

*Shimmering Images:  
On Transgender Embodiment and  
Cinematic Aesthetics*

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In one continuous motion, my idea of myself and who I am turns inside out, like a pond that flips upside down in the spring, when the cold winter water slides under, and the earth-warmed bottom water rises. The underlife comes to the surface. All those years I was no obedient asexual girl, but a restless lover searching for the lost garden, that place of male woman and female man. The mythic place before the Fall, before Adam was shaped from clay by Lilith, and Lilith chased out and forgotten, before Eve was torn from Adam's side and forced to lie down under him. From the beginning I have wanted you. I have wanted to sit beside you on our bed, touch you, feed you the jewels of pomegranate torn from the flesh of our lives. I have wanted to walk with you in that place where we are both at once, to lie down with you under the trees that have not yet begun to flame with the dividing sword, by the water that shimmers with heat rising, risen to the light.

Minnie Bruce Pratt, *s/he*, p. 104

Cinema's greatest power may be its ability to evacuate meanings and identities, to proliferate resemblances without sense or origin. ... There is no structuring lack, no primordial division, but a continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my own body and the appearances and disappearances, the mutations and perdurances, of the bodies and images on screen. The important distinction is not the hierarchical, binary one between bodies and images, or between the real and its representations. It is rather a question of discerning multiple and continually varying interactions among what can be defined indifferently as bodies and as images: degrees of stillness and motion, of action and passion, of clutter and emptiness, of light and dark.

Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p. 255-256

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## Introduction

The cover image I selected for my dissertation, entitled “Chimera” (2007), by multi-media artist Tobaron Waxman, helps introduce the main theoretical motivations for this project. The title suggests the image should be understood as a mythological figure, or at least as a contemporary comment on such a figure. Historically, a chimera is the monstrous fusion of parts from a lion, snake, and hawk; however, in popular culture the chimera has come to connote foolish and ridiculous fantasies.



“Chimera” (2007), Tobaron Waxman

The widespread arms of the figure in Waxman’s underwater photograph suggest a beastly combination of bird and fish. The foreshortened framing that breaks one’s view of the figure’s body, cropping one eye, the left arm, and everything down from the torso, emphasizes the other, missing parts of the figure -- perhaps parts that might be unexpected were they to move into the frame. The ambiguity extends to the scars that, though closest to the viewer, are out of focus. Rather than a born chimera, this one seems to have been created. The question then becomes by whom and through what means? The photograph thus investigates agency as well as perception. Furthermore, by placing the figure into an ‘otherworldly’ environment, it displaces while recalling the earthly realm. The underwater figure threatens to erupt towards the surface, towards the shimmering sunlight. Or, alternatively, it is looking down

towards the viewer. Its hovering movement stilled in the shot, is the chimera moving towards, or fleeing from, the viewer?

The undecidability of motion introduces tension in the image's suspended narrative, while the undecidability of form suspends the viewer's making sense of the figure's gender. Aware of one's troubled sight, being chimerical shifts from the figure's body to the viewer's perception of that body. In other words, the contemporary notion of seeing a fantastic figure redirects the historical sense of a monstrosity. Amending the idiom of "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," "Chimera" suggests that monstrosity arises from cultural norms, which produce or distort perception.

In the introduction to *Herculine Barbin*, the memoirs of a 'hermaphrodite,' Michel Foucault comments on the emerging social perception of monstrous and foolish embodiments, which he traces from early modernity onward. Particularly changes of sex or multiple sexes increasingly become considered as "insulting to 'the truth'" (x). The ideal form of sex as singular became equated with truth. A manner of acting that involved more than one sex or its expression, he writes, was not considered "adequate to reality," and is henceforth "seen as belonging more or less to the realm of chimeras" (x).<sup>1</sup> The figure that embodies chimerical ridiculousness in both Foucault's analysis and Waxman's photograph is the transsexual.<sup>2</sup> In "Chimera," the figure bears the markings of a key female-to-male transsexual procedure: reconstructive chest surgery. Hence, the photograph suggests that gender coherence, and the potential for gender confusion through transitioning or non-normative expression, is of ontological as well as epistemological consequence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Chapter One, I return to this passage in Foucault to discuss the play of truth and falsity in the telling of sexual secrets.

<sup>2</sup> Though it is not appropriate here to explain in detail, Foucault's study of Barbin's conjectured hermaphroditism recalls and to an extent reproduces the early entanglements of inversion theory relying on the notion of physical and psychic hermaphroditism that enfolds sexological histories of both transsexuality and homosexuality. I elaborate further in Chapter One. See also Merl Storr and Jay Prosser's comments in *Sexology Uncensored (75-77)*.

