

other film combines such an evocative formal design, such a pivotal role in history, and such a powerful resonance for our contemporary queer-political discourse” [2–3]) moves beyond a mere prefatory statement to become an all-around defensive posture that threatens to cripple the critical reassessment the collection calls for.

Thus, Steve Cohan intends “to reconsider the enduring assessment of *The Boys in the Band* as having been and remaining ‘always already dated’ because of the camp in its characterizations, humor, and outlooks on homosexuality and on the private worlds of gay male culture in sixties Manhattan” (39), while Joe Wlodarz’s essay is a reminder that “gay liberationists famously derided the film and the play for their apparent inability to envision gay pride and ‘happy homosexuals,’” a reading of the film that “was enhanced by the pathologizing tone of much of the mainstream reception of the play” (57).

These essays are persuasive attempts at redressing these conversations, but they also inadvertently begin construing another altogether unsustainable narrative. Where Crowley’s boys may have once been lambasted for trying (and failing) to represent all gay men in the late 1960s, many of the essays collected here try to find in every costume choice, every throwaway line, and every well-placed prop of Friedkin’s film a reason to redress any and all long-running debates about queer lives and every contemporary discussion on queer theory that one could dream up. Individually, they make for fascinating close readings and astute cultural analyses. Together, they start to make their respective arguments feel overdetermined.

It’s no surprise that the most provocative essays in Bell’s collection use *Boys in the Band* not merely as a gay historical artifact in need of reappraisal (a position that necessarily requires dismissing or downplaying the many ways it has already been appraised by those who came before) but as a chance to situate play and film within the cultural milieu that begat them. For example, in their respective pieces, Nick Davis and David A. Gerstner turn their focus to Friedkin’s take on Crowley’s play as part of his larger filmography. Admitting that the film was more than the gay Guignol he remembered (“a hijacking narrative where one Bette Davis locks up eight Joan Crawfords inside a Manhattan apartment, serving up barely internalized homophobia like a boiled rat on a platter” [115]), Davis opts out of trying to make a case for the inherent value in revisiting *Boys in the Band*, using his chapter instead to illuminate Friedkin’s career through the prism of his 1970 film. With keen readings of *Bug* (2006), *The Birthday Party* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *Killer Joe* (2011) among others, Davis’s essay argues that *Boys* “is neither anomalous nor anonymous but visibly and

coherently informed by its director’s stylistic propensities and signature themes” (135).

Similarly, Gerstner’s suggestion that Friedkin’s New York trilogy (which includes *Boys*, *The French Connection* [1971], and the inflammatory *Cruising* [1980]) reveals a great truth about New York “because it is a cinema that sensually aestheticizes masculine disintegration” (167)—aided by his careful reading of New York City urban policies as they relate to the worlds Friedkin was inadvertently chronicling—speaks to the kind of fresh-eyed criticism on Crowley’s swishy and bitchy text the collection is designed to showcase. Similarly original insights are supplied by Stephen Vider’s provocative essay on the ways Jewish and gay identities collide and collapse in *Boys* actor Leonard Frey’s public persona, and by Ramzi Fawaz’s attempt to see Crowley’s screaming queens as “depicting the seeming fractiousness of gay men as a group but also documenting gay men’s heart-wrenching emotional labor to negotiate newly ‘liberated’ identities and social worlds despite the homophobic logics that continued to plague their lives” (221–22).

If the film (and play) is, as James Wilson writes in his unusually suggestive piece on ghosts and queer utopias, “a repository of replayed vocal intonations, half-remembered queer emotions, and collective LGBT experiences” (157), Bell’s collection constitutes, not just (or not only) a morbid academic exercise but, for better and for worse, an intermittently brilliant séance.

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BOOK DATA Matt Bell, ed., *The Boys in the Band: Flashpoints of Cinema, History, and Queer Politics*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016. \$34.99 paper. 336 pages.

## POOJA RANGAN

### *Words on Screen* by Michel Chion

Cinema is rarely described as a written art, even though films emerge from novels and scripts and even though written words (studio logo, title card, censor certificate, opening credits, introductory text) are among the first things a viewer sees in fiction films. Some films would be only partially comprehensible without subtitles or intertitles, such as films in a language unknown to the spectator, or early silents whose settings or links between scenes need additional explanation. In between these conventional and utilitarian poles lies an immense spectrum of cinematic text with aesthetic and symbolic

functions: letters written, read, torn, or burned, as well as words scrawled, printed, or reflected on signs, bodies, windows, or screens. These textual effects introduce layers and tensions between what is said, shown, and known to characters and spectators.

