

# Dissecting George Miles: Objectification, the Gaze, and Ontological Uncertainty in Dennis Cooper's *Closer*

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That's one of the things that interest me— I mean, not God— but maybe I'm beginning to sense where one finds spiritual comfort or spiritual information, and maybe it's in some place I never thought it would be. I think in a way my work has always been about that kind of locating.  
- Dennis Cooper, 1995

A few blocks away from John's parents' place there was a cobwebbed mansion that two generations of children dubbed "the haunted house". [ . . . ] Until he was twelve, John was too overwhelmed by the words "haunted house" to check the place out. When he finally tiptoed inside one afternoon it was nothing, an empty thing - *Closer*, 8-9.

## Abstract

This article offers a close reading of Dennis Cooper's 1989 cult novel *Closer*. Despite focusing on the experiences of gay males, I argue that *Closer* transcends identity politics by problematizing the status and treatment of the other in a contemporary Western setting. In doing so, the novel explores the theme of objectification from both a superficial and ontological perspective: Superficially, the objectification of the protagonist George Miles seems to mirror the way that women are objectified under patriarchy, however, from an ontological perspective, *Closer's* symbolism suggests a much deeper search for meaning that precipitates from its character's ontological uncertainties. I argue that *Closer* engages the reader in this search by making them aware of their own gaze, thus incriminating them in a figurative search for meaning within the textualized body.

**Key Words:** Dennis Cooper, *Closer*, Objectification, the Gaze, Ontology, Immanuel Kant, Emmanuel Levinas, Martha Nussbaum.

## 1. Introduction

We live in a world where people and their bodies are often treated like objects. Women are objectified under patriarchy, labor is reified by the capitalist mode of production, consumer advertisements exploit the image of the body to sell everything from tires to clothing, organs are traded on the market like spare car parts, and soldiers are sacrificed by their governments every year. Despite the prevalence of this phenomenon, we also create laws that protect an individual's right to *relative* autonomy from being encroached upon by other individuals—i.e. you have the right

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to your own body, but this is often violated or sometimes overlooked by the state. Simply put, there is a tension in society between treating bodies like the objects that they are, and respecting the autonomy of conscious, sentient beings.

Philosophers ranging from Immanuel Kant to Emmanuel Levinas have addressed this tension in their own work, often resulting in highly esoteric writings that are unaccessible to those below the ivory tower. Western Religions have traditionally dealt with this dilemma by appealing to a higher power, thus creating a binary opposition between body and spirit, however, this is becoming more passé in the West, with all empirical evidence pointing towards our brain being the primary source of consciousness and identity. To no surprise, our ontological status as animated biological objects only complicates ethical discussions regarding the status and treatment of the other, and how this tension manifests itself in literature.

Dennis Cooper's *Closer* is the first book in a five-book cycle which Cooper describes as "an ongoing argument with himself about why he should or should not do the things he fantasizes about doing"(Lucas 2001: accessed online). At the center of this argument is the male body; in particular, the body of the protagonist George Miles. In *Closer*, the body is reduced to a mere object of desire; something to be worshiped, used, dissected, explored, then discarded. In *George Miles*, Cooper creates a character who is both passive and beautiful; one who transcends gender and is cast in the role traditionally held by females as the "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey 1999: 834). In the context of the power hierarchy of the novel, a young, confused George becomes the object of desire for mostly older, always more dominant men.

Although *Closer* might be viewed as being too extreme or pornographic by some mainstream readers, I believe that the novel's candid treatment of sex, violence, guts and excrement is much more than a mere shock-tactic; but rather a brutally honest, artistic exploration of the various extremes of human desire. What is particularly interesting, however, is how *Closer* imagines the theme of objectification from both a superficial and ontological perspective: From a purely superficial level, the experiences of George Miles mirrors the objectification of women written about by feminist thinkers—in particular, Martha Nussbaum's "seven ways to treat a person as a thing"; while on a much deeper, ontological horizon, the objectification of George can be realized as a search for meaning within the body of the other. This article will focus on the themes of objectification and the gaze in Cooper's novel, thus illustrating how *Closer* transcends identity politics by problematizing the status and treatment of the other in contemporary Western society.

