The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s ed. by Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco (review)

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In an early photograph of my grandmother, she appears in a drop-waist dress, a cloche hat, and a snake bracelet. While researching types of modern femininity and industrialized image production, I ventured to ask her if she had been a flapper. She recoiled as though slapped. Yet she undoubtedly had cause to identify with the New Woman type. After a stint as a nurse, she worked as a court reporter (though writing under a male pseudonym). Then she and Grandfather set up a tourism venture, running Bren Gun Carriers and then buses to their hostels in the Victorian alps of Australia. She also set up a gallery in her rural town and was an enthusiastic amateur local historian. Flappers, she reproached me, were “silly girls,” uninspired by professional achievement, uninterested in social or political reform, art, history, and—I sensed this from her disdain—of dubious morality.

Her reaction bespoke a confusion of categories I think remains unresolved for scholars of modernity. What is clear from the types New Woman, Modern Girl, and flapper is that classification and typologies were vital to the assignation and articulation of modern gendered and raced identities, which were in the main visually wrought. But the categorization of identity effects into typologies is such a central facet of modern ways of seeing and being, epistemologies and cultural production, that we often fail to perceive their workings. Types and typologies exploded under modernity’s splitting, standardizing, and calibrating of data produced by natural science, medicine, legislative governance, bureaucracy, information, and industrial technologies. Yet despite the force of these categories, typologies remain un-historicized. Classification shares this structural absence with print. Despite print materials forming the basis for historical source, print culture itself often remains unexamined and un-historicized.

Type and typing—classification and print—are unarticulated and unexamined frameworks in many recent cultural histories of modern femininity (including my own), even when these popular assignations determine the object of study and become “heuristics” for modern cultural forms and their historical circumstances.1 Types, from Mogas to Business Girls, are identified as types, yet the peculiar operation of typology in modernity as an overarching and determining epistemology remains unexamined. Similarly, since it was very often in print that photographs were published, or films were advertised, or film stars featured, print history is increasingly entering into analysis of modern visual culture. For instance, the New Woman type peaked in Australian print in 1895 as an empirical entity. Yet she did not embody or encapsulate other types of modern feminine subject positions, but was quite distinct, as an age designation, from the Modern Girl. She bore a closer relation to the Business Girl due to her professional allegiances, but she was quite anathema to the leisure-oriented flapper. These and many other modern feminine types were not variables of the New Woman. They were coterminous and shared a number of features, but they referenced distinct (though related) subject positions.

The New Woman International ranges across a number of such types of modern femininity as “embodiments” of the New Woman as defined and disseminated by the new technological media of photography and film. The collection brings together essays that examine the changing public exposure of the New Woman and her diverse expressions in distinct but increasingly linked localities—although predominantly in Germany and the United States—thereby demonstrating this type’s international presence as a “global phenomenon” and a “universally recognizable icon of change,” due in particular to her distinctive appearance (1). The volume focuses on
visual production and the New Woman's public visibility in these highly engaging and nuanced studies, some of which uncover unknown or little-known archives. Two such notables are Clare Rogan's study of Germaine Krull's portfolios and Gianna Carotenuto's excellent breakdown of portraits of elite colonial women with their interplay between imperial "harem fantasies and zemana realities" (73). All of the essays provide fascinating, wide-ranging, original analyses of photography, film, and the new forms of visibility and identification through visual culture for women as both pictures and producers.

The volume is attentive to the interface of representation and lived experience, particularly as broached by woman photographers, artists, film stars, and consumers of these new visual technologies. It shows the critical role of photography and film in offering women subject positions that contravened the traditional identification of femininity with domesticity and family. Yet print is also very clearly foremost in the dissemination of this imagery. It was very often the means by which photography and film became available to women for daily consumption, as Martha Patterson, Matthew Biro, and a number of other contributors substantiate.

The volume commences fittingly with a skillful study of early stereo-views of the New Woman by Melody Davis. She draws out the implications for this literal foregrounding of space-as-constructed in terms of Victorian imaginings of sexual difference and the "bifurcation" of men's and women's separate spheres. The scandals of Japanese bluestockings and pioneering "female first" adventurers in photojournalism underscore the importance of print in making public images of their rebellious activities. As Despina Straigakos argues, these individual portraits show the "tensions inherent in the desire to forge the singular into a type" (57). In the illustrated press, these portraits offered a subject position by which to "choreograph," as Carotenuto puts it, a modern identity, both through the autonomy of the photograph and within nationalist agendas (82).

