Shimmering images: on transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics
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Shimmering Images:
On Transgender Embodiment and Cinematic Aesthetics

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aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
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prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom
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In one continuous motion, my idea of myself and who I am turns inside out, like a pond that flips upside down in the spring, when the cold winter water slides under, and the earth-warmed bottom water rises. The underlife comes to the surface. All those years I was no obedient asexual girl, but a restless lover searching for the lost garden, that place of male woman and female man. The mythic place before the Fall, before Adam was shaped from clay by Lilith, and Lilith chased out and forgotten, before Eve was torn from Adam’s side and forced to like down under him. From the beginning I have wanted you. I have wanted to sit beside you on our bed, touch you, feed you the jewels of pomegranate torn from the flesh of our lives. I have wanted to walk with you in that place where we are both at once, to lie down with you under the trees that have not yet begun to flame with the dividing sword, by the water that shimmers with heat rising, risen to the light.

Minnie Bruce Pratt, s/he, p. 104

Cinema’s greatest power may be its ability to evacuate meanings and identities, to proliferate resemblances without sense or origin. … There is no structuring lack, no primordial division, but a continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my own body and the appearances and disappearances, the mutations and perdurances, of the bodies and images on screen. The important distinction is not the hierarchical, binary one between bodies and images, or between the real and its representations. It is rather a question of discerning multiple and continually varying interactions among what can be defined indifferently as bodies and as images: degrees of stillness and motion, of action and passion, of clutter and emptiness, of light and dark.

Steven Shaviro, The Cinematic Body, p. 255-256
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Preface

In the course of researching this dissertation I spent time with a colorful variety of groups and individuals amassing as well as discussing an archive of trans erotic film and video. I visited Hamburg for the ever-friendly and helpful “Bildwechsel,” a feminist arts and culture archive, and spent many happy hours watching hard to find tapes in Berlin’s “Sexclusivitäten Salon,” hosted by Laura Méritt. I also attended the first Berlin Porn Film Festival and presented at the second, where trans porn was screened in its own program and Buck Angel made a cameo. I travelled to Manchester’s “Get Bent! Queer Festival” with my carefully selected clips of trans sexual representation to organize a workshop. My own and others’ programming of trans porn and documentaries that addressed trans sexuality appeared in festivals, large and DIY, from the late 1990s to now. My video projects on visualizing trans eroticism (2003, 2005, 2008) travelled on their own from The Netherlands Transgender Film Festival to San Francisco’s Tranyfest, New York’s MIX Queer Experimental Film Festival, Philadelphia, Hamburg, Brussels, and so on.

The growing network I established in interactions, personal and digital, demonstrated to me that this topic was of vital interest to people whose self-image was often for the first time projected as sexy rather than as a fetish category to the general public. My academic training in feminism, sexuality, and film theory shaped my view on this sex-positive revolution in the transgender community as also being of vital interest to the scholarship grappling with the transgender provocation. Since the early 1990s, trans scholars have fought to claim space in academia, particularly in disciplines that allegedly specialize in trans phenomenon such as sexology, clinical medicine, sociology and increasingly in cultural studies and philosophy. What might this material, so preoccupied with themes of representation, sexuality, and gender, have to say to those academic fields that pretend to be the thinkers of such matters?

Early on, one of the project’s crucial moments of formation occurred during the heat of August 2004, inside a dusty artist studio in Brooklyn. I sat with multi-media artist Tobaron Waxman pouring over a personally assembled video and film collection. Tobaron and I were preparing a presentation on what we were calling the FtM erotic archive, or “GenderfluXXXors Uncoded: A FTM Supornova,” for short. It was a mouthful, but we hoped to raise awareness in the breadth of imagery that spoke of, or struggled with the desire for trans eroticism. The emphasis on female-to-male
transsexuals or transmasculine characters sought to counter the assumption of active trans people as only male-to-female and limited to the commercial porn industry’s “chicks with dicks.” Our presentation, with myself beamed in from Amsterdam, was held in a community garden in Manhattan’s East Village as a part of their experimental cinema programming.

Tobaron suggested the archive include films like *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Salmonberries* (1991), *Yentl* (1983), *Liquid Sky* (1983), *Victor/Victoria* (1982), and *Desperate Living* (1977). In a few months of intensive researching I sought to catch up with his roving-eye, which had already been searching out moments of desirous transmasculinity for most of his life. My sensitivity to transmasculinity was more recently activated, and had focused on the boom in self-produced sexually explicit material. Most surprising to me, however, was his ‘prologue’ for the archive, a well-known musical, the 1961 film version of *The West Side Story*. This film in particular suggested that our project raised problems of erotic visibility both specific to and beyond transgender bodies.

*West Side Story* features the character Anybodys, who wants to be in the Jets gang composed of white youth, the fierce rivals of the Sharks who are all Puerto Rican. Gangs are made up of boys and their girls. Anybodys wants to be accepted as one of the boys, but is rejected throughout the film and told to “put on a skirt.” The phrase tells Anybodys that she can only be a Jet if she tries to be one of the girls. The script describes Anybodys as a tomboy, a girl who refuses to express female identification. For this refusal and for expressing a cross-gender identification Anybodys is called a “freak.” In the character of Anybodys, we can find anybody and nobody: everyone and no one. Any and all bodies are subject to the enforcement of a normative gender expression in alignment with their sex. Any body that cannot or does not have a recognizable gender expression as a boy or a girl becomes a no body, a presumably inconsequential body within the social scene. Moreover, this social scene of gangs organizes around a heterosexual scheme of boys and their girls. Where might a tomboy body fit into this erotic script?

But at a crucial point in the film, the character Anybodys is consequential because of what she, or perhaps I should say he, knows. The gang’s fighting has escalated and the leader of the Jets named Tony has disappeared to hide from his crime. Everyone wants to find him and find out what he will do next, but he could be anywhere in the boroughs of New York City, a needle in a haystack. The Jets gang is
walking through the dark streets trying to figure out how to find their leader. Lacking a socially normative body, Anybodys says that s/he slips in and out of the shadows, “like wind through a fence.” Tobaron pointed out, only this transgender character can move between the barriers erected between the territories of the rival gangs to see and hear things others cannot. Stretching back to the Greek character Tiresias, gender ambiguous and gender-changing figures are often the “knowers” of special secrets. Anybodys might be understood as another one of these fictional invocations connecting transgenderism with special knowledge. When a gang member says, “Ah, what’s the freak know,” Anybodys retorts, “plenty.”

As a special agent for the Jets, Anybodys becomes more important to them, indicated in one scene by Anybodys becoming more visible, moving from the darkness behind the gang, yelling, “hey buddy boys!” to the side, hissing “listen listen!” Finally, Anybodys arrives at the center of the group, and under the bright studio lights delivers the news that Chino of the Sharks has a gun. The gang takes in this vital knowledge and goes to search for Tony in places like the docks and the schoolyard, whereas the new leader Ice tells Anybodys to go back to darting in and out of the shadows. From start to the finish, this scene associates Anybodys with shadows. Living in the shadows, however, does not mean Anybodys is invisible to all. Ice alone seems to be able to acknowledge Anybodys: he says, “you done good, buddy boy,” rhetorically making Anybodys one of the buddy boys he, or she, wants to be. This validation includes Anybodys in the Jets gang and perhaps more importantly in the social gang of boys. Anybodys wistfully responds, “Thanks Daddio.” A quiet exchange that speaks volumes, this is the only point in the script that Anybodys is not denigrated, the one time that she, or he, is acknowledged with a smile.

This fragment haunted Tobaron for decades, and now me for the entirety of the project. Strained as it may be, Anybodys’ desire for sameness, to be one of them, seems to tip over into a homosexual desire signaled by the daddy-boy roles. Out of frustration, I had to ask, why is it so hard to ‘see’ Anybodys as an erotic being? Slipping in and out of shadows Anybodys moves into darkness and out of light, becoming a shimmer of a body, difficult to grasp perceptually and, as the film suggests, as a known entity. This dissertation has attempted to understand the difficulties and potential benefits that are posed by Anybodys darting movements. In these pages, I offer a theory of the shimmering image that Anybodys forms in the film;
anybodys, who becomes Somebody to those like myself, who desire to see what seems inscrutable to others.
Introduction

The cover image I selected for my dissertation, entitled “Chimera” (2007), by multi-media artist Tobaron Waxman, helps introduce the main theoretical motivations for this project. The title suggests the image should be understood as a mythological figure, or at least as a contemporary comment on such a figure. Historically, a chimera is the monstrous fusion of parts from a lion, snake, and hawk; however, in popular culture the chimera has come to connote foolish and ridiculous fantasies.

The widespread arms of the figure in Waxman’s underwater photograph suggest a beastly combination of bird and fish. The foreshortened framing that breaks one’s view of the figure’s body, cropping one eye, the left arm, and everything down from the torso, emphasizes the other, missing parts of the figure -- perhaps parts that might be unexpected were they to move into the frame. The ambiguity extends to the scars that, though closest to the viewer, are out of focus. Rather than a born chimera, this one seems to have been created. The question then becomes by whom and through what means? The photograph thus investigates agency as well as perception.

Furthermore, by placing the figure into an ‘otherworldly’ environment, it displaces while recalling the earthly realm. The underwater figure threatens to erupt towards the surface, towards the shimmering sunlight. Or, alternatively, it is looking down
towards the viewer. Its hovering movement stilled in the shot, is the chimera moving
towards, or fleeing from, the viewer?

The undecidability of motion introduces tension in the image’s suspended
narrative, while the undecidability of form suspends the viewer’s making sense of the
figure’s gender. Aware of one’s troubled sight, being chimerical shifts from the
figure’s body to the viewer’s perception of that body. In other words, the
contemporary notion of seeing a fantastic figure redirects the historical sense of a
monstrosity. Amending the idiom of “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” “Chimera”
suggests that monstrosity arises from cultural norms, which produce or distort
perception.

In the introduction to Herculine Barbin, the memoirs of a ‘hermaphrodite,’
Michel Foucault comments on the emerging social perception of monstrous and
foolish embodiments, which he traces from early modernity onward. Particularly
changes of sex or multiple sexes increasingly become considered as “insulting to ‘the
truth’” (x). The ideal form of sex as singular became equated with truth. A manner of
acting that involved more than one sex or its expression, he writes, was not considered
“adequate to reality,” and is henceforth “seen as belonging more or less to the realm
of chimeras” (x).1 The figure that embodies chimerical ridiculousness in both
Foucault’s analysis and Waxman’s photograph is the transsexual.2 In “Chimera,” the
figure bears the markings of a key female-to-male transsexual procedure:
reconstructive chest surgery. Hence, the photograph suggests that gender coherence,
and the potential for gender confusion through transitioning or non-normative
expression, is of ontological as well as epistemological consequence.3

1 In Chapter One, I return to this passage in Foucault to discuss the play of truth and falsity in the
telling of sexual secrets.
2 Though it is not appropriate here to explain in detail, Foucault’s study of Barbin’s conjectured
hermaphroditism recalls and to an extent reproduces the early entanglements of inversion theory
relying on the notion of physical and psychic hermaphroditism that enfolds sexological histories of
both transsexuality and homosexuality. I elaborate further in Chapter One. See also Merl Storr and Jay
Prosser’s comments in Sexology Uncensored (75-77).
3 The terms transgender, transsexual, and trans will come under discussion throughout the study. In
brief, “transgender” came to function in the early 1990s as an umbrella term for all types of non-
normative expressions of gender or sexed embodiment, including transsexual, transvestite, drag queen
or king, and genderqueer. It can also refer to someone who changes his or her expression of everyday
gender through the manipulation of non-genital signs (See Virginia Prince: Pioneer of Transgendering).
To mark the distinction between the term as inclusive or exclusive, I occasionally use ‘trans’ as the
umbrella term to refer to the larger field of gender variance. Since this term can also carry a conceptual
connotation it often appears as trans subject or trans subjectivity. My working definition of
“transsexualism” is that it is a condition diagnosable for someone who has a gender identity – their
sense of maleness and femaleness – that differs from their anatomical sex. The clash may cause such
emotional pain that the person seeks gender (sex) reassignment, often resulting in permanent changes
“Chimera,” I wish to suggest, engages history and contemporary culture, issues of subjectivity and knowledge, the visual and the affective. That engagement is characteristic of the different cultural objects I engage with in the course of this dissertation. My corpus mainly comprises of mainstream and alternative erotic film and video, in which transgender embodiment is intimately at stake. Primarily created by transgender artists or allies, the audio-visual works mobilize cinema’s capacity for depicting movement to a spectator, for animating its subject, and for creating a new aesthetic form out of piecemeal parts. Hence, these images may be understood in part to respond to the overarching notion of transsexuality as a chimerical embodiment. In this way, they can help us work towards developing a theoretical framework that adequately addresses trans embodiment and sexuality. In addition, the inclusion of trans challenges to film and embodiment theory presents an opportunity to the fields of epistemology and ontology to develop and refine their relationship to one another. Each chapter advances theoretical pathways in which one might understand the interrelation of being and knowing, particularly through the rubrics of sex, gender, and sexuality.

These works help me to reflect on salient themes arising from the individual and social perception of trans subjectivity, especially when the subject’s body is displayed in an erotic or sexually explicit manner. “Chimera” reveals a bare chest and hints at further nudity. The image directs our attention to skin, fleshy parts, and scars. I select films with sexually explicit content, imagery in which the trans body risks becoming uncovered and being misperceived, to examine negotiations between the entering of the field of gender representation, the desire for recognition, and the risk of abjection. My contention is that these works of (self)representation shift the discussion of transgenderism as concerning sex and gender primarily or exclusively. My research focuses on the ways in which the presentation of one’s material self may be thought of in terms of experimenting with formal elements of embodiment, which may -- or indeed may not -- be inscribed within gender signification. This approach also enables the juxtaposition of film and transgender studies through the shared concept of the image, perceived and made meaningful within one’s embodied perspective. The

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to genitalia and other gender markers. “Transman” designates a masculine cross-identification and “transwomen” a feminine cross-identification. See Susan Stryker’s “The Transgender Issue: An Introduction” and Transgender History or Stephen Whittle’s The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities. For a brief overview see Roz Kaveney’s “Why trans is in and tranny is out.”
selected corpus suggests and clarifies the import of a shimmering quality, which is associated in key theoretical and artistic texts with both cinematic images and the body images of trans subjects. Though I suggest a specified trans subjectivity, shimmering images form and inform a contested field of knowability that bears on subjectivity more broadly.

**Differencing Transgender Studies**

As an opening image, “Chimera” recalls the most common (mis)perception of transsexual people: the hybrid figure suspended between light and dark, man and woman, truth and falsity. “Chimera” pictures the difficulty of perceiving a being that shimmers, oscillating between lightness and darkness, masculinity and femininity, wavering in time and space. As Foucault clarifies, the ontological suspension of the body incites an epistemological crisis of truth. In taking these ontologies of transgender embodiment seriously – that is, not writing transgender off as mere interruption --, this ‘crisis’ of truth appears less a deviation, than another kind of knowing that calls forth a new epistemology. Beyond assessing the various blocks to perception with the aid of theorists such as Marx, Freud, and Walter Benjamin, I also seek to elaborate a trans-informed model of knowing. These theoretical paradigms are not borrowed and returned in pristine condition; the cultural objects and trans theory also imprint and challenge each framework which with they engage.

Therefore, these representational objects and practices effectively direct my study’s investigation of “transgender effects,” the perceptions that are, in Stryker’s words, “the conditions that cause transgender phenomena to stand out in the first place, and that allow gender normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed, ambient background” (“(De)Subjugated” 3). Rather than solely focus on the notion of transgender itself, a focus that might over-emphasize the difference of being trans, my analysis seeks to examine transgender effects because, in Stryker’s words, “these phenomena reveal the operations of systems and institutions that simultaneously produce various possibilities of viable personhood and eliminate others” (“(De)Subjugated” 3-4).

Rita Felski argues in “Fin de siècle, Fin de sexe: Transsexuality, Postmodernism, and the Death of History” that the undecidability of sexual or gendered suspension insures that the figure of the transsexual serves as a metaphor for cultural crisis in
general. Though the epigram “fin de siècle, fin de sexe” derives from the late nineteenth century, Felski argues that, from within the pre-millennium postmodern moment, “gender emerges as a privileged symbolic field for the articulation of diverse fashionings of history and time” (338). The transgendered subject she finds in the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Donna Haraway, for instance, is marked by an alliance with either an apocalyptic or redemptive metaphor for historical time. Whatever meaning its bellwether existence suggests to its interpreter, the “fin de sexe” of transgender, like its mythic cousin the chimera, serves to symbolize something else.

In Sandy Stone’s early evaluation of transgenderism in medical and cultural scholarship, she surmises, “[t]he people who have no voice in this theorizing are the transsexuals themselves” (“The Empire” 229). Stating the matter more dramatically, Vivian Namaste argues in Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People that particularly queer theory is devoid of attention to transgender subjectivity, even though its figuration of queerness privileges a trans figure. Namaste argues that the effective erasure of transgendered people’s everyday lives and struggles through the reduction of transsexuality to allegory (Butler) or a mere tropological figure (Garber) “robs transgendered people of dignity and integrity” (23). Moreover, those ‘theoretical’ appropriations foreclose the ability to conceptualize the ‘real’ violence that transsexuals face (13). For Stone and Namaste, the theoretical appearance of “the transsexual” signals a cultural fantasy of mythological proportions, installed at the expense of insight into the range of transgender practices and subcultural groupings, including their differentiated struggles.

My contribution, though not sociological, is similarly concerned with the theoretical capture of trans subjectivities and transformative practices. Rather than turn to first-hand experiences, however, I choose to examine a variety of cultural

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4 Similarly, in Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, Marjorie Garber examines the recurrent fascination with cross-dressing and other trans practices as emblems of cultural anxiety with regard to sexual difference, which she attributes to homophobia.

5 Though Felski establishes this symbolic work on the part of transgendered figures, she herself does not offer the kind of theorizing that would do justice to the agency of trans people. Garber produces a similar reading of cultural anxiety that disregards the meaning attributed by transgender people to transitioning or non-normative gender practices.

6 Kate More and Stephen Whittle’s co-edited Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the fin de siècle offers a trans-informed perspective of the state of gender at the millennium juncture, see especially each of their introductions.
productions that enter the discussion between subject, cultural discourse, and theory. My cultural framing challenges each ‘speaker’ in the encounter -- including myself -- to take seriously the concerns voiced by and dealt with in commercial, independent, museum, and community-minded artistic projects. My hope is that the research better reflects the combined wishes and struggles of the object under study, de-centering theory via equal attention to the subject as well as the object, and adjusting a dominance that has come under particular scrutiny when that object of study is transgenderism.

Pragmatically and prudently, Susan Stryker distinguishes between “the study of transgender phenomena” and the field of “transgender studies” (“(De)Subjugated” 12). The former was initially comprised of the immense body of clinical literature that constructed transgender phenomena as a pathology, dating back to the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. As Felski, Stone, Stryker, and Namaste all make clear, the attitude of speaking on behalf of trans peoples can be identified in different disciplines. A change in speaker as well as a change in the object of analysis distinguishes transgender studies scholarship from sexological, philosophical, and cultural studies frameworks. My approach seeks to legitimate the experiential knowledge that is presented in transgender accounts and representations. Yet, I also seek to avoid the naive realism that comes with pure description and the naive

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7 Today it also includes the literature leading up to and following the 1980 diagnosis of “gender identity disorder” (GID), which appeared in the Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the standard text for describing through differential diagnosis current known pathologies. The defining features of GID refer to what was commonly seen as transsexualism: a persistent cross-gender identification and a persistent discomfort with or sense of inappropriateness of one’s sex as assigned at birth. For a discussion of whether transgender is best classified as a medical or a psychiatric illness, see “Transgender as Mental Illness: Nosology, Social Justice, and the Tarnished Golden Mean” by R. Nick Gorton.

8 One can also cite fields such as anthropology and sociology as negligent of trans-informed theoretical frameworks. For such critiques, see for example, David Valentine’s Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category, Aren Z. Aizura’s “Of borders and homes: the imaginary community of (trans)sexual citizenship” and Katrina Roen “Transgender Theory and Embodiment: The Risk of Racial Marginalisation.” For a broader analysis, consider the article by Dean Spade and Sel Wahng “Trans-secting the Academy,” which discusses ways to forge political alliance and mount social change in the trans-phobic university setting.

9 Further, Stryker states in an earlier writing that this new critical field should be “predicated on an explicit recognition of transgendered people as active agents seeking to represent themselves through any number of strategies rather than as passive objects of representation in a few dominant discourses” (“The Transgender Issue” 148). The difference in “transgender studies,” then, is a methodological one in which the subject and object have first say. In this way, transgender studies’ attention to the subject is similar to cultural analysis’ attention to the object. An engaged relationship to cultural objects, according to Bal, involves a commitment to its terms, “to the ways the work solicits its viewer” (“‘You do’” 60). As analysis develops according to the object’s promptings and curtailments, the analyst’s role is to conduct “an encounter in which the object’s specificity can shine,” writes Bal (emphasis in original; “‘You do’” 64).
subjectivism that accompanies self-description.\textsuperscript{10} To borrow Stryker’s
characterization of transgender studies, my project “is as concerned with material
conditions as it is with representational practices, and often pays particular close
attention [to] the interface between the two” (3). Each chapter takes one to three case
studies of film, video, or other artistic works into consideration to work through the
theoretical and aesthetic implications of circumstances, in which specific
embodiments may be difficult to perceive as they are understood as contrary to truth.
Pursuing an interrogation of truth as it hinges on a sexed or gendered being, my
research also discusses the broader framework of Enlightenment empiricism that
invests in the notion of ‘to see is to know,’ a crucially contentious issue in film studies
as well. By pairing transgender practices with practices of film, I am able to suggest
ways in which both aesthetic practices attack and undermine scientific knowledge,
particularly its construction of sex and sexuality that hinges on either discursive or
visual evidence.

My study departs from “Chimera” and its suggestion of seeing oneself seeing
the trans body as a chimerical figure, an awareness that opens towards seeing
differently. It demands an analysis of the material conditions of a vision that takes into
account aesthetic experiences of perception in interaction with the historical
perception of truth. Unlike theories of transgenderism in which the subject is missing
or elided, the photograph places the trans subject front and center; indeed, almost too
close for comfort. Doing so, it refuses to disappear or keep a friendly distance, forcing
the perhaps long overdue confrontation with fleshy materiality. “Chimera” also speaks
of maintaining critical attention to questions of embodiment and positionality, which
Stryker finds in a growing body of interdisciplinary academic research, research
which might be receptive to the insights of transgender studies (“(De)Subjugated” 12).
Finally, “Chimera” suggests that perceptual truth lies not behind, above, or to the side
of an image, in some unmediated materiality, but depends on the working conditions
of adjacent, connected images to come into focus, though that focus may well
shimmer. My intent for this study is to analyze those images that enable others to be
seen. The movement-filled image of shimmering light grants the perceptibility and
recognition of trans bodies.

\textsuperscript{10} For a broader view of this problematic, see Mieke Bal’s discussion of new epistemologies in art
history, cultural anthropology, and museum studies that seek to avoid the authority of ‘objectivism’ and
the potential for ‘subjectivism’ in the activity of description and interpretation, Chapter five: “First
Person, Second Person, Same Person” in Double Exposures: the Subject of Cultural Analysis.
Towards the Shimmering Light

As Stryker predicted, the interdisciplinary nature of research in transgender studies results in “definitional wrangling” over who deploys what terms with what meaning (“The Transgender Issue” 148). This is especially the case with what being transsexual or transgender may mean, or look like. For instance, Henry Rubin’s phenomenological approach focuses on the transsexual’s “desire for coherence and legibility” of the body image, suggesting that the endpoint of transition matters most (“Phenomenology” 273). Yet, Judith Butler summarizes Kate Bornstein’s queer view of transsexual practices as “a desire for transformation itself, a pursuit of identity as a transformative exercise, an example of desire itself as a transformative activity” (Undoin 8). Bornstein advances a theory that emphasizes movement for movement’s sake rather than the desire for conclusion. Seeming to combine the focus on movement and a destination, Zachary Nataf writes that “[f]or at least a period of time, if not as a goal in itself, the transgendered/ transsexual body in transition is unstable, mutating and intermediate in its sex/gender attributes” (“Skin-Flicks” 173).

Transgender studies’ ontological interest lies in accounting for what Brian Massumi has described as the movements between the grid system of identity (Parables 1-4). The “relation of movement and rest,” claims Massumi, “is another way of saying transition” (15). Such relations of movement form the basis of gender transitions, which are usually only thought of in terms of the take-off and landing points of the crossing, as in male-becoming-woman. However, the thing that defines that trans body is not movement, only the beginning and endpoints of movement. I wish to contribute to an understanding of qualitative transformation, and hence potential for change, that lies at the heart of both transgender embodiment and cinematic experience. Just as sex change involves an undertaking of bodily transition, spectators of a film undergo rapid or slow, singular or multiple relations of movement and rest. In both cases, moreover, the subject’s resulting transformation in relation to technologically crafted (body) images may be integral to shifting his or her own identification. As part of my interdisciplinary and inter-medial commitment, I engage critically with select strands of film theory to assess its “gender flexibility,” its ability to account for qualitative transformation rather than with bodies that are distributed on a (sexed) grid. A theory of movement and transformation thus utilizes concepts associated with aesthetics in place of less precise identity terms, such as male/female,
masculine/feminine, man/woman, which fall short of grasping movement and cause “grid lock” (Massumi, Parables 3).

Perhaps the reader will feel similar to Stryker, who exclaims in a moment of frustration, “I’m so tired of this ceaseless movement” (“My Words” 251). A desire for stable identity, to echo Judith Butler, seems crucial to realize a livable life, which requires various degrees of stability and legibility (Undoing 8). The desire for survival, the search for a livable life, as Butler suggests, might involve being undone by gender, in both good and bad ways (1). She writes, “I may feel that without some recognizability [of gender] I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable” (4). The doing of gender, Butler reminds us, is “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (1). A scene involves a social world: one does not “do” gender alone but in concert with or in tension with the socially articulated and thus changeable terms of recognition (1-2). The shifting foundation of trans experience and trans scholarship may be the point; its maneuverability may enable a more livable life. The task of survival -- which involves the embrace of multiple and conflicting terms and desires -- is integral to the transgender lives lived in the face of adversity and struggle. That task is also carried out by scholarship in transgender studies, which emerges as a critique interrogating the terms by which life is constrained and may also be enabled by recognizability.

In “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” Stryker describes the particular suspension from sociality that comes with gender transition.

Like the monster [of Frankenstein], I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (“My Words” 245)

The trans-sexed body transgresses the terms of the human; its mutations render the subject excluded from intelligible humanity. Yet, as Stryker claims, the struggle to exist, to become sexed and gendered through the citation of norms, produces elusive achievements in the midst of the “ceaseless movement” of gender. To abandon the unbearable everyday images of herself -- “self-mutilated deformity, a pervert, a mutant” – the essay turns from theory to the fantastic realm of a waking dream (251).
Stryker’s poetic interlude envisions her struggle in similar terms as Waxman’s “Chimera.” Stryker’s stream of consciousness and formal stanzas offer an extended metaphor of how nature, read: naturalized sex-gender alignment, exerts a hegemonic oppression on her body. The sensation of being trapped in monstrous flesh, she suggests, feels like being trapped underwater. Desperate for air, she swims upwards to the “shimmering light” dancing on the surface, only to find more water: “Inside and out I am surrounded by it” (Stryker 251). Describing the experience in first person narration, Stryker becomes a swimmer caught in the ceaseless motion of gender’s ubiquitous waters. She encounters infinite planes of this shimmering light, caught in an endless mise en abyme: “I break the plane of the water’s surface over and over again” (251). Reaching the shimmering at the edge of the water only pitches the swimmer ever deeper into an abyss of images. The drama of the scene is derived from the swimmer’s desire to survive, while remaining caught within the imagery of gender. Here the shimmering of light proves to be another barrier to, rather than a promise of, survival. It stands for the terms of gender recognition, which both enable and constrain a livable life.

Stryker later introduces an inverted version of the Narcissus myth, in which the image-seeking figure is placed under the cultural waters, drowning (“this water annihilates me” [251]), while Narcissus dies of thirst safely on land for fear of shattering his own image. Deciding to embrace the ‘outside’ image of gender, Stryker writes, “I will become the water/If I cannot change my situation I will change myself” (251). To survive, Stryker’s figure must ‘recognize’ herself again by way of changing herself. The swimmer turns into water to escape the conundrum (251). Like the transsexual’s tentative embrace of gender, Stryker’s swimmer learns to live with the mise-en-abyme of gender, moving furiously through its medium. This “magical transformation” materializes the swimmer as a fluid form, identifying with the mise-en-abyme’s flow across shimmering planes (251). Stryker’s identification with the shimmering surface provides the trans body with a material form, albeit a watery one. She writes, “I am groundless and boundless movement,” now signaling that the swimmer transforms into, no longer merely ‘reflects,’ a shimmering body. If for Stryker, flesh is fluid, that suggests that a transsexual embodiment displaces the opposition between substance and surface. Becoming-flow, the figure demonstrates

11 The term mise-en-abyme refers to the optical illusion of an infinitely receding image repeated within the same image (OED).
that the desire for transformation can be made compatible with one’s desire for coherence.

In another transformation, the water surges, now becoming a wave of rage, a “force that moves me” (252). In the final lines, this drowning scene gives way to a birth, in which sensations and affects beget form: “In birthing my rage,/my rage has rebirthed me” (252). Stryker reflects that, “the rage itself is generated by the subject’s situation,” the situation of becoming severed from representation (252). Language organizes matter so that the transsexual body “simultaneously eludes definitive representation and demands its own perpetual rearticulation in symbolic terms” (252). Thus, in Stryker’s view, the transsexual subject faces the problem of language failing to capture its materiality (253). The poem’s articulation of this rage in a “howl” confronts an empty silence, “in this place without language,” the place and time of the transsexual (252). In response to the trap of language, the swimmer with “transfigured flesh” utilizes her embodiment and its affective potency as an imaging tool for appearing at the surface of legibility. In Stryker’s vision, trans subjects seek representation on their own terms, move toward the shimmering light, and access a plane of representation that at once enables and constrains a livable life.12

Words and Images

William J. T. Mitchell points out that the phrase “word and image” articulates a commonplace distinction between types of representation, “a shorthand way of dividing, mapping, and organizing the field of representation” (Picture Theory 3). The distinction is crucial in Stryker’s appeal to images as recourse to the limitations of language. “The inability of language to represent the transgendered subject’s movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure,” she writes, might be countered by the transsexual’s often successful citation of “the culture’s visual norms of gendered embodiment” (“My Words” 247). This citation becomes subversive for Stryker when, “through a provisional use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we

12 The book Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community also discusses the shimmering quality of visual media, however, author Jennifer Deger does so in relation to aboriginal ontologies of being and their culturally informed modes of perception. In her anthropological study the adjectival term “shimmering” receives no attention as a potential concept in itself. My interdisciplinary purview differs radically in that I mobilize shimmering as the notion that I use to move between, on the one hand, trans corporeality and, on the other, the medium of cinema, as well as between the related disciplines of transgender studies and cinema studies.
nevertheless occupy” (247). Transgender experiences and practices indicate that one’s appearance may cite one gender norm, while the claimed gender identity cites another. As Stryker’s poetry and Waxman’s image in combination with its title make clear, the relation and at times non-relation between word and image forms a central concern for transgender lives. My analysis of transgender representation attends to the particularities of word and image combinations that seek the legibility of what Stryker describes as the “shimmering light.” I particularly focus on those transgender aesthetics that might work to “undo” the images of raving monster and unintelligible chimera.

Therefore, I analyze representative combinations of images and words in visual texts as well as linguistic texts. The image/text problem, as Mitchell is at pains to point out in Picture Theory, is not solely “constructed ‘between’ the arts, the media, or different forms of representation, but [is] an unavoidable issue within the individual arts and media” (94). I am less interested in formal differences and similarities between arts, than in the singularity of the object’s negotiation of visuality and language and its ramifications for (trans)gender representation. The media of the objects that are part of each chapter mainly consist of film and video, but range from photography to sculpture, painting, poetry, memoir, and theory. As in art history and literary studies, Mitchell takes notice of the “[l]ong struggle of film studies to come up with an adequate mediation of linguistic and imagistic models for cinema and to situate the film medium in the larger context of visual culture” (Picture Theory 15). Film is an exemplary “mixed media,” staging a relationship between the visual and the verbal through audio and video tracks. In Gilles Deleuze’s words, “the most complete examples of the disjunction between seeing and speaking are to be found in the cinema” (Foucault 64). I venture that the disjunction of seeing and speaking in the cinema may illuminate the relative disjunction between the transsexual’s seen self and identified self.

Though not explicitly addressed to the transgender context, the literature on the problem of representation may be mobilized to think in new ways about the relation of gender to perception in general. Foucault offers an axiom as a starting point. In

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13 Mitchell proposes following Deleuze’s suggestion of cinema’s potential leading role in understanding and providing a conceptual model for the word and image relation, which he carries out in an analysis of the film Sunset Boulevard (Picture Theory 100-107). For an extended discussion by Deleuze of the relation between speech and vision, sound- and image-tracks, see “The Components of the Image,” in his Cinema 2.
writing on the painter René Magritte, Foucault develops the notion of the incommensurability between what we say and what we see, determining that “it is in vain that we say what we see,” and further that “what we see never resides in what we say” (This is Not a Pipe 9). Mitchell comments that while it may indeed be “in vain” to do so, “no vanity is more common” than the search for proper equivalents; yet, this search is not Foucault’s goal (Picture Theory 64). Foucault’s strategy of starting from an infinite relation between language and vision, Mitchell writes, allows representation to be seen as a dialectical, interactive field of forces (64-65). For trans representations, the desire to link or delink what one sees to what one says may be one way to understand the political and personal stake in representation.

Stryker, for one, suggests that trans scholarly interest should address the “wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages” (“The Transgender Issue” 149). She refers to the ‘links’ that align anatomy, assigned gender category, psychical identifications with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance or expression of gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions (149). With this definition, transgender embodiments may be understood as a field of interactive, dialectical forces. My approach to the problem of words and images is two-fold: to focus on an interdisciplinary method in the study of cinematic and bodily images as well as to anchor this method in an analysis of the power/knowledge nexus that informs the perception and recognition of gender. Each chapter achieves a balance between the consideration of film theory, transgenderism, subjectivity, and epistemology in varying proportions. The resulting intersection of these elements is largely due to the cultural object under consideration: some objects call for heightened attention to certain framing issues.14

Starting in Chapter One, “Secrecy,” I investigate what Foucault has termed the rift between the discursive and the non-discursive, between what Deleuze calls the sayable and the seeable (Foucault 48). The chapter opens up the issues at stake for

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14 To explain more fully the practice of engaging an object’s specificity, Murat Aydemir recalls the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In The Interpretation of Culture, Geertz first uses the term cultural analysis for his research practice, the basis of which he describes as ‘thick description.’ Aydemir writes that “he approaches his objects as densely textured: they don’t reflect contextual givens but condense multiple frames of reference, discursive, social, aesthetic, economic, political, and so on” (“A Reaction” 39). The density of the object “resists full possession by description, contextualization or conceptual articulation,” which is why Aydemir asserts it can never be “just an example” (39). In sum, “objects problematize rather than illustrate” (Aydemir 39). The objects in my analysis transform from a subject matter to become a material subject, participating in the construction of theoretical views: they confront, divert, and elucidate a given disciplinary field as well as a researcher’s interpretation.
transgenderism in terms of a mirror or mimetic theory of knowledge through a search for the secret of (trans)sex in visual forms of \textit{scientia sexualis}. I analyze expository statements cited in the medium of video works, examining a series of three sexually explicit videos that differently negotiate imaging and confessing a ‘real’ sex in the genres of pornography and documentary. In their experimental and artistic modes, the first two videos by Mirah Soliel-Ross, \textit{Tremblement de Chair} (2001) and \textit{Dysfunctional} (1997), contrast with Annie Sprinkle’s commercial \textit{Linda/Les and Annie: The First Transsexual Love Story} (1989). However, in all three, I examine the crack or fissure between what they say of the secret and what one can see of it, particularly whether that fissure is exacerbated, covered, or remains simply at odds.

Despite the apparent antinomy of word and image, my study assesses ways in which one might account for the overlap and imbrication of the visual and the verbal, in short, for aesthetic experience in the “composite” arts. In Chapter Two, “Fetishism,” the economic and political effects of a perceived overlap of word and thing, of value and material, is addressed through a case study of Buck Angel, the first commercial transmasculine porn star. Angel’s provocative embrace of sexual and commodity fetishism prompts a discussion of his popular website as well as the temporality of his participation in having a bronze, life-size statue cast by artist Marc Quinn. Quinn’s recent sculptures suggest that determining one’s embodiment and having access to one’s eroticism and its representation are poignant issues, if not the defining concerns of our age. By taking Angel as my prime example, I also wish to point to the historical “conflation of trans experience with MTF [sic] experience,” as Gayle Salamon rightly notes (\textit{Assuming} 9). This conflation is particularly thorny when it comes to the understanding of trans sexuality as involving only transwomen and their paramours.

Besides those differences between MtF and FtM representation, representation by definition relies on a difference between the thing and its reproduction in an image. Such differences form the problematic of Chapter Three, “Cut,” in which I analyze the soma-cinematic strategies for materializing as well as bridging the abyss between man and woman in Lili Elbe’s account, \textit{Man into Woman: The First Sex Change, A Portrait of Lili Elbe} (1933/2004). Though a literary work, I read it cinematically, paying attention to its editing as if it were the animation of Elbe in a biopic. As the text offers the first modern transsexual “portrait,” my interest lies in the ways in which surgery is mobilized by Elbe to claim an identity as a woman and in the ways
in which this surgical transformation is presented in her book. Elbe’s struggle for representation also involves the struggle to create a work in which she might accede to the reader’s threshold of recognizability. With the aid of Walter Benjamin’s suggestion that cinema takes place in a surgical theatre, I discern the filmic aesthetics that Elbe’s text calls upon for her animation, and their possible effects on the reader.

As Elbe’s text attests, the disjunctions in cinema as well as in identification, underlie, indeed require, forms of connecting over the breach of word and image, a thing and its reflection, an issue which I deal with in Chapter Four, “Suture.” Deleuze holds that “there is a continual relinking which takes place over the irrational break or crack,” a process carried out by both aesthetic experience and artworks, particularly evident in cinema (Foucault 65). Together with Leone Knight’s film The Father is Nothing (1992), I investigate the psychic and material implications of seeking resolution in terms of the literal surgical suture of the body and the psychic process of imaginary identification that Lacan describes as a kind of “suture.” Turning to psychoanalysis might suggest a departure from the bodily realm; however, with the help of Kaja Silverman’s and Maaike Bleeker’s refashioning of psychoanalytical identification to emphasize its bodily basis, this chapter extends the metaphor of cinema as a somatic-surgery.

In the fifth and final chapter, “Curiosity,” I again track an organizing concept of trans experience and filmic aesthetics, this time dealing directly with the desire to know. The experimental, trans-genre film Dandy Dust (1998), directed by and starring Hans Scheirl, is driven by a highly curious and transgender character. The affect of curiosity appears as a force for transitioning both the character and the film’s formats and genre styles. I investigate the ways in which the film’s tactile and sensuous address to the spectator’s body may inform a method of conducting cinematic research. Dandy Dust’s mode of asking what a body can do, or be made to do, posits that the “carnal density of vision” (Crary), that is, the mediated and ideological context of one’s embodiment, may also be central to the mundane task of research encounters. The final section meditates on the phenomenology of knowing, specifically the erotic, fleshy element that Freud names, but disavows to assert an ocularcentric mastery of knowledge. Following Sue Golding, I propose that through curiosity, one gains the ability to think otherwise, a survival technique to access livable epistemological conditions.
To some extent, this dissertation’s attempt to understand the power of images for (trans) subjectivity participates in what Mitchell describes as the “pictorial turn” in contemporary scholarship, following Richard Rorty’s characterization of “the linguistic turn” (*Picture Theory* 11). The emergence of images as a central topic of discussion in the humanities, Mitchell suggests, may be attributed to the growing critique of images in the age of the “spectacle” (Debord), through attention to “surveillance” (Foucault), and of this age’s all-pervasive scene of image-making (13). Mitchell advises that,

> Whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial “presence”: it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figularity. (*Picture Theory* 16)

Specifically for this study, in an era of post-Lacanian film theory and post-performativity gender studies, the apparent bankruptcy of purely linguistic models for film as well as gender studies suggest more reasons for the weighted importance of the image in my dissertation. Furthermore, the complex interplay between visuality, technologies, and bodies in the “picturing” of trans demands an interdisciplinary analysis. Mitchell’s study of images, a kind of applied iconology, assesses that the difference between image and language is not reducible to mere formal matters, addressed in mono-disciplines (*Picture Theory* 5). Rather, the distinction is linked to deeply contested cultural values, “like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing; … between sensory channels, traditions of representation, and modes of experience” (5). The analysis of those differences and their influence on strategies of representing (trans)gender transitional

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15 Mitchell further elaborates the historicity of the turn: “On the one hand, it seems overwhelmingly obvious that the era of video and cybernetic technology, the age of electronic reproduction, has developed new forms of visual stimulation and illusionism with unprecedented powers. On the other hand, the fear of the image, the anxiety that the ‘power of images’ may finally destroy even their creators and manipulators, is as old as image-making itself… *What is specific to our moment is exactly this paradox*” (emphasis mine; *Picture Theory* 15).

16 For various approaches to critiquing psychoanalytical film theory see Steven Shaviro’s *The Cinematic Body*, David Bordwell’s *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, or Patricia MacCormack’s *Cinesexuality*. As for gender studies, Iris van der Tuin’s dissertation “Third Wave Materialism: New Feminist Epistemologies and the Generation of European Women’s Studies” identifies gender scholars Karen Barad, Claire Colebrook, Sara Ahmed as all working in a new paradigm that theorize the co-constitutiveness of words and things, which she designates as new feminist materialism in that it refocuses on the matter and materiality of the body.
movements form the kernel of my study. Each chapter addresses the impact of
self/other, telling/showing, and sense differentiation through concepts culled from
psychoanalysis, phenomenology, affect theory, and cultural history, amongst others.
My working premise is that no single paradigm of image theory can fully explain the
truth-effects of images in relation to culture and changing epistemes. The object’s
specificity and the interest of the inquiry requires an evolving, and therefore changing,
image theory. Each theoretical framework provides a different disciplinary take, but
also offers new possibilities for thinking around and about visuality and its relation to
words and images.

Clearly, then, this dissertation’s study of shimmering images in relation to
transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics should not be understood as
concerned solely with the narrower concepts of vision and visuality. Since image
studies addresses a broader swath than the visual field and to avoid perpetuating the
ideology of ocularcentrism, I employ the term of aesthetics, understood both in the
sense of the formal qualities of visual and verbal images and aesthetic experience. For
my purposes, aesthetics involve perceptual images, the sense data of appearances, but
also the mental images of fantasmata as well as the verbal images of metaphors. Each
chapter engages with a branch of film theory that offers an understanding of
(trans)cinema aesthetics: in “Secrecy,” scholarship on realism in documentary and
pornographic genres are foregrounded; “Fetishism” examines the fantasmatic
elements of pornography; the historicization of media aesthetics features in “Cut;”
“Suture” negotiates Lacanian concepts imported into film theory guided by feminist
film studies; and “Curiosity” focuses on the phenomenological ‘carnal’ body of film
theory and its Freudian resonances.

Lastly, in developing a theory of shimmering images I may appear to call on a
word – shimmering -- that refers to a visual effect. Though shimmering is in the first
instance a visual effect of light, its occurrence in literary and theoretical texts by, for
instance, Stryker, Foucault, Lacan, and Deleuze, as well as featuring in films,
paintings, and photographs, indicates that “shimmering” might be taken as a “hyper-
icon.” Mitchell describes this concept as those images that function in a double sense:
both as an image, and as a producer of images. Hyper-icons like Plato’s cave or

17 See Hal Foster’s introduction to the collection Vision and Visuality for an assessment of the terrain
these terms purport to refer to, namely a natural sense and a culturally-enhanced quality, and the
difficulty of separating one from the other, despite the disciplinary attempts to do so through
psychology and art history, for example.
Locke’s tabula rasa, claims Mitchell, are themselves “‘scenes’ or sites of graphic image-production, as well as verbal or rhetorical images (metaphors, analogies, likenesses)” (Iconology 162). The hyper-iconicity of shimmering, I propose, implies it appears as an image, such as in Stryker’s poetic vision, as well as enable the production of gender images that are central to transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics. Hence, in the following series of chapters, I develop a theory of shimmering images as a hyper-icon, arguing for its ontological role in the constitution of a perceived subject as well as its epistemic function in the production of an intelligible subject.
Chapter One
Secrecy

According to community leader Jamison Green, the vulnerability of transsexuals to secrecy and exposure is especially acute:

It only takes one insensitive or disrespectful attendant or observer, one disgruntled family member or friend to diminish a life by exposing a secret. Surgery does not create a flawless body. Hiding ourselves may serve self-preservation, but it does not address the larger problem of social acceptance, acknowledgment that what we experience is valid. To be believed, we must be seen. (Becoming a Visible Man 172)

A secret suggests hidden content. When secrecy is related to gender, the presumption is that the body has a hidden “true sex” that must be proven. In the case of transsexuality, this translates to a “feeling” that must be made visible. In the current scientific model of the sex-gender system, this visibility is reduced to the supposed “flaw” of the genitals that sex reassignment surgery seeks to change. Yet, as Green points out, even with surgery the transsexual does not fully acquire a natural status, because by definition the transsexual is laboured upon.

In “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” the introduction to The Transgender Studies Reader, Susan Stryker suggests that the central epistemological issue that trans theory should address is the “mirror theory of knowledge” (Frederic Jameson) that relies on a base-and-superstructure paradigm (9). Stryker contends that scientific materialism regards the “matter” of bodily sex as a fundamental source of meaning (a base) that gives rise to the superstructures of gender and subjective gender identity. In this paradigm, the foundational base of sex and the superstructure “are imagined to be strictly, mechanically, mimetic”; in other words, a real thing and its reflection (9). When called upon to reveal their sex-gender, transgender phenomena instead “call into question both the stability of the material referent ‘sex’ and the relationship of that unstable category to the linguistic, social, and psychical categories of ‘gender’” (9). Once exposed as trans, the subject can be considered to make false representations and thus disobey the law of mimeticism, embodying the wilful distortion of surface appearance. The persecution of “false” gender presentation, in which the claim to identity is seen as a lie and the subject as an imposter, renders the
transsexual “bad by definition” (9). What apparently distinguishes transsexuals from other gendered people is the amount of work, concrete and surplus, that turns the resource of the body into a ‘superficial’ product. Being transsexual, one can surmise, involves the burden of a double secret: both the secret of one’s sex and one’s accomplishment of sex.

Michel Foucault asserts in *The History of Sexuality volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* that modern societies can be characterized by the epistemological operation of secrecy, “exploiting” sex “as the secret” (emphasis in original; 35). He is of course referring to sexuality here, but I argue that one meaning of sex cannot be thought separately from the other, though they remain distinct. As a model, however, Foucault’s analysis of sexuality helps to frame my discussion of transsexual “secrets” as Green introduces them. Crucially, the pervasive “will to knowledge” that seeks to uncover and make one confess one’s sexuality also determines whether its discursive productions are true or false. Examining the ways in which secrecy functions as a regime of truth, Foucault offers the hypothesis that the shroud of secrecy gives shape “to the requirement to speak about the matter” as an urgent and necessary revelation (35). In this regard, I submit that pornographic films form a flashpoint between the injunctions to confess one’s true sexuality and to establish an authentic sex; the genre acts as a lighting rod for emergent subjectivities caught by the double bind to confess sex and the impossibility of proving one’s realness.

My approach towards transgender pornography, in which the bodies of trans people are depicted in sexually explicit acts, is to attend to the negotiation of secrecy at the levels of sexuality and gender, bearing in mind the role of “true” representation in securing one’s status as a subject. Through an analysis of a selection of trans pornographic material, I wish to examine the tensions and contradictions within secrecy as an epistemology that entices transsexual subjects to participate in pornographic self-representation. I especially attend to the ways in which trans porn mobilizes generic conventions of realism that enable such displays to address a believing spectator. Green’s axiom of “to be believed, we must be seen” clarifies the incentive to deploy pornographic cinema so that one may become perceptible, perhaps acknowledged, as believable. An examination of realism, the epistemology that

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1 See, for example, Judith Halberstam’s historical analysis of the imposter and passing in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, pp.61-75. For an analysis of the frequency and cause of violence, see Thalia Mae Bettcher’s “‘Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers’: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion.”
professes truth, links together this study of ‘secret’ knowledge, the visual, and the expository gesture of pornographic imagery. I select various cases of audiovisual texts to gauge the diversity of responses to negotiating the ‘telling secret’ of transgender embodiment in a pornographic register. Moreover, each cultural object brings forth particular questions and challenges for the variegated disciplines that I engage, such as film theory, (trans)gender studies, and various incarnations of Foucauldian thought.

The short video *Tremblement de Chair* (“Trembling Flesh”), by Mirah-Soleil Ross and Mark Karbusicky (2001), introduces the issue of sexual secrets in relation to confession. The short depicts Ross naked with her lover’s hand gliding slowly over her body, at times obscured by images of a tornado. My analysis of the layering effect focuses on the location of sexual ‘truth,’ as Foucault discusses in *The History of Sexuality* and in his introduction to the memoirs of the ‘hermaphrodite’ Herculine Barbin. In the second section, I further complicate the notion of achieving transparency through revelation. Discussing another video by Ross, *Dysfunctional* (1997), I examine ways in which one authorizes experience as true, for instance, through the imperative to “look!” Mieke Bal’s book *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* guides my analysis of exposing secrets through visual means.

The last section shifts to film theory, particularly to the genres of documentary and pornography and their privileged relation to realism. *Linda/Les and Annie: The First Female to Male Transsexual Love Story* (1989) by Annie Sprinkle combines both genres in its quest to authenticate the sexual viability of its trans character, Les. The interlocking modes of representation belabour the reality of events; yet, I argue that this mode causes a crack in the film’s “voice” or social point of view (Bill Nichols). Hence, the video points to the struggle of realist representations of secrets and their revelation in word and image, an instance of a conflicted image/text.

**True Confessions: Foucault and “the dark shimmer of sex”**

Beginning with its title, *Tremblement de Chair* (“Trembling Flesh”) invites a consideration of ‘flesh’ and its animation.² The video stars Mirah-Soleil Ross displaying bare skin and desire while locked in an embrace with lover Mark Karbusicky. The video combines imagery of ominous skies, the eye of a tornado, and

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² This video by Ross is available for viewing online at “The Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art: The Canadian Art Database” hosted by York University: <http://www.ccca.ca/> last accessed 10 March 2010.
lightening flashes with that of the lovers’ bodies, which together suggest a seemingly natural power at work. Apart from an effect of the desire circulating between Ross and Karbusicky, the notion of trembling may refer to the fear caused by a tornado, or alternately by the possible violence attributed to an onlooker’s disgust. The video was created in 2001 as an installation in a gallery exhibition, meant to be viewed by an audience in the public sphere. Tremblement de Chair solicits its viewer to consider her flesh and its potential trembling: what might that affective response indicate about oneself? The tension between desire and fear circulating between the lovers and their viewers, I argue, arises from the notion that the affective response of trembling carries a weighted significance for sexual identity. That desire should function as a telling secret about oneself encases the aesthetic experience of Tremblement de Chair within the religious and modern-day framework of the “confession of the flesh.” At stake in the video is the revelation of a secretive sexualized embodiment, yet one that is not necessarily seen as true. Through the notions of confession and ‘truthful’ flesh, I wish to examine the injunction to “speak sex” and explore in what ways Tremblement de Chair may be understood to “speak back to” the confessional mode in its image of transsexual desire.

The term “flesh” in early Christianity carried meaning for religious leaders and lay people alike: flesh connoted the enmeshment of one’s feelings with one’s body. The dangerous feelings that transformed one’s body into a carrier of sin involved sensual appetites and inclinations that would act against the nobler elements of human nature (OED). In the introduction to his Sexuality series, The Will to Knowledge, Foucault cites the changes to the sacrament of penance instituted after the pastoral Council of Trent met in the mid-sixteenth century, which placed the notion of flesh at the center of its politics of confession (19). The new pastoral was instructed to seek the detailed naming of sex and its correlations: a process in which the notion of flesh became the root of evil.

This historical juncture saw the shifting of the moment of transgression “from the act itself to the stirrings – so difficult to perceive and formulate – of desire,”

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3 Due to constraints of space I am unable to offer a broader analysis of the multiple and changing meanings of flesh in the religious register; for instance, its non-dualistic nature, the positive, redemptive quality, or further philosophical implications. For further study, see The Culture of Confession From Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the ‘Confessing Animal,’ edited by Chloë Taylor. Caroline vander Stichele and Todd Penner’s Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse is an engaging analysis of transgender ‘sex’ and other pre-modern gender models proposed in the Christian context.
writes Foucault (emphasis in original; 19-20). Though the flesh became understood to be detectable through feelings, its trembling and convulsions are neigh impossible to control. Confession became the appropriate outlet for attending to the “evil that afflicted the whole man, and in the most secret of forms” (20). Foucault suggests that it was here, perhaps, that the injunction, so peculiar to the West, was laid down for the first time ... the nearly infinite task of telling – telling oneself and another, as often as possible everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex. (20)

Henceforth, the mechanism of confession, which became imperative for every good Christian, not just for monks, was put in charge of tracking down sex. In The Will to Knowledge, Foucault further privileges confession as a mechanism extended by the apparatus of scientia sexualias, such as psychoanalysis, for inciting and regulating a discourse on sexuality.

A confession in common understanding is the pronouncement of a truthful statement, made by one person to another about herself; however, not all statements are confessions. The statement must be shameful, difficult to express, and moreover, revelatory of the ‘true’ identity of the speaker, rendering the confession a feat of voluntary effort. According to Foucault’s introductory study, confession operates beyond the religious context in that it is:

[A] ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply an interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. (61-62)

Foucault’s planned volumes on the modern formations of Western sexuality and confessing attitudes would have begun with the Christian practices of confession that understood flesh as distinct from the body (La Chair et le corps [The Flesh and the Body]). Following this volume, he planned a study of four types of sexual subjects, who constituent breeds of “confessing animals,” as the foci of the last volumes. In the French edition, Foucault projected a fifth volume Pouvoir de la vérité (The Power of Truth) that would deal with the coupling of torture and confession in Greek and

4 In his section on Scientia Sexualis Foucault concludes, “Western man has become a confessing animal,” ironically employing the terms of biology and taxonomy in his critique (59).
Roman times. The subsequent volumes, however, proceeded differently. Stuart Elden proposes that the theme of confession had led Foucault back to ancient Latin and Greek texts, to earlier manifestations of techniques of the self (aesthetic practices) that were not necessarily tied into sexuality (36-39). Departing from the present concerns of the modern conception of sexuality, Foucault came to see sexuality as less important as the manifest technology (apparatus or dispositif) than the extent to which such technologies institute a social and true self. Confession, nevertheless, remained integral to the arrangement and rearrangement of the whole Sexuality series, with the title Les Aveux de la Chair (The Confessions of the Flesh) announced in volume two as the fourth and final in the series. Foucault’s death arrived before its publication, and the mostly finished manuscript languishes as per his wish.

In broadening the terms of his study, Foucault realized that secrecy, and the authoritative interpretation of the revealed secret, was a precondition for the apparatus of sexuality and its mechanism of confession. Moreover, the epistemological repercussion of the telling flesh went beyond acts of confessing hereto ‘unknowns’ to imply an ontologizing power that constitutes knowable subjects of desire. I propose that Foucault’s turn to ontology in volume two and three suggests that he considered a connection between the epistemology of sexual confessions in volume one and the ontological implications of what he calls “a true sex.” During his period of reassessment, Foucault wrote the introduction to a confessional memoir, Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite. His brief study of Barbin’s story links his preoccupation with religious and psychiatric practices of confession as constitutive of sexual identity with

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5 In chapter 3, “Cut,” I return to the question of dispositif becoming important for its role in manifesting a subject. Rather than focus on the technologies of sex or gender, I examine cinematic styles and aesthetics as dispositif’s that might be understood as producing certain kinds of viewing subjects.

6 Foucault submits to a confession in an admission of where his true interest lies at this time: “I must confess that I am much more interested in problems about techniques of the self and things like that rather than sex … sex is boring” in Essential Works of Foucault vol. 1 (253).

7 Elden argues that although the projected and unfinished volumes on confession may have failed in a certain sense, Foucault’s working through the interest and confusion it posed to him was highly productive for developing new horizons. In particular confession held together the divergent articulations of a modality of power as well as playing a role in the production of truth. He cites Foucault in a 1981 interview: “I constantly come up against confession and I wonder whether to write the history of confession as a sort of technique, or to treat this question in the context of studies of the different domains where it seems to play a role, that is in the domain of sexuality and that of penal psychiatry” (Foucault qtd in “The Problem of Confession” 39). The careful wording of Les Aveux de la Chair reflects this proposal for confession, which is not simply the practice les confession, but les aveux, the word for avowal that suggests that the unconstrained admission or declaration of the flesh’s truth is at stake.
another sector, early medical and juridical expertise, that through the examination of ‘flesh’ sought to determine morphological and social sex. His research demonstrates the emerging postulate that a hermaphrodite must have a sex: a single true sex (vii). With Barbin, then, Foucault identifies a parallel sexual confession: one the body was to produce through signs that organize a modality of power and a production of truth.

Though this text neglects to comment on confession explicitly, the introduction to Barbin’s memoirs offers greater specificity for the ways in which the confessional economy of truth and falsity operates in the constitution of the transsexual desiring subject than is found in The Will to Knowledge. The trembling ‘transsexualized’ flesh of Ross bears the marks of a late nineteenth century sea change in understanding physical sex and true identity. I propose that the confessions of the flesh in Tremblement de Chair concern the material flesh of sex as well as the flesh as sexual feeling, two kinds of flesh that can never be thought entirely separately, as Foucault himself demonstrated. The principal difference lies in the mode of confession of the stirrings and markings “so difficult to perceive and formulate”: either the subject submits them in discourse or exposes the visual evidence that becomes inscribed in discourse through interpretation. The visual mode of the video largely relies on exhibiting material flesh as ‘caught’ in the act of becoming stirred as well as marked, articulating a confession directed towards the viewer. In Tremblement de Chair, the virtual presence of the viewer stands in for the judging agent that wants to know the truth of her sexuality as well as the status of her sexed embodiment. The authority of the viewer to assess a true sex, as Foucault traces, has a history in broadening the sciencia sexualis from the experts to the public at large.

In the introduction to the memoir, Foucault offers an overview of the judicial and medical changes concerning “hermaphroditism,” which I read as a genealogy tracing who is authorized to identify sexual dimorphism and in what ways. In legal

8 Gayle Salamon’s chapter, “The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in Phenomenology of Perception,” in Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality offers a brilliant rendering of phenomenological flesh nuanced for the transgender subject’s unyoking of bodily parts from bodily pleasures.

9 For evidence of interest in (trans) genitals and their function, see Riki Ann Wilkins on “17 Things you DON’T Say,” especially numbers 6, 7, 8 is the question “can you have an orgasm?” reflecting the prurient interest directed towards trans sexuality in general. Another humorous retort can be found in Calperina Addams’ video “Bad Questions to Ask a Transsexual” found on her youtube channel <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOjeZnjKlp0&feature=channel> last accessed May 25, 2010.

