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Guerin, Frances (2019) "Brigitte Peucker, "Aesthetic Spaces: The Place of Film in Art, Northwestern University Press, 2019". Review of: Aesthetic Spaces: The Place of Film in Art by Peucker, Brigitte. *Film Quarterly*, 73 (1). pp. 107-109. ISSN 0015-1386.

DOI

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CARRIE RICKEY

***The Apartment Complex: Urban Living and Global Screen Cultures* edited by Pamela Robertson Wojcik**

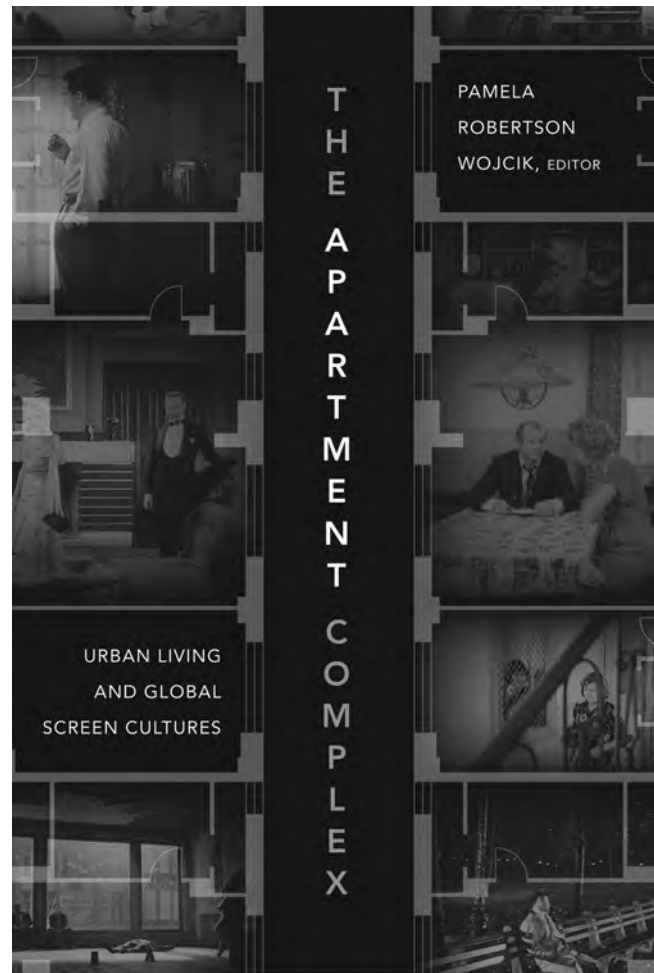
Did historian Lewis Mumford inadvertently inspire a 1930s movie subgenre when he observed of the skyscraper that instead of awe, its lofty apartments struck terror in the heart of the average urban dweller? So suggests Merrill Schleier in “Palaces of Pleasure and Deceit among the Clouds: The Depression-Era Cinematic Penthouse Plot,” the lead essay in *The Apartment Complex*, a collection edited by Pamela Robertson Wojcik that examines how urban architecture in film influences narrative (the premise of her earlier study, *The Apartment Plot*).

Each of the essays in *The Apartment Complex* builds upon the premise of Wojcik’s earlier book that wedded cinema studies to urban studies. The chronological span of the cinematic and televisual texts covered ranges from Schleier’s discussion of 1930s Manhattan penthouse intrigues to those that take place in the Baltimore projects of David Simon’s *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–8). Between the first and last essay, writers variously discuss the semiology of apartments in the movies of Billy Wilder, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Chantal Akerman, and Roman Polanski, with a detour to “the apartment musical” of filmmakers Alain Resnais and Tsai Ming-Liang.

Structurally speaking, *The Apartment Complex* reads like a series of far-ranging responses to Wojcik’s book. It is less a freestanding work than an add-on to *The Apartment Plot*. Its strength lies in how the individual essayists apply Wojcik’s thesis—developed for post–World War II American films—to the more recent output of international films and television.

It was Mumford-type thinking, Schleier says, that led to what she dubs “the penthouse murder mystery” (31); here, she refers to one of those swanky movies in which a shifty or libidinous penthouse dweller is murdered in his aerie after a forbidden liaison or one whose corpse surfaces during a wild party. In other words, it’s a movie that doesn’t show the privileged enjoying their privileges but instead focuses on the corrupt politician, bootlegger, or gangster plying his trade.

Film Quarterly, Vol. 73, Number 1, pp. 98–109, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.
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During the 1920s, when there seemed to be no upper limit to the economy or the skyscraper, apartments in the clouds were literal castles in the air, heralded as a “solution to urban congestion” (24). But with the onset of the Depression, says Schleier, there came a “shift in attitude.” Where a decade previous, penthouses embodied “American ingenuity and aspiration,” by the 1930s they “came to be regarded as ‘tombstones of capitalism’ . . . frequently linked to the corruption wrought by the wealthy” (32).

Schleier cites many examples of penthouse murder mysteries, including *The Secret Witness* (Thornton Freeland, 1931), *A Shriek in the Night* (Albert Ray, 1933) and *The Ninth Guest* (Roy William Neill, 1934). The last provides a platform from which she does a deep dive into the semiology of the penthouse murder mystery. In Neill’s film, an unknown penthouse dweller appeals to the guests’ collective vanity by sending an invitation to his prestigious address. Schleier describes the penthouse’s “labyrinthine innards and murky spaces” (35) in which the host/criminal remains undetected.

This cinematic penthouse, she writes, is the “Depression era’s haunted house” (35), “carrying the stain of unresolved class conflicts and jealousies within its very structure.”

In his essay “From Walter Neff to C. C. Baxter: Billy Wilder’s Apartment Plots,” Steven Cohan considers four films, discussing how noir and the apartment plot are parallel genres in Wilder films. Cohan examines Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), and *The Apartment* (1960), noting that they provide “a means of tracing the intricate relationship of film noir to the apartment genre through the urban habitat of the single man” (45). The earlier two, he writes, are noirs with “incomplete apartment plots;” the latter two are apartment plots veering into sex comedies that “view urban bachelorhood from a cynical viewpoint more characteristic of film noir” (45). Cohan’s strongest arguments illustrate how “the apartment plot” is a frame that draws viewer attention simultaneously to urban interiors and to the inner lives of its characters.

