

Pierrot, Perelà, and the Italian *Saltimbanco* French *fumisme* and the Italian Modernist Imagination

Luca Cottini

After two centuries of critical oblivion, the repertoire of the 16th- and 17th-century Italian *commedia dell'arte* gradually regained popular and cultural relevance in France, starting from the early 19th century, in parallel with the country's industrial development.

Circus performers, acrobatic clowns, and stock masks first re-emerged in rural fairs and shows. With time, itinerant pantomimes moved from the countryside to industrial cities and found stable residence in theatres as popular entertainment for the working classes. Before the Haussmannization of Paris, the most renowned comic theatre in Paris was the Théâtre des Funambules on Boulevard du Temple, both for the quality of its actors and the variety of its productions. While attracting the masses, nonetheless the repertoire of the Italian *commedia* soon captured also the attention of the *écrivains cultivés*, who found in the vital spontaneity of popular fairs and urban theatres not only 'un îlot chatoyant de merveilleux, un morceau demeuré intact du pays d'enfance'¹ as a sort of antidote against the ongoing industrialization, but also a rich source of inspiration for their literary work.

On the one hand, in the report of a show at the Théâtre des Funambules, published on September 4, 1842 for *Revue de Paris* under the title 'Shakspeare aux funambules' [sic],² Théophile Gautier provides an intellectual account of the 'monde étrangement bariolé de la farce italienne'.³ While wondering at the spectacle's magic display of spontaneity, vitality, energy and imagination, Gautier defines its two key elements in the performing artistry of the mime Deburau (re-interpreting the mask of Pierrot in a dark key)⁴ and the active participation of the public. On the other hand, in the poetic collection *Odes Funambulesques* (1857),⁵ Théodore de Banville refashions the peculiar verve and the clownish imagery of Italian comedy

¹ J. Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque*, Genève, Skira, 1970, p. 8.

² T. Gautier, 'Shakspeare aux funambules', in: *L'art moderne*, Paris, Michel Lévy Frères, 1856, pp. 167-179. Gautier's review also represents a historical record of the activities at the Funambules, compensating for the lacking information on its production (due to its improvised performances and the destruction of all materials after the theatre's demolition). For more information about Gautier's report see R. Storey's book *Pierrots on the Stage of Desire. Nineteenth-Century French Literary Artist and the Comic Pantomime*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 40-42.

³ Gautier, 'Shakspeare aux funambules', cit., p. 168.

⁴ The pantomime represents the adventures of Pierrot killing a man, stealing his clothes, speaking with his ghost, and marrying a duchess. In describing Pierrot as a pale criminal, a frenetic performer, a gambler, and a ruthless lover, Gautier captures the ambivalence of the show, which is described as 'un étrange drame, mêlé de rire et de terreur' (*Ivi*, p. 177).

⁵ T. de Banville, 'Odes funambulesques'. in: *Poésies de Théodore de Banville*, Paris, Alphonse Lemerre, 1880, pp. 21-137.

into a new poetic language, turning poems into virtual acrobatic shows,⁶ and the poet himself into a clownish and childish performer. In particular, Banville reconfigured the silent mime of Pierrot as a symbolic equivalent of the poet, expressing the same performing ability, and reflecting the same form of distinction from the norm, as seen in the parodic and anti-bourgeois portrayal of the character with a lunar mask ('le cousin de la lune'),⁷ or in a peculiar vertical tension to reach for the stars.⁸

The literary trope associating the modern poet with acrobatic comic actors⁹ found mature and enduring form in Baudelaire's short story 'Le vieux saltimbanque', published posthumously in the 1869 collection *Pétits poèmes en prose*. Baudelaire's poetic representation of the *saltimbanque* theme certainly iterates Gautier and Banville's excitement toward the frenetic explosion of vitality of circus, yet also re-invents it by way of its original focus on the clown's misery and letdown following the show. In dwelling on the gloomy gaze of a clown after the performance, Baudelaire elaborates a successful metaphor for the artist himself, shifting from his previous association with a brilliant entertainer to his sad fate as a 'victime innocente':¹⁰

À l'extrême bout de la rangée de baraques, comme si, honteux, il s'était exilé lui-même de toutes ces splendeurs, je vis un pauvre saltimbanque, voûté, caduc, adossé contre un des poteaux de sa cahute [...] Partout la joie, le gain, la débauche; partout la certitude du pain pour les lendemains; partout l'explosion frénétique de la vitalité. Ici la misère absolue, la misère affublée, pour comble d'horreur, de haillons comiques, où la nécessité, bien plus que l'art, avait introduit le contraste. [...] Obsédé par cette vision, je cherchai à analyser ma soudaine douleur, et je me dis: Je viens de voir l'image du vieil homme de lettres qui a survécu à la génération dont il fut le brillant amuseur; du vieux poète sans amis, sans famille, sans enfants, dégradé par sa misère et par l'ingratitude publique.¹¹

Baudelaire's image of a desolate clown then reconfigures the original relationship of *funambulisme* with the thrill of circus, ballet, acrobaticism, or the Italian *commedia*, by pairing it instead to the serious theme of the modern artist's self-portrayal as a sad performer. Against the backdrop of industrialization, Baudelaire's gloomy clown hence emblemizes the poet's shift from a recognized or immortal figure into an ephemeral entertainer, subject to the scrutiny of time, utility, and market laws.

