Shimmering images: on transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics

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Epilogue

Like “Chimera,” the image I have selected for the back-cover, entitled “Dean Spade in Water” (2010), by photographer Johanna Breidling, serves as a dialogic device. It creates a dialogue between the introduction and this epilogue, between the theoretical motivations and the trajectory of this study. “Dean Spade in Water” reflects on the transgender and cinematic aesthetics that work to “undo” the images of raving monster and unintelligible chimera. Differently than “Chimera,” this image is taken from above; the subject is clothed and emerging from choppy, dark waters. These differences suggest that agency and perception remain under investigation, but now in another configuration. Similarly to “Chimera,” however, the framing breaks the figure from the torso down, and the subject’s gaze locks with the viewer, if here frontally and centrally.

An eyebrow slightly cocked, he seems to confront the viewer with a question. As the title informs us, the subject is Dean Spade, a well-known transgender attorney and founder of the Sylvia Rivera Legal Resource Program at the Urban Justice Center, a law project serving low-income transgender, transsexual, intersex, and gender
transgressive people.\(^1\) The query posed by the image might be found articulated in Spade’s essay, “Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender.” From both a personal and a legal point of view, it examines the consequences of relying on medical evidence, on genitalia and the ocularcentric paradigm of scientific materialism, to determine gender identity and obtain trans rights. In addition, the avowedly clothed subject of the photograph appears to resist an ocular identification of his body’s sex-gender status. The absurdity of wearing office clothes in the ocean draws attention to the concealed body. Hence, the image’s event echoes Spade’s askance eyebrow, questioning our epistemic desire to determine gender in this way.

Spade expresses the dilemma that, “*Even though I don’t believe in real, it matters if other people see me as real*” (emphasis in original; 20). The cost of realness, Spade writes, is that, if found lacking, “I’m a mutilator, an imitator, and worst of all, I can’t access surgery” (emphasis in original; 20). The problem of realness recalls Foucault’s comments cited in the introduction on the emerging social perception of monstrous embodiments, of changes of sex or multiple sexes in particular. Spade’s contemporary observations find that any manner of acting that involves more than one sex is still not considered “adequate to reality” (Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*). However, rather than relegated to “the realm of chimeras,” Spade is pictured here partially emerging from those shimmering waters I have interpreted as representing the reflecting pool of recognition. In image and in theory, Spade seems to propose a definition of trans realness that is partially, strategically real. Though medical gender ‘checking’ invests in gender realness, it can also be partially, temporarily resisted. Trans organizing and cultural work have also made possible the ‘realness,’ or at least the viability, of qualitative transformation, of living in the movements between the grids of identity.

This dissertation has demonstrated in what ways it matters when other people see you or me or anybody as real, in terms of the power/knowledge nexus that informs the perception and recognition of gender. Following Foucault’s elaboration of sexuality as a ruse of *scientia sexualis*, I have examined in what ways erotic cinema and transgender bodies may relate to regimes of confession and exposure, to discursive and non-discursive evidence. My approach was to understand Foucault’s analysis of sexuality’s relevance to subject formation to hinge on bodily sex as the

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1 Since 2008, Spade has also become an assistant professor at the Seattle University School of Law. More information about his written and activist work can be found on [http://www.deanspade.net/](http://www.deanspade.net/).
first hurdle for a subject to overcome through an individuating confession. Sex is more than a fictitious unity produced by power’s grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures. From Foucault’s brief comments on Herculine Barbin, I take the suggestion that, as sex gained this false unity, so did the body. Sexuality’s various technologies consolidate certain kinds of bodies available for sex as well as for knowledge and for recognition. One must pass through sexuality “in order to have access to his [sic] own intelligibility …, to the whole of his body …, to his identity” (Foucault, Will 155-156).

Foucault tries to make the sexualized, aroused body theoretically intelligible through an analysis of “the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective” (152). The two modern somatechnics that play key roles in this regard are cinema and surgery. Benjamin’s insight into the surgical nature of cinema helps to think through the potential cinematic nature of surgery. Aesthetics and transformation of life are the principles of both types of somatechnics. The continuities of the long durée of eighteenth century strategies show that knowledge of sex became in many ways knowledge of gender, what can be described as a sexdesign body made malleable from the inside out. The pharmaco-pornographic regime’s articulation of sexdesign through surgical practices and cinematic images situates transgenderism at the crux of the technologies of power that take life as their objective. Within and through bodies engaging with trans practices, bio-power as well as agency becomes articulated.