For Cohan, noir and the apartment plot “function in a dialectic tension with each other” (63). In the Wilder noirs, bachelorhood affords each hero a room of his own where his privacy is disrupted by the intrusion of a femme fatale. By contrast, in the Wilder apartment sex comedies, wannabe playboys welcome the intrusion—but there are mitigating circumstances. The married hero of *The Seven Year Itch* (Tom Ewell) misses his wife and son who are summering in Maine while simultaneously being happy to be free of them. His summer bachelor fantasizes about seducing the sexy blonde (Marilyn Monroe) subletting the flat upstairs, but is too guilt-ridden to act on his fantasy. The male lead in *The Apartment* (Jack Lemmon) is routinely displaced from his bachelor pad, having loaned his flat to various workplace superiors for their extramarital fun in exchange for his intra-office promotion. Cohan notes that these awkward comic characters are unlike those 1950s swinging bachelors personified by Frank Sinatra in *The Tender Trap* (Charles Walters, 1957) and Ralph Meeker in *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), whose apartments are built for pleasure.

Cohan concludes on a note that underlines the fleeting lightness of the director’s noirs and the lingering darkness of his comedies. In the Wilder noirs, the director’s male leads are able to briefly enjoy what Wojcik herself once described as “Utopian fantasies of neighborhood, community, contact and porousness, even as [these fantasies] present the darker side of urban encounters” (63). For Cohan, the comedies “do more than just hint at the darker side of those utopian fantasies, while the noirs find more idyllic value in the bachelor’s solitary urban dwelling” (63).

Is there such a cinematic animal as “the apartment plot musical”? The first example that comes to mind is *Broadway Melody of 1936* (Roy Del Ruth, 1935), in which three hoofers (Buddy and Vilma Ebsen and Eleanor Parker) repair to the roof of their New York tenement to breakfast and dance. In an essay contrasting the ecstatic *On connaît la chanson* (*Same Old Song*, Alain Resnais, 1997) with the apocalyptic *Dong* (*The Hole*, Tsai Ming-Liang, 1998), Joe McElhaney celebrates the modernist “apartment plot musical,” a genre that unfolds in a restricted space, and where sometimes a coffee table is employed as a dance floor. McElhaney turns to Hollywood musicals such as *I Love Melvin* (Don Weis, 1953) to note that “apartment living and the formation of romantic couples are essential in *On connaît la chanson* and *The Hole*. But the implications of urban space undergo a shift in these later films, and the notion of the urban world as a hypothetical playground for romance and social success likewise undergoes a shift” (69).

And how. It’s been twenty years since I’ve seen *The Hole*, but at the time I regarded the film not as a musical but as an allegory of the impending erasure of Taiwan, the Republic of China, which would in 2000 be incorporated as part of “One China” under the People’s Republic. In Tsai’s film, which is set in during the final week of December 1999, the residents of Taipei, Taiwan’s capital, suffer from an insidious pandemic (some of the residents have transformed into Kafkaesque cockroaches!) and have been alerted that their water will be turned off on January 1. Their indoor taps won’t be operative, but outside there are torrents of rain, as though the skies weep at the prospect of a united People’s Republic and Republic of China. The two leads are the man in the upstairs apartment and the woman in the flat directly below. When a plumber fixes the leak in her apartment, he leaves a hole between her ceiling and his floor—an opening that effects a connection between what appear to be the last man and last woman in Taipei.

Given its doom and gloom, it’s hard to think of *The Hole*’s setting and plot as the stuff of a musical. And yet, during four musical interludes, the characters transcend the restricted space of their flats and their shrinking horizon. McElhaney persuades the reader (this one, at least) that the film’s climax, a slow dance between the two apartment dwellers, in its “emotional and musical intensity in the midst of chaos and death[,] . . . is a magisterial representation of the musical’s utopic impulses” (76).

Implicit in the collection’s essays on Rainer Werner Fassbinder (by Michael DeAngelis) and Chantal Akerman (by Annamarie Jagose) is a reminder that characters—specifically, the son in *Mutter Küsters’ Fahrt zum Himmel* (*Mother Küsters*

Goes to Heaven, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1975) and the title character in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975)—worked out of their apartments decades before home offices were a thing. While both are excellent essays on the sociopolitical ramifications of each of the directors' work, neither persuaded me that viewing Fassbinder and Akerman through the lens of the apartment plot deepened the understanding of their films.

In *Mother Küsters*, writes DeAngelis, "The sense of the apartment as a private domain rendered public is reinforced" (98) when journalists and other interested parties visit the house where once resided a factory worker. When he hears he is to be laid off, he murders his foreman and then commits suicide. First a newspaperman and then Communist Party members come to the Küsterses' apartment and politicize his death to advance their own causes. Yes, there is an apartment here, but it's a movie about how media mediates and how political figures politicize, not about real estate.

Jagose looks at *Jeanne Dielman*, a film that here needs no synopsis, with an anthropologist's eye, noting that "the apartment plot of Akerman's film is not simply or even primarily spatial; it is, as importantly, temporal, and not just in its celebrated attention to the durational span of everyday domestic gesture" (121). For Jagose, *Jeanne Dielman* is an examination of a woman's daily life at the moment it is about to pass from lived experience into history. For me, it is a landmark film shot in an apartment, one not especially illustrative of the apartment plot.

Where the collection's first essay recognizes the penthouse as a locus of the "haunted house" film, Veronica Fitzpatrick's "Home's Invasion: *Repulsion* and the Horror of Apartments," an intelligent and poetic analysis of *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1965), discusses the apartment as the setting of a horror movie that witnesses its character's psychological unraveling. *Repulsion*, she writes, was the first in Polanski's "apartment trilogy," which includes *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Tenant* (1976). Fitzpatrick quotes Wojcik's *The Apartment Plot* to the effect that, rather than being just a setting, in this genre the apartment "motivates or shapes the narrative in some key way" (129). For Fitzpatrick, the apartment in *Repulsion* is not merely "a container for plot events and figural relations, but an active, if potentially ambient, participant in itself" (129).

Repulsion stars Catherine Deneuve as Carol, an affectless Belgian manicurist in London who shares an apartment with her sister and, sometimes, her sister's married lover. All that is known about Carol is that, as the title implies, she is repelled in particular by the smell of her sister's lover (she sniffs his discarded undershirt and retches) and a kiss from

her beau (from which she recoils and which she assiduously washes away). She is repulsed, in general, by men.

