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Futurismo in Guerra: The Aesthetics and Reception of 1940s "Aeropainting of War"

ABSTRACT

In its final phase (1940–44) Italian Futurism remained a vibrant and multi-faceted movement. However, its enduring Fascist sympathies throughout the dark years of World War II have proved a major obstacle to an objective appraisal of its achievements during this period, which have come to be associated almost exclusively with a genre known as *aeropittura di guerra*.

A late manifestation of the Futurist machine aesthetic and fascination with industrialised conflict, this 'aeropainting of war' is extremely problematic, ideologically speaking. Nevertheless, as an expression of the movement's belief that war was 'Futurism intensified' this tendency demands closer attention than it has hitherto received, despite its unpalatable glorification of violence. Examining the formal characteristics of such work, this paper challenges the habitual presentation of *aeropittura di guerra* as visually crude and unimaginative, subservient to the retrogressive aesthetics of a regime increasingly in thrall to the anti-modernist cultural policies pursued by its Nazi ally, and reveals its imagery to be much more varied and inventive than is often supposed. It also examines contemporary responses to this genre, and suggests that far from being marginalised and suppressed by Fascist ideologues, Futurism's unique ability to evoke the drama of aerial warfare did not go unrecognised — or unrewarded — by the political and cultural establishment of the day.

Introduction

The 1940s are undoubtedly the years most neglected by scholars of Futurism. Considered beyond redemption, morally speaking, due to the movement's obstinate support for Fascism in what was undoubtedly its darkest hour,¹ and perceived as aesthetically impoverished as a consequence of Futurism's apparent readiness to produce work serving an explicitly propagandising end, the period has been dismissed as 'an epilogue, and one of the most unsavoury kind',² characterised by art that was 'vulgar and inflammatory'.³

The basis for this appraisal would appear to be the notion that Futurism of the 1940s is synonymous with an artistic sub-genre that came to be known as *aeropittura di guerra* (aeropainting of war) at the beginning of that decade. Overtly bellicose, this celebrated Mussolini's catastrophic 'multi-front war'⁴ through aggressive imagery characterised by a

General note: all documents from the Fondo Tullio Crali and the Fondo Corrado Forlin — housed in the Archivio del '900 at the Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto — are identified by the letters 'Cra' and 'For', respectively. These are followed by numbers denoting the volume (or folder and sub-folder in the case of the Fondo Corrado Forlin) in which the document is located; an additional number identifies its position within that volume. I would like to thank all at the Archivio del '900 for their kind assistance in the course of writing this article; I am also grateful to Luca Gabrielli of the Museo dell'Aeronautica Gianni Caproni, Trento.

¹ On 10 June 1940 Italy declared war on England and France alongside Hitler's Nazi Germany, with which it had developed ever closer ties since the mid-1930s. Italy's war was disastrous from the beginning, and in the summer of 1943 Mussolini was deposed by his own colleagues and imprisoned. Having been rescued by the Germans, he was subsequently installed as the puppet leader of the so-called 'Republic of Salò', a brutal, squalid and divisive Nazi-controlled regime restricted to the north of Italy that collapsed in April 1945.

² Berghaus, 1996, p. 256.

³ Humphreys, 1999, p. 76.

⁴ Often used by the Futurist leader, F. T. Marinetti, to distinguish the conflict from the *Grande Guerra* of 1915–18 and the colonial *guerra veloce* prosecuted in Africa between October 1935 and May 1936. The phrase was

markedly figurative style. Such work was the focus of many exhibitions organised by the movement between 1940 and 1944, often in collaboration with governmental organisations and bodies such as the *Dopolavoro* and the Ministry of Aviation,⁵ as well as the subject of countless newspaper articles and lectures composed and delivered by Marinetti and other figures within the Futurist ranks. It also dominated the substantial number of works presented by the group at Italy's two most important national art showcases of these years: the 1942 Venice Biennale and the 1943 Rome Quadriennale.

In fact, such a reductive view fails to reflect the continuing diversity of a movement that also embraced the work of artists as singular as Osvaldo Licini and Wladimiro Tulli — the latter's delicate, childlike collages restoring a measure of lost innocence to the Futurist engagement with aviation imagery — as well as the geometric abstraction of painters such as Manlio Rho, Carla Badiali and Mario Radice, and the ideas of Rationalist architects including Giuseppe Terragni and Alberto Sartoris, all of whom found sanctuary in Futurism's broad church following the establishment of the *Gruppo futuristi primordiali Antonio Sant'Elia* in 1941.⁶ That the artists to be considered in this paper, such as Tullio Crali, Alfredo Ambrosi, Renato Di Bosso or Tato (Guglielmo Sansoni), represented only one tendency within Futurism during the 1940s is evident from contemporary press reviews of the group's exhibitions, common to many being the drawing of a distinction between the more accessible work of these painters and that of many other, unnamed, figures whose creations were considered wilfully bizarre and anarchic.⁷

Nevertheless, to denigrate the work of artists such as Ambrosi or Tato — or to question its Futurist credentials — on the basis that its greater figurative emphasis represents some kind of aesthetic lowest common denominator⁸ is, I believe, to do it a great disservice. It is also an inherently problematic and spurious position to adopt given the fact that, for all its programmatic statements, Futurism 'was not a formal problem'⁹ but an essentially spiritual one. Writing in a 1941 monograph on the artist Mario Menin, Luigi Scrivo touched on this issue, summarising the key qualities required of the ideal Futurist painter in the least prescriptive terms imaginable:

inventive capability, originality, swift intuition, sensitivity, emotional responsiveness to the new conquests of mechanical civilisation, patriotism, courage, optimism and passion ... Menin correctly understands Futurism ... as a movement in the broadest sense, affecting wide swathes of the populace, where each individual working in the sphere of poetry, literature and the arts can express himself *with the utmost freedom* provided that he possess at least some of the fundamental qualities noted above.¹⁰

intended to express the virility and dynamism of Italy's military campaign. Unwittingly, however, it also neatly summed up the hubris and chaos that was, in part, ultimately responsible for the nation's undoing.

⁵ For example, *Tato. Mostra personale di aeropitture futuriste di guerra*, Rome: OND Ministero Aeronautica, March 1941 and *Mostra d'arte aeronautica*, Rome: Galleria di Roma, June 1943.

⁶ Founded by Marinetti and Franco Ciliberti, this effectively constituted 'a defensive alliance ... against the attempt of the Fascist right wing to ape the *Entartete Kunst* operation of Nazism' (Crispoliti, 2010, p. 719; see also Salaris, 1992, pp. 265–6). Futurism's openness to those sharing its ambition of keeping the avant-garde flame alight under such difficult conditions was apparent at the Rome Quadriennale of 1939 and 1943 and the Venice Biennale of 1940 and 1942, where artists such as Rho and Radice, affiliated with the abstractionist milieu of the Como region, exhibited alongside the movement's 'official' members.

⁷ See the section 'Critical and Popular Fortunes', below.

⁸ See, for example, Viola, 2004, p. 156, who comments disdainfully on the 'neo-figurative style ... into which aeropainting degenerated' during the 1940s.

⁹ Apollonio, 1950, p. 55.

¹⁰ Scrivo, 1941, pp. 14–5. Italics are Scrivo's own (*liberissimamente*).

In fact, as I will illustrate, *aeropittura di guerra* remains a fascinating repository of Futurist imagery and ideas. Not only did it continue to explore and develop the movement's long-standing preoccupation with concepts such as simultaneity and the painting of 'states of mind', it often contained pronounced expressionist tendencies, reflecting important stylistic trends then gaining currency among some of the most significant artists of the younger generation.

