

# Hybrid Bodies between Utopia and Trauma in F.T. Marinetti

---

Cristina Savettieri

## Abstract

This article analyses a small selection of texts by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti with the aim of shedding new light on the role that the experience of combat during the First World War played in the evolution of the narrative of the body in Marinetti's imagination. Different pre-war narratives of the body will be analysed first and then placed against the backdrop of the cultural production of the war years. Specific attention will be paid to the images of the prosthetic body with a wider look into other social discourses (medical science, politics, propaganda). The article will argue that Marinetti re-writes and adjusts his earlier narratives of the body, and highlight the ambivalences and social fantasies, mostly relevant to gender and sexuality, underlying them.

## Keywords

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti; First World War; Simulacrum; Trauma; Masculinity; Prosthetic body

# Hybrid Bodies between Utopia and Trauma in F.T. Marinetti

Cristina Savettieri

## Introduction

In this article, I will analyse a small selection of texts by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti with a twofold aim: firstly, I will try to shed new light on the role that the experience of combat during the First World War played in the evolution of the narrative of the body in Marinetti's imagination, with a view to briefly expanding this enquiry into a more general reflection on the dynamics of resettlement that a fantastic imagination nurtured by technological fantasies undergoes as soon as those very fantasies turn, even only partially, into actual reality. I will not consider the symbolic function of the machine as such, but rather, more specifically, I will analyse different narratives of the body as emerging in some manifestos and earlier writings by Marinetti. Secondly, I will then locate them against the backdrop of the cultural productions of the war years and with a wider look into social discourses on actual hybrid, prosthetic bodies of soldiers disfigured during the war. I will then discuss the way Marinetti re-writes and adjusts his earlier imaginations and highlight the ambivalences and social fantasies, mostly relevant to gender and sexuality, underlying them.

Given this main aim, I will try to answer the following questions: what is the difference between the mechanic, metallized body imagined in the works and manifestos Marinetti wrote in the early 1910s and the dismembered and reassembled flesh-and-metal bodies that surface in the writings directly related to the war? On a more general level, what happens when a whole imagination of the future or, better, one of its primary roots is overpowered by the violence of history? What's left of a symbolic construction when the imagined, utopic future underpinning it comes out from the darkness of hypothetical posterity and materializes in the blinding, traumatic light of the present?

## Narratives of the body

The hybrid body is one of the seminal constructs of Marinetti's futurist imagination, a symbolic device at work from the very first manifesto of Futurism (1909). In the narrative prologue of the Manifesto, a symbolic rebirth to a new artistic practice, Marinetti stages himself as undergoing a car accident that leaves him alive and ready to pronounce his eleven futurist claims:

Oh! materno fossato, quasi pieno di un'acqua fangosa! Bel fossato d'officina! Io gustai avidamente la tua melma fortificante, che mi ricordò la santa mammella nera della mia nutrice sudanese... Quando mi sollevai – cencio sozzo e puzzolente – di sotto la macchina capovolta, io mi sentii attraversare il cuore, deliziosamente, dal ferro arroventato della gioia!

Una folla di pescatori armati di lenza e di naturalisti podagrosi tumultuava già intorno al prodigio. Con cura paziente e meticolosa, quella gente dispose alte armature ed enormi reti di ferro per pescare il mio automobile, simile ad un gran pescecane arenato. La macchina emerse lentamente dal fosso, abbandonando nel fondo, come squame, la sua pesante carrozzeria di buon senso e le sue morbide imbottiture di comodità.

Credevano che fosse morto il mio bel pescecane, ma una mia carezza bastò a rianimarlo, ed eccoli risuscitato, eccoli in corsa, di nuovo, sulle sue pinne possenti!

Allora col volto coperto della buona melma delle officine – impasto di scorie metalliche, di sudori inutili, di fuliggini celesti – noi, contusi e fasciate le braccia ma impavidi, dettammo le nostre prime volontà a tutti gli uomini *vivi* della terra. (Marinetti 1983: 9-10)

Two complementary rhetorical processes are at work in this passage: on the one hand, natural organic elements are literally and metaphorically mingled with artificial items; on the other, artificial inorganic objects are naturalized and given the appearance and features of life. In the 'maternal' ditch – a uterine space – mud and metallic waste mix (a literal amalgam): a metaphor turns this blend of organic and inorganic matter into a primordial empowering nourishment, linked with the memory of the 'sacred' black breast of Marinetti's wet nurse – a metaphoric milk proper, which he avidly tastes. The excitement provoked by the accident and the violent encounter with the hybrid fluids in the ditch is, in turn, metaphorized through a masochistic image – the heart penetrated by a red-hot iron – similarly based on

the combination of the organic with the inorganic, flesh and metal. Literally covered with this double-nature scum, the human body euphorically hybridizes with a matter alien to it. Other inorganic tenors are signified by organic vehicles: a simile comparing the car to a shark turns into a metaphor proper, amplified by the detail of the chassis and car seats as scales and then again by the reference to fins.

Both the level of reality represented and that of metaphors shaping it converge towards a semantics of hybridization, displaying one of the fundamental engines of Marinetti's imagination. If nature means first and foremost degradation and fragility, but also unruly, destructive forces<sup>1</sup>, naturalizing metaphors express an ambivalence: natural vehicles (the milk, the shark) work as containment structures channeling the anxiety that the inorganic produces in human subjects (the accident is very close to a death scene)<sup>2</sup>. Consistently, organic objects (the heart, the body) are complemented by images of artificial and/or inorganic matter. Building on the idea that metaphors play a role of containment as much as they let the repressed re-surface, one might say that both the natural and the artificial, the biological and the inorganic embody shifting values and call for hybridization as the only condition whereby both the former and the latter stop threatening the subject. It is worth noting that the body of Marinetti is wounded but bandaged: the internal matter of the body is sealed, while the mud covers just the face, with no actual transgression of the binary distinction between the organic and the inorganic, which in fact takes place metaphorically.

