

Eroding the Otherness

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Abstract

This research paper is constructed through the undertaking of practical research via observation and interaction as a method to explore the power of the gaze and the relationship with the Other in the Non-Place.

...a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral¹

My interest in the gaze within the Non Place is grounded in the concept that in a public place, where we do not know the others that surround us, we are more susceptible to erosion and recreating ourselves as a response to observing and being observed. Furthermore, I am questioning what constitutes the otherness of the Other (in Lacans' terms; the site of the symbolic, that which cannot be clearly defined or fixed), as well as, aiming to define the moment when that otherness becomes eroded, creating a relationship or connection that impacts upon our sense of self.

The term 'erosion' is used to define how the essence of otherness might be worn away. This 'erosion' is linked to ideas of domination and control, through my behaviour in the moments documented I am actively gnawing away at what constitutes other; revealing a connection within the realm of the imaginary².

I am using the format of confession to explore the relationship between myself and the Other. Freeman (1993) says 'the *concept* of the self is very much informed by time and place' (Freeman, 1993 p 27, his emphasis) and that '[t]he concept of the self ...hovers in the space between recollection and development' (Freeman, 1993 p 48-9). I am associating this mental space with a real physical space (the Non Place of the train, station, tube and bus) by using that designated time and space, with all the experiential possibilities that it offers, as a place in which to reflect upon the self (myself) and the impact of experiencing the Other and the experience of

¹ a term defined by Marc Augé, *Non-Places - an introduction to an anthropology of super modernity* (Verso: London, 1992)

² The realm of the Imaginary refers to Lacan's theory of the orders of the Symbolic, Imaginary and the Real (Lacan 1979).

being Other through my responses to my encounters that cause me to constantly rewrite myself.

Key Words: Gaze, other, non-place, erosion, desire, confession, self, Lacan.

Woking to Wimbledon, 5:05pm, 17th May 2007. We are the only two people in the carriage³. I am sitting a few seats down, opposite; I have a clear view. You notice almost immediately and, although your eyes keep closing⁴, each time you shake yourself awake and catch me looking.

Clapham Junction Station, Platform, 5 6.25pm, 17th May 2007. You are sauntering up and down the platform, I notice your velvet jacket first; you wear it well. You turn around and I'm slightly startled by your beautiful, feline face. After I've photographed you I get on the train, you sit next to me. I'm pretending to read but I can feel your eyes on me. I decide to close my book and look at you. You return my gaze, I look away.⁵

Northern Line Tube, Southbound, 7.40pm, 30th May 2007. You step onto the crowded tube train and I can't help but stare. You look like a cross between Barbie and Jessica Simpson (or is that just the same thing?).

You exude perfection and gloss, an effect often achieved using moulded plastic. The trench coat works; the tailoring frames your small

³ in this space which is passing through other spaces, not connected to anywhere else, I felt that we may as well have been the only two people in the world. It's an odd sensation to be travelling at rush hour and not surrounded by people, this contributed a surreal quality to the experience and made me feel I was able to manipulate her through my gaze.

⁴ The fact that you kept waking yourself was proof to me that you acknowledged the power of my gaze. You wouldn't allow yourself to sleep, perhaps because you didn't trust me or perhaps because you knew that as soon as you closed your eyes I would be looking.

⁵ 'Your eyes (regard) are burning me, I cannot bear your eyes (regard)' Cocteau, *La Belle et la Bete*, (1950). You are no longer the Other, you are flirting with me, but I can't cope with it because less than two hours after my encounter on the Woking to Wimbledon train in which I felt I retained the power of the gaze you have taken the power. You saw me photograph you and you responded to my action by following me and meeting my gaze directly. What's more, you sat right next to me I could almost feel your breath on my face and it's more than I could cope with. I feel I have been pursued by the Other, and he has taken control. He is no longer the Other, he is the man who responded to me and pursued me. As a result of my actions and his response our relationship moved from the Symbolic order to the Imaginary order.

build and delicate features. Do I want to look like you? At school one of my nicknames was Barbie, but no one calls me that now. Perhaps not, but standing next to you makes me feel a mess. I need to get my roots done and stop wearing this cardigan.⁶

Southampton Central - London Waterloo, 3.15pm, 1st September, 2007. He was just what I needed. I don't know if you realised, but it's OK now anyway. I'm back.

