Groping Theory
Haptic Cinema and Trans-Curiosity in Hans Scheirl's Dandy Dust

ELIZA STEINBOCK

In "Groping Theory," Netherlands-based cinema studies scholar Eliza Steinbock considers affective engagement with media through a discussion of Dandy Dust, a film directed by the Austrian filmmaker and artist Hans Scheirl. Dandy Dust is the anti-story of Dandy, a character whose gender remains permanently in question. As Steinbock points out, Dandy Dust doesn't have a linear narrative—it meshes sci-fi, splatter, porn, art film, and other genres, and resists any effort by the viewer to impose a narrative on the chaotic proceedings. Drawing on a diverse materialist tradition of theorizing affect and cinema (including Brian Massumi, Steven Shaviro, and Linda Williams), Steinbock reads Dandy Dust through a concept of haptic spectatorship that critically revises Freudian notions of scopophilic pleasure. By refusing to privilege sight as the key to proper knowledge and sense-making, watching the film must take place through straining to grasp or gape the bodies on-screen. The non-linearity of the film's structure invites a spectator to uncover meaning on an affective plane: grappling in confusion, thrown back on one's own somatic sensations, pleasures, and discomforts. Refusal of closure through numerous false endings implies a body that is always in the process of composition. Finally, Steinbock invites transgender studies to "use affective operations to mobilize curiosity" in ways that destabilize the normalized, identity-based understanding of transgender as a medical transition, a one-way trip, arriving at a logical conclusion.

Each time I watch Hans Scheirl's experimental feature film Dandy Dust, I feel nauseous, disoriented, and, by its end, excited. Its viewing requires cruising through multiple worlds, swiftly changing scale and points of view from that of an insect to god's eye, from the cosmos to the interior of a bodily cavity. Scheirl, a filmmaker and professor of contextual painting at the Vienna Academy of Art who made his international reputation as Angela Hans Scheirl with the lesbian cult classic Flaming Ears, both directed the film Dandy Dust and played the eponymous title character, Dandy Dust. Scheirl, along with many of his ensemble cast, was beginning to experiment with testosterone injections during filming, which resulted in female-bodied persons who often (yet not consistently) present as masculine, both on-screen and off. In the film's companion text, "Manifesto for the Dada of the Gybong-Embrio," Scheirl explains that the proper pronoun for Dandy Dust is neither she nor he but rather cy, short for cyborg. Scheirl's hormonal "experiments," as he called them, as well as Dandy Dust's experimental style, together articulate a form of "ethologic" research in the vein of Baruch Spinoza, who stated that "we do not yet know what a body can do." In experimenting with encounters that redefine the body's experiences of motion and rest, its capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies, the film poses the question, "What can a body do, or be made to do?" within the mediated and ideological contexts of contemporary cinema.
Like its shape-shifting protagonist, the film jumps genres—from science fiction, to mystery, to horror, to splatter, to porn. It refuses to maintain a singular gender identity or, for that matter, embodiment for its lead character, who appears on-screen as a young boy of color, an older Caucasian tomboy, a talking flame, and a dusty mummy. The stable characteristic of Dandy Dust the character, as well as Dandy Dust the film, is neither gender nor genre, but rather, in the words of Scheirlich’s collaborator Johnny de Philo, a “vastly overgrown appetite for curiosity.” All of the film’s genre references are in fact closely tied to a viewer’s curiosity about bodies. Laura Kipnis points out that science fiction is closely related to the genre of porn, as both take a “what if?” approach to bodies and societies, replacing commonalities with alternative corporeal universes. Further, Linda Williams argues that pornography and horror cinema belong to the category of “body genres,” in that each transforms the body’s affective dimensions, whether to induce arousal or fear. Dandy Dust’s narrative, to the extent that there is one, is full of false plot turns and stylized omissions that subvert the quests for technology that it seems to launch.

Dandy Dust’s curiosity pushes and pulls through various worlds, to collect or disperse fluid and fragmented bits of self, but the curiosity that drives this decidedly posthumanist baunderwomman is more than a mere plot device; curiosity is the central affect of the film. It is expressed formally in the film’s narrative style as well as its visual aesthetics, and it is thematized primarily as a curiosity about gender-transition.

