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Hollywood's Artists: The Directors Guild of America and the Construction of Authorship

by Virginia Wright Wexman.

Columbia University Press.

2020. 312 pages.

\$90 hardcover; \$30 paper; also available in e-book.

Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production

by Kate Fortmueller.

University of Texas Press.

2021. 216 pages.

\$45 hardcover; also available in e-book.

Reversing major declines in labor organizing and participation that began in the 1980s, many Americans are once again turning to unionization to survive increasing economic precarity.¹ Newsrooms across America formed unions throughout the last half decade to stop the gutting of both online and local news outlets.² Strikes by teachers in 2018 and 2019 across states such as Okla-

1 See US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Union Membership in the United States," September 2016, <https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2016/union-membership-in-the-united-states/pdf/union-membership-in-the-united-states.pdf>. The causes are myriad, divided across the political as well as social spectrum. See Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Reuel Schiller, *Forging Rivals: Race, Class, Law, and the Collapse of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

2 Steven Greenhouse, "Why Newsrooms Are Unionizing Now," *NiemanReports*, March 21, 2019, <https://niemanreports.org/articles/why-newsrooms-are-unionizing-now/>.

homa and West Virginia won critical pay increases.³ In Hollywood in 2019, the Writers Guild forced the major talent agencies to halt predatory practices that siphoned off writers' profit share, and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) voted resoundingly in 2020 to authorize a strike only to avoid doing so on a technicality.⁴

Unsurprisingly, these movements have been met with renewed anti-union action, including *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees* (2018) and *Cedar Point Nursery v. Hassid* (2021), two landmark court decisions by the increasingly conservative US Supreme Court.⁵ The contentious passage of Proposition 22 in California in 2020 stymied the potential organization of gig economy workers, while companies such as Amazon and Starbucks have attempted to crush labor organizing efforts across their worksites.⁶ Debates over police unions and their association with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) have prompted questions about how to build coalitions.⁷ Despite the Biden administration's failure to make any manageable gains in labor protections, unions are once again dominating headlines through their grassroots efforts.⁸

Two books about unionization in Hollywood demonstrate how media studies scholars should theorize and teach labor organizing and media industry structures. Each author centers a different set of workers: Virginia Wright Wexman's *Hollywood's Artists: The Directors Guild of America and the Construction of Authorship* focuses on the Directors Guild of America (DGA), whereas Kate Fortmueller's *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* highlights precarious actors and extras in the now-defunct Screen Extras Guild (SEG).⁹

- 3 Andrew Van Dam, "Teacher Strikes Made 2018 the Biggest Year for Worker Protest in a Generation," *Washington Post*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2019/02/14/with-teachers-lead-more-workers-went-strike-than-any-year-since/>.
- 4 Joy Press, "The Agents Certainly Did Not Like Being Called Crooks: How Hollywood Writers Won a War," *Vanity Fair*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2021/02/how-tv-writers-won-a-war>; and Alex N. Press, "The IATSE Contract Vote Is a Worst-Case Scenario," *Jacobin*, November 15, 2021, <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/11/iatse-contract-union-basic-agreement-area-standards>.
- 5 *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees*, Council 31, 138 S. Ct. 2448 (2018); and *Cedar Point Nursery v. Hassid*, 141 S. Ct. 2063 (2021).
- 6 Josh Eidelson, "The Gig Economy Is Coming for Millions of American Jobs," *Bloomberg News*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-02-17/gig-economy-coming-for-millions-of-u-s-jobs-after-california-s-uber-lyft-vote>; Noam Scheiber, "Mandatory Meetings Reveal Amazon's Approach to Resisting Unions," *New York Times*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/business/amazon-meetings-union-elections.html>; and Alex N. Press, "Starbucks Is Desperate to Stop Unionization, So It's Firing Worker Leaders," *Jacobin*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2022/04/starbucks-union-drive-nlrb-worker-union-leaders-firing-ulp-laila-dalton>.
- 7 Kim Kelly, "The AFL-CIO's Untenable Stance on Cops," *New Republic*, August 5, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/158712/afl-cio-police-unions-labor-movement-power-struggle-cops>.
- 8 Sam Adler-Bell, "Do Democrats Really Want Amazon's Workers to Win?," *New York Magazine*, April 8, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/04/do-democrats-really-want-amazons-workers-to-win.html>.
- 9 Virginia Wright Wexman, *Hollywood's Artists: The Directors Guild of America and the Construction of Authorship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); and Kate Fortmueller, *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021).

Since Murray Ross's *Stars and Strikes* was published in 1941, scholars have explored the unique labor dynamics that have defined the entertainment industry.¹⁰ More recently, such scholarship has shifted from large-scale histories of guilds and unions to analyses of the day-to-day work of media laborers, including the status of freelancers, creative standards and their effect on aesthetics, and gender and racial discrimination.¹¹ Neither the DGA nor the SEG has been the central focus of a book before, but more importantly, both Wexman and Fortmueller push labor studies to look at how these unions engage the industry and their members.

Wexman emphasizes the DGA's role in transforming the profession from one made up of workers to one of artists and how its members "negotiate creative matters separately from other labor issues."¹² She focuses on the guild's central goal coined by Frank Capra: "one man, one film," that is, a director is *the* critical creative voice.¹³ *Hollywood's Artists* builds on Wexman's previous research on directing and authorship, and she often contextualizes the union's fights alongside historical theories of auteurism embraced by *Cahiers du cinéma* and Andrew Sarris, among others.¹⁴ Without discounting this cultural or broader industries' history, however, *Hollywood's Artists* centers the numerous initiatives the DGA has taken "to position directors as the singular artists who create Hollywood cinema."¹⁵

The book is organized around the fight to secure and maintain what the DGA has called "creative rights." In chapter 1, Wexman describes the formation for the Screen Directors Guild, the DGA's predecessor, against the backdrop of Hollywood's industrialization in the mid-1930s. As Hollywood studios moved toward efficient production lines, studio directors turned to unionization to avoid what John Ford called the "committee method" of directing, wherein individual directors would work on segments rather than an entire film.¹⁶ Directors' power grew throughout the era of independent production; by the 1960s, the DGA's Creative Rights Committee had successfully added clauses in their agreement to control decision-making during pre- and post-production. Chapter 2 expands on these issues by explaining

10 Murray Ross, *Stars and Strikes: Unionization of Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941); Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1980); Mike Nielsen and Gene Mailes, *Hollywood's Other Blacklist: Union Struggles in the Studio System* (London: British Film Institute, 1995); and Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930–1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, and Trade Unionists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

11 See Miranda J. Banks, *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Catherine L. Fisk, *Writing for Hire: Unions, Hollywood, and Madison Avenue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Eithne Quinn, *A Piece of the Action: Race and Labor in Post-Civil Rights Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); and Ronny Regev, *Working in Hollywood: How the Studio System Turned Creativity into Labor* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

12 Wexman, *Hollywood's Artists*, 10.

13 Quoted in Wexman, 30.

14 Virginia Wright Wexman, ed., *Film and Authorship* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); and Virginia Wright Wexman, ed., *Directing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

15 Wexman, *Hollywood's Artists*, 118.

16 Wexman, 16.

how directors created a unique aura around their work that allowed them to remain free from interference. The union battled actors, writers, editors, and studio heads who strived to make creative decisions that directors saw as central to their work. In doing so, the DGA “cultivated an aura of masculine privilege” by defining charisma and machismo as their professional characteristics while limiting the advancement of women.¹⁷ Although Wexman outlines DGA’s initiatives to expand access beyond a select few, this section sometimes reads like a pamphlet written by the guild that mitigates the struggles still faced by directors from marginalized communities today.

