

Swarthmore College

# Works

---

Film & Media Studies Faculty Works

---

Fall 2013

## Review Of "New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut" By B.R. Rich

Patricia White

*Swarthmore College*, [pwhite1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:pwhite1@swarthmore.edu)

[Let us know how access to this work benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-film-media>

 Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Patricia White. (2013). "Review Of "New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut" By B.R. Rich". *Film Quarterly*. Volume 67, Issue 1. 89-91.

<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-film-media/14>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Swarthmore College Libraries. It has been accepted for inclusion in Film & Media Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

---

Book Review: *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*  
*New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* by B. Ruby Rich  
Review by: Patricia White  
*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Fall 2013), pp. 89-91  
Published by: [University of California Press](#)  
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2013.67.1.89>  
Accessed: 19/11/2014 16:37

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*University of California Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

producing important films. In contrast to other studio moguls, it seems neither felt compelled to compensate for outsider status in American culture. Lev reports that Skouras picked several biblical film projects as personal reflections of his Christianity. Although both were conservative Republicans, Zanuck was interested in critical portrayals of American society and his work ranges from *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932, for Warner Brothers) to *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940) and *Gentleman's Agreement* at Fox. Lev tells us that Zanuck backed away from such social commentaries when the box office seemed to fall off, but his promotion of *Wilson* (Henry King, 1944) and other personal projects indicates that he was a more forceful creative executive than most, one who would lead the audience rather than the other way around.

Lev's choice of centering the book on two men raises some issues in the subfield of media-industry studies. Many have contrasted the classical era of strong personalities shaping a unique industry with today's endlessly revolving door of Hollywood executives whose ability to claim credit mightily exceeds their capacity to influence events. Between them Skouras and Zanuck had allocative and operational control of their company and thus could shape both strategies and tactics. It is precisely this combination that became impossible as the era of global cross-media distribution took shape through the last quarter of the 20th century. It would be good to think about whether this combination became impossible or still survives with producer-directors who launch productions in both movie and television formats. I think the key factor is whether a producer can identify and put together an audience over several cultural transitions. Lev demonstrates that Skouras and Zanuck did so for 30 years. In more recent times we have the examples of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Jerry Bruckheimer, and perhaps Tyler Perry (if he continues for another decade). Notice that all of them are creative personalities who have sufficient resources to allocate to their own efforts. In this way they tend to resemble Zanuck rather than Skouras.

There was not a strong bond between Zanuck and Skouras. Was their forced partnership incidental to their responses to postwar challenges? Left to his own devices, Zanuck would not have shown much interest in technological advances. It is in this matter that Skouras shows what a film-company president can do. Lev has written a book that sticks close to the history of individual productions while giving the reader a sense of the big story of how

two men handled monumental shifts in the cultural landscape of their times.

FREDERICK WASSER is a professor at Brooklyn College-CUNY. His latest book is *Steven Spielberg's America* (Polity 2010).

BOOK DATA Peter Lev, *Twentieth Century Fox: The Zanuck-Skouras Years, 1935-1965*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013. \$55.00 cloth. 326 pages.

## PATRICIA WHITE

### *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* by B. Ruby Rich

As classy and packed with goodies as a Criterion Blu-ray, B. Ruby Rich's *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* marks the 20th anniversary of the movement it covers. The book's eponymous lead essay was first published in both the *Village Voice* and *Sight and Sound* in spring of 1992; Rich coined the term New Queer Cinema to convey her excitement about the explosion of formally, intellectually, and politically challenging works on the film-festival circuit over the preceding year—Todd Haynes's *Poison*, Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*, Gregg Araki's *The Living End*, Derek Jarman's *Edward II*, and Tom Kalin's *Swoon* among them. The book includes the never-before-published original version of that clear-eyed essay; a trove of Rich's articles, reviews, and occasional pieces on the movement, its key players, and its challenges; and new contextualizing material written in the same lively voice, at once conspiratorial and generous.

Written on the side of the risk takers, deeply informed by feminism and about the state of world cinema, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* sets a wholly different agenda for queer film criticism than did Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (1981, rev. 1987) and will surely make as indelible a mark. The behind-the-scenes anecdotes will give new generations access to how these films were made, seen, and contested. And it's a fascinating read for those of us in LGBT film studies, programming, and production—or simply “in the life”—whose stories overlap with the tale it tells.

