Shimmering images: on transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Chapter Two
Fetishism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Edited screenshot of website, May 2010

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

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

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

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

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

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

Angel’s motto, a transgender slogan of self-determination echoed in the works of Kate Bornstein, Riki Ann Wilchins, Dean Spade, and others, relocates the definition of gender away from genitals.6 In interviews in mass and underground media, such as the Tyra Banks (USA) and Jensen (NL) talk shows, BUTT international gay magazine, and in the monthly web show “Bucking the System,” Angel professes to see no conflict between being a man and having a vagina. Though he may be the first man with a pussy to reach porn star status, he is certainly not the only man-identified person with a vulva (Nichols, starring more than a decade earlier, retained his).7 The reality for most FtMs is that undergoing a phalloplasty to create a neophallus is too expensive as well as unappealing as it bears a high risk of losing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

11 Shapiro seems to be repeating observations made by Benjamin that transsexuals want to undergo “corrective surgery, a so called ‘conversion operation,’ so that their bodies would at least resemble those of the sex to which they feel they belong” (27). From Benjamin’s point of view surgery seems to achieve a conversion that cannot be completed to satisfaction mentally. I will explore this supposition in “Suture.”
object becomes a referent for his counter-wish. In the transfer of libido, the fetishist reinstates his earliest belief, however wrong, that his mother has a penis just like him. Besides providing great joy and convenience, the fetish object signifies a “token of triumph” over the horror of castration, something that Freud describes as a successful mental disavowal of the idea of threat (353). He defines disavowal as a perceptual action, not a “blind spot in the retina” that a scotomization would produce, but an investment in a counter-wish to cover over the “unwelcome perception” (353).

According to Freud, the phantasmatic fetish appears more substantial than the negativity that defines woman: “something else … now absorbs all the interest” (353). The fetish object memorializes the threat in as much as it erects a monument to another, more pleasing, idea. Hence, the fetish is both the secret fear and the secret wish, condensed into one object. Freud alleges to be able to see behind the compensatory pleasure to reveal the ‘truth’ of the fetish; yet, that truth is always the same: a bloody wound that reminds the male of his own vulnerability to loss. The fetish hides the universal potential for becoming-negative, which Freud aligns with the female form.12

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

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12 For a different emphasis on reading the dialectic of negation and affirmation in Freudian fetishism, see Miklitsch’s “The Commodity-Body-Sign,” which sees that “fetishism is the ‘negation’ of castration, this also always affirms the existence of that which fetishism serves to deny,” that is, the notion that a woman has no penis (11).

13 Though the actual act of castration refers to the removal of testes (male reproductive organ), Freudian theory erroneously perpetuates the myth that it involves the removal or mutilation of the penis thereby citing the penis as the seat of masculinity or male sexual force.
The joke of the image is that Angel already is a man without a penis, with nothing more to lose. What then will the dynamite blow up? The image indicates another target. In the lower right-hand side, it is stamped with Angel’s brand, the transgender sign in flames, suggesting that the fire may have another source. The threat, indicated by the image’s fierceness and the dynamite, is directed at the sign system of genital fetishism. Fighting signs with signs, the semiotic of the brand’s by-line suggests a challenging narrative to the sight of his allegedly negative image. Instead of starting from zero or less, Angel’s politicized body, marketed as commercial work, seeks out a change in preposition from without (a penis) to with (a pussy) to kindle a change in perception. The image supports Angel’s thrust to recalculate Freud’s plus-or-minus gender algebra and challenge the assertion of sexual difference as visual fact.14 Dismantling the negativity of the castration complex and its reassurance in fetishism, Angel gains the ability to claim that he too is a man, and more than that, a man with the addition of a pussy. Angel’s commodified sex, his particularized “man with a pussy” embodiment, moreover, exhibits the secret labor of becoming gendered. It points to what is between his legs while at the same time

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

**Fungible Fetish**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The glance becomes remembered as the Glanz (shine), though the word choice also seems overdetermined as a pun: Glans is German slang for ‘cock.’19 Although Freud claims that the nose is the fetish, perhaps due to its phallic shape, it is hardly incidental that the fetishist converts the visual pleasure of self-directed looking (his glance) to the visuality of an external glow calling to him (Glanz). In other words, he retains his interest in looking, but now at a “luminous shine,” an even better and more convenient pleasure that he recreates “at will.” Far from being a mere addition to the real object of the nose, the imperceptible shine seems closer to a fetish object: a semi-private delusion that he wills into perception.