Much of *Hollywood’s Artists* stresses that the distinction of “artist” has relied more on perceptions created by the guild rather than their actual contractual gains. Wexman traces the many public battles the DGA waged to create awareness for directors as equal to that of novelists and painters. In her discussion of the DGA’s battle to secure the possessory credit (e.g., “a film by”), she argues that the term is “weighted with symbolic meaning for the industry and for the public at large.”¹⁸ Later chapters recall well-known disputes within the industry, including the guild’s internal battle against an agreement to remove communist-affiliated members in 1950.¹⁹ She argues that the framing of this meeting in the press by the DGA was critical to its mission, noting how they insisted the directors’ interest in freedom of speech while secretly working to clear their names.²⁰ This emphasis on public battles continued into the 1980s with the DGA’s infamous fight against colorization of classic films and advocacy for “moral rights” through congressional testimony. As Wexman suggests, the DGA had “little to show for its decades-long effort to extend its creative rights agenda to the legal arena” but still created a public perception of the director as artist that has paid hefty dividends in their industry role.²¹

Wexman mentions more conventional union issues such as wages and safety in an appendix, but she makes a compelling case for including the DGA’s role in a discussion of auteurism that has either centered cultural debates or focused on the commercialization of auteurism by studios. If there is perhaps too much attention to authorship, it might simply be that for better or worse, to turn a phrase, we are all auteurs now.²²

One brief section in Wexman’s book stands out: the directors’ debates over whether to expand their numbers to include assistant directors and production managers who were more interested in wages and job security than creative rights. This split is where Fortmueller begins. Her particular focus—the below-the-line actors and extras whose work is critical to production—

17 Wexman, 62.

18 Wexman, 85.

19 For the full details of this event, see Kevin Brianton, *Hollywood Divided: The 1950 Screen Directors Guild Meeting and the Impact of the Blacklist* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

20 Wexman, *Hollywood’s Artists*, 94–97.

21 Wexman, 116.

22 A reference to Elena Kagan’s remark, “We are all textualists now,” reflecting on the profound influence of Justice Antonin Scalia in reframing jurisprudence on the United States Supreme Court. Elena Kagan, “The Scalia Lecture: A Dialogue with Justice Kagan on the Reading of Statutes,” Harvard Law School, YouTube video, November 17, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpEtszFTOTg>.

pushes against the idea of “creativity as justification for why the workers being studied are important.”²³ Rather than artistic success, she centers precarity, freelance, and instability as central parts of the industry from its origins. Indeed, her analysis of work in Hollywood cuts against media histories that center occasional silver linings in favor of a century of exploitation.

While some media scholars have used the idea of precarity to build a constellation of media theorization, *Below the Stars* is grounded in a material history of Hollywood and the lives of individuals struggling to make ends meet (including Fortmueller’s own grandfather). Each chapter is devoted to a critical rupture in industry practice as unions at least attempted to quell “unpredictable labor conditions and hierarchical divisions within the large and unwieldy population of actors.”²⁴ As chapter 1 explains, the development of Central Casting in the 1920s promised to clear out predatory agents, but consolidation did little to make the careers of freelance actors easier to navigate. Fortmueller does not even particularly celebrate SEG’s founding in 1945, tracing how the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) was suggested to be “founded for actors only” to delineate ranks (particularly along race and gender lines) that left many of its less prestigious members unprotected.²⁵

As the book traces the limited opportunities for extras, Fortmueller focuses on technological disruptions that have shifted the priorities of freelance actors. In chapter 2, she outlines the battles between labor groups in the 1950s to represent actors within the new television landscape. While details of jurisdictions and mergers are occasionally difficult to follow, Fortmueller emphasizes how this debate often centered the cultural distinctions of the mediums, coming “at the expense of material benefits” for those who might make a living through opportunities on the new medium.²⁶ Chapter 3 takes a similar route, narrating SAG’s negotiation for residuals for television reruns and the new home video market. Freelance actors saw value in limiting television reruns in the hope of increasing production, and the newly formed committees centering parity in race and gender also raised the issue of declining opportunities throughout the 1970s. The eventual establishment of residuals, a payment system from which few actors have materially benefited, ignored the increasing reality of unemployment. SEG remained a union of aspirations rather than reality, rejecting a potential merger with the Teamsters in the 1980s over concerns about being associated with blue-collar work. (In 1992, SEG came under the jurisdiction of SAG.)

Fortmueller’s archival research demonstrates a keen ability to find Hollywood workers often missing from other archival collections. But in her final chapter, interviews with working actors provide a striking look at the precarity of employment that defines our contemporary media moment. Rather than celebrate convergence culture and liberated fandom, Fortmueller notes how working actors must perform a whole new set of tasks to remain employable. “Our unparalleled access to content,” she argues, has “exacer-

23 Fortmueller, *Below the Stars*, 6.

24 Fortmueller, 49.

25 Fortmueller, 43.

26 Fortmueller, 74.

bated worker instability.”²⁷ She focuses on voice actors in both animation and video games who have dealt with a myriad of issues: overworked voice muscles, little knowledge about the projects they are working on, and losing their office-home distinction by having to build home sound booths.²⁸ Even though streaming has provided new opportunities across media platforms, Fortmueller argues this has only exacerbated “scant-career pathways that lead to lucrative or middle-class acting careers.”²⁹

What I find refreshing in Fortmueller’s framing are the ethical dilemmas it presents to Hollywood and to the field of media studies itself. Our dissections of texts or stars or even audiences writ large often rely on ignoring the exploitation of below-the-line workers.³⁰ Even when centering particular trailblazers for the social influence of their work, scholars can easily forget to consider or acknowledge the countless people who received a barely livable wage for their work. For these actors, the artistic possibilities or stories of success will, as Fortmueller phrases it, always “undermine their position as workers.”³¹

