



## The Failure to Act: Acting Subjects and Passive Bodies in Transgressive Fiction

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### Abstract

While subversive texts have existed since antiquity Transgressive Fiction consolidated as a distinct genre during the early 1990s with its particular dedication to the transgression of both social and textual taboos. Works such as Dennis Cooper's *Frisk*, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, Will Self's *Cock and Bull* and *My Idea of Fun*, A.M Homes' *End of Alice* and Urs Allemann's *Babyficker* have come to exemplify this period. The manipulative nature of transgressive texts is rooted in their ability to present themselves as acting subjects. Throughout the reading of a transgressive text the reader and the text exchange position; fulfilling roles as both acting subjects and passive bodies. However, if transgressive texts appear to act they do so without ever truly achieving their supposed intentions. Transgressive texts are often defended on the basis of what Anthony Julius has referred to as 'the estrangement defense'; that "artworks exist to shock us into grasping some truth about ourselves, or about the world, or about art itself".<sup>1</sup> However, this case study analyzes claims about transgressive fictions' ability to analyze truths about both metanarrative and the physical body and shows that both claims are ineffectual when considered against the fiction's textual medium. As an acting subject the text attempts to act upon the body of the reader, but any attempt is always unsuccessful as the reader dissects

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 32.

the text through critical analysis, rendering the text 'safe'. Revealing that, at the close of a transgressive text it is the reader which finally acts upon the textual body.

**Keywords:** *Transgressive Fiction, Estrangement Defense, Acting Subject, Textual Bodies, Erotics of Reading, Text as Subject, Reader as Object.*

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The 1980s saw an increased emphasis on the relationship that exists between the text and its reader. The acceptance of both reader-response theory and metafictional/reflexive fiction placed a new emphasis on the "reciprocal, mutually defining relationship"<sup>2</sup> that exists between a text and its reader. This emphasis on the active roles of the reader *and* the text would be reimagined during the 1990s with the explosion in popularity of Transgressive Fiction<sup>3</sup>. This case study examines a selection of Transgressive texts by comparing them to the work of literary theorists Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, Georges Bataille, Wenche Ommundsen and Linda Hutcheon to examine the ways in which these texts can be seen to fulfil the role of acting subject<sup>4</sup>. These Transgressive texts complicate and attack the notion of the reader-text relationship, transgressing not only the boundaries of social taboo but also the lines of textuality. With their manipulative and antagonist nature, these texts fulfil the role of acting subject in their attempts to cause their readers to become involved in the texts', often violating, content while causing actual bodily discomfort and distress for their readers. Defenders of transgressive fiction have made claims of the text cathartic or pedagogical nature. Anthony Julius described such justification of Transgressive works as the 'estrangement defence' which states that "[...] artworks exist to shock us into grasping some truth about ourselves, or about the world, or about art itself"<sup>5</sup>. However, as Julius himself suggests, the estrangement defense fails to fully analyze the supposed pedagogical potential of Transgressive Fiction. The lack of 'actuality' in

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<sup>2</sup> L. M. Rosenblatt, "The Aesthetic Transaction," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 20, no. 4 (1986).

<sup>3</sup> Transgressive Fiction is the title given to a particular selection of texts (not all named here) that transgresses social, textual and linguistic taboos.

<sup>4</sup> The Transgressive text is seen here as an entity that can act with intention and purpose to cause distress and manipulation rather than being seen as a passive object, which is the conventional image of the text, with acting roles being traditionally assigned to the author and reader.

<sup>5</sup> Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, 32.

transgressive texts has also been noted by Patrick Greaney in his work on German Transgressive text *Babyficker*:

Allemann's text forces us to remain on this threshold and to explore the kind of existence that unfolds there around a single sentence that presents an act that may or may not be realized. Its emergence is, at most, as proleptic as the speaker's pathos, but this prolepsis is no less disturbing or actual than any realized act; in fact, its potential nature may make it more threatening than a sentence spoken by a more fully realized speaker. A possible monster can always emerge and pose a threat while the actual monsters we read about have usually already been imprisoned.<sup>6</sup>

Close examination reveals that Transgressive texts have little to reveal about either "ourselves" or the "world" and really only addresses topics about the manipulative and structuring nature of language. Finally, the only real body that is affected is that of the text. The violating nature of the content and narration motivates the reader to dissect the text with critical analysis as they move from what, B.R. McGraw described as, an Erotics of Reading to a Poetics of Reading<sup>7</sup>; rendering the text 'safe'.