When sister and sister's lover depart for a brief vacation, both Carol and the apartment literally and figuratively crack up. "As Carol spends more and more time alone at home, days and nights bleed together and the space of the apartment increasingly mutates," says Fitzpatrick, "manifesting changes both cosmetic and constitutional" (131). The walls have arms—muscled, male arms—and they aren't graciously hoisting candelabras like those in Jean Cocteau's *La belle et la bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1946); they are ravishing Carol, raped nightly by a male phantom in the apartment. When her apartment, the place where she should be safe, penetrates her, Carol can't easily wash it away. The apartment is not just a reflection of Carol's disintegrating mental state; it becomes her victimizer.

The collection's final essay, Paula J. Massood's "'We Don't Need to Dream No More. We Got Real Estate': *The Wire*, Urban Development, and the Racial Boundaries of the American Dream," considers the adjacency of apartment and gangster plots in the first three seasons of David Simon's *The Wire*. Where some of the essays in the anthology trace how "the apartment plot" applies to foreign cinema, Massood notes that Wojcik's first book primarily focused on the white, middle-class spaces of the postwar era, spaces rarely populated by African Americans.

Massood's essay, then, serves as something of a color correction to Wojcik's original thesis. The characters on which she focuses are the African-American drug dealers turned real estate developers Stringer Bell (Idris Elba) and Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris), the cofounders of B & B Enterprises.

For Massood, the apartment plot of *The Wire* "operates mostly metaphorically in the series" (174), "linked to the discourses of mobility" that run through it (175). The acquisition of abandoned or rundown properties in black and Latino neighborhoods and their transformation into luxury apartments are, Massood observes, "a form of territorial creep not dissimilar to the turf war over drug corners" (176).

Stringer sees property ownership as a path out of the ghetto. Massood quotes David M. Alff, who describes it as "his own form of the American Dream's aspiration to middle-class status" (180). In the end, Stringer is not made, but unmade, by dreams of real estate, for he is assassinated in his "apartment in the sky," his death bookending the lawless victims in the movies that Merrill Schleier had described. The metaphoric apartment plot is made real only after Stringer's death, when a detective sees the inside of the deceased's apartment and is taken aback by its sophistication.

Many of the individual essays in *The Apartment Complex* are worthy and then some, but the collection as a whole could have used a more present editorial voice, perhaps in the mode of interstitial commentary, in such a way that it employed the essays to enlarge the scope of “the apartment plot.” Without it, the book seems to add up to less than the sum of its parts.

CARRIE RICKEY is film critic emerita of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. She reviews movies for Truthdig.com and writes for the *Forward* and the *New York Times*. She is the recipient of the Los Angeles Press Club’s 2018 award for Film and Television Commentary and of a regional Emmy (Mid-Atlantic Division) for Best Documentary for *Before Hollywood: Philadelphia and the Birth of the Movies* (2018).

BOOK DATA Pamela Robertson Wojcik, ed., *The Apartment Complex: Urban Living and Global Screen Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. \$94.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper. 216 pages.

NICK DAVIS

Queer Times, Black Futures by Kara Keeling

With her first monograph, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007), Kara Keeling galvanized the thinking of a great many scholars in film studies as well as other disciplines. That book deployed a range of theoretical armatures (Deleuzian, Gramscian, black feminist, queer) to articulate why and how black lesbians persistently inhabit visual and ideological vestibules between visibility and invisibility, being and becoming, the singular and the general. Its analysis transcended issues of mere depiction since, in Keeling’s view, simply “representing” black femmes where they have been occluded could as easily serve limited or hostile agendas as progressive ones. Instead, she placed more importance on seizing the black femme’s fleeting and otherwise nonexistent figurations in cinema as prompts for interrogating what is meant by “representation” in its perceptual, political, and institutional valences.

Keeling’s new book, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, extends queries that drove *The Witch’s Flight*, analyzing at an even broader level how blackness itself unsettles and evades dominant modes of representation. The book asks what or who is “representable,” who holds rights of access and inclusion within our cultural scene(s), and who, just as crucially, is entitled to invisibility, opacity, and non-sense. The forms of blackness that most excite Keeling contest the violent, oppressive pasts and presents in which humanity remains enmeshed. As Keeling acknowledges, art created from these contestatory positions is not free from complicity in the capitalist, hegemonic, or settler-colonialist systems that sustain the modern world’s pandemic inequalities. Even

so, such formations of blackness herald worlds inimical to the current one, positing not just alternative futures but entire spatiotemporal planes that Keeling locates even farther afield, in a zone she designates as “after the future.”

These ideas plainly affiliate Keeling’s project with those propelling the current, extraordinary surge of Afrofuturist speculations across so many scholarly and cultural texts. However, while Keeling often marshals Afrofuturism as a guiding term, especially as defined by Kodwo Eshun and Ytasha Womack, she does not center that concept or seek to engage its full, ever-expanding bibliography. Indeed, *Queer Times, Black Futures* does not organize itself strictly around any one discourse, opting instead to braid eclectic traditions and pursue idiosyncratic connections.

Gilles Deleuze, Édouard Glissant, and Gilbert Simondon prove to be abiding theoretical influences, as do key concepts from an even wider range of past and present thinkers. These include Beth Coleman on racial technologies, adapting Heidegger’s writings on techne; James Snead on repetition as a dominant trope in black culture; and Karen Barad’s redefinitions of matter, blending insights from feminism and physics. Statistician and probability theorist Nassim Nicholas Taleb plays an especially fertile role in the book’s arguments, as Keeling brilliantly rethinks his model of “antifragility” as a paradigm for the elastic ontologies of race and the achievement of collective survival against heavy and bloody odds. She derives her provocative notions of futures and futurity from more or less distinct traditions within black studies, queer studies, and corporate finance, though Keeling often dares her reader to consider these lineages together.

The book’s biggest surprise is its recurrent attention to, of all literary characters, Herman Melville’s Bartleby the Scrivener. That uncanny bachelor’s cultivated aloofness and his stubborn refusal from assigned tasks strike Keeling as useful referents for the politics of textual, individual, and collective opacity that *Queer Times, Black Futures* explores and mostly valorizes. Bartleby’s appearances, unexpected in a book so fixated on blackness and futurity, are self-consciously structured in ways that accentuate their status as destabilizing thought experiments. He anchors three short caesuras between chapters—successively titled an “Interregnum,” an “Interlude,” and an “Intercession”—that all but invite readers to debate whether they deepen or disrupt Keeling’s lines of thought. I admit I oscillated between these two views, though in intellectual as well as formal terms, these sections do bear out the book’s claim that inherited templates and transparent logics will not foster the wholly reconstituted futures that this book so hungrily seeks.

