

SLEDZINSKA, P.M. 2017. Staging contemporary identities: National Theatre of Scotland's 'Glasgow Girls' through the prism of multimodal discourse analysis. International journal of Scottish theatre and screen [online], 10, pages 69–91. Available from:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20210516184331/https://ijosts.ubiquitypress.com/43/volume/10/issue/0/>

Staging contemporary identities: National Theatre of Scotland's 'Glasgow Girls' through the prism of multimodal discourse analysis.

SLEDZINSKA, P.M.

2017



Paula Sledzinska

**Staging Contemporary Identities –
National Theatre of Scotland’s *Glasgow Girls*
through the Prism of Multimodal Discourse Analysis**

In 2016 the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) celebrated its tenth anniversary. Since its inaugural performances of *Home* the company has contributed substantially to the shaping of Scotland’s cultural landscape. Through its structure of a collaborative, touring theatre without walls, the NTS has challenged traditional perceptions of national theatres as elitist monuments of national culture. Nevertheless, although a lot has been written and said about the political and cultural factors underlying its establishment,¹ messages conveyed in the company’s repertoire have received less scholarly attention. This paper explores the NTS’s discursive treatment of contemporary ‘Scottish’ identities – their character and relevance – in the broader context of the national and trans-national imagining. Using methodology grounded in multimodal discourse analysis, it investigates meanings conveyed in the NTS musical, *Glasgow Girls* (2012), arguing that the popular piece is more than an ‘unashamedly’ positive expression of ‘political populism’.²

Theatre offers a fusion of various semiotic stimuli which help to convey meanings on various levels. Indeed, in a recent collection of works entitled *Theatre, Performance and Cognition: Languages, Bodies and Ecologies*, Barbara Dancygier suggests that the multimodality

¹ See for instance Denis Agnew, ‘Contexts and Concepts of a Scottish National Theatre’, (PhD thesis, Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh, 2000); Christine Hamilton and Adrienne Scullion, ‘Flagships or Flagging? The Post Devolution Role of Scotland’s National Companies’, *Scottish Affairs*, no. 42 (2003), pp.98-114; Robert Leach, ‘The Short, Astonishing History of the National Theatre of Scotland,’ *New Theatre Quarterly* 23, no.2 (2007). pp.177–83; Trish Reid, “‘From scenes like these old Scotia’s grandeur springs’”: The New National Theatre of Scotland’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 17, no.2 (2007), pp.192-201

² See Trish Reid, ‘Scottish Drama: The Expanded Community’ in *Community in Modern Scottish Literature* ed by Scott Lyall, (Boston: Brill, 2016), pp.158-159

of theatre is the very essence of its complexity and potential.³ The first ten years of the NTS's existence have proven that the company places a lot of emphasis on various modes of expression in their innovative, frequently site-specific performances. Music in particular appears as a powerful factor in their work and an exploration of the musical mode, (particularly song), reveals that it is used not only as an amplifier of powerful emotions, but as a mode of communication enabling discursively constructed meanings to be conveyed on the level of sound. Drawing on recent developments in social-semiotics this article explores musical discourses visible in one of NTS's most successful musical plays, *Glasgow Girls*. It argues that music in this production actively contributes to the theatre's critique of old boundaries and national iconographies, offering a bold take on the global circumstances influencing the formation of 'Scottish' identities today. Discourses surrounding the play are initially explored, highlighting ideological undercurrents shaping its representation of immigration and Scottish identity. The article then moves on to the examination of the musical sphere of the play, revealing discursive meanings conveyed in the piece on the level of sound. Together, the analyses offer an interpretation of the *Glasgow Girls* musical suggesting that the concepts proposed on the national stage may be more subversive and radical than they initially seem.

Glasgow Girls, written by Cora Bissett and David Greig, is a musical play based on real events which attracted public attention in 2005. The play has gained significant critical and popular acclaim with reviewers praising its 'explosive energy and political passion'⁴ and referring to it as 'awe-inspiring'⁵ as well as 'strong, gritty, street-wise and unashamedly polemical'.⁶ Indeed, in the words of Mark Brown, '[n]ot, perhaps, since 1973 – when John McGrath and his 7:84 theatre company staged their legendary play *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black Black Oil* – has Scottish musical theatre packed a political punch as hard as *Glasgow*

³ Barbara Dancygier, 'Multimodality in Theatre: Material Objects, Bodies and Language' in *Theatre, Performance and Cognition: Languages, Bodies and Ecologies* ed by Rhonda Blair and Amy Cook, (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), p.39

⁴ Joyce McMillan, Review, *The Scotsman*, 08/11/2012, available in *Theatre in Scotland; A Field of Dreams*, London: Nick Hern Books, 2016), p.363

⁵ Sam Marlowe, Review in *Time Out*, 14/02/2014, available on-line: <http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/glasgow-girls>, last accessed on 21/09/2016

⁶ Johnny Fox, Review in *One Stop Arts*, 22/02/2012, available on-line: <http://johnnyfox.co.uk/reviews/review-glasgow-girls-theatre-royal-stratford-east>, last accessed on 15/10/2016

Girls.⁷ The play tells a real-life story of a group of teenage girls from Drumchapel High School, on the outskirts of Glasgow, who embark upon a passionate mission to free their asylum seeker friend, Agnesa Murselaj, detained in one of the infamous dawn raids carried out by the UK Border Agency in situations where asylum claim is being rejected.⁸ The forced removals, officially criticised by Amnesty International for frequent brutality and racism,⁹ are known to be carried out by the UK Border Agency in situations when the asylum seekers' country of origin is no longer deemed as posing any threat to their safety.¹⁰ With the notion of 'safety' being somewhat arbitrary and the complexities of applicants' individual circumstances being frequently disregarded, the girls' campaign to release Agnesa became a powerful defence of Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that '[e]veryone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution'.¹¹ The girls' efforts began in 2005 with the launch of a petition to stop child detention in Scotland, (an end to this practice was eventually announced in a speech by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg in 2010).¹² The initiative's public appeal and wide media coverage led to a debate in the Scottish Parliament. The girls also won an award for the Public Campaign of the Year during the 2005 Scottish Politician of the Year Awards. The story has been subsequently turned into two BBC documentaries in 2005 and 2006¹³, a musical play commissioned for BBC Three in 2014¹⁴ and an NTS musical,

