of exploitative neoliberalism per se. To get at this, The Wire has to transmute into melodrama of a unique sort: as Williams puts it, “with ‘world enough and time,’ it moves beyond mere Nietzschean resentment [i.e., the railing of victims against victimizers] and beyond the generation of mere pity” (134). The Wire, she claims, has “rewritten” melodrama “in the most progressive way possible” (188), and in this respect, Williams’s book on the series also can be said to rewrite her own previous study of melodrama across media, Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson (2001), insofar as she views The Wire as breaking out of cycles of victim and victimizer that Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson rewrite her own previous study of melodrama across media, this respect, Williams drama “

The sheer multiplication of character, with so many lives on both sides of the law and on so many rungs of the social ladder, makes each individual’s narrative say something about the aggregate whole (capitalism today) that they all in their own ways take part in. And some characters, like Omar or Bubbles, a junkie who ends up going straight, garner special value insofar as they occupy not one position in the aggregation but rather move between identities and explore what a fluidity of positions might be like.

Williams quotes President Obama’s citation of Omar Little as the best character on the show and suggests that Omar’s appeal comes from his ability to not just be a street criminal but to fight for justice (he robs drug dealers) and construct new possibilities for human relationship (Omar is a tough gangsta’ but also a gay man). To the extent that Omar and Bubbles fit no one role and belong to no easy place, they give glimpses of a new sort of hero for a new sort of melodrama. As Williams puts it, “They may be the products of a neoliberal rationality that has placed them outside all existing strata of power, but it is that very place outside, yet also in between, that gives them the ability to invent themselves. The fact that these are black heroes within a predominantly black spatial imaginary is what gives them a fresh moral authority, but for once not because we perceive them or they perceive themselves as racial victims, but rather because they have the imagination to challenge or maneuver around the existing institutions of power” (207).

As noted earlier, there is a double achievement at work here: The Wire revolutionizes American television, and Linda Williams’s book revolutionizes the ways we approach the series. Hers is a provocative, productive analysis that makes an essential contribution to the sociology of television: not only how to think of television as social force but its own ability to constitute sociological investigation. Early in her book, Williams recounts how, bedridden from an illness, she binge-viewed the first seasons of The Wire. Here, again, sheer quantification—long-form series consumed as singular entity—pays off as quality: that of a sharp, smart study that will make everyone see television anew.

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BOOK DATA Linda Williams, On The Wire, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. $84.95 cloth; $23.95 paper. vi + 267 pages.

LEO GOLDSMITH

Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium by Michael Z. Newman

What is video? For many, the word is synonymous with any number of media and formats; for others it’s a scourge whose relation to those media is at best mimetic, at worst parasitic. When former MPAA president Jack Valenti, in a pair of infamous analogies, likened the Betamax to the Boston Strangler and even referred to VCRs as “millions of little tapeworms,” he was pointing out this putatively sinister, monstrous role of video in the trafficking of media. And in a sense, he was justified in his paranoia. Over the last four decades, changes in industries, technologies, and audiences have blurred much of what separated cinema and television, and with the precipitous creation and subsequent obsolescence of digital formats, it has become increasingly difficult to parse a brand name from a device, a file-type from a corporate entity.

And yet all might fit under the aegis of video—whatever that is. Even compared with a historically unstable category like cinema, video has always been a more promiscuous form, able to encompass a range of practices, technologies, objects, formats, and circulatory networks: from activist media collectives, to ad hoc livestreaming communities, and even to alternative commercial industries, such as Nollywood. And all of this raises the question that has dogged video for decades: is it a medium at all? Michael Z. Newman’s concise new book, Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium, provides in a mere 160 pages a clear narrative of the vicissitudes of video, including its emergence in the home alongside television, as a consumer commodity,
and as the many-headed hydra we know today. In his account, Newman departs from an essentially etymological reading, finding in the continual redefinitions of the very word “video” a history of its evolving cultural status. For Newman, video’s “history is more than a progression of material formats” (1). In keeping with Sean Cubitt’s observations in his 1993 book Videography that video can be considered a medium because of its ability to mediate between people and technologies, Newman asserts that “a medium [must be] understood relationally” (3), and he underscores this by a close reading of primary sources and their often overblown utopian or dystopian prognostications about video’s possibilities. Newman looks at the dreams and nightmares that surround the medium as evidenced in the “dominant and typical meanings” of the word “video” itself; in fact, the book’s first illustration is a Google Ngram charting the word’s usage. It is Newman’s claim that by “thinking in terms of cultural status, we can . . . think about [video’s] constitution in relation to dominant institutions and practices and their meanings” (102).