<sup>3</sup> The terms transgender, transsexual, and trans will come under discussion throughout the study. In brief, "transgender" came to function in the early 1990s as an umbrella term for all types of non-normative expressions of gender or sexed embodiment, including transsexual, transvestite, drag queen or king, and genderqueer. It can also refer to someone who changes his or her expression of everyday gender through the manipulation of non-genital signs (See *Virginia Prince: Pioneer of Transgendering*). To mark the distinction between the term as inclusive or exclusive, I occasionally use 'trans' as the umbrella term to refer to the larger field of gender variance. Since this term can also carry a conceptual connotation it often appears as trans subject or trans subjectivity. My working definition of "transsexualism" is that it is a condition diagnosable for someone who has a gender identity – their sense of maleness and femaleness – that differs from their anatomical sex. The clash may cause such emotional pain that the person seeks gender (sex) reassignment, often resulting in permanent changes

“Chimera,” I wish to suggest, engages history and contemporary culture, issues of subjectivity and knowledge, the visual and the affective. That engagement is characteristic of the different cultural objects I engage with in the course of this dissertation. My corpus mainly comprises of mainstream and alternative erotic film and video, in which transgender embodiment is intimately at stake. Primarily created by transgender artists or allies, the audio-visual works mobilize cinema’s capacity for depicting movement to a spectator, for animating its subject, and for creating a new aesthetic form out of piecemeal parts. Hence, these images may be understood in part to respond to the overarching notion of transsexuality as a chimerical embodiment. In this way, they can help us work towards developing a theoretical framework that adequately addresses trans embodiment and sexuality. In addition, the inclusion of trans challenges to film and embodiment theory presents an opportunity to the fields of epistemology and ontology to develop and refine their relationship to one another. Each chapter advances theoretical pathways in which one might understand the interrelation of being and knowing, particularly through the rubrics of sex, gender, and sexuality.

These works help me to reflect on salient themes arising from the individual and social perception of trans subjectivity, especially when the subject’s body is displayed in an erotic or sexually explicit manner. “Chimera” reveals a bare chest and hints at further nudity. The image directs our attention to skin, fleshy parts, and scars. I select films with sexually explicit content, imagery in which the trans body risks becoming uncovered and being misperceived, to examine negotiations between the entering of the field of gender representation, the desire for recognition, and the risk of abjection. My contention is that these works of (self)representation shift the discussion of transgenderism as concerning sex and gender primarily or exclusively. My research focuses on the ways in which the presentation of one’s material self may be thought of in terms of experimenting with formal elements of embodiment, which may -- or indeed may not -- be inscribed within gender signification. This approach also enables the juxtaposition of film and transgender studies through the shared concept of the image, perceived and made meaningful within one’s embodied perspective. The

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to genitalia and other gender markers. “Transman” designates a masculine cross-identification and “transwomen” a feminine cross-identification. See Susan Stryker’s “The Transgender Issue: An Introduction” and *Transgender History* or Stephen Whittle’s *The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities*. For a brief overview see Roz Kaveney’s “Why trans is in and tranny is out.”

selected corpus suggests and clarifies the import of a shimmering quality, which is associated in key theoretical and artistic texts with both cinematic images and the body images of trans subjects. Though I suggest a specified trans subjectivity, shimmering images form and inform a contested field of knowability that bears on subjectivity more broadly.

### **Differencing Transgender Studies**

As an opening image, “Chimera” recalls the most common (mis)perception of transsexual people: the hybrid figure suspended between light and dark, man and woman, truth and falsity. “Chimera” pictures the difficulty of perceiving a being that shimmers, oscillating between lightness and darkness, masculinity and femininity, wavering in time and space. As Foucault clarifies, the ontological suspension of the body incites an epistemological crisis of truth. In taking these ontologies of transgender embodiment seriously – that is, not writing transgender off as mere interruption --, this ‘crisis’ of truth appears less a deviation, than another kind of knowing that calls forth a new epistemology. Beyond assessing the various blocks to perception with the aid of theorists such as Marx, Freud, and Walter Benjamin, I also seek to elaborate a trans-informed model of knowing. These theoretical paradigms are not borrowed and returned in pristine condition; the cultural objects and trans theory also imprint and challenge each framework which with they engage.

Therefore, these representational objects and practices effectively direct my study’s investigation of “transgender effects,” the perceptions that are, in Stryker’s words, “the conditions that cause transgender phenomena to stand out in the first place, and that allow gender normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed, ambient background” (“(De)Subjugated” 3). Rather than solely focus on the notion of transgender itself, a focus that might over-emphasize the difference of being trans, my analysis seeks to examine transgender effects because, in Stryker’s words, “these phenomena reveal the operations of systems and institutions that simultaneously produce various possibilities of viable personhood and eliminate others” (“(De)Subjugated” 3-4).