To defend such imagery against the more damning charges of moral bankruptcy levelled at it for its complicity with a brutal regime that had allied itself with the even greater brutality of Nazism is, of course, an impossible task.¹¹ However, it is by no means either desirable or necessary to do so. One certainly need not condone an ideology in order to recognise its historical, social and cultural significance, to characterise its products, or to assess their critical reception, which are the aims of the present essay. In addition, art historians should be mindful of the fact that in many respects the phenomenon of *aeropittura di guerra* reflects not so much a *rupture* in Futurist thinking, but rather its fundamental *continuity* and, perhaps, the natural culmination of three decades during which nationalism, militarism and colonialism had been endlessly endorsed and celebrated by the movement.¹² Unable to deny Futurism's importance in the evolution of European modernism, art historians have proved themselves willing to accommodate the often extreme violence of its early proclamations to a degree that has been considered unnecessary with those dating from its later, less influential phases, which have been:

ignored out of a postwar desire to maintain modernism's moral edge, to avoid ambiguity, and to create viable and strict categories of collaboration and resistance. Nonetheless, Marinetti and the futurists cannot be divided into a 'good,' authentically modern, early period (pre-1914 and non-Fascist) and a 'bad' post-1922 period.¹³

In truth, there is little in 1940s Futurism that rivals the sheer inhumanity of Marinetti's 1914 observation that 'the shining, aggressive flight of a cannonball, red hot in the sun and speeded by fire, makes the sight of flayed and dying human flesh almost negligible',¹⁴ or the delight he expressed over having personally killed three Arab soldiers during Italy's 1911 colonial invasion of Libya.¹⁵

These prefatory comments in no way represent an attempt to exculpate 1940s Futurism of its own particular sins, but simply aim to highlight the essential consistency of Futurist ideology across its successive artistic phases. In so doing, my intention is to enable the art produced during this concluding period to be judged on something of a 'level playing field' with earlier expressions of those more unpalatable aspects of the Futurist sensibility, and thereby to introduce some small measure of objectivity into an assessment of this at times uncomfortably violent and troubling manifestation of war art.

¹¹ See, for example, Berghaus, 1996, pp. 255–7; Hensher, 2005; Jones, 2005.

¹² It is significant to note in this context that all of the slogans that appear on an invitation to a Futurist event organised in 1942 by the Udine GUF (*Gioventù Universitaria Fascista*, or Fascist University Group) were lifted word for word from Futurism's 1913 'Programma politico futurista' (Caruso, 1980, I, 45). Cf. 'Futurismo in guerra' (Cra.2.225) (Fig. 1).

¹³ Stone, 1998, p. 8.

¹⁴ Marinetti, 1914a, pp. 106–7.

¹⁵ Rainey, 2009, p. 12.



Fig. 1. 'Futurismo in guerra', 1942, Rovereto, Archivio del '900, Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Fondo Tullio Crali (Cra.2.225).

The Roots of *Aeropittura di Guerra*

Identified as a genre in its own right during the 1940s, *aeropittura di guerra* represented the confluence of two earlier Futurist concepts: *guerrapittura* and *aeropittura* (warpainting and aeropainting), which reflected the movement's twofold fascination with conflict and the machine. In his founding manifesto of Futurism of 1909, Marinetti famously declared war to be 'the world's only hygiene' for its ability to sweep away the past and provide a *tabula rasa* on which to construct a more modern and dynamic society. For Marinetti, the most extreme of nationalists, war also symbolised a means for Italy to assert herself politically on the world stage, parallel to his movement's relentless assaults on Europe's cultural centres. Throughout his life Marinetti held fast to this conviction, which quickly became a cornerstone of Futurist orthodoxy and an important area of agreement between his movement and nascent Fascism.¹⁶ Futurism's insistence upon the machine as the inspiration for its art and literature, on the other hand, was grounded in the belief that since modern technology provided the artist with a welter of unprecedented sensory impressions it would, as a consequence, necessitate the evolution of correspondingly innovative means of expression to evoke them. Its adherents' oft-repeated maxim was that 'there can be no modern painting without the starting point of an absolutely modern sensation'.¹⁷

Although other figures belonging to the movement's early phase were to produce examples of art inspired by war, it was Carlo Carrà who baptised such work *guerrapittura* in a volume

¹⁶ For an extended consideration of the complex relationship between Futurism and Fascism see Berghaus, 1996; for a more concise overview of the subject see Tisdall and Bozzolla, 1977, pp. 200–9.

¹⁷ Boccioni, 1912, p. 46.

of the same name published in 1915.¹⁸ However, as practised by Carrà the genre often fell somewhat short of its aggressive, propagandising mark,¹⁹ being characterised by imagery that was inappropriately delicate and dreamlike, and which in certain cases anticipated the Metaphysical style he was soon to pioneer with Giorgio de Chirico. This is particularly true of collages such as *Pursuit* (1915, Venice, Gianni Mattioli Collection on long-term loan to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection) and *On the Night of 20 January 1915 I Dreamed this Picture (Joffre's Angle of Penetration on the Marne Against 2 German Cubes)* (1915, private collection). Nevertheless, Carrà produced what are almost certainly the first *de facto* examples of *aeropittura di guerra* in works such as *Sky of War* (c.1915, whereabouts unknown) and *Aerial Reconnaissance – Sea – Moon + 2 Machine Guns + North-West Wind* (1914, private collection), the latter depicting a sketchily rendered biplane soaring above a landscape, across the surface of which is scattered a variety of letters, words and numbers — a device derived from the Cubist model (Fig. 2).

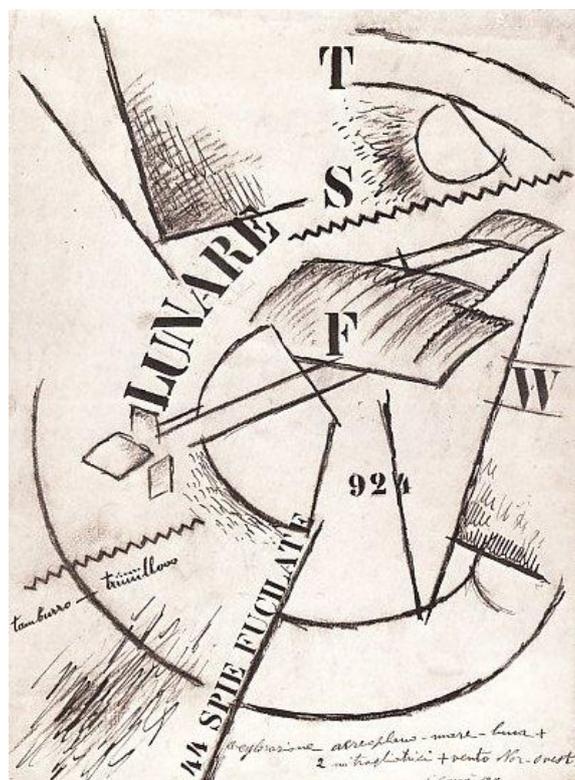


Fig. 2. Carlo Carrà, *Aerial Reconnaissance – Sea – Moon + 2 Machine Guns + North-west Wind*, 1914. Crayon and ink on card, 38 x 27 cm, private collection. (DACS 2012.)

These elements — ‘evocative of the calculations and vast areas involved in the war’²⁰ — also featured in the works of Gino Severini, who devoted an entire exhibition to the conflict at the Galerie Boutet de Monvel in Paris in 1916.²¹ Far more robust than those of Carrà, Severini’s works aspired to represent a ‘plastic synthesis of the idea “war”’ (the title of a number of

¹⁸ Ostensibly an artistic response to the First World War, in reality this was more an anthology of Carrà’s aesthetic statements produced during his years as a member of the movement, not all of which related directly to the subject at hand, such as his 1913 manifesto ‘The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells’.

¹⁹ After a lengthy period of neutrality, Italy entered the Great War in May 1915 to the delight of the interventionist lobby, of which the Futurist movement had been an active and highly vocal element.

²⁰ Martin, 1968, p. 198.

²¹ *Gino Severini. 1^{re} Exposition futuriste d’art plastique de la guerre et d’autres oeuvres antérieures*, 15 January – 1 February 1916.

works in the exhibition). However, as Marianne Martin has noted, in place of the abstract, formal analogy such an ambition suggests, the artist engaged with the eminently concrete elements of armed conflict, accumulating disparate pieces of military hardware in his images such as canons, anchors and aeroplane propellers in the same manner as he had quite literally jumbled together his 'memories of a journey' in an earlier work of that name (Fig. 3).²² In suspending the abstract direction he had been developing over the past two years²³ Severini would appear to have taken heed of advice given to him by Marinetti in a letter of autumn 1914:

It is necessary ... that Futurism not only collaborate directly in the splendour of this conflagration ... but also that it become the plastic expression of this Futurist hour. By this I mean an enlarged expression, not one limited to a small circle of connoisseurs; an expression so strong and synthetic that it will strike the imagination and the eye of all or almost all intelligent viewers ... Your paintings and studies will perhaps become less abstract, a little too realistic, a kind of advanced Post-Impressionism ... We therefore encourage you to interest yourself pictorially in the war and its repercussions in Paris. Try to live the war pictorially, studying it in all its marvellous mechanical forms (military trains, fortifications, the injured, ambulances, hospitals, processions etc.).²⁴

As we shall see, this impulse towards a greater realism was to find an echo in Futurist imagery produced during the Second World War.