In the two decades since that first fury of innovation, which was driven in part by AIDS activism, both media and LGBT cultures have been transformed by technological innovation, globalization, and the profit motive—not to mention new theories, political alliances, and modes of production. Some of the filmmakers who Rich covers—Todd Haynes, Gus Van Sant, Lisa Cholodenko—have received

Oscar nominations; others, such as Isaac Julien, are more firmly established in the art world; sadly still others, such as Jarman and Marlon Riggs, were lost to AIDS.

Rich writes of films that carry on the urgency and inventiveness of NQC—Jonathan Caouette’s autobiographical *Tarnation* (2003) with its no-budget aesthetic, the genderqueer *By Hook or By Crook* (Silas Howard and Harry Dodge, 2001) as part of a New Trans Cinema—and of landmarks such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), Ang Lee’s “post identity-politics epic,” that attest to the changes the movement brought about. In fact, in “What is a good gay film?,” published in 1998 in the now-defunct *Out*, Rich sees on the horizon precisely such a “long promised crossover movie that pleases ‘us’ as well as ‘them’ and makes a bundle of money.” But the preponderance of LGBT media out there, especially in a convulsively altered televisual landscape, is the spawn of a different impulse. If queer cinema today is not completely married to the mainstream, it is at least partly due to Rich’s influence.

For no one has been more keenly aware of the unfulfilled promises and appropriated energies of New Queer Cinema than Rich herself—the greater success enjoyed by white male directors, the devolution of erstwhile community to niche market, the exporting of a “global gay” norm. The best NQC films combined the political consciousness of 1970s modernism with high queer style, historical consciousness, and outsider energy, and Rich laments their passing. “I am an old-time outlaw girl” (41), she says in “Queer and Present Danger.”

The term New Queer Cinema was never fully settled, its newness disputable, its “queerness” too often tied more to content than to form—and no one is quite sure what “cinema” is anymore. But there’s also no one more aware of the enduring importance of the films, filmmakers, festivals, and networks of NQC (as she takes to abbreviating it) than Rich. There are imitators out there—even books called *New Queer Cinema*—but hold out for the director’s cut. Rich knows nearly everyone she writes about, on several continents—she’s been a funder, curator, writer for *Elle* and the *Advocate*, and radio reviewer, and is now critic, professor, and editor-elect of this journal. The book is graced with blurbs from key players, both cineastes and scholars—I could shut down this review in light of John Waters’s endorsement of its “whole new world of fag-friendly feminist film fanaticism.”

The book’s 27 pieces include reprints still breathless with the moment of discovery and longer essays like “Lethal Lesbians” (on a spate of thrill-kill movies from the late 1990s that will surely influence readers’ Netflix

queues) and the thoughtful “Queer *Nouveau*,” on anti-identitarian politics and mortality in films by three key French gay male directors—Cyril Collard, André Téchiné, and François Ozon. Similarly to her first essay collection, *Chick Flicks*, the book offers a retrospective frame that is at once wonderfully dishy and revealing about how film and media artists and professionals, especially talented and queer ones, go about their work. Rich is fiercely opinionated: She’s ready to call out programmers, makers, and audiences on their lack of imagination—but only because she expects more. As refined as her aesthetic taste may be (among her favorites are *Tropical Malady*, *Happy Together*, and Sadie Benning’s *Play/Pause*), she writes criticism for the cause. Her essay linking Jamie Babbitt’s *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* to Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* is imprinted with the textures of decades of dyke activism.

She might say that as NQC’s “baptismal preacher,” she agreed to write the book because queers need to know our history. It is a rhetorical move she makes frequently. For instance, in the delightful chapter on Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner’s scrappy black-and-white film *Go Fish*, which landed an unprecedented Sundance distribution deal in 1994 to become the first of the new queer *lesbian* cinema, she avers: “for the film to get the respect it deserves . . . it’s important to know the birthright.” She then excavates a number of precedents including the hackneyed lesbian video clips in 1980s bars that influenced dyke creativity. But in fact, Rich doesn’t set out to restore the “correct” version of the New Queer Cinema story; she knows the bluff of the director’s cut as well as anyone. Instead, she finds the polyphonic voices within her “official” version, quoting filmmakers, activists, and tastemakers and reminding us what was going on in the larger world.

For example, in “Got Milk?”—her account of Van Sant’s Oscar-winning film about slain San Francisco City Supervisor Harvey Milk—she takes us to the streets, not to the demos, but to the shoot, where the *Milk* team constructed a simulacrum of the Castro in the pre-HIV 1970s, and makes us feel the queer energies of her adopted city. (She moved to San Francisco in 1992, as she notes, her residency coinciding with the lifespan of NQC.) At a city-hall gala celebrating *Milk*, Rich admits feeling disappointed at the film’s mainstreaming. But when California’s gay-marriage ban Proposition 8 passes right as the film opens, Rich realizes how crucial *Milk*’s depiction of coalitional politics still is.

