Shimmering images: on transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics

Steinbock, E.A.

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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 Trannyfest, 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!” 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.