Keeling's arguments culminate most powerfully in two chapters that apply her ingenious sense of how cinema functions to artworks that concertedly reinvent "the cinematic," syncretizing audio, visual, and digital innovations. In chapter 3, she rethinks the category of "black cinema" outside its customary rubrics, arguing that "the confluence of neoliberal multiculturalism as a mode of governance with a virulent strain of anti-Black racism that maintains the socioeconomic relations based in white supremacy indicates that analytics that rely on 'race,' 'representation,' 'difference,' 'recognition,' and 'power' must be recalibrated" (138).

Keeling presents John Akomfrah's "digitopic" minifeature *The Last Angel of History* (1996) and Arthur Jafa's "algorithmic" montage in the experimental shorts *Dreams Are Colder Than Death* (2013) and, especially, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016) as fruitful premonitions of that "recalibrated" black cinema. Such an enterprise presupposes new technologies, including new understandings of race as technology. These works thereby exemplify imaginative leaps, poetic repetitions, and "poetics of relation" that refuse to domesticate blackness within set coordinates, or to construe prospective future as nothing more than standard deviation from the present(s).

Works like those of Akomfrah and Jafa propose—in part by citing past historical moments, but more so through their unruly disruptions of form, thought, and affect—what "black cinema" could become while adjusting prior theorizations of what it has been, or always could have been. Keeling insists that such radical works, however contingent on cutting-edge means of production, realize potentials that were already present in cinema; they need not be seen to hail the advent of a new regime. In her potent words, "Focusing on questions raised by a perceptible Black existence within the cinematic means not only that another legitimate history of cinema can be written, but also that relationships between Black existence and technology emerge as central considerations no matter at what point in the history of the cinematic one focuses" (123).

Stretching these new parameters of what the "black cinematic" could denote, Keeling stages in chapter 4 a complex confrontation with Grace Jones's still-unfolding body of work and its symptomatic ties to legacies of fetishism and commodification. Drawing on Francesca Royster's and Steven Shaviro's rich readings of Jones's dizzying star text, Keeling's take on this artist proves even more conceptually multifaceted, encompassing multiple phases of Jones's career as well as the manifold media forms where she has intervened.

It is here that the book's persistent curiosity about twenty-first-century finance and its vertiginous protocols really pays off. Keeling reads Jones's blackness, androgyny, and

ferocious creativity as "transindividual resources" and as forms of potential wealth that are always-already entrapped within economies of debt. Given Jones's tastes for outré aesthetics and avant-garde technologies, those preoccupations of *Queer Times*, *Black Futures* also reach new peaks in this chapter. Jones's voice, music, and accompanying videos articulate but also formally enact new relations or "modulations" between the prescriptive and the excessive, the repetitive and the errant. Her work consequently allegorizes the formations and deformations of digital codes alongside the twisting and remixing of cultural, racial, and heteropatriarchal codes.

These two phenomenal chapters advance the book's earlier meditations on "freedom dreams," radical refusals, and poetries of the future, carrying these utopian ideas into even more vital, surprising terrain. In comparison, chapter 2, devoted to black queer cinema, seems to fire Keeling's imagination less fully, expanding without fully updating an excellent article from 2009, and reflecting a less adventurous notion of "the cinematic" than what she offers elsewhere. Chapter 5 applies some of the book's speculative questions about blackness, sexuality, and futurity to recent texts by Nigerian-American novelist Nnedi Okorafor and Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu. This chapter's organization into nine sections of variable length (some just short paragraphs, one entirely blank) reiterates Keeling's commitment to bold leaps and eccentric forms but also embodies their variable analytic payoffs.

To the extent that my reading of *Queer Times*, *Black Futures* charts a progression from semifamiliar territory into a series of thrilling epiphanies, arriving at last amid a constellation of tantalizing but pointedly incomplete conjectures, the book's shape mirrors its intellectual concerns with riches already known, thresholds of dawning possibility, and prospects only barely imaginable.

NICK DAVIS is an associate professor of English and of gender and sexuality studies at Northwestern University, where his research and teaching focus on narrative cinema, queer theory, and American literature. He is the author of the film reviews at www.Nick-Davis.com and a contributing editor at *Film Comment* magazine.

BOOK DATA Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*. New York: NYU Press, 2019. \$89.00 cloth; \$30.00 paper; \$28.48 e-book. 288 pages.

RIELLE NAVITSKI

***A Trail of Fire for Political Cinema: "The Hour of the Furnaces" Fifty Years Later* edited by Javier Campo and Humberto Pérez-Blanco**

Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's Argentine agit-prop documentary *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968) is unchallenged in its exemplary status in

English-language scholarship on political cinema. *A Trail of Fire for Political Cinema: "The Hour of the Furnaces" Fifty Years Later*, edited by Javier Campo and Humberto Pérez-Blanco, both investigates and reifies the film's prominence, joining a recent crop of scholarly books animated by reflections on the fiftieth anniversary of 1968. At least five recent anthologies and monographs, including Paul Douglas Grant's *Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking & May '68*, Mariano Mestman's edited volume *Las rupturas del 68 en el cine de América Latina*, Christina Gerhardt and Sara Saljoughi's anthology *1968 and Global Cinema*, and Morgan Adamson's *Enduring Images: A Future History of New Left Cinema*, use that year's tumultuous events—from the student protests and workers' strikes in France to the Prague Spring's abortive turn toward democracy and the bloody massacre in Mexico City's Tlatelolco Plaza—as a lens for illuminating cinema's intersections with politics. It is telling that while the latter two books extend their consideration of 1968 to regions often marginalized in academic film studies, their focus on *The Hour of the Furnaces* perpetuates the film's position as the emblematic work of the politicized New Latin American Cinema movement. Now, in *A Trail of Fire*, the film is interrogated anew from both formalist and historical perspectives.

The volume is structured by the transnational and trans-historical points of contact mapped by the film's circulation, as well as the moments of misrecognition that have shaped its legacy within both the international left and the academy. Responding to these critical blind spots, the editors stress their aim of bringing canonical Euro-American readings of the film into dialogue with the work of the volume's mostly Argentine contributors (14). *A Trail of Fire's* most compelling essays explore the affinities and disjunctures that emerged in the course of *The Hour of the Furnaces's* extended life on-screen and in scholarly discourse. Pablo Piedras's metacritical reflection highlights the ironically pivotal role of French and U.S. commentators—most notably Robert Stam, with his well-known claim that the film epitomized the convergence of the political and formal avant-gardes—in cementing its reputation, as it could not be screened openly in Argentina under the military regime of Juan Carlos Onganía. Similarly, Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson chart how the documentary's screening at the Pesaro International Film Festival—which famously ended with an impassioned audience carrying the filmmakers on their shoulders into the town square, where they encountered an ongoing students' and workers' demonstration—made it legible within currents of activism that rendered film festivals a politically contested site.

