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Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City

by **Debashree Mukherjee.**

Columbia University Press.

2020. 448 pages.

\$105.00 hardcover; \$30.00 paper; also available in e-book.

In *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City*, Debashree Mukherjee uses her contemporary experiences hustling as a “cine-worker” in the “cine-ecology” of early twenty-first-century Mumbai to enrich her ambitious history of a specific site of cinematic production: late colonial Bombay in the 1930s and 1940s. Mukherjee mingles the personal anecdote with an archival approach to demonstrate how Bombay cinema during the period was both integrated within the bodies of its laborers (its cine-workers) and entangled in the localities, infrastructures, industries, politics, technologies, peoples, and environment of its production (its cine-ecology). In one memorable passage, Mukherjee describes her own experience trying to find the former location of the Bombay Talkies studio.¹ Despite her research into its exact GPS coordinates, it is only thanks to a rickshaw driver’s local knowledge that she arrives at the spot where the studio once stood. Relinquishing control, Mukherjee embodies at once the fan, cine-worker, and scholar as she is taken on a surprising and unexpected tour that rewards both the uncertainty of waiting and the faith required to let the environment and its inhabitants speak for themselves.

While reading *Bombay Hustle*, I kept returning to this story as a metaphor for the reader’s experience of Mukherjee’s account of a bustling city

1 Debashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 16.

transformed. The book focuses on the formation of Bombay's studios during the transition to sound between 1929 and 1942. Yet the scope of the project encompasses the city's industrial and social milieu at the turn of the twentieth century and theorizes the lasting effects of the talkie period's production protocols into the twenty-first century. Mukherjee demonstrates that the history of Bombay filmmaking is inseparable from the history of Bombay's colonization, finance, and climate, as well as its particular social, gender, caste, and ethnic politics. Mukherjee argues that the history of late colonial Bombay filmmaking must be read within a web of large-scale and discrete social, ecological, and economic forces, that Bombay cinema is not merely the result of historical events happening alongside its development but an active interlocuter across informal connections to other industries, communities, and its precise locality. To study late Bombay cinema is to study the city and peoples of Bombay during a period of rapid industrial change, financial speculation, and social upheaval. Mukherjee showcases how film production's workaday practices are often embodied and always embedded within a world outside the screen and studio gates—what Mukherjee calls “cine-ecology.”

Careful to distinguish this framework of cine-ecology from a different kind of framework (the Hollywood studio system), Mukherjee makes clear that cine-ecology is not simply the production structures or organizations of filmmaking (with their own internal rules and habits) but an organism that moves, breathes, lives, and is a part of the environment in which it is produced and consumed.² In this she explains the book's formidable framework and most important contribution, “the city and its cine-ecology cannot be disentangled.”³ Mukherjee's opening anecdote then mirrors the constant conversation taking place across the book between cine-workers and the cine-ecology in which they work and live. While made up of a diverse group of people and forces, the cine-ecology and cine-worker become organic entities and living characters that often take on anthropomorphic force in Mukherjee's story. The cine-ecology as an immense energy expresses the hopes and anxieties of its collective cine-workers through its environmental networks and its wider networks of production, distribution, and reception, which are constantly coalescing and dispersing.⁴

Within these useful guiding frameworks of cine-worker and cine-ecology, the accounts excel in their particularities. *Bombay Hustle* also charts the rise and fall of distinct studios, stars, and productions, highlighting the importance of technologies and production crews and enriching the existent film scholarship on popular Hindi and Indian cinema. Making compelling use of multiple methodological approaches, theoretical discourses, and disciplinary traditions requires Mukherjee “to step into unexpected geographical terrains and trespass against disciplinary boundaries.”⁵ The result is a complex and complementary blend of infrastructure studies, production studies, star studies, sound studies, fan studies, gender studies, and even the study of doc-

2 Mukherjee, 18.

3 Mukherjee, 288.

4 Mukherjee, 18.

5 Mukherjee, 318.

uments and paperwork as media and material objects that charts surprising interconnections between social and production history.⁶ But the book's goal is not simply to uncover untold production histories but to amplify what had been mere backing tracks in others' work: the noise of Bombay's monsoons and women's voices on the radio and in dance halls, the hum of trains, and the bustle of its working neighborhoods.

Bombay Hustle positions its various accounts and recurring characters on a map of the city's infrastructural and cultural histories. That is, Mukherjee layers contemporary insights about the city of Mumbai and its production culture over a "fragmented, multi-vocal archive" of documents, literary accounts, oral histories, and trade and popular press from late colonial Bombay.⁷ This methodology privileges disparate ephemera, from a court room transcription to a medicinal advertisement or a film sequence, to show how all were fastened together in the cultural life of the day. Mukherjee pulls at a number of theoretical and conceptual threads across the book, bunching together the fabric of Bombay's late colonial history and cinematic productions with personal anecdotes from her experiences working in the Mumbai film industry at the turn of the twenty-first century. Although this does leave a gap between the transition to sound and today, this technique nonetheless allows readers to feel just how interwoven the studios and the city have always been. These threads that run through the book include the embodied affects and material artifacts of cine-workers' gendered identities and caste status as well as the cine-ecology's constant orientation toward "speculative futures."⁸ The Bombay cine-ecology's financial and artistic gambles took place alongside and as a result of its ever-deepening risks. As Mukherjee explains, "film practitioners wagered daily on their profits, dreams, and lives. Precarity, risk, and danger marked cinema as a space of hustle."⁹ Oftentimes, the anxieties produced by the market and felt by cine-workers found their way onscreen in a variety of home-grown genres—including stunt films, courtroom dramas, self-reflexive star melodramas, and gambling pictures—that spoke directly to the modern sensations audiences would recognize from outside the theater. Mukherjee argues that this sense of urgency—apparent in the constant shifts in Bombay cinema's technological production, studio infrastructure, and personnel—is both the result of changes happening in Bombay as a colonial city and the perpetual engine of production occasioning the city's fluctuating with the cine-ecology's whims.

The transition to talkies encouraged Bombay and its cine-ecology to collectively respond to each other in a way that was both flexible and dispersed. In the book's first half, titled "Elasticity: Infrastructural Maneuvers," Mukherjee brings together the "elasticity" of the finances of

6 Mukherjee explains the importance of the fields of paperwork and document studies' attention to "the materiality of paper archives" and "documents as objects of ethnographic study." In *Bombay Hustle*, Mukherjee similarly treats documents not merely as historical evidence in her story but as their own kind of "technology, genre, practice, media, and process" that is tied to "colonial and bureaucratic regimes of control." Mukherjee, 100n1.

