

The Violence of the Cut: Transsexual Homeopathy and Cinematic Aesthetics

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The medicalized image of the Transsexual, a sexological and psychological nomenclature, is frayed by a long history of conflicts erupting over the question whether teams of psychologists, surgeons and endocrinologists have a sound scientific basis to diagnose, intervene and treat the condition. Crucially, Transsexuality and its current moniker Gender Identity Disorder has been framed as a condition, one that, while treatable with hormone therapy and reconstructive surgeries, may not be cured. The figure of the Transsexual, the »victim« of a lifelong condition, emerged at the turn of the long century when great technological change was underway, giving rise to great anxiety as well as celebration expressed in the Western culture of the *fin de siècle*. The heady conjunction of sex science, surgical technique and new understandings of sexual embodiment as changeable, all potentially enabling and constraining discourses for those who want to be recognized within the domain of Transsexual, is articulated in the 1933 memoir of the European *cause célèbre*, Lili Elbe (1936 [1933]). Titled first in English as *Man into Woman: A True and Authentic Record of a Change of Sex. The true story of the miraculous transformation of the Danish painter, Einar Wegener (Andreas Sparre)*, the 2004 English reprint stresses the historical importance of her »portrait« as in fact representing the technological prototype of sex-change: *Man into Woman: The First Sex-Change. A Portrait of Lili Elbe*, with the even longer subtitle *The true and remarkable transformation of the painter Einar Wegener*.

First published in Danish (later German and English), the book narrates her life 1882–1931 primarily focusing on the emergence of »Lili« some years after Einar Wegener was married to fellow artist, illustrator Gerda Gottlieb, in 1904 (renamed »Gretex« in the book). The protagonist is self-named Lili Elbe, her family name taken after the river surrounding Dresden, the city in which she first has surgery. Like in many trans¹ sex-

¹ I employ »trans« as a term for gender expressions and identities that appear contrary to the mainstream male-female binary, including gender non-conformists, cross dressers,

change narratives, travel is an important trope in her narrating the transformation: the story takes place between Copenhagen, Paris, Berlin, and Dresden.² Edited by a »German friend« posthumously, it reads as part confessional, part biography, consisting of the editor's insider knowledge, material dictated by Elbe, and intimate sources such as her diaries, letters from her, from family and friends, as well as medical records and an affidavit from her doctor. The personal tone and plea for societal recognition laid the groundwork for a Transsexual socio-political identity as well as the paternalistic clinics that sprung up to manage their care. It also patterned the now quite common frenzy of media attention around the »marvelous« and »miraculous« abilities of science. Most directly, Elbe's narrative of a private sex change and international discovery served as a prototype for the public reception of the now more famous Christine Jorgensen of the »atomic age,« whose biography is visually mapped in the experimental film, *Christine in the Cutting Room*, by Susan Stryker (in production). Like Elbe, Jorgensen had a strong affinity for image-making, particularly working as a photographer and film editor, whilst Elbe was primarily a landscape painter, amateur actor and later a writer. In both cases, their trained artistic eye and sense of presentation perhaps prepared them for producing their own aesthetics of transformation in the form of books, films, and stage shows.³

I return to Elbe's life story, rather than one of the many other trans memoirs, biographies, and accounts written since, to point to the tensions apparent from even the very emergence of Transsexual aesthetics between that of a curative violence wrought through surgical cuts and the accessing of agency by desiring and undergoing a reassemblage of embodiment. This is no happy return to the origin story; rather, working through the difficulties of Elbe's self-narration of sex change will demonstrate an enabling

drag queens, drag kings, transgenderists, genderqueers, and transsexuals. Transgender is the state of one's »gender identity« (self-identification as woman, man, neither or both) not matching one's »assigned sex« (identification by others as male, female or intersex), which may or may not lead to elective surgery. Transsexual(ity) is a term that originated in the medical and psychological communities; it refers to people who identify as, or desire to live and be accepted as, a member of the sex opposite to that assigned at birth. I follow Davy (2011) in capitalizing these medical terms to draw attention to their hegemonic power/knowledge in the discourse on gender identity. I do not capitalize trans terms to emphasize their community-generated nature.

² See Aizura's (2010) »Feminine Transformations«.

³ Stryker is developing this film and has generously shared with me the first 14 minutes.

refusal to be neither a coherently proper victim of her condition or cure, nor a sovereign subject created *ex nihilo*. Elbe's engagement with the technologies of sex-change suggests a working-through more in line with the principles of homeopathy and a more entangled experience of subjectivity wrought through technologies that might be better phrased as *Transsexual somatechnics*.

