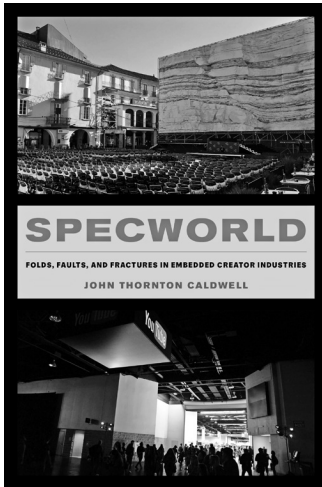


J. D. CONNOR

Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries, by John Thornton Caldwell



There's a way to approach John Thornton Caldwell's *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries* as another of his characteristically decisive interventions in cinema and media studies driven by his decades of ethnographic work. *Specworld* is that, but that isn't how it manifests, nor is that why—for

most readers of *Film Quarterly*—it matters. What he calls “specwork” he describes as a “widely dispersed conceptualizing process” that “may be as central to the core of television/media production today as the industrial and material production of series, formats, and network programming once was” (57).

Specworld is the third in the author's trilogy of ethnographies that include *Televisuality* and *Production Culture*. Caldwell's efforts take their place in a century of thinking through the labor structures of Hollywood, from the incisive journalism typified by *Fortune* writers in the 1930s and Lilian Ross's *Picture* in the 1950s to the anthropological and ethnographic efforts inaugurated by Hortense Powdermaker's *Hollywood, the Dream Factory* (1950).

But the “Hollywood” of today is no longer a film factory with an emergent TV sector; nor is it the world of hundreds of linear channels of the cable era. The central gambit of *Specworld* is to reach out to the incomprehensibly large world of platform content creators to see how they might fit into the system formerly known as “the industry.” Is there a way that broadening the reach can yield a new level of coherence? And is that question of interest merely to scholars?

Where vast swaths of cinema and media studies have attempted to comprehend the totality of contemporary media via their shared cultural values or via the relatively medium-agnostic practices of fans, Caldwell is attempting something nearly impossible: understanding the totality of the system through the titular “folds, faults, and fractures” that unite *and* differentiate its varied worlds of practice or aspiration.

Caldwell's ethnography ranges from high-prestige Hollywood labor (“craftworld,” as in *Game of Thrones*) through more fungible, rapid-fire IP expansion (“brandworld,” as in reality TV) to the instant-upload, always-on world of YouTubers (“specworld”). But the book is not reportage; it is resolutely uncinematic in the way it presents the interactions among those worlds. There are no long set pieces that clock their way through decisive events. There are no “whole experiences” to be disarticulated. There are no rounded characters. There are no piles of redundant quotations from qualitative interviews, the bane of bad ethnography. Instead, there are bits and pieces of interviews, isolated slides from discarded PowerPoint decks, clipped marketing lines, and stills from YouTube behind-the-scenes videos. Each of these fragments sidles up to the argument only to bear more weight than you might have initially imagined. The prose is punctuated by photo illustrations of the detritus of the industry's how-to sessions, “VidCons,” and other paratexts.

The charge of Caldwell's writing does not principally lie in the emergence of “characters” or “stories.” It lies rather in his relentless invention of categories and concepts. His prose spins out hundreds of novel encapsulations to reckon with a phenomenal totality of seemingly impossible variety. For the reader who will not be undertaking such research on their own, the text is a wave to be surfed. The concepts that emerge are not the creators' own—people inside the system often “misperceive the very labor regimes they aspire to or operate in”—but they are adjacent, an inveterate “getting it,” ready to be deployed in strategic empathy.

Alongside that conceptual effulgence are the lists. For Caldwell, parataxis—one damn thing after another—is the mode of reality. The near-synonyms in his lists of nouns, adjectives, or, most importantly, verbs are not redundancies. They are calls to attend to the precise differences each of those terms might name or not quite name. Field work runs into “splintered relations, financing failures, failed pilots, derailed coproductions, finger-pointing, and

Film Quarterly, Vol. 76, No. 4, pp. 101–112. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2023 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2023.76.4.101

self-justifications in the trades” (41–42). Caldwell’s verbs cumulate: “These multiple systems invariably overlap, shadow, feed, alter, monetize, or manage the specific production practice the researcher initially sets out to study” (34). The proliferating nouns appear when the system “fractures,” providing new ways of reading through the events of the cultural world; the verbs unroll when there is some registrable experience that the connotations indicate.

But that wild proliferation is not the final state of Caldwellian prose. For every so often, the unruly terminology is gathered into a table and the “multiple systems” reach toward a higher systematicity. The “semiotic square” à la Fredric Jameson or Rosalind Krauss offers a tidy arrangement of the forces that hold a set of oppositional concepts in place. It produces its effect by revealing an unexpected, diagrammatic simplicity hidden within a complex system. Caldwell’s tables achieve their power in the unhidden, the obvious. They flicker, they congeal, and the ragged edges of their comparisons are not indications of thought that is imprecise, but of the unruly, turbulent realities those conceptual containers bring to semiorder. There must be readers for whom the tables come across as arch, as false precision, as monuments to unrigor. For the rest—for me, obviously—this is where thinking gets hold of reality without squeezing it dry.

Caldwell’s *Production Culture* (2009) still acknowledged that the motor of broad interest in “film-and-television” lay in the aesthetic aspirations of products. In *Specworld*, Caldwell contends that this newly dominant labor domain moves aspiration down the scale, away from flagship products or auteur careers and into the system’s everyday interactions. The spec script is no longer an isolated product; “specwork” is everywhere. “A deep and unfortunate synergy exists between wide-ranging speculation behaviors (on production’s expressive ‘creator’ side) and folding and rift behaviors (on production’s stressed, managerial ‘industry side’)” (19). The system has its tensions, dynamics, and metastable power arrangements. Over time, “proliferating specwork destroys craftworld scarcity even as it feeds huge amounts of new ideas into the brandworld, which large corporate conglomerates efficiently strip-mine” (80). The “dense para-industrial buffer” is “now inseparable from industry proper” (81).

