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# ON VOYEURISM: BEING SEEN ON THE MODERN STAGE

by

MEGAN MOBLEY

(Under the Direction of Dustin Anderson)

## ABSTRACT

At the end of the nineteenth century, playwrights grew more interested in exploring the ramifications of the gaze, looking and being looked at. For existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, the gaze causes a never-ending battle between our subjective selves, how we view ourselves, and our objective selves, or how others view us. The knowledge of the Other's gaze allows us to self-reflect on our own existence. Sartre and Oscar Wilde each incorporate the gaze into their plays to explore the battle between our subjective and objective selves, gendered perception, differences in perception, and to undercut or demonstrates the dominant structures of seeing. By first exploring Sartre's *No Exit*, I can observe how Sartre's three main characters demonstrate Mulvey's theories of the male gaze, a structure of looking which is influenced by the dominant social order. His play offers an exploration of Hélène Cixous' theories on perception, particularly regarding gendered perceptions, and the existential battle between our self-image (being-for-itself) and the Other's perception of ourselves (being-for-others). Wilde's play, on the other hand, allows us to see what comes before Sartre and how his play undercuts the patriarchal nature of the stage and goes against Mulvey's concept of the male gaze.

INDEX WORDS: Scopophilia, Modern drama, Voyeurism, Film theory, Fetishism, Oscar Wilde, Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism, *Salomé*, *No Exit*, Georgia Southern University, Literature

ON VOYEURISM: BEING SEEN ON THE MODERN STAGE

by

MEGAN MOBLEY

B.A., Georgia Southern University, 2017

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

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ON VOYEURISM: BEING SEEN ON THE MODERN STAGE

by

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## DEDICATION

To my mother, father, grandmother, and late grandfathers whose unconditional love and words of encouragement taught me to believe in myself.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout the process of completing this thesis, I learned that, as with writing project, it cannot be completed alone. I could not have produced this thesis without the love and support of my family. Even through my lowest points, they continued to believe in me. I must also thank Dr. Anderson for not only guiding me through this project, but for all the professional advice and words of encouragement he has given me during my graduate years. Without him, not only would I have not been able to produce this thesis, I would not have made it through graduate school. I will never be able to express the gratitude I have for each person in my life who has stood by me during these challenging years.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

During the *fin de siècle*<sup>1</sup>, the modern stage introduced new modes of theatricality. While the Victorian stage encapsulated the queen's idolization of medieval romanticism's virtues, the modern stage offered new ways of seeing the world and individuals. Modern playwrights strayed from the Victorian stage's focus on what constitutes a proper society and began to explore the voyeuristic underside of human existence. Whereas women were mainly under the scrutinizing gaze of spectators on the Victorian stage, both men and women became equally judged on the Modern stage. Not only was the psychology of characters a growing interest for playwrights, so too was the spectator's psyche. Modern playwrights realized that even the spectator, who has no role in the diegetic world on stage, plays a significant part in the theatre. The audience member willingly sits in the dimly lit theatre, relinquishing all control during their spectatorial experience. The feeling of power or powerlessness while viewing even the most horrific or grotesque play, however, grants the spectator visual pleasures. In any play, the spectator becomes a voyeur, a peeping tom, who submits his gaze to the diegesis.

The modern stage provided a platform for postmodern films. Before film, however, there was photography, which ultimately led to film, film theory, and studies on structures of seeing. In particular, a focus on *scopophilia*, the pleasure of looking, became a growing interest to art and film critics. To better understand how drama offers an apparatus of visual pleasure for spectators, one should first examine scopophilia through photography since, as Mary Doane observes, the cinema is a "theatre of pictures" (75). In her book *On Photography*, American

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<sup>1</sup> end of the nineteenth century

filmmaker and philosopher Susan Sontag explores the history of photography and how the camera revolutionized modes of seeing. The invention of the camera, Sontag observes, led to the realization that seeing was more than a unitary activity. “Photographic seeing,” she describes it, “was both a new way for people to see and a new activity for them to perform” as photographs provided spectators with a new opportunity to take possession of a space and the person or object in the image (68).

Photography consequently intensified spectator’s voyeurism. Similar to sexual voyeurism, or sexual gratification through looking, gazing at an image encourages the event being photographed to continue, even if the image captured expresses the pain of others. This sadistic position of viewing a moment of pain, violence, or perversity is in some way accepting that pictorial reality, and in encouraging this pictured reality to continue, the spectator accepts the position of a voyeur. While those photographed remain passive and alarmed participants, the camera transforms the spectator and photographer “into something active, a voyeur: only he has mastered the situation. What do these people see? We don’t know. And it doesn’t matter. It is an Event: something worth seeing — and therefore worth photographing” (10-11). Looking at photography, in this sense, is perverse just as taking the picture is perverse, as explained by photographer Diane Arbus (Sontag 9).

Sontag points out, however, that photography is not the best way to arise sexual stimulation. There needs to be some distance between the subject and photographer to make spectators feel, as feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey words it, peeping toms. Sontag explores the 1960 movie *Peeping Toms* to explain how the main character, Mark Lewis, possessed no desire to have sex with or possess the bodies of the women he stalked. Instead, he desired to eternally possess their bodies in images, frozen in time, to look at the moments of their death,

pain, and horror with their exposed nudity and vulnerability, and experience his sexual voyeurism whenever he wants in solitary confinement. Gazing at images of one's nudity or suffering grants a similar gratification as it provides the spectator with a sense of knowing that the person pictured cannot prevent the viewer from gazing at his or her vulnerability.

Photographs in which the subjects know they are being looked at by the camera are aware of their inability to control how spectators view them, thus resulting in anxiety toward the camera. The camera, Sontag observes, is an invasive object which acts as a phallus. "It [the camera] doesn't rape," she explains, "or even possess, though it may presume, intrude, trespass, distort, exploit, and, at the farthest reach of metaphor, assassinate — all activities that, unlike the sexual push and shove, can be conducted from a distance, and with some detachment" (9). The movie assumes this same phallic-like positioning of the camera between spectators and cinematography, conveying "connections between impotence and aggression, professionalized looking and cruelty, which points to the central fantasy connected with the camera" (9-10). The intrusive phallic gaze of spectators, connected to the intrusive focus of the camera onto characters' pain, pleasure, and control of the diegesis, allows spectators, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, to adopt a phallic, and therefore male, gaze while viewing the passive characters on the screen.<sup>2</sup>

The observation that spectators' gazes stand in for the camera provides the foundation to Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. The spectator's gaze is essentially non-intervention which simultaneously empowers and disempowers spectators since viewing the event provides them with the agency to place themselves in a particular scene, possess objects within the diegesis, and project their repressed desires on the object of their gaze; however, their voyeurism makes it

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<sup>2</sup> Objects of pictures/films are passive because they have no control over how their image is conveyed by the photographer/filmmaker.

impossible to separate spectators from the scene which ultimately disempowers them as they are unable to intervene despite feeling a part of the diegetic world on the screen. Furthermore, as spectators are too indulged in the diegesis to control their conscious and unconscious desires, photography and film, Sontag realizes, is practiced as “a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power” used by the photographer and filmmaker to “unmask hypocrisy and combat ignorance” (8, 86).<sup>3</sup>

In her critically acclaimed essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey expounds upon the use of film to reveal its visual apparatus formed by the dominant social order. She connects Freud’s term *scopophilia* with how spectators view scenes on the screen, particularly scenes which offer sexual stimulation. Looking and being looked at can be pleasurable, she writes, but also threatening (62). It is this paradox which, formed by the representation or image of the woman, links castration anxiety to male spectatorship. This fear ultimately influences cinematography’s portrayal of women. To cope with this fear, Mulvey claims, traditional Hollywood film genres ensure women maintain passive, often sexualized, roles while men portray active, dominant roles which allow men to fetishize women into something less terrifying. Cinema, therefore, ultimately depends on the objectification of women to ensure men’s visual pleasure.

Mulvey further explores this gendered apparatus of the gaze through psychoanalysis and Freud’s *Three Essays on Sexuality*. In his collection of essays, he explains that voyeurism begins during childhood. Children examine other people and are curious about their genitals, such as the presence or absence of a penis. When this voyeurism develops into something more sinister and obsessive, scopophilia transforms into perversion. Obsessive voyeurs, who Mulvey refers to as

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<sup>3</sup> “What is humanity? It is a quality things have in common when they are viewed as photographs” (Sontag 86).

Peeping Toms, can only derive sexual gratification through actively watching an objectified Other who is unaware of being watched. Despite actors and actresses knowing they are being filmed and audience members knowing there are hidden cameras producing the film, the diegesis unfolds, allowing spectators to live out their voyeuristic fantasies. In the theatre, the contrast of the brightly lit stage with the dimly lit seating area allows for the same effect, just without the advantage of the camera being able to zoom in on certain scenes. Spectators, feeling alone in the dimly lit theatre, feel free to act as Peeping Toms as they look at unwilling, helpless characters whose existence remains in the diegesis, unable to control how spectators look at them. Through this voyeurism, men can feel as though they are in their own world and take possession of the woman on screen and control the diegetic world.

According to Mulvey, a man's narcissistic identification with the main character gives him the erotic power of the gaze along with the active role of moving the plot along, making choices, and indirectly possessing the object (woman) in the diegesis. The woman's function, on the other hand, is to be an erotic object for the characters in the diegetic world and the audience members. The male spectator can take two avenues to relieve castration anxiety and hold an active male gaze, even if a threatening female character breaks the fourth wall and looks directly at him. There is fetishistic scopophilia, a look which builds up the beauty of the object, therefore, making it a pleasurable and non-threatening sight. Secondly, there is voyeurism, which Mulvey relates to sadism. The spectator experiences pleasure by placing guilt on the woman, related to castration, by either punishing or forgiving the woman (asserting control) in a "battle of will and strength, victory/defeat" (64).

Critics of Mulvey's essay, however, raise the question, "What of the female spectator's visual pleasure?" Her work received mass criticism for failing to address women's visual

pleasure, people of color, homosexual spectators, and suggesting women cannot escape the gendered apparatus of film to enjoy viewing an active male hero on the screen. Years later, she addressed the question of female spectatorship in “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.’” She opens her essay by stating she will explore how spectators react to a central female protagonist commanding the center of the stage, specifically one who is unable to achieve a stable sexual identity. She argues that women who watch male active heroes are “masculinized” and return to a repressed/subconscious phallic stage and enjoy this identification with a male hero and being able to freely control the diegetic world.

Mulvey then proposes an alternative option, that perhaps the female spectator is too “out of key” with this masculine position (124). Even though she says she will focus on a central female protagonist, she still focuses on the male hero of the text or film. “Hollywood genre films are structured around masculine pleasure,” Mulvey contends, “offering an identification with an *active* point of view, [which allows] a woman spectator to rediscover that lost [masculine] aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bedrock of feminine neurosis” (124). This type of storytelling, shaped by cultural norms and gender expectations, eases a woman into a “transition out of her own sex into another ” (125). In other words, the woman symbolically transitions into a “male” mindset.