The Manifesto *L'uomo moltiplicato e il Regno della Macchina* (1910) starts with a claim on the need to rework the idea of beauty, detaching it from the romantic narrative of the aggressive man assaulting the tower of feminine beauty. In literature and the arts, mechanical beauty and the almost erotic relationship that bounds together humans and machines should replace the old imagery of love and conquest:

Bisogna dunque preparare l'imminente e inevitabile identificazione dell'uomo col motore, facilitando e perfezionando uno scambio incessante d'intuizione, di ritmo, d'istinto e di disciplina metallica ignorato dalla maggioranza e soltanto indovinato dagli spiriti più lucidi.

Certo è che ammettendo l'ipotesi trasformistica di Lamarck, si deve riconoscere che noi aspiriamo alla creazione di un tipo non umano nel

---

<sup>1</sup> See Sartini Blum 1996: 29-54.

<sup>2</sup> A most persuasive Freudian reading of the first futurist manifesto is Foster (2004: 118-120).

quale saranno aboliti il dolore morale, la bontà, l'affetto e l'amore, soli veleni corrosivi dell'inesauribile energia vitale, soli interruttori della nostra possente elettricità fisiologica.

Noi crediamo alla possibilità di un numero incalcolabile di trasformazioni umane, e dichiariamo senza sorridere che nella carne dell'uomo dormono delle ali. [...]

Il tipo non umano e meccanico, costruito per una velocità onnipresente, sarà naturalmente crudele, onnisciente e combattivo. (Marinetti 1983: 299)

Even if embodied in the image of a loving engine driver caressing his locomotive, the new pattern of a human-machine relationship should rely on the removal of all human feelings. Some ambiguities haunt this passage: it is not made clear whether the new non-human type will stem from replacement (machines will substitute men and women) and its body will be entirely made of mechanical pieces or it will result from a 'natural' process of physical enhancement, a phylogenetic step triggered by will, giving birth to a new superior winged being. Two ideas of the body emerge: the first is entirely mechanized, the second implies an organic metamorphosis. Neither case implies hybridization: the human flesh is either replaced by inorganic engines or transformed from within, with no actual blend of different types of matters and no transgression of the body's boundaries. Sexuality will be radically reduced to a corporal function purged from any sentimental implications and even from the experience of pleasure:

Noi possiamo dunque attivare o ritardare il movimento dell'umanità verso questa forma di vita liberata dal sentimentalismo e dalla lussuria. A dispetto del nostro determinismo scettico, che dobbiamo uccidere quotidianamente, noi crediamo nell'utilità di una propaganda artistica contro la concezione apologetica del dongiovanni e quella divertente del cornuto. [...]

L'immenso amore romantico è ridotto unicamente alla conservazione della specie, e l'attrito delle epidermidi è finalmente liberato da ogni mistero stuzzicante, da ogni pepe appetitoso e da ogni vanità dongiovannesca: semplice funzione corporale, come il bere e il mangiare.

*L'uomo moltiplicato* che noi sogniamo, non conoscerà la tragedia della vecchiaia! (Marinetti 1983: 300-301)

Sexuality is then implicitly considered as a devouring force, a tragic ageing factor to be contained, an experience liminal to death, inconsistent

with the evolution towards a superior being.

Accordingly, in the *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* (1912) the subject and its inward life are to be erased:

Distruggere nella letteratura l'«io», cioè tutta la psicologia. L'uomo completamente avariato dalla biblioteca e dal museo, sottoposto ad una logica e ad una saggezza spaventose, non offre assolutamente più interesse alcuno. Dunque, dobbiamo abolirlo nella letteratura, e sostituirlo finalmente colla materia, di cui si deve afferrare l'essenza a colpi d'intuizione, la quale cosa non potranno mai fare i fisici né i chimici. (Marinetti 1983: 50)

The radical erasure of psychology and the self from literature leaves room for the matter as such to take centre stage, but whether organic or inorganic matter, it remains unclear. In the following paragraphs of the *Manifesto*, the fantasy of self-destruction is evoked – «L'arte è un bisogno di distruggersi e di sparpagliarsi» (Marinetti 1983: 54) – while it becomes evident that not only the self is to be destroyed but also the human body as mortal: to free humans from death means to replace them with machines: «Dopo il regno animale, ecco iniziarsi il regno meccanico [...] noi prepariamo la creazione dell'**uomo meccanico dalle parti intercambiabili**. Noi lo libereremo dall'idea della morte, e quindi dalla morte stessa, suprema definizione dell'intelligenza logica» (Marinetti 1983: 54).

Notwithstanding recurrent themes, images, and claims, the three manifestos do not simply overlap with each other. Rather, they open up a space of unstable meanings: the first leans towards a hybridized imagination; the second oscillates between the fantasy of replacement and that of phylogenesis, thus excluding the encounter and mixture of different matters; the third foresees again, at least in the realm of literary creation, an entirely mechanic being, devoid of an organic body and finally freed from mortality.

The first futurist novel by Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista*, first published in French in 1909 and then translated into Italian by Decio Cinti in 1910, is haunted by these conflicting narratives of the human body. A *pastiche* combining racist exotism, adventure, war, and misogynist rape, *Mafarka* is a tale of grief and regeneration culminating in a parthenogenetic male fantasy<sup>3</sup>. The novel begins with the graphic description of a repulsive mass rape

---

<sup>3</sup> Paramount readings of the novel are Spackman 1996 (49-76) and Sarti-  
ni Blum 1996 (55-78), both employing psychoanalytic tools to interpret gender  
structures.

