

79. The Body as the Object of the Gaze in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

Gaze always denotes a reciprocal relationship for humans because it involves the power relations between the gazer and the one who is subjected to the gaze. *The Handmaid's Tale*, written by Margaret Atwood in 1985, is the first focal point of this study as the novel includes dystopic female bodies that are disciplined through a constant gaze and employed in the service of the nation for maintaining the eternity of patrilinearity. Due to the low fertility rates of elites, the Republic of Gilead—the novel's representation of a theocratic state—assigns fertile female bodies as incubators, and those female bodies are constantly under surveillance. The second focus point of this study is Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian science fiction novel *Never Let Me Go* written in 2005, which shares many similarities with *The Handmaid's Tale*. *Never Let Me Go* is set in a dystopic world where scientists are allowed to conduct cloning experiments on children in order to harvest their organs. Because the experts must be certain of the 'harvesting' process, the children's bodies are constantly monitored. The goal of this study is to explore how human bodies become the object of the gaze and under what circumstances they are transformed into reproduction machines by being filtered and controlled by the gazing power in the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Never Let Me Go*.

Keywords: The body, the gaze, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Never Let Me Go*.

Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü ve Beni Asla Bırakma'da Bakışın Nesnesi Olarak Beden

Öz

Bakış, insanlar için her zaman karşılıklı bir ilişkiye işaret eder çünkü bakanla bakışa maruz kalan arasındaki iktidar ilişkilerini içerir. Margaret Atwood'un 1985 yılında kaleme aldığı *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü*, ataerkilliğin ebediliğini korumak için milletin hizmetinde kullanılan ve sürekli bir bakışla disipline edilen distopik kadın bedenlerini içerdiğinden bu çalışmanın ilk odak noktasıdır. Seçkinlerin düşük doğurganlık oranları nedeniyle, romanın teokratik bir devleti temsili olan Gilead Cumhuriyeti, doğurgan kadın bedenlerini kuluçka makinesi olarak görevlendirir ve bu kadın bedenleri sürekli gözetim altındadır. Bu çalışmanın ikinci odak noktası Kazuo Ishiguro'nun 2005 yılında kaleme aldığı ve *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü* ile pek çok paralellik taşıyan distopik bilimkurgu romanı *Beni Asla Bırakma*'dır. *Beni Asla Bırakma*, bilim insanlarının organlarını almak için klonlama deneyleri yapmasına izin verilen distopik çocuk bedenleri etrafında örülmüştür. Uzmanların 'hasat' sürecinden emin olması gerektiğinden, çocukların bedenleri sürekli izlenerek takip edilmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü* ve *Beni Asla Bırakma* romanlarında

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insan bedenlerinin nasıl bakışın nesnesi haline geldiğini ve hangi koşullar altında bakışın gücüyle elekten geçirilerek ve kontrol edilerek yeniden üretim makinelerine dönüştüğünü araştırmaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Beden, bakış, The Handmaid's Tale, Never Let Me Go.

1. The Notion of Gaze

The communication types which are formed through 'seeing' are just as important as linguistic communication because as Berger (1973) states, "seeing comes before words" (p.7). Warhol and Herndl (1997) point out that the gaze is used to define the representation of the act of looking (p. 427) in a broad sense. Humans naturally need to communicate through eye contact before they learn their first language. That is to say, the initial step of acquiring knowledge about other people and the world is realized through the gaze. Thus, humans are able to comprehend the relationship between what they see and what is seen, as well as figure out how things are organised in the visible realm.

In addition, the gaze stands as a psychoanalytical medium through which the subject "I" comprehends the relationship between herself/himself and others. Henry Krips (2010) explains the relationship between "I" and others formed through the notion of gaze as follows:

the scrutiny 'turns around', that is, at the same time it switches from active to passive voice – from 'I look' to 'I am looked at' (Freud, *Instincts and Vicissitudes* 1997, p. 92–94). To put it in general terms, because it encounters an uncomfortable resistance, a conscious look that is directed outwards transforms into a self-consciousness that returns to its agent as anxiety in relation to the scrutiny of an externalized anonymous Other. Lacan refers to the latter scrutiny, but also to the object that is its source as 'the gaze' (p.93).

According to Krips, the gaze has the potential to cause anxiety from the perspective of "the looked" because the dynamics of the gaze enable "the looker" to be omniscient and powerful while locating "the looked" under the subordination of the gaze. Furthermore, Lacan (1973) discusses the concept of the gaze as a psychoanalytical medium that reveals the visual and representational gaps when we are positioned as "the looked" in relation to what we see limitedly but are seen limitlessly:

this is the essential point—the dependence of the visible on that which places us under the eye of the seer [...] What we have to circumscribe, by means of the path he indicates for us, is the pre-existence of a gaze—I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides [...] In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze (p. 72-73).

