

## FUTURISM: VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKI'S URBANISM AND FUTURIST OUTLOOK

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the poetry of Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovski (1893-1930), renowned as a main figure of the Russian Futurist movement. The study first introduces the futurist movement in literature that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century and locates it within formalist theory. Then, it dwells upon the characteristics of futurist poetry since this was the genre the futurists were mostly concerned with. The study moves towards its main objective by examining two characteristic poems, *Morning* (1912) and *A Skyscraper Dissected* (1929), bearing in mind the theme of urbanism which is common in the futurist literary movement. This analysis attempts to prove that Mayakovski used the theme of urbanism to criticize modern city life, unlike other futurists who used this theme to glorify it. The study will also look at an important aspect of Mayakovski's poem *About This* in which he imagines life in the future. To carry out this thematic study, a critically analytical and descriptive method is used.

**Keywords:** Vladimir Mayakovski; Futurism; Urbanism; Modern Russian Poetry; Formalist Theory

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## Introduction: Futurism and Formalism

It is useful at the beginning to introduce the definition of the two terms futurism and formalism. Futurism is generally introduced in the following words:

Italian Futurismo, Russian Futurizm, early 20th-century artistic movement centered in Italy that emphasized the dynamism, speed, energy, and power of the machine and the vitality, change, and restlessness of modern life. During the second decade of the 20th century, the movement's influence radiated outward across most of Europe, most significantly to the Russian avant-garde. The most significant results of the movement were in the visual arts and poetry. (White, 2022)

In the book *Key Concepts in Literary Theory*, formalism is defined as referring to the “critical tendency that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century and devoted its attention to concentrating on literature’s formal structures in an objective manner” (Wolfreys et al., 2006, p. 43). The Russian futurist movement and formalist literary theory are two separate literary activities, but they are often juxtaposed because they share some points of similarity. Both emphasize form as the main bearer of meaning, and they seek to renew the ways of using language in literary works. However, the objectives of the futurists are different from those of the formalists. One basic difference lies in the fact that formalism is a theory while futurism is a movement.

Moreover, Russian futurism and formalism were directed against the symbolist movement of the late nineteenth century and for what it stood. The difference between futurism and symbolism is that although both attempt to eliminate the boundary between content and form, futurists reject the notion that a word stands for anything more than itself, unlike the symbolists for whom the word stands for something else. “The Russian Formalists

were linguists and theorists; the Russian Futurists were poets and artistic practitioners” (Palmer, 2014, p. 31). While the formalists regarded the concept of defamiliarization as one way of conceiving the world from a new perspective, the futurists regarded defamiliarization as the only way of representing the world as it is.

The common ground between futurists and formalists is that both sought to “revolutionize linguistic perception” (Palmer, 2014, p. 31). Both wanted the perception of the world to be anew each time by means of reconfiguring the world. What distinguishes the futurists is their preoccupation with form and their critique of time. The futurists, especially the Russians, were politically and socially engaged while the formalists did not have any ideology or political concerns. “While the latter [Russian futurism] was capitulating politically before communism, formalism opposed Marxism with all its might theoretically” (Trotsky, 1925, p. 1). The formalists were concerned solely with art. Futurists sought to portray in art the historical events from the 1890s to World War I.

## **Futurism**

Futurism is a twentieth-century avant-garde and modernist movement in literature, art, and architecture which also has social and political concerns. The movement began in Italy on February 20, 1909, when Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876- 1944), the father figure of Futurism, published the founding manifesto of the movement. Futurism spread from Italy to France and Russia, then its influence was all over Europe. Trotsky (1925) maintains that “Futurism is a European phenomenon” (p. 1) because according to him, futurism flourished first in Italy and Russia and not in America since the countries which are not advanced are the ones that reflect the achievement of the advanced countries brilliantly. Futurist literature was materialistic because it was based on materials that existed in countries far from the countries where futurist literature was written. Thus, futurist

literature inflamed the imagination of the people as they read about things they could not see.