taking place after a triumphal battle won by Mafarka, the leader of an Arab army. The rape, perpetrated against black women, is harshly condemned by Mafarka but at the same time victims are represented as both suffering and enjoying the violence. Building on this ambivalent female depiction, the novel delves into the interplay between sexuality and mortality, desire and loss, feminine organic decay and masculine transcendence. The plot is loosely conceived, while strong symbolic ties link characters and episodes through an overabundant metaphoric style. At the core of the novel lies the death of Mafarka's beloved brother Magamal, bitten by a rabid dog and then horribly turned into a monster – half slug, half night bird – devouring itself after ravaging the body of his own fiancée. Before this metamorphosis, Magamal appears feminine and delicate<sup>4</sup>, a reversed double of the manly warrior Mafarka – possibly his unconscious double – who dangerously ignites homoerotic and incestuous desires in him. Mafarka weeps desperately over the disfigured body of his dying brother, longing for an impossible last kiss from him, which emphasizes the troubled nature of the gendered undersides of their relationship. Consequently, the death of his feminine Other prompts Mafarka to reject sexuality and the numerous female bodies at his disposal, while fostering his death drive. A journey to the afterlife to meet his parents and give them back the body of his brother amplifies Mafarka's guilt complex and the psychoanalytic resonances of the plot: his mother Langurama refuses Magamal's body, implicitly accusing Mafarka of his death; hence, Mafarka promises his mother that he will bring her another son generated by himself and made immortal. The promise unsettles the parental relationship, making the son a father to his substitute brother<sup>5</sup> and, even more disturbingly, a chaste groom to his own mother. To grant immortality to his creature, Mafarka will construct/generate him with no encounter with the «vulva malefica» (Marinetti 2011: 209), violently

---

<sup>4</sup> In his first appearance Magamal's feminine characterization is immediately made clear through the words of his own brother Mafarka. See Marinetti 2011: 19: «Ho in orrore questa tua ridicola sensibilità femminea che ti lancia talvolta in folli esaltazioni e ti schiaccia, poco dopo, sotto debolezze infantili... [...] Ad onta di tutti gli sforzi della tua volontà, il tuo corpo è rimasto tenero e fragile come un corpo succoso di fanciulla». Sartini Blum (1996: 60) convincingly argues that Magamal «straddles the dangerous boundary between masculinity and femininity».

<sup>5</sup> Mafarka acts as a loving mother to Magamal: «a quando a quando egli si voltava verso il fratello, e stringendone dolcemente il capo fra le larghe mani, lo guardava in fondo agli occhi, con la tenerezza soave di una madre», Marinetti 2011: 19.

identified with decay, evil, and death. The only female being accepted, the mother, is the one whose body is forbidden.

Recalling a long-standing mythical and literary tradition<sup>6</sup>, Gazurmah – the name of Mafarka's son – is a giant creature, a simulacrum<sup>7</sup> proper, carved from oak wood and covered with a plant mixture transforming wood fibers into flesh; his body, provided with palm-tree-fabric wings, iron ribs, and spring hands, will be given life by means of a kiss that will pass from Langurama's lips to Mafarka's mouth and then from Mafarka's to Gazurmah's mouth. The tales of Frankenstein's Creature and Pinocchio<sup>8</sup> apparently meet in Gazurmah's birth; yet no revolt against the creator takes place, nor is the creature defective, in need of change and improvement or, worse, repulsive and stigmatized by his own creator and the whole social community. On the contrary, Gazurmah is an enhanced, perfect hybrid ultra-human body made of organic and inorganic matter, whose life is tied to the death of his own creator. In dying while giving birth to his child, Mafarka identifies with a woman («morirò miserevolmente, come una donna, nel dar la luce al mio figliolo», Marinetti 2011: 201), as if he were a «male mother» (Spackman 1996: 58), literally delivering Gazurmah. This simile places Gazurmah's birth at the crossroads between construction and generation, artistic creation and male parthenogenesis.

Appropriately interpreted as an allegoric apologue on artistic creativity and the birth of Futurism<sup>9</sup>, *Mafarka* is also an attempt to give narrative shape to one of the most controversial outcomes of early-twentieth-century literary imagination, as pinpointed by Spackman (1996): the fantasy of a world inhabited just by men who generate their own sons by constructing them and thus appropriate the exclusive female dominion over human generation – a world in which the mineral, absolute, creative male principle overpowers nature. As brilliantly argued by Sartini Blum (1996 and 2015), in early Futurism the identification of the feminine with nature, decay, and the abject expresses a sense of threat experienced by the male

---

<sup>6</sup> Other mythical genealogies (Achilles, Icarus, Ulysses and others) are discussed in Meazzi 2003.

<sup>7</sup> For the notion of simulacrum, I mainly rely on Stoichita 2008. A broad and detailed discussion on definitions and examples of simulacra is in Micali (2019: 121-174).

<sup>8</sup> Spackman (1996: 54) appropriately defines Mafarka «a sort of futurist Geppetto» and Meazzi (2003: 313) identifies in Pinocchio one of the models underpinning Gazurmah.

<sup>9</sup> See De Maria 1983 and Meazzi 2003.



self and nurtures misogynistic homosocial fantasies. As a posthuman simulacrum, Gazurmah, whose life is not really told, is an uncanny utopic body created so that his too human creator may be destroyed. The plot does not proceed further and the novel ends because the perfect creature cannot be the subject of a story – it has no narrative potential – and Mari-netti’s primary interest dysphorically lies in the destructive process leading to the end of the human.

In comparison with the conflicting narratives of the body suggested by the three manifestos analyzed above, *Mafarka* – contemporaneous to the foundation manifesto – seems to synthesize them all and thus amplifies their inconsistencies and instabilities: hybridization underlies the image of Gazurmah’s wooden body insufflated by Mafarka and partially turned into flesh; his mechanical limbs recall the interchangeable pieces of the machine-human and his wings are literally quoted as the wings ‘sleeping’ in the human body in *L’uomo moltiplicato e il Regno della macchina*. Yet, self-destruction and the repulsion for the human flesh prevail – Mafarka must die – and shape the whole novel as a dark utopia with no human left alive.

