

INTERPRETING GIACOMO BALLA'S PAINTING *Abstract* *Speed + Sound*

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ABSTRACT:

Futurism is an artistic and social movement, originated in the early 20th century in Italy. The Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti founded Futurism as an avant-garde movement in Milan in 1909. He launched the movement in his *Futurist Manifesto* published 5 February 1909 in *La gazzetta dell'Emilia*. He was soon joined by the painters Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini and the composer Luigi Russolo. Marinetti expressed a passionate loathing of everything old, especially political and artistic tradition. They wanted no part of past to hold them back. The Futurists admired everything that was futuristic in nature and all that represented the technological triumph of humanity over nature. They rejected the cult of the past and all imitation, praised originality in whatever form—be it violent or mad. They dismissed art critics as useless; rebelled against harmony and good taste; swept away all the themes and subjects of all previous art, and gloried in science.

Key Words: Balla, Painting, Abstract, Speed, Sound, Futurism, Reversing Gaze, Aporia, Sky, Water, Earth, Colours, Void, Depth.



GENERAL TAKE ON THE PAINTING:

Abstract Speed + Sound (Italian: *Velocità astratta + rumore*) is a painting by Italian Futurist painter Giacomo Balla, one of several studies of motion created by the artist in 1913–14. Balla chose the automobile as a symbol of speed. The painting evokes the sensation of the passing of an automobile, with crisscrossing lines representing sound. The painting may be the second in a triptych narrating the passage of a racing car through a landscape, beginning with *Abstract Speed (Velocità + paesaggio)* (1913) and ending with *Abstract Speed—The Car Has Passed* (1913). The painting is said to have captured the ideals of Italian Futurism. It was featured on the 1980 British television series *100 Great Paintings*, which presented five paintings from each of 20 thematic groups.

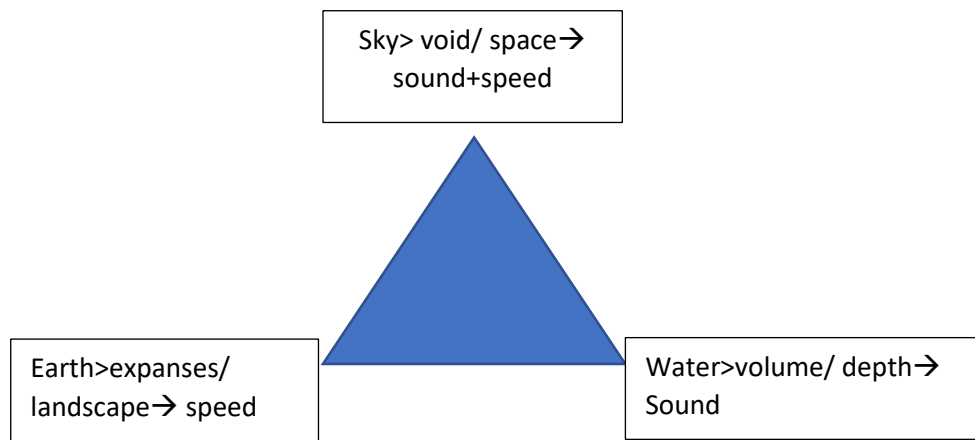
REVERSING GAZE:

Balla's Painting *Abstract Speed + Sound* is a Futuristic painting. However, when evaluated from a different perspective of Futurism this painting could be interpreted as a requiem of loss of Mother Nature in the wake of technology and industrialization. In Futurism, although one sides with industrial triumphalism and seems content to revel in the carnival of mechanization, it also conjoins the fact that this exuberance of celebration marks dissociation of human life from nature, and at its extreme alienation too. The manmade 'speed' and 'sound' are in contrast with natural processes in the world which are 'slow' and 'silent'. In the act of celebrating the unreal, mechanistic, artificial and inorganic as against slow and silent course in nature, one is but re-invoking the ancient voice of Protagoras, 'Man is the measure of all things' and re-admits the Medieval call of humanism, this time only prefixed by 'techno-'. Was Futurism really looking ahead for making 'It' new or the action headed 'Back to Future'? Interpreting this Futurist painting could lead one to its self-willed aporia.

PROMINENCE OF COLORS:

The colors 'blue', 'white', 'red' and 'green' are seen prominently in successive order. The background contains 'blue', 'white' and 'green' and the 'red' appears to be foregrounded due to its contrast to the rest.

At elemental level, the blue color in the painting may well stand for the sky; the green for the landscape and the white color for the space of expanses. The blue color in its varied hues is a prominent color in the painting and this color is 'conventionally' associated with the sky or the sea. Both these representational associations in a synecdochic way suggest nature; precisely infinity of nature. Besides, the medium of space permeating through sky and earth is associated with both sound and speed. So, it can be like sky = space = speed and water = volume/depth = sound. It may be illustrated as below:



Elemental representations in color lay on canvass distinctively separate from each other as the colors do not merge into one another but make way for each to splash through them. This interpretation when carried further suggests a partitive analytical gaze into the natural elements that are conceived as distinct and intersecting, not composite whole and interacting. This disjointedness at the level of natural elements facilitates with a mechanistic utility of the constituents where each element is susceptible of carrying out its function as medium for mankind to take control over and employ it for the use of speed and sound. However, this sound and speed are natural in the course and time and are different from the sound and speed created by man which is suggested by the red streak superimposed over the rest of the colors.

What makes the painting futuristic is that understanding its constituents seem obfuscating. Just as imagery in poetry allows for interpretation a concrete reference, material object in painting allows for envisioning a subject. The meaningful reception either of poem or painting for its beholder happens to take place when the beholder is able to relate his/her intelligent response to the objective correlatives presented in the work. In the absence of the concrete referents, the process of meaning making is obfuscated and the beholder is forced to fulfil this semantic necessity with the colors only, which is what adorns this painting with the quality abstractness. As a consequence the stylistic analysis of use of color—number of colors, choice of colors, prominence of colors, quality of colors, backgrounding/ foregrounding of colors—becomes important in the process of

signification, if at all it were to mean something. And the painter does supply a framework for meaning with the title of the painting.

Whether this painting is pro-nature or pro-mechanized world is subject to the question as to where do its beholder's better feelings lie. But what assuredly comes forth is the fact that no form of art can dispense with content/subject/referent as is not conceived of or perceived by human thought. New imagination howsoever may change or make the complex of thought-experience invisible from its presentation, human reasoning, for the act of meaning making, will never be able to be free from its ancient structures of memory.

CONCLUSION:

Future of Futurism attains to some meaning only when it qualifies itself with the past form of memory or experience. In other words, Futurism can be seen, not as something radically 'new' in time, but as a mere logical sequence in the continuum of human history of ideas. For every 'new' attains its novelty against the backdrop of something old; previous where the latter does not get obliterated but optimized even more.

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