



Roland Barthes and the “beauty of speed”: sports as a Futurist myth

Andrea Lombardinilo

Abstract

The paper deals with Roland Barthes’ interpretation of sports as a contemporary myth, becoming a semiotic and communicative medium with the approach of consumer society. In particular, the paper dwells on the transformation of motor racing into a collective myth, in accordance with Marinetti’s celebration of speed. The texts arranged by Barthes for the documentary directed by Aubert Aquin (*Les sport et les hommes*, 1960-1961) enable an analysis of the diffusion of sports as a mere collective business. Therefore, the paper revolves around Barthes’ ability to elaborate a theoretical framework suitable for the study of contemporary myths, in line with the Futurist “beauty of speed”. Juan Manuel Fangio embodied the real social myth, nowadays enhanced by Luis Hamilton and Sebastian Vettel. The latter won the 2018 edition of the F1 Canadian Gp forty years after Gilles Villeneuve reached his first victory. The deaths of Villeneuve and Senna and Schumacher’s serious injury attest that speed has become an effective social myth, suspended between risks and immortality.

Keywords

Sports | Speed | Social mythologies | Futurism | Risks to life |

Author

Andrea Lombardinilo – andrea.lombardinilo@unich.it
Department of Law and Social Sciences
Gabriele d’Annunzio University, Chieti-Pescara (Italy)



1. *Semiotics of Futurism: speed as a contemporary myth*

Something legendary happened on Sunday 11 June 2018 on the Canadian track dedicated to Gilles Villeneuve: Sebastian Vettel won the F1 Canadian GP. It was Ferrari's first and most important victory since 2004, on a track synonymous with the team through Canadian icon Gilles Villeneuve, the Ferrari driver from 1977-82 until his death at the Belgian Grand Prix. "It is a good side effect, but today at Circuit Gilles Villeneuve we had Jacques driving his father's car earlier, which was very emotional and to have a win with me driving makes me very proud" (Benson, 2018). What happened in the 2018 edition of the F1 Canadian GP confirms that legendary racing drivers like Villeneuve, and also Nuvolari, Fangio, Lauda, Senna, Prost and Schumacher, belong to the dimension of myth, with speed as a social spectacle and a Futurist mindset.

The main purpose of this paper is to show how sports effectively turned into a collective spectacle in the era of connected, reticular interactions with all the symbolic complexity of our post-modernity. Barthes sheds light on the sociological shifts fuelled by the consumer society in the field of mass entertainment that sports continue to influence and animate, as pointed out by the Futurist avant-garde.

Starting from the publication of the first Futurist Manifesto in «Le Figaro» on February, 20, 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti stressed the importance of speed in constructing the contemporary myth of progress. Speed matches dynamism, closely dependent on the possibilities that people have to move and interact.

In this sense, life in the metropolitan space as focused upon by Simmel (1976) appears to be a sociological and cultural endeavor, framed by Futurism within a new and surprising interpretative framework (Salaris, 2016; Berghaus, 2009).

The advent of new communicative devices, together with the development of more effective means of transport, enables Marinetti to pivot his aesthetics of progress on the image of courage and danger, fed by the religion of speed (Humphreys, 1999). The objective correlative of the Futurist mindset is the car, whose glittering beauty resides in the latent anthropomorphism it can display:

We affirm that the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car with a hood that glistens with large pipes resembling a serpent with explosive breath . . . a roaring automobile that seems to ride on grapeshot - that is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" (Marinetti, 2009a: 51).

Progress implies not only the cult of the future, but also contempt for the past, a debatable past targeted by Marinetti and his followers to be struck and wiped out. The new religion of speed fuelled by trains, automobiles, and airplanes triggers the



diffusion of a novel sensorial, perceptive mood to be dealt with by social actors in line with the visual mythologies of the metropolis.

Construction of speedways and highways determines the radical transformation of urban environments, as McLuhan (1964) effectively demonstrates in his main works, inspired by the need to further investigate the relationship between communication and perceptive skills. Sennett (1996) surveyed the deep shifts dependent on the urban environments (both old and modern) every time technology calls for a renewal of human perceptions.

