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As many tens of thousands of hours of newsreel footage are digitized and made available on platforms such as YouTube, what are historians and the public to make of this immense but disjointed collection of moving images? In News Parade: The American Newsreel and the World as Spectacle, Joseph Clark argues persuasively that however tempting it might be to think of them as transparent windows into the past, in order to be properly understood, newsreels must be contextualized within the system in which they were produced and received. News Parade is a thoroughly researched account of this understudied media form, which sets it in the historical context of its production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. Using this approach, Clark shows that American newsreels forged a new kind of realism that structured an increasingly visual public sphere during the 1930s and 1940s.

News Parade not only updates extant research on the newsreel—as Clark points out, the most recent volume dedicated to it dates from the 1970s—but also contributes an original argument about the newsreel, realism, and the public sphere to the field of cinema and media studies. Using evidence from the trade and popular press, memoirs, newsreel production company archives, and representations of the newsreel in other popular media, such as comic books and film, Clark demonstrates that the newsreel did not simply document the world but shaped how the public related to it. It did so
not only by way of filmic indexicality but also, and more precisely, through its system of production, distribution, and exhibition, which shaped its mode of representation and presented the world as a “passing pageant.” Clark refers to this whole system of production, representation, and reception as the “news parade.”

Using well-chosen case studies, the book moves through two initial chapters that sketch this production system’s contours and clarify its mode of address. In the 1920s, the major Hollywood studios absorbed most newsreel companies, consolidating production. Yet even under studio ownership, newsreel production remained centered in New York City and structured by editorial departments that resembled newspaper offices or wire services. Distribution occurred largely through the vertically integrated studio system. The “news parade” depended on what Clark calls a “processional mode.” Due to its serial appearance, it relied on events for which shooting could be easily planned for in advance—such as beauty pageants, sports, and especially parades. Consequently, it ordered the world as a passing procession of unrelated events.

In chapter 2, Clark delves further into the newsreel’s mode of address. The newsreel produced a reality effect by representing events in which the sharing of news itself was a crucial aspect of the story. It constantly referenced the power of its own production system as an argument for its realism, privileging “the experience of watching the news over the news itself.” Using the trial of Bruno Hauptmann for the kidnapping of celebrity aviator Charles Lindbergh’s infant child as a case study, Clark further argues that the newsreel benefited from a tension between “display” and “evidence.” The newsreel not only exploited film’s indexicality to offer evidence about world events but also reveled in its ability to display this evidence, to make it visible for the spectator. It thus allowed viewers to feel that they could judge the visual evidence themselves. Clark writes convincingly on interwar debates about realism and how the newsreel related to them. Especially after the advent of sound and voice-over narration, many in the press faulted the newsreel for misrepresenting reality and adding bias to its filmic representation of the real. Others meanwhile (prominently the documentarian John Grierson) faulted the newsreel for the opposite reason, questioning its refusal to create an artistic or narrative structure that would penetrate beneath the surface of appearances to illuminate social totality. Clark argues that the newsreel was neither a transparent copy of the real nor a synthetic representation of totality. Rather, it produced a reality effect by emphasizing the power of its own production system and the tension between display and evidence, forming a public sphere mediated by its way of visualizing events.

Making a more familiar argument, chapter 3 contends that the “news parade” encouraged identification with the figure of the masculine newsreel cameraman who traversed the world to secure footage, thereby positioning

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2 Clark, 42.
3 Clark, 51.
4 Clark, 49.
the viewer in an “imperial gaze” that feminized, objectified, and dominated the non-Western places and cultures it represented. In chapter 4, Clark turns to newsreel exhibition venues and audience reception, analyzing the Streamline Moderne architecture and interior design of purpose-built newsreel theaters. Such theaters, he argues, structured the viewing experience as a “global information environment” and a “vehicle for virtual travel.” Clark suggests that this exhibition apparatus constituted a public forum in which audiences could react to the news and to one another, reveling in the “collective experience of seeing and debating the news in public.”

