

**Theses of doctoral Dissertation (PhD)**

**THE HUMAN BODY**

**The status of the body in philosophy**

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## I. The objectives of the dissertation

Confronting the body and the intellect, the perishable with the everlasting has been a long-standing, and well-known concept of the Greek Christian philosophical tradition. This contrast naturally leads to the depreciation of the body—in contrast with the glory of the intellect. All this is part of the metaphysical tradition, which has always regarded man as an intellectual being defined by his soul, standing out due to his ability of rationality. This distinguished position provided the basis of a dangerous ideology which raised man above all other (non human) beings and created a victim structure from Humanism. The female sex is also part of this victim structure, because patriarchal thinking has associated the idea of femininity with subjection to the body, animalistic instinctivity, and vulgarity. The idea of a crucial body—soul opposition had first appeared in Plato's and Socrates' teachings and later reappeared in dogmatic Christian philosophy as well; the abyss between the two substances was deepened by Cartesian philosophy. Thus, the duality which governs our philosophical tradition is highly influenced by Christian Ascetism. Our tradition, as a result, assumes man to be, in Freud's words, inherently neurotic: it provides man with a God and a moral order which reject the body on the grounds of its sinful impulses and desires. The repression is, however, in vain: the body is present, and functioning, constantly reminding man of his disowned aspect. This aspect hardly appeared in philosophy before Nietzsche, but has been present in the arts from the birth of our culture. In my dissertation, I analyze the status of the body appearing in works of different art forms: literature, fine art, and film. I do this in order to find the so far "unquestioned" neuralgic points behind the canonized philosophical ideas, still determining Western thought: the questions of inferiority and animality in context of the body.

## II. The structure of the dissertation

Studying the problem of corporeity provides the basis of the dissertation which consists of six parts. The first and last parts function as the frame of the aesthetic and philosophical studies (*First Letter, Second Letter*). The second part (*The Philosopher's Body*) examines the status of the body in philosophy, mainly through the works of Plato and Descartes. The third part (*The Female Body*) discusses alternative approaches and perceptions of the body, which stand in opposition to the patriarchal concepts of the body, mostly through showing

specifically female experiences, like pregnancy, childbirth, or the highly corporeal relationship of mother and child. The fourth part (*The Irritable Body*) focuses on the phenomenon of the frail body, appearing in contrast with the patriarchal body-notion, and taking shape pre-eminently in the experiences of illness, impermanence, and “irritability.” The cornerstone of my dissertation is the fifth part (*The Living Body*), in which I attempt to break away from the traditional definitions of the body which tangle gender based ideas just like they did the opposition-based patriarchal tradition. Instead of a gender-based differentiation and the logic of division, I put forward a neutral, philosophical concept of the body, to which I get, on the one hand, through the previous chapters and the insights they lead to—namely through examining the vulgarity and instinctivity of the body—on the other hand, through a phenomenological and ethical analysis of the phenomenon of being related. I get to the concept of *corporeal anybody* through analyzing the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Lévinas, and Merleau-Ponty, and introduce it as the subject of philosophy, in place of the Cartesian subject. This being, however, can be considered an “anybody” neither in neutral, nor in universal sense, since s/he is defined mainly by its “concretization.” The *corporeal anybody* comes into life in his/her relation with the Other: s/he comes alive through his/her sentient and sensible body. This philosophical subject becomes *direct* and *living*—a specific, present *Somebody*— through his/her relation with the Other and his/her self-articulation as a body (self-expression for the Other). A *Somebody* possesses *flesh* liable to illnesses and impermanence, and as a sensitive, frail being, s/he is at the mercy of others (the Other and the other world). The conclusion of my dissertation follows from the insights concerning the frailty of the body: man becomes the subject of the ethics of responsibility not through his moral obligations, but through his/her dependence: through his/her corporeity intertwined with the prohibition of murder, in other words, through the manifestations or revelations of the *flesh*.