Michel Chion's *Words on Screen*—expertly translated into English by Claudia Gorbman, who has also made Chion's earlier books on cinema accessible to an Anglophone audience—tackles this entire spectrum of cinematic text, or “everything the movie screen has offered us to read, since the seventh art was born” (xv). This is the second of Chion's books to be published in English recently, after *Sound: An Acoustological Treatise* (Duke University Press, 2016), highlighting Chion's sizeable contributions to sound studies as a practicing composer and philosopher. Readers already familiar with Chion's earlier English-language publications—including *Film, a Sound Art* (2009), *The Voice in Cinema* (1999), and *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen* (1994), in which Chion urged attention to the subliminal but fundamental role of sound in film (against then-prevailing visual preoccupations of film scholars)—will recognize a similar impetus in this study of the “fleeting, unstable, contingent status” of words on screen (33). Chion's previous writings on cinema dealt with the distinct but overlapping perceptual fields constructed by images (which for him spatialize sound, containing its boundless form in a frame) and sounds (which temporalize images, giving them direction and orientation). Now, he asserts that the “presence of language redivides what we perceive in a film” (1).

Chion's centering of language in cinema in its written versus spoken forms may feel like a throwback to the semiotic turn in film theory. In the 1970s, scholars Christian Metz and Peter Wollen argued for the value of Freudian psychoanalysis and Peircean semiotics respectively for theorizing cinematic signification, whose specificity they nonetheless conceived in primarily visual terms. Chion, who at least since *Audio-vision* has insisted that the cinema's signifying system is “audio-logo-visual” (197), here undertakes a comprehensive inventory of the symbolic textual effects that semioticians largely excised in favor of film's iconic and indexical aspects, and which Chion himself set aside in previous works to focus on film's vocal effects. This lively and far-ranging inventory will delight students of film form: Chion's research includes over 900 films and his book contains 256 illustrations spanning a century of cinema, bookended by Louis Feuillade's *Les Vampires* and D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (both 1915) and Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012).

Three sections cover diegetic and nondiegetic film text, writing and reading in film, and the spatiality of writing and

film, cultivating a remarkable attunement to the active and passive forms of reading that accompany cinematic looking and listening, grounded in new terminology usefully compiled by Gorbman in a glossary. Key contributions include: *excriptions*, or cinematic text inscribed in spectatorial consciousness even as it is destroyed in the image (the word “Rosebud,” which is at first spoken by a dying man, and at the end seen in writing on a sled before it is destroyed in *Citizen Kane* [Orson Welles, 1941], Ilsa's letter to Rick in *Casablanca* [Michael Curtiz, 1942] that is poetically drowned in rain) (191, 194); fugitive impressions meant for *entrelire* or half-reading that cannot stand up to scrutiny (the newspaper article read by Bill Hartford in *Eyes Wide Shut* [Stanley Kubrick, 1999] that when paused on a DVD turns out to contain several redundancies, or blackboard duels signifying “mathematical virtuosity”) (128, 133); *athorybal*, or diegetic writing that asks viewers to give it a voice by mentally pronouncing it (the handwritten message read silently by Douglas Quaid in *Total Recall* [Paul Verhoeven, 1990], the introductory text at the beginning of *Nosferatu* [F.W. Murnau, 1922] that commands the spectator to refrain from uttering the titular word) (65); and *verbal chiaroscuro*, or spoken words that remain entirely or partially unintelligible because of the conditions of sound-recording or the diction of actors, or when subtitles condense what is uttered in order to accommodate the exigencies of reading (145–46).

The book's most intriguing conceptual contribution, and one that this reader would have liked to see further theorized, is *athorybos* (derived from the Greek privative *a-*, + *thorybos*, noise). Described as “any object or movement in the image that could—either in reality or in the imagination—produce sound but which is not accompanied by any sound,” including unvoiced text (60), *athorybos* is the analogue or inverse of *acousmatic*, a term Chion borrows from the founder of *musique concrète*, composer Pierre Schaeffer, to refer to a cinematic sound that evokes but does not reveal its unseen cause (e.g., a disembodied voice).

