

After the Future

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Chapter 1. The Century that Trusted in the Future

As far as we think of the avant-garde as a conscious movement devoted to revolution in society, in communication, and in the relationship between society and communication, Futurism, namely Italian Futurism, can be considered as the avant-garde's first conscious declaration. The *Manifesto Futurista* [*Futurist Manifesto*] of 1909 is an act of faith in the future. I would argue that it is also the cultural and ideological inauguration of the history of the 20th century, *the century that trusted in the future*.

During the 20th century Futurism, both in its Italian and in its Russian form, became the leading force of *imagination* and of *project*, giving birth to the language of commercial advertising (especially in the Italian variation) and to the language of political agit-propaganda (in the Russian variation). The idea of the future is central in the ideology and in the energy of the 20th century, and in many ways it is mixed with the idea of *utopia*. Notwithstanding the horrors of the century, the Utopian imagination has never stopped to give new breath to the hope of a progressive future, until the high point of '68, when the *modern promise* was expected to be on the brink of fulfilment.

In the last three decades of the century the *utopian imagination* was slowly overturned, and has been replaced by the *dystopian imagination*. For many reasons the year 1977 can be seen as a turning point: this was the year when the punk movement exploded, whose cry – “No Future” – was a self-fulfilling prophecy that has slowly enveloped the world.

A *new utopia* appeared on the stage during the last decade of the century that trusted in the future: *cyberculture*, which has given way to the imagination of a global mind, hyper-connected and infinitely powerful. This *last utopia* ended in depression, after the sudden change of light that followed the 9/11 event, and it has finally produced a growing system of virtual life and actual death, of virtual knowledge and actual war. The artistic imagination, since that day, seems unable to escape the territory of fear and of despair. Will we ever find a path beyond the limits of the *Dystopian Kingdom*?

In this book I want to reconsider the cultural history of the century from this point of view: the mythology of the future. The future is not an obvious concept, but a cultural construction and projection. For the human of the Middle Ages, living in the sphere of a theological culture, perfection was placed in the past, in the time when God created the universe and humankind. Therefore, historic existence is the dimension of the Fall, abandonment and forgetting of the original perfection and unity.

The rise of the myth of the future is rooted in modern capitalism, in the experience of expansion of the economy and knowledge. The idea that the future will be better than the present is not a natural idea, but the imaginary effect of the peculiarity of the bourgeois production model. Since its beginning, since the discovery of the new continent, and the rewriting of the

maps of the world, modernity is defined by an act of amplification of the very limits of the world, and the peculiarity of capitalist economy resides exactly in the accumulation of the surplus value that results in the constant enhancement of the sphere of material goods and knowledge.

In the second part of the 19th century, and in the first part of the 20th, the myth of the future reached its peak, becoming something more than an implicit belief: a true faith, based on the concept of “progress”, the ideological translation of the reality of economic growth. Political action was reframed in the light of this faith in a progressive future. Liberalism and social democracy, nationalism and communism, and anarchism itself, all the different families of modern political theory share a common certainty: notwithstanding the darkness of the present, the future will be bright.

In this book I will try to develop the idea that the future is over. It is not a new idea, as you know: born with punk, the 1970s and '80s witnessed the beginning of the slow cancellation of the future. Now those bizarre predictions have become true. The idea that the future has disappeared is of course rather whimsical, as while I write these lines the future is not stopping to unfold.

But when I say “future” I am not referring to the direction of time. I am thinking, rather, of the psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization, reaching a peak in the years after the Second World War. Those expectations were shaped in the conceptual frameworks of an ever progressing development, albeit through different methodologies: the Hegelo-Marxist mythology of *Aufhebung* and instauration of the new totality of Communism; the bourgeois mythology of a linear development of welfare and democracy; the technocratic mythology of the all encompassing power of scientific knowledge, and so on.

My generation grew up in the high point of this mythological temporalization, and it is very difficult, maybe impossible, to get rid of them, and look at reality without these kind of cultural eyeglasses. I'll never be able to live in accordance with the new reality, no matter how evident, unmistakable, even dazzling the new reality of social planetary trends. These trends seem to be pointing toward the dissipation of the legacy of civilization, based on the philosophy of universal rights.

The right to life, to equal opportunities for all human beings, is daily denied and trampled on in the global landscape, and Europe is no exception. The first decade of the new century has marked the obliteration of the right to life for a growing number of people, even though economic growth has enhanced the amount of available wealth and widened the consumption of goods. A growing number of people are forced to leave their villages and towns because of war, environmental waste, and famine. They are rejected, marginalized, and simultaneously subjected to a new form of slave exploitation. The massive internment of migrant workers in detention centers disseminated all over the

European territory dispels the illusion that the “camp” has been wiped out from the world. Authoritarian racism is everywhere, in the laws of security voted by the parliaments of the countries of Europe, in the aggressiveness of the European white majority, but also in the ethnicization of social conflicts and in fundamentalist identification.

