

A Futurist Art of the Past: Anton Giulio Bragaglia's Photodynamism



Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Un gesto del capo*¹

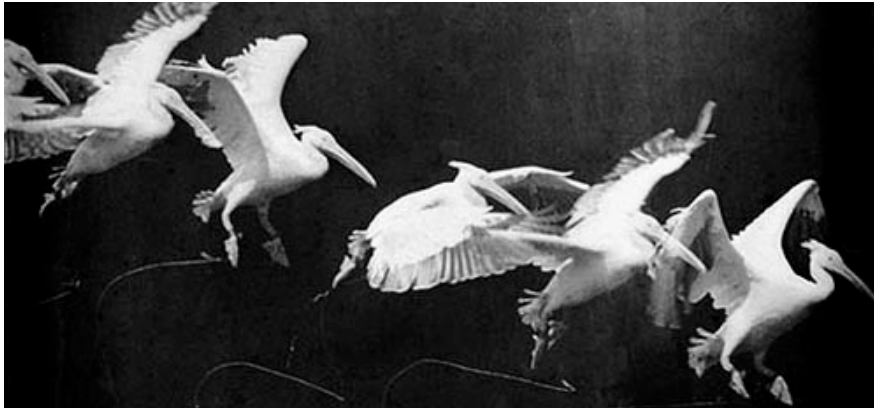
Un gesto del capo (*A gesture of the head*) is a rare 1911 "Photodynamic" picture by Anton Giulio Bragaglia (1890-1960), the Rome-based photographer, director of experimental films, gallerist, theater director, and essayist who played a key role in the development of the Italian Avant-gardes. Initially postcard photographs mailed out to friends, Futurist Photodynamics consist of twenty or so medium size pictures of small gestures (greeting, nodding, bowing), acts of leisure, work, or movements (typing, smoking, a slap in the face), a small corpus that preceded and influenced the experimentations of European Avant-garde photography, such as Christian Schad's Schadographs, Man Ray's Rayographs, and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's Photograms.

Thanks to historians of photography, in particular Giovanni Lista and Marta Braun, we are familiar with the circumstances that led to the birth of Photodynamism, which took on and transformed the principles proclaimed in the April 11, 1910 *Manifesto tecnico della pittura futurista* (*Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting*) by Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, where the primacy of movement and the nature of "dynamic sensation" challenge the conventions of traditional visual arts: "The gesture which we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed moment in universal dynamism. It shall simply be

¹ (*A Gesture of the Head*), 1911. Gelatin silver print, 17.8 x 12.7 cm, Gilman Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York].

the dynamic sensation itself. Indeed, all things move, all things run, all things are rapidly changing. A profile is never motionless before our eyes, but it constantly appears and disappears."

Lista reminds us that the third Italian Congress of photography took place in Rome in April of 1911 and included "two interrelated exhibits: an international photography exposition and an international competition of scientific photography, a forum for the discussion of experimental work and of the Chronophotography of Marey" (188).



Etienne-Jules Marey, *Bird flying*, chronophotography, 1886.

In that same month, "in Bologna the International Congress of Philosophy will be held with the participation of Henri Bergson, who has come to present his ideas on 'philosophical intuition,' a topic that had generated ample debate among Italian intellectuals" (200). Bergson's ideas were circulating widely in Italy since 1909, the year of publication of Giovanni Papini's volume *La filosofia dell'intuizione* (*Philosophy of Intuition*), an anthology of Bergson's texts that Papini quickly reprinted at the beginning of 1911, immediately prior to Bergson's arrival in Bologna.

Following Lista and Braun we could define Bragaglia's Photodynamism as a combination of Marey and Bergson, Chronophotography and vitalism, another interpretation of the "dynamic sensation" singled out by the Futurist painters. From Chronophotography, widely discussed in his December 1911 typewritten manifesto *Fotodinamismo futurista* (*Futurist Photodynamism*),² Bragaglia assimilates the art of visualizing movement, the force lines of movements detaching themselves from the bodies. And yet, as we can notice by comparing *Un gesto del capo* and Marey's chronophotographies, there are substantial differences between the blurry images of Bragaglia and the analytical method of Marey, characterized by sequential and frozen poses, by a staccato of linear although superimposed images.