Such imagination of the sad *saltimbanque* would influence the depiction of clowns and *funambules* in late-19th century painting, as confirmed in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's post-show portrayal of a Moulin Rouge clowness in *Mademoiselle Cha-u-Kao* (1896), or in Pablo Picasso's representations of the acrobat's poverty in *La famille des saltimbanques* (1905), or of Harlequin's death in *La mort d'Arlequin* (1905). Baudelaire's iconography also impacted the figure of Pierrot himself, who turned from a silent acrobat of the *comédie italienne*¹² into a melancholic mask, in

⁶ In the 1857 'Préface' or in the later 'Avertissement' to the 1859 edition of the *Odes*, Banville identifies in the 'feuilles volantes' (*Ivi*, p. 5) of his acrobatic or extravagant poetry 'une forme nouvelle' (*Ivi*, p. 1) of literature, modeled on improvisation, caricature, paroxysme, and 'des fantaisies plus que frivoles' (*Ivi*, p. 5).

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 129.

⁸ For more information about the last poem of the collection, 'Saut du Tremplin', see M. Barbaro, *I poeti-saltimbanchi e le maschere di Aldo Palazzeschi*, Pisa, ETS, 2008, p. 18.

⁹ Starting from the mid-19th century, masks, clowns, and buffoons also start to acquire intellectual and historiographic relevance, as confirmed by the publication of M. Sand's monograph *Masques et bouffons. Comédie Italienne*, Paris, C. Lévy, 1862.

¹⁰ Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste*, cit., p. 112.

¹¹ C. Baudelaire, *Paris Blues. Le Spleen de Paris. The Poems in Prose. Pétits poèmes en prose*. Trans. F. Scarfe, London, Anvil Press Poetry, 2012, pp. 80-82.

¹² Pierrot 'does not appear under his own name and familiar costume until towards the end of the seventeenth century in France' (R. Storey, *Pierrot. A Critical History of a Mask*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 14). His origins relate to the acrobatic Pedrolino (a character interpreted by

the pantomimes of Charles Deburau and Paul Legrand, or a splenetic character, in the theatrical productions of the 1880s. In particular, two adaptations of Pierrot, by Jules Laforgue (*Pierrot Fumiste*, 1882)¹³ and Albert Giraud (*Pierrot Lunaire*, 1884),¹⁴ defined the iconography of the mask as an enigmatic smoker and a nostalgic inept, which would have an immense impact on the contemporary European imagination.

In addition to the imagery of the *commedia dell'arte* and the Baudelairean iconography of the old saltimbanque, Laforgue and Giraud's representation of Pierrot as a lunatic *fumiste* will deeply impact the Italian literary imagination of the early 20th century, reshaping an imported character into a key Modernist symbol. In one way, clowns, *trasformisti*, *funamboli* gradually re-appeared in Italy's early industrial culture in connection to early cinema (in the acrobaticism of the transformist Leopoldo Fregoli) and variety theatre (in the histrionic showmanship of the comic actor Ettore Petrolini). Based upon a similar model of impromptu, ephemeral shows, the *serate futuriste* by Marinetti, Boccioni, or Pratella also recovered the French renderings of the *comédie italienne*, re-inventing it into an avant-garde platform of radical activism and poetic self-promotion. In another way, Pierrot also became a model for representing in poetry the self-proclaimed uselessness of the intellectual in contemporary society, and – by way of Laforgue – a key source of inspiration for Aldo Palazzeschi's light and gloomy character of Perelà, a comic/tragic man of smoke transformed into an archetypal figure in his 1911 novel *Il codice di Perelà*.¹⁵

In tracing the poetic connection between Pierrot and the Italian versions of the *saltimbanco*, whether in the exuberant form of Marinetti and the ambivalent character of Perelà, this study aims at illuminating an underestimated link between the French decadentism of the 1880s and the Italian avant-garde of the early 1910s. In the following sections, the essay will first explore the relationship of *funambulisme* and *fumisterie* in the French Pierrots by Laforgue and Giraud, and then the impact of their imagery on the Futurist representation of smoke and Palazzeschi's character of Perelà. In conclusion, it will refer this French-Italian connection to the enduring success of the clown theme in Italian culture, in relation to Harlequin and Pulcinella.

Pierrot, Fumisme and Funambulisme in French Literature

Pierrot became a common character in French theatre in the 1880s.¹⁶ In 1881, Léon Hennique and Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote a script for the pantomime *Pierrot sceptique*, illustrated by Jules Chéret and performed at the Folies Bergère.¹⁷ The work, which presented Pierrot murdering his tailor, executing a mannequin, and obliterating in fire all of the evidence of his crimes, would influence the composition of Laforgue's play *Pierrot Fumiste*, published the year after and similarly displaying a dandified mask tormented by homicidal instincts. In 1882, Paul Margueritte composed a pantomime (published in 1886) for the Valvins house of Stéphane Mallarmé, entitled *Pierrot assassin de sa femme*,¹⁸ which would inspire the 1883 play

Giovanni Pellesini in the 17th-century scenario of *Li duo finti zingari*) and his success is related to the Italian adaptations at the théâtre italien of Paris of Tirso de Molina's *Don Juan* (1658) and Molière's *Le festin de pierre* (1665).