Rita Felski argues in “Fin de siècle, Fin de sexe: Transsexuality, Postmodernism, and the Death of History” that the undecidability of sexual or gendered suspension insures that the figure of the transsexual serves as a metaphor for cultural crisis in

general.<sup>4</sup> Though the epigram “fin de siècle, fin de sexe” derives from the late nineteenth century, Felski argues that, from within the pre-millennium postmodern moment, “gender emerges as a privileged symbolic field for the articulation of diverse fashionings of history and time” (338). The transgendered subject she finds in the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Donna Haraway, for instance, is marked by an alliance with either an apocalyptic or redemptive metaphor for historical time.<sup>5</sup> Whatever meaning its bellwether existence suggests to its interpreter, the “fin de sexe” of transgender, like its mythic cousin the chimera, serves to symbolize something else.<sup>6</sup>

In Sandy Stone’s early evaluation of transgenderism in medical and cultural scholarship, she surmises, “[t]he people who have no voice in this theorizing are the transsexuals themselves” (“The *Empire*” 229). Stating the matter more dramatically, Vivian Namaste argues in *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* that particularly queer theory is devoid of attention to transgender subjectivity, even though its figuration of queerness privileges a trans figure. Namaste argues that the effective erasure of transgendered people’s everyday lives and struggles through the reduction of transsexuality to allegory (Butler) or a mere tropological figure (Garber) “robs transgendered people of dignity and integrity” (23). Moreover, those ‘theoretical’ appropriations foreclose the ability to conceptualize the ‘real’ violence that transsexuals face (13). For Stone and Namaste, the theoretical appearance of “the transsexual” signals a cultural fantasy of mythological proportions, installed at the expense of insight into the range of transgender practices and subcultural groupings, including their differentiated struggles.

My contribution, though not sociological, is similarly concerned with the theoretical capture of trans subjectivities and transformative practices. Rather than turn to first-hand experiences, however, I choose to examine a variety of cultural

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Marjorie Garber examines the recurrent fascination with cross-dressing and other trans practices as emblems of cultural anxiety with regard to sexual difference, which she attributes to homophobia.

<sup>5</sup> Though Felski establishes this symbolic work on the part of transgendered figures, she herself does not offer the kind of theorizing that would do justice to the agency of trans people. Garber produces a similar reading of cultural anxiety that disregards the meaning attributed by transgender people to transitioning or non-normative gender practices.

<sup>6</sup> Kate More and Stephen Whittle’s co-edited *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the fin de siècle* offers a trans-informed perspective of the state of gender at the millennium juncture, see especially each of their introductions.



productions that enter the discussion between subject, cultural discourse, and theory. My cultural framing challenges each ‘speaker’ in the encounter -- including myself -- to take seriously the concerns voiced by and dealt with in commercial, independent, museum, and community-minded artistic projects. My hope is that the research better reflects the combined wishes and struggles of the object under study, de-centering theory via equal attention to the subject as well as the object, and adjusting a dominance that has come under particular scrutiny when that object of study is transgenderism.

Pragmatically and prudently, Susan Stryker distinguishes between “the study of transgender phenomena” and the field of “transgender studies” (“(De)Subjugated” 12). The former was initially comprised of the immense body of clinical literature that constructed transgender phenomena as a pathology, dating back to the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States.<sup>7</sup> As Felski, Stone, Stryker, and Namaste all make clear, the attitude of speaking *on behalf of* trans peoples can be identified in different disciplines.<sup>8</sup> A change in speaker as well as a change in the object of analysis distinguishes transgender studies scholarship from sexological, philosophical, and cultural studies frameworks.<sup>9</sup> My approach seeks to legitimate the experiential knowledge that is presented in transgender accounts and representations. Yet, I also seek to avoid the naive realism that comes with pure description and the naive

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<sup>7</sup> Today it also includes the literature leading up to and following the 1980 diagnosis of “gender identity disorder” (GID), which appeared in the *Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, the standard text for describing through differential diagnosis current known pathologies. The defining features of GID refer to what was commonly seen as transsexualism: a persistent cross-gender identification and a persistent discomfort with or sense of inappropriateness of one’s sex as assigned at birth. For a discussion of whether transgender is best classified as a medical or a psychiatric illness, see “Transgender as Mental Illness: Nosology, Social Justice, and the Tarnished Golden Mean” by R. Nick Gorton.

<sup>8</sup> One can also cite fields such as anthropology and sociology as negligent of trans-informed theoretical frameworks. For such critiques, see for example, David Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*, Aren Z. Aizura’s “Of borders and homes: the imaginary community of (trans)sexual citizenship” and Katrina Roen “Transgender Theory and Embodiment: The Risk of Racial Marginalisation.” For a broader analysis, consider the article by Dean Spade and Sel Wahng “Transsecting the Academy,” which discusses ways to forge political alliance and mount social change in the trans-phobic university setting.