This is what Marinetti realizes at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the industrial accelerations facilitated the intrusion of new psychological and cultural tendencies. Futurism is no exception, to the extent that the birth of the Italian avant-garde is the beginning of a wider thought revolution, founded on refusal of the past, conceived as a useless legacy of clumsiness and awkwardness.

Thus, myth itself turns into an obsolete medium, inevitably renewed in literature, dancing, music, theatre, food and architecture. The main purpose of Marinetti's supporters is to mould a new vision of life, capable of facing the increasing complexity of social development. Therefore, speed is celebrated as a real myth capable of replacing all the dusty statues and paintings displayed in museums and academies (Lista, 2001).

The celebration of the future cannot neglect the importance of ancient cities attracting millions of tourists. The struggle against old Venice, "enfeebled and undone by centuries of worldly pleasure, though we too once loved and possessed it in a great nostalgic dream" (Marinetti, Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, 2009: 67). The legacy of the past has to be buried regardless of its symbolic and cultural relevance. Such an anti-traditional fight involves Universities and museums as well. Speed waits for no one, as the slow but constant transformation of urban spaces proclaims (Latour, 2009).

The Victory of Samothrace is the emblem of a lost world, unfailingly in debt to the cultural blindness afflicting modern societies, unavoidably left stranded by the worn-out dogma of the past. The Automobile comes as a symbol of a regenerated world, where men can afford to obliterate the past and trust the future without hesitation or doubt. Myth can survive, filtered by a profound semantic shift (Marzo, 2016). This is why the Futurist cult of progress is pivoted on the search for reliable contemporary myths - speed, sports, communication, crowds (Salaris, 1997) to name a few.

The exaltation of cars reveals more than the anthropomorphism of machines, made possible by technological development. In the first part of his Manifesto, Marinetti remembers when "suddenly we heard the famished automobiles roaring beneath the windows" (Marinetti, 2009a: 49). This is the prelude to the birth of the mechanical Centaur, to be followed by flying human angels, as d'Annunzio revealed to a journalist soon after his first flight over Brescia on September 12, 1909. In the Twenties, d'Annunzio himself stated that the automobile - such an inviting and seducing creature - cannot be male, but female, as it still is nowadays (Oliva, 2017: 27-39).



But Marinetti had already underlined the irresistible attraction of the automobile, that mythic and monstrous creature: "We drew close to the three snorting beasts, tenderly stroking their swollen breasts. I stretched out on my car like a corpse in its coffin, but revived at once under the steering wheel, a guillotine blade that menaced my stomach" (Marinetti, 2009a: 49). Marinetti's imaginary exploits a solid symbolist training, fostered by the will to probe the unfathomable depths of human psyche. This is what Benjamin points out in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, precisely in reference to the social revolution triggered by Futurism and its connections with Fascism: "The masses have a *right* to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them *expression* in keeping these relations unchanged. *The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life.* With d'Annunzio, decadence made its entry into political life; with Marinetti, Futurism; and with Hitler, the Bohemian tradition of Schwabing" (Benjamin, 2008: 41).

Thirty years later, McLuhan dwelt on the symbolist influence on the Futurist avant-garde (Lombardinilo, 2017: 217). Furthermore, Barthes seems to echo Marinetti's exaltation of cars when he analyses the Citroen *Déesse*, described as the expression of consumer society (Barthes, 1991: 88-90). About fifty years after Marinetti's manifesto, the automobile turns into the reflection of a mystic engagement, inspired by the aim to emulate the supernatural world of gods:

I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object" (Barthes, 1991: 88).

In the era of frantic consumption, cars have the power to satisfy men's ambition to challenge time and space. They turn into a real hymn to life, exalted by the mechanical embodiment of luxury and comfort. On the one hand, Marinetti develops the image of factual permeation between car and body, in order to strengthen the process of human mechanization, regardless of the risks concealed in such a brave endeavor. On the other, Barthes frames his mythological analysis into the semiotic pattern defined by the conception of myth as a communication system, as Baudrillard clearly demonstrates in *The Consumer Society* (1970).

