

*Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word.* By Michael North. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. ix + 255pp. \$47.50 cloth.

From its title and subtitle alone one might expect of *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* a discussion of photography's effect(s) upon twentieth-century literary writing. Michael North's study does in fact address itself centrally to such matters, but there is much else besides. *Camera Works* is first of all a wide-ranging survey of and meditation upon the astonishingly varied ways both still photographs and movies were understood by artists, critics, and writers. The book is divided into two very nearly equal parts (there's also an introduction): the first, in three chapters under the heading "The Logocinema of the Little Magazines," explores discussions of photography as an art form, concentrating in the first on Alfred Stieglitz (*Camera Work* was his journal), in the second on *transition*, where Eugene Jolas was the presiding figure, and in the third on the nascent film industry's very mixed response to the arrival of sound. Here the focal journal is *Close Up*, published first as a monthly and later as a quarterly from 1927-1933 with Kenneth Macpherson, H. D., and Bryher at the helm.

North's examination of these journals produces in every case complication and paradox; utopian expectations often lead to nearly dystopian results. Cameras were sometimes understood as providing an unblinking, =

all-seeing gaze, as vision perfected. Thus Steiglitz's *Camera Work* published essays promoting photography as "the very end of an inevitable evolutionary process that has faithful mimesis as its goal" (40). But other essays, concerned perhaps with the consequences of such a view for photography's status as an art form, emphasized the artist's active suppression of elements within the camera's automatic and unfiltered mechanical reproduction. As Stieglitz himself put it in 1905, "The problem that is presented is practically one of elimination" (45). North's conclusion is succinct: "photographic art had to work, as best it could, to defeat the basic nature of photography" (44).

Similarly, Jolas's Whitmanesque ambitions for photography as a new, "truly universal language" that would span the globe and "bind the races in a fabulous unity" (71) come to grief in recognition of the visual realm as "not innocent but rather deeply implicated in the history and culture of the observer" (81). Many early films in fact reinforce reigning stereotypes, especially racial stereotypes, often in staggeringly crude form. Hollywood's complex response to the arrival of talkies offers a third ground for perplexities, with optimists predicting Esperanto subtitles and/or a spike in foreign language studies as "moviegoers in all countries would begin to learn other languages to understand the films they loved" (87), while pessimists lamented the contamination of silent film's visual artistry. Arkansas Imagist poet John Gould Fletcher staked out an extreme position in the latter camp—a "complete boycott" of talkies was the "first duty of anyone who has ever achieved a moment's pleasure from the contemplation of any film" (87).

North's painstaking analyses of these controversies lead to a general conclusion itself touched by paradox. Photographic technologies seem at once to perfect human sight and undermine confidence in it. Cameras saw things people missed, and thus highlighted the shortcomings of subjective vision, but they also distorted and blurred, making clearer the analogous filterings of ordinary eyesight. "By recording levels of detail usually ignored and moments in processes usually perceived as fluid wholes," North concludes, "photography exposed the unnoticed filtering and processing that transforms phenomena into useful perceptions" (10). After the camera, it was more obvious that reality needed quotation marks—both the camera eye and the human eye produce a reality at one remove, a "reality" already "composed."

North devotes the four chapters of *Camera Work's* second part, under the heading, "Spectatorship, Media Relations, and Modern American Fiction," to Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, and Hemingway. What emerges is in general an unhappy story; the new technologies that seemed to promise so much end up serving trivial and even sinister ends. Mechanically reproduced images are everywhere, enlarged to

