Shimmering images: on transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics

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English Summary

In this study, I propose that transgender embodiment and cinematic images can be understood as related on the basis of their shimmering quality. I mobilize the notion of “shimmering” to move back and forth between, on the one hand, trans corporeality and, on the other, the medium of cinema, as well as between the related disciplines of transgender studies and cinema studies. The interdisciplinary nature of the project is inspired by the shimmering visual status of specific cinematic images that emphasize movement within the frame or between frames; hence, my project explores how this visuality might relate to particular gender states-of-becoming.

Transgender embodiments challenge sex and gender alignment, which one can supposedly identify through visual evidence. Each chapter addresses the difficulty in seeing and knowing the experiences that waver in a largely uncharted “transitioning” state by outlining an alternative theoretical paradigm. I draw on Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, and feminist theories such as from Kaja Silverman, Laura Mulvey, Linda Williams, as well as transgender theories from Sandy Stone and Susan Stryker, amongst others. In this way, the study seeks to create analytical and theoretical leeway for transitionally gendered embodiments located in the field of image-making. It does so through a heuristic dialogue between a set of relevant concepts and a select corpus of mainstream and alternative erotic film and video. Although I try to trace a specific modality of trans subjectivity, shimmering images also form and inform a contested field of knowability that bears on subjectivity more broadly.

Though focusing on different concepts, each chapter works through a similar method. It takes into consideration one to three case studies of film, video, or other artistic works in order to identify the theoretical limitations and aesthetic conventions that render specific embodiments difficult to perceive. My chapters also reflect on the broader framework of Enlightenment empiricism invested in the idea of ‘to see is to know,’ a contentious issue in film studies as well. By pairing transgender with film practices, I pinpoint the ways in which both ‘aesthetic’ practices undermine scientific knowledge.

Each of my case studies engages historic and contemporary culture, issues of subjectivity and knowledge, the visual and the affective. They help to develop a
framework that adequately addresses trans embodiment and sexuality. In addition, the inclusion of trans challenges to film and embodiment theory offers the opportunity to develop and refine the relationship between epistemology and ontology. Each chapter advances an alternative theoretical pathway, through which one might understand the interrelation of being and knowing. I argue that these works of (self)representation contest the customary view of transgenderism as primarily or exclusively concerned with sexuality and/or gender. Indeed, the presentation of one’s material self may be thought of in terms of an experimentation with formal elements of embodiment, which may—or indeed may not—be inscribed within gender signification.

The significance of film for this project lies in its interest in visualizing events for a perceived spectator. Some strands of film and film theory are deeply skeptical of the apparent self-evidence of capturing an event. Precisely by feigning a heightened realism, however, genres such as documentary and pornography can draw attention to the cracks in their argumentative, expository ‘voice’ (Chapter One). At times though, trans cinema seeks to counter potential doubt in its ‘realness.’ Pornographic trans imagery mobilizes the illusion of realness through appealing to commodity fetishism, in the case of Buck Angel to evade sexual fetishism and the implied reality of being seen as a ‘horror’ (Chapter Two).

Technically, continuity editing in film hides other dimensions of events; hence, aesthetic decisions involving discontinuity, such as cutting across the axis of action or unconventional use of shot/reverse-shots, may unseat the viewer, but also shift their perception (Chapter Three). Also, the viewer’s pleasure might not be taken in the mastery of a narrative, but in its suspension, or in the eroticism of the image fluttering or beating the viewer (Chapters Four and Five). The quasi-therapeutic potential of innervations through shocking cuts may instigate a subject’s sense of bodily mismatch or incoherence (Chapters Three and Four). In short, what may be called the “pornographicity” of the image and an enchanting visual beguilement may be central to understanding cinephilia as well as serve as the keystone to an image theory in which trans embodiment might be perceived and understood.

I attempt to contribute to an understanding of qualitative transformation—a potential for change—that lies at the heart of both transgender embodiment and cinematic experience. Just as sex change involves bodily transition, spectators of a film undergo rapid or slow, singular or multiple relations of movement and rest. In both cases, moreover, the subject’s transformation in relation to technological (body)
images is integral to her or his shift of identification. A theory of movement and transformation departs from concepts associated with the aesthetic instead of less precise yet better known identity terms, such as male/female, masculine/feminine, man/woman. To avoid perpetuating the ideology of ocularcentrism, I understand the notion of aesthetics as the formal qualities of both visual and verbal images and of a multisensory experience.

Chapter One, entitled “Secrecy,” opens the central issue of the mirror or mimetic theory of knowledge through a search for the secret of (trans)sex in the visual aspect of scientia sexualis (Foucault). Following Mieke Bal’s theory that visual objects make expository ‘statements,’ I analyze the implications of exposition arguments for the medium of video works. I examine a series of three sexually explicit videos that differently negotiate imaging and confessing a ‘real’ sex in the genres of pornography and documentary. The first two videos by Mirah Soliel-Ross, Tremblement de Chair (2001) and Dysfunctional (1997), contrast with Annie Sprinkle’s commercial Linda/Les and Annie: The First Transsexual Love Story (1989). I examine the tensions and contradictions within the regime of secrecy; this episteme entices transsexual subjects to participate in pornographic self-representation. Trans porn mobilizes generic conventions of realism that enable such displays to address a believing spectator. In all three cases, however, I examine the crack or fissure between what is said of the secret and what is shown.

