

Reviewed by Ken Feil

# *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History*

by **Quinlan Miller**.

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In *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History*, Quinlan Miller presents a revelatory historical reassessment of the US network sitcom of the 1950s and 1960s in addition to rethinking camp, an ironic performance and reception sensibility usually associated with white, gay male culture. Arguing that non-binary gender is a constitutive element of both camp and situation comedy formulas, Miller disputes the assumptions of both television history and camp studies with meticulous research spanning institutional procedures, social-historical context, and textual features. The subject of camp remains marginal in television studies, as W. D. Phillips and Isabel Pinedo recently observed, despite holding a pivotal position in television history.<sup>1</sup> Genealogies of cult TV, furthermore, have rendered camp either invisible or hovering in the fringes.<sup>2</sup>

Miller confirms the centrality of camp to television aesthetics at the same time as they challenge the typical historical narrative of camp TV, which begins in the 1960s with the iconic network series *Batman* (ABC, 1966–1968) and the burgeoning mainstream currency of “camp” sensibility generated by

1 W. D. Phillips and Isabel Pinedo, “Gilligan and Captain Kirk Have More in Common Than You Think: 1960s Camp TV as an Alternative Genealogy for Cult TV,” *Journal of Popular Television* 6, no. 1 (2018): 23–27, [https://doi.org/10.1386/jptv.6.1.19\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jptv.6.1.19_1).

2 Phillips and Pinedo, “Gilligan and Captain Kirk,” 21–23; Philippe Le Guern, “Toward a Constructivist Approach to Media Cults,” in *Cult Television*, ed. Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 7; and Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt, “The Mainstream, Distinction, and Cult TV,” in Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson, 40. For a discussion of the troubled relationship between camp and cult film (paracinema) studies, see Joan Hawkins, “The Sleazy Pedigree of Todd Haynes,” in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 200–202.

Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp.'"<sup>3</sup> Locating the emergence of "sitcom camp" in the early 1950s with comedy-variety programs whose situational sketches engendered the sitcom, Miller "complicates ideas about trans difference and its queer possibilities in the past . . . and what is possibly at play in TV production, understood as the production of television culture and TV texts."<sup>4</sup> *Camp TV* intertwines this historical intervention with the book's principal critique, namely that historical narratives of camp and the sitcom commonly erase the genderqueer influences and trans meanings of both. Miller interrogates "the subtly absurd story worlds of sitcoms" that recurrently motivate staple elements of camp performance; drag, suggestive wordplay, and cultural parody "incubate trans gender queer representation" and challenge the binary-gendered thinking of both television and camp scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Situating the book in "camp sitcom fandom" from the start, Miller combines scholarly rigor with the engaged, politicized vivacity of a subversive connoisseur and the banter of a raconteur in order to rewrite dominant histories of the sitcom, camp, and LGBTQIA+ media representation.<sup>6</sup>

Miller furnishes a compelling and varied model for locating and analyzing nonbinary gender performance in Eisenhower- and Kennedy-era sitcoms. As explained in the introduction, "In a time before the popularization of the term transgender and before the emergence of the word genderqueer, there was trans gender queer representation. Queer gender in sitcom production of the past is genderqueer camp and queer trans representation, in advance of its historical solidification in dominant discourse."<sup>7</sup> Illustrating the routine deployment of "temporarily [gender] inverting" comedy that always occupied sitcom formulas, *Camp TV* interrupts well-intentioned historical accounts that "rescript queer gender as ridicule in support of cissexism."<sup>8</sup> *Camp TV* provides ample and compelling evidence to demonstrate how situation comedy "makes space for recognition of nonbinary orientations to meaning" in scenarios, characters, dialogue, gags, and performance.<sup>9</sup> In one of many exceptional joke analyses, for instance, Miller locates "camp strategies of wordplay" on *The Bill Dana Show* (NBC, 1963–1965), spotlighting "writers inventing gender-neutral terms for humorous effect."<sup>10</sup>

3 Camp ostentatiously informed numerous sitcoms in the late 1960s, such as *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–1972), *The Monkees* (NBC, 1966–1968), and *Gilligan's Island* (CBS, 1964–1967) as well as comedy-variety programs such as *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (NBC, 1968–1973) and *The Flip Wilson Show* (NBC, 1970–1974). See Phillips and Pinedo, "Gilligan and Captain Kirk"; Andy Medhurst, "Batman, Deviance and Camp," in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 237–251; Walter Metz, *Bewitched* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007); Sasha Torres, "'The Caped Crusader of Camp': Camp, Pop, and the *Batman* Television Series," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 330–343; Matt Yockey, *Batman* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014); and Ken Feil, *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014).

4 Quinlan Miller, *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 2–3.

5 Miller, 3, 72–73, 105.

6 Miller, 1.

7 Miller, 16.

8 Miller, 2, 12, 106–107.

9 Miller, 13.

10 Miller, 13.

Miller ingeniously ties the proliferation of trans gender queer comedy to a network procedure dubbed the “guest-star system,” a framework that privileges “eccentric” characters and “standardizes this contextually absurd formal element.”<sup>11</sup> The introduction launches this argument with a variety of compelling examples of camp sitcom guest stars and supporting players, including Kaye Ballard, Martha Raye, Paul Lynde, Wally Cox, Nancy Kulp, Ann B. Davis, and Rose Marie. Miller shows how guest performances and supporting character turns by typecast actors contributed to the “presentation of nonconformity” and revelation of “queer and trans representation . . . in the same moment.”<sup>12</sup> Ballard personified, for just one example, a “typecast actor’s career . . . marked by queer gender across many venues,” and in 1960s sitcoms, a guest-star image “coded and self-coded as non-white-normative and transgressive, as an energetic, over-the-top white ethnic type within a harshly . . . segregated racial landscape.”<sup>13</sup> In a 1964 guest turn on *The Patty Duke Show* (ABC, 1963–1966), for example, Ballard’s trans gender queer performance as the headmistress of Selby’s School for Models challenges the “strict white gender norms” her character ostensibly teaches, “creating comedy out of contradiction.”<sup>14</sup> Related to “the norm of episodic eccentricity,” the strict standardization of network sitcoms rendered “drag performance as banal, everyday sitcom content” in addition to “tropes of crossed wires and missed connections,” turning the genre into a camp mode of production that tested, stretched, and denuded a range of restrictive binary social discourses.<sup>15</sup>

