The wheel-chaired spectator: Disability as an allegory of "per-versive" viewing pleasures in Suite 16

THE WHEEL-CHAIRED SPECTATOR: DISABILITY AS AN ALLEGORY OF "PER-VERSIVE" VIEWING PLEASURES IN *SUITE 16*[1]

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"In the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger with his clothes still on." This passage, quoted from John Berger's thought-provoking book, *Ways of Seeing*, by Linda Williams in the very beginning of her introduction to the anthology, *Viewing Positions*, may serve as a good overture to the film *Suite 16*.[2] For John Berger, both the nude woman and the boy in Bronzino's (1503-1572) *Allegory of Time and Love* exist, pose, and are displayed for one single purpose—the gaze of the viewer, to "appeal to *his* sexuality" (Berger 55; emphasis Berger's). No matter what the woman does, how the boy kisses the woman, it "has nothing to do with her sexuality," and, we may add, to "his"—the boy's—sexuality, because both of them are *objects* of the *invisible viewer*, presumably and invariably a *male*. Moreover, expression of passions (e.g., "hair is associated with sexual power, with passion") in these objects is monopolized by the man who is looking at her, without her knowing it. It is dependent on the appetite of the man's sexuality that the passions in these objects are minimized or magnified. In other words, the passions displayed by the objects must remain exchangeable, malleable, manageable,

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[1] *Suite 16*, directed by Dominique Deruddere, written by Charles Higson and Lise Mayer, was produced in the United Kingdom and Belgium in 1994. The cast includes Pete Postlethwaite, Antonie Kamerling, *et al*. It is copyrighted by Filmopolis Pictures Inc./ Stranger Than Fiction in 1996 and distributed by A-Pix Entertainment. An outline of the story and a review of this film can be found in *Sight and Sound* (London, August 1995 and May 1996).

[2] See Williams, *Viewing* 1; quoted in *Ways of Seeing*, 54.

and "re-channelable." Although Berger's analysis is based on the still image, the validity of his arguments for Linda Williams can be elaborated in the hypothetical spectatorship of cinema obscura. We see the same argument in Laura Mulvey's famous article which scrutinizes a double 'perversion' in the cinematic gaze, voyeurism and fetishism, in Christian Metz's *Imaginary Signifier* which formulates the encompassing gaze that hooks up the "spectator-fish" with the "invisible thread of sight" (97), and in Vivian Sobchack's theorization of 'film body' in which the male gaze is transformed into a kind of "giant, disembodied set of eyes" (269). In other words, decades of spectatorship theories have glorified the virile eyes of a male voyeur, while downplaying the rest of his body as secondary and as redundant as the objects of his gaze. Dominique Dereddere's curiously ignored film, *Suite 16*, offers an interesting dramatization of modern spectatorship theories through the allegory of an aging, impotent man trespassing the hot field of sex and death. In *Suite 16*, the "per-versive" viewing pleasure, as it conjoins perversity with subversiveness, invites us to rethink our own melancholic identification with the voyeur/murderer, and the complex nature of our ecstatic pleasures ingrained in our arm-chair spectatorship.

Carol J. Clover in her article "The Eye of Horror"[3] has directly linked the act of seeing—more specifically, the eyes—with horror cinema. In horror films, Clover states, it is not only "the look-at-the-monster' which constitutes the fear and distorted pleasures, but more importantly, the "look-at-the-movie" (185). In horror films, such as Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*,[4] the act of looking is insinuated as morbid and dangerous—in the film the camera literally kills. As Linda Williams suggests in her article, "When the Woman Looks," only by turning away from the camera does the woman escape from her victimhood. This alignment of camera eye with killing is interesting, for it signals a kind of spectatorship—we can almost call it *critical spectatorship*—which is overwhelmed by the gaze, becomes highly conscious of it, enjoys it but at the same time feels threatened by it. As Metz puts it, for those who desire not only to 'love the cinema' but also to 'understand the cinema,' for the theoreticians who swing between the absurd opposition between 'the affective' and 'the intellectual,' there is necessarily sadistic pleasure which strives to persecute the bad object—the cinema—for the sake of the good object—knowledge (Metz 80). Now one dissects film as one dissects a body—for

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[3] Excerpted in *Viewing Positions*, ed. by Linda Williams, 184-230.

