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Laurens De Vos*

Spectatorship in the Theatre, the Cinema and Photography

The Gaze of Sartre and Roland Barthes' *punctum* in David Greig

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Abstract: David Greig's *Outlying Islands* can be read as a study of how people watch each other, and the implications of watching and being watched, both for fictional characters and for the spectators. This article analyses the ways identification processes are shaped with the gaze as the mediating actor, and how sexual awakening is bound up with the workings of the look. Sartre and Lacan's perspective on the look will help to explain the experience of being a subject and an object as described in the play.

In addition, the article claims that *Outlying Islands* is a complex of intricate questions as to the nature of theatre itself in which the spectator is implicated as he is urged to engage in the play's identification set-ups. Furthermore, Greig's play explores the relation of the theatre to other art forms such as the cinema and photography, which enhances its metatheatrical nature. Both are predominantly present in the play as they question our way of looking that is initiated by their respective objects. Roland Barthes' notion of the *punctum* in photography will be tested on its usefulness in theatre studies.

Keywords: David Greig, Sartre, gaze, Barthes, metatheatricality

For a long time, among British playwrights David Greig has remained the odd man out. Despite already being a very prolific playwright at the time, his role in Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre* that set the standard for 1990ies drama is restricted to that of an extra. Obviously, by no means does Greig's work fit into this category, which was pointed out by Traverse's artistic director Ian Brown, remarking that "you can't reduce new writing to confrontational plays: other Scottish writers such as David Greig and David Harrower were writing quieter plays" (Sierz 39). Moreover, being a Scot has not contributed to establishing his name in London, and the difficulty to put a label on him because of the wide

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diversity of his work, ranging from children's plays to libretti, makes him not an easy to catch fish. In more than one way, Greig himself has been 'outlying'.

Very often, Greig's work has been interpreted in terms of globalisation, and more or less concomitant with this issue the question as to the local, i.e. Scottish accents in his plays. Without so much as explicitly touching the theme of Scottish identity, his *Outlying Islands* (2002) examines both the continuous renegotiations that underlie the question of what being Scottish consists of and the country's relation to other states, in particular England. How does its peripheral geographical, political and economic position affect the way Scotland looks at itself and its neighbours? David Pattie has argued that the transitory and unstable nature of the island reflects the uncertainty that Scottish identity is subjected to:

There is something usefully unfixed about Greig's idea of Scottishness. It is not an entirely evanescent concept; it is located in an attitude to the traditions of the country, and to the people who inhabit that country – but it also, implicitly, includes other voices, other traditions, woven around the central idea of a Scottish identity. There is something in this description, also, which chimes with longstanding ideas of Scottishness as an identity which tries to escape fixed definition: of a national identity which places itself, self-consciously, on shifting sands.

(Pattie 195)

Although the play's undercurrents questioning Scottish identity are eminently present in *Outlying Islands*, rather than focusing on a political reading with regard to its Scottishness, this article will engage in a more psychological interpretation and argue that the play is as much about the formation of identity and subjectivity in general. "Along with the critique of globalisation and the more local and personal politics staged in his works, David Greig is also a writer of romances", Janelle Reinelt writes. "The desire for human intimacy, sexual longing and relationships that are marked by loss appear everywhere in his work" (Reinelt 218). In what follows I will outline how these emotions and interpersonal developments are structured with the gaze as the centrifugal force that sets them in motion. In addition, I will argue that *Outlying Islands* is a complex of intricate questions as to the nature of theatre itself and its relation to other art forms such as the cinema and photography. Both are predominantly present in the play as they question our way of looking that is initiated by their respective objects. Therefore, in this article I turn to Roland Barthes' notion of the *punctum* in photography to explore the usefulness of a theatrical *punctum* in defining the properties and particularities of the medium of the theatre. Elsewhere I have examined more profoundly the relationship of the theatre with cinema (De Vos forthcoming).

