

PORNO-GRAPHICS & PORNO-TACTICS: DESIRE, AFFECT, AND REPRESENTATION IN PORNOGRAPHY. Copyright © 2016 Editors and authors. This work carries a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix, transform, and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors and editors (but not in a way that suggests the authors or punctum books endorses you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute your rebuild under the same license. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

First published in 2016 by punctum books, Earth, Milky Way.
www.punctumbooks.com

ISBN-13: 978-0692720547

ISBN-10: 0692720545

Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Book design: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei & Natalia Tuero

Cover image: Tejal Shah, *Lucid Dreaming V* (2013)

Tejal Shah (b. 1979, Bhilai, India; currently lives in Goa, India) graduated with a BA in photography from *RMIT*, Melbourne, spent a year as an exchange student at The Art Institute of Chicago and another summer trying to get an MFA from Bard College in upstate New York. Their* practice incorporates everything and anything, including video, photography, performance, food, drawing, sound, installation, and modes of sustainable living. Queerying everything, they often unselfconsciously manifest “the inappropriate/d other” – one whom you cannot appropriate and one who is inappropriate. Experiencing their works entails entering alter-curious worlds riddled with fact, fiction, poetry, and mythology, that compel us to engage with layered propositions on the relationships between interspecies, ecology, gender, post-porn, sexuality, and consciousness. Having recently come out as an ecosexual, they think of themselves as “some kind of artist working on some kind of nature.”

www.tejalshah.in

Porno-Graphics & Porno-Tactics

Desire, Affect, and Representation in Pornography



Edited by
Eirini Avramopoulou
& Irene Peano



CONTENTS

Challenging Pornography, Challenged by Pornography: From Monstrous Tactics to Enactments of <i>Poiēsis</i> Eirini Avramopoulou and Irene Peano	13
Interview with Émilie Juvet Eirini Avramopoulou, Irene Peano, and Adele Tulli	29
Open Letter on Empowerment and Queer Porn Kathryn Fischer	39
A Seductive Intrigue of Sexuality? Sinan Goknur	45
Everyday Porn Namita Aavriti	51
Look! But Also, Touch!: Theorizing Images of Trans Eroticism Beyond a Politics of Visual Essentialism Eliza Steinbock	59
Pornography for Blind and Visually Impaired People: On Tactility and Monstrosity Elia Charidi	77
A Note on Pornography and Violence Mantas Kvedaravicius	85
Biographies	95

Look! But Also, Touch!: Theorizing Images of Trans Eroticism Beyond a Politics of Visual Essentialism

Eliza Steinbock

Introducing Public Confessions: "Wringing the Turkey's Neck"

Jamison Green's essay "Look! No, Don't!: The Visibility Dilemma for Transsexual Men" discusses the conflict between on the one hand claiming that "we" transsexuals want to be invisible, while on the other hand begging to be acknowledged. The activism that demands that society "Look!" is carried out through what Green calls "public 'confessions,'" revelations that are situated beyond family, lovers, and doctors in increasingly public spaces such as classrooms, the television, and especially, in films.¹ The counter-imperative "No, don't!," as Green explains, relates to being caught up in the regulation of transsexual treatment, in which "in order to be a good – or successful – transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all."² At least from a medical perspective, the aim of hormonal and surgical treatment is to make the patient feel "normal" (that is, non-transsexual or dysphoric), a cure embodied by not drawing attention to oneself as transsexual.

¹ Jamison Green, "Look! No, Don't!: The Visibility Dilemma for Transsexual Men," in S. Whittle and K. More (eds), *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the fin de siècle* (London: Cassell, 1999), 117–31, at 118.

² *Ibid.*, 120.