The use of humanized language to describe texts has long been naturalized in critical theory. In his 1975 work *The Pleasure of the Text* Roland Barthes made the comment "The text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*".<sup>8</sup> Here Barthes sought to explore the reader's attainment of *jouissance* through an intense interaction with the writerly text:

...the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.<sup>9</sup>

Barthes' comment explores the idea of the text as its own acting subject, something that can 'desire'. Axiomatically Barthes did not speak of authorial intent; rather he implied a form of textual intent in which it is the fiction itself that, "discomforts" and "unsettles". Similarly Tzvetan

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<sup>6</sup> P. Greaney, "Urs Allemann's Beginnings," *MIn* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1104.

<sup>7</sup> BR McGraw, "Barthes the Pleasure of the Text: An Erotics of Reading," *Boundary 2* 5, no. 3 (1977): 944.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Todorov noted that Mikhail Bakhtin held that the reading process involved, “not one but two spirits (the studying one and the studied, which must not fuse into a single one)”.<sup>10</sup>

This use of humanized language to describe written texts is increasingly common in the rhetoric that surrounds Transgressive fiction. Elizabeth Young noted in regards to Dennis Cooper’s *Closer*, “Barthes says that the text must ‘cruise’ the reader. Cooper’s text goes further. It is, as they say of serial murderers, ‘trolling for prey’”.<sup>11</sup> The naturalized way in which transgressive texts are referred to in human terms leads to the consideration of the transgressive text-reader relationship as gestures passing between two acting subjects. The dyadic contract between the reader and text is unlike the traditional novel, as the transgressive text and its reader do not form the customary correlation of reader as subject and text as object. The transgressive text instead attempts to make itself an acting subject by imposing itself upon the emotional body of the reader. This attempt is made through the reflexive nature of transgressive texts.

Transgressive texts are notably reflexive in their continued denial of mimesis and repeated attempts to draw attention to the reading process, they are, as Linda Hutcheon describes reflexive texts using another personified phrase, “Narcissistic”.<sup>12</sup> This reflexivity can be as implicit as Dennis Cooper’s comments of textual violence in *Frisk*, as reader-directed as the direct address of ‘you’ in A.M Homes’ *End of Alice*, or as overt as Will Self’s *Cock and Bull* with its inescapable textuality.

Transgressive text’s explicitness about their textual nature is part of the joining process, or as Louise Rosenblatt would describe it, the transaction, that occurs between text and reader. Readers of Transgressive fiction must not only fill and participate in textual gaps, in the visualization, and thus realization, of the subversive content, but must also provide the moral boundaries which the text not only refuses to provide, but constantly challenges. As Wenche Ommundsen noted in her work *Metafiction?*

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<sup>10</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich, 13 vols., vol. 13, Theory and History of Literature (1984), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Young, Caveney, Graham, *Shopping in Space: Essays on America’s Blank Generation Fiction* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 241.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), 5.

By theorizing and problematizing the reader's function, metafiction produces readers at once aware of their participation in the fictional game and somewhat confused about what is expected of them [...] By deliberately transgressing conventional patterns of text-reader relationship, the text involves the reader in a kind of conspiratorial pact which sets itself apart from run-of-the-mill fictional contracts .<sup>13</sup>

Hutcheon, in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, outlines the intimate, at times, contradictory link between these acting subjects:

In metafiction...the reader lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional. However, paradoxically the text also demands that he participate, that he engage himself intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation. This two-way pull is the paradox of the reader. The text's own paradox is that it is both narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented towards the reader.<sup>14</sup>

The text causes the reader to become involved in the themes and actions of the narrative through interaction with textual gaps<sup>15</sup>. By allowing themselves to interact with the transgressive narrative voice and visualizing the images that are presented to them, the reader enacts and participates in the violence and subversion that the text depicts. Through this enactment the transgressive text, as acting subject, attempts to objectify and act upon the body of the reader; through a combination of pleasure, guilt and disgust.

The transgressive text can also objectify the reader in a more subtle fashion. On the implicit level the text can only present itself to the reader as through the reader were generic. The text can only speak to an implied reader, not the unknowable entity of the actual audience. In doing so the text reduces the reader to an interchangeable object. However, the transgressive text most effective weapon is its ability to act upon the reader causing them emotional discomfort or distress.

