Shimmering images: on transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics

Steinbock, E.A.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter Five
Curiosity

Each time I watch Hans Scheirl’s experimental feature film Dandy Dust (1998, 95 min, Austria/United Kingdom), I feel nauseous, excited, and, by its ending, disoriented. Its viewing requires cruising through multiple worlds, swiftly changing points of view from the scale of god’s eye to an insect, to the interior of a bodily cavity. In addition to these peregrinations, the film refuses to maintain a singular corporeal or gender identity for its lead character, named “Dandy Dust,” who appears as a young boy of color, an older Caucasian tomboy, a talking flame, and a dusty mummy. Like its same-named shape-shifting protagonist, the trans-genre film jumps from horror, to science fiction, to splatter, to pornography.

Director and lead character Scheirl’s testosterone injections during filming actualize Dandy Dust’s transgender embodiment. His hormonal “experiments,” as he calls them, produce a female-bodied person whose gender often, yet not consistently, presents as masculine (Scheirl “Manifesto” 50; Scheirl “Hans” n/p).1 The stable character trait of Dandy Dust, both character and film, is not so much gender or genre, but rather a “vastly overgrown appetite for curiosity,” Johnny de Philo writes (“To Tremble” 69). Dandy Dust’s curiosity, the desire to understand and to re-member who he, or she, is, pushes and pulls cy2 through various worlds, collecting and dispersing fluids and bits of self. This curiosity drives the plot and seems a potent aspect of unsettling his/her gender identity. More than a device, curiosity may be an affective force for transitioning.

Transgenderism is intimately tied into the historical understanding and picturing of curiosity. Most literature on curiosity note its troubling of identity, not only gender-

---

1 In his artist statement for a solo show of paintings, “Hans in Transition,” he writes “[t]he term ‘transition’ is used in the transsexual and transgender community for the stretch of time it takes a person to change into the other gender. Now, I’m [sic] not going from A to B, but rather zigzagging my way through a large, open space of possibilities.” The artist’s statement can be found on <http://www.transitiongallery.co.uk/htmlpages/hans/hans_pr.html>

2 In Scheirl’s “Manifesto for the Dada of the Cyborg-Embrio,” he explains that rather than she or he, the character Dandy Dust is cy, short for cyborg (46). A cyborg embodiment is closely associated with a transgender kind of identity, though each explicitly trouble the notion of (singular) identity. As the chapter will discuss, the technologies afforded by film and video form an interface with flesh and blood bodies in a mutual re-making of Scheirl’s character’s techno-body, following Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” description.
wise, but also in terms of subjectivity: curious people often become curious objects. Barbara Benedict, for example, investigates the “fluid exchange between agency and objectivity, curiosity and curiousness,” which she dates from the concept’s beginnings in the 1500s (2). Her book, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*, advances the notion that curiosity arises as a sign of “cultural ambition,” the marked desire to escape one’s social role through a modicum of control over engagement with culture (22, 23). The ambition of social challengers to know registers empirically as a violation of species and categories so that they appear as monsters and queers: as curios. Benedict focuses on artefacts that cross the borders “between art and nature, animate and inanimate forms, male and female, animal and human,” which exist on a continuum with explorers and scientists “who crossed the borders of new lands and ideas” (4). Similarly, transgender figures, such as the dual-bodied chimera and its modern-day apparition in a pregnant man, appear as either threatening or promising signs of cultural and social transgression. Long regarded as a curious object marked by deviancy, transgender is reframed in *Dandy Dust* as an agential force, as a way of being curious.

Being curious is also the mark of the detective film genre, though here, the detective, and in turn the spectator, investigates cy-self. Still, next to gender investigations, *Dandy Dust’s* narration engages with the spectator on the level of curiosity. Though the film explicitly addresses the spectator by way of a recurring voice-over narrator, *Dandy Dust* does not ‘tell’ the viewer a story. Instead, it invites the viewers to weave their story from the chaotic plot elements and props according to their interests. Each sequence may work as a building block to advance the plot, may be discarded, or may be ignored until a later purpose gives it a role. Every twist presents an unclear junction, raising the question of what the scenes might have to do with one another. The film thus encourages the spectator to generate a “curiosity hypothesis,” which according to David Bordwell involves reconstructing a plausible hypothesis about past events by looking for patterns and the ways in which the

---

4 See the media fixation on Thomas Beattie and other transmen who, while identifying as masculine men, also become pregnant and bear their own children, utilizing their “female” reproductive organs. Some mainstream media outfits exploit the transgressive ring to the phrase, “pregnant man,” whilst some queer media herald the promising nature of the right to be a man and pregnant, decoupling gender identity from other social roles.
canonical story format is either abided or thwarted (qtd, in Elsaesser and Buckland, *Studying* 172). This lack of adherence to the typical format of “the introduction of setting and characters – explanation of a state of affairs – complicating action – ensuing events – outcome – ending” often positions the viewer in the director’s seat, be it awkwardly or pleasurably (Bordwell qtd. in Elsaesser and Buckland, *Studying* 170-171). Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland’s discussion of Bordwell’s cognitive theory of narration also suggests that *Dandy Dust*’s narration style, which uses recursive and permanent or unresolved “flaunted gaps,” incites a constant need to renew and reconstruct the story (*Studying* 173). As in detective films, the full exposition is delayed until the end, and even then, two versions are suggested that prevent the gaps from being fully resolved.

The film’s aesthetic reflects an interest in generating curiosity on the part of the spectator. Laura Mulvey notes in *Fetishism and Curiosity* that the film viewer’s curiosity at the image’s sensuous address drives her appetite for deciphering meaning. However, the images flickering in the viewer’s perceptual field enchant, but do not readily give up meaning (Mulvey xi). Hence, beyond the combination of (false) plot cues and stylized gaps, generating a greater appetite for curiosity, *Dandy Dust* exploits the sensuous quality of film through filmic images peppered with cheap special effects and mixed formats, such as animation, Super8, 16mm, and video. The extremely low-budget effects, Scheirl claims in an interview, produce an abstract quality that includes a richness of not only color, but suggests a rich field of aesthetic experience (“I am opposed” 19). The D.I.Y. or “Fun-Punk” aspect also led to experimenting to the point of creating the protagonist out of a technology and corporeal interface. Scheirl achieves “this particular ‘glow’ of video” in which the film grain comes alive by recording on video, then filming off the monitor and then transferring the film back to video. The result is the production of the protagonist in *Dandy Dust*, who Scheirl claims “IS the film grain and the TV-noise ‘Fernsehrauschen’” (*Ibid.*).

The film’s other main generic influences, including splatter, porn, and sci-fi, indicate that beyond offering a cognitive and sensate exercise, its interest also lies in the exercise of the body’s potential, both human and cinematic. Laura Kipnis points out that science fiction is closely related to the genre of porn, as both take a “what if?” approach to bodies and societies, replacing commonalities with alternative corporeal universes (“Ladies First” n/p). Further, Linda Williams argues that pornography and
horror cinema belong to the category of “body genres,” in that each transforms the body’s affective dimensions, whether to induce arousal or fear (“Film Bodies”).

*Dandy Dust* articulates a form of “ethologic” research in the vein of Baruch Spinoza, who stated once that “we do not yet know what a body can do.”5 In testing and experimenting with encounters that redefine the body’s experiences of motion and rest, its capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies, the film poses the question, “what can a body do, or be made to do?” within the mediated and ideological contexts of contemporary cinema.

The spectator of *Dandy Dust* becomes the hub for each form of curiosity: perceiving flagrant transgenderism, the film’s tactility and its body genres, and participating in the investigation. Hence, I suggest that, unlike activist cinemas concerned with delivering a cogent message or entertainment cinema with a goal-oriented plot, *Dandy Dust* forgoes accumulating new or reproducing old knowledge. Instead, the film’s curious style and form engage in what I would like to characterize as “cinematic research.”

In my investigation, I first seek to unravel the entanglements of eroticism and knowledge with gender through a selective rereading of Sigmund Freud’s writing on curiosity. Freud’s theory of curiosity proposes an erotic dimension to the agent’s appetite for knowing in so far as he sees that intellectual research is driven by the desire to satisfy questions of sexual difference and reproduction. Focusing on the case study of “Little Hans,” in which Freud develops the castration and Oedipal complexes, I trace the privileging of sight over touch in his epistemological paradigm. Through an analysis of the exposition of setting and characters in the opening sequences, a crucial anchor for the spectator’s curiosity hypothesis, I underscore the difference between a haptic (and anal) curiosity and Freud’s own optical (and penile) approach.

Cognitive film theory such as Bordwell espouses presupposes a universal spectator, whose mind seems to exist without body. While the approach is helpful for explaining cognitive responses to narrative, this undifferentiated spectator is challenged by the film’s carnality. Throughout, the film addresses its audience via image and sound patterns, but also induces a seemingly unavoidable tactile experience,

---

5 Gilles Deleuze provides a definition for Spinoza’s general study of the body: “Ethology is first of all the study of the relations of speed and slowness, of the capacities for affecting and being affected that characterize each thing” (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 125). The significance for ethics of Spinoza’s seemingly simple acknowledgement (stated above) is that beforehand, prior to a specific arrangement or encounter you do not know what a body is capable of, what good or bad. Hence, the body, for Spinoza, is not essentially any quality, but a potentate for them all.
touching and being touched. The cover material boasts that during its release in 1998 *Dandy Dust* was “grabbing international film audiences by the throat and hurling them headfirst into the nearest available human orifice,” and reports that journalists branded it ‘pornography.’ The images of *Dandy Dust* do not just intrigue, but grab the spectator and pull her into the film’s bodily portal. Developing Jonathan Crary’s notion of the “carnal density of vision,” both in terms of enfleshed, subjectively enhanced vision as well as eroticized, pleasuring vision, I inquire into the pornographicity of the viewer’s interest in *Dandy Dust*. The perceptual impact of certain scenes’ tactility on the viewer is elaborated through feminist film theory, such as works by Linda Williams and Vivian Sobchack, who argue for an understanding of cinema’s touching and moving affectivity.