⁷ Mark Brown, 'True Test of Girl Power', Review, *The Herald*, 04/11/2012, available on-line on: http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/13079591.True_test_of_girl_power/

⁸ See Jo Shaw, *The Transformation of Citizenship in the European Union; Electoral Rights and the Restructuring of Political Space*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.273, see also Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, available on-line: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/41/contents>, last accessed on 11/10/16

⁹ See *Out of Control: A Case For a Complete Overhaul of Enforced Removals by Private Contractors; A Briefing by Amnesty International UK*, available on-line on:

https://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/out_of_control_1.pdf, last accessed on 23/11/16

¹⁰ See Jo Shaw, *The Transformation of Citizenship in the European Union; Electoral Rights and the Restructuring of Political Space*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.273, see also Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, available on-line: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/41/contents>, last accessed on 11/10/16

¹¹ See Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, (available on-line: [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/217\(III\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/217(III))), which constitutes the basis for the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, (available on-line: <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html>), which is the key legal basis for asylum applications in the UK.

¹² Deputy Prime Minister 's Speech on Child Detention: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/deputy-prime-ministers-speech-on-child-detention>, last accessed on 18/10/16

¹³ <https://vimeo.com/47646327> Glasgow girls documentary 1, <https://vimeo.com/52571808> Glasgow girls documentary 2, last accessed on 15/01/17

¹⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b049n0js>, last accessed on 15/01/2015

performed on the Scottish national stage in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2016. In a recent documentary entitled *National Theatre of Scotland: A Dramatic Decade*, Cora Bissett explains that the fact the 'story was led by a group of teenage girls that [...] have a passion for life and a kind of defiance and a kind of fearlessness'¹⁵ compelled her to create a 'bigger, bolder, more popular form [and] a musical was the best way to do that.'¹⁶ While the use of the musical mode seems to relate *Glasgow Girls* to the expressive power of McGrath's *The Cheviot...*, the way 'local' identities are approached in the later play signify a clear shift from a dissective representation of the past to the a daring vision of the future.¹⁷ *Glasgow Girls*, whilst offering great popular entertainment, emphasises the topics of immigration, belonging and social justice within the mainstream cultural debate in an emotionally disturbing yet forward-looking manner.

Playwright David Greig, who collaborated with Bissett on the stage adaptation of the story, is known for exploring the dynamics of economic and cultural transformations which frequently leave his characters ontologically and epistemologically puzzled.¹⁸ Deprived of a stable sense of belonging, Greig's characters seek some form of stability in the largely transnational world in which they constantly shift between places or, to use Marc Augé's term, transient 'non-places'.¹⁹ Still, although many of the *Glasgow Girls*' characters are forced to abandon their homelands and seek asylum, the vision painted by Greig and Bissett is far from that of a gloomy dystopia. Instead, what *Glasgow Girls* suggests is that against legal and social odds, and despite incidents of racism and xenophobia which dominated in the popular

¹⁵ Cora Bissett in 'National Theatre of Scotland: A Dramatic Decade', BBC Two, 27/09/2016

¹⁶ Cora Bissett in 'National Theatre of Scotland: A Dramatic Decade', BBC Two, 27/09/2016

¹⁷ For an investigation of ambiguities arising from the selection of songs for *The Cheviot...* see Ian Brown and Sim Innes, 'The Use of Some Gaelic Songs and Poetry in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black. Black Oil*', in *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, Vol.5, No.2, 2012, pp.27-55; For a polemic on the assumed preoccupation of the Scottish independence movement with the past see Joyce McMillan, 'Independence Is Not About the Past' in *The Scotsman*, 26/06/2014, available on-line: <http://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/joyce-mcmillan-independence-is-not-about-the-past-1-3458621>, last accessed on 09/10/16

¹⁸ See Marilena Zaroulia, 'Geographies of the Imagination' in David Greig's Theatre: Mobility, Globalization and European Identities', in *The Theatre of David Greig* ed by Clare Wallace, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.179-182

¹⁹ See Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Anthropology of Supermodernity*, (London: Verso, 1995)

media discourse,²⁰ many of the displaced families find a sense of home and community within Glasgow's working-class neighbourhoods of Scotstoun and Drumchapel.

The play begins with a formal notice of removal voiced by the UK Border Agency during a dawn raid:

This is the UK Borders Agency

Your Asylum Claim has been denied

Your residency is illegal

Your temporary admission has been curtailed

Your Removal must be enforced,

Alright. Enough. Let's knock the door down.²¹

As becomes clear from the Opening Montage, due to a supposed overcrowding of London, Glasgow was selected as an alternative destination for asylum seekers arriving in the United Kingdom in 1999. The musical's characters subsequently address the audience:

Roza: Why Glasgow?

Emma: Maybe (...) it was because Glasgow was full of half empty tower blocks that no one wanted to live in.

Agnesa: Or maybe it was because Glasgow's a friendly city?

Ewelina: Who knows?