7 Mukherjee, 42.

8 Mukherjee, 48.

9 Mukherjee, 4.

both the city and the studios, the role of nationalism in codifying technological tools, and the acousmatic mediation of women's bodies and voices. In chapter 1, she makes the case that the infrastructural possibilities inherent in Bombay's late colonial society and businesses—from gambling on telephone wires to cotton-funded production or caste-based social networks—encouraged a kind of elasticity and adaptability of Bombay's studios and pushed them toward horizontal integration. Mukherjee argues that, unlike Hollywood's vertically integrated studio system, Bombay's production processes were horizontal, referring to “the creation of acquisition of multiple production units which produced similar commodities, in this case, films.”¹⁰ These horizontal processes necessitated a constantly shifting co-facilitation of equipment, space, and genres among producers and studios thanks to speculative financing from independent, non-banking institutions. Film producers required consistent funds from outside the industry, which was bankrolled by friends and family members from financial sectors who saw film production not unlike other speculative financial markets (like cotton) in that cinema depended on a risk-reward-based market wager in the hopes of future commercial success. Many studios' productions thus reflected the inherent gambles guaranteed through “social credit,” which included the “futurity and fallouts” from a focus on stunt-based action films or relying on a star for financial stability (as in the case of Sagar Movietone studios).¹¹

Chapter 2 explores how the concept of *svadeshi* (of one's own country) and the nationalism tied to the growth of India's indigenous industries, including film production, encouraged a diachronic understanding of cinema as both a colonial exhibition of the exotic and a science that codified and gave respectability to the cine-workers and their practices. Film studios embraced paper as an important technological tool of colonial efficiency and brought that belief to bear in a variety of studio practices from the continuity script to the valorization of increasingly specific film technical specialties in the trade papers and the bifurcation of studio production into double-unit shooting. The relationship between these technologies and the humans who practiced with them is the focus of chapter 3, in which Mukherjee introduces the concept of “acousmatic attunement.”¹² Audiences and practitioners utilized skills from the material world of the city—in this case the acousmatic landscape of cinematic and non-cinematic sound technologies such as the telephone, radio, gramophone, and court transcript—to make sense of the separation of the mediated voice from its emanating body. Returning to the prominent figure of the female star in Indian cinema, Mukherjee argues that the woman's vocalicity in speeches and dialogue contributed to their respectability, alongside other aural practices of song and music explored previously by scholars such as Neepa Majumdar.¹³ To that end, the processual and ecological approach in the first half of *Bombay Hustle* offers both a molecular and

10 Mukherjee, 81.

11 Mukherjee, 87, 39, 79.

12 Mukherjee, 147.

13 Neepa Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s–1950s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

integrated account of the unique practices that bring these distinct bodies, technologies, agendas, and mindsets together.

While the first part of the book delves deeply into the changing infrastructure of Bombay's cine-ecology, the second part—which Mukherjee titles “Energy: Intimate Struggles”—slows down to explore how cine-workers responded to these changes. Mukherjee explores embodied theories of labor in the Bombay studios in order to argue that cine-workers were divided not simply by rank (such as actress, stunt worker, or extra) but also by gender, ethnicity, and caste. Chapter 4 explores how public discourses of health and physical vitality pervaded the cine-ecology of early talkie films, prompted conversations about stamina across human and non-human cinematic forces (from tools to protocols), and provided a framework for cine-workers' understandings of their own exhaustion. Mukherjee connects this attention to enervation and depletion relationally and collectively across the cine-ecology from cine-workers to local spectators. Film attendance functioned as a productive site of energy recuperation for weakened workers who could be enlivened by the cinema's “sensory-corporeal register[s],” including the dynamism of the camera's moving vitality, the kinetic energies of film editing, and action-packed fight sequences.¹⁴ Similarly, chapter 5 considers how contemporaneous local and global workers' resistance movements paralleled actress Shanta Apte's hunger strikes and theories of performance exhaustion. Portions of this chapter on Apte appeared in an excellent *Feminist Media Histories* article, but the chapter also discusses whether film studios were “factories” and Apte's designation of the film industry's caste groups.¹⁵ These discussions help ground the material in *Bombay Hustle's* overall arguments. For instance, Mukherjee explains how Apte's caste demarcations showcased the embodied power dynamics of the cine-ecology and the precarity and “dehumanization” of some bodies.¹⁶ By “rematerializing labor power as embodied experience,” Mukherjee shows that gendered and caste prejudices were everyday encounters that some cine-workers fought against.¹⁷

In the book's closing chapter, labor's ambitions and struggles are tied to workers' vulnerability in the cine-ecology. Noting that in Bombay the word *struggle* was often discursively tied to cine-workers' precarity and hustle, Mukherjee explains that the practices of the cine-ecology's employees were often integrally tied to fandom.¹⁸ As Mukherjee explains, “The word ‘struggle’ means something so specific to Bombay that it has ceased to be recognized as an English-language word. To struggle in Bombay is to hustle for that elusive ‘big break’ in the movies, and strugglers are those who do the daily exhausting work of struggle.”¹⁹ This “hustle to become” famous themselves perpetuated conditions in the industry and requires often contradic-

14 Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle*, 220.

15 Debashree Mukherjee, “Somewhere between Human, Nonhuman, and Woman: Shanta Apte's Theory of Exhaustion,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 3 (2020): 21–51.

16 Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle*, 259.

17 Mukherjee, 260.

18 Mukherjee, 283–388.

19 Mukherjee, 41.

tory tasks of waiting around for the big break, situational risk, and non-stop work.²⁰ Through case studies of dead stunt-workers, injuries during location shooting, and a sexual assault of a female extra, Mukherjee demonstrates that film disasters are pre-programmed “short-circuits” that are “not accidental but integral to the overall logics of commercial filmmaking.”²¹ Such a dependence on vulnerable and eager cine-workers inevitably results in such on-set “accidents”; the failure of the human body to withstand these struggles over time is a feature, not a glitch, in the cine-ecology. The cine-ecology would not survive without the energy and exhaustion of its cine-workers. By returning back to the “fleshy” textures of cine-workers’ cine-ecological experiences on and off set, Mukherjee interrogates how the late colonial social and cultural discourses around *energy*, *innervation*, and *exhaustion* made their way into cinematic practices and representations onscreen.²²

Mukherjee’s writing style puts the reader back into the thick of the historical moment, to experience the odd pleasures of film history’s weediness. Instead of offering a linear production or infrastructural history of Bombay, Mukherjee’s historiographical collage asks the reader to participate in a speculative, imaginative, but nonetheless incisive retracing of Bombay’s cine-ecology and practices. In her work, the anecdotal, the memory, or the seemingly insignificant take center stage to show the interconnectedness of much larger systems. The author summons theory like a ready-at-hand spell transfiguring the refuse of extensive historical particularity into a vivid and interconnected circuitry board. As a reader, you’re not always certain where Mukherjee’s many movements are going, but the experience is rarely one of confusion. As Mukherjee teases, “being lost has its own charms,” and indeed the reader finds themselves trying to anticipate how a piece of paper, a studio tour, a bolt of fabric, or a contract will lead to theorizations of technics, labor, and capitalism.²³

Bombay Hustle offers a key intervention in histories of infrastructure and film production. This intervention extends beyond the particularity of South Asia and applies to any major cine-ecology. The book will certainly be widely cited and influential among existing scholarship on popular Hindi cinema, South Asian film history, and star studies. Mukherjee’s theoretical and historical apparatus of cine-ecology and cine-worker are especially useful for breaking away from more constraining and limited notions of Hollywood “systems” and contemporary media “industries.” Mukherjee’s presentation of a history *with feeling* joins an established lineage of feminist media scholars and critical race theorists who have consistently advocated for embodied and affective approaches to historical research and historiographical retelling. By foregrounding the physical struggles, sonic experiences, tactile encounters, and go-for-broke yearning embedded in the people and practices of Bombay’s cine-ecology, Mukherjee’s *Bombay Hustle* not only offers a history but

20 Mukherjee, 37.

21 Mukherjee, 310.

22 Mukherjee, 146.

23 Mukherjee, 38.

also brings expression to the sensations experienced by cine-workers while making movies in a colonial city.

