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## The Art of Destroying History

### A Portrait of Filippo Tomasso Marinetti

In the wake of the First World War the Italian artist Filippo Marinetti started a new art movement called Futurism. His dream was to have an Italy with art at the very core of its existence. Since the 1970's historians have become increasingly interested in Marinetti and his movement. Paradoxically Marinetti detested history, everything that comes with it, and actively pursued its destruction. Andrys Wierstra explains why he is fascinated with Marinetti, and sheds a light on a side of him which seems diametrically opposed to his alleged proto-fascism and his lust for war.

Venetians! Venetians! Why do you still desire to be ever the faithful slaves of the past, the filthy gatekeepers of the biggest brother in history, nurses in the most wretched hospital in the world, in which souls are languishing, mortally corrupted by the syphilis of sentimentalism.

- Filippo Marinetti<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

On the 20th of February 1909, the French newspaper *L'Figaro* opened with the *Futurist Manifesto* of Filippo Tomasso Marinetti (1876-1944). In Europe it was received with much enthusiasm. The Parisian newspapers even dubbed it 'the Caffeine of Europe.'<sup>2</sup> The manifesto is considered to be the birth certificate of Futurism: an art movement which meant to cut all ties with history, the past, traditions and convictions, and which aimed to harness the dynamic of the industrialisation and thriving cities of early twentieth century Europe. Although having several sister organizations, in Russia and

England for example, Futurism bloomed in Italy leaving a legacy as one of the frontrunners of the avant-garde. Marinetti gave birth to Futurism and was its father. His role and influence led R.W. Flint, a renowned scholar when it comes to Futurism, to the conclusion that 'Marinetti was Futurism.'<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps true to its character, Futurism slipped away through the backdoor as quickly as it had risen. World War I and Mussolini's fascistic rule proved to have a disastrous effect on Futurism as well as on the cultural scene in Italy as a whole. It wasn't until the 1970s that, after renewed interest from art historians, historians started studying Marinetti and his Futurism more extensively.<sup>4</sup> Considering the distaste for history, which the Futurists harboured, it is ironic how much attention Marinetti seems to generate amongst historians. This interest may be rooted in the way Marinetti viewed destruction and war as a fundamental necessity of society. In an interview, one of many in the light of the proclamation of Futurism, he stated; 'I believe that a people has to pursue a continuous hygiene of heroism and every century take a glorious shower of blood.'<sup>5</sup> The statements are at times horrific. But at the same time – I must confess – I am intrigued and wonder; who was this man who detested history, what had led him to such ideas? And what is it about this bloodthirsty poet that attracts so much attention?<sup>6</sup>

### A Crossroad of Ideas

Although Marinetti would be ardent to admit it, a range of artists, philosophers and so on influenced him. I will discuss two of them, namely Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Henri Bergson (1859-1941). The work of Nietzsche offers us a first insight on why Marinetti, who became familiar with the German's work around 1893, was so fiercely opposing history.<sup>7</sup> In his *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1874) we find Nietzsche attacking the historicizing tendencies of people in the nineteenth century, depicting them to be like a 'grand magical mirror of a philosophical parodist.'<sup>8</sup> And as the subtitle already tells us, Nietzsche asks the question if history has something to offer life at all. Though there are some who understand the work as a call for continuous reorientation of values, instead of a blunt attack, such nuance would undoubtedly be lost on Marinetti.<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche with his distaste for dogmatism and rigidity was part of the future. History, as Marinetti viewed it with a simplistic reading of Nietzsche in the back of his head, was a roadblock that prohibited Italy from entering a new era of wealth, prosperity, and civilization.<sup>10</sup>

Marinetti combined these insights with the ideas of the widely influential French philosopher Henri Bergson. It was the idea of *élan vital* from Bergson's *L'Évolution Créatrice* (1907) with which Marinetti became completely infatuated.<sup>11</sup> Bergson argued that at the centre of all life there lay a common impulse, *élan vital*.<sup>12</sup> Marinetti similarly would lay creativity – in the form of art born from complete freedom – at the heart of life and society. This was something that, according to Bergson, could only be obtained through instinct. Marinetti was convinced that creativity should be allowed complete freedom, for only then 'humanity can seize life itself'.<sup>13</sup> History with its purely intellectual pretensions blocked this impulse, simply because the intellect for Marinetti, as well as for Bergson, is the opposite of instinct.