¹³ J. Laforgue, *Pierrot Fumiste*, in: *Oeuvres complètes. Mélanges Posthumes*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1919.

¹⁴ A. Giraud, *Pierrot lunaire. Rondels bergamasques*, Paris, A. Lemerre éditeur, 1884.

¹⁵ A. Palazzeschi, *Il Codice di Perelà*, in: *Tutti i romanzi*, Vol. I, G. Tellini (ed.), Milan, Mondadori, 2004.

¹⁶ Pierrot was also a common reference in painting, as attested in the works of Georges Seurat (*Pierrot avec un blanc tuyau*, 1883), Paul Cézanne (*Mardi gras (Pierrot et Arlequin)*, 1888), and Jules Chéret, who dedicated several posters to the mask. Pierrot would also be a source of inspiration for composers, as documented in Claude Debussy's 'Pierrot' song of 1881 (based on Paul Verlaine's poem 'Pantomime', in: *Fêtes galantes*, Paris, A. Lemerre, 1869).

¹⁷ L. Hennique, and J.-K. Huysmans, *Pierrot sceptique: pantomime*, Paris, Édouard Rouveyre, 1881.

¹⁸ P. Margueritte, *Pierrot, assassin de sa femme. Pantomime*, Paris, C. Lévy, 1886.

by Jean Richepin *Pierrot assassin*,¹⁹ staged at the Trocadéro and starring Sarah Bernhardt as Pierrot. In 1887, the Belgian writer Albert Giraud released the play *Pierrot Narcisse*,²⁰ after the success of his 1884 poetic collection *Pierrot Lunaire*, which will be translated in German by Otto Erich Hartleben in 1892 and adapted into a musical melodrama (Op. 21) by Arnold Schoenberg in 1912.²¹ In parallel with theatre, and the establishment of the *Cercle Funambulesque* in 1888 (a theatrical society including the novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, the composer Jules Massenet, and the illustrator Jules Chéret), the mask became a popular reference also in contemporary press, after the foundation of Adolphe Willette's journal *Pierrot* (1888-1889; 1891).

In the context of such rich gallery of adaptations, the anti-bourgeois and funereal Pierrots by Laforgue and Giraud acquired a distinctive relevance in France and deeply impacted the contemporary imagination.

In *Pierrot fumiste* (1882), Laforgue reinvented the character of Lord Pierrot as a disillusioned *viveur*.²² In the 1882 play, which subsequently inspired T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915),²³ he presented the story of Pierrot's unsuccessful marriage to Colombinette (from their wedding day to the trial that she brings against him because of his unwillingness to procreate), and reconfigured the mask around the concept of smoke. Pierrot's *fumisme* then represents, on the one hand, a reflection of his *funambulisme*, as expressed through the metaphor of endless vaulting movement in smoke, and, on the other, the character's new core quality, identified with lightness. Smoke mirrors the "philosophical" lightness of Pierrot, which also takes shape in his splenetic irony, his preference for metamorphosis over reproduction (motivated by his impotence),²⁴ and his final escape on a train, 'léger et ricanant, dansant dans son compartiment à chaque station'.²⁵ In Laforgue's version, the transformation of the *funambule* Pierrot into a *fumiste* aims at debunking his traditional gaiety, and stressing instead his obscure or Dionysian side (made manifest in his anti-bourgeois attitude). Smoke symbolizes then Pierrot's dark *ennui*, which is expressed throughout the play in his absence of sexual appetite for Colombinette, his lingering plan of a 'colombinetticide',²⁶ his purchase of the journal *Le Pornographe illustré* on the way to his wedding, or his cynical greed for money ('c'est de l'argent que je te demande! Quinze malheureux centimes').²⁷ A similar correlation between Pierrot's *fumisme* and his apathy (both prior to and following his failed marriage with Colombinette) would appear in Laforgue's later poetic collection *Complaintes* of 1885. In the sonnet 'La cigarette', smoke returns not by chance as a key symbol, signifying the poet's lightness, acrobatics, and humor, yet also his meaninglessness, self-destructiveness, and resignation:

moi, je vais résigné, sans espoir à mon sort, / et pour tuer le temps, en attendant la mort / je fume en nez des dieux de fines cigarettes [...] me plonge en une extase infinie et m'endors [...] / et puis, quand je m'éveille en songeant à mes vers, / je contemple, le cœur plein d'une douce joie, / mon cher pouce rôti comme une cuisse d'oie. (vv. 2-4; 7; 12-14)

¹⁹ J. Richepin, *Pierrot assassin. Pantomime*, Paris, Palais du Trocadéro, April 28, 1883.

²⁰ A. Giraud, *Pierrot narcissé*, in: *Pierrot lunaire; Les dernières fêtes; Pierrot narcissé*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004, pp. 105-168.

²¹ *Pierrot lunaire* by Schoenberg first introduced the *Pierrot Ensemble* as a new musical combination of instruments and the *Sprechstimme* as a new vocal style.

²² In the 1885 collection of *Complaintes* (Paris: Léon Vanier, 1885), Laforgue explicitly defines Pierrot as a 'viveur lunaire' in the poem 'Locutions de Pierrot'. The lunar quality of Pierrot would also recur in the famous *complaint* 'L'imitation de Notre Dame la lune'.

