The Locus of Looking - Dissecting Visuality in the Theatre
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— The trap of the visual field is that it seems to promise to show all, even while it fails to show the subject who looks, and thus fails to show what the looker most wants to see. The looker is the ‘not-al’ which is left out of the promise of visual plenitude. Seeing is a (false) assertion that the world can be mastered by the gaze and a recognition of the world without one self — (Phelan 1993: 24–25, italics in the text).

In this commentary, Peggy Phelan argues against too optimist expectations about visibility politics. The binary opposition of visibility as power and invisibility as impotence or absence of power, is falsifying. There are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal. As Phelan points out: “[if] representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture” (Phelan 1993: 10). The ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political power.

Visibility does not necessarily serve the interests of the one made visible. Representation is almost always on the side of the one who looks and not on the side of who is seen. The images of women in films, advertisements, in paintings or on stage, do not so much show women ‘as they are,’ as they are revealing about the subjective point of view from where these women are seen. Furthermore, the ideology of the visible obscures the power of the unseen, the unspoken, or what Phelan calls the unmarked. The unmarked appears as a blind spot within the visible real, a blind spot that has to remain blind in order to produce the illusion of visual plenitude; that “inconspicuous allusion which involves both to stage and to hide the subject” (Bal 1996: 176). In this “inconspicuous allusion” of visual plenitude, blind spots are like navels that can help to expose the subjective perspective involved in ‘just looking.’

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the analogy with the vanishing point in a perspectival image exposes blind spots as constitutive of a view of the world ‘as it is.’ The vanishing point is a sign with a special status. What is exceptional about the vanishing point in relation to other locations within a perspectival image is its dual semiotic character. For this reason, Brian Rotman (1987) compares the vanishing point to zero in arithmetic. Internally, the vanishing point is a sign among signs, part of the scene witnessed, like zero is a number among numbers. Externally, however, the vanishing point marks a moment of semiotic disruption. The vanishing point signifies the absence of signs. It is a meta-sign whose meaning is to indicate, via the syntax that accompanies it, the absence of other signs. In other words, the vanishing point stands in for the absence of signs, but in doing so it remains a sign and, as a sign it owes its position to a particular syntax that grants it this status (Rotman 1987:19).

Rotman also points out the analogy between the special status of the vanishing point and of zero and the notion of origin as it functions in metaphysics, and has been criticized by Derrida. Arithmetic, perspective and
metaphysics, all partake in the constitution of a world as though objectively given outside our systems of representation, while at the same time, these systems themselves are constitutive of this world ‘as such.’ Within these systems, zero and the vanishing point, like the notion of origin in metaphysics, have a special status: they keep the differences within the system in place by means of a reference to something (supposedly) prior to the system, yet it is the system itself that grants this term its status as prior. As a result of this special status, the vanishing point serves as meaningful pointer drawing attention to the invisible logic at work in the system of which it itself is part. It presents a starting point for an analysis of the logic at work within the system, a starting point that permits me to begin ‘from within,’ rather than by comparing the system-as-representation to some primary presence outside of it.

**Facing Lack** — In a perspectival drawing, the vanishing point mirrors the vantage point, the point from where the scene depicted is seen. In the Dürer woodcut (fig. 1, see inside flap left) introduced in chapter 1, the vanishing point mirrors the eye of the male artist firmly locked in its place by the erect pillar that fixes his look on the woman in front of him. Dürer’s woodcut thus presents a provokative illustration of Mitchell’s claim that the point of view presented by an image marks a location in concrete space, as well as in the symbolic spaces opened up by discourse. It is not difficult to see why this woodcut presents such a rewarding object for 20th-century feminist critique of the gender bias at work in so-called objective vision.

This vanishing point, modestly veiled in the Dürer woodcut and presented through the intermediary of a fictional artist, reappears in a much more explicit way on Courbet’s painting *L’Origine du Monde* (1866, fig. 4, inside flap left) showing a woman’s torso, the inside of her thighs, her genitals and a single breast, all in extreme foreshortening. The title of this painting links it to the metaphysical notion of origin; not just *some* origin but *the* origin of the world, the origin of human life, the vanishing point *par excellence*. And what a cunning translation of the invitation implied in the perspectival drawing to ‘step inside.’

*L’Origine du Monde* represents, as the catalogue of the 1988 exhibition *Courbet Reconsidered* puts it, “the classical site of castration anxiety as well as the ultimate object of male desire” (Faunce and Nochlin 1988: 176). Faunce and Nochlin explain the appeal presented by the painting to the private individual viewing it, as well the anxiety or shock it frequently provokes, in terms of male subjectivity as it is accounted for in Freudian psychoanalysis. They call the painting “pornographic” and, indeed, the overt visibility of the site of both castration anxiety and desire plays into what Gertrude Koch describes as the core of pornography: “the persistent voyeuristic mania to look at the female organ, constantly and as closely as possible, in order to uncover the secret of the missing penis” (Koch 1989: 135).
24). According to Koch, the adult viewer of pornographic images seeks a confirmation of this childhood sexual theory – the phallic myth of the female organ. The phallic myth is Freud's story of the male child who sees the female sex organ for the first time and is amazed that no penis is attached. Disturbed by the fact that an object so important to him is missing from the female body, he imagines a number of equally anxiety-laden possibilities: either the female organ is the result of castration, or the woman is hiding her penis. The second possibility is already a working through of the fears aroused by the possibility of the first possibility. Hence, castration anxiety is both the effect of what is seen, namely absence, and the drive to compulsively view the absence.