In closing, I focus on the epistemological gesture *Dandy Dust* enacts in its refusal to provide narrative or identitarian closure. The film offers the spectator two consecutive endings, a last spluttering of ‘what if,’ further confusing the identity of the protagonist. The first ending unsettles the resolution of earlier sequences by revealing Scheirl-as-Dandy-Dust to be playing all the other family member characters. The second ending displays a ‘final’ image of Dandy Dust blathering manically, while clutching mommy and daddy dolls and shoving them into his bottom. Recalling the Oedipalism of Freud’s notion of curiosity, the protagonist seems to reenact Little Hans in the throes of a groping curiosity: not so much concerned with mastering meaning, but rather playing with meaning’s polysemy. While seemingly playful, and therefore trivial, the film also conducts serious research of gender and, more broadly, of ethology. Extrapolating from this cinematic research to ‘curious’ encounters with cultural objects, I draw out an anti-Oedipal carnality potentially at work in a theorist’s production of knowledge.

“Where do babies come from?” or, “Have you got a widdler too?”

Freudian thought brings to the fore the erotic dimension of curiosity. Studying the sexual theories the patient “Little Hans” offers, among other children, Freud develops the hypothesis that curiosity is expressed in early investigations of erogenous zones and sexual acts (“A Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy” [1909]). For Freud, the “thirst for knowledge seems to be inseparable from sexual curiosity” (“A Phobia” 173). He proposes that sexuality is shaped through the problem solving the child conducts on the two questions that most puzzle him or her. In the essays on the “Sexual Theories
of Children” [1908] and “The Sexual Researches of Childhood” [1915 addition], Freud asserts that the first problem the child deals with is the riddle as to where babies come from, an interest in parental sexuality that blossoms into the Oedipus complex.

However, in other works such as “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children” [1907] and his study of Hans’ phobia [1909], Freud changes the priority of investigation to the child’s “widdler,” a euphemism for genitalia, and the question whether in one has it or can lose it. This concern develops into the castration complex and, in the case of girls, penis envy (“On the Sexual Theories of Children” [1908], *Three Essays on Sexuality* [1905] 113). The problems of the distinction between the sexes and the mystery of reproductive sexuality, whether primary or secondary, form the basis of the two most prominent complexes the child faces during sexual development. It is significant that Freud develops his theories of the castration and the Oedipus complex via meditations on curiosity in the period of 1905-1915. His conceptualization of sexuality as organized by drives originates from this elaboration of “the desire to know.” Without the libido of curiosity, or with only a blighted spirit of enquiry, Freud asserts that the whole of adult life can become perverted.

In the case “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood” [1910], Freud explores the long-term consequences of channeling infantile eroticism into the instinct for research. Three possible routes exist for the investigator’s sexuality as it intertwines with intellect: inhibition, compulsive brooding, and “the rarest and most perfect” form, sublimation (79-80). The “perfect” outcome of curiosity is described as an “insatiable and indefatigable thirst for knowledge” (74-75). In other words, curiosity results from the refining of the sexual impulse into concerns that are socially more acceptable: the infantile libido must become sublimated into adult intellectual interest. In the outcome of curiosity, affect mingles, however uneasily, with abstract theorizing. In this regard, Freudian thought rejects the utter suppression of carnal knowledge in favor of a cautious embrace. The affirmation of carnality though

---

6 At first, Hans understands a widdler as that which urine passes through and even imagines that a steam engine has one. His parents narrow the meaning to their genitals, but Freud decides the treatment for his phobia should be in the “enlightenment” that the widdler is solely a penis, which boys have, but girls do not. The changing meaning of “widdler” from general function to the province of males is dictated by Freud’s belief in the importance of genitals in sexual difference more than the family’s own interest in gendering the child. Arguably, Hans is far more interested in the penis’ function as pleasure centre and tool for urination than in it making him a boy, as differentiated from a girl. New methods of child-raising that allow the child to self-determine their gender, such as practiced by a Swedish couple making contemporary headlines, would presume to allow the term “widdler” to remain ambiguous and foster a more open-ended model of knowing (see “Swedish parent’s keep 2-year-olds gender secret” posted online 23 June 2009 at <http://www.thelocal.se/20232/20090623/>).
sublimation, however, does seem to effectively side-step “the Judeo-Christian template” of absolute repression, which Paul Willemen sees governing social taboos on sex as well as the taboo on ‘making sense’ through sensory perception (“For a Pornoscape” 9).

As the family disciplines sexual impulses, it also, in Freud’s view, restricts the intellect. In an open letter published in *Soziale Medizin und Hygiene* [1907], Freud champions tutelage in sexual matters for the cause of curiosity and unhindered research. He questions “the purpose of withholding from children – or, let us say, from young people – enlightenment of this kind about the sexual life of human beings” (“Sexual Enlightenment” 173-174). The family that fails to properly explain, for example, sexual reproduction, and instead provides falsehoods such as the story of the stork bringing a baby, “damage his [sic] genuine instinct of research” (177). Science and abstract thinking suffer as a result of the dominant belief in the asexuality of children. Freud regards psychoanalysis as a mode of recovering the sexual impulse that fuels curiosity, in effect rewiring the lines of arousal to fix it to the intellect, the proper “research-orientated” framework.

By embedding the desire to know into the structures of biological, psychological and intellectual development, Freud makes erotic curiosity intrinsic to knowledge production. In the long view, the line Freud draws between a curious instinct and sexuality may be understood as a re-conceptualization that extricates curiosity from the moral debates over ‘good’ and ‘bad’ curiosity, which shape its early modern usages.7 While radical in this sense, Freudian curiosity suffers from one major drawback. Writing from within the modern period, what Freud casually calls the “instinct” of curiosity colludes with the prominence of scientific observation and rational deliberation in Enlightenment thinking. According to Benedict, the widespread deployment of the term indicates a newfound secularism of society that sought the same powers of ‘all-seeing’ that had hereto been a prerogative of the monotheistic God (3, 18).

The confluence of ‘seeing’ with ‘knowing’ in the Enlightenment’s structuring of epistemology can be traced in the voyeuristic forms of curiosity that involve peering and peeking. Figures like artists, astronomers and biologists who use optical

---

7 According to the historical research of Neil Kenny, the slippage between morally good or bad inflections of curiosity – “its extraordinary moral reversibility” -- has haunted the term since it became prominent during the mid-seventeenth century (*Curiosity* 14).
equipment, such as the *camera obscura*, telescope, and microscope, are considered curious, specifically for their far-reaching vision. The more negative definition of curiosity as “going beyond reasonable means to know” indicates the socio-cultural anxiety in modernity that prosthetic (“corrective”) vision was overtaking the other senses (Benedict 254).

Freudian curiosity, with its focus on investigating the genitals as a visual problem, plays directly into the Enlightenment desire to see and thereby know the world; a framework that raises sight to the “noblest of the senses” as René Descartes declares (qtd. in *Downcast Eyes* 21). One of Freud’s prime examples of the voyeurism and scopophilia driving curiosity is the inquisitive Little Hans watching his mother undress. She asks, “What are you staring like that for?” He replies, “I was only looking to see if you’d got a widdler too” (“A Phobia” 173). Freud emphasizes throughout his analysis that Hans looks at his family members, neighbors, and animals to catch a glimpse of widdlers so he might learn to differentiate them. The treatment of Hans’ symptoms focuses on teaching him to recognize the difference in degree and later in kind between widdlers: to see a present or absent penis, bodies as either male or female.

Moreover, the epistemological system that he divines from Hans refuses visual ambiguity or flawed perception. For instance, when Hans watches his seven-day old sister being given a bath he comments, “But her widdler’s quite small …. When she grows up it’ll get bigger all right” (175). Freud muses in a footnote on why, according to him, Hans did not report what he “really saw,” namely that there was no widdler (penis) there. He accounts for Hans’ “faulty perception” as a mistake that conceals a truth he cannot yet understand (175 ftnt 2). Freud’s assumption that the genital insignia of sexual difference is visually obvious, and not informed by a cultural visuality, colors his assessment of Hans’ observations. I wish to carve out a way in

---

8 In *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Martin Jay argues that from the Greeks to the present day, Western visuality has formed what he calls an “ocularcentric discourse” that informs the tightly bound relationship between intellectual inquiry and the experience of vision. Jay draws on Hal Foster’s differentiation of *vision*, the biologically developed sense, and *visuality*, the distinct historical meaning of this habituated sense as inflected by a culture (*Vision and Visuality* ix). As Jay remarks, the threshold between the ‘natural’ and the ‘cultural’ is difficult to mark, particularly in the case of vision/visuality wherein the experience of sight is mediated linguistically by different language cultures, which produce various “images” of that vision (3, 9). Little Hans might see one thing, but its with the imprint of parental visuality that he learns to ‘think’ what he sees.
which curiosity might function not as a natural affect or as a naturalizing force of visual perception, but as a tool to challenge the naturalized limits of knowledge.

In Freud’s model of knowledge, the eyes of the researcher allow for observation, whereas the biological body only provides the means for comparison, not meaning-making. Freudian curiosity relies solely on vision, thus ignoring the influence of other sensory (or perceptual) modes. That curiosity could stimulate the observer’s sensorium beyond the sense of sight is actively denied in the text. Although Freud writes that Hans’ interest in widdlers “also impelled him to touch his member,” any consideration of touching as a mode of meaning-making remains unanalyzed, in spite of his use of italics to signal its importance (emphasis in original; 171).

In the same passage, Freud relates the episode when Hans’ mother finds him touching himself. She threatens to send for a doctor to “cut off your widdler” and asks the question, “and then what’ll you widdle with?” Smartly, Hans responds, “With my bottom” (171). Freud diagnoses this moment as the occasion when Hans acquires the castration complex, when the child perceives that his genitals, the most important pleasure center, are threatened. Hans, however, effectively dodges the importance that Freud and his parents place on the presence of the widdler (the penis) by shifting the function of pleasure to his bottom. Here the analysis represses the suggestion of the mobile and tactile epistemology that Hans expresses. Hans openly acknowledges that he pleasurably ‘gropes’ towards knowledge through the kinesthetic exploration of his own affective embodiment.

