The Birth of Machine Sex: The Pornographic Phenakistiscope Disks of the 1840s

Rod Bantjes†
Department of Sociology
St. Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada
rbantjes@stfx.ca

ABSTRACT

The phenakisistcope was the first device to invoke phantom machine motion in repetitive-loop animations. Almost as soon as it was invented, Alfonse Giroux produced for the phenakistiscope a set of pornographic animations of delirious inventiveness. As though an early 19th-century Donna Haraway, he imagines transgressions of the boundaries between human and animal, human and machine, male and female (a continuous-loop gender reassignment) as well as between pleasure and pain. I explore the origins and implications of this inventiveness, so much in advance of the mid-19th-century crystallization of categories of sexual transgression. Giroux's celebration of female desire and volition suggests an inspiration from Fourier's mechanics of passional attraction rather than de Sade.

More intriguing is the inspiration from the machinic medium itself. The phenaskistiscope was understood as a machine that represented non-mimetically in a way that seems to have released the imagination. Many of the early images for it were pure machinic abstractions. Giroux's images were largely masturbatory. Pistons relentlessly thrusting, gears endlessly meshing in pointless circular motion seemed to invoke an auto-erotic machine self-referentiality. The first human actions to be represented were those of labouring bodies already reduced to their machine-like components and semi-automated. Women performed repetitive tasks of domestic labour, including spanking, unendingly. The eroticism of machine discipline and power also animates Giroux's imagination.

The construction of phenakistiscope motion involves analysis and reassembly. It allows for the virtual simplification and rationalization of work and working bodies as well as sex and sexual embodiments. These affordances allowed for the release of an inventiveness concerning the possibilities of human desire and the plasticity of the desiring body. Giroux creates for it perhaps the first techno-dream of endless erotic abundance and the escape of the limitations of one's sexual embodiment.

CCS CONCEPTS

CCS → Applied computing → Arts and humanities → Media arts

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KEYWORDS

Phenakistiscope; cyber-eroticism; auto-erotic machine art; sex technology; sexual liberation; trans-gender

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1 Introduction

When I first saw the pornographic phenakistiscope disks of the 1840s I was struck by the delirious inventiveness of the images, the playful celebration of erotic transgression and the bold, surely unprecedented, exposure of an untamed erotic unconscious. What makes them perplexing is that they seem to operate within a fully-formed set of discursive categories and concepts – the liberation of female desire, female masturbation, auto-erotic sex machines, homosexuality, trans-sexuality, plus, more darkly, sadomasochism, coprophilia, zoophilia, self-dismemberment – the explicit discussion of which we think of as belonging to a later age. My aim in this paper is to reconstruct, as far as possible, the historical context for this eruption of erotic imagination, in order to "read" its contemporary meanings and to provide a more tempered assessment of just how shockingly revolutionary these images were.

I consider the visual context: Rabelaisian, bawdy, parodic and pornographic prints that were popular in the period. The presumptive author of the phenakistiscope disks, Alphonse Giroux, takes direct inspiration, indeed visually plagiarizes, Eugène Le Poitevin's erotic "diableries" from 1830. I consider also the changing political context in post-Revolutionary Paris where Saint

Simonian and Fourierist socialists were advocating radically transformed gender relations and independent feminists were calling for female sexual liberation. Finally, I consider the novel affordances of the machine medium. The phenakistiscope, invented in 1833, was a machine inspired by pulleys and gears in industrial manufactories, spun and counter-spun at high speeds (see [1] for an illustration). The phenakistiscope and the image-disks made for it were mass-produced. However, the images that the user enjoyed were weightless, "phantom" repetitive-loop motions invoked by the interaction of an image disk and a shutter disk actuated by the user herself.

Non-referential, phantom machines promised endless abundance and repetition, which, when applied to the erotic, suggested new forms of sexual fulfillment for all. The constructed character of these representations entailed the cybernetic decomposition and recomposition of organic forms that may have suggested the possibility of satisfying new desires and enabling previously unimagined erotic embodiments. Modern trans theorists debate the degree to which the current transsexual cultural moment should be understood as enabled by and experienced through the technological, artificial possibilities of engineering [22;24]. Or whether as Meyerowitz [21] puts it "the medical practice of sex change arose less as a result of new technology than as a result of new understandings of sex." I am arguing that in the 1840s a trans-imaginary begins to emerge long in advance of any surgical or hormonal techniques that would actually enable it, in part for the types of socio-cultural reasons that Meyerowitz favours, including the inspiration of "a vocal campaign for sexual emancipation." I also suggest that the erotic phenakistiscope was a performative technology that demonstrated the principle of a sexually transformative technology. It was a machine of representation that released the imagination.

