

# DE-HISTORICISING THE AVANT-GARDE: AN “OUT- OF-TIME” READING OF THE ANTI-LOVE POLEMIC IN THE WRITINGS OF TOMMASO MARINETTI AND VALENTINE DE SAINT-POINT

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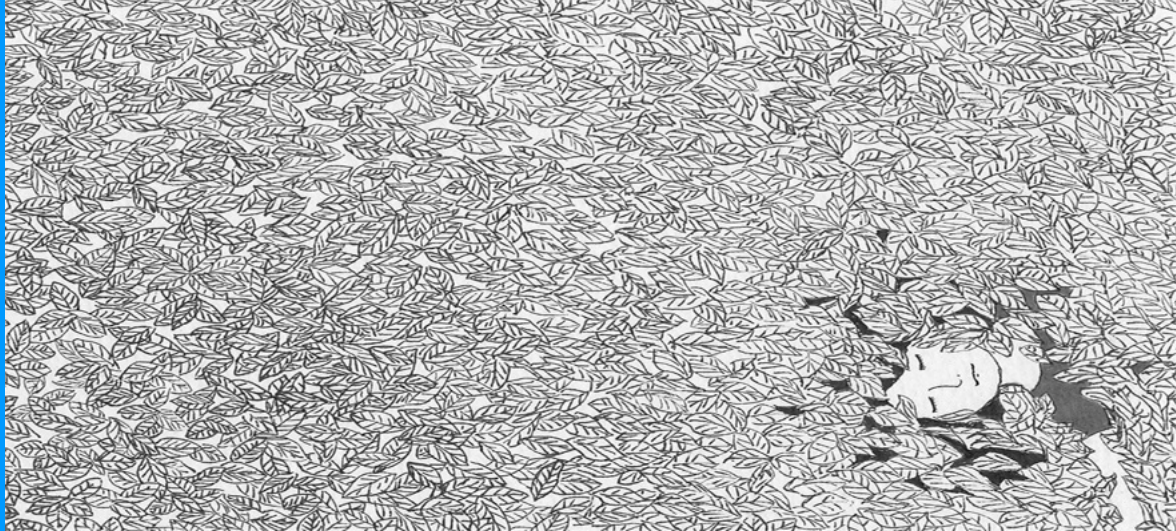
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**Abstract** || The present paper discusses Tommaso Marinetti's and Valentine de Saint-Point's treatment of the theme of love in relation to the ongoing theoretical debate on the death of the avant-garde. It examines some of the most controversial texts against love written by the two futurist authors and explores the possibility of a non-historicist approach to these writings. In particular, using the Derridean notion of textual "transplantability", the paper re-situates the futurist polemic against love in contemporary culture and suggests an "un-timely" connection between the cultural context of the old avant-garde and the present time. In the light of this connection, the paper argues for a broader understanding of the relationship between the "dead" and the "living" in avant-garde studies.

**Keywords** || Avant-garde | Futurism | Love | Death of the avant-garde | Marinetti | De Saint-Point.

## 0. Introduction

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The debate on the avant-garde over the past sixty years has revolved largely around the death theory, according to which the avant-garde has become increasingly incompatible with contemporary culture. The commercialisation of art, the institutionalisation of the avant-garde “style”, a post-revolutionary historical context are some of the changes that are considered to have rendered the avant-garde obsolete, or at least redundant.

