

The Art Of Speed Destiny

"The future - that's the only religion" F.T. Marinetti, *Roi Bombancei*, 1909.

The earliest European avant-garde groups of this century had faith in a particular future that would fuse art, technology and politics. Their Europe was a world that had harnessed the power of steam, fossil fuels and electricity, and these energy sources were bearing fruit in the form of transportation, telecommunications and industrialisation on a massive scale. Their Europe was a world that boasted of the conquest of physical space - one could now cross from West to East (on the Trans-Siberian Railway) or around the globe in only weeks. The Italian Futurists and their comrades in Russia, England, Germany and France were embracing the newly mechanised world with a passion.

The Futurists worshiped innovation, disruption and the heroic nature of a forward advance (hence the military term 'avant-garde') towards a utopian mechanised future. For them, the new communication and transportation technologies were a means to pursue speed. Speed differs from movement in that movement is directional or spatial. Speed is intensive temporal. Movement occurs in a particular direction, across a certain space or time, but speed is the dynamic tempo that gets you there. The Italian Futurist F.T. Marinetti, in the first *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909), wrote,

"We stand on the last promontory of centuries!... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed."¹

Russian Kasimir Malevich, who believed he was moving even faster than the Italian Futurists, wrote in 1915,

"Futurism opened up the "new" in modern life: the beauty of speed. And through speed we move more swiftly. And we, who only yesterday were futurists, have reached new forms through speed, new relationships with nature and objects. We have reached suprematism, abandoning futurism as a loophole through which those lagging behind will pass."²

Malevich and Marinetti were in search of an art that could rival the new trains and aeroplanes, an art with the power of electricity. They both preached liberation from the static forms of post-impressionist painting and poetry. The Futurists initiated a move towards 'montage' and multiple media artworks in an attempt to create models of how the new mechanised world might be assembled. Academic easel painting could no longer adequately reflect the rush of continuous present.

The Futurists believed new technologies were propelling the globe towards a universal culture, a fusion of art and technology. The French critic Apollinaire, reviewing an exhibition in Paris of the Russian Futurists Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov

wrote,

"This art is in accord with the newest and most daring experiments undertaken by French artists. These experiments show that a universal art is being created, an art in which painting, sculpture, poetry, music and even science in all its manifold aspects will be combined."³

For the Futurists, the new global outlook demanded radical new art forms. They worked on the notion of uniting disparate and distant objects, linking things through juxtaposition. The concept of an 'event', a total aesthetic environment incorporating multiple art forms, was common to avant-garde groups across Europe.⁴ Marinetti's concept of 'Words-in-Freedom' ('Parole in Liberta') was an attempt to unite disparate objects in a universal network: "Analogy is nothing more than the deep love that unites distant, diverse and seemingly hostile things..."⁵

His sound/concrete poem *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914) was an early creation of a 'virtual reality' that incorporated text, sound (onomatopoeia) and an extension of the poem's physical space through the graphic arrangement of text. Simultaneously a performance piece and a visual display of words, sounds and images, *Zang Tumb Tumb* represented a dispersal of the literary object in an effort to express the inherent 'dynamism' of all objects. Here was the rush of nouns and colours in a telegraphic or electric manner, the speed and disruption of the new world converted into literature.

The rush of speed, continuous innovation, a universal network, the desire to capture the 'nowness' of the present, fusion of art and technology - such rhetoric sounds all too familiar to contemporary ears. These are slogans that would not sound out of place in the latest Microsoft or IBM brochure. The Futurist's combination of aesthetics with a certain 'politics of technology' seem to have merged into 'common sense' in the late 20th century. To understand the futurist obsession with speed, technology and the future, it is necessary to ask what kind of future they envisage, and what the political implications for the present might be.