Chion's inversion of the acousmatic, a concept he has previously used to demonstrate sound's intractability to cinematic space, now becomes a way for him to assert that writing, too, is not “soluble” in the image, or indeed in film. Writing, he argues, cannot be fully untethered from vocalization by reading, nor does it belong completely to the image. The tension that writing brings to cinema, whether due to its lateral and directional character, which opposes the dimensionality of cinematic space, or its inevitably partial representation of the aural diversity of recorded speech and sound, leads according to Chion to some of cinema's most understudied effects, and even gets

to the core of what separates cinematic reality from diegetic and pro-filmic reality.

Thus, in Chion's agile hands, the seemingly straightforward task of inventorying words on screen raises complex questions about the ontological status of cinematic text. When does the eye, reading words, hand over the baton to the ear? How do the perceptual differences between reading and listening to words overlap with and differ from the perceptual fields activated by images and sounds? Unfortunately, tackling these stimulating questions in depth seems to be beyond this book's scope, since Chion's priority is to generate a broad taxonomy, not a theory or history of cinematic writing. In the course of his extensive research, Chion does unearth many fascinating histories, continuities, and ruptures, such as the emergence of brand names in cinema after 1968 along with the phasing out of the words "The End" at a film's conclusion, or the notion of categories such as the inserted, included, or overlaid text to apply to cinematic writing in the eras of text messaging and the typewriter alike. But though Chion offers theories or historical hypotheses (how the spectatorial encounter with foreign names on screen reveals the basic bilingualism in every language between writing and speaking, for example, or the vanquishing of the oracular dimension of the written word on screen by the ubiquity of writing devices), he moves swiftly past them without further extrapolation.

Linguists and historians of technology will likely be frustrated by Chion's demurral to engage the substantial and rigorous literature on these topics beyond a handful of (mainly Francophone) citations. For a book that claims to embrace the "entire range of cinema," it is also surprising that Chion does not once mention documentary or experimental film. Although Chion looks beyond classical Hollywood and European cinema to a handful of contemporary and canonical non-Western art films, an engagement with the expansive conventional and experimental uses of text in documentary, feminist, and "accented" cinema might have brought other coordinates into sight. But such limitations might instead be regarded, in Chion's own generous spirit, as invitations to further research made possible by this terrifically valuable and enjoyable study.

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BOOK DATA Michel Chion, *Words on Screen*. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. \$90.00 cloth. \$30.00 paper. \$29.99 e-book. 272 pages.

## MATTHEW SOLOMON

### ***Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* by Simone Natale**

Simone Natale's new book is one of several recent media histories that take the historical occult seriously rather than glossing over its practices or entirely ignoring its persistent presence within the mainstream mediascape. The relative inattention that media historians have accorded to spiritualism specifically is somewhat remarkable given that the modern audiovisual media emerged concomitant with widespread public interest in spiritualist phenomena. Thus, new media were often initially tied to nineteenth-century mediumship (and concomitantly gendered as female). A number of the figures associated with the origins of moving image media were interested in spiritualist practice, including Eadweard Muybridge, who, Natale notes, took at least one "fake spirit photograph" (151) and Étienne-Jules Marey, who was cofounder of an institute charged with investigating psychical phenomena. Nor was Thomas A. Edison's interest in spiritualism entirely the stuff of such fictions as Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's novel *L'Ève future* (1886). Philippe Baudouin's recent republication in French translation of Edison's discussion of his plans for the necrophone, a machine that would allow the living to communicate with the dead (*Le royaume de l'au-delà: Précédé de Machines nécrophoniques*, Éditions Jérôme Millon, 2015), is a further reminder that the modern media industries have long been haunted by ostensible paranormal phenomena.

*Supernatural Entertainments* builds on media and communication histories that have taken up the occult, such as Jeffrey Sconce's *Haunted Media* (2000) and John Durham Peters's *Speaking into the Air* (1999), while extending the insights of such earlier revisionist histories of spiritualism as Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* (1989) and Alex Owen's *The Darkened Room* (1989). With all of these, and numerous other books and articles in four different languages, included in Natale's superb and seemingly comprehensive bibliography, his book provides an important addition to the growing body of rigorous scholarship on international spiritualism. Natale's argument, however, is fairly unexpected, even unique, inasmuch as it convincingly focuses on spiritualism as a form of show business.

Critics of spiritualism were especially harsh on the paid professional mediums whose very livelihoods seemed dependent upon regular productions of spirit manifestations. Even convinced believers in spiritualism conceded that mediums who charged for séances were more susceptible to fraud than those who refused payment (though more likely to produce successful manifestations on command). Outspoken critics of