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# [Book Review] Modernism, Media, and the Virtual

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# Modernism, Media, and the Virtual

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Katherine Biers. *Virtual Modernism: Writing and Technology in the Progressive Era*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013. 271 pp. $75.00 cloth; $25.00 paper.

*Katherine Biers's* Virtual Modernism: Writing and Technology in the Progressive Era *outlines the virtual turn in early American modernism, arguing that modernist writers fashioned a "poetics of the virtual" in response to mass culture and its developing communications technologies before the First World War. The book examines five authors (Stephen Crane, Henry James, James Weldon Johnson, Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein), placing their work in conversation with various forms of mass media as well as the vitalist and pragmatist philosophy of Henri Bergson and William James that theorized the nature of virtual experience. Biers demonstrates how these writers both drew upon and countered new media technologies and the rising culture industry through the virtualizing capability of language. Encompassing literary analysis, social theory, and media history,* Virtual Modernism *considerably furthers the intermedial study of modernist culture and the growing scholarship on its interaction with a commercial public sphere.*

**Keywords:** American modernism / virtuality / pragmatist and vitalist philosophy / mass media / technology

I n her innovative *Virtual Modernism: Writing and Technology in the Progressive Era*, Katherine Biers productively draws upon the fields of literary criticism and media studies to trace how a "poetics of the virtual" (1) emerged in American writing as a reaction to the development of communications technologies and mass cultural forms. As it is here construed, virtuality can be realized through

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sensational media representations and also by the evocative force of the written word in the "capacity for objects in language to become other than what—or who—they are" (2). For Biers, the virtual does not denote the fake or the artificial, but is closer to its Aristotelian definition hinged on the idea of virtuality as a potentiality not yet actualized. Above all, though, this study is concerned with the virtual as a type of experience, one distinct from lived or empirical experience and that "both belongs to the self and extends beyond, occupying a liminal position at the fringes of self and world" (3).

Biers sees this notion of virtual experience as stimulated by immersive modes of mass media and purposefully adopted by the authors she examines, who all utilized language's own virtualizing capability to propose an alternative to the pervasive presence of media spectacle. Arguing that these writers "turned to the virtual experience of *language* in order to carve out a value for the literary, both with and against the rise of mass entertainments and the new technologies that made them possible" (3), Biers suggests the knotty and at times contentious relationship between textual culture and popular culture and between literary practice and media technology. In doing so, *Virtual Modernism* is a significant contribution to a recent line of inquiry on this topic—most prominently explored in Nancy Bentley's *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870–1920*—which avoids reducing literary culture's view of mass media to the wholly dismissive, and instead reads a more complex interaction of contested and competing publics.

Exemplifying the mass media turn within modernist studies, *Virtual Modernism* resists narrow and restrictive taxonomies of literary-historical periods and cogently advances an expanded modernist framework. Set in a pre-World War I context, the book balances an interest in writers' "'modernist' formal experimentation, inspired by the deforming and subject-defying energies of mass culture" with their close ties to "realist and naturalist convictions about the representational power of language, the importance of progress, the viability of the public sphere, and the reality of common experience" (7). Biers's study thus does not simply place turn-of-the-century literary realism and naturalism—as well as social reform and progressivism—within a prehistory of modernism, but as crucial to its formal articulation.

Among this volume's other virtues is its use of vitalist and pragmatist philosophy—primarily the work of Henri Bergson and William James—to illuminate its theoretical claims about the virtual as a unique form of experience beyond the actual or the ideal. In affirming the connection between pragmatism and virtuality and in highlighting the impact of the vitalist movement at this transitional moment in media history, Biers reframes the tension between a literary public and a mass public as a struggle over the nature of experience. More specifically, the book stresses how virtual experience is conveyed in literary language through "the experience of language's *potential* to refer" (4). As Biers avows, "only language is able to offer both direct experience *of* the virtual . . . and knowledge *about* it" (14). In delineating what she terms the "early twentieth-century American 'virtual

turn,'" Biers demonstrates how the writers surveyed rely on "the virtualizing powers of language in response to the troubling problems posed by a decentered subjectivity in the context of mass culture and new media technologies" (17). Although the introduction's overview of vitalism and pragmatism may at times be difficult to follow for readers unfamiliar with these philosophical schools, the next five chapters provide clarifying case studies of American writers who participated in early mass culture: Stephen Crane, Henry James, James Weldon Johnson, Djuna Barnes, and Gertrude Stein. These individual studies lucidly elaborate on different aspects of virtuality and their expression within these authors' texts and in an array of popular media.

