

Normative Senses of Spaces, Radical Places of Genders

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Inhabiting gendered spaces that are constructed visually is an essential part of our everyday public and private lives, as the editors of *Space, Gender, and the Gaze in Literature and Art* point out in the opening lines of their introduction (x) to the volume that includes fourteen essays encompassing a vast array of disciplinary fields from theology to the history of architecture, building an interdisciplinary network of the historically, culturally, and socially interconnected concepts of space, gender, and the gaze. The essays trace the visually, fictionally, and poetically conceptualizing gaze(s) concerning space and gender: they problematize the ways in which space and gender are constructed in literature and the visual arts, how these deeply interrelated fields are embedded into the fabric of historically specific cultural and social settings, how this embeddedness limits and liberates simultaneously the gaze by which we not only perceive but also create the gendered spaces of our different histories, cultures, and societies. The editors also draw attention to the “theoretical commonplace” that “particular concepts of space and gaze are tied up with particular social constructions of gender and gender relations” (x). We are all familiar with the binary distinctions that split up the social world into masculine and feminine places and spaces, where the domains of the public, outside, work, production, independence, and power are labeled as masculine spheres whereas the private, inside, home, leisure/pleasure, consumption, dependence, and a lack of power are labeled as feminine spheres. The essays included in this compilation are attempts at exploring, unveiling, and cutting through the power structures that infiltrate the relationship between female spaces and the body, alternative spaces opening up for masculinities, as well as hybrid masculine/feminine spaces that are generated by national, regional, and racial boundaries.

Speaking of theoretical commonplaces, the editors also note that they can be sites of diversity and difference (xi). The fourteen scholarly articles meticulously highlight the varying ways of interpreting our relations to the closely interwoven fabric of space/gender/gaze, varying according to the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of the scholars in English and American Studies from the Hungarian academic context. The authors represent the different generations of the long tradition of English and American Studies in

Hungary, providing a mixture of as diverse fields of contemporary research as cultural studies, intermedial cultural representations, body studies, theories of biopolitics, gender studies, postcolonial studies, the post-semiotics of the embodied subject, cognitive theories, postmodern and postclassical narratology, memory studies, as well as spatiality studies. The research carried out by these scholars connects central theoretical issues concerning the process and possibility of identity formation within gendered and racialized spaces to canonized and recognized literary texts and contexts, as well as intermedial works of art.

The essay collection is organized into three main parts—"Female Spaces and the Body," "Alternative Spaces of Masculinity," and "Hybrid Spaces"—structuring the papers along the lines of the conceptualization of space within the literary works under examination, re-creating the binary normative distinctions that break up the social world into masculine and feminine spaces and disconnect these normatively defined separate spheres from the non-normative sphere of hybrid spaces. This kind of editorial structuring is not only unfortunate but also misleading, since the primary aim as well as the most significant accomplishment of the essays themselves is the challenging of the politics of this binary division.

The first five essays bring together readings of poetry, fiction and (post)conceptual art from various historical, political, racial, class, and geographical settings. Articles by Edit Gállá and Boglárka Kiss provide interpretations of Sylvia Plath's poetry, where the female body is perceived as a contested space upon which cultural, social, historical, economic, and biopolitical fields of power exert their control and domination. Through the not only confessional but also highly political poetry of Plath the authors investigate the ways the dominant and heteronormative ideas concerning femininity, the female body, and the role and place of the mother become challenged through and within the female body itself, through the agony of the woman trying to claim control over her body. Amira Benarioua explores the spiritual and physical spaces in the "womanist" prose of Alice Walker, understanding Walker's "womanist space" as an alternative space to that of the mainstream white and Black feminist movement, and offers a glimpse at the double burdened lives of Black women in a racist patriarchy, directing our readerly gaze primarily on the romantic outcome of *The Colour Purple* (1982), on Celie's metamorphosis and escape from the racialized space of sexual oppression. Lilla Farmasi's analysis of Don DeLillo's "The Ivory Acrobat" (1988) reads corporeality through the gaze of cognitive psychology, trying to map the phenomenology of the experience of the lived physical human body, using the short story's female protagonist's body-centered perceptions of