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Reviewed by Alix Beeston

Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality

by Genevieve Yue.

Fordham University Press.

2020. 240 pages.

\$110.00 hardcover; \$32.00 paper; also available in e-book.

By the time I reached the midpoint of Genevieve Yue's ambitious and original first book, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality*, I'd begun making a list of all the rolled heads. There was Mary Stuart's, tumbling off the executioner's block in Edison Studios' *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1895); there were numerous heads of the Medusa, her severed neck impossibly smooth in Antonio Canova's nineteenth-century statue but a gory trail of tendons and blood in Benvenuto Cellini's sixteenth-century one. Lined up neatly on the page of my notebook, with bullet points like a row of spikes, these heads are significant for what they stand in for or exclude, namely, the women's bodies, chopped off and whisked away. In Edison's film, in fact, the Queen of Scots loses her body several times over. She's played by a male actor in a wig and a dress, whose substituting body is itself substituted by a dummy before the blade falls; even in the footage spliced out in service of this stop-motion illusion—some fourteen feet of film, as Yue notes—Mary's body is nowhere to be found.¹

In *Girl Head*, Yue piles up women's heads as, she argues, film does. Just as Medusa's head becomes the *gorgoneion*, her face petrified by the reflection of Perseus's shield, so, too, does film transform the matter of the body, specifically the female body, into an image cut from life. Separating head

1 Genevieve Yue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 78–81.

from body or face from flesh, this “conceptual decapitation,” as Yue writes in the introduction, involves a willful forgetting of the materiality of film and its production processes.² The material substrata of film—whether analog or digital—and the embodied labor of the film set, laboratory, editing suite, and archive are excised in its projection as a “virtual image,” an image that “conjures an absent presence by resembling it in another form.”³ But the physical matter, bodily or otherwise, that conditions film in its virtuality is also concealed within it, like a corpse stuffed in a trunk. In classic feminist accounts of narrative cinema, such as Mary Ann Doane’s 1982 essay “Film and the Masquerade,” the absence of the objects that appear on the screen interact with film’s “illusory sensory plenitude” to produce the “absolute and irrecoverable distance” necessary for a fetishistic gaze.⁴ In this view, cinema duplicates the measure of separation essential to the actions of the voyeur, actions that must always leave open the possibility of disavowal: *I wasn’t looking at you* or *It wasn’t me looking at you*. Yue’s critical move is to turn away from issues of representation and the structure of the gaze—to leave the voyeurs where they are, fiddling alone in half-grown bushes—and instead to interpret film’s absent-present bodies as figures for the gendered logic of film materiality itself. Feminist scholars have generally assumed the neutrality of film’s technical procedures and practices, but Yue maintains that these procedures—and the concepts of materiality that undergird them—have been “understood and manipulated according to social attitudes about gender.”⁵ Inseparable from the cultural sphere that produces it, film’s materiality, she argues, “is itself gendered, meaning that it is inscribed with the character and associations of women at all levels of a film’s construction.”⁶

Yue argues that film production chops off heads and hides the bodies of its victims, women whose flesh is associated with the material of the filmstrip and is necessary to, but occluded in, the expression of film as virtual image. Across three key sites, which she examines in virtuosic technical detail and with deep theoretical insight, Yue tracks how film production is predicated on female bodies “as something to be utilized as functional material and also concealed as unwanted remainder.”⁷ In the film laboratory—the location of her first chapter—Yue considers the ubiquity of “China Girl” reference images, which were first used in the 1920s and persist in some digital refining processes. Also known as a “girl head,” a less whimsical and more appropriately functional description that Yue adopts as her (wonderful) title, the China Girl consists of a close-up of a female model, almost always a white woman, along with swatches of various reference colors. She—it—is affixed to the header of a filmstrip, lengths of film not intended to be screened to audiences but instead to be scrutinized by film technicians calibrating the color, density, and tone of the image. A

2 Yue, 11.

3 Yue, 10.

4 Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” *Screen* 23, no. 3–4 (1982): 78.

5 Yue, *Girl Head*, 8.

6 Yue, 14.

7 Yue, 13.

“technical tool” designed “to create and maintain ideal appearance for the actors who appear on the screen,” the China Girl, Yue explains, is a nonrepresentational image essential to the representational world from which it is exiled. Its construction requires the model’s disappearance, as her singularity is “sublimated into function and [her] appearance is translated into quantifiable information.” Her body, Yue argues, “is instrumentalized for the production of the image, the face of the leading lady. . . . Its only trace is left on the margins of film, a disappearance deemed necessary as the condition by which the *proper* film image can appear.”⁸

The second chapter moves to the domain of film editing, where Yue narrates a history of what she calls *escamontage*, a portmanteau combining *escamotage*, French for concealment by trickery, and *montage*, the composition of a film through the assemblage of discrete elements. “Escamontage,” Yue writes, “is an editing *out* that also hides its own occurrence,” a form animated by a “fantasy of a cut without a seam.”⁹ It is editing as cleaning up, covering up evidence as of a crime. It is the hidden splice that masks the missing footage in *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*; the strategies of elision and concealment that produce the illusion of temporal and spatial continuity in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948); and the varied practices of “invisible editing” in David Fincher’s *Gone Girl* (2014), which transform the filmic cut by integrating it within the repertoire of digital visual effects, as in the reframing of shots in postproduction and the use of split-screen performance scenes.¹⁰ Since, for Yue, film materiality is allied to the materiality of the female body, it makes sense that the excisions of *escamontage* often accompany interventions into or disappearances of women’s bodies. Mary Stuart loses her head along with her body, and *Gone Girl*’s narrative turns on the vanishing act of its central female character; in the case of *Rope*, the near-absence of women from the penthouse apartment is registered in misplaced props and other elements of the *mise-en-scène*—the traces left behind by a “phantom maid” or by the film’s (uncredited) script supervisor, Charlise Bryant.¹¹

Finally, in the book’s third chapter, Yue enters the film archive. Here she finds another site in which film’s material histories are produced as the remains of a woman whose body has vanished. This conceit structures both Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). and Bill Morrison’s *The Film of Her* (1996), a film documenting the survival of the Library of Congress’s Paper Print Collection. *The Film of Her* is plotted around copyright clerk Howard L.