Engaging with the aesthetic of the cut, a trans-sexing process of materializing oneself, as suggested by Elbe's florid description of her multiple surgeries, this chapter wishes to shift the feminist debate on violence and agency in four interlocking ways. Firstly, I follow feminist theorists of embodiment like Cressida Hayes (2007) and Nikki Sullivan (2006) who challenge radical feminist theorizations of cosmetic surgery that lump together sex change with procedures like rhinoplasty, breast augmentation, and tummy-tucks. Framed as gendered violence, the surgeries are reduced to the binary of autonomous human actors whose instruments strike passive, preformed and pre-sexed flesh. I engage, secondly, the newly coined term *somatechnics* that conceptualizes the interplay of bodies and technologies as more than mere application, but as co-constitutive and occurring in a context that places more value on some somatic changes than others. Thirdly, examining the context of Elbe's transition through the contemporaneous writings of the cultural critic Walter Benjamin, I am sensitive to his metaphor of surgery for describing the therapeutic effects of films, specifically due to the aesthetic principle of the cut. Taking on Benjamin's politicized call for a homeopathic engagement with technology's cut, here the somatechnics of film and sex change, I address the ways in which his materialist and affective theory of homeopathic violence could be a way through the impasse of the victim-perpetrator model for dualistic relations of violence-agency. Lastly, Elbe's story emerges within a new world order of sexes and technological reproducibility, which has only intensified with the globalization of the »pharmaco-pornographic« regime of sexuality as described by Beatriz Preciado (2008).⁴ Paying attention to the affective force of transitioning technologies that produce the multiplicities of Elbe's body serves to remind that, for her, the cutting experience of surgeries was

⁴ In an elaboration of Foucault's sovereign and disciplinary regimes, Preciado's essay stakes out the current body regime as the third part of this series. Drawing out the recent confluence of a global production, circulation and consumption of psycho-tropics, synthetic hormones and sexual material, Preciado names our society of control's bio-power »pharmaco-pornographic.«

a way to access an embodied place of elsewhere, to speak from a body that yearned to grow. Her emphasis on the creation of bodily difference so that she may live might help contemporary critical (trans)gender studies to confront the erroneous assumptions of medical experts who are resolved to pathologize a desire to transition as masochistic. Trans theories could benefit from Elbe's carnal knowledge, from an embodied account with thick descriptions of »noncurative, but wished-for aims of transitions« (Hayward 2008: 84), however tentative and nascent.

Circumscribing Agency and Violence in Transomatechnics

When one thinks patriarchal oppression and violence together, patriarchal structures often appear to enable, sustain, and support the limiting of gendered agency through masculinized forms of violence. From a radical feminist⁵ point of view, which pits violence against agency, one may either have agency or experience violence. As a corollary, one cannot possibly derive agency from experiences of violence. However, other feminist traditions seek to conceptualize a more complicated relation between violence and agency, such as philosopher Judith Butler who draws on the Lacanian-Marxist work of Louis Althusser (1997; 2004). Butlerian theories of subjectivity posit that subjectivation is a violent act, hence agency as a (gendered) subject can only be wrought through a constitutive violence. My considerations lie with rightfully addressing the entrenched physical, psychic, economic, and sexual violence faced by gendered subjects; yet, I do not wish to perpetuate an either/or logic that leads to a reductionist disenfranchisement. Instead, in continuation of Butlerian thinking on ontological violence and in the vein of new materialist feminism that recognizes the dispersal of agency between all actors in a network, I would like to challenge the tenet that excludes agency from experiences of violence. Taking

⁵The radical feminist movement currently has a resurgence with a conference *RadFem 2012* taking place in London. On their website they write, »Radical feminism is a revolutionary politics for the liberation of all women from male domination.« Though they feel disowned by the larger feminist movement – »many of us involved in radical feminist organising feel isolated, even within the wider feminist movement« – they also actively seek to exclude transwomen, phrased as, »we ask that RadFem 2012 be respected as a space where *women born women living as women* are able to meet« (RadFem 2012). I thank Nora Koller for this reference.

the case of Lili Elbe as exemplary for the scalpel's double edge of violence and agency, I see that trans subjects might activate agency in the space of apparent violence, that is, in the space of the surgical theatre.⁶ Here the cut is interpreted as healing, not only framed through the discourse of medical arts as the art of healing, but as a cut that opens up possibilities. The importance of this move – conceptualizing trans agency in relation to practices of gender transitioning or gender experimenting – lies in countering the critiques of surgical arts that reduce surgery to a disempowering dismemberment and disfigurement of a healthy substrate that simply is: the body.

