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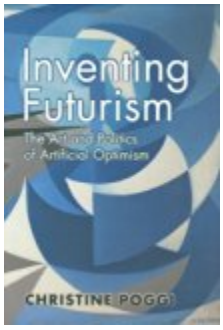

Reviewed by Sarah McLean-Plunkett (SUNY Buffalo)
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Artificial Optimism: The Dialectics of Italian Futurism

Christine Poggi's work is not a simple narrative approach to the developments in futurism. Nor exactly is it a cultural history of the period in the manner of Stephen Kern's *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (1983), or even Sigfried Giedion's earlier *Space, Time and Architecture* (1967), both of which employed art, architecture, and literature along with developments in science and technology as a means of accessing the zeitgeist of the period. Rather, Poggi engages in a close reading and detailed analysis of the key works of the futurists in relation to the imperatives of F. T. Marinetti as they were articulated in the infamous *serate* (theatrical evenings) and manifestoes. These practices and discourses both demonstrated how futurists endeavored to engage the masses and illuminated their goals of social transformation. This examination goes beyond Walter Benjamin's diametric opposition of a Fascist aestheticizing of politics on the one hand and a leftist politicizing of art on the other, as posited in his paradigmatic essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."[1] At the same time, it would seem that Poggi owes a great debt to Benjamin in her recognition of the nature of spectacle, inherent in the futurist project and in the movement's recognition of the potential of mass culture. The debt is also visible in her approach, which does not follow a chronology per se, but assembles the work of each individual artist as a constellation of material cultural fragments that serve to illuminate the world of futurism as a whole. From the manner in which this work is structured it would seem that her method is underpinned by the notion that artistic creations can best be apprehended as concrete manifestations, which form a "series of microhistories" (p. xi).

Inspired by the centennial of Marinetti's "Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" (1909), Poggi examines the group's textual claims of a definitive rupture with tradition and adherence to the "Nietzcheaen art of active forgetting, in order to clear a space for the new" (p. 5). She finds traces of anxiety in response to the shocks of modernity, which they concealed in their belligerent bravado of speed and power. In her explication, she employs Marinetti's own concept of artificial optimism as a key to appreciating the futurist endeavor: something of a dialectic whereby optimism never fully represses its negative counterpart. In the context of the specific works of the individual artists, she examines larger cultural developments, including theories of shock and trauma, railroad expansion and travel, electric plants, the nonsynchronous expansion of Italy's industrial city of Milan, late nineteenth-century crowd psychology, and contemporary theories of matter. Furthermore, she demonstrates that the anxieties that arose in response to modernization, which are recognized in the earlier artistic movements of divisionism and symbolism, were still present but transmuted into a futurist idiom of reactive transformation. Yet the artistic oeuvre of those who wrote and signed the manifestoes maintained stylistic and symbolic continuities. Their earlier work and political commitments often left residues and inconsistencies in their futurist studies. Poggi additionally addresses the difficul-

ties that these artists experienced reconciling their previous commitments to the demands of the futurist ethos. For example, Poggi examines a set of paintings that Umberto Boccioni embarked on under the influence of the "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters" (1910), including *The City Rises* of the same year. This painting was finally exhibited under the title *Lavoro* (Work) at the Free Exhibition of Art in Milan in 1911. In Boccioni's case, his socialist ties had inflected his work with a concern for the worker, recognizing his role in the birth of a modern civilization. As socialist ideals ran counter to those of futurism, though, he was forced to de-emphasize the role of the worker and, over time, find new emblems to populate his representational repertoire of the city.