To name but the most influential texts, after Barthes’ essay *A l’avant-garde de quel théâtre?* underlining the bourgeois roots of the avant-garde –which he defines as a “way of expressing bourgeois death” (Barthes, 1981: 81)–, Enzensberger’s *Aporias of the Avant-garde* further examines the question of a predestined failure of the avant-garde. If avant-garde implies a historical consciousness of the future, says Enzensberger, then its bankruptcy is inscribed in its own project since nobody can determine what is “avant”, that is, “to the fore”, up front. As to the possibility of a new avant-garde, for Enzensberger such an appropriation, far from leading to uncharted territory, would eventually lead to a movement of regression, thus contradicting its purpose and proclaiming its own anachronism (Enzensberger, 1966). Hilton Kramer, in his *The age of Avant-garde*, shifted the discussion from philosophical to historicist terms by declaring the avant-garde dead as a consequence of the changed cultural context. In an age of institutionalised subversion, as Kramer puts it, in which the appetite for innovation has become the normal condition of culture, the avant-garde “no longer has any radical functions to perform” (Kramer, 1973: 18). The conditions for the avant-garde to exist are no longer to be found today. The idea is that of a discursive saturation or, as Eric Hobsbawm later observed in relation to post pop-art painting, of an aesthetic impasse, for, it would seem, “there is nothing left for the avant-garde painting to do” (Hobsbawm, 1998: 36). Bürger’s seminal *The Theory of the Avant-garde* is possibly the first all-encompassing theory of the intrinsic failure of the avant-garde which Bürger attributes to its reunification with life: “An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance” (Bürger, 1984: 50).

This thread of thought has permeated most discussions on the avant-garde until very recently. Today many observers, including Camilla Paglia, Charlie Finch, and Robert Hughes, share the view that the time of the avant-garde has come to an end and that “the odds of [an artist] discovering something new are nil” (Finch, 2009). There have been of course reactions to this interpretation. Unsurprisingly the artists themselves are particularly reluctant to embrace the death-theory and continue asserting the avant-garde’s presence.

Acclaimed avant-garde musician John Cage categorically excluded the possibility of a death of the avant-garde as this would contradict the process of invention itself:

People ask what the *avant-garde* is and whether it's finished. It isn't. There will always be one. The *avant-garde* is flexibility of mind and it follows like day the night from not falling prey to government and education. Without avant-garde nothing would get invented (Cage, 1983: 68).

But even among scholars, the debate is still very much open as the recent international conference *Avant-garde Now!?* organised around this theme demonstrates<sup>1</sup>.

Although the debate on the death of the avant-garde has provided the terrain for a reflection on the relationship between the avant-garde and contemporary culture, it has also defined, and somehow restricted, this relationship. Even among those who maintain that the avant-garde is alive, the theoretical model is still one of legacy, recuperation, connections (political or artistic) linking the new and the old avant-garde<sup>2</sup>. It is no coincidence that the death-theory emerged at a time when new avant-garde movements were established in Europe and in the USA, namely Art Informel in France, Abstract Expressionism in the USA, Neoavanguardia in Italy, to name but a few. Commentators responded to this resurgence by questioning the possibility of a new incarnation of the avant-garde and by interrogating the actual linguistic and conceptual meaning of the notion of the avant-garde itself. Enzensberger opens his study with an explicit reference to his contemporary situation: “to count himself a member of the avant-garde has for several lifetimes now been the privilege of everyone who covers empty surfaces with paint or sets down letters or notes on paper” (1962: 72). Unconvinced by the new avant-garde movements –he makes explicit reference to Tachism, Concrete Poetry, Art Informel and even the beat generation–, Enzensberger denounces the way the term was being reused: “there is much evidence for this term’s having become nowadays a talisman which is to make its wearers proof of all objections and to intimidate perplexed viewers” (1962: 79). Similarly, Kramer reveals writing “at a time when avant-garde claims are enthusiastically embraced by virtually all the institutions ministering to middle-class taste” (1973: 5) whilst Bürger’s awareness of his contemporary situation is apparent throughout his analysis. Artists did not escape the comparison. Angelo Guglielmi, himself a member of the avant-garde Gruppo ‘63, rejected the term of avant-garde in favour of “experimentalism” in order to underline the differences between the old and new movements. What emerges is the idea that in contemporary culture avant-garde can only operate as a retrospective paradigm, a genealogical reference, a comparative benchmark.

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## NOTES

1 | *Avant-Garde Now!?* : Fourth Ghent Conference on Literary Theory, Ghent University, March 2005

2 | See for instance: Sell (2005).

