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Școala Doctorală ‘Paradigma Europeană’

**Constructing East-European Female Sexual Identity
in Sexually Explicit Media**

Summary

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Summary

Walking around Budapest in 2002 I wandered in the area designated primarily for tourists (Váci utca) and I noticed a souvenir shop offering lots of imprinted T-shirts, among which one said in bold print: “*Good boys go to heaven, bad boys come to Budapest*”. I didn’t know what it was at the time, but the message on the T-shirt kept me thinking. I remembered my similar reactions in Prague, where T-shirts and sweaters (and pretty much all other items of clothing) had the inscription “*Czech me out!*” While it was undoubtedly meant both to attract attention and to provoke laughter the tongue-in-cheek play of words was more than an ‘innocent’ sexual innuendo. Somehow, in the concise language of publicity it basically connected sexual and ethnic identity resulting in the marketing of sexual availability. Thus I developed an interest in the ways these identities presupposed each other in the semantic field of tourism in Eastern-Europe.

One of the most important questions of discourse analysis is who does the speaking. The inscription in Prague assumes an active desiring subject who is deliberately attracting attention to his/her body and implicitly sexuality. The message in Budapest is more of a comment made by a third person, delivered like an axiom, like the ‘truth’ of the city. The fact that both were exhibited in places that attracted the most tourists is an indication of which social category is the target audience of these messages. At the time both in Prague as well as Budapest most of the tourists were either from other post-socialist states (like myself) or overwhelmingly from Western Europe and, to a lesser degree, the US. Therefore to hail “*Czech me out!*” was imagined

to be uttered by an ethnic Czech and directed to the mainly western tourist. The message in Budapest was even more explicit. Framed on the binary of good boy/bad boy the sexual innuendo went even further because in Prague no one knew how the story will develop after the first flirtatious moment. But the bad boys who were, supposedly, coming to Budapest knew exactly what they wanted: they came here for sex, and not any kind of ‘goodey-goodey’ sex but for an adventurous, liminal experience indexed by the fact that Budapest is set up as the opposite of heaven. The transgression involved in ‘coming to hell’ implicitly assumes a manly man, a virile adventurer who dares to come to a dangerously attractive place like Budapest. Another important feature deployed by the discourses of the T-shirt inscriptions is that of sexual orientation. The playful “*Czech me out!*” accommodates all types of desires, while the ‘bad boy’ who is invited to Budapest is embedded in an explicitly heterosexual semantic sphere.¹ Thus the “*geographically deployed trope of sexual allure*” (Bunzl in Berdahl et al., 2000, p. 79) refers in this case to the sexual availability of Hungarian women in particular.

In this thesis I am dissecting the representational apparatus that sustains this ideology predicated upon a gendered, sexualized and ethnicized Other in the symbolic geography of the New Europe.² My research assumes a Foucauldian stance on power and the discourses of sexuality and it consists of the discourse analysis of two institutionally distinct discourses: anti-trafficking literature in the news media and adult filmmaking, in particular the Castings X label of Private Media Group Inc. To put it in Foucauldian language, I aim to trace the disciplinary regimes that have produced a distinctly East-European female sexual identity and created their subjugated bodies. Motivated by the desire to address the popular imaginary I adopt a characteristically Cultural Studies approach, which implies the close-reading of mass-produced (sexually explicit) texts that address in a more or less straightforward manner the sexual identity of the token East-European Woman. Therefore, I have decided on the study of the discourse on sex-trafficking from Eastern-Europe and the discourse of adult entertainment centered on the image of Eastern European female sexuality. In the first phase of the research I found that these two discourses were the most popular sites of locution on the subject. However, as I developed

¹ Although it could be argued that it is possible to see it as a male homosexual invitation, based on the reductionist logic of the organization of the discourse of publicity, I believe that it is safe to assume the basic binary of heterosexual desire.

² I use the phrase in order to refer to the negotiation of European boundaries engendered by the fall of communism in the Eastern states.

my arguments I realized that they were more intimately connected than I expected and eventually the analysis of sex-trafficking tropes and metaphors has become the historical and social contextualization for the study of adult entertainment.

In the first chapter I present the theories that influenced my thinking on the intersection of sexual and ethnic identity. The Foucauldian perspective on power, discourse and sexuality is the undercurrent of this research, according to which the relationship between representation and reality is a productive one. Through this I legitimate my focus on the analyses of discourses that I believe produced and reproduce the marked category of East-European female sexuality. In order to explain my methodological choices I describe at length the relationship between cultural studies and sociology by pointing out both their overlaps and differences. Eventually, I establish that my research is interdisciplinary situated at the intersection of cultural studies, sociology and gender studies. It is in this chapter that I compile a literature review of academic research on representations of sexuality, with a specific focus on the most authoritative readings of pornography as expressed in the feminist sex-wars. The perspective that I adopt, however, is more characteristic of contemporary cultural and media studies as I believe that this represents a newer, potentially more fruitful development of scholarship as it can open up previously foreclosed interpretations of representations of sexuality. Additionally, I clarify my connections to the ideas developed in postcolonialist writings (Said, Mitu, le Rider and Todorova) in order to build a framework for the critique of processes of othering later on.

