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**The Representation of Women in Urban Public Spaces: The Case of Novi Sad**

The primary topic of this research is the representation of women in urban public space. More specifically, it seeks to analyse how women are represented through forms of visual culture that can be found in urban environments. Scholars from various fields have extensively studied how representations of women and femininity serve to mobilise gender ideologies: women have been shown to be passive, persistently sexualised, both ornamental objects and the most common visual allegories for liberty, peace and justice (Berger, 1972; Goffman 1979). These depictions are understood to be not a mere reflection of reality, but an important part in the social, cultural and political construction of gender (Hall, Evans and Nixon, 2013). However, while often culturally situated, this research rarely takes into account the spatial dimension of these portrayals. A sexualised advert seen in a magazine operates differently when displayed on a busy bus stop. Similarly, a sexist message sprayed on a public wall has a different effect than one scribbled in a restroom- on the basis of its presence in a public space. The public visual artefacts we encounter every day- signs, graffiti, monuments, billboards, stencils, posters, and many others- can also profoundly impact the way we perceive and navigate the city, and provide insight into the cultural values of a given community.

The existing literature that explores the interplay of space, gender, and visual culture focuses almost exclusively on Western, neoliberal cities. By focusing on the case of Novi Sad, a city in northern Serbia, this research traces both the distinctive evolvement of gender ideologies within the post-socialist, post-Yugoslav context, as well as the cultural, ideational effects of socialist rule and subsequent transitions— as evident in the urban visual landscape. The collected material encompasses written graffiti, street art and advertisements- at a time where Novi Sad aims to adopt various “creative city” agendas, towards its participation in the European Capital of Culture and European Youth Capital programmes. As many post-socialist cities attempt to assert their new identity in the global market, urban culture becomes heavily regulated by public authority in a struggle to brand the city in alignment what they perceive to be a desirable and authentically European image (Czepczynski, 2008). In this context, numerous forms of street art have been appropriated and used as strategies for culture-led urban development. These often stand in tension with traditional, illegal street art. Hence the research explores the portrayals of women throughout these forms- those deemed acceptable, which are often depoliticised and purely decorative- versus those that are pushed aside or destroyed, speaking not only in terms of who has a right to creative expression in public space, but also what kind of portrayals fit into the desired image of a marketable city. It will further look into the way advertising practices have negotiated the various, often conflicting factors of influence on the construction of post-socialist gender identities, the juxtaposition between commercial and non-commercial portrayals, and the ways in which their placing contributes to the creation of gendered spaces.

Works cited:

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