The expansive field of trans media studies is where one can find some of today’s most salient scholarship on visuality’s epistemological, technological, and embodied politics and aesthetics. Two outstanding first books in the field, Jian Neo Chen’s *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies in Movement* and Eliza Steinbock’s *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*, thus go well beyond simply expanding the content of existing categories of cinema and media analysis.¹ They shift the condi-

¹ As testament to their merits, Chen’s book was a finalist for the 2020 Lambda Literary Award, and Steinbock’s book won the SCMS Best First Book Award in 2020.
tions for thought about visibility and its attendant social, political, and methodological implications. Drawing on micha cárdenas’s notion of transreality as a counteraesthetics that remixes and reconstructs dominant social reality, both authors offer timely and fascinating readings of trans media forms and techniques, displacing representation as the analytical category best suited to thinking trans lives and media together. Critically, both works succeed in their sustained critiques of the singular flash of representational visibility as a kind of capture that fails the richness of trans experiences. Both books likewise critique and counterpoint the dullness of the amnesiac and cyclical erasures of mainstream framings of trans lives as “novel.”

Chen’s Trans Exploits traces twenty-first-century disidentifications by trans of color media and performance artists away from the exploitative conditions that govern trans of color lives within the geopolitical, economic, and affective domain of American Empire. Such lives, they argue, are increasingly targeted, policed, and excluded when the United States selectively assimilates communities of color (for instance, as “model minorities”). That same violence is enacted when gender and sexuality determinatively mediate forms of national belonging and social normativity inextricable from race and ethnicity. With elegant lucidity, Chen relentlessly exposes how the “the gender/sex system continues to fundamentally structure the social and territorial body of U.S. neoliberal civil society at the scale of nature.”2 Chen analyzes how trans of color artists have responded to this by short-circuiting their ongoing exploitation by the state. The titular phrase “Trans exploits” refers to “the indeterminate wildness” and ungovernability of bodies, practices, and perceptions traced by trans of color artists working in media, activism, and performance; this wildness occupies the excess repeatedly cut away as the entry fee to normative citizenship. Chen shifts the imperative to make sense away from its demands on the trans body, what Sandy Stone (quoted by Chen) calls a “hotly contested site of cultural inscription” with little grounding in the wants and needs of actual trans people.3 Instead, Chen’s analysis makes epistemological and ethical demands on the media itself as a technically managed image of space-time redistribution that seeks to determine the matrix of livability itself. This shift critically underpins the generative imbrications of what Chen terms “racial trans technologies.”

Chen’s nuanced readings respond to the complex discourse around the current so-called trans tipping point.4 In their essential book Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility (2017), Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton cast a skeptical side-eye on the allegedly transformative discourse of “the tipping point” for its failure to adequately address ongoing anti-trans violence and on the inadequate metric of “positive portrayals.”5 Chen’s approach shares this skepticism and displaces the

3 Chen, 1.
4 Chen, 3.
goal of representation within hegemonic norms to focus attention to how artists navigate questions of survival and thriving. Their analysis is driven by a geopolitical critique of American imperialism and its expropriative frontier mentality, which is powered by progress narratives that contradict the lived experiences of exclusion of trans subjects. Their introduction thus offers a compelling political reimagining of family relations that explores how the “deviant gendering of families of color—and the queer social structures this engendering create[s]” continually police the boundaries of racial assimilation and national belonging while also serving as potent alternative forms of kinship. Via these racialized genderings, Chen reads the family as integral to queerness rather than external to it. In so doing, they enact a form of critique that moves beyond the oppositional into what we might call the alter-ontological.