In its polysemic and fungible form, this exemplary shine (Glanz) structures fetishism’s mobile, distorted, and pleasing perception of a disavowed secret. The pleasurable illusion of seeing sex, or of a phantasm of an immaterial phallus in the place of the vagina, might be likened to Foucault’s suggestion of a mirage of sex (Chapter One). Foucault describes fetishism, albeit briefly, as contributing to a modern notion of sex, the networked dispositif of sexuality (Will 153-4). He contends that sexuality might be described as a modeling of fetishism’s core idea of irrational perception: “that there exists something other than bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions, anatomo-physiological systems, sensations, and pleasures” (Will 152-153).20 This “something other” is a mirage, an irrational perception that appears real and true. As I discuss in the previous chapter, Foucault invokes the shimmering lights of a mirage to provide a metaphor for the collective (mis)perception of sexuality. There, as much as in the fetishist’s perception, the desire to see produces the illusory perception of a secret. In turn the experience of the perception is pleasurable. Foucault’s metaphors of the “dark shimmer of sex” and the “shimmering mirage of sex” also operate on the basis of fantasy producing figments

19 In German, as in English, Glans denotes the head or tip of the penis; by synecdoche (part for whole) it extends to the whole penis. Hence, Freud puns his way through the entire argument of fetishism and its structure of slippery substitution in which the German Glanz becomes Glans, which allows for the shine in English to convert to a penis. I thank Murat Aydemir for sharing the joke.
20 Additionally, the model perversion of fetishism contributed as well to a conceptualization of sex and its deviations “governed by the interplay of whole and part, principle and lack, absence and presence, excess and deficiency” (Foucault, Will 154).
of the imagination taken as natural and self-evident; to the perceiver, sex appears as materially real. This insight can now be recast as a commentary on Marx and Freud’s interpretation of fetishism as universal (mis)perception in a society in the grips of sexual difference and commodity capitalism.

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

According to Fredric Jameson, commodification in late capitalism means that “we consume, less the thing itself, than its abstract idea, open to the all the libidinal investments ingeniously arrayed for us by advertising” (Signature 12). Bracketing the consumption process, the phenomenon of Buck Angel involves labor in branding and tending to the value of his media image, the man with a pussy as an abstract yet shimmering idea. In this respect, the circulation of Angel’s image through digital video, Web sites, magazines, talk shows, and other media modalities are vital to his
becoming at least a thing, a fetish image.\textsuperscript{21} The thing produced, however is less a ‘flesh and blood’ thing than an abstract idea, open to the suffusion of libidinal energies. At the core of Angel’s transmasculine pornography, I observe the exploitation of the interchangeability between the gleam of the token and the shimmering mirage of sex. The fact that the systems of fetishistic codes may shift from industry to gender to sexuality via image media indicates the necessity of accounting for the particular attraction of porn imagery in our time of mediatized and specularized capitalism.

**Pornosphere of Phantasms**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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24 In her introduction to Mainstreaming Sex, Attwood also criticizes the ‘tired binary’ debates about sexualization that focus on whether the process “simply reduces sexual pleasure and energy to an empty and commodified performance” or has the potential to democratize sexual discourse (xxi). She suggests this is the wrong kind of question since it produces either celebratory or cynical responses.
In McNair’s view, Western sexual culture is nowhere near Foucault’s curiously Marxian hope of a different sexual economy, one in which ‘sex without sexuality’ might appear without the fetish of shimmering images or the whispers of the secret. If anything, McNair’s analysis elaborates the “fictitious unity” and “omnipresent meaning” of the sexual “secret to be discovered everywhere,” which Foucault describes as the defining feature of modern subjectivity (Will 154). The deployment of sexuality in the expanding pornosphere tightens its “grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures” (Foucault, Will 155). Attwood adds that “[t]he confession, first described by Foucault as the modern place to discuss sex, is fast becoming mediatized,” proposing that popular media play a central role in creating the domain of “public intimacy” that McNair identifies (Mainstreaming xv). Therefore, the contemporary economy of sexual truth seems entirely caught up in fetishism.