The domain of sexuality functions as a key mode of achieving this disappearing act into normalcy. In the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM IV*, which sets formal standards in psychology around the world, the diagnostic nomenclature of Gender Identity Disorder (formally Transsexualism) painstakingly excludes non-heterosexual and non-reproductive eroticism from this pathology.³ Becoming positively diagnosed is the first step to (legally) accessing hormonal and surgical treatments in those countries that follow *The World Professional Association for Transgender Health* (WPATH) "Standards of Care" guidelines. If you find any element of your pre-transition embodiment sexually arousing or even enjoyable, then you might not actually desire the full range of treatments for genital reconstruction and thus not be a true transsexual. If you masturbate or have sex while "cross-dressed," then you could be a transvestite instead. Or, if your gender identity is the same as potential partners, and transitioning would produce gay or lesbian sexual identity, then the clinician might argue that the desire to transition comes from sexual identity confusion. Through the assumption of heterosexism, the hegemonic clinical discourse on gender dysphoria occludes a specified spectrum of trans(-)sexuality, a sexuality that follows from transitioning and non-binary genders.⁴

If for Green, the political struggle of trans self-representation produces a conflict expressed in the competing demands

3 American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM IV* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Press, 1994).

4 For discussion in detail about the history of this nomenclature see Z. Davy, *Recognizing Transsexuals: Personal, Political and Medicolegal Embodiment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011). In "'Sexing Up' Bodily Aesthetics: Notes towards Theorizing Trans Sexuality," in S. Hines and Y. Taylor (eds), *Sexualities: Past Reflections and Future Directions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 266–85, Steinbock and Davy analyze the history of sexological and clinical parsing of transsexualism in terms of sexuality. The most recent controversial development in trans-focused sexology is known as the "Bailey Affair" (Burns, 2004). Here trans sexuality is once again purported to be a pathological expression of hypersexuality. In *The Man who would be Queen*, Bailey (2003), stresses the hypersexualization of two sub-types of male to female transsexuals, autogynephiles, and homosexual transsexuals.

of, "Look!" and "No, don't!" then alternatively, Sandy Stone's ground-breaking essay of 1991, "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," calls for the transsexual community to "Look!" at themselves. Or, to be more precise, for (post)transsexuals to be honest about their authentic desiring selves, and to show within their self-theorization of trans experience wider "spectra of desire."⁵ It is crucial that the spectra be inclusive of trans desires that articulate trans sexual dissonances, those elements that would potentially exclude you from being diagnosed with transsexualism in the first place. The manifesto draws attention to a sexual spectrum in the trans archive, one that Stone suggests has been enjoyed covertly because of the repercussions that could be suffered if these dissonances were exposed.

Blowing the cover, Stone writes about an erotic act euphemistically called, "'wringing the turkey's neck', the ritual of penile masturbation just before surgery," which she claims is the most "secret of secret traditions."⁶ One may consider that for potential and actual female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs, or transmen, or transmasculine transgender-identified people), such covert sexuality may include enjoyment of ("vaginal" or "front hole") penetration or other play involving "womanly" parts. Pre, post, non-op, or simply transgender embodied sexuality experienced by trans folk continues to be circumscribed by what Stone calls a "permissible range,"⁷ a range which maps onto the same heterosexual matrix that delimits queer sex, kinky sex, and other deviations from the hetero norm. Under investigation in Stone's exposure of dissonant trans eroticism is the regulatory means of delimiting transsexualism as a normative gender and sexual condition.

Rather than restricting ourselves to the sense of sight embedded in the metaphor of *spectrum* of desire, one might also *feel* trans eroticism, as Susan Stryker describes it, as a *poiësis* of the trans body, an aesthetic experience of oneself as "iridescent, shimmer-

5 S. Stone, "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto [1991]," in S. Whittle and S. Stryker (eds) *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 221–35, at 231.

6 *Ibid.*, 228.

7 *Ibid.*

ing,” and, as these visual metaphors of movement suggest, also “unceasingly active in its inversions.”⁸ That is, one feels desire’s shimmering activity through the synesthetic modalities of touch intertwining with vision. Taking Stone’s example of “wringing the turkey’s neck,” the metaphor of strangulation, of “wringing” a neck, points to the key role of touch by the hand and on a body.

Isolating this moment of resistance to the permissible range of touch, the defiant touching of oneself and others perhaps also “wrings out” or takes control of the regulatory discourse. Following Stone’s suggestion to look at instances of trans sexual dissonance, I argue for special attention to be paid to the ways in which the conflicting imperatives of “Look! No, don’t!” are negotiated in public confessions of trans sexualities. Within trans pornography, where genitals are often on display, or at least the exposure of them is negotiated, we can examine the complicated political demand to look at this public confession of trans embodiment, but also the sexual invitation to touch it. Trans pornography may cite the identity politics of visibility, but it also offers a rich opportunity for investigating the force, shape, and experience of trans eroticism through touch.

