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Futurism, Photography and the Representation of Violence

F. T. Marinetti's idea for a Futurist aesthetic was an ambitious one that wanted to include a diverse group of artistic media, ranging from the most traditional—painting, sculpture and literature—to those that had just begun to be considered vital components of an avant-garde movement, namely photography and cinema. The primary figure among the Futurists, other than Marinetti himself, who advocated the inclusion of these media within the Futurist programme was Anton Giulio Bragaglia. Formally known as *fotodinamismo*, Bragaglia's project was first mentioned in the pages of the Futurist publication "Lacerba" in 1913 not in the form of a manifesto, but as an advertisement: "Fotodinamismo Futurista. 16 Tavole fuori testo. Prezzo di Propoganda 10 soldi." In order to account for *fotodinamismo*'s marginal position in the movement, one could begin with a letter dated 4 September 1913 in which Umberto Boccioni writes to G. Sprovieri,

Mi raccomando, te lo scrivo a nome degli amici futuristi, escludi qualsiasi contatto con la fotodinamica del Bragaglia—È una presuntuosa inutilità che danneggia le nostre aspirazioni di liberazione dalla riproduzione schematica o successiva della statica e del moto.¹

In the same letter Bragaglia is described as a "fotografo positivista del dinamismo." It is evident from this description that Bragaglia's particular brand of photography, one that attempted to represent movement, was being stigmatized as a form of mimetic reproduction, something which Boccioni and the other Futurist painters who made movement a thematic focal point in their paintings wanted to transcend. Ironically, Bragaglia's standing among the Futurists suffered from that which the movement sought to overturn, namely the reactionary attitude that held sway over Italian art at the start of the century. In his encounter with the new technology of the day, Boccioni was both cautious and disdainful, choosing instead to conduct his assault on traditional attitudes and values in art within the confines of more traditional media. Nearly two decades after Boccioni's letter in an essay entitled *La fotografia futurista*, Marinetti states that the experiments

being done by the Futurists in photography have “lo scopo di far sempre più sconfinare la scienza fotografica nell’arte pura e favorirne automaticamente lo sviluppo nel campo della fisica, della chimica e della guerra.”² Photography would be a tool operating in Futurism’s ultimate aesthetic glorification, war.

Why did Marinetti delay in writing an essay in support of Bragaglia’s project? A possible explanation would be the camera’s lack of appeal as a literary motif. Marinetti’s machines of choice were the automobile and the airplane perhaps because they corresponded to one of the conditions needed for the creation of art, the “orgiastic impulse” which Nietzsche described in *The Will to Power*.³ According to Marinetti, artistic creation should verge on the irrational:

Usciamo dalla saggezza come da un orribile guscio, e gettiamoci, come frutti pimentati d’orgoglio, entro la bocca immensa e tôrta del vento! . . .
Diamoci in pasto all’Ignoto, non già per disperazione, ma soltanto per colmare i profondi pozzi dell’Assurdo!⁴

Furthermore, they provided Marinetti with the popular imagery that would be necessary to propagate the cult of speed and virility which he would use to shift art’s forum from the ivory tower of the Symbolist poet to mass culture. Schnapp has observed that for Marinetti the shortcomings of Symbolism are derived from its “inability to translate a radically modern poetics into a coherent public practice.”⁵ Marinetti could have facilitated the realization of his vision of mass art by utilizing a medium that makes extensive use of reproductions such as photography, one of the most avant-garde of the arts in which, as Walter Benjamin explains in *Illuminations*, the traditions of authorship and originality begin to be overturned.

Two years before Boccioni composed his letter to Sprovieri, Bragaglia expressed his aversion to any photographic activity that had the aim of creating realistic or painterly images in the preface to his book written in 1911 entitled *Fotodinamismo futurista*, where he and his brother Arturo state that they want to distance themselves from being labeled photographers: “ci piace inoltre di far osservare, che io e mio fratello Arturo, non siamo fotografi, e ci troviamo ben lontanti dalla professione di fotografi.”⁶ For Bragaglia and his brother the word “fotografo” is associated with the *passé* photographic convention of producing a mechanical copy of nature without reflecting critically on the creative moment involved in the image-making process. Bragaglia states in his book that his intention is aimed at purifying and liberating the photograph from its static realism. An example of the realism he wanted to avoid was the work done several decades earlier by the French photographer Marey who made studies of human and animal movement. In an effort to further distance his work from that of his predecessors, Bragaglia makes reference to the tenth canto of Dante’s *Commedia*.