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But what if there were other ways of conceiving the avant-garde in our days outside the dialectics between old and new? Is it possible to envisage a “contemporary reading” of the historical avant-garde? Is the avant-garde of the beginning of the twentieth-century “transplantable” in our context? Derrida, asked to comment on his own text about Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (“Aphorisme Countertime”), and the problems of reading a text that is historically and culturally so distant, replied that texts are both historically-conditioned and open to recontextualisation: “transplantable into a different context, they continue to have meaning and effectiveness” (Attridge, 1992: 64). This is consistent with Derrida’s notion of time as “contretemps”, that is, as a non-linear phenomenon open to discontinuities in which the past and the future are not mutually exclusive: “before knowing whether one can differentiate between the spectre of the past and the spectre of the future, of the past present and the future present” (Derrida, 1994: 5), he explains in *Spectres of Marx*, “one must perhaps ask oneself whether the spectrality effect does not consist in undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective presence and its other” (1994: 40). What is under scrutiny is the very notion of homogenous historic contexts, since the spectrality effect undermines the opposition between past and present and opens up the possibility of multiple, co-existing temporal orders. “Time”, writes Derrida quoting Shakespeare “is out of joint”.

With respect to the avant-garde, it is fundamental to acknowledge that dialectic conceptualisations on the basis of a life-death (or old-new) opposition, or contrasting conservative and avant-garde ages, may miss some of the complexity of the relationship between avant-garde and contemporary culture, or indeed between any given past and time itself. Accordingly, this paper offers a “co-temporal” reading of the historical avant-garde, which is by no means an argument against historicised accounts, nor is it a comprehensive theoretical model. The aim is rather to show how some texts of the first avant-garde can be read outside their original context and recontextualised in contemporary culture, notwithstanding their historical roots. Perhaps more than any other artistic phenomenon or period, the avant-garde has been interpreted primarily within a historicist framework. Under this perspective, its act of provocation is supposed to be non iterable as inextricably interwoven with the historical and cultural conditions in which it was embedded. This view is partly correct but needs to be nuanced. As Derrida says, “there is no history without iterability, and this iterability is also what lets the traces continue to function in the absence of the general context or some elements of the context” (Attridge, 1992: 64). There is always a degree of *jeu* [play] within the relationship between a text and its context which allows for “movement”, that is, in historical terms, for transposition. Besides, history does not unfold continuously in a linear direction and thus the progression from the old to the new does not generate

cultural contexts homogenously “new”. If the act of provocation of the modernist avant-garde can be iterated in the contemporary context is because it is conceivable that our current culture is not uniformly post-modernist. An analysis of some texts taken from futurist writings will help illustrate this point.

## 1. Against love: a futurist provocation

The role that Futurism has played in our critical understanding of the avant-garde has been crucial. Futurism might have not been the first artistic avant-garde movement –Cubism was established a few years earlier– but it was certainly the first avant-garde “model” that has determined the way we conceive the avant-garde today. An antagonist attitude toward the cultural and political apparatuses, a radical rejection of the past summarised in the formula of the *tabula rasa*, a defiant taste for provocation, a strategic use of manifestoes, soirées and events as a means of mass-scale self-advertising, a bold claim of being ahead of its time and an audacious experimentalism in all artistic domains are some of the futurist traits that have shaped the concept of the avant-garde in the twentieth-century. As Bentivoglio and Zoccoli summarise, “[Futurism] originated the very idea of avant-garde as radical revisitation of any kind of experience encompassing every conceivable aspect of human existence” (1997: 3).

More than any other avant-garde movement, Futurism therefore represents the originary moment, the “archetypical avant-garde”, as Giovanni Lista puts it (2006), structuring retrospective historical approaches to the study of the avant-garde in general and thus also defining the relationship between the avant-garde and contemporary culture. Using this approach, Futurism appears to us as the most distant of the avant-gardes, the least “transplantable” in our times, the most obsolete. But if we abandon momentarily the historical framework and allow for a discursive reformulation of the futurist works, we may see a totally different picture.

