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Presentations of Femininity in Patrick Marber's *Closer*

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Abstract: This essay explores the presentation of femininity in Patrick Marber's play *Closer* from perspectives borrowed from Michel Foucault and feminists inspired by post-structuralism and social constructivism. Foucault describes how *self-policing subjects*, or *docile bodies*, are created through the internalisation of dominant discourses in the performances of every-day life under the disciplinary powers of regulation, surveillance and classification. These dominant discourses are created through the production of knowledge and truth by dominant groups in society. However, as Foucault does not pay enough attention to the specific circumstances in the subordination of women, perspectives will also be borrowed from feminist theorists such as Susan Bordo, Sandra Bartkey, Judith Butler and Jana Sawicki, among others. They have shown how the engendering of beauty and sexuality through dominant discourses of femininity contributes to the subordination of women in a patriarchal society. It is from these perspectives *Closer* will be read as a reflection, and both the reproduction as well as the critique, of constructions of gender and femininity within late modern, Western society.

Keywords: *Closer*, Patrick Marber, British theatre, Michel Foucault, gender, representations of femininity

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Introduction

Closer by Patrick Marber is a drama about the four characters Anna, Alice, Dan and Larry and their relationships with each other. Anna is a photographer, Dan is obituarist, Larry is a dermatologist and Alice is a stripper who constantly lies about her identity to the other characters. As they fall in love, have sex, cheat on one another and confront each other, issues about identity, power and truth, are explored and put into question. Although the play has been very successful and is loved by many, there are some remarkably limiting presentations of the female characters. The women are mainly defined by the male characters in terms of their appearance, their sexiness and beauty. Instead of questioning these tendencies, however, the women reproduce the words of the men and re-direct them towards each other. It appears as if the relationship between the women's bodies and their selves are always presented within the frame-work of male, heterosexual sexuality. The women are objectified, defined and perceived through the gaze of the male characters. This essay will explore how the way the female characters are presented in *Closer* reflects, reveals, and possibly reproduces dominant discourses through constructions of femininity.

The play is written within the tradition of 'in-yer-face' drama which is part of the liberation from the censorship of British theatre. Between the years of 1737 and 1968, British drama was dictated by strict guidelines which defined what was acceptable to present on stage. These often included restrictions on nudity, swearwords, representations of God or famous people and political radicalism (Sierz p 5, 7, 11). When the censorship was abolished, British dramatists began to explore what had earlier been outside the acceptable. During the sixties and seventies the themes, words and visuals presented on stage became increasingly provocative. The crossing of boundaries was often expressed through shock tactics such as fowl language, nudity, violence and the explicit presentation of taboo subjects. Among the important issues explored during the time, were the subject of sex and the nature of being a woman, inspired by feminist perspectives on gender and femininity (Sierz p 18-23). In the nineties, these explorations became even darker and more extreme, and despite years of challenging gender constructions, little seemed to have changed. Instead, the distance between the sexes deepened and became more dense with conflict and power struggle. It is within this context of crisis the play takes place (Sierz p 30, 178-180).

This essay will adopt a perspective on gender borrowed from Judith Butler that views gender as a social construction rather than a biological truth. Butler rejects any notion of an universal identity under the category of woman. Instead, it should be understood in relation to other social categories such as ethnicity, class and sexuality, as a representation of historical and cultural

constructions (Butler 4-5). In an engendered, patriarchal society, the construction of the female gender is inevitably intertwined with constructions of sexuality in what Butler defines as *the heterosexual matrix* (Butler p 8). This connection between heterosexuality and constructions of gender is relevant to *Closer* since the presentation of femininity in the play is done mainly in relation to male sexuality, and the women as objects under the male gaze. *The heterosexual matrix* connects to the engendering of our understanding of sex. As a result, sex together with gender has been perceived as something essential rather than cultivated (Butler p 10, 31). It is important to underline this connection in order not to perceive sexuality, or femininity for that matter, as an essential or biological truth but as the result of discursive practices in every-day life (Butler p 23-26).

Butler's use of terminology connects to the theories of Michel Foucault. Foucault has described the close relationship between power and knowledge, how discourses are constructed to maintain and produce power to the advantage of dominant groups in society (Foucault 1977 p 28-29). Essential for this theory is the view of the self as constructed in dialogue with its surroundings. In other words, he rejects the idea of an universal and essential identity for an understanding of identity as a social construction. The reason why discourses are more influential than physical power, Foucault argues, is in the way they use the energy of the individual to discipline himself as he becomes a *self-policing subject*, or a *docile body*. The individual becomes this *docile body* through the practices of every-day life, through the disciplinary powers of regulation, surveillance, and classification (Foucault 1977 p 137-138). These disciplinary powers are all part of the daily life of women, which are reflected in every-day situations of the female characters in *Closer*.

