

FUTURISMO

Impact and Legacy



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CHRONOPHOTOGRAPHY AND CINEMATOGRAPHY TO
PHOTODYNAMISM AND CHROMATIC MUSIC:
BERGSON'S CRITIQUE OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE BIRTH
OF THE FUTURIST MOTION PICTURE, 1910-1912

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Early on, much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography was an art. The primary question — whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art — was not raised. Soon the film theorists asked the same ill-considered question with regards to the film. But the difficulties which photography caused for traditional aesthetics were mere child's play compared to those raised by the film.

— Walter Benjamin, 1936

In his now-classic work of intellectual history, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, Stephan Kern describes the sweeping changes in late 19th century technology, science and culture that made the foundational categories of time and space into urgent problems within literature, philosophy and the arts in the first decades of the 20th century.¹ Technologies such as the telephone, the wireless telegraph, the x-ray, the cinema, the bicycle, the automobile, and the airplane quite dramatically transformed man's spatiotemporal orientation to the world. It is well known that Italian Futurism, born with Marinetti's manifesto of 1909, intended specifically to embrace this new world. Far from refusing these culturally transformative technologies, the Futurists sought to celebrate them as vehicles with which to escape the crushing weight of aesthetic tradition. Declaring war against antiquarianism and nostalgia, they spoke of wishing to experiment and risk failing boldly rather than undertake the careful emulation of past masters, to seize the idea of art from the prison house of the museum. Especially in Italy, a land practically besieged by tradition, where young artists could not but be compared to the manifest genius of past ages, new technologies of movement — such as Marinetti's mythic automobile — were to provide a way forward precisely through their transformation of our experience of time and space.

Yet it is precisely here, on the question of technology, that we encounter an inescapable contradiction. For what could be more exemplary Futurist technology than the motion picture? The cinema was young and dynamic.

It was unburdened by history. It spoke the very language of modernity. Like the manifestos, it could reach a modern mass audience far beyond the great mausoleums of culture the Futurists claimed to despise. And most of all, the very essence of its medium was movement — constant, inescapable movement unfolding through time. Yet for all this, the Futurists' commitment to the moving image was decidedly conflicted. While they expressed a genuine admiration for the cinema — above all, the kinetic vaudeville of the slapstick comedy — they nevertheless understood it to remain essentially beyond the purview of serious visual art, paradoxically choosing instead to embrace the decidedly traditional mediums of painting and sculpture. Only in 1916 does Marinetti sign his name to a manifesto on cinema, arguably some time after the heyday of the movement had passed. Furthermore, the document signed reflected more a vague aspiration than any concrete plan of action. The few late works produced under the title of "Futurist Film" were seldom if ever seen, and have almost all been lost or destroyed. How, then, can we begin to understand the conflicted place of the moving image within early Italian Futurism, and what that conflicted place might reveal about the conflicted place of the moving image within 20th century art more generally?

The history that would come to be called "avant-garde film" has its genesis in the Futurist elaboration of an art of the moving image, a novel reconceptualization of movement within a practice that was and was not a practice of photography. A year after Marinetti's 1909 manifesto, the Bragaglia brothers — sons of a Roman cinema producer — began their experiments towards a new practice of photography they called "photodynamism." Making use of abnormally extended exposure times, their images purposely dilated human and mechanical movement across the pictorial field. In so doing, they sought to refuse the "freezing" of time inherent in the photographic snapshot, as well as the resulting abstraction of time, movement, and life often understood to characterize the "objectivity" (and hence artlessness) of the photographic operation.

After an initial display of the works in 1911 together with the accompanying manifesto "Futurist Photodynamics," the pair quickly achieved some notoriety and attracted the attention of Marinetti and Boccioni. Welcoming the brothers into the Futurist group, Marinetti began financial support of their research during the following year. According to Giovanni Lista, the brothers also had the "spiritual backing" of Boccioni, the self-styled theorist of the Futurist movement.² Yet already by 1913 — at the bequest of Boccioni, but in a statement signed by all the principle members of the movement — the research into photodynamics was summarily re-

jected and the Bragaglia brothers were publically excommunicated. For a movement whose very *raison d'être* was the embrace of modernity's revolutionary technologies, this statement comes to seem only more uncanny with age:

*we have always rejected with disgust and contempt even the most distant relationship with photography because it is outside the boundaries of art.*³

Disconcerted, the Bragalias gave up photography completely, turning back to work in the more traditional forms of literature and theater until some years later.

