

Evening News: Optics, Astronomy, and Journalism in Early Modern Europe.

Eileen Reeves.

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Evening News considers the entanglement of optics, astronomy, and journalism in the first half of the seventeenth century. Not only the telescope, but also the serial newsheet and newsletter emerged and spread at this time, and both technologies made distant regions newly visible. The English diplomat Henry Wotton called the *Starry Messenger* “the strangest piece of news . . . ever received from any part of the world” (210), and the many public allusions linking optics and astronomy to journalism — and, by extension, to politics — continually invoked Galileo himself, if only as a “spectral presence” (109). In this erudite and wide-ranging book, Reeves probes these allusions by examining the shifting meaning of optical and astronomical metaphors as applied to news, and to knowledge claims more generally.

Reeves covers a vast range of primary sources, and her text is populated by an impressive cast of characters. Among them are Johannes Kepler, one of the first to formally respond to Galileo’s news, and John Donne and Ben Jonson, whose literary works invoked the conflation of celestial and terrestrial news on which Kepler relied. We likewise meet the sixteen-year-old René Descartes, who wrote a “Sonnet on the death of the King Henry the Great, and on the discovery of certain new Planets or Stars wandering about Jupiter, made that very same Year by Galileo Galilei” (60), and Traiano Boccalini, the satirist whose *News from Parnasus* bolstered his political pronouncements with telescopic references. Midway through the text, Reeves highlights a transfer of interest from the telescope, now old news, to the camera obscura, and here we encounter Henry Wotton, who viewed the camera obscura as a metaphor for the ideal transmission of foreign news, and an older Descartes and Christian Huygens, both of whom denied the seamless correspondence between an event and its transcription that Wotton’s metaphor suggested.

A central focus of Reeves’s story is the manner in which optical and astronomical metaphors represented a range of epistemic values. Telescopes and camera obscura both allowed for a new kind of observation, yet their purposes and their results were not always consistent. Invocations of these instruments thus emphasized perspective, outlook, and point of view, yet to vastly different effect. Initially, both the telescope and the camera obscura were invoked to emphasize perspicacity and reasoned analysis. The camera obscura, in particular, seemed to offer the prospect not only of objectivity, but of precision and almost effortless mastery; one could view the world, as Kepler claimed, “less as a painter than as a mathematician” (156), and in so doing capture it with ease on the neutral ground of the darkroom canvas. Yet even here, Reeves’s actors were aware of a latent tension between the seeming naturalness and objectivity of their product and the artificiality, and even theatricality, of their exercise. Descartes would embrace this tension by insisting on the impossibility of perfect mimesis, and likening sensory impressions rather to engravings, which are “the most successful, and best suggest an object, when they resemble it less” (191–92). Illusion and phantasm, for Huygens, were

similarly part and parcel of optical instruments; direct and faithful transcription had become an ever-elusive dream.

Reeves links this story to the political and confessional conflict that was about to overtake Europe, and to the “brooding watchfulness so prevalent on the eve of the Thirty Years’ War” (231). When confessional and political disputes threatened, true and useful knowledge seemed indispensable. Hence Boccalini linked the search for *arcana imperii* to optical pursuits; the telescope came to represent a particular kind of political acumen, and natural knowledge was heralded as a precondition for proper political judgment. Yet as the confessional conflict seemed ever more dire, “the ideal of an objective machine for recording neutral data about either the natural or the political world seemed . . . at once the most useful and the most suspect of notions” (135). Scheiner’s *Oculus* thus linked optical and confessional issues by undercutting the linkage between vision and reason; the camera obscura, in the end, only highlighted “the sharp division between the blindness of heresy and the insight of religious orthodoxy” (193). Evening news might obscure as much as it illuminated, and newslessness, rather than news, might become the true desideratum.

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