Of equal interest is the case of Giacomo Balla, whose group of studies entitled *Iridescent Interpenetrations* (1912) further betrays the unease aroused by the technical progress and mechanical modes of production among the futurists. This moreover explains the absence of *Iridescent Interpenetrations* from futurist-sponsored exhibitions. Apparently it was Balla's experimentation with chronophotography and photodynamisms, rather than his previous political and aesthetic alignments with socialists and traditional peasant crafts, that accounted for the resistance his work encountered among his contemporaries. The majority of Balla's fellow futurists and modernists had embraced abstraction as a means of maintaining the integrity of personal expression; however, the brand of abstraction found in *Iridescent Interpenetrations* arose out of an engagement with the mechanical process of photography. Poggi likens the resistance Balla experienced to "the unease many now feel toward digital photography and other computer generated imagery, in which the loss of real-world referents opens onto the dizzying ground of simulation" (p. 110). Chronophotography was developed by Etienne-Jules Marey, who had "found a means to render visible the ephemeral stages of an object's trajectory through space by inventing a photographic gun" (p. 114). Both chronophotography and photodynamism had the effect of dematerializing and blurring the form in movement. Marey attached reflective objects and white cutouts to subjects he dressed in black, thereby "creating a dematerialized graph of lines and dots" and clarifying "the subject of motion itself" (p. 115). Balla took these photographic studies as a point of departure, transforming them into patterns of repeated geometric motifs, which "released him from anthropomorphic norms of perception" and pointed to "a dehumanized world of mechanized vision … [of] interchangeable perspectives," all of which further threatened "deeply held notions of the role of artistic intuition and creativity" (pp. 129, 132, 110).

In her fifth chapter, entitled "Dreams of Metallized Flesh: Futurism and the Masculine Body," Poggi acknowledges the familiar futurist narrative of regeneration that incorporated Marinetti's fantasy of the fusion of the male body with the machine, whereby the specifically male body is fortified "to resist shocks and omnipresent speed" of a new mechanized society (p. 150). These dreams reflect the futurist rejection of the industrial bourgeoisie, represented by the traditional humanist body and their embrace instead of the Nietschean *übermensch* symbolized by the man/machine complex.

According to Poggi, this metallic regeneration was conceived as merely a prelude "to an even more sublime fusion with the volatile world of matter" (p. 150). Marinetti's imagery, most notably in his founding manifesto, celebrates the machine as a triumph over the organic, thereby freeing man from his "cyclic temporality" (p. 156). The futurist anxiety over the changing character of society is further revealed in Marinetti's rhetorical displacement of a feminized procreative nature by a male mechanized autogenesis. Inevitably "the displacement proves unstable, and occasionally the feminine associations of nature … return to contaminate matter … reminding us of what has been refused and repressed" (p. 156). For instance, the eroticized femininity of the car with which Marinetti's body fuses in "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" serves to redress this feminine absence (p. 157).

In spite of futurism's blatant misogyny, Marinetti did not outright reject the female struggle for equality. Even as he rejected feminist ideals he was willing to concede the quintessential modernity of the suffragettes. He believed that as women achieved greater autonomy they would experience a corresponding diminution in the sentimental passions of *Amore*, which he associated with romantic love, luxury, and the outmoded literary conventions of symbolist literary production. According to Poggi, at the root of this was an anxiety "about the changing sexual roles, the new liberties demanded by women, and the rise of consumerism and luxury in modern urban society" (p. 183). She contends that various futurist depictions of the modern female were indebted to currents in feminine criminal physiognomy, particularly the work of Cesare Lombroso. At the same time, Poggi also addresses the unlikely attraction futurism held for a number of women artists, dancers, poets, and novelists. Among them was Valentine de Saint-Point who had penned the

"Manifesto of the Futurist Woman" (1912), which she formulated as "a polemical riposte to the Futurist scorn for women" (p. 223). According to Poggi, Saint-Point's attempt to articulate a space for women futurists required an affirmation of violent clichés and a rejection of the demands of feminists, which she held diminished "the primordial instincts of women" (p. 223). Poggi attributes the continued participation of women in the face of the movement's openly misogynist precepts to its "embrace of modernity and of anticlerical political positions"; it also offered women a space where they "could articulate their experiences and desires" and contribute to the constitution of a "woman of tomorrow" (p. 231).

Poggi's cogent and commonsense argument begs the question of why the undercurrents of anxiety and trauma expressed by the futurists have been largely neglected until now. While I highly recommend the work, I do believe it should be assigned at the undergraduate level in conjunction with a more generalized introduction to the artistic movements of the period. For instance, in her chapter on the photogenic abstraction of Balla she observes: "Like many artists of his generation, Balla did not make a clear distinction between his paintings and decorative works" (p. 138). Beyond this statement, she fails to adequately explain the work of Balla (or the futurists in general) in relation to, or as having affinities with, the earlier and later developments of the arts and crafts, art nouveau, or the Bauhaus movements. Overall, however, her meticulous scholarship here warrants attention, and even as she covers well-traversed ground, her overarching argument reinvigorates the already interesting subject matter with new meaning.

Note

[1]. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 217-251.

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