Outlying Islands depicts two young graduates disembarking on an isolated island somewhere in the Atlantic before the Scottish coast in order to observe and

study a rare species of birds. Robert is the more outgoing and adventurous one, whereas John is more timid and aware of the civilised world they have left behind. One of the ways the play itself can be read is as a study of how people watch each other, and the implications of watching and being watched, both for fictional characters and for the spectators.

Basically, two mental responses can be initiated by the gaze, depending on the hostility or benevolence towards the gaze. One of the most vehement critics of the impact of the gaze undoubtedly was Jean-Paul Sartre, who felt intimidated by the awareness of being watched. The gaze of the other is felt to be an intrusion into his personal world. In fact, no less than his self is being threatened under the other's gaze. His phenomenological world is decentralised as it shifts due to the alternating perspective of the other that literally comes into the field and turns him into an object. Sartre understood perfectly well that the act of looking is not an innocent contemplative act but radically changes the relation between the subject and the object of viewing. It always connects both poles and thus renegotiates the terms on which one's world is constructed. With regard to the dynamics of the look, Heidegger's influence on Sartre's thinking is indisputable. "World," Heidegger said, "is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse transport us into Being" (qtd. in Jay 272). However, in the French existentialist, it never comes to an ocular interaction between the one watching and the one being watched. From the latter's perspective, the Other's look always entails a deprivation of his self. Gone is the Cartesian perspectival all-seeing and hence omniscient gaze by which the observer is not affected in the formation of his own subjectivity. If the western tradition emerging in the wake of Descartes could derive its ontological stability from a self- or ego-conscious driven mind-set, in the twentieth century this view is disrupted and yields to an epistemological suspicion of ocular-based knowledge.

For Sartre, the loss of his self as a result of the look of the other pushes him into the position of object, thus turning him into a passive victim, not unlike the way some victims of torture or suffering are portrayed in photographs. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag notes that "[t]he more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying. [...] The exhibition in photographs in exotic countries continues this offering, oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence; for the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees" (Sontag 63-5). In other words, the more other someone is, the less fear we have of putting them on frontal display and looking them straight in the eye. There is less inclination to turn away in shame and avoid eye contact. To look is to exercise power; to look away is a way of showing

empathy and identification, and acknowledging the other as myself. The philosopher François George says that in Sartre, “[t]he look is always absolute, it emanates from a pitiful, dead transcendence, which makes reciprocity unthinkable” (qtd. in Jay 278).

In *Outlying Islands* we find this non-emphatic, scientific gaze primarily in Robert. Mating and sexual relationships are looked upon in terms of Darwinist principles; he describes Ellen only as another *curiosum* that can be watched and photographed, indeed pretty much as another one of his ‘birds’. Emotions yield to rational explanations, not in the least when it comes to his and John’s mutual position towards Ellen. “It will be interesting to see what happens. According to Darwin –/ We should both fight for her. [...] Don’t worry. According to Darwin, she’ll sleep with the loser as well. She’s claimed by the winner but she’ll mate with the loser when the winner isn’t looking. That’s her strategy” (151–2). A similar cold-hearted scientific explanation follows after Kirk’s death, that is in Robert’s opinion nothing more than a purely natural phenomenon in which no grief or mourning should be involved: “Nature does not require that you weep for the old. Birds on the cliff top clear the corpses without pity. [...] Here – in a natural environment – death means exactly what it should. More room for the young” (196). The fundamentally opposite responses to the frontal display of people that Sontag describes in her essay are reflected in John and Robert’s reactions to the photograph Robert has secretly taken of Ellen. Robert indeed has no qualms displaying his object of interest in full nudity to the eyes of the observer, whereas John shows empathy and is inclined to look away. Together they embody the spectator’s double bind in the theatre to nudity onstage, as two conflicting reactions go hand in hand. On the one hand the performer’s naked body causes discomfort and unease, making the spectator want to divert the eyes. Yet on the other hand the voyeuristic inclination and curiosity draw the gaze towards the stage. Robert and John here personify a *fort/da* game that encompasses the audience onstage.

