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The Riotous State of Trans Visual Culture

I believe that the widely cited sentiment that political and visual cultures have reached a transgender tipping point is a reflection less of absolute numbers of increased trans representation and more of the sense of transness as bubbling up and boiling over, as excessive and seeping into every nook and cranny of media.¹ This moment might be understood as the riotous state of trans visual culture expanding *en masse*, with a cacophony of disputes, settling of scores, and hectic jostling of bodies. In 2021, one can hardly watch or keep track of all forms of trans media: it consists of both the undercommons and the commercial mainstream, the opaque and the seemingly transparent.² I want to claim the current riotous state of trans visual culture then, in the sense of unruly personages in series; unrestrained storylines in film; lively presences on television; loud subcultures on Tumblr, TikTok, YouTube, and other social media platforms; and vivid and varied appearances in mass media, indie, arthouse, and grimy lowbrow. The public disorder caused by trans media and visual culture cannot be tamed or harnessed into understanding by any particular methodological or disciplinary approach. Hence,

1 I want to express gratitude to the In Focus editors and Caetlin Benson-Allott for pushing my thinking and sharpening my writing. See “Where We Are on TV Report—2019,” GLAAD, <http://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv19/>; and Laura Horak, “‘We’d Like to See Trans People at the Very Top’: Transgender Talent Founder Ann Thomas in Conversation,” *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 1 (2021): 21–39.

2 See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, NY: Autonomedia, 2013); Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Cael M. Keegan, “Looking Transparent,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (2015): 137–138; and Eric A. Stanley, “Anti-Trans Optics: Recognition, Opacity, and the Image of Force,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 612–620.

Eliza Steinbock, “The Riotous State of Trans Visual Culture,” *JCMS* 61, no. 2 (Winter 2022): 169–174.

I argue that attending to the formal qualities—and not just the representational quality—of the riotous state of trans media would be a first step in welding trans politics and trans lives to a way of doing media studies.

TRANS STUDIES IS MEDIA STUDIES

Faced with a scene of trans revelry that spills across media forms in an ungovernable fashion, trans media scholars need to think bigger than media objects appearing as film, television, or social media and in particularized genres to grasp the current conditions. I argue that trans studies is media studies, and media studies is (or could be) trans studies. This statement has the formal quality of a loop, and rhetorically it shapes that what I want to assert is potentially a relationship of mutual constitution between these fields of study when they each recognize the mutual constitution of media and the body. Forming a constitutive relation requires their thinking together—looking at their interpenetrations—in order to expand the vocabularies and abilities of each field to envision mediation and embodiment, how they cooperate and their stakes. Allow me here to conjure the deep analogical thinking that forms the backbone of my 2019 book, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*.³ The book's argument is built on an ampersand of trans & cinema, examining the striking similarities between some aesthetic forms of cinema and transgender embodiment. One example I elaborate on in my first chapter is the dominant trope of the before-and-after images used in trans representation, but also in early cinema trick films, both of which rely on a notion of the seamless and yet shocking effect of a cinematographic or surgical cut. The cut effectuates a temporal, narrative, but also bodily change; the question is whether this noted change is affirmed or deemed illusionary.⁴

Transgender studies inherently thinks in terms of media through its consideration of the body as a medium of expression, but media studies does not as yet foreground embodiment.⁵ Might media studies adopt a more capacious understanding of medium as any means by which something is expressed, and consider the body a prime form of media? To complete the constitutive loop of trans studies is media studies is trans studies, I'm suggesting that media studies needs to take on board trans studies' understanding of the body as an expression of a complex subjectivity: affixed by psychic and social desires, forced into racial arrangements of gender, delineated by its capacities, associated with a gender or genre as well as the status of its appearance. Attention to how mediation and visibility work for trans bodies (plural) can be an instructive starting point. This involves media scholars acknowledging how trans people are asked to become visible as such for cis people—to literally mediate ourselves into existence on their terms—to be seen as

3 Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

4 Steinbock, 26–60.

5 See Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); and Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," 1987, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://sandystone.com/empire-strikes-back.html>.

“real,” even when the conditions for becoming visible very likely will trigger unwanted attention, violence, and even death. Media scholars can work toward changing these conditions so that trans people can appear safely, on their own terms, and not become stuck in the conundrum identified as the visibility politics of the trapdoor: when being visible is a door for escaping some harms but transforms into a trap in that it provides limited forms to be seen as gendered.⁶ This media analysis may consist in first identifying terms of recognition that cruelly enclose inclusion; then scholars must transform the logics of (visual) culture that threaten trans bodies, that mark them as deceptive, fraudulent, pathetic, or predatory.

