

# Sexuality and the Transgression of Gaze in the Theatre

**ANNELI SARO**

## ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, the most common cases of transgression in theatre are related either to breaking certain religious or social norms, particularly when combined with indecent language and exposure of the body. Nevertheless, this article investigates something as essential as viewing relying on the notion “gaze” and “soft transgression” (Patrice Pavis).

First, the article explores different theoretical approaches to viewing, especially the ones relevant in the context of performing arts and gender identity, and highlights some phenomenological aspects of bidirectional theatrical gaze. A theoretical framework is constructed for the analysis of a production, which dealt predominantly with female representations and which was interpreted as transgressive – *72 Days* (2022, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre) by Ene-Liis Semper, Tiit Ojasoo and Giacomo Veronesi. The analysis is divided into three parts: transgression of gaze, transgression by mouth and sexualizing gaze. The main conclusions of the analysis are supported by a comparable example from Lithuania – *Sleepers* (2021, Lithuanian National Drama Theatre) by Oskaras Koršunovas.

Based on the case studies, one can conclude that in the current regime of new sensitivities, critical audiences have become more sensitive about artistically unjustified exposure of naked or sexualized bodies on stage. With the notion “new sensitivities” I refer to a trend in the twenty-first century where receivers find certain representational traditions unacceptable, which has led to different forms of censorship.

## KEYWORDS

gaze, soft transgression, sexuality, new sensibilities, Estonian theatre

# Sexuality and the Transgression of Gaze in the Theatre

In the twenty-first century, the most common cases of transgression in theatre are related either to breaking certain religious or social norms, particularly when combined with indecent language and exposure of the body. At first, the names of theatre directors like Romeo Castellucci, Frank Castorf, Oliver Frljić, Milo Rau, Vegard Vinge, and Ida Müller come to mind or numerous works by various performance artists. But I would like to go further from these obvious examples of theatrical transgression and explore something as natural as viewing.

## Gaze and Transgression

The Greek word *theatron* refers to a place for viewing and viewing is still the core of communication in performing arts. Viewing as a process can be divided into smaller units like looks, glances, gazes, etc. Out of the list, the term “gaze” is the most relevant in the current context. In common English, gaze means: a long look, usually of a particular kind<sup>1</sup> or a fixed intent look<sup>2</sup>. Thus, gaze definitely has a strong performative potential as a tool for affecting other people.

The notion of gaze is widely used in philosophy (Jean-Paul Sartre), critical theory (Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida), feminist and postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan) and art research, mostly in the meaning of a tool for creating psychological or power relations between a subject and an object. Feminist film theorists like Laura Mulvey<sup>3</sup>, Teresa de Lauretis<sup>4</sup>, Kaja Silverman<sup>5</sup>, and several others have explored the male gaze, relying on Freudian and neo-Freudian theories of voyeurism and fetishism, pointing out the absence of female gaze as a position of spectating in arts. Different modes of gaze are investigated also in neuro and behavioural sciences as forms of attention, perception, and action control, and affective feelings.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, a gaze can be perceived also as a performative or transgressive act, since it is an implicit extension of the viewer’s body that symbolically touches or even penetrates the viewed object.

But are all kind of gazes always performative or transgressive? Since many theatrical languages rely to a considerable extent on everyday behaviour, one can think, how gaze functions in one’s own culture. Does staring at a smart phone or a pet or a stranger have similar effects? One can stare at a smart phone with a neutral, concentrated gaze when using face recognition for example. One can stare at a pet with a performative gaze when aiming to influence its behaviour. One can also stare at a stranger with a neutral gaze, but it is often considered unpolite or even transgressive.

Nevertheless, in the theatrical communication frame, daily gazes are often recontextualised and magnified, which might make even a neutral gaze performative. In addition to the neutral

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1 “Gaze.” *Cambridge Dictionary*.