The Italian writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the French poet, novelist, dancer, dramatist and painter Valentine de Saint-Point were respectively the founder of Futurism and the first woman to join the movement. Both wrote provocatively about the concept of love, in a way that caused much outrage and scandal. In a typical futurist manner, their ideas were expressed in a non- systemic form and were instead incorporated in a rather fragmentary way in a variety of texts. Nevertheless, in the case of Marinetti and de Saint-Point, these fragments constitute a network of identifiable intertwined threads of thought as many are explicit responses to one another’s texts, true to the culture of debate fostered in the movement. Incidentally, the

intertextuality that arises in the writers’ texts reinforces the argument of those who believe that more cross-national comparative studies are needed, especially in relation to international phenomena such as the avant-garde. France is not often associated with Futurism. Nonetheless, the first woman working with the futurists was French (she was also the niece of Alphonse Lamartine) and authored two important futurist manifestoes, namely the Manifesto of the Futurist Woman and the Futurist Manifesto of Lust.

Marinetti’s and de Saint-Point’s texts concerned with love lend themselves very well to an “out-of-joint” reading experience that transcends the temporality of the texts. They are, in Derrida’s words, “transplantable”. Methodologically, this is made possible by the presence today of the same contextual element discussed in these texts, namely love, understood as a sentimental relationship between two chosen people. Since this is an element strongly rooted in our culture as well, it is possible that the effect of provocation ensued from the futurists polemic is echoed in today’s context and that the shock experienced by the audience of the time parallels ours. An analysis of the content of the polemic, followed by considerations of temporality, will highlight such a parallel.

The first controversial passage on love is found in the founding manifesto of 1909, particularly in the famous formula of the “scorn for women”. This was, according to Marinetti, a way of expressing condemnation on the overused literary theme of love and love-related clichés, of which the idealisation of woman was a typical example. In an interview with a French journalist published soon after the publication of the Manifesto, Marinetti, asked to clarify his expression, explains:

I have perhaps been far too concise, and I’ll try to clarify our ideas on this point, immediately. We wish to protest against the narrowness of inspiration to which imaginative literature is being increasingly subjected. With noble but all too rare exceptions, poems and novels actually seem no longer able to deal with anything other than women and love. It’s an obsessive leitmotif, a depressive literary fixation (Marinetti, 2006: 20)<sup>3</sup>.

Of course, one may think that Marinetti was attempting here to amend his faux-pas by metaphorising what was perceived as a misogynistic statement. But metaphorical language was indeed typical of Marinetti’s writing of the time and remained a feature characteristic of the futurist manifestoes as well. Besides, in the very same manifesto, we find a similarly metaphoric language associating women and love:

And yet, we had no idealised Lover whose sublime being rose up into the skies; no cruel Queen to whom we might offer up our corpses, contorted like Byzantine rings! Nothing at all worth dying for, other than the desire

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## NOTES

3 | All excerpts from Marinetti’s manifestoes, conferences, interviews and critical writings are taken from the English edition (Marinetti, 2006).

to divest ourselves finally of the courage that weighed us down! (2006: 12).

It is also worth mentioning that an anti-female sentiment would conflict with the history of the movement itself that has always welcomed women artists, as recent studies, like the one carried on by Bentivoglio and Zoccoli, demonstrate (1997). That the scorn for women must not be read literally but rather as a rejection of sentimental love is an assertion supported by a number of documents. In the *Second Futurist Proclamation: Let's kill off the Moonlight*, we read: "Yes, our very sinews insist on war and scorn for women, for we fear their supplicating arms being wrapped around our legs, the morning of our setting forth!" (2006: 23); in Preface to *Mafarka the Futurist*, Marinetti writes: "When I told them, 'Scorn for women!' they all hurled their feeble abuse at me, like a pack of brothel keepers, infuriated by a police raid! But don't think I'm casting doubt on the animal worth of women, but rather on the sentimental importance that is attributed to them" (2006: 32). Undoubtedly the most explicit account is in *Against Sentimentalised Love and Parliamentarism*, a text first published in French under the unmistakable title of *Le mépris de la femme* (The scorn for women): "Our hatred, to be precise, for the tyranny of love, we summed up in the laconic expression 'scorn for women'. We scorn women when conceived as the only ideal, the divine receptacle of love" (2006: 55).