As Laura Mulvey notes, a film image’s sensuous address of a viewer’s curiosity drives the viewer’s appetite for deciphering meaning. Dandy Dust’s aesthetic certainly aims to generate just such a curiosity on the part of the spectator; its flickering images enchant, but do not readily give up their meaning.9 Dandy Dust’s “Fun-Punk” sensibility exploits the sensuous quality of film through images peppered with cheap special effects and such mixed formats as animation, Super8, 16mm, and video. Scheirlich intended that his extremely low-budget effects produce an abstract sense of shape and saturated color that is metonymic of the notion of a rich field of aesthetic experience more generally.10 He was especially enamored of a “particular ‘glow’ produced by shooting on video, filming off the monitor, and then transferring the film image back to video, that made the film grain seem to come alive. He claimed, in fact, that the real protagonist of Dandy Dust, “is the film grain and the TV-noise (Fernsehbrauschen, or static),” which visually and aurally represents the interstitial space between technology and corporeality.11

The film-goer who encounters Dandy Dust becomes an experiential hub of curiosity: witnessing flagrant representations of transgressionism, encountering the film’s tactility and its body genres, and participating in the investigation. Hence, unlike activist cinema concerned with delivering a cogent message, or entertainment cinema with a goal-oriented plot, Dandy Dust forgoes accumulating new knowledges or reproducing old ones. Instead, the film’s curious style and form engage in what I call “cinematic research.”

In what follows, I explicate Dandy Dust in relation to Freudian notions of curiosity about sex difference, but I underscore the difference between a haptic (and anal) curiosity and Freud’s own optical (and penile) approach. I draw on film theorist David Bordwell to discuss the film-goer’s cognitive responses to the narrative, as well as Jonathan Crary’s concept of “the carnal density of vision,” and the works of such feminist film scholars as Linda Williams and Vivian Sobchack, who argue for an understanding of cinema’s touching and moving affectivity. Finally, extrapolating from Dandy Dust’s cinematic research to “curious” encounters with cultural objects, I draw out an anti-Oedipal carnality potentially at work in transgender studies’ production of knowledge.
OPTICAL AND HAPTIC CURIOUSITY

For Freud, the "thirst for knowledge seems to be inseparable from sexual curiosity," but the infantile libido focusing on problems of the distinction between the sexes and the mystery of reproductive sexuality (the Oedipal and castration complexes) must become sublimated into adult intellectual interest. Freud regards psychoanalysis as a mode of recovering the sexual impulse that fuels curiosity, which he applies to his case of Little Hans. When Hans watches the bathing of his seven-year-old sister, he comments, "But her widdler's quite small.... When she grows up it'll get bigger all right." Freud muses on why Hans did not report what he "really saw," namely, the absence of a penis. He accounts for Hans' "faulty perception" as a mistake that conceals a truth he cannot yet understand. Although Freud writes that Hans' interest in widdlers "also impelled him to touch his member," any consideration of touching as a mode of meaning-making equal to or complementary to vision remains unanalyzed.

Freudian curiosity, with its focus on investigating the genitals as a visual problem, plays directly into the Enlightenment desire to see and thereby know the world—a framework that raises sight to the "noblest of the senses." 

Hans, however, acknowledges that he pleasurably "gropes" towards knowledge through the kinesthetic exploration of his own embodiment. When Hans' mother finds him touching himself, she threatens to send for a doctor to "cut off your widdler"; she asks, "then what'll you widdle with?" to which Hans responds, "With my bottom." Freud diagnoses this moment as Hans' acquisition of the castration complex, when the child perceives that his genitals, the most important pleasure center, are threatened. Hans, however, effectively dodges the importance that Freud and his parents place on the presence of the widdler (the penis) as a reproductive or gender-specifying problem by shifting pleasurable curiosity to his bottom. A curiosity that begins not from the penis, but from the bottom, points to a haptic or groping curiosity not partial to the difference a widdler makes.

That Freud insists Little Hans' parents distinguish the form of widdlers once and for all as a penis suggests Freud's privileging of visibility. Art historian Alois Riegel asserts that whereas optical images of distinct forms must be perceived from a distance, haptic images (from haptein, to fasten) draw in the viewer. Building on Riegel's insight, film scholar Laura Marks claims that film can orientate spectators towards a haptic visibility, in which "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch." Similarly, Anne Rutherford suggests that haptic visibility locates the perceiver in an environment, perceiving the significance of surfaces in relation to one's body. Thus, perception is "more akin to a millipede than to a camera or camera obscura—a thousand tentacles feeling their way through a space rather than a single lens taking it in view." This corporeally-involved spectator is poised to exploit the bodily pleasures of being touched by the folds of filmic space.

_Dandy Dust_ opens with what I experience as haptic images that "invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding," and conversely, "create an image of such detail ... that it eludes a distanced view." In challenging the viewer to fasten onto images she cannot pretend to fully know or view, the viewer must approach those images through more sensory modes. This approach has far-reaching implications for the understanding of the film's bodily environ and the spectator's sensuous engagement with its gendered space.

