

**Mina Loy, Futurism, and Mass Culture:  
Exploring Context and Bibliographic Codes**

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Early criticism of Mina Loy's work acknowledges her affinity for and association with the Italian Futurist movement; however, the recent trend in the analysis of Loy, has been to dispute this Futurist label as an unimportant phase functioning as a springboard for her later career, essentially "just an excuse for Loy to write herself a manifesto" (Sheffield 630). Both theories on the topic have focused on similarities and differences in the theme and form of the works, yet do not consider the contextual differences between Marinetti's Futurism and Mina Loy's poetry. As critic Lawrence Rainey points out, to "focus on [the] institutions [that house modernism] is to view modernism as more than a series of texts or the ideas that found expression in them," viewing the works as a "social reality" consisting of more than the content of the writing (Rainey 4). Crucial differences in bibliographic codes distinguish Loy's manifesto, "Aphorisms on Futurism", which appeared in the little magazine *Camera Work* in 1914, from Marinetti's Futurist manifesto, which first appeared in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1909. These differences affected the reception, legitimacy, and popular approval of the respective works; while the two share literary elements and theoretical principles, the Futurists appealed to mass culture through advertising and global publication, while Loy "genuflected to no one" and published her works in more elite venues, such as little magazines (Conover xiv). By examining these bibliographic codes, one realizes that Loy's inclusion in (or exclusion from) the Futurist movement is of less importance than her desire for belonging in the sympathetic, intellectual

community provided by little magazine culture. The different attitudes that Marinetti and Loy held towards self-promotion and mass culture, and how these attitudes manifested themselves in each artist's work, led to the Futurists becoming a familiar movement, and Loy's work fading out of both the canon and popular favor.

Marinetti's "Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," published in Paris's *Le Figaro* in 1909 (*Fig. 1*), perpetuated the creation of numerous manifestos for other art movements, exemplifying the spirit of modernism, as "an un-new manifesto is an oxymoron" (Caws xxiii). The Futurist manifesto outraged and surprised the conservative public and "established the strident tone and aggressive style that soon became the standard for artistic treaties," the manifesto that critics refer to as "the grandfather of all the rest" (Vondeling 5; Caws xxi). The manifesto glorified war and the Futurists' new concept of dynamism, as well as cultural, political, and industrial acceleration while disregarding the past.

Marinetti held high standards for publicizing his movement and making it "global"; after all, it was the Futurists "who first suggested an art for the masses and who devised a means of attracting press coverage in the news columns rather than in the limited space of the arts review pages" (Goldberg 369). Marinetti was driven "much less [by] ideological conviction than entrepreneurial action, albeit of an unconventional, cultural sort" (Adamson 97). His goals for the Futurism were so sweeping, that no forum or audience was inappropriate for the publicity and promotion of the ideals of his movement. Although this appeal to mass culture brought Futurism into the public forum, the movement did not sacrifice its quality or high standards: "Futurism operates in venues that are frequented by the masses, but it clings to a modernist mode of establishing artistic value and refuses to accept the masses as the arbiter of taste" (94).

Marinetti manipulated the varieties of media available to him to provide the utmost publicity and success for his new, groundbreaking movement.

Though the Futurists first published in *Le Figaro*, Paris's foremost daily newspaper, their self-promotion and authentication did not stop at that:

Copies of the manifesto were simultaneously mailed to persons of importance in Italy and published in Italian and French in the avant-garde magazine *Poesia* [...] perhaps more importantly, was accompanied by excerpts and reviews from a variety of foreign journals including the London *Daily Telegraph* and the *New York Sun*. (Hand 337)

Not only did Marinetti publish his manifesto in the “large circulation Parisian daily *Le Figaro*” and, like Loy, sought a little magazine venue (*Poesia*), but also worked in an international scope with foreign papers, and sent out individual reminders of his movement's importance (Goldberg 370). Essentially, he published in four times as many venues as Loy, truly making the Futurist movement a household name with an aggressive tactic described as an “assault on the public” (Hand 337).