This identification between love and women can evidently be explained in biographical terms, Marinetti being a heterosexual man experiencing love through interaction with women, or on cultural grounds with the way women were represented and brought up in his time. D'Annunzio, in particular, was accused by Marinetti of aestheticizing the experience of love and idealising femininity. As to the actual cultural and psychological condition of women, it suffices to quote Valentine de Saint-Point herself who, in her 1912 *Manifesto of the Futurist Woman*, describes women as "octopuses of the heart" before exhorting them to a masculinisation of their hearts: "Instead of reducing man to the servitude of abominable sentimental needs, push your sons and your men to surpass themselves" (Bentivoglio and Zoccoli, 1997: 166)<sup>4</sup>. Marinetti's identification between love and women is therefore hardly surprising and does not constitute here a relevant point for discussion. What is arguably less obvious is instead the condemnation of love and its aesthetic and cultural social pervasiveness, as reiterated and further elaborated in later texts.

After the 1909 manifesto, Marinetti makes his remarks more explicit. In *A Futurist Speech of Marinetti to the Venitians*, written just a year later, his rejection of sentimental love is ostensibly militant: "Let us liberate the world from the tyranny of sentimentalism. We've had more than enough of amorous adventures, of lechery, of sentimentalism

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## NOTES

4 | All excerpts from Valentine De Saint-Point's manifestoes are taken from Bentivoglio M. and Zoccoli F. (1997).

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and nostalgia” (2006: 166). Marinetti’s protest against Venice embeds a protest against the overuse of love-related themes in art that the image of the city of love *par excellence* conjures up. In the same year, in his manifesto for futurist playwrights, the rejection of love is listed as one of the top priorities for the new theatre: “the leitmotifs of love and the adulterous triangle, having already been much overused, must be banished entirely from the theatre” (2006: 182). Valentine de Saint-Point expresses similar views in her *Theatre of the Woman*, a conference given in 1912. Lamenting the representation of women as “toys” and femme fatales evoked almost exclusively as “objects of desire”, de Saint-Point calls for an end to the monothematic theatre obsessed with love and adultery. The alternatives Marinetti and Saint-Point propose for the future theatre differ substantially. Whilst de Saint Point later developed the theatre of “métachorie”, a dance of “cerebral essence” inspired by ideas rather than sentiments, Marinetti supported the Variety Theatre, precisely because of, among other reasons, its unsentimental representation which “systematically devalues idealized love and its romantic obsessions” (2006: 188). Nevertheless their argument for a change was the same, based as it was on a need to liberate the theatre from the “tyranny of love”.

The futurist battle against love was therefore an act of artistic purging, in line with the movement’s programme of artistic reawakening. A modern revolutionary art demanded writers to refrain from exploiting such a trite subject-matter, in the same way as it asked painters to stop painting nudes “as nauseous and as tedious as adultery in literature”, as Boccioni declared in *Futurist Painting, Technical Manifesto* (Harrison and Wood, 2003: 152), and dancers to resist the fashion of tango “the last manic yearnings of a sentimental, decadent, paralyzing Romanticism for the cardboard cut-out femme fatale” (Harrison and Wood, 2003: 132). In accordance with the futurist programme of rejuvenating art and society through a radical rejection of the inherited conventions, the long-established tradition of sentimental novels, poems, plays, dances and painting had to be obliterated.

It would be unwise however to regard this battle as a purely aesthetic one. Nothing was more alien from the intentions of the futurists than an art concerned exclusively with aesthetic matters. The anti-love crusade was just as much an attack upon a cultural practice and its moral implications than a criticism on artistic grounds. According to both Marinetti and de Saint-Point love was a cultural poison which, far from elevating, sustaining and perfecting men and women, alienated them from real adventure. Mafarka, the scandalous protagonist of Marinetti’s novel, can only attain his heroic destiny if liberated from the love of women and thus giving birth to his own son: “it is in this way that I have killed love, and in its place I have set the sublime will of heroism!” (2006: 39). Love is seen in opposition not only to

the realm of action but also to that of senses: “You must prepare yourself for, and cultivate every kind of danger, so as to experience the intense pleasure of thwarting them...This is the new Sensuality that will liberate the world from Love” (2006: 39). Both Marinetti and de Saint-Point conceive love as a conservative crushing force, anti-heroic at best, enslaving at worst, that accustoms men and women to obedience and inaction by luring them into the quietness of domestic life. This point is unambiguously expressed in some of the manifestos they separately published during the first decade of the movement. In *Against Sentimentalized Love and Parliamentarism*, Marinetti states:

We despise that horrible, heavy Love that impedes the march of men, preventing them from going beyond their own humanity, doubling themselves, overcoming themselves so as to become what we term extended man. We despise that horrible, heavy Love, that immense leash with which the sun keeps the valiant earth chained in its orbit, when certainly it would prefer to leap wherever chance took it, to take its chance with the stars (2006: 55).

