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## Seen Through the Media: The Persian Gulf War (Book Review)

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## Book Reviews

*Seeing Through the Media: The Persian Gulf War*  
Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinovitz, eds.

New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994. 343 pp.

James Castonguay

Writing shortly after the Persian Gulf War, Robert Stam predicted that "media coverage of the Gulf War news offered a contemporary form of instantaneous historiography, an electronic ecriture that will mold the popular memory of the conflict for some time" ("Mobilizing Fictions," *Public Culture* 4.2 [Spring 1992]: 122). *Seeing Through the Media* is a welcome publication for educators who wish to question that instantaneous historiography in the classroom. This interdisciplinary and accessible text is organized around "the primary functions the media served during the war: reconstructing history, controlling the dissemination of information, creating social consensus, and solidifying national identity" (14). The editors' introduction provides a methodological map for studying the Gulf War media and popular culture in general. The chronology of the war and bibliographical guide to Gulf War scholarship are preeminently useful.

In addition to its pedagogical value, this collection of essays is a valuable contribution to current debates in television studies centered around the inscription of gender and race in US commercial television. Most academic work on the Gulf War has focused on news media in order to expose propagandistic lies, document the structural complicity of the global industrial-military-media complex (and the Bush administration), reveal the rhetorical strategies of Gulf War news, and explore the relation between technology and the war. This has been done at the expense of any rigorous examination of "non news" programming and what are putatively considered to be fictional media forms. On the one hand, *Seeing Through the Media* continues the important critique of Gulf War news. Mimi White provides a lucid analysis of the opening hours of CNN's coverage in light of

recent critical work on banality, fatality, anxiety, and catastrophe in television studies, while Holly Cowan Shulman documents how the US media “managed” the understanding of the Gulf War around the globe. H. Bruce Franklin gives a history of war photography from the Civil War to the Gulf, and Daniel Hallin and Michelle Kendrick contextualize the Gulf in relation to Vietnam. Yet on the other hand, this collection also provides a valuable corrective to Gulf War scholarship by examining a variety of (inter and extra) texts which fall along the discursive continuum known as the Gulf War. In addition to television, print, and radio news journalism, the contributors discuss popular black magazines (Venise Berry and Kim Karloff), Gulf War videos (Kendrick), and supermarket tabloids (Leonard Rifas), as well as situation comedies, soap operas, the Super Bowl, daytime talk shows, bumper stickers, speeches, yellow ribbons, and fashion magazines. As a result, the reader gets both a sense of the overall hegemonic *ethos* of wartime culture, and an introduction to the racist and misogynist images and language invoked to “kick the Vietnam Syndrome,” negotiate gender instabilities, and “manage” other historical insecurities in the name of a “just” and “popular” war.

Within the larger context provided by Cynthia Enloe’s meditations on “The Gendered Gulf” and Dana Cloud’s analysis of the personalized and therapeutic discourse of news stories of military families which posited women as copers and supporters on the home front, Robyn Wiegman and Lauren Rabinovitz examine the realignment of gender on Gulf War TV. Wiegman, following Lynne Joyrich’s reconsideration of melodrama, suggests that “we might understand the contradictory regime of Persian Gulf War representation — where the masculine embodies the tension between public and private and serves as its primary figure of signification — as an extension of melodrama’s broader deployment within the televisual regime” (180-181). The display of military aggression as a domestic(ated), televisual affair is symptomatic of the collapse of private/public distinctions previously maintained by the public space and technology of the cinema. Wiegman assigns the war a “negotiatory function,” presenting it as both a symptom of and response to the broader redefinition of masculinity taking place across the contaminating terrain of television’s melodramatic codes.

Of course, any renegotiation of masculinity affects women — or, more precisely, works in concert with socially constructed definitions of femininity. Rabinovitz shows, for instance, how “feminine” talk shows and the sitcom *Major Dad* were able to immediately “discuss” the war because their generic conventions were well suited for the larger rhetorical coordinates of “domestication” set by the Bush administration and the news media. More surprising, she argues that even the “masculine” Super Bowl — which became an official spectacle of patriotism and support for the troops — did so through conventions associated with “feminine” television forms, thus positioning “both male and female viewers as *feminized* patriots” (196). Yet the feminine genre *par excellence* — the soap opera — did not incorpo-

rate the war as soap operas were already "speaking" Gulf War language and rhetoric, informing it, Rabinovitz argues, from the beginning.