<sup>9</sup> Further, Stryker states in an earlier writing that this new critical field should be “predicated on an explicit recognition of transgendered people as active agents seeking to represent themselves through any number of strategies rather than as passive objects of representation in a few dominant discourses” (“The Transgender Issue” 148). The difference in “transgender studies,” then, is a methodological one in which the subject and object have first say. In this way, transgender studies’ attention to the subject is similar to cultural analysis’ attention to the object. An engaged relationship to cultural objects, according to Bal, involves a commitment to its terms, “to the ways the work solicits its viewer” (“You do” 60). As analysis develops according to the object’s promptings and curtailments, the analyst’s role is to conduct “an encounter in which the object’s *specificity* can shine,” writes Bal (emphasis in original; “You do” 64).

subjectivism that accompanies self-description.<sup>10</sup> To borrow Stryker's characterization of transgender studies, my project "is as concerned with material conditions as it is with representational practices, and often pays particular close attention [to] the interface between the two" (3). Each chapter takes one to three case studies of film, video, or other artistic works into consideration to work through the theoretical and aesthetic implications of circumstances, in which specific embodiments may be difficult to perceive as they are understood as contrary to truth. Pursuing an interrogation of truth as it hinges on a sexed or gendered being, my research also discusses the broader framework of Enlightenment empiricism that invests in the notion of 'to see is to know,' a crucially contentious issue in film studies as well. By pairing transgender practices with practices of film, I am able to suggest ways in which both aesthetic practices attack and undermine scientific knowledge, particularly its construction of sex and sexuality that hinges on either discursive or visual evidence.

My study departs from "Chimera" and its suggestion of seeing oneself seeing the trans body as a chimerical figure, an awareness that opens towards seeing differently. It demands an analysis of the material conditions of a vision that takes into account aesthetic experiences of perception in interaction with the historical perception of truth. Unlike theories of transgenderism in which the subject is missing or elided, the photograph places the trans subject front and center; indeed, almost too close for comfort. Doing so, it refuses to disappear or keep a friendly distance, forcing the perhaps long overdue confrontation with fleshy materiality. "Chimera" also speaks of maintaining critical attention to questions of embodiment and positionality, which Stryker finds in a growing body of interdisciplinary academic research, research which might be receptive to the insights of transgender studies ("(De)Subjugated" 12). Finally, "Chimera" suggests that perceptual truth lies not behind, above, or to the side of an image, in some unmediated materiality, but depends on the working conditions of adjacent, connected images to come into focus, though that focus may well shimmer. My intent for this study is to analyze those images that enable others to be seen. The movement-filled image of shimmering light grants the perceptibility and recognition of trans bodies.

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<sup>10</sup> For a broader view of this problematic, see Mieke Bal's discussion of new epistemologies in art history, cultural anthropology, and museum studies that seek to avoid the authority of 'objectivism' and the potential for 'subjectivism' in the activity of description and interpretation, Chapter five: "First Person, Second Person, Same Person" in *Double Exposures: the Subject of Cultural Analysis*.

## **Towards the Shimmering Light**

As Stryker predicted, the interdisciplinary nature of research in transgender studies results in “definitional wrangling” over who deploys what terms with what meaning (“The Transgender Issue” 148). This is especially the case with what being transsexual or transgender may mean, or look like. For instance, Henry Rubin’s phenomenological approach focuses on the transsexual’s “desire for coherence and legibility” of the body image, suggesting that the endpoint of transition matters most (“Phenomenology” 273). Yet, Judith Butler summarizes Kate Bornstein’s queer view of transsexual practices as “a desire for transformation itself, a pursuit of identity as a transformative exercise, an example of desire itself as a transformative activity” (*Undoing* 8). Bornstein advances a theory that emphasizes movement for movement’s sake rather than the desire for conclusion. Seeming to combine the focus on movement and a destination, Zachary Nataf writes that “[f]or at least a period of time, if not as a goal in itself, the transgendered/ transsexual body in transition is unstable, mutating and intermediate in its sex/gender attributes” (“Skin-Flicks” 173).

Transgender studies’ ontological interest lies in accounting for what Brian Massumi has described as the movements between the grid system of identity (*Parables* 1-4). The “relation of movement and rest,” claims Massumi, “is another way of saying transition” (15). Such relations of movement form the basis of gender transitions, which are usually only thought of in terms of the take-off and landing points of the crossing, as in male-becoming-woman. However, the thing that defines that trans body is not movement, only the beginning and endpoints of movement. I wish to contribute to an understanding of qualitative transformation, and hence potential for change, that lies at the heart of both transgender embodiment and cinematic experience. Just as sex change involves an undertaking of 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 resulting transformation in relation to technologically crafted (body) images may be integral to shifting his or her own identification. As part of my interdisciplinary and inter-medial commitment, I engage critically with select strands of film theory to assess its “gender flexibility,” its ability to account for qualitative transformation rather than with bodies that are distributed on a (sexed) grid. A theory of movement and transformation thus utilizes concepts associated with aesthetics in place of less precise identity terms, such as male/female,

masculine/feminine, man/woman, which fall short of grasping movement and cause “grid lock” (Massumi, *Parables* 3).

