

---

**URBAN GENDERED LEGENDS: DECIPHERING THE INAUDIBLE LANGUAGE OF  
THE CITY OF ORADEA**

**Giulia Suciu, Assist. Prof., PhD, University of Oradea**

*Abstract: The space around us, the city in which we lead our existence is but a mirror reflecting the existent dominant ideologies. As Henri Lefebvre mentioned in his book 'Production of Space' – "social space ceases to be indistinguishable from mental and physical space." (1991:27) The present paper seeks to question social inequalities in everyday life in the city of Oradea, trying to decipher the story told by the city in its inaudible language, focusing mainly on the gender dimension.*

**Keywords: gender, inequality, discrimination, cultural background, patriarchal ideology**

Space is one of the axis around which our existence revolves. "The anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time."<sup>1</sup> In human society, all space is social, as Henri Lefebvre<sup>2</sup> pointed out, and space has always been a social product. Space is the social space around us, the place where we lead our everyday existence, where we form relationships, where we live, "which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us."<sup>3</sup> Now the question that arises is whether it is possible to read or decipher the messages sent by the space around us.

Each space defines a certain cultural context; each city is merely a collection of streets, buildings, monuments and traditions that convey different messages because "social space ceases to be indistinguishable from mental and physical space."<sup>4</sup> The present paper aims to decipher the messages sent by city of Oradea, messages that will be analysed through gender lenses.

Why the public space? Why gendered lenses? Because the public space is the space of gender relations in their most genuine state,<sup>5</sup> it is a space where the interaction between men and women is a symbolic interaction between two representatives of their gender, a space where experiences are generic and interpretations may be easily generalised.

Urban space is gendered. The way we acknowledge the space around us is gendered. On a symbolic level, urban space communicates gender messages<sup>6</sup> about who is visible, who is invisible, who is included and who is excluded. "This gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is understood in the societies in which we live."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Foucault, M. 1967. *Of Other Spaces, Utopias and Heterotopias*. Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité. October, 1984; <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> retrieved 28 September 2014

<sup>2</sup> Lefebvre, H. 2009. *State, Space, World*. University of Minnesota Press. p.186-187

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, M. 1967. *Of Other Spaces, Utopias and Heterotopias*. Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité. October, 1984; <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> retrieved 28 September 2014

<sup>4</sup> Lefebvre, H. 1991. *Production of Space*. Blackwell Publishing. p.27

<sup>5</sup> Pasti, V. 2003. *Ultima inegalitate. Relatiile de gen in Romania*. Editura Polirom p.61

<sup>6</sup> Bailey, A and Hentschell, R. 2010. *Masculinity and the Metropolis of Vice*. Early Modern Cultural Studies Series. Palgrave, Macmillan. p.2

<sup>7</sup> Massey, D.B. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press. p.186 Massey, D.B. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press

The space around us, the city in which we wake up every morning, go to school, go to work, go to parties and clubs and then return home is something all too familiar to all of us. It represents a mundane décor that we do not even notice anymore, and for sure something that we stopped questioning a long time ago. We are always in a hurry, and we do not notice simple, basic things going on around us. Things that at a closer look might seem unfair or abnormal, end up being accepted as normal, as part and parcel of our everyday life, without as much as a second thought.

The city in which we live is but a mirror of the existent dominant ideologies, communicating gender messages about gender roles, about acceptable gender behavior, about gender stereotypes etc. Is Oradea a city in which women feel 'at home'? A city in which they feel comfortable, equal to men, secure? At a closer look, the city of Oradea proves to be yet another urban space in which women are discriminated in a number of ways.

Like I said before, a city is basically a collection of streets, buildings, monuments that together make up the collective memory of a city. How do you think women feel in Oradea – and in most other cities in our country as a matter of fact – a city where all major boulevards and streets bear the names of famous Romanian personalities: e.g. General Magheru Boulevard, Decebal Boulevard, Mihai Eminescu Street, Alexandru Roman Street. Intrigued by this, I took a look at a listing of the streets of Oradea in alphabetical order, to see how many streets with famous Romanian women we have. The results were not very surprising. Or were they? Out of approximately one thousand streets listed there, only three bore the name of famous Romanian women: Ecaterina Teodoroiu, Ecaterina Varga and Ana Ipatescu. And the examples could go on and on: major schools and high schools in Oradea bear the names of well-known Romanian male personalities, the monuments in the centre of the town all celebrate poets, heroes, historians etc. all male, with the exception of Queen Maria who is clearly outnumbered. So my question is "Do women in the city of Oradea find themselves in the collective memory of the city? Do they identify themselves with this city?" According to the 2011 census, in Oradea the female population represented 51.5% of the population; and yet, women are almost completely absent from the historical and cultural background of the city

