“A New Theatrical Zone”: Performing Time in Futurist Photographic Arts

by Jessica Hough

In the final moments of Italian Futurist Anton Giulio Bragaglia’s film Thaïs (1917), the frame fills with a static shot of a clock before cutting to the film’s eponymous protagonist in apparent agony, falling on a diagonal behind a crisscrossing cage of spiked posts (Fig. 1). Desperate and guilt-ridden over the death of her close friend, whose lover she seduced and claimed for herself, Thaïs has chosen to commit suicide. The nearly seven-minute sequence comprises a series of mostly still shots at varying distances from the subject, who wanders through a maze of diaphanous fumes and geometric abstraction (the work of Italian Futurist painter and scenographer Enrico Prampolini) punctuated by shots of the clock, its hands still but its timestamp changing. An intertitle reads, “Fearfully counting the minutes that seem to her to be centuries, Thaïs agonizes.”

Employing what might be considered a rather literal interpretation of Umberto Boccioni’s “force-lines,” the clock reigns in the abstraction of the diegetic, or narrative, space. This curious reassertion of reality, a reminder of the durational experience of the spectator, seems redundant in a nascent medium whose essential element was to record movement and narrative in time. As Thaïs wades through Prampolini’s jutting spears, dizzying vortices, and spectral mists, Bragaglia’s camera follows, shifting from close-ups, to graphic long shots, to the frame-filling clock. While the minute hand advances alongside the film’s vertiginous diegesis, Thaïs’s moving body is simultaneously at odds and in conversation with the clock as each shot registers and manifests time differently.

Enamored of speed, mechanization, technology, and dynamism, the Italian Futurists might have been expected to embrace cinema, then just over a decade old, as the apotheosis of modern art-making. In their 1916 manifesto “The Futurist Cinema,” authors F.T. Marinetti, Bruno Corra, Emilio Settimelli, Arnaldo Ginna, Giacomo Balla, and Remo Chiti proclaim the liberation of film as a new expressive medium, “vaster and nimbler than all existing arts.” Prior to the publication of this manifesto, though, the role of film in the Futurist movement was fraught with debate. Whether implicated in the divisive conflict spearheaded by Umberto Boccioni over the creative potential of photography as an artistic medium, or merely an unfortunate byproduct of the relatively sparse cinematic landscape of pre-World War I Italy, Futurist cinema was markedly limited in product and scope. It consisted of a few abstract experiments by Arnaldo Ginna and Bruno Corra, three
films by Bragaglia, and *Vita Futurista* [Futurist Life] (1916), the only official film of the movement. Bragaglia’s *Thaïs*—despite its aesthetic innovation, a curiously familiar melodrama that smacks of D’Annunzian romance—finds itself the sole extant representative of Futurist forays into this new visual technology, as all of the other films have been lost.

Notwithstanding the scarcity of Futurist filmic artifacts, a theory of time, movement, and performance can be traced through *Thaïs* and “The Futurist Cinema” manifesto. From Boccioni’s force-lines and Balla’s chronophotographic paintings, to Bragaglia’s photodynamism and later cinematic endeavors, the visualization of time and narrative constitutes the aesthetic core of the Futurist cinematic doctrine. In this essay, I examine Futurist responses to the photographic image, both moving and still, focusing specifically on the formal, narrative, and technological means by which Futurists attempted to address representations of time, movement, and the human body. I first consider the role of photography in Futurist thought, particularly as Bragaglia’s articulates it in “Futurist Photodynamism.” An analysis of the 1916 manifesto on Futurist cinema follows. Finally, I trace the narratological strategies employed by Bragaglia in *Thaïs*, attending to the depiction of time and movement. I suggest that fetishes of speed and action materialized not so much as the paragon of technological advancement (the film camera or the celluloid coursing through the projector), but rather in the human
body itself: the individual as object, made the locus and representative of movement or stasis, and the image of the body in motion as the exalted index of Futurist success.

"Icy Reproduction of Reality": Photography and Absolute Motion in Futurist Thought

Marinetti and his cohort make clear in their 1916 manifesto that the Futurist potential of cinema lay not in its technological primacy, but in its capacity for performance and the visual rendering of narrative. The document’s cosigners envisioned cinema to be the ultimate instantiation of their experiments with literature and theater, proclaiming it “a new theatrical zone” that would serve as an antidote to the “pedantic” literary review, the “predictable” theatrical production, and the “tedious and oppressive” novel. Simultaneously, from its onset in Marinetti’s race towards and rebirth from the “Maternal ditch,” to quote his Futurist manifesto, Futurism was fundamentally concerned with time and its products: history, movement, speed, and the future itself. Intuitively, cinema seems to fulfill the promise of Futurism’s ambitions to embrace technology in its creative endeavors to visualize time, speed, and movement. Yet, the Futurists conducted only a few experiments with the medium prior to the publication of their manifesto of Futurist cinema, deeming it too realistic. Bragaglia himself rejected cinema’s “icy reproduction of reality” and asserted in his 1911 essay on photodynamism that the medium failed to capture movement’s essence, instead dividing it arbitrarily and without rhythm.

