**Futurist conceptions of space and time**

**Introduction**

The art movement of Futurism was located in a specific space and time, originating in Italy and expounded by F.T. Marinetti in his key manifesto published in the popular French newspaper Le Figaro in 1909.

However Futurism did not simply arrive in a flash as the self-publicist Marinetti announced, implying that the birth of Futurism occurred as a result of his car crash. The concept of Futurism was certainly launched into the public realm by the manifesto, yet its inherent ideas grew from a combination of influences and factors, some of which were particular to Marinetti’s own history, whilst others were very much of the time, relating to new technologies and alternative conceptualisations of space and time in the arts and the sciences.

In this essay I intend to contextualise Futurism in time and space, examining its influences and pre-cursors and relate these to futurist manifestations and conceptions of space and time.

**Space and Time before 1909**Between 1906 and 1908 Marinetti frequented the symbolist commune Abbaye de Créteil where a key group gathered in an attempt to meld socialist ideologies with art. The commune acted as a melting pot for ideas, comprising of artists such as Albert Gleizes who was one of the founders of Cubism and the writer Jules Romain. In her article “Futurism, Unanimism and Apollinaire”, Martin (1969) draws parallels between Futurism and the writings of Jules Romain and his ideology of Unanimism.

Romain and Marinetti collaborated together in 1906 and Martin believes that their writings shared many similarities with influences derived from theorists such as Henri Bergson, who contributed new ideas on the relationship between memory, space and time.

In 1908 Romain published “La vie unanime” a series of poems which resonates with key ideologies in Marinetti’s Futurist manifesto - the recognition of the artist embracing modernity and acting as the creator of the future.

If we leave aside their radically different literary form, both statements, full of youthfully buoyant spirits and distrustful of the past as an artistic source, stressed two chief points: the artist as creative seer and guide to the future, located at the heart of the most vital modern activity, and the necessity to recover a pure, untrammelled sensibility to express the novel values and experience of the changing world.

(Martin 1969:260)

Martin suggests Romain’s writings also challenged conventional concepts of space and time.

These new realities manifested themselves in what he named "les unanimes," or vast collective sentiments, which created a flux of uncanny physical and spiritual relationships voiding classic concepts of space and time, thus overcoming the isolation of Leibnitz' monads.

(Martin 1969:260)

In his Futurist manifesto Marinetti stated “Time and Space died yesterday”, when in fact space and time had collapsed into a single entity many years before when conceived as the fourth dimension by late 19thC mathematicians and popularised in 1895 by H.G. Wells in the Time machine:

There is no difference between time and any of the three dimensions of space except that our consciousness moves along it.

(Wells 1895:2)

Precluding Marinetti’s statement but echoing the same sentiment, in 1908 the mathematician Minkowski announced the collapse of space and time.

Space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality

(Minkowski 1908)

It seems unlikely that Marinetti was referring to Minkowski or higher dimensions in his announcement that time and space died yesterday, but instead, stating in a typically provocative yet poetical manner, that it was speed that rendered time and space as irrelevant.

We are already living in the absolute, since we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.

(Marinetti 1909)

Marinetti’s art was that of language, printed and orated, whereas the visual artists Boccioni, Balla, Rosollo, Carà and Severini found their means of expression through painting and sculpture. Martin suggests that even though the Technical Manifestos of Painting and Sculpture made significant claims for defining Futurist art, the artists found their voice through the writings of Romain.

Romains' approach to reality, as described in his 1908 La vie unanime, seems to me to have provided the crucial source which enabled the artists to verbalize their aims.

(Martin 1969:260)

Berghaus also believes Marinetti’s futurist ideas were formulated during his time spent in France.

Futurism was greatly indebted to French culture of the 1880’s and 1890’s and Marinetti assembled the basic ingredients of his artist programme in France rather than Italy.

(Berghaus 2000:271)

It is not surprising to find a similarity of ideas amongst artists during this time; Cubism can be seen almost as a parallel movement, with similar ideologies of presenting new renderings of reality, multiple viewpoints and the collapsing of space and time. Many of the Futurists moved in similar circles as the Cubists, they were competitive and acutely aware of each other’s work. The rendering of movement through the experimental photography of Muybridge and Maurey influenced Duchamp with his painting “Nude Descending a Staircase” and it is likely that both Severini and Boccioni moving in similar circles in Paris would be influenced by these new conceptualisations of space and time expressed through photography and cinema.

