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**Carol Szathmári: monographic references and
photojournalism
PhD Thesis
(Summary)**

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INTRODUCTION

The need for a monography of the life and work of a person who exercised a considerable influence on the society he lived in is fully justified in the case of the artist photographer Carol Szathmari. Having a complex personality, the artist distinguished himself mainly in the filed of painting and photography, being a pioneer of many a field in our country. His multiple professional interests such as that of precursor of war photography, pioneer of the Romanian landscape art, one of the first editors of a Bucharest illustrated magazine, painter-photographer of the Princely Court under five princes are the reasons why Carol Szathmari constitutes the subject of this scientific research regarding his contribution to the history of photography, painting and communication in Romania.

Carol Szathmari influnced the visual representation of the political and social identity in the Romanian cultural space, as well as in conflict areas outside the country so that his notoriety grew during his lifetime both in Europe and outside it. It was therefore unsurprising that he was awarded various distinctions by several heads of state and he became a collaborator of several European illustrated magazines. After his death, he was largely ignored, with the exception of a few researchers who refered to his life and activity. The official recognition of his merits only took place in 2012 when the supposed birthday of Carol Szathmari, the 11th of January, was declared the national day of photography in Romania. Thusly, two centuries after the birth of the Romanian photographer, he is once again a well-known international figure. The personality of Carol Szathmari has generated numerous study orientations in the fields of painting, ethnography, monography and photography. One might even consider that there would be nothing to say if photography didn't recently enjoy an increasing recognition on behalf of the public as a medium of communication or information. An approach from the perspective of the communication sciences, a journalistic one to be more precise, in order to elucidate the relationship of Carol Szathmari with this profession, whose terminology was often wrongly interpreted, is necessary. As suggested by the title, the research in this thesis discusses two reflection sources of significant relevance for the life and work of Carol Szathmari: the monography and the photojournalism. His monography reveals the complicated destiny of a person of great artistic talent, an avid traveller, of modest background, who makes to the status of a privileged artist of the Princely Court and and of the European chancelaries. Having been carried out from indirect rather than direct sources, the yet unfinished reconstruction of the portrait of Szathmari is a continuous quest according to one the most accomplished biographers of the artist, professor Adrian Silvan Ionescu: "It may

seem that there is not much which can be said about him. However, when reading the rich bibliography on him, one can easily observe just how thin the underlying documentation of many who have shown an interest in his personality is” (Adrian Silvan Ionescu 2012: 8).

The photojournalism is the second investigative dimension of the activity of Carol Szathmari since it was the intense portraiture of his time which he authored that recommends him as its true and authorised witness. By means of the war image and the press image Carol Szathmari sought to capture, within the limitations of the photographic process, the specific features of a society on its way to westernisation.

This thesis, *Carol Szathmari: monographic references and photojournalism*, contains a primarily journalistic approach, a field where his activity was not well studied. One will however also deal with the historical and artistic aspects connected to the former, thus giving an interdisciplinary character to the thesis.

THESIS STRUCTURE

The thesis called *Carol Szathmari: monographic references and photojournalism* has a five chapter structure, which combine theory and practice. While this undertaking may seem to be fragmentary, it has to be said that a conscientious choice was made to analyse the multiple facets of the photographic activity of the artist, without omitting the painting and the watercolour, in order to see if Szathmari was, in his artistic development, in his visual language, a servile to the Court which had employed him.

The first chapter contains the introduction to the topic, the motivation of this work and the applied methodology. A place of honour is held by the text transcript, seeing that it analyses 19 century texts, which under the guidance of Prof Ilie Rad, PhD, have been adapted to the current norms of the language.

The second chapter discusses the monographic aspects of the work of Carol Szathmari, synthesizing what has been written on this topic and offering supplementary information, from documents found in archives in order to elucidate some of the controversial aspects of his biography. It has three subchapters which highlight the complexity of the problems which occur in deconstructing the legends surrounding the life of the artist photographer. The first subchapter, Controversial aspects surrounding the person of Carol Szathmari, it proposes plausible solutions to certain problems in his monography, which have previously been unconvincingly addressed, such as his date of birth, the orthography of his name, his exact address in Cluj and the social status of Szathmari. His date of birth (11

January 1812) which was, in fact, his baptismal date, was conventionally, not historically, adopted, for it was the only official date registered in church documents. Of the multitude of variations of his name, *Carol Pop de Szathmári*, has been preferred for it is the name chosen by the Romanian Association of Photographic Artists for the commemorative medal. His social status isn't clear either. Even if his tombstone lists him as part of the nobility, he was of humble origins, being the descendant of some landed gentry (the lowest rank of nobility). It was not his origins that were to propel him in the Bucharest milieu, but the protection of his clients and the sympathy of the patrons of the arts.

The second subchapter, *The Voyages of Carol Szathmari*, reviews his travels in the three Romanian Principalities, to record the Romanian version of reality compatible with the idealised view of the Court. His programme is more artistic than journalistic for it fits in a partial representation of reality leaving aside the problems of the lower classes. Not the condition of the peasant is important in the image created by the artist photographer, but the national identity, defined by the vestments. The European voyages and the contact with the new technical tendencies and means in visual arts was the key element in the formation of the artist. Closely associated with the means of communication (Marshall McLuhan 2011: 135), the voyage was twofold important for Szathmari: it was gnoseologic and educational. It is important that, when we relate to the voyages of the artist in Europe we understand that they were, on one hand, a transformation of the self (the training of the individual) and, on the other hand, the path to modernisation and self-refining of the native space. The knowledge obtained in the West corroborated with the means of communication (watercolours, photography, xylography) have been applied at home with the purpose of making a contribution to the advancement of the communication process. The voyages in the East, some supported by documents, others contested, such as the voyages to Siberia and China, were the sources of his artistic inspiration.