An evaluation of the extent to which Futurist cinema and the 1916 manifesto embodied the movement’s core values must be contextualized within the proliferation of photographic arts in Italy and the debate amongst prominent Futurists as to the medium’s potential for artistic innovation. Bragaglia was not alone in experimenting with still and moving images simultaneously; many Italian writers compared the uses and experiences of photography and cinema during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Looking at photography and cinema magazines from this period, Giorgio Bertellini has noted that Italian authors wrote more extensively about the overlap between the two mediums from as early as 1905 than journalists and critics in other European countries. Periodicals such as _Il Dilettante di Fotografia_ [The Amateur Photographer] (Milan, 1891–1905), _Bullettino della Società Fotografia Italiana_ [Bulletin of the Italian Photography Society] (Florence, 1889–1912), and _La Fotografia Artistica_ [Artistic Photography] (Turin, 1904–1917) routinely discussed photography and cinema interchangeably, suggested that photographers should produce films as a means to expand their businesses, and provided advice on coloring, reproduction,
camera technique, and lighting for both mediums. Despite this technological, cultural, and historical imbrication, the Futurists would ultimately come to reject one medium and embrace the other. Unsurprisingly, therefore, both “The Futurist Cinema” manifesto and the films themselves (Thaïs, at least) respond, even if obliquely, to concerns Futurists initially raised about photography.

As Giovanni Lista notes in the opening catalogue essay for the 2001 exhibit “Futurism and Photography” at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, London, by the time Marinetti wrote the first version of the Futurist manifesto in 1908, photography was a familiar presence in Italy, as was the debate over its status as an art. Pictorialist photographers staged an exhibition of their work in Florence in 1895, and the National Photographic Congress held its inaugural exhibitions in Turin (1898) and Florence (1899), respectively. Pictorialists aimed to align the new medium with painting by using labor-intensive production methods to create unique, non-reproducible works, and often drew on Symbolist traditions for narrative content, thus unwittingly setting the rhetoric surrounding photography-as-art in opposition to the artistic goals of the Futurists. Simultaneously, Étienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotography was becoming well-known in Italy due to his work in Naples, where he conducted chronophotographic research at the Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn after 1870. In 1882, Marey developed a camera resembling a rifle that captured 12 timed exposures on a rotating disc, such that the final product contained each image within a picture that delineated the subject’s movement over time.

Mary Ann Doane has suggested that Marey’s experiments marked the start of cinema’s fixation on instantaneity that would continue throughout its history, noting that Marey’s work simultaneously aspired to represent the instant, to dissect it, and to imagine its reconstruction. Given the insistence on “dynamism” in painting and in sculpture by Boccioni, Marey’s chronophotographic experiments were of interest to the artist, who strove to reproduce the “force-lines” of an object’s movement and to provide an aesthetic interpretation of rhythm and the innate vibrations of the world. Boccioni distinguished between “absolute” and “relative” motion, or as Lista more simply defines them, an object’s “energy” and its “kinetics,” respectively. Boccioni describes dynamism as the exchange between an object’s “specific, characteristic motion (absolute motion) and the transformation which the object undergoes in relation to the environment (relative motion), whether that be mobile or static.” Moreover, the “relative” motion that can be scientifically registered by Marey’s chronophotography does not suffice to represent an object’s dynamism because it records only discontinuous markers of movement and thus lacks the ability to depict “absolute” motion; for Boccioni, only painting and sculpture met this criterion.

Boccioni drew his conception of time from Henri Bergson’s notion
of *durée*, and so asserted that even when the camera captured motion, it inevitably froze it—an effect antithetical to the poetics of dynamism and the obsession with speed that permeated Futurist thought. As Bertellini notes, Bergson was widely read in Italy during the pre-war period and his work permeated Futurist thought.\textsuperscript{16} The philosopher famously associated cinema not with movement or dynamism, but with immobility. In *Creative Evolution* (1907), Bergson posits a notion of cinema’s time as merely an “illusion,” suggesting that movement exists not in the image, but “in the apparatus” and is, unlike Boccioni’s “absolute motion” of essence and energy, “abstract and simple, *movement in general*, so to speak.”\textsuperscript{17} In her investigation of time and memory in contemporary time-based art, Homay King complicates Bergson’s view of cinema, suggesting that his critique derived not only from the fundamental immobility of the photographic frame, but also from its determinism; once printed and permanently embedded in the celluloid grains, a film’s images (barring conservation issues) will remain the same regardless of where or how many times they are run through a projector.\textsuperscript{18} Despite Bergson’s explicit rejection of cinema in regard to its potential for dynamism, Boccioni applied these ideas most trenchantly to photography. Perhaps he recognized that the medium, inflected by Pictorialist rhetoric by the early twentieth century, posed a threat to the content and meaning of painting, even if a marginal one. Indeed, the manifesto on cinema deals so extensively with diegetic content and narrative structure that it bears to reason its authors felt it best to simply sidestep all attempts to reconcile cinema’s mobility-immobility paradox and instead engage with it not as a visual, pictorial medium, but as a performative space.