In the introduction to the collection *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies*, Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray (2009) point to the dichotomous thinking in feminist theories of technology which offer either technophobic or technophilic appraisals. Dominant conceptions of technology in these debates often reiterate a naïve materialism that think the body and technology separately, differing largely on whether said technology is neutral (e.g., Shulamith Firestone) or a tool of patriarchy (e.g., Sheila Jeffreys) on brute matter. Even for those theorists who do offer a complex account of the ways in which corporealities are formed, some technologies like cosmetic surgeries tend to be »demonized« while others are valued as »qualitatively different and heterogeneous in their effects,« for instance euthanasia or IVF (Sullivan/Murray 2009: 2).⁷ The technophobia expressed in these feminist debates can and does often lead to the expression of transphobia, the irrational fear of the transitioning subject, who is given as one of the prime examples of how patriarchy and technologies work in tandem to ensure women's servitude.⁸ At issue is the strict distinc-

⁶ An important precursor to my argumentation is the work of Stryker (1994), *The Surgeon Haunts My Dreams*, a performance piece on accessing (sexual) agency within the hegemonic space of the surgery, in a dance of competing and conflicting queer desires with the hetero-sexualizing doctor (»Him«). Stryker returns to surgery and agency in other texts, e.g. »My Words to Victor Frankenstein« (2006) and »Dungeon Intimacies« (2008).

⁷ Refuting the moral judgments about what constitutes »good« rather than »bad« body modification practices, Sullivan (2006: 552f.) develops the concept of »transmogrification« to suggest a fundamentally human expression of transformation and to draw attention to ways in which such »trans« practices« are »interpreted, evaluated, situated, and lived«. This chapter's historical and embodied investigation of the somatechnics of Transsexuality seeks to contribute to such an analysis.

⁸ Some otherwise techno-friendly feminists, such as Braidotti (2002) and Grosz (1994) draw the line at technology-assisted gender transition. For rebuttals within trans theory,

tion between natural female bodies and technologically enhanced, or mutilated bodies within a masculinist program. By conflating technical arts and all kinds of technologies, the distinction between technics, techniques, and technology is often not made in these discussions. For my purposes, I follow Sullivan and Murray's account of technics, such as in *somatechnics*, to refer to the study of various kinds of *dispositifs* and hard technologies in and through which bodies (soma) are transformed. Taking up somatechnics – here: specific Transsexual somatechnics – as theories of how corporealities become crafted, lived, and give meaning to subjects in relation to others and to a world means I understand them as necessarily epistemic.

Within the writings of the radical feminist and psychosexual perspectives, trans surgeries appear as »holes made in a whole,« as the mutilation of a healthy body indicative of a mental sickness (Prosser 1998: 92). Sex is seen as something irreducible, preceding and outside of construction. Trans scholar Zowie Davy comments that in the imaginings of Janice Raymond (1979), Bernice Hausman (1995), and Sheila Jeffreys (2003), sex-reassignment condemns transwomen to be »pseudo-women« with masochistically orientated sexualities (Davy 2011: 75f.). Additionally, sex-change surgery is trivialized as only an aesthetic make-over, in particular by referring to transwomen as »pseudo-women, or reconstructed« (ibid.). In this literature, it follows that the fakeness paraded by Transsexuals – and male-to-female Transsexuals are the target here – in their aesthetic surgery choices »denigrate women through their performance of normative femininity« (ibid.). Transsexuals are reduced to the »dupes« of surgeons, who act as the agents of patriarchy invested in creating hyper-feminine bodies, better ways to normalize genders, and to reify male and female roles (Hausman 1995). Yet, the writings denigrating Transsexuals for committing sex change, or having gender-confirming procedures, rarely discuss the procedures themselves, skipping over the variety of techniques, the diversity in the uptake of Transsexual somatechnics, and the experience of them from the perspective of trans people themselves. Similarly, little attention is given to the history of access to such technologies and the highly localized experience of becoming diagnosed as Transsexual. This chapter hopes to go some way towards addressing these omissions and blind spots, from the positioned perspective of transgender theory in alignment with feminists concerns for situated knowledges (Haraway 1988).

see Spade (2003; 2006), Stone (2006), Crawford (2008), Hayward (2008; 2010), Salamon (2010), and Davy (2011).

Since Magnus Hirschfeld's first resolve to assist somatic changes in the early 20th century, sex change scientists in the Western world and beyond have prescribed in varying measures a program of hormonal and surgical treatment. Those working in this burgeoning field had to convince not only skeptical colleagues but also a traditionalist public that they would pose no harm to their patients, and that their patients would pose no harm to society. Psychoanalysts in private practice led the opposition to surgical gender therapy by using a variety of analytic techniques »to support their position that persons demanding castration were *ipso facto* mentally ill,« with the final diagnosis that all transsexuals were »border-line psychotics« (Meerlo 1967: 263), or victims of »paranoid schizophrenic psychosis« (Socarides 1970: 346 quoted in Billings/Urban 1982: 269). This pathologization raises the question of whether patients could consent to the operations that they »psychotically« demanded, since psychotics cannot legally express consent.

