

SYNTHESIS OF COMMUNICATIONS: A SPIRITUAL VOICE

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ABSTRACT

This study presents Benedetta Cappa Marinetti's *Sintesi delle comunicazioni* (*Synthesis of Communications*) murals, a public commission for the Palermo Post Office, as a vital contribution to the Italian Futurist Movement (1909–1944). Benedetta (1897–1977), who went by her first name only as a way of rejecting patriarchal ideals, defied modern demands placed upon Italian women and artists in the first half of the twentieth century. This study reaches beyond the constructs of past scholarship, which stressed her gender and her place among other women in the movement. Instead, this study argues that her participation in the Fascist Regime, her appreciation of modern technologies, and her understanding of the complexities of the spirituality deserve more intensive scholarly study. The following chapters demonstrate the ways in which Benedetta's depiction of utopian worlds shows her yearning for a harmonious future, seen through the elements of industrialization and nature.

Benedetta's work must be assessed through a political lens, because Fascism had such a strong hold on her ideals. Through the examination of the socio-political

influences on Futurist art, the ways in which her participation in Fascist ideologies prepared her for this commission become evident. However, with the added spiritual values of Second-wave Futurism, her work conveys a vision of fantasy, one that never comes to real-world fruition. I address how the constructs of twentieth-century science and technology provided her with a means to create multisensorial depictions of ethereal spaces. Further, these depictions of technology were often akin to ones of spirituality, especially through the Italian Futurist phenomenon of *aeropittura* (aeropainting). The paradoxes that arise from Futurist work and ideology also manifest themselves in Benedetta's murals, which I will show by comparing her work to that of other second-wave Futurist artists.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Synthesis of Communications: A Spiritual Voice Amidst Belligerent Noise” presented by Ashley N. Lindeman, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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This thesis took shape after I stumbled upon the life and work of Benedetta in my first methodology course at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I immediately knew that I had found an inspirational woman—a role model of sorts—and I wanted to continue studying her and the tenacity she had to strive for a better world. She lived in a tumultuous era, losing loved ones in both World Wars, but she continued pressing on. I have found myself able to relate to some of her struggles, and through her work I found an entry point in the Italian Futurist Movement.

I am incredibly grateful to my advisor Dr. Frances Connelly, my thesis committee chair, for supporting me throughout my research. She provided her patience and motivation, and most importantly, she encouraged me to take a route not yet taken by other scholars in my line of research. Her courses on Primitivism and the Modern Grotesque have inspired me to think in creative ways and to explore new ways of seeing art. I cannot imagine having a better advisor and mentor for the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank the other members of my thesis committee: Dr. Cristina Albu, for always pushing me to go above and beyond my comfort zone, and Dr. Rochelle Ziskin, for her insightful comments, suggestions, and encouragement. These three committee members also provided me with the utmost support while I sent applications to doctoral art history programs around the country.

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learned patience while attempting to understand the language of mid-twentieth-century Italians, and I will take it with me in my future projects. I also thank the UMKC Women's Council for awarding me the Graduate Assistance Fund to travel to Los Angeles to explore the documents of Benedetta and her family. I wish to thank my fellows on the board of the Graduate Art History Association: Tara Karaim, Meghan Dohogne, and CJ Charbonneau. We bonded during the building of the *Body-Mind Entente* exhibition, and we supported each other through the entire thesis process. I'm thrilled that we have built strong friendships that will last a lifetime. I hope our FLAH (Future Leaders in Art History) group text message will continue to flourish even after we have gone our separate ways.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Futurist painter is... alone, with his need for creation, with his senses multiplied in number and potency. He is part of humanity, with its complex of living forces that throng and contend, of dense and attenuated spaces, of expansion and retraction. He is part of nature, experiencing her touching and violent, economical and wasteful rhythms. He is part of the simultaneities that bind the individual to nature, in their contradictions, their continuities, their abysses. —Benedetta (1924)¹

Artist Benedetta Cappa Marinetti (1897–1977), member of the Italian Futurist movement, imagined a utopian world where fluid lines of communication are revealed among humans, machines, and nature. In her *Sintesi delle comunicazioni* (*Synthesis of Communications*) murals (1933–1934) (Figure 1), the artist juxtaposed rigid, mechanical constructions like radio towers, bridges, and ships with the meandering components of nature such as waves, mountains, and planets. She used visual means to suggest the otherwise invisible transmission of information. This set of murals speaks not to the clash between industrialism and nature, but to the marriage of the two. Each painting communicates with the next through the pulsation of varying shades and hues of blues and pinks, and together, the visual representations echo the multisensorial experience realized from the seat of an airplane. The paintings simulate an aerodynamic thrill in the viewer, and the viewer is encouraged to experience a spiritual connection to the world upon encountering it from above. I will argue that through the *Synthesis of Communications* murals, Benedetta fought vigorously to reestablish rapport between three pairs of things: 1.) nature and technology, 2.) past and present, and 3.) Futurism and

¹ Benedetta, “Sensibilità futuriste,” in Lawrence Rainey, *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 280.

Fascism. Benedetta addressed broken relationships by intermixing what she saw as the masculine and feminine elements of industrialization and nature. Benedetta might have used this particular polarity between masculine/feminine components in order to assuage the tension between the other seemingly conflicting dualities.

Synthesis of Communications is a set of five murals devoted to the modern advances of technology in communication that reside in the *Sala del Consiglio* (conference hall) of Palermo's Post Office in Sicily (Figure 2). The paintings are large, detachable panels. The tempera and encaustic surfaces are flat and matte, similar in appearance to the materials and processes used in Pompeian frescoes.² The murals are named after telegraphic and telephonic, radio, terrestrial, maritime, and aerial communications. Benedetta employed a gamut of shapes and lines in these works, both geometric and organic. Human life is absent from all five murals, but through the incorporation of man-made constructions, towns, roads, and vehicles, the paintings hint at a necessary relationship between these machines, the people who created them, and the influence of nature. In 2014, the murals were included in the Guggenheim exhibition, *Italian Futurism 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe* (Figure 3), which not only allowed the murals more exposure than they have ever received, but it also confirmed Benedetta's position as a prominent artist in the Italian Futurist movement.

Benedetta, who went only by her first name as a rejection of patriarchal ideals, was an active participant in the Italian Futurist movement. Benedetta emphasized the

² Romy Golan, "Slow Time: The Futurist Mural," in *Italian Futurism 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Green (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Catalogue, 2014), 318–19.

importance of collaboration between men and women, and industry and nature, in order to realize a stronger future. In this thesis I will consider the ways in which the relationship between Fascism and Futurism affected the conflicts that arise in Benedetta's compositions. As Siobhan Conaty argues in *Italian Futurism: Gender, Culture, and Power*, Benedetta's *Synthesis of Communications* murals reveal her yearning for the alliance of nature (feminine), with industrialization (masculine).³ However, Benedetta also boldly interpreted a world where these dichotomies not only coexisted but relied heavily on one another. She ultimately suggested that the tension between these terms was productive, which is where the crux of my argument lies. She believed in an interdependence between vehicle and earth, airplane and sky, and ship and sea. She illustrated her desire for the past and present to neutralize so that a future modernity could rise up, just as the Futurists had envisioned.

The Italian Futurist movement began in 1909 and ended in 1944. Retrospectively, the movement has been divided into a first and second wave, with the second wave starting after World War I. From the beginning of the movement to its end, the goal of Futurism was to reconstruct not only Italy, but the entire world, in ways that would reach into every aspect of life—not just that of the arts. Italian Futurism's inception started with "*Il Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo*" ("The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism"), written by the movement's founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944), more commonly known as F.T. Marinetti. The movement ended with his death during the

³ Siobhan Conaty first makes this claim in her dissertation, *Italian Futurism: Gender Culture, and Power*, but she expands on it in this article to only fully discuss the *Synthesis of Land Communications* mural. Siobhan Conaty, "Benedetta Cappa Marinetti and the Second Phase of Futurism," *Woman's Art Journal* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 24.

Second World War. This first manifesto expressed a love of danger, power, speed, and the machine, and it expressed disdain for museums, libraries, and academies of every sort. On the ninth point of his manifesto Marinetti cried: “We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women.”⁴ The Futurists sought to reject everything of the past, as a means of starting anew, which involved traditional approaches to art as well.

In *Futurism: An Anthology*, Lawrence Rainey describes the rejection of Italy’s artistic heritage through the many manifestos written in the first decade of the movement. The 1912 “*Il Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista*” (the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature”) proclaims: “Every day we must spit on the altar of Art. We must destroy art with a capital A.”⁵ Recalling the formulation of his first thoughts on Futurism in 1908, Marinetti admitted: “I suddenly felt that all the poems, articles, and debates were no longer sufficient. A change of method was absolutely imperative: to get down into the streets, to attack the theaters, and to bring the fist into the midst of the artistic struggle.”⁶ Marinetti blurred the boundaries between art and life, shaping the world rather than

⁴ All translations are those of the author, unless otherwise stated. F.T. Marinetti, “Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo,” *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909, accessed July 13, 2015, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28144/28144-h/28144-h.htm>.

⁵ F.T. Marinetti, “Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista,” May 11, 1912, trans. Lawrence Rainey in *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 124.

⁶ F. T. Marinetti, “First Futurist Battles,” in *Guerra, sola igiene del mondo*, in Luciano de Maria, ed., *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, 2nd ed., trans. Lawrence Rainey, “F.T. Marinetti and the Development of Futurism,” 5.

crafting inspiring texts. These brazen ideals gradually moderated after World War I. It was during the interwar period—mainly during the 1920s and 1930s—that Futurist ideals, styles, and goals underwent significant changes including subject matter and media utilized in Futurist art. This period is known as the second wave, or phase, of Futurism. Sentimentalism, an evocation of feelings such as tenderness or nostalgia within writing, speech, or visual art, was a surprising addition to Futurist art during the second wave. Benedetta's work was most prominent during the second wave, when a growing taste for spirituality and sentimentalism arose in the work of Benedetta and of several other Futurists, especially Giacomo Balla, Fillia (Luigi Colombo), and Enrico Prampolini.

The second wave of Futurism attracted a number of public commissions from the Fascist political party. The Post Office building in Palermo, where Benedetta's murals are displayed, was commissioned by Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) and built by state architect and engineer Angiolo Mazzoni (1894–1979). It was constructed between 1928 and 1934 (Figure 4). The building complies with rationalist architecture during the pinnacle of Fascism, embracing the same structural elements found in a Roman temple. It features a strong colonnade, assembled by ten Doric columns, each thirty meters in height, cast in reinforced concrete, but covered in grigio Billiemi marble, and it forms a grandiose entrance (Figure 5)⁷. In 1933, part of Mussolini's request was for Benedetta to paint a series of murals for the Director's Conference Hall that would depict the progress

⁷ Pasquale Piraino, "The Post Office building in Palermo," *Thule Italy*, (April 2014), accessed August 7, 2015, <http://thule-italia.com/wordpress/il-palazzo-delle-poste-di-palermo/?lang=en>.

in technology and communication. The commissions of both Mazzoni and Benedetta are prime examples of Italy's new predilection for public works. Benedetta accepted the challenge to create these works, not only as a means of propaganda for Fascism and the reconstruction of Italy, but as a means to make a statement embodying her own convictions. As depicted in the murals, Benedetta held a bias toward nature, which she equated with femininity, which was distinctly opposite the dialogue of early Futurism.⁸ The conference room, grandiose, spacious, and lined with red marble, is decorated with fixed polychrome furniture that supports appearance over comfort.⁹ The architecture and the murals are rich with the aesthetic ideals held by Mussolini and the Fascist political party in the 1930s. The commissioned murals are also key indicators of the importance of technological advances, such as the airplane.

An essential element to many second wave Futurist paintings is the concept of *aeropittura* (aerial painting), which I will discuss in relationship to spirituality. This fascination with the machine quickly developed into a focus on the airplane as the optimal vehicle. Artists found new visual perspectives and inspiration from their experiences at higher altitudes. Benedetta started flying in the mid-1920s. This experience allowed her to envision the world from a more distant vantage point, and the new approach resulted in her signing the "*Manifesto dell'aeropittura*" ("Manifesto of Aeropainting"). This manifesto was launched in 1929 and signed by eight men: F.T. Marinetti, Giacomo Balla, Enrico Prampolini, Fortunato Depero, Fillia, Mino Somenzi,

⁸ Siobhan Conaty, "Benedetta Cappa Marinetti and the Second Phase of Futurism," *Woman's Art Journal* 30, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009), 25.

