

UCLA

Carte Italiane

Title

Elements of the Divine in Futurist Art and Literature

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2041r1c1>

Journal

Carte Italiane, 2(6)

ISSN

0737-9412

Author

Strom, Jessica

Publication Date

2010-10-20

DOI

10.5070/C926011386

Peer reviewed

Elements of the Divine in Futurist Art and Literature

Jessica R. Strom

University of California, Los Angeles

When considering Futurism, rarely does one think of religion. Futurism proclaims itself as moving forward, leaving the past behind and commanding the construction of new forms of almost every artistic medium. Despite its goals, however, Futurism constantly focuses on imagery that represents precisely the things it hopes to forget. One of these elements is religion. Elements of religious dogma, from various sources, can be found from the very beginning of Futurism, with F. T. Marinetti's *Manifesto del futurista*, until its very end with his *L'aeropoema di Gesù*. Furthermore, and with Marinetti's blessing, religion was inserted into numerous works throughout the life of Futurism as a movement. My argument will focus on some of the various representations of God and divinity in both first and second Futurist art. First I will explore the significance of divine elements in Aldo Palazzeschi's *Il codice di Perelà*. This work manipulates traditional religious symbols and iconography by breaking down traditional meaning systems and assigning new significance values to these symbols. In my analysis of the breakdown and the intersection of the variable religious symbology (that is, from different religious traditions), I will offer interpretations as to the importance of the use of religious elements, and why their breakdown and resurrection provide important insight into Futurist ideology. Next I will assess both the importance of dogma (in any and all forms it takes on) and of defined religious space, as well as the role of religion and spirituality within Futurism, as outlined in the "Manifesto della nuova religione-morale della velocità," by connecting the ideas proposed by Marinetti to those of an organized religious structure. After establishing the religious mirror defined by Marinetti, I will move to the second wave of Futurism and analyze the *arte sacra* of Fillia (Luigi Colombo) as well as some of his writings that address Futurist spirituality, paying particular attention to the "Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista" and discussing how Fillia's work

is representative of this manifesto. I will lastly speak to the significance of Fillia's *arte sacra* as a reincarnation of classical artistic conventions and why this is meaningful when viewed in light of Fascist ideology. This article ultimately seeks to trace the progression of Futurism's relationship with the divine, how the divine is (de)constructed and what these representations mean.

Early Futurism's relationship with religion, as with most things *passatista*, was tenuous at best. The persistent effort to disassociate from everything that previously held meaning (however strong this meaning was) served as one of the defining tenets of Futurism, which was constantly, and at times, exclusively, concerned with moving forward and negating all things that impeded its forward velocity. One would expect, then, that there would be a profound disassociation from Catholicism, by far one of the oldest guiding sources in Italian life. In many ways, this disassociation did occur, most certainly with the Church as an institution; however, there was not a significant thrust to rid society of deeply imbedded religious messages, just the institutions that conveyed them. There is also a very clear development in the ideologies regarding religion as Futurism progressed. Initially there was a strong sentiment against religion generally and a push to replace it with new belief systems. This was likely a result of, or was in conjunction with, the First World War and the heroic elements present in the Futurism of this time period. Belief systems were focused on the power of men and machines and the values that they could bring to society rather than on a more formal religious structure. Following the war, and as a reaction to it as well as to Socialism and then to Fascism, religion and religious belief began to be defined in increasingly nuanced, and perhaps more traditional, ways, allowing for the re-appropriation of the symbols that had been previously cast aside.

Given the strong separation from anything previously established, *Il codice di Perelà* provides a unique example of the recasting of *passatista* symbols in an entirely new, or at least restructured, framework. Palazzeschi's novel does not function solely within one realm of religious symbology, but incorporates elements from various sources, putting them together in a way that creates a new religious message while simultaneously allowing the reader to recognize the connections to standard dogma and observe as they are profoundly altered. Palazzeschi's choices are precise as he manipulates symbols, and his destruction of structures mirrors the destructive mentality of early Futurism. We cannot

simply assume that these elements are present only for the sake of being destroyed. Instead, we must assess their value and impact and try to understand *why* they are there. Furthermore, what comment does their presence make about the fundamental ideology of Futurism? How can a work be considered as a prime example of early Futurist literature when it appears to go against so much of what we usually associate with Futurism? And what does this really say about Marinetti, then, if he accepts this novel? While these questions are difficult to even begin to answer, it is crucial to keep them in mind when looking at Palazzeschi and later Fillia. How can two seemingly diverse concepts, religion and Futurism, be reconciled in one piece of art or literature without sacrificing parts of either ideology?

The overarching religious element in *Il codice di Perelà* is the intense and profound recasting of the Christ story. From his miraculous birth to his ascension to heaven, Perelà's story follows that of Christ while it also incorporates elements from the Old Testament, religious ritual, and the stories of other biblical figures. The novel also contains moments of primitive religion as well as of classical mythology. The incorporation of these various elements allow for the construction of a new type of Christ figure who breaks down old constructs, rebuilds them, and propels the symbolic imagery forward.