Every object is a mother lode of meanings and information that the social actor may codify in accordance with his encyclopedic fund (Marrone, 2003; Cobast, 2002). In this sense, *Déesse* transmits the illusion of immortality and elegance, unlike the racing car, compared by Marinetti to a seducing coffin. Of course, races do not belong to our daily routine, but they exist to the extent that they can fulfill human craving to overcome space and time limits. Death may be the natural consequence of this supernatural ambition, in the same way luxury cars may gratify the social and economic representation of self (Goffman, 1959).



Barthes is right when he underlines that the car is «a magical object», like any other commercial stuff fostering the thrill of social emancipation. Despite the fever of consumerism afflicting post-modern society, speed keeps on fascinating the audience, struck by the mythic transformation of sportsmen into such metamorphic actors (Bennett, McDougall, 2013). This is what happens in the presence of speeding racing cars. Barthes exploits the image of the "Gothic cathedrals", in reference to the *Déesse*.

When he writes the texts for the documentary directed by Aubert Aquin, entitled *Les sport et les hommes* (1960-1961), he selects racing (together with hockey, cycling, bullfighting and football) in order to study the diffusion of sports as a mere collective business, bolstered by private and collective interests. Sport is not only a business and a public show, but also the reign of impossible challenges through which men channel their expectations of immortality. The fulfillment of this mission is linked to the degree of permeation between man and his mechanical medium (Barthes, 1997).

The interpenetration of a cyclist with his bike reminds us of the ancient will to dare the dire straits of nature. Furthermore, the pilot in his airplane evokes the myth of Icarus involved in defeating the force of gravity. Anyway, the racing driver yearns to fight against the limits imposed by physics. As Barthes ponders in reference to this irrational fever, death is an impending disaster:

And what do they recognize in the great car racer? The victor over a much subtler enemy: time. Here all of man's courage and knowledge will be focused on one thing: the machine. By the machine man will conquer, but perhaps by the machine he will die (Barthes, 2007: 11).

Time and space are two treacherous enemies, despite the fast process of technological sophistication empowered by engineers and scientists. Unlike the analysis of *Déesse* proposed in *Mythologies*, in the aforementioned documentary Barthes acknowledges the incumbent risks featured in the practice of motor speed, as Marinetti pointed out in his Manifesto. But in the era of consumerism, racing is no longer inspired by Titanism since it is the expression of a collective fever leading to the transformation of sports into a global show: "Sports certainly offer a mapping of the world, a way of understanding the social relations within which we live our lives, but, unlike other media messages (e.g., the news), sports also involve us in other ways" (Jhally, 1989: 73).

Nonetheless, Barthes celebrates the racing driver as a post-modern Centaur, to some extent echoing Marinetti's symbolism, whose metaphoric codex is bolstered by an emotive counterblast to any attempt to recall the past and its nostalgic legacy. Cars are built to zoom forward towards the infinite, regardless of the dangers concealed behind every bend. The wheel is the symbol of command, the objective correlative of human dominion over space: "We intend to hymn man at the steering wheel, the ideal axis of which intersects the earth, itself hurled ahead in its own race along the path of its orbit" (Marinetti, 2009a: 51).



That steering wheel is more than a lyric metaphor. It is the emblem of the new social power provided by progress, in the light of an increasing and unstoppable permeation between man and machine. As Beck (2017) has pondered, machines produce both advantages and disadvantages, thus engendering a new era of risks, as accidents and pollution demonstrate. Marinetti emphasizes the smooth correspondence between cars and the races replacing horse races so popular before the invention of the engine. If the Tour de France is an epic representation of life, motor races qualify as the supernatural craving to fight against time, thanks to the permeation with machines (Bérubé, 2004).

The embodiment of this technologic Centaur is Juan Manuel Fangio, one of the most celebrated racing drivers of all time. Victory is the only target pursued by the champion, whose complaints are both irrational and inexplicable. The mythologist has to understand and explain the social meanings residing in the celebration of the sportsman as a universal hero, to the extent that myth is "a word" and a "communication system" (Lombardinilo, 2016; Bennett, McDougall, 2013).