Caldwell’s work on complex systems has finally found a way around notions of the work as lodestar. All the things that might be reified in a “work of art” can be sliced and diced and distributed across the infinite churn of worker-generated content. Conceptually, aspiration is operationalized. The result is a concomitant increase in scholarly

attention to both method and ethics. “More than, say, economic ‘markets’ or strategic ‘synergies’ or ‘creative economies,’ all three dispositions (deception, coercion, extraction) necessarily involve embodied, experienced, and affective dimensions” (17). The “condition or duress” of the people who make media “should matter more in scholarship” (17).

This is a conceptually audacious solution to the problem of studying creative industries. Caldwell has not simply solved a problem that dogs ethnography or one that is internal to his own intensive attention to the systems of creative exploitation he is busy training people into. This sort of writing, with its attendant conceptual bonanza, shakes received ideas about cultural determination as a whole.

The first step toward this reconception is simply noticing alignments and analogies. Caldwell begins his case studies with a comparison of instructional rhetorics regarding breaking in or making it and the bodily pressures they presume, then moves on to a typology of “administrative production,” particularly the “televisioning” of YouTube content creation. He concludes with an outline of the ways in which production “conjures finance.” Economic aperçus proliferate: “Trade conjecture functions alongside financial speculation”; “aspiration” is “a form of managerial capital” (xiii–xix); “*all film/TV productions are pilots*.... They create the possibility of endless, systematic iterations of the very same readaptable concept” (82, emphasis in the original).

Then things begin to get a little spooky. “Specwork has aligned so well with transmedia production, industry fan interactions, and viral marketing, which mirror it” because it “provides the broad conditions that facilitate linkages and synergies between the malleable digital ‘material’ and technologies of TV production, on the one hand, and current corporate management strategies aimed at developing malleable and self-replicating IP, on the other (which ideally suits corporate reformatting, franchising, branding, transmedia)” (61). Asserting that the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Mr. Beast are up to the same thing seems precipitous. Describing “specwork” this way, though, the system-of-systems begins to coalesce.

Caldwell’s account of the affects and conceptualizing processes that pervade contemporary media production compels us to ask what has brought us to this point. What determines the shape and history of culture? He offers suggestive hints that the building blocks of specworld—“speculative imagination, previsualization, prototyping, pitching, and brainstorming”—were “closely associated with innovation strategies in the arts.” Along the way, innovation was routinized; a massive “folding” brought much creative energy into the system as a whole. Today, artistic

speculations “behave more like institutional and economic bureaucracies than aesthetic principles” (119).

How did artistic speculation get swallowed? Were the concepts always vulnerable to cooptation? Or did early “specwork,” perhaps unknowingly, run just ahead of the economy that would inevitably capture and profit from it? I am, by training and inclination, bound to see such ironies as the mediated results of the mode of production as a whole. And yet. And yet perhaps the starkest challenge Caldwell’s work issues is to that Frankfurt School materialism. “[You] could say that YouTube and its affiliates partner together as a public trading floor for the microfinancing of aspirant creators” (255). You could, and once you plunge into the distilled rhetoric of creators and corporations you probably should. But for that system to work, something else is supplementing it. “The automated therapeutic management” that gluts these platforms helps shore up “specworld’s vast micromedia speculation stock market” (272). Here’s how to deal with burnout; here’s how to deal with disappointment, mistakes, demonetization. Just keep posting. The “cultural reflation” of the creative economy after the crises of 2008 was properly affective, properly cultural.

And powerful. Caldwell’s account of “televisioning” in the world of YouTube hinges not on the conversion of YouTube into something like a linear TV network but rather the penetration of television-style management techniques into YouTubers’ overleveraged businesses. One central feature of that is an imposed scarcity mobilized to drive monetization. Just as television decides between binge drops and weekly releases, so content creators need to find ways of imposing televisual scarcity on their work, pushing audiences into higher Patreon tiers or convincing them to sit through ads.

If we take “televisioning” seriously, we find that its principles are very nearly the story of the streaming wars. In 2022, Wall Street investors demanded that streamers pivot from at-any-cost subscriber acquisition to near-term profitability. The macroeconomic environment was now dominated by postpandemic inflation and higher interest rates. Those raised the costs of delay and shortened the timeline for returns. Netflix was punished, Paramount rewarded; the industry began to shed hundreds of shows, purge library titles, launch ad-supported alternatives to their flagship channels, and tout their hyperprofitable free ad-supported streaming television brands such as Tubi, Pluto TV, and Freevee.

That may or may not be striking to you. It strikes me because it raises the question of why the model of a YouTuber’s ascent should depend on forms of “televisioning.” Was that just a foretaste of the televisioning of

the system overall? Was it the model, the paradigm, the metonym, the allegory, the subsidiary, the case study? Are these transformations the results of material and technological changes, or do they derive from rhetorics of practice? Like no other recent work, *Specworld* presses pause on the quick determination of determination.

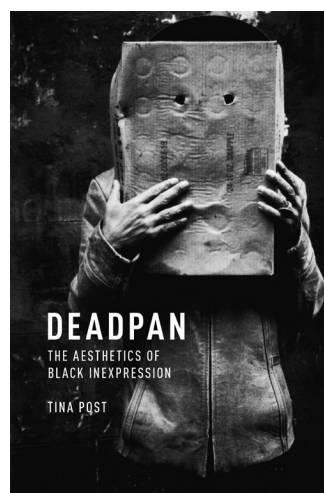
There are scholarly consequences, but for practitioners, creators, viewers, and everyone else, determination becomes a live question again. Caldwell puts industry at the center but describes an industry largely devoid of identities. It will fall to readers and other researchers to ask whether networks built on race, queerness, school, and so on that cut across the industry are mere deviations from the system or whether they erect countersystems, counter-subsystems within the whole. It may require finding new locations of fracture and enfolding. It will absolutely require Caldwellian levels of attention, vision, and language to measure up to the complexities of the world.

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BOOK DATA John Thornton Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. \$85 cloth; \$29.95 paper. 400 pages.