Meanwhile, other Futurist artists more fully embraced the visual potency and theoretical implications of photography. Giacomo Balla’s three paintings from 1912, *Dog on a Leash*, *Girl Running on a Balcony*, and *Rhythms of the Bow*, famously suggest the analytical aesthetic of chronophotography. Despite the formal affinities between Balla’s paintings and Marey’s work, Marta Braun proposes that Balla’s use of photography as a visual resource likely derived from his friendship with brothers Anton Giulio and Arturo Bragaglia, whose photodynamic images specifically rejected the scientific analysis that Marey’s chronophotography enabled.\textsuperscript{19} The Bragaglias instead attempted to reconcile the static image with the Bergsonian concept of *durée*, which had prevented artists like Boccioni from supporting photography as a Futurist art. Between 1911 and 1912, the Bragaglias, with funding from F.T. Marinetti, produced a series of photodynamic pictures that used long exposure times to visualize the movement of bodies performing a variety of simple gestures. The photographs depict a partly blurred and partly distinguishable trajectory of motion, indexical to both direction and speed.

No doubt consciously drawing on Boccioni’s rhetoric of plastic dynamism and composer Francesco Balilla Pratella’s musical dynamism to situate
photography within this particular constellation of mediums, Anton Giulio Bragaglia writes in “Futurist Photodynamism,”

The static synthesis of two static states, even when they are the principal states, does not suffice. What is needed is a synthesis, but it must be a dynamic synthesis of complex evolution.... With Photodynamics we have obtained this synthesis of dynamic evolution and have liberated photography from the obscenity of brutal realism.20

Here, Bragaglia sets his photodynamism in direct opposition to Marey’s chronophotography and simultaneously rejects the misguided mechanical result of the camera’s multiple exposures, implying that his own theory and practice of photodynamism restores not only the role of the individual artist as creative agent, but also the photographic product as embodiment of an intangible but visually insistent energy. Later in the same manifesto, Bragaglia declares his intention to abandon photographic and cinematic realism in favor of an artistic practice that emphasizes the “interior essence of things” through movement.21

Fig. 2. Anton Giulio Bragaglia, [Photodynamic Portrait of a Woman]. 1924, gelatin silver print, 4 1/2 x 6 3/8 in. (11.4 x 16.2 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. © The Estate of Anton Giulio Bragaglia / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Bragaglia does not explicitly reference the human subject in his manifesto, and yet nearly every photodynamic work that he produced makes use of the human body in its demonstration of motion. This exclusive focus on the human body contrasts markedly with the practices of Marey and his contemporary, Eadweard Muybridge, both of whom studied the bodies of sportsmen, gymnasts, dancers, or other human figures performing everyday tasks, but who also demonstrated their methods with prolific images of animal movement. To this day, Muybridge’s sequence of a running horse remains firmly established as a key moment in the histories of both photography and cinema. Marey’s and Muybridge’s studies of human motion tend to show the entire body, whereas the Bragaglias’ photodynamic works depict only parts of the body, often sharply dissociated from their whole. One photograph shows a female face moving in a lateral arc across the frame (Fig. 2). Flattened by the photodynamic process, it resembles a mask floating in darkness and unattached to any discernible wearer, ticking like a metronome. The woman’s body, in contrast, forms a softly sweeping arch in the lower half of the frame, the hint of a lapel emerging as quickly as it dissipates on either side. This dissociation of body part from human whole later came to define some of Bragaglia’s most innovative work in *Thaïs*, where the facial close-up serves a disorienting, paradoxically de-individuating purpose.

Bragaglia asserts that photodynamism simultaneously enables a “minute analysis” of motion, as well as the “concept and general idea of motion,” indicating an expansion of Marey’s project that visually tends toward abstraction.22 Anton Giulio and Arturo Bragaglia’s *The Bow* (1911) depicts a man performing the simple and familiar gesture to which its title alludes, but as his body bends downward across the frame of the photo-

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graph, it multiplies and blurs so as to suggest an overall effect of geometric shapes colliding with and blending into one another (Fig. 3). The motion as a whole denotes a triangle whose edges round in the creation of a cone-like shape, punctuated by spheres corresponding to the figure’s head, which are repeated staccato-like across the upper register. Like all of Bragaglia’s subjects, the figure emerges from a black background, excised from any contextualizing mise-en-scène, such that his body becomes an icon for movement itself and for the Bergsonian durée that Bragaglia invoked in order to elevate photography to the status of art within Futurist circles. In other words, if Marey’s chronophotography precisely registers Boccioni’s “relative motion,” Bragaglia’s photodynamism attempts to move beyond it, literally blurring its lines. Moreover, in his manifesto on photodynamism, Bragaglia quotes Bergson: “To grasp what happens in the intervals in between is more than human,” meaning that the durational time of human experience manifests itself in the discontinuous space left empty by Marey’s chronophotography.23 Curiously, for Bragaglia and for other Futurists concerned with capturing the essence of motion in art, in order to illustrate continuity—to fill in the interval—the human figure must demonstrate and stand in for the more-than-human. The body, not the clock, is the marker of Futurist time.