The first chapter traces the emergence of the sitcom as the preeminent genre of white, heteronormative “American” values: on the heels of the quiz show scandals, the “Red Scare,” and the brief predominance of “ethnic” TV comedy and from the leftovers of comedy-variety show sketches, characters, and stars.<sup>16</sup> Miller proposes that the “production of queer gender within the frame of nonbinary drag . . . carries over to sitcoms from comedy variety” and cites generative instances from numerous programs: *The Martha Raye Show* (NBC, 1954–1956); the *Texaco Star Theater Starring Milton Berle* (NBC, 1948–1956); appearances by Rose Marie on *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show* (NBC, 1956–1963) and *The Jimmy Durante Show* (NBC, 1954–1956); and programs headlined by Ed Wynn.<sup>17</sup> Episodes from sitcoms such as *The Real McCoys* (ABC, 1957–1962; CBS, 1962–1963) demonstrate how “the camp interwoven in comedy variety hours continually reappeared in sitcoms,” and Miller closes the chapter with a dazzling deconstruction of a bit from *Mr. Adams and Eve* (CBS, 1957–1958) involving genderqueer names and queer sexual implications.<sup>18</sup>

Chapter 2 explores *The Bob Cummings Show* (CBS, 1955–1957; NBC, 1957–1959) as well as other sitcoms featuring Cummings. Revising feminist analysis to read both promotional and textual elements “in a ‘trans’ way,” Miller

11 Miller, 12.

12 Miller, 14.

13 Miller, 6, 8.

14 Miller, 6.

15 Miller, 9, 14–16.

16 Miller, 21, 37.

17 Miller, 29, 31.

18 Miller, 50, 52–54.

reveals the trans gender queering of the show through Cummings's pairing with costar Ann B. Davis and, in a revealing examination of promotional materials, through the authorial influence of Cummings's partner and unofficial collaborator, Mary Elliott Cummings.<sup>19</sup> Miller locates camp in both the "heterosexual front" of Cummings's "playboy" image in addition to journalistic reports about "MEC" and Cummings that scramble conventional heteronormative gender roles.<sup>20</sup> The chapter traces this "scandal of gender nonconformity" to the "gay playboy and queer secretary dynamics" of Cummings and Davis in addition to situational pairings with costars Rosemary DeCamp and Dwayne Hickman as well as guest stars such as Mamie Van Doren and the cast of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (CBS, 1950–1958; another production involving writer-producer Paul Henning).<sup>21</sup>

Surveying 1960s sitcoms "about wholesome marriage and devoid of queer life," chapter 3 forthrightly disrupts the prevailing wisdom that camp TV began with *Batman* and that queer visibility first emerged on network television in the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Propelled by the logic that "[c]oupling and sexism are camp points of focus and focal points for camp," Miller marshals "the miraculous detritus preserved in the Harry Ackerman Papers and other collections" to unearth "ambiguity and contradiction of the kind ideologically construed as distinctive of trans people."<sup>23</sup> Close readings of Sally "Sal" Rogers (Rose Marie) on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961–1966) combine with analyses of various guest performances, such as by character actor Mary Grace Canfield (best known as Ralph Monroe on *Green Acres* [CBS, 1965–1971]).<sup>24</sup> Further character analyses include Nancy Kulp on *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962–1971), whose "comic performances and structuring role as Jane Hathaway" remained key to accessing the sitcom's trans gender queer camp, in addition to the queer, slapstick couple in *Car 54, Where Are You?* (NBC, 1961–1963).<sup>25</sup> The final sections of the chapter concentrate on three short-lived late-1960s sitcoms about "hip straight couples" that illuminate "a more direct connection between gender nonconformity and gay codes": *He & She* (CBS, 1967–1968), *Occasional Wife* (NBC, 1966–1967), and *Love on a Rooftop* (ABC, 1966–1967).<sup>26</sup>

Miller carries these inquiries into chapter 4, which focuses on the transformative era of the late-1960s and the sitcom *The Ugliest Girl in Town* (ABC, 1968–1969), a swinging sixties series about a man in drag who ascends to Twiggy-like stardom in the fashion industry. Miller discerns "*Girl* as a feminist text over and against the transmisogyny that conditions its existence, initial circulation, and

19 Miller, 55–56.

20 Both Steven Cohan and Pamela Robertson Wojcik explore the paradoxically queer signification of the 1950s "playboy" figure. See Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); and Pamela Robertson Wojcik, *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

21 Miller, *Camp TV*, 71–74, 76–88.

22 Miller, 118, 88–89.

23 Miller, 111, 89, 118.

24 Miller, 108–109.

25 Miller, 115–116.

26 Miller, 117.

afterlife.”<sup>27</sup> “Trans modes of recognition proliferate in the social context of the series’ story world,” Miller asserts later, adding that “*Girl’s* attention to mod camp mores occasioned femme gendering” in addition to problematizing “its own participation in tenacious regimes of hetero and cis normativity.”<sup>28</sup>

