Oblique Optics: Seeing the Queerness of Ec-static Images

Kristopher L. Cannon

Georgia State University

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ABSTRACT

*Oblique Optics* contends that studies of visual culture must account for the queerness of images. This argument posits images as queer residents within visual culture by asking how and where the queerness of images becomes visible. These questions are interrogated by utilizing queer theories and methods to refigure how the image is conceptualized within traditional approaches to visual culture studies and media studies. Each chapter offers different approaches to see the queerness of images by torquing our vision to see "obliquely," whereby images are located beyond
visible surfaces (like pictures or photographs) through ec-static movements within thresholds between bodies and beings.

Chapter One rethinks how images are conceptualized through metaphorical language by exploring how images emerge from fantasies about will-be-born bodies in fetal photographs. This chapter turns to figures of queer children for insight about oblique approaches to visual culture and foregrounds later engagements with aesthetics of failure. Chapter Two considers how aesthetics of failure extend to the visible forms of lacking bodies. The visibility of lack is explored by considering how pixelated vision provides alternative ways to image mastectomy scars in the film *The Body Beautiful* (1991) and the advertising campaign "Obsessed with Breasts." Chapter Three addresses the visible form and function of cutting within images about Michael Jackson and these images are shown cutting the body toward non-human forms of visibility. Chapter Four expands on this discussion about the non-human by contemplating how the film *Air Doll* (2009) reveals a visual culture of things, where we not only see things but also see how things see. Finally, Chapter Five turns to digital glitches as a visible form to explore how non-human bodies like the computer produce images beyond human-centric concerns and reveals how the digital is shown to image itself.

INDEX WORDS: Aesthetics, Air doll, Avisual, Avisuality, Blackness, The body beautiful, Breast cancer, Children, Cut, Failure, Gender studies, Glitch, Images, Mastectomy, Media studies, Michael Jackson, New media studies, Noise, Non-human, Photographs, Pictures, Pimp my ultrasound, Pixel, Pixelation, Pixelization, Post-human, Queer theory, Race, Sexuality, Thing theory, Oblique optics, Object-oriented ontology, Sonogram, Ultrasound, Visual culture
OBLIQUE OPTICS: SEEING THE QUEERNESS OF EC-STATIC IMAGES

by

KRISTOPHER L. CANNON

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013
DEDICATION

For those things that help us find beauty in failure.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not have had the time, strength, or patience to see things the way they have been written about here if it were not for many people who offered support, encouragement, and love. I met many amazing people at Georgia State University, but my cohort made my experiences and education (in and out of the classroom) a sight to behold. Many thanks to Drew, Karen, Melanie, Michele, Oriana, and Steve for your brilliant insights about work and the world, and your willingness to relax and socialize over the occasional libation. To Drew and Steve: thanks for your willingness to catch a drag show or two, and bigger thanks for staying the whole night. To Melanie: you were a brilliant confidante at school and at home and I only hope I can offer an adequate return on the generosity and care you offered me. To Karen: I cannot even begin to express how much I cherish our friendship or my deep gratitude about your constant cheerleading for my work and well-being. Many thanks are also due to my department chair, David Cheshier, who was an unwavering source of support and an unparalleled advocate for graduate students. To my committee, to Angelo, Jennifer, Ted, and Steven: thank you for your insights about my work, feedback and advice about moments of success and failure, and for your continued friendships.

To my wonderful friends in Atlanta: To Phil: thank you for your support and your willingness to pry me away from the keyboard when I desperately needed to breathe air outside of Starbucks. To Eldon: your friendship and affection were surprises near the end of this academic journey at GSU. Thank you for sharing your wisdom and intellect with me, and for your selfless acts of kindness and love. To Timothy, the nerdy boy I was desperate to meet after hearing him spout off about Judith Butler and
performativity at Caribou Coffee: I could not have chosen a better day to eavesdrop, because you were a wonderful friend to catch. Thank you for continuing to offer me intellectual intimacy and an animated friendship. To my family, who helped me to pave much of the path leading to where I am today. To my grandmother, Bonnie: thank you for your love and encouragement while I've been in school (and for advising me to stop pursuing law school). I want to thank my beautiful sisters, especially for spending so much time with my parents when I was unable to visit. And, to my parents, Tambra, Terry, Chava, and Mark: thank you for always encouraging me to push forward, to pursue my dreams, and for endless amounts of love and support.

Finally, to my advisor, Alessandra: I'm left without words to describe your stunning and spectacular impact on my intellectual and personal growth. You opened my eyes to new and exciting paths of intellectual exploration, were steadfast in your willingness to facilitate my journey into strange and uncertain territory, and turned my ideas into words I would not have been able to compose alone. Thank you for a brilliant introduction to visual culture, and for demonstrating the study of visual culture with such elegance and eloquence that it puts my work to shame. Most importantly, I thank you for being an indefatigable friend. With all of the support you have given me as a friend and mentor, I hope to one day offer you the same unspeakable feeling: the feeling of being beside yourself with gratitude.
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PREFACE

What pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an idea of visuality adequate to their ontology. —W.J.T. Mitchell

I have studied and written about theories of queerness through most of my time in academia and this project began while I was exploring how queer theory (or the broader interdisciplinary field of queer studies) would be useful when applied to the field of visual culture studies. In this process, I began to see the use of the term "queer" in its gerund form as strikingly similar to descriptions about the movements of images. This initial perception resulted in a rather simplistic question: "Are images queer?" My response was an emphatic affirmation—"Of course images are queer!"—because it seemed little could not be (or had not been) considered queer in contemporary academic scholarship.  

2 I describe how I use the term "queer" in the first chapter, with additional references in footnotes 29 and 30.
3 There are countless examples I could offer, so I provide the following list to illustrate a range of queer(ed) topics beyond the scope of what I address in my dissertation. Beyond more familiar topics like bodies, gender, sex, and sexuality, consider: animation (Halberstam); biotechnologies (Parisi); companionship (Haraway); disability through crip theory (McRuer); loneliness and singleness (Cobb); and, post-humans and necrosexuality (MacCormack). See Michael L. Cobb, Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Judith Halberstam, "Animating Revolt/Revolting Animation: Penguin Love, Doll Sex and the Spectacle of the Queer Nonhuman," in Queering the Non/Human, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008); Donna J. Haraway, "Companion Species, Mis-Recognition, and Queer Worlding," in Queering the Non/Human, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008); Patricia MacCormack, "Necrosexuality," in Queering the Non/Human, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008); ——, Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012); Robert McRuer, Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability, Cultural Front (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Luciana Parisi, "The Nanoengineering of Desire," in Queering the Non/Human, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008).
My question about the queerness of images arose in response to specific ways the image is conceptualized in studies of visual culture and, to this end, I wanted to know why and how images are queer.

My initial understanding about how I could define an image in a study about visual culture came from W.J.T. Mitchell’s book, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*. For Mitchell, images facilitate the movements of pictures, they are the unseen support system that allows pictures to become meaningful residents within the realm of visual culture. If, as Mitchell argues, pictures are plagued by inadequate conceptualization, I became curious about what images "want," or if images suffer a similar plight to their pictorial companions. I never aimed to provide an adequate conceptualization of "visuality" because I did not want to direct my inquiries toward the pursuit of mastery over visual knowledge, as a means to master pictures or images.⁴

Instead, my aim was to account for a range of relationships we might have with images. I recognized this as an objective with the potential to become a disappointing relationship were images to thwart my understanding by not being rendered into visibility. I find the uncertain and unknowable properties of images fascinating because

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of my penchant for queer engagement with and analyses of objects. Thus, my aims to gain better understanding about images have always had the potential to fail; I remained open to this possibility and chose to embrace the shame of each experience with the failure to understand.

With these things in mind, my dissertation sets out to answer several questions. First, are images queer and what reveals their queerness? I will argue that it is a palpable, uncertain and changing form that becomes the primary similarity between images and queerness. I determined this by considering two related questions: how can we see the queerness of images and where would we look? To answer these questions I needed to develop a method of looking. The choice to embrace my inability or failure to master images led me to experience visual culture as collections of optical perspectives. In this regard, I utilized queer theories to develop what I call "oplique optics," the sideways forms of sight that have the ability to torque typical or normative approaches to visual culture. This led me to wonder about the possibility to take some of Mitchell’s metaphorical language literally, and if this would enable me to see or hear images and pictures speaking about what they want. To this end, I turned to descriptions of the body that are used to clarify our understanding about pictures and images; and, in the process, determined that the queerness of images becomes visible

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5 In different terms, this experience began to provide modes of engagement functioning similar to descriptions of archaeology, which Michel Foucault uses to describe a departure from the construction of historiographies centered on consciousness or the individual subject, and assemblages, which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use as a designation for heterogeneous entities (multiplicities) operating in unity. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Michel Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, Routledge Classics (London; New York: Routledge, 2002).
through movements within thresholds between bodies and things, detectable only if we turn our vision to see obliquely.

In what follows, I torque some of the tropological figurations that keep images hidden within thresholds between bodies and things. This process will provide palpable means of engagement with the queerness of images in visual culture. I will explore the queerness of images through various forms of embodiment beginning with the human body. In my first chapter, I engage with some of the metaphorical language that situates our understanding of images by discussing how images emerge from fantasies about will-be-born bodies projected onto fetal photographs. In Chapter Two, "Embracing the Shame of Visible Absence," I shift to address visible forms of living and "lacking" bodies. I do this by exploring how images of "imperfection" emerge from pictures of female bodies with mastectomy scars, how these pictures facilitate staring relations, and address why these staring relations inspire shame but also a sense of wonder. I foreground why wonder becomes valuable within staring relations by turning to digital pictures of imperfection, where pixels will be shown to embrace the shame of visible debasement. Pixelization will also provide us with a sense of wonder that orientates toward the possibility to embrace the failure of visual clarity by thwarting our dependence on visual mastery.

Chapter Three, "Cutting Visual Aesthetics," continues to address how the human body operates within visual culture, but, shifting from staring relations and a sense of wonder, I address how Michael Jackson becomes a figure who disorientates
our understanding of the relationship between images and bodies in visual culture. I will explain how this experience of disorientation emerges from an aesthetics of cutting and, more specifically, reveal how Jackson functions as a figure who has learned to image his body beyond the boundaries of the human, becoming an image for a being who need not remain confined by the pictorial form. This chapter also provides a transition to Chapters Four and Five, where I extend my discussion about cutting aesthetics and the post-human toward non-humans within visual culture.

In Chapter Four, "Tracing the Visibility of Palpable Plastic Things," I shift to address a visual culture of things. This chapter proposes the possibility for things to become the center of a non-human visual culture, where things engage with visual cultures of their own by seeing and producing images independently from humans. More importantly, in this chapter I address the possibility for a mode of being and a form of aesthetics to emerge through the process of "becoming ec-static," where beings and images are set beside themselves. I will describe "becoming ec-static" as one form for a queer aesthetics of failure and, in this context, one that reveals the possibility for objects and things to operate beyond the confines of anthropocentric visual cultures. Thus, in Chapter Five, "Seeing Things," I shift to digital aesthetics of failure to detail the ways that non-humans become visible engaging with and producing their own images. I address how glitches uncover the digital imagining and imaging itself and, from this, extrapolate why glitches reiterate the queerness of images and the value of queer aesthetics of failure.

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6 To see what I previously published on this topic, see Kristopher L. Cannon, "Cutting Race Otherwise: Imagining Michael Jackson," *Spectator* 30, no. 2 (2010).
1. SEEING OBLIQUELY: THE UN-SEEABLE SI(GH)TES BETWEEN PICTURES AND IMAGES

Figure 1.1 "Future Athlete" fetal photograph

*Pimp My Ultrasound* is a strange iPhone application for users who want to "announce an arrival of the[ir] newest family member."¹ The ability to use this application to place text, signs and symbols over a sonogram does not imply that the program functions are intrinsically strange, but emerges as strangeness in relation to the utility of these "pimped" pictures (Figure 1.1).² Pimped pictures do not illuminate meaning above or beyond the "original" fetal photograph because these additional layers of textual description function as superimposition rather than supra-imposition. Instead, *Pimp My Ultrasound* merely facilitates our ability to use textual information as

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² I use the word sonogram in reference to the visual object produced by an ultrasound examination. When I reference the ultrasound later, I am writing about the ultrasonic wave technology and machinery used to produce visual representations like the sonogram.
a means to formalize and reinscribe the fantasies parents already project upon non-
"pimped" fetal photographs: imaginings about who their child will become.

I begin with the application *Pimp My Ultrasound* as an introductory context for
two topics I address in this chapter. I will discuss how ultrasound technologies function
within visual culture and, more broadly, why studies of visual culture should continue to
engage with W.J.T. Mitchell's now famous question, "What do pictures want?" I
address why pictures produced by an application like *Pimp My Ultrasound* draw
attention to a peculiar investment in the pictorial form by considering how the
sonogram pictures the un-born child, by interrogating the meaning and meaningfulness
of images emerging between fetal photographs and parental projections, and, most
broadly, by explaining why sonograms demand that we address and reassess how
images structure the forms and functions of pictures within the realm of visual culture.

We can begin to explore these dynamics through the prenatal space where
unborn children are pictured and how this space is accessed through sonography.
Nathan Stormer's writings about the rhetorical and visual framing of prenatal spaces
not only illuminate how cultures engage with the fecund body, or what he calls the
"prenatal sublime," but also lend clarity to how cultural understanding of this
environment frames the fetus or unborn child. Stormer's work engages with a long
history of feminist scholarship about the position of female bodies in relation to
prenatal space and, while I would affirm this as an "heterotopic commonplace for
discourses on life's order," I shift my focus to the unborn child as the necessary

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condition for the emergence of heterotopic qualities within this space. Foucault tells us that heterotopias are both real and "outside all places," both perfect, utopian mirrors and "disorganized, badly arranged and muddled," and create spatial and temporal discontinuities. The reflexive and reflective nature of these internal, in utero spaces extend mirror-like functionality to fetal photographs, lending depth to pictorial surface by collapsing foreground with background and inside with outside.

Prenatal space also functions as a common and heterotopic space because our access to this space is limited. Our inability to picture prenatal spaces without ultrasound technologies facilitates a sense of wonder by providing access to what would otherwise remain unseeable space. This access simultaneously produces a paradoxical sense of amazement, which, Stormer explains, remains "dependent not on what we see but on how we see." Ultrasound technologies facilitate how we see the unborn child through sonography but, if Pimp My Ultrasound offers any indication, what we see indicates how fetal photographs are rarely—if ever—explored beyond their surface. Pimp my Ultrasound reveals how parents picture their desires about the yet-to-be-born child, which functions as an interface for normative fantasies about children. After importing a fetal photograph into the application, the unborn child is imagined by labeling her with a future, including phrases like "best grandbaby," "baby rockstar," and "future athlete." Parental desires and fantasies enable these labels to

6 Stormer, "Looking in Wonder," 668.
function within a logic of difference, which is more precisely a differential logic.\(^7\) The unborn child can be the greatest and most successful because, as with any differential logic, parental fantasies and desires operate outside of measurable, quantifiable standards for differentiation. Within fantasies about the hope and futurity of children, these logics not only reveal, as Judith Halberstam suggests, how winning functions as a "multivalent event: in order for someone to win, someone else must fail to win," but also how the "act of losing has its own logic, its own complexity." The "best" grand-baby only exists when other grand-babies take second or third place and a baby will only reach "rockstar" status by imagining a future where other children demonstrate incompetent musical abilities. Parental fantasies project success and greatness onto fetal photographs, which simultaneously constructs this "best" child by relegating all other children to "the pursuit of greatness."\(^8\)

These fantasies frame fetal photographs as a pictorial form for the will-be-born child but hold the unborn child in a space of optical arrest: she is arrested by pulsating pixels that are captured and then rendered in the form of a digital picture; she is arrested from in utero development to present the unborn child as a pixelated will-be-born body; and, in this process, she becomes confined by parental fantasies within an isolated fetal figuration. The sonogram and the fetal photographs it produces become surfaces for parents to imagine and fantasize about who they mis-recognize as their

\(^7\) This statement about difference and differential logics is based on what Saussure formulates as the structure of language, based on differences without "positive terms." See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Peru: Open Court Publishing, 2006 [1972/1983]; repr., Sixteenth printing), 118.

will-be-born child. Although parental desire brings an imagined child to the surface of fetal photographs, a logic of failure foregrounds why fantasies of the Child and "the future of children" create subjects who cannot match every connotation we conjure through fantasies beholden to futurities that may never effloresce. I expound upon this logic of failure while addressing these dynamics at an intersection between two, transitioning pre-subjects: the picture becoming an image and the fetus becoming a child. This intersection will reveal how sonograms operate in contrast to the desires that fuel and facilitate perceptions of sonograms as static, photographic surfaces.

1.1 From Picture to Image through Si(gh)tes Unseen

W.J.T. Mitchell explores the desires of pictures by turning to the lives of images and, in doing so, distinguishes between pictures as concrete, embodied objects and images as forces circulating between the materiality of pictures, humans, and other bodies. Images, as opposed to pictures, enable and enact desires to mediate their pictorial representations within the realm of visuality, where images function as a "mental thing"—a virtual process—made material through mediated representations. Mitchell argues that pictures desire (and "want") because of their relationship to images, causing pictures to oscillate between desire (for fixed, reified or mortified form), drive (toward repetition or proliferation) and need (for a material form and space to occupy), and to simultaneously occupy the Symbolic (linguistically and semiotically), the Imaginary (figuratively intersecting between drive and desire), and the Real (as

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9 For more on the relationship between images and pictures, see Mitchell’s chapter “The Surplus Value of Images,” in *What Do Pictures Want?:* especially 80-85.
virtual images become material pictures). Mitchell provides these taxonomies to build upon historical engagements with visual culture and reformulate how pictures operate within and outside of classical forms of representation, which emerge within what Heidegger calls the "World Picture" by maintaining multiple relationships with images after the "pictorial turn."11

This distinction between pictures and images is illustrated by pictures in a photographic form, which gesture beyond their boundaries to "point" toward multiple and oft un-seeable images. For example, Roland Barthes explores this distinction through the functions of photographs in Camera Lucida, when cultural perceptions of commonalities between photographs emerging from the studium give way to "uncommented" or un-contemplated meanings and affects. This is why the punctum, Barthes explains, gives the photograph "musical voice;" as if, Barthes says, the "image speaks when the eyes close" because the punctum is the always-already present, potential meaning within photographs, which escapes from the photographic object to pierce a viewer in undetermined or unexpected ways.12 The possibility to be pierced by photographs couples with the "intractable" essence of photography and forms what

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10 Ibid., 72-74. In these contexts, "materiality" is not meant to correlate with a particular body or medium, such as physical photographs or pictures but should be understood as a broad category for various visual media: ranging from photographs and paintings to digital pictures.


Barthes calls the ontology of the photograph: photographic movements perpetually reach beyond their frame, as the "presence and life of the thing" reaches toward the materiality of the real.\textsuperscript{13}

Much like the fantasies and imaginings of parents, images become sources of value in relation to their pictorial representations because images often function as "quasi life-forms" and require host organisms to circulate; thus, as Mitchell explains, images become valuable because of the subjective desires they maintain through circulation and exchange.\textsuperscript{14} Pictures operate within the "seeable" because of their materially visible boundaries but perceptions of pictures (like fetal photographs) become valuable and meaningful through unseeable image movements. Pictures mobilize above and beyond the boundaries of their visibility, becoming rendered through images between but not as material things.\textsuperscript{15} Images move like other processes of perception, between the "seeable" and the "sayable" through imaging

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 78-80, 85-89.
\textsuperscript{14} Mitchell focuses on the subjective movements and exchange-values of images as his broad concerns in \textit{What Do Pictures Want?} but addresses this most specifically in the chapter "The Surplus Value of Images."
\textsuperscript{15} This argument maintains affinities with Mitchell's arguments, specifically in his discussions about the "material support" pictures lend to images. Mitchell expands upon this by summarizing Roland Barthes: "Photographs are things we look at, and yet, as Barthes also insists, "a photograph is always invisible: it is not what we see." By extension, we can locate additional arguments being made by Barthes in his discussion about the function of the punctum, which arises from the capacity of photographs to animate and affect a viewer. See — —, \textit{Camera Lucida}: 6, 16-20, 27; Mitchell, \textit{What Do Pictures Want?}: xiii, 274.
processes. When we imagine or fantasize about the yet-to-be-born child through fetal
photographs, our experiences of their pictorial form extends beyond visible surfaces to
include multifarious imaging processes operating beyond the surface of visibility.

We learn more about these forms of visibility, as Akira Lippit explains in Atomic
Light, by turning to "Derrida's excess visualities," which

"point to a category of complex visuality, a system of visuality that shows
nothing, shows in the very place of the visible, something else: avisuality.
Avisuality not as a form of invisibility, in the sense of an absent or
negated visibility: not as the antithesis of the visible but as a specific
mode of impossible, unimaginable visuality."  

Avisuality emerges as a form of visibility we experience through encounters with visual
forms for unseeable space, which includes but also surpasses visual forms for
invisibility. Lippit explores avisuality in his analysis on the emergence of cinema,
psychoanalysis, and the X-ray, which "haunt 1895" as "technologies" and
"phenomenologies" of the inside. These technologies function as apparatuses of the
invisible by lending visual form and representability beyond seeable surfaces to
produce an "archive of the invisible" where secret archives of surfaces give way to

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16 Mark B.N. Hansen also provides terminology to distinguish between pictures (which he calls images) and images (which he defines as an imaging process by shifting images into verb tense). I prefer to use Hansen’s notion of imaging as a semantic clarification for Mitchell’s terminology because this term foregrounds how images operate as a process rather than as a static form within visual culture. Later, I will refer to imaging processes as "imag(in)ings"—a textual cut-in meant to emphasize how images mediate materiality and lend to virtual conceptualization at the same time. See the introduction in Mark B. N. Hansen, Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media (New York; London: Routledge, 2006).

17 Akira Mizuta Lippit, Atomic Light (Shadow Optics) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 32, his emphasis.

18 Ibid., 10, 58.
anarchives of the visible.¹⁹ Ultrasound technologies function like these technologies of the inside, and the X-ray in particular, in that they allow us to see through and beneath the sealed surface of flesh.²⁰

Figure 1.2 Fetal photograph, provided by the author

Fetal photographs provide material representations for encounters with an otherwise inaccessible, un-seeable space (Figure 1.2). A fetus becomes visible when sonograms employ ultrasounds to vibrate through the fecund body, reverberating with traces of in utero prenatal space to turn this un-seeable interior out, which, simultaneously, produces a visible representation for (ultra)sound. Our experiences with sonograms become an "extreme" form of engagement with sound when it is

¹⁹ Ibid., 29-30, 44-48.

²⁰ Obviously, this is an over-simplification. Ultrasounds provide access to bodily interiors without using the destructive radiated force necessary for XRay technologies. Ultrasound technology (and its differences from the XRay) will be addressed more precisely below.
brought into visibility. Sonograms can only attempt to muffle the noisiness\(^{21}\) of (ultra)sounds by extracting a snapshot from flickering pixels, which are rendered and reduced into a static, less-noisy photographic form. This is to say, an "impossible, unimaginable visibility" is extended to sound through a representable, visible form, which operates beyond what might otherwise be understood as the ocular-phobic properties of sound.

Within this context, I argue that the sonogram functions like all images within visual culture while it also functions as a "metapicture" for imaging processes.\(^{22}\) The sonogram provides a visible form to illustrate how fetal photographs are pictured while it draws attention to picture-making processes by engaging with the pictorial form beyond surfaces of visibility. This is to say, the sonogram illustrates how pictures are not static but emerge from beyond their visible surfaces; it collects and projects (ultra)sounds to continually pulse between recognizability and unintelligibility; and, ultimately, it provides the possibility for us to experience and encounter ec-static forms of avisuality.\(^{23}\) Here, I use ec-stasis to foreground a precise experience or encounter with visual culture. Rather than "ultra-" sound, not only is this term meant to clarify how

\(^{21}\) Although I am not explicitly engaging with the notion of noise in this chapter, I return to the concept of noise in several chapters that follow, including the relationship between visibility and pixilation in Chapter Two, surface orientations toward noise in Chapter Four, and the communicative, ethical, and ontological properties of noise in Chapter Five.

\(^{22}\) Metapictures, we learn from W.J.T. Mitchell, are more than objects of evaluation because they provide a visual form that can be "pictured" while, simultaneously, drawing attention or "pointing" to the process of picture-making as a reflection of their genesis. See the chapter "Metapictures" in Mitchell, *Picture Theory*: 45-49.

\(^{23}\) I base the notion of ec-static sight on Judith Butler's use of the phrase "becoming ec-static," which is a becoming outside, beyond, or beside oneself. I return to this concept in more depth various times throughout my dissertation. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20.
sound is set beside and beyond its sonic properties when being rendered into visibility through the sonogram, but it is also meant to clarify a particular form of visibility I interrogate throughout my dissertation. In everything that follows, I direct my attention to the ec-static forms of images, which operate beyond and beside surfaces of visibility—beyond, for example, what can be pictured on the surface of a photograph—to render what we know as visual culture.

My dissertation takes a closer look at images and imaginings like these to illuminate the processes that mobilize and mediate visual culture at a threshold beyond and between the surfaces of pictures. I draw attention to emergent and dis/embodied forms for images, media, and beings as a means to understand how images and their desires move, mediate, and grow meanings within visual culture. My analysis provides critical accounts regarding these thresholds of visibility to reveal why normative understandings about visual culture—especially those reliant upon surfaces of visibility—should be reconsidered. To this end, I address how we engage with visible surfaces by elucidating various avisual and unseeable images within thresholds beyond the confines of pictorial forms, I explore how moments of optical arrest reveal confrontations between pictures and images, and I reveal why the desires of images become ec-static demands to be (re-)rendered within visual culture.

This exploration reveals why images maintain a patina for strangeness and, more specifically, I contend that we should understand images we encounter and
experience as a species of strangeness. While careful, often curious and rigorous, examinations of visuality and visual culture are anything but new, studies about the strangeness of visual culture have received little scholarly attention. How, then, might this strangeness be understood before we can address it with appropriate attention and rigor?

Most broadly, I want to complicate how studies of visual culture conceptualize images through metaphors (or metaphoric language). For example, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that "the concept of image-as-organism is, of course, 'only' a metaphor, an analogy that must have some limits." Given this position, I am curious about why Mitchell makes a semantic distinction—what he calls a verbal and visual trope—about lively images while, at the same time, he does not address how the different uses of metaphoric, metonymic, or catachretic devices change our understanding about the

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Note, at least provisionally here, how images function as a strange species in both broad and precise terms. A species, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is "a group of living organisms consisting of similar individuals capable of exchanging genes or interbreeding" but, broadly, can also be a "kind or sort." W.J.T. Mitchell also makes this connection and explains how "the origin of the word species itself in the figure of the 'specular' image" is motivated by and accounts for the "recurrent appeal to criteria of similarity, recognizability, and reproductive lineage in both images and species." These criteria can be seen, in Mitchell's account, through the lives of images: communicating information and pasts in "[co]evolutionary" forms as their mechanisms to record transform; maintaining affection for what they communicate; and offering affective qualities, especially for their "hosts" or reproductive "assistants," which are carried into unforeseen futures. This is a similar explanation Donna Haraway offers in her introduction to Queering the Non/Human. Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want?: 85-86; Haraway, "Companion Species."

Mitchell also foregrounds the terminological similarities between ("specular") image and species in his discussion about (images of) cloning and Dolly the Sheep. Mitchell explains how "the clone signifies the potential for the creation of new images in our time—new images that fulfill the ancient dream of creating a 'living image,' a replica or copy that is not merely a mechanical duplicate but an organic, biologically viable simulacrum of a living organism." See "Chapter 1:Vital Signs | Cloning Terror," in Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want?: especially 12-13.
differences between (human) bodies and (non-human) images and pictures. Mitchell extends his argument about the liveliness of images when he interrogates this question:

"Why does the link between images and living things seem so inevitable and necessary, at the same time that it almost invariably arouses a kind of disbelief: 'Do you really believe that images want things?' My answer is, no, I don't believe it. But we cannot ignore that human beings (including myself) insist on talking and behaving as if they did believe it..."

While Mitchell’s book continues to interrogate or engage with questions pertaining to the desires of pictures and images, I question the value or usefulness of his references to these desires when his use of metaphorical language immediately undermines itself by suggesting that images do not "really" want things.

In more precise terms, I aim to understand why these metaphors persist within critical studies of visual culture and, more specifically, remain intrigued by the insights and problematics that arise when these metaphors about the lives and desires of images mobilize beyond metaphor and are really taken literally. To this end, I address how the strangeness of visual culture arises from how we write about pictures and images, and how our use of metaphors for relations to or with visual objects have the potential to estrange our epistemological and ontological understanding of objects circulating within visual culture. While I do not provide an exhaustive account of

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26 Ibid., 11.
metaphors circulating about objects in visual culture, I direct my efforts toward various metaphors about the human body that are used to frame our understanding of visual culture. I inquire about how and why bodies persistently linger in these writings about pictures and images within visual culture and, by extension, how the strangeness of images is made visible through the movements of images within thresholds between bodies and things.

In what could be described as dissected accounts of image anatomy, I move from the sonogram to other visual artifacts to flesh-out and trace the contours of images within thresholds where they reveal a penchant for strange, sideways forms of movement and growth. To accomplish this requires that we understand strangeness in more precise terms before examining the strangeness of visual culture. In this regard, I want to narrow my earlier claim about the lack of scholarly attention devoted to the strangeness of visual culture. I posit that our ability to fully understand what I call the strangeness of visual culture is better understood through precise examinations of and

engagements with the *queerness* of images. More specifically, I argue that strange mediations between and by images *queer* their relationship to pictures because images persistently destabilize each attempt to solidify the boundaries or normalization of bodies, subjectivities and orientations.

### 1.2 Approaching the Strangeness of Images through the Queerness of Children

I foreground queer theories and methods over others to interrogate the *queerness* of images, how images queer, and their connections with bodies. Inherent

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28 Although Judith Halberstam has started to explore the possibility for queer theories to be used as a means to reconsider visual culture studies, I maintain that the queerness of visual culture has not received enough scholarly attention. Halberstam writes about a "transgender aesthetic" in her book *In a Queer Time and Place* and on the "queer art of failure" in the book by the same title. See Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*; ——, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2005), especially "Chapter 4: The Transgender Look".


30 Although it is not fully elaborated here, I incorporate a range of theories to address how the meaning and methodological value of queerness grows as the arguments progress. The theories I explore extend to the work of other critical scholarship by authors like Leo Bersani, on the reconsideration of subjectivity and desire through self-shattering; Lee Edelman, ranging from the graphical forms of bodies to theories about the death drive; Judith Halberstam, regarding queer temporalities, spaces and lives that work against heteronormative structures; and theories that offer new intersections with queer theory (Deleuzian philosophy, post-humanism, etc.) See: Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," *October* 43(1987); ——, *Homos* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995); Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994); ——, *No Future*:}
similarities between the processes of mediating, queering, and imaging emerge when I address how images, media, and technologies maintain fluctuating relationships between bodies and desires as well as subject and discursive formations. I account for these similarities by placing theories about visual culture and (digital) media in conversation, and by queering theoretical and methodological approaches to the image at the intersection between visual culture studies and (new) media studies.

Queer theory functions as a radically deconstructive framework, an epistemology "affirm[ing] the contingency of the term" queer, as Judith Butler explains, which allows queer to "take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated."31 Queer theory emerged from gay and lesbian studies (with homosexuality at the center of political and identitarian disciplinary foci) and, as David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam and José Muñoz explain, functions as an "ironic historical moment" when "queer liberalism" became a pervasive vision for normalized queer politics. While the history and emergence of queer theory is important to their arguments, I do not maintain their focus on the political implications for various social identities even though these concerns remain important lines of inquiry. At the same time, and like these authors, I do remain attentive to what is "queer" within queer studies by returning to Judith Butler’s conceptualization of (critical) queerness, whereby "queer" functions as a term "contingent on its potential obsolescence" while "necessarily at odds with any fortification of its critical reach." Like these authors, I would affirm that this

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| Quer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Halberstam, Queer Time and Place. |
| 31 Butler, Bodies That Matter: 230. |
conceptualization of queerness remains "one of the field's key theoretical and political promises."32

The epistemology and methodologies emerging from queer theory refigure positivist logics by maligning normalcy and normalization. "Queer" tends toward the indeterminable, the in-between, and the both/and; and my critical methods remain indebted to forms of critique within queer(ing) theories that employ these argumentative logics and styles of writing, which aim to estrange structural logics.33

These are writings by queer literati who use and abuse writing—productively, fetishistically, erotically—to de-construct denotations by turning, torquing or twisting linguistic-phrase and, in this process, estrange readers from the meaning that texts are

32 To this end, Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz explain why questioning the queerness of queer studies reaffirms the epistemology of queerness in "what might be called the 'subjectless' critique of queer studies." See David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?," Social Text 84-85 23, no. 3-4 (2005): 3-4.

33 An array of scholars direct us to various oblique or opaque capabilities afforded by queer theory, which I generalize here based on a great synopsis found in Noreen Giffney's collection, Queering the Non/Human, which references scholars writing about queer fluidity (Epps or Tuhkanen), indeterminacy (Freccero), indefinability (Stacey and Street), unknowability (Morland and Willox), impossibility or irreducibility (Edelman 2004), unthinkability (Dowson 2000), unintelligibility (Haver 1997 or Halberstam), meaninglessness (Winnubst 2007 or Halberstam), and unrepresentability (Noble 2006). See Thomas A. Dowson, "Why Queer Archaeology? An Introduction," World Archaeology 12, no. 2 (2000); Edelman, No Future; Brad Epps, "The Fetish of Fluidity," in Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Carla Freccero, Queer/Early/Modern (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Halberstam, "Animating Revolt; — —, Queer Art of Failure; William Haver, "Queer Research; or, How to Practise Invention to the Brink of Intelligibility," in Eight Technologies of Otherness, ed. S Golding (New York: Routledge, 1997); Iian Morland and Annabelle Willox, eds., Queer Theory (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Jean Bobby Noble, Sons of the Movement: Ftms Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape (Toronto: Women's Press, 2006); Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street, eds., Queer Screen (New York: 2007); Mikko Tuhkanen, "Queer Hybridity," in Deleuze and Queer Theory, ed. Chrysanthis Nigianni and Merl Storr, Deleuze Connections (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Shannon Winnubst, "Bataille's Queer Pleasures: The Universe as Spider or Spit," in Reading Bataille Now, ed. Shannon Winnubst (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).
expected to make. Calvin Thomas addresses this post-structural mode or method of theoretical writing to question:

Can simply reading (queer) theory turn a reader who isn't lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered into some "sort of" a "queer"? Assuming the possibility of juicing up the erotic acts of reading and writing with a sufficient charge of creatively abrasive energy, can merely reading (queerly written) theory—as opposed to actually [fucking] "queerly"—transform or provoke an otherwise heterosexual or "straight" subject, who has never come with, into, onto or even in the vicinity of a person of his or her own sex, into becoming what Eve Sedgwick might call one of

34 This is not to suggest that writings by queer theorists offer textual style unique to and contained on within "queer theory" scholarship. Rather, this stylistic form exists within innumerable post-structural writings, ranging from Jacques Lacan (who employs purposeful puns through (aural) words with two denotative meanings) and Jacques Derrida (who writes of difference through différance to illustrate how aural and visual distinctions (even in the word "différance") work to destabilize positive differentials or differences within language) to Gilles Deleuze (who rejects the linguistic turn altogether to illustrate how difference need not remain contingent upon language and negation but, instead, can arise through the positive accumulation of differences among a multitude of minoritarian languages, politics and identities). See Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus; Jacques Derrida, "Differance," in Margins of Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Jacques Lacan, Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006); Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr, Deleuze and Queer Theory, Deleuze Connections (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).
"those other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism?"35

By pivoting his questions through word play, Thomas queers *Theory* itself. He plays with language—possibly like children play, which I address below—to estrange normalized or the normalization of frameworks like "Theory," and, in this process, allows strange meanings to flourish and proliferate. We could turn to queer theory’s perverse cousin, Deconstruction, to understand these processes of strange-making and making-strange, but we have much (if not more) to learn by parsing our understanding of the Child.

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To address the queerness of images I shift to the Child, the figure who has yet to directly reflect upon her position within fetal photographs. The Child bears striking similarities to how I use Mitchell’s conceptualization of the image and provides several insights about the queerness of images within visual culture. In her book *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton explains how cultural investments in the Child, as "anticontaminant" or "cherished ideal," emerge from misperceptions about how children grow. It is the Child, she argues, who

"presents the most apt domain in which to understand the broad and narrow poles of the word queer." Stockton explains, "swerve, delay; ride on a metaphor they tend to make material and so imagine relations of their own. My dog is my wife, my dolly is my child. Not uncommonly, children are shown as having a knack for metaphorical substitution...by which they reconceive relations to time."

Children prompt meaning to grow sideways by "putting people and things...oddly beside themselves" and, Stockton suggests, as children twist conventional, connotative configurations they illustrate what all (queer) theorists must do: engage with "literary indirections and linguistic seductions." To this end, Stockton uses a reflexive method to theorize the Child and analyze figures of children: she places children oddly beside themselves to illustrate how children grow sideways similar to (and because of) the strangely sideways, metaphoric relations and meanings they make. This method of critical inquiry resonates with the reflexive methodology Thomas employs to address how (queer) Theory can queer its readers because of the theories that queerly structure the form of and our access to Theory itself.

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36 Here I cite Stockton's argument from an essay published before her book *The Queer Child*. Stockton includes several versions of queer children in this essay and expands her accounts of these children in her book. Within the context of these quotes, Stockton posits an additional connection between children and queerness in her book, arguing for the possibility to "[bring] back the word *gay*—in the context of children—as the new *queer*." See Kathryn Bond Stockton, "Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal," in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 283; ——, *The Queer Child*: FN8, 245-246, her emphasis.

37 ——, *The Queer Child*: 15.