Visual Essentialism: “Look!”

Pornography’s conventions are often attuned to *realism* through showing bodies in close range that are caught up in sexual acts and hence, engaging viewers in the scopophilic richness of real bodies having apparently real sex. In the first instance, trans porn says, “Look! Trans sex is like this.” The visual availability of the image contributes to the force of this imperative to “Look!” As Mieke Bal notes, an audience tends to go along with the general epistemological meaning of images on display – precisely by inviting the look to linger, they are invited to believe their transparent verac-

8 Susan Stryker, “Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism,” *Parallax* 14, no. 1 (2008): 36–47.

ity, and to enjoy it.⁹ Within the genres of queer, trans, and other minority porn, the political wish to represent these marginalized sexual identities can lead to a conflation of political visibility with actual visible representation in pornographic images. The investment in the apparent empirical knowledge of “real” trans sexualities represented in trans porn has a history in waves of feminist re-visionings of female and lesbian sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s. This history also struggled with what I call “visual essentialism,” or, the mobilization of a mimetic medium and a genre with a history of scientism to represent identities of desire. The essentialism of the image appears to carry over into the essentialism of the identity represented therein.

One of the most influential theories of pornography’s realist drive comes from Linda Williams, who uses the industry term “hard core” that reflects the investment in film to reveal an actual, real core. In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* she historicizes pornography’s origin and function through tracing Foucault’s concept of *scientia sexualis* into more contemporary pornographies. Her thesis is that, in its “positivist quest for the truth of visible phenomena,” as she characterizes pornography’s endeavor, it turns out to be merely a masculinist measure of veracity.¹⁰ Whereas the penis’s ability to provide evidence of pleasure through ejaculation is well aligned with positivism’s preference for direct observation, women’s pleasure ironically happens in an “invisible place.”¹¹ This place is literally the black hole of the vagina. Given (her assumption) that women’s orgasmic pleasure cannot be scientifically verified by external ejaculation, or other outward displays of sexual pleasure, it fails to measure up to the masculinist quest for empirical verification, thereby rendering it invisible and a problem that pornography tries both to solve, and to avoid, in its eternal return to the fetish of the “money shot.”

9 Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 8. This thesis is further developed in her article “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (2003), 5–32.

10 Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1999 [1991]).

11 *Ibid.*

For Williams, women's, and, by extension, lesbians', sexuality remains in the closet and thus un-confessed; that is, female pleasure and sexual identity are invisible in the political realm of sexual representation. However, understanding porn in this way confuses capturing the "real" of the pro-filmic event with the capture of the "truth" of the actor's desire – thus with that desire's confession. Hence, Williams falls into the same trap of the phallogocentric investment in visibility that she wishes to dispute. The doubled notion of visibility at work in her analysis of pornography mistakes the capture of acts and pleasures with the true confession of the individual's sexuality and desire. That this conflation of the cinematic privilege of realism with discursive truth has only recently been addressed¹² perhaps reflects the desire on the part of porn studies scholarship to establish itself as the study of a cultural discourse with a direct relation to political "realities," as Williams frames her study in the introduction.

Film theorist Ingrid Ryberg sees that Williams's harnessing of realist cinematic ontology to a sexual epistemology has contributed to a number of mixed visibility strategies in contemporary queer porn culture, such as obeying the principal of "maximum visibility" of the body, giving context to the performers' sex in a sexual community, and including confessional interviews in which the talents explain themselves.¹³ All these visibility strategies are used in trans porn too, particularly in the stream of docu-porn from *Linda/Les and Annie: The First F-t-M Transsexual Love Story* (1989), to *Enough Man* (2005), to *Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papi and Wil* (2007) and the recent *Doing it Ourselves: The Trans Women Porn Project* (2010), as well as in the regular inclusion of transmasculinity (less so transfeminine talent) in marketed queer porn, such as *The Crash Pad Series* (2005–2012), *Speakeasy* (2010), and *Pornographics* (2004). In her conclusion, Ryberg warns of the risk in assuming that by deploying explicit cinematic language to

reveal all the body's sexual secrets one might then make visible marginalized subject positions and experiences. It is this mistaken conflation of political and representational "visibility," with its double investment in visual essentialism, that I wish to critique in the creation and reception of trans porn. While the moment of saying "Look!" is important to the political call for recognition, porn may also have political force on the bodily level of the viewer and for the performer. Hence, trans porn is political not simply because it reflects "real" bodies, desires, and experiences, but because it engenders them on and off the screen.