Much has been written about treating people as objects, but the idea has its roots in Immanuel Kant's well-known doctrine that people should be treated as ends-in-themselves rather than as (mere) means (Wilkinson 2003: 29). Feminist writers such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine Mackinnon have developed this idea to show how

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women are wrongfully objectified in patriarchal society. In my approach to Cooper's novel, I rely heavily upon Martha Nussbaum's "seven ways to treat a person as a thing" because it incorporates Kant's original doctrine as well as the modern discourses of Dworkin and Mackinnon. This will include Nussbaum's concepts of:

- 1.) *Instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
- 2.) *Denial of autonomy*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self determination.
- 3.) *Inertness*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
- 4.) *Fungibility*: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
- 5.) *Violability*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
- 6.) *Ownership*: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
- 7.) *Denial of Subjectivity*: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account. (Nussbaum 1995: 257)

In addition to Nussbaum's concepts, I also incorporate feminist criticisms of pornography, as well as Laura Mulvey's article on the male gaze entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". These concepts are particularly important to this novel, as each character's objectification of George is implicitly linked to their own gaze, which is in turn shaped by the different forms of visual media that they consume.

Through a careful dissection and examination of the novel, its transcendent nature and ontological implications will hopefully become clearer. I first explore Dennis Cooper's own sexual politics and identity as a writer, illustrating how *Closer* marks an intersection between mainstream America, hetero-patriarchy, homo-eroticism, and various sub-cultures. Next, I discuss how each character projects their gaze and objectifies George, and how these characters are influenced by hetero patriarchy, consumer culture, and various objectifying mediums. Finally, I analyze the symbolism employed throughout the novel to better approximate the reason why this tendency to totalize and objectify others exists on a much deeper level. In my view, this is best explained as a search for meaning within the body, which precipitates from our own feelings of emptiness and uncertainty. *Closer* engages the reader in this search by making them aware of their own gaze, thus incriminating them in a symbolic search for meaning within the textualized body.

## **2. A Poorly-Lit Gay Bar**

Dennis Cooper (a professed anarchist and punk enthusiast) describes his work as "one of a million individualized attempts to understand the human condition" (Gluck 2011: accessed online). He distances himself from gay-identity hardliners when he says, "the whole notion of a collective identity based on sexual preference is ludicrous"

and has even been accused of misrepresenting the gay community, receiving death threats as a result (Reinhardt 1998: accessed online). Although his work could be considered as homoerotic at times, it does not thematize or politicize gay identity—thus eluding the already unstable categorization of “gay writing”. Cooper's characters, although primarily male and gay, often lack the signifiers either of urban, professional, gay male culture or radical identity activism (Lev 2006: 17). Cooper confirms this when he says, “there’s an obvious tendency to group people according to race, sexual preference, gender, and all that. I think my characters don't fit into any of the molds”(Reinhardt 1998: accessed online). Cooper's refusal to be pigeonholed as a “gay writer” or to be viewed as creating characters confined by rigid gender stereotypes should be considered as we examine the world he creates in *Closer*.

Though no specific city or town is named, the many references to Disney Land, as well as the fact that Cooper himself grew up in Arcadia, suggests the setting to be suburban Los Angeles, circa 1986 (when The Swans' song “Greed” was first released (Cooper 1989: 116). Contrary to what one might expect, *Closer* rarely *physically* leaves this typical suburban terrain of Disney imagery, high-school cafeterias, cob-webbed mansions, family parks, and cozy upper-middle class homes. In fact, there is only one mention of a gay-subculture in the whole novel, and this is expressed by an omniscient narrator who seems almost alienated from it: “They headed for Dump, a poorly lit gay bar well known for its loose clientele” (7). Cooper's own politics, as well as his choice to keep his novel's characters out of the “poorly lit gay bars” indicates that his discourse should not be limited to any specific group or subculture.

Professor Laura Lev describes the Cooperian world as being “both other and uncannily familiar, in between, cut from the moorings of heteropatriarchy” (Lev 2006: 19). When considering the recurring theme of objectification throughout the novel, the wealthy suburban American setting seems very fitting. Both Marxists and feminists have argued that in a capitalist system comes “a tendency to treat people not only as consumers, but also as commodities, items for use and consumption” (Langton 2009: 244). This is also echoed by Cooper himself, who describes the gay community in America as being as “banal, brainless, and consumerist as the worst parts of heterosexual culture” (Reinhardt 1998: accessed online). Regardless of his intent, Cooper's writing does raise questions about how human desire and relationships are shaped by mainstream culture and the economic base.