What had happened? Certainly, issues of temperament between Boccioni and the Bragalias were to blame — perhaps the sense by Boccioni that this “minor” practice was taking up too much of the spotlight. But more fundamentally, the break was evidence of the Futurism's early ambivalence towards photography itself and the discourse that its use inescapably entailed. And the roots of this discourse lay in the conjunction of, and confrontation between, two preeminent figures of the *Fin-de-siècle* Parisian academy: the physiologist Etienne-Jules Marey and the philosopher Henri Bergson. Together, the two form an inseparable composite in the problematic emergence of the Futurist motion picture.

The chronophotographic visualizations of the physiologist Marey, and later, the cinematographic projections of Auguste and Louis Lumière, would radically transform the static picture of the world in the late 19th century, opening up an “optical unconscious” through their novel visualizations of time and movement. In various ways, these two practices would serve as an aesthetic and conceptual catalyst not only for Futurism, but also for virtually all the artistic movements of the early 20th century.⁴ Marey's photography in particular constituted an early and seminal example of the kind of “new vision” to which all the avant-gardes, in different ways, ultimately subscribed. Modernism, as the over-determined metaphor would have it, was learning to see the world differently, and Marey's chronophotography provided perhaps the most dramatic new aesthetic vocabulary for the depiction of movement.

Given their interest in temporality and movement, as well as their affection for the new technologies of modernity, one would expect the Italian Futurists to eulogize these precedents and attempt to build upon their foundation. And to a great extent, they did — but only within their art. Within their public rhetoric, Marey's chronophotography and Lumiere's cinematography were both relentlessly attacked and subjected to ridicule.

This was almost certainly a displaced anxiety of influence. Futurism's ambivalent love/hate relationship with the French avant-garde is well documented, and their complaints as to the relative poverty of Italian cultural innovation are well known. But interestingly enough, these critiques themselves — though mouthed by Italians — were themselves of unquestionable French parentage. They had come almost verbatim from the writings and public lectures of the French philosopher Henri Bergson.

The transformations of space and time within the work of Marey and the Lumieres were of a piece with a much broader reconceptualization of space and time that had been emerging throughout the later half of the 19th century. Science and mathematics were engaged in radical reconceptualizations of space and time, and for Bergson, these transformations demanded a correlative reconceptualization of movement and duration within philosophy. In his first major treatise, *Time and Free Will* (1889), Bergson argued against the classical conceptualization of space within natural philosophy as an empty homogenous medium filled by discrete and separable physical objects. Further, he contended that this essential misconception of space had led to a concomitant mischaracterization as to the nature of time. Bergson summarily rejected the classical conception of time as a one-dimensional line along which the present, as an instantaneous snapshot, advances into the future while moving away from the past. Like things in space, individual moments were never strictly separate from and external to one other, but formed a continuous stream of duration. This *durée* was not something that could be scientifically quantified and calculated according to the positivistic sciences of the day, but needed to be understood through new forms of research into our inner experience and mental life.

Marey, by contrast, was an exemplary 19th century positivist. For all the fascinating, even uncanny visions of multiplicity and duration his photographic images might be said to contain, they had been made at the service of the very positivistic model of analytic decomposition against which Bergson would later inveigh. Marey published his major treatise *Movement* in 1894, and the following decade would see a fanatic public devotion to the new "moving pictures" of the Lumiere Brothers' "cinematography." In his writings and lectures, Bergson was quite critical of both. It was certainly not a matter of aesthetics, but rather that manner in which these new photo-mechanical technologies formed a tangible metaphor for movement that was philosophically antagonistic with his own. Both chronophotography and cinematography dissected the natural fluidity and inter-connectedness of time and movement into discrete, isolated segments. The *cinematographe* then recombined these segmented photograms (individual film cells)

through the physiological trick of retinal persistence into what only *appeared* a seamless movement. These modes of deconstructing and reconstructing movement seemed a perfect analogy for the classical, atomistic conception of time and movement Bergson was determined to challenge philosophically. For Bergson, neither time nor movement were matters of distinct, containable segments that could be thought mechanistically, for proceeding in this fashion would inexorably lead to a mechanistic conception of the universe that refused the true complexity and dynamism of life's own "creative evolution."

In 1904 — the very year of Marey's death — Bergson inherited the Chair of Modern Philosophy at the prestigious *Collège de France*, and began a series of open public lectures that were widely attended by the intellectual and artistic community of Paris. Together with his trio of books *Time and Free Will* (1889), *Matter and Memory* (1896) and *Creative Evolution* (1907), these lectures caused Bergson's critique on chronophotography and cinematography to become well known across Europe, and his spirit would certainly pervade the whole of the Futurist enterprise from the beginning. Boccioni and the Bragaglias both claimed to be working in the spirit of Bergson, and both liberally quoted his work as evidence of their advanced aesthetic ambitions. Yet Boccioni and the other painters of the movement could safely incorporate Marey's imagery because their chosen medium was understood to require an essentially subjective and creative act of transformation. The Bragaglias' path was more difficult, and thus perhaps more revealing: trying to advance a Bergsonian conception of temporality and movement using not only Marey's imagery, but also his technology, they were under pressure to explain why the technology itself would not necessarily subsume their intentions.