The final chapter considers *All-American News* (1942–1952), a newsreel that, in the context of the World War II-era “Double-V” campaign to promote victory over fascism abroad and racism at home, attempted to make the achievements and contributions of Black Americans visible within the news parade’s forms and conventions. *All-American News* sought to disseminate positive images of African Americans to a broad cross-racial public while also refusing to directly address white racism or segregation. Instead, it proposed a model of “hard work, discipline, and self-improvement” for Black Americans. Yet the segregated American theater system and the consignment of Army Signal Corps film depicting African American soldiers to *All-American News* rather than the mainstream white newsreels meant that such images ended up being seen almost exclusively by Black audiences. Furthermore, in its “pedagogical address” to African Americans, it replicated what sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois called “double consciousness,” an internalized awareness of being watched and judged by white America. Sitting in segregated theaters watching newsreels depicting segregated armed forces, *All-American News*’ audience was sharply aware of this unresolved tension. Using discussions of audience reception published in the Black press, Clark argues that within this tension a Black counterpublic emerged that both “acknowledged and contested the subordinate position of African Americans within the United States’ visual public sphere.”

This argument fits well with Clark’s overarching argument about his object of study, which is that new media technologies are never wholly determining and instead depend on audiences who actively shape social meaning. Shifting the focus from the text of the newsreel, he calls for an account of production and circulation in order to understand how historically positioned publics and counterpublics contest messages in the media. Clark engages theories of the public sphere to argue that, contrary to narratives in which the vital public dimension of early film was eclipsed by the studio system, the newsreel represented a contested visual public sphere “where American identity and democracy were asserted and debated.”

5 Clark, 130.
6 Clark, 130–131.
7 Clark, 168.
10 Clark, *News Parade*, 12.
Jürgen Habermas’s view of the mass media as “fundamentally beholden to
the ideological interests of capital and the state” in favor of an approach
more sensitive to audience reception.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet Clark’s evidence for the vitality of the newsreel’s public sphere seems
ambiguous at best. Habermas did not maintain that the public sphere ceased
to exist after the eclipse of its bourgeois form, which began in the last quar-
ter of the nineteenth century. In his view, the mutual penetration of state and
society caused “competition between organized private interests” to invade
the public sphere, replacing “rational-critical public debate” with a plebisci-
tary mass public called upon “for the purposes of public acclamation” or the
expression of preference.\textsuperscript{12} In \textit{News Parade}, the evidence for newsreel theaters
as robust public forums largely consists of instances in which audiences
hissed and booed or alternatively clapped and cheered public figures such
as labor leaders and politicians. I wonder whether this form of engagement,
active though it may be, actually constitutes debate. Indeed, this form of audi-
ence participation could sustain a more straightforwardly Habermasian read-
ing in which the newsreel’s public sphere left little room for rational-critical
debate and instead solicited simpler plebiscitary expressions of preference or
group interest. Perhaps one of the newsreel’s most important legacies lies in
the way that social media polarize opinion by boiling public utterances down
to “likes,” allocating to their users a limited range of responses expressing
either approval or outrage.

Given its emphasis on the public sphere, \textit{News Parade} engages surpris-
ingly little with the literature on the history of the press. Clark occasionally
writes as though the newsreel were the only visual mass media in opera-
tion at the time. Yet the newsreel was not alone in transforming the public
sphere along more visual lines; after all, the 1930s and 1940s were photo-
journalism’s golden era as well. Photojournalism likewise produced a sense
of realism by constantly calling attention to its own organizational efforts to
produce and disseminate picture coverage of the world. During this period,
the newspaper underwent dramatic changes; new developments in photo-
mechanical reproduction and communications such as wire photography
meant that it was becoming more visual than ever before. The 1930s and
1940s also witnessed the advent of the great American picture magazines,
such as \textit{Life} and \textit{Look}, shaped in their turn by the longer history of the illus-
trated press reaching back into the nineteenth century. Indeed, the news
had been visual for a long time.