10 Today’s hermaphrodites are considered to suffer from some form of an “intersexual condition” or even “disorders of sexual development”; each nomenclature carries a different resonance of the way in which sexual dimorphism is displayed and categorized as the only possible model of sex and gender.
texts, he sees an adjustment taking place from the Middle Ages and Renaissance, in which the name-giver selected a sex for the child until he or she could later chose the sex by which to live, to an era that continues today, in which medical expertise has the final say. No longer could sex be self-determined, or wavering. Foucault cites the rise of biological theories of sexuality as well as juridical conceptions of the individual as ushering in the rejection of the idea of a mixture of two sexes in a single body (viii). The doctor no longer decided what sex may prevail over the other, but became concerned instead with “deciphering the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances” (viii). The emerging medical modality of stripping a body that might deceive at its surface, ferreting out sex hidden behind organs, and even proposing to correct nature’s “phantasmagorias” that enable licentious behavior gave unprecedented powers to medicine to establish moral standards (viii). Though Foucault notes modern revisions to this oversimplification, such as an individual adopting a sex that is not biologically his or her own (i.e. transsexualism), he points to biology, the mental sciences, and most significantly, current opinion, which all still regard changes of sex or claim to multiple sexes as “insulting to ‘the truth’” if not a breach of law (x). The “current opinion” of the late 1970s rings true today, when anyone can claim gender expertise and imagine him or her self capable of deciphering the “true” sex of others, such as in the case of policing the correct usage of sexed toilets.¹¹

The “error” involved in transsexual practices and diagnosis of intersexual conditions alike, Foucault suggests, ought to be understood in a traditional philosophical sense, that is, as an epistemology. This behavior is not “adequate to reality” and thus “seen as belonging more or less to the realm of chimeras” (x).¹² The suspicion of erroneous bodies as fictional and self-indulgent recalls the difficulty that

See Lena Eckert’s dissertation “Intervening in Intersexualization: The Clinic and the Colony” for an updated genealogical study of this process.

¹¹ An abundance of literature makes reference to trans problems with sexed toilets, see for example Sally Munt “Orifices in Space: Making the Real Possible,” in Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender and Toilet Training: Law and Order in the Bathroom (2003), a film by Tara Mateik and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.

¹² In this passage Foucault also calls upon other gender transgressing behavior such as feminine men and masculine women, which while associated with homosexuality may also be understood as a precursor to modern transgender theory such as articulated by Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinburg, and Riki Ann Wilchins. This literature identifies gender oppression and normativity as underpinning the phobias and attacks on transgender people, homosexuals, bisexuals, and badly behaved heterosexuals alike. The underlying similarity is because they are all considered chimerical, or erroneous, practices. In other words, Foucault offers a brief glimpse into the coalition politics to come that bind together feminism, queer theory, and transgender politics around a critique of gender norms that include compulsory heterosexuality.
transsexuals have in appearing in the mirror theory of knowledge. To combat the social insinuations of “error” towards a mismatch between a felt sense of self and a body, the transsexual claim to being in the ‘wrong body’ places the blame on nature, on one’s wrongly ascribed body. This appeal to medical notions of nature being wrong sometimes, producing phantasmagorias, holds out the possibility for medicine to ‘correct’ a life being lived in a false or conflicted reality. Though the appeal to the ‘wrong body’ produces the desired results for many seeking medical treatment, it also assumes the singularity of a bodily truth and thus fits neatly into the medical model of deciphering the flesh. In committing to the narration of an intelligible transsexual story that fits the criteria for diagnosis, the patient-subject may become bound to this truth to the exclusion of possible other truths. 13

If, in the case of transsexuality, flesh must be taken as material and sexual, the clinical diagnosis locates one principal node of both kinds of confessional flesh. In “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Sandy Stone assesses the regulatory means for the embodiment and sexuality of what the medical practitioners described as a “true transsexual.” 14 Crucial is the ritual of diagnosis, which is performed through a series of questions. The only non-negotiable true confession

13 Of course, the case may be that many people do fit the narrow criteria for transsexualism. However, as research on “Agnes,” only the most famous case of pandering to medical notions to receive treatment, has shown, the truth of the interactions in the medical domain may not be the only truth. See Harold Garfinkel’s initial discussion of the case in Studies in Ethnomethodology pp. 116-185 and Viviane Namaste Invisible Lives pp. 192-194. Rather than assume deception, Agnes and countless others that have studied the required narrative to become identified as “true transsexuals,” or intersexed and require correction, resulting in being given the green light for treatment, are performing the discursive practice of gender norms extraordinarily well, at least in the clinic. What other actions they may perform are not accounted for in my unfortunately narrow analysis of confession as a ritual between the authority of the doctor and the maneuvering of the client. Later in this chapter as well as in further chapters, I will offer analysis of interventions into the medical terms of diagnosis and treatment and cultural contestations through image-making.

14 In medical parlance, the true transsexual has a history in sexology of the 1960s and 70s. The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association’s Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders (Sixth Version) includes the following history in the section on “Diagnostic Nomenclature”: “The true transsexual was thought to be a person with a characteristic path of atypical gender identity development that predicted an improved life from a treatment sequence that culminated in genital surgery. True transsexuals were thought to have: (1) cross-gender identifications that were consistently expressed behaviorally in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood; (2) minimal or no sexual arousal to cross-dressing; and (3) no heterosexual interest, relative to their anatomic sex. True transsexuals could be of either sex. True transsexual males were distinguished from males who arrived at the desire to change sex and gender via a reasonably masculine behavioral developmental pathway. Belief in the true transsexual concept for males dissipated when it was realized that such patients were rarely encountered, and that some of the original true transsexuals had falsified their histories to make their stories match the earliest theories about the disorder. The concept of true transsexual females never created diagnostic uncertainties, largely because patient histories were relatively consistent and gender variant behaviors such as female cross-dressing remained unseen by clinicians. The term ‘gender dysphoria syndrome’ was later adopted to designate the presence of a gender problem in either sex until psychiatry developed an official nomenclature” (5)
concerns the genitalia. As a response to the typical question, “Suppose that you could be a man [or woman] in every way except for your genitals; would you be content?” Stone writes, “there are several possible answers, but only one is clinically correct” (231). The transsexual diagnosis excludes those transsexuals for whom gender identity “is something different from and perhaps irrelevant to physical genitalia” (232). Additionally, true transsexuals were expected to signal a lack of sexual desire, primarily by expressing disgust for their genitals. The clinical understanding of transsexual desire as directed solely at the object of the transition (changing the form of the genitals) meant that desire for others as well as for oneself was foreclosed. The “role inappropriateness” of enjoying one’s penis alone or with another while claiming a feminine gender identity could lead to disqualification, the ultimate punishment of medical authorities for those seeking treatment (228).

*Tremblement de Chair* shows a sexually ambiguous body, no less a body in the midst of “licentious behavior,” and hence, a body in defiance of the morally-minded medical edict of accomplishing a true and singular sex. The video begins innocently enough with an extreme close-up of Ross’ right eye, pans to the left eye, and then slow zooms out to her face addressing the camera, at which point she closes her eyes. The image of storm clouds washes over her face burying her image, which then again comes into a blurry focus. The next minute consists of a slow pan down and up her body, which follows the hand of her lover, his own body situated behind her, hidden from view. A bluish-white coloring outlines his muscular hand as it rests gently on her

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15 See Zowie Davy’s *Recognizing Transsexuals: Personal, Political and Medicolegal Embodiment* for insightful analysis of interviewed subjects on the question of a trans person’s sense of “bodily aesthetics,” a concept she develops to discuss self-styling and a felt-sense of one’s body as a whole, not reduced to genitals.

16 In *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, Harry Benjamin described true transsexualism (of the male to female variety apparently) in this way: “True transsexuals feel that they belong to the other sex, they want to be and function as members of the opposite sex, not only to appear as such. For them, their sex organs, the primary (testes) as well as the secondary (penis and others) are disgusting deformities that must be changed by the surgeon's knife” (emphasis mine; 27).

17 Again, Benjamin’s terms and scale that differentiates the true (male to female) transsexual from transvestism and homosexuality relies on the rejection of male sexuality “his sex organs are sources of disgust and hate” prior to surgery, whereas post-surgery, she may safely embrace a female heterosexual orientation (33). In addition, some surgeons determine the success of a vaginoplasty according to depth, the neo-vagina’s ability to accommodate a penis, rather than sensitivity revealing a strong heterosexual bias. add reference, clean up

18 In consequence for male-to-female transsexuals, Stone provocatively exposes a covert form of auto-erotic sexuality euphemistically called, “wringing the turkey’s neck”, the ritual of penile masturbation just before surgery,” which she claims is the most “secret of secret traditions” (228). On the flipside, female-to-males must forgo and despise vaginal penetration lest they reveal themselves to be too “womanly.” I will further discuss the FtM perspective on sexual enjoyment of one’s given, and perhaps hormonally-enhanced and/or surgically-modified, body the next chapter centering on Buck Angel.
skin, seeming to hover over it as it makes its way over a tendril of hair. Appearing as though under, and yet apart of, his hand, the funnel of a tornado in a searing silver-white tin obscures whatever part of her body it glides across. The coloring of the overall image changes to a deep red as his hand, as well as the accompanying dynamic of the silver-white tornado, approaches a pert breast, down her belly, and in the same motion, now caresses her non-erect penis. The image flashes to a bright white, then fades to black before returning to a screen of branches covering the lovers.

In the extreme close-ups, Ross’ body becomes a series of revelations as the slow pan drifts downwards. Her body is never given at once, but one must anticipate and then integrate the different sections that are offered with varying degrees of perceptibility. The film’s insistence on drawing out the revelation of her embodiment forces one to contemplate the diversity of physical markers that enable a reading of sex. From eye, to breast, then belly, and finally her genitals, the viewer is asked to consider the relative importance of each part to inform a sex judgement. The highlighting and obscuring of her genitalia, shown at the apex of the video’s running
time and as conclusion of the long panning shot, finally produces a quasi-confession of the transsexual secret. While, according to the ritual of confession, the film focuses on telling in detail as well as through the examination of specific details a sort of confession of the flesh, I use the qualifier ‘quasi’ since the marking of a physical sex is never delivered as a singular and complete truth, disallowing conclusive judgment. In privileging a series of parts over a whole, *Tremblement de Chair*’s rebellious response to an imaginary clinical intake is to refuse the synecdoche of sex in which one part – the penis – stands in for sexual identity entire.

Furthermore, the intimacy of the imagery flouts what Stone describes as the medically-enforced “permissible range of expressions of physical sexuality” by which good transsexuals should abide (228). The obscuring effect of the double layering of images, a technical cinematographic effect of “double exposure,” combined with added effects such as the changes in tint and focus all suggest a less than transparent access to Ross’ sexual desire. Most dramatically, the fiery white glow of the tornado’s funnel, caught between the two bodies, blocks out one’s vision of her body trembling on only one layer of the image, even as it may represent the invisible tension of their desire on another.

The cinematographic effects of double exposure and other means of creating shifting patterns of light pictures Foucault’s dictum that the flesh’s stirrings are “difficult to perceive and formulate.” The changing degrees of perceptibility, however, involve the darkness and opacity of images of nature on one layer superimposed on their bodies.

In *Tremblement de Chair*, the forces of nature, such as the storm clouds and a tornado funnel, seem to suggest the phantasmagoria of sex “clouding” or haunting the
image of Ross and her lover on another emergent epistemic level. The video stages an interaction that is characterized by the superimposition of a raging storm that literally becomes violent, in so far as the lovers ultimately disappear into the storm clouds. The depiction of a ‘natural’ phantasmagoria indicates an improper distinction between a true, singular sex and a multiple, and therefore false, sex. Instead of a confession of flesh that indicates a wrong or sinful body, the reverse is depicted: the in-transition and sexually ambiguous body of Ross appears as perfectly in sync with her lover. Only the intervening forces of ‘nature’ threaten to obliterate it. The imagery of her (trans)sex and her desire struggle against the darkening forces of nature to become perceived and articulated. The phantasmagorias of sexual ‘nature’ embodied in the technical effects threaten to cover over her intelligibility. Tremblement de Chair thus inverts the terms of sex’s political truth: the ‘natural’ state of a singular sex appears as a destructive illusion.

In the chapter “Scientia Sexualis” from The Will to Knowledge, Foucault too conjures a natural illusion, a mirage, to suggest a metaphor for the way in which the supposed naturalness of sex is illusory. The passage begins by noting a metamorphosis in literature that complies with modernity’s injunction to confession. It is “ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth” (59). Nevertheless, he criticizes the realness and substantiality of this truth by adding that “the very form of the confession holds [it] out like a shimmering mirage” (59). With the notion of a shimmering mirage, enticing the author bent on extracting truth, Foucault casts doubt on the ability to procure a true sex. The mirage that arises from the confession suggests no direct relation between the visual and conceptual technologies of the self. Foucault thus proposes a model for relating the field of perceptibility and intelligible statements about sexuality, in extension about sex. The shimmering and wavering element of truth-as-mirage further implies that the transformation it produces in the confessant, the constitutive affirmation via a statement, involves a process that integrates image

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19 The English word mirage comes from the French verb “to appear” or “to seem” (OED). As a figure of speech, a mirage refers to something illusionary and insubstantial. Scientifically speaking, a mirage is an optical phenomenon wherein the viewer sees the refracted image of something located elsewhere placed in the field of vision. The movement of light that seems to become something in a mirage might be why Foucault names this form of luminosity “shimmering.” Cinematography, literally “writing in movement,” depends to a large degree on photographic effects as the means to “write in light.” Tremblement de Chair deploys double exposure and tinting effects that create movements of light, technical forms of cinematographic plays of light to create visual shimmering.
and language. Hence, *Tremblement de Chair*’s visual intervention in depicting the obscuring effects of a ‘natural’ sex also contests the discursive sets of statements that qualify as a ‘confession’ of true sex.

In the final pages of *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault returns to the metaphor of a true sex as a “shimmering mirage” to draw out the desire that influences the injunction to confession. Mirages are often depicted in narrative forms as a shimmering oasis of water in the midst of a desert; in other words, as something one wants and needs to such an extent that desire creates the illusion of actually seeing it. Similarly, “speaking sex” appears desirable because it seems to provide the political means to liberation, to throwing off the yoke of sexual repression in expressing the ‘true’ self at last. Foucault writes of the mirage conjured up by the deployment of sexuality that it acts as a mirror, reflecting the subject in its own sex:

And it is this desirability of sex, that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power; it is this desirability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality that has lifted up from deep within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected – the dark shimmer of sex. (156-7)

This ‘false’ mirror only shows darkness, the shimmering shadow of sex rather than what Foucault presumes might be our truer, or differently true, selves. Foucault’s method for ‘correcting’ vision involves inverting the supposed cause for its effect, suggesting instead that desire at the behest of sexuality causes the sense of political liberation. *Tremblement de Chair* seems to follow a similar logic by implying that nature causes not the true sex, but the illusory effect of a sex. Foucault’s figuration of desire -- the dark shimmer of sex -- could be said to materialize at the end of the video. The storm clouds gather, lighting flashes intermittently, and the image of Ross and her lover become mere traces fading from view. Though not a mirage, the slow dissolve image plays on the desire of the viewer to see through the inscrutable image of ‘nature’ to possibly catch a glimpse of her truer self. But she and her lover never appear again.
The critique launched by Ross’ visual mode of “speaking back” to the medical management of transsexual identity and desire invites, indeed demands, the careful attention of a reader-viewer. The visual devices that render identity opaque, however, seem to suggest a refusal to be seen, at least not in the terms that circumscribe a true sex. Instead of with the explicit, detailed, and immediately available exposure of sexuality, one is presented with opaque renderings. If not confessing bodies, then what is exposed? In the case of *Tremblement de Chair*, rather than the truth of transsexuality, the ‘truth-effect’ of the correct statement and corresponding image constituting a true sex is on display. In the following section, I consider the shifting and interactive triangle of exposure between the object on display, the subject on whose behalf it speaks, and the addressee to track further the authentication of a shimmering sex.

**“Look! No, Don’t!” Exposure and Authority**

Jamison Green’s essay “Look! No, Don’t! The Visibility Dilemma for Transsexual Men” discusses the conflict between claiming on the one hand that ‘we’ transsexuals want to be invisible while on the other hand we beg to be acknowledged (118). The activism demanding society to “Look!” is carried out through what Green calls “public ‘confessions,’” situated beyond family, lovers, and doctors in increasingly public spaces such as classrooms, television, and films (118). The counter-imperative “No, don’t!,” as Green explains, relates to the regulation of transsexual treatment, in which “in order to be a good – or successful – transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all” (120). The aim of hormonal and surgical treatment is to make the patient feel ‘normal’ (that is, non-transsexual), precisely not garnering
attention to oneself as transsexual, something described in the community as “being read,” that is, being recognized as transsexual.

This hiding of transsexual experience, in Green’s words, “puts a massive burden of secrecy on the transsexual individual: the most intimate and human aspects of our lives are constantly at risk of disclosure” (120). For Green, the struggle is two-fold: to “progress beyond reinventing the classical transition to invisibility” that stymies a politics of representation, while moving against “the proposition that if people knew that I was born with female genitals, that knowledge would erase their personal experience of me as a man” (Becoming 38, 73). The conflict lies between a personal and medically enforced desire to make one’s secret invisible by becoming visible as either man or women, and the political desire to make one’s secret visible as a transsexual-identified man or woman in the hope of cultural acknowledgement and political affirmation.

In Green’s account, ‘exposure’ describes the two contrary experiences of public disclosure: either on one’s own terms and based on pride, or following the ability of others to read or to reveal, triggering shame. Katrina Roen’s essay, “‘Either/Or’ and ‘Both/Neither’: Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics,” summarizes a tension between the personal transsexual desire to be invisibly gendered like others, and the political transgender desire to be visible as different (both or neither genders, or a third gender). Those tensions suggest that the trans negotiation of the logics of secrecy and exposure involves the doxa of authenticity, whether it involves a desire for acceptance as living the life of the ‘other sex’ or the acceptance of the transition towards gender ambiguity. I will not dwell on the frequently violent means of exposure, for instance, by physically removing clothes or by revealing information that indicates in public one’s transsexual history, or present practices.20 Given the high stakes of personal and physical disclosure, I am most interested here in the moments at which transsexual people like Green choose to defy the fear-based “No,

20 See Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers” and Dean Spade “Compliance is Gendered: Struggling for Gender Self-Determination in a Hostile Economy” in Transgender Rights. Though the discussion of mediatized figures like Brandon Teena or Venus Extravaganza often centers in Humanities scholarship (e.g. Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, C. Jacob Hale, Jay Prosser), more recent sociological research pluralizes the debate in terms of legal ramifications, race, nation, class, and (separatist) women’s space.
Don’t!” reflex while simultaneously seeking to authorize the command to “Look!” for themselves.21

A bold example of negotiating secrecy, Ross’ video-work unequivocally indicates in its titles, descriptions, and contents that it seeks to show a transsexual woman’s desire and, by extension, what a transsexual really looks like. Although in Tremblement de Chair the truth of sex shimmers darkly in the opacity of natural coverage, during Dysfunctional (1997, 2 min 40 sec, Canada), Ross explains in an interview that she wants to share the most uncomfortable truths about her sexuality with her public. The rest of the video shows her sitting on stage playing the accordion next to a screen.

That shows a video-within-the-video, which graphically displays the so-called dysfunctional sexuality, the medically and morally unacceptable ‘chick with a dick.’ In contrast, however, the blue-sepia and black and white adjustment of the video material as well as the lull of the accordion music conjures old world, even traditional, romanticism. In this performance, Ross transforms the passive connotations of being looked at: her image on display tells the audience to “Look!,” while her presence on

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21 Obviously the fear is real considering the extremely disproportionate murder rates of transgender-identified or perceived people, a slow moving but prevalent kind of gendercide that occurs globally, in every country, state, and city. For an online visual, see the website for Transgender Day of Remembrance, “Remembering our Dead,” http://www.rememberingourdead.org/index.html#. David Valentine argues that violence has been central to the categorization of transgender, and critiques the conflation of the category with that experience in “The Calculus of Pain’: Violence, Anthropological Ethics, and the Category Transgender.” Also, it is important to remember that not all people can afford to or want to physically transition, but also more importantly, not everyone is able to pass as nontranssexual. For a fuller discussion of differing desires and negotiating the troubling concept of ‘passing’ see Chapter Two, “Cut.” In these cases, the notion of being read and self-disclosure changes dramatically. I hope that in this text, it becomes clear that I challenge the prevailing medical model that successful transsexuals are in fact, and must be, not detectable as transsexuals at all.
stage forces viewers to look twice, not only at the graphic image, but also at her instructing them to look again, now with the eyes of potential romantic partners.

Sitting on stage, Ross becomes the transfer point between the prior private confession of having sex and enjoying her body and its public statement in the video’s display. The movement from private dwelling to the public stage is typically referred to as “coming out of the closet” or, for short, “coming out,” a notion first applied to homosexuals.22 The phrase “coming out” indicates one is leaving a life of isolation and joining public and collective life. The spatial reference of “the closet” and the phraseology of someone being “closeted” suggest that one might be able to shut away knowledge of oneself, one’s truth. In this sense, a homosexual or transsexual coming out enacts a modern, secular form of confession, hinging on a dynamic of knowledge and ignorance.23 As Karma Lochie summarizes, in the confessional form, the ‘truth’ of the self always demands self-rupture in the form of an admission that “I am not who I am” (“Desiring Foucault” 6). In the case of homosexuality, but as I argue also of transsexuality, the agent of negation, which brings the ‘not-myself’ into play, is sexuality. Whether in a transphobic atmosphere or the presumed safety of a trans community, any declaration that renders someone visible and readable as transsexual inevitably takes on political significance in addition to, and perhaps because of, its epistemological weight.

Ross’ coming-out gesture, performing an alternative, visible transsexuality, might be cast as an artistic response to Stone’s politically charged call for transsexuals to create a “re-visioning of our lives,” serving as well as a prototype of Green’s argument for “becoming a visible man” (232).24 Remaining secretive may gain

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22 One’s “coming out” is a term from young girls debutante parties, in which they came out into society. Similarly, the notion for homosexual was from isolation and denial into coming out into the homosexual community, perhaps literally by entering the gay bar. Later the term came to be attached to ‘the closet’ and referred to coming out to oneself and greater society, perhaps in one’s first homosexual experience. See Evelyn Hooker’s 1965 essay, “Male Homosexuals and their Worlds,” for the first psychological entry in academic parlance of coming out as a self-labeling notion, beginning with participation in sexual subculture, or first same-sex experience.

23 This insight has been greatly expanded by Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, particularly in relation to homosexual men.

24 Stone’s article was first circulated in 1989 and then published in 1991 as a part of *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub). Though Green was politically active at this time, his text was only published in 1999 following its reading at the Second International Congress on Sex and Gender Issues, King of Prussia, PA, on 21 June 1997. Green, however, makes no mention of Stone’s article. Clearly, Stone’s critique of transsexuality was absorbed by community activism despite its academic cadence, specifically theories from Haraway, Derrida, and Spivak. See the introduction to the article in *The Transgender Studies Reader* for a short discussion of its reception.
“acceptability in society,” Stone admits, but at the cost of being able to “authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience” (emphasis mine; 230). As Foucault’s study of confessional practices for sexual secrets proposes, an authenticating interlocutor is always at stake in revelation. In coming out, the virtual or actual presence of a public, I wish to suggest, stands in for the interlocutor in the sense that they become the addressee of the statement. However, the authentication of the statement as truth stems from the use of experience as ‘evidence.’

How, then, does Stone propose to “authentically represent” that experience, and how does *Dysfunctional* achieve such a representation? Stone’s text assumes the interplay between visual and discursive registers: bodies act as visible signs that people read. Stone proposes that transsexuals are a genre, “a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire” has not yet been explored (emphasis in original; 231). Hence, she prescribes for transsexuals, inconceivably so in medical terms, “to be consciously ‘read,’ to read oneself aloud – and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to write oneself in the discourses by which one has been written – in effect, then, to become a … posttranssexual” (emphasis in original; 232).

Binary gender and the mandate of undisruptive transsexual expression become rewritten by those bodies that refuse to, or simply cannot, ‘fit in’ the order of signs that conceal transsexual meaning. Stone’s manifesto calls for making use of embodied agency, for becoming a walking, talking sign of gender excess, showing off an authentic, truer transsexual embodiment.

The writing of the self into discourses through the rubric of ‘experience’ first achieves what Joan Scott describes as “writing the history of difference, the history

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25 Furthermore, in Ross’ works the conventions of documentary, a mimetic representational art that professes to capture experiences as they happen, lend the effect of realism to the demonstration of heretofore ‘secret’ transsexual desire and embodiment. I will deal with cinematic conventions of realism mobilized by documentary and pornography in which transsexuality is represented in the following section. I bracket the issue for now to explore other modes of authority foregrounded in *Dysfunctional*.

26 Jillian St. Jacques rightly points out that Stone’s use of the term *posttranssexual* is confusing and misguided because while she admits in a footnote to responding to a time (the late 80s) when everything in theory was ‘post’ this or that, “posttranssexual” already had a specific medical and social meaning that her essay elides. St. Jacques’ essay “Retrotranslations of Post-Transsexuality, Notions of Regret” tries to reinstall the political thrust of this term that referred originally to transsexuals who ‘undo’ the transition, but who in his analysis go through one transition to enter into another one – there is no ‘undoing,’ no way to return to an original position. See this essay for further clarification of how Stone’s use of the term ignores an opportunity to have political bite as a (post)transsexual. In this chapter, I understand this term with Stone’s attribution that a transsexual who willfully acknowledges their ‘transness’ can no longer be considered transsexual since they have refused to fulfill the socio-medical definition of that term.
that is of the designation of ‘other’” (22). The ‘beyond’ implication of ‘post’ in ‘posttranssexual’ is seemingly achieved by the conscious reading of oneself, of one’s difference. If the politics of writing and reading, of representation and interpretation, are to have any force, then the content and the image must be corrective in relation to the accounts that already exist. Stone is emphatic that transsexuals “must take responsibility for all of their history,” to reappropriate difference, and to reclaim the power of the refigured and reinscribed body (232). She claims, and Dysfunctional proposes to represent, not necessarily a ‘true’ transsexual, but instead the authentic representation of the ‘false’ or unintelligible complexities and ambiguities of lived transsexual experience. In this respect, culling the evidence of experience seeks to correct the historic record of the seen and heard. It does so assuming that visibility leads to the production of accurate knowledge.27 In this regard, Stone’s imperative and Ross’ video response both risk taking as self-evident the identities of the experiences that are being documented, naturalizing the difference of being transsexual.28 Those modes of re-visioning trans experience and identity could well reproduce rather than contest the ideology that opposes the natural and artificial, healthy and dysfunctional, naturally sexed and trans-sexed. I want to suggest, however, that Ross’ self-conscious enactment of a reading of her difference pursues a further aim than the mere correction of knowledge, history, and vision through disclosure.

Ross’ multiplication of a coming out, on stage and on screen, exposes, rather than further conceals, the authority of experience in establishing difference. Though she is present to verify her trans-femininity, twice over, I experience her double act

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27 Scott’s aims this critique at Samuel Delany’s autobiography, The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village 1960-1965, particularly in the section that describes shimmering bodies reflected in the water of a sauna (22-23). She questions his metaphor of visibility as literal transparency, of knowledge that becomes gained through his vision of unmediated objects hereto hidden from history. Her essay challenges the evidence and authority of experience, the notion that “What could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through” (24). My reading follows her interrogation of simply documenting the experience of difference, particularly in visual mediums.

28 This critique, for instance, could be lodged at Ross’ Tremblement de Chair piece that contextualizes a transsexual body in Nature, although I have argued that its obscuring of a fleshly confession complicates its otherwise naturalizing tendencies. Consider, however, the feminist works that double expose nature onto human figurations, such as Femalia by Joani Blank or vulvas on trees in the photography of Tee Corrine, which activate and exploit such associations. Or, for instance, the sex scenes between or with transmen that take place in natural environments like Del LaGrace Volcano’s Pansexual Public Porn, scenes with Raven and Joshua in Lucas Woodward’s Enough Man, or Barbara Degenevieve’s Out of the Woods with JJ Bitch and Tenetty, which similarly draw upon naturalistic tropes with differing effects (listed in trans-erotic filmography appendix).
not as a live audience member, but as a viewer of a re-edited video documentation. In this form, a third layer is added to the coming out, cross-editing the performance footage with an interview. The video begins with the ‘author,’ who authorizes the interpretation of the performance as a declaration of her true sexuality as a transwoman. Ross offers the following statement: “I made Dysfunctional because a lot of people think transsexual’s bodies and sexualities are weird, freaky, and dysfunctional. So, I wanted to show that there is nothing freaky or weird about my body or my sexuality.” This set-up underscores the writer-author’s authentic experience. The statement carries the authorial weight to confirm the actuality of the sexual act, verifies her live presence on stage playing music, and ensures that the voice-over masters meaning in the edited version of the documentation that I view.

Performing the defining experience of coming out in three registers of media, Ross draws attention to, while yet relying on, the assumption of transparency in the visual field: that knowledge is simply gained through giveness-to-vision. As I proposed above, Ross’ hyper-visual availability commands us to “Look!” In Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis Mieke Bal asserts that “Look!” is a speech act that (art) objects on display address to a viewer (2-3). Without literally enjoining discourse, the object produces a visual speech act, bringing into being a relationship between the object, the addressee it hails, and also, here is Bal’s creative intervention, the implied subject of the public demonstration of the object (3-4). The subject, according to Bal, is not necessarily a person such as the artist, or even the curator, but an expository agent. ‘Showing’ acts in the manner of organized knowledge, creating an overlap between visuality and discourse, between showing and telling. Crucially, it is this level of discourse that surrounds, and even is, an exhibition on display, becoming, for Bal, the ‘subject’ of her analysis (3).

The discursive subject in Dysfunctional overlaps with the human subject of Ross, who embodies expository agency. In the shifts of Ross between different registers, the speech act of “Look!” begins to split and diverge. The implication of “that’s how it is,” which Bal notes often follows the command to look, points to at least three different modes of what Stone calls structured sexualities and the spectra of desire (2). The first is the declaration in the interview of being dysfunctional; the second is the romance that is fostered by the accordion music; and the third is the explicit depiction of oral sex. The effect of these modes of looking at sexuality could cause a crisis in exposure, leaving the viewer to wonder if the secret has been made
available through disclosure after all. Where exactly is the secret of trans-sex located, in which image? Moreover, the shifting values of authority, from video image to stage presence to documentation, have different purchase on the authority of experience. The visual evidence of experience shifts, potentially becoming contestable. Who or what might the viewer look to secure the knowledge of Ross’ sexual truth?

According to Bal’s schema, the “first person,” the exposer, tells a “second person,” the visitor or viewer, about a “third person,” the object on display, who usually does not participate in the conversation (3-4). However, in the case of Dysfunctional the object is not mute, but from the start emphatically interprets the sex acts. She first tells the viewer that her sexuality is an uncomfortable truth particular to her. Then, the performance’s musical accompaniment suggests a tender and emotional experience with which anyone can relate. The first person in both modes is Ross, relaying her experience to the second person; what is viewed is the “third person,” or the objectification of her experiential evidence. As Bal explains, the thing on display comes to stand for something else, namely the statement about it; it comes to mean (4).

The video’s conflation of the first and third person does not precisely line-up. Instead, the multiple interpretations provided by differing first person voices opens up a space between thing and statement. A space opens between Ross’ statement of her true sexuality, the interpretive sign she attaches to the video, and the sexual events of the video that recede under pressure of the sign. I suggest it becomes filled not by the classical trans narrative, but by a discursive “author-function” that authorizes the complex trans experience on display (third person) and seeks to link it with Ross’ interpretations (first person).

Foucault’s essay, “What is an Author?,” offers a way in which to understand Bal’s discursive and multiple ‘subject’ that pervades, even is, the exhibition of Dysfunctional. For Foucault, the author is a function of discourse that enables the authentication or the rejection of its truth claims (124-5). Though in his historical analysis, the author is a designation and a description of a person, Foucault suggests it also serves the particular function in discourse to enable true statements (121). Rather than abandon the subject, Foucault pleads to investigate the function of the author: the ways in which it can intervene in discourse, its system of dependencies, and the ways in which it circulates (137). Central to his analysis is the relation of the author to the process of authorizing a text as proper: the author-function implicates a larger process of aligning truth to a subject’s statement. The visibility of the first person in
*Dysfunctional* calls upon the author-function to corroborate the public statement of sexuality that would otherwise be morally and medically unacceptable. The two modes of exposition are taken to collaborate, so that Ross’ first person ‘telling’ or coming out and the third person display ‘showing’ evidence of her sexuality match up. But as Bal is at pains to point out in her monograph, the two modes do not always align (10).

The author-function should smooth over the tension between telling and showing, but the possibility for a shift between the first and second person lingers. In Ross’ appeal to “Look!” at the different modes of presenting experience, the video emphatically instructs the viewer/reader to respond, forcing a difficult decision. Placing the onus of the decision of truth on the viewer recreates the pain of Ross’ own forced decision of assigning truth: to try to be a transsexual without being a transsexual, to become acknowledged though not exposed, to come out as sexual though without an identity to claim. Hence, *Dysfunctional* revolves on what Bal calls the “rigid relation of authority and mastery among expository agent, viewer/reader, and exposed object” that is familiar to museum spaces and that I observe in moments of a trans coming out (10). What does it mean to look and see dysfunction, or to look and see a great love, or to look and see sexual abandon?

The triple exposure that *Dysfunctional* stages, I venture, may be less interested in solidifying Ross’ true confession than in constructing a stage, on which the audience, the second person addressed, is forced to make a quasi-confession in response. First, the audience has to decide whether to integrate or ignore the author-function of Ross in deciding where to look and what to trust. Second, the display of sexuality demands a response: how does one feel about it? Ross’ voice-over discusses the reactions to the video as depending on the crowd who’s seeing it. While the audience of a lesbian and gay film and video festival tend to think it is very “cool,” Ross explains that “[i]n a straight crowd, I get all kinds of reactions to people screaming insults, to guys getting turned on, to people laughing and giggling.” With a wicked laugh, Ross says she finds straight crowds the “most interesting.” In transsexual crowds, she says that the response has been that they “feel very
empowered by a transsexual trying to represent her own sexuality, because it’s not something that we’ve done traditionally outside of commercial porn.”

Given the options of those three crowds, the audience of the video may be able to both respond and reflect on the meaning of that response. Turned on or horrified, feeling cool or empowered, your response says something about you: it exposes your (desire for a) sexuality. In this way, Dysfunctional puts on stage the judgement that operates in secrecy and in coming out; it reveals that judging the other is always also a judgment of one’s self. The video echoes Sedgwick’s reminder to her readers, “even to come out does not end anyone’s relation to the closet, including turbulently the closet of the other” (81). While Dysfunctional deploys the author-function to advance the evidence of experience, it also relies on the alleged transparency of vision in the generic frames of documentation and pornography. The realism inherent in those genres offers a form of “truth-speak” rampant in the discourse of secrecy, requiring further consideration.

“I Love a Woman with a Cock”
The 1989 video Linda/Les and Annie: The First Female-to-Male Transsexual Love Story (Annie Sprinkle, Albert Jaccoma, and John Armstrong, 31min., USA) depicts the sexual affair between transman Les Nichols, formerly Linda Nichols, and porn queen Annie Sprinkle. The box cover describes the “docu-drama” as “fun, unique, sexy and informative”; in short, it appeals to a range of interests from the educational to the prurient. The blurb further acknowledges that wide appeal in the claim that the

29 In the article “‘Sexing Up’ Bodily Aesthetics: Notes towards Theorizing Trans Sexuality” co-authored with Zowie Davy, we take the long view of the ways in which transsexuality either represses or hyper-sexualizes the trans subject; in both cases failing to theorize trans sexuality from the transitioning body itself. Describing and mobilizing the concept of bodily aesthetics attuned to transitioning bodies, we offer a mode of analysis that accounts for sexualities as experienced by trans folks who were interviewed and represented in written and audio-visual trans porn.

30 See her extensive career detailed on her website, www.anniesprinkle.org, or books Post Porn Modernist and Hard Core from the Heart that include pictures, writings, and art. Sprinkle began work in commercial porn during the 70s and in the 90s launched her ‘sex performance’ artworks. Her current art practice with partner Beth Stephens, the Love Art Laboratory, explores “sexecology.” This video hails from the beginning of her self-produced, and often experimental, video porn era. Sprinkle’s technique was developed first in her directorial debut, a pornographic bio-pic of herself called, “Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle” (1981). This format became hugely popular boasting more than a hundred knock-off titles. She elaborated the concept to create a performance called “Deep Inside Porn Stars,” which premiered at the Franklin Furnace art space, New York (1984). It staged the conversations held between members of the women’s porn star support group “Club 90.” Stars such as Veronica Vera and Candida Royalle spoke about their careers and about being mothers, daughters and women with concerns and compassion. This “reality” porn was ostensibly a forerunner of the gonzo porn format, consisting of “random” sexual encounters filmed with a handheld camera.
video is sought out by “sex therapists, film buffs, porn fans and connoisseurs of the unusual.” Pointedly, it does not specify that female-to-male transsexuals (FtM), their erotic partners, or the trans community are a potential audience. Whereas *Dysfunctional* stages an exhibition that can be appreciated by trans and other audiences alike, *Linda/Les and Annie* purports to offer an exposé on the phenomenon of transsexuality, which is directed to seemingly anyone but transsexuals already “in the know.” As an exposé, it alleges to “uncover” hidden knowledge to discredit an accepted truth and perhaps offer new facts (*OED*). In this regard, the video engages with secrecy to bring to light the apparently ‘first’ love affair between a FtM person and someone else, presumably non-transsexual.\(^{31}\) It aims, then, not to *rewrite* history, but to *make* history: to accomplish a historical feat by inserting into public knowledge the evidence of transsexual bodies in graphic detail, showing up close the real lives and loves of a transman.\(^{32}\) The overarching goal of the video is to introduce something new to its viewers, possible “connoisseurs of the unusual;” to achieve this end, it offers the experience through the agency of Sprinkle.

For Sprinkle, it may well be the first trans love story she has been a part of, and the movie may well qualify as the first pornographic rendering of a FtM person’s body.\(^{33}\) However, Sprinkle’s overt personalization of the “love story” marks not just the title: throughout the video the voice-over narration relates her account, focuses on what it means for her to “make love” with “Les Nichols, a woman who became a man (and is now actually a surgically made hermaphrodite)” (video cover). The video pivots on a person, “Linda/Les,” but even more so on Sprinkle’s interest in what the sexual dalliance brings her. Indeed, the work focuses emphatically on the “constant

\(^{31}\) The term “cisgender” is another and increasingly common way to describe non-transsexual/non-transgender people. This is an update on Garfinkels term “gender normals” that suggests trans people are abnormal. For more information on the origins of the term, see Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl FAQ on cissexual, cisgender, and cis privilege*, <http://juliaserano.livejournal.com/14700.html> last accessed 14 Jan. 2011.

\(^{32}\) It puts forward vocabulary like “gender-flexible” and “dual-genitalia,” which may be helpful to other FTMs and partners with similar experiences or anatomy. In offers graphic images of a phalloplasty as well as detailed close-ups of FTM-femme sexual acts that had never been shown before. Medical journals rarely published on FTM genital surgeries and they were then, as now, practiced with much less frequency than vaginoplasty. In 1989, before the internet, trans newsletters or journals contained before and after pictures of different surgeries, but usually people would have to meet in person to “show and tell” about the results.

\(^{33}\) It depends if you count the medical imagery taken of gender non-conforming bodies since the invention of the camera, or even before, erotic lithography, paintings, and other visual and literary arts. But, of its kind, this commercial video was ostensibly a first. Approximately a decade later Chance Ryder performed in a commercial porn for Totally Tasteless Productions, the footage of which as been packaged as both *The Best of Both Worlds: The Chance Ryder Story* and *Mighty Hermaphrodite.*

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mind-fuck” that, Sprinkle explains, is brought about by the sexual ambiguity of her lover’s “dual-genitalia and all of their functions” (Sprinkle in narration, box cover). The titillating confusion she experiences is enshrined in the title’s backslash between Linda/Les, as if Sprinkle is dating two people, one male and one female, or one person who is both.

The film’s official release came after Sprinkle published an essay based on her affair, entitled “I Love a Woman with a Cock” (1989), in the hardcore magazine *Hustler*. The article breathily describes the “wild” reality of transsexual embodiment, including his surgeries, his neo-phallus, and his physical fulfilment of what every bisexual wants. Though arranged slightly differently, the content of the voice-over in the video is almost identical to Sprinkle’s text in *Hustler*. Crucial to the presentation of FtM sexuality as real and as desirable is the way in which it is filtered through Sprinkle's perspective as well as through the various generic frames the film deploys. With its constant use of Sprinkle’s enthusiastic voice relaying “insider knowledge,” the video heightens its strategy of convincing, even seducing, a non-transsexual audience.

The voice of Sprinkle reading from her diary opens the film and reappears at transitional points in the narrative. The voice-over also helps to provide cohesion to the video’s heady oscillation between the romantic storyline, the documentary interviews with Nichols, and the hardcore sex scenes—the main three genre codes the film mobilizes. The use of voice-over in nearly the entire film (except the interviews) places Sprinkle in the role of the trustworthy interpreter and diplomat between the world of FtM sexuality and the rest of society. Beyond Sprinkle’s affirmation of Nichols’ masculinity and sexual attraction, the three employed genres of documentary, pornography, and romantic drama all offer varying versions of realism that lend

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34 Noted by Jamison Green in *Becoming a Visible Man* (172). The *Hustler* version is available on www.anniesprinkle.org in her writings archive (as of March 2010).
35 Sprinkle also grossly misconstrues Nichols as “a woman with a cock” and refers to her partner as “she,” which would imply to the reader a male-to-female transsexual embodiment much like Ross’. Louis Sullivan’s article notes Sprinkle’s “annoying insistence” on getting Nichol’s gender wrong (qtd. in Green, *Becoming* 172).
36 At the close of the video’s credit sequence it also says that it is based on an original story by Annie Sprinkle.
37 As Foucault notes, the use of diary writings signals a confessional genre, such as de Sade used in his pornographic texts and I argue works equally well as an excuse for extracting one’s most intimate thoughts and feelings about sexuality in the video (Will to Knowledge 21). Journaling while chewing on a carrot, Annie wears a girlish polka-dotted dress and large sunhat, emphasizing her youthfulness. These scenes are also set in a natural surrounding, further emphasizing the innocence and natural desire between a porn star, who is really just a girl, and a transmen, who is really just a loveable boy.
authenticity to Nichols’ masculinity and viability as a sexual partner. The video’s combination of championing transgender politics while representing a “real” FtM would seem to be groundbreaking and helpful for the then nascent trans movement.38

However, Sprinkle’s blend of scientific ethnography, pornography, and love story caused a stir amongst FtM transsexuals. The December 1989 issue of the widely circulated FTM Newsletter published an article about the public revelation and sexualisation of Les Nichols. The headline read, “Hustler uncovers an FtM.” As Green recalls, “the Hustler article itself brought outrage and an outpouring of defensiveness from within the FTM [sic] community,” whereas, “the general public hardly blinked” (Becoming 172). Debates on the merits of the article and the film raged in the newsletter for a year, Green recollects.39 Although some appreciated the “attempt to recognize the sexual desirability of transsexual bodies,” most FtMs felt that Les Nichols was not “an appropriate representative” for the general public (Becoming 173).

The backlash in the FtM community in the United States of the late 1980s and early 1990s suggests that it understood Linda/Les and Annie to present a crucial mode of representation.40 Though its docu-porn-drama formula usefully mobilizes a “that’s how it is” mode of visual transparency, it was nevertheless not received as a correct representation of transsexual experience. Implicit in this critique is that Nichols is a poor representative and that other subjects might have been more appropriate.41 Left
unexplored in that debate is the impossibility of achieving a perfect, mirror-like representation of the ideal transsexual. In other words, the demand for better representation, central to identity politics and the imperative to “come out,” forecloses the consideration of the logic of secrecy itself. In short, the movement’s dependency on revealing the secret of their existence, the reality of embodiment, and sexual desires overdetermines the need to bring to light the ‘right’ kind of secret, implying that something secret indeed exists to be revealed.

In the oscillations of its generic frameworks, *Linda/Les and Annie* offers a rough *bricolage* of realist representation. In that sense, it depicts a struggle with the very terms of representation rather than an endorsement of a single formula for visibility politics. One moment in particular stands out as a warning shot for would-be image-makers and trans participants, who might confuse the apparent transparency of sexual acts and truth-telling interviews in docu-porn films with the achievement of political visibility. The moment arrives during the initiation of Nichols’ neophallus through sexual intercourse, a drama-laden instance that depicts Nichols as he may truly feel himself to be: a man.

**Someone’s Crying in the Kitchen. The Limit Case of Docu-Porn Realism**

Sprinkle’s voice-over explains that Les’ newly constructed phallus requires the insertion of a rod to give it turgidity during sexual intercourse (Figure 9). After a few strokes inside Sprinkle’s vagina, the rod comes out and pierces through the condom. The couple has to stop, and Sprinkle says, “in spite of all the modern technology that went into making Les’ dick, we still had to work out a few basics.” With the camera following from the bedroom, they reappear against the domestic backdrop of the kitchen, busy cutting the rod to size with an ordinary knife. Laughing together, suddenly Sprinkle begins to cry as the soundtrack abruptly switches from sexy music to synchronized sound (Figure 10). In another audio track, the voice-over offers a retrospective account. Sprinkle explains:

I just started crying thinking about how much physical and emotional pain he must have suffered to change his gender. I cried for all people who don’t love their bodies just the way they are. For all transsexuals who have suffered, many of whom have resorted to suicide. For all sexual persuasions who are made outcasts in society…. Les told me not to cry, ‘it’s been a wonderful odyssey. After all, I might not have met you.’
Less embraces Annie as she continues to appear overwhelmed, unable to return to the pornographic persona befitting the lingerie she wears. After a slow black fade-out and silence, the next sequence begins with sleazy music and a close-up of Nichols’ face, returning the viewer to the pornographic framing of the event (Figure 11). In voice-over, Sprinkle says, “Les seemed quite happy with his new sex toy. He told me that watching the pleasure on my face made the pain of all twelve surgeries worthwhile.” At that moment, Nichols inserts his neophallus into Sprinkle from behind.

As the video seeks to reveal “everything” in its exposé mode, the frames of realism shift to accommodate the different dimensions of the story. One such moment occurs when Sprinkle shifts from light-hearted laughter to choking sobs. In this sequence, rather than offering a clean break between pornography and documentary, between the bedroom and the kitchen, a tension remains between their respective realities. This remainder, however, offers another kind of reality. The conflicted image of a porn star wearing sex-ready lingerie while crying functions to portray Nichols as real to Sprinkle, specifically as emotionally real. Along with the set change,
the emotional change shifts the video from the technological drama occurring in the pornographic register to a dramatic breakthrough in the love story. Her tears suggest that she understands him as well as the ‘reality’ of his embodiment, which apparently gives her (and perhaps the viewer) a ‘mind-fuck.’ Given the lack of necessity to include this scene, which would be probably considered a blooper or outtake in a commercial edit of a porno, the fact that it is included attests to the video’s emphasis on Sprinkle’s coming to terms with Nichols rather than his own coming into manhood through his first penetrative sexual experience. The resolution of Nichols as an epistemological ‘fuck’ seems more crucial to the plot than achieving the sexual act. Different from the description of the scene in Sprinkle’s confessional essay in *Hustler*, the evidence crucial to her emotional coming out in the video benefits from another truth-effect, derived from its medium.

At the ontological level, film has a privileged relation to the real in that it seems to transmit impressions from the world ‘out there’ to an audience. The apparently genuine tears appear in the pro-filmic world. I must presuppose that ‘someone’ is actually crying about someone else in a kitchen, which has been transferred to film. Yet, next to witnessing this audio-visual synchronization of reality and overhearing their conversation, the video also makes use of a voice-over to relay her reflections on political reality. The indexical tears thus become signs of the film’s social realism, which reveals a hereto concealed political dimension of reality: people suffer because of what their body means in society and because of what they do with that body. In the representation of the tears, *Linda/Les and Annie* becomes a form of (political) discourse. Though it registers a pro-filmic real, through its registration it also engages with the multiple codes that shape its effects, namely with realism as a mode underlying different genres. The genres of pornography and documentary both stage a

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42 The notion of ontological (and later ‘indexical’) realism is most often identified with André Bazin’s essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” Thomas Elsaesser notes that long before “digitalization seemingly did away with the material ‘ground’ for this indexicality of the optic-chemical imprint or trace, ontological realism had already been challenged, critiqued, and denounced as an ideological fiction,” most prominently by the schools of “apparatus theory,” Debord and Baudrillard with the society of the spectacle, and feminist film criticism (5). The epistemic critiques of realism, however, assume that “there is such as thing as ‘correct representation,’ or at least that ‘reality’ can be distinguished from ‘illusion’ and that a ‘truth’ can be meaningfully opposed to ‘mere appearance’ (5). As I intend to argue, neither pure ontological truth, nor a notion of pure illusion is satisfactory to explaining the confluence of fantasy and realism in this video.

43 It also recalls the British genre of “kitchen sink” documentary that depicts the real lives of people in the most domestic of spaces in the home, the workspace of the kitchen. The ‘real’ space of the kitchen lends further truth-effects to the scene depicted. For more on the characteristics of this documentary movement, see, for example, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit-Grit* by Samantha Lay, especially chapter four “1950s and 1960s: Social Problems and Kitchen Sinks” (55-76).
reality through the “show” of events as well as device of voice-over “telling” the image.\(^4^4\)

The show and tell of documentary, or evidence and argument, as film theorist Bill Nichols writes in “The Voice of Documentary,” can be delivered through various strategies.\(^4^5\) The dominant modes of “expository discourse,” he argues, change as the arena of ideological contestation shifts, for instance, from the “direct address” voice-of-god style of the Griersonian tradition to the “directness” of *cinema vérité*; or from the “direct address” of characters telling their story in political films to the filmmakers’ “self-reflexive” voice-over (17-18). In all these cases, the film’s integration of visuals with spoken commentary or dialogue gives rise to its “voice.” Hence, a film’s particular style of showing and telling conveys what Nichols calls a “social point of view.” (18). The film text’s voice, as Nichols’ examples of documentary styles emphasize, often calls upon film’s privileged relation to a pro-filmic real, the relation intrinsic to the genre’s expository discourse.

Sprinkle’s self-reflexive reading from her diary in the voice-over in *Linda/Les and Annie* indicates the video’s construction of a window onto a reality, in which the videographer is an active fabricator of meaning rather than presumptuously neutral. The interspersed interviews with Nichols to some extent allow him to tell his own story, providing context and perspective to the politically-charged topic of his personal transition. Yet, the sexually explicit scenes are shown only with Sprinkle’s authoritative porn star commentary, never from Nichols’ direct point of view. During the kitchen sequence, Nichols’ voice speaking directly to Sprinkle is nearly drowned out by her crying, and enters into further competition with her voice-over. At the close of the scene, Sprinkle goes so far in co-opting his speaking voice that she quotes him rather than allow him to speak for himself. Though his words are muffled by her voice-over, in her quoting she clearly edits his words, resulting in a kind of disconnected double speak. In general, Nichols is spoken about by *Linda/Les and Annie*’s voice.

\(^{4^4}\) Here I draw from the concise and up-to-date overview of the extensive considerations of realism in film, *Realism and the Audiovisual Media* edited by Lucia Nagib and Cecilia Mello (xiv-xxv). This last point should not suggest that voice-over is the only means of creating narrative. I only wish to emphasize that this device for narration is used in *Linda/Les and Annie*, alongside its editing of their ‘love story.’

\(^{4^5}\) Similarly to the “I”-“You” shifting semiotic address in Bal’s analysis of show and tell exhibitions I discuss above, Nichols also supposes that the sounds and images come to function as signs, bearing meaning that is conferred upon them by their function in the text and in relation to the viewer.
Via the character of Sprinkle, the video seems to conflate its evidence -- Nichols’ body -- with its argument -- that while transsexuals suffer for their perceived ambiguity, they are also desirous, not least because their ambiguity. According to Nichols, the problem of conflation is common to the genre of documentary, which “displays a tension arising from the attempt to make statements about life which are quite general, while necessarily using sounds and images that bear the inescapable trace of their particular historical origins” (20). In Sprinkle’s voice-over statement during her crying, the gap between evidence and argument becomes stark. Sprinkle stretches the moment of crisis in her experience with a particular transman into a far-reaching political argument on gender oppression. Reflecting on the gap between image and statement, Nichols proposes that the extreme genre consisting only of visual evidence is pornography, whereas propaganda is a genre reliant only on expository argument (ftnt 3, 30). I submit that the video plugs its generic gap with Sprinkle’s pornographic body, her emotional display, and her command of the video’s voice during the apex of the story. Yet, the gulf between the show and tell, between a (failed) pornographic rendering of sexual experience and a propagandistic manifesto, nevertheless betrays a cracking in the video’s generic ‘voice.’ Most apparent from the rough transitions into and out of the kitchen scene, it becomes pornography that argues for a political future, pitching a political argument that offers pornography as its evidence.

The scene’s failure to be convincing as documentary and pornography at the same time comments not only on the impossibility of representing a true transsexual. It also points at the limits of ontological realism at work in those expository genres. Indeed, Linda/Les and Annie serves as a limit case for film’s ability to close the gap between ‘showing’ a secret and ‘telling’ its meaning. Its struggle to create perfect alignment within a singular voice indicates the complicating, even competing, epistemes operating in these genres. Documentary is stretched to its limit by Sprinkle’s overt and self-reflexive narration of events, acknowledging direct address for the persuasion of its audience, while at the same time overruling Nichols’ own perspective, which conflicts with or exceeds Sprinkle’s. As pornography, the video’s inclusion of her interruptive tears and the political explanation for her emotions, both her arousal and sadness, challenges the limits of feminist ‘realist’ theories of pornography.
As Julie Russo notes, Catherine McKinnon’s *Only Words* forcefully argues that pornographic imagery does not function as representation, but is instead a record of the real, pro-filmic rape of women: “pictures women had to be directly used to make” (qtd. in Russo 243). Acknowledging the credibility of the camera to suggest “a deep verisimilitude, an even stronger claim to truth,” McKinnon calls upon the medium’s ontological relation to the real to discount the defense of pornography as merely a discourse of sexuality (qtd. in Russo 243). She describes this as the assumption that pornography can be defended as “only words” with no referential relation to reality. Hence, porn’s unmediated reality (a reality she describes as rape) ought to be prosecuted as recorded action.

Drawing different conclusions, Linda Williams also advances a realist theory of porn, which is reflected in her use of the term ‘hard core.’ In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* Williams historicizes pornography’s origin and function in the lineage of Foucault’s *scientia sexualis* with the underlying assumption that the genre provides ontological evidence. Instead of recorded rape, however, for Williams, pornographic evidence exposes measured pleasure. Her thesis is that, in this “positivist quest for the truth of visible phenomena,” as she characterizes the *raison d’être* of pornography, women’s pleasure ironically takes place in an “invisible place” (46). Therefore, she argues, “the history of hard core comprises of various strategies devised to overcome the problem of invisibility within an ‘erotic organization of visibility’” (49). Williams continues MacKinnon’s investment in pornographic realism, but argues that for this very reason porn deserves the scrutiny of feminism. In her estimation, feminist porn attempts to re-vision its phallocentric mode of ocular measurement, conducted by men whose curiosity or will to knowledge seeks to see women’s bodies “speaking sex.” Throughout the book, Williams theorizes the “show and tell” of hard core as occurring in one and the same uncomplicated image: it shows sex, and in so doing, speaks of the performers’ sexuality. Hence, her Foucauldian analysis of “speaking sex” fails to integrate Foucault’s warning that sex may seem singular, but it is only a mirage of a seamless image/text, visual and word, equivalency.

According to the delimitations of pornography set by Williams, *Linda/Les and Annie* falls short in a number of revealing ways. The video would not qualify as convincing pornography in the sense of offering what Williams terms “maximum visibility” (48-49). The principle involves the following formal components: a
privileging of close-ups of body parts over other shots; the over-lighting of easily obscured genitals; a selection of sexual positions that show the most of bodies and organs; and, in later and contemporary forms, the creation of generic conventions, such as the variety of sexual ‘numbers’ and the externally ejaculating penis (49). The video often diverts from maximum visibility during the sexual numbers, in which the camera focuses on the engagement of Sprinkle and Nichols in medium shots, which in one longer sequence is further obscured by tinting. The other dominant editing choice is for reaction shots, close-ups of the protagonists’ faces. For instance, following the kitchen scene, while Sprinkle relays Nichols’ emotional state (saying, “He told me that watching the pleasure on my face made the pain of all twelve surgeries worthwhile”) the close-up of Nichols smiling punctuates the scene’s emotional charge. From his smile, the viewer may surmise his erotic and/or gender-confirming pleasure, but no effort is made here or later to visualize the display of orgasms. Foregoing the evidence of sexual pleasure in the so-called cum shot, Sprinkle tells the viewer that her pleasure, which Nichols observes as animating her face, is gratifying enough for him. During this shot, however, the viewer does not see Sprinkle’s face, but her buttocks. Because even this visual evidence is not presented, the viewer will have to trust Annie’s version of events, which cannot be visually verified.

Williams also invests in pornography as discourse to the extent that she compares hard core to confession. She notes that “[i]t obsessively seeks knowledge, through a voyeuristic record of confessional, involuntary paroxysm, of the ‘thing’ itself” (49). Therefore, hardcore offers to its ‘academic’ viewers, who she presumes are men, what it can never be sure of: the out-of-control confession of pleasure, a hard-core “frenzy of the visible” (50). Yet, the cinematic presentation of “unfaked, unstaged mechanics of sexual action,” according to Williams, only succeeds to depict the “poor substitute” of male ejaculation in lieu of female pleasure (48, 94). Though it apparently operates successfully on the basis of ontological realism for male sexual anatomy, Williams understands hard core as a failed (masculine) “fantasy” when it comes to imaging women’s supposedly equally mechanical, though invisible, confessions of pleasure (51).

46 Williams writes, “The animating male fantasy of hard-core cinema might therefore be described as the (impossible) attempt to capture visually the frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured” (51). In other words, for Williams, women’s bodies cannot confess or “speak sex.” Murat Aydemir challenges Williams’ presumption that male anatomy is able to secure for the viewer an indisputable evidence of orgasm as well as the notion that ejaculation
However, for Foucault, confession is precisely about what cannot be seen: “stirrings – so difficult to perceive and formulate – of desire” (19). Whereas pornography may depict socially transgressive acts, it is the transgression of feelings, the trembling of flesh, which constitute the basis of confession. Moreover, as Chloë Taylor offers by way of criticism of Williams, “her repeated references to these so-called ‘involuntary confessions of pleasure’ is that, confessionally-speaking, pleasure is not nearly as important as desire, and meat shots and money shots do not tell us about desire – or [...] at least not about the desires of the actors” (“Confession” 34). Taylor clarifies that “[a]lthough the act of sex is real, it is not true: porn stars are not telling the truth of their sex or their desire” (emphasis in original; 33). Confusing the “real” of the pro-filmic event with the “truth” of the desire, Williams falls into the same trap of the phallocentric investment in visuality that she wishes to dispute. Hence, the doubled notion of visibility at work in her analysis of pornography mistakes the acts and pleasures with the truth of the individual’s sexuality and desire.47

Taylor rightfully notes that most pornography is not offered up as quasi-scientific information about human sexuality, or as the confession of innermost desires, but as fiction and fantasy catering to the desires of its viewers. In Linda/Les and Annie, however, the oscillating documentary framework does sustain an element of a truth-telling even in, perhaps especially in, the pornographic sequences. The “thing” that tells the truth, however, is not an involuntary paroxysm of pleasure, but imagery of a face crying or smiling, coupled with a voice-over that directs the interpretation of the emotional truth. While not based on the model of a proper confession, the seemingly out-of-control paroxysm of Annie’s unfaked, unstaged tears and Les’ big smile inflects the display of emotions and its interpretation with

both on and off camera is experienced or perceived to be unfaked or unstaged hydraulics. See Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning, especially pp. 102-106 and 138-140.