[4] *Peeping Tom* (1960) is directed by Michael Powell, starring Carl Boehm, Moira Shearer, Anna Massey *et al*.

the sake of knowledge. Behind films such as *Peeping Tom*, there is a fantasy of sadistic nature. We spectators are to beware of the danger of the camera, disarm it, and have our redemption by turning away from (or destroying) the overpowering apparatus. This apparatus is a "killer camera" (Clover in Williams, *Viewing* 186).

In *Suite 16*, however, the apparatus appears slightly different. It is still a morbid apparatus, but instead of bringing the threat of killing, it copulates the spectator with its objects, grants *him* (still, this viewer is primarily male) sexual pleasures which nonetheless are not objectal but autoerotic, and proffers the literally impotent viewer with the gratification which, while supposedly gained only through action, is now transmitted through his surrogate. We viewers are allegorized as an old, paraplegic in a wheelchair (Glover), who has no mobility and sinisterly pays for someone (in the film, the gigolo/thief Chris) to act—in both senses of the word— for the sake of our viewing pleasures. The apparatus (the surveillance camera with its complicity, the shooting camera), is not perverse but *perversive*: it enables the impotent wheeler to enjoy, despite the inaccessibility of the "real" objects. Unlike the malicious camera in *Peeping Tom*, the apparatus in *Suite 16* is almost Dionysian (just note how many glasses of wine Glover drinks when he takes pleasure in watching the sexual play of Chris and the prostitutes). The camera here is pleasure-seeking.

At first glance, both *Peeping Tom* and *Sweet 16* are about voyeurism. The word "scopophilia" appears in *Peeping Tom* when Mark, after talking to Helen's blind mother, tries to get help from the psychologist consultant. In *Suite 16* the contractual relation between Glover and Chris is based on seeing and being seen. However, spectators of these two films may have a different relationship with their voyeuristic gazes. In *Peeping Tom*, we see through the cinematographer, Mark's camera, but it is not until the last moment when we follow the female protagonist Helen that we know Mark's trick. We know Mark kills, we see with Mark the petrified faces of the victims, but we do not know *how* we see them. There is something that distances us spectators from Mark's viewing position, "the narrative cuts" (Clover in Williams, *Viewing* 185). This cut cracks the viewers' identification with Mark. This incomplete identification results not only from the psychotic nature of the protagonist, but, more importantly, it also comes from the language of images. When Mark carries his camera, approaching his prey, we see frame within frame, or 'over-framing'[5] on our TV screen,

[5] I am using Jacques Aument's definitions here. In cinema the inclusion of another frame is called "frames within frames" or "over-framing" (Aument 115).

with a big cross indicating the focusing of the camera. Unlike the film *Lady in the Lake*, a broad black frame surrounding the image always appears to disentangle the embodied image. With the director's cut, spiced with de-suturing over-framing technique, the spectators are in fact saved from sinking into the killer's viewing position. Our view is not an "assaultive and reactive" gaze like Mark's; part of us is sympathizing or identifying with the female victims: we see horror films "in order to be scared," to play the Freudian children's game of *fort-da*, to prove that despite our anxiety, the good object always comes back. The case of over-framing is different in *Suite 16*. Unlike Mark who is mobile and threatening, Glover's view is transfixed on the motor wheel, which is physically more analogous to the position of the cinematic viewers. However, unlike the over-framing with a broad black frame around the centered frame, we have access to Glover's view more directly—we see Glover seated in the wheelchair watching the TV with the images of Chris's sexual scenes, then immediately the TV frame is removed so that we see *as* Glover seeing Chris. Our TV/screen frame coincides with Glover's TV frame, as if we were implanted in Glover's wheel chair. In *Suite 16* the voyeuristic view is produced not only in the form of frame within frame, but a 'double frame'—by which I mean a duplicated frame, or two frames which coincide with each other and thereby reduced to one. By being one, the identification or suture[6] is more seamlessly formed. As Stephen Heath points out, the first stage of reading a film, which consists of the moments of "sheer jubilation in the image" (87), is to be followed by the second stage, the awareness of the frame which breaks the initial relation. The limit of the image is revealed[7]—"the fourth wall" is re-discovered. With the realization of the fourth wall and the "absent one" outside the diegetic images, the cinema turns into a discourse, the images slip into the order of signifier, while the viewing subject "fills in" the absence with its movement of continuity and articulation. The crucial moment of filling in as suture is significant in *Suite 16*. As the viewer sneakily sees the private view of Glover without the distancing of the over-framing as in *Peeping Tom*, the space for "the Absent One" is abolished; we become the other, we *are* the voyeur in his wheelchair, Glover.