Both books essentially ask us to recognize the use-value of a union, an issue that many segments of academia have only recently caught up to in their own growing awareness of precarious labor.³² I could not help but see the battle to limit classroom topics and fears of critical race theory reflected in Wexman’s account of these directors framing creative rights as a free speech issue. And as a precariously employed scholar hoping to land a tenure-track position, I saw parallels in how Fortmueller describes the “aspirational nature” of extra work by hopefuls “willing to ensure the normalized hardships of a competitive industry” that “undermines their collective identity of workers.”³³ This review, for example, could have easily been sold to a public-facing media outlet for direct compensation; instead, I wrote it on good faith that this “service” might lead to future “star” (tenure-track) employment, even as the correlation between publication record and employment offers has dissipated throughout the university system.³⁴

As our field faces questions over the future of employment and precarity, I have found that students are more curious about theorizing their future work than media texts. Labor history provides a critical model for building

27 Fortmueller, 123.

28 Fortmueller, 145.

29 Fortmueller, 123.

30 If there was one benefit from the momentum around IATSE’s potential strike in 2021, it was the countless stories published by scholars, critics, journalists, and activists on the labor practices in the industry. See Peter Labuza, “Hollywood Workers Are Ready to Strike over the Future of How Movies and TV Shows Are Made,” *Polygon*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.polygon.com/22728659/how-iatse-strike-2021-affects-movies-tv-industry>.

31 Fortmueller, *Below the Stars*, 158.

32 Bruce Brassell et al., “Organizing Precarious Labor in Film and Media Studies: A Manifesto,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 4 (2020): 1–7.

33 Fortmueller, *Below the Stars*, 29.

34 According to one STEM-based study, “The benchmarks traditionally used to measure research success—including funding, number of publications or journals published in—were unable to completely differentiate applicants with and without job offers.” Jason D. Fernandes et al., “Research Culture: A Survey-Based Analysis of the Academic Job Market,” *eLife* 9 (2020), <https://elifesciences.org/articles/54097>.

political organizations that provide alternatives to the existing system; it is a blueprint. More than that, scholars should support the organizing work of graduate students and adjunct faculty, who are often fighting to simply keep a roof over their heads, or at least should stop ignoring the fraught working dynamics they impose on their precariously employed colleagues and teaching assistants. While reading these two books, which analyze Hollywood workers and unions both historically and today, I cannot help but recall those familiar lyrics by Florence Reece: “Which side are you on?”³⁵

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35 “Which Side Are You On? An Interview with Florence Reece,” *Mountain Life and Work* 48, no. 3 (March 1972): 23.

Reviewed by Dan Bashara

Happiness by Design: Modernism and Media in the Eames Era

by **Justus Nieland.**

University of Minnesota Press.

2020. 400 pages

\$160 hardcover; \$39.95 paper; also available in e-book.

“Do designers ever sleep?”¹ In *Happiness by Design: Modernism and Media in the Eames Era*, Justus Nieland highlights the tirelessness of Charles and Ray Eames, their commitment to design as a force for social transformation, and their conviction that work is play and play is happiness. But this isn’t just a book about the Eameses; in invoking the “Eames era,” Nieland conjures an ensemble of designers, filmmakers, theorists, artists, and other cultural figures who contributed to the development and the texture of the American midcentury. At the core of the invigoratingly dizzying array of ideas in this book—communication, transparency, democracy, technophilia, organicism, and, yes, happiness—is film, and more specifically, film’s role in the development of an interdisciplinary design discourse promising the good life. And we can’t talk about any of these ideas, or any of these people, without talking about Charles and Ray Eames. Not for nothing does Nieland refer to the postwar power couple as “the happy protagonists of midcentury lifestyle media.”²

Nieland has done mind-bogglingly exhaustive research into this moment, and the result is a dazzling intellectual history of a period marked

1 Justus Nieland, *Happiness by Design: Modernism and Media in the Eames Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 66.

2 Nieland, 44.

by creative ferment and interdisciplinary collaboration. One of the book's greatest strengths is the way it situates the Eameses within a vast network of transdisciplinary figures; far more than merely fleshing out the history of the titular couple, Nieland conjures a widespread and intricately connected milieu. Reading these microhistories often feels like finding out two of your closest friends knew each other independently of you, long before you met them. Eero Saarinen, Billy Wilder, and Norbert Wiener appeared together in a public affairs TV segment devoted to the Eameses? Maya Deren hung around with László Moholy-Nagy? Jean Baudrillard joined environmental protestors to interrupt Walter Paepcke's design conference? Nieland's talent not just for finding connections between far-flung figures, but also for transporting the reader to the places where they connected, brings this deeply theoretical work of historiography to immediate, tangible life. Through these stories, *Happiness by Design* develops a divergent, design-oriented film theory "shaped by a modernist aesthetics and ideology of information that crossed a range of disciplines and institutional agendas."³

Part of Nieland's project is to challenge the dominant idea of modernism at midcentury as willfully difficult, obsessed with medium specificity, and devoted to the personal expression of the artist. He foregrounds a modernism running parallel to this old story, one that is in almost every way its opposite: transparent instead of obscure, televised instead of cloistered, promiscuous instead of pure. It is a modernism of toys and chairs, of serious ideas expressed in whimsical photographs. It is not a modernism of austere contemplation; it is a modernism of happiness. Yet in all this discussion of happiness and the good life, Nieland doesn't shy away from the Eameses' complicity in larger and more overtly ideological projects of nation-building and corporate hegemony. If happy modernism was envisioned for everyone, it was also swept up in burgeoning technocracy and corporate managerial logics that threaten to discipline as much as they aim to liberate. He follows these tensions into design studios, conferences, and schools, tracing the development of a film theory that is rigorously interdisciplinary and immersed in the language of design.

