The importance of Modernism and of the artistic movements of the first twenty or so years of this century need not be stressed. It is now widely acknowledged that the "historical avant-garde" was the crucible for most of the art forms and theories of art that made up the contemporary esthetic climate. This is evidenced, more than by the recently coined academic terms "neoavanguardia" and "postmodernism," by objective trends in the culture of the last two decades: the demand for closer ties between artistic performance and real-life interaction, which presupposes a view of art as social communicative behavior; the antitradiationalist thrust toward interdisciplinary or even non-disciplinary academic curricula; the experimental character of all artistic production; the increased awareness of the material qualities of art and its dependence on physical and technological possibilities, on the one hand; on the other, its dependence on social conventions or semiotic codes that can be exposed, broken, rearranged, transformed. I think we can agree that the multi-directional thrust of the arts and their expansion to the social and the pragmatic domain, the attempts to break down distinctions between highbrow and popular art, the widening of the esthetic sphere to encompass an unprecedented range of phenomena, the sense of fast, continual movement in the culture, of rapid obsolescence and a potential transformability of forms are issues characteristic of our time. Many were already implicit, often explicit, in the project of the historical avant-garde. But whereas this connection has been established and pursued for Surrealism and Dada, for example, Italian Futurism has remained rather peripheral in the current reassessment; indeed one could say that it has been marginalized and effectively ignored.

Yet in its clamorous if not glamorous way, and within the specific historical conditions of Italy, Futurism addressed those very issues. In fact, it posed them for the first time as esthetic problems, and tried to impose them on a culture which could not accept their relevance. In the intensity of their desire for change, for modernity, the Futurists sought to effect nothing less than a cultural revolution. The reasons of their failure, and the ways in which they tried,
are of interest to contemporary critical theory precisely because many of their concerns are still relevant today. I will mention only a few:

1. Art should not be a passive imitation of previous models, however great their value and the tradition they created. Art should demystify.

2. Traditional forms reflect a view of the world that belonged to a past society. New forms must be invented to go along with a new society. Art must innovate.

3. Art and society interact: the artist operates in the streets, and social events are of an artistic or esthetic nature. Hence art is public performance, not to be "contemplated in serenity" and privately, but to be experienced sensorily and publicly.

4. Art is not inspiration but device. It is technique, not moonlight that makes artistic expression possible.

When stated in such a way, these propositions may not be immediately recognizable as Futurist. The iconoclastic rhetoric and the purposely offensive jargon of Marinetti's group are perhaps one of the major obstacles to understanding. But, after all, they were themselves products of the literary tradition and their writings, including their manifestoes, were not meant to be "scientific" or expository or transparent. The Futurists knew that language is never innocent. So, they said:

Let's Murder the Moonlight! Down with the Tango and down with Parsifal! We abjure our symbolist masters. We bravely create the UGLY in literature, and everywhere we murder solemnity. We want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, ciceroni, and antiquarians — For too long has Italy been a dealer in second-hand clothes. We must spit on the Altar of Art every day... A racing car, its hood adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.

And they said:

We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons... Art is revolution, improvisation, impetus, enthusiasm, recordsetting, elasticity, elegance, generosity, struggle against every hindrance, destruction of ruins in the face of holy speed, enclosures to open... Thanks to us, the time will come when life will no longer be a simple matter of bread and labor, nor a life of idleness either, but a work of art.²

In art, as in their desire for cultural revolution, the Futurists were in a hurry: they had to achieve it immediately, on the strength of
their will, activism, and brainstorms. Manifestoes (the idea of which Marinetti had brought back from his early years in France) were written in collaboration during noisy sessions at a neighborhood bar-café and often signed with names of individuals who had not been involved in writing that particular manifesto. Performances and exhibitions were put together on impulse, on the occasion of some public event held in any one of the larger cities in Italy, to which they would travel by train, at times all night long. Disruption and provocation, the impact of unexpectedness and extemporaneous acts were considered excellent tactics which didn't give them much time to elaborate or research their arguments. Nonetheless, the amount and variety of their works, both theoretical and creative, was extraordinary.

There are a few facts about Futurism that should be stated at the outset and examined. First, Futurism is very little known, except for its name and the name of its founder and central figure, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Outside of Italy, it is known chiefly as an avant-garde movement in the arts, primarily painting and sculpture — and here the names of Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla and Carlo Carrà are certainly familiar. In the introduction to his important book on Futurist Performance, Michael Kirby states that one of the reasons for the neglect of Futurism (and he is referring to its contributions in experimental theatrical performance) is what he calls "national bias."