²³ T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, in: *Waste Land and Other Poems*, New York, Signet Classic, 1998.

²⁴ 'On veut être plus fumiste que papa' (Laforgue, *Pierrot fumiste*, cit., p. 88).

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 107.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 91.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 94.

While ‘pushing Baudelairean *ennui* to a new, more modern despair’,²⁸ ‘La cigarette’ stages the *fumisme* of the artist as a remedy for the irredeemable flatness of existence, as well as an anti-bougeois protest, in the poet’s deliberate abandonment of any useful activity. The final self-irony of the poet, burning his fingers while giving in to the pleasure of thinking/smoking, sheds light on his uselessness for modern productive life, and his hopeless fate.

The topic of life’s misery or the poet’s *mal de vivre* is also central in Albert Giraud’s 1884 collection *Pierrot lunaire. Rondels bergamasques*. In continuity with the French cultural re-appreciation of the *commedia dell’arte*, Giraud connotes his Pierrot (and his own poetic figure) with a Harlequinian element, as seen in title’s reference to Harlequin’s hometown of Bergamo, in the several poems of the collection dedicated to Harlequin (like ‘Arlequin’, or ‘Arlequinade’), and in his self-definition as ‘Pierrot Bergamasque’ (‘À mon cousin de Bergame’; v.2) or ‘pâle dandy bergamasque’ (‘Pierrot dandy’; v.4). The continuous modifications of Giraud’s Pierrot throughout the collection (as in the poems ‘Pierrot dandy’, ‘Pierrot polaire’, ‘Pierrot voleur’, ‘Pierrot cruel’) also pay homage to the endless self-multiplication at the core of Harlequin’s character. In addition to the *commedia* repertoire, Giraud also positions himself in relation to its French 19th-century re-inventions, as seen in the link (first traced in Banville’s *Odes Funambulesques*) between Pierrot’s pallor and his lunatic temperament, in the formal choice of the rondel (recalling Verlaine’s Parnassianism), and in the Laforguean vision of the mask as an impotent or inapt lover. In the attempt to give coherent form to the mask’s multiple selves, Giraud related them to the common trait of Pierrot’s lunatic pallor, therefore making him *lunaire*. Pierrot’s solitude, gloomy temperament, and self-referential narcissism would be manifested in his dress, as white as the moon, and in his lunar disguise as a dark or nocturnal acrobat, playing a dissonant viola (‘Nocturne acrobat, / d’un grotesque archet dissonant / agaçant sa viole plate’; in: ‘La sérénade de Pierrot’, vv. 6-8),²⁹ and laughing over his suicidal desires (‘en sa robe de Lune blanche / Pierrot rit son rire sanglant’; in: ‘Suicide’, vv. 1-2). Such association of lunar temperament, bloody dark side, and *fumiste* posture would also recur in Giraud’s later play *Pierrot Narcisse*. Based on Laforgue’s work and Banville’s theatrical predilection for smoking actors,³⁰ Giraud’s play constructs smoke in relation to the Hamletic thinking and the self-reflective questions of Pierrot (‘faut-il rester Pierrot, ou bien cesser de l’être? [...] Rêver ou vivre? Il faut choisir’).³¹ The act of smoking underlines the conquest of his mental self-mastery (‘je veux rêver, / redevenir enfin mon maître, et me sauver / dans le silence auguste et fier de ma pensée!’),³² and his narcissistic drive, which is also seen in his final decision to wound himself, staining his white robe with blood, in the attempt to kiss his own image.

As documented, the French Pierrots subsume a complex repertoire of acrobatics, dancing, transformations, and mime, offering a tangible expression of ‘the art of performance at its purest’,³³ (later emblemized in early cinema or the variety theatre) and embodying a mute, non-standardized language (later epitomized by Charlie Chaplin), endowed with new, multiple possible meanings. At the same time, however, far from being a mere mask of popular entertainment,

²⁸ R. Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 59.

²⁹ Giraud’s image of Pierrot playing a dissonant viola would later transfer onto Severini’s painting, and Italo Svevo’s 1923 novel *La coscienza di Zeno*, where the smoking *inetto* Zeno Cosini not by chance appears in the act of playing an out of tune violin.

³⁰ For Banville, the actor who ‘fume un vrai cigare’ (*Ivi*, p. 10) on stage is the core figure of a comic show.

³¹ Laforgue, *Pierrot Narcisse*, cit., p. 129.

³² *Ivi*, p. 162.

³³ M. Green, and J. Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot. The Commedia dell’Arte and the Modern Imagination*, New York, MacMillan, 1986, p. 4.

Pierrot also became an aesthetic archetype of the modern artist, aspiring for visibility and social prestige, yet not compromising with cultural conformity. In this sense, the cultural history of his re-inventions not only defined a new iconography of the *funambule* or the *saltimbanco*, but also generated a substantial ‘part of the history of what we call *modernismo*’,³⁴ both in 19th-century France and in early 20th-century Italian culture.

The Italian Re-Invention of the French Repertoire

The repertoire of the 19th-century French *commedia dell’arte* and the cultural elaboration of Pierrot entered Italian culture through Futurist theater and literature.

