

Günter Berghaus

THE FUTURIST CONCEPTION OF GESAMTKUNSTWERK AND MARINETTI'S TOTAL THEATRE

Introduction

Theatre performances in whichever form are always multi-media spectacles in as much as they combine different channels of expression, such as movement, vocal production, décor, lighting, sound effects and so on. Their inter-relation is governed by codified rules, which vary according to the aesthetics that pertain to specific periods, genres or artistic schools. However, mainstream European theatre since the eighteenth century has tended to reduce this multiplicity of expressive channels in order to give maximum weight to what was conceived as the central element of dramatic theatre: the spoken word.

Some artists, again and again, reacted against this impoverishment of the theatrical experience and created spectacles, where the dramatic text did not attain a dominant position over the other media employed. But multi-media events, which are characterized by the concurrent use of several media ordered in parallel conjunction, are not the same as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.¹

This term, and a highly elaborate theory to explain the concept, came into existence in the Romantic period.² It was a reaction against the Neo-classicists' attempts to establish media-specific aesthetics

¹ The general history of this concept remains to be written. There are a large number of studies on individual periods, countries or artists, some of which have been listed in my essay "A Theatre of Image, Sound and Motion: On Synaesthesia and the Idea of a Total Work of Art."

² Critical studies on the Romantic theory and practice of *Gesamtkunstwerk* are too numerous to be listed here. For a general orientation see Rummenhüller: "Romantik und Gesamtkunstwerk"; Nivelle: *Frühromantische Dichtungstheorie*; Polheim: "Die romantische Einheit der Künste"; Andraschke and Spaude: *Welttheater: Die Künste im neunzehnten Jahrhundert*.

and to create pure forms of expression that were derived from the material characteristics of the media employed. The neo-classical theorists drew up definite rules pertinent to each genre and were particularly hostile to the idea of mixing different media in one work of art.

This situation began to change in the late-eighteenth century. Louis Bertrand Castel in France,³ John Brown in England⁴ and Johann Gottfried Herder in Germany⁵ proposed the idea of a synaesthetic work of art and influenced the Romantics, for whom the fusion of the arts became a favourite dream. Richard Wagner, whose musical dramas were conceived as *Gesamtkunstwerke* and whose writings expounded the theory behind them, was largely responsible for bringing the term into popular currency.⁶ But as scores of critics have pointed out, Wagner's musical compositions never fulfilled the high-reaching aims he set himself in his theoretical reflections. Nor, in fact, did he develop any conceptual foundation for a true synthesis that fuses the arts into a unified whole. Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* was a syncretism based on a rather vague notion of a continuum between the arts. He blurred the dividing line between music, poetry and scenic representation, and created a *mélange* of different media that never fulfilled the aim of totality.

This, however, did not eradicate the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Artists of the modernist period subjected Wagner's conception to a fundamental critique and developed new, no less Utopian notions of a Total Work of Art. Wassily Kandinsky laid the foundations for a new *Gesamtkunstwerk* aesthetics that influenced a whole generation

³ See Castel: "Clavecin pour les yeux, avec l'art de peindre les sons, et toutes sortes de pièces de musique."

⁴ John Brown advocated a return to the natural union of song, dance and poetry, which existed in pre-civilized societies and with the subsequent "separations and corruptions" of the genres fell apart. See his *Dissertation on the Rise, Union and Power, the Progressions, Separations and Corruptions of Poetry and Music*. On the influence of this brochure see Roberts: *A Dawn of Imaginative Feeling: The Contribution of John Brown (1715-66) to Eighteenth Century Thought and Literature*; Schleiermacher: *John Browns Theorie der literarischen Evolution: Untersuchungen zur "Dissertation on poetry and music"*.

⁵ See Nufer: *Herders Ideen zur Verbindung von Poesie, Musik und Tanz*.