38 ——, "Growing Sideways," 277-283.
I am invested in constructing a meta-methodological framework to employ these modes for queer(ing) theories and to weave and twist literatures that intersect between studies of media and visual culture. To explore the queerness of images—and how images queer—requires putting images "oddly beside themselves," and, to facilitate this exploration, I push writings about images and visual culture to places where they must co-mingle, influence, and/or contaminate each other. As a first step toward this, I compare the strange movements of children to how visual culture moves, mediates, and attempts to mitigate its strangeness. I not only address how children strangely move (or are made to move strangely) in fetal photographs but I also expose how the mobility of images undermines normative restrictions preventing our ability to picture queer children within fetal photographs. If the sonogram illustrates how visual culture moves strangely through processes like imaging and imagining, figures for queer children expose how the stability of visual culture fails when debased by the strangeness of images. Ultimately, this process allows us to understand how an oblique approach to visual culture facilitates the possibility to unfold and expose ecstatic, avisual movements hidden within thresholds beyond and between surfaces of visibility.

39 This framework could be compared with what Karen Barad calls a "diffractive" methodological approach, which she defines as a "transdisciplinary approach that remains rigorously attentive to important details of specialised arguments within a given field, in an effort to foster constructive engagements across (and a reworking of) disciplinary boundaries." This methodological approach is also referenced and utilized in the collection *Queering the Non/Human*. See Karan Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 25; Halberstam, "Animating Revolt," especially 6.
1.3 Seeing Queerly with a Child-Like Eye

Let us first inspect various ways children imagine themselves in relation to the demands of parental fantasies and expectations. While the sonogram provides the possibility to render a visual representation for an unborn child, the resulting fetal photograph shifts between recognizability and intelligibility. Every time parents encounter a fetal photograph and imagine the will-be-born child and her future, the child who is born can only encounter these projected, imaged representations retroactively—or, as is often the case, never at all. In contrast to fantasies about will-be-born children, mechanisms like metaphor and sideways sight facilitate the child's ability to reframe temporal relations. These mechanisms also structure the sight (and often the plight) of queer children, which will provide instructive approaches to visual culture.

We can look to Ludovic, the main character in the film *Ma Vie En Rose* (*My Life in Pink*, Berliner, 1997), as a child who does not conform to the heteronormative fantasies his parents would have projected onto his fetal photograph. Throughout this film, family members constantly confront Ludovic with concerns about his non-normative gender behavior. At the start of the film, he dons his sister’s princess dress for a neighborhood party (Figure 1.3). When Ludovic fails to visibly conform to gender, his father Pierre tries to save face by introducing his son as the family "joker," but, as we learn, this is not a joking matter for Ludovic (Figure 1.4).
In another scene, we watch Ludovic pronounce a teddybear the vicar, who is to preside over the pretend marriage he stages with his friend Jerome. Jerome’s mother overhears them exchanging vows. She moves closer to lurk in the doorway, sees Ludovic wearing a dress belonging to her deceased daughter and, on behalf of the teddy bear vicar, hears him say: "now, kiss." The shot cuts—kiss, interrupted—and she faints. When Ludovic’s mother appears and shows signs of shock and surprise, his child-like imagination transitions into an out-of-body fantasy to avoid his impending punishment. The TV personality who plays the role of Pam, a Barbie-like doll, comes to his rescue and helps him fly away. Jerome and Pam accompany Ludovic as he flies into fantasy, but he looks down while flying away and sees himself being dragged
home by his mother. He begins to fall until he crashes back into his body and reality where his mother will scold him for his behavior.

Stockton's book pushes us to reflect upon dynamics like these and, while she primarily traces fictional forms of children through the twentieth century, she notes changes among children just before and in the twenty-first century:

Whereas it might have happened for a child growing up any time before the 1990s that college could be the first occasion for encountering another gay person, children now in the twenty-first century, while they are still children, will at least see and quite possibly know queer, including transgendered, people.40

While we begin to see more queer people near the end of the twentieth century, one wonders how often we choose not to see homosexual children—acting as "homosexual" and "child" simultaneously—when even a fictional, gender-queer child like Ludovic is forced to have his same-sex kiss cut short. Ludovic remains limited by his experience, a lack of knowledge about matters pertaining to sexuality, but he is expected to conform to gender norms because he shows signs of a potentially sexual identity he does not understand. This is how cultural perceptions about innocence wed the Child and our figurations of children with time. Children eventually grow up, can eventually show signs of more knowledge or understanding, but only after it is deemed temporally appropriate; that is, after we, as adults, "say it's time."41 Although, as I

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40 Stockton, The Queer Child: 49.
41 Ibid., 6.
explain in the examples that follow, queer children are often seen torquing this timeline through strange ways of seeing.

1.4 Naive Sight and the Child Queered by Freud

Another queer child, "the child queered by Freud," is a not-so-innocent, "not-yet-straight-child." This child, Stockton explains, has seemingly "aggressive wishes. From wanting the mother to have its child, to wanting to have its father's baby, to wanting to kill its rival lover, the Freudian child (the child penned by Freud) looks remarkably, threateningly precocious: sexual and aggressive." Stockton explores this "dangerous" child in her analysis on the film The Children's Hour (Wyler, 1961), where we are confronted by a child who refuses her innocence, seeming antithetical to the demands of "at least two centuries...of childhood." The narrative in The Children's Hour follows the story of Karen Wright (Audrey Hepburn) and Martha Dobie (Shirley MacLaine), who run the Wright and Dobie School for Girls, and the film becomes centered on their relationship after their student, Mary Tillman, discloses information about their relationship, which will culminate in the closure of the school.

Mary is a precocious child who refuses her innocence because of "unnamed aggressive motivation[s]": whether she looks jealous or shows signs of resentment for being disciplined at school, she becomes an aggressive child who is motivated by too much knowledge for a child because she knows too much to fit within normative cultural configurations for childhood innocence. Stockton's analysis of this film clarifies

42 Ibid., 27-30.
43 Ibid.
why Mary functions as a queer child within the narrative, but we also begin to see how the child queered by Freud engages with visual culture by addressing moments when Mary is framed in relation to modes of visual perception. While the film provides dialogue to clarify what Mary sees, hears, and says, we are provided with various framings to acknowledge how she navigates and tries to untangle the complicated intersection between sight, sound, and speech.

In one scene, we see Mary in close-up, framed tightly, secretly spying on her co-headmistresses (Figure 1.5). A set of stairs confine her sight to a partial view of the interactions between Karen and Martha, but close-up reaction-shots of Mary's surprised expression do not obscure our ability to see how she responds to Karen kissing Martha's cheek. When Mary slinks to hide behind the stairs, we see a close-up of a perplexed expression on her face. As the scene closes, her sight is offered a greater sense of significance through a transition to an extreme-close-up of her eyes, which remain frozen in the frame; but, as we come to find out, what Mary actually sees in this scene becomes less important than how she sees (Figure 1.6). This is to say: Mary's mode of visual perception conjoins her limited point-of-view with other pieces of information she overhears and, in doing so, reveals one possible method to see the "unseeable."

Mary reveals to us how she sees the unseeable during a scene later in the film when she runs away from school and, hoping she will not be forced to return, tries to justify this behavior to her grandmother. Mary initially tries to tell her grandmother about her experience at school (being "scared" and "punished") but is rebuffed as being imaginative. Mary shifts tactics and tells her grandmother about things she heard
while gossiping with schoolmates earlier in the film. Mary had learned about Martha being called "unnatural" by other adults, and proceeds to tell her grandmother about Martha's unnaturalness and about other "strange, funny noises" she has overheard. This idle gossip garners little attention from Mary's grandmother until she proclaims to have "seen things ... bad things!" These things Mary has seen are so bad, she explains, they cannot even be spoken aloud—they must be whispered.

Figure 1.5 Seeing Mary spying

Figure 1.6 Seeing how Mary sees

This child—like other children queered by Freud—illustrates one type of engagement with what Jacque Ranciere calls the "regime of imageness." Ranciere questions how presence and re-presentability moves within and among images, and
determines that these movements emerge in the form of "hyper-resemblance[s]" because they mobilize above and beyond the confines of the seeable and sayable.\textsuperscript{44} Regardless of Mary's actual knowledge and her limited point-of-view, she must merely speak to her grandmother about what she sees to appear truthful rather than childishly imaginative. Mary not only shows us how we can direct ourselves (and others) to see the unseeable, but she conflates the unseeable with the unsayable under another sign: "unnatural." Mary cannot fully comprehend how "unnatural" becomes meaningful for adults, who seem to cling to the stickiness of this signifier, and, thus, reveals the power of "naive" sight when it couples with metaphor to provide (albeit, accurate) interpretation of what she hears without understanding the ramifications of the meaning she makes.

Mary's claims sever her from a position of childlike understanding because she appears to have learned \textit{too much} about adult-oriented matters. This is also what remains instructive and menacing within the film, as Stockton points out: "the inversion of child/adult conventions. ...A pupil schools a teacher through the clarifying act of her deception. The pupil's lie reveals to the teacher (Martha) her own feelings, making her pregnant, one might say, with the child's suggestion of her (retrospective) queerness."\textsuperscript{45} Mary reframes her temporal position beyond the confines of an "innocent" child because she severs herself from child-like sight to see otherwise and, thus, produces meaningful images that mobilize above and beyond the confines of the


\textsuperscript{45} Stockton, \textit{The Queer Child}: 29.
visible. Further, Mary’s ability to speak about sights she cannot comprehend—incomprehensible largely because she lies about the sights she has seen—allow this schoolgirl to torque vision sideways and *school us* about visual culture. Mary lies about what she has seen but, in doing so, reveals how easily it becomes possible to see beyond the surfaces of visibility. Our ability to see beyond surface becomes important if we are to return to the sonogram and examine queer formulations of aesthetics, and, like the sexual child queered by Freud, to illuminate how un(fo)reseeable si(gh)tes arise by thwarting our misperceptions about visibility as the sign and limit of truth within visual culture.

1.5 The Failure to See Queerly and the Ghostly Gay Child

The ability for the previous children to reframe temporal relations through metaphor and sideways sight becomes the plight of another queer child: the "ghostly gay child," the queer child who illustrates how visual culture mobilizes aslant when time becomes torqued by, and tamed through, delay. This queer child, with "clear-cut same-sex preference," would be sexual, is too adult and, thus, cannot exist within cultural configurations of the Child. By refusing a designation for this child, Stockton explains, she exists as a contradiction to how we culturally construct the sexual orientation of children: "the tendency to treat all children as straight while we culturally consider them asexual."46

Refusing the growth of this sexual child locks her in past-tense, asynchronous form, and while this is how adults often access childhood—through memories of

46 ——, "Growing Sideways."
childhood—this is the *only* form of existence made available to the gay child. The phrase "gay child," Stockton explains, "is a gravestone marker for where and when a straight person died. Straight person dead; gay child now born." This child is born retroactively, a retroactive rebirth where the phrase "I am Gay" ends the possibility for "growing up" straight, thereby giving birth to a gay childhood which will (and could) never be lived. It is, Stockton concludes, an "efficient means for aborting 'gay kids'."

The ghostly gay child becomes a figure who forces us to consider why she lives within past-tense form. This child cannot appear in fetal photographs and forces us to address how the clarity of our vision has the potential to fail when confronted by avisual imaging processes.47

We confront this queer child in the Canadian film *The Hanging Garden* (Fitzgerald, 1997), where we will see Sweet William, the main character, as a ghostly gay child who literally and metaphorically hangs in asynchronous temporal form. Sweet William returns to visit his family for the first time in ten years and will see himself in the family garden as a fat teen, hanging from a rope in spectral form. Sweet William tells his mother that "skinny was the only thing you couldn’t make me be," and even when his pre-fat, ghost-child form walks through the kitchen (to sneak snacks like he did as a child), his mother remains unable to see this version of her son. She only sees the result of Sweet William’s literal sideways growth: a fat child who functions as a visible sign of difference from his younger, once-was-skinny, could-have-been-straight form.

Thus, in Stockton's account, fatness "is the visible effect...of a child unable to grow 'up' in his family as his preferred self."48

We later watch Sweet William (as a teenager) attempt suicide by hanging. William carries a white chair into the garden and hangs a noose from a tree. This shot cuts to a close-up of his feet on the chair, which was not placed in a level position and wobbles under his weight. We see shots of the garden—windblown trees and vibrant flowers—before Sweet William finally fits the noose around his neck, places one foot on the back of the chair, and falls. As Sweet William falls, the shots rapidly cut to close-ups of his hanging: enlarged eyes swaying between edges of the frame, hand extending from shock and tension, and a tongue hanging from his gasping mouth. As his eyes close, the shots return to this sequence but with a difference: his swaying legs stretch to stabilize on the chair, his hands reach to loosen the rope around his neck, but his flailing feet cause the chair to fumble from the frame. With Sweet William's last effort to reframe his fate, the film transitions to shots of his body becoming lifeless, intercut with shots of flowers dying in time-lapse, photographic form.

The dense metaphors of straight growth and growing upright—both up and "right"—wither and die in this garden. Sweet William's fat spectral form hangs heavily—is a metaphor that hangs heavily—for a childhood that did and could not grow into straightness. The next scene shows Sweet William wake up in adult form, gasping like an infant taking his first breath. This transition takes time and tries to tame the effect of its gaps: it asks us to contemplate why this version of the queer child hides in

time, forced to experience childhood retroactively; and it also asks us to interrogate why homosexual children are prevented from the ability to access or create self-images in the present—as children—rather than remaining relegated to images and representations from the standpoint of adulthood.

In contrast to where the ghostly gay child typically resides, in memories of impossible (was-not-gay-then) childhoods, *The Hanging Garden* forces this retroactive life into visibility by providing a visible representation for the ghostly gay child. The spectre of Sweet William's childhood occupies a visible site of uncertainty because we cannot determine if he actually attempted suicide or distinguish whose perspective gives his hanging body its haunting, "in memoriam" form. But, nonetheless, his body hangs in the present to haunt the gay childhood that could never take shape in his past (Figure 1.7). This film provides a hauntingly sublime visible form for the gay child, who pierces the surface of visibility in a punctum-like fashion. This film also provides us with a visible representation we can optically register but, in contrast to Barthes's ontology of photography, this image does not carry traces of an intractable past because this child can only exist in fabricated, imaged form.

If the ontology of the photographic implies an intractable past-presence, the ghostly gay child questions the ontogenic fact of photographic representability and forces us to question how she can be photographically represented. Her oblique perspective about visibility pushes us to see how she becomes positioned within an unlivable representation, where the over-emphasis on the visible surfaces of pictures, like fetal photographs, eradicates any trace of her form. This child is left with what Akira Lippit calls an atomic trace, "a timeless image of timelessness," which "inscribes
an end of visuality, an aporia, a point after which visuality is seared by the forces of an insurmountable avisuality."49 The "insurmountable" atomic trace of this ghostly gay child becomes a shameful, un-visible livery; but, this child embraces this shame by marking and challenging pictorial and photographic representations while emphatically attesting to the ontological fact of photographic traceability as an heteronormative affect that relies upon the over-emphasis of visible surfaces.

Figure 1.7 Gay child hangs in haunting, asynchronous form

The sonogram already affirms these dynamics through its constantly changing visual form. Each pulse of ultrasound becomes a radiating, rhythmic force like other technologies of the inside Lippit addresses, and each ultrasonic pulse renders another picture, another fetal form, which could, but will not, be captured and pictured in photographic form. Ultrasounds lend visibility to imaging processes and facilitate our

49 Lippit, Atomic Light: 82.
ability to visualize an array of images that would otherwise remain unseen and unimaginable. We experience avisuality through these images of concealed space, of otherwise un-visible uncertainty. This is the embodied experience of visual culture whereby signifiers, in Katherine Hayles's words, "flicker" or glitch as our perceptions produce images becoming enfolded and unfolded within complex feedback loops.50 While our perception of ultrasound images can produce meaning from understandable patterns of signification, meaning escapes just as easily. A new picture flickers with every pulse of ultrasound, images transform into other images, and we experience avisuality as a "crisis in visuality"—every visible trace becoming a trace of un-visibility.51 This crisis extends to the circumstances of all pictures as they destabilize and flicker within thresholds between static forms of visibility. Images circulate within this threshold, making this an intrinsically unstable space where pictures are affected and queered by images before they become rendered as meaningful surfaces of visibility.

This is why the ghostly gay child compounds and draws attention to this visual crisis. If and when heterosexual futures are projected onto the fetal photograph of an unborn child, the ghostly gay child affirms the potential for these fantasies to fail as readily as each ultrasound flickers into and out of visibility on a sonogram screen. This

50 I expand upon the concept of flickering signifiers in Chapter Three, and explore Marks's writings about enfolding and unfolding in my discussion about computational memory and glitches in Chapter Five. See N. Katherine Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). On enfolding/unfolding, see Laura U. Marks, Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002). On the fold, see Timothy Murray, Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds, Electronic Mediations (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

51 Lippit, Atomic Light: 92-23.
is why every fetal photograph signifies meaning beyond its surface and, more significantly, pictures potentially explosive confrontations with the heterosexual matrix;\textsuperscript{52} this child hides beyond the surface of fetal photographs and reveals the always-already-present potential for any child to "come out" queerly, to twist heteronormative fantasies sideways, and to necessitate a re-visioning and re-imaging of the child beyond fantasies of heterosexual futurity.\textsuperscript{53} The ghostly gay child not only illuminates oblique, and often opaque, imaging processes, but she also reveals how we treat most (if not all) images like her, like children: we attempt to relegate them to a realm of decipherable and meaningful representation, while children and images continually fail to fit this form and embrace the shame from the failure to fulfill our expectations.

1.6 The Child Queered by Innocence and by Color

Children must frequently grapple with the shame that so easily sticks to cultural perceptions of failure and, to this end, I want to shift to a final version of the queer child to address the significance of children who visibly fail to fit cultural expectations. In doing so, I illustrate how we engage with—and why we should learn to value—images that facilitate and embrace the failures of their pictorial companions. We encounter one such version of this final, queer and fictional child in the film \textit{Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire} (Lee Daniels, 2009). Unlike the other queer children I have


\textsuperscript{53} This statement is connected with what Lee Edelman writes about the Child and reproductive futurism in \textit{No Future}. See Edelman, \textit{No Future}. 

addressed, Claireece "Precious" Jones (hereafter, Precious) is a child who oscillates between different versions of children, making visible an inconsistent and often precarious position where children of color and lower classes are frequently cast.

While the first child I addressed, the child queered by innocence, is defined by her distance from the adulthood she must approach, her normative strangeness, Stockton argues, "may explain why children, as an idea, are likely to be both white and middle-class." Precious is neither White nor middle-class but, instead, is a child who is undoubtedly queered by the circumstances of her life that emerge from or, minimally, are coupled with cultural renderings for color and class. Despite their differences, Sapphire's book and the adaptation directed by Daniels both portray Precious as a character who experiences a life that does not conform to cultural fantasies about childhood. Precious is like other non-White children Stockton writes about, who are most commonly made visible through "depictions of streetwise children" with experiences that are "hard to square with innocence" because they are made visible living lives outside of or beyond cultural conceptions of childhood.54

In the film, Precious's story forces various types of failure into visibility, becoming most visible for spectators within sequences about her memories and fantasies. The conjunction between fantasy and failure comes to the fore near the start of this film, in a sequence when Precious is seen slaving over the stove to cook dinner for Mary, her abusive and slobbish mother who sits on the sofa in the living room. Although Mary is not fully in focus, we see her reach for a television remote she swiftly

54 Stockton, *The Queer Child*: 30-32, her emphasis.
pitches at Precious’s head, which causes her daughter to collapse on the kitchen floor. It is perhaps misleading to suggest that Precious simply collapses onto the kitchen floor because, as Alessandra Raengo clarifies in her analysis of this scene, this "cut in mid-motion shows Precious falling not on the kitchen floor, but rather backward onto a bed." The abruptness of this cut transports spectators to another space and time where we see Precious’s body on a bed in front of a shadowy figure in the doorway.

This man approaches Precious from the doorway while asynchronous sounds, similar to plastic and metal scraping along cement, accompany a close-up shot of him removing his belt. The shot cuts to the man at the edge of the bed preparing to fuck Precious and she closes her eyes before her body begins to bounce in unison with sounds of old, squeaky mattress springs. This sequence cuts again, to three different shots: a close-up of metal springs (accompanied by even louder sounds of metal squeaking) is followed by another close-up (and sounds) of eggs sizzling in a frying pan and, finally, we hear a loud horn accompanying the close-up shot of a Vaseline jar being opened. This brief but visceral montage sequence returns to a shot of this man, reaching into his pants while we hear a deep industrial hum, before shifting to sounds of a baby crying when the shot cuts back to Precious on the bed. Although this scene will continue with more disjunctive pairings between pictures and sounds, the narrative doesn’t fully clarify what is occurring within the sequence until spectators see a close-up shot of Precious’s slightly-pained face when the man says: "Yes, you like that? Yea, daddy loves you."

This scene not only makes a sexual encounter between child and adult visible, but does so by laying bare a child's experience with incest and molestation. This is an inexorable reality for many children, which, as Precious's story reveals, remains inescapable even in moments of fantasy. At the same time, it remains puzzling to consider how and why this scene unfolds through disjunctive audio/visual events and, more specifically, why it remains so difficult to parse Precious's facial expressions in what is clearly her recollection of the past. Does this scene merely attempt to provide a visible representation for the chaotic traffic of memories and images, which often remain difficult to translate into visibly representable forms? Is this scene meant to provide an array of pictures to be openly interpreted by spectators? Stockton poignantly articulates how innocence is unequally extended to non-White or non-middle-class children and, more disturbing still, how the extension of this innocence carries particular requirements: to gain access to "this equal-opportunity innocence" these children are not only brutalized but the brutality directed toward these children is visible as if it were "worthy of our sight."

Precious is portrayed as a child who certainly is not innocent to adult forms of sexuality—she has had sex and bears two of her father's children—but this sequence about sexual experience in the filmic version of Precious's story does not clarify if her

56 This is a reference to Michel Chion's writings about sound in Audio-Vision, which is addressed with more specificity in Chapter 4.

57 I will consider this question again in the context of digital computation in Chapter Five.

countermotions engage or avoid sexual pleasure during this encounter.\footnote{Ibid. Stockton provides insight about images like these in her writing about \textit{Bastard Out of Carolina} (Allison), where "brutality" is meant to show "the child's need for protection" whereby "weakness" is utilized and necessary to simply gesture at the possibility of a non-White child's innocence. Stockton writes about Bone's experience in this novel to explore where her innocence exists. She questions: "innocence of what? Not of sexuality; the child sadly knows what is being done to her and she is bearing it. Rather, she is innocent of any consent [...]. there is not sexual countermotion on Bone's part. No erotic pleasure in her own world, and no mystery surrounding her motives. Knowingly, and fully unambiguously, Bone does not consent." See also Dorothy Allison, \textit{Bastard out of Carolina} (New York: Plume Books, 2012; repr., Twentieth Anniversary).} Sapphire's novel and the film both offer insight about Precious's perceptions of her father, although it is only in the novel where Precious's confusion about her experiences with sexual pleasure are made explicit.\footnote{In the novel, Precious recounts her feelings about sex while she is pregnant with a second child by her father: "I try to forget I got baby in me. I hated borning the first one. No fun. Hurt. Now again. I think my daddy. He stink, the white shit drip off his dick. Lick it lick it. I HATE that. But then I feel the hot sauce hot cha cha feeling when he be fucking me. I get so confuse. I HATE him. But my pussy be popping. He say that, 'Big Mama your pussy is popping!' I HATE myself when I feel good. 'How long you gonna stand there like you retarded.' I start to tell her don't, don't call me that, but all, everything, is out me. I jus' want to lay down, listen to radio, look at picture of Farrakhan, a real man, who don't fuck his daughter, fuck children. Everything feel like it is too big for my mind. Can't nuffin' fit when I think 'bout Daddy." See Ramona Lofton Sapphire, \textit{Push, a Novel by Sapphire} (New York: Vintage Contemporaries / Vintage Books, 1997), 57-58.} But, Precious's confusion cannot compensate for the brutality of her experiences, which must seemingly be made visible in the film adaptation for spectators to understand and imagine the possibility of her innocence as a child.\footnote{Others also write about this compulsion to make visible—and, thus, draw attention to—the spectacle of pained, non-White bodies. See, for example, Christina Sharpe, \textit{Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).}

We gain further insight about the visibility of Precious's unconscious recollections when the scene transitions and breaks from its viscerally visual account of her experience with incestual rape. Visible gaps in this sequence facilitate the mobilization of images within thresholds between realities, memories, and fantasies.
The visibility of these gaps reveals how this film refuses to separate the sediment of what Stockton calls a "tonal stack," which she bases on Roland Barthes's reference to *vertical din*. Stockton asserts that Precious's poetics in the novel *Push* prompt signification to grow, to "rip between ear and eye," but also to slip from our grasp when we attempt to make meaning (or make meaning seeable) within a text that opens up toward different modes of decipherability. By extending Stockton's analysis to the film, the visceral experience of this tonal stack becomes meaningful through the gaps between states of visibility.

Precious's recollections construct a gap in the movement from memory to fantasy, where signification slips because of irreconcilable differences between the visibility of pictures and images slipping from the surface of visibility as much as the slippages between sight and sound in this scene. As Precious looks away from her father and stares toward the ceiling, her point-of-view focuses on paint beginning to peel, sheetrock beginning to crumble, and wood beams beginning to crack away from the ceiling. A warm glow begins to show through the corroding materials and the scene of a memory slowly, almost haptically, transports us elsewhere. This transition transports Precious and us into fantasy, where she dons a large and luxurious red gown while she walks among reporters, photographers and fans who fawn over her.

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63 Stockton suggests possibilities ranging from "everyday lyrics of domestic enslavement" and "sexual abuse" to signifiers that become stuck to "state neglect" through levels of illiteracy revealed by Precious's prose. ---, "Kid Orientalism."
Perhaps Precious escapes the horrors of memory by mobilizing fantasies of fame and fortune, which make visible what Heather Love calls "Backward feelings" that often "serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world." At the same time, Love pointedly notes how "queers face a strange choice: is it better to move on toward a brighter future or to hang back and cling to the past?"\(^{64}\) Precious thwarts the polarity between memories of her past and fantasies about her future when she pivots from the plight of the ghostly gay child (who could not live in the past) toward meaningful modes of engagement with fantasies, which remain potentially uncomfortable for spectators because of the gaps they produce for our sense of visual clarity.

Raengo draws our attention to the precision of detail within this scene to illuminate how "paratactic transition" structures and enables the possibility for visual movements to "suture together various forms of abuse and fantasy." While it is possible that "these are movements we would be prone to complete if they did not lead to unexpected destinations," Raengo explains, "they also lead one to hesitate before, rather than invest in, the film's sensible figuration." Raengo’s arguments about Precious’s fantasies provide pointed clarity about the function of sensorial stimuli, which "come from, and pull, in opposite directions" while simultaneously producing a "profoundly troubling chiasm—the chiasm that connects, in a reversible relation, pleasure and abuse."\(^{65}\) I would add a parallel point of inquiry to expand upon Raengo’s insights about this reversible relation: is there a logic that accompanies the reversibility

\(^{64}\) Love, *Feeling Backward*: 27.

of these pictures by conforming to typical cultural imaginings about non-White, non-middle-class children?

Like the ghostly gay child, Precious's fantasies and plights reiterate why some images never become visible but, more specifically, take us to the darker side of avvisual images about children—where children are not even afforded the possibility to fit within images of the Child because they cannot thwart the visibility of their color and class. Thus, one of the most troubling forms of the chiasm Raengo addresses emerges from unspoken engagements with images we attach to non-White, non-middle-class children: Precious is made visible in more abusive situations than the Innocent Child—or worse, must be made visible taking more abuse than the Innocent Child—who is so frequently and inappropriately imagined as White and middle-class.

Precious may escape her memories by imaging and imagining a future through fantasy, but a different sequence reveals why her fantasies cannot escape the confines of her brutal, lived reality. Later in the film, sounds of a music box melody accompany Precious showering before school when we transition to a slow pan across pictures of Cyndi Lauper lining the walls of her bedroom. These shots abruptly cut to a close-up of Precious staring directly into the camera and a reverse-shot reveals Precious looking into the mirror, but the most shocking revelation comes from who she sees reflected in the mirror: Precious sees her reflection in the form of a girl who is visibly thinner than herself and, thus, probably not pregnant but, more significantly, also as a girl who is White and middle-class (Figure 1.8). While the first memory/fantasy sequence reiterates problematic forms of visibility imposed upon non-White and underprivileged children, who become visible through violence before they can be framed by cultural fantasies
about innocence, the second fantasy sequence compounds this problematic by revealing the impossibility for non-White children to escape the visibility of their skin. This fantasy shows us Precious seeing herself in the eyes of an/other body, and this fantasy—like fantasies about Oprah-moments of fame—becomes her only option to image and imagine another life she could live when cultural constructions of bodies aim to limit our engagement with visual culture to surface-orientated engagements that need not extend beyond the visible surface of skin.

Figure 1.8 Precious seeing herself as a White child

Our ability to see Precious seeing herself as a White child becomes another instance where the queerness of images explode into visibility. What we see in this film, beyond images of fantasy, is an array of paths to explore images becoming strangely stuck to bodies. Precious reveals the queerness of images that cannot mobilize into literal states of visibility and, thus, becomes queered by images of color
and class that vertiginously fold back upon and hit, as their limit, an actual, lived body. Precious's self-image, as a White, middle-class teen, becomes an image that can only fail because what spectators see can only be imagined or imaged within fantasy—from fetal photograph to her present state, hers is an image for an impossible, never-will-be visible body. This is to say: Precious has imaged herself far beyond what could have been imagined through her fetal photographs and, within her present moment, her self-image remains trapped within her reflections as an acknowledgement of her engagement with unimaginable forms of visuality.

1.7 Aesthetics of Failure

In addition to how the film Precious engages with issues like sexuality and literacy, this film foregrounds modes of engagement with visual culture where images circulate within thresholds around pictures. These are thresholds where images move strangely, are becoming ec-static, and reveal the potential for pictures to fail to become meaningful if the only meaning they produce can emerge from what remains visible on their surfaces. Precious, like the other queer children I have addressed, teaches us to torque our vision, teach us to see obliquely and otherwise, and provide methods for us to engage with and understand visual forms for aesthetics of failure. An aesthetics of failure arises from reiterative and vertiginous noises produced by images as they thwart our aims for visual mastery. Because images remain difficult—and, more often, impossible—to render into visibility, we must approach these images obliquely.

66 I engage with these types of images again in Chapter Three but from an opposing position. In that chapter I explore the differences between pictures of Michael Jackson's adult body that do not conform to images of his past.
to see how they becoming meaningful beyond the confines of picturable surfaces. This mode of engagement with visual culture begins the pathway toward understanding the queerness of images and various aesthetics of failure that follow.
2. EMBRACING THE SHAME OF VISIBLE ABSENCE: STARING AT PIXELATED PICTURES TO WONDER ABOUT DEBASED, LACKING BODIES

I want to continue to explore aesthetics of failure through child-like engagements within visual culture. Queer children reveal pathways to refigure how shame attaches to relationships with pictures when they fail to fulfill fantasies based on their visible surfaces. These children reveal these pathways by torquing our vision to see the threshold where images move queerly, by disrupting (heteronormative) orientations toward an ontogenic emphasis on visible traces within pictures, and by refiguring how we understand our relationship to visual failure. In this chapter, I shift my discussion regarding what we learn about visual culture from queer children who refigure images projected upon fetal photographs to explore child-like engagements with the imperfections of visible, living bodies. Like the fantasies projected upon fetal photographs that do not come into fruition, our ability to imagine perfection does not necessarily counteract the sense of failure arising from perceptions about or encounters with pictures of imperfection.

This chapter engages with aesthetics of failure by addressing the images of "normal" bodies lingering within and around pictures of abnormal bodies, which extends to an exploration of images people project upon bodies by imagining what should be seeable within the boundaries of the visible. To facilitate this engagement I address the visibility of imperfection through an ocular behavior children frequently employ: staring. Children, especially those who have yet to acquire language, are not only prone to staring but their under-developed social skills lend them the leniency to contradict social rules about staring. Until they are taught to conform to social norms,
children show us how and why we might want to wonder about wonders or become stunned by the spectacle of unordinary sightings. The curiosity of children reveals how staring, in its most common form, renders strangeness into the familiar. On the one hand, staring makes the strange familiar through encounters with visible surfaces by facilitating what Martin Jay calls "epistemological vision." This form of vision operates as uni-directional interpretation from a distance and can occur while staring and trying to make meaning out of unordinary, unfamiliar, and/or uncomfortable sights.¹ On the other hand, we can consider how staring has the potential to function beyond an ocularcentric emphasis on surface. Staring, as we learn from David Michael Levin, reveals how our interpretations of the visible emphasize "present-at-hand" surfaces and neglect the "concealed essence of 're-presentation'." Levin asks us to consider how "the visible deeply objects" to our surface-orientations and, thus, invites us to contemplate how staring grants access to avisual images beyond the visible surfaces that might draw our attention and stares.²

Objects have the potential to become visible while protesting human projections because of what W.J.T. Mitchell notes as the capacity for images to remain autonomous as much as they function as tools.³ This autonomy emerges from the mobility and mediation of images, which prompts Mitchell to suggest that the "primal


³ I expand this discussion about autonomous objects and tools in Chapter Four, where I explore the categorical distinctions between objects and things.
scene" in visual culture emerges from what "Levinas calls the face of the Other," perhaps beginning, he notes, "with the face of the Mother." This primal scene is a staring encounter, and often facilitates and structures power relations, but, as Martin Jay is right to remind us, "downcast eyes" do not always provide an escape. I explore how acts of staring can subvert power dynamics within looking relations by closely examining the function of images within staring encounters. To this end, I extend my discussion about the threshold of images from the previous chapter by addressing how acts of staring facilitate the movement of images within a threshold where visible surfaces and bodies operate within a bi-directional relationship; and, in turn, my focus on imperfect, queer bodies illuminates how staring facilitates an ocular sense of wonder to subvert power dynamics rather than perpetuating aspirations for visual mastery.

Unlike the shame and stigma so often attributed to imperfect or abnormal bodies, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reminds us that "ordinary" or "normal, properly presentable" bodies are provided "civil inattention—that is, the freedom to be


5 Jay, Downcast Eyes.

6 I have already addressed how images mobilize within thresholds beyond visible surfaces and, in this context, these movements resonate with what W.J.T. Mitchell addresses as the capacity of images to function as "go-betweens in social transactions." See Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 175.
inconspicuous, not to be a staree. Staring relations focused upon unordinary or otherwise non-normative bodies often inspire shame for a staree who will then strive for conformity. At the same time, many bodily imperfections cannot conform to ordinariness or normalcy. Childish staring provides a different form of engagement with visual culture whereby embracing the alternative to dwell on unordinary, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable sights of shame enables new modes of engagement with what Jay calls "ocular-eccentric" sights. My exploration of shame sticking to visible signs for imperfection or non-normativity reveals another context to understand visible forms of failure, which, as I address later in this chapter, also become visible through the shame that sticks to failure as it is experienced by digital pictures.

I begin with a brief introduction to Ngozi Onwurah's autobiographical film, The Body Beautiful (1991), to address how body parts—the female breast in particular—can betray desires for a "Normal" or "Ideal" body. This betrayal can create a lived experience with shame that sticks to signifiers for gender, reproductivity, sexuality, and

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8 Jay, Downcast Eyes: 591-592.
eroticism. The Body Beautiful provides another perspective on the visibility of relationships between bodies from a child-like point-of-view, albeit a retroactive account of memories from the vantage point of an adult filmmaker. Onwurah structures this narrative as an account of her memories, and considers the connections between bodies through her relationship with her mother, Madge Onwurah, to determine how her mother is defined as a woman after her mastectomy. Diana Mafe posits The Body Beautiful as a "seldom discussed yet highly subversive text" because of how it engages with, among other things, "cinematic representations of the (lacking) female body." The visibility of nude female bodies contribute to the subversiveness of this film but it is often perceived as highly subversive because Madge's mastectomy scar remains relentlessly visible within the filmic frame.

I explore the visibility of bodies and looking relations between bodies through three types of imaging movement. First, I address W.J.T Mitchell's argument about looking relations within visual culture's primal scene by complicating the visible signs for sex and gender in relation to the maternal body. Perceptions of sex and gender differences can emerge within the context of looking relations, which I clarify by

9 Other scholarship has addressed how this film explores the impact of breast cancer on familial relationships and provides a framework to discuss the relationships between family members of different races (playing out in this film by drawing attention to Ngozi being the child of a British mother and African father). On gendered and race relations, see E. Ann Kaplan, Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze (New York: Routledge, 1997), especially Chapter 9. On womanness and raced bodies, see Diana Adesola Mafe, "Misplaced Bodies Probing Racial and Gender Signifiers in Ngozi Onwurah’s the Body Beautiful," Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies 29, no. 1 (2008). On the relationship between mothers and daughters, see Andrea Liss, Feminist Art and the Maternal (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). On politicized or heterosexist medical treatments and services, see Lisa Cartwright, "Community and the Public Body in Breast Cancer Media Activism," Cultural Studies 12, no. 2 (1998).

addressing how shame sticks to perceptions of imperfect bodies and how clothing functions as a visible trace for sex and gender in movements through thresholds beyond the visible.

Second, I address how the sight of a mastectomy scar structures visible difference between images of a lacking, absent breast and the virtual image of a once-was breast. I address this form of visible difference through an analysis of looking relations in the film The Body Beautiful to contemplate how shame is made visible. While The Body Beautiful directs viewers to engage with "complex responses like recognition, identification and [the] denial of bodily signs,"11 Lisa Cartwright explains, I became interested in the visible (aged, gendered, and raced) differences prompting Ngozi Onwurah to address avisual relationships between bodies within this film. These differences refigure how the film engages with forms of visibility by shifting from a visible mark or sign of difference to looking relations and staring encounters. A shameful staring encounter arises when looking relations become an interface to oscillate between the visible absence of Madge’s breast and images of her once-was-visible breast. I then interrogate how staring encounters can mobilize looking relations toward pathways where this sense of shame is embraced.

