

Folla/Follia: Futurism and the Crowd

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Crowds are somewhat like the sphinx of ancient fable: it is necessary to arrive at a solution of the problems offered by their psychology or to resign ourselves to being devoured by them.

—GUSTAVE LE BON, *The Crowd*

When F. T. Marinetti founded the futurist movement in February 1909 by publishing an inflammatory manifesto on the front page of the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, he announced his desire to address both elite and mass audiences (fig. 1). Many of the manifesto's most extreme declarations—the glorification of war, militarism and patriotism, scorn for women, the call for libraries, museums, and academies of all kinds to be destroyed, the celebration of courage, audacity, and revolt, a new aesthetic of speed and struggle—can be understood as deliberately provocative. But, on a deeper level, these sometimes conflicting demands reveal that futurism did not seek merely to establish a literary or artistic school but to provoke the cultural and political regeneration of Italy. To this end it fused the destruction of tradition central to avant-garde rhetoric with calls for new forms of patriotic consciousness and action. Marinetti clearly understood the necessity of reaching beyond a small circle of elite intellectuals and bourgeois supporters if his movement were to bring about the revolution he desired. Yet his embrace of the masses was always paradoxical, mediated by a Nietzschean cult of the superman, and filtered through an ideology that both celebrated and derided the crowd as a force of the future and a regression to a primitive past. This essay explores the multiple ways in which the futurists sought to interpellate and galvanize the masses, focusing particularly on their performative interpretation of late-nineteenth-century French and Italian

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Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.



FIGURE 1. F. T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism." *Le Figaro*, 20 Feb. 1909, p. 1.

crowd theory. By attending to the futurists's pervasive effort both to shape and to merge with the masses, we gain a clearer understanding of the motivations that drove some of their most famous avant-garde inventions: the futurist *serata* (evening), *parole in libertà* (free-word poetry), and their pictorial syntheses of visual and verbal "images."

Not surprisingly, the figure of *la folla*—the crowd—occupies a central place within the constellation of futurist topoi. Simultaneously flattered and reviled, desired and feared, the crowd is the necessary addressee of futurist rhetoric and the locus of its political and cultural aspirations. Indeed, futurism's fascination with *la folla* was deeply ambivalent, revealing an awareness of the masses as a powerful political force whose newly declared rights and demands were destabilizing traditional social hierarchies.¹ Conflated with "the people" or even the Italian race, these masses at times became synonymous with the nation. As such they were said to embody positive characteristics such as intuitive vitality, elasticity, heroism, and even genius. Conflated with the mob, *la folla* degenerated into a spontaneous, unruly collectivity, dangerous in its proclivity for crime, but thrilling as a potential agent of violent political revolt.² It was this very slippage from one mythified referent to the next, from the boisterous multitude gathered at a political demonstration to the violent throng of rioting workers, from the enthusiastic audience at a theatrical performance to the people at large, that gave *la folla* its peculiar power and resonance as an imaginary Other.

Always haunting this Other was the threat of social and psychic degeneration. Crowds, as they were theorized at the turn of the century, were thought to succumb inevitably to an atavistic regression to unconscious

1. Among the "wholly new phenomena" characteristic of modernity, Marinetti singles out "the right to strike, equality before the law, the authority of numbers, the usurping power of mobs [*la folla*], the speed of international communications" (F. T. Marinetti, "Nascita di un'estetica futurista," *Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*, ed. Luciano De Maria [Milan, 1968], p. 269; trans. R. W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli, under the title "The Birth of a Futurist Aesthetic," *Let's Murder the Moonshine: Selected Writings*, ed. Flint [Los Angeles, 1991], p. 88).

2. George Rudé points out that the term *mob* derives from the Latin *mobile vulgus*, a term that associates a fickle "mobility" with the masses, thereby revealing more about the fears of the possessing classes than about the characteristics of the crowd. See George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England 1730–1848* (New York, 1964), pp. 252–53.

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primal impulses. Once immersed in a crowd, it was claimed, one experienced a loss of differentiation and individuality and merged with the larger, *informe* mass of an impulsive, irrational group. The futurists desired integration with this mass in order to experience the exhilarating tumult at its explosive center. But they also desired to stand above or beyond it, in order to make the crowd an instrument of their will.

As in the literature of the period, the futurists understood the crowd to be “feminine” in its malleability, its incapacity to reason, its susceptibility to flattery and hysteria, and its secret desire to be seduced and dominated. Marinetti made this association of the crowd and femininity explicit in 1916 in a manifesto announcing a new, militaristic form of poetic declamation designed to promote the war effort. In this manifesto he referred to his long “experience of the femininity of crowds and weakness of their collective virginity in the course of forcing Futurist free verse upon them.”³ But Marinetti’s interest in crowd psychology as a means of understanding the social unrest of his time can be traced back as far as his early articles and theater reviews for *La Revue blanche*. In 1900, in an essay analyzing the riots in Milan of May 1898, Marinetti used the phrase “the psychology of crowds,” which was also the title of an enormously influential book by Gustave Le Bon (*La Psychologie des foules* [1895]).⁴ No doubt drawing on Le Bon’s book, but also perhaps on the contemporary work of the Italian social theorist Scipio Sighelle, Marinetti described the riots as rooted in “deep and complex psychological forces” rather than in material social causes such as poverty or famine. He understood the violence that erupted, seemingly without warning, as an expression of the people’s “horizon, the climate, and atavistic behavior.” Such imperious factors defied reasoned argument and seemed nearly impossible to control. Although he demonstrated some sympathy for the socialists on the barricades in Milan, he regarded the military’s bloody suppression of the riots as inevitable. Marinetti believed that such spontaneous and convulsive events could not lead to genuine reform, for “no country in the world shows itself less prepared for social reform by way of revolutionary change than Italy” (“E,” pp. 561, 564, 575).

Marinetti’s early fascination with crowds is also evident in his play *Le Roi bombance* (*King Revelry*), a satiric tragedy published in 1905 in the *Mercur de France* and performed for the first time in 1909 under the auspices of the

3. Marinetti, “Dynamic and Synoptic Declamation” (11 Mar. 1916), *Let’s Murder the Moonshine*, p. 151; hereafter abbreviated “D.”

4. Marinetti, “Les Emeutes milanaises de mai 1898,” *La Revue blanche*, 15 Aug. 1900, p. 569; hereafter abbreviated “E.”

Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris. The title and grotesque tone of this play reveals the important influence of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, with its reliance on gastronomic and obscene bodily metaphors. More specifically, the play allegorizes contemporary political debates on socialism and reflects on the fatality and meaninglessness of the human condition. *Le Roi bombance* opens with an image of a famished crowd, whose physical hunger represents the desire for power as an implacable force located not in the mind but in the lower bodily domain of the stomach. The revolution provoked by the famine is overturned when the people consume the king's cadaver, thereby metaphorically restoring him to life. The king's reincarnation through the very revolutionaries who had deposed him presents a cyclical view of history in which powerful institutions such as the monarchy eternally reassert themselves in new guises, despite the rhetoric of politicians or the revolts of sectarian groups.

In a letter of 1905 to Giovanni Pascoli, Marinetti explains that he conceived this play in 1901 while assisting at an oratorical duel between two of the leading political figures of his day: Filippo Turati, a reformist socialist, and Arturo Labriola, a revolutionary socialist.⁵ This spectacle occurred before three thousand Milanese workers in a vast hall and was characterized by "brutal stupidities." Marinetti completed *Le Roi bombance* during the Milanese general strike of 1904, in a spirit of unshakable pessimism toward what he called "irreducible popular imbecility and the ferocity of human nature." Against the crowd, with its eternal "hunger for an impossible happiness," Marinetti set the tragicomic figure of the Poet-Idiot, who was satirically modelled on several known symbolist and decadent poets, including himself. This Poet-Idiot, allied with the insurgent dynamism of the libertarian character called Famone (Big Hunger), proposes that the only solution to human misery lies in Art and in a government of artist-revolutionaries.⁶ Finding his ideas misunderstood and derided by the crowd, which cannot distinguish truth from illusion, the Poet chooses to die by striking himself on the forehead. Even this action has symbolic mean-

5. Marinetti, letter to Giovanni Pascoli, summer 1905, in *Marinetti et le futurisme: Études, documents, iconographies*, ed. Giovanni Lista (Lausanne, 1976), p. 63. Lista also reprints part of this letter in his excellent analysis of *Le Roi bombance*. See Lista, *F.T. Marinetti: L'Anarchiste du futurisme* (Paris, 1995), pp. 43–46.