Hypnosis

Walter Benjamin, in his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), argued that art became politicized by the new reproductive technologies: "mechanical reproduction emancipates art from its parasitical dependence on ritual."⁶ Photography, to a much greater degree than woodcuts, engravings or etchings, is a reproductive technology driven by speed: faster to take, faster to reproduce, faster to disseminate to a mass audience. As an extension of photography, Benjamin notes that film is also driven by speed. With film, there is no time to inspect each frame carefully, its images are constantly assailing the audience. For Benjamin, film had the potential to become the most democratic art of the new world, appealing to a broader audience than the traditional art forms.

Whilst approaching from different ends of the political spectrum, Benjamin and Marinetti both recognised the new concept of an

art without appeal to ritual or the sacred, a mass art for a mass audience. They both proclaimed the transition of art from specialised experimentation within a historical tradition to a 'useful' function of society, a politicization in line with the new mass politics - the future Russian revolution or Italian and German fascism. For Benjamin, the new reproductive technologies lack presence, in both time and space, and lack historical context or tradition. Both hide behind the facade of objectivity, where technologies are portrayed as neutral. For both of them, the future society will contain no ritual, sacred or religion aspects except for the myth of a glorious future brought to you via speed and technology.

The Futurist city (like the Fascist or Communist city) was to be an efficient, dynamic machine. In Italian Futurist architect Sant'Elia's visionary city, "habitation and communication systems were to be fused into a whole. Every aspect of city life was to be rationalised and centralised into one great powerhouse of energy."⁷ The futurists understood the modern city as an efficient and dynamic communication network comprising roads, railways and telegraph lines.

In the Futurist city, all was in flux, or at least appeared to be. What they failed to recognise was that the increase in speed would lead to State regulations that control the flows of traffic. Speed theorist Paul Virilio argues that the bourgeoisie in the 20th century maintains its power and class status less through commerce and industry and more from "the strategic implantation that establishes the 'fixed domicile' as a social and monetary value."⁸ That is, while the masses are mesmerised by the speed of industrialisation, new technologies and sources of energy, the capitalist State (and later the Fascist State in Italy and Germany) is being cemented into place on the foundation of private property.

In the hands of the Futurists, the discourse of a utopian future driven by speed and technology becomes a historical mission to make all things functional. In the pursuit of maximum efficiency, the human being 'becomes part of the technological machine'. This is the point Heidegger made in his essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, where he warns that the logical outcome is that human beings become purely functional units, part of the "standing reserve"⁹. Humans are not using technology (as a tool) but an integral part of its discourse, caught up and towed along in the speed. Along similar lines, Walter Benjamin warned, "If the natural utilisation of productive forces is impeded by the property system, the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for unnatural utilisation, and this is found in war."¹⁰

Sun Tzu's dictum from *The Art of War*, "Speed is the essence of war", was not lost on the Futurists. In his first manifesto, Marinetti wrote, "We will glorify war- the world's only hygiene"¹¹. For the Italian Futurists, it was an easy transition from the avant-garde into the masses of troops in the First World War. For them, the beauty of speed was manifest in the beauty of war. War promised the full utilisation of new technologies and a faster passage to the future utopia. Benjamin wrote, in his turn to Fascism, Marinetti "expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense of perception that has been changed by technology."¹² War was the epitome of the concept of the masses as functional units. English Futurist sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska wrote from the front lines of World War One

¹THIS WAR IS A GREAT REMEDY. IN THE INDIVIDUAL IT KILLS ARROGANCE, SELF-ESTEEM, PRIDE. IT TAKES AWAY FROM THE MASSES NUMBERS UPON NUMBERS OF UNIMPORTANT UNITS, WHOSE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES BECOME NOXIOUS AS THE RECENT TRADE CRISES HAVE SHOWN US.^{œ13}

Many of the Futurist artists actively participated as volunteers in the war and some were injured or killed, among them the Italians Boccioni and Sant'Elia, and ironically, English sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska.