The mass press seems continually to haunt the background of \textit{News
Parade}. The newsreels’ “processional mode” was shared by the mass press
as a whole and was arguably invented by it long before the advent of film.
Moreover, the cultural landscape of the 1930s and 1940s was relentlessly
intermedial. Audiences watching newsreels also listened to radio reports
and read daily newspapers filled with photographs from far-off places, which
likewise invited them to relate to the world as a passing parade. The newsreel

\textsuperscript{11} Clark, 10.
\textsuperscript{12} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry
into a Category of Bourgeois Society}, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of
seems to have translated this non-narrative way of representing reality into a cinematic medium.

While News Parade features some strong analyses of the newsreel’s filmic techniques, it might have benefited from a more sustained discussion of the specific importance of the moving image. Such a discussion would have clarified exactly what about the newsreel’s visuality differentiated it from the illustrated press writ large. Although moving away from the cinematic apparatus and the newsreel’s text and toward its production, dissemination, and reception allows Clark to make convincing arguments about the newsreel’s representational mode, such a move also poses a problem for cinema studies and studies of media generally. Shifting focus away from the medium’s specific formal properties makes newsreels seem very similar to photojournalism, not to mention radio news and written reporting. The difficult task ahead might be to determine how cultural artifacts’ unique formal attributes shaped the formation of publics and counterpublics, given a broad field of similar representational strategies and institutional practices among related cultural industries. One might then consider the overlaps between these representational forms and their respective business models. As Clark points out during his discussion of newsreel coverage of the second Sino-Japanese War, for example, newsreel stills were sometimes excerpted to circulate in the press as photographs. Such an endeavor might move outside photography studies or film studies to engage the broader conversation of visual studies, or even beyond the visual to something such as popular culture studies.

These criticisms ought not to detract from the contribution this book represents. Quite the reverse; News Parade should be commended for raising important questions about the future directions that media studies might take. It is sure to be invaluable to instructors who want to use newsreel footage that is now being digitized and placed on online platforms. Clark shows that such images do not speak for themselves, particularly since the studios’ archival practices tended to decontextualize films by cutting up footage and storing it by subject matter for future resale. The book concludes with a consideration of the newsreel’s legacy, identifying its “continuous, non-narrative sequence” as a formal structure that persists in today’s social media streams. Though more work remains to be done, News Parade will certainly be a key reference for the important but underappreciated newsreel medium for the foreseeable future.

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Clark, News Parade, 206.
Reviewed by Alanna Thain

Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies in Movement

by Jian Neo Chen
$89.95 hardcover; $23.95 paper; also available in e-book.

Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change

by Eliza Steinbock
$99.95 hardcover; $25.95 paper; also available in e-book.

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

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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.6 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.”7 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.”8 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.”9 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.17 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).18 The shimmer’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.”19

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.”20 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.

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21 Steinbock, 137.
22 Steinbock, 147.
23 Steinbock, 150.
Reviewed by Atlanta Ina Beyer

Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture

by Curran Nault.
Routledge.
2018. 192 pages.
$170.00 hardcover; $49.95 paper; also available in ebook.

It’s been thirty years since the emergence of Riot Grrrl. In the early 1990s, this cultural movement, led by young women, created a new wave of feminist punk politics in the United States and beyond. As early as 1997, Mary Celeste Kearney pointed to erased connections between Riot Grrrl and several other movements, including queercore, in mainstream media’s reporting on this phenomenon.1 Queercore emerged a few years earlier and in fact inspired the zines and music of Riot Grrrl groups. This close relationship to Riot Grrrl makes it all the more peculiar that scholarship on queercore has been so spotty to date. Various authors have published essays on aspects of queer punk culture.2 In 2015, Maria Katharina Wiedlack was the first author to systematically examine the history of North American queer-feminist punk scenes since the 1980s.3 Yet a comprehensive scholarly account of queercore itself has remained pending.