As in her previous paper, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” she uses Freud to analyze film structure. She quotes Freud’s comments on femininity and sexuality, stating he argues that there is only one libido, the masculine libido. To refute Freud’s assertion that women’s day-dreams are only focused on the erotic while men’s ambitious fantasies are more concerned with financial success and dominance, Mulvey further explains, “The ego, of men *and* women, desires to fantasise itself in a certain, active, manner” (125, italics my own).

Consequently, the gender fluidity of the ego assists in trans-sex identification while viewing a male hero and in everyday life. It is not an easy transition, however, and it shifts constantly, implying that it is more difficult for women to form their ego ideal and sexual identity. It is as if the woman cannot fully accept her masculine side, trapped in a sea of masculinity and femininity. The female spectator can more easily transition from femininity to masculinity, allowing her to identify with both the female, passive or active, and the active male hero.

Mary Doane explores this idea of the transvestite female spectator while offering a more detailed exploration of the female spectator in her essay “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator.” She poses this question: “what is there to prevent her [the female spectator] from reversing the [active male/passive female] relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure?” (77). Theories on female spectatorship, she points out, are rare, mainly due to women finding it difficult to take on the position of fetishist since they have no castration anxiety to fetishize away. The female spectator must therefore assume a masochistic or passive position when identifying with a female character. While Doane attributes masochism with identification of the passive female character, she agrees with Mulvey in her idea of masculine spectatorship, or the adoption of the male gaze, when identifying with an active male hero. The gender fluidity of the female gaze, she explains, is what Mulvey meant by her closing statement in “Afterthoughts,” in which she describes a woman, metaphorically, as always shifting in her “transvestite clothes.” Womanliness is a mask, Mulvey asserts, and acting masculine “effects a defamiliarisation of female iconography” which “confounds this masculine structure of the look” (82).

Until quite recently, there has been little skepticism about Mulvey and Doane’s claims (Studlar 18). In a more in-depth discussion of masochism, feminist critic Gaylyn Studlar’s *The*

*Realm of Pleasure*<sup>4</sup> proposes that, despite “psychoanalysis [having] often been theoretically closed to an analysis of female fetishism,” there nonetheless exists the possibility of a woman indulging in both fetishism and disavowal (45). Studlar therefore problematizes Mulvey’s argument that the spectator is “male” and derives pleasure from feeling dominant over the passive female figures on the screen, ultimately relieving castration anxiety. The act of fetishism which Mulvey and Doane base their arguments on, does not always have ties with castration anxiety, Studlar argues, and narrowing the scope of male/female spectatorship to castration anxiety consequently limits the exploration of visual pleasure. Just as women’s scopophilic pleasures have been narrowed to masochism and masculinization of the gaze, so too has men’s spectatorial pleasures been narrowed to fetishism.

Mulvey’s narrowed view of the masculine gaze further prohibits the possibility of female characters existing as objects of identification as opposed to existing merely as objects of possession. Studlar continues this exploration in “Visual Pleasure and the Masochistic Aesthetic.” She criticizes Mulvey’s assumption that the female spectator cannot view the male character “as an object of sexual looking . . . [which] inadvertently seems to promote the general cultural sanction against women’s public right to sexual looking” (45).<sup>5</sup> In denying a woman’s ability to fetishize, one denies a woman the freedom of sexual voyeurism and embracing her libido without guilt or shame.

In addition to the discussion of the gaze during spectatorial experiences, others such as Jacques Lacan and Jean-Paul Sartre explore the existential dilemma between how we view ourselves (subjective self) and how others view us (objective self). According to Lacan, what we

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<sup>4</sup> In closing the gap of gendered spectatorship, Studlar also proposes that the desire for all spectators, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, is to feel powerless, which offers more spectatorial possibilities other than the sadistic, controlling gaze Mulvey focuses on.

<sup>5</sup> *Magic Mike* (2012), *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), Brad Pitt in *Troy* (2004)



think of our identity is actually imaginary. Lacan termed this process of forming one's "imaginary" identity the mirror stage. At the age of five or six months old, the child recognizes, either literally or symbolically, his reflection in the mirror. He attributes this identification process to apperception, or the turning of oneself into an object in order to view one's body outside of oneself. This self-objectification and observation through the mirror will continue throughout the rest of his life. This conscious perception of himself transforms the child's self-image from a part of the mother to a whole, independent individual. Realizing he exists apart from the world and his mother, the authenticity of being a whole subject is lost. This causes a split between the id and ego, arising a feeling of detachment from his real self. The child, from this point on, must develop his own identity in a way which will help him make sense of himself and cope with the id's inconsistent desires. The mirror henceforth provides the illusion that his identity is whole, when in reality the desires and inconsistencies of life as experienced by the subject before the mirror stage alters what is authentic and real. From this stage of childhood and onward, the individual attempts to affirm his identity through everyday conversation and experiences.

From this infantile mirror stage, the individual remains conflicted between his self-consciousness, what existential dramatist Jean-Paul Sartre terms *being-for-itself*, and how they are perceived through the Other's consciousness, what Sartre terms *being-for-others*. Sartre further writes,

[W]e experience our inapprehensible being-for-others in the form of a possession. I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds

the secret of what I am. He makes me be and thereby he possesses me, and this possession is nothing other than the consciousness of possessing me. (364)

Consequently, while this mirror stage affirms one's existence as a whole, independent subject, there will forever be the external gaze of the other to which one will continually feel possessed by. While the individual wishes to exist as wholly and independently as he sees himself in the mirror, through which seeing his motor skills makes him feel in control of his subjectivity, he will forever feel a sense of belonging to the Other's consciousness, an existence apart from his *for-itself*, separate from his own self-perception. Sartre's most well-known work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), is an impressive six hundred and thirty-eight pages through which Sartre articulates the consciousness of being. Sartre believed human making a choice, he explains, is a choice, as choices reveal what we think a human being should be. Unlike a tree, there is no one way to define humanity, so our individual choices define us. To intensify the anguish of existence, Sartre viewed the world as having no fixed values, with men and women existing merely as actors. As evident in his play *No Exit*, Sartre focused on the monstrousness and the multitudes of existence for individuals.

Another renowned playwright, Oscar Wilde, may not be considered an existentialist, but he seems to have shared similar views with Jean-Paul Sartre when it comes to one's self-image. Wilde's ideas of possible versions of himself reflect Sartre's philosophy outlined in *Being and Nothingness*. According to Richard Ellmann, American literary critic and biographer of Oscar Wilde, "Wilde thought of the self as having multiple possibilities, and of his life manifesting each of these in turn" (311). In other words, Wilde believed there exists no singular version of oneself. Who we are, and how we present ourselves to others and how others perceive us constantly changes. Wilde believed the "imaginative creation of oneself" began from birth (311).

He painted numerous self-portraits, grew a beard, then shaved it, and his style changed periodically as well. No wonder, Ellmann points out, he focused so much on masks and poses. He tried to capture his imaginative, or ideal image, of himself in a single painting that he wanted to be remembered in. He was never satisfied. It seems that Wilde was able to capture himself better in his literature, through characters such as Dorian and Salomé, as he always tried to “articulate his own sentiments” through his characters (318).<sup>6</sup>

Ellmann points out that Wilde did not know of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, a book in which he explores the aesthetic man who, unlike the ethical man, is overwhelmed with his “succession of moods, to each of which he surrenders wholly,” so much so that he loses that aspect of his personality which he wished to initially express (89). Kierkegaard refuted the aesthetic lifestyle. Nonetheless, his idea of the aesthetic is indicative of what we later see in Salomé, who becomes so enthralled in her passionate mood that she surrenders her desire to that image of herself she wished to express, the chaste virgin untouchable to man. Wilde, although known for his aesthetic lifestyle,<sup>7</sup> considered aestheticism “not a creed but a problem” (310). Experiencing the consequences of aestheticism led him to explore such ramifications in his work. Wilde’s subject matter encourages the reader or spectator to witness “exercises in self-criticism as well as pleas for tolerance” (100). As Sontag proclaims decades later, art reveals social masks, and Wilde’s work “almost always end in unmasking” (vxi). His works reveal secrets about ourselves and propose that evil and good are not always so easily discernable, “that moral tabs cannot cope with the complexity of behavior” (vxi). His wit and unique envisioning of the world is still applicable to the world today, Ellmann writes, as he “ranged over the visible and invisible

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<sup>6</sup> “Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian is what I would like to be- in other ages, perhaps” (qtd. in Ellmann 319).

<sup>7</sup> His mother gave him a monthly allowance, but he spent it mostly on clothes, and he spent money he did not even have

worlds, and dominated them by his unusual views” (vxii). Demonstrations of Wilde’s unusual views are evident in his one-act drama, *Salomé*.

Both Sartre’s *No Exit* and Wilde’s *Salomé* take place in one setting as characters try, but fail, to escape from each other’s objectifying gazes. Each play reveals a sort of battle of the gazes between characters, and neither offer admirable characters to identify with. By examining each play, it becomes evident that Sartre’s existential views expressed in *No Exit* explore ontological structures of seeing while Wilde’s play challenges traditional theories on gendered spectatorship, particularly Mulvey’s. As neither portray admirable figures to identify with, each character try to justify their actions and build up their ideal self-image, or ego ideal, only to have it defamed by the Other’s look. As demonstrated by Sartre and Wilde’s plays, the gaze carries three primary functions in *No Exist* and *Salomé*: to make spectators aware of the existential battle between our subjective and objective selves, to address how gendered perceptions and biases affect how the Other views us, and how spectators’ experience visual pleasure when viewing abject characters on the stage.

CHAPTER 2  
 “[Y]OU’LL LIVE IN MY GAZE”: VOYEURISTIC AND FETISHISTIC SCOPOPHILIA  
 IN SARTRE’S *NO EXIT*

Sartre did not consider himself an existentialist until Gabriel Marcel referred to him as such. Before then, he called himself a phenomenologist, one who studies structures of consciousness (Kern 2). Edith Kern responded to Sartre not considering himself an existentialist, despite so many calling him one:

Had he not realized in *Being and Nothingness* . . . that man was not justified in assuming the image he held of himself to be closer to reality than that which Others beheld? Had he not, therefore, to accept as reality the way in which he revealed himself to the Other- be that ever so fragmentary and incomplete? The freedom left to him was that of not conforming to the mold Others had prepared for him. (3)

Ironically, Sartre himself initially denied and rejected his own philosophy. But it is exactly this mode of thinking, this relationship between the self and Others, which Sartre explores in *No Exit* (1944).