2 Self-Referential, Auto-Erotic Machines

Michael Faraday [9], who first described the phantom motions that became the basis for phenakistscope moving images, recognized that these were images that referred to nothing in nature and indeed to nothing outside themselves. They were simply pattered illusions generated through an interaction between regularly sectioned parts (the spokes of wheels or teeth of gears) moving in relation to one another and the fallible light-sensitive surface of the eye. Perhaps in acknowledgement of this self-referentiality, the first phenakistiscope images were of machines, often whimsical and pointless (see for example [1], figures 4.1 and 4.4). Phenakistiscope machines work tirelessly, rotating, thrusting and pumping without cease. They fail, repeatedly, to signify beyond self-generating machine systems. They are repetitive without being productive or re-productive (the motion eternally returns and never moves forward to any outside purpose, completion, or instrumentality). Their pleasures are purely masturbatory.

As Jonathan Crary [3] has pointed out, one of the scientific purposes of machines like the phenakistiscope, was the analysis of human motion for the purposes of rationalization and control. Motion design in the phenakistiscope involves both the analysis of continuous motion into segments and of complex motion into simple components. The first humans that are represented in phenakistiscope format are already reduced to machine-like simplicity. The representational reduction suggests technological possibilities for real bodies that Charles Babbage and Fredric Taylor put into practise in time-motion studies [2]. Workers are reduced to a series of body parts and discrete motions that can be separated out, reconfigured and ultimately replaced by improved technological components.

Phenakistiscope mechanization was applied also to domestic labour, including the disciplinary and covertly sexual act of spanking (see [1], figures 4.7 and 4.8). Images of women attending to the phallic rhythms of the butter churn hinted at more intimate and affective dimensions of domestic labour. If the mechanistic imagination here followed the logic of industrial labour discipline, we should expect automation in this case to reflect the interests of the machine designers and leave the hapless machine operatives reduced, severed from their agency or replaced altogether. In other words, the logic of development should be towards animated sex-dolls for the exclusive pleasures of male engineers – or specifically in this case whatever automated sex-thing pleased Giroux. Instead we see a surprising inversion of the expected logic. Giroux offers us numerous examples of sex-toys designed exclusively for women. Male sexual labour here has been reduced to its barest essentials, automated and decisively alienated from male pleasure and agency since there is no sentient man attached.

Figure 2.2 - Robert Cruikshank, 1818, "The English Ladies Dandy Toy," hand-coloured etching on paper, 35.2 cm x 25.3 cm, © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 2.3 – Pellerin, "Colombine (Pantin)," *Imagerie d'Épinal.* N° 1344, collection of the author. /Alphonse Giroux, c. 1840 Phénakisticope Disk [cropped], courtesy of François Binétruy.

The phenakistiscope is a machine but it is also a toy, and there is an inter-textuality between it and other toys which is evident in the genealogy of the automation of sex. Consider first the pantin, or what the English called a jumping-jack. The English caricaturist Robert Cruikshank has the ardent male reduced to a puppet of his own passions controlled by his female lover (note the point from which he is strung). I have placed one of Giroux's sex machines beside a dismembered pantin for comparison. The plie motion of the two is identical. Except in Giroux's image the woman is her own pantin and controls her own pleasure. The second genealogical route is through the "jig doll" pictured in Figure 2.4. Le Poidevin has done even greater mischief than Cruikshank to male sexual dignity. Dismembered masculinity here is reanimated in a "cock fight" for the exclusive amusement of women. Giroux too furnishes these charming and ridiculous cocks with little bird's feet and/or wings. In the phenakistiscope these little dildos become machine components. In one case they are endlessly produced and endlessly consumed by an apparently insatiable female desire (Figure 2.5). In another, they become the head of a piston driven by a cam (Figure 2.6). This latter form of sex machine both actually exists and is still in the 21st century set into continuous-loop animation in a new virtual medium – the GIFF. The loop-animation abstracts a moment out of time – the mesmerizing point of maximum erotic fascination (for example, a phenakistiscope come-shot that I lack space to reproduce). It is an optical device of stop-motion, and its endless stop-and-return-stop-and-return action captures the manic quality of erotic obsession.