It is necessary, however, to incorporate the feminist perspectives added to his theories by writers such as Susan Bordo, Sarah Bartkey, Judith Butler, among others, as Foucault does not treat the specificity of female subordination within patriarchal structures (Diamond and Quinby p 14). Instead, he views the treatment of social categories with suspicion as he identifies the potential dangers in the production of theory. This perspective can be used as a reminder to feminists, to be aware of the dangers in their own conceptualisation and production of knowledge, as power and resistance are closely intertwined (Foucault 1976 p 95). Jana Sawicki has described the politicisation of theory as one of the strengths of Foucault's approach by pointing to his critique of the oppression that has resulted from revolutionary or liberal humanistic theory. Instead of a revolutionary, global transformation, a Foucauldian resistance opens up the possibilities of fighting injustices in the present, without the limitations of a grand theory (Sawicki p 188-189).

The main strength with the constructivist view on gender and identity is the rejection of essentialist or biological forms of explanation. Instead, there is the possibility of changing

discriminating structures in society. If identity is defined as constant and essential, it provides the support for a view of the world as built on the permanent differences between people. This view conceals the influence of power structures and dominant discourses. As culture is part of the spread of dominant discourses through presentations of femininity, as well as questioning the very same presentations, it is necessary to analyse culture from constructivist perspectives. Further, because resistance can never be outside of power, it is also necessary to consider how the questioning of old constructions can generate new forms of discourses. Therefore, the play *Closer* will be analysed through the perspectives of social constructivism and feminist theory within that tradition, as a reflection of late modern, Western society, and its role in it as a cultural presentation.

The Bodies of the Female Characters

A body is something often considered as highly private but at the same time it is a social object that interacts with other bodies. It is our physical connection with other people and the way we realise our personal thoughts and feelings through a dialogue with the potential for both unity and conflict. In *Closer*, there are substantial differences in the way the bodies of the female and male characters are portrayed that can be defined in terms of definition, surveillance and control. Reading these differences through the perspective of twentieth century feminist theory and post-structuralism opens up new possibilities of reading texts not only as cultural representations, but as reflections of dominating discourses through the body as a social construction.

The first observation that encourages a feminist reading of *Closer*, is the constant commenting on the bodies of the two female characters Alice and Anna, mainly by the male characters Dan and Larry, but also between the women. They are referred to as 'beautiful', 'bloody gorgeous' and 'with the face of an angel' (*Closer*, Act 1, Scene 2-4, Act 2, Scene 7). The definitions are repeated several times as to mirror each other in different situations and with different characters, with a tendency for the women to echo the words of the men (Ibid. Act 1, Scene 2, Act 2, Scene 9). The only comments made on the bodies of the male characters are done by Larry and mainly on himself (Ibid. Act 1, Scene 5). It is interesting to observe that most of the comments made on the male body is done by the person himself, which allows him to maintain the power of description, in contrast to the women who are commented upon but never allowed to comment on themselves. The act of commenting is related to the way the women are under constant observation in the actors' directions and in the lines. Initially, both the female and the male characters are

directed to 'look' at each other but eventually the men's looking turn into 'gazing' and 'staring' while the women's view remains the same (Ibid. Act 1, Scene 1, Act 2, Scene 7). This is important considering that to 'look' is more neutral than to 'gaze' or 'stare'. There is also a notable difference in how the women react to the attention from the male characters. Anna appears to become uncomfortable and distinctly denies being beautiful while Alice enjoys the attention and even encourages it (Ibid. Act 1, Scene 2, 5). Dan and Larry, on the other hand, share the same reaction in that they both admits to observing the women, maybe a bit guilty when confronted, but without the reflection on their gaze being in any way problematic (Ibid. Act 1, Scene 5). Finally, it could be argued that there is a level of detachment between the female characters sense of self and their bodies through the temporary renounce of bodily control. Larry asks Anna to give him her body in exchange for signing the divorce papers. She accepts the agreement but fails to recognize the sacrifice of her body by defending her actions with the claim that she did not give him anything (Ibid. Act 2, Scene 8). The situation at the strip club also gives Larry some sort of temporary control over Alice by being able to tell her what to do. He argues that the strippers fools themselves into thinking that they do not give anything by hiding their identity but that they actually provide the customer with imagery (Ibid. Act 2, Scene 7). However, Alice's sense of body and identity is more complex since she constantly lies about who she is but uses her real name at the strip club. The way she takes control over the male gaze by directing their attention to her body, gives her some form of influence over the claimed imagery, as she appears to use her body as a distraction from her real identity (Ibid. Act 1, Scene 1, Act 2, Scene 7, 12).