The basis of the ideological substance Marinetti gave to Futurism lies with these two men. A striking passage of Bergson's Huxley lecture of 1911 given at the University of Birmingham captures the ideas on which Futurism was build:

[But] It is the moral man who is a creator in the highest degree,- the man whose action, itself intense, is also capable of intensifying the action of other men, and, itself generous, can kindle fires on the hearts of generosity. The men of moral grandeur, particularly those whose inventive and simple heroism has opened new paths to virtue, are revealers of metaphysical truth. Although they are the culminating point of evolution, yet they are nearest the source and they enable us to perceive the impulsion, which comes from the deep.<sup>14</sup>

Bergson warns us that automatisms and repetition are signs that we have reached the end-of-the-line. The artist will still be able to penetrate existing forms and shower us with beauty, but as Bergson shows, we should not confuse fabrication with creation. This beauty thus will only be an embodiment of an inability to keep going, and thus will lose its evolutionary character. At this time of automatisms and repetition man will be tempted to shed itself of morality and history, and thus create a new and potent start of the future. Something Bergson treasures as 'the grand success of life'.<sup>15</sup>

Similar views can be found in the work of Nietzsche, when he proclaims in his *Also sprach Zarathustra*; 'Ready you must be to burn yourself in your own flame; how could you become new if you not first become ashes?'<sup>16</sup> This necessity for destruction in order to change can be found throughout the work of Nietzsche. Also in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* we find; 'The desire for destruction, for change and for becoming can be the expression of an

overflowing energy pregnant with the future.<sup>17</sup> In a similar allegory Marinetti reflects on the accomplishments and ambition of the Futurist; 'And what I am telling you is this, that the human spirit is an untried womb... And it is we [the Futurists] who are impregnating it for the first time!'<sup>18</sup> If Italy, or Europe for that matter, wanted to enter the future, it was inevitable to sever all ties with the past. The self-destructive tendencies was considered a necessity, only then would a rebirth be possible. The sentiments of war could not have come at a better time for Marinetti.

Marinetti's Futurism was in a certain way the voice and catalyst of existing tendencies of Europe before WWI. Are historians not still puzzled by the signs of the hunger for war, and the enthusiasm with which it was greeted?<sup>19</sup> One of the talents of Marinetti was his ability to pick up on and cultivate the sentiments and frustrations that were lying dormant within Italian society.

Of course he was not the only one sensing that change was on the horizon. Others who reflected on the seemingly fundamental changes in Europe at the time were men such as Stefan Zweig (*Die Welt von Gestern*), Robert Musil (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*), and Rainer Maria Rilke (*Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*). In *Entartung* (1892) the Hungarian Max Nordau (1849-1923) laid out a grim evaluation of contemporary European society by stating that the fundamental changes Europe was undergoing led to degeneration – which is the English equivalent of the title – and neurasthenia.<sup>20</sup> Nordau picked up on similar sentiments as Marinetti. Only whereas for Marinetti viewed these changes in terms of evolution and *élan vital*, Nordau came to a different conclusion altogether using the homonymous theory of the French psychiatrist Bénédict Augustine Morel (1809-1873). Morel developed the idea of degeneration as a way of understanding his patients. Nordau applied it on society as a whole, stating that society had taken a turn for the worst. The future Nordau saw was grim. Moral was fleeting; art was not what it used to be and people were decadent and filled with ennui.<sup>21</sup> What Nordau, Marinetti and others had in common was the fact that they all reflected on a feeling of excitement, a fascination with speed and the fear of an unknown future.<sup>22</sup>

