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Transnational Multimedia: Fortunato Depero's Impressions of New York City (1928-1930)

Laura Chiesa

apocalyptic

Fantastic, wonderful, prophetic revelation of
a new spectral and dramatic world

Fortunato Depero, *So I think, so I paint* (18)

In the October/January 1928-1929 issue of *Brochure Quarterly*, the art publication of the Société Anonyme, five exhibitions are reviewed. One of them is the solo exhibition of the Italian futurist Fortunato Depero at the Guarino Gallery in New York City.¹ In 1928, Depero had left Genoa for New York, where he would remain until 1930. Depero is one of the few Italian futurists who had a lived experience of New York,² the capital of the twentieth century and whose work was recognized and promoted by the Société Anonyme, one of the most important American-based art organizations of that time.

This essay looks at the experimental works Depero created during his brief stay in New York City. Through a close reading of sections of Depero's unfinished project *New York–Film Vissuto* [*New York–A Lived Film*],³ accompanied by a consideration of other works (painting, photography, advertising, and poetry), I will show how Depero, with his multimedia and foreign perspective on the experience of New York, captured crucial elements of New York modernity. Depero's enthusiastic avant-gardist take on New York as it was becoming the capital of the twentieth century illuminates some of his differences from and relations to competing movements (such as *Novecentismo*, *Esprit Nouveau*, *Futurist Radio Poetry*) and to the aesthetic-political milieu in Italy under Fascism.

In *New York–Film Vissuto*, the traces of Depero's experience, always filtered through different media, offer very interesting perspectival impressions of these foreign city spectacles. Depero was in New York during the Great Depression, a time when an incredible energy was just starting to crystallize in art, architecture, film, and literature. Several of Depero's experiments can be properly read only if situated in a changing time and in changing spaces. For instance, *The New Babel*, the sketch for a theatrical project Depero composed in New York, is

¹ "The exhibition was endorsed by the Société Anonyme, which was only glad to render such aid in drawing the public's attention to the powerful constructive work of this artist." (*Brochure Quarterly*, 24). At the Guarino Gallery Depero presented several of his recent works, paintings and tapestries, but the review focuses principally on his "typographical architectures."

² The futurists were invited to the Armory show, a crucial moment of international artistic exchange in the United States, but they didn't participate. For a survey of this event see Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988). Among the exhibitions that brought futurist artists to the United States are the Panama-Pacific Exposition held in San Francisco in 1915 and the Exhibition of Modern Italian Art held in New York City in 1926. See John Oliver Hand, "Futurism in America: 1909–1914," *Art Journal* 41:4 (Winter 1981): 237–42.

³ Although *New York–Film Vissuto* was never completed, Depero published several of the writings in Italian newspapers and journals. These texts, along with all of Depero's unpublished writings related to New York, were posthumously published under the title *Un futurista a New York*.

exemplary of the way Depero filters his impressions not only through different national languages but also through different media. It is not, in fact, a completed and self-contained work; rather, we find samples of Depero's experiments with and experiences of this foreign cityscape. Depero translates bits of experience into various media, creating a maze of artifacts that communicate with each other, but that also insist on the differences and Babel-like confusion among their divergent media.⁴ Undermining the stable relation between ground and ornament, Depero rethinks the oppositions between the ephemeral and the stable, the artificial and the natural, the commercial and the artistic, and, finally, the close and the distant and the black-and-white and the color.

1. *From Genoa to New York*

Depero's writing in *New York–Film Vissuto* mimics cinematic montage. As Giovanni Lista has recently established, it shares traits with the experimentation in film that futurists and the European avant-garde were conducting during the same period.⁵

Depero typically writes as if he were performing what he is writing about and dwells on transforming reality into his own terms. He is a man without a camera but nevertheless writes as if creating a film script, conveying lively and almost “moving” images, scenes, and sequences. *New York–Film Vissuto*, which begins in Genoa, has a diegetic narrative and several subtexts that nourish it. Depero begins by describing his walk through the busy, animated cityscape of Genoa, “salire e discendere per vie larghe e strette, luminose ed oscure, per vicoli pittoreschi, per scalinate selciate. Banche, negozi di valigerie all'aperto, ristoranti nascosti” [Going up and down wide and narrow streets, bright and dark, through picturesque lanes, by paved steps. Banks, open-air leather goods shops, hidden restaurants] (*FNY* 9).⁶ Here Depero maps the topography around him⁷ while also employing a *Novecento* tone to transmit a sense of synthesis between the old city and the modernized cityscape. A historical piazza, though a fixed location, is described as a catalyst for departure: “Piazza de Ferrari . . . da qui il viaggiatore emigra per tutto il mondo.” [Piazza de Ferrari . . . from here the traveler migrates all over the world] (*FNY* 9). The piazza serves as a clear frame, but at the same time indicates an out of field, a radical elsewhere, toward which Depero was perhaps trying to move.⁸ Then, with a cut-in, the description moves to the modern building of the *Navigazione Generale Italiana*, but instead of focusing on the building,

⁴ As Mark Wigley has noted, architecture has a grounding metaphorical status in philosophy: “philosophy describes itself in the terms of that thing which it subordinates” and “philosophy translates itself as architecture, producing itself in translation” (11). What is interesting in relation to Depero is that his works show a kind of impossibility of absolute translation, as the Tower of Babel does. “[The Tower of Babel] does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness or incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics.” Wigley, “The Translation of Architecture, the Production of Babel” *Assemblage* 8 (Feb. 1989): 11. Depero's experimentation and unfinished projects seem to move in this direction.

⁵ See Giovanni Lista, *Cinema e Fotografia futurista* (Milano: Skira, 1999), which gives a panoramic overview of the ways in which futurism, from its beginnings up to the 1930s, experimented with film. Depero himself, in the second half of the 1920s, had several cinematographic projects, which remained only on paper; for details of these projects see *Cinema e fotografia futurista*.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Depero are mine.

⁷ See Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007): 21 on the way “great auteurs [in cinema] make maps of their movies.”

⁸ For the question of cinematic “frame” and “out-of-frame” see Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: from Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006): 200–201.

the vision becomes multiple: Depero notes the vast modern window frames of the building, the miniaturized models of ferry boats, the gigantic enlargements of photos, and finally, upon entering the building, the crowd of new people. The movement of this crowd is defined by the metonymic complexity that a transatlantic departure entails: money, passports, and gestures of preparation for boarding. Certain scenes connect gesture and speech through puns, as in this passage focusing on money:

Le mani di tutti serrano pacchi di biglietti da lire Mille. Chi manipola la considerevole somma con disinvoltura; segno di gratitudine e di abbondanza. Chi serra la somma con la morsa dello sguardo e la tenaglia delle dita; segno che la sommetta costò sacrifici e ben pochi altri ne rimangono in tasca.

[Everyone's hands clasp parcels of thousand-lire notes. Some who handle the considerable sum with ease; sign of gratitude and abundance. Some who clasp the sum with the vise of a look and the pincers of fingers; sign that the small sum cost sacrifices and that very little else remains in their pocket] (*FNY* 9).

Though Depero left Italy apparently knowing little English, he nevertheless makes puns – conscious or unconscious – like the one here on the Italian word “mani,” which when pronounced falls somewhere between the English words “many” and “money.” Following this, Depero himself enters the scene, also manipulating money “Io, artista, verso i pochi bigliettoni con sicurezza millionaria, anche se solo l'ombra di essi mi rimane in saccoccia.” [I, an artist, pay the few large notes with a millionaire's security, even if only their shadow remains in my pocket] (*FNY* 10).⁹ After a description of a long wait for passport control, he details the transatlantic liner in an extreme close-up, with forms defined in photographic blacks and whites: “Davanti a me si erge una parete verticale, mezza nera e mezza bianca. Su quella nera molti buchi rotondi, su quella bianca ed in cima molte ringhiere. Mi trovo di fianco alla motonave ‘Augustus’.” [In front of me rises a vertical wall, half black and half white. On the black part many round holes, on the white part and at the top many railings. I found myself next to the liner ‘Augustus’] (*FNY* 10).

After capturing this photographic image of the liner from the outside, Depero himself becomes a performer, jumping into the “metallic palace” of the liner Augustus: “Salgo a bordo per una scaletta ballonzolante. Entro nel palazzo metallico.” [I get on board by a little swaying stairway. I enter into the metallic palace] (*FNY* 11). And in the chapter “Considerazioni estetiche” [Aesthetic Remarks], with a wink to Le Corbusier's proposition that modern architecture ought to find its inspiration in the products of engineering,¹⁰ Depero observes that the liner's exterior, with its “pareti cilindriche, le aste protese, le pance spiraliche, i ponti protesi, i camini sfidanti, la prua fendente di una nave moderna” [cylindrical walls, outstretched poles,

⁹ On Depero's financial struggles and the aid offered by the industrialist Benvenuto Ottolenghi, see Maurizio Scudiero, “Depero & New York,” in *Depero Futurista & New York*, eds. Maurizio Scudiero and David Leiber (Rovereto: Longo Editore, 1986).

¹⁰ See *Toward a New Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1986) where Le Corbusier promotes an aesthetic able to capture the style of this epoch, which “our eyes, unhappily, are unable yet to discern” (90). Interestingly, Le Corbusier inserts a series of photos of transatlantic liners into this chapter, accompanying them with brief suggestions reminiscent of Depero later remarks: let's build a house in Normandy in the style of *Acquitania*, let's look at the *Express of France* and understand the contrast between “architecture pure, neat, clear, clean and healthy” and “our carpets, cushions, canopies, wall-papers, carved and gilt furniture, faded or ‘arty’ colors: the dismalness of our Western bazaar” (100).

spiral girths, outstretched bridges, rival chimneys, the plowing prow of a modern ship] (*FNY* 13), should have a corresponding interior of similarly “più luminosa, più chiara, più lineare” [more luminous, clearer, more linear architecture] (*FNY* 13). Yet Depero moves away from visions in black and white, noting that the general ambience of the transatlantic liner should be more colorful, with diffuse lighting and more freshly colored curved shapes, “atti a far scivolare più velocemente la folla, l’aria, la luce, di pensiero, ed alimentare la velocità” [suitable for making the crowd, the air, the light, thoughts glide faster and feed the speed] (*FNY* 13). By considering the interior, with archaic capitals, Romanesque arcades, Empire-style friezes, and *stile liberty* ornaments that clearly clash with the liner’s construction, Depero takes Le Corbusier a step further. Depero sees the agitated space of the liner, packed with porters and bags of many shapes, colors, and materials, all with their polychrome tags. Once inside, Depero grafts together in quick succession a series of upside-down moving images and spinning visions, in sequences determined by colors, smells, and sounds, while subsequently giving an open-perspective shot of an exterior in a state of transition, as if describing a futurist landscape:

Nel mare: le navi capovolte, sorte, oscillanti, liquefatte. Sirene di tante voci, ricami di tante luci, bandiere di tanti colori e di tante nazioni. Onde di mille odori salati. Da un foro in basso, la pancia nera della nave vomita acqua bianca e verde.
[In the sea: capsized ships, surfacing, swaying, liquefied. Sirens with many voices, embroideries of many lights, flags of many colors and of many nations. Waves of a thousand salty scents. From a hole below, the black belly of the ship vomits white and green water.] (*FNY* 11)

Descending in the liner, Depero records the smelly, boiling kitchens, where pots whistle and spout steam that is a reality check to the perfection of the futurist “mechanical splendor.”¹¹ The liner is packed with emigrants with harsh faces, luggage, and children who laugh, play, or cry. The atmosphere of the “navigating house” that springs out of this vision is “angusta” [cramped] and not “augusta” [august], as the liner’s name would suggest (*FNY* 21)!

