

Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century. By *Scott Bukatman*. Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 2003. 296 pp. ISBN 0822331195 (pbk.).

Musical films, superheroes, the sublime, morphing, science fiction, special effects, and amusement parks may seem like an eclectic array of subjects ill suited to a single collection of essays, but in his preface and introduction Scott Bukatman artfully sums up their connection—gravity. The heavy sense of gravity that has been delivered courtesy of September 11 and its aftermath for Bukatman shines light on the importance of weightlessness, of buoyancy, of flight, and of play. In his assembling of eight essays written between 1991 and 2000, the author brings together a series of diverse but complementary works that, while differing in content, approach, and tone, work together not only cohesively but artistically as well.

In *Matters of Gravity*, each chapter examines, in a distinct manner, the body, its environment, and some aspect of gravity. However, though all the essays do carry these conceptual threads, their unique origins in varying journals and collections ensure that they are by no means homogenous. Many chapters, including “The Artificial Infinite” and “Taking Shape,” are written in a scholarly manner and originally intended for academic texts. “X-Bodies” is much less academic, as evinced by the inclusion of juvenile references to “my dick” and superfluous detail on the author’s escapades in the study of superheroes and was originally intended for a testimonial book. Still, the essays each add vibrancy as well as solidity to the argument of the other. Read together, “Syncopated Cities” and “The Boys in the Hoods” make the relation between musical films and superheroes apparent. Unfortunately, as the essays were written without any knowledge of this future collection, there is at times redundancy. For example, while “The Artificial Infinite” and “The Ultimate Trip” serve to develop Bukatman’s various views on special effects, there is overlap. Nevertheless, the overall effect is that the reader sometimes wonders at how Bukatman managed to form such a cohesive unity with these essays, considering their diverse origins.

The book is organized into three sections, which explore a) the enduring logic of the body even in a world of technology, b) the connotations of the movement of the body through technology and the mediated gaze, and c) the relation between idealized performances of the body and the culture of technology. Each essay contains some element of the body, the self, and their spaces, usually the city or a constructed environment. However, these imposed distinctions between essays do at times feel arbitrary. For instance, “The Artificial Infinite” and “The Ultimate Trip” do work together in the section “Kaleidoscopic Perceptions,” functioning to support and supplement the other’s perspective on special effects. In contrast, the section “Remembering Cyberspace” is slightly fragmented. It is indeed a stretch to see the links between the body and the environment explorations of “There’s Always . . . Tomorrowland” and “X-Bodies,” and the historical irony of the typewriter in “Gibson’s Typewriter.” Nevertheless, “The Grace of Beings” is a section in which Bukatman firmly hits the mark. The fluidity of morphing in “Taking Shape,” the volatility of the body in musical films in “Syncopated City,” and the secret identities of superheroes in “The Boys in the Hoods” form a solid, fascinating argument on the negotiation of the bodied, the disembodied, and the spaces they inhabit.

Another structural question arises from the author’s frequent tendency to divide his essays with subtitles. While at times these subtitles work to introduce a fresh argument or perspective, in other essays they seem to stand in for transitional phrases, causing fragmentation. (This can be seen in “There’s Always . . . Tomorrowland,” where the 18-page argument is fractured by 13 subtitles.) While Bukatman’s subtitles function better in “Taking Shape” and “X-Bodies,” they weaken “Syncopated City,” where they capriciously interrupt the excellent argument and serve to splinter its unity.

Matters of Gravity is enhanced by copious endnotes and quotes, evidence that provides Bukatman's fiery and breathless prose with impressive substantiation. His many secondary sources, ranging from academic references such as de Certeau, Nietzsche, and Kracauer to authors and comic book writers, consistently serve to validate his experiences, textual analyses, and observations. One glaringly absent detail is a farewell on parallel with Bukatman's fine preface and eloquent introduction. With the at times tenuous links between each essay, this collection would have been well served by a final assertion of the importance of this assortment of topics and the thread that connects these flights of fancy.

Whatever his structural difficulties, Bukatman's arguments and his style of writing are both tightly effective. A lovely element of Bukatman's work is how he turns to texts as evidence without assumptions of previous familiarity. His descriptions of luminism in "The Artificial Infinite," of jazz in "Syncopated City," and of the music video *Weapon of Choice* in his introduction not only give the reader access to his subject if they have no prior knowledge, but also paint a fabulously rich portrait in their minds, usually with the assistance of meticulously captioned illustrations and glossy pictures.

One way Bukatman could have strengthened his arguments is with the addition of historical context in his pieces. He does this very well in "Syncopated City" and "Gibson's Typewriter," and less well in "The Artificial Infinite," where he introduces the concept of luminism with a profound sense of history only to lose it when he brings in the discussion of technology. Other essays, such as "There's Always . . . Tomorrowland" and "Taking Shape," have even less historical background, leaving the reader wondering sometimes where real people fit into these descriptions of the body.

Of course, Bukatman's essays are quite dense as they are. Indeed, he frequently touches on a subject before proceeding onto another, leaving the reader wishing for more of his evocative analyses. It does seem at times that these essays could provide enough fodder for a book in themselves. A case in point is "Syncopated City," which makes a fine argument but does not fully exploit the richness of the subject of the body and the city in musical films.

Part of Bukatman's charm is his admittedly autobiographical approach. Each text is dotted with confessions of his ongoing clashes in academia, his life-long love of superheroes, and his battle with his subjects (for instance, his indecision and an analysis of it on the topic of morphing in "Taking Shape"). This autobiographical element is tempered in almost all cases (except for "X-Bodies") by an enthusiastic but detached analysis. Fortunately, his arguments are powered rather than tainted by his passion. Indeed, Bukatman's magic is not simply in his lustrous pictures and fun subjects, but in his lively, colourful, and powerful writing. His pace is always exhilaratingly fast, and his choice of adjectives and verbs is always shaped by his subject. (In his essay on morphing, elements twist and pulse and swirl.) Still, while beautiful, Bukatman's prose is quick and impenetrable, and usually too conceptual to be deemed accessible.

Bukatman in his preface refers to his at-times tenuous position in the "academy." Upon reading his material, the reader sees past his light-hearted self-mocking and subjects of fantasy into the heart and mind of a peerless, powerful thinker. In *Matters of Gravity*, the seriousness of popular culture is revealed. In Bukatman, we have found a substantial voice in the realms that were once not matters of gravity.

Alison Harvey
Concordia University