Amal: But whatever reason it was – in the late spring of 1999 – a few frightened and bewildered families from all the war zones of the world were taken from London and dumped in a city they'd never heard of –

Glasgow –²²

²⁰ Mark Brown, 'Magnificent Seven' in *The Herald* originally published on 28/10/2012, available on-line on: http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/13078691.The_magnificent_seven/, last accessed on 17/10/2016

²¹ David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls*, London Script, National Theatre of Scotland, p.2

²² David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls...*, p.2

If it is not quite obvious at this stage whether Agnesa's mention of Glasgow's friendliness is genuine or comically ironic, Emma's comment concerning abandoned tower blocks being adapted as temporary refugee accommodation brings to mind a sense of urban dystopia emerging from Augé's work. Drumchapel is not an entirely neutral choice of location for the refugees within Glasgow. The neighbourhood around which the story revolves is a 'peripheral Glasgow housing estate built in the 1960s as an exercise in slum clearance.'²³ In the words of Jennifer, one of the play's characters, Drumchapel High is: '[o]ne of the toughest schools in one of the toughest areas of one of the toughest cities in Scotland.'²⁴ Indeed, according to a report by the Steering Committee on Local and Regional Democracy published by the Council of Europe in 2001, Drumchapel is an area where deprivation and social exclusion contribute to the shortening of its inhabitants' life expectancy by ten years in comparison to those living one mile away, in the neighbouring Bearsden.²⁵ While social housing in the area may be available, considering the rough character of the neighbourhood as well as frequent dawn raids affecting the refugee residents, the sense of precariousness in Drumchapel would likely seem profound. Nevertheless, it is here that the refugee families find a home and, as the tale unravels, their children fight passionately to keep it.

The audience meet the key protagonists, Amal, Roza, Ewelina, Agnesa, Jennifer and Emma early in the play, (the seventh original schoolgirl, Tony-Lee, does not feature in the NTS piece). Having described each other briefly, the characters announce that Mr Girvan, a Bilingual Learning Support Teacher, Scots language enthusiast, Kilmarnock fan, great lover of folk music and the poetry of Robert Burns, and a 'legend'²⁶ is also a 'Glasgow Girl' – a significant and surprisingly subversive concept which is crucial in understanding *Glasgow Girls* as more than a celebration of a naively conceived, multicultural utopia. The play, which interlaces the account of the girls' campaign with musical material functioning as a powerful commentary of their situation, offers a discursively innovative and realistically feasible take on cultural diversity and what its shape could be in a contemporary, forward-looking society.

²³ Trish Reid, 'Scottish Drama...', (2016), p.158

²⁴ David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls...*, p. 4

²⁵ Steering Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CDLR) prepared with the collaboration of Professor Massimo Balducci, *Neighbourhood Services in Disadvantaged Urban Areas and in Areas of Low Population*, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2001), p.150

²⁶ David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls...*, p.8

To understand what the refreshing take on these issues is, it is first necessary to look at the interaction of the newly arrived girls and their Bilingual Support Teacher. Mr Girvan initiates his teaching of English with an image and narrative embedded in the target language and culture.²⁷ He begins with Robert Burns, Scottish national poet, whom he presents to the girls on a banknote. He then moves on to recite Burns's 'To a Mouse', a poem expressing the poet's poignant reflection upon the fate of a helpless *beastie* he has accidentally made homeless while ploughing the field. The lyric is thus offered as a form of 'introduction to Scotland', (discursive complexities associated with that choice are explored in the section devoted to the poem's musical rendition below.) Crucially, the teacher delivers the poem in Scots followed by its English translation, which students may be more likely to understand. Notably, during this first performance at the beginning of the play, Mr Girvan asks the pupils to draw images reminding them of home. His request significantly amplifies the straightforward message of compassion conveyed in Burns's stanzas as the last drawing is Roza's image of a man pointing a gun at another man's head.²⁸ Mr Girvan thus delivers what appears to be an emblematically Scottish poem, whilst simultaneously enabling foreign students to immediately identify with the work's themes through their own, often traumatic experience of war and persecution. Not only is the sequence a mere endeavour to represent the process of translation during an English language class, but an attempt at conveying universal human experience. It is possible through the use of a familiar poem which enables the students *as well as* the audience to identify with the experience of others. Contrary to assimilation models of multiculturalism²⁹, Mr Girvan's seemingly simple gesture opens a window of opportunity for meaningful dialogue hinting at what historian, Donald Cuccioletta, terms *transculturalism*, in which, instead of merely tolerating, we perceive ourselves in the '*Other*'.³⁰ It is this approach which makes it possible for Emma to say that:

²⁷ James McGonigla and Evelyn Arizpe, (2007), p.27

²⁸ David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls...*, pp.12-13

²⁹ See See Guilherme D. Pires, P.John Stanton, *Accepting the Challenge of Cultural Diversity*, (London: Thomson, 2005), pp.42-43

³⁰ Donald Cuccioletta, 'Multiculturalism or Transculturalism: Towards a Cosmopolitan Citizenship' in *London Journal of Canadian Studies*, (Vol.17, 2001/2002), p.9

Emma: The Bilingual base soon became a haven – a sort of second home for the Asylum kids.

Jen: A place where they felt comfortable.³¹

This sense of acceptance and safety in the school environment finds a strong reflection in the girls' integration within the local community. Indeed, in the words of a bilingualism scholar Jim Cummins, '[b]ilingual students who feel a sense of belonging in their classroom learning community are more likely to feel 'at home' in their society upon graduation and to contribute actively to building that society'.³² The interaction here is nevertheless not initiated from a position of a 'tolerant', socially dominant power, but openness and recognition of human experience. It is the mutual, two-way interaction which underlies the notion of 'Glasgow Girls' as a term encompassing both the refugee kids who claim a Glasgow identity and, equally, members of the local community who identify with the refugee cause.