This means [Kirby writes] that we have tended to take our view of the history of the arts from the French and that they, in turn, have tended to stress the importance of French developments at the expense of those in other countries. . . . It could be pointed out that books dealing with avant-garde drama and the Theatre of the Absurd, for example, stress the importance of Dada without devoting space to Futurism. . . . Dada, it might be argued, is accepted by the "French school" of avant-garde chronology even though it originated in Switzerland. But Dada migrated, in part, to Paris — its history in Germany is still not well documented in English — and was crucial in the development of a truly French movement, Surrealism. Although Futurism should not be elevated at the expense of Dada, the earlier movement (Futurism) achieved many of the things for which Dada is given credit, and its work in, and contributions to, performance are much more extensive.

In Italy also, contrary to what might be expected, the first serious efforts to study Futurism were made only in the late 50's, and even then they were merely monographs on individual artists (especially Boccioni), almost exclusively limited to the visual and plastic arts. Futurist music, theatre, cinema, architecture, literature, and their cultural impact were ignored until very recently: for example, as
late as 1962, Renato Poggioli's well-known *Theory of the Avant-Garde* contains virtually no analysis of Italian Futurism and merely re-states the usual generalizations. Another indication is given by the fact that the Mondadori collection of Marinetti's major works, edited by Luciano De Maria, appeared only in 1968.

Currently, there is a resurgence of interest in Futurism throughout the Western world, particularly in Italy and in the US. In order to discuss the possible causes and the modalities of this renascence, one must at the same time account for the long period of oblivion. Actually, oblivion is not the right word. There is evidence that Italian artists after 1920 have *not at all disregarded* the formal proposals of Futurism, and in more or less direct ways this is as true of poetry as it is of painting. As for literary criticism and artistic theory, the Futurists were not so much forgotten as they were repressed, condemned, ostracized — which goes to show how closely esthetic values are related to sociopolitical values. To put it simply, many of the Futurists, particularly Marinetti, were seen only as apologists for the Fascist regime; and Futurism itself was thought of as the demagogic torch bearer of Fascist culture, the subverter of traditional standards of value in the arts, the loud, undisciplined, irresponsible, bohemian counterpart of that motley group of unemployed, veterans, and street hoods who had been hired by Mussolini's boys to march on Rome in 1922. However, it is not that simple a matter, for artistic movements, like historical periods, are not homogeneous or monolithic but rather wrought with internal contradictions which often can be assessed only in a larger historical perspective.

Looking at Futurism today, in both its historical dimension and its unquestionable contribution to artistic experimentation, one finds keen historical ironies, which are precisely the phenomenal form of the internal contradictions I mentioned a while ago. For instance, much like Decadentism or its typically Italian sub-division called Crepuscolarismo, Futurism has been seen as the reflection in art of a decayed bourgeois society in the last stages of its cultural evolution. This assessment is obviously insufficient, for several reasons: first, Futurism *did* usher into Italy a radically new and modern consciousness of artistic processes and forms whose strength is evident in the major artists and writers of this century, from Pirandello to Ungaretti to Antonioni. Second, Futurism, as the forerunner of the whole European avant-garde, *did* extend the boundaries of artistic expression and possibilities beyond the schemata of 19th century bourgeois esthetics. Third, if the orthodox Marxist of Lukácsian reflection theory were correct, how could one account for the fact that the strongest and most success-
ful adversary of Futurist art theory and practice was the liberal bourgeoisie itself, whose cultural hegemony (to use Gramsci's powerful term) was represented, throughout the first half of the century, by the work and personality of Benedetto Croce? If, during the entire period of my schooling in Italy, from the early 50's to the mid-60's, I seldom even heard the word "Futurism," this is due to the specific cultural politics of post-war Italy. And the fact that the renewal of interest in Futurism appears at a time in which the whole of Italy, as well as literary studies, are concretely affected by historical materialist theories and politics, would only be a further and keener irony.