More important than the physical settings of the novel, are the psycho-sexual topographies that Cooper explores. The story is fragmented, each chapter focusing on the obsessions of one character, as well as the protagonist George Miles. As a result, there are countless, sometimes hallucinatory references to Disney Land, pop-music-culture, teen idol magazines, paintings, slasher films, punk-rock and pornography.

In each chapter, there is also a tendency to eroticize the anus, rather than the penis. Literary critic Elizabeth Young notes that “George's body is the ultimate object of

desire and quite literally within that, his ass is the fetish object" (Lev 2006: 48). Realizing his friends' obsession, George Miles finally examines his back-side in a mirror, comparing it to "Injun Joe's Cave, his eighth or ninth favorite Disney-land ride at the moment"(91). This blatant focus on the anus might be an attempt by the implied author to explore both homo-and-heterosexual male desire through a common, unifying medium. Laura Lev puts it best when she says, "one has but to scratch the surface of male heterosexual desire to discover a fetish for anality [. . .] giving it and occasionally even getting it up the rear are high on the male heterosexual erotic obsession list" (Lev 2006: 213). The internal and external world of *Closer* is laced with fragments of hetero-patriarchy, consumerism, mainstream pop-culture and anal fetishism. It is in this all-too familiar world, that the binary lines get blurred and the evils of treating people as (mere) means become clearer.

### 3. Blue Tubes Inside a Skin Wrapper

The novel opens with the character John, a punk obsessed with the idea of beauty and its connection to the male body. As a result of his obsession, he attempts to demythologize the body by drawing portraits of his classmates to "reveal the dark underside", then defacing them to achieve what he describes as a "Dorian Gray type of thing" (5).

Frustrated with his inability to understand George's essence through art, he begins exploring his body sexually. This aspect of their relationship mirrors Nussbaum's principles of *instrumentality* and *fungibility*. George is made instrumental in the sense that he becomes a mere model for John's art, as well as a tool for his own sexual pleasure and exploration. He is also made *fungible*, reduced to a mere pretty face attached to a body that is interchangeable with John's other male subjects/sex-objects. During sex, John treats George as being *inert*, using him as a "prop" while testing out "positions he'd seen in a porno film"(5). It could also be argued that their relationship demonstrates both *ownership* and *violability* as the dominant John "ordered George to sit down" and "rolled George back over and fucked his mouth" (8). Throughout their relationship, John completely *denies* George's inner feelings and *subjectivity*, using him as mere means to an end. When he finally (begrudgingly) learns of George's inner feelings, he tosses him away like an old toy because he "can't focus on his art and also deal with Georges problems" (16-17).

The character John not only personifies many of Nussbaum's "ways to treat a person as a thing", but he also reveals the role that visual art may play in perpetuating these tendencies. This is demonstrated best by John's later art collaboration with Jules: Before the exhibition (which, unbeknownst to Jules is comprised entirely of sketches of George) Jules suggests that they have a "three-way with some Jerk," later selecting George from the crowd (18-19 ). This suggests that it is John's own gaze that influences Jules idea of beauty through the visual consumption of his art. This

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same gaze casts George in the familiar role traditionally played by females in patriarchal society: "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey 1999: 834). In this first chapter, the passive, beautiful George is reduced to a mere body whose meaning is defined by the gaze of the more dominant men in his life.

In chapter two, the character David, like George, is too reduced to a mere object, but tries to understand his world through the delusion of being a pop star. Though just a regular student in George's high-school, David lies to his peers and to the audience, describing his life as a singer on-stage and as a model for teen-idol magazines. He also describes himself as George's double or "parallel self or whatever" (36), thus can serve as a means to better understand the very passive protagonist. David's own perception of himself mirrors what feminists describe as self-objectification—when a woman views herself as "nothing more than her body, nothing more than a thing whose (relevant) properties are bodily and sensory, shape, weight, textures, and looks"(Langton 2009: 334-335).