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

**My Body, My Material**

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

32 In comparison’s to the Freudian paradigm’s more limited sense of sex, Angel’s motto understands gender may be detached from and reproduced without reference to genitalia.
Preciado’s analysis of hard and soft technologies resonates with Quinn’s sculpture “Allanah and Buck.” S/he identifies transsexualism as one way in which bodies may produce resistant mutations of the normative gender codes that are propagated by pornography and digested through hormones. Following Preciado, I suggest that the transsphre plays a special role in both conceiving of the violence of this regime’s biopower and of ways in which it might be mobilized to “de-install gender” (114). With respect to mobilizing agency, Preciado offers the labor model of the collective factory as a metaphor for the self-determining assemblage of gender codes (115). For instance, in the figures of Starr and Angel, one might recognize emblematic workers in the factory of gender, who appropriate the material, production and even consumption of their self-determined genders. Through chirurgical procedures, the ingesting of hormones, and commodification, they control and utilize the flows of gender in today’s political economy of gender.33

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

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

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

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

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

Machines for Perceiving ‘Self-Evidences’

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

34 See <http://www.transexualstarr.com/images/bio.jpg>
modifications, she responds to Hattenstone’s inquiry regarding whether she would ever “get rid of her penis” that she might have a vaginoplasty later if only “to normalise myself for old age” (2).35 For the moment, she explains, her penis is her crucial selling point as a she-male porn star, integral to her image. While visiting the gallery to see “Allanah and Buck” for the first time, Starr asks, “The genitals, are they there?” Hattenstone recounts: “We get on our knees to look, diffidently feeling our way along the sculpture until we find an erect penis” (Ibid.) “Oh yes! They are!” she shouts with delight (Ibid.). Starr’s anxiety about her sculpture’s likeness to her body suggests that though her penis carries a function in the fetishistic regime of sex it is equally central to her particular sexdesign. The penis is at once a fetishized sex part signaling a gendered truth and the centerpiece of her sexdesigned body, sculpted and augmented to accentuate her cock.

According to Preciado, transsexualism is a testament to the simultaneity of various corporeal regimes. Referring to Dean Spade’s comparative analysis of rhinoplasty (nose surgery) and phallo-or vaginoplasty (genital surgery) as a case in which different somatic fictions become juxtaposed, s/he suggests that inside the same body different organs can be understood through different regimes of power (113). Nasal surgery, s/he argues, is considered a cosmetic change, because the nose is categorized as individual property and a market object. In contrast, surgery performs a sex change, because genitals are part of a sovereign regime that considers them state property (113).36 Even one organ, like Starr’s penis or like Angel’s vagina, I would like to add, can be understood in two contradictory regimes: both a trademark of self-design and an anatomical feature that reveals truth. Critically, the perceiver’s point of view may influence which of the varying models overlay the genitals. Walking around the sculpture “Allanah and Buck,” one would not necessarily be aware of Allanah’s penis or Buck’s vagina, leading one to perhaps assume that the sculpture shows the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Deleuze suggests that in the same way that statements depend on their system for sayability, visibilities are inseparable from machines. Such visibility machines do not have to be optical machines like film projectors per se, but are more generally
conceived as an assembly of organs and functions that makes something visible and
conspicuous: producing a thing as a shimmer (Deleuze, Foucault 58). Referring to
Foucault’s interest in identifying the ‘machines’ at work in Raymond Roussel’s poetry,
Deleuze proposes that the first light “opens ups things and brings forth visibilities as
flashes and shimmerings, which are the ‘second light’” (58). Thus, the pervasive
lights of an era can be analyzed as a form that is capable of creating other forms and
movements, such as the shimmerings of sex and the gleams of the commodity’s
fetish.38 The first light acts as a virtual visibility, producing all perceptible experiences, enabling the “multisensorial complexes” of visibilities to “emerge into
the light of day” (59). Crucial to entering the visible field as a second light, then, is
the proper relation to the machine that acts as a first light. Only then can one become
a shimmer, created as a “light-being” both absolute in one’s givenness and yet
historical, since a being of light “is inseparable from the way in which it falls into a
formation or corpus” (Deleuze 58).

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

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

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