Bragaglia is drawn to this particular canto because of the bas-reliefs that Dante-pilgrim describes as he begins his ascent. The bas-reliefs represent for Bragaglia, "un'arte divina che sapesse dare non uno ma molteplici tempi di un'azione, sempre nello stesso quadro, proprio col metodo del nostro movimentismo."⁷ "Il nostro movimentismo" to which Bragaglia refers was the collective aspiration of the Futurists—writers, painters and photographers alike—to represent the simultaneity and synthesis of movement, the interpenetration of planes, and finally the disintegration of the object through a given medium, be it textual or plastic.

Bragaglia's *fotodinamismo* was the result of a precise equivalence between light, movement, color and film that, once obtained, would produce an image which represented the flux and rhythm of lines. The type of seeing that interested Bragaglia involved a "slow seeing by means of the fixation of movements spread over a period of time: prolonged time exposures."⁸ The space of the photograph is filled by movement that has been fragmented so that we perceive not one moment of time, but many of them which have been multiplied creating a sense of dynamism; the result is thereby the illusion of perpetual movement. In this way, Bragaglia breaks the static sequences of movement found in earlier photographers like Marey. His primary preoccupation was to create a transcendental photograph of movement. For Bragaglia this meant

la essenza interiore delle cose: il puro movimento, e preferiamo tutto in moto, perché, nel moto le cose dematerializzandosi, si idealizzano, pur possedendo ancora, profondamente, un forte scheletro di verità.⁹

Thus Bragaglia affirms the Futurist faith in movement, however he does so by making recourse to Platonic and Bergsonian philosophies. In the passage quoted, Bragaglia indicates his predilection for pursuing that which is transcendent in his subject. Movement, as Bragaglia understood it, is the means through which the transcendent reality of the phenomena around us could be revealed. By creating the illusion of movement in his photographs, Bragaglia hoped to avoid the stigma of the photographic image as imitation. His images display a dynamism that recalls Bergson's principle of *élan vital* which emphasizes the continual flux and mobility of matter. His notion of movement thus differs from the Futurist party-line whose main interest was in the contingent transient reality that Bragaglia had wanted to sublimate. Furthermore, Bragaglia writes of the idealization of the subject, which is the second phase of Auguste Comte's theory of art. In *A General View of Positivism*, Comte distinguishes three phases found in every work of art: imitation, idealization and expression.¹⁰ He observes that the second phase is a feature that can be traced

back to the masterpieces of antiquity. The idealized beauty of the *Victory of Samothrace* which Marinetti rejected, is sought by Bragaglia via the machine.

Bragaglia's art, like that of his fellow Futurists, raises the question about the existence of an aesthetic creation: to what extent can a work of art seek to be alive and still be considered art? This ambition to create an art that seems to have overcome the dichotomy between being and appearance is made clear when Bragaglia makes reference to Dante's description of an art that speaks:

Colui che mai non vide cosa nova
produsse esto visibile parlare,
novello a noi perché qui non si trova.¹¹

By using a technique that places emphasis on the reproduction of movement, not to mention the transformative powers of photography, Bragaglia, through relentless experimentation, pushes his response to its limits. According to Walter Benjamin, "No work of art may appear completely and unchecked alive without becoming mere appearance, thus ceasing to be a work of art."¹² The divine art of which Dante speaks has succeeded in creating a fusion of being and appearance that can still maintain the claim of being a work of art. Bragaglia's photographs come close to evoking the impression of looking at such art. One can imagine hearing the sound caused by the movement of hands typing, of a blow to the face, of a carpenter who is sawing. His work, however, is nothing more than illusion; it is an attempt to represent the Idea. Failure to obtain an art such as the one described by Dante through the photographic process is implicit. In order to find something that begins to approach the realization of "visibile parlare," we need to go outside of the plastic arts and into film.

Bragaglia's images were intended to reshape the public's perception of what constituted not only a photograph but also what could be considered art. The modernization of the viewer's sensibility was to be obtained through a direct appeal to his or her emotions rather than through spiritual or mystical means. Bragaglia's *Lo schiaffo* (1913) fulfills his desire to stimulate the senses of the viewer and to awaken the viewer's realization of possible alternative ways to conceive of reality. The alternative that Bragaglia offers to the public is one based on a reality permeated with optimism, faith in the ability of technology to revolutionize the way in which we perceive daily existence. The emphasis on content was no longer central to the Futurist movement. What mattered was the immediacy with which the message could be grasped.

Photography communicates its message through form, that is through lines and the use of space and light. The organization as well as the interaction of these elements creates the composition. Bragaglia's photographs demonstrate the multiplication of time and at the same time its immobilization. He opens up the



Figure 1: Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Lo schiaffo* (1913).