The first chapter concentrates on Stephen Crane's engagement with the wartime news spectacles of the 1890s that Biers reads as virtual modes of experience themselves, focusing on his writing's complicated relationship with an "emerging mass public sphere, in thrall to spectacularized war" (37). This is particularly apparent in the news media's appeal to mass feeling, where rational judgment is trumped by a dangerously immersive theatricality. In this way, the chapter illustrates what Biers describes as the opposition between "the virtual self of the American public sphere, prophetically remade in the service of a more just society, and the virtual self solicited by the war news spectacles" (45). Along with a consideration of Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), famously composed without its author having had direct experience of battle, this chapter assesses the comparatively overlooked fiction that followed Crane's dispatches from the Greco-Turkish War. In discussing Crane's story "Death and the Child" (1898) and his novel *Active Service* (1899)—both centering on the figure of the war correspondent—Biers underscores his simultaneous involvement in and critique of mass media, as well as the manner in which his texts foreground the sensational allure of yellow journalism by "invoking a material encounter between media and mind as a way to explain the public's enthusiasm for war" (59). Alluding to the virtual experiences of war generated by the yellow press, Biers intriguingly speculates about the influence of such dramatic media coverage upon the relation between reason and feeling in William James's pragmatist thought. Finally, in reading Crane's "The Open Boat" (1897) as a self-conscious reimagining of the real-life shipwreck on which it was based—and of his journalistic rendering of the incident published several months earlier—Biers closes the chapter with a nuanced and convincing interpretation of a tale whose protagonist is another correspondent figure, yet one that suggests "what the writer's role might be in overcoming the human 'blindness' inherent in the fact of embodied cognition" (68).

Chapter Two investigates the virtualizing potential of textual and visual forms alike as Biers explores Henry James's interest in pictorialism through his appraisal of George du Maurier's immensely successful novel *Trilby* (1894) and its assorted iterations and adaptations across various media. While James's friendship with du Maurier is noted, Biers is less concerned with biographical detail, instead positing how James's celebrated late style embraces certain pictorialist practices evident in *Trilby* with "the hope that the experience of a distinctively

linguistic potentiality or citationality might help to rescue the literary itself as a site for the cultivation of reason" (74). It is this intermedial "citable quality" of the novel — especially the illustrations and song lyrics interspersed throughout the text — that fueled the *Trilby* "mania" at the turn of the century and what Biers calls the "scenic principle" and the "grammar of latency" of James's late phase (72–73). After a thorough account of the history of *Trilby* and du Maurier's visual and literary aesthetic, Biers discusses James's understanding of pictorialism and his ambivalence toward Trilby-mania, the novel itself, and its subsequent commodification and proliferation in the marketplace, thus said to evoke "two *Trilby*s, the virtual and the actual" (105). Relating pictorialism's indefinite temporality and virtualizing attributes to the syntactical structure of the late Jamesian sentence, Biers persuasively shows how James appropriates mass pictorialist devices in a paradoxical attempt to reclaim authorial vision from the commercial public sphere.

Virtuality is linked to narrative voice in the third chapter, on James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), where this voice's liminality (situated as it is between racial and epistemological boundaries) is associated with the techniques of ragtime performance and aesthetics. Starting with a synopsis of the controversy around ragtime among the era's traditional music establishment, Biers connects the Ex-Colored Man's narrative to these culture wars as well as to issues of sound reproduction. In contending that Johnson "derives his representational strategy from the 'phonographic' art of ragtime itself" (111), Biers's reading of the *Autobiography* encompasses not merely its racial or visual logic, but also the sonic aspect of this pivotal work of black modernism. The legacies of captivity and bondage, Biers asserts, are themselves manifested in the narrator's musical performances, in which "America's history of slavery and miscegenation can be heard only as an inarticulate sound" (134), whereas Johnson's ambiguous narrative voice is said to be "inspired by the virtuality of black artistic practices in the age of mechanical reproduction" (136). Arguing that its narrator assumes "the authority of the 'real' much like a phonograph," Biers comes to suggest that in the *Autobiography*, Johnson is "archiving black performances in a way that preserves their energy and originality" while still allowing for a generic instability that calls attention to itself "like the crackle and hiss of a phonograph record" (137–138). This concern with the sonic and its interaction with the visual and the virtual, then, is yet another notable contribution this volume makes to intermedial studies of modernist writing.