Perhaps the reader will feel similar to Stryker, who exclaims in a moment of frustration, “I’m so tired of this ceaseless movement” (“My Words” 251). A desire for stable identity, to echo Judith Butler, seems crucial to realize a livable life, which requires various degrees of stability and legibility (*Undoing* 8). The desire for survival, the search for a livable life, as Butler suggests, might involve being undone by gender, in both good and bad ways (1). She writes, “I may feel that without some recognizability [of gender] I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable” (4). The doing of gender, Butler reminds us, is “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (1). A scene involves a social world: one does not “do” gender alone but in concert with or in tension with the socially articulated and thus changeable terms of recognition (1-2). The shifting foundation of trans experience and trans scholarship may be the point; its maneuverability may enable a more livable life. The task of survival -- which involves the embrace of multiple and conflicting terms and desires -- is integral to the transgender lives lived in the face of adversity and struggle. That task is also carried out by scholarship in transgender studies, which emerges as a critique interrogating the terms by which life is constrained and may also be enabled by recognizability.

In “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” Stryker describes the particular suspension from sociality that comes with gender transition.

Like the monster [of Frankenstein], I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (“My Words” 245)

The trans-sexed body transgresses the terms of the human; its mutations render the subject excluded from intelligible humanity. Yet, as Stryker claims, the struggle to exist, to become sexed and gendered through the citation of norms, produces elusive achievements in the midst of the “ceaseless movement” of gender. To abandon the unbearable everyday images of herself -- “self-mutilated deformity, a pervert, a mutant” -- the essay turns from theory to the fantastic realm of a waking dream (251).

Stryker's poetic interlude envisions her struggle in similar terms as Waxman's "Chimera." Stryker's stream of consciousness and formal stanzas offer an extended metaphor of how nature, read: naturalized sex-gender alignment, exerts a hegemonic oppression on her body. The sensation of being trapped in monstrous flesh, she suggests, feels like being trapped underwater. Desperate for air, she swims upwards to the "shimmering light" dancing on the surface, only to find more water: "Inside and out I am surrounded by it" (Stryker 251). Describing the experience in first person narration, Stryker becomes a swimmer caught in the ceaseless motion of gender's ubiquitous waters. She encounters infinite planes of this shimmering light, caught in an endless *mise en abyme*: "I break the plane of the water's surface over and over again" (251).<sup>11</sup> Reaching the shimmering at the edge of the water only pitches the swimmer ever deeper into an abyss of images. The drama of the scene is derived from the swimmer's desire to survive, while remaining caught within the imagery of gender. Here the shimmering of light proves to be another barrier to, rather than a promise of, survival. It stands for the terms of gender recognition, which both enable and constrain a livable life.

Stryker later introduces an inverted version of the Narcissus myth, in which the image-seeking figure is placed under the cultural waters, drowning ("this water annihilates me" [251]), while Narcissus dies of thirst safely on land for fear of shattering his own image. Deciding to embrace the 'outside' image of gender, Stryker writes, "I will become the water/If I cannot change my situation I will change myself" (251). To survive, Stryker's figure must 'recognize' herself again by way of changing herself. The swimmer turns into water to escape the conundrum (251). Like the transsexual's tentative embrace of gender, Stryker's swimmer learns to live with the *mise-en-abyme* of gender, moving furiously through its medium. This "magical transformation" materializes the swimmer as a fluid form, identifying with the *mise-en-abyme*'s flow across shimmering planes (251). Stryker's identification with the shimmering surface provides the trans body with a material form, albeit a watery one. She writes, "I am groundless and boundless movement," now signaling that the swimmer transforms into, no longer merely 'reflects,' a shimmering body. If for Stryker, flesh is fluid, that suggests that a transsexual embodiment displaces the opposition between substance and surface. Becoming-flow, the figure demonstrates

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<sup>11</sup> The term *mise-en-abyme* refers to the optical illusion of an infinitely receding image repeated within the same image (*OED*).

that the desire for transformation can be made compatible with one's desire for coherence.

In another transformation, the water surges, now becoming a wave of rage, a "force that moves me" (252). In the final lines, this drowning scene gives way to a birth, in which sensations and affects beget form: "In birthing my rage,/my rage has rebirthed me" (252). Stryker reflects that, "the rage itself is generated by the subject's situation," the situation of becoming severed from representation (252). Language organizes matter so that the transsexual body "simultaneously eludes definitive representation and demands its own perpetual rearticulation in symbolic terms" (252). Thus, in Stryker's view, the transsexual subject faces the problem of language failing to capture its materiality (253). The poem's articulation of this rage in a "howl" confronts an empty silence, "in this place without language," the place and time of the transsexual (252). In response to the trap of language, the swimmer with "transfigured flesh" utilizes her embodiment and its affective potency as an imaging tool for appearing at the surface of legibility. In Stryker's vision, trans subjects seek representation on their own terms, move toward the shimmering light, and access a plane of representation that at once enables and constrains a livable life.<sup>12</sup>