From a Catholic Italian perspective, and not a Futurist one, the Christ symbology should be immediately apparent. *Il codice di Perelà* remains grounded in *passatista* elements, causing us yet again to question the true Futurist value of the work. In a sense, the Christological structure is somewhat banal precisely because it is so common. Many have argued, Luciano De Maria in particular, that one of Palazzeschi's most important influences, in terms of religion, was his mother, who was quite religious. Quoting Palazzeschi, De Maria writes: "Quand'ero bambino e da giovane, avevo sentito parlare tanto di Gesù da mia madre."¹ Given this situation, one could argue that the Christ imagery in *Il codice di Perelà* in fact makes it anti-Futurist, for it is grounded in a traditional way of approaching religion. Palazzeschi himself states that his Christianity is a foundational component to his identity, as it is presumably for many Italians. And, if the goal of the Futurists was to distance themselves from their ingrained identities and construct identities that were fundamentally separate from the norm, Palazzeschi, as a Futurist, fails. As we will see, given that the Futurists hoped to create a new religion (be it based on speed), the development and reconfiguration of past religious themes

seem like important steps in this process. Perhaps the process of being provocative (the ultimate Futurist goal) needed to develop slowly, or at variable degrees. Palazzeschi's novel, clearly religiously provocative because of its manipulation of the Christ figure, serves as an important precursor to the forthcoming "Manifesto della nuova religione-morale della velocità," which provokes religious symbols even further, to such a degree that they are almost anti-religious and certainly anti-Christian. Before directly addressing the manifesto, it is important to more profoundly analyze the religious disruptions in *Il codice di Perelà* in order to better understand the progression outlined above.

The first essential element in this analysis is that of the smoke itself and Perelà's amorphous form. Biblical smoke is not only representative of destruction (sacrifice) but of purification as well. The concept of fire over body, explored in Palazzeschi's first chapter, speaks directly to this idea. First, this is the classic imagery of a martyr. The martyr sacrifices himself for faith, thus allowing the fire to overtake him. While destruction is fundamental to early Futurism, destruction *in this way* seems to have much stronger religious implications than Futurist ones. The martyr theme is also particularly relevant in the case of Alloro who burns himself so that he can be like Perelà, the Christ figure. Alloro can most certainly be viewed as a martyr, as he dies in the name of Perelà, the Christ figure, and is thus clearly representative of *passatista* religion. Despite the *passatista* implications, Palazzeschi is making this martyr his own, reinventing the concept and breaking down old constructs. Whereas a traditional martyr is a direct result of extreme public disapproval, at which point his life ends, Alloro only becomes a problematic figure after his death. In death, the people's ultimate allegiance is to Alloro, whom they feel died without cause, and not to Perelà. It is then Perelà, as the Christ figure, who is martyred precisely because of the martyrdom he precipitated. Palazzeschi reverses the martyr image, creating newness from a classical concept and propelling the concept into a new realm of meaning, thus, despite its religious implications, rendering the situation Futurist after all.

Returning to the implications of Perelà's smoky form, he is pure, and thus can be considered Christ-like, precisely because he has undergone purification at the hands of his "mothers," much like Mary was able to produce a pure being because she herself was free from sin. While a Christological connotation of purity is evident here, one can also draw connections to other biblical situations. Perelà's "mothers" have

completed an arduous process, much like that performed by the high priest in the Temple period and explored extensively in Leviticus. This process requires a performance of sorts, prescribing that certain activities be executed in order for the burnt offering to be “accepted” and for true purification to occur. It is not easy for purification to be achieved, and here, Perelà represents its personification. This purified being is amorphous: purity cannot take on a form because it is not a material product, but a state of being. Palazzeschi here profoundly recasts religious imagery, simultaneously reinforcing it and casting it aside. It is also important to note here that he is, in this example, functioning outside the Christological framework. While the concept of purity is certainly part of Christian theology, in this case, it is much more pre-Christian than Christian. The Old Testament connections to purity speak more to a Judeo interpretation.²

Perhaps it is for his purity, in addition to his novelty, that Perelà is so revered in the kingdom. Having been declared the epitome of purification, Perelà represents all that anyone could hope to become.³ The people with whom Perelà interacts equate their awe for purity with their awe for Perelà himself, inferring that, at least initially, his purity (that is, his untainted body and soul) will be the solution to all of their problems and will allow for the creation of the new social code. This is all to say that initially, Perelà is received as a prophet, which quickly evolves into his perception as a god — akin to the progression undergone by Christ and to His perception as the son of God and as God himself. It is notable that the first declaration of Perelà as a god comes, not from man, but from an animal, giving a sense of the primitive to his godliness: his smoky form also lends itself to a primitive state of being, with fire as one of the most primitive elements in general.⁴ It is not until the grand ball that people begin to refer to Perelà as divine (“il divino, dio dio”) and the choir of angels (see: *Adieu mon ange*) and followers await for the entrance of the god.⁵ He is received with the appellation of God, and from this point forward, he is all-knowing, all powerful, and, it would seem, infallible. It is now this man (in case we were not sure before) who will change the law of the land and how its citizens interact.