What may be even more astounding than the nervousness that spread to Europe, was the reaction to it. The nervousness came to be considered as a sign of weakness, something that had to be overcome. In its reaction, Europe seemed to have been taken up by an odd masculine attitude. The contemporary feminist Rosa Mayreder (1858-1938) reflected on this

tendency by stating; ‘They are insensitive to the brutality of defeat or the sheer wrongness of an act if it only coincides with the traditional canon of masculinity.’<sup>23</sup> Marinetti’s *Futurist Manifesto*, as we will see, is sodden with masculinity and brutality. And as such it is truly a document of its time. Whereas thinkers such as Mayreder and Nordau reflect more on the seeming demise of a world on the brink of fundamental change, Marinetti embraces this change and had already said his farewells in an optimistic anticipation of that new and wonderful world.

A second phenomenon which was greatly influential on Marinetti and Italian society as a whole, was the Risorgimento, a period of unification of Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Marinetti was an admirer of the key players of the Risorgimento; Garibaldi, Mazzini, and the Young Italy movement (La Giovine Italia).<sup>24</sup> But what was perhaps most influential about the Risorgimento was that which it lacked. Something which Massimo D’Azeglio (1778-1866), former Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Sardinia, explained in but a few words; ‘having made Italy, now we must make Italians, but how?’<sup>25</sup> The ‘old’ Italy was not the Italy of the generation of Marinetti. In a way, contemporary Italians felt that the grandness of old Italy, glorified in the museums and the ruins, had faded. Rome had become bourgeois and passive.<sup>26</sup> The Italy of the end of the 19th century no longer formed the home of the Italians of the generation of Marinetti. For them culture, art, and history were alienated from reality. The Risorgimento, conveying a similar meaning as that of the Italian Renaissance, offered an opportunity for a new beginning in which the Italian identity could be redefined.<sup>27</sup>

The Risorgimento had unmasked Italian society for what it had become; backwards. The history books told the tales of Rome, but for the Italians of the early twentieth century this was another time and another country. Italy, in its newly found political construct, was without a history that was real and true to this new reality. In a similar fashion, as Marinetti and his Futurists felt, art had also become detached from reality. Art did not express the dynamism, energy and change which cities and society in early twentieth century harboured. It did not capture life. If art was to be at the centre of society – as Marinetti foresaw with his acclaimed idea of an ‘artocracy’ – it needed to embrace the changes society was undergoing.<sup>28</sup> This ‘artocracy’ would fill the hearts of Italians with a new hope and give them a reason to be proud of their nationality. It would express the soul of the Italians and enable them to lead Europe once more.

## The Manifest

In the same year as the publication of the *Futurist Manifesto*, 1909, Marinetti published a novel called *Mafarka the Futurist*. The book gives us an insight in Marinetti's ideas, and perhaps even more interesting, in the person himself. What is most striking about the book is the fact that Marinetti's alter ego Mafarka is the sole creator of his son Gazourmah. The historian Marja Härmänmaa proposes that this is a shameless metaphor for the fact that Marinetti saw himself as the sole creator of Futurism. Futurism in the eyes of Marinetti was his greatest work of art.<sup>29</sup> Not only Futurism or the manifest itself, but everything was art. In the preface of *Mafarka*, Marinetti reflects on his book; 'I am the only man who has dared write such a masterpiece, and it will be me own hand that will destroy it.'<sup>30</sup> Futurism was the force behind a revolution in Italian society, and behind Futurism stood but one man as its creator and leader, Marinetti.