### **Words and Images**

William J. T. Mitchell points out that the phrase "word and image" articulates a commonplace distinction between types of representation, "a shorthand way of dividing, mapping, and organizing the field of representation" (*Picture Theory* 3). The distinction is crucial in Stryker's appeal to images as recourse to the limitations of language. "The inability of language to represent the transgendered subject's movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure," she writes, might be countered by the transsexual's often successful citation of "the culture's visual norms of gendered embodiment" ("My Words" 247). This citation becomes subversive for Stryker when, "through a provisional use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we

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<sup>12</sup> The book *Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community* also discusses the shimmering quality of visual media, however, author Jennifer Deger does so in relation to aboriginal ontologies of being and their culturally informed modes of perception. In her anthropological study the adjectival term "shimmering" receives no attention as a potential concept in itself. My interdisciplinary purview differs radically in that I mobilize shimmering as the notion that I use to move 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.

nevertheless occupy” (247). Transgender experiences and practices indicate that one’s appearance may cite one gender norm, while the claimed gender identity cites another. As Stryker’s poetry and Waxman’s image in combination with its title make clear, the relation and at times non-relation between word and image forms a central concern for transgender lives. My analysis of transgender representation attends to the particularities of word and image combinations that seek the legibility of what Stryker describes as the “shimmering light.” I particularly focus on those transgender aesthetics that might work to “undo” the images of raving monster and unintelligible chimera.

Therefore, I analyze representative combinations of images and words in visual texts as well as linguistic texts. The image/text problem, as Mitchell is at pains to point out in *Picture Theory*, is not solely “constructed ‘between’ the arts, the media, or different forms of representation, but [is] an unavoidable issue within the individual arts and media” (94). I am less interested in formal differences and similarities between arts, than in the singularity of the object’s negotiation of visuality and language and its ramifications for (trans)gender representation. The media of the objects that are part of each chapter mainly consist of film and video, but range from photography to sculpture, painting, poetry, memoir, and theory. As in art history and literary studies, Mitchell takes notice of the “[l]ong struggle of film studies to come up with an adequate mediation of linguistic and imagistic models for cinema and to situate the film medium in the larger context of visual culture” (*Picture Theory* 15). Film is an exemplary “mixed media,” staging a relationship between the visual and the verbal through audio and video tracks. In Gilles Deleuze’s words, “the most complete examples of the disjunction between seeing and speaking are to be found in the cinema” (*Foucault* 64).<sup>13</sup> I venture that the disjunction of seeing and speaking in the cinema may illuminate the relative disjunction between the transsexual’s seen self and identified self.

Though not explicitly addressed to the transgender context, the literature on the problem of representation may be mobilized to think in new ways about the relation of gender to perception in general. Foucault offers an axiom as a starting point. In

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<sup>13</sup> Mitchell proposes following Deleuze’s suggestion of cinema’s potential leading role in understanding and providing a conceptual model for the word and image relation, which he carries out in an analysis of the film *Sunset Boulevard* (*Picture Theory* 100-107). For an extended discussion by Deleuze of the relation between speech and vision, sound- and image-tracks, see “The Components of the Image,” in his *Cinema 2*.

writing on the painter René Magritte, Foucault develops the notion of the incommensurability between what we say and what we see, determining that “it is in vain that we say what we see,” and further that “what we see never resides in what we say” (*This is Not a Pipe* 9). Mitchell comments that while it may indeed be “in vain” to do so, “no vanity is more common” than the search for proper equivalents; yet, this search is not Foucault’s goal (*Picture Theory* 64). Foucault’s strategy of starting from an infinite relation between language and vision, Mitchell writes, allows representation to be seen as a dialectical, interactive field of forces (64-65). For trans representations, the desire to link or delink what one sees to what one says may be one way to understand the political and personal stake in representation.

Stryker, for one, suggests that trans scholarly interest should address the “wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages” (“The Transgender Issue” 149). She refers to the ‘links’ that align anatomy, assigned gender category, psychical identifications with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance or expression of gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions (149). With this definition, transgender embodiments may be understood as a field of interactive, dialectical forces. My approach to the problem of words and images is two-fold: to focus on an interdisciplinary method in the study of cinematic and bodily images as well as to anchor this method in an analysis of the power/knowledge nexus that informs the perception and recognition of gender. Each chapter achieves a balance between the consideration of film theory, transgenderism, subjectivity, and epistemology in varying proportions. The resulting intersection of these elements is largely due to the cultural object under consideration: some objects call for heightened attention to certain framing issues.<sup>14</sup>

Starting in Chapter One, “Secrecy,” I investigate what Foucault has termed the rift between the discursive and the non-discursive, between what Deleuze calls the sayable and the seeable (*Foucault* 48). The chapter opens up the issues at stake for