L'Origine du Monde was intended for the private delectation of a sophisticated connoisseur. For a long time, this painting was only viewed by a few and in private. Today, on public display in a world famous temple of High Art in Paris, it draws huge crowds of visitors. It seems that everybody wants to see this painting, but at the same time it appears to be difficult to look at it, much harder than looking at the other representations of naked female flesh as they cover the walls of the Musée D'Orsay, and flank this image. The ambiguous response of visitors of the Musée D'Orsay is subject of Renée Kool's Looking at L'Origine du Monde (provisional title, work in progress) based on a series of photographs taken in the gallery.

At the time I visited Musée D'Orsay to see L'Origine du Monde, the painting was part of a grouping of four paintings that filled an entire wall of the gallery. The grouping was similar in many ways to the one photographed by Renée Kool (fig. 5, inside flap left), with the exception that the painting on the left, showing a naked woman with a dog (Femme nue au chien, 1862), then hung on the right side. The place on the left side was occupied by Le Sommeil (1866), showing two women asleep, their naked bodies draped on a luxuriously decorated bed in a complex embrace that allows the spectator an unencumbered view of breasts and buttocks. The large painting hanging on top of these three smaller paintings is La nuit de printemps, combat des cerfs (1877), showing what looks like a herd of rutting deer. Within this composition, the position of L'Origine du Monde, mirroring the position of the eye of the visitor, marks the position of the vanishing point in linear perspective. The female sex organ appears as the lack or sign of absence analogous to the vanishing point in perspective, which structures a particular vision, consisting of a constellation in which female flesh, animals and nature are conflated and presented as objects to the vision of the subject whose position mirrors that of the vanishing point represented by the female sex.

Shortly after WW II, Jacques Lacan was the lucky owner of Courbet's painting. Faunce and Nochlin point out how in a recent history of French psychoanalysis dealing with Lacan's life and work, L'Origine du Monde is described as half of a 'strange diptych,' a 'double' painting, consisting of Courbet's painting covered with a wooden 'hiding device,' constructed by
artist Andrè Masson, which represented elements in the first painting in abstract form. A secret system allowed the viewer to slide off the wooden protective covering to reveal the painting beneath, thus allowing Jacques Lacan, to stage the relation between the seer and the female sex organ seen at will (Faunce & Nochlin 1988: 176-177).

Faunce and Nochlin also point out the strange analogy between this ‘diptych’ and Marcel Duchamp’s final work *Etant Donnés* (c.1946–66) in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This work consists of a life-size diorama behind a large wooden door with holes bored in it through which the viewer is invited to peep. Through these holes, the viewer sees a brick wall with a hole in it. Behind the hole lies a female body with spread legs and one outstretched hand holding a lamp. She lies in a diagonal angle in a field. Her outspread legs and exposed vulva are the nearest points in this figure to the opening in the wall. The field in which she lies extends in a landscape so foreshortened that it does not have a vanishing point. “Through this foreshortening the spectator is made aware that the vanishing point in this image is to be found somewhere other than on the horizon” observes Kaja Silverman dryly in her discussion of Duchamp’s diorama as part of her critique of Lacan in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996).

Duchamp’s installation stages the act of looking at a three dimensional version of *L’Origine du Monde*. In his installation, Duchamp explicitly relates the ‘pull’ presented by the vanishing point in perspective to male sexual desire. Seeing is represented as a penetrating movement directed towards the vanishing point marked by the sex organ of the woman on display. All the elements of perspective are in place, but in a strangely literal way. The suggestion presented by the perspectival painting, that the picture plane opens up to a space beyond, is staged here as a matter of literally breaking through the barrier presented by the brick wall. The ragged edges of the hole in the wall seem to indicate violence. Duchamp’s staging of the vanishing point behind a hole in the wall is a reminder of many Renaissance painters’ habit of placing the vanishing point inside a hole: a framed opening such as a door, a window, a mirror or even another painting, as if to emphasize the essential otherness and exteriority of its location. This had the effect of doubling the pull exerted by the vanishing point on the spectator and, at the same time, of pushing the vanishing point out to an infinite, unreal, numinous distance by invoking the potentially unlimited iteration of a frame within a frame (Rotman 1987: 18–19).