Figure 2.4 – [Jig Dolls] Le Poitevin, Eugène, 1830, *Charges et Décharges Diaboloque.* Paris. Courtesy of bannedbooks.indiana.edu and Kinsey Institute at Indiana University Bloomington.

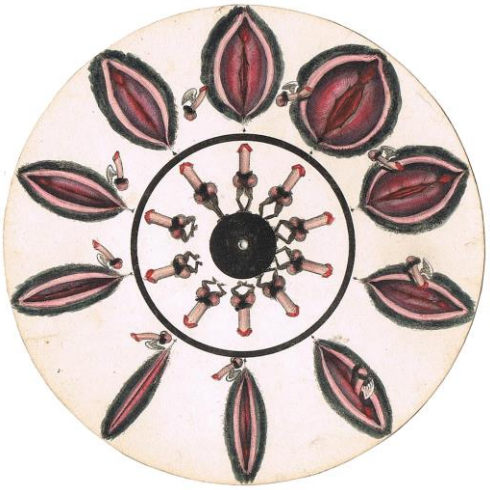

Figure 2.5 – Alphonse Giroux c. 1840 Phénakisticope Disk, courtesy of François Binétruy.

Figure 2.6 – Alphonse Giroux c. 1840 Phénakisticope Disk [cropped], courtesy of François Binétruy.

Not only are these examples of the alienation of male sexual labour for exclusively female pleasure, but that pleasure is unashamedly masturbatory. Masturbation in the early 19th century was subject to a new disciplinary complex in order to forge the ascetic self-control of the bourgeois subject [14]. To indulge in self-pleasure was, for men, a shameful moral failing as well as a danger to physical and mental health. Until recently, female orgasm had been understood as essential to procreation, and medical theorists and practitioners therefore gave some attention to the health and the proper treatment of the delicate equipment that produced it [16]. All of this became irrelevant when medical consensus shifted, and female orgasm was no longer assigned any material biological function. Women's self-pleasure had never factored into medical discussions and remained taboo until the 1970s. In the 19th century new debates emerged around whether or to what extent women had motivation for ecstatic sexual pleasure. The question of female virtue, at least within the framework of 19th-century bourgeois respectability, was not so much whether women repressed desires for personal sexual gratification, but whether they felt them in the first place [16].

What does Giroux's invocation of the female masturbatory sex toy mean? How much of what we see here is paranoid male projection and parody? Both Le Poidevin's and Cruikshank's images can be understood in terms of misogynist tropes: men who fear the loss of agency to their own erotic drives project that fear and loathing onto the female object of those desires. Do we see in Giroux any genuine sympathy for the idea of liberating female desire? Would feminists of his time have wanted the kind of technological liberation he is offering? The only clear documentation of what actual feminists might have said on this question comes from a different era. Hallie Lieberman [19] has tapped into a rich archive of writings of 1970s feminists describing their feelings about the personal-use sex toy and its political meanings. The "liberating vibrator" was embraced by many as a means of self-realization of their erotic potential and sexual identity, but also explicitly as a tool to guarantee independence from men. At the same time, many women expressed ambivalence about the alienating effects of relying on a technology – an inanimate object and an artefact of commercial culture. In the end perhaps the determining consideration for women was purely libidinal – the palpable joy in female pleasure expressed by people like Betty Dodson [5;6]. Giroux's image of a woman leaping up in pursuit of the winged penises, captures perhaps the same spirit of playful libidinal joy (Figure 2.7). Further evidence that Giroux may have been attuned to female pleasure is the fact that he is always careful to visually locate the clitoris.

Figure 2.7 – Alphonse Giroux, c. 1840 Phénakisticope Disk, courtesy of François Binétruy.

Figure 3.1 – "Tout le monde en aura" Le Poitevin, Eugène, 1830. *Charges et Décharges Diaboloque*. Paris. Courtesy of bannedbooks.indiana.edu and Kinsey Institute at Indiana University Bloomington.

3 Sexual Revolution

In the extraordinary image "Tout le monde en aura" [Everyone shall have some!] Le Poidevin invokes the imagery of a revolution of female desire. Sex-toys are thrown from breadbaskets like baguettes to the clamorous crowd. In this and related images erotic loot is purchased ("dans la boutique" [17]), stolen, and carried off in handfuls to be enjoyed without the inconvenience of a man attached. The 1830s was a revolutionary period in Paris, and the

most socially radical of the revolutionaries were the utopian socialists – Saint-Simonians, and, increasingly after 1830, Fourierists [7]. A group of working-class feminists had split from the Saint-Simonians and in the opening pages of their new journal *Le Femme Libre* had proclaimed: "Comprenons donc nos droits; comprenons notre puissance nous avons la puissance attractive, pouvoir des charmes, arme irrésistible, sachons l'employer" [15].

Divine love, secularized, "naturalized" (in a way that encompassed all the erotic implications that came with that idea) and socialized, was an organizing principle for all three of these movements. Passionate love between and among human beings was the altruistic force meant to motivate action and harmonize interaction in the ideal society. I want to chart the development of this idea visually in part to show that it was fully understood by artists of Giroux's milieu. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Blessed Ludovica Albertoni (1671–74) is an explicit example of an erotic interpretation of divine passion. Henry Fuseli's The Nightmare, (1781) which would have been widely known through multiple reproductions, invokes the same ecstatic pose but interprets it rather as the grip of an erotic subconscious. The two lithographic "diableries" in Figure 9 are blunt parodies of Fuseli. The raising of the erotic to the status of a new divinity is repeatedly satirized by Le Poidevin (figure 3.2, and [17]).

Figure 3.2 – Poidevin, Eugène. c.1830. *Diableries* [Folio of Lithographs]. Paris: n.p., Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 3.3 –Poidevin, Eugène. c.1830, *Diableries* [Folio of Lithographs]. Paris: n.p., Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Parody has no bite and no audience unless it skewers some recognizable social target. In what could easily be read as a comment on Le Poidevin's satire Fourier himself observes that "People vaunt the chaste morals of Roman ladies who piously participated in the worship of the phallus" [10] Le Poidevin 's pulpit scene (figure 3.3) again invokes the social character of the worship of Eros. Surely the target here is Saint-Simonian and Fourierist ideas circulating in the bookshops and cafes of Paris at the time. There is a French tradition of thought that runs from Saint-Simone through Fourier, Comte and to Durkheim that understands the sacred to be a sublimation of the social. Fourier declares that "It is obvious God meant love to be one of the two principle mainsprings of the social mechanism" [10].

There was also a line of French thought, articulated in this period by de Sade, Senacour [24], Saint-Simone and Fourier, that insisted that sexual love, in its multiplicity of forms, was natural, irrepressible and (if one brackets out Sade) fundamentally good. Repression, the diversion of love from its natural path, was thought to produce a variety of evils: hypocrisy and deceit in those (mostly male) who indulged in its unsanctioned expressions; misery and perversion in those who suppressed their natural longings. This discourse was in opposition to the new bourgeois asceticism. Fourier, himself keenly aware of the pain of thwarted desire, was passionate in his denunciation of religious constraints on female sexuality and celebrated evidence of revolt. "Women are even less intimidated by hell in matters concerning love," he writes, "which they call God's secret. Young women are so convinced that love has divine sanction that armies of priests could not make them change their minds or discuss their love affairs in the confessional" [10]. Josephine-Felicite, one of the young feminists writing for *La Femme Libre*, concurs: "To me who yearned for love, it [Christianity] only said not to love; to me who yearned for pleasure, it only commanded suffering; to me who believes as much in the

flesh as the spirit, it exalted the latter but condemned the former..." [22].

I am arguing that Le Poidevin and Giroux make visual reference to this political discourse of sexual liberation – Le Poidevin satirically, and Giroux more sympathetically. While the outlines of Fourier's ideas about "amorous liberty" had been published by 1808, much of his detailed elaboration of them remained unpublished until 1967 when they appeared under the title Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux. There do seem to be resonances of Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux in the imagery of Le Poidevin and Giroux, and it may be that Fourier or ardent disciples like Victor Considérant, conveyed these more scandalous ideas in coffee-house or salon conversations. Le Poidevin (figure 3.1) makes the same parallel between the revolutionary demand for the equal distribution of food and the demand for sexual fulfillment for all which Fourier refers to as the "sexual minimum." "Everyone knows," writes Fourier "what hunger can do to the common people: it can stifle their feelings of honor and duty and drive them into a state of rage. …The same thing occurs in love when people lack the necessary minimum" [10].