The manifesto is made up of two parts. The first part is a scene describing how Marinetti and his friends were working in the middle of the night. It is in the second sentence of the manifest that Marinetti makes it fully clear what Futurism will aim for; 'For hours we had trampled our atavistic ennui into rich oriental rugs, arguing up to the last confines of logic and blackening many reams of paper with our frenzied scribbling.'<sup>31</sup> He tells us: 'We felt that at that hour we alone were vigilant and unbending, like magnificent beacons or guards in forward positions, facing an army of hostile stars, which watched us closely from their celestial encampments.'<sup>32</sup> Marinetti, in his usual prosaic style, tells us that he and his Futurists were destined to make an end to the existing sentiments of ennui and decadence. He is fully aware that the revolution he perceives will not be easy and that the agents of the old world (an army of hostile stars) will try and stop them. Then at the sound of the engines of motorcars outside, they are filled with a new energy. Marinetti raves: 'At long last the myths and mystical ideals are behind us. We are about to witness the birth of a Centaur.'<sup>33</sup> It seems that Marinetti underlines the fact that time, in the sense of new developments such as cars and aeroplanes (symbols of the new world), was on their side. They jump into their car and race through the streets. 'Let's leave wisdom behind as if it were some hideous shell. And cast ourselves, like fruit, flushed with pride, into the immense, twisting jaws of the wind.'<sup>34</sup> Trying to avoid a couple of cyclists, the car spins out of control and crashes into the water. But at a touch of his hand the car is revived, leaving its framework behind.<sup>35</sup> The crash itself

seems to refer to the link between destruction and rebirth, which Marinetti believed existed. As the car crashed and is damaged beyond repair it leaves behind its old form and is 'reborn' in a new and better way.

In the second part Marinetti sums up the beginnings of Futurism in eleven points. Declaring in the first place that: 'We [the Futurists] want to sing about the love of danger, about the use of energy and recklessness as common daily practice'.<sup>36</sup> The tone is aggressive and full of bravado. He mentions violence, assault, and destruction and declares war on museums, libraries, academia, moralism, and feminism. And why?

It is from Italy that we hurl at the whole world this utterly violent, inflammatory manifesto of ours, with which today we are founding "Futurism," because we wish to free our country from the stinking cancer of its professors, archaeologists, tour guides, and antiquarians.<sup>37</sup>

It is clear that Marinetti and his Futurists declared war on the old Italy, its history and all that could be associated with it. To get a better understanding it is necessary to define this war a bit further. We should not be tempted by the idea that Futurism simply opposed to history in the sense of the past, history books, libraries, museums, and what we now would perhaps call *lieux de memoire*. It is much more fundamental. Marinetti felt that the concept and idea of history as a whole should be destroyed. This meant that when Marinetti's time had passed, he wanted his successors to destroy his art as well. All this was necessary to allow creativity, *élan vital*, to roam free. Boundaries – be it geographical, be it disciplines within science and art, even something as fundamental as syntax – are in a sense historical. They pose a limitation on freedom and creativity, and therefore, according to Marinetti, should be destroyed.

The revolutionary character of the Futurists, then, has two sides. In the first place, what makes them true revolutionaries is their longing for an abrupt and complete change of society. They are seemingly ready to jump into the abyss without hesitation. This then is the more classical understanding of revolution. Second, what the Futurists were looking for was not simply a change of the guards. Destroying history was not about establishing their own names – at least if we follow the doctrine – but rather about creating a new kind of society: one in which history had no place and at which art lay at the centre. Chaos was to become the status quo. In that sense, Futurism was not simply avant-garde because it did not limit itself to art. Rather it should be defined as a modernist movement.

## Futurism 1909-1916

Futurism was more than just words. Marinetti held a tour through Italy organizing theatre evenings and exhibitions called *serata*. Together with Umberto Boccioni, Luigi Russolo, and Carlo Carra, Marinetti visited several cities spreading the word about Futurism, sharing their ideas, and provoking their public. The event at Bologna, for example, escalated in a wild goose chase in which 3000 angry Bolognese citizens chased the eleven Futurists through the streets. It was not uncommon that the night ended in a riot spreading through bars and caf es throughout the city. Afterwards the Futurists spent their time at police stations because they were arrested for fighting or for their own protection.<sup>38</sup> These events were also an opportunity to incite with pro-war feelings. This part of Futurism, at least during the *serata*, proved difficult to get across. The Futurist theatre was too abstract and experimental to get a political message across. Boccioni once even made a caricature depicting the evening as a circus of sorts.<sup>39</sup>

Once war broke out, the Futurists joined the ranks. But similar to the well-known tales of deception, depression and feelings of senselessness, the Futurists were hit by reality. Boccioni was high-spirited in his early correspondence with those at home, but after a few weeks it had faded away. Marinetti, enjoying a lot of freedom and privileges, was rarely found on the front. He travelled a lot, seemingly to mobilize the people and spreading the word on the necessity of the war. Other Futurists were not so happy Marinetti left them at the front as he was nicknamed, 'the itinerant ambassador'.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless from its conception in 1909 to 1916, the ideas of Futurism enjoyed fruitful years. But for the Futurists the war took its toll as well. Many Futurists died in battle. Either way the war claimed lives, and prevented new talent from surfacing. Marinetti was prepared to compromise on talent simply to fill the ranks of his own Futurism. It would hard to fill the shoes of the unique group talents of early Futurism. The ideas seemed to fade. There were plans for a new *serata* tour, but it never became a reality. After the war, when Mussolini took power, Marinetti made many concessions. It did not even matter in which shape or form; Marinetti did everything to keep Futurism alive. Marinetti proclaimed freedom of art and freedom of rules. It was the basis on which he came to despise history, but in reality Marinetti sacrificed a lot of his ideas and ideals, simply to stay relevant and keep Futurism alive. To an extent Futurism, i.e. after 1916, had become in many ways contradictory to its founding beliefs.



## Conclusion

Should we herald Marinetti for his courage, his love of creativity, for the art brought forth by him and his Futurists? Or should we condemn him for his love of bloodshed, his praise of war, his support of the rise of Mussolini's fascist Italy? Historians often restrain from such verdicts, keen as they are on emphasizing that a deed should be assessed within the context of its time, a kind of temporal play on cultural relativism. Ranke's echo of *Wie es eigentlich gewesen* and *das Reine Sehen der Dinge* remains a reminder of the objectivity that historians are so persistently defending within their work. Perhaps it is not all that surprising that it was a historian, namely Tzvetan Todorov, who stated that good and evil are empty words if you yourself determine what these words mean.<sup>41</sup> I am similarly cautious when it comes to value judgments. And maybe in this case in particular I am happy with it. For if we truly would need to judge Marinetti it would be difficult not to discard him as a bloodthirsty madman with a remarkable pen. Rather, postponing our verdict indefinitely, we are allowed to be fascinated by his ideas, poems, speeches and manifestos.

Marinetti is fascinating because of his love of creativity, which surpassed everything else. Standing on the shoulders of philosophic giants as Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche, Marinetti tried to place creativity at the centre of art, shedding it of traditions, rules and convictions; placing art consequently at the centre of society. The loss of history meant the loss of structure, restrictions and clarity. Chaos was inevitable and welcomed: something that, in Marinetti's view, should be achieved through revolution. The chaos following the revolution would bring the Futurists the ultimate freedom they longed for. Freedom of creativity, which in turn fuelled evolution, that core impulse of life. A revolution of creativity was what Marinetti had in mind. Amongst all the talk of destruction and violence Marinetti saw man fundamentally as a creating being. I for one cannot disagree.

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## Notes

1. F.T. Marinetti, "Battles of Venice" in *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus and Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 167.
2. *Idem*, 8.
3. R.W. Flint, "Introduction," in F.T. Marinetti, *Selected Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 8.