space and motion to create an embodied cognitive approach to narrative spatiality and temporality. Anna Kérchy's essay about the (post)conceptual art of Orshi Drozdik as an example of queering the "museal space" is a perfect encapsulating closure to the "Female Spaces and the Body" part of the book. Her case study focusing on the New York-based Hungarian feminist artist is a multi-layered critical reading of the museal, medical, and male gaze. She examines how Drozdik's project termed "*queering of the gaze*" unsettles the "hierarchically organized binaries as spectator versus spectacle, subject versus object, artist versus model, male versus female, objective scientific insight versus subjective aesthetic sight, pathologizing versus eroticizing view" (67) in a boundary-bursting reading that in a way epitomizes the essays not only of the first part of the book but of the whole compilation.

"Alternative Spaces of Masculinity" offers readings that focus on alternative spaces, representations, and embodiments of masculinity, reverberating with the theory of R. W. Connell about the different and competing versions of masculinities. With one exception, the essays of this section illuminate the often invisible, hidden, secreted corners of Victorianism, giving light to expressions, manifestations, embodiments of masculinities that were covertly and overtly constrained by the era's moral code. Zsófia Anna Tóth investigates the possibilities of "girls in a boy status" (86) in Jane Austen's fiction, resolving the unexpectedness and the seeming contradictions of combining the boy status with being female by contextualizing it in the strict Victorian rules and laws of inheritance. Within her article on surveillance of the Decadent subculture of the late 1800s, Zsuzsanna Lukács highlights how the "suspiciousness" of decadent men was associated with "blatant femininity" and how the control of these suspicious male figures, practices, and bodies—such as Oscar Wilde—can be understood along the lines of the puritan control exerted on Victorian women, aimed at diminishing the vices of bodies. In Renáta Zsámba's essay, the theme of evil reappears in the interwar space of Victorian suburbs through the examination of how crime and anxiety over gender politics are interlinked in Dorothy Sayers's detective novel *The Documents in the Case* (1974). The above-mentioned exception is the work of Georgina Bozsó, which investigates the highly hierarchical manifestations of masculinities in Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1990), underscoring the constructedness of gender, the contradictory performances of masculinities, suffused with extreme expressions of heteronormative devices.

The last section of the compilation explores "Hybrid Spaces," where "hybridity" denotes mixed spaces, roles, and gazes of femininities and masculinities manifested through the transgressive spaces created by the

infusion of different languages and identities, diverse dimensions of life and non-life, human and non-human/post-human. Hybridity here refers not only to the mixing together of fiction and nonfiction, but also to the fusion or even transgression of generic boundaries. In this section, Ágnes Zsófia Kovács dwells on the hybrid canon of Edith Wharton, positioning her not only as a writer of literature but also as a cultural ethnographer of wartime human landscapes; Katalin G. Kállay opens up the space of “memento mori” in the last story of Flannery O’Connor through the transgression of human boundaries, which entails spatial, racial, and gender transgressions through following character and writer facing mortality; Zsuzsa Sütő ushers us into the haunted house of neo-slave narratives, the hybrid, ghostly space of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (2004) created by the infusion of literary, personal, and cultural memory; Éva Pataki introduces us to hybridity *per se* through the figure of DJ Zaf and his inhabiting the uniquely hybrid space of “Migra Polis” in Suhayl Saadi’s *Psychoraag* (2004); and finally, Andrea F. Szabó depicts Cormac McCarthy’s “frontier gothic” encapsulating the myth of the West, American historiography, and national identity as the ultimate hybrid space.

Thus, the compilation of essays we are presented with in *Space, Gender, and the Gaze in Literature and Art* takes us on a highly engaging intellectual journey where we are constantly reminded that the neatly separated spaces of our roles, positions, lives, practices, traditions, knowledges, and spaces are somehow always already beyond themselves, permeated by differences and contradictions that we have to face, turning our gaze towards the past and present hybridity of our ever-challenging human existence.

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