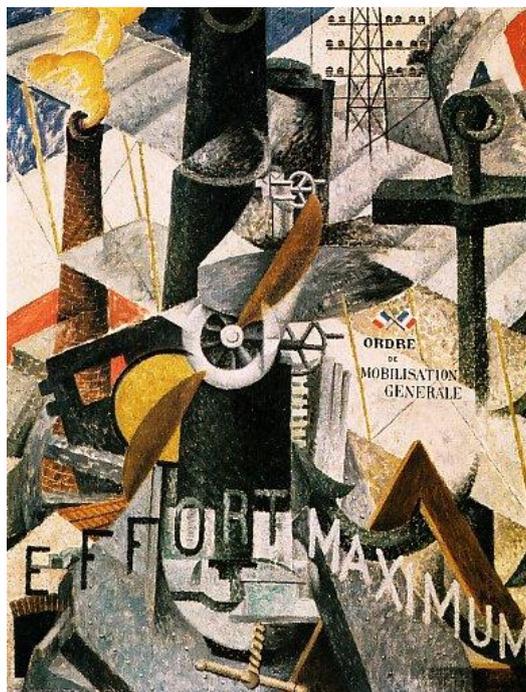


Fig. 3. Gino Severini, *Visual Synthesis of the Idea: 'War'*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 92.7 x 73 cm, New York, Museum of Modern Art. Bequest of Sylvia Slifka, inv. no. 24.2004. (ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2012.)

²² Martin, 1968, p. 198.

²³ Martin, 1968, pp. 144–7.

²⁴ Marinetti, 1914b, pp. 349–50.

By 1940 the genre of 'aeropainting' had dominated Futurist art for a decade although — as pointed out in the manifesto that set out its principles — flight had been a consistent preoccupation of the movement from its earliest days.²⁵ The intensified focus upon this specific aspect of modernity was in large part owed to the fact that the period 1925–35 had represented a golden decade for Italian aviation, witnessing Francesco de Pinedo's completion of his landmark 1925 return flight to Australia, and Mario de Bernardi's speed records and triumph in the Schneider Trophy between 1926 and 1928. These were also the years of Italo Balbo's famous transatlantic formation flights of 1930 and 1933, and of the (still unbeaten) speed record for a piston-engine seaplane set by Francesco Agello in 1934 (an achievement Marinetti commemorated in a poem).²⁶ That such an ostensibly restricted avenue of exploration had been able to sustain the interest of artists for so long might seem extraordinary. However, the scope for interpreting this subject proved to be vast, ranging from the representational imagery of artists such as Tato and Ambrosi to the abstraction of Enrico Prampolini, where biomorphic elements floating in limitless spaces vividly suggest liberation from the earth's gravitational pull and humanity's attainment of the weightless realms of the cosmos. Aeropainting, then, aspired not only to depict the visual novelties experienced in flight, such as vertiginous, topsy-turvy landscapes, but also to explore the metaphysical dimensions of finding oneself suspended high above the earth, through imagery aiming to evoke 'the transcendence of the spirit towards higher states of consciousness'.²⁷ As Crali stated in a text explaining the works he displayed at the 1940 Biennale:

To the obsolete conceptual and symbolic representations of divinity we prefer the direct and pure emotion of immense altitudes where silence and emptiness saturated with light relieve us of our everyday preoccupations and allow us to touch the threshold of the Heavens.²⁸

Looking back over ten years of aeropictorial research in his introduction to the Futurist section at the 1939 Quadriennale, Marinetti in fact identified four main permutations of aeropainting, distinguished by their cosmic, mystical, lyrical or documentary treatment of the theme.²⁹

Even in its more poetic manifestations, aeropainting had always implicitly celebrated the dynamism and technological prowess of Mussolini's Fascist Italy. After the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 — a conflict in which Marinetti fought, together with other members of the Futurist movement³⁰ — and the nation's subsequent intervention in the Spanish Civil War alongside Nazi Germany, *aeropittura* seamlessly morphed into explicit praise for the regime's brutal colonial and militaristic adventures. Both campaigns were addressed in the selection of works displayed at the 1938 Venice Biennale by Marinetti's troupe of *aeropittori d'Africa e Spagna*. Although Futurist artists had continued to create works exploring the theme of flight in a vaguely military context throughout the inter-war period (Fig. 4) it is with

²⁵ Balla, 1929.

²⁶ 'L'aeropoema di Agello: 700 all'ora'. The poem appears (with English translation) in Bohn, 2005, pp. 14–7. In the context of this essay it is interesting to note that Italy had also been a pioneer in the military application of aviation. On 23 October 1911 Captain Carlo Piazza completed the first aerial reconnaissance mission when he flew over Turkish lines during the Italo-Turkish War. Just over a week later, on 1 November, Second Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti had the distinctly dubious honour of being the first pilot to drop bombs from an aeroplane during the same conflict.

²⁷ Humphreys, 1999, p. 73.

²⁸ Crali, 1941, p. 5.

²⁹ Marinetti, 1939.

³⁰ See *Stile Futurista*, 1935, for a list of other *poeti e artisti futuristi volontari in Africa Orientale*.

the images created in response to political developments during the mid-1930s — when representatives of the figurative wing of aeropainting started to come to the fore, chronicling specific military operations in their works (Fig. 5) — that the aesthetics of a future *aeropittura di guerra* clearly began to emerge for the first time. However, it was only upon Italy's involvement in the Second World War that the genre established itself as *the* dominant trend within Futurist art, as mechanised conflict once again became the overriding muse of the movement's painters.³¹



Fig. 4. Tullio Crali, *Nocturnal Bombardment*, 1929–30. Medium, dimensions and whereabouts unknown.



Fig. 5. Alfredo Ambrosi, *Bombardment in East Africa ('La Disperata' Squadron)*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm, Trento, Museo dell'Aeronautica Gianni Caproni.

³¹ In the literary sphere, a number of Futurist poets produced volumes of *aeropoesia di guerra* around this time, such as Ennio De Concini (*Aeropoesie futuriste di bombardamenti*, Rome: Edizioni Futuriste di 'Poesia', 1941) and Piero Bellanova (*Bombardata Napoli canta*, Rome: Edizioni Futuriste di 'Poesia', 1943).

Stylistic Traits and Characteristics

Broadly speaking, then, *aeropittura di guerra* married overtly militaristic imagery depicting scenes from the various theatres of the Second World War to a formal vocabulary containing a greater figurative dimension than that of any other Futurist art since the very early days of the movement, prior to its adherents' encounter with Cubism in late 1911. Stylistically it corresponded most closely to that aeropictorial tendency identified by Marinetti in his aforementioned text of 1939 as 'a synthetic documentary dynamic aeropainting of landscapes and cityscapes seen from aloft and at speed'.³² Significantly, in that text Marinetti placed this tendency as the last of his four categories; however, in his essay for the 1943 Quadriennale catalogue he inverted the order, thereby giving greater prominence and prestige to the figurative approach.³³

That 'realism' constituted the dominant stylistic trait of this genre has frequently been accounted for in the context of Futurism's desire to appeal to the Fascist regime's increasingly conservative tastes at this time (a direct consequence of Italy's ever-closer relationship with Nazi Germany following the establishment of the Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936) in line with the movement's long-standing aspiration to become the official state art of Fascism. To be sure, there is a degree of truth to this image of *aeropittura di guerra*, which was most certainly conceived of as propaganda and, consequently, required to be sufficiently palatable for mass consumption, stylistically-speaking. If, for instance, one compares two works illustrated on facing pages of the 1942 Venice Biennale catalogue — Ambrosi's *Men and Machines of War* (c. 1942, whereabouts unknown) and a non-Futurist painting by Armando Tonello entitled *Infantry Patrol* (c. 1942, whereabouts unknown) (Fig. 6) — there is little but the merest nod to simultaneity in the former to distinguish it from Tonello's fundamentally naturalistic depiction of soldiers in action.



