Eduardo Ledesma

Catalan Futurism(s) and Technology: Poetry, Painting, Architecture and Film

Abstract: In this essay I examine the question of the Catalan avant-garde’s relation to the Mechanical Age in light of works by four artists who approached technology with a ‘futurist’ sensibility, and were enthusiastically swept away by the zeitgeist of the times – the speed, novelty and adventure of the machine era – but who also recognized and negotiated with its destructive elements. By analysing representative works by the painter Joaquim Torres-García, the poet Joan Salvat-Papasseit, the architect Josep Lluís Sert and the film director Segundo de Chomón, I explore how Catalan Futurism engaged with the dynamic forces of modernity, and how it incorporated local and traditional sources of inspiration, thereby balancing internationalist impulses with autochthonous nationalist urges. What Salvat-Papasseit’s anarchic visual poetry, Torre-García’s constructivist paintings, Sert’s rationalist structures and Chomón’s proto-futurist film art share is a radical experimentalism with the materials of their craft. Their œuvre is simultaneously informed by their authors’ socio-political concerns and tempered by their various degrees of involvement with the Catalan nationalist project. In every case, studying their relationship to the mechanical illuminates their particular and variable understanding of the different Catalan Futurism(s).

Keywords: Joan Salvat-Papasseit, Joaquim Torres-García, Josep Lluís Sert, Segundo de Chomón, historical avant-garde in Barcelona, modernity, mechanical age, technophilia, machine angst, visual poetry, trick films, Constructivism, Razionalismo

Catalan Futurism is different

The Catalan Futurists’ depictions of the machine contain a number of stylistic features and devices that set them apart from other Peninsular and European Futurisms and that are characterized by a rather paradoxical relationship to technology. As Brad Epps, Joan Ramon Resina and other critics have argued, in Catalunya (Catalonia) the avant-garde did not achieve the radical boldness exhibited, for instance, by the Italian Futurists, or the Russian Constructivists, due to a variety of reasons: Catalunya’s status as a stateless nation, the conservative influence of bourgeois Catalan nationalism on every sphere of endeavour (specially politics and the arts), a limited financial support for innovative movements, and
the domineering institutional influence of the neo-classicist movement, *Noucentisme*, which was backed by the official art establishment. How then, might we characterize Catalan Futurism’s encounter with the Machine?

Caught in a vibrant embrace, avant-garde art and technology in the Barcelona of the early twentieth century revealed an expressive yet contradictory snapshot of Modernity, exposing the thrill of innovation, while simultaneously laying bare an ambivalent relation with the past. Moreover, the new artistic sensibility called Futurism involved not only a critique but also an assimilation of technology and its processes. The machine metaphor (the body as machine, city as machine, society as a machine) was mobilized to represent both technophilic and technophobic visions of the future. Artists, especially those who described themselves as Futurists, approached their craft as technicians, constructing their artwork by means of new technologies that often fused aesthetics and functionality. The Futurists’ subject matter, style and method reflected the latest scientific and technological developments, and the machine became their prime object of fear and desire.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, engineers and architects were restructuring Barcelona’s urban space in major Haussman-style interventions,¹ and the Catalan avant-garde movements (Futurism, Cubism, Art-Evolució, Vibrationism, Ultraism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Rationalism, Constructivism, and so on) observed and applied new notions of dynamism and mathematical logic to their own work; avant-garde art was being systematized, mathematized and mechanically reproduced, but, at the same time, such rationalization was being questioned as art was gradually entangled with the mechanisms responsible for increasing de-humanization, war and destruction in Europe. Furthermore, whereas some artistic modalities seemed to form a quasi-perfect fusion with technology – as was the case with cinematography, photography, architecture, and some sculpture – vindicating avant-gardist claims that the separation between art and technology was rapidly dissolving, in other arts – literature and painting – such bio-mechanical ‘synthesis’ was more difficult to achieve, and the rupture with tradition was more hesitant.