The sense of how the Italian neoavanguardia responds to the issues raised (but not solved) by Futurism is conveyed by the words of one of its foremost figures, Edoardo Sanguineti, writer, critic, editor and militant. Like Marinetti some 60 years before, Sanguineti speaks against museums, but he does so with an awareness of the real relations between artistic production and socio-economic factors in the modern culture-industry that Marinetti did not have:

The museum and the market are contingent and intercommunicating; or rather, they are two façades of the same social edifice.... If the museum is a true image of the autonomy of art, it also represents compensation for art's subjection to commerce. Art descends to the level of the market, but, once plunged into it, finds itself straightway thrown back towards the inaccessible Olympian heights of the classics. The process seems mysterious, until one grasps how the mechanism works as a whole; one then understands that the museum's specific raison d'être rests on the fact that, in it, all the commercial reality that surrounds art is sublimated. It represents the highest level and furthest limit of art's career as commodity; here in the museum the clinking of moneybags is finally stilled; reality hides its head in the clouds and the artistic product is offered as the sole object which no money can buy.... Thus the economic élite, while destroying the meaning of art, assumes the noble role of saving it. It is by definition, the prerogative of the petit bourgeois to conserve traditional common sense, and, by some illusion, all the eternal human values, as they have been instilled in him by school, family and church. Thus he continues, poor man, to be astonished and appalled by the dehumanization of art. But nothing can frighten the grand bourgeois who controls prices, directs consumption, and knows perfectly well what he is buying. Just as he knows that each thing has its price, and that it is simply a matter of paying the right price, he also knows equally well that every product of art will, sooner or later, find its place in an appropriate museum.9

The Futurists also, like the neoavanguardia, were active politically. They formed their own party, participated in street rallies as well as staged their own, and published political manifestoes in addition
to esthetic ones. They, too, were going against the grain of prevailing academism and bourgeois conceptions of the social function of art. But their politics was different. Robert Dombroski and Stephen Sharkey have argued that the Futurist program and ideological system were based on two theoretical and technical precepts:

first, the rejection of delimiters, i.e., of the existing categories by which human physical, social, and psychological realities are organized; secondly, the representation of the dynamics of movement. Such a programme presented itself as the diametrical opposite to what is generally described as the bourgeois artistic paradigm wherein a high premium is placed on linear causality and the historical determining of experience. By contrast, Futurism stressed the coherent simultaneity of experience and the interpenetration of objects, thus superseding, in its view, static representation of reality and the social-psychological quiescence such a representation implied.10

The configuration of the sign-vehicle in Futurist poetry, that is to say, its formal devices — verbal and graphic, — were meant to effect a drastic semantic rupture in poetic discourse through the breakdown of all metric, phonic, and thematic constraints (we may recall that the battle for free verse was fought in Marinetti’s own poetry review, Poesia, around 1907). Agrammatical writing, parole in libertà, the extreme use of ellipsis, analogy and onomatopoea, and the emphasis placed on non-representation and abstract graphic values were the verbal/visual/phonic vehicles of what Marinetti defined as “wire-less imagination.” By its multi-media, cacophonous messages, Futurist art wanted to communicate a sense of dynamism as perpetual tension or strife, as orgasmic psychophysical energy; with these it sought to replace both the classical principle of decorum and balance, and the romantic bourgeois ideal of the psychic and moral integrity of the Subject. Due to the impossibility of linear and unequivocal communication, art — and consequently, life — would be perceived as process itself. In this scheme, process as unbridled movement or active creativity was opposed to structure as rational organization in social and artistic forms that were static, reactionary, “passéist.” And so the Futurists came to equate process with progress, dynamism with speed, modernity with machine. Machine-like men and humanoid mechanisms, Dombroski and Starkey suggest, were the dual aspects of the anti-humanist hybrid force which constituted the Futurist “mythology” and by which the Futurists hoped to revolutionize society at large and the artistic intellectual academy in particular, since the latter is the repository, the conscious bearer of cultural tradition.
Their violent, ritualized destruction of everything "passéist," from the moonlight to the museum, from sedentary life to Ibsenian theatre, from harmony to syntax, was meant to clear the way for the libidinal creative energies that had been repressed within bourgeois culture. But, ironically, those energies had to be embodied in and released by, not humans but machines. "Motors, they say, are truly mysterious. . . . They seem to have personalities, souls, or wills. They have whims, freakish impulses. You must caress them, treat them respectfully, never mishandle or overtire them." This two-fold attraction toward irrational and technological forces found its mythical expression in war as the supreme form of man-machine intercourse. War was at once the verification of technological power (World War I was indeed called the first technological war), and the achievement of chaos in which the orgiastic self ultimately transcends nature and society through self-negation.