⁹ Ibid.

Gerardo Dottori, and Tato (Guglielmo Sansoni) and one woman: Benedetta.¹⁰ She claimed that many of her paintings are “plastic results of [her] flights over Rome, Milan, the Mediterranean, the Apennines, Tunis, and Palermo.”¹¹

It is important to recognize that the *Synthesis of Communications* murals are not objective representations of territories that could have been seen from the altitude reached by a small plane. In fact, some of them are cosmic landscape fantasies and complemented by Benedetta’s interpretation of sensations and emotions that were generated through her aerial experiences.¹² In the “*Manifesto dell’aeropittura*,” Benedetta and the other writers asserted:

The changing perspectives of flight constitute an absolutely new reality which has nothing in common with reality as traditionally established by a terrestrial perspective; the elements of this new reality have no fixed point and are constructed by perpetual mobility; the painter should not observe and paint except by participating in their same speed...all the parts of the landscape appear to the painter in flight as: a) crushed, b) artificial, c) provisional, d) as if they had just fallen from the sky.¹³

Through her reflection in this manifesto and also in the murals, she conveys the impression of a mobile, fluid experience by creating different vantage points and unifying different moments in time in her pictorial representations.

¹⁰ Siobhan Conaty, *Italian Futurism: Gender, Culture, and Power* (PhD diss., Case Western Reserve University, 2002), 130.

¹¹ Benedetta in Zoccoli, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Queen of Futurism*, 55–56.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Giacomo Balla, Benedetta, Fortunato Depero, Gerardo Dottori, Fillia, F.T. Marinetti, Enrico Prampolini, Mino Somenzi, and Tato, “*Manifesto dell’aeropittura*,” *Vecchio e Nuovo*, 1929, accessed September 5, 2015, http://www.culturaservizi.it/vrd/files/VN1931_manifesto_aeropittura.pdf.

The murals are exactly what her title claims: a synthesis. This is significant partly because—as Christine Poggi points out in *Inventing Futurism*—these otherworldly scenes suggest a hunger for a utopia that Fascist Futurism anticipates, but one that never becomes reality.¹⁴ This is precisely the type of imagery Benedetta created for the post office commission. In 1911, Italian Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni declared in a lecture: “What needs to be painted is not the visible, but what has heretofore been held to be invisible, that is, what the clairvoyant painter sees.”¹⁵ It appears that Benedetta understood this to be a valuable strategy in depicting the important themes of the Futurist ideology, while introducing an ethereal aspect to the Futurist vision of speed and power. This is evident at the level of her cosmic, sublime representations of the modern world in the *Synthesis of Communications* murals as a whole. By intertwining worldly structures with cosmic aspirations, she delineated the importance of strong relationships between industry and nature.

The 2014 Guggenheim exhibition catalogue, *Italian Futurism 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, was my personal introduction to the art, ideas, and current scholars on the Italian Futurist movement. However, since the 1990s, research on Benedetta has been wedged into a gender–studies asylum. Her practice was consistently boxed in with work on the few other women artists involved in the Futurist movement, as if it could have relevance only because it offered a feminine perspective upon the ideas

¹⁴ Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 248.

¹⁵ Umberto Boccioni, trans. Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Vibratory Modernism: Boccioni, Kupka, and the Ether of Space,” *From Energy to Information* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 128.

upheld by this avant-garde group. Furthermore, in past studies on Benedetta, discussion on the marital relationship between F.T. Marinetti and Benedetta has been evaluated to an extent that I do not deem necessary.

I would not claim that Benedetta's gender is what makes her most unique. I intend to view Benedetta first as a painter, a poet, a Futurist, a Fascist, and a spiritual individual, without neglecting her position as a woman in the midst of a men-led art movement. In taking this new avenue, I have discovered that descriptions of Benedetta's life and relationships advised my capacity to write more about her aspirations, faults, and ideals, rather than focusing on the fact that she was a woman participating in an overtly masculine movement. I hope that this study provides a framework for which to view Benedetta's *Synthesis of Communications* murals amongst the other Italian Futurist artists and also alongside the social, political, and personal circumstances of Benedetta's experience in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century.

In Chapter 2, I will explain how the *Synthesis of Communications* murals met and surpassed the propaganda goals of the Fascist regime. By focusing on the conflicts of the interwar period, I will examine Benedetta's position and the reasons for which the murals were significant to the Italian Futurist movement. In Chapter 3, I will introduce technological influences on Benedetta's work and that of other twentieth-century artists. I introduce the ether, the fourth dimension, and vibrations as critical components to the discourse of second-wave Futurists works. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the inclusion of spirituality to Benedetta's works and to Italian Futurism. Through new experiences in flight, I delineate the impression those instances had on Futurist art.

CHAPTER 2

A PROPAGANDISTIC ENDEAVOR TURNED POIGNANT

For the Futurist, the pictorial problem, like every other problem, appears under a new and special viewpoint: what is this Futurist sensibility, what does it involve, what does it grasp, what does it discover, what does it render, what does it reveal, what does it create? —Benedetta (1924)¹

***Sintesi delle comunicazioni* as Cultural Propaganda**

Almost all Italian artists who were prominent during the first wave of Futurism rejected Italy's glorious past. Their attitude stemmed in part from their aversion to the political situation in Italy at the turn of the century.² In the interwar period, Futurist artists forged close ties with Fascism, hoping that the new political ideologies of this party would help Italy claim a new future glory. In *Modernism and Fascism*, Roger Griffin signals the paradoxes of Fascist Modernism by questioning what led Marinetti to see Mussolini's brand of nationalism as something that the Futurist movement should partake in.³ This is an inquiry that might be helpful in understanding why Fascism was so alluring to the Futurists. It also might answer why Benedetta's commission was such an important part of her career as a visual artist. After World War I ended, it seemed the Futurist call for destroying the past was no longer a prevalent mindset; Mussolini's political agenda gave hope to Italian people, and was especially appealing to artists who were part of

¹ Benedetta, "Sensibilità futuriste," in Lawrence Rainey, *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 279.

² Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 37.

³ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 19.

Futurism, which in the 1920s and 1930s became increasingly unpopular. In Benedetta's murals, there is no overt sense of conquering the past, but there is a desire to rectify the ties between the past and the present. This is what makes Benedetta's compositions stand apart from other Fascist art. In *Synthesis of Radio Communications* (Figure 6), the new technology that represents the future immerses itself within the ancient spirit of the universe. The radio tower acts as a ladder that allows mankind to climb to new limits in nature because of the supporting technology. The rungs of the radio tower, possibly a metaphor for the steps the Fascist movement was taking, act as stepping-stones, encouraging viewers to embrace higher goals.

In Fascist propaganda, the past is not despised, but embraced. The strength found in ancient Rome gave rise to a new and better future. The inclination for the regime to use ancient Rome as a backbone started with *Risorgimento* (1861–1870), which may be defined as a period of Italian unification and nationalism, was a movement that brought together the different states of Italy into one single nation or kingdom. *Risorgimento* had an influence on Fascist politics, and stemming from those ideas, Mussolini strove to recover the glorious past of Italy and a call to reclaim its cultural heritage.⁴ Mussolini himself claimed that the fall of the Roman Empire was only temporary. He announced: “Rome is our point of departure and our point of reference; it is our symbol, and if you like, our myth. We dream of a Roman Italy, that is [an Italy] wise and strong, disciplined

⁴ Claudia Lazzaro, Introduction to *Donatello Among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 2.

and imperial. Much of the immortal spirit of Rome is reborn in Fascism.”⁵ This same attitude was pushed onto art practices of the Futurists, and the movement became even more convoluted with paradoxes. Benedetta was one artist who successfully continued to render the significance of the machine through the various modes of communication, while also catering to some of the ideals of Fascism, such as the desire to build a strong nation through hard work, technology, and military power.

During the second phase of Futurism, the machine was still a particularly important symbol. Although her murals feature speed and virility, Benedetta’s works introduce a new vision—one that embraced the splendor of ancient Italy through the ideals of the Fascist *primordio* (return to origins). The panels of her murals were set in black, yellow, and tan polychromatic marble, which according to Romy Golan, is a direct reference to past grandeur, especially that of Pompeii and ancient Rome.⁶ She chose to use tempera and encaustic, which was older than fresco, instead of oil painting, because mediums used in ancient Roman society were preferred over the more conventional mediums like oil paint.⁷ This shows yet another paradox of her work. As the Futurists were called to speed into the future to escape the past, there was also a tug from Fascism to embrace the past grandeur of ancient Rome.

⁵ Mussolini in Gerard Silk, “Il Primo Pilota: Mussolini, Fascist Aeronautical Symbolism, and Imperial Rome,” *Donatello Among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 2.

⁶ Golan, *Muralnomad*, 51.

⁷ Golan suggests that from the writings of Alberto Savinio in 1934, there was a call to return to tempera, which as imperative to eliminate oil painting completely. *Ibid*, 50.

Mussolini was a supporter of the Futurist Movement and of Marinetti from 1909 onward, and in 1919 he formed the Fascist movement with assistance from Marinetti and other first-wave Futurists.⁸ Mussolini was aware that the arts must play a key role in his attempt to lead Italy toward international prominence, so he advocated for cultural change and artistic revolution. At an exhibition in Milan in 1923, Mussolini proclaimed: “I declare that it is far from my idea to encourage anything like an art of the State. Art belongs to the domain of the individual. The state has only one duty: not to undermine art, to provide humane conditions for artists, and to encourage them from the artistic and national point of view.”⁹ However, his views seem to have changed later. This is certainly the type of independence Benedetta would later urge for women to adopt in their art practices, so these ideals fit well within the goals of the Futurist movement.

Mussolini initially promised to grant independence and creative freedom to the artists so that the work of Italian genius would arise and reclaim Italy’s position among the big international powers.¹⁰ However, in the 1930s, Mussolini began dictating which art practices would be successful depending on how they supported the Regime. Public works like Benedetta’s murals were encouraged, and many artists espoused Mussolini’s support.¹¹ Therefore, Benedetta was successful in the project mainly because the series

⁸ This benefitted both movements until the 1930s when ideals changed and Fascism was not as widely accepted. Barbara McCloskey, “Artists in Italy: Shaping a Fascist Culture of Consensus,” *Artists of World War II* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2005), 91.

⁹ Mussolini in Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

¹⁰ McCloskey, “Artists in Italy: Shaping a Fascist Culture of Consensus,” 89.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 98.

includes propagandistic elements. It is evident that through her illustrations of the heavy wing of an airplane in *Synthesis of Aerial Communications* (Figure 7) or the resilient lines of communication waves overwhelming the fields of time and space in *Synthesis of Telegraphic and Telephonic Communications* (Figure 8), Benedetta conveyed the importance of these elements to the modernity of the nation and its success as a modern one. Although the elements of new technology could be seen as symbols of the advancement of technology worldwide, I view them as catering specifically to Fascism's desire to see more productivity. According to Alfred Rocco (1875–1935), a theoretician on Fascism, found that industrialists, labor unions, and civil servants were the new “elites” of modern society.¹² Benedetta shows their importance by recognizing those technological accomplishments in the murals.

Some Futurist works claimed to be representative ideals of the regime, but it is not always obvious from their visual representations, and their devotion to Fascism can sometimes only be gleaned from the work's title.¹³ The fractured identity of Italy in the 1930s resulted in artists approaching new visual and literary solutions, while also reaching back to ancient Roman roots to find strength. Because Benedetta's murals were commissioned for propagandistic reasons, she was able to include the strengths and

¹² James B. Whisker, “Italian Fascism: An Interpretation,” *The Journal of Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1983), Accessed April 27, 2016, http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v04/v04p--5_whisker.html.

¹³ Not many Fascist works were made by women, and there are examples of their work holding different tones (such as lightheartedness, objectivity, or irony) than works by men artists. Franca Zoccoli, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Queen of Futurism* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2003), 14.

modernity associated with Fascist Italy, depicting a powerful nation where all components work together to create a strong whole.