The approach to these observations will relate to a twentieth century perspective in which the fixed and unitary view of the relationship between body and self has been questioned by theorists within the post-structuralist tradition. From their perspective, body and self is not understood in terms of essence or universality but as fragmented, changing and in a constant dialogue with its surrounding (Bordo p 288). An influential theorist on the feminist movement, within this tradition, has been Michael Foucault. He has provided a vocabulary that describes the way that dominant discourses make us internalize power through the institutions and practices of everyday life. He has shown how modern institutions such as schools, military and manufacturing are organized to discipline our bodies into what he refers to as *docile bodies*. Through the regulation of daily lives, we are trained to reproduce 'historical forms of self-hood' under the disciplinary powers of regulation, surveillance, and classification (Foucault 1977 p 137-138). His act of questioning the sovereignty of the subject has also supported the understanding of gender as a social construction rather than a biological identity. The subject to him is created through modern discourses and practises; a view that has been adopted by feminists that define gender not as

something essential but what we internalize through the *performances of our everyday life* (Diamond and Quinby p 11). However, he has been criticized for not paying enough attention to how gender is connected to power in a patriarchal society. His negative view of social categories has also been perceived as threatening to the particularity of female oppression. On the other hand, his scepticism towards categorization can be used as a reminder for feminist theorists to consider the way their production of meaning and use of concepts could reinforce or produce entirely new discourses of power (Ibid. p 14- 17).

The descriptions made by Foucault of how disciplinary powers work through regulation, surveillance and classification seems to correspond to how the female characters are subjugated to definition, observation and the temporary loss of control over their bodies. Classification is performed through the constant commenting on the bodies of the female characters, surveillance relates to the ever presence of the male gaze and regulation can be connected to a loss of control through the act of bodily submission. To understand how this creates *docile bodies*, however, it is necessary to take into account the developments made by feminists on the theories of Foucault. In *Closer*, the way the characters interact with each other is more relevant for identifying dominant discourses than the presence of any institutional regulation. Foucault has generalized some of the disciplinary powers by showing how they can be used for political purposes but not fully defined how the techniques can be traced to the every-day life of women in a patriarchal society. Sarah Lee Bartky has developed these generalizations and shown how the production of *docile bodies* through the discourse of femininity can be understood as a scattered and anonymous power; as a power that is 'everywhere and nowhere' and the disciplinarians as 'no one and everyone' (Bartky p 74-75).

This notion of 'everyone' is important considering that the disciplinary powers are not only practised by the men but also by the women themselves. Beginning with the commenting of the bodies of the female characters, it is a performance that defines both what is worth paying attention to and, through the choice of vocabulary, what classifies the receiver of the comment. Since the female characters comment on themselves using the vocabulary of the men, it is reasonable to argue that they participate in the creation of the discourse of femininity (*Closer*, Act 1, Scene 2, Act 2, Scene 9). The focus and vocabulary of the commenting in *Closer*, reveal the production of a femininity that is associated with an attention to the female body and its appearance. In the work of Foucault, this can be related to his description of how dominant discourses use the *production of knowledge* to produce a *regime of truth* (Foucault 1977 p 28-29). In other words, those who holds the power in a society often produce and control the way people view and understand the world and their idea of what is 'true', through for example science and social institutions. An important feature in this production is the act of classification, which in *Closer* would be the attention of the comment

and the choice of vocabulary. From a feminist perspective, this would be the *production of knowledge* by the dominant group, which would be the men, in a patriarchal society.

The comment renders the subject visible and aware of its visibility, but in many cases the same effect can be achieved without words. Instead, they merely reveal and reinforce existing power structures, as the knowledge of being watched is enough to make a person discipline themselves and their behaviour in accordance to what is expected of them. Foucault inscribes this to the efficiency of surveillance as a disciplinary power. Since there is no need for physical power, the technique can be used on a grander scale and incorporate a vast number of people, for example women. The visibility of the observer but the unverifiable question of being observed or not, makes the subjected internalize the disciplinary power and turn him into his own disciplinarian (Foucault 1977 p 201-203). As a woman, there is the constant threat of being subjected to the male gaze but also, similar to the act of commenting, through the eyes of other women. To Bartky, this visibility turns women into *self-policing subjects* that reproduces the patriarchal structure through obedience (Bartky p 81). However, it is problematic to speak in terms of internalization since Anna and Alice are fictional characters and not real people. What can be noted is the difference in the way the women are directed to 'look' and the development of the men's looking into 'gaze' and 'stare', and how this reveals an imbalance in gender surveillance. Considering the choice of the word 'gaze', it is also the word used by Foucault in defining surveillance as a discipline of power, and by Lacan to describe how the subject becomes aware of also being an object by being gazed at (Foucault 1977 p 217, Lacan p 67-78).