**Space and Time in Futurist Art**

Critics tend to regard Umberto Boccioni as perhaps the most talented and influential of the Futurist artists in comparison to Carà, Balla, Russolo and Severini. In some ways he can be seen as the artistic voice of Futurism and Marinetti the poet, wordsmith and publicist. Boccioni produced his own manifestos describing ideas of dynamism, plasticity, force lines, physical transcendentalism and defining his visions for Futurist painting and sculpture.

Boccioni, like Marinetti was also familiar with the work of Henri Bergson, and used Bergson’s concept of intuition as a means of informing his practice.

In an extract from Bergson the parallels with Futurist ideologies are clear:

True continuity of life requires an overlapping of principles and an interpenetration  
of all with all.

(Ohana 2010:46)

Boccioni was influenced by Cubism and sought to create a new post-Impressionist approach that would define Futurism as something very different from Cubism and give it an edge, if not an Italian one. In the Futurist Syndrome (Ohana 2010:21) the author likens Futurism as ‘dynamic cubism’, a dynamic rendering of dynamic objects influenced by the modern aspects of acceleration, speed and light. Cubism rendered objects from multiple perspectives and employed a static sensibility; it did not incorporate movement nor seek to place the spectator at the centre of perception. Further, Futurism embraced the idea of simultaneity, attempting not only to convey multiple viewpoints but also to convey multiple sensory sensations in time.

Boccioni expressed many theoretical ideas concerning space, time and the relationships between the viewer, the artwork and its content. In his triptych “States of Mind”, it is apparent that not only did Boccioni try and synthesise time, motion and travel in the work, but also to integrate the various emotional perspectives of those who stay, and those who go, and evoke these feelings in the viewer.

Boccioni sought to challenge traditional concepts and methods of viewing art, with the aim of collapsing the space between subject and object, artwork and environment.

This systematization of the vibration of light and of the interpenetrations of planes will produce Futurist sculpture: it will be architectonic in character, not only from the point of view of the construction of the masses, but also because the sculptural block will contain the architectonic elements of the sculptural milieu in which the subject lives.

(Boccioni 1912)

The concept of interpenetration is rendered in Boccioni’s artworks, and occurs in his manifesto on Futurist painting, where he describes the intermingling of matter and space.

Our bodies penetrate the sofas upon which we sit, and the sofas penetrate our bodies. The motor bus rushes into the houses which it passes, and in their turn the houses throw themselves upon the motor bus and are blended with it.

(Boccioni 1910)

Boccioni vision exceeded the limitations of two dimensional media, and from 1912 he began to work in three dimensions and in his Plastic Dynamism manifesto mentions the concept of the fourth dimension, possibly in reference to his sculptural work “Unique Forms of Continuity in Space”.

.. instead of the modem concept of the Impressionists with their subdivision and repetition and rough indications of images, we would substitute a concept of dynamic continuity as the only form. And it is not by accident that I say 'form' instead of 'line' since dynamic form is a species of the fourth dimension.  
 (Boccioni 1913)

In her book “The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art”, Henderson (1992) describes how the Cubists were influenced by ideas of the fourth dimension and it is likely that Boccioni became aware of the concept through his contact with the Cubists in Paris, 1911 - 1912. Boccioni however links dynamic form with the fourth dimension in contrast to what he views as the Cubist’s static understanding.

Which is why we do not render a fourth dimension that is measured and finite, but a continuous projection of the forces and forms intuited in their infinite unfolding.

(Boccioni 1914:191)

Boccioni viewed form, space, environment and perceiver all interconnected in a dynamic relationship encompassing simultaneity and interpenetration.

Hence Dynamism is a general law of simultaneity and interpenetration dominating everything, in movement, that is appearance/exception/shading. We have called ourselves 'the primitives of a new and completely transformed sensitivity'. This frankly acknowledges a clear view of our creative potential.

(Boccioni 1913)

Boccioni concludes this paragraph stating the creative potential of these ideas. Sadly he did not have chance to fully develop these concepts and no doubt would have created further cutting edge work if he had not been killed by a tragic accident in 1916.   
  