*Camp TV* importantly de- and re-constructs “sitcom history” through the interlacing constructs of heteronormativity and naturalized whiteness. The trajectory from live comedy-variety to filmed sitcom corresponded to both minimizing sexual humor and accentuating the “wholesome,” “family” orientation of programming. It further involved the “TV industry’s assimilation of ethnic specificity into a more homogenized whiteness,” particularly the networks’ retreat from overtly Jewish comedy and comedians as well as the consignment of People of Color to “mostly token roles.”<sup>29</sup> It is consequently surprising that *Camp TV* leaves out of its otherwise exhaustive historical narrative the innovation of the comedy-variety show in the late 1960s: the overtly Black and queer humor that hit variety shows incorporated in concert with the changing social context and the eventual absorption of these tropes into socially conscious sitcoms of the 1970s.

Comedy-variety shows in the late 1960s offered unprecedented opportunities for showcasing African American performers and might have been the first form of TV comedy to explicitly discuss homosexuality and sex reassignment surgery.<sup>30</sup> *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In* (NBC, 1968–1973) presented overtly racialized gender play by guests Sammy Davis Jr. and Flip Wilson as well as ensemble members Chelsea Brown, Teresa Graves, Johnny Brown, and Byron Gilliam; featured recurrent jokes and gags about “camp,” “drag,” “Gay Liberation,” and “sex change” operations; and enlisted openly genderqueer criteria in casting Alan Sues to play a “sissy.”<sup>31</sup> Drag takes on a whole new range of meanings when it coexists with racialized mimicry, a dynamic that Flip Wilson would explore repeatedly. This work began with a drag character Wilson introduced on *Laugh-In* that later evolved into his signature character on *The Flip Wilson Show* (NBC, 1970–1974), Geraldine Jones.<sup>32</sup> The significance of these events is magnified when one considers the implications of Miller’s phenomenal formulation of the “guest-star system,” the proposition that “eccentricity” drives the trans gender queer camp of guest performers and supporting players on early comedy-variety and the ensuing sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s. Such eccentricity revealed the ridiculous confines of normatively gendered and racialized identity constructs. It might be worth applying this model to frequent *Laugh-In* guests Davis and Wilson and to recurrent guests on *The Flip Wilson Show*, such as Lily Tomlin and Richard Pryor, as well as pairings between “guest star” GERAL-

27 Miller, 132.

28 Miller, 146, 149, 152

29 Miller, 35–36, 45.

30 For instance, two episodes of *Laugh-In* (March 3, 1969, and November 24, 1969) referenced a news report about Dawn Hall, a white trans woman, and her marriage to John-Paul Simmons, a Black man from South Carolina. Dan Rowan and Dick Martin joke about it as groundbreaking and ridiculous for combining so many marginal signs of social difference and transgression. See “Dawn Hall Is Married,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1969, 18.

31 See Feil, *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In*.

32 Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 76–78; and Meghan Sutherland, *The Flip Wilson Show* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 66–75.

dine and rigidly cis celebrities such as Bill Cosby and Muhammad Ali.<sup>33</sup> Wilson vitally materialized a widely popular, iconic drag character whose presumed heterosexuality and ostensible “ugliness”—a word that Miller vibrantly attacks in accounts of gender nonconforming characters on TV—bore both Black queer and feminist appeal, even as the character also received some criticism from African American intellectuals for being a regressive stereotype redolent of *The Amos 'n Andy Show* (CBS, 1951–1953).<sup>34</sup> Socially conscious sitcoms of the early 1970s “followed in the tradition of the comedy-variety show,” as Elana Levine explains.<sup>35</sup> Programs such as *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–1979), *Good Times* (CBS, 1974–1979), *Maude* (CBS, 1972–1978), and *Soap* (ABC, 1977–1981) enlisted the iconography of the sexual revolution—including nonbinary gender—“as another symbol of the changing times, right alongside race relations, the generation gap, and the women’s movement.”<sup>36</sup>

*Camp TV* is nevertheless a tour de force abounding with compelling and witty textual analyses fueled by painstaking archival research. Miller’s trans gender queer camp paradigm furthermore promises the kind of enduring applicability as such queer media studies classics as Alexander Doty’s *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* and Pamela Robertson Wojcik’s *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*.<sup>37</sup> Alongside Doty’s model for queering mass culture and Wojcik’s paradigm for feminist camp, Miller’s trans gender queer camp locates “queer gender as camp productive of a straightforward irony in characters and coupling that generates a discourse of trans representation.”<sup>38</sup> Although Miller avers “that the history of queer gender resists conventional narration through tropes like ‘firsts,’” *Camp TV* offers numerous historical “firsts”: to “articulate genderqueer culture as trans by analyzing queer gender in US sitcom history”; to “showcase the kind of queer gender that . . . queer scholars have a history of violently appropriating from trans people whose identities they undermine and obscure”; “to show how transgender representation enhances queer history”; and “to revise television history away from the transphobic self-perpetuation of the media industries.”<sup>39</sup>

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33 Acham, *Revolution Televised*, 77–79; Sutherland, *Flip Wilson Show*, 43–44, 52–54, 55–56, 69–71, 74; and Feil, *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In*, 4–6, 67–68, 87–98.

34 Bruce Morrow, “A Play,” *Callaloo* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 312–313; Dwight A. McBride, “Can the Queen Speak? Racial Essentialism, Sexuality and the Problem of Authority,” *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 371–372; and Lerone Bennett Jr., “The Emancipation Orgasm,” *Ebony*, September 1971, 106, 108.