In *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Donna Generatrice*, Lisa Panzera argues that Benedetta used the regime to advance her career and Futurism's potential, but also that the regime used her artwork as propaganda.¹⁴ During and after the Second World War, many Futurist artists such as Fortunato Depero and Benedetta apologized for their affiliations with Fascist politics. Benedetta and Marinetti proclaimed publicly that they did not share several of the political positions of the party, being considerably opposed to the racial discrimination encouraged by the regime.¹⁵ Furthermore, there was a rift between Marinetti and Mussolini, which lasted through the 1920s and 1930s, because Futurism had never been declared the official art of the state.¹⁶ Marinetti testified about him: “[Mussolini] comes from the people, but he doesn't love them anymore. He is tending toward an aristocracy of thought and heroic will. He is not a great *mind*...He doesn't see things clearly. He's led along by his character, his propensity for heroic struggle, a Napoleonic ideal, and I think that he also aspires to wealth.”¹⁷ Despite the problems between the two leaders, Benedetta was one of the few Futurist artists who was recognized as an important contributor to Fascism. It is likely that she was successful due

¹⁴ Lisa Panzera, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Donna Generatrice* (Diss., New York: CUNY, 2003), 142.

¹⁵ Franca Zoccoli, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Queen of Futurism*, (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2003), 31.

¹⁶ Panzera, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Donna Generatrice*, 7.

¹⁷ This description was found in one of Marinetti's journals. F.T. Marinetti, *Taccuini: 1915–1921* in Lawrence Rainey, *Futurism: An Anthology*, 25.

to her adoption of communication themes while also agreeing to use ancient Roman mediums and techniques.¹⁸ Through her interpretation of Italy's modern technological feats, paired with the literal *primordio* utilization of ancient mediums, the murals seem to be works that would have satisfied Mussolini.

Forging Relationships

Benedetta's *Synthesis of Land Communications* (Figure 9) is a painting that depicts the relationship between industrialization and nature as two opposing forces working in agreement to further the existence of mankind. Benedetta delineated her views on masculinity and femininity by creating an image in which elements of nature are just as robust as steel and asphalt. On the right, she illustrated a growing mass of land elements such as grass, rock, and water and intertwines them with components of industrialization such as roads, bridges, and tunnels. A set of train tracks in the bottom right corner catches our attention in the reflective surface of what could be skyscrapers. The cavernous space near the center of the composition could reference a primeval space of retreat, or it could allude to a time tunnel or mine corridor. From the tunnel, the eye is led upward to the zigzag of rocks and mountains. An unyielding leg of a bridge slices the composition in half, and the left side of the canvas is bare, sleek, and clean. At first glance, it may appear as though there is a clear separation of nature and industry presented here between the left and right sides of the canvas; on further inspection however, it is apparent that Benedetta juxtaposed manmade and natural elements in such a way that she establishes balance between them while nonetheless maintaining an element of tension. An impenetrable ray of sunlight permeates the canvas from beyond

¹⁸ Panzera, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Donna Generatrice*, 8.

the mountaintops and suffuses the infinite sky on the left half. Its powerful projection across the composition suggests the dawning of a new day in Futurist Italy.

Through both the murals and her writing, Benedetta unequivocally illustrated that technology depends upon the elements of nature. This understanding of the mutual support between the elements paralleled her belief that the Futurist and Fascist movements could not be shaped by men alone, but needed the contribution of women. This being said, there is nothing in her imagery that conspicuously affirms a feminist stance, although she did advocate for the complete independence of women.¹⁹ She was certainly a woman of contradiction, as seen through her support of Fascist ideas and her endorsement of the idea that men and women are intrinsically different and unequal, as expressed in *Spiritualità della donna italiana*. Benedetta asserted that Italian women would never be equal to men, because they are too essentially “mother,” an overtly Fascist claim. However, by “mother,” she also meant creator: of man, of ideas, and of emotions.²⁰ Benedetta believed it was through combining the strengths of men and women that society would progress to modernity.

Although she married the seemingly misogynistic leader of the Futurist movement in 1923, Benedetta had a significant impact on his views as the movement evolved, and he became more compassionate. In 1909, Marinetti, more than 20 years her senior, vehemently expressed a scorn for “the woman-poison, woman the tragic trinket, the

¹⁹ Zoccoli, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Queen of Futurism*, 71.

²⁰ Benedetta continued this claim by stating that woman is neither inferior, superior, or equal. Conaty, *Italian Futurism: Gender, Culture, and Power* (Diss., Case Western Reserve University, 2002), 141.

fragile woman, the obsessing and fatal, whose voice, heavy with destiny, and whose dreaming tresses reach out and mingle with the foliage of forests drenched in moonlight...”²¹ His manifesto references a clear alignment of woman with wild nature. However, after meeting Benedetta, Marinetti toned down his extreme claims and began to consider that not all women deserved to be scorned. Gradually, Marinetti acquired more accepting views about women and embraced facets he had previously rejected: woman as both artist and sexual partner.²²

The majority of Benedetta’s visual work was completed in a fifteen-year period, from about 1925–1940. Marinetti and Benedetta had three daughters, all named after principal features of the Futurist movement: Vittoria (victory) 1927, Ala (wing) 1928, and Luce (light) 1932. These are also names that Benedetta used in her novels and poems.²³ This inclination to incorporate Futurism within their daily lives encouraged Marinetti to shift his prior mentalities of outrage into a cognizance that the movement was a spiritual calling. Conaty affirms that this is mainly due to the influence of Marinetti’s wife and daughters on his life, and more importantly, on the movement itself.²⁴ Due to Benedetta’s rising popularity alongside the charismatic leader, some Futurist members were concerned that she had too much power and that she was diluting

²¹ Marinetti in Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, 182.

²² Lisa Panzera, *La Futurista: Benedetta Cappa Marinetti*, (Moore College of Art and Design Exhibition Catalogue, 1998), 7.

²³ Zoccoli, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Queen of Futurism*, 27.

²⁴ Conaty, *Italian Futurism: Gender, Culture, and Power*, 124.

the revolutionary drive that had once been at the forefront of the movement.²⁵ Although she promoted sentimentalism through her visual and written work, she held some extreme First-wave Futurist ideals. Prior to the start of World War II, for example, Benedetta advocated a “reverse call up,” a proposal that the elderly be recruited into the war instead of the younger generations, to preserve the youth for art and procreation, and to allow them to follow through with the Futurists’ ambitions. Unfortunately, Marinetti was 64 years old when he volunteered to fight in the war, and he returned from the front in 1942 with a fatal heart disease.²⁶ Benedetta’s passion for the Futurist movement started in the literary and visual realm, and continued via her work to preserve the movement through speeches and lectures.

An Insurgence of Spiritual Futurist Art

Another of Benedetta’s paintings, *Monte Tabor (Mount Tabor)* (Figure 11), created in 1936, is often mentioned as representative of the climax of Benedetta’s utopian works.²⁷ Here, she sought to repress physical reality completely in her search for a spiritual, lyrical walk into the celestial heavens. In Benedetta’s *Synthesis of Aerial Communications*, in the Palermo scenes (Figure 7), we see a similar powerful cosmic representation which incorporates a large set of mountains that stand erect at the top of the canvas, setting the stage for a power struggle between nature and culture, represented

²⁵ Benedetta was called *first lady* by many of her followers and artists and writers portrayed her in paintings and newspaper articles in the 1930s. Zoccoli, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Queen of Futurism*, 29.

²⁶ Zoccoli, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Queen of Futurism*, 33–34.

²⁷ Both Siobhan Conaty and Franca Zoccoli refer to this painting as the pinnacle of her painting career.

visually by the division of the canvas by a large airplane wing. Benedetta depicted a view of the earth from afar, allowing her viewers to notice the ways in which nature continues to overpower the miniscule buildings, roads, and constructions that sporadically appear on the earth. A river seems to flow through a valley, and the sky in the upper right seems to morph into a water as it courses through the middle of the composition. As the airplane wing cuts through the composition, it wrenches us back into the reality that this is only a vision. As the spheres give way to land formations or architectural components, each form stands independent but also appears integral to the composition as a whole.

Although there is a push and pull between nature and the establishments that attempt to dominate the earth, it reads as harmony, a balance of power. In *Mount Tabor*, we see Benedetta's endeavor to attain an ineffable landscape where mountain peak morphs into a planet, which morphs into a celestial arch. Competition seems not to exist between nature and technology in *Mount Tabor* because those elements have united into a divine ambiance. Indeed, there are no more visual cues to suggest that technology was ever part of this landscape. About her work, Benedetta stated, "my art, although it starts from reality, is never verist and gets far from it in an effort of synthesis, abstraction, and fantasy."²⁸ The new approach found in second-wave Futurist art reaches toward heavenly landscapes, possibly linking an otherworldly paradise with the aspiration of the regime. She also asserted that femininity was linked with the spiritual or sacred realm, which might be the reason for her emphasis upon the transcendent vistas.

²⁸ Benedetta in Panzera, *La Futurista: Benedetta Cappa Marinetti*, 13.

Benedetta's airy landscapes might also offer an escape from the upheaval Italy was moving through, although they were more so a means of suggesting consonance between industrial advancement, progress, and spiritual upheaval. The Fascist state desired to impose its standards over men and women, and separate them into distinct spaces. Under Fascist rule, men were to remain the working force and women were to return to the home front, their destinies confined to bearing children.²⁹ Although Benedetta believed that men and women were inherently different, her vision was one where men and women worked together to establish modernism. In the *Synthesis of Aerial Communications* (Figure 7) composition, for example, the peaceful residence of buildings on the earth and the airplane gliding through the crystalline air do not disagree with one another. However, this concord was not destined to happen under Fascism. Toward the end of her painting career, her landscapes became more transcendent and less physical. Perhaps it represents her growing understanding that the quintessential Futurist world she and Marinetti had first envisioned was out of their reach.

Benedetta's teacher, Giacomo Balla (1871–1958), considerably influenced her practice. She studied under him in Rome in 1918 at his *Casa Balla* (Figure 12), where she met Marinetti that same year.³⁰ Balla had a great interest in light, color, and geometry; these are characteristics Benedetta appropriated for her own paintings.³¹ Poggi claims that

²⁹ Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922–1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 2.

³⁰ Zoccoli, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Queen of Futurism*, 21.

³¹ Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton University Press: 2009), 148.

Balla's practice in 1912 is expressive of a utopian pursuit of a perfect future. By focusing on the purity of the optical experience, detached from material objects or obvious political implications, he conveyed a perfect world.³² Although Benedetta took a direction stylistically different from Balla's, her art practice incorporated the same types of force lines seen in Balla's work. For instance, in comparing her *Velocità di motoscafo* (*Speeding Motorboat*), 1923–24 (Figure 13) and Balla's *Velocità astratta + rumore* (*Abstract Speed + Sound*), 1913–14 (Figure 14), the same triangular marks are employed by each artist to create a sense of speed that is almost too quick for the human eye to register. Benedetta chose not to create works that were overly abstract, but the same reverberating lines that suggest the quick transmission of energy and information found in Balla's work is recognized as a staple of Futurist paintings and found in many of Benedetta's earlier works.

Balla also taught artists Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916) and Gino Severini (1883–1966), and at points his works were rejected from Futurist exhibitions due to his neglect to depict the most important aspects of Futurist art: simultaneity, speed, and the fragmentation of forms.³³ He also took a different aesthetic approach to representing movement such as using wavy lines and wedges, which were not preferred by some of his

³² Ibid.

³³ Fabio Benzi, "Giacomo Balla: The Conquest of Speed," in *Italian 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Catalogue, 2014), 103.

contemporaries.³⁴ Benedetta's works incorporated many of his techniques. In addition to this, she introduced a spiritual dimension that was not characteristic of Balla's paintings. In 1910, the "*Manifesto tecnico dei pittori futuristi*" exclaimed: "We declare that we will rebel against the tyranny of the words "harmony" and "good taste," as they are too elastic expressions, with which it is easy to demolish the works of Rembrandt, Goya, and Rodin."³⁵ Balla's aesthetic choices were considerably narrowed after signing this manifesto. However, since Benedetta's art practice did not fully develop publicly until the 1920s, she was given more freedom. She was later commemorated for incorporating spiritual values into her landscapes.

Poggi makes reference to Balla's work as a beckoning to nature through its secret language seen in his paintings.³⁶ Benedetta must have been aware of this in her studies of his work, because she was able to expand on his ideas. For instance, in *Streamlines Futur*, 1916 (Figure 15), Balla highlighted the elegance and harmony of geometric forms that radiate from the composition. The deeply saturated curvilinear shapes anticipate Benedetta's *Synthesis of Aerial Communications*, where land flows into sky in a mass of organic pulsations. Both artists played with nature from the same lens, but Benedetta's strategy evoked a richer understanding of the socio-political complications of the 1930s,

³⁴ Flavio Fergonzi, "The Question of 'Unique Forms': Theory and Works," in *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Green (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Catalogue, 2014), 127.