Fig. 6. (Left) Alfredo Ambrosi, *Men and Machines of War*, c. 1942. Medium, dimensions and whereabouts unknown. (Right) Armando Tonello, *Infantry Patrol*, c. 1942. Medium, dimensions and whereabouts unknown.

³² Marinetti, 1939.

³³ Marinetti, 1943, p. 790. This was also the case in his introduction to the catalogue of the 1942 exhibition '6 *aeropittori futuristi di guerra. Ambrosi – Crali – Di Bosso – Dottori – Prampolini – Tato*'.

Yet one must be careful not to overstate the case. As during the 1914–18 conflict, the greater realism characterising this genre also reflected the Futurists' fascination with the sheer overwhelming spectacle of warfare and those 'marvellous mechanical forms' commended to Severini by Marinetti in his aforementioned letter. Moreover, it is a rarely acknowledged fact that the figurative vocabulary employed by the key practitioners of *aeropittura di guerra* was in fact far from conventional — and by no means 'photographic' — in nature, often incorporating multiple perspectives and the fluid extension of forms in space in order to convey the plunging, vertiginous sensations experienced by pilots or parachutists (Fig. 7). Such imagery was also shot through with pronounced expressionist overtones and aggressive brushwork that reflected the violence of the subject matter and imbued the work with its own, eminently painterly, brand of dynamism. Both traits distance it from the somewhat bland, documentary realism traditionally associated with the genre of war art and typified by the imagery of many painters working under the aegis of the British War Artists Advisory Committee around the same time, such as Richard Eurich or Laura Knight. Certainly, in terms of kitsch there is nothing in the repertoire of artists such as Crali, Ambrosi or Tato to rival the paintings of figures such as Thomas Monnington (Fig. 8).



Fig. 7. Tullio Crali, *Space-speed (Parachutist)*, 1944–9. Oil on canvas, 130 x 154 cm, Rovereto, Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, inv. no. MART 363.

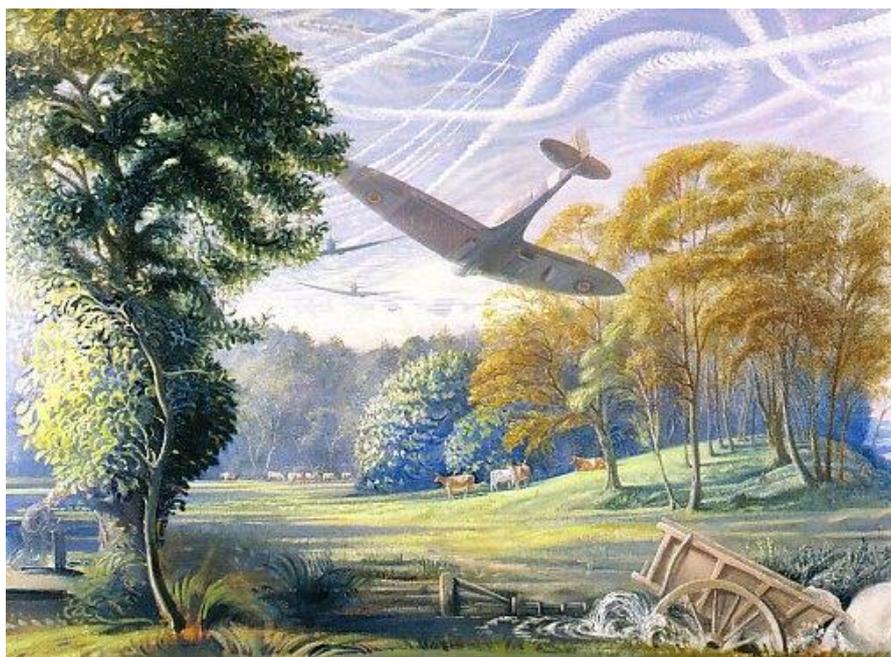


Fig. 8. Thomas Monnington, *Southern England, 1944. Spitfires Attacking Flying-Bombs*, 1944. Oil on canvas, 105.4 x 143.3 cm, London, Imperial War Museum, inv. no. Art.IWM Art LD 4589.

In fact, stylistically speaking, the work of artists such as Tato or Sante Monachesi is not dissimilar to that of painters such as Mario Mafai, Renato Guttuso or Bruno Cassinari (Fig. 9) — rising stars of the *Corrente* movement, whose emotionally-charged brand of realism began to emerge as one of the most vital stylistic trends in Italian art around 1938, likewise eschewing ‘the evasiveness of both pure formalism and mere naturalistic representation’.³⁴ Marinetti had in fact been at pains to highlight the ways in which the work of Tato and Ambrosi diverged from unalloyed realism in his catalogue essay for the 1938 Venice Biennale, emphasising how it was ‘embellished by [the] caprice and imagination’ of the painters.³⁵ In a text of 1940 he stressed the way in which Crali’s works likewise aspired to poetry rather than mere ‘documentation’, being characterised not by pedestrian figuration but rather by a ‘lyrical and spatial *transfiguration* achieved by a brush which becomes intoxicated painting the sky’.³⁶

³⁴ Vivarelli, 1989, p. 185. It is true that the work of Guttuso and Mafai was treated with scorn in Di Bosso and Ambrosi’s polemical 1942 volume *Eroi macchine ali contro nature morte*. However, it is also significant to note that such artists were pilloried for their subject matter (the still life), rather than their pictorial vocabularies. That Futurist artists knew, and possibly admired, the work of painters such as Mafai is also suggested by the fact that one of the key *aeropittori di guerra*, Sante Monachesi, exhibited alongside this artist (and Giorgio de Chirico) in an exhibition at Rome’s San Bernardo Gallery as early as March 1945.

³⁵ Marinetti, 1938.

³⁶ Marinetti, 1940a. My italics.

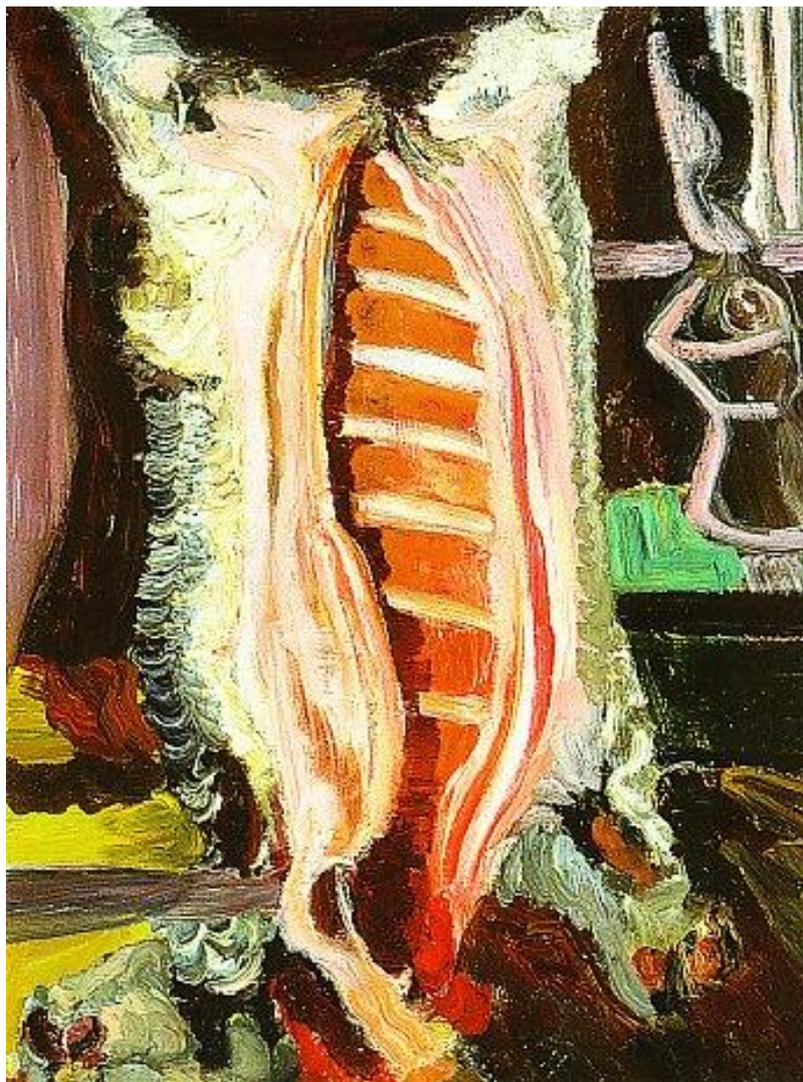


Fig. 9. Bruno Cassinari, *Butchered Calf*, 1941. Oil on canvas, 87 x 63 cm, Florence, Musei Civici Fiorentini. (Raccolta Alberto Della Ragione.)

