

Stoffel's method is convincingly placed in conversation with other approaches in queer studies and other disciplines when he develops his understanding and choice of the by now widely used concept of 'worldmaking'. Distinct from Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking after Empire* (2019), which focuses on the writing and thought of elite men, Stoffel looks at movements of women and queers who were more often than not marginalised in several ways. In contrast to more ephemeral notions of disidentification as developed by Muñoz or Berlant and Warner's counterpublics, Stoffel is interested in longer term strategic, materialist and scaled-up queer politics. I wonder if the turn to the state in chapter four, the 'theoretical interlude', limits the analytical and imaginative reach that could be built on the rich material about transnationalism and more-than-nation politics. He puts forward a Marxist analysis of the bourgeois state with a contradiction constitutive for sexual politics: the declaration of equality, liberty and security (albeit only for some) and the simultaneous intensification of processes of exploitation, violence and dispossession. The state with its abstract equality and concrete hierarchisation then is both the condition of possibility of these movements and their limit by way of subsumption of desire under the figures of the consumer, the child and the citizen – erotic arrangements which Eros, as conceptualized by Stoffel, works against but which ultimately also lead to the expansion of US empire. This leads Stoffel to argue that the 'ungovernable nature of desire' can animate 'radical struggles against the social order' but it cannot guarantee success.

Thinking with the transnational queer materialist methodology put forward by Rana Jaleel and Evren Savci and invoked by Stoffel in chapter three, I wonder if a deeper engagement with the transnational could have pushed the reconstructive perspective even further towards a pragmatic transnationalism for movements.

Stoffel's book makes important contributions to queer and trans studies, feminist theory and the study of global politics. The chapters on the movements he studies are highly relevant for historians, theorists or activists. Importantly, Stoffel's findings are an important reminder that methodological nationalism continues to be a powerful restrictive force in the scholarship of politics. This historical study urges us to look for the transnational when studying contemporary phenomena rather than adding it belatedly as a corrective. It also shows critics of queer politics that queer movements were more radical than they are often times made out to be, encompassing comprehensive critiques of capitalist relations. The historical materialist analysis of the imperial state and its institutions that govern sexual life is an important guide for where to look and what to pay attention to when studying counterhegemonic and queer anti-imperial movements. In conversation with Getachew's work and others like Durba Mitra's *The Future that Was* (2025) on Third World Feminist projects and Anne McNevin's *Worldmaking and Border Politics* (2026) on alternative bordering projects, *Eros and Empire* inspires us not only to think against empires but also to reach for queer feminist worlds.

Esther Franke

Avant-garde models

Nicolas Helm-Grovas, *Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Towards Counter-Cinema* (Leiden: Brill, 2026). 454pp., €150 hb., 978 90 04 75207 8

In 1974, Peter Bürger first published his *Theorie der Avantgarde*. In his now classic account Bürger proclaimed the inauthenticity of the post-war neo-avant-garde: for Bürger, the art institution subsumed the historic avant-garde's protests as the very autonomous artworks such protests were intended to negate. In the same year, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen completed their first film *Pen-*

thesilea, Queen of the Amazons. This was, as Nicolas Helm-Grovas terms it, a cinematic 'scorched earth' which signalled the coming of an avant-garde, a counter-cinema, perhaps unconstrained by the limits glimpsed and set by Bürger. As Wollen would have it, due to the combined effects of socialist realist and Nazi reaction, Hollywood's dominance and war-time retreats, cinema un-

derwent an uneven, ‘delayed encounter’ with modernism leading to a post-’68 break which offered belated avant-garde possibilities. That this avant-garde was situated within and against the culture industry proper, not the autonomous art institution, and constructed its own counter-institutions, as much as it negated its own instrumental industrial conditions, suggests a more complicated and perhaps productive moment for the specifically cinematic neo-avant-garde than Bürger’s gloomy coordinates of doomed repetition.

