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Review

The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s edited by Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco

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Abstract

A review of Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco's edited volume *The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s*, published in 2011 by the University of Michigan Press.

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Review

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There have been many books and discussions centered on modern femininity in the field of literature. In the course of the 1990s, the "New Woman" began to be presented as an important object of analysis in various fields of studies from literary criticism and history to cultural and feminist studies and political science. In these studies, the New Woman has been dealt with as a mode of address, through which modernity and modernism can be rethought from the different perspectives of gender and sexuality. Such

explorations are surely correct to call attention to the importance of other aspects of modernity, entailing provoking questions about the body, sexuality, and representation in conjunction with the formations of massive material culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet because of this, their emphasis easily falls on a sort of a Western-centered Modern, tending to remove different pictures taken from different geographies across the world.

In this context, a recently published volume of essays on the New Woman, *The New Woman International*, is especially interesting and meaningful. Its essays derive from a symposium held at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2007 and were collected into a rather inclusive volume on the international dimension of New Womanhood. The essays in this book thus precede the contemporary scholarly interests in globalism, building on and responding to the New Woman as a gendered paradigm that was mass-targeted and disseminated in the process of late-nineteenth globalization. In other words, the most remarkable challenge of this book comes from its attempt to broaden the scope in which modern femininity has been discussed. Its ambition is to illuminate the transnational dimension of New Womanhood, which has received only limited attention in the previous scholarship. Its expansive angle then reaches various cases of Euro-America, India, East Asia, South America and other countries, just as the "New Woman" herself developed as a global and international phenomenon. Such a wider perspective is proper and timely, especially when considering the contested idea of globalism and modernization that has been challenged by critical theories and postcolonial discourses.¹

This approach seems similar to that of an anthology published in 2008, entitled *The Modern Girl Around the World*, which calls attention to the "Modern Girl" as heuristic device and method of connective comparison.² And yet the essays of *The New Woman International* merits consideration both as whole and separately, given their broader attentions to multiple ways of displaying New Womanhood, rather than particular traits that were used to define

¹ For the contested notion of modernity and its colonial root, see Timothy Mitchell, "The State of Modernity," *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1-34; Depesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000); Tani E. Barlow, ed., *Formations of Colonial Modernity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); and Thomas Lamarre, "Introduction: Impact of Modernities." *Traces 3: A Multilingual Series of Cultural Theory and Translation*, ed. Thomas LaMarre and Kang Nae-hui (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994), 1-35.

² Tani E. Barlow, ed., *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

Modern Girl – bobbed hair, painted lips, provocative clothing, elongated body, etc.³ With larger concerns about modern femininity, the essays anticipate basic questions about the politics of gendered identity in relation to the visual economy of modernity, in which the New Woman appeared, was represented, and circulated. The emphasis on the visual is then not only to introduce the overarching principles that incorporate different practices in different locales, but concurrently to pose critical questions of where and how New Womanhood was formulated, performed, and embodied.

While seeking to track modern femininity across the world, *The New Woman International* thus draws upon its specific aspects of femininity that inhabit the visual. As the editors clearly point out, the New Woman is an inherently visual phenomenon, most deeply rooted in, and debated through, images and representations.⁴ The questions of identity are then addressed via questions of vision and media, especially photography and film, which operated as catalysis in the process of self-determination, mass production, and global reproduction of New Womanhood. For example, Melody Davis attempts to associate the ambiguous identities of the American New Woman with the parallax view of stereoscope, both of which embody oscillation between different genders and fields of vision. Gianna Carotenuto points out that the New Woman based on Victorian virtues co-opted, depended on, and disseminated in colonial India the visual trope of Harem photography rather than excluding it. At the same time, colonial imaginary was circulated in a reverse way, as Brett M. Van Hosen indicates, in European metropolises like Germany, since its exotic icons could support and supplement a still fragile identity of the Weimar New Woman.