In the final section, I extend my discussion about differences between bodily forms and embodied imperfections to digital pictures. I address how digital pictures experience a sense of shame arising from the visibility of digital pixels. For digital pictures, the pixel becomes a visible sign of difference and, in the case of pixelization,

11 Cartwright, "Cancer Media Activism," 133.
has the potential to facilitate a sense of failure by revealing how digital pixels cannot
Photoshop images of fantasy into pictorial realities. To this end, I address how
pixelization in an advertisement campaign about breast cancer continues to produce
movements between presence and absence, how these movements put visibility at a
distance, and provide a mode of engagement within staring relations that allow us to
embrace states of shameful visibility beyond the artifacts I examine in this chapter.

2.1 Disfiguring Distance: the Scarred Gap Between Present and Absent

One of the first things I felt when I was facing
the diagnosis of breast cancer was, "Shit, now
I guess I really must be a woman."
—Eve Sedgwick¹²

I want to address the relationship between breast cancer and gender before I
attend to the visible differences between female breasts and mastectomy scars. In the
chapter "White Glasses" from her book Tendencies, Eve Sedgwick offers an account
of her reactions after learning she had developed breast cancer. One might wonder
how breast cancer becomes the signifier for and the fact of Sedgwick's womanness,
as the above epigraph suggests, when she was always resistant to heteronormative
gender identity and performance. Sedgwick was "nonprocreative by choice," had a
"sense of femininity" that was not "routed through a pretty appearance in the imagined
view of heterosexual men," and admitted that her "mammary globes, though pleasing
in [herself] and in others who sported them, were nonetheless relatively peripheral to

¹² Sedgwick, Tendencies: 256.
the complex places where sexuality and gender identity really happen." Upon being diagnosed, Sedgwick was responding, like any woman must respond, to the cultural ideologies that construct meaning about female breasts.

These are normative cultural ideologies that render gender in relation to female breasts. Breast cancer enters into this web of culturally over-coded meanings, becoming a part of the female body and a condition for how women define themselves in relation to their bodies, because, as Alisa Solomon explains, it occurs within this "iconic lump of flesh." American society has increasingly "glorified the erotic nature of the female breast," as James Olson explains. Olson clarifies how broader cultural contexts further situate breasts as erotic symbols and distinctly visible signifiers for women and femininity because, for humans, they appear as an "external, visual sign of puberty" rather than developing during a female's first pregnancy.

Cultural and personal perspectives about female breasts intersect with concerns about cancer at the start of the film *The Body Beautiful*, when we learn about Madge Onwurah's experience with breast cancer while she was pregnant with her son. Madge's voice-over narration addresses her breast as a force that began to polarize her position as a woman, positioning her experience as a fight between reproductive faculties and cancer. "For nine months," she tells us, "they grew inside of me—the cancer and the child—life and death fighting for possession of my body. Each day, as they grew stronger, I must grow weaker." Only two days after her son was born, she

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13 Ibid.
explains, "the doctors removed my breast—the price they had demanded in return for my life."

Madge is required to have a mastectomy if she wants to live and this choice initiates her experiences with cultural ideologies that govern visual perceptions about lacking female bodies. The film continually confronts spectators with the voice-over from a doctor who instructs Madge about how to compensate for her visible lack. "When packing your hospital requirements," the doctor's voice-over suggests, "include a few tiny safety pins, a needle, some thread, some of your husbands large white handkerchiefs, and a pure silk scarf—if you have one. This kit is to help you experiment with a temporary breast form, so that you leave the hospital feeling at least partially compensated." By this doctor's estimation, Madge has the potential to feel "partially" compensated by re-constructing a form and façade for her excised breast from her husband's handkerchiefs but, despite the option to construct a breast-form through façade, her experience of absence and lack will not end when she leaves the hospital. "The inability of the male medical voice to acknowledge the trauma of the mastectomy" and "the literally patronizing suggestion that breasts are somewhat replaceable," Diana Mafe argues, become telling comments about "the objectification of the breast cancer survivor" and reveal why "the male gaze remains incapable of seeing past Madge's lack of a breast to her femininity." At the same time it is possible to complicate Mafe's claim by addressing two competing modes of visibility within the film.

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16 Mafe, "Misplaced Bodies," 42.
While this doctor provides a normative prescription to compensate for an experience of loss he may not fully understand through his personal experiences, he also, whether inadvertent or not, makes accurate reference to the mimetic function of gender performance. More specifically, this doctor reiterates a particularly queer description of gender performance: femininity as it is penned by Sigmund Freud. In his *Three Essays on the Theories of Sexuality*, Freud has difficulty addressing what constitutes gender. He aims to more thoroughly theorize masculinity and femininity in his later work and, in his lecture on femininity, Freud lends particular specificity to his perception of gender. It is Freud’s contention that his lecture "brings forward nothing but observed facts, almost without any speculative additions," and, in doing so, he proceeds to answer the "riddle of the nature of femininity." Anatomical distinctions do not constitute gender for Freud but, instead, gender emerges from experiences with biological development after children recognize the differences between sexed bodies. Females experience gender through differences between sexed reproductive organs, which is an experience of difference emerging from the lack of a penis and results in the experience of genital deficiency as a condition for the development of their sexual identity and behavior.

Freud’s rendering of gender becomes strange and rather interesting if we inspect how he addresses the form and function of femininity arising from its

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18 Freud differentiates between sexes according to (visible or internal) reproductive organs, secondary sexual characteristics (such as non-reproductive organs or body shapes), and other "atrophied similarities" (such as nipples). See ———, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962).
connection to clothing and shame, which, he tells us, "is considered to be a feminine characteristic *par excellence*.\(^{19}\) Women, Freud explains, have made "few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization" besides what may be their only contribution to society: "plaiting and weaving."\(^{20}\) The unconscious motivation for the development of this technique, Freud explains, arose from women who wove clothing into a modern version of cover modeled after pubic hair. Clothing, thus, is meant to fulfill a woman's aim to cover the genital deficiency she bears—bare and visible genital deficiency if the clothing were not there.

Kathryn Bond Stockton complicates Freud's reference to cloth-making and considers how this description of (gendered) clothing also connects with queerness through shame. Stockton argues that queerness emerges from clothing when the perpetual performance of gender is woven into a material lie that we buy: a "weave" of cloth can be worn as a wrapping, is rendered to conceal our sex behind gender but, in the process, only guarantees estrangement from the purpose of this surface. While gender might become attached to clothing as visual objects, its circulation does not eradicate unseen, queer qualities that mobilize beyond surface-orientated perceptions. In contrast to Freud's description of clothing as a mask for genital deficiency, Stockton clarifies how culturally-coded cloth "reveals the category (male or female) of the person's genitals it purports to cover." It is an inescapable "bold revelation," a material

\(^{19}\) — —, "Femininity," 132, his emphasis.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 132.
surface-sign for the unseen, which makes us strange for adhering to the conventions of clothing as cover.  

Clothing undoes our claims to control their meaning as covers and queers us by flaunting an aversion to our conventional fabric-aided configurations of gender. Rendering gender and sex through cloth-things positions us between two concomitant choices: undress to reveal what is not invisible in the first place or embrace the shame of being queered by cloth. In one sense, this becomes a daily experience for women with mastectomies when, as Eve Sedgwick recalls, "just getting dressed in the morning means deciding how many breasts I will be able to recognize" (albeit unlikely for many women to hear "a voice" whispering "three"). At the same time, Stockton explains,

"Where skin and cloth more obviously and dramatically diverge from each other as forms of surface is in their perceived degrees of permanence. Given that a person can more easily remove her clothes than her skin and can change kinds of clothes (from feminine to masculine, from glamorous to plainstyle), certain cultural imperatives that ask for a person's compliance—you must wear this, you can't wear that—are hard to duplicate with skin."

The voice of Madge's doctor provides commentary about the visibility of her mastectomy scar and, whether intentional or not, reveals how the visibility of gender depends upon the surface to which it will stick. A faux breast form might allow Madge

21 Stockton, Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: 44.
22 Sedgwick, Tendencies: 257.
23 Stockton, Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: 40.
to alter the contours of her body, but the mimetic function of handkerchiefs sewn into the shape of a breast cannot alter the scar that remains on her skin. Rather, her mastectomy remains the inescapable, bold revelation cloth rarely covers within the film.

2.2 Staring at the Shame of (Virtual) Visibility

In contrast to the ease with which women can change their clothing, Madge's mastectomy is permanent. Ngozi’s narration emphasizes this permanence when she likens her mother’s mastectomy to blindness—an irreversible circumstance she cannot imagine.24 This occurs, on the one hand, because Madge’s scar is visible within the filmic frame. Madge's experience with the visibility of sex, gender, and sexuality is conditioned by the visible lack of breast tissue. This experience structures her gender as a lack or absence within a culture demanding present and visible manifestations of femininity. This experience produces a visual gap between a cultural image of breasts as visibly present in contrast to their recognizable absence at the site/sight of a scar, which is a visible absence conditioning the experience of many women who have had a mastectomy and cannot, do not, or refuse to get prosthetic implants.25

On the other hand, the visibility of Madge’s scar and, by extension, the contours of her body function like all visible dichotomies within the film. Madge determined it "was almost possible" to love her scar because it allowed her to be with her children,

24 Mafe also addresses this scene and its impact on Ngozi's understanding about her mother. See Mafe, "Misplaced Bodies," 47.

25 As examples, see Solomon's discussion about the pressure placed on women to receive reconstructive surgery and Audre Lorde's writing about the "atrocity" of breast reconstruction in Audre Lorde, The Cancer Journals, 2nd edition ed. (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1988).
who became her "shield" by protecting her from "rejection and disgust" but "most of all," she explains, from "pity." Ngozi, Madge tells us, became a "model daughter" who "joined that elite breed of women, penciled in by men who decided on a sliding scale of beauty that stops at women like me." It is puzzling how Madge's children effectively shield her from the shame of her scar when Ngozi affirms her mother's differently visible body because of her work as a runway and photography model (Figures 2.1 & 2.2). As we later learn, perceptions about visual standards of gender and beauty do not stop with men but, as Lisa Cartwright explains, become recognizable to us (and Ngozi) through Madge's humiliation—humiliation brought on by the stares of other women.26

In one of the most significant scenes in the film, Ngozi persuades her mother to go to a sauna, but Madge's reluctance persists even after Ngozi tells her about 80-year-old grannies who enjoy the experience in Sweden. The sauna is filled with "women of the world" who choose to be topless because, Ngozi tells us, "hang-ups are out." It is in this where Madge's humiliation becomes visible, where spectators witness the disgust and pity inspired by the sight of Madge's scar. The scene begins with a shot-reverse-shot to place us within Madge's perspective. The camera slowly pans the room as she looks at each woman through the steam, then it returns to a shot of Madge, who shows signs of discomfort and remains the only woman covering her breasts with a towel. Madge begins to fall asleep and, as her body begins to relax, her towel droops below her chest and reveals her scar.

26 Cartwright, "Cancer Media Activism," 133.
We, like Ngozi, will see Madge from the perspective of the other women after her scar is exposed, but Madge will not remain the centrally-framed figure. Instead, the scar is reframed as the central sight of the reaction-shots. The multi-directional stares that structure these looking relations within the sauna allow Ngozi to see Madge from another point-of-view. Beforehand, Ngozi’s perception of her mother’s scar was framed by familiarity because, as Ngozi tells us earlier in the film, she and her brother had grown accustomed to seeing Madge’s naked body. Ngozi’s is positioned to see these women stare at Madge and her perceptions are reframed when she and forced
to contemplate what these women imagine after reacting to the sight of her mother's scar.

Ngozi's voice-over narration becomes puzzling accompaniment to the reactions from the women in the sauna before Madge wakes up: "I remember that day in the sauna as the first day my mother appeared before me as a woman. I was forced to see her as others might." With these words, we should begin to wonder about several things: What does Ngozi see when she sees her mother from the point-of-view of another? How does the sight of women staring reveal Madge as a woman? And, by extension, why does the sight of a scar become a sign of femininity for Ngozi (or any spectator) when seeing these women stare at Madge's scar? We can begin to address these questions by inquiring about the production of these images as a visible form for staring encounters to determine how the sight of Madge's scar produces multiple images simultaneously.

When the first woman sees Madge's scar in the sauna, her surprised reaction quickly shifts to an uneasy stare and mobilizes a series of stares from the other women in the sauna. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, the meaning we gather from staring encounters remains "unstable and open-ended." Staring often begins as an "ocular inquiry" to initiate other cognitive or "intellectual" inquiries, such as curiosity and observation; but, although staring may aim to "make the unknown intelligible" or "incorporate the unusual into our understandings of the usual," staring encounters do not guarantee specific understanding will arise from our observations.27 This is

illustrated in the sauna scene because staring had the potential to fulfill a sense of curiosity through observation. Instead, we soon see these looking relations extend beyond observation-oriented staring when the reaction-shots change and resist transforming an "unordinary" sight into something familiar.

![Figure 2.3 Madge, exposed in sauna](image)

![Figure 2.4 Camera close-up on Madge's scar](image)

The shot-lengths decrease between point-of-view and reaction-shots when Madge’s scar is exposed, which provokes emotive, non-verbal reactions from the women and the camera. While the women are initially unable to look away from the scar, it is the camera that frames her scar with increasing closeness and clarity (Figures
2.3 & 2.4). In other words, the camera cannot not look closer and illustrates why, as Garland-Thomson suggests, "the kind of visual scrutiny leveled by a stare is both impersonal and intimate." The camera foregrounds the ability for staring to facilitate intimate engagements with surfaces of visible things and, in doing so, spectators sense an intimately impersonal form of scrutiny emerging from these women while the camera traces a series of reaction-shots to show us how they stare.

This is reiterated by the camera as an intimate engagement with the visible surface of Madge's body and these reaction-shots allow us to see how these women reconcile the differences between what they expected as opposed to what they actually encounter within their field of vision. The camera also reveals why the reactions from these women are not simply physiological responses to an unordinary sight in an attempt to render Madge's scar into legibility, but rather, reactions to the unordinariness of an unexpected sight. These women do not need to observe or contemplate the sight of Madge's mastectomy scar because they know what her scar signifies and, more tellingly, spectators learn this because the camera shows these women turn to look away (Figures 2.5 - 2.8).

28 Ibid., 33.
Figure 2.5 In sauna, staring

Figure 2.6 In sauna, looking away

Figure 2.7 In sauna, staring

Figure 2.8 In sauna, looking away
For the women in the sauna, Madge’s scar makes an unexpected absence visible—the absence of breast tissue connected to her body—but her breast continues to exist through imaging processes because the scar-line bears the burden of a virtual gap. As the camera frames the stares of these women it reveals how our ocular perceptions initiate virtual imaging processes, which mobilize and become meaningful between ocular perception and cognition, between what is "seeable" or "sayable" and what is imagined or imaged. Like other visible objects, Madge’s scar functions as a site where imaging processes mobilize our perceptions and projections within the "hinge" or threshold of virtuality, which, as Brian Massumi explains, is an "otherwise empty and dimensionless plane" between our visual perceptions of "object[s] in the world."29 Within this threshold, the scar becomes meaningful by providing a "synesthetic [form of] experience," "combining senses, tenses, and dimensions on a single surface" of perception.30 Massumi’s discussion about perception draws our attention to the prefix

29 I do not use the terms virtual or virtuality (especially in my discussions about images) in the context of "virtual reality" and/or artificial reality but, instead, echo the sentiments theorized by scholars who do not see these terms in opposition to reality or the Real. These terms refer to processes within deterritorialized or transcendental spaces, where the possibilities of "becoming reality" accumulate and comprise a different form of reality that is both real and not real simultaneously. For examples, see: Gilles Deleuze on general theories about both terms in relation to film, in Cinema 2: The Time-Image, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). David J. Gunkel on how the virtual is created by the co-presence of real and unreal actualities, in Thinking Otherwise: Philosophy, Communication, Technology (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2007). Mark B.N. Hansen on how virtuality disconnects the body schema from the body image, in Bodies in Code. Akria Mizuta Lippit about the connections between virtuality and avisuality, in Atomic Light. And, Brian Massumi on the topological plane of virtuality that exists outside of cognition, in Parables.

30 These processes also function similarly to what Massumi calls a biogram, as the container for these processes shift from surface to "hypersurface" within the virtual. See in Massumi, Parables: 187-190.
of surface to recognize how our perceptions collapse as if they are isolated experiences and as if visible surfaces are sites with intrinsic meaning.

Our ocular perceptions of visible surfaces mobilize within this virtual threshold, where we must reconcile and organize our perceptions based on an array of incompatible or incompossible images. These imaging processes allow us to engage with visible objects beyond their surface, which we might understand as virtual surfaces emerging from the threshold where images queer the surfaces of visible objects. Within this threshold, images refigure visible surfaces by queering how we attribute meaning to visual objects and by surpassing the limitations of surface and reflexively rendering virtual meanings through unseeable, avisual processes and experiences.31

Thus, within virtuality, visible surfaces open up to images that can become pregnant with past images, memories, and experiences at the same time that they can open up to images of undeterminable futures.

These virtual imaging processes allow any scar to facilitate the production of (multiple) images because, Winfried Menninghaus explains, "the scar is a flaw on the skin's closed surface" that functions as "a reminder of the chemical processes [that

31 This argument is connected with what Massumi writes about memories within virtuality. For Massumi, memory is topological—a "process of arriving at a form through continuous deformation"—and is enacted across and between durations of time. Every temporal duration, he explains, includes the potentiality for "productive interferences, or in-between effects (affects)." In other words, gaps emerge in-between memory and cognition and create the possibility for the body to receive other intersensorial stimuli that can affect memories before they enter cognition. These gaps occur in "hypertime," as Massumi explains, when the transportation of sensorial experiences can be stimulated and cause these "experiences (and temporalities) to meld together, intermingle, contaminate or move in-between each other." The possibility for memories to become stimulated, even virtually altered, before cognitive processing or recollection not only reveals its fickle or volatile nature, but also reveals how perceptions of (subjective) experiences are flexible and uncertain because they can "smudge." ibid., 184, 195-200.
had raged] beneath." Madge's scar functions within a visual economy of disgust like most scars, which debase the sealed surface of the body by functioning as visible reminders of "disgusting" wounds, of no-longer present and only imaginable sites of lacerated flesh. Within this context, scars become ideal examples for the queerness of images because they are continually imaged beyond their surfaces but, more specifically, because they take the form of a visible surface that requires an onlooker to consider the culmination of once-were-visible processes leading to the currently visible condition on the surface of skin. Thus, Madge's scar functions as a visible mark for her experiences with the pain(s) of body-altering surgery and remains a visible sign for particular experiences with cancer that renders multiple images simultaneously: images for the presence of an absence; images of an abject breast that is a debased image for the places where parts were cut or cast away from the body; and, in addition to these images of disfigurement, images of a once-was-visible, pre-cancerous breast.

The possibility for multiple, co-existing images of Madge's scar to emerge from a virtual threshold also reveals its threateningly abject visual form because, as Julia Kristeva tells us, "abjection is above all ambiguity" and "it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it." In other words, each glimpse of Madge's scar mobilizes motions that reopen the scar of the mastectomy in an "as if" movement, where the metaphor of absence splits in two directions: we see the scar as the absence of a breast and, in turn, this initiates an avisual rendering of a breast that


once-was. This is a metaphoric movement that re-imagines a breast within the present, as a constant, albeit virtually present and presently distant, reminder of its absence; but it is also a projected sign of woman's lack, re-imagined and lacking in the present, in the form of a scar-line.

If we return to the stares of the women in the sauna, we should ask what these women find disgusting about the sight of Madge's scar and, more specifically, why disgust prompts them to look away. These women can choose to look away because they know what they have seen; they do not need to acquire additional information about what they know they have seen. Unlike the women, the camera continues to frame these looking relations with increasing clarity and, in doing so, lingers long enough for us to make meaning of the images circulating beyond the surface of Madge's scar. In the broadest sense, Madge's body confronts the expectations of women in the sauna because she is visible and does not conform to their images of a "normal" female body with two visible breasts. In this way, Madge's body confronts these women's perceptions about the female body in several ways. Her scar reveals how "normal" bodies are never visible because normalcy operates through images projected onto visible surfaces by people who imagine what can or should be seeable and, more specifically, the visibility of her scar draws attention to how breasts need not function as the sign for femininity these women understand as an acceptable form for publicly visible female bodies.34

34 As Garland-Thomson explains, normalcy becomes an illusion "people reach for in creating self-presentations, particularly those in the public eye." Garland-Thomson, Staring: 45.
Yet, if these women stare at and then desire distance from the sight of Madge’s scar, we should also inquire about how her scar makes visible the possibility for any woman’s body to bear the mark of a similar scar. This is why mastectomy scars also represent, as Lisa Cartwright argues, “the unimaginable, unimage-able fear that any woman might one day be disfigured by breast cancer.”35 While breasts are often associated with puberty, eroticism, and reproductivity, as the cultural historian Marilyn Yalom explains, they are simultaneously and “increasingly associated with cancer and death. [...] Breasts literally incarnate the existential tension between Eros and Thanatos—life and death—in a visible and palpable form.”36 Cartwright and Yalom reveal how breasts become more than visible signs for reproductive potential because they function simultaneously as signifiers for mastectomies and breast cancer, and facilitate potent fears about the life-threatening possibility they will need to be removed.

At the same time, while it is possible for people to distance themselves from their fear about the threat of cancer by avoiding images that draw attention to this threat, the fear and threat of potential futures with cancer are always and only imaginable. If these women turn away because of threatening thoughts about a potential future with breast cancer, they simply portray the fundamentally affective relationship all people experience in relation to virtual images of threat. The turning-away from Madge’s scar can be understood as a response to what Brian Massumi

35 Cartwright, "Cancer Media Activism," 133.
calls the "affectively presented" quality of threat. This is the quality of threat that becomes "contagious" and reveals why the stares from one woman initiate a series of stares from multiple women before transforming into shocked and startled reactions.

These women are affected by Madge's scar because, as Massumi explains, "in the past there was a future threat;" before these women saw the scar it is possible that the "threat" of breast cancer was always and only an imagined threat.

At the same time, a mastectomy scar is an odd visible sign for breast cancer because it does not index cancer. Mastectomy scars can contribute to how we image breast cancer, but these scars only allow us to imagine a previous experience with breast cancer that will ideally never resurface with another cancerous trace. This is the perversity of signs for threat, as Massumi illustrates, because "threat has no actual referent." Mastectomy scars are perverse signs for breast cancer because of how signs function as "vehicle[s] for making presently felt the potential force of the objectively absent." If mastectomy scars are signs for past experiences with cancer, Madge's scar becomes a sign for excised cancerous tissue, a sign for the hope for a future without cancer, and these women are affected by a threat that is not visible and can only be virtually imaged within the sauna.


38 Ibid., 58.

39 Ibid., 53.

40 Ibid., 59.

41 Ibid., 63.
Thus, these looking relations function as a form of staring aiming to gain power over a complex visual field. These stares are a social interaction that enables these women to assign stigma to the site of Madge's scar because of their knowledge and perceptions about the significance of mastectomy scars. These stares are fueled by disgust and facilitate power relations because, Menninghaus explains, "disgusts’s intention toward the object only knows the 'for us' of a strange 'thing' with which no dialog takes place, but which simply deserves, because and to the extent it comes close to us, an immediate act of distancing." These women provide themselves distance from the sight of Madge's scar when they shift from stares to look away. Ngozi’s perception of her mother’s ordinariness is challenged by the stares and abreactions of these women, allowing us to understand why these intimate looking relations remain impersonal when she (or any spectator) tries to dissect what these women think they know about the meaning of a scar they only see from a distance. This is to say, all of these meanings and images emerge within a few seconds, between the time it takes for Ngozi to tell us about her realization and the moment when Madge wakes up, realizing her towel has fallen and has exposed her scar.

Madge quickly and shamefully re-covers her body with the towel, but she cannot cover what the other women and we have already seen. The towel is a cover like clothing, a cover that does not cover, rendering its form like un-covered, bare and visible breast (and genital) deficiency. This is the persistent, shameful form of gender performed on and by the body. This is a shameful visible performance without an

42 Menninghaus, *Disgust*: 85.
origin—but, as I explain, is a form of shame that digital pictures instruct us to embrace. I return to *The Body Beautiful* at the end of this chapter after I explore images of breast cancer in digital contexts, which provide insight about looking relations that undermine visual mastery.

### 2.3 Digital Shame; or, Wondering About the Shame of Pixels

Queering is at its heart a process of wonder.
—Jeffrey J. Cohen

In January of 2000, the Breast Cancer Fund started what would become the short-lived San Francisco ad campaign "Obsessed with Breasts," which aimed to address America’s obsession with breasts by suggesting that "we should be no less obsessed with eradicating the disease that afflicts them." I first encountered these advertisements within the context of controversy. While living in Utah, I saw a report on the evening news about this breast cancer awareness campaign as it began to gain worldwide media attention. These advertisements looked rather familiar—one looked like a cover for *Cosmopolitan* magazine while the other two looked like advertisements for Calvin Klein and Victoria’s Secret (Figures 2.9 & 2.10).

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Figure 2.9 "It's No Secret," pixels recreated

Figure 2.10 "Obsessed with Breasts," pixels recreated
The news program I was watching noted how people began to protest the public display of these advertisements, which, as Thomas Bivins notes, prompted at least one billboard company to refuse to post the advertisement within the space they had donated to the Breast Cancer Fund. The story piqued my interest when the reporter began to discuss the controversial nature of censorship while, on my TV screen, I saw pixelated chests of the women in the advertisements because they featured topless models. I understood why a television network would censor images of female breasts to comply with FCC guidelines on obscenity and indecency, which is why I was not surprised by their decision to pixelate the advertisements. The network was merely reinforcing sexual difference within visual culture, whereby bare chests of men are presentable and seen while the chests of women are rendered unseeable and obscene.

The Breast Cancer Fund recognized why these advertisements had the potential to "shock or disturb some people," but as I began to see the content of these advertisements mimicking common slogans ("Obsessed with Breasts" rather than Calvin Klein's "Obsession" and "It's No Secret" rather than Victoria's Secret), I became puzzled about the decision to censor these advertisements on billboards. The


46 As I would learn four years later, a public network will go to great lengths to maintain distance from the accidental appearance of a breast on television, when wardrobe malfunctions cause a sheathed nipple to show up in the middle of a SuperBowl half-time show. Others have also written about Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction; see, as examples, Nicole Fleetwood's writings about "Nipplegate" in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 131-132; Garland-Thomson, *Staring*: 145-147.

47 Baird and Martin, "Press Statement".
controversial nature of the visual content became textually apparent beyond the pixelization of the advertisements when the title "Mastectomy" topped the advertisement styled to look like a Cosmopolitan magazine cover (Figure 2.11). Contrary to this network's intentions to render female breasts and their associations out of visibility, pixelization resulted in distortion of another kind because these advertisements contained female chests without visible breasts.

The breasts I first imagined, as visible but hidden behind the pixels on TV, began to change after seeing the title of the magazine-styled advertisement. I began to
imagine mastectomy scars behind the pixelization and I realized how the rather conventional and recognizable format of these advertisements would be reconfigured when seeing or, in my case, imaging mastectomy scars beyond the pixels. The pixelation became a greater concern when I began to wonder what it might mean for pixelization to conflate—even eradicate—the visual differences between breasts and mastectomy scars.

Similar to the sight of Madge’s scar, the "Obsessed with Breasts" campaign advertisements produce movements between the presence of a mastectomy scar (that is, an absence of a visible breast) and virtual images for the presence of absence (that is, imaginings of once-were visible breasts). The pixelization of these scars on television, on the other hand, attempts to end these movements, to deform or disfigure the images produced within the virtual gap between presence and absence. At the same time, pixelization conjoins different states of visibility and complicates several concerns I have already addressed in this chapter.

The dictionary defines a pixel as the "smallest element of an image that can be individually processed in a video display system" and functions as a measurable unit that often goes unseen by our optical faculties. Pixels become measurable through spatial organization because, as Sean Cubitt explains, every pixel on a display is bit-mapped and "derives its address from ... the pixel whose position is written ‘(0,0)’." At the same time, this is an arbitrary zero-point—what Cubitt calls the "nonidentity" of an "unstable" origin—and as pixels change in relation to this arbitrary origin point they reveal a form of mobility within a temporal logic: "Each pixel address is symbolized by its distance from zero, its difference from the nonidentical, the fullness of that
apparently empty address (0,0). As original difference, the absent pixel (0,0) of origin is both essential and nonexistent. Its resultant instability is the perpetual source of movement." While I agree with his formulation of the pixel as a discrete but "formless" unit, Cubitt does not fully explore how pixelation and the process of pixelization recontextualize the visible form and functionality of pixels beyond their limitation as "bounded figures" within spatial or temporal arrangements.48

Pixels draw attention to the differences between visible presence and absence by reconfiguring their relationship to space and time. Through this process, pixels lend visible form to the otherwise unseen movements of images within visual culture and, thus, provide a palpable form to encounter imaging processes.49 Pixels draw attention to the artifice of visual wholeness when they become visible through pixelation, which is a state when pixels are large enough to be drawn to our attention while on display (e.g. a low-resolution screen). Pixelization is a similar but more precise form of pixelation, because it implies a process was used to deliberately lower or reduce visual resolution (e.g. pixel art, such as contemporary video games created with an 8-bit aesthetic based on older game system technological limitations). Pixels materialize through pixelation and pixelization by disrupting and deforming visual clarity and, by

48 Cubitt also defines the pixel as "formless" in contrast to other (digital) forms of media like the "cut," which is a concept I address specifically in Chapter Three. See Sean Cubitt, The Cinema Effect (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 32-33, 43, 48-49.

49 Although Cubitt does not make reference to the book co-authored by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, his argument about the formlessness of the pixel resonates with how they conceptualize the formless at the start of the book. Bois writes: "the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very act of their delivery." See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, Formless: A User's Guide (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 18.
doing so, begin to demonstrate their queerness when, as I explain below, they 
embrace the shame that sticks to this fractured and failed form of visibility.

I refer to this materialization of pixels as a moment when visual clarity is 
debased. Debasement has been written about as a synonym for shame beyond purely 
"negative" connotations, and I want to contemplate what conditions facilitate our 
embrace of these shameful and debased experiences. Michael Taussig, for example, 
clarifies how debasement reveals the "doubleness of the word 'base' as both 
substantial support and as obscene or abject." Pixels engage in both of these forms 
of debased relations because they are the "base" unit required for digital display—
pixels are the smallest part capable of supporting and de-basing their whole— and 
become obscenely recognizable by "disfiguring" or "deforming" visual clarity through 
pixelation and pixelization.

50 Critical theorists have engaged with the concept of shame in various ways and, within the 
realm of queer theory, shame is often suggested as something to embrace rather than avoid. 
See these writings as a sample of scholarship where shame is not only understood through 
negative connotations: George Bataille, Michael Taussig, and Kathryn Bond Stockton on 
debasement; George Bataille and Sharon Patricia Holland on death; Leo Bersani on self- 
shattering; Lee Edelman on debasement and the death drive; Judith Halberstam on failure and 
losing; Julia Kristeva on abjection; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Kathryn Bond Stockton on 
shame; and Sharon Patricia Holland and Kathryn Bond Stockton who explore the connections 
Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); ——, Erotism: Death & 
Sensuality, 1st City lights ed. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986); Bersani, "Rectum; ——, 
Homes; Lee Edelman, "Tearooms and Sympathy, or, the Epistemology of the Water Closet," in 
The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. 
Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993); Halberstam, Queer Art of Failure; Sharon Patricia 
Holland, Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity, New Americanists 
(Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); Kristeva, Powers of Horror; Eve Kosofsky 
Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); ——, 
Novel Gazing; Stockton, Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame; Michael Taussig, Defacement: 

51 ——, Defacement: 53.
Within the context of debasement, digital pixelation and pixelization do not utilize or engage with base-ness and shame in the same way. Digital pixelation internalizes the shame of the pixel form by putting the pixel on display as a base unit of visibility. Pixelation draws attention to the façade of visual clarity by leaving pixels within a perpetual state of low resolution visibility, and remains in this state of shameful visibility by prompting spectators to imagine digital pictures bit-mapped with fewer visible pixels. In contrast, pixelization embraces the shame of the pixel form by purposefully rendering pixels into visibility. Pixelization disrupts our ability to map and trace the relationship between pixels by deforming and disfiguring how pixels function as parts within a mappable whole.

Pixels become visible signs of debasement within the context of my previous discussion about pixelzation being used to cover mastectomy scars in the "Obsessed with Breasts" advertisements. Television screens map pixels as discrete units of light (for example, assigning a red, blue, or green color to each pixel), which combine to form a picture on a screen. The pixelization rendered over the female chests in these advertisements was likely achieved by creating each pixel by averaging the colors below the area it covers, but the resulting pixels merely construct a partially unclear picture with uncertain (but still similarly colored) attributes. While the pixelized part of a television screen can reduce picture clarity, the visible pixels are anything but opaque covers. This is to say, the process of rendering large pixels over the chests of these women does not imply that the mastectomy scars are not or do not continue to be imaged behind or beyond the pixels. Rather, the pixels intended to hide the visibility of scars in these advertisements become pictures of queer visual movement: the pixels
rendered over these advertisements mobilize images below the surface of visibility, beyond the visible sight of scars, and, thus, become meta-pictures for the ever-present threshold of imaging processes informing our culturally over-coded perceptions of female bodies—whether breasts are visible or not. The intention but failure to disrupt visual clarity results in queer visual movements whereby the following question presents itself: what cannot be imagined behind these pixels?

While reading about the Obsessed with Breasts campaign, I came across a lot of information about Andrea Martin, the director of the Breast Cancer Fund who initiated the campaign. As I read No Family History, Sabrina McCormick recounted much of the information I already knew about the campaign: Martin was inspired by Matuschka's mastectomy photographs in Time magazine; this inspiration prompted Martin to create a similar advertisement campaign; the campaign would include billboards and posters with young women who had mastectomy scars and were topless; and these images, McCormick reveals in her book, "were of models who typified beauty—thin, young, white— with Andrea's mastectomy scar digitally drawn onto the photograph." Much to my surprise, I did not imagine that these pixels did not cover bodies with mastectomy scars. In this context, the pixelization on my television screen functioned as a cover I would never been able to anticipate: these pixels functioned as cover for mastectomy scars that were already digital covers because they were rendered as layers upon bodies without mastectomy scars.

The rendering of these pixels through a process of pixelization initially allowed me to produce multiple images. Pixelization allowed me to simultaneously imagine a breast before a scar, followed by a breast and a scar. Pixelization also constructed a mode of visibility where pixels become more than a breast or a scar. This is the distance produced by pixelization whereby images of topless models can come to contain every imaginable image of breasts, every imaginable image of mastectomy scars, or neither. These pixelated advertisements also enfold darker connotations that stick with images of breasts and mastectomy scars, such as the images about the possibility for anybody to picture themselves with breast cancer.53

The pixelization of the Obsessed with Breasts advertisements reveals the differential relationships and spaces between individual pixels and makes visible the threshold where images move queerly while queering the boundaries of pixels. This form of pixelization asks us to look at, stare at, and wonder about what it is we think we see. As pixels become visible through pixelization they draw our attention to their imprecision and engage us in an affective looking relationship similar to what Vivian Sobchack calls the enchanting form of digital fragmentation.54 These pixels embrace the shame of uncertainty and draw our attention and stares by providing us with a sense of wonder. We are affected by the virtual possibilities of pixels because their

53 Retrospectively, knowing these advertisements digitally reproduce pictures of Martin’s mastectomy scars on the bodies of other women, we might also take note of why these pixels become pictures to address the association some women make between mastectomy scars and death—a connotative association moving more toward denotation if we consider Martin’s death in 2001, caused by the spread of cancer from her breast to her brain. See ibid., especially 130.

54 This is based on what Vivian Sobchack writes in the section "Frames Within Frames" in "Nostalgia for a Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of Quicktime," Millennium Film Journal 34(1999), http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ34/VivianSobchack.html.
simple, yet stunning form allows us to imagine how we might construct a pictorial form for images that would otherwise remain unseeable.

At the same time, the visibility of pixels independent from a bit-map is unlikely to prompt the same sense of wonder we experience when processes like pixelation and pixelization debase visual clarity. Tom R. Chambers’s minimalist pixel art, for example, utilizes pixelation to make reference to and refigure the traditions of Abstractionism and Minimalism within a digital medium.55 Excising and displaying an individual pixel from any work in his minimalist "Pixelscape" series (Figures 2.12 & 2.13) would render little sense of wonder in comparison to the relationship between pixels he makes visible within cascades of pixelated color blocks. More specifically, it is the loss of visual clarity emerging from processes of pixelation and pixelization that seductively affects us and prompts us to contemplate why we wonder about the absence of or uncertainty surrounding visual clarity.

The wonder of pixelization also draws us into a baroque experience with visual culture through baroque looking relations. This is an experience within a threshold between the folds of visible space(s) where our engagement with the visible surfaces of matter do not direct us toward an experience of visual mastery. Pixelization becomes a picture for a threshold similar to the Deleuzian fold, which, Anna Munster explains, operates as a temporal and spatial location where "matter cannot be divided into atomistic units—parts that add up to a whole—but instead is both continuous and differentiated in and between its parts." Our experience with pixelization further aligns

with what Munster calls the "baroque aesthetic," which is an experience where we can sense "a deep ripple that disturbs the firm opposition between clear and confused perceptions" by appearing "as cultural symptoms of the cracks and ruptures opened up when dualities fail to maintain their due distance from each other." More specific still, pixelization becomes a visible and affective pictorial form for the baroque aesthetic and, in turn, reveals how engagements with visible surfaces are enriched by childish, persistent forms of staring.56

Our experience of pixelization as a baroque aesthetic relation creates an invitation to engage in what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls "baroque staring."

Baroque staring functions as a childish form of staring and engagement with visual

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cultural because, as she explains, it "eludes logical narrative, defying the search for meaning inherent in the knowledge producing human stare." This stare, so keenly aimed away from knowledge and mastery over the visual field, foregrounds the possibility for an aesthetic relation where the debasement and shame arising from uncertainty, unclarity, and failed intelligibility is expected and embraced.

Garland-Thomson's exploration of baroque staring becomes strikingly relevant to the artifacts I have addressed thus far because she specifically discusses its emergence while looking at Matuschka's *Time* magazine cover, which she extends to the "Obsessed with Breasts" campaign. She suggests that these visual artifacts push us "to look hard, not so much at what we do not want to see, but [at that] which we are not supposed to stare. To see a wound where we expect a breast demands not just attention, but an explanation, a new reality."57 What I find intriguing in her arguments, beyond how baroque stares draw her toward these stunning sights, is a striking absence she does not address: like most others writing about the "Obsessed with Breasts" campaign advertisements, Garland-Thomson does not know about or account for the digitally produced mastectomy scars.