The early work of Giacomo Balla such as “Dynamism of a Dog on A Leash” (1912), exemplified an altogether different approach to space and time, visually reminiscent of the chronophotography of Maray and the photodynamic works of Bragaglia and stylistically akin to Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase. However over time, Balla moved away from these rather literal representations of space and time, velocity and movement, developing a more abstract approach, perhaps taking on board Boccioni’s concepts of force lines and plastic dynamism.

In 1915 Balla together with Fortunato Depero developed a manifesto entitled “A Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe”. In the manifesto Balla describes the use of three dimensional media combined with movement to produce kinetic renditions of space and time - “the dynamic plastic complex”.

After more than twenty exploratory paintings, he understood that the flat plane of the canvas prevented him from reproducing the dynamic volume of speed in depth. Balla felt the need to construct, with strands of wire, cardboard sheets, fabrics, tissue paper, etc., the first dynamic plastic complex.

(Balla 1915)

In 1917 Balla devised the play “Fireworks” challenging traditional notions of performance, audience and space by means of illuminated geometric objects rather than actors.

Balla choreographed the lighting of the audience and the lighting of the objects to music producing a completely different concept of theatre and through the rapid synchronous changes of light to music, forty-nine changes in five minutes, created a new subjective experience of space and time. (Causey 2009:87)

Marinetti was inspired by variety theatre and his manifesto (Marinetti 1913) exalts its inventiveness and freedom, praising it for combining many forms of media, including film, for breaking the divide between audience and performers, its non-linearity and rapidity but probably most of all, its anti-intellectual appeal.

Marinetti also felt variety theatre presented a means of challenging conventional ideas of space and time.

The variety theatre destroys all our conception of perspective, proportion, time and space

(Marinetti 1913)

For Marinetti, variety theatre was alogical having no real narrative, instead a rapid sequence of unconnected acts; and represented an attractive alternative to the bourgeois and passeist concepts of traditional theatre. Taking inspiration from variety theatre and his own experimental happenings, the serate, in 1915 Marinetti synthesised a number of ideas to formulate a new form of theatre he named synthetic theatre.

The Synthetic Futurist Theatre Manifesto (Marinetti 1915) calls for dynamism, simultaneity, theatre that has “an interpenetration of different atmospheres and times” reflecting a vibrating reality with entangled and chaotic events embedded in one another. The language mirrors that of Boccioni, applied to performance - the presentation of simultaneous events and happenings, an assault of the senses and the breaking down of barriers between audience and actors.

Using the medium of theatre all forms of media could be combined together, oration, sound, music, noise, smell, painting, sculpture, light – for Marinetti it presented the ultimate method of communication.

In fact, ninety percent of Italians go to see plays, whereas only ten percent read books and reviews. Therefore, what we need is a FUTURIST THEATRE;

(Marinetti 1915)

One of the main ideas of synthetic theatre was unsurprisingly, speed and brevity. Combined with the concept of simultaneity, synthetic theatre acted as a mirror to the cultural rapidity of transport and information, a collapsing of space and time to convey as much information to the audience as possible. In 1915 Marinetti produced a play entitled Simultaneity, which literally showed action occurring in two differing locations at the same time.

In 1933 Marinetti experimented with radio as an artistic medium, in his manifesto La Radia, he once again proclaimed the conquering of space and time, stating La Radia abolishes space, time and unity of action.

3. The immensification of space. No longer visible and framable the stage becomes universal and cosmic.

7. An art without time or space without yesterday or tomorrow. The possibility of receiving broadcast stations situated in various time zones and the lack of light will destroy the hours of the day and night. The reception and amplification of the light and the voices of the past with thermoionic valves will destroy time.

8. The synthesis of infinite simultaneous actions

(Marinetti 1933)

The key ideas of conquering time and space combined with simultaneity are once again present, but Marinetti has found yet another new technological medium to explore and make his ideas manifest. Further his aim was to induce a nervous sensation through abstract sounds and noise, once again abandoning ideas of literal representational narrative.

The futurists though united as a collective voice through the will power and charismatic spokesperson Marinetti, individually held differing viewpoints and produced alternative interpretations of space and time to those commonly associated with Futurism, that of velocity and speed. Luigi Rusollo famous for his Art of Noises, held an interest in theosophy and the occult. These metaphysical ideologies informed Rusollo’s renditions of space, time and simultaneity.

Russolo’s theosophy is the key that allows us to identify, decode, and contextualise the occultist interests that were ever present in his work.