It would be incorrect, however, or at best simplistic, merely to label as Fascist either one or the other component of the Futurist mythology, even though it did eventually become instrumental to, or rather instrumentalized by, the Fascist State. Technology was an exciting new reality in 1909. Its potential for social development and for new forms of communication (including art or esthetic communication) were perceived not only by Futurism. There was, for example, Russian constructivism around 1920, after the October revolution. Or, to choose an international phenomenon, the development of cinema is a good case in point: the excitement of early film viewers who were thrilled by Lumière's train engine coming at them from the wide screen was elicited by mechanical and chemical means (I chose film as an example because film technology has lent itself to art, to politics, to criticism and to social science research, to mass communication, to commercial advertising, even to the domestic purposes of home movies). Merely to equate Futurism with Fascism because of the former's attraction to technology and to the irrational does not provide us with any useful means to deal with the continued lure of technology in contemporary society, or with the strong irrationalistic currents that survive in Western cultures and countercultures, evidenced by the increasing concern with religion, ritual, mysticism, and the occult.

The problem with Futurism was that it finally substituted its own mythology for the traditional one, remaining caught in its rhetoric. It fetishized both the products and the process of industrialization, making them abstractions, tropes, purely discursive events; and it hypostatized certain values into dogmas, slogans,
judgments out of context. In other words, Futurism "irrationalized" technology, losing track of its being a social production and endowing it with inherent, mystical, a-historical powers. By ignoring the real social relations on which technological "progress" was being achieved, they did not see that the potential of technology, which could have greatly improved and renewed Italian society as a whole, was in fact being channeled into wealth and power for a single class, the capital-owning or grande bourgeoisie, who needed war in order to increase that power. In their disregard for socio-economic factors, the Futurists failed to see how their art and ideology were related to the system of capitalist production; and they found themselves in the totally contradictory position of reaffirming as absolute and necessary that very social organization against which they were fighting; namely, the forces of industrialization in a commodity-producing society. Having no understanding of the relation between socio-economic base and ideological superstructure (in Marxian terms), the Futurists assumed, like their opponent Croce, that art was unmotivated by, and autonomous from, socio-economic forces; and they expected to change society by revolutionizing certain institutions or superstructural aspects of the social fabric: art forms, museums, universities, religious conventions, marriage. Thus, while they correctly assessed the importance of technology to social transformation — especially in a country like Italy, just beginning to raise its standards of living and still ridden with enormous socio-economic problems — the Futurists mythologized technology, placed it on the altar, and bowed to it. In this way, by abstracting from the historical process, they universalized the particular class reality of that very bourgeoisie they intended to do away with.

Since Futurism was inextricably compromised by Fascism, a fact that has weighed heavily on its esthetic assessment, I wish to clarify the situation a little more. In the first place, we must distinguish between the first period of Futurism up to the Great War, in which some of its most representative artists died (Boccioni, and the architect Sant'Elia — Carrà seceded to Pittura Metafisica), and the post-war period. Almost everyone agrees in determining the life span of the movement from 1909 (the year of the first Manifesto published in Le Figaro by Marinetti) to 1920. Fascism came into power two years later, in 1922, with the appointment of Mussolini as Prime Minister. So the actual relation of Futurism to Fascism after World War I consisted in large measure in the position assumed by Marinetti himself vis-à-vis the Fascist regime.
Marinetti was born on December 22, 1876 in Alexandria. The bare facts of a childhood spent in Egypt, far from his parents’ country, and a youth and formative years in Paris, hold a clue to the man who not only founded the Italian avant-garde movement, but also invented the model for the rest of Europe. In one highly cultured and who, unlike most Italian intellectuals of the time, was steeped in 19th century French literature and in the then declining season of symbolism, the visceral, obsessive love for the mother country was to produce the grand scheme of Marinetti’s life: to raise his abused country to the cultural and political level of France and of the other major European nations. For this purpose, an art “absolutum moderne” (in Rimbaud’s words) had to be created, free of purist and pedantic constraints, an action-art (arte-azione) capable of leaving behind the academy and encompassing the totality of life. The cultural model he set up, namely the movement, was open to and composed of anyone, without restrictions of school, age or class, who tendentially had “elective affinity” with the artistic and extra-artistic ideology of Futurism. The movement did not focus on a single sphere of artistic activity, but, on the contrary, was open to all innovative action aimed at renewing the culture and social behavior. It posited art and life as continuous, although such continuity had to be demonstrated by their clash and the merciless confrontation of all their aspects. This same model was followed by Dada and Surrealism, and later revived in the 60’s. If Marinetti did not invent but merely perfected the art of manifesto-making (l’arte di far manifesti), he did originate the concept and the practice of staging rallies and performances known as “Futurist evenings” (serate futuriste); these began approximately in 1910, and were later followed by the Dada evenings at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, which opened in 1916.