Right after the events of 1989, that is in the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, a “*discursive verbosity*”³ (Foucault, 1978, p. 33) in Western media addressed the sexuality of East-European women. In this thesis I attempt to chart the two most popular discourses involved in the dissemination of knowledge about the sexual identity of these women. I approached the discourse on sex-trafficking and the discourse of adult entertainment as specific instances of what Foucault called “*scientia sexualis*” or discourses for the regulation of sexuality. He argues:

One should not think that desire is repressed, for the simple reason that the law is what constitutes desire and the lack on which it is predicated. Where there is desire, the power

³ Phrase used by Foucault to designate the frequency of a topic.

relation is already present; an illusion, then to denounce this relation for a repression exerted after the event; but a vanity as well, to go questing after a desire that is beyond the reach of power (Foucault, cited by Stoler, 1995, p.165)⁴.

It is probably unusual to think of my two discursive sites as disciplinary regimes, but what's important here is that Foucault theorizes desire as a social construct mainly produced by discourses of sexuality. He also claims that these discourses of sexuality are productive of new forms of power and function in a cultural and "*social field that always specified class and gender*" [and ethnic] locations (idem, p. 178).

The second chapter is dedicated to the discourse on sex-trafficking. After I engage in academic writing on sex trafficking with the objective of drawing out the relevant analytical concepts I present the method of Critical Discourse Analysis as developed by Norman Fairclough. On the basis of the critical discourse analysis of 92 newspaper articles and two books on sex-trafficking I show that the process of trafficking, the victims of trafficking as well as Eastern Europe signifies in these texts in a highly reductive, stereotypical way ultimately detrimental to the professed aim of the discourse, namely combating sex-trafficking. Additionally, universal moral outrage and the predisposition of reveling both in the details of physical abuse and the bodily aspects of the victims opens these texts up to prurient interests and, in the right circumstances, it translates it into sexually explicit material in which Eastern-Europe figures as a sex market. The criticism that I construct is not meant to question the extreme experiences of trafficked people, rather I am less concerned with the facts in themselves than with the symbolic construction of sex-trafficking that establishes "*the form, content, speaker and location of speech*" (Berman, 2003, p. 47). Therefore I aim to reveal the linguistic devices contributing to the construction of sex-trafficking as such and its effects. My research is not meant to trivialize the sex-trafficking phenomenon, instead it is a first step for its reconceptualization.

Throughout my analysis I have pointed at the nefarious consequences of conceptualizing trafficking in terms of slavery and to the easily appropriable nature of this highly emotive language by other international agendas like concerns about security and immigration.

⁴ My main inspiration for this section is the excellent discussion by Ann Stoler regarding the first volume of Foucault's History of Sexuality entitled *Race and the Education of Desire*.

Implicitly, I have argued for the necessity of developing new perspectives that could suitably record and express the multiplicity of experiences related to trafficking and sexual exploitation. One of these possibilities would be to adopt the points of view of sex-work research that I believe to be best situated to register the spectrum of exploitation in the field at the moment. As for myself I have expressed my loyalty towards this latter strand of research of the sex industry and implicitly trafficking.

The third chapter is the most voluminous and it is concerned with the analysis of the discourse of adult entertainment. I start by a detailed discussion of the analytical frameworks available for image analysis and I select discourse analysis as my primary method. This time I have decided to follow the lead of Gillian Rose and structure my results according to the model of image analysis presented in her book that takes into account the threefold conditioning of a cultural product and its interpretation. Thus I engage in the study of the site of production, the image itself and its reception. Since porn studies is a relatively new academic interest I undertook a quite extended historical analysis of blue movies and made a point by frequent comments on other studies conducted in this field as well as expressed my opinion regarding future directions of the research and methodology of sexually explicit media. Once again my conviction is that the necessity to adopt new perspectives is imperative. I profess that the research of sexually explicit media has to be thoroughly contextualized both historically and culturally and its mediated nature brought to the forefront.