Throughout his first-person narration, David describes himself as a teen idol who's beauty distracts him from the ugly reality that he is "just a bunch of blue tubes inside a skin wrapper" (Cooper, 22). He personifies *fungibility* as he admits to being himself "dispensable" (29) and describes his bandmates as machinery (which demonstrates *instrumentality*, *fungibility*, and *denial of subjectivity*) that "represent the world, slightly romanticized" (31). Throughout his discourse, David reflects on his suspicion that someone is watching him and how "his eyes are the nemesis" (22). At the end of the chapter, after confessing being molested as a child, he says "maybe his gaze is what's sifting through me at the moment"(37). David's many references to being watched and to "the gaze" all mirror the idea of how "the male gaze" objectifies women through film and pop-culture:

In a world ordered by sexual unbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." (Mulvey 1999: 837)

David (George's double), like many teen-idols and pop-stars, is a projection of the gaze, but also objectifies himself and others to conform to the demands/desires rooted in the consumer-driven, hetero-patriarchal power structure. As a result, he identifies most with his own body, which, in his delusional world, is constantly being put on display for visual consumption.

The tensions created by objectification and the gaze are further explored in

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Cooper's next chapter entitled *Cliff: The Outsiders*. Here, the lines between fantasy, reality, pornography, the male gaze, and voyeurism all get blurred as Cooper begins to employ a very cinematic language, reminiscent of a film screenplay. Cooper's writing provides gaze—by a roaming camera eye and frequent reference to film terminology and techniques (Aarona 2004: 122). This use of cinematic language is motivated by Cliff, who funnels his own fascination with George through pornography and slasher films.

When Cliff and his aspiring filmmaker friend Alex have sex, the lines between pornographic fantasy and reality become blurred: They begin masturbating to a scene in a magazine, where two older "muscle-men" have sex with a teenage boy who looks like George (61-63). After they finish actual intercourse, Cliff admits that he "kept George in mind" as they recreated some poses they had seen in magazines (64). This is all compounded by the reader's knowledge that Cliff had previously watched George and his lover Phillippe have sex through a window.

This blurring of the lines between voyeurism, pornographic magazines, and Cliff's own sex life brings to mind Catharine Makinon's observation of how "pornography shapes a gaze" (Langton 2009: 251) and how pornographic artifacts are used in place of a human sexual partner, and that a human sexual partner is used as if she were a pornographic artifact, a thing (Langton 2009: 317). George Miles—the object of Cliff's desires and voyeuristic fantasies—becomes a mere pornographic artifact and a projection of his gaze. Cliff, *denies* George's *subjectivity* by faking interest in his troubles, hoping that "compassion would strike him as sexy"(53) and admits to just wanting to "figure his body out and get him over with" (66).

As Cliff has sex with George, the Disney characters on his wall (like Cooper's readers) become voyeurs, or as Cliff describes "the crowd at a strip joint" (67). Using George as a prop, he recreates what he saw while peeping through Philippe's window, then discards him when he is finished. Cliff's final encounter with George not only mirrors Nussbaum's concepts of *instrumentality*, *denial of autonomy*, *fungibility* and *denial of subjectivity*, but also confirms Makinon's idea of how pornography can help shape the gaze and lead to objectifying others. This final scene also implies that Cooper's audience, like the Disney characters on George's wall, might too be complicit in this voyeuristic act.

The cinematic language and blurring of the lines becomes even more obvious in the chapter entitled *Alex: The Replacements*. Cooper writes, "For Alex, life is a series of gradual dissolves— one thought or mood or companion dissolving into another, over and over" (70). Alex, unlike his friend Cliff, realizes that photos, words, and films are just failed representations of reality, and speculates that bodies (perhaps even people) have no real meaning other than what he projects onto them: "For Alex's part, he has always felt very detached from his freckles. When strangers make a big deal out of them it just confuses him. What's he supposed to say? Skin's skin. What's

the point of decoding it?" (73).

Alex's awareness of the gaze does not prevent him from treating others as objects, and even after becoming paralyzed, he allows his friend Cliff to use his inert lower region for his own sexual purposes. Alex's own awareness of the gaze, as well as his willingness to treat and be treated as an object perhaps raises a much deeper ethical question: Why, in a secular, capitalist society, should we not treat mere bodies (that have no inherent essence or meaning) as things?

Cooper, to an extent, answers this ethical question through characters like Tom and Philippe; both of whom take their objectification of George to horrifying extremes. Philippe, like George's other lovers, projects his gaze onto George through what Cooper describes as "his mind's eye, his tinted lens" (105). Like Cliff and John, he is fascinated with the male body and what secrets it might hold, but funnels *his* fascination through snuff-films, coprophilia, and death fetishism.

Philippe mirrors what Marilyn Frye describes as "the arrogant perceiver", one who coerces the objects of his perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes (Langton 2009: 282). In the case of Philippe, he coerces George into playing dead and defecating while they have sex. His erotic obsession with violent pornography and dead bodies brings to mind the feminist argument of how "hardcore sadistic pornography represents women as creatures whose *autonomy* and *subjectivity* don't matter at all; the woman's *inertness*, her lack of *autonomy*, her *violability* is eroticized" (Langton 2009: 232). In Philippe's warped mind, the only way to fully understand George is by making him an object—a corpse.

Through murder, he hopes not only to figure out what George meant to him, but also wishes to "see himself in death" (110-111). Marvin Taylor explains: "For Philippe, the beautiful inhabits a space outside of expression. To understand something is to break it open and to interrogate its parts. In death, he sees unity. Bodies are objects without subjectivity. He wishes to see himself in death to see his unity, which he cannot find." (Lev 2006: 190) Philippe's desire to see himself in George's death, not only personifies all seven of Nussbaum's "ways to treat a person as a thing", but also hints towards a much deeper search for meaning; a search that most of Cooper's characters project onto human bodies, like we, as complicit readers, project into his texts.

In the Cooperian world, Philippe's friend Tom represents the most extreme form of an objectifier; a heartless consumer, a pedophile and murderer. Philippe meets Tom when he joins a network of men who all fantasize about killing someone cute during sex. Tom, unlike the other men in the group, is actually able to follow through with his fantasy because, as Philippe explains, "he can kill someone because he knows who he is" (110). In other words, Tom, like Alex, suspects that there is no inherent meaning to human bodies other than what he projects onto them. He is incapable of



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understanding the notion of “inside” as anything other than a literal interpretation (Lev 2006: 191), so he dissects boys to better understand his desire for them. Tom could be viewed as a product of a Western society gone mad—a society that projects meaning onto passive objects (both living and inanimate), then commodifies and consumes them in an effort to get closer to understanding a desire that can't fully be explained.

Tom's suspicions prove false, however, as he is unable to continue dissecting George after realizing the boy's desire to live (99-100). George, the once inanimate object, becomes a non-fungible, autonomous, subjective being whose agency and boundary integrity should be respected. Confronted with this reality, Tom lets George live, for, “dead men tell no tales”(100)—in other words, dead bodies cannot tell stories; they cannot bring us closer to explaining humanity, love, or desire. Perhaps, for a brief moment, Tom realizes the falsity of his belief system as he encounters George—the subject rather than George—the object.

In the brutal world of *Closer*, there is only one real example of love. Months after escaping near death, the now scarred George encounters Steve, a teen entrepreneur conflicted over his desire for bodily perfection and his feelings for George. Unlike all the other characters in the book, Steve actually gets to know “George the subject” and his feelings for him grow. Steve's act of friendship mirrors Kant's idea of how “friendship provides release from the 'prison' of the self” (Langton 2009: 360) and this helps him to actually love George—to see past his beauty and scars. “George the object” becomes a subjective, autonomous being with a unique personality and experiences; thus confirming the Kantian idea of how when people (or people's bodies) are used as passive and impersonal objects, the risk of objectification is greater than when they're used in ways which are somehow expressive of their personalities (Wilkinson 2003: 38).

At first, Steve is confused by his feelings for the scarred boy, so he projects his gaze onto David (George's parallel self), but after having sex with him realizes that “it's his skin I've engaged and he's elsewhere” (125-126). Steve suspects that desire, beauty, and whatever *it* is he's searching for within people is ineffable, thus bodies, like reflections, words, pictures, and other signifiers, are just failed representations. This is confirmed after he witnesses David's body get “shredded like paper” (127), revealing “a bunch of blue tubes inside a skin wrapper” (22). Steve explains this best: “I had this dualistic thing going on I my head, loving George—a mess—and wanting David a perfect mess[. . .] This sounds crazy, I know, but when I saw David there with his insides exposed, the perfection thing uglified” (128).