The future that my generation was expecting was based on the unspoken attainment that human beings will never again be treated as Jews were treated during their German nightmare. This assumption is proving to be misleading.

I want to rewind the past evolution of the future in order to understand when and why it was trampled and drowned.

Futurism and the Reversal of the Future

On February 20th 1909 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published the first *Futurist Manifesto*; in the same year Henry Ford put into operation the first assembly line in his automobile factory in Detroit. Both events can be considered as the inauguration of the century that trusted in the future. The assembly line is the technological system that best defines the age of industrial massification. Thanks to the assembly line the mass production of the automobile becomes possible and the mobilisation of social energies is submitted to the goal of the acceleration of labor’s productivity.

Acceleration, speed, cult of the machine – these are the values emphasized by the *Futurist Manifesto*. The text written by Marinetti^[1] is a hymn to the disrupting modernity that in those decades was changing the face of the world, especially in the industrialized countries. Italy was not one of them: having only recently reached national union, its economy was based on agriculture, and the Italian style of life and consumption was traditional and backward. Not by chance the Futurist movement surfaced in Italy – and in Russia. These two countries shared a common social situation: scant development of industrial production, marginality of the bourgeois class, reliance on the cultural and religious models of the past, attraction of foreign culture (especially French) for the urban intellectuals. This is the background of the Futurist explosion, both in Italy and in Russia, but we should not only see this movement as a reaction against national backwardness. On the contrary, it was the activator of an aesthetic energy which spread all over Europe during the following decades, and the artistic core of the enthusiastic belief that the future was going to be the fulfilment of great expectations in the field of politics, science, technology, and of new styles of life.

We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath ... a roaring motor car which seems

to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace. (*Futurist Manifesto*, Clause 4)

The Futurist Manifesto declared the aesthetic value of speed. The myth of speed sustained the whole edifice of the imaginary of modernity, and the reality of speed played a crucial role in the history of capital, whose development is based on the acceleration of labor time. Productivity in fact is the growth factor of the accretion of relative surplus value determined by the speed of the productive gesture and by the intensification of its rhythm.

We will sing of the great crowds agitated by work, pleasure and revolt; the multi-colored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals: the nocturnal vibration of the arsenals and the workshops beneath their violent electric moons: the gluttonous railway stations devouring smoking serpents; factories suspended from the clouds by the thread of their smoke; bridges with the leap of gymnasts flung across the diabolic cutlery of sunny rivers: adventurous steamers sniffing the horizon; great-breasted locomotives, puffing on the rails like enormous steel horses with long tubes for bridle, and the gliding flight of aeroplanes whose propeller sounds like the flapping of a flag and the applause of enthusiastic crowds. (*FM*, Clause 11)

The Manifesto asserted the aesthetic value of the machine. The machine par excellence is the speed machine, the car, the airplane, tools making possible the mobilisation of the social body. Marinetti dedicated a poem to the racing car:

To The Racing Car

Veeeeehemently god of a race of steel
Car drrrunken on space,
that paws the ground and trembles with anguish
seizing the bit with shrill teeth ...
Formidable Japanese monster,
with the eyes of a forge,
nourished on flame
and mineral oils,
eager for horizons and sidereal prey ...
I unchain your heart that pulsates diabolically,
I unchain your gigantic tires,
for the dance that you know how to dance
away through the white sheets of the whole world! ... (Marinetti 2004: 47)

For us, dwellers of the postmodern conurbation, driving back home from the

office, stuck and immovable in the traffic jam of rush hour, Marinetti's adoration of the car seems a little bit ludicrous. But the reality and concept of the machine have changed a hundred years after the *Futurist Manifesto*. Futurism exalted the machine as an external object, visible in the city landscape, but now the machine is inside us: we are no longer obsessed with the external machine; instead, the "info-machine" now intersects with the social nervous system, the "bio-machine" interacts with the genetic becoming of the human organism. Digital and bio-technologies have turned the external machine of iron and steel into the internalised and recombining machine of the bio-info era. The bio-info machine is no more separable from the body and the mind, because it is no more an external tool, but an internal transformer of the body and of the mind, a linguistic and cognitive enhancer. Now the nano-machine is mutating the human brain and the linguistic ability to produce and communicate. The Machine is us.