8 Yue, 56.

9 Yue, 74, 79.

10 Yue borrows the term *invisible editing* from *Gone Girl*’s editor, Kirk Baxter, cited in Meagan Keane, “‘Gone Girl’ Marks Yet Another Milestone for Adobe Premiere Pro CC,” ProVideo Coalition, October 3, 2014, <https://www.provideocoalition.com/gone-girl-marks-yet-another-milestone-for-adobe-premiere-pro-cc/>.

11 D. A. Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 72. Yue’s discussion of *Rope*’s *mise-en-scène* draws on Miller’s reading as well as on the feminist interpretation offered by Tania Modleski: “I like to imagine that the continuity girl cleaning up the messes made by men . . . performed a role in deaesthetizing the film and thus contributed to its understyle.” Tania Modleski, “Remastering the Master: Hitchcock after Feminism,” *New Literary History* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 153.

Walls's passionate search for the image of a woman he saw at the cinema as a child; in seeking this elusive image, Walls sorted and copied to paper 2.5 million feet of film that would otherwise have been destroyed. Meanwhile Derrida's account of the archive, Yue notes, derives its "model of the lost feminine" from a narrative of male obsession in Wilhelm Jensen's 1903 novella *Gradiva: A Pompeian Fancy*.¹² Derrida's theory, Yue convincingly argues, is founded on a gendered ideology that sublimates the material female body as it figures the archive through the ghostly, absent Gradiva and frames the archivist's work as a melancholic pursuit of the traces she leaves behind. In relation to film, in particular, such conceptions of the archive, which "cannot admit of the female *body* which drops out of the telling," extrapolate "an already uneasy relation between real bodies and those that appear on screen."¹³

Imaginatively conceived, elegantly written, and superbly researched, *Girl Head*'s three chapters work together to articulate, in compelling and often surprising ways, the gendering of film materiality. In keeping with the book's emphasis on how film is structured around its exclusions—the excess, physical material that is excised to produce the seamless virtuality of the image—Yue resists the positivist impulse of much feminist film scholarship, including work in production studies, to recognize and recenter the historical contributions of women filmmakers and film practitioners. *Girl Head* doesn't set out to recover or recuperate the female bodies cut out and discarded in the film laboratory, editing room, and archive; rather, its purpose is "to patiently observe the scenes of their disappearance," as Yue writes in the afterword.¹⁴ The afterword is organized around a reading of Adrienne Rich's 1972 poem "Diving into the Wreck," which describes an underwater expedition to a sunken ship "long after the devastation has occurred," when, as Yue notes, "there is no one left to rescue."¹⁵ In the poem, Rich's speaker expresses a desire to "see the damage done," to encounter "the thing itself."¹⁶ This is, in Yue's gloss, the ship's "stripped-down contours, its brute material."¹⁷ In attending to the brute material of film, Yue, like Rich, is not on a "salvage mission"; she instead issues the reader an invitation to visit, and witness, "the scene of disaster."¹⁸

Yet to the extent that the chapters valorize the living, laboring female body in film history, *Girl Head* might be said to share more with the recovery project of feminist production studies than it admits. Each chapter concludes by examining experimental works that meditate on the physical bodies in and of film materiality. For instance, chapter 1 ends with Mark Toscano's *Releasing Human Energies* (2012), which incorporates found footage of a woman posing for a China Girl reel. By presenting an uninterrupted stretch of her sitting at attention, shifting facial expressions in response, presumably,

12 Yue, *Girl Head*, 103.

13 Yue, 103.

14 Yue, 131.

15 Yue, 130.

16 Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," in *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971–1972* (1973; New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 23, 24.

17 Yue, *Girl Head*, 130.

18 Yue, 131.

to off-screen directions, the film “restores a sense of labor and endurance, of life itself, to the woman in the China Girl image. Here she is as she is truly never seen: uncomfortable, awkward, and very much alive.”¹⁹ Similarly, the second chapter’s discussion of hidden editing culminates with Jennifer Montgomery’s *Transitional Objects* (2000), a film that begins and ends with shots of Montgomery struggling to tape-splice strips of 16mm film using her bare feet. Feet moving clumsily, toes nicked by the slicer’s blade, Montgomery offers up an alternative vision of editing practices, one that is not “seamless and pristine,” as in Fincher’s films, but viscerally physical, a procedure both “painful and arduous.”²⁰

The chapters thus drive toward—or dive toward, to borrow Yue’s underwater metaphor—reflexive film works that dredge up female bodies from “below the surface” of film and its histories. Deep in the ocean, as Yue writes at the very end of the book, there are women’s bodies, and they are “quietly and insistently alive.”²¹ In this sense, each chapter presents a drama of revelation, progressing from female bodies hidden in film processes to female bodies disclosed by them. And in so doing, the chapters enact a kind of conceptual vitalization of those bodies: from absent and dead to present and living.

In saying this, I don’t mean to dismiss Yue’s important point that in reflecting scholars’ desire to “restore female presence to the historical record,” the recuperative posture of feminist film studies rests on a theory of film history derived from film’s representational functions and hence treats film as a medium of presence rather than one constituted by its absences, by all the material that remains off-screen.²² Yet even as *Girl Head* engages female figures that appear barely if at all, and proves the value of a feminist theory of film in its negative valences, Yue’s work should, I think, be contextualized alongside the large body of feminist recovery work—if not exactly within that body of work. For *Girl Head*’s conclusions are broadly compatible with feminist studies that reclaim the concealed or occluded labor of women at every level of film production, including labor that leaves few or no signs on the screen or in the archive.²³ Such scholarship, especially in production studies, subtends Yue’s discovery of living female bodies in the works of Toscano, Montgomery, and others, even as that scholarship is enriched and complicated by Yue’s tight focus on the material construction of film.

19 Yue, 72.

20 Yue, 100.

21 Yue, 131.

22 Yue, 17.

23 Relatively, Yue perhaps overstates the distinction between *Girl Head* and Karen Redrobe (Beckman)’s 2003 study *Vanishing Women*. In addition to noting her attention to “sites of material production where gender is not explicitly marked as a foremost concern,” Yue differentiates her work from Redrobe’s by emphasizing unspectacular forms of vanishing (137n28). This is, in my view, a difference in degree rather than in kind. Redrobe’s acknowledgment of how spectacular acts of vanishing in film, which usually center white women, may serve to screen the non-appearance of other bodies offers a point of departure for Yue’s argument. Moreover, there is a marked (but unremarked upon) correspondence between Yue’s analysis of *Rope* and Redrobe’s analysis of Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), as both scholars connect the effects of the editorial splice to the motivated elisions of particular subjects within the films’ diegetic worlds. See Karen Redrobe (Beckman), *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 129–152.

This genuinely innovative history of film materiality shows how deep film's gendered logic goes. And although it doesn't try to bring up women long drowned, or to reattach their severed heads to their bodies, it still manages to breathe life into them.