The scopic field in which woman and landscape conflate, is literally ‘feminized,’ passive, accessible, turning the woman, spread out across the landscape, into an emblem of the scopic field itself. The explicit staging of Duchamp’s piece, highlights the relationship between seer and seen as given in perspective. The retheatricalization exposes the address presented to the viewer and undermines the absorptive qualities of the invitation to ‘step inside.’
Duchamp's installation features prominently in both Rosalind Krauss' (1993) and Kaja Silverman's (1996) critiques of modernist notions of disembodied vision. Both remind us of Lyotard's discussion of Duchamp's work in *Les TRANSformateurs Duchamp* (Paris: Galilee, 1977). Krauss points out how, for Lyotard, the meaning of *Etant Donnés* is to be found in the way it comments on the implicit equation of the vanishing point and the point at which the observing subject is encouraged to stand before a perspectival image.

In this type of organization, the viewpoint and the vanishing point are symmetrical. Thus if it is true that the latter is the vulva, this is the specular image of the peeping eyes; such that when these think they are seeing the vulva, they see themselves. *Con celui qui voit. [...]* He who sees is a cunt (Lyotard quoted in Krauss 1993: 113, italics in the text).

For Lyotard, the significance of Duchamp's installation is that it works to corporealize the male eye. In this incarnation, the female body appears as the object of a vision that originates not from the body seen 'over there' but rather whose origin is located in the male eye. Silverman, in her comments upon both Duchamp and Lyotard, points out that the installation also effects a remarkable deconstruction of the grounding opposition upon which sexual difference is based.

The male look at the female genitals is emblematic of that exteriorizing displacement through which the male subject repeatedly situates his lack at the site of the female body, and naturalizes it as essentially (i.e. anatomically) 'other.' The additional oppositions which the Duchamp diorama works both to articulate and collapse – carnality/transcendence, spectacle/eye – are built upon this foundational antithesis. When the male voyeur who is caught within the machinery diagrammed by Lyotard [...] finds his look put in a mirror relation to the female genitals, he is given the opportunity to acknowledge as his own what he is accustomed to throw violently away, and so, to renegotiate the relation between his ego and the object (Silverman 1996: 172).

Mirror, mirror on the wall, the seer wants to see it all, but what he sees is absence or lack. This mirror, instead of reflecting back an ideal image, invites the viewer to identify with lack. Instead of reflecting the visual plenitude promised by the perspectival construction that the installation mimics, it undermines the position of the seer as the one who can see it as it is. Duchamp's installation positions the viewer literally at a peephole, thus exposing the voyeurism involved in perspectival vision. The place of his installation in the museum, a public place, undermines the position of the seer as neutral, absent, non-desiring, disembodied eye.
Threatened by discovery on the part of a fellow viewer, the purely cognitive subject of Kant's aesthetic experience is redefined in this setting as the subject of desire, and subjectivity itself is taken from the faculty of cognition and reinscribed in the carnal body (Krauss 1993: 114).

Classical perspective orients the field of vision to the viewer's invisible body, as if the scene seen had emanated from the viewer's own eyes, while at the same time, this eye is erased from implication within the visual field. The degree to which the seer is invisible, detached, is the degree to which he bears authority within the terms of perspective, but it is also precisely the degree to which he is vulnerable to being caught seeing. To be caught seeing is to lose one's prerogative as a disinterested viewer. To be caught seeing is to be robbed of one's privilege and power as seer; it is to be castrated, to be turned into an object of vision. To be caught seeing is to be feminized.

Con celui qui voit. He who sees is a cunt. In Renée Kool's photograph (fig. 5), a male viewer literally becomes the cunt he is watching when his hair fuses with the pubic hair depicted in Courbet's painting. His legs, spread like the legs in the picture he sees, turn his body into a physical mirror of the painting, an act of physical mirroring through which he becomes the female figure. What this photograph also demonstrates is that all of this happens within the 'vision' of a third party. The fusion requires a perspective within which all of this takes place. This third party is represented in the picture by the woman on the right side, watching the men, but even more by the photographic apparatus that caught this man seeing.

Echoes of Duchamp's staging of the seer as carnal body both seeing and seen re-appear in Annie Sprinkle's performance Post Porn Modernism, in which she invited the audience to look inside her genitals through a speculum. In this performance, the artist places her own body on display. This is not some objectively given body (the female body) but this individual body here and now. It is a body furthermore, that looks back. Sprinkle literally puts the audience and their act of looking on stage and thus exposes these seers to the look of others looking at them. In this way, her performance underlines what perspective grants the beholder: a safe position marked by absence – an absence that is the very condition of the privilege of the seer as a disembodied observer.