Despite resistance from clinical, psychoanalytic, and radical feminist quarters, as sociologists of sexual culture put it in 1978, »[g]enitals have turned out to be easier to change than gender identity [...] [w]hat we have witnessed in the last ten years is the triumph of the surgeons over the psychotherapists [and the radical feminists] in the race to restore gender to an unambiguous reality« (Kessler/McKenna 1978: 120). However, for trans subjects themselves, the point of treatment through hormonal and surgical means might not be to restore an unambiguous gender, though that might be a valued effect for some, but to experience the cuts of gendered embodiment differently.

One of the most influential pioneers, Harry Benjamin (1966: 196f.), published *The Transsexual Phenomenon* to dispel the common image of the mentally deranged transsexual held by clinicians and laypeople. He argues that »[f]rom the therapeutic end, it cannot be doubted or denied that surgery and hormone treatment can change a miserable and maladjusted person of one sex into a happier and more adequate, although by no means neurosis-free, personality of the opposite sex.« The message is clear: sex-change surgery is a therapy for a kind of mental condition and as such it adjusts the body to *alleviate* the psychic stress derived from »maladjustment« in society. Helpfully, Benjamin acknowledges the importance of treatment for one's emotional wellbeing; unfortunately, he does not fully evaluate the psychic stress placed on the trans individual by society to be-

come visually unambiguous, which relieves the psychic stress of gender normative people.

In the analysis of Transsexual treatments, radical feminists, psychoanalysts, and medical practitioners silence the voices of trans people who are requesting it. In so far as hormonal and surgical options are a therapy, trans people select some procedures and not others; whether out of preference or financial ability, the adaption of sex-change somatechnics has been uneven and hugely personal, despite international protocols. It seems to me that we are missing the real issue of understanding the ways in which varying subjects mobilize the same techniques. For instance, radical mastectomies have become a procedure for trans men who want to have a male-appearing chest, though they were initially developed for female breast cancer patients. Radical mastectomies thus have been adapted for Transsexual somatechnical use. Clearly, experiencing somatechnics, such as chest surgeries for reduction or enlargement, are practices invested with personal, social meaning and are not understood as simply instrumental or curative. Though heuristically discrete, the aesthetic practices of trans-sexing and the development of trans subjectivities might be thought together as *trans-somatechnics*. Hence, the somatechnics of Transsexualism signals the confluence of flesh, knowledge, and political bodies in the operation theatre.

Operation Theatres

To elaborate on my proposal for understanding trans aesthetic and political practices as somatechnics, I focus on the space of the operation theatre. This space may sanction violence in so far as subjects are »cut« according to the operating regime of power/knowledge. Preciado identifies this grand-scale »operation theatre« as the performative space of culture, which enforces through violent »cuts« of knowledge a binary gender regime and so »hetero-sexualizes« bodies (quoted in Eckert 2010: 30). The question is, given the overarching performative space of a heterosexist culture in which bodies enact difference, to what extent can bodies be cut, and also cut themselves, differently? To locate agency within trans-somatechnics, in addition to the *operation theatre of culture*, I consider in parallel two other kinds of operation theatres that likewise function as aesthetic regimes;

namely, *cinema*, with its system of editing cuts, alongside the incisions that take place in a literal *surgical theatre*.

In »The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version,« Walter Benjamin (2002 [1936]) offers a theory of cinema with respect to its propensity to cut into reality in order to extract new perceptions. Benjamin (*ibid.*: 115) describes cinema as a form of surgery: he likens the cut into flesh in surgery to the cut into celluloid in a montage sequence. His insight inspires my own project to affirm the practices of rendering trans embodiments through surgical and other techniques. Benjamin (*ibid.*) considers how the notion of the camera operator »is familiar to us from surgery,« where the surgeon »makes an *intervention* in the patient [emphasis mine].« Film assembles shots by cutting into the celluloid and splicing them together in a new order; transsexuals may require the surgical cutting and splicing together of rearranged parts. This connects film's interpenetration of reality, which Benjamin (*ibid.*: 118) praises for its ability to »trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies« with the therapeutic necessity of surgery that is part of the transsexual experience. The cut in both instances is understood as an intervention. In Benjamin's metaphorical »surgery,« the cut that introduces a bodily difference suggests a therapeutic *and* aesthetic change. Considered from a filmic point of view, the cut appears a vital and formative action to render »difference.« In filmmaking, these decisive, violent cuts do not necessarily foreclose agency on the part of reality, the film body, or the spectator. To the contrary, cuts revitalize and engender a renewed aesthetic experience through the mediation of violence and technologies. These theoretical points about the cinematic operation theatre may help to counter hostilities towards trans-somatechnics.