LAUREN TREIHAFT

Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression, by Tina Post



Though the expression or inexpression of deadpan is most commonly associated with silent-film star Buster Keaton (“the Great Stone Face”), the comic actor known for the impassiveness of his face and the imperiousness of his body, Tina Post’s *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* reconsiders the historical legacy of

the concept outside of traditional accounts of comedy and humor studies by offering an impressive “investigation of the aesthetic affects at work at the intersection of blackness and embodied inexpressions” (3).

Most descriptions of deadpan invoke a certain concreteness or frankness as the de facto qualities of the gesture or comic mode. Post astutely recontextualizes the notion of deadpan through the lens of a black historical intervention that begins in the early nineteenth century with the science of specimenization and the fascination with mechanical bodies. Post reveals how such vocabulary concealed the more enigmatic and racially charged vocabulary of inscrutability that lies underneath the surface of appearances, especially when it comes to the study of black bodies. She writes: “[T]his makes the deadpan a remarkably malleable performative—a surface quiet that affects its audience through genre, material surroundings, and sensoria” (4), and later goes on to state: “[I]f there’s nothing inherently black about the impassive face, there is something distinct about the affects and reactions that congeal around black inexpression” (13).

Post begins by prefacing that deadpan gestures can be located in arenas unaccustomed to or external to the realm of comedy performances, such as the boxing ring, the dance floor, and the art gallery. Thus, her study draws from a wide range of disciplines, from dance studies to African American studies, from photography to affect theory. Post laments the dearth of humor studies addressing black bodies and the performance of race, especially in her final chapter, where she discusses Buster Keaton and the indebtedness of the silent clown to the vaudeville circuit for African American performers and the black minstrel tradition.

Significantly, Post notes that her study is neither a comprehensive account of the registers of black inexpression nor an attempt at one; instead, she endorses a poetics of relation, one that does not demand completion, coherence, identification, or legibility. In this way, despite centering on deadpan specifically in the context of black inexpression, Post occasionally relates the performative mode as analogous to the inscrutability that runs through accounts of Western encounters with Asian and Asian American subjects.

Before plunging headfirst into the more complex discursive threads that come together to reveal an ambitious and exceptionally nuanced intervention into conceptual deadpan as an aesthetic of black inexpression, Post pauses to contextualize her wide range of sources, uncovering a radically divergent cultural history of the term and etymological basis for it, largely located in “examples of expressionlessness and emotional withholding that have originated with black cultural actors” (165).

Post defines the realm of deadpan aesthetics as “the place where the inexpressive black person meets narratives of black inexpression” (3). She does this provocatively by

identifying the “blandly ubiquitous” facade of the gestural economy charted in Jim Borgman’s “How Are You Feeling Today?” poster in conjunction with the poster’s black intervention in 2014 by an online purveyor of hip-hop paraphernalia promoting a new single by rapper Rich Homie Quan. The revised, twenty-first century chart of feeling pictures Quan’s face in the center of the poster, with the caption of his emotion stating the title of his single: “Some Type of Way.” Post’s inclusion of the chart in the opening of the study immediately indicates her focus on modes of black expression and inexpression that are not readily identifiable as she explains how Quan’s “realistic black face also interrupts the assumption of ubiquitous universal, deraced whiteness” (2).

Further underlying the spectrum of feeling featured in the caricaturesque white-faced poster, found almost ubiquitously in doctor’s offices and primary schools, is a particular specter of scientific knowledge, a haunting erasure that both omits and prevents black identification. Recalling Lauren Berlant’s theorization of flat affect, Post points to the power of the gestural surface. Post investigates how inexpressiveness can be projected by an observer or performed by the observed. In this way, the deadpan’s aesthetic function operates with or without the intention of the subject who performed it.

Post begins her survey of black modes of withholding and reserve with a significant referent: Black world heavyweight champion Joe Louis. “Poker Face” Joe Louis, like Keaton, donned a famous deadpan, and yet, unlike with Keaton, discussion of Louis has been relatively lost to the annals of history. Post reads Louis’s deadpan as a means of self-regulation, respectability, and humility. This case study haunts the entirety of the project, not only inserting the famed boxer into the narrative of historical deadpan, but also opening onto one of the most provocative aims of the study: to investigate how a single performative gesture could signal such divergent affectations. What is at stake in the shift from the emotional recession and impassiveness of Keaton to Louis’s enactment of modernity through a deadpan veneer of respectability?

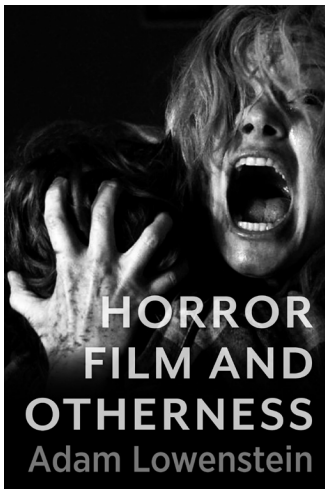
From references to performances by Lena Horne to the resemblance of Keaton’s raggedy corporeal gesticulations to the racialized bodies of Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy dolls, Post manages to unfold intricately each case study to investigate the affective ecologies of images. Ultimately, it is difficult to give justice to the formidable scope of research Post’s work presents, but overall the study provides an intelligent contribution to the strands of literature on black performance studies, humor studies, and visual studies at large.

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BOOK DATA Tina Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression*. New York: NYU Press, 2023. \$89.00 cloth; \$30.00 paper. 272 pages.

M. SELLERS JOHNSON

Horror Film and Otherness, by Adam Lowenstein



In *Horror Film and Otherness*, Adam Lowenstein situates the impetus for the book in the social context of contemporary Pittsburgh in the wake of the shooting massacre that occurred at the Tree of Life synagogue in November 2018 and the death of local horror auteur George Romero the previous year. Lowenstein asks,

“What happens when horror comes home?” He proposes that horror films may be a surprisingly profound avenue for addressing and reconciling the social horrors of the real world (1). In fact, fictional horror narratives and their historical contexts can function as a catalyst in rousing social consciousness.

Lowenstein challenges the binary self/other distinctions typical of conventional conceptualizations of horror, arguing that the genre instead affords an experience of “transformative otherness.” Throughout this text, Lowenstein readdresses long-standing theories by critical pioneers such as Robin Wood and Carol Clover, reexamines the works of established horror directors Tobe Hooper, George A. Romero, and David Cronenberg, and investigates minority authorship in horror cinema through female, black, and Jewish perspectives.