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Reviewed by Mikal J. Gaines

Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen

by **Samantha N. Sheppard.**

University of California Press. George Gund Foundation

Imprint in African American Studies.

2020. 264 pages.

\$85.00 hardcover; \$29.95 paper; also available in e-book.

As I was reading Samantha Sheppard's incisive new study on Black representation in the modern American sports film, a genre she rightly describes as "conservative," since "structural inequalities can be overcome by a buzzer-beater or a dignified loss," I immediately began imagining how her dynamic interpretive framework, "critical muscle memory," could be activated to examine some of my own favorite sports films.¹ Then, of course, I began scanning the index to see if and how those films would find their way into the discussion. While some of my favorites do receive attention, it became clear that Sheppard's provocative choices—the texts she has selected, the wide breadth and depth of interdisciplinary scholarship that informs her arguments, and the measured methodological moves she makes—are all intended to position *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen* as a deliberate act of scholarly resistance. The book is largely unconcerned with questions about sports films' box office success or critical reception, and it eschews a wide, comprehensive view of the genre in favor of detailed and sustained analyses of specific texts. Put another way, Sheppard provides not

1 Samantha N. Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 9.

the work we may believe we want but rather the work we *need* by positing an imaginative theoretical paradigm that has compelling implications for future studies of embodied Blackness across media.

Drawing on human kinetics—the study of the body in motion and the forces that act upon it—Sheppard deploys the term *critical muscle memory* to describe how representations of Black sporting bodies “contain embodied, kinesthetic, and cinematic histories that go beyond a film’s diegesis to index, circulate, reproduce, and/or counter broader narratives about Black sporting and non-sporting experiences in American society.”² Sheppard therefore presents the Black sporting body as itself a kind of haunted text, an endlessly signifying palimpsest whose power is integral to the sort of story that sports films want to tell even as it also serves as a site of disruption within those very same narratives. In this sense, sports films need the Black sporting body in order to make certain fundamental aspects of the genre legible to audiences. And yet, as Sheppard argues, the Black sporting body also “functions as an unruly historical force that exceeds the generic constraints.”³ *Sporting Blackness* thus hopes to move beyond reductive treatments of “positive” and “negative” racial representations (“skin in the game”) to inspect “skin in the genre,” a more potent examination of “what Black characters, themes, and cinematic-athletic stylistics do to the sports film in terms of generic modes.”⁴ This renewed emphasis on understanding how Blackness is continually conjured up and reconfigured within the particular aesthetic, political, and emotional registers demanded by the sports film feels in concert with Michael Boyce Gillespie’s and Racquel Gates’s recent calls for renewed focus on formal analysis in Black film and media studies.⁵

Sheppard demonstrates the reach of critical muscle memory as an investigative tool across four thoroughly researched chapters and varied case studies. Texts that center basketball and football are her primary focus due to their heightened prominence in the Black public sphere, though Sheppard acknowledges that her hermeneutic could just as easily be applied to films about other sports. Chapter 1, “Historical Contestants in Black Sports Documentaries,” looks at some films that longtime fans of sports docs will immediately recognize and others that are less familiar: *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Story of the Greatest Basketball Team You Never Heard of* (Deborah Morales, 2011), *This Is a Game, Ladies* (Peter Schnall and Rob Kuhns, 2004), *Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994), and *Hoop Reality* (Lee Davis, 2007). What becomes apparent in this opening inquiry—and is further reinforced throughout the book—is that Sheppard intends to use her close readings as more than just evidence for her larger thesis. Instead, they function as a means of critical praxis unto themselves. For it is through the close, formal study of film that

2 Sheppard, 5.

3 Sheppard, 11.

4 Sheppard, 6.

5 See Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Racquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); and Michael Boyce Gillespie and Racquel Gates, introduction to “Dimensions in Black: Perspectives on Black Film and Media” dossier, *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 9–11.

Sheppard's voice emerges at its most erudite and distinct; this is also where she demonstrates the concept of critical muscle memory most convincingly. In this way, the form and structure of *Sporting Blackness* does for the study of Black film the same kind of "unruly" work that the Black sporting body does within its respective genre.

Sheppard's choice of case studies similarly acts as a form of methodological resistance. The inclusion of *This Is a Game, Ladies*, for example, facilitates a closer look at the unique gendered entanglements that accompany Black women's sporting bodies within both the documentary itself and the larger, extradiegetic circuits of meaning where the bodies of the Rutgers women's basketball team are transmuted. Sheppard's reading of a highly metatextual moment when Coach C. Vivian Stringer watches herself on HBO's *Real Sports* is especially well rendered and lays the groundwork for themes that she returns to later in chapter 3's more detailed discussion of Black women in sports. And while one expects a film as iconic as *Hoop Dreams* to make an appearance in this chapter, the connections Sheppard traces between it and its lesser-known sequel, *Hoop Reality*, evince an impressive level of continuity in her approach. If many readers might not even know that the second film exists, Sheppard's inclusion of it suggests the need to think through the afterlives of the Black sporting body as it manifests in other spaces in the pop culture imaginary.

Chapter 2, "Racial Iconicity and the Transmedia Black Athlete," unquestionably serves as the book's best display of interdisciplinarity as Sheppard traces transmedia incarnations of former Texas high school football star James "Boobie" Miles. After his tragic tale was first chronicled in H. G. Bissinger's bestselling book *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, a Dream* (1990), the character later appeared in *Friday Night Lights* (Peter Berg, 2004) and was then transposed onto other similar characters, specifically other Black star players Brian "Smash" Williams (Gaius Charles) and later Vince Howard (Michael B. Jordan), in NBC's cult favorite series of the same name (2006–2008; 2008–2011 The 101 Network). Sheppard considers how Miles's tragic injury during his senior year, before making it to college or the NFL, functions as an archetypal example of the Black sporting body's vulnerability. She then traces how his cautionary tale manifests in songs and videos by rapper Big K.R.I.T. As a persona whose legend transects multiple media, Miles represents one of Sheppard's strongest examples of how critical muscle memory performs its meaning-making work. She asserts, "Boobie's sporting history has become memorialized as iconic and familiar, a discourse on exceptionality and failure, and a site of cultural (re)production for those who (re)imagine him in popular culture."⁶ Moreover, the chapter is an excellent example of a media phenomenon for which only a truly interdisciplinary understanding of different textual vocabularies would yield the necessary insight. Fortunately, Sheppard reads with fluidity and grace when moving from one interpretation of Miles to the next.

The last two chapters are no less artfully written and no less important to the book's broader themes. In fact, for many readers, it is only upon reading

6 Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness*, 71.

chapter 3, “Black Female Incommensurability and Athletic Genders,” that some of Sheppard’s earlier choices, such as the aforementioned discussion of *This Is a Game, Ladies*, begin to coalesce. More specifically, if Sheppard is right that the Black sporting body creates fundamental obstacles to satisfying the narrative desires that most sports films hold dear, then her readings of Penny Marshall’s *A League of Their Own* (1992), Gina Prince-Bythewood’s *Love & Basketball* (2000), and Jesse Vaughan’s *Juwanna Mann* (2002) in chapter 3 illustrate what is at stake when Black women cannot “coherently signify as athlete and woman simultaneously.”⁷ Whereas most critics would likely turn their noses up at a film such as Vaughan’s deeply problematic gender-switch comedy, Sheppard finds productive tensions even in its failings, suggesting that there really are no such things as bad objects of analysis, only uninspired readings.