The possibility of the subject also being an object raises questions about ownership and the relationship between the body and the self. For both Anna and Alice there is some sort of trade with their bodies; Anna trades her body for her freedom to make Larry sign the divorce papers and Alice trades her body for money in her work as a stripper. None of the characters appears to think that they are giving anything away except from the temporary bodily submission (*Closer*, Act 2, Scene 7-8). To approach this from a feminist perspective, one has to consider two polar views of the relationship between body and self that have been identified within feminist writing. The first view defines the self as distinct from the body, and the second view the self as identical to the body. In terms of ownership, the first allows a person to own their body through usage and the second by the state of existing (Church p 86-88). Jennifer Church proposes an alternative to these approaches that defines ownership over body and sense of self as a process that creates different degrees of attachment. According to her, the aims of the body and person's sense of self and ownership over their body are integrated processes with mutual influence (Church p 89-94). In those terms, a body is not a thing that can be traded with since the body and the owner of the body can not be separated

and trade includes a separation between object and owner. Instead, Anna and Alice would not trade their bodies but incorporate the act of submission into their sense of self and ownership, which is reflected in their complicated relationship between self and body. This perspective can be connected to the description of how power relationships, within a patriarchy, are internalized in the *performances of our every-day life* (Bordo p 289). Because it is not the male characters that trade their bodies or express a sense of detachment between body and self. Their identities may be subjected to play, for example when Dan pretends to be Anna in the chat room or Dan's description of himself as both a writer and a obituarist, but it is the women who hide their identities and forget about the submission of their bodies (*Closer*, Act 1, Scene 3, 5).

Beauty and the Internalisation of the Male Gaze

'Beauty' is often said to be in 'the eye of the beholder', defined as something subjective and personal. This quotation, however, neglects to take into consideration the political aspects of 'beauty' by locating it within the individual and not recognizing the stream of images that enters the eye and shapes the beholder's personal preferences. Analysing this stream of images and how people relate to it, can help to reveal power structures and dominant discourses as 'beauty' is used both by individuals to gain power and directed at groups of people as a form of social control. The way the appearance of the female characters in *Closer* is commented on can, in relation to these aspects, be seen as a reflection of a wider tendency in contemporary, Western society in which concepts of 'beauty' are used to retain women in subordination within patriarchal structures.

Modern society is becoming more and more visually oriented and is overflowing with an increasingly standardised image of beauty. The message conveyed by this image is directed towards women and is connected to a modern construction of femininity in which the discourse of attractiveness is one of its most distinctive features. As have been pointed out by Susan Bordo, this message has resulted in a construction of femininity which is experienced by women through their bodies, by making women aware of its visuality due to a continuous presence of visuals that put emphasis on physical appearance (Bordo p 169-170). The frequency of comments related to the appearance of the female characters in *Closer* supports this notion of regularity and the construction of dominant discourses through the every-day definition of 'beauty'. However, to understand the current relationship between women and 'beauty', it is necessary to trace the development of historical constructions of femininity as, according to Bartkey, specific forms of oppression

transform into new ones when old are brought into question (Bartkey p 81).

When first-wave feminists began to question the fictions connected to constructions of femininity, the modern understanding of 'beauty' was created to keep women bound within the limitations of patriarchal structures (Wolf p 10). Written during the 1990's, however, *Closer* would be positioned in the latest backlash, against the successes of the second wave feminists of the late 1960's and early 1970's, which are still a part of us today. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider how old constructions of femininity often linger within societies and tend to change and adapt into modern variations. This is made visible by certain aspects of *Closer* in the light of older fictions. In her description of the relationship between women and 'beauty', Wolf traces the transformation of discourses of femininity through the Western industrialisation and the rise of the women's rights movement with the increase in awareness of, and discussion about female oppression. The resistance against first-wave feminism is described in terms of the development of a *cult of domesticity* and the *invention of a beauty index*, in which the latter would be the most prominent reflection of patriarchal constructions of femininity in *Closer* (Wolf p 15).

The origins of the *cult of domesticity* and *the beauty index* can be traced to the changed living conditions for women in a mature society, in which old fictions of femininity were transformed into new in order to maintain their relevance and the power of their influence. These new fictions were summarised by Betty Friedan in her description of *the feminine mystique* of 1950's femininity. There Friedan identifies 'beauty' as one of the most important features of femininity (Friedan p 17-18). This connection impels us to read the modern understanding of 'beauty' as a reaction against the successes of first-wave feminism. When women proved their intellectual and moral equality within what had earlier been the domains of men, new fictions had to be constructed to infuse a new sense of inferiority. As a result, the construction of 'beauty' was created as a way of keeping women subordinated under the presence of constant physical evaluation (Sichterman p 44).