## Prosthetic bodies

With the outbreak of the First World War, an unprecedented biological event in the words of Antonio Gibelli (1998: 7), European public space suddenly becomes populated with violently disfigured bodies, whose wounds, deformations, and mutilations had never been seen before in history. In the paradoxical symbolic economy of the war, the wound is what defines both the use and the exchange value of a male body: a wounded body that has been close to its own destruction is worthier than an intact body in that it appears more heroic, virile, and hence sexually attractive<sup>10</sup>. Representations of wounded soldiers in popular culture and propagandistic products of the time converge towards this narrative that eroticizes the main byproduct of war violence, making it palatable. The powerful framing of the wound as the worthiest sign of masculinity<sup>11</sup> emerges even in personal writings by officers and soldiers fighting at the front, thus demonstrating to what extent this was a hegemonic social narrative.

Yet, mutilations compel a stronger semantic effort<sup>12</sup>, especially when

---

<sup>10</sup> See Bourke 1996 and 1999.

<sup>11</sup> See Mosse 1996, Banti 2005 and 2011.

<sup>12</sup> See Bracco 2012.

they imply a radical re-shaping of the body through prostheses, which make the organic and the inorganic co-exist and re-codify the human soma as comprehending what is alien to it. Mutilated bodies are damaged matter, hard to heal and repair but also to invest with positive meanings and re-include within the wider social body; bodies on which politics, science, and war propaganda conjure up narratives and exert power; bodies to which popular culture attributes conflicting values, experiences, and representations: abjection and monstrosity, virile courage, emasculation, psychic abnormality.

It is possible to single out at least three main narratives framing the prosthetic body: the discourse of medical science, which conceives the mutilated as a ground for pioneering experimentations and, accordingly, the prosthetic body as a progress of civilization; the discourse of politics, which needs to re-integrate mutilated men into the fabric of society by normalizing them; the discourse of the nation at war, which uses mutilation as either a stigma to demonize the image of the enemy or a mark of extreme heroic supererogation, if referred to home soldiers. I will briefly discuss specific examples of each narrative – in some cases overlapping with each other – to re-locate futurist imagination against the backdrop of dominant social discourses.

If medical research on cinematic prostheses had already started in the late nineteenth century thanks to the pioneering work of Giuliano Vanghetti, today considered a precursor of bionic surgery<sup>13</sup>, it is only with the world war that the attempts to design and implement more functional artificial limbs multiply, along with experiments on new surgery techniques able to cinematize mechanic prostheses. At the core of these cinematic applications lies the idea of exploiting the natural movement of tendons and muscles still attached to the wounded area in order to make the prosthesis move: from simple static interpolation, prostheses become fully functional dynamic integrations of the body<sup>14</sup>. With a singular lexical choice, Vanghetti and other scientists used to describe the prostheses as depending on the will, directly connected to the brain «in una telegrafia di strumento trasmettitore e strumento ricevente», as explained by surgeon Giovanni Franceschini (quoted in Plaitano 2019: 354). Cinematic prostheses, then, prospected an integration of flesh and mechanic tools, nervous impulse and lifeless matter. The hybrid body made of organic and inorganic matter was no longer a literary speculation, being rather the signpost of scientific progress.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Tropea *et al.* 2017.

<sup>14</sup> See Plaitano 2019.

Notwithstanding these groundbreaking scientific developments, it was extremely difficult to make sense of the mutilated and their deformed body in the wider social community. Psychiatrists and psychologists were committed to identifying possible mental illnesses affecting mutilated veterans and surgeons debated on whether the worst cases were to be operated (Bracco 2012: 97-108). The mutilated body, with no limbs or eyes or recognizable facial lineaments, is unfit for combat and as such undermines the symbolic economy of the war wound: mutilation undoes the association between masculine value and suffered violence and suspiciously blurs gender boundaries. In some propagandistic materials, such as photographic postcards, mutilated soldiers are depicted while sewing, a typical womanly domestic activity: if, on the one hand, these are normalizing images, aimed at demonstrating that the mutilated is still functioning and ready to be re-integrated into the family and the wider social body as a worker, on the other, this apparent normalcy diverges dramatically from hegemonic social images of masculinity, especially from the ideal type of the warrior. The mutilated body is, at the very same time, re-functionalized and diminished, made familiar and normal yet de-virilized and childlike (see Bracco 2012: 101).

Gender anxieties emerging from the prosthetic body are strikingly at work in comics and illustrations of trench newspapers. In parallel with the transnational tendency of war cultures to make a monster of the enemy<sup>15</sup>, German and Austro-Hungarian mutilated soldiers are the object of violent deformation and harsh ridiculing, as demonstrated in a disturbing series of strips published in "La Tradotta"<sup>16</sup> (fig. 1). It is the story of a man marrying a beautiful woman who, on the first wedding night, starts disassembling her own body, almost entirely made of prostheses: one of her legs, the breasts, her hair, and even her eyes are artificial objects mechanically fixed to a meager, mutilated male trunk. The meaning of this tale is clear: Austrians are as crafty and dishonest as puppets disguising broken, useless men. On a deeper level, the prosthetic body is perceived as an uncanny object threatening gender boundaries and inclining mutilated men towards abnormal sexuality outside the limits of heteronormative bourgeois respectability.

The very same propaganda, though, especially in the last year of war, sanctifies the dismembered body of the heroic soldier as a pledge to the homeland and an emblem of supererogation, as some posters promoting

---

<sup>15</sup> See Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 2000.

<sup>16</sup> The strips appear in «La Tradotta», 6, 1918. The author is unknown.