The manifesto *The Founding Manifesto of Futurism* Marinetti clearly lays out the main features of the futurist movement. Futurist literature celebrates “danger,” “energy and fearlessness” (Marinetti as cited in Rainey et al., 2009, p. 51). Futurist poetry can thus be described as courageous, revolutionary, and bold. Through their literature, the futurists sought to glorify “movement and aggression” (Marinetti as cited in Rainey et al., 2009, p. 51) unlike past literature which glorified things that provoked stillness or passion. Marinetti claims that the new beauty is the “beauty of speed,” that of cars, automobiles, and other innovations. A masterpiece for the futurists is something that cannot be achieved without including an aggressive element. Indeed, the futurists were known for their violent protest through their art against bourgeois culture and art. Because the rising of the futurist movement coincided with the revolution in Russia and with World War I, the futurist literature “caught rhythms of movement, of action, of attack, and of destruction” (Trotsky, 1925, p. 3). An important thing Marinetti highlights in his manifesto is the futurists’ rejection of the concept of time and place; they instead live in the “absolute.” Consequently, war is glorified by Marinetti; destructiveness along with nationalism are required to purify the world. Futurists wanted to destroy libraries and museums and to stand against every “utilitarian ... cowardice” (Marinetti as cited in Rainey et al., 2009, p. 51).

In another manifesto, Marinetti expresses the futurists’ disagreement with the symbolists. He criticizes the symbolists for being obsessed with the bygone past. The symbolists always longed for the past, the very thing that the futurists could not tolerate. Similarly, the symbolists curse what the futurists glorify most, the machine. Symbolists wrote literary works that should be immortal and everlasting. The futurists, on the contrary, admitted that their works are mortal. In another manifesto, *Technical Manifesto of*

*Futurist Literature* (1912), Marinetti specified his vision about how literary works should be, intending to set the word free from the “prison of the Latin period” (Marinetti as cited in Rainey et al., 2009, p. 119) through the literature he wrote with his fellow futurists.

There are eleven rules to be followed by an author for their writings to be considered futurist according to Marinetti. This indicates the paradoxical nature of the because he claims that he wants to free literature from past conventions while restricting the process of writing by setting rules to be followed. More specifically, syntax, punctuation marks, adjectives, and adverbs are to be eliminated and verbs are to be used always in the infinitive. For Marinetti, the writer should express the world as he or she first perceived it. Accordingly, the use of adverbs, adjectives, tenses, and syntax indicates that the author has manipulated his first perception of the world by trying to give it order or harmony.

Marinetti actually assigns a rule to suit the futurists' preoccupation with representing movement and speed in their literature. He suggests that instead of using simile, the noun, which stands for an object, is to be followed immediately by another noun that stands for the image that the first noun provokes. These two successive nouns must be analogous. It is an analogy of the technique through which Marinetti claims that writers can represent moving objects. A writer is to prove himself as an excellent futurist by using far-fetched analogies through which he expresses his “unwired imagination.” Marinetti gives an example of this by linking a woman to a machinegun.

Marinetti regards it images as the “lifeblood” of poetry. However, he rejects the use of familiar images which are favored by writers as they excite readers. He maintains that these familiar images become stereotypes and lose their meanings with the passing of time. Marinetti concludes his rules with the elimination of the “I” which stands for “the man who has been

damaged by libraries and museums,” (Marinetti as cited in Rainey et al., 2009, p. 122) and to replace it with the “matter.”

## **Russian Futurism**

As for Russian futurism, a controversial issue concerns whether it is an offspring of the Italian movement or an independent movement by itself. At any rate, Russian futurism contains two branches, ego-futurism and cubo-futurism. The ego-futurists had the point of view and the artistic aesthetics of the political regime at that time, while the cubo-futurists were interested in the status quo of Russia at that time and sought to change it through their literature.