47 That this conflation of the cinematic privilege of realism with discursive truth in Williams’ seminal text for porn studies has only recently been addressed by Taylor perhaps reflects the desire on part of porn studies scholarship to establish itself as a study of a cultural discourse with a direct relation to political ‘realities,’ as Williams frames her study in the introduction. Also, film theorist Ingrid Ryberg sees that her harnessing of cinematic ontology to a sexual epistemology has contributed to a visual essentialism in contemporary queer porn culture. In “Maximizing Visibility,” she argues that explicit cinematic language is used in queer porn towards revealing all the body’s sexual secrets in order to render visible marginalized subject positions and experiences (72). It is this mistaken use of the doubled notion of “visibility” that I wish to clarify and critique in the creation and reception of Linda/Les and Annie, foremost as an early example of a format still in place in contemporary queer/trans porn that considers itself political simply because it reflects “real” bodies, desires, experiences.
authenticity. Taylor’s critique of Williams emphasizes the role of the porn consumers. Studies indicate that he (male only) is not concerned with the authenticity or truthfulness of an actor’s pleasures and desires, so long as she or he performs well, in other words, as long as the imagery offers a convincing “fantasy of realness” (34). The emphasis in the video on authentic emotions in combination with its staging of sexual acts indicates that its pornographic dimension of ‘realness’ also relies on fantasy, not of the realness of sex, but of its emotional impact.

Sprinkle’s seducing voice-over and the videos’ reliance on emotional reaction shots solicit the viewer to believe instead of observe truth; *Linda/Les and Annie* entails much more than a straightforward use of representational realism. Its apparent scepticism of film’s ontology has more in common with the genre of world cinema that Thomas Elsaesser terms a “new realism” and “new materiality” (“World Cinema” 5, 7). Central to the ‘ontological unrest’ and ‘uncertainty’ of this group of films, he claims, is a form of “contractualism”: “the notion that what allows one to cope with social constructions both in real life and in visual representations are in each case not only hidden power structures, but also openly negotiated conventions” (8). The audience plays the role of the partner in the negotiation: neither master nor dupe, but co-constructor of the contract that organizes the visual mapping of the knowable social field (8).

The contractual relation with the audience, for Elsaesser, most dramatically changes the conventions of visual representation. Instead of suffering the mastery of a monocular central perspective, the main protagonists enter into a contract to accept as given what appears to be impossible, which extends to the spectator a “mutually confirming ‘as-if’ mode” (10). In Elsaesser’s genre of new realist films, there is no way back to assume that ‘evidence’ can be based on “ocular verification,” in which ‘to see is to know’ (10). He compares this aspect to watching other people have a headache: “there is no way I can have positive evidence, other than reading signs or the agreed semantics of symptoms” (10-11). Of such signs, such as a smile for pleasure, or a frown for sadness, the audience has to trust. Trust on the part of the audience, who do not see the sign but are told of the condition, involves taking a “leap across an abyss” (Elsaesser, “World” 11). *Linda/Les and Annie* similarly expresses

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48 I return to the epistemological import of an ‘as-if’ mode in Chapter Five, “Curiosity,” to explore in more depth the potential of sci-fi, porn, and detective genres to think otherwise, to suspend conventions of reality and insert fantastical conventions that might benefit, for instance, survival of trans figures.
scepticism towards ocular verification. The film relies on trust, on the audience’s belief in Sprinkle’s purported feeling, which is not unlike a headache: an apparently pleasurable “head-fuck.” Hence, although the box cover implores “see it to believe it,” *Linda/Les and Annie* suggests otherwise: the secret it reveals is sensible, material, as well as fantastic. Via Sprinkle, the video solicits a contractual relation with the spectator to enter a mutually affirming ‘as-if’ mode in relation to the pleasure and pain that arise from Nichols’ gender ambiguity. In effect, the audience may agree to “believe in” the epistemic challenge that Nichols presents to the ocular-centric attribution of gender.

The emotional voice points a finger at its supposed real, imploring the audience to “Look!” Even without this command, as Bal notes, an audience tends to go along with the general meaning of the gesture of exposing: to believe, to appreciate, and to enjoy (*Double 8*). However, as Judith Butler writes, “when we point to something as real, and in political discourse it is very often imperative to wield the ontological indicator in precisely that way, this is not the end but the beginning of the political problematic” (emphasis mine; “The Force of Fantasy” 489). Similarly, the video’s effect of pointing at phantasmatic ‘things’ as real -- the head-fuck, the pleasure, the pain, Nichols’ masculinity – is to interrogate the variable boundary of the social phantasmatic from which the real is insistently contested. Pointing to the ontological becomes a way to point at the phantasmatic dimension, and *vice versa*. In this way, the video’s examination of the “mind-blowing head-fuck” might be understood as central to the performance of what Butler deems feminist thought can do: examine the circumspection of the (supposed) real (487).

Sprinkle’s fantasy of the “transgender” is elaborated in the closing montage, during which she says, “I imagined a new community forming of men with cunts, a new political force of women taking over the world as men.” In a similar vein, Butler defends feminism’s use of fantasy for political change in its task of (re)thinking futurity: “fantasy is not equated with what is not real, but rather what is not *yet* real, what is possible or futural, or what belongs to a different version of the real” (487). Sprinkle’s strategic claim of Les’ desirous masculinity suggests that the video participates in the protean dynamics of community and identity building, not merely offering up a pre-given real that appears transparently in the image. Its task is not to

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49 Hence, it also challenges the similar assumption that visual representation leads to political recognition in Green’s statement “to be believed, we must be seen.”
resolve the tension between real and phantasmatic, but to picture the crisis. The simultaneous use of documentary and pornographic modes of seeing engages the discourse of positivism to seize on its fantastical dimension. Hence, rather than merely relaying a pre-existing experience in evidence and argument, delivered by the generic conventions of pornography and documentary, the video’s most crucial political work is of installing belief. As I view it, the video offers an exposé not only of transsexuality, but also of the epistemological gesture of exposing sex.

Shifting from investigating the real and its epistemological regime in the activist-styled works of Ross and Sprinkle, the next chapter, “Fetishism,” focuses on commercial works that mobilize the phantasmatic element of sex, which Sigmund Freud describes as a fetish. In the economic register, Karl Marx similarly analyzes the secretly hidden labour appearing in the incorporeal, yet material glitter of a fetish. Chapter Two seeks to develop further a critical epistemology of a true sex in terms of assessing the strategy of becoming a not-so-secret fetish; in other words, by embracing commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism, a practice which I locate in commercial FtM pornography.
Chapter Two
Fetishism

Mirah-Soleil Ross’ assertion that transsexuals rarely represent their sexuality outside the genre of commercial porn resonates with the views of editors Raven Kaldera and Hanne Blank of *Best Transgender Erotica*. In this historic volume of “our stories,” those “images of transgender sex that are truly transgender in nature” are strictly opposed to “traditional” transgender erotica, starring mostly so-called she-males, who are often required “to fuck like men” (8). Until very recently erotic material featuring FtMs was nonexistent, leaving little to complain about except the lack of apparent interest. The editors offer the following explanation for the erotic invisibility of FtMs: “Our sexual culture, by and large, runs on stereotyped femininity and fetishizations of the phallus” (8-9). They take as an example of this ‘girl-girl’ porn for a heterosexual male audience, in which stylized femininity and a prominent phallus, usually a dildo, are prominent. In this context, the popularity of she-male porn, featuring cosmetically and even surgically feminized talent, but otherwise offering cock-focused imagery, seems obvious. Missing in FtM porn is an erotically validating combination of sexual markers, so that neither attributes of stereotyped femininity nor “the God-given schlongs that command recognition of sexual maleness” are dominant (Kaldera and Blank 9).

Buck Angel’s pioneering enterprise as a commercial FtM pornstar, dubbed ”a man with a pussy,” has sent shock waves through an industry which, reflective of Western sexual culture, largely runs on stereotyped femininity and fetishizations of the phallus. The porn industry makes 10,000 – 11,000 films a year (Hollywood makes approximately 400) to the tune of $57 billion in annual revenue worldwide.¹ Angel’s intervention lies not in entering or competing in this market in a different manner. Like many current stars, he uses a membership-based website to make a living and stars in relatively low-budget productions sold as DVDs. However, characteristic of his work is the refusal to accept the traditional terms of fetishizing a phallus, encapsulated in his motto, “It’s not what’s between your legs that defines your

¹ Nina Power’s chapter on pornography and capitalism in *One Dimensional Woman* quotes similar figures to Linda Williams’ introduction to *Porn Studies* (1-2). Power also places this figure into the context that this is more money than Hollywood and all major league sports make together. Additionally, she writes that 300,000 porn sites are available with a click of the mouse, and 200 new films are estimated to be in production a week (56).
gender” (website banner). The repetitive format of Angel’s new posting or DVD, in which his “man with a pussy” body is revealed over and again, stresses in its unavailability the fetishized element of gender, the penis, according to both Freudian and cultural norms. In the “Fetishism” essay, Freud writes “we may say that the normal prototype of fetishes is a man’s penis, just as the normal prototype of inferior organs is a woman’s real small penis, the clitoris” (357). Like Les Nichols’, who features in the Annie Sprinkle film I discussed in the previous chapter, Buck Angel’s body has been hormonally-enhanced. Also, it is crisscrossed with tattoos and is incredibly muscular. Unlike Nichols’, Angel’s genitals have not been modified by surgery, although regularly injected testosterone encourages minimal growth of the clitoris. Apparently, for Angel and his fans, the clitoris and vulva are not inferior, but just what they were looking for, on a man.

Angel’s trans reality, in which his manly gender seems to clash with his female vagina, is not exhibited in a museum, an artistic performance, or an educational exposé, such as in the works of Ross and Sprinkle. The revelation of a “sex secret” is Angel’s trademark in the porn and sex show industry. Angel maintains that he did not want to create freak porn, or even trans porn, but rather porn that reflects a “community of men with pussies” (in We-TV’s Secret Lives). Though the niche market of men with pussies may be small, its appeal does not conform to the categories for sexual identity: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, even transsexual. In *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault argues that the rational “concatenation” of local sexualities “has been ensured and relayed by the countless economic interests” that, “with the help of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution, and pornography have tapped into both this analytical multiplication of pleasure and this optimization of the power that controls it” (emphasis mine; 48). The first volume is committed to medicine and psychiatry, while the industries of prostitution and pornography are largely left by the wayside.² The comment, however, suggests that pornography is one economic engine that implants new perversions and new local sexualities, an insight that scholars in Porn Studies have seized upon to both celebrate and decry pornography’s influence on sexuality.

Foucault does not develop a traditional analysis of the “economic interests” that thrive on secrecy, focusing instead on the political economy of truth. Karl Marx,

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² The writings of de Sade and other confessional text are taken to be paradigmatic, but no visual pornographies are discussed.
however, does offer a theory of secrecy’s economic and epistemic importance that I wish to pursue for its potential bearing on commercial pornography and transsexuality. The first chapter of *Capital* vol. 1, titled “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof,” accounts for the ways in which capital requires commodification. That only seems transparent because of the hidden character of exploited surplus labor, which the consumer does not notice when she gazes upon a commodity. In other words, the value of a commodity derives not from its usefulness, but from the amount of profit made on the surplus labor abstracted from the worker in its production. The material relations between persons (workers and capitalists) are displayed in the marketplace through the commodity’s perceived value. Commodification transforms the material relation between worker and capitalist into a fantastical social relation between things circulating in the economy; for instance, when $x$ bolts of linen becomes equal to $y$ jackets. The commodity’s illusionary independence of value, divorced from the creative labor of the worker, Marx compares to ‘fetish’ images that are invested with divine powers by religious cults. Hence, his coinage of the ‘fetishism’ of commodities.

Marx famously makes the statement, “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood” (81). He further asserts that his analysis will show “that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties” (81). Starting from the investigation of what appears trivial and easily understood, Marxist feminism assumes an analogy between the hidden labors of commodification and genderization. Donna Haraway writes that the critique of patriarchy similarly disputes the naturalization of the binary pairs of nature/culture and resource/product (“An Entry” 130-131). The epistemology of difference that separates the resource from the product by hiding the labor that creates the commodity is the same epistemology that naturalizes the division of the sexes, hiding the labor that is involved in becoming gendered. Hence, the feminist position may suggest that, like a fetishized commodity, the secret of sex is shown by *not* showing itself to be a secret at all. It perpetuates in every exchange that deems the thing of gender real or natural. For some bodies in the marketplace of gender ‘the secret of sex’ has a special valence. For transsexuals and transgender people, the revelation of one’s secret sex refers to the materiality of the body and the ways in which it is valued in relation to gender.

In this chapter, I propose understanding Foucault’s argument of sex as a secret to be exploited for profit and as materialization of power as a particularly Marxist
insight. Developing Foucauldian sexuality through an economic framework enables me to address the stakes that medicine, psychiatry and psychoanalysis, as well as pornography, all have in the sex-gender system, especially in multiplying and penetrating sexual conduct. Moreover, I contend that the strand of marxist critique that advocates ‘critical’ gestures of exposure become difficult to sustain as pure acts of rebellion against secrecy, when viewed in terms of trans image-making practices. Most dramatically, such self-representations in the form of pornography mobilize and to some extent embrace the logic of secrecy and its side effect of fetishism. The genre of “trans porn,” I suggest, indicates the necessity of a theoretical framework that includes an analysis of secrecy’s economic and epistemological stakes, while also accounting for the political efficacy of seemingly pro-fetishistic representations.

Pointing at the interpenetration of mainstream culture and marginal pornographies, Williams underlines the importance of shifting the focus of analysis towards the popularity of the material:

Where once it seemed necessary to argue vehemently against pro-censorship, antipornography feminism for the value and importance of studying pornography …, today porn studies address a veritable explosion of sexually explicit material that cry out for better understanding. (“Porn” 1)

Apart of the explosion of material that demands analysis, I argue that FtM and transmasculine porn require new methods for understanding the stakes of sexual secrets in terms of fetishization and visibility. The present chapter interrogates the phantasmatic, yet material, representation of sex secrets in the commercial pornography of Buck Angel. I examine the involvement of both Marx’s commodity and Freud’s fetish in the trademarked image of Buck as the “man with a pussy.” I close with a reflection on the temporality of trans porn, its political cutting edge in an age of an unprecedented market for commercial pornography. The political gain in mobilizing secrecy lies in potentially transforming the order of “visibility and readability” (Foucault), an accounting of which I propose involves tracing the shimmering image of a material, yet phantasmic, ‘thing’ through pornographic imagery.
**Buck Angel’s ‘Trademark’**

In February 2003, Buck Angel launched ‘www.transsexual-man.com’ to introduce a new genre of pornography, as Angel relates in the ‘about me’ section of the website. However, he continues, “in an industry where you can see clown porn and balloon porn, [ironically] a man with a pussy is horrific!” (in We-TV’s *Secret Lives*).

Nevertheless, the member-only site generated enough market interest for Angel to be signed by Robert Hill Releasing in 2005, which produced videos starring “Buck Angel, the man with a pussy™.” Angel broke contract for unknown reasons, and thereafter set up his production team as Buck Angel Entertainment. The economic story of the evolution from the nameless “transsexual-man” to the registered trademark of “Buck Angel,” I propose, speaks of the successful marketing of his transmasculine embodiment, exploiting secrecy and exposure for financial profit.³

As he discloses in the documentary *Secret Lives of Women Porn Stars* (2008), while other porn talent require a gimmick, all he needed “was to be myself.” The product Angel sells is the image of a man with a pussy, a phrase decorated with the official sign of a trademark, as well as a registered name, on his current webpage.

The page asserts that “Buck Angel is the man with a pussy,” implying that the two terms are identical and exchangeable. Elsewhere the site claims he is “the original”

³ A trademark is a distinctive sign used by an individual, business organization, or other legal entity to identify that the products or services originate from a unique source, and to distinguish its products or services from those of other entities. It is a type of intellectual property, and typically a name, word, phrase, logo, symbol, design, image, or a combination of these elements. The term trademark is also used informally to refer to any distinguishing attribute by which an individual is readily identified, such as the characteristics of celebrities.
man with the pussy, which suggests less worthy knock-offs of his product. The commodification of Angel’s particular transsexual embodiment transforms Buck Angel, an actual person with a transsexual history, into a collectable item, a product on the website for sale in stills, clips, or in DVD format.\(^4\)

The figure of Angel demonstrates a complex integration of secrecy for monetary, and potentially, I would add, political gain at the levels of gender, sexuality, visual image, and commodity. Katja Diefenbach describes the political as the “contingent advent of an event that allows for the coming together of different dissident practices, increasing their mutual connections, whereby the normal distributions of places and functions are interrupted and the chance of exceeding the existing order emerges” (“Fizzle Out” 74). The interpenetration of secrecy in the aspects that cluster around “Buck Angel,” I suggest, may produce such a contingent political event. The various operations of secrecy in Angel’s work are all channeled through the ‘irrational perception’ that both Marx and Freud describes as fetishism. Though their emphasis and interpretation differ, fetishism is for both a disturbance in perception, perceiving something not there, an illusory belief in the value of specific objects. Both theories expand upon nineteenth-century anthropological research into religion, in which fetishism denotes the worship of a crude representation, an idol with animating power. Strikingly, both theories contain a corrective element to faulty imagery in the tradition of iconoclasm.\(^5\) Counter to the idolatry of commodity forms and sexual substitutes, both Marx and Freud promise to reveal this perception’s hidden incentives. Whereas Freud seeks to prove that ‘nothing’ is really there behind the secret of the fetish other than a phantasm of a penis, Marx claims the material object in its state of pure use value can be sought out. Unlike the Marx and Freud-inspired anti-fetishistic theories of pornography that focus on its dangerous and illusionary *vraisemblance*, however, Angel’s embrace of fetishism accounts for the political benefits it may offer through

\(^4\) Also, in accordance with the capitalist model of trade, Angel’s availability for purchase displays great flexibility: stills, clips, full-length video, and sexual performance (for instance at the club “Torture Garden” in London). Due to space constraints, I will not be able to further incorporate this element of his commodity status. On capitalism’s characteristic of flexibility in relation to transgenderism, see Judith Halberstam’s chapter “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies” in *In a Queer Time and Place*. She draws on the economic theories of Frederic Jameson and David Harvey, and integrates Emily Martin’s book *Flexible Bodies* on the economics of the immune system.

\(^5\) This has been pointed out by many writers, see for example Williams, “they both share a common will to expose the processes by which individuals fall victim to an illusory belief in the exalted value of certain (fetish) objects. Thus both writers pose the illusion of the fetish object’s intrinsic value against their own greater knowledge of the social-economic or psychic conditions that construct that illusion” (*Hard Core* 104).
the mobilization of an image – the man with a pussy – that is phantasmatic yet material.

Both Marx and Freud suggest an ideal fetishist, who is confronted with a world of representations. As Laura Mulvey attests, feminist aesthetics seized the task of combining the insights of sexual and economic fetishism because it provided a powerful concept that “made visible a gap between an image and the object it purported to represent and, thus, a mobility and instability of meaning have been a source of liberation” (“Some Thoughts” 3). Hence, fetishism plays the part of a cultural wedge between image and referent, a subjective perception through which things become distorted. The tension between sexual and commodity fetishism in Angel’s commercial porn demonstrates the varying epistemological consequences of this lack of faith in vision. The mobility of meaning of fetishistic practices is encapsulated in his motto, “It’s not what’s between your legs that defines your gender” (website banner). I will try to show that Angel’s pornography utilizes commodity fetishism as a wedge to assert an anti-fetishistic stance towards the genitals, offering a corrective to Freudian fetishism.

Angel’s motto, a transgender slogan of self-determination echoed in the works of Kate Bornstein, Riki Ann Wilchins, Dean Spade, and others, relocates the definition of gender away from genitals. In interviews in mass and underground media, such as the Tyra Banks (USA) and Jensen (NL) talk shows, BUTT international gay magazine, and in the monthly web show “Bucking the System,” Angel professes to see no conflict between being a man and having a vagina. Though he may be the first man with a pussy to reach porn star status, he is certainly not the only man-identified person with a vulva (Nichols, starring more than a decade earlier, retained his). The reality for most FtMs is that undergoing a phalloplasty to create a neophallus is too expensive as well as unappealing as it bears a high risk of losing

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6 See Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaws*, Wilchin’s *Read My Lips*, Spade’s “Mutilating Gender” as well as C. Jacob Hale’s “Sex without Men or Women” and Jordy Jones’ “Gender without Genitals.”

7 In the late 90s, the likely FtM transsexual porn talent “Chance Ryder” performed in videos for Totally Tasteless Productions, of which I have been able to locate and view four scenes. He is marketed as a hermaphrodite and explains that he was born this way (manly with a large clitoris and a vagina), though visible scars from a chest surgery suggest otherwise. Ryder unfortunately committed suicide and no interview or other research exists to confirm or contest my suspicion that he was in fact a transsexual person. Since Angel’s fame, another FtM (without chest surgery), who goes by “van Diesel” has also made pornographic videos, marketed to gay men. Titles include *Man with a Pussy, Diesel’s Double Vision*, and *Diesel Exposed.*
sexual sensation.⁸ One might say that the open secret amongst transmen is that most FtM transsexuals are, in fact, men with vaginas.⁹

Without naming precisely what or who defines your gender, Angel’s motto indicates that the thing, the “what’s between your legs,” is not the determinate sign, the referent that corresponds to the truth of gender. However, as Judith Shapiro explains, most transsexuals do acknowledge the social force of “what’s between your legs” as a determinate sign:

To those who might be inclined to diagnose the transsexual’s focus on the genitals as obsessive or fetishistic […] the response is that they are, in fact, simply conforming to their culture’s criteria for gender assignment. Transsexuals’ fixation on having the right genitals is clearly less pathological than if they were to insist that they were women with penises or men with vaginas. (emphasis mine; 260)

In Shapiro’s use, ‘fetishistic’ refers to the focus on genitals as the principal sign of gender, a usage that derives from Freud’s emphasis on the psychical consequences of recognizing, that is misperceiving, anatomical difference.¹⁰ In insisting on being a man with a vagina, Angel counters the social obsession with a singular marker that ‘counts’ as the only criterion for gender assignment. The price for his negligence to be fetishistic in the proper way by demanding a penis, or at least a replacement, Shapiro informs the reader, is to become classified as pathological, or in the porn business as “horrific,” as Angel phrased it. The transgression rendered by his transgender embodiment is the exposure of the ‘social secret’ hidden in and by sexual fetishism: the fetishism of the correct anatomical criterion for gender identity, the absence or

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⁸ The other serious health risks include fissures, bleeding, infection, etc. For a recent but preliminary analysis of FtM choice with regard to genital reconstruction see Katherine Rachlin’s “Factors Which Influence Individual’s Decisions When Considering Female-To-Male Genital Reconstructive Surgery.” Rachlin draws the following implications from her research results: “It is crucial to be realistic and allow that many FTMs will choose not to have surgery not because they do not want a penis, but because we can not offer them an affordable, realistic, and fully functioning penis” (n/p). FtM sources include *ManTool* by Loren Cameron, Dean Kotula’s *The Phallus Palace: Female-to-Male Transsexuals* and forthcoming *Hung Jury: Testimonies of Genital Surgery by Transsexual Men* by Trystan Cotten and Zander Keig.

⁹ It is also common to opt for some type of genital reconstruction and chose to retain the vaginal opening. Sedgwick defines the open secret in her analysis of homosexuality as a special secret that is widely known to be true, but none of the people intimately involved is willing to categorically acknowledge it in public (22). FtMs are more and more willing to acknowledge this in public, which changes the face of being transsexual, of being invisible as such. This state of gender nonconformity, while perhaps not satisfactory for some FtMs, if acknowledged, poses a serious threat to both the cultural and clinical criteria for gender (re)assignment.

¹⁰ See his development of the main terms of fetishism in terms of sexual distinction in “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes” (1925), which was published some two years prior to his essay “Fetishism” (1927).
presence of a penis. This revelation, exposing the mysticism of gender as an unnatural and irrational association between referent and image, comes across as horrific. This horror affixes to Angel (and other transmasculine bodies) because his specific embodiment also fulfills the criteria of gendered “horror” attached to Freud’s vision of the naked female body.

Of Sex Conversions and the “Compensatory Substitute”

Freud’s interpretation, offered in his 1927 essay “Fetishism,” describes sexual fetishism as a psychic action against the “horror of castration,” which is experienced by the little boy in seeing his mother’s genitals, imagining that something is missing, the penis (353). “Probably,” Freud muses, “no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital” (354). Expressing sympathy with the fetishist, Freud normalizes, universalizes even, the nominal ‘perversion.’ No male, including Freud himself, is able to see anything other than a wound at the site or sight of the female genitalia. Freud projects the truth of female lack onto the fetishist. This leads Williams to conclude that “his very explanation originates in a fetishistic misrecognition of a sensuous, perceptual thing, followed by the creation of a compensatory substitute” (Hard Core 105). Freud, acting as the prototypical fetishist, uses the veil of theory as a substitute for the ‘bloody wound’; the Freudian ‘theory’ of fetishism stands in for the compensatory counter-wish. Nevertheless, the interpretation that Freud advances has had great resonance in social theories of sexual difference and gender attribution. As Shapiro indicates in her study, “Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex,” some transsexuals, obeying fetishistic logic, insist that at the least anatomical sex be mutable through plastic surgery and hormonal modification, although the ‘felt sense’ of a gender identity may be unchanging.11 Similarly, the fetishist, at least in Freud’s description, presumes the ability to convert sexes, even if only psychically.

The psychic action, according to Freud, involves the fetishist’s libidinal investment in non-genital objects that substitute for the woman’s lost or stolen penis. Freud views this as a helpful, if delusional, response to the threat of castration. The

11 Shapiro seems to be repeating observations made by Benjamin that transsexuals want to undergo “corrective surgery, a so-called ‘conversion operation,’ so that their bodies would at least resemble those of the sex to which they feel they belong” (27). From Benjamin’s point of view surgery seems to achieve a conversion that cannot be completed to satisfaction mentally. I will explore this supposition in “Suture.”
object becomes a referent for his counter-wish. In the transfer of libido, the fetishist reinstates his earliest belief, however wrong, that his mother has a penis just like him. Besides providing great joy and convenience, the fetish object signifies a “token of triumph” over the horror of castration, something that Freud describes as a successful mental disavowal of the idea of threat (353). He defines disavowal as a perceptual action, not a “blind spot in the retina” that a scotomization would produce, but an investment in a counter-wish to cover over the “unwelcome perception” (353). According to Freud, the phantasmatic fetish appears more substantial than the negativity that defines woman: “something else … now absorbs all the interest” (353). The fetish object memorializes the threat in as much as it erects a monument to another, more pleasing, idea. Hence, the fetish is both the secret fear and the secret wish, condensed into one object. Freud alleges to be able to see behind the compensatory pleasure to reveal the ‘truth’ of the fetish; yet, that truth is always the same: a bloody wound that reminds the male of his own vulnerability to loss. The fetish hides the universal potential for becoming-negative, which Freud aligns with the female form.12

At first glance, Angel’s body resonates with Freud’s description of the body that (he imagines that) the little boy sees: a castrated male form, in other words, a man without a penis.13 Yet, Buck Angel’s pronounced trademark is not Freud’s proffered negative description of a woman as ‘man without a penis.’ The banner stamped on most images of Angel promises a ‘man with a pussy.’ In a cheeky promotional image, Angel holds a stick of dynamite over his crotch. It functions to conceal what Freud would perceive as the nothing, thus acting as a fetish. However, as a stick of dynamite with a lit fuse, it offers more than the helpful counter-wish: it also threatens to blow up what the viewer might assume to be a penis, based on his otherwise male physique. The photograph also shows Angel smoking a cigar, providing the fire to light the dynamite. As a phallic object offered to the viewer as another insignia of his masculinity, the cigar is also a complicit fetish object, articulating at once a desire for the phallus and the threat to its destruction.

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12 For a different emphasis on reading the dialectic of negation and affirmation in Freudian fetishism, see Miklitsch’s “The Commodity-Body-Sign,” which sees that “fetishism is the ‘negation’ of castration, this also always affirms the existence of that which fetishism serves to deny,” that is, the notion that a woman has no penis (11).
13 Though the actual act of castration refers to the removal of testes (male reproductive organ), Freudian theory erroneously perpetuates the myth that it involves the removal or mutilation of the penis thereby citing the penis as the seat of masculinity or male sexual force.
The joke of the image is that Angel already is a man without a penis, with nothing more to lose. What then will the dynamite blow up? The image indicates another target. In the lower right-hand side, it is stamped with Angel’s brand, the transgender sign in flames, suggesting that the fire may have another source. The threat, indicated by the image’s fierceness and the dynamite, is directed at the sign system of genital fetishism. Fighting signs with signs, the semiotic of the brand’s by-line suggests a challenging narrative to the sight of his allegedly negative image. Instead of starting from zero or less, Angel’s politicized body, marketed as commercial work, seeks out a change in preposition from without (a penis) to with (a pussy) to kindle a change in perception. The image supports Angel’s thrust to recalculate Freud’s plus-or-minus gender algebra and challenge the assertion of sexual difference as visual fact.14 Dismantling the negativity of the castration complex and its reassurance in fetishism, Angel gains the ability to claim that he too is a man, and more than that, a man with the addition of a pussy. Angel’s commodified sex, his particularized “man with a pussy” embodiment, moreover, exhibits the secret labor of becoming gendered. It points to what is between his legs while at the same time

14 This ‘something’ of the vagina, as Williams points out, is a “sensuous, perceptual thing,” even if Freud is unable to “see beyond appearances to recognize how social relations of power have constructed him to so perceive women’s genitals” as nothing or less (Hard Core 105).
pointing to the process of making the genitalia act as the fixture of gender. In this regard, the works resulting from his commercial pornography can be said to interrogate the labor involved in gendering oneself and being gendered: the ways in which the penis animates, and naturalizes that animation, of a gendered body.

Fungible Fetish

From a feminist perspective, Williams first advanced an analysis of pornographic film that sought out epistemological and gender uncertainty in “this most masculine of film genres” (xvi). Her chapter Four “Fetishism and Hard Core: Marx, Freud, and the ‘Money Shot’” examines what she describes as “the most blatantly phallic of all hard-core film representations” (95). Williams argues that “the money shot can be viewed as the most representative instance of phallic power and pleasure” (95).15 In her analysis, fetishism functions as leverage to pry apart the genre’s phallic encasement. From a Freudian perspective, she alleges that the ‘cum shot’ serves as a compensatory substitute for what cannot be seen, a fetish for female climatic pleasure.16 Pointing at the extra fee that performers earn for ejaculating at the right time, she suggests that the so-called ‘money shot’ is an ideal instance of commodity fetishism. Williams’ analysis of the interaction of the two kinds of fetishisms suggests that the substitution object may be transferable: “The Marxian and Freudian fetishist locates illusory and compensatory pleasure and power in the gleam of gold or the lacy frill of an undergarment” (104). The phantasmatic yet material secret of commodity fetishism evidenced by its “gleam,” I contend, might be substituted for the unresolved search

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15 In Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning, Murat Aydemir describes the cum shot’s defining features in terms of its function as hard core’s pinnacle filmic convention of an ejaculating penis shown in close-up that always occurs out of the body of the sexual partner: “Semen spurts, trickles, or gushes from the penis, and lands on the female or male skin of the buttocks, chest, belly, backside, or face” signaling the conclusion, nearly always, of the sexual encounter and the film’s sexual narrative (93). His chapters on pornography, however, challenge the concluding note of cum shots and their reification of a phallic masculinity.

16 In Williams’ analysis of the “money shot,” in which the penis is depicted ejaculating in pornographic films, she asserts that this actual penis is a fetishistic, over-valued ruse to distract from the “thing” pornography most wants to depict, but cannot: the climatic pleasure of the vagina. Ultimately, the vagina, according to Williams’ Freudian thinking, can never be a fetish in hard core pornography. Instead, she seeks to expand Luce Irigarary’s main thesis that woman appears as absence, lack and nothingness in a male-signifying -- a visual -- economy. She claims that the “real thing” of female pleasure is the additive combination of erogenous zones. She insists on “the clitoris and the vagina, the lips and the vulva” – an enumeration project that puts forward a plural economy of the female to combat the “one and only phallic pleasure” Freud’s theory of sexuality advances (emphasis mine; 115-116). Yet in her citation of many valuable (because useful) locations of female pleasure, she reaffirms the distinction of corporeal complexes that distinguishes the woman’s body from the man’s, “the either/or opposition posed by Freud” that she wishes to abandon (115).
for a pleasing frilly cover, or for the “money shot” that distracts from the so-called horror that Freud assumes all men see. However, rather than attribute this helpful fetish to the exemplary male fetishist, I want to suggest that Buck Angel foremost profits from the gleam of the commodity fetish, not only monetarily, but also in securing an image in the visual field.

Angel’s transmasculine embodiment precludes the production of a classic “cum shot” fetish image, at least as originating from him, and he certainly foregoes frilly panties or other ‘feminine’ distractions. However, his trademarked embodiment materializes as an image or series of images that circulate in a monetary and libidinal economy. On the basis of the case of Angel’s relative success as a porn star, one might come to understand a “counter-wish” of sexual fetishism, which seeks to locate interest in a “something else” than the “horror of castration,” which attempts to find fulfillment in the specifically visual qualities of the commodity fetish. In the trademark of being “the man with a pussy,” Angel lays claim to becoming at least a “token of triumph” (Freud, “Fetishism” 353). The term “token” in Freud’s analysis suggests a point of overlap between libidinal economy, the visual economy of commodities, and the monetary system. Hence, the image for sale – Buck Angel, the man with the pussy – can be understood to engage with the so-called “unwelcome perception” of the horror of castration in order to overcome it with the production of an appealing, triumphant token.

The relation of interchange between sexual and commodity fetish can be elaborated from Freud’s development of fetishism, particularly the case in which his fetishist collapses pleasure, the play of light, and a mode of interested looking. Freud offers the following explanation for a young man’s exaltation of a particular “shine on the nose” into a fetish:

The surprising explanation of this was that the patient had been brought up in an English nursery but had later come to Germany, where he forgot his mother-tongue almost completely. The fetish, which originated from

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17 Due to limitations of space, I am only able to speculate the extent that this token is a fetish substitute for a phallus for the largest consumer market of his material, gay men, who presumably would be most interested in the penis. This line of thought might be usefully followed with Freud’s own inquiry into homosexual men and the castration complex and Jean-Joseph Goux’s analysis of the interchangeability of the phallus and gold in Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud.

18 The phrase “triumphant token” might be taken in an additional sense. Since Buck Angel is the first and only professional FtM porn star, he is also a ‘token’ or symbolic representative of FtM sexuality in commercial porn. Particularly with regard to his nominations and awards from the Adult Video News and Gay Video News, in which he is (still) the first transman to be considered or named.
his earliest childhood, had to be understood in English, not German. The ‘shine on the nose’ [in German ‘Glanz auf der Nase’] – was in reality a ‘glance at the nose.’ The nose was thus the fetish, which, incidentally, he endowed at will with the luminous shine which was not perceptible to others. (emphasis in original; 351)

The glance becomes remembered as the Glanz (shine), though the word choice also seems overdetermined as a pun: Glans is German slang for ‘cock.’ Although Freud claims that the nose is the fetish, perhaps due to its phallic shape, it is hardly incidental that the fetishist converts the visual pleasure of self-directed looking (his glance) to the visuality of an external glow calling to him (Glanz). In other words, he retains his interest in looking, but now at a “luminous shine,” an even better and more convenient pleasure that he recreates “at will.” Far from being a mere addition to the real object of the nose, the imperceptible shine seems closer to a fetish object: a semi-private delusion that he wills into perception.

In its polysemic and fungible form, this exemplary shine (Glanz) structures fetishism’s mobile, distorted, and pleasing perception of a disavowed secret. The pleasurable illusion of seeing sex, or of a phantasm of an immaterial phallus in the place of the vagina, might be likened to Foucault’s suggestion of a mirage of sex (Chapter One). Foucault describes fetishism, albeit briefly, as contributing to a modern notion of sex, the networked dispositif of sexuality (Will 153-4). He contends that sexuality might be described as a modeling of fetishism’s core idea of irrational perception: “that there exists something other than bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions, anatomo-physiological systems, sensations, and pleasures” (Will 152-153). This “something other” is a mirage, an irrational perception that appears real and true. As I discuss in the previous chapter, Foucault invokes the shimmering lights of a mirage to provide a metaphor for the collective (mis)perception of sexuality. There, as much as in the fetishist’s perception, the desire to see produces the illusory perception of a secret. In turn the experience of the perception is pleasurable. Foucault’s metaphors of the “dark shimmer of sex” and the “shimmering mirage of sex” also operate on the basis of fantasy producing figments

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19 In German, as in English, Glans denotes the head or tip of the penis; by synecdoche (part for whole) it extends to the whole penis. Hence, Freud puns his way through the entire argument of fetishism and its structure of slippery substitution in which the German Glanz becomes Glans, which allows for the shine in English to convert to a penis. I thank Murat Aydemir for sharing the joke.

20 Additionally, the model perversion of fetishism contributed as well to a conceptualization of sex and its deviations “governed by the interplay of whole and part, principle and lack, absence and presence, excess and deficiency” (Foucault, Will 154).
of the imagination taken as natural and self-evident; to the perceiver, sex appears as materially real. This insight can now be recast as a commentary on Marx and Freud’s interpretation of fetishism as universal (mis)perception in a society in the grips of sexual difference and commodity capitalism.

Moreover, Marxist critique intimates that the ‘token triumph’ of the commodity comes from the social relation it mediates rather than from a shine naturally animating it. Marx writes that “every commodity is a symbol, since, in so far as it is value, it is only the material envelope of the human labor spent upon it” (qtd. in Mitchell, Iconology 192). Far from being a secret thing that is hidden, Marx claims that the everyday ubiquity of the commodity expresses a secret meaning, acting as a “hieroglyphic” sign of capitalism, the code of which he deciphers to demonstrate the pure use of the object once again, its truth. His method is expressly to “try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language” (33). In the process of stamping exchange value, which Wolfgang Fritz Haug describes as the “aestheticization of commodities,” the envelopment of labor creates luminosity, resulting in a production of surface and a sense of depth (qtd. in Miklitsch 15). In other words, the thing becomes a commodity by becoming a secret, covered by an enveloping sheen. In Marx’s terms, the exchange-form is collected as the desirable fetish. In consuming the shiny surface, the use-form (object) becomes sublimated as the consumed secret (commodity). Katja Diefenbach reads Marx’s analysis of fetishism as a futile exercise in grasping the secret in so far as commodification involves a mysterious incorporation. In her estimation, “The secret is not hidden behind the phenomena, it is in the phenomena” (emphasis in original; “Spectral” 5). No amount of tearing away the veils of labor cloaking the commodity will reveal the hard core secret, the real thing. It can only be deciphered, analyzed as the production of self-evidence.

According to Fredric Jameson, commodification in late capitalism means that “we consume, less the thing itself, than its abstract idea, open to the all the libidinal investments ingeniously arrayed for us by advertising” (Signature 12). Bracketing the consumption process, the phenomenon of Buck Angel involves labor in branding and tending to the value of his media image, the man with a pussy as an abstract yet shimmering idea. In this respect, the circulation of Angel’s image through digital video, Web sites, magazines, talk shows, and other media modalities are vital to his
becoming at least a thing, a fetish image. The thing produced, however is less a ‘flesh and blood’ thing than an abstract idea, open to the suffusion of libidinal energies. At the core of Angel’s transmasculine pornography, I observe the exploitation of the interchangeability between the gleam of the token and the shimmering mirage of sex. The fact that the systems of fetishistic codes may shift from industry to gender to sexuality via image media indicates the necessity of accounting for the particular attraction of porn imagery in our time of mediatized and specularized capitalism.

**Pornosphere of Phantasms**

Provocatively, Jameson opens his book *Signatures of the Visible* with the statement that:

> Pornographic films are thus only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body. … [W]e know this today more clearly because our society has begun to offer us the world – now mostly a collection of products of our own making – as just such a body, that you can possess visually, and collect the images of. (1)

Jameson identifies the medium of film as soliciting a graphic perception that commodifies the seen world. However, in addition he asserts that “the visual is essentially pornographic” (emphasis in original; 1). In this sweeping statement, Jameson claims that the commodity experience is modeled on the fetishistic activity of consuming porn. Dana Polan similarly accepts that the appeal of a luminous shine might be understood as the core aesthetic experience of postmodern culture in the era of late capitalism. She writes that “such spectacle [of mass culture] creates the promise of a rich sight: not the sight of particular fetishized objects, but sight itself as richness, as the ground for extensive experience” (emphasis mine; qtd. in Mulvey, “Some Thoughts” 5-6). The experience of sight enriches, even eroticize, the commodity’s gleam.

Laura Mulvey singles out cinema’s appeal as a production of rich sight and a consumption of an abstract idea. She claims that Hollywood “projected across the

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21 *Pace* Williams, the intermedial presence of Angel suggests that hard core film may not be the main mode of producing a fetishized image, nor perhaps the dominant medium for contemporary pornography. As Kaarina Nikunen and Susanna Passonen detect in their study of Finnish porn star and talk show host Rakel Liekki, the “cross-platform” nature of pornography, a characteristic of media at large, contributes to the blurring boundaries of the pornographic and mainstream culture.
A shimmering mirage of desirability that held up the United States to view as the democracy of glamour and the democracy of commodity acquisition” (emphasis mine; Fetishism 43). That cinematic images may project a “shimmering mirage” of a lifestyle and belief system for worldwide audiences turns cinema into the highest instructional form of consumerism. It also attests to the importance of pornographic cinema in commodifying the mirage of sex, showcasing ‘sex-the-idea’ on what Mulvey calls the “magical sheen of the screen” (“Some Thoughts” 12). Cinema coincides with commodity fetishism in its triumph as spectacle; according to Mulvey, “as spectacle, the object becomes image and belief is secured by an erotic, rather than a religious, aura” (12).

In the age of a global ‘movie-going world,’ cinematic pictures become part of, if not the core of, what Susan Buck-Morss calls the “new urban phantasmagoria” (Dialectics 81). In her analysis of Walter Benjamin’s late nineteenth century Arcades project, she argues that representational value triumphs over exchange value: “not so much the commodity-in-the-market as the commodity-on-display … Everything desirable, from sex to social status, could be transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display” (81-82). Cinema’s development as a form of entertainment and mode of perception might not only be traced in the coincidence with commodity aesthetics of shimmering mirages and erotic auras. The notion of the phantasmagoria has roots in the early cinematic technologies of magic lantern shows, which took place in the market (agora) and depicted shadow shows of ghosts (phantasm). The nineteenth-century term was also employed by Marx to describe the fetishistic and, hence, fantastical social-form of commodities. He writes,

> The fetishism of commodities has its origin … in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them … It is only a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things. (Marx qtd. in Cohen., translation modified, 88)

‘Phantasmagoria’ served as a key term in Marxist analysis that valorizes rational representation. In “Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria,” Margaret Cohen, tracks its increasing overlap with commodity culture in its mediatization. I propose that through this concept one might connect the material and phantasmatic products of both image and gender as they circulate in commodity culture, often with the institution of cinema
projecting the shimmering mirage of sex-gender. Moreover, these phantasms (gender, image, gender images) are traded in the marketplace of the so-called naked and readily available illusions we call pornography.

As Jameson reminds us, porn is the exemplary genre of graphic arts, which “ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body.” Speaking from the context of the early twenty-first century, Brian McNair argues in Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire that Western culture ought to be understood as entering the latest stage “in the commodification of sex, and the extension of sexual consumerism” (87). He tracks a broad sexualization of culture through celebrity and amateur porn tapes and sex shops marketed to women, which to him indicate a movement towards “striptease culture.” Indexing the increasing pornographic making over of art and popular culture, McNair claims today’s producer and consumer of sex participate in a democratic sexual discourse. Integral to the expansion of the “pornosphere” is an individuated preoccupation with self-revelation and self-exposure (81). From McNair’s perspective, Angel and other trans porn performers appear to position themselves in terms of a self-produced striptease, seizing pornography as a means to expose one’s sexuality and become culturally visible in that way. In an analysis of the porno-chic movement in advertising, art, and fashion, McNair suggests the generic platform for stripping and for representing a pornified self extends into non-pornographic art and culture (61).

McNair concludes his survey of commodified sexual culture by suggesting that it functions as a space for the “articulation and dissemination of diverse sexual identities and radical sexual politics” (206). Hence, one might understand the drive towards pornographic principals at work in artistic, independent, and popular events as moments of participation in, or investigation of, striptease culture to develop alternative sexual economies. However, as Feona Attwood cautions, a celebratory

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22 Extending this point, Mulvey advances the feminist argument that “Hollywood movies gave a respectable veneer to the sexualized image of woman as signifier of the erotic and as a ‘trade-mark’ for the seductive potential of the cinema itself... the image of woman was conflated with the commodity spectacle” (Fetishism 43). The respectable veneer of woman she argues is embodied by the “glamour” of women such as Marilyn Monroe. In “Viva McGlam? Is Transgenderism a Critique of or Captialization to Opulence-Driven Glamour Models?,” Terre Thaemlitz examines the impetus in transgender (MtF) embodiments of feminine glamour, unpacking its relation to fetishism and the visual economy of femininity. In particular zie connects glamour’s roots in magic and secrecy surrounding trickery that has resonance in terms of phantasmagoria and in transgender secrets, the notion of deceitful bodies misrepresenting the ‘real’ of sex.

23 Similarly, with the neologism ‘pornification,’ the editors of Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture aim to rethink pornography’s common understanding as contained within a separated, marginal space (Passonen, Nikunen, Saarenmaa 1-13).
approach towards seemingly democratic participation, such as McNair’s, glosses over the ways in which social positions such as gender and class may influence sexual taste, representation and practice (82-83). Not all local sexualities become easily recognizable “implanted perversions” (Foucault) through mobilizing characteristics of pornography. Furthermore, Attwood argues, the mainstreaming of sex could be identified with the rise of neo-liberalism, in which the individual becomes a self-regulating unit within society (Mainstreaming xxiii). Nevertheless, McNair’s schematization of a transformation in the cultural place of pornography highlights the expanded role of commodity fetishism in producing sexuality as a discourse of disclosure and exposure. Rather than democratizing and liberating sexuality, the commodification of sex may work to reify the epistemology of secrecy. Apparently contemporary sexuality is for having and for showing.

Today’s striptease culture involves the valorization of exposure in the idioms of gender and sexuality. According to Mieke Bal, the threefold meaning of the verb ‘to expose’ -- exposition, exposé, and exposure -- “defines cultural behaviour if not ‘culture’ as such” (Double 5). She suggests that the act of placing objects on display constitutes a gesture that is potentially exploitative, indiscreet, and objectifying, but also possibly erotically engaging (6). While Bal understands cultural gestures as potentially erotic expositions, McNair’s insight that contemporary culture is preoccupied with sexual exposure clarifies the erotic qualities of display. Through his public (sexual) exposure, a subject presumes to tell something of cultural consequence. This reckoning of culture suggests that limits, blind spots, and perceptual disavowals are a principal concern for an analysis of pornography’s cultural positioning and framing of behavior. Hence, pornographic artifacts such as Angel’s work expose the extent to which the formation of what is displayable and demonstrative in the present time depends on self-exposure, the successful citation of oneself through pornography.

At the close of The Will to Knowledge, Foucault reflects that,

We need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became

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24 In her introduction to Mainstreaming Sex, Attwood also criticizes the ‘tired binary’ debates about sexualization that focus on whether the process “simply reduces sexual pleasure and energy to an empty and commodified performance” or has the potential to democratize sexual discourse (xxi). She suggests this is the wrong kind of question since it produces either celebratory or cynical responses.
dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of
confessions from a shadow. (159)

In McNair’s view, Western sexual culture is nowhere near Foucault’s curiously
Marxian hope of a different sexual economy, one in which ‘sex without sexuality’
might appear without the fetish of shimmering images or the whispers of the secret. If
anything, McNair’s analysis elaborates the “fictitious unity” and “omnipresent
meaning” of the sexual “secret to be discovered everywhere,” which Foucault
describes as the defining feature of modern subjectivity (Will 154). The deployment of
sexuality in the expanding pornosphere tightens its “grip on bodies and their
materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures” (Foucault, Will 155).
Attwood adds that “[t]he confession, first described by Foucault as the modern place
to discuss sex, is fast becoming mediatized,” proposing that popular media play a
central role in creating the domain of “public intimacy” that McNair identifies
(Mainstreaming xv). Therefore, the contemporary economy of sexual truth seems
entirely caught up in fetishism.

Diefenbach claims that Foucault reminds us that “the body – as working, as
fucking – could never be liberated; it is an effect of power” (“Spectral” 1). Politics
today “should question how we can alter our bodies so that they are not time bombs
of mobilized discipline, of the wish to work, the wish to confess ” (emphasis mine;
“Spectral” 1). The question of altering our bodies refocuses attention from
consumption to production, including that of self, and of self-commodification. The
engagement of fetishistic practices on the surface of Buck Angel suggests one specific
way to alter bodies: by engaging with regimes of secrecy through cultural gestures of
exposure. Angel’s surgical, hormonal, and bodybuilding practices suggest another
mode of alteration: that of the body’s sex and gender signs. Though these alterations
may challenge the regime of fetishism, I argue, they also indicate another active
regime of “bio-power,” Foucault’s term for the ways in which the state controls and
manages populations through the body (Will 140). Bio-power focuses on the concrete
arrangements (techniques and institutions) indispensable to the development of
capitalism, which, Foucault argues, would not have been possible without the
controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of population (Will 140-141).
Foucault’s insight strongly suggests that the influence of sexual regimes on the body
as well as the ways in which a subject navigates her corporeal material constitutes an engagement in bio-politics.

**My Body, My Material**

The issues that Angel’s pornographic work touches upon, such as the politics of self transformation and plastic surgery, led British “sensation” artist Marc Quinn to Angel by using precisely those terms in an online search (qtd. in “Marc Quinn” 1). During his discussions with Angel, the suggestion came up that Quinn also meet Allanah Starr, a self-professed she-male porn star, who had co-created with Angel the first FtM-on-MtF transsexual porn scene, entitled “Surprise Surprise!!!” (2009). A collaboration between the three artists resulted in a series of life-size bronze sculptures cast directly from the figures of Starr and Angel. One sculpture, “Allanah and Buck,” seems to have been modeled based on their collaborative video.

![Image 15. “Allanah and Buck,” 2010](image1)

![Image 16. “Surprise Surprise!!,” 2008](image2)

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25 Quinn came to national attention in the Charles Saatchi show *Sensation* (1997) exhibiting alongside forty-two other Young British Artists (YBAs) his signature piece *Self*, a sculpture of his head made from his own blood. Quinn’s works are often charged with sensationalism as well as focus on the body and its sensations, particularly involving the viewer’s heightened awareness of their own bodily materials and processes. With regard to Angel’s participation, he remarks to the journalist that “the world is so weird that you don’t have to make things up, you just find things” suggesting the “weirdness” of Angel appeals to his sensationalist instinct (1).

26 The scene is included in the DVD series *Allanah Starr’s Big Boob Adventures: Tawdry Tales of the Third Sex* under the production label of MtF trans porn star Gia Darling. It was nominated for the “Most Outrageous Sex Scene” in the 2008 Adult Video News Awards.
The sculpture was created through classic techniques: molds made from their bodies were filled with bronze, then orbital-sanded and polished with a flap-wheel and lacquer. The visual effects of the gloss and shade from polishing and sanding accentuate the surface of the material, drawing attention to the dispersion of light. This treatment creates uneven shine patterns that seem more akin to shimmering light, rather than a smooth all-over reflection.\textsuperscript{27} The commodity’s shimmering property, its gleam, also converges with the value of an artwork, particularly apparent in the lavish use of the precious metal bronze. It also appears to participate in the culture of pornification: the shine of the bodies’ surface and their arrangement references pornographic postures and aesthetics. In particular, it repeats the lighting and posing of “maximum visibility” for the sexual act (Williams). Quinn’s portrait of Angel and Starr, however, appear alongside other sculptures in cast silver and white marble in the exhibition “Allanah, Buck, Catman, Chelsea, Michael, Pamela and Thomas,” which modifies the pornographic meaning of the work.\textsuperscript{28}

The cataloguers specify that the exhibition consists of “real people who have significantly modified their own bodies in an attempt to reconcile self-perceived inconsistencies” between felt self with external expression (Pissarro and Hoberman 81). Singled out by their first names, the collection focuses on known individuals who symbolize the contemporary sensibility of self-transformation. The celebrities selected are all global icons, porn stars or tabloid stars, renowned for the extreme alteration of the physical self. In addition to Buck and Allanah, Dennis Aver ‘Catman’ uses lip bifurcation surgery, transplants, and tattoos to create feline features. Chelsea Charms purportedly has the largest implanted breasts in the world, weighing twenty-six pounds each. Michael Jackson’s facial transformation is legendary, as is Pamela Anderson’s enhanced physique, now more a beauty norm than an extreme. And finally, Thomas Beattie attracted attention for becoming a pregnant (trans)man, currently having carried to term three of his own babies.

The formal production of the plastic art of sculpture supports the social themes of malleability and transformation. Journalist Simon Hattenstone relates that, “yes, he

\textsuperscript{27} Seen above in “Allanah and Buck,” this effect is similar to the ‘sheen of the screen’ in film spectacles such as the Marlene Dietrich-Josef von Sternberg creations in which, an entire surface shimmers due to soft-focus and use of highly reflective objects (see Gaylyn Studlar’s \textit{In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the masochistic aesthetic}).

\textsuperscript{28} Documentation photographs can be found in the catalogue published by White Cube gallery or on Quinn’s website, <http://www.marcquinn.com/exhibitions/2010/>.
[Quinn] has made the works that will fill the gallery,” but according to Quinn, “the originals were sculpted by themselves and their surgeons” (4). Their portraits thus raise the question of agency and the limits to the plasticity of the self. Quinn’s choice of sculpted figures neatly reflects the new everyday in which, according to him, subjects have the technological capacity to “make their dreams real” (Quinn qtd. in Pissarro and Hoberman 99). The resulting work of “Allanah and Buck” is for Quinn “a reality show in the purest etymological sense”: they show their true reality (99). Indeed, the classically sculptural form can be seen to constitute a sort of still from a reality show on extreme make-overs: sculpted bodies that become entirely made-over, which the viewer may now encounter four-dimensionally. Hence, the sculptures seem to participate as well in the (porno)graphic imperative to depict a reality, naked so as to be available for the eye’s taking.

For Quinn, the sculptures serve as signs “of the moment,” saying, “I like the idea that if you left them in the desert and somebody found them in 5,000 years, it would probably tell them something about the society we live in now”; a society of “extremes,” in which the possibility of transformation enables people to “make their own worlds” (qtd. in Hattenstone 4). Redefining one’s gender reflects, in Pissarro and Hoberman’s words, a desire “to control one’s own physical appearance in order to accurately project one’s true inner self to the world” (81). The desire to express inner truth externally is couched in the ruling episteme of secrecy. While Pissarro and Hoberman place the desire for controlling one’s appearance in the realm of the “universal” and “distinctly human,” the individual’s self-sculpted bodies primarily refer to accepted twenty-first century options for self-expression: silicon implants, synthetic hormones, plastic surgery and reconstruction.29 In the case of many of the sculptures, the expressions of self-exposure are articulated through pornographic citations of fetishized sexual body parts.

The moment we live in now, one may conclude from Quinn’s portraits, is a moment in which the abstraction of sexuality as it is mapped onto the material body remains a dominant paradigm for expressing the self. Yet, “Allanah and Buck” shows that one’s sex is alterable in new ways, configuring new relations of control between

29 Unlike the publication *Modern Primitives* that catalogues the contemporary use of ancient techniques such as tattooing, piercing, etc, this exhibition showcases figures that are pre-occupied with the use of relatively new techniques for bodily modification, though arguably the motivation or interest in modification could be similar for both primitive and cutting-edge techniques. For more on the theoretical distinctions between mainstream and marginalized bodily modification practices, see Nikki Sullivan’s “Transmogrifications: (Un)Becoming Other(s).”
the subject, technology, and the materials of the self. Star and Angel’s production of self through body-altering techniques and through commodification could be indicative of a shift away from the modern regime of sexuality, which disciplines the body externally via confessional acts, schools, public hygiene, etc. The ways in which they alter their selves, employ a new set of technologies for producing sexual subjectivity internally via hormones, injected silicon, and the removal of tissues, perhaps signaling a changing modus of bio-power.

Foucault’s analysis stops at the beginning of the twentieth century. From there, his history moves backwards to ancient Greece.\(^{30}\) The return to the Greeks, according to Gilles Deleuze, delivers a partial and ambiguous analysis of sexuality (Foucault ftnt 28, 148).\(^ {31}\) It stems particularly from Grecian sexuality’s near non-relation to contemporary sexual politics: “for the body and its pleasures in the Greek view was related to the agonistic relations between free men, and hence to a ‘virile society’ that was unisexual and excluded women; while we are obviously looking for a different type of relations that is unique to our own social field” (ibid.). Though dissatisfying, Foucault’s history of sexuality in volume two and three, on the use of pleasure and the care of the self, seeks out alternative practices as “technologies of the self,” ways in which the subject can produce and alter the body through aesthetic transformations. In short, Foucault was examining the conditions for a different economy of bodies and pleasures, albeit located in a pre-capitalist economy that is difficult to bring to bear on our own late capitalist social field.

Beatriz Preciado comments on the lack of connection that Foucault establishes between the self-administered care of the Greeks and the contemporary subject’s stylization through aesthetic practices, particularly those of the gendering and sexualizing of self. S/he writes,

Today it seems astonishing that [Foucault’s] definition of aesthetics of life (esthétiques de la vie) in terms of ‘technologies of the self,’ was made without taking into account new biotechnologies as well as technologies of representation (photography, cinema, television, and cybernetics) which expanded enormously during the second half of the 20th century. (“Gender” 152).

\(^{30}\) As I mention in the previous chapter, the original plan to work from the sixteenth century forward was abandoned.