In *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture*, Curran Nault resolves this problem.\(^4\) The author examines key queercore texts produced during the subculture’s peak phase between 1985 and 2006. Approaching them from a media studies perspective makes this especially exciting. Queercore productions, as Nault reminds readers, come in many shapes: “zines, music, films, live events, writings, visual and performance art.”\(^5\) This is also true for punk culture in general. Yet research on punk media has tended to overemphasize the role of music and zines. Nault, in contrast, puts a strong emphasis on visual culture and includes the often overlooked realm of film in his study, thereby expanding the way we think about punk culture. His treatment of queercore as a transmedia movement is the first systematic engagement with its complexly structured aesthetics.

The impact of queer subcultures on not only Riot Grrrl but also punk movements in general has been remarkable. Yet in many official accounts of punk history, queer contributions are still hard to find. In his book’s first chapter, Nault rewrites punk genealogies, bringing the long history of queer artists within punk culture to the fore and illuminating the important foundations they laid for queercore’s emergence. The author takes readers back to 1970s punk hubs New York, London, and Los Angeles and to selected queer artists in each locale. He focuses on trans punk legend Jayne County and her role in the scene around Andy Warhol’s Factory; butch musician Phranc, whose experimental bands Nervous Gender and Catholic Discipline were among the most interesting in the early LA punk scene; as well as London filmmaker Derek Jarman, creator of the queer punk classic *Jubilee* (1978). Although it certainly was not an epicenter for the emergence of punk culture, Nault includes Baltimore, too, and with it, the important impact of local filmmaker John Waters, and Waters’s icon, Divine, on queer and punk aesthetics. Nault is interested in these artists as connectors between the worlds of queer and punk culture and treats them as “switch points” with many different people revolving around them. By doing so, he lays out the many overlaps between gay liberation movements and queer and punk subcultures and their interwoven histories.\(^6\)

The author also situates queercore’s development in the historical context of the 1980s and 1990s in North America. In the 1980s, parts of gay and lesbian movements embarked on an assimilationist course. The HIV/AIDS crisis, the Reagan regime, the immense cultural, political, and sexual backlash to the feminist and gay rights movements of the 1970s, and also the angry new queer politics that developed in response, all frame Nault’s understanding of the queercore movement’s emergent cultural strategies. Through the first chapter’s historical framing, Nault deepens his account of the recurring tropes he identifies as queercore’s defining features. The three following chapters are organized conceptually. In each of them, the author concentrates on one aspect that he considers central: explicit sexual representations, confrontational tactics, and shockingly subversive body politics.

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5 Nault, 33.
6 Nault, 49.
In chapter 2, launching the conceptual section, Nault investigates (soft) pornographic representations by Canadian filmmakers and multimedia artists G. B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce. Through close readings of J.D.s (1985–1991), their influential zine, Jones’s and LaBruce’s films, and Jones’s *Tom Girls* drawings, Nault discusses how these punk artists used their sexually explicit art as strategic interventions against both the homophobic mainstream and assimilation efforts by parts of the conservative gay movement at the time. Such efforts depended, he reminds us, largely on representations of respectable, desexualized subjects. Nault reads “bad object choice” as a recurring strategy in *J.D.s* and LaBruce’s films. He also engages with the fetishization of macho punk skinheads and other toxic masculinities in queercore projects such as LaBruce’s cult flick *No Skin Off My Ass* (1991). He reads such overt sexualizations of apparently unsafe partners as provocative ways of troubling conventional, safe representations of queer desire, arguing that they force audiences “to grapple with difficult, disturbing desires that some, in the interest of respectability, wish to keep silent.” Nault attributes important potential to those strategies to undermine the presumed straightness of hypermasculine figures. Yet he also admits that it can be difficult to disentangle affirmation and disruption of toxic masculinities in those works.