Notwithstanding what appears to be the formal success of this project, and despite the vehemence of Bragaglia’s rhetoric, which echoes Marinetti’s own poetics with prolific declarations and the use of the first-person plural, the Futurists fell under the sway of Boccioni and ultimately rejected photodynamism, ousting the Bragaglias from the group. On March 24, 1913, Anton Giulio organized an exhibition of his and his brother’s prints at the Galleria Romagna where they displayed 30 photodynamic works. The exhibition initiated a short period in which Anton Giulio (the brother most in the public eye) regularly delivered lectures throughout Italy and published a new manifesto, “La Fotografia del Movimento” [Photography of Movement], and an updated edition of “Futurist Photodynamism.” In 1913, Bragaglia published a book with Giuseppe Ugo Nalato in Rome that featured “Futurist Photodynamism” and sixteen photodynamic images. The release of the book was met with strident criticism from Boccioni, whose rebuttal in Lacerba effectively signaled the shoring up of a new Futurist group in Rome that included Balla, Dinamo Correnti, Libero Altomare, Luciano Folgore, and Gustavo Bonaventura, with whom the Bragaglias continued to remain close, and the exile of the brothers from Boccioni’s and Marinetti’s faction.24 Despite their expulsion, the Bragaglias continued to produce writings and photographs under Futurism’s name, while Anton Giulio began to work with the moving image, which would be championed by Marinetti and the old guard just three years later.
A Polyexpressive “School for Children”: The New Futurist Cinema

In September 1916, one month prior to Boccioni’s death, Marinetti, in conjunction with Corra, Settimelli, Ginna, Balla, and Chiti, published “The Futurist Cinema.” This manifesto suggests that Boccioni’s more photographically-inclined colleagues were still open to considering at least one of the photographic arts as a Futurist medium. Up to this point, the only mention of cinema in Futurist manifestos was by Bragaglia, who had rejected it for precisely the same reasons that Boccioni denied the viability of photography and photodynamism: “cinematography shatters [movement] in the frames of the film strip” only to produce a reproduction of reality. Italian literary and cultural scholar Millicent Marcus argues that film lent itself best to Futurist ambitions because, as a medium that depended on constant movement (16 to 24 frames per second), it was particularly well suited to depict speed. But, as we have seen, it was precisely the paradox of film’s material condition, by which a constantly moving filmstrip is necessarily parsed into distinct frames, that proved an obstacle to Futurist artists. In their manifesto, Marinetti and his cosigners bypass this medium-specific problem and, with it, the mechanical natures of the camera and cinema more generally. The authors initially champion the cinema not for any advance it makes over photography, but rather as the natural endpoint for Futurist experiments in literature and theater. Having established film within this particular narrative paradigm, the manifesto’s signers declare cinema an independent art capable of encompassing all other arts through what the Futurists term its essential “polyexpressiveness.” Ultimately, they call for a remarkable synthesis of mediums and disciplines: “In short, it will be painting, architecture, sculpture, words-in-freedom, music of colors, lines, and forms, a clash of objects and realities thrown together at random.”

On one level, the film camera seems to fulfill the Futurist techno-fantasy of the machine-body of the multiplied man, with the cameraperson’s bodily connection to his or her camera and the capacity to ostensibly make visible a subjective experience via that union. In this way, cinema answers Marinetti’s call in “Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine”: “On the day when man will be able to externalize his will and make it into a huge invisible arm, Dream and Desire, which are empty words today, will master and reign over space and time.” However, the similarities between the medium and Marinetti’s vision of a human-machine hybrid do not take primacy in his newfound interest in cinema in 1916. Despite their claims for the polyexpressive nature of the medium, the signers focus on cinema’s structural, narrative, and performative capacities. A mechanical body, with its vision determined by a machine, might be at odds with the Futurist mythos of the inspired, autonomous genius whose will is actualized through his art. In that sense, the body of the cameraperson is rendered subordinate to the bod-
ies on screen and in the diegetic space of the film; those actors then embody Futurist fantasies of youth, speed, and loveless romance.

The manifesto is composed of an introduction and fourteen points that call for a variety of Futurist demonstrations ranging from the documentation of political conventions, to narrative depictions of Futurist romance, to experiments in depicting the human body. The manifesto demands that cinema’s narrative content strive toward pedagogy and prescription, in line with the more educational concerns of second-wave Futurism that emerged at the end of the war. The signers declare cinema to be “the best school for children: a school of joy, speed, force, courage, and heroism.” The Futurists hoped to depict these scenes with “cinematic analogy” and graphic collisions of “words-in-freedom.” This method echoes Marinetti’s “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature” (1912), whose emphasis on the structural similarities between film editing and language prefigures the work of Russian filmmakers and theorists Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein. Marinetti and his cohort called for the use of “cinematic analogy” to describe the subjective experience of the characters within the narrative, claiming, “The universe will be our vocabulary…. We shall add color to the dialogue by swiftly and simultaneously showing every image that passes through the actor’s brain.” The synesthetic quality of this proclamation is noteworthy, as “color” and “dialogue” unite, despite being the two elements most glaringly absent from early cinema. Marinetti’s statement suggests that he envisioned a Futurist cinema that, through its visual and narrative style, would achieve a potentially absorptive, compensatory experience for the viewer.