\(^{31}\) Many feminist and queer theory commentators have struggled to understand this abrupt change in plan and its implications for abandoning a more gender-specific analysis of hysterical women, masturbating boys, homosexuals, etc, that he commits to in volume one. See for instance, Lynn Hunt’s “Foucault’s Subject in The History of Sexuality.”
In a follow-up essay, titled “Pharmaco-Pornographic Politics: Towards a New Gender Ecology,” Preciado attempts to take into account contemporary modes of modification, such as those on display in Quinn’s exhibition. S/he begins from the social and technical changes begun during Second World War, which Foucault did not consider in his understanding of bio-power. In hir description of today’s “pharmaco-porn power,” s/he argues that the present technologies of the self revolve on the gendering of the body through bio-techniques and media, which announce a new turn in the series of shifts that Foucault describes from a sovereign to a disciplinary society (109-110). Additionally, Preciado’s outlook is more encompassing than McNair’s strict description of our contemporary pornosphere, reduced as it is to an analysis of a cultural striptease, which remains tied the literal prevalence of stripteases. Preciado characterizes our post-industrial, global, and mediatic regime by a range of technologies that focus on the material and immaterial production of bodies. In particular, the dispersion of bio-molecular technologies (pharmaceutical) and semiotic-technical sexual materials (pornographic), of which the birth control pill and Playboy are two paradigmatic representatives (107-108).

Though indebted to Foucault’s notion of a versatile bio-power, her analysis seeks to account for the “hot, psychotropic, and punk” capitalism that deploys new micro-prosthetic mechanisms of control. The liquidity of today’s capitalist network of flows emerges from advancements in bio-molecular techniques, such as synthetic hormones, and media platforms like the internet (110). In contrast to the nineteenth century’s rigid notion of sex, Preciado proposes that the category of gender is essential to the pharmaco-pornographic regime of sexuality (111). Examining John Money’s suggestive use of gender for the plasticity of psychological sex, amenable to technological modifications, s/he claims that while sex was natural, untransferable and transcendental, gender now appears synthetic, malleable, and susceptible to technical production and reproduction (111).32 Whereas in the disciplinary regime of sex, hard technologies, such as an iron ankle spreader and speculum, worked over a body from the outside, in the pharmaco-pornographic regime of gender, soft micro-technologies enter the body to become part of it, dissolving and becoming the very stuff of subjectivity (109-110).

32 In comparison’s to the Freudian paradigm’s more limited sense of sex, Angel’s motto understands gender may be detached from and reproduced without reference to genitalia.
Preciado’s analysis of hard and soft technologies resonates with Quinn’s sculpture “Allanah and Buck.” S/he identifies transsexualism as one way in which bodies may produce resistant mutations of the normative gender codes that are propagated by pornography and digested through hormones. Following Preciado, I suggest that the transsoxy plays a special role in both conceiving of the violence of this regime’s biopower and of ways in which it might be mobilized to “de-install gender” (114). With respect to mobilizing agency, Preciado offers the labor model of the collective factory as a metaphor for the self-determining assemblage of gender codes (115). For instance, in the figures of Starr and Angel, one might recognize emblematic workers in the factory of gender, who appropriate the material, production and even consumption of their self-determined genders. Through chirurgical procedures, the ingesting of hormones, and commodification, they control and utilize the flows of gender in today’s political economy of gender.  

The sculptures seem indicative of a different model of sexuality, shifting from self-disclosure towards the re-installation of the sexual self. The pharmaco-pornographic manufacture of gender suggests to Preciado that today “[t]here is nothing to discover in nature, there is no hidden secret … [t]he truth about sex is not a disclosure; it is sexdesign” (emphasis in original; 108). Biotechnologies like synthetic hormones and cosmetic surgeries, as well as the use of representation technologies, such as digital photography and video, produce in a material fashion the trans subjectivity at stake. Preciado draws from the aesthetic model of cinema to re-conceptualize the medicalized employment of gender’s plasticity with the notion of sexdesign. In the “operation theatre,” figurative representations are produced by tools such as editing, 3D modeling, personality design, “according to which the organs, the vessels, the fluids and the molecules are converted into the prime material from which our corporality is manufactured” (Preciado 111). Gender is glued, cut, copied, bought, sold, transferred, exchanged, certified, dosed, extracted, denied, mutated (Preciado 111). The emphasis in Quinn’s exhibition on self-design is not to suggest, however, that sex has become obsolete. Now that “the contemporary body is a techno-life,” to borrow Preciado’s words, the new somatic fiction of sexdesign asserts that sex is not

33 Preciado writes even more emphatically that transsexuals defend their right to self-determine sex “re-appropriating hormonal and chirurgical techniques to construct themselves, in loud disagreement with normative codes of masculinity and femininity” (115).
what it once was: gender as sexdesign functions as the abstract device of technical subjectivation (111).

In contrast to the Biblical Adam and Eve, for whom sexuality was a secret that once obtained banished them from the Garden of Eden, today’s sexuality involves the invention of the subject through expressive design. Another sculpture of the pair captures a self-defined Adam and Eve born as “laboratory man and woman” (Preciado 113).

The frontal sculpture presents Angel and Starr holding hands, without a fig leaf covering their genitals (Figure 17). This sculpture, as well as the others, is exhibited set amongst a cultivated photographic and painted garden (Figure 18). The surrounding series, entitled “In the Night Garden,” extends the theme of ‘the new Adam and Eve,’ living in cross-gender harmony, in a world of their own making. The lavish painted prints consist of floral arrangements that would never be found in the same climate nor bloom during the same season: unnatural bouquets that reflect the models semi-artificial physiques (Quinn 86-87). The vibrancy of the paintings derives from Quinn’s technique of inverting the color scheme of photographs and of adjusting the hue through paint. Therefore, they are also products of a deeply modifying
transformation, Quinn’s own (Quinn 108). Set amongst Quinn’s floral garden, Buck and Allanah’s blatant nakedness suggests the innocence Adam and Eve enjoyed before they received knowledge of their sex. In an ironic reversal, the specialized knowledge of sex that Angel and Starr enjoy through their trans-sexed status seems to inform rather than interrupt their contentedness in a techno-Eden. The serene and confident stance of the recast original couple, which belies its affront to traditional heterosexual coupling, complements the kneeling sculpture’s more literal coupling.

In “Allanah and Buck,” the penetration is clearly motivated not by heterosexual reproduction, but purely by pleasure (Figure 15). The faces contort in ecstasy, indicating a marginalized interest in sexual identity in favor of the show of pleasure as achieved through their particular sexdesigned bodies. The moment recalls as well as marginalizes mainstream pornography. Could it be that the hope of an economy of “bodies and pleasures” that Foucault calls for now erupts in the form of pharmaco-pornographic modification and commodification? Like Foucault, the sculptures also question, “Do we truly need a true sex?” (emphasis in original; Herculine vii). The response from modern Western societies, including the sculptures, is affirmative: “They have obstinately brought into play this question of a ‘true sex’ in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures” (Ibid.). Yet, however pervasive the model of a pharmaco-pornographic regime may be, other models of sexuality may also be in operation, as Preciado claims, “at diverse intensities, diverse rates of penetration, and diverse grades of effectiveness in the production of subjectivity” (113). In the final section of this chapter, I wish to re-examine the regimes of sexdesign and fetishized sex parts in light of cinema’s potential role in visualizing trans bodies and installing gender from a different vantage point.

**Machines for Perceiving ‘Self-Evidences’**

On Allanah Starr’s website, she voices an enthusiastic interest in plastic surgery, listing it as her number two hobby, after traveling. To a Guardian reporter, she states that she has had fifty-five surgeries to date, including six on her nose and six on her breasts (Hattenstone 2). The fervent remodeling of her body contrasts with her current disinterest in genital surgery. Though she plans to continue acquiring more

34 See <http://www.transexualstarr.com/images/bio.jpg>
modifications, she responds to Hattenstone’s inquiry regarding whether she would ever “get rid of her penis” that she might have a vaginoplasty later if only “to normalise myself for old age” (2). For the moment, she explains, her penis is her crucial selling point as a she-male porn star, integral to her image. While visiting the gallery to see “Allanah and Buck” for the first time, Starr asks, “The genitals, are they there?” Hattenstone recounts: “We get on our knees to look, diffidently feeling our way along the sculpture until we find an erect penis” (Ibid.) “Oh yes! They are!” she shouts with delight (Ibid.). Starr’s anxiety about her sculpture’s likeness to her body suggests that though her penis carries a function in the fetishistic regime of sex it is equally central to her particular sexdesign. The penis is at once a fetishized sex part signaling a gendered truth and the centerpiece of her sexdesigned body, sculpted and augmented to accentuate her cock.

According to Preciado, transsexualism is a testament to the simultaneity of various corporeal regimes. Referring to Dean Spade’s comparative analysis of rhinoplasty (nose surgery) and phallo-or vaginoplasty (genital surgery) as a case in which different somatic fictions become juxtaposed, s/he suggests that inside the same body different organs can be understood through different regimes of power (113). Nasal surgery, s/he argues, is considered a cosmetic change, because the nose is categorized as individual property and a market object. In contrast, surgery performs a sex change, because genitals are part of a sovereign regime that considers them state property (113). Even one organ, like Starr’s penis or like Angel’s vagina, I would like to add, can be understood in two contradictory regimes: both a trademark of self-design and an anatomical feature that reveals truth. Critically, the perceiver’s point of view may influence which of the varying models overlay the genitals. Walking around the sculpture “Allanah and Buck,” one would not necessarily be aware of Allanah’s penis or Buck’s vagina, leading one to perhaps assume that the sculpture shows the

35 She demonstrates a keen awareness of her ‘pathological’ claim and the influence of genital fetishism, and also her current marketability in this statement. Please note that contrary to Hattenstone’s assumptions, a vaginoplasty does not remove the penis so much as the testicles, inverting the penile skin and tissue to create a vaginal pathway and reshaping the glans into a clitoris. Regardless of how the experience may be understood, such surgery reshapes and makes use of what is available rather than cuts off, or removes any penile form.

36 In the chapter “Withholding the Letter: Sex as State Property” Gayle Salamon analyzes the way in which sex is not a kind of bodily property privately owned, but property that belongs to the state itself. She writes “[s]ex is something the documents [passport, birth certificate, driver’s license, etc.] themselves enact, and sex becomes performative in the sense that the m or the f on the document does not merely report on the sex of its bearer but become the truth of and bestows the bearer’s sex” hence, sex is assigned rather than discovered (183).
The absurdity of a woman having sex with a man from behind, however ecstasically. Quinn, though, hopes that viewers will be interested in changing their perspective, and like Starr, lie on the floor to see the genitals, casting the figures and their sexual act in a new light (Hattenstone 2).

The pair of sculptures connect otherwise paradoxical points of view through display, which offers different ways in which to encounter them, ‘eye-to-eye’ or ‘hand-to-metal penis.’ Bal proposes that a multiplication of perspectives provides a “useful strategy” for examining the epistemological implications of exposition (Double 9). In the encounter, Bal writes, the critic/viewer co-constitutes with the work a condensed “social and cultural present from which we look, and look back, at the objects that are always already of the past” (Practice 1). An analysis of the encounter and the particularities of the display involve a reckoning with the regimes of power that cling to the object, which defines present culture. Seen today, from some angles, the sculptures portray genitals seemingly at odds with the otherwise gendered body, hence, signaling a modern regime of sexual fetishism. From other angles, the bodies quote a common mode of self-transformation, particularly sexdesign, reliant on hard and now increasingly soft technologies to lend shape to an inner truth. Both epistemes, however, involve a relationship to the production of sex as a mode of truth-telling.

Though Foucault did not draw on the material changes that occurred in his lifetime, the book series on the history of sexuality as dispositif underscores the tremendous transformations that are possible as mechanisms of power morph from regime to regime. Foucault’s historical analysis notes that the exercise of power produces epistemological formations, enabling something to be said, and another thing to be seen, as true. “Power ‘produces reality’ before it represses. Equally, it produces truth before it ideologizes, abstracts or masks,” writes Foucault in Discipline and Punish (194). To put it another way, for Foucault, a cultural moment consists in the visible and the sayable that enable a certain knowledge to emerge as self-evident. My interest in this chapter has been in the variety of regimes that overlay the genitals and in the question which of those provides the conditions in which it can appear as a true sex. Whether in the light of a designed sex or fetish object, it seems that truth and the epistemological condition of being conspicuous remains at stake.

Rather than focusing on the material history of economic systems to understand changing conceptions of reality (Marxism), Foucault steers his analysis of political economies to “the [material] effects of power and the production of ‘truth’” (qtd. in
Barrett 139-140). In a chapter of *Foucault*, Gilles Deleuze offers the following summary of Foucault’s perspective of History: “an ‘age’ does not pre-exist the statements which express it, nor the visibilities which fill it” (*Foucault* 48). “What Foucault takes from History,” Deleuze continues, “is that determination of visible and articulable features unique to each age which goes beyond any behaviour, mentality or set of ideas, since it makes these things possible” (48-49). A historical perception or sensibility, as much as a discursive system, is the effect of the composition and combination of statements and visibilities that are embedded in the stratification of an age (48). Using Foucault’s metaphor of archaeology, Deleuze argues that he seeks to “break open” and hence “open up” the self-evidence of culture that is suspended in the “strata” of an age (53). The method of extraction does not entail the examination of positivities of seeing and speaking as independent phenomena, but of the ways in which they come into existence as things and words, forming bands of discursive knowledge and fields of non-discursive knowledge; “the archaeology he conceived of is an audiovisual archive” (Deleuze, *Foucault* 50).^37

Refusing the Marxian (or Freudian) notion that illusory perception is an effect that is entirely dependent on one’s material reality, Foucault focused on the relation of forces that produce and deploy truth. To do so, Deleuze explains, Foucault developed a dual method of extraction. The extraction of statements by breaking open words and phrases has the extraction of visibilities by breaking open things and qualities as its counterpart (Deleuze, *Foucault* 52). Statements are never hidden. Deleuze takes Foucault’s study of sexuality as exemplary: the secret that allowed no obscurity or respite (53). Even though sexuality is not directly readable or sayable, the archaeologist need only know how to read: “The secret exists only in order to be betrayed, or to betray itself” (Deleuze 54). Similarly, since behind the curtain there is

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^37 In his assessment of Foucault’s method, Deleuze places emphasis on the covert literary project he conducts entitled *Death and The Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel* (1963) that outlines the poet’s method of production. In his treatment of Roussel’s various kinds of writing, Foucault argues that in his extraction of words he reveals the secret meanings of phrases and, similarly, he draws images that show the object’s shimmering visibility. Deleuze suggests that Foucault’s archaeological method of breaking and extracting may be attributed to becoming inspired by Roussel’s various methods to scramble, and decode language and everyday imagery. Deleuze also argues that it is integral to his development of the notion of relationality, forces, and power. This work follows his Nietzsche-influenced reassessment of power in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and written during the period of *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* that studies power’s productive capacity. Later upon publication Foucault explains his analysis was highly personal; he tried to bury the manuscript in his pseudonymously written entry on the work of Foucault by not mentioning it. Certainly in style and argumentation, it stands apart. See the introduction to the text by John Ashbery for more on the reception of this work and its place in Foucault’s oeuvre (xiii-xxvii).
nothing to see, “it was all the more important each time to describe the curtain, or the base” (Ibid.). Extracting from things and sight, Foucault seeks ‘visibilities,’ which, as Deleuze writes, “are not forms of objects, nor even forms that would show up under light, but rather forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer” (emphasis mine; 52). The mirage of sex serves a unifying function, acting as a production and distribution centre of light and dark, the opaque and transparent, the seen and non-seen; a system of light as Foucault sees in Velásquez’s painting Las Meninas (Deleuze 57). In Deleuze’s reading of Foucault, the method of tracing secret statements and the light that makes a thing shimmer underlines all of Foucault’s historical works. It culminates in the history of modern sexuality only from a retrospective perspective.

From The Archaeology of Knowledge onwards, discourse precedes the visible field he designates as “non-discursive.” For Foucault, however, this suggests irreducibility, not a reduction. The prior chapter on the ways in which revelatory discourse was established by the regime of secrecy focused primarily on confession as a particular kind of statement central to the determining of one’s truth. For Foucault, words or discourse are distinct from and primary to visible things, like pornographic DVDs. The non-relation of words and images, as I discuss in the introduction, implies for Foucault an important cultural process of mutual grappling and capture. The theme of confession is exemplary here: language seeking to capture the shimmering mirage of sex in the endless task of telling. This chapter demonstrates the equal importance of non-discursive things, such as the fetish, in the production of knowledge. Though the fetish is never hidden, it is nonetheless not immediately seen or visible. The practices and conditions of visibilities are “not to be confused with elements that are visible or more generally perceptible, such as qualities, things, objects, compounds of objects” (Deleuze, Foucault 52). When conditions of perception change, Deleuze writes, visibilities may “become hazy or blurred to the point where ‘self-evident’ phenomena cannot be grasped by another age” (57). It is Foucault’s hope, voiced at the close of the first volume on sexuality, that one day sex will become unperceivable through a change in the condition of its visibility, ushering in a new economy of bodies and pleasures.

Deleuze suggests that in the same way that statements depend on their system for sayability, visibilities are inseparable from machines. Such visibility machines do not have to be optical machines like film projectors per se, but are more generally
conceived as an assembly of organs and functions that makes something visible and conspicuous: producing a thing as a shimmer (Deleuze, *Foucault* 58). Referring to Foucault’s interest in identifying the ‘machines’ at work in Raymond Roussel’s poetry, Deleuze proposes that the first light “opens ups things and brings forth visibilities as flashes and shimmerings, which are the ‘second light’” (58). Thus, the pervasive lights of an era can be analyzed as a form that is capable of creating other forms and movements, such as the shimmerings of sex and the gleams of the commodity’s fetish. The first light acts as a virtual visibility, producing all perceptible experiences, enabling the “multisensorial complexes” of visibilities to “emerge into the light of day” (59). Crucial to entering the visible field as a second light, then, is the proper relation to the machine that acts as a first light. Only then can one become a shimmer, created as a “light-being” both absolute in one’s givenness and yet historical, since a being of light “is inseparable from the way in which it falls into a formation or corpus” (Deleuze 58).

The actual cinema, a concrete apparatus, may be a tertiary light, facilitating the relations between an enabling vision and what becomes perceivable. However, my contention is that cinema’s virtual function in organizing perception, particularly in its collusion with both sexual and commodity fetishism, may act as such a visibility machine. In opening up those phantasms of gender and sexuality, cinema might function as a first light; it brings forth “flashes and shimmerings” of trans bodies that become knowable when they enter through a threshold of epistemologization. Deleuze observes that in Foucault’s schema knowledge exists only according to widely varying thresholds, which impose layers, splits, and directions. Those knowledge thresholds travel towards scientificity, and ultimately towards formalization. However, other thresholds exist in a stratum: ethics, aesthetics, politics, etc. (51). With respect to the threshold of aesthetics, I have sought to account for the way in which transsexual filmmakers and porn stars utilize what Mulvey describes as the “beautifully polished surface” of the screen’s skin, a material and yet phantasmatic envelope covering the “horrifying” exposure of a transsexual secret (“Some Thoughts” 12). Accessing the technologies that enable the new regime of sexdesign and its attendant pharmaco-pornographic episteme may serve to shift the threshold of

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38 Foucault tried to locate visibilities in his study of Roussel and isolate them in Manet, tracing an aesthetics of an era in a manner close to the French artist Robert Delaunay (1885-1941), argues Deleuze (52).
the seeable and sayable. The overlap of fetish regime and sexdesign regime may blur the visibility of transgenderism from some perspectives, but it could just as well be seen to shimmer from others.

The uptake of aesthetic modes of production through media and biotechnologies as a means of sexdesign, commodity production, and public expositions can best be understood, in Foucault’s words, as the “coming back of the subjugated knowledges” (Society). As Foucault explains in the first of last lecture series, Society Must Be Defended, the insurrection of “subjugated knowledges” involves both buried and disqualified knowledges. The functional coherence sought in historical contents bury potential scholarly knowledges, whereas naïve, inferior knowledges consisting of “what people know” locally are disqualified by the hierarchy of erudition (7). The method of archaeology and its “breaking open” of words and things to extract statements and visibilities is designed for the analysis of such subjugated knowledge (Foucault 10). Potentially, a multiplicity of “discontinuous and local critiques” organized by forms of disqualified knowledge and pleasure in transgender pornographic films may shift the realm of the visible and the livable towards one in which the shimmering of trans-sex can be perceived (163). In the next chapter I strike out an historical examination of cinema’s immaterial and biopolitical effects on the perceiver, both its capacity for creating shimmers and for cutting a body anew.
Chapter Three
Cut

Walter Benjamin locates the promise of commodity aesthetics in short seconds of bliss, in the fragile beauty of overlooking a scene that changes before your eyes, in an encounter with the commodity in the form of cinema. This scene-in-movement I propose as potentially being ‘seen’ in shimmering images of transgender bodies.

1. “View of the Seine and Paris at Night” (1901), Franz Skarbina

In this turn of the century “mood painting” (Stimmungsbild) by Franz Skarbina entitled “View of the Seine and Paris at Night” (1901), a couple turned away from the viewer appears in rapt fascination with the World Fair lit up at night. The lighting reflects on the Seine, doubling the technological and engineering feats for their apparent pleasure. Seeming to rival cinema, Susan Buck-Morss comments that “[d]espite the depth of view, the visual pleasure is provided by the luminous surface of the painting that shimmers over the scene like a veil” (“Aesthetics” 24). The veil here animates the urban phantasmagoria, suggesting pleasure in the form of a fetishistic perception. The city contracts to the pleasing mood consumed by the perceiver’s multisensorial complex. Yet, even in this commodification of a cityscape
and its technological manifestation, “there trembles, in the commodities’ glitter of distraction, a possibility of that which has not yet been actualized” relates Katja Diefenbach (“Spectral Form” 7).

At the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, cinema offered a new view of the world to the general public, and, perhaps most scintillatingly, a new view of the human body and its functions. In Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine’s Visual Culture, Lisa Cartwright claims that the development of film technology and screening culture was driven by scientists like August Lumière with a definite interest in studying the physiology of the body in movement. Early cinema invited the spectator “to participate in the ‘scientific’ fascination with the execution of ‘life,’” a fascination still at work in contemporary medical imaging of anatomy and extreme make-over shows (Cartwright 16). Film historian Jean-Louis Comolli contends that a cultural preoccupation with visuality —“a frenzy of the visible” — was already apparent in the popular culture, arts, and science of the nineteenth century, which suggests that cinema’s role in observational culture was pre-destined (122-123).

Specifically, Cartwright identifies the concurrent Western scientific traditions of surveillance, measurement, and physical transformation that utilized cinema to perform a “fantastic construction of ‘human life’ as a dynamic entity to be tracked, studied, and transformed in the social ‘theatre’ of the laboratory” (9). Hence, the ontology of cinema, in its special relation to animating life and suspending death in a ‘cinema theatre,’ may bear strong connections to the ontology of the body that undergoes surgery, which takes place in an ‘operating theatre.’ I propose that attention to the construction of human life with respect to the ways in which surgical and cinematic cuts refigure bodies may offer insight into the cultural and technical conditions that enabled ‘transsexuality’ to emerge.

In this chapter, I examine the historical features and epistemological frameworks that underpin a dense and hereto unexplored aesthetic relationship between ‘early’ transsexuality and cinema. Though my analysis focuses on this particular period, the cultural paradigm of observation, an epistemophilic “machine interest” (Stephen Heath), and a ‘body interest’ all survive to the present.1 In particular, this worldview is present in the chirurgical investigation of live bodies that

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1 From Questions of Cinema, chapter 10 “The Cinematic Apparatus: Technology as Historical and Cultural Form,” in which Heath contends that in the early days of distribution and screening what is promoted and sold is the experience of the machine (221).
seem ‘plastic,’ exemplified by the transsexual body. At the close of chapter two, I suggested that the contemporary regime of gender plasticity and self-transformation extends the notion of production and consumption to the body, treating the body as any other commodity, such as goods and services, images and ideas. To qualify this claim further I focus in this third chapter on the notion of the ‘operation theatre,’ which may be considered as a power/knowledge nexus in which subjects are ‘cut.’ In other words, I consider in parallel cinema, with its system of editing cuts, and the incisions that take place in a surgical theatre. This chapter further draws upon the concept of an epistemic ‘operation theatre,’ which Beatriz Preciado identifies as the performative space of culture that ‘hetero-sexualizes’ bodies and so enforces through ‘cuts’ of knowledge a binary gender regime (qtd. in Eckert, “Post(-)anarchism” n/p).²

In the “Work of Art” essay, Walter Benjamin offers a theory of cinema with respect to its propensity to cut into reality in order to extract new perceptions.³ Benjamin describes cinema as a form of surgery. His insight inspires my own project to affirm the expression of trans embodiment. This chapter suggests a number of analogies. The first is between the cut in flesh of surgery and the cut of celluloid in a montage sequence. Benjamin considers how the notion of the camera operator “is familiar to us from surgery,” where the surgeon “makes an intervention in the patient” (115). Film assembles shots by cutting into the celluloid and splicing them together in a new order; transsexuals may require the surgical cutting and splicing together of rearranged parts. This connects film’s interpenetration of reality, which Benjamin praises for its ability to “trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies,” with the therapeutic necessity of surgery that is part of the transsexual experience (118). The cut in both instances is understood as an intervention.

In Benjamin’s metaphorical ‘surgery,’ the cut that introduces a bodily difference suggests a therapeutic and aesthetic change. Considered from a filmic point of view, the cut appears a vital and formative action to render ‘difference.’ In film and corporeality, the difference marked by the cut is potentially limitless rather than

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² Lena Eckert makes her own translations from the German version of Preciado’s book-length work kontrasexuelles manifest, which was originally published in French and then Spanish. As I am unable to read these languages, I rely on her understanding of Preciado’s concept “operation theatre” and its relation to her theory of the “heterosexual social contract.”

³ Following Miriam Hansen and others, I name the essay more generally for brevity and since there are two English versions. I refer to the second version “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version” (1936) in Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 3 1935-1938, since this was the one Benjamin considered complete. I realize this nomination runs the risk of canonization; I hope the reader can forgive this unintended gesture.
determinative of becoming either a man or woman. Focusing on surgery in this manner intervenes in the existing literature, which categorically separates between those who engage in surgery as transsexual (either man or woman) or as transgender (both/neither man and woman). Transsexual practice is too-often considered a deluded wish, with the result that the subject undergoing transition becomes stripped of subjectivity. Refocusing on surgery as a form of expression in a sexdesign culture (Chapter Two), which situates the subject in a cultural ‘operation theatre,’ I hope to demonstrate the trope of cutting at work in trans practices more generally, even for those who may never go under anaesthesia and experience the surgeon’s knife. Hence, I offer this analysis of cuts taking place in various operating theatres to propose another way of approaching sex reassignment surgery as a form of aesthetic expression.

Though gender studies and film studies have of course often shared theoretical approaches, such as semiotics, psychoanalysis, and feminism, I wish to more closely bind this relation. In the medical literature that I discuss in this chapter, the transsexual is described in the endocrinological and surgical terms of the discipline, and codified according to expectations that I examine in terms of the form of “continuity editing,” which prioritizes a smooth transition between cuts. Subsequently, I contrast this rendition of transsexual experience with a literary account by one of the first transsexuals. In Lili Elbe’s narration of her life as an artist, first as painter and later as the co-creator of her own feminine form, Elbe relates the multiple surgeries that enabled her ‘female self’ to become animated. Entitled From Man into Woman: A True and Authentic Record of a Sex Change (1933), the book not only inaugurated the genre of trans autobiographical writing, but also places the surgical experience center stage, a position at which it has remained in nearly all trans autobiographies since.

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4 For an informative overview, see Katrina Roen’s discussion in “‘Either/Or’ and ‘Both/Neither’: Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics,” particularly 501-503.
5 Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle frame the work of transgender studies as countering how some brands of feminism and medical tracks had “automatically dismissed [the transgender practice of surgery] as damaged, deluded, second-rate, or somehow inherently compromised” (Transgender Studies 221). For original sources, see the dubious psychoanalytical framing of transsexuality by Robert Stoller that also figures in Catherine Millot’s condemning Horsexe. Janice Raymond’s anti-transsexual propaganda passed off as feminist work, the 1979 The Transsexual Empire, is most often cited, though newer works by Bernice Hausman and Sheila Jeffry’s also reinforce this point of view.
6 The 2004 English reprint changed the title to Man into Woman: The First Sex-Change, A Portrait of Lili Elbe, with the even longer subtitle A true and remarkable transformation of the painter Einar Wegener, which emphasizes the visuality of the text, a dimension that I will discuss in more detail below.
Rather than merely read those texts through a purely contextual lens, I also pursue an analytical integration of transgender and film studies by reading my source material ‘cinematically.’ My reading will pay attention to the concrete form and delivery of the text, its editing as if it were a film, and approach Elbe’s text as if it were a biographical film or ‘biopic.’ Editing consists of selecting and joining camera takes. For the finished film, it refers to the set of techniques that governs the relations among shots (Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art* 493). In my analysis of writing in terms of continuity and discontinuity editing, I focus on cuts and joins to track the techniques that assemble images and expressions of trans embodiment. The attention to this kind of editing is to illustrate the broader application of the ‘cut’ for transgender studies beyond the medical and lived arena to an aesthetic domain. In the realm of text, the dynamic fusion of embodiment and technique is similarly at stake. Trans embodiment may hence not be about sex or gender primarily, but about the presentation of one’s material self and about the experimentation with the formal aesthetics of corporeal experience.

**Attractions at the Turn of the Century**

The scientific trajectory of inventing transsexuality, and the attendant tension between maintaining a respectable veneer of scientism and publicizing the experiments using sensationalism, can be traced through the partially autobiographical work on Lili Elbe. Published after her death, the title *Man into Woman: A True and Authentic Record of a Sex Change* was followed by the noted subtitle: “the true story of the miraculous transformation of the Danish painter Einar Wegener (Andreas Sparre).” The issue of privacy, perhaps to protect professional reputations, was addressed by changing the names of doctors and practitioners as well as her own. For example, Elbe’s life-saving German doctor from Dresden, “Werner Kreutz,” apparently “passed his account of the case as correct” (14) and yet, “the Professor,” as he mainly appears in the book, preferred to remain anonymous. The book is compiled by biographer and friend Niels Hoyer (also a pseudonym), and consists of his own knowledge, material dictated by Elbe, and intimate sources such as her diaries, letters from her and family and friends, as well as medical records. Towards the end, the extraordinary case’s secrecy was broken by a friend’s indiscretion, resulting in a great sensation in German and Danish newspapers in the year 1931. In particular, it brought more fame – or at least a spotlight – to Hirschfeld’s institute, which almost certainly was responsible for Elbe’s
first affirmed diagnosis and surgery. In the book, Elbe’s doctor Kreutz recommends for her to go to a “specialist in Berlin,” named Dr Hardenfeld, “to undergo various treatment of a preliminary nature” and a thorough psychological examination (28, 54).  

Indisputably, the fame of Elbe’s experimental surgeries was related to her status as a well-known European artist. Hence, although Elbe often writes as though she is the first to receive a male-to-female sex change, this posture is not historically accurate. Her five operations from 1930-1933 were among the earliest that German and Danish doctors had conducted with the goal of transforming a human’s physical and hormonal sex. The terms transsexual or psychic transsexualism at no time appear in the book; the framing concept was “sexual intermediacy” (17), accompanied by a vague notion of her conflicted psychic state (“Andreas believed that in reality he was not a man, but a woman” [23]), reflecting an internal inversion. The medical understanding of underdeveloped “germ glands” lead to the Professor’s decision to “give [Elbe] new and strong ovaries” in order to “remove the arrest in [her] development” (28). The profane “miracle” to which the subtitle refers is “to remove the dead (and formerly imperfect) male organs, and to restore the female organs with

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7 The work of Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany was influential in defining the terms as well as the aesthetic descriptors of ‘transsexualism’ and ‘transsexuality,’ though for people who hoped to change their sex, he used the word transvestite from 1910. First appearing in a paper in 1923, the term seelischer Transsexualismus or ‘psychic transsexualism’ referred to a spiritual inversion rather than to the desire to transform the body physically. The seminal text from Hirschfeld is Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress with transsexualism appearing in “Die Intersexuelle Konstitution” some thirteen years later, at which time he had already recommended and helped arrange for human sexchanges. The American David O. Cauldwell, who wrote for the question-and-answer-section of Sexology: Sex Science Magazine, put forward the term psychopathia transsexualis in a 1949 publication, indicating an alliance with the sexological school of Richard von Krafft-Ebing. His contemporary and German émigré to New York, Harry Benjamin, reformulated Hirschfeld’s theory and coined transsexualism as early as 1953 in a presentation to a medical society. For more on the convoluted, contested history of these terms see Richard Ekins and David King’s “Pioneers of Transgendering: The Popular Sexology of David O. Cauldwell” and Susan Stryker Transgender History.

8 Beginning with Austrian physiologist Eugen Steinach in the 1910s, so-called sex transformation experiments were first tried out on animals (Meyerowitz 15). The successful results were put into practice for humans in the 1920s and 1930s by doctors associated with Hirshfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, who reported on their human sex-change surgeries to much acclaim (Meyerowitz 15). Meyerowitz notes that Dorchen Richter was the first male-to-female to undergo complete genital transformation, arranged through Hirshfeld’s institute (19). In 1931, Felix Abraham published an article on two such surgeries (one of which was on Richter); additionally, Ludwig Levy Lenz was reputed to have performed several surgeries at this time, the total of which are unknown (Meyerowitz 20).
new and fresh material” – a then marvelous kind of transformation that would enable Lili to survive and effectively kill Andreas, the man.⁹

Her dual hope to inform a general population about her kind and potentially to make her money (not just the newspapers selling her story) suggests it appealed to cultural and economic imperatives. That is, the book, which she calls with a hint of risqué her “confessions,” had a somewhat conflicted purpose of attraction. It performed a direct, somewhat aggressive address with exhibitionist tendencies, including, for instance, personal photographs and frank discussions of her changing sexuality. It also opens with the chapter heading “Man into Woman,” suggestive of a trick shot in which stop editing replaces one thing for another. These decided aesthetics of before and after seem attempts to explain, justify, the means and purpose of bodily transformation as a narrative in which the female protagonist, who the reader should sympathize with, would survive. In other words, like cinema, which at its core negotiates the opposition between the spectacular and narrative, Elbe’s portrait in both text and image seeks to create linear progression out of the shocks of her changes, moment to moment. The book’s effectivity as a bio-pic, I venture, involves not only the creation of her own living and memorialized portrait, but also hinges on the attractional address of its viewer. The potential conflict in attractional and narrative address I suggest be understood through the heuristic category of cinema and its attendant epistemological tensions that early film theory discusses.

The attraction of cinema was invented during the 1880s and 90s, appearing only after visual culture was already soaked with popular gizmos such as the Magic Lantern, the Zoetrope, flipbooks of photographs, etc. (Bordwell and Thompson, Film History 3-4).¹⁰ The busy field of turn of the century ‘attractions’ also included variety acts and other stage entertainment, a stage that by the mid-1880s was shared by short cinema shows. In a reflective essay on early cinema, titled “From ‘Primitive Cinema’ to ‘Kine-Attractography,’” André Gaudreault concludes that the widespread use of the term “attraction” for any of those spectacles contributed to filmmaker Sergei

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⁹ For context, see Chandak Sengoopta’s book about the history of hormones, The Most Secret Quintessence of Life. Sex, Glands, and Hormones, 1850-1950. And for an overview about the history of medicine in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century read Paul Weindling’s Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870-1945. I thank Heiko Stoff for bringing these references to my attention.

¹⁰ Chapter Five, “Curiosity,” will elaborate on the relation between visual culture and viewing practices suggested by these toys, which I suggest contributed to the enabling conditions for cinema to emerge in diverse forms, such as privileging tactile or optical ways of seeing.
Eisenstein, amongst others, to promote the concept into a theory of film (94). Certain technological conditions had to be met before motion pictures could be created; the literature on early cinema shows that the cultural, aesthetic, and economic relevance of such attractions were all roughly equal factors. In other words, cinema required an epistemological context in which it could flourish as an attraction.

The attraction, Gaudreault reports, was considered the captivating element of the show; in Tom Gunning’s words, a moment of pure “exhibitionism” that acknowledges the viewer and his or her interest in seeing (Giraud and Gunning qtd. in Gaudreault 95). As Viva Paci explains, “cinema of attractions” suggests a cinema that offers viewers a specific pleasure, one that cannot be reduced to the later narrative system of classical cinema (121). This distinction between cinemas seems to lie in its address to a viewer. In “sudden bursts,” attractions show “erupt[ions] on a monstrative level,” which Paci views as distinct from narrative films, whose viewer is positioned as observer-voyeur (121). Attractions alternate between revealing and concealing, Paci continues, “in a way that is not dependent on the objects or time that precede – or follow – it in a cause and effect relationship” (121-122). Paci suggests that even narrative-driven films could foreground visual pleasure, at times seeking to grab the audience’s attention through physical participation, “as if he or she were in an amusement park” (122).

Indicative of this dual potential was one of the first screenings of early cinema on December 28, 1895 in the Grand Café in Paris. Ten films of about a minute each included a close-up of filmmaker Auguste Lumière and his wife feeding their baby, a comic scene of a boy stepping on a hose to cause a puzzled gardener to spray his face, and a view of a stormy sea (Bordwell and Thompson, Film History 9-10). The collection indicates that filmmakers experimented with cinema as a technology capable of both narrative and monstronation of attractions, or, in film terms, of story and actuality. Recounting the age-old debate of the word-image opposition through the cinema’s apparent duplicity between narrative and show, Gaudreault (citing Gunning) suggests understanding ‘kine-attractography’ as a specific “mode of film practice,” which privileges spectacular effects in opposition to narrative effects (96-97). Gaudreault speculates that this essential contradiction of the cinema as a system is in fact its operational feature. The opposition between the spectacular and narrative, he claims, recreates on a technical level the defining problem of the cinema: “to create linear progression out of the momentary” (97). He closes the essay by insisting on the
differences between early (1895-1914) cinema and institutional cinema (beginning 1915), and by highlighting “early cinema’s alien quality” owing to the “open field of enquiry and experimentation” in which the cinematograph was born (emphasis in original; 99).

Early filmmakers and producers were keen to see what the new technology could do and what forms could be exploited for profit. For instance, multiple frontal shots edited into a montage were first used to study movement. Filmmakers soon figured out that trick films, consisting of spliced frontal shots in which location or even subject changed (pioneered by producers like Georges Méliès in France and James Williamson in England), were popular for creating a sudden, funny or scary, transformation (Bordwell and Thompson, *Film History* 17-18). These attractional editing techniques were also put to work in fiction films to tell stories quickly and with great tension. Traditional histories of film state that extensive changes in formal and stylistic traits occurred only after permanent theatres enabled longer and complexly edited films to be exhibited (Gaudreault, Bordwell and Thompson, *Film History* 26). However, early film material suggests that cinema’s rapidly explored possibilities of integrating showing and telling seem to have pre-empted later feature film genres.

Wanda Strauven’s introduction to a collected edition on the cinema of attractions identifies confusion in the literature, in which attraction and monstration, “albeit both equally ‘opposed’ to narration ... cannot simply be considered as synonyms” (17). The difference, she explains, is that “whereas the concept of monstration implies a (narratological) instance that shows something, the notion of attraction emphasizes the magnetism of the spectacle shown” (17). Strauven points to a subtle distinction with respect to the effect of the show on the viewer. With attraction features, the spectator is attracted *towards* the filmic, which suggests a machinic and a bodily interest (17). In instances of monstration, Strauven claims, the images seem to move *towards* the spectator to direct his or her look, defining narratological interest (17). The difference between the kinds of showing lies in the direction of the pull or the force: attractions draw in and involve the spectator in the film’s “peak moments” (Eisenstein) whereas monstration shows images to direct the viewer along in the narrative.

More than simply appealing to the desires of the viewer, the cinema of attractions implicates a direct, somewhat aggressive address to the spectator (Strauven
According to Eisenstein, an attraction relied on the theatrical tradition of horror and special effects, which was supposed to produce “emotional shocks” (qtd. in Strauven 18). Strauven quotes specific examples from Eisenstein’s 1923 “Montage of Attractions” essay, such as “an eye is gouged out” or “an arm or leg [is] amputated before the very eyes of the audience” (18). She remarks that this bodily violence characterizes early cinema, in which car accidents and other ways of “cutting up of the body” were exhibited (18).

Strauven’s account of a cinema that “cuts up the body” recalls the attraction of quasi-scientific demonstrations of the dissection of human bodies. For a fee, theatre-goers could watch the cutting up of a body, and glimpse into an interior space. Seemingly mirroring the Renaissance interest in flaying bodies, the era of anatomical theatres demonstrated the pliability of the body as attractional cinema attempted to jolt its viewers by appealing to the vulnerability of the body. Both spectacles incite curiosity, drawing in the viewer. Jonathan Sawday’s examination of the conjoined “culture of dissection” of dead bodies and the “surgical culture” that reconstructs living bodies comments on the premise of anatomization present in both. His study of the 1500-1600s focuses on the practical, material outcome of scientific enquiry through chirurgical means. The parceling out of knowledge and body parts both involve division, the cutting up of a whole into parts. Sawday unravels the cultural knot of the anatomist/surgeon, whose work invites danger as well as desire.

The ‘operation theatre’ that Preciado identifies also consists in the division of bodies, reflecting the “culture of dissection” (Sawday) that involves violence. The darker sense of dissection can also be traced in the etymology of the term sex, in so far as sex derives from the Latin verb secāre, meaning “to cut” (Graham 300). The decision of sex, also from secāre, one might extrapolate, thus involves the division and separation of bodies. Each body, then, undergoes a cutting insofar as it is assigned a sex and thereafter, each time that sex becomes affirmed. With the notion of the operation theatre as an epistemological framework, the cultural relevance of a cinema of attractions may be based on seeing the anatomization of bodies, the literal and conceptual cutting up presented as entertainment. Hence, a gender-focused analysis of early cinema and its ‘alien’ experimental formats could benefit from understanding

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11 In Chapter Five “Curiosity” I discuss the relation of this kind of viewing with pornographic modes of examining the body via Williams’ assertion that physiology studies also involve a pornographic impulse, suggesting that porn is the longtime anchor to (and brandished origin) of cinema.
the category of a cinema of attractions as a primary site, an operation theatre, for (re-)sexing bodies. In addition, in the field of attractional apparati at the turn of the century, attractional cinema may provide conceptual coherence for the transformation of bodies that turn out for the public spectacle of bodily violence, one of which became transsexuality.

**Therapeutic Somatechnics**

As Joanne Meyerowitz documents in *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, from the early twentieth century, “the concepts of sex change and sex-change surgery existed well before the word transsexual entered the medical parlance” (15). Print and image culture marketed a bewitching cocktail of sex and science. Meyerowitz’s history includes a selection of press headlines from the 1930s to 50s, such as “Girl Transformed into a Man, Plans to Take a Bride” and “Ex-GI becomes Blonde Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth.” At the same time, Meyerowitz discusses the thinly veiled pornographic contents of academic circulations like *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*. The research of these early scientists was informed by the discoveries of anatomists, who investigated the human embryo and found stages of sexual differentiation and, moreover, noted the ways in which the development of women and men overlapped. Meyerowitz points out that the emergence of transsexuality in the early twentieth century was not due to new developments in medical technology alone; equally important was the new definition of sex as gradational and malleable, concomitant with a vocal campaign for sexual emancipation (21).

From a medical point of view, early and recent accounts of transsexuality have been primarily defined by the utilization of hormone therapy and/or sex reassignment surgery to assuage the condition.12 Both in the popular imagination and in most transsexual autobiographies since *Man into Woman*, the transsexual is engaged as a

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12 See, for example, Harry Benjamin *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966), The World Professional Association for Transgender Health *Standards of Care* (6th edition), and *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, IV* of the American Psychiatric Association. Though currently being rewritten, most recently it lists the diagnostic criteria for “gender identity disorder,” known to lay people as transsexualism. Foremost is “a strong and persistent cross-gender identification, manifested by a repeatedly stated desire to be, live as, or be treated as the other sex or by the conviction that the person has the typical feelings or reactions of the other sex,” and secondly, “a persistent discomfort with their bodies.” These criteria suggest that the treatment for the disorder would likely involve sex-assignment surgery because it both alleviates discomfort and enables the desire to live as, and be treated as, the other sex to be achieved.
surgical subject. The surgery – genital reconstruction, usually happening in phases – is the defining moment of crossing over. Following her four surgeries, now feeling “himself to be entirely a woman,” Sparre/Elbe was able to receive a new Danish passport as female and have her marriage declared null and void (13). The singularized moment veils the other and ongoing aspects of sex reassignment technologies, however. These options today range from shaving the Adam’s apple, electrolysis, and voice lessons to breast removal or augmentation, and, like early treatment programs, often include name and wardrobe changes. Surgery also functions as a principle tool for self-definition through the rhetoric of ‘pre-op,’ ‘post-op,’ and ‘non-op,’ all temporal references to ‘the’ operation. For better or worse, then, surgery has become metonymic for transsexuality, standing in for the suffering, the wound, and finally, the cure.

According to Stryker, surgery often causes “abrupt, often jarring transition” between genders (“My Words” 245). Echoing Strauven’s description of the cinema of attraction, Stryker writes of the transsexual body: “it is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born” (245). Historically, the term transsexuality emerges as a specific cultural-historical interaction with hard and soft technologies. Therefore, I propose understanding transsexuality specifically as a “somatechnic,” a term that asserts the inextricable relation of the soma, the body as a culturally intelligible construct, and techne, the technologies through which bodies are positioned and transformed. According to Nikki Sullivan, the concept of somatechnics does not see the fleshy substrate of the body as existing prior to its enhancement or mutilation by technology, and nor does it see hard and soft technologies as separate entities waiting to become applied (“Somatechnics” 314). Beyond suggesting an originary chiasmic interdependence of soma and techne, somatechnics involves investigating and describing the historical specificity of the

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13 See Sandy Stone’s “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” for an overview of MtF transsexual memoirs that place the operation as the moment of no return to manhood and the point of crossing into being a woman (221-227).
14 The theoretical literature on transsexualism from the humanities and social sciences (and mainly by non-trans authors) sees surgery as central to the construction of transsexuality, especially Marjorie Garber’s chapter “Spare Parts: The Surgical Construction of Gender” in Vested Interests and Bernice Hausman’s Changing Sex: Transsexuality, Technology, and the Idea of Gender.
15 The next chapter, “Suture,” focuses on the stage of trans embodiment following the cut, that is, becoming sewn together again in another shape.
16 This formulation paraphrases Susan Stryker’s in “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” which describes the concept’s development in tandem with scholars at Macquarie University (12). See http://www.somatechnics.mq.edu.au/index.php. and the new Somatechnics Journal for current research using this concept.
form and positioning of a body. Sullivan coined the term to help “think though the varied and complex ways in which bodily-being is shaped not only by the surgeon’s knife but also by the discourses that justify and contest the use of such instruments” (314). Hence, somatechnics signals the confluence of flesh, knowledge, and political bodies in the operation theatre. An emergent somatechnic, the transsexual formed both a medical field of study and a spectacle reminiscent of a cinema of attractions.

The medicalized image of the transsexual is frayed by a long history of conflicts erupting over the question whether teams of psychologists, surgeons and endocrinologists have a sound scientific basis to intervene and treat the condition. Since Hirschfeld’s first resolve to assist somatic changes, scientists in the Western world and beyond insist on a program of hormonal and surgical treatment. Those working in this burgeoning field had to convince not only skeptical colleagues but also a traditionalist public that they would pose no harm to their patients, and that their patients would pose no harm to society.

Psychoanalysts in private practice led the opposition to gender therapy by surgery by using a variety of analytic techniques “to support their position that persons demanding castration were *ipso facto* mentally ill,” with the final diagnosis that all transsexuals were “border-line psychotics” (Meerloo), or victims of “paranoid schizophrenic psychosis” (Socarides) (qtd. in Billings and Urban 269). This pathologization raises the question of whether patients could consent to the operations that they ‘psychotically’ demanded, since psychotics cannot legally express consent.

From a so-called ‘radical feminist’ perspective, sex-change surgery is trivialized as only an aesthetic make-over. Trans scholar Zowie Davy comments that in the imaginings of Sheila Jeffrey, Mary Daly, and Janice Raymond sex-reassignment is considered the violation of healthy flesh – the “amputation and mutilation of an otherwise healthy body, rather than its enhancement” – which condemns transwomen to be “pseudo-women” with masochistically orientated sexualities (75-76).

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17 In the article “Speaking Transsexuality in the Cinematic Tongue,” I elaborate on the somatechnics of cinema and transsexuality to seek an understanding of gender and language (expression) wherein transsexual embodiments and practices are intelligible. This move explores Benjamin’s mimetic theory of language, to suggest that the speaking and reading of these somatechnics take place through the subject’s mimetic faculty in which cuts and flashes transfer meaning.

18 Refuting the moral judgments about what constitutes “good” rather than “bad” body modification practices, Nikki Sullivan develops the concept of “transmogrification” to suggest a fundamentally human expression of transformation and to draw attention to ways in which such “trans’ practices” are “interpreted, evaluated, situated, and lived” (“Transmogrifications” 552-553). This chapter’s historical investigation of the attractional seeks to contribute to such an analysis.
resistance from these and other quarters, as sociologists of sexual culture put it in 1978, “[g]enitals have turned out to be easier to change than gender identity…. [w]hat we have witnessed in the last ten years is the triumph of the surgeons over the psychotherapists in the race to restore gender to an unambiguous reality” (Kessler and McKenna 120).

One of the most influential pioneers, Harry Benjamin [b. 1885- d.1986], published *The Transsexual Phenomenon* as early as 1966 to dispel the common image of the mentally deranged transsexual held by clinicians and laypeople. He argues that “[f]rom the therapeutic end, it cannot be doubted or denied that surgery and hormone treatment can change a miserable and maladjusted person of one sex into a happier and more adequate, although by no means neurosis-free, personality of the opposite sex” (196-197). The message is clear: sex-change surgery is a therapy for a kind of mental condition and as such it adjusts the body to alleviate the psychic stress derived from “maladjustment” in society.19 This viewpoint on transsexuality was integral to legitimating gender clinics in American academic institutions.20 Richard Green, working at the University of California in Los Angeles as director of the gender identity clinic, pronounced in 1970: “For me, at this time, the critical question is no longer whether sex reassignment for adults should be performed, but rather for whom?” (emphasis in original; qtd. in Dwight and Billings, 270).21

In writing “an account of myself and my helper,” that is, her surgeon, Elbe’s task in *Man into Woman* was in part to describe and justify the apparent violence of surgery for the trans subject (267). In many places, she expresses the hope that the story would be helpful in promoting an understanding of her kind. On the eve of her final (and fatal) surgery, she writes to Hoyer (her editor) the following directives:

“now you will understand me and now you will be able to teach others to understand me” (264). At a mid-way point in her series of operations, one of Elbe’s diary entries

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19 Benjamin’s endocrinology career developed into advocacy work for transsexuals and writing sexological texts on the subject. These include “Transsexualism and Transvestism as Psycho-somatic and Somato-psychic Syndromes,” “The Transsexual Phenomenon,” and “Should surgery be performed on transsexuals?”.

20 The Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program opened in 1968, the University of Minnesota and Johns Hopkins University Clinic in Baltimore began operation soon after. Benjamin notes that a few operations were performed in the 1950s at the University of California Medical Center (142-143). Billings and Dwight report that Cook County Hospital in Chicago performed sex-change operations as early as 1947 (269).

21 The search for etiology, diagnosis, and treatment proved a battle of wills between the researchers and the transsexuals. As Stone sees it, they were “pursuing separate ends. The researchers wanted to know what this thing they called gender dysphoria syndrome was. … The transsexuals wanted surgery” (228).
provides a clue to her strong desire for others to understand her, to be able to identify her kind:

Formerly, I had found distraction in reading. Now, I never opened a book or journal. What were the fates of strange persons to me, unless I could find consolation in reading about a person of my own kind? But of such a person no author had been able to write, because it had never occurred to any that such a person could ever have existed. (emphasis mine; 110-111)

This passage suggests that her articulations are invested in forming an identity, because a language to describe people like her has not yet been invented. The comment proposes a particular embodiment, a special “kind,” and a distinct way of being. For the reader coming across “such a person” as Elbe, via the spreading of news about sex-change surgery from the 1930s, during which the book was published in three languages, the encounter might instigate the “shock of recognition,” to borrow a phrase from Meyerowitz (“Sex-Change” 176). In this sense, Elbe’s story could offer consolation, a kind of “shock” therapy that might lead to actual surgical treatment in order to become a certain kind of being.

In a letter to Hoyer included in the last pages, Elbe acknowledges the public’s interest in the details about her miraculous surgeries: “You say that the people who read my book will want to know something about the nature and the progress of the operations” (266). Offering lurid details throughout, she writes, “Ought I to say that when Andreas was … in Paris, he suddenly started to menstruate …. Ought I to say that the first operation in Berlin was the castration of Andreas,” and so on, with the derisive tone of one made to strip (266-267). Knowingly, she supposed it would sell better to write about her surgeries, which would enable her to “provide for my material existence” (267). The exhibitionism of the abrupt, jolting transition from man into woman, necessary and, yet, difficult (“Oh, dear friend, more than this I cannot write” [267]), fulfilled the multiple aims of the book: to reach out to those who might recognize her aesthetic sense of self, and to seek acknowledgement from others. However, writing involved her negotiation of the painful knot of sensationalism, money, and finally, perhaps, a satisfactory account of herself that may reach a public. For the general public, might the encounter with exhibitionist attractions also serve a therapeutic purpose?
Aesthetics and Anaesthetics

According to Benjamin, with the emergence of cinematic technologies and styles of editing, filmic jolts of bodily violence and shocks of abrupt movement between frames arose to meet the need for fresh stimulus. In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin describes a newly forming mass, crowds of people eager to be entertained through the eyes of writers Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allen Poe. Specifically, he highlights the intimate connection between the experience of shock and the mechanical reality of metropolitan life (159-169). Reviewing the working notes of these and other “students of the physiognomy of the big city,” Benjamin characterizes the era by experiences of overstimulation – a bombardment of the senses -- leading to feelings of alienation (170-171). Referring to technology like the match, the telephone, the photography camera, and traffic signals, Benjamin looks critically at the haptic experiences that retrain the human sensorium to move abruptly. For Benjamin, film plays a special, both aesthetic and therapeutic, role in the context of the turn of the century industrialization. In film “perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle” (171).

The role of the editing cut that the viewer may perceive as a shock would become key to both Benjamin’s political agenda and analysis of the cinema asserted in the “Work of Art” essay. The surgery analogy is introduced at the juncture in Benjamin’s argument where he wishes to harness the potential therapeutic capacity of film to revitalize the perception of the masses, deadened by the “prison-world” of urban industrial modernity. Benjamin writes,

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. (“Work of Art” 117)

Film for Benjamin has a decisive role in the epochal reconfigurations of the sensorium. In Hansen’s words, “having opened the Pandora’s box of therapeutic violence,” Benjamin saw that one way to close it again would be by “handing the key to the proletariat” (327). The gamble that the “Work of Art” essay makes is that the

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22 The masses were also coming to terms with machines like the telephone (invented in 1876), the phonograph (1877), and the automobile (developed during the 1880s and 1890s).
collective would be ‘innervated’ by film; that the violence rendered by film would train them to be able to deal with the shocks of modern life. Benjamin asserts that “the most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus” (117). What cannot now be heard or seen any longer due to the numbing factors of modernity, such as the factory and the crowd, Benjamin believes can be perceived anew in the operating theatre of cinema. Hence, the vigor of the masses, and for my purposes, the emergence of transsexual aesthetics, both rely on transforming the violence of the cut into an intervention to restore vitality to the senses, an aesthetic transformation that is carried out in the soma-cinematic operating theatre.

In Benjamin’s theorization of the cinema-as-surgical theatre, incisions occur on a number of levels: (1) the selection of reality to be captured on celluloid, (2) editing the celluloid, and (3) the viewer’s reception of the edited film. First, the cinematographer “penetrates deeply into [reality’s] tissue” to extract piecemeal parts. The camera operator intervenes in perceived reality by slicing into it (“Work of Art” 115). Then, during the film’s production, the editor acts as a kind of surgeon: in piecing together the parts, he or she assembles the various cuts to create another perception of reality (114). Finally, when this artificially ‘equipment-free’ view of reality is hoisted on film viewers, the film becomes the surrogate surgeon (119). Cinema, based on successive changes of scene and focus made possible through the procedure of cutting celluloid, has a “percussive effect” on the spectator: the tactile quality of the unstoppable and erratic flow of cuts assails the viewer (119). Benjamin asserts that film as a whole—not just at either its production or its reception—operates on an ailing relationship with reality. Film’s mode of expression in and through the cut enables Benjamin to make this claim.

In the theatre, the viewer’s body learns to feel again. Hansen writes,

Benjamin envisions a regeneration of affect by means of technically produced images, that is the possibility of countering the alienation of the

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23 Hansen sees that innervation is the key term in Benjamin’s efforts to imagine an alternative reception of technology (“Benjamin and Cinema” 313). She explains that innervation broadly refers to the “neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and mechanical registers” (313). The spin Benjamin places on the term is mostly taken from Freud’s psychoanalytical conception of it. For further information, see Hansen’s “Benjamin and Cinema,” especially 313-341.

24 In “One-Way Street” Benjamin writes on the ability of advertising billboards to restore sentimentality, “just as people whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again in the cinema” (qtd. in Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema” 335).
human sensorium with the same means and media that are part of the technological proliferation of shock-anaesthetics-aestheticization. (335)²⁵

Hansen warns against reading Benjamin “too optimistically as assuming that the anaesthetization and alienation wreaked by technology on the human sensorium could be overcome,” because, she continues, “for Benjamin there is no beyond or outside of technology” (325). Since a reversal of the historical process is impossible, the issue for Benjamin is how to mobilize and modify its effects.

Stryker takes a similar approach as Benjamin with regard to the apparatus of sex and sex reassignment. For her, there is no going back to a so-called natural state, in which the body would be unmarked by the divisive decision of sex. Stryker suggests an alternative mode of reception that foregrounds agency in movement: “Though I may not hold the stylus [scalpel] myself, I can move beneath it for my own deep self-sustaining pleasures” (“My Words” 254). This solution suggests masochistic engagement as an adequate response, in that the message of gender is writ in one’s interaction with the movements of the scalpel or stylus. In engaging the violence of the cut, whether rendered through surgery or cinema, one may transform one’s bodily aesthetic and find therapeutic release. Benjamin’s and Stryker’s responses both suggest a politics of homeopathy or immunization: they prescribe a dose of what ails to cure you. The only way to bear the violence of anatomized sex or physical alienation wrought through other means is to move through it. Benjamin’s film-therapy and transsex-therapy both rely on embracing the somatechnic of surgical cutting.

In the essay “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: The ‘Work of Art’ essay Reconsidered,” Buck-Morss explains why Benjamin was keen to keep moving the dialectic between aesthetics and anaesthetics, which I quote at length:

Being ‘cheated out of experience’ has become the general state, as the synaesthetical system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to

²⁵ Buck-Morss further solidifies the experience of surgery in the cinema by point out that advances in anaesthesia in the 1840s occasioned a tripartite division of perspective into agent, matter and observer; this same division, a continuation of dissection culture, she continues, “paralleled the brand new, contemporary experience of the cinema” (32). The aesthetic-to-anaesthetic dialectic underpins Benjamin alignment of operation theatres with the surgeries of cinema. “Unlike the magician (traces of whom are still found in the medical practitioner), the surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his [sic] patient person to person; instead he penetrates the patient by operating,” writes Benjamin (“Work of Art” 115-116). Similar to the surgeon, the camera operator in the pro-filmic world avoids a direct confrontation with the viewer and vice versa: the somatechnic of cinema mediates their relationship.
protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to numb the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather one of anaesthetics. In this situation of ‘crisis in perception,’ it is no longer a question of educating the crude ear to hear music, but of giving back hearing. It is no longer a question of training the eye to see beauty, but of restoring ‘perceptibility.’ (emphasis in original; 18)

Since the synaesthetic system reverses to become anaesthetic, Benjamin argues that the only way to reconstitute experience is to shock the system once more to reestablish perception. This is where cinema comes in as the therapy that may break through the protective shield of consciousness. Alternately, it could also, Buck-Morss points out, “provide a ‘drill’ for the strength of its defenses” (ftnt. 18, 62). The way in which the technology might work takes on acute political significance: one is either duped into a fascistic pleasure, or becomes involved in a promising transformation of perceptibility. The political leeway that Benjamin bets on is subject to the extent to which the acculturation of perception is subject to change. As he writes at the beginning of the “Work of Art” essay, “[t]he way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history” (104). History attests to possible change.