I suggest that alongside and in relation to the visual, a haptic process of knowing – or groping -- supports Hans’ investigations. Furthermore, by shifting the significance of ‘widdling’ to the bottom, Hans discovers another site for exploring his curiosity, which has no reproductive or gender-specifying problem to solve. A model of curiosity that begins not from the penis, but from the bottom, so to speak, points to another trajectory of curiosity that is possible within Freudian thought. A haptic or groping curiosity continues to be erotically-infused, but not partial to the difference a widdler makes. This curiosity then raises the question, What would it mean to experience the embodied affect of curiosity in a non-gender specific, or in a transitioning fashion, as Hans suggests is possible?
Touch and Corporeal Openings

Art historian Aloïs Riegl asserts that haptic images draw the viewer close and fasten her to the image (from *haptein*, to fasten), whereas optical images of distinct forms must be perceived from a distance (qtd. in Marks, *Skin* 162). Building on Riegl’s study of Roman crafts and fine art, film scholar Laura Marks claims that, for cinema, optical visuality depends on the separation of subject and object to produce depth, while haptic visuality moves over the surface of the object, inclined to graze over the texture rather than gaze in order to distinguish a form (*Skin* 162).9 The fact that Freud insists Little Hans’ parents distinguish the form of widdlers once and for all as a penis suggests that Freud privileges optic visuality.

The assumption that the form of the penis is essentially given, or that “all the resources the viewer requires” to identify it “are available in the image,” as Marks writes of optical visuality, supports the illusion of outward projection that Freud wishes Hans’ to observe (*Skin* 163). Marks develops the term “haptic visuality” to account for experimental, intercultural, and other minority cinema, such as to which *Dandy Dust* belongs, which all evoke the sense of touch to overcome the inability to visualize subjective experience.10 Film cannot literally engage haptic perception encompassing tactile and proprioceptive functions, but it can, according to Marks, orientate the spectator towards a haptic *visuality*, in which “the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (*Skin* 162).

Although Marks follows Riegl’s differentiation between near and far vision, James Gibson anchors the textural experience of images in their enveloping environs. In *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Gibson suggests that vision in general involves a relay with the felt environment, a process he terms “ecological” perception. He emphasizes that the perceiver’s vision entails far more than the anatomical structure of the eye, describing a kinesthetic vision that “registers movements of the body just as much as does the muscle-joint-skin system and the inner-ear system” (183). More attuned to the space, this sort of haptic visuality locates the perceiver *in* an environment, perceiving the significance of surfaces in relation to

---

9 Marks also comments on Riegl’s initial work as a curator of textiles that she speculates may have influenced his theory of close-up and tactile ways of looking (*Touch* 4-5).
10 My thinking is indebted to Marks’ two works *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, which both revolve around the notion of haptic visuality in relation to marginal or minority cinema. The first explores the medium of film through the rubrics of images and memory, the second focuses more on video and various sense modes, including a pronounced relation to eroticism.
one’s body. In Anne Rutherford’s astute reading of Gibson for cinema experience, she suggests this perception is “more akin to a millipede than to a camera or camera obscura – a thousand tentacles feeling their way through a space rather than a single lens taking it in view” (“Cinema” 6). Taken together, Marks’ and Rutherford’s translation of vision’s hapticity into reception studies suggest a ‘touched’ spectator (for lack of a better term), who resides up close, in contact, inhabiting the spectacle. This corporeally-involved spectator is poised to exploit the bodily pleasures of being touched by the folds of filmic space.

Other scholars have related haptic aesthetics and viewing to women and to feminine pleasures in an effort to shift from a phallocentric model of vision: vision-centered because the penis is supposedly more visible and experienced as outwardly projecting. Sociologist Harold Garfinkel calls such ‘optical’ gender epistemologies “the natural attitude toward gender,” which invest in the identification of one characteristic, the genitalia, to determine the sharp distinction between women and men (Studies in Ethnomethodology). Prominently, Luce Irigarary argues that “woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking” because the female genitalia, two lips touching, are experienced in terms of tactility, not visuality (qtd. in Touch 7). Similarly countering a phallocentric organization of the body, Leo Bersani specifies the anus as a site for performing politics, especially for male homosexuals. In “Is the Rectum a Grave?” he proposes that anal penetration shatters the phallic form of identity. Penetration by the penis inverts the male body’s “active” attitude that presses out onto the world into a feminine “passive” attitude of being pressed into. I suggest that a haptic gender epistemology such as Little Hans enacts in ‘widdling’ the non-gender specific bottom might side-step the limitations of binary sex-gender constructions as employed by Freud, Irigarary, and Bersani, in which the penis is determined male and the vulva is female.

Dinesh Wadiwel’s essay on the sexual practice of anal fisting, “Sex and the Lubricative Ethic,” supports Hans’ hypothesis that entering and exploring the anus relies on the sense of touch:

The lubricative engagement is too slippery to be captured by the vision of the appropriating subject that finds sexuality only through the knowledge provided by what it sees. [During fisting] [t]ouch must take precedence over vision. Erotic operators come to negotiate with each other’s potentiality through a sensual exploration of dark erotic spaces, caverns
that have no need of sight. This does not mean vision does not play a role, rather vision is compelled to move as a caress. (501)

Wadiwal’s view implies the irrelevance of the usual attitude towards gender as based on an optical paradigm for his anal and haptic visuality. Stating the matter more clearly, Guy Hocquenghem jokes in *Homosexual Desire* that “the anus does not practice sexual discrimination” (87). According to him, when “seen from behind we are all women” (87). Hocquenghem is too quick to assume that the lack of a visible phallus immediately conjures up ‘woman.’ More accurately, when seen – or touched - - from behind, one could be any gender. The anus, as Little Hans subtly demonstrates, belongs to all bodies, all genders. I propose that the pleasures that Little Hans takes from indiscriminate widdling might be at the center of cinephilia. In other words, in developing the proprioceptive-focused spectator I introduced in Chapter Four’s discussion of inner mimicry, I argue that a viewing experience stimulates the whole sensorium, with haptic visuality being one mode of doing so.

I follow Marks and Rutherford in thinking of cinema as a haptic and a sensuous environ as a step towards considering the ways *Dandy Dust* appeals to the spectator’s cognitive apparatus as well as his/her body’s carnality. I am not suggesting that *Dandy Dust* only presents haptic images. The difference between optical and haptic visuality is a matter of degree and likely experienced in a dialectical movement from near to far (Marks, *Skin* 163). Yet, from its opening, *Dandy Dust* offers what I experience as haptic images, those that in Marks’ words, “invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding,” and conversely, “create an image of such detail … that it evades a distanced view” (*Skin* 162-163). In challenging the viewer to fasten onto images she cannot pretend to fully know or view, the viewer must approach those images through other sensory modes. This approach has far-reaching implications for the understanding of the film’s bodily environ and the spectator’s sensuous engagement with its gendered space.

**The Openings of *Dandy Dust***

After the title sequence, *Dandy Dust* opens with a black screen accompanied by the sound of air whirling around space. The setting places the viewer in a groundless position, akin to an astronaut or God. The sequence then displays a flimsy white ball
made from plaster goo and wraps, which moves up vertically to the centre of the frame. A somewhat shaky zoom at the slowly turning ball reveals that the flickering light shows a projection of black and white images. A masculine voice-over narrates, “Wars are raging through the centuries on the Planet of White Dust.” The zoom continues until the planet fills the screen and the sound of a machine turning and shrill cries become louder, as if the spectator were just about to crash land on its surface.

![Close-up, the Planet of White Dust](image1)

1. Close-up, the Planet of White Dust

A hard cut dangles the viewer above a white dusty surface with animated insects, bones, and toy airplanes. Shifting point of view to the surface, the viewer stands in the midst of a scene, which the narrator describes as, “scavengers from the surrounding galaxies ravage its cadaverous surface.” Dandy Dust then moves the spectator from a flat surface to deeper creases. The next shot takes the viewer to the centre of the planet, where naked and greased bodies stand on each others’ shoulders (Figure 2). Their grim physical struggle in an enclosed space suggests they are working in the shaft of the planet. The voice-over tells the viewer that the workers “pump the mechanism for death and destruction” that runs on the white dust of crushed bones (Figure 3).

![The workers](image2)  ![The “screw”](image3)

2. The workers  3. The “screw”
A tightly framed close-up of the screw spinning and flashing, with an intercut black shot, continues for longer than necessary to establish the object. The length of fifteen seconds may well unnerve the viewer, who cannot get away from almost falling into the grinder. Lasting twenty-five seconds, the follow-up shot of white dust falling against a black background fascinates the eye. Less menacing, the dust also shines, reflecting the light as it falls directly from above, a movement in which the rushing of cinematic images seem to stream down vertically, like a waterfall.

The spectator’s body becomes implicated in each shot: not close enough, then too close for comfort, and finally unable to the grasp. The opening sequence addresses an embodied viewer. It suggests that *Dandy Dust* will likely not appeal to the spectator’s desire for a goal-oriented narrative, or offer an identification with the as-yet unannounced protagonist. Rather, it begins with an appeal to the spectator’s bodily aspect that locates him or her in a physical relation to the imagery of the film’s setting. As Bordwell claims, a film’s beginning is crucial to the spectator’s hypothesis finding an anchor point. The introduction of the setting of the Planet of White Dust includes an omniscient narrator, whose presence is felt within the narrative. The anchor point for the spectator, however, is not with a character, but with the environment. As the exposition continues in *Dandy Dust*’s first ten minutes, the spectator is introduced to another three environments, all of which recall various parts of the body and place the action in their midst. The spectator travels to the parental lodgings on the “Planet of Blood and Swelling,” to Dandy Dust’s mother’s flying “Mother-Ship” in the shape of the uterus and fallopian tubes, and to the bladder of “Planet 3075,” in which naked hermaphroditic beings live connected by tubes diffusing nectar.

The cinematic construction of such worlds in the aesthetics of a humid and lived corporeality maps *Dandy Dust*’s “filmscape” as a “bodyscape.” To borrow Marks’ phrase, the spectator touched by “the skin of the film” contacts the outside cutaneous surfaces, then slips inside the bodily cavity, only to be pushed out again. At no point can a spectator grasp physically or cognitively the unity of the film’s given “body.” Through a haptic visuality, however, the viewer might travel along its organs, capillaries, and pock-marked surfaces. Though a viewer’s perceptual location is in the immediacy of the image, she sits in her chair, perhaps sweating, frowning, or leaning forward. Since the film consists of a sort of body not accessible to optical vision alone,
it seems that the sexualized elements belong to a loosely defined, gender-flexible bodyscape.

