Shimmering images: on transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics

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Chapter Four
Suture

“We need visual texts which activate in us the capacity to idealize bodies which diverge as widely as possible both from ourselves and from the cultural norm,” concludes Kaja Silverman’s first chapter of The Threshold of the Visible World (37). The way in which a culture, and by extension an individual, relate to idealized and de-idealized bodies is central to Silverman’s monograph on Lacanian subjectivity. The title, The Threshold of the Visible World, is a phrase taken from Jacques Lacan’s essay “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience” (1949/1977), in which he claims that the feeble infant’s reflection in the mirror instigates a jubilant identification with an image of Gestalt.¹ In the moment of investing in a (false) correspondence between sentient self and seen self, the child enters a threshold to the visible world, along with entering what Lacan terms the “Imaginary” realm, characterized by illusion, vulnerability, and division. Lacan later calls the ongoing false recognition of correspondence a “pseudo-identification,” a function he also terms “suture” (Four 117, 118).

The surgical synonym of suture highlights the way in which, through recognition, a body is pulled together in the mirrors of the visible world, mirrors existing at the level of the Imaginary and ratified at the level of the Symbolic. For Lacan, a coherent body is an ideal form, a form that Silverman contests as being available to all subjects at all times and at all levels. Countering Lacan’s presumption of the cultural norm that limits the fantasy of the Imaginary, Silverman seeks ways of idealizing and enabling divergent bodies to ‘suture.’ This chapter continues Silverman’s critique of Lacanian ideality, elaborating on the operations of psychoanalytical suture, in light of the specific bodily divergence of transsexualism. Suture’s function seems to break down in the transsexual “mirror stage,” in so far as transsexuality is indicated by a failure of identification due to the non-correspondence between felt self and reflected self. A trans divergent body is medically understood as the experience of non-correspondence between the sexed

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

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

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coherence threatens one’s survival as a subject. In this chapter, I wish to develop the surgical analogy between cinema and transsexuality by focusing on their shared notion of suture, in which the cohering of the film viewer’s and the transsexual’s subjectivity is in play. I have selected a case study from trans cinema that strikes me as a rich reflection on suture in terms of sex change surgery and cinematic identification.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Identification is associated with the idealization of a militarized body.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In a traditional posturing of femininity in relation to beautification, *The Father is Nothing* introduces the mirror with the advent of the femme putting on her make-up. The scene recalls and then displaces Western fairy tales such as “Snow White,” in which the Queen is obsessed with how others view her and demands the truth from a mirror.6 Here, a young woman faces the mirror to apply the finishing touches and thus anticipates an other. The first shot of the sequence suggests but excludes the mirror by coming from behind her left shoulder as she leans forward to see better: the frame crops the femme’s hair, emphasizing her left cheek as her hand crosses over to line her eyelid with kohl. The image freezes on the motion before cutting to a quick insertion shot of naked bodies lying horizontally. The femme’s mouth appears to be on her lover’s crotch, but her hand covers the action (Figure 1). She wears a black cap in an s/m style that also hides from view her gestures. The camera is positioned at her lover’s head, accentuating the perspective as from the FtM.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Look of Love**

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

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

3. Femme gazing out

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

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

5. FtM flogging femme

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

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

In viewing the film, the spectator may take up the position of the camera’s eye,
the mirror which the characters address. Direct address is rare in continuity editing of
fiction, even more so when such editing uses a shot/reverse-shot edit as a way to
suture the viewer into identification with a character’s point of view.
Acknowledgement of the camera/mirror/spectator would break the illusion of reality
achieved with cinema’s traditional fourth wall. Comedy films, such as those with
Charlie Chaplin, or famously Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, have often used the device to
underscore a punch line.7 In contrast, in The Father is Nothing, the series of direct
looks force the viewer into the position of third party, a point on the triangle of their
erotic rather than comedic exchange. The sequence pits the viewer into a necessary
position of exchange, a position that suture requires of the spectator, here with the
added resonance of sexual invitation. The association of intersubjective eroticism to
suture has not been carefully explored by suture theorists, who tend to treat
identification as an individual psychic experience of cinematic images and underplay,
if not ignore, the libidinal energy that Silverman suggests consecrates suture.

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

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

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

Suture was imported into film theory by Jean-Pierre Oudart’s 1969 article “La suture” in *Cahiers du cinema*. Oudart theorizes its operation as the securing of a ‘place’ for the spectator to re-enact the production of subjectivity. He defines suture as “the closure of the cinematic *énoncé* in line with its relationship with its subject …, which is recognized, and then put in its place as the spectator” (“Cinema and Suture” 35). The place for the spectator must be kept constant throughout the film so that he or she may ‘speak’ the film as cinematic discourse and become the cinematic subject. The spectator, according to Oudart, fulfills the role of the subject of the cinematic discourse, “a role which is only possible from a locus displaced in relation to field of the Imaginary and the place of the Absent One” (38). The mysterious ‘Absent One’ is simply the image’s presumed point of view that remains vacant and all-seeing, which with the spectator identifies to access the film. This Absent One, Silverman points out, “has all the attributes of the mythically potent symbolic father: potency, knowledge, transcendental vision, self-sufficiency, and discursive power” (*Subject* 204). Ascension to this place is much like the mirror-stage’s formation of an anticipatory ‘I’ in that it “helps the spectator organize the space and the progression of the representation” (38). Hence, this phallicized *Gestalt* and simultaneously empty place is the keyhole the viewer must slip through in order to enter the visible world of the film.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Screen of Culture**

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

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

The screen is a determining factor in the subject’s ability to suture: it allows for bodily images to come together where the subject is locatable in the grid of culture.