Horror Film and Otherness contains seven chapters in three sections. The first part contends with the legacy of Robin Wood and his established conceptions of a “progressive versus reactionary” approach to otherness in 1970s horror. Lowenstein utilizes James Clifford’s notions of ethnographic surrealism to highlight the blurred distinctions of subject/object and dream/reality as modes of achieving

transformative otherness. In the first chapter, Lowenstein interrogates the ideological binaries in Wood’s critical assessment of “good taste” versus “bad taste” in his comparison of Richard Donner’s *The Omen* (1976) and Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). While Wood expresses a preference for *Massacre* as an aesthetically superior, independent, and even auteur film, Lowenstein argues that Wood was too focused on auteurism and that there is more critical nuance within these two staples of American horror cinema.

Lowenstein further scrutinizes Clover’s notions of sadomasochistic spectatorship and identity association between viewers and on-screen characters. Through an analysis of John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1979), he shifts away from common psychological identification-dependent theories surrounding the slasher subgenre and focuses instead on the aesthetics of horror as spectacle and attraction. Rather than simply seeing the murderer and the Final Girl as two binaries of audience identification, he argues that the ambiguity of their mirrored relationship and interactions creates oscillating intimations of a shared being. Instead of making hard distinctions between these two archetypes, he argues for “horror’s transformative otherness, where normality and monstrosity, self and other, shift endlessly in ongoing metamorphosis rather than settling into two oppositional dichotomies” (39). Chapter 2 approaches Jerzy Skolimowski’s 1978 film *The Shout* through Clifford’s understanding of ethnographic surrealism as a mode of challenging assumptions of cultural order and politics of representation.

In part 2, Lowenstein analyses a range of case studies from iconic horror filmmakers Hooper, Romero, and Cronenberg. These filmmakers use the genre’s monsters to transform understandings of aging, in Hooper’s *The Funhouse* (1981), *Salem’s Lot* (1979), and *Lifeforce* (1985); of economic trauma, in Romero’s underrated vampire film *Martin* (1978); and of therapeutic perspectives, in Cronenberg’s *Scanners* (1981) and his more recent *Maps to the Stars* (2014).

In the final section, Lowenstein analyzes the presence of minority filmmakers and characters whose own issues of social otherness elevate the main argument of transformative otherness. In one of the book’s more exceptional sections, Lowenstein looks to surrealism as a critical lens for examining what he describes as “feminine horror.” He surveys the works of female horror creatives Marina de Van, Stephanie Rothman, and Jennifer Kent. His analysis of de Van’s underappreciated film *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) offers some of the best critical assessments of her work

since Tim Palmer's lucid writings on de Van and her fellow New French Extremity cohorts.

Lowenstein proposes a "feminine horror" that considers not only the representation of women on-screen but also the question of female authorship. The final chapter considers the ties that bind Jordan Peele's *Get Out* to Ira Levin's stories of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The real paranoia and lived horror shared by the Jewish writer and the Black filmmaker become the ground for horror's "minority vocabulary," as he terms "the genre's ability to articulate the experience of social minorities as real pain rather than just paranoid fantasy" (158).

In an afterword, Lowenstein acknowledges that his monograph was finalized in the spring and summer of 2020, a time frame especially meaningful because people had lived within a historic period of significant struggle, isolation, and otherness to one another. Lowenstein reflects on these "anguished times of virus lockdown, economic meltdown, murderous racism, presidential failure, [and] international upheaval" (186). While his overall arguments stem from an affinity for horror films, other major factors contributing to this monograph involve affective tragedies endured in these contemporary times, not only personally for Lowenstein, but also within the Jewish community of Pittsburgh and through violent prejudices felt across the nation and the world. Nevertheless, Lowenstein uses his notion of transformative otherness in horror cinema as a potential means for cathartic transformation. His book stakes a claim for horror's ability to transmute the objectionable issues it might otherwise appear to endorse, reframing the issues of trauma and misunderstood otherness within horror as expressive vehicles for understanding and metamorphosis.

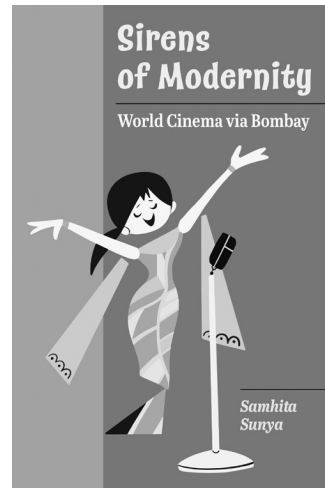
Horror Film and Otherness lays important groundwork in elevating perceptions of social difference through the horror film. At times, Lowenstein does make bold theoretical claims that appear to be motivated mostly by his textual examples and their potential to make a case for transformative otherness. However, importantly, he also reevaluates traditional critical perspectives on the horror genre and offers provocative understandings of the aesthetic, allegorical, and historical fruitfulness of the genre as a narrative and formal exercise in addressing social difference in the real world. The fantastical and horrific narratives of Lowenstein's body of films generate reflections and refractions of the real world, its horrors, and the potential for transformative otherness to inspire a more positive understanding and recognition of the difficulties and horrors manifested in public life.

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BOOK DATA Adam Lowenstein, *Horror Film and Otherness*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. \$140.00 cloth; \$35 paper; \$34.99 e-book. 248 pages.

SWAPNA GOPINATH

Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema via Bombay, by Samhita Sunya



In her new book *Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema via Bombay*, Samhita Sunya examines "public debates over gender, excess, cinephilia and the world via Bombay ... over a 'long' 1960s period" (4). A fitting addition to the Cinema Cultures in Contact series, Sunya's book considers the role of popular Hindi cinema in the nation's embrace

of modernity, but moves away from national allegorical approaches to explore the transnational visibility and circulation of popular Hindi films of the 1960s. More provocatively, Sunya's case studies are not purely Bombay productions; rather, they are transnational coproductions or remakes of Madras productions, thereby enabling the reader to see beyond the hegemonic patterns of production and reception of Bombay cinema.