Eric Bentley points out that while Sartre is a talented dramatist, he “has in abundance the defects of his qualities: he can be superficial, perverse, clever, naughty” (77). In defense of his “naughty” and perverse qualities, Sartre explained that the new French drama “seeks . . . to explore the state of man in his entirety and to present to the modern man a portrait of himself, his problems, his hopes, and his struggles” (qtd. in Bentley 78). Bentley compares Sartre’s *No Exit* to a melodrama, with traditional settings and characters, but Jacques Guicharnaud justifies the melodramatic structure of Sartre’s plays as he “wanted first to get the spectator on familiar ground and then gradually bring him into existentialist drama, far from his familiar ground” (Guicharnaud. 69). In other words, the melodramatic structure provides a comfortably realistic

setting for spectators to identify and integrate themselves into while the depth of his modern framework plunges spectators, unexpectedly, into Sartre's absurd, existential world. In exploring the most common, everyday scenarios, as did melodramatic plays, Sartre eases spectators into his unravelling of the dark, absurd side of human existence.

The play's melodramatic setting includes one room, "a drawing room in Second Empire style," practically empty save for three benches and a bronze ornament on a mantelpiece. An unnamed male valet escorts three people inside, Estelle, Inez, and Garcin, whose lives have ended on earth. Presumably in Hell, the play follows their interactions and conversations in the unbearably claustrophobic room. With no mirrors and no way out, except for one door which appears locked, the three individuals engage in a "battle of the gazes" with each character hoping another confirms their self-image. Each having committed horrible acts on earth, they try to justify their actions while building up their image, only to have it defamed by the Other's look.

Whether the person is doing the looking (the subject) or being looked at (the object), the gaze evokes a sense of erotic pleasure from either objectifying another person or being objectified as the source of pleasure through the Other's gaze. Mulvey discusses four essential forms of the gaze. There is first the intra-diegetic gaze, characters interacting with each other on the screen; secondly, the extra-diegetic gaze, or characters talking about people who are not in the same room as they are; thirdly, the speaker's gaze, which for Mulvey is the camera and how the director focuses on certain characters and their bodies (for plays, however, this can mean the narrative voice); and lastly, the spectator's gaze deals with how the audience interacts with the characters on the screen or stage. Each form of these diegetic gazes, as demonstrated in Sartre's *No Exit*, uncover our existential fears of identity, consciousness, objectivity, and lack of freedom in the eternal gaze of the Other whose consciousness our meaning relies on.

For Mulvey, the male gaze which objectifies women provides a sense of erotic superiority, allowing spectators to feel erotically superior as well. Through these intra and extra-diegetic male gazes, “the cinema poses questions about the ways the unconscious (formed by dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking” (Mulvey 2085). As a man stuck in a room with two women, Garcin does not feel objectified, but marginalized as he is in a sort of “battle of the gazes” between Inez, Estelle, and himself. As Inez threatens Garcin’s dominance and power through her own erotically charged gaze, Garcin must take two scopophilic avenues, voyeuristic and fetishistic, in order to transform Inez and Estelle into non-threatening, submissive female figures. As Garcin glances about the room, he feels uncomfortable with the Valet’s fixed gaze upon him. Garcin “Eyes the Valet suspiciously” as the Valet looks at Garcin through “paralyzed eyes” since the Valet is unable to blink. Uncomfortable with this constant, paralyzed male gaze Garcin cannot escape from, he feels marginalized and asserts he will heroically “face the situation” and not be afraid (5). Ironically, Garcin continues to do just the opposite throughout the play.

Mulvey asserts that the spectator identifies with the male character since he is “free to command the stage . . . in which he articulates the look and creates the action” (63). Since Mulvey associates the gaze with the active male and passive female relationship, the spectator’s gaze allows him to “identif[y] with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look” the male character places on women (63). The issue Garcin experiences, however, is twofold: first, the valet, although not visibly present for most of the play, literally commands the stage (evident by the door which swings open) and creates action; secondly, Inez also possesses an objectifying “male” gaze which threatens to

emasculate Garcin. Consequently, it is not Garcin whom spectators are meant to identify with, but the Valet whose omnipotent gaze mirrors their own judgmental gazes.

When the first female character, Inez, enters the room, Garcin “refrains from looking at Inez, who is inspecting the room” (8). He later repeats this same action of covering not only his gaze but also hiding behind his hands from Inez’s gaze shortly after: “after a glance at Inez he buries his face in his hands” (10). Having already been marginalized under the valet’s gaze, Garcin protects himself from being marginalized yet again by a threatening female figure. Garcin therefore demonstrates Mulvey’s theory that “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” (63). Unable to assert dominance, Garcin continues to cover himself from Inez and Estelle’s gaze throughout the play.

As a homosexual woman, Inez relies on the attention and gaze of Estelle to give her pleasure and meaning. Estelle, being a heterosexual woman, relies on Garcin’s objectification of her. Garcin realizes this dependence on the Other is the purpose they have for each other, the struggle for objectivity which will then confirm their own subjective sense of self. The issue, however, lies in that none of the characters wish to, or are unable to, grant each other this symbiotic subject/object gaze. As Garcin claims he has no interest in Estelle or Inez, he boastfully tells Inez, “It’s through her [Estelle] they’ll get you. I, of course, I’m different- aloof. I take no notice of her” (30). What Inez and Estelle subconsciously arise in Garcin, however, is the fear of castration. Mulvey observes that the female figure “connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure” (64). It is this displeasing fear of castration which prevents Garcin from looking at Inez, but which allows him to look at the Valet, despite his disturbingly paralyzed, fixated gaze on Garcin.



The woman, because of this lack of a phallus, signifies the original anxiety of castration. In order to cope with this castration anxiety, there are two avenues the male unconscious takes: voyeuristic scopophilia and fetishistic scopophilia. Mulvey associates sadism with voyeuristic scopophilia, which involves a controlling gaze on an objectified female figure. "Pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration)," she writes, "asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness . . . Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat" (64). Through his voyeuristic scopophilia, Garcin objectifies Estelle while simultaneously ascertaining her guilt and shame over her infanticide<sup>8</sup> in order to place himself in a non-threatening, dominant position.

At first, it is Inez who projects this voyeuristic scopophilia on Estelle in the hopes of admitting her actions which brought her to this horrific afterlife. Estelle responds she has not the faintest idea why, that her presence in what is presumably Hell must be a mistake. After a long and strange encounter in which Inez acts as a mirror for Estelle, Garcin becomes increasingly disturbed and annoyed by their constant talking which breaks his concentration of avoiding their gaze. To satisfy his desire for isolation, he suggests they sit in their respective sofas and not speak or look at each other, which Inez finds impossible and refuses to do. "I won't stand for that," Inez exclaims, "I prefer to choose my hell; I prefer to look you in the eyes and fight it out face to face" (23). Garcin annoyingly replies, "If they'd put me in a room with men - men can keep their mouths shut. But it's no use wanting the impossible" (23). It is after this acceptance of Inez's threatening desire for eye-to-eye contact which will place her as the subject/holder of the gaze. Her gaze intensifies Garcin's fear of castration, prompting him to indulge in his voyeuristic

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<sup>8</sup> The act of killing one's own child, usually within one year of its birth

scopophilia in order to no longer feel castration anxiety or emasculation from the two female figures he is outnumbered by.

No longer burying his head in his hands, he continues to indulge voyeuristically by asking each woman why she is in Hell in order to sadistically gain pleasure from their guilt and fear. By placing the woman in an objectifying position, Garcin unconsciously hopes to relieve his castration anxiety since he will no longer view the female figures as a threatening presence. Inez reveals her story, but Estelle still refuses. Instead of backing down, Garcin insists that he and Inez will “give [her] a hand” and pries Estelle about “That fellow with the smashed face” who Estelle assumed would be in the room when she first entered (26). Estelle finally reveals that she had an affair with a man, Roger, and drowned the baby that came from their affair, prompting him to suicide. While looking at Estelle, Garcin urges her on to finish the story and provide more details: “And then? . . . Yes? And then?” (28). When Estelle acknowledges her past and shouts, “I’m a coward. A coward!” (28), Inez notices Estelle has done what Garcin has repeatedly done until this point and has “buried her head in her hands” (30). By demonstrating this voyeuristic scopophilia which convinces Inez and Estelle to reveal their darkest secrets, Garcin sadistically achieves some type of power over Estelle by inciting pity and fear into her so that she ceases to gaze at him.

While Garcin presumably gains control of the room, Inez continues to receive some sort of affection from Estelle. After learning Inez worked at a post office, however, she recoils from her touch. As a spoiled woman who married a rich man old enough to be her father in Paris, Estelle’s superficiality bothers Gracin, and he fears being made a superficial object with no genuine essence in her eyes. In order to escape this objectifying gaze, he demonstrates the second avenue Mulvey discusses in her essay: fetishistic scopophilia. Unlike voyeuristic

scopophilia, with its association with sadism, fetishistic scopophilia “builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself” (64). By viewing Estelle’s body as a non-threatening object for erotic pleasure, his castration anxiety is relieved as well as the fear of having no subjective existence, only objective. With only the feeling of an objective existence, his fear of existing as a coward in Estelle’s eyes is vanquished.

Inez’s quest for requited love, on the other hand, is obliterated when Garcin and Estelle kiss and exclaim they will have sex right in front of her. Yet, when Garcin tells Estelle she must trust him first before they have sex, she exclaims indignantly, “Oh, what a nuisance you are! I’m giving you my mouth, my arms, my whole body - and everything could be so simple . . . You must have something ghastly on your conscience to make such a fuss about my trusting you” (26). While Garcin and Estelle are lying on the floor, he and Inez awkwardly begin a conversation of whether Garcin was a hero for leaving the army, a brave pacifist who stood by his actions, or a coward who avoided fighting. Inez turns to Estelle and asks, “Do you like cowards?” to which Estelle replies, “If you knew how little I care! Coward or hero, it’s all one - provided he kisses well” (38). Estelle soon admits, “You haven’t a coward’s chin, or a coward’s hair. And it’s for your mouth, your hair, your voice, I love you . . . even if you were a coward. Isn’t that enough?” (40). In belittling herself to a sexual object, Estelle rids herself of the fear of the Other’s judgment. Garcin, in contrast, cannot ignore his overwhelming fear of a meaningless, purely objectified existence which she is so comfortable in

As previously noted, “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification,” (Mulvey 63). Because Estelle can only see the superficiality of people, such as their looks and money, Garcin yet again finds Estelle’s objectifying gaze unbearable, causing him to relinquish control over the event. His vulnerability once again arises castration anxiety since Estelle refuses

to confirm his “manhood” by affirming he was in fact not a coward for refusing to fight in the war. Enclosed in a room with two other women, Garcin is unable to have a purely subjective existence. As Sontag explores with photographs, Garcin (the subject) possesses no control over how the Other (Estelle and Inez) view him. Despite building his ego-ideal through self-affirmation that he was not in fact a coward, his existence feels incomplete without validation from another. He cannot focus on his inward perception of himself or the perception of those he knew in his conscious life on earth. While on earth he “aimed at being a real man,” now he must submit to the gaze of Estelle and Inez; he is forced to exist through their eyes (43).

