Shimmering images: on transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics

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Chapter Three
Cut

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Attractions at the Turn of the Century**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Therapeutic Somatechnics**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Psychoanalysts in private practice led the opposition to gender therapy by surgery by using a variety of analytic techniques “to support their position that persons demanding castration were ipso facto mentally ill,” with the final diagnosis that all transsexuals were “border-line psychotics” (Meerloo), or victims of “paranoid schizophrenic psychosis” (Socarides) (qtd. in Billings and Urban 269). This pathologization raises the question of whether patients could consent to the operations that they ‘psychotically’ demanded, since psychotics cannot legally express consent. From a so-called ‘radical feminist’ perspective, sex-change surgery is trivialized as only an aesthetic make-over. Trans scholar Zowie Davy comments that in the imaginings of Sheila Jeffrey, Mary Daly, and Janice Raymond sex-reassignment is considered the violation of healthy flesh – the “amputation and mutilation of an otherwise healthy body, rather than its enhancement” – which condemns transwomen to be “pseudo-women” with masochistically orientated sexualities (75-76).

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

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

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

In writing “an account of myself and my helper,” that is, her surgeon, Elbe’s task in *Man into Woman* was in part to describe and justify the apparent violence of surgery for the trans subject (267). In many places, she expresses the hope that the story would be helpful in promoting an understanding of her kind. On the eve of her final (and fatal) surgery, she writes to Hoyer (her editor) the following directives: “now you will understand me and now you will be able to teach others to understand me” (264). At a mid-way point in her series of operations, one of Elbe’s diary entries

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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22 The masses were also coming to terms with machines like the telephone (invented in 1876), the phonograph (1877), and the automobile (developed during the 1880s and 1890s).
collective would be ‘innervated’ by film; that the violence rendered by film would train them to be able to deal with the shocks of modern life.  

Benjamin asserts that “the most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus” (117). What cannot now be heard or seen any longer due to the numbing factors of modernity, such as the factory and the crowd, Benjamin believes can be perceived anew in the operating theatre of cinema. Hence, the vigor of the masses, and for my purposes, the emergence of transsexual aesthetics, both rely on transforming the violence of the cut into an intervention to restore vitality to the senses, an aesthetic transformation that is carried out in the soma-cinematic operating theatre.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The story of an internalization of warring masculine and feminine traits justifies the divided sexual self into Sparre/Elbe. The continuous assertion of this division guides the narrative about her kind by way of montage sequences of what I identify as shot/reverse-shots. This editing technique serves to drive the narrative -- cutting from Sparre to Elbe and back -- while engaging the reader in the life and death drama, in which “one of the two beings had to disappear, or else both had to perish” (111). The question then becomes at what exact point will this dramatic bio-picture cut back to find that Sparre has suddenly disappeared?30

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

Editing might appear to present a dilemma to the filmmaker. On one hand, the physical break between one shot and another may seem to have a disturbing effect, interrupting the viewer’s flow of attention. But, on the other hand, editing is undeniably a primary means for constructing a film. How can one use editing and yet control its potentially disruptive force? (261)

Editing can be used to create continuity of time and space for the viewer, or of discontinuity. The common synonym for editing, montage, the French word for the putting together of parts into a machine, suggests that film may be formed into different kinds of ‘machines’ that can disturb by interrupting the flow of attention, or conceal these breaks. Benjamin cautions for viewers to remain mindful of the way in which these machines are put to use. Hence, the history of film editing might also chart a history of changing political perceptions.31

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Bridging the Cut**

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

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

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

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

A core issue in “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility” essay is the manner in which the mechanical reproduction of works of art effects the viewer’s perception. Elbe’s technologically produced, yet glossed as natural, form begs the same question: in what ways is one’s aesthetic experience changed by the intensive engagement with technology, and furthermore, what might be the political consequences of that engagement? The “Work of Art” essay prophetically envisioned the onslaught of World War Two as well as the potential of the masses to enjoy their own violent disembodiment, prepared through cinematic techniques. Against this negative outcome of war, I have championed the potential of cinema – and cinematic techniques -- to affirm and revitalize perceptibility, even through bodily violence. *Man into Woman* presents an affirmative relation to cutting, whether in relation to the cuts from the flickers of shimmers, edits, or the scalpel. The protagonist is clearly not pictured as a ‘victim’ of the cutting machines. To the contrary, the editing of gender removes and then repairs her masculinity. In addition, several passages of the book demonstrate how the technology of writing served as a means to re-produce her version of womanhood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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