The characteristics of the Italian futurist movement mentioned in the previous section are applicable to the cubo-futurist movement. However, the cubo-futurists insist on distancing themselves from the Italian movement as well as from ego-futurism because their priority was to be a movement which mostly engages with the reality in Russia and to spread their ideas in advocating the revolution against the Empire. The cubo-futurists added to the Bolshevik revolution a third artistic dimension.

The cubo-futurists wanted to be close to the reality of the people in Russia. Through their manifesto *A Slap in the Face to the Public Taste* (1912) they expressed their will to depart from the past with its social, political, and artistic values. To break with conventions and to attract the people to read their works and follow their vision about the future of Russia, the cubo-futurists manipulated the use of regular typography. For instance, they used different font sizes on the same page with the words distributed irregularly. They thought that in this way the words will convey their revolutionary spirit. They believed in the “self-sufficient” word which has a message by itself without any referent. A well-known and widely celebrated cubo-futurist is Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovski.

## Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovski (1893–1930)

Vladimir Mayakovski was a leading figure in the cubo-futurist movement. In 1909, he started to write poetry. Mayakovski's poems were different in form, language, techniques from the known traditional poetry of the past. He inclined to "depoetize" poetry. More specifically, his two main poems *A Cloud in Trousers* (1915) and *The Backbone Flute* (1916) are clearly representative of this new poetical language. He wrote some satirical poems and ironical elegies and spoke of politics and love. Concerning his influence, he did not only leave a great influence on Soviet literature but also some prominent world poets, including Nazim Hikmet, Louis Aragon, and Pablo Neruda, who started to adopt his poetic style outside of Russia. Before the Bolshevik revolution, the idea of urbanism was dominant in Mayakovski's poetry, whereas after the revolution he used his poetry as a tool to spread his Marxist and revolutionary beliefs. As a futurist, he wrote about the way he envisioned the future or how he wished it to be in many of his poems.

### The Theme of Urbanism

As the futurists, whether Italian or Russian, were showing interest in the modern city with all its new machines and new transportation systems, the urban theme manifested itself in their writings. The word 'urbanist' was used to describe the futurists who depicted the city landscape in their poetry. The urbanists praised the city in their writings as they expressed their fascination for it. Mayakovski was one of those poets interested in talking about the city, "considered the only representative of true futurism, primarily because of the predominance of urban themes in his early poetry" (Richter, 1998, p. 49). However, unlike other urbanists, Mayakovski took the city to be his object to criticize the life and the people in it rather than praising it. I argue that Mayakovski has depicted the city as an ugly place through an analysis of two poems, *Morning* (1912) and *A Skyscraper Dissected* (1929). It will also shed some light on Mayakovski's vision of the future through an analysis of his poem *About This* (1923).

In her dissertation, Richter (1998) states that “Mayakovski [is]... the most prominent urbanist among Russian Futurists” (p. 49). She refers to Chukovsky who distinguishes between two meanings of the word “urbanist.” The first describes the author who uses urbanist landscape in his works. This meaning is neutral as the author in this case depicts the city without promoting or criticizing it. The second meaning refers to the author who portrays the city in his works because he is fascinated with it. According to Chukovsky, Mayakovski comes under the first meaning and not the second one as he appears in his urbanist poetry (as cited in Richter, 1998, p. 50). Chukovsky thus contends that Mayakovski was not one of those who were fascinated by modern city life.

Brown (2015) also argues that Mayakovski depicted the modern city in his urbanist poetry in a gloomy way as does Ball (2004) when he writes that “modern urban settings do indeed occupy Mayakovski’s work, but the view is sometimes dark” (p. 45). While other academic works allude to the same idea, none of these works justify this argument through an analysis of the texts of Mayakovski’s urbanist poetry. This study fills this gap and will also give an example of Mayakovski’s depiction of the future in a hopeful note.