In order to fully appreciate the complexity of messages conveyed by the NTS play, the discursive undercurrents related to the specific choice of musical material within the drama should be analysed in more detail. The relationship between Burns's 'To a Mouse', its contemporary musical rendition as well as the play's theme song, 'We are the Glasgow Girls' will thus to be examined. According to scholars such as Johan Fornäs, song ought to be approached as a 'multimodal supergenre that mediates between words and music'.³³ Discursive meanings are conveyed by both lyrics and music, which carries sets of underlying contextual references. As argued by a semiotician, (and jazz musician), Theo van Leeuwen, music and speech were not always treated as entirely autonomous disciplines. Recent advocates of social semiotics and multimodal theory call for a more holistic approach to meaning. Such a position stems from a recognition that communication consists of many more elements than just language. According to social semioticians, in order to understand how meanings are transmitted and perceived, an interaction of a variety of audio-visual and

³¹ David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls...*, pp.13-14

³² Jim Cummins, *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*, (Ontario: CABE, 1996), p.236

³³ See Johan Fornäs, 'The Words of Music' in *Popular Music and Society*, Issue 26, No 1, (2003), pp.37-38

spatial factors can, and should, be considered.³⁴ Van Leeuwen proposes that instead of invariably following the approach to language as a dominant and largely fixed code, more emphasis should be put on the exploration of semiotic resources, enabling objects and practices to be perceived and interpreted in multiple ways depending on the context and manner in which they are used. While Roland Barthes argued that denotation and connotation are not limited to language but can include image, social semiotic investigation of meaning goes even further and incorporates visual, auditory and even kinaesthetic modes, (previously 'signs'), in what is known as the multimodal discourse analysis.³⁵ As suggested in the introduction of this article, theatre offers a rich source of material for a multimodal investigation devoted to the constructions of national and transnational identities. Writing about the inherent multimodality of theatre, Barbara Dancygier argues that '[t]he interaction between the material, the embodied, and the linguistic is intricate and relies on a number of dimensions: visual perception, frame evocation, conceptualization of the human body, understanding of space and, last but not least, the language.'³⁶ To that list I would certainly add the perception of auditory modes such as music, the exploration of which can be successfully approached using methodology grounded in social-semiotic analyses of van Leeuwen,³⁷ Kress³⁸ and Machin.³⁹ Such an exploration reveals discursive complexities underlying the message put forward on the Scottish national stage. 'We are the Glasgow Girls', the theme song of *Glasgow Girls*, is a potent source of material for such an investigation.

Without delving into neuroscience, (which admittedly offers fascinating insights into processes involved in the perception of music),⁴⁰ social semiotics enables us to investigate music as discourse. In the words of van Leeuwen, 'Almost everything we do or make can be

³⁴ See Gunther Kress, *Multimodality: a Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, (London: Routledge, 2009), pp.1-15

³⁵ Theo van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), pp.4-5, 26, 37

³⁶ Barbara Dancygier, 'Multimodality in Theatre: Material Objects, Bodies and Language' in *Theatre, Performance and Cognition: Languages, Bodies and Ecologies* ed by Rhonda Blair and Amy Cook, (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), p.39

³⁷ Theo van Leeuwen, (1999), and (2005), op.cit.

³⁸ Gunther Kress, *Multimodality; A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2010) and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

³⁹ David Machin, *Analysing Popular Music; Image, Sound, Text*, (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2010)

⁴⁰ See works by Stefan Koelsch, <http://www.stefan-koelsch.de/papers.html>, last accessed on 30/09/2016

done or made in different ways and therefore allows, at least in principle, the articulation of different social and cultural meanings.⁴¹ A socio-semiotic analysis is thus interested in how exactly semiotic resources are used, who uses them, what connotations they carry in a particular situation and what *new* meanings emerge in this process. The plural form ‘meanings’ is deliberately used here as the meaning potential is not fixed. Drawing on the works of James Gibson⁴² and Michael Halliday⁴³, van Leeuwen suggests that the semiotic potential of the resources is largely informed by their past uses which may be selectively employed depending on why the new users need them.⁴⁴ It is thus largely up to the users to pick a particular meaning applicable to a given situation. What complicates the matter is that the potential use of a given resource, (in other words, its *affordance*), remains objectively there, which leads to a somewhat paradoxical conclusion that meanings are subjective and objective at the same time.⁴⁵ Still, the idea that semiotic resources should be analysed not only in their current context but also with consideration of their origins and past applications is highly useful in the exploration of musical discourse in the work of the NTS and, more generally, in theatre as a medium of communication. What such an approach necessitates is attention to *change*. To put it in Barthesian terms, semantic resources will never emerge ‘naturally’ or in an ideological vacuum, however persuasive such visions may be.⁴⁶ They will always be driven by some form of ideologically marked discourse. Unravelling these discourses within the work of the NTS enables an exploration of changes within the collective ‘imagining’ conducted on the Scottish national stage.

‘We are the Glasgow Girls’ is the theme song of the musical, written by a reggae, trip and hip-hop artist MC Soom T. Born in Glasgow to a family of Indian immigrants, MC Soom T, or Sumati Bhardwaj, enjoys a reputation as a militant activist⁴⁷ and stands out as a powerful female voice on the city’s music scene – details which certainly resonate with the themes explored in the NTS musical. To comprehend the musically and discursively significant

⁴¹ van Leeuwen, (2005), p.4

⁴² James J. Gibson, ‘Theory of Affordances’ in *The People, Place and Space Reader*, ed by Jen Jack Gieseeking, William Mangold, Cindi Katz, Setha Low and Susan Saegert, (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp.57-60

⁴³ Michael Halliday, (1978)

⁴⁴ See differences between ‘theoretical’ and ‘actual’ semiotic potential in van Leeuwen, (2005), p.4

⁴⁵ Van Leeuwen. (2005), pp.4-5

⁴⁶ See Roland Barthes’s critique of myth in *Mythologies*, (London: Grant and Cutler, 1994)