Benjamin brings the discourse of surgery to bear on cinema to underscore the ambiguous cultural and political consequences of interacting with reproductive technologies.26 While most readers of the “Work of Art” essay take away Benjamin’s affirmation of cinema as an art in spite of its mechanical reproducibility, the essay is also alert to fascist tendencies. Its last section turns from optimism to warn against the ways in which film could be co-opted. Benjamin recognizes that a fascist deployment of film grants the masses a means to expression without granting them rights. Such a fascist aestheticizing of political life, Benjamin declares, culminates in one point, and “that one point is war” (121). The violence of the cut found in film and war alike may merely provide “artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology” (122). In this light, Benjamin asserts that film “proves to be the most important subject matter, at present [1936], for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics” (120).

26 Benjamin deals with other industrial technologies such as the telephone, grammaphone, photographic camera, matches in “Some Motifs in Baudelaire” and “Little History of Photography.”
Buck-Morss pinpoints the difficulty of interpreting the last section, in which Benjamin reverses his confidence and notes the immediate danger of technical arts culminating in a war. The final words of the essay read: “Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art” (emphasis in original; 122). Allow me to quote at length Buck-Morss’ reading of this move:

[H]alfway through this final thought (aestheticized politics, politicized art), Benjamin changes the constellation in which his conceptual terms (politics, arts, aesthetics) are deployed, and hence their meaning. If we were really to ‘politicize art’ in the radical way he is suggesting, art would cease to be art as we know it. Moreover, the key term ‘aesthetics’ would shift its meaning one hundred and eighty degrees. ‘Aesthetics’ would be transformed, indeed, redeemed, so that, ironically (or dialectically), it would describe the field in which the antidote to fascism is deployed as a political response. (emphasis in original; 5)

Buck-Morss clarifies that this revolution in terms is a return to original etymological meaning: ‘aesthetics’ is a derivative of Greek aisthētikos, “of sense perception,” from aisthanesthai, “to perceive” (6 and “Work of Art” 132 fn. 36). Initially, aesthetics was a discourse of the body’s specific relation to material reality. Only through a reversal of meaning did aesthetics begin to apply foremost to art, “to cultural forms rather than sensible experience” (6-7). Relying heavily on Terry Eagleton’s history of the concept, Buck-Morss conducts a tour of this reversal that points out the way in which philosophy absorbed the term aesthetics to contain its bodiliness in a bodyphobic era (7-11). Central to these works is the need to control corporeal response, with the height of control exemplified by the figure of the warrior (10). In the “Work of Art” essay, aesthetics circumscribes a tension between an incision into the body and the socio-political consequences of that violence (either war or therapeutic release), a tension that Benjamin applied to film as an exemplary test case.

The crucial question posed by Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay, “In what ways might the operating theatre’s aesthetics relate to politics?,” might also be asked of Man into Woman. Elbe’s account offers an aesthetic of cuts derived from her experiences of surgery, which I venture in the next section to detect at the level of the text. She attributes her two drives, to endure multiple surgeries and to write the

27 See also Alexander Gelley’s “Contexts of the Aesthetic in Walter Benjamin” for further discussion of this prominent issue (7-9).
memoir, to an overpowering desire to be identified as a woman. The book’s political
dimension conjures up an early version of identity politics in its paradoxical directive
that she is both a woman, and differently so. Tragically, her story ends in death, very
likely resulting from complications following the final surgery that was to provide her
with a womb and a vulva so that she might bear a child and finally “become a mother”
(258).28 Although she was not to experience her life as a woman for long, the
continued circulation of the (auto)biography allows others to access to the aesthetic of
soma-cinematic cutting in the form of what I suggest is best understood as a bio-
picture show.

A Bio-Picture Show
In her final days, Elbe writes to her editor and friend, “I want nothing more ardently
than to demonstrate that Andreas has been completely obliterated in me …. Through a
child I should be able to convince myself in the unequivocal manner that I have been
a woman from the very beginning” (260). Though she was unable to bear a child with
her fiancé, she understood that one day her writings “would burst upon mankind as
the confessions of the first person who was not born unconsciously through a
mother’s travail, but fully conscious through her own pangs” (255). Much like
Stryker’s birth of herself through rage (Introduction), in birthing herself Elbe claims
responsibility for the creation of her newfound womanly identity. Man into Woman
engages the reader in a plotline in which one character is subdivided into male and
female, but it does so carefully, and in her own words, to parse a new subject.

The portrait Elbe draws of herself is both an image of her body and her story:
her bios, in both senses. The particular kind of ‘pre-historical’ transsexualism she
depicts, drawing on the earlier theory of sexual inversion, mobilizes the accepted
hypothesis of internal hermaphroditism (she showed no external signs). Elbe matches
her womanly feelings, her cross-gender identification, with her doctor’s discovery of
“withered ovaries” in her abdomen, which were explained to her as trying to
overcome the testicular hormones.29 The illness of her body was understood as
signaling the presence of

28 Alternatively, rumors circulated at the time and now online that Elbe staged her death to live out her
life in peace.
29 This particular intersex condition is highly implausible, as no other case of developed testes and
ovaries has ever been found (Meyerowitz 30-31).
two beings, separate from each other, unrelated to each other, hostile to each other, although they had compassion on each other, as they knew that this body had room only for one of them. (emphasis in original; 111)

The story of an internalization of warring masculine and feminine traits justifies the divided sexual self into Sparre/Elbe. The continuous assertion of this division guides the narrative about her kind by way of montage sequences of what I identify as shot/reverse-shots. This editing technique serves to drive the narrative -- cutting from Sparre to Elbe and back -- while engaging the reader in the life and death drama, in which “one of the two beings had to disappear, or else both had to perish” (111). The question then becomes at what exact point will this dramatic bio-picture cut back to find that Sparre has suddenly disappeared?

Film scholars David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson explain that film editing contributes to the film’s organization and renders affective and cognitive effects on viewers (Film Art 247). Each cut, they make plain, poses a problem to the filmmaker:

Editing might appear to present a dilemma to the filmmaker. On one hand, the physical break between one shot and another may seem to have a disturbing effect, interrupting the viewer’s flow of attention. But, on the other hand, editing is undeniably a primary means for constructing a film. How can one use editing and yet control its potentially disruptive force?

Editing can be used to create continuity of time and space for the viewer, or of discontinuity. The common synonym for editing, montage, the French word for the putting together of parts into a machine, suggests that film may be formed into different kinds of ‘machines’ that can disturb by interrupting the flow of attention, or conceal these breaks. Benjamin cautions for viewers to remain mindful of the way in which these machines are put to use. Hence, the history of film editing might also chart a history of changing political perceptions.

30 Perhaps unsurprisingly, her memoir has been made into a screenplay entitled The Danish Girl, due out in 2011. As it is not yet available, I am unable to comment on the ways in which the cinematic style of the memoir has been retained (or not) in the film; however, it is reported to be told not from Elbe’s point of view, but from that of her wife. This decision may reflect the assumption that viewers can identify Elbe as a transsexual, but that a general public would not be capable of fully identifying with her.

31 There are traditions that follow Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, who mainly praise film’s documentary abilities and therefore detest manipulative editing techniques, and other traditions that follow Sergei Eisenstein and Gilles Deleuze, who heavily favor invigorating montage techniques. Benjamin’s interest in film tends to saddle both of these impetuses.
As Bordwell and Thompson point out, most films produced in the Western form make use of a very narrow set of editing possibilities (*Film Art* 261). On a visual level, between shot A and B the filmmaker can focus on manipulating four basic relationships: graphic, rhythmic, spatial, and temporal. The potential range of these relationships is virtually unlimited. Editing for continuity is only one answer to the predicament of editing’s potential disturbance to the viewer. As Benjamin points out, each shot implies a division, a cut on the level of selecting from the pro-filmic world, the level of editing celluloid, and in relation to the viewer’s experience of these cuts. Continuity editing is characterized by the way in which the relationship of one shot to another is harmonized by similarity, matching the graphic qualities of shots, whether by color, arrangement, or mood, or by relying on conventions of linear time and space. Space in continuity cinema must match from shot to shot; to maintain the effect, cinematographers only shoot along what is called the ‘axis of action,’ which divides in half the 360 degrees of the scene’s space. If one suddenly were shown the action from the other side of the axis, it would provide a viewing position incongruous with the established one. For cuts that join person to person, or subject to object located at either end of the axis of action, the continuity system developed the shot/reverse-shot pattern. By cutting back and forth, this edit establishes a relation between the two images (even when there might not be one). Often an eye-line match is used as well, which has in shot A someone looking off-screen, while shot B shows what is being looked at or vice versa (265). Key to this editing pattern is that in neither shot are both looker and object present; they are divided in the breakdown of the shot (265).

The theme of matching in continuity editing may be related to the way in which the transsexual’s behavior is tutored to match gender norms, so as to avoid disruption. This medically-enforced transsexual aesthetic resonates with the cinematic style of continuity editing to maintain an “unbroken connection” between shots and encourages clear narrative action (*Film Art* 492). Matching up the key elements of screen direction, position, and temporal relations to ensure a seamless flow of narrative action requires intense deliberation on the part of the filmmaker and crew. This labor is also expected of transsexuals so that their changed or potentially fractured gender presentation is undetectable. I concur with Stone that “at the site of [the film’s] enactment we can locate an actual instance of the apparatus of production of gender” (emphasis in original; 228). In establishing their credentials as men or women, as narrative films have to do for their worlds, transsexuals are doing...
the work that everyone has to do, though in a relatively self-conscious way (Shapiro 253). Since cuts must be made in either case by the cinematographer and editor, transsexual and cinematic narratives vary on the basis of the specific aesthetic choices to join together -- or show gaping -- cuts.

The medical community’s narrow vision of gender enjoins transsexuals to make their ‘plot’ cohere. They highly recommend rewriting their life story to construct a ‘plausible life history,’ in which the physical break from one sexual embodiment to the next is smoothed over through the omission of the earlier gendered name or other experiences. The difficulty of telling a transsexual story, then, is that division plays a central role in transsexual narratives, which foremost seek to explain a psychic-physical rupture in a single character and then present, post-surgery, a changed protagonist. As the title Man into Woman suggests, if Andreas Sparre is a man in one take, then in the next a woman, Lili Elbe, appears. At the same time, both characters are aligned on the same axis of action. Stone identifies this division as a strategy of “building barriers” within a single subject to maintain “polar personae” (225, 226). Although the divided individual is the same person, he or she must deny the mixture existing in one body, the mixture of s/he, by enforcing a divisive cut of he/she.32

The story of transitioning follows a pattern akin to the continuity editing technique of shot/reverse-shot that cuts from one image to another to establish a relationship as well as, crucially, a certain distance between the two images. Engaging this shot pattern in transsexual writing necessarily means to reveal the birth name and life before the transition. In other words, by acknowledging oneself as a transsexual, looking back at a previous incarnation, the protagonist abandons the plausibility of an uninterrupted gender. This looking back in the reverse-shot risks breaking down the careful division between the self that exists before the transition and the self one wishes to establish post-operatively. Taking this risk, however, means that one continues to cut long after surgery is over. The narrative of telling and showing oneself as divided (even if only in time or by name) reveals that the process of gender editing is ongoing.

32 s/he is the title of Minnie Bruce Pratt’s 1995 book that details her love relationship to Leslie Feinburg, the well-known American transgender activist and writer. My epigraph is taken from one of its short stories. This formulation is more commonly made in reference to transgender experience than transsexual, which underlines the pervasiveness of transsexual experience as divided along either pre- or post-sex reassignment.
Given that the transsexual story has a fundamental discontinuity at its base, it might well follow that a representative montage visualizes it by using spatial and temporal discontinuities. Elbe’s narrative technically involves potentially disturbing cuts from one shot to the next, specifically from one character to another to establish difference between Sparre and Elbe. The effect could highlight discontinuity in time and space between the characters rather than imply the continuity of one character’s location. Hence, each sequence that flicks from Sparre to Elbe reflects an aesthetic negotiation of de-subjectification, which would result from a completely discontinuous montage, bereft of narrative and sense. However, even if a transsexual like Elbe commits to narrating a compressed version of her life with montage sequences of shot/reverse-shots, she does not necessarily obey a particular system of editing, whether the continuity as prescribed by later medical teams or the discontinuity that may hamper her ability to make sense of her experiences. To specify this point, I want to look at Elbe’s writing in some detail. The book may be perceived as conventional in its use of a continuity narrative for her sex change. When translated into filmic terms, however, it can be appreciated anew for the ways in which it draws on editing techniques that are used in the various film forms, yet to different effect.

From the start, the plotline enacts a character subdivided, reinforced by a conflict of division. In the first chapter of *Man into Woman*, Sparre and his wife Grete are pictured as a happy couple enjoying a languorous meal with friends. However, ‘Lili’ interrupts the banter; Sparre then becomes suddenly serious. Lili is described to their friends as a “condition” that is “gradually becoming intolerable” (20). Sparre goes on to frame himself separately from but intermingled with Lili, the overpowering intruder: “Lili is no longer content to share her existence with me. She wants to have an existence of her own” (20). One of their dinner companions sets up an appointment with a promising Dr. Kreutz, who after a brief examination tells Sparre to go to Berlin for further testing. In the scene when Sparre leaves Paris, the narrator dictates, “all his bridges were burned,” emphasizing the imminent division between Sparre’s life in France, and the emerging character of Lili, indigenous to Germany (39). The metaphor of a bridge between cities, between sexes, and characters suggests that the protagonist is in the process of crossing over from one gendered personae to another.

Lili was first discovered by the happy accident of Andreas sitting for his wife, whose illustrations of women’s fashions demanded a model. When the particular
model failed to show, he wore the outfit as a favor, but his feminine poses were so convincing it became routine for Andreas to cross-dress to help his wife. The drawings by Grete became the first portraits of Lili, whose captured stillness seems to instigate the desire to become animated. The morning before Sparre visits the German doctors for the first time, he speaks to a friend about his feelings about Lili becoming an externalized personae with a life of her own. The friend’s parlor is decorated with Grete’s drawings of Lili, to which Sparre refers to assert their impending split: “‘the man you are talking to is condemned to death. And now the question is, whether that being – there –‘ and he pointed to the portrait, ‘can be summoned into existence and take up the battle of life’” (52). When visiting the doctor, who informs him of the operation, Sparre learns that “‘when the surgeon here dismisses you, you will be no longer Andreas Sparre, but …,’” to which he exclaims, “‘Lili!’” (58).

*Man into Woman* thus sets-up the surgery as the final arbitrator in the battle for life and death, between man and woman. However, on a textual level, the reader is already directed to gauge the division between Sparre and Lili by flicking his or her attention from one to another, from one shot depicting Sparre cut to another shot of Lili, already visually present hanging on the wall. The shot/reverse-shot expresses a vision of her ‘own kind.’ That is to say, the editing technique introduces the transsexual as a divided self along the axis of action. To demonstrate the signals of this changing expression through the shot/reverse-shot device, I want to focus on the first instance in which surgical and textual cutting converge.

Following the protagonist’s first surgery to remove the testicles, the shot/reverse-shot patterns linking and distancing Sparre and Elbe accelerate in intensity. Sparre/Elbe and the medical staff discuss the “simply astounding” transformation from man to woman through the flick of the scalpel, said to result in a change of vocal tenor and handwriting (126).33 The shot/reverse-shot pattern is established through the use of changing names and pronouns to dramatize the change in voice. It is Sparre who wakes up and is crying out. He asks if he screamed much. The nurse replies that he made a little noise, “and the strange thing was that your voice had completely changed. It was a shrill woman’s voice” (125). The doctor then comes in to congratulate Sparre on having a “splendid soprano voice” (126). Even

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33 Modern science now confirms that the effects of castration (actually, the non-effects) have no bearing on tonality and certainly not on handwriting. This seems to be a case of the “jaundiced eyes” of clinicians, which Stone refers to in her analysis of this scene (225).
Sparre’s lifelong friend who is visiting does not recognize to whom the new voice belongs.

The drama of this first recovery scene in a Berlin hospital is encapsulated in the decisive cut between the sexes, affected through the chirurgical cut between Sparre/Elbe. In a great pain that s/he compares to the other patients on the gynecological ward who give birth, the protagonist wonders aloud, “Who am I? What am I? What was I? What shall I become?” (127). The questions are answered through the change in voice from tenor to soprano, male to female, leading the reader to expect that the feminine Elbe will now take over as the protagonist. The existential crisis is also present in the writing: in the next sequence, Sparre/Elbe writes a note thanking a friend for sending flowers. A nurse reads the card and gives it back to Sparre/Elbe to look at, apparently with the intention to prove that Lili Elbe is there, finally brought to life, an animated version of her portrait, a reality that Sparre/Elbe still struggles to accept:

*He* [Sparre] gazed at the card and failed to recognize the writing. It was a *woman’s script.* (emphasis mine; 128)

Although the reader does not see the writing on the card, one is able to perceive its expression in the text: in the shift of a shot/reverse-shot from one sentence to another, from the narrator to the evidence of the card, a cut linking and distancing “he” and “woman.” This cut expresses Elbe’s perceptibility through her pronounced script, to which the doctor responds, “[o]ne thing after another is pushing out,” suggesting a creature being born (128). It also enables the reader to look back at Sparre to find a weaker character, one whose castration seems to render him linguistically impotent, utterly unable to speak or write from the standpoint of an ‘I.’

The book’s title *Man into Woman* suggests that the man will transform instantly into woman, which could be visualized with a ‘trick shot’ that uses a direct cut from the same static position to show a character in one frame, who then disappears in the next.34 This trick shot edit seems produced in the sequence of the recovery scene. Sparre disappears in the blink of an eye, the flick of the scalpel, the space between two sentences. Yet, the narrative continues to describe a series of surgical

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34 George Méliès of France pioneered the trick shot in *The Vanishing Lady* (1896) using in-camera editing, specifically by stopping the camera and substituting the woman for a skeleton (*Film History* 16).
transformations and refer back to Sparre until well into the last quarter of the book. At this late stage, Elbe is unable to remember the place where Sparre’s parents were buried; she announces, “Andreas Sparre was dead” (230). Only then does Elbe declare herself alone in the world, with neither father nor mother -- and also without Sparre in the picture.

If Sparre dominates the screen of the first quarter of the text and the battle between Sparre and Elbe takes up the second and third quarters, then the final quarter of this biopic concludes with the transformation of Elbe into a woman, following the slow erasure of Sparre’s appearance in the frame. No one single surgery transforms Elbe: transformation is slowly wrought from the ongoing word-image montage sequences that reconfigure gender over the course of the story. A literal cut, the castration, accelerates the flashing cuts of the montage, but the text does not end here. The story follows a narrative of becoming a woman in the form of continuity editing to the extent that it presents time and space as linear with proper use of shot/reverse-shots depicted from one side of the axis. However, the textual technique of a shot/reverse-shot also serves to maintain a discontinuous barrier between the characters of Sparre and Elbe. The cutting back and forth between Elbe and Sparre enforces a formalized sense of shared space, but it also functions as a stylistic expression of the drama of Elbe’s emotional and physical division, which she desires readers to perceive and hopefully understand.

The story of her kind is edited to highlight a divided frame where man and woman stand on opposite sides, even as each find harbor in the same body. Stryker argues that the voices in these memoirs that demonstrate an editing of themselves “are something more, and something other, than the creatures [or films] our makers intended us to be” (“My Words” 248). This suggests that the process of transsexualization, or transition, is not bound to surgical practices. The technologized body continues to be rendered through the cuts of language.

**Bridging the Cut**

My tracking of the way in which Elbe narrates the drama of transformation through the shot/reverse-shot division of her character complicates Stone’s reading of this text. Stone compares Elbe to the transsexuals who “go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women” (225). She concludes that “[t]here is no territory between,” which suggests to her an expression of a medicalized
transsexuality that avoids the disturbance of cuts (225). The transsexual protagonist, however, does not carry out this operation of division in isolation. In fact, the territory between Sparre and Elbe is the cut, the jointed space that readers, or rather viewers, have to link for the filmic narrative to work. As Bordwell and Thompson note, filmic cuts are there to keep the action moving, which suggests that the viewer’s desire to follow the action across the cut is so powerful that most ignore the cut itself (*Film Art* 268). The viewer’s desire not to notice cuts is shored up by the similarity of movement from shot to shot, which likely holds the viewer’s attention more than the difference that also results from the cut. In a comparable manner, the transsexual who seeks to avoid the viewer’s shock must embody similarity by matching qualities from one take to the next, attempting to overcome the audience’s threshold for seeing the difference of the cut. However, in the case of Elbe’s story, the viewer’s desire follows the action that flows over the cut so to potentially understand Elbe’s discontinuous subjectivity. In other words, despite the division and piecemeal presentation that disrupt the flow, the viewer is able to make sense of Lili Elbe as a coherent character in part because of his or her desire to follow the story, and hence may cooperate by joining the cuts. On the body of Elbe, then, the viewer connects one side of the divide to the other. To use Stone’s phrase, the cuts of gender editing effectively cover a “territory between.”

In film terms, the desire to relate one shot to another gives rise to what is called the “Kuleshov effect” (Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art* 258). This effect describes how, in the absence of an establishing shot, any series of shots will cue the spectator to infer a spatial whole on the basis of seeing only portions of that space (*Ibid.*). Hence, even though the viewer is only able to see a portion of Sparre or Elbe at a time, she or he understands that the protagonist is suspended over the abyss of the cut between the two personas. In the book, the German friend (the posthumous editor) describes this abyss to Elbe, and claims she has a peculiar position as a “bridge” between the sexes (246). Likewise, for the sake of being able to surmise wholeness, the reader might follow Elbe’s desire to flow over the abyss of the cut, willing a bridge-like effect that marks out a “territory between.” This brings new resonance to the term for an obliging practice of spectatorship, ‘suspension of disbelief.’ The viewer’s potential disbelief at a man actually becoming a woman would interrupt the narrative coherence, but its willing suspension serves like a suspension bridge over the cut, connecting one edge to the other.
In the story’s unfolding, the issue of bridging is explicitly enacted. Though the story begins with the building of a barrier between the personae, the transformation from man into woman is rendered in the text through the building of a bridge across the body of the protagonist. Her editor even confronts her to help her writing become more explicit about her nature as a bridge-builder across the banks of the “abyss which separates man from woman” (246). He accuses her of timidly depicting the temporality of her gendered status as broken, rather than continuous “from the solid bank of today” into the past and future. He rallies her to come forward about “the remarkable thing about your fate, the unique thing that slumbers within you, namely the emotional bond between the two sexes” (246). Adopting a warning tone, he says, “this new country, Lili, this new country of the soul, is lying dormant within you, and whether you like it not, it will go on expanding” (246). Thus, Hoyer presents the stability of the bridge as the new unbroken ground, on which Elbe might find support, a revision of her earlier, perhaps necessary, insistence on the burned bridges between the two sexes.

The central depiction of the bridge over the cut of sexual difference, which Elbe is said to embody, is pre-figured in the text as the bridge over the Elbe River into Dresden, where the final surgeries are carried out. The elements put forward in this passage undermine the ultimate stability of the territory or ground on which Hoyer suggests Lili Elbe might reside. The character Lili Elbe takes her name from the river she describes crossing on her first visit to see the surgeon Dr. Kreutz. The Elbe is the water that laps around her place of ‘birth,’ in the Dresden Municipal Women’s Clinic. For the protagonist, one may surmise, the Elbe River marks the wavering boundary between the banks of man and woman. On her first crossing of the bridge, Elbe describes the water’s magical ability to reflect the city’s architectural feats, which “emerge from the shimmering water’s surface” like “phantasmagoria” (152). In taking her surname from the Elbe, it seems that the protagonist imagines that she, too, emerges from the Elbe’s surface. The description of the Elbe River invites the viewer to imagine the protagonist as one of those shimmering figures, emerging as potentially disruptive flashes in the viewer’s flow of attention. Lili’s embrace of the Elbe River as her namesake suggests not an identity in terms of gender, but rather expresses an affinity with the movement of the river’s shimmers. This affinity, however, introduces the risk of being a mere flash of light, a phantasmagoria of modern science concocted through smoke and mirrors.
The flow of the Elbe and of Elbe over the cut is thus a bridge in a contradictory sense. There is the literal bridge the train crosses in her text, but Elbe identifies more with what is below it, even though the shimmers of the water might interrupt the very bridging process. Elbe’s narrative traverses the abyss between man and woman thematically in describing a transsexual transition as well as somatically in that the text offers a corporeal instance of that transition. The writing’s determination to not only keep Elbe in the future-oriented frame, but also to accommodate her past (embodied by Sparre) speaks of a flow of action towards becoming-woman to bridge the dividing cut between the banks of man and woman. The narrator’s attention to the process of transitioning, of bridging the cut of sexual difference with ‘flows’ of graphically matching shots, seeks to negate the male (Sparre) to achieve the perceptible effect of ‘woman.’ Instead of a story that tells how a man shockingly became a woman, the portrait narrates through a flow of gender shimmers rendered by the on-going flashes from Sparre to Elbe and back. The emphasis on flow as connection suggests a subjectivity more like ‘bridging man and woman’ than ‘man into woman.’ Yet, the bridge is only constructed because of the cut. In other words, the cut foregrounds the creation of a persona that emerges from surgical incisions as well as a figuration of the same persona, who seems to magically emerge from the shimmering flow, a phantasmagoria of the soma-cinematic dispositif.

A shimmering vision is constituted when the dividing cut and unifying flow come together. The cut marks the difference, but the disruptive effect of points of light engages the viewer to follow the flow of action rather than process the perception of the difference. One might surmise from Elbe’s deep affinity with the Elbe River’s shimmering surface, to the point of taking its name for her own family name, that she pays homage to her new country, the territory flowing between the banks. Shimmering water, however, is hardly a stable territory to stake one’s claim on. It is in the sense of the cinematic as expansive and animating that I suggest Lili Elbe comes into being: from the flow of a character who defies the so-called impossible leap over the cut of perceived sex difference. This principle cinematic problem, creating linear progression out of the momentary, is addressed by Man into Woman’s balancing of attractional and narrational techniques. The resulting use of shot/reverse-shots produces a vision of her shimmering sex and invites the viewer to experience the image of sex shimmering.
“The work of [gender] in an age of technological reproducibility”

A core issue in “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility” essay is the manner in which the mechanical reproduction of works of art effects the viewer’s perception. Elbe’s technologically produced, yet glossed as natural, form begs the same question: in what ways is one’s aesthetic experience changed by the intensive engagement with technology, and furthermore, what might be the political consequences of that engagement? The “Work of Art” essay prophetically envisioned the onslaught of World War Two as well as the potential of the masses to enjoy their own violent disembodiment, prepared through cinematic techniques. Against this negative outcome of war, I have championed the potential of cinema – and cinematic techniques -- to affirm and revitalize perceptibility, even through bodily violence. 

*Man into Woman* presents an affirmative relation to cutting, whether in relation to the cuts from the flickers of shimmers, edits, or the scalpel. The protagonist is clearly not pictured as a ‘victim’ of the cutting machines. To the contrary, the editing of gender removes and then repairs her masculinity. In addition, several passages of the book demonstrate how the technology of writing served as a means to re-produce her version of womanhood.

In many places, she relishes how complete and clear her expression as a (technologically-produced) woman comes across. For example, she writes,

> [N]obody saw anything unusual in her … she saw two of Andreas’ studio comrades approaching, without being recognized by them, and she heard one whispering to the other: ‘By Jove, what a fine pair of legs!’ meaning Lili’s legs, she swallowed the remark with avidity, not only as a compliment, but as one hundred per cent recognition of her identity as a woman. (224)

The passersby, who knew her before as Andreas Sparre, now so completely perceive her apparently natural, or at least usual, womanliness as Lili Elbe that they are attracted to it. The effect of the transformation, her writing would have us believe, has been to reproduce her history as Lili Elbe, not the famous artist Andreas Sparre, thereby writing into being her authenticity as a woman.

Benjamin’s concern with the authenticity of the artwork derives from the effect of reproduction: it enables the object to move, shifting time and space, and destabilizing the historical testimony attached to it. The ‘loss’ of history is also evident in the process of reproduction. Taking the object out of the here and now
strips the work from the weight of tradition that shores up its authority, which Benjamin terms the object’s “aura” (“Work of Art” 103). Elbe’s loss of her masculine aura, however, is cause for profound relief. Through her reproduction, she has given herself the opportunity to embody a paradoxically unique existence, one without the mark of history, which is to say without being made unique: “nobody saw anything unusual in her.” With her shedding of her ‘aura,’ Elbe establishes a kind of generic sameness, which she embraces as a feminine identity, an ideal that she is now able to copy.

Elbe’s transformation, however, is less like the reproduction of artworks, such as musical records and photographs, than like the art of film. Benjamin’s principle observation of the “Work of Art” essay is that the new technology of moving-image reproduction in cinema gives rise to a reshaping of perception, in short, to a new field of possible aesthetic experience. While Benjamin views cinema as the training ground for overcoming, however briefly, sensual alienation, in the context of transsexual surgeries the reshaping of perception is a profound self-transformation. The important distinction is that the filmic transformation entails a temporary shock of the masses that may or may not have lasting effects, while the abruptness of the transsexual’s transition likely reflects a seemingly permanent transformation of the subject’s selfhood. The perceptibility of the newly emergent, the perception of trans aesthetics, however, may become installed through film’s training of the senses to expand, offering another route towards (re)vitalization.

According to Benjamin, film’s expression or way of ‘speaking’ entails more than the tactile quality of the cuts that shock the body in percussive waves. Cinematographic techniques such as close-ups, pans, and other in-camera edits, hold open and expand the viewer’s field of action [Spielraum].

On the one hand, film furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [Spielraum]. (“Work of Art” 117)

Film revitalizes the experience of the familiar, and is capable of introducing the viewer to the new within the commonplace, which was heretofore unimaginable (“unsuspected”). In the cinematic image, close-ups expand space, slow motion
extends movement, enlargement clarifies indistinctness -- those techniques of the kino-eye observe another nature, bringing to light new structures of matter and new kinds of movement, which “have a curious gliding, floating character” (Rudolf Arnheim as qtd. in Benjamin, “Work of Art” 117).35

For Benjamin, those images are formations of a particular kind of unconscious, of “another nature” than human consciousness, which the camera captures with techniques of “swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object” (117). He argues that through the camera, the viewer discovers the language of the “optical unconscious” that humans may do well to learn for its therapeutic value (117-118). Images of objects and humans provide a distance from the pro-filmic world and its enveloping sheen of nature, a distance that enables play and experimentation.36 The distance gained by the filmic shock opens up new milieux for the viewer, encouraging, in Benjamin’s words, “journeys of adventure” through the debris of the prison-world (117).

Cinematography not only sees newness. Doing so, it explodes the industrial, alienating, and all-to-familiar prison-world that relentlessly closes in on the viewer. When juxtaposed with film’s aesthetic and political potential, the writings of transsexual individuals, who also seek to speak and represent creatures other than understood to exist before, might also appear to contain expansive and explosive effects. Elbe’s recollection of her youth, “a first life encased in a prison, from which I could not get free,” motivates the writing of her portrait, which depicts “my youth as girl and maiden” coming to life in the operating theatre and walking in the gardens of Dresden’s Women’s Clinic (260). The somatechnical cutting machines of trans writing may perform to rework the range of possible aesthetic experience and awareness. The bio-picture show interrupts the prison-world of Andreas Sparre, allowing Lili Elbe to go adventuring in an expanded field. The cinematographic impact of filmic cuts, in Benjamin’s terms Spielraum, or expanded ‘room-for-play,’ may also expand the gendered Spielraum, which transsexual aesthetics explore. The practices of transsexuality seem to concern far more than merely changing sex or gender. The presentation and representation of sexed or gendered material indicates

35 The ‘curious character’ of film will be addressed in depth in Chapter Five.
36 I refer the reader to Miriam Hansen’s excellent lecture “Room-for-Play: Benjamin’s Gamble with Cinema,” which reopens the “Work of Art” essay from the perspective of Spiel, appreciated in the multiple German meanings as play, game, performance, and gamble.
that transitioning might also be a process of experimenting with the aesthetics of corporeality, perhaps even exploding its narrow confines.

My cinematic reading of *Man into Woman* suggests that cuts can trigger a perception of shimmering, a perception of flickering lights that Elbe relates to the perception of her particular embodiment as a bridge over an abyss. As I argued above, the developments of the somatechnics of sex-change and cinema were both hawked as entertainment, shocking populations and glorifying humankind’s ability to transform perception. The impact of these various operating theatres on society, however, might not merely train the masses for their destruction, but could also invigorate and encourage the perception of shimmers. This cinematic perception, I propose, may affirm the shimmering quality of trans aesthetics, whose movements also flicker, perhaps jolting the viewer disruptively or at times flowingly.

Overall, this chapter aimed to investigate what tentatively might be gained from connecting transsexual corporeality and the medium of cinema. I related the two somatechnics through their engagement in transforming and expressing by the principle of the cut. With Benjaminian insights, I argued that the cinema has become a dominant mode of representation that structures the ways we think about ourselves. Its intricate relationship to the phenomenon of transsexuality is one instance that provides overwhelming evidence of the way in which cinema has come to culturally frame subjectivity through the manifestation of cutting techniques. Discursively, cinema and transsexuality share a relationship to surgical incision, in which cuts guide and enable a certain kind of ‘expression.’ As I have suggested, the creative principle or ‘mode of expression’ of film and transsexuality is cutting, montage in film terms, which I connect to gender montage. A cinematic reading presents a feasible, if unusual, account of the deliberation involved in everyday gender presentation as well as literary representation. Furthermore, the corresponding aspects of cinematic and bodily surgery were analyzed conceptually as taking place within an operation theatre that enforces certain modes of cutting.

Yet, Benjamin’s notion of ‘expression’ through the cut has its limitations. My concern is the extent to which Benjamin fails in the “Work of Art” essay to develop an analogical understanding of the psychic structures of cinema and the subject. In the next chapter, I will consider the psychic implications of the cut by examining “suture,” a psychoanalytical term that refers to the binding of the subject, which has been imported into film theory. With the concept of suture I wish to expand on the
question posed here regarding the conceptual and perceptual relationship between transsexuality and cinema.
Chapter Four

Suture

“We need visual texts which activate in us the capacity to idealize bodies which diverge as widely as possible both from ourselves and from the cultural norm,” concludes Kaja Silverman’s first chapter of The Threshold of the Visible World (37). The way in which a culture, and by extension an individual, relate to idealized and de-idealized bodies is central to Silverman’s monograph on Lacanian subjectivity. The title, The Threshold of the Visible World, is a phrase taken from Jacques Lacan’s essay “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience” (1949/1977), in which he claims that the feeble infant’s reflection in the mirror instigates a jubilant identification with an image of Gestalt. In the moment of investing in a (false) correspondence between sentient self and seen self, the child enters a threshold to the visible world, along with entering what Lacan terms the “Imaginary” realm, characterized by illusion, vulnerability, and division. Lacan later calls the ongoing false recognition of correspondence a “pseudo-identification,” a function he also terms “suture” (Four 117, 118).

The surgical synonym of suture highlights the way in which, through recognition, a body is pulled together in the mirrors of the visible world, mirrors existing at the level of the Imaginary and ratified at the level of the Symbolic. For Lacan, a coherent body is an ideal form, a form that Silverman contests as being available to all subjects at all times and at all levels. Countering Lacan’s presumption of the cultural norm that limits the fantasy of the Imaginary, Silverman seeks ways of idealizing and enabling divergent bodies to ‘suture.’ This chapter continues Silverman’s critique of Lacanian ideality, elaborating on the operations of psychoanalytical suture, in light of the specific bodily divergence of transsexualism.

Suture’s function seems to break down in the transsexual “mirror stage,” in so far as transsexuality is indicated by a failure of identification due to the non-correspondence between felt self and reflected self. A trans divergent body is medically understood as the experience of non-correspondence between the sexed

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1 An earlier version was given at the 14th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, held in Marianbad in August 1936, but which was never published. I follow the paper delivered at the 16th International Congress of Psychoanalysis, in Zürich on July 17, 1949, which is translated in Ecrits: A Selection (1977).
body and gender. That state is then de-idealized to the point of mental distress, deemed a “gender identity disorder” as listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM IV. Many trans people experience ‘non-correspondence’ as a less than ideal situation, and wish to bring their incongruence into conformity with the right ‘match.’ Surgical intervention is a logical solution to this visual and experiential predicament. Transgender theorist Jay Prosser conveys that, “‘sex change’ entails a transformation of the body’s surface” that hormone therapy begins and “surgery continues and radicalizes,” which “consists in the surgical manipulation of the body’s surface: the grafting, stretching, inverting, splitting, tucking, suturing of the tissues” (66). Prosser ends on suturing, suggesting that with surgical suture, finality is brought to bear on the transsexual subject. As I explore in the previous chapter through Man into Woman, the transsexual drive for this form of suture – a sense of completion, or finality -- is perceptible, if not made explicit in many transsexual writings. A trans subject surgically produces the binding effect when the pseudo-identification of suture may fail.

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, vision and its processes of assuming subjectivity and a bodily sense of self involves a complex interaction between the orders of the Real, Imaginary, and the Symbolic. For Lacan, the Real is foreclosed and thus instigates the subject’s desire to regain access to its plentitude through the Imaginary’s realm of images; however, those images also indicate the presence of others and usher in the rules of the Symbolic. The transsexual deployment of surgical suture, a renegotiation of the Real and Imaginary to overcome the breakdown of psychic-sensational coherence in the Symbolic, might be considered in relation to theories of filmic suture. Introduced by Jean-Pierre Oudart, suture in cinema names the successful (or failed) operation of identification that each spectator undergoes in the mirror of the cinematic image. In both instances of suture, the subject emphatically seeks to reconcile with a potentially antagonistic, alienating vision of the self. Suture might seem too divergent to consider a singular concept; still, in all cases suture serves as a cohering function for the subject teetering on the threshold of man and woman, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. As Elbe’s writing indicates, a lack of

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2 See for example the work of trans phenomenologist Henry Rubin, Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men, or Zowie Davey’s empirical research in the UK, Recognizing Transsexuals: Personal, Political and Medicolegal Embodiment.

3 See for instance Prosser’s chapter “Mirror Images: Transsexuality and Autobiography” and Myra Hird’s “Gender’s Nature: Intersexuality, Transsexualism and the ‘sex’/‘gender’ binary” for a discussion of this drive in trans writings.
coherence threatens one’s survival as a subject. In this chapter, I wish to develop the surgical analogy between cinema and transsexuality by focusing on their shared notion of suture, in which the cohering of the film viewer’s and the transsexual’s subjectivity is in play. I have selected a case study from trans cinema that strikes me as a rich reflection on suture in terms of sex change surgery and cinematic identification.

I focus on the trans-erotic film *The Father is Nothing* (1992, 11 min, Australia), directed by Leone Knight, because it dramatically displays the ways in which the formal cinematic operations of editing and *mise-en-scène* fasten together the subjectivity of the on-screen character and the spectator. Formally, I argue, the film offers a critique as well as an innovative practice of suture by staging a revision of cultural and social limits to idealization, that is, the Symbolic, which become reworked through a filmic Imaginary. The film stages an erotic scene between a female-to-male transsexual (FtM) character and his femme lover.\(^4\) This combination brings to light new insights about the erotic and the social dimension of suture, which is often overlooked by theorists who focus on the individual experience of narcissism or false ‘solo’ *jouissance*. My focus on the social aspect of suture, brilliantly invoked in the film’s framing of the operation through an erotic relation, emphasizes the point that it takes others to suture, which Lacanian accounts of suture tend to neglect. *The Father is Nothing* offers a rendition of suture that stages the potential for interruption from others as well as the necessity of help from others to forge an adequate gender perception of oneself.

Unlike in Lili Elbe’s recounting, *The Father is Nothing* does not directly deal with the issue of surgery, but indirectly the presence of the FtM recalls the medical discourse of transsexuality as sex-change. As I argued in the previous chapter, film cuts and edits a filmic body analogously to the procedures that take place in a surgical theatre. In addition, this film’s particular use of *mise-en-scène*, which includes all the elements captured by the camera such as acting, lighting, costume, contributes to the film’s surgical undertaking just as much as the editing. It is responsible for

\(^4\) I will interchangeably use the shorthand FtM and transman to refer to the film’s transsexual character. Also in denoting “femme” as the counterpart here, I specifically avoid the term woman, in accordance with femme politics that suggests femme is an identity that queers femininity, similar to how butch and other trans-masculinities may potentially queer masculinity. For an elaboration of femme as both a gender and sexuality, see the excellent collection, *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*, particularly Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh’s contribution, “A Fem(me)inist Manifesto” (165-170).
materializing the social and Symbolic elements that psychic suture depends on for ratification of the Imaginary. Yet, in contrast to the drive for approved coherence, the film also presents scenes staging and suggesting ‘incoherence’ with respect to the character’s masculinity. The film’s preoccupation with incoherence suggests that it regards psychic suture as a precarious activity, which when externalized in the practice of cinema can be reworked in ways perhaps unforeseen by the viewer. I propose that suture be considered at the level of figuration, mise-en-scène, and editing to understand the critical, tenuous ways in which *The Father is Nothing* sutures a less than ideal, but wholly desired subjectivity.

In the midst of the film’s opacity in narrative, aesthetic, and sexual tone, three mirror-like surfaces are offered: an actual mirror, the cinematic image, and oceanic water. In sections that focus separately on each kind of mirror and the ways in which the film relates them, this chapter discusses how these mirrors reassess suture, particularly by imaging the fallibility of coherence in favor of dehiscence. Unlike Lacan’s mirror that reflects an ‘ideal’ image of Gestalt, the film’s various kinds of mirrors reflect the incoherence of transsexualism, projecting the image of transmasculinity as a viable shimmer on the screen of culture.

**Facing the Mirror: A Stage and a Scene**

To understand the role of the mirror in Lacan’s oeuvre, and by extension in a possible psychoanalytical reading of *The Father is Nothing*, one must revisit Lacan’s main sources. The mirror as both the trap of beauty and the anticipation of the look of the other derives from Ovid’s story of Narcissus. Sigmund Freud’s coinage of the “narcissistic ego” transformed the myth’s emphasis on a divided self into a psychological state. For Freud, the narcissistic ego has the ability to take itself as a libidinal object, making it simultaneously a subject and an object. This is different from auto-eroticism, as it involves a more eventful confusion on the part of the subject:

> A unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed …. There must be something new added to auto-eroticism – a new psychical action – in order to bring about narcissism. (“On Narcissism” 69)

Clearly narcissism is not a natural or innate state, but the effect of a non-biological intervention into the subject’s development. In Freud’s version of the Narcissus story,
there is no actual mirror the subject chances upon. Instead, Freud’s mirror can be found anywhere and in all things. According to Elizabeth Grosz’s reading, the narcissistic ego is “an entirely fluid, mobile, amorphous series of identifications, internalizations of images/perceptions invested with libidinal cathexes,” which Freud likens to an amoeba (Feminist Introduction 28; “On Narcissism” 68). Freud’s development of the myth into a central feature of psychology resulted in the first proposition of psychoanalysis: the subject is fundamentally split because it can take itself as its object, a division that Lacan will specify further.

Lacan’s account of the ego in “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I” can be interpreted as his attempt to transform the unspecified “new psychical action” into a clearly marked stage in the development of the subject. This attempt seems to work against Freud’s point that the emergence of the unified ego is unpredictable and unnatural. Grosz concludes that Lacan’s ego is paradoxically “naturally social” (emphasis in original; Feminist Introduction 33). Lacan begins to fill in the genesis of the narcissistic ego from an empirical observation: “the child, at an age when he [sic] is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize his own image in a mirror” (1). Malcolm Bowie notes the significance of the occasion: “At the mirror moment something glimmers in the world for the first time” (emphasis mine; 22). Lacan’s gloss on the ego’s emergence is far more vision-centered than Freud’s mental projection, and in this regard more loyal to the myth’s connection of vision with the deluded recognition of the self. But, contrasting with Freud’s amorphous ego that can take in any image, Lacan’s ego is derived from recognition of a rigid, outlined Gestalt. The hard surface of the mirror reflects back a hardened glimmer that Lacan assumes is embraced as the self.

Bowie underlines the importance of the mirror stage for Lacan by drawing out the witticisms he makes in French: “The mirror stage (stade du miroir) is not a mere epoch in the history of the individual but a stadium (stade) in which the battle of the human subject is permanently being waged” (Lacan 21). This formative battle involves the “psychic action” of grasping the image and bringing it back to cloak the body. This creates a sense of unity for the human subject(-to-be), which Lacan (and Freud) see as fragmentary: full of “turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him” (“Mirror Stage” 2). The mirror provides not a perfect reflection, then, but an even more perfect reflection of the subject “as Gestalt,” which “symbolizes the
mental permanence of the *I,*” a unity that enables the infant to anticipate the maturation of its power and the adult to coordinate his or her mental and physical powers (2). Lacan’s mirror image is exactly not self-same, but the first incorporation of difference that the subject is motivated to ‘misrecognize’ as self. In accordance with the battle metaphor, Lacan likens the ego’s more perfect self-image to “armor,” yet one with an orthopedic (helping) function to assemble, sheath, and solidify its parts (4). In this masculinized form, the ego provides protective covering. Identification is associated with the idealization of a militarized body.

The benefit (and perhaps unlucky result) of this primary identification with what Lacan calls the infant’s cloaking “imago” is the ability to visualize the self in relation to objects, in other words, to spatially organize the visual world and thus move from “insufficiency to anticipation” (4). The infant’s self-identification will be brought to bear indefinitely upon the world beyond the mirror (Bowie 36). For the newly born ego, the “mirror-image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world”: a threshold, which, not long after its birth, the infant enters, enacting its own ‘fall’ into the Imaginary (“Mirror Stage” 3). Lacan’s Narcissistic subject does not die of thirst for fear of disturbing the water. Rather, the emergence of the infantile ‘I’ coincides with its fall under water, where it will remain ‘caught’ by the illusion of representations, doubles, and the others it fatefully embraces. The infant’s mirror stage, then, is only the first of many mirror scenes that repeat the troubling recognition of self in the reflections of the visible world. Each mirror scene contains a kernel of the intensity of the first fall, reenacting the suturing of correspondence Lacan asserts as vital to the functioning of the subject as *I*. Each mirror scene works as well (or as badly, depending on one’s perspective) as the first and the previous ones. As a repeated psychic action, suture is vulnerable to failure over time.

While retrospectively suture seems a key term in Lacan’s works, the concept is mentioned almost as an afterthought in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. It arrives in the question section of the last seminar in the series “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*.” “The conjunction of the imaginary and the symbolic” is the sutured psychic union, first occurring at the “threshold” of the mirror stage (Lacan, 118). In capsule form, psychoanalytical suture is the join of identification (that is *me*) and identity (*I* am this, not that). Hence, suture names the ‘click’ or the ‘zip’ of the subject experiencing concurrence between the mirror’s reflected sense of ‘me-ness’ with the Symbolic’s terms (e.g. man or woman). This conjunction, or the coincidence
of ego and subject, might be understood as a pseudo-thing, but it nonetheless situates the subject in the social. Unhindered suturing is a status that many non-transsexual people may take for granted. For instance, someone who can check the male or female box on an institutional form without qualms would be successfully, if fictionally, sutured.

Silverman’s rereading of the Lacanian ego clarifies the event of pseudo-identification; she indicates the ways in which cultural differences come into play in mirror scenes. She turns to Lacan’s contemporary, Henri Wallon, who asserts that the visual imago, or “exteroceptive ego,” is always initially disjunctive from the subject’s felt sense of “ownness,” or that which takes up space, which he calls the “proprioceptive ego” (Threshold 14-16). Silverman suggests that the jubilant experience of suture during mirror scenes is not so much attributable to assuming the Gestalt but rather to the hard-won, yet fleeting unison of exterior and interior egos. She writes that, “a unified bodily ego comes into existence only as the result of a laborious stitching together of disparate parts,” suggesting that the joint between these egos could come in many forms if culturally resonate terms were to exist for their shapes (17). Furthermore, the process is unique to the body’s history, to the way various cutaneous sensations have been registered and organized according to culturally distinct meanings.

This alternative perspective on the functioning parts of the ego is helpful to understand the transsexual practice of psychically and corporeally rearranging and stitching together parts to match the exteroceptive to the proprioceptive ego in search of personal and social legibility. Silverman alludes to how transsexualism has shaped her thinking when she writes that, “the ‘gender-bending’ of recent years has alerted us to the fact that the proprioceptive ego may not always be compatible with what the reflecting surface shows,” leaving open the possibility that it can be made compatible (17). However, she insists that a disjunction must always be overcome, which makes it difficult to articulate the trans-specific labor of stitching together a compatible bodily ego. Positively, her use of Wallon points out that this disjunction does not give rise to embarrassment, nor a sense of incoherence, nor “seem to produce pathological effects” (18). In this view, it is possible to have a maligned visual and sensational ego that requires continuous suturing in the sense of the stitching together of disparate parts.
Transgender theorist Susan Stryker better explains the difficulty of attaining psychic suture for transsexuals as well as its emotional impetus. Following from Judith Butler’s discussion of the gendered regulatory schemata that determines the viability of bodies, Stryker considers transgender rage as “an emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one’s own continued survival as a subject, a set of practices that precipitates one’s exclusion from a naturalized order of existence” (“My Words” 253). As I discuss in the introduction, Stryker views transsexual transitions in terms of a desire to survive as a subject. Yet, in trying to survive, the trans subject is simultaneously thrust into a “domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation,” which distorts the way s/he is perceived (Butler qtd. in “My Words” 253). Stryker suggests that a quasi-sutured self might be constituted by means of disidentification with compulsorily assigned subject positions (253). Disidentification requires a strong identification with and against, a relation that suspends the conclusive incorporation of either idealized image. The pseudo-union of Imaginary and Symbolic, Stryker suggests, is forged by recourse to different codes of intelligibility, made possible by strategically occupying and then modifying those gendered identities with which one dis-identifies (253).

The series of disjunctions I will discuss between the mirror image and the characters in The Father is Nothing do not indicate a failed subjectivity, but as Stryker suggests a trans-informed modification of the cultural terms of coherence. A first-time viewer would not know until the credits that the masculine character in The Father is Nothing is a transman (it reads “F2M/Jasper”). Without this acknowledgement, the character might well be seen as non-transsexual (either as a lesbian or heterosexual male), which begs the larger issue of securing visual evidence of transsexuality (or gender for that matter). With Silverman, it is clear that regardless of the actual status of the character’s bodily ego “laborious stitching” is necessary for all subjects. The film’s FtM is shown to have particular problems to do so, mainly by never being the one depicted in relation to the mirror scenes, but the one who becomes joined to the femme through an exchange of mirroring looks.

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5 Stryker’s elaboration of queer disidentificatory practices in the deforming mirror of society suggests an affirming potential in suturing, whereas Prosser’s Lacanian mirror “enables in the transsexual only disidentification, not a jubilant integration of body but an anguishing shattering of the felt already formed imaginary body—that sensory body of the body ‘image’” (100). For the practice of disidentification in the context of sexuality and race, see José Muñoz’s Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.
The importance of focusing on the FtM as a transsexual is not to overstate a medical or psychic condition, but to point to the ways in which the film emphasizes the FtM character’s refusal or difficulty in fulfilling the rite of identification in a one-on-one relationship with the mirrors in the film. Instead, the sequences with reflecting surfaces demonstrate the various ways that the FtM continually missteps towards, yet approaches the threshold. These missteps make for images that rework the mirror stage to introduce a mode of suture that calls for the validation of non-normative cultural formations of masculinity. The suture the film calls for becomes possible within the Lacanian schema, but only once it is stretched to its limits and certain agencies that Silverman points out are tapped. To accommodate discussing these pressure points in detail, I will next consider the repetition of mirror scenes in *The Father is Nothing* as revealing the serial nature of the mirror stage.

**Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: The Femme and Her Other**

In a traditional posturing of femininity in relation to beautification, *The Father is Nothing* introduces the mirror with the advent of the femme putting on her make-up. The scene recalls and then displaces Western fairy tales such as “Snow White,” in which the Queen is obsessed with how others view her and demands the truth from a mirror. Here, a young woman faces the mirror to apply the finishing touches and thus anticipates an other. The first shot of the sequence suggests but excludes the mirror by coming from behind her left shoulder as she leans forward to see better: the frame crops the femme’s hair, emphasizing her left cheek as her hand crosses over to line her eyelid with kohl. The image freezes on the motion before cutting to a quick insertion shot of naked bodies lying horizontally. The femme’s mouth appears to be on her lover’s crotch, but her hand covers the action (Figure 1). She wears a black cap in an s/m style that also hides from view her gestures. The camera is positioned at her lover’s head, accentuating the perspective as from the FtM.

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6 In some versions she says, “mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” For a discussion of the mirror stages’ bearing on beauty in the context of race and gender, see Mieke Bal’s analysis of Snow White, Lacan and Carrie Mae Weems’s photographic restaging of this mirror scene in Chapter Seven “Mirrors of Nature,” from *Quoting Caravaggio*. 

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A direct cut takes the viewer back to the mirror scene, this time framing the femme from behind in a medium shot that takes in her body and her double reflected in the mirror (Figure 2). The cross-cut sex scene suggests that the femme looks in the mirror not thinking of herself, but of shared pleasure, either to come or in the past. The mirror doubles not so much the femme’s body, but rather the erotic encounter, standing in as well for the lover who drinks in her image. The incoherence between who is looking and who is reflected rattles the mirror’s function to supply the stable reflection of the one present, whether of the femme or of the FtM. Unlike Narcissus trapped into an erotic engagement with his own image, the femme’s image escapes the framing of the mirror to become adored by someone else.

Next in the sequence, she returns the look to her lover. All done-up, she sits at the mirror, but instead of admiring herself she holds open a magazine. Yielding to and directing the viewer’s interest, the camera zooms in slowly. But before it arrives, a direct cut takes the viewer to the FtM, who in three-quarter profile glances back into the camera. A shot lasting just one second, its effect is interruptive and exciting, building anticipation for them to meet, and also suggesting that they may have already met. The shot upon return to the mirror scene is a softened extreme close-up of the left side of her face: a smile spreading lightly across her lips. The camera then continues its zoom into the magazine, stopping to rest longingly on the page’s collage of images, where a dashing masculine person in a tuxedo stands proud and two queer women in sailor outfits kiss. The camera’s movement away from the mirror towards the image of her FtM lover and his doubles in the magazine suggests that the reflection of one’s personal image is generated by more than a so-called objective mirror. The mirror alone does not ‘show’ the femme, nor the FtM. The composite image of the FtM and
his lover is given substance by the social or collective mirror of the magazine as well as by the film’s editing that forges an identification between them.

In a film of many reflecting surfaces, this literal mirror sequence offers something other than a femme’s narcissistic self-contemplation or the formation of her *Gestalt* self. Her mirror time is split between her image, her lover’s, and an index of the social world. The image of her beauty is cut into and therefore shaped by her lover’s look, and reciprocally her lover’s image is shaped by her vision of him. The mirror glimmers not with her image alone, but serves as the metaphorical threshold of identification between her and her lover. Thus, the mirror crucially connects these characters in a film in which they share screen space only briefly. Finally, the mirror and the additional image of the magazine seem vital to establish a vision of the femme and her other/lover as non-normative. In this sense, the editing and mise-en-scène both contribute to the ‘queer’ image of their gender formations. The femme may at first recall the Queen’s obsessive entreaty to the mirror to assure her (heteronormative) beauty, but her distractions lie elsewhere, in s/m and queer imagery. For his part, the FtM may seem to enjoy oral sex, but his genitals, much less his orgasm, are not revealed. What can be seen is the femme poring over prominent “genderqueer” images, coloring his masculinity as non-traditional. The mirrors work in this scene to make sense of the visual story of their identification and their queer eroticism.

As in Lacan’s version, the femme may seem motivated at the level of ego to cross the threshold of the visible world via the mirror, but joining together with the FtM seems to be her impetus. The assumed instant (and therefore jubilant) correspondence of subject and image is disturbed by the mirror serving to image someone else. This is the first indication that a different kind of identification is at play here. The disturbance of the non-matching image is not achieved through dissolves or fades that would loosely align the FtM with the mirror, but through direct cuts which provide an immediate face to the mirror’s ‘look.’ The FtM is placed in the montage as the ‘face’ of the mirror, an undeniably idealized vision. Yet, this image is clearly also her lover/other, an admitted identification across difference. I wish to suggest that this moment of identification is not so much confused, but rather visually motivated by what Silverman calls a generous and profound love. If, according to Silverman, jubilation may be felt by the subject when the exterior and the interior egos momentarily unify, then it seems possible that in cases of strong identification, such as love, joy could be experienced by subjects whose egos briefly and
reciprocally match. This sequence hints at what a representation of love-based rather
than anxiety-based identification might look like. Moreover, it points to ways in
which subsequent mirror scenes may provide opportunities to idealize outside the
masculine norm that Lacan observes in the primary mirror scene.

Silverman notes that in Lacan’s Seminar I “it is only through the mirror that
each of us is able to love an other” (Threshold 43). There, love demands the other lie
prostrate to our image of them, evoking a murderous logic of narcissism (Ibid.). But
Silverman insists that Lacan allows for another kind of love existing in a generous
relation with the other, “which can best be described as my recognition of that other
as an other” (Ibid.). The alternative is to accept that the image does not show me
myself, but someone else’s face and form. “The goal is to confer ideality upon an
image which cannot be even delusorily mapped onto one’s sensational body,”
Silverman asserts (45). Ideality is usually conferred on what is most culturally
valorized. However, idealization as a practice, what she calls with Lacan “the active
gift of love,” can open up an identification, “which would otherwise be foreclosed by
the imperatives of normative representation and the ego” (40-41). Engaging in the
active gift of love on both conscious and unconscious levels can produce a new range
of idealized forms. A shift of cultural values would allow for these forms to become
successfully sutured.

How does one idealize lovingly, then? Silverman reminds us that identification
occurs often enough without idealization, but that idealization first requires
identification (70). The difference lies in whether the identification perceives the
object’s separateness or seeks to absorb it into its narcissistic orbit. To clarify the
difference Silverman follows philosopher Max Scheler’s terms of heteropathic and
idiopathic identification. She describes idiopathic identification as absorbing the other
(23). In contrast, through heteropathic identification the subject identifies at a distance
from his or her proprioceptive self, and corporeally surrenders its “specular
parameters” for those of the other (23-4). I suggest that the mode of identification
between the characters in the film is pictured as heteropathic and, therefore, as
actively loving. In the montage, the femme faces the mirror, but her lover is imaged
first with a shot from his POV of her, then a close-up of his face looking again at her,
and finally of similar figures in a magazine again addressing the camera/viewer. In the
sequence, her specular parameters, framed doubly by the mirror and the camera,
become surrendered to the image of her lover three-times over. The sequence
continually places his face and body as the image she ‘sees’ when she looks into the mirror, indicating that the femme sustains an identification-at-a-distance.