### III. The subject in contemporary Hungarian philosophy

The questions formulated in my dissertation mainly concern the philosophical status of the body, but the problem of the female body gets the most emphasis. My contextualization of the problem must sound radical and new in contemporary Hungarian philosophical discourse. Since traditional philosophical feminism and philosophy with a feminist approach, dealing with questions of the female body have

no representatives in Hungary. This, however, does not mean that I claim my efforts to be without antecedents. *Gender studies*, which is well established in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, have countless followers in Hungary; several antologies and essay collections have been published in the field of feminist critical thinking.<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian representatives of gender studies, however, approach the problem of femininity from the perspective of postmodernism and deconstruction. The feminist discourses that became “fashionable” in Hungary are inspired by the theories of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, and are based on the works of authors like Judith Butler, or Martha Nussbaum (Butler’s critique), Luce Irigaray, H  l  n Cixous, and, last but certainly not least, Julia Kristeva. About Kristeva, I need to point out that Hungarian feminist discourse recognizes her more as a follower of Lacan and less as a pioneer of feminist philosophical thinking. Feminist philosophical thinking does not coincide with deconstruction based critical thinking, which seeks to reinterpret the philosophical and cultural-historical tradition. Of course, the critical attitude cannot be evaded, moreover, it turns out to be quite useful in dealing with questions of female identity. Some studies preferring feminist questions have been published in the area of the history of philosophy by Hungarian authors (for example the works of Jo   M  ria), what is more a book dealing with similar questions has also been published in the field of the history of philosophy and cultural history by a Hungarian author (Hell Judit: *Van-e feminista filoz  fia?*). However, these authors do not raise general philosophical problems. No study has been published in Hungarian so far which specifically deals with the questions of philosophical feminism, or, in other words, which deduces the question of female identity not from sexual differences, but from a universal, or rather, phenomenological body concept (*fleshlike body*).

## IV. Methods

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples of these are included in the following non-exhaustive list:): Judit Butler: *Jelent  s testek. A szexus diszkurz  v korl  tair  l*.   j Mand  tum, Bp., 2005.; Csabai M  rta   s Er  s Ferenc (szerk.): *Freud titokzatos t  rgya. Pszichoanal  zis   s n  i szexualit  s*.   j Mand  tum, Bp., 1997.; Hadas Mikl  s (szerk.): *F  rfiuralom?* Replika k  nyvek, Bp., ; Hell Judit: *Van-e feminista filoz  fia?*   ron, Bp., 2006.; Drozdik Orsolya (szerk.): *S  t  l   agyak. Kort  rs feminista diskurzus*. Kij  rat, Bp., 1997.; Miglena Nikolchina: *Jelent  s   s anyagyilkoss  g. Virginia Woolf Julia Kristeva olvasat  ban*. Balassi, Bp., 2004.; Annemarie Pieper: *Van-e feminista etika?*   ron, Bp., 2004.; Joan Scott (szerk.): *Van-e a n  knek t  rt  nelm  k?* Balassi, Bp., 2001.; S  llei N  ra (szerk.): *A feminizmus tal  lkoz  sa a posztmodernnel*. Csokonai, Debrecen, 2006.

My studies take place in a strictly philosophical context, thus do not coincide with the perspective of *gender studies*. I regard the human body as a (sensing and sensible) phenomenon veined with sensitivity. Thus, the experiences of the female body necessarily appear as experiences articulating the palpability of corporeity (the impossibility of suspending bodily perceptions). Therefore, the analyses appearing in my dissertation are not based on the principles and insights of *gender studies*, but rather make use of a phenomenological approach – even at those points where I use the toolbox of deconstruction to examine and understand different chapters of the philosophical tradition. In the analyses based on the methods of deconstruction, I endeavor to unveil hidden signs resisting canonical readings in different works of art – more precisely in different works of different art forms; for example those of literature, fine arts, and cinema – thus making them available for new interpretational possibilities. To be able to achieve this, I not only do theoretical analysis of works of art, but “the other way round” as well, I also look at philosophical works (for example Plato’s dialogues) as works of art. I do this in order to find the so far “unquestioned” neuralgic points behind the canonized philosophical ideas, still determining Western thought: the questions of inferiority and animality in context of the body.