2 “Gaze.” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

3 Mulvey 1975.

4 Lauretis 1983.

5 Silverman 1989.

6 Schilbach 2015, Hietanen 2018.

gaze of a spectator and the theatrical or performative gaze that is used on the stage, one can distinguish also meta- and extra-theatrical gazes. Meta-theatrical gaze indicates the awareness of a spectator about the theatrical frame of viewing and extra-theatrical gaze refers to the social circumstances and conventions that surround the performance as an art form and that affect the gaze of a spectator. Gaze is never just a physiological phenomenon but as a concept of cultural theory it is deeply embedded in cultural and social contexts of a beholder.

The Dutch cultural theorist and art researcher Mieke Bal has also indicated the plurality of gaze. She has used the term “focalization” from narratology in the analysis of visual arts (photos, films and paintings). Focalization as a term refers “to the relationship between the elements presented – that which is “seen” or perceived – and the vision through which they are seen or presented.”<sup>7</sup> In the definition and the way Bal is using the tool, the perspectives of author/character and reader/viewer overlap, i.e. the viewer sees the things from the perspective the author has decided to present. (Directors at rehearsals also usually take the spectator’s location and position.) In addition, focalization covers both the physical and psychological points of perception.<sup>8</sup> Both aspects – the distance from the object, the angle of viewing, personal characteristics, values and taste of the viewer, etc. – are also relevant in watching a performance.

Norman Bryson in his introduction to Bal’s collection of essays, stresses that such an approach where physical aspects of gaze are combined with semiotic ones creates a far more complex and volatile arena of power in vision than the Gaze as it is addressed by Mulvey or her descendants. A set of relations taking place during viewing, according to Bal, enables the reversal of power relations at each node of focalization.<sup>9</sup> Bryson also highlights two axes of intersubjectivity between subject and object: intimacy (comparable to the communication between the first and second person) and objectification (first and third person).<sup>10</sup> Several essays in Bal’s book tackle the contradiction between objectification and (suppressed) intimacy, desire or eroticism in focalization and perception of the arts.

Thus, viewing as such contains implicitly a certain transgressive and sexual potential, in spite of the fact that boundaries between a subject and an object are not crossed physically. For example, Ignacio Ramos-Gay has pointed out that “voyeurism is an act through which to consume the other”<sup>11</sup> and Georges Bataille explains the function of eroticism as a destruction of the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their everyday lives.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, one may ask what is actually happening during the process of viewing between a subject and an object. Who is the active participator? Does the subject choose an object to gaze at or is it the object that is looking for the attention of the subject? How does the process of focalization affect the relationship? Etc.

Bernhard Giesen has explored spaces in between the opposites and one of such spaces is created through seduction. Female seduction operates mainly through glances, smiles, and the revealing of parts of the female body.<sup>13</sup> “It [seduction – A. S.] relies on ambivalence, equivocality, and inbetweenness; it hints at risk; it lures its targets into a realm beyond the principled world of truth, law, morality, and rationality. (...) It occurs in transitory spaces where extraordinary phenomena may occur, but we are able to return from these spaces to familiar everyday life.”<sup>14</sup> Theatre as an institution and a physical room is definitely such a transitory, in-between space, which has a long history in serving the function of exposure of eroticism and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> Darkened auditorium and the fourth wall also encourage public voyeurism.

Finally, considering the widespread sexualization of the public space in the Western countries, can a gaze, either carried by erotic desire or not, be considered transgressive at

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7 Bal 2001, 43.

8 Bal 2001, 43.

9 Bryson 2001, 15.

10 Bryson 2001, 19, 21.

11 Ramos-Gay 2018, 167.

12 Bataille 2001, 17.

13 Giesen 2015, 66.

14 Giesen 2015, 66.

15 Dolan 2010.

all? Patrice Pavis has recently introduced the term “soft transgression” by which he refers to the testing of prohibitions that would not have been considered transgressive in the 1960s or 1970s. Under soft transgression, Pavis mentions interartistic and intercultural works, and the disturbance of political correctness (blasphemy, homophobia, racism, sexism, etc)<sup>16</sup>, but also artistic acts in highly regulated spaces (industrial and military buildings), exposure of nudity and many other issues can be added to the list. Soft transgressions remain ambivalently at the border of the acceptable and non-acceptable. In the following, I will analyse the performance *72 Days* that helps to explain the notions of soft transgression and sexuality on stage.