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[6] There is already rich literature on the issues of identification and suture. Readers can refer to Laplanche and Pontalis' classic definition of "identification" in their *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. On suture, see Oudart's article "La suture" in *Cahiers du cinema*, no. 211, May 1969.

[7] Let us recall what Jacques Aumount says in *Image*, that frames, no matter in the case of painting or in cinema, accentuate the limit of image—all images have frames, all images are bound to be limited. Aumount also defines limit-frame for differentiation from the object frame of paintings (114-5).

However, some questions may arise from this interpretation of identification or suture. First, in viewing this film, do we have just one viewing position, the one analogous to Glover's? Or do we have multiple viewing positions? Do we viewers have to identify with the viewer in the film, so that our viewing is an "identification in a univocal sense," or, as Judith Mayne suggests, can we have alternative viewing positions in which our fantasy facilitates a mobile "oscillation rather than identification" (Mayne 86)? In fact, in this film we are offered two different viewing positions as we see through the director's shooting camera to see Glover's voyeuristic surveillance camera: one that parallels Glover's limited, morbidly voyeuristic viewing, and the other one a more liberal, omnipotent, and omnipresent shooting camera viewing. We can ask by the analogy: to what extent are they identical? Or are we prevented from being the amputated viewer?

The analogy between the cinematic spectators and the impotent wheelchair-user interestingly brings us back to a primal point of the theory of gaze—Plato's metaphor of cave in his *Republic*. In Plato's theory, in which seeing is hopelessly illusory, the subjects of viewing are prisoners in the cave, fettered and tied to the chair. The setting of the cave interestingly reflects Glover's position of a fixated, handicapped viewer. Let us see how Plato sets up the imprisoned viewers:

> Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them… (Plato 186)

Isn't it already a parody that our double, the old, impotent Glover, happens to live in his luxurious suite, a "cavelike dwelling" which is isolated from the external world? The dim orange light of the layout of the suite characterizes its closure: the suite is like a cave, or a womb, even a pre-life monad[8] that no *other* is ever needed. Glover, as a dweller in this cave, is fettered like the cave prisoners in Plato's allegory. Plato's cave metaphor suggests to cinematic theorization of gaze that what we see as real is only mimesis: "shadows of shadows," three layers removed from the reality. However, confined to

[8] In the British psychoanalyst Balint's theory, 'monad' is the pre-subjectal stage from which narcissism is registered. In this monad, one is self-contained and self-sufficient. It is at the moment of birth— the birth-trauma— that the closure is broken. However, the fantasy of a self-sufficient closure sustains and inaugurates narcissism. See Balint, *Basic Fault* (London: Hogarth, 1972).

the wheel chair, the "real world" turns its back against us the fettered cave-dwellers. We are fated to take shadows for reality.

However, following Jonathan Crary in his article "Modernizing Vision,"[9] we may find a way out of the Platonic cave. Crary does not outflank the tradition of the gaze theory from Plato, Euclid, Aristotle, Roger Bacon, Leonardo, *et al*. For Crary there is an "evolutionary ladder" by which a modernized vision is to emerge in cinema obscura as not only an "isolated space of metaphysic interiority" but also a "socially constructed artifact" (Crary in Williams, *Viewing* 24). To jump out from the Platonic cave which degrades the viewers as prisoners of visions of shadows, a position the film *Suite 16* in a similar way implicitly insinuates, we have to examine the irreducible materiality in the images, the body or corporeality of the film. In this way, following Sobchock, we blur the distinction between viewing subject and viewed object, break down the "traditional oppositions between …mind and body, the visual act and the visible object" (Williams, *Viewing* 9), and, at least strategically, disenchant ourselves from the call for the real which Plato invites us to imagine (or hallucinate).