The *commedia dell’arte* largely influenced the creation of the Futurist *serate*, which were similarly conceived as performances of “scripted improvisation” (often based upon a *scenario*). The Futurist *serate* brought back to Italy the spontaneity and energy of both the early mimes at the Théâtre italien of Paris³⁵ and the variety show at the Funambules, articulating them ‘secondo modalità piuttosto rituali’.³⁶ The strict codification of these pre-established sets of situations was functional to the elaboration of variations, to the breaking of rules, as well as to achieving the ultimate goals of provoking the audience, involving it in the action, or solely generating a reaction. In consciously presenting himself as an extravagant mask, Marinetti eccentrically broke theatrical and social codes in the *serate* by means of his unpredictable laughter, provocation, showmanship, and verbal acrobatics. In his Laforguean anti-bourgeois posture, Marinetti purposely constructed the *serate* then as anticonformist, deforming, and destabilizing events, dismantling recognized aesthetic canons through the avant-garde’s typical ‘antagonismo trascendentale’,³⁷ and often overflowing into politics. In the first *serata* or “battle” of Trieste, on January 12, 1910, Marinetti histrionically appeared on stage with the trained boxer Armando Mazza (who read the *Manifesto of Futurism*) and the young Aldo Palazzeschi (who read the poem ‘La regola del sole’), provocatively promoting the Italian irredentist agenda in a city controlled by the Austrians. In the *serata* of Venice, on April 27, 1910, Marinetti followed the event at the La Fenice theatre (where he read his ‘Discorso futurista ai Veneziani’) by launching leaflets of ‘Venezia futurista’ from the city’s Clock Tower. Through their militant nature and their enactment of the avant-gardist idea of poetry, painting, and music as ephemeral artistic performances, the *serate* ultimately aimed at staging a new model of comic theatre, which, in addition to the *commedia dell’arte*, found inspiration in the spectacular attractions of variety and early cinema, as specifically outlined in Marinetti’s ‘Manifesto del teatro di varietà’ (1913).

As a ‘scuola di sottigliezza, di complicazione e di sintesi cerebrale’,³⁸ variety theatre offered a platform for the Futurist ideal of ‘fisico-follia’³⁹ and a clear support for the pursuit of the ‘meraviglioso futurista’.⁴⁰ Albeit not mentioning him directly, Marinetti saw in the Harlequinesque temperament of the comic actor Ettore Petrolini

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 7.

³⁵ The Compagnia dei Gelosi first exported the Italian comic repertoire in France in 1576. Mimes developed as a way to overcome the language barrier between Italian actors (who originally performed in their native dialects) and their different audiences in Italy and Europe.

³⁶ G. Baldissoni, ‘Presentazione’, in: *Marinetti e le eroiche serate*, S. Bertini (ed.), Novara, Interlinea, 2002, p. 8. Albeit all different, the *serate* were organized around the same basic poetic *canovaccio*, organized in four moments: opening (presentation), proposition (demonstrative reading of manifestos), argument (new poems and compositions), and conclusion (final lines).

³⁷ R. Poggioli, *Teoria dell’arte d’avanguardia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1962, p. 40.

³⁸ F. T. Marinetti, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, L. De Maria (ed.), Milan, Mondadori, 1968, p. 84.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 87.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 82.

the embodiment of the extravagant variety of such theatre.⁴¹ In parallel with variety, he also saw in early cinematography and Fregoli's transformism a model for Futurist theatre, enriching it 'd'un numero incalcolabile di visioni e di spettacoli irrealizzabili',⁴² and modeling an effective 'sintesi di velocità + trasformazioni'.⁴³

In this context, it is important to highlight the singular importance attributed by the 'Variety Theatre' manifesto to cigarettes and smoke, presented as key elements for representing the Futurist ideal of destruction and renewal, as well as for creating a Futurist atmosphere bonding artists with their audience: 'il Teatro di Varietà utilizza il fumo dei sigari e delle sigarette per fondere l'atmosfera del pubblico con quella del palcoscenico'.⁴⁴ In continuity with 19th-century French *funambulisme*, the emphasized element of smoke reflected in its ever-performing deformation and alogical movement not just the comic lightness, endless transformism, and creative improvisation of the *poeta saltimbanco* (acrobat poet), but also the 'allegoric equivalent of the poetic act' itself.⁴⁵ In continuity with French *fumisme*, cigarettes made manifest the exhilarating improvisation, diversity, and constant transformation of the actor's body, his visible bond with the audience,⁴⁶ and his relation to the Laforguean smoking mask of Pierrot.

This theatrical synthesis of French literary *funambulisme* (Banville) and *fumisme* (Laforgue)⁴⁷ found another contemporary expression in the smoking clownerie of Aldo Palazzeschi. Drawing on his attendance of the Futurist *serate* and his own personal training as a comic actor, Palazzeschi purposely anchored the *saltimbanco* theme to the poetics of Baudelaire and Laforgue, reconfiguring the imagery of Pierrot into a new Italian archetype, in his poetic collections,⁴⁸ as well as in his Futurist novel *Il codice di Perelà* (1911).