⁶ See Stein: *Richard Wagner and the Synthesis of the Arts*; Dahlhaus: *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas*; Kunze: "Richard Wagners Idee des, Gesamtkunstwerks"; Tanner: "The Total Work of Art"; Borchmeyer: *Das Theater Richard Wagners*; Glass: *The Fertilizing Seed: Wagner's Concept of the Poetic Intent*; Bermbach: *Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerks*.

of artists, writers, and intellectuals in the new century. His search for a new language to express the spiritual concerns of his epoch made him develop the concept of a synaesthetic, abstract Total Work of Art.

Many modernist artists seized upon Kandinsky's theories, which were widely circulating in Europe before the First World War. This was also the case in Italy, where they fell on fertile ground, amongst others, in the circle of Futurist artists.⁷ The group of painters Marinetti had assembled around himself propagated in numerous manifestos a new art based on the principles of universal dynamism, multiple viewpoints, simultaneity, interpenetration and synthesis. After an initial period of maturation, the Futurist painters and sculptors presented their first polymaterial works in which various media were combined.⁸ These creations aimed at dismantling the balanced and harmonious structures of Naturalist and salon art, and at reflecting the reality of a world in a state of permanent flux. Yet, behind their seeming disorder the outlines of a new world lay hidden. Or as they themselves explained: "There is with us not merely variety, but chaos and clashing of rhythms, totally opposed to one another, which we nevertheless assemble into a new harmony."⁹

The dream of creating unity out of a fragmented, disjointed experience of the world gave rise to a new concept of a Total Work of Art. In this essay I want to show how under changed historical circumstances certain Utopian concepts first formulated by the Romantics could continue to exercise influence upon Futurist artists, and find expression especially in the field of theatre.

Primo futurismo

The Futurists sought to remodel life as an artwork and to reintegrate art into the praxis of life. Futurist aesthetics aimed at a transforma-

⁷ Kandinsky published his ideas of an abstract Total Work of Art in the *Blaue Reiter Almanach* (1912). Enrico Prampolini appears to have received the *Almanach* and other information about Kandinsky before the latter's work began to be translated into Italian. See Fornari: "Prampolini e Kandinsky."

⁸ *Fusione di una testa e di una finestra* and *Testa+casa+luce* by Boccioni are only known from contemporary photographs. Similarly, the early experiments by Depero and Balla are largely lost.

⁹ Boccioni et al.: "The Exhibitors to the Public", in Apollonio: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 49.

tion of humankind in all its physiological, psychological and social aspects. Art was no longer restricted to be a *reflection* of reality, but sought to *create* new realities on the basis of a unified theoretical concept. The totally refashioned universe according to Futurist principles was a Utopian construct based on abstract, absolute and universal principles. The Futurists wanted to be architects of a new world and to turn life into the ultimate Total Work of Art. For this purpose, they carried out a large number of experiments in the domains of ceramics, fashion, furniture, advertisements, photography, book art, architecture, interior design, etc.

The idea of an amalgamation of the arts, designed to offer an all-embracing experience of the dynamic forces of the universe, led them to the creation of night clubs where every aspect – the physical environment, the lighting, the furniture, the drinks, the music, the dance shows etc. – were meticulously planned.¹⁰ Similarly, they ran restaurants in which all five senses were fully engaged in the act of eating. Futurist cuisine was combined with imaginative table décor, poetry declamations and measured doses of musical entertainment, all designed to accentuate the flavours of the dishes. The abolition of knives and forks enhanced the tactile pleasures; appetizing or suggestive perfumes were sprayed onto the diners. The food resembled edible sculptures and reflected the shape, texture and colour of the décor and furniture of the dining hall.¹¹

In these surroundings, every element was integrated into an overall scheme. A careful balance of heterogeneous parts produced a vibrant and dynamic whole: from the dynamic interplay of colours, lines and forms, which the eye perceives, to the noise, sounds or music the ear takes in; from the taste of the cocktails and food to the olfactory sensations of the smells pervading the room: the spectators were immersed in multiple, synaesthetic sensations and exposed to a bombardment of sensual stimuli. At the same time, the separations between performer and scenery, between décor and furniture, between stage and audience were abolished. The pulsating, energetic and vitalistic environment exercised an activating influence on the audience

¹⁰ See the chapter “Futurist Cabarets, Artists’ Festivals and Banquets” in Berghaus: *Italian Futurist Theatre*.