Scheirl’s “Manifesto for the Dada of the Cyborg-Embrio,” published a year prior to the film’s release, provides clues as to how the spectator might navigate the film. He writes that rather than moving in and out of spaces, the film’s figures travel in the dimension of “scale” (55). Instead of judging inside or outside, Dandy Dust, along with the spectator as fellow traveler, move through a “big” universe, then approaches a “small” one (55). For instance, from the depths of space, the spectator lands on the open surface of the Planet Dust, then enters the constricted anal canal. Whereas Freud relates ‘big’ and ‘small’ to the size of the male member, for the protagonist, the experience of space changes according to cy’s movement within and across the bodyscape. Similarly, the spectator cannot rely solely on the optical, distanced, and phallocentric point of view. The body’s movement, sensations, and responsive affects determine the scale and shape of this kind of space, suggesting that it is organized through touch, or for the viewer, through a haptic visuality keyed to the environment.

Those constant fluctuations of the scale of space Scheirl likens to a tight-ringed doughnut, infinitely folding “in/out/side insideout” to create “a transgendered arsehole!” (“Manifesto” 55). Scheirl describes anal space as ‘transgendered’ rather than in association with gay men, or non-gender specificity, or gender-irrelevancy. Rejecting the phallic rendering of folds that privileges the form of the penis, Scheirl declares Dandy Dust’s corporeal scale to follow “the politics of bulge and cavity” (55). The transgendered bulge and cavity, and not the ‘present’ penis or the ‘absent’ vagina, form Dandy Dust’s undulating bodyscape. Scheirl’s depiction of Dandy Dust’s bodyscape renders the haptic experience of the film as an ever shifting scale that is sensitive to minute changes.

Relating to the film as an “arsehole” does not cancel out the other sexualized forms in the bodyscape, but I understand that it refers to its strong address to touch, which blurs the distinction between inside and outside, internal cavities and external projections. Hence, ‘transgender,’ with its association with ‘arsehole’ in Scheirl’s definition, refuses the imperative to maintain the self as singular. In the manifesto, and manifestly in Dandy Dust, Scheirl reframes identity as a “complex system of inwards & outwards bulging hyrarchical [sic] identities with the potential to blow up to pieces” (“Manifesto” 51). He goes on to profess that “only where there are multiple
identities, fear of identity termination fades” (Ibid.). The effect of bulging in three dimensions reflects an understanding of transgender as embracing forms of bodily uncertainty.

The potential of losing or growing an identity ‘part’ provides the trans subject of Dandy Dust with more options and directions to experience the folds of space. The film offers the viewer a chance to sidestep the horrors of the castration complex, in effect to touch and widdle ‘elsewhere’ on the body. The multiple identities available in experiencing the body as having ever-changing inward cavities and outward bulges translates into a lack of fear over losing (or not having to begin with) a widdler, putting to rest the psychological or social need to fear a lack. Freud would have done well to heed Little Hans’ advice: there are always other bulges and cavities with which to widdle, should one be lost.

The Carnal Density of Vision
Jonathan Crary’s Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century historicizes a profound change in the regime of vision, the transition from optical to haptic visuality. He charts an embodied model of vision emerging in the 1800s, which ruptures with the organization of vision featured in the disembodied eye of the camera obscura. Provocatively, he claims that the proliferating “philosophical toys,” such as the stereoscope and kaleidoscope, belong not to the progression of perspectival realism inherent in the camera obscura, but to a “modernization” of vision that newly corporealis the observer (97-136). The involved and disciplined “observer” experiences hapticity through handling the gadgets and by participating in the visual illusion of movement or depth (such as with the stereoscope, phenakistoscope, or thaumatrope) (105-112).¹¹ Cinema, too, involves the body of the observer to produce a subjective form of vision from the flicker of frames or the arrangement of pixels. Vision relocated in the coordination of the

---
¹¹ The thaumatrope, literally a “wonder turner,” popularized in 1825 was a toy consisting of a disk that when twirled would blend the images on both sides, say of a bird and cage. According to Crary, it was a scientific illustration of the rupture between perception and object, the fusion of “afterimages” not hereto represented, but a result of subjective vision (105). Similarly, the phenakistoscope of the early 1830s exploits retinal persistence to achieve illusion of continuous movement when the subject turns the wheel and looks into the mirror to watch, for instance a horse, turn around the disc (107). The stereoscope that combines two slightly different photographs to produce three dimensional figures requires the viewer to create the sense of depth, just as today’s “View-Masters” toys do (111). See Crary for illustrations (105-112).
viewer’s corporeality and senses renders a “palpable opacity” to the experience of movies, which Crary terms the “carnal density of vision” (150).

Despite his attempt to survey the social, scientific, and artistic field of modernity, Crary does not address the overlap between the popularity of philosophical toys and the emergence of mass curiosity in the period. However, his chosen objects of study include the same range of visual games that Benedict notes greatly interested ‘curious’ scientists, inventors, and collectors. Linda Williams’ reading of Crary in “Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the ‘Carnal Density of Vision’” also points out that the imagery for the toys during the “media explosion” of the nineteenth century often consisted of erotic and pornographic images (3, fn1). Her essay develops Crary’s turn of phrase, the “carnal density of vision,” in light of mass produced “dirty pictures.” Citing Baudelaire’s passage on the “thousands of greedy eyes” that were “glued to the peephole of the stereoscope” for the “love of obscenity,” Williams seeks to explain the pleasurable, even sexual, sensations that were experienced while viewing images (4). Exploiting the double meaning of “carnal” as referring to the flesh and to sexual intercourse, Williams addresses the carnality of vision, which she argues has a pleasurable effect due “haptic immediacies” (11). I propose that the “carnal density of vision” that Crary and Williams develop can be expanded to address the sexual and sensual dimension of curiosity.

Freudian curiosity, as I describe above, accounts for its eroticism through the (sublimated) drive to know the details of reproductive sex and genitalia. In contrast, a carnally-inflected curiosity might refer instead to the pleasures of widdling, or more generally to the desire to act, to grasp. According to the OED, curiosity foremost suggests a personalized interest: the subject’s interest leads her to inquiry; curiosity is peaked by an interesting object. The response of the viewer to the formal components of an object has been used to determine the difference between an aesthetic and obscene work. For example, Kenneth Clark, a leading art historian of the 1970s,

---

12 Crary quietly notes that the mass appeal of the stereoscope, for instance, was in part due to its link with “indecent” subject matter (Techniques 127).

13 The article focuses on the mechanical “cranking” of the body that early cinema machines such as the mutoscope required that paralleled the male cranking himself, i.e. masturbating. She calls this a “very real stimulation of the (male) body via the image-machine” that although seems mechanical fits in well to other sexual activities that according to her, “have an element of the mechanical, of the body as machine, that is always easy to dismiss, unless, of course, one is caught up in those motions, and emotions, oneself” (19). Cinema, in extension, provides mechanical tactile pleasure; itself a possible substitute, though by no means equal or equitable, sexual partner.
summarizes the Kantian distinctions between an artistic response and a pornographic one as follows:

To my mind art exists in the realm of contemplation, and is bound by some sort of imaginative transposition. The moment art becomes an incentive to act it loses its true character. This is my objection to painting with a communist programme, and it would also apply to pornography. (emphasis mine; qtd. in Nead, “‘Above the Pulp-Line’” 216)

The proper mode of aesthetic contemplation requires disinterest in action; it should address the mind, not the body. Magnus Ullén’s article “Pornography and its Critical Reception: Toward a Theory of Masturbation” claims that Kantian aesthetics also underpin the typical comparative literature approach to reading, in which the reader ascribes significance to the text. This aesthetic, as do all formal modes of reading, approaches literature (or any art object) “as a means towards its own end, rather than as a means of satisfying our personal interest” (2).14 According to Ullén’s framework, thought and the search for meaning are opposed to the viewer’s interested curiosity, which is distracting to the production of meaning.

Ullén further distinguishes between the production of meaning, for which the reader/viewer is responsible during aesthetic contemplation, and the consumption of meaning that he ascribes to the “in-action” reader. The essay proposes that typically pornography “triggers a set of actions” that enable the masturbating reader to enjoy the discourse “sans interpretation” (1). In contrast to Kant’s ideal, the masturbating reader is anything but disinterested. According to Ullén, this reader reduces the text’s potential to the pleasure of his or her own body, which assumes that the viewer’s “mental activity” is limited to fantasy that can be easily combined with physical activity (2). I find Ullén’s account of masturbation as a mode of pure consumption unconvincing as it presumes that physical intimacy with a text or other object does not allow for the simultaneous exercise of critical faculties. To the contrary, the tactility of the experience invests the viewer with an even greater ‘aesthetic’ experience, understood as sense perception. Ullén’s formulation, following Kant, assumes no thought can arise from sensation. In short, he fashions a subject unable to reconcile the mind with the body.

14 Clearly aesthetic here refers to a disembodied interest in the formal properties of an art work, which I differentiate in Chapter Three as belonging to a body-phobic ideological camp. My refashioning of aesthetics throughout the dissertation seeks to return to the notion a corporeal and cognitive dimension.
I would like to suggest instead that the masturbatory reader/viewer might be likened to a viewer absorbed in his or her field of vision, in touch and in the midst of the environs. The model of “participant-observer” for anthropological field workers whose production of knowledge is inevitably saturated with personal interest might better express the embeddedness of the masturbatory reader or viewer. Rather than the “destruction of meaning” as Ullén claims, the participant-observer’s integration in the field plays a key role in this production of knowledge. It indicates an alignment with an insider position, not with the masterful overview filling in all gaps. Philosopher Andrew Benjamin locates the entry for one’s curiosity between mastery and complacency, allowing one’s personal interest to position oneself. Yielding to the object of interest and to one’s own interest, the participant-observer becomes enmeshed in spatial and affective relations.

Though I disagree with the implied mind-body split, the main thrust of Ullén’s article usefully challenges the “vulgar equation” between pornography and explicit sex. Ullén claims that the pornographic lies not in the traits of the discourse, but in the “structuring” of the relationship between reader and discourse. What he calls the “pornographicity” of porn relates to its interactive form, not to specific content; the sex in pornography he sees as a pretext for producing pornographicity. He cites Rousseau’s confession to enjoying books that one reads with one hand (“ces livre qu’on ne lit que d’une main” qtd. in Ullén). This comment suggests that the mode of reading pornography requires that a part of one’s body remains in contact with the

---

15 See for instance the work of Margaret Mead or Esther Newton for twentieth-century practices of participant observation. Steven Rubenstein’s article, “Fieldwork and the Erotic Economy on the Colonial Frontier” offers a personal reflection on his fieldwork in a colonial context that addresses the ways power and desire “infuses relationships and constitute knowledge and its subjects” (1041). Most relevant here is his discussion of the erotic economy that brings him closer to and more distant from the people with whom he was living, which could well be named the paradox of curiosity.