Before venturing across the Atlantic, the liner stops in Naples, and in the chapter “Mediterraneo,” Depero presents an almost naïve image of Mount Vesuvius, which “scodinzola contro la sua coda diabolica . . . Mille vaporini strillano mille nomi e i loro fumi più bianchi e meno bianchi, più neri e meno neri, tessono ansie, nostalgie, tragedie e melanconie infinite” [tosses about its diabolic tail against the light . . . A thousand steamers scream a thousand names, and their smoke, whiter and less white, blacker and less black, weaves infinite anxieties, nostalgia, tragedies, and melancholies] (*FNY* 14). Naples, a crucial point of departure for

¹¹ See F. T. Marinetti, “Geometric and Mechanical Splendor” (1914) in *Selected Poems and Related Prose*, Ed. E. R. Napier and B. R. Studholme (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Depero in a sense imitates this earlier manifesto; giving it a more human spin, he adds a level of “complexity,” or better “perplexity,” and substitutes a passenger ship for a Marinetti’s dreadnought and a journey for a war. Marinetti writes: “My Futurist senses first perceived this geometric splendor on the deck of a dreadnought. The speed of the ship, the range of fire fixed from the bridge in the cool breeze of warlike probabilities, the strange vitality of the admiral’s orders suddenly turned autonomous and inhuman through the caprices, fits, and complaints of steel and copper: all this glowed with geometric and mechanical splendor. I perceived the lyrical initiative of electricity coursing through the armor of the quadruple turrets and running down armored tubes to the magazine to pull shells and cartridges up to the breech [*santabarbara*], toward the emerging barrel” (90).

For a recent summary of the question of the futurist mechanical theme during the 1920s, see the chapter “La machine comme modèle ou les années vingt” of Lista’s *Le Futurisme*.

immigrants, is not given any existential connotation related to the hardships experienced by the Italian immigrants. Depero notices the new arrivals on the liner – people, bundles, foods – but he cannot find postcards to send to friends, an allusion to the futurist *Arte Postale*! The diegetic mode of the description continues during the sea voyage when Depero records from a distance the vision of Gibraltar and finally, in “Sui ponti” [On the Decks], documents the journey in the open ocean. While the prow “spacca gli spessi cristalli del mare” [splits the thick crystals of the sea] (*FNY* 17), passengers are put into a kind of temporal suspension during which they can accommodate their existential temporality to their mental temperament: “La maggioranza dei viaggiatori cammina su e giù per le passeggiate con velocità parallela al pensiero: chi pensa pigramente, cammina adagio; chi pensa velocemente, corre. Chi non pensa affatto, dorme” [The majority of travelers walk up and down the promenades with the same speed as their thoughts: the person who thinks lazily, walks slowly; the person who thinks quickly, runs. The person who doesn’t think at all, sleeps] (*FNY* 16). Days pass drearily, and Depero also notes a temporary looseness of spatiality: “acqua all’infinito. Ai fianchi, acqua a perdita d’occhio. Dietro, giorni di acqua passata. Onde immense profonde come valli alte e con le vette biancheggianti come le montagne” [Infinite water. To the sides, water as far as the eye can see. Behind, days of water passed. Deep immense waves like high valleys and with white summits like on mountains] (*FNY* 21). Depero records his own attentive, waiting attitude: “per ore sto fermo con le braccia incollate ai parapetti, il mento nel pugno e lo sguardo dentro la pelle vibrante del mare, inseguendo pesci ed onde” [For hours, I stayed still with my arms glued to the bulwarks, my chin on my fist, and my gaze fixed on the vibrant skin of the sea, following fish and waves] (*FNY* 21). The infinitive verbs typical of futurism are suspended in a restless temporality (“Irrequietezza d’acqua, di schiuma e di luce, sciacquò, brontolò, schiaffeggiò e scivolò. Abbagliare, ingorgare, tremolare, biancheggiare, verdeggiare simultaneo di liquido e di luce abbacinate”) [Restlessness of the water, of foam and of light, rinsed out, rumbled, slapped and slipped. The liquid and the dazzling light simultaneously to dazzle, to choke up, to tremble, to whiten, to become green”] (*FNY* 21).

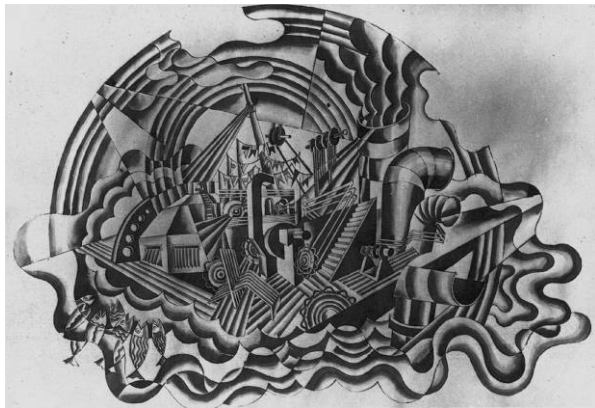


Figure 1: *Sotto gli arcobaleni atlantici*, 1930*

liner.¹² It is a painting that lives at the moment of division of Benjamin’s famous juxtapositions of cinematographer/painter, of surgeon/magician: “The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue [. . .] The

* All images, unless otherwise noted, provided courtesy of Museo MART.

¹² See Depero, “Prospettiva multipla” in *Fortunato Depero nelle opere e nella vita* (Trento: Ed. Mutilati e Invalidi, 1940): 76-78. Hereafter cited as *FDOV*. Also see the “words” “centrifugal and centripetal perspective” and “multiple perspective” in *So I think so I paint*. This book is a selection of Depero’s previously published and new texts, translated into English, and presented with an indexical format.

painter's is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is a piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law."¹³ Incorporating filmic and photographic techniques into his paintings and writings, Depero the magician (as Marinetti nicknamed him) mimics the surgeon's gestures and effects.

Eventually the transatlantic liner reaches New York harbor, and Depero sees the magical apparition of the skyline. But out of this first, clichéd image, an animated atmosphere of the cityscape appears with “segnalazioni luminose e voci di sirene che si interrogano” [bright signals and sirens' voices that question each other] (*FNY* 23). The shock of the encounter with the metropolis, and an attendant sense of suffocation, is magnified by the inspections at customs that are presented in the futurist infinitive: “immensità, intensità turbinante, differenza di guardare, sorridere, vedere, parlare, agire, vivere. Centinaia di ispettori, di ufficiali e di assistenti esaminano la falange di bagagli, di casse, di bauli, di valigie e di fagotti” [immensity, whirling intensity, difference in looking, smiling, seeing, speaking, behaving, living. Hundreds of inspectors, of officers, and of assistants examine the phalanges of baggage, of boxes, of trunks, of luggage, and of bundles] (*FNY* 24–25). This very first meeting with the city (not unlike Emilio Cecchi's encounter with “America amara” a few years later) is tinged with bitter feelings and even tragic ones. The first place where Depero lives is full of suffering; thousands of migrants pass through the New Transit Hotel, “gente stanca, delusa, che parte e arriva, vi sosta come sotto una provvidenziale grondaia durante l'acquazzone della vita nomade” [tired, frustrated people who leave and arrive, stop here as under a providential drainpipe during the shower of a nomadic life] (*FNY* 29). Depero records a loud, divergent reality, where the futurist poetics of simultaneity are tinted with gloomy tones: “il rauco vociare dei rivoltosi, il rumore delle ferraglie del convoglio, i clacson dei tassi, il pianto e le bestemmie del derubato, la canzonetta fischiata dal lucidatore di scarpe si mescolano in una simultaneità sonora, grottesca e tragica” [The hoarse shouting of the rebellious, the clanking noise of the train, the honking of the taxis, the grief and curses of those robbed, the ditty whistled by the shoe polishers blend into a loud, grotesque, and tragic simultaneity] (*FNY* 31). It was at this same New Transit Hotel, located at 464 West 23rd Street, that Depero first established his *Depero House*. After his initial bitter encounters, Depero drew on the advertising experience he had gained just before leaving Italy (his work on “Bitter Campari,” for instance) in order to promote his own activities. The following analysis focuses not directly on his advertisements, which have already received much critical attention, but on his impressions of the spectacle of New York City.¹⁴

2. *Strolling in the Multi-Dimensionality of New York City*

L'umanità più multiforme e più colorata; il manicomio delle macchine è New York- Il senso tradizionale è una cosa sconosciuta- Il domani è una calamita che ognuno porta al naso.

[The most multifarious and colored humanity; the insane asylum of cars is New York—the traditional meaning is something unknown—Tomorrow is a magnet that everyone brings in front of his nose.]

(Letter from Depero to Marinetti, May 27, 1929, New York)

¹³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*. (Cambridge: Harvard, 2002): 116.

¹⁴ For the important factual details of the economic basis of Depero's stay in New York City, see Maurizio Scudiero, “Depero & New York,” 47–85.

Conquisto l'America stop. Voglio modificare il piano regolatore di New-York. Stop. Quando ritorno in coperta il padrone della situazione è il mare. Il transatlantico è diventato una scarpetta da ballerina. [. . .] Non parlare al manovratore. Fortunato Depero ha mantenuto la promessa: ha modificato il piano regolatore di New York. La foresta vergine dei grattacieli è stata sradicata dalle fondamenta.

[I conquer America stop. I want to change New York's city plan. Stop. When I return on deck the master of the situation is the water. The transatlantic became a ballet slipper. . . . — Don't talk to the operator. Fortunato Depero kept his promise: he changed the city plan of New York. The virgin forest of skyscrapers has been uprooted from its foundations.]

(Cine-intervista, by Raffaele Carrieri¹⁵)

In *New York—Film Vissuto*, Depero sketches many enchanted but harsh descriptions of the city while strolling through its streets. Exemplary of his singular strolling is the chapter “A zig-zag per la Va Avenue” [Zigzag along 5th Avenue], where the zigzag refers not only to the path of the wanderer as he drifts in the spaces of the city, but also, as we shall see, to textiles. The chapter begins with a close-up of the exit from the Easter Sunday Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, depicting millionaires and billionaires showing off the latest fashions, and then zooms out to a wide shot of the surroundings. Near the Cathedral, Depero notices temporary scaffoldings, strangely similar to metallic shirts: “un nuovo sistema innalzato . . . , per la pulitura, grattatura [. . .] per sbiancare ogni angolo più nascosto” [a new system erected for cleaning, scraping . . . , in order to bleach each and every most hidden corner] (*FNY* 46). Depero's vision is thus situated somewhere between Gottfried Semper's theory of architecture as clothing and that quintessential obsession of modern architecture, the impulse to whitewash.¹⁶ Moreover, by emphasizing the multiple ways passers-by, photographers, and the readers of illustrated newspapers perceive the scaffolding and its reproductions, he amplifies its transitional and transitory effects. Focusing his attention further up 5th Avenue, he spots a sign for a transnational business that sells shawls of all kinds, for high and low budgets, printed and woven, Chinese, Mexican, and Indian, and even the latest to arrive from France and Germany: “scialli con quadratini, coriandoli, fiorellini e zig-zag bianchi con fondo nero, comunissimi” [Shawls with little squares, confetti, small flowers and white zigzags with a black background, very common] (*FNY* 47). And, last but not least, the “pittore Depero, rappresentato da una serie di scialletti sgargianti” [painter Depero, represented by a series of snazzy shawls] (*FNY* 47). The painter's zigzag path through the city thus materializes in the multinational shawls.¹⁷

¹⁵ *FDOV*, 406.

¹⁶ Commenting on Semper's theory, Wigley writes: “The textile is a mask that dissimulates rather than represents the structure. The material wall is no more than a prop, a contingent piece of ‘scaffolding’ that is ‘foreign’ to the production of the building, merely a supporting player, playing the role of support, supporting precisely because it does not play. Architecture is located within the play of signs. Space is produced within the sensuality of language. As its origin is dissimulation, its essence is no longer construction” (*White Walls, Designer Dresses*, 12). See also Wigley's discussions of the importance of whitewash in Le Corbusier (30) and of Siegfried Giedion's attempts to isolate modern architecture from fashion (44–47).