In the mechanical era the machine stood in front of the body, and changed human behaviour, enhancing their potency without changing their physical structure. The assembly line, for instance, although improving and increasing the productive power of laborers did not modify their physical organism nor introduce mutations inside their cognitive ability. Now the machine is no more in front of the body but inside it. Bodies and minds therefore cannot express and relate anymore without the technical support of the bio machine.

Because of this change political power has changed its nature. When the machine was external the State had to regulate the body and for this used the law. Agencies of repression were used in order to force the conscious organisms to submit to that rhythm without rebellion. Now the political domination is internalized and is undistinguishable from the machine itself. Not only the machine but also the machinic imagination undergoes a mutation during this passage. Marinetti conceived the machine in the modern way, like an external enhancer. In the bio-social age the machine is difference of information: not exteriority but linguistic modeling, logic and cognitive automatism, internal necessity.

A hundred years on since the publication of the *Futurist Manifesto*, speed too has been transferred from the realm of external machines to the information domain. Speed itself has been internalised. During the 20th century, the machine of speed accomplished the colonisation of global space; this was followed by the colonisation of the domain of time, of the mind and perception, so that the future collapsed. In the acceleration of psychic and cognitive rhythm is rooted the collapse of the future.

Thanks to the external machine the colonization of the space of the planet has been accomplished: transportation tools have made us reach every inch of the Earth, and have given us the possibility of knowing, marking, controlling and exploiting every single place. The machines have made it possible to displace fast, to penetrate the bowels of the Earth, to exploit the underground resources,

to occupy every visible spot with the products of technical reproduction. As long as the spatial colonization was still underway, as far as the external machine could go towards new territories, a future was conceivable, because the future is not only a dimension of time, but also a dimension of space. The future is the space that we do not yet know; we are yet to discover and exploit it. When every inch of the planet has been colonized, the colonization of the temporal dimension has began, i.e., the colonization of mind, of perception, of life. Thus began the century with no future.

The question of the relationship between an unlimited expansion of cyberspace and the limits of cyber time opens up here. Being the point of virtual intersection of the projections generated by countless issuers, cyberspace is unlimited and in a process of continuous expansion. Cybertime, which is the ability of social attention to process information in time, is organic, cultural and emotional, therefore it is everything but unlimited. Subjected to the infinite acceleration of the info-stimuli, the mind reacts with either panic or de-sensitisation. The concept of sensibility (and the different but related concept of sensitivity) are crucial here: sensitivity is the ability of the human senses to process information, and sensibility is the faculty that makes empathic understanding possible, the ability to comprehend what words cannot say, the power to interpret a continuum of non-discrete elements, non-verbal signs and the flows of empathy. This faculty, which enables humans to understand ambiguous messages in the context of relationships, might now be disappearing. We are witnessing now the development of a generation of human beings lacking competence in sensibility, the ability to empathically understand the other and decode signs that are not codified in a binary system. When the punks cried “No Future”, at the turning point of the year 1977, that cry seemed a paradox not to be taken too seriously. Actually, it was the announcement of something quite important: the perception of the future was changing. Future is not a natural dimension of the mind, rather it is a modality of perception and imagination, a feature of expectation and attention, and its modalities and features change with the changing of cultures. Futurism is the artistic movement that embodies and asserts the accomplished modernity of the future. The movement called Futurism announces what is most essential in the 20th century because this century is pervaded by a religious belief in the future. We do not believe in the future in the same way. Of course, we know that a time after the present is going to come, but we don't expect that this time will fulfill the promises of the present.

The Futurists – and the moderns in general – thought that the future is reliable and trustworthy. In the first part of the century Fascists and Communists and the supporters of Democracy held very different ideas, and followed divergent methods, but all of them shared the belief that the future will be bright, no matter how hard the present. Our post-futurist mood is based on the consciousness that the future is not going to be bright, or at least we doubt that

the future means progress.

Modernity started with the reversal of the theocratic vision of time as Fall and distancing from the City of God. Moderns are those who live time as the sphere of a progress towards perfection, or at least towards improvement, enrichment, and rightness. Since the turning point of the century that trusted in the future – and I like to place this turning point in the year 1977 – humankind has abandoned this illusion. The insurgents of '68 believed that they were fulfilling the Modern Hegelian Utopia of the becoming true of thought, the Marcusean fusion of reason and reality. By the integration of Reality and Reason (embedded in social knowledge, information and technology) turned history into a code-generated world. Terror and Code took over the social relationship and *utopia* went *dystopic*. The century that trusted in the future could be described as the systematic reversal of *utopia* into *dystopia*. Futurism chanted the utopia of Technique, Speed and Energy, but the result was Fascism in Italy and totalitarian communism in Russia.