For despite the burgeoning Photo club movements on both sides of the Atlantic, the overwhelming majority of artists still understood photography and film as mere technologies of registration that were necessarily devoid of the creative subjectivity through which the specificity of art practice was grounded. In his 1911 manifesto on Photodynamism, Anton Giulio Bragaglia is at great pains to demonstrate that his was not, in fact, a practice of photography. Rejecting both the "pedestrian photographic reproduction of the real as something static or caught in a pose" as well as "the obscene, brutal, and static realism" inherent in cinematography's reproduction of the "brute fact of movement," photodynamism sought rather to capture the "trajectory" and thus "the sensation" of movement, an essentially subjective dimension "rich with magnificent, hidden depths and multiple emotive sources that render it unspeakable and ungraspable."⁵ This newly hybrid

practice was neither film nor photography but something between the still and moving image — a practice that sought to resist both the fixity and pseudo-objectivity of the still photograph, as well as the pseudo-objectivity of “false” movement in film. This new form of “motion picture” is already here very close to the topos of 1920s “New Vision” movement, with its quasi-objective, quasi-mystical emphasis on photography’s ability to reveal what Benjamin would famously come to call a realm of the “optical unconscious.”⁶

Yet despite their best efforts to dismiss the objective, positivist connotations with which chronophotography and cinematography were still tainted, the Bragaglias were ultimately unsuccessful in contesting Boccioni’s Bergsonian criticism of the medium. One reason was that the manner in which *Fin-de-siècle* photography was being raised to the level of a legitimate artistic medium was by means of a soft, atmospheric impressionism deliberately evocative of classical tableaux. The Bragaglias work could not be read in this “Pictorialist” aesthetic, yet neither did it conform to the newly emergent “straight” aesthetic of a photographer like Stieglitz. Formally speaking, the Bragaglias’ work was simply more akin to the work of Étienne-Jules Marey than to anything before or after.

While the Bragaglias short-lived practice would initially fall prey to the Bergsonian critique, the controversy regarding the photomechanical “segmentation” of movement and time could effectively be sidestepped through a conception of the moving image sufficiently “abstract” to be seen to renounce its claims to photographic indexicality. And this is precisely what had already been taking place in a parallel practice, also begun in 1910, by another set of brothers, Arnaldo and Bruno Corradini-Ginanni. Ginna and Corra, as the Corradini brothers were renamed by Marinetti upon being adopted into the Futurist group, may have employed the same cinematographic technologies of projection as did Edison and the Lumieres, but they were much more convincingly able to remove the offending indexicality of photography from their cinematic practice. Working in what would come to be called “abstract” or “absolute cinema,” their work sought to forge a synaesthetic experience of “visual music” through the variation of projected color, form and movement in time.⁷

While the Bragaglia’s practice was chiefly understood by reference to the chronophotographic procedures of Muybridge and Marey, the Corradini’s synaesthetic project could immediately be related to a vast range of investigation then taking place at the intersection of visual art and music. Of these, Wassily Kandinsky’s synaesthetic theories were doubtless the most influential, but it is important to remember that Kandinsky’s own

ground, manages to free itself, flashes, then disappears again to reappear more intensely close to the frame. Finally, in an unexpected dusty disintegration, the grey crumbles and the spectrum triumphs in a whirling of catherine-wheels which disappear in their turn, buried under an avalanche of colors.

The Corradinis' manifesto thus entailed a futurist reconceptualization of music quite different from that which Luigi Russolo would articulate within his much more famous *Art of Noises* (1913) the following year.¹¹ Much less radical and ambitious than Russolo's practice, the Corradinis's synaesthetic conception was nevertheless much better attuned to international developments then taking place across the arts and would have been received — to the extent that it became known — as a natural progression from advanced, yet still widely accepted attitudes and ideas.¹² While it may now be impossible to reconstruct the extent of their international communication, the Corradinis' 1912 manifesto — quite unlike that of the Bragaglias the year before — took place within a major cresting of its synaesthetic concerns across a wide range of artists, mediums, and countries. Besides Kandinsky's treatise, Rimington published a book that year of his own experiments and theories in London entitled, *Color-Music: The Art of Mobile Color*, the American pair Morgan Russell and Stanon Macdonald-Wright developed a theory of spatial rhythm and color harmony into a style they called "synchronism," and major paintings based on these ideas of color harmony would be executed by Frantisek Kupka, Robert Delaunay and Stanton Macdonald-Wright.¹³ While the after-effects of this painterly tradition were developed in the works of Mikhail Mitiushin, Paul Klee, and Piet Mondrian, the impact of this new paradigm of "abstract cinema" would prove no less pervasive. Two years later, the Paris-based Russian expatriate Léopold Surville's unfinished sketches for a cinematographic-chromatic symphony were described by no less than Guillaume Apollinaire as effecting a "glistening bridge" between painterly abstraction and the technology of the motion picture.¹⁴

