At first glance, the night scenes in the Futurist paintings Streetlight: A Study in Light, by Giacomo Balla, and Forces of the Street, by Umberto Boccioni, seem to have little relation to James Whistler’s Nocturne: Grey and Gold. Yet although the Futurists created their night scenes some 30 years later than Whistler, when we consider the Futurist night scenes as a response to the late 19th century nocturnes of Whistler, we can see the ways in which their creations departed from but also modernized the form of the nocturne in painting. In my paper, I will explore how the Futurist paintings of Balla and Boccioni embody the ideals advocated by the writings of the Futurist movement, which embraced violent progress through machinization and destruction.

1. Color representations of Streetlight, Forces of the Street, and Nocturne: Grey and Gold are attached in Appendices A, B, & C, respectively.

their attention and admiration on electric lights at night, making light itself the subject of the piece, instead of simply the lingering details in the background of Nocturne: Grey and Gold. They also redefine the vocabulary of description in painting: Balla with his fragmented precision borne out of his Divisionist past, and Boccioni with the influences of Cubism and Expressionism. However, both paintings are ultimately Futurist in their modern subject, in their violent glorification of the machine, and in their depiction of light as an active force that takes on anthropomorphic, even humanistic qualities. The Futurists embraced a comparison of painting to analogous sounds, evoked by both visual and musical energy in their paintings, as did Whistler with calm tones of the Nocturnes. Yet if his Nocturnes are comparable to the compositions of Chopin, then Balla and Boccioni’s paintings evoke the violent, unpredictable and cacophonous noise of the modern city. Despite the dismissal of Romanticism implicit in the Futurist Manifestos, in Balla and Boccioni’s
paintings, a new kind of glorious idealism emerges in their representations of electric lights: an idealism and reverence for the spirit of Futurism, and a celebration of the Futurists and their founder, Filippo Marinetti.

Kill the Moonlight

“It differs from his early representations of a street light or illuminated lamp—where the lamp and its radiating light are but one component of the urban setting. In this composition, the artist brings his subject up to the surface, filling the canvas with it, obliterating all sense of locale, of spatial depth, and drowning the pale crescent of the moon in the vibrating pattern of light.”

-- Susan Barnes Robinson

Balla's Streetlight: Study of Light depicts an explicit assertion of the modern superiority of electricity over the natural light of the moon. Balla fills his canvas with layered fragmented brushstrokes radiating from the electric streetlamp, leaving the moon only a small corner of the background in the upper right corner. The moon, as an icon of Romanticism in both art and literature, seems to represent the stagnant old traditions that Balla is trying to break away from. Susan Barnes Robinson explains that the streetlight itself was not a new subject, but that "bring[ing] his subject up to the surface," and "obliterating all sense of locale" created a new perspective on the subject when isolated from the rest of the city street scene. In this painting, we can see Balla evoking the images that Marinetti coined in the “Founding Manifesto of Futurism,” particularly those of the first powerful sentence: “We had stayed up all night, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits, shining like them with the prised radiance of electric hearts.” This alludes to the other aspect of dynamism that Balla captures: the anthropomorphic comparison of light to the essence of the human spirit, emphasizing the radiation of energy and the dynamic movement of light itself as an intangible form with great force and effect, despite a lack of physical substance. Marinetti used the shapes of the lamps, "stared like our spirits," to imagine a shape for the emerging spirit of Futurism, projecting the violence of Futurist emotions into a lamp. The street lamps then, for Marinetti but perhaps also for Balla, become "electric hearts" with the power of the human spirit and none of the weakness of its sentimentalism.

The Streetlight first divides light into tiny piercing components, which then re-emerge as a forceful whole, radiating outwards from the deep yellow shining center, starred like Marinetti's description, and pulsing with movement. This movement is created by the use of many v-shaped strokes that are separated just enough to evoke fast, shooting, violent movement. The strokes fling outward from the center, as Balla attempts to codify a quality of the movement of light, in different saturations of yellow, orange and red applied in layers, with small spaces in between, our eye chasing one brushstroke to the next. The overlapping of different colors, moving between the warm reds and oranges into the darker greens and blues of the background, creates a separation of the particles, creating an effect not of harmony but of a staccato-like punctuated change. If Whistler's wide strokes and washes could be compared to a few long, sweet tones, then Balla's would be a fast snare drum roll, increasing in speed and intensity as the brushstrokes move outward. The synthesis in the mind of the viewer completes the tension between stasis and dynamism, since the brushstrokes radiate diagonally, but are patterned in circular formations, creating concentric rings of light constituted by the small pointed fragments of diagonal movement.

The shape of the lamp post itself, and the metal enclosure for the yellow glass bulb, is created not by the addition of paint, but by the absence of yellows and oranges delineating light, and is instead represented by a negative space filled with the reds, blues and greens that create the background and separate the brushstrokes of light. Another notable absence is that of the radiating light of the moon, which while colored a pale yellow similar to the center of the streetlight, does not radiate fragmented beams of light at all. The pictorial domination of the streetlight over the moon is further signified by the overlap of the streetlight's diagonal rays over and into the yellow crescent of the moon, which literally obscure the moon with the more immediate, more exciting, and more modern movement of light.

In the upper left hand corner, there is a date: AN. 1909, which has been speculated not to have been the actual date of painting but the commemoration of the creation of Futurism’, honoring Marinetti’s manifesto, and the effect of his energizing words. This sort of celebratory purpose for the painting implies that perhaps Balla did explicitly intend to make his Streetlight a portrait of the modern technology, or even a portrait of the Futurist spirit in a broader sense. When we examine some of his earlier preceding sketches for Streetlight, the larger oval shape of the lamp becomes very portrait-like, alluding to the shape of a face. In this way, Balla may be painting Streetlight to depict the new face of the spirit of Italian art. But he was a very precise painter who enjoyed Divisionism because of its stark purity and gesture towards scientific accuracy. I would rather suggest that instead of gesturing towards the entire spirit of the young Futurists, Balla painted in Streetlight a metaphorical portrait of Marinetti himself, borrowing inspiration from his words in the Founding Manifesto: "we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyard blazing with violent electric moons." In this interpretation, the light itself takes on human properties, and the radiating of light can be understood as bringing both a sense of enlightenment and a violent challenge to the darkened, empty sky. In this way, Balla may be gesturing to the ways in

4. This quotation alludes to Filippo Marinetti’s manifesto of the same title, 1909-1910.
which Marinetti cast a bright light over an otherwise stagnated and desolate artistic milieu of Italy mired in the past, represented by the moon.

“Movement and light destroy the materiality of bodies”  

“Space no longer exists: the street pavement, soaked by rain beneath the glare of electric lamps, becomes immensely deep and gapes to the very center of the earth. Thousands of miles divide us from the sun; yet the house in front of us fits into the solar disk. / Who can still believe in the opacity of bodies, since our sharpened and multiplied sensitiveness has already penetrated the obscure manifestations of the medium?”  

-- Boccioni et al.  

Boccioni’s Forces of the Street contrasts more directly with Whistler’s Nocturne: Grey and Gold, since both depict a street scene, one or more people, buildings, and lights. But instead of using Whistler’s “wash” effect, tying all aspects of the composition together, Boccioni rips them apart, using dark colors in stark contrast with one another, purples battling greens as voids of black and shadow crop up between them. Boccioni portrays the light shining from above as an active force of movement and destruction, and the people on the streets become flattened shadows and silhouettes, melting over the jagged edges and falling into the crevices and canyons created by the shadows, or perhaps, by the force of the lights themselves. We can imagine that the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting” (in part written by Boccioni) may have been directly influential in the conceptualization of this painting, especially the line stating, “the street pavement, soaked by rain beneath the glare of electric lamps, becomes immensely deep, and gapes to the very center of the earth.” In this description, ideals of Futurism suggest a way to reconceptualize the way the reality is constructed, moving agency from men to the “forces” of the street scene. Unlike Whistler's street, which provides a stable and soothing background to the lone pedestrian, Boccioni’s world of the streets is dangerous and unpredictable. The electric light cuts through the flimsy people, decimates the streets and leaves gaping holes, illuminating the world in a chaotic, even apocalyptic vision of modernity. Interesting, however, is that although the diagonal interlocking beams of light invokes destruction, it seems to simultaneously invoke the image of a divine light, alluding to Catholic imagery.

Examining the beams of light themselves, their source is not explicitly stated, but we imagine them to be electric streetlights shining down from either side of the street. Each beam of light starts as bright yellow-white, seemingly pure and unaltered energy, but as it approaches the ground, it takes on the blue of the night and the texture of worldly reality, before it continues its trajectory into the ground, leaving behind the new climate of the modern city. In this way, light becomes simultaneously portrayed as a creation force—like the Catholic imagery of a divine light coming from above to usher in a new, rejuvenating potential for growth—and also a force of destruction, creating black gaping holes even as it provides inspiration. I would like to suggest that the tension in this work, then, reflects the tension between the creative and destructive impulses within the movement of Futurism itself, intent on progress and creation through destruction. Boccioni glorifies the intensity of the streetlights to suggest that the new godlike force in the modern world is electricity.

The black outlines in Forces of the Street depict an ephemeral sort of motion in the movement of the people in the picture, as shadowed pedestrians trudge toward the back of the painting and a suggestion of two bicycle wheels near the center seems to reveal the traces of motion already past. The buildings that should border the street as a frame of reference and stability have instead collapsed into overlapping planes and darkened voids, while the green and purple shapes to the left of the streetlights seem to be buildings in the process of collapse. The overlapping planes—colored in liberal mixes of colors that tend purple, pink or green depending on their exposure to light—present a rocky landscape, uncertain and unstable, and it is unclear whether the jagged shapes are separated by distance, height, or merely time. Perhaps this painting depicts a small area of space expressed temporally over the course of a night.