In light of Wiegman and Rabinovitz's arguments, we could describe the Gulf War as a *masquerade of massacre* — an excessive display of hypermasculine aggression (or hyper-remasculinization) in response to threats of the feminine rooted in historical insecurities and cultural assumptions about television itself. Thus the excessive "feminization" discussed by Rabinovitz becomes another kind of masquerade — an attempt to provide the Gulf War spectator with the necessary (un)critical distance for "identifying" with the popular war and thus serving to mitigate dissent. In this view the Gulf War was not only a triumph for US military technology and weaponry, but also an attempt to redeem the signifying technology of television. If the Vietnam War had been lost on television in our living rooms in the sixties and seventies, the Gulf War was won in our homes in the nineties — through the conventions of televisual form associated with the "feminine."

From the outset of the war George Bush used violent, racist, and gendered metaphors to justify US military aggression; he referred to the Iraqi invasion as the "rape of Kuwait" in his "Aggression Speech." As Ella Shohat notes in her piece, the rape and rescue scenario (of women from dark men) has often been invoked to justify imperial and patriarchal violence — a rhetorical tactic basic for most colonial narratives (153). Therese Saliba's discussion of the literal and symbolic absence of Arab women in Gulf War media suggests that any discussion of gender, race, and the Gulf must consider processes of gender and racial *exscription*. Saliba shows how Arab women were Orientalized, subordinated, and/or excised from the images and language of fashion magazines, talk shows, US news reports, and NOW literature during the war. She traces these absences to the military's appropriation of NOW's critique of Arab patriarchy, arguing that many US feminists were unaware of their complicity with colonial power structures which grant "white women a presence at the expense of brown women" (282).

Saliba's discussion of the absent bodies of Arab women can be placed alongside the structuring absence of dead and injured Iraqi bodies which were surgically removed from the slick and clean television production titled "Operation Desert Storm." As Susan Jeffords remarks in her thought-provoking afterword, the Gulf War achieved an "efficient and pervasive intermingling of the production of warfare and the reproduction of US social culture. . . . Such a process necessitated . . . not only the reconfiguration of Iraqi bodies as absent but the reconstruction of US bodies as carriers and purveyors of the technological death-world. This is one of the reasons for the reconstruction of the military body as both female (in the many images of female soldiers that became popular during the war) and familial (as mothers went to war), simultaneously distancing the family from and inserting the family into the death-world through the presence of the

life giving mother" (304-05). We are reminded that in analyzing mediatized constructions of the Gulf War, we must not lose sight of war's empirical reality, which — although displaced — is to inflict pain and suffering on the bodies of the enemy (see in particular Margot Norris's excellent discussion of censorship and the body count). And while cultural critics (most notably Jeffords) have shown how pre-Gulf War popular texts revised the Vietnam War as a victory and negotiated the "crisis of masculinity," the Gulf War was an atrocious and deadly attempt to realize these fictional revisions. In short, the relentless pounding and complete destruction of Iraq's infrastructure — which is still killing thousands of civilians — was largely fought in the name of overcoming, once and for all, an emasculated cultural psyche haunted by the memory of Vietnam.

What *Seeing Through the Media* shows us, then, is that sitcoms and soap operas can kill, and that scholarly critique and an informed pedagogy are crucial in combating our complicity as spectators with the violently gendered, telegenic death-world. And while there is certainly room for disagreement with individual essays in this volume, taken together, they demonstrate that the Persian Gulf War provides a rich site for thinking through current theoretical debates in television studies, particularly for those who foreground questions of gender, race, and the body in their teaching and writing.

*Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Music*  
Caryl Flinn

Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992. 195 pp.

Corey K. Creekmur

Caryl Flinn begins her study of Hollywood film music by finally retiring an overworked rhetorical gesture: it has been *de rigueur* for critics to decry the neglect of the topic in their opening pages, thereby heralding their own unprecedented arrival. With the shelf of books on film sound and music expanding rapidly (given the efforts of Rick Altman, Michel Chion, Claudia Gorbman, and Kathryn Kalinak, in addition to studies of individual Hollywood composers), Flinn recognizes that such self-justifications have themselves become comically unjustifiable: she is one of the first critics of film music to acknowledge a significant body of work surrounding her topic and to fully address that work as a central component of her study. In fact, al-