35 Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 173–174.

36 Levine, 178–179, 186–190.

37 Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993); and Pamela Robertson [Wojcik], *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

38 Miller, *Camp TV*, 28.

39 Miller, 34, 17, 137, 163, 164.

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## *The Open Invitation: Activist Video, Mexico, and the Politics of Affect*

by **Freya Schiwy.**

University of Pittsburgh Press.

2019. 296 pages.

\$40.00 hardcover; also available in e-book.

## *Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela*

by **Naomi Schiller.**

Duke University Press.

2018. 296 pages.

\$99.95 hardcover; \$26.95 paper; also available in e-book.

In May 2006, an annual teachers' strike in the southern Mexican city of Oaxaca became the site of an unprecedented act of state brutality. Less than one month into this planned labor action, organized initially against a series of neoliberal educational reforms, the recently elected governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz deployed an army of several thousand riot police to forcefully infiltrate a number of protest camps assembled across the town square. The scenes that followed were devastating: striking labor activists were taken as political prisoners, union coordinators were evicted and reportedly tortured, and at least seventeen individuals lost their lives at the hands of the Mexican state. Over the following days, in an unexpected gesture of support, outraged local residents helped rebuild the devastated encampments, declared themselves

the new regional governing body, and initiated a grassroots anarchist uprising that would seize control of the city for the next seven months. Images of this unrest soon began to circulate globally; almost overnight, Oaxaca emerged onto the world stage as a city in flames, recognizable amid its swaths of smoke and tear gas as a zone of active democratic contestation. From behind their reinforced barricades, the energized occupants—soon to become the Oaxaca Peoples' Popular Assembly (APPO)—led with the prefigurative chant “Ulises ya cayó! Ya cayó! Ya cayó!” (Ulises already fell! Already fell! Already fell!).<sup>1</sup>

Just a decade earlier, in the neighboring state of Venezuela, a political project spearheaded by the newly elected Hugo Chávez was likewise reconfiguring the contours of an established participatory democracy. Leading the nation out of a decades-long crisis—one stemming from countless years of authoritarianism and a host of failed centrist reforms—Chávez implemented a constitution rich with socialist commitments. Shortly following his election in 1998, flows of capital were redirected from wealthy individuals to poorer citizens and Indigenous communities; welfare projects, vaccine campaigns, and education initiatives were launched in poverty-struck areas of the nation; and a thriving culture sector, consisting of state-subsidized publishing houses, entertainment venues, and arts councils, was fostered in various metropolitan districts.<sup>2</sup> Amassing a populist following in the run-up to his inauguration, Chávez banked on his status as a veritable political underdog while in power to cultivate seemingly boundless support for the ongoing Bolivarian Revolution. Thus, for the first time in the nation's turbulent political history, it appeared to many that an elected leader truly had their constituents' best interests in mind. Consequently, a very different mantra was pronounced by the Venezuelan public: “Con Chávez, manda el pueblo” (With Chávez, the people rule).<sup>3</sup>

In many respects, these disparate revolutionary uprisings point to two seemingly incompatible trajectories in Latin American political thought at the onset of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, the Oaxaca strike indexes a pronounced disengagement from traditional state activity. As the citizens of Oaxaca bore collective witness to the brutalities of their militarized local authorities, public sentiment during this period verged on the seditious. Throughout this moment of conflict, the representative state was figured as a corrupt model to be discarded; graffiti murals throughout the city stated clearly what the torched cars lining the streets asserted materially: “todo el poder al pueblo” (all power to the people).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Chávez's unprecedented popularity signaled a newfound investment in state politics on

1 For more on this slogan, see Lorraine Affourtit, “Embodying Decolonial Democracy: The Teachers' Union and the People's Guelagueta in Oaxaca, Mexico,” *Labor and Society* 22, no. 1 (2019): 89. For a more comprehensive account of the uprising itself, see John Gibler, “Oaxaca Uprising,” *New Politics* 11, no. 2 (2007): 56–62.

2 For a detailed list of these cultural initiatives, see Gisela Kozak-Rovero, “Cultural Policies and the Bolivarian Revolution in the Socialist Venezuela of Hugo Chávez (1999–2013),” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 38, no. S1 (2019): 21–23.

3 See Barry Cannon, *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution: Populism and Democracy in a Globalised Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 54.

4 For a discussion and images of such graffiti murals, see Lynn Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 265.

behalf of the Venezuelan people. With an overwhelming turnout in the 1998 presidential election, assertions of widespread trust in the new leader soon reverberated across the nation, and the state's capacity to represent was resolutely affirmed. The differences between these political situations, it seems, could not be starker. Yet, in two recently published monographs attending to the cultural manifestations of these respective incidents—Freya Schiwy's *The Open Invitation* and Naomi Schiller's *Channeling the State*—one point of alignment is made clear: screen media was a critical site through which domestic audiences came to both process and negotiate these rapidly transforming political contexts.

Schiwy's study centers on a mass of activist videos produced alongside and from within the Oaxaca uprising, framing the stakes of its investment around a declaration that the city's occupation was "one of the first widely . . . recorded social uprisings of the twenty-first century."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, covering an impressive range of this output—from "well-crafted documentaries" to "short animations" and "feature-length" productions—the book's intention to expand and update an established corpus of Latin American political cinema is clear from the outset.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, however, such wide scope facilitates the book's secondary project: to grapple "with the apparent shift in revolutionary affect that [these] activist videos make apprehensible."<sup>7</sup> To this end, chapters dedicated to the decolonial capacities of solicited *rage* and *joy*, as well as those zoning in on Indigenous uses of humor, offer some welcome additions to a burgeoning body of scholarship that weds considerations of cinematic affect to the study of national political cultures.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, such a move to the affective surface of these video-texts is framed as a neutral departure "from the ethnographic" mode currently dominating reflections on the uprising. By the book's conclusion, however, this same assertion is more provocatively inflected. Up until now, Schiwy states, accounts of this political history have "bypassed" the significant "appeals for recognition" harnessed within these videos.<sup>9</sup> At the core of *The Open Invitation*, then, is a demand that we take seriously the aesthetic as a sphere of generative insurgent activity; "activist video," Schiwy notes, worked to extend "the time and space of [the Oaxacan] uprising" in ways that push back upon many inherent recollections of this political moment.<sup>10</sup>

5 Freya Schiwy, *The Open Invitation: Activist Video, Mexico, and the Politics of Affect* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 3.

6 Schiwy, 5.

7 Schiwy, 4.

8 To cite just a few recent works that have made use of "affect" (broadly conceived) in order to parse a specifically national political situation, see Paul Gormley, *The New-Brutality Film: Race and Affect in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2005); E. Ann Kaplan, "European Art Cinema, Affect, and Postcolonialism: Herzog, Denis, and the Dardenne Brothers," in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 285–302; Laura Podalsky, *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and Lindsey Green-Simms, "Occult Melodramas: Spectral Affect and West African Video-Film," *Camera Obscura* 27, no. 2 (2012): 25–59.

9 Schiwy, *Open Invitation*, 15, 162.

10 Schiwy, 162.

For Schiller, however, the ethnographic retains its critical purchase. Structured in line with a more orthodox “anthropological methodology” involving “long-term engagement with . . . research subjects,” *Channeling the State* offers an account of Schiller’s extended stay with members of Catia TVe, one of Venezuela’s most prominent community television stations.<sup>11</sup> Acquiring their “cameras, cables, [and] microphones” through a “publicity contract with the state oil company,” Catia TVe rose to prominence following the election of Chávez, directly benefiting from his commitment to actively “remake Venezuela’s media world.”<sup>12</sup> It is this tenuous alignment—between state influence and community expression—that occupies most of Schiller’s attention. How, she asks across a series of broadly focused chapters, was this small media operation—run primarily by volunteers living in the barrios of Caracas—able to carve out a network for vernacular communication under the looming influence of the state? Her answers lead us away from the ever-present textual surfaces dominating Schiwy’s work and toward a claim that reading production *process* is the most generative means of reaching conclusions. The illustrative tendencies of the ethnographic thus buttress the analytic here; “[t]o acknowledge the state as a process rather than a thing,” Schiller argues, “allows us to account for the history of the material and ideational unfolding of the state-idea and the social relations that constitute it in particular places and times.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite their different approaches to navigating these distinct media economies, Schiller and Schiwy share a commitment to upholding local specificities. “Any true learning and critical assessment must occur in deep context,” Schiwy writes, an observation that aligns neatly with Schiller’s assertion that “[w]e require an empirical understanding of the specifics of place and time.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, whereas some recent shifts in the discipline have led film scholars to herald cinema as a productive site through which to grapple with the totality of an overwhelming global system, *Channeling the State* and *The Open Invitation* suggest that the unique tenets of television and video practices might also function as a means to *scale down* our often too-generic figurations of the world.<sup>15</sup> One welcome outcome of this scalar reduction is the emergence of various Indigenous perspectives, those voices all too easily eclipsed by imposed universal frameworks.

For Schiller, “Bolivarian maternalism” therefore provides a more useful interpretive category than does liberal feminism; for Schiwy, the “shared laughter of a Mayan audience” offers as much insight as any grand theory of spectatorship.<sup>16</sup> In sustaining such anchored methodologies, both Schiwy

11 Naomi Schiller, *Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), xi.

12 Schiller, 23.

13 Schiller, 88.

14 Schiwy, *Open Invitation*, 77; and Schiller, *Channeling the State*, 67.

15 Such a line of thought is frequently anchored in Fredric Jameson’s concept of “cognitive mapping.” Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). Recent publications that have both energized and adapted this engagement with geopolitical systems via the cinematic include Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015); and Elena Gorfinkel and Tami Williams, eds., *Global Cinema Networks* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

16 Schiller, *Channeling the State*, 190; and Schiwy, *Open Invitation*, 176.

and Schiller effectively echo the memorable conclusion of an essay that the late Chuck Kleinhans wrote on “subversive media” practices, wherein he calls for us to attend “to the local situation (the when and where), to contingency, and to seeing media as part of an historical process, itself in change, offering different possibilities through time.”<sup>17</sup>

The necessity of this grounded engagement is affirmed furthermore in both books by repeated references to the inefficiency of our established political-theoretical vocabularies. For instance, in *Channeling the State*, the formation of a post-Chávez televisual economy is said to be “incomprehensible to a liberal framework of press freedom.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the Oaxacan activist videos at the core of Schiwy’s project are described as transcending those same “liberal democratic framework[s].”<sup>19</sup> While there is something to be said here about a specifically Venezuelan/Mexican aversion to the exhausted benefits of a liberal politics, other, perhaps more historically transformative, conceptual frameworks come under similar scrutiny. In this respect, Schiller pronounces that “[o]rthodox Marxist understandings of class as one’s relationship to the means of production have been ill-equipped to analyze conditions in Venezuela.”<sup>20</sup> Relatedly, Schiwy writes of Jill Friedberg’s *Un poquito de tanta verdad* (*A Little Bit of So Much Truth*, 2007) as a video that “works on the limits of capital, not quite entering its matrix but rather corroding it from the edges.”<sup>21</sup>