For one reason or another, perhaps because of the juiciness of the autobiographical link to Sartre’s disgust of his own ugliness, critical thinking about his musings on the look has focused almost exclusively on the objectifying power of the gaze. However, Sartre’s fear of being objectified is not entirely one of repulsion. Being watched allows one to regain self-consciousness. “I see myself because somebody sees me” (Sartre 349). And this is the second mental response to the gaze that has largely influenced Lacan in the description of man’s identification process. Although the gaze, as the empty embodiment of the so-called, ever-lost *objet a*, signifies the loss of the self, it simultaneously presents itself as an absolute necessity in order to become a subject, for which the existence of the Other is quintessential. Self-consciousness is a prerogative that can only emerge

in the gap that has opened up with the implementation of the lack. Sartre's comments lean very closely to Lacan's later elaborations on subjectivity: "The unreflective consciousness does not apprehend the *person* directly or as *its* object; the person is presented to consciousness *in so far as the person is an object for the Other*. This means that all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other" (Sartre 349).

Greig's *Outlying Islands* represents this development towards subjectivity through identification. The arrival of two twenty-somethings John and Robert on an island that is uninhabited but for the landowner Kirk and his niece Ellen marks the onset of a transition towards sexual awakening. Ellen is brought to life and given meaning thanks to Robert watching her and noticing her response to his attention:

She moves with an acute awareness of being watched and judged. Even the way she set fire – before – when you were fetching the kit – every step she took was considered as to the eyes watching. And when she finished she stood back to be sure she'd be taken in – as a picture. Every movement of hers is arranged into a small performance for the spectator. When the performance is over she drops her eyes to the floor and awaits applause. (151)

John for his part is trying to keep all temptations at bay, comprised in the metaphor of the old door that he fixes in order to keep it shut. As a consequence, while Robert is depicted as the one being all eyes, so to speak, the timid John keeps his eyes closed, literally and figuratively refusing to see. Moreover, when John finds out that Robert has secretly photographed the naked Ellen, her reaction to this act of voyeurism is welcoming rather than disgusted or outraged. After all, Ellen's behaviour beginning with her ostentatious performance as described in the above quote by Robert up to her desire to be a film star attests to her profound wish to be seen. This fetish for the visual does not signal the vain comportment of a film diva that is addicted to the spotlights, but reveals the metaphoric link of seeing and being. Only when she is freed from oblivion and has escaped the cave she was kept hostage in by her uncle is she able to make herself the object of the boys' gaze and take on an active role. From a passive spectator she develops into a performer herself. As Freud has outlined in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), this can only happen after the murder of the father figure, and Kirk fulfils this role perfectly. Not only is he a grumpy, authoritative man who keeps a tight rein on his niece, his name Kirk is a clear reference to the religious authority of the church from which he borrows his dogmatic morality.

In addition, since subjectivity can only proceed due and thanks to the lack that deprives man of his pre-oedipal, unspoiled state of completeness, it necessa-

rily goes hand in hand with the instrument that seeks to undo the consequences of this break-up with oneself, which is sexuality. Genesis, after all, relates that after having eaten from the apple hanging from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve's eyes were opened and they saw that they were naked, after which they were expelled from paradise. Hence, self-consciousness, the gaze of the Other and sexuality form (to keep up the biblical metaphors) a holy trinity, completely in line with Sartre's contention that I am not where I am seen, but I am replaced by my self-reflection. The connection between the visual and the sexual is somewhat prosaically rendered in *Outlying Islands*, when the object of Robert's praise to John of Ellen's "lovely jugs" (150) shifts in a later scene a bit higher up, as the shameful John translates Robert's words to her to the more masked "lovely eyes" (184). Although Robert is the bolder one in giving vent to his sexual craving for Ellen, in the end it is John with whom she makes love, be it that Robert is watching them, which is a thrilling experience to Ellen. Before she whispers to John that they have both become film stars, she sets the mood as if it were in a cinema: "Quiet./ Let it be dark./ Let him be silent./ Let me see him seeing us" (224). However, what Ellen here evokes is precisely not a cinematic setting and gaze, because what characterises cinema is the failure of co-presence of audience and actors. When the actors are playing their parts, the only witnesses are the artistic crew and the camera, but the real audience can only watch the final result later on, when the actors are no longer there, probably already occupied by another project, as Christian Metz has noticed (264). In other words, the reciprocity of the gaze that Ellen refers to is anathema to the cinema, and its absence distinguishes the cinema from the theatre, where such a co-presence and dual gaze are considered elementary for the art of theatre itself.