In *Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen*, Helm-Grovas traces this delayed avant-garde formation in Britain, addressing its intellectual, aesthetic, political and counter-institutional forms from the break of 1968 to the dissolutions of the early 1980s. The book explores its two titular figures as both privileged objects to interrogate this broader history and unique theorists and artists in their own right. Moving between these two frames Helm-Grovas avoids what Raymond Williams would call a ‘reduced sociology’, that is historical inquiry siloed in discussions of singular institutions, individual artists or lone intellectuals, in favour of continually moving outwards, from Mulvey and Wollen towards counter-cinema, from theory towards film, or from cinema to politics, always coming back to re-read such poles through and past one another.



‘Louise’s Story’, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1977). Courtesy of Laura Mulvey.

Mulvey and Wollen are two canonised figures of film studies, feminism and critical theory. This canonisation is tied up in a restricted selection of key texts now stultified due to their familiarity: Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’; Wollen’s ‘The Two Avant-Gardes’, and “‘Ontology” and “Materialism” in Film’. As such, these writings have been endlessly critiqued for their

insufficient schematism and glaring absences. Without disregarding such limits, Helm-Grovas’ analysis frees Mulvey and Wollen’s interventions from their academic ossification to restore to them their force as ‘programme texts’, or writings intended as partial, incomplete contributions to a collective context. One immediate result of this move is that it brushes off the nebulous notions of overly speculative ‘Screen theory’ or ‘apparatus theory’, often constructed post-hoc through North American edited collections, that were ostensibly unconcerned with the contexts of film production or cultural struggle. Rather, by placing this theory as foundational to and situated within an avant-garde formation, Helm-Grovas suggests we can better understand how theoretical analyses and articulations staked out conjectures to be tested and modulated in practice and rallied for new kinds of spectators, filmmakers and subjectivities.

His reading of Mulvey’s seemingly near-exhausted ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ is particularly instructive in this regard. For Helm-Grovas, Mulvey does not describe a concrete spectator but rather the abstract ideal spectator according to classical Hollywood’s visual-narrative logic, much the same way that for Michael Heinrich, Marx describes the theoretically ‘ideal average’ of capitalism. While this suggests a completely smooth functioning of Hollywood’s ideological interpellation, in so doing Mulvey hides her own ‘position of enunciation’. That is, Mulvey does not explicitly discuss the ‘bad spectators’ who might resist interpellation, but her very critical reading exhibits such a resistance by ‘performatively’ undermining the ‘seamless recognition it describes’. Hence, as Helm-Grovas indicates, Mulvey’s text leaves out the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘her’ that might refer to a concrete female counter-spectator in order to make ‘apprehensible a gap’, to call forth, through new interpellations, or leave open, such a spectator in its many possible guises. This was a gap to be filled by the radical and feminist practitioners to which Mulvey speaks. Likewise, ‘Visual Pleasure’ was not simply, or primarily, for the purposes of complete analysis. Indeed, as Helm-Grovas notes, Mulvey would go on to extrapolate counterexamples through the latent feminist possibilities of Hollywood melodrama. Published in 1975 and positioned between *Penthesilea* and Mulvey/Wollen’s later film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), ‘Visual Pleasure’, for Helm-Grovas, takes stock of past cinema, in its critical

attention to dominant forms to be negated, and, in its desire to articulate the possibility for a critical feminist interpellation, offers new positions to be iteratively tested in practice.

Here we have Helm-Grovas' portrait of Mulvey and Wollen's counter-cinema *in nuce*: a practice of ruthless theoretical critique of cinema, often over-totalising and yet productive, which throws up new questions and problems to be tested and expanded in practice, if only to return again to theory. Counter-cinema is a mode in which, as Adorno puts it, theory and praxis are 'neither immediately one nor absolutely different'. Helm-Grovas traces this dialectic in his mode of presentation, moving from Mulvey and Wollen's contexts to their theoretical writings to their films in narrating three key conjunctures. The first is from the late 1960s, when Mulvey and Wollen excavated avant-garde models, 'privileged historic and contemporary examples serving as guideposts for cultural production', in order to lay the groundwork for the textual negativity of *Penthesilea* in 1974. The second emerges with the mid-1970s expansion of a counter-institutional apparatus for counter-cinema in Britain, in which Mulvey and Wollen's avant-garde textuality conjoined with a desire to alter the social relations in and around cinema. Helm-Grovas places the aforementioned programme texts here. The final conjuncture is one of decline. With the growth of a British art cinema model and the emergence of Channel Four, the space for counter-cinema closed.