In total, the Futurist cinematic output consisted of a few abstract short films called “chromatic symphonies” (described only in Bruno Corra’s manifesto “Abstract Cinema, Chromatic Music”), three feature-length films by Bragaglia—*Thaïs*, *Il mio cadavere* [My Corpse] (1917), and *Perfido incanto* [Evil Spell] (1918)—and *Vita Futurista* (1916), collaboratively attributed to and starring Marinetti, Corra, Balla, Settimelli, and Chiti. *Vita Futurista*, now extant only in archival materials and stills, pictured each of the signers of “The Futurist Cinema” and was an attempt to illustrates the manifesto’s tenets. In her analysis of surviving materials, Marcus asserts that *Vita Futurista* enacts a list-like application of the manifesto’s calls for speed and the mechanized man. While integrating disparate narratives through montage rather than the use of intertitles, the makers of *Vita Futurista* fell short of attempting the kind of abstraction and formal play that would characterize later avant-garde works. Consequently, they demanded that the performing body itself make legible Futurist ideology in a series of sketches that were received with tangible hesitation by their first audiences. The vignettes alternately portrayed young men harassing a passéist older gentleman, women in tinfoil costumes dancing through rays of light, and bodies changing shape as they are reflected in a succession of convex or concave mirrors.
most of the episodes center on human performance, some included objects as protagonists, manifesting Marinetti’s call for cinema as the synthesis of narrative and plastic form. In an untitled sequence, Balla displays some sculptural objects and wooden neckties, illustrating their formal and dynamic qualities.\(^{38}\) In another, titled “Caricatura dell’Amleto, simbolo del passatismo pessimista” [“Caricature of Hamlet, Symbol of Pessimistic Passéism”], Balla falls in love with a chair, whose spirit is represented as the double exposure of a ghostly young woman in a white dress, and together they give birth to a footstool.\(^{39}\) Such scenes suggest that while the body and movement remained critical elements in illustrating the manifesto’s tenets, conceptions of what constituted a living body or an acting agent were fluid and afforded space for satire.

Time, Movement, and the Body in Anton Giulio Bragaglia’s \textit{Thaïs}

\textit{Thaïs} is the only extant Futurist film that can be seen in its entirety, so it is difficult to gauge its relationship to other Futurist films or judge its comparative success in implementing Futurist theories. The film shares its name, and very obliquely its content, with Anatole France’s novel (1890) and Jules Massenet’s opera, which premiered in Paris in 1894 and Milan in 1903. The novel and opera both tell the story of an Alexandrian courtesan (Thaïs) who converts to Christianity at the urging of Cenobite monk Athanaël. While this process of conversion reveals the monk’s baser, lustful nature and compromises his holy status, Thaïs successfully achieves salvation. In contrast, Bragaglia’s film follows its aristocratic heroine as she seduces the Count of San Remo, the lover of her best friend, Bianca Belincioni-Stagno. The film lacks any overtones of religious eroticism and has little in common with either France’s plotline or Massenet’s stage adaptation, with the exception of Thaïs’s death, which dramatically concludes both the opera and the beloved early diva film.\(^{40}\)

\textit{Thaïs} defies easy characterization as Futurist because of its ties to “passéist” narratives and narrative forms, as well as its frequent use of intertitles (banned, according to Marinetti’s “Futurist Cinema”). While passéism, or passatismo, was not a codified aesthetic movement per se, Marinetti saw it as a backward-looking cultural conservatism that the Futurists should seek to upend. The early Futurist performative declaration “Against Passéist Venice” offers insight into Marinetti’s conception of passéism. In July of 1910, Marinetti, Boccioni, Carlo Carrà and Luigi Russolo tossed 800,000 leaflets from St. Mark’s Clock Tower into the square below. They declared war on the old Venice, “enfeebled and undone by centuries of worldly pleasure,” and flooded with tourists, newlyweds, courtesans, and the elderly.\(^{41}\) Six years later, Marinetti and his co-authors declared cinema to be the Futurist
response to the quintessentially passéist novel: the “static companion to those who are sedentary, nostalgic, and neutralist” and an art form replete with romantic clichés and circuitous description. In addition to depending on “passéist” romance for much of its plot development, Thaïs relies heavily on descriptive intertitles to advance its narrative, particularly in its expository section. Blocks of text, some so long that they cannot fit within a single frame, describe Thaïs as both author and libertine. “Thaïs” is merely a nom de plume and one of several names, her true identity being the Slavic Countess Vera Préobajenska, nicknamed “Nitchevo”—meaning “nothing” in Russian. She is educated, aristocratic, and free from the confines of marriage and traditional romances—the pinnacle of Futurist womanhood. But, like the courtesan from whom she apparently draws her name, Thaïs is a woman with many lovers, whom she manipulates like puppets while holding no emotional attachments, threatening the Futurist patriarchy as she entangles men in lustful traps and reduces them to playthings. The echoes between the nature of Thaïs’s menace and the distrust of the camera are striking; both disallow the will of the (male) subject, positioning him as a mechanism controlled by another (be it woman or machine), rather than as a machine-warrior, the multiplied-man of Futurist fantasies.