Aesthetic Experience: "Touch!"

The first step toward accounting for the politics of touch in trans porn involves recognizing the impact of embracing trans sexuality in general – in defiance of medical discourse that either de-eroticizes or hyper-eroticizes transsexualism. The erotic touching between trans porn talent on-screen and trans porn viewers off-screen may challenge the medical terms of transsexuality that have delimited eroticism for trans persons to heteronormative penetration and to the desire to transition itself. Secondly, regarding the politics of touch in trans porn, it is often overlooked how visual representations of sexually explicit acts also facilitate a haptically erotic experience. The everyday vernacular related to porn, which includes phrases like "one-handed reading" and "whatever turns your crank," suggests that at the base of pornography lies a synesthetic relationship of vision to touch similar to trans eroticism's shimmering *poiēsis*. Thus although it may suggest a mimetic relationship to reality, clearly porn also functions as an inter-subjective social space to explore and produce our sexual bodies. A good example of this call to both "Look!" and "Touch!" – this tension between the politics of visibility and the trans erotics of touch – is Barbara DeGenevieve's *Out of the Woods* (2002), in which both imperatives compete for attention from the viewer.

This short video was one of many scenes that she shot with participants who responded to the call to appear on the now offline website *ssspreload.com*, which features "hot femmes, studly butches

12 Cf. C. Taylor, "Pornographic Confessions?: *Sex Work and Scientia Sexualis in Foucault and Linda Williams*." *Foucault Studies* 7 (2009), 18–44.

13 Ingrid Ryberg, "Maximizing Visibility," *Film International* 6, no. 6 (2008), 72–79, at 72–74.



Figs. 1–14. *Out of the Woods* (2002), dir. Barbara DeGenevieve (USA), 7 min. – Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

and lots of genderfuck” (January 2001–February 2004).¹⁴ Like the other scenes, DeGenevieve shot whatever the participants wanted. This format lends a sense of authenticity to the video, providing a kind of document of an unscripted and undirected sexual scene between transman JJ and transwoman Tennetty. The video’s public display functions as a confession of their prior private experience of having sex, a “coming out of the [trans sexual] closet.” A declaration that renders someone visible as a *sexual* transsexual, particularly a non-heteronormative transsexual, takes on acute political significance as it signals defiance of the range of permissible touch. Through both its production and its public circulation, *Out of the Woods* suggests that trans desire is “out” of the determining factors of psycho-sexual diagnosis: “out” of the “woods” that renders trans, in particular trans on trans, desire impossible and at the same time invisible. The emphatic “outness” in *Out of the Woods* signals the significance of eroticism to trans experience, which furthermore demands to be addressed as more than a deviant complication of male or female, and heterosexual or homosexual, subject positions.

The performative force of this trans sexual coming out, however, is rendered largely through the scene’s use of physical and emotionally laden touch. Involving wrestling and powerplay, the performers never break contact after the first circling and taking down of each other (figs. 1 and 2). Bare-chested and barelegged, Tennetty’s and JJ’s skin very quickly becomes covered in the earth and pine needles that blanket the forest floor. Shots showing tousled and matted hair, dirt under nails, and impressed dead leaves on the body draw even more attention to their tactile experience. The vulnerability of their near nakedness (socks, shoes, and ripped fishnet tights stay on) is amplified by their flipping and slamming of one another into the ground (figs. 3, 4, and 5). While the handheld camera quietly tracks the progression of their sexual

¹⁴ This scene was made available personally through the director; however, DeGenevieve, who has now passed away, believed it would achieve commercial release through the production house Femme Fatale (Nan Kinney) on the compilation video *Rough Stuff: More Scenes from Ssspread.com*.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 4.