¹¹ See Berghaus: “The Futurist Banquet: Nouvelle Cuisine or Performance Art?”

and stimulated in them a new sensibility and a new attitude towards life. The boundaries between aesthetic and everyday reality were broken down. Everything became part of a dynamic field of action and interaction, an unlimited expansion of creative energies. Or as Marinetti said: "This fusion [...] represents the total synthesis of life itself."¹²

Like Kandinsky, Marinetti believed in the concept of a sounding universe and a vitalistic force embedded in all creation.¹³ Especially the theatre, he believed, could create "a synthesis of life at its most typical and most significant."¹⁴ And when he applied the idea to cinema, he demanded that films should offer a "playful deformation of the universe, an a-logical, fleeting synthesis of daily life."¹⁵ Arnaldo Ginna was the person largely in charge of the first realization of this concept. He shared Marinetti's esoteric beliefs and drew in his works on the same mystic and occult sources. Together with his brother Bruno Corra he developed a Futurist concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and sought to express it in what he called "chromatic drama = translating a system of passion into colour and to concretize these in a system of images and actions."¹⁶

Ginna's artistic credo in this period had a strongly abstract orientation. His "musical paintings" were meant to be an "expression of occult forces"¹⁷ and were composed according to the laws of musical

¹² "Destruction of Syntax – Untrammelled Imagination – Words-in-Freedom", *Critical Writings*, p. 126.

¹³ See his manifesto, *Destruction of Syntax – Untrammelled Imagination – Words-in-Freedom*, where he speaks of literature capturing the multifaceted human experiences and thus "providing the highest number of vibrations and a deeper synthesis of life." *Critical Writings*, p. 127.

¹⁴ "Manifesto of Futurist Playwrights: The Pleasures of Being Booed", *Critical Writings*, p. 183.

¹⁵ "The Futurist Cinema", *Critical Writings*, p. 260

¹⁶ "For example: on the stage unfolds an action (*pure* action, without words, a mime). Instead of the normal orchestra in a musical drama, there are instruments (as reflectors) able to produce (each according to its own modality) all simple colours. During the unfolding of the action on stage, this chromatic orchestra inundates the theatre with diverse lights according to certain motifs: these chromatic motifs must express the situation and characters of the mimic drama. The colours, of course, have been determined and scored (with a notation system similar to the musical one) by the artist (painter)." "Arte dell'avvenire: Paradosso" in Verdone, ed.: *Manifesti futuristi e scritti teorici di Arnaldo Ginna e Bruno Corra*, p. 143.

¹⁷ See Ginna and Corra: *Manifesti futuristi e scritti teorici*, p. 259, and Verdone: "Astrazione, futurismo e occultismo: Ginna, Corra e Rosà", *idem*: "Musica e pittura astratta in Arnaldo Ginna."

harmonies.¹⁸ But he soon discovered that there was a fundamental difference between painting and music, namely that the first exists in a spatial, the second in a temporal dimension. A truly chromatic music or harmonic painting had to combine the spatial and the temporal. That way, abstract cinema was born.¹⁹

Ginna and Corra were not the only artists of the Futurist movement to experiment with ways of fusing “multilinear” streams of “analogous” sensations²⁰ into a unified whole. Similar suggestions can be found in manifestos such as Carrà’s *The Painting of Sound, Noise and Odours* (1913), or Prampolini’s *Chromóphony: The Colour of Sounds* (1913). Severini’s *Plastic Analogies of Dynamism* (1913) suggested to “enclose the universe in the work of art” by unifying the different synaesthetic sensations under the umbrella of “architectural ensembles.”²¹ In terms of Futurist theorizing, 1914 became the year of architecture: Prampolini’s *The Futurist Structure of Atmosphere: Basis for a new Architecture* and Sant’Elia’s *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture* broke new ground towards a theory of a Futurist Total Work of Art that was integrated into human life praxis. Boccioni’s *Futurist Painting and Sculpture* of 1914 proclaimed the end of the traditional distinction between painting, music and poetry and envisaged a new, unifying Futurist art which exists only as pure creation.²²