Implicit, then, in both of these studies is a question about our cultivated language for attending to radical media practices.<sup>22</sup> How, both authors ask, do we effectively convey the machinations of these revolutionary flushes within a discursive economy oriented around comparative generalities? Given the persistent relevance of such a query—made amid a resurgence of anti-government protests in Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, and Nicaragua—we would do well to think on a much broader scale than can be covered in these monographs.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, the most impressive aspect of these two books lies in the way they employ cinema to reconcile and mitigate some of these broad terminological impasses. In varying ways, centering the filmic here facilitates both Schiller’s and Schiwy’s attempts to attend to political sentiments lying well

17 Chuck Kleinhans, “Subversive Media: When, Why, and Where,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 56 (2014–2015), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/KleinhansSubversiveMedia/index.html>.

18 Schiller, *Channeling the State*, 216.

19 Schiwy, *Open Invitation*, 61.

20 Schiller, *Channeling the State*, 96.

21 Schiwy, *Open Invitation*, 53.

22 Here both texts offer inadvertent contributions to an ongoing discussion in the field of critical and political theory surrounding the necessity of both reclaiming and/or abandoning established terms for describing radical action in our present. We can see the opposing parameters of such a debate through two recently published monographs: McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (New York: Verso, 2019); and Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (New York: Verso, 2019).

23 Though I limit my examples here to those protests occurring in Central and South America, a lot of work on the so-called Arab Spring uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East have called for a similar interrogation of our inherited political terminologies. See, for example, Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed Books, 2012); and Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy’s Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

outside the rigid determinants of established revolutionary models. Whether via Schiller's foregrounding of production networks in community television or Schiwy's focus on the affective labor of activist video practices, screen media works for both thinkers to put static interpretive frameworks into conjunctural motion. As Schiwy notes, in opening ourselves up to the cinematic, we encounter "traveling political theor[ies]," those necessary palliatives to the depersonalized, the abstract, and the generic.<sup>24</sup> Taken together, *Channeling the State* and *The Open Invitation* thus do some significant work in making a case for the cinema's capacious function as an agent of insurrection. In both accounts, the outputs of Catia TVe and the Oaxacan uprising are said to not merely consolidate our inherited historical and political narratives but rather fundamentally reconstitute the grounds upon which we are able to conceive of these respective political histories. Therefore, while operating, for the most part, at seemingly incompatible registers of national focus, disciplinary commitment, and methodological rationale, these books collaboratively affirm the potential of screen media as political tool, historiographic document, and object for theory.

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24 Schiwy, *Open Invitation*, 90.

Reviewed by Rielle Navitski

*Hollywood in Havana:  
US Cinema and Revolutionary  
Nationalism in Cuba  
before 1959*

by Megan Feeney.

University of Chicago Press.

2019. 320 pages.

\$105.00 hardcover; \$35.00 paper; also available in e-book.

*Fidel between the Lines:  
Paranoia and Ambivalence in  
Late Socialist Cuban Cinema*

by Laura-Zoë Humphreys.

Duke University Press.

2019. 304 pages.

\$104.95 hardcover; \$27.95 paper; also available in e-book.

In English-language film studies, perceptions of Cuban cinema are still shaped by an oft-romanticized period in the 1960s, when politically and formally radical works like the recently restored *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968) emerged from the newly created Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos and gained international renown. This vision of Cuban film persists despite growing scholarly interest in its transformation after the fall of the Soviet Union, the subject of recent book-length studies such as Enrique García's *Cuban Cinema After the*

*Cold War*, Nicholas Balais's *Cuban Film Media, Late Socialism, and the Public Sphere*, and Dunja Fehimović's *National Identity in 21st Century Cuban Cinema*.<sup>1</sup>

Two monographs join this recent crop of works examining Cuban film outside its most familiar parameters, with Megan Feeney's *Hollywood in Havana* addressing film culture on the island prior to 1959 and Laura-Zoë Humphreys's *Fidel between the Lines* largely focusing on Cuban cinema from the 1980s to the present. The iconic figure of Fidel Castro, rendered all but inseparable from the Revolution in the discourse of the authoritarian Cuban state, looms as a spectral presence in both books. *Hollywood in Havana* begins by evoking a famous 1959 photograph of Castro gazing upward at the Lincoln Memorial, a gesture that simultaneously pays homage to US principles of liberty and democracy and offers a rebuke of actual US policies that contradict these ideals. Both are implied by the image's citation of a moment from Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), in which the idealistic protagonist, played by Jimmy Stewart, squares off against a corrupt political establishment.<sup>2</sup> For Feeney, the photograph encapsulates how in the years prior to the Revolution, Hollywood cinema served as a means through which Cubans actively imagined political change, even as they resisted the United States' economic and cultural dominance on the island. Feeney writes, "Like Castro in the photo, Cuban film writers and moviegoers paid homage to US ideals and their heroes but also asserted themselves as agents of an adjudicating gaze rather than its passive objects."<sup>3</sup> In *Fidel between the Lines*, Humphreys notes that satirical and critical references to Castro in film act as litmus tests for the shifting and uncertain limits of politically permissible cultural expression in Cuba, defined ambiguously in Castro's famous 1961 speech "Words to the Intellectuals" as "within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing."<sup>4</sup>

Humphreys argues that these perceived allusions to Castro—whether deliberately inserted by filmmakers or identified by audiences, who have developed a tendency toward "paranoid" modes of reading due to a climate of unpredictable repression—exemplify the dynamic, two-way process through which political allegory is constructed in contemporary Cuba, with creators and consumers playing equally significant roles. Humphreys observes that "[w]hile spectators argued about whether films harbored secret messages against the socialist state, veiled complicity with political leaders, or served as publicity stunts, filmmakers complained that these readings ignored the nuances of their depictions of Cuba and reduced their art to propaganda" and interrogates how "allegory and conflicts over textual interpretation shape

1 Enrique García, *Cuban Cinema After the Cold War: A Critical Analysis of Selected Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015); Nicholas Balais, *Cuban Film Media, Late Socialism, and the Public Sphere: Imperfect Aesthetics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Dunja Fehimović, *National Identity in 21st Century Cuban Cinema: Screening the Repeating Island* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

2 Megan Feeney, *Hollywood in Havana: US Cinema and Revolutionary Nationalism in Cuba before 1959* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 1–2.