¹⁷ In *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, Wigley recognizes that at the core of the dryness of modern architecture, fashion (if not clothing) is a persistent element. Fashion and clothing stand as crucial supplements to the works of modern architecture; from another angle, Beatrice Colomina has shown in her *Privacy and Publicity: Modern*

Depero captures ephemeral, transitional, and also grotesque aspects of this rising metropolis. In “24th Street,” Depero applies his harsh writing to some of the lushest of garments: furs. Millions of genuine and fake furs cover “delicatissimi nudi di gelo d’alba . . . creole meridiane e mulatte vespertine” [extremely delicate nudes of dawn’s frost . . . noon creoles and vespertine mulattos], as well as exhausted workers: “africane, notturne e gonfie, sgangherate, dagli occhi spaventati, dalle labbra mostruose” [African women, nocturnal and swollen, rickety, with frightened eyes, with monstrous lips] (*FNY 51*).¹⁸ A grotesque and inhuman view of African American and transnational commerce, the passage then emphasizes the gaudy style of tiger-print gloves, big hats, bad shoes, and oversized cracked eyeglasses that veil everything in mist. After this hazy vision, Depero returns to his stubborn walking as his thoughts are quickly overcome by numbers, ciphers, “percenti, acconti, crediti, debiti, provvigioni, dogana, affitto, vitto, telefono, luce, gas . . . cifre-cifre-cifre-cifre che s’incrociano, che si allacciano con unghie e petali di rose” [percentages, accounts, credits, debits, commissions, customs, rent, food, telephone, light, gas . . . ciphers-ciphers-ciphers-ciphers that intersect each other, that are enlaced with nails and rose petals] (*FNY 52*).



Fig 2: 24th Street (1929); courtesy Depero Archive

On 24th Street, Depero confronts an abstract and dangerous network of difficulties that he escapes in a very Baudelairian way: “cerco di fissare l’immagine di una fanciulla incontrata o desiderata ma essa mi appare inafferrabile e caleidoscopica” [I try to fix the image of an encountered or desired girl, but she seems to me ineffable and kaleidoscopic] (*FNY 52*). Depero projects the “kaleidoscopic”¹⁹ onto the multicultural flesh of the people who live in the city: “carne che va dal rosa anilina allo scarlatto fragola, fino al nero catrame e mezzonero di piombo, con apparizioni di gialli e bruni patinati. È diabolico arcobaleno di carne che mi appare attraverso colline di scale di ferro” [flesh that goes from aniline pink to a strawberry scarlet, to tar black and lead gray, with apparitions of glazed yellow and brown. The rainbow of flesh that appears to me through the hills of iron stairs is diabolic] (*FNY 52*). From these impressions of 24th Street, Depero also produced a free-word plate version, depicting a cluster of skyscrapers, streets, and subways. The multiple perspectives of the plate, while evoking the turbulent complexity of the life and

Architecture as Mass Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) how modern architecture is embedded in mass media (photography, film, and advertising).

¹⁸ Depero was very attentive to several aspects of the African American community; he visited Harlem stages and did several paintings depicting this community. Unfortunately, I don’t have space here to comment on these impressions.

¹⁹ On the kaleidoscope in Baudelaire as “a machine for the disintegration of a unitary subjectivity and for the scattering of desire into new shifting and labile arrangements,” see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 113–14. In his *Suspension of Attention* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), Crary follows how the kaleidoscopic motif passes among Charles Baudelaire, William James and Henri Bergson, among others.

economy of such a city, seem like an updated Piranesi vision. The word *ferro* [iron] running both diagonally and vertically provides the structures for some skyscrapers while bolded words such as **NEW YORK, PARAMOUNT, ASCENSORI [ELEVATORS]** verticalize the plate and serpentine tubes offer alternative modes of circulation in the city. It is ambiguous whether the growing iron cages define space or negate it. At the top, the text is thinner, as if becoming part of the sky; within the left-most word-building we read: “TORRI, TORRI per salire sulle nuvole scalinate per entrare nel dancing dei temporali” [TOWERS TOWERS to climb up on staired clouds to enter into the dancing of the storm] and further down, “torri babeliche di affari affari affari – milioni 22 di telefonate al giorno che tessono la più intensa elettività umana” [babelish towers of business business business – 22 million phone calls a day that weave the most intense human electricity]. At the top of the plate, the central skyscraper, the Paramount-Cine Building, forms one center of gravity. The words that define its shape are abstracted into a series of circles, like the “gabbie numeriche, cifre, crediti, debiti” [numerical cages, ciphers, credit, debit] in Depero’s thoughts in the chapter “24th Street.” On the plate, these tall buildings are like “scatole squadrate luminose” [that] “buttano sulle strade-cappelli colorati- abiti di mille tessuti; carni-LIBERIE- macchine fiori di carta e di vetro” [bright boxes [that] are flinging on the streets- colorful hats- clothes of a thousand fabrics; flesh BOOK STORES-cars paper and glass flowers]. In the lower part of the plate, in a free/bound opposition, arrows give direction to multiple pieces of free-word texts, where people and goods are packed into a frenetic but calculated turbulence. At the bottom left, Depero returns to 24th street and 7th Avenue and its fur coats; at the bottom right, the vision is compressed to the lowest level of the street with words such as: “fiumane di gambe che si falciano tra di loro-mandrie di auto procedono compatte” [swollen stream of legs that mow down among themselves – dense herds of autos proceed]. Depero navigates through the city’s spectacle on Broadway, the luminous white street where the “lettere piovono, le parole ruotano, i titoli abbagliano, i nomi scompaiono” [letters rain, words rotate, titles dazzle, names disappear] (*NUF*, 40), and he is exposed to the cosmopolitan soundscape, a babel of international accents that enlase him from all directions: “la burrasca delle lingue continua ad imperversare; russo a poppa, cinese a prua, tedesco nei timpani, giapponese sulla faccia, italiano in bocca” [the storm of languages continues to rage; Russian at the stern, Chinese on the prow, German in the tympanums, Japanese on faces, Italian in mouths] (*FNY* 40). On the street, Macy’s has a carnivalesque advertising parade for the Christmas holiday, while inside the store another spectacle on the top floor defies any precise description: “folla caleidoscopica: oggetti, tessuti, teste, teste, teste; piedi, piedi, piedi; mani, mani, mani; cappelli, chincaglierie, bambole, pizzi . . . il tutto brulica misto e fuso, abbagliante di colore e di luce in un caos che toglie la vista e la possibilità di fermarsi su di un singolo dettaglio [Kaleidoscopic crowd: objects, fabric, heads, heads, heads; feet, feet, feet; hands, hands, hands; hair, knick-knacks, dolls, lace . . . everything swarms, mixed and melted, dazzling with color and light in a chaos that takes away one’s sight and the possibility of fixating on a single detail] (*FNY* 66). At Saks, Depero admires the geometric, rhythmic, and elegant uniformity of Archipenko’s window displays,²⁰ which creates a background of shadows and lights against which metallic and crystal mannequins “stand out” (“spiccano,” a hybrid of Italian and English meaning “they speak”!)

²⁰ On Archipenko’s presence in the American art scene, see D. Tashjian, “A Big Cosmic Force: Katherine S. Drier and the Russian/Soviet Avant-Garde,” in *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, ed. Jennifer Gross (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

Depero's advertisements, which have been given much critical attention, can be read in the context of his depictions of skyscrapers. In the advertisement for the Venus pencil, in his signature topsy-turvy style, he visually connects the pencil to the mega-construction by making the simple design tool as tall, long, and wide as the skyscrapers. Depero often compares skyscrapers to the Dolomite Alps, where he had grown up,²¹ and describes them in tones that move away from a standardized image of city life toward a surreal and fantastic zoology.²² In the chapter "Il mulo metropolitano" [The Metropolitan Mule], he presents encounters in elevators as nearly inhuman and humans as insects circulating incessantly between inside and outside; he notes the "visi duri, porte ermetiche, conversazioni amare, e fatiche inconcludenti. Fruscio e sventate degli ascensori che aspirano e immergono come potenti stantuffi. . . . È una marea di insetti che brulicano, mordono, penetrano" [hard faces, airtight doors, bitter conversations, and inconclusive difficulties. The rustling and heedlessness of the elevators that inhale and plunge. . . . It is a tide of insects that swarm, bite, penetrate] (*FNY* 87). Elsewhere, New Yorkers become metropolitan mules:

Ogni tanto, ai bordi dell'aspro cammino un ciuffo d'erba, una zolla di speranza, un pugno di dollari, per la sosta, il bivacco e la ripresa . . . su ancora per i viottoli rocciosi, fra gli spettacoli apocalittici della babele irraggiungibile. Ma i sentieri si moltiplicano, si confondono deviano il cammino. Il terremoto è permanente, le cadute impreviste, le fatiche annullate. Il diavolo d'oro si diverte di questa immensa e iperbolica condanna umana.

[Sometimes, at the edges of the rough path a tuft of grass, a clod of hope, a fistful of dollars, for the pause, the bivouac and the resumption . . . up again by rocky paths, among the apocalyptic spectacles of the unreachable Babel. But the paths multiply, mingle, deviate from the way. The earthquake is permanent, the drop unexpected, the difficulties canceled. The gold devil enjoys this immense and hyperbolic human condemnation] (*FNY* 88).

Depero's commentary on New York skyscrapers is not entirely idiosyncratic; indeed, it can be situated within interdisciplinary criticism contemporary with and subsequent to his time. Depero's modernist take on the proliferation of skyscrapers precisely captures the turning point for architecture in New York. In the genesis of skyscrapers Eliel Saarinen's Chicago Tribune Tower design (1922), which was taken up in New York architecture, is considered an archi-model, one that Louis H. Sullivan interpreted as a mountain, as Manfredo Tafuri has underlined.²³ Depero's vision goes beyond any simple dichotomy between the enchanted and the

²¹ Depero grew up in the Dolomite Alps and before going to New York had proposed different projects for temporary pavilions. Among those, the Pavilion of the Venezia Tridentina for the Fiera Campionaria di Milano, with its abstract zigzag and colored mountain forms, clearly contrasts in its temporary nature with the massiveness of New York's skyscrapers.

²² Depero's works (writings and paintings) are populated by a fantastic zoology, not only mules, asses and elephants, but also monkeys and many other animals.

²³ On this point, Tafuri quotes Vincent Scully: "Hugh Ferriss uses [Saarinen's project] as his model in studying the massing possibilities of the new zoning laws. His stupefying drawings show buildings emerging from mountains, really more Mayan than Gothic in the visual weight of their profiled step-backs. . . . The Barclay-Vesey Building of the late 1920s sums it up: Saarinen, Ferriss, mountain mass, and edging the surfaces, a kind of flattened jazz-modern decoration which had swept the board at the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, of 1925." (Interestingly, Depero had participated in that Parisian exhibition.) See Manfredo Tafuri, "The Disenchanted Mountain: The

disenchanted and can be contrasted with Le Corbusier's response to New York just a few years later. Le Corbusier's *esprit nouveau* tone, while it reflects both irritation and delight with New York architecture, recognizes in the "Alpine spectacle" a geometric progress of chaos, a "fairy catastrophe": the skyscrapers are "plumes" and their styles are worthy "of the legend of the Tower of Babel." Broadway and its lights may enchant Le Corbusier for a moment, but he is resolutely averse to advertisements on the street: "If I were an authority," he writes, "I would forbid advertising" (*TNA* 100). Le Corbusier offers advice on how to connect irrational, un-Cartesian skyscrapers in a city where there is no planning: "the plan is the dictator" (*TNA* 210). In a lecture at Radio City, he offers his impressions of New York and makes his famous proclamation of what he calls a *casus belli*: "skyscrapers are too small." Depero, in contrast, drifts like John Dos Passos among "Manhattan transfers," translating into different media the city's sparks and the storm of styles that agitated the architectural projects of the late 1920s. In this new and immense Babel, Depero emphasizes the distinct quality of each skyscraper²⁴ and shows a curiosity about the experimental stylistic cross-pollination between skyscrapers, whose "mundane functions were clothed in a fantastic scenography," as Robert A. M. Stern says.²⁵ Considering the skyscrapers' styles, Depero takes note of buildings that are black with golden tops like embers, others so sharp and thin that they resemble bayonets, and others still, the most recent of them, with exteriors like fish scales and vertical steel bands that run from the sidewalk to the 60th floor and reflect all the luminous variations of sunrises and sunsets. Immense iron cages of scaffolding grow incessantly, and to render this artificial and infernal growth visible, Depero suggests that his readers take pictures from their windows in May and again in October: "avrete due panorami diversi. Grattacieli scomparsi – grattacieli risorti, nuove gabbie metalliche, nuovi tubi" [you will have two different panoramas. Disappeared skyscrapers – resurrected skyscrapers, new metallic cages, new pipes] (*FNY* 38).