Chapter 1 is about chairs. But in exploring the Eameses' work in furniture, Nieland embraces the Eames ethos in his own scholarship: if you're talking about chairs, you're actually talking about *everything*. In his inventive readings of Eames furniture, as well as the films about that furniture, Nieland hits upon the core of the Eameses' worldview: they didn't care about things. They cared about the *variety* of things, the networks those things reached out to join, the permutations that arose when chairs and sofas met the people who sat in them. The chapter masterfully traces the web of connections that turned these chairs into communicative objects, part material and part media, or, as Nieland puts it, "another site of media convergence: chair, television, film."⁴ "To talk of these designers," he writes, "is to talk of their chairs, which is to speak of their house, which is to say something of the things in it, which is to marvel at their curious assemblages and thus work to

3 Nieland, 292.

4 Nieland, 69.

make connections. To speak of the Eameses is to enact a cascading logic of interrelatedness and connectivity.”⁵

In chapter 2, we see just how far that cascading logic runs. Moving beyond the Eameses’ immediate production and circulation contexts, Nieland follows the couple into the brave new postwar world they were busily helping to invent. The cast of characters widens here—Buckminster Fuller and György Kepes loom large, George Nelson and Gene Youngblood leave their mark—and this increasing complexity is by design. Charting the “dizzying scalar movement between the domestic and the geopolitical,” this chapter explores the direction of Eames-era modernism toward the question of global, ecological consciousness.⁶ Nieland places the Eameses within an array of modernists who viewed media in utopian terms, seeking “the forms of belonging, community, and citizenship it might offer in proposing a human sensorium scaled to the world.”⁷

Chapters 3 and 4 operate as a pair, examining the conference circuits of the postwar era where a new model of communication was collaboratively built. The annual International Design Conference in Aspen (IDCA) and the 1965 and 1967 Vision Conferences form the backbone of this history, in which a new ideal emerges as the basis of all realms of production: “Underpinning all of them was communication, that master category of the Cold War semiosphere.”⁸ The accounts of these conference proceedings are painstakingly detailed, forming an indispensable history of a movement and the milieu in which it coalesced. Nieland’s ability to conjure vivid moments from these seminal gatherings of the who’s who of the design world is breathtaking; if only every conference offered the rollicking energy of these accounts. Across these two chapters, the design conference takes on many guises: therapeutic session, interdisciplinary melting pot, corporate sellout, political protest, even a design interface in and of itself. Linking them all is the idea of “the technique of the conference as a mode of knowledge work and an instrument of organization at the dawn of the information age.”⁹ But most compelling is Nieland’s argument that these conferences, occurring before film studies had solidified as a discipline, served as a crucible where a competing model of film studies—pedagogical, genre-agnostic, mostly non-theatrical—was taking shape. The final chapters of the book explore the possibilities of this parallel discipline.

Chapter 5 balances two modernisms: the medium-specific modernism of the fledgling Society of Cinematologists (now SCMS), which was establishing a pure identity by severing ties with the rest of the humanities, and the transdisciplinary modernism of the IDCA, which Nieland calls “designer film theory.”¹⁰ In this persuasive account, designer film theory was there at the birth of film studies proper, and its contributions have until now been overlooked. Kepes and Moholy-Nagy appear as shepherds of an interdisciplinary

5 Nieland, 78.

6 Nieland, 96.

7 Nieland, 103.

8 Nieland, 170.

9 Nieland, 195.

10 Nieland, 246.

moving-image program at the Institute of Design, but it is a revisionist reading of Deren's writing that forms the chapter's most surprising and illuminating hook. Deren emerges as a filmmaker steeped in design thinking and a regular collaborator with the luminaries of the postwar design scene: Kepes and Moholy-Nagy, to be sure, but also Alvin Lustig and Rudolf Arnheim. The recuperation of this missing moment in midcentury film theory is complex and fascinating; Nieland traces the broad theoretical connections between useful cinema, experimental film, democratic uplift, and anti-fascism while also zooming in to capture specific faces in the crowd, and the result should change the way we think about our own disciplinary history.

Chapter 6 and the coda grapple with the ambivalence of designer film theory and its designs on happiness, crystallizing the contradictions and paradoxes of the previous five chapters. Is art still art when its methods are quantifiable? Is modernism's job to frustrate by capturing the incommunicable or to communicate by making everything transparent? What does it mean to think ecologically without considering the ecology of the planet and its resources? Can designers design for democracy while answering to corporations and governments? Is technophilia really the answer to sensory overwhelm caused by a rapidly technologizing world? What if happiness is merely surrender? At the end of the story, as at the beginning, are the Eameses, for whom "the expansive network of liberal choice and decisionism involves individuals *and* collectives *and* corporate entities equally."¹¹ Their question, which is also the question at the center of the midcentury American design scene, is a question about how to live in an increasingly mediated and technologized world. Nieland gracefully allows the paradoxes to remain: "There is no position outside of this material field of mediation. One can only aim to be happy within it."¹²

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11 Nieland, 346.

12 Nieland, 279.

Reviewed by Karen Fang

*Experts in Action:
Transnational Hong Kong–
Style Stunt Work and
Performance*

by Lauren Steimer.

Duke University Press.

2021. 240 pages.

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

Chief among the many appeals of Quentin Tarantino's 2019 alternative history fable, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, is the film's centering of a stuntman. "You're too pretty to be a stuntman," snarks the movie's cartoonishly bombastic Bruce Lee (Mike Moh) of the protagonist, played by Brad Pitt. In a typically Tarantino-ish mélange of film nerd and fan boy humor, the line reminds us that stunt workers, by definition, are never stars.

By contrast, Lauren Steimer's new book, *Experts in Action: Transnational Hong Kong–Style Stunt Work and Performance*, is a scholarly exploration of the underlying premise that Tarantino (who is a recurring reference throughout her book) presents with such cheek. Situated between cinema and performance studies, and contributing to production culture, fan, and media industry studies, Steimer's work shines a spotlight on the "stunting stars" whose physical feats are a main attraction of contemporary action-centered film and television.¹ Her specific interest is in how Hong Kong cinema's transnational influence has offered industrial and professional opportunities that might

1 Lauren Steimer, *Experts in Action: Transnational Hong Kong–Style Stuntwork and Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 2.

not otherwise have been possible outside of Hollywood. Through case studies that include Thai action stars Tony Jaa and Jeeja Yanin, the international production of popular television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (syndication, 1995–2001), and celebrated stunt doubles and action choreographers such as Dayna Grant, Chad Stahelski, and Zoë Bell, Steimer shows how global media and entertainment have assimilated Hong Kong production practices such as frontal performance, uncut action sequences, and a full-time second unit that enjoys a high degree of independent agency.² These developments are part of the longer transnational flow of labor that has empowered Hollywood since the mid-1990s and whose effects have irrevocably transformed the look and feel of global media. Steimer analyzes the flexible, diffuse, truly global media landscape of the first decades of the twenty-first century, which scarcely resembles the unilateral, predominately transatlantic poaching of Anglo-European talent that enabled US global media dominance throughout the twentieth century. As Steimer puts it, adapting a phrase originally used by *Xena* director Doug Leffler to describe how he intentionally borrowed from Hong Kong action and production practice, Hong Kong is now a “reservoir of technique” whose impact on global media exceeds mainstream Hollywood cinema, spilling out from movies to television, documentary, and other content heavily influenced by fan fiction. This ripple effect is geographic as well as transmedial: while Hollywood lifts, in typically unabashed fashion, from Hong Kong, Hong Kong’s global influence is further augmented by its Hollywood aura, fostering lateral connections with other non-Hollywood production sites—such as New Zealand—that benefit from their proximity to Hong Kong.³