¹ There was around the turn of the century a series of major restructuring projects in Barcelona stemming from the demolition of the city’s walls in 1859, followed by the rapid expansion under the grid-like Plan Cerdà. Other significant projects included two major Universal Exhibitions (in 1888 and 1929), the arrival of electric light and a modern sewer system, as well as the railroad, and the expansion of working-class quarters to accommodate the influx of immigrant workers who were arriving en masse to work at the textile factories, earning the city the nickname “Manchester of Spain”.

Eduardo Ledesma
Examining the question of the Catalan avant-garde’s relation to the mechanical age in light of works by four artists experimenting with different media and exploring their material characteristics – the painter Joaquim Torres-García, the poet Joan Salvat-Papasseit, the architect Josep Lluís Sert and the filmmaker Segundo de Chomón – I explore how Catalan Futurism incorporated local and traditional sources of inspiration with the influence from Italian Futurism and from other movements. In some cases, the Catalan vanguard found it difficult to maintain an equilibrium between internationalist impulses and nationalist urges for autonomy.

In order to set the stage, it is useful to understand how Futurism developed in Catalonia. Preceding F. T. Marinetti’s *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) by a few years, the Majorcan poet Gabriel Alomar laid out his concept of *Futurisme* in a 1904 lecture at the Ateneu Barcelonès. *Futurisme* differed considerably from the somewhat later and better known Italian *Futurismo*. Until April 1909, when Ramon Gómez de la Serna published a Spanish translation of Marinetti’s brand of Futurism (as ‘manifested’ by the Italian poet in *Le Figaro*), Alomar’s humanist Futurism with its call for artistic renovation, was among the few forward-thinking proto-avant-garde propositions in Europe.² A number of critics have long debated the degree to which Alomar’s text influenced Marinetti’s development of Italian Futurism, if at all. I would side with Anderson, who believes that the most probable influence would have been the adoption of the name of the movement, which might also have been developed independently.³ Later, Catalan avant-gardists such as Josep Maria Junoy and Joan Salvat-Papasseit would correspond with Marinetti and other Italian Futurists, establishing a flow of mutual influence.⁴ The first artist to be examined here, Joaquim Torres-García, came to his own peculiar combination of pictorial Cubism and Futurism through the sway of Salvat-Papasseit, with whom he worked closely on avant-garde magazines, book covers, posters and similar projects.

---

² See David W. Bird’s essay in this volume, “Futurist Social Critique in Gabriel Alomar i Villalonga (1873–1941)”, and the critical literature on Alomar and Marinetti listed in his bibliography.
Joaquim Torres-García: Cubo-Futurist grids and the mechanized city

The painter, muralist, art theorist and toymaker Joaquim (Joaquín) Torres-García (1874–1949) was born to Catalan parents in Montevideo, Uruguay, and lived in Barcelona from 1891 until 1916. There he established friendships with leading Catalan writers and artists such as Eugeni d’Ors, Joan Salvat-Papasseit, Joaquim Mir, Miquel Utrillo, Isidre Nonell, Josep Pijuan, Pablo Picasso, Juli González and also his close friend and fellow Uruguayan painter Rafael Barradas, founder of Vibracionisme (Vibrationism).⁵ While Torres-García belonged to both the Modernista and the Noucentista movements during the first years of his painting career, by 1915–16 he became interested in Cubism and Futurism, particularly in how their aesthetic might allow him to capture images of the modern, mechanized city.⁷

In December 1917, Torres-García ushered in his Art-Evolució (Art-Evolution) manifesto in an exhibition at the famed Dalmau Galleries in Barcelona.⁸ The essential tenet of the manifesto – with which Torres-García sought to distance himself from the conservative-minded Noucentista movement – was “forgetting all artistic tradition and painting according to one’s intuition.”⁹ His method, however, owes as much to artistic inspiration as to a systematic application of a ‘constructive’ principle of organizing objects, which foregrounds technology and urban life, hailing the machine as a tool for engineer and artist alike – as well as an object of study. As Andrew Anderson observes, Torres-García’s Art-Evolució espoused attitudes including “individualism, internationalism, ‘presentism’, vitalism and dynamism, which […] suggests a link to Futurism.”¹⁰

---

⁵ I do not focus on Barradas here (see Renée Silverman’s essay in this volume), but undoubtedly both artists influenced each other’s work. Although Art-Evolució differs considerably from Vibracionisme aesthetically, both movements reflect a positive, yet cautious, attitude towards technology, which owes much to Futurism.