Silverman reminds us of the Symbolic order’s role in suture: “‘captation’ can occur only with the complicity of the gaze; the subject can only achieve an invisible join

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9 The term trans-masculinity was likely introduced, if not codified, by Judith Halberstam in *The Drag King Book* and her seminal *Female Masculinity*, though it continues to be used by trans scholars, such as Jean Bobby Noble in *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape*. 

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with those images or screens through which the gaze in its capacity as ‘others as such’
looks at her” (emphasis mine; 152). The “invisible join” of suture requires the
agreement of the gaze and the imaginary of the screen. The introduction of the screen
revises the mirror stage’s self-recognition by becoming the mediating and crucial third
term. This enables me to address the armored and masculine image of the ego as
particular and not universal (152).

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

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

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

The opening sequence of *The Father is Nothing* contains beguiling shapes, which foreshadow a series of elusive images. A string quartet plays languorously, as the viewer is treated to an extreme close-up of a glistening surface for twenty-two seconds: water from screen right washes up over an unidentifiable object, catching the light, forming what Silverman has called a “glittering radiance” (Figure 6). Then, a three-second cut to an extreme close-up of the skin of an indeterminate body with light searching over it impels the viewer’s look to stay on the surface (Figure 7). The film cuts back to the camera position of first shot looking over a glistening surface. From this position, the next shot pulls out into a medium shot to reveal more of the water with light dancing on it, until it becomes framed by the jagged edge of a dock and stops (Figure 8). It becomes apparent in this third shot that the first shot introduced, yet obscured in detail, a waterlogged car tire being gently rocked by waves.

6. Water on indeterminate object  
7. Searchlight over skin
8. Tire bobbing

This sequence questions the viability and appeal of Lacan’s *Gestalt*. The mirror of the water enables the viewer to see but not understand what it is she or he sees. Instead of wanting to identify with an image of unification, it suggests a dreamy pleasure in identification with indeterminate, moving shapes. This display suspends the viewer’s semiotic quest, restricting it to the inscrutable shimmers reflecting off the surface: enjoyable in their own right, not because they are recognizable. The first two shots are confusing, if pleasurable; they only start to make sense after the viewer sees the later shots. The first shot of the tire becomes comprehensible with the addition of final shot, but the intermittent flash of the body may remain unrecognizable as a (gendered) body until more than a minute later when a more easily discernible close-up of a flat, pale breast with a tattoo matches it. However, this body is never attributed with a conclusive gender.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

17. Shot 14, Water


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the same time, the passage suggests that the phallus may in fact be the Imaginary part of the Symbolic, meaning that the privileged part of the Symbolic is itself an Imaginary remainder. Lacan’s formulation of the imaginary anatomy seems to be filtered through the dominant fiction of culture’s masculine screen, which colors his own projections of penile privilege as a “fact.” If the screen of the Imaginary “governs the gaze most secretly,” as Lacan asserts elsewhere, then surely Lacan cannot stand outside his own culture to describe the so-called facts that inform the laws of the system (Four 74). 10

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Desire to Be in the Picture**

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

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

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

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

![Images of tunnel and pier with light](image1.jpg)

22. Tunnel with light  23. Under pier with light

![Images of mouth over nipple and licking nipple](image2.jpg)

24. Mouth over nipple  25. Mouth licking nipple

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Cinematic Subject and Inner Mimicry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**A Murdered or Vitalized Subjectivity**

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

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

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

With this gesture, the film pauses itself and invites reflection on its mode of representation. The mode is clearly cinematic; however, the emphatic use of a still demands analysis. In contrast to the theorists of suture, for Lacan, suture is connected to photography and painting, the still visual arts. Remarkably, this final image holds in tension the freeze of suture’s pseudo-identification between the stilled image and the shimmering surface. In that sense, it visually frames the problematic of suture. I argue that The Father is Nothing presents, however briefly, cinema as an Imaginary space in which identification with a shimmering image might be enjoyed without the imposition of a freezing suture that is deemed necessary to the subject’s Symbolic survival.
Lacan’s preference for still photography is signaled earlier in a discussion of the camera-like gaze that is pre-existent to the eye of the seer, which he calls the seer’s “shoot” (pousse) (Four 72). As Silverman rightly points out, Lacan figures the gaze as an “imaginary apparatus,” much like a camera, but also as the film projector, through which light is embodied, directed, and thus able to “photo-graph” the subject (Male 145). It is not that Lacan’s schema is inherently wrong for film studies, but, given film’s nature as moving imagery, dehiscence appears to be the more likely outcome of film viewing.

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

In his discussion of photography, Lacan uses the term suture to describe the “pseudo-identification” or mental match that the subject makes between “the gesture,” the physical pose, and “the moment of seeing” (Ibid.). Like a trompe-l’oeil, the gesture of the body is falsely seen to link up with the image. The deceptive correspondence between the sensate body and vision “can intervene here only as a suture” to provide provisional identity (118). The pose or gesture for the camera is deadening for Lacan, because it is arrested by the gaze. Against the fascination of the world (the shimmering of all things), the gaze, [174]
Lacan’s use of the Latin term fascinum, an evil spell or a phallic-shaped amulet, suggests that the gaze has magical powers. The murderous masculinized gaze is placed in contradistinction to the shimmering vitality of the moving world. One may conclude that ‘seeing shimmering’ would signify seeing life in movement, life which produces differentiated, multiple fascinations. Such moving-images one might understand as a potential of cinema.

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

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

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

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

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

Photography only became available in modernity, while other somatechnics followed. The “cutting machines” of cinema offer the relief of suture in provisional terms, frame to frame, which creates a flickering of the subject in eclipses.13

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

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