The book's fourth chapter, its strongest and most compelling, is centered on the early journalism of Djuna Barnes, tapping into the virtual by way of her work's allegorical constructions and its dialectical stance in relation to social reform and consumer culture. This emphasis on Barnes's generally neglected newspaper and magazine articles of the 1910s — rather than on more well-known texts, such as her radical novel *Nightwood* (1936) — effectively opens up this formative phase of her career while considering its affinities with her later major writings. In the sketches for periodicals like the *New York World* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* that

Biers excavates here, Barnes touches upon topics as varied as urban tourism and leisure, street life and sideshow entertainment, and the questionable methods of New York City's police and fire departments. In examining her journalism, Biers claims that Barnes's noted "neobaroque" style had emerged well before her time in Paris during the interwar years and "was in fact forged in response to the shifting episteme between reform and entertainment, progressivism and consumer culture, that characterized pre-World War I New York" (141). Detailing Barnes's use of "baroque allegory," Biers explains how her social problem journalism enabled her "to potentialize or virtualize the subjects of her articles, capturing their, and thereby her own, capacity to become something entirely—even obscenely—other" (142), revealing the critical if surprising importance of the reform era to this experimental modernist. Analyzing her journalism's stylistic flourishes and motives, Biers reflects on Barnes's performative sense (derivative of commercial culture) and her conflicted view of nineteenth-century beliefs of social good. The tension between reform and amusement in Barnes's sketches had involved her quite explicitly, since she maintained "a highly paradoxical position as a female reporter, charged as she was with investigating the city and its denizens while also putting on a highly entertaining show," her own role tending to "mix titillation and gender subversion" (169). By spotlighting her position as author, using unexpected rhetorical tropes, and deploying "the potentiality of language," Barnes's articles hold on to the opposing narratives offered by residual ideals of social justice and a bourgeoning mass culture, so that, Biers concludes, Barnes's "baroque staging of New York life suspends her *readers* in between the vanishing hope for social salvation and the unmistakable glare of the publicity era to come" (172).

Media exposure in the mass public sphere is the focal point of Biers's final chapter, which somewhat jarringly jumps forward to the 1930s and delves into Gertrude Stein's widely publicized American tour in the wake of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Stein's celebrity and relationship to the marketplace have been thoroughly documented in some recent studies—such as Karen Leick's *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* and Jonathan Goldman's *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity*—and so, at first glance this chapter seems less essential than those that preceded it. Yet Biers takes up this issue with fresh readings of the popular press's coverage of Stein's lectures and her newspaper writing from these years. Moreover, in respect to the press's obsession with Stein's aesthetic obscurity, Biers presents the dispute around Stein's curious communications as "a popular and public version of what had become a ubiquitous topic in philosophy and social thought during the 1920s and 1930s" (181–182), citing the ideas of progressive philosopher John Dewey and media critic Walter Lippmann. Stein similarly interrogates communicative methods with an acute awareness of the growing culture industry, as her work of this time aims to have her audience pay attention to language "in such a way that they can recognize what underlies or allows for linguistic habits, and also for the coercive habits of thought she sees being fostered by mass consumer society" (190). As Biers describes it, Stein

views the mechanisms of mass media as forming a virtual public sphere driven by emotion and charisma. Her lectures, press interviews, and occasional writing on her own celebrity therefore self-reflexively gesture to media practices and communicative systems, with Stein putting in debate "the very terms on which she is herself consumed by her public" (197).

In drawing out the significance of the virtual for these writers and illustrating what constitutes virtuality in their work, Biers analyzes multiple zones of contact among literary and linguistic strategies, new media technologies, and their respective forms of representation. If Biers's focus on the contested nexus of literary and mass culture seems often to privilege a vision of mass media as a threat or an emblem of commercial manipulation, her insightful readings ultimately temper this anxiety with the sense of potentiality or possibility posed by the virtual. Additionally, *Virtual Modernism* greatly benefits from its pluralistic intermedial approach, as it impressively addresses a broad range of media networks spanning popular print media and visual and aural modes.

While this turn to the virtual may appear to mirror certain contemporary trends and concerns, Biers cautions against constructing sweeping analogies "between the multimedia culture of pre-World War I America and the present moment" which might confuse the virtual, as it was then theorized, with the digital. Instead, the book is rigorous in concentrating on literary language's connection to virtuality and, with a nod to Walter Benjamin, its usefulness in "unleashing the 'hidden index' of the past" (32). Skillfully sketching out a genealogy of the early encounters of modernist writing with mass media and communications technologies, Katherine Biers's *Virtual Modernism* is a valuable contribution to both American literary criticism and media studies. This richly interdisciplinary work should be of considerable interest to scholars of modernism, media, and popular culture, and promises to inspire future research on the intersections of these fields.

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