Palazzeschi established a clear link between the poet and the acrobatic clown in the poems 'L'incendiario' (1910) and 'Chi sono?' (1910). In 'L'incendiario', Palazzeschi relates Marinetti's condition as an arsonist to his burning *clownerie* ('brucia per divertimento'; v. 63), presenting his attempt to destroy the old codes and enflame the world with new life as both a divine prodigy, worthy of marvel or curiosity, and a threatening diversity, worthy of public scorn. In 'Chi sono?' Palazzeschi identifies instead with an acrobatic clown (*saltimbanco*) "leaping" on stage with a deforming lens into his heart, and provocatively distorting his codified role as poet ('sono forse un poeta?'; v. 1), yet tragically hiding in his performance the 'follia', 'malinconia', and 'nostalgia' (vv. 5; 10; 15) of 'his soul' (my italics), as emphasized by the repeated rhyme with 'anima mia' (vv. 4; 9; 14; 21).

During the same period, Palazzeschi also fashioned a new clownish figure in the character/mask of Perelà, the protagonist of his 1911 novel, praised by Marinetti

⁴¹ Marinetti invited the actor to attend the Futurist *serata* of May 18, 1914 in Genoa. After the *serata*, Petrolini identified himself as an 'ammiratore fervido del futurismo'; S. Bertini (ed.), *Marinetti e le eroiche serate*, Novara, Interlinea, 2002, p. 98.

⁴² 'Il Teatro di Varietà, solo, utilizza oggi il cinematografo, che lo arricchisce d'un numero incalcolabile di visioni e di spettacoli irrealizzabili (battaglie, tumulti, corse, circuiti d'automobili e d'aeroplani, viaggi, transatlantici, profondità di città, di campagne, d'oceani, e di cieli)', *Ivi*, p. 81.

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 85.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 83.

⁴⁵ Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste*, cit., p. 33. Francesco Cangiullo illustrates this Futurist ideal of writing as a self-vanishing performance and endless recreation in his tavola parolibera of 1914 *Ho molte parole in libertà in riserva di molti nuovi paroliberi*, by depicting Marinetti in the act of smoking words (or uttering smoke) in front of his admirers.

⁴⁶ In 'Shakspeare aux Funambules', Gautier had already noticed the importance of the public's participation in the vaudeville show by describing the audience of the Funambules as 'un véritable public, comprenant la fantaisie avec une merveilleuse facilité'. *L'art moderne*, cit., p. 168.

⁴⁷ 'Una forma particolare dell'umorismo avanguardistico è indubbiamente quell'attitudine che, dal Pierrot fumiste di Laforgue, si chiamò *fumisterie* [...] Il fumismo non è che una specie di cerebralismo infantile: ed ha relazioni evidenti con un'altra attitudine, quella che prende nome di funambolismo'. Poggioli, *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia*, cit., p. 164.

⁴⁸ A. Palazzeschi, *Tutte le poesie*, A. Dei (ed.), Milan, A. Mondadori, 2002.

as a model for Futurist prose. The book revolves around a mysterious man of smoke, Perelà, born out of the ashes of a chimney 33 years after a fire, and living in the fluid form of a cloud. The ‘most singular oxymoron’⁴⁹ of Perelà’s light ‘body’ relates him to the vitality of his burning and his exhilarated laughter (‘Ah! Ah! Ah!’), along the lines of Palazzeschi’s own poem ‘E lasciatemi divertire’ (1910). His smoky nature, however, simultaneously relates him to the gloom of a past combustion (as revealed by his boots, indicating the only piece left of his former corporeity) and to the hidden pain inscribed in his name, made from the initial syllable of his stepmothers Pena, Rete, and Lama.

Against the backdrop of French *saltimbanques* and the Futurist *serate*, Perelà condenses in his smoky body a living synthesis and a successful Italian archetype of the so-called ‘commedia phase of modernism’.⁵⁰ Acrobatically vaulting in his histrionic laughter, and dressed in his white cloud-of-smoke costume, Perelà finds his visual roots in the *spleenétique* lightness and lunar paleness of Legrand and Deburau’s Pierrots. Welcomed as a prodigious being, in a state of constant motion, yet later accused of a homicide (after the death of the castle servant Alloro), Perelà also embraces the Hamletic ambiguity of French literary Pierrots, suspended between the exhilarating liveliness of Banville’s *Odes Funambulesques*, and Laforgue and Giraud’s dark versions of the mask as a Macbethian criminal, a *viveur lunaire*, or a disquieting cousin of Harlequin.

While reflecting Giraud and Laforgue’s modernist mask of the artist, Perelà however also “embodies” an additional Italian element, certainly related to Harlequin, but mostly importantly to Pierrot’s “progenitor”⁵¹ Pulcinella. On the one hand, his histrionic and desecrating laughter (which relates him to Futurist theatre) connects him to the transformism and the diversity of Harlequin, symbolically visualized in Fregoli’s cinematographic performances or in Petrolini’s comic eclecticism. On the other hand, against the backdrop of his scholarly reappraisal, Perelà also refers to Pulcinella, not by chance defined by Michele Scherillo as ‘un buffone di professione che, sotto la scorza del lazzo e della facezia, nasconde la lagrima’.⁵²

Perelà’s reference to the French Pierrots and the Italian *commedia* is then functional to turning the pages of *Il codice* into a theatrical stage, where the artist can display not only his affirmed alterity through the protagonist’s undefinable body, but also, along the lines of Baudelaire’s old acrobat, his ambivalent condition as both an ‘incendiario’, capable of setting life in motion with his burning clownerie, and ‘incendiato’, worthy of public scorn, imprisoned in the cage of his uselessness, and immolated as a self-sacrificed savior.