It has been said, outside of hyperbole, that although Marinetti was not a painter, Futurist painting would not have existed without Marinetti.14 His seemingly endless vitality, personal enthusiasm, brilliancy, resourcefulness, and the variety of his interests and initiatives made him the central figure of Futurist cultural politics, obscuring his contribution as a prolific and diversified producer of art. Unlike Apollinaire’s, Marinetti’s non-theoretical works, from poems to novels to radio plays to theatrical sintesi, have not yet been properly studied.

(Let me open, here, a brief parenthesis. There are many obvious parallels between Marinetti and Apollinaire: they were born four years apart; they were both Italians transplanted in France, both early exiles in a way — one from the mother country, the other from society; — both widely-travelled and cosmopolitan, both
volcanic personalities with a private and public myth: the love of poetry and of country, the belief in art as a force of life, the "esthetization of war" (Walter Benjamin) for which the explosion of a grenade was like the blossoming of a flower. Both enlisted as soon as the Great War was declared. The son of Madame de Kostrowitski was a gourmet who ate enormous quantities of food; the Futurist chainsmoked. They were both jailed, Guillaume for an alleged theft at the Louvre, Filippo Tommaso for an anti-Austrian demonstration — rather romantic episodes which, if anything, added glamor to their legends. Apollinaire was not the first Italian to have become a famous Frenchman: there were, of course, Caterina de Medici and Napoleon Bonaparte, and there would be Yves Montand and certainly others. Nor was Marinetti the first Italian to entertain what the MLA calls "literary relations" with France: for example, Brunetto Latini, Petrarch, Leonardo, Goldoni, D'Annunzio, Ungaretti, up to Italo Svevo whose fortune was made in France by Valéry Larbaud, and Italo Calvino who lives in Paris. But the Marinetti-Apollinaire connection is a peculiar case of parallel lives.\(^{15}\)

Going back to Marinetti's position vis-à-vis Fascism, it is true that he considered Fascism as the social movement potentially capable of fulfilling the mission of Futurism as an artistic and cultural revolution. Even his acceptance of the membership in the Accademia d'Italia in 1929, when Fascism was in full swing, was motivated by the desire to secure official status for Futurism, which at the time was more tolerated than encouraged. However, his adherence was not always uncritical: he did oppose Mussolini's self-serving acquiescence to the demands of the monarchists and of the Vatican; and, as the Fascist ideology became more and more reactionary with the establishment of the dictatorship, Marinetti vehemently, if vainly, protested the racial laws against the Jews in 1938, and the late-fascist condemnation of modernism as "degenerate art."\(^{16}\) Undoubtedly, Marinetti's political adherence to Fascism was not unrelated to what I have described as the mythology of Futurism as a whole, whose contradictions rested on its eventual support of the very social class against which their war at home had been waged. The progress made by contemporary Italian historiography in the study of Fascism has contributed new perspectives on the entire period.