In *Suite 16*, an episode of Glover's overseeing Chris's erotic scenes deserves further analysis as in the fluidity of their position-exchange we see omnipotence emerging in the seat of impotence. In this episode, right after Chris's discovery of the existence of the surveillance camera, Glover offers to give Chris the money he needs to realize his dream on the condition that Chris performs sexual acts for his viewing. The formerly dissipated, bored Chris, ironically, is suddenly energized on his bed/stage and becomes a more virile performer in bed. We first see Chris making love with the woman, and then the camera zooms in to focus on the intertwined bodies. We see the bodies, the flesh, the faces, and every expression of their *jouissance*. Then the camera takes us back to Glover. We see him watching Chris and the naked woman, agitatedly. His inability to cope with this excessively pleasurable vision is conspicuous to us: he drinks a lot of wine, which his poor health forbids. Our vision swings freely between Glover's surveillance camera and our TV screen; the two frames of these images are exchangeable. However, compared to the frame of Glover's viewing, which always has a fixed distance, and a more superficial orange color, we are directed by the shooting camera to see more, to know more, and to enjoy more—and more comfortably. In our exchange with Glover's position, we may forget that ours is not totally identical with his. However, the cinematic

[9] In Williams, ed. *Viewing*, 23-35.

apparatus does grant something that may be eternally denied to Glover: the elimination of distance from the body, the flesh. While we see the close-ups of Chris, we are the real omnipotent viewers overseeing every actor's—Glover's as much as Chris's—virility as well as impotency.

Paradoxically, in *Suite 16* the relationship between the viewer (Glover) and the object (Chris) allegorizes film spectatorship, yet the thematic proximity between the film viewer and the wheel-chaired Glover is not without its discontents. We the "*savoir-tout*" and "*jouir-tout*" viewers ask how we *armed-chaired* spectator may be morally and aesthetically superior to the *wheel-chaired* spectator, who is himself our viewing object. From the oscillation of frames and viewing positions, we strive to deny our "*alter ego*," our "other self"[10] to become what he is *not*. We strive to be *not* impotent, but *omnipotent*. In a sense, this desire of being what our other self is *not* reveals the fantasy behind the erotic and epistemophilic gaze: the fantasy that we are not within film,[11] but we *are* the film. Nevertheless, what else can film industry be except its ability to turn the doomed "great expectation" into a great fantasization?

Let us then return to the issue of impotence. What further characterizes the episode of Glover's viewing is that Chris functions not only as an object for Glover's voyeuristic pleasures, but he is also the surrogate of Glover. The two characters have a direct, immediate relation: Glover is watching *live* performance happening just a room away. Although his viewing position is fixed, his relation to the image is more direct. We can see that Chris waves, poses for Glover, and exchanges looks with Glover through the frame that confines him. This surrogatehood is symbolized by a video game. In a previous scene, Chris was sitting on the floor playing a video game while Glover watches him play. Analogously, with their mutual consent, Chris *acts out* what Glover desires and represses—he plunges himself into the TV-frame so that Glover can watch him "play." Furthermore, the relation between the subject and his surrogate becomes more and more real as Glover's fantasy grows. After exploring almost all potentials of Chris' surrogatehood, Glover desires something beyond a video game: now he wants reality TV. He comes up with a final proposal:

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[10] For an interesting discussion on the double as our *alter ego* (other self), cf. Otto Rank's *The Double: A Psychoanalytical Study* (trans. & ed. by Harry Tucker, Jr., Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1971) and "The Double as Immortal Self" in *Beyond Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1941).

[11] The idea that the spectators are "in" the work comes mainly from John Berger and the gaze theory through 1970s and 1980s.