Other artists, such as Angelo Caviglioni, pushed these aspects of their work much further. Caviglioni's 1941 painting of an *Aero-Naval Battle* (Bologna, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio) is an expressionist *tour-de-force* that verges on outright abstraction. At the centre of the image the prow of a battleship, guns blazing, is almost lost amidst clashing force lines and radiating waves of energy.

Such expressionist and abstract elements were actively encouraged in a programmatic statement of 1940 entitled 'The Aeropainting of Bombardments', which was signed by Marinetti but inspired by Monachesi's images depicting the carpet-bombing of London and other unidentified enemy cities and ports.³⁷ Alongside its stated purpose of inspiring works that would be a 'propagandising glorification of heroic patriotism', this text suggested a number of formal solutions that artists might employ in order to convey the visual pyrotechnics of aerial warfare — first and foremost being the use of a 'terrifying contrast of forms and colours'. The rendering of 'smoke and its asphyxiating bitterness' was, for instance, to be achieved by means of 'forms resembling oak trees pines mushrooms canopies

³⁷ Marinetti, 1940c.

ramifications and long-tentacled octopi', whilst the rumble of explosions might be evoked by pictorial elements recalling 'breasts blocks jostling porcupines [and] water-skins'. The text also called for the incorporation of numerals into the image to provide 'clarification [of the] distances proportions quantities [and] weights' represented in the work: a device which had earlier been a feature of *guerrapittura* and the war art of Severini, as we have seen.

This *aeropittura dei bombardamenti* can be closely related to Marinetti's slightly earlier manifesto entitled 'New Aesthetic of War', a text published on the eve of Italy's ill-timed and disastrous invasion of Greece in October 1940.³⁸ The manifesto opens with a long, rhapsodic evocation of mechanised conflict ('O my imagination dances with the tri-motors intoxicated with tearing the roofs off houses like children with their exercise books') that reads like the fulfilment of an earlier 'visionary' essay by the Futurist leader entitled 'Electrical War'.³⁹ A second section comprises eleven programmatic points that specify the character of this new aesthetic. Mario Maritano has observed that among the many Futurist ideas 'revisited and clarified' in this text, one distinctive point stands out: a greater focus upon the mechanical aspect of warfare.

The indications of this new manifesto are clear: the exaltation of war in general gives way to a glorification of the war machine as the true protagonist of the new conflict. ... Accordingly, leaving unchanged the substance of his preceding statements in favour of war, Marinetti simply declares that the true protagonists have changed, and that artists must therefore adapt their work to this new perspective, something requiring no great effort, merely the substitution of the figure of the hero — or better, the superman — of recent Futurist work, with machines of war.⁴⁰

However, in reality Marinetti's emphasis upon the mechanical rather than the human element of conflict was no real novelty either. The desire to overturn 'the traditional narrative proportions ... according to which a battle wound would have a greatly exaggerated importance in respect to the instruments of destruction' had long been an objective of the Futurist programme.⁴¹ Rather, it is the context in which these machines appear — the urban landscape rather than the battlefield — that represents the real shift in emphasis here. The truly novel dimension of this 'new aesthetic', then, was that which distinguished the conflict itself: the concept of 'total war' in the sense of a conflict without fronts, where not only soldiers but civilians ('children, the elderly, the injured and the sick') were considered legitimate targets.⁴² *Aeropittura dei bombardamenti* represents the most emblematic and distinctive expression of 1940s *aeropittura di guerra*, no longer concerned with the heroic dogfight but with the meting out of indiscriminate carnage from the skies.

1942 was an important year in the public presentation of *aeropittura di guerra*, seeing several Futurists exhibit at the Venice Biennale as official war artists.⁴³ It also constituted a major

³⁸ Marinetti, 1940b.

³⁹ Marinetti, 1911–5.

⁴⁰ Maritano, 1993, p. 115.

⁴¹ Marinetti, 1914a, p. 106.

⁴² Marinetti's recognition of the terrible suffering inflicted by war in this text sits uneasily with his continued assertion that it constituted the world's only hygiene. The manifesto also addressed the notion of 'total war' in the sense of the full-scale mobilisation of a nation's social and economic resources in the service of the war effort, Marinetti recognising the important contribution of Italy's industrialists and factory workers.

⁴³ Ambrosi, Giovanni Chetoffi, Crali, Di Bosso and Verossi (Albino Siviero).

element of the selection of works put together for the Futurist pavilion by Marinetti who, shortly thereafter, departed for military service in the Soviet Union despite his ill health.⁴⁴ Finally, towards the end of the year an exhibition of *6 aeropittori futuristi di guerra* was organised at Rome's Galleria San Marco, which brought together perhaps the most representative and significant artists of this concluding Futurist phase: Ambrosi, Crali, Di Bosso, Gerardo Dottori, Prampolini and Tato.

Of these, Prampolini's work was undoubtedly the least reflective of the genre's engagement with contemporary events and broadly representational vocabulary, focussing instead on cosmic themes and more eternal notions such as the latent energy and metamorphic potential of matter. Indeed, in his introduction to the catalogue of a 1941 exhibition, Prampolini clearly distanced his work from any propagandising intent, claiming 'every contact with contingent reality has been excluded; the inspiration of the artist is directed toward the extreme latitudes of the introspective world'.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Prampolini did make the occasional sally into such territory through images tempered with a far greater figurative dimension, such as the large *Simultaneous Aeroportrait of Italo Balbo* (1940, Genoa, Wolfson Collection), a work commemorating the Fascist aviator and Governor of Libya, shot down by friendly fire over Tobruk in June 1940. The imagery of the Umbrian artist Dottori likewise tended strongly toward the transcendental, having been identified by Marinetti as belonging to that category of aeropainting defined as 'transfiguring, lyrical [and] spatial'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he occasionally incorporated military imagery into his otherwise meditative, rolling landscapes, as in his 1941 depiction of aeroplanes duelling high above the Bay of Naples entitled *Inferno of Battle in the Paradise of the Gulf* (Milan, private collection).

Altogether more emblematic of the genre was the imagery of Ambrosi, Crali, Di Bosso and Tato. Of these, Tato's work reveals the greatest stylistic shift in comparison with his earlier imagery. Having joined the Futurist movement in 1919 he quickly proved himself adept at working across a range of media and disciplines including graphic design, photography, painting and ceramics. An early and enthusiastic practitioner of *aeropittura*, Tato brought his bold figurative style to the genre. Although always exhibiting a tendency to be somewhat fluid, this characteristic was greatly exaggerated in his works of the 1940s, which are aggressively physical to an unprecedented degree, the artist applying paint in rapid, gestural brushstrokes and oppressively sombre, dark tones (Fig. 10). In other respects, too, Tato's works depart from straightforward realism: his images of bombed cities are in no way topographically accurate records of military campaigns, but rather fantastical re-imaginings of real-life episodes in which geographical exactness is sacrificed for the sake of greater dramatic impact. A case in point is his *Aeropainting of London under Bombardment* (c. 1942, whereabouts unknown), in which a drastically simplified depiction of Tower Bridge leads the viewer's eye across an improbably vast River Thames to the opposite bank, where bombs rain down from aeroplanes vainly sought by searchlights in the foreground.