I find this glaring absence to be troubling, although I continue to find Garland-Thomson's analysis valuable and instructive because, whether she (or anyone) saw these advertisements on billboards, television, or another media platform, she suggests that we know what we see. Her argument suggests that we are shocked because we know what is and should not be visible and, thus, know what we should

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not be staring at. It seems likely that people who saw the "Obsessed with Breasts" campaign imagined these bodies as having "real" scars. To suggest that we "know" what we see seems misleading, then, because this suggestion distances us from the possibility to embrace the benefits of open-ended engagements with baroque staring where what we know is not as important as the possibilities of what we imag(in)e.

While we can stare at these advertisements, and these scars could become recognizable or familiar, Garland-Thomson also reminds us about the ethical dilemma we face by misrecognizing others. "To be recognizable," she explains,

"a person must appear as distinct from a generic, generalized figure. To be recognized is to become familiar, no longer strange. [...] Recognition, then relies on a combination of identification and differentiation. [...] I recognize you by seeing your similarity and your difference to me, and then I make your strangeness familiar. In other words, I see you as you are."\(^\text{58}\)

Whether pixelized on television or not, the mastectomy scars we see in the "Obsessed with Breasts" campaign are digital renderings with specific impact. Unlike Matuschka's portraits or Madge Onwurah's body in the sauna, these advertisements render a digitized body with a photographic trace we cannot follow if we cannot image Andrea Martin's body.

We can aim to move beyond this dilemma by utilizing baroque staring to frame our looking relations. Baroque staring expands our ability to engage with visual culture

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 158.
through images that operate beyond and debase the fixity of pictorial surfaces. This form of debasement puts visuality into question by facilitating the possibility to dwell within visual culture without needing to fully understand all that is visible with perfect clarity. The process of pixelization facilitates a mode of engagement with visual culture to extend this dynamic beyond digital contexts. Pixelization illustrates one means to collapse the distances between meanings that stick (shamefully or not) to our images of females, women, femininity, and, more generally, sex, gender, and sexuality. To this end, I want to return to and complicate the moments following Ngozi’s declaration about seeing her mother as a woman. I aim to produce a pixelated sense of wonder about images surrounding *The Body Beautiful* by facilitating looking relations directed away from mastery over the meaningfulness of these images. The scene that follows Madge’s experience in the sauna shows us how, as an adult, Ngozi attempts to confront the images and messages that prompt Madge to experience shame because of her scar. This scene forces Ngozi to confront her experience in the sauna and the possibility that her mother is not defined by her scar.

The scene I am describing begins with Madge and Ngozi sitting in a pub while they watch a group of young men across the room. Ngozi stares at them with disgust while they engage in sexual banter about women’s breasts but, as the camera shifts to a close-up of one young man, we watch Madge stare timidly but desirously as her voice-over begins:

“I saw the look in his eyes and remembered it from somewhere in the past. A youth, a mere boy; I wanted him for his very ordinariness, his
outrageous normality. A single caress from him would smooth out the deformities,..."

Madge’s voice-over transports her elsewhere, to a place of memories about Ngozi’s father that is also a place where her present fantasies include this young man. We see him holding her as she kisses his chest, and her voice over continues: "...give me back the right to be desired for my body and not in spite of it. A forbidden fantasy, a fairytale without a beginning." What becomes most striking in this scene, beyond how Madge finally speaks about her desires as a woman, are the changes to the film's audio-visual rhythms.

As the scene continues, it transports us outside of the pub where we found Nozomi and Madge to their opposite experiences with life. Madge’s fantasy is intercut with shots of Nozomi at a photography shoot, and the use of cutting positions us to see how both women contemplate their conflicting self-perceptions and perceptions of each other. We see make-up being applied to Ngozi’s body and the shot cuts to Madge’s fantasy, where she lays on a bed before being joined by the boy who caught her eye in the pub. We see this young man laying on top of Madge, kissing her, before we hear a voice we have heard before: "It's important for you to realize that you are far from being the first woman to face the prospect of losing a breast." The voice of the doctor who told Madge how she could partially compensate for her excised breast returns and positions her within a fantasy that cannot escape the demands to acknowledge the visibility of her absent breast.

The shot cuts again to Ngozi laughing and smiling, and we hear her photographer talking about her nipples going soft. In close-up, we watch a hand icing
Ngozi’s nipple; we cut again, to the boy kissing Madge on her scar, but—kiss interrupted—we hear Ngozi through voice-over from moments before Madge reluctantly entered the sauna: "Oh, come on mom, don’t be so uptight." As the scene progresses the array of voice-overs increase, including a repetition of the younger Ngozi’s voice calling her mother a "titless-cow" at the start of the film. Simultaneously, the length of each shot continues to decrease until it becomes apparent that the sounds and events in Madge’s fantasy and Ngozi’s photography shoot affect each other. These locations and experiences fold into each other and, as these spaces intertwine, we see Madge begin to flinch or close her eyes with discomfort while Ngozi appears increasingly frustrated by the chaotic form of her mother’s fantasy.

As Ngozi’s frustrations increase, she begins to scream "touch her" and "do it, you bastard" toward the camera. Finally, the foldings between both places collapse: as voice-overs persist and Ngozi’s screams continue, we see Ngozi’s hand enter into Madge’s fantasy to hold the man’s hand on her mother’s scar (Figure 2.14). Ngozi’s other hand follows shortly after to help hold his hand and head on Madge’s scar but, as the voice-overs and Ngozi’s yelling persists, Madge begins to speak back, asking them to stop before she forcefully, almost sobbingly, begs them to stop. The scene cuts to a look of defeat on Ngozi’s face before returning to Madge, who looks as if she can finally relax and enjoy the fantasy she has shared with her daughter. This scene draws to a close while we watch Ngozi, rather than Madge, smoking a post-coital cigarette.
After Ngozi stands and the camera pans around her naked body, we see her staring in a mirror, holding down her own breasts because, as I mentioned before, she will try to imagine "what it would be like to have no breasts," but Ngozi realizes that it is impossible to even imagine the experience of a life without her breasts. This moment of understanding positions Ngozi to experience pixelated vision because, no matter how she tries to imagine her life without breasts, the images she produces cannot allow her to see and know life through Madge's experience in a different body. Ngozi has realized she cannot know her mother based on how she sees her mother, and this moment of recognition is what inspires Ngozi's shift toward embracing the uncertainty of baroque looking relations. Nogozi's looking relations position her to become perplexed and stunned by the sights she has seen—she is stunned because she will never fully understand and can only stare and wonder about the wonderousness of her mother.

Our ability to enact these types of looking relations will position us to traverse the distance from looking to know and master toward seeing with wonder. These are
distances pixels traverse by estranging our ability to make meaning based on singular or standardized points of focus. Pixels embrace the shame of visible states that remain fragmented or out of focus because, most broadly, they direct us to wonder about images that will congeal into pictorial surfaces. Pixels embrace the shame of uncertainty or a lack in visual clarity because they know that pixelization affirms the presence of more to imagine, image, and know about what is around or otherwise beyond the visible surfaces we see. Embracing a pixelated point-of-view, or any shameful experience emerging from visual uncertainty, enables engagements with the threshold where virtual images facilitate our sense of wonder and, in doing so, queer our ability to determine or extract meaning merely by engaging with the surface of visual culture. Yet, this shameful embrace is also closely trailed by experiences of disorientation. The wonder that emerges from pixelated uncertainties or the intimacy of staring and baroque looking relations will shift in new directions in the next chapter. There, I depart from precise discussions about pixelated vision but continue to discuss wonder through aesthetics of cutting, where I emphasize how precise, captivating details about bodies that facilitate our sense of wonder can also cut away from and beyond the surfaces of bodies. These cutting aesthetics shift our sense of fascination and wonder into disorientating experiences that reiterate how queerly images move beyond the surfaces of visual culture.
3. CUTTING VISUAL AESTHETICS: OBLIQUELY ORIENTATING THE BODY THROUGH MICHAEL JACKSON

Have you seen my Childhood? I’m searching for the world that I come from. ‘Cause I’ve been looking around, in the lost and found of my heart. No one understands me, they view it as such strange eccentricities. ‘Cause I keep kidding around, Like a child, but pardon me. People say I’m not okay, ‘cause I love such elementary things. It’s been my fate to compensate, for the Childhood I’ve never known.

Michael Jackson has been given many nicknames. Most prominently, he is known by what was, at first, his self-designation as the "King of Pop," but this title has little resemblance to his other, less prestigious monikers. From "Wacko Jacko" to "Turd" (the name he penned in letters to Lisa Marie Presley), Jackson has continually been situated in debased relations, which took their most controversial (and public) form when he was designated "the pedophile" in discussions about his relationships with children. In his essay, "Producing Erotic Children," James Kincaid reminds us of a popular joke circulating about Jackson in the 1990s: "How do you know when Michael Jackson is having a party? By all the Big Wheels parked in the driveway." Kincaid explains how this joke, which took many forms but retained similar punch-lines, functions within a purposeful, culturally-manufactured narrative about children. The children who are not mentioned in the punchline of this joke are far from absent because, similar to my discussion about the Child in Chapter One, this joke carries the burden of cultural narratives about innocence being "lost and sullied." More poignantly, Kincaid is right to suggest that a figure like Jackson would be invented if he did not
exist because he functions as a "handy fabrication and focus for our passions that we can abuse and pretend to disown."  

These children exist in Kincaid's joke because they are imaged into existence: no longer do these children sit on their Big Wheels but, instead, they materialize within images of sexually abusive relations that could take place in Jackson's palatial Neverland Ranch. In broader terms, a dilemma (and irony) emerges from our cultural fantasies about childhood innocence in the form of a contradiction: to imagine an innocent child requires that she is simultaneously imagined within a position where she loses her innocence through violation. While trying to determine or define Jackson's relationships with real or fictional children would prove to be a futile and problematic endeavor of projection, Jackson offers some insight to his perceptions about childhood and childishness in the lyrics for his song "Childhood" (1995). In a broad sense, this song reflects his perspective about growing up differently, knowing he was unable to be like a child during his childhood, and reveals his affinities with the ghostly gay child who can only exist as a child through images from the retroactive perspective of adulthood.

In more precise terms, the lyrics for "Childhood" also reveal Jackson's awareness of cultural perceptions about his "strangeness" and "eccentricity" as an adult. "From the public's perspective," David Yuan explains, "Jackson's enfreakment did not occur until after he became an adult, when his behavior seemed to become

progressively more bizarre and disturbing."² In this context, I find it necessary to explicate how and why Jackson becomes framed by queer tropes like strangeness. I argue that the persistent visibility of Jackson's body facilitates public perceptions, epithets, and jokes about his freakishness more than any other factor. I turn my attention to Jackson's body, which has been pictured and made visible in many forms, to explore how he functions as a surface or canvas to imagine debased relations; and, more specifically, I address how Jackson's body creates images to challenge normative or "proper" orientations toward and between the surfaces of bodies.

### 3.1 Cutting Queer Orientations: Aesthetic Cuts and Visible Disorientation

Jackson—previously and aptly titled "possessor of the PomoBod"³—functions as a locus that precipitates, prompts, and provokes visual disorientation. I explore how this disorientation arises from the visibility of Jackson's body undergoing de- and re-construction. It is important to remain attentive to our orientations toward objects and bodies, as Sara Ahmed explains, because our "orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward." Ahmed does suggest that disorientating encounters with "deviant" objects can be re-orientated. To this end, I

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address how the disorientation emerging from the sight of Jackson's body can be re-orientated toward an aim of many queer theorists: making the "strange" familiar.  

The sight of Jackson's body not only fosters an experience of disorientation but also functions as an experience with fascinating forms for the unstable body. Jackson's body is an extravagant site to explore the visible form of bodies because his body cuts the structural confines of visible certainty within scopic regimes that reduce race to chromatic contrast, gender to binary oppositions between sexes, and embodiment to the boundaries of flesh. To expand upon my discussions about fascination and looking relations from the previous chapter, I address how Jackson's visibly changing body provides insights about the transitional properties of bodies that attract, cut, and hold meaning in fascinating ways. Cutting, in fact, influences the thrust of this chapter. A cut, as transitional action in gerund form, can imply particular types of motion. Cutting to analogy: a cinematic cut can be understood as a motion that literally breaks or slices the connection between frames to offer some form of transition toward another framing, whereby filmic meaning is moved or carried from one frame to another through cuts. However, to only explore cutting as the movement to break and suture filmic frames would limit how we understand the aesthetic function of visible cuts outside of framed, dialectical oppositions.

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5 A model for dialectical montage—where dialectical oppositions between or within shots prompt (political) understanding—is initially and productively theorized by Sergei Eisenstein in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, 1st ed. (New York,: Harcourt, 1977 [1949]). For other discussions about the filmic functions of cutting or suture, see: Pavle Levi, "The Crevice and the Stitch," *Critical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2009); Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
I want to contextualize the cut within broader formulations by returning to its properties Sean Cubitt distinguishes from the pixel I discuss in the previous chapter. "Cutting," Cubitt explains, "proliferates in the endless attempt to structure the boundless flow of the pixel." For Cubitt, the cut enables a spectator to simultaneously inhabit three temporalities: although a spectator must travel "at exactly the same speed as the film," cuts facilitate a spectator's ability to imagine what happens "beyond the frame as a movement toward the future, while also composing a retrospective account of what has passed." These movements prompted by the visibility of cuts become similar to what I address as the movements arising while we wonder about the visible forms of pixelation. An individual pixel is unlikely to prompt a sense of wonder or contribute to the production of images when it is isolated from a spatial relationship to other pixels in a bit-mapped display. In contrast, the process of pixelization prompts a sense of wonder because it makes the spatial relationship between pixels visible in an unclear form; and, more specifically, pixelization becomes an aesthetic form for pixel visibility that reveals why the production and proliferation of visual meaning need not depend on visual clarity but, instead, emerges from a threshold beyond visual perceptions where images proliferate.

Similar to how I previously address the process of pixelization, Kathryn Bond Stockton’s writes about the capacity for (visible) forms of cutting transitions to produce visual movement that produce a patina to facilitate our fascination. Take any text and begin with a detail, Stockton explains, and each "compelling detail (or striking set of

details)" allows us to engage a text with "a kind of love—or at least an intensification of our attraction or attention."7 This detail "can also be said to cut the text ... since it may carry the mind away, and thus in a sense cut the viewer away, from the forward flow of plot or message by drawing attention to itself as a source of fascination."8 Fascination, then, should also be understood as a cut-away, which becomes filled by this production of meaningful connections. This meaningfulness of the cut is, here, made full: each break from the forward flow of messages simultaneously functions as "a kind of holding pen," to "hold our interest," where we find within the cut, "tucked in the cut (and, therefore, held in it)," "a cache of interest that may take many forms."9 Stockton reveals how forms of fascination facilitate our understanding of visual transitions and, in turn, I elaborate upon and leverage connections between attraction, cutting and holding to reconsider how our perceptions of visible signifiers or boundaries for bodies mobilize beyond the presence or absence of particular traits.

To this end, I explore the cut by considering divisions or transitions for all the possibilities they contain, where cuts produce movements across and beyond (as in transgression), through (to transform or transcend) or from (to break, split, or alienate) one visible site to another. It is within this context that I extend beyond my discussion about Baroque aesthetics from the previous chapter. I will account for how we make sense of the "cracks and ruptures" in our perceptions of and orientations toward

7 Stockton, Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: 106.
8 Ibid., 107. These cutting textual details closely relate to Barthes's conceptualization of the punctum, which Stockton later addresses in relation to aesthetic wounding. See also: Barthes, Camera Lucida.
9 Stockton, Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: 107.
bodies when the visible certainty of their boundaries fail. I argue that Jackson's body is an ideal text to explore why our participation in staring relations provide different forms of affective engagement with aesthetics and, in turn, provides the possibility for us to revel in the cutting discomforts of our uncertain orientations toward queer bodies within visual culture. Jackson's body, as I explain, occupies an in-between, hyphenated space and reveals how the visible traits of human bodies need not be confined dialectically but, instead, can become visible through images that perpetually force onlookers to reconcile dissonant signifiers. In other words, rather than reiterating a scopic ontology that differentiates between the visibility of bodies within either/or binaries (Black or White, masculine or feminine, etc.), Jackson’s body is visible because of traits that remain both/and (Black, White, post-Black, masculine, feminine, androgynous, and ... ).

The visibility of Jackson's transitional body also reveals fascinating details that continue to oscillate between historical moments or memories and posthumous visibilities within the present. Through cyborgian theft, Jackson's body enters the space between discrete pictures of bodies and reveals how pictures of bodies can be refigured beyond decisive signification. I argue that Jackson provides us with images that deconstruct the visible signifiers for race, gender, and sexuality. Even posthumously, which is the final context I explore, imagining Jackson’s body often cannot and need not correlate with his lived-body. Jackson's body becomes visible and occupies space outside of live-ness, as a hyphenate that can only be imaged within processes that transitionally cut and re-stitch our every attempt to identify with or picture the human-bodied form. Our images of Jackson have the potential to
refigure our orientations toward the boundaries of human bodies by making possible a means of perpetual reorientation through the visible form of work that must be done to and with the body.\textsuperscript{10}

3.2 Picturing Jackson: Look! He was a Black Man

The release of the \textit{Thriller} album (1982) offered pictures and videos of Michael Jackson as a site of public spectacle, and contributed to questions about the "fact" of Jackson’s Blackness.\textsuperscript{11} Questions about Jackson’s body intensified with the release of subsequent albums, which provided additional visual representations to facilitate public fascination about his appearance. This fascination with and intensification of interest in Jackson speaks to his popularity, and "the role of the 'popular' in popular culture," Stuart Hall reminds us, "is to fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in experiences of popular communities from which they draw strength."\textsuperscript{12} Cultural fascination about Jackson’s raced body can prompt questions about the community from which Jackson’s popularity arises or whether Jackson was neatly categorized within the realm of Black popular culture.

\textsuperscript{10} On the work of reorientation, see Ahmed, \textit{Queer Phenomenology}: 100.
Hall, for example, provides various ways to consider where Blackness resides in popular culture. "By definition," Hall explains, "black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a sight of strategic contestation." Hall identifies style, music, and the body as the central factors prompting these forms of difference and contestation, and, more specifically, he is clear to remind us that the body was typically the only accessible form of cultural capital available for Black people. As Blackness was being worked into the "canvases of representation," the body becomes a mark of difference that mobilizes Black popular culture: "[a] mark of difference inside forms of popular culture—which are by definition contradictory and which therefore appear as impure, threatened by incorporation or exclusion." At the same time, while Hall focuses on the problematics that arise when racial signifiers like Black are biologically attached to bodies, his conceptualization of the problematically fixed signifier does not account for the ways in which Blackness is understood in relation to a body that was signifying but can no longer signify Black.

Kobena Mercer moves toward a more precise path to inquire about the impact of Jackson’s changing appearance relative to his growing popularity after the release of the Thriller album: The former "cute child dressed in gaudy flower-power gear" while "sporting a huge 'Afro' hairstyle" transformed into a young adult who became "a paragon of racial and sexual ambiguity." These ambiguities prompt a number of initial questions about Jackson’s Blackness: Is Jackson Black? If so, how do we understand

\[13 \text{Ibid., 26-28, his emphasis.}\]
race in relation to the color of skin; or, is it possible to assert that there is a "fact of Blackness" when someone sees Jackson? If not, at what point is it possible to mark or recognize his transition from Blackness to Whiteness; or, how and in what ways is his Blackness concealed or contained?

If we consider the seemingly simplistic but all too intricate or entangled distinctions between black and white, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that black is "the very darkest color," "the opposite of white," or "due to the absence of or complete absorption of light" while white is "the opposite of black," or "due to the reflection of most wavelengths of visible light." We are afforded these simplistic distinctions when color is conceptualized by chromatic properties—black and white are distinguishable because they are polarized in relation to light—but when the distinctions between Black and White or, more appropriately, Blackness and Whiteness are transplanted to skin, they lose the transparency that the physical properties of light appear to offer.15

15 I want to draw attention to how I capitalize these terms as a means to maintain distinctions between their uses. When I write about chromatic properties I do not capitalize the words black and white. My use of the terms Black and White are capitalized in the context of discussions about race. This is meant to function as a visible textual designation for how these terms can frequently be understood as matter-of-fact categories (almost to the degree of pronouns) to define bodies based on their race/ethnicity. I remain critical of definitions for race being based solely on the chromatic properties of bodies, although there are other scholars who devote entire texts to interrogations of the visual and chromatic properties of race. As examples, see: Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Raengo, *On the Sleeve*. 
The mobilization of visible signifiers for race gives rise to a complex interchange within scopic regimes that attach chromatic properties to the surface of skin.¹⁶ Consider one formulation of how, "in the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one's body is solely negating. It's an image in the third person."¹⁷ Frantz Fanon experienced this when a child hailed him as Negro ("Look! A Negro!") because, chromatically, "[t]he proof was there, implacable. My blackness there, dense and undeniable."¹⁸ This occurs in the most general sense because inscriptions of race, as Lee Edelman argues, frequently function under the guise of synecdoche. Edelman explains how race becomes coded through disciplinary inscription, whereby parts of the Black body (like skin pigmentation, blood, and sexuality) are expanded to define the whole body. Or, in other words, a part (such as one drop of Black blood) is discursively rendered to construct and contaminate the


¹⁷ Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks: 90.

¹⁸ Ibid., 96.
whole body. This surface-orientation is meant to determine race by visible properties and Fanon clarifies how this orientation toward bodies emerges from an ontology of race that traps Black bodies within a double-bind: "Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man." Fanon reveals how bodies are put into relation by an ontological orientation toward chromatic difference. This orientation distinguishes Black bodies from White bodies because of their chromatic properties, which function as differentials within a quasi-Saussurian system without positive terms.

As Jackson’s body continues to change, we lose the capacity to identify a visible part of his (Black) body that can synecdochally define the whole of his body. Not only does Jackson’s body become a site to explore how accumulations of pictures complicate our ability to imagine the wholeness of his body, but the visibility of his body also prompts us to contemplate why bodies cannot or need not stabilize in a singular or uniform fashion. Jackson’s body thwarts categorization in ways that are similar to what is implicitly addressed in Mercer’s discussion about social hieroglyphs. Mercer describes Jackson as a social hieroglyph by explaining how Jackson becomes visible as "neither child nor man, not clearly either black or white, and with an

10 This connects with Fanon’s writing on the ontology of race, which Edelman also considers in relation to the epidermal properties of skin. Further, Edelman elaborates on writings by Homi Bhabha that I will reference later. See the chapter "Part for the (W)Hole" in Edelman, Homographesis.

20 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks: 90.

21 This is based on what Alessandra Raengo writes about the differential in On the Sleeve: 130. As Saussure explains, "in language there are only differences, and no positive terms." See de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics: 118, his emphasis.
androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine."  
While Mercer suggests that Jackson's popularity had much to do with his ambiguous, innovative style, metaphor becomes Mercer's means to describe the visible signifiers of bodies and identities in transition. Jackson, Mercer suggests, "may sing as sweet as Al Green, dance as hard as James Brown, but he looks more like Diana Ross than any black male soul artist."  
Mercer's analogy about Jackson's ambiguously gendered body functions as an historical node for one state of his visible body.

The delimited boundary set up by Mercer—that Jackson looks like a Black female instead of a Black male—reveals how Jackson's image fluctuates in relation to gendered codes of difference. At the same time, Mercer does not fully interrogate how Jackson's body transitions between visible chromatic properties. In contrast, Victoria Johnson clarifies why Jackson's self-assigned racial identity begins to conflict with the visible chromatic properties of his skin:

"While Jackson was forced to assert on Oprah that he was 'proud to be a black American', his apparently increasing whiteness, or, at the least, 'aracial' identity (his skin tone has radically changed since he has fallen victim to the depigmentation process caused by vitiligo), visually paralleled the togetherness message of the major anthems of his Dangerous LP and tour ("Black or White" and "Heal the World")."

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22 Mercer, "Monster Metaphors," 95.
23 Ibid., 94.
Take note of the intriguing place where Johnson provides a brief description about Jackson’s victimization: vitiligo becomes a parenthetical excuse for Jackson’s skin condition and literally cuts or divides the argument that Johnson constructs. By her account, Jackson’s white pigmentation validates his promotion of (racial) togetherness, but his ability to assert Black pride warrants a disclaimer about the visible disconnect between the past and present chromatic properties of his skin.\(^25\) Johnson employs vitiligo—through a (parenthetical) cut—to explain (and perhaps justify) visible discontinuity but, more specifically, this parenthetical cut allows grammar to function in the stead of, and simultaneous to, how we engage with the visibility of Jackson’s body.

Each picture of Jackson contains various visible signifiers for the material visible form of his body and, each time we see or engage with the visibility of Jackson’s body, we must reconcile how pictures signify his body differently than images. These signifiers do not contain intrinsic meaning, but their meaning moves and flickers as we try to understand how pictures become confronted by the meanings we produce through images.\(^26\) This oscillatory process prohibits pictures of Jackson from acting as absolute signs for racial ambiguity and, instead, reveals how the act of cutting from

\(^{25}\) This discussion about Jackson’s possible skin condition (causing pigmentation loss and various whitish patches on the skin) circumvents considerations of his visual presence: the visibility of Jackson’s chromatically black body does not merely deteriorate post-*Thriller*; Jackson’s entire body shifts from non-white to white synchronously. Johnson’s account of Jackson’s visibility denies the possibility for his transitional body to operate beyond simplified chromatic distinctions, which are then extended to Blackness and Whiteness as racial categories. While vitiligo can be addressed as one (among endless) explanation about Jackson’s visible transformations, this explanation does not clarify how Jackson’s body operates within visual culture or why the chromatic properties of his body transition away from the human form altogether.

\(^{26}\) Additional information about the semiotic structures of flickering signifiers and non-linear visual formations is addressed later in this chapter when I account for the work of Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman*. 
pictures to imaging processes also illuminates various types of work done with or to race and, by extension, the body. I continue to address the visibility of Jackson's body in relation to imaging processes but I want to make visible how I understand the term imaging as imag(in)ing. This brief textual cut(-in) is meant to reiterate that, for me, the term "imaging" always implies the dual-function of images, as processes meant to mediate what we imagine about, as well as what we experience through, material and visual objects. I addressed images in this way in the previous two chapters. In Chapter One, as images that mediate between fetal photographs and fantasies about the will-be-born child. In Chapter Two, I discuss the range of potential images emerging from a virtual threshold while trying to determine what is visible beyond the pixels covering mastectomy scars in the "Obsessed With Breasts" advertisements.27

I could choose from an almost endless array of pictures to write about Michael Jackson. The pictures and images I chose to discuss in this chapter each affected me in particular ways. I first read Kobena Mercer's essay about Michael Jackson's monstrosity over 10 years ago but, after I began to write more rigorously about the visibility of Jackson's racialized body and incessantly watched his music videos, there were many images I have been unable to forget. From all of the pictures and videos, two images of Jackson affected me most out of all of the media I encountered and, to this end, these images function as bookends to my critical analysis in this chapter. I

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27 I address the relationship between images and their material, pictorial forms in Chapter One. These forms of non-visual mediation are also explored in depth through phenomenological purview in Hansen, *Bodies in Code*. To consider the materiality of racial photographs and their material meaning, see Foreman, "Who's Your Mama?."
begin with a picture from the music video "Bad" because, like other videos from the *Bad* album (1987), Jackson is pictured in ways that complicate our understanding of and identification with the visible form or presence of his body. Beyond how Jackson is pictured in this video, it was a minute detail pertaining to his hairstyle that affected how I began to understand his fluctuating states of visibility, which exemplified what Mercer describes as an opposition between pictures of Jackson's childhood as opposed to how Jackson is pictured as an adult (Figure 3.1).

![Figure 3.1 Jackson's hairline, waning from its afro past](image)

Attraction to the visibility of Jackson's body, and the specific details of his hair, invites us to recognize Jackson's past Blackness, when the visible loss of Blackness becomes tucked within images that cut to the past. The visible hairline between woven and unwoven hair becomes a weave that wanes from Jackson's Afro past: an identifiable mark to distinguish between hair that grows from his head—the hair of his past or what some might call his "natural" or "original" hair—and the hair that has been used as a cover. The cover or new weave of hair we encounter at Jackson's hairline
becomes a detail that cuts and pierces a viewer by prompting an emergence of various images about the transition that has taken place.

While this pictured hairline is not the only visible signifier that draws attention to Jackson's past, it illuminates one way to understand how once-visible, intricate details from the past can become tucked within the present. Jackson's perpetual and visible transformations point to past-Blackness and direct us to remain attentive to the visible changes of his body. The most significant form of visibility, beyond the intricate detail of a hairline, is the omnipresent visibility of Jackson's skin color. The visible chromatic properties of Jackson's body complicate images of race and, in the process, refigure Fanon's primal scene thusly: "Look! He was a Black Man." This is how Jackson's body produces or contributes to images of a racialized body that has been (but possibly must always be) Black but that can also be (was becoming, became, will henceforth be) White.

Jackson's transitional visibility cuts a viewer from the ability to categorize through binary opposition and, simultaneously, shifts his body into a liminal holding pen where meanings gather and proliferate. The stability of Jackson's pictorial meanings cut to a virtual threshold where images become increasingly uncertain, and this experience with imaging processes is where Jackson's disorienting body is laid bare. Jackson's body creates an image of transgression by continually oscillating between past and present (or presently absent) chromatic blackness, which undermines any temporal connection to visible skin color. The color or tone of Jackson's skin is inescapable, unavoidable, when pictures testify to the visibility of a
chromatic presence in conflict with our image of Jackson's visible body (and, perhaps, racial identity) from his past.

Jackson's body becomes a visible and malleable body because images of his body oscillate between chromatic forms of visibility, which remain contingent upon our understanding of the visible present as distinct from what was seeable in the past. Blackness wanes within the visible present through perplexing chromatic contradictions, only to regain visibility through processes of imaging—where signifiers flicker between "past-ness" and "post-ness."

3.3 Not Quite the Right White

While the visibility of Jackson's body draws attention to past- or post-Blackness, I want to address how and in what ways these forms of visibility may or may not connote Whiteness, and, by extension, how Jackson's body escapes his past or whether the images we produce always cut to and hold his body there. In this context, consider how images of Jackson's body can orientate us toward encounters with mimicry which are elaborated by Homi Bhabha's provocative prose: "Excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence." Visible changes to Jackson's body attract us to images of a partial presence residing within the interstices between Blackness and Whiteness. Attraction to these images cut to recognizable contrasts

28 It is important to note that my use of the hyphenated phrase "post-Blackness" is a temporal designation of Jackson's past/post Blackness and not a reference to post-black art.

29 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 123.
between Blackness and Whiteness, and held within this cut are unmistakable forms for
an unassimilable body that is not Black and not White. If we reconfigure Bhabha’s
notion of mimicry, Jackson’s visible unassimilability might be better imagined as
masked mimicry—a partial presence that is almost the same White but, because
Blackness becomes tucked within each cut to images of his past, his presence
remains never quite the "right" White.30

Jackson's body becomes more visible within the interstices between Blackness
and Whiteness through his proximity to other bodies in his music videos. In the music
video "Black or White," we first see Jackson dancing in the midst of "African" people.
As the video progresses, Jackson mobilizes between scenes with various tropological
and "Russian" (Figures 3.2 – 3.5). Throughout the video, each of these bodies become
visible contrasts to Jackson’s chromatically lighter skin, which marks Jackson’s body
as a rhythmically mobile body touring "cultural" spaces across scenes without the
possibility to (mimetically) achieve racial similitude.31 Even if we consider how Jackson
is pictured alongside bodies with different genders and ages, it remains apparent that

30 While Jackson’s identity and images do not correlate with the colonial subject, this play on
Bhabha’s words draws on the contextual performance of Whiteness that both performances
share. Neither occupy the space or employ the identity of Whiteness; rather, both
subjects/identities perform the function of Whiteness, only ever asymptotically approaching
that designation.

31 Lisa Nakamura provides a different way to understand these dynamics in her writings about
identity tourism and the digitization of race. See Lisa Nakamura, Digitizing Race: Visual
Cultures of the Internet, Electronic Mediations V 23 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
Press, 2007); ———, "Where Do You Want to Go Today?" Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet, and
Routledge, 2000); ———, "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the
he remains unable to mimic any bodily presence within these scenes. To this end, it becomes more apparent why the chromatic properties of his skin signify universal Whiteness—still not quite the "right White," but an image for "Whiter-than" forms of embodiment.

Figure 3.2 "Black or White," Jackson among "Africans"

Figure 3.3 "Black or White," Jackson among "Asians"
But *what* or *whose* body is the "right" White and how might this differ from Jackson’s "Whiter-than" body? Sara Ahmed provides some clarification about this question when she writes about Whiteness being "lived as a background to experience."³² Ahmed writes about Fanon’s experience with the corporeal schema through his racial interpellation ("Look! A Negro!") and suggests that the corporeal

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schema "is already racialized" because "race does not just interrupt such a schema, but structures its mode of operation. The corporeal schema is of a 'body-at-home'. If the world is made white, then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness."  

Within this context, the chromatic properties of Jackson's skin come to signify "Whiteness" because he inhabits his skin like a "body-at-home." If, as Ahmed explains, "race becomes a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do 'things' with," then we might say that Jackson's body orientates through Whiteness because the chromatic properties of his skin put particular "things" within proximity.  

Jackson's proximity to chromatically White properties intrigue me about the brief moments when chromatic Blackness caresses the contours of Jackson's body, forcing us to reconcile with how he continues to orientate toward differing forms of embodiment.

For example, chromatic blackness is visibly pictured alongside or in proximity to Jackson in a scene from the "You Rock My World" (2001) music video, when Jackson becomes visible behind a curtain because a backlight projects a shadow of his body on a screen (Figure 3.6). In my earlier discussion, I address why chromatic blackness became increasingly impossible to picture on the surface of Jackson's body as he continued to age. Jackson's body, and our images of Jackson, become in/formed by the visibility of a body divided between our images of his once-was-visible chromatically darker skin and the visibly present, chromatic Blackness of Jackson's

33 Ibid., 153.
34 Ibid., 154.
Thus, this video complicates the relationship between pictures and images of Jackson’s body by revealing how his shadow becomes the only way in which Blackness visibly sticks to his body: when Jackson’s Blackness becomes tucked within virtual images of his body, his shadow becomes the only remaining "fact" of (chromatic) Blackness that can be visibly pictured.

Figure 3.6 "You Rock My World"

This shadow reconfigures Jackson’s body to operate in relation to (and simultaneously cut away from) what W.T. Lhamon Jr. calls "Optic Blackness." We can extend our understanding about the relationship between Jackson’s body and the visibility of shadows turning to Lhamon Jr. who addresses Optic Blackness through his analysis of silhouettes in the works of Kara Walker. Jackson’s Blackness can only caress the contours of his body in the form of a shadow; and, although his shadow is a visible and identifiable form for chromatic Blackness, his shadow only extends from his

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35 On the shadow, as semiotic index for the human body, see footnote 16 above.

body as a disembodied, phantasmatic indexical presence. In different words, Jackson's body is confronted by a shadow that warps, haunts, and buggers his chromatic presence because the chromatic blackness of his shadow can only ever function as an extension of and will not transform into part of his body.37

Shadows continue to haunt and taunt Jackson's body in the music video for "Blood on the Dancefloor" (1997). This video continues to draw attention to chromatic differences between bodies and the visibility of shadows exaggerates Jackson's difference (e.g. dance partners are paired by chromatically differing skin tones while Jackson's body remains White than any other body in the video). Many scenes in this video are lit to create a high-contrast environment where shadows surround Jackson but, unlike Jackson's overtly visible shadow in "You Rock My World," these shadows cannot be indexically traced to Jackson's body (Figures 3.7 & 3.8). Instead, it seems as if Jackson's shadow is forced out of visibility.

We could dismiss the absence of Jackson's shadow as circumstances arising from a highly constructed mise-en-scene, but this does not clarify why Jackson remains lit in such a way that his body cannot cast shadows or why his body is framed to prevent spectators from locating shadows extending from the base of his body or feet. In these videos, shadows function as a context and preface to image Jackson's body beyond human-oriented perceptions: these shadows haunt his increasing distance from racial visibility when blackness would remain a visible, chromatic property of his skin but also, when they no longer index his body, reveal how

37 This function of shadows is drawn from Lhamon Jr.'s discussion. Ibid., especially 115. See also Victor Leromim Stoichita, A Short History of the Shadow, Essays in Art and Culture (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).
Jackson’s body loses its proximity to the human form. Not only does the absence of these shadows remove any haunting racial signifier, but begins to gesture toward how Jackson is no longer subject to signify through a human form of the body within, for example, three-dimensional space.

Figure 3.7 "Blood on the Dancefloor"

Figure 3.8 "Blood on the Dancefloor"

Imagining Jackson through these contrasting pictures of chromatic skin tone provokes our ability to recognize how his visible body persistently lingers within virtual
gaps and, in turn, necessitates that we reconsider the ways we imag(in)e relationships between bodies. As Jackson’s body continues to thwart boundaries meant to differentiate between bodies, we should wonder if the absence of Jackson’s shadow becomes a haunting testament to his inability to be imag(in)ed as a normally visible body. Jackson enters a space of imag(in)ing where signifiers begin to flicker and could be said to literally "cut" pictures and images of Jackson’s visible body from the process of comparative interchange. Within this context, Jackson’s continual de- and re-construction becomes a visual form to interrogate how bodies cut away from the visibility of the human form altogether.

3.4 Jackson's Miscegenated Body in a Cyborgian "World Without Gender"

Michael Jackson is a solitary mutant, a precursor of a hybridization that is perfect because it is universal—the race to end all races. Today's young people have no problem with a miscegenated society: they already inhabit such a universe, and Michael Jackson foreshadows what they see as an ideal future. Add to this the fact that Michael has had his face lifted, his hair straightened, his skin lightened—in short, he has been reconstructed with the greatest attention to detail.