Steve feels that his love for George, who is no longer perfect but scarred and marred by his experiences, becomes deeper and clearer as a result of his new understanding regarding how very limited the human physical perfection is (Lev 2006: 56). He learns to see George as being more than a mere body; more than mere

means to an end. As a result, he is able to get closer to something deep within George (and himself) that may be ineffable—something that lies at the heart of each characters' desire to understand George through the various ways that they objectify him.

#### 4. A Granite Man Covered with Bird Shit

If heteropatriarchy and consumer culture disappeared tomorrow, I suspect that the objectification of the other, much like the objectification of George, would occur ontologically as well. This can be understood by reading the symbolism in *Closer* through the lense of philosopher Emmanuale Levinas: For Levinas, the other represents "absence and mystery"; a being always beyond and more than what I can conceive (Flipovic 2011: 65). What Levinas is really talking about goes far beyond race, gender, and the physical characteristics of mere bodies; but rather something transcendent and ineffable—a consciousness and subjectivity inherent in all of humanity.

Ethics begins with what Levinas describes as a *face-to-face encounter* with the other person (Flipovic 2011: 65). The face, for Levinas represents something that is "uncontainable"—the origin of all moral obligation which precedes conceptual knowledge (Flipovic 2011: 68). Once again, I think what he is really talking about here is an individual's consciousness and subjectivity. After all, the face (on its own) is just an object; a facade that can be ripped off, separated from its owner and worn. However, it is one's consciousness and subjectivity that animates this object, providing a brief window into the mind of the other during the so-called *face-to face* encounter.

In our failure to negotiate this dichotomy between the face and its owner, we tend to objectify and reduce people to a set of knowable categories such as race, gender, nationality, sub-culture affiliation, etc. This inscription of the other is described by Levinas as *totalisation*, and this might explain why after all the characters in *Closer* project their gaze onto George, they then feel the need to dissect him (both literally and figuratively). But what is it that they are really trying to locate within his body? Through an analysis of the symbolism and language that Cooper employs, I hope to come closer to answering this question.

Throughout the novel, Cooper uses many symbols to represent both George and the human body. The characters often draw parallels between human beings, statues, mannequins, sculptures, plastic dolls, machinery, wood, and even Pinocchio. Of all the symbols employed, the symbol of the statue is the most reoccurring and effective: "At the edge of the park he took a piss on the feet of a statue of some long-forgotten war hero, a granite man covered with bird shit"(15).

This first reference to a statue shows how the representation of a man is really just a piece of stone. Like a corpse, it has no life or meaning, and even if it did, it is "forgotten" over time. Levinas writes, "within the life, or death, of a statue, an instant

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grows infinitely" (Levinas 1987: 9). The statue (like a corpse, or even a photograph) is a testament to something lost; in this case, a fungible body consumed by the flames of war. By having his characters describe George and others as statues, the implied author is showing how we project meaning onto objects, as well as objectify people (who are both autonomous beings and objects). He is also showing how symbols, words, statues and (mere) bodies are all failed representations of a person.

Because bodies are failed representations, *Closer's* characters wish to go deeper, beyond the facade of the flesh. This symbolized by references to empty buildings, George's bedroom, and haunted houses. John first introduces us to a literal place:

A few blocks away from John's parents' place there was a cobwebbed mansion that two generations of children dubbed "the haunted house". [ . . . ] Until he was twelve, John was too overwhelmed by the words "haunted house" to check the place out. When he finally tiptoed inside one afternoon it was nothing, an empty thing (8-9).

After video-taping George and Philippe having sex, Alex expresses his desire to shoot a "big-budget splatter film" at this same haunted house (81). The house, like David, could be viewed as George's parallel-self, and is used to symbolize both his body and inner-world. This is made clear when John compares George to this same house after figuring out how to draw him (15). George, like John's drawings and the haunted house, becomes demythologized. This is foreshadowed by John when he voices his concerns about society: "Or had the world gotten so generally ugly and fucked up since he was a kid that a haunted house seemed kind of quaint? If that's true, he thought aloud, then so are my drawings"(9-10).