Each chapter explores media and performance remappings of gender as a “perception—or sensuous cultural interpretation” of “bodily material at the threshold between the self and social world.” Chapter 1 elaborates the concept of racial trans technologies through close readings of twenty-first-century trans Asian American multimedia performances by Yozmit, Wu Tsang, and Zavé Martohardjono. The three performances use trans embodied practices to intervene in “U.S. state and social mind-body-sense regimes that have sought to extinguish, surveil, sequester, and control the multiplicity of Asian American genders—and the social and sensual relations this multiplicity engenders.” The body is the expressive medium here, one that can “provide visual signals while dispelling the drive to see and read” through performance. In this context, then, the body can “invite more of an enfolding of sight where it meets the body than a gaze.” Such affective and embodied looking, a practice also addressed in Steinbock’s book, is one way that Chen takes up and challenges how cinema and media studies has historically imagined relations of visuality and power.

Cheang Shu Lea’s pornographic Blade Runner remake, I.K.U. (2001), and its sequel, UKI (2009), are the focus of chapter 2. Using these films, Chen considers the sex work and technological labor of counter-humans in an exploitative world of data harvesting and corporeal transformation, what they term “the under- and off-sites of the twenty-first-century new global economy.” Through these tropes, they argue, Cheang powerfully refigures Blade Runner’s melancholy for whiteness at risk in transnational capitalism. I.K.U. and UKI don’t seek to deny exploitation through heroic images of resistance or revolution. Rather, Chen argues, Cheang reattaches risk to and restores the labor of and by racially gendered bodies within the twenty-first-century transnational political economy. In so doing, Cheang aligns subjective agency with the affordances of this marginalization rather than allowing it to be aspirationally determined by majoritarian forms of whiteness, heteronormativity, and binary gender. This insistence on the lived constraints and

---

6 Chen, Trans Exploits, 11.
7 Chen, 16.
8 Chen, 32.
9 Chen, 33.
captures (of somatic potential, surplus value, and mobility) of these technocircuits underpins the transformative impact of Cheang’s work.

The influential producer, writer, director, host, and activist Janet Mock’s “liminal storytelling” and her ambivalent use of the memoir form are the subject of chapter 3. Chen studies Mock’s careful rereadings of American history through the minoritarian lens of “the vestiges of Native Hawaiian and Black cultural memory” and frames them as tactical and self-reflexive subversions of the narrative of trans self-realization. Indeed, they argue that Mock’s rereadings should be understood in parallel with American myths of self-making. In pursuing this claim, Chen incisively mobilizes a critique of memoir as an American genre whose supposed democratizing or populist tendencies fail to capture the personal and collective dynamics of minoritarian experience and histories. They restage Mock’s navigation of the exploitative effects of representational systems to resituate memoir’s iconic individualism within her works’ wider rethinking of kin, care, love, and sex relationships as “world enlargement” and a “promiscuous sociality.”

This excellent analysis also suspends binary oppositions of the popular and the experimental, raising important points about popular forms as sites of somatic and social experimental subjectivity and activism. Chapter 4, “Trans and Gender Nonconforming Digital Activisms and U.S. Transnational Empire,” likewise explores activists’ ability to rework exploitation. Chen’s vivid reading of Thai kathoey digital filmmaker Tanwarin Sukkhapisit’s work, particularly Insects in the Backyard (2010), is a model of a trans of color visual pedagogy for the digital age. It highlights Chen’s insistence on the digital as marking a critical shift in the embodied appeal to and positioning of the spectator, with significant political potential.

Steinbock’s Shimmering Images also makes demands of its reader and, by extension, on viewers of transformative works. With poetic rigor, Steinbock boldly claims cinema as a privileged “medium for transitioning . . . [for] eliciting modes of perceiving disjunctions that are advantageous to trans studies.” In experimental cinema, Steinbock finds, disjunction—both corporeal and technological—is normative rather than exceptional. Asking, “What if trans embodiment is not primarily about sex or gender, but about experimenting with the aesthetics of corporeality in terms of efficacy and political purchase?” they attend to forms of change and their epistemological ruptures.