On the other hand, when the gaze is combined with several discourses and ideologies imposed on subjects, the relationship between "the looker" and "the looked" transforms into a strategy for defining power relations and subject positions in social order. That is, it could be argued that the gaze becomes one of the mediums which deliberates the map of power as well as power relations within the society. The combination of the gaze, discourses and ideologies invariably bears power, which leaks into a set of relationships that pervade society. In his book *Power/Knowledge*, Michel Foucault suggests that "power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain. [...] Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation. [...] Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application" (p. 68). The Foucauldian view regards power as an ever-present enactment, regardless of the diversity of individuals and ideologies. It is power that produces bodies, discourses and even desires that identify individuals (p.98). For this reason, power could manifest itself through the gaze in various relationships, such as in families, groups, and institutions

that have the potential to be spots for exercising power. Power relations between individuals, individuals and groups, and groups and institutions generate a diverse set of social identities and behavioural patterns. As a result, the gaze, with its undeniable impact, becomes an essential component in the organisation of power relations. Therefore, the gaze loses its simple meaning as a medium of communication and becomes an ideological disciplinary apparatus.

Disciplinary power operated through the gaze can also be related to Michel Foucault's conception of 'panopticon'. The term panopticon, which means seeing and watching all, originates in Jeremy Bentham's design for a prison developed in 1785. While the circular design allows security guards to observe and control prisoners from all angles, the prisoners are unaware of who watches them or when they are watched. The constant but invisible control through the gaze is intended to motivate the prisoners to follow the rules. Therefore, the order in the prisons would be provided without any breaks.

Essentially, Jeremy Bentham proposed the panopticon as a prison design that allows prisoners to see no one else while allowing controllers to see all of the prisoners. It aims to create a prison in the prisoner's mind to obtain total self-discipline. As a result, the controllers do not spend constant effort to chasten the prisoners because the disciplinary mechanism (the controllers' gaze), which is uncertain when to operate, provides all-the-time security and discipline. As quoted in Jeremy Hawthorn's essay, Foucault suggests that such an arrangement is crueller than systems reliant on physical torture (2006, p.512).

Inspired by this design, Michel Foucault (1977) introduced the term "panopticon" to describe a theory of social discipline referring to "ideally the exercise of disciplinary power" (p.198). According to Foucault, panopticon could be regarded as a place "in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" (p. 197). Firstly, in Foucault's panopticon, a superior seer, occupying the highest position in the hierarchical order, is omnipresent and thought to be on duty at all times. Secondly, other figures in the hierarchical order are temporal and subject to change. Power is constantly exercised from top to bottom, as well as among those at the bottom of the hierarchical chain. Thus, the social disciplinary mechanism operates "by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him" (p.197). Inevitably, the panoptic exercise of disciplinary power in societies is invasive. It can easily permeate every moment of a person's life without his/her knowledge, as it is internalized through all of our actions and behaviours.

As a result, the gaze is a problematic concept that operates over a pre-defined binary opposition at first glance: "the looker and the looked". The binary oppositions are designed to serve social order constantly, and this inevitably results in the formation of social hierarchy. For instance, in patriarchal societies, men are positioned against women, culture against nature, white against black, the holy mother against femme fatale, and heterosexual against homosexual. The number of such binary oppositions could easily be increased. What should be taken into consideration is that, in all of these binary oppositions, the latter ones are always on the side of 'being looked at' whereas the formers are the total subject of power that subjugates, 'looks down', controls and manages to discipline.

2. The Functions of the Gaze over the Body in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Never Let Me Go*

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood and *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro are both notable works of postmodern dystopian fiction. Both novels provide a suitable ground for debate in terms of postmodernism in literature. However, the purpose of this study is not to discuss the postmodern representations of these works. Rather, the theoretical approach of the study is limited to the concept and variations of the gaze. Also, the body is regarded as both the domain and the object of the gaze in the discussion of the novels.

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a postmodern dystopian fiction. It takes place in the Republic of Gilead, which is a theocratic and patriarchal state replacing the United States government. Offred, the main character and narrator, is one of the handmaids assigned to bear children for Gilead's elite males who are called the commanders. The novel delves into issues of subordinated women in a patriarchal society, loss of female freedom, mistreatment of women's reproductive rights, and the numerous ways in which women struggle and try to restore independence and autonomy.