Just as in matters of work, so in matters of sex, Fourier believes that social harmony can be achieved by cataloguing and finely co-ordinating our predilections and passions. There are, says Fourier, an almost infinite variety of sexual predilections and fetishes or "amorous manias," notable for "their apparent uselessness, their great rarity and their extreme oddness" [10]. Fourier offers by way of example, his own love of lesbians which he calculates to be a joy shared by only one in 300,000 people. Heel-scratching is another that he offers as both rare and odd. Both Le Poidevin and Giroux are drawn to the comical variety and oddity of sexual obsessions. To heel-scratching, Giroux adds back-scratching (figure 3.4). Both men also depict, in numerous images, zoophilia, and coprophilia. Giroux includes anal sex, both male-to-male and male-to-female, and various forms of masochistic self-harm (figures 5.2, 5.4).

Figure 3.4 – Alphonse Giroux, c. 1840 Phénakisticope Disk, courtesy of François Binétruy.

Fourier, like de Sade, accepts homosexual love as entirely natural [8;10]. Unlike de Sade, Fourier believes that sadism, whipping, self-flagellation, and torture are unnatural "counterpassions" produced in corrupt civilization by repression of otherwise benign manias. He gives as an example "Lady Stroganoff" whose repressed lesbian love for a beautiful slave can only find malignant expression through cruel torture of the innocent object of her desire [10]. In general, the sentiments of Le Poidevin and Giroux appear to be closer to those of de Sade than of Fourier. They do not share the utopian faith that sexual liberation will always contribute to the common good. Le Poidevin is credited with inventing the French tradition of "diableries" [11]. His demons are mischievous characters subversive of all pretention. They parody both civilization and utopia. They are equally cynical about despotism and liberation. They offer a critique that is ultimately conservative in its effect: the human condition is grim and inescapable and the only relief that we can hope for is laughter.

4 Natural Versus Technological Erotic Possibilities

Fourier understands that in revealing the multiplicity of passions he is rediscovering nature's secrets that have been forced into hiding by a corrupted civilization. Once catalogued, co-ordinated and finely tuned – the heel scratchers finally brought into harmonious contact with those who harbour a mania for being scratched – the passions will drive a fully balanced and productive machinery of society. Giroux's machinic imagination is different. He uses the affordances of the phenakistiscope to disassemble eroticism into its component parts, abstracting sex from its natural embodiments. While Fourier wants to repair the broken clockwork of nature, Giroux by contrast wants to take the clock apart and rebuild it in a hundred new ways. His project suggests that perhaps we can invent new types of sex and even new sexualities. Instead of solving the problem of sexual scarcity by co-ordination – formerly isolated and frustrated heel-scratchers brought together with other heel-scratchers – solve it by industrial production – manufacture, as many as needed, new heel-scratching machines.

The cybernetic option would solve a problem in distributing the sexual minimum that Fourier wrestled with, with unsatisfying results – how to bring fulfilment to those who because of age, ugliness or the particularities of their desire, may not be able to be connected with the type or abundance of love that they need. Fourier resorts to external inducements to persuade young and beautiful love-objects to volunteer their services [10]. This is still, as Goldstein [12] points out, a kind of prostitution for social reward. This problem of the unlovable is the same that troubled the fictional Frankenstein's monster. In his case, he was able to appeal to medical science, his maker, the young Doctor Frankenstein, to create a cyborg that he could love and that could love him in return. Mary Shelley's novel, published in French in 1821, may have been a further inspiration for the idea that artificial bodies could be manufactured or reconfigured where natural bodies fell short.

As for abundance, the phenakistiscope sex-machine promised, as did so many other machines of the 19th century, to overcome natural scarcities. The device itself was factory-made and its image-disks mechanically reproduced so that everyone could have one or more. When put in motion, the continuous-loop animation produced satisfaction over and over without cease, offering fulfilment at last of that oft-repeated cry of "don't stop!"