Silverman argues with Lacan that textual productions that take an imaginary form, such as *The Father is Nothing*, can encourage the idealization of different kinds of bodies by showing heteropathic identification in action (81). The more general term she uses for this ethical aspect of the field of vision is the “productive look,” in the sense of productive of a consciousness that idealizes the other as other. Given the central role of the look in both psychic and cinematic suture, the next section focuses on another montage sequence that depicts an exchange of looks through the use of shot/reverse-shots. I discuss how this cinematic technique extends the established mirroring relationship between the two protagonists to the edges of each shot’s frame. In doing so, I recast Lacan’s mirror stage, which names an intrapersonal erotic relationship, into an understanding of the cinematic mirroring between the femme and FtM as a mode of eroticized intersubjectivity. The shot/reverse-shots in this sequence position the viewer at a third point of the exchange and thereby as a participant in their eroticism. The viewer is drawn into the opportunity to exercise a productive look, and can find a place from which to be sutured into the film’s picture of the world.

**The Look of Love**

Mieke Bal notes in a review of *The Threshold of the Visual World* that, more clearly than Lacan, Silverman makes the point that “not every mirror image is framed by, clothed in a positive, validating response from the outer world, whereas the subject is dependent on such a ‘ratification’ for the formation of the ego” (“Looking” 62). If the outside world does not offer affirmation for the bodily ego, how does one find a loving ratification? How does one survive the cultural debasement that threatens to frame you? The transman in the film does not approach reflecting surfaces — except for looking at his lover looking at him. Hence, *The Father is Nothing* displaces the ratifying framework onto a third party, an other who is willing and able to grant the affirming look of love. The film does this through the use of the shot/reverse-shot, a technique that would ordinarily piece together the vision of the character looking at the world (shot 1 shows an object and shot 2 shows who sees it, or vice versa). In one particular sequence, the combination of shots act not like a window into the world of the FtM, but like a mirroring system, in which the FtM derives coherence as an erotic subject as ratified by the return of the femme’s idealizing look. This deviant use of the
shot/reverse-shot suggests the film makes use of cinematic suture in a peculiar way. Cinema’s ability to demonstrate the exchange of looks and thus extend the frame of the mirror seems useful for a trans subject with suture trouble. The exchange makes use of film’s surgical technique to place the FtM “in the picture,” as Lacan calls the visual world, and draws the spectator into the filmic picture as well (Four 96)

In the sequence’s first shot, the femme is shown under a gauzy dark veil in a close-up framing her shoulders and face. She looks out through the veil. Her direct gaze catches the light, making an eye twinkle.

3. Femme gazing out

The shaky handheld effect of the camera and the dazzle of her eye bring her even closer to the viewer, despite the distance established by the veil. But it is not for the viewer that she sits, waiting and longing. The next shot is of the FtM laying horizontal on a bed, shiny riding boots in the foreground, with the rest of his body disappearing towards the far right corner. His arm folded behind his head props up his face, which confronts the camera, inviting the looker to take him in full. Looking up and down his lean body from the boots to his eyes, one cannot miss how his legs are cocked open in provocation.
4. FtM looking, posing

Cutting back to the femme, she slowly pulls the veil over to expose her alabaster skin, mouth slightly open in a sexual invitation, still directly looking into the camera, now aligned with the FtM. Taken from the ground up, the next shot returns to the FtM focusing on his face clearly for the first time, panned in medium close-up, then zoomed out just as he raises his arm with the flogger in hand. The next shot cuts to the bare back of the femme crossed by a black bra strap. The cut back resumes the shot in which the FtM lowers his arm, and the next shot shows the lashes falling over the femme’s back. The FtM takes target again with the camera set-up from behind his left shoulder to reveal the perspective of handling the flogger as it connects with her body.

5. FtM flogging femme

Situated in line with him, the camerawork concludes with a string of shots understood from the FtM’s perspective that also create a vision of him as ‘he-who-looks.’

The first shot of the sequence shows the object being looked at, the femme. The second shot, the reverse-shot, reveals the subject of the look, who is the FtM. The cuts
back and forth between the two characters show them each exchanging looks in the
direction of the camera, as if they were admiring themselves in a mirror. But the next
shot depicts who is looking and who he or she is looking back at; this creates a
mirroring effect. Because the femme has her head turned during the flogging, even
though they share screen time, they do not look at each other directly in the same
frame of a shot. At all times, the camera and editing mediate their exchange. Against
convention, these looks treat the camera as a mirror, looking into it directly.

In viewing the film, the spectator may take up the position of the camera’s eye,
the mirror which the characters address. Direct address is rare in continuity editing of
fiction, even more so when such editing uses a shot/reverse-shot edit as a way to
suture the viewer into identification with a character’s point of view.

Acknowledgement of the camera/mirror/spectator would break the illusion of reality
achieved with cinema’s traditional fourth wall. Comedy films, such as those with
Charlie Chaplin, or famously Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, have often used the device to
underscore a punch line. In contrast, in The Father is Nothing, the series of direct
looks force the viewer into the position of third party, a point on the triangle of their
erotic rather than comedic exchange. The sequence pits the viewer into a necessary
position of exchange, a position that suture requires of the spectator, here with the
added resonance of sexual invitation. The association of intersubjective eroticism to
suture has not been carefully explored by suture theorists, who tend to treat
identification as an individual psychic experience of cinematic images and underplay,
if not ignore, the libidinal energy that Silverman suggests consecrates suture.

Accounts of suture in film theory commonly convert the psychic situation of
suture, the mended split between Imaginary and Symbolic, to the spectator’s
oscillation between the Imaginary and the Symbolic while viewing a moving image.
As film scholars Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink note,

The idea of suture … seemed a useful way of defining the minute shifts
and revisions that take place in our state of mind throughout the viewing
of a film: a constant movement of the spectator between the dual domains
of the imaginary and the symbolic, a movement which ‘holds us in
place’… as we watch the film. (335)

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7 Thanks to Laura Copier for this film suggestion.
Cook and Bernink suggest that ‘motion pictures’ refer not the movement of the image, but the movement in the psyche of the viewing subject. As The Father is Nothing demonstrates, the viewer is hooked into the exchange of looks, because it mirrors his or her threshold position ascending to the visible world. The translation of suture to the viewing situation supposes that each film is the junction or threshold of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. At stake then, is the same sense of jubilation from achieving coherence in external and internal egos, which requires accession to an idealized image. Hence, the spectator, like the FtM and his lover, needs to find a way into the exchange of loving looks, a place in the ménage-a-trois.

Suture was imported into film theory by Jean-Pierre Oudart’s 1969 article “La suture” in Cahiers du cinéma. Oudart theorizes its operation as the securing of a ‘place’ for the spectator to re-enact the production of subjectivity. He defines suture as “the closure of the cinematic énoncé in line with its relationship with its subject …, which is recognized, and then put in its place as the spectator” (“Cinema and Suture” 35). The place for the spectator must be kept constant throughout the film so that he or she may ‘speak’ the film as cinematic discourse and become the cinematic subject. The spectator, according to Oudart, fulfills the role of the subject of the cinematic discourse, “a role which is only possible from a locus displaced in relation to field of the Imaginary and the place of the Absent One” (38). The mysterious ‘Absent One’ is simply the image’s presumed point of view that remains vacant and all-seeing, which with the spectator identifies to access the film. This Absent One, Silverman points out, “has all the attributes of the mythically potent symbolic father: potency, knowledge, transcendental vision, self-sufficiency, and discursive power” (Subject 204).

Ascension to this place is much like the mirror-stage’s formation of an anticipatory ‘I’ in that it “helps the spectator organize the space and the progression of the representation” (38). Hence, this phallicized Gestalt and simultaneously empty place is the keyhole the viewer must slip through in order to enter the visible world of the film.

The subject is moved by the exchanges between the film and its imaginary field, which for Oudart, are marked most significantly by the shot/reverse-shot principle (37). The film is punctuated by the Absent One becoming Some One, when a character or object enters to take its place. The eclipse of the subject’s imaginary place in the film, writes Oudart, “ensures the suturing function of the subject of the discourse” (40). Oudart’s proposal posits that the meaning of cinematic images
derives not from the sequence of images, but through the absence left by the camera that the cinematic-subject takes up. The spectator moves along the signifying chain of images making sense of the film’s discourse. In a position of ceaseless exchange the cinematic subject acts as the ‘turn’ of the film, moving, in film scholar Stephen Heath’s words, “ceaselessly in and out of the film,” like a needle joining the Imaginary field with the Symbolic field (88). Oudart renders this process in two stages.

The first moment is *jouissance* in the image. In this Imaginary field, the spectator is described as fluid, elastic, and expanding, and, I might add, as being unmarked by difference, nor disturbed by the frame of the film. Silverman emphasizes that Oudart’s shot 1 is “akin to that of the mirror stage prior to the child’s discovery of its separation from the ideal image which it has discovered in the reflecting glass,” that is, the subject enjoys the plenitude of the Real (*Subject* 203). An awareness of the limitations of this vision, provoked by the framing or a character, breaks up this initial relation. According to Heath, that which was “pleasure becomes a problem of representation,” resulting in the subject crossing the threshold of the Imaginary and entering the restrictive order of the Symbolic (*Questions* 87). Oudart’s description of the shot/reverse-shot makes much of the suturing role of the spectator in transforming the film’s images from mere cinema to cinematic discourse. This transformation can only be achieved if, as the film moves along its sequences, the spectator follows in the correct manner by being drawn into the imaginary space of the Absent One, identifying with the character, and investing it with the powers of omniscience that it idealizes and desires.

Oudart’s suture would seem borne out in this sequence to the extent that through the shot/reverse-shot the spectator is drawn into an Imaginary identification with the character he calls the “stand-in” for the camera’s Absent One, namely the FtM. It brings the FtM into view as a subject who has an enviable perspective on the femme, one of mastery by his role as the controlling sadist, both physically and visually depicted. In clothing the FtM in a European officer’s uniform and giving the character the role of a master who flogs his lover, the film portrays a militarized and sadistic form of masculinity. Perhaps sharing this point of view is attractive enough to maintain the viewer’s identification with him. Yet, the style of *The Father is Nothing* takes the format of the suturing shot/reverse-shot and puts it to different ends than merely the identification with the ideals of the Absent One. On the level of style, the
film’s editing interrupts the viewer’s identification with what Laura Mulvey describes as the “classic sadistic male gaze,” with the ‘active’ male protagonist who is given control over the visual field (“Visual Pleasure”).

In the reverse-shot, the FtM is given to be looked-at, reclining in a sexual pose on the bed. This is emphasized by the subsequent direct address of the femme to the Absent One’s on-screen stand-in, the placeholder which with the viewer is invited to identify, i.e. the FtM. Despite his dominant position, the ‘looker’ is shown as also being looked at, restricting the FtM (and the viewer’s position) from mastery. Yet, on another level, it is her look and the viewer’s position of exchange that directs longing and that constructs the FtM as both erotic and a viable subject. Hence, the construction of his idealized masculinity is fraught. The FtM’s masculinity poses as dominant and therefore in agreement with the paternal vision of the Absent One, and yet, the revocation of his masterful gaze by her looking back also leads the FtM to become eroticized.

The spectator’s options -- either to identify with the masculinity on display or to continually be shut out of the process of cinematic suture -- both place pressure on the viewer to consider the film’s divergent bodies as potentially ideal and erotically viable. At the close of his essay, Oudart briefly suggests that the operation of suture in which the spectator experiences jouissance in plenitude and the pleasures of mastery in alternating waves illuminates the erotic dimension of cinema. He then declares that film offers “the staging of a ‘passion’ of signifiers, a mise-en-scène of bodies and of the spectator himself [sic] who is privileged to represent the passion operating in communication, and in eroticism especially” (47). This suggests that the position of exchange is inherently an erotic place, and that the position of ‘speech’ which the viewer ‘represents’ in his or her suturing exchange with the film’s Imaginary is a desirous position. The Father is Nothing’s re-enactment of suture also opens up the possibility of failed suture in so far as the spectator’s place in the passionate exchange depends on their ability to idealize divergent bodies, to look lovingly with the productive look. The reworking of the Imaginary with a placeholder who fails to maintain mastery, but who remains an erotic subject, supplies an opportunity for the viewer to suture cinematic speech differently, not motivated by the ascension to an omniscient position but rather by heteropathic identification.

In this sequence, The Father is Nothing uses a sexual encounter to stage a critical rendition of passion being communicated. Rather than engage the viewer in
the idealization of mastery, this sequence suggests that eroticism and mastery need not go hand in hand. The eroticism is still derived from positioning the viewer in the hinge between shots: he or she links up the looks, some of which are aligned with physical dominance. However, the lovers’ direct address breaks down an alignment with the Absent One’s mastery that comes from His presumed invisibility. While the characters cannot ‘see’ the audience, their looks nevertheless emphasize the voyeuristic action of watching. The sequence thus opens up Oudart’s assumption that visual erotics are derived from a position of visual mastery, suggesting instead a reciprocating series of looks echoed in the sexual reciprocation of oral sex and flogging. The viewer’s position exchanges the master’s for the submissive’s view and then the submissive’s for the master’s. Participatory exchange seems the erotic aspect, not the illusion of control over the visual field. The editing that examines the characters by exposing their power dynamic within the exchange of looks also submits suture to examination.

Suture’s alignment of the Absent One’s Imaginary field with the mastery of the masculine character’s look over the visual field has been critiqued thoroughly by feminist film scholars in terms of the “male gaze.” Silverman contributes to the debate the notion that cultural forms, such as Hollywood cinema, re-enact and propagate a “dominant fiction” in a kind of ideological training of viewers (Male 15-51). The Father is Nothing confronts the well-established dominant fiction that masculinity is associated with mastery over the visual field. To the contrary, it gives the femme the role to reciprocate the look. In doing so it forces to light the disjunction of the “look” from what Lacan and in his wake (feminist) film theorists have called the “gaze.” Lacan names the gaze “an iridescence of which [the subject is] at first a part,” which can issue “from all sides” enacting the very “function of seeingness” (82). Although dehumanized as light, Lacan also describes the gaze as “the presence of others as such” (84). The Lacanian subject’s specular emergence takes place precisely with the production of the gaze: an internalized experience of being ‘seen’ that integrates the social, the Symbolic, into vision. However, this social (albeit anonymous and disembodied) aspect of the gaze is rarely considered in relation to either suture, or to its gendered dimensions.

8 Introduced in Mulvey’s 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the concept of the male gaze is discussed in, for example, Mary Ann Doane’s The Desire to Desire, Tania Modleski’s The Women Who Knew Too Much and by Jackey Stacey in “Desperately Seeking Difference.” Edward Snow’s “Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some Problems” offers a rebuttal from a male perspective.
In traditional cinema, suture typically ties the gaze of the Symbolic, the Absent One, to the male character’s look, who accesses the Imaginary field, from which he oversees the narrative action. Strikingly, the male protagonist directs his ‘gaze’ towards the female, who in her passivity of what Mulvey calls “to-be-looked-at-ness” is made into a frozen image (“Visual Pleasure” 27). Silverman’s analysis of Fassbinder films reminds us that the look is given by male or female subjects within a spectacle, but that the gaze is not theirs to deploy (Male 125-156). The gaze is neither anthropomorphic nor attributable to any subject or object: it is “unapprehensible” (Lacan, Four 83). Hence, an authoritative look may masquerade in cinema as the ‘all-seeing’ gaze, but this is only possible with the conceit of the gaze supporting it invisibly, hidden by editing. The gaze precisely shows (off) the specularity that all subjects and objects are subject to, “in the spectacle of the world” (Lacan, Four 75). Necessary and invisible, the gaze renders the subject “lit up,” to borrow a phrase from Silverman. In interrogating the male look and seeking to ascribe to the woman the gaze, feminist film theory has, according to Silverman, missed the opportunity to expose “the impossibility of anyone ever owning that visual agency, or of herself escaping specularity” (Male 152). In The Father is Nothing, the femme assuredly possesses a looking agency, just as the FtM does, while the reciprocating shots between them and with the participating viewer, underline the unavoidable scopic regime in which she, her lover, the spectator, as well as their visual desire operate.

The mirror scene sequence I first analyze spaces-out the operation of suture in mirror stage identification. However, the “mirroring” sequence I subsequently discuss above points to the disjunction between the gaze and the look. Yet, the gaze has to be negotiated and to an extent satisfied in the process of suturing. The exchange of looks from subject to viewer to subject cine-psychically suture the FtM’s non-normative masculinity by extending the frame of the mirror between them, across the expanse of the cut between shots. The looks dodge the supposedly necessary ratification of a paternalistic figure, whether of the Absent One, or of the masculinity inherent to Lacan’s normative Gestalt. However, the refusal of a dominant masculinity does not render the FtM’s masculinity null and void. To the contrary, the move in this scene to split the gaze from the look, and both from normative masculinity, allows for a different masculinity to show up, ‘lit up’ by the femme’s, and in turn the viewer’s, identification-at-a-distance. Neither invoking a fragmented mirror image, nor
engaging a Gestalt image, *The Father is Nothing* idealizes a ‘fatherless’ masculinity that we might call a masculinity without men or trans-masculinity.⁹

Throughout, *The Father is Nothing* invokes the dominant fiction of masculinity in its staging of sadistic mastery and militarism. The FtM appears on the threshold between this dominant masculinity and his lover’s vision of him. How is her idealizing look able to see something that others cannot, or divergent from the “other” as the dominant visual culture would have it? Lacan articulates the wedge of culture in between the look and the gaze in the concept of the “screen,” which Silverman handily translates to the “cultural image-repertoire” (*Threshold* 3). I argue that *The Father is Nothing* goes further than dispelling the paternal gaze: it also provides a new image, or a “screen-image” as Silverman would have it, of this particular threshold vision and aligns it with the femme’s vision. She seems to see something in the moving reflection of light on the oceanic water, which the film captures in repeated images of shimmering. In the next section, I explore the ways in which one might read Lacan against the grain to understand the ambiguity prompted by a shimmering image, which he positively calls a “jewel.” Crucially, if the screen-image lodged between the look and the gaze is transformable, then new visual forms might become sutured to the proprioceptive ego.

**The Screen of Culture**

As Silverman has argued, vision involves the complex interaction of all three Lacanian orders:

> The gaze occupies two domains simultaneously; in its capacity as light, and as that which is foreclosed from the subject, it partakes of the real, but in its status as ‘the presence of others as such,’ it clearly belongs to the symbolic. The relation of subject to screen, on the other hand, is articulated within the domain of the imaginary. (*Male* 152)

The screen is a determining factor in the subject’s ability to suture: it allows for bodily images to come together where the subject is locatable in the grid of culture. Silverman reminds us of the Symbolic order’s role in suture: ‘‘capitation’ can occur only with the complicity of the gaze; the subject can only achieve an invisible join

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⁹ The term trans-masculinity was likely introduced, if not codified, by Judith Halberstam in *The Drag King Book* and her seminal *Female Masculinity*, though it continues to be used by trans scholars, such as Jean Bobby Noble in *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape*. 152
with those images or screens through which the gaze in its capacity as ‘others as such’ looks at her” (emphasis mine; 152). The “invisible join” of suture requires the agreement of the gaze and the imaginary of the screen. The introduction of the screen revises the mirror stage’s self-recognition by becoming the mediating and crucial third term. This enables me to address the armored and masculine image of the ego as particular and not universal (152).

The screen has an intra-subjective role, which Silverman proposes to understand in a certain way. In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, she discusses the screen’s work as a “grid” between visual image and sensate body that spaces out the process of identification within the opaque insert of predetermined shapes (150). Bal writes succinctly, the screen “makes visible what the culture admits, and blocks out the rest” (“Looking” 65). Although Lacan does not stress the ideological status of the screen, I want to follow Silverman’s description of the screen as the repertoire of representations by means of which subjects are not only constituted, but also differentiated along lines of gender, sexuality, race, etc. (*Male* 150).

In contrast to the *Gestalt* mirror-image, the “opaque” screen enforces an image that may or may not be pleasurable or comfortable for the subject: it is not necessarily ideal (Silverman, *Threshold* 96). The understanding of the screen as ideological provides a productive distance between subject and self, a distance that Silverman stresses as indispensable to political contestation (*Male* 150). Relevant to transsexual practices is her suggestion that, at the individual level, one might substitute another screen-image for the conventional one, or even distort or resignify the normative image (*Threshold* 19). In Silverman’s view, the screen is managed as well as transformed collectively through cultural imaginary, which is subject to historical change.

Bal writes that, for Silverman’s analysis, “film is almost an embodiment – at least a metaphor – of the screen,” due to its appeal to fantasy and its capacity to shine light on memories (“Looking” 134). Furthermore, the screen enjoins the viewer towards an affective state of reception (134). Silverman insists that the cinematic screen, functioning as the Lacanian screen, can offer the “lighting up” of others as “an active gift of love”: “‘active’… might be said to qualify most profoundly that process of idealization which, rather than blindly and involuntarily conforming to what the cultural screen mandates as ‘ideal,’ light up with a glittering radiance bodies long accustomed to a forced alignment with debased images” (*Threshold* 78-79).
In my analysis of visible masculinities in Lacan, Oudart, and the film, I look to the role of the screen for multiple reasons. First, its repertoire may be limited, but fluctuates over time, enabling a historicization of what images are being lit up or darkened, whether in Lacan’s vision or in *The Father is Nothing*. Secondly, the screen names the subject’s burden of cultural meaning accrued to one’s self image, in other words, it is precisely what surgical, psychic, and cinematic suture work on in the Imaginary. Finally, Silverman holds out the possibility that if one’s idealizing look acts in concert with enough other looks, “it can reterritorialize the screen, bringing new elements into cultural prominence,” while normative elements fall into the shadows (*Threshold* 223).

The opening sequence of *The Father is Nothing* contains beguiling shapes, which foreshadow a series of elusive images. A string quartet plays languorously, as the viewer is treated to an extreme close-up of a glistening surface for twenty-two seconds: water from screen right washes up over an unidentifiable object, catching the light, forming what Silverman has called a “glittering radiance” (Figure 6). Then, a three-second cut to an extreme close-up of the skin of an indeterminate body with light searching over it impels the viewer’s look to stay on the surface (Figure 7). The film cuts back to the camera position of first shot looking over a glistening surface. From this position, the next shot pulls out into a medium shot to reveal more of the water with light dancing on it, until it becomes framed by the jagged edge of a dock and stops (Figure 8). It becomes apparent in this third shot that the first shot introduced, yet obscured in detail, a waterlogged car tire being gently rocked by waves.
This sequence questions the viability and appeal of Lacan’s *Gestalt*. The mirror of the water enables the viewer to see but not understand what it is she or he sees. Instead of wanting to identify with an image of unification, it suggests a dreamy pleasure in identification with indeterminate, moving shapes. This display suspends the viewer’s semiotic quest, restricting it to the inscrutable shimmers reflecting off the surface: enjoyable in their own right, not because they are recognizable. The first two shots are confusing, if pleasurable; they only start to make sense after the viewer sees the later shots. The first shot of the tire becomes comprehensible with the addition of final shot, but the intermittent flash of the body may remain unrecognizable as a (gendered) body until more than a minute later when a more easily discernible close-up of a flat, pale breast with a tattoo matches it. However, this body is never attributed with a conclusive gender.

The film’s opening, which establishes the graphic similarity between the shimmering surface of the water and the skin, suggests that the body, one that could be attributed to anyone, especially since no character has been introduced, is itself the mirror’s play of a shimmering transformation. This corporeality, I suggest, the film introduces as ‘trans’ and later attaches to masculinity. However, I first explore the way in which Lacan suggests an understanding of this shimmering Imaginary through the “ambiguity of the jewel,” a phrase from his discussion of the subject in the field of vision. I recount this discussion at length because it recalls with fascinating similarity the tropes present in this sequence, and clarifies the role of the screen in the sequence, while it also offers a conceit to Lacan’s own vision of the Imaginary.

To explain the relation of the subject to the domain of vision Lacan tells a story of an experience he had on a fishing boat in Brittany. A fellow worker, Petit-Jean
points out to him something “floating on the surface of waves,” a visual reminiscent of the tire glistening in the water. “It was a small can, a sardine can,” Lacan writes, “it glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me – *You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!*” (emphasis in original; *Four* 95). He acknowledges that this joke is not funny for him, as he felt “out of place in the picture,” not able to pass as a fisherman among fishermen due to his class background. Although the scene points to Lacan’s own trouble with suturing in not matching the dominant screen of class in this context, Lacan changes the topic from his personal experience to extrapolate a universal occurrence of the subject being out of place in the picture (96). He notes that one is not able to see oneself in the act of seeing; in other words, in vision the subject is displaced. The glittering sardine can ‘looks’ at Lacan “at the level of the point of light,” but as it looks, the subject, the “I,” becomes the vanishing point (95).

The can in the waves is a picture that is painted by light “in the depth of my eye,” but while the picture is in the eye, “I am not in the picture” strictly speaking (96). What is painted in the eye Lacan calls an “impression” (96). To extend the importance of light in constituting a subject-object relation, he clarifies that the impression in the subject’s eye is “the shimmering of a surface that is not, in advance, situated for me in its distance” (emphasis mine; 96). The picture places the subject on the threshold of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. It also constitutes a “shimmering” that grasps the subject at every moment, saying “*You want to see? Well, take a look at this!*” (emphasis in original; 101). Lacan concludes, “If I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen,” because the subject’s cultured vision and markings render a ‘form’ that reflects onto the picture (97). The iridescence of the gaze bounces off the shimmering surface and falls on the subject’s screen-shape, transforming the impression into a culturally located signifier. The subject interprets the shimmers as the surface of a potentially meaningful object in the depth of field, which reciprocally locates her in a particularized space. In other words, what he or she understands of the picture is dependent on the form of the screen as well as on the point of the gaze, on “the play of light and opacity” (96). The play created by the gaze’s iridescence, filtered by the screen’s opacity, constitutes what Lacan calls “the ambiguity of the jewel,” since what the subject sees is not fixed in time or space nor to the subject itself, but attributable to any number of outside factors (96).

In *The Father is Nothing* the shimmering of the water is captured by the filmic image and given to the viewer to enjoy and contemplate. Although the tire ultimately
becomes legible, the associated body whose surface is equally fascinating and, yet, difficult to identify, maintains the status of Lacan’s jewel. In other words, the body is ambiguous in so far as it is an object whose surface makes an impression, but whose play with the screen in the light of the gaze does not necessarily arrive at a determinable semiotic. The viewer’s screen is thus exposed: looking at the glittering tire, the shimmering water, the pale patch of skin, what does one see? Which shimmering elements does one’s eye select?

Lacan asserts that the subject’s fascination with the visual world hides his or her own specularity. The desire to be in the picture, to suture a pseudo-identification, propels the subject to adjust his or her screen-image, to give both the object and her or himself a place in the picture. The opening sequence, however, presents shimmering objects that resist pseudo-identification: in order to be in the picture of *The Father is Nothing*, the viewer must suture to the shimmering image. The ambiguity of the jewel, or inconclusive gender identity, is thus inserted into the viewer’s cultural repertoire, albeit not yet idealized (as later sequences I will discuss below do). Nevertheless, the ambiguous image is available for the transformation that takes place in the subject when he or she assumes an image, that is, for identification. Is such a suture to ambiguity possible in Lacan’s schema, or, does the ambiguity of the jewel pose the defiant opposite of the rigid *Gestalt*?

The question raised by *The Father is Nothing* regards whether Lacan’s militarized and masterful *Gestalt* of the mirror stage, translated into cinema as the Absent One, is anything more than one possibly desirable image among many in the Imaginary. Why should Lacanian psychoanalysis, and in its wake film analysis, assume the cloak of the phallic image as a precursor to the veil of the Symbolic’s phallus? Shimmering images that suggest an imperfect match of masculinity will serve as my guide to address Lacan’s fraught image of masculinity and its privileged place in his orders.

**Seeing Lacan’s Imaginary Phallus and Other Eccentric Forms**

From its opening, *The Father is Nothing* stages a series of mirror scenes that test the liability of Lacan’s suture, which supposes a rigid Ideal-ego. A longer sequence depicting the femme looking awry – casting her look over the shimmering water -- begins after the third shot, which reveals the tire and the edge of the dock. Shot 4 then introduces the femme with a medium shot from her left shoulder, extending the field.
of vision over the pebbled beach, the water and the long pier. Returning to the water in shot 5, the camera searches under the pier where the water swirls around. A cut to a steady close-up of the femme’s face follows in shot 6, then shifts in shot 7 to an out of focus slow zoom that seems to coast over the water that is sloshing around under the pier, towards a lit up end. Shot 8 graphically echoes 7 but with a subjective camera: from the darkness the shot moves towards a bright light and the handheld camera lurches and swaggers as it marches there. Changing the imagery again, shot 9 is of a nipple under a spotlight that a lip-sticked mouth envelopes. Shot 10 repeats the close-up of shot 6, suggesting that these images belong to the femme who is remembering them as she casts her gaze over the water.

Shot 11 returns to the water under the pier, this time in a zoom out suggesting the femme is drawing back from her reverie. Still looking over the water in her eyeline, shot 12 is a close-up of the femme from slightly above her. Shot 13 of the pier tells the viewer where she is looking in a typical shot/reverse-shot, but then shot 14 disorientates. The camera moves in slow-motion swinging over the open water, a striking play of light and dark and at seven seconds a longer shot than the others. Shot 15 returns to the femme, but from in front of her, she looks to the side and then flicks her eyes directly into the camera. Shot 16 cuts immediately into a long shot of the pier
that begins to track and then speeds up in a blur of pillars meeting the water. In shot 17 the camera returns to the femme, this time above her; she keeps her eyes on it, turning her head slightly as it slips to the left. The final shot of the sequence, 18, watches her from the bottom of a long staircase running in slow motion. It then segues into the first mirror scene, which I discuss above.

15. Shot 12, Close-up femme 
16. Shot 14, Water
17. Shot 14, Water

18. Shot 15, Femme direct 
19. Shot 16, Blur of pier
20. Shot 17, Femme glancing
This second major sequence of the film installs the femme as a looker: someone whose vision of the water, the dark hallway, and the sexual encounter the viewer is invited to share. The details that she focuses on, such as the shimmering lights bouncing off the water, the white light, and the pert nipple, are held-out to the viewer to see. However, the sequence also confuses who might be there with her, who she is addressing as she looks into the camera. Although there are suggestions of reverie, these images are not given less legitimacy than the others, and in fact suggest that those are just as caught up in the Imaginary.

With specialized spotlighting and a highly constructed *mise-en-scène*, various details emerge more sharply than others. The screen literally lights up certain facets of the bodies that float across the cinema screen. As the images distort and become focused again, whether of the water, or of the femme’s face, in the hallway, or of the bodies, the pattern of peek-a-boo visuals impart a rhythm that teases the viewer’s desire to see a ready-made scene. The aspects that do show up are precisely those that remain ambiguous: the unattributed nipple meeting the femme’s mouth, the shimmers and swirls of the water, the blurry white light of the doorway, and so on. The screen busy filtering the images becomes obvious through self-reflexive tweaks, like slow motion and fragmented camera-work. Unlike traditional cinematic images, in which the ideological work of the screen is hidden, rendered opaque by aspirations to verisimilitude and conventions of continuity, here the distortion and manipulation of the “to-be-seen” image render it pronounced.

The viewer is pressed to look anew and, moreover, to look at the screen from a new angle. In a reading of Lacan’s model of normative vision as based on Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533), Silverman asserts that the painting also “shows that the same image can look very different depending upon the vantage-point from which it is observed” (*Threshold* 177). The painting of two ambassadors, their
accoutrement, and a death’s head is organized by two competing systems of intelligibility, one anamorphic and one perspectival; the viewer’s position becomes a vantage point to see through different screens. In a similar fashion as the painting, the film offers another system of intelligibility by aligning with the femme’s point of view. From there, the viewer might be enjoined to see something altogether different.

The tone of the film’s engagement with the viewer’s experience of suture, or pseudo-identification, has been set: filmic reality might be distorted for the benefit of seeing differently. Filmmaking has the capacity to indicate “ creations of hitherto unseen and invisible things-as-(to be)-experienced,” as Bal writes of the kind of vision video makes possible, but which Walter Benjamin affirms celluloid filmmaking makes possible as well (“Heterochronotopia” 1). The film’s embrace of ambiguous imagery in the style of a politicized avant-garde film accomplishes more than making the point that the Imaginary, specifically the screen, might be the means to rework our field of vision. I suggest that the film’s insistence on the political possibilities of the Imaginary (“ creations of hitherto unseen”) extends to the process of gendering: forms of embodiment must be reworked in the domain of the Imaginary.

Whereas Lacan is known for positioning sexual difference in the Symbolic, I have suggested that the sexing of the ego during the mirror stage into a masculine shape foregrounds the work of the Oedipus complex and further Symbolic rites of passage. The Father is Nothing holds off the ‘genderization’ of the mirror stage’s jouissance in shot 1-3, but it inevitably returns to a Symbolically-colored vision to a gendered shape in the mirror of secondary identifications. In these subsequent scenes, however, the film calls attention to the remaining ambiguity of the gender process, to what it denies with suture’s captation: the on-going ambiguity of the body as jewel.

As argued, Lacan’s mirror stage produces a precipitate ‘ I’ (je) that he calls a ‘me’ (moi) in anticipation of achieving a Gestalt form, and this Gestalt is already given properties of a militarized masculinity, such as being sheathed and cohered by armor. After the 1949 publication of the mirror stage essay, Lacan’s next paper in 1951, “Some Reflections on the Ego,” makes an even more explicit case for the masculine form of the mirror image that suggests the Symbolic is always-already present in the mirror stage. Here, Lacan proposes an anachronic temporality of the orders, seeking to close the gap between the Imaginary and Symbolic, which the earlier essay had left open by positioning the Imaginary as primary in the child’s
development. Lacan introduces the new concept of “imaginary anatomy,” which is already culturally-inflected, and already sensitive to sexing. I quote at length:

I would emphasize that the imaginary anatomy referred to here varies with the ideas (clear or confused) about bodily functions which are prevalent to a given culture. It all happens as if the body-image had an autonomous existence of its own, and by autonomous I mean here independent of objective structure. All the phenomena we are discussing seem to exhibit the laws of Gestalt; the fact that the penis is dominant in the shaping of the body-image is evidence of this. Though this may shock the sworn champions of the autonomy of female sexuality, such dominance is a fact and one moreover which cannot be put down to cultural influences alone. (13)

With imaginary anatomy, Lacan revises Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s “body-image” into a new synonym for ego. This ego sensibly varies from culture to culture, but Lacan also attributes a certain universalism. From the mirror stage essay, Lacan retains the emergent ego’s Gestalt, a shape unified and formative. However, in this rendition, the sense of corporeal unity is clearly marked as male by law: the penis is not only a prime influence, but gives rise to the imaginary anatomy’s feeling of autonomy from “objective structure,” by which Lacan surely means the Symbolic and the phallic law. The trans-cultural penis appears to be the privileged model for Lacan’s ego, that which acts on its own accord, that which is of me, but not me, and that which dangerously overshoots its own powers.

At the same time, the passage suggests that the phallus may in fact be the Imaginary part of the Symbolic, meaning that the privileged part of the Symbolic is itself an Imaginary remainder. Lacan’s formulation of the imaginary anatomy seems to be filtered through the dominant fiction of culture’s masculine screen, which colors his own projections of penile privilege as a “fact.” If the screen of the Imaginary “governs the gaze most secretly,” as Lacan asserts elsewhere, then surely Lacan cannot stand outside his own culture to describe the so-called facts that inform the laws of the system (Four 74).

Turning Lacan’s logic inside-out, Silverman takes the Imaginary order’s avoidance of fragmentation in the phantasy of a penile body-image as evidence that Lacan accepts the ultimate impossibility of sustaining an identification with it

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10 Visuality scholar Maaike Bleeker’s method of “looking back at Lacan,” not the historical person, but “the subject of vision as it is produced in his text” inspires my own re-view of his texts, to see them askance (Visuality 141).
Silverman’s analysis puts pressure on the hierarchy Lacan ascribes to bodily fragmentation and disintegration versus wholeness and unity. Rather than the “organic disturbance and discord” that Lacan suggests prompts the child to seek out the form of the “whole body-image,” it seems to her that the reverse is actually true: “it is the cultural premium placed on the notion of a coherent bodily ego which results in such a dystopic apprehension of corporeal multiplicity” (21). *The Father is Nothing* offers an Imaginary that differs from the fragment/whole binary. The subject’s obedience to the law to either be or desire the phallus seems to depend on the location and shape of the cultural screen after all.

Lacan envisages that the subject’s activation of imaginary anatomy counteracts the drive for dis-unification, most fully realized by what he terms the “phantasy of the body in bits and pieces” (imago du corps morcelé) (“Reflections” 13). This body is already introduced in the mirror stage as a body with “lines of ‘fragilization.’” Bowie explains, “[t]he body once seemed dismembered, all over the place, and the anxiety associated with this memory fuels the individual’s desire to be the possessor and the resident of a secure bodily ‘I’” (*Lacan* 26). In Lacan’s system, the fear of dismemberment retroactively drives the subject to exhort a suit of armor from a real or metaphorical mirror. This fear from lack of coordination becomes expanded in “Some Reflections on the Ego” into a phantasy, which the subject conducts from the point of view of the Symbolic (“Mirror Stage” 4-5). Lacan describes it as follows,

> The incongruous images in which disjointed limbs are rearranged as strange trophies; trunks cut up in slices and stuffed with the most unlikely fillings, strange appendages in eccentric positions, reduplications of the penis, images of the cloaca represented as a surgical excision, often accompanied in male patients by fantasies of pregnancy. (“Reflections” 13)

For Lacan, this phantasy is necessarily anxiety-producing, which motivates the maintenance of the imaginary ego. But the term of “trophy” suggests that the body’s rearrangement, however “eccentric,” might be pleasure-inducing as well. Notably, Lacan’s examples include cross-sex visions, such as men giving birth, and excessive sexed parts, some assembled by surgical means. Here, Lacan seems to give full voice to an Imaginary of corporeal multiplicity, not a frightful sense of bodily fragmentation. Furthermore, Lacan’s analytical synecdoche of the penile image taken for the whole is in no way less of a body “in bits and pieces,” just one that takes one specific ‘bit’ for the whole.
In a discussion of trans mirror scenes and surgeries in memoir literature, Prosser points out that the critique of transsexualism as mutilation views its practice as a psychotic phantasy of achieving a body in bits and pieces. This logic is based on a vision of surgery as fragmenting the body: “holes made in a whole, rather than (as it is portrayed in transsexual autobiography) the transformation of an unlivable shattered body into a livable whole” (92). Although Prosser does not depart from the fragmented/whole binary, he draws attention to the way in which imaginary anatomy is far from an accomplished fact for transsexuals. Approximating unification must be continually renewed, whether by surgical means or other feats of the Imaginary. However, unlike Prosser, Lacan’s subject of vision leaves room to seek eccentric formations, which may nevertheless be ideal for someone.

The Imaginary order will always be present, or return, being only partially repressed or succeeded by the Symbolic order as ushered in by the Oedipus complex and the “Name-of-the-Father.” Its formative (and deformative) effects are ongoing. Lacan is typically understood to view the Symbolic order’s normalizing and gendering role as dominant. I wish to pursue another conclusion. Lacan’s evolving theory of the mirror stage allows for a proper ‘me,’ before language produces a proper ‘I.’ Furthermore, the disjunction between sentient body and seen image supplies the opportunity to achieve corporeal multiplicity and eccentricity. These egos are precisely not the same, and their difference makes available many variations of matching up images in the operations of suture. Lacan’s structural proposal of the orders leaves open a gap – the threshold of suture – where a differing sense of ‘me-ness’ may present in the interval between orders. The ‘me’ that is suspended between the Real and Imaginary body, and between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, hence gendered, body could be said to shimmer like an enchanting yet ambiguous jewel. Such an Imaginary disjunction sustains an ongoing shimmering of self, which, I wish to argue, is visualized in The Father is Nothing.

The Desire to Be in the Picture
The film’s main disjunction is situated in the incongruent masculine images on display: the FtM and the fascist, the queered subcultural figure and the uniformed sadist. Silverman writes that, while the screen consists of normative representations, it also necessarily includes oppositional and subcultural representations (Threshold 179). The film breaks apart the normative from the subcultural masculine screen-image,
while nevertheless depicting the figure as doubled, or both at the same time. I suggest that the activity of the screen here might be best understood in the metaphorical terms of one of Lacan’s synonyms for the screen: a “thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield” (Four 107).\(^{11}\) It protects the subject by serving as a survival device and inserts distance between the subject and its image. Strikingly, the union of the skin and the frame of the shield also highlights a disjunction between the bodily ego’s visual and sensate form. This distance makes this form of suture precarious, but nonetheless effective in the ‘battle’ on the visual field. One needs space between the shield and oneself in order to manipulate it effectively. Lacan claims that “it is through this separated form of himself [sic] that the being comes into play in his effects of life and death,” suggesting that the disjunctive distance negotiated by the bodily ego produces an animated form (Four 107).

The thrown-off skin opens up a number of opportunities to account for psychoanalytic suture in the practice of transsexuality and for transsexual suture in the practice of cinema viewing. One might understand the film’s doubled masculine figure – the FtM figure throwing-off a skin of masculinity and stitching it onto the rigid frame of a militarized masculinity – as staging a separated form of himself in a battle between life and death. The skin-shield would then form a site of contestation, challenging what passes for gendered reality. The film presents militarism in the figure of the FtM wearing an officer’s uniform, as well as through the soundtrack, consisting of sirens wailing, boots marching, and a crowd roaring reminiscent of Nazi Germany rallies. In sharp contrast to the soothing classical string quartet, the sirens signal an air raid, announcing an interruption. The interruption of the Imaginary erotic scene by Symbolic elements associated with war creates a tension. Is the FtM the enemy or hiding from the enemy?

The interruption happens in the middle of the film’s playing time. It begins as the flogging scenes end. The sounds of a crowd crying out in unison fade-in as the FtM flogs the femme from the sixth to the tenth time on-screen. The classical music stops with a hard cut to the grainy shot in a dark tunnel, presented for a second time. As the camera moves slowly towards the light, one hears warbled distortion (as if

\(^{11}\) With Lacan’s example of “thrown-off skin” Silverman hears the connotations of a number of possible ways to rework the screen-image. For instance, it could describe the rejection of the image that one has been forced to wear, a bodily dismemberment or a protective device (Threshold 202). Prosser’s discussion of narrative as a “second” skin might be enriched by this visual understanding of the cultural and yet changeable skin.
from bombs exploding in the near distance) join the crowd’s roar (Figure 22). An eerie silence of the people is echoed visually by the image pausing on black while two bombs distinctly go off. As the image moves again beginning to bring the lit doorway into relief, the sound of marching begins, coming closer. The marching continues over the image of water under the pier, which also zooms out towards a blurry white light (Figure 23).

Just as it goes out of focus, it cuts to a clear close-up of a nipple with a lip-sticked mouth closing over it, timed while an air-raid siren begins to wail, and continuing throughout the alarm (Figures 24, 25). These images recall the reverie montage attributed to the femme, the second major sequence. This time, however, they issue from the FtM’s point of view.

The doubling of the sirens with the sound of boots marching plays over the mouth sucking. Then the viewer sees the distorted searchlight imagery of a pale body from the second shot of the opening sequence. As the sirens wind down, the mouth bites the nipple. Simultaneously, an amplified scratch of a record needle is heard as the nipple is released, a combination that surprises the viewer, startling her after an already tense combination of audio-visuals. The soundtrack returns to the strings, the mouth continues briefly sucking at the nipple, before a hard cut transports the viewer
to a medium shot of the femme sitting nude on the bed, holding a black veil against her chest, head bowed in a sad or perhaps submissive position (Figure 26). It all seems to be over. Loss pervades the image. Has the FtM, shown once more in full uniform and flogger in hand, vanished, whether abducted or called to duty (Figure 27)? Was she only remembering their love from during the war, but then, love of an enemy or a hero?

Narrative wants to creep in here, but I wish to hold-out for a reading of the images. With the audiovisual cues of militarism, the FtM is bound by a shield of a masculine and militarized skin. The provision of a proper Gestalt (I) that the FtM can hide behind casts him into the picture. However, the sequence undoes the effectiveness of constituting the FtM in this guise. Although present in haunting audio, he only appears during the sequence as the unattributable pale body and a chest. The militarized masculinity is disembodied, just as empty of an image as the Absent One. The FtM remains an unstable point of the Imaginary, and as such, I argue, a critical point of leverage to undo Symbolic dominance. The suture of representable masculinity seems precariously balanced on this mid-point of the film, a sort of threshold in its formal presentation. The darkness of the tunnel through which the army is marching offers the image of a threshold shot to consider whether and how the FtM figure enters into the visible world. The camera, which embodies the soldier’s point of view, never crosses into the field of vision, ‘into the light’ of the picture.

The film extends Lacan’s battle metaphor, but it remains unclear what the subject, the FtM, is battling. I return to Lacan to locate the so-called enemy of the film. In Lacan’s terms, being breaks up in an extraordinary way between itself and the
“paper tiger it shows to the other” (Four 107). The screen enables the subject to mimic and cast itself into a representation. Lacan argues that mimicry comes into play in both a sexual union and in a struggle to the death. Both situations call for facing the other. The FtM’s unattributable sexual being interfaces with the threatening ‘other’ of (fascistic) masculinity. Clothed in the uniform, he seems like one of them, but the uniform also forms a second skin that shows up in the light of the camera. He is only wholly lit and recognizable when wearing it, but never fully visible when he is nude and in his own skin. The shield protects by concealing, but in the gesture of hiding it prevents one from getting a good look. It cannot be clear who is the FtM and who the fascist, or whether they are in fact different: the effect of suture is to meld these images into a bodily ego that is perceived at once.

Silverman attributes a qualified agency to dodging the gaze and adjusting the screen through changes in one’s bodily ego, a move relevant for accounting for the creation of a visual masculinity in The Father is Nothing. Citing mimicry as behavior befitting the Imaginary, Lacan writes,

Only the subject … is not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation. (Four 107)

Lacan ascribes the human subject an ounce of agency in the sense of not being entirely mired in the Imaginary. Mimicry deploys the embodied screen as a travesty projecting images, which “he gives of himself, or receives from the other” (Ibid.). Dodging the gaze with a play that consists of only a grimace or a swelling is nevertheless a psychic-somatic response that dispels the ability to separate the two, even as it divides the subject from self. The response of mimicry channels psychic response through the body in a loop that recalls a somatechnic (Chapter Three). The body stages itself as a technology of expression, and the expression consists in constituting a body. Suture, in this sense, names this somatechnical feedback loop of the expression-response of the desire to be in the picture.

Cinema externalizes the mechanism of suture that maps the subject into the picture. Although theorists emphasize the ideological constraints on the viewer through suture, I am more concerned with the mapping that is made possible through the address of the visible world. Extending Lacan’s mimetic skin-shield, might a
viewer similarly suture via a thrown-off skin? The gesture of looking that Maaike Bleeker develops for theatre studies, called “inner mimicry,” opens up a new way to understand cinematic suture.

**The Cinematic Subject and Inner Mimicry**

In Bleeker’s chapter “Disorders That Consciousness Can Produce” from *Visuality in the Theatre*, she proposes that “inner mimicry” denote the audience’s physical albeit internal response to watching movement (121-211). Taking the term from modern dance theoretician John Martin, inner mimicry notes the ideological effects of the screen and the relations that can be formed through the skin of the spectator. Quoting Martin, Bleeker writes, “through inner mimicry, we ‘cease to be mere spectators and become participants in the moment [of dance] that is presented to us and though to all outward appearances we shall be sitting quietly in our chairs we shall nevertheless be dancing synthetically with all our musculature”’ (124). Martin describes a situation akin to the cinema viewer’s position. The viewer, in identification, reacts with a bodily responsiveness. The body’s desire to move along with the picture recalls Lacan’s discussion of the screen: this is a viewer who is actively ‘in the picture’ and who desires to move along with it.

In her development of the notion, Bleeker critiques Martin’s false universalism, for he in fact only willingly mimics (moves with) some bodies, those bodies who pose less of a gap between his own (125). The space of which Martin speaks, between the one seeing and feeling and the one seen as spectacle, as she points out, is akin to the breach Lacan poses in the mirror stage. Both authors assume this gap is “bridged by an instantaneous mapping of one body onto the other within the act of looking” (Bleeker 126). Following Silverman’s critique of Lacan, Bleeker also argues that this process is mediated by cultural ideals paired with devalued images. Inner mimicry, which makes the ‘click’ of suture possible, is “a way of making things one’s own through a process of non-visual mapping of what is seen on a culturally inflected body” (128).

Hence, in the cinema, identification is mediated with “cultural and psychological pressure” (140). Inner mimicry ‘plays with’ the skin-screen, which accounts for, in Bleeker’s words, “the feeling of intense closeness to bodies directly ‘present’ on stage, not in terms of characteristics of the object, nor as the result of the immediateness of the presentation, but as the effect of a culturally mediated way of
looking” (140). This reformulation of Martin combines his allusion to the inner transformations of a screen via musculature and feelings with a culturally in-tune ‘corporeal literacy’: the spectator uses “one’s own bodily kinesthetic responses to make sense of a body seen” (emphasis mine; 145). The spectator approximates the shape of that body, not as it is, but as he or she perceives it through his or her own screen, selectively.

The refurbished concept of inner mimicry challenges certain tenets of feminist spectatorship theories first advanced by Mulvey’s 1975 “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and re-worked in the follow-up essay from 1981, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s Duel in the Sun (1946).” This work relies on the stability of sexual difference to relate the female spectator to the screen through a kind of transvestism or cross-identification mode. Of this pleasure in relating to the hero and his control over the diegetic world, Mulvey suggests the female spectator would either secretly enjoy it or would interrupt the “spell of fascination” (“Afterthoughts” 29) In her elaboration of Freudian theories of pre-oedipal active femininity for the spectator, Mulvey can only see a conflict ensuing from this “trans-sex identification,” resulting in restless shifting around in the “borrowed transvestite clothes” (33). In the wake of work that assumes the Imaginary to already be overwritten by the Symbolic, transsexual incoherence or eccentricity has been foreclosed. This assumption can no longer hold. Silverman’s insights into the regularity of the bodily ego’s non-correspondence and the labor involved in each subject’s struggle with suture encourage a reconsideration of the (feminist/gendered) viewing subject. The kinesthetic response that comes with identification goes deeper than visual mapping. Indeed, according to Lacan, identification is a transformative act, that is to say, it forms and reforms the subject’s parameters as well as the ways in which the subject understands them (“Mirror Stage” 2).

Transgender studies has posed not only the ‘gender-bending’ question Silverman mentions, but also the transsexual one that intensifies the question of the impact of cinematic cross-identification. Films such as The Father is Nothing beg the question of what exactly is possible in sutured identification. How much does identification change, or demand to change, corporeality? What are the possibilities for altering morphology via identification? What does the “transformation that takes place in the subject when he [sic] assumes an image” mean when the subject “assumes an image” across difference (“Mirror Stage” 2)? Though suture hems the
viewer to the imaged identities available onscreen, the spectator’s response has the capacity to re-articulate these positions. The spectator might shape-shift through inner mimicry to make sense of the film and in turn make the film mean (differently). The imitation of an image by a transformative morphology achieves for the subject a possible, livable place in the larger picture.

Silverman considers a connection between mimicry and photography that Lacan does not mention in his reading of socio-biologist and philosopher Roger Caillois, who supplies Lacan with a theoretical basis for discussing mimicry. Caillois writes that mimicry is “a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids: sculpture-photography” (qtd. in Threshold 201). Silverman suggests that the metaphor of photography establishes the link between the animal and the Lacanian subject (Ibid.). The mimetic crustacean under discussion, as the human subject, is not restricted to passively waiting for the gaze to ‘photograph’ her in the shape of a preexisting image, but through mimicry can actively give herself to be apprehended by the gaze in a certain way (Ibid.). The subject approximates the form of a desired body image. The space between subject and image, the disjunction that I have discussed as filled by the shimmering of reflections, allows for a mimetic transformation, which with Silverman we might call the materialization of “three-dimensional photography” (Ibid.). Mimicry suggests an identificatory process in which the materiality of the body is transformed into a photographic representation: “a corporeal assimilation of the image” (Silverman 202). This is more than a cloak or disguise, an image that is more than skin-deep.

Silverman’s reading of Lacan proposes that the screen is not so much mere biology but rather a practice to negotiate the gaze and the visual field. Bearing in mind transsexual practices, the shielding skin accounts for surgical manipulation with one’s tissues. Both second skins and thrown-off skins paint the subject into the picture, and yet keep separate, creating what Silverman terms a “productive distance” (Male 150). The distance is productive in the sense that the subject may not create ex nihilo new images, but work upon existing images in the cultural imaginary (Ibid.). More than a cloak or a disguise of “transvestite clothes,” which Mulvey offers the female spectator to gain access to the masculine position, the spectator reworks what I call an Imaginary “skin-screen” to ‘map’ herself into the picture. The spectator strategically

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12 I explore the sculptural element of the desire to be in the picture through Quinn’s sculptures of Angel and Starr in Chapter Two.
develops and occupies the identity with which the film hails the viewer. In this sense, the way in which the viewer plays with existing images is a form of disidentification in Stryker’s sense. If the on-screen positions are typically limited, this only means that film has not further explored other positions. Against the majority of films that only offer stable Symbolic points of identification, *The Father is Nothing* offers the viewer points of (dis)identification with multiple corporealities in the form of shimmering bodies.

The presumption I make, following Lacan, is that the viewer, just as much as any other subject, desires to “be in the picture.” To be seen, to take a place or be placed in the scene of specularity, the viewer is compelled to suture and, therefore, to shape her or his material and psychical form according to the screen. The ‘skin-shield’ screen highlights the material effects of psychic suture and provides a new form for the cinematic subject. The concept fleshes out the viewer’s mode of identification and attests to the materiality of suture in cinema. Although there are no scalpels or needles present, the effects of suture in the cinema are nonetheless material; grimaces, laughter, crying, swelling, sweating and heart palpitations all come to mind. The viewer’s engagement internalizes suture, whereas on-screen imagery externalizes the mechanisms involved in suture. The image doubles as a thrown-off skin, through which the cinema subject has recourse to rework the Imaginary through his or her cultural understandings, and so suture in the Lacanian sense a transformative self. This conclusion, however, should also be subjected to the same historicizing as Lacan’s universalizing of the phallic form. In the final section of this chapter, therefore, I address the conceptual as well as the historical role of media in Lacan’s development of the phallic, armored imaginary anatomy and the present cinematic imaginary in which trans practices operate.

A Murdered or Vitalized Subjectivity

“I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture,” Lacan remarks in the seminar “What is a Picture?” (*Four 106*). Seminar XI gives the impression that there is no ducking the impact of the gaze. Lacan speaks in first person, emphasizing the subject’s dependent relation to the gaze. But here, the gaze is considered in aesthetic terms rather than biological ones:
What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which – if you will allow me to use a word, as I often do, in a fragmented form – I am photo-graphed. (emphasis in original; Ibid.).

By way of conclusion, I want to elaborate on the camera metaphor introduced in this passage, specifically because it raises the issue of medium, the difference between photography and cinema. The final sequence of The Father is Nothing provokes me to close this chapter with this issue.

Opening and closing with shimmering imagery, The Father is Nothing returns the viewer to the waters of a dissolved rather than sutured subjectivity. Importantly, rather than a still reflecting pool, now the image that the viewer looks into is in motion. Yet, the very last image of the film freezes the motion of light on water into a paradoxical still of shimmering light.

With this gesture, the film pauses itself and invites reflection on its mode of representation. The mode is clearly cinematic; however, the emphatic use of a still demands analysis. In contrast to the theorists of suture, for Lacan, suture is connected to photography and painting, the still visual arts. Remarkably, this final image holds in tension the freeze of suture’s pseudo-identification between the stilled image and the shimmering surface. In that sense, it visually frames the problematic of suture. I argue that The Father is Nothing presents, however briefly, cinema as an Imaginary space in which identification with a shimmering image might be enjoyed without the imposition of a freezing suture that is deemed necessary to the subject’s Symbolic survival.

28. Final image, a still
Lacan’s preference for still photography is signaled earlier in a discussion of the camera-like gaze that is pre-existent to the eye of the seer, which he calls the seer’s “shoot” (pousse) (Four 72). As Silverman rightly points out, Lacan figures the gaze as an “imaginary apparatus,” much like a camera, but also as the film projector, through which light is embodied, directed, and thus able to “photo-graph” the subject (Male 145). It is not that Lacan’s schema is inherently wrong for film studies, but, given film’s nature as moving imagery, dehiscence appears to be the more likely outcome of film viewing.

In the “photo session,” as Silverman calls it, Lacan conceives of the fix of subjectivity. Lacan claims that the click of the photography camera terminates a movement (Four 114). This termination Lacan understands as bringing to a halt the movement of the “identificatory dialectic of the signifier and the spoken” (Ibid.). The movement of identification is characterized by “haste” and is translated to the visual field as “the moment of seeing” (Ibid.). The body-image dialectically relates to the screen’s opacity and the gaze’s iridescence in the field of visuality. Lacan’s self-conscious splitting of “photo-graph” seems to indicate that for him the light (photo) of the gaze writes (graph) the body of the subject. The subject may respond with mimetic gestures, but inevitably has to ‘strike a pose’ for the camera/gaze, which freezes it in discourse: “The gaze in itself not only terminates the movement, it freezes it,” Lacan writes (Four 117). The gaze as light for Lacan has a similar import as discourse: it surrounds, it pre-exists, it is ungraspable, and it is the field of emergence for the subject and desire. It also offers only two forms of embodiment: male or female.

In his discussion of photography, Lacan uses the term suture to describe the “pseudo-identification” or mental match that the subject makes between “the gesture,” the physical pose, and “the moment of seeing” (Ibid.). Like a trompe-l’oeil, the gesture of the body is falsely seen to link up with the image. The deceptive correspondence between the sensate body and vision “can intervene here only as a suture” to provide provisional identity (118). The pose or gesture for the camera is deadening for Lacan, because it is arrested by the gaze. Against the fascination of the world (the shimmering of all things), the gaze,
the fascinum, and it is precisely one of the dimensions in which the power of the gaze is exercised directly. *(Ibid.)*

Lacan’s use of the Latin term *fascinum*, an evil spell or a phallic-shaped amulet, suggests that the gaze has magical powers. The murderous masculinized gaze is placed in contradistinction to the shimmering vitality of the moving world. One may conclude that ‘seeing shimmering’ would signify seeing life in movement, life which produces differentiated, multiple fascinations. Such moving-images one might understand as a potential of cinema.

Silverman agrees with Lacan that the still photograph offers a powerful dramatization of the subject’s emergence into the visual field at the cost of flux and, we now learn, of vitality *(Threshold* 198). After being born a spectacle, the subject exchanges life for subjectivity. Cinema produces a different dramatization of the subject. The liveliness of cinema disrupts rather than arrests the subject, according to Silverman: “movement disrupts the [body’s] ‘composition’ in every sense of the word. It is synonymous with dehiscence, with a kind of unraveling of the *Gestalt*” *(Threshold* 198). I venture that the undoing of coherence may potentially revitalize the cinema-subject, setting her or him loose from the tyranny of the masculine ideal implicated in Lacan’s presumption of *Gestalt*. *The Father is Nothing* draws attention to the peculiar relation between *Gestalt* and fascistic masculinity, which may help to gauge the extent to which the film offers a cinematic critique of the presumptions embedded in the concept of suture. *Gestalt* not only forecloses corporeal multiplicity, it mobilizes a militarization of the body providing “the armor of an always alienating identity” (Lacan, “Mirror Stage” 4). Following a number of scholars, I argue that the cultural imperative for wholeness can only be understood in the context of what Walter Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss describe as modernity’s sensory alienation.