After the title sequence, _Dandy Dust_ begins with a black screen accompanied by the sound of air whirling around space. The setting places the viewer in a godless position, akin to an astronaut or God. It then displays a flimsy white ball made from plaster and wraps, which moves vertically to the center of the frame. A shaky zoom at the slowly turning ball reveals the flickering light to be a projection of black and white images (Figure 8.1). A masculine voice-over narrates, "Wars are raging through the centuries on the Planet of White Dust." The zoom continues until the planet fills the screen and the sound of shrill cries and whirling machines become louder, as if the spectator were about to crash onto its surface.
A hard cut dangles the viewer above a white dusty surface populated with animated insects, bones, and toy airplanes. Shifting the point of view, the viewer is positioned amidst a scene in which, as the narrator describes, "scavengers from the surrounding galaxies ravage [the planet’s] cadaverous surface." *Dandy Dust* then moves the spectator to a deep crease in the flat surface, and then to the center of the planet, where naked and greased bodies stand on each other’s shoulders. Their grim physical struggle in an enclosed space suggests they are working in a shaft of the planet. The voice-over tells the viewer that the workers “pump the mechanism for death and destruction” that runs on the white dust of crushed bones. A tightly framed close-up of a screw spinning and flashing, with an intercut black shot, continues longer than necessary to establish the object, which has the effect of unnerving the viewer, who cannot get away from almost seeming to fall into the grinder. A twenty-five-second-long follow-up shot of white dust falling against a black background fascinates the eye. Less menacing than the screw, the dust shines, reflecting light and flows directly from above—a movement in which rushing cinematic images seem to stream down like a waterfall.

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

The cinematic construction of such worlds maps *Dandy Dust*’s “filmscape” as a “bodyscape.” To borrow Marks’ phrase, the spectator, touched by “the skin of the film,” first contacts outer cutaneous surfaces, then slips inside the bodily cavity, only to be pushed out again. At no point can a spectator physically or cognitively grasp the unity of the film’s given “body.” Through a haptic visuality, however, the viewer might travel perceptual location is in or leaning forward. Since it seems that the sexualize.

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the viewer might travel along its organs, capillaries, and pock-marked surfaces. Though a viewer’s perceptual location is in the immediacy of the image, she sits in her chair, perhaps sweating, frowning, or leaning forward. Since the film consists of a sort of body not accessible to optical vision alone, it seems that the sexualized elements must belong to a loosely defined, gender-flexible bodyscape.

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

Scheir likens these constant fluctuations of spatial scale to a tight-ringed doughnut, infinitely folding "in/outside insideout" to create a "transgendered arsehole." Scheir describes anal space as "transgendered," or non-gender specific, or gender-irrelevant, rather than associating it with gay men or homosexuality. Rejecting the phallic rendering of folds that privileges the form of the penis, Scheir declares Dandy Dust’s corporeal scale to follow "the politics of bulge and cavity." The transgendered bulge and cavity, and not the "present" penis or the "absent" vagina, form Dandy Dust’s undulating bodyscape. Scheir’s depiction of Dandy Dust’s bodyscape thus renders the haptic experience of the film as an ever-shifting scale, sensitive to minute changes.

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

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

THE STAIN OF CARNALITY

Several interconnected theoretical texts inform my approach to Dandy Dust. Jonathan Crary’s term the "carnal density of vision" describes how the relocation of vision through film’s coordination of the viewer’s sensual corporeality confers a “palpable opacity” to the experience of movies. Exploiting the double meaning of "carnal" as referring both to flesh and sexual intercourse, porn theorist Linda Williams develops Crary’s turn of phrase in relation to mass-produced “dirty pictures” to explain the pleasurable, even sexual, sensations experienced while viewing images due to “haptic
immediacies." Wagering that the sex in (audio-)visual pornography is mere pretext for triggering haptic, masturbatory actions, Magnus Ullén claims that porn’s interactive format is its essential “pornographicity.” Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological conception of embodied viewing specifies that the cinematic spectator comes back to her or his own body through an intentional arc that originates and ends with the spectator, not with the image-world; the inability to literally touch, smell, or taste whatever it is that solicits her desire means that her body’s intentional trajectory “will reverse its direction” to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible, namely her own “subjectively felt lived body.” The compensation of herself as the sensible object might be roughly understood as a masturbatory action. The lived body “turning back” to itself has the effect of both growing sensual awareness and diffusing its specific content. In this sense, cinematic pleasures and masturbatory pleasures can be seen as relying on the same increase of general carnal density. Although Sobchack’s carnally intense and substantialized viewer does not explicitly refer to a viewer enjoying pornography, it provides a model for understanding the “rebound” effect of haptic cinematic images.

Dandy Dust’s carnality is concerned not only with density— it also ramps up in intensity. Film scholars have sought to account for cinema’s ability to mobilize the spectator: to charge her or his affective disposition. Summarizing this concern, Rutherford writes, against competing cultural theories of narration, “[c]inema is not only about telling a story; it’s about creating an affect, an event, a moment which lodges itself under the skin of the spectator.” An exemplary sequence of intense and dense pornographicity in Dandy Dust revolves around Dandy’s auto-erotic relation to other selves in the film.