What the evolution of video as a category reveals, for Newman, can be summarized in three broad historical phases: first, the era in which video was synonymous with television and distinct from cinema; second, its emergence as a commercial format distinct, both technologically and ideologically, from television; and third, an age of convergence or, as Newman has it, “the substitution of video for television, as well as television’s inclusion within the wider set of practices, texts, and technologies called video” (86). This final phase is the current moment, in which “video has come to include practically any kind of object combining motion pictures and sound” (73). Along the way, Newman succinctly charts how various cultural commentators and advertisers have characterized video’s relationships with other media, from television to cinema, from gaming to the internet. These relationships are described as sometimes harmonious, sometimes antagonistic, but usually with the language of “liberation,” “empowerment,” and “democratization”: first from the conformity and commercialism of the cinema, then from the passivity-inducing ideological forces of television. Thus, the “revolutions” of Newman’s title are themselves important markers of semantic shifts, moments in which video’s technological promise is endowed with a certain emancipatory power in mass culture.

Newman makes a case for emphasizing video’s cultural status over its unstable material form, a methodology with considerable benefits. For one, this approach allows him to flout many of the old binaries of media studies: container vs. content, medium vs. message, hardware vs. software, console vs. coding. If video’s “essence” exists at all, it must float between these categories, just as it allies or contrasts itself with media old and new. To this end, the book relies heavily on primary accounts, from journalists and cultural critics to advertising and marketing campaigns, which hint at the ideological fervor that has accompanied shifts in video’s uses. And while this is not the book to gain insight into the technical nuts and bolts of the medium (what is a cathode ray? how does magnetic tape work? where do those liquid crystals come from?), this approach allows for a relatable narrative without getting bogged down in techno-fetishism.

This etymological emphasis has its limitations. Video’s form is protean, but clearly not irrelevant, as the emphasis of Videodrome (David Cronenberg, 1982) on video’s squishy incarnations suggests. Artists are, of course, drawn to media for its malleability, its plasticity, but CEOs and advertisers are drawn to its physical properties for reasons of their own: cost of materials, compatibility, functionality. While Cubitt claimed that, “Video boasts its materiality, its physicality,” other scholars such as Laura Marks and Lucas Hildebrand have dedicated their studies of video to its specific sensory qualities, like decay and grain. For Newman, such properties as magnetic tape and scan lines are too ephemeral and too particular to a given format to help generate a broader history of video, and in any case, they are “not important or legible to the ordinary user” (100).

But who is an ordinary user? Common sense suggests—and brevity and clarity perhaps demand—that one can chart a medium’s “socially circulating identities,” a claim that Newman defends at length in a very interesting final chapter on media methodology. This “cultural view” also perpetually demands a certain breadth and sweep, as evidenced in the repetition of phrases like “prevailing ways of thinking” and even the almost fanciful “in popular imagination.” Whose zeitgeist is under discussion here? Naturally, North America’s. While this limitation of geographic purview is surely understandable, given the book’s concision, the broader value and applicability of this “cultural view” remains an open question. Canned claims of the video “revolution” in American advertising do ring a bit hollow. What of the effects of digital video in China, or of indigenous media initiatives in Latin America? Has video entered its “third phase” all over the world? Or, are there different notions of video in places where “old” and “new” media, like videotapes and the internet, are both still in use?

Greater attention to questions of materiality, local or global, might well have led in interesting directions. Newman is most interested in video’s relation to the cultural objects and institutions it is most often associated with—cinema and
television—but what of other everyday experiences of video, such as camera endoscopies, baby monitors, or video chatting? The book’s discussion of surveillance, for example, serves as a brief prelude to a more robust consideration of Reality TV. The latter subject is undoubtedly significant, but is it of greater concern in the wider understanding of video and its affordances?