—Jean Baudrillard

In contrast to how media have often addressed Jackson’s appearance throughout his career, Nicole Fleetwood notes greater differences among public perceptions because of varied recollections about the visible properties of his body. Fleetwood draws attention to the initial problem arising from the visible traits of his

raced body—she bluntly states: "Jackson is black and is not black"—but adds that his body becomes meaningful because "there are so many ways to remember him and the accumulation of those images." But, as images of Jackson begin to proliferate and accumulate, how are we able to categorize—let alone inspect and understand—the body we see within pictures of Jackson?

Jackson's image of "Whiter-than-ness" even persists in his familial relations and is made visible in the video for "Scream" (1995), where he co-stars with his sister Janet Jackson. Although siblings may have different skin tones, Michael's skin is much lighter than Janet's. If we cut, again, to images from the past, we can recollect moments where Jackson's skin tone was more chromatically similar to Janet's darker skin tone in this video (Figure 3.9). Cutting to these images positions us to inquire about when Jackson's body began to visibly signify its difference from his sister relative to and beyond the chromatic properties of their skin. Further, this comparison allows us to pause and contemplate how the "Scream" video expands the differences between the bodies of these siblings by drawing attention to performances of gender.

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39 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision: 211.

40 Although discussions about Jackson's plastic surgery arise in various contexts, Nicole Fleetwood notes an interesting difference between how Jackson's changing appearance has been addressed within the media in contrast to responses from the general public. David Gates, for example, called Jackson the "Prince of Artifice" in a Newsweek article. In this article, Gates explains how Jackson's artifice became most apparent after his adolescence, when "he consciously took on the role of Peter Pan ... with what he seemed to believe was an ageless, androgynous physical appearance ... thanks to the straightened hair and plastic surgery." Gates is also cited by Fleetwood. See ibid., 209-210; David Gates, "Finding Neverland," Newsweek, July 13, 2009, 35.

41 For another example of the visible framing of Jackson's femininity, look to Jackson's performance in the music video for "You Are Not Alone" (1995) in comparison to his co-star Lisa Marie Presley (who was also his wife at the time of video production).
This video pictures Michael as feminine so explicitly that a discussion about gendered "looking relations" in this video would seem rather redundant. Jackson’s femininity becomes apparent in this video in contrast to his gender performance in previous videos but also because his body is made more feminine through its visible

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42 The obligatory reference would obviously be Laura Mulvey's essay on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and my decision not to discuss it does not mean to dismiss how influential Mulvey's essay was in the development of film theory, and feminist film theory in particular. Whether her arguments were polemical or anecdotal, she pioneered discussions about the role of gender in the relationship between spectators and the screen. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16, no. 3 (1975). For an array of expansions and criticisms of Mulvey's theory, see the collection by E. Ann Kaplan, ed. Feminism and Film (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially the essays: Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in Feminism and Film, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," in Feminism and Film, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Steve Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema," in Feminism and Film, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Mulvey also readdresses her arguments in Visual and Other Pleasures, and Death 24x a Second, which accounts for changes to contemporary media technologies and visual culture that refigure cinematic looking relations and the position of women as cinematic spectacles. See Laura Mulvey, Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 190-191; ———, Visual and Other Pleasures, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
differentiation from his sister Janet, who engages in more masculine performances of gender.

Janet and Michael are frequently framed within the same profilmic space throughout this video. The differences between their performances become most apparent when Janet visibly engages in "masculine" behaviors: not only does she show her anger with more bravado than Michael's display of the same emotion but Janet also engages in "male," sexed behavior by standing over a toilet to urinate (Figure 3.10). Not only do Janet's masculine behaviors seem successful, but her performance is a visible confrontation with a body pictured as female. This contradiction between sex and gender begins to undermine how we can reconcile pictures of Janet with our images of gender performance and, to some degree, resonates with gender performances that fall within the broad category Judith Halberstam has labeled "female masculinity." More specifically, Janet's performance carries an implication for Michael: If Janet can engage in masculine performances of gender, which are performances pointing to the failure of masculinity to be anything but "a copy with no original," Michael's gender is put into question because he does not conform to normative prescriptions for masculinity and becomes more questionable for gender performances that fail to fulfill standards masculine expected from male bodies. But, is he perceived to be male in the first place?

44 This is the phrase Halberstam uses to paraphrase Judith Butler's arguments about masculinity as a performance of gender. See ibid., 17, 236; Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999), especially the chapter "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire".
One moment to grapple with Michael's gender performance occurs when each person dances alone in front of a large projection screen: When we see Janet, Michael fills the screen behind her by reaching toward the edges of the frame, but when Michael performs we see an anime character filling the screen behind him (Figures 3.11 & 3.12). Framing Michael in proximity to an anime character almost hilariously suggests a greater level of similarity between Michael and a non-human figure than with his sister. This is to say, in the words of Jason King: "If Jackson has widely been perceived as a 'space alien drag queen'—supremely freaky in his gender and racial ambiguities—then the outer-space antics of 'Scream' can be read as a metaphor for Jackson's profound sense of alienation from society as a whole."45 Our ability to reconcile images of difference we experience while seeing Jackson's body in this context becomes a

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form of disorientation arising from a sense of wonder about the proximity of bodily relations.

We experience this disorientation because the proximity of bodily relations enable us to engage with our perceptions about "likeness." When considering proximity and likeness within the context of racial (and familial) relations, Sara Ahmed explains how proximity affects how "bodies come to be seen as 'alike', as for instance
'sharing whiteness' as a 'characteristic'. This experience of disorientation occurs when the act of wondering about Jackson's changing body requires us to account for our typical orientations toward the "proximity" of human bodies and consider if we have been attracted to images of a visible body that is not, or at least not "naturally," human. This becomes a form of attraction and fascination that cuts to the recognition of a constructed body, and tucked within this cut are the intimate details of the technological contributions and productions of Jackson's cyborgian, hybrid body.

We learn about cyborgs from Donna Haraway, who posits the cyborg as a figure for border-bodies operating at the junction between binary breakdowns like human/animal and organism/machine. For Haraway, the cyborg illustrates how humans are discursively constructed through their relationships with non-human beings or bodies. She uses running shoes as one example to illustrate how the border between human (organism) and technology (machine) breaks down. Although running shoes can function as technological supplements for humans by enabling movement, they specifically enable mobility beyond "natural" forms of human mobility. Humanist frameworks would not refigure the definition for a human who wears running shoes because these frameworks construct discursive boundaries for the Human whereby the human-wearing-running-shoes remains human rather than becoming a hybridized or cyborg being who need not be defined as (wholly) human.

Similar to the cyborg figure who ruptures the boundaries between binary categories, Jackson's body functions as cyborg by disrupting and contaminating "natural" forms of embodiment when he signifies "Optic Whiteness." This is a form of visibility and signification emerging when, Harryette Mullen explains, "technological fantasies feature mechanical production as an asexual reproduction of whiteness."48 This fantasy is the "contemporary electronic version of the miscegenated text" and produces, Mullen argues, "a media cyborg constructed as a white body with a black soul."49 Because chromatically Black characteristics are no longer visible on the surface of Jackson's body, his Blackness is relegated to the virtual threshold where avisual images of his soul reside. Within this regard, I expand upon the asexual and technological production of Whiteness by, first, returning to the video for "Black or White" to clarify how bodies are made visible through transitions and, second, by addressing why images of Jackson operate between the figure of the cyborg and figures of miscegenation.

Mullen's argument about the technological fantasy for racial transcendence is made visible near the end of the music video for "Black or White." The fantasy takes its form as what Jennifer González calls the "race machine," which is a machination and technological illusion for bodily transmutation. The race machine utilizes seamless transitions to purposefully disrupt and eradicate the boundaries between visible properties on the surfaces of bodies and, as a result, pictures the possibility for any body to transition into another—no matter one's age, gender, or race (Figure 3.13).

48 Mullen, "Optic White," 77.
49 Ibid., 85-86.
Transitions are what allow various videos (or pictures) of bodies to intermix—to melt—because literal cuts between shots or pieces of film are not made visible. Each transition contributes to the construction of a visibly malleable and morphological utopian fantasy about bodily transition, which aims to hide the technological movement and editorial labor occurring outside and, thus, unseeable within the frame.
This race machine produces what González considers an "historical elision that erases any complex notion of cultural identity" whereby "a hybrid identity is presumed to reside in or on the visible markers of the body, the flesh."^50 Within these images, bodies transition according to identity markers on the surface of skin—one facial feature morphs into another or one skin tone blends into the next. This is "a thinly veiled fantasy of difference," González claims, especially when we consider the filmic-focus on faces as "a device that is ultimately mutable and theoretically nonidentitarian," which allows "any face...might become like any other face, any whatever face, and by doing so implies that the racial discourses attached to those signs will fall away."^51 González argues that the race machine aims to erase the boundaries of racial difference; yet, these morphological changes cannot undo the signs attached to the visible presence or surface of bodies. While Jackson remains the conspicuous absence among these transitional bodies, the race machine functions as a picture for how bodies move through virtual imaging processes and, thus, seeing Jackson’s body transforming within this scene would be an unnecessarily reiteration of how we already imag(in)e his unpredictable, "morphological" body when we reconcile the differences between his different forms of visibility.

Yet, to understand Jackson's transformational body requires us to engage in, as Sarah Ahmed suggests, "an even more fundamental critique of the idea that difference


only takes a morphological form (race/sex) and that such morphology is, as it were, given to the world." Ahmed argues that our ability to understand the differences between bodies can be determined by ascertaining the ways bodies become raced and sexed as they extend into space. "Differences," Ahmed explains, "are shaped in how we take up space, or how we orient ourselves toward objects and others," and our ability to understand why disorientation arises from images of Jackson is necessary to understand how his body functions as a visible form for the hybridization of difference.52

Jackson's body can only operate as a technologically produced media cyborg when images of Jackson emerge from a threshold between identity categories, and these images allow us to push Mullen's discussion about miscegenation toward Baudrillard's broader use of the term in the epigraph at the start of this section. Jackson's body challenges and expands the notion of miscegenation Mullen uses to describe Black bodies by enabling the production of images for a hybrid and queer form of growth. Jackson's body emerges as a site of growth by making the processes of mixing categories or classifications visible but irreconcilable, and, by extension, undermines the processes of classification altogether by not morphologically transitioning into an identifiable bodily form.53

Jackson's miscegenation becomes a visible mixture of traits similar to what Haraway describes as the "disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling" of traits


53 This broader context could emerge by simply acknowledging the Latin roots in the word miscegenation, which comes from *miscere*, meaning "to mix" and *genus*, meaning "kind."
signaled by cyborgs. His miscegenation extends into a technological form made visible through the border breakdown between organism and machine in Haraway’s cyborg ontology. This breakdown, Haraway explains, arises when “disturbingly lively” machines confront “frighteningly inert” humans whereby differences like “natural and artificial” lose distinction. This breakdown reveals a deep-rooted hybridity that is (or, has become) part of the human condition, and gestures at what Haraway envisions as “the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end.” Jackson epitomizes Haraway’s vision for a “world without genesis” because his body reveals how the biomechanical potential of plastic surgery has the ability to facilitate different forms of embodiment no matter what one’s technological fantasies may be.

Further, pictures of Jackson become critiques of Humanist and heteronormative modes of reproduction because they make technological manipulations and alterations to the body visible when they are imaged as visibly different from the body in which he was born. While the form of reproduction that brings about the birth of a child can lend to expectations about how a child’s body will extend along particular lines of growth and aging within normative logics about “succession and success,” Jackson’s body strays from any orientation toward these pathways because, as he continued to age,

54 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*: 152.
55 Ibid., 150.
56 Although Jackson’s plastic surgery is a valid realm of inquiry, I have chosen to focus on the visible manifestations of Jackson’s body, which secure un-seen plastic surgery processes. This shift productively heightens our awareness of imag(in)ing as a process to reconsider avisibility within any picture/d medium.
57 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*: 119.
his body did not bear "typical," visible signs of aging, which reveals an orientation toward non-normative pathways of growing up more closely akin to those I address in relation to the queer child in Chapter One. This is why Jackson’s body becomes and remains disorientating for people who want him to "grow up" because normative images of adulthood would necessitate our imaginings to emerge from paths where he has rarely been pictured.

Images of Jackson’s body may give us the greatest sense of disorientation because we lack pictures that provide visible confirmation about how his body was produced. Returning, in this context, to my previous discussion about the shadows lingering around images of Jackson would reveal a different spectral form I did not previously address: the shadows haunting many pictures of Jackson testify to his inability to pass as purely human; his body, in fact, may not always hide its own "ghosts in the machine." In other words, images of Jackson’s body perpetually carry the possibility and threat of pictures that could emerge and reveal how Jackson’s body was produced; and, each signifier for Jackson’s body escapes into virtuality only to

58 I began using this phrase about "ghosts in the machine" as a way to think about Jackson and the spectral presence of race in light of what Mullen and Lhamon Jr. write about the production of "Optic White" paint in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. During the production of "Optic White" paint, the whiteness of the paint was explained to be so white that "you could paint a chunka coal and you’d have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn’t white clear through!" This statement by one of the Black factory workers became more telling in light of his explanation about how this chromatic quality of white paint was achieved. Not only were the chromatic properties of the optic white paint dependent on the chromatic properties of black pigment (each container necessitating 10 drops of black paint) but the production of this line of paint was dependent on unseen Black bodies to which the worker explains: "They got all this machinery, but that ain’t everything; we the machines inside the machine." See Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2nd Vintage International ed. (New York: Random House, 1995 [1947]), 217, his emphasis.
return as an image with the haunting potentiality to reveal the laborious technological procedures that were necessary to produce his body.

Although these procedures are not made visible, the non-human technological reconstructions become images for work being done to and with Jackson's body and suggest a sort of theft: Jackson's inability to visibly "pass"—as a body that is Black or White or feminine or masculine or adult or child—emerges not as a means to acquire access to a "higher" racial class but, instead, suggests that he has stolen access to a mode of visibility that need not operate within systems of racial or bodily exchange and identifiability. Jackson's body moves outside of the realm of assimilation and toward the possibility to radically construct the form of a body or identity that need not be subject to visible distinctions at all.59

In different words, Jackson's body queers the limitations of categorical boundaries like miscegenation and assimilation by functioning as a "chromatic aberration."60 This form of aberration emerges when differing wavelengths of light hit a lens, become refracted along different angles, and result in a failure to focus. Jackson’s body functions as a surface to contemplate the failure to connect race with the visible properties of chromatics and, as a lens to understand visible forms of the human more broadly, Jackson forces us to reconfigure the failure of our surface-orientated engagements with the body. To image Jackson is to try and reconcile any

59 Regarding discussions about assimilation and/or passing, see footnote 16 above.
60 While I found it intriguing to come across this term long after I had been writing about the chromatic properties of Jackson’s skin, I have not found reference to the use of this term in critical studies of visual culture. Rather, this term is most commonly used in the study of optics, as reference to "the material effect produced by the refraction of different wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation through slightly different angles, resulting in a failure to focus. It causes colored fringes in the images produced by uncorrected lenses" (OED).
range of parts that may not compose a whole body; but, to picture Jackson is also to produce a form of embodiment that has been "cut away" from the human altogether. Thus, in the final section of this chapter, I reveal how Jackson functions as a hyphenate who occupies the space between post(-)human and post(-)identity—potentially best described as an image for a flickering form of embodiment becoming a visible form for the post-identifiable body.

3.5 Imag(In)ing Post-Humous Presence: Visible Hyphenation and the Visibility of Non-Human Forms of Embodiment

Jackson’s visual transmutations have also been discussed in terms of a broader boundary crossing that moves beyond race and gender and moves the icon into the realm of the nonhuman, either as one so innocent and vulnerable that he was not accustomed to social norms or as one whose sense of risk-taking imagined a life and possibilities outside of the strictures and norms of human life.

—Nicole Fleetwood

Jackson's body hides its re-construction but, unlike the race machine hiding the labor of its technological production, Jackson's body cannot be visibly pictured in transition from one race or gender to another. Instead, he occupies a hyphenated terrain within a threshold where our imaging processes become cut from their orientations toward the surface-signs for normative human body types. Pictures of Jackson become disorientating by perpetually thwarting our orientations toward identifiable traits on the surface of his body. This experience of disorientation provides us with the possibility to complicate the aesthetic function of cutting—and cutting

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61 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision: 212.
forms of visibility that extend beyond surfaces of visibility to pierce a spectator. I address aesthetics of cutting within the context of post-humanism as an aesthetic form with capacity to reorientate our engagement with bodily surfaces toward different images and forms for embodiment.

Kathryn Hayles explores the post-human within the context of virtuality to elaborate disembodied modes of subjectivity and being. For Hayles, cognitive processes operate within virtuality as an interface between our material bodies and discursive constructions. When discourse is mediated through cognition, Hayles argues that signifiers have the potential to flicker and change in unforeseeable ways because signification remains irreducible to absent or present meaning. Signifiers flicker between patterned and random signification and, as Hayles explains, reveal why subjectivity can slip or become malleable in the context of the human body, which flickers between being defined by the corporeal experience of the body and being

62 See Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: specifically Chapter 2: “Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers”.

63 This is, it might seem, similar to Jacques Lacan's discussion about crossings between the syntagmatic (metonymic) and paradigmatic (metaphoric) axes of language—where meaning slips or slides between signifiers on the syntagmatic chain—until reaching a quilting point of understandable meaning. Although, Hayles argues that “flickering” signifiers are not the same as what Lacan refers to as “floating” signifiers because his argument about signification through lack does not fully account for the materiality of signifiers. See ibid., 30-32; Lacan, Écrits: “Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious; or Reason since Freud”. 
defined by signifiers (and meanings) projected back upon the body. Similarly, imaging processes always retain a level of unpredictability because they remain dependent on our perceptions of pictures, which cut to a feedback loop between understandable patterns of signification and the random flickerings of potential, imagined meaningfulness.

More importantly, Hayles notes how flickering signification becomes a way to conceptualize a shift from the discursive limitations of the human body toward a more malleable interface for post-human forms of embodiment operating within an "enmeshed" network of "integrated circuits." These networks of signifiers emerge when flickering signifiers collide within virtuality, and the resulting "reflexive and transformative union" becomes one form of post-human unification to clarify why pictures of Jackson stray from signifiers for the normative human body. Hayles suggests that this union occurs in a circuit through "cybernetic splice," which is quite different from the work of unification that hyphenation is arguably supposed to perform. Thus, while Hayles lends insight about the potential for flickering forms of embodiment to become signified within virtuality, she also complicates how I utilize

64 For a more detailed account of the corporeality and post-humanism, we could turn to Mark Hansen’s about the relationships between technologies and machines. For Hansen, the body-in-code is a fundamentally technological body because bodies attain corporeality and subjectivity through an intrinsically technic experience. This experience is based on Benjamin’s notion of shock and accounts for the corporeal experience of human relations with and to technology, where humans encounter sensorial and shocking experiences through the use of technology—ranging between technologies from the hammer to the computer. See Mark B. N. Hansen, *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing*, Studies in Literature and Science (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); ——, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); ——, *Bodies in Code*.

hyphenation as a means to describe Jackson's forms of embodiment and, thus, these distinctions require further elaboration.

One way to articulate the distinction between splice and hyphen becomes apparent in philosophies or writings about the "post-human" when a decision must be made about how the term is spelled. In the most general sense, I use a hyphen in the term post-human to draw attention to the processes Hayles addresses, whereby words that are cut or spaced from connection are simultaneously and visibly re-stitched to offer mutual critical reflections. Unlike my use of the term thus far, Hayles bypasses the use of the hyphen in posthuman to illustrate how this term implies and connotes a mutually constitutive relationship between two terms: "postness" says something about "human," which says something about "postness." This spelling also reiterates how categorical boundaries between humans and information technologies become coupled and function within discursive relationships as I address earlier. Further, Hayles's use of the term posthuman is meant to mobilize and enact the capabilities of the cybernetic splice by placing "post" and "human" within a tightly fused and reflexive circuit of signification.

In a more specific sense, my use of the hyphen in post-human also aims to draw attention to various debates about the post-human within the theoretical body of work on post-humanism. Many scholars like Hayles have argued for careful consideration when making typographical choices to define terms like post-human when the splice/s or hyphen-ing also operate as "graphic and semiotic prostheses."66 One such example

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66 Ibid., 127.
is found in the book *Representations of the Post/human* by Elaine Graham. In this book, Graham specifically chooses to utilize a splice in the term *post/human* as an implicit reference to the uncertainties (and debates) about successors to the human, and extends this logic to articulate how the post/human functions as a figure who "confounds but also holds up to scrutiny the terms on which the quintessentially human will be conceived."67 If, as Judith Butler explains, "there are norms of recognition by which the 'human' is constituted, and these norms encode operations of power, then it follows that the contest over the future of the 'human' will be a contest over the power that works in and through such norms."68 In other words, the hyphen also functions as means to reiterate how "human" emerges within and structures contingent relations and often remains situated as a standard by which beings are defined.69

I also rely on Butler's argument when I suggest that the visibility of Jackson's body allows him to occupy the space of the hyphen within a term like post-human.

While Butler addresses how the discursive nature of language structures and


69 This argument is also a precursor to my discussion about visibility of non-human "things" in Chapter Four.
designates boundaries between beings and bodies or subjects and objects, Jackson comes to occupy the space of the hyphen by simultaneously drawing attention to and undermining our ability to see and image boundaries or limitations for bodies within visual culture. The final picture I want to address about Jackson illustrates how he becomes visible as hyphenate and, more importantly, how his hyphenated visible form persists even when his body is not or cannot be pictured. This bodiless picture exposes the threshold where images of Jackson circulate, emerging from a hyphenated intersection between metaphor and memorial.

After his untimely death, a public memorial was held for Jackson at the Los Angeles Staples Center. During the memorial service, Jackson was put on display through pictures that continually flashed on the back of the stage. Pictures of Jackson continued to accumulate and positioned his body to linger within limitless virtual images produced by spectators in attendance or watching the service being broadcast to their televisions at home. Whether being spoken about by family, friends, or fans, Jackson was memorialized as a figure who provided the world with a sense of wonder—such a precise sense of wonder, in fact, that Jackson was eulogized in ways that could have described a child just as easily as it described an adult. While spectators heard Brook Shields talk about Jackson's sweet and pure laugh and Rev. Al Sharpton tell us why "Michael made us love each other," the most striking tributes made reference to Jackson's immortality. Smokey Robinson, for example, said that

70 In this book, Butler continues and complicates the line of arguments about gender from her earlier works and suggests that gender not only remains contingent on the historical and cultural frames or configurations of bodies, but that these historical and cultural contingencies construct gender, anatomy and sex as perpetually reconfigured categories. Butler, *Undoing Gender*: 9-10. See also ——, *Gender Trouble*. 
"[Jackson] is going to live forever and ever and ever and ever" and, similarly, President Barack Obama reflected upon the death of Michael Jackson during an interview with CBS, stating: "There are certain people in our popular culture that just capture people's imaginations. And in death, they become even larger."71

These references to immortality became more intriguing in relation to the pictures of Jackson continually flashing on the back of the stage throughout the memorial service, which seemed to affirm Jackson's inability to (posthumously) maintain control over the visibility of his body while, simultaneously, revealing how little control Jackson had over images of his body while he was living.72 Jackson's postmortem body was never made visible during the memorial service and, although it may not be necessary to see Jackson's body pictured posthumously by offering an open-casket memorial, this visible absence gestures at another form of imaging that has lingered in all I have written about the visibility of Jackson’s body: the notion of picture or photograph as corpse.

In Camera Lucida, Barthes writes that photographs take their most haunting form when they become figures for the face of death.73 After several descriptions about

71 Quoted from an interview with CBS while President Obama was in Moscow, when he was asked about the outpouring of emotion related to Michael Jackson’s death.

72 I am writing here, at least in part, in response what Kathy Davis wrote about the control Jackson retained over the visibility of his body while he was living. She argued that Jackson’s "surgical exploits are shaped by, but also transgress, the boundaries of race, gender, age and sexuality," but she goes on to suggest that "[his] operations demonstrate the spuriousness of categories of race and force his public to see him as an individual in complete control of his bodily image." To this statement, she correctly adds: "The image that emerges is a new category, made more captivating and volatile by virtue of its multiple transgressions of masculinity and heterosexuality." See Kathy Davis, "Surgical Passing: Or Why Michael Jackson’s Nose Makes "Us" Uneasy," Feminist Theory 4(2003): 85.

73 Barthes, Camera Lucida: 30-32, 78-79.
his engagements with a photograph of his mother in the Winter Garden, Barthes concludes that death can be read in photographs. His experiences with this photograph allow him to clarify how the punctum extends from the photograph by piercing an onlooker. Further, Barthes observes how photographs make an anterior future ("this will be and this has been") visible, which he describes as a forceful prick of "horror" when he discovers this anterior visibility to function as a flattened form for equivalence between future (this person will die) and past (this person has already died). "In front of the photograph of my mother as child," Barthes recalls, "I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder [...] over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe." The force of the punctum becomes a "defeat of Time" for Barthes because he locates life in the photograph of his mother by imaging her youthful past—"that is going to die"—while also locating an image of death in a photograph exiting beyond the life of his mother as a child or an adult—"that is dead."74

Barthes’s discussions about the piercing force of photographs clarifies why Jackson did not need to be pictured posthumously—as a corpse in a postmortem picture—because each picture projected upon the backdrop of the stage during his memorial service left Jackson lingering as a hyphenate between images for all of his forms of (in-/animate) embodiment. Similarly, Peter Schwenger clarifies why any "living image" carries a "figurative corpse of what has been alive" and requires us to question

74 Ibid., 96, his emphasis.
the nature of all images. Within this context, each photograph or picture of Jackson would always and already produce images of corpses for each of the "bodies" Jackson occupied and for all of the forms of embodiment Jackson would no longer occupy.

Schwenger's extends his discussion about the relationship between corpses and images by putting Barthes's writings about the image in conversation with what Maurice Blanchot writes about cadavers and what Julia Kristeva writes about abjection. For Schwenger, these authors reveal why images do not occupy the space of subjects or objects because images lend form to bodies so that they can take up residence as subjects and objects. In a different way, the visible form of the race machine aids Jackson's body in its function as corpse-like images. The race machine parallels what Schwenger writes about Eadweard Muybridge's time-lapse photography, providing a pictorial representation to make the gaps between visible states apparent. In contrast, Jackson's visible forms do not allow us to see—perhaps not even obliquely—how or when his body emerges through different states of visibility.

While any picture of Jackson can proffer limitless images about his life, each of the pictures presented during the slideshow at his memorial service could only animate his body through an excess of past, pictorial lives. Spectators could remain fascinated by or attracted to Jackson's visibility through this large collection of photographs, 


76 Schwenger, "Corpsing the Image," 400-401, 412. Schwenger argues that the cadaver is its own image based on Maurice Blanchot’s statement: "The cadaver's strangeness is perhaps also that of the image." See "The Two Versions of the Imaginary" in Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, 1982), 256.
which also pictured Jackson’s vast and varied forms of embodiment; yet these pictures became a testament to an impossible fantasy for a unified, perfect picture of Jackson. Jackson could not and will never exist within (the fantasy of) a perfect picture but, as his memorial service drew to a close, Jackson was granted a mode of visibility beyond the photographic form whereby we encounter Jackson’s visibly unique and hyphenated form of embodiment.

When Jackson’s casket was removed from the front of the stage near the end of the service, an instrumental version of "Man in the Mirror" began to play. It seemed all too ironic to hear the melody for "Man in the Mirror" as a contrasting statement about Jackson’s varied forms of embodiment. After all, who does Jackson become, or remain visible as, when he has already seemingly thwarted his shadow and now, posthumously, is left without the need to reflect upon his changing body in any mirror? Or, to ask the question differently, hasn’t Jackson’s body only ever existed reflectively between the images projected upon him (and his pictorial representations)?

By the time the casket was no longer visible, a single over-head spotlight appeared, cutting through blackness on the empty stage, to illuminate and encircle a microphone (Figure 3.14). Two more pictures of Jackson were projected onto the backdrop of the stage—one of him as a child and the other as an adult—but, despite the range of pictures portraying Jackson throughout the memorial service, these pictures seemed to provide minimal visible reciprocity for the array of images any spectator could construct while reflecting about their memories of Jackson. Rather, the illuminated emptiness of this spotlight becomes the ideal, visible form to metaphorize the hyphenation of Jackson's body. The illumination of empty space surrounding this
microphone pictures Jackson’s ideal form of embodiment because his body must be imaged in hyphenation: in the spotlight, as pictures of his past flicker into images we project upon the space where light lingers around a microphone. Here, Jackson is pictured as hyphenate: he becomes a picture for queer forms of embodiment within the virtual threshold where images for malleable forms of embodiment proliferate and circulate endlessly.  

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I also see Jackson’s hyphenation to function similarly to what Mikko Tuhkanen calls "queer hybridity" in his essay by the same title. Tuhkanen thinks queerness through Gloria Anzaldúa’s figure of the Mestiza to assert that queerness can be figured as a mixing or form of connectedness that crosses temporalities and cultures through processes of becoming rather than being. See Tuhkanen, "Queer Hybridity." See also Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Bordlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, eds., *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
How have we orientated ourselves to approach the otherness of Jackson's body and, more broadly, what does this teach us about disorientation as a necessary component for our ability to see other bodies?

Because Jackson has literally and figuratively cut his body otherwise, in response to the first question, I would argue that the visibility of Jackson's malleable forms of embodiment allow us to orientate toward an ability to queer human forms of the body within visual culture. Jackson's hyphenated form of embodiment illuminates how it is possible to rupture the connections between chromatic epidermal signifiers and racial identities, and illuminates the possibility to thwart racial indices by transgressing the chromatic properties of race. Jackson's hyphenated visibility torques normative orientations toward growth and aging, reveals how technological productions of bodies can function to thwart heteronormative relations between the gender and sex of bodies, and, in doing so, makes his hyphenated relationship to the body visible as a disorientating pathway toward queerer forms of relation and embodiment.

At the same time, I would point out that "being orientated" is not the solution. Rather, Jackson's body becomes a striking and transgressive form of embodiment that extends beyond orientations toward normally-visible human bodies. Efforts to imag(in)e Jackson's body torque Sara Ahmed's framing of orientation because these images give way to perpetual disorientation instead. Even though staring at Jackson's body in pictures can begin with a detail, the process of imaging Jackson cuts our engagement from the visible surfaces of pictures and initiates this experience of disorientation: we
experience our movements on a pathway that undermines our orientation toward Jackson’s body because we cannot locate a surface where our images of him should be projected.

It is a utopian fantasy to suggest that images of Jackson completely transform our aesthetic or ontological understanding about race, gender, and identity, possibly because we often reinstate binary or morphological notions of difference through any attempt to structure and normalize their signification. At the same time, my critical engagement with the aesthetic function of cutting reveals how Jackson’s body refigures forms of embodiment beyond the ("will-be-born" or "lacking") human bodies I have addressed thus far. It is within this context that I begin to imagine the emergence of a different visual culture, where the disorientation produced by aesthetics of cutting begins to reveal the noisiness of images emerging around and from non-human bodies and beings. This shift will illustrate how our aesthetic engagements with bodies may open toward more experiences of disorientation when non-human visual cultures render images in opaque or unidentifiable ways.
4. **TRACING THE VISIBILITY OF PALPABLE PLASTIC THINGS**

In *The Transparency of Evil*, Jean Baudrillard constructs an interesting—albeit unexpected—comparison between Michael Jackson and Andy Warhol. Baudrillard suggests that Warhol's art can be understood as aesthetically similar to Jackson's use of the body because, "like Michael Jackson, Andy Warhol is a solitary mutant—a precursor, for his part, of a perfect and universal hybridization of art, of a new aesthetic to end all aesthetics." For Baudrillard, the similarity between aesthetic styles emerges from symbolic transsexuality and facilitates the possibility for subjectivity or subjects to float free from the body.¹

In the previous chapter, I addressed how visible transformations of Jackson's body objectify the form of the human body by making it visibly pliable and palpable. Through Jackson we encounter the human body being imaged beyond the boundaries of flesh. This encounter refigures how we orientate toward the (human) body as an object through different forms of embodiment within visual culture. Jackson's visible and transformational body cuts away from human forms of embodiment. The proliferation of images arising from this move, I argue below, can be further understood when compared to objects in Warhol's silkscreen art.

In this chapter, I explore visual culture beyond the human by addressing bodily forms of non-human beings. My previous chapters have centered on the malleable forms of the human body and because Jackson's body gestures at a visual culture where images move away from normative forms of the human body, I remain curious

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¹ Baudrillard conceptualizes this mode of floating free within the context of cyberspace. See Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil*: 21.
about the possibility to understand visual cultures beyond the human body and how visual cultures change when the human (body) no longer operates as a central figure of exploration or analysis. More succinctly: I am interested in a better understanding of visual cultures emerging from or being produced by things, which I refer to as a "visual culture of things."

My exploration of a visual culture of things aims to accomplish several goals. First, I have made a terminological choice to address the visual culture of things as parallel to but distinct from a visual culture of objects. On the one hand, my choice to deploy the term "things" instead of "objects" is meant to draw attention to critiques about subject/object dialectics and move from a subject-centered analysis toward theories about things we find in the work of thinkers like Bill Brown. On the other hand, this choice is also meant to provide a theoretical framework that builds toward and into

my explicit engagement with contemporary object-oriented philosophies in my final chapter about glitch images.³

Second, I want to shift away from the explicit engagement with visual cultures centered anthropocentrically on humans. Although Michael Jackson provides one pathway to obliquely orientate our understanding about instances when the human body can be made to visibly come undone, it is important to be mindful about the moments when the human body insidiously lingers or returns within explorations of the non-human. To this end, this chapter articulates how visual culture operates when things become central to our understanding about pictures of bodies and beings by providing clarity about how and when non-human bodies and beings are imag(in)ed.

Finally, this chapter aims to expand upon my concluding remarks about disorientation in the previous chapter by revealing how our aim to "capture" understanding through pictures or images becomes a troubling endeavor within a visual culture of things. These visual cultures stray from our full understanding or domination toward what Jean-Luc Nancy describes as a more aporetic structure.⁴ The aporetic structure of visual culture arises when pictures and photographs of things are


at once familiar (because of their familial function as pictures or photographs) and also untenable or unreachable (as their familiarity escapes into strangeness).\(^5\) Between familiar and frustrating interactions, I feel it is important for this chapter to position us to contemplate moments when visual culture becomes tactile or even touches us—possibly what might be an experience of pictures that are "rubbing" us the wrong way.\(^6\) This experience can arise when things (and thingness) shift our orientation toward (visible) objects. This can become an obscure and disorienting form of engagement with visual culture when we are positioned to see how non-humans see differently from ourselves.

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I clarify how visual culture operates within these contexts through close analysis of Kore-eda Hirokazu’s film *Air Doll* (2009). This film offers a fascinating encounter with images of a becoming-sentient sex doll and I address these images as a means to explore the lives of objects and things. First, however, I want to dwell on Baudrillard’s comparison between Michael Jackson and Andy Warhol because I am intrigued by the possibility to turn to Warhol’s silkscreen art and, in the instance of his reproductions of

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\(^6\) My use of "rubbing" in this context is, at least in part, a reference to Jean-Luc Nancy’s argument that "a photograph is a rubbing or rubbing away of a body." Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*: 107.
Campbell's Soup cans, explore forms of embodiment as they are imaged and linger around non-human objects.

In the next section, I aim to begin the approach toward the visual culture of things by illustrating something similar to what W.J.T. Mitchell calls "showing seeing." Mitchell describes this as a pedagogical practice aiming to "overcome the veil of familiarity and self-evidence that surrounds the experience of seeing." This is, in a broader sense, what I have aimed to enact throughout my dissertation by foregrounding a oblique approach to seeing as a means to engage with the queerness of images. I have aimed to expand Mitchell's formulation of "showing seeing" and allow the practice of seeing obliquely to "show itself," be "on display," and "accessible to analysis," whereby the queerness of images unfolds and becomes visible. To move toward understanding about the visual culture of things requires us to extend our ocular orientations beyond the surfaces of objects and things so we can see images of things becoming ec-static and have the potential to see things showing us how they see.⁷

### 4.1 A Thought Problem about Things

To begin this approach toward the visual culture of things, I want to ask two questions which will, or so I hope, sound rather strange: What if Andy Warhol had utilized a can of Crisco as the object of his silkscreen portraits rather than cans of Campbell's tomato soup? And, by extension, would a can of Crisco function like a can of tomato soup within visual culture?

⁷ See Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 166; ---, What Do Pictures Want?
Contextual knowledge about each object would reveal how both emerge in the consumer market around the same time (Campbell’s Soup in 1898\(^8\) and Crisco in 1911\(^9\)), provide similar iconic features (such as shape and textually-informative labels), and can be found in similar locations (advertised on billboards, purchased in grocery stores, and stored in the kitchen). To contextualize the position of Campbell’s tomato soup within Warhol’s art, we should acknowledge how his silkscreen art has been addressed as a political critique of commodification within late capitalism, which, in the broadest sense, draws attention to the conjunction between commodity fetishism and shifting modes of production.\(^{10}\) This (predominantly Marxist) reading of Warhol’s work could easily extend to a silk-screened can of Crisco because its commodity properties would not reconfigure a general political and economic critique about commodities.