³⁵ Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Gino Severini, and Giacomo Balla, "Manifesto tecnico dei pittori futuristi," *Poesia*, March 18, 1910, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.futurismo.altervista.org/manifesti/pittoriFut.htm>.

³⁶ His daughter, Elicia Balla, called her father "a lover of nature" which further illustrates Balla's intentions in these works. Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, 235.

whereas Balla's work attempted to encourage viewers to see spirituality within the force lines in the first-wave Futurist style.

Benedetta was not the only second-wave Futurist to embrace sentimentalism and spirituality through visual representation. Fillia (1904–1936), another signatory of the “Futurist Manifesto of Aeropainting,” voiced in 1931: “We understand art to have a spiritual function, to be a means of rendering images of a mysterious superhuman world. Man has a need to detach himself from the earth, to dream, to desire eternal happiness continually to forget everyday reality.”³⁷ This impulse to reach beyond the physical world exemplified the struggle for Italians in the interwar period. They were in disarray about the direction in which to move, resulting in a myriad of contradictions found in art, literature, and politics. In 1931, Fillia created *L'adorazione (Adoration)* (Figure 16), where he included overt symbols of Christianity in order to communicate the emotions and responses he had cosmic space. His fascination with psychology paired with cosmic explorations in his landscapes point to many of the same types of ideas that Benedetta expressed in her work. Emilio Gentile, a specialist in Italian Fascist ideology, stated that both artists in the 1930s became paragons of the “sacralization” of Fascism, which linked Fascist ideology to Christian themes.³⁸ Carlo Rosselli, an Italian political leader and anti-Fascist activist, proclaimed that the “generation of 1914 [desired to] sacrifice their body and soul for a cause—whatever it was—provided that it had the capacity to transcend the

³⁷ Fillia in Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, 265.

³⁸ Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, 265.

wretched nature of everyday life.”³⁹ Through her *aeropittura* paintings, Benedetta opened up a world to her viewers that helped resolve the ambiguity of the cultural and political battles (such as the invasion of Ethiopia) in Italy. As seen in *Synthesis of Telegraphic and Telephonic Communications* (Figure 8), Benedetta showed that by allowing nature to take its own course, there is room for technology, communications, and modernity to develop. They simply must work together.

Walter Benjamin theorized that spatial and temporal “inapproachability” was an important phenomenon in preserving social and religious hierarchies,⁴⁰ which is clearly an aspect of both Benedetta and Fillia’s work. In 1930, Fillia claimed: “This is why we approach art today with a changed spirit (in comparison to the first Futurists), no longer obsessed with the anxiety of inventiveness, but already rich in “our” tradition. We approach art with constructive goals, more liberated than before from the weight of the past.”⁴¹ One can best see this in Benedetta’s *Il Monte Tabor* (Figure 11), where her treatment of this sacred space speaks to those changed spirits after World War I. Mark Antliff argues that mythmakers during the Risorgimento drew contrasts between the corrupt present and their vision of a transformed future, possibly constructed through a recovery of spiritual values, with the inclusion of spiritualism, a dynamic that was also

³⁹ Carlo Rosselli in Emilio Gentile, “Fascism as Political Religion,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2/3 (June 1990), 233.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 222–223.

⁴¹ Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, 232.

explored in Benedetta's later work.⁴² Her spiritual optimism revealed a new dimension that was surely a response to her aims to amend the barriers between the past, present, and future.

Although the Futurist movement was paradoxical in nearly all aspects, the Futurists had a shared goal of building a better, faster, and more stable world for themselves and their descendants. The violent momentum of the first phase of Futurism was over within its first decade of existence, but what followed was a merging of those combative, assertive qualities and the more tender, ethereal ones that exposed themselves in the interwar period. Although Benedetta might not have fit well within the first wave of Futurism, she never abandoned her convictions concerning the masculine–feminine relationship that would create a modernism never before realized. After Marinetti's death in 1944, Benedetta spent the rest of her life—over thirty years—dedicated to keeping Futurism alive, making sure that the movement would find its place within the history of art.⁴³ The contingent relations of nature and industrialization, as well as masculinity and femininity, in which Benedetta invested into her paintings contain seemingly opposite principles, but they are relations that were necessary in her view for conceiving of a more mellifluous world for the modern future.

⁴² Mark Antliff, *Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 23.

⁴³ Zoccoli, *Benedetta Cappa Marinetti: Queen of Futurism*, 36.

CHAPTER 3

MODERN TECHNOLOGY AS A MEANS TO METAPHYSICAL AWARENESS

“Breaking beyond the humiliating limits of canvas and tubes of paint, he seizes with purity, renders with immediacy his universe, using those absolute elements that will make his creation live.”—Benedetta (1924)¹

The years 1896–1908 leading up to the beginning of the Italian Futurist movement were abundant with economic development, especially in the industries of electricity, chemicals, and steel, as well as in modes of transportation and communication.² These developing sciences manifested themselves in literary and visual artworks of the time, and are particularly dominant in works by Italian Futurists such as Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, and later, Benedetta. Technology—from the speeding automobile in the first decade of the movement, to the more invisible technologies such as waves of communication (telegraph and radio) throughout the 1920s and 30s—was the foundation for the movement and its push for a stronger future. The Italians felt they had fallen behind neighboring European countries and the United States in the development of new technologies, so Marinetti and other Italian leaders, such as Mussolini, overcompensated in their demand for faster and more powerful technology, possibly hoping it would drive scientists, engineers, architects, and artists to invent and develop further than the other nations attempting the same feats.

¹ Benedetta, “Sensibilità futuriste,” in Lawrence Rainey, *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 281.

² Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and the Technological Imagination* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Publishers, 2009), 2.

In 1913, F.T. Marinetti postulated about technology:

Futurism is based on the complete renewal of human sensibility brought about by the great discoveries made by science. Anyone who today uses the telegraph, the telephone, and the gramophone, the train, the bicycle, the motorcycle, the automobile, the ocean liner, the airship, the airplane, the film theater, the great daily newspaper (which synthesizes the daily events of the whole world), fails to recognize that these different forms of communication, of transport and information, have a far-reaching effect on their psyche.³

Because of the shared goal for a revitalization of technology in Italy, there were efforts from both art movements and political parties alike to see it actualized. Although Marinetti felt that man and machine would lead to power, Mussolini thought that the strength of ancient Rome paired with modern technology would lead to power; they both instilled urgency into Italian citizens to build anew.

The concept of “cosmic consciousness” becomes relevant in this discussion, as artists who were directly commenting on the technological realm produced a mystical experience that connected human beings to something outside of themselves. Cosmic consciousness can be defined as a possible energy field that cannot be grasped visually. James Twitchell describes the experience of this phenomenon as an epiphany of sorts.⁴ Cosmic consciousness will be pertinent to this chapter, as I discuss the scientific side of Benedetta’s murals alongside concepts such as the ether and vibrations and explore the ways in which these scientific and spiritual concepts work together in second-wave Italian Futurist art. Furthermore, I will examine the ways in which Benedetta and several

³ Marinetti in Berghaus, *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, 23.

⁴ James B. Twitchell, “Romanticism and Cosmic Consciousness,” *The Centennial Review* 19, no. 4 (Fall 1975), 291.

other Italian Futurists used technology as a way of baptizing themselves within the science while relaying their experiences on a more personal, and sometimes spiritual, level.

Detecting the Invisible in Futurist Art

The ether is an important concept to understanding modern art, especially in the case of the second wave of Italian Futurism. The concept of the ether is used to explain the idea of light, sound, and matter comprised of vibrations in the universe. The ether, which unites the separate concepts of space and matter, was considered the vehicle for the transmission of communication waves and vibrations in the air. This phenomenon had been part of physics since the 1820s.⁵ In the 1910 the “*Manifesto tecnico dei pittori futuristi*,” there was talk of vibrations in space as being an important part of artistic expression. It states: “Indeed all things move, all things run, all things are rapidly changing...On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves, change shape, succeeding one another, like rapid vibrations, in the space where they traverse.”⁶ Futurist ideas were built upon associations between invisible realms and abstractions. Such analogies included parallels between noise and rebellion, momentum and modernity, and the future and the cosmos. The ether

⁵ Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Abstraction, the Ether, and the Fourth Dimension: Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich in Context,” *The Infinite White Abyss* (Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2014), 234.

⁶ Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, “Manifesto tecnico dei pittori futuristi,” *Poesia*, March 18, 1910, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://www.futurismo.altervista.org/manifesti/pittoriFut.htm>.

in the Futurist context might have been thought of as a space to experiment with new ideas.

The modern world was viewed with more complexity after scientific studies introduced new findings on space, energy, and matter.⁷ Furthermore, early twentieth century artists were challenged by new interpretations of matter and space, which resulted in new standards for depicting physical reality. For instance, the Futurists often used “forcelines” as an expression of movement or speed. The Cubists, on the other hand, concentrated formally on using geometrical shapes, simultaneity, and overlapping planes to depict modern scientific phenomena. The Futurist “forcelines” were meant to evoke not only literal movement, but development, vitality, and channels to new maturation.

Linda Dalrymple Henderson, a scholar whose work focuses on science, geometry, and technology in modern art, argues that modernists were influenced by the idea that the fourth dimension and the ether are traces of an invisible reality that goes beyond human perception. British physicists Balfour Stewart and P.G. Tait were the first to create a connection between the ether and the fourth dimension in their 1875 book *The Unseen Universe, or Physical Speculations on a Future State*. These two physicists suggested that the ether might not actually be a tangible medium. Instead, it might act as a bridge to the invisible universe. In other words, Stewart and Tait suggested that the invisible universe of the ether might be four-dimensional, but that humans cannot see it. By the twentieth century, the fourth dimension had gained new significance in philosophy and theology and included associations to cosmic consciousness. It became an

⁷ Anthony Enns and Shelley Trowler, eds., *Vibratory Modernism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

unconventional, twentieth-century sublime, according to Henderson.⁸ The application of the sublime might have been one of Benedetta's aims in the *Synthesis of Communications* (Figure 1) murals because of her intentionally uninhabited landscapes, cosmic views, and cool color palettes.

Cosmic consciousness is deeply connected to the spiritual, and although it is not necessarily *above* matter, it "increases empathy with the world of matter," according to Twitchell.⁹ The idea of a "cosmic consciousness" had been around for more than a century by the time Benedetta began her painting career, and with her interest in poetry and spirituality, it is not unlikely that she would have stumbled upon it. John Keats (1795–1821) dwelt on this idea in his poem, "Endymion" (1818). Paraphrased by Twitchell, Keats relays:

How can we elevate our consciousness until we are free from the constraints of self? The first step is to immerse the self in Nature...then to realize that in doing this you have connected yourself to the history of art and of all men. And if you are able to do this and to free yourself into nature, then elevated consciousness will come. The self will begin to disappear; love and friendship will follow until finally you will lose consciousness and achieve the mystic oneness.¹⁰

Benedetta, a strong advocate for the amicable relationship between nature, technology, and humanity, espoused similar views given the implicit rather than explicit signs of human presence in the murals. She intentionally created reliance between machines and natural elements. For instance, in *Synthesis of Radio Communications* (Figure 6), she

⁸ Henderson, "Abstraction, the Ether, and the Fourth Dimension: Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich in context," 235.

⁹ Twitchell, "Romanticism and Cosmic Consciousness," 295.

¹⁰ John Keats, *Endymion*, paraphrased by Twitchell, "Romanticism and Cosmic Consciousness," 295–297.

extended the radio tower to find its peak in the heavens, while still allowing the tension to show through, given the diagonal of the tower cuts swiftly across visible physical space.

Guglielmo Marconi (1874–1937), an Italian inventor and best known for his invention of the telegraph, is a considerable figure in the discussion on modern technology, especially in relation to Benedetta’s murals. When he was only twenty years old when he utilized Heinrich Hertz’ research on waves and applied them to wireless telegraphy.¹¹ Despite his inventions having been rejected multiple times by the Italian and Great Britain governments, he ended up receiving many honors, including the Nobel Prize in 1909.¹² His treatment of radio waves must have been important to the Fascist regime’s respect for invisible modes of communication. Especially because he was Italian, one could interpret Benedetta’s *Synthesis of Telegraphic and Telephonic* mural as a commemoration to Marconi.