In a recent book entitled Proletari senza rivoluzione (Proletarians Without Revolution), Raffaele Del Carria proposes that the widely accepted distinction, à propos of the Futurists or those he calls "the angry young men" of the first 2 decades of the century, between nationalist-reactionary on one hand, and extreme-left socialists
on the other, is correct only to some extent: it is true that the nationalists (Papini, Prezzolini, D'Annunzio, Marinetti) were as openly in favor of militarism as they were strongly anti-working class; while the left-wing extremists (among whom was Mussolini), fought against the established Socialist Party in the name of the subordinate classes. However, the historian argues convincingly, there were substantial affinities in the two groups: both came from the petty and intellectual bourgeoisie and expressed its claims and its frustrated aspirations — hence the co-existence of libertarian, anarchical gestures and the will “to sing the masses” with the glorification of war and patriotism in the Futurist manifestoes. The contradictions of Futurism, then, were those of a large sector of the Italian bourgeoisie which, being composed of diversified social elements, trades or professions, was neither on the side of labor nor on the side of capital. What this numerous, dissatisfied segment of the Italian population did not have, in the Giolitti era (1903-13), was a piece of the political pie, a real voice in the new parliament, a comparable amount of political power and influence. Unlike in France or England, capitalism in Italy had developed with gaps and loopholes, and because of its weakness could not accommodate the new groups that had emerged out of the underprivileged classes (for example, the bureaucracy, the newest class of unified Italy). At the same time, these groups did not find entrance into the workers’ organizations affiliated with the then very strong Socialist Party, whose politics of reformism and class collaboration earned them the label of “labor aristocracy.” The result, for the petty bourgeoisie, was a feeling of dispossessedness, of being shortchanged or alienated from its rightful class affiliation. Thus, they were united to the socialists in the fierce critique of liberal parliamentarism, while, on the other hand, they shared the conservatives’ hatred of labor unions. These twin antithetical impulses constituted the core of the petty bourgeoisie ambivalence between revolution and reaction. It is not therefore surprising, in Del Carria’s view, that when the battle between the main antagonists (namely, the capital-owning industrial bourgeoisie, and the working class organizations) was resolved with the defeat of the latter in 1919-20 (the “red biennium”), Mussolini and Marinetti were together on the side of the victorious hegemonic class. The historiographical novelty of Del Carria’s thesis is apparent in his conclusion: whereas the Fascist as well as the anti-Fascist historiographies maintained that all artistic avant-garde and political vanguard movements in Italy at the beginning of the century were destined to flow into Fascism, as if by historical necessity, Del Carria proposes that such outcome was not at all determined, and
Indeed Marinetti might have found himself on the side of the proletariat had the working class succeeded in becoming the dominant class through revolution. In other words, at that historical moment, in the goals and self-definition of the class represented in art by Futurism (the petty and intellectual bourgeoisie), there was sufficient ambiguity to go both ways — as it were. Which is not only a new historical judgment on the cultural and artistic phenomenon of Futurism, but a useful approach to understanding its contradictions.

If I have insisted on the social and ideological aspects of Futurism, it is because there are almost no works in English that confront this fundamental issue. There are, on the contrary, several excellent books that document its formal and theoretical innovations in all the arts. So I will only outline some of the more striking futuristic hypotheses of the Futurists, and refer the reader to books like Kirby’s, Martin’s, and Taylor’s.

Looking at Futurism from the contemporary, postmodern, debate in the arts, particularly in the United States, I would select three main areas of concerns:

1. The notion of performance as expressive activity between performer and other people or objects in a contextualized situation, theatrical or not; performance as a modality of human interaction basic to both art and life.

2. The extension of artistic categories and means; the extension in space of the artistic object into the environment; and the expansion of the traditional notion of linear time.

3. The perception of art as material of physical production; and conversely, of the artistic object as process or processual event.

As Kirby’s book amply documents, the notion of performance was central to Futurist art and life: the “futurist evenings” invented certain techniques of performance very much used in contemporary experimental theatre, such as violent surprise and the disorientation or psychological brutalization of spectators, intended to force their participation. More consciously than today’s “skywriting,” Fedele Azari’s aerial theatre (1918-1919) used the sky for a stage and airplanes as performers — their “gestures” and movements being derived from the acrobatics of the flyers during the war. The Futurists synthetic theatre, in which the specially designed props, sets and costumes played an essential role, extended the notion of performance to objects, undermining the social and psychological integrity of the spectator as Subject. This was to be pursued, in different ways, by Pirandello and by the Theatre of the Absurd. The similarity, pointed out by many,
between Ionesco's *Les chaises* and Marinetti's *Vengono* (*They Are Coming: Drama of Objects*) is indeed striking. Another clearly absurd piece of the same year 1915, *Le basi* (*Feet*), consists of 7 short vignettes in which the audience sees only the performers' legs. Futurist sintesi were predicated on constructed scenic space, that is to say, the compenetration of performers and sets, including the audience, in a designed — horizontal and vertical — environment.\(^{19}\) The sintesi also employed simultaneity techniques on stage similar to what the Futurists were trying out in film, especially montage and the split-screen.\(^{20}\) The spectacular and the popular side of performance in live interaction were stressed in the *Variety Theatre Manifesto* (1913), "*varietà*" in Italian meaning something between cabaret and vaudeville. The concern has re-emerged in the current studies on circus performance (by the semiotician Paul Bouissac in particular) and in theatrical pageants like Luca Ronconi's *Orlando Furioso*, staged in stadiums, lakefronts or city squares.\(^{21}\)