The setting is in a European mansion circa 1780, in which the character “Spider-Cuntboy” visits Dandy in cy’s bedroom late at night. Waking Dandy by stimulating cy’s genitals, Spider-Cuntboy takes cy time-travelling to see a future self, “speeding up” cy’s sexual development. The masculine Dandy of the eighteenth century observes the Dandy of 3075: a breastfed figure amongst other short-haired and breastfed beings naked on all fours, being filled by fluorescent tubes of fluid (Figure 8.2). Spider-Cuntboy remarks that “Dandy was so shaken by seeing his sexually-fluid self that he went nuts!” (Figure 8.3). What is implied is that he becomes turned on by seeing herself sucking and being penetrated. Dandy’s response, thrown back into cy’s body, indicates an experience of carnal vision.

While the content of the sequence includes sexual acts, the mise en scène of cy’s sexual awakening, including setting, the behavior of the figures, and the use of costume as well as props, reflect on the viewer’s fragmented self, one hand emphasizes that masturba- tion to feel a tactile thrust: this pornographicity. L indicates a sexuality th other words, the viewer’s direct participation in the narrative.

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as mere pretext for triggering retractive format is its essential of embodied viewing specifics through an intentional act that sensibility to literally touch, smail, intentional trajectory "will reverse bringing more literally accessible," of herself as the sensible object "turning back" to itself has the intent. In this sense, cinematic same increase of general canal viewer does not explicitly referring the "rebound" effect of bapic
so ramps up in intensity. Film spectator: to charge her or his against competing cogni tive about creating an affect in: An exemplar sequence of Dandy's auto-erotic relation with another "Spider-Cuntboy" visiting cy's genitals, Spider-Cuntboy's development. The masculine/kid figure amongst other shot cent tubes of fluid (Figure 8.2) sexually-fluid self that he rest seeing herself sucking and being an experience of carnal vision. mise en scene of cy's sexual use of costume as well as props, reflect on the viewer's position as masturbator. The sequence demonstrates the autoeroticism of a squatted self, one hand grasping outward and one compensatory hand towards the self. The scene emphasizes that masturbatory cinematic pleasures require the exclusion from the image in order to feel a tactile thrust in compensation. However, the depiction of sex is hardly a mere pretext for this porographicity. Dandy Dust's exhibition of sexual fluids, tumescence, and physical action indicates a sexuality that potentially spreads and stains the viewer as much as it does Dandy. In other words, the viewer's body absorbs the affect of arousal precisely because it is excluded from direct participation in what is seen.

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

Though the editing depicts the characters as separate, the pleasurable feelings seem to spread from the future Dandy to the eighteen-century teenager. Although the colorful liquids do not literally spray on cy, the scene revolves on the idea of transfer. The fluid self relates at once to the sexual fluids the hermaphroditic beings enjoy, and signals the mobility that is possible as one "grows up" the sexual development of Dandy Dust progresses on a scale of acceleration and deceleration, as two being centralized and dispersed and back, rather than cycling through Freud's stages to adolescence. Like Little Hans' widdling, masturbation figures here as the igniting of sexuality and as a key action towards carnal knowledge. That the spread of throbbing blood from Dandy's body flows into the family house indicates that arousal might also be directed towards the family, establishing an incestuous connection that shortly becomes apparent. For the moment, however, the seepage into the family house suggests that sexuality in Dandy Dust functions through the contagion of affect.
The following cut begins the "dinner party" portion of the sequence, which shows Dandy behaving badly during a formal gathering in his father's household. The first part of the sequence focuses on tight, tilted shots that capture Dandy's barbaric stuffing of food into his mouth and trousers. The effect is a disorienting, almost subjective camera, spinning out of control as it follows Dandy's wild gyrations and waving of a knife. In Figure 8.4, Dandy has just grasped onto some reddish fruit that he squeezed through his fingers at crotch level to create a mushy penis shape. The remains have been inserted quickly into his pants and further mashed into the white fabric. The color contrast has a metaphorical function: the material transformed into blotches of color brings to light the intangible affect of arousal. On the surface of the body, textile and stain mark a mounting tension. At this point, the color red becomes a motif, indicating the spreading of arousal, marked like a virus that is stained to be traceable.

Besides grabbing cy-self, Dandy also moves around the table quickly, following cy's eyeing and poking at the goodies available. The intense affect thus spreads from the future self, to Dandy's body, to surround the house, inside it, and now across the whole of the banquet spread. Distracted by a guest's stare and overt popping of cleavage, even of a nipple (Figure 8.5), Dandy (and the mask) briefly stops to check that!" The red filter disheveled look the

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Dandy's arousal are caught rubbing raging desire. Stare coincides, as if cy's again, cy tugs at fesi on the way to cy's ii from which the gun readjust gloves and

Distracted, Dan lude from the pun fluids of cy's future Cunthboy. The fluid tablecloth is pulled bits of stuff spread
briefly stops to check out this new fascination. Dandy even wonders out loud, “Who the hell is that?” The red filter over the woman’s white-caked skin highlights that the contagion has spread. The disheveled look she casts at Dandy shows she has become undone by the intensity of her interest.