6. Marinetti offered this gloss on his play in his essay "Beyond Communism," written after he and Mussolini were defeated by the socialists in the November 1919 elections and at a time when Mussolini was rejecting the libertarian elements of their political platform; see Marinetti, "Al di là del Comunismo," *Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*, pp. 421–22. See also Antonella Nuzzaci's analysis of this later interpretation by Marinetti in *Il Teatro Futurista: Genesi, Linguaggi, Tecniche* (Rome, 1995), pp. 12–16.

ing, since the center of activity of the crowd is not the mind but the stomach.⁷ The poet's suicide is an affirmation of his freedom to determine his own destiny and a recognition of his uselessness before the power and ignorance of the masses. In Marinetti's words, the play was intended to demonstrate, in a burlesque manner, "the tragic and inevitable victory of idealist individualism over the brutal mass. Briefly, I concluded with the failure of socialism, the glory of anarchy and the complete ridicule of the charlatans, reformists, and other scullions of universal Happiness."⁸

As this brief description suggests, Marinetti's concern was as much with his own futile role as an idealist poet in an age of mass audiences as it was with the spectre of proletarian revolution. The writing of *Le Roi bombance* was framed by two violent but ultimately suppressed strikes. But as Giovanni Lista has observed, Marinetti's pessimistic response to these events cannot be attributed to the disillusionment of revolutionary aspirations. Rather, his reaction is that of an aristocrat and poet who is repelled by the rising power of the masses, the threat of socialism, and its leveling egalitarian ideals.

Ironically, when *Le Roi bombance* was performed in July 1909 to an outraged audience, the "Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" had only just appeared. Marinetti chose to publish it on the front page of a Parisian newspaper, where it was guaranteed to garner the attention, not just of poets and other literati, but of an international mass public. Although the futurist movement that Marinetti founded retained until its end the notion of an innate social hierarchy, his attitude toward the masses had shifted. In a calculated move, Marinetti rejected his former pessimism, so much part of the symbolist legacy he had inherited, as well as the ivory tower attitude it implied. In its place he assumed an antidecadent attitude of "artificial optimism" and enthusiasm for modern life, and the life of the masses in particular.⁹ In language that owes much to Walt Whitman, the "Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" proclaims:

We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot;
we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the
modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of the arsenals
and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons . . . and the

7. See *ibid.*, p. 14.

8. Marinetti, letter to Pascoli, summer 1905, *Marinetti et le futurisme*, p. 63.

9. In "Electrical War," first published in French in 1911, Marinetti proclaimed the need "to create an artificial optimism against chronic pessimism" (Marinetti, "Electrical War," *Let's Murder the Moonshine*, p. 116; see also Marinetti, *Le Futurisme* [Paris, 1911], p. 135).

sleek flight of planes whose propellers chatter in the wind like banners and seem to cheer like an enthusiastic crowd.¹⁰

Marinetti here sings of crowds in a passage that compares them, in vitality and force, to modern technological inventions. He embraces the crowd as a phenomenon typical of modernity, and he affirms the potential for action and revolution that it promises. His new strategy will be to appeal directly to the masses with the goal of reenergizing the nation along futurist lines. Only with the collaboration of the strongest and most subversive elements of the working class will he be able to achieve his goal of overthrowing the existing bourgeoisie, which he regards as weak and corrupt. Futurism, then, will mount a program of political and cultural regeneration with the aim of establishing a patriotic, fully industrialized, militant nation. At the heart of this project lay the recognition, filtered through the lens of crowd theory, of the new social importance of the masses.

Interestingly, Umberto Boccioni had also meditated on the modern phenomenon of the crowd in a prefuturist drawing of 1908. *Crowd Surrounding an Equestrian Monument* (fig. 2) was based on the fourteenth-century monument to Cansignorio della Scala by Bonino da Campione in Verona (fig. 3).¹¹ Boccioni's rendering abstracts the gothic base of the sculpture in order to transform it into a phallic tower that raises the equestrian hero, dressed in medieval armor, high above the wildly gesturing crowd. Its blurred and partially fused forms oppose his clear, immobile silhouette, set starkly against the sky. This image proclaims the desire of the crowd for the leader in terms so exaggerated as to imply parody. That this desire is decadent, hysterical, and contagious is suggested by the otherwise surprising presence of a laughing nude woman at the right and by the mimetic repetition of the gesture of the outstretched arms. As if seized by demonic forces, or perhaps in a moment of hysteria, the woman seems to give way to sexual fantasies or at least to embody the dangerous principle of unleashed desire. The men who raise their arms before the monument also seem overcome; their violently imploring gestures suggest an exalted, irrational state of mind.

10. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (London, 1973), p. 22.

11. For more information on this monument and its place within the larger complex of sarcophagi to the Scaligeri, see Fernanda de Maffei, *Le Arche Scaligere di Verona* (1955; Verona, 1966). De Maffei sees the equestrian monument to Cansignorio as an inferior copy of a monument Bonino da Campione had executed twenty years earlier for Bernabò Visconti, and therefore as a workshop product. I am grateful to Irving Lavin for his discussion of this monument with me and for providing me with this reference.



FIGURE 2. Umberto Boccioni, *Crowd Surrounding an Equestrian Monument* (1908). Private collection. Pencil and ink on paper.



FIGURE 3. Bonino da Campione, *Cansignorio della Scala* (1370–74).

This image is fascinating in that Boccioni chooses to portray not one of the numerous worker demonstrations or riots that shook the nation during the preceding decade but an aristocratic crowd fashionably attired in black tie.¹² As such, he seems to acknowledge that the modern crowd is a heterogeneous phenomenon, typical not only of proletarian masses but also of other social classes and groups. If he represents this crowd as enthralled by the monument to Cansignorio, the last of the dynastic Scaligeri family that ruled Verona in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it may be in order to allude generally to the desperate desire of the Italian aristocracy to reaffirm its waning prestige and authority. Boccioni still considered himself a socialist in 1908 and (like Marinetti) would have been critical of the decadence of the ruling elite and of dynastic privilege. His drawing may be a satirical response to the political debates of this period (preceding the parliamentary elections of 1909) in which socialist demands that suffrage be extended beyond the members of a small, landholding class encountered resistance.¹³ Significantly, the equestrian monument to Cansignorio, dedicated to a feudal court, presides over a serene, enclosed cemetery located in the center of Verona. Rather than romanticize this emblem of a bygone era, Boccioni portrays the prince as rigid and insubstantial; lacking corporeal presence, his virility and power are sustained only by his stiff posture and the absurdly phallic plinth. Crudely outlined and with hatchmarks that do little to establish a sense of volume, the prince appears as an illusory being, the collective projection of an hysterical upper class threatened by growing demands for democratic reform. Seen in this light, Boccioni's drawing unmasks the claims to power of this class as rooted in the political myths and symbols of the distant past. Yet this image can also be read as revealing Boccioni's own fascination with virility and power, as manifested by the "leader" who electrifies and dominates the crowd.¹⁴

Although Boccioni's drawing of an elegant if hysterical aristocratic crowd

12. One can compare this subject and its treatment to another drawing on a theme with class ramifications that Boccioni executed in 1908: *The Mining Disaster of Rabdob in Westfalia*. Published on 22 Nov. 1908 in *L'illustrazione italiana*, this drawing depicts the anguish of the miners' wives and children before the bodies of the dead men, laid out on the ground in a row and sheathed in white. Although overcome by grief, this crowd does not succumb to violence or hysteria. For a reproduction of this drawing see Maurizio Calvesi and Ester Coen, *Boccioni* (Milan, 1983), p. 259.

13. "Universal manhood suffrage" was only enacted in 1912 and exercised for the first time in the elections of 1913.

14. Significantly, the artist joined the futurist movement after attending a *serata* in Milan, where Marinetti and a few other poets harangued their audience with a combination of patriotic, bellicose, and avant-garde rhetoric. Marinetti seems to have fulfilled the role of the heroic, dynamic leader Boccioni sought.

is comparatively unusual, it nonetheless exhibits the psychological qualities and behaviors that, according to contemporary theorists, define a crowd.¹⁵ For not every assembly of persons, of course, constitutes a proper crowd. Le Bon's aforementioned study popularized much that was being debated in scientific journals at this time. He claimed that the crowd appeared when "the sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes."¹⁶ No matter how heterogeneous the members of a gathering might be, once they have submitted to what Le Bon called the "psychological law of the mental unity of crowds," their individual attributes and ability to reason became submerged within the newly formed organism. In their place Le Bon discerned the workings of the unconscious, which he believed was a mental substratum created primarily by hereditary influences, or "the genius of a race" (C, pp. 26, 28). This regression to the unconscious also implied an atavistic return to a precivilized state or even a less advanced stage of human evolution. Le Bon defined the main characteristics of crowds as "impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgement and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides—which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution—in women, savages, and children, for instance" (C, pp. 35–36). Similar parallels between the workings of the modern unconscious and the mental state of so-called primitive peoples, women, and children would also be drawn by Freud in his theory the psyche, and they turned up in Sighele's crowd theory as well.¹⁷ Sighele had written about the criminal attributes of crowds as early as 1891 and had published a book titled *The Criminal Couple* in 1897 in which he asserted that "the crowd—like woman—has an extreme psychology, capable of every excess, possibly capable only of excesses, admirable at times for its abnegation, frequently frightening in its ferocity, never or almost never even and measured in its sentiments."¹⁸ His more general

15. For an excellent discussion of the development of crowd theory, especially as it emerges out of the French context of nineteenth-century social philosophy and literature, see Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven, Conn., 1981).