Loy, who supported and was scandalously involved with members of the Futurist group, shared many of their ideals. Her “poetry made a fetish out of immediacy and acceleration” and she strove to create new art forms, abolishing those of the past (Sheffield 626). She took the model of Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto and created her own version, the first non-translated English language manifesto expressing Futurist principles.

Although the content of Loy's work was similar to that of the Futurists, her venues of publication were far different than the fast-paced daily *Le Figaro*. Loy's *Aphorisms on Futurism* was first published in Stieglitz's quarterly little magazine *Camera Work*, Number XLV (Fig.2). *Camera Work* first noticed Mina Loy when prompted by Loy's friend, Mable Dodge, who

realized that her work was on par “with the baffling artistic projects of Alfred Steiglitz, Gertrude Stein, and the Italian Futurists, and her subject matter with the public soul-searching and lawbreaking of the new woman” (Burke 37). This discovery led Steiglitz to publish Loy’s poem in the forty-fifth issue of *Camera Work*, which came out in 1914, five years after Marinetti’s manifesto appeared in *Le Figaro*. Futurism, then, was an established art movement with previously published works; however, Loy’s poem put the Futurist ideas into a new context, the little magazine, through a new medium, poetry.

*Camera Work* Number XLV was dated January 1914, but was not published until June 1914, enduring a six month publication period that exemplifies the painstaking nature with which it was put together. The mission statement of the magazine states that *Camera Work* was “an illustrated quarterly magazine devoted to Photography and to the activities of the Photo-Secession” (*Camera Work* 1). The magazine was truly *devoted* to the works it published; this is exemplified by the layout of the photographs in the magazine. Each individual plate occupies a two page spread. Although this layout inefficiently uses valuable magazine space, each photo is showcased and is not crowded with other images and text. The artwork resides isolated on the page – there is no mention of the author or title of the piece; rather, this information is contained in a brief table of contents before each set of pictures. This method preserves the sanctity of the work, publishing it closely to how the artist intended the picture to be viewed.

The context in which “Aphorisms on Futurism” appears creates an artistically provocative scene for Loy’s poem. It is the first piece of writing in the magazine, aside from the mission statement, and a table of contents for several plates by J. Craig Annan. The Annan photos, titled “A Blind Musician – Granada,” “A Gianta – Granada,” “A Carpenter’s Shop – Toledo,” and “Group on a Hill Road – Granada,” are pictures from Spanish communities that are

earthy and almost primitive. The contrast between the photograph of a Spanish woman dressed in handmade blankets carrying a handmade basket (*Fig. 3*) and Loy's words claiming that "the past [is] a trail of insidious reactions" provides a jarring jolt between natural primitivism and promoting the future and forward movement (*Camera Work* 13). Loy's poem, in fact, has little in common with any other piece of art in the magazine, as *Camera Work* was designed to publish photography and not necessarily poetry. This independence of both form and topic matter proves that in the case of *Camera Work* and Loy "the manifesto stands alone, does not need to lean on anything else, demands no other texts than itself. Its rules are self-contained, included in its own body" (Caws xxv).

Loy's poem occupies a three-page spread near the front of the magazine, appearing on pages thirteen through fifteen of a fifty-five page magazine. "Aphorisms on Futurism" is directly followed by a selection of art criticisms, the first piece by Loy's comrade Mabel Dodge describing a Marsden Hartley exhibition at 291. Hartley writes the following piece as a foreword to his exhibition, commenting on the artist's intention in any exhibition. Like a manifesto, "the intention [...] separately and collectively is to state a personal conviction – to express a purely personal approach [...] suitable to his own specialized experience" (*Camera Work* 17). Most pieces that appear in little magazines possess this individualized approach, in part because they are often creative criticism, fiction, or poetry, such as Loy's work, Dodge's criticism, or Hartley's foreword. Unlike a newspaper, which publishes mostly objective pieces, containing facts or summaries of events, the works in a little magazine are often individual opinions or creative expressions, providing a subjective viewpoint. *Camera Work* serves as an artistic outlet, not an informational one.