### ***Morning (1912)***

Here Mayakovski depicts the city in a way that makes the readers or listeners feel that the exact words and images used in the poem are intended to evoke the emotions of despair and misery. The persona starts his description of the city landscape with the gloomy image of the rain. Starting with rain implies that the tone is not cheerful, it is rather a sad one. The rain is thus personified. It has a face that is “sullen,” glancing at the city with condemnation. It sounds as if the persona is personified by the rain as both seem not to be pleased with the city.

Then the persona moves to describe how the sky appears through some framework made of iron which also indicates the poem's urban theme. It is implicit that the iron wires, symbolizing the city's buildings, prevent the persona from seeing the cloud, "featherbed," clearly. The image seems quite beautiful and poetic. The stars, as the morning is approaching, are putting their legs on that cloud as if preparing to leave the sky. Just like the rain, the stars are personified as they have legs. Thus, the city here is something that is suppressing and distorting the beautiful scene of the sky. Afterwards, the persona moves to the scene of the city itself far from the sky and the rain. While the city prevented the persona from contemplating the beautiful scene previously, it now doubles the ugliness of an originally ugly scene.

Light, conventionally, is a source of illumination. However, for Mayakovski, the "streetlamps" are "tsars" which may be the most despised things by the poet who has strong Marxist inclinations. The lamps in the street, signaling the urban theme, are apparently something tyrannical. However, when the lamps, which are also personified, start to fade away, they make the originally ugly scene of the drunken people in the streets who are quarreling over trifles "painful for the eyes." The eye which was first prevented from seeing the clouds and the stars through the wires is now horrified as it cannot see the suspicious people who are moving and shouting in the darkness.

In the city, the street at midnight, before the morning arises, is full of people who are making jokes. While the image itself is discomforting, the persona further extends its ugliness. The "laughter" that those jokes cause is "horrid," "lurid," and "pecking." The persona seems tortured to listen to the horrifying sound of the laughter. To make the image even iller, the persona claims that the laughter does not arise from the human beings but from the "poisoned," "yellow roses". Here, the description bears two interpretations,

none of which is less ugly than the other. First, the image may indicate that the loud and frightening laughter resulted from the “poisoned” roses. This interpretation indicates that the city people made the natural scene seem scary. The second interpretation is to understand that the laughing humans themselves are “poisoned” and “yellow” which indicates their stinky nature. In the final sentence, the persona is finally pleased because the morning has come and with it, the torture of the night will end. However, in the last sentence, the persona continues to intensify the ugliness of the city that the morning will throw away. The sun comes from behind the city scene which is epitomized in the words “wracking horror and squalor.”

The sun which indicates the coming of the “Morning” covers all the cross-roads of Moscow: however, the persona explicitly describes the citizens covered by the sun as slave-like. It may be understood here that the persona has chosen the word “crosses” to refer to the automobiles which were becoming more widespread during that time. So, it is those automobiles and other materialistic inventions that made this citizen seen as a “slave” who is suffering calmly without paying any attention to the sun which may present hope. In this sense, the modern human being is depicted as lacking spirituality. Even the houses are described as “coffins” which means that the people inside those homes are dead. So, the morning comes to end the ugliness of the night in the city, but it does not appear that even the day hours in the city will be more pleasant.

### ***A Skyscraper Dissected (1929)***

Another poem by Mayakovski, *A Skyscraper Dissected*, that bears the urban theme, and which validates the argument that Mayakovski used the urban landscape to criticize it and not to praise it as other futurists did. The poem is futurist as it includes some important characteristics of cubo-futurist poetry. It is evident from the first sentence that the words are gradually painting a picture in the mind of the reader. The persona invites the reader

to look at the biggest skyscraper in New York City and scrutinize it floor by floor. The manipulation of the use of typography is another futurist element. The words are distributed on the page to take the shape of a building with multi-layers. The theme of the poem, urbanism, is also a chief futurist theme. The poem is also engaged with the social reality of the people. The persona throughout the poem describes what is happening on the floors of a large skyscraper. Having the skyscraper as its object of discussion or as the landscape of the poem makes it urbanist in theme. Each floor in the building presents one form of corruption in the modern cities' lifestyle.