Kings Cross – Grantham, 3.10pm, 6th September 2007. Your glasses are wonky. The man sitting in front of you keeps half turning and looking because he can see me looking and drawing you. He can't concentrate on what the man next to him is saying because I am distracting him.⁷

Brockenhurst Station, platform 2, 8.35am, 11th September 2007. I watch you as you get in the right position to photograph her with your phone. I can see how you are trying to frame her on the screen. You are not aware of me. She isn't aware of you. I take my phone out and frame you, she sees me do this, then looks at you⁸. I've taken you, you've taken her and now she's seen it all.

⁶ Bourdieu recognises this unease I experience;

The petit-bourgeois experience of the world starts out from timidity, the embarrassment of someone who is uneasy in his body and his language and who, instead of being 'as one body with them', observes them from outside, through other people's eyes, watching, checking, correcting himself. (Bourdieu 1984, p207).

The bearer's perception of the subject can immediately de-stabilise the identity of the bearer of the gaze, therefore empowering the subject. In a look I imagine everything the other is, and everything I am not. We don't move beyond that, beyond the symbolic.

⁷ the gaze impacts upon the others who experience acts of observation; the bearer through their gaze has a degree of control over the spectator, whose gaze is also curious. At this moment the bearer of the gaze becomes the 'active controller' (a term defined by Mulvey, 1975), not only of their own look but that of an Other also. This particular more focused gaze is controlling others - making others want to look, through looking. In this situation there is an awareness that the gaze has become a performance and has created a dialogue with the subject and the spectator. Furthermore, the spectator in the non-place is controlled through the possibility that at any moment the gaze may fall upon them, making them the subject.

⁸ Where the power is situated here is difficult to pinpoint, but for the girl there is an awareness that she has simultaneously become the subject and the bearer of the gaze.

Southampton Central - London Waterloo, 1pm, 17th September 2007. I've just watched you use your mobile phone to photograph a page of The Star newspaper, with a topless model on it. What a strange thing to do. Are you pleased with the picture⁹? Now I've made you the subject. It was quite obvious, I know. You can't really miss the loud 'camera shutter' sound effect my phone makes when I take a picture. I took the picture but I didn't look at you. Now I'm looking. You are looking at the paper. I notice you've written on the leg of a girl wearing only underwear on the front page. I think it's one of the girls that used to be in Liberty X.

Southampton Central - Brockenhurst, 5.32 pm, 23rd September 2007. She keeps staring at me. She's actually turning round in her seat to look at me. I'm trying to ignore her but this woman is making an effort to actually turn round in her seat to see, what the fuck is she looking at¹⁰? Have I got some of my lunch on my face? I feel like asking her if she wants a picture. There, you've got one.

Brockenhurst - London Waterloo, 3.50pm, 7th November 2007. I can feel you watching me, you know. You look like Richard March and you leer like him too, creep. God I hated working with him. Hated the way he used to stand close when he was talking to me, and move closer when I took a step back. The concept of personal space was totally alien to him, or one he choose to ignore. Do you ignore it too? Why did you choose to sit in that seat? I hate you for sitting in that seat. The camera shutter sound effect on my phone is so loud but you didn't look then, did you?

⁹ The dialogue addresses the subject of my gaze in an attempt to explore how addressing the subject of my gaze (the Other) would impact upon my relationship with them (thinking back to the Lomax quote 'to photograph is to affect' (2000, p79)). I take this further by photographing him in a very obvious way. This has a greater impact on the way he perceives me. He is submissive. He appears to read the newspaper more avidly than before. He has lifted it so that he's now holding it upright in front of him, like a shield. The response of holding the newspaper as a shield reinforces the status of the camera as weapon (Sontag, 1971). Not once has he looked around at me, but I know he's aware of me. He may also know that at the start of this journey I sat angled towards the window and away from him and that since I saw him I turned around so that I could watch. Now he's plucked up the courage to look (as I'm untangling my ipod and have looked away, slightly bored of him). He looks over the top of his seat at me and I meet his gaze. He looks away. Then back. I meet his gaze again and lift an eyebrow. He turns away, folds his arms and closes his eyes. I have him; my gaze is also operating as a weapon.