The photographs, creative writing, and reviews presented in *Camera Work* represent expressions of their artists, and even the critical reviews are subjective, as they are one person's opinion. The editors of *Camera Work* provide a disclaimer that gives their criticism credibility: "As is our custom, we reprint, for the sake of record, some of the press comments on above exhibitions" (*Camera Work* 19). The views expressed are not only those of the writers for the magazine, but opinions written by journalists who publish in larger newspapers similar to *Le Figaro*.

Contrary to these journalists and the writers of the Futurist movement, Loy seemed indifferent about advertising her ideas, judging by her "reclusiveness in her later years, the fact that she published in only two books during her lifetime, and her seeming lack of concern – in interviews and conversations at least – with building a reputation" (Conover xii). In her poetry, "the cosmos she constructs is chaotic, purposeless, and indifferent to humanity" (Kouidis 172). In other words, principles of fragmentation, dynamism, and frantic motion (adopted from the Futurists) infiltrate Loy's poetry so strongly that she addresses her reader with aloof disinterest. Her poetry was so radical, so "scornful" of tradition that Alfred Kreymborg ogled her talent, and commented that her ability to "reduce eroticism to the sty was an outrage, and to do so without verbs, sentence structure, punctuation, even more offensive", and her poems are famous for "delivering cruelty with such precision that it seems a form of compassion" (Burke 45; Conover xii). This almost antisocial attitude of one "indifferent to humanity" is the antithesis of the entrepreneurial attitude of Marinetti and his Futurist followers. Loy, rather, shares the attitude that Hartley expresses in issue 45 of *Camera Work*: "the intention [of art] separately and collectively is to state a personal conviction – to express a purely personal approach" (*Camera*

*Work* 17). She would rather share this “personal conviction” with an intimate, cerebral audience than thrust it upon the masses.

The difference in medium between these two manifestos also factors into their reception and popularity. As McGann says in *The Textual Condition*, “poetical texts – unlike propaganda and advertising texts, which are also highly self-conscious constructions –turn readers back upon themselves, make them attentive to what they are doing when they read” (McGann 11).

Marinetti’s prose pressed new ideas onto the public (in that sense it can be read as propaganda), yet it becomes lost in the dizzying amount of prose that comprises a daily newspaper. Unlike a poem, which McGann believes forces introspection upon the reader, a common Futurist essay or advertisement in a newspaper can be glazed over as easily as an advertisement for toilet paper or an article about boring statistics. Like any advertisement, the Futurist manifestos were designed to advertise the movement and catch the readers attention. Though the bold typefaces and strong wording catch a reader’s eye, the meaning might not be absorbed, nor might the principles of the movement be adopted.

McGann’s interest in studying “bibliographic codes” augments the comparison of Marinetti’s and Loy’s work by calling attention “to typefaces, bindings, book prices, page format, and all those textual phenomena usually regarded as (at best) peripheral” (McGann 13). As previously mentioned, the page format in *Camera Work* allows more space for each individual piece to be read, unlike *le Figaro*, which crams many different pieces of information onto one page. The experience of reading a newspaper and reading a little magazine can be described as an issue of quality versus quantity.

*Camera Work* provides a reading experience based on quality: with high quality paper, generous layout, and a booklet form, the format of the magazine suggests that it is something to

be cherished, and perhaps even preserved and collected by the magazine's owner. The subscription price when "Aphorisms on Futurism" appeared in the magazine was eight dollars a year, or four dollars for a single issue, and "the right to increase the price of subscription without notice is reserved" (*Camera Work* 1). This expensive price limited the readership to audiences that were truly interested, or had enough disposable income that he or she could invest in coffee-table books. Furthermore, the magazine was only published quarterly, and although it published every four months, Number 45 took six months to produce. The readership of *Camera Work* highly anticipated each issue, and consequently each piece included in the magazine was carefully selected and scrutinized by the editorial staff.