Less ambivalent in this regard is Jones’s *Tom Girls* series. In these drawings, the artist critically appropriates the fetish art of Tom of Finland. In his analysis, Nault focuses on a work that appeared in the first issue of *J.D.s* in 1985. Finland’s homoerotic drawings feature muscle-bound hunks, yet he’s also been accused of fetishizing fascist symbols. Jones closely adopts Finland’s drawing style but draws dykes instead to celebrate sexually active, rebellious women. In this particular work, she bricolages two of his picture stories. This drastically alters the meaning of Finland’s original drawings. Nault explains how Jones, in her revisions to them, satirizes Finland’s toying with fascism.

In the book’s next chapter, Nault focuses on queercore’s “bash back” attitude. The case studies in this chapter are a highlight of the book. The author draws connections from queercore aesthetics to Queer Nation’s 1990s verbal-militant activism, arguing that queercore activists adapted the group’s confrontational strategies and combined them with punk’s shock tactics. To strengthen this argument, he refers to Jack Halberstam’s concept of “imagined violence” as a rhetorical strategy of resistance for minoritarian subjects. Imagined violence blurs the line between fake and real violence, thus “opening up a politicized space of counter-possibilities,” as Nault writes, where empowerment and pleasure can be regained by staging revenge on oppressive structures.

Nault explores such counter-spaces in *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992). The 16 mm feature expresses rage and fury over the HIV/AIDS crisis.

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7 Nault, 82.
8 Nault, 84.
9 Nault, 92.
Two HIV-positive gay men embark on a road trip to avenge their imminent deaths and punish an uncaring society. In a key scene, one of the main characters, Luke (Mike Dytri), kills three homophobic attackers in self-defense. Nault discusses how Araki’s film stages this cathartic moment as “an empowering reversal of then-dominant narratives of queer victimhood.”12 He also traces bash back strategies in works by the band Tribe 8 and in Margarita Alcantara’s zine Bamboo Girl (1995–2005). Nault reads Tribe 8’s confrontations as ways of “working through” lived realities as women (of color) and trans people in a society that systematically abuses them.13 He further discusses the experimental short film Shut Up White Boy (Vú T. Thu Há, 2002), in which Tribe 8 guitarist Leslie Mah stars as an employee of an all-Asian American punk dyke diner. In the film, the employees take creative revenge on a customer with an Asian fetish. Here, as in Bamboo Girl, Nault understands imagined violence as queer empowerment but also as a disruption of the notion of the quiet and submissive Asian American “model minority.” These case studies illuminate how the tactic of imagined violence in queercore primarily works to problematize actual violence.

In the final chapter, the author outlines queercore’s subversive body politics, focusing on two performers: singer Beth Ditto of the band Gossip and multimedia artist Nomy Lamm. He analyzes Ditto’s live performances and her appearance, naked, on the cover of NME magazine’s August 2007 issue. Through acts of resignification, he argues, Ditto reclaims “fat as a term of positive self-identification” and strength.14 Nault then discusses Lamm’s work as part of disability justice performance organization Sins Invalid. He describes how Sins Invalid often specifically directs the audience’s gaze toward the disabled body, inviting them to look. He further elaborates on this strategy in a close examination of Lamm’s multimedia performance piece “Bird Song.” Fat positivity and disability activism—the two topics that move into focus in this chapter—have rarely been explored in connection with queer punk. Nault demonstrates how both queercore artists “counteract oppressive norms of beauty, gender, sexuality and able-bodiedness,” thereby expanding the boundaries of acceptable female behavior.15

In his tracing of the aesthetic and thematic contours of the subculture, Nault reconstructs the ways in which queercore’s protagonists appropriated punk style and media to create oppositional identities, meanings, and culture. These enabled challenges to both dominant culture as well as the increased liberal culture and assimilationist tendencies in lesbian and gay politics. Queercore itself might now be mostly a thing of the past. All the more important then that Nault’s book works to preserve and revive these often marginalized and little-known alternative queer histories and identities.

12 Nault, 118.
13 Nault, 120.
14 Nault, 148.
15 Nault, 158.
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