Students and scholars of Hong Kong cinema, global media, performance, and industry studies will find much of value in *Experts in Action*. As a behind-the-scenes look into the specialized labor of contemporary stunts and physical performance, Steimer’s book offers a fascinating glimpse into how the human spectacle of modern action cinema straddles both cutting-edge motion capture technologies and low-tech paraphernalia such as cardboard boxes to break falls. The book opens with a sustained discussion of practice theory and the scholarship on expertise, including Malcolm Gladwell’s well-known and oft-cited assertion of 10,000 hours as the minimum training time necessary to achieve mastery in any discipline. As example and model of such expertise, Steimer cites Jackie Chan’s Peking opera training and Hong Kong stunt crew, whose influence and standard is evident throughout all the other performers and choreographers studied in Steimer’s subsequent chapters.⁴ This paradigm of expert performance frames Steimer’s overall goal of according attention and due credit to individual performers, action choreographers, and the “collective effort necessary to produce phenomenal body

2 Zoë Bell’s career is particularly noteworthy. Initially hired as Uma Thurman’s “crash and smash” double for *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003), tae kwon do-trained Bell was promoted to fight double, garnering considerable attention for her work in both *Kill Bill* films. She stars as herself in the 2004 documentary *Double Dare* (Amanda Micheli) as well as in Tarantino’s 2007 quasi-slasher film, *Death Proof*. Since then, her acting roles have outnumbered her stunting work; in 2020, Bell signed with Creative Artists Agency.

3 Steimer, *Experts in Action*, 89, 5.

4 Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008).

effects.”⁵ As Steimer wryly notes, “while, in the course of my research, I have encountered countless critics, academics, and fans who decry wirework as the effortless trickery of unskilled performers, I have yet to meet one who can fulfill most of these requirements.”⁶ However facile it may be to pick apart action sequences, Steimer’s goal is to “identify the ways in which expert labor makes spectacle possible.”⁷

Notably, fan knowledge and commentary exert considerable insight in this analysis, manifesting an inclusive and democratic approach that is to Steimer’s credit. Part of her methodology includes original ethnographic research, in which fans were surveyed regarding their reception of Jackie Chan and other action stars. Unlike some other work in fan studies, which may either subordinate fans to objects of sociological analysis or explore their creation of new content, Steimer engages with fans as fellow theorists themselves. Weaving in fan quotes and quantifiable data to document the popular reception of stunt sequences, Steimer treats fans as “expert interlocuters” who are as valid and insightful as the credentialed scholars within our own discipline.⁸ For Hong Kong film studies and film and media studies at large, Steimer’s approach models a multidimensional, inclusive methodology notably unbounded by geography, media specificity, or institutional and disciplinary bona fides.

Given *Experts in Action*’s capaciousness and the subtlety with which Steimer treats her subject, however, I did want to read more about how her case studies are complicated by gender. Respondents to Steimer’s survey about young female Thai action star Jeeja Yanin “mostly spoke about her size, age, and cuteness,” thereby revealing another dimension in which some stunt workers and physical performers are visually commodified on-screen.⁹ Similarly, while Steimer’s discussion of *Xena*’s production provides an intriguing variation on familiar commentary on the show’s physical imagery and queer sensibility, the very fact of the action series’ female protagonists also invites questions about gender and behind-the-scenes agency. Whether known for their work in television series such as *Xena* or in feature films, female stunting stars such as Yanin, Grant, and Bell are an even smaller subset of the already small cohort of stunt experts who have earned professional visibility and influence. As such, their careers should also raise questions about how their gender may have facilitated or distorted their reception and professional autonomy.

On a related note, *Expert in Action*’s narrative of professional recognition and opportunity could be complicated by a more cautionary analysis of the consequences of Hong Kong cinema’s outsize influence on global action imagery. One case in point is *Xena* director Lefler’s aforementioned reference to Hong Kong cinema as a “reservoir of technique.” Although stemming from admiration and homage, such an approach diminishes an entire nation and industry to a resource of neocolonial exploitation. Similarly, the widespread

5 Steimer, *Experts in Action*, 174.

6 Steimer, 108, 174.

7 Steimer, 163.

8 Steimer, 16.

9 Steimer, 83.

adoption of Hong Kong cinema's smaller-budget production methods raises uneasy parallels to outsourcing. Although individual, migrant, and female workers have benefited from both globalization and a gender-diversified workplace, expanded female representation and transnational movement too often cause wage stagnation, reduced benefits and workplace protections, and more precarious labor practices. While virtuoso performers and in-demand action visionaries such as Bell, Grant, and legendary Hong Kong martial artist Yuen Woo-ping command increasing creative authority within ever larger industrial circles, one can't help but wonder how their compensation compares with the Hollywood insiders they replace or the A-listers they double. How has this embrace of international action creatives impacted the salary and workplace conditions for unionized Hollywood workers? Now that Bell and Grant have transcended the anonymity of most stunt workers, do they still benefit from their profession's established pay scale and protections—or are they now vulnerable to the same pay discrepancies as other female stars?

This question brings me back to Tarantino's "too pretty for a stuntman" line in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Wry and insightful, what seems like a throwaway line in a scene and a movie known for its overtly fantastical rendering of Hollywood is also a revealing glimpse into how Hollywood has co-opted the visceral action for which Hong Kong cinema was once renowned. *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood's* depiction of Bruce Lee has been widely criticized as counterfactual and unflattering, with more nuanced discussions also taking Tarantino to task for caricaturing a screen legend to whom he is clearly indebted.¹⁰ Those assessments, I agree, are well founded, and in its dismaying appropriation of a Hong Kong cinema legend, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is a telling example of how frequently the industry embraces unique talent, only to subordinate them to archetypally good-looking, white, cis male A-listers. Steimer's nuanced, democratic study, with its commitment to showing "the ways in which expert labor makes spectacle possible" is an important step toward challenging this history.¹¹ And as Steimer notes in a rousing "call to action" that concludes her book, "If we wish to call ourselves experts in action," "there is much work left to be done."¹²

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10 Jen Yamato, "Bruce Lee's Family Calls 'Once Upon a Time' 'a Mockery.' Is It Inult or Homage?," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2019-07-31/bruce-lee-tarantino-once-upon-a-time-in-hollywood>; Gabrielle Bruney and Brady Langmann, "Why the Bruce Lee Fight in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* Became the Movie's Most Controversial Scene," *Esquire*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/a28607548/mike-moh-bruce-lee-once-upon-a-time-in-hollywood-controversy/>; and Tom Fordy, "From Kung Fu to Quentin Tarantino: Why Hollywood Keeps Beating up Bruce Lee," *Telegraph*, August 15, 2019.