monstrous size, speeded up, and endlessly repeated. The virtuosos of the new technology are advertisers and demagogues, the true modern masters. “Newsreels,” North notes in the Dos Passos chapter, “were notoriously bereft of anything that could be considered actual news, concentrating instead on scandals, ceremonies, sporting events, and human interest stories” (143). Citizens of this new world are increasingly turned into spectators and consumers, strangely enervated folks for whom “rapt, sedentary consumption” is “a new kind of doing” (205). The “spectroscopic gayety” of Gatsby’s party depends on the omnipresence of endlessly recycled images: “the peculiar exhilaration that occurs when members of the audience see in the flesh someone they have seen dozens and dozens of times in pictures” (122). In the world of *The Sun Also Rises* watching is no less central: “both bullfighters and bullfight fans are said, when their feelings are authentic, to have *aficion*” (204). North sees Hemingway’s prose, especially, as rooted in the language of advertising and fashion. As his apprentice work in journalism had little connection with actual news reporting, but was “generally about taste” (205), so “the world implied by Hemingway’s fiction is . . . very much the one defined by the glossy magazines with which he was so closely identified” (206).

North notes in the works of several individual authors a recurrence of the move from utopian hopes to dystopian results apparent in the little magazines. Where Nick Carraway is sometimes stimulated and excited by a modern scene he sees in cinematic terms — “the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars” (123)—the Dick Diver of the later and much grimmer *Tender Is the Night* senses himself as caught in “the quick re-wind of a film” (112). “The spatial and temporal fragmentation characteristic of the movies and the repetitive nature of the recording medium itself” imposes upon citizens “a jumbled experience that is personally and socially fatal” (135). A similar downturn, this time resulting more from the rise of recorded sound than from visual technologies, is noted between the autobiographical works of Johnson and Du Bois: “*The Autobiography* is therefore hopeless and defeated where *Souls of Black Folk* is inspirational” (183).

North’s close analyses of *Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, *U.S.A.*, *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and *In Our Time*, in every case carefully rooted in the developing technologies of photographic reproduction, make up the heart of the book’s second part. North is always an adroit reader, especially adept at convincingly teasing out nuanced implications from slender phrasal tics or recurrent images. The exploration of “the metaphor of broken glass” in *Tender Is the Night* (129) and the analysis of Hemingway’s predilection for “performative utterances” (198) stand out as particularly helpful readings.

The one dismaying feature of *Camera Work* is its recurrent air of

arraignment. To be, in these pages, is to be guilty (unless you're a scholar—North is a generous bestower of collegial compliment). A Fitzgerald letter says bad things about Italians, plus he was an ugly American in Europe, involved in several brawls “having a distinctly racial character” (137). Johnson and his songwriting collaborators exaggerated their contributions to ragtime's vogue and “were not themselves the blameless originators they pretended to be” (181); even Du Bois gets scolded for his use of an African American music “not a part of any culture immediately available to him” (171). Dos Passos gets off easily, upbraided only for a “notorious” conservatism (142). But all this pales in comparison to the Swiftboating of Hemingway, that most inviting of targets. His military clothing is “undeserved” (110); he “had no legal right” to an army uniform (197); his proximity to an alleged act of “battlefield cowardice” is explored with distaste (196-197).

The “battlefield cowardice” consists entirely of a frightened prayer—who but an academic Torquemada on the hunt would set such an impossibly high bar for courage? And Hemingway, for all his odious self-promotion and betrayal of friends, did in fact serve, was in fact wounded, and, according to the National Archives, was in fact awarded a medal for valor by the Italian government. He's using crutches in a photo on the Archives website—but perhaps he didn't deserve them either. The only truly disingenuous line in North's study may be the one suggesting that locating the sources of Hemingway's fictional world in the flackery of newspaper puff pieces and glossy magazines “may seem to debase the fiction” (207). Well, yes, this would seem to be very much the purpose, though of course no exposé of sources, however tawdry, can in fact “debase” any fictional accomplishment.

It's probably not fair to place blame for this priggishness solely on North; it's in the air now, part of the territory, and has been since critics starting using terms like “interrogate” to describe their work. Has it crossed anyone's mind that sinister associations adhere, suggestions of third degree, of Lubyanka and Abu Ghraib? And surely the pendulum swings back, leaving tomorrow's readers bewildered. Whatever were they thinking, these fierce self-righteous denouncers? At any rate, such moments make a jarring note in a first-rate work of sustained and painstaking investigation. Students of several arts and of modernist culture in general will find North's analyses stimulating and rewarding.

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