In the next two subchapters I engage in the close-reading of 50 so-called 'sex initiation' videos shot by Pierre Woodman for Private Media Group Inc, released between 1997 and 2003. I start by the investigation of the site of production where my objective is to assess the influence of each economic agent on the form and interpretation of the final product. The next section is concerned with the meaning-making possibilities engendered by the videos themselves. I demonstrate that the sexuality of East-European women always signifies 'immoderation' either as *too* traditional or as *too* uninhibited and that it is especially the combination of these two that gets constructed and commercialized as the 'superior' sexual fitness of the East-European Woman in the adult industry. I emphasize that it is necessary to investigate the patterns of consumption as well. In the context of the serious dearth of audience research for sexually explicit media I provide a quick glimpse into the viewing practices of online communities, which

allowed me to claim a reconfiguration of the conceptualization of porn users. Certainly they are diverse, knowledgeable, quite savvy of the problematic status of porn and critical of the representational practices of the genre. However, at the same time they are a mostly homosocial group bonding through the consumption of the female form articulating their tastes according to deep-seated patterns of sexism, racism, othering and classism. By exploring some aspects of the reception of the videos I show that the doubly excessive sexual identity accorded to East-European women is registered and (pleasurably) consumed by the audience. I argue that the ethnically attributed psychological and physiological features of Eastern European women in adult media are engendered by specific cultural, political and economic configurations at work in the porn industry. Simultaneously with the study of the videos I suggest that the discourse of adult media draws on the vocabulary and rhetoric of anti-trafficking literature on all three sites of signification: production, the image and its reception.

In this thesis I have set out to illuminate the cultural, political and economic configurations that have led to the symbolic definition of a generically Eastern-European female sexuality, predicated on the discursive exclusions characteristic of othering. The connections between these two discourses are manifold, both quantitative and qualitative. On the one hand since I was looking for the *most popular* sites of discussion the selection of news-reports on sex-trafficking and adult media seem justified. On the other hand there are multiple counter-fertilizations happening between these two, institutionally distinct discourses. First, the 'pornography' of suffering characteristic of the style of anti-trafficking literature opens it up to prurient viewing interests often turning it into sexually explicit media. I believe that it is no accident that both the topic of sex-trafficking – above all when it involves 'white' girls – and porn texts about Eastern-European women are prolific and economically very successful in this timeframe. Second, the discourse of adult entertainment, particularly the Private Castings X series seems to be filtered through and occasionally even patterned by the tropes and rhetorical strategies of a stereotypically reductive imaginary of trafficking. Given their mutually reinforcing nature I argued that both anti-trafficking discourse and that of adult entertainment are informed by the same economy of desire, being invested in the cultural production of historical Others (Stoler, 1995 p. 195). My overall argument is that these two discourses function in the same economy of desire which in this case means that in the East-West directionality of desiring

the Eastern-European Woman represents both nostalgia for 'true' femininity and longing for sexual plenty set in the safe framework of racial sameness.

Both discourses in my study tell the story of powerful subjects looking upon sexual objects, but none of these categories are made up of just about anybody. The distribution of desire implicitly suggests that those who watch are overwhelmingly male, while those under surveillance are always already female. Stoler puts it in her characteristically eloquent style:

For this was a discourse and a domain of knowledge that was productive of and responsive to, taxonomies of power and a range of desires that articulated unevenly with the multiple hierarchies of nation gender, race and class (1995, p. 188).

However, the gendered nature of the sexualization of East-European women is not achieved exclusively through the binary of the active male spectator/client versus the passive female sex-worker, but also by the asymmetry in the roles accorded to men and women from Eastern Europe. It is only the female that gets to be sexualized, illustrated by the marginal position granted to East-European men in both discourses.

In sex-trafficking men are clearly in the background, or even if they emerge they embody the full-fledged stereotype of balkanism as described by Todorova. Actually, the nations that seem to provide the manpower for the operation of trafficking rings are Albania, Serbia and occasionally Russia. Their profiles are similar. They are all extremely macho and aggressive, totally lacking the capacity of empathy who resort to brute force to get what they want. In the hegemonic hierarchy of masculinities this type of physical, unsophisticated, domineering man is a lower level of the performance of masculinity, usually connected to the working classes. Eastern-European men lack the skills of a seasoned businessman or sophisticated smooth talker; therefore they make up the foot-soldiers of the organization and are not running the enterprise. However, in the anti-trafficking discourse the roles of these men are almost insignificant.

In the discourse of adult entertainment they figure even less. The brand 'East-European porn star' refers exclusively to women, even if there are a few men from the region who have made careers in the international porn industry. It could simply illustrate the generally inconspicuous nature of men in porn (except of course for PW, but for different reasons), although historically there are a few names that have been successful in their self-marketing. In

this context the men from Eastern-Europe are again manpower figuring as technicians, porters, mechanics or drivers of the filming crews. Clearly, these two discourses are in the business of sexualizing women and not men.