Yet between the Corradinis and the Bragaglias, Italian Futurism had already begun building this "glistening bridge" between photography, cinema, painting and music. By conjoining an emerging topos of painterly abstraction to the still-youthful technology of the motion picture, the Corradinis both intuited and helped to establish what would become a major tradition in the 1920s with Eggeling, Ruttman, Richter and Fischinger, continuing throughout the 20th century in the work of Lye, McLaren and the Whitneys, Belson, Brakahage, and innumerable others. And in their critical engagement with photographic representation, and their ambition to create

newly hybridized form between stillness and movement, singularity and multiplicity, the Bragaglias elaborated many of the questions and possibilities that would emerge in the "new vision" of photographic art within the Dada, Constructivist and Surrealist movements of the 20s and 30s, and which would return in the photoconceptualist practices of the 60s and 70s. The problematic conjunction of Marey and Bergson that was Futurism's inheritance perhaps ensured that these early efforts to reimagine both photography and cinema would be stillborn. But rather than a tale of frustration and failure, we might reflect instead on the outsized nature of their ambition. For the Bragaglias and the Corradinis did not aim to make an art of photography or cinema. Rather, they sought to explore — as Walter Benjamin later would — the epistemic transformation these technologies had wrought upon our very idea of art in the modern era.

¹ *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999). Stephan Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 2003).

² See Giovanni Lista, "Futurist Photography," *Art Journal* 41 (1981): 358-64 and more expansively, Lista, *Cinema E Fotografia Futurista* (Milan: Skira, 2001). Marta Braun claims that Boccioni's own writings confirm that, at one point, he considered photography the primary medium for documenting the "luminous emanations of bodies," citing Boccioni's "fondamento plastico della scultura e pittura futuriste" in Zeno Birolli, ed., *Umberto Boccioni: Gli scritti editi e inediti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971), 143, in Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1995), 418 fn 75.

³ Originally published in *Lacerba* in August 1913, reprinted as "Futurist Dynamism and French Painting," in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, 110.

⁴ For a succinct overview, see Marta Braun, *Picturing Time*, op cit., 264-319.

⁵ Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Futurist Photodynamism*, trans. Lawrence Rainley, *Modernism / Modernity* Vol.15, No.2, 365, section 3.

⁶ See Walter Benjamin, "A Little History of Photography" (1931) in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2*, op cit., and Béla Balázs's 1924 account of "expressive movement" in Erica Carter and Rodney Livingstone, "Béla Balázs, Visible Man, or the Culture of Film (1924)" *Screen* 2007, vol 48: 91-108; as well as Kracauer's famous essay "On Photography" in Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y Levin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995). Bragaglia also anticipates Alexandr Rodchenko's interest in mobilizing the singular image of photography, albeit in a radically different way. See Alexander Rodchenko, "Against the Synthetic Portrait for the Snapshot" (1928) and "The Paths of Modern Photography" (1928) in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York: Aperture, 1989).

⁷ For an excellent overview, see Judith Zilcher, "Music for the Eyes: Abstract Painting and Light Art," as well as Kerry Brougher, "Visual Music Culture," in

Brougher, et al., eds., *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005).

⁸ Kenneth Peacock, "Instruments to Perform Color-Music: Two Centuries of Technological Experimentation," *Leonardo* 21, no. 4 (1988): 397-406.

⁹ See Olivia Mattis, "Scriabin to Gershwin: Color Music from a Musical Perspective" in Brougher, et al., *Visual Music*, op cit., 219.

¹⁰ First published in Mario Verdone's Futurist issue of *Bianco e Nero*, 1912. Republished in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, op cit.

¹¹ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986)

¹² While we know that the early Dadas knew about Italian Futurism, there is no concrete evidence of which I am aware that the Corradini's films travelled or became known outside of Italy, to the extent to which they might have influenced artists like Richter, Eggeling, Ruttman, or Fischinger.

¹³ Rimington, Alexander Wallace. *Colour-Music: The Art of Mobile Colour* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1912).

¹⁴ See Cecile Starr, "Pioneers of Abstract Animation in Europe" in Robert Russell and Cecile Starr, *Experimental Animation: An Illustrated Anthology* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976), 32-39.

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