16 The larger context of Ullén’s advocacy for analysis of the form of pornography is his disagreement with casting pornography as a genre. Linda Williams’ work in particular and her edited collection Porn Studies, he argues, have cast porn as a cultural discourse that refers to the content of sex and can be read and interpreted like the content of other genres. Making porn palatable to academic study as a mode of discursive knowledge has its merits, but Ullén points out, it circles around the questions of what exactly it is, how to date it, and incites the relativism of “I know it when I see it” argument. Whatever it is (or is not according to generic ‘rules’), he emphasizes, its study should concern why it has such great “persuasive efficiency” to not just talk about sex, but be a form of sex. I have followed him in not discussing porn as a genre, but as a mode of engagement that might occur despite a lack of explicit sexual imagery; in other words, as a dimension of curiosity’s experience. For genre as a way of defining film form, see Steve Neale Genre and Hollywood, Rick Altman Film/Genre and Williams’ “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess” and Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible." Richard Dyer’s groundbreaking article “Male Gay Porn: Coming to Terms” [1985] in Jumpcut inspired Williams’ treatment of porn as that which aims at arousal and contains narrative. (It was later published as “Coming to Terms: Gay Pornography”.) He first stepped away from political analysis of porn as the degradation of women, or men.
self while another part reaches elsewhere. Pornographicity in the cinema takes advantage of the potential for a carnally dense vision.

Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological conception of embodied viewing specifies that the spectator comes back to her or his own body through an intentional arc that originates and ends with the spectator, not with the image-world. In “What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh,” she notes that when her curiosity is peaked, her intentional comportment arranges her bodily being and her attention. In response to the image, Sobchack’s viewer shifts, moves around in her seat, betraying interest through tension. The inability to literally touch, smell, or taste whatever it is that solicits her desire means that her body’s intentional trajectory “will reverse its direction to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible,” namely her own “subjectively felt lived body” (emphasis in original; Carnal 76). The compensation of herself as the sensible object might be roughly understood as a masturbatory action. The screen deflects her gaping hand; she rebounds from it “without a reflective thought” so that she “turn[s] toward my own carnal and sensual being to touch myself touch, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and in sum, feel my own sensuality” (Carnal 76-77).

The “partially frustrated grasp” that Sobchack describes as reaching outwards before it bounces back to the viewer’s own carnal being helps to nuance the meaning-making process of Ullén’s masturbatory ‘double action.’ Rather than a pure consumption of the image that destroys all meaning, Sobchack suggests that a sensual experience prohibits the simultaneous reflection of the body’s sensual particularity, but not reflection in general. She states that the form of ‘self-touching’ she discusses is consciously ‘other directed,’ towards figural objects that are elsewhere. This may be contrasted to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ‘self directed’ touch that results in the body reflecting itself: “I touch myself touching myself” (qtd. in Carnal 77 fnt 68). With regard to this kind of self-directed pleasure, Sobchack relates that, “the doubled intention and attention towards oneself often become so highly reflective that despite one’s autoerotic goals, it can undo carnal pleasure” (Carnal 78). Like laughing, crying, and tickling, Sobchack asserts that “sexual desire is other-directed during masturbation and needs an object that is not only oneself so as to avoid a reflexivity that is so doubled as to cause conscious reflection on sexual desire itself” (Carnal 78).

The lived body “turning back” to itself has the effect of both intensifying sensual awareness and diffusing its specific content. In this sense, cinematic pleasures
and masturbatory pleasures can be seen as relying on the same intensification of carnal density, itself unthought, but leaving room for another form of knowing, a curiosity which Benjamin claims would produce “knowledge without knowledge,” or knowing without mastery (4). Although Sobchack’s carnally intense and substantialized viewer does not explicitly refer to a viewer enjoying pornography, it provides a model for understanding the “rebound” effect of haptic cinematic images. Through this relationship of viewer to cinematic discourse, turning towards one’s own carnal being to touch the other in compensation and excitement, Sobchack also describes a formal, rather than content-driven, quality of pornography.

_Dandy Dust_’s pornographic mode, according to reviewers, revolves around the images’ ability to move the spectator and the sexually explicit content, showing various human orifices in detail. The sexual imagery clearly aligns itself with the genre of porn. However, the masturbatory mode of reading that it solicits – carnally dense and intense self-touching that is yet ‘other directed’-- might offer a more precise acknowledgement of its pornographicity. The film’s carnality is not only concerned with corporeal density, it also ramps up in intensity; a dimension that might be discussed under the banner of affect.

**The Stain**
The modern notion of individuality prohibits the idea that affect, personalized as emotion, might not be self-generated but received from without. Teresa Brennan’s book *The Transmission of Affect* traces the ways in which, under alternative regimes of subjectivity, affect’s contagious nature was well accepted until the seventeenth century (1-2). Studies of crowds have long provided evidence of the subject’s porosity, which allows for transmission and flow of affect (see overview in *Transmission* 53-68). In the social space of cinema, film scholars have sought to account for cinema’s ability to mobilize the spectator: to charge her or his affective disposition. Summarizing this position, running counter to cognitive theories of narration, Anne Rutherford writes, “[c]inema is not only about telling a story; its about creating an affect, an event, a moment which lodges itself under the skin of the spectator” (“Cinema” 10). An exemplary sequence in _Dandy Dust_ of intense and dense pornographicity revolves around Dandy’s auto-erotic relation to other selves in the film.
The setting is in a European mansion circa 1780, in which the character “Spider-Cuntboy” visits Dandy in cy’s bedroom late at night. Waking Dandy by stimulating cy’s genitals, Spider-Cuntboy takes cy time-travelling to see a future self, “speeding up” cy’s sexual development. The masculine Dandy of the nineteenth century observes the Dandy of 3075: a breasted figure amongst other short-haired and breasted beings naked on all fours, being filled by fluorescent tubes of fluid (Figure 4). Spider-Cuntboy remarks that “Dandy was so shaken by seeing his sexually-fluid self that he went nuts!” (Figure 5). What is implied is that he becomes turned on by seeing herself sucking and being penetrated. Dandy’s response, thrown back into cy’s body, indicates an experience of carnal vision.

While the content of the sequence includes sexual acts, the mise-en-scène of cy’s sexual awakening, including setting, the behavior of the figures, and the use of costume as well as props, reflect on the viewer’s position as masturbator. The sequence demonstrates the autoeroticism of a separated self, one hand grasping outward and one compensatory hand towards the self. The scene emphasizes that masturbatory cinematic pleasures require the exclusion from the image in order to feel a tactile thrust in compensation. However, the depiction of sex is hardly a mere pretext for this pornographicity. Dandy Dust’s exhibition of sexual fluids, tumescence, and physical action indicates a sexuality that potentially spreads and stains the viewer as much as it does Dandy. In other words, precisely because excluded from direct participation, the viewer’s body absorbs the affect of arousal.

The self-pleasuring scene, starring the future Dandy, initiates the uneducated Dandy’s acting out of lasciviousness, including rubbing trees, biting legs, eating
beasts, etc. Heavy, distorted techno music carries over from the future to the past, connecting worlds through a sound bridge. The following sequence, situated in a late eighteenth century setting, shows the increasingly dramatic activities that sexually “going nuts” entails. The viewer can see from a low angle that Dandy stands alone in a tree. Seeming to recall cy’s other self, cy closes his eyes. Cy rubs cy’s now pronounced crotch, which centers the shot. Depicted in slow motion and moving in closer, the viewer now sees cy humping the trunk, apparently building up steam. The self-love imagery of Dandy’s goes deeper: a biological slide of flesh, perhaps of cy’s organ, is seen as if from under a microscope. The sound of blood pumping accompanies a flash from blue to red. The animated family house shown next receives the same treatment: it shows lust by a hot red color, which surrounds the blue-lit figurine of a house perched on a globe, then to flow into it, making it throb.

Though the editing depicts the characters as separate, the pleasurable feelings seem to spread from the future fluid Dandy to the eighteenth century teenager. Although the colorful liquids do not literally spray on cy, the scene revolves on the idea of transfer. The fluid self relates at once to the sexual fluids the hermaphroditic beings enjoy and signals the mobility that is possible as one “grows up.” The sexual development of Dandy Dust progresses on a scale of acceleration and deceleration, or from being centralized and dispersed and back, rather than cycling through Freud’s stages to adulthood. Like Little Hans’ widdling, masturbation figures here as the igniting of sexuality and as a key action towards carnal knowledge. That the spread of throbbing blood from Dandy’s body flows into the family house indicates that arousal might also be directed towards the family, establishing an incestuous connection that shortly becomes apparent. For the moment, however, the seepage into the family house suggests that sexuality in Dandy Dust functions through the contagion of affect.

The following cut begins the “dinner party” portion of the sequence, which shows Dandy behaving badly during a formal gathering in his father’s household. The first part of the sequence focuses on tight, tilted shots that capture Dandy’s barbaric stuffing of food into his mouth and trousers. The effect is a disorienting, almost subjective camera, spinning out of control as it follows Dandy’s wild gyrations and waving of a knife. In figure 6, Dandy has just grasped onto some reddish fruit that he squeezed through his fingers at crotch level to create a mushy penis shape. The remains have been inserted quickly into his pants and further mashed into the white fabric. The color contrast has a metaphorical function: the material transformed into
blotches of color brings to light the intangible affect of arousal. On the surface of the body, textile and stain mark a mounting tension. At this point, the color red becomes a motif, indicating the spreading of arousal, marked like a virus that is stained to be traceable.

6. Stained crouch

Besides grabbing cy-self, Dandy also moves around the table quickly, following cy’s eyeing and poking at the goodies available. The intense affect thus spreads from the future self, to Dandy’s body, to surround the house, inside it, and now across the whole of the banquet spread. Distracted by a guest’s stare and overt popping of cleavage, even of a nipple (Figure 7), Dandy (and the music) briefly stops to check out this new fascination. Dandy even wonders out loud, “Who is the hell is that?” The red filter over the woman’s white-caked skin highlights that the contagion has spread. The disheveled look she casts at Dandy shows she has become undone by the intensity of her interest.

7. Come hither
Once Dandy crosses to the side of the guests, the table is left for another kind of spread. The camera work notes the new interest through a change in style. Though Dandy is situated amongst the guests, the camera aligns not with Dandy but with the guests’ perspective: it becomes more static, staying at a distance of long to medium shots. The distance frames the guests, who sit and stand facing the camera. The change of overall style from volatile gestures to shots that emphasize a particular arrangement creates the impression of an especially stilted scene.