Another interesting experiment was outlined by Marinetti in the *Tactilism Manifesto* (1921). His "tactile theatre" was to appeal primarily to the spectators' sense of touch, and Marinetti envisioned moving bands or turning wheels that were to be touched by the spectators and provide different surfaces and textural rythmes, accompanied by music and lights. This latter example is perhaps the most obvious link between the visual-plastic art object and the theatre: in fact, it seems to be a direct precursor of Kaprow's assemblages. In Kaprow's development from painting to assemblages (objects that can be handled or walked around) to environments (objects that must be walked into or through), the basic principle is the extension in space of the expressive function of the object.\(^{22}\) Happenings, and later events and activities (as Kaprow now calls his works) extend that function in time, as performance, becoming more theatrical. In a less orderly fashion, the Futurists experimented with both types of extensions, and with different sensory stimuli (e.g. some playscripts, or more exactly playscores contain directions for altering the temperature in the auditorium as well as lighting, and Marinetti even thought of a "*perfumer*" that would spread scents in the theatre).

The Italian art historian Maurizio Calvesi, one of the first to re-discover Futurist art, suggests a direct line of ascendance from Boccioni to Pollock and action painting, and argues that Futurist dynamism in painting is not, as was believed, a simple photographic or mechanistic reproduction of movement, but an internal charge, energy deployed from within, an expansion of the painted object from the inside out through luminous and color vibrations. Calvesi
also traces to Marinetti (1913) the origin of commercial advertising fetishism, the billboards with moving luminous figures, eyes or mouths opening and closing, that were to be picked up by the American Neo Dada and Pop artists. The Futurist so-called “art of noise,” music conceived as collage of disparate sounds, extended the concept and range of musical possibilities, instruments and notation in the direction later taken by musique concrète, electronic music, etcetera. Luigi Russolo’s intonarumori (noise-intoners, or noise organs) and his other personally constructed instruments, psafarmoni (imitating sounds of nature), foreshadow Cage’s “prepared piano” and the Moog Synthesizer. Semantically coded noises were “actors” in Marinetti’s radio sintesi, or radio pieces made up entirely of sound effects, prototypes of the famous Orson Welles’ War of the Worlds at the Mercury Theatre. Likewise, one could see Marinetti’s poem, The Battle of Adrianople, or other free-word compositions (parole in libertà) as a musical score; which furthermore stressed, in its typographical format, the plastic-figurative value of writing that is so new today in the postmodern novel, in visual or concrete poetry, or in the “simultaneous” philosofictional writing of, say, Derrida’s Glas.

I will conclude by restating some of the questions that interested me in regard to Futurism and to the avant-garde past and present.

Why did the “Futurist revolution” fail? Why were their energy, enthusiasm and imagination so easily co-opted by Fascism? Were the Futurists’ artistic inventions finally resolved, like the subsequent movements, in sterile formalism? Or, is formalism the eternal childhood disease of all avant-garde? Is there more than a simple parallel between the disillusionment suffered by the Futurists after 1918, in the social despair that rose in Italy as the aftermath of the Great War, and the sense of apathy felt by many, in this country and in Europe, after 1968, with the setting in of reaction in the present restoration climate? (Which, by the way, may explain the current fascination with Dada, whose aloof, nihilistic irony was a result of the disbelief in the power of art to lead or even affect society.) And more: considering the European avant-garde at the turn of the century, and the new avant-garde that began in the United States in the Kennedy years, is the role of innovation different in 1970 from what it was in 1910? Or is Postmodernism a naive re-play of modernist events, and therefore simply a case of “artistic amnesia” (Jacobi)?

The vicissitude of Futurism and of the historical avant-garde showed clearly that art is cooptable because, in and by itself, art is not revolutionary. It does, however, and perhaps better than any other cultural form, deal with and expose the contradictions of
its historical moment. In this sense, all art is Futurist: it not only reflects social reality but also invents, or proposes alternative models, new possibilities, a new "language" — a new perceptual organization of personal and social reality. I would hope that the current resurgence of interest in modernism and the historical study of the avant-garde will bring home to us the awareness that history, like space and time, is not simple linear progression from old to new, with or without solution of continuity; but a very complex dialectic process in which artistic forms do have a role, however indirect. This awareness itself, I think, if nothing else, should be one of the main differences between the first and the second avant-garde.

The University of Wisconsin
Milwaukee

NOTES

* A slightly different version of this paper was presented at the Symposium on "Apollinaire and Modernism," held at the University of Texas, Austin in 1976. I am grateful to Gian-Paolo Biasin, Joy Potter, and Donald Sellstrom for their invitation and courteous hospitality.