Once he averts Estelle’s eyes through his sadistic, voyeuristic scopophilia, Garcin then turns to Inez to confirm his manhood. As Luna Dolezal points out in her discussion of the Look in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, “in order to fully realize all the structure of one’s being, the subject requires the existence of others, as some modes of consciousness (in particular reflective self-consciousness) can only be realized from the point of view of the other” (11). Furthermore, Dolezal explains, “our self-knowledge depends largely on objectifying responses from other people who make us objects of their judgment” (13). Consequently, Garcin hopes Inez’s intradiegetic gazes of him will solidify his subjective self into her consciousness so that he will eternally be viewed as a masculine hero, not a coward. It is one’s knowledge of the Other’s consciousness of himself which ultimately defines or shapes his identity. Garcin’s inescapable desire to exist through Inez’s affirming eyes reveals the innate human reliance on the Other’s consciousness to make real one’s subjective self, or ego ideal, which Sartre calls one’s being-for-itself.

As a homosexual woman not concerned with superficiality, as opposed to Estelle’s shallow obsession with her appearances, Garcin views Inez as the closest thing to a man he has.

In a way, Garcin sees himself in Inez as both are able to place themselves in positions of power, not through their sexual exhibitionism as Estelle does, but through acts of sadistic voyeurism when ascertaining guilt.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, he identifies with Inez better than he can Estelle. Garcin continually asks Inez if he is a coward so that she can give him the confirmation he desires in order to ease his anxiety and reaffirm his manhood. In trying to masculinize her, however, he dehumanizes and further marginalizes her. As Cixous explores in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” there is a difference in perception based on expected gender behavior. Cixous explains, “you can’t talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes-any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women’s imaginary<sup>10</sup> is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible” (876). Despite her sadistic voyeurism, Inez is still no less of a woman; it is only Garcin’s perception of her which defeminizes her. This difference between Inez’s subjective self and her objective self through Garcin’s masculine perception of her further demonstrates that how the Other views another person relies entirely on their gendered biases and expectations. Inez exists as a woman in-itself, and her existence in Garcin’s eyes as “one of the boys” represents this struggle between her subjective existence and her objective, her being-for-others.

Unlike Inez, Estelle cannot bear to exist merely *for-itself* as she requires the objective look of another to affirm her self-perception as a beautiful, seductive woman. Due to her reliance on *being-for-others*, she practically begs Garcin to affirm her subjective existence as a sexual object. As Garcin is preoccupied with visions of his life on earth, however, she acquiesces to Inez’s gaze. Estelle desires nothing else than to be the object of the Other’s gaze, and while she

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<sup>9</sup> Garcin and Inez both ascertain guilt from Estelle when they pry her about why she is in Hell, manipulating her into revealing her infanticide.

<sup>10</sup> By “imaginary,” Cixous refers to the imaginary female, or the ideal of woman we cannot attain or even exists

views herself as a sexual object, she wishes others to see her in this same way in order to affirm her ego-ideal, just as Garcin wishes to affirm his manhood. Without mirrors in the room, Estelle is unable to regress to the mirror stage through which she would be able to reinforce her identity as an independent individual, in control of her subjectivity and self-perception as she did during her earthly existence. While Garcin suggests they avoid each other's glances and simply "[look] into ourselves," this is not enough for Estelle since, throughout her life, she relied on the looks of others and formed her identity based on how others viewed her (18).

As Estelle relies on her mirror image to reaffirm her existence, she pleads for a mirror from Garcin, who ignores her. Inez, on the other hand, does not hesitate to substitute herself as looking glass, placing her once again in a position of power. As Inez uses her reflection in Inez's eyes, Inez controls how Estelle views herself. Her sexual gratification derives from this close proximity of her voyeurism while Estelle uses her eyes to trace her lips with lipstick. At first, Inez praises Estelle's looks and compliments her beauty. Moments later, however, she teases Estelle, who comments on how "maddening [it is] not being able to see for [herself]" (20). Inez continues teasing her, pointing out a "nasty red spot at the bottom of [her] cheek" (21). After Estelle's horrified outcry, Inez sadistically admits, "There isn't any pimple, not a trace of one . . . Suppose the mirror started telling lies? Or suppose I covered my eyes - as he [Garcin] is doing - and refused to look at you, all that loveliness of yours would be wasted on the desert air" (21). Unable to look at an actual mirror and see herself how she desires to be seen, Estelle's "individuality is tampered and flirted with," making it impossible for Estelle to exist independently in the *for-itself* of her consciousness, only *for-others* (Sartre 18). Inez and Garcin can make Estelle as ugly as they wish. They can say she has red dots on her face, scars and other

unsightly blemishes, and it makes no difference whether they are present or not because Estelle cannot see for herself.

As Rajabali Torghabeh contends, “what the Others make of them in fact, will torture their self-identity . . . [as] the body that is enslaved to the gaze and judgment of other individuals [and] its conscience is stubbornly under their surveillance to shape its own morality . . . and in consequence they grapple with conflict of freedom” (18). Without the mirror, Estelle only exists *for-others*, ridding her of a subjective experience. Estelle finds her acknowledgement of Inez’s cruel intra-diegetic gaze overwhelming, yet she continues to stare with “fearful fascination” as she is shocked that one person can have so much control over one’s self-perception (21). This direct eye-to-eye gaze makes Estelle extremely uncomfortable. Lacan explores this uneasiness a woman feels when she is aware that the subject (Other) acknowledges the object’s awareness of the Other’s gaze: “At the very level of the phenomenal experience of contemplation, this all-seeing aspect is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows” (75). Inez, being the direct mirror to Estelle’s self-consciousness, forces Estelle to acknowledge her objectifying gaze. Inez tortures Estelle with this terrifying truth: “I’ll keep looking at you forever and ever, without a flutter of my eyelids, and you’ll live in my gaze like a mote in a sunbeam” (34). This awareness produces Estelle’s anxiety and forces her to question her own authenticity as an individual who exists outside of the Other’s possession.

Inez consequently threatens Estelle’s perception of herself as a nearly perfect sexual object whose intimidating gaze has control over others. Estelle reminisces on her power as a sexual object during her earthly existence: “Oh, once I’d have only had to glance at them and she’d [Olga] have slunk away” (32). Inez’s power as the mirror which defines Estelle’s body

denies her freedom of subjectivity and prevents her from regressing to the subjective mirror stage. Foucault also writes about this power relation that arises from the freedom of the Other to shape one's own body. He states that "power relations have an immediate hold upon it [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (qtd. in Torghabeh 18). Estelle wishes to live independently from Inez's gaze which threatens her ego ideal but will be eternally unable to do so under her scrutinizing gaze. Inez, she realizes, will forever have this possession over her being. Without a mirror, Estelle's subjective experience (being-for-itself) no longer matters. It is only through the Other's, mainly Inez's, consciousness which she exists as Garcin continually refuses to grant her this confirmation of her sexuality.

Through Estelle and Inez's intimate intra-diegetic gazes, Estelle experiences this anxiety of the Other's possession through Inez's sadistically scrutinizing gaze. Each rely on the other as objects of their own judgment. However, as a homosexual and heterosexual woman, neither are able to grant each other this desire. Inez proclaims that she is confident in herself and who she is. Unlike Estelle and Garcin, she willingly admits her own faults as well as Garcin and Estelle's: "Yes, we are criminals -murderers- all three of us. We're in hell, my pets; they never make mistakes, and people aren't damned for nothing" (16). Inez is the only character who is confident in her self-perception and does not desire the confirmation of her identity through the others. With this advantage of seemingly not desiring to exist *for-others*, Inez is able to be the torturer for both Garcin and Estelle because of her self-affirmation of her own identity; she does not need her existence affirmed by the others' objectifying gazes. She serves as the only character who has a grasp on her true, authentic identity as she claims she has "always watched [her] face in the glass" and is aware that she is "quite cruel" (9, 26). Her self-image as a torturer who gains



pleasure from the sufferings of others through her objectifying gaze is validated through her behavior in the play. Her ability to feel at ease in her own conscious self-image places her in a position of power over Garcin and Estelle. Her awareness of this subject/object relationship allows her to take advantage of Estelle, who relies heavily on the objectifying gazes of others.

Inez realizes this power struggle between the three of them: “It’s obvious what they’re after - an economy of man-power - or devil power, if you prefer . . . each of us will act as torturer of the two others ” (17). Through only three characters, Sartre explores the inevitable power dichotomy in human relationships in which people try to gain control through their gaze. Inez, unlike Estelle, does not wish so much to be the object of one’s looks, but rather the subject of Estelle’s. She also hopes that Estelle gains pleasure from her objectifying gaze as well. Because Inez is aware of Estelle’s infanticide, however, the illusion, or “imaginary order” of her identity dissolves. “The crystal's shattered,” Estelle explains, “but I don't care. I'm just a hollow dummy, all that's left of me is the outside—but it's not for you” (35). Estelle can no longer mold herself into how she wishes the Others’ consciousness to view her. She has lost that freedom. She now inherently exists through the Other’s gaze and has no control over her identity. Her “imaginary order,” her own sense of identity and character, is consequently “shattered” as well. Perhaps the most defining existential lines of the play is said by Inez: “you are your life, and nothing else” (45). Since our actions, at least according to existentialists like Sartre, give our lives meaning, Estelle cannot undo the others’ knowledge of her infanticide, and she must now remain in the critical gaze of Garcin and Inez.

In order to escape the critical and threatening intra-diegetic gazes of the Other, each character engages in his/her own extra-diegetic gazes to view the people they knew on earth to discover what legacies they have left behind. This, however, proves unsatisfiable for each

character. Even Garcin, after viewing his colleague Gomez and what he says about him, wishes he could “see [himself] in a glass” since neither Gomez or the other men he worked with affirm his masculinity (28). Instead, he sees the men he worked closely with call him a coward.

According to Sartre, one is responsible for their “being-for-others” through their representation to the Other. Unable to mold their subjectivity in order to make them view him as a hero, not a coward, Garcin wishes, like Estelle, to have a glass to look in so that he will see his own reflection and regress as well to the mirror stage so he will once again form his own sense of identity, to feel like an independent being, which no longer has the freedom to do. No longer on earth, he has no control of his earthly identity.

Psychologist Jesse M. Bering explores the innate human fear of epistemic social anxiety evident in *No Exit*. She defines epistemic social anxiety as “the negative affective state that is associated with someone else knowing about - or threatening to know about - the self’s undesirable attributes. This includes such things as moral offenses, questionable intentions, embarrassing foibles, or even physical defects” (4). This social anxiety, Bering asserts, causes severe psychological distress on individuals since one’s undesirable attributes, one known by the Other, cannot be retracted. Nor can an individual shape the Other’s perception of the individual’s actions since it is impossible to gain access into another’s mind.