Lili Elbe's postmortem memoir of 1933 offers a site from which we can examine the aesthetic as well as historical relationship between »early« Transsexuality and cinema. In tracking backwards, I hope to develop an alternative feminist history of agency in relation to violence, one that involves the potential of deriving agency through apparent violence, or of homeopathy. This relationship, I venture, revolves around the ways in which Transsexuality and cinema have been conceptualized as therapeutic treatments for sensate and psychic violence. We might understand these surgical treatments to utilize the »law of similars«: they trigger the body's system of healing through administering a dose of what ails. Samuel Hahnemann (1810) is considered the first practitioner of medicine to formulate

the law of homeopathy: »let like be cured by like.« In the lifelong dedication to revising his foundational text, *The Organon of Rational Art of Healing*, Hahnemann's interest was in wanting to reduce the damaging side effects of invasive and intensive treatment such as bloodletting, purging, and arsenic. In one sense his development of homeopathy was a direct and open reaction against the violence of common medical treatment, in another sense, homeopathic methods examined the violent course of sickness and perceived the antidote inherent in the violence wrought by the body. This insight was first generated in his discovery that a Peruvian remedy for malaria produced similar effects as the illness (Khuda-Bukhsh 2003: 339). The law of similars was formulated in the Greek for *bómoios* »like« and *páthos* »suffering« in which treatment induces in the patient a »like suffering« as the disease. The analogy of homeopathy remedies to surgical treatment is imperfect, but what might be compared is the way in which the surgical cut induces a »like suffering« as the cut of Preciado's operation theatre of gender, or of Benjamin's industrial-scale reproduction of the social. Through »like suffering,« the body is triggered to heal; in Eva Hayward's (2008: 72) words, it is »a generative effort to *pull the body back through itself* in order to feel mending, to feel the growth of new margins«. This cut is not into the body, but of the body.

In the case of Transsexuality, Elbe's story suggests a violent battle between the sexes raged in her body, and surgery, some five surgeries actually, were central to the sensate and psychic solution for quelling this violent conflict. Cinema, for Benjamin (2002 [1936]: 118), was an aesthetic treatment for a deadened and numb subject whose daily bombardment by stimulus left it alienated. The tactility of its cuts experienced by the cinema viewer, he argued, may restore perception, and offer relief. My point is not to emphasize how cinema is somehow the same as Transsexual surgeries, but to tentatively connect them through their aesthetic of the homeopathic cut. The conceptual model Benjamin offers suggests a less damning way of theorizing agency in the operation theatre than that articulated by radical feminists. It is of particular use to trans subjects undergoing physical transitions, who are subsequently dismissed by the sexual difference theories of radical feminism, techno-phobic theorists, and some clinicians alike. Moreover, Elbe's rendering of her feminine self involves utilizing surgical aesthetics to renew perception, which may shed light on the gendering dynamics of Benjamin's operation theatre.

»Early« Transsexuality

In Lili Elbe's narration of her life as an artist, first as a painter and later as the co-creator of her own feminine form, the experience of the multiple surgeries and her extended recovery in the women's ward are what enabled her »female self« to become animated. The book's inauguration of the genre of trans autobiographical writing places the surgical experience center stage, a position at which it has remained in nearly all trans autobiographies since (Prosser 1998; Stone 2006; Aizura 2011). Drawing from the jargon of visual arts, the subtitle's framing of the book's representational function as a portrait, and the inclusion of a photographic portrait on the cover, emphasizes the visuality of the text. The English version comes with accompanying images, inserted throughout to show the changing gendered expression of the protagonist. Especially in the context of the visual documents, the literary self-portrait seems to constitute an audio-visual sort of biopic.

Authenticated by Elbe's use of personal writings and photographs, the portrait appears to be a self-portrait, a genre that, as Mieke Bal (2003) writes, operates on the basis of the humanist ideology of individualism. In her article »Allo-Portraits,« taking the term from the Greek word *allo* for other, the notion of self-portraiture founded on an assumption of autonomy is contrasted to that of the self constituted through the other, foregrounding the social aspect of the process of identification. Elbe's portrait is an allo-portrait in so far as it confuses authorship, it formalizes a type or stereotyping of the transitioning subject, and it mimics the sensationalism of the press to a different effect. From journal entries integrated at the end of the book, Elbe comments briefly on how a friend's indiscretion broke the secrecy of her sex change, which resulted in an explosion of the story in German and Danish newspapers in the year 1931. In order to teach people not to judge, she writes:

»I am fighting against the prepossession of the Philistine, who looks upon me as a phenomenon, as an abnormality. As I am now, I am a perfectly ordinary woman among other women. The skepticism of the Philistine [...] who invests me and my fate with the quality of a sensation, often depresses me so severely that I find myself wanting to die« (Elbe 2004 [1933]: 262).

Indisputably, the fame of Elbe's experimental surgeries was related to her status as a well-known European artist. Hence, although Elbe often writes as though she is the first to receive a male-to-female sex change, this pos-

ture is not historically accurate. Her five operations from 1930–1933 were among the earliest that German and Danish doctors had conducted with the goal of transforming a human's physical and hormonal sex. The profane »miracle« of science was »to remove the dead (and formerly imperfect) male organs, and to restore the female organs with new and fresh material« – a then marvelous kind of transformation that would enable Lili to survive and effectively kill Andreas (Einar), the man (ibid.: 34).

