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POZNAŃSKIE STUDIA SLAWISTYCZNE
NR 30 (2026)
DOI: 10.14746/pss.2026.30.12

Data przesłania tekstu do redakcji: 13.02.2026
Data przyjęcia tekstu do publikacji: 13.04.2026

Transgression, Identity, and the Semiotics of Space: Exploring Transgressive Sexuality in the novel *Three* by Drago Glamuzina

ABSTRACT: Marot Kiš Danijela, *Transgression, Identity, and the Semiotics of Space: Exploring Transgressive Sexuality in the novel Three by Drago Glamuzina*, "Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne" 30. Poznań 2026. Wydawnictwo "Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne," Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, pp. 273–286. ISSN 2084-3011.

The analysis of Drago Glamuzina's novel *Three* (2023) sets Derrida's and Bataille's theoretical frameworks on transgression in critical contrast. From a Bataillean view, the erotic triangle that forms the thematic core of the novel functions as a ritual of transgression in which the gaze exposes vulnerability and dissolves autonomous subjectivity, ultimately reaffirming taboo. Derrida redirects attention to the instability of boundaries, which in the novel emerges through the portrayal of fluid relations among the main characters, relations that resist binary categorization and expose identity as inherently relational. A second key component of the analysis concerns the semantics of space (Patrick Califa, Nancy Duncan), as spatiality likewise functions as an unstable semiotic field structured by thresholds. The paper examines how the novel presents subjectivity, desire, and space as dynamic, continually deferred structures.

KEYWORDS: Drago Glamuzina; *Three*; transgression; sexuality; space; identity



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Introduction: *Il n'y a rien en de hors du triangle*

Drago Glamuzina's novel *Three* (2003) depicts a psychologically and emotionally complex relationship among Goran, his wife Sandra, and his lover Hana. Although Goran narrates the story, his marriage remains only sketchily portrayed, functioning more as a structural anchor than as a fully developed emotional bond. Sandra appears intermittently, primarily commenting on her husband's affair rather than actively shaping the narrative. Despite the intensity of Goran's relationship with Hana, neither partner considers dissolving their respective marriages. Over time, an unusual dynamic of tolerance, acceptance, and muted affection emerges among the three. Secondary characters occasionally enter this triangular constellation, revealing the protagonists' conflicting emotional states: love, jealousy, obsession, and vulnerability. Their interactions foreground motifs of voyeurism, exhibitionism, and transgressive sexuality, shifting intimacy from the private sphere into a quasipublic domain. The novel contrasts the vaguely rendered marital relationship with the explicit, meticulously detailed extramarital affair, embedding transgression both as a rejection of socially sanctioned norms and as an exploration of the limits of acceptable sexuality.

By dissolving binaries such as loyalty/betrayal and public/private, the novel exposes the complexity of unconventional intimacy. Everything outside the central triangle fades into an indistinct backdrop, forming an "absent presence" that mirrors Derrida's idea that meaning arises only within relational structures. His claim that "*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors texte*]" (1976, 158) resonates here: the protagonists construct a self-contained world whose significance emerges not from external referents but from the internal dynamics of their triangle. The triangular relationship in *Three* reflects Derrida's view of unstable signifier–signified relations: concepts such as marriage, love, sex, fidelity, and jealousy lack fixed meanings and acquire significance only within the triangle's internal dynamics. What appears as transgression from a social perspective (infidelity, sexual freedom, rejection of norms) becomes, within the triangle, a generative force that expands meaning and exposes the fluidity of concepts traditionally bound by binaries. The novel thus

challenges fixed norms and urges the continual redefinition of intimacy and love.