The influence of the 'beauty index' is most evident in *Closer* by the way the successes of the female characters are always accompanied by comments about their appearance. When Larry tells Anna he found her photo book in the shop of a famous American museum, he also mentions the presence of a man 'drooling over her picture' on the inside cover. Likewise, at the exhibition, where Anna's work should be in focus, another woman's beauty becomes the centre of attention as one of the photos is a picture of Alice (*Closer*, Act 1, Scene 5-6). These examples need to be put in comparison to the descriptions of the male characters, as none of the appearances of the men are mentioned in connection to their work. It is as if the women are only allowed to be successful as long as they remember their position as visual objects.

Even though *the beauty index* is perhaps more relevant for understanding the construction of femininity in *Closer*, it is important to recognise how both the *cult of domesticity* and *the beauty index* unite in the common interest of directing the attention of women away from the social and political towards the personal. Susan Faludi has described this tendency as a key feature, and even as determining the level of success, of the backlash against feminism (Faludi p 13). In the play, it is presented as a successful strategy since none of the women appears to react very strongly against being constantly defined in terms of 'beauty', but rather internalise the importance of appearance and re-direct it towards each other. They both define each other as beautiful, echoing the words of the male characters, but it is done with both positive and negative intentions, revealing the degrading potential of the word (*Closer*, Act 1, Scene 2, Act 2, Scene 9). By forcing women to compete for a position within the beauty hierarchy, Wolf argues, the unknown woman is turned into a threat, through the act of concealing shared interests with a sense of hostility (Wolf p 75). This is most apparent in the scene where Anna is accused by Alice for stealing Dan, and Alice defines her as the perfect woman because she is 'beautiful even when she is angry' (*Closer*, Act 2, Scene 9). In this scene, the political becomes personal as, instead of uniting in a common cause against patriarchal subordination under *the beauty index*, the women turn on each other using the words of the men.

These tendencies need to be related to the presence of the constant stream of images that circulate within late modern society, in which political and economic interests and the personal understandings of 'beauty' have become inseparable. With the invention and refinement of technologies of mass production from the last part of the nineteenth century, it became possible to produce a continuous stream of images that, according to Bordo, characterises the movement from a verbal to a visual representation of femininity (Bordo p 170). These images enabled the spread of a standardised femininity to all women, but also an essential increase in awareness of the visibility of the female body. In *Closer*, the image of beauty and the visibility of the female body are presented as threats against the perception of the real woman.

At Anna's exhibition, the visual representation of Alice becomes more important than the real person, as she has to point out to Dan that she is actually there in real life and not only present in the picture. She continues to question the truthfulness of the photos by arguing that '... the people in the photos are sad and alone but the pictures make the world seem beautiful.', which makes the images deceitful (*Closer*, Act 1, Scene 5). The scenes express a reception of the images that is affected by personal ideas and values. This is because, John Berger argues, the way we see things is affected by our understanding of the world; a visual in itself contains a way of seeing, but we contribute to it with our own views as we always perceive images in relation to ourselves

(Berger p 8-9). From this perspective, when Dan sees Alice's 'beauty' but neglects to recognise her sadness, it indicates a way of seeing that puts attention on 'beauty' rather than on the expression of emotions, in which the vision of Alice becomes more important than the real person.

There are a number of differences between the characters Anna and Alice in age, occupation and background, but both are exposed to dominant discourses of 'beauty'. The inclusiveness of this exposure reflects what Barbara Sichterman has described as *the democratisation of beauty* in the 1950's. With the developments of commercial imagery in an economy that depended on female consumption, the demand on being beautiful extended to incorporate all women in society (Sichterman p 47). These commercial images, which encouraged the consumption of beauty products and services, created the demand on women to groom their bodies and the promise to provide them with the necessary tools to make them beautiful. However, what they also provided, were the tools for a patriarchal and capitalist society to maintain the female citizens in subordination by connecting the domain of 'beauty' with constructions of femininity (Sichterman p 53). This has contributed to a sense of inferiority for many women by imposing feelings of insecurity about physical appearance, or in some cases, a misleading sense of power.

It is misleading, however, to blame commercial images exclusively for female subordination under dominant discourses connected to physical appearance. Gendered 'beauty' is not essential to capitalism but rather the result of an economy based on capitalism constructed in a patriarchal society (Brown p 9). As have been described by Berger, commercial images provide consumption as a substitute for an unfulfilled democracy. Individual happiness is defined as a right but is not made possible within the existing society (Berger p 148-149). This idea can be translated to a feminist perspective, in which women's rights are acknowledged but not fulfilled. Instead, women are offered 'beauty' as something to strive for, to feel empowered by and to invest in financially. What makes 'Beauty' effective as a comparative category for women, then, is its nature as a non-productive illusion of power, since women might feel empowered by being defined as beautiful. This can be seen in Alice's positive reaction to the male gaze, through the way she encourages it and tries to take control over it. However, it is a limited and temporary influence, since the control she is given is only to encourage and not to constrain (*Closer*, Act 1, Scene 1, 5).