Bering claims that the awareness of the Other’s mind, as Estelle becomes aware of Inez’s freedom to mold her image as she wishes, leads to representational loneliness. Representational loneliness, she outlines, “occurs when the awareness of other minds comes into conflict with the awareness that the self can never be understood by others in its totality because it can never be experienced by anyone else. Unlike any other forms of loneliness, it is exacerbated by the presence of others” (6). As demonstrated by Estelle and Garcin’s inability to force the Other’s

perception of their own self-perceptions, our identities exist only in our own self-consciousness, in our being-for-itself, which can never align with how we are perceived by the Other's consciousness (*being-for-others*).

Estelle experiences this existential and representational loneliness as she is tortured by her inability to use her extra-diegetic gaze to have power over others. She observes a past lover, Peter, dancing with her friend Olga. She watches helplessly as Olga tells him of Estelle's infanticide, consequently, as Estelle puts it, causing the "crystal" to "shatter" (32). Christina Howells asserts the most quoted line, "Hell is other people," "was offered as a description of a certain kind of inauthentic human relationship" (3). As outlined by Bering and demonstrated by Estelle, however, people put on a performance for the Other in the hopes it will shape the Other's consciousness of ourselves. Once undesirable attributes come to light, this illusion shatters along with the Other's previous perception of them. Sartre's message seems to be that there are no authentic relationships.

As Sartre asserts, the Look "is not bound to the *Other's body*" (276). The unnamed Valet, who only appears briefly at the beginning of the play, is an omnipotent presence throughout the play. According to Mulvey, scopophilia "can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other" (835). The Valet affirms the characters' powerlessness and serves as an analogue to the spectator as he, like the audience, indulges in his voyeuristic scopophilia safely observing and judging them from afar.

Despite each character's awareness of how they are viewed by the Other's consciousness, there is no character development. None of the three characters demonstrate an inward self-reflection of their character beyond what they wish to be affirmed by the Other: Estelle reflects

on her beauty, Inez on her sadistic manipulation, and Garcin on his masculinity and cowardice. Nonetheless, none intend on becoming a better person because, in both the room and on earth, their identities have been exposed by each other's intra-diegetic gazes and the extra-diegetic gazes of those on earth. Their being-for-others as well as their being-for-itself is solidified by these gazes of the Other: Estelle will forever be the baby-murderer, Inez forever the cruel, heartless woman, and Garcin will remain a coward.

While the characters appear to get what they deserve for their distasteful actions, spectators do not feel empathy for the characters. Rather, it is the pity and fear that the characters feel for themselves which is projected inward into the spectator for his or her own self-reflection. It encourages the viewer to ask themselves, "Am I as bad as Garcin, Estelle, or Inez?" Once the viewer comes to the inevitable conclusion that no, they are not as bad as Sartre's characters are<sup>11</sup>, it gives audience members relief, and they reassure themselves, "Thank God I am not as bad as them." It does, however, also create an awareness among spectators of how they present themselves to others. It makes the spectator consciously aware of the possibility of either some omnipotent Peeping Tom who casts judgment on our actions, or of the countless gazes of others experienced each day. Sartre was correct, Hell is other people, because it is through the Other's objective gaze that we internally gaze into ourselves and uncover what makes us human, what gives our hellish existence meaning. While we believe what we want to about ourselves our self-perception does not truly matter other than to give ourselves a false sense of wholeness. In the end, as Sartre shows, our existence is dependent on the consciousness of Others, because it is through our interactions with the Other which gives our lives meaning.

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<sup>11</sup> This is based on the assumption, of course, that viewers have neither murdered their child or prompted someone else's suicide

## CHAPTER 3

## WILDE VISIONS: UNDERCUTTING THE PATRIARCHAL NATURE OF THE STAGE

Sixty-three years prior to Jean-Paul Sartre's renowned play *No Exit* (1944), Anglo-Irish author Oscar Wilde explored similar concepts of the gaze, to look and be looked at, in his one act tragedy *Salomé* (1861). Written in the *fin de siècle*, the play's final scene remains to be one of the most disturbing in playwright history, and it certainly was so during the Victorian era. Into the mid-twentieth century, Wilde's play was banned in numerous countries and cities and faced censorship for being too grotesque and displaying biblical characters on the stage. Despite this disgust toward *Salomé*, there was a popular fascination with the violent Victorian woman. In her book *Victorian Murderesses*, Ayşe Bulamar explores the fascination with Victorian female criminals and murderesses and why their violence surprised many at the time. Bulamar points out that scientific authority and the religious dogma of Victorian England repressed women's sexual desires and prevented women them from having a place in law or politics. Furthermore, the public image of the woman as a nurturing, domestic child-bearer eradicated the plausibility of a violent woman existing. In an increasingly modern and godless world, men were encouraged to protect their wives from the evils of the public sphere which tempted women to sexual dissidence and violence. Confinement to the domestic space, it was believed, stripped women's potential for violence. Any novel or play which featured a violent woman in the domestic space "shattered the myth of feminine purity" (Bulamar 2). These violent domestic wives, in both literature and real-life Victorian murderesses, however, still do not compare to *Salomé*'s uncanny image of chastity, sexual deviance, and violence.

Plays during the nineteenth century's *fin de siècle* explored concepts of the gaze, sexual difference, and sexual dissidence. Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890),

for instance, follows a violent sexual female protagonist, Hedda, as she manipulates others with her overpowering look and encourages past lover Eilert Løvborg to commit suicide with her own pistol. The production ends with Hedda committing suicide, not visible to the audience, after Judge Brack reminds her she will be powerless over others and eternally under his controlling gaze. Similarly, Swedish playwright August Strindberg's anti-feminist drama *Miss Julie* (1888) deals more clearly with the concept of the gaze to comment on male/female relationships in the domestic sphere. When Julie attempts to seduce her butler Jean in her husband's absence, Jean at first refuses her sexual advances while addressing the dangers of looking: ". . . do you think any one of my position would ever have dared to raise his eyes to you if you yourself had invited it?" (18). In the end, Julie ultimately fails to convince Jean, through her seductive gaze, to elope with her. Like Hedda, she discovers she is ultimately powerless over others and is last seen walking absent-mindedly out of the house, the knife Jean handed her in her grasp.

Plots of Victorian drama were mundane until the *fin de siècle*, with the exception of a few plays which defied traditional dramatic expectations.<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* served as a popular text to teach young women and men how to behave. He stressed that "the whole education of women ought to relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them . . . these are the duties of women at all times, and they ought to be taught from childhood" (365). Teachings such as Rousseau's, combined with the Victorian era's return to Classical art, science, and philosophies, maintained an active male, passive female dynamic in real life and on the stage. Traditional plays appealed to the middle class and offered cathartic relief after the drama's resolution of some social scandal in order to stress the importance of traditional gender roles. The popular social taboo granted the most attention was

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<sup>12</sup> Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), Henry Arthur Jones's *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894), and George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893)

that of the disobedient, seductive woman who is brought to “justice,” sometimes through death, and no longer threatens patriarchal society.

None of Oscar Wilde’s audience members, therefore, could have expected to witness Salomé holding the decapitated head of Iokanaan<sup>13</sup> while lustfully glancing at his severed face. While the kiss Salomé places on Iok’s lips occur in dim light, and is therefore hidden from spectators, it nonetheless left a horrifying mental image of necrophilia and female violence which Victorian audiences abhorred.<sup>14</sup> Taking inspiration from the biblical story of John the Baptist’s beheading at the request of Queen Herodias, Wilde adapts the Judeo-Christian story into a visual display of power, lust, and revenge. In the biblical version, King Herod, bound by an oath to his unnamed stepdaughter and niece, promises her any request if she dances for him on the night of his birthday celebration. Prompted by her mother Herodias to ask for the head of John the Baptist after the prophet’s denunciation of her marriage to her deceased husband’s half-brother Herod, she acquiesces despite her own possible desires. Originally an unnamed, passive girl with no agency, Wilde creates his own story of this powerless, innocent female into a terrifyingly sexually deviant character who subverts the male gaze to pursue her necrophilic desires.

Although Ibsen and Strindberg’s sexually dissident female protagonists commit suicide, an act also abhorred by spectators, no productions received as much negative attention as Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* when audiences heard the tragic hero repeatedly exclaim in the dark how she has at last kissed the head of Iokanaan: “ I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth . . . I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth” (91). One factor contributing to

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<sup>13</sup> Wilde’s name for John the Baptist

<sup>14</sup> “The slaves put out the torches. The stars disappear. A great black cloud crosses the moon and conceals it completely. The stage becomes very dark” (91).

the horror of *Salomé*'s infamous final scene is the predictability of melodramatic plays still popular during the *fin de siècle*, such as Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie whose suicides provided contemporary audiences with a cathartic sense of justice and restored social order between men and women while reassuring women's powerlessness over men. Wilde's *femme fatale*, of course, performs far more taboo acts than the aforementioned heroines<sup>15</sup>. Nonetheless, there are factors beyond Salomé's necrophilic kiss which makes her a terrifying image for spectators, even today.

Ellmann describes his play as one displaying "perverse passion, the desire of vice for virtue, pagan for Christian, living for dead . . . and the abhorrence of vice by virtue, the extremity of renunciation" (341). Despite his growing obsession, Wilde was at first not sure how to engender Salomé. In a conversation with Gomez Carrillo, Wilde commented on French Yvanhoe Rambosson's appearances. Wilde asked Carrillo if it was not a man's duty to be beautiful. Carrillo responded that he has only seen beautiful women. Wilde, not having it, responded with, "Women aren't beautiful at all. They are something else, I allow: magnificent, when dressed with taste and covered with jewels, but beautiful, no. Beauty reflects the soul" (qtd. in Ellmann 342). Wilde consequently spent years searching for a painting of Salomé which depicted her as more than a mere beautiful woman, one which captured Salomé's magnificence.

Only French symbolist Moureau's paintings of Salomé satisfied him<sup>16</sup>. In other depictions of Salomé, he found her too apoplectic. Wilde commented on the originally passive Salomé: "I don't conceive of her as unconscious, serving as a mute instrument. No, her lips in Leonardo's painting disclose the cruelty of her soul. Her lust must be infinite, and her perversity without limits" (342). He wanted to make her into a delicate "cardinal flower of the perverse

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<sup>15</sup> Chris Snodgrass argues that, since Wilde declared this play a tragedy, Salomé cannot be a *femme fatale*

<sup>16</sup> *Salomé at the Prison* (c 1873-76), *The Apparition* (1875), *Salomé* (1876), *Salomé Dancing before Herod* (1876), *Salomé Carrying the Head of John the Baptist on a Platter* (1876),



garden,” an innocent flower that wilts from passion and demands John’s head out of unrequited love (344). Ellmann says Salomé’s “passion . . . drowns in its own excess” and Herod’s lust for her body “pales in comparison with Salomé’s lust for Iokanaan’s bodiless head” (345). The willingness of spectators to watch such a grotesque display of desire, combined with Salomé’s uncanny transition from chastity to perversity, thus challenges Mulvey’s theories of the male gaze.