These questions themselves suggest the usefulness of Newman’s book: it prompts a greater exploration of its subject and how best to historicize it, a welcome reorientation of scholarship in a hitherto somewhat limited field of study. Much of the foundational scholarship on the subject, as Lucas Hildebrand has pointed out, tended to focus exclusively on video art, often privileging those works and artists who seemed best to fulfill a certain notion of the medium’s potential. It has been the task of more recent video scholarship like Newman’s to offer a more compendious view that takes into account video’s relation to a much broader array of media—especially as video’s role in relation to those media becomes more powerful, more monstrous, and often more baffling.

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Jennifer Peterson

The Forms of the Affects by Eugenie Brinkema

The Forms of the Affects proposes no less than a complete redefinition of affect theory and formalist analysis for film studies. The book maps a new critical approach in which film’s affective dimensions are not read as themes, narrative strategies, or constructions of identity, but as formal elements. Characterized by elegant, challenging writing and sure-footed, persuasive argumentation, this book is a provocative intervention in a key area of humanities scholarship.

Eugenie Brinkema opens with the contention that affect theory has become a problematic paradigm. “Affect,” as a now-familiar (and usually singular) term, has come to stand for emotions, subjectivity, and embodied responses to texts; in other words, “affect” is a placeholder for that which resists reading, that vital yet contingent realm of sensorial experience that is activated when humans interact with aesthetic texts. Brinkema parts ways with this critical tradition, arguing that affect is not a “vague shuddering intensity” (xiv) but rather a matter of form. Her thesis is that “affect is not where reading is no longer needed” (xiv). On the contrary, one of the pillars of her argument is that affect “must be read for” (19).

Affect theory has become an exhausted critical tradition, Brinkema argues, for it tends to produce only a series of generalized and even comforting reports about how films move audiences. “If affect as a conceptual area of inquiry is to have the radical potential to open up ethical, political, and aesthetic avenues for theoretical inquiry, then, quite simply, we have to do better than documenting the stirrings of the skin” (37–38). Moreover, as Brinkema points out, “the effect is to preserve a kernel of humanism in any discussion of affect,” even in the most committed poststructuralist theoretical approaches (32).

Brinkema’s reconceptualization of affect follows Gilles Deleuze in thinking outside the familiar domain of individualized subjectivity. Deleuze, as she reminds the reader, finds that affects “are not feelings, emotions, or moods but autonomous potentialities, pure ‘possibles’ that are linked to a complex series of highly specific terms such as ‘sensation,’ ‘becoming,’ ‘force,’ ‘lines of flight,’ and ‘deterриториализation’” (24). But Brinkema goes one step further to dispense with bodies as well as subjects, arguing that affect is not about embodied visceral responses to texts. Thus, affect is not a question of sensation or spectatorship; rather, it is a matter of form. Affects are also, importantly, nonintentional, indifferent, and nonteleological.

If affect theory has failed to live up to its potential to confront ideological and aesthetic problems with its supposedly disruptive set of embodied intensities, how might the study of affects be revived for film? Brinkema’s answer comes at first (and intentionally, for this is a writer carefully attuned to rhetorical strategies) as a thudding disappointment: the answer is close reading. Close reading, that venerable tool of the humanities since the heyday of New Criticism, does not appear to be the magical new paradigm one might have wished for. But Brinkema immediately acknowledges the “perversity” of this move: “if affect theory is what is utterly fashionable, it is answered here with the corrective of the utterly unfashionable, with what is, let us say, an unzeitgemässe call for the sustained interpretation of texts” (xv). Brinkema promises that this approach, with the full sense of close reading’s meaning as active and difficult analytical labor, has the benefit of locating and preserving all the wild, fecund, strange, contingent, minor, and secret dimensions that affect theory has always celebrated, but with a more powerful force of specificity and complexity. A little later, too, Brinkema claims a timeliness for this return to form, explaining that