Boccioni wrote in the catalogue for a Futurist show in Paris, which included this painting, that in Futurist works, that one could find:

… spots, lines, and areas of color that do not correspond to any reality, but, according to the law of our inner mathematics, musically prepare and increase the emotion of the spectator… We are destroying everyday, in ourselves and in our paintings, the realistic forms and obvious details that still serve to establish a bridge of intelligence between ourselves and the public.  

In destroying “the realistic forms and obvious details,” Boccioni is dispensing with the usual traffic of the street travelers in favor of focusing on the effect of the electric lights on the passive atmosphere. The shadowy figures could be the people of the past, whether that past is a few minutes or a few decades. The electric light, however, is a force of the present, cutting through the specters of the past and the banalities of the everyday, in favor of a Futurist, mechanized spirit represented by the beams of a new sort of holy light.

The presence of the crossing of the beams also creates a sort of archway of light, which may again refer back to a religious image of a churchlike structure. Inside the lit archway could be a haven for those who embrace the spirit of the Futurists, and Boccioni, like Balla, may be offering his reverence for the new innovations of the modern city, to those who have inspired his appreciation, and even the ability to see the lights as they are in his painting, as opposed to the shadowy figures who seem to continue on their way, oblivious. In the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting,” Boccioni et al. state, “The construction of pictures has hitherto been foolishly tradi-

10. Boccioni et al., p.28.  
tional. Painters have shown us the objects and the people placed before us. We shall henceforward put the spectator in the center of the picture.\textsuperscript{12} In Boccioni’s world of \textit{Forces of the Street}, the viewer is attracted first to the powerful streetlights, and thus escapes the fate of the “realistic forms” in favor of seeing the divine vision of the Futurists. Even the title, “Forces” of the street, suggests that what is depicted here is not reality and its “obvious details,” but instead a sort of hyper-reality, or the perceptual effect of living as a Futurist.

\textit{“We will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals”}\textsuperscript{13}

“Nature contains the elements of color and form of all pictures—as the keyboard contains the notes of all music-- / but the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful—as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos, glorious harmony—” -- Umberto Boccioni et al.\textsuperscript{15}

Whistler’s new artistic language of musical vocabulary was challenged, though perhaps not annihilated, by the Futurists. He described his use of color in terms of tones and harmonies, and created a base color that would permeate the whole piece, that he called the ‘sauce,’ since:

The liquid color was washed on to the composition and Whistler would lighten or darken the tone, as needs be, while working. In many Nocturnes, the entire expanse of the sky or the water, as may be seen even in reproduction, is rendered with great sweeps of the brush, and in exactly the right tone.\textsuperscript{16}

Balla and Boccioni revolutionized this approach first in the desire to portray directly the nature of light as an active subject, instead of as an implicit atmospheric element, as Whistler had portrayed light subtly in his Nocturnes. And in the desire to show “the dynamic sensation itself,” they revolutionized the image of a city at night with fragmented brushstrokes, with the introduction of explicit movement to their pieces, and with an emphasis on the tension between excitement and danger in the modern atmosphere of their creations. As the cities themselves had changed much since Whistler’s time, the perspective through which Balla and Boccioni viewed their subjects differed greatly from Whistler’s.

Their final goal was also a different one, one that expanded beyond the representation of reality. At the time of the paintings’ creation, Balla was an older man feeling the stirrings of Futurism as a refreshing change. In \textit{Streetlight}, he departs just far enough from his Divisionist background to portray an icon of Futurism, and in doing so, depicts a portrait of the Futurists themselves, and in particular of Marinetti, the torch-bearing leader of the artistic movement. Boccioni, on the other hand, had just returned from a visit to Paris when he painted \textit{Forces of the Street}, and his approach to the painting refers to the Cubism he has seen, but answers it in the dynamic, violent, expressionistic style he embodied. He not only represents accurate movement, like Balla did, but reflects personally on the experience of viewing a city street through the eyes of a Futurist, who emulates the dynamism of the shafts of light that cut through the infrastructure of the aesthetic and cultural world around him.

If we look at \textit{Forces of the Street} in an autobiographical manner, we can see Boccioni’s complex emotional struggle to find a place for himself in the divinity of the new aesthetic experience, a world of active beams of light and passive figures. To illuminate the concept of his own role to play in the movement, I would like to point to the two lower beams of light at the center and bottom of the page, which I would like to consider as two headlights of a car. In an earlier sketch of \textit{Forces of the Street}, the lower beams of light seem to be coming from a car, and there is a figure that seems to be driving. I would like to suggest that this figure is Boccioni, and that in the final painting, he removes the representation of the driver, because the entire painting can be considered his own self-portrait of himself in the driver’s seat. He steers the viewer into a world that holds cacophony and danger, but that can also move you, as it has moved him, in the glorious destruction of the old and the emergence of new hope in the shafts of light. Historically, however, this enrapture with the violent mechanization of modernity led to his early death as a soldier in World War I, and so when we view his painting now, we can also see him as one of the darkened silhouettes, ascending the overlapping planes, approaching the light head on.
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