This move from a synaesthetic to a synthetic theory of Futurist art in 1913-14 took on a new dimension with the publication of Balla and Depero’s manifesto, *The Futurist Re-fashioning of the Universe* (1915).²³ The four-page document presented a unified theoretical concept for a fusion of art and life in a universe entirely redesigned according to

¹⁸ See the exhibition catalogues *Arnaldo Ginna tra astrazione e futurismo* and *Armonie e disarmonie degli stati d’animo: Ginna futurista*.

¹⁹ See Mancebo Roca: “Del piano cromático a la pintura cinematográfica directa: Las experiencias abstractas de los Ginanni-Corradini.” A more detailed study of Ginna and Corra’s experiments with abstract film can be found in Terzano: *Sulla nascita del cinema sperimentale*.

²⁰ See the manifesto *Destruction of Syntax – Untrammelled Imagination – Words-in-Freedom* (1913) in Apollonio: *Futurist Manifestos*, pp. 105-106.

²¹ See Maria Drudi Gambillo & Teresa Fiori (eds.) *Archivi del futurismo*, vol. 1, Rome 1958, p. 80 (Apollonio: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 125).

²² See Boccioni, *Pittura scultura futurista*, p. 325.

²³ See Balla and Depero: “Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo”, in Drudi Gambillo and Fiori, eds.: *Archivi del futurismo*. Vol. 1, pp. 48-51. An English translation can be found in Apollonio: *Futurist Manifestos*, pp. 197-200.

Futurist principles. Balla had first demonstrated his evolving theory in his *Compleksi plastici* of 1913-15. These three-dimensional kinetic objects, which can hardly be classified any longer as 'sculpture', were meant to generate "a new reality with the abstract elements of the universe".²⁴ Balla himself used the term 'dramatic' for them and described them as "action developed in space".²⁵ We are dealing here, no doubt, with a proto-theatrical phenomenon, and it is no wonder that many of the elements and ideas were employed again in *Feu d'artifice* (1917), an actorless, abstract ballet designed to interpret Stravinsky's music of the same title.²⁶

Balla was not the only Futurist who discovered that the fusion of art and life could be anticipated in the theatre. The idea of a synthesis of the arts was explored in a large number of experiments on stage and propagated in a steady flow of manifestos. Balla's most important disciple was Enrico Prampolini, whose initial interest in the correspondences between the sense impressions of sound, colour, form and motion was derived from Wagner and the Symbolists. His inquiry into the nature of synaesthesia found further nourishment from Kandinsky, Carrà and Boccioni. He developed a complex theory of synaesthetic correspondences between the senses and how these can be explored in "dynamic constructions of a polyphonic architectural whole".²⁷ These experiments with what he called "absolute constructions of noise in motion"²⁸ led him, like Balla, straight into the domain of theatre.

Prampolini's scenic constructions re-ordered the different artistic media according to the rules of a Futurist aesthetics. His total artwork of the stage was not *describing* the synaesthetic experience of our dynamic existence, but rather *re-creating* the emotive qualities of the

²⁴ Balla and Depero: "Ricostruzione futurista del universo", in Drudi Gambillo and Fiori, eds.: *Archivi del futurismo*. Vol. 1, p. 49, translated in Apollonio: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 198.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ For a more detailed examination of the ballet and its performances see Berghaus: *Italian Futurist Theatre*, 253-259, and Gigli: *Giochi di luce e forme strane di Giacomo Balla*.

²⁷ *La cromofonia: Il colore dei suoni* first appeared in the *Gazzetta ferrarese* of 26 August 1913 and has been reprinted in Bucarelli: *Enrico Prampolini*, pp. 31-34. For an English translation see Apollonio: *Futurist Manifestos*, pp. 115-118.