The high sophistication of Formula 1 races demonstrates that both Marinetti and Barthes were right about the imaginary force of automobiles. "The mythologist is condemned to live in a theoretical sociality; for him, to be in society is, at best, to be truthful: his utmost sociality dwells in his utmost morality. His connection with the world is of the order of sarcasm" (Barthes, 1991: 158). The image of Fangio laughing in the documentary conjures up the way the hero can face death and exorcize it: "the most murderous of sports is also the most generous" (Barthes, 2007: 25).

2. Marinetti and the myth of sport as "an essential element in Art"

Futurism was to influence every aspect of social life, in order to fuel a real aesthetic and psychological revolution. In accordance with his blind faith in progress and reason, Marinetti aims to mould a new sort of society, deprived of the clumsy legacy of the past (Guerri, 2018). Rainey duly observes:

Futurism had done something startling. It had revealed the power of a new type of intellectual formation: a small collectivity, buttressed by publicity and spectacle, that could produce cultural artifacts that spanned the spectrum of the arts and were constructed in accordance with a coherent body of theoretical precepts grounded in not just arbitrary aesthetic preferences, but a systematic reading of contemporary society (Rainey, 2009: 1).

~~The way~~ How the avant-garde strives to shape the new Futurist society appears to be extravagant, as turmoil and fights burst out in the first Futurist meetings in Rome and Milan. Violence is one of the most effective forms of provocation, in the same way that the destruction of syntax and words-in-freedom astonished readers.

The ascent to the promontory of immortality is triggered by the will to touch what is intangible and grasp what is not reachable. But art, like sport and food, may provide men with the astonishing sensation of the supernatural, engendered by the potential to



overcome human limits. This a founding principle of Futurist aesthetics, developed by Marinetti in the first and later manifestos (Salaris, 1997).

According to his startling plan, sports are more than a personal attitude or an occasional engagement, health care is necessary to enable individuals to face the new challenges of modernity. Therefore, the sportsman is the personification of the fallen-to-earth hero. He may embody a post-modern God capable of consoling and redeeming the human league from the numbness of the past (Lombardinilo, 2017a).

In *Futurist speech to the English: given at the Lyceum Club of London* (December 1910), Marinetti stigmatizes the cult of the body as a form of pleasure and hedonism, which only contributes to the empowerment of frivolous Narcissism:

You invented the love of hygiene, the adoration of muscles, a harsh taste for effort, all of which triumph in your beautiful sporting life. But, unfortunately, you push your exaggerated cult of the body to the point of scorning ideas, and you care seriously only for physical pleasures. Platonic love is virtually absent among you—which is a good thing—but your love of succulent meals is excessive. And it's in the brutalizing religion of the table that you appease all your anxieties and all your worries! . . ." (Marinetti, 2009b: 73).

On the contrary, sports must fuel the awareness of dynamism, energy and reactivity,—necessary to support a real social renewal. This endeavor is about to be fostered by the new religion of speed and technology, trusted in without any perplexity (Marzo, 2016). Exaggeration implies infirmity, in the way that excess leads to disease. The balance between mind and body is an existential goal to be achieved through training and self-sacrifice (Smith, 2010).

These are the terms of the Futurist exaltation of sportsmen as outstanding interpreters of Futurist modernity. Hence follows that sports are cited in one of the main Futurist manifestos, titled *Destruction of syntax – radio imagination – words in freedom*, released on 11 May 1913. The communicative revolution fostered in the field of literature and art is the prelude to the renewal of daily habits, increasingly influenced by the diffusion of machines: "12. Man multiplied by the machine. New mechanical sense, a fusion of instinct with the output of a motor and forces that have been mastered. 13. The passion, art, and idealism of Sport. Idea and love of 'the record' " (Marinetti, 2009e: 144).

The transfiguration of machines carried out by Futurist painters Depero, Balla, Boccioni, Tato and Sironi shows how irresistible the atavistic myth of speed may be in the era of the mechanical reproduction of life, pinpointed by Benjamin in the aesthetic framework of the metropolis (Mele, 2011).

Thus, sports lose their physical dimension and gain a wider socio-cultural meaning, through the insight of speed as a state of mind. Sports turn into an art, as Barthes effectively demonstrates in writing for Auquin's documentary, especially when he dwells on bullfighting. Motor racing is no exception, since it enables men to pursue "the idea and love of the record" (Dupuis, 2007).