Far from constituting a male perspective, this view is shared by de Saint-Point in her *Manifesto of the Futurist Woman* written as a response to the Founding Futurist Manifesto: “In my *Poèmes de l’Orgueil* (Poems of Pride), as in *La Soif et les Mirages* (Thirst and Mirages), I have repudiated sentimentalism as contemptible weakness, because it shackles our strength and immobilizes it” (Bentivoglio and Zoccoli, 1997: 165). To such a weakness, de Saint-Point, like Marinetti, opposes a more heroic posture, which, for her, had its ultimate source in lust:

*Lust is a force*, because it destroys the weak and excites the strong to expend energy, and hence renews them [...]. The woman who keeps her man at her feet with her tears and her sentimentalism is inferior to the prostitute who spurs her man toward vainglory, to conserve with a revolver in his fist his arrogant domination over the underworld of the city. This woman at least cultivates an energy which can serve better causes (1997: 165).

Unsurprisingly, such views expressed by a woman provoked scandal and outrage and, in a typical futurist style, even physical clashes. According to some witnesses, the conference organised in Paris for the reading of the manifesto was interrupted before de Saint-Point could finish reading it due to the riots which arose among the audience (Warnod, 1912: 5). Outside the door was a defiant poster setting the tone: “To the contemporary public numb from femininity. Against submission, sentimentalism, feminism, a conception of the futurist woman by Mrs Valentine de Saint-Point” (Richard de la Fuente, 2003: 126).

Undaunted by the reaction of the public, de Saint Point wrote another

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manifesto overtly challenging the accepted order of things. Her *Futurist Manifesto of Lust* overturns the moral order based on love in favour of a self-conscious lust. After making the eulogy of lust as a positive force in nature, one that has to be seconded rather than opposed, she condemns all sentimental weakness:

It is not lust that disunites, dissolves and annihilates. It is rather the mesmerizing complications of sentimentality, artificial jealousies, words that inebriate and deceive, the rhetoric of parting and eternal fidelities, literary nostalgia –all the histrionics of love (1997: 168).

Unlike lust, sentimentality is degrading for it leads to a static, parasitical, unheroic life:

We must strip lust of all the sentimental veils that disfigure it. These veils were thrown over it out of mere cowardice, because smug sentimentality is so satisfying. Sentimentality is comfortable and therefore demeaning. [...] Lust is a force, finally, in that it never leads to the insipidity of the definite and the secure, doled out by soothing sentimentality (1997: 169).

De Saint-Point's condemnation of sentimentality echoes remarkably Marinetti's rejection of love. Other documents suggest that de Saint-Point might have used the two terms interchangeably. In an interview for *The New York Evening World* entitled "Geometric dancer doesn't believe in love but interprets love poems in the square" she said: "I see two imaginary poles, one representing all of life which calls to me; the other, love which holds me, and I dance between these two poles" (Satin, 1990: 9). Leslie Satin reports that she also told the interviewer that "she did not believe in love, nor in anything that caused a person "to become a slave" [...] as one does when in love" (Satin, 1990: 2).