However there are other popular discussions clustered around the token image of the East-European man, but these rely on totally different associations in order to signify.⁵ Such a metaphor is the image of the ‘Polish plumber’ which overlaps with that of the East-European woman only in regard to symbolic geography, namely that it is only intelligible in the context of an ‘East’ ‘West’ polarity. However, its content is totally different. Deployed mainly to represent the ambivalent effects of labor migration from the countries of Eastern Europe to those in the West the ‘Polish plumber’ refers to the token inexpensive and undemanding worker from the East.⁶ Conceptualized sometimes as a dangerous figure who will create unemployment in the host country, other times it figures as a metaphor for hard and dependable workers. The image seems to have some currency as it has entered the realms of popular imaginary as illustrated by Tom Hanks, the protagonist of the Hollywood production, *Terminal*. Evidently, this is in no way comparable to the much more salient and sexualized roles accorded to Eastern-European women in global symbolic imaginaries.

The concluding part summarizes and offers the synthesis of the main arguments developed in the previous chapters, at the same time that it connects my findings with the theory of sexualization. Conceptualized as an emerging discursive field hosting the debate on female sexuality, it is primarily concerned with the process called the sexualization or pornification of culture. My results nuance the theory of sexualization by showing its unequal distribution according to class, race, ethnicity or body-type. I finish with a discussion about the apparent lack of critical engagement with the processes of sexualization for adult women in Romania and speculate on possible strategies of awareness-raising.

The phenomenon of sexualization is figured as a cultural phenomenon directly tied to the process of the pornification of culture and while problematic in general it is seen as particularly detrimental for young girls and women. Paasonen and Nikunen define pornification

⁵ I thank Ovidiu Pecican for bringing this to my attention.

⁶ For an authoritative expose on the meanings accorded to this metaphor in Hungary and Romania see Antonela Capelle-Pogacean's (2011). "The Polish Plumber and the Imaginaries of the East-West Divide in Hungary and Romania. Old Divisions and New Boundaries in *Studia Europaea* LVI(2).

as *“the expansion and success of the porn industry and play with hard-core representations in fashion, advertising and other fields of popular culture”* (Nikunen&Paasonen, 2007, p. 30). The blurring of the boundaries between the mainstream and the sex industry is again cause for concern not only for feminists or right-wing intellectuals as it used to be the case in the sex-wars but in this extended field of interest is the concern of mothers, teachers, school psychologists, therapists, teenagers, magazine editors, photographers, modeling agencies, and individual women. Revived as a problem primarily related to media representations (and to a smaller degree to products marketed for children) it tends to rehearse very similar arguments to the ones used during the feminist sex-wars. It is feared that the greater visibility of the sexually explicit will interfere with children’s natural development and it will induce sexually precocious behavior and cause psychological harm. With the advent of increasing currency accorded to the phenomenon of pornification there has been significant investment into the research on sexualization. One of the most authoritative accounts comes from the American Psychological Association, which in 2007 has put together a document assessing the nefarious effects of the sexualization of girls in contemporary culture. Their definition of sexualization revolves around four conditions:

1. *“A person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics.*
2. *A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy.*
3. *A person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making.*
4. *Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person”* (APA, 2007, p. 2).

This definition has received quite a lot of criticism, mainly for its disregard for personal agency, but with the widening of the interest pool to children, criticism of sexualizing representations is gaining increased public currency. In my view the biggest problem in the new theory about (mostly female sexual development) is that although it criticizes media it fails to take into consideration the mediated aspect of it. This type of attitude engenders generalizations and the assumption is that ‘what you see is what you get’. Despite the now established tradition of media studies and cultural studies that engage in great detail with the various practices of

interpretation of different media, sexualization theory once again relies on the figure of the consumer as a passive dupe. Since it is also about children it is gaining increasing currency.

Viewing anti-trafficking discourse and especially the discourse of adult media in the light of the above definition of sexualization it can easily be argued that both discourses participate and effectively sexualize Eastern-European women. According to Gill (2007) sexualization is a highly unequal process. That is, young, white and supposedly middle class women are sexualized more often while men, older women, lesbians or women of color don't share the same epistemological space. Additionally, some groups are totally invisible in professional advertising like women above 50 or larger body sizes. What's missing in my view from this otherwise very sophisticated argument is the appreciation that the patterns of sexualization change according to ethnic identity as well. As I have already argued, Eastern-Europeans have to both be women and have a certain ethnicity in order to signify excessive sexuality translated either as 'purity' or 'hotness'. Either way, the hypersexualized image of the East-European female seems to have been a favorite trope of western popular media, a way of effectively capturing the imagination of the audience and both reflecting and perpetuating the symbolic geography of the New Europe in which its Eastern part functions primarily as a sex market. By the use of the Present Perfect Tense I want to underline the still ongoing process of the sexualization of Eastern-European women most of all in adult film, but also in popular culture and, to a certain degree in anti-trafficking writings.

As discourses of 'scientia sexualis' both the rhetoric of anti-trafficking and the rhetoric of adult media are in the business of defining, classifying and ranking desires. However, while they primarily record 'inappropriate' desires they also, inadvertently create spaces for it.

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