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Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film (review)

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Book Reviews

***Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film.* Susan McCabe.**

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 284 pp. \$75 (cloth).

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Susan McCabe's new book focuses on four modern poets—Gertrude Stein, Williams, H. D., and Marianne Moore—and their links with silent film. Her concerns are both historical and theoretical: "The larger argument of this book is that the four poets engaged in an ongoing dialogue that emerges on one axis through the concourse between modern poetry and modern film, and on the other between versions of embodiment generated by the prominent discourses of psychoanalysis and experimental psychology" (4).

Chapter 1 uses Pound and Eliot to represent mainstream modernism as an expression of "male hysteria." Eliot in particular transmutes his "anxieties over racial and gender identity" into *The Waste Land*, "the modern montage poem par excellence" (40). In chapter 2, McCabe compares the "fragmented, repetitive bodies of Stein's poetics" with the film work of Charlie Chaplin and Man Ray. [The argument would be helped by some discussion of how the works she discusses by Stein—*The Making of Americans*, *Wars I Have Seen*, "Mrs. Emerson," and others—relate to the subject of modern poetry.] Williams and surrealist film is the subject of chapter 3 (see below). Chapter 4 focuses primarily on H. D.'s film *Borderline* which, like her poetry, "underscores the instability of gender and racial categories" (168). Finally, in chapter 5, McCabe characterizes Marianne Moore's "fetishist sensibility" (222) in comparison with the films *Ballet Mécanique*, *Maedchen in Uniform*, and *Lot in Sodom*.

The four poets she discusses are seen as forming a more positive, "cinematic" tradition that opposes the elitist and patriarchal poetics of mainstream modernism with its male "fantasy of omnipotence" (108). Williams fits in this group because, in *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All*, he deliberately "undercuts the primacy of the male gaze" (94), taking masochistic pleasure in "the deflated scopophilia necessary to [his] self-reflexive spectator" (108). Like the surrealist films *Un Chien*

Andalou and *Seashell and the Clergyman*, Williams's poetry dwells upon "loss of fantasized bodily omnipotence" (111), creating "a bodily poetic of thwarted desire" (117). Williams uses surrealist techniques to "deflect wish fulfillment and disarray the male bodily ego in its *mise-en-scène* of desire" (123).

The chapter builds to some fresh readings of poems from *Spring and All* (123–32) in terms of surrealist cinematic themes and techniques. Some of these points—e.g., the use of fragmentation, juxtaposition, and multiple perspectives—are familiar from critical discussion of Williams and modern painting. Unfortunately, McCabe ignores most previous criticism on Williams and surrealism, including the special issue of the *WCWR* on this topic (Spring 1996). But she makes a convincing case that Williams's dual emphasis on movement and on the body has significant parallels with surrealist film.

One difficulty of this book is that some readers (this reviewer included) may not have seen some of the more experimental films discussed, such as G. W. Pabst's *Joyless Street* and *Pandora's Box*, and Man Ray's *Emak Bakia*. Although McCabe does her best to describe the film passages under discussion, the more experimental a film is, the more it tends to resist such verbal paraphrase. Another difficulty is the book's style. I admired McCabe's first book, *Elizabeth Bishop and the Poetics of Loss* (1994), partly because of the way she was able to use specialized critical terms precisely and sparingly to illuminate Bishop's poetry. This new book is dense with the terminology of queer/gender/women's/racial studies. *Cinematic Modernism* outlines a fresh and important approach to modernist poetry. Its argument would sometimes benefit from clearer expression and a fuller recognition of previous scholarship on its subject.

William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems. Ed. Robert Pinsky.

American Poets Project. New York: The Library of America, 2004.
189 pp. \$20.00 (cloth).

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That Robert Pinsky has for a long time admired the poetry of fellow New Jerseyite William Carlos Williams is demonstrated by the considerable space devoted to Williams's work in Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (1976). Examining the relationship between the work of the modernists and the verse that was still considered "contemporary" when he wrote that book, Pinsky focused on Williams's "coolness," on the way he treats