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

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

Dandy’s arousal ripples through the arrangement, gradually animating the bodies. The guests are caught rubbing their breasts and coyly smiling to flirt with him. The slightest motion indicates raging desire. Standing behind the characters done up in petticoats and bodices, Dandy’s entrance coincides, as if cy’s presence causes it, with the image flipping upside down (Figure 8.6). Once righted again, cy tugs at feathers stuck in hats, then whips up a skirt to crawl under it, and then through it on the way to cy’s interest: grasping her, cy bites the tender leg of this “lady.” Cy’s motions cause a stir from which the guests try to recover, struggling to regain composure as they smooth down dresses, readjust gloves and headgear.

Distracted, Dandy follows a rat-like creature that scurries under the table. On cy’s way, cy grabs a ladle from the punch bowl and sprays the drink around the room. The red liquid echoes the sexual fluids of cy’s future self; cy has caught up with the accelerated development instigated by Spider-Cuntboy. The fluids inscribe the spread of affect through color and form. In the commotion, the tablecloth is pulled off the table, comically scattering the dishes piled high around the room. Larger bits of stuff spread the arousal. The lust built through stuffing, biting, and rushing about seems about
to explode in a visual orgasm. The reaction shot of the guests depicts them undone, giggling amidst the food raining down on them.

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

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

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

This shimmering quality triggers a haptic response in the spectator: called to action, she lifts a hand, seeking to become caught up in the flux of images. The image's impact instigates a blurring between the subject's senses of the visual and the tactile. The shimmering of the image, though achieved by visual effects, also creates a texture, a rhythmic beating on the spectator's body. While the allure of shimmering is most easily taken as a visual effect, its appeal may also refer to affective, haptic contact. The social aspect of affect means that it extends beyond individuals, while registering its effect in the body. The dinner table and the tableau vivant organize the viewer's interest in the goods on display, but it is the tablecloth that hangs over them, extending the pro-filic surface of the table towards the characters. This texture meets with the movie screen, further extending the skin prickled by affect towards the viewer. The pro-filic tablecloth acts as a skin the viewer can brush up against to catch the scene's affect.

Psychologist Silvan Tomkins describes affects as the essential "amplifiers" of drives and the directors of cognitive systems, "because without its amplification nothing else matters and with its amplification anything else can matter." The amplification of interest to the level of arousal, for instance, offers an account of curiosity's erotic dimension during film viewing. Yet, only when the physiological sensation of affect, here the nervous excitation of interest, is "owned" does it transform into a subjective feeling of curiosity. Brian Massumi explains this action of owning or possessing affect is the "socio-linguistic affect's carnal intensification. The spreading of sensation with red fluid, but the co- here rather the strain, of towards the image and m

The groping motion o consists in the subject se Knowledge becomes the response to shimmering! Bell terms "pornosophy," Susan Stryker elaborates. Inspired by Dandy Dust's grasping, groping subject

**GROPING THEORY**

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affect is the "socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience." Hence, curiosity moves from affects carnal intensification into a signifier of arousal precisely when the subject grasps for meaning. The spreading of sensation between bodies and material objects on screen might not mark the viewer with red fluid, but the comportment of the viewer's body registers the transmission of the stain, or here rather the strain, of arousal. The spectator's curiosity pitches him or her forward, straining towards the image and meaning-making, which prove elusive.

The groping motion of embodied thinking that Shaviro describes, and that Dandy Dust invites, consists in the subject seeking a foothold in the image, a handgrip to guide towards knowability. Knowledge becomes the most elusive outcome of the process initiated by the spectator's evaluated response to shimmering images. The spectator's dalliance with Dandy Dust performs what Shannon Bell terms "pornosophy," a philosophy that emerges from the carnal. Inspired by Dandy Dust's pornographicity, I wish to address the haptic knowledge generated by a grasping, groping subject.

GROPING THEORY

"the film begins, again. Always again. Sometimes the film begins to begin again in the middle of the film, sometimes at the end. Sometimes it doesn't begin at all. Sometimes it just gestures to the beginning, as if to say, 'you lazy bastards out there in t.v. land, get off your butts and go start the film,'" Johnny de Philo writes in the catalogue for Dandy Dust. Dandy Dust appears for the first time only in minute twelve. Cy begins cy's journey the same way as the film instructs the viewer to "get off your butt." Rotating in a void, Dandy Dust seems to ponder cy's existence, while the narrator offers the advice: "Sometimes, when we know too much, we forget everything; Dust was bored from watching tellyvision" (Figure 8.7). "Knowing too much" here means not knowing how to know new things. Suddenly, the protagonist notices a new planet flickering on the horizon and asks, "When did that grow? Let's go check it out!" Cy cures cy's boredom in the instant of seeing a new planet and taking action, de Philo continues, "flying into the projection screen of life, arms outstretched, whimsical and full of the kind of wonder only untamed horses and fashion models know is theirs for certain" (Figure 8.7). This is not a self-conscious wonderment, but a dispossessing curiosity.