Chapter 4, “The Revolt of the Cinematic Black Athlete,” concentrates on L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Haile Gerima’s experimental film *Hour Glass* (1971). Like Sheppard’s concluding discussion of “The Fitness of Sporting Blackness,” this last chapter is invested in what happens when the Black sporting body refuses to play and thereby short-circuits the very transactional economies that leave it trapped in a liminal state between polarities of exploitation, exaltation, or expulsion. These final sections provide excellent jumping-off points for further study, as they leave the reader to ponder other fruitful directions for critical muscle memory. Certainly future applications of critical muscle memory might include recent docuseries such as Esquire Network’s *Friday Night Tykes* (2014–2017) or Netflix’s *Last Chance U* (2016–2020) and *Cheer* (2020–). The boxing film, which Sheppard does discuss briefly, also seems like an appropriate genre to expand upon; the *Rocky* series (1976–2006) and the related *Creed* films (Ryan Coogler, 2015; Steven Caple Jr., 2018) constitute one of the, if not the, longest-running, continuous sports film franchises. Even more significantly, all of the films in the franchise are animated by the Black sporting body of Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) or his afterimage, following the character’s infamous death in *Rocky IV* (Sylvester Stallone, 1985). This is one among a seemingly endless series of Black representational sites awaiting the illuminative power of Sheppard’s approach. Indeed, as a new sourcebook for forward-looking Black studies scholarship and powerful contribution in its own right, *Sporting Blackness* “hauls more than its weight.”⁸

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7 Sheppard, 26.

8 Sheppard, 5.

Reviewed by Christopher Goetz

Video Games Have Always Been Queer

by **Bonnie Ruberg.**

New York University Press.

2019. 288 pages.

\$89.00 hardcover; \$30.00 paper; also available in e-book.

Video Games Have Always Been Queer makes its central argument boldly and on the front cover. Bonnie Ruberg, a leading voice at the intersection of queer theory and digital media studies, carefully lays out the provocative premise behind the title with characteristic patience and a deep eagerness to address a broad audience. If you know nothing about queer theory or video games—not to mention why their intersection has recently become so urgently important—do not fear. You soon will. Throughout the book, Ruberg demonstrates repeatedly that queerness is not some special coefficient added to games by scholars and activists; it's always been there, just as queer people have always been playing video games. Games, like the world we live in, are more diverse, complex, and strange than is suggested by the simplified frameworks or assumptions we deploy when talking about them, including what games are, why they exist, and who plays them.

Ruberg frequently frames a special connection between gaming and queer subjectivity in terms of queerness's counter-hegemonic function. She argues that both queerness and games “share a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play.”¹ The book's first half explores games that already oppose such structures, but perhaps in ways not always fully appreciated. In the first three chapters, Ruberg works “to reimagine the history of

1 Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1.

video games” by locating queerness “beneath the surface of digital games from their earliest forms.”² The book’s second half considers a variety of ways players have “queered” even commercial games with no LGBTQ content by engaging in play that itself resists the dominant systems that games reproduce. In the broadest sense, Ruberg is offering a comprehensive map of how players “queer”—or pose some sort of opposition to—hegemonic forces in the industry, its games, and its communities. Queering a game can entail challenging assumptions about why we play (e.g., to win), how we interpret a game’s meanings (e.g., *Pong* [Atari, 1972] is just table tennis), what features we assume a game must have (e.g., that it should take dozens of hours to complete), or even how we should feel while playing (e.g., triumphant or happy). One necessary starting point for understanding Ruberg’s intervention is the notion that the video game industry is rigidly standardized with deeply embedded protocol, business models, and mentalities. So, too, is much of gaming culture apparently set in its ways and determined to resist the changes that are being called for by a growing number of voices within the community.

The threat of real-world violence directed through online spaces at anyone who stands apart from or poses questions about gaming’s normative models of play or its supposedly cisgendered, straight, white, and male culture looms over Ruberg’s discussion. Readers will likely have already heard about #GamerGate and the harassment faced by queer players and women in online spaces. But some readers may still be surprised to learn that simply undertaking a close reading of a game in order to highlight its gender politics can result in violent threats of rape and murder. As with their peers in the emerging paradigm of queer game studies, Ruberg sadly does not have the luxury of simply writing for an academic audience in an ivory tower, shielded from the difficult realities of a culture war unfolding in real time. Ruberg addresses and beautifully analyzes some of the anti-intellectual and homophobic vitriol that they have personally received as a result of basic queer readings of games. Though difficult to encounter even vicariously, such reactions against queer or feminist voices in online spaces attest powerfully to both the serious difficulty and the urgent necessity of addressing identity in gaming.

This reference to a culture war is meant to speak to the timeliness of Ruberg’s important book. But I also have in mind Ruberg’s contention that in order to act in this present moment to “make space for LGBTQ identities, lives and desires in games today . . . we must turn backwards and lay claim to the queerness that has existed beneath the surface of digital games from their earliest forms.”³ Finding queerness beneath the surface of gaming’s past helps imagine queer subjectivity and gaming in positive terms, rather than though “a history of exclusion.”⁴ Put otherwise, coming to terms with the past has taken on a new kind of urgency in Ruberg’s project.

One of Ruberg’s key strategies throughout the book is to broaden the reader’s conception of queerness “beyond representation,” or beyond the

2 Ruberg, 209.

3 Ruberg, 209.

4 Ruberg, 209.

appearance of queer characters and themes in game narratives and imagery.⁵ This is not to say that the presence or absence of explicitly LGBTQ representational content in games such as *Pong* is insignificant. Rather, even in its absence, Ruberg targets the narrow strictures binding how we might think about gaming in its entirety. They walk readers through a range of critical responses, including how to perform a queer reading of a classic game (e.g., *Pong* or *Super Mario Bros.* [Nintendo, 1985]), how to queer such a game by playing it in unexpected ways (e.g., losing on purpose or finishing it too quickly), and how to recognize and discuss implicitly queer themes in a game's subtext (e.g., *Portal* [Valve, 2007]). To further demonstrate gaming's often unrecognized complexity and potential for expressiveness, Ruberg also devotes much of the book to games that are deliberately queer in their mechanisms, such as short games about goal-less affection (*Realistic Kissing Simulator* [Loren Schmidt and Jimmy Andrews, 2014]) or expressing love in one's last moments alive (*Queers in Love at the End of the World* [Anna Anthropy, 2013]), or games that problematize movement through space that is typically fluid and uncomplicated (e.g., *QWOP* [Bennett Foddy, 2008] and *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* [Young Horses, 2014]).

Over the course of seven chapters, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* offers a comprehensive primer for anyone interested in queer theory or game studies. The book is meticulously engaged with both, and Ruberg emerges as a scholar with their finger on the pulse of both canonical and recent work in these fields. Their ideas range from the immediately graspable to the nuanced and complex. This book would be wonderful for an eager college student curious about issues of identity and media. It would also sit well on a shelf beside the most engaging and important recent works of queer theory or game studies. I have taught portions of this book in my own undergraduate classrooms, and I have found that students immediately grasp the significance of its interventions and, moreover, that they apply its ideas in ways that surprise me, attesting to its timeliness and relevance for their thinking. I never have to sell students on the idea of queer failure in games (addressed in chapter 5). The subversive potential in embracing the failure to live up to the ideals of parents and the demands of society finds a friendly, if not eager, audience in young adults still under the full weight of such expectations. So, too, do students quickly grasp concepts such as queer embodiment in game mechanics that disrupt industry conventions of smoothly functioning, able-bodied avatars, such as in *Octodad*, an indie game about an octopus awkwardly trying to walk and perform everyday tasks (and thus "pass") as a man.

However, I imagine some readers may initially struggle with Ruberg's close reading of *Pong* in conjunction with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985). *Pong* is the most abstract, not to mention oldest, game Ruberg considers at length. And its chapter comes first, before discussions of games with clearer and more concrete examples of "queer experience, queer embodiment, queer affect, and queer desire."⁶ Ruberg anticipates (if not directly invites) such a struggle by prefacing their reading of *Pong*

5 Ruberg, 1.

6 Ruberg, 1.

with the backlash Janet Murray faced for reading *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov and Vladimir Pokhilko, 1984) as an allegory for the “overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s.”⁷ At stake here is nothing short of the meanings scholars are willing to consider or see in a game. Ruberg asserts that their own allegorical approach would remain responsive to the “‘stories,’ loosely termed, that these playful systems themselves tell.”⁸ However, these stories’ meanings can sometimes feel more strongly influenced by Sedgwick’s terms than *Pong*’s. For instance, Ruberg argues, “[I]f we overlay the gender dynamics of Sedgwick’s erotic triangle onto the interactive structures of *Pong*, the paddles become the ‘men’ forming bonds and the ball becomes a ‘woman’ heatedly exchanged between them. This mapping implies that *Pong* offers a concerning model of gendered agency, with ‘male’ paddles as subjects and a ‘female’ ball as an object. Whereas the paddles are free to move and exert their own power, the ball must go where it is sent, obeying both the whims of the players and the basic rules of physics as programmed into the game.”⁹ Mapping or overlaying Sedgwick’s text to *Pong* produces a “parable of oppression” in which the only “female-coded ‘character’” (the ball) cannot even be directly controlled.¹⁰ But *Pong*’s “queer geometry,” which is “structured around ricochets, crossed paths, and movement that almost never adds up ‘straight,’” renders any sense of control precarious.¹¹ Ruberg’s reading of *Pong* through the lens of queer intimacy is provocative and memorable in spite of the possibility that Ruberg imagines formalist skeptics perceiving this interpretation as “overreaching.”¹²

In response to such skeptics, I would join critical game scholars such as Ruberg in arguing that regardless of what we might teach our students when inculcating methods of close textual analysis, the text is never actually a sealed entity. Or, in the terms of games scholars, “there is no magic circle.”¹³ The formalist objection that reading gender into *Pong* is tantamount to invention (or the intrusion of a wholly external discourse to the internal logics of a game) could be productively reframed as the accusation of introducing the *wrong sort* of external text to the discussion. I don’t imagine many would be as apt to reject comparisons with tennis—an external text often mapped onto *Pong*. This, of course, raises the relevant question of who gets

7 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 144.

8 Ruberg, *Video Games*, 38.

9 Ruberg, 50.

10 Ruberg, 49, 52.

11 Ruberg, 47.

12 Ruberg, 38.

13 This is in reference to Mia Consalvo’s influential essay of the same name. The notion of “magic circle” in game studies comes from Johan Huizinga’s play theory and refers roughly to the notion that play unfolds from everyday life. In game design discourse, this concept of separateness came to encapsulate the idea of a game’s formal boundaries, determining the time and place in which a game occurs (e.g., the time allotted for a match of speed chess or the lines demarcating the boundaries of a basketball court) as well as the boundaries determined by its rules (e.g., when a chess match ends and who is considered the winner). Consalvo and others have challenged this idea on the basis of all the messy, complex ways that everyday life pervades the space of games. See Mia Consalvo, “There Is No Magic Circle,” *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2009): 408–417.

to determine which are the right sorts of textual conjunctions for finding meaning in games.

As with the discussion of *Pong*, each of *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*'s seven chapters may initially seem straightforward or even narrow in their focus, as most pair a single game with a single prominent queer theorist or text. However, the implications for this pairing can be complex. Each chapter accumulates a conceptual density that ultimately opens onto key questions facing not only the relatively new field of game studies but also queer theory as it grapples with the potential of new and digital media. Taken in isolation, most instances of queering a game could be understood in seemingly more banal terms. For example, *Realistic Kissing Simulator*'s eschewal of orgasm might be queer, as Ruberg suggests in chapter 4, but it might also be understood to evoke the perversity of fore-pleasure that Freud located in sexuality more broadly (not that the two are mutually exclusive).¹⁴ However, with Ruberg's analyses, the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts, and the book's persuasiveness lies less in what's revealed in any one moment of queering a game than in the gradual realization of the potentiality of queerness in games that has been there all along. Over the course of the book, it becomes apparent that queerness as a counter-hegemonic force takes such varied forms precisely because queerness is not some radically alien condition of subjectivity. Queerness has always been part of the world of gaming. And this book is a celebration of what happens when queer subjectivity becomes visible, when the straight and narrow (but powerful and brutally enforced) assumptions about what gaming is or should be are refracted into a queer rainbow: a spectrum of possibility that reflects the variety of people who design and play games.

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14 See, for instance, Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (1905; New York: Basic Books, 1962), 38.

Reviewed by Christina G. Petersen

Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television, 1878–1939

by **Doron Galili**.

Duke University Press. Sign, Storage, Transmission Series.

2020. 264 pages.

\$99.95 hardcover; \$25.95 paper; also available in e-book.

As the lines between television and film have become increasingly blurred in the streaming era and now even further in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, Doron Galili's pathbreaking intermedial history of television before the broadcast era is an important entry into television, film, and new media studies. An expansion of a dissertation honored by the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in 2013, *Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television, 1878–1939* provides a wide-ranging study of television as "moving image transmission" that moves away from defining television against film in favor of exploring both media's "historical instances of intermedial influences, technical amalgamations, and shared imaginaries."¹ At the heart of this study is a consideration of medium specificity not as enduring ontology but rather as a continual process of emergence. As such, Galili's excavation of the history of the medium that became known as television offers a model for how to think through both the recent past and the mercurial present of moving image transmission.