Like de Saint-Point's previous manifesto, the *Futurist Manifesto of Lust* caused scandal and outrage. *Lacerba's* journalist and futurist member Italo Tavolato was even put on trial for defending the manifesto in his "Glossa sopra il manifesto futurista della lussuria" (Ballardin, 2007: 44). The polemic was all but tamed and Marinetti issued more condemnations of love in a number of speeches and manifestoes, from the most literary ones, such as *Destruction of Syntax- Untrammled Imagination – Words-in-freedom* where "a reduction in the value of love" is deemed necessary for a renewal of human sensibility in general (2006: 121), to the most political ones, such as *Futurist and the Great War* where the war is seen also as an opportunity to eradicate the culture of love: "the Great War is devaluing love, ridding it of any sense of nobility and reducing it to its natural proportions" (2006: 246). It is this hope that prompts Marinetti to write possibly his most frontal assault to sentimental love with his book *How to seduce women*, written during the war. Once again, behind the anti-female rhetoric apparent since the title, is a

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lucid, rational demolition of the cultural, moral and social notion of love. Combining biographical details with acute critical excavation of thought, Marinetti unmasks some of the (not so noble) emotional and social underpinnings of love, from jealousy, sexual “needs” and vanity, to ownership and domesticity. In doing so, as Corra and Settimelli commented, he “succeeds in efficiently assaulting the idea of love by revealing its composition”, particularly in those “sacred concepts of unicity, eternity and fidelity” (Corra and Settimelli, 2007: 17).

Unlike de Saint-Point, whose interest in political debates was always marginal to her activity as an artist, Marinetti extended the polemic against love far beyond its aesthetic and moral dimensions. Together with his closest collaborators, he wrote entire passages that attempt at unlocking conventionalised constructions of love, in a way that questioned its ontological premises. Not just the representation of love or its moral value, but the very idea of love was disputed as the “least natural thing in the world”: “love –romantic obsession and sensual pleasure– is nothing but the invention of poets, who made a present of it to mankind” (2006: 55).

This is possibly one of the most audacious provocations ever made by the avant-garde. Such words were overturning centuries of western thought that had conceived love as a natural passion in the human heart. The vision of love as a conservative force was, for instance, in stark contrast with the romantic notion of passionate love as a force of nature able to shake social conventions, on which so many of nineteenth-century novels are based. But in denying love its existence outside the representational world, Marinetti was challenging not just a literary but also a long-established philosophic tradition that associated love with nature and the meaning of life itself. His main target was no doubt Schopenhauer whose work he had read and criticised on several occasions, particularly in relation to his concept of love as an impulse of nature. This is a concept developed in *The World as Will and Idea*, where Schopenhauer conceptualises love as an instinct toward the “will-to-life”, nature’s way of preserving the survival of the human species and the strongest and most active of all motives, together with the love of life itself. Reminiscent of this theory, in his *Extended Man and the Kingdom of Machine*, Marinetti describes Schopenhauer as “that bitter philosopher who so often proffered the tantalizing revolver of philosophy to kill off, in ourselves, the deep-seated sickness of Love with a capital L.” (2006: 88). Then he anticipates his battling intentions: “and it is precisely with this revolver that we shall so gladly target the great Romantic Moonlight” (2006: 88).

Marinetti therefore strongly contested a biological justification of the existence of love. In his view, together with poetry and philosophy,

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other manmade institutions, such as religion and economy, had contributed to the shaping of love. On the one hand, Catholicism had created the myth of eternity which was at the foundation of the myth of true love (Love with a capital L): “eternity of spiritual values, eternity of joy in an extraterrestrial heaven, and therefore the absurd of eternity of love on Earth” (2006: 321). Marriage is seen, in this respect, as the necessary institution bound to preserve the artifice: “priests have created the most absurd prison of all –indissoluble marriage. So, to make sure that the law of eternal love is not broken, priests have imprisoned the hearts and the sensibilities of women” (2006: 323). On the other hand, an association is made between another crucial romantic imperative, the norm of exclusivity, and the economic principle of private property: “We want to destroy not only the ownership of the land but also that of women” (2006: 310). The laws of commerce seem also embedded in the institution of family, “with its “my wife”, “my husband”, which “so far as the woman is concerned, is born out of a buying and selling of body and soul” (2006: 310). Under this perspective, the main forces in society, particularly religion and economy, were providing the mental structures as well as the psychological and social conditions at the base of romantic love. Nature was only playing a role in the form of the sexual act: “all that’s natural and important in it is the coitus, whose goal is the futurism of the species” (2006: 55).