This well-researched work lies at the intersections of film studies and cultural studies, using the aesthetic forms and material practices of cinephilia to position Hindi cinema within the larger framework of world cinema. The book is structured in two parts: the first part reconstructs recent world-cinema historiographic debates and inserts popular Hindi cinema by way of circuits of film distribution (chapter 1) and Hindi film songs (chapter 2). Sunya argues that song lyrics are "key interfaces for collective, critical reflections propelled by cinephilia" (23). In the second part she looks at "cross-industry productions" (23) to unpack the self-reflective character of cinema, using paratexts such as posters and song lyrics.

The book begins with a close reading of a song clip from the Hindi comedy *Chintu Ji* (Ranjit Kapoor, 2009),

which “pays homage to the moment in history as two parallel streams—one of canonical auteur cinema and the other of the “spectacular audiovisual excess”—got consolidated” (1). Sunya uses the sequence to outline the main features of Bombay cinema that would circulate, consolidate, and transform in the 1960s and 1970s: the spectacles of romance and music and comic narratives that are loud and crass. In addition, Chintu Ji is the nickname of Raj Kapoor’s real-life son, and Kapoor’s transnational popularity in the Cold War era speaks to the book’s main intervention: how Hindi cinema worked as a cultural ambassador to build diplomatic connections with the world. Sunya’s work delves deep into this aspect of popular Hindi cinema, using case studies from popular genres rather than the auteurist films that have received more scholarly attention in the Anglo-European academy.

Sunya claims that films such as *Pardesi* (Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and Vasili Pronin, 1957), a Russian-Indian collaboration, shaped concepts of both national identity and modernity. These were films of excesses, and Sunya contemplates the “excess of bodily difference, the excess of form and the excess of capitalism” (22). These films were instrumental in the project of nation building but were also objects of cinephilic attachment, with cinephilia figured as a practice of modernity.

Sunya defines cinephilia as “that ‘something’ that is embodied and authentic in its vitality and critical awareness. It is posited as an excess that is inadvertently produced by a commercial industry, yet critically escapes its commoditization” (20). Popular Hindi cinema requires an expansion of Anglo-European understandings of cinephilia, as Sunya argues that Hindi cinema enabled “cinephilic reciprocities.” In her telling, Hindi film songs become “participatory, cinephilic engagements” and thereby “both a practice and a vibrant ekphrastic discourse” (23, 27).

The self-reflexive nature of Hindi cinema also is figured as a trope of Indian modernity. Sunya turns to the representation of gender in these popular films, scrutinizing the players in the film industry as well as the cinephilic critics and viewers who consumed popular Hindi cinema prior to the emergence of television. Sunya demonstrates how the women in popular films were construed as erotic objects of temptation and subjected to a male gaze, arguing that this consumption of visual pleasure was instrumental to the nation’s embrace of modernity.

Sunya uses the film song and dance sequences to explain further the dilemma of the modern Indian

sensibility. Sunya claims that the songs in the films are disruptions to the narratives that also overcome language barriers with subtitling and dubbing in order to circulate transnationally. For example, she shows how films drew on premodern genres and tropes of love poetry—such as *prem nagar* (“city of love”)—to posit the potential and limits of cinephilia as a thoroughly modern form of love (76). *Prem nagar* is an open metaphorical space where the play of sociocultural narratives—as defined by spatio-temporal dimensions, along with vernacular histories in the form of localized song and dance narratives—can be witnessed, allowing for a participatory cinephilic engagement that defines the history of cinema in a multicultural nation like India.

Sunya’s work with paratexts is impressive. The book draws on a great deal of archival material, ranging from advertisements and newspaper reports to publicity materials for films (including Persian and Russian posters for Hindi films) to evaluate the socioeconomic discourses that have shaped and tested the borders of the nation-state. Sunya uses these paratexts to trace the complex cultural transactions within cinematic spaces between India and South Asia, India and the Middle East, and India and other Asian nations. Sunya cleverly positions Hindi cinema as a significant cultural product through case studies that include low-budget films, remakes and dubbed films, and similar oft-forgotten films.

Sunya’s text foregrounds how cinema was instrumental in the evolution of modernity in India, shaping notions of nationhood and identity. She demonstrates how popular cinema’s obsession with spectacles of love and music enabled transnational collaborations that solidified the image of the nation on-screen while testing its limits off-screen. For Sunya, cinema is a privileged site because its status is “caught between that of an expressive art and an industrial commodity” (55). With its focus on popular cinematic texts of the 1960s, *Sirens of Modernity* provides a rigorous and scholarly, yet accessible and engrossing, contribution to Indian cinema studies that will be useful for world cinema studies, sound studies, and gender studies.

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BOOK DATA Samhita Sunya, *Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema via Bombay*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022. \$34.95 paper. 270 pages.

HOOR ELSHAFEI

Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image, edited
by Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg



As a complement to the exhibition *No Master Territories: Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image*, curated for the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, *Feminist Worldmaking and The Moving Image* is a book that belongs to a long tradition of scholarly efforts that focus on practices that flourish in the shadow of the industry,

often in fierce opposition to it. The book surveys the moving-image works made by and about women in defiance of commercial norms, works that seek to invent new languages to represent gendered experience.

Constructed as an extensive library of moving images, the book offers ten original texts, two conversations, and eight diptychs with key historical texts appearing alongside short responses from contemporary filmmakers. Editors Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg marshal the intersectional, cross-generational, and global perspectives of filmmakers and scholars on nonfiction, examining practices ranging from activist and observational documentaries to avant-garde films, essay films, and personal testimonies. The collection's essays range in tone, style, and approach to recast the period between the 1970s and 1990s, revisiting prominent figures and film theorists from multicentric and international geographic contexts.

These essays not only discuss well-trodden debates about female representations, but also reflect on critical international filmmakers who use film in connection to feminist movements in their countries. The editors emphasize the associations between feminist and anti-imperialist struggles by placing the modernist search for a cinematic language alongside multiple forms of activist organization. In this way, the use of the word *feminism* in these essays demands a broader, more inclusive definition, one that can critically reflect on a realist aesthetics and interrogate how to write a history of feminist film.