5 Technology and the Trans-Sexual Imaginary

Both Frankenstein's monster and the phenakistiscope raise the possibility of building reconfigured bodies from dismembered parts. I want, finally, to consider the idea that Giroux might have applied this possibility to his own body, that in some of his images he was exploring an unprecedented dream of a technological male-to-female trans-sexual transformation. Part of my evidence for this claim I have already presented – Giroux's inversion of the expected logic of automation to produce machines of female orgasm. Also, throughout his imagery there is an obsession with penises, but mostly for their capacity to provide female pleasure. When I cropped the GIFF animation of figure 5.1 with the pivot at the base, it seemed the wrong way up. To me it made more technological sense to have the base of the penis at the bottom since the cam drive normally comes from the centre of the disk. This was also the "natural" perspective from which I saw this piston-like motion. Then I realized that Giroux's "inversion" here makes total sense if you take the female perspective. The vulva sits upon the machine drive and somehow mysteriously envelops and expels the love-object.

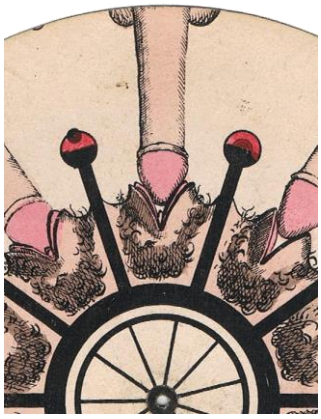

Figure 5.1 – Alphonse Giroux, c. 1840 Phénakisticope Disk, courtesy of François Binétruy.

The self-castration of figure 5.2 (one of two examples) is metaphorically suggested by Giroux; however, the key that makes the metaphor's signification explicit is provided by Le Poidevin in figure 5.3. Neither castration nor self-castration figures in de Sade. De Sade was more interested in mutilating others. A Fourierist interpretation is more apt. This is the rage of a Lady Strogonoff turned inwards. In this instance it is perhaps the rage of Giroux's feminine self against his male embodiment. The trope is repeated, in modified form, in the image of the demon blacksmith (figure 5.4). A blacksmith heats iron and strikes it with his hammer with the aim of transforming it from one, apparently fixed form, into another. If the true aim of the demon's passion is represented in the lower band of animation, it is perhaps to possess that female form in the sense of taking it as his own body. The apparent glee with which he undertakes this work further confirms this reading of it. The final, and I think most persuasive piece of evidence that a dream of technological sex-transition is at play here is figure 5.5. A penis transforms into a vulva and back in a way that announces a fluid boundary endlessly traversable.

Figure 5.2 – Alphonse Giroux, c. 1840 Phénakisticope Disk, courtesy of François Binétruy.

Figure 5.3 – Poidevin, Eugène, c. 1830 *Diableries [Folio of Lithographs]*. Paris: n.p., Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 5.4 – Alphonse Giroux, c. 1840 Phénakisticope Disk, courtesy of François Binétruy.

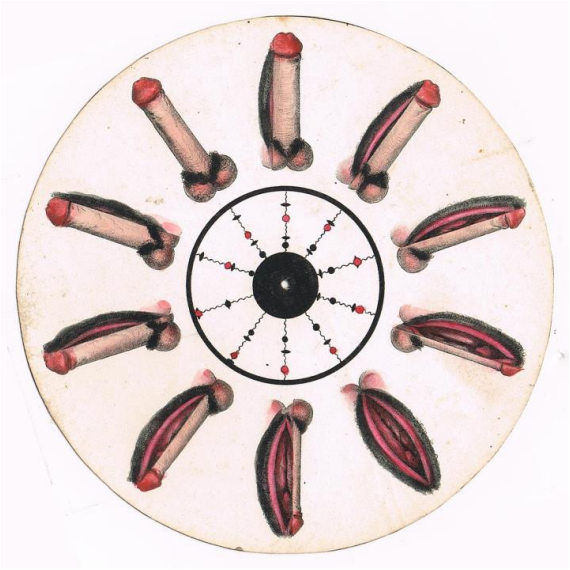

Figure 5.5 – Alphonse Giroux, c. 1840 Phénakisticope Disk, courtesy of François Binétruy.

In summary, I am arguing that Giroux's visual imagination, enabled by the technological affordances of the phenakistiscope, introduce radical new possibilities for sexual expression and sexual embodiment. His sex machines represent a particular form of female sexual liberation that involves self-pleasure and a technology to achieve it independently of male approval or participation. His sexual re-assignment loop-animation announces for the first time the plasticity of sexual embodiment and the possibility of a technologically-engineered male-to-female transition.

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