“I want the curtain raised on all the dirty lesbian secrets: the power plays, the naked lust,” Rich writes in “What’s a Good Gay Film?” “I want clues, signposts, prophecies,

playfulness and revelations” (45). This book gives all this plus added value. From a scholarly perspective, there’s new material: Rich’s expertise in Latin American cinema is on display in a section of previously unpublished essays and think pieces on queer cinema in the Americas. Comprising topics from Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s *Strawberries and Chocolate* to Lucrecia Martel’s Salta trilogy, it is a dialectical synthesis of two of Rich’s primary contributions to the field. From a pedagogical perspective, the combination of insider reporting and cultural commentary delivers students a whole new perspective on independent cinema. Although collecting all the pieces together may on one level be driven by academic publishing demands, this is a book that will surely outgrow its covers. It is tied to thoughtful print journalism in the most organic way—I can see sequels and new cuts, maybe bootlegs, as Rich continues to comment on queer film and beyond. In short, Rich’s is exactly the voice combining erudition, political passion, a feeling for the indie scene as deep as her joints, and the kind of quick turnaround of new ideas about culture and change that we, readers of journals such as this, need.

PATRICIA WHITE is Professor of Film and Media Studies at Swarthmore College and author of *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* and of the forthcoming *Women’s Cinema/World Cinema: Projecting 21st Century Feminisms*.

BOOK DATA B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. \$25.95 paperback. 360 pages.

## GENEVIEVE YUE

***Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens:  
Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing*  
by Caetlin Benson-Allott**

Caetlin Benson-Allott’s *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens* marks the quiet shift from one generation of film scholars, whose theories—psychoanalytic, phenomenological, and feminist, to name but a few—were profoundly shaped by their time spent in darkened movie theaters, to a younger one that came of age after the invention of the VCR. As Benson-Allott writes, “going to the movies meant staying home,” whether that meant watching films broadcast on television, or by the middle 1980s, rented from the local video store (24). Yet the field of film and media studies has been slow to acknowledge, and in some cases even disavows, this profound transformation in the way most people view movies, particularly prerecorded video, the “bastard child of cinema and television” (11).

Although the term “postcinematic” most frequently invokes digital technologies, Benson-Allott uses it to explore an earlier, overlooked, and in many ways messier moment when video both stood in for film as a cultural experience and stood for everything *but* film as a range of ancillary formats, platforms, and media devices. Video, Benson-Allott provocatively suggests, represents the “death not of cinema, but of medium specificity,” and to that end she treats not only VCRs and VHS cassettes but also DVDs, digital effects, and the various media codecs distributed across peer-to-peer file-sharing networks (15). Despite the heterogeneity of the term (Rosalind Krauss once referred to video as a “discursive chaos”), Benson-Allott narrows her study to examine prerecorded video and its effect on contemporary viewers. This new mode of spectatorship, she argues, not only shapes the look of the media we consume, but informs how we as viewers are constituted in and through the experience of watching movies in any way other than film.

As the book makes explicit, video means a particular interface, with buttons for play, stop, fast forward, and rewind, which in the palm of the viewer, offers a fantasy of interactivity and control. Benson-Allott elaborates this theme of control, including its illusory nature, in the several case studies that structure each chapter, all of them culled from the realm of horror. From the most monitor-shattering title sequence of Sean S. Cunningham’s *Friday the 13th* (1980) to the possession narrative caught on a jerry-rigged nanny cam in Oren Peli’s *Paranormal Activity* (2009), Benson-Allott not only selects films that reflect cultural attitudes toward video viewership but also films that directly address the terror of what Laura Mulvey has called the technological uncanny, manifest here in illicit tapes and deadly machines. Although horror and cult fare certainly offer much in the way of expressing societal anxieties, responding more swiftly than their art-house and middlebrow cousins to cultural trends and commercial demands, a treatment of more mundane uses of technology—the domesticized, unhomey device—might have offered additional nuance to the book’s theorization of control. In this way, the author might have followed through on a debate she mentions, namely, the challenge that reception studies posed to apparatus theory, wherein audience members, rather than submitting to the thrall of a film, might have multiple and often contradictory responses. Benson-Allott herself indicates these variations in the complexity of her anecdotes, in one case banishing, against her better judgment, a VHS copy of George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) to the foot of the stairs, while in another