⁴⁷ See for instance Echorek, <http://echorek.com/soomt/>, last accessed on 20/09/2016

elements within her song, it is useful to examine it through the prism of the following factors: its relation to other musical pieces in the play, musical genres and traditions influencing its composition, rhythm, prosody and song lyrics. The discursive potential of 'We are the Glasgow Girls' is best realised in its initial performance in the show beginning immediately after, and thus in juxtaposition to, the acoustic, folk rendition of Burns's 'To a Mouse', which has already been mentioned. The use of a 1785 poem in a drama staged by a contemporary national theatre has a variety of underlying connotations. It can be interpreted as a reference to a collective past which is subsequently transformed and adapted to the twenty-first century context. Contrary to voices criticising references to heritage as standing in inevitable conflict with Scotland's alleged civic nationalism,⁴⁸ the employment of a traditional piece can be seen here as a form of critical engagement with cultural memory— a sense of a historical and cultural past through which national character may be celebrated but also questioned.⁴⁹ Several aspects concerning the choice and arrangement of the poem suggest a more complex interpretation. First of all, the use of a contemporary, acoustic guitar accompaniment hints at a rather dynamic character of the proposed 'past'. The poem, seemingly familiar, is already transformed and subtly foreshadows the more radical changes to come. The very choice of an 'iconically traditional' piece by Burns not only resonates with heritage but also a variety of potential transgressions if we consider the bard's reputation as a music-loving dancer⁵⁰, internationalist,⁵¹ as well as a working-class radical,⁵² expressing the voice of those marginalised within the society.⁵³ Not only do these factors embed the play in the narrative of social resistance, but also foreshadow its focus on youthful passion and rebelliousness, which is key to its expressive power and discursive orientation. If Carol McGuirk's recent take on 'To a Mouse' affirms it as one of the bard's most powerfully self-reflective works in which

⁴⁸ Ben Torrance, 'A Curious Case of SNP's Shift from Ethnic Nationalism', *The Herald*, 14/04/2014, available online:

http://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/13155444.Curious_case_of_SNP_s_shift_from_ethnic_nationalism/, last accessed on 17/09/2016

⁴⁹ See Ann Rigney, *Afterlives of Walter Scott; Memory on the Move*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

⁵⁰ John Gibson Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns*, (Edinburgh: Constable and Co., 1830), p.28

⁵¹ Robert Crawford, 'Introduction' to *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1997), p.xi

⁵² See Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in the Late Eighteenth-century Scotland*, (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002)

⁵³ See Alan Rawes, 'Burns in Italy: Giuseppe Chiarini's 'Roberto Burns'' in *Robert Burns in Global Culture* ed by Murray Pittock, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), pp.94

he considers the precariousness of his own social and economic prospects,⁵⁴ the play's preoccupation with asylum seekers gives it doubly resonant interpretative undertones, which easily give in to both direct and metaphorical interpretations. The teacher's second rendition towards the end of the play completes the process of cultural transformation explored throughout the musical. *Glasgow Girls* is thus not only an emotional story of the girls' struggle to release their friend from detention, but also a story of the Scottish working class neighbourhood becoming a home to the recently arrived refugees, *as well as* the area becoming enriched with the newcomers' cultural influence. This, of course, carries a variety of implications for both local and incoming communities and finds expression in the musical layer of the Mr Girvan's performance which is interjected with sudden, fast-paced Romani-style stanzas. The composition does not follow the rhythmic pattern we *expect* to on the basis of what we are familiar with and what we hear at the beginning of the piece. Without analysing the lyrics, the rhythm itself, with its recognisably shifting origins, signifies an interruption in the familiar sound flow and suggests a change in the character of the tune leading up to the musical finale. These interludes signify more than a change of musical style. They reflect a complex transformation in the nature of the 'local' Scottish voice. It is quite clear that the critical commentary on the political turmoil leading to hostilities amongst 'fellow mortals', as well as the references to the destruction of the mouse's safe dwelling, relate Burns's song to the adversities faced by the displaced asylum seekers, confirming a contemporary, spatially and thematically fresh dimension to the otherwise well recognised traditional piece. The Romani sounds, however, initially coming across as incongruous with the familiar mode of Scottish folk performance, offer a performative prelude to the 'We are the Glasgow Girls' finale which acts as a musical statement concerning the multicultural transformation within the local Glasgow communities.

The play's musical finale is based on a combination of electronic beats, quickly-articulated, reggae-influenced rap lyrics interwoven with melodious choruses and elements of 'world-music' blended into its structure. As such, it offers a rich source of material for socio-semiotic discourse analysis. The overall hip-hop style of the song carries a variety of

⁵⁴ Carol McGuirk, *Reading Robert Burns: Texts, Contexts, Transformations*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p.65

underlying meanings and connotations. While the study into rap's origins in the sixteenth-century Scottish flyting stormed the news in 2008,⁵⁵ it is fair to agree with Becky Blanchard that contemporary rap music is most strongly associated with the 'hip-hop culture of young, urban, working-class African-Americans, its roots in the African oral tradition, its function as the voice of an otherwise underrepresented group(...)'.⁵⁶ Certainly not all contemporary artists subscribe to this celebration of early genre-associated values in their lyrics, but if some of the mainstream rappers abandoned social engagement in favour of swish cars, diamonds, and private jets,⁵⁷ strands of hip-hop, and notably European hip-hop, continue to constitute a platform for expression and empowerment to the otherwise underprivileged. Focusing on the struggles faced by the rappers' close-knit community, they stay true to hip-hop's 'foundational roots' embedded in the reality of the 'hood'.⁵⁸ Indeed, Scottish rap has been described as 'the sound of the schemes', driven by the desire to 'give voice to the voiceless'.⁵⁹ Such attitudes are also well reflected in migrant communities where the music scene tends to be one of the very few arenas granting social acceptance.⁶⁰ Here, migrant youth assume an equal space in their articulation of solidarity as well as protest against racial, political and economic oppression. Through their musical practice, through the shared physical act of music production and perception, and finally through the expression of shared messages, these musicians construct a community. A community thus becomes not just 'represented' but 'constructed' through the medium of music. In the words of Simon Frith:

the issue is not how a particular piece of music or a performance reflects the people, but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience – a musical