This volume attends to historiographical gaps with an awareness of how perilous it can be to speak of “forgotten“

films. The editors avoid following a strict chronology or centering a particular topic, organizing the essays into conversations. This looser structure allows for larger meanings to emerge across texts, freeing readers to chart their own path and choose from dozens of artistic proposals. A historical essay that stands out is “Whose History?,” by Liz Rhodes, who in 1979 critiqued the elimination of women filmmakers from the canon of film history. This essay remains one of the most potent reflections on feminist film historiography. In her essay, Rhodes cites earlier women filmmakers, like Maya Deren and Germaine Dulac, expressing their concern that their work has not received the recognition it deserves. Rhodes's essay is a precursor to later debates within feminist and postcolonial theory that reached their apotheosis in the 1980s and 1990s under the rubric of “deconstruction.” Lakshmi Padmanabhan follows up with a contemporary piece, “Cut the Line,” to expand on Rhodes's polemic in order to include Black, Indigenous, and non-Western filmmakers within film history and to trouble the figure of “woman” as a stable category of difference.

With a focus on textual analysis, filmmakers such as Haneda Sumiko and Ayanna Dozier examine particular films to situate them as feminist films. Haneda Sumiko, a leading Japanese documentary filmmaker, discusses her journey to become a director in a male-dominated film industry. She writes two short reviews of her own films, *Mura no fujin gakkyū* ([Village women's classroom], 1957) and *Usuzumi no sakura* ([The cherry tree with gray blossoms], 1977), in which she elaborates on their meanings and how they contributed to her self-awareness and experience as a filmmaker. Mitsoyu Wada-Marciano expands on Sumiko's reviews with a close reading of the two films to argue that Sumiko's films attempted to educate and liberate women in the context of postwar Japanese society.

The volume highlights the ways in which women-of-color filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s accentuated how different their needs and social histories were as compared with those of their white counterparts. The editors frame this project through an aesthetics of eroticism rather than more-conventional debates around the politics of representation. Ayanna Dozier begins her article, “Ecstatic Forms, Erotic Bodies,” with Senga Nengundi's sculpture *Internal I* (1977), which captures the spirit of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, when many sought to break free from their restrictive garments. Dozier then examines Nalini Malani's *Onanism* (1969) and Barbara McCullough's *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979) to reconsider the

silent whiteness that haunts these films' images. Both films present and reclaim sexual expression through an alternative to the archive of sexually overt images. These films address the fraught question of racial difference in the canon of feminist filmmaking with recourse to the embodiment of eroticism.

To emphasize international feminist discourse, Rasha Salti argues in her article, "Beirut: A City of Women," that notions of feminist consciousness and struggle deserve to be expanded globally. The corrective impulse in film history to decenter the canon, according to considerations of sexual, racial, or ethnic identity, often raises the question of whether there ever was or is a feminist cinema in Lebanon and the Arab world. In an article titled "The Means of Autonomy," Giovanna Zapperi highlights the extent to which male control over technology is the main obstacle to women's self-expression in cinema. Invoking the language of workerist feminism, Zapperi claims that men constantly bar women from the site of production, consigning them to reproductive tasks and appropriating their creative energy and imagination. Zapperi encourages women to overthrow these structures and claim technology for themselves. She writes of how the feminist movement provided a political and existential framework that made it possible for women to speak about their feelings of alienation from the field of the moving image and their aspirations to become part of it.

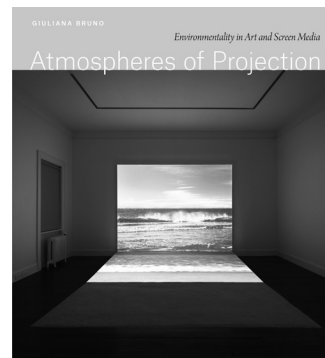
The book's final essay, "Cinema of the Grandmother," by Elena Gorfinkel, discusses the deployment of that figure as a feminist filmic resource, a way to think laterally across generations, to articulate a relationship to the past and to social rituals, to historicize shifting meanings of gender and of patriarchy's demands, and to bear witness to historical trauma and oppression. Concluding with the figure of the grandmother suggests that the copresence of multiple generations in shared cinematic temporality is intrinsic to the force of women's films and their claim on spectators. It represents a hope for change and for current generations to be able to witness that change in the future.

Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image is a book dedicated to feminist research and praxis, where feminism is defined as a commitment to making a world that ends domination in all its forms. In its tribute to the critical work of the past, the book also addresses the pressures of today, placing canonical feminist film texts in conversation with forgotten criticism and overlooked films from around the world. The essays honor feminine strength, celebrate community bonds, and picture women's lives in their particularity and variability.

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BOOK DATA *Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image*, edited by Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022. \$39.95 paper. 512 pages.

JOSH MARTIN



***Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media*, by Giuliana Bruno**

In her introduction to *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media*, Giuliana Bruno revisits

the myth of Dibutades, the tale of a Corinthian woman's attempts to capture the image of the man she loves. Bruno notes that this first-century story has often been situated as an origin point for the act of painting, drawing, or imaging (1). Complicating this origin story, Bruno instead suggests that Dibutades committed a precinematic "act of projection" by experimenting with luminosity. Moreover, Bruno asserts that artistic renderings of Dibutades emphasize projection as an environment, an "affective atmosphere" that enables "a transmission of affect" (2). Through this myth and its relationship to modern understandings of cinematic projection, Bruno explores the "projective imagination" and the many possible configurations of atmosphere (9).

This introduction by way of ancient mythology is emblematic of the scope of Bruno's monumental volume, which is as theoretically ambitious as it is historically and artistically expansive. Though her principal examples are contemporary installation art, Bruno approaches projection as a subject with dynamic historical connotations. In examining this "transitive medium," Bruno positions projection as an activity that does not belong to a single artistic medium or intellectual field, instead presenting "the potential to link diverse temporal, formal, and disciplinary elements together" (8). Despite this wide-ranging approach, the volume is precise about the stakes of projection and why its study remains so potent for interdisciplinary scholars and artists. Indeed, projection is now inescapable, as diffuse as the atmospheres it engenders, spreading through the quotidian world by way of physical spaces, technologies, and artworks (8). In a world modified by projection, Bruno

vitality centers the aesthetic creation and transmission of atmospheres, generating new ways to think about the political valence of spectatorship within artistic spaces in a post-cinematic era.