One final comment must be made about Perelà’s “birth” and his “mothers” before moving on. Here, the connotation is again two-fold. First, it could certainly be argued that Perelà is conceived immaculately. He comes from nothingness, like Christ and Mary, and is ultimately viewed as divine because his origins cannot be traditionally explained.

While the Christological connection is yet again explicit, Palazzeschi reconfigures traditional symbology within a Futurist framework by creating a pseudo-human being who does not fit within the traditional Catholic view of Christ. Unlike Christ, Perelà is not entirely human (with human form and thoughts), nor is he entirely divine. The other religious component here comes from Perelà's "mothers" who are modeled directly after the mythological Fates. Like the Fates, Pena, Rete, and Lama are directly in control of Perelà's destiny. They give him life and they send him out at the age of thirty-three (again Christologically important). Perelà takes his name from the beginning syllables of each of their names, again symbolic of the life they gave him. However, it is interesting to note, as De Maria does, the implications of the last syllables of their names. He writes:

Ma si badi, se prendiamo con un certo accorgimento le sillabe finali viene fuori *anatema*. Così:

Pena Rete Lama

Pena Rete Lama

*anatema*⁶

Anathema speaks directly to Perelà's ultimate damned and cursed status. With this interpretation we have set up both positive and negative connotations for the Christ figure, and despite the motif invoked, this sense of damnation ultimately wins out and Palazzeschi reimagines the Christ story negatively while simultaneously maintaining a strong connection to it.

It is ultimately, however, Perelà's relationship to Alloro's death that finally casts Perelà as fallible, and immediately, all faith is lost in him, his power, and his potential to frame the city's legal code. The only remaining faith comes from Oliva, whose conviction originates not from awe but from love. She also represents another important Christological figure, Mary Magdalene. Oliva stays with Perelà until the end, thus ensuring that some faith remains in the martyred Christ figure. The end of the novel yet again returns to the Christ/martyr metaphor, as Perelà escapes his earthly prison. Importantly, both his body (despite its amorphous and smoky nature) and soul ascend, indicating a double representation of both Christ (soul) and the Madonna (body) in heaven. This duality could be viewed as a precursor to the concept of simultaneity that becomes important in Fillia's art. The ability to

present multiple religious moments at the same time is, according to Fillia and Marinetti, something only accomplished by the Futurists. Here, Palazzeschi proves himself capable of such a feat.

The “Manifesto della nuova religione–morale della velocità” speaks directly to issues of prayer, and the replacement of traditional religious symbology with that of speed. This manifesto also provides an excellent transitional moment between *Il codice di Perelà* and Fillia. The manifesto states: “La morale cristiana servì a svillupare la vita interna dell’uomo. Non ha più ragione d’essere oggi, poiché s’è vuotata di tutto il Divino.”⁷ This is a bold statement against the development of Christian ideals, but, importantly, not against Christian ideals as a concept. It is the fact that Christian morals have been manipulated by the Church that makes them problematic because they have lost their divine qualities and have simply become an arm of the church, void of real meaning. Claudia Salaris notes that within early Futurism there was a profound sense of anti-clericalism or *svaticanamento*, which reinforced the anti-establishment sentiment.⁸ The manifesto continues: “La morale futurista difenderà l’uomo dalla decomposizione determinate dalla lentezza, dal ricordo, dall’analisi, dal riposo e dall’abitudine. L’energia umana centuplicata dalla velocità dominerà il Tempo e lo Spazio.”⁹ Unlike the contaminated Christian morals, the Futurist ideals support man and help him progress forward. Like Perelà they are able to transcend space and time and move forward in a progressive and energetic way that has not been seen before. Because the Futurist ideology has in effect replaced the Christian, and because velocity is the dominant principle of the Futurist moral, velocity has now replaced Christianity as religion. Furthermore, “La velocità dà finalmente alla vita umana uno dei caratteri della divinità: *la linea retta*.”¹⁰ The forward projection of velocity is directly related to the divinity it possesses. As man is propelled forward, on the just path, he becomes closer to the divine, because he can transcend time and space, thus rendering him a more advanced and sublime being. Finally, velocity is “naturalmente *pura*” thus rendering it acceptable as divine because it is untainted and full of possibility.¹¹