Dandy Dust's trajectory in the film is to allow cy-self to be thrown off track, to redo actions, and change dwelling places. The fact that Dandy thrice returns to a monitor to watch flashbacks as well

Figure 8.7 Dandy Dust, bored in a void
as to escape into a “trippy story” (read, disorientating and freeing) indicates that curiosity “starts the film,” over and again. The openness or wonder that Dandy Dust displays brings cy into contact with a host of inadvertent incidences. In wondering, cy seems to ask, or is forced to ask, “What if?” This cinematic gesture has much in common with academic research, which, according to Christopher Bollas, feels something like this: “I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it.”44 The practice of beginning again, struggling to think, “What if?” I propose, suggests a theory of curiosity, as well it offers a demonstration of how one may produce “groping theory” in the interdisciplinary of transgender studies.

Jonathan Culler emphasizes that theory be defined in terms of “practical effects,” and hence, he continues, “it is less a particular content, it seems, than something one can do or not do, something one can study, teach, or ignore, be interested in or hate.”45 Culler’s broad strokes suggest that theory is a practice, a successful one if it succeeds in making one feel by “challenging and reorienting thinking” in their own field and new fields.46 Whereas Culler focuses on the “scarciness” and “intimidation” one might feel when confronted with a lack of delineation, Dandy Dust also articulates the appeal of theory in terms of the erotic amplification of curiosity.47 The possibility of new understanding that comes from the openness of a theorist at the interstices of disciplines, or of a plot juncture, might summon pleasure, not just fear. The desire to become reoriented, perhaps through the disorienting process of juxtaposing disciplines, may account for why some become interested in “doing” theory.

Mieke Bal’s theoretical practice of cultural analysis insists on the trajectory of learning the difference between an unreflective use of a word and a historicized concept. Concepts only become useful when lending understanding to the object, “on its—the object’s—own terms.”48 The dynamism that Bal describes in turn encourages and conditions what she calls “a groping” towards understanding.49 The groping involved in the process of defining a meaning of a particular concept, provisionally and partly, produces an experience, a learning moment. Situated in relation to the object and confronted with a concept, she comes to learn something about what the concept can do: the ways in which it can inflect, deflect, and reflect the object.50 Bal maintains that “it is in the groping that the valuable work lies,” emphasizing not the so-called determination of meaning, but the performative dimension of what it can do and what affects it may prompt.51

The learning moment in Dandy Dust comes from the film’s non-linear structure, which implores the viewer to open up the film, to try to assert meaning and infer connections. In Bal’s paradigm, the cognitive act of groping for a provisional concept in relation to the object offers an alternative to both mastery (“without claiming to know it all”) as well as “floundering” in confusion.52 A method of groping suggests that one starts from where one is, and necessarily goes from there. The practice of groping challenges the theorist to become reoriented towards the object and to become unstuck from his or her epistemological trajectory. A daughter who is also a son, for instance, confronts the viewer to retrace the film, try again, and recontext her concept of gender to bodily formation. Opening out to the object forces a dispossessing: entering the world requires one to leave “home,” wherever that might be at a given point for the researcher, or Dandy Dust. The posture of arms out, embracing what may come, means that one’s interest eclipses “knowledge” itself, since this knowing “is always knowing about, knowing of, knowing towards.”53 Like grasping for a cinematic image, a theoretician’s groping towards the object and for a reasonable concept proves elusive. Dandy’s face-forward movement suggests that the push and pull that directs cy’s route towards knowledge also prohibits the arrival of mastery (Figure 8.8). The shimmering lights of the “screen of life” that Dandy sails through are the affective backdrop to the groping theory produced as the practitioner moves towards, and is moved towards, “knowing.” At best, Bal suggests, one might find a provisional resting place, from which to write.54
ates that curiosity "starts the eyes brings cy into contact with forced to ask, "What if?" This, according to Christopher, on an idea without knowing to have me think it." He suggests a theory of curiosity in the interdisciplinary practical effects," and hence, he can do or not do, something strokes suggest that theory is an and reorienting thinking" "carniness" and "intimidation" also articulates the appeal of new understanding that or of a plot juncture, might slips through the disorienting interested in "doing" theory of learning the difference its only become useful when. The dynamism that Bal's "towards understanding," concept, provisionally and the object and confronted an do: the ways in which it the prismatic that the valuable the performative dimension