1. Sexuality and Space: The Re-Signification of Spatial Boundaries

Max Deutscher links Derrida's ideas on textuality to intimacy, framing sexuality as a negotiation between autonomy and openness to the Other (2014). This tension defines *Three*, especially in Goran and Hana's dynamic, where desire for control arises from the surrender of autonomy. Goran's obsessive monitoring of Hana (particularly in the episode titled "The Quarrel") reveals the collapse of boundaries between self and Other. Throughout the triangle, shifts between public and private space mirror the characters' psychological negotiations, showing how identity forms through the interplay of inner experience and external environments. Open spaces in *Three* serve as settings for unrestrained sexuality, while enclosed spaces host conflict and introspection. Public and private spatial markers function as indicators of transgression, questioning norms of identity, intimacy, and sexuality. By destabilizing traditional spatial roles, the novel deconstructs concepts such as marriage, sexuality, and intimacy, with its first half focusing on explicit depictions of Goran and Hana's intimacy shaped by exhibitionism and voyeurism:

In cafés, in parking lots, on other people's cars, on market stalls in Opatovina, in a hospital basement, in front of the door to a bomb shelter, in the restroom of the University Library... (...) In the snow, at minus ten degrees, standing, without taking off our coats and shivering, just outside the theatre, ten meters from the main exit, behind some miserable bush, listening to people comment on the play they had just seen... (...) We didn't have time for a bed, so we had to make do on the street. And then we discovered something in it that excited us. So next time we'd be even braver – or crazier¹ (Glamuzina, 2008, 16–17).

1 All translations from Glamuzina are my own.

The novel positions space as a decisive force in shaping and destabilizing intimacy. Instead of treating sexuality as something that merely occurs within space, it shows how spatial environments themselves become active components of erotic experience. By disregarding the traditional hierarchy between public and private domains and the moral norms attached to them, the protagonists integrate space into their sexual identities. Public locations generate excitement, invite voyeurism, and heighten tension, becoming participants rather than neutral settings. This challenges the Western binary that associates public space with rationality and private space with hidden corporeality. The novel's approach aligns with Foucault's view of sexuality as regulated through discourse and spatial organization. As he notes, Victorian society displaced forbidden sexual practices into "places of tolerance" such as brothels and asylums, where "untrammelled sex" was permitted only in "clandestine, circumscribed, and coded" forms (1980, 4). These heterotopic zones normalize acts that are unacceptable elsewhere, whereas Glamuzina sharply demarcates them by depicting transgressive sexual acts that carry performative force within the novel. Although sexual encounters occur in public environments like parks or forests, the protagonists' brief appropriations temporarily remove these places from the public realm. The spatial binary also mirrors the tension between individual and collective identity, showing how both private experience and social structures shape selfhood. As Nancy Duncan observes, the public/private divide is deeply embedded in political philosophy, law, and spatial practices that separate domestic, embodied life from a supposedly disembodied public sphere. This dichotomy is used to "construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and suppress gender and sexual difference" (1996, 126), reinforcing patriarchal and heterosexist norms. At the same time, the idea of privacy remains tied to Western notions of autonomy, familial sovereignty, and property.

Glamuzina's novel radically disrupts these binaries through its portrayal of intimacy and sexuality. Acts traditionally confined to the private sphere are repeatedly relocated into public or semi-public environments (beaches, parks, libraries, cafés), which the protagonists appropriate as intimate zones. Their indifference to social judgment ("Over time, we stopped caring whether anyone understood what we were doing..." (Glamuzina, 2018, 18)) underscores their assertion of personal

sovereignty over socially regulated spaces. By transforming public locations into sites of erotic meaning, they resist normative spatial classifications and re-signify space according to their desires. Public space becomes a temporary private enclave, not by erasing the boundary between public and private, but by exposing its instability and showing that spatial meaning is continually reshaped through use, interaction, and appropriation.