The concept of prayer and prayer space is also interestingly addressed within the “Manifesto della nuova religione–morale della velocità.” Because velocity is the most divine thing possible, prayer is explicitly associated with it. The manifesto states, “Se pregare vuol dire comunicare con la divinità correre a grande velocità è una preghiera. Santità della ruota e delle rotaie. Bisogna inginocchiarsi sulle rotaie per

pregare la divina velocità. Bisogna inginocchiarsi davanti alla velocità rotante di una bussola giroscopica.”¹² In completing acts that emphasize velocity, such as running, one is, in fact, praying. Things that produce velocity, such as wheels, are sanctified and we are to bow in front of them as a sign of respect and of their divinity. And as the compass that is our destiny spins even faster, we must worship it too. In this section, the word *inginocchiarsi* is particularly striking. This concept comes directly from religious practice and it is quite interesting how here, despite the altered concept of the divine, we are expected to invoke the same rituals that we would if presented with a more “traditional” divine being.¹³ The re-appropriation of this term speaks directly, again, to the role of traditional ritual in the lives of Italians. They can never really escape tradition, despite their best efforts to move forward.

Given the centrality of velocity in terms of prayer, it is not surprising then that the prayer space of this new religion is precisely located in places where velocity can be seen at its most extreme. These places include: train stations, bridges and tunnels, battlefields, and places that bustle with people, such as a busy *piazza*. Here, prayer and prayer space are directly connected because they are simultaneous representations of the same thing. Religious space is typically created in the spaces where the divine is consistently found, and this remains true for Futurist religion. In this case, these spaces speak directly to the mechanization of the divine. Because the machine is equal to velocity, it becomes divine, thus ultimately mechanizing the belief system.

As a result of the mechanization of religion and all things spiritual, in 1930 Fillia asserted that society was in a place where it could reach new spiritual levels and that artistic mechanization in fact increased the profundity and universality of religion, and vice versa.¹⁴ He writes:

Un'arte veramente spirituale è duratura, un'arte che sia per gli uomini necessità e non semplice godimento estetico, si sviluppa sempre in un'atmosfera di pura religiosità. Intendiamo perciò l'arte come una funzione spirituale, come un mezzo per rendere le immagini di un misterioso mondo superumano. L'uomo ha bisogno di staccarsi dalla terra, ha bisogno di sognare, di desiderare eterne felicità, di dimenticare continuamente la realtà quotidiana. Dopo tanti secoli di cultura e di attaccamento terrestre, poiché crediamo di essere all'inizio di una nuova, immensa, originale

civiltà, riteniamo indispensabile dichiarare che i nostri spiriti si armonizzano oggi con i periodi più intensamente religiosi del passato, così come si trovano indifferenti e contrari a tutto ciò che sa di pagano e di umanistico. ...La civiltà meccanica, che l'uomo fu costretto a inventare e che modifica i costumi e le abitudini di tutto il mondo raggiungendo una autentica e palpabile universalità, non è un fenomeno puramente materiale. La civiltà meccanica provoca un'atmosfera di mistero, di ignoto, di imprevedibile: ha tutti i caratteri di una forza superiore a qualsiasi logica umana e domina la nostra vita.¹⁵

The mechanic quality of art and ideas in fact makes them more mysterious, allowing for increased interpretation and more profound and universal conclusions to be drawn from them. Individuals are forced to think more about concepts before reacting to them, in a sense creating a spiritual and mystical atmosphere in which to wrestle with the divine and spirituality in general. Religious qualities enhance art and facilitate the best possible artistic production.

Given that the mechanization of ideas can be made universal and divine, we can then apply these ideas specifically to art. Fillia continues:

Ogni arte religiosa ebbe come base degli enigmi (se visti con mentalità terrestre) che diventarono misteri rappresentativi di tutta una fede. Ecco perciò che nel formarsi di una vita fino a ieri imprevedibile, questo andare verso un avvenire carico di lirismo, è per l'uomo l'inizio di un periodo ricco di divinità.¹⁶

Again, the mysteries found in art are capable of rendering it more divine, allowing for a more spiritual feeling to be invoked in the viewer, which ultimately positions him closer to the divine and better able to understand the divinity and the artistic representation. This is the goal of Futurist religious art and is laid out expressly in the "Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista (1931)."

The "Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista" speaks directly to the uses of religious art and why Futurist religious art is the most beneficial and valuable incarnation of this artistic representation.¹⁷ While the entire

manifesto discusses these ideas, I found two points to be particularly relevant to Fillia's work. The manifesto states:

4. Soltanto gli artisti futuristi ansiosi di originalità ad ogni costo e sistematici odiatori del già visto, possono dare al quadro, all'affresco e al complesso plastico la potenza di sorpresa magica necessaria per sperimentare miracoli.