Following the introduction, Bruno's volume is split into two distinct halves. The first half, "The Cultural Atmosphere of Projection," establishes the philosophical foundations for Bruno's conceptualization of projective atmospheres. In chapter 1, she adopts a media archaeological perspective, attempting to ascertain the historical genealogy of projection and "grasp the material function of ambiance" (19). The following pages span areas from the psychoanalytical to the alchemical, setting the terms and historical conditions for this understanding of projective atmospheres. Particularly crucial for Bruno's broader theoretical base is the idea of "transduction," an alchemical concept concerning the "transfer of materials" that is connected to early notions of projection and sets the groundwork for the book's "transductive methodology" (21). Bringing together histories and disparate intellectual approaches, this methodology enables one of Bruno's most crucial arguments: that projection is fundamentally a "*process* of porous mediation," an act of "transformation" that has the power to reconfigure and reinvent spaces, worlds, and spectatorial relations (22, emphasis in the original).

Chapter 2 begins by noting the preponderance of screens in early cinema, situating the parallels between the emergence of what she calls "cine-projection" and the development of the psychoanalytic concept of "projection." For Bruno, projection as both medium and "psychic apparatus" can be understood as a "zone of transmission" (62). However, Bruno suggests that psychic projection is not individual but spatial—that it enables the "circulation of affects *between* and *through* bodies and the body of things." The stakes of the chapter coalesce as Bruno investigates projection's status "as a form of relational transit" defined by "permeable boundaries" (63, emphasis in original).

The study of relationality within atmospheres gains further clarity in chapter 3, which reexamines the German concept of *Stimmung*, a word often synonymous with "atmosphere," and its possibilities for the creation of sympathetic environments. Building off a century of analyses of *Stimmung*, Bruno suggests that the concept signifies "a modern, material turn toward affirming the life of objects, the vibrancy of matter, and the character of spatial qualities" (90). In this manner, Bruno situates projection as an action that enables "a seam with the inanimate," a link between spectator and space (101). However, this seam is not inherent: it demands an "openness" on the part of the

spectator for its "alchemy of transformation" to take hold on the senses (117–18).

In the second half of the volume, "Environmentality: The Art of Projection," Bruno shifts her attention to the contemporary artists who create these inanimate seams and transformative atmospheres in their experiential exhibitions. Having already set the stage for her inquiries, Bruno engages with the work of a single artist in each of the remaining seven chapters, in case studies devoted to artists such as Diana Thater, Cristina Iglesias, and Rosa Barba.

It is in these studies that the book's remarkable sense of intellectual exchange between historical modes of projection and contemporary practices of atmospheric screening takes shape, enabling the strategies of the precinematic era and the postcinematic turn to the gallery to be unified. Analyzing Jesper Just's thirteen-minute video *This Nameless Spectacle* (2011) and his many experiments with scale and panoramic construction, Bruno asserts that the atmospheric experience of the artist's work allows the spectator to trace "the environmental emergence of modern visual culture" and its rendering of "the atmosphere of cine-projection" (178). Thus, Just's panoramic re-creation of the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, becomes a starting point for Bruno to recontextualize and expand conventional ideas of screened space. Most persuasive in this reconstructed genealogy of the panorama is the reconfiguration of projection and screen as "an environmental medium" of spatialized cinematic constructions (182).

In another chapter, titled "Elemental Apathy: Chantal Akerman's Psychic Atmospheres," Bruno builds on the volume's earlier conceptualizations of *Stimmung*, temporality, and relatedness. Emphasizing extended duration and a particular configuration of time and space in Akerman's installation work, Bruno argues that these artistic objects build a sense of spatial empathy that extends beyond the anthropomorphic realm. Drawing on studies of *Einführung*, a German term often translated as "empathy," to analyze Akerman, Bruno traces the sense of relatedness with non-human objects and spaces, a "feeling into" the spaces, places, and worlds created by the artist (229).

Bruno concludes with Robert Irwin's "nebular" work, a springboard for analyzing the creation of a kind of atmospheric weather that produces "an intersubjective, social sense of affect" (285). Bruno writes that, if a viewer becomes attuned to atmospheres—of art, of cinema, of the world—then it becomes possible to register "perturbations" in liminal spaces, ruptures that produce relationality and "alter social perceptions of divisions" (285). An engagement with atmosphere is far from a mere act of aesthetic creation and

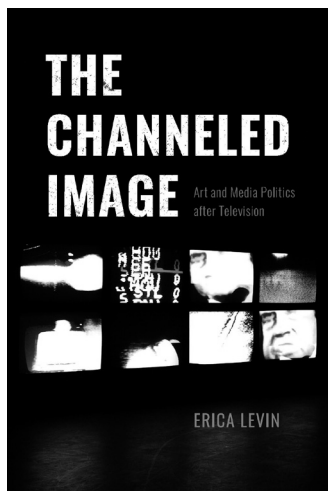
appreciation that exists in isolation: it can potentially “transform the experience of cultural ambiance,” allowing new relations, sensations, and encounters to emerge into the air of lived space (286).

Through nuanced and inquisitive case studies, highlighted by evocative descriptions of each artist’s ambient, atmospheric work, Bruno’s volume serves as its own site of intellectual transmission. As the book delves further, tracing projection from Dibutades to Irwin and Akerman, a sense of altered perception begins to take shape for the reader, encouraging a stronger understanding of how the projective spaces of daily life create affective and sensorial atmospheres. *Atmospheres of Projection* is a call to attunement: in a world of omnipresent projection, of inescapable screens, Bruno guides her readers to become more observant of the ambience, sensation, and empathy generated by these atmospheres and worlds.

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BOOK DATA Giuliana Bruno, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmental-ity in Art and Screen Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. \$45.00 cloth; \$44.99 pdf; \$44.99 e-book. 360 pages.