This ties in with David Greig's own perspective on theatre. Onstage reality and fiction are constantly entwined, constantly in struggle to have the upper hand. The more this struggle is visible and the more it is played out, the more theatre becomes a transcendent medium, he writes in 'Rough Theatre':

Theatre is built upon a contradiction. When one watches a play one must hold two worlds in one's head: the actor (real) and the character (imagined), the stage (real) and the world (imagined). The better the performance, the more profound the contradiction and the greater the chance that – in the enactment of the play – the fabric of 'reality' will tear and we can experience transcendence. This moment of transcendence is, for me, the *political* foundation of Rough Theatre.

(Greig, "Rough Theatre" 220; my italics)

Not only does Greig exalt this kind of theatre to what in his opinion should be the most paramount goal of any playwright, elsewhere he states that "there is no 'political' theatre but that theatre is, by its own nature, political" (212). Hence, the

theatricality “that tore at the fabric of reality and opened up the multiple possibilities of the imagination” is inherent in the medium of theatre itself (Greig, “Rough Theatre” 212). This is why he chooses to make the audience complicit in the acts of voyeurism: “I do enjoy using the technique of direct address,” Greig says in an interview. “Also, most of my plays have a poetic/rhetorical register which has the effect of recognizing the presence of the audience even when that is not through overt address” (in Rodosthenous, “Language” 6).

In juxtaposing both media, the world of cinema that runs as a major motif throughout the play turns into a metatheatrical commentary about the relation between performers and audience in the theatre. John’s remark that it’s “a bit – off-putting – having a spectator” (225) strengthens the shift from a cinematic, narrative-driven to an extra-narrative theatrical gaze. Because of the lack of visual reciprocity in the film, and also because western cinema has long been associated with an Aristotelian-driven narrative that does not allow for what Barbara Freedman calls a fractured gaze, the cinema is considered to be ruled by a Cartesian gaze the one dimensionality of which enhances the spectator’s absorption in the film’s narrative, and thus establishes Sartre’s “non-thetic consciousness” that reduces what is being watched to an object.

When Ellen presents herself as a film character craving to be watched, as a theatre audience we find ourselves in the same position as Robert who secretly makes pictures of her. He as well as we are voyeurs occupying a cinematic position. Several critics have pointed at the introduction in the theatre of the fourth wall and the dimming of the lights in the auditorium as contributing factors to the voyeuristic nature of being a spectator; from the dark we look into the light. Instead of the common space that used to assemble and unite both performers and audience a gap between the stage and the auditorium has been installed that secures the spectator’s anonymous and secluded position in front of the actor who himself looks into a black night. This darkness, then, fulfils the role of the keyhole that Sartre considers an absolute necessity for the spectator to also become a voyeur. To the theatre spectator, the obstacle that is raised because of this lack of light is at the same time an instrument (Sartre 348). Patrice Pavis does not refrain from calling the theatre “an institutionalized space for voyeurism” (Pavis 388). Looking has become a one-way direction. We look at Ellen with Robert’s objectifying eyes, exposing her as another of his birds to the flashlight of the camera that regularly returns in Greig’s play and turning her into a photograph. “Photography transformed subject into object,” Roland Barthes writes in *La Chambre Claire* (1980), which is dedicated to Sartre and breathes many similar concerns. “[E]ach time,” he says, “I am [...] photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity” (Barthes 13). Looking at a photograph, according to Barthes, is looking at death, because it is a reality that *has been*, that is no longer