As a husband and father with sexual relationships with men, Wilde’s lifestyle as an esthete caused widespread social scandals throughout Victorian England, a time in which the crime of homosexuality was punishable by imprisonment.<sup>17</sup> Despite being imprisoned for two years, 1895-1897, he continued to advocate for sexual freedom and tolerance, with his own lifestyle often reflected in his work. As editor in chief for *The Lady’s World*, a magazine for high class women’s fashion, he later changed the name to *Woman’s World Magazine* and focused mainly on what women think and feel. Friends of Wilde said he had an uncomfortably “feminine air” about him. Some argue this is attributed to his mother’s repression of his masculinity as a child. A family friend, Luther Munday, recalls Lady Wilde admittedly treating Wilde as a daughter, rather than a son, and there is even an image of Wilde, at the age of about four, in a dress (Ellmann 17). While this “smothering of masculinity” may make it easy to explain Wilde’s homosexuality, Ellmann argues, there is still some skepticism as his mother’s letters reveal no evidence that she considered him anything other than a boy (18). Regardless, Wilde was nonetheless introduced to the conversation of gender at a very young age, and his mother undoubtedly had an influence in his unique views which are reflected in his work.

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<sup>17</sup> Sodomy was punishable by death in England until the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act

In Rozina Nezhinskaia's exploration of Salomé's historically inaccurate (according to the original biblical version) reputation as a seducer, she traces Wilde's obsession with the paintings of Salomé (168). Rozina theorizes that Wilde's popular image of Salomé as *la grande séductrice*<sup>18</sup> cannot be attributed to one particular painting; rather, "one could consider his play a kind of summation of all existing Salomé's created before his" (171). The image of Salomé was first popularized in the fourteenth century. Of the few surviving paintings, Giotto di Bondone's Feast of Herod (1315) is one of the most well-known. In this version, Bondone places Salomé outside of the center of the painting (far right) and is pictured being handed the head of John the Baptist. She is fully clothed and upon merely glancing at the photo with no prior knowledge of the biblical story, proves to be an innocent and unthreatening image. She is merely a small aspect of the painting. The spectator's eyes do not immediately rest on her but on King Herod being handed the decapitated head. This appears to be an image of a power dynamic between the king and his subjects. In the far right of the image, Salomé passes the head of the prophet to her mother. Salomé is not pictured as having agency but is rather a mere pawn in her parents' affairs.

She then resurfaces during the Renaissance as a victimized woman. The Renaissance represented a time of logic, science, and reason available only to men. Consequently, these strong political, religious, and artistic leaders saw no threat in "a stage mother and a teenage girl with a penchant for dancing" (Hoeveler 92). Fra Filippo Lippi's mid-fifteenth century painting, *Herod's Banquet* (1452–1465) depicts a more sexualized Salomé. The Renaissance transformed the static girl into a dynamic character, particularly through her infamous dance, who plays a significant part in the prophet's death. Whereas the prophet's head centers the scene in previous paintings, artists like Lippi began placing Salomé in the center. Her white dress stands out from

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<sup>18</sup> The grand seducer

the darker clothing of those she is around. This comes closer to Wilde's depiction of Salomé, as Lippi's choice to paint Salomé in a white dress creates a juxtaposition of her youthful innocence to her violent, perverse sexuality. As in other paintings before his, more than one scene is shown, but not in chronological order. To the far left, a servant hands Salomé John's head on a platter, in the center, Salomé dances, and to the far right, she hands the head to her mother. The increasing focus of Salomé's dance ultimately transformed her reputation into the infamous *femme fatale*, *la grande séductrice*, we remember her as today.

Some other paintings which may have sparked Wilde's interests is Hans Memling's *St. John Altarpiece* (1474–1479) and Bernardino Luini's *Salomé* (1527–1531) which exemplify the growing interest in Salomé's gaze. Emulating the biblical narrative, Salomé averts her gaze from John's head, indicative of her mother's cohesion and manipulation, as other previous paintings have also shown. These paintings are close-up portrayals of Salomé and John's head. Salomé is calm yet expressionless, showing neither disgust nor regret, but rather an indifference toward the prophet's beheading. Perhaps the most disturbing painting is Giovanni Batista Cracciolo's *Salomé* (1615–1620). Salomé looks at the spectator, not passively to the side, sort of absent-mindedly and expressionless as she has previously been painted, as though confronting the painter and the spectator.

According to Bucknell, in the late 19th century, "we witness the insertion of the gaze itself into the discourse [of Salomé], producing a kind of unconscious revelation of the power, and anxiety, of seeing Salomé" (503). Wilde incorporates the subject of the gaze from preceding paintings into his play. When Salomé flees from the banquet hall, she is first relieved by the change of atmosphere from the domestic sphere to the natural world not contaminated by the domestic roles and social expectations of man. She rejoices in her momentary freedom,

exclaiming, “How sweet is the air here! I can breathe here! Within there are . . . barbarians who drink and drink and spill their wine on the pavement” (68). Despite her chastity, she is not too innocent as to not recognize lust, evident when she observes Herod’s “mole’s eyes under his shaking eyelids” (68). Although she admits she “know[s] not” what Herod’s look suggests implies her innocence as a virgin, yet her following statement, “Of a truth I know it too well,” reveals that not only does she recognize lust, it is a knowing, lustful glance she recognizes too well, presumably from other men in the past. Consequently, Salomé is initially received as a sympathetic victim of her incestuous uncle’s gaze.

Furthermore, her self-identification with the moon signifies her chastity and innocence: “How good to see the moon! She is like a little piece of money, a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses” (68). In *Beauty, A Very Short Introduction*, Roger Scruton explores the popular belief during the Victorian era and shared by philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, who “believed that natural beauty is a ‘symbol’ of morality, and suggested that people who take a real interest in natural beauty thereby show that they possess the germ of a morally good disposition- of a “good will” (65).<sup>19</sup> Wilde’s play, however, parodies this belief as the physically beautiful Salomé, who worships the moon, relinquishes her morals to the violent passion she feels for Iok.

Salomé worships the moon as a spiritual symbol, and her interest in nature, according to Kant and Victorians in an increasingly modern and urbanized world, should reflect her innocence and morality against Wilde’s increasingly industrial and seemingly corrupt world. According to Chris Snodgrass, the moon is a beautiful piece of art onto whom “all-too-human individual

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<sup>19</sup> *Critique of Judgment* (1790)

spectators project their impassioned preoccupations” (187). Narraboth’s opening lines of the play introduce her as a beautiful spectacle: “How beautiful is the princess Salomé tonight!” The Page of Herodias’ following line, “She [the moon] is like a woman rising from a tomb . . . looking for dead things,” immediately introduces the connection between Salomé and the moon, and the different perceptions characters possess (65). In contrast with Narraboth’s perception of Salomé’s innocence and beauty and the Page’s view of the insidious moon, Herod describes the moon as “a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers . . . She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman” (75).

There are three different perceptions of the moon and therefore Salomé: the beautifully chaste youth, the violent sexual deviant, and the lustful whore, all of which have been depicted in art before Wilde’s play. Yet, no previous portraits had combined all three images of Salomé in an ambiguous representation of corrupt innocence as Wilde’s. The different perceptions of the moon, and consequently Salomé, introduce the crux of the gaze in Wilde’s play, that how one sees another may not be that person’s true subjective self, or that there does not exist one “true self. Narraboth, a young Syrian, projects his sexual desires on her, describing her “as something otherworldly trying to escape worldly desire,” an attempt which proves futile when she hears Iok’s voice echoing from the cistern (Snodgrass 187). Narraboth’s description suggests a biblically accurate Salomé, one of innocence and chastity: “Her feet are of silver . . . [and like] little white doves . . . She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver” (66). Her pale white skin, dove-like silver feet, and comparison to a white rose all suggest a biblically accurate Salomé, one of innocence and chastity.

Diane Hoeverler describes Salomé and John as “archetypes for gendered warfare” (102). She pulls from Cixous’ “Castration or Decapitation” to support her claim that they stand as “the

two poles of decapitation and castration that western society has proffered as possible alternatives for the sexes” (102). She argues Salomé is “demanding to be like a man in her control of her emotions and to have the power that a man has in both religious and political institutions” (102). Critics’ argument that Salomé wishes to become a man by symbolically castrating Iok undercuts Wilde’s two dominant images in the play: the moon and blood, both of which are feminine symbols. Salomé does not wish to become a man; rather, she wishes to possess John as a love object. Hoeveler’s interpretation of Salomé as a transvestite male or androgynous masculinizes Salomé, as so many other critics have done, through a male paradigm of sexual difference.

It has been noted by many critics as well that John’s head on the platter symbolically represents his phallus, and by decapitating John, Salomé has in some way castrated him through his head, his surrogate phallus. By implying Salomé is driven mad by her desire to possess his phallus-surrogate head places her in the abyss Cixous discusses in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Women, Cixous argues, can in fact exist and desire without any relation to castration anxiety or penis envy. Suggesting otherwise implies that women’s desires and passions cannot exist solely in and of themselves, that without men, they would exist in some unsure “abyss” of nothingness. It is not “penis envy” that drives Salomé, but an overwhelming passion of fear and awe to which she abandons herself.<sup>20</sup>

Chris Snodgrass’s argument contradicts Hoeveler’s. Although Wilde clearly constructed Salomé to be a character with a “monstrous passion,” he did not conceive of her as merely a “lascivious sex object,” as evident by Wilde’s vague description of her infamous dance (185). By

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<sup>20</sup> Amanda Fernbach argues Salomé’s obsession with John is due to the fact that “He is symbolically forbidden to her because in Wilde’s Britain all homosexual acts were made illegal by the Labouchere Amendment of the 1/\*885 Criminal Law Act.16” (206). But Salomé is a feminine woman, and John a man, so this likely is not Wilde’s focus.

naming it The Dance of the Seven Veils without any clear instructions as to how it was meant to be performed, he implies that Salomé's exhibitionism is not the cause for Herod or Narraboth's infatuation with her. She does not seduce her admirers; rather, the only thing she does to enthrall her admirers is simply *be*. (Snodgrass 187). Herod and Narraboth are not seduced by an animalistic display of sexuality; rather, it is her innocence which enthralls them. Although she is viewed only as a beautiful object, she is nonetheless "chaste and aloof." In fact, Narraboth's description of her implies she is attempting to escape worldly desire, away from the indulgently drunk "monstrous beasts" in the banquet hall (187). She does not desire defilement, she fears it.

Once she looks at John, as Snodgrass observes, she never again looks at the moon. She is overcome with desire, of fright and awe. Salomé is not the monstrous beast Hoeveler and others make her out to be. Rather, she is an innocent girl whose chaste "moral quality" is overcome with passion (her *hamartia*, or tragic flaw) which leads to her demise. This vulnerability to passion, a tragic flaw which resides in every human being, maintains Salomé's image as a sympathetic character, and the knowledge spectators' possess of their own vulnerability to passion evokes the pity and fear which Aristotle stated spectators must feel in tragedy. Snodgrass further suggests that by linking Salomé's dance to the sacred Dance of the Seven Veils in mythology,<sup>21</sup> "Wilde suggests that her dance is less a *femme fatale*'s display of animal sexuality than some quest to grasp life's "central Mystery"" (186).