(Chessa 2012:225)

Chessa states that the Art of Noises sought to express time and space in new ways by existing in a continuum of both pitch and time.

In the pitch-space continuum, time and space collide.

(Chessa 2012:191)

Simultaneity is also present in the Art of Noises, expressed through the simultaneous generation of a multitude of noises, resonating with the cacophony of sounds present in the modern metropolis.

Simultaneity is an acoustic re-creation of experiencing the world as multiplicity and unity, exactly as in the topological dialectic of the spiral, which projects reality outward and at the same time converges reality in its central point of fusion.

(Chessa 2012:161)

The spiral had metaphysical connotations for Russolo as it did for Boccioni who referenced the spiral in the title of his work “Spiral expansion of speeding muscles “ (1913) and his Plastic Dynamism manifesto of the same year. Chessa is not alone in linking futurism to theosophy and the occult. The group *L’italia Futurista,* whose members included Bruno Corra, Remo Chitti, Arnaldo Ginna and Maria Ginanni shared a similar interest in occultist notions of time and space, less associated with speed, but more mediation and contemplation.

Writers of *L’italia Futurista* share with other futurists the same concern with time; but instead of searching for poetic forms that reflect speed, they prefer to reflect upon the past, the present, the future and eternity. One does not find too many cars and aeroplanes in their writings, rather one sees glimpse of omnipotence and mediumistic forces in place.

(Sica 2012 :168)

According to Chessa, Giocomo Balla was another Futurist interested in the occult.

In 1916 Balla is also interested in psychic phenomena and attends the meetings of a society of theosophists presided over by General Ballatore; they hold, in said society, séances.

(Chessa 2012:33)

Gino Severini also appears to embrace a metaphysical understanding of space and time.

The abstract forms and colors that we draw belong to the Universe outside of time and space

(Severini 1913)

The occult aspect appears to be understated in modern day critical understandings of Futurism and was perhaps underplayed by Marinetti himself, possibly because of its roots in French Symbolism, which Marinetti had rejected, or perhaps the occult was viewed by Marinetti as intellectual, bourgeois and inappropriate to his more strident and aggressive visions of speed and violence.

**Conclusions**

Marinetti adored speed and travel - the motor car, trains and electric trams and later the aeroplane. These modernistic and rapid forms of transport, offering new perspectives on reality played a great influence in shrinking space and time. Likewise the new telecommunications of the telegraph and the radio led to a sense of instantaneous communication, breaking down traditional concepts of space and time completely. Time and distance was being compressed and the new technologies of photographic and cinematic mediation gave rise to new perspectives of movement, transition and duration.

Futurist artists sought to render notions of speed, velocity, and alternative conceptions of space and time through words, collage, painting, sound, performance and sculpture. Unlike Cubism, the Futurist’s vision was to forcefully (with precision and violence) transmit their messages in the widest range of media to as many people in as many countries as possible. Futurism utilised the mass media as propaganda – via the radio, leafleting, travel and worldwide lectures to communicate their vision to the world.

The enactment of Futurism carried out simultaneously and rapidly through multiple media in many locations was itself an act that served to collapse the traditionally slow, linear and conservative notions of space and time.

Futurist conceptions of space and time embraced ideas of simultaneity, the interpenetration of forms, placing the viewer at the centre, but also splintered into many differing facets according to the artists and their choice of media for expression – Universal and Plastic Dynamism, Art of noises and perhaps less well known, the more esoteric occultist conceptions of space and time and invisible higher dimensions.

The manifestos left an indelible impression in time; its ideologies though tainted through association with fascism have impacted upon modern times where the early uses of advertising by Marinetti have become an art form in its own right. Futurism with its multitude of experimental art forms in sound, theatre and performance perhaps paved the way for contemporary performance practice and its use of digital multimedia.

Digital performance’s historical lineage is precisely and inextricably linked to the philosophies, aesthetics and practices of the Futurist movement.  
(Dixon 2005:2)

There are no doubt countless examples of art practice that have precursors in Futurism - the experimental music of John Cage and Russolo’s Art of Noises, the happenings of the sixties and Marinetti’s serates, multimedia collage and dynamic typography of the internet and words in freedom.

Futurism collapsed space and time in ways they could not predict, the Futurists created a vision of a time to come, a modern day present.

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