Also Bergson's influence, despite the obvious relevance of his terminology for Futurist artistic practices and Bragaglia's photography, is still largely misunderstood. If we wish to grasp

² The manifesto has been expanded by Bragaglia and republished in 1913, accompanied by 16 plates. The most recent edition is A. G. Bragaglia, *Fotodinamismo futurista*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980.

the sense of the dematerialization of bodies and of the phantasmal appearance of photodynamic images, we must move within the space of Bragaglia’s eccentric Bergsonism. By doing so we will detect an unsuspected aspect of Futurism and the European Avant-gardes: their technological engagement with the non-active, past side of actions, life, and movement.

1. *Intervals of Duration*

In his manifesto *Fotodinamismo futurista*, Bragaglia comments on the following citation from Bergson: “Bergson says: ‘In the living mobility of things, the understanding applies itself to marking out real or virtual stations; it notes departures and arrivals—that is all that matters to the thought of man in so far as it is simply human. It is more than human to grasp what happens in the interval’” (34, my translation).

What Bragaglia adds to Bergson is that the “more than human” perception that can “grasp what happens in the interval” and capture the essence of the “living mobility of things” must be located in a technology of artistic representation, in Futurist photography. Photodynamism is for Bragaglia precisely that “more than human” art of intervals, a technique of visualization of the “intermovemental states of a motion”. Whereas philosophers have mostly understood Bergson’s intervals as segments of duration, and these segments as ineffable psychological or spiritual units, Bragaglia sees them as topological phenomena that can be constructed and represented through artistic technologies.

The following is one of Bergson’s descriptions of the intervals of duration: “Let us reflect for a moment on this “present” which alone is considered to have existence. What precisely is the present? If it is a question of the present—I mean, of a mathematical instant which would be to time what the mathematical point is to the line—it is clear that such an instant is a pure abstraction, an aspect of the mind; it cannot have real existence [...] Our consciousness tells us that when we speak of our present we are thinking of a certain interval of duration” (*The Perception* 261-262).

The notion of “duration”, *durée*, has been the object of an infinite amount of philosophical interpretations. Nevertheless, with just a few exceptions, it has not been noticed that which truly counts in Bergson is not the duration in itself as much as the “interval of duration”. The most esoteric categories elaborated by the Avant-gardes, for example Marcel Duchamp’s “infra-thin” (*infra-mince*), are nothing else but methods of constructing such intervals and inserting human activity in the structure of the present. Many years before Duchamp introduced the notion of “infra-thin”—reasoning, along with Bergson, on the inexistence of an “instantaneous present” and on the “multiplicity of extensions” of which every “interval of duration” is composed—Bragaglia was addressing a similar theoretical constellation and developing his own conception of “intermovemental states.”

In Bragaglia, the more than human faculty invoked by Bergson, the capacity to “grasp

what happens in the interval,” spreads out into an unexplored field of artistic production, the task of art becoming that of the construction of aesthetic apparatuses that penetrate the infra-representative intervals: “Photodynamism is a creation aiming at the realization of ideals that are contrary to the scope of all of today’s representative methods.” Photodynamism is for Bragaglia a “more than human” art of intervals, a technique that intercepts the “intermomental minutes existent between seconds” and “the intermovemental states of a motion”. Futurist photography “represents” nothing. It reveals, through body actions and technical gestures, the infra-representative life of intervals. Photodynamism is a technological naturalism, a constructivism of forces.

Most importantly, Bragaglia shares with Bergson the belief that: “the preservation of the past in the present is nothing else than the indivisibility of change.” (Bergson, *Perception* 264).³ After meditating on this premise, and on the coexistence of living forces and the past, Bragaglia infers that Photodynamism’s capacity to visualize the “intermovemental states of a motion” must also allow it to express the exhausted vitality of gestures, their past. For this reason, Bragaglia’s photograph is not conceived as an illusory, analytical simulation of movement—as for instance in Maray’s chronophotographies and Giacomo Balla’s paintings—but as the manifestation of the enigmatic, “phantasmatic” texture of change itself.



Giacomo Balla, *Dinamismo di un cane al guinzaglio* (*Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*), 1912. [Oil on canvas, 91 × 110 cm, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo]

2. *The Photography of the Invisible*

I wish to take the term “phantasmatic” seriously and introduce a brief aside on the photographic reproduction of phantasms, a topic that was much discussed in those years. In a 1913 article, *La fotografia dell'invisibile / Photography of the Invisible* (*Fotodinamismo* 282-285),⁴ Bragaglia considers at length the conditions that, in his opinion, would permit photography to capture with authenticity

a "*stereosi*," a manifestation, an incarnation, of "the impenetrable invisible:" which photographic devices would allow one to portray the invisible? The occasion for this discussion was offered to Bragaglia from the report—appearing in the notable *Les Annales des Sciences Psychiques*, a French magazine founded in 1891 by Charles Richet, Nobel recipient and professor of physiology at the College de France—of an "instrument to photograph the invisible" invented by "Mr.s Mesnard and Plomb of Bordeaux." Bragaglia asks himself: for which reasons do the captured phantasms on the plate from Mesnard and Plomb resemble poorly drawn puppets? Why are they so shapeless, without form?