Ulysses' instinct to break the boundaries of the unknown is inherited by sailors, pilots and racing drivers, sharing the same instinct of discovery. This is why sports can turn into show business, fed by the media anxiety to recount anything that may attract people's imagination (Gruneau, 2017; Porro, Martelli, 2013).

But in reference to the idealism of sports, it is worth underlining that Marinetti's symbolism gives his prose this type of dreaming cipher, mingled with an intense metaphorical codex. Therefore, sportsmen appear to be divine interpreters of speed society, molded by "multiplied" machines. This is a conception stressed by Marinetti in *Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine* (1911): "We believe in the possibility of an incalculable number of human transformations, and we declare without a smile that wings are waiting to be awakened within the flesh of man" (Marinetti, 2009c: 89).

The multiplied man is condemned to conquer a privileged seat in the reign of machines, whose glittering dome is paved with iron and brass. To the fore is the diffusion of the religion of dynamism, implying the destruction of all the rubble of the past (Berghaus, 2009). The Greek Olympic tradition is replaced with the dogma of the mechanized man, empowering the process of "Futurization" of the world. Marinetti assumes that this process should tend towards shaping a new humanity:

15. The earth shrunk by speed. New sense of the world. Let me explain: men have successively conquered a sense of the house, the neighborhood in which they live, the city, the region, the continent. Today man possesses a sense of the world; he has only a modest need to know what his forebears have done, but a burning need to know what his contemporaries are doing in every part of the globe. Whence the necessity, for the individual, of communicating with all the peoples of the earth. Whence the need to feel oneself at the center, to be judge and motor of the infinite both explored and unexplored. A gigantic increase in the sense of humanity and an urgent need to coordinate at every moment our relations with all humanity" (Marinetti, 2009e: 144-145).

The new sense of life is given by opportunity of making the entire globe interact, thanks to the major role of telegraph and radio. Television will transform our audible and written world into a visual global village, as McLuhan pointed out in the Fifties (Gordon, 2010). With the advent of broadcasting, sports turn into a global show, featuring cunning social semiotics. This is what Barthes emphasizes about football, attracting millions of supporters all around the world (Lombardinilo, 2017b; Bérubé, 2004).

This is made possible by the permeation process involving followers who share the same emotions as the racing driver, and it holds true for cycling, skiing and racing. In this sense, Barthes inherits some of Marinetti's insights into the deification of sportsmen through public acknowledgment of their alleged supernatural nature. The Machine is the medium leading men to the limit, despite the fear of death and defeat. It is for this shining goddess that Futurists abandon their "glorious intellectual fathers", mainly Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine: "for them, no poetry could exist without nostalgia, without the evocation of dead ages, without the fog of history and legend" (Marinetti, 2009d: 93).



This is what Marinetti states in the Manifesto *The New Religion-Morality of Speed*, in the first issue of the journal «L'Italia futurista», published on May 11, 1916, during the First World War. Before the rise of Fascism, Marinetti had already celebrated war as "pure hygiene of the world", bound to cleanse humanity of mediocrity, ugliness and nostalgia.

The same patriotic faith inspires the previous manifestos, and especially *The New Religion-Morality of Speed*. For the first time ever, war imposes technology and progress as the only means of supremacy. To the fore is the beauty of speed, imposing the cult of Futurist morality, which "will protect man against the inevitable decay produced by slowness, memory, analysis, rest, and habit. Human energy, multiplied a hundredfold by velocity, will dominate Space and Time" (Marinetti, 2009f: 224).

The dominion over time barriers and space limits is visually represented by the "straight line", whose impact on social and urban environments is emphasized by Futurist architects, especially Antonio Sant'Elia. Cars, trains and airplanes are the icons of mechanical modernity, empowered by the discovery of electricity and the invention of engines and telephones (Humphreys, 1999).

Progress is a never ending journey into social emancipation, made possible by those clever enough to exploit the relationship between nature and intelligence:

He stole electricity and carbon-burning fuels in order to create new allies in the form of motors. He forged metals, defeated and rendered ductile by fire, to join with fuels and electricity, and thus he created an army of slaves, hostile and dangerous and yet sufficiently domesticated, who would transport him swiftly over the curves of the earth (Marinetti, 2009f: 224).