During the age of avant-gardism and the reach for modernity, there were also ideas circulating that space itself might possess a higher, invisible dimension.¹³ In her book *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, Henderson beautifully outlined the progression from the nineteenth-century initial hypotheses on the mysterious qualities of time and space to the twentieth-century recognition that three–

¹¹ Joel J. Berger, “Marconi and the Beginnings of Wireless Communication,” *The Science Teacher* 41, no. 4 (April 1974), 20.

¹² *Ibid*, 21.

¹³ Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), xix.

dimensional space is only a limit of the brain. To further explain this point, Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1954), a member of the Theosophical Society, postulated that:

In effect, in our physical world we know only three dimensions. It is not that only these three dimensions exist, but that they alone can be understood by the physical brain. In reality, we live in a space possessing a quantity of dimensions. The limits that are imposed on us for comprehending them in different states always exist only in our consciousness and consequently are truly subjective.¹⁴

Benedetta's murals are receptive to the kinds of unseen dimensions that were so fashionably portrayed during the first half of the twentieth century. For instance, in *Synthesis of Telegraphic and Telephonic Communications*, (Figure 8) she invited her viewers to experience a space that involved the possibility of multiple dimensions. The wavy lines that move across the canvas could represent the vibrations within telephone lines or a telegraph being sent in the air across hundreds of miles. In the bottom left corner Benedetta alluded to the concept of space–time by incorporating the numbers of a rotary telephone. She shows the progression from the tangible device to the transmissions in the air. The different types of lines (curvy and straight) work together to create layers of space that provide a depth that might not be seen with the naked eye and layers of time that defy the human sense of chronology. She introduced these technologies of communication as moving invisibly through time/space, from one architectural element to another, creating a solid, material source through which the energies of the telegraph and telephone flow.

I would postulate that she imagined these lines as part of the fourth–dimension. Among Benedetta's papers preserved at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, she

¹⁴ Charles Webster Leadbeater in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non–Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, 45.

predicted in a speech: “When the history of Futurism will be written, it will be necessary to show what deep changes have taken place in the poetic personality of its head, Marinetti, after the entrance of Benedetta in his life and in his fantasy... And more, the historian of Futurism will have to say what Benedetta has brought to Futurism.”¹⁵ She had visions of technology in her novels and paintings that reached a new level of understanding compared to other Futurists.

It is also common to associate the Cubists with the fourth dimension as an indication of higher reality, because Cubists recognized that simultaneity and space-time have become references to the fourth dimension.¹⁶ In the manifesto “Absolute Motion + Relative Motion = Dynamism,” Umberto Boccioni reminisced: “I recall having read somewhere that Cubism, with its faceting of the object and the placing of its various parts on the flat surface of the canvas, was drawing close to a fourth dimension...”¹⁷ Kandinsky also referenced invisible elements present in art, especially within color in his 1914 treatise, *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*: “But to a more sensitive soul the effect of colours is deeper and intensely moving. And so we come to the second main result of looking at colours: THEIR PSYCHIC EFFECT. They produce a corresponding spiritual vibration, and it is only as a step towards this spiritual vibration that the elementary

¹⁵ Benedetta, “The Contribution of the Modern Woman to Literature and to Art,” box 6, folder 3, Inventory of the Papers of F.T. Marinetti and Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, 1902–1965, Special Collections and Archives, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 4.

¹⁶ Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, 89.

¹⁷ Umberto Boccioni in *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 190–191.

physical impression is of importance.”¹⁸ Consider Kandinsky’s 1913 *Composition, VII* (Figure 17) as he attempts to express the spirit of the world through a massive vortex.

The vibrations that Kandinsky introduced had a stronger spiritual origin and possibly a different connotation from the vibrations in the air that contribute to the lines of communication, but he claimed that a person’s psychological well-being was affected by vibrations, whether they be spiritual or technological. In his chapter on avant-garde theater and ethereal aesthetics, Mike Vanden Huevel claims that it is apparent in Kandinsky’s art that he was conscious of the conflict between matter and spirit, and that the second law of thermodynamics could be represented symbolically in his studies. In that law, it is stated that energy and matter are chaotic and dissolute, so there is a spiritual force working against materialism.¹⁹ In fighting materialism, he believed that one can reach modernity and spirituality. Benedetta, however, conceived of an interdependent relationship between spirituality and materialism rather than a dissonant one.

Not only were the Italian Futurists cognizant of these concepts and technologies as important aspects to modern life, but artists in Europe and America working in art movements such as Dada, Surrealism, and Cubism also emphasized these ideas. Berlin Dadaist Raoul Hausmann (1886–1971) stated, “Mechanics as science, technology, and machine is not simply an increased economy of work, but leads in the end—similar to the

¹⁸ Wassily Kandinsky, *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, trans. Michael T.H. Sadler, (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 2014), accessed February 27, 2016, <http://web.mnstate.edu/gracyk/courses/phil%20of%20art/kandinskytext3.htm>.

¹⁹ Mike Vanden Heuvel, “Good Vibrations: Avant-Garde Theatre and Ethereal Aesthetics from Kandinsky to Futurism” in *Vibratory Modernism*, eds. Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 201.

sensory achievements of art—to the heightening of the organic functionality of mankind”²⁰

The connection between art and science was an ever growing phenomenon and captured by artists in distinct movements. Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) presupposed:

Art transcends reality—it has no direct rapport with reality. Between the physical and the ethereal spheres, there is a boundary, clearly delimited for our senses; yet the ether penetrates the physical sphere and acts upon it. In this manner the artistic sphere pervades reality; but for our senses they are two separate entities, the spiritual and the material. In order to approach the spiritual in art, one employs reality as little as possible because reality is the polar opposite of the spiritual. This explains why primary forms are employed.²¹

Henderson mentions that some artists thought that if space happened to possess a fourth dimension, their familiar three-dimensional world would then simply become a shadow of a higher, undetectable reality—which is an idea long supported by Plato’s allegory of the cave.²² Benedetta illustrated this clearly by taking a viewpoint from above and bringing the viewer away from the earth and its materialism. I propose that she attempted to give the viewer a vivid view of the relationship between nature and industrialism, spirituality and materialism, and she hoped to repair the prejudices against either side. Boccioni even interpreted the fourth-dimension in his 1914 “*Moto assoluto + moto relative = Dinamismo*” by stating, “the *dynamic* element is a sort of fourth dimension in painting and sculpture, which cannot thrive without a total affirmation of

²⁰ Raoul Hausmann in Arndt Niebisch, “Ether Machines: Raoul Hausmann’s Optophonetic Media,” in *Vibratory Modernism*, eds. Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 172.

²¹ Henderson, “Abstraction, the Ether, and the Fourth Dimension: Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich in context,” 239.

²² Henderson, “Abstraction, the Ether, and the Fourth Dimension: Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich in context,” 235.

the three dimensions that determine volume: height, width, depth.”²³ Benedetta used that formula in the *Synthesis of Communications* to depict not only a two-dimensional simulation of the universe, but a three-dimensional vision.

First Phase vs. Second Phase Technologies

From 1909 onward, the Italian Futurist movement glorified technology, and it became a principal element of many manifestos, and therefore the movement, as a cultural phenomenon.²⁴ In his first manifesto, Marinetti exclaimed, “We affirm that the magnificence of the world has been enriched by new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car with a hood that is adorned with large pipes like a serpent with explosive breath...a roaring car that seems to ride on a grapeshot is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.”²⁵ According to Günter Berghaus in *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, the machine symbolized Marinetti’s vision of an industrialized environment shaping a “second nature” that would assist mankind in moving towards the future. The machine served as a channel for new ideologies and also new aesthetic agendas. It is through the machine that man could become superior to the human beings that were created by God.²⁶

The beginning of the movement focused on energy, whether that be through speed, power, or vitality. It was present in visual art, literature, and the theatrical poetry

²³ Boccioni in Lawrence Rainey, *Futurism: An Anthology*, 190.

²⁴ Berghaus, ed. *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, vii.

²⁵ F.T. Marinetti, “Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo,” *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909, accessed July 13, 2015, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28144/28144-h/28144-h.htm>.

²⁶ Berghaus, ed. *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, 20.

that Marinetti called *serate*.²⁷ In his 1914 treatise, Boccioni exclaimed, “Don’t forget that life resides in the unity of energy, that we are centers who receive and transmit, so that we are indissolubly connected to everything.”²⁸ Energy was most readily seen in representations of transportation machines such as cars, railways, and aeronautics, even though Italian transportation straggled far behind Germany, France, and the United States throughout the twentieth century.²⁹ Benedetta spoke of a challenge to the artist depicting these technological aspects of life. She supposed that “[the artist] mechanizes his work. Let me explain: modern sensibility has created the machine, i.e., a complex of different forms and materials which give rise to an outcome that lives, determined only by its indispensable elements. An automobile is composed of parts that are all indispensable to achieving motion.”³⁰ The holistic perspective offered by Benedetta on machines resounds throughout her artistic practice during the second wave.

Giacomo Balla’s work is a strong example of the ways the Futurists depicted motion, energy, and speed throughout both phases of the movement. In his 1913 *Velocità d’automobile (Speeding Car)* (Figure 18), he drew inspiration from the momentum of an accelerating car. He used black to translate the auditory impact of sound, similar to

²⁷ *Serate* literally translates to “evenings,” but the term was used by Marinetti to describe the theatrical presentations of poetry, “Words-in-Freedom,” and other performances.

²⁸ Bruce Clark and Linda Dalrymple Henderson, Introduction to *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2.

²⁹ Berghaus, ed. *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, 8.

³⁰ Benedetta, “Sensibilità futuriste,” in Lawrence Rainey, *Futurism: An Anthology*, 281.

musical notes covering a score.³¹ In this painting, he relied on movement of vehicles to convey emotion, which fills the viewer with a sense of uncontrollability as the seemingly random spirals pulsate throughout the crowded space. Compare this painting to his calming portrayal of Italian aeronautics in *Balbo and the Italian Transatlantic Flyers (Celestial Metallic Airplane)*, 1931 (Figure 19). Only eighteen years later, he depicted a halcyon scene as airplanes rise above the mountains, moving parallel to each other and creating a stacked, symmetrical pyramid of upward motion. His palette transitioned from vibrant primary colors to a more subdued, tranquil palette. Yet, he continued to demonstrate the strengths and control over Italian transportation and technology in the later half of the movement through his use of hierarchy in the 1931 painting.

After World War I ended, Futurist attitudes changed with respect to technology, and it was no longer something that mankind could use to escape death. Umberto Boccioni tragically died on August 17, 1916 after falling from his horse. This event is believed to have abruptly put an end to the first wave of the Futurist movement.³² After Boccioni and several others met their deaths during World War I, there was a shift in ideology, which contributes to the airplane being the new face of the movement. I will further discuss the airplane's significance to Futurist painting in chapter four, but it is important to note that the airplane was part of a new sensibility and a new ideology that

³¹ Claudia Salaris, "The Invention of the Programmatic Avant-Garde," in *Italian Futurism 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Catalogue, 2014), 28.

³² Walter L. Adamson, "Futurism and Italian Intervention in World War I," *Italian Futurism 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Catalogue, 2014), 176.

allowed Benedetta to expose her thoughts on spirituality and sentimentality as being essential elements to the Italian Futurist movement.

Marinetti viewed technology and the machine with all its capabilities as victories over nature and the lifecycles that inevitably led to death. The idea of synthesis, enabled by technological developments, is crucial in his statements. For instance, in the “*Manifesto Futurista della radio (The Futurist Manifesto of the Radia)* of 1933, Marinetti entertained thoughts about future technology:

Today we already possess a television containing fifty thousand dots for every image on a big screen. While we are awaiting the invention of tele-tactilism and teleperfume and telesoap we Futurists are working on radio programs destined to multiply a hundredfold the creative genius of the Italian race and to abolish the old nostalgic rage of distances and to impose everywhere words-in-freedom as its logical and natural mode of expression.³³

Participants in the Italian Futurist movement believed that technology would continue to bring the Italian people (and everyone in the world) a fresh modernity that would be rid of the obstacles of the past. As the nation became more closely drawn to Fascism, which invoked the greatness of Italy’s past, while advocating the embrace of the machine age future, the thought of continuing the advancement of technologies and machines became complex and abstract. The rise of the airplane brought on an escape from the perplexing years of the 1930s and 1940s, allowing artists to see beyond the dirt and blood of the wars surrounding them. As a form of liberation, technological transportation for the Italian people started with a roaring automobile on the ground and ended in the air, wings spread suggestive of an existence devoid of conflict.