Thus, dealing with the problem of corporeity, the questions I am seeking an answer to are not those of femininity – what is more, I consider the discrimination of beings on the grounds of sex and the resultant victim structure totally unacceptable. For me, the experiences of the female body provide insight into the “mystery” of human existence. When I talk about the human body, I do not intend to grasp humans as some kind of clever animals whose material givens are topped with some rationality or soul. On the contrary, I regard humans as beings whose bodies are seeped through by the sensitivity and openness of flesh—a distinctive, “flesh-like soul.” I define humans as beings which, through their bodies, are constantly exposed to the world (to other humans, to otherness, to the other world). In the phenomenological definition of corporeity, I rely mainly on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, but discussing the questions of corporeal dependence and victim-ness, I place his theories into the context of the ethics of responsibility. I hope that unfolding the possible philosophical relations of femininity and corporeity in my dissertation, I formulate authentic questions and answers not only in a Hungarian, but in an international context as well.

## V. LIST OF CONCLUSIONS

### (CONTRASTING THE BODY AND THE INTELLECT)

1. The concept of the body gets ontologically degraded in Plato's dialogues. According to Socrates, being at the mercy of bodily processes hinders man from remembering the pure realm of ideas, namely, from knowledge.
2. The worthlessness of the body gets accepted in dogmatic Christian philosophy as well through Neoplatonist mediation. Interpreting ideas to be eternal, Plotinos prepares the way for the doctrines about the other word: he creates a concept of the soul which establishes the speculative image of a perfectly self-enclosed I. His idealism turns into subjectivism, based on repressing any understanding of the body.
3. Christianity connects the concept of sin to the body, thus regards the body to be inferior. In the ascetic philosophical tradition, the body is associated with sinful drives and desires, and exposed to these, humans are unable to rise from the realm of impure animals obeying lowly instincts.
4. The obviousness of corporeal experiences becomes parenthesized in Descartes. The subject in Descartes – along the demarcation line separating body and soul – is understood as a pure, conscious I. This I, which becomes the paradigmatic subject model of Cartesian-rooted western philosophy for hundreds of years, is based on the reflexive cogito, the unshakable intellect.
5. The philosophical tradition established on the (Christian and Cartesian) practice of self-limitation eliminates the authenticity of bodily experiences. Thus, this tradition *loses* the body, since, on the one hand, declares it to be inferior, on the other hand, degrades it to the level of illusion and doubt. The concept of a natural body—a body not regarded as an object, but as an intrinsically experienced, flesh-like body, connected to animalistic instincts, sinful desires and the obviousness of decay—is *missing* from this tradition.
6. Cartesianism created a scientific paradigm in which the idea of a split world (and split humans) became self-evident. Scientific thinking, on the one hand, chose the body to be its object (as an object), on the other hand it chose the soul (as a subject).

7. In a scientific paradigm which divides the world into two different entities, the antinomy of subject and object is insoluble.
8. The division creates its ethical, value-oriented structure, which generates a structure of victimization.
9. This structure of victimization is based on a power structure, the values of which are established by the degree of corporeal dependence.
10. Beings ruled by their corporeity and instincts are on the victims' side – thus, in some sense women (the female sex) as well.

#### **(THE RELATIONS OF CORPOREALITY AND FEMALE IDENTITY)**

11. The philosophical subject of the patriarchal philosophical tradition (the “Subject”) is an intellect-centered being, capable of suspending bodily experiences. Being unable to parenthesize the involuntary, unrestrainable manifestations of her body, “Woman” is unable to identify with this philosophical subject.
12. Distinctively female experiences (menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth etc.) seem to inform us of a horizon beyond human culture, a “foreign land.” These experiences cannot be rationalized, nor can be held back.
13. Women who have no other choice but to experience their intensive bodily experiences “roam rejected” in this philosophical tradition: female identity cannot be created within the framework of patriarchal discourse.
14. The paradigms of female identity can be read or put together from different representations of arts—the representations of fine arts, carrying visual codes (“hidden signs”), make possible a particularly powerful reading.
15. In our culture, motherhood is the most evident identity-model for women.
16. “Mother” is the personification of the non-linguistic function. Through her body and her un-symbolized, natural (-biological) convulsions, a “mother” represents the split, the localized space outside social contact but inside culture which is, by necessity, negated by discourse.