¹⁰ 'I am indeed the object the Other is looking at and judging' Sartre (1943, p261).

You made me hug my coat against myself and turn away. I want to pull it over my head and deny your unwanted gaze, but I don't because it might appear very strange to these others.¹¹

Brockenhurst - London Waterloo, 10:43pm, 22nd November 2007. I think you are filming me. I can tell by the way you are angling that camera phone, because I do it myself. It's an amazing phone, with DV recorder I think, I've looked at them, one like it is on my wish list. You're not cool with it though, you can't stop twitching and fidgeting. I do it better. See?

Southampton Central Station sitting on the stationary train from London Waterloo – Brockenhurst, 21.23 pm, 13th December 2007. I did recognise you at the start of the journey, I just choose not to acknowledge you. Let's face it, we didn't know each other well and I can't be bothered to make polite conversation. You don't interest me and I didn't remember your name until a moment ago when you got off, Ann. I was aware though, aware that you kept looking over and that if I'd looked up you may have caught my eye. Perhaps not, perhaps you would have looked away. Maybe there was a part of you that only kept looking because I refused to look your way. It was at the end I knew you were really trying to make a connection with me, when

¹¹ Though feeling uncomfortable I take comfort in the theory of the Roman Jurists discussed by George Simmel in *On Individuality and Social Forms* (1971) :

the elimination of all independent significance of one of the two interacting parties annuls the very notion of society. This definition was to the effect that the *societas Leonia* must not be conceived of as a social contract.

When feeling confident, I like to think of myself as a lioness, stalking public spaces, hunting for interesting subjects, ignoring and refusing to acknowledge the existence of mortals that bore me. I hold on to the knowledge that refusing to return his gaze annihilates him in some way, but wonder have I negated this by taking the photograph, and have looked at him through my artificial eye, though it felt defiant and like an act of aggression to match his invasive gaze, at the time. The real problem is that it only lasted for a moment, and as soon as I have taken the snap, I was naked again, without my weapon to hide behind and therefore left wanting to put the coat over my head. My gaze wasn't weapon enough in this instance. However, thinking back to the moment of capturing his image, yet refusing to look directly at him, it was a contradictory act. I will shoot but I won't look, I won't connect with you. I'll use you, I'll write about you and take your image without your permission but I will not engage with you or acknowledge to through eye contact.

you stood, long before the train stopped so that you were right by my seat. Then your presence felt a little oppressive, but I still refused to look. I think you may have been reading what I was writing¹².

Brockenhurst to London Waterloo, 15:40pm, 10th January 2008.

You've just got on wearing a brown trilby, long herring bone weave coat and red tartan scarf, I love it! You're reading an Eva Hesse catalogue, I love it, you're perfect. You've just got up and I notice the combination of your dark blue Levis and red socks, that is so right, I'm in love.

15:55 pm. Actually I think you might be famous. You definitely have an air of success and confidence, but in a gentle way.

15:57pm. You have leaned forward now and you look pensive. Your rail card holder is cream and I wonder if you're foreign.

16:00pm. You are talking to the girl sitting opposite you - I wish I was her. She's talking to you about training to be a financial analyst - you must be bored¹³. I would have talked to you about far more interesting things. Now you're telling her about you but you talk quietly and I can't quite hear what you are saying. The people sitting behind you are making too much noise. I think you're talking about your son. You have a nice voice - it's exactly what I thought it would be. I have put my Dictaphone down to try and record you, but I think it's too quiet to pick you up. She works at Goldman Sachs. I think you've seen me taking pictures out of the corner of your eye. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking.¹⁴ He's saying 'I'm sure you could use these skills to better ends'. Now she's talking about herself again, like she's seeking his approval. She's boring. Her voice is simpering and annoying. He's got two sons. One's just left university; the other is still at school.