11 Steimer, *Experts in Action*, 163.

12 Steimer, 172, 173.

Reviewed by Elmo Gonzaga

City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila's Alternative Film Culture

by Jasmine Nadua Trice.

Duke University Press.

2021. 328 pages.

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

Jasmine Nadua Trice's *City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila's Alternative Film Culture* is an eloquent, thought-provoking work that scholars of film, media, urban studies, and Asian studies will debate for a long time. This pioneering monograph about alternative film cultures in Metropolitan Manila from 2005 to 2012 joins the growing scholarship about understudied contemporary Southeast Asian cinemas that includes Patrick F. Campos's *The End of National Cinema*, Arnika Fuhrmann's *Ghostly Desires*, David Hanan's *Cultural Specificity in Indonesian Film*, Alicia Izharuddin's *Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema*, Thomas Barker's *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order*, Matthew Hunt's *Thai Cinema Uncensored*, and Katrina Macapagal's *Slum Imaginaries and Spatial Justice in Philippine Cinema*.¹ *City of Screens* could also be juxtaposed with recent books studying neoliberal spaces in millennial Manila

1 Patrick F. Campos, *The End of National Cinema: Filipino Film at the Turn of the Century* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2016); Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); David Hanan, *Cultural Specificity in Indonesian Film: Diversity in Unity* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017); Alicia Izharuddin, *Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Thomas Barker, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019); Matthew Hunt, *Thai Cinema Uncensored* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021); and Katrina Macapagal, *Slum Imaginaries and Spatial Justice in Philippine Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

from the fields of geography, sociology, and literature, such as Arnisson Andre Ortega's *Neoliberalizing Spaces in the Philippines*, Marco Z. Garrido's *The Patchwork City*, and Gary C. Devilles's *Sensing Manila*.² Moreover, its astute analysis of the emergence of counterpublics from sites of exhibition, distribution, and consumption in the global southern metropolis places it in dialogue with newer, historically situated critical interventions about media and modernity such as Ravi Sundaram's *Pirate Modernity* and Joshua Neves's *Underglobalization*.³

Trice cogently and provocatively argues that alternative film cultures imagine, contemplate, anticipate, and cultivate cinematic audiences as speculative publics in an inchoate and discordant national community. According to Trice, these alternative cultures emerge from "distribution and exhibition channels" that provide opportunities to audiences to view works that are not screened in "mainstream" theaters operated by state institutions or private corporations.⁴ In its heyday, the Philippine movie industry was one of the largest producers of films in the world. After the decline of mainstream commercial studios in the 1990s, Philippine cinema has experienced a renaissance over the past two decades thanks to the support of film funding competitions and accessibility of video production technologies. Set in the long global 1990s, *City of Screens* explores the "technological, cultural, and institutional transformation" in Metropolitan Manila during the aughts, a time of naive optimism about the possibilities of neoliberal capitalism and social networking.⁵ Trice's monograph ably documents this "transition period" in the rise of digital culture, before the dominance of 3G smartphones and streaming services, when VCDs and DVDs were still the principal sources of transnational media content. One of its most fascinating aspects is the importance *City of Screens* accords to "transitional" or "ephemeral" sites or events as constitutive of the dynamism of the global south metropolis. In Trice's analysis, well-meaning initiatives for fledgling film festivals, cinema-theques, and screening rooms with "short lives" widen the scope of possibility while seemingly resulting in failure.⁶

As its most significant scholarly intervention, *City of Screens* introduces and expands the concept of *speculative publics*, which, for Trice, allows it to transcend the limiting dichotomy of national and transnational by exploring their coexistence and interaction.⁷ Each chapter looks at a different exhibition space or cultural institution that contributed to the cultivation of prospective, speculative publics and their networks, such as the mall multi-

2 Arnisson Andre Ortega, *Neoliberalizing Spaces in the Philippines: Suburbanization, Transnational Migration, and Dispossession* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016); Marco Z. Garrido, *The Patchwork City: Class, Space, and Politics in Metro Manila* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); and Gary C. Devilles, *Sensing Manila* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2020).

3 Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2010); and Joshua Neves, *Underglobalization: Beijing's Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

4 Jasmine Nadua Trice, *City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila's Alternative Film Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 3.

5 Trice, 4.

6 Trice, 4.

7 Trice, 4.

plex, film festival, art house cinemathèque, censorship board, and informal market. Trice explains how the dearth in viewership of art house and independent cinema in the Philippines has caused artists, critics, and scholars to lament the absence of a “national audience.” Characterizing speculative publics as “asymptotic” because they bear “unrealized potential” but stay “not fully formed,” she explores how their contingencies and frictions create competing ideal futures for city and nation often in opposition to a perceived mainstream or state.⁸ Trice’s book stands out because it filters its sharp, critical observations through the author’s own experiences of the DIY vitality and passion of millennial Metro Manila’s democratic public sphere, which flourished before the violence, cynicism, and hate of Rodrigo Duterte’s authoritarian regime.

Focusing less on textual analysis or ethnographic description than on an innovative, interdisciplinary approach that draws on urbanism, geography, and anthropology, Trice emphasizes that her work diverges from most scholarship on Philippine cinema by studying the paratexts that circulate within the spatial environments in which they are produced or among the mass audiences to whom they are addressed.⁹ Illustrating an expansive understanding of film culture, her method de-emphasizes close readings of films and concentrates instead on the “rhetorics” of promotional materials, public speeches, and mission statements of cultural institutions and film organizations. The book’s two most compelling chapters thus look at the Mogwai bar in Cubao and DVD markets in Quiapo as cosmopolitan sites of cinephilic accessibility; they deftly demonstrate Trice’s approach of examining multiple paratextual discourses produced by music videos, programming notes, advertising billboards, and discussion threads to uncover their cultural imaginaries and contrapuntal temporalities within millennial Manila’s variegated urban rhythms.

Trice self-consciously highlights her positionality as an academic based in the United States and Singapore engaged in knowledge production about the Philippines. It is this positionality that is the source of new insight from the book, which allows her to bring fresh perspectives to heated debates about the possibilities of national cinema and its fractured audiences. Because concepts such as *revanchism* and *authenticity* are infrequently cited by local scholars and critics, Trice’s use of them seems “contradictory” at first, as she admits, but they nonetheless open up unexplored avenues of inquiry into long-standing questions about urbanity and spectatorship.

One of the book’s strengths is Trice’s ability to pinpoint relevant global scholarly discussions that resonate with the local historical and social conditions she examines. However, the book would have benefited more from less emphasis on dominant strands of critical theory and closer dialogue with the already extensive body of film and cultural studies about public and media cultures in Asian cities. Because of *City of Screens*’ vernacular orientation, I was eager to learn how it builds on Sundaram’s and Neves’s ideas about how fantasies of development in global southern metropolises, such as Delhi and

8 Trice, 21, 46.

9 Trice, 12.

Beijing, are entangled with blueprints of urban renewal and infrastructures of media piracy. I would have especially liked to see a deeper engagement with the important work of the Manila-based scholar Patrick Campos, who is interested in many of the issues about alternative film cultures in the Philippines during the post-millennium period that Trice spotlights.