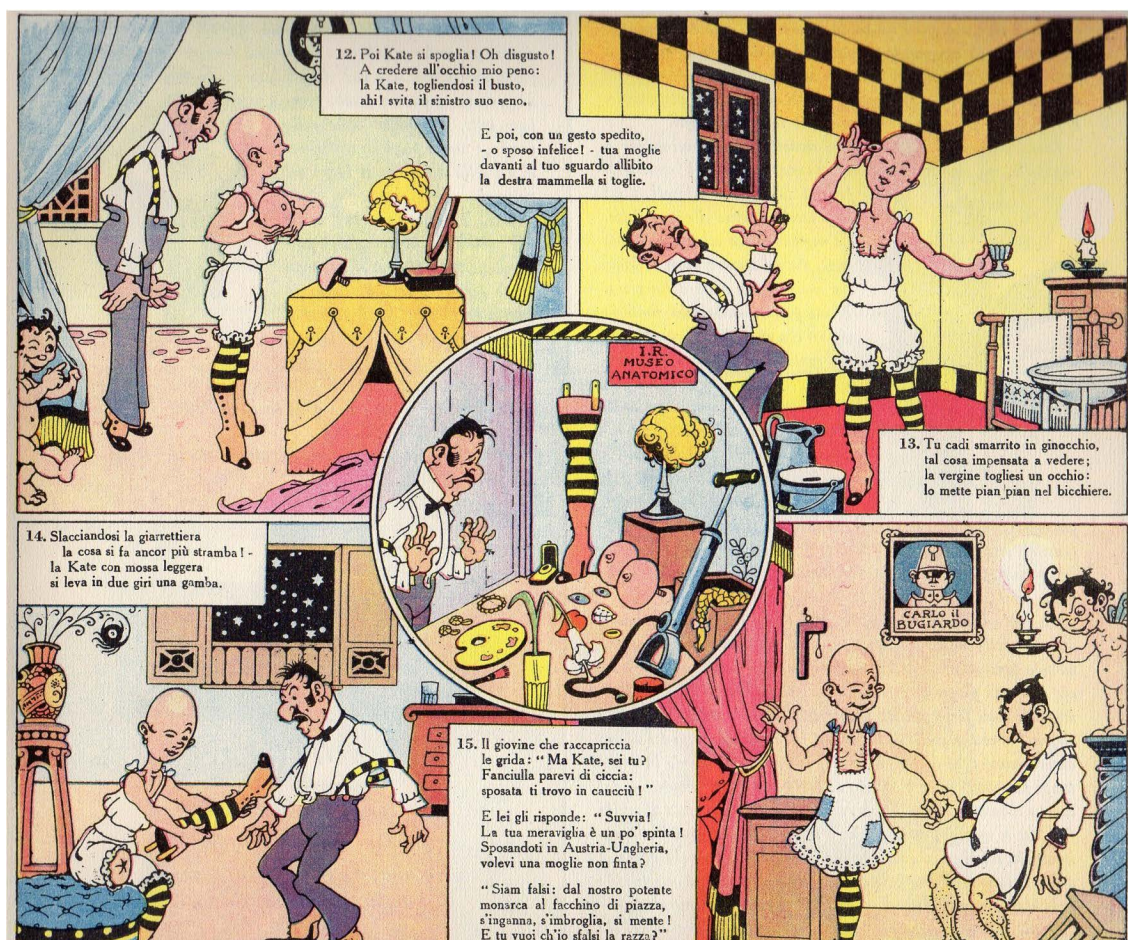


Fig. 1: *La Tradotta*, 6 (1918): 4-5, detail.

the sale of war bonds demonstrate (Bracco 2012: 220-231): instead of the canonical female figure representing the motherland, the blind and the maimed ask the viewer for support, thus establishing a total identification between the sacred body of the nation and the male bodies bearing the marks of sacrifice. The body of the soldier is expropriated matter, an object at the disposal of the nation at war, as all European national pedagogies of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century demonstrate<sup>17</sup>. On the literary side, the novel *Pinocchio alla guerra* (1917) by Paolo Lorenzini uncannily celebrates the destruction of Pinocchio's flesh-and-bone body in the name of the homeland. A former wooden puppet, Pinocchio joins the army as a human kid that, repeatedly wounded and mutilated, is turned into metallic pieces concealing a still beating heart. Put in a small wooden box, similar to a coffin proper, Pinocchio is returned to Geppetto, who is

<sup>17</sup> See Mosse 1996; Banti 2005; Blom-Hagemann-Hall 2000; Horne 2004.

aghast at the sight of his son's body: the path towards humanization that Pinocchio has undergone in the original novel by Carlo Collodi is reversed and his own soma re-codified as an experimental ground within which the loss of organic matter and its substitution with prostheses testify to an absolute devotion to the national cause<sup>18</sup>.

While at the front, in May 1917, Marinetti gets seriously wounded. His war notebooks do not particularly emphasize this event and the following long stay in hospital (see Marinetti 1987: 98-113) and, more generally, showcase a cold gaze in the description of wounded bodies, in fact not frequently represented. Lacerated flesh, burns, and scattered pieces of organic matter are usually depicted through nominal style and rapid sketches accumulating details with no pathos<sup>19</sup>. While the actual byproducts of perpetrated and suffered violence on the battlefield are marginalized in Marinetti's personal writings, some of his books directly relating to his war experience leave significant room to the prosthetic body. This cannot be explained just as an outcome of the increasing public pressure to frame and re-locate the bodies of mutilated soldiers: I rather argue that this is a late, ambiguous attempt to re-write early futurist imaginations and narratives of the body, urged by the appalling bio-political impact of the war<sup>20</sup>.

In 1916 Marinetti publishes in *L'Italia futurista* a singular plea directed to Italian women, inviting them to have sexual intercourse with mutilated veterans. The text, entitled *Donne, dovete preferire i gloriosi mutilati!*, was later collected in the 'handbook' *Come si seducono le donne* (1917), co-authored with Bruno Corra, and can be considered as both a collection of propagandistic *topoi* and an involuntary deconstruction of them:

Donne, avete l'onore di vivere in un tempo virile e futurista di nazioni cancellate, di città rase al suolo, di popoli migranti, di squadre affondate, di montagne esplose e di eserciti catturati.

In questo meraviglioso tempo infedele, veloce, dissonante, asimmetrico e squilibrato, crolla e muore finalmente l'idiotissima

---

<sup>18</sup> See Savettieri 2017.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Marinetti 1987: 125: «Il legno la carne le ossa il grasso e l'aluminio bruciato. Una gamba senza piede ancora colle fasce è già tutta carbonizzata e mezza in cenere. Il braccio stringe un ferro mostra un gomito arrostito color di mogano verniciato. Il gomito mi fa pensare a l'osso d'una coscia di montone bene cotto allo spiedo».