#### **(INSIGHTS ABOUT THE IRRITABLE BODY)**

17. Due to their uncontrollability, the manifestations of the female-maternal body are of imperious power. However, not only women possess uncontrollable corporeal experiences. The experiences of the natural body are given for all embodied beings.
18. The ability of having a natural body is—quite obviously—not a matter of sex.
19. The body of a human being is as irritable as the body of an animal.
20. Marquis de Sade, who got to the margins of philosophical discourse in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, shows us the irritable body in his works. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it gets into the center of thought through Nietzsche's philosophy.
21. *Humans possess irritable bodies.*—This statement, on the one hand, means that, through their bodies, humans are exposed to the world, to the will of another human (or animal): the body, through its senses and sensibility, is exposed to all kinds of physical impacts and permeations – let these be joyful and erotic, or violent, or even life-threatening.
22. *Humans possess irritable bodies.*—This statement also means that through their bodies, which are flesh-like and corporeal, humans are exposed to illnesses and decay.
23. Humans having irritable bodies are frail: are exposed to death.
24. Beings possessing frail and irritable bodies—in other words, humans—cannot be grasped through the subject-concept of the metaphysical philosophical tradition.

**(STUDIES IN SUBJECT-PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGY)**

25. The subject of metaphysics can become the subject only of general and virtual experiences.
26. The seed-like subject structure, based on utter self-enclosure, which follows the laws of the Intellect, does not allow itself to obey other (corporeal) laws of its selfhood or to move towards the Other, alien subject.
27. The metaphysical “subject-framework” is not “compatible” with the living body of a human, endowed with flesh, instincts, and desires.
28. Instead of the closed subject-structure of metaphysics, the existence of an *open subjectivity* becomes necessary, whose most important ability is his/her ability to move.

29. The open subject, with his/her original openness to the world through the body, is characterized by an unceasing “being related”-ness. S/he is in a relationship with the world, other humans, and him/herself.
30. The open subject is able to “step” or “lean” over into another subject only if s/he is able to forget about him/herself.
31. This forgetting, however, does not mean diving into total emptiness, because the subject would thus lose his/her concreteness and livingness. A totally emptied I—like the transcendental ego of Husserl—would become pure intellect.
32. The open subject is, however, characterized by heterogeneity, coincidence with bodily experiences, and an unceasing experience of corporeity.
33. Merleau-Ponty presents corporeity as an alternative of Cartesian cogito, thus reinterpreting the relationship of the subject and the world and dissolving the tense duality between the two. Instead of a subject, he talks about an incarnated subjectivity.
34. Merleau-Ponty regards the world, that he calls an “objective” body, to be flesh, to be a universe of flesh.
35. The objective body contains the I as a phenomenal body. The world opens up only through this sensate-sensible body.
36. For Merleau-Ponty, flesh is neither a physical, nor some sort of ethereal matter or substance, but an “element” which includes the whole existence.
37. Merleau-Ponty’s idea of wild being corresponds with the idea of an anonymous, totally polymorph “flesh-like universe,” with no more beings capable of self-perception. This “flesh-like universe” is the transcendental field of the transcendental anybody. No-man’s land.
38. The subjectivity of the transcendental anybody is based on corporeity in Merleau-Ponty, however, he dissolves the body (the flesh) in the anonymity of the empty subject.
39. Therefore, we can state that Merleau-Ponty does not provide the possibility of a unique, articulate existence for the generic subject of his philosophy.
40. What is more, Merleau-Ponty does not confront his transcendental anybody neither with the irritable body, nor with the dilemmas of its destruction and destructability. The body becomes a dimension, a timeless general term in his philosophy, from which it is impossible to unfold the discrete, concrete body, the

perishable matter—that extraordinary material which, in spite of its dematerialization, is vulnerable and perishable.

41. Conclusion: the open I cannot be understood as “anybody.”

(THE DEFINITION OF *SOMEBODY*)

42. For the open I, which is an unceasing “being related”-ness, the relation means self-realization: falling out of him/herself, coming alive, expression as a concrete *Somebody*.

43. Coming into life: is articulation as flesh—the expression of a unique, concrete being’s presence and living-ness.

44. The open I’s, in other words, the *Somebody*’s corporeity simultaneously means a flesh-like self-perception [*Leib, la chair*], that is to say, the directly experienced body (not through the senses); and the form [*Körper, Corps*], the externally visible, tangible, sensually perceivable body.

45. *Leib* and *Körper* are not separate, but strain into the relation with the Other (chiasmus) intertwined; they enable the perception and understanding of the Other—his/her embrace or refusal and rejection—stratified into each other.

46. *Leib* and *Körper* attain together the sensibility that expresses itself in the open I’s, the *Somebody*’s corporeity, flesh-like-ness.

47. Body as flesh: what we have here is not only a flesh-like self-perception—expressed by the French *chair* or the German *Leib*. Some kind of “depth” or the “inner” glows through the form—the concept of fleshlike-ness expresses this intertwining manifestation.

48. Flesh-like-ness expresses itself for a being who possesses a unique, materialized body (an incarnated being) partly through self-perception—as the phenomenon of life revealing itself. On the other hand, it is expressed in his/her relation with the world as well—in the phenomenon of decay.

49. As flesh-like-ness reveals itself, flesh appears as a vulnerable material (this is expressed by the German *Fleisch*).

50. Flesh (*Fleisch*), as vulnerable matter, denotes a highly sensitive material, which is partly characterized by its exposure to its own sensibility and self-perception, partly by its exposure to a sensitivity happening through the

others' flesh—through intuition, telepathy, games of interweaving or acts of refusal and rejection.

51. Flesh cannot be understood merely as a general sensitivity (see Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh as a general quality of life)—the generality of sensitivity dissolves through its actualization: flesh becomes concrete.
52. Concretization means that in the being, understood as flesh, the "story" inscribed into him/her as his/her own existence becomes actual—through his/her general sensitivity. The actualization, animation or "radiance" of his/her being expresses itself as vibration, tremor and glow.
53. Concretization—becoming present and frail—exposes the flesh-like being in front of the Other, in front of the being who by their relation called him/her into existence, who jolted him/her out of his/her echoless selfhood.
54. The animation of a flesh-like being, a Somebody means concretization as something ever different, in ever different experiences.
55. The realized being strains into a relation with the Other with his flesh and bodily-appearance, which appears as the articulation of his/her being, supplying the Other a flesh with body-limits.
56. The being, with his/her flesh experienced and offered in its finitude, straining into the relation with the Other, risks all his/her existence.
57. Self-expression—for the Other—in a relation is always a concretization, or incarnation.
58. Incarnation is only made possible by life. Life can only be experienced until the body as flesh "breathes," until it strains into the flesh of the world as a "warm matter" full of sensibility.
59. Living beings (not only humans, but animals as well), through their bodies, are exposed to the vulnerable and perishable flesh, to the will of others, to illnesses and decay.
60. The flesh-like-ness of the human body calls out for taking into consideration the limits of life.

## VI. List of Publications

### VI/1. Publications in the same topic:

1. *Miért nem hallgatott soha Sokrates?* = *Határ* 1994. február
2. *Szégyen és erotika. Előadás a Tudománynapi konferencián, Nyíregyháza, 2001.*
3. *Szégyen és erotika = Literatura* 2001/4.
4. *Az önmaga-felejtés erotizált technikái = Vulgo* 2002/1.
5. *Te csak egy testet kaptál. A génhumanizáció etikai kérdéseiről. Előadás. Vulgo-Szalon, Debrecen, 2002.*
6. *A szerelmes és a csaló. Autoerotizmus a karteziánus gondolkodásban. = Vulgo* 2003/3.
7. *Enni és szeretni. Az abjekció kérdése Platón A lakoma című művében. Előadás. Móra Ferenc Szakkollégium, Szeged, 2004.*
8. *A hiányzó test rövid története = Disputa* 2005/7-8.
9. *A tótágast álló Szókratész (Platón és a diploé). In: Nagyerdei megálló. Debrecen, 2005.*
10. *Fátyolos nők és traktoros anyák. A feminizmus és a totális gondolat. Előadás A totalitarizmus és a magyar filozófia című konferencián, Debrecen, 2005.*
11. *Fátyolos nők és traktoros anyák. A feminizmus és a totális gondolat. In: A totalitarizmus és a magyar filozófia (tanulmánykötet). Debrecen, 2005.*
12. *Egy formabontó gondolkodó. Vajda Mihály stílusai = Vulgo* 2005/1-2.
13. *Progresszív-e a parasztgiccs? – avagy női groteszk a szocializmusban. Anna Margit művészete a hatvanas-hetvenes években. Előadás A zsarnokság szépsége – a totalitarizmus esztétikája című konferencián, Debrecen, 2007.*
14. *Hogyan lesz progresszív a parasztgiccs? Anna Margit művészete a hatvanas-hetvenes években. In: A zsarnokság szépsége. Tanulmányok a totalitizmus művészetéről (tanulmánykötet). Kalligram, Pozsony, 2008.*
15. *Az erotika sötét oldala = Disputa, 2009/6.*

## VI/2. Further publications:

### A. In scholarly journals and conferences:

16. *Túlélni az igazság felismerését* = *Határ* 1992. január
17. *A tudás öngyilkossága* = *Határ* 1992. március
18. *Az aktualitás aktualizálása* = *Határ* 1992. május
19. *Áttételek (Kritikai ujjgyakorlatok)* = *Hiány* 1993. november
20. *Számvetés. Tamus István kiállításáról* = *Disputa* 2003/12.
21. *A nagy színlelés regénye. Rakovszky Zsuzsa: A kígyó árnyéka* = *Disputa* 2004/2.
22. *A kiállítás teste* = *Disputa* 2004/3.
23. *Amerikai álom magyaroknak. A Tökmag Tom és a Hórihorgas Tom című felnőtt bábelőadásról* = *Disputa* 2004/6.
24. *Száz év késés? A debreceni képzőművészeti életről* = *Disputa* 2004/7.
25. *Jelen idő. Tar Sándor emlékére* = *Disputa* 2005/3.
26. *Kis debreceni modern. Az új képzőművészeti központról* = *Disputa* 2005/12.
27. *A hatalom művészete – a művészet hatalma*. Előadás a *Művészet és politika* című konferencián, Debrecen, 2008.
28. *Műkritika és értelmezés* = Előadás a *Miért nincs magyar műkritika?* című konferencián, Debrecen, 2010.

### B. In antologies

29. *A heideggeri halálhoz viszonyuló létnek, Ivan Iljics üvöltésének és a fiatal Lukács messianisztikus szakadék-fogalmának különös szimbiózisáról*. In: *Megkerült dilemmák*. Debrecen, 1995.
30. *Előszó*. In: *A zsarnokság szépsége. Tanulmányok a totalitizmus művészetéről* (tanulmánykötet). Kalligram, Pozsony, 2008.

### C. Separate volume

31. Széplaky Gerda (szerk.): *A zsarnokság szépsége. Tanulmányok a totalitarizmus művészetéről*. Kalligram Kiadó, Memento Könyvek, 2008.
32. Széplaky Gerda (Írta és szerk.): *Berszán: Genézis-projekt*. (Kiállítási katalógus), MODEM, Debrecen, 2010.

33. Széplaky Gerda (szerk.): *Az árnyék helye. Tanulmányok a hatalom, a morál és az erőszak kérdéseiről.* Kalligram Kiadó, Memento Könyvek, 2010. (megjelenés alatt, várható időpont: 2010 október)

#### **D. Editorial works**

34. *Határ* című folyóirat szerkesztése. 1993-1995.

35. *Vulgo* című folyóirat szerkesztése. 2001-2008.

36. *Debreceni Disputa* című folyóirat szerkesztése. 2003-2005.

37. *Memento könyvek* sorozatszerkesztése (Vajda Mihállyal együtt): Vulgo Könyvek (2005.) kiadásában 2 kötet; Kalligram Kiadó (2008-2009.) kiadásában 6 kötet