

Judith Clark

**LOOKING FORWARD
HISTORICAL FUTURISM**

The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves... in the creation of something that does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language... In the same the beginner who has learned a new language always retranslates it into his mother tongue: he can only be said to have appropriated the spirit of the new language and to express himself in it freely when he can manipulate it without reference to the old, and when he forgets his original language while using the new one.

Successful translation usually refers to the degree of faithfulness to a text in all its nuances, not deviation from it. It is therefore that Amrz, in his opening to the *The Eighteenth Brumaire* of Louis Bonaparte, provides us with the idea of translation as an analogy for revolution or in this context radicalism. Confusing perhaps is his use of the term 'original', which in creative terms means both that with no precedent, the first, and that which is new. Yet to describe such translation from the privileged vantage-point of fashion is to highlight the need both for change—our re-invention as more daring and successful, beautiful, desirable and fashionable—and for consensus, or legitimisation, and to accept its inherent paradox. The fashion system relies on these definitions for its perpetuation and its biannual consumption.

How do we recognise a design project as radical? How far does it need to deviate from the roots implied in the word itself, and how do we develop a language with which to describe it? As increasingly sophisticated viewers of fashion where have we learnt to look for the tools used by fashion designers at the forefront of the avant-garde? Chalayan's technological muse, Margiel's slogans or the dramatic asymmetry of Alexander McQueen's tailoring: all provide us with new answers to the many-stranded questions that have persisted throughout the century, questions that are

contained very explicitly and provocatively in the reading of the futurist project. Fashion celebrates the new, that which has never been seen before, as proof of progress, genius or inspiration: yet terms such as 'timeless elegance' are frequently used as synonymous with good. This paradox is central when looking at the role that fashion played within the Futurist movement. The Futurist desired a total 'reconstruction of the universe' through their endeavour to identify conditions for perceptual change—and the 'dynamic' tension that resulted from this equation—and, by definition, through prescriptive fixed design.

Futurism's relationship with fashion has largely been omitted from the history of fashion design, considerably overlooked when compared, for example, to fashion's love affair with Surrealism. This is in the most part the consequence of the Surrealists' direct collaborations with Parisian couturiers and Surrealism's love affair with photography, reality's representational double. The images that emerged from this alliance were widely shown in fashion magazine and achieved Surrealism international renown, while, conversely Futurism dress designs became relegated to a small subset of painting. This unfortunate historical quirk is misleading in its consignment of Futurism to a footnote in fashion. The reality is that the Movement's powerful association with the rhetoric of change has underwritten the immediate communicative power of radical design throughout the twentieth century.

Within the Department of History of Art In Siena, Enrico Crispolti's work is central to what we know internationally about Futurism and its links with fashion, though its publication in Italian may be something of a barrier to its wider accessibility. It is through exhibitions that Crispolti curated and documented, which drew upon Italian collections of Futurist art, and his seminal book *Il Futurismo e La Moda, Balla e gli altri* (Futurism and Fashion, Balla and the others, 1986), that the enormity of the Futurist vision is revealed.

‘We will glorify war, the only bygiene of the world.’

F.T. Marinetti, Futurist Manifesto, 20 February 1909, *Le Figaro*.

The origins of Futurism are precisely located in the first manifesto by the Italian poet, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909. From this Futurism took its shape, colour and sound over the following two decades as Marinetti found collaborators throughout the arts, from painting, sculpture and music, graphics and architecture, photography and theatre design and of course, from fashion.

In his founding manifesto Marinetti called from an all-encompassing strategy for renewal, a dressing-up for a new era that would abhor nostalgia (in which he located all feminine weakness). Instead the focus would be on the sensibility of the new machine ages in order to make a weapon of dynamic action that would cut across experience in all its linguistic manifestations. A new artistic order was to be established in which the artist would draw inspiration from modern life itself—incessantly and tumultuously transformed by the victories of science—and express newly found values of speed and the machine. Futurism rebelled against the cult of the past that in all its forms, from museums to academia, from tourist guides to antique dealers, was deadening to any artistic endeavour. In the hands of the Futurists words would be translated into propagandistic slogans; statements, through emphasis, exaggeration, repetition, caricature and distortion, would become true declarations of declamations of Futurist intent. Artistic compositions would rupture their traditional frame of proscenium arch, and the clothed body would become a three-dimensional provocative presence within the urban landscape.

‘Fashion has always been more or less futurist.’

F.T. Marinetti

In the first issue of *L’Italia Futurista* Marinetti looked for echoes of his vision, for sites of inspiration, of what he described as ‘divine speed’. He found this not only in the trains, bridges and tunnels of the new and active cities but also in ‘the great Parisian fashion houses that due to their fast invention of fashion create the passion for that which is new and loathing for that which has already been seen.’ This had to be harnessed for even faster consumption, and his fascination with the fashion system itself, as one of infinitely renewed desire, remained at the centre of the Futurist movement.

