Shimmering images: on transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics
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Citation for published version (APA):

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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).¹ 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

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 Betcher’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. 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

[i]t 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.4 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)\(^5\) than the extent to which such technologies institute a social and true self.\(^6\) 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.\(^7\)

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

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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)

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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.

1. Eye  
2. Breast  
3. Belly  
4. Penis

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” (Beconming 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,
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.

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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. 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. 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). 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 (ed.s 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 transsexualism 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. 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.

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

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 exposers, 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 to 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
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

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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.
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

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³⁸ This is the context in which Stone calls for a mass coming-out of the transsexual population. On the building momentum of trans organizing in the United States at this time see Joanne Meyerowitz *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* and Susan Stryker and Jim van Buskirk *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* or Stryker’s recent *Transgender History*.

³⁹ Green notes that the film was screened during one of the meetings and quite some people stormed out, angry or embarrassed, or both (*Becoming* 173).

⁴⁰ Today, some twenty years on, the outpour continues of film and video works that combine pornography either with drama and/or documentary to represent the desirability of transsexual bodies. See the appendix for the trans-erotic filmography I have compiled for titles that combine porn with documentary, which include *Enough Man, True Spirit*, the vignette series *Pansexual Public Porn*, and *Trans Entities*.

⁴¹ Green quotes a letter to the editor that claims Les was “highly eccentric, extremely exhibitionistic and totally irrepressible” (173). The fault also could lie with the gender confusion Nichols’ himself perpetuates. Though he makes macho statements about his sex drive and heterosexual orientation, he isn’t really a man, the argument goes, since he seems to integrate the history and the physicality of the female-bodied “Linda” by enjoying (and showing) vaginal penetration. Though not unambiguously, in the context of the video, Nichols projects a sort of “posttranssexual” re-visioning of his transitioning experiences. In the least he’s enthusiastically ‘out’ and willing to risk becoming exposed as transsexual, which could lead others to not believe his masculinity, or claim to manhood. Hence, backlash to the video from the FtM community may be understood as discomfort with Les’ personal uncovering, which in turn could forcibly ‘uncover’ their lives.
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 optical-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.44

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.45 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 cinéma 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.

44 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.’

45 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

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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

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.

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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.49 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

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.