<sup>20</sup> According to Sartini Blum (2015: 97), in *L'alcova d'acciaio* the impact of industrial warfare «is exorcized through an excessive display of sexual prowess».

armonia del corpo umano. [...]

L'asimmetria dinamica dell'alpino scolpito e cesellato dal fuoco deve imporsi al vostro cuore e ai vostri sensi rinnovatori.

Donne, dovete preferire ai maschi intatti più o meno sospetti di vigliaccheria, i gloriosi mutilati! Amateli ardentemente! I loro baci futuristi vi daranno dei figli di acciaio, precisi, veloci, carichi di elettricità celeste, ispirati come il fulmine nel colpire e abbattere uomini, alberi e ruderi secolari.

Il proiettile è come un secondo padre del ferito. Gli impone il suo carattere. Gli insinua nelle fibre un atavismo di violenza feroce e di velocità incendiaria.

Gloria alla pelle umana straziata dalla mitraglia! Scopritene lo splendore scabro!

Sappiate ammirare un volto sul quale si è schiacciata una stella!... [...]

La chirurgia ha già iniziato la grande trasformazione. Dopo Carrel la guerra chirurgica compie fulmineamente la rivoluzione fisiologica. Fusione dell'Acciaio e della Carne. Umanizzazione dell'acciaio e metallizzazione della carne nell'uomo moltiplicato. Corpo motore dalle diverse parti intercambiabili e sostituibili. Immortalità dell'uomo!

Donne, amate i gloriosi mutilati e imitateli partecipando alla guerra. (Marinetti 1916)

If, on the one hand, Marinetti is apparently just retrieving the national propaganda celebrating heroic mutilated soldiers, on the other, he is revisiting one of the fundamental sites of his imagination: he explicitly quotes his earlier manifesto *L'uomo moltiplicato e il Regno della macchina* and calls for a hybridization between flesh and metal, in which the steel metallizes the flesh and the flesh, in turn, humanizes the steel, as if only the balance between the elements could neutralize the sense of threat engendered by the 'too organic' as much as by the 'too inorganic'. It is the very same process underpinning metaphorical strategies in the manifestos: natural tenors activate metallic vehicles and vice versa. Yet, there are some ineludible differences: first, Marinetti is now referring to actual prosthetic bodies whereby metaphors have become literal; second, these bodies are now explicitly gendered and eroticized and the multiplied man, far from repelling the contaminating effects of the feminine, does need (hetero)sexuality to contain the anxiety of devirilization. Marinetti, then, re-writes the symbolic stigma over the feminine, culminating in the homosocial self-destructive fantasy of *Mafarka*, and tries to reverse one of the dominant social images of the mutilated: from helpless, childlike, and, worse, sexually abnormal,

to heroic, vigorous, and empowered man. It is not by chance that women are invited to join men at the front: they are included in the new social project pivoting around the enhanced man that war surgery seems to design.

In *L'alcova d'acciaio* (1921), *romanzo vissuto* in which Marinetti goes back over the last months of war, from the catastrophic rout in Caporetto to the final battle in Vittorio Veneto, the path towards victory of the Italian army is accompanied by the numerous sexual performances of the narrating self and his comrades. The novel begins in June 1918 with a merry dinner in a barrack of bombardiers, followed by a group visit to a brothel. Topic narrative situations in war memoirs and diaries, these scenes set out the fundamental themes and tones of the novel: war and love are euphorically intertwined through sexual metaphors employed in the descriptions of fighting and war metaphors surfacing in love scenes (see Sartini Blum 1996: 99-104). Tenors and vehicles become interchangeable: war is still a form of masculine mastering of nature, as in *Mafarka*, but love is no longer just a devouring, self-destructive force that threatens the subject by making him passive and close to decay. A traumatic core underpins this interplay of conflicting yet contiguous drives, as demonstrated by a self-representation depicted after the joyful prologue of the novel: Marinetti's limping pace, probably caused by the accident at the front we are aware of from the notebooks, is directly connected to the metaphorical ulcer of Caporetto:

Ho il passo indeciso, malfermo ondeggiante, ferito, che ripete sulla terra le punture dilananti d'una piaga infame e assillante aperta nel mio fianco. Piaga di Caporetto, piaga enorme che sento vivere soffrire, imputridire e che presto bisogna, ad ogni costo bisogna colmare, colmare con nuovo ultravermiglio generosissimo sangue a fiotti bollenti, a torrenti nel suo centro e sugli orli il cui viola sinistro ricorda le botti sventrate dai fuggiaschi ubriachi, le schifose avvinazzate bombe incendiarie su Cervignano e il putrido violaceo fuggente tramonto del 27 ottobre. Guarire, guarire quella piaga! La guariremo. Già domino il mio passo e lo cadenzo. (Marinetti 1921: 18)

In this hypertrophic metaphor, the purple center and the borders of Caporetto's ulceration are compared to ripped open barrels alluding to drunk defectors, incendiary bombs, and the dark sunset of the day of the rout, thus implicitly establishing a puzzling identity between the agents provoking the wound and the wound itself. Coming full circle, towards the end of the novel Caporetto's ulcer is recalled again as in the process of being sutured by means of copulation:

La razza ha urgente bisogno di riprendere contatto con la razza. Aderire, aderire l'uno all'altra. Il giardino è pieno di bisbigli. Amplessi nel buio. Ogni amplesso è un punto chirurgico dato con frenesia per saldare le labbra dell'immensa ferita. Ah! Ah! Bisogna che presto questo punto della carne della Patria si ricongiunga con quest'altro punto corrispondente della stessa carne. (Marinetti 1921: 260)

The association between lacerated flesh and sexuality is the key to understanding the imagination nurturing the novel, no longer oriented towards the ascetic overcoming of sexuality and the decaying human body, but, on the contrary, refiguring the relationship with the feminine as essential to keeping the male self together and coping with the trauma of war. As in *Donne, dovete preferire i gloriosi mutilati!*, at the core of this rewriting lies the prosthetic body<sup>21</sup>. In the chapter entitled *Gli equipaggi della luna sbarcano a Rapallo*, a long scene is entirely devoted to the description of the erotic encounters between a group of mutilated veterans and some women against the backdrop of a beautiful full moon on the seaside:

Coppie strane dove un agile corpo di donna giovane è accarezzato un attimo, ma preferisce accarezzare un corpo maschio infranto che zoppica, ondeggia. Questi tende una mano sola, e non può tender la bocca per baciare.