On the other hand, other essays suggest that film-based technologies were not only the main locus wherein New Woman figures were represented, but also spaces where those figures could perform themselves, prominently featuring their freedom, mobility, and artistic sensibility. Elizabeth Otto, among others, traces the artistic trajectories of Marianne Brandt, a Bauhaus female artist, in conjunction with the shifting trajectories of her gender identities. In the same vein, Clare Rogan explores in depth how Germaine Krull's photographs of lesbian scenes set up a table upon which to play with different gazes, sexualities, and powers. By highlighting the active visual engagement of the New Woman, this book invites us to the yet uncharted territory of "feminine modernism," shaped and reshaped as a parallel to the emergence of new visual technologies, democracy, and urban culture.⁵ Ultimately, *The New Woman International* attempts to move beyond the general historiography of modernism that has tended to place the male viewer and creator at the center of culture.

Certainly, the somehow universal claims – the global and the visual – introduce to us multiple histories from multiple geographies, especially when they come into local specificity. Interestingly enough, the cosmopolitan vision embedded in New Womanhood did not necessarily result in homogeneous practices, just as modern global capitalism could not level different cultural and political forces behind the different formations of modernity. Its radical diversity, conversely, led to the relationship of the New Woman to other social issues, such as class and race, nationalism and colonialism, and war and Fascism. By putting the local in dialogue with the global, the essays of *The New Woman International* address the diverse conditions and multiple interactions of images and ideas of the New Woman.

³ Elizabeth Otto and Vanessa Rocco, eds. *The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 2011), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Despite the volume's contributions, what is not entirely clear to me is how such a dialogue works out in the critique of absolute and one-directional Modernity. Surely this anthology gives us an expansive picture of modern femininity, but it does not radicalize the question of the synchronicity or contemporaneity of New Womanhood.⁶ How does the book, as a whole, reveal the linkage between the coincidental developments of female images and representations in different geographies? What vision and perspective does this book provide regarding the relationship between empires and peripheries? For example, how can we consider the almost simultaneous appearance of the American New Woman and Japanese Geisha in American stereoscopic views? What are the parameters of comparing and contrasting the radical differences in visuality that exist in photographs taken in colonial India and colonial Korea? Why were such visual differences produced, despite the common ideas, figurations, and backdrops of New Womanhood they shared?

While each essay conveys rich sources and stories that urge us to think of diversity, still unclear to me is what perspective this book, as a whole project, suggests that we take in order to readdress the problem of modernity through the very notion of multiplicity. Was New Womanhood a mutual formation from heterogeneous geographies? What is at stake in the comparisonism and collectivism? Miriam Silverberg, in her recent work published in *The Modern Girl around the World*, attempts to expand the discursive boundary of the Modern Girl, by looking closely at the "girls" outside the metropole – daughters of the colonizers and the colonized, collaborators and adventurers. This is not to add the issue of periphery as an appendix to the main narrative of modernity, but to bring up the very problem of the concept of "global" underlying the emergence of the Modern Girl, which she calls "modern fantasies of universality" prevalent in early phases of globalization. Silverberg points out that the analogy between Japanese and European girls that appeared in Japanese ads does not merely illustrate the cosmopolitan nature of the Modern Girl, but more importantly shows how ideologies of universalism could be quickly displaced by female references to racial phantoms – that is, one extreme could follow the other.⁷ For Silverberg, then, the Modern Girl as a globalized phenomenon is not a given history, but a heuristic device, through which one complicates the abstracted norms of modernization and racialization, which prioritize the West as an origin as well as a model of Modernity.

Following from Silverberg's discussion, it seems to me that the diversification of modern femininity would only take on theoretical force, if it is posed as a challenge to specific modalities of unification, and particularly to histories of modernity as geopolitical as well as gendered paradigms. In other words, the goal of multiplicity would be to excavate the contingency of the emergence of a modern form of absolutism, which would also make it possible to imagine other outcomes, other political possibilities, than what we call the Modern. The *New Woman International* provides us a standpoint from which we can contemplate modern femininity from a panoramic perspective, and I hope this expansive vision will serve as a means of reflecting the larger capitalist world system and the geopolitically charged power that staged and was staged by Modernity.

⁶ Conversely, we may want to come to mind here Johannes Fabian's critique of modernity and its structure of "temporal othering." He points out that it is the very habit of the modern that projects its others into the past. Within this temporal schema, synchronicity or contemporaneity is a mere fantasy of modernity itself, unless we begin with the coevalness of the other. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁷ See Miriam Silverberg, "After the Grand Tour: The Modern Girl, the New Woman, and the Colonial Maiden," *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, Alys Eve Weinbaum et al., eds. (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2008), 360.



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