Among the meticulous records of Crispolti’s book we find a full wardrobe that articulated the Futurist commitment to dress: fabric design, suits, shirts, waistcoats, dresses, bathing suits; accessories, hats, ties (both of which had entire manifestos dedicated to them), handbags, scarves, gloves, even parasols and fans. Each item was re-described: for example in romantic language fans and parasols are the apotheosis of the coy shyness of women, here translated into ‘triangular dynamic shapes that could cut across the face’. Their love of ties, again a symbol of formal etiquette and in that way anti-futurist, instead became ‘easy accents of colour, triangular—dynamic’.

Futurists enjoying daring, novelty, originality, even absurdity in its own right, highlighting the obviously associated behavioural dimension of dress.

For Futurists both wearer and dress were active. Its visual legacy is predominantly that left by the Italian artist Giacomo Balla in his designs for his Anti-neutral Dress of 1914 (changed from its original title of Manifesto of Men’s Clothing in response to the declaration of war). Through his experiments were carried out over an extended period (between 1914 and 1930) they largely conformed to the ideas laid out in this manifesto.

Balla, one of the founders of Futurism and a signatory to the 1910 Futurist Manifesto, was primarily concerned with conveying movement and speed in painterly terms; he achieved this by imitating time-lapse photography. He chose mainly surface decoration and composition as his transformative tool, his illustrative medium

the hurried trace of his brush stroke. Balla heads his manifesto with Marinetti's declaration of 1909 'We will glorify war,' locating the potent creative force within the act of destruction itself.

Abolished were neutral colours, stripes, checks, 'diplomatic' spots, mourning robes (heroic deaths must not be wept over but remembered with red clothes). Abolished also was good taste (can radical dress ever be tasteful?) and colours that harmoniously match and symmetrical tailoring. Futurist clothing had to be aggressive and dynamic (through the use of triangles, spirals, cones, that 'inspire love of danger, speed, hatred of peace and immobility'). It has to be asymmetrical as opposed to classically harmonious (he specifies examples—perhaps a jacket with one sleeve longer than the other or one rounded lapel and the other square.) It had to be agile, simple (easy to put on and remove) and hygienic (for war marches). It had to be joyful and hence its colours had to be vivid (here Balla uses the emphasis typical of Futurist manifestos to describe colour 'Reeeeeeeeeeeeds, Viiiiooooooleeeets, greeeeeeens') and fluorescent (an early example of its application to textiles used for everyday dress). It had, vitally, to be reactive, achievable, with *modificanti* (fabric badges), applied to an outfit both to reflect the wearer's mood and to enhance its impact, using 'war-hungry, decisive' adjectives never before applied to dress. Finally, it had to be disposable, not durable, to ensure fast renewal.

It was not until 29 February 1920 that Vincenzo Fani, Known as Volt, published the only specific Manifesto of Women's Fashion. This reflected many of the ideas previously published by Balla. Compositional in intent, there was no real adjustment made to take account of the fact that this was aimed at women, the only clue being the use throughout of the feminine pronoun. The manifesto is divided into three sections: Genius, Daring and Economy. Genius demands that great poets and artists take over the fashion houses; fashion being an art the same as architecture and music: 'Women's dress, if well designed and well worn, has the same value as a fresco by Michelangelo, or a Tiziano Madonna.' Daring

I aimed at the wearer: 'Women's fashion will never be extravagant enough' (though for extravagant read flamboyant, otherwise there is a contradiction with the third requirement of economy). Specifically, in agreement with Balla, symmetry should be abolished, prescribing instead zigzag neck lines, sleeves, one longer than the other, shoes of differing colour and shape with heels a different height. 'We shall graft onto feminine silhouettes the most aggressive lines and the most garish colours of our futurist paintings, in a frenzy of spirals and triangles.' It is in this section that Volt coined fantastic and descriptive titles such as machine-gun woman, the antenna-radio-telegraph creature created with carious sprung devices to play tricks on coy lovers. Volt pays homage to their mechanical muse. When it comes to Economy, Volt departs from Balla's manifesto most conspicuously. In his reaction to the post-war situation he fights against expensive materials: 'The age of silk must end in dress as that of marble is in architectural constructions...we will throw the doors open the ateliers to cardboard, aluminium...gas...fresh plants...living animals...Everywoman will be a walking synthesis of the universe.'

'We must multiply by a hundred the dynamic virtues of fashion.'

Futurist Slogan

If the fashion system was at heart Futurist, then confusingly many of its associated feminine attributes—romantic nostalgia, vanity, artifice and luxury—were not and were therefore to be removed. Marinetti went as far as to publish a manifesto 'Against Feminine Luxuries' attacking what he coined as *toilettite* (toilettitus): a vain and in his opinion morose interest in jewels, silk, velvet, fur and perfume.