Figure 2: Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Dattilografa* (1911).

element of time in his photographs making it less rigid. His technique creates a sense of the passage of time due to the repetition and the fusion of lines while it simultaneously creates an uncanny sense of time as frozen, still, blocked. Bragaglia's photographs reveal the paradoxical nature of movement which contradicts a basic tenet of Futurism. The nearly aporetic revelation of the paradox of movement is not recent; it can be traced back to the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea and his four arguments against movement. The paradoxical nature of movement exemplified in Bragaglia's photographs explains why the Futurists resisted photography so ardently.

A textual source other than that with which Bragaglia has provided us which can establish the aesthetic climate in which his photographs functioned, is Marinetti's 1913 *Distruzione della sintassi—Immaginazione senza fili—Parole in libertà*. An initial reading of the section entitled "La sensibilità futurista" demonstrates one point in particular which Bragaglia has realized through his *fotodinamismo*: "L'uomo moltiplicato dalla macchina. Nuovo senso meccanico, fusi nell'istinto col rendimento del motore e colle forze ammaestrate."¹³ Instinct has the implied meaning of that which is spontaneous and uncontrollable such as violence for example. Here Marinetti, without making any reference to the photography of Bragaglia, concisely describes a photodynamic image as well as providing some insight on the sensibility of a Futurist photographer who embodies the marriage of art and science. Since photography and technology run parallel with one another the images are produced from the fusion of the photographer's artistic sensibility and the science which has given the photographer the means with which he can articulate his particular vision. Other affinities between Bragaglia's images and Marinetti's *Distruzione della sintassi—Immaginazione senza fili—Parole in libertà* are clear in such passages as follows: "noi potremo . . . liquefare lo stile"; "I ventagli chiusi o aperti di movimenti"; "I movimenti a due, tre, quattro, cinque tempi."¹⁴ Incorporating such descriptions into an artwork had the specific aim of representing a modern reality whose experiences and objects reflected a plastic sensibility.

Bragaglia's effort to rethink photography's use of light and line was not confined to technique alone. What was the role which could be assigned to photography within the Futurist movement? Bragaglia gives an indication of this role when he writes, "Ed è indubbio che da tale moltiplicazione di entità noi veniamo ad ottenere una moltiplicazione di valori, atta ad arricchire ogni fatto di una più imponente personalità."¹⁵ Here he introduces the idea of creating images that begin to change the values of the individual who views the photograph. Although Bragaglia does not theorize the use of photography as a means of political propaganda, his images are intended to convince the viewer that we are perpetual movement. The viewer is drawn into the Futurist sensibility

while the perception that the person has of his or her existence undergoes a reexamination. If the images were diffused in such a manner that the public was constantly exposed to them, it is possible to conclude that the images would alter the consciousness of the masses. A photograph for Bragaglia had value only insofar as the luminosity and energy of its lines could overflow its borders and engulf a responsive public which would take the spirit of the image out into the streets. It was hoped that the crowds would leave his exhibition having had their understanding of reality in some way altered: "Il quadro dunque potrà essere invaso e pervaso dalla essenza del soggetto, potrà essere ossessionato dal soggetto così da energicamente invadere ed ossessionare il pubblico con i propri valori."¹⁶ From a Marxist point of view, Bragaglia's efforts could be perceived as an attempt to induce change on the level of the superstructure. Neither his photographs nor his texts with which I am familiar express his specific political affiliations; he was however a Futurist, which means that like Marinetti he too shared in the idea of art as revolution. There are not, however, any photographs taken by Bragaglia that belong to work done among the public on the streets. Two images of his which approach the working class are *Il falegname che sega* (1911) and *Dattilografa* (1911). Both of these images involve only on a superficial level the existence of the worker. The photographs are more concerned with the way in which movement is being handled. Some difficulty also lies in finding any evidence in Bragaglia's photographs which would suggest that he was attempting to promote change in the economic structures that were present in Italy, a country which was late in experiencing the forces of an industrial revolution when compared to other nations such as France or Britain.

Bragaglia's goal of idealizing the subject's form by dematerializing it through a combination of light and movement, his preoccupation with liberating the subject's interior essence reveal that his "rivoluzione" and "moltiplicazione dei valori" was actually addressed to the individual aesthete rather than to the masses; Bragaglia's true audience was an élite of writers and artists, a fact that contradicts Futurism's more populist aspects and expectations. The notion of anarchism in Italy with its concerns for political and social reform at the time of *fotodinamismo* would suggest a need for a more documentary oriented style of photography which *fotodinamismo* is clearly lacking. The distance between Bragaglia's photographs and the political realities of the times is evident in the techniques that he used such as multiple exposures and a carefully formulated lighting arrangement. Bragaglia's photodynamic images were carried out in a studio resulting in a composition that is meant to be contemplated for the beauty of its rhythms.

