

protests as Occupy Wall Street, the Umbrella Movement, the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement. While some authors are eager to draw links between these and guerrilla video practices of the past, Kim points out the salient differences: new audience behavior and networked circulation.

In the twenty-first century, it is not only guerrilla video makers who create radical content or alternative cable television networks that show them. More people than ever before can create and circulate activist videos. In addition to amateurs creating vernacular videos, they also organize and contextualize the videos, by collecting them on YouTube channels and Facebook pages. Activists curate the deluge of videos to create awareness, amplify messages, and provoke communal action. These practices have also, from the bottom up, worked their way into traditional documentary films and mainstream journalism.

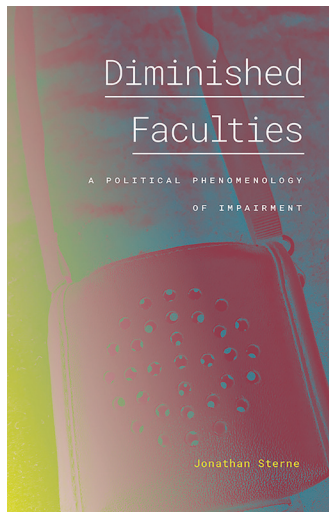
By decentering documentary film, Kim makes room for a nuanced study of cinema-adjacent works and new-media projects. It is admirable work to bring these documentaries into contact with documentary film studies, while also drawing on other fields of scholarship. Kim's book yields greater value and knowledge than those who would police the boundaries with tired arguments about what is and isn't a documentary.

BOOK DATA Jihoon Kim, *Documentary's Expanded Fields: New Media and the Twenty-First-Century Documentary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. \$125.00 cloth, \$39.95 paper. 320 pages.

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## SLAVA GREENBERG

### *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* by Jonathan Sterne



Jonathan Sterne's *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* offers a new theoretically and methodologically accessible impairment theory as a political phenomenology of bodies and technologies. The book provides a rigorous study of technology, hearing, and voice with respect to impairment. In addition, Sterne

engages with his own lived experiences of diminished faculties in speech, voice, hearing, and the feeling of wellness.

Sterne is a prolific author who has written extensively about sound, technologies, the politics of culture, and disability studies. This book makes an insightful contribution in its content (a word Sterne dislikes), especially as it delves into timely phenomena: Zoom fatigue and “regular” fatigue, as well as their aesthetic and political organization. However, the book is not only insightful, but also funny and quite quirky. Even the serious and respectful trigger warnings that precede each chapter include jokes. In tandem with the book's arguments, this review will follow my impaired reading of it—and in particular two significant guidelines offered by the book to those interested in self-doubtful accounts of lived experience.

Sterne begins with a phenomenological account of his own paralyzed vocal cord. What may have otherwise been referred to as “speech impairment,” caused by the paralysis, is rather defined as “some things about my speech” (195). This point of entry into the text asks the reader to rethink terms such as *impairment*, *disability*, *feature*, and *bug* (and many others). Addressing his embodied experiences in reference to communication technologies, Sterne defines impairment through its proximity to disability. He relies on Husserl's phenomenology, specifically focusing on the malfunctioning of intentionality:

An impairment ... can involve a short-circuiting of intention: a transmission impairment happens when a telecommunications network doesn't behave as it is supposed to. A physical limit is experienced as an impairment when a person has a point of comparison beyond that limit. ... It exists in relation to something: an external norm of ability or action, a remembered embodiment or affect, an unrealized or altered intention. (194)

While related to disability, “[p]olitically, impairment should be understood as one possible margin of disability—it can certainly exist outside the category of disability technically, juridically, or experientially” (194). Sterne stresses that not all impairments are disabling, just as what's classified as a disability isn't always an impairment. This argument is honed throughout chapter 4, “Audile Scarification: On Normal Impairments,” referring to impairments that are expected. This is not a cyborg phenomenology, but rather a new way of thinking through limits, features, and bugs in human and technological bodies.