LISA WELLS JACOBSON



The Channeled Image: Art and Media Politics after Television, by Erica Levin

Even before Gil Scott-Heron recorded his famous “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” questions about the relationship between radical political movements of the 1960s and television news media were circulating among artists,

activists, journalists, and everyday people living through that particularly tumultuous moment in US history. To what extent *would* the revolution be televised? How, by whom, and for whom? Erica Levin’s *The Channeled Image: Art and Media Politics after Television* focuses on responses from artists of that era—specifically, those whose work engaged with the imagery and apparatus of television. The work she discusses ranges in form and exhibition context: gallery

installations by Bruce Conner and Carolee Schneemann’s multimedia theatrical performances in the book’s first half, and the radical collective Newsreel’s takeover of a public broadcast station in 1968 as well as Nam June Paik’s and Stan VanDerBeek’s institutionally supported public-television experiments in the second.

While many of the works Levin analyzes never aired on television, she argues that each piece set out to explore the political, social, and aesthetic potential of the medium. Television, for these artists as for Levin, is not a simple conduit for political meaning, but rather a vehicle for experimentation. Levin weighs the successes of the era alongside its false starts and failures as part of an ongoing negotiation of the social and political potential of media that continues to evolve in online contexts today.

Levin introduces her titular concept of the “channeled image” as a way of bringing together a diverse set of artistic practices that overlap with but are not fully contained by the category of expanded cinema theorized by Gene Youngblood and taken up by subsequent scholars and practitioners. If Levin’s term is somewhat protean, it is ultimately more useful for its slipperiness in that it casts familiar practices in a new light. On the most basic technical level, the idea of “channeling” refers to “the transmission of light as energy over airwaves” (3). In practice, many of Levin’s “channeled images” were not actually broadcast after being recorded on film or video. Some were designed to interact with found objects or live performers. What they share is a critical approach to “television’s production of authority and social meaning” (4), particularly amid the increasing live coverage of news events like the high-profile assassinations that punctured and thereby restructured US television broadcasts of the 1960s. These artworks partook in the political urgency of such broadcasts, even as they critiqued the choice of images—especially of the Vietnam War—and how they were packaged for public consumption.

Throughout, Levin’s project is as much about reanimating a historical moment and its ephemeral art as it is about television itself. She vividly re-creates the artworks in prose, aided by black-and-white images and a handful of well-chosen color plates. The 1960s, as Levin paints them, are hardly the polarized caricature one often sees today of emerging youth radicalism coming into conflict with the conservatism of the immediate postwar period. Levin highlights the internal contradictions within each camp, and for everyone in between. The television of the time embodied these contradictions, implicated as it was in the commercial consumption of Cold War America, as contrasted with non-profit educational broadcasting’s promise to offer a (limited)

way out. Levin is not interested in resolving such tensions, but in plumbing their depth.

The analysis of Bruce Conner's experimental short films *REPORT* (1964–67) and *TELEVISION ASSASSINATION* (1963/64–75) in the book's first chapter exemplifies Levin's methodological approach. The films dealt with the media frenzy over the assassinations of US president John F. Kennedy and his accused killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, respectively. In both films, Conner formally disrupted the expected flow of televisual images—in the former through jump cuts and repetitive looped editing, and in the latter through double exposures that conveyed the “spectral” quality of “having been broadcast again and again” (46). Levin closely analyzes these films not only in the final forms in which they can be accessed today, but also as the works in progress that Conner exhibited over years of reediting. At one point, she even brings into the discussion of *REPORT* an image from Conner's source material (a 1940 AT&T industrial film) that did not make it into any of his exhibited versions but exists just beyond the margins of the film itself.

Levin's diachronic, process-oriented approach to art lends it a liveliness and presence that is especially effective when it comes to unrepeatable performances like Carolee Schneemann's *Snows* (1967), which is the focus of the second chapter. The ephemerality and contingency of broadcast television is mirrored in the art as Levin describes it, and she folds this idea of change over time into her definition of “channeling.”

While the connection to television in the artworks in the first two chapters is oblique—at times relying on blurred boundaries between print media, photojournalism, and television news—the third and fourth chapters deal much more explicitly with broadcast. Amid a growing body of scholarship on educational and public-access television, Levin smartly keeps her focus narrow: first on the Newsreel collective's unsanctioned interruption of a New York City public broadcast to demand access to the very means of televisual production, and then on the mixed results of artist-in-residence programs at the same channel and its Boston equivalent a few years later. She presents this as neither a resounding success story nor a parable of how outsider art will inevitably be incorporated into the existing

hegemonic order. Levin's point is again more nuanced: such access granted by networks gave artists the ability to critique the conditions placed on their access while limiting their ability to break free of such constraints. The artists channeled and were channeled by the conventions and power structures of television of the time.

In her conclusion, Levin turns to the present and the legacy of the 1960s art that is the focus of the preceding chapters. As a clever bookend, she returns to the work of Aldo Tambellini with which the book began, now as Tambellini's *Black TV* (1969) is revisited and revised by the artist himself in the 2010s. The temporal process of channeling continues. Levin also seeks to bring forward discussions of race that are interwoven throughout the book with brief analyses of recent works by Kahlil Joseph and Sondra Perry. Levin concludes by putting her own notion of channeling into conversation with Christina Sharpe's theorization of black life in the ongoing “wake” of the Middle Passage. These sections are intriguing, if rushed, and speak to the potential for extending Levin's theoretical and methodological approach into the present.

Still, a nagging question remains at the edges of Levin's thoughtful analysis: who was watching? To some extent, the minimal attention she gives to the question of audience is a necessary limit of the author's methodology. Audience is nonetheless a defining feature of broadcast television as a mass medium, particularly in its 1960s iteration. While Levin addresses the larger political categories of nation, public, and “the people,” there is little discussion of who was actually engaging with the artists' works, especially for those exhibited in a gallery setting. As primarily a television scholar myself, it strikes me as worth considering how, in the various ways these artists have “channeled” the images and strategies of television, they have narrowed television's broadness and effectively bypassed its most powerful and dangerous strategy of all: mass address.

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