3 Feeney, 8.

4 Laura-Zoë Humphreys, *Fidel between the Lines: Paranoia and Ambivalence in Late Socialist Cuban Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 32.

the public sphere.”<sup>5</sup> Whether focusing on production and audience reception, as in Humphreys’s case, or on exhibition and film criticism, as in Feeney’s, both books illuminate cinema’s role in the collective construction of political imaginaries in Cuba.

In her account of pre-revolutionary Cuban film culture, Feeney argues (repurposing language from a 1949 epigraph from Motion Picture Association of America president Eric Johnston) that “Hollywood’s ‘Americanization’ of foreign audiences—and the way those foreign audiences localize Hollywood’s meanings—can subvert US global hegemony, paradoxically enough, by ‘keeping alive’ not just desires for consumer goods but also for the ‘democracy and freedom’ that US foreign policy sometimes ‘snuffed out.’”<sup>6</sup> *Hollywood in Havana* charts the ebb and flow of Cuban-US relations across a series of major historical events, tracking how these relations were mediated through the local consumption of Hollywood film. Throughout, Feeney focuses on two groups of social actors that embody the complex negotiations between US cinema and Cuban audiences: left-leaning film critics who identified both reactionary and radical meanings in Hollywood films, signaling an active engagement with imported entertainment, and US-born workers in the exhibition sector, who were obliged both to “Cubanize” themselves to succeed locally and to negotiate (often literally) with native-born employees, who were typically relegated to subordinate positions in a highly stratified labor market.

Feeney’s first chapter charts the development of film exhibition in Cuba from moving images’ debut on the island in 1897 (just prior to the Spanish-American War) through the 1910s (when US films first came to dominate Cuban screens) and 1920s. Even as the island’s residents became avid consumers of US cinema, Hollywood’s presence served as a keen reminder of the United States’ economic hegemony and the limitations on Cuban sovereignty established by the Platt Amendment, which authorized US military intervention on the island. Rejecting this semi-colonial situation, a leftist school of Cuban film criticism emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in the context of armed resistance to the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado. In chapter 2, Feeney explores how these critics sought to cultivate questioning and politically engaged spectators who could decode the pro-capitalist and implicitly imperialist messages embedded in Hollywood films’ happy endings while appreciating the potentially subversive aspects of Charlie Chaplin’s cinema, with its championing of the downtrodden and its condemnation of the absurdities of capitalist modernity.

Both the exhibition business and film criticism reflected the rapprochement between the United States and Cuba that was fostered by the Good Neighbor policy (1933–1945), under which the United States sought to nurture more cordial relationships with Latin American nations and temporarily renounced its habit of intervening in their internal affairs. *Hollywood in Havana*’s third chapter traces the reception history of key Good Neighbor-era films such as *A Message to Garcia* (George Marshall, 1936), a tale of Cuban independence struggles carefully calibrated to flatter the nationalist

5 Humphreys, 2–3.

6 Feeney, *Hollywood in Havana*, 6.

feelings of the island's spectators. In addition, it explores how the success of individual US-born and Cuban managers in the exhibition business—success achieved via their careful navigation between local and Hollywood norms—generated a sense that the industry was marked by cordial or even familial relationships, an impression belied by the favoritism for US personnel shown in the studios' branch offices. During World War II, the United States' self-serving affirmations of Pan-American solidarity—often communicated through the propaganda efforts of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs—reached their high point.

At the same time, Cuban reviewers increasingly embraced the heroes of anti-fascist Hollywood films as stand-ins for their own egalitarian aspirations. In a more pessimistic vein, the disillusioned protagonists of film noir—a genre embraced as a vehicle for social critique by the Hollywood Left—resonated with Cuban experiences of political corruption and labor unrest in the postwar period, as explored in chapter 5. The book's sixth and final chapter looks at the revolutionary energies generated by these developments, which intensified during the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (1952–1959). Cuba's Hollywood-centric exhibition sector began to crumble in the face of postwar market pressures and growing labor demands, and film critics increasingly expressed openly anti-government sentiments. Ironically, Hollywood films' local presence thus helped lay the groundwork for the Cuban Revolution, which would go on to adopt a fervently anti-American and anti-Hollywood stance.

*Fidel between the Lines* also adopts a largely chronological structure that attends to major cultural shifts in Cuba while delving into contemporary filmmakers' dialogues with works released decades earlier. Humphreys begins by outlining the contours of a “paranoid public sphere” in Cuba, marked both by political optimism and pervasive suspicion, through the lens of a 2007 incident dubbed “the email war.”<sup>7</sup> This series of online exchanges was sparked by state television programs' decision to invite two infamous censors of the *quinquenio gris* (the five grey years, a period of intense repression in Cuba that lasted from 1971–1976) to appear as guests. The broadcasts triggered speculation that the state would enact more repressive cultural policies in the face of the tentative political opening represented by the transfer of power from an ailing Fidel to his brother Raúl Castro. Holding out the promise that the internet might function as a more open space for dissent, the email conversation also highlighted the limitations of this emergent public sphere and generated anxieties about its participants' hidden political motives. Internet access was largely limited to privileged Cubans at the time, circumscribing the reach of the email communications, and the discussion quickly devolved as interlocutors traded accusations of complicity with the state or the anti-revolutionary exile agenda.