My impaired reading begins at the end, which is certainly no way to read a book (but perhaps the only way for

me). My short attention span drew me to the practical guide of the theory featured at the end of the book (illustrated by Darsha Hewitt). My reading is therefore impaired, since the book assumes that I would start using a theory without reading its manual, even when provided—if I “ever read it at all” (15). The guide speaks directly to readers, presenting key terms, distinctions, and advice on how “to do” impairment theory, all using accessible language. Similarly to major parts of the book, the guide keeps to guideline 16: “Please: if you are going to work on impairment, be accommodating! ... Sometimes the work is a matter of life and death, but if we can’t do it with love, how can we expect to build a world worth living in?” (202). The reader’s guide provides sixteen additional practical pieces of advice under the heading “How to Use Impairment Theory.”

This manual for using political impairment phenomenology continues Sterne’s earlier work with Mara Mills in providing scholars with three proposals and six tactics for dismediating disability. In their collaborative afterword to *Disability Media Studies*, Mills and Sterne offered nine ways of thinking about “disability as a constituting dimension of media, and media as a constituting dimension of disability.” They argue that dismediation does not default to a celebration of glitch, error, noise, jamming, or hacking that casts “disablement” as the ultimate Other. Impairment theory, like dismediation theory, asks significant questions about bodies, technologies, subjectivity, power, and experience, while at the same time carefully refraining from self-exoticizing and essentialism.

The first chapter puts two guidelines to the test: guideline 2, “Try being an unreliable narrator for a while”; and guideline 3, “If you have acquired or use an impairment, then distance yourself from it .... Then try an impairment phenomenology, taking into account the contingency of the impaired experience you are describing, and always, always, supplementing the phenomenology with other methods, so that experience never pretends to transparency or sufficiency” (198). When describing various aspects of impairment—through rigorous theoretical debates or amusing illustrations—Sterne adds a self-doubting tone to his first-person accounts. He explains how this experience is not fully available to him. In other words, Sterne attempts to dismediate his experience, distance himself from it, and critique it as he would any other scholarly text.

This exercise in political impairment phenomenology presented in the first chapter raises some challenges for disability-studies scholars. Phenomenological accounts of lived experiences and embodied anecdotes are often used

as springboards to question inter- and intrapersonal shifts between the self and the world (as, for example, in Vivian Sobchack’s work). However, in Sterne’s accounts, they serve to undermine his own authority. Recognizing that “[e]ven writing in disability studies often relies on the power of testimony as a mode of access to reality,” Sterne takes up the challenge of including “the testimony of disability while subjecting the very category of testimony to a critique” (40).

Sterne proposes a challenge for the articulations of self-doubtful testimonies, which undermine the sense of a full and coherent self-knowledge, while he still validates testimonies of impairment and disability that have been historically disavowed by sharing his own narrative. However, even as he does so, he provides considerably more tools and guidelines for the former than the latter. And here intrudes my impaired reading of the book: I worry that “we”—that is, feminist, queer, trans and nonbinary, intersex, BIPOC, crip, and impaired folks—are not quite there yet. This is partly, though not solely, due to the eugenic pseudoscience that is still dominant in today’s medicine. Sterne speaks to a posttestimony atmosphere, where testimonies are regarded as reliable access points to reality. However, in disability studies, like trans studies, such demedicalization of testimonies is already politicized and loaded with disbelief.

And yet, my concern impairs my reading and writing. I worry that impairment and disability will be used by media scholars as metaphors to speak about malfunctioning technology. I am concerned about the movement toward discrediting and invalidating our experiences and making them unreliable (a movement that is always present, but all the more so during times of crisis). At the same time, I dread coherency and didactic descriptions intended for an imagined “general audience” whom I need to educate as they force me to discard my self-doubt, regrets, errors, and glitches. *Diminished Faculties*, when read from the end (or its new beginning, as Sterne proposes), provides useful tools to work through these concerns.

BOOK DATA Jonathan Sterne, *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. \$99.95 cloth; \$26.95 paper. 304 pages.

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