(2005), in which voyeurism plays a central role, and the more adventurous foreign contemporary “hard core art film,” perhaps best exemplified by French director Catherine Breillat’s numerous films, including Romance (1999) and Fat Girl (2001).

After a chapter on the fate of American hard core, Williams ends with a fascinating consideration of how pornographic cinema and other visual imagery are transformed by the Internet and the “home theater”—asking (in relation to screens), “Does size matter?” (300). While in the public space of the theater the masturbatory dynamic of pornography is somewhat contained (on the part of the spectator, at least)—at home it is assumed to be the raison d’être and set free. Here she discusses cable TV pornography, Internet porn, and computerized interactive sex sites, arguing with notions that the digital or virtual worlds “disembody” the viewer.

In sum, this is an insightful, articulate, and honest volume that gives serious thought to a subject that challenges the tenets of distanced, scholarly discourse.

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JOANNA E. RAPF

Machine-Age Comedy
by Michael North

Michael North’s erudite, playful, and challenging Machine-Age Comedy inaugurates a new series on Modernist Literature and Culture from Oxford University Press. Presented in two parts as a series of interrelated case studies, the book is well illustrated and arranged in roughly chronological order, beginning with a skillful juxtaposition of Buster Keaton’s The Cameraman (1928) and Dziga Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera (1929) and aptly concluding with a dense chapter on James Foster Wallace’s even denser novel, Infinite Jest (1996).

The second chapter, “Mickey’s Mechanical Man,” is devoted to Walt Disney. Walter Benjamin, whose “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935) North cites extensively in his introduction, was a serious Disney fan, and Disney and Keaton were similarly drawn to filmmaking because of its technological challenges.

Because animation is both practically and conceptually dependent on mechanical reproduction, it not only flourished with the Fleischers and then Disney, but it appealed to artists such as Rube Goldberg and Marcel Duchamp, about whom North writes in the third chapter, cleverly entitled “Goldberg Variations.” Both men, he suggests, shared a satirical perspective on what he calls “the machine age.” With Goldberg, “the joke made at the expense of the machine is also quite literally a machine as well” (96). Duchamp’s “readymades,” in juxtaposition, seem to put the mechanical in a kind of punning relationship with the human. Like many of the Cubist pioneers with whom he associated, Duchamp, North intimates, was influenced by Henri Bergson, whose Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, first published in 1899, was in its tenth edition by 1913.

Bergson’s theories were the key theoretical link between modernity, the mechanical, and comedy, particularly his argument that laughter is caused by “the mechanical encrusted on the living.” North reminds us that for Bergson “inauthentic, machinelike behavior prompts laughter . . . because it violates our faith in the essential flexibility of human nature, which is what distinguishes us from inorganic matter in the first place” (154). But elsewhere in the book, North does not always make clear when Bergson is talking about laughter and when about comedy in general. Indeed, if there is one serious flaw in the otherwise ingenious arguments that weave throughout the chapters of Machine-Age Comedy, it is that such key terms as “laughter,” “comedy,” “humor,” and “satire” are not always differentiated or defined.

In part 1, with Vertov, Keaton, Disney, Goldberg, and Duchamp, North discusses artists who exploit the link between the mechanical and comic satirically, and satire is a type of comedy that suggests the possibility of reform. The vision of these artists is critical, but playful. Part 2 is darker. With Wyndham Lewis, Samuel Beckett, and finally David Foster Wallace, we’re in the world of black comedy, an attitude that uses an ironic and biting intelligence to attack sentimentality, social conventions, and an apparently absurd and meaningless universe. For Wyndham Lewis, North tells us that laughter has no corrective function (as it does for Henri Bergson), since “human beings lack the power to change” (118). Discussing Lewis as both author and painter, he concludes that his “anger and discomfort at his own laughable state represent a final inability to believe there is any way out of the comic situation” (140).

“No way out”—the very idea evokes Samuel Beckett, and North gives a welcome and full reading of Film (1965), ingeniously connecting this work with his earlier discussions of Vertov and Keaton, since Keaton stars in this Beckett–Schneider production which was shot by Vertov’s brother, Boris Kaufman. And indeed, both Man with a Movie Camera
and Film do utilize a close identification between the human eye and the camera eye, but Beckett’s work is ultimately more pessimistic, even anti-human, asking how we can “rid ourselves of ourselves” (153). Playing with Bishop Berkeley’s esse est percipi, Beckett pushes the rational to the point of the irrational, coming to a kind of extralogical conclusion that makes his work, according to North, a powerful example of machine-age comedy.