5. Soltanto gli artisti futuristi, che da vent'anni impongono nell'arte l'arduo problema della simultaneità, possono esprimere chiaramente, con adeguate compenetrazioni di tempo-spazio, i dogmi simultanei del culto cattolico, come la Santa Trinità, l'Immacolata Concezione e il Calvario di Dio.¹⁸

As will be apparent, Fillia tries to embrace all of the Christological elements in one artistic endeavor. The concept of simultaneity is particularly important, as it is something with which, according to the manifesto, artists have consistently struggled. Furthermore, it is now only because the Futurists have mastered the transcendence of space and time that they can apply these principles to religious interpretation. In so doing, they are able to express miracles, the mysteries of the universe, and the divine.

From the "Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista," it is clear that the 1930s represented a period of intense ideological shift, particularly in terms of representations of the divine and spirituality within Futurism. This shift can be attributed to many sources, though probably the most influential was Fascist ideology. Despite the Futurist aesthetic, Fascism dominated public discourse, and, in many ways, Futurism was forced to conform to it, at least to a degree, in order to still be regarded as a worthwhile and acceptable artistic movement.¹⁹ Fillia in fact proclaims that not only is Futurist *arte sacra* the best representation of *arte sacra* ever created, but Futurist art is also a prime example of Fascist art. Salaris notes:

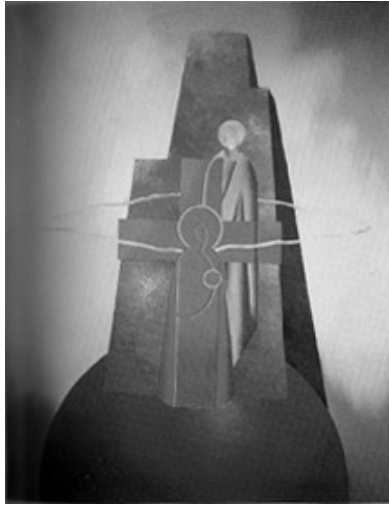
[Per] iniziativa di Fillia viene pubblicato un volume collettivo, *Arte fascista*, contenente scritti di Marinetti, Balla, Bragaglia, Depero, Dottori, Prampolini, Volt, Soffici, dello stesso Fillia e di altri, in cui si affronta la questione del

futurismo come espressione estetica del nuovo Stato. Dice Fillia: 'L'arte futurista è la sola arte ricca di elementi e di valori fascisti. Il futurismo italiano, creatore di una nuova sensibilità, à influenzato tutta la produzione artistica mondiale: in questo è l'importanza decisiva che lo afferma come unica espressione spirituale del secolo.'²⁰

With this, Fillia effectively eliminates the conflict between Futurist and Fascist aesthetics, allowing for him to continue his search for spirituality in art. For Fillia, there remained a persistent desire to understand and capture the spiritual within art, as evidenced by the previously discussed "Spiritualità futurista." Fillia's definition of "spiritual" is unclear, for at moments it seems to embrace Christian theology while at others "the divine" is an abstract concept. It is not evident exactly where God, that is, the Christian God, fits into the picture, at least initially. It does seem that in Fillia's *arte sacra* of the early 1930s, God is a clear presence and, based on various writings, including the "Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista," it is apparent that Fillia felt his *arte sacra*, because of the various components it contained, was the best possible representation of the divine. Importantly, Fillia embraced traditional conventions of religious art, reinterpreted them, and presented them in a new way that not only conveyed the Christian message, but the Futurist aesthetic as well.²¹

There are three important elements found in Fillia's work that are essential to understanding why the Futurist *arte sacra* was viewed, at least by the Futurists themselves, as the prime example of religious art. First, there is the element of mysticism. The aesthetic of *aeropittura* provides a sense of omniscience that appears to look down on the art from above, creating a mystical and spiritual quality that allows for an ethereal interpretation of the divine and the qualities associated with it. Additionally, the Futurists asserted that their art was the only art that could explain the miracles of the divine. It was able to transcend uncertainty in miracles and interpret them in a way that apparently rendered them explainable and clear to viewers. In part, this was accomplished through the simultaneity found in Fillia's *arte sacra*. Simultaneity indicates, at least in terms of religion, that all of the elements of the Christ story, that is, birth, crucifixion, death/entombment, and resurrection, are represented at the same time. The linear nature of space and time is altered, thanks to *aeropittura* and its aesthetics, thus allowing for all these elements to be depicted together.

Despite the value that Fillia finds in simultaneity, he also painted several works that break down the Christological story into its various components. I will begin with an analysis of these paintings and then move to those that depict all of the elements together. In all cases I will pay particular attention to both the traditional conventions utilized and well as the use of repetition throughout Fillia's works, providing inferences into his choices and how they are beneficial to the creation of *arte sacra* and its Futurist aesthetic.