⁵⁵ See 'Scotland Takes the Rap for Hip-Hop' in *The Scotsman*, 27/12/2008, available on-line on: <http://www.scotsman.com/news/scotland-takes-the-rap-for-hip-hop-1-1302656>, last accessed on 11/09/2017

⁵⁶ Becky Blanchard, 'The Social Significance of Rap and Hip-Hop Culture', *Journals on Poverty and Prejudice*, Vol. VII, *Media and Race*, (Stanford University, Spring 1999), available online on: https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/mediarace/socialsignificance.htm, last accessed on 12/08/16

⁵⁷ See Omar Shahid, 'Lowkey, Logic and a New Wave of Political British Hip-Hop MCs' in *The Guardian*, (19/03/12), available on-line: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2012/mar/19/lowkey-logic-british-hop-hop>, last accessed on 12/05/16

⁵⁸ See Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), p.236

⁵⁹ Peter Ross, 'Scottish Hip-Hop: Rap Battles in the Heart of Glasgow' in *The Scotsman*, 12/08/2012

⁶⁰ See Verena Zelger, 'Identity and Triple Liminality of a Young Hip-Hop Group in Tyrol, Austria: A Case Study' in *Hip Hop in Europe; Cultural Trends and Transnational Flows*, ed by Sina A. Nietzsche and Walter Grünzweig, (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2013), pp.241-242

experience, an aesthetic experience – that we can only make sense of by *taking on* both a subjective and collective identity. (...) Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social (...).⁶¹

Importantly, drawing on the African oral traditions where ‘rhyme, beat and vocal inflection carry as much meaning as the words themselves’,⁶² identities and meanings in hip-hop songs are conveyed on various, linguistic and supralinguistic levels. Consequently, if hip hop connotes a rebellious struggle for recognition of a marginalised voice, it is quite significant that this particular call is articulated not outside but *inside* of a national theatre performance. On the discursive level, the youth, hip-hop theme song of the play thus brings the question of the marginalised, underprivileged members of the society to the high profile cultural debate. The genre-associated meanings are further stressed when analysed through the prism of cultural history: hip-hop, together with rock ‘n’ roll and jazz, to give other examples, have been seen as socially dangerous musical styles attributed to youth⁶³ and the ‘common people’.⁶⁴ In fact, the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane which has fuelled such ideas about popular music has operated in the Western discourse since antiquity, with popular music being often dismissed as ‘pornographic’,⁶⁵ and ‘inciting bad behaviour’.⁶⁶ In line with this theory, there is a significant, (and hierarchal), dichotomy between spiritually-elevated high cultural music to be contemplated in silence, and the sex-driven rhythms of pop,⁶⁷ which have been widely enjoyed by audiences around the world, and frequently used as means of shaking off the established social conventions.⁶⁸ Bearing in mind that hip-hop

⁶¹ Simon Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), p.294

⁶² Simon Frith, (2007), p.224

⁶³ See for instance Joe Alan Austin and Michael Willard, (eds), *Generations of Youth; Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998) and Andy Bennett, *Cultures of Popular Music*, (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2001)

⁶⁴ See Jaap Kooijman, *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p.11

⁶⁵ Marina Terkourafi, ‘Introduction: A Fresh Look at Some Old Questions’ in *The Languages of Global Hip Hop* ed by Marina Terkourafi, (London: Continuum, 2010), p.2

⁶⁶ Terkourafi, (2010), op.cit.

⁶⁷ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp.130-141

⁶⁸ David Machin, ‘Lecture One’, Semiotics Institute Online, available on: <http://semioticon.com/sio/courses/language-media-and-manipulation-a-course-in-critical-discourse-analysis/> last accessed on 09/11/16

continues to be a largely male-dominated genre,⁶⁹ the distinctively female voice within the musical further emphasises the play's rebellious drive to tear down inadequate barriers, expose social injustice and instil a sense of agency amongst the contemporary youth. This is well reflected in the following stanza:

Amal: Girls united from afar
We bind to make a fist
Roza: To make right the very wrongs
Betrayed by the courts justice
Ewelina: Rebuild the faith that once was gone
Assist those in our hearts and homes
All: Never to be left alone⁷⁰

The feeling of strong defiance against unjust treatment of fellowmen is clearly and emotively articulated here. As will be argued in the sections below, also the structure of the musical's hip-hop verses plays a crucial part in conveying the political message successfully. With its earliest focus being, in fact, dance and rhythm,⁷¹ hip-hop is extremely evocative as a means of discursive attack on the political and cultural establishment.