Mariano Mestman's study of the reception of *The Hour of the Furnaces* in Europe and North America highlights a more vexed moment of cross-cultural reading, chronicling, for example, how European spectators' incomplete understanding of the film's Peronist ideology sparked backlash from the orthodox left and led to the suppression of Peronist content from some prints screened in France (147–51). Clara Kriger persuasively argues that the seminal status accorded to *The Hour of the Furnaces* has contributed to the critical erasure of earlier documentary practices in Argentina, including the very documentaries and newsreels repurposed by Solanas and Getino for their chronicle of Juan Domingo Perón's first two presidential terms in the film's second part.

Another cluster of essays focuses on key intertexts for the film in the moment of its production. Ignacio Del Valle Dávila delves into the film's dialogue with Frantz Fanon's anticolonial thought, tracing specific allusions, revisions, omissions, and condensations in its written and spoken discourse. María Amelia García and Teresita María Victoria Fuentes evoke the documentary's resonances with foundational works of Argentine literature such as José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* and Esteban Echeverría's *El matadero* (*The Slaughter Yard*) and with the novels of the boom that—like the New Latin American Cinema movement—marked the growing global marketability of the region's cultural production in the 1960s.

Tomás Crowder-Taraborrelli situates *The Hour of the Furnaces* within the contemporary emergence of *rock nacional* in Argentina, though the genre ultimately remains a structuring absence on a soundtrack featuring opera, indigenous instruments, African-derived drumming, and American soul. Taking experimental filmmaker Claudio Caldini's comparison of *The Hour of the Furnaces* with television as a point of departure, Clara Garavelli traces the film's glancing intersections with the just-emerging practice of video art, highlighting their shared appropriation and critique of televisual and advertising languages.

Three additional chapters offer formal and discursive analyses of the film, with Javier Campo focusing on its articulation of political discourse through a varied range of sound-image relations. Guillermo Olivera takes up the constitutive exclusion of the feminine, the queer, and the infantile from the ideal (masculine) revolutionary subject assumed by the film. Closing out the volume, Humberto Pérez-Blanco reads *The Hour of the Furnaces* as an essay film, stressing its complex construction of authorial and collective subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and enactment of the mechanisms of thought.

A Trail of Fire's wide-ranging approach is stimulating but ultimately not always satisfying. With the exception of

Magali Mariano and María Emilia Zarini's cogent analysis of Fernando Solanas's documentary output in the twenty-first century—which they argue is marked by a turn away from formal experimentation correlated with the filmmaker's growing involvement in electoral politics—the volume offers limited consideration of *The Hour of the Furnaces*'s contemporary resonances. In an afterword, Michael Chanan briefly considers the forms of political action and transnational circulation made possible by present-day digital technologies, but overall, the anthology has relatively little to say about the ideological and aesthetic investments that might shape the film's ongoing afterlife in the present.

In addition, *A Trail of Fire*'s minimal attention to the reverberations of *The Hour of the Furnaces* elsewhere in the Global South is something of a disappointment, particularly given the film's explicit investment in a tricontinental project of decolonization. While Mestman mentions Mrinal Sen's appropriation of footage from the film in *Padatik* (*The Guerilla Fighter*, 1974), the polemics and practices attached to the concept of Third Cinema in Africa and Asia get short shrift here (143, 156). Overall, no doubt due to space constraints, the volume's twelve studies are sometimes too concise to match the epic scale and ambition of their shared subject. Despite these caveats, *A Trail of Fire* attests to how—extending the metaphor of the film and anthology's titles—the embers of the sixties' revolutionary energy can still be fanned to life in the present.

RIELLE NAVITSKI is assistant professor of theater and film studies at the University of Georgia. She is the author of *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil* (Duke University Press, 2017) and coeditor of *Cosmopolitan Film Cultures in Latin America, 1896–1960* (Indiana University Press, 2017).

BOOK DATA Javier Campo and Humberto Perez-Blanco, eds., *A Trail of Fire for Political Cinema: "The Hour of the Furnaces" Fifty Years Later*. Chicago: Intellect Books, 2019. \$106.50 cloth; \$77.19 e-book. 283 pages.

LINDA WILLIAMS

***Front Lines of Community: Hollywood between War and Democracy* by Hermann Kappelhoff, translated by Daniel Hendrickson**

Front Lines of Community: Hollywood between War and Democracy is a book by a German writer that asks how the famously isolationist Americans became convinced of the value of risking their lives in a war that would cause huge sacrifice and death. The book's greatest innovation is to take seriously the notion that film genres form communities of

feeling, and that on some level, communities of feeling can be a model for the way that genres actually work. Centrally, Kappelhoff argues that it was not through the creation of any heroic depiction of war that the American public was mobilized but by the fusion of the already well-established mode of melodrama into a new genre: the combat war film. Kappelhoff suggests that the pathos of sacrifice as witnessed in community, both in the combat unit and in the movie-theater audience, was a key emotion leading to America's participation in World War II.

The book begins with a discussion of three fairly recent combat films looking back on World War II—*Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), *Windtalkers* (John Woo, 2002), and *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998)—before proceeding to two film treatments of the Vietnam War: *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) and *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986). Its first chapters are thus about films mostly familiar to contemporary audiences. (*Windtalkers*, John Woo's commercial failure, is the outlier here since it was not popular in the United States and remains relatively unfamiliar.)

In the remaining chapters, Kappelhoff traces a more detailed history of the genre's formation, from early propaganda documentaries of the *Why We Fight* (1953) series through the fiction films forming the matrix of the combat-film genre—from *They Were Expendable* (John Ford and Robert Montgomery, 1945), *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949), and *The Steel Helmet* (Sam Fuller, 1951) through *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, 2007), and beyond.

In contrast to Jeanine Bassinger's earlier *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, Kappelhoff avoids taxonomies. Instead of grouping genres as shared types of actions, iconographies, and represented worlds, he argues that the raw materials of the genre are built out of caches of personal and collective mediated memories, such as the much-circulated news photo of a shell-shocked marine, eyes vacant, frozen in fear, that graces his cover. Arguing that the genre has never been about the deeds of war heroes but rather the "melodramatic depiction of the suffering individual soldier," he further insists that "the pathos of the genre" elicits "compassion for this suffering man, not his heroic transfiguration" (67).

