Screening Vulnerability

Brian Bergen-Aurand

Opening is the vulnerability of a skin offered in wound and outrage beyond all that can show itself, beyond all that of essence of being can expose itself to understanding and celebration.

Emmanuel Levinas, “Without Identity”

About the time I first encountered Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* soon after its publication in 2006, I began to turn my research and teaching from queer theory toward disability studies and crip theory. Or, it might be more accurate to say that crip theory and disability studies began to infect my previous work in queer theory and dis-ease its trajectory. Rather than focus on carnality and desire as much as I once had, I began focusing on corporeality and vulnerability—what Emmanuel Levinas (2006: 64) describes as the radical passivity of being “for the other” without ever desiring such a responsibility, without having either force or intention, something I experience despite myself. Vulnerability, especially rather than capability or ability—with their links to energy, strength, power, and vitality—began to hold a more central place in my research and critical thought. I began rethinking what bodies do and what they do to us when we experience them, especially through screens.

Perhaps one of the most interesting images of how this vulnerability works appears in a section of Jay Rosenblatt’s *Phantom Limb* (“a film about grief and loss” 2005). *Phantom Limb* is a twenty-eight minute film that addresses Rosenblatt’s family’s struggles with the death of his younger brother, Eliot, in 1964, when Rosenblatt was nine years old. It is a film about the indescribable pain of mourning the loss of a younger brother and a film that speaks to mourning on many levels. Recently, while teaching a section of the film (“Chapter 8: Advice”) in a course on screen bodies, I asked students to describe how the sequence affected them and how they reacted to the bodies off screen (the female narrator, the director, the crew), on screen (the white man who shears the sheep, the sheep itself which is cradled between the man’s legs while he removes its wool), and in front of the screen (the students themselves, their classmates).

This section of *Phantom Limb* is approximately five-and-a-half minutes long. It is composed of a single shot of a white man wearing blue denim pants and a blue tank top, who is bent over a sheep he his shearing with an electric shearing tool. The man shears the sheep as a woman’s voice begins a voice-over of “Advice for the grieving parent.” In a calm and therapeutic voice, she relays fifteen points...
regarding the loss of a child, concluding with the stark statement, “Don’t expect the pain to ever fully go away.” In the final seconds of Chapter 8, the shearer, almost done with the task, moves his tools to the side and looks directly into the camera for an instant. The sheep is completely shorn. The man caresses the animal’s face and helps it to its feet before the film cuts to the next chapter.

My students first expressed disbelief that such a simple sequence, of a man shearing a sheep while a woman spoke about the stages of mourning a child, could evoke as much emotion as it did. We considered the simple pain of the somber voice and the subject matter that she was discussing: the anguish of a family losing a child. It seems obvious that a serious discussion of this topic would affect viewer-listeners so intensely. Yet, as we discussed the sequence more, we began to think about the role of the sheep and how the affective force of the chapter depends on the perceived precarity, the observed vulnerability of the animal shorn and, at the same time, cared for by the man. The sheep appears utterly helpless in the video, manipulated at every beat by the movements of the shearer’s skilled hands and legs that cradle it. It lacks all agency, all force, all intention. Its situation is dictated by the needs of another. Yet, in this state, it also seems enabled by its very passivity. It seems as if its passivity allows for the possibility of its relationship with the man and for the possibility of its new existence within its skin: it is no longer burdened by the wool coat the man has just taken from it. As we rewatched and rethought the relationship between the shearer and the sheep, and the fact that the sheep’s very passivity makes possible its relationship with the man, we began to rethink how connection and relation might be linked otherwise than through power or autonomy. We began to consider how this scene might expose us to the links between responsibility and vulnerability, how vulnerability might enable responsibility, and how these possibilities might be thwarted by power and force of will—by the sheep resisting the shearer. Then, we began to wonder how the sheep’s very nudity might transfer something of these effects to us as we watched the process and its eventual completion—how the sheep’s very exposure might affect us. Finally, in the end, we were left wondering whether its vulnerability might have triggered in us a spectatorial vulnerability that opened us, as Levinas (2006: 63) describes, “from top to toe and to the very marrow,” to the affect of the scene.

* * *

Volume two, issue one of Screen Bodies features Michele White’s essay on transformation and women beauty vloggers’ self-representations under the rubric of #thepowerofmakeup; Heather Warren-Crow’s study of primitivism, vitality, and visual art in relation to the motion-capture video Ghostcatching (1999); Andrew Webber’s close analysis of children, passing, and Nazism in the film Lore (2012); William Solomon’s overview of the role of shock and Modernist aesthetics in
American underground film; and Ryan Schowen’s report on the photographic project *A Journey Inside*. It also includes reviews covering women’s pornography in post-digital China and rewriting the sexual in women’s pornography, queer nostalgia, female film stardom, affect and queer sociality, and Alfred Hitchcock’s things on screens.

* * *

It is with much sadness that the debut of volume two sees the departure of two assistant editors. Alexandra (Alex) Sastre and Danielle Zorbas have been with *Screen Bodies* from its very beginning and are now moving on to other ventures inside and outside academia. They began their tenures with the journal in 2014 and worked hard to assemble the original board and advisors, seek new submissions and outside readers, and explore different areas of research into bodies and screens, and they worked even harder to produce the strongest first two issues possible. We will miss them very much. Good luck to Alex and Danielle!