In his article, Bragaglia makes reference to the long tradition of research on parapsychological phenomena—Crookes, Morselli, Richet, de Rochas, Lombroso—and in closing he writes of the experiments of the Turin native photographer Enrico Imoda, whose fifty photographs of ectoplasms were published in 1912, at the same time as the photodynamic experiences of Bragaglia.



Enrico Imoda, *Un fantasma* (*A Ghost*), in *Fotografie di fantasmi* (*Pictures of Ghosts*), Torino 1912.

Bragaglia does not call into question the existence of "mediumistic *stereosi* constituted of etheric and astral forces." What is pressing for him is to bring to light the blatant technical impossibility, not to mention the artistic inutility, of these images—that resemble the "puppets drawn with chalk on a blackboard:" given the low sensibility to light of the photographic devices, in order to fix their images of phantasms, Mesnard and Plomb must have convinced spirits to sit patiently immobile: "I'm not sure who could induce a phantasm, molded or not, to sit still for two minutes: two long minutes." Developing similar arguments in another text from that period, entitled *La fotografia dei vivi e dei morti* (*The Photography of the Living and the Dead*), Bragaglia polemicizes the "ruses" of parapsychological photography, accompanying his article with false

images of ectoplasms that he himself created to refute the claims of the photographers of the invisible.

Beyond erudite curiosity, this polemic allows us to grasp a fundamental motif of Photodynamism. Possibly because they are misled by Bragaglia's own terminology—who himself does not renounce anthroposophic jargon and often defines Photodynamism as a "transcendental photography of movement"—historians of photography have often confused Photodynamism for an esoteric attempt to "photograph the invisible." This is the case also of Marta Braun's recent essay on Photodynamism—that accompanies the catalogue of the 2014 Futurist exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum of New York—in which Photodynamism is interpreted as a generic "mixture of science, pseudo-science, and the philosophical ideas of Henri Bergson" (94). Instead, as argued by Bragaglia in *Fotodinamismo futurista*, the technical characteristics of the photography produce a "dematerialization of the visible" not a "visualization of the invisible." This is a principle maintained also by the *Manifesto tecnico della pittura futurista*, which states that movement destroys bodies. For this reason, Bragaglia contraposes his own "animated images," a "deformation" and "dematerialization of external corporeal forms" to the "absurd" phantasms of Mesnard and Plomb. Photodynamic images are an expansion of the living, not the incarnation of the transcendent.

3. *The Life of Life*

Let's go back to Bragaglia's Bergsonism. As we have seen, the new perspective opened by Bergson concerns the forms of spatial manifestation of a temporality in which present and past, action and memory, are nothing but two faces of change. Photodynamism presupposes this question: in which type of present are "the living" immersed? What are the modes of presence of a present of "pure movement," of a present in which the past of memory and the present of action coexist? Bragaglia realizes that, thanks to its potential to "conserve the past," photography may become the privileged artistic technology for penetrating this *infra-representative* structure of vital temporality. His Bergsonism thus consists in a pedagogy of change, in a technique of contact with this multiple present, in which the past is sedimented in an actual existence, assuming the unusual aspect of a grume of change, the "deformation" of bodies sought by Bragaglia.

Given these premises, we may return to Bragaglia's Photodynamic image of the gesture of the head. What can we observe in this picture? Not an illusionistic, analytical simulation of movement. In what, therefore, does the dynamism revindicated by Bragaglia consist? What is the "pure movement that is the life of life," as Bragaglia states in *Fotodinamismo futurista*? (22). To respond to these questions it could be useful to compare the expression of dynamism of Bragaglia to that of Umberto Boccioni.