16. Gustave Le Bon, *La Psychologie des foules* (Paris, 1895); trans. pub., under the title *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1896; London, 1952), p. 23; hereafter abbreviated C.

17. Freud took Le Bon's theories as a point of departure for his 1921 study *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Freud praised many aspects of Le Bon's study of the crowd, including his "identification of the group mind with the mind of primitive people." Yet Freud also points out that Le Bon's understanding of the unconscious does not coincide with his own, which in addition to residues of the "archaic heritage" of the human mind, comprises the "unconscious repressed" (Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey [London, 1953–74], 18:79, 75).

18. Quoted in Scipio Sighele, *L'intelligenza della folla* (Turin, 1903), p. 4; hereafter abbreviated I. See also the final chapter of Sighele, *La coppia-criminale: Studio di psicologia morbosa* (Turin, 1893;

work of 1903, *The Intelligence of the Crowd*, consisted for the most part of previously published papers, including some of the responses he received from other theorists. In this book he agreed with Le Bon that the crowd is not the sum of its parts but the diffusion of the self into the greater unity of the collectivity. And he asserted that the crowd is governed by the laws of the unconscious, which are largely determined by race. Sighele also repeatedly emphasized the femininity of the crowd as well as its atavism: "Collective psychology,—similar to this in feminine psychology (may the women forgive me)—is made of cruelty and of contradictions, and passes, or rather leaps, with great velocity from one sentiment to the contrary sentiment." He differed from Le Bon, however, in insisting on a distinction between the crowd as a static or synchronic phenomenon and the crowd as a dynamic or historically developing phenomenon. Collective psychology, he maintained, pertained only to the static crowd, which he characterized as a simple and improvised gathering and, in that sense, nearly an animal agglomeration; it did not pertain to the formation of publics, which entailed a much slower, more human and civilizing process. He claimed that "the crowd, in sum, is an eminently barbarous and atavistic collectivity: the public is an eminently civil and modern collectivity" (I, pp. 66, 87). The crowd, therefore, is a "wild horde" or, in other terms, an *informe* human agglomeration that thinks and feels tumultuously and which is, with few exceptions, prone to commit crimes.

Boccioni painted *Riot in the Galleria* in 1910, shortly after he joined the futurist movement (fig. 4). This work, which was originally exhibited in December 1910 with the less politically charged title *A Brawl* (*Una baruffa*), depicts a melee that erupts in Milan's most famous arcade, the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, at night, under the glare of brilliant electric lights.¹⁹ Here again Boccioni displays his interest in an upper-class crowd, but he now

2d ed., 1897; 3d ed., 1909). Also relevant are Sighele's other books on the criminal crowd; see *La folla delinquente* (Turin, 1891) and *I delitti della folla* (Turin, 1902).

19. Coen notes that this painting was first exhibited with the title *Una Baruffa* in late 1910 and early 1911 at the Famiglia Artistica in Milan, where a critic for *La Perseveranza* observed: "The Brawl is set under an arcade near a café; the crowd runs, it gets excited, thereby exciting the shadows under the arc lamps" (quoted in Coen, *Umberto Boccioni* [exhibition catalog, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 15 Sept. 1988–8 Jan. 1989], pp. 93–94). In late 1916, the painting was reproduced in the catalog of a posthumous retrospective of Boccioni's work held in Milan under the title *La rissa* [The Riot]. In the exhibition checklist, however, it appears under the title *Baruffa in galleria* (*Brawl in the Galleria*). The painting acquired its present title only in 1952. For a discussion of the title and exhibition history of this painting, see *ibid.* It is likely that Marinetti was responsible for changing the title in 1916, thereby giving the violence depicted in the work more political resonance than it initially had. Although the painting is consonant with Marinetti's enthusiasm for violence and for the crowd as a phenomenon characteristic of modernity, as originally conceived *La Baruffa* did not directly address the rhetoric and demands of the just-emerging irredentist movement in Italy.



FIGURE 4. Umberto Boccioni, *Riot in the Galleria* (1910). Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. Gift of Emilio and Maria Jesi. Oil on canvas.

provides it with a specifically modern urban setting: a shopping arcade, where the signs of pleasure, fashion, advertising, and consumption create a new, destabilized, hallucinatory space. Paradoxically, this very modernity is linked to a resurgence of atavistic behavior, so that the new artificial intoxicants (alcohol, cosmetics, fashionable hats, electric lights) release regressive or submerged tendencies. Few art historians have observed that at the center of this melee we find two women, probably prostitutes, locked in battle. Just before them, framed by the arc of their outstretched bodies, two men engage in a skirmish while a third strives to hold them apart. This linking of female and male bodies suggests a possible narrative pretext for the outburst of anger in sexual rivalry or jealousy, although Boccioni does not clarify causes but focuses, rather, on effects. *Riot in the Galleria* is formally and thematically similar to a painting now titled *La retata (The Raid)* but exhibited in 1911 with the ironic title *Care puttane (Dear Prostitutes)* (fig. 5).²⁰ This latter work seeks to capture the tumultuous moment of a police arrest of several prostitutes, again under streams of violent electric light.

Both paintings, then, portray the physical and psychological effects of an agitated crowd, and both center on the activities of "criminal" women. In *Riot in the Galleria*, the violence of the women at the vortex of the scene seems to generate a double movement. Hysteria spreads like a form of contagion outwards to entrap all of those within its field, while it also precipitates a stampede inward toward the center. As in *Crowd Surrounding an Equestrian Monument*, Boccioni establishes a sense of the unity of the multitude through the use of simple repeated gestures and postures, especially the body flung forward, arms raised in agitation or supplication. This allows us to distinguish those who have been drawn into the chaos and who begin to form a circle around the protagonists, from those who occupy the far reaches of the Galleria, and are as yet unaffected. Only the gentleman with raised arms in the lower center foreground faces outward. Cut off by the picture's edge, this figure seems to pitch forward into the viewers' space, as if to forestall their inward rush. Indeed the painting's literal edge is treated as a boundary to be transgressed on all sides; Boccioni crops the electric lamp at the top and causes figures to flow into the pictorial field from the foreground and sides as if they were compelled by a magnetic force. By this device, he imagines an expanding circle of participants, including those

20. This painting, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, was formerly owned by Louis Lépine, prefect of police in Paris. Lépine purchased this painting on the occasion of the futurist exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris (February 1912). His memoirs, published in 1929, contain numerous accounts of the violence of crowds. See Louis Lépine, *Mes souvenirs* (Paris, 1929).



FIGURE 5. Umberto Boccioni, *The Raid* (1910). Private collection. Oil on canvas.

viewers who wish to project themselves into the center of the picture, as if it were the tumultuous center of a riot.

The radiant electric light that suffuses the scene enhances the sense that a current of energy runs through this crowd, connecting each individual to the others. Dazzling specks of complementary color dissolve the boundaries between figures so that bodies flow into each other and into the pictorial ground. The treatment of the faces and limbs is especially telling; the visage of each man in the foreground, for example, is indistinguishable from the stippled surface, and their legs and arms have only the wavering, optical presence of reflections in water. Many of the figures lack visible feet and hands so that at their extremities they seem to dissipate into a charged, atmospheric flux. The loss of felt somatic boundaries and of psychic individ-

uality thought to be characteristic of crowd experience finds its formal equivalent in this brilliantly shimmering, unified surface.

Similarly in *The Raid* vectors of light, emanating from a set of brilliant lamps in the background, pierce the scene at oblique angles, disrupting its logical spatial coordinates, while also making the narrative difficult to interpret. Such extreme night lighting both illuminates and blinds the figures it falls upon. The hapless prostitute at the center is exposed, trapped by the light. The mass of nearly fused figures who surround her grow increasingly agitated, pointing, turning away, flailing, even as the ground beneath their feet seems to implode. Fractured, multiplied, and all too dazzling, light appears in these works under the sign of hysteria, producing convulsive behaviors that no longer submit to reason or control. Electric light also provides a setting for the delirium of the crowd in many of Marinetti's texts. This motif turns up, for example, in his descriptions of the riots of May 1898. In one passage of his essay we read, "Towards eight o'clock at night, on the vast square of the Duomo, all inflamed with small electric moons, a human tide burst into foam, armed with raised fists and cries."²¹ Or, again, "Milan gasped, all its windows open in an atmosphere exasperated by light and by waiting."²²

At least one other major painting is worth considering in this context. Boccioni's *The Riot* of 1911 counterposes a massed group of figures on the street with a set of opened windows and electric lamps on the upper floor of a building (fig. 6). In the earliest sketch for this work there are no indications of place or time (fig. 7).²³ A throng of violently gesturing figures surrounds a closed inner circle of men who presumably are hunched around a victim of uncertain identity. We appear to witness the consequences of a raid or attack, as the men with raised fists in the foreground

21. "Vers huit heures du soir, sur la vaste place du Dôme, toute incendiée de petites lunes électriques, une marée humaine, hérissée de poings brandis et de clameurs, déferlait" ("E," p. 567).