In his study *Public Sex*, Patrick Califia challenges legal and cultural binaries surrounding public sexuality by arguing that “public sex” is an unstable category: spaces treated as private in everyday life become reclassified as public only when sexual acts occur, enabling their criminalization. He notes that such encounters usually involve a physical barrier – a car, wall, or bush – that shields participants, making “quasipublic sex” a more accurate term (1994, 73–74). In this view, private space is not a fixed location but a temporary intimate zone created through the appropriation of a segment of public space. This perspective aligns with the novel’s portrayal of fluid, heterotopic environments in which intimacy continually reshapes the meaning of place. Duncan similarly emphasizes the heterogeneity of space and the territorial processes that empower or marginalize social groups, especially regarding gender and sexuality: both public and private spaces are unstable, continually claimed, challenged, and redefined. Such spatial dynamics can create protective sites of resistance, but they may also isolate groups and depoliticize them (1996, 129).

In *Three*, spatial differentiation becomes a means of redefining normative identity roles and legitimizing nontraditional relational structures. Marital intimacy is destabilized not by the presence of a third person as a threat, but by integrating that third person into the relationship’s structure. The intense, noninstitutional bond between Goran and Hana reveals how sexual practices interrogate the spatial foundations of privacy, fidelity, attachment, and identity. Within the Goran–Hana–Sandra triangle, categories such as husband, wife, and lover refuse fixed meaning and are continually reshaped through the transgressive reimagining of intimacy. This fluidity mirrors the instability of spatial markers themselves: just as space cannot be reduced to a public/private binary, intimate relationships resist the exclusivity of traditional dualisms that underpin normative concepts of marriage and love.

2. The Role of Voyeurism in the Spatial Processes of Identification and Re-signification

Within a heterogeneous space, whose meaning is continuously re-configured through patterns of use, the figure of the voyeur occupies a particularly significant position. As a third, uninvited participant, an (un)wanted observer, the voyeur embodies the intrusive gaze of public scrutiny, representing the site of confrontation between public and private domains during the sexual act. This gaze does not merely observe but symbolically negotiates the boundaries of intimacy and visibility. Califia argues that sexual encounters in public settings create temporary zones of privatized intimacy, raising the question of who has the right to observe or intervene. His question, "Who has a right to intrude and take a look?" (1994, 77), highlights the tension between spatial labels and the sovereignty of the gaze. As he notes, seeing such acts requires deliberate intrusion: penetrating barriers, using covert surveillance, or posing as participants (1994, 76). This exposes how voyeurism destabilizes fixed distinctions between public and private space. In addressing the question of sexual privacy through its spatial determinants, Califia further indirectly engages with the issue of voyeurism as an intrusive and unsolicited presence of the public gaze within the domain of privacy. The presence of an uninvited observer during a sexual act (exposure to the gaze of a third party) is also thematized in Glamuzina's novel. Voyeurism in the novel is realized in two distinct ways: first, as an unidentified presence that suggests a blending of public and private sexual space; and second, as a constitutive element of the sexual dynamic itself. Both dimensions are explored in detail in the chapter titled "Creatures from the Dark". From the undifferentiated mass of intrusive onlookers, one figure emerges – Damir, who gradually assumes an increasingly significant role in the sexual relationship between Hana and Goran.

At first, we didn't even know they existed – we'd go to Jarun and throw ourselves at each other, happy that we finally didn't have to fight anything except our own bodies. The first time she saw a face in the window behind my back, she screamed, and he ran away. (...) The next time, the surprise and discomfort were less, but we still started the car and

moved to another spot, just to show we didn't like it. Soon we realized that the Jarun forest – actually a small grove we called a forest – was full of voyeurs, and it was hard to go there without someone sticking to the car. (...) After that, we pretended not to see them... (Glamuzina, 2008, 115) Damir was more timid than anyone else we encountered there. He didn't just run away when a car's headlights flashed – he also fled when other voyeurs arrived... (...) Because he recoiled from those people, whom we also found repulsive, he seemed different to us (Glamuzina, 2008, 116).