Umberto Boccioni, *Stati d'animo* (*States of Mind*), 1911
[Oil on canvas, 70,5 × 96,2 cm, MoMA, New York]

The “style of movement” of Boccioni—the interaction among bodies and their contexts, the “atmosphere” of objects—diverges substantially from the phantasmic dematerializations of Bragaglia. “Plastic dynamism” presupposes a swirling “co-penetration” of the various “atmospheric strata,” a chromatic and figurative simultaneism modeled on the multiplicity of movement-changes of bodies and their vital surroundings.⁵ In opposition to Boccioni, Bragaglia eliminates from his images every background, every color, and every atmosphere. As in Marey, from a shapeless obscurity we witness the emergence of minimal gestures: a gesture of the head, a hand waving, and a person smoking. In a variety of his texts, gestures such as those portrayed by Bragaglia are used by Bergson as metaphors for exemplifying the nature of the “indivisible acts,” the “intervals of duration.” An arm as it rises is celebrated for instance in Bergson’s *Introduction to Metaphysics* and the movement of a hand returns in his last book, *The Two Sources of Morality and religion* (1932):

Move your hand from one point to another: to you who perceive it from the inside this is an indivisible movement. But I who perceive it from the outside, with my attention centered on the line followed, say to myself that your hand has had to cover the first part of the interval, then the half of the second half, then the half of what was left, and so on: I could go on for millions of centuries, and never finish the enumeration of the acts into which, in my eyes, the movement you feel to be indivisible is split up. [...] We cannot think of this multiplicity without bewilderment; yet it is but the reverse side of something indivisible. (*The Two Sources* 222)

5 This aesthetic divergence explains in my opinion the attack by Boccioni against Bragaglia’s 1913 edition of *Fotodinamismo futurista*, which culminated in a note on the review *Lacerba* opposing Photodynamism to Plastic dynamism and photography to painting, sculpture, and architecture; a statement followed by the repudiation and expulsion of Bragaglia from the Futurist movement.

Bergson defines this feeling from the inside an "absolute," the vision of a gesture in its indivisibility and yet as a multiple present. Thanks to Bragaglia's images we can understand the conditions and implications of this perception from the inside. The infra-representative intervals constructed by Bragaglia's photography appear only thanks to the *interruption of actions*. So that there be a real temporal multiplicity, the past and the present must separate themselves. The past must be past, the action must be concluded. Only under this condition, the interruption of gestures detaches the totality of the past from its efficacious present, permitting these two dimensions to come back together and reconfigure themselves, thus revealing the density of action. The gesture of the head is a "ghost of the living" because its frozen limits gather into its own action a larger horizon, its defunct past. The action is interrupted, impotent, and yet it is still registered on the plate. From Bergson, the philosopher of "pure memory" and of the virtual as "absolute past," Bragaglia learns this paradoxical lesson and selects it as an artistic principle: in order for an action to be vital, it must exhaust its actuality. It must complete itself and fade away without residue.

Un gesto del capo's gesture of the head is thus "phantasmatic" and "dematerialized" because it gathers into its own action a larger horizon, its past. The action is interrupted, registered on the plate, by now exhausted and impotent, and yet absorbed in bodies to which it restitutes their profoundness through an unforeseen deformation, a dilation towards virtuality. If the gesture were not carried out, if the past were not completely emancipated from the present, Photodynamism could not construct the infra-representative intervals of duration.

This is the true paradox on which Photodynamism knowingly grounds itself: the photography of "life of life," the artistic expression of the "passion for change" of Futurist vitalism is inseparable from the cult of pure past, the depletion of force, and the interruption of efficacious actions. To the conventionalism of traditional artistic culture Bragaglia responds with a radical pedagogy of the past, with a technological constructivism of memory.

Bragaglia's Photodynamism thus allows us to thematize an aspect that both historians of photography and Bergson's scholars have rarely noticed: intervals of duration are revealed only when actions are interrupted. Since duration is an interval and not just a flow, its puzzling life presupposes borders, and the separation of the past from the present. Only under these conditions, gestures detach the totality of the past from their efficacious present, allowing these two dimensions to come back together, and reconfigure themselves. If photography is a technology of presence, as well as a technique of interruption, and Bergson's duration is not just a flow but the simultaneous coexistence of the actuality of the present and the virtuality of the past, then Bragaglia's blurred photographs can be interpreted as two-faced images, in which also the dematerialization and phantasmatic nature of duration are exposed.

By studying comparatively a single image and putting it into dialogue with Bergson's philosophy and with the Avant-gardes *episteme*, we can draw several unexpected conclusions.

Firstly, Photodynamism is not a visualization of life's efficacy but a peculiar Futurist art of the past. Secondly, Bergson's vitalism and philosophy of duration are translated by Bragaglia into an artistic reflection on the ghostly side of actions and enigmatic texture of change. And lastly, Bergson's well known rejection of cinema and mechanic devices of artistic representation, is turned upside down by Bragaglia's own Bergsonism, and transformed into a celebration of photography's more than human capacity to "grasp what happens in the interval."

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