⁴⁴ The Biennale opened on 21 June; Marinetti left for the Soviet Union from Verona on 27 July, returning in November as the cold was starting to become intense. For an account of Marinetti's time at the Front see Agnese, 1990, pp. 284–94 and D'Ambrosio, 1999.

⁴⁵ Prampolini, 1941.

⁴⁶ Marinetti, 1939.



Fig. 10. Tato, *Italian Torpedo-bomber in Pursuit of a Torpedo-boat*, 1941. Oil on canvas, 49 x 62 cm, Rome, private collection.

It is interesting that Lawrence Alloway should have identified a relationship between the iconography of Prampolini and the war paintings of Paul Nash,⁴⁷ for the work of the latter also has a certain affinity with that of Tato. This is particularly apparent if one compares Nash's celebrated *Battle of Britain* (London, Imperial War Museum) with the Italian artist's *Aerial Combat in Norwegian Skies* (Trento, Museo dell'Aeronautica Gianni Caproni) (Figs 11, 12). Both dating from 1941, not only do these works address a similar theme, they also possess marked compositional parallels: the lower third of each work depicts a watery landscape (in the former, the English Channel; in the latter, a Scandinavian fjord), while the central zone is marked by a sunset glowing in tones of peach and cobalt blue. In the upper tier aeroplanes vie for dominance over one another, while those that have been hit plummet to the ground, trailing black plumes of smoke. Neither work is a documentarily exact rendering of the event depicted, and both were consciously created and displayed as works of propaganda. And yet for all their similarities the fate of the two works could not have been more different: while Nash's painting is universally acclaimed as a masterpiece,⁴⁸ Tato's has been all but forgotten in an apparently clear case of (art) history being written by the victors.

⁴⁷ Alloway, 1968, p. 116.

⁴⁸ Along with his 1944 work *Battle of Germany* (London, Imperial War Museum), celebrating the missions of Bomber Command.

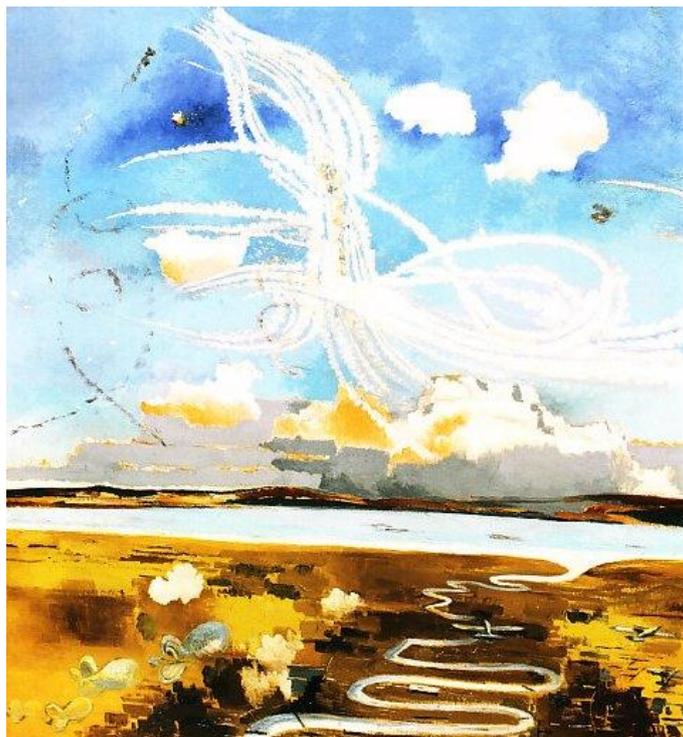


Fig. 11. Paul Nash, *Battle of Britain*, 1941. Oil on canvas, 122.6 x 183.5 cm, London, Imperial War Museum, inv. no. Art.IWM Art LD 1550.

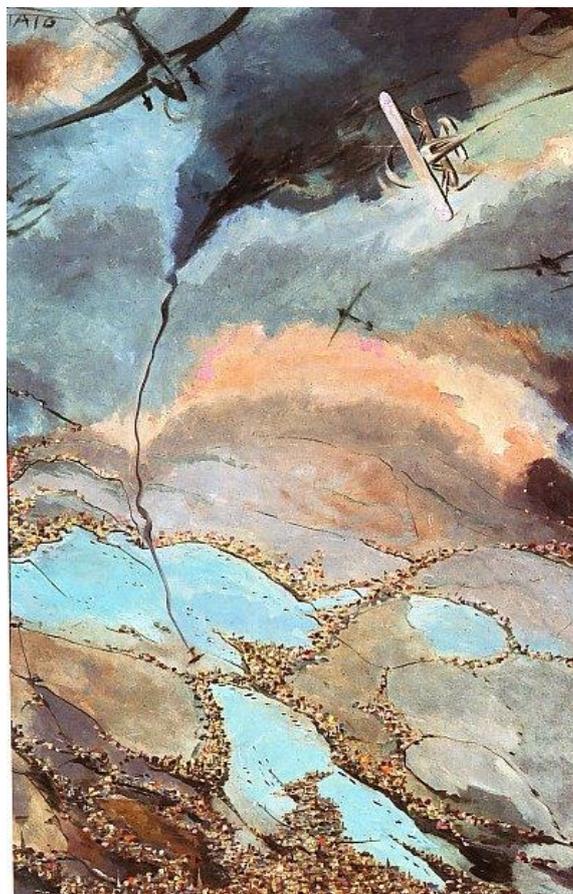


Fig. 12. Tato, *Aerial Combat in Norwegian Skies*, c. 1941. Oil on canvas, 150.5 x 99.5 cm, Trento, Museo dell'Aeronautica Gianni Caproni.

The work of the remaining artists changed less as a result of their engagement with this new theme, simply being reoriented along more aggressive lines in terms of its subject matter. However, the fact that Ambrosi, Crali and Di Bosso all experienced military flights at first hand endows their work with a strong dramatic charge, and may also account for the fact that where Tato's imagery is primarily *of* aeroplanes⁴⁹ the works of these painters more often tend to be images *from* aeroplanes, incorporating details of the cockpit or fuselage. A little less forceful and dynamic in terms of his handling of paint, Ambrosi's brighter, more vibrant palette also contrasts with Tato's dark images of annihilation. However, despite the many 'aeroportraits'⁵⁰ one comes across in his oeuvre, Ambrosi revealed a similar emphasis upon the machine in his aeropaintings of war — although this perhaps had less to do with an adherence to Marinetti's *nuova estetica della guerra* than with the fact that one of his most important patrons was the aviation giant Gianni Caproni (Fig. 13).⁵¹

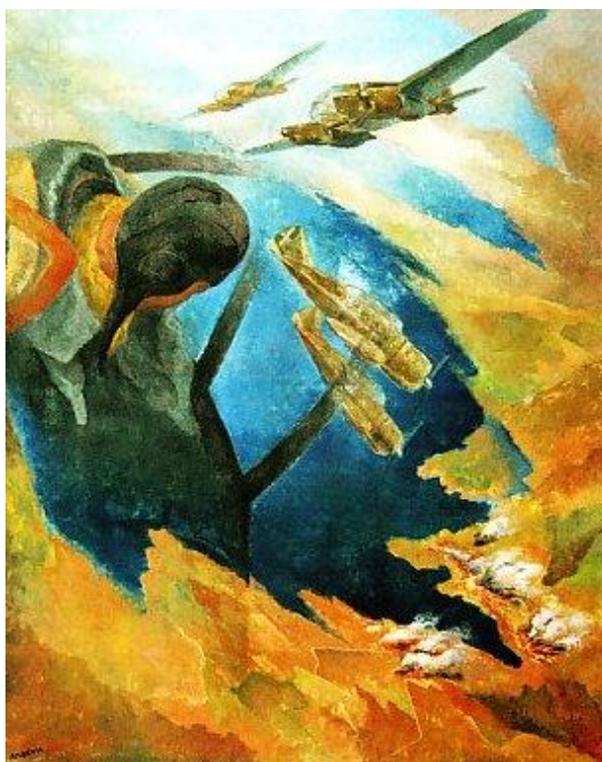


Fig. 13. Alfredo Ambrosi, *Attack with Caproni Aeroplane*, c. 1942. Oil on canvas, 75.5 x 99.8 cm, Trento, Museo dell' Aeronautica Gianni Caproni.