Chris would go out of the suite to seduce a girl and kill her. When Chris goes out wearing a microphone that transmits every sound and conversation, we feel the thrill of Glover at this new receptive position situated more in the real than in reality. The "sonic vraisemblable" (Silverman 45) suggests a more direct immediacy and presence than the "visual vraisemblable," as Charles Affron has shown:

> [S]ound … guarantees immediacy and presence in the system of absence that is cinema. Images that constantly remind us of the distance in time and space between their making and their viewing are charged, through voice, with the presence both that uttered words require for their transmission and that they lend to our viewing of the art. (qtd. in Silverman 43)

When sounds are transmitted through the microphone to Glover's headphones, a different sense of "here and now" from Glover's voyeuristic viewing is constituted. Not only is there no lapse of time, there is no mediation—the acoustic apparatus is almost non-representational. Chris and Glover are in this sense both *in* the scene, collaborating in the seduction and murder of Helen, and finally Glover's suicide (beyond the pleasure principle?) as the ending of the story.

While Chris and Glover become the collaborators/co-actors, we viewers become the ultimate agents of their representations. While Glover strives for the effect of reality—the progression of the plot impinges on his demand for proximity to the real object—we opt for the symbolic real. Surrounded by diegetic as well as non-diegetic sounds, we enjoy without fussing over the ability to make love to or kill an object out there—through the viewing, love and death take on a new light and start to make sense to us, despite the disappearance of the shadowy images on the fourth screen.

Our relationship to the actors, therefore, is beyond that of surrogatehood. The actors are not our objects, nor our representatives: they are at most our *objet petit a*. As Chris addresses his viewer, gestures for and exchanges looks with Glover, we see through the frame between the two males as an outsider (a viewing subject off frame). We don't exchange looks. As Glover's look, reactive like that in *Peeping Tom*, is both "penetrated and penetrating" (Clover in Williams, *Viewing* 197), ours is not confined by the looks inside the frames. Our look only interacts with the "fourth look"[12]—the look of

[12] Willemen theorizes the look between characters as the third look, and the look of the character to the audience as the "fourth look." Cf. Willemen, "The Fourth Look," in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; London: British Film Institute, 1994, 99-123.

the film, the cinematic gaze. What I am suggesting is that our relation to the cinema obscura cannot be simplified as one between a surrogate and an alibi, between "lord and bondsman," such as the one between video game player and the game itself. The cinema does not present images so that we can fling ourselves into them by means of *projection*. Rather, what is overpowered and what imprints on "the fourth look" is an 'afterimage,' as in the psychical mechanism of *introjection*.

Psychoanalytically speaking, projection is the mechanism in which the "privatized isolated subject enclosed in a quasi-domestic space separated from a public exterior world" (Crary in Williams, *Viewing* 26) expels some elements, qualities, feelings, wishes of his own and finds them "displaced and relocated in an *external* position" and in so doing passes "from center to periphery" or "from subject to object" (Laplanche & Pontalis 349; emphasis added). Projection theory leads us to Plato's cave, where the observer is a static, motionless individual, and what he sees on the wall as *external* is but solipsist shadows *projected* on the wall. Contrary to this, I propose, images in cinema obscura work as our *introjections*. Introjection, according to Sandor Ferenczi and later elaborated by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, denotes a process of taking in:[13] "Introjecting a desire, a pain, a situation means channeling them through language into a communion of empty mouths" (Abraham & Torok 128). What Crary calls "afterimages" of camera obscura—the shadowy images which linger after one stares at the blinding sun—can be translated psychoanalytically into what Abraham and Torok call "the exquisite corpse"—the undying dead who bear the ultimate truth of our subjectivity.[14] If the wheel-chaired Glover watches to kill, we arm-chair spectators watch to bring to life the dead so that the exquisite corpse, such as the ghost of Hamlet's father, will again speak the truth.

If the murderous voyeurs in *Suite 16* and *Peeping Tom* are viewed as monsters by the films' viewers, it is because by such a projection we can expel and exorcize what is uncannily monstrous in us. This is why the representation of Glover is so ambivalent and double-sided.

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[13] Cf. Ferenczi, 1955; Abraham and Torok, 1994.