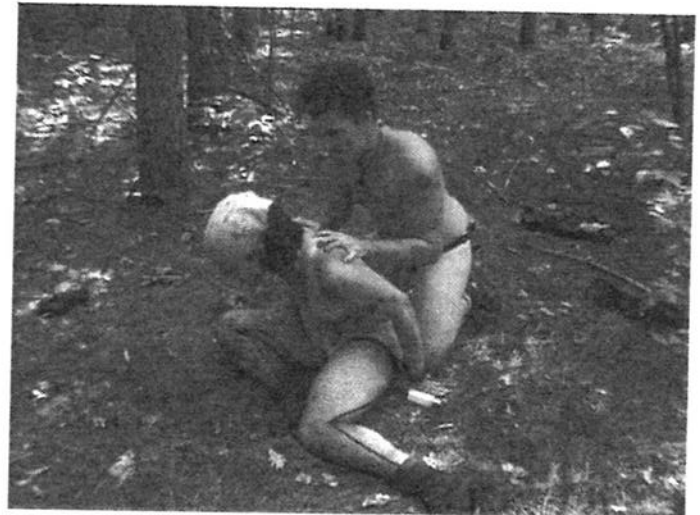


Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

experience, moving to frame it from all sides in close-up and medium shots, Tennyty and JJ never glance into it. Absorbed in the intensity of the scene, the exchange of touches reverberates and amplifies through the alternation of caresses with slaps, punches, and grabs. Primarily, it is JJ, as a Top, or Dominant, who initiates contact, with Tennyty guiding, yielding, and encouraging the touches in movement and in sound (*figs. 6 and 7*).

With the careful application of a condom and lube, JJ prepares Tennyty for penetration, her back arching in sensual anticipation. As they begin to rollick and find a pleasurable rhythm, the camera comes closer to their bodies to focus on the pucker of skin, the concentration of pleasure on their faces (*fig. 8*). Noticeably, there is no “meat shot” or attempt to get between them to show us the penetration. Likewise, we have no access to a “money shot” to conclude the scene. Though no audible or visible orgasm is had, the intensity of the experience is felt in the capture of the aftercare.

The post-sex clean up would not normally be included in commercial porn formats. But here we drift seamlessly from the sex into the same attention to touch in the sensual closure of the scene. The white bandage that mysteriously had covered the front of Tennyty’s crotch comes into focus. JJ backs her up towards a tree, gingerly guiding her exposed skin safely past the sharp edges of broken limbs sticking out akimbo from the tree’s trunk (*fig. 9*). The so-called climax of the scene, in the place of a “money shot,” is the very slow removal of Tennyty’s bandage. At first seen from the side view, Tennyty lifts her leg over JJ’s shoulder to allow him to reach the tape (*fig. 10*). Swinging to a frontal shot, JJ, now standing, starts to pull the tape off, a gesture that causes her skin to pull away from her body, eliciting a sensation of pain (*fig. 11*). Although painful now, the bandage’s stickiness had provided a protective covering for her genitals, those that could not be directly touched by her sexual partner. She takes hold of the tender bits, gently massaging them (*fig. 12*) before relaxing into JJ’s embrace (*fig. 13*), which concludes the scene.

The characters JJ as “Pants” and Tennyty as “Fishnets” (*fig. 14*) who appear on camera in “Out of the Woods” do not seek to



Fig. 9.

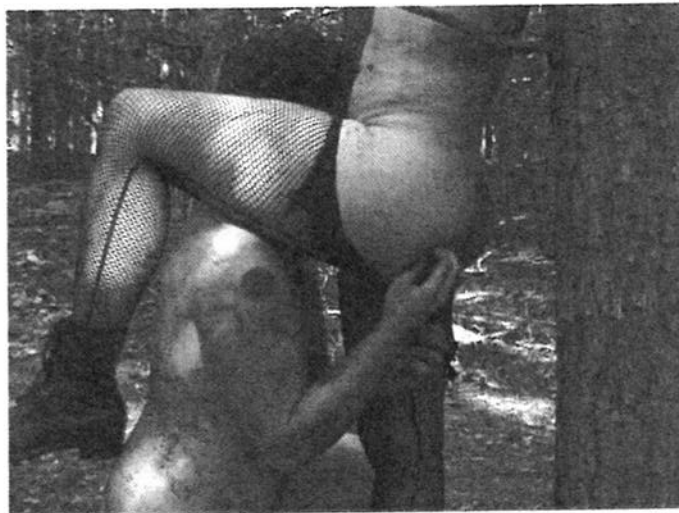


Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.