Damir's role in Hana and Goran's sexual dynamic becomes increasingly active as he shifts from observer to orchestrator, openly expressing his desires and directing their behaviour. They respond by exposing themselves to him and sometimes even adapting to his preferences, integrating him into their encounters. Although not part of the intimate dyad, his presence significantly shapes its emotional and relational structure. Positioned on the threshold between inclusion and exclusion, he destabilizes fixed boundaries, becoming a disruptive force that reshapes meanings of intimacy, identity, and relational limits. The pivotal moment in their relationship, one that reveals the heterogeneity of spatial markers within the dynamics of sexuality, occurs when Damir proposes relocating their encounters from the grove (and the car) to his apartment:

Everything shifted and changed when he suggested that next time we go to his apartment. "I'd just sit on the couch and watch," he said. We refused, but he didn't give up, not realizing that he didn't exist outside that forest—and that by pleading, he was quickly losing his allure (Glamuzina, 2008, 118).

When Damir proposes relocating their encounters, he initiates a symbolic shift in the spatial framework that has defined his relationship to the couple. In the semi-public, wooded environment, he embodies the anonymous, intrusive, socially transgressive, unpredictable, and erotically charged public gaze. This ambiguity fuels the tension between desire and social norms. Moving into a private interior, however, threatens to neutralize the very dynamics that made his presence compelling. The transition from an open, heterotopic space to a regulated domestic

setting marks a reconfiguration of power, visibility, and affective control. In the forest, Damir is one voyeur among many, exposed and vulnerable within a collective ritual of anonymous watching. By suggesting his apartment, he attempts to transform this diffuse spectatorship into a controlled, personalized performance in which he becomes the singular observer. His desire “to just sit and watch” signals an attempt to curate the scene, converting passive voyeurism into an orchestrated act. The shift from public to private space thus reflects a deeper attempt to claim authority over the gaze. The view through the car window carries a transgressive charge by unsettling spatial boundaries and blurring the line between public and private, along with the sexual practices tied to them. Goran and Hana maintain control within this observer–observed dynamic as long as Damir remains an “external gaze”: they initiate the encounters, while his presence is incidental and subject to their terms. The shift to Damir’s apartment signals a reversal of power, as the observer becomes the initiator and the observed becomes the object of his agency. This episode underscores how spatial markers shape power relations between watcher and watched, highlighting the central role of the gaze in constructing those dynamics. The novel thus foregrounds the transformative power of the gaze, which continually reshapes the relationship between Hana and Goran. Their intimacy is built not only on mutual observation but also on exposure to external gazes: those of spouses, friends, acquaintances, and voyeurs. The voyeur’s gaze, though seemingly peripheral, becomes a constitutive force in their relational meaning. Sartre’s analysis of the gaze in *Being and Nothingness* (1957) provides a useful framework. For Sartre, becoming aware of being observed transforms the subject from a free consciousness (*être-pour-soi*) into an object for the Other (*être-pour-autrui*), producing shame, vulnerability, and a loss of autonomy. Observation is never neutral; it is a force that redefines the subject’s being. However, Glamuzina’s novel both complicates and expands Sartre’s model. Rather than experiencing shame or objectification, the protagonists actively embrace Damir’s gaze, transforming it from a threat into a tool of interaction, as long as he remains on the outside and his gaze continues to signal a transgressive act that dissolves the boundary between public and private space. Sartre’s *être-pour-autrui* becomes a performative mode of being: they not only accept

objectification but choreograph it. What Sartre describes as a loss of freedom becomes, paradoxically, a chosen form of freedom, an intentional surrender that reconfigures power dynamics. Damir, though ostensibly a spectator, becomes integral to their selfconstruction. The protagonists define themselves through his gaze, but in a collaborative rather than oppressive way. The gaze becomes creative, not repressive. What is traumatic in Sartre becomes erotically and emotionally productive in Glamuzina's narrative. *Three* thus radicalizes Sartre's concept by situating the gaze within a relational field where subject and object negotiate meaning rather than oppose one another.

3. The Dualism of Social Life: Bataille's Theory of the Sacred and the Profane

Georges Bataille, in a series of his works,² explores the relationship between the sacred and the profane in social life, firmly opposing the traditional profanation of sexuality. In *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*, he argues that social organization is structured by a strict dualism between "the realm of calm and rational behaviour and the violence of the sexual impulse in human experience" (1962, 53). According to Judy Kuo, for Bataille the sacred encompasses that dimension of inner experience whose opacity resists any homogeneous social system or body of knowledge. It disrupts order and seduces us toward destruction through its heterogeneity, through "useless expenditure" and "waste and annihilation". The profane, by contrast, belongs to the social sphere, where meaning is stabilized, defined, and ordered, and where understanding is governed by homogeneity. Modern processes of rationalization and secularization aim to produce a submissive human species suited for production, rational consumption, and the preservation of goods. These processes seek to subsume the irrational under the rational, and the unknown under the known (Kuo, 2005, 23). Profane

2 *L'Erotisme/Erotism* (1957), *L'Expérience intérieure/Inner Experience* (1943), *La Part maudite/The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (1949).

society thus represents a world of labour, production, functionality, and meaning, a space in which behaviour is rationalized, controlled, and purpose-driven. The sacred world, by contrast, symbolizes the irrational, the non-productive, that which escapes function: an order to which sexuality undoubtedly belongs. It is that which provokes disgust and reverence, calling into question established norms and meanings.

Modern society seeks to suppress, regulate, and sanction the sacred because it threatens the survival of stable traditional meanings and, consequently, the survival of social structures themselves. The sacred, as an ontologically present category of human experience, appears in society as excess or surplus, what Bataille terms “useless expenditure.” This force disrupts paradigms of utility and order and manifests through transgressive acts, among which eroticism and sexuality occupy a central place. As Koludrović states, according to Bataille, “the first condition of inner experience is the abandonment of the principle of rationality, especially when the individual confronts systems of value, rituals, and roles prescribed by the superstructure: religious systems, sexuality, social morality, and art...” (2014, 209). Bataille’s dialectic between the sacred and the profane provides a productive framework for analysing the transgressive eroticism at the heart of Glamuzina’s *Three*. The novel stages intimacy not as emotional fulfilment but as an existential rupture, in which identity, desire, and space collide in acts of exposure and excess. In Bataille’s terms, the sacred emerges through irrationality, excess, and the undoing of rational limits. Erotic experience, especially when tied to vulnerability and performative surrender, becomes a moment of sacred intensity. The triangular relationship in *Three* exemplifies this: intimacy is not a closed loop of mutual affirmation but a charged site of dissolution. This eroticism demands the loss and reconstitution of the self. The protagonists’ willingness to be observed by a third party evokes the structure of erotic sacrifice: they become not only subjects of desire but objects of disintegration within desire.

4. Language – Identity – Sexuality: Derrida and Rousseau

The public-private binary is also embedded in language, understood in poststructuralist theory as an ideological tool of power. In public space, language operates as a shared norm, while in private contexts, its transgression expresses individuality and subjective autonomy. This division mirrors the *langue-parole* binary: *langue* corresponds to the structured, rulegoverned public sphere, whereas *parole* aligns with the private sphere as an improvised, uncoded individual utterance. The contrast extends to writing, which is organized and polished, and to speech, marked by spontaneity and ellipsis. Writing is shaped by its spatial form, whether on paper or a screen, while speech unfolds in real time, governed by temporal flow. The hierarchical relationship between speech and writing is central to Derrida's reading of Rousseau in the second part of *Of Grammatology*. Rousseau views speech as natural, immediate, and transparent, whereas writing is an artificial, secondary mode that corrupts the purity of spoken expression. He extends this hierarchy into the realm of sexuality, equating speech with natural alterosexuality and writing with autoeroticism or sublimation: "Speech is the natural use of language... Activity with another person is the natural use of sexuality... Writing is itself a principal form of sublimation" (Deutcher, 2014, 106). Derrida challenges this view, arguing that writing is not an external addition but a "dangerous supplement" that exposes the inherent incompleteness of speech. Writing compensates for the gaps and absences already present within speech; it is not optional but structurally necessary. As Deutcher notes, "in occupying the place of another, one has divorced oneself from oneself... what one had hoped to gain as unmediated intimacy turns out to be selfalienating" (2014, 106–107). For Derrida, writing is embedded within speech from the outset, making the supposed purity of speech an illusion. This debate has significant implications for understanding personal and collective identity, particularly the tension between individual autonomy and social determination. Within language as a normative system, speech and writing relate differently to the governing linguistic order. Speech appears spontaneous, improvisational, and