As such, *Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen* is poised between two historiographical impulses, a social history of cinema, represented by the likes of David E. James' *Allegories of Cinema*, and a film-theoretical history, exemplified by D. N. Rodowick's *The Crisis of Political Modernism*. Or perhaps it is better to say that it points to some of the tensions between these modes and the necessity for movement across them (much like the movement of the dichotomous 'and', between films and writing, theory and practice, or Mulvey and Wollen that, for Helm-Grovas, marks counter-cinema). There is sometimes here a tendency, in centring the intellectual output of two major figures and their films' theoretical ambitions, to preclude a sense of the under- or non-theorised within the terrain of counter-cinema. The focus on counter-cinema's institutional-intellectual contexts, left-wing journals, university-based or women's movements reading groups,

is certainly appropriate to Mulvey and Wollen's work. However, while it is sometimes referred to here, it remains necessary to advance the story of independent film's relations to and collaborations with concrete women's liberation groups, the workers' movement or non-intellectual spectators.

In a similar sense, the book's approach is one of a productive immanence to both the material and intellectual output of the figures under discussion. Rarely do figures or frameworks from beyond the 'intertextual space of counter-cinema' enter Helm-Grovas' analyses. For example, instead of belatedly reading Mulvey and Wollen's films as examples of the nebulous contemporary 'essay film' category, Helm-Grovas holds on to their notion of 'theory film' to attend to the specific articulation between 'metalingual' and 'poetic' functions therein. This particularity is useful in clarifying the motivations and theoretical terrain working through counter-cinema but, at times, threatens to lose sight of the broader stakes for a radical cinema in generating ambient, non-conceptual meaning within and beyond concrete political struggle.

In their sophistication and deep knowledge of the intertextual space, these readings risk becoming too complete or over-determined by Mulvey/Wollen's problematics. In other words, where the readings are constructed from a secure position of scholarly knowledge of the counter-cinematic intertextual field, a building up from a more 'naïve', in situ or tentative interpretation, which might give a greater sense of the contingency within any aesthetic encounter, is delimited. This is the gamble or tension of the historiographical approach described above. Equally, we might think of it as the gamble of counter-cinema (perhaps another instance of the book's immanence to its subject); in activating the intertextual field, counter-cinema hails a certain intellectual-spectatorial position for aspects of its intelligibility. If the theoretical sometimes tends to be the ultimate horizon for meaning and interpretation, some of the stickier, historical and affective spectatorial positions can be left by the wayside.

A category that returns throughout the book, and that helps navigate these difficulties, is that of 'passionate detachment'. Passionate detachment is simultaneously a spectatorial position, subjective disposition and mode of filmic construction that holds open the possibility of intimate identification while resist-

ing a total enclosure on subjectivity through the distance of critique. It emerges through and out of Helm-Grovas' interpretations of Mulvey and Wollen's films and theoretical writings. For example, in his reading of *Riddles of the Sphinx*, the sphinx's 'voice-off' that repeats throughout speculatively undercuts the theoretical metalanguage of Mulvey's monologue on the Oedipus myth. Equally, the film's narrative section riffs on classical melodrama, soliciting identification with the female lead, while its form, discombobulating 360 panning shots, depersonalises the action. Helm-Grovas discusses how *Riddles* overlays psychoanalytic and Marxist approaches to gender, showing how both might critique one another to delineate the affective, laborious 'lived contradiction' of motherhood. Contra a dogmatist theoretical silo, passionate detachment then is a 'way of engaging and valourising the felt, lived, experiential investments of the viewer, while retaining and fostering activities of critical scrutiny and allowing enough distance to be able to view these investments as part of a larger social and political terrain'.