Yet more echoes of Duchamp's staging reappear again in Gonnie Heggen's Looking for Peter (1996), in which she draws attention to the a-symmetry at work in the way signs of sexual difference are perceived as a means of exposing the subjective perspective involved in 'just looking' as it takes place in the theatre. Heggen too, holds up a mirror to the spectator, confronting him or her with his or her own looking. However, unlike Duchamp's staging, this mirror does not present the spectator with a clear vision of otherness, but rather confronts the spectator with its invisibility.
**Back to Nature** — The Peter that the title of Heggen’s performance refers to is Peter Pan, the famous character from the play by the same name. “Peter Pan is the ultimate ambition of all actresses just as Hamlet is of all actors,” writes Roger Lancelyn Green in 1954 in his book *Fifty Years of Peter Pan* (quoted in Garber 1992: 165). There is a curious absence of symmetry in this apparently symmetrical assertion, since Peter Pan, as well as Hamlet, is nominally gendered male. Yet unlike Hamlet, Peter Pan has always been played by a woman. Hamlet too has been played by women many times, some of them the greatest actresses of their time. Nevertheless, it seems highly unlikely that Hamlet would ever be called the ultimate ambition of every actress. But Peter Pan is, if we are to believe Roger Lancelyn Green.

In “Fear of Flying, or, Why is Peter Pan a Woman?” Majorie Garber (1992) discusses one of the rare occasions on which a major professional company cast a man in the role of Peter Pan. This was with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1982. The director explained his move by declaring his desire to make the play a real tragedy. He spoke of “elevating it from the ghetto of children’s theatre into a national masterpiece” (quoted in Garber 1992:165). And to do so, what he needed was a man.

Actually, it is not difficult to imagine that it makes a difference whether Peter Pan is played by a man or by a woman. It is much more difficult, however, to account for this difference and to explain it in terms of signs and referents. When a famous actress plays Hamlet, her stage presence represents the absent fictional prince of Denmark. Her female body functions as a sign for the male body of the prince. The difference between sign (the female body of the actress) and referent (the male character Hamlet) can contribute to the meaning of the performance, or to the pleasure derived from seeing it. If, though, one wanted the audience to believe that this person he or see is seeing here and now is Hamlet rather than representative of Hamlet, if one were to strive to achieve the effect of apparent conflation of sign and referent on stage, casting an actress as Hamlet does not seem a very productive choice. Nevertheless, Peter Pan is played by a woman exactly because this supports the conflation of sign and referent, even though the male gender of Peter Pan would seem to suggest the opposite.

In Ginnie Heggen’s performance, Peter Pan is ambiguous in appearance possessing both male and female features. Dressed in a camouflage shirt and shorts, with blond dreadlocks and a baseball cap, he/she frolics happily through a landscape inhabited only by animals. This Peter Pan has a mission: the god given task to measure with a m/f indicator the male and female energy in all living creatures in order to give ‘him up there’ an impression of how things are going ‘down here.’

The character refuses to be classified as either male or female. He/she argues that he/she does not fit into the male-female binary because, he/she says that in him/her, male and female energy are completely in balance. He/she is neither male nor female and both at the same time. With his/her ambiguous sexuality, Peter Pan seems to represent a third possibility:
a third sex that is neither male nor female. "In nature everything is both male and female," says Peter Pan, and presents his/her 'natural' condition as a more authentic state of being, a presumed state of original fullness that we can see reflected in many stories of paradise or Arcadia: "the utopian ideal of the world as a garden in which human bodies are so at one with their environment that they lack nothing" (Halke 2001: 14). These stories are lodged within the imagination of western culture as a utopian ideal, as a 'recovery narrative,' as a sustained attempt to recover a lost ideal of the body, wanting in nothing in the garden of plenty. This presumed state of original fullness is reflected in the psychoanalytical concept of the subject.

For the subject of psychoanalysis, the desire for fullness and completeness manifests itself in the desire for the penis (Freud) or the phallus (Lacan). In Freud's account, men appear as those who have, who are complete, and women as those who are incomplete and want to have what they lack. Penis envy appears as the very cornerstone of female subjectivity. It marks the castration complex of the young girl: her wish to be able to exhibit the penis she does not have. Successful maturation will convert this female wish for the penis into the wish for a baby. Ultimately the outcome of the infantile wish for a penis becomes the wish for a man, prompting the woman to accept a man as an appendage to the penis.

Lacan, in his reading of Freud, replaces the centrality of the penis with the centrality of the phallus. The phallus is not the penis, it is not an organ, it is a signifier. Lacan uses the term phallus to designate all those values that are opposed to lack. In Lacan's account, lack defines both male and female subjectivity. As in Freud, this lack is sexual in definition: it starts from the impossibility of being both male and female. One of the assumptions that underlies the Lacanian notion of the subject, is that the subject derives from a primordial whole, that it becomes a subject by separating from this whole, and that this separation inaugurates lack as well as a desire to return to primordial wholeness.