Visually, the camerawork now seems to obey the characteristics of the *tableau vivant*. A theatrical device that renders a live performance still, players freeze into an expressive formation. Hence, it indicates a Victorian obsession with the control of movement: the staging of animation or aliveness (*vivant*) in a still picture (*tableau*). Lynda Nead’s study of moving bodies in the 1890s claims that *tableau vivant* predates the perceived problems of pornographic arousal, which arises from nudity in combination with movement, such as the strip film (“Strip” 141). While this staging is typical for painting or still photography, its inclusion in the motion picture opens the possibility of disrupting the contained eroticism of the genre.

Dandy’s arousal ripples through the arrangement, gradually animating the bodies. The guests are caught rubbing their breasts and coyly smiling to flirt with him. The slightest motion indicates raging desire. Standing behind the characters done up in petticoats and bodices, Dandy’s entrance coincides, as if cy’s presence causes it, with the image flipping upside down (Figure 8). Once righted again, cy tugs at feathers stuck in hats, then whips up a skirt to crawl under it, and then through it on the way to cy’s interest: grasping her, cy bites the tender leg of this ‘lady’ (Figure 9). Cy’s motions cause a stir from which the guests try to recover, struggling to regain composure as they smooth down dresses, readjust gloves and headgear.
Distracted, Dandy follows a rat-like creature that scurries under the table. On cy’s way, cy grabs a ladle from the punch bowl and sprays the drink around the room. The red liquid echoes the sexual fluids of cy’s future self: cy has caught up with the accelerated development instigated by Spider-Cuntboy. The fluids inscribe the spread of affect through color and form. In the commotion, the tablecloth is pulled off the table, comically scattering the dishes piled high around the room. Larger bits of stuff spread the arousal. The lust built through stuffing, biting, and rushing about seems about to explode in a visual orgasm. The reaction shot of the guests depicts them undone, giggling amidst the food raining down on them.

From the guests, the sequence cuts back to a close-up of Dandy greedily eating up the rat-thing. As lumpy blood oozes out of his mouth, cy moans in pleasure. The abjectness of the image perhaps lies in the blood evoking regurgitated semen, or suggesting a death scene. The flirtatious woman moves back across the room, drawn to Dandy. In one quick motion, cy grabs her and lunges in for a kiss, smearing her face with the blood. Disgusted at first, she says “blegh” before grabbing cy by the crotch, pushing cy down to the ground, and smacking cy repeatedly across the face. The infusion of lust then gets the best of her: the music plays in reverse, signaling a change in direction. She kisses cy back hard. The camera’s point of view, following the flow of affect, then jumps to Sir Sidore, who watches over the scene. The narrator says, “Sir Sidore’s desire is aroused. And his hate is a volcano ready to erupt,” while an image of a red pulsating light under his white pants illustrates his throbbing penis. Desire has now spread throughout the scene, dangerously from son to father.

Rutherford argues that the elements of *mise-en-scène* are vehicles, through which sensory intensification can be translated from the screen to audience
(“Precarious Boundaries” 2). This proposition specifies the carnal recourse of which Sobchack writes. The banquet table and the tableau vivant lay out for the viewer delights on which to grab and feast. Both sorts of tables, banquet and ‘living,’ arrange and focus the desire of Dandy and likely also of the participant-observer. Yet, the viewers cannot get at the delicacies; they are excluded from sitting down to join the fun. The inability of the viewer to touch the objects redirects the grasp from the party setting, back to the fleshy delights of his or her own sensuality. The dinner party scene exemplifies a ‘pornographic’ aesthetic not so much because of its perversity, but rather because of the taunting of the spectator with an over-the-top haptic field, one in which he or she cannot fully participate.

In The Cinematic Body, Steven Shaviro describes the cinema as a site of visual fascination, in which the spectator’s sensorium is “powerless not to see” or to be touched, and yet strains towards the image (47). Drawing from Maurice Blanchot’s theory of the subject’s “passion for the image,” Shaviro’s cinema always involves a haptic curiosity that wishes to touch back to connect and produce sensate meaning. One quality of the image that Shaviro singles out as responsible for fascination is the image’s appeal to tactility in combination with its simultaneous exclusion from touch. Shaviro describes it as follows, “I cannot take hold of it in return, but always find it shimmering just beyond my grasp” (emphasis mine; 47).

This shimmering quality triggers a haptic response in the spectator: called to action, she lifts a hand, seeking to become caught up in the flux of images. The image’s impact instigates a blurring between the subject’s senses of the visual and the tactile. The shimmering of the image, though achieved by visual effects, also creates a texture, a rhythmic beating on the spectator’s body. While the allure of shimmering is most easily taken as a visual effect, its appeal may also refer to affective contact. The social aspect of affect means that it extends beyond individuals, while registering its effect in the body. The dinner table and the tableau vivant organize the viewer’s interest in the goodies on display, but it is the tablecloth that hangs over them,

17 Sara Ahmed’s Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others considers the form of the table as an orientation tool in philosophy, the family, and public spaces that inspires my insight into the use of tables in Dandy Dust. Unfortunately, due to space I only mention the argument that could be made as to the sexual orientation of tables in the film that Ahmed makes at length in discussing the history of the term ‘orientation’ in orientalism and sexual orientation. Her analysis, however, was present in my thoughts here.

18 He cites Blanchot’s question as central to any theory of embodied spectatorship, “What happens when what you see, even though from a distance, seems to touch you with a grasping contact, when the matter of seeing is a sort of touch, when seeing is a contact at a distance?” (qtd. in Cinematic Body 47).
extending the pro-filmic surface of the table towards the characters. This textile meets with the movie screen, further extending the skin prickled by affect towards the viewer. The pro-filmic tablecloth acts as a skin the viewer can brush up against to catch the scene’s affect.

Ernst van Alphen’s article on the affective operations of art and literature seeks to understand their “energetic dimension” (23). He refers to affect theorists, such as Deleuze and Silvan Tompkins, who both agree that affects function as intensifiers. Deleuze uses the synonym of “intensities” for the reaction of embodied affect through contact with other entities (qtd. in “Affective Operations” 23). Similarly, Tompkins calls affects the essential amplifiers of drives and the directors of cognitive systems “because without its amplification nothing else matters and with its amplification anything else can matter” (qtd. in “Affective Operations” 23). The amplification of interest to the level of arousal, for instance, offers an account of curiosity’s erotic dimension during film viewing.

Though received through transmission, according to Brennan, affects pose a moment of judgment (5). The physiological shift accompanies an evaluation, positive or negative towards, for example, the desire exchanged in looks between Dandy and the lady, or the sprays of arousal of punch and blood. However, the question Will I project or introject this affect?, answered through the shifting around in one’s seat, falling beads of sweat, or sudden turgidity, falsely presumes a unified interpretation of that shift or stimulation. Only when the physiological sensation of affect, specifically the nervous excitation of interest, is ‘owned’ does it transform into a subjective feeling of curiosity. Brian Massumi explains this action of owning or possessing affect is the “socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience” (“The Autonomy of Affect” 88). Hence, curiosity moves from affect’s carnal intensification into a signifier of arousal precisely when the subject grasps for meaning. The spreading of sensation between bodies and material objects on screen might not mark the viewer with red fluid, but the comportment of the viewer’s body registers the transmission of the stain, or here rather the strain, of arousal.19 The spectator’s curiosity pitches him or her forward, straining towards the image and meaning-making, which prove elusive.

19 Freud’s writing on curiosity’s affective dimension unfortunately resorts to a masculinist narrative of eroticizing interest. For instance, with regard to da Vinci, “he applied himself to investigation with the persistence, constancy and penetration which is derived from passion, and at the climax of intellectual labor, when knowledge had been won, he allowed the long restrained affect to break loose and to flow away freely” (“Leonardo” 74-75).
The groping motion of embodied thinking that Shaviro describes, and that *Dandy Dust* invites, consists in the subject seeking a foothold in the image, a handgrip to guide towards knowability. Knowledge becomes the most elusive outcome of the process initiated by the spectator’s evaluated response to shimmering images. The spectator’s dalliance with *Dandy Dust* performs what Shannon Bell terms “pornosophy,” a philosophy that emerges from the carnal (“Fast Feminism” 93-112). Philosophy here refers to the love of investigation, and to the critical analysis of knowledge; which both might be ‘pornified’ by the carnality of the subject (*OED*).

The practice of pornosophy, Susan Stryker elaborates, consists in a “refusal to discredit what our own carnality can teach us” (“Dungeon Intimacies” 39). Inspired by Dandy Dust’s pornographicity, I wish to address the kind of knowledge generated by a grasping, groping subject. The “gropers” I have analyzed thus far, such as Little Hans, Dandy Dust, and the film’s spectator, offer the insight that curiosity necessarily involves a method of knowing. For curious researchers, the questions, terms, and affective effects of their practice prove central to the inquiry, more so than the pursuit of formal and masterful conclusions.

**Curious Theory**

“The film begins, again. Always again. Sometimes the film begins to begin again in the middle of the film, sometimes at the end. Sometimes it doesn’t begin at all. Sometimes it just gestures to the beginning, as if to say, ‘you lazy bastards out there in t.v. land, get off your butts and go start the film’, ” de Philo writes in the catalogue for *Dandy Dust* (“To Tremble” 69-70). Dandy Dust appears for the first time only in minute twelve. He begins his journey the same way as the film instructs the viewer to “get off your butt.” Rotating in a void, Dandy Dust seems to ponder his existence, while the narrator offers the advice: “Sometimes, when we know too much, we forget everything; Dust was bored from watching telly-vision” (Figure 9). “Knowing too much” here means not knowing how to know new things. Suddenly, the protagonist notices a new planet flickering on the horizon and asks, “When did that grow? Let’s go check it out!” He cures his boredom in the instant of seeing a new planet and taking action, de Philo continues, “flying into the projection screen of life, arms outstretched, whimsical and full of the kind of wonder only untamed horses and fashion models know is theirs for certain” (“To Tremble” 69) (Figure 10). This is not a self-conscious wonderment, but a dispossessing curiosity.
9. Dandy Dust, bored in a void

10. Dandy Dust, flying to planet

Dandy Dust’s trajectory in the film is to allow cy-self to be thrown off track, to redo actions, and change dwelling places. The fact that Dandy thrice returns to a monitor to watch flashbacks as well as to escape into a “trippy story” (read, disorientating and freeing) indicates that curiosity “starts the film,” over and again. The openness or wonder that Dandy Dust displays brings him into contact with a host of inadvertent incidences. In wondering, he seems to ask, be forced to ask, “What if?” This gesture has much in common with academic research, which, according to Christopher Bollas, feels something like this: “I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it” (qtd. in Bal Travelling 96). The practice of beginning again, struggling to think, What if?, I propose, suggests a theory of curiosity, as well as offers a demonstration of how one may produce ‘curious theory.’