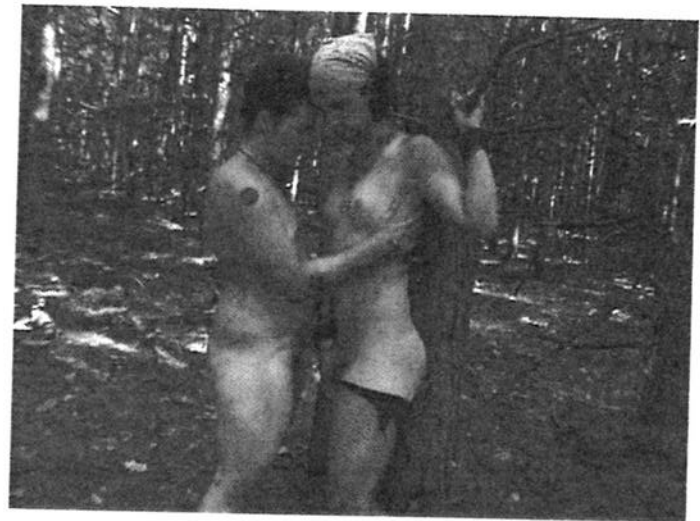


Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.

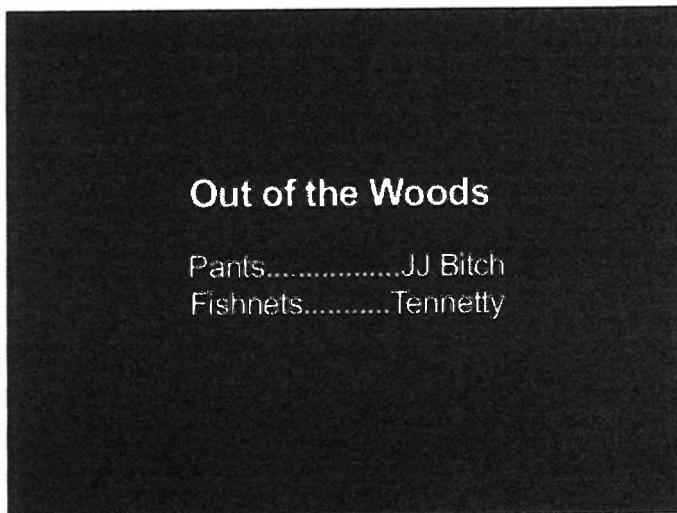


Fig. 14.

produce a documentation of their passing as cisgender, or to confess their chosen gender role. The talent bravely lets the camera into the space of their trans sexual practice, calling the audience to “Look!” at their shimmering spectrum of desire. In this way, *Out of the Woods* may be understood as part of Stone’s summons for a “next transformation” within the community. This transformation is not linear. It seems to involve an alternative genealogy: rather than acceding to realness, it investigates gendered experience, it questions sexual authenticity and the ways we might conceive of trans sex through sensate understanding rather than through ocular determinism.

Nevertheless, *Out of the Woods* mobilizes its touching effects through the visual medium of digital video. In *The Cinematic Body* (1993), Steven Shaviro singles out one quality of the image most responsible for filmic fascination: 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.”¹⁵ This shimmering quality, which Stryker also attributes to trans embodiment, triggers a haptic response in the spectator: called to action, s/he lifts a hand, seeking to become caught up in the flux of images. As phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack theorizes through the film *The Piano*, barred from grasping the image, the viewer’s hand recursively seeks out his or her own body at hand, to make sensate meaning of the image.¹⁶ Perhaps even more literally, the viewer’s grasp of their body while they look at pornography is a substitute for the body on-screen, a “one-handed” reading of the filmic text. *Out of the Woods* and other trans porn potentially depicts as well as generates a groping subject defying the permissible range of touch to engender trans erotics.

¹⁵ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), 47.

¹⁶ V. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2004), 76–78.