Figure 8.8 Dandy Dust, flying

In the logic of Dandy Dust that requires regular kick-starts, one finds few rest stops in between starting again. The multiple endings, however, demonstrate a commitment to open-ended knowledge. The final part of the film begins with fusing the separated state of Dandy and Dust, suggesting closure at first. After facing rape and eventual death by Sidore's penis, Dandy's electronic remains return to a holding in the Mother Ship. Through a cinematic operation of a green-screen special effect, in which the image of a flame, the essence of "Dust," merges with Dandy's head, the entities unify (Figures 8.9 and 8.10). The technological nature of this operation is specified in the top right corner, which depicts the running time, a video's plea for the viewer to "look at me, see what tricks I can do." An animation of a shivered clay heart pulsing confirms Dandy Dust's reanimation. The theme song sounds to signal the end of the film. But the events continue: a voice-manipulator multiplies the protagonist's voice into different tones, shouting, "You've got the best, you got them all. Now dance." Interrupting the dance, Aunt Theodora asks, "Who's that now?" To which the protagonist proudly claims, "I am Dandy Dust," Theodora says, "Oh that makes sense. Do me a favor and stay that way for a while," before going back to her tinkering with a wrench. The "for a while" extends the film for a bit longer, or at least casts doubt on attempts at closure.

Figure 8.9 Unification with flame
The resolution of the protagonist’s main problem, his split-self, makes for a proper ending to the goal-oriented narrative. However, as one might by now expect, the flame-headed protagonist then sits down to watch the film, beginning it again, launching a new investigation and another reading (Figure 8.11).

The narrator takes up the plot when Dandy was killed off and brought into the Mother-Ship. The sequence of gruesome surgeries, including the stitching of over-sized genitals with thick yarn, closed mouths, and baby fingers onto adult hands, ends with the theme song coming on, once again. The voice-over now instructs the protagonist and viewer to “stay tuned,” as the film begins to end again, framed by the red flame encasing the monitor (as shown in Figure 8.11). Yet, the next sequence offers a recap of events, followed by the camera pulling out to reveal who is still watching: the flame-headed Dandy Dust reclining on the couch. After getting a copy of the “trippy story,” cy attempts to face “no more detours” to take cyself in cy’s own hands, to go cy’s own path. Now the film should surely ends. Instead, Dandy Dust announces cy’s trip back to the Mother-Ship to confront history. Entering the scene, cy is immediately grabbed by all family members. They force cy into a gynecological chair, strapping cy down and forcing cy’s legs open to reveal an open wound. The surgery commences with cy’s mother, Cynibc intelligent. Replant our f ar too large to penetrate am without fear! Come y ending with a cackle.

The narrator announces the extra selves—waste p reverse-shot then shows : costume by the removal the masks provokes the Dust was always all the Dust delivered in each af ending, but outwards to .

The last image before projection screen of life t Pants down around as Dandy Dust blathers not bottom has less interest i to join, “Come to me ba and Cyniborg. Dandy D: recalls Little Hans wrest of sexual difference, cine thousand tiny performa’ stopping, and starting a “deterritorialization” of ’ operations; thousands of in relation to the territo void manifests a body tl remains in a state of co to the subject’s ontology transgender politics.
with cy’s mother, Cyniborg, shouting, “We shall end sloppy patchwork. We shall breed clean and intelligent. Replant our future,” as everyone pummels Dandy Dust with squirting oversized bats, far too large to penetrate. Rising up and impervious to the violence, cy cries, “I am Dandy Dust. I am without fear! Come you feeble fleas, come feed from my rivers, come and see that I’m burning,” ending with a cackle.

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

The last image before the credit sequence is of Dandy Dust back in the shimmering void, the projection screen of life that makes possible the contradictions of multiple identities (Figure 8.12).

Pants down around ankles, squatting with bottom in the air, a flower dart thrust into cy’s anus, Dandy Dust blathers nonsense in between bursts of laughter. This widdling child playing with cy’s bottom has less interest in explanation than in provocation and pleasure. Cy coaxes to the viewer to join, “Come to me baby,” only then to grab at the figurines of father and mother, of Sir Sidore and Cyniborg. Dandy Dust performs a transgressive “regression”; his swinging of the parent dolls recalls Little Hans wresting control of his parents and their threat of castration. Like cy’s groping of sexual difference, cinematic curiosity consists in, to borrow a phrase from Brian Massumi, “a thousand tiny performative struggles,” that differ the body in unpredictable ways. The starting, stopping, and starting again signal the machinic assemblage of body and cinema. The mutual “deterioralization” of body and cinema struggling together involves multiple, perhaps infinite, operations; thousands of tiny shifts in the body that “differ” the (boundary of) the “body" territory in relation to the territory of “affect.” The final image of Dandy Dust rotating in the shimmering void manifests a body that cannot be said to be composed with any sense of finality, but always remains in a state of composing, Dandy Dust’s refusal to provide closure to meaning as well as to the subject’s ontology indicates that its groping research for new subjectivities underpins its transgender politics.
Lucas Cassidy Crawford’s “Transgender without Organs: Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification” introduces affect into the debate on transgender embodiment in terms of what it “feels like” to be transgender. Examining the narratives of transsexual transitions, which often involve moving from one place to another, Crawford argues that transitions involve an orientation to place as much as to the body. Countering the “proper” trans affect of coming home to the self, he suggests considering a different style of affect that involves the deterritorialization of the self: “the process of leaving home, of altering your habits, of learning new tricks.” The impetus might then become directed towards composing forces that undermine “our best attempts at deciding, conclusively, on identities and selves.”