³³ *The Radia* refers to the term Futurists gave to the larger shows on the radio in the 1930s. F.T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata in Lawrence Rainey, *Futurism: An Anthology*, 292.

CHAPTER 4

AEROPITTURA AS SPIRITUAL CONDUIT

*“This is a period of rapid evolution. Revolutions part from the spirit and transform the social structure. Each force in the universe estimates and tries to affirm itself in its true character and with the greatest strength possible.”*¹

—Benedetta

Benedetta’s *Synthesis of Communications* murals (Figure 1) evoke enthusiasm for Italy’s potential to overcome a troubled past. The compositions conjure a sense of timelessness by pulling the viewer up into the cosmos, away from the buzz and conflict of the world; they arouse a sense of spirituality within the viewer. The murals are influenced by the perpetually changing perspectives offered by flight, unlike viewpoints from an earthbound perspective. The murals reflect the Futurist style known as *aeropittura* (aeropainting), which is traditionally understood as a pictorial technique inspired by flight or aeronautics during the first half of the twentieth century.² In “Sensibilità futuriste,” Benedetta explained the phenomenon of *aeropittura*: “The Futurist painter is confronting a problem: how to express these numerous new worlds, how to render them nakedly and powerfully, in such a way that every viewer experiences unmediated contact with the universe of the artist.”³ After the end of World War I in 1918, the Futurists introduced this new sensibility to the movement that allowed

¹ Benedetta, “The Contribution of the Modern Woman to Literature and to Art,” box 6, folder 3, Inventory of the Papers of F.T. Marinetti and Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, 1902–1965, Special Collections and Archives, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 1.

² Maurizio Scudiero, “Futurist Aeropainting,” *FMR: The Magazine of Franco Maria Ricci*, no. 112 (2001): 72.

³ Benedetta, “Sensibilità futuriste,” in Lawrence Rainey, *Futurism: An Anthology*, 280.

spirituality and sentimentality to undermine the bellicose ideals of the movement.

Ruggero Vasari (1898–1968), a Futurist artist, commented on the spiritual lift that the airplane provided:

The spiritual climate surrounding the modernist artist is ambivalent: it is above all exhilarating and exalting, because of the momentum that mankind seems to be gaining and because of the endless prospects that seems to open up. But at the same time it is also frustrating, frightening and alienating, because of the discrepancy which is more and more acutely felt to exist between (spiritual) man and (technological) civilization. This dualistic view of the world continually alternates optimism with pessimism, reckless confidence with gloomy feelings of doom, and these moods may even manifest themselves simultaneously.⁴

Early in the Futurist Movement, Marinetti considered the machine a ‘metaphysical force’ and not only as an emblem of technological advancements. This idea expanded and became more apparent through *aeropittura* in the 1930s, when the cult of the machine became intertwined with spiritual and cosmic undertones. In 1930, Fillia suggested that, “Aero = the most perfect vision of the mechanical nature, expression of the spirit of our times and [...] indication of the new spirituality.”⁵ In the second phase of the Italian Futurist movement, *aeropittura* fused machine iconography with visions of the celestial heavens, connotative of the spiritual attitude embraced by the artists. The harsh realities of the Fascist regime took a toll on the Futurist artists, and *aeropittura* offered what Günter Berghaus, a prominent scholar in Italian Futurism, refers to as “metaphysical consolation and escapist thrill.”⁶

⁴ Günter Berghaus, ed., *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi Publishers, 2009), 29.

⁵ Fillia in Berghaus, ed., *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, 32.

⁶ Ibid.

In her essay on *aeropittura*, Emily Braun claims that the term can, to an extent, be understood as an extension of the underlying Futurist ideas of virility and speed.⁷ In the “*Manifesto dell’aeropittura*” (1929), the Futurists declared: “The elements of this new reality have no established position and are made from the same endless mobility” and “soon a new plastic, extra–terrestrial spirituality will arrive.”⁸ Benedetta especially took the “extra–terrestrial” approach in her paintings by incorporating a cosmic view that is void of human habitation. For instance, in *Synthesis of Maritime Communications* (Figure 10) or *Synthesis of Terrestrial Communications* (Figure 9), she easily could have included human figures to demonstrate the ways in which modern technologies were being used. Nonetheless, she chose to depict scenes where the viewer is encouraged to focus primarily on the interconnectivity between technological design and natural forces.

Tendencies in *Aeropittura*

Maurizio Scudiero identifies two tendencies in *aeropittura*. The first is “cosmic,” where the airplane is simply the vehicle for the new sense of vision and for the artist’s development of a cosmic sensibility. In this awareness, the artist is dissociated from earthly events and therefore experiences spiritual “transfigurations.”⁹ Works by

⁷ Emily Braun, “Shock and Awe: Futurist *Aeropittura* and the Theories of Giulio Douhet,” in *Italian Futurism, 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Catalogue, 2014), 269.

⁸ Giacomo Balla, Benedetta, Fortunato Depero, Gerardo Dottori, Fillia, F.T. Marinetti, Enrico Prampolini, Mino Somenzi, and Tato, “Manifesto della aeropittura.” *Vecchio e Nuovo*, 1929, accessed September 5, 2015, http://www.culturaserivizi.it/vrd/files/VN1931_manifesto_aeropittura.pdf.

⁹ Scudiero, “Futurist Aeropainting,” 84.

Benedetta and Enrico Prampolini (1894–1956) illustrate the “cosmic” tendency through their evocation of transcendental views that allow the viewer to look beyond the materialism of the world to see a brighter dimension in the future. For example, Prampolini’s 1930 *The Spacediver* (Figure 20) extends so far into the cosmic realm that it verges on the surreal. The structure (or figure) is shaped like a keyhole or magnifying glass, but evokes the sense that we are looking into the lens of a camera, which sits literally up in the clouds. It is also an anthropomorphic shape—a silhouette of a human body that appears to grant the individual access to a cosmic consciousness that defies bodily limitations. In 1931 Prampolini wrote, “I see in *aeropittura* the means to go beyond the boundaries of terrestrial reality, as there rises in us—untiring pilots—the desire to discover new plastic reality and give life to the occult forces of cosmic idealism.”¹⁰

The second tendency in *aeropittura* defined by Scudiero is the “documentary,” where the airplane becomes the subject rendered in various directions and positions.¹¹ Take for instance Tato’s (Guglielmo Sansoni) 1930 *Svorlando in spirale il Colosseo [Spiralata] (Falling over the Coliseum in a Spiral [Spiraling])* (Figure 21). He provided a bird’s eye view of an airplane spiraling upward, soaring above the Roman Coliseum, no doubt an important structure to Mussolini and the regime. Through the interesting juxtaposition of a dynamic, airborne technology with the ancient, earthbound emblem of strength, Tato comments on the powers of both. He likely took inspiration from the

¹⁰ Enrico Prampolini in Lisa Panzera, “Celestial Futurism and the “Parasurreal,” in *Italian Futurism, 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Catalogue, 2014), 328.

¹¹ Scudiero, “Futurist Aeropainting,” 84.

“*Manifesto dell’aeropittura*,” which mentions, “The Coliseum, seen from 3,000 meters by an aviator gliding in spirals, changes its shape and dimension at every moment and subsequently thickens all the faces of its volume in the act of showing them.”¹² The spiraling motion in his painting simulates a sense of speed, not unlike the ways the first wave Futurists handled speeding vehicles in art. However, there is also a sense of imminent danger, of potential failure and collapse, something that is less characteristic of the depiction of speed in the first wave, where glory seems to be found even in utter destruction. The documentary tendency gained popularity after Fillia died in 1936 and as a result of the work of artists such as Tato with his wild compositions of spinning, reckless flight.¹³ The documentary tendency lauds the airplane itself as a war machine, as a mode of transportation, and as a symbol of Italy’s newfound modernity and power—retrieving its connection to spirituality through the mechanical processes of flying.

The airplane became a vehicle for much more than artistic inspiration and awareness of one’s spiritual connection to the heavens and earth. It became a tool for aerial bombing, aerial photography, and even aerial motion pictures. The Italian military was the first to bomb an opponent from an airplane.¹⁴ Braun says that the Italian military commander and theorist Giulio Douhet (1869–1930) was significant to the development of *aeropittura* through his ambitions to see Italian flight advance as a splendid weapon of

¹² Balla, Benedetta, Depero, Dottori, Fillia, Marinetti, Prampolini, Somenzi, Tato, “*Manifesto della aeropittura*.”

¹³ Scudiero, “*Futurist Aeropainting*,” 84.

¹⁴ Braun, “*Shock and Awe*,” in *Italian Futurism, 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, 269.

war. Writing on the subject as early as 1909, he predicted the future of warfare by concentrating on the airplane. He commented on the uses of the airplane for surveillance, tactical advantages, and firepower and prepared a vigorous strategy for offense for Italy. Douhet was not unlike Marinetti; he promoted his visions in the media through novels and the press. Furthermore, he believed that with the aid of the airplane, Italy would become a world power once again; his ideals went hand-in-hand with Mussolini's views.

In 1923, Mussolini was one of the first to create an independent air force (*Il Regia Aeronautica Italiana*).¹⁵ That being said, the government banned the release of any potential war carnage photography of current conflicts or those in the future, claiming that it would have provoked fear of war and the airplane, instead of zeal for the advancements in aerial technology.¹⁶ Therefore, those types of scenes were rarely present in *aeropittura* paintings. Artists did allude to the fact that technology can spiral out of control and pose a threat to humans, however. There is some degree of anxiety in Tato's painting, but his works are not overt comments on the destructive qualities that technology can hold. The push for the airplane as the optimal vehicle, both literally and symbolically, would have no doubt permeated art movements in Italy at the time. The energy and excitement that emerged through flying was an inspiration to artists that allowed for the new discovery and discussion of higher/invisible dimensions.

The Futurists' creation of spiritual *aeropittura* works coincided with Fascist propaganda and military flight development, which promoted perspectives from flight in

¹⁵ Ibid, 269.

¹⁶ Ibid, 271.

order to support high morale for new soldiers.¹⁷ By 1934, *aeropittura* had taken over Italian Futurist depictions and exhibitions, and this is especially true during the period in which the regime invaded Ethiopia (October 1935) and entered World War II (June 1940). Airplanes gave men feelings of invincibility and courage, which translated in works such as Futurist artist Gerardo Dottori's (1884–1977) 1942 *Battaglia aerea sul Golfo di Napoli* (*Aerial Battle over the Gulf of Naples*) (Figure 22). No longer do we see attention given to speed, or gravity. Suddenly, Dottori elevates his viewer into the “cosmic consciousness” where both the aviator and the viewer have been cemented into a limbo of fire and smoke, where time has stopped and an air battle rages on. He seems to be commenting on the overpowering of spirituality in this painting, as fighter pilots may not have been able to experience spirituality in flight. Dottori frightens his viewers to an extent by depicting airplanes that are falling, swerving, and bombing other planes. Yet, somehow the viewer is removed from the chaos, and is invited to look down into the depths of the ocean and onto the villages that took root at the water's edge. This is an archetypal image that would have been relished by Mussolini because of the impression of power and strength in the machine.

Benedetta fully engaged in *aeropittura* as a means to create Fascist propaganda, fully embracing the ideals of the regime. In a message to the women of America and Europe, Benedetta encouraged women to, “[be] thankful to Fascism because it has given

¹⁷ Ibid, 270.

us our rightful place, serene, full of soul and future. Rich with work. Luminous.”¹⁸ In “Spirituality of the Italian Woman,” she also claimed that, “Tomorrow is sacred to the Italian women who contain and prepare it. They raise a bright, spiritual front in defense of the will of Il Duce, armed with magic weapons that ensure every victory.”¹⁹ Benedetta encouraged the women of Italy to embrace Fascism, especially through the lens of a woman fighting for her family, her art practice and career, and for the Italian Futurist Movement. Not only are the *Synthesis of Communications* (Figure 1) murals prime examples of her respect for Fascism, but her reverence for the regime can also be seen in her painting, *Il Grande X (The Great X)*, 1930 (fig. 23). The X in *aeropittura* imagery often represents a nosedive in flight.²⁰ It suggests a vitalizing thrill as the plane and the people inside drop vertically through space. Poggi also notes that the X could represent the anticipated ten-year anniversary of the March on Rome²¹, while also linking modern

¹⁸ Benedetta, “A Message to the Women of America and Europe,” box 6, folder 1, Inventory of the Papers of F.T. Marinetti and Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, 1902–1965, Special Collections and Archives, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 1.