In my previous chapter, I discussed the revitalizing politics of the subject at work in the alienating factory to enter the equally alienating cinema theatre to homeopathically innervate the senses. The cuts of film, I suggested, might break through the armor shield of an anaesthetized body. Benjamin develops the theory of innervation from Freud’s writing during the First World War, in which he describes consciousness as a protective shield against excessive stimuli, which “is an almost more important function than the reception of stimuli” (qtd. in Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics” 16 fn. 45). Lacan too takes note of Freud’s writing during the war, but
on a slightly different topic, that of the narcissistic disorders, which appear to him to have a historical specificity. He reflects on Freud’s major work on narcissism, which, he muses, was not accidental: it “dates from the beginning of the 1914 war, and it is quite moving to think that it was at that time that Freud was developing such a construction” (qtd. in Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics” 37). Indeed, as Buck-Morss points out, narcissism comes from the same etymological root as narcotic, which numbs the body to pain (“Aesthetics” 38).

As Hal Foster demonstrates in “Armor Fou,” Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage can also be historicized as a theory of fascism. Buck-Morss goes a step further to understand Lacan’s work in tandem with Benjamin’s concern with “the crisis in cognitive experience caused by the alienation of the senses that makes it possible for humanity to view its own destruction with enjoyment,” an apt summary of Lacan’s mirror stage experience as well as the crisis of modern fascism (“Aesthetics” 37). The “Work of Art” essay was first published in 1936, and as Buck-Morss reports, that same year Lacan journeyed to Marienbad to present his first formulations of the mirror stage at the International Psychoanalytic Association. On the same trip, he went to the Berlin Olympic Games, a grand visual and material spectacle that Benjamin comments on in notes to the “Work of Art” essay, as Buck-Morss points out. The modern Olympics in Benjamin’s eyes “were less a contest than a proceeding of exact, technological measurement,” Buck-Morss surmises (38). In addition to this historical connection, she detects a conceptual alignment between Benjamin’s vision of incipient fascism and Lacan’s prototypical ego.

As I discuss in Chapter Three, Buck-Morss’ interest in Benjamin’s aesthetic of a reversal of aesthetics comes face to face with the image of the soldier, the warrior whose bodily control renders him impervious to pain. According to Foster’s reading of surrealist art in this period, the physical body of the fascistic ideal was armored against fragmentation and pain. In “Armor Fou,” he claims that the soldier-worker, the alienated male body as weapon and commodity, was repeatedly depicted as the (proto)fascist ideal subjectivity (66). The armor’s prosthetic function “served to shore up a disrupted body image or to support a ruined ego construction” (68). Foster singles out Benjamin’s quotation of the “metallization of the human body” from Marinetti’s manifesto for the colonial war in Ethiopia, in which the body as armor was exulted for its aesthetic appeal (86). On this point, Buck-Morss states that “the armored, mechanized body with its galvanized surface and metallic, sharp-angled face
provides the illusion of invulnerability,” a body cast as the phallicized body that provides the illusion of evading lack (“Aesthetics” 38). In 1951, Foster notes, Lacan’s paper “Some Reflections on the Ego” suggested that armored figures “exteriorize the protective shell of [the] ego [of the heterosexual male], as well as the failure of his virility” (qtd. in Foster 69, fn. 8).

Divorced from sensory vulnerability, the body can see itself as an object and endure pain, perhaps even enjoy the spectacle of surgery. The establishment of “man’s [sic] dominion over the subjugated machine” is what Marinetti argues makes war beautiful (qtd. in Benjamin “Work” 121). The psychical action that gives rise to a narcissistic ego may well be the outcome of modernity’s alienating environs, including the cinema. However, cinema may also undercut the drive for an armored suture through exposure of the subject to the shimmering of the image. Unlike Benjamin’s cautious embrace of cinema, Lacan’s avoidance provides the biggest clue that cinema might potentially offer the undoing of an armored coherence. Photography only became available in modernity, while other somatechnics followed. The “cutting machines” of cinema offer the relief of suture in provisional terms, frame to frame, which creates a flickering of the subject in eclipses. ¹³

The Father is Nothing demonstrates that the paternal Absent One is nothing, or at least not present as such. Working in the resulting vacuum, the film activates a capacity for identification beyond the idealized offering reflecting shimmers. Motion unravels Gestalt through emphasis on the motion of light on water. Aesthetically, the film arranges a new configuration of body-images, making new screen forms available for suture. In that sense, the film’s content and techniques might be understood as a response to Silverman’s call for visual texts that help the viewer forge an identification with culturally de-idealized images. It offers a mirror in which to see trans-eroticism, but the film image also reflects back confusing and unrecognizable objects. In the next chapter, I consider the way in which the subject is informed to look by the seeming naturalization of fascination through the concept of curiosity. Curiosity has a double nature: it implies that one may find an object curious to see,

¹³ This turn of phrase is taken up from Jacques-Alain Miller’s article “La Suture” in which he likens the endless movement of the constitution of the subject across the division of the subject and Other as a “gaping, flickering, an alternating suction” and hence, “an active break” (qtd. in Heath 78). This passage is discussed at length in Stephen Heath’s article “On Suture,” in which he offers the synopsis that “the unconscious is the breaking edge, a constant flickering of the subject, flickering in eclipses” utilizing language that recalls cinema’s flickering light causes by images continuously eclipsing one another across the cut (79).
but that one is also curious. As we look at the world, its objects, such as Lacan’s sardine can, also look at us. But in looking out from our viewpoint, our cultural screen also constitutes the visible world. The final chapter considers the affect of curiosity as an epistemological tool to question perception’s parameters.
Chapter Five
Curiosity

Each time I watch Hans Scheirl’s experimental feature film Dandy Dust (1998, 95 min, Austria/United Kingdom), I feel nauseous, excited, and, by its ending, disoriented. Its viewing requires cruising through multiple worlds, swiftly changing points of view from the scale of god’s eye to an insect, to the interior of a bodily cavity. In addition to these peregrinations, the film refuses to maintain a singular corporeal or gender identity for its lead character, named “Dandy Dust,” who appears as a young boy of color, an older Caucasian tomboy, a talking flame, and a dusty mummy. Like its same-named shape-shifting protagonist, the trans-genre film jumps from horror, to science fiction, to splatter, to pornography.

Director and lead character Scheirl’s testosterone injections during filming actualize Dandy Dust’s transgender embodiment. His hormonal “experiments,” as he calls them, produce a female-bodied person whose gender often, yet not consistently, presents as masculine (Scheirl “Manifesto” 50; Scheirl “Hans” n/p).¹ The stable character trait of Dandy Dust, both character and film, is not so much gender or genre, but rather a “vastly overgrown appetite for curiosity,” Johnny de Philo writes (“To Tremble” 69). Dandy Dust’s curiosity, the desire to understand and to re-member who he, or she, is, pushes and pulls cy² through various worlds, collecting and dispersing fluids and bits of self. This curiosity drives the plot and seems a potent aspect of unsettling his/her gender identity. More than a device, curiosity may be an affective force for transitioning.

Transgenderism is intimately tied into the historical understanding and picturing of curiosity. Most literature on curiosity note its troubling of identity, not only gender-

¹ In his artist statement for a solo show of paintings, “Hans in Transition,” he writes “[t]he term ‘transition’ is used in the transsexual and transgender community for the stretch of time it takes a person to change into the other gender. Now, I’m [sic] not going from A to B, but rather zigzagging my way through a large, open space of possibilities.” The artist’s statement can be found on <http://www.transitiongallery.co.uk/htmlpages/hans/hans_pr.html>

² In Scheirl’s “Manifesto for the Dada of the Cyborg-Embrio,” he explains that rather than she or he, the character Dandy Dust is cy, short for cyborg (46). A cyborg embodiment is closely associated with a transgender kind of identity, though each explicitly trouble the notion of (singular) identity. As the chapter will discuss, the technologies afforded by film and video form an interface with flesh and blood bodies in a mutual re-making of Scheirl’s character’s techno-body, following Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” description.
wise, but also in terms of subjectivity: curious people often become curious objects.  
Barbara Benedict, for example, investigates the “fluid exchange between agency and objectivity, curiosity and curiousness,” which she dates from the concept’s beginnings in the 1500s (2). Her book, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*, advances the notion that curiosity arises as a sign of “cultural ambition,” the marked desire to escape one’s social role through a modicum of control over engagement with culture (22, 23). The ambition of social challengers to know registers empirically as a violation of species and categories so that they appear as monsters and queers: as curios. Benedict focuses on artefacts that cross the borders “between art and nature, animate and inanimate forms, male and female, animal and human,” which exist on a continuum with explorers and scientists “who crossed the borders of new lands and ideas” (4). Similarly, transgender figures, such as the dual-bodied chimera and its modern-day apparition in a pregnant man, appear as either threatening or promising signs of cultural and social transgression.  
Long regarded as a curious object marked by deviancy, transgender is reframed in *Dandy Dust* as an agential force, as a way of being curious.

Being curious is also the mark of the detective film genre, though here, the detective, and in turn the spectator, investigates cy-self. Still, next to gender investigations, *Dandy Dust*’s narration engages with the spectator on the level of curiosity. Though the film explicitly addresses the spectator by way of a recurring voice-over narrator, *Dandy Dust* does not ‘tell’ the viewer a story. Instead, it invites the viewers to weave their story from the chaotic plot elements and props according to their interests. Each sequence may work as a building block to advance the plot, may be discarded, or may be ignored until a later purpose gives it a role. Every twist presents an unclear junction, raising the question of what the scenes might have to do with one another. The film thus encourages the spectator to generate a “curiosity hypothesis,” which according to David Bordwell involves reconstructing a plausible hypothesis about past events by looking for patterns and the ways in which the

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4 See the media fixation on Thomas Beattie and other transmen who, while identifying as masculine men, also become pregnant and bear their own children, utilizing their “female” reproductive organs. Some mainstream media outfits exploit the transgressive ring to the phrase, “pregnant man,” whilst some queer media herald the promising nature of the right to be a man and pregnant, decoupling gender identity from other social roles.
canonical story format is either abided or thwarted (qtd, in Elsaesser and Buckland, *Studying* 172). This lack of adherence to the typical format of “the introduction of setting and characters – explanation of a state of affairs – complicating action – ensuing events – outcome – ending” often positions the viewer in the director’s seat, be it awkwardly or pleasurably (Bordwell qtd. in Elsaesser and Buckland, *Studying* 170-171). Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland’s discussion of Bordwell’s cognitive theory of narration also suggests that *Dandy Dust*’s narration style, which uses recursive and permanent or unresolved “flaunted gaps,” incites a constant need to renew and reconstruct the story (*Studying* 173). As in detective films, the full exposition is delayed until the end, and even then, two versions are suggested that prevent the gaps from being fully resolved.

The film’s aesthetic reflects an interest in generating curiosity on the part of the spectator. Laura Mulvey notes in *Fetishism and Curiosity* that the film viewer’s curiosity at the image’s sensuous address drives her appetite for deciphering meaning. However, the images flickering in the viewer’s perceptual field enchant, but do not readily give up meaning (Mulvey xi). Hence, beyond the combination of (false) plot cues and stylized gaps, generating a greater appetite for curiosity, *Dandy Dust* exploits the sensuous quality of film through filmic images peppered with cheap special effects and mixed formats, such as animation, Super8, 16mm, and video. The extremely low-budget effects, Scheirl claims in an interview, produce an abstract quality that includes a richness of not only color, but suggests a rich field of aesthetic experience (“‘I am opposed’” 19). The D.I.Y. or “Fun-Punk” aspect also led to experimenting to the point of creating the protagonist out of a technology and corporeal interface. Scheirl achieves “this particular ‘glow’ of video” in which the film grain comes alive by recording on video, then filming off the monitor and then transferring the film back to video. The result is the production of the protagonist in *Dandy Dust*, who Scheirl claims “IS the film grain and the TV-noise ‘Fernsehrauschen’” (*Ibid.*).

The film’s other main generic influences, including splatter, porn, and sci-fi, indicate that beyond offering a cognitive and sensate exercise, its interest also lies in the exercise of the body’s potential, both human and cinematic. Laura Kipnis points out that science fiction is closely related to the genre of porn, as both take a “what if?” approach to bodies and societies, replacing commonalities with alternative corporeal universes (“Ladies First” n/p). Further, Linda Williams argues that pornography and
horror cinema belong to the category of “body genres,” in that each transforms the body’s affective dimensions, whether to induce arousal or fear (“Film Bodies”).

*Dandy Dust* articulates a form of “ethologic” research in the vein of Baruch Spinoza, who stated once that “we do not yet know what a body can do.”5 In testing and experimenting with encounters that redefine the body’s experiences of motion and rest, its capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies, the film poses the question, “what can a body do, or be made to do?” within the mediated and ideological contexts of contemporary cinema.

The spectator of *Dandy Dust* becomes the hub for each form of curiosity: perceiving flagrant transgenderism, the film’s tactility and its body genres, and participating in the investigation. Hence, I suggest that, unlike activist cinemas concerned with delivering a cogent message or entertainment cinema with a goal-oriented plot, *Dandy Dust* forgoes accumulating new or reproducing old knowledge. Instead, the film’s curious style and form engage in what I would like to characterize as “cinematic research.”

In my investigation, I first seek to unravel the entanglements of eroticism and knowledge with gender through a selective rereading of Sigmund Freud’s writing on curiosity. Freud’s theory of curiosity proposes an erotic dimension to the agent’s appetite for knowing in so far as he sees that intellectual research is driven by the desire to satisfy questions of sexual difference and reproduction. Focusing on the case study of “Little Hans,” in which Freud develops the castration and Oedipal complexes, I trace the privileging of sight over touch in his epistemological paradigm. Through an analysis of the exposition of setting and characters in the opening sequences, a crucial anchor for the spectator’s curiosity hypothesis, I underscore the difference between a haptic (and anal) curiosity and Freud’s own optical (and penile) approach.

Cognitive film theory such as Bordwell espouses presupposes a universal spectator, whose mind seems to exist without body. While the approach is helpful for explaining cognitive responses to narrative, this undifferentiated spectator is challenged by the film’s carnality. Throughout, the film addresses its audience via image and sound patterns, but also induces a seemingly unavoidable tactile experience,

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5 Gilles Deleuze provides a definition for Spinoza’s general study of the body: “Ethology is first of all the study of the relations of speed and slowness, of the capacities for affecting and being affected that characterize each thing” (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 125). The significance for ethics of Spinoza’s seemingly simple acknowledgement (stated above) is that beforehand, prior to a specific arrangement or encounter you do not know what a body is capable of, what good or bad. Hence, the body, for Spinoza, is not essentially any quality, but a potentate for them all.
touching and being touched. The cover material boasts that during its release in 1998 *Dandy Dust* was “grabbing international film audiences by the throat and hurling them headfirst into the nearest available human orifice,” and reports that journalists branded it ‘pornography.’ The images of *Dandy Dust* do not just intrigue, but grab the spectator and pull her into the film’s bodily portal. Developing Jonathan Crary’s notion of the “carnal density of vision,” both in terms of enfleshed, subjectively enhanced vision as well as eroticized, pleasuring vision, I inquire into the pornographicity of the viewer’s interest in *Dandy Dust*. The perceptual impact of certain scenes’ tactility on the viewer is elaborated through feminist film theory, such as works by Linda Williams and Vivian Sobchack, who argue for an understanding of cinema’s touching and moving affectivity.

In closing, I focus on the epistemological gesture *Dandy Dust* enacts in its refusal to provide narrative or identitarian closure. The film offers the spectator two consecutive endings, a last spluttering of ‘what if,’ further confusing the identity of the protagonist. The first ending unsettles the resolution of earlier sequences by revealing Scheirl-as-Dandy-Dust to be playing all the other family member characters. The second ending displays a ‘final’ image of Dandy Dust blathering manically, while clutching mommy and daddy dolls and shoving them into his bottom. Recalling the Oedipalism of Freud’s notion of curiosity, the protagonist seems to reenact Little Hans in the throes of a groping curiosity: not so much concerned with mastering meaning, but rather playing with meaning’s polysemy. While seemingly playful, and therefore trivial, the film also conducts serious research of gender and, more broadly, of ethology. Extrapolating from this cinematic research to ‘curious’ encounters with cultural objects, I draw out an anti-Oedipal carnality potentially at work in a theorist’s production of knowledge.

“Where do babies come from?” or, “Have you got a widdler too?”

Freudian thought brings to the fore the erotic dimension of curiosity. Studying the sexual theories the patient “Little Hans” offers, among other children, Freud develops the hypothesis that curiosity is expressed in early investigations of erogenous zones and sexual acts (“A Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy” [1909]). For Freud, the “thirst for knowledge seems to be inseparable from sexual curiosity” (“A Phobia” 173). He proposes that sexuality is shaped through the problem solving the child conducts on the two questions that most puzzle him or her. In the essays on the “Sexual Theories
of Children” [1908] and “The Sexual Researches of Childhood” [1915 addition], Freud asserts that the first problem the child deals with is the riddle as to where babies come from, an interest in parental sexuality that blossoms into the Oedipus complex.

However, in other works such as “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children” [1907] and his study of Hans’ phobia [1909], Freud changes the priority of investigation to the child’s “widdler,” a euphemism for genitalia, and the question whether in one has it or can lose it.6 This concern develops into the castration complex and, in the case of girls, penis envy (“On the Sexual Theories of Children” [1908], Three Essays on Sexuality [1905] 113). The problems of the distinction between the sexes and the mystery of reproductive sexuality, whether primary or secondary, form the basis of the two most prominent complexes the child faces during sexual development. It is significant that Freud develops his theories of the castration and the Oedipus complex via meditations on curiosity in the period of 1905-1915. His conceptualization of sexuality as organized by drives originates from this elaboration of “the desire to know.” Without the libido of curiosity, or with only a blighted spirit of enquiry, Freud asserts that the whole of adult life can become perverted.

In the case “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood” [1910], Freud explores the long-term consequences of channeling infantile eroticism into the instinct for research. Three possible routes exist for the investigator's sexuality as it intertwines with intellect: inhibition, compulsive brooding, and “the rarest and most perfect” form, sublimation (79-80). The “perfect” outcome of curiosity is described as an “insatiable and indefatigable thirst for knowledge” (74-75). In other words, curiosity results from the refining of the sexual impulse into concerns that are socially more acceptable: the infantile libido must become sublimated into adult intellectual interest. In the outcome of curiosity, affect mingles, however uneasily, with abstract theorizing. In this regard, Freudian thought rejects the utter suppression of carnal knowledge in favor of a cautious embrace. The affirmation of carnality though

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6 At first, Hans understands a widdler as that which urine passes through and even imagines that a steam engine has one. His parents narrow the meaning to their genitals, but Freud decides the treatment for his phobia should be in the “enlightenment” that the widdler is solely a penis, which boys have, but girls do not. The changing meaning of “widdler” from general function to the province of males is dictated by Freud’s belief in the importance of genitals in sexual difference more than the family’s own interest in gendering the child. Arguably, Hans is far more interested in the penis’ function as pleasure centre and tool for urination than in it making him a boy, as differentiated from a girl. New methods of child-raising that allow the child to self-determine their gender, such as practiced by a Swedish couple making contemporary headlines, would presume to allow the term “widdler” to remain ambiguous and foster a more open-ended model of knowing (see “Swedish parent’s keep 2-year-olds gender secret” posted online 23 June 2009 at <http://www.thelocal.se/20232/20090623/>).
sublimation, however, does seem to effectively side-step “the Judeo-Christian template” of absolute repression, which Paul Willemen sees governing social taboos on sex as well as the taboo on ‘making sense’ through sensory perception (“For a Pornoscape” 9).

As the family disciplines sexual impulses, it also, in Freud’s view, restricts the intellect. In an open letter published in Soziale Medizin und Hygiene [1907], Freud champions tutelage in sexual matters for the cause of curiosity and unhindered research. He questions “the purpose of withholding from children – or, let us say, from young people – enlightenment of this kind about the sexual life of human beings” (“Sexual Enlightenment” 173-174). The family that fails to properly explain, for example, sexual reproduction, and instead provides falsehoods such as the story of the stork bringing a baby, “damage his [sic] genuine instinct of research” (177). Science and abstract thinking suffer as a result of the dominant belief in the asexuality of children. Freud regards psychoanalysis as a mode of recovering the sexual impulse that fuels curiosity, in effect rewiring the lines of arousal to fix it to the intellect, the proper “research-orientated” framework.

By embedding the desire to know into the structures of biological, psychological and intellectual development, Freud makes erotic curiosity intrinsic to knowledge production. In the long view, the line Freud draws between a curious instinct and sexuality may be understood as a re-conceptualization that extricates curiosity from the moral debates over ‘good’ and ‘bad’ curiosity, which shape its early modern usages. While radical in this sense, Freudian curiosity suffers from one major drawback. Writing from within the modern period, what Freud casually calls the “instinct” of curiosity colludes with the prominence of scientific observation and rational deliberation in Enlightenment thinking. According to Benedict, the widespread deployment of the term indicates a newfound secularism of society that sought the same powers of ‘all-seeing’ that had hereto been a prerogative of the monotheistic God (3, 18).

The confluence of ‘seeing’ with ‘knowing’ in the Enlightenment’s structuring of epistemology can be traced in the voyeuristic forms of curiosity that involve peering and peeking. Figures like artists, astronomers and biologists who use optical

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7 According to the historical research of Neil Kenny, the slippage between morally good or bad inflections of curiosity – “its extraordinary moral reversibility” -- has haunted the term since it became prominent during the mid-seventeenth century (Curiosity 14).
equipment, such as the *camera obscura*, telescope, and microscope, are considered curious, specifically for their far-reaching vision. The more negative definition of curiosity as “going beyond reasonable means to know” indicates the socio-cultural anxiety in modernity that prosthetic (“corrective”) vision was overtaking the other senses (Benedict 254).

Freudian curiosity, with its focus on investigating the genitals as a visual problem, plays directly into the Enlightenment desire to see and thereby know the world; a framework that raises sight to the “noblest of the senses” as René Descartes declares (qtd. in *Downcast Eyes* 21). One of Freud’s prime examples of the voyeurism and scopophilia driving curiosity is the inquisitive Little Hans watching his mother undress. She asks, “What are you staring like that for?” He replies, “I was only looking to see if you’d got a widdler too” (“A Phobia” 173). Freud emphasizes throughout his analysis that Hans looks at his family members, neighbors, and animals to catch a glimpse of widdlers so he might learn to differentiate them. The treatment of Hans’ symptoms focuses on teaching him to recognize the difference in degree and later in kind between widdlers: to see a present or absent penis, bodies as either male or female.

Moreover, the epistemological system that he divines from Hans refuses visual ambiguity or flawed perception. For instance, when Hans watches his seven-day old sister being given a bath he comments, “But her widdler’s quite small …. When she grows up it’ll get bigger all right” (175). Freud muses in a footnote on why, according to him, Hans did not report what he “really saw,” namely that there was no widdler (penis) there. He accounts for Hans’ “faulty perception” as a mistake that conceals a truth he cannot yet understand (175 ftnt 2). Freud’s assumption that the genital insignia of sexual difference is visually obvious, and not informed by a cultural visuality, colors his assessment of Hans’ observations. I wish to carve out a way in

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8 In *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Martin Jay argues that from the Greeks to the present day, Western visuality has formed what he calls an “ocularcentric discourse” that informs the tightly bound relationship between intellectual inquiry and the experience of vision. Jay draws on Hal Foster’s differentiation of *vision*, the biologically developed sense, and *visuality*, the distinct historical meaning of this habituated sense as inflected by a culture (*Vision and Visuality* ix). As Jay remarks, the threshold between the ‘natural’ and the ‘cultural’ is difficult to mark, particularly in the case of vision/visuality wherein the experience of sight is mediated linguistically by different language cultures, which produce various “images” of that vision (3, 9). Little Hans might see one thing, but its with the imprint of parental visuality that he learns to ‘think’ what he sees.
which curiosity might function not as a natural affect or as a naturalizing force of visual perception, but as a tool to challenge the naturalized limits of knowledge.

In Freud’s model of knowledge, the eyes of the researcher allow for observation, whereas the biological body only provides the means for comparison, not meaning-making. Freudian curiosity relies solely on vision, thus ignoring the influence of other sensory (or perceptual) modes. That curiosity could stimulate the observer’s sensorium beyond the sense of sight is actively denied in the text. Although Freud writes that Hans’ interest in widdlers “also impelled him to touch his member,” any consideration of touching as a mode of meaning-making remains unanalyzed, in spite of his use of italics to signal its importance (emphasis in original; 171).

In the same passage, Freud relates the episode when Hans’ mother finds him touching himself. She threatens to send for a doctor to “cut off your widdler” and asks the question, “and then what’ll you widdle with?” Smartly, Hans responds, “With my bottom” (171). Freud diagnoses this moment as the occasion when Hans acquires the castration complex, when the child perceives that his genitals, the most important pleasure center, are threatened. Hans, however, effectively dodges the importance that Freud and his parents place on the presence of the widdler (the penis) by shifting the function of pleasure to his bottom. Here the analysis represses the suggestion of the mobile and tactile epistemology that Hans expresses. Hans openly acknowledges that he pleasurable ‘gropes’ towards knowledge through the kinesthetic exploration of his own affective embodiment.

I suggest that alongside and in relation to the visual, a haptic process of knowing – or groping -- supports Hans’ investigations. Furthermore, by shifting the significance of ‘widdling’ to the bottom, Hans discovers another site for exploring his curiosity, which has no reproductive or gender-specifying problem to solve. A model of curiosity that begins not from the penis, but from the bottom, so to speak, points to another trajectory of curiosity that is possible within Freudian thought. A haptic or groping curiosity continues to be erotically-infused, but not partial to the difference a widdler makes. This curiosity then raises the question, What would it mean to experience the embodied affect of curiosity in a non-gender specific, or in a transitioning fashion, as Hans suggests is possible?
Touch and Corporeal Openings

Art historian Aloïs Riegl asserts that haptic images draw the viewer close and fasten her to the image (from haptein, to fasten), whereas optical images of distinct forms must be perceived from a distance (qtd. in Marks, Skin 162). Building on Riegl’s study of Roman crafts and fine art, film scholar Laura Marks claims that, for cinema, optical visuality depends on the separation of subject and object to produce depth, while haptic visuality moves over the surface of the object, inclined to graze over the texture rather than gaze in order to distinguish a form (Skin 162). The fact that Freud insists Little Hans’ parents distinguish the form of widdlers once and for all as a penis suggests that Freud privileges optic visuality.

The assumption that the form of the penis is essentially given, or that “all the resources the viewer requires” to identify it “are available in the image,” as Marks writes of optical visuality, supports the illusion of outward projection that Freud wishes Hans’ to observe (Skin 163). Marks develops the term “haptic visuality” to account for experimental, intercultural, and other minority cinema, such as to which Dandy Dust belongs, which all evoke the sense of touch to overcome the inability to visualize subjective experience. Film cannot literally engage haptic perception encompassing tactile and proprioceptive functions, but it can, according to Marks, orientate the spectator towards a haptic visuality, in which “the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (Skin 162).

Although Marks follows Riegl’s differentiation between near and far vision, James Gibson anchors the textural experience of images in their enveloping environs. In The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, Gibson suggests that vision in general involves a relay with the felt environment, a process he terms “ecological” perception. He emphasizes that the perceiver’s vision entails far more than the anatomical structure of the eye, describing a kinesthetic vision that “registers movements of the body just as much as does the muscle-joint-skin system and the inner-ear system” (183). More attuned to the space, this sort of haptic visuality locates the perceiver in an environment, perceiving the significance of surfaces in relation to

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9 Marks also comments on Riegl’s initial work as a curator of textiles that she speculates may have influenced his theory of close-up and tactile ways of looking (Touch 4-5).

10 My thinking is indebted to Marks’ two works The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses and Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media, which both revolve around the notion of haptic visuality in relation to marginal or minority cinema. The first explores the medium of film through the rubrics of images and memory, the second focuses more on video and various sense modes, including a pronounced relation to eroticism.
one’s body. In Anne Rutherford’s astute reading of Gibson for cinema experience, she suggests this perception is “more akin to a millipede than to a camera or camera obscura – a thousand tentacles feeling their way through a space rather than a single lens taking it in view” (“Cinema” 6). Taken together, Marks’ and Rutherford’s translation of vision’s hapticity into reception studies suggest a ‘touched’ spectator (for lack of a better term), who resides up close, in contact, inhabiting the spectacle. This corporeally-involved spectator is poised to exploit the bodily pleasures of being touched by the folds of filmic space.

Other scholars have related haptic aesthetics and viewing to women and to feminine pleasures in an effort to shift from a phallocentric model of vision: vision-centered because the penis is supposedly more visible and experienced as outwardly projecting. Sociologist Harold Garfinkel calls such ‘optical’ gender epistemologies “the natural attitude toward gender,” which invest in the identification of one characteristic, the genitalia, to determine the sharp distinction between women and men (Studies in Ethnomethodology). Prominently, Luce Irigarary argues that “woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking” because the female genitalia, two lips touching, are experienced in terms of tactility, not visuality (qtd. in Touch 7). Similarly countering a phallocentric organization of the body, Leo Bersani specifies the anus as a site for performing politics, especially for male homosexuals. In “Is the Rectum a Grave?” he proposes that anal penetration shatters the phallic form of identity. Penetration by the penis inverts the male body’s “active” attitude that presses out onto the world into a feminine “passive” attitude of being pressed into. I suggest that a haptic gender epistemology such as Little Hans enacts in ‘widdling’ the non-gender specific bottom might side-step the limitations of binary sex-gender constructions as employed by Freud, Irigarary, and Bersani, in which the penis is determined male and the vulva is female.

Dinesh Wadiwel’s essay on the sexual practice of anal fisting, “Sex and the Lubricative Ethic,” supports Hans’ hypothesis that entering and exploring the anus relies on the sense of touch:

The lubricative engagement is too slippery to be captured by the vision of the appropriating subject that finds sexuality only through the knowledge provided by what it sees. [During fisting] [t]ouch must take precedence over vision. Erotic operators come to negotiate with each other’s potentiality through a sensual exploration of dark erotic spaces, caverns
that have no need of sight. This does not mean vision does not play a role, rather vision is compelled to move as a caress. (501)

Wadiwal’s view implies the irrelevance of the usual attitude towards gender as based on an optical paradigm for his anal and haptic visuality. Stating the matter more clearly, Guy Hocquenghem jokes in Homosexual Desire that “the anus does not practice sexual discrimination” (87). According to him, when “seen from behind we are all women” (87). Hocquenghem is too quick to assume that the lack of a visible phallus immediately conjures up ‘woman.’ More accurately, when seen – or touched - from behind, one could be any gender. The anus, as Little Hans subtly demonstrates, belongs to all bodies, all genders. I propose that the pleasures that Little Hans takes from indiscriminate widdling might be at the center of cinephilia. In other words, in developing the proprioceptive-focused spectator I introduced in Chapter Four’s discussion of inner mimicry, I argue that a viewing experience stimulates the whole sensorium, with haptic visuality being one mode of doing so.

I follow Marks and Rutherford in thinking of cinema as a haptic and a sensuous environ as a step towards considering the ways Dandy Dust appeals to the spectator’s cognitive apparatus as well as his/her body’s carnality. I am not suggesting that Dandy Dust only presents haptic images. The difference between optical and haptic visuality is a matter of degree and likely experienced in a dialectical movement from near to far (Marks, Skin 163). Yet, from its opening, Dandy Dust offers what I experience as haptic images, those that in Marks’ words, “invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding,” and conversely, “create an image of such detail … that it evades a distanced view” (Skin 162-163). In challenging the viewer to fasten onto images she cannot pretend to fully know or view, the viewer must approach those images through other sensory modes. This approach has far-reaching implications for the understanding of the film’s bodily environ and the spectator’s sensuous engagement with its gendered space.

The Openings of Dandy Dust

After the title sequence, Dandy Dust opens with a black screen accompanied by the sound of air whirling around space. The setting places the viewer in a groundless position, akin to an astronaut or God. The sequence then displays a flimsy white ball
made from plaster goo and wraps, which moves up vertically to the centre of the frame. A somewhat shaky zoom at the slowly turning ball reveals that the flickering light shows a projection of black and white images. A masculine voice-over narrates, “Wars are raging through the centuries on the Planet of White Dust.” The zoom continues until the planet fills the screen and the sound of a machine turning and shrill cries become louder, as if the spectator were just about to crash land on its surface.

1. Close-up, the Planet of White Dust

A hard cut dangles the viewer above a white dusty surface with animated insects, bones, and toy airplanes. Shifting point of view to the surface, the viewer stands in the midst of a scene, which the narrator describes as, “scavengers from the surrounding galaxies ravage its cadaverous surface.” Dandy Dust then moves the spectator from a flat surface to deeper creases. The next shot takes the viewer to the centre of the planet, where naked and greased bodies stand on each others’ shoulders (Figure 2). Their grim physical struggle in an enclosed space suggests they are working in the shaft of the planet. The voice-over tells the viewer that the workers “pump the mechanism for death and destruction” that runs on the white dust of crushed bones (Figure 3).
A tightly framed close-up of the screw spinning and flashing, with an intercut black shot, continues for longer than necessary to establish the object. The length of fifteen seconds may well unnerve the viewer, who cannot get away from almost falling into the grinder. Lasting twenty-five seconds, the follow-up shot of white dust falling against a black background fascinates the eye. Less menacing, the dust also shines, reflecting the light as it falls directly from above, a movement in which the rushing of cinematic images seem to stream down vertically, like a waterfall.

The spectator’s body becomes implicated in each shot: not close enough, then too close for comfort, and finally unable to the grasp. The opening sequence addresses an embodied viewer. It suggests that *Dandy Dust* will likely not appeal to the spectator’s desire for a goal-oriented narrative, or offer an identification with the as-yet unannounced protagonist. Rather, it begins with an appeal to the spectator’s bodily aspect that locates him or her in a physical relation to the imagery of the film’s setting. As Bordwell claims, a film’s beginning is crucial to the spectator’s hypothesis finding an anchor point. The introduction of the setting of the Planet of White Dust includes an omniscient narrator, whose presence is felt within the narrative. The anchor point for the spectator, however, is not with a character, but with the environment. As the exposition continues in *Dandy Dust*’s first ten minutes, the spectator is introduced to another three environments, all of which recall various parts of the body and place the action in their midst. The spectator travels to the parental lodgings on the “Planet of Blood and Swelling,” to Dandy Dust’s mother’s flying “Mother-Ship” in the shape of the uterus and fallopian tubes, and to the bladder of “Planet 3075,” in which naked hermaphroditic beings live connected by tubes diffusing nectar.

The cinematic construction of such worlds in the aesthetics of a humid and lived corporeality maps *Dandy Dust*’s “filmscape” as a “bodyscape.” To borrow Marks’ phrase, the spectator touched by “the skin of the film” contacts the outside cutaneous surfaces, then slips inside the bodily cavity, only to be pushed out again. At no point can a spectator grasp physically or cognitively the unity of the film’s given “body.” Through a haptic visuality, however, the viewer might travel along its organs, capillaries, and pock-marked surfaces. Though a viewer’s perceptual location is in the immediacy of the image, she sits in her chair, perhaps sweating, frowning, or leaning forward. Since the film consists of a sort of body not accessible to optical vision alone,
it seems that the sexualized elements belong to a loosely defined, gender-flexible bodyscape.

Scheirld’s “Manifesto for the Dada of the Cyborg-Embrio,” published a year prior to the film’s release, provides clues as to how the spectator might navigate the film. He writes that rather than moving in and out of spaces, the film’s figures travel in the dimension of “scale” (55). Instead of judging inside or outside, Dandy Dust, along with the spectator as fellow traveler, move through a “big” universe, then approaches a “small” one (55). For instance, from the depths of space, the spectator lands on the open surface of the Planet Dust, then enters the constricted anal canal. Whereas Freud relates ‘big’ and ‘small’ to the size of the male member, for the protagonist, the experience of space changes according to cy’s movement within and across the bodyscape. Similarly, the spectator cannot rely solely on the optical, distanced, and phallocentric point of view. The body’s movement, sensations, and responsive affects determine the scale and shape of this kind of space, suggesting that it is organized through touch, or for the viewer, through a haptic visuality keyed to the environment.

Those constant fluctuations of the scale of space Scheirld likens to a tight-ringed doughnut, infinitely folding “in/out/side insideout” to create “a transgendered arsehole!” (“Manifesto” 55). Scheirld describes anal space as ‘transgendered’ rather than in association with gay men, or non-gender specificity, or gender-irrelevancy. Rejecting the phallic rendering of folds that privileges the form of the penis, Scheirld declares Dandy Dust’s corporeal scale to follow “the politics of bulge and cavity” (55). The transgendered bulge and cavity, and not the ‘present’ penis or the ‘absent’ vagina, form Dandy Dust’s undulating bodyscape. Scheirld’s depiction of Dandy Dust’s bodyscape renders the haptic experience of the film as an ever shifting scale that is sensitive to minute changes.

Relating to the film as an “arsehole” does not cancel out the other sexualized forms in the bodyscape, but I understand that it refers to its strong address to touch, which blurs the distinction between inside and outside, internal cavities and external projections. Hence, ‘transgender,’ with its association with ‘arsehole’ in Scheirld’s definition, refuses the imperative to maintain the self as singular. In the manifesto, and manifestly in Dandy Dust, Scheirld reframes identity as a “complex system of inwards & outwards bulging hyrarchical [sic] identities with the potential to blow up to pieces” (“Manifesto” 51). He goes on to profess that “only where there are multiple
identities, fear of identity termination fades” (*Ibid.*). The effect of bulging in three dimensions reflects an understanding of transgender as embracing forms of bodily uncertainty.

The potential of losing or growing an identity ‘part’ provides the trans subject of *Dandy Dust* with more options and directions to experience the folds of space. The film offers the viewer a chance to sidestep the horrors of the castration complex, in effect to touch and widdle ‘elsewhere’ on the body. The multiple identities available in experiencing the body as having ever-changing inward cavities and outward bulges translates into a lack of fear over losing (or not having to begin with) a widdler, putting to rest the psychological or social need to fear a lack. Freud would have done well to heed Little Hans’ advice: there are always other bulges and cavities with which to widdle, should one be lost.

**The Carnal Density of Vision**

Jonathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* historicizes a profound change in the regime of vision, the transition from optical to haptic visuality. He charts an embodied model of vision emerging in the 1800s, which ruptures with the organization of vision featured in the disembodied eye of the camera obscura. Provocatively, he claims that the proliferating “philosophical toys,” such as the stereoscope and kaleidoscope, belong not to the progression of perspectival realism inherent in the camera obscura, but to a “modernization” of vision that newly corporealisizes the observer (97-136). The involved and disciplined “observer” experiences hapticity through handling the gadgets and by participating in the visual illusion of movement or depth (such as with the stereoscope, phenakistoscope, or thaumatrope) (105-112).11 Cinema, too, involves the body of the observer to produce a subjective form of vision from the flicker of frames or the arrangement of pixels. Vision relocated in the coordination of the

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11 The thaumatrope, literally a “wonder turner,” popularized in 1825 was a toy consisting of a disk that when twirled would blend the images on both sides, say of a bird and cage. According to Crary, it was a scientific illustration of the rupture between perception and object, the fusion of “afterimages” not hereto represented, but a result of subjective vision (105). Similarly, the phenakistoscope of the early 1830s exploits retinal persistence to achieve illusion of continuous movement when the subject turns the wheel and looks into the mirror to watch, for instance a horse, turn around the disc (107). The stereoscope that combines two slightly different photographs to produce three dimensional figures requires the viewer to create the sense of depth, just as today’s “View-Masters” toys do (111). See Crary for illustrations (105-112).
viewer’s corporeality and senses renders a “palpable opacity” to the experience of movies, which Crary terms the “carnal density of vision” (150).

Despite his attempt to survey the social, scientific, and artistic field of modernity, Crary does not address the overlap between the popularity of philosophical toys and the emergence of mass curiosity in the period. However, his chosen objects of study include the same range of visual games that Benedict notes greatly interested ‘curious’ scientists, inventors, and collectors. Linda Williams’ reading of Crary in “Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the ‘Carnal Density of Vision’” also points out that the imagery for the toys during the “media explosion” of the nineteenth century often consisted of erotic and pornographic images (3, fn11). Her essay develops Crary’s turn of phrase, the “carnal density of vision,” in light of mass produced “dirty pictures.” Citing Baudelaire’s passage on the “thousands of greedy eyes” that were “glued to the peephole of the stereoscope” for the “love of obscenity,” Williams seeks to explain the pleasurable, even sexual, sensations that were experienced while viewing images (4). Exploiting the double meaning of “carnal” as referring to the flesh and to sexual intercourse, Williams addresses the carnality of vision, which she argues has a pleasurable effect due “haptic immediacies” (11). I propose that the “carnal density of vision” that Crary and Williams develop can be expanded to address the sexual and sensual dimension of curiosity.

Freudian curiosity, as I describe above, accounts for its eroticism through the (sublimated) drive to know the details of reproductive sex and genitalia. In contrast, a carnally-inflected curiosity might refer instead to the pleasures of widdling, or more generally to the desire to act, to grasp. According to the OED, curiosity foremost suggests a personalized interest: the subject’s interest leads her to inquiry; curiosity is peaked by an interesting object. The response of the viewer to the formal components of an object has been used to determine the difference between an aesthetic and obscene work. For example, Kenneth Clark, a leading art historian of the 1970s,

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12 Crary quietly notes that the mass appeal of the stereoscope, for instance, was in part due to its link with “indecent” subject matter (Techniques 127).

13 The article focuses on the mechanical “cranking” of the body that early cinema machines such as the mutoscope required that paralleled the male cranking himself, i.e. masturbating. She calls this a “very real stimulation of the (male) body via the image-machine” that although seems mechanical fits in well to other sexual activities that according to her, “have an element of the mechanical, of the body as machine, that is always easy to dismiss, unless, of course, one is caught up in those motions, and emotions, oneself” (19). Cinema, in extension, provides mechanical tactile pleasure; itself a possible substitute, though by no means equal or equitable, sexual partner.
summarizes the Kantian distinctions between an artistic response and a pornographic one as follows:

To my mind art exists in the realm of contemplation, and is bound by some sort of imaginative transposition. The moment art becomes an incentive to act it loses its true character. This is my objection to painting with a communist programme, and it would also apply to pornography.

(emphasis mine; qtd. in Nead, “‘Above the Pulp-Line’” 216)

The proper mode of aesthetic contemplation requires disinterest in action; it should address the mind, not the body. Magnus Ullén’s article “Pornography and its Critical Reception: Toward a Theory of Masturbation” claims that Kantian aesthetics also underpin the typical comparative literature approach to reading, in which the reader ascribes significance to the text. This aesthetic, as do all formal modes of reading, approaches literature (or any art object) “as a means towards its own end, rather than as a means of satisfying our personal interest” (2).14 According to Ullén’s framework, thought and the search for meaning are opposed to the viewer’s interested curiosity, which is distracting to the production of meaning.

Ullén further distinguishes between the production of meaning, for which the reader/viewer is responsible during aesthetic contemplation, and the consumption of meaning that he ascribes to the “in-action” reader. The essay proposes that typically pornography “triggers a set of actions” that enable the masturbating reader to enjoy the discourse “sans interpretation” (1). In contrast to Kant’s ideal, the masturbating reader is anything but disinterested. According to Ullén, this reader reduces the text’s potential to the pleasure of his or her own body, which assumes that the viewer’s “mental activity” is limited to fantasy that can be easily combined with physical activity (2). I find Ullén’s account of masturbation as a mode of pure consumption unconvincing as it presumes that physical intimacy with a text or other object does not allow for the simultaneous exercise of critical faculties. To the contrary, the tactility of the experience invests the viewer with an even greater ‘aesthetic’ experience, understood as sense perception. Ullén’s formulation, following Kant, assumes no thought can arise from sensation. In short, he fashions a subject unable to reconcile the mind with the body.

14 Clearly aesthetic here refers to a disembodied interest in the formal properties of an art work, which I differentiate in Chapter Three as belonging to a body-phobic ideological camp. My refashioning of aesthetics throughout the dissertation seeks to return to the notion a corporeal and cognitive dimension.
I would like to suggest instead that the masturbatory reader/viewer might be likened to a viewer absorbed in his or her field of vision, in touch and in the midst of the environs. The model of “participant-observer” for anthropological field workers whose production of knowledge is inevitably saturated with personal interest might better express the embeddedness of the masturbatory reader or viewer. Rather than the “destruction of meaning” as Ullén claims, the participant-observer’s integration in the field plays a key role in this production of knowledge (2). It indicates an alignment with an insider position, not with the masterful overview filling in all gaps. Philosopher Andrew Benjamin locates the entry for one’s curiosity between mastery and complacency, allowing one’s personal interest to position oneself (4). Yielding to the object of interest and to one’s own interest, the participant-observer becomes enmeshed in spatial and affective relations.

Though I disagree with the implied mind-body split, the main thrust of Ullén’s article usefully challenges the “vulgar equation” between pornography and explicit sex. Ullén claims that the pornographic lies not in the traits of the discourse, but in the “structuring” of the relationship between reader and discourse (10). What he calls the “pornographicity” of porn relates to its interactive form, not to specific content; the sex in pornography he sees as a pretext for producing pornographicity (9). He cites Rousseau’s confession to enjoying books that one reads with one hand (“ces livre qu’on ne lit que d’une main” qtd. in Ullén 16). This comment suggests that the mode of reading pornography requires that a part of one’s body remains in contact with the

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15 See for instance the work of Margaret Mead or Esther Newton for twentieth-century practices of participant observation. Steven Rubenstein’s article, “Fieldwork and the Erotic Economy on the Colonial Frontier” offers a personal reflection on his fieldwork in a colonial context that addresses the ways power and desire “infuses relationships and constitute knowledge and its subjects” (1041). Most relevant here is his discussion of the erotic economy that brings him closer to and more distant from the people with whom he was living, which could well be named the paradox of curiosity.

16 The larger context of Ullén’s advocacy for analysis of the form of pornography is his disagreement with casting pornography as a genre. Linda Williams’ work in particular and her edited collection Porn Studies, he argues, have cast porn as a cultural discourse that refers to the content of sex and can be read and interpreted like the content of other genres. Making porn palatable to academic study as a mode of discursive knowledge has its merits, but Ullén points out, it circles around the questions of what exactly it is, how to date it, and incites the relativism of “I know it when I see it” argument. Whatever it is (or is not according to generic ‘rules’), he emphasizes, its study should concern why it has such great “persuasive efficiency” to not just talk about sex, but be a form of sex (13). I have followed him in not discussing porn as a genre, but as a mode of engagement that might occur despite a lack of explicit sexual imagery; in other words, as a dimension of curiosity’s experience. For genre as a way of defining film form, see Steve Neale Genre and Hollywood, Rick Altman Film/Genre and Williams’ “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess” and Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible.” Richard Dyer’s groundbreaking article “Male Gay Porn: Coming to Terms” [1985] in Jumpcut inspired Williams’ treatment of porn as that which aims at arousal and contains narrative. (It was later published as “Coming to Terms: Gay Pornography”.) He first stepped away from political analysis of porn as the degradation of women, or men.
self while another part reaches elsewhere. Pornographicity in the cinema takes advantage of the potential for a carnally dense vision.

Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological conception of embodied viewing specifies that the spectator comes back to her or his own body through an intentional arc that originates and ends with the spectator, not with the image-world. In “What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh,” she notes that when her curiosity is peaked, her intentional comportment arranges her bodily being and her attention. In response to the image, Sobchack’s viewer shifts, moves around in her seat, betraying interest through tension. The inability to literally touch, smell, or taste whatever it is that solicits her desire means that her body’s intentional trajectory “will reverse its direction to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible,” namely her own “subjectively felt lived body” (emphasis in original; Carnal 76). The compensation of herself as the sensible object might be roughly understood as a masturbatory action. The screen deflects her gaping hand; she rebounds from it “without a reflective thought” so that she “turn[s] toward my own carnal and sensual being to touch myself touch, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and in sum, feel my own sensuality” (Carnal 76-77).

The “partially frustrated grasp” that Sobchack describes as reaching outwards before it bounces back to the viewer’s own carnal being helps to nuance the meaning-making process of Ullén’s masturbatory ‘double action.’ Rather than a pure consumption of the image that destroys all meaning, Sobchack suggests that a sensual experience prohibits the simultaneous reflection of the body’s sensual particularity, but not reflection in general. She states that the form of ‘self-touching’ she discusses is consciously ‘other directed,’ towards figural objects that are elsewhere. This may be contrasted to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ‘self directed’ touch that results in the body reflecting itself: “I touch myself touching myself” (qtd. in Carnal 77 fn 68). With regard to this kind of self-directed pleasure, Sobchack relates that, “the doubled intention and attention towards oneself often become so highly reflective that despite one’s autoerotic goals, it can undo carnal pleasure” (Carnal 78). Like laughing, crying, and tickling, Sobchack asserts that “sexual desire is other-directed during masturbation and needs an object that is not only oneself so as to avoid a reflexivity that is so doubled as to cause conscious reflection on sexual desire itself” (Carnal 78).

The lived body “turning back” to itself has the effect of both intensifying sensual awareness and diffusing its specific content. In this sense, cinematic pleasures
and masturbatory pleasures can be seen as relying on the same intensification of carnal density, itself unthought, but leaving room for another form of knowing, a curiosity which Benjamin claims would produce “knowledge without knowledge,” or knowing without mastery (4). Although Sobchack’s carnally intense and substantialized viewer does not explicitly refer to a viewer enjoying pornography, it provides a model for understanding the “rebound” effect of haptic cinematic images. Through this relationship of viewer to cinematic discourse, turning towards one’s own carnal being to touch the other in compensation and excitement, Sobchack also describes a formal, rather than content-driven, quality of pornography.

_**Dandy Dust**_’s pornographic mode, according to reviewers, revolves around the images’ ability to move the spectator and the sexually explicit content, showing various human orifices in detail. The sexual imagery clearly aligns itself with the genre of porn. However, the masturbatory mode of reading that it solicits – carnally dense and intense self-touching that is yet ‘other directed’-- might offer a more precise acknowledgement of its pornographicity. The film’s carnality is not only concerned with corporeal density, it also ramps up in intensity; a dimension that might be discussed under the banner of affect.

**The Stain**
The modern notion of individuality prohibits the idea that affect, personalized as emotion, might not be self-generated but received from without. Teresa Brennan’s book _The Transmission of Affect_ traces the ways in which, under alternative regimes of subjectivity, affect’s contagious nature was well accepted until the seventeenth century (1-2). Studies of crowds have long provided evidence of the subject’s porosity, which allows for transmission and flow of affect (see overview in _Transmission_ 53-68). In the social space of cinema, film scholars have sought to account for cinema’s ability to mobilize the spectator: to charge her or his affective disposition. Summarizing this position, running counter to cognitive theories of narration, Anne Rutherford writes, “[c]inema is not only about telling a story; its about creating an affect, an event, a moment which lodges itself under the skin of the spectator” (“Cinema” 10). An exemplary sequence in _Dandy Dust_ of intense and dense pornographicity revolves around Dandy’s auto-erotic relation to other selves in the film.
The setting is in a European mansion circa 1780, in which the character “Spider-Cuntboy” visits Dandy in cy’s bedroom late at night. Waking Dandy by stimulating cy’s genitals, Spider-Cuntboy takes cy time-travelling to see a future self, “speeding up” cy’s sexual development. The masculine Dandy of the nineteenth century observes the Dandy of 3075: a breasted figure amongst other short-haired and breasted beings naked on all fours, being filled by fluorescent tubes of fluid (Figure 4). Spider-Cuntboy remarks that “Dandy was so shaken by seeing his sexually-fluid self that he went nuts!” (Figure 5). What is implied is that he becomes turned on by seeing herself sucking and being penetrated. Dandy’s response, thrown back into cy’s body, indicates an experience of carnal vision.

While the content of the sequence includes sexual acts, the mise-en-scène of cy’s sexual awakening, including setting, the behavior of the figures, and the use of costume as well as props, reflect on the viewer’s position as masturbator. The sequence demonstrates the autoeroticism of a separated self, one hand grasping outward and one compensatory hand towards the self. The scene emphasizes that masturbatory cinematic pleasures require the exclusion from the image in order to feel a tactile thrust in compensation. However, the depiction of sex is hardly a mere pretext for this pornographicity. Dandy Dust’s exhibition of sexual fluids, tumescence, and physical action indicates a sexuality that potentially spreads and stains the viewer as much as it does Dandy. In other words, precisely because excluded from direct participation, the viewer’s body absorbs the affect of arousal.

The self-pleasuring scene, starring the future Dandy, initiates the uneducated Dandy’s acting out of lasciviousness, including rubbing trees, biting legs, eating
beasts, etc. Heavy, distorted techno music carries over from the future to the past, connecting worlds through a sound bridge. The following sequence, situated in a late eighteenth century setting, shows the increasingly dramatic activities that sexually “going nuts” entails. The viewer can see from a low angle that Dandy stands alone in a tree. Seeming to recall cy’s other self, cy closes his eyes. Cy rubs cy’s now pronounced crotch, which centers the shot. Depicted in slow motion and moving in closer, the viewer now sees cy humping the trunk, apparently building up steam. The self-love imagery of Dandy’s goes deeper: a biological slide of flesh, perhaps of cy’s organ, is seen as if from under a microscope. The sound of blood pumping accompanies a flash from blue to red. The animated family house shown next receives the same treatment: it shows lust by a hot red color, which surrounds the blue-lit figurine of a house perched on a globe, then to flow into it, making it throb.

Though the editing depicts the characters as separate, the pleasurable feelings seem to spread from the future fluid Dandy to the eighteenth century teenager. Although the colorful liquids do not literally spray on cy, the scene revolves on the idea of transfer. The fluid self relates at once to the sexual fluids the hermaphroditic beings enjoy and signals the mobility that is possible as one “grows up.” The sexual development of Dandy Dust progresses on a scale of acceleration and deceleration, or from being centralized and dispersed and back, rather than cycling through Freud’s stages to adulthood. Like Little Hans’ widdling, masturbation figures here as the igniting of sexuality and as a key action towards carnal knowledge. That the spread of throbbing blood from Dandy’s body flows into the family house indicates that arousal might also be directed towards the family, establishing an incestuous connection that shortly becomes apparent. For the moment, however, the seepage into the family house suggests that sexuality in Dandy Dust functions through the contagion of affect.

The following cut begins the “dinner party” portion of the sequence, which shows Dandy behaving badly during a formal gathering in his father’s household. The first part of the sequence focuses on tight, tilted shots that capture Dandy’s barbaric stuffing of food into his mouth and trousers. The effect is a disorienting, almost subjective camera, spinning out of control as it follows Dandy’s wild gyrations and waving of a knife. In figure 6, Dandy has just grasped onto some reddish fruit that he squeezed through his fingers at crotch level to create a mushy penis shape. The remains have been inserted quickly into his pants and further mashed into the white fabric. The color contrast has a metaphorical function: the material transformed into
blotches of color brings to light the intangible affect of arousal. On the surface of the body, textile and stain mark a mounting tension. At this point, the color red becomes a motif, indicating the spreading of arousal, marked like a virus that is stained to be traceable.

6. Stained crouch

Besides grabbing cy-self, Dandy also moves around the table quickly, following cy’s eyeing and poking at the goodies available. The intense affect thus spreads from the future self, to Dandy’s body, to surround the house, inside it, and now across the whole of the banquet spread. Distracted by a guest’s stare and overt popping of cleavage, even of a nipple (Figure 7), Dandy (and the music) briefly stops to check out this new fascination. Dandy even wonders out loud, “Who is the hell is that?” The red filter over the woman’s white-caked skin highlights that the contagion has spread. The disheveled look she casts at Dandy shows she has become undone by the intensity of her interest.

7. Come hither
Once Dandy crosses to the side of the guests, the table is left for another kind of spread. The camera work notes the new interest through a change in style. Though Dandy is situated amongst the guests, the camera aligns not with Dandy but with the guests’ perspective: it becomes more static, staying at a distance of long to medium shots. The distance frames the guests, who sit and stand facing the camera. The change of overall style from volatile gestures to shots that emphasize a particular arrangement creates the impression of an especially stilted scene.

Visually, the camerawork now seems to obey the characteristics of the tableau vivant. A theatrical device that renders a live performance still, players freeze into an expressive formation. Hence, it indicates a Victorian obsession with the control of movement: the staging of animation or aliveness (vivant) in a still picture (tableau). Lynda Nead’s study of moving bodies in the 1890s claims that tableau vivant predates the perceived problems of pornographic arousal, which arises from nudity in combination with movement, such as the strip film (“Strip” 141). While this staging is typical for painting or still photography, its inclusion in the motion picture opens the possibility of disrupting the contained eroticism of the genre.

Dandy’s arousal ripples through the arrangement, gradually animating the bodies. The guests are caught rubbing their breasts and coyly smiling to flirt with him. The slightest motion indicates raging desire. Standing behind the characters done up in petticoats and bodices, Dandy’s entrance coincides, as if cy’s presence causes it, with the image flipping upside down (Figure 8). Once righted again, cy tugs at feathers stuck in hats, then whips up a skirt to crawl under it, and then through it on the way to cy’s interest: grasping her, cy bites the tender leg of this ‘lady’ (Figure 9). Cy’s motions cause a stir from which the guests try to recover, struggling to regain composure as they smooth down dresses, readjust gloves and headgear.
Distracted, Dandy follows a rat-like creature that scurries under the table. On cy’s way, cy grabs a ladle from the punch bowl and sprays the drink around the room. The red liquid echoes the sexual fluids of cy’s future self: cy has caught up with the accelerated development instigated by Spider-Cuntboy. The fluids inscribe the spread of affect through color and form. In the commotion, the tablecloth is pulled off the table, comically scattering the dishes piled high around the room. Larger bits of stuff spread the arousal. The lust built through stuffing, biting, and rushing about seems about to explode in a visual orgasm. The reaction shot of the guests depicts them undone, giggling amidst the food raining down on them.

From the guests, the sequence cuts back to a close-up of Dandy greedily eating up the rat-thing. As lumpy blood oozes out of his mouth, cy moans in pleasure. The abjectness of the image perhaps lies in the blood evoking regurgitated semen, or suggesting a death scene. The flirtatious woman moves back across the room, drawn to Dandy. In one quick motion, cy grabs her and lunges in for a kiss, smearing her face with the blood. Disgusted at first, she says “blegh” before grabbing cy by the crotch, pushing cy down to the ground, and smacking cy repeatedly across the face. The infusion of lust then gets the best of her: the music plays in reverse, signaling a change in direction. She kisses cy back hard. The camera’s point of view, following the flow of affect, then jumps to Sir Sidore, who watches over the scene. The narrator says, “Sir Sidore’s desire is aroused. And his hate is a volcano ready to erupt,” while an image of a red pulsating light under his white pants illustrates his throbbing penis. Desire has now spread throughout the scene, dangerously from son to father.