The inserted photographs throughout the book mirror the narrative's telling of her life. We readers and viewers are witness to the transformation of the handsome painter, eyes cast down and face serious, posing in a natty three-piece suit, tie, and with glossed short hair, holding his palette and brush, framed by the empty interior of a studio (1929) to the buxom woman, relaxing in a garden with her faced turned towards the camera, a smile resting coyly on her lips, dressed in heels, stockings, mid-calf dress, coat and hat while reading letters (1930). Like the genre of the before and after pictures common to women's magazines covering a »make over,« the rhetoric of transformation is indicated in this offering of visual, documentary proof of her change.⁹

In her final days, Elbe (ibid.: 260) writes to her editor and friend, »I want nothing more ardently than to demonstrate that Andreas has been completely obliterated in me [...]. Through a child I should be able to convince myself in the unequivocal manner that I have been a woman from the very beginning«. Though she was unable to bear a child with her fiancé, she anticipated that one day her writings »would burst upon mankind as the confessions of the first person who was not born unconsciously through a mother's travail, but fully conscious through her own pangs« (ibid.: 255). In birthing herself, Elbe claims responsibility for the creation of her newfound womanly identity and embodiment. Hence, *Man into Woman's* narrative of emergence engages the reader in a plotline in which one character is subdivided into male and female, but it does so carefully, and in her own words, to parse a new subject.

The portrait Elbe draws of herself is both an image of her body and her story: her *bios*, in both senses. The particular kind of »pre-historical« Transsexualism she depicts, drawing on the earlier theory of sexual inversion, mobilizes the accepted hypothesis of internal hermaphroditism (she appar-

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of before and after photography in transsexual self-representation, see Prosser's (1998) »Transsexuality in Photography.«

ently showed no external signs).¹⁰ Elbe (ibid.: 111) matches her womanly feelings, her cross-gender identification, with her doctor's discovery of weak, »withered ovaries« in her abdomen, which were explained to her as trying to overcome the potent production of her testicular hormones. The illness of her body was understood as signaling the presence of »two beings, separate from each other, unrelated to each other, hostile to each other, although they had compassion on each other, as they knew that this body had room only for one of them« (ibid.).

The story of an internalization of warring masculine and feminine traits justifies the divided sexual self into Sparre/Elbe. The continuous assertion of this division guides the narrative by way of montage sequences of what I identify as shot/reverse-shots. This editing technique serves to drive the narrative – cutting from Sparre to Elbe and back – while engaging the reader in the life and death drama, in which »one of the two beings had to disappear, or else both had to perish« (ibid.). The question then becomes: at what point will this dramatic bio-picture cut back to find that Sparre has suddenly disappeared?

Lili was first discovered by the happy accident of Andreas sitting for his wife, whose illustrations of women's fashions demanded a model. When a model failed to show, he wore the outfit as a favor, but his feminine poses were so convincing it became routine for Andreas to cross-dress to help his wife. The drawings by Grete became the first portraits of Lili, whose captured stillness seems to instigate the desire to become animated. The morning before Sparre visits the German doctors for the first time, he speaks to a friend about his feelings about Lili becoming an externalized persona with a life of her own. The friend's parlor is decorated with Grete's drawings of Lili to which Sparre refers to assert their impending split: »the man you are talking to is condemned to death. And now the question is, whether that being – there – and he pointed to the portrait, can be summoned into existence and take up the battle of life« (ibid.: 52). When visiting the doctor, who informs him of the operation, Sparre learns that »when the surgeon here dismisses you, you will be no longer Andreas Sparre, but [...],« to which he exclaims, »Lili!« (ibid.: 58). *Man into Woman*

10 As most intersex conditions were identified after Elbe's death, it is difficult, if not impossible to correlate her symptoms with known conditions (assuming that enfolding Elbe into a history of intersexualization should be desired). In either case, she mobilized the scientific category, discourse, and personal narrative of hermaphroditism to access surgical options.

thus sets up the surgery as the final arbitrator in the battle for life and death, between man and woman. However, on a textual level, the reader is directed to gauge the division between Sparre and Lili by flicking her_his attention from one to the other, from one shot depicting Sparre cut to another shot of Lili, already visually present hanging on the wall. These decided aesthetics of before and after seem attempts to explain, justify even, the means and purpose of the bodily transformation wrought by surgery as a narrative in which the female protagonist alone would survive.