4. Because of a lack of translations the Italians Futurist texts went by largely unnoticed by the Anglo-Saxon art historians and historians. It seems that the production of translation is paralleled by an increase of interest.
5. F.T. Marinetti, *Critical Writings*, 19.
6. Marinetti, together with D'Annunzio, was the subject of my master thesis *Breaking with the Past: The Revolutionary Tendencies of the Italian Futurist Movement and Gabriele D'Annunzio* (2014)
7. Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), 24.
8. F. Nietzsche, *Over nut en nadeel van geschiedenis voor het leven* (4e ed.), ed. Vertalerscollectief Historische Uitgeverij (Groningen: Historische uitgeverij, 2012), 85-86.
9. Frank Ankersmit, "Nawoord," in *Nietzsche: over nut en nadeel van geschiedenis voor het leven*, 112, 121; Jill Anne Kowalik, "'Sympathy with Death': Hans Castorp's Nietzschean Resentment," *The German Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (1985): 30.
10. It is tempting to think that Marinetti was fascinated with Nietzsche's *übermensch*. And although Marinetti undoubtedly was familiar with the concept, he did not obsess about it as much as he did about Bergson's *élan vital*. Something I find quite telling.
11. Marinetti himself stated in his *Supplement to the Manifesto of Futurist Literature* (1912) that he was already well aware of the intellect/intuition dichotomy well before he read the work of Bergson; Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 25; Lucy Hughes-Hallet, *The Pike* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013), 309.
12. With *Élan Vital* Bergson refers to an impulse which lays at the core of life. A creative and creating force which stimulates the never ending evolution of life in a broad understanding of the word. Henri Bergson, *Essays over bewustzijn en verandering*, trans. Joke van Zijl (Leuven, ISVW publishers, 2014).
13. F.T. Marinetti, *Critical Writings*, 14.
14. Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy; lectures and essays* translation H. Wildon Carr (Henry Holt and Company: New York, 1920), 31-32.
15. Henri Bergson, *Essays over bewustzijn en verandering*, trans. Joke van Zijl (Leuven, ISVW publishers, 2014), 110.
16. The quote can be found in part I "The Way of the Creating One". F. Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common and Bill Chapko (2010), 55.
17. F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 235.
18. F.T. Marinetti, *Critical Writings*, 33.
19. One only has to review widely popular publications such as Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers*, Phillip Blom's *The Vertigo Years*, or Ewoud Kieff's *Oorlogsenthoustiasme* to name but a few.
20. As a psychopathological term, neurasthenia was denote a condition with symptoms of fatigue, anxiety, headache, neuralgia and depressed mood, while Nordau emphasized on emotionalism, pessimism, and ennui. Walter Laquer, "Fin-de-siecle: Once more with Feeling," *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no 1 (1996): 12-16.

21. Ennui is understood as a sense of decadence, vulgarity, and all round boredom.
22. Philipp Blom views that such fascinations and fears typify the period from 1900 to 1914 in his *Vertigo Years*. Philipp Blom, *De duizelingwekkende Jaren: Europa 1900-1914* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2014), 14.
23. Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers* (London: Penguin, 2013), 360-361.
24. Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini both played an integral role in the unification of Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Young Italy was a movement led by Mazzini which pursued the unification.
25. Giovanni Lista and Scott Sheridan, "The Activist Model; or the Avant-Garde as Italian Invention," *South Central Review* 13, no. 2/3 (1996): 16.
26. Anthony Rhodes, *The Poet as Superman: A life of Gabriele D' Annunzio* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson. 1959), 26.
27. Walter L. Adamson, "Modernity and Fascism: The Politics of Culture in Italy, 1903-1922," *The American Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (April, 1990): 362.
28. Artocracy is the conjunction of 'art' and 'cracy', a play of words on the various cracy's such as democracy and theocracy, underling the fundamental role of art.
29. Marja Härmänmaa, "Beyond Anarchism: Marinetti's Futurist (anti)Utopia of individualism and 'Artocracy,'" 861.
30. F.T. Marinetti, *Critical Writings*, 32.
31. Idem, 11-18.
32. Ibidem.
33. The Centaur is a mythical creature which is often understood to be barbaric, violent, beastly creatures. In my view Marinetti is referring to these characteristics, and is telling us that we should even let go of the most basal of human and civil convictions. Idem, 12.
34. Ibidem.
35. Ibidem.
36. Idem, 14.
37. Ibidem.
38. Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 13.
39. Anne Bowler, "Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism," *Theory and Society* 20, no. 6 (1991): 783.
40. Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Oxford: Bergbahn Books, 1996), 83.
41. Tzvetan Todorov, *Angst voor de Barbaren* (Amsterdam: Atlas, 2009), 286.