Yet, unlike scholars such as Baudrillard and Fredrick Jameson who "define postmodern simulation in terms of the ubiquity and precedence of the code, the freeing of the sign from referential meaning," Steven Shaviro explains how Warhol sees this simulation as "a detaching of the body from signification." Shaviro's criticism seems

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\(^8\) Campbell’s tomato soup was available to consumer markets by 1897, but the red and white label for Campbell’s condensed tomato soup was adopted in 1898 after a company executive was inspired by the uniform colors at a Cornell / Penn State football game. See Campbell Soup Company, "Campbell Story," Retrieved July 01, 2013, http://careers.campbellsoupcompany.com/who-we-are/campbell-story.


warranted based on Baudrillard’s arguments in The Transparency of Evil, which focus on human subjects and forms of the body rather than utilizing the figure of the transsexual or the "mutant" to move away from the human as the center for categorical determinations. In contrast, Shaviro addresses Warhol’s work as a visual form for and function of repetition within post-modern aesthetics. Shaviro asks us to consider why Warhol would paint "an interminable series of Campbell’s soup can labels" and, in turn, explains how "Warhol repeats images in order to drain them of pathos, meaning, and memory."11

Shaviro asserts that Warhol's works construct an aesthetic of flatness, which he distinguishes from various modernist approaches to Warhol's work (from Marxist and Heideggerian to performative and liberal humanist). "The modernist approach," Shaviro explains, "assumes that there is a hidden dimension to Warhol’s work," and Shaviro clarifies how the aim to interpret this hidden dimension—as an inquiry beyond the surface of Warhol’s art—can culminate in interpretive failure when "the last resort of the hermeneutics of suspicion is to jump to a metalevel: to decipher the very fact of the work's indecipherability." In contrast to the modernist approaches, Shaviro’s postmodern reading "takes quite literally [Warhol's] claim to present nothing but surfaces" and this reading provides clarification about why Warhol’s Campbell's Soup would differ from a silkscreened can of Crisco.12

11 Steven Shaviro, The Cinematic Body, Theory out of Bounds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 203. Shaviro also notes similarities between his argument and what Foucault has written about repetition. See Michel Foucault, This Is Not a Pipe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
Shaviro addresses how the orientation toward flatness in Warhol’s art facilitates an impenetrable lack of depth while also becoming porous and remaining open to "all possible interpretations." He explains:

The critic can either praise Warhol’s works or condemn them, can continue looking at them or can walk away, or can even attempt—typically and unavoidably—to transform the distance of their indifference into the very different distance of critical estrangement and judgment. Yet all these strategies ultimately fail, because all of them only add to the interminable flood of words, which mimics but never corresponds to Warhol’s equally interminable flood of images.

Shaviro is correct to note very different modes of engagement we might utilize as scholars engaged with Warhol’s work. My questions about Crisco are meant to extend Shaviro’s discussion about potential modes of engagement with Warhol’s work by providing a thought problem with interpretive possibilities along a different path.

Objects, even within Warhol’s postmodern aesthetic of flatness, have the potential to torque common divisions between modernist and postmodern forms of critical inquiry. In different words, there is the possibility for Warhol’s flat aesthetic to facilitate an array of interpretive and critical engagements that are, in Shaviro’s words, “equally plausible and equally unfounded.” At the same time, objects frequently beckon us to engage them from the standpoint of Modernity’s child who, Bill Brown

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13 Ibid., 206.
14 Ibid., 239.
15 Ibid., 206.
explains, engages with objects beyond their surface whereby they often emerge from or escape to the socio-cultural life of Things.¹⁶

Within the context of my previous discussions about surfaces of visibility, I want to briefly explain how Crisco would function within a flat aesthetic before exploring how it would undermine that form. By extension, this context opens toward the possibility to note properties of visible objects that resist being flattened by interpretations humans might project upon them. Social and material circumstances surrounding the circulation of objects facilitate their resistance to visual mastery and, most broadly, can reveal how objects escape into the lively, social world of Things. Thus, I want to address the presence of a complication to surface-oriented interpretations of a flattened visual aesthetic arising from a (albeit hypothetical) Warholian-styled silkscreen print of Crisco when the visible surface of a commodity cannot account for its different modes of circulation within a subcultural social life.

Mark Graham provides an anecdote that gestures at why the subcultural life of Crisco cans would draw attention to an array of cultural meanings beyond surface-orientated engagements with commodification or domesticity. As Graham recalls:

I was carrying out an inventory of [Grant’s] possessions ... when I discovered a small, old can of Crisco vegetable oil in a cupboard in his guest bathroom. Grant was as surprised as I was to find it there. It was rusty and had leaked, leaving a stain on the shelf. Needless to say, the oil had never been used for cooking, and the obvious place where one

¹⁶ I will expand upon some of Brown’s work in later sections of this chapter, including “Things Thwarting Objectness” and “Ec-Static Air.” See Brown, Sense of Things; ——, Things (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004); ——, “Thing Theory.”
would have expected to find it was not in his kitchen or guest bathroom but in the bottom drawer of his bedroom dresser. [...] Since 1911 Crisco has been advertised as an element of traditional heterosexual family life, with Mom cooking in the kitchen, sometimes aided by her young daughter. Among gay men, the brand is so well known that bars have been named after it in, among other places, Berlin, Florence, and Stockholm. Baking or fist fucking? Heteronormative gender or hardcore gay male sexuality? The can can open in either direction, depending on what is known about the thing and which of its uses eclipses the others.17

A can of Crisco could be flattened in a Warhol-styled silkscreen print, which would lend to an array of critical interpretations. Yet, as Graham begins to illustrate, rendering a can of Crisco (rather than a can of Campbell's soup) into this visible and serialized format would not necessarily be able to flatten or eradicate the array of subcultural meanings arising from memories about its use outside the kitchen.

This functions similarly to Judith Halberstam's discussion about Mandy Merck's criticism of Fredrick Jameson's distinction between modernist and postmodernist works of art, which Merck directs at Jameson's comments about Vincent van Gogh's Peasant Shoes and Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes. Halberstam asserts that Jameson's analysis "falters in the face" of a "buried 'other' history" when Jameson makes a distinction between the presence of materiality within van Gogh's work in contrast to the paradigm of global capitalism he locates in Warhol's clean, manufactured,

commodified footwear. A Warhol-styled can of Crisco would function closely to what Mandy Merck locates as "a queer history of sex work and gay community" within Warhol's Shoes because a can of Crisco carries with it an array of dense histories about its subcultural life as a sexual object and these histories are impossible to eradicate simply by rendering an object visible within a different dimensional format.18

The can of Crisco is a visible object with the potential to carry the mind away, cutting to memories of domestic endeavors within the kitchen as much as its potential to be remembered within gay subcultural practices. Or, in more explicit terms: every memory of Crisco being scooped and plopped into a bowl of ingredients for a cake is paralleled or counter-positioned within memories of its use for bareback fucking and fisting in New York's "Vaseline Alley."19 Crisco's expected use as a vegetable-oil replacement for other types of fat structured how it was marketed as a cultural object—"it's digestible" was one common slogan—but its use-value was repurposed beyond the kitchen when books like The Joy of Gay Sex touted that "vegetable shortening may be the best lubricant, since it is not only greasy but also digestible."20 At the same time, after the discovery of HIV and AIDS, uncertainties about the spread of viral contagions culminated in decreasing use of Crisco as a lubricant. "Even

18 See Halberstam, Queer Time and Place: 100. See Halberstam, Queer Time and Place p. 100; See also Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism; Mandy Merck, "Figuring out Warhol," in Pop Out: Queer Warhol, ed. J Doyle, J. Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).


Crisco," Douglas Crimp explained, "the lube we used because it was edible, is now forbidden because it breaks down the rubber."  

These shifting subcultural uses of shortening as lubrication bring us back to Graham's anecdote about this object's unexpected discovery in a guest bathroom and reiterate why Graham argues for us to "consider sexuality together with things." Graham explains how sexuality severs things from their "relations between people, places, materials, and history that have produced them in order to create discrete objects;" or, in different words, Things operate and facilitate the relations between sexual subjects and objects. Crisco operates within multiple, often contradictory, relations whereby the shifting uses of this object give way to its thingness. While a silk screen of Crisco would, like Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans, provide a canvas for critiques of commodity fetishism within late capitalism, the sexualized, subcultural uses

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21 Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51, no. Winter (1989): 11. I also imagine that this thought problem could be extended along another interesting trajectory were it extended to inquires about pornography. Not only would this contribute to additional subcultural memories about the visibility of Crisco outside of the kitchen, but, within the context of Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo's research, also has the potential to facilitate insights about how images of Crisco become embedded with spatial relationships that remain incredibly relevant within gay male pornography. See Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, "The Cultural-Aesthetic Specificities of All-Male Moving-Image Pornography," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).


23 By extension, one of the stakes in examining how things facilitate the relations between sexual subjects and objects arises from Graham’s use of the term "sever" and his discussion about its connection to sexuality (from the Latin secure). This resonates with my discussion about "cutting aesthetics" in Chapter Three, and opens up toward the possibility to extend my analysis toward the sexual relations emerging from our affective relationship with cutting aesthetics.
also reveal why the thingness of Crisco continues to emerge within, but also in opposition to, domesticated, heteronormative sexual spaces and practices.\textsuperscript{24}

When shortening used as lubricant is left untouched, rotting, and rancid in a bathroom cupboard after sexual practices shifted to alternative objects for lubrication, the two-dimensional silk-screen canvas would also begin to bulge from its flatness by turning the patina for rancidity into an affirmation of the history about Crisco’s social life as an object within subcultural sexual practices. In other words, whether or not Crisco is flattened in a Warhol-styled silkscreen print, every picture of Crisco is trailed by images about its contemporary and historical uses. We learn more about these images while attending to the (non-human) social and sexual life of shortening and this encounter provides our initial entry to a path of reorientations, toward images of objects within a visual culture produced for and by things.

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Lingering behind what I have posed as a thought problem about Crisco is the central motivation or question driving the present and final chapter of this dissertation: what do we gain in an analysis of visual culture by de-centering the human body to engage in an explicit account of the lives of things? Phrased in different terms, my motivation to interrogate a visual culture of things emerges because of my desire to pursue several lines of inquiry about ethical, aesthetic, and ontological formulations of non-humans, many of which are currently being formulated within object-oriented philosophies.

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\textsuperscript{24} Many thanks to Timothy Lyle for engaging with me about broader ways in which Crisco has the potential to insidiously infect domestic space.
I address the lives of things along speculative trajectories in the hopes that some of my engagements with speculative realism can also reveal a queer use value for speculative fabulations. In part, this is a mode of contemplation aiming to interrogate forms of ethical engagement with non-humans and, more importantly, the conditions prompting humans to contemplate non-humans as viable candidates for ethical and ontological consideration. Initially, as Judith Butler explains, this can require us to rethink "where or how the human comes into being" within various social or psychical landscapes, which range from the emergence and rearing of children to relations like kinship. Within the context of my broad concerns in this chapter, I aim to extend questions like those Butler poses to determine the steps that are necessary for us to understand non-human engagements with and productions of visual culture as rigorously as the scholarship devoted to human engagement with visual culture.

This aim requires us to refigure how objects and things become situated in opposition to concepts like the "subject" and can begin with what Judith Butler writes about the performative subjective act—to proclaim oneself as a subject by stating "I"—as her overarching concern in *Undoing Gender* before extending beyond gender into her only (ethical) concern in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. In *Giving an Account*,

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27 See ——, "Imitation and Gender; ——, *Gender Trouble*; ——, *Giving an Account*. 
Butler explores the conditional, discursive relationship between self and other as a path to critique anthropocentric notions of humanness and explains how making claims about oneself implies that those claims are simultaneously made about an/other. To consider the meaning of "oneself," Butler explains, requires us to ask the "question of life and the question of the human" so that neither question can collapse into the other. To sever the connection between these questions is to recognize the conditional relationship between self and other, subject and object. Recognition of these mutually constitutive categories also allows us to reconsider and rework dehumanizing discursive structures, which construct ontological accounts for Being whereby "certain lives are not considered lives at all."²⁹

4.2 The Visible Social Life of Things

Kore-eda Hirokazu's Air Doll (2009) provides a context to interrogate various object orientations and, by animating the plastic "object," this film lends visibility to images emerging from encounters with visual "things." Air Doll asks us to contemplate the lives of things after objects become animated. This film asks us to acknowledge how objects become restricted from equitable consideration as beings by, most

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²⁸ ——, Undoing Gender: 12-17; ——, Giving an Account: especially the sections “Scenes of Address” and “The ‘I’ and the ‘You’”.

²⁹ ——, Undoing Gender: 25. The underlying premises of Butler’s arguments are not completely alien to other accounts of objects, Things, or Otherness. Lacan is well known for his account of the mirror stage as an encounter between self and Other. The infant’s encounter with the mirror stage becomes the structuring force for a subject who desires and lacks. See Lacan, Écrits: "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". For additional insights about the linguistic structure of negation Lacan utilizes within his work, see Peter Brooks and Alex Woloch, Whose Freud? The Place of Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Jameson, The Prison-House of Language; a Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism.
commonly, rendering them as tender, as commodities with use and exchange values. At the same time, *Air Doll* portrays the life of things through images of an object becoming an autonomous thing; it asks us to recognize how objects become strikingly similar to subjects through images of desirous things—a thing who desires; and, to this end, *Air Doll* prompts us to reconfigure how we orientate ourselves in a world beyond the surfaces of things, where things can and do live independent lives.

As *Air Doll* begins, we watch Hideo traveling by train toward his home. After a brief stop at a convenience store, Hideo arrives at his residence and speaks to someone off-screen before we cut to a scene at the dinner table. As the camera cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot from Hideo’s point-of-view we realize he was speaking and continues to speak to an inanimate object: a blow-up sex doll he has named Nozomi. We sense Nozomi’s objectness on the surface of her plastic body and, although Hideo personifies her, she remains a silent object who is forced to listen rather than being able to speak back to her purchaser.

As we cut to the next scene in Hideo’s bedroom, where we will watch him use Nozomi for sex, sound orientates us toward our understanding of her surface much more explicitly than the visibility of her body. Each thrust or movement Hideo makes is accompanied by sounds of air-filled plastic under pressure. Sounds of moans and panting coming from Hideo suppress or distract from our ability to hear the sound of human flesh becoming chaffed by plastic. Instead, our attention is drawn to the sounds

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30 This argument is based partly on the discussion W.J.T. Mitchell provides regarding the commodification of images, but I am more specifically making reference to what Bill Brown writes about the commodification of objects. See Bill Brown, “The Tyranny of Things (Trivia in Karl Marx and Mark Twain),” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002); Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*
of Nozomi's plastic exterior. The sounds of strained plastic provide us with a sense of the weight and pressure any air doll must support and lures us toward the looming possibility that her plastic would pop at the seam were the force of these thrusts to become too great.\textsuperscript{31}

The potential for Nozomi's plastic to pop reiterates her status as an object whose purpose is for the sexual gratification of her owner. We will see Nozomi situated as an object in multiple sexual encounters throughout the film, which are most visible, perhaps, in the moments when post-coital close-ups direct our attention and point-of-view to her vaginal cup being washed outside of her body. As the scene draws to a close, the film transitions to provide a different context for us to understand Nozomi's objectness by showing Nozomi straying from how she is expected to function as a human-oriented (sexual) object and, through this process, we encounter a sex-object becoming a \textit{thing}.

\textbf{4.2.1 Things Thwarting Objectness}

In addition to moments where we see Nozomi within sexual encounters, I turn to the audible properties of the film as a means to more broadly examine how the differences between human subjects and manufactured objects become situated or solidified. Overtly audible sounds of breathing accompany the film's transition to

\textsuperscript{31} This connects with what Steven Connor notes as the "rhetoric of the inflatatable" because "the inflatatable object is frail, delicate, but also ridiculous, always on the point of abject eruption and collapse." See Steven Connor, "Next-to-Nothing," \textit{Tate} 12(2008), http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/next-nothing. My use of the word "lure" also resonates with what Steven Shaviro writes on this topic and the experience of allure in Steven Shaviro, \textit{Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics} (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 2-6; — —, "The Universe of Things" 8-9.
daytime and we return to Hideo's home after a few brief scenic shots of the surrounding neighborhood in Tokyo. We watch Hideo dress and prepare to leave for work while Nozomi remains unclothed in bed. The sounds of breathing persist and become attributed to Nozomi when these sounds couple with a wind-chime that jingles and moves above her head while Hideo is out of the frame. The sound of Nozomi breathing is followed by a visible shift from her state as an inanimate object: we hear sounds of strained, stretching plastic similar to the previous night but, in Hideo's absence, we watch her legs begin to move and follow a translucent shadow cast from her body onto the wall while she walks from the bed toward the window (Figure 4.1).

The translucence of her shadow becomes an interesting visible manifestation for her status as an object in light of Bill Brown's writings about things. "As they circulate through our lives," Brown explains, "we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a
discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts.” Brown turns to Vladamir
Nobokov's writings to clarify how objects are relegated to a dialectical position to be
looked at or through, which becomes a mode of engagement fueling perceptions about
the transparency of objects. To this, Brown adds, "we don't apprehend things except
partially or obliquely (as what's beyond our apprehension). In fact, by looking at things
we render them as objects." Yet, spectators are positioned outside of these two
modes of looking because we do not look at or through Nozomi (as an object). Instead,
this shadow offers Nozomi a murkier mode of translucent visibility and begins to align
more closely with the qualities Brown attributes to things.

Unlike objects, Brown explains, "a thing ... can hardly function as a window."
This is because, Brown continues:

"We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working
for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get
filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution,
consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.
The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a
changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the

\[\text{32 Brown, "Thing Theory," 4, my emphasis.} \]
\[\text{33 Ibid. 4 FN11, my emphasis. These arguments align with the connection to Shaviro's}
\text{discussion about allure I address in footnote 31. W.J.T. Mitchell also reiterates some of}
\text{Brown's arguments in his discussion about "objects and things." See Mitchell, What Do}
\text{Pictures Want?: 156-158.} \]
thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation."³⁴

Brown’s argument about the ability for things to thwart the binary relationship between subject and object resonates with how Nozomi is framed as an air doll. Further, Brown’s explicit statement about changes in a relationship between human subjects and things seems to resonate with the changing relationships between humans and tools in Martin Heidegger’s book Being and Time. Although his discussion is not directly about things, Heidegger’s writings about tools have been used to understand the relationship between humans and objects. Heidegger explains how the hammer functions as an object so long as it is "ready-to-hand" but, if or when the hammer breaks, it becomes present-at-hand because its functionality as a ready-to-hand object changes.³⁵

Heidegger’s discussion about tools could seem to suggest that a hammer becomes visible as a thing once it becomes present-at-hand because the broken hammer would then operate outside of human-oriented expectations about its use-value as a ready-to-hand object. According to this interpretation, Nozomi’s status and use-value as an inanimate, ready-to-hand sexual object changes in the moment she becomes animate and rises from Hideo’s bed; and, by extension, it would seem that Nozomi’s animacy allows her to become present-at-hand (for spectators) by thwarting how she was situated as a passive object meant to be ready at hand for Hideo’s sexual

³⁴ Brown, "Thing Theory," 4. See also — —, "Tyranny of Things."
gratification. At the same time, this interpretation of Heidegger’s discussion about the presence of the hammer has been criticized as limited in its capacity to clarify our understanding about objects and things.36

Rather than suggesting that a broken hammer reveals its thingness by becoming present-at-hand and operating outside of our human-oriented expectations about the use-value and purpose of hammers as objects, it is important to emphasize what Brown notes as our partial and oblique apprehension of thingness. The oblique or opaque properties of things are addressed by Steven Shaviro, who explains how "even when we have shaped things into tools, and thereby constrained them to serve our own purposes, they still have independent lives of their own." Here, the uncertainty about how we define or understand thingness arises because of what thinkers like Shaviro and Graham Harman describe as the independent "powers" or "innate tendencies" of things. Exploring the relationship between tools and humans positions us to "confront the paradoxes of nonhuman actants, of vital matter, and of object independence," which otherwise, as Shaviro explains, remain situated within anthropocentric perspectives about the subservient purpose of tools as objects meant to serve the needs of humans and "to be subordinate to our will." This perspective about tools is why "we don’t even think about our tools," and, yet, as Shaviro explains, it is their constant availability that reveals their "strange autonomy and vitality." While tools can have a use-value for humans, this does not negate how humans must learn

to work with their tools and, more broadly, to find ways to tend to the needs of tools, things, or objects as much as our human needs.\(^{37}\)

I want to specifically situate these arguments about tools and things through Nozomi’s portrayal in *Air Doll* while also explicating their broader applicability for our understanding about a visual culture of things. In either case, we must first grapple with the fundamental opacity of objects and things. As Harman explains: "inanimate objects are not just manipulable clods of matter, not philosophical dead weight best left to 'positive science.' Instead, they are more like undiscovered planets, stony or gaseous worlds which ontology is now obliged to colonize with a full array of probes and seismic instruments—most of them not invented."\(^{38}\) Harman’s discussion about the opacity of objects clarifies why engagements with a visual culture of things has the potential to become a maddening and disorientating experience, which arises because we must choose to embrace our inability to fully understand the thingness of things. I embrace this potential for uncertainty not as a means to elide criticism about my interpretations of *Air Doll* but, instead, to affirm the existence of multiple interpretations about things and objects that emerge concurrently at any moment in the film and, more importantly, to affirm how things maintain a level of opacity that cannot be fully elaborated.

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\(^{38}\) Much of Harman’s discussion about Tool-Being emerges from his distinction between ontic and ontology. In particular, he argues that the interpretation of *ontic* as "pertaining to objects" rather than "pertaining to presence-at-hand" has resulted in several misunderstandings about Heidegger’s work and, as a result, often leads readers to "move as far away from specific objects as possible." See Harman, *Tool-Being*: 6, 19.
4.2.2 Things and/in the Presence of Humans

After seeing her translucent shadow, Nozomi moves across the room and we see her plastic hand extending toward the open window. The sounds of water droplets plopping on plastic digits contribute to a tactile sense of the surface of Nozomi’s body and how this surface functions as her bodied-boundary (Figure 4.2). More specifically, these sounds lend a sense of texture to the visible surface of Nozomi’s body and become an audible reiteration of her plasticity because of the visible transformation that is about to transpire. The camera lingers momentarily before panning back to Nozomi staring at her hand, and spectators encounter an overt visible transformation: the panning movement of the camera maintains continuity within the diegetic world but produces visual discontinuity because the visible, plastic body of a sex doll is replaced by a flesh-bodied actor (Figure 4.3).

This transition resonates with my discussions about transitional forms of visibility in the previous chapter. On the one hand, this transition between the visible forms of Nozomi’s body is similar to the visible changes someone can imagine while staring at Michael Jackson’s body and recollecting images of a differently visible body from a prior time. Further, the transition from doll to human may not function like the (literal) transformations of Jackson’s body over the duration of his life but our ability to

understand differences between the visible forms of Jackson's body is accessed from a spectatorial position similar to how we see the transformation of Nozomi’s body, which becomes recognizable as such only from our position as spectators outside of the (profilmic) event that is pictured.

Figure 4.2 Water droplets, plopping on plastic digits

Figure 4.3 Transition from plastic to flesh

On the other hand, we can compare *Air Doll’s* panning transition from plastic prop to human actor with the façade of transformation I discuss through the race machine in Jackson’s "Black or White" music video. The pan of the camera in *Air Doll* hides the presence of a cut between shots similar to how cuts and editing are hidden
from visibility in the "Black or White" music video. Air Doll and "Black or White" both rely upon visible presence as a means to mask the presence of images beyond the surface of visibility, but Air Doll ultimately engages with a different form of transition than I addressed through Jackson or the race machine in "Black or White." While Jackson’s body and the race machine provide a way for us to understand how cutting transitions facilitate transformational forms for bodies, Air Doll utilizes a pan to construct the appearance of a seamless transition and avoid suggesting that Nozomi’s body has transformed. Because Air Doll does not make the replacement of the plastic prop visible and does not acknowledge the presence of a flesh bodied actor diegetically, we are positioned to contemplate the significance of Nozomi’s transition from an inanimate to animate state and how objects become lively things.

To imagine the visibility of things and how visual cultures are produced by and with things rather than about things requires us to contemplate modes of visibility beyond humanist and anthropocentric frameworks. Because Nozomi’s thingness becomes visible or extends from the confines of an anthropomorphic body, it becomes even more prescient to interrogate the degree to which Nozomi’s thingness becomes visible after the plastic prop is replaced by a human actor. Doona Bae, the actor who portrays Nozomi, might interact with other characters in the film more easily than her inanimate plastic predecessor but the choice to replace an object with a human in a
story about the life of an object requires us to see her as an object through the form of the human rather than exploring the visible differences between both.\textsuperscript{40}

The narrative perpetuates how Nozomi is situated as an object meant to interact with and like humans because it does not account for the transition to or continued visibility of Bae's human body. Further, the visibility of Bae's body positions spectators to continually look at Nozomi within a human form of embodiment whereby spectators must look at the human body before being able to look toward Nozomi's figuration within a visual culture of things. At the same time, the replacement of a plastic prop by Bae's body can simultaneously gesture at the visible properties of things that often remain slippery and out of sight.

Bae's entrance into the role as Nozomi provides a different context to think about the presence of the absence of the plastic prop as a different condition to engage with the visibility of things. The absence of the plastic doll is what becomes visible when Bae enters the diegesis in the role of Nozomi, which gestures at a different way to understand how thingness often remains opaque or undeterminable. The impact of this absence should not be overlooked and, expanding upon my previous comments about tools, we should acknowledge what Graham Harman writes about presence-at-hand as a mode of relation between beings. "What exists outside of human contexts does not have the mode of being of presence-at-hand," Harman explains, and this is because "an entity becomes present-at-hand when we relate to it,

\textsuperscript{40} This transformation/replacement contrasts the visible form for the life of a sex doll in the film \textit{Lars and the Real Girl} (Craig Gillespie, 2007), which was released two years prior to \textit{Air Doll} and portrays a different mode of engagement with objects when human projections drive social engagements with an overtly-inanimate and inaudibly-responsive sex doll.
not when it is independent of us."\textsuperscript{41} While it is possible for spectators to see a plastic sex doll failing to function as a tool for Hideo's sexual gratification, Nozomi does not necessarily fail to function as a tool; and, although Hideo will later speak with Nozomi about how she has failed to function in accordance with his expectations, her animacy resists how her status as a being can be reduced to her visible presence-at-hand.\textsuperscript{42}

Steven Shaviro offers additional insights about Harman's writings about tool-being, which also provides more clarification about the shift from plastic doll to human actor. "Tool-being does not apply just to the human use of things" because, Shaviro explains, its ontological function "involves a radical withdrawal from simple presence." We operate within a correlationist point-of-view when we attempt to reduce or equate things to presence-at-hand because things are restricted to meanings based only on our (human) perceptions. Shaviro goes on to explain how "a thing is always more than its qualities; it always exists and acts independently of, and in excess over, the particular ways that we grasp and comprehend it."\textsuperscript{43} In this context, the transition to a human actor removes the possibility for the actual plastic doll to remain situated within a subject/object dialectic and, more significantly, this act of replacement becomes an avisual affirmation or punctation for the ability of things to elide full understanding.

\textsuperscript{41} Harman, \textit{Tool-Being}: 126, his emphasis.

\textsuperscript{42} For a very provocative discussion about the connection between queerness and animacy (and how queer animates), see Mel Y. Chen, \textit{Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect}, Perverse Modernities (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{43} Shaviro, "The Universe of Things" 4. The concept of correlationism is discussed explicitly in Quentin Meillassoux, \textit{After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency} (London; New York: Continuum, 2008).
This parallels what Steven Shaviro notes as the "double movement of tool-being—both retreat and eruption." This double movement occurs when the doll is replaced by a human actor because the thingness of the actual doll retreats from visibility while, at the same time, this replacement spawns a form of tool-being that erupts aurally. Thus, the plastic doll retreats from visibility and becomes, as Shaviro notes regarding this dual-movement, "irreducible to any correlation of subject and object, or of human perceiver and world perceived," while thingness erupts aurally as a means to reiterate how "things are forever escaping our grasp." In short, the replacement of the plastic doll reveals how things recede into the background of our understanding. In light of this, I want to address how this (double) movement complicates our ability to rely upon ocular perceptions as the only means whereby we encounter or are affected by (the thingness of) things.44

4.3 Airy Object Orientations: Sound Refiguring the Air Err of our Visual Orientations Toward Objects

Our ocular perceptions about and engagements with Nozomi’s thingness are complicated by the uses of sound in the film. Thus, I want to expand upon my discussion about the moment when Nozomi becomes animate by addressing how sound and aural perceptions reorientate our understanding of Nozomi’s visible body. This exploration of sound is also an extension and elaboration on my discussion about the capacity for sound to enrich our understanding of imaging in Chapter One. Sound

44 Shaviro bases his discussion about the doubleness of tool-being on writings by Graham Harman. My use of the word "recede" is also used in the contexts of what Harman writes about the doubleness of tool-being. See Harman, Tool-Being: 44-45; Shaviro, "The Universe of Things" 5, 7.
enriches our understanding of visual culture by providing a perceptual form of engagement with avisual imaging processes; therefore, it becomes useful to clarify how sound contributes to our understanding about a visual culture of things when things recede from visibility so easily.

In this context, Michel Chion’s reconfiguration of the relationship between the audible and visual elements of cinema lends more insight about Nozomi’s body. Chion’s book, *Audio-Vision*, provides an instructive framework to address the sounds of dripping water across the transition from Nozomi’s (diegetic) plastic surface to Doona Bae’s (non-diegetic) flesh body because sounds are often overlooked and reduced to what Chion critiques as an interpretation of sound as *added value*. For Chion, our perceptions about the "expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image" becomes a misperception of meaning when we assume that sound "'naturally' comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself." By extension, Chion explains, the perception of sound as *added value* renders it as redundant and stifles the possibility for auditory meaning to operate beyond interpretations of visual meaning.45

Within the context of *Air Doll*, interpreting sound as *added value* becomes problematic because the sounds of water droplets hitting the surface of Nozomi’s body change across the transition from prop to actor. As water droplets hit plastic we hear the resounding impact and reverberation of a "plop" but, after the air doll prop is replaced by an actor, the droplets hitting the surface of Doona Bae’s skin become

quieter sounds like faint drips from a leaky faucet. How, then, do we make sense of these differing sounds? Should we understand this transition to situate the story as a slightly more sexual incarnation of Disney’s *Pinocchio*? These differences may seem obvious when the sound of water changes while dripping onto different materials like plastic and skin. The sounds we hear suggest that the plastic shell containing the air of her body has been replaced by skin but this interpretation falls short. Our ability to reconcile these auditory differences is obscured from a diegetic standpoint because the sound of water droplets hitting Bae’s skin *should not* produce a different sound. Nozomi’s body does not transform from plastic to flesh as if she were becoming a "real" girl and, because she remains an air doll across the transition from prop to actor, the different sound from water droplets hitting Bae’s hand cannot produce *added value* within the context of the diegetic world.46

Additional insight about the differences between sounds produced by these droplets is found in Chion’s commentary about the audible properties of water. Chion writes about the prologue in the film *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966) to clarify how auditory perceptions produce meaning from the sound of dripping water and notes how "the sound of the smallest droplet imposes a real and irreversible time on what we see." In *Persona*, sound becomes meaningful for Chion because the resonant force of auditory reverberation launches the "small impact" of water droplets along a temporal trajectory.47 This is to say, as Chion explains: sound "quite often consists of a marking

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46 The impossibility of Nozomi’s transition from plastic to flesh is made manifest in the scene when she punctures her hand, which is a scene I address in more depth later in this chapter.

off of small phenomena oriented in time. The temporal trajectory Chion addresses is similar to the temporal gap created by the transition from a plastic prop to a human body and, across this transition, it constructs a path to explore the emergence of a temporal intersection between sound, story, and surfaces of visibility.

The temporality of sound across the transition from plastic to flesh does offer insight to Nozomi’s perceptions about the material properties of her body. In one sense, we might ask what temporal framework allows the transition from plastic to flesh to take place and, more importantly, the ideological implications of taking time for this transition. Sound lends dimensional texture to the surface of Nozomi’s body because it reverberates into auditory perceptions about the plastic exterior and shape of her body before she is portrayed through the body of a human actor. This collision between sound and visible surface prompts Nozomi’s plastic body to become surfaced before it is resurfaced in the visible form of a human body, which positions spectators to account for the differences between perceptions of visible surfaces before having the ability to determine whether visual or auditory perceptions more prominently structure the material form of her body. In this way, the collusion between sound and visible surface provides a temporal transition whereby spectators can engage with the sight and sound of Nozomi’s plasticity before the visible traces of her plastic body transition to the realm of unseeable images.

Simultaneous to this, we should remain attentive to the possibility for anthropocentrism to emerge as an ideological implication if the replacement of the

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48 Ibid., 20.
plastic prop is meant to create a sense of versimilitude for spectators watching the (animated) life of an air doll. Nozomi’s character and story can demand anthropocentric perspectives about objects to be suspended but, if this film aims to refigure how spectators imag(in)e objects or things, this demand also requires spectators to contemplate ethical and ontological relationships between humans and things outside of a humanist framework. In other words, this film positions spectators to contemplate different ethical and ontological formulations for Things—what we might imagine as a form of “inclusive ethics” extended toward an object-inclusive ontology—which can be embraced by spectators as productive thought problems as easily as it can shift toward an acknowledgement of the film’s fictional framework could lead spectators to overlook ontological or ethical questions about their relationship to objects and things.

So, how do we begin to approach ethical inclusivity whereby it becomes possible to acknowledge forms of being beyond the human? One path begins with the work of Judith Butler who explains how, “on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized.” Within an anthropocentric or humanist framework, Nozomi would be relegated to occupy a position Judith Butler 49 I am quoting this phrase from David Gunkel’s work on the machine, and I more thoroughly discuss his work in relation to glitch in the next chapter. I follow many of Gunkel’s arguments and want to affirm that “inclusive ethics” recognize how differences always exist between bodies and address how distinct bodies treat each other to proclaim, as a fundamentally moral cause, that negative-difference is problematic. Further, these ethics valorize noise and recognize that all communication, no matter the source, is inherently noise(y). The outcome is a possibility to set aside (potentially recognizable) differences and foster communication or interconnections that allow all bodies to sustain noisy sensorial experiences. See Gunkel, Thinking Otherwise: 122.

50 Butler, Undoing Gender: 25.
has called “non-narratable existence.”51 But, immediately after hearing the sounds of water droplets, Nozomi thwarts the possibility to be haphazardly relegated into a mode of non-narratable existence when we hear her speak her first word: beau-ti-ful. One way to understand the significance of her one-word proclamation arises because she makes a declaration about beauty. Her utterance adds a level of complication to how we understand Nozomi’s transition from object to thing because her proclamation seems to situate her as a subject in relation to another beautiful object.

In his writings about the work of Immanuel Kant and Alfred North Whitehead, Steven Shaviro offers a pathway to locate a sense of being emerging from our affective experiences with these types of aesthetic judgements. As Shaviro explains, “in an aesthetic judgement, I am not asserting anything about what is, nor am I legislating as to what ought to be. Rather, I am being lured, allured, seduced, repulsed, incited, or dissuaded. And for Whitehead—if not explicitly for Kant—this is part of the process by which I become what I am.”52 This type of aesthetic judgement refigures the relationship between subject and object because, as Shaviro explains:

“A subject does not cognize the beauty of an object. Rather, the object lures the subject while remaining indifferent to it; and the subject feels the object, without knowing it or possessing it or even caring about it. The object touches me, but for my part I cannot grasp it or lay hold of it, or

51 ——, Giving an Account: 135.
52 Shaviro, Without Criteria: 3.
make it last. I cannot dispel its otherness, its alien splendor. If I could, I would no longer find it beautiful; I would, alas, merely find it useful."  

Here, Shaviro provides a context to understand how aesthetic judgments give way to affective relations between subjects and objects. These aesthetic judgments function as malleable affective relations, which reveal oblique or opaque connections between subjects and objects rather than restructuring subject/object dialectics altogether.

Some-thing lures Nozomi to (st)utter the word beautiful and the thing luring her has implications for our understanding about her perspective as a newly animated being.

While Nozomi’s aesthetic experiences can arise from being affected by her first encounter with the "alien splendor" of things, her fractured, first attempt to speak opens up toward multiple questions: is she referring to the beauty of water droplets hitting her newly animated hand or the experience of feeling the droplet touch the surface of her body for the first time? Or, perhaps most troubling, is she speaking about the beauty of the flesh that now covers the contours of her body as a signifier for a form of embodiment typical to human subjects? We must move further into the film to get a better sense about what Nozomi finds beautiful in this scene and, more specifically, where we locate answers to both of these questions (i.e. she can simultaneously be affected by her aesthetic relation to the sound, sight and feeling of a water droplet and her shift from a plastic to skin-based bodily surface) by tracing the commonalities between the properties of things she finds beautiful.

53 Ibid., 4.
To this end, I address two broad topics to clarify how Nozomi utilizes her newly animated body and how her engagements with the world operate within a visual culture of things. I begin by addressing Nozomi’s search for similitude. Nozomi aims to define her place within the world by making her similarities visible to other beings around her rather than remaining relegated to a position as an object she could not define or control. Nozomi is continually fascinated by the beauty of things she finds similar to herself and, more specifically, she also continually tries to demonstrate her similarity to other characters as her primary mode of relation and engagement. In this context, Nozomi’s fascination with the visible properties of things reveals a surface orientation that will persist in her efforts to demonstrate why she is similar to other humans. I continue exploring Nozomi’s surface orientation in the precise context of her body and, in light of her aesthetic relationships with surfaces, I explain how audible traces and resonances of plasticity foreground the problems she will face while relying upon surfaces to acquire information about modes of (visibly) being.

4.4 How Objects Orientate Within a World of Subjects (Mimicry)

When Nozomi leaves Hideo’s home, she begins to see a range of people in the streets of the surrounding Tokyo neighborhood and, although the narrative does not specify how Nozomi acquired language almost immediately after she becomes animated, it seems fitting that many of the people she initially sees and mimics are children. As Nozomi walks down one street, looking around with wonder, and turns to watch a father give his daughter a purse holding the lunch she forgot to take with her
to school. The father directs his daughter to continue her trek to school ("Off you go," he says), she acknowledges him with the statement "I'm off!," and by the time these characters exit the frame we hear Nozomi softly repeat the child's statement. "I'm off..." becomes Nozomi’s first moment of mimicry and, as indicated by the subtitles and the sound of her voice trailing off, an ellipsis leaves her statement open to reflect curiosity and uncertainty about the ways of the world around her.