The character Peter Pan defines him/herself as a being without the lack that defines the subject of psychoanalysis because he/she successfully refuses to submit to the division that inaugurates lack in the first place. Although at first this may seem to represent a successful return to nature, in the end Peter Pan's authentic condition is shown to be a cultural projection. In Looking for Peter, the character Peter Pan literally only exists as projection, as part of a film that is projected onto a screen framed by antlers and pieces of bark. In this film, Peter Pan appears, as a Dutch critic described it: "a cheerful, esoteric creature of the woods that has taken a bite of all religions without swallowing anything so it can, in a carefree way, shed confusion on all that is blossoming and flowering."

Peter Pan's encompassing condition is shown to be a projection screen for a desire for wholeness that, in today's popular culture, finds its most prominent expression in the figure of Michael Jackson. With his ambiguous identity - neither man nor woman, child, nor adult, black nor
white – oppositions he seems to join a union without tears. He suggests the possibility of a conflict-less unification of differences by being one and the other in perfect balance. His public imago includes the promise that with him, the m/f indicator will hold exactly in the middle. Like Peter Pan, Jackson's appearance is sex-less rather than sexually ambiguous (in contrast to the ambiguity involved in transvestism which is usually erotically charged). Indeed, his childish innocent appeal is so strong that his image has even managed to survive serious accusations of child abuse.

With their successful refusal to grow up, both Michael Jackson and Peter Pan have placed themselves outside society. They can only exist in a fantasy world. In *Looking for Peter*, this fantasy world is 'nature': nature that is shown to be a product of culture, a kitsch illusion populated by animals that upon closer look appear to be either already dead and stuffed, or domesticated and living in the zoo. Michael Jackson too is a cultural construct, even at the most physical level. The oppositions he unites in his appearance are not kept together from the inside. Instead, unity has to be won over and over again by technical means against the very serious threat of falling apart. Like Peter Pan, Jackson has fled the world of the grown ups. In a far away place, he has created his own fantasy world where he spends his time in a private playground named Never Land.

**Having and not Having** — Peter, apart from being the name of the famous character, is also slang for the male member. In Freudian psychoanalysis, 'looking for Peter' marks the crucial moment in the development of sexual identity. In “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes,” Freud describes this critical moment in infantile sexuality that establishes the concepts of maleness and femaleness and determines a very different history for each. It is a moment in which vision plays a central role, in which the male and female subjects first 'see' each other.

According to Freud, it is not becoming aware of the anatomical differences between penis and vagina that does the job. The awareness of sexual difference results from 'looking for' the absence or presence of one single factor. The difference between man and woman thus appears as the difference between having and not having, between man and not man. That is, it is not the difference between two sexes, but between one sex and its absence. In the Freudian account, the female genitals stand for the absence that inaugurates the awareness of sexual difference, and thus inaugurates a fundamental binary opposition.

In this view, women appear as neutered in contrast to men, who are marked by a sign that defines their sexuality. It seems logical then that a woman would be better suited to play Peter Pan than a man. Who could be more suited to play a boy who does not want to grow up and become a man than a woman, a non-man, someone who will never be a man? Given this, the choice of the Royal Shakespeare Company to cast a man in the role literally
means putting the 'peter' in Peter Pan, a critical move that, in the eyes of this company, would take the play from the backwaters of kid's stuff and turn it into a national masterpiece of tragic drama. In Looking for Peter, Gonnie Heggen presents her own version of what it means to put the 'peter' in Peter Pan, and this does not turn her performance into a tragedy, quite the contrary.

**Gender as Performance** — On stage, four women dressed in brown jackets and tight fitting trousers demonstrate how they are able to transform themselves into 'real men,' as 'real' as we rarely get to see them. They cross the stage with sturdy steps, spit high into the curtains and burp into the microphone. Just as easily they transform into 'real' women. Under their jackets they wear colorful, seductive tops. They trip around on staggeringly high heels while looking at the audience with a helpless expression on their faces. Seemingly effortless they transform into various animals as well.

With their performance, these women do not represent a story but show transformations in looks and behavior, constantly crossing the lines dividing the sexes and dividing culture and nature. The movements suggest recognizable patterns but before they are fully developed they have already transformed into something else. The behavior of the women on stage blurs the boundaries between male and female, nature and culture, and human and animal, as categories ontologically grounded in what is 'over there.' They show all of it to be 'just performance' depending on using the right signs. Seen in this way, they present an illustration of Judith Butler's dictum underlying her *Gender Trouble* (1990): that gender is performance. They also illustrate that this performative aspect of gender does not imply the freedom to do and be at will.

The theoretical concept of gender as distinct from sexuality has proved useful in understanding the ways sexual identity manifests itself as culturally mediated rather than natural and given. From the perspective of gender, sexual identity is not the destiny implied within one's anatomy but a cultural construct. The distinction between sex and gender has helped to criticize roles and ways of behaving as granted to men and women at a particular time and place. It is instructive to understand sexual identity as a role whose traits are not naturally given qualities inherent in bodies but culturally determined functions that manifest themselves in behavior which defines the actors involved and not vice versa.