Never Let Me Go, Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian science fiction novel was published in 2005. The novel takes place in an altered version of Great Britain in the 1990's when organ donation and transplantation are in great demand due to advances in cloning technology. As organs are 'harvested' from clones under the supervision of scientific experts assigned by the state, cancer illness can be treated. The organs of the cloned children are removed from their bodies one by one till they die. Kathy, a clone who works as a caretaker for cloned children all across the country, narrates the story as she recalls her life and friends in Hailsham where cloned children are under surveillance.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the gaze operates as a control mechanism that limits, assigns missions and leaves no area for the handmaids' bodies to move freely. The Republic of Gilead is ruled by military and theocratic dictatorship that creates a hierarchical society in the novel. The theocracy of Gilead represents the Christian tradition, in which women are "perceived as more connected to the natural world and to the –lower functions of the body. They are viewed as more nurturing, since their bodies prepare them for childbearing, and as less capable of higher orders of thinking" (June, 2010, p. 15). Women's bodies are subjected to conservatism and used to satisfy men's desire for reproduction. Moreover, hierarchy does not only involve men and women; there is also a clear distinction between the females. For instance, the handmaids represent the automatized female bodies used for childbirth. The commanders' wives are the elites of all females. Econowives, who are married to low-ranked men of Gilead, are responsible for all domestic duties. Moreover, Marthas are old and infertile women who prepare handmaids for their reproduction duties, and the Aunts function as the trainers of the handmaids. This hierarchical system is strictly remained loyal and also controlled over the assigned women who function as the eye of the male gaze in Gilead. As Newman (1990) claims, the male gaze works "as a substitution of authority for the privilege of the [heterosexual] male subject" (p. 1031). By distributing the male gaze among the women of Gilead, the male authority ensures supremacy over the female body by designating the women of Gilead as an extension of their gaze. As a result, the women of Gilead become both the object and the distributor of the male gaze, and male-centered disciplinary power becomes ever-present and omniscient.

Women like Offred are constantly under the gaze, and thus under the control, of the superior women. Even when the commander has a sexual encounter with Offred, Serena Joy, his wife, maintains complete control by using her body and gaze: "My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of

hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control of the process and thus of the product” (Atwood, 1985, p. 121). While Serena Joy is assigned to control Offred’s body from the upper/seer position, Offred is exposed to sexual harassment by Serena’s husband. So, Offred is the one who is looked at, passivized and limited. It demonstrates that the female body appears to be divided into functions as a result of the symbolic controlling gaze which divides subjects into categories.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the reader meets a mass of children who are not aware that they are cloned for donation. They are educated in Hailsham as typical children and supervised by 'guardians' who encourage their interest in art. Students have faith in the 'Gallery,' where their best artworks are displayed. As a result, it fosters competitive ambition among the students, and they begin to observe and spy upon each other in their world limited to Hailsham: “Even after I’d seen the pencil case, the idea of a guardian giving a present like that was so beyond the bound” (Ishiguro, 2005, p.57). The children of Hailsham, who are the object of the gaze, are also controlling each other through the power of the gaze. Guardians rarely give gifts to those they control through their gaze. The Hailsham children understand that if guardians gave presents to some children, it would signal inequality among them because a gift could place a child in a different position than the others. This will disrupt their equality and create a hierarchical order among Hailsham students.

Furthermore, Hailsham students are aware of the monitors at the Sales, and they realize that gazing gives them power over others, so they develop alternatives for gazing their friends: “Ruth ran the risk of others having *seen* it [...] she’d heard about the pencil case coming and reserved it with one of *monitors* [...] the *monitors* took them back to Miss Emily’s office after each sale [...] If I hung around a *monitor* at the next sale, it *wouldn’t be difficult* to browse through the pages” (p.59, emphasis mine). Kathy realizes that gazing means gaining knowledge about what is going on. Therefore, the gaze disrupts the power relations among Hailsham students. Although the power of the gaze belongs to the experts of the state, some children discover the potential of visual control and deconstruct the equality among them through the power of the gaze.