After following an elderly woman around town and learning to bow as a polite display of gratitude or thankfulness, we cut to Nozomi on a bridge where she trails behind a line of children holding hands and singing "Don't copy me, Mr. Echo, Mr. Copycat." As Nozomi watches, the child at the end of the line reaches out for Nozomi to join the line but, after linking hands, the child quickly lets go while shouting "Cold!" before rejoining the other children. Beyond the way the dialogue overtly comments upon Nozomi’s mimicry, this child draws attention to Nozomi’s difference because of the physical properties of her plastic surface. Comments about her cold body are reiterated multiple times after this moment, including when Hideo tells her that a cold body is her only flaw; but, unlike the opening scene when Hideo talks to Nozomi, spectators now see Nozomi’s awareness of and reactions to other people around her. In response to comments like these, Nozomi begins to contemplate and, at times, conceal traits on the surface of her body she has learned to locate as signs of difference from the humans around her.

54 It is also interesting to note what seems like a visible reversal between the objects Nozomi and this girl (Moe) carry. While the young girl carries her lunch in a bag shaped like a purse while Nozomi uses what looks like an apple lunch box as her purse.
Because objects are easily relegated to the fantasies humans project upon them without their consent, we might understand Nozomi’s mimicry as an attempt to demonstrate why her subjectivity is not different from other human subjects. This engagement with difference can be described as part of an isomorphic dynamic. Following thinkers like Jacques Derrida or Luce Irigaray, an isomorphic dynamic operates within a system of logic that defines and structures difference—alterity, that is—by the properties that fail to align with default expectations about what constitutes a human being.\(^5^5\) While a tool might fail to function, revealing part of its thingness, this does not imply that a failing tool successfully signifies its Being like humans.\(^5^6\) At the same time, Nozomi understands and tries to enact a form of embodiment most prominently based on the information she acquires about her similarities and differences from the shape of the human form.

Nozomi’s aim to demonstrate her subjectivity based on the traits she perceives as indicators of human subjectivity appears to specifically demonstrate a search for similitude that I would call visible homomorphism, whereby we sense and see her desire to maintain a visible mode of subjectivity that passes as human within a system that maps the human onto the ontological system or structure for subjectivity and being. We witness Nozomi’s fascination with surface similarities throughout the

\(^{5^5}\) For more discussion about isomorphism, see Patricia MacCormack, “Queer Posthumanism: Cyborgs, Animals, Monsters, Perverts,” in The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory, ed. Michael O’Rourke and Noreen Giffney (Ashgate, 2009), especially 114-115.

\(^{5^6}\) Patricia MacCormack addresses the distinctions between signification, the failure to signify, and significance in more depth in her essay on queer posthumanism. See ibid., 114; Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1976]; repr., Corrected); Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).
duration of the film; this occurs, for example, during multiple encounters between Nozomi and a woman she sees wearing nylons with seams along the backside of her legs. Nozomi initially sees sameness on the surface of the woman’s body by mistaking the seam that sutures the nylons together for the same seams on her body. Nozomi sees sameness on this woman’s surface—a surface-sign for another being like herself—and, later in the film, Nozomi inspects the seam-lines on her body before determining how she (and this woman) can look more like humans if they were to "wipe off" the lines.

Nozomi chooses to render a layer of cover to hide her lines, to use cosmetic concealer as a means to hide her seams she sees as a sign of difference (Figure 4.4). She has seemingly decided what constitutes the visible form of humans and determines that the ability to cover her non-human lines will stifle the possibility for her body to signify its plasticity. Nozomi’s surface-orientation structures how she understands human forms of embodiment based on the homomorphic properties of human bodies she can see. Her surface-orientation allows her to imagine the
possibility to construct a visible form of embodiment similar to humans by covering her signs of visible difference. Further, Nozomi is not necessarily mistaken to assume that she can register as human (or subject) by constructing this cover because, as Judith Butler explains, to declare our subjectivity or being by giving an account of oneself is also "a kind of showing of oneself." This is, she continues,

"a showing for the purpose of testing whether the account seems right, whether it is understandable by the other, who 'receives' the account through one set of norms or another. I have a relation to myself, but I have it in the context of an address to an other. So the relation is disclosed, but it is also, to borrow from Foucault's work on confession, published, brought into the realm of appearance, constituted as a social manifestation."\(^57\)

Nozomi aims to "show" herself in a form more similar to the humans around her, and she "publishes" this intention by concealing the visibility of her seams. This act of visible mimicry also reveals the problematic position for an object becoming animated as a thing because the standards by which non-humans like Nozomi can offer an account of the "self" are not extended to objects or things and must, in at least some sense, be co-opted and enacted to become decipherable by other (human) beings.

To give an account of herself, Nozomi considers how the surface-orientations of humans around her structure a normative requirement whereby any sign of her life as a plastic object has the potential to undermine her thingness and, perhaps more

\(^{57}\) Butler, *Giving an Account*: 131, her emphasis.
significant for Nozomi, her efforts to be seen as (wholly) human, as a subject or being who need not be reduced to their parts. Yet, Nozomi’s act of concealment maintains the possibility for failure, which will persist until she and we (as spectators) can determine the degree to which the use of concealer can eradicate her seams from the surface of her body and/or can undermine the presence or visibility of palpable, puncturable plastic held together by these seams.58

4.5 Ec-Static Air; Or, The Unseeable Sounds of Becoming Beside Oneself

Nozomi’s inability to alter her plastic exterior seems to fuel her human-oriented engagements with the visible surface of her body, such as her attempt to render a cover for the seams on her body with cosmetic concealer. Her surface orientations are driven, at least in part, by a desire to become a subject like other humans rather than remaining relegated to her previous status as an inanimate object. Nozomi’s orientation toward surfaces is another illustration of Bill Brown’s distinction between Modernity’s child, who looks beyond the surface of things, and Postmodernity’s child, who, like Nozomi, remains satiated by surfaces.59

This fixation on visible surfaces complicates Nozomi’s ability to understand the matter contained by the surface of her plastic exterior. We gain a sense of this dynamic while watching Nozomi’s reaction to the translucent shadow cast by her body, which

58 This has some connection with my discussion about clothing in Chapter Two, although her concealer does not seem to provide the same possibility to queer her surface as clothing does to the human body.

she takes as a visible indication of her difference from humans with opaque shadows.\footnote{This seems to be a different version of a haunting shadow than the one I addressed in Chapter Three, but it does remain similar to the shadows that draw attention to Jackson’s non-human, hyphenated forms of embodiment.}

This reaction seems to reflect her fear about emptiness—perhaps fearing the heart she "was not supposed to have" was only ever a metaphorical heart—but, as I address below, her non-human interior facilitates our ability to better understand Nozomi’s thingness and a visual culture of things. In one of the most fascinating moments in the film, Nozomi will experience her body failing to conform to what she desired to remain within its homomorphic, human shape.

Nozomi and her co-worker Junichi (who she also finds attractive) put up Christmas decorations at the video rental shop where they work. Nozomi’s aim to maintain a human shaped body is obliterated when she slips on a ladder and punctures her hand on the corner of a metal shelf. At this moment, a loud sound of an airstream overwhelms the soundtrack. The sound of air escaping Nozomi’s body becomes a testament to her misplaced investment in the capabilities of cosmetic concealer to prevent the plastic held between her seams from being punctured. Further, the emphatic sound of air prompts Nozomi’s thingness to return to the surface of our attention before it is possible to see her body beginning to deflate.

The sound of air leaving Nozomi’s body resonates with my earlier discussion about our audible perceptions of breathing or water dripping on her surface. Although the sound of air in this scene differs from the sound of breathing at the start of the film, similar visual framing is utilized to depict the connection between the sound that is heard and the source of the sound. To add a level of complexity to how I have
addressed the connection between sound and source in this scene, I want to explain why the sound of air functions both synchronously and acoustically.

Synchronous sound manifests in various ways but most commonly it denotes the moments when visual and audio events occur in unison. This occurs, for example, when the sound (event) of air escaping Nozomi’s body joins the visual (event) sight of her hand being pierced by metal. Further, the audiovisual synchronicity in this scene becomes most apparent when the visible elements of the film are emphasized by the physical properties Chion notes as indicative of synchronous sound: when seeing the closeup shot of Nozomi puncturing her hand, the sound of air becomes "louder than the rest of the soundtrack" through the physicality of "visual fortissimo." The air leaving Nozomi's body is visibly indexed after she falls out of the frame and, similar to the jostling of the wind chime above Nozomi's head when she becomes animated at the start of the film, the camera lingers on the slightly frantic sway of Christmas ornaments hanging from the ceiling above her head. The synchrones in this and the opening scene becomes important because sound is not visible, but the meaning of synchronicity gains significance because the sounds of air are acousmatic.

For Chion, the acousmatic dimension of film is that which allows sound to "reveal itself in all of its dimensions" rather than being relegated to support visual perceptions within an ocularcentric mode of film engagement. The ambiguity surrounding the source of air becomes a sign of its acousmatic properties that function closely to what Chion calls the acousmetre, the acousmatic character who has an

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62 Ibid., 32.
oscillating relationship with the screen because it remains "neither inside nor outside the image." Chion goes on to clarify that the acousmetre is "not inside, because the image of the voice's source—the body, the mouth—is not included. Nor is it outside, since it is not clearly positioned offscreen in an imaginary 'wing,' like a master of ceremonies or a witness, and it is implicated in the action, constantly about to be part of it." Yet, various extra-diegetic factors make it difficult to map Chion's definition for the acousmetre onto the sound of air in Air Doll.

The indexical source of air and breath often remain unseen from a spectatorial position, which complicates how the sounds of air or breath might be reduced to added value. By extension, the means of attributing the sound of air to Nozomi's body is not always coherent within the diegetic world. The sound of breathing at the start of the film, for example, is followed by the movement and sounds of a wind chime. Nozomi begins to breathe at the moment of becoming animate but this sound of air functions in contrast to the scene where she is punctured. While the sound of Nozomi’s breath (leaving her body) prefaces how we see her becoming animated, the sound of air (also leaving her body) after being punctured shows us the potential for her to return to a state of inanimacy. Thus, we should question how Nozomi breathes in the opening scene if the act of breathing does not cause her body to at least partially deflate.

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63 Ibid., 125.
Air remains a visually omnipresent throughout the film—air is everywhere—and although sounds of air could emerge at any moment, it is unlikely for the sounds of air or breathing to function as acousmatic characters when they are rarely drawn to the attention of spectators without being attributed to Nozomi. These examples gesture at why the sound of air might be more accurately labeled as a paradoxical acousmetre, which utilizes some of the abilities of the acousmetre but, in the case of Air Doll, emerges in conjunction with changes to Nozomi's status as an inanimate being. The acousmatic properties of air reveal how affective qualities of sound "shimmer in the image" and, as a result, the sound of air reverberates through the frame before Nozomi becomes visible. This becomes apparent by the time her body enters the frame, after the reverberations of this sound have already affected her: we see her on the floor, legs and arms partially deflated (Figure 4.5 & 4.6). 

Figure 4.5 Nozomi’s plasticity returns

64 More discussion about the omnipresence of air will follow.

65 Chion, Audio-Vision: 60.
The inability for Nozomi’s plastic to retain the air that was previously sealed within her body is followed by a series of potential failures: the heart she found but "was not supposed to have" did not become visible and reveals the likelihood that it was a metaphor she utilized to signify a form for her subjectivity; her ability to function as an independent being becomes crippled because—while deflated—she cannot refill herself with the air her plastic body requires to remain full; and, by extension, it is possible to see her return to a partially inanimate state and Junichi’s rush to assist her as an indication that she could not live an independent life as a thing.

Nozomi demonstrates her desire to be seen as something other than an air doll when she avoids eye contact with Junichi, and this is emphasized further after she asks him to not look at her when he comes running to her aid. Junichi ignores her request and finds tape to patch the hole in her hand before he proceeds to blow her back up. We see Nozomi’s plastic legs and arms begin to inflate when Junichi breathes air into her plug and, after a quick cut from her face to her legs, the plastic legs of a prop are replaced again by Bae’s body. At this point in the film, it is not surprising for
Bae’s body to return in its entirety when Nozomi’s body becomes refilled with air but, as the camera pans from Nozomi’s legs to her face, this shift also shows Nozomi’s expressions change from a look of pain to pleasure. We can determine that Nozomi experiences pleasure while her body swells to its capacity with air but, from an extra-diegetic standpoint, this form of pleasure reiterates how Nozomi experiences satisfaction while visible through Bae’s body rather than when her plastic appendages are visible (Figure 4.7). Nozomi’s pleasure also connects with fluctuations to the visibility of her thingness and, in this context, the sounds of air ripple into images—images becoming ec-static.

4.6 The Being of Air, and Beings Becoming Ec-Static

The sound of air operates in conjunction with fluctuations to Nozomi’s status as an inanimate being and, when she is punctured and the air deflates from her body, these sounds draw attention to her thingness by situating the essence of her being-animate literally around and beside her. Not only does this manifestation of leaking air position spectators to contemplate the malleable nature of Nozomi’s body, but the
sound of air also re-surfaces Nozomi’s body as if the air escaping her body was meant to function as a reminder for her to recognize her thingness. It remains unclear if Nozomi would return to her previous state as an inanimate object, were she left deflated on the floor of the video store. But, as an air doll, she understands the potential of becoming relegated to a position with particular use-value ("I am an air doll. A substitute for handling sexual desire.") and exchange-value ("I am an air doll. A late model, cheap one….") while the plastic form of her body remains in this state of visibility.

At the moment Nozomi is forced to contemplate the change to the visible properties of her body, the transparent properties of air give way to an avisual form for becoming ec-static. "To be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself," Judith Butler explains, "and this can have several meanings":

to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be beside oneself with rage or grief. [...] I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways beside ourselves [...] In a sense, the predicament is to understand what kind of community is composed of those who are beside themselves.66

Nozomi likely experiences this moment of being positioned beside herself (with grief or pain or terror) because of inappropriate orientations toward the properties of her body. Nozomi’s experiences as an inanimate object remain present within the plasticity of her body. Shifting her attention to the surface of her plastic exterior did and could not

66 Butler, Undoing Gender: 20.
protect her from being punctured and, as a result, Nozomi's aim to "wipe away" her seams merely displaced the visible form that would only ever bulge through the concealed cover if air was let loose from beneath.

This moment of ec-stasis similarly affects how spectators understand the visibility of Nozomi's body and thingness. Nozomi's plasticity returns to the surface after being punctured and, at first glance, might illustrate the "countermovement" or "reversal" of tool-being, which occurs when a tools or thing fails to function as we have expected whereby "the excess of its being is suddenly revealed to us."

Kevin Ferguson addresses the presence and purpose of air in cinema by first clarifying how, more generally, it operates as "an intimate medium, breathing life into

67 Here, Steven Shaviro summarizes Graham Harman's discussion. See Harman, Tool-Being: 47; Shaviro, "The Universe of Things" 5.
our notions of embodiment and our relationships with others." Ferguson notes various types of scholarship about the intimate mediations of air and his discussion about Luce Irigaray's writings on air clarify how the avisual properties of air facilitate an excess of being that will not become visible in \textit{Air Doll}. In \textit{The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger}, Irigaray reconsiders Heidegger's philosophical writings about Being to "take away from him [the] solid ground"—that is, his emphasis on the significance of Earth—and address the importance of air for our understanding about the presence and visibility of beings. Irigaray emphasizes how Heidegger's work becomes

\footnote{Kevin L. Ferguson, "Panting in the Dark: The Ambivalence of Air in Cinema," \textit{Camera Obscura} 26, no. 2 (2011): 34.}


\footnote{See Luce Irigaray, \textit{The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger}, 1st ed., Constructs Series (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 2-5, 62.}

Irigaray also becomes significant in the context of my previous discussions about Heidegger, tools, and things. It also seems relevant to note that Graham Harman criticizes her work. I do not necessarily find his critique of her methodology problematic, but I find Irigaray's exploration of being \textit{beyond the visible} to be relevant in the context of my analysis of \textit{Air Doll} as opposed to what Harman defines as a primary aim of his work: "a military campaign driving back toward the \textit{surface} of reality." See Harman, \textit{Tool-Being}: 6, his emphasis.
indicative of and participates in the perpetual neglect and exclusion of air in Western culture.\textsuperscript{71}

While the avisual properties of air facilitate its exclusion from many philosophical accounts of Being, the avisual properties cannot be excluded from engagements with visual culture. In \textit{The Place of Breath in Cinema}, Davina Quinlivan explains how breath facilitates this type of avisual connection between beings and, more broadly, enables us to "contemplate beyond the visible." For Quinlivan, Irigaray reveals how the "nature of breathing" facilitates the commingling of bodies through the threshold of air that "weaves a proximity, \textit{between.}\textsuperscript{72} Breath reveals how it facilitates this type of connection in \textit{Air Doll}, and is extended toward the capacity to animate objects by weaving air through a threshold \textit{between} states of being. Recall the sounds of breathing—especially audible and emphatic when it is exhalation—across various scenes of Tokyo at the start of the film, heard before we return to Hideo’s apartment to see Nozomi becoming animated. After cutting back to Hideo’s apartment, we continue to hear acousmatic sounds of breathing that have yet to be indexically connected with Nozomi as the being who breathes. Across these opening sequences, then, breath operates within an avisual threshold, where air becomes a force of connection by refiguring how Nozomi’s state as an inanimate object can connect with an animate state of being.

Ferguson also relies upon Irigaray to foreground the "difficult visibility" of air and his acknowledgement about the marginalization of air in discussions about erotic life

\textsuperscript{71} This is something Davina Quinlivan also notes in her book, \textit{Place of Breath in Cinema}: 28.

\textsuperscript{72} Irigaray, \textit{The Forgetting of Air}: 62-64.
points to why we should remain attentive to Nozomi’s experience while being refilled with Junichi’s breath. Nozomi experiences pleasure that is distinct within this scene because it is the act of being filled by Junichi’s breath that seems to differ from another scene where we watch her refill her body with a pump. This experience of being filled by another becomes an encounter that is both intimate and pleasurable for Nozomi, where the experience of becoming beside herself when air escapes from her body functions as a moment of ec-stasis before giving way to the feeling of ecstasy. Nozomi experiences ecstasy from the fullness of an air-filled body she perceives as a form of wholeness. More specific still, she knows this as a condition of her properties as a thing because her fullness becomes necessary to continue her participation in the "social life" of humans rather than the solitary life of things.

This form of ec-stasis emerging from Junichi’s breath will be repeated when he requests to deflate her body during an explicit sexual encounter, but Nozomi’s attempt to reciprocate fails when she tries to facilitate a similar experience of ecstasy for Junichi. Nozomi questions Junichi’s intentions when he asks to let her air out for the second time, but after he tells her not to worry ("I’ll breathe into you like before," he says) she agrees to reenact her previous moment of ec-static deflation before becoming inflated by Junichi again. Junichi’s desire to deflate Nozomi positions both characters to experience an intimate exchange between bodies through the act of breathing. Becoming filled by Junichi’s breath remains pleasurable for Nozomi and

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73 Ferguson elaborates on the sexual properties of air, which become apparent through the synonyms used to describe sexual behaviors (think “blow job”) as much as the audibility of autonomic respiratory functions during intercourse. See Ferguson, "Panting in the Dark," 39-40.
afterward, while Junichi sleeps on the bed, we see Nozomi search for his plug to fill him with her breath.

After being unable to locate his plug, she finds a pair of scissors to put a hole into his body like the hole he patched on her hand; but, unlike her experience of becoming punctured, she realizes and nervously states: "I couldn’t exhale my breath into Junichi." While Nozomi’s ability to literally breathe remains questionable due to composition of her body, her aim to fill Junichi with air suggests how she equates the ability to experience pleasure with the ability to occupy the same type of body. In this case, she would seem to be aiming for Junichi to have a similar experience with the pleasure of becoming ec-static. At the same time, it remains uncertain what Junichi experiences as the final breaths respire from his body, when his final breaths become audible rather than visible manifestations for the temporal fluctuation as he becomes ec-static and commingles between life and death.74

It remains unclear how Nozomi could mistake the properties of Junichi’s human body as similar to the plasticity of her body. Her mistake is also not clarified by the narrative. Nozomi’s actions become puzzling because of her continual orientation toward visible homomorphism. Nozomi initially saw difference along the surface of her

74 This situates Junichi’s experience with ec-stasis in a temporal framework that might operate within what Heidegger calls "ecstatic temporality" in his discussions about Dasein. Also there are ways in which Junichi’s request situate him within a position similar to other ec-static experiences of sexual encounters, such as an odd reveral of what David Marriott describes as sex among bug chasers (people seeing to "catch" HIV/AIDS through sexual encounters). Marriott explains this as a performance "standing in for, as supplement or prosthesis, a teleology of sex as ecstatic transmission: variously, the destructive, rageful, ecstasy of a potentially fatal fuck." See Heidegger, Being and Time: 402; David Marriott, "No Second Chances," in Queer Times, Queer Becomings, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 55.
body because the seams of her plastic were not visibly present on most of the human bodies she encountered, including Junichi. At the same time, Nozomi reveals her awareness about the properties of Junichi’s body when she puts his body in a trash bag before placing it atop a pile of burnable trash. Nozomi "trashes" Junichi’s body because she has learned from her creator about the fate of humans after death ("After all, once we die, we're 'burnable garbage'.") This contrasts what her creator explains as the fate of air dolls who, like herself, are not burnable garbage, which relegates them to landfills where they must reside with other nonburnable things (Figure 4.8).

Nozomi’s decision to trash Junichi’s body is followed by her decision to resign from a social life with humans by laying herself atop a pile of garbage (Figure 4.9). Nozomi’s choice to be sent to a landfill not only becomes significant within the context of the narrative, but also reveals how she has come to understand and engage with the visual culture of things. In her final moments, the camera frames her position on top of a pile of trash, where she is surrounded by the things she collected during her experience with animacy. Nozomi did not arbitrarily collect these things—mostly glass
bottles in different colors—but chose them because of the properties she saw in herself. These things affected her because of their beauty, such as the sounds the bottles produced when air streamed across their necks. The visible translucence of the bottles also captivated Nozomi, affecting her with their beauty like the water droplets she felt after becoming animate, although she seemed resistant to the possibility of becoming affected by this property of her body.

By the end of *Air Doll*, Nozomi does lend clarity to how things engage with the visibility of things and beings around them, which might also include an education about the pitfalls of understanding visual culture based upon surfaces. At the same time, the final moments of the film transport spectators by way of Nozomi's respiration, carried with her air into her memories of a social life amongst humans. Nozomi's memories emerge similar to what Heather Love describes as "backward feeling," whereby Nozomi need not seek redemption for her experiences of history because her engagements with humans merely reiterate the ruined state things face within their social lives once humans become involved.
Yet, the things Nozomi finds beautiful should always surprise or escape us because the things with the capacity to lure and seduce other things live different social lives than humans. More importantly, *Air Doll* utilizes the audio and avisional properties of air to reveal a threshold where the possibility of becoming ec-static need not only function within a metaphorical form. Instead, *Air Doll* situates spectators to contemplate how easily things and non-humans become ec-static beyond the threshold of our ocular perceptions, whereby the ec-static behaviors of things and non-humans have the potential to produce noisy forms of embodiment humans cannot always reduce to their surfaces.
5. SEEING THINGS: HOW THE DIGITAL IMAG(IN)ES ITSELF

We’ve been living in a tiny prison of our own devising, one in which all that concerns us are the fleshy beings that are our kindred, or the stuffs with which we stuff ourselves. Culture, cuisine, experience, expression, politics, polemic: all existence is drawn through the sieve of humanity, the rich world of things discarded like chaff so thoroughly, so immediately, so efficiently that we don’t even notice. —Ian Bogost

I have aimed to draw attention to how images and things can be seen queerly, how torquing our vision to see obliquely allows us to undermine normative engagements with visual culture whereby we encounter the movements and mediation of images beyond human interlocutors. In the preface, I discussed my desire to push metaphors about visual culture in new directions, specifically in the context of Mitchell’s metaphorical statements about the desires and drives of images and their pictured companions. While I have focused on the position and potential plight of images rather than pictures, this chapter builds upon my discussion about a visual culture of things to interrogate Mitchell’s use of this metaphor in rather explicit ways.

If you recall, Mitchell argues that want what we fail to give pictures is "an idea of visuality adequate to their ontology." My position remains orientated along a different path than Mitchell not only because I have not sought to pursue the development of visuality as a standard by which our engagements with visual culture are measured, but also because the means by which we are able to understand the ontology of

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1 Bogost, Alien Phenomenology: 3.
2 Mitchell, "What Do Pictures "Really" Want?," 82.
images or pictures should not emerge from an effort to master or control how they exist. Rather, and more explicitly, images and pictures deserve the possibility to be seen existing independent our pursuit of knowledge about or mastery over them. Dis/orientating toward the queerness of images provides a starting point. This dis/orientation requires us to experience the failure to fully grasp or understand visual culture, to reconcile with moments when we have mistaken or misunderstood images, and, ultimately, to acknowledge the possibility for an array of images we have yet to or might never, even obliquely, encounter.

There are ways in which I began to explore these dynamics in the previous chapter while addressing how bodies and beings become imaged and pictured within a visual culture of things. This chapter expands this exploration toward non-human visual cultures within explicitly digital terrain to interrogate two questions: how do pictures and images of digital beings become visible and, by extension, can we encounter the digital producing images of itself? In an effort to answer these questions, I continue to stray from the aim to capture non-human things within pictures and images but also hope that their lives become visible, even obliquely at the periphery of my vision. I continue to foreground the importance of an ethical investment in the autonomy of non-human things beyond humanist and anthropocentric frameworks, which would otherwise deny any possibility for non-humans to show us how they picture and image themselves. At the same time, and similar to my previous inquiries about things, the potential to encounter moments of opacity remains because, like things, non-humans can also reveal their independent lives by restricting our access to understand the visual cultures they produce. Although, I have located at least one thing
to direct us toward new understanding about the queerness of images within non-
human visual culture.

We can consider an array of media formats that lend to different aesthetics but,
within and across all types of digital media, one common digital aesthetic form
remains: the bastard child of digital aesthetics, more commonly known as the glitch. I
address this bastard-status as a title that is not meant to detrimentally deride the
significance of glitch images but, instead, as a title foregrounding how glitches
proliferate within digital forms. Glitches are not the product of digitized copulation but
they might be imagined as the unfortunate, illegitimate children of digital media.
Glitches spawn from digital media as beautiful "mistakes;" they are the children who
visibly disfigure the digital media from which they proliferate.

As I contemplated how to better understand manifestations of glitch, I found
Sean Cubitt’s questions about the effect of cinema to be an enlightening frame of
reference. Like Cubitt’s curiosity about cinema, I want to know what glitch does and
within whose reality glitch operates. More specifically, I want to understand what glitch
does beyond its ability to affect and captivate me as a spectator; I want to understand
why glitches become attached to concepts like error, malfunction, or irregularity, and,
ultimately, to understand how glitches function beyond anthropocentric concerns.
Similar to Cubitt, I would argue that if glitch does nothing, we would only need to ask
what it fails to be. Glitch does something.3

3 Cubitt frames his questions about cinema, stating: "I want to know what cinema does. If it
causes no effect, however ornery or belated, cinema doesn’t do anything, and there is left only
the question of what it is or, more exactly, what it fails to be. Cinema does something, and
what it does matters. Cinema’s first effect is to exist. Yet like everything else it has trouble
In what follows, I elaborate upon the processes that culminate in the emergence of glitch, which situate queer aesthetics of failure as complications or challenges to our understanding of digitality and, more broadly, thingness. I address how glitch is defined within the context of glitch art to understand the types of conditions that result in the emergence of glitches and what their emergence reveals about our conceptualizations of (but also particular forms of engagement with) digital media. Digital glitch art, for example, often emerges in the form of pixelated pictures and, as I addressed in Chapter Two, a pixelated visual aesthetic has the potential to debase visual clarity while providing us with an array of alternative, virtual images. I address the relationship between glitches and the things that facilitate their emergence—the computer serves in this capacity later.

To fully understand glitches, and the relationships between glitches and computers, we can begin by asking a series of questions: Why or how do glitches emerge and is their emergence a manifestation of malfunctioning hardware and software processes? If glitches are affected by hardware and software processes, do they operate beyond the context of digital malfunction? And, by extension, what might glitches reveal about the ontology of digital things, like computers and the pictures computers produce?

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existing, and the effects it produces—images and sounds, dimensions, durations, sensations, understandings, and thoughts—all share a quizzical and oblique relation to reality. Certainly you could measure physiological dilations and palpitations to ascertain the reality of a film’s emotional clout. But there is something fictive, something uncanny, or something that, however marginally, fails the reality test in even the most engrossing films, and perhaps in them most of all. Studying special effects has led me to an odd little problem that has turned out, over the years we have spent together, to be fascinating and revealing companion: the problem of the object of cinema.” See Cubitt, *The Cinema Effect*: 1.
I will reorientate our approach to the visibility of digitality and digital media by exploring the affective relationship between computers and glitches, and how computers are affected by or affect the visible form of glitches. Ultimately, I will argue that the beauty of glitched pictures does not emerge from our ability to dispense with glitches as memory "mistakes" but, rather, emerges from how we have mistaken these digital "failures." It is within this context that I turn toward my final arguments about glitch images, to the aesthetics of glitch images that reveal their thingness and the materiality of digital and computational memory. This constructs a pathway to explore how computers and their imaging processes operate beyond human-oriented experiences and expectations. Within this context, the visible manifestations of glitches within digital visual culture complicate aesthetic distinctions about types of media—such as concepts like fidelity and indexicality—and reveal "failure" as a valuable aesthetic relation. I conclude by addressing how queer aesthetics of failure operates within digital visual culture; and, more specifically, I address why queer formulations for relations within digital aesthetics open up in multiple directions to rethink and refigure digital ontology.
5.1 Defining a "Glitch"

Glitch | gliCH | informal
noun: a sudden, usually temporary malfunction or irregularity of equipment; an unexpected setback in a plan. verb [no obj.]: suffer a sudden malfunction or irregularity.⁴

The visual glitch is an artifact resulting from an error. It is neither the cause, nor the error itself, it is simply the product of an error and more specifically its visual manifestation. It is a significant slip that marks a departure from our expected result. —Iman Moradi⁵

Glitches take various forms within works of art, including hardware modifications by artists like Reed Ghazala (1970s–) or Rob Lycett (2001–) and more recent software-based manipulations by artists like Ant Scott (1980s–) or Iman Moradi (2004–).⁶ In the glitch art collection *Glitch: Designing Imperfection*, Iman Moradi was joined by many artists who began to provide insights about how to, at least provisionally, conceptualize glitch within the framework of visual art and aesthetics.⁷ Moradi introduced *Glitch* by defining glitches as "unashamedly amorphous" because their processes of production result in particular visual styles. Glitches not only emerge as

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⁴ This definition is from the digital version of the *New Oxford American Dictionary (American English)*.
⁷ One of the first symposia on glitch art took place in Oslo, Norway in 2002, and resulted in discussions and debates about how glitch is (too) broadly defined. Two years later, Iman Moradi echoed some of the sentiments emerging from this symposium and argued for, minimally, scholars and artists to extend their conceptualization of glitch to its use in visual art. See Iman Moradi’s B.A. Thesis: Iman Moradi, "Glitch Aesthetics" (The University of Huddersfield, 2004).
the result of an "error," from "mistranslations that are facilitated by a loss or breakdown in our communication signals" but also, he explains, become "fleeting artifacts" because of these malfunctioning processes. At the same time, Moradi explains, these are processes of malfunction and failure that lend to the similarly fragmented and linearly complex visual form of glitch art.8

This general conceptualization is reiterated by other artists like Johnny Rogers, who explains how glitches emerge "outside of the user's intentions,"9 and Kim Cascone who, in the context of auditory glitch art, explains that the "effect of a glitch is to subvert the listener's expectations."10 Each of these artists draw attention to the processes that enable the production and manifestation of glitches within their work and, at the same time, they draw attention to how these processes typically result in unexpected or unanticipated visual imagery. The result of unanticipated visual imagery that emerges in a final work of glitch art becomes its primary distinction from other digital works of art with visual elements that are similar to or present in digital glitch art.

"The Wave of the Future," for example, was curated in the early 1990s by The Computer Museum in Boston and The High Tech Times magazine (Figure 5.1).11 This artwork is an homage to the woodblock print by Katsushika Hokusai, "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" (circa 1830-1833), and transitions from the likeness of Hokusai’s wave

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8 Moradi et al., Designing Imperfection, 8.
to pixels before transitioning into a vibrant, vectored wireframe version of the waves (Figure 5.2). While "The Wave of the Future" retains elements like pixels, which are often present in digital glitch images, this artwork specifically distinguishes between digital aesthetics and the analog aesthetic of woodblock art.

![Figure 5.1 "Wave of the Future"](image1)

![Figure 5.2 "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" (Hokusai, circa 1830-1833)](image2)

Within the plastic arts, we could also inspect the use of pointillism in the work of Georges Seurat, the French Post-Impressionist painter, whose use of pointillism could also be categorized within glitch aesthetics.¹² In his paintings, Seurat uses contrary

¹² Iman Moradi has already drawn this comparison. See "Glitch Aesthetics," 24.
colors of paint to produce an optical effect of blended paint color. This façade is produced because of how our eyes optically register contrary colors in close proximity: red, yellow, and blue paint pigments combine and produce an optical appearance of black on a canvas, much like red, blue, and green colors of light combine to produce the optical appearance of white on an LCD screen. Seurat's use of pointillism prompts an aesthetic experience similar to glitch art by drawing attention to processes of perception but, in this instance, the glitch arises within the spectator—as a condition of how color is optically registered—rather than arising from the painting. Seurat's paintings are visually similar to the work of some glitch artists but his purposeful placement of color does not result in the same type of unpredictability expected from the production of glitch art.

Many discussions about glitch art, especially as they pertain to aesthetics, often center around the differences between "pure glitch" and "glitch alike" art. Moradi coined the term "glitch-alike" as an alternative category for artworks that are visually similar to glitch art. The glitch-alike is produced to look like an authentic glitch, but we might ask where the "realness"—to use Moradi's terminology again—of a "pure glitch" is rooted and how a glitch directs us toward a different understanding of media. If real glitches emerge from media manipulation with unpredictable results, glitch-alikes are created through media manipulations that provide a result an artist can anticipate. In this instance, both "The Wave of the Future" and paintings by Seurat qualify as glitch-alike because they are results of media manipulation with anticipatable outcomes but, at the same time, these works remain excluded from the term "glitch-alike" because they are not produced to look like glitch art.
Reed Ghazala’s art does illustrate how Moradi attempts to distinguish between pure glitch and glitch-alike works of art. Ghazala provides an analogical form for glitch art through the manipulation of camera hardware in his earlier works, which reconfigure the form of snapshot photography by manipulating the film’s exposure to alter how light is photochemically registered on celluloid. Ghazala explains how the photographs in his "35 MM" collection were created in-camera by manipulating the hardware of his manual Nikkormat FTN over durations of time and provided unexpected photographic results.¹³ Ghazala expands the form of analogical manipulations in his "Landfall" series through photochemical manipulation he calls dye migration art. Ghazala foregoes the use of any camera hardware in the "Landfall" series by manipulating the photochemical properties of instant film with his fingers while exposing the film to flashes of light.¹⁴

Ghazala’s photographs provide a form of glitch but this form remains distinct from digital glitch art. While these photographs illustrate how the manipulation of hardware provide unexpected visual results, they also reveal how difficult it can be to determine the processes of manipulation culminating in a work of glitch art. At the same time, these photographs stage a question about broader definitions of glitch: If all (overt) media manipulation does not result in a work of glitch art, do all glitches emerge from the (overt) manipulation of media?

This question gestures at why Moradi’s use of the term "glitch-alike" remains an imprecise category to distinguish between types of glitches. This imprecision arises

because the differences between authentic and mimetic forms of glitches are difficult to detect, but also, as I address in greater depth below, because these categories do not account for glitches emerging beyond artistic modes of production. In addition to hardware manipulation used in glitch art created by artists like Ghazala, Hugh Manon and Daniel Temkin address how glitch can take its visible form through the manipulation of software or data. These authors also recognize glitch art as a type of "process art" because the image becomes less important for our understanding of the artwork than the processes enabling the visual form of the final product. The problem with only defining glitch by the processes that result in the final aesthetic form arises when the final artifact can appear the same as any work produced to look like glitch art. Glitches rarely proclaim how they were produced, let alone distinguish between analog or digital artistic manipulations of hardware or software.15

I dispense with Moradi's categories toward a more nuanced definition of glitch aesthetics, aiming to specifically provide a definition for glitch art aesthetics that are not centered on the desire for authenticity. Not only is it difficult to determine whether a glitch is pure or authentic, but these terms are based solely on a final work of glitch art and the assumption that artistic forms of manipulation and production are the only standards by which glitch is defined. I refigure this assumption later by addressing how glitch aesthetics apply to glitches that are not even artistically produced and, more specifically, that this aesthetic form refigures several assumptions about digital things and digital visual culture.

15 Manon and Temkin, "Notes on Glitch," 3; Hugh S. Manon, "Rude Aesthetics in the Digital Mainstream" (paper presented at World Picture Conference, Oklahoma State University, October 24-25 2008 of Conference), ¶ 9-10.
Glitch aesthetics have been defined as "lo-fi," which, in conjunction with the broader category of "rude aesthetics," has the potential to undermine an emphasis on realism as a necessary categorized distinction to define glitch. Low fidelity art takes its visual form by accounting for and then deliberately degrading "state-of-the-art" technologies that function as standards for realism within an historical moment. Hugh Manon explains how fidelity becomes an important factor to consider within the broader category he calls rude aesthetics because, "unlike 'mimesis' or 'verisimilitude,' fidelity implies a mediation through the Other as locus of judgment—a hypothetical, never-verifiable third part, which permits us to assess the effectiveness of our own lies." Manon explains how concepts like low and high fidelity challenge aesthetic notions like realism because the tropes of fidelity (like accuracy, faithfulness, exactness, and/or loyalty) can only be understood as an enactment of "truth" in accordance with biased expectations and standards (of truth, of verisimilitude, of quality, etc.).