These transitional photographic effects are immediately followed by a consideration of that which sparks and flashes on the skyscrapers: the illuminated billboards. On the top of the Paramount building there are mobile projectors whose lights shine on revolving, colored lettering and "spazzolano l'oscura notte" [brush the dark night] (*FNY* 38). In this description, Depero points toward something more "immaterial" than the skyscrapers: cinema. *Paramount* is not only the proper name of a motion picture company but also in a literal sense indicates something beyond a mountain (para-mount). With a downward tracking shot from above, Depero maps the streets:

guardando da queste verande nelle nuvole, guardando nelle profonde viscere-corridoi, giù, giù, giù, ma proprio molto giù, si vedono guizzare piccoli autobus carichi di piccole ombre umane, migliaia di piccole automobili- topi che si rincorrono in ogni senso.

[looking from these verandas in the clouds, looking in the deep bowels-passages, down, down, down, but really very far down below, one sees flicker small buses

Skyscraper and the City" in *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal*, ed. Girogio Ciucci, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), 389–528.

²⁴ For a very different take on skyscrapers, a detached and critical one, see Emilio Cecchi's *America Amara*. Also notable in the same book are Cecchi's memories of his conversations about skyscrapers with Bernhard Berenson and Meyer Shapiro. See also Giulia Guarnieri, *Narrative di viaggio urbano. Mito e anti-mito della metropoli americana* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory F. Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 589.

loaded with little human shadows, thousands of small automobiles-mice that run after one another in every direction.] (*FNY* 38)

Depero's writing evidences his exposure to avant-garde cinema,²⁶ but being a man without a camera, he produces both cinematic writing and cinema-related prints. These latter projects include the cover for the journal *Movie Makers*, depicting a robot-man that is a movie camera [see Fig. 3], and a flyer for the promotion of his studio, where Depero gives an oblique twist to the abstract buildings and imparts dynamism through lettering, arrows, and colors (black/white, pink-red/black) [see Fig. 4]. As David Leiber points out, the flyer graphically inscribes within itself mass-technological devices such as the megaphone and the movie reel.²⁷

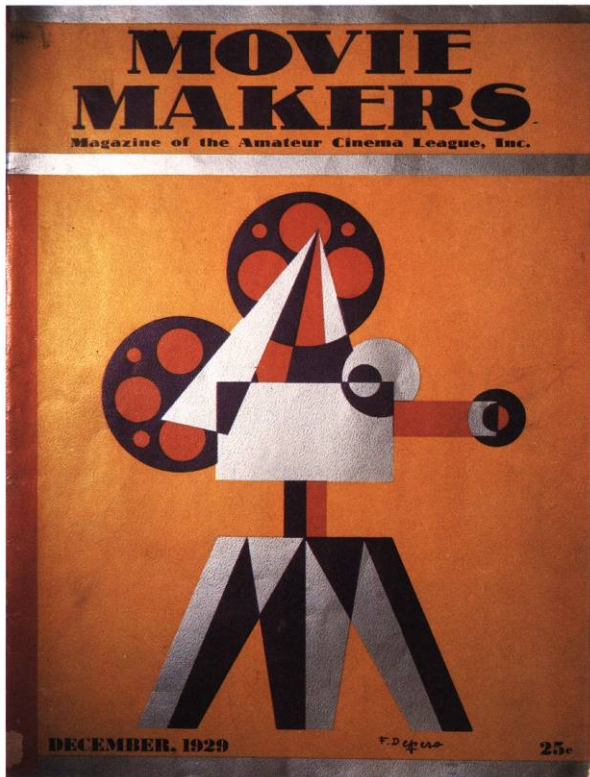


Figure 3: Cover for *Movie Makers* (December, 1929)



Figure 4: Depero House (1928-1929)

3. Spectacular New York.

I miei sogni magici, il mio mondo fiabesco, gli automi meccanici, i treni volanti, la flora e la fauna favolose, viaggiano fra le pareti a piombo dei grattacieli, fra le prospettive ferrigne dei ponti e dei treni elevati, seguendo la compatta fiumana delle automobili, tra due argini di folla nera che brulica nella bassa, densa ed asfissiante atmosfera metropolitana . . . Saluto la folla, fischio con le sirene, canto con gli altoparlanti; ho la sensazione di viaggiare con carico pericoloso, considero questi dipinti

²⁶ See Lista, *Cinema e Fotografia Futurista*. From Lista's book one could extract a long list of avant-garde international movies that cross-pollinated with futurism (Paul Strand's *Manhatta*, Charles Post Mason's *Greater NY* and H.G. Weinberg's *City Symphony*, to name only a few).

²⁷ David Leiber, "The Socialization of Art" in *Depero Futurista & New York*, 96–98.

come bombe concentrate di esplosioni policrome. Sarà mia intima gioia lanciarle contro i cupi parallelepipedi di questa babele.

[My magic dreams, my fantasy land, mechanical automatons, flying trains and fabulous flora and fauna, they travel through the leaden walls of skyscrapers, through the iron perspective of bridges and elevated trains, following the steady stream of cars, between the dikes of two dark masses teeming below, in the dense and asphyxiating air of the metropolis . . . I greet the crowd, I whistle with the mermaids, I sing with the loudspeaker; I feel like I'm traveling with a dangerous load, I see these paintings like concentrated bombs of polychromatic explosions. How I'll love to hurl them against the dismal parallelepipeds of this Babel.] (*FNY* 33)

In 1926, two exhibitions, the Machine Age Exposition and the International Theatre Exposition (organized by Friedrich Kiesler),²⁸ brought to the attention of New York some highly sophisticated experimental set designs made by European avant-garde artists. Depero had projects presented at both, although he did not attend. Once in New York City, Depero integrated himself as much as he could with the other European artists living in New York and with curators such as Katherine Drier²⁹ and Christian Brinton. Brinton, an energetic curator, was instrumental in introducing futurist artists in America and also in facilitating Depero's first solo exhibition of paintings and tapestries in New York at the Guarino Art Gallery (January 1929); he defined Depero's work as "dynamic modernism."³⁰ At his exhibition opening at the Guarino, Depero met the dancer and choreographer Léonide Massine for the second time. Massine lived in New York at the same time as Depero, and they eventually collaborated on projects at the Wanamaker Auditorium and the Roxy Theater.³¹ Futurism had given the *coup d'envoi* to a totally new way of understanding avant-garde theater in Europe, but as Arnold Aronson has shown, avant-garde theater did not emerge in the United States until the 1950s.³² Depero nonetheless focuses his attention on the theatrical settings available in New York, and in his set designs he often cites, or ex-cites, certain metropolitan scenes, extracting them and galvanizing specific spectacular features.

²⁸ See the catalogues *Machine-Age Exposition*, ed. Jane Heap (New York, 1927) and *International Theatre Exposition*, eds. Frederick Kiesler and Jane Heap (New York: Little Review, 1926).

²⁹ Depero appreciates Drier's cosmopolitanism and he recognizes that artists of any nationality would be grateful for her crucial advice on American methods of introducing themselves. She believed that "making a space for the exhibition of modernism was inseparable from the need to market modernism." (David Joselitz, "The Artist Readymade," in *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, 33–43).

³⁰ Brinton's characterization of Depero's work was typical of his reception in America, as can be seen in reviews of this exhibition. "Signor Depero is a futurist, as all Italians of radical tendencies apparently are. There can be no question of the vitality of these gorgeous patterns and the beauty of the workmanship. Whether American taste will respond to their dynamic energy is another matter" (*The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Sunday, Jan. 20, 1929). "Depero blazes with color. There are two scales--the scale he uses in paint and the scale called upon when the work is done in bits of colored felt sewed together. The handsome felt pieces in particular are all a-tremble with dynamism and 'delirium.' They are intoxicating splashes of color and design" (*The New York Times*, Sunday, Jan. 20, 1929). Both articles are included in *FDOV*.

³¹ Garcíá-Marques, Massine's biographer, has extensively detailed Massine's encounter with the American Jazz Age and his work at the Roxy. Though a well-established choreographer in Europe, Massine was not immediately welcomed in New York; he was hired on a trial basis and he had to provide a new ballet every week for the enormous Roxy audience.

³² Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-garde Theatre: A History* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Depero devotes several sections to theater in *New York–Film Vissuto*, and in the chapter “Al Teatro Roxy” [At the Roxy Theater], he crystallizes his expectations, desires, and perhaps hallucinations of the Roxy’s spectacular multi-story complex. While the Roxy’s marquee showers the public with its glaring lights, the entrance hall, full of mirrors and programs, is populated by ushers whose uniforms and attitudes are so choreographed that they seem to begin the spectacle even in the lobby. Depero highlights tactile aspects of the hallway and the aisles, which are entirely covered by thick carpets that silence the continuous movement of the people. As Depero plays with words and misspellings – in his account of the transatlantic journey, for instance – so he plays in the Roxy with a different paradigm of noise and controlled soundscape. Indeed, Depero finds himself in the midst of the celebration of sound, very nearly at the apogee of the restoration of the aural dimension of modernity, as Emily Thompson has defined it.³³ Depero’s entrance into the Roxy theatricalizes the soundscape of modernity insofar as it is facilitated by architecture and engineering, whose aim was to silence space and to absorb and isolate noises. In this artificially silenced space, Depero has access to the mobile structures backstage: “il pavimento del palcoscenico è diviso in scacchiere mobili, da poter abbassare e rialzare, far apparire e scomparire pezzi di scene o scenari interi, con rapidità precisa e silenziosa” [the stage floor is divided into moveable checkerboards that can be lowered and raised so that pieces of scenery or whole sets can appear and disappear with methodical and

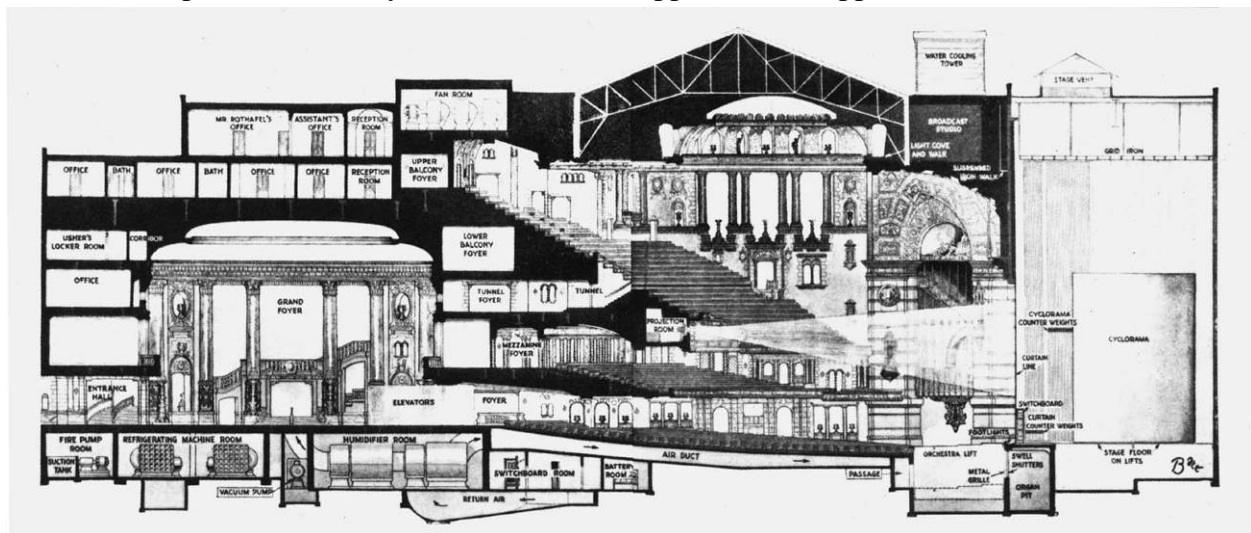


Figure 5: ROXY THEATER, Longitudinal section. The Golden Age of the Movie Palace I. Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory F. Gilmartin, Thomas Mellins ; assisted by David Fishman and Raymond W. Gastil. Published: New York : Rizzoli, 1987. p 251.

silent speed] [see Fig. 5] (*FNY* 101). Depero visits the director’s and owner’s noiseless offices, passes through rooms equipped with many kinds of technical devices, and moves along walls “ciphered” by switches, finally entering underground labyrinths with complex machinery for lighting, heating, and cooling. Depero continues his visit through the building’s marvelous technological scenography with Massine, a visit that almost resembles a stroll outdoors, complete with traffic lights: “cammino tra tubi sotterranei, illuminato e guidato da luci gialle, rosse, e verdi, salgo e discendo per mezzo di vari ascensori” [I walk through the underground tubes, illuminated and guided by yellow, red, and green lights, I rise and fall with the countless elevators] (*FNY* 102). The visit is magical – sometimes almost surgical in its detailing – but also delirious, punctuated by elevator stops with different stage settings on different floors: on the

³³ Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

sixth floor a Chinese dance, on the third floor a Mexican show, etc. And then, the visit “precipitates” again underground, “su un ascensore-osservatorio, riservato e nascosto, ad uso dei direttori e dei registi” [on a private, hidden elevator-observatory, reserved for the managers and directors] (*FNY* 103). To give more force to Depero’s vision we could retroactively quote Rem Koolhaas’s “doctrine of Manhattanism – the creation of congestion on all possible levels” (*DNY* 184).³⁴ Indeed, Depero allegorically records this emerging Manhattanism in his writings, especially in his accounts of productions at the Roxy directed by Samuel Lionel Rotaphel, and eventually in his own theatrical sets. Rotaphel, the director of the Roxy from 1927 to 1932, eventually went on to direct Radio City Music Hall in the newly constructed Rockefeller Center, which according to Rem Koolhaas is “an unspoken theory of the simultaneous existence of different programs on a single site, connected only by the common data of elevators, service cores, columns and external envelope” (*DNY* 197), or as Reinhold Martin points out, a complex project at the juncture of commerce and social integration.³⁵ In short, what Depero saw at the Roxy would soon be taken even further at the Rockefeller Center.