In its connection to the notion of an avant-garde break, passionate detachment also becomes a flash point for more transversal political connections to emerge. In offering itself as absolute rupture with dominant

forms that determine interpretative frameworks, counter-cinema risks becoming incomprehensible or without framework. Helm-Grovas puts this dilemma in analogy with the question of revolutionary break: how can we rupture from capitalist social relations if these constitute the general means of reproduction? Equally, we might think of the so-called paradox of abolition: can a subject (e.g., the proletariat) abolish itself if it is wholly constituted by the relations which it must abolish? Can we avoid affirming such a subject beyond the moment of abolition if we need to affirm it in the struggle for abolition? Passionate detachment might suggest that radical artistic activity can simultaneously hold together the affirmative moment of identification and negative moment of critique in strategic tension. Counter-cinema would then not purport to construct the subjectivity beyond a revolutionary break but would offer a speculative activity for glimpsing affirmative subjectivities without a totalising identification which would foreclose the horizon of negativity.

The book's immanent approach often entails that such directions of theoretical travel are gestured towards but left productively open. One such unexplored opening is an articulation of the history of counter-cinema alongside broader art theoretical debates on the avant-garde,



'Laura Speaking', *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1977). Courtesy of Laura Mulvey.

commitment and subsumption gestured to in my opening paragraph. For example, how might Daniel Spaulding's account of the avant-garde's entanglement with the fate of the programmatic workers' movement and the horizon of the value-form's socialisation (mis)translate into the terrain of counter-cinema? Indeed, if this belated cinematic avant-garde emerged at the moment of the workers' movement dissolution, of the breakdown of an older revolutionary horizon, and with the emergence of new forms of struggle, principally the women's movement, might it suggest an alternative pathway for the avant-garde beyond the programmatic impasse? Such a narrative would also have to think through the cinema's different relationship to the value-form and real subsumption as compared with the fine arts, in order to clarify the specificity of counter-cinema's avant-garde postures. Alternatively, perhaps there is a means of narrating the fate of counter-cinema's decline offered in the book's final section within and against broader narratives of 'post-modern' artistic subsumption and/or the becoming-speculative of the labour-capital relation. What capitalist conditions made counter-cinema ambitions possible and what undermined them? How might relating these narratives help us to clarify the relationships between cinema and political praxis today? While they often briefly frame Helm-Grovas' periodisation, deepening these directions could enrich the art-theoretical

debates with alternative histories and position counter-cinema within a broader social field, of class struggle and capitalist crisis, than the book's tendential focus on Mulvey and Wollen's problematics.

Nonetheless, *Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen* is easily the most expansive, rigorous and clear-eyed account of this period of radical film production in Britain to date. In the book's conclusion, Helm-Grovas reflects on several 'avant-garde models for historiography' that might emerge from Mulvey and Wollen's work: resistance to closure, historical montage and defamiliarisation. With these closing frames, Helm-Grovas makes perceptible both the limited conditions for revolutionary art, the unending desires which sustain it and the possibility to – like counter-cinema's own excavation of the historic avant-garde – 'continue the earlier project under new conditions'. We may have left the counter-cinematic moment, but the desires and horizons it made perceptible stay with us as keys, lessons and, as yet, undetermined meanings. In a 1989 essay, Wollen described the Situationist International in like terms:

The wasteful luxury of utopian projects, however doomed, is no bad thing. We need not persist in seeking a unique condition for revolution, but neither need we forget the desire for liberation. We move from place to place and from time to time. This is true of art as well as politics.

Oliver Dixon

Possible music

Fumi Okiji, *Billie's Bent Elbow: Exorbitance, Intimacy, and a Nonsensuous Standard* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2025). 196pp., £19.99 pb., 978 1 50364 123 5

In Ron Mann's 1981 documentary on free jazz, *Imagine the Sound*, Cecil Taylor offers a theory of music as incessant creative act: 'It seems to me what music is', Taylor remarks, 'is everything that you do ... So to read or dance, to converse, is all a part of the making of music.' Fumi Okiji's new book, *Billie's Bent Elbow: Exorbitance, Intimacy, and a Nonsensuous Standard*, is a study of this mode of music-making, in thought and in practice. Part exploration and part demonstration, it attends to interstices and overlaps, to the blurred edges of sound and theory.

Okiji grounds the work in a conjecture, that there exists an affinity between three geographically and temporally separated philosophical traditions: black studies, particularly the study of what Nahum Chandler calls blackness's 'exorbitance'; Yorùbá philosophy and aesthetics; and western critical theory in the mould of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. This affinity goes by the name 'nonsensuous', her term for a field in which relations between subjects and objects are constructed along more expansive lines than those