Transgressive texts require reader's to dedicate a large amount of effort to move through the narrative. This can be done with complex irregular language, such as that found in

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<sup>13</sup> Wenche Ommundsen, *Metafictions? Reflexivity in Contemporary Text*, ed. Ken Ruthven Stephen Knight, Interpretations (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1993), 77.

<sup>14</sup> Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> As outlined by Wolfgang Iser.

*Babyficker*, or it can be done through boredom and confusion as in *American Psycho*. The text makes the reader 'act' by providing ambiguous textual gaps and forcing the reader to fill them. This effort, however, is often needed simply to move through the unambiguously antagonistic sections of Transgressive texts. And it is here that the text can act directly on the reader:

Ian let himself down off his elbows and settled his chest and abdomen deeper into the crushed dried grass. He was sucking on the pit bull's penis, a knotty slug of gristle which he eased in and out of his mouth with a combination of suction and jaw movement. The penis was detached from the dog. It was a placid scene. The pink tip of the dog's penis pushed out from Ian's mouth at the same time as it emerged from its black foreskin, so that the whole motion had a secondary mechanical phase to it, as if the penis was a piston and Ian's jaw the engine.<sup>16</sup>

A reader taking in this passage from Will Self's *My Idea of Fun* must engage in a certain level of effort to continue reading. Through a range of different mechanisms the text attempts to impress itself upon the reader, to be what Hutcheon referred to as "explicitly thematized".<sup>17</sup> Self's *Cock: A Novelette* is not only a story of sexual frustration and carnal revenge; it is a removed, yet sexual, assault on the reader themselves. As Robin Mookerjee has noted, "The metaphor of an anemic or one-sided sexual encounter applies therefore to the story itself".<sup>18</sup> In reading of the narrator, Carol (who has grown a penis) and her final attainment of sexual satisfaction by sodomizing her husband, the reader is allowing the text to inflict itself upon them:

She came with a bang rather than a whimper, the bummy numbness of her genitals squishing home for the last time into the bummy mush of Dan's derriere [...] She subsided. Subsided and looked and saw: Dan's dying stare, fawn-like, innocently stupid, as the grey giblets fell from his shattered skull and grey porridge began to stain the flower-patterned pillowcase [...] Dan's bowels loosened when he died, and it may be small consolation, but he also had one of his sweet piddling orgasms, nice that isn't it.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Will Self, *My Idea of Fun: A Cautionary Tale* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 270.

<sup>17</sup> Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Robin Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2013), 164.

<sup>19</sup> Will Self, *Cock and Bull* (London: Bloomsbury 1992), 130.

The narrative voice is glib and mocking and directed straight to the reader. As Brian Finney has noted

Self's comic sleight of hand in this final paragraph draws readers' attention to their own prurient involvement in this doubly pornographic tale of sexual violation, violence and death. Just as the internal narrator positions the external narrator as victim through the power of his transgressive language, so the external narrator does the same to us. We are seduced and then compelled into confronting the "silent life" of violence and transgression lurking within us, concealed beneath our civilized language of sexual love and eroticism. Through language we are made to confront the non-linguistic void, the area of transgression that the erotic can unveil where the speaking subject loses its voice.<sup>20</sup>

*Frisk* involves the reader in a similar process. In an interview with Benjamin Weissman, Cooper demonstrated how *Frisk* is itself a dissection:

*Frisk* was supposed to resemble a dismembered body [...] I wanted to write a book in which the body of the text would be dismembered, as though the writer had dismembered a novel the way a murderer might dismember a body. Altogether it formed a dead, open body ready to be explored by a reader curious about how it came to be.<sup>21</sup>

In *Frisk* the reader is forced to enact the same fascination with the intricate workings of the body (both human and textual), as the narrator Dennis. This hinders the reader's ability to judge Dennis as they witness and share in his faults. As Hutcheon has noted with reflexive texts

Reading and writing belong to the process of "life" as much as they do to those of "art". It is this realization that constitutes one side of metafiction for the reader. On the one hand, he is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the "art," of what he is reading; on the other, explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience. In fact, these responses are shown to be part of his life experience.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Finney, "The Sweet Smell of Excess: Will Self's Fiction, Bataille and Transgression," <http://web.csulb.edu/~bhfinney/selfsweetsmell.html>

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Weissman, "Dennis Cooper," in *Bomb* (1994).