In his mix of *fumismo/funambolismo* and tragedy, and in his original synthesis of Pulcinella and Pierrot, Perelà ultimately “incarnates” a modern Italian archetype. His smoky “costume” (mirroring Pierrot or Pulcinella’s white robe) matches the insatiable urge for action, and the alogical/analogic movement of deformation and transformation of the *commedia dell’arte*. At the same time, as the character is suspended in his endless vaulting over the abyss of his absence and the inexorability of fixity, his body also represents a Hamletic dilemma of presence/absence. Unlike Marinetti’s personifications of the acrobatic clown in the *serate*, Perelà defines instead a paradoxical *funambule*, whose material body, made of smoke and ashes, perpetually lies on the edge of fluidity and solidity, ubiquity and nowhere-ness, self-exhibition and self-erasure. His “body” – lightly elevated in the heavens, flying above the abyss of emptiness, and rarefied into a laughing cloud in the book’s conclusion –

⁴⁹ N. Perella, and R. Stefanini, ‘Aldo Palazzeschi’s Code of Lightness’, in: *Forum Italicum*, 26, 1 (1992), p. 106.

⁵⁰ Green and Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot*, cit., p. 8.

⁵¹ Storey, *Pierrot*, cit., p. 14.

⁵² M. Scherillo, *La commedia dell’arte in Italia*, Turin, Loescher, 1884, p. 1.

thus analogically manifests an open-ended being, reflecting the chaotic interaction or creative synthesis of endless possibilities.

French *Fumisme* and Italian Modernism

In reconstructing the cross-cultural exchange of the French and Italian *commedia dell'arte* at the turn of the 20th century, this essay advances the argument that the re-emerging trope of the acrobatic clown, as emblemized in the key figure of Pierrot, not only reflects the origins and genealogy of the widespread Modernist self-definition of the artist as a 'sauveur sacrifié',⁵³ but also reveals an underestimated point of cultural suture, tying the Italian milieu to the broader context of European Modernism.

From French *funambulisme* to Italian Futurist theatre, from French *fumisme* to the Italian re-invention of Perelà, from French *Pierrotisme* to the Italian rediscovery of Pulcinella, the outlined interaction of the French and Italian *commedia* shed lights on a powerful *trait d'union* connecting Italian intellectuals to the aesthetics of European modernism. On the one hand, French culture provided Italian culture with a solid model for the representation of the poet as a sad clown, for the depiction of the *inetto* (inept characters) in contemporary novels (along the lines of the *noir* tradition of French Pierrots), as well as for the academic re-appreciation of the *commedia dell'arte* – along the path from Michele Scherillo's first manual of 1884 (*La commedia dell'arte in Italia*)⁵⁴ to Mario Apollonio's comprehensive *Storia della commedia dell'arte* of 1930.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the Italian comic imagery enriched the French repertoire by re-inventing the figure of the *saltimbanco* (in the radical actionism of Futurist theater or in the prophetic lightness of Perelà), and putting it into dialogue with the historical tradition and local masks like Harlequin and, above all, Pulcinella.

The Italian *saltimbanco* trope finds deeper roots than French *funambulisme* in the early experience of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, and in its *saltimbanco* troupes which already outline – as hinted in the name, deriving from *saltare* (to leap) and *banco* (bench) – the figure of 'an acrobat whose stage was a portable bench'.⁵⁶ Yet certainly the interaction with French *Pierrotisme* alters and recreates this original model. In continuity with Giraud's Harlequinesque imagination and the Futurist *serate*, the character of Harlequin would emphasize the radical physicality and alterity of the early phase of the *commedia*. Ardengo Soffici's poetic collection *Arlecchino* of 1914⁵⁷ would iterate this topos, in the book's similar structure as a micro-variety theater or as a "sentimental journey" across random atmospheres, anecdotes, and encounters. In continuity with the French Pierrot theme, and its musical variations around the figure of *Polichinelle* (first by Rachmaninoff and later by Stravinsky),⁵⁸ also the Neapolitan Pulcinella impacted the Italian imagination, as the academic the quest for his true genealogy overlapped with his theatrical construction as an Italian-made prototype of the *saltimbanco*.

The philosopher Benedetto Croce dedicated two key studies to Pulcinella at the turn of the 20th century: the 1899 monograph *Pulcinella e il personaggio del*

⁵³ Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste*, cit., p. 117.

⁵⁴ From an academic point of view, the Italian theater of the 16th and 17th centuries became an object of critical investigation after the publication of Michele Scherillo's 1884 study (*op. cit.*). The monograph first re-evaluated the forms, masks, and tropes of a theatrical form that had been discarded since Goldoni's reformation of theater in the 18th century.

⁵⁵ M. Apollonio, *Storia della commedia dell'arte*, Roma, Augustea, 1930.

⁵⁶ Green and Swan, *op. cit.* p. 163.

⁵⁷ A. Soffici, *Arlecchino*, Firenze, Lacerba, 1914.

⁵⁸ Pulcinella inspired Sergei Rachmaninoff to write the piano *Fantasy Piece* in F-sharp minor *Polichinelle* (*Morceaux de fantaisie*, Op. 3, No. 4), and Igor Stravinsky to create the 1920 ballet (Paris, Opéra, May 15, 1920) *Pulcinella*, whose set was designed by Pablo Picasso.