Manon and Temkin draw attention to the persistence of a particular "latent desire for the noise of old" emerging within lo-fi art as a response to cultural penchants for fidelity and perfection. To this, Manon and Temkin add:

We could say that lo-fi art is a perverse recursion into archaic, noisy and unsupported modes of production, whereas glitch embodies the inappropriate return of laborious and messy analog diddling in the

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context of the digital era's slick, pixel polishing, drag-and-drop perfectionism.\(^{17}\)

Categorizing glitch art based on Moradi’s division between pure glitch and glitch-alike, as opposed to lo-fi art, reveals an underlying *impulse or desire for* authenticity to remain a determinable factor within works of glitch art. Manon and Temkin draw attention to fidelity as a malleable standard of aesthetic distinction, whereby truthfulness or "realness" become arbitrary standards of an artistic form. In contrast, as Manon suggests, lo-fi aesthetics illustrate how we need not necessarily challenge concepts like truth or realism, but, instead, enable the possibility for these concepts to "slip."\(^{18}\)

If digital reproductions of lo-fi, analog noise appear the same as their analog ancestry, it begs the question as to why the desire for the "noise of old" persists as Manon and Temkin suggest. On the one hand, Manon and Temkin note, digital glitch images function like other media that undermine distinctions between analog and digital formats because digital imagery often "greets the beholder in the guise of analog."\(^{19}\) On the other hand, there are fundamental differences between digital and analog media that become evident through the ways in which the different technologies fail. Digital glitches begin to undermine any possibility for disguise as analog artifacts because, as Manon and Temkin explain:


\(^{18}\) Manon, "Rude Aesthetics in the Digital Mainstream."

\(^{19}\) Manon and Temkin, "Notes on Glitch," ¶ 1.
Unlike its predecessors, when digital technology fails, it tends to fail catastrophically. It takes nothing—a fleck of dust, minor condensation—to flummox the digital. Comparatively, to effectuate an analog media catastrophe one needs to bring out the heavy artillery: fire, scissors, sandpaper, a large magnet. When excessively damaged, digital moving images do not bleed; they disintegrate to the point of unreadability. They do not skip, but instead freeze. When they distort, they do not gain pleasing overtones; instead, having reached a certain amplitude, they "clip," and when they do one literally sees or hears the orthogonal relation between the analog source and its digital reproduction.  

Pixelation, for example, is common in digital glitch art as a visible sign for (catastrophically) failing digital technology, but every instance of visible pixelation does not qualify as a work of glitch art. Rather, I find it more valuable to foreground the failures of digital technology, which result in an array of irregular, unusual, and abnormal aesthetic forms and reiterate the possibility to engage with the queerness of (digital) failure.

I address the aesthetic form of glitches that emerge unintentionally by turning my discussion to aesthetic forms of failure. Although unintentional glitches are visually similar to those created as glitch art, unintentional glitches become primary illustrations for what we might define as visual artifacts operating within an aesthetics of failure, which is a broader category to encompass lo-fi aesthetics—the aesthetic form of

\[20\text{ Ibid., ¶ 28.}\]
things that fail to uphold standardized, contemporary technological styles—and rude aesthetics—the aesthetic form of things failing to "be" or function as they are expected.

5.2 Aesthetics of Failure

5.2.1 Whose Malfunction?

I continue to be touched by the beauty of failure every time I see a glitch, and I have been affected by glitches and digital failures in a number of ways: I have seen my screen flicker, pixelate, and lose sound during a storm because I subscribe to satellite TV (Figure 5.3); while using my Playstation 3, I occasionally experience a lag during gameplay, which will then begin to stutter, pause, and finally crash my system; and, my attempt to recover digital photographs that were accidentally deleted from a hard-drive resulted in recovered files that could not be rendered into the pictures they once were.

Figure 5.3 Satellite TV glitch

My reflection on Sean Cubbit’s questions about the effect of cinema at the start of this chapter becomes useful within this context. I argue that glitch does something
but, like cinema, affirm that "it has trouble existing, and the effects it produces—images and sounds, dimensions, durations, sensations, understandings, and thoughts—all share a quizzical and oblique relation to reality."\(^{21}\) We can better understand how glitches position themselves within an oblique relation to reality—or, more specifically, within an oblique relation to human reality—by addressing specific manifestations of unanticipated glitches, which complicate human experiences with digital technologies and lend to misperceptions about their irrelevance within our understanding about digital visual culture.

When I write anything "important" on an electronic device, I have a rather standard habit: type, save; type, save; pause to think, save; finish writing, save and then save a duplicate, external copy; and, finally, backup both copies. This is a tedious process but remains a process with particular purpose after a few bad incidents in college when floppy discs were still the common form for external data storage. It was the floppy disc’s magnetic data storage that proved to be fickle, falling victim to demagnetization on more than one occasion and seemingly unable to retain data with so much as a sneeze while being held in my hand. I learned to never trust a floppy disc as my only storage device because of the potential for its memory to malfunction but, even as I shifted to different standards for data storage, my experiences with data loss frequently remain the same. My experience with the "failures" and "malfunctions" of data storage have ranged from \textit{bitrot} and DVD-R expiration to scratches resulting in

\(^{21}\) Cubitt, \textit{The Cinema Effect}: 1.
un-readable CDs and hard-drives, and with each experience it becomes easier to
direct my frustrations at what appeared to be a delinquent digital device.

I continually asked "What is the matter with computer memory?" because these
glitches or malfunctions disrupted my expectations for smooth operation. This problem
arose because of how and what I could not see. After all, as Vivian Sobchack explains,

What is the computer but a fathomless "memory box"—one that collects
reserves, and allows for the conscious retrieval and visible recollection of
memories, all "cached" in an enormous unseen network of past images,
sounds, and texts.²²

My inability to see the processes that enable the movement and storage of digital
memory resulted in how I correlated the purpose of digital devices with the
expectations I had of them, how I understood myself in relation to their difference from
me as objects. Sobchack clarifies why our experience with electronic objects can differ
from other media, such as cinema: whereas cinema provides an "objective and visible
performance ... of lived body experience," the materiality and forms of engagement
with electronic media become "so diffused" as to appear that they "belong to no-
body."²³ Because "electronic presence has neither a point of view nor a visual situation,
such as we experience, respectively, with the photograph and cinema," Sobchack
explains, electronic space transforms "aesthetic characteristics and sensibility," which

²² Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of Quicktime".
²³ There are ways that this distinction also seems to become slipperier when cinema is
increasingly experienced with and through electronic objects. See ——, Carnal Thoughts: 152.
also marks a "significant transformation of ethical investments." I recognize Sobchack’s ethical investment in embodied experience and, rather than dismissing the significance and importance of her analysis about human-oriented phenomenological experiences, I explore the transformation of ethical investments through a parallel but different form of aesthetic experience.

Machines are plagued by their formulation within humanist frameworks and remain riddled by the binary logics that structure difference within human discourse; and, the imagined differences between humans and machines are merely one example of the binary logics that preoccupy Western thought, which, as David Gunkel notes, are "not without ethical complications and consequences." In his book *Thinking Otherwise*, Gunkel elaborates upon the capacity for machines to function as moral agents—as "legitimate subject[s] of or for moral reasoning"—and possibly as agents deserving moral consideration. To fully understand the significance and impact of glitches within visual culture requires that we understand how they emerge from or relate to electronic and digital objects. Further, this understanding reveals how glitches emerge from unseen, rhythmic processes operating outside of our human perceptions.

Thus, instead of folding floppy discs in half from the frustration of their failure or instead of cracking a corrupt CD in two, I want to reframe my question about problems with computer memory into a different query: what is the matter of computer memory? I want to ascertain the matter of computer memory much like others address human

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24 Ibid., 158-159.
25 Gunkel, *Thinking Otherwise*: 120.
26 Ibid., 121-123.
memory. To this end, I explore how the matter of computer memory reveals glitches as "visual situation[s]" that are as captivating as photography and cinema and, more importantly, are manifestations of a digital "point of view." Sobchack rightfully articulates how within "this historical moment in our particular society and culture, we can see all around us that the lived body is in crisis," and I redirect my engagement with this crisis by shifting the center of ethical concern away from human bodies and experiences toward digital glitches, which confront this crisis emerging for those who cannot be pictured or imaged because they are not considered beings at all.27

5.2.2 Memory (and) Malfunction

I begin my inquiry about computer memory by addressing what constitutes the phenomenological experience of human memory, which is meant to clarify the experiences of humans that often remain central foci within explorations about the crisis of lived bodies. From here, I shift to address the matter and affective movements of computer memory that would be excluded from equal consideration within anthropocentric frameworks.

Henri Bergson provides initial insight for us to understand how memory functions as a vehicle to transport sensorial experiences within and between bodies. "Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection," Bergson explains, "we become conscious of an act sui generis by which we detach ourselves from the present in order

27 Sobchack, Carnal Thoughts: 161.
to replace ourselves, first in the past in general, then in a certain region of the past.\textsuperscript{28}

This detachment and movement into the past is why Bergson suggests that "questions relating to subject and object, to their distinction and their union, should be put in terms of time rather than space."\textsuperscript{29} Brian Massumi elaborates on Bergson's writings about memory and specifies how the movement of memories become active, affective processes for bodies engaging with and making sense of sensorial perceptions. Massumi reiterates how memories become a fickle or volatile form of storage for our sense perceptions because they are easily stimulated or can become virtually altered before being stored in cognition or being recalled in the form of a recollection.\textsuperscript{30}

Steven Connor clarifies these as movements that are meant to allow humans to "organize, articulate, [and] make sense of our sensory perception" as "forms of self-relation" for "uncollected works-in-progress."\textsuperscript{31} These forms of relation evoke the fate of memory as susceptible to alterations, oscillations, and interchanges across durations of time. The potential for particular futures may never enter into present experiences; our subjective experiences within the present immediately enter into the past, into memories of a once-was present; and, within our present experiences, our recollections of the past can never necessarily or accurately reflect our experiences and perceptions from another time. In other words, as each infinitesimal moment within

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{28} Henri Bergson, \textit{Matter and Memory}, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and William Scott Palmer, 5th ed. (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007), 171, his emphasis.
\item\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 77.
\item\textsuperscript{30} Massumi, \textit{Parables}: 193-200.
\item\textsuperscript{31} See Steven Connor, "Intersensoriality" (paper presented at Thames Valley University conference "The Senses," Thames Valley University, February 6 2004 of Conference), especially the sections “Well-Being” and “Complexion”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the present folds into the past or each present becomes a past that continues its propulsion toward potential futures, memory becomes infinitely scalable whereby any subject position is already giving way to subject positions that are perpetually becoming something else.

Laura Marks provides a point of departure into computational memory by detailing the active, affective processes that organize and mediate memory "along traceable pathways." She explains how memory has little to do with "will or self-consciousness," but, instead, operates as an interconnected form of communication. Marks's analysis is an affair with infinitesimal proportion and she provides a different scale of perception to clarify how subatomic electron particles that are easily dismissed as an intangible form of sensorial/memory experiences. Through her analysis on digital photography, Marks explores how electrons move and exchange information through digital and computational memory. Electrons become lively vehicles that "communicate" by being "interconnected" within paths that are indiscernible to human experiences with or perceptions of memory. "Electrons remember," Marks explains, by enfolding information that is transported, communicated, and connected with a material form of storage. The movement of this

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32 It is possible to correlate this experience to human forms for the transportation of memory. As John E. Dowling explains, the brain is composed of neuron cells that process and carry information. Neuron cells, like all matter, are composed of atoms. "Atoms ordinarily have equal numbers of electrons and protons and are, therefore, electrically neutral. But atoms can gain or lose electrons and become charged, either negatively or positively. They can have extra electrons or fewer electrons." When electrons charge atoms (becoming ions), they are able to move in-between cells. Although, I will not elaborate on arguments about human uses of electrons as vehicles for sense perceptions to be stored within our brains as cognitive storage systems. See John E. Dowling, Creating Mind: How the Brain Works. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 20-22.
information becomes a "raw" form of sensation within memory that is felt—as a pulse or surge, perhaps—as each electron carries information to be enfolded within a storage before it can be unfolded and recollected at another time.33 A primary difference between human and computer memory, as Laura Marks explains, arises from the computer's reliance on binary code as "present" or "absent" electron charges that "cannot tolerate intermediate states between 0 and 1" as they enfold information to be transported, communicated, and stored.34

What is written here was not typed in binary code. Rather, it is has been typed within several word-processing graphical interfaces, on several different machines, which all allow me to produce text that I can read in English on any computer running the same software. As I type this paper on a keyboard, electrical currents pulse a series of electrons into RAM. Beneath a graphical interface, computers mediate individual bits as pulsations of electrical current. These pulsations (absence, pulse, pulse, etc.) enfold the absence and presence of electrons as bits that accumulate in memory before unfolding in the form of text or image in a GUI (graphical user-interface).

33 Marks, Touch: 161-162.
34 See ibid., 172. Ted Friedman offers additional insights about how analog, digital, and binary have functioned terminologically and historically within the context of computations. See Ted Friedman, Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture (New York: New York University Press, 2005), especially Chapter 2, “Ideologies of Information Processing, From Analog to Digital.”. Also note that 0 and 1 are the human representations for absent and present electrons as "bits" of information. The base unit of information that is processed by most computers is a byte (which contains eight bits). Contemporary computers still process bits and bytes, but humans typically refer to computer information that is stored in greater quantities: one megabyte, for example, contains 8 million bits; or as Wikipedia analogizes, one megabyte contains the amount of information in a short novel. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Megabyte
When I "recode" or translate a sentence into binary, numerical digits humans understand, my computer encounters an array of electronic pulsations for each keystroke that is not made visible within the GUI. For example, typing the statement "binary-code processes in the background" results in this string of binary code:

01100010 01101001 01101110 01100001 01110010 01110101 01100011 01101111 01100100 01100101 00100000 01110000 01110010 01101111 01100011 01100101 01110011 01110011 01100101 01110011 00100000 01101001 01101110 00100000 01110100 01101000 01100101 00100000 01100010 01100001 01100011 01101011 01100111 01110010 01101111 01110101 01101110 01100100

Because human users need not utilize binary code within a GUI, it becomes easy to dismiss unseen computational processes and communication.35 Human users communicate or "compute" comfortably without the need to engage with the range of information enfolded into computer memory before it unfolds into the visible GUI, which, by extension, can prompt the fantasy and façade of computers as objects, as utilities that communicate for but not with or beyond our human-oriented needs or expectations.

Consider, as an example, how Microsoft Word uses computer memory to temporarily save word-processing input from users. If or when Word "crashes," there is typically the possibility for a user to return to a document in a recovered, that is, temporarily saved, state. Opening Word after a glitch of any sort to find a "recovered" document commonly results in recovered data that differs from what a user hopes to

35 Users easily interface with computers without binary digits (bits), as Bill Daley explains, because it requires 8 bits of binary code to produce one letter or number and has become so "tedious to translate" that computer-programmers have developed other systems for character codes. See Bill Daley, Computers Are Your Future, Brief ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2005).
find as a duplication of information that was typed prior to the software crash; and this can result, at least for myself on a few occasions, in a rough slam of a hand on the desk or monitor and an array of profanities spouted toward the computer screen. What are the errors, malfunctions, or irregularities that facilitate the emergence or proliferation of an unanticipated glitches such as this? Or, in more precise terms, what are the conditions that lend to the emergence and proliferation of glitches?

Several factors can affect how Microsoft Word operates, crashes, and then recovers an unsaved document. Word could crash or quit for an array of reasons: a battery power-source could run out; the electrical current carrying information could fluctuate, interrupting the pulses of data in transit, and alter the strings of code being stored; a virus could contaminate the code that Word requires to engage with other computer processes; etc. Because computers communicate by collecting and returning information from permanent storage, an interruption to the flows of machine memory can result in the recovered state of a Word document that lacks information. While the computer and its software may not return to a saved state that the user desires, the computer and its software cannot and should not be expected to reproduce human memories of a previous state.

Although the unexpected software crash may appear to indicate the failure of computational processing, there are more factors to consider. First, hardware and software activate memory transmissions (such as keystrokes that transmit new strings of information), which transform into information that is communicated, exchanged, accessed, and stored. The logic of these operations are easily interrupted by outside stimuli or noise, including interruptions like viral contamination. Second, while
computer crashes or memory malfunctions can emerge from a series of unseeable background processes, they can also have just as much to do with how human users interact with, neglect, interrupt, or disregard their information-processing machines and the requirements that are necessary for computers to mediate information. Several things can be asked: Did the user supply the machine with enough information storage (the hard-drive); or, a more likely factor, enough dynamic random access memory (DRAM)? DRAM is the temporary residence of cellular computer memories, where electrons mediate information before it is permanently stored on a hard-drive. Does the user run too much software simultaneously? Software process overloads can impede the central processing unit (CPU), which maintains the order of electron movement in the computer.\(^{36}\) Or, does the user choose to run, but simultaneously disregard, programs that do not adequately exchange information—exchanges that intermix processes that disrupt the transitions between memory types altogether.\(^{37}\)

Finally, I explore next, a third option arises when we contemplate the possibility that computational processes \textit{did not} fail in the first place.

\(^{36}\) The CPU must refresh the electrical activities within the DRAM memory cells (volatile spaces that must refresh to actively mediate information), move the dynamic RAM to static RAM or cache (spaces that hold information in static positions, only volatile if the machine loses of power), or direct all of these random-access memories into permanent storage on the hard-drive.

\(^{37}\) In fact, when I initially started writing on this topic, I perpetually crashed Microsoft Word by choosing to use a newer version of the software that was incompatible with my copy of Endnote citation software. I frequently forgot that placing a citation in a footnote would cause Word to crash and found myself, just as frequently, screaming at my laptop for losing the prose I had so carefully written just moments before.
5.2.3 Digital Noise and Non-Human Being(s)

As Manon and Temkin explain, "whether its cause is intentional or accidental, a glitch flamboyantly undoes the communications platforms that we, as subjects of digital culture, both rely on and take for granted." These authors are correct to make this assertion, which is similar to earlier arguments I note from Laura Marks and Iman Moradi, but I want to more fully interrogate this form of undoing when it emerges from unintentional or unexpected glitches. The unexpected, visible manifestation of glitches function as signs for digital objects failing to conform to human expectations and, at the same time, glitches have the potential to reveal the failure of human communication as a standard by which non-human beings make their presence known or visible.

Much of the scholarship on communication engages with and frequently perpetuates a theory of interaction developed by Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, who provide a model for the information mediated between two humans. When this communication theory is applied to the machine (often in the context of literature about computer-mediated-communication), David Gunkel explains, the communication model continues to reply on an "unquestioned assumption" about computers and information technologies: "the other with whom [we] interact ... is

38 Manon and Temkin, "Notes on Glitch," ¶ 1.
always [assumed to be] another human being."40 This assumption structures a human-oriented sender/receiver model of communication, which reduces machines to "channels" or "mediums" where humans exchange information. More significantly, within the context of my argument here, this assumption does not provide the possibility to understand how computers communicate and experience communication independently from humans.

In Shannon and Weaver's model of communication, "noise" becomes the contaminating force within human communication because it interrupts the flow of messages that are sent and received between humans. Gunkel argues for the reconfiguration of noise within this model by foregrounding how the computer "actively participates in communicative exchanges as a kind of additional agent and/or (inter)active co-conspirator," to which he adds:

"[T]he computer participates in and contaminates the process [of human communication]. It acts on the messages, significantly alters them, and delivers information that was not necessarily selected, composed, or even controlled by human participants. These various occurrences

cannot be reduced to a form of unintentional noise introduced by the
exigencies of the channel, which is precisely how [traditional
communication] models have dispensed with and accounted for this kind
of machinic contribution."

Gunkel’s argument is illustrated by recalling telephonic static carried over phone lines
by dial-up modems. Picking up my telephone, the noise I heard—to my ears, sounding
like an array of blips and bleeps—was not heard as “noise” by my computer. Rather,
the sounds I could hear were an intentional, algorithmic system used to disseminate
information from my computer to be received by my internet service provider while
connected to the Web. In other words, this modem-based communication channel is
only filled with noise by human-oriented standards of communication because it is
unlikely that most humans would be able to translate these sounds into bits and bytes
before, again, translating this data into the graphical pages appearing on a Web
browser.

Gunkel’s arguments about computer communication lend interesting
perspective to how I have addressed manifestations of unexpected glitches thus far.
Unexpected glitches reveal how our human perceptions of error or contamination
function as one form of failure that is, at the same time, more than failure. Glitches
become visibly queer manifestations of calculated and intentional digital behavior by
"properly" decoding "improper" data or processes. The failure glitches reveal is a
failure to be properly presentable to humans within a human point-of-view. Computer

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41 Gunkel, Thinking Otherwise: 138.
42 Manon and Temkin, "Notes on Glitch," ¶ 1.
glitches become visible manifestations of the digital failing at impropriety; or, in short, glitches become queer signs for the failures of computers to not not follow their standard operating procedures, which is a failure to succeed at being like humans. Or, in other words, what appears as technological failure to humans is not necessarily anything but the failure to communicate with humans as humans communicate and, more broadly, the failure to be human.

Judith Halberstam provides a path to expand on our understanding of these forms of failure as modes of "unbeing" and "unbecoming," which she addresses in her analysis on queer aesthetics of failure.43 I agree with Halberstam's assertion that these modes of failure produce different relations to knowledge, but I remain most concerned with how failure functions as a form of "unbecoming" that reveals different understandings of ontology. Rather than aiming to conceptualize modes of "unbeing," I want to address how glitches function as forms of digital failure that refigure problematic notions of Being constructed within Western and Continental Philosophy. When failure is understood as a form of unbecoming it also functions as a becoming (in the Deleuzian sense), which structures a different ontological mode to understand the malleability of Being.

Unintentional and unexpected glitches become the visible manifestation of digital, non-human Beings, which fail to be presentable for humans by failing to conform to anthropocentric and humanist forms of existence. In short, glitches function as performative utterances for the failure of digital objects to constitute their being

43 Halberstam, Queer Art of Failure: 3, 23.
through the human. Glitches force us to consider why we should think otherwise about ontology by lending visible form to digital objects as unbecoming objects—that is, ill-suited as objects while also turning into or becoming beings beyond subject-object dialectics—and this becomes the context where glitches visibly indicate their desire to perpetuate queer relationships to failure.

5.3 The Digital Imag(in)es Itself

Beyond my discussion about the distinctions between objects and things in the previous chapter, there is a different category to address within the context of digital non-humans. Electronic objects, shortened to e-jects, stage a crisis in the object; and function, Michael Angelo Tata explains, as signs for "innervation," "undirected emotion." The e-ject is, in the broadest sense, a term that culminates several meanings: its slightly Derridian vowel-switch draws attention to the similarities to and differences from objects and its hyphenation becomes a play-on-words to reject its status as an object—pure "throw" (-ject) without direction "toward" (ob-). The e-ject's resistance to objectness is meant to throw our understanding and becomes, in the context of glitches, a patina of abjection by making the hidden processes of electron transfer visible—a revelation of the processes that we require to understand the rhythmic and ecstatic engagements of electronic objects. The visibility of hidden information also emphasizes our lack of understanding and control, which reiterates the e-ject's ephemerality, as Tata argues, which takes Lacan's objet petit a to an
extreme by breaking apart the possibility of wholeness or universalism toward a "smashed mess" of particularities.44

As e-jects, glitches reveal a mode of Being that is simply non-human. As e-jects, they carry our conceptualizations of objects and stretch them through abjection to produce a form of thingness that results in what Tata describes as:

a type of notoriety—and motoriety, given the nimbleness and fluidity of this radical popularity—that can only be described as the fame of fame (fame revealed not as quality, but as quantity): that is, the type of telepoetic popularity produced when being and its attributes become less the potential for knowledge or contemplation or comprehension or mastery and more the sheer fact of being-seen, being-heard, being-talked-about, being-circulated, being-encountered, being-electrified, and, of course, being—or perhaps not being—ephemeral.45

These properties in Tata’s description of e-jects are similar to many descriptions of glitches, and because glitches proliferate from other electronic objects I explore the visibility of glitches as a manifestation of non-human visual culture. While human ears may hear a noise, computers communicate. Although silicon may construct the substance of computer memory, this does not negate how computers can and do affectively experience memories. Glitches confront us, have the potential to queer us

45 Ibid.
and, more specifically, queer our understanding of (digital) visual culture by refигuring how we understand the visible forms of (digital) failure.

Whether we consider instances when televisions or computers glitch, or consider instances when digital cameras and photographs glitch, I remain perplexed and have a sense of wonder about the possibility for an ontological account that would allow me to understand if or how the digital imag(in)es itself. To provide an argument about how the digital imag(in)es itself requires that we fully account for the conditions whereby digital objects, things, or e-jects can become positioned ontologically on their own terms. To this end, I want to raise some questions about a glitched digital photograph as an attempt to explore how this photograph functions as an instance when the digital imag(in)es itself.

5.3.1 Does Ethical Consideration Allow Us To See the Digital Imag(in)ing Itself?

This glitched picture is the visible result from my attempt to access a photograph from the memory card of a digital camera through software on my computer (Figure 5.4). I am initially inclined to argue that this photograph is the result of my computer aiming to access and process the memory of my digital camera SD card and the data it encountered was not compatible with the software I used or was otherwise inaccessible. The camera utilizes its hardware to capture and store light that is, in turn, transcoded by software into bits of data that can be recollected and made visible by software on a computer. Similar to my previous discussion about computer communication, these movements of data and memory function as forms of
communication between digital devices as much as they often appear to function as a visible form for memory miscommunications.

David Gunkel, as I previously explain, argues that these forms of memory exchange illustrate information processing machines engaging in ethical forms of communication. Gunkel argues that our understanding about the ethical behavior of machines can be determined based on how ethics have been defined as "systematic rules of behavior that can be encoded, like an algorithm, and implemented by different moral agents."\(^{46}\) It seems ironic that machines like computers have not challenged biocentric prejudice before the animal because, Gunkel explains, "unlike the animal, the machine, especially the information processing machine that comprises so much of

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\(^{46}\) Gunkel, *Thinking Otherwise*: 128.
contemporary technology, appears to possess something like intelligence, reason."47 While machines would not think or communicate like humans or animals, Gunkel argues that for the need to examine how "machine intelligence may take place and be organized completely otherwise."48

Emmanuel Levinas provides additional insight about the intersection between communication, ethics, and Being within a framework for ethical engagements with Otherness. Levinas argues that the center for ethical and affective relations can be located in the "face" as a surface for linguistic and communicative processes. Within his account, beings can interact by "facing" other beings, which allows us to create and engage in ethical, affective relations. Facing "the Other," he explains, "is to welcome his expression," to welcome an "ethical relation" where "at each instant he overflows;" and it is information and exchange we "receive from the Other" as an interface "beyond the capacity of the I" where we began.49 To imagine the face of a computer or a digital camera requires that we expand our understanding of ethics,

47 Ibid., 126. One could also extend this critique of to zoocentrism in animal studies as Steven Shaviro has suggested: "I'm not being facetious when I criticize the zoocentrism of 'animal studies.' What about plants, fungi, protists, bacteria, etc?" This post on Twitter has also been quoted in Bogost's work. See Bogost, Alien Phenomenology: 8; Steven Shaviro, "Zoocentrism of 'Animal Studies'," Twitter, Retrieved September 16, 2009, https://twitter.com/shaviro/status/4038354360.

48 Gunkel, Thinking Otherwise: 149.

49 Levinas, Totality and Infinity: 50-51. Further, my argument is not to be confused with works by scholars who employ Levinas to discuss inter-facing between humans and perpetuate the objectification of the machine. While there may be facings between humans in cyberspace, as argued by Zembylas and Vrasidas, the computer must not be excluded from the communication network. See Michalinos Zembylas and Charalambos Vrasidas, "Lavinas and the "Inter-Face": The Ethical Challenge of Online Education," Educational Theory 55, no. 1 (2005): 61-78.
which becomes a possibility by foregrounding how humans *inter-face* with machines through computer interfaces.\(^{50}\)

To locate a face within an interface where we can see the glitched digital photograph (in this case, perhaps an operating system made visible on a computer monitor) requires us to not only recognize but also acknowledge how computers independently and diligently mediate non-human information behind the complexion of an interface. To acknowledge this would be an about-face from anthropocentric and humanist ethical engagements, an about-face that would account for the complexities of digital communication and intelligence that becomes visible in the form of a glitch. In this way, the computer reveals its ability produce a visible form for how it mediates and communicates digital information but this does not fully account for how the digital imag(in)es its non-human existence.

**5.3.2 Does Ontological Reconfiguration Allow Us To See the Digital Imag(in)ing Itself?**

Lingering beneath much of what I have written to this point in the chapter are conversations taking place about object-oriented ontology. I find Levi Bryant's notion of Flat Ontology to be an insightful pathway toward an initial understanding about the metaphysical manifestations of all beings. Bryant conceptualizes flat ontology as path toward a democracy of objects, which is an aim to flatten ontological divisiveness by affirming how all objects maintain the same ontological status. Bryant makes these

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\(^{50}\) The distinction between "inter-face" and "interface" is meant to differentiate between programmed interfaces (like GUIs) and how we can engage or interrelate with the Other by inter-facing.
arguments most broadly by suggesting that "all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally."\textsuperscript{51}

Ian Bogost extends Bryant’s arguments to suggest "tiny ontology" as another approach toward understanding the existence of things. Bogost also notes Bruno Latour as an influence for his notion of ontology but, in light of additional theoretical influences (and objections), Bogost proposes the "unit" (as opposed to Bryant’s "object" or Latour’s "actor") as a more malleable category to understand the presence of things and beings.\textsuperscript{52} Bogost writes about the "unit" in his earlier book, Unit Operations,\textsuperscript{53} but, within the context of a unit-oriented ontology, he uses it as an "ambivalent" term to define beings because units can simultaneously function as singularities or unitary entities as well as units within a system or collection of other units. Within this context, then, is it possible to understand the computer as a non-human being because it is a singularity like all other singularities? Or, by extension, does it suggest that the glitch also functions as a non-human being rather than the bastard child of digital media?

\textsuperscript{51} Although Ian Bogost provided this as a summary of Bryant’s work, Bryant affirms this as a good way to define a democracy of objects. See Bogost, Alien Phenomenology: 10; Bryant, The Democracy of Objects: 11.

\textsuperscript{52} For example, Bogost remains critical Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory when it functions as "an overly normalized structure, one driven by order and predefinition." Bogost contends that actor-network theory might consider a redirection toward "Latour’s later notion of the imbraglio, a confusion in which ‘it’s never clear who and what is acting’." See Bogost, Alien Phenomenology: 17-23; Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

\textsuperscript{53} Ian Bogost, Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).
5.3.3 The Digital Glitch Imag(in)es its Queerness as a "Strange Stranger"

I find Bogost’s conceptualization of the "unit" to be informative in light of Shaviro’s central concern about aesthetics. Bogost’s unit remains, by and large, ambivalent, and resonates with Shaviro’s discussion about our inability to fully grasp affective, aesthetic relations. The ambivalence of the unit becomes apparent for Bogost by stating that "units operate … acting and reacting to properties and states while still keeping something secret." Within this context, Bogost and Shaviro both seem to affirm how the aim to define objects, units, or things will always result in opacities where full understanding remains indescribably out of reach.

Not only is this uncertainty or ambivalence refreshing, but it also reveals our rather queer relation to non-human beings. While queerness is not explicitly what Bogost or Shaviro address, queerness comes to the fore through their uses of the word "alien" (or alienation) to describe encounters with objects and things. This is perhaps more explicit in Levi Bryant’s writing about "Phallosophy," where he suggests that the withdrawal of objects becomes "so abyssal that it moves beyond any epistemological limitation" and creates what Timothy Morton has called a "strange stranger." In response to the emergence of this "strange stranger" Bryant asks: "does this deserve [sic] the title of a queer ontology, in addition to the title of feminist

54 ——, Alien Phenomenology: 25.
55 It is also important to note how they use the term "alienation" within differing philosophical contexts. Alienation is Whiteheadian for Shaviro and Husserlian for Bogost.
ontology?\(^{57}\) Within the context of digital media and aesthetics, the glitched picture reveals at least one answer: the digital image(in)es itself for us within a the familiar form of the glitch and does so to reveal itself as a queer, strange stranger.

In short, unintentional and unexpected glitches become the visible manifestation of digital, non-human Beings failing to be for humans by failing to conform to anthropocentric and humanist forms of visible existence. Glitches become performative utterances for the failure of digital objects to constitute their being through the human. Glitches force us to consider why we should think otherwise about ontology by lending visible form to digital objects as unbecoming objects—that is, ill-suited as objects while also turning into or becoming beings beyond subject-object dialectics—and this becomes the context where glitches visibly indicate their desire to perpetuate queer relationships to failure. Glitches confront us, have the potential to queer us by avoiding our full understanding and, more specifically, queer our understanding of visual culture by refiguring the impact of visible failure. Whether we consider instances when televisions or computers glitch, or instances when digital cameras and photographs glitch, each of these moments of failure should facilitate a sense of wonder because we have become privy to the pleasure of seeing this strange stranger while the digital images and imagines itself.

\(^{57}\) In response to this question he discusses the strangeness of queerness as emerging from the uncanny and a penchant for masquerade, which reveal the capacity to disclose “the relation that is a non-relation to the strange stranger.” See Bryant, "Phallosophy".
CODA: HAVING SEEN OBLIQUELY

If at first you don’t succeed, failure may be your style. —Quentin Crisp

Each of the previous chapters has moved toward an answer for my initial question, that is, what circumstances might reveal the queerness of images. I addressed why images function strangely within visual culture before I began to interrogate how we can see the queerness of images. I began my discussion about the strangeness of images by addressing how fantasies are projected upon will-be-born children in fetal photographs. Then, I turned to figures of queer children to reflect upon these projections. These children illustrated sideways approaches to visual culture and provided insight about how we could approach the strangeness of images by torquing our vision to see obliquely. This oblique approach to visual culture led me to explain how we could initially locate these images lingering beyond seeable surfaces (like pictures and photographs), where the avisual properties of images allow them to move within thresholds between bodies and things. I ended Chapter One by suggesting that not only we had begun to see the queerness of images but that the process of seeing obliquely would result in greater understanding about "aesthetics of failure" and why aesthetic forms of failure are worthy of our sight. But, before I return to this point, I want to briefly walk through the ways we have seen obliquely and the places where these queer forms of sight have taken us.

I continued to explore the queerness of images beyond fetal photographs by suggesting various ways we could torque our vision to see obliquely, beyond surfaces

of visibility. This included refiguring how staring can function within looking relations to facilitate a sense of wonder; extending this sense of wonder to fascination by increasing our attention to visual details; shifting our fascination within ocularcentric paradigms toward the audible, avisual properties of visual culture; and looking to the peripheries of our vision where the noisiness of visual culture provides a new insight about visual failure.

Each of these methods aimed to torque our vision to see obliquely while also providing new insights about where we could encounter the queerness of images. In Chapter Two, I torqued our attention from the oblique sight of avisual images toward the possibility to experience these movements with a sense of wonder. I considered how it would be possible to decrease our distance from the image by finding ways to refigure our participation in looking relations and, in this case, it was the pixel—or, more accurately, a pixelated point-of-view—that provided clarification. Processes of pixelization drew our attention to the shame that sticks to uncertainties about images of “lacking” bodies but also revealed how a much broader range of images accumulate and proliferate within virtuality. Despite the failure to fully master the many forms images might take, a pixelated point-of-view revealed why baroque looking relations and acts of staring facilitate our ability to embrace these failures as an alternative relationship to visual culture.

While I continued to explore how a sense of wonder and fascination operate in Chapter Three, I also addressed why our ability to fully understand images and visual culture did not improve once we shifted our focus from bodies that "lack" toward more intimate engagements with details on the surfaces of bodies. Rather, turning to precise
details within the context of Michael Jackson's malleable forms of embodiment revealed how our proximity to the details of pictures also cut away from the confines of visible certainty. More specifically, the proximity to these details cut toward disorienting experiences with visual culture. From this point, I pushed the discussion about Jackson's hyphenated forms of post-human embodiment into the final two chapters of my dissertation, where I addressed the persistence of uncertainty and disorientation arising from images circulating around non-human bodies and beings. In Chapter Four, I addressed how a visual culture of things emerges when we look beyond the visible surfaces of objects. Further, this chapter explicitly engaged with the sonic properties of visual culture to explore how the avisual properties of air facilitate the possibility to see the processes of becoming ec-static, or a mode of being that occupies spaces beside and beyond the body, similar to the threshold where images reside.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I extended my discussion about sound toward noisy forms of being that reside at the peripheries of our vision. My discussion about the audio/visual properties of plasticity and thingness in Chapter Four allowed me to explore how we see beyond the surfaces of (everyday) objects to see a visual culture of things. In contrast, in Chapter Five I addressed everyday experiences with digital failure through glitch images. Digital glitches reveal ephemeral or indiscernible forms for images being produced by non-human beings and also function as visible manifestations for our strange encounters with the strangeness of non-humans and images. Yet, our experiences with digital glitches reveal more about the queerness of images and about how we can understand aesthetics of failure. At the end of Chapter
Five I argued that each experience with failure should facilitate a sense of wonder because it has become a moment when the digital imag(in)es itself, a moment where we encounter and see the strange stranger who often remains within the peripheries of our vision.

To conclude my reflection on the queerness of images I want to take these arguments about digital images a bit further. I want to suggest that all of the images I have addressed have been "strange strangers," and I alluded to this much earlier in my dissertation when I made reference to Nancy's point about the aporetic properties of images, which position images as familiar and untenable or unreachable. Further, I want to suggest that the strangeness of images emerges because images move beyond the surfaces of visibility, beyond the surfaces that often remain the central focus within studies of visual culture. Finally, I want to affirm that the failure of images to become visible is merely one way in which images function like digital glitches: in this case, images fail to be properly presentable to humans from an anthropocentric, human point-of-view.

These are the strange properties of images that point to their queerness. This penchant for strangeness and failure is what queer children have in common with images, and indicates why these children provided such valuable insight about how and where we could begin to locate the queerness of images. Images, like these children, flamboyantly affirm failure as their style. This similarity (or proximity) also reveals why images are ideal candidates to enable our study of oblique and queer approaches to visual culture as well as aesthetics of failure. These are queer aesthetics mobilizing beyond our control, where images are becoming intelligible only because
they are messy, disrupt, shock, and annihilate our understanding of visual culture.\textsuperscript{2}

Only after these modes of seeing are unfolded, showing us the many strange movements that often remain hidden, can we finally understand and experience beautifully oblique and ec-static forms of failure.

\textsuperscript{2} Halberstam, \textit{Queer Art of Failure}: 110.
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*Signs* 33, no. 3 (2008): 647-673.