²⁸ See "Pittura pura: Riposta a Kandinsky", *L'artista moderno* of January 1915, and "Un'arte nuova? Costruzione assoluta di motorumore" in the same journal in March 1915. Both essays have been reprinted in Bucarelli: *Enrico Prampolini*, pp. 36-39.

modern world. A luminous-dynamic stage machinery was to create simultaneous sense impressions in abstract form and integrate them within an overarching artistic concept.

Secondo futurismo

After the outbreak of the First World War, Futurism went into a period of decline. Many of the old guard left the movement; others were killed at the front. After the failed attempt, in 1918-19, to re-launch Futurism as a political movement, Marinetti embarked on a new course of action, also in his private life. His love affair with Benedetta Cappa introduced him to a new concept of *sensualità*, both in a physiological and psychological sense. Benedetta's spiritual leanings brought out and reinforced a long-hidden character trait in Marinetti's personality, and her educational experience as a primary-school teacher opened up in him new perspectives on art. This became most apparent in the Tactilism manifesto of 1920. Here, Marinetti redefined the rôle played by the five senses in artistic matters and developed his vision of a synaesthetic work of art that could offer a unified and 'total' experience of the world.²⁹

At the Futurist Congress of 1924, Benedetta summarized the position she and Marinetti had arrived at. In her talk, subsequently published as *Sensibilità futuriste*,³⁰ she addressed the question of how the new and infinite worlds (*i nuovi mondi infiniti*) could be artistically represented. Each Futurist – she states – has developed his or her own approach towards capturing a synthesis of the universe, “with all its contradictions, continuities and chasms”. What unites them is a certain primitivist sensibility³¹ and a desire to overcome the limitations of painting on a flat surface. This aspiration results in what Benedetta calls “three-dimensional, polymaterial, sound-producing compounds, in which the rapports between colour and material, be-

²⁹ See Berghaus: “Marinetti's Volte-Face of 1920: Occultism, Tactilism and 'Gli indomabili'”

³⁰ First published in *L'Ambrosiano*, 10 December 1924, and then reprinted in *Vetrina futurista di letteratura – teatro – arte* (1927), pp. 52-55.

³¹ Her phrase “I futuristi sono i primitivi di una nuova sensibilità” takes up Boccioni's motto “Noi siamo invece i Primitivi di una sensibilità completamente trasformata” in the *Manifesto della pittura futurista* of 1910.

tween form and weight, between heat and emotions respond to each other in a visual and tactile manner.”³²

Benedetta and Marinetti were fully aware that they were moving in a terrain that had already been explored by other artists before them. Nonetheless, their research into “the interlacing senses that constitute the characteristic, driving force of the human machine”³³ was not without originality and brought to the point a number of Futurist innovations, such as:

- using the basic elements of Nature in order to represent the unlimited prospects of the world;
- overcoming the limits of the picture frame;
- placing the viewer in the centre of the picture;
- addressing all five senses in an immediate, non-intellectual manner.

From Tactile to Total Theatre

In the first half of the 1920s, Marinetti developed – supported and no doubt inspired by his wife Benedetta – the project of a Tactile Theatre. The idea arose from the presentations of their tactile panels in conventional playhouses,³⁴ where they were used for “journeys of the hands” along certain tracks, indicated by coloured signs, producing emotional experiences through tactile sensations. From this, Marinetti developed the idea of theatres entirely dedicated to tactilism, where “the seated spectators will place their hands on running conveyor belts, which produce tactile sensations at different rhythmic intervals. The panels can also be mounted on turning disks and accompanied by music and light.”³⁵

The ideas were developed a stage further in Marinetti’s project of a Total Theatre. The inspiration for this may have come from the Bauhaus, where Enrico Prampolini, Ivo Pannaggi, Nicolay Diulgher-

³² The passage is difficult to translate. In the original it reads: “complessi plastici polimaterici rumoristi in cui visivamente tattilmente si odono il rapporto fra colore e materia, fra forma e peso, fra calore ed emotività.”