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<sup>14</sup> To explain more fully the practice of engaging an object’s specificity, Murat Aydemir recalls the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In *The Interpretation of Culture*, Geertz first uses the term cultural analysis for his research practice, the basis of which he describes as ‘thick description.’ Aydemir writes that “he approaches his objects as densely textured: they don’t reflect contextual givens but condense multiple frames of reference, discursive, social, aesthetic, economic, political, and so on” (“A Reaction” 39). The density of the object “resists full possession by description, contextualization or conceptual articulation,” which is why Aydemir asserts it can never be “just an example” (39). In sum, “objects problematize rather than illustrate” (Aydemir 39). The objects in my analysis transform from a subject matter to become a material subject, participating in the construction of theoretical views: they confront, divert, and elucidate a given disciplinary field as well as a researcher’s interpretation.



transgenderism in terms of a mirror or mimetic theory of knowledge through a search for the secret of (trans)sex in visual forms of *scientia sexualis*. I analyze expository statements cited in the medium of video works, examining a series of three sexually explicit videos that differently negotiate imaging and confessing a ‘real’ sex in the genres of pornography and documentary. In their experimental and artistic modes, 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). However, in all three, I examine the crack or fissure between what they say of the secret and what one can see of it, particularly whether that fissure is exacerbated, covered, or remains simply at odds.

Despite the apparent antinomy of word and image, my study assesses ways in which one might account for the overlap and imbrication of the visual and the verbal, in short, for aesthetic experience in the “composite” arts. In Chapter Two, “Fetishism,” the economic and political effects of a perceived overlap of word and thing, of value and material, is addressed through a case study of Buck Angel, the first commercial transmasculine porn star. Angel’s provocative embrace of sexual and commodity fetishism prompts a discussion of his popular website as well as the temporality of his participation in having a bronze, life-size statue cast by artist Marc Quinn. Quinn’s recent sculptures suggest that determining one’s embodiment and having access to one’s eroticism and its representation are poignant issues, if not the defining concerns of our age. By taking Angel as my prime example, I also wish to point to the historical “conflation of trans experience with MTF [*sic*] experience,” as Gayle Salamon rightly notes (*Assuming* 9). This conflation is particularly thorny when it comes to the understanding of trans sexuality as involving only transwomen and their paramours.

Besides those differences between MtF and FtM representation, representation by definition relies on a difference between the thing and its reproduction in an image. Such differences form the problematic of Chapter Three, “Cut,” in which I analyze the soma-cinematic strategies for materializing as well as bridging the abyss between man and woman in Lili Elbe’s account, *Man into Woman: The First Sex Change, A Portrait of Lili Elbe* (1933/2004). Though a literary work, I read it cinematically, paying attention to its editing as if it were the animation of Elbe in a biopic. As the text offers the first modern transsexual “portrait,” my interest lies in the ways in which surgery is mobilized by Elbe to claim an identity as a woman and in the ways

in which this surgical transformation is presented in her book. Elbe's struggle for representation also involves the struggle to create a work in which she might accede to the reader's threshold of recognizability. With the aid of Walter Benjamin's suggestion that cinema takes place in a surgical theatre, I discern the filmic aesthetics that Elbe's text calls upon for her animation, and their possible effects on the reader.

As Elbe's text attests, the disjunctions in cinema as well as in identification, underlie, indeed require, forms of connecting over the breach of word and image, a thing and its reflection, an issue which I deal with in Chapter Four, "Suture." Deleuze holds that "there is a continual relinking which takes place over the irrational break or crack," a process carried out by both aesthetic experience and artworks, particularly evident in cinema (*Foucault* 65). Together with Leone Knight's film *The Father is Nothing* (1992), I investigate the psychic and material implications of seeking resolution in terms of the literal surgical suture of the body and the psychic process of imaginary identification that Lacan describes as a kind of "suture." Turning to psychoanalysis might suggest a departure from the bodily realm; however, with the help of Kaja Silverman's and Maaïke Bleeker's refashioning of psychoanalytical identification to emphasize its bodily basis, this chapter extends the metaphor of cinema as a somatic-surgery.

In the fifth and final chapter, "Curiosity," I again track an organizing concept of trans experience and filmic aesthetics, this time dealing directly with the desire to know. The experimental, trans-genre film *Dandy Dust* (1998), directed by and starring Hans Scheirl, is driven by a highly curious and transgender character. The affect of curiosity appears as a force for transitioning both the character and the film's formats and genre styles. I investigate the ways in which the film's tactile and sensuous address to the spectator's body may inform a method of conducting cinematic research. *Dandy Dust's* mode of asking what a body can do, or be made to do, posits that the "carnal density of vision" (Crary), that is, the mediated and ideological context of one's embodiment, may also be central to the mundane task of research encounters. The final section meditates on the phenomenology of knowing, specifically the erotic, fleshy element that Freud names, but disavows to assert an ocularcentric mastery of knowledge. Following Sue Golding, I propose that through curiosity, one gains the ability to think otherwise, a survival technique to access livable epistemological conditions.