there. It is therefore a spectral experience, an experience that bridges two worlds, that eerily connects past and present. What is remarkable in Barthes' writings is that he shares with Sartre the transition to or reconciliation of initial hostility towards being seen and the 'spectrality' that haunts the interspace between the one looking at and the one looking from a photograph. Maybe somewhat odd at first sight, Barthes compares photography with theatre. What they have in common, he argues, is that both theatre and photography wear a mask of death. Death hovers through theatre and "[p]hotography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead" (Barthes 32). He does not really elaborate on this parallel, but the reference to the medieval tradition of the *tableaux vivants* gives us a clue as to the meaning of this enigmatic comparison held together by the role of death. Unsettling, not to say uncanny about these *tableaux vivants* is that although they are like paintings they still contain a living element. So what is troubling Barthes in photography as well as theatre is not the face of death as such but the idea of death as not entirely dead. Subject to an inventive and inverted kind of Freudian repression, what Barthes distinguishes is not a "made-up face beneath which we see the dead" but a dead face beneath which we see the living. In addition, this is precisely what strikes him in photographs. They are portraits, representations and thus anathema to what is present, to the real thing, but this non-being cannot be entirely fulfilled because the gap between representation and presentation is too close; it still bears traces of the living.

Later on Barthes refers to the *punctum*, an immediate unsettlement that a quick look at a photograph, or at a small detail of that photograph, can trigger. It seems to me that the mental disturbance that is provoked by this feeling is related to the hovering atmosphere on the threshold between life and death. Photography, just like theatre, ascertains ontology yet in its representative capacity it simultaneously disrupts this certainty. "[I]n Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past" (Barthes 77). Presentation and separation go hand in hand in this in-between space; in a photograph I recognise that "it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred. It is all this which the verb *intersum* means" (78). The world of the theatre is there, right in front of us and tangible, yet alienated and separated by the frame of fiction. It is an island that we can visit, but that is ruled by its own particular otherworldly laws and logics.

Not coincidentally, the spectrality Barthes speaks of is accompanied by a disruption of time. Past, present and future lose their chronological logics; the time is out of joint – looking at a photograph throws us back into the future and provokes, Barthes says, a "shudder [...] over a [future] catastrophe that has

already occurred” (96). And here too, as in the *tableau vivant*, in each photograph “my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting” (93).

Time indeed falls apart, evaporates, in *Outlying Islands*, as John remarks in the opening lines of his monologue:

In the days since the burial of Kirk I have noticed that time has begun to evaporate. The summer day stretches on long into the night and just as darkness finally falls so the first soft light of dawn appears on the far horizon. I am aware of seconds and minutes but hours and days merge into each other and wash away. We measure our time in the photographs we take of the birds – nesting, with their chicks, flighting, resting on rocks, or mating on the cliff-top colonies. Each photograph, each phosphorescent burst of flash, is a solid instant of time, a branch to hold on to in the flood. (201)

But the attempt to grip and hold on to reality, to objectify or, so to speak, despectralise the past and ontologically stabilise it in a photograph is doomed to fail, for afterwards, when John is developing some bird pictures in Ellen’s company and discovers Robert’s secretly made photograph of the naked Ellen, the so-called objectified photograph becomes a subject. To be looked at is part of the identification process that Lacan situates in the imaginary order of the mirror stage and thus, it allows Ellen to break out of the cocoon she had been held into by her authoritative uncle and develop into a subjectified being. Up to then, she tells John, she had never seen herself (218).

Admittedly, as Lacan has demonstrated, this process towards subjectivity is always accompanied by a fundamental loss, which runs parallel with Barthes’ sensation of inauthenticity. Ellen is present and she urges John to look at her photograph and respond to it. The object speaks back and thus becomes a subject. She is literally doubly present. If a representation is a sign that stands in for the thing that is absent, the representation that is the photograph here allows Ellen as a person to appear, but she can never coincide with her image; the story of her existence is one of presentation and separation at the same time.