16:09pm. They've stopped talking now and he's gone back to reading his Eva Hesse catalogue.

¹² There is a flicker of a connection that I can't deny, because although I try to ignore it, I do recognise you and I'm fairly sure you recognise me. However, the slight uncertainty keeps the moment hovering between what I think I know, but I cannot be sure of; the interstice of the symbolic and the imaginary.

¹³ I assume you are bored by her conversation because of all the decisions I've made about you and what you're interested in, based upon the way you are dressed and what you are reading, but this is of course really just my construction of you, like Nathaniel's Olympia in *The Sandman* (Hoffman, 1982).

¹⁴ I want to be acknowledged by you, I want you to make me real:

The look which the eyes manifest, no matter what kind of eyes they are is a pure reference to myself. Sartre (1943, p259)

16:30pm. You're staring out of the rain streaked window into the dark. I wonder where you're going. I could miss my seminar and follow you.

I don't want to be like Sophie Calle following Henri B. She had met him anyway, she was introduced. I doubt I will ever be introduced to you. You just looked at me, glanced really, in this general direction. I could introduce myself to you but what would I say? "Hello, I'm Jennifer, I like your red socks and I've been photographing, writing about and recording you since you got on the train?" I suppose that is what I should say, but I don't know if I'm brave enough.

*Train from Waterloo to Brockenhurst, 13.58pm, 2nd February 2008 (at this point in the research I decide to attempt to record everything that happens on my train journey, rather than waiting for an individual to attract my attention).*¹⁵ The man behind me is eating a Cornish pasty. It smells but I can't be bothered to lug my case any further. Actually it smells less now than when I got on so perhaps it will go away. He has a copy of The Guardian next to him, so does the girl opposite me. I didn't have enough money to get The Guardian and I have my books anyway and I have my writing to do. It's probably best to limit the distractions. She is reading The Guide, she looks pale and drawn, she needs to put some make up on, perhaps she doesn't care. I care about that sort of thing. A girl has just got on; a man helped her with her bags then went. She didn't know him. She is eating, she has short blonde hair and is wearing a turquoise top and a plastic pink ring, it looks tacky. She has bright pink nail varnish on too, that also looks tacky. Her silver bag is horrible, she has terrible taste. I wonder if everyone is as judgmental as me. Maybe that's not the right word. Her top is almost the same shade of turquoise as the pale woman sitting behind her and opposite me. She is still reading The Guide. The woman in front of the blonde one has a bunch of daffodils from Marks & Spencer. It seems like everyone has been to Marks & Spencer today and everyone is eating. A man opposite, a few seats down, has just looked up and made eye contact with me. He looks serious and quite brooding. He looks a bit like an actor that used to be in Hollyoaks - Jeremy someone. He has a nice jaw line and he looks like he is concentrating hard. He has a laptop in front of him. He is sitting at one of the tables in the middle of the carriage. I thought the first stop was Basingstoke, the journey will be a bit longer. He might think that I look like I am concentrating on something too, but I don't think he has looked again. I keep wanting to look now to see if he is looking. My hand hurts now and I'm thirsty. The pattern on the inside of the blonde woman's coat is garish and she is sucking her finger. She looks like an aerobics instructor. Jeremy is

¹⁵ This is the point at which I decided to record my journey from start to finish.