22. "Milan haletait, toutes ses fenêtres ouvertes en une atmosphère exaspérée de lumière et d'attente" ("E," p. 569). The trope of the electrified crowd was common in nineteenth-century literature. In "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire writes: "Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy" (Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne [New York, 1964], p. 9). Baudelaire's fascination with the crowd, one shared with Gabriele D'Annunzio, Edgar Allan Poe, and other decadent writers is analyzed in Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), chap. 2.

23. Boccioni dated and numbered this and the subsequent sketch "18 April 1911 U.B. I" and "18 April 1911 U.B. II" respectively. Neither the sketches nor the oil painting now called *The Riot* were exhibited in Boccioni's lifetime, and we therefore do not have the artist's title nor any contemporary critical commentary on this work. This painting entered the collection of Boccioni's friend Vico Baer in 1911. When first exhibited in 1924, it was titled *La retata (The Raid or The Police Raid)*.



FIGURE 6. Umberto Boccioni, *The Riot* (1911). Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (50.5 × 50.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Herbert and Nannette Rothschild.

seem roused to vengeance. A distraught woman with two children at the far right provides some anecdotal information without clarifying the circumstances. In *Sketch No. 2*, the execution is looser and the poses are less detailed (though still legible), but the artist now situates the scene against a backdrop of blazing arc lamps, thereby indicating that the action occurs at night and in an urban setting (fig. 8). In a third study for *The Riot*, the scuffle is spatially compressed, reduced to one-third of the scene and treated even more summarily, while far greater prominence is given to the multiplied orbs of light (fig. 9). The final painting again rearranges these proportions but retains the thematic interaction of the fiercely illuminated environment and mob hysteria. Here as in related works Boccioni uses elec-



FIGURE 7. Umberto Boccioni, *Study No. 1 for "The Riot"* (18 Apr. 1911). Private collection. Ink on paper.



FIGURE 8. Umberto Boccioni, *Study No. 2 for "The Riot"* (18 Apr. 1911). Private collection. Ink on paper.



FIGURE 9. Umberto Boccioni, *Study for "The Riot"* (1911). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Lydia Winton Malbin, 1989. Pencil on paper.

tric light as a symbol of the transmission of energy and as the agent of a “new psychology of night-life” whose most “feverish” figures included the bon viveur, the cocotte, the apache dancer, and the absinthe drinker.²⁴ Each of these social types exists on the fringes of bourgeois society and connotes an excess of pleasure spawned by addiction, hallucination, or delirium. For Boccioni, the crowd comprising such types is most exciting and most perilous at night, when repressed desires and illicit behaviors find expression and when the electric lamps are the brightest and most disorienting. Elec-

24. “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters,” in *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 25. The manifesto is dated 11 Feb. 1910 and signed by Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, although Boccioni is credited with being its major author.

tricity could also serve as a metaphor of the artist's expressive power to sway and dominate a crowd, much like a great orator or authoritarian leader. In a short theatrical synthesis of 1916 titled *Genius and Culture*, Boccioni has an agitated artist exclaim to an uncomprehending critic: "Glory! Ah! Glory! . . . I'm strong! I'm young! I can face anything! . . . Oh divine electric light! . . . Sun . . . Electrify the crowds! Set them on fire! Dominate!"²⁵

The connection I am making here between images of rioting or agitated crowds, a nighttime setting, and particular effects of illumination is one that was frequently discussed at the turn of the century. Social theorists like Gabriel Tarde, Le Bon, and Sighele drew analogies between social formations and recent discoveries (or in many cases merely hypotheses) in the physical sciences about the nature of matter. In particular, they synthesized psychological theories of hypnosis, somnambulism, and hysteria with the science of electromagnetism to explain the peculiar psychology of the crowd. In adumbrating his theory that imitation lay at the root of all social relations, for example, Tarde claimed that inspiring human initiatives "tend to propagate themselves [through imitation] at a more or less rapid, but regular, rate, like a wave of light."²⁶ The key recurring term, *vibration*, was adduced to account equally for the transmission of rays of light, for contagious diseases, and for ideas: "For the propagation of an attractive force or luminous vibration from a heavenly body . . . or of a national idea or desire or religious rite from a scholar or inventor or missionary, seem to us like natural and regular phenomena."²⁷ Or, similarly, "repetitions are also multiplications or self-spreading contagions" (*L*, pp. 7–8, 12). For the most part, such imitation occurred through unconscious or automatic means, as a form of passive adaptation to the environment. While an individual might feel his or her socially mimetic actions to be consciously willed and spontaneous, they were actually closer to the actions carried out by the somnambulist in a dreamlike trance. Hence Tarde could claim that "society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism" (*L*, p. 87). In the second edition of his book (1895) Tarde at times added the newer word *hypnosis* to that of *somnambulism* and stated the newer term might substitute for the earlier one. Both terms signified that the subject was, at least for the time being,

25. Umberto Boccioni, "Genio e cultura," in Balla et al., *Teatro Futurista Sintetico*, ed. Guido Davico Bonino (1916; Genoa, 1993), p. 50; trans. Laura Wittman, under the title "Genius and Culture," in *Futurism: A Reader and Visual Repertory*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Wittman (forthcoming).

26. Gabriel Tarde, *Les Lois de l'imitation*, 2d ed. (1890; Paris, 1895); trans. Elsie Clews Parsons, under the title *The Laws of Imitation* (New York, 1903), pp. 2–3; hereafter abbreviated *L*.

27. Similar analogies occur throughout Tarde's book. We read: "Imitation plays a role in societies analogous to that of heredity in organic life or to that of vibration among inorganic bodies" (*L*, p. 11).

deprived of the power of resistance and in a state of “imitative quiescence.” When writing about the somnambulist, however, Tarde emphasized that the torpor that appears to envelop the affected individual is in reality quite superficial and masks an intense excitement (*L*, pp. 79, 80). Recall that Boccioni, too, had referred to the exemplars of the new psychology of night (the bon viveurs and others) as “feverish,” implying both a pathological condition and a corresponding state of mental agitation. It is not surprising, then, that his crowds frequently erupt into violence at night, when their somnambulant character is most evident.

Le Bon also argued that the mental unity characteristic of a crowd was due to mental contagion, which he classified “among those phenomena of a hypnotic order.” And if a crowd could be easily hypnotized, this was because of its susceptibility to suggestion, which Le Bon believed exerted a force comparable to magnetism (*C*, pp. 30, 31). In articulating the mechanism by which sentiments were propagated in a crowd, both Le Bon and Sighele followed Tarde.²⁸ Sighele, in particular, developed Tarde’s notion of imitation into a theory of physiognomic expressionism, in which the cries and gestures of the body functioned as the manifest and precise signs of an interior psychology. As Sighele explained, “physiognomy expresses quite well the emotions of the spirit, and expresses them, not in a vague and indefinite manner, but definitely and precisely: one can read on the face of a person joy, fear, hatred, almost all of the affects of the heart” (*I*, p. 8). He cites Tarde in further affirming that “it is a universal law in the entire kingdom of intelligent life that the representation of an emotional state provokes the birth of this identical state in whoever witnesses it” (quoted in *I*, p. 8). In support of this idea he observed that a man’s cry of alarm in a crowded street or piazza induced fear-flight in all of those near him. Both Sighele and Tarde relied on the hypotheses of Henry Maudsley, who in *The Pathology of Mind* had asserted that, as muscular action is intimately bound to the passions, an emotional state would not be merely imitated but genuinely and intimately experienced.²⁹ The replication of simple, legible gestures and cries in Boccioni’s crowd scenes enacts this propagation of sentiment through spontaneous imitation, as if it were an overwhelming

28. In addition to *Les Lois de l’imitation*, Sighele also cites Tarde, *Les Crimes des foules* (Lyons, 1892) and “Foules et sectes au point de vue criminel,” *Revue des deux mondes*, 15 Nov. 1893, pp. 347–87.

29. Sighele quotes Maudsley (*I*, p. 8), but does not give a reference. In *Les Lois de l’imitation*, p. 87, Tarde also quotes Maudsley, citing Henry Maudsley, *La Pathologie de l’esprit*, trans. Germont (Paris, 1883), p. 73. The original English version was published as *The Pathology of Mind: A Study of Its Distempers, Deformities, and Disorders*, 3d ed. of the 2d part of *The Physiology and Pathology of Mind* (London, 1879).

force of contagion. The various members of the crowd thereby become united as if they formed a single body and exclaimed with a single voice.