The physical and sexual body were treated as almost entirely separate within Futurist writing. The body corporeal was a locus of experimentation that resulted in largely painted formal designs viewed very much within the context of all European modernist art and its

cubist representational legacy (bright colours, diagonal intersecting planes and an obsession with depicted motion). The body sensual was at one extreme passive, or coy, and at the other held the clue to sustained erotic promise, and was thereby truly dynamic.

Valentine de Saint-Point, the only female futurist, author of *Manifesto della Donna Futurista* (Manifesto of the Futurist Woman), provided a response to Marinetti's views, which, as outlined in the manifesto of 1909, were unequivocally anti-female. De Saint-Point forced him to clarify his position of hatred for feminine attributes, of what he regarded as the tyranny of love or sentimentality over women's 'animal qualities'. In Paris on 11 January 1913 she published her *Manifesto Futurista della Lussuria* (Futurist Manifesto of Lust) appealing to women to ride their instinct: 'Lust is a carnal search of the unknown...Lust is a creation...we need to create from it a work of art...stripping it of all the veils which deform it...recognise it as a force.' Ironically, in her theatrical living poems she physically acts out this promise with veils, imbuing the transference from clothing to nudity, from one metaphysical state to another, with the same dynamic tension as that of the asymmetrical, unresolved compositions of Giacomo Balla's painting. Strength and other Futurist qualities she locates precisely in the power of female sexuality.

Marinetti responds playfully with a series of contradictory rhetorical extremes. Fashion's artifice is a problem for Marinetti: 'The naked woman is loyal. A dressed woman will always be a bit false.' In his novel *Gli Amori Futuristi* (Futurist Loves, 1922), he proposed the total abolition of clothes, the 'last trophies of humanity': 'You know that when humanity will be naked, when women will all be naked virgins and married, finally this obsession with lust [here the Italian *lussuriosa* means both lust and luxury], which always results in that fretting to undo the button of a blouse or look up a skirt...naked we will mate, as naturally as we eat, drink or sleep, without feverish and unnerving complications...the only ornament allowed virgins will be two lit cigarettes held tightly under their armpits, glowing and smoking next to the red flower of their breasts.'

By 28 April 1935 he thinks again, this time in support of 'new Latin pleasures' for the mind and spirit, 'an integrated dress for a woman to give her body that indispensable *mysterious charm*'. For the body he suggests 'the dress-metaphor which has both tactile and sound components, regulated by the hour, day, season, and temperament to give the sense of dawn, of midday, of spring, summer, winter, autumn, ambition, love etc.' The dress will have the power to be an active metaphor for every situation.

The Futurists were not dress designers but painter, sculptures and poets. Dress to them was only one more active canvas upon which to work rhetorically; they did not want to learn about its construction. Ernesto Thayaht is perhaps the one exception to this as the only Futurist who worked directly within the fashion system. Thayaht designed the now universally known tuta (the boiler suit - still called *tuta* in Italian) to be worn by both men and women. This was an all occasion garment; only the weight of the material was changed to suit season. The *tuta* was to be monotone and worn without an undershirt. Practical and simple, it was similar in shape and cut to the Constructivists' working uniform, *prozodezba*, the main difference being that the tuta was not specifically designed as workwear. Its essential simplicity linked the concept of the tuta more to Art Nouveau and the Secession. There were strong parallels with the attitudes of artists working within these contexts, for example to Henry van de Velde and Josef Hoffman, to Gustav Klimt and Koloman Moser, for whom the aim was to derive a fixed and rational, even utopian model, as if dress could in some way conform to the demands of modern life.

Thayaht's association with Parisian couturier Madeleine Vionnet reveals a gap in the Futurist vision when it comes to the construction of the garment and to the creative rather than destructive cut of the fabric. It is interesting that Vionnet, whose clothes are described as timeless, elegant, feminine and goddess-like (everything that the Futurists were in theory turning their back on), would choose for her designs to be illustrated by a Futurist. The extended lines of Thayaht's illustrations draw

attention to the dynamic drapery of Vionnet's revolutionary construction. The weave of the fabric itself creates the force field for Vionnet; its flexibility when cut on the bias (the futurist diagonal) uses the dynamism inherent to the cloth to facilitate its movement. Vionnet's clothes fell asymmetrical and were literally activated by the body. It is Vionnet perhaps who ultimately legitimised Futurism within a progressive history of fashion design, but the subtlety of her work was a far cry from the Movement's rhetoric of shock and provocation. Shock-weary designers continue today to push the boundary seasonally to new extremes no longer reflecting the impact of change that resulted from war-time conditions but feeding off the vitality of contemporary urban life.

When fashion is presented as spectacle, radicalism is based in the behavioural implications of what is being shown. The extent to which this behaviour deviates from the norm is the measure of the divisiveness that is also its vitality: what would it be like to behave like this? What would it be like to live in a world where this is the norm or acceptable. Where discernible the rules are located in disruption and become our tools for translation: exaggerations, disorder, chaos even. Just by putting 'ism' on the end of 'future' the Futurists found the perfect label, the ultimate byword for looking forward.