The book's second chapter turns to filmmakers' and audiences' roles in constructing cinematic allegories, examining the cases of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's canonical films *Memorias del subdesarrollo* and *Fresa y chocolate* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*, with Juan Carlos Tabío, 1994). Due to their textual openness

7 Humphreys, *Fidel between the Lines*, 15, 28.

(in the case of *Memorias*) and controversial subject matter (namely, the theme of homosexuality central to *Fresa y chocolate*), these works could easily be interpreted as either excessively or insufficiently critical of the Revolution or as pandering to foreign sensibilities. This latter concern is at the core of the short *Oda a la piña* (Ode to the pineapple, Laimir Fano Villaescusa, 2008). Following an Afro-Cuban dancer performing for foreigners, the film critiques the commodification of Cuban culture for a tourist gaze while paying an ambivalent homage to the opening scene of *Memorias* by citing the iconic rumba heard on its soundtrack.

A third chapter examines bureaucrat comedies of the 1980s and 1990s as a means of articulating constructive criticism from within the Revolution during a period when Castro called for “rectification” (action to address issues like excessive bureaucracy and corruption). In the controversial *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas* (*Alice in Wondertown*, Daniel Díaz Torres, 1991), a well-meaning theater teacher attempts to revitalize a town plagued by the ills that rectification was designed to address. The film’s reception demonstrates how easily criticisms that creators viewed as being “from within the Revolution” could be read as counterrevolutionary. Other comedies produced during and after the Special Period (a moment of profound economic crisis following the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s main trading partner) proved similarly contentious. In a fourth chapter, Humphreys highlights the allegorical weight placed on endings in which characters choose to stay in dire situations and fight for the nation’s future, stressing how meta-fictional elements and intertextual references solicit complex allegorical responses. In *Lista de espera* (*Waiting List*, Juan Carlos Tabío, 2000), a utopian scenario (bus passengers stranded at a terminal by inadequate infrastructure create a thriving revolutionary community) is revealed at the end of the film to be a dream, raising questions about whether it offers sincere optimism about Cuba’s future. In the wildly popular zombie comedy *Juan de los muertos* (*Juan of the Dead*, Alejandro Brugués, 2011), cinematic citation—including an homage to Bruce Lee’s iconic leap toward the camera in *Jing wu men* (*Fist of Fury*, Lo Wei, 1972)—undercuts any simple reading of its final shot, in which the protagonist jumps into a mass of zombies as his companions escape the island for Miami. Some spectators read this move as suicidal devotion to Cuba’s national project, while others viewed it as referencing a revolutionary commitment they themselves shared.

Humphreys’s final chapter examines reworkings of the politicized montage practice of the 1960s and 1970s in contemporary Cuban film. She links the aesthetic of the fragment that characterizes Susana Barriga’s 2008 film *The Illusion*, an account of her surreptitiously filmed and paranoia-filled encounter with her exiled father in London, with the lyrical semi-ethnographic films of Nicolás Guillén Landrián, an Afro-Cuban filmmaker who experienced persecution at the hands of the Cuban cultural establishment. Guillén Landrián’s later montage-driven films implicating Cuba in the violence of modernization find echoes in Esteban Insausti’s experimental film *Existen* (*They exist*, 2005) and the found-footage interludes in *La obra del siglo* (*The Project of the Century*, Carlos Machado Quintela, 2015), filmed at the site of a nuclear reactor planned in collaboration with the Soviet Union and left unfinished after its fall.

With training in the fields of history and anthropology, respectively, Fee-ney and Humphreys each bring interdisciplinary methods to bear on Cuban film culture. *Hollywood in Havana* delves into industry and mainstream periodicals as well as studio and government records as it deftly traces the trajectories of individual critics and film industry workers in the context of broader developments. *Fidel between the Lines* benefits from the author's privileged access to established directors and her extended time at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión, where she forged connections with emerging Cuban filmmakers. By offering access to cineastes' self-presentation of their work, interviews play a core role in establishing the disconnect between the allegorical meanings avowed by creators and those identified by audiences so central to the study (although their use in the field of film studies seems less *outré* than the author suggests at one point).<sup>8</sup>

*Hollywood in Havana* and *Fidel between the Lines* make compelling contributions to an established but ever-vital trend in film studies examining the dynamic construction of meaning in audience reception, both highlighting the broader circulation and impact of these readings in Cuban political life. In particular, in stressing the contribution of both creators and spectators to meaning-making processes and identifying "how allegory can both enable and constrain public debate and representations," Humphreys's approach to allegory offers a key contribution to scholarly dialogue surrounding the mode.<sup>9</sup> As a rare English-language study of Cuban film culture in the first half of the twentieth century, *Hollywood in Havana* builds on growing interest in how overseas audiences, critics, and exhibitors worked to domesticate US cinema, particularly in the classical Hollywood era. While *Fidel between the Lines* deals with more thoroughly researched territory in terms of its historical period and some individual films, it offers important insights for students and scholars of socialist and post-socialist cultures. Both books will find a well-deserved place on the shelves of Cubanists, Latin Americanists, and those invested in the politics of culture more broadly.

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8 Humphreys, 18.

9 Humphreys, 15.