John "tip toes inside" of George's inner-world and finds nothing profound— no Ghosts—just an empty, boring place. George, who mostly identifies with his own body, also feels empty: "He had a fondness for empty things normally filled up with people. Abandoned houses, parking-lot structures on Sunday nights, holograms, telephone booths"(44). This feeling of emptiness causes him to objectify himself, and enjoy the feeling of being "plugged up"(42) when being sexually objectified by Tom and Philippe.

This is also alluded to by George's father as he directs Cliff to George's bedroom and says, "I think you'll find what you are seeking behind that locked door" (64), but Cliff too is disappointed by what he finds. George describes his bedroom as "his flimsy kingdom" (94) and after getting mutilated by Tom, even draws parallels between the ruins of his ransacked bedroom and his now mutilated back-side (100).

In each example, *Closer's* characters are unable to fathom the possible transcendent nature of love, desire, and the other, therefore project meaning onto the object, rather than the subject; the body rather than the person. The fact that *Closer* employs a demystified, empty, "ghostless" haunted house as a reoccurring symbol for a human being, hints at a possible spiritual/ontological crisis in the novel. When asked about

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his characters and spirituality in an interview, Cooper replies:

Well, that's one of the things that interest me—I mean, not God— but maybe I'm beginning to sense where one finds spiritual comfort or spiritual information, and maybe it's in some place I never thought it would be. I think in a way my work has always been about that kind of locating. (Boddy 1995: 109)

It could be that what these characters are all trying to “locate” within George (and in themselves) is something transcendent and ineffable that was, at one time, assumed to be a spirit or “ghost”. In light of this, the empty haunted house might serve as a symbol for the spiritless body and the feeling of emptiness that comes with such a realization. Cooper suggests this in an interview:

For all practical purposes, the body is a machine with all this stuff inside. I guess the characters in all my books are like this, though not so much in the new one, *Try*. Since they don't believe in religious stuff. You just see what's in front of you. [. . .] These are people who objectify other people into being like that, as a way to figure things out, and they willfully ignore emotion and spirituality and all that stuff. (Laurence 2001: accessed online)

This lack spirituality causes Cooper's characters to project meaning onto the literal body, while their own feelings of emptiness are then identified and projected *into* George.

In fact, in *Closer*, the characters' projection of spiritual emptiness into George might best be explained by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's concept of projective identification: “In explicating the concept of projective identification Klein defined the process as one in which parts of the self are projected into an object, thereby allowing forceful control of, and identification with the object” (Crisp1988: 390). Cooper's characters are all a product of a society that has abandoned the notion God and the spirit. This emphasis on the body rather than the spirit creates a feeling of emptiness and ontological uncertainty within the characters, which they then identify with and project into George. By dissecting and exploring George, *Closer's* characters (sometimes consciously, other times unconsciously) are negotiating their own ontological confusion. George, the “empty haunted house” is then objectified and explored by his lovers, culminating with the literal destruction of his body by Tom.

Tom's failed dissection of George is paralleled with the automobile accident in the final chapter. When the car crashes into Steve's club “the Forefront” it breaks down the club's facade, revealing it for what it really is—a garage (127). This same car crash also kills David (George's double), whose once beautiful body becomes “shredded like paper” revealing his insides, which Steve describes as “blue, greasy and jumbled”(127). David, like George, the haunted house, George's bedroom, and the Forefront becomes demythologized—revealing the ugly truth. Faced with this truth, Steve realizes that external beauty is just a facade, and that bodies are failed

Wade A Bell Jr. – "Dissecting George Miles..."

representations of a person.

Steve's epiphany suggest that focusing merely on the literal body of a person will in no way bring us closer to understanding love, desire, or humanity. Although we all may be "spiritless" like John's ghostless haunted house, our subjectivity and autonomy separate us from being mere objects. Steve, unlike the other characters, is at least able to separate the object from the subject, thus enabling him to come closer to understanding both George and himself. Conversely, characters like Philippe are unable to negotiate this dichotomy, therefore rely on acts of violent sex and dismemberment.

