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**FILTHY MATERIAL:
MODERNISM AND THE MEDIA OF OBSCENITY
BY CHRIS FORSTER**

Reviewed by Matthew Pilkington, University of Tennessee

On the surface, Chris Forster's *Filthy Material* (2019)¹ enters the well-trod landscape of literary obscenity and retreads familiar arguments found in the pioneering works of scholars from Celia Marshik and Adam Parkes to Rachel Potter and Paul K. Saint-Amour. However, *Filthy Material* differentiates itself from its forebears by viewing the evolution of literary modernism through the intersection of obscenity censorship and the study of media ecology featured prominently in the works of Friedrich Kittler and Marshall McLuhan.

Forster is deeply invested in how the pervasive culture of obscenity censorship shaped literary modernism, and his work covers the staple texts of this discourse: Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). Forster also brings fresh discussion to works by Wyndham Lewis, Walter Sickert, Norah James, and T. S. Eliot. He argues that properly understanding the complicated history of modernist obscenity means acknowledging the prominent role of "the media-technological landscape" on the development of literary modernism since "obscenity is foremost a media crime" (3–4). The scope of *Filthy Material* is extensive, with each chapter providing valuable insights on the shifting media ecology of twentieth-century literary modernism.

Chapter I—"Modernism and the Media History of Obscenity"—is a valuable survey of the field of media ecology and the evolution of how "literature was read, valued, or judged obscene" (15). Forster argues that new technological developments in printing and distribution create the conditions by which "the *publicity* of reading itself" (17, emphasis in original) shift and force a reevaluation of the public's relationship to literature and obscenity. These examples are illustrative of a larger cultural shift in literary modernism in which our understanding of modernist obscenity is inextricably tied to changes in media (38).

Chapter Two—"The Pornometric Gospel: Wyndham Lewis, Walter Sickert, and the Collapse of the Ideology of the Nude"—charts a different evolution of artistic obscenity by looking at the shifting perspective of the academic nude as seen in Walter Sickert's Camden Town nudes and Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr*

(1918). By tracing the history of the female nude through to the beginning of the twentieth century, Forster highlights the role of mass reproduction on diminishing the “ideology of the nude” (43) and suggests that as access to the female nude became more commonplace, artists like Sickert and Lewis—who would have had extensive education in the study of the female nude—began to reevaluate its status as a privileged art object.

For Sickert, this demystification is achieved by removing the female nude from its mythological and allegorical context by encouraging voyeuristic engagement with the nude placed in “a modern, realistic setting” (46). Whereas Lewis’s rejection of the academic nude is mediated through his novel *Tarr* and the aesthetic values of the character Kriesler and his rape of Bertha. In the end, Forster argues that Lewis’s “rejection of the nude is a rejection of an entire ideology of aesthetic value that locates the value of art in the idealization of life and the sublimation of sexuality” (52). Forster posits that Sickert and Lewis’s devaluations of the academic nude were a direct result of pornographic representation made commonplace in a shifting media-technological landscape that necessitated their intervention.

Chapter Three—“Skirmishing with Jolly Roger: D.H. Lawrence, Obscenity, and Book Piracy”—offers a refreshing look at the publication history of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, not through the obscenity of the work itself, but through Lawrence’s own critiques of pornography and his fraught relationship with piracy and the art of copying. Forster highlights the contrast between Lawrence’s response to the piracy of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and Joyce’s condemnation of pirated editions of *Ulysses*. Whereas Joyce’s stance against piracy came largely from questions of authorship and property, the emphasis on Lawrence is more concerned with “trying to perfect a condemnation of obscenity” (72) that would emphasize questions of “circulation and production” (79). Forster argues that as print culture became more accessible, the emergence of low-quality, mass-produced pirate editions created the conditions for Lawrence’s anger at the piracy of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. His displeasure was less a concern over the rights to his intellectual property than a response to the degradation of the novel’s artistic legitimacy.