Overall, the plot falls short of revolutionary, either in Futurist or feminist terms, with its messy love triangle and the final desperate deaths of its two heroines. When Bianca discovers Thaïs’s advances toward the Count of San Remo, she falls into suicidal despair and departs on a fatal horseback ride. Wracked by guilt, Thaïs commits suicide as well, precipitating the film’s transition from a poorly acted melodrama to a lengthy, visually abstract, and graphic suicide sequence. Marcus argues that the first part of Bragaglia’s film is not a failed effort at Futurist cinema, but rather a conscious depiction of passéism replete with femininity, heavy-handed descriptive intertitles, and lesbian undertones to the tune of Charles Baudelaire’s erotic, Symbolist poetry. She suggests that Thaïs’s symbolic death rejects and subverts this passéism, and claims that Thaïs must be removed from the narrative both as woman and as representative of sentimentality—two entities without a place in a Futurist world. Marcus sees the final scene as both a violent, visceral rejection of passéism (symbolized by the death of Thaïs) and the apotheosis of Bragaglia’s efforts to express the “interior essence of the object itself.” Prampolini’s stage sets, Marcus argues, embody this “essence” as hallucinated manifestations of externalized psychological distress.

I argue, however, that a closer analysis of Bragaglia’s formal and narrative explorations compels a more nuanced reading, not reducible to an allegory of the erasure of passéism and femininity. Marcus is correct to note the striking contrast between the first 30 and final five minutes of the
film, and certainly there are elements that suggest a direct engagement with the anti-passéist Futurist rhetoric (the use of Baudelaire’s poetry in some intertitles might be seen as ironic, for example), but Bragaglia’s innovative visual strategies are present throughout the duration of film. Within the first five minutes, amidst the barrage of descriptive intertitles, several top hats parade across the frame, changing scale and shape as Bragaglia switches from close-up to long-shot. This sequence is delightfully textural, with the hats’ sheen doubling the reflective surface of the cinema screen. The shot recalls Marinetti’s call for playful synecdoche in “The Futurist Cinema” and the hats embody the previously discussed fluidity between human form and object. They simultaneously evoke the blurred heads of Bragaglia’s *The Bow* and *Portrait of a Photodynamic Woman* and anticipate the more active, abstracted role that objects will play in the final suicide sequence. Additionally, Prampolini’s sets throughout the film are anything but passéist reproductions of the theater stage, and the characters move gracefully across them with gestures that suggest liquidity and continuity. A closer analysis of the final sequence of the film also reveals Bragaglia’s engagement with theories of motion, photography, and film to be more complicated than previously acknowledged. The sequence does not merely revise Bragaglia’s photodynamic experiments, but demonstrates a commitment to the specific instructions posited by “The Futurist Cinema.” The loss of Thaïs does not herald a Futurist vision through allegorical self-sacrifice, as Marcus suggests, but her body itself makes legible that vision throughout the film. In other words, Thaïs’s movement across the screen, over time, and through diegetic space, particularly in the final suicide sequence, evinces the Futurist fixation on time and its narratives.

If the film fails to illustrate every one of Marinetti’s fourteen points, the final sequence can be seen as a montage-based visualization of interior experience, but not merely as a direct analogy to an object’s “essence,” as Marcus suggests. The first point of the manifesto stipulates, “If we should want to express a character’s state of anguish, instead of showing him in various stages of suffering, we would give an equivalent impression with the view of a jagged and cavernous mountain.” Bragaglia, rather than showing mountains, has instead—with the help of Prampolini—created them on-screen and placed Thaïs within them. Geometric structures seem to swallow Thaïs as she navigates stacks of unidentifiable obstructions. The scene recalls the opening shot of the film, in which Thaïs smiles wildly as she is consumed by a set of interconnected triangles that seem to spiral into the screen and away from the viewer (Fig. 4). The arrangement of figure and ground in both of these scenes exemplifies Bragaglia’s manipulation of scale, disorienting the viewer and alienating Thaïs from any recognizable diegetic space or narrative. On what resembles an assembly of large building blocks, there appears a panoply of painted shapes in black and white: a black cat,
biomorphic globules, sharp zigzags, and a tightly coiled spiral. Wearing a ruffled polka-dotted dress, Thaïs simultaneously floats and blends into the backdrop, raising her hand repeatedly in a gesture that is in dialogue with the shapes that surround her. Thaïs enlivens the objects that compose the set and together they exchange abstract patterns and decorative, enigmatic signs, muddling any distinction between the actress and her surroundings, or between the living body and the Futurist object.

