surface of popular culture. Along with Emily Hennings, Ball (1886-1926) founded the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, which only lasted five months but spawned the Dada movement. "Karawane" was one of the last events held at the Cabaret. For it Ball placed his texts on music stands scattered all over the podium and turned from one to another during the performance, raising and lowering the cardboard "wings" of his costume.

The Cabaret Voltaire was a hotbed of performance poetry, which was often recited by several voices, all screaming at once. The most famous of these poems, "L'amiral Cherche Une Maison à Louer" (1916) featured Marcel Janco, Hugo Ball, Richard Hulsenbeck, and Tristan Tzara all whistling, singing, grunting, coughing, and speaking at the same time. It was the first instance of what Fluxus artist Dick Higgins later would call intermedia, which morphed into Happenings and later into performance art.

Raoul Hausmann (1886-1971) invented what he called "optophonetics" which, like Marinetti, used typographic variations in size to indicate the spoken variations of pitch and volume of a score when performed. In 1916, after hearing Hausmann's poems, Kurt Schwitters, too, jumped into the act and built up a totally abstract piece called "Sonata in Urläten." Over the years, the "Sonata" grew in both size and variation, finally becoming the stunning *Ursonate* (1926). Often acknowledged as the greatest sound poem ever written, it clocks in at around 40 minutes. For many years, there had only been snippets of Schwitters reading his masterpiece, but in the early '90s, a full-length tape recorded in the 1930s surfaced in an attic in Holland. It was finally released on CD by Wergo in 1993.

Although most people know Marcel Duchamp as a visual artist, few are aware of his small, but important musical output. Again, most of his activity in music was part of the Futurist movement, taking place between 1912 and 1915. He created an aleatory vocal piece for three voices, "Erratum Musical," which was included in the *Green Box Duchamp* published in 1934.

It's undated, but historians have pinned it to somewhere around 1913. It was originally written with Duchamp's three sisters in mind. To compose it, he made three sets of 25 cards, one for each voice, with a single note per card. Each set of cards was mixed in a hat; he then drew out the cards from the hat one at a time and wrote down the series of notes indicated by the order in which they were drawn. Another work, "La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires même. Erratum Musical" (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even. Erratum Musical), belongs to a series of notes and projects that Duchamp started to collect around 1912. It was written using numbers, instead of notes, and Duchamp prescribes an elaborate mechanical procedure to generate the score. It's an insane process: you need to get several open-top railroad cars, a set of numbered balls, and a funnel. Each ball represents a note (pitch) and these balls have to fall through the funnel into the cars passing underneath it at various speeds. When the funnel is empty, the composition is completed. Needless to say, it's a different piece each time it's "composed" and played. This lack of definitive versioning would resonate later in remix culture.

The photographer Man Ray, too, while primarily known as a visual artist, created a score called Lautgedicht "Sound Poem" (1924). The score is simply a poem that Ray found and crossed out, word by word. Dutch sound poet Jaap Blonk did a fantastic rendition of it recently by interpreting the lengths of the crossed-out lines as durational elements; he simply intones every duration in an obnoxious, nasally, guttural honk which lasts about seven minutes. I've played it in full on the radio on my WFMU show and it never fails to light up the phone, mostly with listeners begging me to take it off.

Retrieved March 3, 2007 from <http://www.newmusicbox.org/page.nmbx?id=59tp01>
