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Optical Impersonality: Science, Images, and Literary Modernism
by Christina Walter
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 352 pages

Megan Poole

The penning of a foundational book within contemporary modernist studies is a rare occurrence, especially when the text relates to a well-known concept, such as modernist impersonality. Yet Christina Walter has fashioned just such a masterful text. She calls scholars to reevaluate the traditional understanding of impersonality: the masking of writers' subjective emotion in pursuit of the self over communal engagements in social or cultural agendas (25). She then directs scholars to consider the modernist's turn toward optical science and the visual-scientific vernacular toward creating what she terms as optical impersonality. Walter explicitly defines optical impersonality as the "combination of embodied subjectivity and its social consequences" (6), and she envisions the pursuit of imagetextuality (that of blurring the seeable with the sayable) as the signature of this work in modernist art. Through an exploration that spans art history, literature, gender and queer studies, physics, and contemporary affect theory, Walter sets out to demonstrate that optical impersonality, produced by a new understanding of the physiology of vision, permeated sociopolitical aspects of culture and allowed modernist writers to examine "the making and unmaking of personality" (27). Indeed, Walter's book presents a scientific perspective that has been missing from much work in modernist studies but is necessary if future scholars are to engage productively in the multiplicity of discourses surrounding gender, race, and identity in modernism.

In her introduction, Walter sets up a conceptual framework that considers three cultural and historical realms factoring in to her study of optical impersonality: the history of optical science, the history of image-text relations, and the history of personality (7). A brief history of

optical science, from the Cartesian notion of sight as a faithful record for the autonomous mind to Helmholtz' suggestion of an embodied observer, helps readers to contextualize the rest of Walter's argument according to its relation to modernists' evaluation and rejection of the mind/body duality. Just as optics blurs the subject/object line, Walter allows the concept of imagetextuality to blur the line between the image and the text. Finally, Walter rounds out the foundation for her text by previewing the historical evolution of personality from a marker of individuality into a performance of constructed identity.

Imagetextuality moves to the forefront of Walter's agenda in Chapter One as she evaluates Walter Pater, a nineteenth-century philosopher and art historian, who hypothesized that imagetexts were opaque and fragmented structures that left "the reader always desiring to know, and always faced with the limits of knowing" (46). Though Pater's experimentation with the image/text binary would challenge identity, he never attempted to solve issues of identity and personality. On this note, Walter turns to Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, two women poets who collaborated and published under the unified penname of "Michael Field." Walter reads Bradley and Cooper's documented friendship with Pater as the foundation for Fields' ekphrastic poetry collection, *Sight and Song* (1892). Walter reveals Bradley and Cooper as "a kind of bridge between Pater and modernist impersonality" (56). As Walter shows, their active bending of gender roles and use of Pater's imagetextuality allowed the two women writers to abandon the Cartesian mind/body duality for a psychophysiological notion of optics that created space to explore gender in non-essentialist ways.

In the next two chapters, Walter presents feminists Hilda "H.D." Doolittle and Mina Loy, respectively, to show the ways that modernists used optical impersonality to spur conversations about race and gender in modernist circles. Walter describes H.D.'s extension of optical science

into the visual technologies surrounding cinema that allowed the memoirist to develop the concept of a “visual perception that creates the world rather than know[s] it immediately” (81). H.D.’s experimentation with embodied theories allowed her to adopt the notion of fluctuating identity that challenged not only essentialist, but also social constructivist views of race and gender. Highlighting the imagetextuality in cinematic modernist works through H.D. allows Walter to better evaluate the poetry of Loy. Walter describes Loy’s agenda as an endeavor “to use a scientific vernacular of vision in order to grasp the opaque psychophysiological forces that constitute [the] excess [of personality] and condition knowledge” (128). The subjective visual experiences of the speakers in Loy’s poems brought modern readers to understand the materiality of their world and their own embodied nature, notions that, Walter suggests, hint at the sociopolitical implications of optical impersonality on modernist literature.

The poems, essays, and fiction of D.H. Lawrence allow Walter to explore the political implications of optical impersonality in Chapter Four. Throughout his work, Lawrence actively recovers individuality—a conservative ideal—all the while attempting to reconcile the individual with impersonality, a feat that creates a bit of a paradox at times. Walter connects Lawrence’s work, especially *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, to Einstein’s theory of relativity, a liberal concept that allowed Lawrence to hypothesize that the human mindbody and the universe were a part of the same open system. Attempting to reconcile his politically conflicting views, Walter details Lawrence’s removal of impersonality from the sociopolitical realm, as she states, “*Chatterley’s* imaginative account of visual evolution promotes impersonality while also keeping embodied identities in an unresolved state of play” (212).

Reaching the culmination of her argument in the fifth and final chapter, Walter attempts to recast T.S. Eliot, the modernist most frequently associated with impersonality, as a modernist

practicing optical impersonality. Walter reads Eliot's early essays as representative of his conceptual inseparability of the psychological and the physiological systems so that subjectivity could be seen as fluctuating and embodied. Though building on the modernists who came before him, Eliot's impersonality could not reconcile gender roles. Walter's evaluation of the gendered narration of *The Waste Land* proves that even those who "achieved impersonality" had to deal with the "complex role of gender" (244). The final modernist text that Walter consults, Eliot's play, *The Family Reunion*, allows her to make a return to imagetextuality and its ability to "broadcast [impersonal] verse to a more popular culture" (245).

In the afterword, Walter shares her vision for the novel theory detailed in her book: the welding of optical impersonality with current affect theory. In this sense, she relates the work of Eve Sedgwick with imagetextuality and suggests that this new optical theory could supplement some of Brian Massumi's and affect theory's more problematic arguments. Walter culminates her text by suggesting, "Impersonality is a persistent way of thinking about science, art, being, perceiving, and knowing" (271). At every turn throughout the book, Walter attempts to weld science with modernism as she offers a new theoretical lens for scholars of modernist studies.

Perhaps the only shortcoming of the text occurs in Walter's bypassing integral philosophies and scientific studies that would help to concretize and fortify her argument. For example, while Maurice Merleau-Ponty is quoted in the opening epigraph of her introduction, Walter never delves further into Merleau-Ponty's philosophy regarding his concept of colors, visuality, or phenomenology. In fairness, Walter only promises to explore the intersections of "sight and reason, images and texts, and otherness and selfhood in *Western* thought" (2, emphasis added). Still, the notable absence of continental philosophers and their theories

illustrates the constant blurring of the line in modernist studies between what should or should not be included in an analysis of “Western thought.”

With a text that succeeds in making a case for reframing modernist studies, Walter fulfills the monumental task set out at the beginning of her work and explores the broad spectrum of sociopolitical implications that optical impersonality allowed modernists to traverse. In doing so, Walter ensures that her book appeals to a multiplicity of audiences, including those focused on authorship, race, gender, queer, cultural, border, and film studies. The broadness of her work does indeed highlight a need for the expansion of modernist impersonality to include scientific conversations. Yet Walter first had to pen this foundational text before scholars could explore the advancements of scientific studies, ophthalmological studies specifically, and their relation to modern art and literature.