But the worst form of discrimination – in my opinion – is the one caused by advertising. Advertising is possibly the most prevalent cultural form of the twentieth century and will probably have the greatest longevity. One of the strongest and most dynamic industries in the world today, advertising is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. In contemporary society advertising is everywhere. We cannot walk down the street, shop, watch television, read a newspaper or take a train without encountering it. Whether we are alone, with our friends or family, or in a crowd, advertising is always with us.

Advertising doesn't simply advertise a product, it deals with ideas, attitudes, and values and gives them cultural form through its practices. As Schudson<sup>8</sup> puts it, the promotional culture of advertising has worked its way into "what we read, what we care about, the ways we raise our children, our ideas of right and wrong conduct, our attribution of significance to 'image' in both public and private life".

---

<sup>8</sup> Schudson, M. (1984). *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion*. New York: Basic Books p.13

Advertising is one of the most important areas of public life in which gender is displayed in images as well as in language. Although ads persuade consumers to buy products, they do more than sell products. “They sell values and concepts. They present images of sexuality, popularity, success and normalcy. They tell us who we are and who we should be.”<sup>9</sup> They work in subtle ways to persuade us to accept the way of life they depict. Advertising describes and prescribes gender roles, gender behaviour, gender identity and gender stereotypes. The majority of ads rests on gender identity, on the stereotyped iconography of masculinity and femininity, telling us what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, what is considered appropriate gender behaviour/identity etc. and what is not.

Let’s take for instance the following two ads<sup>10</sup>, one advertising the DIY brand Praktiker and the other one a stationary shop OVM. Both of them present women in a stereotyped gender role –

that of secretary, which has come to be associated in our minds with certain ‘mandatory’ traits: first condition – to be female, because who has heard of male secretaries? Then we have youth, beauty, sex-appeal, deep cleavages, short dresses and so on.



are presented as secretaries, nurses, cashiers, while men are presented as drivers, firemen, bricklayers etc.



The visual imagery provided by the media can have a powerful impact on our attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors, since it can contribute meanings and associations entirely apart and of much greater significance. Never before was a culture so obsessed with the issue of sexuality and gender. Huge billboards we pass by every day on our way to school, work etc. promote obsessively either ideals of unattainable beauty or the commodification of the female body.



<sup>9</sup> Romaine, S.(1999) *Communicating Gender*, Mahwah NJ Lawrence Erlbaum Associates p.252

<sup>10</sup> The ads used in this paper appeared on the streets of Oradea in the months of July, August, September 2014.

In the world of manufacturing and advertising, women's bodies and female sexuality in particular, become marketable commodities: women's bodies are used as sex objects in the selling of a variety of products, starting from cars, furniture, clothes to chocolate bars, mattresses and wooden floors.

People might argue that all these are but trivial issues, that what we are actually talking about is *normality*. But how can it be normal to shut out half of the population of the city? How can it be considered normal to live in a city which does not acknowledge your existence? Instead of accepting it as normal, we should stop for a minute and listen carefully to the silent but at the same time loud and clear statement made by everything around us. Because the way in which we name our streets, institutions, the use of nudity, sexual innuendos, body positioning and gender stereotyping in ads – all these are but ways of prying into gender messages.

#### **REFERENCES:**

- Bailey, A and Hentschell, R. 2010. *Masculinity and the Metropolis of Vice*. Early Modern Cultural Studies Series. Palgrave, Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. 1967. *Of Other Spaces, Utopias and Heterotopias*. Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité. October, 1984. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> retrieved 28 September 2014
- Lefebvre, H. 1991. *Production of Space*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Lefebvre, H. 2009. *State, Space, World*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Massey, D.B. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Pasti, V. 2003. *Ultima inegalitate. Relatiile de gen in Romania*. Editura Polirom.
- Romaine, S. (1999) *Communicating Gender*, Mahwah NJ Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Schudson, M. (1984). *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion*. New York: Basic Books.