Furthermore, the (post)human, technological, and affective unruliness of bodies should be taken more seriously so that scholars may better attend to ways form becomes modified and genres constantly flail, to borrow a phrase from Lauren Berlant. With *genre flailing* (and its reliable failing), Berlant speaks to necessary attachments one has to a confident “frame” of expectation and the aftermath of interpretation (of events, images, and sounds) when this frame is disturbed.⁷ In media studies, when the question of representation becomes all-consuming, we may miss larger patterns of formal significance that (dis)organize that expression in a medium. For instance, the documentary mode hegemonically organizes trans media objects, lending a truth-telling and authenticating device that nevertheless tends to weaponize confession as formally integral to trans expression. In response to the coercive status of confession, the experimental film *against a trans narrative* (Jules Roskam, 2008) introduces documentary conventions such as intimate diary footage, only to suspend them with stylized fictional dramatic scenes, which productively induces a crisis in the surety of the documentary, giving way to gender and genre flailing.

This trans approach to film studies and visual culture enlarges the potential corpus of media scholarship to the expression of the body and the corporeal form.⁸ As Henri Bergson considered it, the body is the pivot point to grasping the world perceptually as a series of images; it is the first image to be perceived and the filter of perception for other perceptual experiences.⁹ No two experiences of media are the same, but they can encourage scenes of shared affective habitus. Furthermore, the body in both cases does not stand in isolation but is a site of an apparatus for desires: expanding our attention to practices of re-assembly. Let us embrace the troublesome, wanton, extravagant body shot through with desire, that riotous medium that brings on disputes.

My own research in media archaeology finds a transsexual logic of cinematic embodiment at work in filmmaking since its inception. This includes a

6 See Tourmaline [formerly Reina Gossett], Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, “Known Unknowns: An Introduction to *Trap Door*,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), xxiii.

7 Lauren Berlant, “Genre Flailing,” *Capacious Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2018): 156–162, <https://doi.org/10.22387/CAP2018.16>.

8 See Cael M. Keegan, Laura Horak, and Eliza Steinbock, “Guest Editors’ Introduction: Cinematic/Trans*/Bodies Now (and Then, and to Come),” *Somatechnics* 8, no. 1 (2018): 1.

9 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 17.

keen interest in reordering the sensible ushered in by the age of technological reproducibility—the splicing together of images in new ways and the projection of the medium so that it became a public way to tell a story through constructed images.¹⁰ While not all media creation involves physically cutting and suturing celluloid or tape to transform and multiply bodies, these are a broad set of creative practices that in many regards mirror the apparatus for gender transitioning desires. Via attention to the wide range of practices and habitus gathered under gender incongruence and transitioning, the looping of trans (as) media could usher in an explicit attention to formal analysis of media that may (or may not) have a trans person involved in its creation. This approach could, for example, consider the formal elements of successive states of personhood and genders given or expressed as mutable, multiple, and spatialized that lend it what David Getsy calls “transgender capacity.”¹¹

We are at a juncture in which trans issues have become mainstream enough to be announced as so-called debatable. In fact, trans lives are not debatable; we exist, and we are who we say we are. But the increasing frequency of representations of trans bodies and trans lives within media has given rise to a false sense of familiarity that, as Aren Aizura has suggested, “breeds contempt.”¹² So much for the cruelly optimistic adage that if they’d only know us, they’d accept us. The politics of recognition behind much trans scholarship and activism rests on the thorny issue of ontology—that is, what is trans being? And the tussle over establishing an ontology for the trans subject effectively leads to policing of who is and who can claim to be trans, and even if trans people can be said to exist. This boils down to what a trans person must do with their bodily expression to be trusted that they are the gender they say they are, what mimetic relation they must enact, what performed indexes will grant validity to their claim.

Trans scholarship has long shown that indexicality is one of the problems transgender existence centrally confronts, and this is but one reason that a traditional notion of representation is insufficient for grasping trans subjectivities, for parsing our lives and deaths.¹³ Therefore, trans experiences of gender incongruence—however we might conceptualize *gender*—become expressed in a broad set of practices and felt within a (partially) shared affective habitus. These shift like a kaleidoscope and constellate differently across historical periods and cultures. As scholars, we can look at how these markers of gender transitioning, transgression, or incongruence are cited, framed, elaborated in media, but we should not make the mistake of assuming that a description of bodily expression is ever a prescription for what defines a trans person.

10 This description is paraphrased from Susan Stryker’s lecture on her documentary *Christine in the Cutting Room* (2013). See Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 17.

11 David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), xvi, 34.

12 Aren Aizura, “Introduction,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (July 2017): 606–611.

13 My thanks to Cael Keegan for discussion on this point. See Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Talia Mae Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007): 43–65.

HOT SHIT

The increase in transgender, non-binary, and quietly queer characters has come from waves of activism by cultural producers, including writers, directors, actors, and by media advocacy organizations the world over. At the same time, as actor, writer, and artist Travis Alabanza has baldly stated, “gender non conformity is allowed to exist in public space but only as entertainment, and never in mutual respect.”¹⁴ I, too, remain wary about the historical persistence of media cycles that feature exceptionalized trans figures when it suits ratings, niche viewership, or spectacularized news. Speaking from her own experience, trans media artist Tourmaline has expressed mistrust in becoming “hot shit,” or enough of a body to be a body in demand: “I’ve spent enough of my life feeling like a nobody to feel how different it is to be called upon as a somebody.”¹⁵ The hot shit media body is hard, glossy; think of the “Call me Caitlyn” cover of *Vanity Fair* or Hilary Swank accepting an Oscar for the role of Brandon Teena.¹⁶ Aizura cites Tourmaline’s speech as evidence of the state of trans recognition in 2017, but it remains pertinent in the ever more cluttered trans mediascape of 2021.¹⁷ This is the trans mediation double-bind of visibility: becoming “hot shit” can usher in recognition that nevertheless invites value extraction from the trans person. I, too, hesitate to cheer when trans bodies are seen and celebrated for the capitalist ends of offering differentiation in the media consumption of bodies. This does not make trans expressed (or perceived) bodies safer.

Hence Tourmaline and Aizura look to Denise Ferreira da Silva’s claiming of the “no-body” as a political position worth fighting for when mobilizing against cis-centric recognition politics. Da Silva asks, “if the state is ready to kill to defend itself from the black, sexual, trans body brought before it, do we want to be somebody before the state, or no-body against it?”¹⁸ Understanding ourselves as having self-possession on the terms of the state, with its investment in recognizing individual bodily rights, leads one to forget the porous body that has been central to disability studies’ frameworks, that mingling of I and we, and the vulnerability and care that composes this intermingling.¹⁹

My counter-body, the kind of body I wish for media studies to be ready to theorize, would be the writings of N.O. Body, the pseudonym of Karl M. Baer,

14 Travis Alabanza, “We Can No Longer Accept LGBTQ Solidarity That Stops at a TV Screen, Stage or Meme,” *Metro*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.metro.co.uk/2019/06/21/we-can-no-longer-accept-lgbtq-solidarity-that-stops-at-a-tv-screen-stage-or-meme-10019773/?ito=cbshare>.

15 Tourmaline [formerly Reina Gossett], Cyrus Grace Dunham, and Constantina Zavitzanos, “Commencement Address at Hampshire College,” May 17, 2016, cited in Aizura, “Introduction,” 608.

16 Buzz Bissinger, “Caitlyn Jenner: The Full Story,” *Vanity Fair*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/06/caitlyn-jenner-bruce-cover-annie-leibovitz/>.

17 Aizura, “Introduction,” 608.

18 See “Episode 8: Refuse Powers’ Grasp,” lecture, Tramway & The Art School, Glasgow, October 21–23, 2016, <http://arika.org.uk/archive/items/episode-8-refuse-powers-grasp>.

19 See “In Focus: Crippling Cinema and Media Studies,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 4 (Summer 2019).

who penned *Memoirs of a Man's Maiden Years* (1907).²⁰ The trans body of Baer inspired the multimedia installation of *N.O.Body* (2008) by the European artist duo Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz. This image-conscious work confronts the viewer's perceptual system with reproductions of bodies taken from Magnus Hirschfeld's 800-page book, *Sexology, In Pictures* (1930), and the live and recorded performing body of trans man Werner Hirsch as the turn-of-the-century "bearded lady" Annie Jones.²¹ The confusion wrought from the layering of these bodies—as pictures in a salon-style installation, light from film projections, and performers using shadow play—engages my own body's perceptual sense of an expanding, porous *we* of media nobodies. Encountering *N.O.Body*, I'm invited into the swirl of the reproduced, projected, performed bodily expressions seeking escape from being made a somebody by the cis-centric, white supremacist, and ableist visual logics of pathology, Nazism, and freak shows. Trans media scholars might therefore consider the operations in effect for the where, when, and how nobodies become somebody to us, so that we, too, are writing from within the loosely drawn circle of a *we*. That is, as scholars apart of the order of the sensible, we should place ourselves inside the loop of trans media to establish a rapport and responsibility to these bodies in all their forms of expression.

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20 *N.O. Body, Memoirs of a Man's Maiden Years*, trans. Deborah Simon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

21 Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *N.O.Body*, boudry-lorenz.de, 2008, <https://www.boudry-lorenz.de/n-o-body/>.