Discourses of 'beauty' can appear empowering to individuals but are harmful to women as a social group. They are ultimately constructed from a heterosexual ideal in a patriarchal society. For images of 'beauty', even though they are often directed at women, are built to stand the evaluation of men, and by doing so, places the object-woman in a subordinate position (Bartkey p 81). As a concept, 'beauty' has become gendered in modern, Western society. However, it is necessary to include the scepticism of Foucault to properly understand this conceptualization. Sichterman asks

for a de-genderalisation of 'beauty' (Sichterman p 53) but neglects to consider that the concept itself is constructed to reflect a gendered, Western and heterosexually dominated society. By referring to an universalistic definition of 'beauty', Sichterman falls back into the trap of essentialism as she disregards the influence from other dominant discourses, such as class or ethnicity, which have been recognised to unite in maintaining female subordination (Butler p 4-5).

The way a modern play like *Closer* reconnects with *the feminine mystique* of the 1950's reveals a continuous presence of *the beauty index* throughout the twentieth century. When the domestic fictions of *the feminine mystique* came under questioning by second wave feminists, the grip of *the beauty myth* hardened, spread and transformed once more into its modern form by adapting to a non-domestic version femininity (Wolf p 16). The female characters appear relatively liberated in many aspects. However, they still live under the constant evaluation of the male gaze, from the male characters but also from an internalised version of the gaze within themselves and from other women.

Representations of Sexuality

The meaning of the word 'sex' reveals the close connection between sexuality and constructions of gender, as the earliest trace of the word, Jeffrey Weeks argues, relates to the categorisation of humanity into femininity and masculinity. In an engendered, patriarchal society, sexuality has inevitably become a part of the subordination of women through discourses of femininity. Men hold the power over production as well as the power over re-production, and when sexuality became a public issue during the late nineteenth century, this connection was consolidated through new languages of gender definition in areas such as education, social work, psychoanalysis and medicine (Weeks p 4-7, 36-37). Despite the impression of a female sexual liberation in the later part of the nineteenth century, as is evident in *Closer*, women have not yet been sexually liberated. Instead, dominant discourses of sexuality are used to maintain women in subordination through illusions of power and sexual freedom.

The female characters in *Closer* choose where, when and with whom they want to have sex. At first sight, these freedoms imply women in control of their sexuality. However, these choices are made within a dominant male and heterosexual frame-work. From a social constructivist perspective, the presented sexuality of the female characters can not be understood as a reflection of *a biological imperative*, as something natural and static, but should rather be viewed *as a historical*

construction (Weeks p 4, Foucault p 105). In the play, these discourses connect to other constructions of femininity, mainly the view on 'beauty', through the constant commenting and observation of the sexualised bodies of the female characters. Alice and Anna appear to be free, sexual subjects, but the constant objectification from the men opens up a reading of the play as a reflection of what Rosalind Gill has defined as a the female internalisation of male objectification. This is one of the aspects of a 'sensibility' characteristic for Western, post-feminist society.

Gill describes a tendency in post-feminist culture in which women are presented as free and autonomous subjects who make active choices about their sexuality, choices that only happen to closely resemble the dominant discourses of male heterosexuality. This resemblance, Gill argues, is not an accident, but the result of a female internalisation of the male gaze. Women are presented as desiring subjects, but are actually reflecting a construction of femininity created to keep women in an object position (Gill and Arthurs p 445-446). As a realistic play taking place during the 1990's, *Closer* reflects a post-feminist, Western society. The tendencies described by Gill can be identified in the character Alice's relation to her body and sexuality. Alice tries to connect with the male characters through her sexuality but fails to do so by re-producing the inert distance in an object-subject hierarchy through an intentional act of self-objectification. In the end, the male characters only perceive their own fantasies, as they think they know her but do not even know her real name. This is most evidently put in the words of one of the male characters himself as Dan expresses 'I love your face... I saw this face... this... vision' (*Closer*, Act 2, Scene 11).