Steinbock convincingly produces a counter-history of cinema that shows how its machinic and transversal linkings and de-linkings are ideally suited to amplifying and sustaining the shimmering apparitions of trans lives. They read with a “trans loving and cinephilic eye” across three forms of experimental cinema—the “trickality” (a phrase borrowed from André Gaudreault that identified an emphasis on spectacle over narrative) of early and late cinematic phantasmagoria, the intersections of pornography and documentary, and avant-garde cybernetic cinema. Across these histories of shimmering images, Steinbock argues for the parallels of cinema and trans

10 Chen, 99.
12 Steinbock, 6.
lives in their affective allure and transformational challenge to conventional epistemologies.

Steinbock adapts their central notion, the shimmer, from Roland Barthes, as a characteristic of the “Neutral” alert to difference, nuance, and change itself. Barthes described the work of the Neutral as that which, through intensity, could “outplay the [Western] paradigm” of conflictual binary structures and their attendant epistemological certainties in favor of a critical practice that can attend to process over structure, generating what he terms (and what Steinbock expansively explores as) an “inventory of shimmers.” For Steinbock, the shimmer becomes the basis for the opening up of alter-epistemologies that do not require the guarantee of visual confirmation. This reading for trans as a form of change implicates not only trans subjects onscreen but also viewers who may be seduced into a transamorous relation through the shimmer’s expansive and vital allure. Affect is thus central to Steinbock’s analytic approach to such shimmering images; their gamble is that “if the shimmer is hard to grasp, it is because it becomes dislocated from sociality, not because it doesn’t exist.” Through critical attention to forms that sustain shimmer’s affect without stabilizing change, Steinbock succeeds in modeling a transcinephilic looking.

This gamble pays off splendidly in the book’s standout first chapter, “Shimmering Phantasmagoria: Trans/Cinema/Aesthetics in an Age of Technological Reproducibility.” Steinbock launches a bold prompt for their media archaeological excavations: “Are trans people the heirs of phantasmagoric visual culture?” Tracing the trickality of the sex change between men and women for both trans subjects and as cinematic special effect, they examine how Georges Méliès’s trick films, like then-new surgical procedures for “changing sex,” reorder the sensible in an age of technological reproduction. They reread the shimmers of trans embodiment and the phantasmagoria as scenes of temporal drag, working politically and affectively against the chrononormativity of the before-and-after paradigm that stabilizes normative narratives of trans lives at the expense of process and change. Steinbock extends this in readings of the hybrid form (photomontage and narrative life writing) of Danish artist Lili Elbe’s posthumous account of her gender transition, Man into Woman, before turning to contemporary phantasmagorias by Zackary Drucker, A. L. Steiner, and Yishay Garbasz. Steinbock’s rich contextualization shifts others’ decisive insistence on the binary opposition of the illusion and the real to an exploration of moments of epistemological and affective suspense; their reading brings provocative nuance to our contemporary “post-truth” moment. Phantasmagoria becomes a “training ground for a sensorial reckoning of those psychic and affective currents of being that fall away from rational belief.” In rereading the history of the phantasmagoria,

14 Steinbock, Shimmering Images, 69.
15 Steinbock, 26.
16 Steinbock, 59.
Steinbock reworks an affective epistemology of the image toward a reparative approach of sustaining surprise beyond a single instant.

In chapter 2, “Shimmering Sex: Docu-Porn’s Trans-Sexualities, Confession Culture, and Suturing Practices,” Steinbock mines the affordances of documentary and pornography around the evidentiary demands of visibility that conventionally conflates seeing with knowing. They explore alternative approaches to such perceptual certainty, approaches that expand a space of affective trust in what they term the “mind-fuck,” Annie Sprinkle’s term from Linda/Les and Annie: The First Female-to-Male Transsexual Love Story (Albert Jacoma, John Armstrong, and Annie Sprinkle, 1990). Here, Steinbock reads for practices, rather than sexual orientations, that make space for trans sexualities and do not conform to binary norms. In these works, shimmers mark what Samuel Delany terms “the motion of light in water,” which for Steinbock “bathes the trans protagonists in the productive look of love, whether infused with nasty, futuristic, or even fetishistic sentiment” as they read for desire and for its disidentifications. With a special attention to how trans subjects have negotiated the delicate and overdetermined terrain of the “sex reveal” and its relation to visual epistemology, Steinbock also considers transmasculine commercial porn by controversial figure Buck Angel and explicit, experimental videos from Mirha-Soleil Ross and Morty Diamond’s docu-porn Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papí and Wil (Morty Diamond, 2007). The shimer’s affective charge is here tracked for how “transgender bodies . . . gain new potency of meaning when secrecy shifts from revealing one’s desire for certain sex acts to the disclosure of sexed embodiment.”