Of all the practitioners of Futurist *aeropittura di guerra* Tullio Crali achieved perhaps the greatest popular and critical consensus during the 1940s. Having joined the Futurist movement in 1929, it was initially Prampolini's semi-abstract vocabulary of sinuous lines and metallic tones that exerted the strongest influence on his work. However, by the early

⁴⁹ This quality of Tato's work was noted by Marinetti when he observed how 'Tato endows his flying machines with a range of different personalities each one with its own sense of elegance impetuosity arrogance delicacy' (Marinetti, 1941, p. 751).

⁵⁰ Yet another Futurist genre, in which the faces of the artist's sitter were superimposed upon images of cloud-strewn skies. Ambrosi had in fact been a society portraitist earlier in his career.

⁵¹ Caproni aircraft feature prominently in Ambrosi's imagery. By contrast, Tato and Monachesi often focussed (somewhat unpatriotically) on menacing images of German Stukas and Messerschmitts at the very moment of delivering their payloads.

1930s Crali had developed his own highly individual language, creating thrilling imagery that, whilst firmly anchored in the recognisable world of clouds, wings and propellers, consistently subverted any conventional notions of realism by means of the most extraordinary compositional complexities, contortions and simultaneous viewpoints. More than those of any other artist, Crali's war scenes fulfilled the early Futurist promise to 'put the spectator at the centre of the picture', drawing the viewer in emotionally through their sheer drama and intensity, as well 'spatially' by recourse to a range of judicious compositional devices. For instance, having successfully completed his mission, the protagonist of *Illuminations of War* (1942, whereabouts unknown) (Fig. 14) casts a tense glance in our direction as if turning to his co-pilot, thereby directly engaging the viewer's gaze. In another dynamic image entitled *Intercepting English Torpedo-Bombers* (1942, Rome, private collection) (Fig. 15), the finger poised above the trigger on the control stick could well be our own.



Fig. 14. Tullio Crali, *Illuminations of War*, 1942. Medium, dimensions and whereabouts unknown.



Fig. 15. Tullio Crali, *Intercepting English Torpedo-bombers*, 1942. Oil on board, 68 x 79 cm, Rome, private collection.

Critical and Popular Fortunes

The years 1937–39 had proved extremely difficult for Marinetti's movement — the aesthetic pluralism that had marked Fascism's cultural policies throughout the first decade of the regime having given way to a climate that was far more hostile to the avant-garde. Enthusiastic about Hitler's attacks against 'degenerate' art, and eager to see the prevailing *laissez faire* policy toward culture renounced, journalists and politicians such as Stefano Tuscano, Telesio Interlandi and Roberto Farinacci waged war against modernist tendencies through journals and newspapers such as *Il perseo*, *Quadrivio*, *Il tevere* and *Il regime fascista*.⁵² In terms of Futurism's fate, it has been asserted that this 'anti-modernist campaign ... brought to an end a movement that had been gagged for a while'.⁵³ However, whilst the influence of the conservative wing of Fascism increased dramatically at this time, its crusade against the avant-garde did not lead to tangible results, largely due to Marinetti's status in Italian cultural life and continued closeness to Mussolini. As Marla Stone has noted:

Futurism's protected status continued throughout the Fascist era. Even after National Socialist antimodernism and the Nazi aesthetic purges influenced Fascist cultural policy, the futurists and Marinetti remained central players in state-sponsored culture.⁵⁴

Indeed, far from being ostracised, Futurism would enjoy a not inconsiderable degree of official support during this concluding phase. This was manifested in a variety of ways, including Mussolini's provision of an unsolicited monthly stipend of 15,000 lire to Marinetti to assist with his movement's running costs (1941–43),⁵⁵ the aforementioned involvement of Futurist painters in official war art programmes (1942) and the institution of two prizes for Futurist painting and architecture worth a total of 100,000 lire administered and awarded by the Italian Royal Academy (1943), of which Marinetti remained an important member.⁵⁶ Fascist *gerarch*i contributed to Futurist publications,⁵⁷ while the press also gave its support in generally positive reviews of Futurist exhibitions. As Stone has observed, 'the fact that the press was government controlled or monitored means that even art reviews must be read through the lens of official influence'.⁵⁸

Crali's solo exhibition of fourteen major aeropaintings at the 1940 Venice Biennale, which received widespread critical and popular acclaim, is a good place to begin considering the reasons for this improvement in the fortunes of the Futurist movement at this time. A review of the show by the art historian Remigio Marini expressed sentiments typical of many reactions to the works on display:

I can say with complete sincerity that among the many things that I do not admire, and which my constitution will never allow me to admire in this aeroexhibition ... I

⁵² See Stone, 1998, pp. 180–1; Berghaus, 1996, pp. 248–55.

⁵³ Berghaus, 1996, p. 255.

⁵⁴ Stone, 1998, p. 52. Stone also recalls how 'Marinetti persuaded Mussolini to deny entrance into Italy to a traveling Nazi show of "degenerate art," which included futurism', concluding that 'the pro-Nazi rights ... campaign in Fascist Italy failed' (p. 193).

⁵⁵ Agnese, 1990, p. 284; pp. 338–9, n. 98.

⁵⁶ Viola, 2004, pp. 158–9.

⁵⁷ Both the Minister for Popular Culture (Alessandro Pavolini) and the Secretary of the National Fascist Party (Adelchi Serena) contributed to the 1941 Futurist volume *Antinglese*.

⁵⁸ Stone, 1998, p. 16.

liked the blue-white fantasies of Crali very much: I find that in these paintings there is not simply eccentricity ... (something that I would not dare to assert in relation to many of his fellow believers) but genuine feeling and artistic value ... A clarity of technique, a feeling for the dramatic and an ability to convey a sense of unlimited space are the qualities of an artist of very great ingenuity whose approach promises an art that is less programmatic and more complete.⁵⁹

Visually compelling and psychologically rich, here was a body of work suggesting even to hostile critics such as Marini that within Futurism there existed artists able, and willing, to bridge the gap between the intellectual elite and the masses. As another critic observed, writing in the journal *Vedetta fascista*:

This year, then, the Futurist exhibition organised by Marinetti merits genuine praise. It does not present eccentric works of painting or sculpture, but true works of art. It is a deeply-rooted conviction that by Futurist art one means something deliberately crazy and incoherent, but the works exhibited here prove this not to be the case. In fact, Tullio Crali's paintings are true masterpieces of dynamism ... and of the clear communication of ideas between artist and observer⁶⁰

Whilst such reviews betray a depressingly stubborn resistance to the more formally challenging aspects of Futurist imagery at this time — such as that of artists like Prampolini — they at least reveal that the movement had not lost its old ability to *épater le bourgeois*. Having said that, the fact that Crali's works proved acceptable to a wider audience should not be taken as an indication of his renunciation of Futurist principles, to which he remained firmly committed throughout his life.⁶¹

The 1940 Biennale opened on 18 May, that is, less than one month before Italy abandoned its euphemistic stance of 'non-belligerence' and entered the Second World War, embarking upon a new phase of its history in which the expansionist objectives of an aggressively nationalistic regime were once more pursued by means of mechanised warfare. Accordingly, it is plausible to account for the positive noises being made about the work of Crali at this specific time in terms of an emerging awareness that here was an art perhaps better equipped than any other to capture this dramatic moment in the life of the nation.

It would certainly appear that the regime sat up and took note of the positive reviews this exhibition garnered, perceiving the potential not only of Crali but also of other aeropainters for enthusing the population about the looming conflict. At the following Biennale formally-commissioned works of war art were displayed in the Air Force pavilion, housed in the vacant exhibition space previously reserved for the work of French artists. These images were the fruits of impressions received by the painters while accompanying pilots on combat and reconnaissance missions — an approach consistent with Futurist theory, according to which first-hand experience of flight was an indispensable condition for creating authentic works of aeropainting. It was in these terms that Crali later rationalised his decision to take part in the project, framing the experience merely as an indispensable opportunity for him and his fellow Futurists to gather new material for their work, insisting that 'our hands are stained only with colour'.⁶² 'Today we are still seen as warmongers, as criminals almost', he later lamented,

⁵⁹ Marini, 1941.