»Early« Cinema

The aesthetics of exhibitionism and direct address in the book have a cinematic equivalent in early cinema techniques. Many of the first filmic techniques came to be organized around the aesthetics of a »cinema of attractions.« This cinema style offers viewers a specific pleasure, one that cannot be reduced to the later narrative system of classical cinema (Paci 2006: 121). The distinction between cinemas seems to lie in its address to a viewer. In »sudden bursts,« attractions show »erupt[ions] on a monstrative level,« which is distinct from narrative films, whose viewer is positioned as observer-voyeur (ibid.). For Strauven (2006b: 18), the cinema of attractions implicates a somewhat aggressive address to the spectator. According to filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (quoted in ibid.), an attraction relied on the theatrical tradition of horror and special effects, which was supposed to produce »emotional shocks.« Strauven quotes specific examples from Eisenstein's 1923 *Montage of Attractions* essay, such as »an eye is gouged out« or »an arm or leg [is] amputated before the very eyes of the audience« (ibid.). She remarks that this bodily violence characterizes early cinema, in which car accidents and other ways of »cutting up of the body« were exhibited (ibid.).

In both cases, early cinema and Transsexuality reflect a violent »culture of dissection« (Sawday 1995). The darker sense of dissection's division of bodies can also be traced in the etymology of the term »sex,« in so far as »sex« derives from the Latin verb *secāre*, meaning »to cut« (Graham 2004: 300). The *decision* of sex, also from *secāre*, one might extrapolate, thus involves the division and separation of bodies dead or alive. Each body, then, undergoes a cutting insofar as it is assigned a sex and thereafter, each

time that sex becomes affirmed. With the notion of the operation theatre as an epistemological framework, the cultural relevance of a cinema of attractions may be based on seeing the anatomization of bodies, the literal and conceptual cutting up presented as entertainment. Hence, a gender-focused analysis of early cinema and its experimental formats could benefit from understanding the category of a cinema of attractions as a primary site, an operation theatre, for (re)sexing bodies. In addition, at the turn of the century, attractional cinema may have provided conceptual coherence for the transformation of bodies that turned out for the public spectacle of bodily violence, one of which became Transsexuality.

Aesthetics and Anaesthetics

Echoing Strauven's description of the cinema of attraction, Susan Stryker (2006a [1994]: 245) writes of the transsexual body: »it is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born«. Stryker's conceptualization of transsexual surgical practices also echoes cinema's formal principle of the cut that renders perception in the form of shocks. Surgery, she writes, often causes an »abrupt, often jarring transition« between genders (ibid.). According to Benjamin (1999 [1939]: 171), with the emergence of cinematic technologies and styles of editing, filmic jolts of bodily violence and shocks of abrupt movement between frames arose to meet the need for fresh stimulus. Referring to technologies like the match, the telephone, the photography camera, and traffic signals, Benjamin (1999 [1939]) looks critically at the haptic experiences that retrain the human sensorium to move abruptly. For Benjamin, film plays an aesthetic and therapeutic role in the context of turn-of-the-century industrialization. The surgery analogy becomes introduced at the juncture in Benjamin's (2002 [1936]: 117) argument where he wishes to harness the potential therapeutic capacity of film to revitalize the perception of the masses, deadened by the »prison-world« of urban industrial modernity.

The role of the editing cut that the viewer may perceive as a shock would become key to both Benjamin's political agenda and the assessment of the cinema asserted in the »Work of Art« essay. In Hansen's (1999: 327) words, »having opened the Pandora's box of therapeutic violence,« Benjamin saw that one way to close it again would be by »handing the key to the

proletariat.« The gamble that the essay makes is that the collective would be »innervated« by film; that the violence rendered by film would train them to be able to deal with the shocks of modern life. Hansen (ibid.: 313) sees that *innervation* is the key term in Benjamin's efforts to imagine an alternative reception of technology. What cannot now be heard or seen any longer due to the numbing factors of modernity, such as the factory and the crowd, he believes can be perceived anew in the operating theatre of cinema. Hence, the vigor of the masses, and for my purposes, the emergence of Transsexual aesthetics, both rely on transforming the violence of the cut into an intervention to restore vitality to the senses, an aesthetic transformation that is carried out in the soma-cinematic operating theatre.

Since a reversal of the historical process is impossible, the issue for Benjamin is how to mobilize and modify its effects. One must »counter [...] the alienation of the human sensorium with the same means and media that are part of the technological proliferation of shock-anaesthetics-aestheticization« (ibid.: 335). In the essay *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered*, Buck-Morss (1992: 18) explains why Benjamin was keen to keep moving the dialectic between aesthetics and anaesthetics, which I quote at length:

»Being »cheated out of experience« has become the general state, as the synaesthetic system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to numb the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather one of anaesthetics. In this situation of »crisis in perception,« it is no longer a question of educating the crude ear to hear music, but of giving back hearing. It is no longer a question of training the eye to see beauty, but of restoring »perceptibility.«