Where German propaganda aimed at the fusion of the hero with the mass, or with its leader, in the American context, the soldier remains an individual even as the success of the combat unit often depends upon some degree of egoless merger with the corps. In a compelling comparison between Frank Capra's *Prelude to War* (1942) and Leni Riefenstahl's *Tag Der Freiheit: Unsere Wehrmacht* (1935)—both masterful

pieces of documentary war propaganda—Kappelhoff shows how Capra’s mastery of the “sentimental pathos” of the “family melodrama”(62) worked to the advantage of celebrating American democratic freedom.

From an American critic, such a pronouncement championing American individualism, freedom, and democracy might seem facile. From a German critic, whose father and grandfathers presumably fought for the opposition in the same war, it might seem to overly idealize the values of the conquering enemy. However, the rest of the book follows the war genre through some decidedly less triumphalist wars and delves deeper into questions of democracy, genre, and community. Though it sometimes suffers from an absence of U.S. historical detail (such as the end of the draft after the Vietnam War, leaving the discussion of post-Vietnam War films a little wanting), what fascinates in Kappelhoff’s study is his striking claim that the recourse to melodrama goes to the heart of the viability of democratic traditions—to be found in popular moving-image culture.

Frontlines of Community’s fundamental recognition of the operation of melodrama in the war film is an important contribution to the field. Recognizing that there can be no heroic action without a preexisting feeling of community, and taking the notion of feeling quite literally, Kappelhoff works to understand the links between common feeling, community building, and melodrama. Arguing that most studies of the war genre begin to read at some point as if they were analyzing works of literature rather than an audiovisually shared perception of a world, he turns to phenomenology, especially via Vivian Sobchack and Stanley Cavell, to emphasize the importance of generically shared perceptions and “worlds viewed” in the film medium.

Ultimately aiming to understand the relation between “genre poetics and politics” (79), Kappelhoff seems to equate the ways of making a genre seem new with the larger process of poetic production. Rather than invoking genre as responding to repetitious formulas, he understands it as a mediated way of discovering new forms of individuality. However, when he argues—following Deleuze, Rorty, and Rancière—that genre poetics and politics in turn become “poetology,” something that becomes a challenge to classical or rule-governed poetics, I begin to scratch my head.

The book works best when it does not ascribe to melodrama any sinister ideological manipulations and instead prefers to fathom how American audiences simultaneously felt the pain, sacrifice, and suffering of American soldiers as individuals, even as they saw the need for military conformity. *Frontlines of Community* is an apt title

given the insight that individuals who give up their precious right to individuality—say, when they become part of a platoon or unit—nevertheless do not fully merge into the community. This, Kappelhoff asserts, is the basic conflict that “defines and structures the genre, the irreconcilable opposition between the political and the military forms of community” (67).

I must come back, though, to Kappelhoff’s provocative adoption of the melodramatic mode as a way out of the circular problem of genre study that views genre only as conventions of narrative and iconography. While he seems to want to follow Christine Gledhill’s groundbreaking work on melodrama in its relation to genre, and to discover a “poetic logic” in genre making at the heart of commercial genre production, Kappelhoff does not actually follow through on Gledhill’s insight that melodrama cannot be understood as a singular genre and must be understood modally. Rather than understanding the complexity, multiplicity, and pervasiveness of the melodramatic mode, he reduces melodrama (despite calling it a modality) to one single emotion: namely, what he chooses to call sentimentality.

For all his insights, Kappelhoff thus ends up naming the sentimental sadness of the melodrama, the “laughing of the comedy, the scariness of the horror genres, the suspense of the thriller” as if these were aesthetic modalities constructing “the communal fabrication of a common world” (96). As a result, he cannot grasp the sense of melodrama as a machine capable of mobilizing a range of strongly felt generic emotions that go beyond pathos to the exhilaration of physical action, the suspense of too late or in the nick of time, righteous indignation, and so on. Melodrama, especially in its more capacious modal extensions, cannot be limited to one emotion, one kind of action, one kind of mood.

Too often, when he utters the phrase “melodramatic mode,” Kappelhoff seems to reduce it to just sentimental pathos of the so-called woman’s film or family melodrama type. However, he seems on the right track when he places shared experiences of feelings first. The basic notion that emotions are important to genre study remains central to his thinking, as does the idea that genres are all about the communal fabrication of a common world. Further, because the combat film was an entirely new genre, developing out of World War II with no prior existence in theater or novel, his historical observations about it are full of insights that have not been previously made. This is a book to read precisely for its ambition to synthesize film theory in new ways. Even if the argument sometimes stumbles, Kappelhoff’s erudition is both impressive and thought-provoking.

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BOOK DATA Hermann Kappelhoff, *Front Lines of Community: Hollywood between War and Democracy*. Translated by Daniel Hendrickson. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018. \$80.99 cloth; \$56.99 e-book. 388 pages.

LEO GOLDSMITH

***The Technical Delusion: Electronics, Power, Insanity* by Jeffrey Sconce**

We've all had the experience: one day you are idly chatting about Doritos or having to clean your windows, and the next an ad appears on Facebook or Instagram for nacho-cheese-flavored tortilla chips or the Original Squeegee. Sometimes it seems as if mere proximity to certain products will prompt messages from your smartphone about exciting offers and where to find them. Weren't you just thinking that you needed to buy more dish soap? It's almost as if your phone is listening to you, tracking you, in an effort to understand your habits and desires so that it can influence your behavior.

Only a few years ago, most would think that such seemingly paranoid reactions belonged to the realms of the mentally infirm. Perhaps these anxieties were rooted in prescience. Since the advent of such technological innovations, the notion that electronic media serve as instruments for remote mind control that are puppeteered by shadowy, Mabuse-like figures has been consistent—and consistently entertaining. But what once was regarded as a symptom is now accepted as something that is part of one's daily life: your phone *is* indeed listening to you (via its built-in mic); your web browser really *is* sending you subtle provocations to do or purchase certain things (by tracking habits and tastes through those innocent-sounding "cookies" that then feed complex algorithms). As much as tech companies like Facebook may deny that they engage in such brainwashing and targeted advertising ploys, the quotidian experience of networked technologies has become one that fosters a low-level paranoia to which many "users" are now largely resigned.