As evidenced with the examples from *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Never Let Me Go*, the gaze is represented as “the power of power” because it generates some specific controlling and disciplining mechanisms. The relationship between visual control and power in both novels could be related to Michel Foucault’s conception of “panoptic gaze”. Foucault’s panoptic gaze “has a constitutive impact upon the subjectivity of the individuals in its field of view: The techniques of disciplinary power (of the construction of the subject) are conceived as capable of ‘materially penetrating’ the body in depth without depending on the mediation of the subject’s own representations [...] having first to be interiorized in people’s consciousness” (Krips, 2010, p.94). The controllers’ gaze becomes panoptic in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Never Let Me Go*, as it constructs the handmaids of Gilead and the children of Hailsham as subjects specifically categorised according to their function by penetrating their bodies directly.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Never Let Me Go*, the human bodies are designed to be dystopic bodies through the panoptic gaze. Except for an all-seeing controlling authority whose appearance time is ambiguous, this disciplinary mechanism promises nothing to cherish the hope. In both novels, the panoptic gaze only generates disciplinary power to stereotype the bodies of the handmaids and children. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the female bodies are forced to give birth in exchange for nothing, they are not even allowed to have and hide any personal objects. For this reason, Offred’s desire to hide a knife is a

symbolic strategy for her to break up with the panoptic gaze over her. On the other hand, the children do not trespass beyond the boundaries of Hailsham despite the lack of high walls and security around the school in *Never Let Me Go*. Thus, the examples from the two novels demonstrate the panoptic gaze causes the limitation of movement for the bodies of the handmaids of Gilead and the children of Hailsham as a result of invisible potential that condemns these dystopic bodies into a dystopic world.

Berger (1973) claims that “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at [...] Thus, she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: sight” (p. 47). Moreover, as quoted in Newman’s essay (1990), Ann Kaplan says that “[t]he gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the ‘masculine’ position” (p. 1029). Accordingly, in both novels, the panoptic gaze designs two different male-centered worlds controlling human bodies for the sake of the state’s ideology. The subjects – the handmaids and the children- are exposed to the panoptic gaze and oppressed by passivity, limitation, and sentence. Moreover, their names are designed to display their bodies as objects of the gazing authorities. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the names of women trapped for childbirth begin with the preposition ‘of’: Offred which means Fred’s handmaid, Ofglen which means Glen’s handmaid. These women are either not allowed to use their own names or are given a name that is not associated with a male’s name. Their names are designed to demonstrate men’s total possession and women’s subjection. As a result, the male gaze constitutes the novel’s panoptic gaze, and Gilead stands as the panopticon for the handmaids. Moreover, as exemplified in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the woman is the negation of the man because she lacks a phallus, a visible organ from the Freudian view. For this reason, phallus is the gazer, and thus the controller, “it is the eye that decides what is clearly true what isn’t” (Moi, 1985, p. 132). Thus, the male gaze which represents the controlling power of Gilead, could be related to phallus of the male authorities condemning the handmaids into “the male-identified, male-dominated, male-centred, and control-obsessed nature of patriarchy” (Johnson, 2014, p. 87).

On the other hand, in *Never Let Me Go*, the children cloned for donation have no surname. The reader follows them only with their names throughout the novel. It means that Kathy is only one of the hundreds of Kathies, Tommy is only one of the hundreds of Tommies who come to Hailsham. These children are not permitted to have anything that distinguishes them from the others, such as a surname. Therefore, the power of the panoptic gaze enhances its controlling mechanisms beyond visual control by naming human bodies as they are aware that “to name is to know; to know is to control” (Paglia, 1999, p. 5), as exemplified in *Never Let Me Go*. They are like a community whose only duty is to obey what is imposed on them without possessing anything, and their bodies are torn apart under the control of the panoptic gaze that defines their role in the social order as the ‘harvested’ subjects. So, the bodies of Hailsham children coincide with what Foucault (2007) tells about ‘the body’ in his work “Discipline and Punish”: “[T]he body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (p.549).

Not only does the power of the gaze control and limit human bodies, but it also creates a ‘simulacra’ for them in both novels. When *The Handmaid’s Tale and Never Let Me Go* are analysed, it is clearly seen that the visual controllers create dystopic worlds that have no resemblance to the outside world. Jean Baudrillard (1988) points out that “power [...] produces nothing but signs of its resemblance” (p.410). Baudrillard gives Disneyland as an example that is “the perfect model of all entangled orders of simulation” (p.405) by referring to a kind of utopia. However, both Atwood and Ishiguro reverse

Baudrillard's Disneyland by creating dystopic simulations which mask and pervert reality in a catastrophic way. In parallel with Baudrillard's simulacra, the house of the commander, where Offred becomes a concubine in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the school of Hailsham in *Never Let Me Go* lack any border or wire fence. They form a world in which people have no other way of thinking than in their controlled and constructed worlds. They are so enslaved by the power of the gaze that they cannot imagine another world.