Il gesto della donna diventa materno per accarezzare un mento d'argento, che la luna subito con dolce meccanico furore salda alla carne. Ride il sangue del mutilato in questa bizzarra officina improvvisata di metalli innamorati e carni che sognano di metallizzarsi. Il torso di quel tenente bersagliere si rizza con forza nella pienezza della sua virilità. (Marinetti 1921: 85)

The semantics of hybridization underlies this passage: metal and flesh are in fact blended in the bodies of these fragile and yet virile veterans. As such, they attract women, who are half mothers, half lovers. The body, haunted by the lost limbs and muscles (the missing mouth, hand, and arms), is described as a patchwork of distinct parts (the chin, the hand, the

---

<sup>21</sup> Referring to *L'alcova d'acciaio*, Martire (2011) interprets mutilation in futurist imagination as a means to work out the problem of the integrity of the Italian body politic. While acknowledging the importance of such political-allegorical reading, I rather explore the proximity of futurist mutilation to the actual war experience and the social discourses making sense of it.



trunk, the blood) and different materials (silver, flesh, metal). Even more sexually explicit is the following passage:

Fuori sulla terrazza, uno più ebbro degli altri, sull'altalena, abbracciato con una donna seminuda volava volava inargentandosi in alto di luna tra i fogliami. Certo un soprannaturale sciampagna li esaltava. Anche le donne erano impazzite. Una vergine bellissima si spalancò così a pochi metri di distanza, fra due rosai, al desiderio feroce d'un alpino, che, mutilato delle due braccia, realmente le mangiava di baci il viso, imprimendole il suo amore fra le poppe coi colpi reiterati del suo petto. (Marinetti 1921: 94)

The anguish of lost virility turns into the fantasy of the dismembered and re-assembled flesh-and-metal body that proves more virile than the intact body. As Stefano Bragato (2018: 186-189) has convincingly demonstrated, this chapter relies on a thick web of intertextual references to *La pioggia nel pineto* by Gabriele d'Annunzio: not only is Marinetti quoting with no parodying aims one of the most famous poems of his controversial literary rival; he is also turning upside down his own radical critique of romantic love and giving new value to its most indulgent symbol, the full moon, which was harshly attacked in one of the earliest manifestos, *Uccidiamo il chiaro di luna!*. At the center of this estranged marine landscape lies a twofold re-writing of a crucial locus of imagination of early Futurism: first, the cultural code of romantic love is at work in this passage only because it frames an abnormal and fetishistic sexual desire<sup>22</sup>, activated by the fantasy of a body whose unity is lost; second, the rigid separation between the masculine and the feminine is undermined because the broken male body compels Marinetti to re-think the relationship with nature and the feminine. Even if instrumentally refigured, the feminine turns from a foreclosed element into a psychic prosthesis that encapsulates the fear of destruction and helps cope with the trauma of the battleground<sup>23</sup>.

In another scene of the novel, mutilated veterans reappear: celebrated during an upper-class party, they look still and silent, frozen in elegant seats and dramatically incongruous with the frivolous atmosphere around them:

---

<sup>22</sup> According to Foster (2004: 124), Marinetti conceives technology (and prostheses) not as a violation of nature, but rather as a fetishistic reconfiguration of it.

<sup>23</sup> In more general terms, Daly (2016: 80-87) talks about «futurist coping» with reference to letter writing and the artistic practice of *parole in libertà*.

Tutto in vetrina, anche i gloriosi mutilati da festeggiare. Sono seduti immobili nelle poltrone rosso e oro del grande salone. Visi rudi cotti e riplasmati dalle carezze ferree corrosive delle rose granate. Visi scabri, tipici come il Carso. Pezzi di sole ancora fumanti e vibranti. Ora sono un po' pacificati, ma vi passa sopra il brivido di una irritazione. Perla il sudore su quella fronte. Sentono il peso insopportabile di quel lusso sfarzoso ammucciato con boria. Nei loro occhi oscilla l'anima tra le preoccupazioni di denaro e il piacere inusitato dei ricchi omaggi mondani. Intorno accaparranti fastidiosi tutti i brusii mormorii delle donne che vorrebbero essere materne e invece urtano sbadatamente tutti gli spigoli doloranti di quelle sensibilità troncate. (Marinetti 1921: 141)

A *topos* of war literature, the harsh contrast between civil and military life – the former effeminate, the latter manly – and the polemic against bourgeois laxness and luxury conceal here a less evident traumatic core: childlike, fragile, and unsettled, the mutilated are no longer the object of sexual attentions, as rather of distracted maternal gestures. A cautious, almost embarrassed, euphemistic rhetoric is in place to describe them: «cotti e riplasmati» alludes to burns and disfigured facial lineaments; «ferree carezze» are bombs and explosions; «sensibilità troncate» is both a metaphor of their psychic vulnerability and an accurate depiction of their trunk with no limbs. This dystonic setting co-exists with the sexual euphoria of the previous scene: both can be interpreted as reactions to the trauma of the scattered body, the former as a means of compensation boosted by the pleasure principle, the latter as a somber return to the reality principle.