On the first floor, there are "jewelers" who are dead scared about their fortune. They quickly shut the windows as though to separate the world from their wealth. If Mayakovski was not criticizing their materialism, he would have depicted them, for example, as contemplating the beauty of the precious stones. The spread of fortunes in a capitalist society leads to the spread of theft and consequently, more policemen are required. In the poem, even the policemen are depicted in a gloomy way. They spend their lives wearing suits that make them look like "film-star[s]" while simultaneously trying to protect other people's wealth, and, ultimately, they die "hound-like."

The following floor's description is a criticism of the capitalist system. The floor is full of "offices" which are witnessing several deals, some win, others lose. The condition of the offices is bad; all office doors bear the name of one boss. The name is written in gold which indicates that the boss is living in luxury while the officers are living in the "slavish sweat". The fifth floor is inhabited by an apparently unmarried old girl who is depicted in an ugly way. Her mind cannot think of anything than what she lacks in her "trousseau" even though she is not married. She seems anxious and disturbed to have "prodigious brooms." This may be understood as a social criticism of modern men who abandoned marriage, or a criticism of the women who thought that marriage is to be prepared for only through material things.

The floor after is of a “mister” who is living in luxury. He collected his wealth through his own efforts. Thus, his fortune becomes the only thing that consoles and interests him. He becomes blinded to the extent that he is able to condone “marital infidelity.” The loss of morality resulting from the interest in wealth is apparent on this floor. The picture continues to be drawn and next, it includes a newly married couple. Despite all the hopeful things they are supposed to think of, they are reading a newspaper advertisement. It offers to buy a car on a “monthly basis.” In a capitalist society, people are driven to be obsessed with securing their needs. Other forms of corruption and moral deterioration continue to appear. On another floor, “shareholders” gather to collect billions in money. Their greed makes them behave like animals. Their only way of communication is through shouting and quarreling. The means through which they seek to gain money is to reproduce the remains of animals, “offal” into “ham.”

The criticism of modern society and habits even reaches the artists. There is a painter on the nineteenth floor. His paintings are ugly and of no meaning. Instead of thinking about how to produce fine art, he is thinking about how to get his paintings bought and how to marry the “landlord’s daughter.” The final floor is depicted in a way that makes the criticism of the capitalist society evident in the poem. The floor is a restaurant. First-class people come and eat fresh food. After that, “Negro[s] [sic]” eat the huge remnants of food that the first-class people have not eaten. Then next comes the poorest people, represented as “rats” in the poem, to have the “crumbs” that remain from the remnants of food.

There are no presentations of any kind of beauty or morality in the whole skyscraper which is a microcosm of the large modern society. The persona expresses his disappointment with the scene and describes the inhabitants of the building as prisoners, “inmates,” who are apparently imprisoned in their greed for material gains. The persona says that his intention before

scrutinizing the skyscraper was to continue his walk, which indicates that he thought that glimpses of positive development were expected to be seen in the skyscraper. However, what he got after contemplating is the sense that greed and corruption are growing at the expense of humanity and morality.

From the persona's viewpoint, the modern cities' lifestyle controls the minds of people. They have become corrupted, ugly and, more importantly, they lost their sense of humanity. Corruption and destruction of social life and morals is a very powerful theme in this poem. The persona shows his dissatisfaction with this life. Towards the end of the poem, he draws our attention to the gaps between people in this materialistic world.