Without a doubt, contemporary experiences with being tracked by such electronic devices must have prompted Jeffrey Sconce to write *The Technical Delusion: Electronics, Power, Insanity*, in which he investigates the relationship between electronic media and the rise of mental disturbances, which all too often accompany technology's various innovations and permutations. Sconce's richly detailed and frequently entertaining

book is loaded with medical case studies, media spectacles, pseudoscience, material culture, conspiracy theories, and the occult.

Sconce begins his historical analysis in the eighteenth century when galvanism—the application of electricity to (usually dead) muscles—emerged as a speculative method for physiological study. Inspiring both wonderment and anxiety about electricity's effects on organic matter, galvanism serves as a harbinger for ever more elaborate speculation and concern about the human body's relationship with electronic media. (It also inspired and informed the experiments with dead flesh in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.) In building this historical genealogy of conditions still being experienced, *The Technical Delusion* suggests that there has been an ongoing, albeit gradual, intensification of delusions and hallucinations alongside the burgeoning of technological innovation.

Arrayed across five central chapters, Sconce offers a sense of this trajectory through a structure that pivots back and forth in time, tracking the links between past and present. The first two chapters, "The Technical Delusion" and "Chipnapped," lay out key terms and debates around mental health and technology in both American and European contexts and offer up examples from early technologies in order to consider recent phenomena. The next two chapters, "The Will to (Invisible) Power" and "The System," address the period from the eighteenth century through the postwar period. And a final chapter, "Targeted Individuals," brings the reader back once again to the present moment.

Sconce's deft and fluid movements back and forth across time periods allow him to elucidate a comparative history that averts any simplistically linear or "evolutionary" sense of the histories of science and technology. As Sconce indicates, today's understanding of psychosis or magnetism may be more complex now than it was two centuries ago, but by no means should this suggest any achievement of full omniscience. Indeed, one of Sconce's key insights is that the concern that modern generations have about the psychophysical effects of electronic media on the individual and/or collective mind is remarkably consistent with how earlier incarnations of electronic media were received at the time.

To his credit, Sconce quite judiciously examines the complex correspondence between electronically mediated devices and mental health without oversimplifying it. Much like *Madness and Modernism*, Louis A. Sass's earlier landmark study of the close affinities between modernist art and schizophrenia, Sconce does not so much seek causal explanations as track the ways in which discourses surrounding electronics and psychosis echo and feed off one another across time. Avoiding simplistic explanations (or specious

universalisms) for technology's effects on the mind, Sconce gestures toward a much broader study of the relations between media and mental health, concocting an analysis that melds approaches from psychoanalysis, media theory, philosophy, and cultural history.

Along the way, Sconce adroitly navigates the boundaries between empirical research, critical theory, and outright quackery. For example, the book has luminaries such as Sigmund Freud, Marshall McLuhan, and Jean Baudrillard sharing its pages with infamous case studies that include the German paranoid memoirist Daniel Paul Schreber, Bettelheim's Joey the "Mechanical Boy," and the prolific pop ranter Francis E. Dec. Sconce further layers his analysis by engaging such disparate references as John Lennon's murderer, Mark David Chapman; sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick; and actor-turned-"targeted individual" Randy Quaid.

Sconce has developed his own distinctive media-historiography mode that considers works belonging to the esoteric and marginal alongside those that might be considered canonical. His methodology is radically nonhierarchical; it skillfully leapfrogs from more established theoretical paradigms to conspiracy theories. In his previous book, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Sconce found a connection between trash culture and certain artifacts of "cultural detritus" or "paracinema." In this sense, *The Technical Delusion* is a clear extension of his previous scholarship. Here, however, he seems to question what, after all, distinguishes more established notions such as the modernity thesis or theories of the unconscious from such "dodgier" theoretical gambits as mesmerism, or the elaborate speculations around Project MKUltra, or even Pizzagate. Sconce's point is not that there is *no difference*, of course, but rather that these ideas that emanate from adjacent cultural phenomena are in scant dialogue with each other within the scope of scholarly inquiry, either because of established snobbery or because they are taken up too slowly in academia. His work, avoiding such barriers, finds artifacts such as ectoplasm, ray guns, and earbuds to be just as compelling as objects of study as gramophones, films, and typewriters.

Sconce, it must also be said, is that rarest of academic figures: the funny scholar. Few recent works of media scholarship could be said to be, even occasionally, laugh-out-loud hilarious. But alongside evenhanded appraisals of delicate subjects such as mental illness and conspiracy theories, Sconce manages to deliver his salient points with comedic flair, frequently punctuating his analyses with unexpected jokes about Trump, adult men complaining about lady ghostbusters, and dick pics; absurdist neo-acronyms (such as

the "Just Ubiquitous Internet of Computing Everything and You," or "JUICEY"); and weird asides (for example, an oddly compelling disquisition on shit as analog, or at least nondigital, media). It comes as no surprise to learn that Sconce is a great presence on Twitter. If *The Technical Delusion*, for all its many insights, does occasionally feel like a compendium of well-contextualized case histories, its accessibility and flair would make it worth the cover price alone. But, indeed, the book holds a good deal more than that—and, better yet, it's not trying to control your mind!

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BOOK DATA Jeffrey Sconce, *The Technical Delusion: Electronics, Power, Insanity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. \$29.95 paperback; \$109.95 cloth; \$29.95 e-book. 448 pages.

FRANCES GUERIN

Aesthetic Spaces: The Place of Art in Film by Brigitte Peucker

Few would disagree that the cinema is a hybrid medium. It has been variously understood as developing from philosophical toys, visual cultures, and urban entertainment, as well as the nineteenth-century novel. As such, the cinema is often considered the bastard child of other arts and visual media. In the first half of the twentieth century, this inherent hybridity was arguably one of the factors motivating the earliest theorists to identify cinema's ontological specificity and, as a result, claim its legitimacy as a unique artistic medium. In *Aesthetic Spaces: The Place of Art in Film*, Brigitte Peucker demonstrates that not only does the cinema carry other art forms in its genes but, in the case of the modernist films she analyzes, it culls from, re-presents, and manipulates other artworks and art forms in order to interrogate and expand its boundaries. Peucker's investigation runs counter to the claims of many classical and contemporary film theories regarding cinema's ontological specificity. For her, hybridity is the very quality that makes cinema unique.

Across seven chapters, Peucker argues that modernist films characteristically do not, in fact, seek to distinguish themselves from painting, sculpture, theater, performance, puppetry, and/or literature. Rather, they interface with the aesthetic language of other art forms in order "to critique and renew cinema at different moments of its history" (14). For her analysis, she relies on such films as Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso*

(*Red Desert*, 1964), Agnès Varda's *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000), and Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, & Her Lover* (1989).