The homosocial fantasies dominating early futurist imagination are to be revised because they are fantasies no more: the trench is indeed a nightmarish all-men world, a highly technologized and primordial 'ditch', entirely artificial but at the same time ultra-organic, saturated with mud, human bodies, and their waste matter. Steel and flesh mingle in the hybrid bodies of the mutilated, but prostheses are not the signs of enhancement foreshadowing the birth of an immortal creature. The narrative of the perfect, over-human simulacrum is contradicted by the patchwork of real prosthetic bodies. Marinetti will not explicitly acknowledge the need to re-write his seminal feats of the imagination; he rather tailors them to new meanings and undersides, in accordance with his absolute ideological support to the war and his full, vitalist enjoyment of the experience of combat.

It is only relatively important to establish whether he is fully aware of the discontinuity between his earlier avant-gardist narratives of the body and the adjustments and reconfigurations of some of his later war writ-

ings. Rather, one should see in this a striking example of the ambiguous workings between the literary imagination and historical reality, involving ideological blindness, delusion, partial repression of traumatic contents, assimilation of dominant social discourses and a reaction to them. To answer the second question that I posed at the beginning of this article, nothing apparently happens – stylistic homogeneity testifying to it – when the violence of history makes Marinetti's earlier narratives of the body suddenly turn real, except that Futurism – at least Marinetti's – has destroyed the future. It has, in fact, destroyed itself.

## Works Cited

- Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane - Becker, Annette, *14-18, retrouver la Guerre*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000.
- Bracco, Barbara, *La patria ferita. I corpi dei soldati italiani e la Grande guerra*, Firenze, Giunti, 2012.
- Banti, Alberto Mario, *L'onore della nazione. Identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla Grande Guerra*, Torino, Einaudi, 2005.
- Id., *Sublime madre nostra. La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011.
- Blom, Ida - Hagemann, Karen - Hall, Catherine (eds.), *Gendered Nations: Nationalism and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2000.
- Bourke, Joanna, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, London, Reaktion, 1996.
- Ead., *An Intimate History of Killing*, Basic Books, 1999.
- Bragato, Stefano, *Futurismo in nota. Studio sui taccuini di Marinetti*, Firenze, Franco Cesati, 2018.
- Daly, Selena, *Italian Futurism and The First World War*, Toronto, Buffalo, London, University of Toronto Press, 2016.
- De Maria, Luciano, "Marinetti poeta e ideologo", in F.T. Marinetti, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, Ed. L. De Maria, Milano, Mondadori, 1983: XXIX-C.
- Foster, Hal, *Prosthetic Gods*, Cambridge MA, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2004.
- Gibelli, Antonio, *La Grande guerra degli italiani 1915-1918*, Milano, Sansoni, 1998.
- Horne, John, "Masculinity in Politics and War in the Age of Nation-States and World Wars, 1850-1950", in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, Eds. Stefan Dudink - Karen Hagemann - John Tosh, New York, Manchester University Press, 2004: 22-40.
- Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso, "Donne, dovete preferire i gloriosi mutilati!", *L'Italia futurista*, 2, 1916: 1
- Id., *L'alcova d'acciaio. Romanzo vissuto*, Milano, Vitagliano, 1921.
- Id., *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, Ed. Luciano De Maria, Milano, Mondadori, 1983.
- Id., *Taccuini 1915/1921*, Ed. Alberto Bertoni, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1987.
- Id., *Mafarka il futurista* [1910], Ed. Luigi Ballerini, Milano, Mondadori, 2011.

- Martire, Anthony, "Il soggetto mutilato del futurismo: F.T. Marinetti e la costruzione dell'italiano futurista nel primo dopoguerra", *Memoria e ricerca*, 38 (2011): 99-110.
- Meazzi, Barbara, "Mafarka le futuriste ou l'imposture mythologique du Futurisme", in *Les mythes des avant-gardes*, Eds. Véronique Léonard-Roques, Jean-Christophe Valtat, Clermont-Ferrand, Press Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2003 : 302-315.
- Micali, Simona, *Towards a Posthuman Imagination in Literature and Media: Monsters, Mutants, Aliens, Artificial Beings*, London, Peter Lang, 2019.
- Mosse, George, *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Plaitano, Greta, "Il 'metodo Vanghetti': protesi cinetiche al servizio della volontà", in *Guerra e scienze della mente in Italia nella prima metà del Novecento*, Ed. Dario De Santis, Roma, Aracne, 2019: 331-359.
- Sartini Blum, Cinzia, *The Other Modernism. F.T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1996.
- Ead., "Marvellous Masculinity: Futurist Strategies of Self-Transfiguration through the Maelstrom of Modernity", in *Modernism and Masculinity*, Eds. Natalya Lusty - Julian Murphet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015: 87-102.
- Savettieri, Cristina, "Corpi feriti nella letteratura della Grande guerra", *Arabeschi*, 10 (2017), <http://www.arabeschi.it/corpi-feriti-nella-letteratura-della-grande-guerra>.
- Spackman, Barbara, *Fascist Virilities. Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Stoichita, Victor, *The Pygmalion Effect: From Ovid to Hitchcock*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Tropea, Peppino - Mazzoni, Alberto - Micera, Silvestro - Corbo, Massimo, "Giuliano Vanghetti and the innovation of 'cineplastic operations'", *Neurology*, 89, 15 (2017), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1212/WNL.0000000000004488>

## The author

**Cristina Savettieri**

Cristina Savettieri is an Associate Professor of Contemporary Italian

Literature at the University of Pisa. She previously worked at Freie Universität Berlin as an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow (2011-13) and at the University of Edinburgh as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow (2015-17). Among her main research interests are: Carlo Emilio Gadda, Italian Modernism, the culture of the First World War, the theories and practices of the modern tragic.

Email: [cristina.savettieri@unipi.it](mailto:cristina.savettieri@unipi.it)

## The article

Date sent: 31/03/2022

Date accepted: 31/07/2022

Date published: 30/11/2022

## How to cite this article

Savettieri, Cristina, "Hybrid Bodies between Utopia and Trauma in F.T. Marinetti", *Entering the Simulacra World*, Eds. A. Ghezzani - L. Giovannelli - F. Rossi - C. Savettieri, *Between*, XII.24 (2022): 461-482, [www.between-journal.it](http://www.between-journal.it)