Discourses of 'beauty' and sexuality are closely intertwined in Gill's descriptions of contemporary constructions of femininity (Gill and Arthurs p 448). This tendency can be traced to the visual nature of the sexuality presented in *Closer*. In every scene where there is a sense of physical attraction between the characters, there is also a comment about the appearance of the women. The visuality of the presented attraction becomes most evident at the strip club when Larry tries to approach Alice. When she refuses to reveal anything about herself, he falls back to the position of the observer. As he is denied intimacy, he requests imagery, and ultimately, to the question if that is what he desires, he replies 'What else could I want?' (*Closer*, Act 2, Scene 8). This reveals a close connection between discourses of visual 'beauty' and sexuality in the play. These discourses are reflected in the way Alice draws the attention of the male characters to the visuality of her body. However, since this connection affects both of the female characters, but none of the male characters, it becomes a part of the play's presentation of femininity.

Foucault has described how the *production of knowledge* produces a *regime of truth*, which in *Closer* connects to the disciplinary power of classification (Foucault 1977 p 28-29). As it is only the men who evaluate the appearance or sexiness of the women, this can be read as a reflection of

the historical power of men to formulate the dominant discourses of female sexuality (Weeks p 36). In other words, if imagery can be seen as a form of knowledge or truth, this classification generates power. In a society where women are being increasingly perceived visually, it is necessary to recognise how, as described by Berger, we always understand imagery in relation to ourselves. Men see the visual representation of women in relation to themselves, their desires and ideas. Since men still have most of the power, they will continue to produce the knowledge and truth about the sexuality of women, drawn from the imagery that is actually a reflection of themselves (Berger p 8-9).

In the construction of fictions about female sexuality that defend male, dominant discourses of sexuality and subordinate women's, Weeks has identified three historical assumptions which are deeply enclosed in Western society. It is the distinction between feminine and masculine sexuality, the view of heterosexuality as a form of natural truth, and the view of sexuality as an overwhelming biological force. The first assumption provides the foundation for female subordination by connecting sexuality with constructions of gender. The second assumption dictates the possible roles for women in relation to men. The third assumption provides the fiction which makes all the other constructions unquestionable and constant (Weeks p 4-5).

The engendering of sexuality in Western culture has been traced as far back as to the development of the ancient Greek *polis*, when sexuality was connected to, and made part of, the construction of femininity as a way of controlling women (Brown p 11). However, sexuality in its modern meaning was not established within the discourses of modern society until it was defined by the new language of psychoanalysis in terms of 'inert' and 'essential' desires in the late nineteenth century (Foucault 1976 p 33). This assumption can easily be questioned by considering the variety in cultural and historical definitions of the differences in the sexuality of the sexes (Butler p 4-5). Nevertheless, it has continued to influence the way sexuality is defined, and often in the form of a reaction against female demand on sexual autonomy.

In *Closer*, there are expressions of views that reveal essentialist attitudes to the differences between the sexuality of the female and the male characters. Since the female sexuality in *Closer* is partly constructed as a reflection of male objectification, it is necessary to also consider the representations of male sexuality. When Anna asks Larry why the sex is so important he exclaims 'BECAUSE I'M A FUCKING CAVE MAN.' In the scene where he asks Anna to give him her body, he defends his reasons not in terms of desire but as an obsession (*Closer*, Act 1, Scene 6, Act 2, Scene 8). Dan on the other hand does not explicitly define his actions in terms of a physical demand but behaves as if he has no choice but to act on his attraction (Ibid. Act 1, Scene 2). The female characters internalise this essentialist idea, expressed by the male characters, and reproduce it as

statements of truth in expressions such as 'You're a man, you'd come if the tooth fairy winked at you.' (Ibid. Act 2, Scene 8). These kinds of statements provide what Weeks has described as the 'ideological justification' for the objectification of women through the biological aspect of male sexuality (Weeks p 5). It also affects the way women perceive themselves as sexual objects rather than sexual subjects as they internalise dominant discourses of sexuality that restricts their own sexual autonomy.

The essentialist idea about a gender-specific, unchangeable sexuality was, in a way, already questioned during first-wave feminism, in the demand for a transformation of male sexuality (Jeffreys p 1). However, with the rise of the sex reform movement in Britain during the 1890's together with the development of the science of sexology, there was a backlash against the ideals of first-wave feminism. Instead, they supported a the presentation of sexuality as a biological, gender-specific and natural urge (Ibid. p 5-7). This essentialist idea is rooted in our culture, as Weeks has pointed out, and in feminism as well. Jana Sawicki has criticised both liberal feminists and radical feminists for essentialist tendencies in their preservation of *the traditional repressive hypothesis*. This hypothesis presents a view of sexuality as a natural force that has been suppressed during the Victorian period but which holds the promise of individual sexual liberation if dismantled. Sawicki criticises radical feminists who define sexual autonomy in terms of the freedom from an inherently violent and oppressive male sexuality, and liberal feminists who promotes the liberation of a naturally liberating female sexuality (Sawicki p 179-181).