In his account of the Roxy, Depero attentively describes spectacles such as acrobatic performances or innovative dances: “se il piano unico per le vecchie danze era il pavimento, per i ballerini acrobati d’oggi è lo spazio. . . . Gli acrobati d’oggi guizzano nello spazio, si tuffano, lo plasmano, lo architettano con un senso di dominio stupefacente” [if the only plane for old dances was the floor, for today’s acrobatic dancers, it’s space. . . . Today’s acrobats shimmer in space, they dive, they mold it, they engineer it with a sense of wondrous dominion] (*FNY* 100). His impressions of these dances are close to Kracauer’s consideration of the Tillers Girls in “The Mass Ornament”; in the chapter “Mille piedi” [“Millipede”], Depero writes that the pupils of the audience are splattered open by the chorus line on a very narrow bridge that traverses the theater: “mostro di carne umana che sorride con ventotto bocche e con cinquantasei occhi . . . automatico, instancabile, tentacolare, esibizionistico, tutto d’un pezzo, con code e teste incarnate” [monster of human flesh that smiles with twenty-eight mouths and fifty-six eyes . . . Automatic, unstoppable, tentacular, exhibitionist, impeccable, with tails and heads made out of flesh] (*FNY* 106). He also pins down these bodily aspects in male dances. In the chapter “Muscoli volanti e muscoli cromati” [Flying Muscles and Chromium Muscles], Depero notes how the dancers’ bodies fragment and recombine with muscular perfection: “diversi atleti, con attillate maglie, uniti in gruppo simili a monumenti vivi di forza e equilibrio . . . questi gruppi statuari si scompongono e ricompongono” [assorted athletes, in tight-fitting shirts, grouped together like live monuments of strength and balance . . . these statuary groups disintegrate and reintegrate] (*FNY* 107). In contrast to this living sculpture is the ghostly dance of “Pantaloni e giacche danzanti” [Dancing Pants and Jackets], as Depero watches dancers who seem to be ghosts escaped from the shop windows. Performed during the capitalist crisis at the end of the 1920s, this dance reminds us of the dance that Kracauer describes in “Girls and Crisis,” even if it exhibits a different mode of criticality. As Andrew Hewitt writes, situating Kracauer’s text in the

³⁴ Koolhaas notes that Manhattanism first emerges in the work of the New York architect Hugh Ferriss: “Each of Ferriss’s drawings records a moment of that never-ending gestation. The promiscuity of the Ferrissian womb blurs the issue of paternity. The womb absorbs multiple impregnations by any number of alien and even foreign influences--Expressionism, Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism, even Functionalism--all are effortlessly accommodated in the expanding receptacle of Ferriss’s womb. *Manhattanism* is conceived in Ferriss’s womb.” Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994), 117.

³⁵ See Reinhold Martin, *Architecture, Media and Corporate Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 88.

Depression, “the effect achieved by these girls has to be termed ghostly” (203);³⁶ “The Girls are no longer timely – they are spectral because they suggest the functioning of an economic miracle machine that has meanwhile ground to a halt by 1931” (204). This shift from symbolic to asymbolic, from reference to performance, means, according to Hewitt, that “‘display’ would be the mode of cultural performance in which it is revealed that nothing is to be revealed” (206). This is in tune with Depero’s interpretation of the dances he witnesses, which are in fact ghostly in Hewitt’s sense.

The final category of spectacle that is notable for our purposes is the Chinese dance. Depero evokes the magic theatricality of Chinese gestural and situational dance through accounts of jumpers mimicking willows, streams of blood, flowers, and butterflies. In another Chinese spectacle, singers perform a syllabic chorus, spelling out words in totally different tones of voice and in gestures of body and face. Depero, who had already experimented with such vocal play – which he called *onomalingua*³⁷ – was more equipped than the typical audience member to appreciate the performance for its “*intepenzione sonora e psicologica di vocali*” [sonorous and psychological interpretation of the vowels].

Although *New York–Film Vissuto* constantly employs techniques related to cinematography, Depero explicitly refers to the seventh art only a few times.³⁸ One reference is directed to the UFA-produced experimental movie shown at the opening of Kiesler’s Film Guild Cinema entitled “*Dramma di mani*,” which in a schematic, abstract landscape shows the “dramatic life of hands.” The other reference to film is in his chapter “*Child Actors*,” in which Depero is fascinated by the young actors’ lack of embarrassment in their performance, “*ne organizzano di tutti i colori*” [The stuff kids get into covers every color in the rainbow]³⁹ (*FNY* 122). Depero thus emphasizes two divergent aspects of cinema: on the one hand, the gestural, silent, avant-garde perspective of the film shown in Kiesler’s movie house and, on the other, children, the next generation, who seem to be the ones who will reinvent life through gesture and sound in the cinemascap. Depero seems less interested in representational and narrative aspects of cinema than in its performative and transformative ones.

Up to now we have considered the wide-eyed Depero playing the part of an implacable observer of a new world. But what was he able to accomplish in the New York theater? Not much, in fact. He mostly plays in writing with the theatricality that infuses the experiences to which he is exposed. Nonetheless, he was able to produce proper theatrical experiments, if only a few and if largely unsuccessful. At the Roxy Theater, which would abruptly lose its importance when the RCA was built in 1934, Depero tried to present his theatrical ideas. He adapted ciphers, one of his obsessions in the city as we saw above, to make costumes for a ballet, bodysuits marked or as if tattooed with abstract drawings and numbers. In the costumes for Massine’s dance *Motoplane*, he again uses tights, but at different focal points on the body, he adds discs,

³⁶ Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

³⁷ “*L’onomalingua è una lingua poetica compresa universalmente; non ha bisogno di traduttori*” [The *onomalingua* is a universally understood poetic language; it has no need for translators] (*Depero Futurista*, 217). See also the “*Canzone Rumorista (ritmo cinese)*” (*FNY* 225).

³⁸ In addition to the two references discussed here, he refers to a third film, entitled *Africa Speaks!* in his *Numero unico futurista. Campari 1931*.

³⁹ Depero is fascinated by the next generation because they already seem at ease in handling the technological means of reproduction. He notes that New York children play with phonographs and that they even project films in miniature (*FNY* 61).

possibly rotating and illuminating.⁴⁰ Depero's definitive New York project is "The New Babel," with its "settings in motion" – as an American newspaper described it⁴¹ – which he had planned to produce with Massine for the Roxy Theater; few artifacts remain besides the sketches for the mobile stage setting (*Skyscrapers and Tunnel* and *The New Babel*) [see Fig. 6-7]. On the fantastic stage of *The New Babel*, constructions – in progress and completed, colored and tilted, all lit abstractly – are theatrical interpretations of the metropolis whose chaos is framed by a magical invention. But the sketches show no human figures, and one may well wonder what the show would have been like.



Figure 6: *Skyscrapers and Tunnels* (1930)

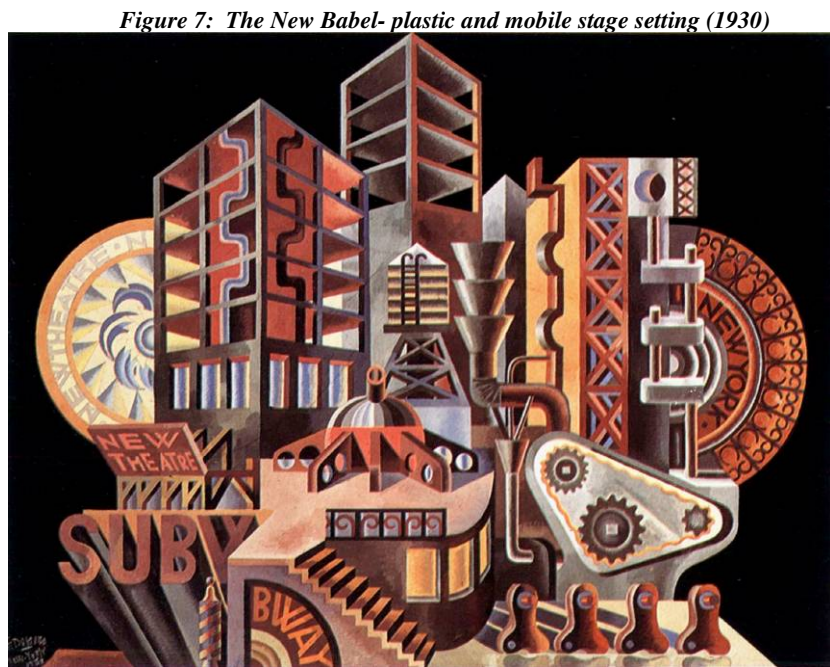


Figure 7: *The New Babel- plastic and mobile stage setting* (1930)

⁴⁰ According to Passamani, with these projects Depero was hoping finally to concretize older ideas by availing himself of the technical means offered by the New York theaters. See Passamani, *Fortunato Depero*.

⁴¹ "Settings in Motion," *Theatre Magazine*, March 1930, now in *FDOV* (403).

Depero's paintings for *The New Babel's* stage set include not only skyscrapers but also

underground subways. This latter motif is taken up in the free-word plate entitled "Subway" [see Fig. 8]: everything in the lower part of the plate is condensed, while the word **SUBWAY** in a large font at the top allows a sense of movement and congestion to emerge. In the middle of the plate, the word "milioni" [millions] in the shape of a megaphone shouts the word "mani" [hands], which reverberates in a semi-circle that in turn shouts out "mani tese per afferare" [hands extended to grasp]. Thick and thin characters cover the plate with words that connote the infrastructural fabric of the underground like "conduttori di surrogati d'aria" [air surrogate's ducts] or "travi" [beams]. Thick lines define beams and arches of the underground tubes (called "sacco nero di un tunnel" [black bag of a tunnel] in the plate), which contain compressed phrases such as "occhi che tendono le loro dita-sguardi e spogliano impudicissimi" [eyes that point their finger-gazes and shamelessly undress] or "prosciutti cosce offrono irresistibili appetiti" [prosciutto legs offer uncontrollable appetites]. The word **EXIT** in the lower part, and again at the top, seems to orient the viewer toward an escape from this congested underground network. *Subway* [see Fig. 9] is an inked pasteboard depicting the 42nd Street subway stop: the overwhelming rendering of the massive constructions is a bold and filmic avant-gardistic vision of the city. The pasteboard *Subway* leaves us with a sense of ambiguity: we cannot say if the human figures indicate a mass of identical individuals or an unrepresentable assemblage that is yet-to-come in the cityscape. Depero's inventive ideas show him stumbling among an endless series of novelties to which he was exposed during his stay. He translated his impressions into different media, producing fleeting experiments situated between identity and repetition and between lived impressions and spectacles.

