

Mark Whalan. *American Culture in the 1910s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. 234pp.

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Every author contributing a volume to the Edinburgh University Press series “Twentieth-Century American Culture” has probably addressed at least two qualms: how legitimate is it to engage with history in what have been jokily called “decaditis”? And secondly, how does one write a cultural history of a decade convincingly sifting the cultural from the institutional formations? While any ten-year fragment of a relatively recent history may not possess the internal coherence that makes it opportunely self-contained, or may be, on the contrary, branded by some hypertrophic occurrence that has obscured the rest of its cultural legacy, the 1910s offer both challenges at a peculiarly high degree of complexity. Professor Mark Whalan, in fact, faced the admittedly difficult task of sharpening the cultural profile of a decade indelibly marked by the conspicuous presence of a world war and inevitably upstaged, in retrospective, by the catalyzing vividness of the “roaring twenties.”

Since the impact of a war which “changed American culture enormously” (2) is undisputable, one strategy to balance the period’s portrait resides in highlighting the factors whose cruciality was evident before war-time hostilities – Progressive politics, labour unrest, the imperial adventure, modernist aesthetics, popular entertainment, just to name a few. As to producing a “corrective to seeing the 1920s as a decade of dramatic transformation” (4), Whalan puts himself in the good company of cultural historians such as Warren Susman, Jackson T. Lears and Kathy Peiss, whose work has presented the 1910s as the passage towards a consumerist economy that sparked off deep shifts only accelerated in the next decade. On his part, Whalan finds his defining narrative in pointing at

how the institutional organisation of culture in wartime consolidated trends in the 1910s towards the nationalisation of culture and the homogenisation of tastes, and also [at] how it took the Progressive

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vision of culture ... in the direction of propaganda...in a way few could have foreseen. (34)

Interweaving three cultural forces which he identifies in Progressivism, the market, and modernism, Whalan precedes the thematic chapters with a sweeping introduction where these concepts are outlined next to treatments of both the Women's Movement and Socialism. The five chapters that follow, each punctuated by three case studies, are organized around four disciplinary clusters and capped with an exploration of how the pressure of the war either exacerbated or curtailed the different visions expressed in the cultural forms the book analyses. Chapter 1 "Film and Vaudeville" examines the "trustification" of early cinema and vaudeville through the contradictions of an entertainment industry that relies on objectionable forms of racial representation and the "reactionary pull of sentimentality" (61) while producing nonetheless revolutionary artistic developments. Chapter 2 "Visual Art and Photography" opens with the New York Armory Show and the transatlantic visual avant-garde; it then proceeds to focus on photography from the early phase of modernist experimentation throughout some commercial and ethnographic developments. Moving the discussion on modernist aesthetics into the field of literature, Chapter 3 "Fiction and Poetry" features numerous high modernist classics – Pound's *Cantos*, Eliot's *Prufrock* and Stein's *Tender Buttons* – but also accounts for works which adhered to more established formal conventions such as naturalism, local colour, rural fiction, ethnic literature and popular novels. Chapter 4 "Performance and Music" investigates middle-class negotiations with popular entertainment in the evolution of modern dance, in the thriving of little experimental theatres alongside Broadway's corporate-like dominance, and in the music industry. The chapter closes with a fascinating excursus on the early soundscapes of blues and jazz. The final chapter accounts for the impact that World War One had in radicalizing a nationalist understanding of Americanness and, conversely, in extinguishing "the remarkable reformist energies that connected up socialism, feminism, modernism" (179).

Whalan's book traces an elegant itinerary through a decade whose legacy has resonated in different occasions throughout the century, and whose radical components have nourished a certain nostalgia which periodically seem to make Americans long for the road not taken. Although I would have personally appreciated Whalan's fine narrative to linger longer and deeper on what has often been considered

one of the high-water mark of female influence on public life – maybe with a case study on the nineteenth amendment, or on the New York shirtwaist strike of 1910 – the selection offered is diverse and exhaustive, solidly set in a persuasive framework. Given the growing interest that university curricula have in cultural studies, this book is certainly fitted to become a valuable instrument for B.A. and M.A. instructors as well as a satisfying reference guide to an intriguingly layered period of American history