³³ Marinetti: “Tactilism: Toward the Discovery of New Senses”, *Critical Writings*, p. 379

³⁴ See Berghaus: *Italian Futurist Theatre*, pp. 364-366.

³⁵ Marinetti: “Il tattilismo: Manifesto futurista”, flysheet published by the Movimento Futurista. It has been reprinted in *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, pp. 135-142.

off, Erberto Carboni and Ruggero Vāsari had found inspiration for an overhaul of Futurist aesthetics in order to make it more suitable for an era characterized by a ‘return to order’. Marinetti will have been informed by his colleagues of the institution’s aim “to bring together all creative effort into one whole, to reunify all the disciplines of practical art”³⁶ and to create “a new unity from gathering the many arts, directions and appearances into an undividable whole.”³⁷ The key medium to demonstrate these lofty ideas was the theatre, or rather, a *total* theatre explored in many experimental performances in Weimar and Dessau and propagated in the book, *Die Bühne am Bauhaus* (1925). This inspired László Moholy-Nagy to write the essay “Total Theatre Is the Theatre of the Future” (1927)³⁸, Andreas Weininger to design his Spherical Theatre (1927)³⁹ and Walter Gropius to the best-known of all Utopian theatre designs, the *Piscatortheaterneubau* of 1927.⁴⁰ Marinetti will have known about this grand design from Prampolini, who undertook his own research in this field and was in regular contact with the Bauhaus. When Pannaggi formally joined the institution in 1932,⁴¹ he provided a detailed and well-illustrated report on Gropius’s Total Theatre project in the Italian theatre journal *Scenario*.⁴²

³⁶ *Programm des staatlichen Bauhauses Weimar*, reprinted in Wingler: *The Bauhaus*, p. 32.

³⁷ Gropius: “Idee und Aufbau des staatlichen Bauhauses”, p. 9.

³⁸ Moholy-Nagy: “A jövő színháza a teljes színház”, translated in Passuth: *Moholy-Nagy*, pp. 299–301. This visionary text and a range of other Total-Theatre conceptions at the Bauhaus have been discussed in Berghaus: *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde*, pp. 212–230.

³⁹ Published in *bauhaus* 3 (1927), p. 2. See also Andor Weininger: *Vom Bauhaus zur konzeptuellen Kunst*, pp. 47–50, 55–57, 111–115 and Kersting and Vogelsang: *Raumkonzepte*, pp. 189–190 with some preparatory drawings.

⁴⁰ For a detailed analysis of this project see Woll: *Das Totaltheater*. Gropius first published his concept in “Vom modernen Theaterbau, unter Berücksichtigung des Piscatortheaterneubaues in Berlin”, *Berliner Tageblatt*, 2 November 1927, p. 5 and *Die Scene* 18:1 (1928), pp. 4–6. See also Piscator: *Das Politische Theater*, pp. 124–127. A later explanation given at the Volta Congress in Rome (*Convegno di lettere, 8–14 ottobre 1934: Il teatro drammatico*, Rome: Reale Accademia d’Italia, Fondazione Alessandro Volta, 1935) was reprinted in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, pp. 11–14.

⁴¹ Wingler lists him in the roster of Bauhaus students in *The Bauhaus*, p. 619. Pannaggi remembered the time in an interview for Oslo’s *Dagbladet* (19 December 1970): “Io vi ero entrato dopo il trasferimento a Berlino, e vi rimasi un solo semestre, e cioè fino a quando Hitler lo fece chiedere.” Quoted in *Pannaggi e Parte meccanica*, p. 451. See also his brochure *Bauhaus*.

⁴² Pannaggi: “Teatro totale.”