### Transgression of Gaze

To elaborate the idea of the transgression of the gaze, I will analyse some softly transgressive examples from Ene-Liis Semper's and Tiit Ojasoo's production *72 Days* (*72 päeva*, 2022, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre)<sup>17</sup>. The production had its starting point in the diary of American journalist Nellie Bly's *Around the World in Seventy-two Days*<sup>18</sup>. Bly travelled around the world within 72 days in 1889, competing with Jules Verne's character Phileas Fogg and challenging dominant gender norms: she was a young, single working woman, who travelled alone having only two dresses with her and managed to break the (fictional) world record. In 2022, Semper and Ojasoo together with body dramaturg Giacomo Veronesi and eleven young actresses (eight of them still students) took a symbolic trip around the world, relying on famous paintings, sculptures, daguerreotypes, and photos from different decades and countries. Thus, in principle, the production consisted of remakes of these images more or less in chronological order where dynamic preparations alternated with stills. Since the whole troupe consisted of female performers, all images predominantly seemed to represent women in different circumstances. As was stated on the homepage of the Estonian Music and Theatre Academy, it was “a feminine picture of the world, a picture that is at the same time sensitive and tender, dimly wild and fascinating in its changing and intriguing presence.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, among the authors of the production, Ene-Liis Semper was the only female artist, thus the question of the correlation/competition of male and female gazes during the creation process is also relevant. Despite the fact that many more males were depicted on the reenacted visuals<sup>20</sup> than I could detect (Charlie Chaplin, Adolf Hitler, Borat), all the representations on stage were clearly feminized from my point of view, referring to different social roles women can take or imitate.

The composition of *72 Days* is scenic, i.e. the production consisted of relatively independent scenes that could be freely rearranged due to the lack of logic regarding cause and effect between the scenes. Nevertheless, the travelling took place more in time than in space. The performers wore, among other things, clothing and ethnic costumes, which suggested globalization rather than travelling from one country to another. The main principle of the composition seemed to be temporal – the production moved gradually from the innocent looking girls of the nineteenth century towards more and more erotic and sexually loaded depictions of women until pornographic remakes that can be located to the end of the twentieth century. In the beginning, there were clear signs of a group identity – they all wore similar kinds of clothing and took similar poses – then, gradually, everyone started to explore their own sexuality and identity.

In the following, I will analyse some scenes where performers made direct eye contact with the spectators. As *72 Days* was played in a wide and narrow black box with only three rows of seats and pillows, the distance between performers and spectators was relatively short, which created an intimate relationship between them. Furthermore, since the performers did not use any verbal expression throughout the performance, their gazes, poses, and costumes were the main vehicles of expression and agency.

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16 Pavis 2020, 266.

17 Authors and directors Ene-Liis Semper and Tiit Ojasoo, body dramaturg Giacomo Veronesi, light designer Siim Reisspass, sound designer Raido Linkmann.

18 Bly 1890.

19 *72 päeva*. Eesti Muusika- ja Teatriakadeemia.

20 Ojasoo 24.2.2023.



*Figure 1: 72 Days, photo by Tiit Ojasoo, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre*

In the second scene of the performance, seven acting students wearing T-shirts and sweatpants put on top of it a crinoline skirt. They came to the centre of the stage one after another, took a pose of innocent young girls familiar from nineteenth-century paintings and daguerreotypes, stood or sat erectly, hands gracefully fixed, eyes modestly lowered and lips a bit pursed. When the pose was fixed, the performer or performers suddenly raised their eyes and looked directly towards the audience and froze in the pose without blinking for 30 seconds.

M.A. student of theatre research and director Tõnis Veelmaa has indicated three types of gazes in the performance. First, a gaze as if directed towards the eyes of a spectator but goes a bit aside and creates the feeling of anonymity. Only the person who is looked at notices it. Second, a glassy gaze (as if out of focus) that is directed towards the eyes of a spectator. Technically, the gaze of a spectator and a performer are connected but there is no connection between the two. This could be defined as a mannequin's gaze. And third, a gaze that is directed towards the eyes of a spectator and when it finds a response, a live connection is created through which the spectator is able to meet the performer or a character behind the gaze. The live connection is perceivable also by the other audience members.<sup>21</sup> All the three types of gazes are performative since direct gaze tends to focus the attention of a spectator but only the last one has transgressive potential because it surpasses the physical distance between the viewers and enables them to look behind the glance.

Considerable variables among performers and in the relationships created between a performer and a spectator by their gazes could be detected. The three types of gazes indicated by Veelmaa were probably not staged by the directors but depended mostly on the personal abilities of the performers. Breaking the imaginary fourth wall and looking directly into the eyes of a stranger might be difficult, especially when the stage is brightly lit, and foremost when eye blinking is to be avoided. This explains why some performers looked a bit aside or had a mannequin's glassy gaze.

This fixed and focused sight – comparable to the magical gaze (and not so much to the enigmatic smile) of the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci – freezes the person, who is looked at, because it indicates an attempt of personal communication that is rather rare in mainstream performance. Since eye gaze conveys a lot of information about attentional, intentional, and

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<sup>21</sup> Veelmaa 2022.

emotional states of a person<sup>22</sup>, performers or characters in the above-mentioned scene seemed to express not only their agency and the need for attention but also certain enigmatic and well-hidden emotions. A strong contrast between the socially controlled visual surface of the bodies as a site of objectification and private, intimate, non-transparent and less controllable inner worlds came to the fore in the scene.

Jari Hietanen, in his research review, has indicated that longer periods of eye contact may be disruptive for cognitive performance and may lead to gaze aversion when shorter periods of eye contact could trigger positive affective reactions, thus leading to improved cognitive performance and the facilitation of social interaction.<sup>23</sup> I perceived the 30 seconds when a performer looked at me or somebody else in my vicinity as uncomfortable, even softly transgressive because of the visible psychophysical exertion of the performer and because of the physical invasion of her gaze into my safe space in the auditorium and mental invasion into my inner world.

### **Transgression by Mouth**

The scene with the crinoline skirts continued with food or medicine being inserted via a spoon by another person into the mouth of the girls. The feeders stood, but some fed girls knelt during the scene, suggesting either a child or a position of obedience. Most importantly, their mouths were roundly open while waiting for something strange to be inserted into their mouths and bodies.

After that a series of remakes seemed to copy advertisements from American women's magazines of the 1950s where models advertise shoes and cleaning devices. Some women were on their knees, the décolletage of their T-shirts on display, and they had either opened their mouths in surprise or were smiling seductively, looking invitingly directly into the auditorium. The pose was definitely addressed to a male gaze, since the photographers or journalists of the era were men. The gaze itself could be named performative, since it encourages the addressee to act. Since I did not feel like being the main addressee of the gaze and sexual seduction does not belong in the public sphere, I presume, female heterosexual or male homosexual spectators switched to a meta-theatrical gaze during the scene because, implicitly, they were displaced from the gaze. (Of course, here, I rely on broad gender and sexual stereotypes, admitting at the same time that also heterosexual men can resist or ignore an openly seductive gaze.)



*Figure 2: 72 Days, photo by Tiit Ojasoo, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre*

<sup>22</sup> Schilbach 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Hietanen 2018.

The roundly opened mouth was one of the repeated elements in the performance acquiring new and often ambivalent meanings in different scenes: the intention to ingest something, talking and singing, the expression of emotions like surprise, anger and agony, sexual seduction with reference to potential penetration. Ignacio Ramos-Gay has highlighted the mouth as an important centre in power structures: "At the centre of the schema is the mouth – whether through words or through mastication, phallocentrism and logocentrism are reinvigorated through the passage of the mouth."<sup>24</sup> Since the depicted characters had no voice and language, they were just bodies, the lips and eyes became especially significant in acquiring agency, power, and representation. The imaginary stage frame functioned like a magnifying glass amplifying the performativity of the eyes and lips of the performers enabling them to transgress the fourth wall between the stage and the auditorium, but also the wall of self-protection and ignorance we tend mentally to build around ourselves. When the fourth wall, behind which audiences of the mainstream theatre tend to hide themselves, unexpectedly collapsed and the space of representations dehisced like a mouth or an eye, the gaze of a real or an imaginary spectator transgressed the space of representations and the order of the sensible (emanating the notion of Rancière). The bidirectional act of transgression through the fourth wall was violent and intimate, carnal, and spiritual at the same time.

### **Sexualizing Gaze**

Half an hour after the beginning of *72 Days*, some performers unexpectedly exposed their naked upper body, rose a fist (a sign of protest) or hand with open palm (a stop sign) and stared at the spectators with a determined or angry gaze. The spectators reacted quite differently to the nudity of performers because of diverse and ambivalent extra-theatrical associations the pose created: some interpreted the image in artistic or political contexts, others in the practical context (issues of gender and power relations) of theatre making and through the meta-theatrical sexualizing gaze. I personally belonged to the first group, since women in the arts are often depicted (half-)naked, and nudity has also become rather a common feature in the mainstream of performing arts. In these particularly powerful and empowering images I recognized first of all the feminist protest movement Femen and after that Eugène Delacroix's painting *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). Delacroix's painting is dedicated to the July Revolution of 1830 and depicts the people, revolutionaries led by a goddess-like woman, falling dress revealing her breasts, with the French tricolour in her aloft right hand and a gun in her left. Femen, the movement of topless female activists painted with slogans and crowned with flowers<sup>25</sup>, was established in Ukraine in 2008 but the movement has since spread internationally. The movement uses female sexual liberation to oppose patriarchal eroticism and pornography, but has usually also more specific political ambitions related to the undermining of dictatorships, the sex-industry, and the church.<sup>26</sup> As Jacki Willson has pointed out, in our cultural arena, sexual display is sanctioned and validated power at the same time.<sup>27</sup> The described images in *72 Days* and photos of Femen actions on the internet have a strong transgressive power: partly because nakedness in public spaces is illegal in many countries<sup>28</sup>, partly due to strong emotions expressed by the poses and partly due to the political meanings instead of exhibitionist intentions of the poses.

There were also some nude moments later in *72 Days* when performers as characters changed their costumes on stage, but the sporadic nudity did not have such a strong effect and significance. Nevertheless, several remakes of pornographic images were also

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24 Ramos-Gay 2018, 167.

25 "About us." *Femen official blog*.

26 "About us." *Femen official blog*.

27 Willson 2015, 41.

28 Until 2015, being naked in a public space was forbidden in Estonia. Currently, the Estonian Law Enforcement Act §55 states that in a public space, it is forbidden to act in ways that might disturb or endanger other persons. Clause 3 specifies: to be naked if it significantly interferes with another person's intended use of the place. A local authority has the right to designate places on its territory where the presence of naked persons, regardless of the circumstances, is not considered a nuisance to other persons (Korrakaitseadus).

presented that had maybe an even more disturbing effect on some spectators. As was explained by Ene-Liis Semper at one of the post-performance discussions, some scenes were remakes of photos of parties in the liberal New York nightclub Studio 54 in the 1970's and some remakes of photos and sculptures by Jeff Koons and Cicciolina.<sup>29</sup> Koons is a scandalous American artist, who collaborated with his wife, porn star Cicciolina, making love in many positions, settings and costumes, images of which were exhibited under the title *Made in Heaven* (1990–1991). Despite the sexualized visual sources and cheerful disco music, women in short dresses and stilettos did not seem self-confident and sincerely happy thus looking at their search for identity through changing outfits and poses as certain masks triggered empathy and pity. Thus, nudity functioned in the performance not only as a sign of revolt or sexual exhibition and objectification but also as a sign of intimacy, vulnerability, and shame, even humiliation. The ambivalent and estranged poetics of the performance offered a transgressive insight into sexuality and sexualization of women, a topic that is currently being widely discussed again in relation to representation politics and work ethics in the arts.



Figure 3: *72 Days*, photo by Tiit Ojasoo, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre

Consequently, it was no wonder that some male critics<sup>30</sup> and spectators of both genders found the production very disturbing, especially considering the fact that *72 Days* was a production with students and that there were two male directors working with the second-year acting students, implementing either directly or indirectly their power position. Journalist Andrus Karnau explained his affects and ethical position as follows: "(...) but I am not able to overcome the creeping disgust that caught me in the middle

29 Semper & Ojasoo 8.9.2022.

30 Karnau 2022, Oidsalu 2022.



of the performance. I am not able to overcome the feeling of sexual misuse of actors. Was the creation of the feeling in the spectator an aim of the performance?”<sup>31</sup> In another comment, he contextualized the production with references to American film producer Harvey Weinstein and Estonian executive theatre director Aivar Mäe, who resigned from his position in 2020 due to accusations of sexual harassment.<sup>32</sup> According to the oral statement of the directors at the conference “Performativity and transgression” in 2022 and my secondary sources, the performers of *72 Days* did not experience or acknowledge any sexual harassment and misuse of power by the directors.

Nevertheless, the meta-theatrical sexualizing gazes initiated by the soft transgression of the scenes and deriving thoughts and feelings described above were predictable considering the current regime of new sensitivities. The notion “new sensitivities” refers to a trend in the twenty-first century where receivers find certain representational traditions unacceptable (indicated by Patrice Pavis as soft transgression), which has led to different forms of censorship (sensitivity editors in publishing houses, pre-performance warnings about indecent language, nudity or physical violence in artworks, self-censorship, etc.). Critical audiences have also become quite sensitive about the artistically unjustified exposure of the naked body on stage.

Another recent example that illustrates the statement took place at the Lithuanian theatre showcase in September 2022 when the performance *Sleepers* (*Miegantys*, 2021, Lithuanian National Drama Theatre) by playwright Marius Ivaškevičius and director Oskaras Koršunovas, caused a heated debate and strong emotions among festival guests because of the sexual misuse of actresses and oversexualization of the female characters.

The setup of *Sleepers* was science fiction like in the beginning. The play takes place in Moscow in 2109. Because of overpopulation and global warming that have led to a shortage of clean water and food, half of the population is hibernating, and the other half is awake. *Sleepers* starts when three sisters and their mother wake up for their shift. Soon, one learns that there are male and female shifts for the avoidance of procreation – it means, this is supposedly the world without the male gaze. Maya (age 32) is a pop singer, Maria (31) is a physician and Nastia (20) becomes a soldier during the play. The setup is thus highly intriguing and the topic politically transgressive – due to explicit parallels with the autocratic military regime in contemporary Russia, the play was banned in the Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>33</sup>

There are several sexually transgressive elements in the performance. The costumes (designer Dainius Bendikas) of two of the sisters are highly exposing and erotic: catsuits, bikini- and corset-like outfits, deep cleavages, tight outfits stressing the lack of underwear, high heels, etc. Even soldier Nastia does not abandon sexy clothing. Maria, the physician conversely wears sweatpants, highlighting the stereotype that scientists do not care about their look. It appears, however, that this is not true as she conducts an operation to unite her brain and the body of her beautiful lover, a prostitute. After the operation she does not bother to cover her upper body at all. *Sleepers* is a quite drastic example of a male gaze and sexualization of female characters and actors. Instead of a depiction of a dystopian world and analysis of future scenarios, the director entertained audiences with a lesbian love scene and interludes with a funny elderly homosexual couple. Koršunovas also casted male actors in what were originally female roles, thus also presenting a male gaze on stage and breaking the unigender logic of the fictional world.

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31 Karnau 2022, 28.

32 “Teatriankeet hooajast 2021/22.”, 37.

33 *To be or not to be in Russia, a huge dilemma for Lithuanian artists – interview*, 2022.



Figure 4: *Sleepers*, photo by Dmitrij Matvejev, Lithuanian National Drama Theatre

*Sleepers* serves as a good example of a dystopian/political play that has been modified through the sexualizing gaze into a product of popular culture. The general audience in the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre seemed to enjoy the performance but critical spectators (incl. many guests of the festival) decided to leave and through that express their discontent. One of the critical spectators at the festival was Hedi-Liis Toome, who has analysed the performance, her own reception, and the possibilities of the subversion of the male gaze more thoroughly.<sup>34</sup> Toome's article exemplifies also the regime of new sensitivities.

In both productions, the sexualizing gaze – either of the spectator or director or both – has led spectators to overlook explicit political connotations related not only to body, gender, identity, and representational politics but also to the broader environmental and political issues at stake. (In *72 Days*, environmental issues were also implicitly tackled, since costumes for different social roles were selected from the huge piles of second-hand clothing and canisters with pure water were used.) Furthermore, the meta-theatrical gaze drew attention to gender politics and power relations in the performing arts institutions of the Baltics.

### Conclusions

Thinking about transgression and transgressive art, and looking for a minimal transgression, I ended up with viewing, a gaze – the core of theatrical communication. A gaze can be perceived as a transgressive act, since it implicitly emanates from the viewer's body and symbolically touches the viewed object, i.e. it crosses the border between a subject and an object. In the theatre, both the subject and the object can be either a spectator or a performer. The bidirectional gazes between them are dependent on focalization (conducted by director and performer) and meta- and extra-theatrical contexts. Thus, no gaze is entirely free nor in the possession of the beholder only.

*72 Days*, a performance without words, provided a good opportunity to explore the functioning of gaze in theatrical communication. The production highlighted the well-known issue of sexualization of women in public life and in the arts but also the dependence between representations, the representable, and the order of the sensible. The reception and interpretation of the performed images varied considerably and several spectators considered *72 Days* as soft transgression, i.e. unacceptable in the regime of new sensitivities. The number

<sup>34</sup> Toome 2022.

of relevant reception documents in mass and social media is limited, but discussions among audience members were very lively. Based on the essays of ten M.A. students of theatre studies at the University of Tartu and several private conversations with other spectators, I can conclude that some spectators were disturbed because the sexualization of women on the stage cumulated with mental and physical violence (dress code is also a part of the system of power as both analysed productions demonstrated). Others noticed that the alternative to the sexually charged images in the production were poverty, domestic violence, crying babies, etc. Some spectators evaluated the whole production as a repetition of outdated gender, social, and ethnic stereotypes, while others saw in these ambivalent remakes a critique of particular representations and hegemonic representation regimes through cumulation and subversion that may lead to liberation and empowerment of female agency. The diversity of reactions to *72 Days* exemplifies the affective impact of ambivalence of soft transgression.

Sexuality and representations of sexuality are definitely not the only topics and tools that feel transgressive nowadays. In the performing arts of the twenty-first century, direct and intentional transgression might often be marginalized into the field of performance (art). But soft transgression and ambivalence as such is often perceived even more transgressive because they are not regulated by laws or consensual social norms and due to that provoke negotiations between different parties. One should always ask what is the function of transgression in the arts, mass media, and in society at large.

**AUTHOR**

Anneli Saro is Professor of Theatre Research at the University of Tartu (Estonia). In 2010-2014, she was Lecturer of Estonian Culture at the University of Helsinki. Saro has published articles and books on Estonian theatre history and its systems, performance theory and audience research. Currently she is working on two projects: comparative analysis of European amateur theatres and transgression in the arts.

Saro has been a convener of the international working groups Project on European Theatre Systems (2004-2008, 2017-) and Theatrical Event (2011-2017). She has been active as the Editor-in-Chief of Nordic Theatre Studies (2013-2015) and as a member of the executive committee of the International Federation for Theatre Research (2007-2015). She also served the University of Tartu as Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs and as Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

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