In chapter 3, the “switch-form” becomes the third site where Steinbock reroutes clichés of trans duplicity by undermining the titillating charge of monstrous cyborg forms. Switch here implies a cybernetic and directional cut that can deliriously link, relink, and delink perceptual and affective circuits. In analyses of Hans Scheirl’s Dandy Dust (1998) and Cheang Shu Lea’s I.K.U., Steinbock tracks curiosity as a survival technique, exploring how these works “first amplify the affect of interest to curiosity before other affects can be directed along the circuit of the film.” Memory, like affect, is a volatile form in these films, subject to circuit bending. This chapter foregrounds Steinbock’s reworking of Eugenie Brinkema’s theory of affective form away from radical passivity or disinterestedness to a minimal affective state—that of the Neutral. This state suspends the straightforward transit from seeing to knowing in favor of an expanded circuit of an aesthetics of ongoing change and nonlinear narratives and temporalities.

Both Trans Exploits and Steinbock’s Shimmering Images end by addressing the urgencies of the last decade. Steinbock analyzes Cassils’s 103 Shots (2016), about the Pulse nightclub massacre in Florida, while Chen attends to the migration crisis in the United States. Specifically, Chen looks at the kaleidoscopic captures on social media of activist Jennicet Gutiérrez’s intervention.

17 Steinbock, 105.
18 Steinbock, 67.
19 Steinbock, 67.
20 Steinbock, 113.
at a speech by Barack Obama on behalf of trans women migrants subject to deportation, torture, and death at the hands of US agencies. Their powerful reading reveals the carceral logic that underpins the deadly symbiosis of the policing of national borders and that of race and gender. The last line of the book underscores how such activist forms “activate the possibility of imagining futures without ICE, detention centers, and prisons.” Thus a key critical goal of attuning to exploit within exploitation—away from a biopolitics of bare life toward the ongoing daring and invention of trans lives—is to make embodied and affective demands on the viewer and reader to participate in this work of social imagination. Steinbock reads *103 Shots*, and its images of queer and trans bodies (over two hundred volunteers) embracing until a balloon held between them pops, as “an important transing practice of reassembly” that exploits, through negative affect, “the disjunction between seeing and speaking”: a political trickality. We think we see the source of sound (actually Foley recordings of popping balloons in a cement room) but this neither stands in for nor displaces the memory of gunshots; the entire video fabulates the (mis)recognition of a survivor who for a moment failed to perceive threat in what he took as the sound of celebration. For Steinbock, Cassils’s video resourcefully recomposes “those forces of disaggregation to cultivate negative affects as possible resources for political action,” beyond memorialization and mourning or an appeal to a utopian future, in favor of “discovering what Raymond Williams calls ‘social experiences in solution.’” These books are essential reading for the current moment and also rigorous reworkings of established notions within film and media studies. They are a provocation to see what else we might do with the shimmers and exploits of trans media in the wider social and visual field.

**Alanna Thain** is associate professor of cultural studies and world cinemas at McGill University, Montreal. She directs the Moving Image Research Lab, dedicated to the study of the body in moving image media. She is the author of *Bodies in Suspense: Time and Affect in Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

---

21 Steinbock, 137.
22 Steinbock, 147.
23 Steinbock, 150.