Peucker focuses on the cinematic articulation of space, spectator, frame, color, props, decor, and actor, dedicating a chapter to each. She contends that her chosen modernist films consciously re-present the aesthetic and formal properties of other artworks in a manner that not only challenges their own boundaries but also pushes beyond those of the cinema as a medium. As such, Peucker's intervention into the debates about cinema today is to contend that, far from becoming obsolete in the aftermath of the invention of digital image making, the cinema continues to redefine itself, precisely by gleaning from the "traditional" arts.

Peucker travels a similar path in each chapter: she leads the reader through a meticulous discussion of how individual paintings, performances, plays, poems, and other texts accrue meaning in the films she explores. At the conclusion of each chapter, Peucker considers each film's broader themes and hermeneutics in light of its engagement with other art forms. In one compelling example, she points out that Rainer Werner Fassbinder places a cropped and enlarged version of Nicolas Poussin's *Midas Giving Thanks to Bacchus* as "wallpaper" in the *mise-en-scène* of his *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant* (*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, 1972). In Peucker's assessment, Poussin's image functions throughout the film as mirror to, script for, and explanation of the action.

In addition, she contends that the camera, framing, and performances interact with Poussin's painting to blur both the world of the painting and that of the film's diegetic reality. As she puts it, "[I]mpressions of depth [are] collapsed," which allows *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* to create an "intermedial space," inviting the film's spectator to immerse herself in the hybrid, "painterly, theatrical, and filmic" world of pure performance (80). Peucker locates the playing out of the film's themes, such as the complexities of sexual and relational identity, in the filmic consequences of this appropriation of Poussin. Lastly, she argues that the entwining of painting and film, the "spilling over of Poussin's tableau into the theatrical space of actor interaction—and into spectatorial space" in turn mirrors Fassbinder's "authorial 'identity,'" as it "colors narrative and *mise-en-scène* alike" (84). Ultimately, Peucker's approach enables her to unearth multiple layers of meaning to reveal the film's integral dependence on other art forms.

Aesthetic Spaces is immensely readable. As distinct from the current work on "intermediality," it is also noteworthy for its focus on the films under discussion, avoiding extensive theoretical digressions and yet steeped in philosophical and

theoretical rigor. She deftly marries film theory with traditional art theory and criticism, invoking the work of Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl, Erwin Panofsky, and also such contemporary art critics as Svetlana Alpers and Norman Bryson. Peucker impressively pulls together diverse strands of criticism to build a rich and novel foundation for analyzing cinema. In doing so, she provides a substantial intervention into the otherwise undertheorized, and often cursorily understood, relationship between film and the traditional arts as it is explored in film studies today.

The freshness of Peucker's perspective derives from her assertion that, in spite of the arrival of the digital image, the cinema continues to burgeon and that, with it, film theory and criticism are obliged to remain fluid and negotiable to meet the challenges of the changing medium. Peucker brings a new perspective to widely discussed films, implying that cinema develops through an ongoing renewal of its conversation with the other arts.

Several undercurrents wind through the chapters, prompting a reconceptualization of a number of accepted assumptions of classical and contemporary film theory and criticism. Again, to give an example: even though her own argument is built on André Bazin's claims regarding the distinctions between theater, painting, and the cinema, Peucker suggests that today, "faced with films that flaunt their hybridity, we think somewhat differently about medium specificity, about the conditions that separate—and join—the arts" (156). Peucker looks back on Bazin's arguments, as well as those of other canonical thinkers such as Rudolf Arnheim, Noël Burch, Stephen Heath, and Gilles Deleuze, and updates them to offer a twenty-first-century understanding of seemingly familiar films.

Another of Peucker's resonant claims sets the stage for a notion of film spectatorship that is very different from that developed by twentieth-century film theory. Namely, she reconceives the spectator-cinema relationship. In her discussion of the "unstable diegetic realities" of the films, she highlights their tendency to break the fourth wall again and again—threatening to enter, and sometimes actually entering, the space occupied by the film spectator. When paintings such as Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* are brought to life in Peter Greenaway's *Nightwatching* (2007) and Balzac's *The Hidden Masterpiece* finds its way into Jacques Rivette's *La belle noiseuse* (1991), "a continuity [is created] with the theatrical world of the film," and an "immersive space" emerges (68). This immersive space is fabricated when "spectatorial space extends into the space of representation" (76).

Effectively, when characters in the film's diegesis perform the parts of those in the painting, or when characters, props,

and other aspects of the *mise-en-scène* cross from one register of representation to another, the distinction between different realities is confounded, even erased. Film and painting become continuous. Moreover, in these blurred narrative spaces, “questions of identity are both staged and undone” (165). Peucker argues that these modernist films collapse representational spaces in a way that self-consciously announces the interrogation of their own aesthetic. By extension, the spectator is alerted to question her own assumptions about the distinction between film and lived reality, and the conflation of truth and fiction within that reality.

Peucker extends this logic to argue for the wider political and historical significance of the films she discusses. Regarding *Nightwatching*, she quotes Greenaway’s voiceover when he accuses Rembrandt’s painting of depicting Italy as a “land of vicious assassination” (63). It is then a small step for Peucker to suggest that Greenaway’s next question—“Was Rembrandt being prophetic?”—invokes the contemporaneous assassinations of Dutch citizens Pim Fortuyn (2002) and Theo van Gogh (2004). Thus, Peucker makes a series of connections between spectators of *The Night Watch* in Greenaway’s film and spectators of the film itself to point to possible transhistorical interpretations. Thanks to its fusion of

spectators, fictions, and realities, *Nightwatching* becomes a powerful film with an urgent message for a contemporary audience.

Lastly, Peucker’s skillful analyses are a result of the complexity of detail that she uncovers. The layers of her writing weave together historical and contemporary writings on film, an analysis of paintings from different centuries, and a discussion of the differences between cinema and painting as artistic media. This results in a challenging, yet rewarding, read. *Aesthetic Spaces* is both a compelling work of film criticism and a welcome intervention into the discussion of the medium itself. Readers will be left eager to return to the films Peucker analyzes to follow her insights into their reliance on the other arts.

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BOOK DATA Brigitte Peucker, *Aesthetic Spaces. The Place of Art in Film*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019. \$99.95 cloth; \$34.95 paper; \$34.95 e-book. 224 pages.