<sup>22</sup> Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, 5.

The Transgressive text becomes part of the reader's "life experience" through the texts incitement or the reader to engage, enact and participate in the text.

In order to explore and understand transgressive fictions' aggression toward its reader many theorists have quoted the supposed exploratory or cathartic elements of transgressive fiction. Brian Finney, in his work on Will self, emphasizes what Georges Bataille referred to as "aufheben", the reaffirmation of the taboo through its transcendence. Finney claims

[...] while Self may be able to transgress the limits of the social majority in his fictions, we have to reinscribe our own limits. He can liberate us into a world of partiality and temporality, but only we can decide where to draw our own tentative and vulnerable line in the ever-shifting, heterogeneous sands. In facing his readers with the necessity of making such a choice he can be seen to be writing against the very emptiness that he is too often assumed to be reproducing.<sup>23</sup>

Transgressive authors' have also been known to makes pedagogical claims about their work. Chuck Palahniuk claimed of his work, "The big role of anything creative is to model new ways of being for people and to allow people to try on these ways of being as a sort of a costume and seeing if there is anything to be gained from that".<sup>24</sup> Mookerjee makes a similar pedagogical claim, "Menippean and transgressive fiction may be seen as regressive, but its authors view it as revelatory of a truth that emerges in the absence of frameworks, theories, ideologies, and formulaic beliefs".<sup>25</sup> Even Michael Silverblatt, who coined the term 'transgressive fiction' claims that there is a greater purpose to transgressive fiction outside of the violence "The narrator seems to be interested in carnage; Dennis Cooper himself seems engage in a search for the soul".<sup>26</sup>

Each of these justifications forms what Anthony Julius referred to in *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* as the "the estrangement defense" of subversive art work. This defense claims that "[...] artworks exist to shock us into grasping some truth about ourselves, or about the world, or about art itself".<sup>27</sup> Julius continues, "These arguments comprise a distinct way of

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<sup>23</sup> Finney, "The Sweet Smell of Excess: Will Self's Fiction, Bataille and Transgression".

<sup>24</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, interview by Josh Jackson, September 26, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* 16.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Silverblatt, "Tales from the Crypt: Frisk: By Dennis Cooper," in *Los Angeles Times* (1991).

<sup>27</sup> Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, 32.

thinking about art. Through it has a number of diverse aspects, the master thesis is: art teaches. Art exists to teach a lesson, and its shock and disturbances are justified by its overriding purpose".<sup>28</sup> However, Julius felt that the estrangement defense often failed to explain all elements of transgressive art, arguing that "[...] taboo-breaking often wounds our sensibilities, causing us distress without enlarging our imagination".<sup>29</sup> Defenders of transgressive fiction often use the estrangement defense, claiming that the content of transgressive fiction is justified by its ability to explore human experience. However, under closer analysis, transgressive texts make little to no comment on human experience, and therefore have equally little to impart on the subject. The first element of Julius' description is that transgressive texts in some way explore metanarratives, and have, what Mookerjee describes as, an "uncompromising aversion to all formulae that organize experience".<sup>30</sup> These claims are undermined by two points. The first is that transgressive texts do not produce revelations about social systems: *Cock* does not reveal anything about repressed female sexuality, *End of Alice* and *Babyficker* do not reveal anything about pedophilia and *Frisk* does not reveal anything about mutilation. These texts in no way try to convince the reader that these are socially repressed and misunderstood urges that need further exploration, these texts do not teach us about, or explore the nature of, these subversions and therefore fails in Julius' understanding, " Art 'teaches' not by communicating lessons but by enlarging our sense of what is possible. It gives us something other than the already given".<sup>31</sup> In a small sense these texts do create a certain level of aufheben, but in these instances the reassertion of the taboo is no revelation as we never sought its absence.

The second point that undermines transgressive texts ability to comment on metanarratives is that while they express the postmodern need for "the interrogation of the limit [which] replaces the search for totality"<sup>32</sup> they also express a modernist nostalgia for the quest for unified experience. In *American Psycho*, *BabyFicker*, *Cock*, *My Idea of Fun*, *End of Alice* and *Frisk* the narrator is seeking some experience of an abstract perfection outside of human

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>30</sup> Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* 8.