[14] Cf. Abraham & Torok; also see Derrida's discussions on the "exquisite corpse" in his "*Fors*: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok," Forwards, trans. Barbara Johnson, to *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, By Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, trans. Nicholas T. Rand, pp. xi- xlviii. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

On the one hand his amputation and his disproportionate desire add up to give us a monstrous picture of the disabled—as if we had not been and would never be in the infantile position characteristic of the same voraciousness and helplessness. On the other hand, Glover's monstrosity cannot but appear human: the melancholy on his face, therefore, testifies to an unconscious loss in our disidentification. It is insofar as we introject the exquisite corpse that Glover—our projection—has to kill; it is insofar as we enjoy transcending our monstrosity that Glover enjoys transcending his disability. After all, the answer to Metz's question why people still go to the cinema, can be answered, admittedly naively, but not nonsensically: to enjoy. We go to the cinema to enjoy both the pleasures ascribed to us and those outside our reach—the "per-versive" pleasures.

The pleasures of film-viewing are not only subversive but *per-ver*-sive. As mentioned, the theory of surrogatehood is definitely at play, but it is not a sufficient account of film spectatorship. One way to rethink this surrogatehood is to look at its "soft core" images: I use this term because, to some extent, the images we have seen in *Suite 16* are similar to those in *hard core* pornographic films. In *Suite 16*, the hard-core-ness is dissolved and softened by its attempts at artistry, which can be detected from its 'academic-ness' in the exposure of frames (as Jacques Aumont notes, the device of overframing or reframing is a "hangover from academic expression") as well as the stardom of the cast, especially the internationally acclaimed actor Pete Postlethwaite. In *Suite 16*, as in pornography, we see the close-ups of flesh, of the arching of female bodies, and we hear the sounds of their moaning, the clash of two bodies, and even the rattle of the bed springs (the acoustic verisimilitude). In what way is it different from pornography? In such a reverse parody, our viewing experience returns us to "pervert" the prejudice against pornography: if pornography compensates for the inactiveness and impotency inscribed to the viewing position with perverse viewing pleasures, *Suite 16* makes both the viewing pleasures and the impotency a pain. While pornography-viewing can be a form of fore-play, the fore-pleasure of watching *Suite 16* is such that it suspends such pleasures connected exclusively with the deed itself to fixate only on the act of watching. Therefore, although Glover is placed in another room and his pleasure has to be mediated through surrogatehood, he is actually present in a sense; he is what Chris' fabulous performance is intended for. The present-ness of Glover, interestingly, reverses the ostensible opposition of potency and disability. For Chris the ensuing love-making is not so much about sex as about performance, which is an indication that the erotic scenes in the film are closer to those

of strip-dancing than to those of hard-core pornography.[15] We may recall that without Glover's presentness, i.e., before Chris ever knows that Glover is watching, he just sits on the bed with the prostitute, bored and *impotent*. It is Glover's present-ness that energizes him, and it is for Glover that he *performs* (in double sense of the word) sex; later on, it is for Glover that he gropes Helen, touching her in front of Glover, to show that he can do what Glover can only watch. This surrogatehood binds them together, as if Glover's final act of killing Helen is just to complete what Chris leaves behind in their collaboration. It is, in a word, for the sake of the view that Chris *acts* (in both senses of the word). Who, we might ask, is the one really disabled?

Our viewing position differs from Glover's in that we are not present in any mediated way. The soft-core images foreclose the "money shot," so unlike Glover whose potency consists primarily in his power to buy, we pay *not* to see what we desire to see— *not* to enjoy the "climax." By digressing our capital from the one-way street of consumptive pleasures, we create a circuit of unconsummated yet insurmountable desires.

If the image of disability becomes a perfect allegory of such a paradoxical law of desire, it is because in real life we are all threatened by finitude. As much as the fourth wall reappears the moment when the lights in a cinema are on, so the omnipotence of spectatorship diminishes when we get up and walk away from the arm-chairs. The wheel-chaired spectator is a melancholic reminder of how impotent we still are in our seat of subjectivity, despite the per-versiveness of our desires.

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[15] Linda Williams in her book *Hard Core* makes the point that the differencebetween porn and the strip-dancing club lies in the characteristic of present-ness in the case of strip-dancing.

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