In the introduction to The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis, Jonathan Culler seeks to explain the point of theory. He emphasizes that theory be defined in terms of “practical effects,” or of the formal way in which it is engaged. “Theory,” Culler writes, refers not to “a theory of anything in particular nor of things in general; it is less a particular content, it seems, than something one can do or not do, something one can study, teach, or ignore, be interested in or hate” (emphasis in original; 13). Culler’s broad strokes suggest that theory is a practice, one that makes one feel or at least engages on an affective level. In more specific terms, theory is “the nickname for an unbounded corpus of works” that succeeds in “challenging and reorienting thinking” in their own field and new fields (13). Hence, the unmasterability of theory tends the greatest challenge to its practitioners, calling for an open-ended commitment to the scrutiny of assumptions and alternatives.
Whereas Culler focuses on the “scariness” and “intimadation” one might feel when confronted with a lack of delineation, Dandy Dust also articulates the appeal of theory in terms of the erotic amplification of curiosity (16-17). The possibility of new understanding that comes from the openness of a theorist at the interstices of disciplines, or of a plot juncture, might summon pleasure, not just fear. The desire to become reoriented, perhaps through the disorienting process of juxtaposing disciplines, may account for why some become interested, but others ignore theory. Similarly, this curious desire embodied by Dust’s wayward travels might also account for those viewers who stay to watch Dandy Dust, whereas others walk out, branding kinaesthetic disorientation intolerable, and hence, mere ‘porno.’

Affect must be considered an influential aspect of a bodily practice, whether of a viewer’s, whose subjective vision of shimmering images produce a carnal experience, or of a theoretician’s, who shifts towards a shimmering object, grasps at a thought, or struggles with a concept. The shimmering lights of the “screen of life” that Dandy sails through (Figure 11) forms the backdrop to cy’s own frenzy of affect sending cy through space, to explore a new dwelling and a new formation. The affective propulsion of curiosity animating cy’s body renders it as a loose configuration of shimmers, which infuse and amplify the character’s flesh.

11. Dandy Dust, flying

One advantage of incorporating the shimmers of affect and the personalized emotion of curiosity in knowledge production is that it clarifies the way in which during the groping process the practitioner moves towards, and is moved towards, ‘knowing.’ Dandy’s face-forward movement suggests that the push and pull that directs cy’s
route towards knowledge also prohibits the arrival of mastery. The subsequent crash-landing on a boot of cy’s ‘sister’ underscores the unpredictability of events upon arrival, which nevertheless becomes another departure. Glen Mazis describes a functional relation between emotions and curiosity: “the emotions do not lead to rest, to closure, but rather are natural allies of an understanding that ‘never knows where it’s going’” (Emotion 20). Like the viewer hurled through portals, Dandy Dust’s body too, can never be said to know where it is going, or what it is going to become.

Mieke Bal clarifies the intricacies of the process of theorizing by setting out the terms and provisions for cultural analysis. In her guide book, Travelling Concepts in the Humanities, she parses the practitioner’s encounter with a cultural object and the concepts it suggests. Interested in the same metaphor of travelling, Bal structures this “rough guide” as a series of excursions, much like Dandy Dust’s path through various worlds. At the crossroads of the humanities, according to Bal, innovative research takes place, a kind of disorientating theorizing that Culler describes. While the innovation of theory in the practice of cultural studies has been to pay attention to a different kind of object (e.g. from another field), Bal raises the concern that sound interdisciplinary methods for studying objects have not been proposed (6-7). What method might prevent the analysis by eager travelers from “floundering into sheer partisanship,” or be perceived as such, while also avoiding an unsystematic borrowing of terms (7, 11)?

Bal focuses on the student’s trajectory of learning the difference between an unreflective use of a word and a historicized concept. Concepts can and do often look like words, yet the work of concepts involves hosting miniature theories, creating a ‘cutting edge’ to a student’s framing of an object (Travelling 22-23). Crucially, then, concepts only become useful when lending understanding to the object, “on its – the object’s – own terms” (emphasis in original; 8). The dynamism that Bal describes in turn encourages and conditions what she calls “a groping” towards understanding (11). The groping involved in the process of defining a meaning of a particular concept, provisionally and partly, produces an experience, a learning moment. Situated in relation to the object and confronted with a concept, she comes to learn something about what the concept can do: the ways in which it can inflect, deflect, and reflect the object (Ibid.). Bal maintains that “it is in the groping that the valuable work lies,” emphasizing not the so-called determination of meaning, but the performative dimension of what it can do and what affects it may prompt (Ibid.).
The learning moment in *Dandy Dust* comes from the film’s non-linear structure, which implores the viewer to open up the film, to try to assert meaning and infer connections. In Bal’s paradigm, the cognitive action of groping for a provisional concept in relation to the object offers an alternative to both mastery (“without claiming to know it all” [*Travelling 55*]) as well as “floundering” in confusion. A method of groping suggests that one starts from where you are, and necessarily goes from there. The practice of groping challenges the theorist to become reoriented towards the object and to become unstuck from his or her epistemological trajectory. A daughter who is also a son, for instance, confronts the viewer to retrace the film, try again, and reconnect her concept of gender to bodily formations. The effects of the object confronting concepts (and vice versa), in the thought-process of the theorist, might be considered the affective edge of learning. Bal, however, does not suggest a fleshy or phenomenological rendering of knowledge that might point towards the erotic dimension of research that *Dandy Dust* highlights.

Steven Connor argues in “A Short Stirring to Meekness” that knowing always involves a phenomenological outwardness, what he calls “a repertoire of goings out” to the object (194). Framing his discussion is the doctrine of intentionality that pays attention to the act of paying attention (195). The straining of the subject’s “intention,” from the Latin *intendere*, meaning to draw a bow, suggests “directiveness” rather than “purposiveness” in his or her attending to an aim (195). According to this principle, there can be no pure thought, only thought about objects one strains towards and with which one forges an affective relation. Dandy’s flying might be understood to literalize this directiveness in thought, the embodiment of a “let’s go check it out!” interest. Connor describes the intermediary space of relation “between us and [the object]” as a third space, made tangible as the shimmering void of *Dandy Dust* (198-199). Opening out forces a dispossession: entering the world requires one to leave “home,” wherever that might be at a given point for Dandy and/or Dust (Connor 205).

Connor’s addition to Culler’s and Bal’s models brings into relief what I like to characterize as a masturbatory process of knowing. Like grasping for a cinematic image, a theoretician’s groping towards the object and for a reasonable concept proves elusive. At best, Bal suggests, one might find a provisional resting place, from which to write. The intentional comportment of a researcher yields to the desire to encounter the object and answers the object’s call for attention. The posture of arms out,
embracing what may come, means that one’s interest eclipses ‘knowledge’ itself, since this knowing “is always knowing about, knowing of, knowing towards” (emphasis mine; Connor 202).

To clarify the agency of the researcher, it must be stated that the concept of intention in common usage confuses the outward pull of the object with the will of a master purposefully collecting objects. Neither the viewer nor researcher ought to be confused with a masterful author. To the contrary, and stated more forcefully than Bal or Connor, Deleuze suggests that the object a subject finds fascinating forms a sign that “forces us to think,” suggesting a subject prostrate to thought (Proust and Signs 97). Dandy Dust offers a scene of such coercion. Following cy’s flight to and crash-landing on the new planet, the twins gather up cy, proclaim “brain damage,” and decide to “operate right away.” Cy pleads, “I’m only a tourist,” to which the twins retort, “[a]ll visitors must leave their baggage with us.” They then proceed to cut cy’s skull and extract cy’s memory disk. The object wrests thought from what Deleuze describes as “its natural stupor and its merely abstract possibilities” towards active, dispossessing mediation (97).

Deleuze insists on the essential element of involuntary feeling. Object-signs and instigated thoughts can be categorized by the type of encounter, by the intensity of sensation:

The truths which intelligence grasps directly in the open light of day have something less profound, less necessary about them than those which life has communicated to us in spite of ourselves in an impression, a material impression because it has reached us through our senses. (emphasis in original; Proust qtd. in Proust 95-96)

It is not what you go looking for, Deleuze says, paraphrasing Proust and echoing Lacan’s shimmering impressions, but the fortuitous and inevitable way in which the sensation had been encountered, which governs the truth of the thought (96). The “encountered sign,” as Deleuze calls this kind of accidental, yet unavoidable, brush with life is felt rather than recognized. In spite of one’s management of attention, some impressions reach one’s senses in a chance encounter that nevertheless seems expected, at least in the logic of the film that requires regular kickstarts. The inability to recognize the object-sign provokes the feeling of “Oh what is that? A new planet?,” such as the protagonist relates.
In Jill Bennett’s understanding of Deleuze’s treatise on signs, she states, “Deleuze’s argument is not simply, however, that sensation is an end in itself, but that feeling [sensation and elsewhere affect] is a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought” (Empathic Vision 7). Bennett continues, “we assume, he says, that the best philosophy is motivated by a love of wisdom, but this is not, in fact, the case, since there is nothing that compels rational inquiry” (7). 20 Freud suggests, as I describe above, that erotic sublimation motivates rational thought. That Deleuze dismisses such individualized compulsions and instead places emphasis on material impressions of the world frames thought as a series of being enticed, or forced, to ‘go out’ of oneself.

The involuntary quality to the practice of curiosity does not mean a theorist waits around for something of interest to strike her. The inevitability that Deleuze emphasizes suggests that material impressions can be sought, but that the impact of the force cannot be predetermined. What interests one person can bore the next. The longstanding industry of cinema and other mechanical arts, I propose, has been persuasive to the masses as well as to theorists because it offers what I see as an “operation theatre of affect.” The force and intensity of affects may occasionally misfire, but generally, cinema’s multitudes of impressions provide a site to spectators, in which to practice curiosity. Dandy Dust’s staging of the medical forces the protagonist to depart from cy-self gestures toward its capacity and interest in the ‘operation’ of affect. Operation here must refer to both the process of functioning and the specific function of manipulating the body. This surgery “starts” the film, but later consecutive surgeries performed on Dandy Dust prevent the film from ending, at least on a conclusive note. My closing remarks to this chapter focus on Dandy Dust’s open-endedness.