Reproduction is the ultimate goal of the gaze, which controls human bodies and creates dystopian simulacra for the handmaids of Gilead and the children of Hailsham. The women of commanders are charged with bearing children and providing the continuation of male genes for the sake of rebuilding the society in which public and private lives are regulated. Moreover, their bodies are regarded as an object which can easily be broken into pieces or transformed into another form of being. For instance, the female bodies in *The Handmaid's Tale* are viewed and treated as farm animals. They are carved up like a Christmas turkey, objectified, and transformed into 'it': "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (Atwood, 1985, p.124). The power of the gaze is what drives Offred to define herself in this way because "the gaze does not only look, it shows" (Kitsi-Mitakou, 1997, p. 87). Thus, the gaze of patriarchal authority traps female bodies within what is seen by the male gaze and forms their sense of self according to their representation through the male gaze.

Similarly, the children of Hailsham in *Never Let Me Go* are cloned for organ donation, so it is another form of reproduction. Nonetheless, overpopulation would result in environmental degradation and a several epidemic diseases. This would be harmful to economic growth, education, and healthcare. This is the point that the authorities of the gaze cannot observe: the dystopian state of the world. The end of the world would be brought but by anthropocentric egoism. As a result, those who control others through the gaze will inevitably become victims of their anthropocentric passions; they are unaware that they are preparing their own terrible ending with their hands. Furthermore, the attempt to transform human bodies into consumption tools is directly connected to capitalism. The capitalist idea is based on the 'use, consume, and throw away' rule, which provides a foundation for consumption recycling. However, if the capitalist economic order continues to control human bodies as a grinder, capitalism, as one of the most anthropocentric movements, will collapse all humanitarian notions in an unexpected way. As a result, both novels are so critical that they imply the eventual demise of the anthropocentric hierarchical order formed through the gaze, which serves as a useful apparatus for all ideologies.

It is clear that both female bodies in Atwood's novel and children's bodies in Ishiguro's novel are politicised and brought together to represent minorities because authority knows that ideology can work over and be imposed on minority groups initially. As a result, the controlling gaze is always fixed on the minorities, such as the handmaids and the Hailsham children. Although the reader is aware of who makes up these minorities, such as Offred and Ofglen in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well as Kathy and Tommy in *Never Let Me Go*, the characters (and the readers) never appear to have the top-down perspective throughout the novels. Foucault (2007) states that "invisibility is a guarantee of order" (p.554). It is seen in both novels that the most powerful gaze is never at the stage, it is always felt but not caught by the eye. Neither the reader nor the characters cannot give any exact answer to the following questions: Who gives the orders? Who makes the final decisions? Who takes notice of minorities and their caregivers? Because humans fear what is most invisible, the handmaids of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the children of *Never Let Me Go* have no idea about what to fight for. They are aware of the omniscient power of the gaze over them, and they feel it, but they are unable to find a solution for something they cannot see through the eye.

Thus, the invisible but omniscient gaze at the top “lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease, and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what happens to him” (Foucault, 2007, p.554). As Foucault claims, the gaze as a disciplinary mechanism is such an invasive power that it achieves to rule an individual’s life from the very beginning of his life so that s/he cannot easily recognize its presence and oppression. As it is seen in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Never Let Me Go*, the gaze is successfully imposed on Gilead’s handmaids and Hailsham’s students, with the omnipotent presence of the gazers ensuring unbroken, standardised, and regular order. As a result, the two dystopic state representations offer great use of the gaze, which is always operating within the boundaries of the dystopic worlds they create.

3. Conclusion

This study has critically analysed and discussed the transformation process of human bodies into the object of the gaze in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*. The concept of the gaze and its varieties, especially the panoptic gaze, are regarded as the theoretical medium while analysing the reciprocal power relations between the gaze and the female bodies in *The Handmaid’s Tale* as well as the children’s bodies in *Never Let Me Go*. The panoptic gaze functions as a disciplinary apparatus for identifying and controlling power relationships within the settings of both novels, allowing us to describe Gilead and Hailsham as panopticon examples. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the female bodies are used as incubators for population growth and the authorities can easily control and oppress these mechanized bodies through the power of the gaze. Furthermore, the novel criticises mind/body duality by portraying the male gaze as mind and the handmaids as body. At this point, Atwood’s criticism may be interpreted as a challenge to question the origins of Western thought, which highlights asymmetrical divisions within gender and sexuality. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the gaze, as a disciplinary mechanism, has authority over the children’s bodies, which the authorities employ as an organ field to ‘harvest’ in *Never Let Me Go*. Both novels reveal that the gaze inevitably causes reciprocity and defines the superiors and inferiors in the chain of power relations. Therefore, it should not be considered a value-free or random act. Rather, it must be regarded as a deliberate and organized enactment that defines individuals’ subject positions in society as well as an ideological apparatus capable of transforming the human body into an object through the dynamics of vision.

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