Seeing by Electricity takes a media archaeological approach to the pre-broadcast era, uncovering early conceptualizations of television from the 1870s to late 1930s. Galili engages with the work of early television scholars,

1 Doron Galili, *Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television, 1878–1939* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 6–7 (emphasis in original).

including William Uricchio and Siegfried Zielinski, to break down previous contrasts between film as a medium of “capturing, storing, and reanimating scenes” for display and television as a medium of “scanning or dissecting” images for relay to a distant viewer.² Equally important, this book explores early television’s relationship to twentieth-century modernity, when political, economic, and technological changes accelerated alterations in social relations. Galili’s approach thus has important implications for the present day. Indeed, the cultural imaginary of early television, which engaged the implications of visual connectedness at a distance, resonates with the current Zoom era and the rise of socially distanced video chats, happy hours, and town halls. As Galili discusses, long before the formation of commercial television networks, moving image transmission shared with early cinema the ability to foster both connection to and disconnection from disparate groups and individuals.

Divided into two parts of three chapters each, *Seeing by Electricity* begins with television history’s “speculative era”: the late 1870s to the mid-1920s.³ The first chapter, “Ancient Affiliates: The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Cinema and Television,” offers a fascinating account of how television, like film, was initially conceived in the context and “as an *extension* of other media.”⁴ In this case, technicians, journalists, and science fiction writers described television as a visual version of the telegraph or telephone that could also conquer the barriers of space and time to create decentralized communication networks.⁵ Building on Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s study of the effects of railway transportation and Mary Ann Doane’s discussion of cinema and modern time, Galili notes that television’s affiliation with the telegraph presented utopian (and dystopian) implications. Long before Marshall McLuhan’s “global village,” television’s disintegration of distance between peoples held the potential to reduce prejudice as much as to reinforce colonial ways of thinking.⁶ Employing Carolyn Marvin’s concept of “media fantasies,” this chapter mines science fiction literature by Jules Verne, Edward Bellamy, and Mark Twain to note how early television was imagined as a way for future societies to eradicate difference by reinforcing connection, equality, and uniformity through the ability to see “*everything, everywhere, at all times.*”⁷ Like conceptualizations of early cinema as engaging with the lived experience of modernity through its form as well as content, *Seeing by Electricity* argues persuasively that media fantasies of early television addressed the ambivalence of modern existence.⁸

2 Galili, 6.

3 Galili, 10.

4 Galili, 25 (emphasis in original).

5 Galili, 22–28.

6 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 35; Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 82; and Galili, *Seeing by Electricity*, 29–32. For more on the global village, see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 89–105.

7 Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 35; and Galili, *Seeing by Electricity*, 36, 39 (emphasis in original).

8 Galili, *Seeing by Electricity*, 47–48. For more on the connections between cinema

The next chapter, “Severed Eyeballs and Prolonged Optic Nerves: Television as Modern Prosthetic Vision,” excavates early television’s relationship to modernity in a careful consideration of technological discourse about moving image transmission as like “an eye that ‘sees’ by electricity.”⁹ Galili argues that early television was conceived not as a technology distinct from the modern human body but rather as a type of detachable prosthesis, in which the electrified eye could travel places where the rest of the body could not.¹⁰ In my view, this immersive quality of early moving image transmission offers much for contemporary considerations of virtual reality as an unbounded interactive viewing experience with a distinctive effect on the human body. Chapter 3 concludes this section by refusing a strict dichotomy between moving image transmission and recording, or television and cinema, in the period leading up to World War I; instead, it offers analyses of early cinema’s depictions of simultaneous moving image transmission. In films such as *Long Distance Wireless Photography* (Georges Méliès, 1908) and *Amour et science* (*Love and Science*, 1912), the new transmission technology initially leads to disaster and disruption but ultimately alleviates these effects through a demonstration of its affinity with cinema.

The second half of *Seeing by Electricity* moves from conceptions and fantasies of early television to realizations of the medium in its experimental period between World Wars I and II. One of the strengths of this section is its international focus, as Galili looks beyond the United States to the Soviet Union, Germany, and Italy for examples of how television took its shape. Chapter 4, “Cinema’s Radio Double: Hollywood Comes to Terms with Television,” reconsiders the beginnings of television—Charles Francis Jenkins’s patent application for the wireless transmission of images and the development of American television broadcasting—through its interactions with other media. In addition to situating early television within the context of radio broadcasting, Galili examines Hollywood’s interest in the new medium in ways that evoke today’s digital relocation of cinema away from the traditional movie theater.¹¹ *Seeing by Electricity* thus further defines both film and television as distinct viewing experiences rather than just specific forms of technology, which Galili explores through striking examples of films broadcast on television and filmic representations of television in this era, including the meta-televisual and meta-cinematic B movie *S.O.S. Tidal Wave* (John H. Auer, 1939).

The last two chapters unearth further confluences between early television and film in unexpected places. The fifth chapter reconsiders Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov’s canonical documentary, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), as an experiment in early television that could best represent the new Soviet order. As Galili discusses, Vertov viewed television as a new evolution of the moving image that aimed to “reveal aspects of everyday reality

and modernity, see Tom Gunning, “Modernity and Cinema: A Culture of Shocks and Flows,” in *Cinema and Modernity*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 297–315.

9 Galili, *Seeing by Electricity*, 51.

10 Galili, 69–70.

11 Galili, 128–129.

that escape the naked eye.”¹² *Man with a Movie Camera* is often discussed as a case study for cinematic medium specificity, but in this chapter, Vertov’s film comes into view as an intermedial work that “simulates” television in its amalgamation of sound and image and its depiction of its own production and reception.¹³ Such (re)thinking across media and national contexts also structures the book’s final chapter, which considers television’s emergence in the late 1920s and early 1930s as a factor in the classical film theories of André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Sergei Eisenstein, and Rudolf Arnheim. Arnheim in particular noted that the immersive and unmediated aspects of television could promote greater human understanding but also the potential for totalitarian conformity at the expense of moving images’ status as an art form.¹⁴ As Galili persuasively argues, these film theorists’ engagement with television offers a rich archive of intermedial perspectives on the confluences between film and television that long predate the age of streaming.

Galili concludes with an evocative description of moving image transmission history “as a palindrome of sorts.” Whether one reads the history of moving image transmission forward or backward, the “relatively stable dominant mass media” in the center gives way to a “multiplicity of configurations” at either end.¹⁵ This orientation allows for a comparison between the disparate media fantasies of television of the late nineteenth century and the splintered streaming mediascape of the early twenty-first without losing sight of either’s specific historical context. Deeply researched and thoroughly informed by theory, *Seeing by Electricity*’s discussion of media fantasy and reality as well as technological and textual examples unearths unexpected connections and offers exciting new pathways for thinking about the emergence of a new medium.

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12 Galili, 155.

13 Galili, 160–164.

14 Galili, 172–173.

15 Galili, 184.