On a more upbeat note, coming onboard with volume two are three new assistant editors who have already been involved in the production of this issue. We hope their visions and commitment to the study of bodies and screens will see us through to a new stage in the evolution of *Screen Bodies*. Ira Allen teaches rhetoric, writing, and digital media studies at Northern Arizona University. He writes on rhetorical and political theory and has produced media-sensitive translations of the works of Walter Benjamin, Werner Hamacher, and other theorists. He is also the translator of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Dionysian Vision of the World* and the author of the forthcoming book *The Ethical Fantasy of Rhetorical Theory*, which will be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Andrew Ball teaches in the English Department at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston, where he specializes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, visual culture, and continental philosophy. His work emphasizes matters of religion, ethics, and social justice. Saravanan Mani is completing his doctoral research in the Division of English at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research focuses on screen studies and morality, and he is currently writing about ethics and American crime drama TV series. He blogs regularly at *Screen Ethics*: *A discursive, lingering look at arts, culture and entertainment*.

These new assistant editors, along with our expanded editorial board, will be overseeing the progress of several *Screen Bodies* coming attractions, including screenshots on MENA queer film and global trans screens; articles and reports on desire and Hong Kong women filmmakers, gendosexuality in *Jersey Shore*, the work of Barbara Hammer, screening horror, body agency, mixed-media screen movement, animal videos, musical vitality in film, pornography and the state, strangers in travel photography, Syrian online memorials, and the Otherkin movement; and reviews of work by Anthony Curtis Adler, Rebecca
Bell-Metereau, Colleen Glenn, Scott C. Richmond, David Church, Grant Bollmer, Aaron Kerner, Jonathan Knapp, and April Householder. In addition, we will also be considering screen images that challenge the reception of South African self-portraits and Turkish film stills.

*Screen Bodies* has striven to use its cover image to convey a sense of what lies within each issue and as a platform to promote a variety of emergent and underrepresented screen artists. On the cover of this issue, we feature a frame capture from Lianain Films’s three-part documentary *Hong Kong: Occupy Central*, which first aired on Al Jazeera English in 2014–2015. Lianain Films is an independent Hong-Kong- and Singapore-based film company headed by Lynn Lee and James Leong. (*Lianain* means “storyteller” in Tetum, the language of East Timor, and comes from Lee and Leong’s experience in Timor-Leste filming *Passabe* (2005)—their first documentary—which featured village elders preserving the oral history of their village and community.) Lee does the bulk of the scriptwriting and Leong most of the camerawork. Since 2004, they have produced more than thirty independent documentaries and TV documentaries and one feature film, *Camera* (2014), which is a science-fiction thriller concerned with surveillance, obsession, and gentrification. Their films have won or been nominated for a number of awards and recognitions, including a Sundance Institute Documentary Grant, two Chinese Documentary Festival Best Film prizes, a Freedom Film Festival top honor, two Human Rights Press Award first prizes, a Puchon Project award, and various other humanitarian prizes.

The majority of their films are concerned with struggle, social justice issues, and the entanglement of work and bodies at work. They focus on the people and institutions involved in complex and complicated relationships—variably sympathetic, empathetic, antagonistic, apathetic, cooperative, and combative—articulating through their films questions of action, activism, and the ambivalent products and affects of embodied labor. In the process, they highlight two aspects of these social relations, and eventually show how they intersect. First, they magnify certain dynamics at work in authority and hierarchy: they focus on citizens, police, bosses, employees, bureaucrats, elites, and politicians and the institutions through which they interrelate. In doing so, they depict institutions that bind people to and separate them from their own governments—highlighting how different regimes (official, semi-official, and unofficial) work to survey and articulate the social relations through which they collaborate and cooperate. Second, through their depictions of the work of migrant laborers, clandestine or temporary employees, activists, civic representatives, professionals and academics, and security, industry, and state officials, they trace the intricate webs of responsibility that enmesh each actor along the way. While their images of the regimes delineate the hierarchical organization of social interaction, their depictions of the temporally and logistically dynamic arrangements of the people involved in them problematize simplistic understandings of social participation and culpability.
Much of this dynamic is in play in Hong Kong: Occupy Central, which focuses on the forces at work (sometimes in alignment, sometimes in competition) during the 2014 demonstrations. According to the filmmakers, the cover image shows a moment when “Hong Kong’s ‘Umbrella Movement’ pro-democracy protestors confront[ed] police with mirrors. Scrawled above the glass: ‘We are the same people,’ ‘Restraint! love and peace,’ and ‘Be gentler please. Please be soft.’ Protestors often implored police to listen to their conscience, hoping to win them over with moral argument.” Here, the demonstrators put their bodies in harm’s way to call the police to look at themselves and their actions and reconsider what they are doing. This image of bodies put in jeopardy or made vulnerable through entreaty and this film full of such bodies are excellent examples of the complicated situations and strategies highlighted by so many of Lianain Films’s productions.

Brian Bergen-Aurand teaches in the English Department at Bellevue College, Washington, where he specializes in film, ethics, and embodiment. He is the founder and editor of Screen Bodies journal, the editor of Comedy Begins with Our Simplest Gestures: Levinas, Ethics, and Humor (2017) and Transnational Chinese Cinema, Corporeality, Desire, and the Ethics of Failure (2014, with Mary Mazzilli and Hee Wai Siam), and the author of Cinematic Provocation: Ethics, Justice, Embodiment, and Global Film (forthcoming 2018). Currently, he is developing (with Andrew Grossman) an encyclopedia of Global Queer Cinema. E-mail: screenbodies@berghahnjournals.com

Notes
1 Levinas 2006: 63.

References

Filmography