

Book Review of *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*

Review by Elizabeth Berman

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



“Call me they,” Eliza Steinbock entreats in the preface of their monograph *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*. With this injunction, Steinbock productively positions their embodied experience within the book’s lines of inquiry, with which they interrogate the multiplicity of trans experiences through and alongside cinematic aesthetics of change. Steinbock’s interest in cinema derives from its use of disjunction and conjunction, cuts and sutures, which makes it “the art form most suited to a politically advantageous comparison with transgender forms of embodiment” (Steinbock 2019, 6). The three chapters that comprise *Shimmering Images* draw from visual culture and weave together psychoanalysis, Marxism, and deconstruction. These genealogies situate the book in the field of new feminist materialisms. In a nod to the materiality of language, Steinbock titles their chapters with a twinkle of linguistic play: each dealing with, respectively, “the cut of the forward slash (/), the suture of the hyphen (-), and the multiplicity of the asterisk (*)”

(21). In order to devise a cinematic philosophy across filmic history and genre, Steinbock reads closely the “trans shimmerings” (150) of early trick films, docu-pornographic sex, and multi-genre avant-garde films.

The greatest achievement of *Shimmering Images* is Steinbock’s contestation of the status of the “visible,” and of the attendant concepts expressed in the hegemonic Enlightenment insistence that to see something is to know it: “visuality,” “recognition,” “knowledge,” and “objectivity.” Steinbock invokes Peggy Phelan’s “ideology of the visible,” refusing the demand that all identities are visibly marked (Phelan 1993, 7; Steinbock 2019, 18). They opt instead to consider the shimmering energies of that which remains tacit and concealed; *Shimmering Images* interrogates, above all, visuality itself. Steinbock’s investigation into visuality—and its attachment to embodied identity—requires a multidisciplinary examination of vision’s material, affective, and epistemological effects, one that unfolds with their titular concept of *shimmering*. Steinbock presents the shimmer as a transfeminist onto-epistemology (or mode of activity) that undoes dominating either/or paradigms in the interpenetrating realms of gender, aesthetics,



and affect. Steinbock links the shimmer to the everyday in/visibilities of transgender bodies, offering micha cárdenas's description of "the moment of passing in which someone's perception of one's gender can shift back and forth rapidly, like a kind of shimmering mirage" (cárdenas 2011, 39; Steinbock 2019, 67). The process-oriented shimmer enjoys a "radical antistatic status" (Steinbock 106) that suggests multiplicity and becomings, whether materialized on screen or felt as an embodied affect.

In the text's first chapter, "Shimmering Phantasmagoria: Trans/Cinema/Aesthetics in an Age of Technological Reproducibility," Steinbock takes Walter Benjamin's metaphorical linking of the cinematographer and/as surgeon as an apt point of departure for their account of the entangled histories of early cinematic technologies and sexology. With a Foucauldian media archaeological investigation into the affective underpinnings of the phantasmagoria, Steinbock interrogates the popular 19th-century trick films of George Méliès, which "play" with gender and "embody the perversion of the age of reason in their phantasmagoric flash of the "*now* you see it, *now* you don't apparitional body" (Steinbock 41). In their reading of more recent works that employ these early techniques to disrupt the reductive "before/after" binary, Steinbock cites Elizabeth Freeman's queer historical concept of "temporal drag" (Freeman 2010, 62–64; Steinbock 2019, 27) in order to reflect on the forceful flashing up of the past in the present. For Steinbock, the anachronistic appeal of the shimmering phantasmagoria offers contemporary trans artists a means to disrupt normative temporalities of embodiment. Steinbock's second chapter, "Shimmering Sex: Docu-Porn's Trans-Sexualities, Confession Culture, and Suturing Practices" lingers with trans pornographies that incorporate documentary elements and reads these films against the normative genital optics of the clinical gaze. The experimental docu-porns that stud Steinbock's second chapter allow them to theorize both affective (s)excess and the surgical concept of the "suture," which emerge as methods for the trans subject to wrest agential power from medically regulated forms of embodiment. Steinbock's third and final chapter, "Shimmering Multiplicity: Trans*Forms in *Dandy Dust* and *I.K.U* from Dada to Data to D@d@," examines cybernetic film forms produced at the turn of the millennium. Steinbock attends to the flickering aesthetics of Hans Scheirl's *Dandy Dust* (1998) and Shu-Lea Cheang's *I.K.U.* (2000), positing that both films adhere to "millennial aesthetics of change that undermine the notion of one long-lasting gendered self" (Steinbock 135), thereby transforming technophobic and transphobic readings of the "monstrous" cyborg into moments of curiosity.

Shimmering Images constitutes a critical refusal of the foundational sex/gender binary that has heretofore characterized much of feminist film theory, instead identifying film's nonbinary ontologies and epistemologies. Steinbock's "shimmering" indeed enacts this nonbinary onto-epistemology, dissolving the dichotomies of visible/invisible, before/after, penis/pussy. Steinbock's cinematic inventory argues for a productive reclamation of affects marked as negative, particularly those that lie at the intersection of trans and racialized experiences and embodiments. Through their concept of the shimmer, Steinbock recasts what is often considered an archival 'void' of trans images as a visual history that is in fact "overfull and ready to become again a scene of wild activities" (152–153). With this final call for feral multiplicity, Steinbock leaves the reader with new tools for examining trans embodiment with(in) cinema.



Works Cited

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