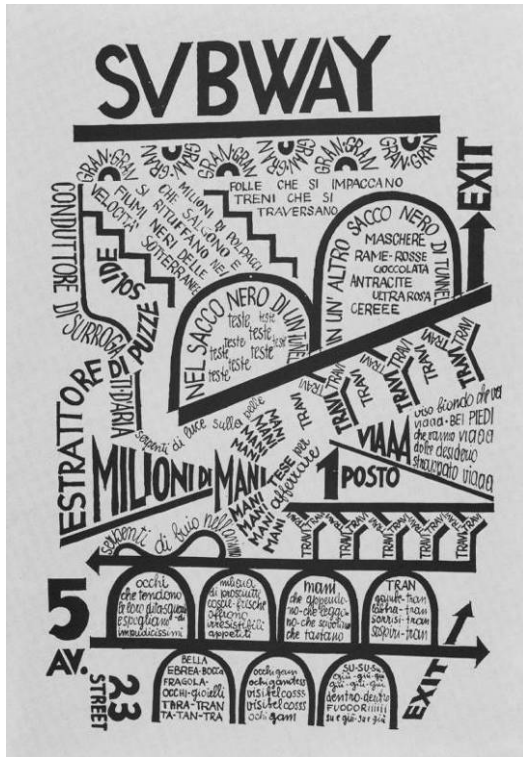


Figure 8: Above: *Subway* (1929)

Figure 9: Below: *Subway, crowd to the underground trains* (1930), Courtesy of Depero Archive

4. Back to Italy: Diariogrammi and Radiographies

In New York, despite Depero's many activities and projects (besides those already mentioned, he was working on interior decoration, an artistic factory, a futurist school, and other writings such as the unfinished *A,B,C of Italian Futurism*). He certainly had



a hard time settling down and completing many of them. In 1929, he wrote to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, whom he calls his “spiritual father,” asking him to intercede in Rome to prolong his stay with a new visa, which was not granted.⁴² His manifesto “Futurism and Advertising,” published in 1932,⁴³ seems to be preparing his return to Italy in its attempt to interest such established authorities as Balbo, De Pinedo, De Bernardi, and “new kings” Pirelli, Ansaldo, Fiat, Lancia in a futurist renewal. This manifesto is a preemptive plea to Italian authorities to recognize his work and futurism in general: “Anche l’arte ha bisogno di marciare con l’industria, la scienza, la politica, e gli stili del tempo” [Art too needs to march in step with industry, science, politics, the styles of time]. He uses bombastic words to convince them that futurist advertising (as futurist art) can glorify them because it is a living art that has already taken “il suo posto sui muri, sulle facciate degli edifici, nelle vetrine, nei treni, nella strada, dappertutto; un tentativo fu fatto anche di proiettarla sulle nuvole” [its position on the walls, the facades of palaces, in shop windows, in trains, on the street, everywhere; an attempt was even made to project it onto the clouds]. Depero devoted most of *New York–Film Vissuto* to his journey to New York, but he needs only half a page for the memories of his return.⁴⁴ He had left on the *Augustus* and now he returns on the liner *Roma*:

“dopo due anni a New York (due anni nell’inferno dei vivi) babele internazionale-cannibalismo-cinismo-pugnolate di gomiti- farsi avanti per forza- raggiungere dollari, dollari, dollari, dollari morire scoppiare indigestione di dollari (non importa) pittore Depero ritorna campione di resistenza, fantasia incendiata fiumi di luce.”

[After two years in New York (two years in hell among the living) international babel-cannibalism-cynicism-bulldozing-got to get ahead at any cost-got to make money, money, money die explode of dollar indigestion (it doesn’t matter), painter Depero returns champion of resistance, fantasy on fire, rivers of light] (*FN*Y 205)

Once back in Italy, Depero mainly devoted his energies to the applied arts and gained critical attention in that domain. The influential critic Margherita Sarfatti, for one, appreciates Depero’s tapestries, made by an “attentive pupil” and pleasing to the eye because their colors and forms are reminiscent of a kaleidoscope or a fabulous world. Sarfatti admires Depero’s

⁴² See the letter sent by Depero to Marinetti October 31, 1929 in the Marinetti Archives at the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁴³ Depero, “Futurism and Advertising.”

⁴⁴ The only other trace of the sea voyage is in the portrait of an anonymous Japanese engineer who had gone to New York to study the subway’s engineering but found that it wasn’t adaptable to seismic Japan and was therefore going to Sweden to study urbanism. They spoke in German with much difficulty, but Depero came to understand that despite “non lo interessasse l’architettura italiana d’oggi, si manifestò nostro grande ammiratore” [uninterested in the Italian architecture of today, he proved to be our great admirer] (*FN*Y 146). They also found a way to communicate perfectly once Depero showed him his *Libro Imbullonato*: “La sera prima del congedo sfogliamo assieme il mio libro imbullonato in alluminio *Depero – futurista 1927*. Lessi al nuovo amico giapponese una mia lirica cinese. Arabesco linguistico. Cadenze ed intrecci vocali in lingua cinese astratta ed onomatopeica. Si divertì, applaudì e ci comprendemmo ottimamente” [The night before we said goodbye we leafed through my bolted book covered in aluminum--*Depero- futurista 1927*. I read one of my Chinese poems to my new Japanese friend. Linguistic arabesque. Cadences and vocal twists in abstract and onomatopoeic Chinese. He enjoyed it, he clapped and we understood each other perfectly] (*FN*Y 146).

“translation or transposition” of real things in the realm of decorative arts. She believes that



Figure 10: Advertising leaflet for the book “New York Film Vissuto” (1931)

Depero explains, that at this point a record will be bound to the volume that you can pull out and play on the phonograph.”⁴⁷ Perplexity sets in when Depero shows his friends the “contents” and they come across the “record” page. For some reason, this recording device, which Depero calls *diariogrammi*, [see Fig. 10] unsettles them, and they question its “voler-dire” [meaning]. Apparently it is most disconcerting to Marinetti, who is present at the meeting but, as Villaroel reports, is absolutely silent about Depero’s project. Was Marinetti’s silence due to an aversion to the project and to recording technology, or did he perhaps feel plagiarized and reminded of his

decorative and industrial art requires the ability to simplify and stylize, which Depero demonstrates fabulously. She admires the symmetry, order and stylization of Depero’s depictions of “a woman seated at the loom” or a “little gentle cow,” but she cannot accept it when Depero applies the same stylization to themes of lyrical pathos, which indeed become grotesque.⁴⁵ In response to Sarfatti’s article, which in the end expresses the hope that Depero’s work will not degenerate, the futurist Volt replies with a fiery counterattack against her search for symmetry. Volt invites Sarfatti to participate in a dynamic art that is “orgiastic” instead of praising the “grave-digger of still-life,” Giorgio De Chirico.⁴⁶

As for Depero’s multimedia project *New York–Film Vissuto*, it was never published as he had planned. From a short article by Giuseppe Villaroel, we can imagine but we cannot be certain of what happened. This is the scene that Villaroel’s article reports: Depero arrives at a meeting with his friends carrying a large manuscript that looks like a musical score, and he reads it out loud. According to Villaroel, what the listeners saw was humanity refashioned in a thousand mirrors. He also comments on the vocal aspects of the work: “Depero reads with priceless imitative harmonies, stammering, tones, semi tones, snaps, hisses, rumbling, roars. In some chapters, we read, as a note to the readers: the word ‘disco.’” What does it mean? It means,

⁴⁵ Margherita Sarfatti, on “Popolo d’Italia,” now in *FDOV* (391-392).

⁴⁶ Volt, “Lettera aperta di Volt a Margherita Sarfatti” (*Testa di ferro*, now in *FDOV*, 393-94).

⁴⁷ Giuseppe Villaroel, “La gazzetta del popolo” Torino 1933, now in *FDOV*, 394. “Viene a dirigere? Appunto, sentirete che musica! Depero apre il suo zibaldone tempestato di disegni, caratteri cuneiformi, striscie, banderuole, grattacieli, fulmini, note di voci che escono dalle finestre, sigle di rumori infernali, labirinti, ponti, ghirigori, rabeschi, gomitolì, periodi rovesciati...regolare scrittura...pentagrammi indecifrabili. Ma cos’è insomma? Il mio capolavoro!- esclama il pittore- Marinetti impone il silenzio. Ah! è un romanzo. Il romanzo dell’America vera.” [Is he coming to conduct? That’s right, you’ll hear what great music! Depero opens his zibaldone bombarded with drawings, wedge-shaped characters, stripes, weathervanes, skyscrapers, lightning bolts, the sound of voices coming from the windows, initials of infernal sounds, labyrinths, bridges, scrawls, knots, upside-down sentences...symmetrical writing...indecipherable pentagrams. But what is it? My masterpiece! Exclaims the painter – Marinetti calls for silence. Ah! It’s a novel. The novel of the real America.]

own early poetry, such as “The Babels of Dreams” (1904)? Or, on the contrary, was Marinetti encouraging the group to listen?

In 1933, Marinetti and Masnata co-signed the manifesto *La Radia*. While the manifesto keeps faith with the futurist’s refusal of realism, it differentiates the Radia from any existing theatrical or filmic scene. According to the manifesto, the Radia is “a new art that begins where theatre, cinematography, and narration stop.” It should abolish space, time, unity of action, yesterday and tomorrow; it should be an “immensification of space,” capturing the “amplification and transfiguration of vibrations” emitted by living or dead spirits, noises, or matter. In 1934, Depero published the book *Liriche Radiofoniche [Radiophonic Poems]*, and he explains in the introduction that the poems are adapted for radio broadcasting and that the listener may be anywhere – in the street, in a café, or on a plane. Although these poems aim at a certain radiophonic presence, they can nonetheless be interpreted as fleeting radio-graphies veiling Depero’s various positions on his time. The poems assembled in the book may be schematically divided among some major motifs: a few New York memories, an ostensible glorification of fascism, and sights and sounds from the city and nature. Depero must have assembled these poems while he was in Milan upon his return from New York, when he was trying to establish his *casa Depero* there. Milan’s modernism and its “*panettoni*” are described in fabulous prose from the point of view of a mouse, and eventually the two merge in Depero’s visit to the pastry shop. From the heights of New York’s Babel-like skyscrapers, Depero had seen cars and people so small they resembled mice; now it is almost the opposite. In “Il topo della fantasia” [“The mice of fantasy”], the mouse perceives the modernist interior design of a pastry shop as a fantastic and desirable metropolis.⁴⁸ The prose poem is as much an amusing advertisement for *panettoni* as a mocking fairy tale of Milan: “Oh! Felicità di vivere questa terra sconosciuta, queste montagnole di continente inesplorato, questa terza America dell’estasi e del palato!” [Oh! Joy of savoring this unknown land, these mountains of unexplored continent, this third America of ecstasy and taste!] (LR 51).

The two New York poems are “Brindisi all’Hotel Fifth Avenue” [Toast at Hotel Fifth Avenue] and “Broadway.” The first one takes place in the luxurious apartment of Mr. and Mrs. Jacobson who are hosting a party. Depero, who is there with his friend Mario Soldati, expresses his frustration at not speaking English well by preparing an “Abstract Toast” that would be comprehensible in any language. Critic Christopher Wagstaff, who describes this phonetic poem as a “little jewel” at the center of the collection, has given a very sophisticated reading of it that

⁴⁸ “I cristalli sono enormi. Le colonne di vetro gigantesche. Le luci violette di nuovo sole dei ‘Neon’ corrono, brillano. Le canne, i tralicci, le piastre di metallo cromato abbagliano. ...

Colline appena nate.

Apparizioni or ora sbocciate.

Elevazioni mangerecce.

PANETTONI.

Il mio muso si allunga. Il mio naso trivella le grosse lastre di vetro. Entro con le punte sottilissime del mio insaziabile olfatto ghiottone”

[The windows are enormous. The glass columns gigantic. The lavender lights shine on the new day of Neon. The pipes dazzle with the pylons, the chrome metal slabs...

