

Joan Hawkins, ed. *Downtown Film & TV Culture 1975-2001*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 380pp.

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Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001 articulates a New York City arts scene characterized as punk, alternative, performative, visual, marginalized, activist, counter-cultural, and political – defying easy characterizations. Here the appellation “downtown” is less a geophysical boundary than it is a state of mind. Editor Joan Hawkins, an Associate Professor of Film Theory and History at Indiana University Bloomington, eschews a pedantic approach, opting instead for a multi-vocal work that blends previously published journalistic accounts of the downtown scene with original works of cultural analysis, subject interviews, cultural perspective pieces and textual juxtapositions/critiques/analyses. The book’s three major sections (Moments, Scenes and Memorials) highlight notable events, texts, and figures of the downtown scene while writers are often self-reflexively critical of attempts at taxonomizing and canonizing a cultural scene that by its very ethos a rejection of neat boundaries and simple definitions.

The book details artists and performers like Lydia Lunch, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Spaulding Grey and Glenn O’Brien, cutting edge public access television like *TV Party*, *Cast Iron TV*, *Electra Elf* and germinal films representing punk, art, feminist, queer, and no wave movements/moments like *Blank Generation*, *Unmade Beds*, *The Right Side of My Brain*, *Variety*, *Rome ’78*. With twenty-three chapters (plus a filmography/videography) a brief review can offer only a glimpse into the work. From Part I: Moments, chapter three (*At Last Real Movies: Super 8 Cinema from New York*), considers a wave of 1970-80’s Super 8 films. What the piece lacks in an analysis it makes up for in capturing audiences’ exuberance for a new visual and fleeting reality created from meagre means

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with little artifice. Author Tony Conrad argues that “*these* films are made for a kind of watching that dies when one analyses it too narrowly; these are REAL LIVE MOVIES” (28). Chapter seventeen (*Cock Worship: Todd Haynes, Fassbinder, and Praxis*) from Part II: Scenes, may seemingly lack downtown pedigree as it offers an examination of a pre-queer theory analysis written on Fassbinder’s film *Querelle* by Los Angeles filmmaker Todd Haynes while he was a student attending Ivy League Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. In defence of Haynes’ inclusion in a larger discussion of downtown media culture, author Chris Dumas notes: “Before this queering [that Haynes was foreshadowing], the Downtown movement operated in an exclusively heterosexual universe, with a set of logics and limitations clearly inherited from Godard” (224). In Part III: Memorials, chapter twenty (*The Downtown Scene in the Digital Era*) author Laurel Westrup reminds readers that while Joan Hawkins might mark the end of the downtown film/TV scene with the events of 9/11 these texts have been given new life by a digital age. Recirculating and reconstructing these texts digitally pits education against nostalgia, opens the door to multiple readings, criticisms and contestations, and questions whether the oft-extolled adage “You had to be there” still determines one’s downtown credentials (287).

Part III: Memorials, despite the terminal name, arguably keeps the downtown discourse most active and future focused. In chapter nineteen (*Canonization and No Wave Cinema History*) Mark Benedetti challenges the recent attempts to create a canon of no wave films and filmmakers asking whether films deemed definitive of this movement (for example, *11 thru 12*) are just that or just the most accessible and well preserved when others’ might be more notable but they may have been lost, damaged/degraded, and/or not circulated/accessible widely enough. Further, Benedetti questions the impulse to separately discuss television and filmic formats, as some units in this book might do, as TV gets positioned as more fleeting and less developed. Additionally, in chapter twenty two (*The Centre Cannot Hold: Blank City (2010) and the Problems of Historicizing New York’s Independent Cinema of the Late 1970’s and Early 1980’s*) Juan Carlos Kase critically positions Céline Danhier’s documentary *Blank City* as presenting the downtown arts scene in a way that celebrates popular personalities, bohemian lifestyles and cultural nostalgia at the expense of more substantial content. Kase argues that the documentary, “dedicates substantially more screen time to presenting anecdotes ...lacks any descriptive or analytical context ... [and] lacks the essential qualities of historical consciousness and historiographic self-awareness” (317).

This book is laudable for recognizing that by delineating downtown as merely the output of a collection of city blocks in Manhattan that we are missing the essential essence of this creative venture. Hawkins does well to include a variety of voices of

artists, performers, critics, journalists and does not approach this topic from within the walls of academe. The result is that the contributors refreshingly call into question each other's perspectives and even the overall project of trying to define a cultural scene that is intertextual, boundary defying, multi-vocal and contested. Readers interested in avant-garde media, U.S. popular and cultural studies, identity politics and social movements will appreciate this book and while the naming of the book's parts suggests a chronological progression the chapters within can also be appreciated out of order and individually. One criticism of a work like this is one that is has already been noted by chapter nineteen author Mark Benedetti above. In our desire to provide and explore a meaningful movement in American media, we can never be sure what texts and figures we might be overlooking. This issue of the texts and people that this book might be overlooking is best summed up by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld who when discussing the lack of evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq cryptically stated, "There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones."