

RESEARCH EXAMPLE. Description of troubling research situation: de/ contextualising and recontextualising an ambiguity or ambivalence / lamija čehajić

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For the exposition of a research example, unfortunately, I still cannot describe the research project for my thesis – it is still in the very first phases of initial research question formulation and search for literature. For my BA thesis, I would like to establish a connection between classical Greek tragedy, particularly works of Sophocles, and the contemporary perception of the apocalypse, with the hypothesis being that both Greek peripeteia and current global threats and catastrophes offer a chance for a necessary catharsis. Tragedy as an object of desire comes to signify that which is beyond rather than a mere end. However, even in these initial stages, i am becoming aware of the ambiguities that perhaps need to be introduced into the reading of the primary sources, such as the reading of the character of Sophocles' Antigone as a victim of the state, which at this point in the research, i am addressing through diversification of secondary literature.

The research example that I would like to describe here was a very brief one but I have chosen it because it was probably the only piece of research of mine which involved the method of interviewing, and even more importantly, it was a sufficiently troublesome one that it was soon enough completely abandoned. Last year I enrolled in a documentary making class, hoping for a different task than we were assigned – shooting a traditional reportage. I was prepared to make something that would have fulfilled the required informational character of the work, yet would have some artistic value as well. I decided to conduct my research during the summer, which I spent in Bosnia and Herzegovina visiting my family, and interview women who sell woollen socks on improvised stands in the streets of Sarajevo.

The hypothesis was that the sales of the socks allow these women to financially contribute to their households and thus improve their status in the household. Looking back, it is quite clear that i had approached this project with presumptions about these women as subjects, that i myself have represented them as victimised and oppressed by the traditional patriarchal family structure, perpetuating not only them as subordinate subjects who find a way to buy pieces of respect for themselves but also the Bosnian family culture as regressive and inherently violent towards women.

Additionally, now i consider myself able to at least partially reflect on how the showing of the footage filmed in Bosnia in the classroom in Prague could in itself be problematic, especially in the socio-political context which, if it does not demonise the Balkans, romanticises it for its "raw nature" and "kind people". I was once asked if my family had ever had a television, and in 1993 in Slovenia, my mother was shown how to use a toilet, based on the presumption that "down there" they did not have those. Now it seems that i was prepared to produce a piece of research that fed into the categories of "undeveloped", "rural", "poor", "raw", "genuine", "authentic", both in the sense of the people interviewed and the bulky woollen socks, wrapped in the poetics of the Bosnian highlands and sheep – as if advertising the product that arrives directly from the field onto one's foot, while enabling empowerment of women and poor rural families. Ironically enough, currently, the FHS Moodle page features an announcement for the student trip to Bosnia and Herzegovina, luring the students in with the promise of Sarajevo's "unique spell", in which the "European culture merges with Oriental", where one encounters mosques, churches and synagogues "literally meters from one another" (2020).

Retrospectively, i feel ashamed on multiple levels that for this research project i had chosen persons who are oppressed within the socio-political matrix on more than one axis – gender, class, ethnicity, religion and education – and yet the research project practically, due to its context of being a university project abroad, could not have impacted them in any truly empowering manner. I imagined that by compiling information about them i would be able to speak for them – but speak for them to whom exactly? I interviewed two people in total before I decided to drop the class, based on the experience with the second person. The first person was a man coincidentally. He was selling the socks near the vegetable market in the centre, which was the site of the 1995 Markale massacres. As I approached him, i felt that i was, despite my awareness, falling into the interviewer-interviewee hierarchical dichotomy – i told him what my project was about and presented him with all the mandatory ethical research standards and he amiably agreed. However, he could not answer my questions, for he could not understand why on earth would anyone be interested in his socks beyond the possible purchase. He told me that he sells them but his daughter-in-law makes them, and he found my question of whether she gets any money from the purchase ridiculous – they live in the same home, everyone contributes in a way. I wrote down my notes and asked if i could take some photographs and perhaps come some other day that week to film him, and he agreed.

Thinking that the conversation with the man was not very productive, I made my way to the woman who was selling socks next to my high school, The First Gymnasium, and has been there since I can remember, next to fur resellers and a chain of used textbook vendors. I began the interview with the customary announcements of ethical conduct and her agreement. However, as soon as she answered a couple of my questions about where the socks come from, who knits them (she actually imported them from Serbia, which partially denied my hypothesis), she assumed that i am a person of at least some importance and that my project would even be in the television, the elderly woman took my arm quite firmly and started an angry monologue about how rotten the system is – she told me in details how she was arrested and beaten in prison, spat on and tortured, she named people in the government who she claimed were responsible for that, cursing them. I do not remember much because at that point it occurred to me that I had poked something much larger than a 15-minute university reportage could digest. I realised that being in the comfort of Prague, of art school and universities, I had forgotten the realities that people are living from where i felt i had escaped.

It was a very naïve endeavour, and i was not prepared for the project i thought i would be conducting. I did not take into account the political implications of my project, the potential essentialization that i was about to perpetuate, nor the emotional and social needs of the people i wanted to participate in my research. I had virtually nothing to give them in return – the documentary video that i could have made would have been a dead-end, glorifying their struggle for people who would not even be able to go to the old town and buy a pair of sock from them. I realised that perhaps academically i could have been given an authority to speak about “them”, equalising myself with the European academic “us”, conducting a Marxist analysis of the access to the means of production throw which “they” liberate themselves, giving “them” a platform to demonstrate this process. A year ago it did not feel right, for it seemed too big and too complicated – now it feels just plain wrong.