Newborn hills.

Visions unfolding.

Edible levations.

PANETTONI.

I stick out my snout. My nose bores through the sheets of glass. I enter through the super-subtle tips of my insatiable, gluttonous sense of smell] (FNY 49).

considers the transcriptions of the different pronunciations of the proper name in different languages, as well as all the contaminations of words and sounds when reduced to their syllabic structure; the poem has a structure composed of variations in tones, volumes, and rhythms.⁴⁹ What we can now add is that this poem in a Babel-like style reformulates city impressions already present in *New York–Film Vissuto*. The same observation obtains for the second poem:

N (enne) **E** (e) **W** (vi doppio)

new (niù) new (niù) **York** [. . .]

Riali? iesse, iesse, iesse,

ach! spuff- ach suff – (sputacchio)

ai em sori (mi dispiace)

datz oll rait (benissimo fa niente)

Brrr . . . Brrr. Brrr

fischietto del poliziotto (*LR 75*)

Depero captures visual and aural elements that record the flow of the crowd; in fact in this poem, where words from many tongues are assembled, we hear short phrases repeated by a parrot in a shop window, the paperboy, and a policeman shouting “stap.” Volatile scenes occur between illuminated signs:

pa alto **ra** enorme **mount** altissimo

si accende e si spenge

sì e no, sì e no, sì e no,

sì e no, sì e no, sì e no.

Fuga luminosa in basso delle notizie di luce, recentissime, tremolanti sulla facciata del *Times*

[High **pa** enormous **ra** gigantic **mount**

On and off, on and off

Yes and no, yes and no, yes and no,

Yes and no, yes and no, yes and no.

Luminous flight of the news of light, hot-off-the-presses, trembling on the cover of the *Times*] (*LR 77*)

Fleeting images and sounds are glimpsed in construction sites:

A destra: enorme building in costruzione.

Ghrrr degli scalpelli automatici per forare il ferro

ghrrrrrr ghrrrrrr ghrrrrrr ghrrrrrr ghrrrrrr

tatatatatata trrrrrrr tèn trrrrrrr tèn

⁴⁹ Christopher Wagstaff, “Le campane di Depero” (*LR LVI–LXIV*).

[To the right: giant building under construction.

Ghrrr of the automatic chisels drilling through iron
ghrrrrr ghrrrrr ghrrrrr ghrrrrr ghrrrrr
tatatatatata trrrrrr tenn trrrrrr tenn] (LR 78)

Then the poem shifts to the sounds of popular music and of the multi-linguistic voices heard in the streets, which are spelled with idiomatic pronunciations and rhythms of the speakers. In this sense, Depero is yet another man from Babel à la Eugene Jolas, whose plurilingual dogma, as Emily Apter has noted, expresses an “amerigrating,” an expression of linguistic migration (113–14).

. . . ooooo mai boòoi ai aai low iùu, ooo mai
dear suit hard ai ai ai ai low iùùùùùùù . . . mai
laif is foor iùùùùù
Accenti internazionali s’incontrano in tutte le direzioni:
senorita, seniorita, sepoltuto pedro; [. . .]

Jà, jà, ià, ià, ià, ià, ià
eine sehr schöne frau, eine sehr junge
frau habe ich getroffen vorgestern im
theater. . . . (LR 78–79)

This is briefly followed by a “**...pam ...pam pam...** tre colpi di rivoltella. Chi è stato? Tutta la folla si volta e guarda verso un angolo del Paramount” [**...pam ...pam pam...** three shots. Who did it? The crowd turns its attention toward a corner of the Paramount building], presented in such a way that one cannot tell if it depicts a real street scene or one out of the movies. Depero enjoys not only steeping himself in the vertigo of skyscrapers and subways and in the storms of languages, but also subverting the Italian language, tympanizing it with all other languages. On Broadway, the storm of languages from *New York–Film Vissuto* returns:

La burrasca delle lingue continua ad imperversare.

Russo a poppa.
Cinese a prua.
Tedesco nei timpani.
Giapponese sulla faccia.
Italiano in bocca

[The storm of languages continues to rage.

Russian on the stern.
Chinese at the bow.
German at the kettledrums.
Japanese at the face.
Italian at the mouth] (LR 80).

This list of national languages is inscribed also in the free-word plate “Stato d’animo in New York” [State of Mind in New York], [see Fig. 11],

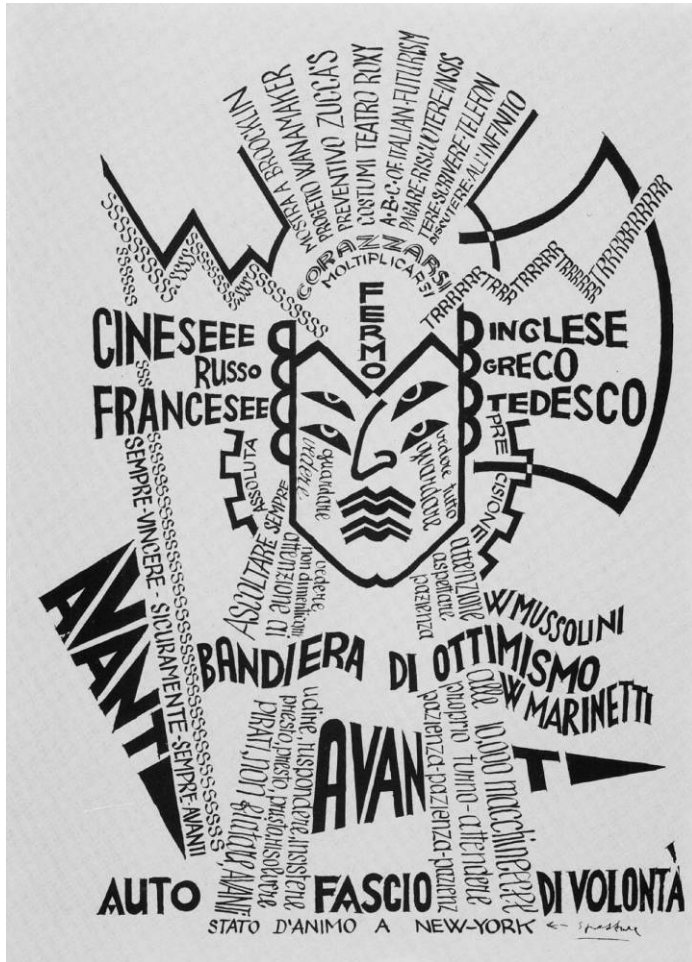


Figure 11: *Stato d’animo a New York* (State of Mind in New York) (1930)

where the center is a stylized Medusa-like face, with doubled eyes, ears, and mouth; spokes from the head contain the names of some of Depero’s projects, while the stylized bust is traversed by a serpentine line of boldface and capitalized letters:

W MUSSOLINI
 BANDIERA DI OTTIMISMO
 W MARINETTI
 [W MUSSOLINI
 FLAG OF OPTIMISM
 W MARINETTI]

The *Liriche Radiofoniche* also contains a few newspaper clips. One is from the *Corriere della Sera*, which reports on Depero’s reading of some of his poems at the “Galleria delle tre arti.” The article foregrounds two of the many poems in particular: “But where the poet struck the most eloquent and

impassioned tones was in the declamation of his latest verses “Acciaio” [Steel] and “Tempo Fascista: COSTRUIRE” [Fascist Time: TO BUILD].⁵⁰ These two poems are parodies or, more specifically, parodies in the form of ads, of fascist rhetoric and of what Hal Foster has called prosthetic gods.⁵¹ In this sense, my interpretation departs from Günter Berghaus’s contention in *Futurism and Politics*: “[Depero] preferred [to *aeropittura* style] a *stile d’acciaio*, a far less Futurist and much more Fascist propaganda style.”⁵² To the contrary, “Steel” in its structural logic may be compared to the form of a Klein bottle: the authority of the Duce and his steeliness

⁵⁰ *Corriere della Sera*, March 14, 1934--XII (LR 19).

⁵¹ Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/October Books, 2004).

⁵² Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*. (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), 297. My own interpretation is in tune with the structural remarks that Claudio Fogu made in his review of Berghaus’s book, “Futurism and Politics: Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944.” Fogu sharply underlines the need to consider the cultural production of that time as mediated by competing avant-gardes, where “fascist culture was a signifier with no fixed referent, [and] it was structurally (not just opportunistically) open to the competitive interplay of many artistic groups and intellectuals. . . . Futurism, placed in this context, was neither leftist nor Fascist; it was, instead, a unique avant-garde within the broader phenomenon of modernism, unique because it sought to take a leading role within the development of mass culture in advanced capitalism, doing so via the aestheticization of both politics and economics.” (179-80)

(which is certainly not stillness but rather movement) are connected in the poem through a parodic perspective that bends the rhetoric. It begins with a self-affirming “I” who speaks; the speaker defines himself in short and clear sentences (“I raise my muscular levers, cylindrical fists”) until the lyric intersects itself at the point where the “I” of the Duce meets ACCIAIO [steel]:

Ha una calotta cranica di precisa semisfera. Ha le occhiaie scavate dal compasso .
. . . L'acciaio ha le mascelle ad angolo retto che si muovono su cardini oleati
silenziosi . . . Il suo sguardo ha la vibrazione dell'onda herziana. Somiglia ad un
solo uomo:

AL DUCE

L'acciaio è il poema moderno della perfezione accuratissima e della possanza
massima.

[He has a cranial ice cap shaped like a perfect semisphere. His eye sockets are rung as if
with a caliper . . . The steel of his jaws forms right-angles that move on silent, well-oiled
hinges . . . His expression vibrates like Hertzian wave. He looks like only one man:

THE DUCE

Steel is the modern poem of ruthless perfection and maximum power] (*LR 20–21*)

Steel is then presented in its multifarious capacities: it is a super symbol, it resists (“tra le alte
guglie dei suoi splendori fischia la parola: ‘resistere’ [among the spires of its splendors
whistles the word: ‘resist’]), it devours kilometers. Steel, as a sublime poet, has married speed:

compagna dalle mille anime inafferrabili, dalle capigliature mutevoli.

È il cantore della sposa veloce che ovunque vibra seducentissima:

frrrrr vrrrrr

[Mate to the thousand elusive souls, of the ever-changing hair.

He’s the cantor of the hasty bride who trembles all over, so seductively:

frrrrr vrrrrr] (*LR 22*)

In the title of the poem “Tempo fascista: COSTRUIRE,” the tempo of fascism is equivalent
to the verb “to build” in the infinitive; the poem presents the workers’ daily routine without
giving any indication of the intended construction. A workers’ chorus, which is repeated as a
refrain in the lyric, is a remake of the seven dwarves’ song:

oilì, oilì, oilà, in nome del DUCE

Andiamo a lavorar . . .

[hi-hi, hi-ho, in the name of the DUCE

It’s off to work we go . . . (*LR 35*)

A megaphone amplifies constructive, forward-looking verbs in the infinitive and gerund forms:

Lettere grosse – alte – solide – cubitali, e quindi con un megafono grida ad alta voce la risultante massiccia parola

COSTRUIRE

Indici sul marciapiede della vita, sull'asfalto del destino, ogni cento passi, quali verbi miliari i vocaboli incitatori:

camminare- procedere-combattere-salire costruendo-vincendo-abbellendo-con dolore eroico, con ardore tenace, inesorabilmente.

Esulta con le campane, con le incudini e con i martelli sincopati:

dinn donn dann

tènn titotitatitèn tènn tènn

DU-CE DU-CE DU-CE

lu-ce for-za vi-ta

[Huge letters – tall – solid – poster-size, and so with a megaphone on full blast, the massive word resounds

BUILD

Traces on the sidewalk of life, on the asphalt of destiny, every hundred steps, mile-verbs sound like a battle cry:

walk – proceed-combat-mount building-winning-beautifying-with heroic pain, with tenacious ardor, inexorably.