The distinction between sex and gender has contributed to a more complicated conception of sexual identity. At the same time, however, this distinction runs the risk of turning into a binary opposition once again, an opposition that repeats the old nature/culture binary in which sex is understood in terms of materiality as biologically given, and therefore, more natural than gender as 'just' cultural performance, inscription, overlay. It is this opposition that Judith Butler argues against in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), which followed *Gender Trouble*. 


In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler argues that although matter is posited as the neutral, non-signifying outside of signifying systems, this happens within a logic in which matter is associated with the feminine and signification with the masculine. Within this logic, materiality appears as the effect of signifying practices that produce it as ‘other,’ as that which falls outside signification. Matter and materiality, Butler argues, appear as neutral, that is, as opposed to signification, only from within this gendered perspective within which the absence of signification and the feminine are conflated. This perspective is what is at stake in *Looking for Peter*.

**Productive Looking > the Penis as Prop** — At first Heggen’s performance only seems to confirm the idea that gender is like a set of clothes one can don at will. The audience knows that the bodies of the dancers seen on stage are female, yet we also see how they convincingly transform into men and animals by giving signs that make us understand them as such. This would suggest that the body, and more precisely, the female body, is a neutral ground for inscription through a performance that turns its materiality into a meaningful appearance.

But then, at one point, a macho demonstration of masculinity smoothly transforms into a striptease. Each of the women brings out a powder puff, traditionally a female attribute that heightens the femininity of the one using it or seen with it, in the same way that breasts (fake and otherwise), long lashes, long hair, high heels and corsets heighten the femininity of the one seen with them, even if this one is a man, as in the case of transvestism. These attributes are understood to function on a cosmetic level. They do not really change the sexual identity of the one wearing them. They are part of the signs used in gender performance. When a man wears lashes or false breasts it does not turn him into a woman. Yet it does heighten his femininity by making him look more female. Similarly, many kinds of surgical interventions are understood to function on this cosmetic level. A breast job does not turn a man into a woman. There is only one operation that changes sexual identity.

When in *Looking for Peter*, the women on stage put their powder puffs into their panties to use them as signs of masculinity analogous to the way fake breasts can serve as signs of femininity, this is indeed a hilarious moment. They effectively present the ‘powder-puff-as-sign-for-masculinity’ as an exchangeable signifier, a stage prop, but what their performance demonstrates is that it does not work that way at all. While for a man, masking the sex organ can contribute to his appearing more feminine, for a woman, hiding the female sex organ behind a fake penis heightens femininity instead of masculinity.

The penis as a sign for masculinity appears to function unlike other signs. In order to function as a sign of masculinity, the penis must be attached to the male body; it must be part of it. If it is not, it signifies the
absence of masculinity instead. The penis, as a sign of masculinity, thus appears to depend upon a situation in which sign and referent (seem to) be conflated. That is, it depends upon a situation in which the penis does not appear as a sign at all, but as the full self-validating presence that evokes the ‘there it is’ quality described in the previous chapter.

By presenting the ‘peter’ literally as a sign, Gonnie Heggen performs a deconstructive reversal of the binary opposition that inaugurates dominant conceptions of sexual difference. She shows how this binary opposition results in a subjective deviation in the visual field. She demonstrates that an alternative perspective is thinkable. From the point of view of the female body, this body is not lacking anything. The male body then is a body with something extra, a part that functions as a sign. If it is present, the body signifies male. If it is absent, the body signifies as not male.

Heggen’s performance also demonstrates that this subjective deviation cannot simply be undone and that we cannot simply choose to see it one way or the other. The different perspectives presented are not equally visible. Yet, her performance does make a change in the sense that it denaturalizes the dominant perspective and invites what Kaja Silverman (1996) has termed productive looking.

Silverman acknowledges that it may very well be that there is nothing we can consciously do to prevent certain projections from occurring over and over again in an almost mechanical manner. That does not mean though, that it is not possible to make a change or, as she calls it, ‘to make the ethical operative:’

The ethical becomes operative not at the moment when unconscious desires and phobias assume possession of our look, but in a subsequent moment, when we take stock of what we have just ‘seen’ and attempt – with an inevitably limited self-knowledge – to look again differently. Once again, then, the moment of conscious agency is written under the sign of Nachträglichkeit, or deferred action (Silverman 1996: 173).

It is this reconsideration, this becoming aware of the relationship between seers and seen, that can turn looking into productive looking, and that can turn confusing experiences on the post-dramatic stage into a political act.

According to Silverman, one way to make the ethical operative is theatricalization. Theatricalization can be used to show bodies that, within the current symbolic order, appear as non-ideal in the guise of the ideality they lack. At the same time explicit theatricality helps to understand this ideality “as a garment rather than the body itself” (Silverman 1996: 103), that is, it helps us to understand the appearance of bodies as the effect of signs, signs we read and interpret, and that get their meaning within a frame of reference, rather than as something essentially given within them.

In Looking for Peter, the theatricalization of the penis, its appearance as sign rather than given, confronts the audience with a process of framing as it is at work within its own looking: where is the border between what you
think you see and what is actually there to be seen? Is it possible to see the difference between the powder puff bulge and the bulge of the male member? What is actually there to be seen and where do your own projections, desires, and denials begin? Constantly shifting their behavior between male and female, human and animal, the dancers' performances question distinctions between nature and culture, sex and gender, what is there to be seen and what is produced by our culturally determined look.

The performance does not provide the audience with a clear frame through which to understand what is there to be seen on stage. Instead, the performance highlights ambiguity as we seem to be able to see everything 'as it is' and yet feel that our vision is somehow 'framed,' that we are not really free. *Looking for Peter* makes us as seers aware of perspective as something within which we are implicated and that guides our looking, as though someone was looking over our shoulder and directing what we see and don't see. This 'someone' shows us the world according to an invisible logic, and since this logic will determine what becomes visible and how, a special strategy is needed to expose this agency. Gonnie Heggen manages to do so by means of a strategy that Majorie Garber has called *empowered transvestism*.

**Empowered Transvestism** — Garber explains the meaning of her notion of empowered transvestism with the help of a video clip by Madonna. In the clip that accompanied the song *Express Yourself*, Madonna imitates Michael Jackson. Dressed up in a double-breasted suit and Jackson's famous white socks and shiny black men's shoes, she dances in a style directly imitative of Jackson, mimicking many of his moves including his trade mark crotch grabbing. When performed by Jackson, this move has not been considered offensive or objectionable. Performed by Madonna, it gave rise to controversies and was considered to be obscene.

Madonna is a famous female star who is impersonating a famous male star who is celebrated for his androgynous looks and his dancing style. Why is it shocking when she grabs her crotch, repeating as she does so a gesture so familiar to anyone who has watched a two-year-old male child reassuring himself of his intactness? Not because it is unseemly for a woman to do this – although it may be so, to some people – but because what she is saying, in doing so, is: I am not intact, he is not intact; I am intact, this is what intact is (Garber 1992: 127).

In the case of Jackson, the challenged gesture can be understood as a confirmation of what he has. Madonna derives her pleasure from squeezing what she hasn't got, or has she? She imitates Michael Jackson's looks and behavior and demonstrates how this masquerade gives her pleasure. This pleasure derives not from pretending to have what she has not got. She does not pretend to be Jackson, she performs like him. Neither is what she is doing a female masquerade aiming at seducing someone who has got what she does not have. Instead, she seems to enjoy performing herself as she is.
Analogously, in *Looking for Peter* the installment of the powder puff as penis does not happen on the quiet, suggesting an attempt to pass for real. The installment happens front stage, and at arms length from the first row of spectators. While doing this, the dancers look the audience in the eyes as if trying to figure out their response. The dancers show that they know that they show, that they know that they are being watched, and that they like it. Like Madonna, they present their game openly, thrusting their pelvis and seeming to take pleasure in their performance. The audience responds with nervous giggling.

"Of course I lack (the penis)," is what Madonna seems to say. "So what? That does not mean that my being is necessarily driven by wanting to have (this penis). More than that, it is only from the point of view of someone who has, that I can appear to be lacking and wanting to have. I can only appear as wanting to have from the point of view of someone who is driven by castration anxiety, that is, from the point of view of someone who interprets my being different as lack."

With their acts of empowered transvestism, Madonna and Gonnie Heggen show the focus on either the penis or the phallus as being opposed to lack and, therefore, to what we all want to have, itself to be a masquerade that serves to veil something else. Their performance suggests that the focus on lack as the driving force behind a continuous desire to get what one does not have, serves to veil the fact that the vanishing point keeping the symbolic order together is not the fear of lack or castration, but the fear of its discovery. Both Madonna and Heggen's performance suggest that it is not castration anxiety that keeps the symbolic order together, but the way in which castration anxiety goes unquestioned. This is the real vanishing point hidden behind the continuous reiteration of scenarios that re-enact this childhood sexual theory – the phallic myth about the female organ.

This is not to deny the power of castration anxiety within the current symbolic order, nor is it to deny the usefulness of the concept of castration anxiety to understand the way experience and meaning comes into being in interaction with cultural artifacts such as for example Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* or Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde*. But it is to argue that performances like Madonna's or Gonnie Heggen's point to the need to understand both the Freudian and the Lacanian model of the subject in relation to the discursive practices which defined their immediate context, and which continue to prevail. That is, they point to the need to understand that, what in their models appears as primordial wholeness preceding absence or lack, is not something given, but is itself a product of the symbolic order. Madonna and Gonnie Heggen’s empowered transvestism points to the need to understand the perspective within which castration anxiety can appear as such a central term. Whose interests are being served by its unquestioned position?