immediate, which is why Rousseau associates it with authenticity and elevates it above the structured, deliberate nature of writing. He uses this analogy to conceptualize the difference between heteroerotic and autoerotic relations. Derrida, however, argues that autonomy is never pure independence but always involves supplementation: one entity completing another. Writing cannot be reduced to a secondary substitute because it is already part of the structure of speech, filling its deficiencies and enabling its very possibility. In this sense, the binary between speech and writing mirrors broader binaries: public/private and natural/artificial, revealing that these oppositions are unstable and mutually dependent rather than absolute.

The dynamic between speech and writing directly informs Derrida's understanding of selfidentification. For Derrida, the self is never autonomous or selfcontained; it is constituted through the presence of the Other within it. His dialogue with Rousseau shows that identity, like language, is not grounded in purity or selfsufficiency but in supplementation, interdependence, and continual transgression. Selfhood emerges not through exclusivity but through a network of relations, influences, and crossings. Within this framework, transgression becomes central to identity. It is not merely the act of crossing boundaries but the very condition that makes subjectivity possible. Only by abandoning the ideal of a selfgoverning, autonomous subject can we conceive of an open, plural self that exists through the Other. As Derrida writes, "without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work, and no meaning would appear" (1976, 62).

Identity depends on this internal otherness, on the trace that disrupts unity and enables meaning. In the realms of intimacy and sexuality, this relational model of identity becomes especially visible. The protagonists of *Three* construct their selfhood through their interactions, desires, and responses to one another. Their practices of spatial transgression – blurring public and private, individual and collective – mirror their processes of (self)identification. Goran understands himself through his relationships with Sandra and Hana; Sandra defines herself through Goran's bond with Hana; Hana shapes her selfperception through Goran's needs and his ties to his family. Each character's identity is formed through the presence of the Others, not in isolation.

Thus, the intimate triangle functions as a model of Derridean subjectivity: a fluid, relational, and transgressive process in which boundaries between self and Other are continuously negotiated and blurred.

Conclusion

The analysis of Drago Glamuzina's novel *Three* contrasts the theoretical frameworks of Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida to illuminate the novel's treatment of desire, subjectivity, and spatiality. From a Bataillean perspective, the erotic triangle among Goran, Sandra, and Hana is interpreted as a ritualized transgression in which the gaze functions as a site of exposure, vulnerability, and the dissolution of autonomous subjectivity. These moments do not abolish taboo but instead reaffirm its force, generating an intensified, quasisacred erotic experience. Derrida's approach shifts the emphasis from the act of crossing a boundary to the inherent instability of boundaries themselves. The protagonists' relationships resist binary classifications such as fidelity versus infidelity or public versus private, revealing identity as relational, contingent, and constituted through traces of the Other. Spatiality in the novel operates according to similar principles: space is not a fixed backdrop but an unstable semiotic field in which thresholds and transitions produce meaning and unsettle conventional divisions. Taken together, this analysis demonstrates that *Three* conceptualizes subjectivity, desire, and space as dynamic, relational, and continually deferred structures shaped by alterity and negotiation.

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