Exulting with the bells, the anvils and syncopated hammers:

dinn donn dann

tènn titotitatitèn tènn tènn

[. . .] DU-CE DU-CE DU-CE

Li-ght stren-gth li-ve] (LR 38)

Another parodic poem is “La voce dell’antenna” [The Voice of the Antenna], where Depero moves in the futurist tradition while subverting it; the antenna springs up out of fantastic green-grass tapestries. The poem is divided into segments by bolded words: **antenne, silenzio, meditazione, pausa** [antennas, silence, meditation, pause]. **Antenne** is followed by their description:

alti fiammiferi del suono, occhi da terra lanciati dai lumaconi delle valli, per vedere, spiare e controllare lo spazio e gli orizzonti. Orecchie della terra, sradicate e sospese nelle altitudini per udire, ascoltare i richiami, le voci dei pericoli, dei naufraghi, dei disperati

[Tall matches of sound, eyes launched from the earth from the slowcoaches of the valleys, to watch, to spy, and to control the space and the horizons. Ears of the earth, uprooted and suspended on high to hear, to listen to the warnings, the voices of danger, the castaways, the hopeless] (LR 24).

After **silence** comes a counterfeiting of the futurist avant-garde war style: airplanes take off urgently and out of synch with each other and have as their objective a rescue mission rather than a military target. **Meditazione** is composed entirely in the subjunctive, a sequence of hypothetical sentences about the impossibility of being an antenna that ends within an “aerial-cosmic” sentence: “Mi lancerei a nuoto nella via lattea per un bagno di polvere cosmica. Angeli a destra. Angeli a sinistra . . . Ali ovunque. Nuvole sotto i piedi, pioggia d’oro, vini d’argento, biscotti di luce, autentico paradiso di agognata altitudine” [I would launch myself into the milky way for a bath of cosmic dust. Angels to the right. Angels to the left . . . Wings everywhere. Clouds underfoot, rain of gold, wines of silver, biscuits of light, authentic paradise of longed for height] (*LR* 25–26). This segment is followed by a **pausa** where the anthropomorphized speaking antenna gives its point of view:

Io, antenna, con le mie ossa puntute . . . piantata su di un cuscino duro di cemento armato, sono la sentinella dello spazio.

Senza batter ciglio attendo la faccia minacciosa della notte per aprire e tendere maggiormente le orecchie.....

tinn tinn tinn 35 nord

peee peee peee **S. O. S.** 4.7 ovest

tempesta cre-scente sal-va-taglio im-possibile
..... silenzio.

[I, antenna, with my jagged bones . . . fixed to hard cushion of armed cement, I’m the sentinel of space.

Without batting an eye I wait for the threatening face of night to open and lend her ears.....

tinn tinn tinn 35 nord

peee peee peee **S. O. S.** 4.7 ovest

storm ri-sing res-cue im-possible
..... silence.

.....](*LR* 26)

In the sea storm, the antenna’s voice alone cannot be swallowed. The antenna itself performs the rescue operation: “Io antenna, afferro, chiedo, ascolto, multiplico e diffondo il grido e lo strazio” [I, antenna, grasp, ask, listen, multiply, and diffuse the scream and the torture] (*LR* 26). Here, Depero not only counters the militaristic notion of the planes but also underlines the difference between form and content (without establishing an opposition) in the many possible, complex uses of the radio system. Perhaps we can also hear posthumously an urgent call to be rescued from the rhetoric of war.

“Il puledro innamorato” [The Colt in Love], a colt’s monologue, is presented in a cartoonist’s mocking “strapaese” style: “Dentro di me tutto bolle . . . Voglio scappare dalla pelle. . .” [Inside of me everything’s boiling . . . I want to escape from my flesh . . .]. Depero seems to

allude to the figure of the horse in the visual arts as an emblem of movement and strength: “Balzo, scatto, mi raddrizzo, fischio, cincischio, rischio e fr fr frremo nel galoppo. Balzano le colline – rotolano le tonde teste degli ippocastani. Le case scompaiono sgomentate con il cielo negli occhi.” [I leap, spring, straighten, whistle, putter, risk and shh shh shhhake on the gallop. The hills leap – wheeling around the round heads of the horse-chestnuts. The houses disappear stunned with the sky in their eyes] (*LR* 46–47). In a later text, *So I think so I paint*, Depero describes the horse in Umberto Boccioni’s painting *Elasticity* (1912): “One of Umberto Boccioni’s favorite subjects was the speed and elasticity of a racing horse. (Boccioni loved riding and this was also the cause of his tragic end)” (*STP* 132). Comparing Boccioni’s painting to his own “Neighing with Speed (1932),” Depero notes that Boccioni’s “power-forms” are disordered with an almost impressionistic pictorial solidity, while in his own painting the “power-forms” are reconstructed together. “They are concrete forms of obvious speed, of moving figures happily cast into a single plastic design and body” (*STP* 133). Depero wrote the book *So I think so I paint* for his second visit in 1947 to the United States. He found it almost impossible to get close to the American contemporary art scene, to the Société Anonyme, for example, which indeed would dissolve shortly. *The Radiophonic Poems* display Depero’s search for an inventive mix of reality and fantasy, where the visual aspects are blended with other sensory aspects such as sounds and textures.⁵³ The poems “Pioggia” [Rain] and “Il vento” [The Wind] are concerned with natural phenomena. In “Pioggia,” the sensuality of rain emerges in its many effects, which slip and slide in the poem.

Piove leggermente:

tessuto obliquo che sfalda ogni consistenza, che appiattisce i muscoli e sfilaccia la volontà; che graffia le belle tinte delle affiches e cancella la luce brillante dei negozi lussuosi.

La pioggia è uno scarabocchio che il cielo rovescia sul compito finito della natura.

Cancellare per rifare.

Cancellare per ridisegnare.

Cancellare per ridipingere.

Tessuto di punti esclamativi che scendono di traverso. Miriadi di punti fermi sull’asfalto.

Nel cielo mani-spugne-nuvole che spremono. Immenso telaio-pianto che ordisce facce strambe di paesaggi lacrimogeni.

Pettini. Pettini. Pettini.

[It’s raining softly:

⁵³ “Physically, sound is a rhythmical, equal vibration through air; noise is a disordered sound, confused and prolonged. Both expand by means of invisible waves. But modern technique has been able to phonograph these waves so that now it is possible to distinguish the wave of a sweet sound from that of a deafening noise. Why then, if this plastic reality exists and is scientifically proved, if it can be technically photographed, are not painters allowed to paint and interpret it? Carlo Carrà wrote a manifesto on the abstract painting of noises and smells, Giacomo Balla and Depero painted many pictures inspired by sound and noise and by the reality, transfigured waves, of noises and sounds” (*STP* 38-39).

Oblique weave that dulls every texture, flattens the muscles and unravels the will;
that smears the lovely hues of the billboards and dims the glare of the luxury
shops.

The rain is a scribble the sky overturns on nature's finished work.

Erase to redo.

Erase to redraw.

Erase to repaint.

Weave of exclamation marks descending sideways. Myriads of full stops
on the asphalt.

In the sky hands-sponges-clouds that condense. Immense loom-lament
that weaves strange faces of lachrymatory landscapes.

Combs. Combs. Combs] (*LR 15*)

In the summertime rain one can glimpse the process of erasing, repainting, and weaving, and one can follow the musicality of the flow of this aerial-natural phenomenon; but one can also imagine a possible translation in one of Depero's paintings or tapestries. "Pioggia" records a quasi object, where the sound of the rain collapses into a tapestry; in this sense it is perfectly in tune with the avant-garde experiments analyzed by Douglas Kahn in his study of the history of sound in the arts, *Noise, Water, Meat*. In "Pioggia," as we have seen again and again in his work, Depero manages to juggle and weave together different media. The fluidity of water is only momentarily solidified in the weaving.

Tesse, ritesse, trama, ritrama, tutte le materie dei paesaggi, come fossero
sostanze musicali sensibilissime.

Cambiare, sfiorare, sfumare, rigare, fondere, liquefare, su e giù,
verticalmente, obliquamente, a ventate, a mulini, a rulli, a tendaggi.

Ecco l'attività bizzarra di questo stato originario di natura
indecente

[It weaves, reweaves, concocts, reconcocts, every aspect of the landscapes,
as if they were ultrasensitive musical substances.

Change, skim, blend, straighten, merge, liquefy, up and down, vertically,
diagonally, in flurries, windmills, steam rollers, drapes.

That's the bizarre activity of this original state of indecent nature]

(*LR 16– 17*)

Passing from "Pioggia" to "Il vento," a voice speaks from the top of a high rocky mountain, echoing the new music of sounds and noises invented by the futurist composer Luigi Russolo. The wind has hands ("le mani del vento") [the wind's hands].

Lo scoglio alto-saldo resiste ai piccoli e grandi fiumi dell'aria. Le mani del
vento, fredde, lunghe, compatte, fitte, veloci, cercano di avvinghiarmi, di rapirmi
e di trascinarci per lo spazio.

Alcune mi accarezzano seducenti, altre mi schiaffeggiano dispettose, tutte
sono inguantate di cielo.

[The high-solid rock stands firm against the rivers of air, big and small. Cold, long, closed, clenched, fast, the hands of the winds try to catch me, to kidnap me and drag me through space.

Some stroke me seductively, others slap me mischievously, they're all gloved with sky] (LR 53)

The winds surpass the voice (or the author) with their speed, and the voice is displaced “on the immense glaciers of light, with blue skates of the howled” (LR 53) while downhill the houses inflate and sail.

The lyric ends in an onomatopoeic style:

Vento-cartiera di luce e di velocità, sui tuoi rulli voglio stampare il mio canto assetato di altezza e di avvenire . . .

violini vi u-o - iiiiiiiiiiiiii
corde vi u-o - iiiiiiiiiiiiii
fischi; vio vio vio vio vio
moine viù viù viù viù viù
gatti
lamenti; vivivivivi viiiiiiiiiiii
bandiere. uuuu vvvummm

[Wind-paper mill of light and speed, I want to print on your reels my song, thirsty for altitude and time to come. . .

violins vi u-o - iiiiiiiiiiiiii
chords vi u-o - iiiiiiiiiiiiii
whistles; vio vio vio vio vio
sweet-talk viù viù viù viù viù
cats
whispers; vivivivivi viiiiiiiiiiii
flags. uuuu vvvummm] (LR 55).

Depero eventually came back to live in Rovereto. With this return to the natural mountains, he dedicated his energies to artisanal production, collaborating with the Italian fascist autarchy. He ultimately produced much more predictable artifacts – or, as Sarfatti would have said, artifacts that were not degenerate or excessive. Depero’s impressions of his experiences in New York, translated within multifarious, transnational encounters with a specific time, were not produced as a “work.” That *New York–Film Vissuto* was neither completed nor published is perhaps evidence that his time was not technically able to address a multimedia and multi-rhythm temporality, stretched between the present and memory; Depero could potentially have done so by working with different media and technologies, but they were not at hand. Nevertheless Depero’s unfinished project shows a logic of translatability; rather than different media “that resemble one another,” there is a network of media, in Samuel Weber’s sense,

“whose sole shared trait is the ability to ‘part with’ im-parting.”⁵⁴ Depero’s project had the potential to express this ability, but once back in Italy, Depero worked mainly with what was ready at hand, accessible, at that time: the artisanal aspects. What is most striking is the shock effect generated by the clash between Depero’s experimentation and his experience, between his avant-garde gestures and the political and capitalist complex. Between these poles, and in a very specific historical moment (1928-1930), Depero finds a space of play, capturing the spectacles in order to displace and interrupt them again and again. During his stay in New York City, Depero was confronted with the material complexity of a fantasized and allegorized future which was taking kaleidoscopic shape before his eyes; what he experienced there was significantly disjointed from the “reconstruction of the universe” that futurism had advocated (in architecture, theater, and cinema). On the one hand, Depero’s multimedia gestures attempt to reopen a transnational avant-garde perspective on his time; on the other hand, it is clear that in his time such a vision was factually impossible to propose or to produce.

Ultimately, Depero’s experiments in New York must be related to the activities of futurism at the beginning of the ‘30s: The *Radiophonic Poems* plays in part with the proposal of the futurist manifesto *La Radia* (which was looking for “a new art that begins where theatre, cinematography, and narration stop”) and in part with the enchanting visual and aural spectacle of New York City itself.

⁵⁴ Samuel Weber, “The Virtuality of the Media,” *Sites: Journal of the Twentieth-Century/Contemporary French Studies* 4:2 (2000), 311.

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