Trice has such a masterful facility for analyzing theoretical sources that I also hoped to hear more of her own thoughts about significant ideas that are given less emphasis in her book. For instance, the alternative scene she describes is presented as a foundational rupture; this approach affords little room for tracing the subversive film cultures in existence before the twenty-first century. Also, the authority, efficacy, and influence of the Philippine government are overstated in the later chapters, which seem to assume greater continuity between the oppression of the Martial Law dictatorship under Ferdinand Marcos and the instability of the neoliberal state under Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Conversely, Trice arguably understates the social dominance of Catholicism in the Philippines, even as its indigenization has informed cultural imaginaries of Quiapo and its conservatism has permeated political policies on censorship. Responding to Campos's ideas about the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival would have enabled Trice to grapple more with its contradictions as a cultural institution and exhibition space. Instead of viewing the festival as an extension of the state, Campos describes it as being entangled with both the public and private resources of its diverse stakeholders. Engaging with Campos's incisive exposition of the contrasting meanings of *alternative* and *indie* for various artists and critics as being democratic and revolutionary would have likewise allowed Trice to further advance her argument about the inchoateness of mass audiences as asymptotic speculative publics. Such scholarly connections might have enriched the work, but their absence does not diminish the originality and complexity of Trice's critical intervention.

Trice displays a generosity to her marginalized objects of study by offering possible questions and connections instead of forcing predetermined approaches and interpretations. Her book is distinguished by its careful selection of less obvious examples, which are described and analyzed in rich language that yields compelling insights with every reading. Like any path-breaking work that stakes out new ground, *City of Screens* puts forward observations and arguments that are bound to be provocative and disputed. With its innovative methods and unexpected ideas, which distill the lost vibrancy of a transitional historical moment, this monograph will reverberate with readers yet to come.

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Reviewed by Seung-hoon Jeong

Contemporary Political Cinema

by **Matthew Holtmeier**.

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Every film is political or can be seen from a political angle. Still, not all films belong to the narrowly defined category of political cinema as oppositional to the political status quo and marked by an alternative ideology. Indeed, today there is no clear articulation of political cinema we might compare to the explicit doctrines of early Soviet revolutionary cinema, the post-1968 anti-representational politically inflected European modernism, or Latin American Third Cinema and its worldwide variations. In this post-Cold War age initiated with the so-called End of History, how could cinema be politicized more radically than its present engagement with the identity politics of the post-political, post-ideological system of triumphant global capitalism?¹ How would this politicization be significant, if indeed it still matters at all? Anybody interested in these questions will want to open Matthew Holtmeier's timely book *Contemporary Political Cinema*.

The book's lengthy introduction, which takes up almost a quarter of this relatively slim monograph, lays out the author's ambitious theoretical framework step by step. Holtmeier's core inspiration comes consistently and comprehensively from Gilles Deleuze's political philosophy and film theory. Interestingly, Holtmeier relates Deleuze's diagnosis of the sensory-motor collapse in the movement-image after World War II to Theodor Adorno's dialectical disillusionment with enlightenment rationalism after the Holocaust. Though Deleuze's political philosophy differs substantially from Adorno's dialectical thinking, Holtmeier reads the movement-image as a sort of dialectical practice driven by actions that change the situation and

1 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *National Interest* 16 (1989): 3–18.

constitute “the people” as “a unified subject” who could then be “co-opted in order to be exploited by individuals like Hitler and Stalin.”² Adorno’s condemnation of the Hollywood culture industry as fascistic and his championing of avant-garde music broadly resonate with Deleuze’s evaluation of the value shift from classical to modern cinema in this postwar time frame. As Holtmeier explains, the decentered, disorienting time-image thus engages the project of the “counter-enlightenment,” the loss of belief in the rational, causal, teleological progress of the world.³ But this loss is political in that, Deleuze argues, it is necessary to nurture another belief, “a belief in the immanent or existential possibilities inherent in one’s immediate experience.”⁴ That ambivalence is the political potential of apparently apolitical modern cinema. Since a new political program, once actualized, “carries the same repressive danger in constructing a homogeneous psychopolitical space under the banner of ideology,” then the task of political cinema, according to Holtmeier, is to collapse any unifying system and identity into the non-signifying fabric of being.⁵

No wonder Holtmeier equates the classical production of political subjectivity, like the organization of revolutionary guerrillas in *La battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*, Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), with reducing this potential immanence to an individual subject. This process of “individuation” typically involves the subject’s internalization of the state and market’s biopower that works in the mode of modern “discipline” or postmodern “control.”⁶ Against this negative sense of biopower emerges a positive one that people themselves produce by becoming an amorphous, ununified, yet dynamic “multitude,” as seen in the anti-globalization protest against the World Trade Organization summit in 1999 and the anti-capitalist movement of Occupy Wall Street in 2011.⁷ Holtmeier intends to formulate a cinematic version of such multitudinous politics. It is a cinema that explores how repressive biopolitics becomes “intolerable” in individual lives; this intolerability could then rupture the hegemonic dialectic of resolving conflict only to reinstitute another norm, ideology, or identity.⁸ It is a cinema that focuses on the daily existential lives under “intangible forces and flows of globalization” without depending on the extreme experiment of political modernism or the sweeping generalizations offered by grand narratives.⁹ Holtmeier claims that solutions should be sought not in cinematic fiction but in spectators’ reality.¹⁰

2 Matthew Holtmeier, *Contemporary Political Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 8.

3 Holtmeier, 9.

4 Holtmeier, 9.

5 Holtmeier, 134.

6 See Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990); and Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3–7.