Rutherford argues that the elements of *mise-en-scène* are vehicles, through which sensory intensification can be translated from the screen to audience
“Precarious Boundaries” 2). This proposition specifies the carnal recourse of which Sobchack writes. The banquet table and the tableau vivant lay out for the viewer delights on which to grab and feast. Both sorts of tables, banquet and ‘living,’ arrange and focus the desire of Dandy and likely also of the participant-observer.17 Yet, the viewers cannot get at the delicacies; they are excluded from sitting down to join the fun. The inability of the viewer to touch the objects redirects the grasp from the party setting, back to the fleshy delights of his or her own sensuality. The dinner party scene exemplifies a ‘pornographic’ aesthetic not so much because of its perversity, but rather because of the taunting of the spectator with an over-the-top haptic field, one in which he or she cannot fully participate.

In The Cinematic Body, Steven Shaviro describes the cinema as a site of visual fascination, in which the spectator’s sensorium is “powerless not to see” or to be touched, and yet strains towards the image (47). Drawing from Maurice Blanchot’s theory of the subject’s “passion for the image,” Shaviro’s cinema always involves a haptic curiosity that wishes to touch back to connect and produce sensate meaning.18 One quality of the image that Shaviro singles out as responsible for fascination is the image’s appeal to tactility in combination with its simultaneous exclusion from touch. Shaviro describes it as follows, “I cannot take hold of it in return, but always find it shimmering just beyond my grasp” (emphasis mine; 47).

This shimmering quality triggers a haptic response in the spectator: called to action, she lifts a hand, seeking to become caught up in the flux of images. The image’s impact instigates a blurring between the subject’s senses of the visual and the tactile. The shimmering of the image, though achieved by visual effects, also creates a texture, a rhythmic beating on the spectator’s body. While the allure of shimmering is most easily taken as a visual effect, its appeal may also refer to affective contact. The social aspect of affect means that it extends beyond individuals, while registering its effect in the body. The dinner table and the tableau vivant organize the viewer’s interest in the goodies on display, but it is the tablecloth that hangs over them,

17 Sara Ahmed’s Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others considers the form of the table as an orientation tool in philosophy, the family, and public spaces that inspires my insight into the use of tables in Dandy Dust. Unfortunately, due to space I only mention the argument that could be made as to the sexual orientation of tables in the film that Ahmed makes at length in discussing the history of the term ‘orientation’ in orientalism and sexual orientation. Her analysis, however, was present in my thoughts here.

18 He cites Blanchot’s question as central to any theory of embodied spectatorship, “What happens when what you see, even though from a distance, seems to touch you with a grasping contact, when the matter of seeing is a sort of touch, when seeing is a contact at a distance?” (qtd. in Cinematic Body 47).
extending the pro-filmic surface of the table towards the characters. This textile meets with the movie screen, further extending the skin prickled by affect towards the viewer. The pro-filmic tablecloth acts as a skin the viewer can brush up against to catch the scene’s affect.

Ernst van Alphen’s article on the affective operations of art and literature seeks to understand their “energetic dimension” (23). He refers to affect theorists, such as Deleuze and Silvan Tompkins, who both agree that affects function as intensifiers. Deleuze uses the synonym of “intensities” for the reaction of embodied affect through contact with other entities (qtd. in “Affective Operations” 23). Similarly, Tompkins calls affects the essential amplifiers of drives and the directors of cognitive systems “because without its amplification nothing else matters and with its amplification anything else can matter” (qtd. in “Affective Operations” 23). The amplification of interest to the level of arousal, for instance, offers an account of curiosity’s erotic dimension during film viewing.

Though received through transmission, according to Brennan, affects pose a moment of judgment (5). The physiological shift accompanies an evaluation, positive or negative towards, for example, the desire exchanged in looks between Dandy and the lady, or the sprays of arousal of punch and blood. However, the question Will I project or introject this affect?, answered through the shifting around in one’s seat, falling beads of sweat, or sudden turgidity, falsely presumes a unified interpretation of that shift or stimulation. Only when the physiological sensation of affect, specifically the nervous excitation of interest, is ‘owned’ does it transform into a subjective feeling of curiosity. Brian Massumi explains this action of owning or possessing affect is the “socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience” (“The Autonomy of Affect” 88). Hence, curiosity moves from affect’s carnal intensification into a signifier of arousal precisely when the subject grasps for meaning. The spreading of sensation between bodies and material objects on screen might not mark the viewer with red fluid, but the comportment of the viewer’s body registers the transmission of the stain, or here rather the strain, of arousal.19 The spectator’s curiosity pitches him or her forward, straining towards the image and meaning-making, which prove elusive.

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19 Freud’s writing on curiosity’s affective dimension unfortunately resorts to a masculinist narrative of eroticizing interest. For instance, with regard to da Vinci, “he applied himself to investigation with the persistence, constancy and penetration which is derived from passion, and at the climax of intellectual labor, when knowledge had been won, he allowed the long restrained affect to break loose and to flow away freely” (“Leonardo” 74-75).
The groping motion of embodied thinking that Shaviro describes, and that *Dandy Dust* invites, consists in the subject seeking a foothold in the image, a handgrip to guide towards knowability. Knowledge becomes the most elusive outcome of the process initiated by the spectator’s evaluated response to shimmering images. The spectator’s dalliance with *Dandy Dust* performs what Shannon Bell terms “pornosophy,” a philosophy that emerges from the carnal (“Fast Feminism” 93-112). Philosophy here refers to the love of investigation, and to the critical analysis of knowledge; which both might be ‘pornified’ by the carnality of the subject (*OED*).

The practice of pornosophy, Susan Stryker elaborates, consists in a “refusal to discredit what our own carnality can teach us” (“Dungeon Intimacies” 39). Inspired by Dandy Dust’s pornographicitity, I wish to address the kind of knowledge generated by a grasping, groping subject. The “gropers” I have analyzed thus far, such as Little Hans, Dandy Dust, and the film’s spectator, offer the insight that curiosity necessarily involves a method of knowing. For curious researchers, the questions, terms, and affective effects of their practice prove central to the inquiry, more so than the pursuit of formal and masterful conclusions.

**Curious Theory**

“The film begins, again. Always again. Sometimes the film begins to begin again in the middle of the film, sometimes at the end. Sometimes it doesn’t begin at all. Sometimes it just gestures to the beginning, as if to say, ‘you lazy bastards out there in t.v. land, get off your butts and go start the film’,” de Philo writes in the catalogue for *Dandy Dust* (“To Tremble” 69-70). Dandy Dust appears for the first time only in minute twelve. He begins his journey the same way as the film instructs the viewer to “get off your butt.” Rotating in a void, Dandy Dust seems to ponder his existence, while the narrator offers the advice: “Sometimes, when we know too much, we forget everything; Dust was bored from watching telly-vision” (Figure 9). “Knowing too much” here means not knowing how to know new things. Suddenly, the protagonist notices a new planet flickering on the horizon and asks, “When did that grow? Let’s go check it out!” He cures his boredom in the instant of seeing a new planet and taking action, de Philo continues, “flying into the projection screen of life, arms outstretched, whimsical and full of the kind of wonder only untamed horses and fashion models know is theirs for certain” (“To Tremble” 69) (Figure 10). This is not a self-conscious wonderment, but a dispossessing curiosity.
Dandy Dust’s trajectory in the film is to allow cy-self to be thrown off track, to redo actions, and change dwelling places. The fact that Dandy thrice returns to a monitor to watch flashbacks as well as to escape into a “trippy story” (read, disorientating and freeing) indicates that curiosity “starts the film,” over and again. The openness or wonder that Dandy Dust displays brings him into contact with a host of inadvertent incidences. In wondering, he seems to ask, be forced to ask, “What if?” This gesture has much in common with academic research, which, according to Christopher Bollas, feels something like this: “I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it” (qtd. in Bal Travelling 96). The practice of beginning again, struggling to think, What if?, I propose, suggests a theory of curiosity, as well as offers a demonstration of how one may produce ‘curious theory.’

In the introduction to The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis, Jonathan Culler seeks to explain the point of theory. He emphasizes that theory be defined in terms of “practical effects,” or of the formal way in which it is engaged. “Theory,” Culler writes, refers not to “a theory of anything in particular nor of things in general; it is less a particular content, it seems, than something one can do or not do, something one can study, teach, or ignore, be interested in or hate” (emphasis in original; 13). Culler’s broad strokes suggest that theory is a practice, one that makes one feel or at least engages on an affective level. In more specific terms, theory is “the nickname for an unbounded corpus of works” that succeeds in “challenging and reorienting thinking” in their own field and new fields (13). Hence, the unmasterability of theory tenders the greatest challenge to its practitioners, calling for an open-ended commitment to the scrutiny of assumptions and alternatives.
Whereas Culler focuses on the “scariness” and “intimidation” one might feel when confronted with a lack of delineation, Dandy Dust also articulates the appeal of theory in terms of the erotic amplification of curiosity (16-17). The possibility of new understanding that comes from the openness of a theorist at the interstices of disciplines, or of a plot juncture, might summon pleasure, not just fear. The desire to become reoriented, perhaps through the disorienting process of juxtaposing disciplines, may account for why some become interested, but others ignore theory. Similarly, this curious desire embodied by Dust’s wayward travels might also account for those viewers who stay to watch Dandy Dust, whereas others walk out, branding kinaesthetic disorientation intolerable, and hence, mere ‘porno.’

Affect must be considered an influential aspect of a bodily practice, whether of a viewer’s, whose subjective vision of shimmering images produce a carnal experience, or of a theoretician’s, who shifts towards a shimmering object, grasps at a thought, or struggles with a concept. The shimmering lights of the “screen of life” that Dandy sails through (Figure 11) forms the backdrop to cy’s own frenzy of affect sending cy through space, to explore a new dwelling and a new formation. The affective propulsion of curiosity animating cy’s body renders it as a loose configuration of shimmers, which infuse and amplify the character’s flesh.

11. Dandy Dust, flying

One advantage of incorporating the shimmers of affect and the personalized emotion of curiosity in knowledge production is that it clarifies the way in which during the groping process the practitioner moves towards, and is moved towards, ‘knowing.’ Dandy’s face-forward movement suggests that the push and pull that directs cy’s
route towards knowledge also prohibits the arrival of mastery. The subsequent crash-landing on a boot of cy’s ‘sister’ underscores the unpredictability of events upon arrival, which nevertheless becomes another departure. Glen Mazis describes a functional relation between emotions and curiosity: “the emotions do not lead to rest, to closure, but rather are natural allies of an understanding that ‘never knows where it’s going’” (Emotion 20). Like the viewer hurled through portals, Dandy Dust’s body too, can never be said to know where it is going, or what it is going to become.

Mieke Bal clarifies the intricacies of the process of theorizing by setting out the terms and provisions for cultural analysis. In her guide book, Travelling Concepts in the Humanities, she parses the practitioner’s encounter with a cultural object and the concepts it suggests. Interested in the same metaphor of travelling, Bal structures this “rough guide” as a series of excursions, much like Dandy Dust’s path through various worlds. At the crossroads of the humanities, according to Bal, innovative research takes place, a kind of disorientating theorizing that Culler describes. While the innovation of theory in the practice of cultural studies has been to pay attention to a different kind of object (e.g. from another field), Bal raises the concern that sound interdisciplinary methods for studying objects have not been proposed (6-7). What method might prevent the analysis by eager travelers from “floundering into sheer partisanship,” or be perceived as such, while also avoiding an unsystematic borrowing of terms (7, 11)?

Bal focuses on the student’s trajectory of learning the difference between an unreflective use of a word and a historicized concept. Concepts can and do often look like words, yet the work of concepts involves hosting miniature theories, creating a ‘cutting edge’ to a student’s framing of an object (Travelling 22-23). Crucially, then, concepts only become useful when lending understanding to the object, “on its – the object’s – own terms” (emphasis in original; 8). The dynamism that Bal describes in turn encourages and conditions what she calls “a groping” towards understanding (11). The groping involved in the process of defining a meaning of a particular concept, provisionally and partly, produces an experience, a learning moment. Situated in relation to the object and confronted with a concept, she comes to learn something about what the concept can do: the ways in which it can inflect, deflect, and reflect the object (Ibid.). Bal maintains that “it is in the groping that the valuable work lies,” emphasizing not the so-called determination of meaning, but the performative dimension of what it can do and what affects it may prompt (Ibid.).
The learning moment in *Dandy Dust* comes from the film’s non-linear structure, which implores the viewer to open up the film, to try to assert meaning and infer connections. In Bal’s paradigm, the cognitive action of groping for a provisional concept in relation to the object offers an alternative to both mastery (“without claiming to know it all” [*Travelling* 55]) as well as “floundering” in confusion. A method of groping suggests that one starts from where you are, and necessarily goes from there. The practice of groping challenges the theorist to become reoriented towards the object and to become unstuck from his or her epistemological trajectory. A daughter who is also a son, for instance, confronts the viewer to retrace the film, try again, and reconnect her concept of gender to bodily formations. The effects of the object confronting concepts (and vice versa), in the thought-process of the theorist, might be considered the affective edge of learning. Bal, however, does not suggest a fleshy or phenomenological rendering of knowledge that might point towards the erotic dimension of research that *Dandy Dust* highlights.

Steven Connor argues in “A Short Stirring to Meekness” that knowing always involves a phenomenological outwardness, what he calls “a repertoire of goings out” to the object (194). Framing his discussion is the doctrine of intentionality that pays attention to the act of paying attention (195). The straining of the subject’s “intention,” from the Latin *intendere*, meaning to draw a bow, suggests “directiveness” rather than “purposiveness” in his or her attending to an aim (195). According to this principle, there can be no pure thought, only thought about objects one strains towards and with which one forges an affective relation. Dandy’s flying might be understood to literalize this directiveness in thought, the embodiment of a “let’s go check it out!” interest. Connor describes the intermediary space of relation “between us and [the object]” as a third space, made tangible as the shimmering void of *Dandy Dust* (198-199). Opening out forces a disposssession: entering the world requires one to leave “home,” wherever that might be at a given point for Dandy and/or Dust (Connor 205).

Connor’s addition to Culler’s and Bal’s models brings into relief what I like to characterize as a masturbatory process of knowing. Like grasping for a cinematic image, a theoretician’s groping towards the object and for a reasonable concept proves elusive. At best, Bal suggests, one might find a provisional resting place, from which to write. The intentional comportment of a researcher yields to the desire to encounter the object and answers the object’s call for attention. The posture of arms out,
embracing what may come, means that one’s interest eclipses ‘knowledge’ itself, since this knowing “is always knowing about, knowing of, knowing towards” (emphasis mine; Connor 202).

To clarify the agency of the researcher, it must be stated that the concept of intention in common usage confuses the outward pull of the object with the will of a master purposefully collecting objects. Neither the viewer nor researcher ought to be confused with a masterful author. To the contrary, and stated more forcefully than Bal or Connor, Deleuze suggests that the object a subject finds fascinating forms a sign that “forces us to think,” suggesting a subject prostrate to thought (Proust and Signs 97). Dandy Dust offers a scene of such coercion. Following cy’s flight to and crash-landing on the new planet, the twins gather up cy, proclaim “brain damage,” and decide to “operate right away.” Cy pleads, “I’m only a tourist,” to which the twins retort, “[a]ll visitors must leave their baggage with us.” They then proceed to cut cy’s skull and extract cy’s memory disk. The object wrests thought from what Deleuze describes as “its natural stupor and its merely abstract possibilities” towards active, dispossessing mediation (97).

Deleuze insists on the essential element of involuntary feeling. Object-signs and instigated thoughts can be categorized by the type of encounter, by the intensity of sensation:

The truths which intelligence grasps directly in the open light of day have something less profound, less necessary about them than those which life has communicated to us in spite of ourselves in an impression, a material impression because it has reached us through our senses. (emphasis in original; Proust qtd. in Proust 95-96)

It is not what you go looking for, Deleuze says, paraphrasing Proust and echoing Lacan’s shimmering impressions, but the fortuitous and inevitable way in which the sensation had been encountered, which governs the truth of the thought (96). The “encountered sign,” as Deleuze calls this kind of accidental, yet unavoidable, brush with life is felt rather than recognized. In spite of one’s management of attention, some impressions reach one’s senses in a chance encounter that nevertheless seems expected, at least in the logic of the film that requires regular kickstarts. The inability to recognize the object-sign provokes the feeling of “Oh what is that? A new planet?,” such as the protagonist relates.
In Jill Bennett’s understanding of Deleuze’s treatise on signs, she states, “Deleuze’s argument is not simply, however, that sensation is an end in itself, but that feeling [sensation and elsewhere affect] is a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought” (Empathic Vision 7). Bennett continues, “we assume, he says, that the best philosophy is motivated by a love of wisdom, but this is not, in fact, the case, since there is nothing that compels rational inquiry” (7). 20 Freud suggests, as I describe above, that erotic sublimation motivates rational thought. That Deleuze dismisses such individualized compulsions and instead places emphasis on material impressions of the world frames thought as a series of being enticed, or forced, to ‘go out’ of oneself.

The involuntary quality to the practice of curiosity does not mean a theorist waits around for something of interest to strike her. The inevitability that Deleuze emphasizes suggests that material impressions can be sought, but that the impact of the force cannot be predetermined. What interests one person can bore the next. The longstanding industry of cinema and other mechanical arts, I propose, has been persuasive to the masses as well as to theorists because it offers what I see as an “operation theatre of affect.” The force and intensity of affects may occasionally misfire, but generally, cinema’s multitudes of impressions provide a site to spectators, in which to practice curiosity. Dandy Dust’s staging of the medical forces the protagonist to depart from cy-self gestures toward its capacity and interest in the ‘operation’ of affect. Operation here must refer to both the process of functioning and the specific function of manipulating the body. This surgery “starts” the film, but later consecutive surgeries performed on Dandy Dust prevent the film from ending, at least on a conclusive note. My closing remarks to this chapter focus on Dandy Dust’s open-endedness.

**The Commitment to Open-endedness**

The final part of the film begins with ending the separated state of Dandy and Dust. After facing rape and eventual death by Sir Sidore’s penis, Dandy’s electronic remains return to a holding in the Mother-Ship. Through a cinematic operation of a

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20 For Silvan Tompkins, the rational or reasonable in thought is easily combined and even necessitated: “Reason without affect would be impotent, affect without reason would be blind” (qtd. in “Affective Operations” 21). Deleuze, it seems, does not posit the possibility of rational inquiry (nothing motivates it, not even “love”), but rather sees that affect always guides and provides the potency and shades of light to thought.
green-screen special effect, in which the image of a flame, the essence of ‘Dust,’ merges with Dandy’s head, the entities unify (Figures 12 and 13). The technological nature of this operation is specified in the top right corner, depicts the running time, a video’s plea for the viewer to “look at me, see what tricks I can do.” An animation of a shriveled clay heart pulsing confirms Dandy Dust’s reanimation. The theme song sounds to signal the end of the film. But the events continue: a voice-manipulator multiplies the protagonist’s voice into different tones, shouting, “You’ve got the best, you got them all. Now dance.” Interrupting the dance, Aunt Theodora asks, “Who’s that now?” To which the protagonist proudly claims, “I am Dandy Dust.” Theodora says, “Oh that makes sense. Do me a favor and stay that way for awhile,” before going back to her tinkering with a wrench. The “for awhile” extends the film for a bit longer, or at least casts doubt on attempts at closure.

12. Unification with flame  13. “You’ve got the best, you’ve got them all!”

The resolution of the protagonist’s main problem, his split-self, makes for a proper ending to goal-oriented narrative. However, as one might by now expect, the flame-headed protagonist then sits down to watch the film, beginning it again, launching a new investigation and another reading (Figure 14).
The narrator takes up the plot when Dandy was killed off and brought into the Mother-ship. The sequence of gruesome surgeries, including the stitching of oversized genitals with thick yarn, closed mouths, and baby fingers onto adult hands, ends with the theme song coming on, once again. The voice-over now instructs the protagonist and viewer to “stay tuned,” as the film begins to end again, framed by the red flame encasing of the monitor (as shown in Figure 14). Yet, the next sequence offers a recap of events, followed by the camera pulling out to reveal who is still watching: the flame-headed Dandy Dust reclining on the couch. After getting a copy of the “trippy story” cy attempts to face “no more detours” to take cyself in cy own hands, to go cy own path. Now the film should surely end. Instead, Dandy Dust announces cy’s trip back to the Mother-Ship to confront history. Entering the scene, cy is immediately grabbed by all family members. They force cy into a gynaecological chair, strapping cy down and forcing cy’s legs open to reveal an open wound. The surgery commences with cy’s mother, Cyniborg, shouting, “We shall end sloppy patchwork. We shall breed clean and intelligent. Replant our future,” as everyone pummels Dandy Dust with squirting oversized bats, far too large to penetrate. Rising up and impervious to the violence, cy cries, “I am Dandy Dust. I am without fear! Come you feeble fleas, come feed from my rivers, come and see that I’m burning,” ending with a cackle.

The narrator announces, “Bravo, Dandy Dust, you’ve said it, but too late. Shock, horror. Remember the extra selves – waste products of unification?” Grinning madly while looking into the camera, a reverse-shot then shows Dandy Dust and the viewer, that each character reveals that cy is in their costume by the removal of a masque representing the mother, father, and twins. The ripping off of the masques provokes
the viewer to reconsider the events of the last ninety minutes. If Dandy Dust was always all the other characters as well, then…? The confounding “thinking” of Dandy Dust delivered in each operation, each reorientation, gestures away from a beginning or an ending, but outwards to the edges of possibility.

The last image before the credit sequence is of Dandy Dust back in the shimmering void, the projection screen of life that makes possible the contradictions of multiple identity.

Pants down around ankles, squatting with bottom in the air, a flower dart thrust into cy’s anus, Dandy Dust blathers nonsense in-between bursts of laughter. This widdling child playing with cy’s bottom has less interest in interpretation than in provocation and pleasure. Cy coaxes to the viewer to join, “Come to me baby,” only then to grab at the figurines of father and mother, of Sir Sidore and Cyniborg. Cy’s swinging of the parent dolls recalls Little Hans wresting control of his parents and their threat of castration. Dandy Dust embodies cy’s transgressive ‘regression’ to take the Freudian operation of fear out on himself in the interest of pleasure.

In “Like a Thought,” Brian Massumi discusses the body in Deleuze’s field of expression, which helps to clarify the “machinic” quality of Dandy Dust’s effect on the theorist:21

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21 Although writing on Proust and the literary machine, Deleuze’s proposition I take to signal the emergence of curiosity in the encountered sign may well be available in cinema. In general, he suggests a special relationship between the signs of art, affect, and thought production (see especially “Essence and the Signs of Art” p 39-51). In writing about cinema, his term of “image” often works in similar ways to the sign in literature, for instance, the image “shocks to thought.” I have relied on Massumi’s preferred term from Deleuze, “expression,” to connect sign and image as two modes of expression that have similar forms and practical effects for instigating “thought.”
The force of expression ... strikes the body first, directly and
unmediatedly. It passes transformatively through the flesh before being
instantiated in subject-positions subsumed by a system of power. Its
immediate effect is a differing. It must be made a reproduction. The body,
fresh in the throes of expression, incarnates not an already-formed system
but a modification – a change. (xvii)

The opportunity cinema presents consists in the instigation of change. Affective
forces pose the chance of transformation through the differing of flesh. The language
Massumi employs speaks of a body convulsing, differing in modification as it
becomes shot-through with affect.22 The body’s reproduction of the force, received
from without, transforms it into an open and open-ended theory machine.

Cinema as an operation theatre functions through a cumulative effort. If one
thing does not work, maybe the next will. The groping aspect of cinematic curiosity
consists in “a thousand tiny performative struggles,” to borrow a phrase from
Massumi (“Like” xix). The starting, stopping, and starting again signal the machinic
assemblage of body and cinema. Hence, in the affective operations of cinema the
body of the spectator/theorist encounters and passes into ‘machines that make the
body do things.’23 However, the supposed passivity implied in the sense of being
made to do something does not have to indicate a literal-minded behaviorism. The
mutual “deterritorialization” of body and cinema struggling together involves multiple,
perhaps infinite, operations; thousands of tiny shifts in the body that “differ” the
(boundary of) the ‘body’ territory in relation to the territory of ‘affect.’

The possibilities arising from the encounter, the “emergence, mutation, change”
of which Deleuze speaks, “affect composing forces, not composed forms” (Foucault
87). The final image of Dandy Dust rotating in the shimmering void manifests a body
that cannot be said to be composed with any sense of finality, but always remains in a
state of composing. Dandy Dust’s refusal to provide closure to meaning and to the
subject’s ontology indicates its function as cinematic research as well as its politics.

22 Linda Williams’ essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess” registers no interest in cognition,
but does consider arousal one mode of de-centering the subject. According to Williams, for the genre of
pornography to be ‘successful’ it must place the body ‘beside itself’ during the ecstatic excess of an
uncontrollable convulsion, in other words, during orgasm. Such an affected body wreaks havoc on the
subject’s unitary mode of being, forcing the binds of subjectivity to come ‘undone.’
23 The phrase “machines that make the body do things” I take from the title of Jane Gaines’ article on
the ways in which the vibrator and porno cinema both produce bodily movement, though approached
very differently in feminist studies.
Lucas Cassidy Crawford’s article, “Transgender without Organs? Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification,” introduces affect into the debate on transgender embodiment in terms of what it ‘feels like’ to be transgender. Examining the narratives of transsexual transitions, which often involve moving from one place to another, Crawford argues that transitions involve an orientation to place as much as to the body (129). Countering the “proper” trans affect of coming home to the self, he suggests considering a different style of affect that involves the deterritorialization of the self: “the process of leaving home, of altering your habits, of learning new tricks” (Deleuze qtd. in Crawford 133). The impetus might then become directed towards composing forces that undermine “our best attempts at deciding, conclusively, on identities and selves” (Crawford 133).

According to Crawford, and in accordance with the affective style of transgender in Dandy Dust, where one dwells and moves are technologies of the subject who is done and undone in affective operations, “equally as much as those surgical and hormonal technologies we recognize more easily as body/gender modification” (137). Placing affect on a par with the hard technologies of surgery does not question the necessity of the kind of surgery that generates ‘transgender’ bodies, but highlights other possible arenas of operation.24 The mobile character of transgender bodies, in Crawford’s view, may “deterritorialize gender rather than settle it … to help us experiment rather than solve a problem, and to take us wayward rather than directly from one point to the next” (139). While of course not all cinema operates with a commitment towards open-endedness, the potential for cinema to practice curiosity lies in encountering the force of affect.

The framework of affective operations opens out the notion of (surgical) operation and its politics. The transgender use of affective operations might mobilize curiosity in the interest of survival that comes from refusing to settle, to accept the constraints of an unlivable narrative. Sue Golding (also de Philo) suggests that affect and the force of curious thinking may offer a livability that is not available by other means:

> It is amazing how people have survived some horrible things, and one of the things that have actually made them survive is curiosity, that is

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24 In a footnote, Crawford does question the efficacy of genitalia-focused surgeries to the transition or leaving home that changing gender involves. However, rather than dismiss such surgeries his emphasis is to think twice about the centrality of sexual organs to gender (142, ftnt. 2).
thinking the most famous radical question of all: Supposing that it could be otherwise? (“A Bit(e)” 154)

With this notion of survival, my discussion of curiosity approaches the gravity of the ways in which aesthetic experience might invigorate and amplify thinking. The value in thinking ‘anew’ might be appreciated in relation to the distance it gains from the “horrible things” that threaten one’s existence. Though it is scary not to be able to commit to meaning, the appeal of curiosity may well register in the commitment to asking questions that lead one astray and far from home.
Epilogue

Like “Chimera,” the image I have selected for the back-cover, entitled “Dean Spade in Water” (2010), by photographer Johanna Breidling, serves as a dialogic device. It creates a dialogue between the introduction and this epilogue, between the theoretical motivations and the trajectory of this study. “Dean Spade in Water” reflects on the transgender and cinematic aesthetics that work to “undo” the images of raving monster and unintelligible chimera. Differently than “Chimera,” this image is taken from above; the subject is clothed and emerging from choppy, dark waters. These differences suggest that agency and perception remain under investigation, but now in another configuration. Similarly to “Chimera,” however, the framing breaks the figure from the torso down, and the subject’s gaze locks with the viewer, if here frontally and centrally.

“Dean Spade in Water” (2010), Johanna Breidling

An eyebrow slightly cocked, he seems to confront the viewer with a question. As the title informs us, the subject is Dean Spade, a well-known transgender attorney and founder of the Sylvia Rivera Legal Resource Program at the Urban Justice Center, a law project serving low-income transgender, transsexual, intersex, and gender
transgressive people.¹ The query posed by the image might be found articulated in Spade’s essay, “Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender.” From both a personal and a legal point of view, it examines the consequences of relying on medical evidence, on genitalia and the ocularcentric paradigm of scientific materialism, to determine gender identity and obtain trans rights. In addition, the avowedly clothed subject of the photograph appears to resist an ocular identification of his body’s sex-gender status. The absurdity of wearing office clothes in the ocean draws attention to the concealed body. Hence, the image’s event echoes Spade’s askance eyebrow, questioning our epistemic desire to determine gender in this way.

Spade expresses the dilemma that, “Even though I don’t believe in real, it matters if other people see me as real” (emphasis in original; 20). The cost of realness, Spade writes, is that, if found lacking, “I’m a mutilator, an imitator, and worst of all, I can’t access surgery” (emphasis in original; 20). The problem of realness recalls Foucault’s comments cited in the introduction on the emerging social perception of monstrous embodiments, of changes of sex or multiple sexes in particular. Spade’s contemporary observations find that any manner of acting that involves more than one sex is still not considered “adequate to reality” (Foucault, Herculine x). However, rather than relegated to “the realm of chimeras,” Spade is pictured here partially emerging from those shimmering waters I have interpreted as representing the reflecting pool of recognition. In image and in theory, Spade seems to propose a definition of trans realness that is partially, strategically real. Though medical gender ‘checking’ invests in gender realness, it can also be partially, temporarily resisted. Trans organizing and cultural work have also made possible the ‘realness,’ or at least the viability, of qualitative transformation, of living in the movements between the grids of identity.

This dissertation has demonstrated in what ways it matters when other people see you or me or anybody as real, in terms of the power/knowledge nexus that informs the perception and recognition of gender. Following Foucault’s elaboration of sexuality as a ruse of scientia sexualis, I have examined in what ways erotic cinema and transgender bodies may relate to regimes of confession and exposure, to discursive and non-discursive evidence. My approach was to understand Foucault’s analysis of sexuality’s relevance to subject formation to hinge on bodily sex as the

¹ Since 2008, Spade has also become an assistant professor at the Seattle University School of Law. More information about his written and activist work can be found on http://www.deanspade.net/.
first hurdle for a subject to overcome through an individuating confession. Sex is more than a fictitious unity produced by power’s grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures. From Foucault’s brief comments on Herculine Barbin, I take the suggestion that, as sex gained this false unity, so did the body. Sexuality’s various technologies consolidate certain kinds of bodies available for sex as well as for knowledge and for recognition. One must pass through sexuality “in order to have access to his [sic] own intelligibility …, to the whole of his body …, to his identity” (Foucault, *Will* 155-156).

Foucault tries to make the sexualized, aroused body theoretically intelligible through an analysis of “the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective” (152). The two modern somatechnics that play key roles in this regard are cinema and surgery. Benjamin’s insight into the surgical nature of cinema helps to think through the potential cinematic nature of surgery. Aesthetics and transformation of life are the principles of both types of somatechnics. The continuities of the long *durée* of eighteenth century strategies show that knowledge of sex became in many ways knowledge of gender, what can be described as a sexdesign body made malleable from the inside out. The pharmaco-pornographic regime’s articulation of sexdesign through surgical practices and cinematic images situates transgenderism at the crux of the technologies of power that take life as their objective. Within and through bodies engaging with trans practices, bio-power as well as agency becomes articulated.

In the overlapping and at times disjointed regimes of bio-power that I investigate, body knowledge refers not to knowledge about or of something, but rather, is shown to produce a sensible thing. Instead of Freud’s interest in the importance of discovering one’s genitals or the truth of the fetish and Lacan’s insistence on the facticity of one’s imaginary anatomy, the fetish’s gleam and the mirror’s glimmer rather suggest that a certain way of knowing produces these images, however brief and shimmering. Challenging the direct link between knowledge and vision in ocular verification was crucial to my challenging of medical forms of evidence for trans bodies and trans identities. Through some ways of knowing, through some epistemic modes, and under some epistemic lights, one is able to produce a shimmer of a thing.

I have tried to develop a theory of shimmering images as a hyper-icon, arguing for its role in the constitution of a perceived subject as well as its function in the production of an intelligible subject. Shimmering images circumscribe a different
economy of bodies and pleasures than the one described by Foucault as *scientia sexualis* with its focus on sex-desire: an economy that Barbin and Spade call for, that Preciado maps out, that Crawford theorizes, that Sprinkle visualizes, that Ross provokes, that Angel suggests, and that Dandy Dust, Elbe, the femme and her transman embody.

By attending to the claims of a transgender economy that takes pleasure in movement, I do not wish to oppose the desire for coherence. My study sought to avoid coming down on either side of intelligibility or transformation. Spade seems to suppose mutual exclusion:

> What would it mean to suggest that such desire for surgery is a joyful affirmation of gender self-determination – that a SRS candidate would not wish to get comfortable in a stable gender category, but instead be delighted to be transforming – to choose it over residing safely in ‘man’ or ‘woman’? (21 fn. 20)

Spade’s point is to counter the negative view of surgery and other trans practices as motivated by helplessness and suffering. Yet, Elbe’s and Stryker’s writing, Ross’ performance, and *The Father is Nothing*, all show that coherence and flow can be experienced together, and that distress does not have to exclude delight. Scheirl’s erotically-charged Dandy Dust and Crawford’s discussion of transitioning as a mode of deterritorializing the self both suggested ways in which the motivations and rewards of gender-related body alteration may be multiple.2

In examining the wavering space between reality and unintelligibility I have sought to refuse the “immediate error and danger of the medical model of transsexuality,” which Spade ascribes to the “separation of gender from cultural forces” (25). Spade asserts that “the mostly unexplored territory [of theory] remains in the realm of de-medicalization” (30). I have attempted to take medicalization into a different conceptual space, in which an agency to ‘cut’ and ‘suture’ do not rely on gatekeepers, “where trans rights [and subjectivity] are recognized but will not hinge upon surgical status or medical evidence” as Spade eloquently writes (30).

In the beginning of this project, I simply wanted to examine the conceptual ‘space between’ that many versions of transgender studies, in the spirit of queer

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2 Spade suggests additional goals such as, “access to different sexual practices, ability to look different in clothing, enhancement of a self-understanding about one’s gender that is not entirely reliant on public recognition, public disruption of female and male codes, or any number of other things” (28).
theory, championed as a space of becoming. As the project developed, I bracketed the notions of male and female as polar opposites to explore this space I thought of as the shimmering void, both culturally and theoretically. However, as the chapters advanced, the so-called void, gap, or abyss, seemed to proceed from my analysis in an infinite undulation. To my horror and delight, the brackets were surpassed, no longer analytically relevant. The new territories of trans movement involved (mis)adventures, rage, erotic ecstasy; certainly leaving one’s home discipline.

I needed film studies to develop concepts for trans ontologies, which may not be accessed by *scientia sexualis*’ simple formulation of ‘now you see it’ or you don’t. Though filmic works and film theory has a history of scienticism, so argue Williams, Cartwright, and Comolli, to see and be seen, the body has to become involved. The carnal density of vision insists on the corporeal and cultural infiltration in the process of producing sensate meaning. The question is not so much why impressions shimmer, but rather why the identity of objects becomes stilled and fixed with meaning in the persistence of vision.

As “Dean Spade in Water” formally suggests, the persistence of shimmering and emerging meaning occurs in tension with one another. Neither mode of perception – transforming or solidifying – can claim dominance. This is the challenge meted out by these cultural objects. If I was successful in theorizing the viability of shimmering images, of transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics, then this challenge has helped produce a way of knowing from a shimmer of a thought.
Works Cited


The Father is Nothing. Dir. Leone Knight, 1992.


---. *This is Not a Pipe* [1968]. Berkeley: California UP, 1983.


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Appendix
Trans-Erotic Filmography


*Couch Surfers 2,* Dir. With Dex Hardlove, Cupid, Lube Boy. Trannywood Pictures, 2009


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1 The filmography was compiled with suggestions from Tobaron Waxman and Stephan Whittle. Some entries remain incomplete due to the difficulty in accessing full information on titles. This list is by no means exhaustive, but more generally representative of the diversity of genres and types of imagemakers that portray trans folks in an erotic light.


1/2 Frogs Fuck Fast, Dir. Hans Scheirl, 1992-96.


how long has it been. Dir. Tobaron Waxman, 2001.


Madame Lauraine’s Transsexual Touch, Dir. Mirah-Soleil Ross, Monica Forrester, Viviane Namaste, 2001.


Mommy is Coming. Dir. Cheryl Dunye. forthcoming.


Sugar & Steele: All that’s Good For Her. Good For Her Productions, 2006.


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English Summary

In this study, I propose that transgender embodiment and cinematic images can be understood as related on the basis of their shimmering quality. I mobilize the notion of “shimmering” to move back and forth between, on the one hand, trans corporeality and, on the other, the medium of cinema, as well as between the related disciplines of transgender studies and cinema studies. The interdisciplinarity of the project is inspired by the shimmering visual status of specific cinematic images that emphasize movement within the frame or between frames; hence, my project explores how this visuality might relate to particular gender states-of-becoming.

Transgender embodiments challenge sex and gender alignment, which one can supposedly identify through visual evidence. Each chapter addresses the difficulty in seeing and knowing the experiences that waver in a largely uncharted “transitioning” state by outlining an alternative theoretical paradigm. I draw on Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, and feminist theories such as from Kaja Silverman, Laura Mulvey, Linda Williams, as well as transgender theories from Sandy Stone and Susan Stryker, amongst others. In this way, the study seeks to create analytical and theoretical leeway for transitionally gendered embodiments located in the field of image-making. It does so through a heuristic dialogue between a set of relevant concepts and a select corpus of mainstream and alternative erotic film and video. Although I try to trace a specific modality of trans subjectivity, shimmering images also form and inform a contested field of knowability that bears on subjectivity more broadly.

Though focusing on different concepts, each chapter works through a similar method. It takes into consideration one to three case studies of film, video, or other artistic works in order to identify the theoretical limitations and aesthetic conventions that render specific embodiments difficult to perceive. My chapters also reflect on the broader framework of Enlightenment empiricism invested in the idea of ‘to see is to know,’ a contentious issue in film studies as well. By pairing transgender with film practices, I pinpoint the ways in which both ‘aesthetic’ practices undermine scientific knowledge.

Each of my case studies engages historic and contemporary culture, issues of subjectivity and knowledge, the visual and the affective. They help to develop a
framework that adequately addresses trans embodiment and sexuality. In addition, the inclusion of trans challenges to film and embodiment theory offers the opportunity to develop and refine the relationship between epistemology and ontology. Each chapter advances an alternative theoretical pathway, through which one might understand the interrelation of being and knowing. I argue that these works of (self)representation contest the customary view of transgenderism as primarily or exclusively concerned with sexuality and/or gender. Indeed, the presentation of one’s material self may be thought of in terms of an experimentation with formal elements of embodiment, which may--or indeed may not--be inscribed within gender signification.

The significance of film for this project lies in its interest in visualizing events for a perceived spectator. Some strands of film and film theory are deeply skeptical of the apparent self-evidence of capturing an event. Precisely by feigning a heightened realism, however, genres such as documentary and pornography can draw attention to the cracks in their argumentative, expository ‘voice’ (Chapter One). At times though, trans cinema seeks to counter potential doubt in its ‘realness.’ Pornographic trans imagery mobilizes the illusion of realness through appealing to commodity fetishism, in the case of Buck Angel to evade sexual fetishism and the implied reality of being seen as a ‘horror’ (Chapter Two).

Technically, continuity editing in film hides other dimensions of events; hence, aesthetic decisions involving discontinuity, such as cutting across the axis of action or unconventional use of shot/reverse-shots, may unseat the viewer, but also shift their perception (Chapter Three). Also, the viewer’s pleasure might not be taken in the mastery of a narrative, but in its suspension, or in the eroticism of the image fluttering or beating the viewer (Chapters Four and Five). The quasi-therapeutic potential of innervations through shocking cuts may instigate a subject’s sense of bodily mismatch or incoherence (Chapters Three and Four). In short, what may be called the “pornographicity” of the image and an enchanting visual beguilement may be central to understanding cinephilia as well as serve as the keystone to an image theory in which trans embodiment might be perceived and understood.

I attempt to contribute to an understanding of qualitative transformation—a potential for change—that lies at the heart of both transgender embodiment and cinematic experience. Just as sex change involves bodily transition, spectators of a film undergo rapid or slow, singular or multiple relations of movement and rest. In both cases, moreover, the subject’s transformation in relation to technological (body)
images is integral to her or his shift of identification. A theory of movement and transformation departs from concepts associated with the aesthetic instead of less precise yet better known identity terms, such as male/female, masculine/feminine, man/woman. To avoid perpetuating the ideology of ocularcentrism, I understand the notion of aesthetics as the formal qualities of both visual and verbal images and of a multisensory experience.

Chapter One, entitled “Secrecy,” opens the central issue of the mirror or mimetic theory of knowledge through a search for the secret of (trans)sex in the visual aspect of *scientia sexualis* (Foucault). Following Mieke Bal’s theory that visual objects make expository ‘statements,’ I analyze the implications of exposition arguments for the medium of video works. I examine a series of three sexually explicit videos that differently negotiate imaging and confessing a ‘real’ sex in the genres of pornography and documentary. The first two videos by Mirah Soliel-Ross, *Tremblement de Chair* (2001) and *Dysfunctional* (1997), contrast with Annie Sprinkle’s commercial *Linda/Les and Annie: The First Transsexual Love Story* (1989). I examine the tensions and contradictions within the regime of secrecy; this episteme entices transsexual subjects to participate in pornographic self-representation. Trans porn mobilizes generic conventions of realism that enable such displays to address a believing spectator. In all three cases, however, I examine the crack or fissure between what is said of the secret and what is shown.

Chapter Two, “Fetishism,” interrogates the phantasmatic, yet material, representation of sexual secrets in the pornography of Buck Angel, the first commercial transmasculine porn star. Apart of the explosion of porn material that demands analysis, I argue that female-to-male (FtM) and transmasculine porn requires new methods for understanding sexual secrecy in terms of fetishization and visibility. Angel’s provocative embrace of sexual and commodity fetishism prompts a discussion of his popular website as well as his life-size bronze statue, created by the artist Marc Quinn. Quinn’s recent sculptures suggest that self-determination of one’s embodiment and access to one’s eroticism are crucial means of becoming a subject, or at least a commodity on the marketplace. Taking Angel as my case in this chapter, I also point to the common misunderstanding of trans sexuality as limited to male-to-female experience. For better and worse, FtM bodies are proving to be equally viable sexual commodities.
In Chapter Three, “Cut,” I examine the historical and epistemological frameworks that underpin a dense and hereto unexplored aesthetic relationship between ‘early’ transsexuality and cinema. The case study focuses on Lili Elbe’s account, *Man into Woman: The First Sex Change, A Portrait of Lili Elbe* (1933/2004). This text presents the first modern transsexual “portrait,” and my interest lies in the ways in which surgery is mobilized by Elbe to claim an identity and how this surgical transformation is presented. I read this literary work “cinematically,” paying attention to its editing as if it is a so-called biopic. The ontology of cinema, in its special relation with animating life and suspending death in a ‘cinema theatre,’ may have implicit connections with the body that undergoes surgery in an ‘operating theatre.’ With the aid of Walter Benjamin’s suggestion that cinema takes place in a surgical theatre, I specify the quasi-filmic aesthetic that Elbe’s text calls upon for its animation and consider its possible therapeutic effects on the reader.

The disjunctions of cinematic cuts, as well as in identifications, underlie connections between things and their reflections, an issue I deal with in Chapter Four, “Suture.” With Leone Knight’s film *The Father is Nothing* (1992) as my central case, I investigate the material implications of the literal surgical suture of the body as well as the psychic process of imaginary identification that Lacan describes as a kind of “suture.” Countering Lacan’s assumption of the cultural norm (Symbolic) that limits the Imaginary, Silverman tries to find ways of idealizing non-normative bodies. This chapter draws on her critique of Lacan in light of the specific bodily divergence of transsexualism. My focal point on the social aspect of suture, an operation brilliantly invoked in Knight’s film through an erotic relation, emphasizes that it takes others to suture, something that strictly Lacanian accounts of suture tend to neglect. Turning to psychoanalysis may be taken to suggest a departure from the material body; however, with the help of Silverman’s and Maaike Bleeker’s refashioning of psychoanalytical identification to highlight its bodily basis, this chapter extends the key metaphor of cinema as somatic surgery.

The fifth and final chapter, “Curiosity,” deals with the desire to know in the experimental film *Dandy Dust* (1998), directed by and starring Hans Scheirl. Propelled by a highly curious transgender protagonist, here the affect of curiosity appears as a force provoking the transitioning of characters, generic formats, and styles. Long regarded an object of curiosity, the transgender figure is reframed in *Dandy Dust* as an agential force, a way of being. *Dandy Dust*’s inquiry into what a
body can do, or be made to do, posits that the “carnal density of vision” (Crary), the mediated and ideological context of one’s embodiment, may be central to the mundane task of research encounters as well. The final section meditates on the phenomenology of knowing, particularly the erotic, fleshy aspect to it that is disavowed in an ocularcentric mastery. Following Sue Golding, I propose that through curiosity one gains the ability to think otherwise, a survival technique to give shape to livable conditions.

The present study demonstrates the ways in which it matters when other people see you or me or anybody as real, or not. It asserts that, although medicalized gender is staked on evidentiary realness, gender identification can also be partially and temporarily resisted. Trans organization and cultural work have also made possible the ‘realness,’ or at least viability, of qualitative transformation, of living in the movements between the grids of identity. In the overlapping and at times disjointed regimes of “bio-power” (Foucault) that I investigate, bodily knowledge refers not to knowledge about or of something, but rather, it produces a sensible thing. In place of the importance Freud ascribes to the discovery of one’s genitals or the truth of the fetish, and Lacan’s insistence on the facticity of imaginary anatomy, the fetish’s gleam and the mirror’s glimmer suggest that a certain way of knowing produces these images, for however brief and intermittently they persist. My study accounts not for the knowledge of transgender bodies and sexualities, but instead seeks to open up a bodily economy of transgender and cinematic pleasures, which points towards a wider aesthetic field of shimmering. Shimmering transgender and cinematic images suggest a different regime of instruments of power, but also distinct ways to break with the agency of sex. Principally, shimmering images may counter the grips of power with alternative claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges.
Nederlandse samenvatting

In dit proefschrift laat ik zien dat transgender belichaming en filmbeelden mogelijkerwijs een eigenschap met elkaar gemeen hebben die ik beschrijf als *glinsterend* (“shimmering”). Ik gebruik het aspect van “glinstering” om heen en weer te gaan tussen transseksuele lichamelijkheid aan de ene kant en het medium film aan de andere, en tussen de gerelateerde disciplines van transgender studies en film studies. Het interdisciplinaire karakter van dit onderzoek komt voort uit de “glinsterende” visualiteit van specifieke filmbeelden die de nadruk leggen op beweging, zowel binnen een frame als tussen verschillende frames. Ik onderzoek de mogelijke verbanden tussen dat aspect van visualiteit en specifieke gender posities-in-wording

Meestal wordt aangenomen dat iemands sekse en gender op grond van zichtbare kenmerken met zekerheid kunnen worden vastgesteld. Transgender belichamingen ondermijnen die aanname. Ik ontwikkel in mijn dissertatie daarom een alternatief model, waarbij ik gebruik maak van ideeën van onder anderen Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan en van feministische theoretici als Kaja Silverman, Laura Mulvey, Linda Williams. Daarnaast maak ik ook, onder andere, gebruik van het werk van transgender theoretici Sandy Stone en Susan Stryker. Met dat model als uitgangspunt traceer ik hoe de verschillende manieren waarop een nauwelijks onderzochte “overgangslichamelijkheid” wordt beleefd, zichtbaar en kenbaar gemaakt kunnen worden. Ik maak daarbij gebruik van een heuristische methode, waarbinnen een aantal theoretische begrippen in dialoog wordt gebracht met een geselecteerd corpus van zowel “mainstream” als alternatieve Erotische films en video’s. Op die manier probeer ik veranderende belichamingen binnen de beeldcultuur te analyseren en te theorectiseren. Mijn voornaamste doel is om een specifieke modaliteit van transsubjectiviteit te traceren. Daarnaast laat ik zien dat het glinsteren van beelden nieuwe en omstreden manieren van weten mogelijk maken die van belang zijn voor subjectiviteit in het algemeen.

Aan de hand van één tot drie case studies per hoofdstuk (film, video of een andere kunstvorm) onderzoek ik de esthetische conventies en theoretische beperkingen die maken dat bepaalde belichamingen moeilijk waarneembaar zijn. De nog altijd dominante empirische denkwijze gaat ervan uit dat waarnemen gelijk staat
aan weten, een stelregel die ook in film studies omstreden is. Door transgender studies en filmstudies met elkaar in verband te brengen, ga ik na op welke manieren deze disciplines, die allebei het accent leggen op esthetiek, bestaande natuurwetenschappelijke kennis ter discussie stellen.

Mijn case studies betreffen historische en hedendaagse cultuur, subjectiviteit en kennisproductie, visualiteit en affect. Ze stellen me in staat om een theoretisch kader te ontwikkelen waarin transbelichaming en seksualiteit op een productieve manier geanalyseerd kunnen worden. De nadruk ligt op de manieren waarop trans gangbare ideeën en aannames over zowel film als lichamelijkheid ter discussie stelt. Ik probeer in mijn hoofdstukken een relatie te ontwikkelen tussen ontologie en epistemologie om beter grip te krijgen op de relatie tussen “zijn” en “weten.” De geanalyseerde werken gaan allemaal over (zelf)representatie en weerleggen gaandeweg het conventionele beeld van “transgenderisme” als iets dat voornamelijk of zelfs uitsluitend met seksualiteit en/of gender te maken heeft. De manier waarop iemand haar of zijn materiële zelf presenteert kan immers ook gezien worden als een vorm van experimenteren met de formele elementen van belichaming, elementen die mogelijk—en mogelijk ook niet—raken aan gender.

Film is van belang voor dit project omdat in dit medium het visualiseren van gebeurtenissen voor een veronderstelde kijker centraal staat. In film (en ook in de filmtheorie) bestaat echter ook veel scepsis over de vanzelfsprekendheid dat film een gebeurtenis zou kunnen vastleggen. Ik bespreek de manieren waarop genres als de documentaire of pornografie juist door het voorwenden van een extreem realisme de aandacht kunnen leggen op de hiaten in hun argumentatieve en informatieve manier van vertellen (Hoofdstuk Een). Soms probeert transcinema het wantrouwen dat heerst over het realisme ook te weerleggen. Pornografische transbeelden creëren de illusie van echttheid door te appelleren aan consumptiefetisjisme. Een voorbeeld hiervan is pornoster Buck Angels gebruik van consumptiefetisjisme, in plaats van seksueel fetisjisme. In zijn films wordt het ‘horror’ effect juist vermeden. (Hoofdstuk Twee).

Films worden gebruikelijk gemonteerd op een manier die continuïteit moet suggereren. Dit belemmert de mogelijkheid van “cuts” om een mogelijk andere dimensie van gebeurtenissen laten zien. Door ook buiten het beeld beweging op te roepen, of door gebruik te maken van onconventionele “shot/reverse-shots,” kunnen kijkers van hun stoel worden losgerukt en hun manier van kijken ingrijpend veranderen (Hoofdstuk Drie). Misschien hangt kijkplezier om te beginnen niet zozeer
af van de manier waarop een verhaal gemonteerd wordt, maar juist van hoe een verhaal wordt onderbroken, of van de manier waarop een erotisch beeld de kijker aanraakt: duwt of slaat (Hoofdstukken Vier en Vijf). Schokkende “cuts” kunnen, door de manier waarop ze de kijker opwinden, op een quasitherapeutische manier bij het subject een gevoel van lichamelijke incoherentie opwekken (Hoofdstukken Drie en Vier). Kortom, mogelijk is de “pornograficiteit” van het beeld, dat te maken heeft met de macht van het visuele om ons te intrigeren en op te winden, van belang om cinefilie te begrijpen. Ook zou het de sleutel kunnen zijn tot een nieuwe beeldtheorie, waarin transbelichaming niet alleen kan worden waargenomen maar ook kan worden “nagevoeld” en begrepen.

Met mijn onderzoek probeer ik inzicht te verwerven in de kwalitatieve transformatie—de daadwerkelijke mogelijkheid om te veranderen—die de basis vormt van zowel transgender belichaming als de filmervaring van kijkers. Verandering van sekse houdt een lichamelijke verandering in; filmkijkers worden gemanipuleerd door (snelle of langzame, enkelvoudige of meervoudige) overgangen tussen rust en beweging. In beide gevallen ligt de transformatie van het subject, in verhouding tot technologisch gemedieerde (lichaams-)beelden, aan de basis van de identificatieverandering. Ik ontwikkel een theorie over beweging en transformatie die uitgaat van concepten uit de esthetiek in plaats van de bekendere en minder nauwkeurige termen van identiteit, zoals mannelijk/vrouwelijk, man/vrouw. Naar mijn inzicht betreft de esthetiek zich op de formele eigenschappen van niet louter visuele, maar ook verbale beelden, en op ervaringen waar meerdere zintuigen bij betrokken zijn. Met deze definitie van esthetiek is het oog niet langer het enige of zelfs maar belangrijkste zintuig.

Ik onderzoek de spanningen en tegenstrijdigheden die zich schuilhouden in de geheimhouding; een geheimhouding die transseksuele subjecten er toe verleidt om zich over te geven aan pornografische zelfrepresentatie. Transporno maakt enerzijds gebruik van de conventies van het realisme en appelleert zo aan het geloof van kijkers in wat ze zien. Anderzijds laten de video’s ook steeds een breuk of discrepantie zien tussen wat er over het geheim wordt beweerd en wordt getoond.

Hoofdstuk Twee, “Fetisjisme,” gaat over de fantasmatische en materiële representatie van seksuele geheimen in het werk van Buck Angel, de eerste commerciële transmasculine pornoster. Allereerst bestudeer ik de hedendaagse explosie aan pornografisch materiaal. Vervolgens bespreek ik de noodzaak om de seksuele “geheimhouding” en “onthulling” in “Female-to-Male” (FtM) en transmasculiene porno in termen van fetisjisme en visualiteit te begrijpen. Aan de hand van Angels populaire website en zijn levensgrote, bronzen standbeeld, gemaakt door de kunstenaar Marc Quinn, analyseer ik hoe hij seksueel- en consumptiefetisjisme inzet op een provocerende manier. De recente standbeelden van Quinn benadrukken dat het bepalen van je eigen belichaming en het ontdekken en gebruiken van je eigen erotisch, belangrijke manieren zijn om een subject (of in ieder geval een consumptiegoed) te worden. Het werk van Angel laat zien dat de commodificatie van transseksualiteit niet uitsluitend in “Male-to-Female” (MtF) termen moet worden gezien; FtM lichamen worden net zo goed gecommodificeerd.

In Hoofdstuk Drie, “Cut,” bespreek ik de complexe en nog onvoldoende onderzochte esthetische overeenkomsten tussen “vroege” transseksualiteit en film. Ik doe dit vanuit een historisch en epistemologisch perspectief. Mijn casestudy is Lili Elbe’s verhaal Man into Woman: The First Sex Change, A Portrait of Lili Elbe (1933/2004). Deze tekst geldt als het eerste moderne transseksuele portret. Ik onderzoek hoe Elbe zich een identiteit toe-eigent door middel van chirurgie, en hoe deze chirurgische transformatie wordt gepresenteerd. Ik “lees” dit literaire verhaal op een cinematografische manier en beargumenteer dat het is gemonteerd alsof het een biografische film (een “biopic”) is. Wellicht is er een impliciet verband tussen de ontologie van film en het lichaam dat geopereerd wordt in de operatiezaal, in de zin dat film binnen de filmzaal op vergelijkbare wijze het leven opwekt terwijl de dood op afstand houdt. Met gebruik van Walter Benjamin, die stelt dat film zich inderdaad afspellet in een operatiezaal, onderzoek ik Elbe’s quasi-filmische esthetiek en het mogelijke effect daarvan op de lezer.

Het Vijfde en laatste hoofdstuk, “Curiosity” (nieuwsgierigheid) gaat over het verlangen naar kennis in de experimentele film Dandy Dust (1998). In deze film (geregisseerd door Hans Scheirl, die ook de hoofdrol speelt) draait alles om de enorme nieuwsgierigheid van het transgender hoofdpersonage. Nieuwsgierigheid wordt een affect dat krachtige vormen aanneemt, waarbij het niet alleen transities van personages, maar ook transities tussen filmgenres en -stijlen in gang zet. Terwijl de transgender traditioneel wordt gezien als het object van nieuwsgierigheid, wordt deze in Dandy Dust een handelend subject, een manier van zijn. De film onderzoekt zo wat een lichaam kan doen en wat iemand een lichaam kan laten doen. Het werk laat zien dat wat Jonathan Crary als de “carnal density of vision” beschrijft, de gemedieerde en ideologische context van iemands lichamelijkheid, ook in academisch onderzoek centraal zou kunnen staan. Het laatste deel van dit hoofdstuk gaat dan ook over de fenomenologie van kennis, met het accent op de erotische, vleselijke kant daarvan, een kant die door de nadruk op visualiteit vaak genegeerd wordt. In navolging van Sue Golding betoog ik dat nieuwsgierigheid het mogelijk maakt om anders te denken, maar ook dat die kan dienstdoen als een manier van overleven voor transsubjecten.
Mijn analyses laten zien dat het uitmaakt dat iemand jou of mij of een ander als echt ziet, of niet. In dit proefschrift beweer ik dat de medische definitie van gender, die uitgaat van een echtheid die op bewijs berust, gedeeltelijk of tijdelijk ondermijnd kan worden. Trans organisaties en trans cultureel werk hebben de “echtheid”, of in ieder geval de leefbaarheid, van kwalitatieve transformatie mogelijk gemaakt: leven in de overgangen tussen vastgestelde identiteiten. In de overkoepelende, en soms doorbroken regimes van “biomacht” (Foucault) die ik onderzoek, gaat lichamelijke kennis niet om kennis over of van iets, maar creëert kennis iets zintuiglijks. Waar Freud vooral belang toekent aan het ontdekken van genitaliën en aan de waarheid van de fetisj, en waar Lacan de nadruk legt op de feitelijkheid van de imaginaire anatomie, suggereren de glans van de fetisj en de glinstering van de spiegel dat deze beelden, vanuit een specifieke manier van kennen gemaakt worden, hoe kortdurend en sporadisch ook. Het perspectief dat ik ontwikkel biedt geen kennis van of over transgender lichamen en seksualiteiten, maar biedt ruimte aan een alternatieve economie van transgender en cinematische lichamen en genot (Foucault) op grond van een esthetiek van glinstering. Niet alleen wijzen glinsterende transgender en cinematische beelden op nieuwe vormen van macht, ze laten ook manieren zien om het gebruik van seks als machtsinstrument te vermijden. Ze bieden ruimte aan alternatieve belangen van lichamen, van vormen van genot en van manieren van kennen.