⁶ Torres-García’s was in fact an accomplished Noucentista painter, having been commissioned to paint the frescoes of the sumptuous Saló Sant Jordi (Hall of Saint George) in the Palau de de la Generalitat, the seat of the Catalan government, an honour which certified both his talent as a painter and his commitment to Catalan nationalist ideals.

⁷ While Futurism and Cubism were forward thinking, Noucentisme was focussed instead on fostering Catalan cultural identity by linking it to Mediterranean classicism, Greco-Roman proportions, and a rootedness in rural Catalonia.

⁸ The manifesto had first been published in September, 1917, in Salvat-Papasseit’s Un enemic del poble.


Between 1914 and 1918, Barcelona’s importance as a locus of the avant-garde grew exponentially because of the influx of artists dislocated by the Great War and others arriving from Latin America. It was a crucial time for Catalan Futurism, rich in both theoretical treatises and notable works, on account of the confluence between foreign and local avant-gardists.¹¹ The first number of poet Josep Maria Junoy’s Futurist inspired magazine, Troços (1916–18) was published in 1916. Other publications followed, such as Salvat-Papasseit’s Un enemic del poble (1917–18), Arc-Voltaic (1918), and Proa (1921), as well as Francis Picabia’s 391 (1917).

During the years of the Great War, Torres-García, Rafael Barradas and Salvador Dalí were in the midst of a Cubo-Futurist phase.¹² Inspired by Gino Severini’s paintings, Barradas created Vibracionisme in 1917, painting urban scenes in vibrant colours that emphasized the energy and dynamic nature of the Catalan metropolis. Torres-García’s work was arguably closer to the Cubists than to the Futurists, although he shared the latter’s obsession with the mechanical. His infatuation with machines, however, was mitigated by a distrust of the standardization and utilitarianism associated with the assembly line and its processes, a distrust which would find an outlet in his artisanal manufacture of wooden children’s toys. Torre’s paintings paradoxically operate with the normalizing grid-structure as organizing principle, while retaining elements of the individual, the artisanal and the hand-made.

In Figura con paisaje de ciudad (Figure with Urban Landscape, 1917; see Fig. 1), Torres-García emphasizes form and colour in order to make intelligible

---

¹¹ Among the recognizable names to pass through or live in Barcelona in that period are French painters Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Marie Laurencin and Albert Gleizes, Swiss painter-boxer Arthur Cravan, Russian Constructivist painters Hélène Grunhoff, Olga Sakharova and Serge Charshoue, Dadaist Swiss painter Francis Picabia, Uruguayan painter Rafael Barradas (originator of vibracionisme), and writers André Breton and Max Jacob. A decade later, in 1928, Marinetti himself paid a brief visit to the city and met with Rafael Barradas and other local artists (see Anderson: “Futurism and Spanish Literature in the Context of the Historical Avant-garde”, pp. 173–176). While it is unlikely that Umberto Boccioni visited Barcelona, in the 1916 issue of Josep Maria Junoy’s avant-garde magazine Troços we find a visual poem commemorating the Italian Futurist’s death in the battlefield. The poem written by Junoy himself is entitled “Estela Angular” (“Angular Wake”) and its text reads: “Detached from our miserable matter, the soul undoubtedly has immediate radioactivity. Boccioni was a living and breathing coryphee of multiplex plasticity and paroxysmic clauses, whose death has enabled him to attain a purified life (the transfusion of his spirit with pristine, fluttering light), while pus and clouds of smoke cover the plowed earth.” (trans. Willard Bohn). For a complete analysis of the poem and its visual design see Willard Bohn’s The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, pp. 91–93.

¹² Cubo-Futurism amalgamated stylistic elements from both French Cubism and Italian Futurism.
This is a partial preview of the article.


Available for purchase through the publisher, De Gruyter:

http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/futur