Emerging mass markets and the corporate strategies of international companies precipitated global commodity flows involving print, film, and photography. As Brett Van Hoesen vividly reveals, these became more cosmopolitan in Weimar visual culture, fostering a sense of access to the world despite Germany's colonial losses. Though the New Woman seems tangentially related to these developments, contributions by Elizabeth Otto and Matthew Biro show how the photomontages by Hannah Hoch, Marianne Brandt, and other women artists draw on the visual literacy created by photojournalism to comment on the fragmentation and perceived distraction of illustrated print. Vanessa Rocco's groundbreaking study of film stills carefully details the trans-platform dependency of cinema and print as indeed a neglected body of photography.

The editors pay homage to the research group Modern Girl Around the World, whose prior collection is more focused on global circuits of consumption and on how Modern-Girl images in advertising were implicated in the "production of national racial formation" within multiple contexts (W, 50). Their collection historicizes the "girl" who comes to the fore in the 1880s in England, and it examines the unstable, subversive relationship between unmarried young women and social norms. They note the New Woman often figured as the Mother to the 1920s Modern Girl (W, 9), perhaps as a more transnational rendition of the American Gibson Girl and her flapper daughter. Lisa Jaye Young's outstanding essay, which focuses on the reception of the Tiller Girl in Weimar illustrated press as Amerikanismus, gives the most attention to typology and its particular operation in modernity. At times in the collection, the New Women type is conflated with related but quite distinct modern feminine types; in one instance, a child is even included within this type, and while early flappers could be as young as six, New Women were undoubtedly sexually mature. While print is historicized in a number of notable essays, a few ostensibly concerned with photography do not engage with the medium in which the images they study appear. "Print," then, might have been a useful addition to the subtitle. The attenuated timeframe of the New Woman type stretches into the 1960s despite the fact that she retreats as an empirical entity; this discrepancy points to a conflation of modern feminine types as historical entities and feminine types as categories of analysis generated by authors. Nevertheless, this collection shows why visual autonomy was so important to women's political and domestic emancipation, and it
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contributes to the recent project to draw out transnational linkages between these syndicated modern feminine types with much detail, diversity, and applied creative analysis.

Note


Reviewed by Cheryl Hindrichs, Boise State University

Virginia Woolf’s 1926 essay “On Being Ill” questions why illness has failed to feature as a prime theme of literature alongside love, battle, and jealousy. Jane Elizabeth Fisher’s invaluable book lays the groundwork for understanding how the twentieth-century novel has not been, as Woolf suggested, “devoted to influenza” (74). The tone of Woolf’s question takes on new dimensions when one contrasts the scope of the 1918 influenza pandemic and the scope of the First World War, which has certainly framed our readings of twentieth-century literature and modernism. Compared to the estimated nine million that died in the war’s four years, current estimates are “that the 1918–1920 influenza pandemic killed at least 50 million worldwide and probably closer to 100 million” (14). The sources of this silence are twofold. On the one hand, Fisher argues, reading and writing about an event as traumatic as the pandemic would be difficult for survivors; on the other, as Woolf predicted, the novel devoted to influenza would defy conventional literary expectations. By analyzing how the pandemic was suppressed in literature between the wars and has now become a usable “historical trauma” for contemporary writers (37), Fisher’s text carries out its important task: namely, examining the “complex processes of repression and recollection” in literature and history that have made the 1918 influenza pandemic “absent, invisible, or underinterpreted” until the last decade (1). Fisher’s work is important because it provides a foundation for redressing the pandemic’s absence from literary criticism of modernism; a third source of its invisibility, I suggest, lies in critics’ lack of a paradigm for recognizing its presence.

Fisher’s prologue and first chapter are essential reading: the questions raised inaugurate a new paradigm for rereading modernity in the first half of the twentieth century, a paradigm that Fisher extends to the rewritings of that moment that have begun to proliferate in recent decades (extensive footnotes document this trend, which ranges from popular memoir to children’s literature to postmodern fiction). The first four chapters focus on literary narratives that link war and the pandemic and portray a dynamic development in gendered identity. Fisher generally eschews theorizing a relationship between modernist modes of writing and the influence of the pandemic, but her analysis of the empowering vision that illness creates in these novels certainly invites such a consideration. Her compelling, chapter-length close readings of Mrs. Dalloway, Willa Cather’s One of Ours, Katherine Anne Porter’s “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” and Alice Munro’s “Carried Away” reveal in each a female flâneur, a “figure fitted in (figurative) mourning; by experiencing the shocks of modernity, she becomes a hero(ine), if not permanently a convalescent,” demonstrating a “dynamism” her male counterparts lack (27).