Chapter Two, “Fetishism,” interrogates the phantasmatic, yet material, representation of sexual secrets in the pornography of Buck Angel, the first commercial transmasculine porn star. Apart of the explosion of porn material that demands analysis, I argue that female-to-male (FtM) and transmasculine porn requires new methods for understanding sexual secrecy in terms of fetishization and visibility. Angel’s provocative embrace of sexual and commodity fetishism prompts a discussion of his popular website as well as his life-size bronze statue, created by the artist Marc Quinn. Quinn’s recent sculptures suggest that self-determination of one’s embodiment and access to one’s eroticism are crucial means of becoming a subject, or at least a commodity on the marketplace. Taking Angel as my case in this chapter, I also point to the common misunderstanding of trans sexuality as limited to male-to-female experience. For better and worse, FtM bodies are proving to be equally viable sexual commodities.
In Chapter Three, “Cut,” I examine the historical and epistemological frameworks that underpin a dense and hereto unexplored aesthetic relationship between ‘early’ transsexuality and cinema. The case study focuses on Lili Elbe’s account, *Man into Woman: The First Sex Change, A Portrait of Lili Elbe* (1933/2004). This text presents the first modern transsexual “portrait,” and my interest lies in the ways in which surgery is mobilized by Elbe to claim an identity and how this surgical transformation is presented. I read this literary work “cinematically,” paying attention to its editing as if it is a so-called biopic. The ontology of cinema, in its special relation with animating life and suspending death in a ‘cinema theatre,’ may have implicit connections with the body that undergoes surgery in an ‘operating theatre.’ With the aid of Walter Benjamin’s suggestion that cinema takes place in a surgical theatre, I specify the quasi-filmic aesthetic that Elbe’s text calls upon for its animation and consider its possible therapeutic effects on the reader.

The disjunctions of cinematic cuts, as well as in identifications, underlie connections between things and their reflections, an issue I deal with in Chapter Four, “Suture.” With Leone Knight’s film *The Father is Nothing* (1992) as my central case, I investigate the material implications of the literal surgical suture of the body as well as the psychic process of imaginary identification that Lacan describes as a kind of “suture.” Countering Lacan’s assumption of the cultural norm (Symbolic) that limits the Imaginary, Silverman tries to find ways of idealizing non-normative bodies. This chapter draws on her critique of Lacan in light of the specific bodily divergence of transsexualism. My focal point on the social aspect of suture, an operation brilliantly invoked in Knight’s film through an erotic relation, emphasizes that it takes others to suture, something that strictly Lacanian accounts of suture tend to neglect. Turning to psychoanalysis may be taken to suggest a departure from the material body; however, with the help of Silverman’s and Maaike Bleeker’s refashioning of psychoanalytical identification to highlight its bodily basis, this chapter extends the key metaphor of cinema as somatic surgery.

The fifth and final chapter, “Curiosity,” deals with the desire to know in the experimental film *Dandy Dust* (1998), directed by and starring Hans Scheiril. Propelled by a highly curious transgender protagonist, here the affect of curiosity appears as a force provoking the transitioning of characters, generic formats, and styles. Long regarded an object of curiosity, the transgender figure is reframed in *Dandy Dust* as an agential force, a way of being. *Dandy Dust*’s inquiry into what a
body can do, or be made to do, posits that the “carnal density of vision” (Crary), the mediated and ideological context of one’s embodiment, may be central to the mundane task of research encounters as well. The final section meditates on the phenomenology of knowing, particularly the erotic, fleshy aspect to it that is disavowed in an ocularcentric mastery. Following Sue Golding, I propose that through curiosity one gains the ability to think otherwise, a survival technique to give shape to livable conditions.

The present study demonstrates the ways in which it matters when other people see you or me or anybody as real, or not. It asserts that, although medicalized gender is staked on evidentiary realness, gender identification can also be partially and temporarily resisted. Trans organization and cultural work have also made possible the ‘realness,’ or at least viability, of qualitative transformation, of living in the movements between the grids of identity. In the overlapping and at times disjointed regimes of “bio-power” (Foucault) that I investigate, bodily knowledge refers not to knowledge about or of something, but rather, it produces a sensible thing. In place of the importance Freud ascribes to the discovery of one’s genitals or the truth of the fetish, and Lacan’s insistence on the facticity of imaginary anatomy, the fetish’s gleam and the mirror’s glimmer suggest that a certain way of knowing produces these images, for however brief and intermittently they persist. My study accounts not for the knowledge of transgender bodies and sexualities, but instead seeks to open up a bodily economy of transgender and cinematic pleasures, which points towards a wider aesthetic field of shimmering. Shimmering transgender and cinematic images suggest a different regime of instruments of power, but also distinct ways to break with the agency of sex. Principally, shimmering images may counter the grips of power with alternative claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges.