YOU LOOK AT HER TOO MUCH

Reading the Male Gaze in Contemporary Opera Performances of Richard Strauss' *Salome*

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Abstract

With Salome's famous 'Dance of the Seven Veils', the essential role of looking in the story and the libretto's wordplay concerning 'gazing' and the visual senses, Richard Strauss' Salome is one of the most salient examples of a canonical opera pervaded with the oppressive mechanism of the male gaze. The latter feminist concept, having been coined in film studies and applied in related fields such as literary studies, has generated a large body of feminist rewritings of canonical literary works, demonstrating artistic resistance to the male gaze and the dangerous consequences it entails. However, although canonical opera scores and libretti have been subjected to feminist criticism as well, the act of rewriting these texts from a feminist perspective is rarely undertaken. This thesis departs from the contention that operatic artistic resistance to the male gaze does not belong to the realm of rewriting, but that of rereading as a creative resource to critically reinvent canonical opera texts through performative elements on the contemporary operatic stage. By attending to opera's performative elements through close reading, this thesis thus aims to explore the ways in which we can *read* critical dramaturgical and performative engagements with the male gaze and its dangerous implications in contemporary operatic performances of Richard Strauss' *Salome:* Gabriele Lavia's production for Teatro Comunale di Bologna (2010), Ivo Van Hove's production for Dutch National Opera (2017) and Aïda Gabriëls' new creation *Dance of the Seven Veils* for Toneelhuis (2021/2022).

Preface

In Alma Mahler's memoirs, we can read that Richard Strauss composed the music for *Salome'*s 'Dance of the Seven Veils' when the rest of the composition was already finished, having had a hard time composing music for this wordless event. Not trying to compare myself with a musical genius, I do relate with him on this one, as the writing process of this thesis was one of many hiatuses and happened in stressful circumstances. However, I somehow did it, and I could not have without the help of so many.

Therefore, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Kiene Brillenburg Wurth. From the very outset, she was extremely enthusiastic about my project and spontaneously sent me words of courage, which was much appreciated during desperate times of missing self-confidence. I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Annelies Andries, who was open to many conversations about my topic, redirected me to useful literature and helped me narrowing down the scope of my research project.

Furthermore, the topic of this thesis emerges out of the preliminary research I conducted at Dutch National Opera. Writing my thesis while working as a content editor in this company was certainly challenging, but also inspiring. I would like to thank Luc Joosten, who was willing to listen to my ideas, and the Audio-Video and Media department, who provided me with a video recording of Ivo van Hove's production of *Salome*. On a similar note, I would also like to acknowledge Jan Vandenhouwe and Aïda Gabriëls, who took their time to respond to many questions on their productions.

Moreover, I would not have succeeded in writing this thesis without the relentless support of my parents, Katleen Wachters and Ivo Hadermann. I am especially grateful for the rich, musical environment in which they raised me, and beyond that for the relentless support they have given me during my entire education at the Universities of Antwerp and Utrecht. My profound gratitude also goes to Rani Guinée, who was brave enough to proofread seventy-five pages about opera, and to Ulrike Burki, with whom I have chanted the quote: "Just because it is not written on paper, does not mean that it does not exist" until I started to believe it.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Julien Derolez for his endless support and encouragement, but also for making me believe that this project matters. I know no one else who talks about opera so passionately, a trait which I admire and truly needed to finish this thesis.

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> Page: [to officer Narraboth] "You're always looking at her.
> You look at her too much. It's dangerous to look at people
> in such a way. Something terrible may happen."
> (Strauss 39)

In the opening scene of Richard Strauss' opera *Salome* (1905), based on Oscar Wilde's eponymous play (1892), the first lines already point to the opera's most pivotal scene as well as its fatal ending. At the Judean court, a page is warning his officer Narraboth about the dangerous consequences of his lustful gazing upon the thirteen-year-old princess Salome. Whereas Salome is gazed upon throughout the opera by numerous male characters, this consistent male gaze is most concretely present in Salome's famous Dance of the Seven Veils, in which she performs a striptease *avant la lettre* for her lustful stepfather, king Herod, and his male guests. Her dance is a favour for which she expects one in return: she demands the confined prophet Johan's head on a silver platter, so that she can finally kiss the man who has been refusing to look at her loving, admiring eyes. When Salome fulfils her desire, the "terrible" thing that the page unknowingly hinted at becomes reality: horrified by her act of necrophilia, Herod demands Salome's death. In other words, just as many nineteenth- and twentieth-century canonical opera works do, Strauss' *Salome* reflects what "terrible" things "may happen" to female characters when a male one "looks at her too often" or in a certain, objectifying way (Strauss 39). Such an objectifying look has been coined as "the male gaze" by feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey, a concept that has travelled from visual culture studies and film studies to other related fields, of which opera studies and literary studies constitute an important share.

As Linda and Michael Hutcheon state, "for decades audiences have kept going to this opera, to see and hear the deaths of Salome and Jochanaan over and over", while at the same time they have experienced great unease watching and listening to it (111). According to them, the source of this feeling of unease does not only lie in the political connotations of the male gaze, but also in the "fatal consequences" of that gaze (111). Indeed, in times where #metoo is – unfortunately – not passé, not in the least in cultural institutions such as opera houses, these blunt depictions of violence against and sexual objectification of women (both in the literary work and the opera it is based on) might raise questions about the rousing popularity of contemporary performances of these canonical works.

Moreover, as they are part of the Western canon, they are still considered to be an important part of musical and literary education. Consequently, the fact that these works are essential in curricula and on stages raises questions about the tenability of their canonical status. Indeed, according to Suzanne G. Cusick and Monica A. Hershberger, the preconception that "female human beings are – and should behave as – the physical, moral or sexual property of male human beings, to be used for their physical, social or political gratification" is indeed "deeply embedded in the cultural tradition of Western opera" (217). In order not to "unwittingly [sustain] a part of its tradition that we now find morally repugnant", they therefore call for an explicitly critical engagement with these operas in the classroom and artistic resistance to this notion on the part of contemporary performances of these canonical operas (217). In other words, in their view, opera houses and artistic teams who stage canonical opera productions in which the male gaze and its 'dangerous', problematic consequences are palpable, need to resist or critically engage with it.

But how can artists resist such a pervasive mechanism as the male gaze? In the case of literature, an art that forms the adaptive basis for opera works, artistic resistance belongs primarily to the realm of 'rewriting'. In a way, then, Cusick and Hershberger's call for artistic resistance echoes a trend in literary studies from the 1970s-1980s, when feminist critics such as Hélène Cixous exposed the Western literary canon as complicitous with the male gaze in its ill, often misogynistic representations of women. For instance, in her seminal essay "The Laugh of Medusa" (1975), Cixous denounces the way in which literature is male dominated. Her criticism is twofold: first, she points out the small number of female writers and their limitations to writing in a male economy (888). Second, she discusses how "woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man" (887), meaning that the representation of women in literature is consistently shaped through the objectifying gaze of a man. Therefore, Cixous suggests that women should write in a style deviating from the norm laid down by male authors, in order to metaphorically take on the petrifying gaze of the mythological figure Medusa and gaze back. In her words, a female writer should "dislocate this 'within', to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of" (887). This new language is what Cixous calls *écriture féminine,* a subversive, individual writing style originating in the feminine body, which a female author can create and develop in order to resist the male, patriarchal discourse she is traditionally part of (883).

Strikingly, feminist deconstructivism such as Cixous' has inspired a prolific body of literary resistance in the form of transformative rewritings; a collection of *écritures féminines,* in which female writers rewrite Western canonical classics from a female point of view to resist the male gaze and its 'dangerous' consequences these classics depict. Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* (1999) is exemplary of such a strategy. In this poem collection, Duffy lets female characters of canonical works retell the traditional stories they have been part of, thereby resisting the male gaze they have been portrayed by. Interestingly, Salome writes back as well, as her story is reimagined in a poem that

portrays her as a female killer who resists being an object of male desire by beheading her love interests. However, in Duffy's version, she is not repudiated for it, but granted the chance to pathologically and repeatedly continue to do so. By rewriting the remediated myth of *Salome* from a female point of view, the main character's thoughts and beliefs are depicted to resist the objectifying male gaze.

Whereas such artistic counteracts of rewritten narratives are thus thriving in literature, such a specific, transformative form of artistic resistance to the male gaze seems not to take place in opera. In contrast to opera's other related genres such as ballet and theatre, opera is considered a stubborn, "settled" genre (Levin 1). Whereas ballet pieces and theatre texts allow for conceptual rewritings and textual revisions, because the former is not tied to words and the second not tied to music,[1] opera resists radical textual and structural revisions in the libretto and score. Indeed, as Nicholas Till describes, opera audiences and critics tend to believe that "an ideal version of the opera" is "enshrined in a 'text' of some sort" (227). This idea generates an ontological and epistemological issue questioning the "assumption that the performance exists to present the work as faithfully as possible", thereby "arguing that the 'work' serves as a pretext for the performance" (230). Consequently, the artistic resistance to the male gaze in opera requires a different creative resource than rewriting. According to David J. Levin, the critical engagement with problematics in libretti and scores happens rather through a strategy of re-reading. As he explains, there is a relatively recent consensus in the European opera world that opera productions inevitably require a new reading or interpretation "such that [the opera's] meaning, action and setting would be the product of – and would stimulate – creative or critical engagement" by the directors and dramaturgs, who reread the opera in a new light (49).

In other words, just as literary resistance to the male gaze of rewriting involves the strategy of rereading, operatic artistic resistance also concerns rereading as a creative resource to reinvent performative elements on the operatic stage. However, rereading in opera requires fundamentally different strategies as there is the stage, the direction, the scenography, the singers, and other performative elements to consider. Moreover, although the two disciplines thus have a relationship based on adaptation and share a sensitivity to problematic matters such as the male gaze and its dangerous implications, the scholarly response to their respective strategies is fundamentally different. In literary studies, critical rewritings of Western canonical literature are increasingly becoming a substantial part of the research corpus of comparatists, who close read canonical work in comparison with its critical rewritings (Hutchinson 44). Musicologists and opera scholars, however, have been rather reluctant to return the favour of incorporating the performative reconceptualizations based on rereadings on the operatic stage in their corpus of case studies (Levin 6).

[1] For classical ballet, an exemplary production that shows artistic resistance through rewriting is Dada Masilo's *Swan Lake*. In this production, the choreographer rewrites the traditional choreography by adding African Dance, while also rewriting the narrative by including a gay love story in it. In this way, Masilo resists the "social convention" in which both the characters as well as the genre of classical ballet might be trapped (Sulcas).

As a research project of a literary scholar, this thesis aims to close this gap. Given the apparent societal necessity of artistic resistance to the persistent male gaze and its dangerous consequences in the operatic canon (Gusick and Hershberger 217), and given the apparent efforts made by artistic teams and opera houses on stage (Levin 6), the question arises to what extent contemporary opera performances use the strategy of critically rereading operatic libretti and scores. Moreover, given the relevant connection between literature and opera and their respective scholarly fields, one might raise the question to what extent a literary scholar can contribute as a reader of these performative operatic engagements. Aiming to extend the conventional, textual research corpus of literary rewritings to operatic performances, I will tackle the following research question: in what way can we *read* critical dramaturgical engagements with the male gaze and its dangerous implications in contemporary operatic performances of Richard Strauss' *Salome*? Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework including concepts from film studies, literary studies, New Musicology and feminist opera studies, I will first provide an overview of how opera libretti and scores, and *Salome*'s in particular, have been studied against the background of the male gaze. Next, I will discuss the emergent nexus of performance studies and opera studies, which will serve as a theoretical framework and will provide a methodological apparatus. After a chapter that introduces the concept of *Regietheater* and a chapter that discusses the genesis of the male gaze in *Salome* throughout the opera's literary history, these methodological tools will be used as parameters for a close reading of three contemporary opera performances of Strauss' *Salome:* Ivo Van Hove's production for Dutch National Opera & Ballet (2017), and Aïda Gabriëls' *Dance of the Seven Veils* for Toneelhuis (2022).

2

Opera and The Male Gaze

From Film Studies and Literary Studies to New Musicology and Feminist Opera Studies

Feminist criticism of operas and music generally started in the wake of New Musicology, a scholarly turn in musicology emerging in the 1980s and most famously called for by Joseph Kerman. In his seminal *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (1985), he argued that new hermeneutic concepts had to make their way in the academic study of music, which up until then had remained isolated from new critical studies in related fields, such as literary studies, psychology and feminist studies. As he stated, "post-structuralism, deconstruction, and serious feminism have yet to make their debuts in musicology or music theory" (Kerman in Levin 2). As opera contains an important theatrical and literary dimension, "opera studies proved a central arena" for "feminist criticism of the canonical works", which was "one of the most significant directions in the New Musicology of the 1980s" (Headlock 258). In light of this new disciplinary turn, then, canonical opera works were subjected to critical readings of the libretti and scores and their representation of women and femininity, thereby strongly influenced by the academic studies who had already scrutinized opera's related genres in this way: literary studies and film studies (Headlock 258).

Musicology's reliance on literary studies and film studies to create a critical framework for the scholarly study of music, is especially interesting for the current study. That is, as this thesis attends to the male gaze in opera, it is worth noting that the male gaze as a concept is most famously theorized in critical film studies, which, in its turn, had taken up the concept from visual art studies. Thus, the theoretical concept of the male gaze stems from an interdisciplinary framework, on which I will elaborate in the following paragraphs. More specifically, the concept was first introduced by art critic John Berger, who attended to the focus on female nudity in European canonical paintings in his influential series *Ways of Seeing* (1972). Demonstrating a lasting impact on art criticism, the concept travelled to film studies through Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). In this essay, she elaborates on John Berger's concept of the male gaze, which she reintroduces as a heteropatriarchal mechanism that had been dominating Western cinema. More specifically, she contends that cinematic codes are constructed to serve male visual pleasure, a statement for which she relied on psychoanalysis. For instance, Mulvey assumes that the core pleasure offered by cinema is scopophilia – the pleasure of looking – which Sigmund Freud theorizes as a pleasure with which one "tak[es] other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (343). This curiosity is the privilege of a masculine, heterosexual audience, who can practice its

primordial voyeuristic desire to gaze at a private, screened and narrativized world (345). Moreover, Mulvey builds on Lacan's concept of the mirror stage to explain why men are unlikely to be objectified by the cinematic male gaze: as the desire to gaze stems from a desire to recognize oneself in the object of the gaze, the male viewer is "reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (347). In this way, Mulvey establishes that the primary cinematic role for women is to be looked at, passively, whereas men have the active role to cast a controlling gaze.

The psychoanalytic background enabled Mulvey to identify important consequences for the depiction of women in cinema. First, she contends that the male gaze dehumanizes cinematic women, who are reduced to sexual objects of desire. Second, she observes that the male voyeuristic desire can have violent consequences. In her view, "voyeurism … has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment" (348-349) because "woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat" (351). Altogether, Mulvey contends that female agency in films is denied to avoid this threat. To conclude her argument, Mulvey states that the only way to create female agency in classic narrative cinema, is to break down the voyeuristic codes that lay at the foundation of this kind of film. That is, Mulvey observes that the male gaze is a mechanism happening in three different looks: (1) the camera recording the object (2) the (male) audience watching the screened object and (3) the male characters in the narrative gazing upon the female characters (351). The first two looks are subordinated to the last one, as "the material process of recording" and "the critical reading of the viewer" are not explicitly shown (Leitch et al 2082). In this way, the voyeuristic modes of representation are downplayed, which creates an illusion of verisimilitude in which the (male, heterosexual) audience can freely satisfy its voyeuristic, scopophilic desires (Mulvey 352). In order to defy this controlling look, then, Mulvey suggests breaking down this visual denial of the first two "cinematic codes" by openly showing them: "only by disrupting the seamlessness of this whole visual illusion can women' subordination to the male gaze be defied" (Leitch et al. 2082).

Interestingly, except for the recording camera, the final two looks defined by Mulvey are not only cinematic, but also operatic codes. This insight enabled Cathérine Clément to observe the male gaze in opera libretti – albeit not explicitly so. In her seminal monograph *Opera, or, the Undoing of Women* (1988) she discusses canonical opera works by analysing them from an archetypal and psychoanalytical point of view. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian concepts and the abject, she contends that nineteenth-century operas consistently end with the heroine's death. Echoing Mulvey's idea that the male spectator/cinematic character aspires to punish the female object of his gaze as an implication of his Freudian voyeuristic desire, Clément contends that the death of a female operatic character – which one should interpret as a maternal figure – "permit the spectator to affirm his separation from and mastery over the mother" (Hadlock 259), thus pleasuring the heterosexual, male audience. Moreover, Clément does not only identify Mulvey's second layer of the male gaze in opera,

but also – and most prominently so – the third one. That is, analysing canonical operas and their fatal endings for female characters, she observes that the death of an operatic heroine is a consistent result of the oppression by a male character. In her view, "there is always this one constant: death by a man. Whether they do it themselves, like Butterfly, or are stabbed, like Carmen, the provenance of the knife, or the chocking hand, or the fading breath is a man, and the result is fatal" (Clément 47). In this way, the operatic heroine is "the prisoner of a machinery, and booby-trapped by a machination", who, "in her womanly weakness, will never get away" (26). In other words, the male gaze, cast by the male audience or the male operatic characters – confines the operatic heroine in an oppressive system imposed by the male gaze, generating fatal consequences such as gynocide and suicide.

As stated in the beginning of the introduction, Richard Strauss' *Salome* is steeped in this spiral of fatal consequences of the male gaze. The story of the Biblical Judean princess who demands the decapitation of her love interest John the Baptist (Jochanaan) has a long tradition of artistic imagination, from paintings to decadent novels, and from plays to operas. Strauss' opera is based on Oscar Wilde's play, in which the latter introduced Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils', a striptease *avant la lettre* which Salome performs for her stepfather King Herod in order to achieve her goal. As Strauss used the German translation of Wilde's play almost verbatim, he also included the dance, which he provided with compelling, Oriental music and detailed choreography. In feminist analyses of both Wilde and Strauss' *Salome,* the focus is on Salome's dance and her characterization as the *femme fatale* generated by that dance. Moreover, these studies typically include the story's pictorial and novelistic history in order to demonstrate the ambiguity of Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils'. The first ambiguity concerns the characterization of Salome as the ultimate manifestation of the male castration threat. As Shireen Malik observes, "Salome's popularity soared in the nineteenth century, … coinciding with the spread of colonialism and Europe's growing fascination with the East" (143-4), which accounts for the paradoxical characterization of Salome in decadent literature. Toni Bentley, for instance, describes how in novels such as Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884) and Gustave Flaubert's "Hérodias" (1877), Salome is depicted by heterosexual male gazes as an "oversexed virgin" who incarnated the two ultimate manifestations of the male castration threat: the sexual *femme fatale* and the celibate woman, two categories that might break free from male mastery (23).

It is exactly this ambiguity of sexual and virginal; of threatening and submissive; of veiling and unveiling that is central in Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils'. As both Bentley and Malik notice, this dance did not only please male voyeurs, but also women who wanted to "escape bourgeois domesticity's constraints" (Malik 150). Therefore, scholars such as Bentley advance the theory that Wilde actually "freed" Salome from her nineteenth-century misogynistic characterizations, by introducing this specific dance in the play (26). Derick Puffet has also put forward that, in his Oriental composition and self-designed choreography for Salome's dance, Strauss recognized her "dignity" and "regal aspect" more than her portrayal as a "cheap seductress" (166). Similarly, Linda and Michael Hutcheon contend that Salome's dance is in fact an act of empowerment, and that the widely accepted

theory of Mulvey – which considers the gazed-at object as powerless – is turned upside down (106). As a matter of fact, they consider the gazing subject – whether it is the audience or Herod – as an entity that "bestows power on her as we gaze" (107). Thus, in feminist critical readings of Wilde's dramatic text and Strauss' libretto, the subversive potential is also acknowledged.

However, the music does not correspond with this inversion, according to Susan McClary. In her monograph *Feminine Endings* (2002), she argues that the representation of sexually and mentally transgressive female operatic characters is sustained by a hegemonically imposed musical frame that consists of chromatic excess and ornamentation, deviating from the tonal order that is associated with the male subject (81-82). In the case of Strauss' *Salome*, for instance, she explains that "Salome's pathology is signalled by her slippery chromatic deviations from normative diatonicism" (100). McClary also explains that the music is used to justify the lethal violence perpetrated on Salome, in the sense that "the monstrosity" of her "sexual and chromatic transgressions is such that extreme violence seems justified – even demanded – for the sake of social and tonal order" (100). In other words, McClary implies that the male gaze is not only present in the libretto, but also in the musical structure of the opera. Similarly, Lawrence Kramer has stated that "if Catherine Clément … is right to suggest that nineteenth-century opera thrives on the 'undoing' … of women, then Strauss' monologue scene might tell us why" (285). In his view, Salome's final monologue in which she addresses John's decapitated head and kisses it, is provided with music that is "a figurative extension of Salome's body in a state of distinctively feminine sexual pleasure" (286), which attracts the male gaze of Strauss' intended audience and the characters of the narrative. Whereas McClary attends to the musical structure of Strauss' opera, Kramer claims that the "broad effects" of Strauss' music – of the final monologue in particular – continue the *fin-the-siècle* "masculine projects of scopic triumph and aesthetic vindication" (285). In other words, critical musicological readings of Strauss' libretto and the score of *Salome* remain inconclusive about Salome's subjection to the male gaze, and whether she can free herself from it.

The abundant criticism of Strauss' *Salome* and the opera's importance of looking demonstrate that Mulvey's cinematic concept of the male gaze can thus be an operatic one too. Moreover, the example of *Salome* demonstrates how the musical score and the libretto bear witness to that gaze. Cast by the audience, the composers, the librettist or novelist and the male characters, the operatic male gaze pervades a different set of layers exceeding the one suggested by Mulvey and transgressing the boundaries of different categories in opera production: the operatic adaptation of a literary work, the creation of opera texts and the actual performance of these texts. Interestingly, the focus on the opera's libretto and score in feminist opera studies also stems from a rather negative stance towards opera's musical element on Clément's part. In her view,

> [t]he music makes one forget the plot, but the plot sets traps for the imaginary. The plot works quietly, plainly visible to all, but outside the code of the pleasures of opera. It is totally dull ...; it

> is all familiar and forgettable. But beyond the romantic ideology, lines are being woven, tying up the characters and leading them to death for transgression-for transgressions of familial rules, political rules, the things at stake in sexual and authoritarian power. That is what it is all about. (Clément 10)

In other words, Clément devalues operatic music as a study object, as its audibility during the performance only masks the visual violence done to women on stage, thereby covering the fatal plot with its transcendental nature and embellishing effect.

In contrast to Clément's denouncement of music in opera, Carolyn Abbate suggests that it is exactly the music and the female character's voice that can liberate her from the male gaze. In her seminal response to Clément's monograph, ironically entitled "Opera, or, the Envoicing of Women", Abbate destabilizes the essentialist femininity of female operatic characters by pointing out the performativity of their gender. In this article, she uses the film *Mascara* (1987) as a vantage point for her argument. The film portrays a drag who lip-syncs to operatic music, namely of Strauss' *Salome* and Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo.* The drag, performing a striptease just as Salome does, reveals her secret maleness as she is undraping, thereby thwarting "the conventional female-object male-subject dichotomy invoked by the two operatic plots" (*Envoicing* 227). Moreover, as Abbate explains, this sequence even "makes a subversive suggestion about opera" in general: namely that opera, a genre consisting of numerous media and performed by different bodies, constantly inverts the essentialist male-female dichotomy "by unveiling an authorial voice as a woman's" (227-228). Drawing on Roland Barthes' concept of the "death of the author" and claiming that the latter poststructuralist scholar proposed "the rebirth of an author 'inside' the artwork" (232), Abbate suggests that female singers can "usurp the authorial voice" of a male composer or character by performing their operatic character's gender in a subversive way (235). In her view, the "locus of creation" does not reside with the composer, but with the performers on stage (235). Moreover, since Barthes aligns discursive language with male gender and music with female gender (232), a female voice carries the largest power to claim a female authorial voice that gazes back at male control. In other words, Abbate considers the performative voice of the embodied Salome the most important resource of artistic resistance to the male gaze in *Salome,* an observation that readers of the libretto and the score solely might have failed to make.

Tellingly, Abbate defines this appropriation of a female authorial voice as an *écriture féminine* on stage (*Envoicing* 232). Acknowledging the scepticism towards the 'death of the author' in literary criticism as a mechanism that might dismiss critical feminist readings, she highlights how "the effect of [dispersing authority] is strongest in all the genres that are played live, given life in the visible and audible efforts of performers" (236). It is therefore rather unfortunate, Abbate claims, that new musicologist hermeneutics such as Clément's foreclose the "real music" in their analyses (*Drastic* 506). In her view, Clément's devaluation of operatic music and its immediate, ephemeral nature has

supported a general academic overstatement of libretti and scores as objects for feminist approaches to the interpretation of operas. Although she acknowledges Clément's point that the overwhelming, emotive effect of musical performance has been used to "dismiss" feminist interpretations of operas, she challenges the "uncompromising text-oriented stance toward performed arts" in musicology by theorizing that interpreting a musical masterpiece – like opera – is in fact interpreting "what was experienced in a moment of hearing or playing or singing", and that it is exactly this embodied, female voice that can "break down the Apollonian master voice" (*Search* 53). Therefore, Abbate puts forward the statement that "what counts is not a work in the abstract, but a material, present event" (*Drastic* 506), as it is this live performance that "can [engender] physical and spiritual conditions wherein sound might suggest multiple concrete meanings and associations, conflicting and interchangeable ones" (532). Finally, she suggests that musicologists, literary scholars, and other critics start to take into account operatic performances for their analyses, while still embarking on the new hermeneutics incepted by new musicology (513). At the same time, she acknowledges that a new discourse needs to be created to write about performances and the artistically resisting meanings they can display (505). In light of her concern, this thesis embarks on such a new discourse created by opera scholars David J. Levin and Clemens Risi, who have devised a theoretical framework that attends to opera's performative aspects rather than its hermeneutics.

As this thesis will analyse three opera performances in light of the feminist criticism of their libretto, it embarks on Abbate's call for a performative turn in opera studies. After all, if the previous state of the art has demonstrated that the artistic resistance to the male gaze manifests itself not in the libretto or the score of an opera, it is Abbate's contention that it does so on stage. This argument generates a shift in responsibility when it comes to that resistance: namely from the librettist and or composer to the contributors to a performance, namely the singing actors on stage, the stage elements constituting the mise-en-scène, the stage director, and the dramaturge. In the next section, I will first discuss the role of the latter two in contemporary operatic performance practices. Next, I will elaborate on the theoretical framework devised by David J. Levin and Clemens Risi that responds to Abbate's call for a performative approach to opera and a corresponding vocabulary, as their respective theories will serve the construction of a methodological apparatus that can analyse the critical engagement with the male gaze on the operatic stage.

3

The Rise of *Regietheater*

Who Reads, Who Writes?

The previous chapters have demonstrated how the critical readings of *Salome'*s libretto and score are an important, yet insufficient step in demonstrating resistance to the male gaze. More specifically, chapter two has shown that academic attendance to the performative aspect of opera, as Carolyn Abbate called for, is required. I have also argued that the operatic practice of rereading as artistic resistance requires different strategies and, most importantly, different agents than literary rereading. In the following chapter, I am going to argue that the evolved status of operatic *Regietheater* allows opera directors and dramaturges to demonstrate artistic resistance through a collaborative form of rereading.

3.1 *Regietheater*

Over the years, the genre of opera has known many shifts in production and performance practices, guided and influenced by spoken theatre. In particular, the role of the stage director has evolved remarkably. Whereas he had a mere controlling, supervising function in the course of the nineteenth century, the second half of this century marked a time in which a stage director gained some creative power as well, complementing his coordinating role with one of the "interpretative artist" (William 147). This coincided with an important, "historic change in the function and context of theatre", either spoken or lyric, namely that the Romantic-realist style waned in favour of drama "that explored with considerable intimacy the complexities of the human psyche, and, … a deep antipathy toward the authoritarianism of late-imperial Europe" (147). Consequently, the end of the nineteenth century was the beginning of an operatic production process in which there was more focus on the production and performance practices as forms of artistic creativity, rather than as ways to display a dramatic text (147). This trend was even more advanced during the first half of the twentieth century, in which operatic singers spent an intensive amount of time with stage directors to improve their acting skills (148-149). Also, the creative function of the director became even more palpable during the Weimar Republic, as German opera houses started to experiment by inviting "outsiders" from other disciplines to direct operas, such as directors from spoken theatre, choreographers, and visual artists. Consequently, they innovated operatic representation as a result of their lack of preconceptions of the operatic genre (Levin 22).

But the contemporary type of opera production, in which the stage director is ascribed creative authorship similar to that of the composer and librettist of the well-known, canonical opera and which is described with the German term *Regietheater,* did not peak until after the Second World War. After all, the inception of *Regietheater* is generally ascribed to Wieland Wagner, grandson of Richard Wagner, who reopened the Bayreuth Festival[2] in 1951 with a production of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*. After being closed during the German denazification in the post-war years,[3] Wagner intended to revamp the festival by discarding the political connotations attached to it (Thurman 608). Relying on the concurrently popular alienation technique devised by theatre innovator Bertolt Brecht, Wieland Wagner envisioned a new course for the staging of Wagnerian opera, leaving behind the naturalistic imagery that had once been admired by the Nazi regime (612). He was also inspired by Swiss scenographer Adolph Appia, who contended that the 'new' Wagnerian opera required "a stage for symbolic action alone, in which the physical environment was merely suggested, and abstract space and the play of light encouraged the audience's imagination" (Williams 150). As a stage director, Wieland Wagner created a production of *Parsifal* considering this innovative conception, which was abstract and minimalist, without the concrete display of any mythic reference. By appropriating authorship as a stage director – meaning that he revised the conventional stage practices of a Wagnerian opera in terms of mise-en-scène, costume design and performative matters – e.g. by using the new practice of *Regietheater*, Wieland Wagner had demonstrated artistic resistance to the problematic political meaning attached to it, a practice that was revolutionary at the time and widely popular up until today.

Wieland Wagner's innovative and deconstructive approach had a lasting effect on operatic performance practices. In the 1970s, this effect even coincided – and thus intensified – with a new spirit of innovation in German opera houses, constituted by the reintroduction of stage directors from spoken theatre to the opera scene. In contrast to the new faces invited during the Weimar Republic, these stage directors were embarking on a new literary-theatrical movement, namely post-dramatic theatre, which encompasses literary-dramatic texts and theatre practices that "[query] the presumed unity of theatrical signification, its reliance on the transmission of a homogenized meaning" (Levin 23-24). As the problematic association of Wagnerian opera with Nazism, and the subsequent deconstructing thereof by Wieland Wagner had already demonstrated, opera was more than ready for this kind of "query", or, in other words, artistic resistance. Simultaneously, these opera houses faced

[2] Richard Wagner, "frustrated by his experiences of operatic routine and the difficulties of securing adequate performances of his operas", aspired to devise a new operatic "model" (Payne 58). Inspired by ancient Greek drama, the performances of which lasted for several days, he built a theatre on top of a hill in Bayreuth, which became the site for an annual performance of Wagner's tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (59).

[3] As Thurman explains, Richard Wagner's modernist and rather progressive musical and artistic views were in stark contrast with his political ones, which were informed by nationalism and racism (609-610). Consequently, Wagner as an artistic persona and his music were soon admired by Adolf Hitler, who showed his admiration by supporting the Bayreuth Festival Opera House financially and politically during the Second World War. This effected a close relationship between Bayreuth, its festival, Richard Wagner and Nazism, which Wieland Wagner thus aimed to step away from (611).

some institutional changes as well. Gradually, they moved from the "star system" to the ensemble system, meaning that opera companies started to work with a group of resident singers who join an extended period of rehearsal time, instead of inviting a quickly visiting star singer who, after a few performances, must perform the same role in a different European opera house. This structural change in production practices facilitated a shift for interpretations as well, as "[the singers'] availability for extended rehearsal periods and extended performance runs provided the necessary preconditions for substantive dramaturgical and directorial innovation" (24). In other words, the institutional shift to the ensemble system paved the way for rereadings of the canon that might artistically resist the problematic content inscribed in the libretto and score.

3.2 The role of the dramaturge: rereading

This practice of rereading traditionally belongs to the dramaturge. The function of a dramaturge, having evolved from "resident playwright and literary manager" who either wrote pieces himself, supervised the rehearsal processes of new works that were being created in terms of dramatic efficiency, or translated foreign opera pieces, shifted at the end of the nineteenth century when stage directing was an emergent opera practice (Levin 28-29). Like the stage director, the dramaturge gained an authorial function during the creation process of the opera performance of a canonical work, a function he also cherishes today. Levin explains this newly acquired function most aptly:

> If the dramaturg was most likely to be found in a writer's salon in the eighteenth century, assessing and serving the playwright's production of new material, in the twentieth century he (and, more recently, she) was more often to be found in a theater (*sic*) or opera house serving the production of the new interpretations. Today, the opera dramaturge– or, more precisely, the critically oriented opera dramaturge– tends to shuttle between a reading room, a conference room, and a rehearsal room, preparing an interpretation in the first, discussing and refining it in the second, and assessing its disposition in the third. … In this sense, we can conceive of the dramaturg not just as a given production's 'first (or privileged) spectator,' but, before that, as its first reader. (29-30)

As a (re)reader, a dramaturge thus first and foremost performs a 'philological task': he reads the libretto and score against the background of their textual geneses, historical contexts, and the oeuvres to which they belong.

Recently, a dramaturge also takes into account the academic criticism of the performed work, "transplanting textual theory and analysis from the library and the classroom into the rehearsal room and onto the stage" (Levin 32). In other words, by attending the multiple expressive forms of an opera (music, text and theatre) and the way these interact and contradict each other, a dramaturge creates an

interpretation of a work that, ultimately, might serve an "unsettling staging" (32;30). As Risi explains, this newly evolved dramaturgical method is also deployed outside the practice of *Regietheater,* defining "three directions" of operatic performance practices, he distinguishes *Regietheater, Werktreue* (being as faithful as possible to the textual material provided) and the technique of "creations" (6). Such rather experimental operatic performances are "attempts to expose texts to new frictions by combining them with other material" (5) and are rather "hybrid forms that arise in interstices between theater (*sic*) and opera" (6). Apart from bringing different operatic music pieces together, such creations are often based loosely on the libretti and the scores and 'unsettle' these conventionalized texts by improvisation and new musical arrangements (6).

The unsettling of a staging, or, put differently, the artistic resistance to the 'settledness' of a certain problematic element in an operatic text, is at the heart of the present study. It therefore also builds on Levin's argument that it is exactly at the rise of *Regietheater,* artistic operatic experiments and the current role of the dramaturge where criticism, theory, and the workings of an opera company should intersect. As he writes: "[i]n reading opera texts and opera's performance texts, we animate the intersection of creative interpretation in the academy and onstage, adding vibrancy and substance to both" (Levin 33). As I have tried to argue, the practice of (re)reading is thus important when it comes to the production of opera performances that aim to realize artistic resistance to the male gaze and its dangerous implications. Moreover, scholars can attend to these artistically resisting – or, as Levin calls it, 'unsettling' – stagings and creations by reading them in turn. As this thesis revolves around reading such unsettling performances, the next section will discuss how one can do so.

4

How to Read an Opera Performance?

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

4.1 Theoretical Framework

The performative turn in opera studies as suggested by Abbate has been theoretically established by David J. Levin and Clemens Risi. Levin, for instance, theorizes that the "settledness" of opera as a genre (that is, the way it resists radical textual and conceptual changes to libretti/scores containing societally problematic elements) can be "unsettled" by the performance itself (7). In his view, although performative reconceptualizations happen on the contemporary stage through unsettling dramaturgies and deconstructive mise-en-scènes[4] as a reaction to academic attendance to problematic elements of an operatic libretto/score, such an effect is not returned, which prevented opera productions from being analysed in academic writing. Therefore, by considering specific contemporary operatic performances as "loci of interpretation" (14), he aims to demonstrate "how much we stand to gain in analytic range and explanatory power by attending to the reconceptualization of opera that has been taking place in our midst, onstage" (7). In other words, just as Abbate already hinted at, Levin paves the way for including operatic performances in the corpora of musicologists and opera scholars alike.

Whereas Levin's call for attention to opera performances is thus centred around the creation of opera productions – thereby attending to plannable transformations of canonical material – Risi moves away from the way in which "stagings transform the template" (8) and suggests an analytical framework that "engages with the performative dimension" of opera. This dimension exceeds the dramaturgy and mise-en-scène that Levin typically attends to and resides in "the concrete sounds of individual voices, the concrete movements of individual bodies, communication that always occurs in new and different ways, and the dialogue between the performers and the audience". He thereby embarks on the "post-1960s performative turn in the arts – the concentration on materiality, the emphasis on sensual and not meaningful moments, and the focus on the eventness of performance" (9). This thesis combines the production-oriented framework devised by Levin and the performative-oriented framework proposed by Risi, as it aims to analyse that which makes up the performance: both

[4] In *The Oxford Handbook of Opera,* Ulrich Müller describes mise-en-scène as the act "to 'put' the drama onto the stage, that is, 'in scene', … with the collaboration of the impresario, the stage master, and the actors" (584). A broader understanding of the term also denotes the stage setting and costume design ("mise-en-scène", def. 1). Throughout this thesis, the term mise-en-scène refers to every visual element of the stage that is part of the planned staging, outlined by the stage director, dramaturge and other creative actors in the production process.

the unsettling dramaturgy and mise-en-scène on the one hand, and the unplannable performative elements of the performance on the other. This approach generates four theoretical premises that are foundational for this thesis.

The first theoretical premise is the contention that **the performance is a text** and that an operatic performance can thus be read as one. In Levin's view, an opera consists of "opera texts" on the one hand (materials such as the score, the libretto and stage notes existing prior to the performance) and a "performance text" on the other. The latter is defined by the signifying systems at work during a performance, such as the mise-en-scène, the dramaturgy, the bodily voices heard on stage, the bodily gestures and movements by singers and other performative elements, which always relate to the opera texts in some way (Levin 11).

Levin's concept relies on the important assumption that there is no hierarchical order between the opera texts and the performance text. On a similar note, Risi claims that reading a performance means privileging it as a study object, thereby "understanding … the score as material for producing a performance (and not as the starting point or goal of an interpretation or of an analysis of an interpretation …)" (30). In other words, a performance should not be considered as an interpretation of the score, but the score should be considered as one of the many materials required to produce a performance (38). Nevertheless, insights into the score and libretto remain valuable, as Risi continues: "the widespread knowledge about a template and the general fact of previous knowledge should be considered in analyzing [*sic*] the cultural practice of performance" (34). In this way, the operatic performance is not a revelatory force laying bare some truths hidden in the opera texts, but an independent, additional text that adds meaning to the operatic work as a whole.

Secondly, **the performance text is constituted by an interplay between representation and presence.** Although the metaphor of the performance text seems to be a productive one to analyse the performative dimension of an opera performance, Risi also cautions that the metaphor of a text has been depended upon too rigidly. After all, the metaphor of a text might "reduce the theatrical process to a function of creating meaning, limiting it to a process of signification" (45). That is, in his view, a solely semiotically oriented reading of a performance considers both the body of a performer and his/her voice as functions of a certain character represented on stage, whereas in fact, "the body [is] a sensual, phenomenal reality and the voice … a corporeally affective event" (45). Therefore, a reading of the performative dimension of opera should not only address the meaning-making systems on stage – symbolizations planned beforehand – but also the actual, affective presence of bodies, events, movements, and voices, thereby approaching these two elements as the productive interplay of "representation" and "presence" (48). In contrast to the concept of representation, which is "the dimension in which meaning is conferred on a staging, in which the levels and layers of meaning ... are evoked in audience members", the concept of presence allows for the description of how a certain element (a gesture, a voice timbre, a movement) "first of all only refers to itself" (46-47). According to Risi, this self-reference can lead to experiences that generate "associations that can be very distant

from the plausible ascriptions of meaning in the context of the overall meaning of a performance" (47). In other words, reading an operatic performance as a text means accepting that signification processes beforehand can be complemented with, reinforced and transformed by meaningful moments happening on stage only.

Thirdly, **an opera performance produces new meanings.** That is, the previous nuance to the notion of the performance as a text in fact relies on a foundational premise of performance theory, namely that "a performance does not convey meanings already given somewhere else but rather produces new meanings that can be constituted by the individual participants in the course of the performance" (Erika Fischer-Lichte in Risi 51). This theoretical foundation maintains that performative elements such as gestures, vocal expressions, movements, and scenic elements constitute a new, meaningful reality at the moment that they are performed (Risi 55). This reality only exists because of the presence of participants, which, in the case of opera, are the performers and the audience. In Risi's view, the performative force of a staging of a canonical opera can therefore not only "present that opera and our knowledge about it", but also "definitively and lastingly constitute[e] and chang[e] our understanding of the opera" (58). If performance theory demonstrates that operatic performances make new meaningful approaches to canonical, 'settled' operas, such new meanings can easily be interpreted as cases of artistic resistance.

Finally, an analysis of an opera performance should acknowledge that **the operatic perceptual situation is inherently subjective and reliant on an interplay of visual and aural impressions.** If the new, meaningful reality of a performance is only effectuated through the presence of an audience, it is implied that a performance-based analysis of an operatic performance relies on its perception. In order to support this statement, Risi suggests that no performative event can even be "described independently from subjective corporeal experience" (60). Relying on theories of phenomenology, Risi therefore recognizes that meaning can only be conferred on stage if an audience member "actualizes" his aesthetic experience. For Risi, this means that the operatic perceptual situation entails a "dissolution of the subject-object dichotomy", defining it rather as a process of "exchange":

> I, as an audience member perceiving a singing person in the opera, enter into a relation with this other. The voice is then to be understood as the experience of a relation between producers and perceivers, in their copresence and covibration. Just as singing is a bodily process, a transfer of unique bodily characteristics into space, experiencing a voice is also a bodily process. The entangled process of singing, being heard, and listening can be understood as an intimate act of exchange. (61)

Moreover, the theoretical premise of the subjective experience has an important implication for the academic engagement with the performative dimension of opera. That is, for Risi, this subjectivity

should not be “an obstacle” for the scholarly analysis of opera performances, but rather “a challenge and decisive factor for one to take on” (62). In other words, this theory of phenomenology allows the performative experience of the scholar, determined by his previous knowledge of the ‘template’ but now refreshingly oriented towards the eventness of a performance, to be inherently subjective.

Furthermore, because opera is a multimedial art form, the subjective experience of an opera performance is constituted by both visual and aural impressions. The simultaneity of these impressions can be theoretically analysed through the theory of “intermodal integration” (Risi 63) or “intermodal perception”, which is the ability to integrate and perceive “information from objects or events available to multiple senses simultaneously” (Bahrick & Lickliter 753). According to this theory of perception, the simultaneously occurring, different sensory impulses can either intensify or transform each other. For the perceptual experience during an opera performance, this means that audience members combine the auditory impressions of music and other sounds on stage (such as the sound of feet walking on stage, the closing of stage doors, etc.) with the visual impressions of the mise-en-scène, body figures, gestures, lighting, etc. Strikingly, the aural impressions are based on a certain degree of familiarity on the part of the audience members, who are acquainted with the opera’s music through its presence in media and recordings. However, “in connection with unfamiliar and unexpected visual impressions, it becomes tied to new associations and changes even as an auditory impression” (64). Therefore, Risi suggests that the relationship between these impressions can be one of correspondence or opposition, effecting emotions of either “pleasure” or “irritation and rejection” with the audience (66). In this way, the theory of intermodal integration accounts for the interplay between the multidisciplinary performative elements of an opera performance and their interplay with both the performers and the audience members.

As the previous theoretical premises situate the analysis of this thesis – and the analytical tools used more particularly – they also contextualize its theoretical object: a performance of an opera of which gazing, looking, and watching are fundamental story and performative elements and which an audience watches and listens to. Such a “visual event as an object”, which naturally belongs to “visual culture studies”, can benefit from a highly interdisciplinary framework (Bal *Visual* 11-12). As literary scholar Mieke Bal contends, the methods of analysing a visual object require an interdisciplinary approach, as “the object co-performs the analysis” (25). Her theory is built on three principles that largely overlap with Risi’s theoretical premises for the performative dimension of opera: (1) that the visual object “enables reflection and speculation”, e.g. new meanings (2) that are accrued dialogically as an exchange between object and viewer and (3) based on previously gained knowledge from any discipline (24-25). Put differently, as the visual object is newly created by every look at it, a versatility in disciplines looking at it can reinvent – reread and eventually rewrite – the object altogether. Strikingly describing the idea that “objects are interpreted through a ‘reading’ using the gaze which is combined with a broader sensory experience involving tacit knowledge and embodied responses” of which “[b]oth cognitive and emotive responses may result, some of which may remain unspoken”

(Hooper-Greenhill in Bal *Visual* 25), she concludes her argument by stating that erecting disciplinary boundaries when analysing a visual object is "the most futile of all futilities that academic work can engage in" (25). While engaging with Bal's similar theory of "literature in an expanded field", in which she urges literary scholars to "open up our research imagination" (Bal *Expanded* 14), this thesis embarks on these insights exactly, by allowing a literary scholar to (re)read, and thus recreate a visual (and auditory) object that belongs to an expanded field of literature – consisting of literary studies, feminist studies, opera studies, and performance studies.

4.2 Methodology and analytical toolbox

Given Levin's and Risi's concept of the performance text, I will use the method of close reading to analyse the performances. Viewing both the planned staging and the performative moments as possible 'passages' to close read, I will use four analytical tools that follow out of the theoretical premises introduced previously:

4.2.1 Visual elements and their interaction with auditory elements

A close reading of the performance text can attend to the visual elements on stage, which include all the production-oriented elements belonging to the mise-en-scène: the stage setting, the costume design, the lighting, and so forth. Moreover, these elements might have a specific relationship with what is to be heard during the performance. That is, the music might "[legitimize] the scene", and visual elements can change the meaning or perception of familiar music and words written into it (Risi 78-79). In what way can visual elements and their interaction with auditory elements manifest a critical engagement with the male gaze and its dangerous implications?

4.2.2 The use of different (modern) visual media

As the three performances under scrutiny stage different (modern) visual media such as video recordings, a close reading would approach the way in which this extra intermodal layer heightens the audience's ability of intermodal integration (Risi 134). How does intensifying the intermediality of an opera performance impact the possibility of a critical stance to the male gaze, and the audience's reading thereof?

4.2.3 The interplay between representation and presence

A close reading of the performance text aims to illustrate the way in which the focus on presence can either strengthen or thwart a representational function, "and so produce a certain meaning of the opera texts" (Risi 90). This interplay ultimately occurs due to a combination of planned staging and

unintended events (105). In what way can the interplay between the represented figure of *Salome* and the present body that performs it reveal a critical engagement with the male gaze and its dangerous implications?

4.2.4 The potential meanings produced by the bodies and voices of the singing actors

A close reading of the performance text might also attend to the gestures and the voices of the singing actors, to corporeal acts that can produce critical meanings. How do the performances of *Salome* alter more conventional performance gestures and movements, and how does that alteration entail a critical engagement with the male gaze and its dangerous implications?

4.3 Corpus selection

With his theoretical premise of the performative dimension of opera, Risi pleads for the acknowledgment of the eventness of a performance and its ability to produce new meanings that cannot be hermeneutically analysed a priori, based on the opera texts. At the same time, Risi's focus on performativity and eventness does not preclude hermeneutic analysis or interpretation: his theoretical framework is rather an invitation to allow for a co-determination of representation and presence; performativity and interpretation (Levin 10). According to Levin, this means that recordings of operatic performances form a reliable theoretical object when one aims to attend to this co-determination: "[t]hanks to recording technologies, we can be absorbed an attempt to delineate the terms of absorption; furthermore, we can focus upon the particularities of interpretation and argue about their implications" (11). Building on Levin's acknowledgment of recordings as objects of analysis, I will analyse three video recordings of operatic performances.

The first concerns Gabriela Lavia's *Salome* for the Teatro Comunale di Bologna (2010), which is entirely available on Youtube and commercialized as a DVD recording. Next, I will analyse Ivo van Hove's *Salome* at Dutch National Opera (2017), the video recording of which I was able to attain through my colleagues at this company. Finally, I will focus on *Dance of the Seven Veils* for Toneelhuis (2021/2022) by Aïda Gabriëls, who provided me with a Vimeo recording of a performance. As the first part of this chapter demonstrated, and as both Levin and Clemens contend, it is important to build the performative analysis on previous hermeneutic work. After all, if a dramaturge rereads a canonical opera against its cultural background in order to inform a staging that can critically engage with the textually inscribed male gaze and its dangerous consequences, an academic reader of such a staging can only benefit from such dramaturgical research. Therefore, the next chapter will give an overview of the literary histories of Strauss' *Salome* on the one hand, whereas it will also focus on its cultural afterlife on the other. As it will show, both histories reveal

how the male gaze is constructed in the opera texts of *Salome,* something contemporary performances might resist to.

5

The Male Gaze in the *Salome* myth

A dramaturgical reading from the Bible to Strauss' opera texts and beyond

If Levin and Risi suggest that a performative analysis of an opera performance entails a combination of inquiries in the a priori hermeneutics and the instantaneous, performative elements (Risi 34); and if they consider the opera texts as material for specific performances, an analysis that aims to lay bare the artistic resistance to the male gaze during an opera performance should therefore take into account the genesis of those materials leading to the performances. More specifically, the textual and cultural genesis of the operatic male gaze in Strauss' opera texts for *Salome* are interesting. Moreover, as the following chapter will demonstrate, *Salome's* literary history affected future performances of Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils', which in its turn influenced their cultural imagination and, eventually, the construction of the male gaze upon her in Strauss' opera texts. By attending to the Biblical rendition of Salome, the medieval portrayal of her, the nineteenth-century creation of the *femme fatale,* and her embodiment in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé/Salome,* Richard Strauss' and popular Salome-inspired dance performances, this chapter will demonstrate that *a reading* of the performative dimension of Salome's myth and the actual performances thereof reveals that exactly the latter two elements can create, shift, and return the male gaze all at once.

5.1 "The Daughter of Herodias"

Salome makes a short appearance in the Bible, namely in the New Testament. In both Mark 6:14-29 and Matthew 14:1-12, she is not named and is simply described as "the daughter of Herodias" (*New International Version,* Mark. 6:22). Moreover, in both gospels, Salome's dance is captured in one line suggesting that Salome dances out of free will, or, at least, without being ordered to. However, this possibly confident portrayal of Salome is quickly countered by her almost childish dependency on her mother. When King Herod asks Salome what she wants in return for her apparently exciting dance, both gospels describe how she immediately turns to her mother for her answer. Herodias, who is irritated by John the Baptist's constant public denouncements of the unlawful, incestuous nature of her marriage with her brother-in-law, Herodes Antipas, is of course quick to command her daughter to request John's decapitation. Although Herod feels "distressed" about his stepdaughter's uncanny request to give her "the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (Mark. 6:25) – in Mark's gospel because

he admired and feared John for his beautiful, yet prophetic speeches, in Matthew's because he fears his people's reaction to the death of a possible prophet – he proceeds. The story ends with the rather laconic statement that John's disciples buried him afterwards, to which Matthew adds that they notified Jesus about John's beheading. The historicity of this Biblical story is also partly substantiated by "extrabiblical evidence", namely in Flavius Josephus' historical writings *The Antiquities of the Jews,* in which he disentangles the complex family history of Herodias, Herodes Antipas and Salome, thereby revealing the name of 'the daughter of Herodias' (Streete 15).

Nevertheless, the involvement of both Herodias and Salome in John the Baptist's death remains evidenced in the gospels of Mark and Matthew only. As Salome's dance is narrated in only one line, and the story of John's death in less than twenty, it comes as no surprise that "the emotional motivations and reactions of [Salome] remain unexplained" (Streete 16). Consequently, the conciseness of this biblical story makes it hard to decide on Salome's agency in John's decapitation: is she dancing because she wants to entertain an audience, or because she innocently abides by her parents' rules? In other words, in the gospels, both the domination of Salome – thus, the gazes upon her – as well as her possible manipulation of it, remains uncertain. However, according to Gail P. Streete, Mark and Matthew's usage of the Greek word *korasion* or its diminutive *kor*, meaning a little girl that does not have the age of puberty yet (Neginsky 10), might hint at a rather innocent *Salome* who has no agency. As Mark uses the same word to describe another biblical character who he explicitly gives the age of twelve years old, this correlation "between the two girls could emphasize their passivity under their parents' control: they have no agency in the events related to them" and "might also underscore the unconscious innocence of Herodias' daughter's dance: obediently, she does what her mother tells her to do" (Streete 17). Moreover, Streete explains that "because the dancing daughter is characterized as a child, her performance, as briefly and drily described by Mark, is devoid of erotic overtones", as neither of the gospels is explicit about the gender of the audience, the nature of the dance or Herod's feelings of enjoyment as a result of it (17).

Despite this devoid of eroticism in the Biblical text, it is the sole one considering Salome and her mother as involved in John's death. As a result, speculations about their share in John's death grew in fourth-century theology, which often led to harsh denunciations of the two women separately or a conflation of the two. More specifically, when a church dedicated to John the Baptist was erected in Alexandria in the fourth century, John was venerated increasingly, and the religious and theological interest in his death and the involvement of Salome and Herodias corresponded accordingly (Neginsky 23). Moreover, as Rosina Neginsky explains, the enhanced interest in figures such as Salome and Herodias is also to be contextualized in the theological search for codified gender roles. That is, church fathers were developing Christian gender roles based on theology, thereby drawing "on images of biblical women to develop their ideas on women's roles in society" (23). Interestingly, whereas theological writings in the fourth and fifth century still consider Herodias as the main culprit in John's death, viewing her as an anti-role mother, Salome gradually becomes the greater focus of attention.

Whereas Salome has been "stage-managed" by her mother in the gospels, Salome becomes solely "responsible for seductively persuading Herod", thereby effecting John's death (Streete 25). Church father John Chrysostom (347-407), for instance, writes in his *Homily on Matthew* that between Herod's "demonic banquet" and Salome's pleasing dance the latter is more culpable for John's decapitation (Streete 29). In Streete's interpretation of Chrysostomos' text, Chrysostomos is mostly appalled by Salome's apparent attempt to usurp the male gaze:

> Although he suggests that Herod may have been "the worst transgressor of all," because he was supposed to be in control, Salome is nonetheless complicit in the drunkenness, luxury, and depravity of the banquet because she incites the "irrational pleasure" that subverts the chief male virtue, self-control. The girl is thus the more to blame, since she, "because of whom the marriage was illegal, who ought even to have hid herself, as though her mother were dishonored by her, comes making a show, and throwing into the shade all harlots, virgin as she was. (29)

During the Middle Ages, then, this "show" was in fact already performed by female street performers called "jongleuresses" or "jongleresses", who were eager to portray the figure of Salome (Streete 31). As a result, "[m]edieval Salome was often portrayed standing on her hands with legs bent towards her head, nearly touching the floor, in the manner of entertainers who performed throughout Europe" (Malik 143). As a result, Salome's dance was painted on church walls and tympanums, glass windows, and illustrations on manuscripts (Zagona 21).[5] Moreover, as medieval church fathers considered any form of dancing as diabolic and sinful (Malik 143), Salome's acrobatic qualities continued to be combined with her depiction as demonic and pure evil. After all, fourteenth-century illustrations also show her dancing, not before Herod, but with John's decapitated head – as if she is celebrating her victory (Streete 33). In that sense, Salome is perceived as a villainous figure not only because of her dance, but also because she is a female dancer.

In the Renaissance, however, this image alters slightly: while still holding the head, she now looks away from it. As Streete believes, such a portrayal could be the result of a period in which reason prevails over sensuality, which is why he interprets such images of Salome as if she has "come to her senses" and regrets what she has done (35). More importantly, the eroticism and evil previously associated with Salome in the fourth century and the Middle Ages, are minimized. As Helen Grace Zagona writes, depictions of Salome in the Renaissance lost the focus on violence and eroticism in favour of Salome's beauty: "[n]o longer strictly a morality symbol, the seductive dancer retained her place in art as an ideal subject for depicting the beauty of the human form" (21). As a result,

[5] Helen Grace Zagona notes that the most famous images of Salome in churches "is the representation of the banquet scene on the tympanum of the Cathedral of Rouen", in which "she is portrayed upside down, dancing on her hands" (21). According to her and many, this cathedral might have inspired Flaubert's rendition of Salome's dance, as Rouen is his birth town (21).

Renaissance Salome holds dignified poses and wears modest clothing (Zagona 21), and in the rare cases in which she is dancing, she is portrayed as a nymph, which served as the symbol of female beauty at the time (Neginsky 29).

Eventually, the downplaying of Salome's dance in favor of depictions of John's head and focus on her gracious beauty even led to Salome's "artistic hibernation" between the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth century (Bentley 20). In other words, whereas Salome's early characterization as an eroticized object to the male gaze is the result of "mythological and theological reflections on aspects of 'the feminine,' rather than any attempt to portray or to understand a historical woman" (Streete 36), these reflections would take an entirely different turn in the centuries to come. Still, this characterization had also formed her image as the virginal femme fatale, preparing her to erupt as explosively during the end of the nineteenth century. As this century harbours the most defining influences on both Wilde's and Strauss' versions of the Salome myth, the following section will explain their impact in greater detail.

5.2 Salome, the turn-of-the-century *femme fatale*

As Toni Bentley describes in apt, performative terms: whilst she was waiting backstage during the sixteenth until the nineteenth century, Salome was "perhaps preparing … for her greatest entrance in history, at the turn of the twentieth century, when as a raging seductress, an inescapable siren, she left the holy man in the wings and finally took center stage for herself" (20). Neginsky also mentions how her figure becomes more independent. These readings are valid on the one hand, as Salome indeed takes the stage without her mother, thereby deciding that she is the one wanting John dead. On the other hand, her characterizations fully remain a product of the male gaze, as her appearances – and the descriptions of her dance in particular – in Gustave Flaubert's "Hérodias" (1877) and Karl Huysmans *Á Rebours* (1884) will demonstrate. In order to attend to the mechanism of the male gaze in these literary examples, we first have to attend to the roots of their inspiration during the nineteenth century: Heinrich Heine's epic poem *Atta troll* (1843).

In the course of the nineteenth century, the interest in the myth of Salome was reinvigorated by the publication and subsequent French translation of German author Heinrich Heine's *Atta troll* (Malik 144). In this poem, Heine introduces the Roman goddess Diana, the Celtic spirit Fey Aboundia and Herodias as magical apparitions "on a haunted hunt, appearing appropriately on the Eve of Saint John the Baptist" (Streete 40). When the narrator describes the phantom of Herodias, he immediately includes characterizations that are foundational for Salome's later portrayal in French fin-the-siècle literature. First, although his text thus concerns Herodias instead of her daughter, Heine's account of the former is still relevant, as it is one of the first ones in which the theme of unrequited love as the reason for John's downfall is introduced (Zagona 32; Malik 144). That is, as the following passage suggests, Herodias desired John's head, not out of revenge, but because of love:

…
She who craved the Baptist's head.

For this crimson crime was she
Banned and cursed.
…

Still within her hands she bears
That deep charger with the head
Of the Prophet, *still she kisses—*
Kisses it with fiery lips.

For she loved the Prophet once,
Though the Bible naught reveals,
Yet her blood-stained love lives on
Storied in her people's hearts. (Heine, Canto XIX, emphasis added)

Secondly, the same passage introduces the nexus between death and eroticism, as well as the figure of the femme fatale (Streete 41). As the narrator notes, the figure of Herodias is difficult to grasp:

Whether devil this or saint
Know I not. With women, ah,
None can ever know where saint
Ends nor where the fiend begins. (Heine, Canto XIX)

Finally, while the previous paragraph already lays the foundation for a misogynistic representation of the female main characters of the Salome myth, the following paragraph already suggests that this representation is inextricably connected with a Western interpretation of the Orient (Sreete 41-42):

All the magic of the East
Lay within her glowing face,
And her dress brought memories
Of Scheherazade's tales.

…
From her palfrey white she leaned,

Flanked by giant Moors who trod
Close beside the queenly dame
Holding up the golden reins. (Heine, Canto XIX)

In other words, Heine's description of Herodias testifies to a poetic mixture of eroticism, evilness, and Orientalism, a mixture that will eventually turn Salome into a *femme fatale.*

As Zagona explains, Heine's *Atta Troll* had a large influence on the subsequent literary engagements with the Salome/Herodias myth in France, as "at the time when this legend began to crop up frequently in France as a literary theme, Heine's poem was much more widely read and appreciated than it has since become" (40). Indeed, in nineteenth-century France, Salome became "a fount of literary reference through the remainder of the [nineteenth] century" (40), with a remarkable peak at the close of it (Neginsky 71). Interestingly, the renewed interest in Salome in the late nineteenth century is inextricably intertwined with the typical, colonial obsession with the Orient at the time (Bentley 23; Malik 144). As a result of Europe's increasing and peaking colonial power, many young, Western male artists travelled to the East – mostly regions such as Egypt, Palestine and the Levant (Streete 42) – to investigate the Orient for artistic inspiration (Malik 144). In his seminal critical and theoretical monograph *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes how this intricate nexus of European political hegemony and artistic, journalistic, and academic writing on the Orient created a structured relationship between East and West. Thus, coining the term 'Orientalism', Said describes this phenomenon as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (1). He also adds that the Orient is constructed as the other of that experience because, as Said argues, this complicated relationship between Europe and the Orient is inherently one of power, thereby also defining Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). In other words, Said asserts that by writing about the Orient and using the Orient for artistic imagery, Western authors and thinkers in fact Orientalized the Orient (the continent, the people and other contextual elements) by creating their own, powerful imagery of it, thereby also perpetuating the power the European continent held over the Orient.

Interestingly, Said uses Gustave Flaubert's writings about his travels to Egypt – in which he met the Egyptian courtesan/dancer Kuchuk Hanem – as an example of such hegemonic, Orientalized writing:

> There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her

> and tell his readers in what way she was 'typically Oriental.' My argument is that Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled. (6)

As a matter of fact, Flaubert used this "model of the Oriental woman" (Said 6) for his depiction of Salome in his novella "Hérodias". Not incorporating the theme of unrequited love, his account of the Salome myth involves a Herodias who wants to have John the Baptist killed out of revenge, as she feels attacked by his public scorns about her unlawful marriage with her brother-in-law. In order to achieve her goal, she uses her young daughter Salome – who she had abandoned – to lurk her husband into beheading John as a reward for Salome's seductive dance:

> Herodias had had her daughter Salome brought up far from Machaerus, knowing that one day the Tetrarch would fall in love with her. It was a clever move and she now knew that her plan was working. (Flaubert 274)

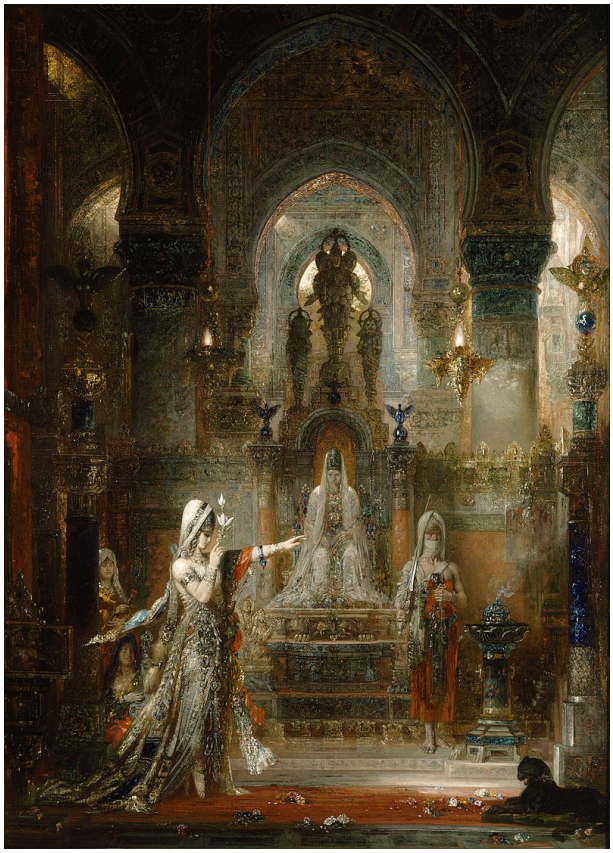
In a vivid way, Flaubert deploys characterizations of Salome as the Oriental *femme fatale*. That is, clearly inspired by his encounter with Kuchuk Hanem, who had already been the model for his two other oriental, dancing heroines Salammbbô in the eponymous novel and the Queen of Sheba in his novella *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (Bentley 24), Flaubert constructs an Orientalized Salome who dances "rhythmically … to the sounds of a flute and a pair of hand cymbals" (Flaubert 272) and "like the priestess of the Indies, like the Nubian girls of cataracts, like the bacchantes of Lydia" (274). Flaubert also embellishes his image of Salome with Oriental jewels and draperies:

> A blue-tinted veil covered her head and breasts. Through it could be glimpsed the curve of her eyes, the chalcedony jewels that hung from her ears and the whiteness of her body. A drape of dove-coloured silk fell from her shoulders and was fastened about her thighs with a jeweled [*sic*] girdle. … The jewels that hung from her ears danced about her face, her silken shift shimmered in the light, and from her arms, her feet and her clothing leapt unseen sparks that enflamed the hearts of the men who watched her. (272-274)

Clearly, the nexus between sensuality and Orientalism already introduced by Heine, as well as the connection of these elements with power and hegemony as suggested by Said, are apparent in Flaubert's descriptions of Salome.

Such a colourful, Orientalized image of Salome's spangled body was not only inspired by Flaubert's "racy narratives of his experiences with dancers in Egypt" (Malik 146), but also by the pictorial arts of the fin the siècle. As Flaubert was known to have visited the Salon of 1876, a year

before the publication of his *Three Tales,* and since he "mentioned this visit in a letter to Ivan Turgenev, explaining that, as a result of it, he planned to write a story about Ioakanann, the Hebraic name of John the Baptist" (Neginsky 151), it can be deduced that he was influenced by the paintings of Salome exhibited at this Salon. More specifically, Flaubert's Oriental imagery of Salome resurfaces in two paintings by Gustave Moreau: "*Salomé dansant devant Hérode* (Salome Dancing before Herod) and *L'Apparition* (The Apparition). Both the paintings "portray a fantasized, bejewelled (*sic*), seminude Salome" (Malik 146), and clearly engage with Flaubert's male fantasy of the Oriental femme fatale. Whereas the former painting depicts Salome's dance, the latter concerns an imaginary turn on the subject by the painter, as it portrays John's dripping head appearing before her.



Moreau, Gustave. Salomé dansant devant Hérode,1876. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

Moreau, L'Apparition,1876. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

If Flaubert's engagement with these paintings is implicit in "Hérodias", Moreau's paintings are more explicitly referred to in another important literary work that bore its imprint on the artistic male gaze in both Wilde's and Strauss' *Salome*. In Joris-Karl Huysmans' decadent novel *Á Rebours*, Moreau's paintings are invoked at different points in the story, resulting in ekphrastic passages that highlight the way in which the paintings affect the protagonist, the recluse aesthete Jean Des Esseintes. That is, Des Esseintes is "allured and entranced" by the artist Gustave Moreau, of whom he has acquired two paintings: *Salomé*[6] and *L'Apparition* (Huysmans 76). Huysmans vividly describes how Des Esseintes

[6] Although deviating from the original title, *Salomé* actually refers to *Salomé dansant devant Hérod*.

is mesmerized by the representation of Salome. After setting an Oriental scene of "burned perfumes wafting aloft clouds of incense" (76-77) and an "overheated atmosphere of the temple", Huysmans describes how Des Esseintes gazes upon the painting *Salomé*, and, more importantly, upon Salome herself:

> Her [Salome's] face is meditative, solemn, almost august, as she commences the lascivious dance that will awaken the slumbering senses of old Herod. Diamonds scintillate against her glistening skin. Her bracelets, her girdles, her rings flash. On her triumphal robe, seamed with pearls, flowered with silver and laminated with gold, the breastplate of jewels, each link of which is a precious stone, flashes serpents of fire against the pallid flesh, delicate as a tea-rose: its jewels like splendid insects with dazzling elytra, veined with carmine, dotted with yellow gold, diapered with blue steel, speckled with peacock green. (77)

This Oriental image corresponds with Flaubert's Orientalized vision of Salome more explicitly, when Huysmans describes how Moreau

> [places] his Salome in this extraordinary palace with its confused and imposing style, in clothing her with sumptuous and chimerical robes, in crowning her with a fantastic mitre shaped like a Phoenician tower, such as *Salammbo* bore, and placing in her hand the sceptre of Isis, the tall lotus, sacred flower of Egypt and India. (80-81, emphasis added)

In other words, the correspondence between Flaubert's and Huysmans' literary descriptions of Salome connects Flaubert, Moreau and Huysmans together through an intricate nexus of Orientalism and objectification, which illustrates how a similar Salome constantly returns in nineteenth-century literature and art: a Salome that is constantly objectified through imposed associations with the Orient and eroticism.

Flaubert's, Moreau's and Huysmans' intertwined, Orientalized representations can also be extended to a rather misogynist, ambiguous characterization of the desired, yet feared fatal woman. Although Salome asks for John's head "with a look of childish innocence" (Flaubert 276) in Flaubert's "Hérodias" – she even hesitates whether she has his name right – Flaubert still portrays her as a woman who is set to seduce Herod by "slip[ing] off her veil" before she begins to dance, and who "swiveled her waist, thrust her belly backwards and forwards in rhythmic waves and made her breasts quiver" (Flaubert 272-273). In Flaubert's view, Salome's dance continues as a depiction of her as a lover who "[yearns] for satisfaction" (274), and, more importantly, as an acrobatic act that resembles the acrobatic dances with which Salome was portrayed in the Middle Ages:

> Without bending her knees, she spread her legs apart and inclined her body so low that her chin touched the floor. … Next she danced in a circle around the Tetrarch's table, spinning wildly on her feet like the humming-top of a sorceress. … She threw herself on her hands with her heels in the air and in this pose she crossed from one side of the platform to the other like an enormous beetle. (274-275)

Resembling Salome's portrayal dancing upside-down, on her hands on the tympanum of the cathedral of Rouen, Flaubert's hometown (Zagona 21; Malik 146), the medieval, diabolical characterization conjured up by this image is invoked in this passage. Thus re-entering the literary stage as a *femme fatale,* Huysmans develops this ambiguous characterization even further. In Des Esseintes'view, of all the (literary) representations of Salome, Moreau's *Salomé* was the only one that was able to grasp her fatal attractiveness:

> But neither Saint Matthew, nor Saint Mark, nor Saint Luke, nor the other Evangelists had emphasized the maddening charms and depravities of the dancer. She remained vague and hidden, mysterious and swooning in the far-off mist of the centuries, not to be grasped by vulgar and materialistic minds, accessible only to disordered and volcanic intellects made visionaries by their neuroticism; rebellious to painters of the flesh, to Rubens who disguised her as a butcher's wife of Flanders; a mystery to all the writers who had never succeeded in portraying the disquieting exaltation of this dancer, the refined grandeur of this murderess. (Huysmans 79)

Clearly, Des Esseintes is impressed by Salome's mixture of eroticism and murder. This ambiguous, but archetypal duo of characteristics found in the figure of the desired, yet feared *femme fatale* is even more palpable in Moreau's second painting, *L'Apparition*, in which he presents a Salome "who, even while dancing, was having lustful visions of the Baptist's severed head, which the painter showed suspended in the air above the dancer's eagerly outstretched hand, its precious fluids dripping" (Dijkstra 382). When Des Esseintes gazes at the watercolour painting, he even identifies with the gazing King Herod:

> Like the old king, Des Esseintes remained dumbfounded, overwhelmed and seized with giddiness, in the presence of this dancer who was less majestic, less haughty but more disquieting than the Salome of the oil painting. (84)

The fact that Des Esseintes finds the Salome of the watercolour painting more seductive than her representation in the oil painting, is explained by the severed head that exposes her "ardent and cruel temperament" (84):

> She was living, more refined and savage, more execrable and exquisite. She more energetically awakened the dulled senses of man, more surely bewitched and subdued his power of will, with the charm of a tall venereal flower, cultivated in sacrilegious beds, in impious hothouses. (84)

In other words, Moreau can provide Des Esseintes with "the superhuman and exotic Salome of his dreams" (Huysmans 80), as he visualizes the entire male fantasy that Heine and Flaubert had created along with him: an oriental, arousing, yet fearfully murderous Salome.

Interestingly, Moreau's Salome is in fact not only the visual expression of Des Esseintes' dreams, but also of the entire ambiguous and perverse turn-of-the-century male sexual fantasy, which was a product of important social changes of that time. That is, the fin de siècle was a period of crisis for masculinity, particularly in France. As Bentley explains, the loss of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 had generated feelings of shame and insecurity, a sense that was only intensified when industrialization "challenged the individual's place in the world" (23). Moreover, when divorce became legalized in 1884, the issue of women's rights was raised increasingly, coinciding with a raising number of women who "had begun to enter the workforce and had taken more active roles in society" (Neginsky 74). Staggeringly, women traded their submission to male domination for increasing self-sufficiency by "challenging the notion that a good woman had no sexual impulses of her own but was content to mold herself into the vessel of male desire" (Dijkstra 64). Feeling insecure about these male certainties slipping away, men reacted with sheer anxiety, which manifested itself in misogynistic representations of (mythological) women in the visual and literary arts. Bram Dijkstra, for instance, observes that the changing social scene of the nineteenth century generated a male "cultural campaign" that "escalated into what can truthfully be called a war on woman – for to say 'women' would contradict a major premise of the period's antifeminine thought" (vii). Coining this cultural campaign as an "iconography of misogyny" (viii), Dijkstra maps out different female archetypes created by male painters, sculptors, and writers, such as the siren, the vampire woman, the ill woman, the sexually insatiable nymph, and most to the purpose of this study: the virginal whore and the female executioner. In the following paragraphs, I will use Dijkstra's observations to analyse how Salome became the object of an ambivalent mixture of nineteenth-century male anxiety, which the literary examples discussed above already demonstrated.

In fin-de-siècle arts, Salome is used to create the archetypes discerned by Dijkstra, in order for men to cope with their fear of them. However, these archetypes are strikingly ambiguous in two ways. First, they reconcile two contradictory characterizations. As a murderous, young temptress who lurks men into danger by exploiting a highly sensual, Oriental dance, fin-de-siècle Salome is indeed men's "favorite femme fatale" (Bentley 22). At the same time, however, Salome retains her virginal, pubescent traits as well: her young age is ever emphasized and, in Flaubert's mind, so is her innocence. The divergence of these portrayals stems from men's fear of female independence, which both the "highly sexed" as the "celibate" woman might seek (23). Secondly, although this

contradictory image is thus created out of fear, it also stems from a perverse desire breading in the "male, masochistic mind" (22). As Bentley explains, Salome as virginal femme fatale is in fact the resolution for men's "contradictory desire for sexual connection and his even deeper fear for castration and annihilation" (22). As Dijkstra continues the argument, Salome's desire for a severed head is in fact "the supreme act of the male's physical submission to woman's predatory desire" (375). This in its turn relates to the age-old ambivalent relation to females as bearers of life, creating a thin line between fear and desire. Again, the male desire to be subjected to such evil, female lust, is a coping mechanism for the turn-of-the-century fear of powerlessness:

> The masochism, then, of the late nineteenth-century male, and his manipulation of the image of woman as an all-destroying, rampaging animal was an expression of his attempt to come to terms with the implications of his own marginalization, his removal from the true seats of power in his society. It was not at all a backhanded compliment to woman's power over him; it was rather the creation of a surrogate master who could be sacrificed – indeed, destroyed if necessary – once the true masculine … master-slave bond … had established itself. (Dijkstra 374).

However, in none of the nineteenth-century depictions of Salome discussed above, Salome is actually sacrificed or destroyed. It was Oscar Wilde's take on the subject that provides the real resolution to this male heterosexual, masochistic desire. After all, in his version, Herod demands his soldiers to kill Salome as punishment for her evil request and transgressive desire.

Clearly influenced by the misogynistic representations of the heterosexual male artists casting their gaze on their perfect *femme fatale*, Wilde continued this representation in his play *Salomé* (1891).[7] Wilde's play, originally written in French, was planned to premiere in London in 1892. However, the Lord Chamberlain was unsatisfied with the portrayal of Biblical characters on a public stage and banned the play from the British stage until 1931 (Malik 148). Nevertheless, the play premiered in Paris in 1896 and was very successful in Europe at the turn of the century. *Salome* was even staged in Berlin, where Strauss saw it for the first time. Afterwards, Strauss adapted the play into an opera, using a virtually unaltered version of the German translation by Hedwich Lachmann as libretto. Although Strauss' adaptation of Wilde's play is the focus of this thesis, I will first analyse Wilde's *Salome* and the way in which he transformed the subsequent image of Salome for good in particular. After all, although Wilde's *Salome* might have been impacted by the "misogynistic subtext" (Bucknell 503) created by Salome's turn-of-the-century forefathers, his play is distinguished from the latter in three particular ways: he verbally plays with the political and metaphorical implications of looking, he imagines Salome's individual motivations for her deadly request and gives her the

[7] From now on, I will only refer to Wilde's play as *Salome*, since this thesis uses the English translation.

performance of a lifetime: the 'Dance of the Seven Veils'. As the following section will demonstrate, it is exactly these three essential differences that pave the way for performative, artistic resistance to the male gaze.

5.3 Performing Salome: continuing or resisting the male gaze?

5.3.1 Wilde's critical implications of looking

First, Wilde's dramatic text testifies to a critical recognition of scopophilia and the inherent power of looking. For instance, from the beginning of the text onwards, it is clear that Salome is the object of numerous male gazes, and that this fact might cause disastrous outcomes. After Narraboth's repeated comments on Salome's beauty, Herodias' page, secretly in love with him, tries to divert his gaze to the moon: "Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things" (Wilde 5). The page's projection of Salome's character on the moon, namely as someone who seeks dead objects, motivates his later warning that Narraboth is "always looking at her", too much even, which is "dangerous" and might cause "something terrible" (7). This sequence is followed by a conversation between Narraboth, the Cappadocian and Herodias' page, who discuss Herod's new prisoner Iokanaan.[8]

However, their discussion is constantly interrupted by Narraboth's perception of Salome, whose actions he follows closely. For instance, after observing that "The Princess has hidden her face behind her fan! Her little white hands are fluttering like doves that fly to their dove-cots. They are like white butterflies. They are just like white butterflies" (14), Narraboth continues his gaze by remarking that she "is getting up! She is leaving the table! She looks very troubled. Ah, she is coming this way. Yes, she is coming towards us. How pale she is! Never have I seen her so pale" (17). Salome, already bored from the banquet her stepfather required her to attend, is tired from Herod's gaze:

> "I will not stay. I cannot stay. Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids? It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. Of a truth I know it too well" (17-18).

Indeed, Salome knows "too well" (18) what the male gazes cast on her mean, and upon this recognition, she will appropriate the power associated with them to fulfil her own desire: to kiss Iokanaan.

[8] Please note the difference in spelling. Since Wilde uses this spelling to refer to John the Baptist, I will do so too. In Strauss' libretto, John is spelled as 'Jochanaan'. The latter spelling will be continued in the chapters covering my case studies.

When Salome hears Iokanaan's prophecies for the first time, she wishes only to speak with him. When Herod's disciples try to get her back to the banquet, though, her desire alters to vision: "How black it is, down there! It must be terrible to be in so black a hole! It is like a tomb . . . (To the soldiers.) Did you not hear me? Bring out the prophet. I would look on him" (Wilde 24). Knowing "too well" (18) that a gaze can hold power, Salome tries to appropriate the mechanism of the gaze to persuade Narraboth to fulfil her desire:

> Thou wilt do this thing for me, Narraboth. Thou knowest that thou wilt do this thing for me. And on the morrow when I shall pass in my litter by the bridge of the idolbuyers, I will look at thee through the muslin veils, I will look at thee, Narraboth, it may be I will smile at thee. Look at me, Narraboth, look at me. Ah! thou knowest that thou wilt do what I ask of thee. Thou knowest it . . . . I know that thou wilt do this thing. (27)

When Narraboth gives in and opens the cistern to show Iokanaan, Salome cannot but "look at him closer" (31). But Iokanaan immediately resists her gaze:

> Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me. Wherefore doth she look at me, with her golden eyes, under her gilded eyelids? I know not who she is. I do not desire to know who she is. Bid her begone, it is not to her that I would speak. (32)

Salome experiences confusing emotions upon this rejection. Uttering declamations of love and desire for his body first – "I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan! …There is nothing in the world so white as thy body – Suffer me to touch thy body" (34) she immediately switches to scornful language instead: "Thy body is hideous … it is horrible, thy body is horrible" (35). After switching between laudable and hateful speech about Iokanaan's body and hair, Salome finishes her description of her perception with Iokanaan's mouth: "It is thy mouth that I desire, Iokanaan, … There is nothing in the world so red as thy mouth …. Suffer me to kiss thy mouth." (36-37). After a few rejections, upon which Salome repeatedly claims that she will succeed in kissing him eventually, Iokanaan reformulates his revulsion in terms of vision for the last time before he returns to his cistern: "I will not look at thee. Thou art accursed, Salome, thou art accursed" (40). Salome's attempts to imitate the controlling male gaze cast on her – by Narraboth and her stepfather – are doomed to fail, a failure which the rest of the play's plot might even enhance. After this sequence, Narraboth is physically unable to look at Salome engaging with Iokanaan any longer and kills himself.

Given Iokanaan's explicit refusal to look at Salome, Herod's affiliation with looking is another important structural principle of the play. After Herodias' many reproaches of her husband looking at Salome, Herod – like the page – starts to compare his view of Salome with that of the moon, on which he projects both his desires and fears:

> The moon has a strange look to-night. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman . . . . I am sure she is looking for lovers. Does she not reel like a drunken woman? She is like a mad woman, is she not? (42)

Herod's alignment of the moon with a naked, drunken mad woman who is on the hunt for men recalls the fin-de-siècle ambiguous combination of desire and anxiety, which founded the concept of Salome as a *femme fatale.* Moreover, as Dijkstra states, the moon is a typical end-of-the-century symbol "for the essence of everything that was truly feminine in the world" (122). In his view, the moon is a reflective phenomenon without "light of its own, just as woman, in her proper function, had existence only as the passive reflection of male creativity" (122). In this sense, Wilde's recurring theme of the moon might refer to the way in which Salome, the epitome of the fin-de-siècle *femme fatale*, has been created by the male gaze only.

Interestingly, that the ambiguity of Herod's emotions lies within the purview of his male gaze is evidenced by the importance he gives to, and the pleasure he finds in looking – even at males. For instance, when he remarks Narraboth's body, he finds it very "strange" that he has killed himself, his feelings of remorse are inspired by the affordances of vision:

> "I am sorry he has slain himself … For he was fair to look upon. He was even very fair. He had very languorous eyes. I remember that I saw that he looked languorously at Salome. Truly, I thought he looked too much at her" (45).

Herodias finds this comment ironic – "There are others who look too much at her" (45) – and continues to blame him for looking so often at her daughter: "Why are you always gazing at her?" (47). Herodias' explicit referral to Herod's male gaze demonstrates how the power and pleasure of looking is presented as a structural principle of the play, which functions both to illustrate the desires of different characters and to foretell plotlines.

However, Herod ignores her reprimands, as well as her requests to silence Iokanaan, who continues to foretell her and Herod's downfall. Attempting to distract himself from Iokanaan's scary prophecies and the paranoia he is experiencing because of them, Herod asks Salome to dance. Despite his commanding tone, Salome repeatedly rejects his request. But when Herod promises her "whatsoever thou shalt ask of me … even unto the half of my kingdom" (72), Salome sees a way to beget what she wants, namely, a kiss from Iokanaan. She therefore decides: "I will dance for you, Tetrarch" (75). Afterwards, Herod pledges to pay "a royal price to those who dance for [his] pleasure" (79), but is immediately appalled by the price Salome is asking for. Not exactly the murderous nature

of her request, but rather the fact that she aims to cast a gaze upon a desirable object is impossible to him:

> Surely, I think thou art jesting. The head of a man that is cut from his body is ill to look upon, is it not? It is not meet that the eyes of a virgin should look upon such a thing. What pleasure couldst thou have in it? There is no pleasure that thou couldst have in it. No, no, it is not that thou desirest. (83)

Trying to avert Salome's desire, he suggests other rewards for her dance: "I have a crystal, into which it is not lawful for a woman to look" (87). As Abbate argues, with this gift, Herod in fact offers her a position to usurp the male gaze, which is in fact forbidden for women (238). However, Abbate continues, this is only an empty promise, as he then adds "turquoises" to his offerings that make you "imagine things which are not" (Wilde 88). In other words, the idea that Salome would in fact be able to appropriate the dominating role of the male gaze, is considered to be delusionary (Abbate 238). When Salome is in fact able to cast her gaze – and force her lips – upon Iokanaan's decapitated head at the end of the play, Herod brings his gender essentialism to action not only by ordering her death, but also to request it to happen in the darkness so that he does not have to look upon her anymore: "I will not look at things, I will not suffer things to look at me. Put out the torches! Hide the moon! Hide the stars!" (Wilde 93). Essentially, by including Salome's death in the story, Wilde adds an important layer to the complex fin-de-siècle representation stemming from male desire and anxiety: Salome is punished for inverting the "nineteenth-century culture's stereotyped gender roles" by claiming the male gaze, namely because she wants to gaze upon a desirable object – an essentially "male privilege" (Abbate 237). In other words, Wilde demonstrates that even though women were trying to free themselves from the male gaze at the time, it was nearly impossible for them to do so, especially without being severely punished for it.

5.3.2 Salome's interior

Thus, although the addition of Salome's execution on Wilde's behalf might endorse the "misogynistic subtext" (Bucknell 503) of the Salome myth, Wilde's second important difference with Salome's nineteenth-century male creators is in fact a gateway to subvert that subtext. In particular, by representing Salome through the dramatic description of her sexually transgressive desire from her own point of view, Wilde can let in on her psychology and personality (Bentley 28). For instance, Salome is explicit about her personal desires when Herod accuses her of asking for Iokanaan's head upon her mother's request: "It is not my mother's voice that I heed. It is for my own pleasure that I ask the head of Iokanaan in a silver charger" (Wilde 81). In articulating the fact that it is not her mother

who wants Iokanaan's head but she herself, Wilde ascribes substantially more agency and depth to Salome than previous authors.

Moreover, Wilde endows her with more verbal agency as well by letting her utter emasculating language against her male audience. For example, she is surprised not to hear Iokanaan scream during his execution: "Why does he not cry out, this man? Ah! If any man sought to kill me, I would cry out" (Wilde 90; Abbate 237). She also bluntly tells the male guardians that "there are not dead men enough" (90). Although the latter statement might reinforce her monstrous image already created by nineteenth-century artists, Salome becomes more sensitive and vocal about her psychological motivations and emotions informing her murderous request. With Iokanaan's head in her hand, she proclaims: "Ah, Iokanaan, Iokanaan, thou wert the man that I loved alone among men! All other men were hateful to me. But thou wert beautiful!" (91), after which she describes his beauty and her own affective emotions regarding to it:

> I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me. I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire . . . . Ah! ah! wherefore didst thou not look at me? If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me. Well I know that thou wouldst have loved me, and the mystery of Love is greater than the mystery of Death. (92)

Scholars tend to believe that Wilde's homosexuality – then considered to be transgressive – informed his literary-dramatic sensitivity to Salome's sexual transgressions. Bentley, for instance, argues that Wilde tried to see Salome from a woman's point of view (30). Indeed, Wilde's biographer Richard Ellmann also believes that Salome's "appetite for strange experiences" relates to the way in which John the Baptist's beauty is more eloquently and extensively described, which is "reminiscent of … Wilde's predisposition" (34). Similarly, Gail Finney believes that "Wilde seems to be less condemning a particular femme fatale than commenting on the decadence of a whole society – perhaps a mask for his own" (184). Since the patriarchal society of the *fin the siècle* was as hard on women as on male homosexuals; and that Wilde was believed to cherish feminist ideals (186), Wilde's Salome could indeed be read "less as a misogynistic denunciation of the *femme fatale* than as a masked depiction of one man's prohibited longing for another" (185). In any case, by attending to Salome's emotive responses to her gaze upon Iokanaan and her psychological motivations for her actions, he has endowed Salome with agency and personality, which she lacked in her misogynistic representation of nineteenth-century male fantasies.

5.3.3 "Salome dances the 'Dance of the Seven Veils'"

Wilde's third essential dissimilarity with the fin-the-siècle authors is concerned with Salome's dance. After all, Wilde is the one who introduced the 'Dance of the Seven Veils' as name for the dance

Salome had been performing so self-evidently. Whereas Wilde gives an extensive account of Salome's personal desires, he is extremely concise about the performative act that is so central to the play and has been verbally imagined in the literary and pictorial works of Wilde's forerunners. More specifically, only one line, namely a stage direction, refers to it: "*Salome dances the dance of the seven veils*" (Wilde 79). In March 1893, Wilde provided another rather vague description of the dance in a signed copy of the original French version of his play, which he offered to the illustrator Aubrey Beardsley. In the inscription, Wilde writes: "For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance" (Wilde in Bentley 31). Tellingly, what Beardsley understood to be the essence of the dance, was an Oriental atmosphere. After all, in the illustrations for the English translation of the play in 1894, which Beardsley created, Salome's dance is depicted and designated as 'The Stomach Dance', showing Salome with a stripped-down upper body and what appears to be moving hips (31). If an Orientalized stomach dance is what Wilde really had envisioned for Salome's 'invisible dance' remains uncertain, but it is exactly his conciseness of the introduction of the 'Dance of the Seven Veils' that sparked the imagination of the subsequent cultural depictions of Salome.

Aubrey Beardsley, The Stomach Dance, 1894

Richard Strauss, for instance, took the liberty to fill in the blank Wilde had bequeathed. Using Wilde's dramatic text (translated in German and slightly abridged) as a libretto, Strauss naturally had

to compose solely instrumental music for the 'Dance of Seven Veils' in his opera adaptation of Wilde's play. As Linda and Michael Hutcheon note, Strauss' music evinces Orientalism just as much as Beardsley's drawings do:

> "Drawing on authentic Oriental music (as modified by European clichés about it)", Strauss composed music that consisted of "[f]amiliar waltz music … interwoven with Oriental(ist) sounds that, to a turn-of-the-century European audience at least, would have connoted sensuality – not to mention the luxury and cruelty associated with the Eastern 'other'" (104).

In addition to a composition, Strauss also devised a scenario for the dance in the 1920s, which he jotted down in an undefined document that was discovered (Puffet 165). At first, Strauss seems eager to stress that Salome's movements should be "gentle" and "graceful" (Strauss in Puffet 166). These designations also relate to his later statement that "Salome, being a chaste virgin and an oriental princess, must be played with the simplest and most restrained of gestures" (166-167), suggesting "that the dignity of the heroine, her regal aspect, was uppermost in his mind" (166). However, Strauss uses Moreau's paintings as a model for his choreography, as he writes the following: "Salome takes off the first veil and adopts the pose shown in Moreau's picture of Salome" (165). Moreover, he lists a few dances that might inspire certain poses, such as the dance of an "Egyptian woman (!!!??), … *Japanese Dancers*, … *Bayadères*" (166). Thus, Strauss' envisioning for Salome's dance is clearly influenced by the Oriental imagery created by Gustave Moreau, which is steeped into an inherent connection with the objectification of a sexualized, Orientalized other. Therefore, as Clair Rowden argues, neither a 'regal' and dignified or an "embodied, unrestrainable Salome" was in Strauss' mind, "as here he seems to want to reimpose the 'frame', and Salome as the object of the gaze" (10). Consequently, Strauss' reliance on Oriental models for his music – and, by extension, his choreography – generated a tradition in opera productions to stage an "Orientalized choreography" for Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils' (Hutcheon 105).

Although Strauss' inspiration for his composition and scenario thus might suggest an imposition of the male gaze in his score, the cultural afterlife of his (and, by extension, Wilde's) *Salome* demonstrates that many female performers seized the figure of Salome as an opportunity to liberate themselves from the oppressive, patriarchal society at the beginning of the twentieth century. That is, the premieres of Strauss' opera in different European cities as well as in The United States coincided with and fuelled a trend of solo performances based on Salome's dance. In 1907, for instance, the famous North American dancer Loïe Fuller presented *La Tragédie de Salome,* a solo dance performance with music by Florent Schmitt, who composed it "in the wake of hearing Strauss' opera" (Rowden 3-4). At that time, Canadian dancer Maud Allan had already triggered a shockwave through Europe with her dance pantomime *Vision of Salome*, which premiered in 1906 in Vienna. In this performance, Allan retold Wilde's play through her almost naked body and a vivid display of

Salome's necrophilic desires. Allan's bejewelled costume made her the "exemplary three-dimensional display of the Western idea of an Oriental belly dancer and one of the first such concoctions to reach the public's attention" (Bentley 62). Gradually, this attention moved to American popular culture, as vaudevillian dancer Gertrude Hoffmann studied Allan's performance in London and introduced it in New York (Malik 153). On Strauss' music for 'Dance of the Seven Veils', Hoffmann performed her take on Allan's dance in New York in 1908, after which she toured throughout the entire country (Bentley 39). Around the same time, namely from 1907 onwards, Salome's dance was also picked up by the Ziegfield Follies on Broadway, who from 1907 onwards invariably added a Salome dance to their repertoire. The act, performed by Mademoiselle Dazié and based on Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, was so popular that the latter founded a school in which women were taught seductive movements and undressing. Moreover, the "I don't care" girl Eva Tanguay added the 'Dance of the Sven Veils' to her repertoire, closing the performance by pouring a bottle of champagne on her body (Bentley 39). As Bentley describes, "by 1909 there was not a variety or vaudeville show in America that did not offer a Salome act as part of its entertainment", a trend in popular culture which is called "Salomania" (40).

According to Bentley, the popularity of these performances, both among the performers and the audience, can be explained from their liberating, even feminist power attached to them (33). Indeed, as historian Philipp Blom explains, the beginning of the twentieth century marked a time in which "by small increments, ideals and expectations about men and women lost their anchorage and were cast adrift" (398). For instance, inspired by the British suffragettes and feminist authors such as Emmeline Pankhurst and Rosa Mayreder, women's liberation from the European, patriarchal system became a public topic in Britain and beyond (398). Moreover, European women were having less children every year, which male commentators often perceived as the degeneration of men (398-399). Slowly, "women grew more assertive and appeared to be assuming new roles" (399), roles that men associated with their own gender only. As a dancer who performs independently on stage is one of those roles and the popular vaudeville performances thus, in this sense, continue this trend of lingering female independency, the actual efficacy of this artistic resistance should be nuanced. After all, these performances still bring to live the misogynistic male desires created during the fin the siècle. However, Bentley believes that "appearing to act in accordance with a misogynistic point of view" is a strategy to subvert it (34), thereby showing "revenge for their own social, physical, and sexual powerlessness" (33). According to Blom, these performative acts of revenge effected a wave of male anxiety, again. In addition to the previous point, men's only certainty, namely their physical power, proved to be useless in the industrialized society running on machines (399). As a result, men became insecure in such a way that they reacted exaggeratingly, "retreat[ing] into an assertion of exaggerated ideas of manliness" that constituted of war, ostensive show-offs of uniforms, the growth of remarkable moustaches etc. (399) – in short: performative acts of masculinity.

Whereas ascribing the strategy of subversion to the Salome-inspired stripteases *avant la lettre* might be a valid interpretation, I would like to suggest a conclusion that transcends the question whether Wilde's text, Strauss' music or the popular cultural performances of Salome's dance either continued or resisted the male gaze inherently cast on the figure of Salome. Most importantly, the reading of *Salome*'s literary forerunners and an incomplete historical overview of its cultural afterlife reveals the fact that it is Salome's performative nature that has urged male artists to capture her in words and images that evince their anxiety-driven desires. It was the performative act of Salome's dance, described only very concisely in the Bible, that lit male masochistic desire from the fourth century up until the fin the siècle and beyond. Similarly, it was her performative act of dancing, whether embodied in Wilde's play, Strauss' opera and classical and popular performances inspired on the latter that made men resort to exaggerated self-expression of manliness. It thus seems that performative acts, whether it be performing the role of Salome in a play, opera or as a dancer, provide a prolific realm of artistic resistance to male dominant, oppressive representations. This insight supports the methodology of this thesis, namely to analyse the performative elements of contemporary operatic performances of Strauss' *Salome.* In the following chapters, three specific operatic performances of Strauss' *Salome* will reveal how the power of the performative works on the operatic stage.

6

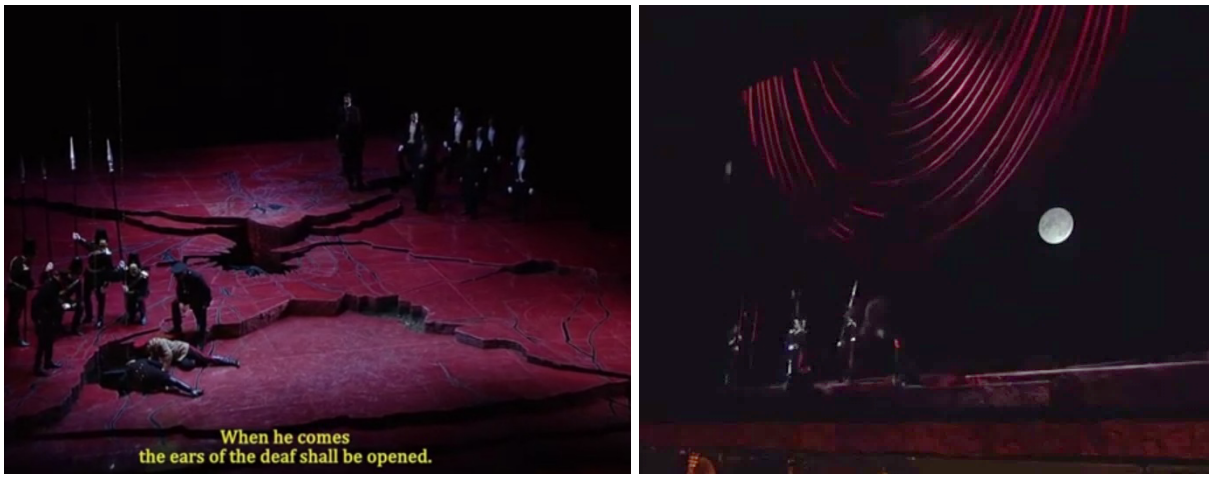
Salome through the magnifying glass

A comparison of Ivo van Hove's production for Dutch National Opera and Gabriele Lavia's production for Teatro Comunale di Bologna

As already stated in the introduction and the previous chapter, Levin's production-oriented framework emerges out of the idea that "the new opera studies have had a noticeable effect on the new mise-en-scène", as contemporary opera productions "have freely incorporated recent academic work in their production protocols" (5). Put differently, following Levi's argument, the dramaturgical reading of Salome's literary histories, revealing the mechanisms underpinning the inherent male gaze of Strauss' opera texts, can generate new mise-en-scènes that 'unsettle' it. At the same time, Risi's performance-oriented framework emerges out of the notion that unplanned, performative elements of a specific performance can conjure up meanings that, possibly, hold an unsettling effect as well. In this chapter, two examples of *Regietheater* – namely Ivo van Hove's direction for Dutch National Opera and Gabriele Lavia's for Teatro Comunale di Bologna – will be read in comparison, highlighting the way in which both the production-oriented framework by Levin and the performance-oriented framework by Risi can reveal strategies of artistic resistance to the male gaze in Strauss' *Salome.*

6.1 Unsettling mise-en-scènes

In order two reveal the production-oriented strategies of both Van Hove's and Lavia's mise-en-scènes, the stage setting and costume design are particularly noteworthy. Fundamentally, their take on their respective stage settings could not be more different. In Lavia's mise-en-scène, for instance, elements of magical realism prevail. For example, the most remarkable element of the stage setting constitutes the floor, which is red and teared up by many cracks and larger gaps, suggesting an image of barren ground. In one of these gaps, a long chain connects the ceiling with an invisible space beneath the floor, which represents Jochanaan's cistern. On the wall in the back of the stage, a large, radiant moon is projected. Although the stage setting does not undergo far-reaching changes, a few larger set pieces emerge and disappear on stage automatically: either from upstairs through cables (such as Herod's couch and a large magnifying glass) or emerging from beneath the floor (such as a large, marble head at the end of the performance).



Teatro Comunale di Bologna, 2010

In contrast to Lavia's magical realist and rather timeless take on the setting, Van Hove draws the age-old opera texts into the twentieth and twenty-first century. The stage is wide and circular, enabling a wide view for the audience, and contains a large hole in the middle of the floor, representing Jochanaan's cistern. The circular floor is surrounded by a large, black wall, which constitutes a large, modern palace building. As the decoration with palm trees suggests, this palace is set in an Eastern scenery. These palm trees are to be seen through a small recess in the black wall at the back of the stage, which provides a limited view on a grand, fancy lounge terrace. In line with Lavia's stage setting, the moon is projected on the top of that black wall, which moves slowly from left to right throughout the performance. Moreover, its movement coincides with a gradual shrinkage of the cutout in the black wall, so that our gaze upon the inside of the palace becomes increasingly limited. Throughout the entire performance, the moon magnifies constantly, until it encompasses the entire wall. At the end of the performance, when Salome has kissed John, the wall reopens rapidly to show what has taken place behind: a complete ruining of the palace, with only ruins of pillars and walls remaining.

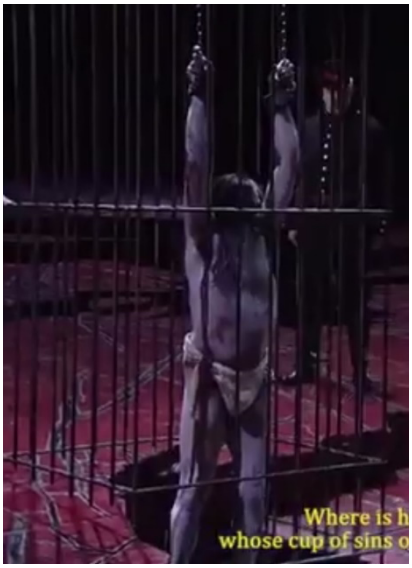
Dutch National Opera, 2017.

6.1.1 Costume design: military uniforms

The costume design in Lavia's production is emphatically fairylike: while Salome wears fancy princess gowns, embellished with (fake) diamonds and pearls, Herodias is dressed in a blatant gown and heavy jewelry. Whereas these female characters' costumes in Lavia's production create a magical realist scenery that appears timeless, Van Hove's production suggests a rather contemporary time frame. This is also hinted at by Herodias' and Salome's gowns: although Herodias is still dressed in a sparkly dress that contrasts Salome's modest, gray dress, both dresses appear modern. Interestingly, Lavia's and Van Hove's mise-en-scène find common ground in the costume design for the male characters. In Lavia's production, Herod wears a formal, military costume and a large, golden crown. Except for Jochanaan, the other male characters wear the same military, buttoned vests. Similarly, in Van Hove's production, the male singers and extras on stage wear costumes resembling twenty-first-century military uniforms of middle eastern regimes "such as Sadam Hoessein's" (Vandenhouwe). Herod, then, stands out with his navy blue, satin suit, which does not even resemble a military costume, but rather suggests a managing function that puts him in control of the military men.

Teatro Comunale di Bologna.
Salome.

Teatro Comunale di Bologna.
Male characters in military costumes.



Teatro Comunale di Bologna.
Jochanaan.

Teatro Comunale di Bologna.
King Herod and Herodias.

Dutch National Opera, 2017. Salome.

Dutch National Opera, 2017. Male characters in military costumes.

Dutch National Opera, 2017. King Herod and Herodias.

Dutch National Opera, 2017. Jochanaan.

Although the idea of dressing the male characters in military costumes is similar in both productions, the costume design in Dutch National Opera's production suggests an explicit modern time setting that contrasts with the magical realist, rather timeless costumes in the one for Teatro Comunale di Bologna. In both cases, however, the uniform, its military aspect and the fact that several male characters wear it suggest that these productions of *Salome* are set in a powerful, political institution – whether it be imaginary or referential. In Van Hove's production, this meaning produced by the mise-en-scène is even enhanced by the bodily gestures of the male extras. For instance, a particular extra who constantly remains in the back on the terrace is relentlessly fidgeting with his collar and buttoning up his vest, creating a self-image of someone who deeply cares about how he is perceived.

These costume designs might not seem remarkable at first sight, as Van Hove's rather realist approach to this particular setting sets the expectation to dress male participants of a leading institution

in formal clothes. However, the male costumes in both productions reveal two important aspects of the male gaze in *Salome*'s opera texts and their literary history. First, the costumes demonstrate the early twentieth-century 'exaggerating', performative reaction to increasing female independence which Blom historically observed in this period. The military nature of the uniform suggests a connotation with warfare and a display of power, two performative exponents of the male anxiety as a result of the instability of their once so fixed domination over women (Blom 399). As male characters are on display in a costume that evinces an exaggerated performance of masculinity, they are visually endowed with the male anxiety underpinning the male gaze as a mechanism. Secondly, it is the explicit, visual difference with Jochanaan's clothes that enhances the association with forced, performative male dominance of the costumes. Wearing a dirty, revealing tank top and showing off an upper body full of tattoos in Dutch National Opera's production, and wearing nothing else than underpants Teatro Comunale di Bologna's, both productions' Jochanaan clearly opposes the male, formally dressed party that dominates him in the first place. The contrasting designs of Jochanaan's costume and that of the rest of the male characters reveal his exclusion from the male dominated, patriarchal micro-society performed on stage.

The latter insight is particularly relevant for the interaction between visual and auditory elements in both productions. More specifically, both productions show a different perspective on following the actions inscribed in the libretto – performative verbs on stage that are to be heard through singing them and to be seen by actually acting them out. For instance, during the scene where Jochanaan ascends from the cistern and meets Salome, Salome numerously asks him to let her kiss him. After many verbal rejections and warnings that Salome is "accursed", Jochanaan states clearly: "I do not want to look at you" (Strauss 20). As the reading of Salome's literary history up until Wilde's play has demonstrated, the fact that a man does not want to cast his male gaze on her is not only out of (the patriarchal) order, but it also generates the rather hopeful idea that a man can 'break down' this oppressive mechanism himself. In Lavia's staging, Jochanaan does in fact not even attempt to look at her, constantly looking away and forcing himself not to cross eyes with the woman who is singing to him. By displaying Jochanaan as a visual outsider of the patriarchal society that is responsible for the male gaze, one might read the hopeful message that a world outside of patriarchy exists.

Teatro Comunale di Bologna, 2010

In Van Hove's staging, however, Jochanaan visually does the opposite of what he is proclaiming not to want: Clearly and decidedly looking upon Salome, Jochanaan visually generates a "friction or even … a contradiction with the materials" that are auditorily perceptible on stage (Risi 87).[9] However, Van Hove's Jochanaan is still represented as someone who is not part of the patriarchal society that has captured him too, which makes a reading that Jochanaan has succumbed to it untenable. Therefore, Jochanaan's explicit choice to look at her while saying that he does not want to, can also be read as "another level to the layering of text and music, a level that enriches and complicates the network of relations". In other words, Jochanaan's looking away "adds something to the templates" (87), namely that Jochanaan is able to see through Salome's imposed characterizations as the dangerous *femme fatale*, believing that her words might indeed be out of love rather than out of lustful desires.

Dutch National Opera, 2017

6.1.2 Setting design: the palace and the moon

Moreover, in Dutch National Opera's production, the setting design evokes a questioning of the tenability of that controlling patriarchal system populated by the military men described previously. The visualization of the moon and the palace on stage are particularly significant in this sense. In the libretto, Jochanaan condemns Salome ("daughter of Solomon! Daughter of Babylon"), her "incestuous mother" and Herod for the latter two's unlawful marriage. Moreover, Jochanaan believes that the family will be punished for this sinful situation soon, as he "can hear "the beating of the wings of the angel of death in the palace" (Strauss 18). Jochanaan's prophecy includes his death and that of Salome, something Herod is stressed out from his entering on stage onwards. After all, he is constantly paranoid about something bad to happen: he thinks he thinks Narraboth's suicide is "a bad omen" (31) and hears" in the air … something like the beating of huge wings" (32).

Interestingly, Wilde's text and Strauss' libretto let Herod's stream of paranoid comments commence with a projection on the moon, which he thinks "looks strange", like a "mad" and "drunken" woman, "looking everywhere for lovers" (21). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Herod's projection of his fear on the moon is not coincidental, as it in fact evinces his patriarchal male

[9] The purely auditory nature of Jochanaan's proclamation should be nuanced, as the majority of the audience members will perceive this line through reading the surtitles. However, this example still shows how many visual and auditory impressions work at the same time to generate meaning.

gaze. Thus, in Van Hove's setting, both the movement and the augmentation of the moon illustrate a growing male fear that remarkably, coincides with an increasing desire to look at Salome dancing. In this way, the visual element of the moving, growing moon corresponds with the auditory element of the libretto, in which the increasing male desire to look at Salome is verbally manifested. For instance, in the beginning, this ambivalent mixture of fear and desire is mostly an experience of Narraboth and Herodias' page, who start the opera with a comparison of the "beautiful Princess Salome" and the "strange … moon" (Strauss 5). Here, the moon is almost invisibly small, positioned in the left corner of the stage. Interestingly, when Narraboth has killed himself and Herod makes his first, physical entry, the moon is sized up and projected onto the center of the stage. Given that Herod's first line involves the question "Where is Salome?" (21), the centrality and large size of the moon illustrate that Herod's gaze is what might cause the "terrible" things the page had warned about (6). Further on, the moon keeps on moving to the right, until Salome says: "I am ready, Tetrarch" (33): the moon has now reached the other side of the stage and slowly disappears.

Dutch National Opera, 2017

After Salome's dance, however, the moon reappears as a dark circle, showing a radiating circle around it. This image resembles a solar eclipse, a natural phenomenon in which a celestial body – mostly the moon – positions itself in front of the sun, its light provider. Thus, visually, the moon becomes independent from the sun, resisting the light which the former is determined to reflect. Extending this image to Salome's relationship with the other male characters, the visual element of the solar eclipse enhances the idea that Salome resists the male gazes cast on her, by making her deadly request. Such a reading only grows stronger through the new expansion of the moon, which grows so intensely that it covers the entire stage in darkness. In other words, it seems as if the sun is deprived of her power, and so is Herod for an instant.

Dutch National Opera, 2017

Herod's waning power is also visually demonstrated by the contrasting image of the growing moon on the one hand and the shrinking recess on the other, which keeps on limiting the view on the

literal manifestation of the patriarchal, male society: the palace. Most interesting, however, is the final vision of that palace. When Salome has kissed Jochanaan, the once completely closed recess reopens again, showing the damage Salome's kiss has caused to the patriarchal society. That is, the palace has completely collapsed and only exists as ruins. When Herod, then, demands his soldiers to "put out the torches" and to "hide the moon [and] the stars!" (Strauss 43), it is clear that he does not make this request to cover Salome's necrophilic desires: he simply cannot face the way in which his own male gaze has destroyed the patriarchal society he had been so comfortably part of.

Dutch National Opera, 2017


Dutch National Opera, 2017

6.2 Gazing at a screen, looking through a magnifying glass

Apart from the light projection of the moon on a black screen, another innovation in terms of media is prominent in Van Hove's production. That is, the projection of video is one of the most remarkable additions to the scenography. According to Risi, the display of a video during an opera performance has the potential to create the perception of tension because of the experience of different time dimensions. As a video can show narrative elements happening in a different time frame (for instance as a flash-forward, a flashback, narrative elements displayed in a higher or lower tempo), the combination with these specific "media contexts and expectations" and those of opera can create an enhanced "awareness of the perception of time" with the audience (Risi 136-137). In the case of Van Hove's production, I want to argue that the video does not produce tension arising from a different dimension of time, but from a different locus of desire. After all, the video of Van Hove's production is on display during the scene in which desire prevails: Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils'.

Salome starts her dance fulfilling Herod's desire mostly, as she dances right in front of him while looking into his eyes. After a while however, Salome considers her dance as the manifestation of her own desire, which is not to dance for Herod, but before Jochanaan. This reading is evinced by the video on display, on which the audience members watch a dance duet between Jochanaan and Salome. The video shows a Jochanaan who is physically rejecting Salome at first, by planting his hand palm on her face, pushing her away strongly two times. However, just as in his verbal rejections, Salome keeps showing her desire for him. Whereas she was not able to have Jochanaan respond to her words of love before, she achieves her goal in the video after all: Jochanaan touches her and embraces her,

Dutch National Opera, 2017

performing an intimate duet containing close swirls, holding hands and other bodily forms of intimacy. Although the duet is still an ambivalent performance of attraction and repulsion on behalf of Jochanaan, the video is clearly a visual manifestation of her imagination during her dance, and thus shows Salome's real desires. Interestingly, the video also shows Salome undressing before Jochanaan while dancing naked in circles around him, whereas she keeps her dress on during the entire dance on stage. The tension between these two visual elements demonstrate that the dance is not simply an underhand method of a fatal woman merely trying to get what she wants, but rather a performative act of female agency to choose for whom to undress out of love, and for whom not to.

Moreover, the display of this video during Salome's dance has two important effects. First, it visually complements Wilde's aim to show Salome's sensitive interior, thereby verbally attending to her deepest desires. In fact, the video of Salome's imagination during her dance even goes beyond Wilde's verbal efforts in his play script, as the latter only refers to her dance with a concise inscription that restrains from any further details about it. As stated in the previous chapter, the conciseness of this inscription has paved the way for a freely conceptualized performance of the dance that is able to demonstrate resistance to the male gaze, and it is exactly this freedom on which this video embarks. That the video is in fact the visualization of Salome's mind at that point is reinforced by Salome's

performance on stage, in which she copies her movements on display at the same time. Thus, by creating an extra visual dimension to Salome's dance, Van Hove can show that which had been missing in the obsessive fin-the-siècle male creations of that dance, and that which had challenged the efficacy of female performers' power in Wilde's play: the female agency to have a personal imagination and emotions of desire.

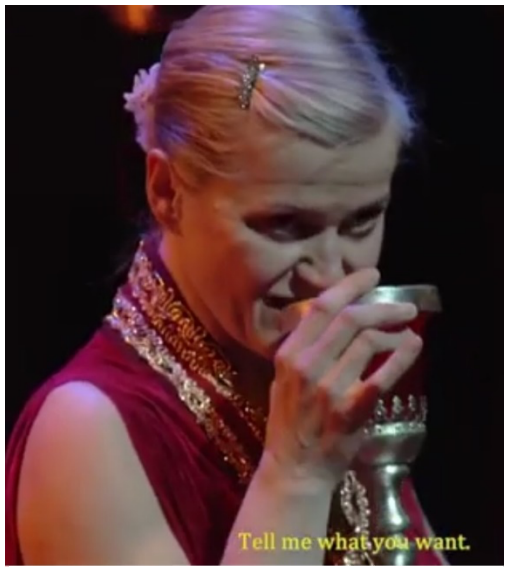
Secondly, this visual female agency might also stem from the emphatically visual nature of Salome's imaginary meta-narrative, which holds the power to "break" the operatic "code" of watching – to put it in Mulvey's terms (Mulvey 352). As highlighted in chapter two, Mulvey contends that the only way to defy the male gaze that is locked in the three looks of mainstream cinema (the camera, the audience and the characters), is to disillusion the audience by disrupting the verisimilitude of cinematic representation, thus by showing the material recording process and visually expose the audience. Traditionally, an opera performance relies on the final two looks only: the audience watching and the operatic characters gazing upon each other, whereas the look of the camera can be associated with the gaze of the authorial figures in the opera's creation, namely the composer, librettist and director. But in Van Hove's production, the use of a video that represents a female mind adds the look of a recording camera to these operatic codes. This addition might 'unsettle' or 'break down' the two other codes that perpetuate the male gaze once locked into the opera texts of *Salome*. For instance, the new medium of the video added to the already highly intermedial art form of opera does not only make the audience aware of the new dimension it brings forward, but also of their own status as gazers. As modern-day audience members are probably more familiar with a screen as a visual entity than the theatre, such a video exposes the audience itself as an entity that finds pleasure in watching what happens on the video *and* on stage. In this way, the male gaze, once so 'seamlessly' encoded in the canonical opera texts of Strauss' *Salome* through its gazing characters and audience, is broken down by a cinematic medium: not only by visually showing a female's mind and her desires, but also by exposing an operatic performance as reliant on visual pleasures.

In Lavia's production, the latter effect is similarly achieved through the sudden emergence of a giant magnifying glass. When Salome sings: "I am ready, Tetrarch" (Strauss 33), the magnifier glass is lowered from above, granting a short, magnified look on the moon. Next, during Salome's choreography, Salome starts to dance behind the glass. As Lavia's Salome holds small veils in her hand – in contrast to Van Hove's, who has none – she starts to play with them behind the glass. Having discarded all the veils on stage, Salome then returns to the glass and starts a random pantomimic act with emphatically performative gestures: making gestures that express the act of looking through a small window, she then mimics a scream by putting her open hands next to her mouth. Afterwards, Salome performs dramatic gestures, holding her hands in the air and looking with desperate eyes. Then, in a frenzy, she turns around and keeps spinning while holding the upper side of her dress. As a close to her pantomimic act, Salome let's her dress fall onto the ground, leaving her naked behind the magnifying glass.

Teatro Comunale di Bologna, 2010

Although a magnifying glass is not a medium in a strict sense, it certainly performs as one. Just as the video in Van Hove's production provided an extra dimension by showing Salome's interior, the magnifying glass adds an extra layer to Salome's opera texts. By literally magnifying Salome's naked body, the glass performs as a medium that independently decides on which parts its gazer is allowed to watch. In this case, the explicit focus is on Salome's naked breasts, which visualizes the 'misogynistic subtext' underlying *Salome'*s opera texts. At the same time, just like Van Hove's video, the magnifying glass holds the power to expose the audience gazing at it. The overly emphatic gestures performed behind the glass, which resemble the dramatic, exaggerated gestures typically associated with operatic singing, can be read as a self-referential strategy to reveal an important implication: that Herod's visual pleasure while looking at Salome is not that different from the audience's. Again, a visual medium has broken down the operatic code of a gazing audience, which is a valuable strategy of artistic resistance to the male gaze inscribed in *Salome'*s opera texts.

6.3 The Dance of the Seven Veils



Teatro Comunale di Bologna 2010.

Although Salome's nakedness is probably the most remarkable moment of the 'Dance of the Seven Veils' in Lavia's production, her costume change is as important for her portrayal. Before and during her dance, Salome wears a white dress that is little revealing and does not exactly accentuate her body. This rather innocent look visually corresponds with the way in which she behaves at this point: hopping around and constantly holding her eyes wide open, Salome shows the physical behavior of a young, childish girl. However, after her dance – ending nakedly – Salome chooses a red dress to wear. Suddenly, her behavior changes too, as she drinks wine from a cup in a seductive manner. Seemingly, the dance has visually turned Salome into a woman that can be divided in the two female archetypes with which

the fin-the-siècle artists where so obsessed: the virginal girl and the *femme fatale.* However, the actual, present body on stage generates an image that complicates this simplified ambivalence. For instance, the female upper body of Erika Sunnegardh (Salome's impersonator), which is rather small and immobile, is in stark contrast with Salome's "quiver[ing]" breasts once so vividly described by Flaubert (273). Moreover, even in Salome's *femme fatale* phase, her gestures give away her insecure, childish character. For instance, when she sings to Jochanaan's head, she continues fiddling with her hands, which challenges the *femme fatale* persona she has turned into. Finally, Salome's portrayal as a virginal child is also visually questioned by Sunnegardh's obvious older age and mature physique. The contrast between Salome's childish gestures and movements on the one hand and the mature look of her impersonator on the other creates an almost laughable image, which brings together different female stereotypes that physically do not belong together. In this way, the actual body of Salome's performer has conjured up a meaningful conclusion: that Salome is unable to grasp in a dualism of two archetypes, and that she is more than what male, obsessive minds have turned her into.

As mentioned above, Van Hove's staging continues such a reading by showing a video that displays Salome's inner desires. Moreover, the reading that Salome's imagination is visualized, and the fact that this imagination holds the power to resist the male gaze(s) cast on her, is also supported during the rest of her dance. For instance, the choreography of the dance, created by Flemish choreographer Wim Vandekeybus, does not exactly take a stance in any relationships of power in which Salome is either a powerless object of a male gaze or an over-sexualized *femme fatale* who is set to destruct. More specifically, Salome's bodily movements could not resemble oriental movements any less than her sober, neutral dress does. Showing rugged, fast movements rather than slow and enticing ones, Vandekeybus' choreography purposely steps away from any connotation with Beardsley's belly dance or Allan's striptease *avant-la-lettre.* Put more strongly, Salome's initial dances moves, still deliberately performed before Herod, give the impression that she does not really know what she is doing, an impression which releases her from her fin-the-siècle images of the underhand *femme fatale*.

However, Salome's dance movements do not render her as a powerless, innocent pubescent girl either. After all, the subsequent choreography of the dance demonstrates that her goal reaches beyond her love interest, and that she also cherishes the desire to fight the patriarchal society she is part of. That is, in Van Hove's production, Salome's dance on stage moves from an individual performance to a collective one. A few moments before the walls have completely closed, the entire ensemble (of which the Jews, … and Herodias are part) joins the dance. Swiftly, all the people on stage – except for Salome and Herod – take positions scattered out on stage. Each person faces a different side of the stage and subtly takes out a handkerchief, or, a small veil, out of their pockets. In what follows, the ensemble performs a dance that consists of identical, symmetrical movements that on the one hand resemble epileptic gestures because of their abruptness, but on the other hand make the veils move in a visually eccentric way. All the while, the video projected on the screen in the back shows a close-up of

Salome, whose intriguing, staring eyes suggest an act of supervision. This cinematographic gaze is mimicked on stage, as Salome's stage equivalent is walking around gazing at each person belonging to the ensemble more closely. Herod, who is clearly uncomfortable with this evolution, resides at the back of the stage where he keeps pacing impatiently. After having tried to take away some of the veils, Salome kneels for the group, who gather around her like a hurdle and invisibly 'veil' her with a black, transparent balaclava. For a moment, the group leaves her while waving the handkerchiefs, making weird, abrupt movements while moving in circles. After Salome's naked appearance on screen, the society slowly returns while the video shows close-ups from some ensemble members, shot with a camera that moves in a quick, circular motion.

Dutch National Opera, 2017

At first glance, the previous observations might imply a reading against Salome's agency: it seems as if the patriarchal society to which Salome is subjected is collectively ganging up on her during her individual moment of potential agency, thereby trying to take that away from her. At the same time, though, the changing setting of this scene supports a reading in which this collective dance is yet another desire manifesting in Salome's mind. As stated above, Salome starts her dance when the moon disappeared and the wall is almost completely closed – only a glimpse from the realistic setting of the terrace is still visible at this point. During the beginning of the group dance, however, the walls close up entirely, a movement in the setting that is followed by an increasing amount of smoke filling up the stage floor. Both the closing of the wall and the increasing amount of smoke suggest an evolution from an exterior space to an interior space, and, by extension, from a realistic space to a dreamlike space. Such an evolution in the setting design has an important consequence for the visualization of Salome's mind: not only the duet with Iokanaan in the video, but also the group dance is part of Salome's psyche during the 'Dance of the Seven Veils'. Thus, part of Salome's thoughts and

desires are the elite guests of her stepfather's party who join her in her performative act of agency; which generates a reading of the group dance as a joint fight against the patriarchal society embodied by Herod. In other words, the addition of a collective choreography to an individual one split up in two different media has the following important consequence for Salome's characterization: that she is neither the *femme fatale* who simply wishes to destroy her object of desire, nor the stubborn adolescent who has a childish desire to be kissed by a man. Rather, her psychological spaces – albeit embodied by the stage setting or the video – endow her with the intellectual capacity to be tired of her subjection to a patriarchal society and to dream of a joint effort to free her from it.

The comparison of Lavia's and Van Hove's productions of *Salome* have demonstrated how the combination of planned staging and unplanned events, gestures and movements during a performance can work together to show artistic resistance to the male gaze. In the next section, the relationship between planned meanings and eventful moments, or between representation and presence, will be furtherly inquired against the background of Aïda Gabriëls' *Dance of the Seven Veils.*

7

Salome and the gaze beyond gender

Aïda Gabriël's *Dance of the Seven Veils* for Toneelhuis Antwerp

If Van Hove's production of *Salome* set out to humanize Salome, Aïda Gabriëls' production does so even more. Gabriëls is artistic director of the theatre company OESTER*,* which sets out to create experimental opera productions that "ask recurring questions about cultivated structures like gender, power and the relationship with the Self and the other" ("we are"). Moreover, the company explores opera's societal position in these questions, thereby "explor[ing] and dismantl[ing] the heritage of performative arts (with a focal point on opera) and its relevance to exist in the now" ("we are"). This artistic goal also prevails in the company's most recent production, *Dance of the Seven Veils*.

In an interview conducted for the purpose of this study, Gabriëls explained that the latter production is built on the recognition that the male gaze is a systemic epitome of patriarchy. Considering Strauss' *Salome*, and her 'Dance of the Seven Veils' in particular, as an exemplary opera perpetuating the power politics of the male gaze, Gabriëls created an investigatory performance that is twofold. On the one hand, the performance seeks to free the figure of Salome from the misogynistic stereotypes with which she has been created and to inquire the human behind her gazed upon image of the *femme fatale*. The focus is therefore not on the female-male dichotomy and punishing males by portraying a revengeful Salome, but rather on the more general aim to understand how humans can live together in a society that is conditioned by patriarchy and the male gaze. Interestingly, as a theatre company that belongs to the conceptual, experimental opera branch, Gabriëls and dramaturges Ylona Supèr and Tessa Vannieuwenhuyze have in fact rewritten Salome's opera texts. More specifically, in creating a new libretto, they developed a dramaturgy in which Salome's seven veils are attached to five female stereotypes and two theoretical premises belonging to Jungian theory of the archetype. Each veil corresponds with a scene, which generates the idea that the performance slowly peels off the seven stereotypical veils hanging around Salome, namely to find her human core.[10]

On the other hand, such a performative research project corresponds with OESTER's general artistic aim to seek opera's position in an inquiry into human relationships. This second component is achieved through researching and challenging "the stage as an interdisciplinary playground" ("we are"). This is also the case for *Dance of the Seven Veils:* the performance consists of a classical singer,

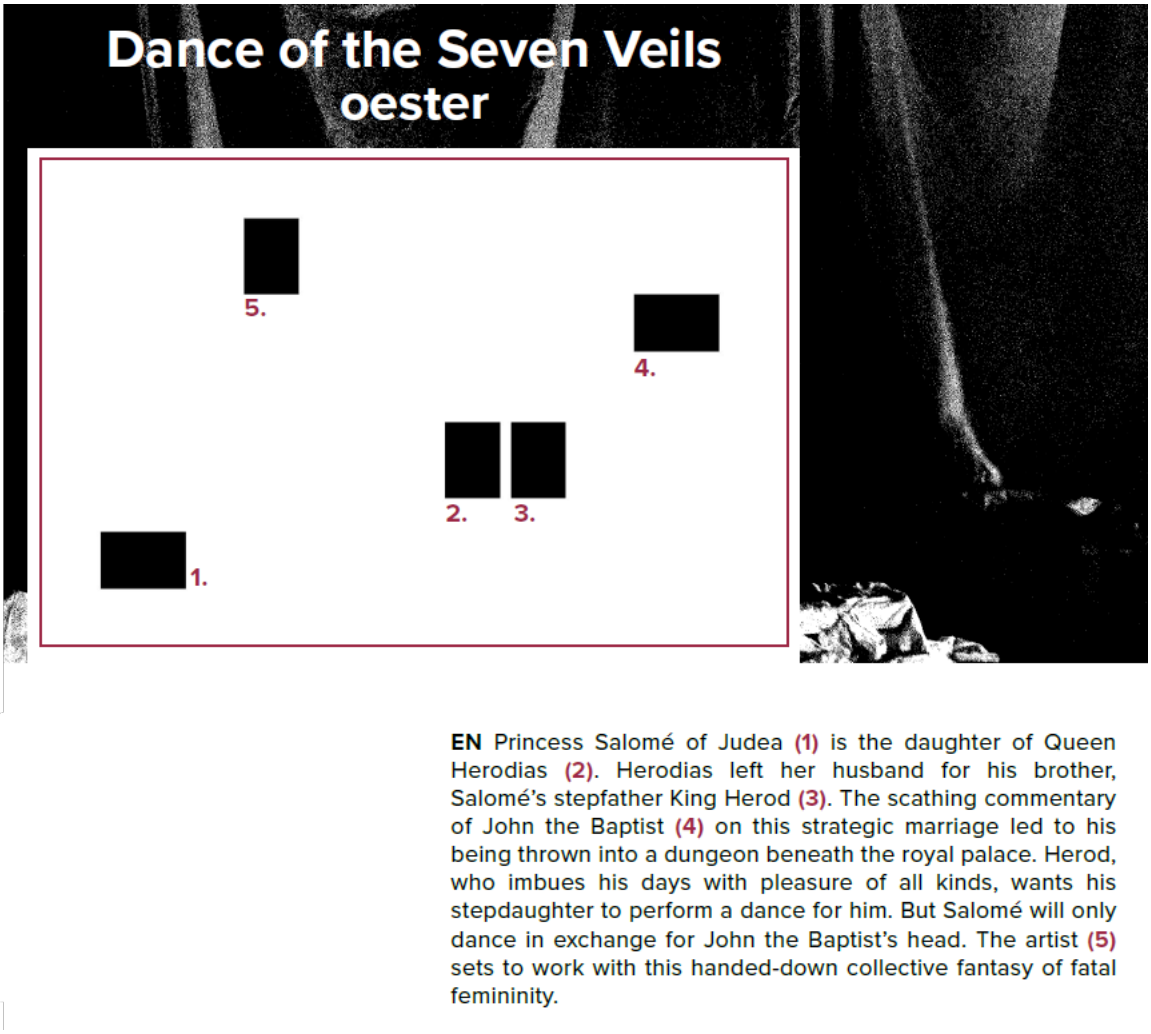
[10] In Appendix A, the libretto and a scheme that gives an overview of the course of the performance, is provided.

musicians, a dancer, a sculptor, and a sound and lighting designer. As a close comparison of OESTER's textual rewritings of Strauss' score and libretto is beyond the scope of this thesis, the current section will rather pay attention to the way in which the performative elements of *Dance of the Seven Veils* relate to its opera texts, albeit the ones of OESTER's hands or those of Strauss. More specifically, this chapter will look at the interplay of representation and presence, a performative element that most clearly emerges out of the renewed dramatis personae of the production.

7.1 Dramatis personae

According to Risi, the interplay of representation and presence is "one of the most central features and appealing aspects of opera in performance", as it can "challenge the audience's perception" (90). In Risi's theory, the presence of a certain body or movement representing a certain character can alter, generate or challenge the meaning attached to both the present body and the represented material, as it is perceived by the audience. Risi continues that "the details of [this interplay] … can vary greatly" (90), but eventually focuses on three effects. First, he explains that the sudden advancing of bodily presence can "strengthen the representational function" and generate meaning of the represented opera texts (90). Second, such a focus can also "interrupt, alienate and thwart" a particular meaning of the material that was conferred a priori. Thirdly, the tension and or correspondence of representation and presence in an opera performance can illuminate other dimensions of that performance, such as an "ideologically loaded performance history" (90). As the material Strauss' *Salome* consists of an 'ideologically loaded' genesis and performance history (as demonstrated in chapter 5), it is interesting to see how the interplay of representation and presence of *Dance of the Seven Veils* might illuminate or challenge these a priori meanings regarding the male gaze, or how it can produce new ones that hold the power to resist it. In order to analyse this relationship, I will investigate the dramatis personae of Gabriëls' production.

The outline of the dramatis personae of *Dance of the Seven Veils* is visualized in the following dramaturgical scheme provided by Tessa Vannieuwenhuyze:



As the outline demonstrates, the scope of the dramatis personae is limited to the main characters of the Salome myth. Herodias is represented by Flemish, popular classical soprano Astrid Stockman, and the two male characters are impersonated by two musicians: all-round electronic musician Colin H. van Eeckhout and double bass player Pieter-Jan Van Assche, who play John and Herod respectively. The two most significant casting choices in terms of the male gaze, however, are the impersonator of Salome on the one hand, and the addition of the artist, the live scenographer Rui Barros to the dramatis personae on the other.

7.2 The interplay of representation and presence

7.2.1 Live scenography

The sculptor Rui Barros functions as a "live scenographer" according to the credits (Supèr), whereas he is also called 'the artist' in the dramaturgical scheme above. These two designations turn him into a figure that creates and adjusts: in the beginning of the performance, Barros walks around inspecting the veils hanging up and adjusting their position now and then. Barros' presence on stage affects the audience in such a way that spectators ascribe an unfinished state to the performance: his presence

OESTER, 2021.

exposes the performance as a work in progress, which is also evinced by the improvised, ethereal music heard on stage.

The artist's creative power is palpable from the very beginning. Clearly, he attempts to control the way in which the performers will represent Salome's story. For instance, right before John's verse 'veil of the Believer', Barros lays down a book on the floor, which he opens on a specific page. It seems as if he wants Salome's story to be portrayed from a particular point onwards, thereby leaving the previous chapters out of the representational framework. His action of arranging a book might have been a reaction to Herodias' previous verse, the 'verse of the Persona', in which she has recounted her own life- and love story, consisting of her numerous marriages with Herodes Filippus and Herodes Antipas. Thus, Barros' action of placing a large book on the floor and opening it on a specific page might be read as an act of control, trying to limit the narrative scope of Salome's story so that only her representation comes to the fore. However, increasingly, the artist loses the creative power he so ostentatiously exerted in this scene. At the end of the 'veil of the Wife', in which Salome and Herodias use Herod as a toy by undressing him and spinning him around, both the visual and the auditory effects generated by technological lighting and sound design have gone in overdrive. At the end of this verse, lights flicker in such a rapid and flashy way that it is uncomfortable to look at. Moreover, Herodias is singing the word "whore" in a nagging voice and repeatedly, and Salome is spinning Herod around in such a rapid speed that he almost loses his balance. In the back, the artist walks on stage, clearly unsatisfied with the way in which Salome and Herodias have taken control over the performance's representational function. In order to regain control over his 'puppets', the artist unplugs the cord that supplies electricity for the sound- and lighting effects.

The presence of a creating artist on stage, whose actions and bodily gestures are as limited as placing props on stage; inspecting his constellation and putting a halt to technological features, has the power to elucidate the "ideologically loaded" (Risi 90) artistic history of Salome's representation. As demonstrated in chapter five, Salome is only a figure, sculpted by male minds who used her to verbalize and depict their masochistic desires. Put differently, Salome's history is one of male artists constantly trying to (re)gain control over her representation and identity. The presence of such an artist on stage has an important, meaningful consequence for Salome's representation in *Dance of the Seven Veils:* that the artist's scenographic interventions are, seemingly, not substantial enough to take away her mode of expression, namely dancing. More specifically, Salome's presence on stage is

characterized by relentless dance movements that intensify in terms of speed, rigidity and force. No scenographic intervention or form of verbal aggression uttered by the other characters stops her from continuing her dance. Her perseverance is also connected to another dimension of her presence during this performance, namely the gender of her impersonator German Jauregui. In the following section, this aspect will be looked at in greater detail.

7.2.2 Salome performed by a male

The decision to represent a female character as Salome by a cisgender, male dancer produces an interesting interplay of presence and representation. At the beginning of the performance, a low, male robotic voice introduces every character and their role in the narrative, explaining that "Salome, the princess of Judea, equally gazing at you from the left corner, is the daughter of Herodias". This sentence immediately negotiates an interplay of representation and presence: on the one hand, I am interested in Salome's narrative function in the story I am about to watch, thereby focusing on the representational function of the body I am gazing at. On the other hand, when the voice highlights that Salome can be found on "your left corner on stage", my perceptive focus immediately shifts from this dancer's representational function to his presence and position on stage. Moreover, the word "gazing" triggers a similar effect of a shifting focus. Whereas the verb 'to gaze' first makes me aware of Salome's "framework of representation" (Risi 94) throughout her literary history – because the dramaturgical research as a literary scholar has illuminated how the male gaze influenced this literary history in the first place – the specific, bodily act of gazing by the dancer on stage makes me reflect on the critical engagement with that male gaze on stage. What does it mean for me, an audience member and literary scholar interested in the critical engagement with the male gaze on stage, that Salome, represented by a male dancer, gazes back?

OESTER, 2021. Left: Salome. Right: John the Baptist.
Picture: Francis Van Hee

Moreover, one could raise some issues regarding the representation of Salome by a male dancer. For instance, the fact that Salome is represented by a male dancer instead of a singer – which one would expect in an operatic adaptation of her story – also implies that the character of Salome has no voice or any other form of verbal expression at her disposal. Just as in the fin de siècle, Salome's silence makes her potentially dependent on other (male and verbal) representations, possibly subjecting her to the dangerous implications of the male gaze again. Moreover, if one would read a strategy of subversion into the presence of a male body that represents an overly objectified female figure, one would have to conclude that such a strategy is not exactly effective: if a male body is what it takes to subvert or take control over the male gaze – to gaze back – such reasoning in fact reinstalls the idea that a female body as such does not have that kind of power. Nevertheless, the actual presence of German Jauregui's body tackles these challenges generated by that presence's frictional relationship with Salome's representational framework. That is, two examples of the interplay of representation and presence demonstrate critical engagement with the male gaze in *Salome* that lies beyond the gendered, verbalized nature of the power this gaze yields.

First, as this kind of interplay "can also define longer segments, entire scenes, acts, or even an entire performance" (Risi 99), it is important to note that Salome's 'presence' was to be felt during the entire performance. That is, in every scene, during every verse, Salome was present in some way or another: dancing, gazing, walking around, or touching the other characters on stage, for instance. Salome's constant presence had a powerful effect at times when the danger of verbal misrepresentations of her was heard on stage. In the second verse 'veil of the Believer', for example, John performs a song that contains scornful language to curse Salome. Right before John starts to sing this song in the middle of the stage, Salome runs up to him, clinging onto his lower body for a while. Describing her as "devils born" who is "tempt[ing]" his "faith … by her hell", John sings this verse while looking straight in front of him. After all, the focus of this song is John's belief that his belief system enables him to stand above Salome's expressions of desire; that it is impossible for him to be tempted by her: "in your eyes; I see a void / Nothing but emptiness / Nothingness" (Supèr). By not even looking at Salome while he sings these words, John perpetuates the representational framework of the inherent male gaze of Strauss' opera texts and their literary history: he clearly suffers from the typical male anxiety that a Salome is a *femme fatale* set out to destroy him. Forcefully, he tries to convey a steadiness in his musical language by singing the melodically repetitive lines in a monotonous way, not showing one flaw in terms of intonation and rhythm. However, Salome's presence and rough movements in particular alter this interpretation. When John sings "I will not be tempted by your hell' (Supèr), Salome jumps up to him again, which causes a crack in his voice, a deviation in his flawless intonation and an inconsistency in his volume. These auditory imperfections might not occur on a different performance than the one capitated on video, or they could be of a different kind. However, during this specific performance, they conjured up meaning, not only because corporeal acts can be meaningful, affective performative elements (Risi 45), but also because

of the interplay of the representational framework of the male gaze on the one hand and the presence of the performing bodies on stage on the other. Audibly, John is not that resistant to Salome's presence as he might want to believe, and as Salome is represented by a male dancer who performs acute, sturdy movements, this irresistibility does not stem from Salome's inherent female sensuality or evilness. Rather, it is generated by his own male predisposition that a female figure like Salome is dangerous to look at.

Secondly, at the beginning of the sixth verse 'veil of the Anima', both the presence of Salome's body and the representational function of her attributes play an important role in the production's critical engagement with the male gaze. During this scene, John's decapitation is taking place. This event is not only represented in a symbolic way, but it also informs the subsequent final dance of Salome, whose wordless verse 'veil of the Unveiled' coincides with 'veil of the Anima'. More specifically, neither the decapitation nor its literal consequence – namely John's beheaded head – is on display. Instead, Salome calmly resumes her position on stage – in the audience's left corner – and creates a similar posture: kneeling, while gazing at the audience. At the same time, Salome's position differs from her beginning posture because she is holding up a silver platter, as if she wants to show the audience the exact circumstances in which she would like her object of desire to be destroyed.

OESTER, 2021.

Indeed, the representational function of that silver platter, namely the symbol for John's decapitated head and the decadent setting in which this decapitation has taken place generates an anxious effect on the audience.

This uncomfortable feeling becomes even more intense when Salome uses the silver platter as a follow spot directed at the audience: by slowly showing around the silver platter, Salome purposely lets the light reflect onto the audience, which makes some audience members sit in a literal spotlight on the one hand, while turning the silver platter into a mirror on the other. The presence of the silver platter, functioning both as a spotlight and a mirror, has two important effects. First, just as the

projection of a video in Van Hove's direction of *Salome* and the magnifying glass in Lavia's did, the spotlight function of the silver platter exposes the audience as gazing subjects. The literal exposure coming from the light beam highlights the audience's conventions for watching the performance that had been invisible in the – conventionally – dark hall: the audience members' seated positions and their watching in silence, for instance. In this way, the operatic code of a gazing audience, in Mulvey's terms, is 'broken down' in order to raise awareness of the inherent male gaze in the operatic genre. Next, the mirroring function of the platter evinces the general, de-gendered artistic resistance that underpins the entire production in the first place: to situate the problem of the male gaze in human relationships, beyond gender. By letting the audience members watch themselves in the platter during the performance, they can be provoked and questioned on their own responsibility in the powerful system of the male gaze. In this way, the interplay of representation and presence, both in the case of German's gender and the symbolistic and functional role of the silver platter, has demonstrated that artistic resistance to the male gaze in opera might step away from its gendered nature, thereby highlighting its pervasiveness in all human relationships.

8
Conclusion

In conclusion, the three case studies discussed in this thesis have demonstrated that contemporary opera productions have many performative strategies to show artistic resistance to the male gaze on stage. In contrast to artistic resistance in the closely connected literary genre, where rewriting the template is the usual strategy, the three opera productions under scrutiny here testify to a complicated process of rereading the template and transforming it through performative considerations. Interestingly, the connection between the performative and reading as a method emerges not only through the rather obvious relationship of adaptation between the literary and the operatic genre, but also through the dramaturgical reading performed in this thesis. That is, as chapter five has demonstrated, attending to the most salient performative element of the Salome myth, namely her dance, enabled the reader to determine the important historical and artistic strategies of the male gaze cast on her. In other words, the reading of the performative in the literary history of Strauss' *Salome* has demonstrated that the male gaze cast on Salome is the product of the turn-of-the-century ambivalence of male anxiety and desire. As a consequence, this insight underpins many strategies of artistic resistance in this thesis' case studies. At the same time, an incomprehensive, historical overview of *Salome's* (popular) cultural afterlife shows that it is Salome's performative embodiment that grants her a chance of liberating herself from the 'misogynistic subtext' she has been subjected to, which in its turn makes an analysis of the performative elements of three *Salome* productions highly relevant.

Interestingly, all three case studies show how artistic resistance on stage relies on such dramaturgical rereadings and the critical academic work already done. More specifically, the implementation of a large magnifying glass in Gabriele Lavia's production; the use of video in Ivo van Hove's production and the clever use of a silver platter in Aïda Gabriëls' creation show critical engagement with the mechanisms of the male gaze as described by Laura Mulvey, who coined the male gaze as an artistic system in the first place. Also, the latter three setting elements have the potential to break down the operatic code of a watching audience, thereby illuminating the spectators' responsibility in perpetuating the male gaze in art and society. In this way, all three setting elements produce meaning that adds new layers to the 'settled' opera texts, while at the same time revealing their genesis as well. For instance, Van Hove's video embarks on Oscar Wilde's attempt to create a sensitive interior for Salome, thereby adding a subtext of mutual, respectful love between Jochanaan and Salome. By visually showing Salome's desires in a setting that represents her psychological space, Van Hove is not only able to resist Salome's imposed fin-the-siècle portrayals as a mere *femme fatale,* but also to reveal a small element of *Salome's* literary history.

On a similar note, a close reading of the three performances reveal how important performative and unplanned events on stage hold the potential to artistically resist the male gaze, either inscribed in the opera texts or visually suspected on stage. In both Van Hove's and Lavia's staging, for example, the interaction between Jochanaan's visual appearance, movements and gestures on the one hand and auditory, musical utterances on the other generates an extra meaningful layer to the opera texts, which can be read as resistance to the male gaze. Moreover, the living bodies on stage produce meanings that alter our visual perception of the representation as well. For instance, Salome's nakedness and red dress after her dance endow her with symbols of the *femme fatale*, whereas her bodily gestures as a singer do not correspond with this anxiety-driven, male projection. Also, Risi's concept of the interplay of representation and presence is a fruitful tool to discuss the performative elements of Gabriëls' *Dance of the Seven Veils*. The presence of a creating, controlling artist whose acts and movements are narratively limited generates a critical meta-comment on the role of the fin-the-siècle artist, who constantly attempts to get a hold of Salome by objectifying her. Moreover, the friction between the representation of Salome on the one hand and the presence of a male dancer on the other enables the audience to think of the male gaze as an issue beyond gender, extrapolating the issue to a patriarchal society that upholds its funds up until today. In this way, the reading of this performative element has added a societal layer to *Salome*'s opera texts, namely one that makes Salome's story one of human (power) relationships. These insights, collected through a reading from a production-oriented and performance-oriented theoretical perspective, demonstrate the following important conclusion: that a performance as such can constitute a meaningful element, existing in juxtaposition with the opera texts, and should not only be considered an eventful revelation of these texts.

Finally, the essential part of (re)reading in both this thesis project and in the artistic process to resist the male gaze on an opera stage generates an important methodological conclusion, concerning the productive connection between literary studies and opera studies. That is, this thesis has shown that the literary critic can be a productive conversation partner in both the artistic production process of an opera, as well as in its critical reception. First, as a literary scholar is a skilled close reader in the first place, the fifth chapter of this thesis has shown that a literary-historical perspective on the male gaze in *Salome* can be useful to determine the mechanisms underpinning it. Secondly, by stretching the usual corpus of texts to opera performances, thereby close reading performative elements that affect the watching literary scholar and the audience, the literary critic can further his/her ability to describe and analyze affect, a topic that needs more scholarly attention in literary studies. On a similar note, such an intervention seems to be a mutual favour, as the close reading of operatic performances can respond to the methodological gap in opera studies, namely that performances are only rarely included in the corpora. In this way, the reading of three productions of Richard Strauss' *Salome* has convinced us of one, important warning: as far as opera performances are concerned, we do not look at them enough.

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Appendix

Veil of the Persona	Herodias tells her life story, directed to her father Herodes The Great. She narrates the events leading up to Salome's birth, namely her marriages with Herodes Filippus and Herodes Antipas. On stage, she walks around while Salome is dancing. At the end of the song, the artist enters on stage and lays down a large book, which he opens on a specific page.
Veil of the Believer	John the Baptist positions himself in the middle of the stage. He sings a song directed to Salome, awaiting his death. He curses Salome for being seductive. While he sings the song, John gazes at the void before him, purposely looking away from Salome, who is dancing around him.
Veil of the Mother	Herodias sings a song directed to Salome, in which she lets out her motherly emotions. While singing it, she lies in Salome's arms, touches her and dances with her. In the meantime, the artist is fixing up the décor that consists of large white veils. Musically, the song echoes the ending of 'veil of the Persona', which closes with the sound loop of Herodias singing 'Salomé' repetitively. The song ends abruptly with an electric, intrusive, loud sound. The artist returns on stage to remove the book again.
Veil of the Wife	Pieter-Jan Van Assche starts a jazzy bass line on his double bass and repeats it through a loop system. It is the intro to Herodias' song directed to Herod, in which she uses condescending words to downplay his feelings of desire for her daughter. Herodias' sound is designed in such a way that her voice is doubled in a higher pitch. During her song, Herodias pets Herod like a

	dog. Salome watches the scene from the left corner until she starts to take off Herod's shoes. Herod starts to undress his pants before Herodias, after which he dances a duet with Salome. In the duet, Herod follows Salome's arm movements, as if he were a dog. The sound volume increases, the lights begin to flash more quickly and Salome's pirouettes become faster and more uncontrollable. The scene ends abruptly, when the artist unplugs the loop system.
Veil of the Sinner	Herodias and John the Baptist respectively sin and recite a verse in which they both give their perspective on sins. After pouring a white fluid into a bowl, John, Herodias, Salome and Herod pass along the fluid with their hands, repeatedly. The scene ends with John trying to cover the floor with the fluid, while Salome is walking all over it.
Veil of the Anima Veil of the Unveiledèr	From the left corner, Salome shows a silver platter to the audience. The artist returns on stage and sprinkles a large amount of sand on the floor. During Herodias' verse 'veil of the Anima', in which she praises her daughter for "prevail[ing]" (Supèr), Salome already starts her final dance. Only this time, she is alone on stage, enabling her to perform a free-of-style choreography.