¹⁹ Benedetta, “Spiritualità della donna italiana,” box 6, folder 2, Inventory of the Papers of F.T. Marinetti and Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, 1902–1965, Special Collections and Archives, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 1.

²⁰ Braun, “Shock and Awe,” in *Italian Futurism, 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, 271.

²¹ The March on Rome took place from October 22-29, 1922 and was led by Benito Mussolini to celebrate his coming to power. He gathered several “blackshirts,” or *squadristi* to stand behind him while he claimed his throne to Italy. This was the turning point that veered Italy away from monarchy.

Fascism to the ancient language of the Romans through the use of the Roman numeral.²² The X is also evocative of the shape of an hourglass, alluding to the passing time in life, war, and modernity. Finally, Benedetta also uses the X in this painting possibly to create a sharp division between material world and cosmic heaven. She eradicates any notion of time and space through this perspective, as it seems to be both day and night from her view in the airplane.

Futurist Sacred Art

Another goal for *aeropittura* was to convey a sense of the sublime in the view from above, attempting to both unnerve and thrill the viewer. The perspectives of the aeropainters reveal their desires to illustrate a higher dimension which, recalling the discussion from chapter three will be *invisible*, or neither aerial nor earthbound, but customarily cosmic. Scudiero points out that most of these viewpoints do not seem in the least bit ideological or political in tone and this is where “Futurist Sacred Art” comes into play.²³ Sacred art in this context involves religious iconography and symbolism (almost always Christian-based) paired with the Futurist ideals of speed, power, and the machine (particularly as seen through the airplane). The authors of the “*Manifesto dell’arte sacra futurista*” (“Futurist Manifesto of Sacred Art”) (1931) assert:

Only Futurist aeropainters, masters of aerial perspectives and accustomed to painting while high in flight, can give plastic articulation to the incomprehensible charm and blessed transparencies of the infinite. However, this is not something accessible to traditional painters, all of whom are more or less confined by

²² Poggi, “The Return of the Repressed,” in *Donatello Among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy*, eds. Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 218.

²³ Scudiero, “Futurist Aeropainting,” 82.

obsessive realism, all permanently terrestrial in outlook and therefore incapable of rising up to mystical abstraction.²⁴

Aeropittura was sometimes even considered *synonymous* with sacred art. In “Fascism as Political Religion,” Emilio Gentile argues that from its inception Fascism unequivocally rejected rationalism and that it applauded mythical thinking.²⁵ Mussolini’s rise to power was portrayed as the “second coming of Augustus.” Augustus was considered the most accomplished Roman leader in Italy’s history, so comparing Mussolini to Augustus was claiming another great power in the making.²⁶ This mythology found its way through propaganda art, speeches, and literature by Benedetto and other Futurists. Mussolini himself announced in 1922 that Fascism was a “belief which has reached the level of religion,” and that Fascists were soldiers, apostles, and prophets of a new “patriotic religion” which had emerged during the cleansing struggle of the war.²⁷ As Futurism and Fascism each partially intertwined with religion, a notion developed that *aeropittura* was the answer to visualizing this newfound spirituality and religiosity. In the “*Manifesto dell’arte sacra futurista*,” the Futurists staked their claim to religion in their art by affirming: “Only Futurist artists, who for twenty years have posed

²⁴ F.T. Marinetti, “Manifesto dell’arte sacra futurista,” *Gazzetta del Popolo*, June 23, 1931, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://www.arte-argomenti.org/manifesti/sacra.htm>.

²⁵ Emilio Gentile, “Fascism as Political Religion,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2/3 (June 1990): 241.

²⁶ Gerald Silk, “Il Primo Polota: Mussolini, Fascist Aeronautical Symbolism, and Imperial Rome,” in *Donatello among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy*, eds. Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 69.

²⁷ Mussolini in Gentile, “Fascism as Political Religion,” 234.

the laborious problem of simultaneity in art, can clearly express, and with adequate spatio-temporal interpenetration, the simultaneous ideologies of the Catholic faith, such as the Holy Trinity, the Immaculate Conception, and the Crucifixion of God.”²⁸ The artists who rebuked Fascism certainly would have opposed the views in this manifesto, as religion and Fascism were unified in the 1920s and 1930s.

Fillia (1904–1936) is one Futurist artist who invoked a specific type of aerial spirituality in his work, which united technology and Christianity—a different form of spirituality than what we see in Benedetta’s or Dottori’s work.²⁹ Fillia’s work became linked to religious art around 1929. He participated in the dialogue that connected religion to *aeropittura* in order to imagine spiritual transcendence inspired by aviation.³⁰ However, very few of his paintings show overt aerial views or depictions of planes or flight, and thus he does not fall under either the “cosmic” or the “documentary” tendency. I want to discuss his 1930–1931 painting, *Mistero aereo* (*Mystery Plane*) (Figure 24), because this is one example in which he overtly used *aeropittura* to consider the relationship between religion and flight. As Christine Poggi rightly points out, Fillia uses color as symbol, especially in the painting *L’adorazione* (*The Adoration*) (Figure 16). The red sphere suggests the spirit or “pure creativity.” The plane glides directly along a path that is made to reach the red sphere. It is as if the plane is leaving the earth in order to pursue a life free of materialism, and it aims to be engulfed by the spiritual realm.

²⁸ F.T. Marinetti, “Manifesto dell’arte sacra futurista.”

²⁹ Braun, in *Italian Futurism, 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, “Shock and Awe,” 270.

³⁰ Poggi, “The Return of the Repressed,” 211–212.

Aeropittura was the Futurist artist's method of coping with an influx of technological advancements, especially those that were used in warfare. Spirituality, which was essential for people in a time of confusion and socio-political upheaval, was a support that allowed artists to escape from the trials of earth and to explore the clouds, universe, and heavens. I believe that Benedetta chose this path through her visions of the celestial unknowns, where she could walk the isolated cosmos, free of strife and open to modernity.

Conclusion

Benedetta was a figure of considerable importance to the Italian Futurist movement, not only on account of her personal and artistic relationship to F.T. Marinetti, but because she prompted second-wave Futurist artists in the movement to be open to a multi-dimensional universe and embrace sensibility, which derived less from the vortex of mechanically-produced energy and more from a cosmic consciousness that elevated humans beyond material/earthly limitations. She was particularly moved by nature. In her speech to the women of Europe and America she attested, "We have the blue of the sea, the roses of our gardens, the perfumed orange groves with which to clothe our bodies. And on our hair the sunshine."³¹ Her poetic voice was heard through speeches and also visualized through the sensual worlds she created in the five murals. In *Synthesis of Maritime Communications* (Figure 10), she divided the canvas diagonally and perfectly from the top left corner to the bottom right, suggesting that there are always two sides to a given conflict or situation and that resolution should not imply the destruction of one side, but the identification of a balance of power between two forces. Benedetta's

³¹ Benedetta, "A Message to the Women of America and Europe," 3.

personal and artistic positions were complex. She was both a Futurist and a Fascist; she was dedicated to her assumed duties as wife and mother and she also pursued a successful career, despite the misogynistic views of some fellow Futurists. She loved both technology and nature and she wanted to move into the future without letting go of the past. In a movement overflowing with paradoxes, Benedetta was no different and did not avoid them in her own life and art practice.

The technological advances of the 1920s and 1930s gave artists a reason to continue developing their Futurist art practices, quickly and anxiously, as Italy moved into unknown territories—politically, scientifically, economically, and geographically with the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. The airplane was a medium through which to feel and express the splendor of these new technologies and to acquire an embodied understanding of the tangibility of vibrations in the air. From aerial perspectives, artists were able to create changes in perception, not only in a visual sense. The speeding, vibrating, inspirational experiences seized by Benedetta and other aeropainters provided clarity in a time of perplexity.

One thing I have gleaned from the Italian Futurist movement and from Benedetta's work is that technology and spirituality have never been so inseparable. Upon experiencing the death and suffering in World War I, energetic spirituality diffused itself into new creative outlets, allowing artists to see the world from many new vantage points. Benedetta helped bring a second life to the Italian Futurist movement, which almost appears to be an *afterlife* of sorts. Sensitive, spiritual, and removed from the belligerent essence of the world below, she constructed an answer to the incessant conflict of her time.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1
Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni (Synthesis of Communications)*, 1933–1934,
Tempera and Encaustic, 10 x 6 ½ feet each, Sala del Consiglio, Palermo Post Office



Figure 2
Sala del Consiglio (Conference Room), Palermo Post Office, Sicily, Italy
1933–1934, Architect: Angiolo Mazzoni



Figure 3
Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni (Synthesis of Communications)*, 1933–1934,
Tempera and Encaustic
10 x 6 ½ feet each, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2014.



Figure 4
Palermo Post Office, Sicily, Italy
1928–1934, Architect: Angiolo Mazzoni



Figure 5
Palermo Post Office, Sicily, Italy
1928–1934, Architect: Angiolo Mazzoni



Figure 6
Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni radiofoniche* (*Synthesis of Radio Communications*), 1933–1934, Tempera and Encaustic, 10 x 6 ½ feet, Sala del Consiglio, Palermo Post Office, Palermo, Italy

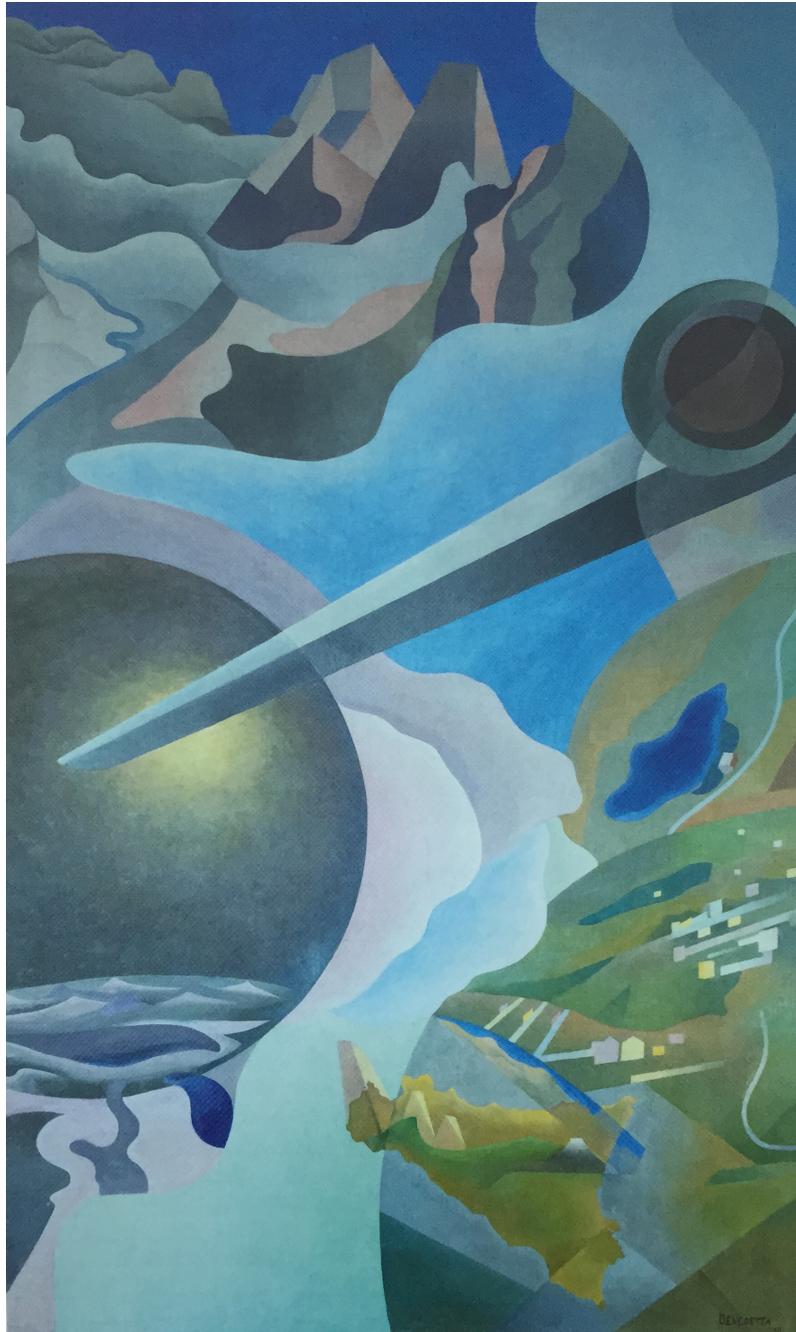


Figure 7
Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni aeree* (*Synthesis of Aerial Communications*),
1933–1934, Tempera and Encaustic, 10 x 6 ½ feet,
Sala del Consiglio, Palermo Post Office, Palermo, Italy