<sup>31</sup> Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression " in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F Bouchard (New York: Ithica 1997), 50.

experience. The claim that transgressive fiction teaches the reader something about themselves is equally suspect. If the *aufheben* construct holds true then the reader will return to the moral and ethical framework from which they started, and any pleasure that has been experienced throughout the text draws attention to the manipulative nature of language, rather than the reader pleasures or repressed fantasies. Transgressive fiction's final comment is on the nature of textuality and the way in which language constructs and models identity and understanding. So transgressive texts only interact with the final element of the estrangement defense and exist, "to shock us into grasping some truth about [...] art itself".<sup>33</sup>

Transgressive texts also attempt to produce revelations about the physical body; either the body of desire, or the body of the reader. Mookerjee claims that, "[...] the subject, enmeshed in a language drawn from a single theme in public discourse, seeks a path out of that arbitrary language through experiences of bodily truths [...]."<sup>34</sup> Mookerjee's statement implies that transgressive texts use visceral language and violence as a way to get beyond cultural standards and attempt an atavistic return to the body. However, transgressive texts cannot communicate any bodily desire, pleasure or perfection because of their medium. A textual depiction of sloughing the skin from someone's arm is language simulacrum, an uncanny attempt to get to the untranslatability of trauma, which is on the body and silent. The description of rape and the experience of rape are incomparable, just as reading about reading about dissection is incomparable to actually dissecting someone. As Mookerjee noted in this quote from Kathy Acker, transgressive texts cannot themselves transgress, the transgression is always simulated, through language:

You can talk about sexuality as a social phenomenon, so that it's up for grabs. You can talk about any intellectual thought and it's up for grabs, because anything can mean anything, any thought can lead into another thought and thus be completely perverted...But when you get to the actual physical act of sexuality, or of bodily disease, there's an undeniable materiality which isn't up for grabs. So it's the body which finally

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<sup>33</sup> Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Mookerjee, *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* 197.

can't be touched by all our skepticism and ambiguous systems of belief...With the body there is something that's essentially untouchable. And therefore transgressive.<sup>35</sup>

This simulation is, however, complicated by the transgressive texts' ability to morph between textual antagonist and literary passive body. Because while the text presents itself as a place for the exploration of abjection, as a body laid out for the exploration for desire, it turns out that the body is bloodless. Mookerjee even noted this trickster element of transgressive fiction in that, "The trickster muddies high gods",<sup>36</sup> but he failed to consider that it is not the narrator that is the trickster, but the text itself. The text makes promises of catharsis and exploration, and then mocks the reader for believing such a thing possible. The absurdity of attempting to obtain actual pleasure or experience through reading a transgressive text is often challenged within the texts themselves. This exposure is so complete at times that transgressive texts draw attention to the absurdity of reading. Within *Frisk*, Dennis, the narrator, highlights the inaccessible reality of the body when his description of dismembering someone is simple a collection of allusions to film:

I'm pretty sure if I tore some guy open I'd know him as well as anyone could, because I'd have what he consists of right there in my hands, mouth, wherever. Not that I know what I'd do with that stuff. Probably something insane...spill the guts through my finger like pirates supposedly did with doubloons or whatever. Except there'd be a smell, which I guess would be strong and hard to take. I can't imagine it [...] That's what I'm thinking about. I've got this longstanding urge to really open up someone I'm hot for [...] But since I don't have the boy or nerve or weapon, I just sit here scribbling, jerking off. That's what my left hand is doing while this one is writing. But inside my head the most spectacular violence is happening. A boy's exploding, caving in. It looks sort of fake since my only models are splatter films, but it's unbelievably powerful.<sup>37</sup>

At this stage in the book Dennis has yet to actually enact any of his fantasies, and, as is revealed at the books conclusion, never will. Here Dennis, like the reader, can only take images and references from cultural sources and clichés. The reader has to fill in the visual gaps of what a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>37</sup> Dennis Cooper, *Frisk* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), 54.

body under high impact would actually look like. This happens again a few pages later when several comparable images are made between the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film that is being viewed and the acts that are going on in front of it, “They kissed. That involves so much tonguing and sucking, their faces deflated”.<sup>38</sup> The possible attainment of violent fantasy in Transgressive fiction is often nullified by the text ending with the revelation that the violence was imaginary. This is a common trope in Transgressive fiction, and it could be argued forms the conclusion for *Frisk*, *American Psycho*, *Babyficker*, *My Idea of Fun* and *The End of Alice*; forming another element of the text antagonistic, objectifying nature.