Chapter Four—“Very Serious Books: The Circulation and Censorship of *The Well of Loneliness* and *Sleeveless Errand*”—charts the suppression of Norah James’s *Sleeveless Errand* (1929) by drawing a direct connection to action taken against Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) several years earlier. In the case of *The Well*, Forster illuminates the conceived correlation between price and the perception of obscenity. Selling Hall’s novel at a higher price—one typically reserved for academic texts—led to “pretensions to seriousness and social importance” that amplified the threat already presented by its female authorship and subject matter (116). In highlighting how the suppression of *The Well* served as a test case for the corrupting influence of

these kinds of text, Forster makes it clear that Norah James faced opposition for the “imagined effect that publishing a novel about a class of women who use . . . verbal obscenities would have on the biopolitical health of postwar England” (105).

Chapter Five—“Obscenity and the Voice: Eliot’s Bawdry”—contrasts starkly with the previous chapter by examining how private circulation was used to bypass traditional checks against modernist obscenity and by exploring the connection between modernist obscenity and homosocial networks. Forster’s inclusion of Eliot is a unique addition in works on obscene modernism, as Eliot largely avoided suppression of his work. The subject of Forster’s discussion—Eliot’s unpublished poem “King Bolo and His Great Black Queen”—circulated “outside circuits of print and acceptable discourse” (127) and instead occurred through word of mouth and private letters passed within an exclusively male circle of readers. Forster suggests that the private circulation of Eliot’s obscene “King Bolo” poem harkens back to a lost era of homosocial unity and this private circulation—contrasted with the publicity of the music hall or bawdy folk song—makes the reader keenly aware that “modern disintegration is at the center of [Eliot’s] work” (143).

Chapter Six—“Materializing *Ulysses*: Obscenity and the Work of Print in the Age of Film”—swerves slightly from the preceding studies, which largely emphasize an outside-in approach to how media technologies influence and shape literary modernism, by focusing on *Ulysses*’s “foregrounding of its own printedness” (154) in a move that emphasizes the role of form and style on the creation of obscene art. Forster argues that the presence of material censorship—from asterisks or ellipses in print to pixelization or bleeps in audiovisual media—emphasizes a work’s own materiality while serving as valuable protest against censorship.

This deliberate emphasis on preserving these obfuscating errors associated with typesetting and literature’s materiality—contrasted with the bald approach to obscene content—meant that “*Ulysses* posed such a challenge that reviewers often struggled to find some framework by which to understand the ‘novel’” (173), as it eschewed the expectation of how the obscene novel conceals or exposes. Forster then shifts his focus to the 1967 film adaptation of *Ulysses* to emphasize the role of transmission on the perception of obscenity. By 1967, *Ulysses* had long been deemed “not obscene” and was widely circulated, but the film faced significant censorship for the use of language that appeared nearly verbatim in the original novel. Forster’s argument here is that as the age of obscenity in print was coming to an end, the remediation of print to film meant that obscenity would be reassessed as changes in medium led to new modes of circulation.

Forster closes with a look at the waning years of print censorship through the shifting focus of two small publishers of obscene literature: The Obelisk

and Olympia Presses. Operating out of Paris, these presses were instrumental in the publication of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) because they could serve as "a way station between utter suppression and complete liberalization" (191), but Forster makes clear that these presses were anomalies whose service came during a period of major upheaval in the way that books were policed. In the same year that *Lolita* was published in England, the Obscene Publications Act would see significant reform, and what deemed a book worthy of suppression was much harder to quantify. Forster argues that these changes were illustrative of a larger shift in media ecology that is still visible today in how we think about everything from film and TV to violence in video games (192).

Where *Filthy Material* triumphs is in the timelessness of its messaging. Artists creating at the turn of the twentieth century faced very different challenges from their modern counterparts. However, by examining the struggles of literary modernism and the evolutions of art that were driven by rapid reinventions of media technology, we can learn a great deal about how to prepare for the arrival of unforeseen yet inevitable changes to the media ecological landscape.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Chris Forster, *Filthy Material: Modernism and the Media of Obscenity* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 216 pages.