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

Transgender studies might use affective operations to mobilize curiosity, to commit to knowing new things, to refuse to settle, to accept the constraints of an unlivable narrative. Sue Golding (a.k.a. Johnny de Philo) suggests that affect and the force of curious thinking may offer a livability that is not available by other means: “It is amazing how people have survived some horrible things, and one of the things that have actually made them survive is curiosity, that is thinking the most famous radical question of all: Supposing that it could be otherwise?”

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

NOTES
4. Scheir, “Manifesto,” 46. A cyborg embodiment is closely associated with a transgender kind of identity; each explicitly trouble the notion of (singular) identity. As the chapter will discuss, the technologies afforded by film and video form an interface with irl and blood bodies in a mutual re-making of Scheir’s character’s techno-body, allowing Domsa Haravoy’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” description.
5. In Spinoza: Practical Philosophy, (1988, San Francisco, CA, City Lights Books) Gilles Deleuze provides a definition of Spinoza’s general study of the body: “Ethology is first of all the study of the relations of speed and slowness, of capacities for affecting and being affected that characterize each thing” (125). The significance for ethics of Spinoza’s seemingly simple acknowledgement (stated above) is that beforehand, prior to a specific arrangement or encounter, does not know what a body is capable of, what good or bad. Hence, the body, for Spinoza, is not essentially any quaint but a potentate for them all.
a Geo-Affective Theory of embodiment in terms of what I call transitions, which often involve an orientation of coming home to the self. Transitions of the self-ideal.

The impetus might best be to decide at a: transgender in Dandy Dust, we see an undoing of the familiar, more easily intelligible body of the body, but it is often the case that in Crawford's reference to "soul" and the potential for or orient and exist, to commit to knowing rative. Sue Golding offers a livability that is not this or that, but one of the most radical of the ways in value in thinking "new" things that threaten one's view of the world. This need not be so.

1. Of Otherness, ed. Sue Golding (Transition), he writes "The time it takes a person to change through a large, open space of 1 September 2004, http://www.

2. Of Otherness, ed. Sue Golding (Transition), he writes "The time it takes a person to change through a large, open space of 1 September 2004, http://www.

3. Of Otherness, ed. Sue Golding (Transition), he writes "The time it takes a person to change through a large, open space of 1 September 2004, http://www.

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5. Of Otherness, ed. Sue Golding (Transition), he writes "The time it takes a person to change through a large, open space of 1 September 2004, http://www.


11. Ibid.


13. Freud, A Phobia, 175.


15. Freud, A Phobia, 171.


17. Freud, A Phobia, 171.


19. Marks, Skin of the Film, 162.


21. Marks, Skin of the Film, 162–163.


23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.


27. Ibid.


29. Linda Williams, "Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the Carnal Density of Vision," in Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video, ed. Patricia Petro (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3–4, 11. Williams' article focuses on the mechanical "cranking" of the body that early cinema machines such as the mutoscope required that paralleled the male cranking himself, i.e., masturbating, Cinema in extension, provides mechanical tactile pleasure, itself a possible substitute, though by no means an equal or equitable, sexual partner.


32. Rutherford, Cinema and Embodied Affect, 10.


36. Shaviro asserts Blanchot's question is central to any theory of embodied spectatorship. "What happens when what we see, even though from a distance, seems to touch you with a grasping contact, when the matter of seeing is a sort of touch, when seeing is a contact at a distance?"

37. Shaviro, The Cinematic Body, emphasis mine, 47.


42. Golding [as de Philo], "To Tremble," 69–70.

43. Golding [as de Philo], "To Tremble," 69.

46. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
57. Gilles Deleuze quoted in Crawford, "Transgender without Organs?" 133.
58. Crawford, "Transgender without Organs?" 133.
59. Crawford, "Transgender without Organs?" 137.
60. In footnote 2, Crawford does question the efficacy of genitalia-focused surgeries to the transition or leaving based on which the chapter turns on which the chapter is largely based on and is informed by the "male gaze" which is seen and is conscious of the object masculine subject and the roles that are played by gender and genderqueer embodied spectators important films with trans.
61. Crawford, "Transgender without Organs?" 139.

In the last two chapters, we have an idea of the idea of gender ambiguity, placing the globalizing of the visual as a gazing or looking at as it has developed into photography and post queer art making has looked at contests the dominance of the...