In the overlapping and at times disjointed regimes of bio-power that I investigate, body knowledge refers not to knowledge about or of something, but rather, is shown to produce a sensible thing. Instead of Freud’s interest in the importance of discovering one’s genitals or the truth of the fetish and Lacan’s insistence on the facticity of one’s imaginary anatomy, the fetish’s gleam and the mirror’s glimmer rather suggest that a certain way of knowing produces these images, however brief and shimmering. Challenging the direct link between knowledge and vision in ocular verification was crucial to my challenging of medical forms of evidence for trans bodies and trans identities. Through some ways of knowing, through some epistemic modes, and under some epistemic lights, one is able to produce a shimmer of a thing.

I have tried to develop a theory of shimmering images as a hyper-icon, arguing for its role in the constitution of a perceived subject as well as its function in the production of an intelligible subject. Shimmering images circumscribe a different
economy of bodies and pleasures than the one described by Foucault as *scientia sexualis* with its focus on sex-desire: an economy that Barbin and Spade call for, that Preciado maps out, that Crawford theorizes, that Sprinkle visualizes, that Ross provokes, that Angel suggests, and that Dandy Dust, Elbe, the femme and her transman embody.

By attending to the claims of a transgender economy that takes pleasure in movement, I do not wish to oppose the desire for coherence. My study sought to avoid coming down on either side of intelligibility or transformation. Spade seems to suppose mutual exclusion:

> What would it mean to suggest that such desire for surgery is a joyful affirmation of gender self-determination – that a SRS candidate would not wish to get comfortable in a stable gender category, but instead be delighted to be transforming – to choose it over residing safely in ‘man’ or ‘woman’? (21 fn. 20)

Spade’s point is to counter the negative view of surgery and other trans practices as motivated by helplessness and suffering. Yet, Elbe’s and Stryker’s writing, Ross’ performance, and *The Father is Nothing*, all show that coherence and flow can be experienced together, and that distress does not have to exclude delight. Scheirl’s erotically-charged Dandy Dust and Crawford’s discussion of transitioning as a mode of deteriorioralizing the self both suggested ways in which the motivations and rewards of gender-related body alteration may be multiple.²

In examining the wavering space between reality and unintelligibility I have sought to refuse the “immediate error and danger of the medical model of transsexuality,” which Spade ascribes to the “separation of gender from cultural forces” (25). Spade asserts that “the mostly unexplored territory [of theory] remains in the realm of de-medicalization” (30). I have attempted to take medicalization into a different conceptual space, in which an agency to ‘cut’ and ‘suture’ do not rely on gatekeepers, “where trans rights [and subjectivity] are recognized but will not hinge upon surgical status or medical evidence” as Spade eloquently writes (30).

In the beginning of this project, I simply wanted to examine the conceptual ‘space between’ that many versions of transgender studies, in the spirit of queer ²

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² Spade suggests additional goals such as, “access to different sexual practices, ability to look different in clothing, enhancement of a self-understanding about one’s gender that is not entirely reliant on public recognition, public disruption of female and male codes, or any number of other things” (28).
theory, championed as a space of becoming. As the project developed, I bracketed the notions of male and female as polar opposites to explore this space I thought of as the shimmering void, both culturally and theoretically. However, as the chapters advanced, the so-called void, gap, or abyss, seemed to proceed from my analysis in an infinite undulation. To my horror and delight, the brackets were surpassed, no longer analytically relevant. The new territories of trans movement involved (mis)adventures, rage, erotic ecstasy; certainly leaving one’s home discipline.

I needed film studies to develop concepts for trans ontologies, which may not be accessed by scientia sexualis’ simple formulation of ‘now you see it’ or you don’t. Though filmic works and film theory has a history of scienticism, so argue Williams, Cartwright, and Comolli, to see and be seen, the body has to become involved. The carnal density of vision insists on the corporeal and cultural infiltration in the process of producing sensate meaning. The question is not so much why impressions shimmer, but rather why the identity of objects becomes stilled and fixed with meaning in the persistence of vision.

As “Dean Spade in Water” formally suggests, the persistence of shimmering and emerging meaning occurs in tension with one another. Neither mode of perception – transforming or solidifying – can claim dominance. This is the challenge meted out by these cultural objects. If I was successful in theorizing the viability of shimmering images, of transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics, then this challenge has helped produce a way of knowing from a shimmer of a thought.