

Carol Shloss. *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer, 1840-1940*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. \$24.95. 308pp.

Carol Shloss has written a series of case studies of seven authors—Hawthorne, James, Dreiser, Dos Passos, Agee, Steinbeck, and Mailer—emphasizing throughout their complex relations to photography. To a certain extent she does emphasize direct influence, for example stressing Dreiser's early attraction to Stieglitz's images of the city and his later rejection of pictorialism in *The Genius*, or the impact of Soviet cinema on Dos Passos in devising a composition strategy for *USA*. But Shloss is more interested in comparing photography and writing as two forms of subjectivity, two ways of approaching the world which have problematics that illuminate each other. Artist-photographer collaborations are thus particularly important, and she devotes a full chapter to Agee and Walker Evans' creation of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and some space to Alvin Landon Coburn's work on the photographic frontispieces for the New York edition of James's novels. Yet her book is not merely about the interrelations of two art forms; it is a meditation on their uses and abuses in depicting the inarticulate and the poor, from James's *The Princess Casamassima* to Mailer's foot soldiers in *The Naked and the Dead*, from Jacob Riis's famous New York slum images to Dorothea Lange's depiction of the Okie migration out of the Dust Bowl to California.

Throughout Shloss is concerned with "the damage a culture's unequal distribution of visibility can promote" (p. 267), with the problems faced by the artist who wishes to make visible the lower class "other," and with the dangers of exploiting or degrading the subject in the process. Shloss emphatically prefers artists with an open and egalitarian approach to their subject, and her methodology develops out of the writings of Michel Foucault and John Berger on forms of social domination. In each chapter she passes judgement. She rejects Stieglitz's aestheticization of the poor in favor of Jacob Riis's imagery. Yet she rightly locates an important split in Riis's work, between those images that "imply some degree of structural equality between the photographer and his subjects" and others that were virtual acts of aggression, images "that tell us, through stunned or defiant gazes, that Riis's presence in the midst of his subjects created difficulty and evoked resistance" (p.126). Among the writers Steinbeck comes off badly for assuming an alias and surreptitiously gathering material for *The Grapes of Wrath*, while Mailer's strength is his ability to see the Second World War both in the trenches as a combat photographer would, and in the abstract images of air reconnaissance seen only by the generals. Mailer himself served first as a foot soldier and later as a member of a photographic interpretation unit, and Shloss traces how

these experiences shaped the structure of *The Naked and the Dead*, where Cummings relies upon air photographs to plan the campaign, while Hearn criticizes him for knowing nothing of the average soldier's experience. "Through Hearn, he brings together questions about 'seeing' and militarism; and because Mailer conflates the American military with the society that sponsors it, Hearn's dilemma joins together the more general issues of observation, aggression, and power in American culture at large" (p. 245). The strength of Shloss's book is her return to such central issues, knitting together the seven case studies and framing them with a set of fundamental issues. She concludes: "What is mirrored by photography and by the writers who have been influenced by it is ... American culture's tendency to organize itself hierarchically and to cloak interested motives in the language of equity while the true structure of privilege remains unnamed" (p. 267).

Shloss does not explain why she selected these seven authors rather than others such as Wright Morris or Gertrude Stein, a remarkable omission since these writers are all male and all firmly within the usual canon. Accepting the list as given, however, the volume's faults stem from her greater familiarity with literature than with photography. There is little here about how the evolving technology of the darkroom and camera transformed the possibilities of representation, and Shloss ignores issues raised by color photography, restricting discussion to black and white prints. Nor does she analyze many of the photographs she has reproduced in any detail. She appears more comfortable discussing the writings of photographers than their images, and she has not taken pains to examine original prints or publications. For example, she appears unaware that the first edition of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* did not contain his photographs, which were redrawn and presented as engravings which considerably simplified and softened the original images. These drawings, like Reginald Marsh's many illustrations for *USA* (which she does not mention) must be included in any analysis of the representation of "the other." Curiously, she makes only a single passing reference to the work of Alan Trachtenberg, the best known American Studies scholar working on photography, and she does not mention F. Richard Thomas's important book, *Literary Admirers of Alfred Stieglitz*,¹ which is devoted to parallels between the techniques of photography and writing in Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Sherwood Anderson, and Hart Crane. Yet admitting these limitations, *In Visible Light* indisputably is an important re-visioning of seven American authors.

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1 (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1983)