Understanding the significance of rhythm in theatre offers a valuable insight into the tremendous success of *Glasgow Girls*, a play which certainly loses a lot of its electrifying appeal when only experienced on the page. According to van Leeuwen, rhythm, as a basic, natural element of our biologic existence, is the very 'lifeblood' of semiotics:⁷²

As we act together and talk together we synchronize. The rhythms of our actions become as finely attuned to each other as the parts of different instruments in a musical

⁶⁹Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2010), p.150

⁷⁰ David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls...*, p.23

⁷¹ David Samuels, 'The Rap on Rap: The "Black Music" that Isn't Either' in *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2004) ed by Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, p.148

⁷² Van Leeuwen, (2005), op.cit., p.181

performance.(...) The essence of rhythm is alternation – alternation between two states: an up and a down, a tense and a lax, a loud and a soft,(...). Such an alternation between two ‘opposite poles’ is so essential to human perception that we perceive it even when, ‘objectively’, it is not there.⁷³

What this means is that rhythm and its various aspects such as pulse, accent, meter and stress organise sound as well as our actions into structured patterns.⁷⁴ By doing so, they tend to facilitate better understanding of multimodal compositions which convey messages through dialogues, movements or, indeed, music.⁷⁵ Rhythm helps to transmit meaning through allowing the listener and their entire body to give in to its natural ebb and flow. This is particularly true for regular rhythmic patterns which characterise structurally uncomplicated popular songs, appealing to the widest audience. This brings to mind Aristotle’s distinction between heroic metres such as hexameter, and those associated with speech of ordinary people, such as iambic.⁷⁶ As is to be expected, iambic often features in the lyrics of popular songs and, indeed, large sections of ‘We Are the Glasgow Girls’ are performed using this metre. One of the fast reggae-hip-hop verses of the piece reads

/ x / x / x / x

We’ll organise and plan this war

/ x / x / x

And we’ll set out to win

/ x / x / x / x

Back rights for all our fellow men

/ x / x / x

Community and friends⁷⁷

⁷³ Van Leeuwen, (2005), pp.181-182

⁷⁴ See Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard B. Meyer, *The Rhythmic Structure of Music*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp.1-11

⁷⁵ Van Leeuwen, (2005), op.cit.

⁷⁶ Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and Poetics*, (New York: Random House, 1954), pp.180-181

⁷⁷ David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls...*, p.45

The fast, clear and broadly iambic rhythm thus follows the metre of common speech. As explained by Steve Larson in his recent book *Musical Forces; Motion, Metaphor and Meaning in Music*, listeners get used to such 'rhythmic stability' as they grow familiar with a given rhythmic pattern.⁷⁸ Regular rhythmic pattern and skilfully interwoven international rhythmic and tonal influences are certainly some of the most important reasons why 'We are the Glasgow Girls' works well as the play's anthem. While the context and provenance of used sounds and rhythms express sets of values and ideas, their combination in a different musical setting constructs new meanings, expressive of entirely new realities. As argued by Larson:

in agreement with contemporary cognitive metaphor theory, our experience of musical motion seems to borrow not just selective features of physical motion but any aspect of physical motion that can be mapped onto musical succession [and] physical motions tend to have beginnings, middles, and ends that move from stability through instability then back again to stability.⁷⁹

If we pursue Larson's movement metaphor and apply it to the musical discourse of the main song in the *Glasgow Girls*, our attention may be drawn to the fluid character of contemporary identities, which, just as the sounds of displaced communities they come from, are very much in the state of flux. Understood as a process rather than a fixed given, identity can be perceived similarly to music— as a flow, movement through time.⁸⁰ If Mr Girvan's 'To a Mouse' may initially suggest the notions of a familiar Scottish 'national' status quo, (or Larson's 'stability'), the Roma beats introduce the sense of 'global' cultural and political disturbance and tension, which is subsequently resolved in a creative blending of international influences in 'We are the Glasgow Girls' finale. If it is clear that the musical mode of 'To a Mouse' discursively represents 'us', (the 'local' voice,) and the semiotic resources used to denote asylum seekers' appearance in the community are initially perceived as an unexpected sound of the 'Other', the entire play and, importantly, the emotionally powerful musical finale, arrives at a very transformed sense of who 'we' are.

⁷⁸ Steve Larson, *Musical Forces; Motion, Metaphor and Meaning in Music* (Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 2012) pp.143-149

⁷⁹ Steve Larson, (2012), p.145

⁸⁰ Simon Frith, (2007), op.cit., p.295

'We Are the Glasgow Girls' mixes and juxtaposes verbally transmitted text with music drawing on a variety of semiotic resources. In terms of voice articulation, rap/singing style of the song performed by the girls follows standard semiotic assumptions about meanings non-verbally conveyed by the human voice. Words are articulated quickly with a raised tone conveying a sense of urgency. As in the case of news delivered by on-the-scene reporters, the high tempo helps to create a feeling of relevance and immediacy amongst the listeners.⁸¹ This is certainly true in the stanza already quoted above. Essentially, the voice, articulated with tension, not only is in itself tense but 'also *means* tense and *makes* tense',⁸² helping us to understand connotations underlying the performance. In the words of van Leeuwen, 'we can use our experience of vocal tension to understand other things, transfer it from the domain of direct human experience to the domain of more abstract cultural ideas, values and practices.'⁸³ In the case of *Glasgow Girls* the tension seems to refer to the frustration with the unjustly precarious position the refugees find themselves in. What is significant, however, is that meanings conveyed by text and music in the song do not always correspond but subvert each other taking the discursive argument to somewhat unexpected conclusions.

'We are the Glasgow Girls' is performed assuming an agitated, bold if not angry hip-hop voice – a notion enhanced by the play's trailer visuals,⁸⁴ which involve a somewhat threatening black and yellow tunnel with flashing slogans rapidly appearing in the background, (Figure 1,2,3). But what the slogans and lyrics say is not quite what the notion of 'migrant youth against the system' or 'militant activism' could suggest. The rebelliousness here is simply the rejection of obsolete boundaries which stop the girls from being a part of *their* local community. The community in question is importantly not that of migrants or refugees, but that of Scotstown and Drumchapel. The notion of 'us' and 'them' is thus fluid and its character is further explored through the use of musical borrowings in the song's composition.

