

INTRODUCTION

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WHY THIS BOOK?

The members of the Gender Studies Stream at the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Szeged decided to celebrate Dr. Sarolta Marinovich-Resch, our senior colleague's 60th birthday in recognition of the excellence of her contribution to the field of feminist scholarship as well as her support and encouragement to all of us, in her diverse and generous ways. The celebration took place on November 21st, 2003 in the local headquarters of the Hungarian Academy of Science. The current volume is partly an outcome of that event, including the talks presented on the occasion by Éva Federmayer, Mária Joó, Mária Kurdi, and Nóra Séllei. Except for Éva Federmayer, the presenters are not Sári's local colleagues and friends but scholars from all major Departments in the Faculties of Humanities in the country, attesting to the significance of Sári's achievement in building a successful feminist network over the past fifteen years. We, the organisers thought it would be in accordance with the nature of feminist concerns not to have our local voice domineer the event. The current volume, however, may provide an appropriate site for extending our congratulations in this more academic manner as well. Therefore the conference presentations are accompanied by further works written by Irén Annus, Anna Kérchy and Andrea P. Balogh, representing the ongoing research of the members of the Stream.

VALIDITY AND INVOLVEMENT

As for myself, the most precious concern I have learnt from Sári is the relevance of involvement and its impact on the life of the researcher. Perhaps the most striking and convincing example of this knowledge is the current struggle over the proper

institutionalisation of feminist scholarship in the changing field of Hungarian Academy.

Arguing that doing research can seriously damage one's health and that feminist ways of knowing are far from being a rather harmless and comfortable activity has never been more valid than now, only a year after the actual event that led to this publication. However, I do not need to feel defenseless in the face of the hostile gate-keeping strategies of the predominantly male academy. The source of my encouragement comes from the other dimension of this knowledge regarding the impact of feminist research on the researcher. It is being a member of a research team, our Gender Stream. It is this solidarity that may have the potential to fight the vulnerable effects of masculinist notions of science and relevance. Although, we may not have as much power and influence on the hierarchical academic institution itself as it may appear to the respondents involved in our research projects or, ironically, as it may appear even to ourselves in comparison with the researched 'other' women, I have learnt from Sári's ways of negotiations to value the enabling power of belonging in a team when it comes to considering the possibility of breaking down hierarchical relations of power in order precisely to have the space for working collectively.

Another way of formulating the issue of impact could be in terms of experience. In the day-to-day practicalities of finding the space for conducting feminist research and inculcating students in critical awareness, what also seems to be at issue is the understanding of women's lived experience itself. Whilst the personal, autobiographical location of the researcher undoubtedly shapes her understanding of what she sees to be the particular forms of oppression, and therefore the matter to be put on the public agenda, it does not mean that her awareness is beyond the access of those who have not 'lived' such experiences. Nor does it mean that a reference to such experience should inevitably legitimize the knowledge ensuing from it. That is, experience is always already mediated by interpretation, to the experiencing self and the 'other' alike. However, this recognition should not necessarily lead us to giving up all claims to authenticity, to sharing a language or to negotiating an allegiance. What we should make explicit in the course of our analyses, instead, is the ways in which these ways of interpretation/mediation seem to be effects of differential access to cultural and political resources.

This latter point takes us to the consideration of the relationship between politics and academy. What seems to be at stake these days in Hungarian academy is a concern to re-examine the possible transformatory potential of feminist research, its potential of facilitating a change of the higher educational institution in a way that could at long last legitimate the curriculum of our Stream in the form of an MA degree. It is in this particular context where we should address the apparently abstract matter of validity in/of (feminist) research.



There is definitely one aspect of the current situation with regard to which we as feminists can make use of our 'abstract' scholarship: the social nature of interpretation. We may argue that we are experiencing a moment of feminist methodological logic that can explain the grounds on which certain selective interpretations have been made over others. That logic can expose the silences and absences in the emerging legitimizations of decision making.

To reach a (favourable) conclusion on matters of accreditation is a social process and the interpretation of the various Government documents is a political, highly contested and unstable activity. Therefore we cannot really believe that if all there is on offer for woman scholars to emerge as bearers of agency is some (preferably as little as possible) privileged status accorded to a non-reflexive, essentialist conception of 'women's ways of knowing', then teaching/researching that experience could radicalize their audience. And most certainly, it does not turn their audience of researchers into subversive voices. For that resistance we need to shift our position and expose the presence of other (textually mediated) experiences.

I think the problem is not that we 'come out' about our 'desire' to have an MA degree accredited but if we render ourselves blind to the dangers of doing "theory as life insurance" (in the sense of Meaghan Morris's¹ insightful concept). In my opinion, the problem is that the latter position can implicate our arguments all too easily into the commodifying logic of another form of culture, namely that of the advertising industry where there is always the promise of a way to 'redemption'. As a painful ironic twist, the appeal of the celebratory approach to (masculinist) prestige then consists in its promise of power to knowing the way to this mode of pleasure; in the promise of knowing how to shift back and forth between the textual worlds of the Government documents and feminist theories, without inflicting any (further) damage on us.

CODA

The contributions in this volume are attempts at exploring the unsettling potentials of feminist ways of seeing. What they have in common is the discourse of critical awareness of the various textually mediated ways of women's oppression and the potential power we may learn through their exposure. I hope it may resonate with the Readers while reading this book.

In fact the book as a site for this identification could not have come about without Sári's pioneering experiences involved when undertaking feminist literary

¹ Morris, Meaghan. "Banality in Cultural Studies", *Discourse*. 10/2, 1988, 19.

criticism in the past fifteen years or so. That is, the historic legacy of Sári's scholarship can teach us something very important at the moment: It is a focus on our history of scholarship in the Department that can alone bring back us as 'actual women' into the position of bearers of agency. In my view, without this turn to our local history we may not even stand a chance in the ongoing battle over accreditation.