Although at first it may seem that castration anxiety poses a threat to those who have, and can therefore be castrated, this is in fact not the case. The presupposed link between having and a (supposed) primordial unity turns those who have into the winners. To put it in Freudian terms, the little boy's
fear of lack gets projected onto the little girl, turning her state of being different from him into lack and confirming his superiority. Because she is missing what is important to him, he assumes that she is driven by a desire to have what he has. It is only because this vision is then imposed on the girl as well, that she can begin to understand her being different in terms of lack.

What is at issue in penis envy is not some biological inferiority. The attribution of superiority and presence to the penis, and inferiority or lack to the clitoris, occurs from within patriarchal culture. It is, as Silverman points out, only after the subject has arrived at an understanding of the privileged status afforded to men and the de-privileged status afforded to women within the current symbolic order, that sexual difference can be read in the way suggested by Freud. It is only retroactively that anatomy can be confused with destiny. This confusion performs a vital ideological function because it serves to naturalize or biologize what would otherwise be open to question (Silverman 1983: 142).

The Lacanian distinction between penis and phallus suggests the possibility of undoing this naturalization, and thereby overcoming the a-symmetry between the sexes. Neither men nor women have the phallus. They both want the phallus because the phallus stands for what they lack. Yet only the Other has the phallus; the subject, whatever organ he or she may have, is symbolically castrated. This ‘Other’ is an ideal other to whom we contribute what we lack. We are symbolically castrated because we have fallen from a supposed primary condition of being at one with the world. Instead our connection with the world that surrounds us is always mediated through the symbolic order into which we are born. This symbolic order provides us with our ways of making meaning, but at the same time it implies alienation from what is presumed to be our origin and from what might be called the origin of meaning.

In practice, the distinction between penis and phallus appears to be more complicated and has been the subject of vehement discussion. The signifier phallus sounds and looks differently than the signifier penis. It produces different associations. But within the current symbolic order it also always refers to the penis. “Despite Lacan’s repeated reassertions that the penis is not the phallus, it is clear that there is a very intimate and important relation between the two” (Silverman 1983: 185). Silverman points out that, within Lacan’s own texts, the signifier phallus sustains two different meanings, neither of which entirely maintains its autonomy from the penis. On the one hand, the phallus appears as the signifier of ‘the fullness of being,’ of those things which have been partitioned off from the subject during various stages of its constitution, and which will never be restored to it. On the other hand, the phallus is a signifier for the cultural privileges and positive values which define male subjectivity within patriarchal society, but from which the female subject remains isolated (Silverman 1983: 183–184).
Some might wish to polarize penis and phallus into a neat opposition, but it is hard to polarize synonyms. Furthermore, as Jane Gallop (1988) remarks, such attempts to remake language fit to one's own theoretical needs, as if language were merely a tool one could use, bespeaks a very un-Lacanian view of language:

The Lacanian's desire clearly to separate *phallus* from *penis*, to control the meaning of the signifier *phallus*, is precisely symptomatic of their desire to have the phallus, that is, the desire to be at the center of language, at its origin. And their inability to control the meaning of the word *phallus* is evidence of what Lacan calls symbolic castration (Gallop 1988: 126, italics in the text).

The desire to control the meaning of the signifier phallus is itself a manifestation of the symbolic castration that sets the Lacanian model in motion. In this model, the presupposed primordial unity functions like the notion of origin in metaphysics, or the vanishing point in perspective. Like the notion of origin in metaphysics, this notion of primordial unity is posed as a primary presence and as such it helps to keep the system of differences within the symbolic order in place. But, as Rotman points out, this primary presence owes its status from the system it is supposed to precede. It can appear as primary only from within the system. Seen this way, the replacement of the penis with the phallus functions like a 'recovery narrative,' that helps to preserve the dream of original fullness by projecting it outside the symbolic order. Such a presumed original state is, as *Looking for Peter* demonstrates, itself a product of culture, a projection screen. Projected outside the symbolic order it helps to keep the differences within the system in place.

Again, this is not to say that we can simply change the invisible perspective that underlies how the world becomes visible at will. But critical gestures like those made by Madonna and by Gonnie Heggen can help to 'make the ethical operative,' by alerting us to aspects of this perspective and how they mediate in what we think we see. This perspective is kept together by the tendency to reduce heterogeneity to a clear-cut opposition between self and other, and a potential multitude of differences to the opposition of plenitude and lack, presence and absence, as well as the many other binary oppositions that structure dominant ways of seeing and ways of thinking, including what is still the dominant model of the subject.
1 — This third term involved in the way our culturally determined look 'takes place' is crucial to Silverman's rereading of Lacan and will be discussed at length in the following chapter.


7 — Original in Dutch: "een vrolijk esoterisch boswezentje dat van alle godsdiensten een hapje heeft genomen en niets heeft doorgeslikt zodat het onbekommerd zijn dwaallicht kan laten schijnen over alles wat groeit en bloeit" Ariejan Korteweg, *De Volkskrant*, November 19, 1996.