Such a view of the crowd's suggestibility also implied that the hierarchical relation between the hypnotist and his subject (the hysteric, for example) could be transposed to account for the authoritarian relation between the leader and the crowd.³⁰ According to Le Bon, once immersed in a crowd, an individual would soon find himself in a "special state, which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotised individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotiser." Similarly, Le Bon argued that "crowds exhibit a docile respect for force, and are but slightly impressed by kindness Their sympathies have never been bestowed on easy-going masters, but on tyrants who vigorously oppressed them" (*C*, pp. 31, 54). Such a desire for domination, and a lack of tolerance for differing views or sentiments, was especially typical of Latin crowds. Returning to racial stereotypes, Le Bon repeatedly singles out Latin crowds for their extreme qualities, seeing them as the most impulsive, the most changeable, the most feminine (see *C*, p. 39). Capable of the most horrific excesses, they might also attain the loftiest destiny if properly manipulated. The crucial goal was to shape the amorphous and potentially expanding crowd, and to give it a single aim and direction. This required the leader who, like the hypnotist, would hold sway over his subjects through the persuasive use of rhetorical images.

Luigi Russolo's painting *La rivolta* (*The Revolt*) of 1911 seeks to convey a sense of the power of the shaped crowd as a new political force (fig. 10). Configured as a dynamically projecting wedge, his crowd surges leftward and upward, thereby implicitly countering norms of reading as well as the force of gravity. Within the wedge, nearly identical mechanized figures march forward with linked or raised arms to form a single advancing body. This body, composed of simplified, interlocking, angular limbs, appears to be resolutely male and invincible. Once the crowd is disciplined, then, it seems to lose certain of its feminine attributes and instead assumes a regimented, or paramilitary character. Russolo's painting provides an image of the type of social formation that Elias Canetti, in his book *Crowds and Power*, has called "crowd crystals." These he defines as "the small, rigid groups of men, strictly delimited and of great constancy, which serve to precipitate crowds. Their structure is such that they can be comprehended and taken in at a glance."³¹ For Canetti, the crowd crystal is all limit, each

30. Robert A. Nye makes this point about Le Bon in *The Origins of Crowd Psychology* (London, 1975), pp. 70–71.

31. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York, 1984), p. 73.



FIGURE 10. Luigi Rossolo, *The Revolt* (1911). Courtesy the Gemeentemuseum, The Hague. Oil on canvas.

of its members constituting part of its boundary. Russolo's image captures the essence of this formation, its geometric clarity, density, and constancy serving as the visible signature of unity, force, and impenetrability. He multiplies the power that emanates from this crowd crystal through a repetition of the geometric wedge as an animated shape in its own right, which seems to open and expand as it penetrates the urban landscape. On either side, the houses appear as if magnetically aligned with this brilliantly illuminated angle, thereby conforming to the revolutionary will it figures forth. The implication is that a larger, more *informe* crowd will follow the path carved out by this advance guard, to take on the new meaning (direction) and militaristic collective identity it asserts. This identity, in which individual particularity and interiority give way to standardization and an emphasis on impenetrable boundaries, presages the postwar development of the fascist mass subject.³² One thinks of Italo Balbo's famous transatlantic flights, during each of which his fleet of aircraft maintained a similarly rigid, military formation for the entire journey.³³

Like Russolo's *The Revolt*, Carlo Carrà's *Free-Word Painting—Patriotic Festival* of summer 1914 pictures a shaped crowd in dynamic action—although here the heterogeneity of the individual elements is asserted, if only to be subsumed in the greater unity of the whole (fig. 11). As Linda Landis has argued, this collage is modelled on the exhilarating new form of vision made possible through aviation. In the center we read “aviatore” (aviator), “Italia,” “battere il record” (break the record), and “eliche perforanti” (perforating propellers), terms that invoke Marinetti's patriotic celebration of flight and of record breaking.³⁴ Indeed this work invites the viewer to assume the daring vantage point of the aviator at the fulcrum of its whirring propellers, which spew forth fragments of futurist manifestos, political slo-

32. For an illuminating analysis of fascist formations of mass subjectivity and their links to prewar prototypes, see Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18 BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses* (Stanford, Calif., 1996).

33. Balbo crossed the Atlantic twice: first in 1930–31 in a flight from Italy to Brazil (10,400 kilometers) in six stages, with twelve hydroplanes and forty-four men; then again in 1933 in a flight to the United States, with twenty-four hydroplanes and about one hundred military personnel. The first crossing comprised Balbo in a I-Balb hydroplane, at the head of a squadron of Siai S. 55 hydroplanes, the first four painted (fascist) black, followed by eight in the colors of the Italian flag. The longest stage of the crossing consisted of eighteen consecutive hours of flight in formation, a severe test of endurance; as Balbo himself noted of his earlier collective crossings in the Mediterranean, such feats substituted the “freedom, speed and security” of solitary flight with the demand for “permanent control, not only of the self, but also of others” (Italo Balbo, *Da Roma à Odessa sui cieli dell' Egeo e del mar Nero: Note di viaggio* [Milan, 1930], pp. 198–99; quoted in Mario Isnenghi, *L'Italia del Fascio* [Florence, 1996], p. 244).

34. See Linda Landis, “Futurists at War,” in *The Futurist Imagination*, ed. Anne Coffin Hanson (exhibition catalog, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., 13 Apr.–26 June 1983), pp. 60–75.



FIGURE 11. Carlo Carrà, *Free-Word Painting—Patriotic Festival* (late June–early July 1914). Mattioli collection, Milan. Pasted papers, charcoal, ink, gouache, and colored sparkles on board.

gans, advertisements for medicinal and hygiene products, and, at bottom center, an image of the Italian flag with the inflammatory, irredentist words “Trieste Italiano Milano” inscribed upon it. “Folla” also appears more than once: at the top right, where it is juxtaposed to fragments referring to tramways, bicycles, wagons, and pedestrians, all contained within a “piazza”; and again along a propeller-like form at the top right, where references to the “grunts of excited crowds” collide with references to train tracks and the *volontà* (will) of Edison.³⁵ The silver-, pink-, and peach-colored sparkles that Carrà flecked onto the painted parts of this collage bring a subtle shimmer to its surface, enhancing the association of light, movement, and the enthusiasm of the crowd.

Although it has long been noted that *Patriotic Festival* can be precisely dated to the end of June 1914, Oliver Shell is the first scholar to interpret this work as a response to the political crisis provoked by Red Week, a week of widespread anarchist and socialist rioting that erupted on June 7.³⁶ The mass revolt was precipitated when the police killed three men who were taking part in a socialist demonstration in Ancona. News of the deaths spread quickly and generated a series of violent and potentially revolutionary activities in cities throughout Italy. For one week, the red flag flew over many town halls, private property was expropriated, and many laws, including tax laws, were suspended or revoked. When this insurrectionary movement collapsed, Carrà, like many other anarchists and intransigent socialists, seems to have lost faith in the spontaneous revolutionary potential of the proletariat. A new and invigorated nation would be achieved through an ideal of unity under the guidance of a heroic, visionary leader rather than through continued class conflict. As Shell argues, the synthesizing composition of this work provides an image of this unity in the form of a centralized social organization. With the term *Italia* firmly anchored at its center, the nation appears as a centrifugally expanding force. The volatility and cacophony of modern life—as signified by the bits of collage text and onomatopoeic effects—are affirmed within this all-embracing, dynamic, but hierarchical structure. For Carrà, unity and wholeness now require nationalist myths and must be sustained by the authority of the monarchy and the power of the army—ideas that would have been anathema to the former anarchist. Carrà’s collage, according to this analysis, presents the viewer with an alternative to the revolt of Red Week: the threatening

35. These fragments were culled from Carrà’s freeword poem, “1900–1913, Bilancio,” *Lacerba*, 1 Feb. 1914, p. 39; and Marinetti’s freeword poem, “Contrabbando di guerra,” *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1914), *Teoria e Invenzione*, p. 667.

36. See Oliver C. Shell, “Cleansing the Nation: Italian Art, Consumerism, and World War I” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1998), chap. 2.

proletarian crowd would be absorbed into the larger, homogeneous notion of the people and given a new, synthesizing shape. We might add that the radial structure of this collage, which simulates the whirring blade of a propeller, also speaks of the violence inherent in the accomplishment of this new unity. At the center is the leader/aviator; cast out to the margins are the crowds. In 1915, in his book of essays and pictorial works called *War-painting*, Carrà made his belief in the distinction between the leader and the crowd explicit: “The crowd, the plebes, will never understand the superior man. We’ll leave the masses their silly leaders. We have always insulted the crowd.”³⁷

By contrast, Francesco Cangiullo’s *Great Crowd in the Piazza del Popolo*, also of 1914, exemplifies the chaotic structure, heterogeneity, and purposelessness of contemporary mass society in the absence of a strong leader (fig. 12). The multicolored and typographically varied slogans that stand in for the voices and sensations of the crowd remain disparate and jumbled. We can catch fragments of isolated remarks, most of which fail to take on any revolutionary significance: “cappelli” (hair); “vento” (wind: blowing the hair); “acciuftarti” (to grab); “profumato” (perfumed); “fischia” (whistle); “prepotenza” (arrogance); “flatulente” (flatulent); “gonfio di” (swollen with); “minacciarti polmonite” (threat of pneumonia); “ssiii raglio” (ssiii bray). The many references to bodily functions, shouts, whistles, and even animal cries call attention to the material desires and needs of the crowd. The only unifying element is the slogan Cangiullo inscribed diagonally across his cacophonous assembly: “TUTTO VENTRE” (ALL BELLY). As in Marinetti’s *Le Roi bombance*, the crowd is depicted as driven by base instincts for sensuous gratification and self-aggrandizement and seems incapable of reasoned discourse or self-discipline.³⁸

Remo Chiti’s theatrical synthesis *Parole (Words)* of 1915 is similarly structured, if more optimistic about the possibility of a dispersed, *informe* multitude overturning existing laws and social institutions. It comprises the random, fragmented phrases heard in a crowd as it confronts the “old, white-haired, automatic” gatekeeper, who bars the door of a government building. As Chiti explains in his notes, “The life of the plaza, overflowing with conflict, shows signs of forming around a determined movement.” The words of the crowd, although incoherent and emanating “from various

37. “La folla, la plebe, non intenderà mai l’uomo superiore. Lasciamo alla massa i suoi balordi guidatori. Noi abbiamo sempre insolentita la folla” (Carlo Carrà, *Guerrapittura* [Florence, 1978], p. 51).

38. Similarly, in his manifesto, “Battaglie di Trieste” (April–June 1910), Marinetti proclaimed: “In politics, we are very far from international and antipatriotic socialism—ignoble exaltation of the rights of the stomach” (Marinetti, “Battaglie di Trieste,” *Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*, p. 213).

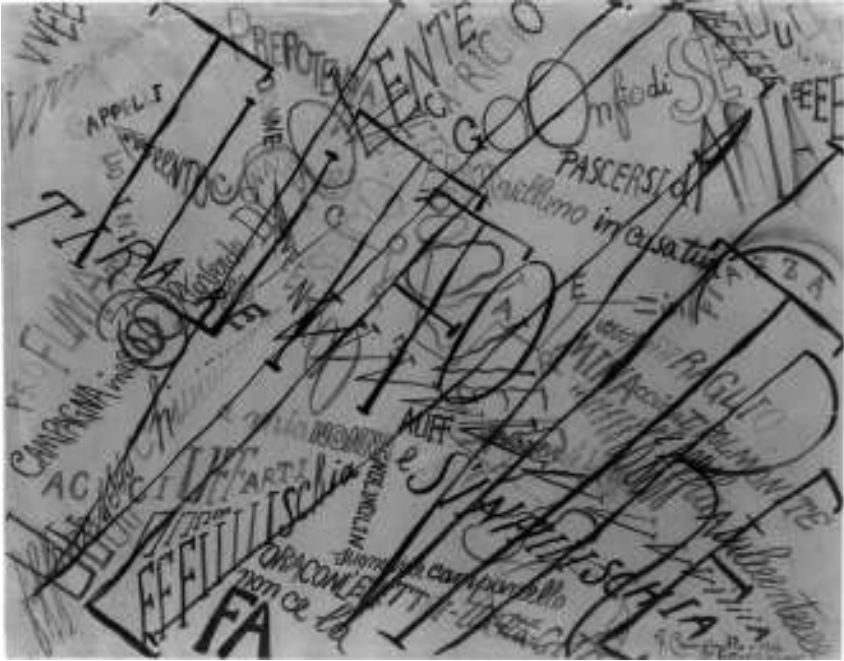


FIGURE 12. Francesco Cangiullo. *Great Crowd in the Piazza del Popolo* (1914). Private collection. Watercolor and pencil on paper.

points,” nonetheless express “an adamant wish; a strange influence murmurs something from its innumerable mouths”:

. . .and why ARE THEY also a . . .
 . . .exactly! and in FIFTY YEARS not . . .
 . . .go there! THAT IS enough . . .
 . . .of him who WAITS some more . . .
 . . .that is SOMETHING that doesn’t work . . .³⁹

Although characterized as governed by unconscious desires and articulating no specific political view, this waiting and arguing crowd is sufficiently terrifying to bring about the collapse of the decrepit gatekeeper. The implication is that with this destructive gesture it has cleared the way for a new social order and that the door to the future now lies open.

The “determined movement” that Chiti believed was nascent in 1915 probably alluded, at least in part, to the growing demand for intervention in the war on the part of futurists and other patriotic militants. Despite the

39. Remo Chiti, “Words,” in *Futurist Performance*, trans. Victoria Nes Kirby, ed. Michael Kirby (New York, 1986), p. 258.

ambivalence of Cangiullo and Chiti toward the “life of the plaza,” it was precisely on the Piazza del Popolo in Rome, and in other city squares in Italy, that orderly, well-dressed bourgeois demonstrators gathered during the “Radiant Days of May,” 1915, to insist that Italy enter the war on the side of France and England. The slogan these demonstrators shouted, “War or Revolution!” contributed to the Italian parliament’s surprisingly enthusiastic declaration of war just days thereafter. Giacomo Balla was inspired by the interventionist rally he witnessed in the Piazza di Siena, in the gardens of the Villa Borghese near his home, to paint a number of “hymns” to patriotic crowds. *Patriotic Song* of 1915 departs from the oval shape of the Piazza di Siena to provide a centralized image of a strongly unified crowd (fig. 13). Wavelike violet, blue, and orange forms well up out of this oval, creating dynamic circular patterns that figure forth the voice of the multitude as if it were a force of nature—much like the diagonal ray of golden light that strikes the scene from the upper right. In the center rise three towers, painted red, white, and green. These towers elongate the colored stripes of the Italian flag, give them three-dimensional form, and project them into space, as if embodying a cry hurled to the skies. This cry is answered by the shaft of light that streams down on the scene from above in a secular allusion to a divine benediction.⁴⁰ Balla thus renders the desire of the demonstrating crowd for intervention in the war through three mythic and overdetermined allegorical tropes, constructing an image of a unified, patriotic nation that in fact did not exist: the people (the cresting waves), the nation (the flag), and the indomitable will of Nature/Truth/God (the ray of light).⁴¹

40. David Lloyd Dowd discusses the important symbolic role attributed to morning rays of light in the pageants organized by David to celebrate the French Revolution. According to David’s plan: “All Frenchmen who wish[ed] to celebrate the Festival of Unity and of Indivisibility [were to] rise before the dawn, so that the touching scene of their gathering [might] be illumined by the sun’s first rays . . . [which were to] be for them the symbol of Truth to which they would address their songs of praise” (quoted in David Lloyd Dowd, *Pageant Master of the Republic: Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution* [Lincoln, Nebr., 1948], p. 111).

41. In his book of 1911, *Political Parties*, Robert Michels analyzed the strategy adopted by traditional monarchies to affirm their power: “The logical basis of every monarchy resides in an appeal to God. God is brought down from heaven to serve as a buttress to the monarchical stronghold, furnishing it with its foundation of constitutional law—the grace of God.” With the rise of mass democracies, however, Michels observed that this appeal may be supplemented with an appeal to the popular will: “Our age has destroyed once and for all the ancient and rigid forms of aristocracy, has destroyed them, at least, in certain important regions of political constitutional life . . . Where its power is still comparatively unrestricted, as in Germany, it appeals exclusively to the grace of God. But when, as in Italy, it feels insecure, it adds to the appeal to the deity an appeal to the popular will” (Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul [1911; London, 1962], pp. 43, 44). Michels was already living in Turin when he first published this influential book in German as *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie: Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens* (Leipzig, 1911). It appeared in Italian the following year as *La*



FIGURE 13. Giacomo Balla, *Patriotic Song* (1915). Collection Ente "Italia '61," Turin. Oil on canvas.

Flags on the Altar of the Country, also of 1915, similarly defines and shapes the patriotic crowd through a dominant, architecturally defined site (fig. 14). Balla situates this interventionist demonstration before the famous Monument to Victor Emanuel II in the Piazza Venezia in Rome. Intended to represent the unity of the Italian nation, this imposing structure contains the Tomb to the Unknown Soldier and was popularly referred to as the Altar of the Country. Balla synthesizes and abstracts this monument, which had been inaugurated only four years earlier, retaining the white of the marble facade and the symmetrical arms formed by the lateral pavilions. But he also compresses the monument, increases its height, and interprets the curvature of the classical facade as a dynamic metaphor of expansive movement. Again, wavelike forms, colored red, white, and green, denote the patriotic cries and songs of the demonstrators who mount the monument's steps while holding aloft their flags. The purple-grey forms that swirl up out of this crowd constitute a visual cipher for the slogan *Viva l'Italia* (Long Live Italy). Another work from this series, titled *The Shout Viva l'Italia*, embodies the patriotic voice of the crowd with similar forms (fig. 15). In visualizing the unified body and voice of the crowd as explicitly oceanic, Balla appropriated an existing literary metaphor for the crowd and its volatility,

sociologia del partito politico nella democrazia moderna: Studi sulle tendenze oligarchiche degli aggregati politici, trans. Alfredo Polledro (Turin, 1912).



FIGURE 14. Giacomo Balla, *Flags on the Altar of the Country* (1915). Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome. Oil on canvas.



FIGURE 15. Giacomo Balla, *The Shout Viva l'Italia* (1915). Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome. Oil on canvas.

with important recent examples in the writings of Gabriele D'Annunzio, the futurist poet Enrico Cavacchioli, and Marinetti himself. In his novel *The Virgins of the Rocks* (1895), D'Annunzio employs the term *gorghi melmosi* to refer to the slimy whirlpools of the multitude that threaten to engulf the legitimate king. The term *gorghi*, in which one also hears an allusion to the gorgons, figures the crowd as a Medusa-like, castrating force.⁴² Cavacchioli's poem "Revolution" adopts a similar set of tropes:

Oceano di popolo,
 Marea disordinata del terrore,
 Maëlstrom d'ogni libidine,
 Singhiozzo maciullato dal pianto,
 Urlo, grande urlo di una sola bocca,
 Pugno di un solo braccio gigantesco,
 Testarda forza d'ariete e di catapulta,
 Proiettile del disprezzo,
 In piazza!
 [Ocean of people,
 Confused tide of terror,
 Maelstrom of every lust,
 Sob, broken by weeping,
 Shout, great shout from a single mouth,
 Punch from a single gigantic arm,
 Obstinate force of a battering ram and catapult,
 Projectile of defiance,
 In piazza!]⁴³

Here the oceanic metaphor expresses simultaneously the confused disorder of the crowd, its uncontained libidinal energies, and its unity as a driving, ineluctable force. In Marinetti's writings, the sea appears in a number of guises; its attributes alternate between the masculine and the feminine and it serves as a figure both of formidable natural power and of the abyss. In Balla's paintings, the swirling, wavelike forms of the crowd retain some sense of this fundamental ambivalence. Although configured as enthusiastically patriotic and proroyalty, the welling and surging, never-stable forms of the singing crowd demand articulation and containment. Balla achieves this through the shaping device of the architectural site, through the symbolic use of color, and through the literal frame of the canvas.

42. Spackman discusses this passage from D'Annunzio's novel; see Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 99–101.

43. Enrico Cavacchioli, "Rivoluzione," in *I Poeti del Futurismo, 1909–1944*, ed. Glauco Viazzi (Milan, 1978), p. 139.

In *The Shout Viva l'Italia*, as in related works, Balla repeats the red, white, and green of the flag in the colors of his painted and shaped frame. In *Shouting Forms—Long Live Italy* Balla again deploys rising wavelike volumes as the abstract equivalent of the shouts of the crowd (fig. 16). This work seeks to capture the sensations of the artist who had participated in an interventionist demonstration at the Piazza del Quirinale, in front of the king's palace. A photograph of a rally that occurred in this piazza shows the multitude that gathered to demand intervention of the king, who stood far above observing from his balcony (fig. 17). The bourgeois demonstrators, composed for the most part of men wearing straw boaters, stand by calmly. In his painting, Balla transforms an orderly demonstration into a tumultuous event, characterized by jostling curved forms that give rise to voluminous, embodied cries. He denotes the presence of the monarch above the crowd through the insignia of the House of Savoy, an owl-like form with a knotted rope. As in Carrà's *Patriotic Festival*, the crowd, a metonym for the people, is galvanized through nationalist, prowar sentiment. Moreover, this crowd demands a leader who will realize its desires—in this case, King Vittorio Emanuele III. Balla's paintings of interventionist demonstrations portray the demands of predominantly bourgeois groups as if they were the will of the people in unity with their king. Yet we know that the majority of Italians were opposed to the war; support for intervention was centered in the urban and industrial north and was popular among discontented members of the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia, including the futurists. For these groups, war appeared as an antidote to the threat of socialism and as a means of bringing into being a newly invigorated, imperialist nation. Whereas Marinetti had witnessed the violent student and worker riots of 1898 and had eventually retreated from the barricades to the safety of his balcony, he, Balla, and the other futurists were active participants in prowar rallies.⁴⁴ Indeed, they often organized these events and on several occasions found themselves in jail for their actions. Through inflammatory rhetoric and Austrian flag burnings, the futurists sought to incite their audiences to rise up in revolt against the government's apparent pacifism and neutrality. Such activism had its roots in strategies already developed in futurist *serate* or evenings, performative events staged throughout Europe during which Marinetti and his friends harangued and insulted their audiences with the aim of jolting them out of their stasis and complacency. Yet Marinetti's goals

44. In his essay "Les Emeutes milanaises de mai 1898," Marinetti wrote that he had visited the barricades in the center of Milan, but then decided "to avoid the mishap of being hit by a bullet. So I went home and observed the drama from the height of my balcony," ("E," p. 571). Guenter Berghaus discusses this essay in *The Genesis of Futurism: Marinetti's Early Career and Writings 1899–1909* (Leeds, 1995), pp. 9–10.



FIGURE 16. Giacomo Balla, *Shouting Forms—Long Live Italy* (1915). Former collection Balla. Oil on canvas.

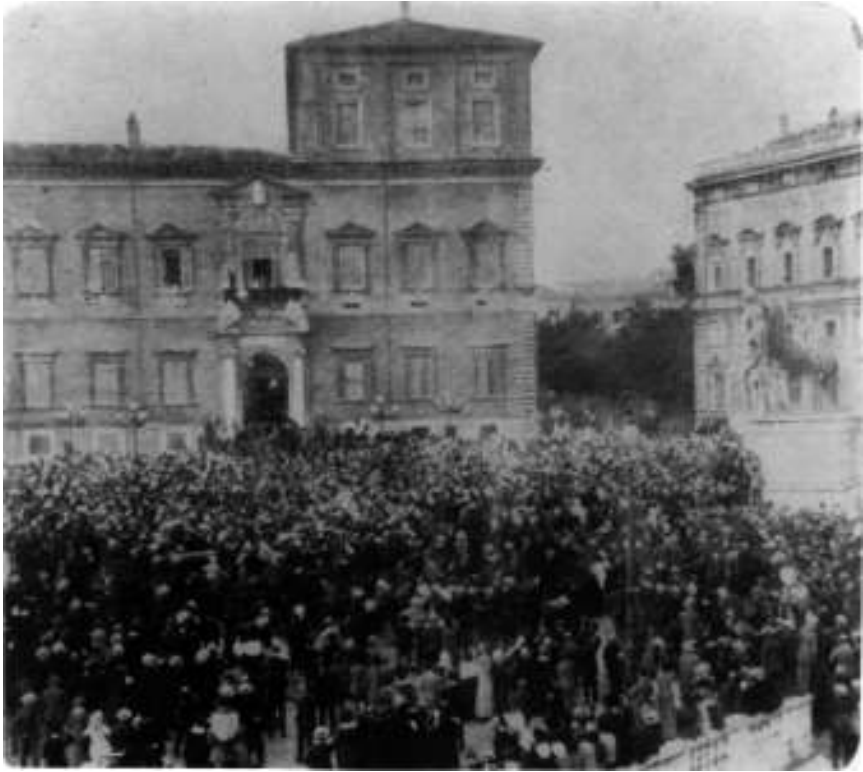


FIGURE 17. Photograph of a demonstration in the Piazza del Quirinale, Rome (1915).

and strategies in these *serate* exhibit the ambivalence of his attitude toward the crowd—his desire both to dominate and to merge with a larger oceanic multitude. He appeared on stage in black tie, the very figure of an aristocratic poet, whose lineage might be traced to Baudelaire’s flaneur (fig. 18). As such, Marinetti distinguished himself from the teeming, heterogeneous audiences who flocked to hear him. Yet he also advocated a dissolution of the traditional barriers between performers and spectators. In his manifesto “The Variety Theater” of 1913, he declared the need to seek the audience’s collaboration so that the action might develop “simultaneously on the stage, in the boxes, and in the orchestra.” Such a fusion of spaces and actions could only derive, however, from the fact that “the audience cooperates in this way with the actors’ fantasy.”⁴⁵

45. Marinetti, “The Variety Theater” (29 Sept. 1913), *Let’s Murder the Moonshine*, p. 126.



FIGURE 18. Photograph of F. T. Marinetti, Francesco Cangiullo, and Luciano Folgore on stage during a *serate futurista* (1914).