Salomé's identification with the moon, contrasted with her violent demands and subversion of the male gaze, leads many critics to describe her as an androgynous character. By bringing a Bronze Age woman into the Victorian era, Wilde raises the question of why spectators

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<sup>21</sup> The ritual Dance of the Seven Veils originates from the Sumerian mythic tale of the Goddess Inanna who, to retrieve the surrogate-king Tammuz, relinquished one garment at each of the seven gates to the underworld. While the goddess is associated with sex, she is also associated with war, justice, and political power.

view a Victorian woman any differently from a Bronze Age woman, such as Medea who critics do not deem androgynous. Due to the Victorian era's perception of sexual differences through traditionally binary structures, portraying powerful female figures as androgynous eased the fear of female violence. By looking at her as androgynous and masculinizing her, critics and spectators give her an imaginary phallus, a symbol of power which people are more comfortable with because they are comfortable seeing through a male paradigm. Wilde modernizes the biblical version of Salomé, combining the past, her chastity and femininity, with the new, female empowerment. How others view the moon as either an objectified version of a femme fatale (the page) or a completely chaste and innocent being (Herod, Narraboth, Salomé) demonstrates how structuring the power dynamic according to the patriarchal structure limits women's existence as independently powerful, apart from men. According to this male paradigm of seeing, women are left with only two options; either they have no power as feminine beings (the moon) or they are too powerful, so they must be masculinized and looked at as androgynous, which inevitably strips power from them.

The moon serves as the most prominent motif of the play; thus, Salomé cannot be androgynous. Wilde has clearly identified her as a feminine character. Her violence and power, Wilde stresses, does not obfuscate her femininity. Wilde undoubtedly knew that contemporary audience members saw gender through a male paradigm and believed that femininity implies powerlessness, while masculinity holds power. But feminine women, Salomé demonstrates, can in fact be just as powerful, dangerous, and influential. To better understand how Salomé, as a feminine woman, gains power and control over the gaze, it is important to discuss how men and women experience the gaze and touch differently. Luce Irigaray's *The Sex Which is Not One* explores the pleasure sensorium. The knowing glance, Irigaray concludes, is the same thing as



the knowing touch, but they are experienced differently between men and women. She focuses on the idea of power and being seen. According to Irigaray, the ability to touch and interact changes power dynamics, since women are more comfortable with touch rather than sight.<sup>22</sup> She proves to those around her that she is not this “sexual female imaginary,” as Irigaray describes, and she has taken control over her own desires rather than exist merely as an “obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies” (25). In this sexual female imaginary, the woman exists as a passive sexual object. The act of decapitating, holding, and kissing Iok’s head does not transform her into an androgynous character; rather, it changes the power dynamic between Iok and Salomé.

Wilde’s play is not, as Hoeverler and other critics argue, the dream of the violent female which must be destroyed. Rather, it is a demonstration of a spectrum of gender fluidity which all men and women exist in. Salomé is an example of the Madonna/Whore Complex, or a woman who is simultaneously chaste but highly sexualized and eroticized. Irigaray brings this complex from Freud into female genitalia form. The Madonna/Whore Complex is owned internally in the feminine, causing women to desire exhibitionism although there is nothing to exhibit. The male silhouette, for example, has something to exhibit. Their phallus adds shape to their silhouette. Women’s, on the other hand, has nothing to exhibit. Irigaray’s idea of visualization for the female is therefore different for the male. She attempts to structure visualization outside of the male paradigm in order to cease the discussion of womanhood and femininity as something which “lacks”. Mulvey aimed to explore structures of seeing outside of the male paradigm, but ultimately failed to do so as she focuses primarily on the active male gaze. To truly undercut this

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<sup>22</sup> “Woman “touches herself” all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact . . . the predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form, is [therefore] particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking” (Irigaray 24,26).

narrow focus of seeing, Irigaray and other feminists, such as Cixous, declared that women and feminism exist separate from, and outside of, masculinity. Femininity and women, they asserted, can be explored and exist without having to be compared to masculinity. Ultimately, woman can exist without man, in and of itself.

The idea of being viewed through a male paradigm in *Salomé* demonstrates Irigaray's ideas outlined in *The Second Sex*. Wilde goes even further than Irigaray, whose literature is written through binary terms. There is an external function of Salomé's exhibitionism; she is pushed by Herod to exhibit herself in exchange for her own desires. John and Salomé exist in a never-ending spectrum of femininity and masculinity. A third thing exists for Wilde. We can see that what critics draw on (Salomé as androgynous) makes sense, but it is not what Wilde is doing in this drama. Salomé and Iok exist in this fluid gender state. This "becoming more" masculine or feminine does not exist for Wilde. Salomé is not a woman with specific body parts with this imaginary femininity, nor is John. They are simply them, existing on a never-ending spectrum of femininity and masculinity.

The theory of one continually transitioning from feminine and masculine influenced Irigaray to explore the female imaginary. This concept connects with Cixous, who takes issue with the idea of the monolithic female. She argues women are not all x or y, and femininity capital X does not exist. When imagining a female, no one imagines an actual female. People imagine what the woman represents, with all the shapes, features, and colors the particular person associates with the feminine. The platonic ideal of the feminine is projected onto women, which is written large in society with the "ideal female form." The imaginary female, therefore, is beautiful in context of what one imagines the ideal female to be, which de Beauvoir explores.

The imaginary female of one's conscience is an imaginary ideal of woman we cannot attain, or one which even exists. As Irigaray explains,

To claim that the feminine can be expressed in the form of a concept is to allow oneself to be caught up again in a system of "masculine" representations, in which women are trapped in a system of meaning which serves the auto-affection of the (masculine) subject. If it is really a matter of calling "femininity" into question, there is still no need to elaborate another "concept"-unless a woman is renouncing her sex and wants to speak like men. For the elaboration of a theory of woman, men, I think, suffice. In a woman's language, the concept as such would have no place. (122-123)

Judith Butler, American feminist philosopher and gender theorist, adds to this conversation of gender and the phallogentric language surrounding the conversation of "women" and "woman," which she argues are contingent and what defines or makes a woman is always open to interpretation. Her most notable work, *Gender Trouble*, expresses her belief that sex and gender are culturally constructed. Sex, Butler explains, defines a person as man or woman depending on their sexual organs. Gender, on the other hand, is the "the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes," and these meanings are forever open to be reinterpreted (6). Gender, she concludes, there is no stable, universal gender. Yet while Butler's canonical work in gender theory undoubtedly raises questions of Salomé's gendered performances, from her dance to the penetrating, cannibalistic kiss, Butler's assertion that "gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one," aligns more with critics' arguments that Salomé and Iok are androgynous, and it is precisely this interpretation of Salomé as androgynous which this thesis aims to dispute.

Among such critics, some<sup>23</sup> go so far as to suggest there is a homoerotic relationship between Salomé and Iok since, to them, she is a woman who desires to be a man. Amanda Fernbach argues that the Medusa imagery in the play does not offer a “horrificing symbol of castration,” but rather a “stimulus to homoeroticism” (206)<sup>24</sup>. Interestingly, Fernbach, among others, see a homoerotic relationship between Salomé and Iok while viewing her as a “male transvestite” (206). Iok’s head on the platter, suggestive of a penis, represents an act of fellatio, an argument presented by Richard Dellamora.<sup>25</sup> It is precisely this interpretation of her as a male transvestite, however, which ultimately dehumanizes and strips power from Salomé. Through Freud’s “Femininity,” we can see that what critics draw on when viewing Salomé as androgynous or a transvestite male makes sense. In “Femininity,” Freud discusses how a woman's realization of castration leads to "a powerful masculinity complex" which makes her defiant, rebellious, and exaggerate her "previous masculinity" (repressed from childhood). This complex will likely lead to the woman desiring "a feminine love-object" and adopting a masculine attitude toward the feminine love-object. Freud explains this relationship as the woman turning "into a man, and [takes] mother in place of her father as the object of her love" (qtd. 43). Although this seems to explain what Salomé does, Fernbach, among the others, neglect to recognize the two most important feminine symbols in the play: the moon and blood.

As Helen Tookey observes, “Salomé’s sexuality transgresses the boundaries for female sexuality” (25) and her “sexual transgressiveness consists in her menstrual sexuality” (27).

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<sup>23</sup>see Diance Hoeveler

<sup>24</sup> Fernbach also explores a topic often neglected in studies of spectatorship, the homosexual spectator. The male homosexual spectator, she argues, would not feel castration anxiety toward Salomé’s possession of Iok’s decapitated head, as Mulvey would likely argue, because Salomé is symbolically “male” in this final scene.

<sup>25</sup> Dellamora, Richard. "Traversing the Feminine in Oscar Wilde's Salomé." *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourses: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, edited by Thais E. Morgan. Rutgers University Press, 1990, pp. 246-64.

Blood, Tookey observes, is an obvious signifier of menstruation, even more so than the moon. Blood has historically “revered and feared because it symbolizes the power of life and death” which for men is the ultimate female mystery (28). Inaccessible and misunderstood by men, menstruation has been constructed as profane, unclean, envied, and taboo “in an attempt to nullify its power” (28). Her femininity and menstruality, emphasized by the moon and blood, demonstrate the fear of femininity holding power. Spectators and critics viewing Salomé as androgynous goes along with what Cixous explains on the difference in perception. Salomé does not act androgynous; people just view her that way because of this internalized belief that femininity does not equate power. In viewing her as androgynous, spectators and critics nullify her power.