Inertia

The politics of technology seems little changed today. Much of the rhetoric of early avant-garde groups is still with us. The fusion of art, technology and life is still just around the corner and in the new digital world of the late 20th century, speed is again an omnipresent god. From computer technology to television to sport, speed's hypnotic effect is pervasive. The holy pursuit of speed through technology has again become a common sense, value-free model of thought. The evolution from analogue to digital technologies is believed to be the natural way of things. Again, the facade of technological objectivity covers the fact that the digital utopian future, far from being value-free, is a fantasy propped up by a rational, Euro-centric and masculine discourse, not unlike that of the Futurists.

The Futurist faith in mechanisation, technology and flight towards a utopian future were easily absorbed into Fascism after the First World War or later incorporated into the dynamism of capitalist or communist colonial expansions. With hindsight, we can see their brave new world was still a Euro-centric world propped up by colonialism. In our post-historical contemporary age, the legacy of their faith has been transformed to digital technology and the speed it promises. Even more so than mechanisation, information technology creates a mass of undifferentiated labour behind the facade of objectivity. Fantasies of a digital democracy provide an alibi for a future world rendered as digital data.

A fresh contemporary perspective on the new discourse of speed is the work of London-based contemporary artist David Noonan. Noonan's installations approach speed from the late 20th century where the virtual world of digital reality sets the pace. His references to the Futurists seem to be more of a critique of contemporary values than a homage to the art they created. Using videos and stills from fast-paced contemporary sports, Noonan closes in on the contemporary discourse of speed.

His 1994 video work, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* is named after Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni's sculpture of 1913 and also references Boccioni's painting of the same year, *Dynamism of a Cyclist*. Boccioni's version is a three dimensional sculpture depicting a human figure in motion, a barely discernable human figure in the process of becoming something else. Noonan's four minute video loop silently tracks a competition cyclist around a velodrome, a human figure as an inextricable part of a machine dedicated to speed.

In Noonan's videos, speed has been negativised or neutralised of competition or useful end. These are infinite races, loops of infinity without a winner. The Futurist project was the first attempt to subordinate the energy and intensity of the machine age

to the reasonable mind, to arrest speed in two or three dimensions. At the end of the 20th century, the limits of physicality have been reached, and are repeated in the negation of matter through speed. In Noonan's videos, speed is hypnotic to the point where the cyclist appears to be barely moving. He reaches the ultimate limit of speed - inertia.

Noonan's infinite races also focus on the mechanistic movements of technological bodies in space. The human body becomes part of a projectile, a machine of maximum efficiency and precision. Through training, discipline and control, the human body is 'improved'. With the streamlined continuity of body suits and helmets, human beings are not using machines as a tool but becoming machines. Smooth, clean surfaces minimise the risk of human error. The aim of these man-cycle machines is to overcome physical resistances - weather, wind, gravity, even physical being itself. Every facet of the race down to the continuous smooth skin of the velodrome echoes this pursuit. The human body is merely a functional unit in a speed machine dedicated to the economy of time.

The new economy of time at the end of the 20th century is also addressed in another of Noonan's cycling videos, *Omega Time*. Mechanical timekeeping devices, with their complex cogs and tiny screws become worn, they 'lose time'. Digital time promises to overcome the potential inaccuracies of the physical world by inching closer to the infinite present. Its virtual world of ones and zeros is the latest attempt to master the physical world through technology.

Noonan's latest installation head on at Karen Lovegrove Gallery featured videos and stills of *Thrust II* (1997), currently the fastest vehicle in the world. With its streamlined metal case, the audience presume there is a human body somewhere inside to drive the machine. In a video of *Thrust II* in action, it moves so quickly that the machine is barely visible. In the late 20th century, the mechanised world has reached limits beyond human perception. Both time and space have been eclipsed by speed.

The speed of the brave new digital world is slowed by Noonan's videos and stills and with the slowdown arise the questions so easily passed over in the hypnotic state. The Futurist's utopian future was being supported by European colonialism, patriarchy, a dynamic art always almost fused with technology, a human body as a functional part of the industrial machine, dreams of a universal culture... In the past ninety years we are certainly going faster but how far have we moved?

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