In conclusion, the futurist destruction of the myth of love as developed in the writings of Marinetti and de Saint-Point, appears to be based on the one hand on a refutation of its existential and biological necessity through an interrogation of its artifice, on the other hand on a condemnation of the cultural practice of love as an oppressive and conservative force. This demolition was part of a wider revolution of thought against all conservative forces of the past that was also going to have practical political implementations. The abolition of marriage and its replacement with casual encounters (“amore libero”) in the programme of the *Futurist Political Party* show the extent to which the private and the public spheres were seen as intertwined. Retrospectively it can be said that this was a first attempt at disentangling the debate on love from the epistemological limitations of a discourse narrowly confined to the private sphere, so as to reveal the societal and moral premises which sustain it.

## 2. Conclusion: love, time and the death-theory

According to the influential theory of the death of the avant-garde which has been dominant in the past sixty years, decades of transgressive art have “immunised” us from the effect of scandal the first avant-garde was able to create. Opponents to this theory

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maintain that a new avant-garde challenging radically, like its predecessor, our understanding and perception of the world is also found in contemporary culture. Both positions entail a historical contextualisation of the old and new incarnations of the avant-garde anchoring each of them to its own original context, to its own age. But the texts analysed here raise important questions in relation to the possibility of a “recontextualisation” of the avant-garde, that is, of a belated, or “out of time”, reading.

There is reasonable evidence to suggest that these writings might sound today as provocative as when they were written. Romantic overdoses in films, soap-operas and novels can be taken as an indication that ideologies of sentimental love are still solidly in place. The sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies was precisely a “sexual” revolution, that is, a rebellion against sex taboos and the censorship of sexual information. But an interrogation of the political, societal and moral premises of sentimental love simply did not occur. Contemporary sociologist Jacqueline Sarnsby, author of one of the few academic studies on this topic, explains why we might be so reluctant to scrutinise love:

The very idea that social forces, rather than one’s uniquely personal needs and desires, might have shaped the form of one’s love seems like an infringement of personal liberty, an intrusion into that mysterious, private world, the irrational splendour of one’s finer feelings (Sarsby, 1983: 1).

Arguably, love is an aspect of our life that neither the post-war liberalisation of attitudes, nor the decline in the cultural influence of religion has fundamentally changed. Far from having been discarded by the course of history, love has remained, it seems, one of the unshakable institutions of our society. “Who would dream of being against love?” (Kipnis, 2003: 3, 39) wonders contemporary critic Laura Kipnis reflecting on what she thinks might be one of the few unquestioned beliefs of our times and perhaps the most efficient form of social control possible. Catherine Belsey argues that contemporary society is structurally dependant on love as the guarantor of social cohesion:

More effectively even than Christianity in the nineteenth century, true love in the twentieth acts as the solvent of class struggle. Meanwhile family values, cemented by True Love, legitimize oppressive state policies and inadequate social expenditure (Belsey, 1994: 7).

Accordingly, those who repudiate true love (what the futurist were calling “love with a capital L”) “are seen by the right as deviant and culpable, betraying society by rejecting the promise it holds out of nuclear cosiness for life” (Belsey, 1994: 7).

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What these observations show is that the contingency of de Saint-Point's and Marinetti's writings might have not changed considerably with respect to the discourse on love. As a result, their challenging of the common perception of love as a natural (and desirable) state of being can only sound disturbing to contemporary readers. On the basis of this cultural continuity, it is possible to envisage a relationship between the old avant-garde and contemporary society that is not just "vertical" but also, at the same time, "horizontal", notwithstanding the historical distance that separates them. The texts examined here are perfectly "transplantable" in our time because as Derrida reminds us, "we have available contextual elements of great stability which [...] allow reading, transformation, transposition, etc." (Attridge, 1992: 64). This "out-of-time" connection between past and present indicates that historicist analysis might not suffice to explore historic literary phenomena in all their complexity. Literary historians Hutcheon and Valdes have recently proposed new historiographic models that take into account the intertwining of the past and the present and challenge conventional periodizations (Hutcheon and Valdes, 1995). The suggestion made here through the example of the futurist polemic against love is that even the avant-garde can lend itself to a "de-historiced" reading, thus challenging the dualistic separation between a "dead" and a "living" avant-garde.

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