The title *A Skyscraper Dissected* is of noticeable significance here since it connects to the theme of urbanism. Burwell (2016) defines a skyscraper as "a staple of development in the modern-day cityscape by which to address the concerns of our growing population and density. The urban landscape of cities has thus been radically trans-formed, enabling staggering density within small land ratios" (p. ii). The poet emphasizes that the skyscraper is a symbol of life where the city is full and dominated by giant towers and buildings. It creates a new lifestyle based only on money, selfishness, and adultery, which brainwashes people and makes them throw their moral values away.

Although Mayakovski depicted the city in a gloomy picture, he intended to depict the future in a hopeful way, possibly suggesting that there the gloomy present must be turned into a hopeful future. To carry out this idea, he wrote several poems, among them *About This* (1923). This poem begins with the presentation of a case of a modern man who suffers from a lack of love and care. In the last part, Mayakovski depicts the future in a hopeful manner as a solution to the misery of the man. The poem's main theme is

love. The persona, which is believed to be the poet, alludes to his own self in the poem as a man who is attempting to commit suicide by throwing himself from a bridge. The man tries to tell his family, beloved, and friends about his misery hoping that they may help him out of it. However, they seem not to be interested and they are rather distracted. Thus, “the man on the bridge is nailed fast, crucified, and suffering for all mankind” (Mayakovski as cited in Jangfeldt, 2014).

The rest of the poem presents the poet's journey in the future. “The last section of the poem is in the form of a petition to an unknown alchemist in the thirtieth century” (Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 252). The poet requests the alchemist to return his life for him. Mayakovski expressed his belief that there would be a day in the future when life will be restored to all the dead (Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 253), which is seen in the poem. The persona in the poem claims that another life is needed for him as he has not fulfilled his need for love. The important part of our topic is the final one as it is set in the future. The part is entitled “love” in a suggestion that love is the solution to the misery of the modern man. Love in the future as envisioned by Mayakovski is free from all restrictions. It seems that love becomes the leading force in all aspects of life. Even the job that a person will be employed as a caretaker in a zoo will be something he loves, and he will be reunited with his beloved as they both share the love of animals.

The poet expresses his eagerness for a future in which he will be able to fulfill his need for pure love as he was deprived of it in his lifetime. He says that his beloved deserves a new life because she is beautiful, and he deserves it because he was able as a poet to liberate himself from the dirt of everyday life. This indicates that the future the poet wants is inhabited only by people who are kind and pure. The distorted forms of love that are found in the present life will have no place in the future. The poet did not want love to be only a means toward achieving other goals. Love is not inferior

to marriage. It is not only restricted to the confines of the marital relationship. It is a universal value. It should not be a means to get materialistic advantages or to satisfy mere sexual lust. In the future, love “climbs up out of its bed to wander through the universe’s infinity” (Mayakovski as cited in Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 255). It will spread among all human beings. Just then, the man that was begging for love at the beginning of the poem will be happy to fulfill his need for love. He will also keep his dignity because he will not need to ask for love as it will be spread everywhere. People will be freed from earthly constraints. What will replace the old values is a universal relationship that links all human beings together and they will be “brothers and sisters” (Mayakovski as cited in Jangfeldt, 2014, p. 255). All human beings will have in Mayakovski’s future one mother which is “earth,” and one father which is “the world.”

## Conclusion

This study showed that the futurist movement and formalist literary theory can be discussed together due their similarities, without neglecting that they are two separate literary activities with points of friction between them. While both the Russian cubo-futurists and the Italian futurists share the love of speed, dynamism, and the revolutionary spirit, the cubo-futurist movement distinguishes itself through its engagement with the social and political reality in Russia.

Thus, by discussing two futurist characteristic poems of his works, I showed that Mayakovski is a futurist poet and uses the city landscape in his poetry to depict his gloomy vision of it. Both poems discussed support this argument as they are full of images that present modern city life as corrupted. But nevertheless, Mayakovski’s vision of the future is hopeful showing that the poet was not defeated by the gloom of the his present as he was able to imagine a future in which love is the leading force.

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