If transgressive texts are indeed an attempt to return to the body, then it is an unsatisfying one. Within the transgressive texts the reader is primed for a visceral experience but is then both protected and disappointed by its textual nature. Ommundsen has noted that in regards to metafiction

[...]The sense of danger is, however, accompanied by the margin of security represented by the literary act itself: knowing that it is ‘only a text’, the reader can allow his- or herself to take pleasure in being put at risk. Metafiction thus involves the reader in a kind of catharsis, an acting out and purging of violent emotions, not, as in tragedy, through identification with the characters, but through the very performance of the role of the reader.<sup>39</sup>

With regards to Transgressive fiction, however, this security is experienced as a disappointment, another exposure to the reader of the prison house of language; a dangerous literary liaison is revealed to be textual safe sex.

The revelation of unattainability of either the body or pleasure through Transgressive texts causes an additional level of insult to the reader because the text lays its own body bare for the reader’s exploration. As Barthes claimed, “Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body”.<sup>40</sup> At the closing of a Transgressive text it is revealed that the true acting subject is that of the reader, as they act upon the body of the text. During the reading of a Transgressive text the reader preforms two distinct readings: the first is

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>39</sup> Ommundsen, *Metafictions? Reflexivity in Contemporary Text*, 77.

<sup>40</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 17.

emotional and it is here that the text impacts upon the reader, the second is analytical and is where the reader dissects the texts. These two readings may happen on the same occasion and together they form the transgressive reading experience, what B.R. McGraw would call an Erotics of Reading followed by a Poetics of Reading.<sup>41</sup> The reader's loss occurs upon the first reading, which is reactionary and often emotional. But the reader returns to the text, and, with the tool of the analytical trade, steadily takes the text apart. The baiting and reflexive nature of transgressive texts are noted, as is its dedication to both the Menippean and post-modernist traditions, the discomfort that is experienced on first reading inspires and ignites the need for the second analytical reading. During the second reading the text as object is pinned down and dismembered as the reader is compulsively driven to find that spark of perfect abjection which they found so fascinating. In reading and interpreting the work the reader destroys the spark of abjection; the very spark which drew them towards the text in the first place. And, like the transgressive narrator, is left with meaningless body parts.

In this element of the text-reader relationship the text acts as passive object, and is again easily referred to in humanized terms. As Ommundsen notes, "Not surprisingly, then, textual communication is frequently represented as an act of love: the text must offer itself as an object of desire, seduce the reader, play and be played upon like the body of a lover".<sup>42</sup> Despite any damage or insult that the reader experiences their very perseverance with the text reveals pleasure, whether it is through conquest, survival or a benign encounter with abjection. It would be simple to claim that during this phase of analysis the text is masochistic but the gestures between text and reader moves in both directions. It would be more correct to refer to transgressive texts as sadomasochistic because whilst they lay bare for dissection they ultimately deny the reader the pleasure of a clean dismemberment. The acute reader will inevitably neuter the text through analysis and criticism, but only after the text has made its play. So within this closely knit relationship the reader will always walk away the victor; but always at a loss.

The reader has endured through the transgressive experience, but their endurance has come at a cost. Perhaps their dignity has been squashed or their morals insulted, but at the

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<sup>41</sup> McGraw, "Barthes the Pleasure of the Text: An Erotics of Reading," 944.

<sup>42</sup> Ommundsen, *Metafiction? Reflexivity in Contemporary Text*, 71.

closing of the book the reader must admit to some form of gratifying experience. This relationship reveals an oscillation between the text and the reader both taking on passive and acting roles, acting as objects and subjects. Though its depiction of violence and violation the transgressive text makes promises for the exploration of social systems and metanarratives, and to a return to the proto-taboo body. But the reader is confronted by the knowledge that such a promise is impossible; for the text cannot get beyond the mirrored room of medium and convention. But while transgressive texts offer little in the way of catharsis or pedagogy they effectively draw attention to the complex nature of textuality and the reader-text relationship. At the opening of a subversive text a silent and abiding bargain is struck between the text and the reader. The text will attempt to hold affective power over the implied reader through its insidious textual nature and in return the reader will take the text apart as though conducting a dissection, rendering the text compartmentalized and lifeless.

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### **About the Author**

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