Since the synaesthetic system reverses to become anaesthetic, Benjamin argues that the only way to reconstitute experience is to shock the system *once more* to reestablish perception. This is where cinema comes in as the therapy that may break through the protective shield of consciousness. Alternately, it could also, Buck-Morss (ibid.: 62) points out, »provide a »drill for the strength of its defenses.« The way in which the somatechnic of cinema might work takes on acute political significance: one may become lost in self-annihilating pleasure, or become involved in a promising transformation of perceptibility. Benjamin recognizes that a fascist deployment of film grants the masses a pleasurable means to expression

without granting them rights. Such a fascist aestheticizing of political life, Benjamin (2002 [1936]: 121) declares, culminates in one point, and »that one point is war.« The violence of the cut found in film *and war alike* may merely provide »artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology« (ibid.: 122). He brings the discourse of surgery to bear on cinema to underscore the ambiguous cultural and political consequences of interacting with reproductive technologies. The political leeway that Benjamin bets on is the extent to which the acculturation of perception is subject to change. However, Hansen (1999: 325) warns against reading Benjamin »too optimistically as assuming that the anaesthetization and alienation wreaked by technology on the human sensorium could be overcome,« because, she continues, »for Benjamin there is no beyond or outside of technology.« Similarly, from the perspective of trans-somatechnics, there is no outside of technology, but varying political alignments and epistemological modes of becoming corporeally entangled with technologies.

Stryker takes a similar approach as Benjamin with regard to the somatechnics of sex and sex reassignment. For her, there is no going back to a so-called natural state, in which the body would be unmarked by the divisive decision of sex. Stryker (2006a [1994]: 254) suggests an alternative mode of reception that foregrounds agency in movement: »Though I may not hold the stylus [scalpel] myself, I can move beneath it for my own deep self-sustaining pleasures.« This solution suggests masochistic engagement with violence as an adequate response, in that the message of gender is writ in one's interaction with the cutting movements of the scalpel or stylus. In engaging the violence of the cut, whether rendered through surgery or cinema, one may transform one's bodily aesthetic and find therapeutic release. Benjamin's and Stryker's responses both suggest a politics of homeopathy: they prescribe a dose of what ails to cure you. The only way to bear the violence of anatomized sex or physical alienation is to move through it. Benjamin's film-therapy and transsex-therapy both rely on embracing the somatechnics of surgical cutting.

In writing »an account of myself and my helper,« that is, her surgeon, Elbe's task in *Man into Woman* was in part to describe and justify the apparent violence of surgery for the trans subject (Elbe 2004: 267). In many places, she expresses the hope that the story would be helpful in promoting an understanding of her kind, that is to make perceptible her trans-femininity. On the eve of her final (and fatal) surgery, she writes to her editor, Hoyer, the following directives: »now you will understand me and

now you will be able to teach others to understand me« (ibid.: 264). At a mid-way point in her series of operations, one of Elbe's (ibid.: 110f.) diary entries provides a clue to her strong desire for others to understand her:

»Formerly, I had found distraction in reading. Now, I never opened a book or journal. What were the fates of strange persons to me, unless I could find consolation in reading about a person of *my own kind*? But of such a person no author had been able to write, because it had never occurred to any that such a person could ever have existed.«

This passage suggests that her articulations are invested in forming an identity, because a language to describe people like her has not yet been invented. The comment proposes a particular embodiment, a special »kind,« and a distinct way of being. For the reader coming across »such a person« as Elbe, via the spreading of news about sex-change surgery from the 1930s – during which the book was published in three languages – the encounter might instigate the »shock of recognition,« to borrow a phrase from Joanne Meyerowitz (2002: 176). In this sense, Elbe's story could offer consolation, a kind of »shock« therapy that might lead to actual surgical treatment in order to become a certain kind of being.

Following Elbe, we might amend Benjamin's tagline, »the work of art in an age of technological reproducibility,« to insert gender in the place of art. Elbe's self-parsing and allo-portraiture, in both literary and photographic forms, suggests a »work of gender in an age of technological reproducibility.« Benjamin's principle observation of the »Work of Art« essay is that the new technology of moving-image reproduction in cinema gives rise to a reshaping of perception, in short, to a new field of possible aesthetic experience. While Benjamin views cinema as the training ground for overcoming, however briefly, sensual alienation, in the context of transsexual surgeries the reshaping of perception is a profound self-transformation. The important distinction is that the filmic transformation entails a temporary shock of the masses that may or may not have lasting effects, while the abruptness of the transsexual's transition likely reflects an enduring transformation of the subject's selfhood. The perceptibility of the newly emergent, the perception of trans aesthetics, however, may become installed through film's training of the senses to expand through cuts that shock and innervate the sensorium. Cinema, then, may offer a route towards somatechnical re-vitalization as well as a rich conceptual field for theorizing trans agency.