Herod’s disgust towards the blood of blood Narraboth, who kills himself out of jealousy over Salomé’s desire for Iok and not himself, further demonstrates the fear of a powerful, feminine woman. Herod repeatedly says the blood is a “bad omen” (83). The emphasis on Salomé’s uncanny gender performances is demonstrated once more in the following scene when Salomé dances the infamous dance of the seven veils. Before she dances, Herod asks her to dance on naked feet. He begins complimenting her “little feet . . . [which are] like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees” (84). To Herod’s surprise and horror, his imaginary image of Salomé as an innocent “white dove” who is also the ideal image of femininity, represented by the flower imagery, begins dancing on Narraboth’s blood. “No, no, she is going to dance on blood!” Herod exclaims, “She must not dance on blood. It were an evil omen” (85). The horrifying image of Herod’s ideal image of Salomé contrasted with Salomé’s true self, a woman who is not afraid to dance in the blood, demonstrates her ability to exist as both. There does not exist, Wilde demonstrates, the monolithic female which Victorian ideals of

femininity expect and uphold. Disgusted with Salomé's perverse performance and her refusal to drink wine and eat fruit with him afterwards, Herod hopes for Iok's sadistic declaration that he will "wipe out all wickedness from the earth, and that all women shall learn not to imitate her abominations" (80). "I should like to see that day of which he speaks," Herod admits, "when the moon shall become like blood, and when the stars shall fall upon the earth" (81)

Viewing John as a transvestite woman and Salomé as a transvestite man is simply an interpretation influenced by structures of seeing through a male paradigm. Salomé was able to take control of the stage, of her situation, and "defeat" John in their battle between their gazes. Salomé does not feel attracted to John because he is feminine, however, she takes interest in him because, as Snodgrass contends, she is a religious figure not allowed to her. By knowing she was not allowed to possess him, this made her desire him even more. Just as Salomé's exhibitionist dance did not cause Herod and Narraboth's lust, nor does John's feminine characteristics. Salomé is not a man in a feminine, womanly body. She is a woman driven by passion and who has the power to get what she wants. Who has a demanding voice and gaze. Just because she gets what she wants and has a voice, it does not make her manly. This is an absurd argument that disempowers Salomé as a woman. She is a powerful, violent, feminine woman. The following quotation from Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" reflects the underlying message of Wilde's play:

Too bad for them [men] if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one [a phallus]. But isn't this [castration] fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to

change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. (885)

Salomé, of course, is deadly, but she does not exist in relationship to men, and she exists outside of this fear of castration. By prescribing her an imaginary phallus, it makes Salomé something different, obsolete. It places her into the “abyss” of nothingness. Of something which “lacks” that symbol of power: the phallus. Cixous also wittily says: “If they [men] believe, in order to muster up some self-importance, if they really need to believe that we're dying of desire, that we are this hole fringed with desire for their penis-that's their immemorial business” (890). Hoeveler and Fernbach seem to both be implying what Cixous is arguing against, that Salomé is simply overcome with desire for John's symbol of power: his phallus. It seems more probable that she simply wants what she cannot have, and it has nothing to do with his penis.<sup>26</sup> And John really is not in power, Salomé is.

Why watch the pain and suffering of Salomé, Herod, Narraboth, John, and the Page? Gaylyn Studlar explores masochism, or pleasure derived from one's own pain, suffering, or humiliation. When watching plays, spectators identify with the characters on the stage, but every character in this play, even the executioner who does not want to behead John, experiences suffering. The only enjoyable moment for spectators appears to be during Salomé's dance, a scene in which women can feel sexual empowerment or identify with Herod and enjoy owning Salomé vicariously through Herod. Irigaray also touches on masochism, stating, “the tendency toward self-appropriation will find its complement in the desire to be possessed, the pleasure of causing suffering will be complemented by feminine masochism, the desire to see by “masks” and modesty that evoke the desire to exhibit oneself, and so on” (36). But Salomé does not

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<sup>26</sup> After all, John is feminized, so if she wanted any man's phallus which symbolizes power, would it not be Herod's?

exhibit herself during her dance for some masochistic pleasure. She is not like Estelle, who enjoys being submissive. Rather, it is a manipulative tactic to get what she wants.

Just as Salomé is androgenized, so is Iok. Salomé refers to him as pale with hair like “a knot of serpents” (73). Salomé as the holder of the intrusive male gaze disrupts popular film theories shaped around the male paradigm of cinema. Studlar observes that “the sadistic, controlling pleasure [is] commonly associated with the spectatorship in modern film theory,” as seen in Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure” as she discusses the objectifying active male gaze (9). Wilde writes against this male paradigm of the gaze and gender. Salomé actually describes Iok as a femme fatale with Medusa-like imagery (serpent hair). “Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory . . . [like] pomegranate flowers that blossom in the gardens of Tyre, and are redder than roses . . . Thy mouth . . . is redder than the feet of the doves” (73). Salomé looks at Iok just as Narraboth and Herod look at her. This introduces an idea which contradicts Mulvey’s, that there is no “male” gaze and that even the feminine gaze, as Salomé demonstrates, has the terrifying power to possess and objectify another.

Wilde’s play undoubtedly stands out from other Victorian dramas and influenced other dramas to challenge the patriarchal nature of the stage. He pulls back from Mulvey, allowing us to see what came before modern film theory. His play demonstrates the spectrum of gender performances which all men and women exist on. Not being entirely masculine or feminine does not make people “androgynous” or something to be made a spectacle out of; it just makes them . . . them, as later discussed by Cixous and Irigaray. The implication that powerful, demanding women are not “masculine” undercuts the power femininity holds and the ability of a woman to exist, in and of herself, as simply a woman rather than that which “lacks.” Arguments which say Wilde’s infamous Salomé is androgynous or a transvestite male reveal how individuals, even



over one hundred years after the play's first production, continue to structure power and gender through a male paradigm. There is no monolithic image of man or woman, Wilde shows, just as there is no singular version of ourselves.

## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

Wilde's *Salomé* and Sartre's *No Exit* offer insight on the existential and gender framework of the gaze. Sartre focuses more on the existential aspect of the gaze, the objectifying look which captures the person being looked at, powerless to how the one looking, the subject, views them. Sartre's play extended from Wilde who, on the other hand, used the gaze more so to explore gender fluidity of individuals and how society views non-binary or gender fluid individuals through a comfortable male paradigm. Through *Salomé*'s uncanny juxtaposition of chastity and sexual dissidence, combined with her embrace of feminine beauty, exemplifies the gender fluid existence Wilde argues all humans experience. There are different ways of acting and different ways of looking. Each play portrays the never-ending battle between our subjective existence and our objective existence which the Other places us in through their gazes. Each also explores the dark underside of human existence and relationships, and despite the darkness of it all, we still depend on each other to confirm our existence.

Wilde subverts the gender dynamic of the gaze by transforming *Salomé* from the passive object of the gaze, as the biblical story and portraits had imaged her, to the active holder of the gaze who possesses Iok, the passive object. Sartre more so delves into the existential aspect of the gaze and the true meaning behind human relationships. Hell may be other people, as his famous line goes, but we rely on the Other's intrusive gazes in order to gaze into ourselves, as we do when watching plays and film, to dive into the good and the bad of our souls. This is what life is about. We have these different personas, these different versions of ourselves, and the Other's look makes us more aware of how the Other sees us. We can either mold ourselves to

that image, or take actions that reflect our ego ideal, that image of ourselves we aspire to be. The Other's look, however, will always be an influence.

We have seen the psychological depths of Sartre's work and what came before it in Wilde. We can now see what has extended from Sartre. Modern film has delved further into the dark underside of humanity Sartre and others laid the groundwork for. Their plays led the way for psychological thrillers which offer further exploration of the gaze and gender performances. Tod Phillips's *The Joker* (2019) does just that. The film follows the anti-hero, Arthur Fleck, who lives an abject life of ostracization, poverty, and crime. The movie offers an exploration of spectatorial pleasure when rooting for, or feeling sympathetic towards, villains or anti-heroes on the screen.<sup>27</sup> This movie, like Wilde's, also pulls away from what Mulvey proposes and subverts her idea of the active male, passive female dynamic of the screen. Arthur is always under the scrutinizing gazes of others. He works as a clown, working meaningless jobs just to get by. He waves signs in front of stores and performs in front of sick children in hospitals, but no one finds him funny.

Arthur, who his mother calls Happy, has always been told his meaning in life is to make others smile. As the movie progresses, however, he realizes this is not the case. The gaze plays a significant role in this realization. Arthur is feminized in this movie. He has a soft voice, long hair, wears makeup, and is a maternal figure to his sick mom as he bathes her and cooks for her. His skeleton-like, emaciated body also makes it impossible for him to stand up for himself in an increasingly violent Gotham City. Consequently, there are numerous moments in which Arthur is physically beaten, frozen in fear. While Mulvey says that the male character in film commands

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<sup>27</sup> Dominique Miranda and Louis J. Parker's *Bonnie and Clyde* (2013) also does this.

the stage, which is why men and women identify with the active male hero, he only achieves this active role, and thus only possesses the “male gaze,” in his fantasies.

He envisions himself winning the affection of women, such as his neighbor, and winning over talk-show host Murray Franklin’s audience members. However, he does not discover that many of his experiences are merely in his head until much later in the film. Throughout the movie, Arthur is on a quest to become a “real man.” He appears to be at a stand-up comedy club, laughing when everyone else is not, and still no one pays attention to his outbursts, suggesting this moment is in his head. Nonetheless, Arthur watches the comedian on stage and writes down sexist jokes in an attempt to learn how to command the stage “like a real man.” Furthermore, he is empowered by a gun, a phallic object, given to him by his coworker, but when the gun accidentally goes off, it suggests he is still not “man enough” to possess such power and control.

In the final scenes, he finally does what he has always wanted. He spontaneously kisses a woman, but it is the elderly Dr. Sally; he takes control of the stage on Murray’s talk show, but by shooting Murray, not how he had originally planned in killing himself; and he finally gets to meet Murray, a man whom he views as a father figure, but he is not admired by him as he imagined in his fantasies. His subjective self does not match his objective self. Even the most gruesome, bloody scene of the film, Randall’s murder, is also the funniest with helpless Gary, Arthur’s fellow clown coworker who has dwarfism, hysterically cries in the corner. He tells Gary to go, but with his dwarfism, he cannot reach the lock, and he has to awkwardly ask Arthur for help. The entire scene is ironically hilarious, manipulating spectators’ emotions into laughing at a scene in which a gruesome murder just took place.

Throughout the film, spectators’ emotions are played with. Arthur goes from an awkward, sympathetic mentally ill individual, to a psychopathic serial killer. How others never

confirmed his subjective existence and his overwhelming representational loneliness ultimately drives him mad. People only see him as an awkward guy with a condition that makes him laugh uncontrollably, and with his laughing condition, no one is ever able to access the real Arthur Fleck, not even the spectators who are left to question what is reality and what is not in the film. *The Joker* is the perfect movie for advances in film theory. It offers a study of films which influence spectators to root for the villain/anti-hero. It also allows us to explore our spectatorial experiences when viewing psychopathic characters on the stage and how spectators respond to viewing abject characters on the screen. According to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1980), the disturbance of identity, order, and systems cause abjection. The abject, in turn, "does not respect borders, positions, rules . . ." such as crimes, especially premeditated ones, which expose the fragility of laws (4). Abjection, she explains, is more than amorality, since amorality can be "liberating, rebellious, and suicidal"; rather, abjection is "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady, . . . a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you" (4).

Gaylyn Studlar proposes that this pleasure of feeling powerless is acquired through a passive, masochistic spectatorial position. "Cinematic pleasure," Studlar proposes, "is much closer to masochistic pleasure than to the sadistic, controlling pleasure," which Mulvey focuses on and which is "commonly associated with spectatorship in modern film theory" (9). Perhaps this explains why people choose to watch the abject life of Arthur Fleck unfold. Just as Wilde's *Salome* and Sartre's *No Exit*, the depressing film reveals the fragility of mental health, laws, and morals. Nonetheless, spectators voluntarily submerge themselves into the misery of the diegetic world on the screen. By feminizing Arthur Fleck, Tod Phillips's *The Joker* further breaks down

structures of seeing through a male paradigm and opens a new avenue for theories on spectatorship.

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