Third-wave feminism brought into question the essentialism of second-wave feminism by pointing to the white, European and middle-class perspective inherent in the universalising of female experiences. Even though it is often described in terms of a critique against existing feminism, by contributing with social constructivist perspectives, it has also contributed to the deconstruction of the idea of an inherent female sexuality in need of liberation. Especially influential in this aspect were queer theorists such as Judith Butler. By pointing out the ahistorical aspect, and the lack or concern for other cultural categories such as class or ethnicity, of an 'universal female oppression', Butler reveals the close connection between 'the category of woman' and the 'heterosexual matrix'. Since sex is gendered, it also defines the idea of a 'natural sex' before the influence of culture. Butler questions the truth in the connection between sex-gender-desire, by defining it as part of the gender construction (Butler p 4-10, 30-31).

Despite the influence from post-structuralism, however, ideas of biological differences resurged in the 1990's (Gill and Arthurs p 446). It is within this period *Closer* was written, performed and takes place. As with the critique of first-wave feminism, essentialist attitudes form a backlash in post-feminist culture. These attitudes are connected to a view of sexual liberation as the

right to have sex, rather than the right to define your own sexuality. The female characters in *Closer* are liberated in the first sense, but as have been shown, not in the second sense as their sexuality is defined in relation to the sexuality of the male characters. In a post-feminist society that is becoming increasingly sexualised, connected to a visual understanding of femininity and a consumer oriented economy, women are not entitled to their own sexuality but to the object position in a reflection of male sexuality (Jeffrey p 2, Weeks p 37-39).

The play is positioned within a tradition of British drama referred to as 'in-yer-face-theatre'. The aim of many of the play writers within this tradition has been to push the limits of what is acceptable to present on stage, often resulting in the exploration of taboo subjects and the use of 'fowl' language (Sierz p 5-6, 11, 178-179). The use of explicit language about sex combines both of these aspects and is one of the main characteristics which binds *Closer* to the tradition. Despite challenging the taboo of talking about sex on stage, as with the sexual revolution of the 1960's, it can be argued that new forms of dominant discourses rise from the act of resistance. In the revolution of the 1960's, women were allowed to express their sexuality, but since resistance is part of power, it was often done within the frame-work of male sexuality (Foucault 1976 p 95, 130-131). In *Closer*, the language of sex can be said to contribute to the presentation of, and on a larger scale the reproduction of ideas about, female sexuality. Foucault describes one of the main ways to control sexuality is through language, by talking about it 'ad infinitum' and rising it to the level of a 'problem of truth', that needs to be explored (Ibid. p 35, 56-57). Since part of the nature of theatre is to use individual stories to express something larger about society, it connects to Foucault's description of how individual pleasure is turned into public discourse (Ibid. p 25, 63). Because, fictional representations can be used both to reflect and reinforce, and from the perspective of Foucault, 'there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy' (Ibid. p 102). In other words, the sexual content in *Closer* can be read as to both reveal, reflect and reproduce oppressive constructions of female sexuality.

Conclusion

It is difficult to read *Closer* as anything else than realistic and contemporary. If it should be read as a mirror against the world, or a mirror against a rather restricted understanding of the world, however, can be discussed. What is apparent, nevertheless, is the presence of limiting, dominant discourses of femininity. The female characters are always presented within the frame-work of male, heterosexual

sexuality. By analysing the presentation of the female characters from the perspectives of Foucault and feminists within that tradition, it is possible to reveal the disciplinary powers that classify, survey and regulate the women into subordination. As a result, the female characters internalise the dominant discourses and re-direct them towards each other, directing their attention away from the political and towards the personal. This is done by focusing on the visuality of the bodies of the female characters through discourses of 'beauty' and sexuality, which threatens the perception of the real women. It is a strategy which connects to the strategies used within the historical backlashes against feminism, and with the development of a post-feminist society with the resurgence of essentialist views on gender and illusionary powers of 'beauty' and sexiness.

The way cultural representations can be used to reflect dominant discourses within society has a double function. They can be used to reveal these discourses by giving the audience the possibility to take a closer look at them. However, they can also be used to reinforce existing views by adding to the stream of similar presentations, and in doing so contributing to the internalisation of dominant discourses. In the words of Foucault, they can contribute to the production of knowledge and truth. Perhaps these should not be too closely connected to the tradition of theatre since these concepts are often questioned within modern drama. However, from a more general perspective, influenced by social constructivism, the impressions around us, in one way or another, affect our understanding of the world. Considering the interest in gender critique that has influenced the development of contemporary British drama, it is interesting to notice the presence of rather essentialist and conservative views on gender and constructions of femininity. Perhaps the rather pessimistic view on the relationship between men and women during the tradition of in-yer-face theatre in the 1990's could be connected to the history of backlashes against feminism. This could be an interesting subject for further studies.

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