Marinetti's style of addressing the crowds who attended his *serate*, no doubt seeking a confrontation, was based on the practice of *fisicofollia* or "body-madness."⁴⁶ This was an expressive language involving the entire body, comprising a rapid fire of verbal images delivered in dramatic cadences, enhanced by facial mimicry and violent gestures. In his account of the riots of May 1898, Marinetti had observed that, in trying to quell the revolt, the socialist deputy Turati had addressed the rebels with a speech

46. The term *fisicofollia* occurs in Marinetti's manifesto "The Variety Theater," where it opposes conventional psychology. See *ibid.*, p. 128.

accompanied by brief and monotonous gestures; the assembly had then dispersed.⁴⁷ He argued that such a timid and restrained form of interpellation would hardly serve the cause of fomenting a revolution. In 1916, with Italy in the midst of war, the futurist leader criticized what he called “passéist declamation,” arguing that “even when supported by the most marvelous vocal organs and the strongest temperaments, [such declaiming] always comes down to an inevitable monotony of highs and lows, to a ragbag of gestures.” In contrast, he characterized his own style of declamation as an ironically self-conscious form of seduction:

I have amused myself with seducing and moving [lecture audiences] better and more reliably than all the other declaimers of Europe, insinuating into their obtuse brains the most astonishing images, caressing them with the most refined vocal sensations, with velvety softnesses and brutalities until, mastered by my look or entranced by my smile, they feel a feminine need to applaud something they neither understand nor love. [“D,” p. 151]

Such an approach to inciting the audience might have been culled directly from a reading of Le Bon or other contemporary theorists of the crowd. Le Bon maintained that “the laws of logic have no action on crowds” (C, pp. 112–13). An idea could only exert influence on a crowd when it “entered the domain of the unconscious, when indeed it has become a sentiment, for which much time is required.” The language of the unconscious lay not in reasoned discourse but in images, for “crowds being only capable of thinking in images are only to be impressed by images. It is only images that terrify or attract them and become motives of action.” Hence, he declared the theater to be an ideal medium for communicating with the crowd, a view shared by Marinetti (C, pp. 64, 68). Le Bon further stated that “an orator in intimate communication with a crowd can evoke images by which it will be seduced.” These images, however, should avoid the cumbersome trappings of cause and effect, always based on logic, and instead join dissimilar or unconnected things by the merely apparent “bonds of analogy or succession”: “The characteristics of the reasoning of crowds are the association of dissimilar things possessing a merely apparent connection between each other, and the immediate generalisation of particular cases” (C, p. 66). It was this leap to an unfounded conclusion that the successful orator

47. “Quand j’arrivai devant l’établissement, MM. Rondani et Turati, députés socialistes, avaient obtenu du questeur ce que réclamait la foule. Ils venaient exhorter les factieux au calme. Turati, le geste bref et monotone, parlait. . . . Puis la foule s’éparpilla” (“E,” p. 566).

would produce through a succession of images, hammering it home through sheer repetition and affirmation.

Marinetti's invention of *parole in libertà* (free-word poetry), which he declaimed in futurist *serate* throughout Europe prior to the war, depended on just such strategies of alogical condensation and displacement. In his 1912 "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature," he advocated the destruction of syntax and punctuation in order to achieve a rapid, telegraphic style of writing. Verbal images, torn from the connective tissue of language, deprived of adjectives, adverbs, and other mediating terms, would be juxtaposed in order to create startling new analogies. As Marinetti put it, "analogy is nothing more than the deep love that assembles distant, seemingly diverse and hostile things." The examples he presented, "Man-torpedo-boat, woman-gulf, crowd-surf," achieve fusion only through the force of the dominating image. "One should deliberately confound the object with the image that it evokes, foreshortening the image to a single essential word."⁴⁸ If such foreshortening precluded the orator being understood, all the better, for *la folla* did not seek understanding but belief. Marinetti declared that he had taught the futurist poets "to hate the intelligence, reawakening in [them] divine intuition, the characteristic gift of the Latin races."⁴⁹ Speed and the power of mimicry would be essential to this circumvention of reason. Words should arrive in fistfuls or be launched as if they were bombs; they should perform the actions they signified, rather than merely describe them.⁵⁰ Similarly, Le Bon had remarked: "When it is wanted to stir up a crowd for a short space of time, to induce it to commit an act of any nature . . . the crowd must be acted upon by rapid suggestions, among which example is the most powerful in its effect" (C, p. 124). Much would depend upon the prestige of the orator, his ability to provide a model for mimetic action, and the susceptibility of crowd to his hypnotic performance.

Significantly, with the war underway, Marinetti came to regard his previous declamatory mode as insufficiently militaristic. Whereas in the past he had sought to seduce and master a "feminized" and essentially passive crowd, now he wished even more explicitly to transform the crowd, to give it a masculine shape and infuse it with the will to power. This task demanded a more militant style, characterized by systematic forms of dehumanization; the declaimer must metallize, liquify, and even electrify his voice in order to ground it in the vibrations of matter, as opposed to a "convulsive hu-

48. Marinetti, "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature," *Let's Murder the Moonshine*, p. 93.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

50. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax—Imagination without Strings—Words-in-Freedom," in *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 98.

manization of the universe” (“D,” p. 151). Similarly, gestures would become starkly geometric and rigid in order to divest them of the lingering nostalgic effects of feminine caresses or supplications (see “D,” pp. 151–52). The somatic language of desire would be suppressed in favor of an austere, mechanized repertory of movements. These movements would collaborate in the “scattering of words-in-freedom,” engendering a euphoric fusion of self and matter, self and crowd, in an accession of power. Thus interpellated, the audience, “magnetized as it follows the figure of the declaimer,” would nevertheless not submit to his force passively, but would respond in kind with dynamic energy. The ideal was to achieve unbroken contact with the crowd, the flow of energy establishing a current whose effects would be both psychic and physical.

If for Marinetti the primary medium for addressing the crowd inevitably became the performative event—*serata* (in which he also declaimed his free-word poetry or read his manifestos), theater, political demonstration, or riot—what, then, of futurist poetry and visual images? These too were imagined as staging an encounter with the viewer or reader in which the separation of subject and object would be overcome. Significantly, in his remarks on addressing the crowd, Le Bon insisted on the power of images to convey sentiments, even while analyzing “the science of employing words” (*C*, p. 107). He frequently referred to what he called “image-ideas” in pictorial and theatrical terms, noting that they became effective “on condition that they assume a very absolute, uncompromising, and simple shape.” In their rapid and disconnected succession, he also compared them to the progression of slides in a magic lantern show (*C*, pp. 61–62). Le Bon further associated the image with illusion or appearance, as opposed to reality, and argued that only the former mattered when it came to swaying a crowd since it was incapable of distinguishing between the two (see *C*, p. 69). Seen in this light, the futurist desire to infuse verbal forms with visual qualities becomes clearer. By adopting dynamic and varied typography or displaying words in a pictorial format, the futurists sought to allow their freeword poems, paintings, and collages to be taken in at a glance, at least initially. Words were to perform like images, establishing the appearance of a desired reality that would be intuitively and instantaneously grasped and affirmed as a whole. As such, the futurist word—deformed, stretched, and onomatopoeic—strives to take on the characteristics of a symbol, a signifier whose form appears motivated rather than merely conventional or arbitrary. Conversely, futurist visual works frequently employed verbal elements, interpolating fragments of manifestos, newspaper clippings, and slogans into their works as a means of making their political message more explicit and multisensory. The convergence of pictorial and poetic devices



FIGURE 19. Xanti Schawinsky, 1934-XII. Poster for 1934 referendum.

in works such as Carrà's *Patriotic Festival* reveals an effort to appeal to the viewer both linguistically and visually. In such works, meaning is carried through onomatopoeic effects and fragments of freeword poems, popular advertisements and slogans, as well as through the centrifugal design. Carrà also sought to overcome traditional conventions of singular viewing/reading by publishing this work in the journal *Lacerba* where it would be seen by a larger public than possible in a traditional museum setting.⁵¹

Although they did experiment with new subjects, techniques, and forms of distribution, most futurist visual works only gestured toward the ideal of an encounter with a mass audience. What drawing, painting, and collage could not achieve in the realm of direct, bodily confrontation and action might nonetheless occur in the register of empathic identification. Working in visual media, the artists exploited the immediacy and apparently non-discursive logic of the image, as theorized by Le Bon and others. Their goal was to appeal to the viewer's intuition, to draw him or her, as if magnetically, into the dynamic center of the work. The boundaries of subject and object, self and other, necessary to critical thought, would thereby be dissolved in favor of an exhilarating expansion of the ego. But whereas Baudelaire's flâneur imagined himself taking on and discarding the identities of anonymous but discrete individuals encountered in the crowd, futurist empathy was comparatively dehumanized. In futurist painting, strident effects of contrasting color, dazzling light, distortions of perspective, and brushwork that fuses figure and ground all correspond to Marinetti's literary strategy of using analogies to cast a net over all of matter. Ideally, in futurist art, the image functions as a kind of hypnotic lure, similarly casting its net over viewers, and dispersing subjectivity into the oceanic expanse of the crowd, dominated by the leader. If such an appeal frequently missed its target during the prewar period, when the crowds at the futurist *serate* or theatrical events shouted back, or when the viewers of futurist art responded with satire, the fate of crowd psychology and the arts it inspired in the postwar period provide an alternate view of its potential ideological effects. Under the fascist regime, mass culture is dominated by images of crowds gathered in adulation of the Duce. The crowd finds its shape in the leader, who now exists by virtue of, and in relation to, the mythified crowd (fig. 19).

51. This collage was published in *Lacerba* on 1 Aug. 1914. Many other futurist collages and typographically innovative free-word poems appeared in this journal as well.