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Review of Fawaz, Queer Forms

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Fawaz, Ramzi. *Queer Forms*. New York: New York University Press, 2022. 464 pp. \$30.00 (hardcover) ISBN-13: 978-1-479-82073-3.

Reviewed by Axelle Demus, York University, Toronto, Canada.

"Not every form is a distinctly queer one, but it could be, with the right imagination," Ramzi Fawaz boldly claims in *Queer Forms* (p. 6). Assembling a capacious archive of American cultural forms—from lesbian science fiction and queer graphic novels to gay theater and melodrama—produced from the 1970s to the 1990s, Fawaz's ambitious monograph weaves together history, theory, and popular culture to raise the question: how might we interpret and understand cultural objects that give shape to political ideas about gender and sexual freedom? In doing so, *Queer Forms* reclaims the power of imagination and worldmaking so dear to feminists and gay liberationists, mapping a path forward for movements dedicated to gender and sexual freedom.

A primary concern of the book is the author's dissatisfaction with contemporary revisitations of the 1970s movements for women's and gay liberation. These revisionist approaches, Fawaz tells us, disavow these two movements' radical potential in favour of privileging narratives that not only theorize women's and gay liberation as distinct entities, but as retrograde political interventions whose ideas need to be contained to the past. Against these accusations, Fawaz portrays the 1970s as an immensely generative decade, during which the movements for women's and gay liberation mutually influenced one another and produced a variety of ground-breaking political ideas and cultural forms. In arguing that we should understand these movements, as, in Anne Snitow's term from *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary* (Duke University Press, 2015), "zones of invention," *Queer Forms* pushes its readers to draw from the 1970s and keep inventing ways to relate to one another—politically, socially, and culturally.

Fawaz meticulously analyzes different feminist and queer cultural forms produced at a time when women and gay liberationists were testing out new ideas such as equality, difference, separatism, consciousness raising, and coming out of the closet. In investigating the ways in which such concepts were translated to mass audiences through popular culture, Fawaz simultaneously writes a history of various media—cinema, television, literature, theater—and of their innovative experimentations with form and content from the 1970s to the 1990s. *Queer Forms*, however, refrains from exhaustively surveying queer and feminist popular culture; rather, Fawaz’s eclectic and idiosyncratic archive of media forms is composed of overtly queer and feminist cultural artifacts such as Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975), Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band* (1970), Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1989-1991), and Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (1983), as well as queer-coded ones like John Boorman’s *Zardoz* (1974) and Ridley Scott’s *Thelma & Louise* (1991).

Through the study of each of these forms, Fawaz’s analysis gives life to a number of figures and shapes: the female replicant, the bounded enclave, the circle, the serial, the digestive system. The imaginative readings that make up the book’s six chapters skillfully demonstrate how these queer forms can “collide[] with the desires, aspirations, and attachments of individual readers and viewers” (p. 27). Fawaz’s chapter on Armistead’s Maupin’s *Tales of the City* and its examination of the serial form of installment fiction as a framework for articulating the gay liberationist political strategy of “coming out of the closet” is a particularly strong example of Fawaz’s compelling proposition that any cultural form can be inhabited by and exhibit elements of queerness (p. 197-245). Queer forms, then, are not fixed but infinite, and Fawaz’s book provides its readers with a blueprint for interpreting a variety of media and cultural objects.

At the same time, because such interpretations are deeply linked to the affective attachments of their readers, the book’s strongest claim—that not every form is a distinctly queer one but could be, with the right imagination—is also, perhaps purposefully, one of its weaknesses, as Fawaz’s subjective analysis opens itself up to conflicting and perhaps wholly contradictory interpretations. For instance, his understanding of the cult Sci-fi film *Zardoz* as an allegory for the logic of lesbian separatism may seem rather contrived at times. Still, the book is a deeply personal and beautifully crafted love letter from Fawaz to the movements for women’s and gay liberation and their cultural manifestations, which encourages others to invest, affectively and politically, in a multitude of queer cultural forms—even if these investments may look different from one individual, or group, to another.

Affect similarly drives Fawaz's theoretical position. *Queer Forms* makes a timely and bold intervention in the field of queer theory, as Fawaz's simultaneous frustration with and admiration of the field leads him to question the direction the discipline has taken, as well as the ways in which contemporary claims to fluidity have become rigid and identity-based—the very things queer theory seemingly seeks to reject. By introducing shapeshifting as a productive metaphor against formlessness's failings, Fawaz not only endeavors to address theoretical pitfalls within the field of queer studies, but to resurrect the ghost of 1970s feminism and gay liberation and integrate its worldmaking impulses within current theoretical assumptions. Fawaz's book is an invigorating plea to understand and learn from for some, and to remember and acknowledge for others.

Fawaz simultaneously makes a significant contribution to the fields of media history, media studies, and popular culture studies as he mobilizes media and cultural objects to investigate women's and gay liberation's process of translating their ideas to mass audiences. *Queer Forms'* desire to rehabilitate the radical potential of women's and gay and lesbian liberation nicely complements recent interdisciplinary contributions to the field of queer and media studies that, too, trace the genealogy of contemporary feminist, queer, and trans cultural politics—such as Rox Samer's *Lesbian Potentiality and Feminist Media in the 1970s* (Duke University Press, 2022) and Cait McKinney's *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Duke University Press, 2020).

Queer Forms offers an original and powerful method of interpretation for the archive Fawaz has compiled, which “treats forms as enabling structures or shapes that powerfully articulate queer genders and sexualities, rather than disciplining or ‘straightening’ them” (p. 37-38). This innovative method, which Fawaz names “queer formalism,” allows the author to demonstrate how his archive effectively contains traces of women's and gay liberation. The book's exhortation to think through the *potential* of women's and gay liberation's cultural objects rather than obsessively focus on their failures makes *Queer Forms* a refreshing methodological intervention which offers a model of accountability that registers the complexity of history, social movements, media artefacts, and, ultimately, of human beings. Fawaz's call to treat cultural representations “as if they were our friends” (p. 344) is at once a call to be in dialogue with media forms and a testament to the power he attributes to imagination as a political and cultural force.

Queer Forms also contains a palpable sense of urgency as the author encourages his readers to “keep taking shape, learn to shapeshift with style, clear space for others to do the same, and never stop” (p. 366). Overall, Fawaz's book is a superb piece of scholarship

of interdisciplinary scope which offers fascinating insights into the many ways in which gender and sexual freedom have been imagined and have yet to take shape. It is also a moving tribute to theorists, activists, and artists whom Fawaz feels a strong connection to, and whose work he generously shares with his readers. *Queer Forms* is a deeply affective, provocative, and regenerative work, which puts queer futures in conversation with queer pasts and affirms the importance of playfulness and imagination in our queer present.