A few years earlier, Simmel had dwelt on the social effects engendered by metropolitan life, where human rhythm is accelerated by the rushing flood of interactions (D'Andrea, 2012). The appearance of *flâneur* is eased by the mute sense of alienation nestling within daily existence, drawn by the trust in urban dogmas. *Flâneur* is the counterpart of the racing driver, hating slowness and yearning for speed (Simmel, 1976).

Since velocity implies "disdain for obstacles, desire for the new and unexplored" (Marinetti, 2009f: 225), this new religion of speed is embodied by the racing driver, seen as the prophet of risk and courage. He is the hieratic interpreter of a new cultural mindset. Thus, he can afford to challenge what is unknown and concealed. But the goddess of speed must be within touch of the audience, as it were an icon to be admired and gained by people. Only sportsmen are able to grasp her, despite the risks they may have to cope with:

The Inebriation of great speeds in cars is simply the joy of feeling oneself merged with the only divinity. Sportsmen are the first catechumens of this religion. Imminent destruction of houses and cities, to make way for meeting places for cars and planes (Marinetti, 2009f: 226).



Circuits are compared to contemporary theatres, crowded by people craving for the immanent spectacle of human courage. Unlike what happened in the ancient arenas, men fight to achieve an immortal condition, revealed by the presence of cars and airplanes. Highways and airports are essential to develop this new religion of life, requiring the transformation of urban spaces and country landscapes. Velocity has the power to shift the way men now look at the divinity, whose feature is to be fast and invisible. Hence follows the rapid adaption of places to the dynamic force of the machine, whose influence is bolstered by the deification of daily life (Rainey, 2009).

This is why Futurism aims to build

places inhabited by the divine: trains, dining cars (eating while speeding). Railroad stations; especially those of the American West, where trains speeding at 140 km. an hour can take water and pick up mail sacks without stopping. Bridges and tunnels. The Place de l'Opéra in Paris. The Strand in London. Automobile races. Films. Radiotelegraphic stations. The great turbines turned by columns of mountain water to strip animating electricity from the air (Marinetti, 2009f: 226).

The celebration of speed as pure creativity - triggered by engineering research - is one of the main features of our postmodern mythology, overwhelmed by consumerism and reification. Nonetheless, motor and car races keep on attracting and fascinating the twenty-first century audience, thanks to the same religion of the unknown fuelling the great drivers of the last century. This is what Barthes points out in reference to Juan Manuel Fangio, one the "first catechumens" of the religion of speed which still appeals to the masses nowadays (Smith, 2010).

3. Barthes and the contemporary myth of speed

"What is a myth, today? I shall give at the outset a first, very simple answer, which is perfectly consistent with etymology: *myth is a type of speech*" (Barthes, 1991: 107). In accordance with the public acknowledgment featuring the consumer society, Barthes explains the semiotic patterns of myth, set within social phenomenology (Grassi, 2012; McQuillan, 2011). Myth is more than a legacy of the past, expected to eternalize the atavistic contradictions of the human league. With the advent of industrialization and the expansion of the metropolis, the technical reproducibility of existence rises to a sort of communicative dogma, as confirmed by the advent of the internet galaxy: "The nature of sport has been changed by the media with its emphasis on display" (Frey, Eitzen, 1991: 510).

Every object, every man, every place can become a myth, to the extent that the significance of myth acquires a defined semiotic complexity. In this sense, Barthes can deal with the hidden meanings of mythical signs, fundamental to focus on the communicative process leading to the construction of mythical significance, somehow probed in a number of his most relevant critical and semiotic works (Barthes, 1953, 1964, 1973).



"Everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse": this means that myth is a sign and a system of communication, radically renewable by mainstream media. The discourse of post-modernity (Lyotard, 1979) matches myth to the extent media symbolism moulds the logos of consumerism, as Baudrillard pointed out in *The Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976).

As a matter of fact, broadcasting turns every event into a public happening, in the same way cinema and television can make actors or actresses real divine images, in accordance with the symbolic paradigms of the "sports logic" (Altheide, Snow, 1979: 217-235). This is true for sportsmen as well. Taking into account the irresistible will of social actors to gain public acknowledgment, Barthes focuses on the factors making the racing driver the priest of the Futurist religion of speed, taking place on circuits. In the short but effective writings arranged by Barthes for Auquin's TV documentary, Juan Manuel Fangio is the quintessence of man challenging time and space, thanks to the perfect symbiosis with his car. Victory is the only goal contemplated by the champion, much closer to a god than to a man (Lombardinilo, 2017b).

Barthes copes with the images of a twelve-hour race taking place on the Sebring circuit, Florida. To the fore is the outstanding excitement of the crowd staring at the miracle of speed come true through the balance between man and machine (Barthes, 2004: 11-25).

Icarus wanted to touch the sky with his wax and feather wings. His technology was evidently unsuitable. Death is the incumbent specter of any brave attempt to overcome the limits of time and space. Death can be defeated only by deities, inhabiting places reserved to the divine. Circuits and airports are the perfect expression of such supernatural places, attended by crowds craving for the performance of heroes. This is why Barthes' *What is Sport?* can be considered as «one of the first contributions to a body of thought destined to occupy generations of commentators, concerning sport-as-spectacle» (Dupuis, 2007: xi).

This is even more true for racing drivers, to the extent that an accident can suddenly interrupt the ascent to the lap of the gods. The worldwide shock caused by the death of Ayrton Senna in Imola in 1994 is the comprehensible reaction to the departure of the beloved god of driving. People crowding circuits are quite different from tourists lazing around in ancient cities: "Sinful slowness of the Sunday crowds and the Venetian lagoons" (Marinetti, 2009f: 225).

More recently, Sebastian Vettel won the 2018 edition of the F1 Canadian GP, 40 years after Villeneuve's first victory. His joyful response to the result was unsurprising; but the victory meant even more on the circuit named after one of Enzo Ferrari's favourites, Gilles Villeneuve, who won his first GP in his country for the Scuderia in 1978. "A great weekend for us and 40 years after Gilles' victory here to have Ferrari win again and for a long time since Michael" (Richards, 2018). Schumacher's skiing injury later came as the unthinkable fall of a god shrouded in the impenetrable nature of fate.



Nevertheless, Barthes points out that speed is the result of slowness, necessary to assemble all the components of the car. Velocity is the reward of slowness, essential to every technical operation: "So that the relation between man and the machine is infinitely circumspect; what will function very fast must first be tested very slowly, for speed is never anything but the recompense of extreme deliberation" (Barthes, 2007: 11).

Gestures and actions bringing the driver to the race determine whether the man and his machine will or will not survive speed's embrace. The engine is the startling result of intelligence, functional to the conquest of a divine condition. The smell of fuel recalled by Marinetti is the dominant fragrance of racing theatres, where man and machine can compete without hesitation. On one side the driver alone in his car; on the other, the crew assists in all the procedures needful for making the car run in compliance with the expectations of the audience.

But on the turns, apart from the machine's suspension, it is the racer who does everything; for here, space is against time. Hence the racer must be able to cheat space, to decide whether he can spare it... or if he will brutally cut it down; and he must have the courage to drive this wager to the brink of the impossible (Barthes, 200: 15-16).

The sense of limit features in the different skill of drivers, his challenge is to break the boundaries of time and space. Perfection preludes immortality. But what is produced by men may be defective and may lack the fundamental safety parameters. The driver may be the victim of both his courage and mechanical imperfection. Death reminds us that our aspiration to immortality is pure illusion. But when the great champion dies, the spell of immortality is broken: "Hence the death of a racer is infinitely sad: for it is not only a man who dies here, it is a particle of perfection which vanishes from this world" (Barthes, 2007: 17-19).

Tragedy and ecstasy are the different faces of the same medal, and the driver learns to cohabit with that. In line with the Futurist lesson, Barthes explains the role that speed has in the process of construction of contemporary identity. The most important purpose is to keep the engine on and press the throttle, for as long as the car can stand the pressure of the race. After all, the semiotics of speed is not so different from the semiotics of daily life, since it is fostered by the same trust in human skills and visual signs (Rabaté, 1997). Despite the effort to make a machine reliable, a breakdown is a permanent specter, determining the quashing of the human dream to defeat time:

To stop is virtually to die. If the machine fails, its master must be informed of the fact with a certain discretion. For a great racer does not conquer his machine, he tames it; he is not only the winner, he is also the one who destroys nothing. A wrecked machine generates something like the sadness caused by the death of an irreplaceable being, even as life continues around him (Barthes, 2007: 23).