Figure 8

Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni telegrafiche e telefoniche* (*Synthesis of Telegraphic and Telephonic Communications*), 1933–1934, Tempera and Encaustic, 10 x 6 ½ feet, Sala del Consiglio, Palermo Post Office, Palermo, Italy



Figure 9
Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni terrestri (Synthesis of Land Communications)*,
1933–1934, Tempera and Encaustic, 10 x 6 ½ feet,
Sala del Consiglio, Palermo Post Office, Palermo, Italy

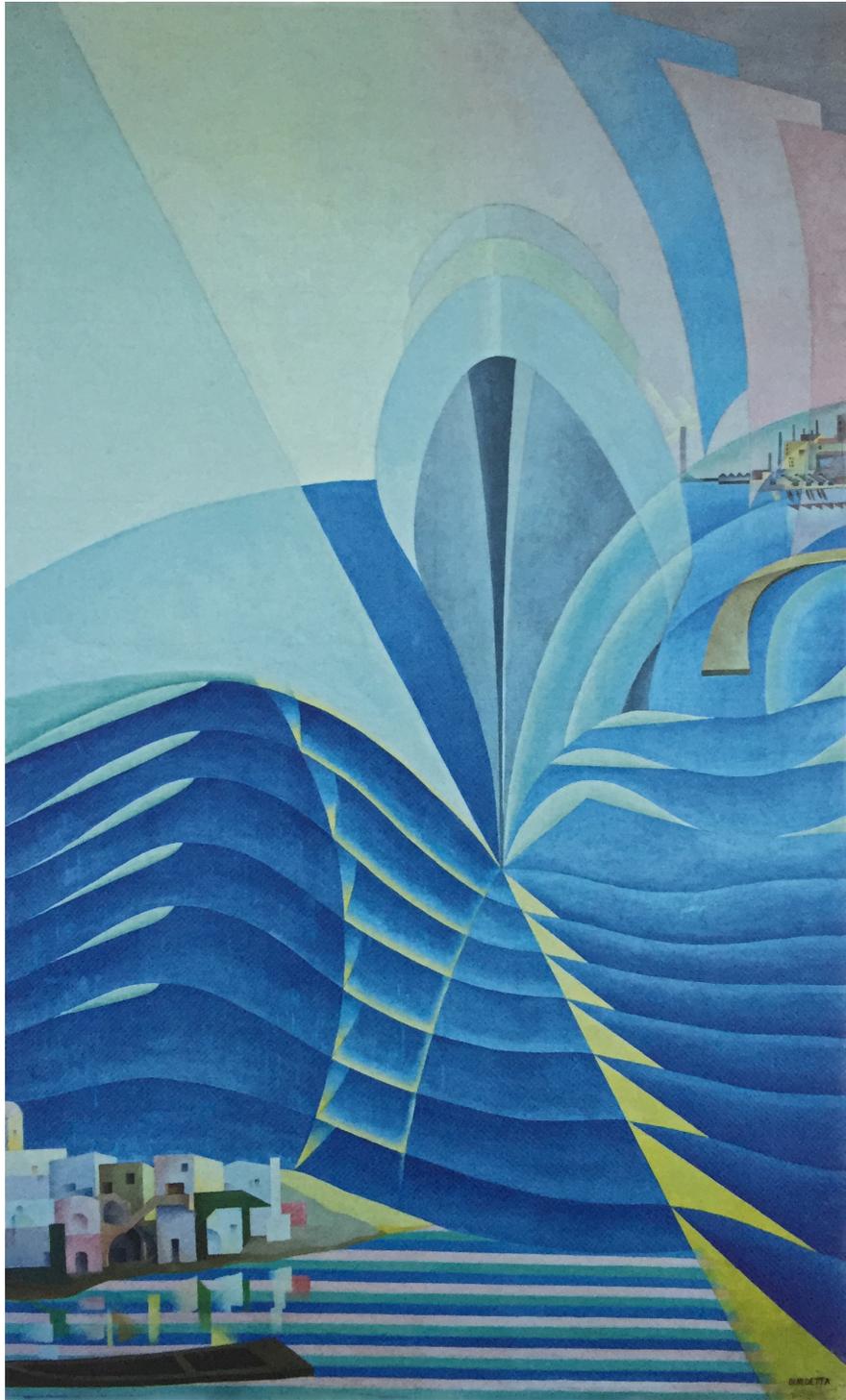


Figure 10
Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni maritime* (*Synthesis of Maritime Communications*), 1933–1934, Tempera and Encaustic, 10 x 6 ½ feet
Sala del Consiglio, Palermo Post Office, Palermo, Italy



Figure 11
Benedetta, *Monte Tabor (Mount Tabor)*, 1936
Piazoni–Marinetti Collection



Figure 12
Giacomo Balla, *Casa Balla (House of Balla)*,
1929–1958, Balla's home and studio, Rome, Italy



Figure 13

Benedetta, *Velocità di motoscafo* (*Speeding Motorboat*), 1923–1924,
Oil on Canvas, 27 ½ x 39 inches, Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Roma Capitale



Figure 14

Giacomo Balla, *Velocità astratta + rumore (Abstract Speed + Sound)*, 1913–1914, Oil Paint on millboard, 21 ½ x 30 inches, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation/Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy



Figure 15
Giacomo Balla, *Streamlines Futur (Streamlines Future)*, 1916,
Oil on Canvas, Private collection



Figure 16
Fillia (Luigi Colombo), *L'adorazione*, (*Adoration*), 1931,
Oil on Cardboard, 25 ½ x 19 ½ inches, Private Collection



Figure 17
Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition, VII*, 1913, Oil on canvas
79 x 118 inches, Moscow, Russia, The State Tretyakov Gallery



Figure 18
Giacomo Balla, *Velocità astratta*, (*Speeding Car*), 1913, Gouache and watercolor on paper, Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto



Figure 19
Giacomo Balla, *Balbo e i trasvolatori italiani [Celeste metallico aeroplano]* (*Balbo and the Italian Transatlantic Flyers [Celestial Metallic Airplane]*), 1931, Museo Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare, Rome



Figure 20
Enrico Prampolini, *Spacediver*, 1930
Oil on canvas, 45 x 35 inches, Musée de Grenoble, France



Figure 21

Tato (Guglielmo Sansoni), *Sorvolando in spirale il Colosseo* [*Spiralata*] (*Flying over the Coliseum in a Spiral* [*Spiraling*]), 1930

Oil on canvas, 31 ½ x 31 ½ inches, Ventura Collection, Rome



Figure 22

Gerardo Dottori, *Battaglia aerea sul Golfo di Napoli* (*Aerial Battle over the Gulf of Naples*) or *Inferna di battaglia sul paradise del golfo* (*Infernal Battle over the Paradise of the Gulf*), 1942, Oil on canvas, 73 x 51 ½ inches, Private collection

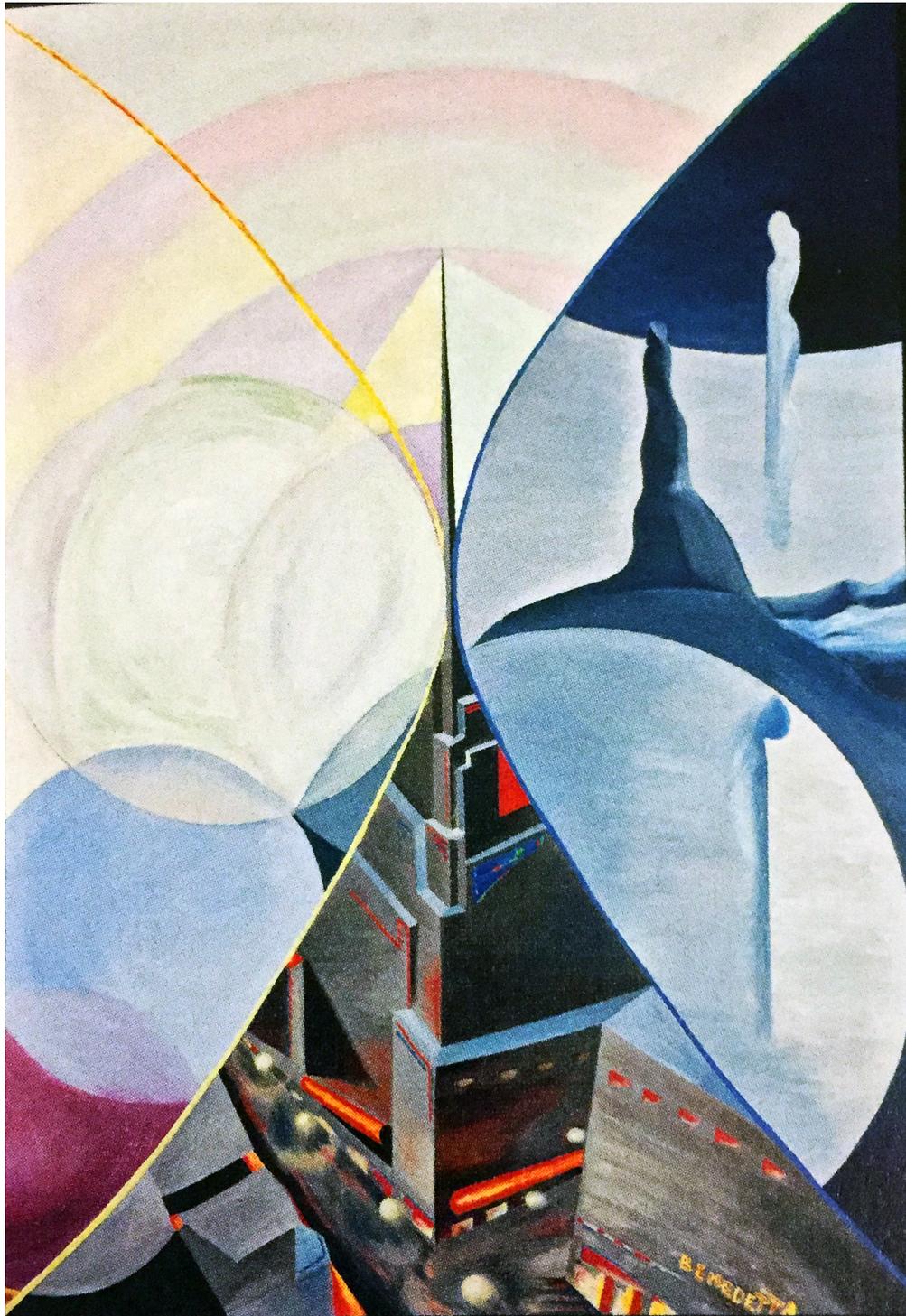


Figure 23
Benedetta, *Il Grande X* (*The Great X*), 1930,
Oil on canvas, 50 ½ x 35 ½ inches, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris



Figure 24
Fillia, *Mistero Aereo (Mystery Plane)*, 1930–1931,
Oil on canvas, 19 x 27 inches, Trento, Museo dell'aeronautica Gianni Caproni

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Vita

Ashley Lindeman obtained a bachelor's degree in Art History and Illustration at the University of Kansas, aiming to pursue a career in curating or teaching. As a graduate student at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, she presented conference papers on Benedetta and served as president of the Graduate Art History Association (GAHA). She received a Graduate Teaching Assistant position for the Art & Art History Department, working as a gallery assistant in the UMKC Gallery of Art and advising undergraduate students. She co-curated the exhibition *Body-Mind Entente* that took place in the UMKC Gallery of Art in January–February of 2016. Constructed by GAHA from the ground up, the exhibition took an interdisciplinary approach to exploring parallels between art and science and helped strengthen the bonds between the UMKC Art & Art History Department and the UMKC School of Medicine. After completing her Master of Arts degree, she will begin her Ph.D. studies at Florida State University, to continue exploring the history of Italian Futurism and cultural policy at the time of Mussolini's Fascist regime.