To some extent, this dissertation's attempt to understand the power of images for (trans) subjectivity participates in what Mitchell describes as the "pictorial turn" in contemporary scholarship, following Richard Rorty's characterization of "the linguistic turn" (*Picture Theory* 11). The emergence of images as a central topic of discussion in the humanities, Mitchell suggests, may be attributed to the growing critique of images in the age of the "spectacle" (Debord), through attention to "surveillance" (Foucault), and of this age's all-pervasive scene of image-making (13).<sup>15</sup> Mitchell advises that,

Whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial "presence": it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. (*Picture Theory* 16)

Specifically for this study, in an era of post-Lacanian film theory and post-performativity gender studies, the apparent bankruptcy of purely linguistic models for film as well as gender studies suggest more reasons for the weighted importance of the image in my dissertation.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the complex interplay between visibility, technologies, and bodies in the "picturing" of trans demands an interdisciplinary analysis. Mitchell's study of images, a kind of applied iconology, assesses that the difference between image and language is not reducible to mere formal matters, addressed in mono-disciplines (*Picture Theory* 5). Rather, the distinction is linked to deeply contested cultural values, "like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing; ... between sensory channels, traditions of representation, and modes of experience" (5). The analysis of those differences and their influence on strategies of representing (trans)gender transitional

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<sup>15</sup> Mitchell further elaborates the historicity of the turn: "On the one hand, it seems overwhelmingly obvious that the era of video and cybernetic technology, the age of electronic reproduction, has developed new forms of visual stimulation and illusionism with unprecedented powers. On the other hand, the fear of the image, the anxiety that the 'power of images' may finally destroy even their creators and manipulators, is as old as image-making itself... *What is specific to our moment is exactly this paradox*" (emphasis mine; *Picture Theory* 15).

<sup>16</sup> For various approaches to critiquing psychoanalytical film theory see Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body*, David Bordwell's *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, or Patricia MacCormack's *Cinesexuality*. As for gender studies, Iris van der Tuin's dissertation "Third Wave Materialism: New Feminist Epistemologies and the Generation of European Women's Studies" identifies gender scholars Karen Barad, Claire Colebrook, Sara Ahmed as all working in a new paradigm that theorize the co-constitutiveness of words and things, which she designates as new feminist materialism in that it refocuses on the matter and materiality of the body.

movements form the kernel of my study. Each chapter addresses the impact of self/other, telling/showing, and sense differentiation through concepts culled from psychoanalysis, phenomenology, affect theory, and cultural history, amongst others. My working premise is that no single paradigm of image theory can fully explain the truth-effects of images in relation to culture and changing epistemes. The object's specificity and the interest of the inquiry requires an evolving, and therefore changing, image theory. Each theoretical framework provides a different disciplinary take, but also offers new possibilities for thinking around and about visuality and its relation to words and images.

Clearly, then, this dissertation's study of shimmering images in relation to transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics should not be understood as concerned solely with the narrower concepts of vision and visuality.<sup>17</sup> Since image studies addresses a broader swath than the visual field and to avoid perpetuating the ideology of ocularcentricism, I employ the term of aesthetics, understood both in the sense of the formal qualities of visual and verbal images and aesthetic experience. For my purposes, aesthetics involve perceptual images, the sense data of appearances, but also the mental images of *fantasmata* as well as the verbal images of metaphors. Each chapter engages with a branch of film theory that offers an understanding of (trans)cinema aesthetics: in "Secrecy," scholarship on realism in documentary and pornographic genres are foregrounded; "Fetishism" examines the *fantasmatic* elements of pornography; the historicization of media aesthetics features in "Cut;" "Suture" negotiates Lacanian concepts imported into film theory guided by feminist film studies; and "Curiosity" focuses on the phenomenological 'carnal' body of film theory and its Freudian resonances.

Lastly, in developing a theory of shimmering images I may appear to call on a word – shimmering -- that refers to a visual effect. Though shimmering is in the first instance a visual effect of light, its occurrence in literary and theoretical texts by, for instance, Stryker, Foucault, Lacan, and Deleuze, as well as featuring in films, paintings, and photographs, indicates that "shimmering" might be taken as a "hyper-icon." Mitchell describes this concept as those images that function in a double sense: both as an image, and as a producer of images. Hyper-icons like Plato's cave or

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<sup>17</sup> See Hal Foster's introduction to the collection *Vision and Visuality* for an assessment of the terrain these terms purport to refer to, namely a natural sense and a culturally-enhanced quality, and the difficulty of separating one from the other, despite the disciplinary attempts to do so through psychology and art history, for example.

Locke's tabula rasa, claims Mitchell, are themselves "'scenes' or sites of graphic image-production, as well as verbal or rhetorical images (metaphors, analogies, likenesses)" (*Iconology* 162). The hyper-iconicity of shimmering, I propose, implies it appears as an image, such as in Stryker's poetic vision, as well as enable the production of gender images that are central to transgender embodiment and cinematic aesthetics. Hence, in the following series of chapters, I develop a theory of shimmering images as a hyper-icon, arguing for its ontological role in the constitution of a perceived subject as well as its epistemic function in the production of an intelligible subject.

## 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 interdisciplinarity 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 Maaïke 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 Scheirl. 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.