Bragaglia allows Thaïs to languish across Prampolini’s sets in agony or bizarrely ecstatic pleasure in a sequence whose duration suggests an affinity with the opera’s final death scene, indicating that his goal is not a full erasure of Thaïs as a purported embodiment of passéism. Thaïs’s curious nickname itself, Nitchevo, complicates the idea of Thaïs’s mere existence throughout the film and obscures an easy reading of her death as such. Rather, the movements of the actress through the set—which becomes remarkably flattened in its geometric hallucinations, as if trapping Thaïs between two-dimensional frames—further develop Bragaglia’s thoughts laid out in “Futurist Photodynamism” (Fig. 5). Even if Bragaglia was merely elaborating an allegorical death of passéist Italian cinema and the sentimental woman, he was also grappling with issues of durational movement and time, as well as the myriad ways to represent them. The disorienting effect
that Bragaglia produces through the manipulation of scale reappears in his close-ups during this final sequence. These shots mark a divergence from the cinematography in the first part of the film, in which he relied primarily on long shots and a static camera. In the suicide sequence, Bragaglia intercuts short close-ups of Thaïs falling through darkness or writhing, trapped behind crisscrossing spikes, with longer shots of her moving through the set (see Fig. 1). Bragaglia’s close-ups break both spatial and temporal continuity, instantiating Doane’s theorization of the close-up as a “for-itself,” dissociated from the mise-en-scène and uncoupled from strategies of narrative cohesion. In Thaïs, the close-up disrupts the semblance of durational movement that seems inherent to the moving image and introduces a space of static separation that is almost purely visual.

Returning to the scene with which I began this essay, Bragaglia’s depiction of the clock in this final sequence is its most illuminating, as well as its most troubling, aspect. The clock fills the frame four times during the last two minutes of the suicide sequence at nearly regular intervals (ten seconds, thirteen seconds, and thirteen seconds apart), establishing a rhythm that illustrates what its face signifies. Still, time dilates; over the course of
two minutes, five minutes pass on the clock, such that our experience as viewers diverges from Thaïs’s experience described in the intertitles (“Fearfully counting the minutes that seem to her to be centuries, Thaïs agonizes”). Thaïs experiences time more slowly than the clock depicts it passing, implying that the essence of lived time differs from the interval-based time marked by the clock. The minute hand strikes six-thirty and a final intertitle declares, “Thaïs dies!” Yet, she appears again on screen with a minute remaining, during which she slowly, elegantly sinks into the black depths of the screen space away from the viewer. Moreover, Thaïs remains within the frame, in close-up—a movement out of time, if we apply Doane’s theorization here—before a mist overtakes the lower half of the frame and she dissolves entirely into the darkness. Aestheticized, her death is not alien to Futurist narratives, but the structure and content of the sequence itself move beyond a merely allegorical reading and suggest sustained play with the notion of continuity and the visualization of cinema time.

To a certain degree, Thaïs falls prey to the predicament of Marinetti’s manifestos of literature: in an effort to reject passéist film style, it still partially embodies it. And if Bragaglia initially wished to investigate the way that photography could depict movement durationally and to visualize the “essence” of motion, he seems to have abandoned that effort in his cinematic endeavors of the late 1910s. During this period, Bragaglia subordinated that project to the potential of film to tell a Futurist narrative through performance, articulated in “The Futurist Cinema.” However, like photodynamism’s insistence on the human figure as signifer of narrative movement and the passage of time, performance does not purely serve narratological ends in Bragaglia’s Thaïs. Rather, it plays a more nuanced role in the representation, manipulation, and experience of time. In the film’s final moments, the clock manifests a rhythmic but unrealistic time, despite being a “realistic” (indexical) measure of time on screen (and, for Bergson, the quintessential signifier of non-durational time). In a paradoxical way, the clock fulfills Bragaglia’s hope in “Futurist Photodynamism” to “in short, record reality unrealistically.” Thaïs performs this “unrealistic” time as she wanders through the disorienting, abstracted space of cinema. If, as Mary Ann Doane argues in The Emergence of Cinematic Time, chronophotography “speaks its own time,” then in cinema the performing body, be it human or object, “speaks” the passage of Futurist time.
Notes

1. The intertitles that accompany the extant copy of the film are in French: “Comptant avec effroi les minutes qui lui semblent des siècles, Thaïs agonise.” Translation is my own. Throughout the essay, translations appear in cited sources unless otherwise noted.