So although Ellen continuously refers to cinema in *Outlying Islands*, it is not so much the cinematic, Cartesian gaze that prevails in the play, but the theatrical gaze that is always cast back upon the spectator. The world of the voyeur is broken up and he is trapped in his own gaze. The spectator can no longer voyeuristically sit still in his chair and indulge in the pleasures onstage. Since Ellen stops being a silent object of the gaze, but becomes a subject that confronts him with his objectifying look, he necessarily has to leave the comfort zone of the voyeur’s position. The seclusion that allows him to watch the scene secretly precludes the degree of interaction that underlies any kind of metatheatricality. It rather requires an ultimately passive position. “Voyeurism implies a certain degree of passivity and non-contribution. Extreme and overt exhibitionism can

hinder the elements of an unveiling which is observed accidentally or unwillingly” (Rodosthenous, “Introduction” 16). This kind of exchange between voyeurism and exhibitionism is precisely what unsettles the spectator in *Outlying Islands*. In reference to Barthes’ experience of looking at photographs, this is the moment in a performance experience that I would call the theatrical *punctum*. It is the moment that the voyeur is caught unawares in his seat, that the spots so to speak are turned towards him. The narrative onstage no longer builds up a parallel world but starts to include the spectator. “[T]he *punctum* has,” says Barthes, “more or less potentially, a power of expansion. This power is often metonymic” (Barthes 45). Ellen’s overtly exhibitionistic demeanour breaks through the fourth wall and makes visible the blind spot from which we have been looking. In undermining his cinematic scopophilia Ellen turns the tables on the spectator and forces him to look at the spectacle with a theatrical gaze that necessitates his interaction. There is a world out there beyond what we can see, and when the theatrical *punctum* emerges it not only marks “a kind of subtle *beyond*” (Barthes 59) but also a return to the spectator’s self-reflective position. By means of this reciprocity of looking the island itself becomes a metaphor for the theatre.

Given the numerous elements in the text that point at the status of the island as a metaphor for the stage itself, another parallel readily comes to mind. Not only does Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, after all, also depict a largely uninhabited island that gradually transforms into a theatrical world, where the power of man’s imagination surmounts the reality of what is possible. Prospero is the director in control of all actors in his world who act exactly as he tells them, and whose affects and behaviour he so easily moulds and manipulates. In addition, the use of theatrical techniques and illusions, along with the integration of a masque full of theatricality such as colourful costumes, singing and dancing, strengthens our understanding of the island as a world similar to the theatre stage. This kind of metatheatricality has been ascribed to *The Tempest* since Thomas Campbell’s autobiographical reading of the play in 1838.

The initial constellation of its characters is not all that different either. There is a clear parallel between the authoritative Prospero and his innocent and immaculate daughter Miranda on the one hand and Kirk and his niece Ellen, whose chastity is equally important to Kirk as Miranda’s is to Prospero. And if Caliban and Ferdinand represent the bestial and civilised part of man respectively, Robert and John who both disembark on the island are drawn along similar lines. Thus, this straightforward intertextuality with *The Tempest* serves as a lubricant to emphasise the metatheatrical dimension of *Outlying Islands*. Through this specific kind of co-presence, this combination of presentation and separation, *Outlying Islands* gradually evolves into a play that is not just about the

development of subjectivity and the awakening of sexuality, but as much about the nature of theatre itself, and the difference between the theatrical and the cinematic gaze. One of the quintessential features of theatre, after all, is that audience and performers need to be in the same room at the same time. The spectator's gaze in the theatre is not the all-seeing gaze that remains hidden for both himself and the return of the gaze. In his *Discipline and Punish* Foucault compares the cells in his famous Panopticon structure as "so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (Foucault 200), that is, visible to the supervisor who watches them from a central tower who himself is invisible to the cellmates. However, this panoptic gaze is the very opposite of the theatrical gaze, where seeing and being seen are each other's mirror images. And in its metaphoric nature as a play about what theatre makes theatre, *Outlying Islands* makes us see this fundamental distinction.

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