On the other hand, *Le Figaro* contributes daily to the public's reading material, as an overwhelming, all-encompassing, *mostly* factual source of information. Journalist Raphael Levy reports in 1929 that "the front page offers both significant and insignificant discussion," but in general "the typography of French papers is faulty. They are printed on rather cheap material [...] the news service in France is on the whole poor" (Levy 301; 296). The paper was founded in 1825, and by November of 1866, the daily edition printed 56,000 copies daily (fact-index.com). In addition to the daily edition, "the management also publishes weekly supplements, including *Le Figaro des Etats-Unis*" (Levy 302). Although the readership of *Le Figaro* clearly surpassed that of *Camera Work*, one might argue that the readers of *Camera Work* were enjoying a more quality product.

Marinetti's groundbreaking, authority-rebuking manifesto was published in this newspaper, which strangely was recognized as a publication that "stands always for national traditionalism" (Shinz 140). In Albert Shinz's "Hints to Subscribers" of French newspapers written in 1920, he emphasizes the conservative, traditional values of *Le Figaro*, which are

completely contrary to the value system of the Futurists. Why seek publication in this venue, then? Shinz goes on: “One sometimes thinks of the NY Sun in reading the French *Figaro*. Many people read it who do not share the views expressed in the paper, but who enjoy the cleverness of the style” (140). Readers of *Le Figaro* might not take the Futurist Manifesto seriously, writing it off as the over-ambitious “work of young idealists” with little ability to change the future of art, much less the world; yet, they could still appreciate the collage-like, catchy advertisements (*Fig. 4*) that the Futurists published (Goldberg 370). Marinetti’s manifesto was exposed to a much greater public, but whether this readership agreed or supported the Futurist ideals as a result of the manifesto is improbable. *Le Figaro* was a daily paper where anyone could read an essay or peruse an advertisement, use the leaf as a coaster, and then throw the paper away after breakfast, unaffected. The Futurist movement, though internationally recognized, was short-lived. The recognition of the movement far exceeded its membership, and most of the notable members had died by World War One (Hunter 152).

Though “Aphorisms on Futurism” reached a much smaller demographic of readers, and as a whole affected the cultural community less, its impact was nonetheless important to avant-garde literary circles. In fact, Rob Scheffield, a contemporary Loy critic, enjoys the elusiveness and unpopularity of her work: “Sometimes, when you flip for something obscure, and it becomes famous, you feel a sense of loss” (Sheffield 627). The elitism of Loy’s work and ideas provides shelters her work from the global culture that Marinetti strove to reach and change. Innovative criticism on Loy continues to emerge, while criticism on Futurism has not reached many new conclusions in the past few decades. Although Loy remained an elusive figure in the decades following her career, the current resurgence in interest has proven that small and scholarly publications legitimize art as much as mass media, just in their own time.

## Appendix of Images

Figure 1

Cover page of *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909

Figure 2

## APHORISMS ON FUTURISM

DIE in the Past  
Live in the Future.

THE velocity of velocities arrives in starting.

IN pressing the material to derive its essence, matter becomes deformed.

AND form hurtling against itself is thrown beyond the synopsis of vision.

THE straight line and the circle are the parents of design, form the basis of art: there is no limit to their coherent variability.

LOVE the hideous in order to find the sublime core of it.

OPEN your arms to the delapidated, to rehabilitate them.

YOU prefer to observe the past on which your eyes are already opened.

BUT the Future is only dark from outside.  
*Leap* into it—and it EXPLODES with *Light*.

FORGET that you live in houses, that you may live in yourself—

FOR the smallest people live in the greatest houses.

BUT the smallest person, potentially, is as great as the Universe.

WHAT can you know of expansion, who limit yourselves to compromise?

HITHERTO the great man has achieved greatness by keeping the people small.

BUT in the Future, by inspiring the people to expand to their fullest capacity, the great man proportionately must be tremendous—a God.

LOVE of others is the appreciation of one's self.

MAY your egotism be so gigantic that you comprise mankind in your self-sympathy.

THE Future is limitless—the past a trail of insidious reactions.