The Commitment to Open-endedness
The final part of the film begins with ending the separated state of Dandy and Dust. After facing rape and eventual death by Sir Sidore’s penis, Dandy’s electronic remains return to a holding in the Mother-Ship. Through a cinematic operation of a

---

20 For Silvan Tompkins, the rational or reasonable in thought is easily combined and even necessitated: “Reason without affect would be impotent, affect without reason would be blind” (qtd. in “Affective Operations” 21). Deleuze, it seems, does not posit the possibility of rational inquiry (nothing motivates it, not even “love”), but rather sees that affect always guides and provides the potency and shades of light to thought.
green-screen special effect, in which the image of a flame, the essence of ‘Dust,’ merges with Dandy’s head, the entities unify (Figures 12 and 13). The technological nature of this operation is specified in the top right corner, depicts the running time, a video’s plea for the viewer to “look at me, see what tricks I can do.” An animation of a shriveled clay heart pulsing confirms Dandy Dust’s reanimation. The theme song sounds to signal the end of the film. But the events continue: a voice-manipulator multiplies the protagonist’s voice into different tones, shouting, “You’ve got the best, you got them all. Now dance.” Interrupting the dance, Aunt Theodora asks, “Who’s that now?” To which the protagonist proudly claims, “I am Dandy Dust.” Theodora says, “Oh that makes sense. Do me a favor and stay that way for awhile,” before going back to her tinkering with a wrench. The “for awhile” extends the film for a bit longer, or at least casts doubt on attempts at closure.

12. Unification with flame  13. “You’ve got the best, you’ve got them all!”

The resolution of the protagonist’s main problem, his split-self, makes for a proper ending to goal-oriented narrative. However, as one might by now expect, the flame-headed protagonist then sits down to watch the film, beginning it again, launching a new investigation and another reading (Figure 14).
The narrator takes up the plot when Dandy was killed off and brought into the Mother-ship. The sequence of gruesome surgeries, including the stitching of oversized genitals with thick yarn, closed mouths, and baby fingers onto adult hands, ends with the theme song coming on, once again. The voice-over now instructs the protagonist and viewer to “stay tuned,” as the film begins to end again, framed by the red flame encasing of the monitor (as shown in Figure 14). Yet, the next sequence offers a recap of events, followed by the camera pulling out to reveal who is still watching: the flame-headed Dandy Dust reclining on the couch. After getting a copy of the “trippy story” cy attempts to face “no more detours” to take cyself in cy own hands, to go cy own path. Now the film should surely end. Instead, Dandy Dust announces cy’s trip back to the Mother-Ship to confront history. Entering the scene, cy is immediately grabbed by all family members. They force cy into a gynaecological chair, strapping cy down and forcing cy’s legs open to reveal an open wound. The surgery commences with cy’s mother, Cyniborg, shouting, “We shall end sloppy patchwork. We shall breed clean and intelligent. Replant our future,” as everyone pummels Dandy Dust with squirting oversized bats, far too large to penetrate. Rising up and impervious to the violence, cy cries, “I am Dandy Dust. I am without fear! Come you feeble fleas, come feed from my rivers, come and see that I’m burning,” ending with a cackle.

The narrator announces, “Bravo, Dandy Dust, you’ve said it, but too late. Shock, horror. Remember the extra selves – waste products of unification?” Grinning madly while looking into the camera, a reverse-shot then shows Dandy Dust and the viewer, that each character reveals that cy is in their costume by the removal of a masque representing the mother, father, and twins. The ripping off of the masques provokes
the viewer to reconsider the events of the last ninety minutes. If Dandy Dust was always all the other characters as well, then…? The confounding “thinking” of *Dandy Dust* delivered in each operation, each reorientation, gestures away from a beginning or an ending, but outwards to the edges of possibility.

The last image before the credit sequence is of Dandy Dust back in the shimmering void, the projection screen of life that makes possible the contradictions of multiple identity.

Pants down around ankles, squatting with bottom in the air, a flower dart thrust into cy’s anus, Dandy Dust blathers nonsense in-between bursts of laughter. This widdling child playing with cy’s bottom has less interest in interpretation than in provocation and pleasure. Cy coaxes to the viewer to join, “Come to me baby,” only then to grab at the figurines of father and mother, of Sir Sidore and Cyniborg. Cy’s swinging of the parent dolls recalls Little Hans wrestling control of his parents and their threat of castration. Dandy Dust embodies cy’s transgressive ‘regression’ to take the Freudian operation of fear out on himself in the interest of pleasure.

In “Like a Thought,” Brian Massumi discusses the body in Deleuze’s field of expression, which helps to clarify the “machinic” quality of *Dandy Dust*’s effect on the theorist:

---

21 Although writing on Proust and the literary machine, Deleuze’s proposition I take to signal the emergence of curiosity in the encountered sign may well be available in cinema. In general, he suggests a special relationship between the signs of art, affect, and thought production (see especially “Essence and the Signs of Art” p 39-51). In writing about cinema, his term of “image” often works in similar ways to the sign in literature, for instance, the image “shocks to thought.” I have relied on Massumi’s preferred term from Deleuze, “expression,” to connect sign and image as two modes of expression that have similar forms and practical effects for instigating “thought.”

---

15. Dandy Dust, mad child
The force of expression … strikes the body first, directly and
unmediatedly. It passes transformatively through the flesh before being
instantiated in subject-positions subsumed by a system of power. Its
immediate effect is a differing. It must be made a reproduction. The body,
fresh in the throes of expression, incarnates not an already-formed system
but a modification – a change. (xvii)

The opportunity cinema presents consists in the instigation of change. Affective
forces pose the chance of transformation through the differing of flesh. The language
Massumi employs speaks of a body convulsing, differing in modification as it
becomes shot-through with affect. The body’s reproduction of the force, received
from without, transforms it into an open and open-ended theory machine.

Cinema as an operation theatre functions through a cumulative effort. If one
thing does not work, maybe the next will. The groping aspect of cinematic curiosity
consists in “a thousand tiny performative struggles,” to borrow a phrase from
Massumi (“Like” xix). The starting, stopping, and starting again signal the machinic
assemblage of body and cinema. Hence, in the affective operations of cinema the
body of the spectator/theorist encounters and passes into ‘machines that make the
body do things.’ However, the supposed passivity implied in the sense of being
made to do something does not have to indicate a literal-minded behaviorism. The
mutual “deterritorialization” of body and cinema struggling together involves multiple,
perhaps infinite, operations; thousands of tiny shifts in the body that “differ” the
(boundary of) the ‘body’ territory in relation to the territory of ‘affect.’

The possibilities arising from the encounter, the “emergence, mutation, change”
of which Deleuze speaks, “affect composing forces, not composed forms” (Foucault
87). The final image of Dandy Dust rotating in the shimmering void manifests a body
that cannot be said to be composed with any sense of finality, but always remains in a
state of composing. Dandy Dust’s refusal to provide closure to meaning and to the
subject’s ontology indicates its function as cinematic research as well as its politics.

---

22 Linda Williams’ essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess” registers no interest in cognition,
but does consider arousal one mode of de-centering the subject. According to Williams, for the genre of
pornography to be ‘successful’ it must place the body ‘beside itself’ during the ecstatic excess of an
uncontrollable convulsion, in other words, during orgasm. Such an affected body wreaks havoc on the
subject’s unitary mode of being, forcing the binds of subjectivity to come ‘undone.’
23 The phrase “machines that make the body do things” I take from the title of Jane Gaines’ article on
the ways in which the vibrator and porno cinema both produce bodily movement, though approached
very differently in feminist studies.
Lucas Cassidy Crawford’s article, “Transgender without Organs? Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification,” introduces affect into the debate on transgender embodiment in terms of what it ‘feels like’ to be transgender. Examining the narratives of transsexual transitions, which often involve moving from one place to another, Crawford argues that transitions involve an orientation to place as much as to the body (129). Countering the “proper” trans affect of coming home to the self, he suggests considering a different style of affect that involves the deterritorialization of the self: “the process of leaving home, of altering your habits, of learning new tricks” (Deleuze qtd. in Crawford 133). The impetus might then become directed towards composing forces that undermine “our best attempts at deciding, conclusively, on identities and selves” (Crawford 133).

According to Crawford, and in accordance with the affective style of transgender in Dandy Dust, where one dwells and moves are technologies of the subject who is done and undone in affective operations, “equally as much as those surgical and hormonal technologies we recognize more easily as body/gender modification” (137). Placing affect on a par with the hard technologies of surgery does not question the necessity of the kind of surgery that generates ‘transgender’ bodies, but highlights other possible arenas of operation.24 The mobile character of transgender bodies, in Crawford’s view, may “deterritorialize gender rather than settle it … to help us experiment rather than solve a problem, and to take us wayward rather than directly from one point to the next” (139). While of course not all cinema operates with a commitment towards open-endedness, the potential for cinema to practice curiosity lies in encountering the force of affect.

The framework of affective operations opens out the notion of (surgical) operation and its politics. The transgender use of affective operations might mobilize curiosity in the interest of survival that comes from refusing to settle, to accept the constraints of an unlivable narrative. Sue Golding (also de Philo) suggests that affect and the force of curious thinking may offer a livability that is not available by other means:

It is amazing how people have survived some horrible things, and one of the things that have actually made them survive is curiosity, that is

24 In a footnote, Crawford does question the efficacy of genitalia-focused surgeries to the transition or leaving home that changing gender involves. However, rather than dismiss such surgeries his emphasis is to think twice about the centrality of sexual organs to gender (142, ftnt. 2).
thinking the most famous radical question of all: Supposing that it could be otherwise?
(“A Bit(e)” 154)

With this notion of survival, my discussion of curiosity approaches the gravity of the ways in which aesthetic experience might invigorate and amplify thinking. The value in thinking ‘anew’ might be appreciated in relation to the distance it gains from the “horrible things” that threaten one’s existence. Though it is scary not to be able to commit to meaning, the appeal of curiosity may well register in the commitment to asking questions that lead one astray and far from home.