7 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

8 Holtmeier, *Contemporary Political Cinema*, 7.

9 Holtmeier, 16–19.

10 Holtmeier, 16–19.

A model for this political cinema is the “minor literature” developed in Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s book, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975).¹¹ Just as minor literature deterritorializes the dominant discourse from within, Holtmeier argues, political cinema brings “a rupture in a commercial signifying system that has become so qualified and widespread that it has become majoritarian or cliché.”¹² Holtmeier spotlights a set of “festival films” outside the mainstream market, minor films that depict fragmented subjects and multiple peoples who collectively articulate the intolerable in the manner of making visible “the people who are missing.”¹³ Instead of proposing or practicing any alternative political program, such films embody what he calls an “oblique ethics” that “explore[s] the limits over political realities . . . the limits of a bearable life, and the possibility of coexistence and co-operation.”¹⁴ What counts is “the [film’s] potential to engender subjective change in its spectators, by revealing the internal ability of conflict and forced conformity to a political logic that differs on a biological, cultural, political, religious, and existential, that is to say, a biopolitical scale.”¹⁵

Each of the five chapters in the book serves as a case study of contemporary political cinema in this framework. The first three center on the mobilization of Islamic identity for revolutionary purposes in Algerian, Malian, Iranian, and Iranian American cinema. While chapter 1 begins with *La battaglia di Algeri*, it contrasts the film’s classical politicization of subjects based on clear boundaries of conflict with its modern retelling in *Hors-la-loi* (*Outside the Law*, Rachid Bouchareb, 2010), in which anti-colonial struggle by Algerians in France suggests that no coherent revolutionary subject identity exists. Chapter 2 examines prevalent global networks and impossible traditional revolutions through *Bab El-Oued City* (Merzak Allouache, 1994) and *Timbuktu* (Abderrahmane Sissako, 2014), which place even supposedly anti-globalization Islamic fundamentalists within the same global flows. In chapter 3, two films by Bahman Ghobadi showcase two modes of transnationality: *Niwemang* (*Half Moon*, 2006) stages the story of an overflowing Kurdish social web that fragments the Iranian national subject, and *Kasi az Gorbeyeh* (*Iranian Khabar Nadareh* (*No One Knows About Persian Cats*, 2009) fragments that subject within Tehran in a music video style. The last two chapters pay attention to global capitalism via its two superpowers: China and the United States. Chapter 4 follows Jia Zhangke’s early films, from *Xiao Wu* (*Pickpocket*, 1997) to *Rèn xiāo yào* (*Unknown Pleasures*, 2002) and *Shìjiè* (*The World*, 2004), illuminating how this dissident auteur depicts banal events in post-socialist China to reveal its rapid embrace of capitalism and consequent social fractures. Finally, Iranian American filmmaker Ramin Bahrani’s two films are spotlighted in chapter 5: *Man Push Cart* (2005), in which both narrative time and the diegetic time devoted to labor in the film become Sisyphean, and *Chop Shop* (2007), in which a street orphan’s new subjectivity and relationship

11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

12 Holtmeier, *Contemporary Political Cinema*, 19.

13 Holtmeier, 81.

14 Holtmeier, 81.

15 Holtmeier, 81.

potentially restore the spectator's belief in the world without resorting to the American Dream pursued within the dominant capitalist system.

The book offers a rich platform for discussing the cinematic consequences of myriad political dilemmas, including today's globalization, capitalism, and imperialism. Avid readers will want to engage in a virtual conversation with the author, posing questions about his approach to further develop this crucial study. Above all, one may wonder if the historical dichotomy of Deleuze's two cinema books isn't applied a little too broadly and schematically. For instance, the movement-image is not limited to the American style action-image, whose narrative arc does not necessarily lead to a dialectically unified people. Rather, Hollywood's persistent de-politicizing mechanism almost always reduces systemic collective conflicts to individual heroes' dramas and fictionally sutures structural traumas back into normality through their singular triumph or sacrifice. Holtmeier contrasts collective, people-oriented (or populist) Third Cinema with contemporary political cinema that focuses on lives that are not collectivized. But doesn't this attention to individuals without unity also signal the dilution of politics that is and should be inherently collective?

By extension, let's note that Deleuze's concept of postwar modern cinema is several decades old and thus has historical limitations. Even his vision of minor literature is a post-1968 product that celebrates the schizophrenic molecularization of a "tyrannical unity" like the nation-state and the anarchic desire for rhizomatic "lines of flight" from any centralizing, fascistic power.¹⁶ However, this anti-fascist deterritorialization is not too different from the borderless flux of capital and culture under globalization. Paradoxically, this very deterritorialization has even been reterritorialized into the global system of neoliberal desires, multiplying identities, permissive authorities, and postmodern simulacra. The multitude's resistance to this system thus often ends up being a flash mob-like ephemeral performance, just as the sensational Occupy movement had little impact on Wall Street. Such a sporadic spasm is not so much communal politics oriented toward fundamental change as a nudge in the ribs of the system, which then upgrades itself to be more inclusive at best, co-opting and commodifying critical voices into it. This flexible self-modulating status quo was best formulated by Deleuze as "control society" in the 1990s, when contemporary globalization began, that is, after his schizoanalysis wound down. Interestingly, isn't it Hollywood cinema that most palpably embodies and critically grasps this post-political age of flexible control?

Holtmeier's film selection seems somewhat mismatched with his theoretical framework in this sense. Without clear justification, his scope is limited to a handful of post-1990 Middle Eastern directors (and the Iranian American Bahrani) in the (Third World) transnational cinema context in which Jia, too, could be located. Yet there are also, of course, many other (Western) festival films that reveal "the intolerable" and promote "the potential mobilization of political subjectivity" without dialectic solutions,

16 Holtmeier, 19.

such as works of Ken Loach and the Dardenne brothers.¹⁷ Those films have little to do with the time-image, productive rhizomes, the multitude with positive biopower, or control societies. But then, Holtmeier does not really elucidate his chosen films in these terms. Moreover, what is called “intolerable” sounds like a dominant unifying normality in general rather than an analytical frame that can be applied specifically to contemporary biopolitical contexts. Although Judith Butler’s critique of “being-dispossessed” is mentioned and relevant to all the films at issue, Holtmeier’s Foucauldian biopolitics does not develop into an Agambenian discussion about the global system’s law and violence, sovereign power and bare life.¹⁸ The intolerable Sharia’s arbitrary dispossession of local lives in *Timbuktu*—not unlike the supralegal operation of global sovereignty—thus gets less attention than the Islamic militants’ involvement in global networks. Likewise, Jia’s later films are put aside after a brief note that their “political statement” is the same as before.¹⁹ But doesn’t *Tiān zhùdìng* (*A Touch of Sin*, Jia Zhangke, 2013), for instance, radically signal the political deadlock in which intolerable inequality in today’s neoliberal regime provokes spasmodic explosions of terroristic violence that leads nowhere?

All these questions suggest that contemporary political cinema is not so much political but rather, as Holtmeier himself claims, ethical. Indeed, I contend that cinema most effectively engages in the world when shedding light on the dispossessed figures inevitably generated by and excluded from society, however politically utopian, thereby making us reflect on reality and humanity from the abject position of those existential lives. This ethical position is precious in itself and indicates the social role and significance of cinema as art. Only from here could we ask how to rethink politics. This book thus promotes political thinking by provoking such questions. And such questions may be directed not only to the author but to cinema itself, because asking what kind of political cinema is imaginable is as vital as asking what kind of politics is possible.

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17 Holtmeier, 35.

18 Holtmeier, 28.

19 Holtmeier, 135.