2. For Boccioni, “force-lines” represent the dynamic essence of an object. He writes, “We [the Futurists] want to give a style to our movement. We don’t want to observe, dissect, or transpose into pictorial terms. We identify ourselves with the thing itself, which is a profoundly different matter. Hence, for us, the object has no form in itself; the only definable thing is the line which reveals the relationship between the object’s weight (quantity) and its expansion (quality). This has suggested to us the notion of force-lines, which characterize the object and enable us to see it as a whole—it is the essential interpretation of the object, the perception of life itself.” Umberto Boccioni, “The Plastic Foundations of Futurist Sculpture and Painting,” in Futurist Manifestos, ed. Umbro Apollonio, trans. Robert Brain (Boston: MFA Publications, 2001), 90.


5. General Gabriele d’Annunzio was a prominent Italian poet, journalist, playwright, and later soldier and politician, at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. His literary work married traditions of French Symbolism and British Aestheticism and emphasized youth, sensuality, and power. For one recent account of D’Annunzio’s life, his artistic practices, and his influence on the rise of fascism in Italy, see Lucy Hughes-Hallett, The Pike: Gabriele d’Annunzio, Poet, Seducer and Preacher of War (New York: Anchor, 2014).


7. In Marinetti’s founding manifesto of the Futurist movement, he dramatizes a frenzied automotive crash fueled by the revelation of Futurism. He
writes, “‘Let’s break out of the horrible shell of wisdom and throw ourselves like pride-ripened fruit into the wide, contorted mouth of the wind! Let’s give ourselves utterly to the Unknown, not in desperation, but only to replenish the deep wells of the Absurd!’ The words were scarcely out of my mouth when I spun my car around….and to my disgust rolled over into a ditch….Oh! Maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water!….When I came up—torn, filthy, and stinking—from under the capsized car, I felt the white-hot iron of joy deliciously pass through my heart!” F.T. Marinetti, “The Founding Manifesto of Futurism,” in Let’s Murder the Moonshine: Selected Writings, ed. R.W. Flint, trans. R.W. Flint et al. (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Classics, 1991), 48.


11. The historical archive of the Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn holds documents detailing Marey’s work in Naples, where he studied the movement of fish in the center’s tanks. Also see Lista, Futurism and Photography, 9.


305.


21. “Our aim is to make a decisive move away from reality, since cinematography, photography, and chronophotography already exist to deal with mechanically precise and cold reproduction. *We are seeking the interior essence of things: pure movement; and we prefer to see everything in motion, for in motion, as things are dematerialized they also become idealized, while still retaining, deep down, a strong skeleton of truth.*” Ibid., 376

22. Bragaglia characterized this aesthetic as the “recording [of] reality unrealistically.” Ibid., 366.

23. Bergson, qtd. in Bragaglia, “Futurist Photodynamism,” 376. Translated by Bragaglia into Italian and then by Rainey into English. As Rainey notes, Bragaglia’s source for this quotation was not specified.

24. Boccioni wrote, “All the worse for those short-sighted people who thought we were infatuated with this episode; who thought we were merely chasing trajectories and mechanical gestures. We have always rejected with disgust and contempt even the remotest connection with photography.” Boccioni qtd. in Lista, *Futurism and Photography*, 25.


28. Ibid., 231.


31. Ibid., 230.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 231.
36. One such late avant-garde film is Fernand Léger’s Dadaist *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), which is characterized by a dizzying grind of gears and frame-filling geometric forms.
37. The film was a failure at the box office and spurred viewers to throw rocks at the screen. Ibid.
38. Descriptions for each episode can be found in Marcus, “Anton Giulio Bragaglia’s Thaïs.”
39. Contemporary video and performance artist Trisha Baga created a short video titled *Love Story of Balla and a Chair* in 2009 for *Futurist Life Redux*, a Performa commission by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Portland Green Cultural Products to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Futurist manifesto. The video is at once interpretation, response, and remake, reviving and expanding upon the visual tactics that Marinetti calls for in “The Futurist Cinema.”
43. The intertitle reads: “D’origine slave, la Comtesse Véra Préobajenska que ses amis ont surnommé ‘Nitchevo’ a su se créer, par ses excentricités, une certaine réputation littéraire sous le pseudonyme de THAIS.” [“Of Slavic or-
igin, the Countess Véra Pröbajenksa, nicknamed ‘Nitchevo’ by her friends, used her eccentricities to create for herself a certain literary reputation under the pseudonym ‘THAIS.’” Translation is my own.

44. The intertitles read: “De la célèbre courtisane elle aime à se donner les folles allures: et pourtant, très sincèrement, elle n’aime personne” and, “Courte et bonne! Telle est la devise que Thaïs a imposée à ses nombreux adorateurs, dont, comme d’une collection de pantins, elle s’amuse énormément.” [“As a famous courtesan, she loves to assume incredible guises: and yet, quite honestly, she loves no one” and, “Short and sweet! Such is the motto that Thaïs required of her numerous admirers, with whom, like a collection of puppets, she amuses herself enormously.” Translations are my own.]


46. Ibid., 77.

47. Ibid., 79.


49. Ibid., 231.


51. See note 1.

52. Original: “Thaïs meurt!”

53. Death, for example, is at once a force of discontinuity, but also in some ways the continuity of “nitchevo.”


55. Doane, The Emergence of Cinematic Time, 231.