1 The first to use the term "postmodernism" was, I believe, Ihab Hassan in "Frontiers of Criticism," Virginia Quarterly, 46 (Winter 1970), reprinted in Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times (Urbana, 1975). The concept was elaborated in The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature (New York, 1971). Since then it has been acquiring international currency.

2 These quotations are taken, as mere samples of the Futurist writing, and therefore out of sequence and of context, from F.T. Marinetti, Selected Writings, ed. by R.W. Flint (New York, 1971). Writings by the major Futurists are available in English in Umbro Apollonio, ed., Futurist Manifestos (New York, 1975).

3 Remo Chiti, La vita si fa da sé. Fantasie, teatro sintetico, scritti futuristi, a cura di M. Verdone (Bologna, 1974).

4 I am thinking, for example, of Joshua Taylor, Futurism (New York, 1961); Werner Haftmann, Painting in the 20th Century (New York, 1960); Christa Baumgarth, Geschichte des Futurismus (Reibek bei Hamburg, 1966); and Marianne W. Martin, Futurist Art and Theory: 1909-1915 (Oxford, 1968). As the dates show, Western interest in Futurism did not start until the 60's.


6 Poggioli's Theory of the Avant-Garde (Cambridge, Mass., 1968) was originally published in Italian as Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia (Bologna, 1962).

7 F.T. Marinetti, Teoria e invenzione futurista, a cura di Luciano De Maria (Milano, 1968) and La grande Milano tradizionale e futurista, a cura di Luciano De Maria (Milano, 1969). A very useful paperback guide and anthology, also edited by De Maria, is Per conoscere Marinetti e il Futurismo (Milano, 1975). In addition, two major Italian journals devoted an entire issue to Futurism: Sipario (December 1967), which published several theatre manifestoes, texts of plays and scenographies, and Il Verri, 33/34 (1970).


12 See Stephen Bann, ed., The Tradition of Constructivism (New York, 1974). Unlike the Italian Futurists, the Soviet Constructivists of 1920-23 (Gabo, Pevsner, Taitlin, El Lissitzky) saw the artist as a worker in another field of production, as a social being concerned with imposing on the world an order based on scientific laws and logical reasoning. However, their pronouncements, extolling technique against the tyranny of the individual and proclaiming the social function of art, were not dissimilar in tone from the Futurist slogans.

13 "The right to strike, equality before the law, the authority of numbers, the usurping power of mobs, the speed of international communications, the habits of hygiene and domestic comfort; these wholly new phenomena require large, popular, well-ventilated apartment blocks, absolutely comfortable trains, tunnels, iron bridges, immense meeting halls, and perfected chambres de toilette for the rapid daily care of the body....

In Japan they carry on the strangest of trades: the sale of coal made from human bones:... skeletons of heroes who do not hesitate to be crushed in mortars by their own sons, their relatives, or their fellow citizens, to be brutally vomited out by Japanese artillery against hostile armies. Glory to the indomitable ashes of man, that come to life in cannons!" (Marinetti, "War, the World's Only Hygiene", in Selected Writings, pp. 80-82.

14 Calvesi, Le due avanguardie.


17 See in particular the first Manifesto of Futurism and Marinetti's "Beyond Communism" (1920): "'Soiled and moribund bourgeoisie' is an absurd description of that great mass of young, intelligent, and hard-working lower middle class; notaries, lawyers, etc., all sons of the people, all absorbed in working furiously to do better than their fathers" (Selected Writings, p. 151).

19 This notion has been recently re-proposed by Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theatre* (New York, 1973).

20 Unfortunately, the only two Futurist films of which there is record are lost: Arnaldo Ginna’s *Vita futurista* and Anton Giulio Bragaglia’s *Il perfido incanto*, both made in 1916. See Kirby, *Futurist Performance*, p. 120-42.


23 Maurizio Calvesi, *Le due avanguardie*.

24 Kirby, *Futurist Performance*, pp. 39-40. An interesting example of how Russolo’s musical experiments with noise were utilized in a non-artistic but purely social context is cited by R. Fulop-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism* (London, 1927), who describes the fifth anniversary celebration of the October revolution in the city of Baku, where a concert was performed by two batteries of artillery, several regiments of infantry, the foghorns of the Caspian fleet, six machine-gun units, 8 hydroplanes, and choruses in which all the spectators participated (quoted by Martin Damus, *Funktionen der Bildenden Kunst im Spatkapitalismus*, Frankfort, 1973, p. 36).