*Closer's* blurring of the lines between cinematic language, pornography, voyeurism, and the gaze, all serve as means to incriminate the reader as an active participant in this search. Cooper's writing style has even been described as "fill in the blank" fiction (Aarona 2004: 115) and in my opinion, the use of pornographic language is one way of incriminating the reader by forcing them to find their own meaning (or lack thereof) within the text. Cooper confesses:

I think that using porno is cerebral. Apart from the components of the parts of the people that are involved in it, you can do whatever you want with it. It's all about filling in a blank. Animating these bodies that are frozen, or if it's video, I don't know what you do. You're always filling in these people with whatever content you want to make them more desirable. I don't know about it being cerebral. But the use of it is. It's like a study. It's like a text. (Laurence 2001: accessed online)

The reader is further implicated by characters like David, who constantly feel as though he is being watched, while characters such as Cliff, Alex, and Philippe are all portrayed as seeing the world through their own preferred pornographic mediums.

As readers, we become active voyeurs/consumers of both the text and its characters. We see their world through their eyes, yet provide our own gaze as well. In the end, we are all responsible for dissecting the text/body and discovering our own meaning (or lack thereof). In the case of *Closer*, some readers might find mere pornography, but if that is the case, it is more a reflection of the reader than of the text itself. Like the characters in the novel, we can either focus on the superficial exterior (which is pornographic at times); or we can look deeper and try to understand the interior (which is far more complex).

Elizabeth Young writes, "In Cooper's work the text is the body. Barthes has said that "Text means Tissue". And in *Closer*, George's body, which is seen as "covered with braille" and "filled up with hieroglyphs" is the text itself"(Lev 2006: 57). In other words, Cooper uses the physical body of his characters as a symbol for an actual text and vice-versa. This is why Philippe asks Tom as he fists George, "is there anything else you want to understand?" (90) and after George's mutilation, Philippe describes the boy's body as being "filled up with hieroglyphs"(105). This is further

implied at the end of the novel as David's corpse is described as being "shredded like paper" (127) and is also indicated when George says, "dead men tell no tales" (100). When talking about the parallels between a text and body, Cooper admits that "the body interests me in that way, and it interests me that the text is like a body. I like the writing to be eviscerated too, opened up in different ways" (Laurence 2001: accessed online).

In my view, drawing parallels between his characters and texts is Cooper's way of further implicating his audience in a voyeuristic act as well as a figurative dissection. In other words, the audience projects their gaze onto the characters, and is then responsible for finding their own meaning (or lack thereof) within the text. Like the characters in *Closer*, we are all (to a certain degree) influenced by the gaze of the dominant culture and mode of production, as well as our own ontological uncertainties. Confronted with this reality, we can either choose the easy path by simply decoding the exterior, or we can investigate the inner world of the Cooperian textualized body, which, like most great works of art, attempts to explore something much deeper within the human condition—something which we may (or may not) have a vocabulary for.

## 5. Conclusion

As a pragmatist, I cannot help but wonder if all this talk of the ineffable, the transcendent, and God is really just a romantic way of masking our own ontological uncertainties (could there be an element of "The Emperor's New Clothes" at work here?). If the face, the portrait, and the novel are just objects of fear and doubt, then looking at the face of the other would be the equivalent of staring into a void and realizing that we are nothing more than just little insects, spinning around aimlessly on a blue ball.

Unlike philosophy, good literature can reflect on our ontological suspicions, hopes, and uncertainties without explicitly stating them. A good novel lays naked on the table, completely open and vulnerable to the prying eyes of those who would objectify, interrogate, and dissect its most intimate areas. It is "the life that endures death and maintains itself in it" (Blanchot 1995:336). Such a dynamic is certainly at work in Dennis Cooper's *Closer*.

I hope to have shown how *Closer* marks an intersection between mainstream America, hetero-patriarchy, and various other sub-cultures. I have discussed how the novel offers a look at our tendency to objectify the other from both a superficial and ontological perspective. Superficially speaking, the objectification of George Miles seems to conform to the way that people—in particularly women—are objectified under patriarchy. From an ontological point of view, *Closer's* symbolism seems to suggest a search for meaning within the body, which precipitates from our own feelings of emptiness and uncertainty. The novel then engages the reader in this search by making them aware of their own gaze, thus incriminating them in a

symbolic search for meaning within the textualized body. Like the punk rock that inspired its prose, *Closer* demystifies everything; the novel puts the reader in the position to question, reevaluate, redefine, and most importantly—*think* for him-or-herself.

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