drinking coffee.¹⁶ There is a man I hadn't noticed sat in front of the blonde woman, also eating. I suppose it is lunchtime. Tacky blonde and pink woman is flicking through her turquoise diary. It has times in it - like times of aerobics classes. She is looking at a page with the word 'weekend' hand written on it. Why would you need to write that in? I'm being unfair. I am craning my neck to see what it says now but I can't see. I can smell coffee. The person in the seat in front of me is reading a story in a magazine about threesomes. Now he's looking at an article about Snoop Dog. I think it's a he. He has hairy forearms. I bet he's reading 'Nuts' or something like that. He's just risen in my estimation for having a brown trilby on the seat next to him though. Everybody in here is alone. Travelling alone, except the young child but I can't see them I can only hear the child. Jeremy still looks so serious; he is scowling now, looking at the screen and he has earphones in. Now she has her pink pen to match her pink nails and pink plastic ring. Somebody has just opened a fizzy drink and the child is gurgling. I also quite like the guy in front's boots, they sort of look like riding boots, it's a shame about the magazine. The girl just keeps turning the pages of her diary as if she's trying to work something out. There is an older woman sitting opposite Jeremy. She is wearing glasses with a cord attached so that they hang around her neck and what looks like a blanket. I think she is reading. She is wearing pearl earrings - they look too big to be real. I like pearls. Still looking through her diary. I can't even be bothered to try and read it now. Jeremy just looked at me again¹⁷. I wasn't looking for it this time and when I glanced around I caught him looking then he looked away. I want to look again now to see if he can, I

¹⁶ Through naming I am further empowering myself as the bearer of the gaze, the Other exists only in relation to me, by naming the Other I further define him in relation to my own identity.

¹⁷ The exchange of looks and anticipation of the eventually returned gaze creates a relationship which erodes the otherness of the Other. There is a knowingness in the gaze at the same time as an uncertainty and this paradox is where the power is situated. Phillips discusses this in *On Flirtation*:

Flirting creates an uncertainty it is also trying to control,
and so can make us wonder which ways of knowing, or
being known, sustain our interest, our excitement, in other
people. (1994, p xviii)

Jeremy is the only person my attention returns to without an action from him. Flirtation and the exciting instability it offers wavers between what 'eye' see and 'I' experience. Between the order of the symbolic, in which there is an assumed foundation of nothing and the order of the imaginary, in which I begin to feel his counterpart.

mean, to see if he is looking, but I don't want him to see me. I wonder what I look like. Not great, a bit tired, but not awful.¹⁸ The man in front of the blond woman has a rash on his neck; I can see it through the seats. Cornish pasty has just opened a fizzy bottle. I wonder if he can read what I'm writing through the seats. Tired now, I could really sleep. The guy in front has a different magazine now, I can't see what it is and he has a newspaper - I think it's a tabloid and a bottle of diet coke. This magazine looks better. I can see all the people reflected in the parcel shelf. I've been here 50 minutes already, it's ten to three. That silver bag is so horrible, she is too old for those colours; they don't flatter her and the combination is worryingly childlike. Not that I am worried for her. She's gone, this is Basingstoke. New people. Jeremy has gone too. Too many people, it's changed the calm, I don't like it. A loud man on the phone is getting the bus to Sway.

Train from Brockenhurst to Southampton Central, 8.45am, 25th February, 2008. The man sitting across the carriage from me is reading a book. The thing he is using as a bookmark is a photograph of a woman lying on a bed with her top open so that her breasts are exposed. It is not a professional photograph, it is a snapshot. She has a slight smirk on her face and her hair is ruffled. I wonder if he was the person who took the photograph. Perhaps he likes that when he uses this photograph as a bookmark, others might see it.

Now he's holding it against the cover of the book - with the photograph facing outwards, facing the aisle of the train. There is definitely an element of exhibitionism in his action, and I am here to see, record and respond. I wonder if the woman in the photograph knows that he displays her in this way. He pretends to be engrossed in his book but I think he must be thinking about showing the photograph.¹⁹

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¹⁸ "Do you love me?" is a social question, a question of relation. It is fundamentally a question of perspective, of where one is in relation to the other. (Phelan, 1997, p31). The exchange of looks is a flirtation with this question.

¹⁹ I am reminded again of Mulvey (1975), and consider in how many ways this man tries to actively control the gaze. He is provoking the Other into becoming the Voyeur through the display of this sexual image, while simultaneously being a voyeur himself, without raising his eyes from his book.

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