La religione imperiale (1931, oil on canvas, 100x125cm)²²

The first painting I will discuss is titled *La religione imperiale* and was painted in 1931.²³ In terms of simultaneity, the cross, which is made of air, is one of the most important elements, as it is able to transcend both space and time, capturing all of the Christological elements at once. Furthermore this painting shows both the Madonna and Child, the first element to the Christ story, as well as the Golgotha, the location of the crucifixion. The angel is also representative of resurrection, indicating Christ's divine status. This painting also contains elements that signify its status as a work of *aeropittura*, most notably the cloud that surrounds the entire scene. The use of blue and red is particularly interesting in all of Fillia's paintings and this work is no exception. Fillia repeatedly uses red and blue spheres, which arguably represent the terrestrial world and the kingdom of God, respectively. Given the sense of *aeropittura*, the angel, and the color of the sphere, this painting seems meant to be

situated within the heavens. We are leaving the earthly realm in favor of the divine. However, the red surrounding the Madonna indicates that a connection to the earth remains, and that there will forever be a duality, earthly and divine, within the constructs of the Christological story.²⁴



L'annunciazione (1932, oil on canvas
100x125cm)

The next painting, *L'annunciazione* (1932) takes us to the beginning of the Christ story. In this painting, importantly, there is no red, perhaps speaking to Mary's forthcoming divinity and to her purity. The use of blue is extremely strong, with almost every notable surface functioning within this color palette. There is also the strong sense of *aeropittura*, as it appears that the surface on which Mary rests is actually floating. The swath of blue with stars in the middle of the painting is very important for two reasons. First, this color is a convention of the Madonna dating to the end of the twelfth century. Here it appears as though it is also representative of the divine, and it divides the Madonna and the angel Gabriel. The stars also appear to represent not only the Madonna but also the word of God that impregnates her. Finally, that the Madonna is white speaks to her purity and to her capability to receive the divine word. The use of conventional color schemes in this painting is particularly interesting. It would seem as though Futurist representations of the Madonna would do away with conventions, however the use of said conventions is representative of contemporary criticisms of Second Futurism which condemn "il ritorno all'ordine" that is in profound

opposition to earlier Futurist ideology. In his use of convention, Fillia recasts its meaning (while blue represents the Madonna, she is not actually wearing blue), simultaneously making his painting accessible to a popular audience while manipulating the popular convention by altering the standard color scheme.



L'adorazione (1931, oil on canvas, 100x124cm)

In contrast to *L'annunciazione*, *L'adorazione* (1931) invokes different conventions while at the same time promoting an incredibly Futurist female aesthetic, one that mechanizes the female body and renders it without form or sex. Here we return to simultaneity, with the cross, the Golgotha, and Christ present. Christ is represented by the red ball, on which the Madonna appears to be bestowing her adoration. The Madonna is all in black (yet another convention) and is nearly formless. Fillia and Marinetti speak directly to this painting in the “Manifesto dell’arte sacra futurista.” They write: “Il quadro di Fillia *L'Adorazione* figura una Madonna pregante, il cui corpo è smaterializzato al punto da non avere più nulla di umano, forma astratta della preghiera ai piedi di una croce fatta di atmosfera.”²⁵ This mechanization of the female is particularly poignant, given Futurist sentiments toward women. The sense of velocity in Futurism took women away from their traditional role of procreation. Many Futurist writers, both male and female, speak to the reshaping of female gender roles and Fillia himself wrote *La morte della donna*, which speaks explicitly of female mechanization.²⁶

Furthermore, the Madonna, generally, is a mechanical woman, as she serves only as a vessel for the divine. She does not perform any sexual act in her procreation and is simply an instrument of God. Perhaps then, Fillia's shapeless, severe Madonna is the best representation that we could have. She is similar to other Futurist ideals of the female, which emphasize female prowess in spheres other than reproduction. Like the ideal Futurist woman, Fillia's Madonna is strong and powerful, asserting her dominance in this situation. In *L'adorazione*, Fillia simultaneously embraces convention while recasting gender roles and our interpretation of the Christological story in general.



L'itinerario della passione (1933, oil on canvas,
100x125cm)

The last stop on Fillia's Christological journey is with *L'itinerario della passione* (1933), which is an explicit depiction of the crucifixion. This painting is the only example of Fillia's *arte sacra* in which the cross is not made of air, but of earthly red instead. The crucifixion is a completely terrestrial event, and thus we are not given any sense of *aeropittura*, of air in general, or anything that could be viewed as the divine. There are also explicit representations of stigmata, again speaking directly to the corporality of Christ. In this painting it does not appear as though space and time are transcended, that is, it appears to be firmly grounded in the terrestrial realm. This is perhaps due to the latter date of this work. With Fascism growing reactionary, it is possible that Fillia felt it necessary to tone down his religious abstraction and to work within

a more traditional convention instead of in *aeropittura*. That is to say, in this example, there seems to be little manipulation of convention and the sense of simultaneity does not appear to be present. There remains, however, a sense of mechanization, particularly given the fact that the body of Christ is not present, simply the representation of the stigmata. Perhaps this is a nod to a more elevated religious aesthetic in which the body is no longer necessary, being replaced by only a representation of what happens to the body.