Marinetti's vision of a *teatro totale* was outlined in an essay that was first published in the journal *Futurismo*.⁴³ But much more interesting is the longer and more detailed manuscript version as it contains a number of drawings. They help us to visualize how Marinetti intended to release the spectators from their immobility and to immerse them in a multi-sensorial spectacle.⁴⁴

The circular construction had several stages around which the audience rotated on armchairs furnished with tactile panels, olfactory boxes and tables for food and drinks. The multiple stage allowed the simultaneous unfolding of several actions and the projection of further scenes by means of films, slides and electronic images. A large cupola showed the mechanical movements of sun, moon, stars, aeroplanes etc. Television screens and radio loudspeakers enabled the spectators to follow the actions in close-up; telephones allowed communication with each other, and elevators transported them to the bar whenever they needed a break from the overkill of sense impressions. To illustrate the concept, Marinetti added a few scenarios.

For example: one stage represents a casino, where a capitalist ruins an old aristocrat in a roulette game, whilst on another stage his wife is having an affair with the aristocrat's son. A third stage shows the young aristocrat's girlfriend committing suicide, and a fourth presents a general meeting of the factory workers voting for the expropriation of their employer. Simultaneous war events taking place in Russia and Japan are projected onto the screens, while on the streets anarchists are inveigling the populace to rebellion. A complex lighting design enhances the scenes and simultaneously floods the spectators in synchronized colours. Musical accompaniment is provided by a hidden orchestra.

The unity which dominates the multiple actions was to be occasionally interrupted by intentional breakdowns of the communication system, thus provoking improvised reactions from the audience and achieving unforeseen humorous or tragic effects in the show. The

⁴³ 15 January 1933; reprinted in the *Almanacco letterario per l'anno 1933*. See Berghaus: *Italian Futurist Theatre*, pp. 539-541, and the translation of the original manuscript in Marinetti: *Critical Writings*, pp. 440-407.

⁴⁴ The manifesto has been translated in Taylor: *Futurism: Politics, Painting and Performance*, pp. 70-74. The text of the manuscript has been published in *Teatro contemporaneo* 5:9 (February-May 1985), pp. 373-384. The drawings have been reproduced in Salaris: *F. T. Marinetti*, p. 241.

ultimate objective of this Total Theatre was to conjure up a “synthesis of the world”, to increase people’s “multiple sensibilities” and “to revolutionize our times” by activating the audience’s ability for dynamic, spontaneous behaviour.

Summary

In the Modernist period, the quest for a total experience of the world gave rise to numerous and highly divergent projects referred to as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Synthesis, Synaesthetic Work of Art, etc. Theodor Adorno interpreted this as a search for unity and cohesion, which had vanished in the era of modernity and which cannot be reinvented, although one may still hanker after it.⁴⁵ What Harald Szeemann called “Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk”,⁴⁶ i.e. the “tendency towards” or the desire for a Total Work of Art, can therefore be considered a typical trait of the ‘crisis of modernity’.

One of the fundamental differences between Romantic and modernist art was that the former was integrative, the latter fragmentary. Romantic works of art possessed a symbolic relation to reality and prepared the way for the autonomous, abstract works of the modernist period, which were independent of any empirical relation to Nature and no longer served to reflect on an outside reality or to transform it into art. Art had become a configuration of elements that did not *stand for* reality but *were* reality. Artists produced abstract works, which overcame all mimetic relation to reality, and constructed art out of its own components.

The release of art from its subordinate relationship to Nature liberated it from traditional genre definitions. This explains the modernists’ interests in fusing different artistic media in one work of art. However, the relation between the parts and the whole could no longer be a harmonious one; rather, it became fragmented, contradictory, disjointed. This essential quality reflected an equally disjointed condition of the world, but to achieve this aim, and to reflect the *totality* of experience, the work of art still required to be arranged, composed and ordered.

⁴⁵ Adorno, in his *Versuch über Wagner* (1952), interpreted the Utopian quest for a *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a futile attempt to overcome the division of labour and alienation in capitalist society. The essay has been reprinted in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 13.

⁴⁶ Szeemann: *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800*.

This is why the Futurist artists again and again produced theatre performances that aspired to be Total Works of Art, assembled from the “chaos and clashing of rhythms” of modern times, yet still aspiring to contain “a new harmony.”⁴⁷

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⁴⁷ Boccioni et al.: “The Exhibitors to the Public”, in Apollonio: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 49.

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