Bragaglia draws his inspiration for *Lo schiaffo* from the third point of Marinetti's 1909 *Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo*: "Noi vogliamo esaltare

il movimento aggressivo, l'insonnia febbrile, il passo di corsa, il salto mortale, lo schiaffo ed il pugno."¹⁷ In the photograph a man seated in a chair is looking up nonchalantly at another man who is about to strike him. The theme itself is interesting to the extent that it promotes violence as a form of art. Because the violence is being expressed via the language of aesthetics, however, the moral significance of the act is diminished. The photographic image, by nature removed from reality, can be a vehicle for "naturalizing" and promoting the acceptance of less acceptable forms of behavior, therefore undermining traditional codes of conduct. Commenting on the relationship between image and reality, Susan Sontag observes, "The notions of image and reality are complimentary. When the notion of reality changes, so does that of the image, and vice versa."¹⁸ There is no attempt made by the individual who was knocked to the floor to defend against the blow from the other. He seems to sit passively in his chair waiting for the moment to come when the hand will make contact with his face. The description sounds absurd because the image suggests to us that there is some positive value in being struck to the ground, that participating in such an act equals aesthetic pleasure. Bragaglia's photodynamic image is inherently contradictory because the violence that it seeks to represent is sublimated through the flux of movement. Instead of maintaining a clear distinction between subject and object as would occur in a static image, dynamism causes them to become fused. Rather than undermine the continuity of the composition, the fragmenting and the subsequent synthesis of subject and object endows the photograph with a center the presence of which creates an image that is organic. The photograph's high degree of self-referentiality places it in the realm of aesthetics. It lacks a clear beginning and ending due to the fragmentation and interpenetration which prohibit any definitive completion of the action. As a result the viewer's gaze is allowed to circulate freely within the space appropriated by the two men in the photograph. This temporal ambiguity is akin to that of a gerund insofar as it refers to an ongoing action in the present. Bragaglia's interest in going beyond mere appearances in the hope of revealing "l'essenza interiore delle cose" indicates his concern with the Idea which he tried to represent not by showing us the whole, but by showing us fragments. His pursuit of the Idea results in images that are equivocal and paradoxical, hence beautiful. The photodynamic image must be something "attiva che impone al pubblico la propria essenza liberissima, la quale per questo non sarà afferabile con la insipida facilità di tutte le cose troppo fedeli alla realtà solità."¹⁹ Consequently, techniques essential to Futurist aesthetics such as dynamism, interpenetration and fragmentation disembodied violence. In the founding manifesto of 1909, violence possesses a directness and an immediacy not found in *Lo schiaffo*; this is because violence loses its primacy in the photograph which subordinates it

to the beauty that comes from the transformative powers of movement. Moreover, in opposition to media of mass communication such as newspapers and manifestos whose content was intended for quick consumption and disposal, gallery exhibitions and art catalogs conferred upon Futurist art the status of elitism and permanency.

When it was first introduced by Marinetti, Futurism was grounded on an aesthetics of movement that emphasized aggressivity and virility. Photography adhered thematically to representing violence but not without reinterpreting it radically. My sense is that Futurism was initially interested in movement from a perspective that was univocal and superficial. Movement and the violence produced were ends in themselves. With Bragaglia's photography an aspect of Futurism emerged that intended to go beyond appearance hoping to arrive at what Benjamin has referred to as being. Thus, violence lost its corporeality when it was used by Bragaglia in his attempt at making "una fotografia trascendentale del movimento."²⁰

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Notes

¹Umberto Boccioni, letter to G. Sprovieri, 4 September 1913, rpt in Gambillo 228.

²Marinetti, *La fotografia futurista, Teoria e invenzione futurista* 197.

³Nietzsche 491.

⁴Marinetti, *Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo, Teoria e invenzione futurista* 9.

⁵Schnapp 79.

⁶Bragaglia 9.

⁷Bragaglia 19.

⁸Moholy-Nagy 78.

⁹Bragaglia 29.

¹⁰Comte 382-83.

¹¹Alighieri, *Purgatorio* X, 94-96.

¹²Quoted by Nägele 222.

¹³Marinetti, *Distruzione della sintassi—Immaginazione senza fili—Parole in libertà, Teoria e invenzione futurista* 68.

¹⁴Marinetti, *Distruzione della sintassi—Immaginazione senza fili—Parole in libertà, Teoria e invenzione futurista* 73.

¹⁵Bragaglia 29.

¹⁶Bragaglia 29.

¹⁷Marinetti, *Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo, Teoria e invenzione futurista* 10.

¹⁸Sontag 160.

¹⁹Bragaglia 29.

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