Natività — Morte — Eternità (1931, oil on canvas, 135x115cm)

Having gone through the entire Christ story, we can now put all of the elements together in one painting: *Natività – Morte – Eternità* (1931). This painting is not only a profound example of simultaneity, but also provides a subtle historical analysis of the Church and the development of religion, ending with the optimal religious structure, that of Futurism. The “Manifesto dell’arte sacra futurista” again speaks explicitly of this painting and provides an in-depth analysis of the various elements. The manifesto states:

Il quadro di Fillia *Natività – morte – eternità* offre intorno alla Madonna seduta in primo piano un paesaggio reso irreali dall’apparizione di una grande croce smaterializzata, cioè formata di puro cielo. Questa croce affiora nel liquido corpo della Madonna, come una soave fosforescenza sottomarina. L’insieme è chiuso nella sfera del mondo sulla cui superficie

appaiono tutte le chiese della storia da quelle incavernate nelle catacombe alle romane, bizantine, romaniche, gotiche, rinascimento, ecc, fino a quelle futuriste. La figurazione della Madonna è animata dalla linea luminosa del Bambino Gesù. Questa continua nel ritmo del corpo della madre cogli stessi elementi architettonici delle chiese. Il quadro contiene una prodigiosa simultaneità di elementi diversissimi.²⁷

In terms of simultaneity, one can see how the cross transcends all the elements of the painting, passing through the Madonna, the Child, the Golgotha, and the Tomb. All elements are represented through the cross, which, because it is made of air, is able to suspend the linear construct of time and allows for all the Christological elements to occur together. While the simultaneity is essential to this painting, even more interesting are the line drawings of the churches from various periods that surround the red (that is, earthly) background. Here it seems as though Fillia is embracing the past, and depicting it explicitly, in order to prove that in fact the last drawing, the Futurist church, is the most advanced and functional religious institution. This one painting captures all the major elements of the “Manifesto dell’arte sacra futurista” as discussed above, and explicitly proves that religion and Futurism are not at all mutually exclusive and in fact must function together and absorb preexisting structures in order to propel those structures forward, recast them, and improve and enhance their meanings.

Throughout the Futurist art discussed above, it is clear that religion, despite its presumed *passatista* quality, is in fact quite essential to Futurism. While religious interpretation varies depending on the Futurist period, its presence has profound implications regarding the centrality of religion within the Italian cultural landscape. Futurism, in spite of its efforts to break from the past, could never really escape this cultural landscape, dominated by Catholicism, and was constantly affected by the social shifts occurring around it. While some may view this as essentially problematic, I argue that the inclusion of religion and manifestations of prominent religious iconography in fact enhance the art, making it accessible to a wider reader/viewership and ultimately increasing its aesthetic and cultural value.

Notes

1. Luciano De Maria, *La nascita dell'avanguardia: Saggi sul futurismo italiano* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1986), 163, note 4.

2. See Leviticus, Chapter 1 for a description of the process of a burnt or elevation offering, which specifically refers the use of fire to create smoke, which is the pure offering. Leviticus, Chapter 6 refers to the proper procedures for tending to a burnt offering, mostly importantly that the fire with which the offering is made is never to be extinguished. In Aldo Palazzeschi's *Il codice di Perelà* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1974), 17-18, we learn that Perelà's mothers also tend to a fire that is never extinguished, even in August (as Perelà's audience learns with shock).

3. In the 1974 edition of *Il codice di Perelà*, Perelà is addressed as such: "Voi siete, Signor Perelà, un uomo purificato da ogni immondezza umana. Questo vi renderà sommamente gradito ai nostri occhi, un essere d'accezione e di privilegio: eccelso" (20). In an earlier version of the novel, *Il codice di Perelà: Un romanzo futurista*, which was re-released by SE in 1991 and edited by Marco Marchi, the language is somewhat different and states: "Voi siete, Signor Perelà, un uomo purificato, e questo vi renderà ai nostri occhi un essere privilegiato ed eccezionale" (26). While the reason for the discrepancies in these two versions of the novel is unclear, what is clear is that Perelà is viewed as a higher being of sorts, one that will be revered by people to the utmost degree.

4. Palazzeschi, *Il codice di Perelà* (1974), 87. While this animal is a parrot and thus typically prone to repetition, there is no indication before this point in the novel that the word "God" has been previously used to refer to Perelà and that the parrot could have picked up this word from someone else. It is interesting, then, that the creature that is typically mimicking others here is creating the language used to code Perelà as divine.

5. *Ibid.*, 93.

6. Palazzeschi, *Il codice di Perelà: Un romanzo futurista* (1991), 205.

7. F. T. Marinetti, "La nuova religione-morale della velocità," *L'Italia Futurista*, 11 maggio 1916.

8. Claudia Salaris, "Il futurismo e il sacro," in F. T. Marinetti, *L'aeropoema di Gesù* (Montepulciano: Editori del Grifo, 1991), 81-82.