LIFE is only limited by our prejudices. Destroy them, and you cease to be at the mercy of yourself.

TIME is the dispersion of intensiveness.

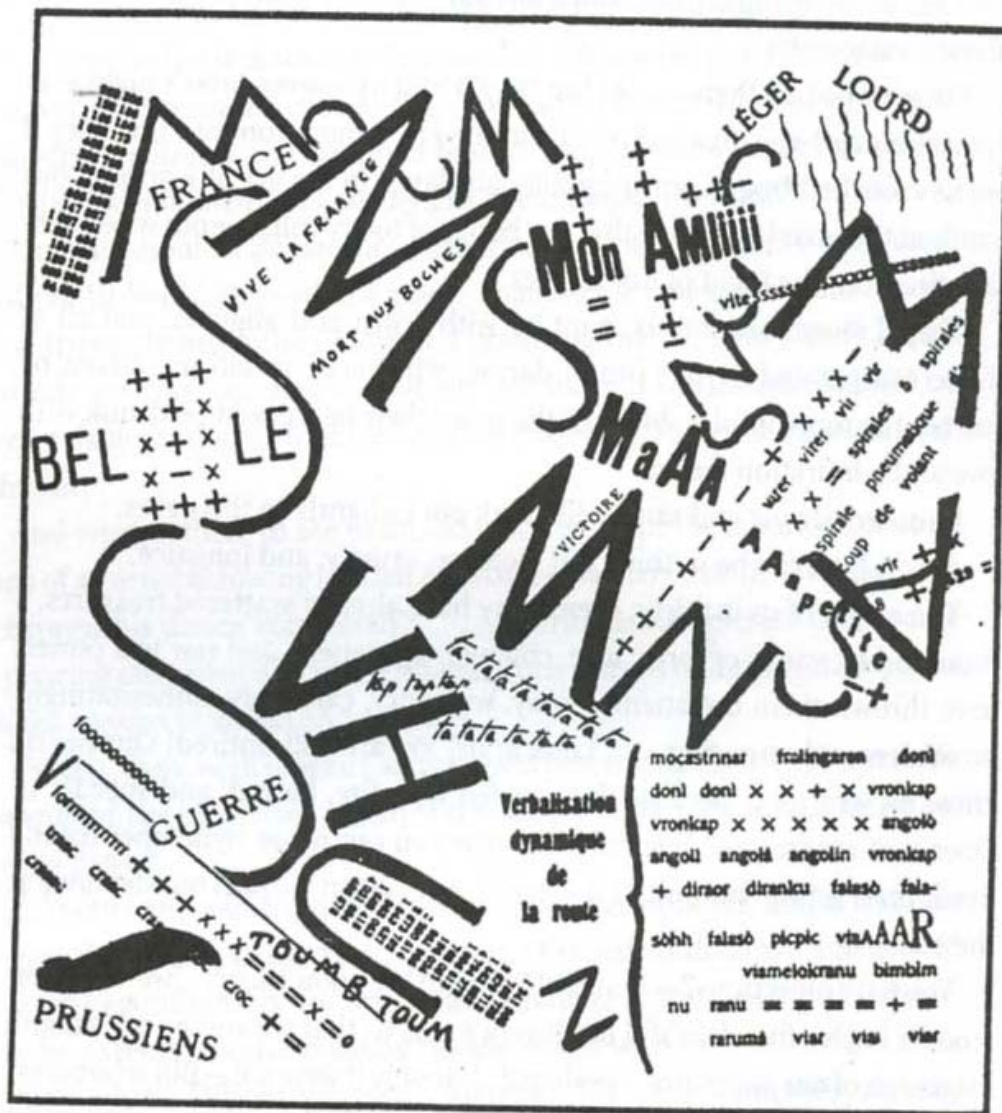
THE Futurist can live a thousand years in one poem.

Figure 3



J. Craig Annan's "A Gianta – Granada," Published in *Camera Work*, Number XLV, June 1914.

Figure 4



Marinetti's "After the Marn, Joffre Visited the Front in an Automobile."

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