Writing on the far side of postmodernism, Wallace, in Infinite Jest, takes to an even further extreme the pessimism of Lewis and Beckett, where every activity in his convoluted novel follows the same pattern: “An initial desire for fun, freedom, or even just change leads ironically to repetition, routine, machine dependency, and sometimes death” (174). “Ironically” is a bitter adverb here, for North seems to have written this chapter before Wallace’s own death by suicide in 2008.

Machine-Age Comedy is an intriguing book, a mosaic of ideas, connecting a diverse group of twentieth-century artists through their fascination with the mechanical. North ends with Chaplin and Modern Times (1936). The film, he concludes, is “the definitive machine-age comedy” through its “wholesale repudiation of the machine,” including the camera (188). Unlike Vertov, Keaton, Goldberg, or Duchamp, who were really interested in the machine, Chaplin saw its limitations and dangers. And unlike Lewis, Beckett, or Wallace, Chaplin may roller-skate on the precipice of darkness, but he does not succumb to it. The images in this film, such as the Rube Goldberg-like feeding machine or the assembly line that resembles an animation filmstrip, do sum up much of what North has examined in the artists he has used in this book to define “machine-age comedy.” But Chaplin alone, of these men, celebrates spontaneity, what Bergson called “the essential flexibility of human nature,” and defies the repetition, both mechanical and human, that is at the heart of twentieth-century laughter.

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CHARLIE KEIL

_Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema_ by Dan Streible

Dan Streible’s _Fight Pictures_ is an authoritative, near-exhaustive account of how the worlds of organized sport and early cinema intersected at a crucial time in the development of each, establishing a model for the ways media could shape the nature of public sporting events. Interested mainly in the production and reception contexts of these films, Streible uses the vibrant twenty-year period of boxing’s initial appearances on celluloid to argue persuasively that the “film industry, boxing world, and theatrical business . . . inhabited a common sociological world” (49). He shows how the contested and intertwined domains of prizefighting and cinema revealed faultlines in early twentieth-century America, stoking controversy, tantalizing audiences, and straining race relations.

From the outset, Streible makes a strong case for why and how boxing became the sport most consistently aligned with moving pictures when the medium emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Most obviously, prizefights’ confined space and short bursts of regulated action lent themselves particularly well to the limited resources of early films. Streible succinctly characterizes the affinity as a “match of two practices that relied on brief, segmented units of performance” (23). In keeping with the emphasis on context over text, Streible stresses how both boxing and cinema emerged out of a male urban milieu in which commercial entertainments were vigorously promoted. Heavyweight champions like “Gentleman” Jim Corbett parlayed their success in boxing into appearances at venues as varied as the Folies Bergère and the World’s Fair. Successful prizefighters became celebrities ready to benefit from the mass circulation of their images and achievements that cinema could offer. Key boxing promoters did not limit themselves to the realm of sport, moving freely from managing fights to setting up theatrical tours and producing films. Thus, as Streible shows, cinema and boxing existed in a mutually advantageous relationship that fostered interest in both, though that relationship was tested by social censure and government intervention.

Streible discusses fight films in relation to key issues in the study of early cinema. In his chapter (subtitled “Women at the Veriscope”) on the 1897 James J. Corbett–Bob Fitzsimmons heavyweight contest in Carson City, Nevada, billed at the time as “The Fight of the Century,” he concludes that female viewers’ enthusiasm for early projections of prizefights may have been overstated by historians. The spotty documentation available and the inevitable distortions inherent in the contemporaneous promotional material that reported the attendance of so-called “matinee girls” at screenings must temper any reading of this example as an early occasion of female scopic desire (as Charles Musser and Miriam Hansen, among others, have claimed). Later, in the engrossing chapter on fake fight films, Streible contends that Siegmmund Lubin’s notoriety as the chief purveyor of reenactments derives to a large degree from anti-Semitism because piracy and