*napoletano in commedia: ricerche ed osservazioni*⁵⁹ and the essay ‘Pulcinella e le relazioni della commedia dell’arte con la commedia popolare romana’, included in the pioneering volume *Saggi sulla letteratura italiana del Seicento* (1910).⁶⁰ Both studies were concerned with reconstructing the origins of the mask, in ancient times (as a re-invention of the *atellana* character of Macchus), as well as in early modern theater (as a interpretation of Captain Matamoros by the Neapolitan actor Silvio Fiorillo). After Croce, the former Futurist photographer Anton Giulio Bragaglia also published a monograph on Pulcinella in 1930,⁶¹ offering new contributions to the scholarship on the mask (e.g. name, origins, characters, interpreting actors). In his monograph, however, Bragaglia also interpreted Pulcinella in a broader cultural sense, as both the symbol of an entire people,⁶² and an archetypical Italian buffoon figure. In one way, Bragaglia’s reading of Pulcinella as a symbol of otherness, a clownish fool, and a Hamletic halved being, carrying in himself his own opposite, connoted the mask as an ‘Arlecchino del Sud’.⁶³ In another way, in his appreciation of Pulcinella’s capacity of improvisation, body language, and constant dialogue with the public, Bragaglia detected the cultural roots of the similar alogicity, acrobatic dancing, juggling ability, and unpredictable tricks of Leopoldo Fregoli’s transformism and Ettore Petrolini’s variety theater, two main sources of inspiration for the Italian Futurist theatre (and indirectly for Perelà).⁶⁴

In this light then, Pulcinella represents in some way an Italian counterpart of the French Pierrots. Thanks to his body language, condensing at once expressive freedom, self-deceit, wit, and diversity (‘che è, prima di tutto, etnica e sociale, e appartiene a un orizzonte geografico o culturale, vicino o lontano, ma comunque “altro”’),⁶⁵ Pulcinella gave visual form not only to repressed desires but also to the experimental search for alternative artistic voices, in his attempt to embody an Italian version of the acrobatic clown. While subsuming an Italian form of the modern intellectual’s self-identification with the *saltimbanco* in his personality as an eclectic traveler, able to overcome self-repetition, communicate in all idioms, and embody a radical diversity, Pulcinella ultimately connoted also the comic/sad mask of Perelà with a particular Italian vein, defining in it the ultimate representation of a melancholic *inetto*.

Parole chiave

Pierrot, Perelà, *Saltimbanco*, Commedia dell’Arte, Modernism

Luca Cottini is Associate Professor of Italian Studies at Villanova University. He holds a Ph.D from Harvard University (2012), a Master’s from the University of Notre Dame (2007), and BA in classics from the University of Milan (2003). He published for Longo *I passaggi obbligati di Italo Calvino* (2017) and for University of Toronto Press *The Art of Objects. The Birth of Italian Industrial Culture, 1878-1928* (2018). His scholarship includes studies on Calvino, Fenoglio, Palazzeschi, Papini, De Amicis, Alvaro, Fellini, the silent film *Maciste alpino*, and Italian war photography.

Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

⁵⁹ B. Croce, *Pulcinella e il personaggio del napoletano in commedia: ricerche ed osservazioni*, Roma, Loescher, 1899.

⁶⁰ B. Croce, *Saggi sulla letteratura italiana del Seicento*, Bari, Laterza, 1962, pp. 195-260.

⁶¹ A. G. Bragaglia, *Pulcinella*, Roma, Gherardo Casini Editore, 1953.

⁶² ‘Pulcinella non è un uomo con nome e cognome; ma è un popolo’, *Ivi*, p. 115.

⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 143.

⁶⁴ Bragaglia also identifies the *commedia* as the source of the theatre of Eduardo De Filippo (‘La commedia dell’arte s’è rifugiata nel *Varietà* dove sono nati grandi comici come Petrolini e De Filippo’; *Ivi*, p. 30).

⁶⁵ L. Lombardi Satriani and D. Scafoglio, ‘Pulcinella e l’altro’, in: *Pulcinella. Una maschera tra gli specchi*, Franco C. Greco (ed.), Napoli, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1990, p. 39.

Villanova University
800 E Lancaster Ave., SAC 339, Villanova PA 19085 (USA)
luca.cottini@villanova.edu

RIASSUNTO

Pierrot, Perelà, e la figura del saltimbanco in Italia

Dal fumismo francese all'immaginazione modernista italiana

Il presente saggio esplora i legami tra l'immaginario fumista, nella letteratura e nel teatro francese del XIX secolo, e le rappresentazioni dell'artista come saltimbanco nella cultura italiana del primo novecento. A partire dalla riscoperta francese del repertorio della commedia dell'arte, la presente ricerca documenta l'impatto delle re-invenzioni di Pierrot, da parte di Laforgue e Giraud, sul teatro futurista di Marinetti e sulla figura letteraria di Perelà, protagonista del romanzo palazzesco *Il codice di Perelà*. Lo studio dell'immaginario pierrotesco nella cultura francese e italiana mette in evidenza un significativo momento di contatto tra l'Italia e il modernismo europeo.