Incidents or mechanical problems may interrupt the ascent to the glory of victory. Every stopped driver embodies the quintessence of stasis, immobility and



disappointment. On the contrary, the champion celebrates the eternal ambition of men to achieve a divine dimension. In this sense, Juan Manuel Fangio can afford to laugh before starting the race, thanks to a blind trust in his car:

What this man has done is to drive himself and his machine to the limit of what is possible. He has won his victory not over his rivals, but on the contrary *with them*, over the obstinate heaviness of things: the most murderous of sports is also the most generous (Barthes, 2007: 25).

Barthes is right when he points out that car races are the most murderous of sports, triggered by the myth of eternal time. This is the main endeavor of sportsmen and, more generally, of the Futurists, as Marinetti assumes in the founding Manifesto of 1909: "Time and space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, for we have already created velocity which is eternal and omnipresent" (Marinetti, 2009a: 51).

Danger is tightly linked to the practice of velocity: "We intend to sing to the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness" (Marinetti, 2009a: 51). Juan Manuel Fangio would share the incipit of Marinetti's founding Manifesto, emphasizing the role of velocity and speed in a society made frantic and anxious by the obsession of speed. Barthes's interest in sports stems from the semantic complexity of daily life, fuelled by the infinite flood of sense (Rylance, 2014; Ponzio, Calefato, Petrilli, 2006).

4. Conclusion

In the era of communicative and functional dynamism, Futurism can still provide us with some effective insights to interpret the deep social changes fuelled by technology and progress (Poggi, 2009). The society of speed is the result of the eternal longing to infringe the limits imposed by nature on human beings, engaged in a constant evolutionary effort, not lacking in sudden risks (Beck, 2016).

The sociology of sports sketched out by Barthes for Auquin's documentary seems to take to heart Marinetti's exaltation of velocity and racing drivers, as he set forth in the Manifesto *The New Religion-Morality of Speed*:

We must continually vary our speed so that our mind is actively participating in it. In an s-shaped curve with double bends, velocity achieves its absolute beauty, for it is struggling against: (1) the resistance of the ground, (2) the various atmospheric pressures, (3) the pull of gravity formed by the empty space in the curves. Speed in a straight line is massive, crude, unthinking. Speed with and after a curve is velocity that has become agile, acquired consciousness" (Marinetti, 2009f: 228).

This kind of self-consciousness enables men to trust the gods of velocity and turn them into pagan priests of a new mythology. The latter is supported by the possibility of watching sport events live on TV, including Formula 1 races, increasingly attractive in the individualized society surveyed by Bauman (2001). The society of spectacle



foreshadowed by Debord (1967) has finally come true, thanks to the convergence of media and social representations (Dupuis, 2007).

These are the advantages stemming from the diffusion of media society, enabled to make myths of anyone able to reveal the supernatural features granted only to heroes. In this sense, machines are the objective correlative of human transfiguration. This is truer for racing cars, described by Barthes with a Futurist accent: "At rest, these cars are heavy, passive, difficult to maneuver: as with a bird hampered by its wings, it is their potential power that weighs them down" (Barthes, 2007: 19-21).

This is why motor races can be considered a Futurist myth, framed by Barthes into communicative and consumption patterns of mass society, peopled by millions of citizens comfortably watching sports events in their homes (Delaney, Madigan, 2015). Thus sport turns into a static entertainment, increasingly distant from circuits and grounds, once "places inhabited by the divine".

Forty years after Villeneuve's first victory, and 14 years after the Ferrari's last victory in Canada thanks to Schumacher, Vettel's success in the 2018 edition of the F1 Canadian GP emphasizes the immortal fashion of speed, bolstered by the attractive force of risk and danger. This is why racing drivers are post-modern and Futurist myths, capable of defeating fears through their trust in technology and bravery, in compliance with the perpetual worship of speed.

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