⁸¹ See Van Leeuwen, (2005), p.191

⁸² Van Leeuwen, (2005), p.33

⁸³ Van Leeuwen, (2005), p.33

⁸⁴ NTS *Glasgow Girls* 2012 trailer, available on-line on: <https://vimeo.com/50772326>, last accessed on 03/11/2016

Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



'We are the Glasgow Girls' features a variety of borrowings from world-music sources. Such semiotic 'imports' are employed in music for various purposes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, folk instruments, such as the French hurdy-gurdy, were employed in symphonic orchestras to convey the sense of authenticity associated with an 'idyllic

countryside'.⁸⁵ In other instances, contemporary film makers used relatively recent instruments in their attempt to convey the 'national' spirit in soundscapes of films preoccupied with a distant past. Such was the case of Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* and the employment of bagpipes.⁸⁶ 'We are the Glasgow Girls', an overall urban-sounding, dub-hip-hop piece, features gypsy scale stylisation⁸⁷ realised in a sorrowful, emotively lingering melody phrase combined with the word 'Glasgow' towards the end of the contrastingly energetic chorus. The syncopated Kurdish beats⁸⁸ appearing towards the end of the song give it a boost of vibrant folk-dance energy. Finally, an Arabic stylisation is introduced on the repetition of the word 'strong' through a clever use of the C# minor harmonic scale which hints at the quartertone melismata⁸⁹ popular in the Arabic music tradition. The lyrics of the popular refrain read:

CHORUS

Glasgow Girls

We'll show them how to do it

When we show the world

How to get up and to it

The Glasgow Girls are one and all

The Glasgow Girls together we are strong

Together we are strong

Together we are strong.

CHORUS & ROMA

Glasgow Girls, we show em [sic] how to do it –

Oh, Glasgow

Oh, Glasgow

Glasgow Girls

⁸⁵ Van Leeuwen, (2005), pp.40-41

⁸⁶David Machin, 'Sound and Music as Communication' Lectures 3 and 4 available on: <http://semioticon.com/sio/courses/sound-and-music-as-communication-a-social-semiotic-approach/>, last accessed on 19/01/2017

⁸⁷ See Sok-Hoon Tan, 'The "Gypsy" Style as Extramusical Reference: A Historical and Stylistic Reassessment of Liszt's Book I "Swiss" of "Annees de Pelerinage"', (Master's Thesis, University of North Texas, 2008), pp.24-25

⁸⁸ Cora Bissett in 'National Theatre of Scotland: A Dramatic Decade', BBC Two, 27/09/2016

⁸⁹ See Dalia Cohen and Ruth Katz, *Palestinian Arab Music; A Maqam Tradition in Practice*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp.229-230

Glasgow Girls (...)
Hup hup hup hup hup hup hup hup
Glasgow Girls
We'll show em how to do it (...) ⁹⁰

While words may convey relatively clear meanings, musical borrowings used in the song function as distinct semiotic resources which can attach very specific connotations to otherwise entirely neutral vocabulary, such as 'oh' or 'hup'. While an uprooting of sounds from their original cultural context into a piece of western, popular music could be interpreted as a sign of cultural appropriation or simply a fusion of international influences in the age of globalisation, what the international influence seems offer is a semiotic change. As the notion of mobile, adaptable identities lies at heart of the play, the sense of what is local and what signifies the foreign 'Other' is shaken. The girls confidently voice their own story, which, significantly, becomes a story of the entire Scotstoun, and, indeed, everyone supporting their cause. As the re-contextualised external musical influences blend in with the Scottish tradition and become proposed *as* local, the notion of what 'local' means becomes creatively transformed, opening up to a variety of resources which become naturalised and embraced within one semiotic order of things.

Employing elements of multimodal analysis this article illuminates the role of musical discourse in David Greig and Cora Bisset's *Glasgow Girls*. Music is a tremendously significant factor in the work of Scotland's National Theatre and, indeed, in the construction of Scottish identities. In the case of *Glasgow Girls*, its passionate, youthful energy has been a key factor in bringing the issues of refugees and working-class communities to the forefront of the 'national' cultural debate. It has certainly helped to convey an overwhelmingly positive message concerning the sense of integrity within these communities and, by doing so, functioned as a resonant factor in the NTS's criticism of UK immigration policy. Still, even though the diverse multicultural vision of Glasgow is certainly stressed in the drama, the NTS does not pretend there is no other side in the argument – it is well articulated in the hostile

⁹⁰ David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls...*, p.45

attitudes of xenophobic radio callers or even Jennifer's own father.⁹¹ This is significant if we consider Gerry Hassan's criticism of the myths of modern Scotland which he sees as being continuously propelled in the political and popular discourse.⁹² One of such false beliefs, according to Hassan, is the openness and tolerance binarily opposed to British prejudice and conservatism. This, he argues, is far from a shared stance amongst the whole society and could be perhaps rephrased as an 'aspiration' rather than the actual state of affairs. Nevertheless if, as Foucault, and others, have argued, powerful discourse is capable of constructing reality, the visions and versions of contemporary Scotland rehearsed on the national stage may, (to draw on psychoanalytical theory),⁹³ in fact, influence the popular attitudes to some of the most pressing topics today. Although the NTS is frequently praised for remaining politically neutral in the case of Scottish Independence, it does not shy away from engaging with the topic in ways which, often, ever so slightly emphasise the distinctly Scottish take on contemporary global issues. In the heat of the current refugee crisis, this certainly involves a discussion of belonging and identity, in which the NTS cautiously yet confidently searches for a common ground between its national roots and transnational routes.

⁹¹ David Greig, Cora Bissett, John Kielty, MC Soom T, Patricia Panther, *Glasgow Girls...*, pp.57-60 and 38-39

⁹² See Gerry Hassan, *Caledonian Dreaming; The Quest for a Different Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2014), pp.31-38

⁹³ See Patrick Campbell, 'Introduction' to *Psychoanalysis and Performance* ed by Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear, (London: Routledge, 2001)