9. Marinetti, "La nuova religione-morale della velocità."

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. This is importantly *not* a religious practice characterized by one specific religious system. Almost all belief systems contain some process of bowing and the inclusion of the practice here speaks to the Futurists' desire to break from the traditional Christian belief system and institutions, but not from a more general religious structure.

14. Fillia, born Luigi Colombo, took his mother's maiden name in 1924. In 1923 he founded the *Sindacati artistici futuristi* in Torino, where he was also involved in the activities of the Torinese working class revolution. Fillia was an important member of the Torinese Futurist movement and was not only a painter but also wrote poetry, novels, stories, and a play. In addition to his central position in *arte sacra futurista*, he also played an important role in the development of Futurist architectural and cooking aesthetics. More information on Fillia can be found in Claudia Salaris, *Dizionario del futurismo: Idee provocazioni e parole d'ordine di una grande avanguardia* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1996), 160; *Fillia: Fra immaginario meccanico e primordio cosmico*, ed. Enrico Crispolti (Milano: Mazzotta, 1988); and Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

15. Fillia, "Spiritualità futurista," in *Oggi e Domani*, Roma, 26 ottobre 1931.

16. *Ibid.*

17. For an overview of abstract spiritual art in general, see *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. Edward Weisberger (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Abbeville Press, 1986). This text specifically addresses the relationship between abstract art, various interpretations of the spiritual and the mystical, and shifting belief systems.

18. F.T. Marinetti and Fillia, "Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista," in *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, ed. Luciano de Maria (Milano: Mondadori, 2005), 201-205.

19. Two important components of Fascist ideology which specifically relate to religion are the issues of marriage and Catholic education. The Lateran Pacts of 1929, which outline the relationship between the Church and the State, emphasize the sanctity of marriage (and the traditional gender roles the institution prescribes) and the institution of the family. Furthermore, the pacts stress the importance of Catholic education, noting that it must be taught with increased intensity throughout a child's schooling. In order to remain an acceptable artistic movement in the face of the drastic changes being brought about by the Fascist government, the Futurists had to embrace, at least publicly, some of these key elements of Fascist ideology. This may account, in part, for the *passatista* elements found in Futurist *arte sacra*, which adhere quite well to the Fascist religious rhetoric. However the various subversive qualities of the *arte sacra* also firmly ground them within Futurism.

20. Claudia Salaris, *Artecrazia: L'avanguardia futurista negli anni del fascismo* (Scandicci (Firenze): La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1992), 83–84.

21. Fillia was not the only Futurist artist to create religious art. Marinetti's wife Benedetta Cappa Marinetti also painted spiritual works, though her pieces are more abstract and do not contain the explicit Christological scenes depicted in those of Fillia. More information of her works can be found in Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), and in *La futurista Benedetta Cappa Marinetti*, ed. Lisa Panzera (Philadelphia: Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art and Design, 1998).

22. All images taken from *Fillia e il Manifesto dell'Arte Sacre Futurista* (Torino: Narciso Galleria d'Arte, 2001).

23. Of note in the title of this painting is the use of the word “imperiale” which has specific Fascist connotations. The goals of the Fascist regime included the formation of a standardized, powerful Italian identity based on the traditional family and religious structures that would help to create a national identity, thus rendering Italy a strong and well constructed imperial power. The religion of this state is powerfully Catholic and profoundly important. The use of this word also speaks to Fascist goals of imperialism and colonialism in North Africa.

24. In *Inventing Futurism*, Poggi provides a different reading of Fillia's color scheme. She argues that in 1925, in a text called “Spiritual Alphabet,” Fillia established a precise color code in which red represents “creation—thought—force—domination—originality—intelligence.” She continues that “if the color red represents creativity as well as force—domination, it may allude both to God's original creativity and to the dominating power of the regime” (258). While this may have been how Fillia coded red in 1925, before he was creating religious art, I am not entirely convinced of this interpretation here. It seems that conventional uses of color in religious art are being overlooked (and Poggi does not discuss the blue spheres), as are the conventions of *aeropittura*. Poggi also suggests that the spheres in the paintings are representative of “modern industry” and “mystical geometry,” which I largely disagree with, and she then later implies a Marinettian influence that codes the spheres as representations of an ideally expanding nation. It is unclear how these interpretations fit in to the aesthetics expressed in the “Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista.”

25. Marinetti and Fillia, “Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista,” 204.

26. Fillia's *La morte della donna* was written in 1925. Other writings by women include Rosa Rosà, *Una donna con tre anime* (1918), Enif Robert, *Un ventre di donna* (1919), and Maria Ginanni, *Il poema dello spazio* (1919).

27. Marinetti and Fillia, “Manifesto dell'arte sacra futurista,” 203–204.