⁶⁰ Lotti, 1940.

⁶¹ Crali, 1994b.

⁶² Crali, 1994a, p. 11.

'because of our enthusiastic acceptance of that invitation, nobody seeming to notice that between the "still life" and the "aeroplane" it was the latter that excited us'.⁶³ Unlike their British counterparts, who were by and large shielded from peril,⁶⁴ the Futurists would often find themselves in the thick of the action, with the aeroplanes they were travelling in engaged in dogfights. Di Bosso later recalled:

In 1942 Ambrosi and I received an invitation from the Ministry of Propaganda. I was not a member of the forces. I took off in a flying-suit, but wearing civilian clothes, aboard an 'S 79' in place of the tail-gunner.⁶⁵ Our role was to patrol the skies of the Mediterranean from Palermo to Malta and beyond. If we met anything nasty (such as an attack by English fighters) I was supposed to use the machine-gun.⁶⁶

When the exhibition opened the response was once more overwhelmingly positive. In his review of the exhibition for the mouthpiece of the Fascist regime, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, Raffaele Calzini favourably compared Futurist works with those of other, less imaginative war artists:

It is not sufficient to place oneself in front of a battleship or a tri-motor aeroplane and transcribe its outlines; it is necessary to convey the sensation of power and threat embodied in such instruments of warfare, to identify the relationship between the individual and his deadly machine ... The Futurists, who were the first proponents of aeropainting, are the best illustrators of aerial warfare.⁶⁷

The correspondent of *La Voce di Bergamo* concurred, enthusing: 'This year, Italian Futurism has a pavilion entirely to itself. And this is as it should be, for Futurist art is justified in this moment as never before'.⁶⁸

As this journalist noted, the twenty-seven Futurist works appearing in the Air Force pavilion complemented a much larger selection of 190 pieces displayed in the vacant Belgian pavilion, which the organisers had put entirely at the disposal of Marinetti's group. This year's total of over 200 paintings and sculptures represents far and away the most abundant body of Futurist work ever assembled at a Biennale, trumping by some eighty-nine pieces the previous record of 128 set twelve years earlier. As Tomasella has observed, 'the richness of the Futurist presence at the XXIII Biennale [was] unprecedented'.⁶⁹ This would seem to reflect the extent to which Marinetti's recently-embattled movement found acceptance within the establishment around this time, its willingness to engage with political subject matter having been decisive in this respect. In a characteristically pungent introduction to the 1942 catalogue, the Biennale's Secretary General, Antonio Maraini, railed against the detachment from reality that he saw as characterising much contemporary art, arguing that many artists were evading their true responsibility to chronicle the historic events taking place in front of their very eyes. 'Why is it', he fulminated:

that ... when artists work with the sole aim of giving the full measure of their value

⁶³ Crali, 1994a, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Spalding, 1986, p. 137.

⁶⁵ Di Bosso is here presumably referring to the SM.79 bomber designed by the Savoia-Marchetti firm.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Scudiero, 1988, p. 18.

⁶⁷ Calzini, 1942.

⁶⁸ Ronchi, 1942. Ronchi's positive appraisal may have been coloured by the fact that he would appear to have been a comrade of the Futurist painter Mario Menin during the Ethiopian campaign of 1935–6.

⁶⁹ Tomasella, 2001, p. 93.

... they take refuge in a world completely removed from events that affect them just as they do all other mortals, and when they try to consider, interest themselves in and interpret these events they fail to do so with the same interest, the same thirst for research — almost, I would say, the same intellectual commitment? Why do they fear to diminish themselves through this when the example of our past Masters — from Giotto to Paolo Uccello, from Piero della Francesca to Tintoretto — demonstrates that it is possible to attain the highest achievements in art by addressing one's own times and representing them? Yet perhaps this problem is not peculiar to the Biennale: perhaps it is the central problem of all contemporary art.⁷⁰

As in a Venn diagram, one can identify a certain degree of overlapping here between Maraini's words — which echoed Fascist beliefs and concerns — and Futurist ideology of the preceding three decades. No other movement had so consistently asserted the conviction that artists should direct their attention to the contemporary world, expressing scorn for painters who chose to pursue formal perfection in the context of neutral subject matter such as the nude or the still life. The latter genre particularly aroused the Futurists' ire, as witnessed by the volume *Heroes Machines Wings Against Still Lifes*, published by Di Bosso and Ambrosi in 1942, in which the authors railed against the production of such imagery not only as a sign of creative paralysis on the part of artists such as Filippo de Pisis and Giorgio Morandi, but as political absenteeism of the worst kind. Di Bosso savagely attacked those artists 'for whom a bottle, two candles or three carrots are transformed into: MYSTERIOUS PINNACLES OF THE SPIRIT AND RAINBOWS OF PURE POETRY', mocking the rarefied language of the *Scuola metafisica*.⁷¹ He also stressed the nationalistic dimension of the problem, stating that whilst the still life might conceivably form part of foreign culture, its existence within Italy could only be accounted for in terms of 'base commercial opportunism or a passive and habitual mania for foreign things'.⁷² In this too, then, Futurist scorn for *esterofilia* was perfectly aligned with the contemporary emphasis on cultural as well as economic autarky.

That Futurism's principles could be so closely aligned with those of a reactionary cultural and political establishment may strike us as inexplicable today. And yet as Berghaus has observed, within the ranks of this most contradictory of movements one can readily identify any number of paradoxical characters ranging from 'idealist opportunists [to] reactionary modernists [and] rebellious traditionalists'.⁷³ A perfect example of this is the figure of Corrado Forlin, founder of the Monselice *Gruppo futurista Savarè*, which was incredibly active during these years. Forlin could simultaneously applaud the Nazis' 'degenerate' art exhibition of 1937 for having censured those 'anti-patriotic works aiming to undermine the national conscience, outraging the combatants and ridiculing the dynamic spirit of youth',⁷⁴ yet maintain cordial relations with one of the founders of Milan's Galleria del Milione, Peppino Ghiringhelli — a leading promoter of abstract art from both Italy and abroad at this time.⁷⁵ Likewise, he perceived no conflict between his friendship with the virulently anti-Semitic poet Gaetano Pattarozzi and his commitment to the principles of *aeropittura*, initially set down by the Jewish Futurist Mino Somenzi. Evidently, what Max Hastings has recently

⁷⁰ Maraini, 1942, pp. 33–4.

⁷¹ Di Bosso, 1942, p. 4.

⁷² Di Bosso, 1942, p. 5.

⁷³ Berghaus, 1996, p. 261.

⁷⁴ Forlin, 1940.

⁷⁵ The Fondo Corrado Forlin contains postcards dated 27 March and 7 July 1940 from Ghiringhelli to Forlin (For.2.1.137; For.2.1.148).

written concerning the behaviour of average men and women during the London blitz applies, in the broadest sense, to the history of Futurism during these chaotic, turbulent years: 'scoundrels as well as heroes played their parts ... and some people were a tangle of both'.⁷⁶

Shortly before the fall of his regime, Mussolini authorised the establishment of a National Gallery of Futurist Art and the Aeropainting of War — a decree that prompted an excited Mino Somenzi to claim, somewhat ironically, that 'Futurism is more alive than ever'.⁷⁷ This was unquestionably an exaggeration, yet in terms of the movement's relationship with Fascism — undoubtedly one of the senses in which Somenzi meant his comment to be understood — it was not simply pure 'spin'. It is also true that in creating works judged suitable for propaganda purposes Futurism had not been compelled to produce imagery devoid of artistic interest. Indeed, however much one may deplore the political system that gave rise to this imagery, and the brutal acts it depicts, Futurist *aeropitture di guerra* undeniably remain, like those of Carrà and Severini, 'notable modern additions to the ancient genre of war scenes'.⁷⁸

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⁷⁶ Hastings, 2012, p. 97.

⁷⁷ Somenzi, 1943. The project was never realised since 'after World War II the new Republican State declared Mussolini's commitments null and void' (Lista, 2001, p. 200).

⁷⁸ Martin, 1968, p. 199.

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