The Subchapter *The photographic activity of Carol Szathmari* highlights, within a theoretical framework, the tension between painting and photography, stressing the meeting between the painter and the new medium of communication which brought him national and international fame. While the artist was not the first to experience daguerrotyping in Romania, he started his photographic experience with talbotyping moving on to the wet collodin process. Using high-performance devices at the most advanced procedures of the time, the artist proved to be an expert of the photographic technique. As an artist, he used, in photography, mostly the portraying as a genre (landscape art and reportage) without creating new direction, only exploring the known ones. This subchapter also offers notable explanations

of the photographic genres used by Szathmari, who does not fall under the typology of the photoreporter familiar to us today, for he was and always would be a documentary photographer. Dominated by the artist's condition, Szathmari always tried to see photography as art, but the main feature of photoreportage is the information while the artistic expression is secondary. Having worked at the dawn of press photography, terms like photoreporter, photo reportage and photojournalism, which would only enter the journalistic vocabulary a decade after his death, would have been unfamiliar to Carol Szathmari. Nonetheless, as a predecessor of photography he was familiar with some of its components such as the photography associated with the idea of document and the photographer seen as a witness to reality, a fact gives the reader the status of eyewitness to the sensational of every day life (Bauret 1998: 18).

The third chapter is dedicated to the purported photojournalism of Carol Szathmari developed in three directions: in the war image, the press image and the political image. The theoretical debate regarding the affiliation of the artist to photojournalism versus the war correspondent leads to the conclusion that he was terribly close to the latter, as a representative of the establishment to the conflict area. The photographs which bear witness to the participation of Szathmari in the Crimean War have determined many researchers to consider him the first war photographer in the world, a hypothesis challenged in this thesis by the presentation of documents which certify the fact that there were photographs from conflict areas prior to this war.

The implication in the two Russo-Turkish Wars, 1854 and 1877-1878, respectively, betray the artist's vulnerability to censorship which he opposed in no way whatsoever. A text-photograph parallel analysis of the work of Szathmari reveals the fact that he was influenced not just by the precarious photographic hardware of the time, but also by the pressures of the political and military establishment. In as far as the press image is concerned, even if it was printed on the newspaper as xylograph, Szathmari even in this guise showed himself to have been a good precursor, by issuing the first illustrated magazine in Bucharest. That magazine was actually meant to familiarise the Bucharest public with the Europeanness from a visual perspective. With only political approval but no financial support to go, this magazine, dependent on the low number of subscribers, proved to be a short-lasting project. The Subchapter *The political image of the time* supports the idea that Szathmari made a name for himself as a good portraitist of the political image, both of the political class and of the princes of the United Principalities. Although he was, as shown, the unofficial painter and photographer to the princes during the Organic Statute, and the official one of their successors, their representation was done according to their legitimacy in claiming power. Out

of the five princes with whom Szathmari collaborated and who enjoyed his services, one has chosen to dwell upon the image campaign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the first of this kind of a modern leader in the Romanian cultural space. Both the documentary analysis as well as the interpretation of the qualitative data collected as a result of the interviews have shown that it was on in the case of Cuza that Szathmari had created a posthumous image with a powerful media function, a fact which actually reveals that his relationship with this prince had been tighter than the one with the foreign-born prince Carol I for whom he built the same type of image as that of his predecessor.

The fourth chapter deals with posterity of the artist, specifically with his promotion in the post-socialist era, when the personality of Carol Szathmari has become a national brand: numerous manifestations have been organized to celebrate him, and two hundred years from his birth, his very birthday (or his baptism day) was declared national photography day in Romania, in order to seal his pioneering contribution in this field for good. After two documentaries *The witness*, *A painter at the dawn of photography*, a national festival with international participation *The month of photography in Romania*, an international conference organised in Bucharest *Szathmari: pioneer of photography and his contemporaries* and numerous exhibitions, both home and abroad, Carol Szathmari has become once again an internationally recognised precursor of photography in world history.

The fifth chapter, containing the general conclusions, is a synthesis of the results obtained during this scientific process, which readily describes the contribution of the artist to the Romanian visual culture, helped directly by his clients and indirectly by the patrons of the arts with whom he interacted.

METHODOLOGY

The research question which underlays this scientific process is aimed at the connection with the political power; was Carol Szathmari, a witness of his time, influenced and conditioned in his visual message by political power? How did he collaborate with the political leaders and with the executive? What factors may lead to this reasoning? are helping questions to identify the elements which favour the artist's submissiveness to the Court.

For this study one has used qualitative methods of research, such as the content analysis, in order to explain the aspects of censorship in the photography during the Crimean War and to dwell upon the topic of political image, more precisely, the image of the political leader in the Romanian culture, the portrait of Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza from the perspective of creativity and media value, using the interview as a method of choice. Both qualitative methods have been accompanied by theoretical information and by contexts.

In the first part, one has tried to identify the elements of the censorship in the visual language of photography, drawing a comparison between itself by means of its two representatives, Carol Szathmari and Roger Fenton in parallel with the written text represented literally by the first correspondent, William Howard Russell and the Russian officer Leo Tolstoy. One must also mention that in the Crimean War, besides the two photographers, the war imagery was kept alive by other artists such as Constantin Guys, J.B.H. Durand-Barger, William Simpson, Adolf Schreyer, Theodor Aman, etc. One has focused on the two photographers for they were the most famous and the most rewarded by the European monarchs. The purpose of this research is to identify forms of military and political censorship in the works of the two photographers. The stated objective targets the parallel between the impartiality proposed by the written text and the version imposed by the authorities in the photographs of the two photographers. How can it be explained that in the beginnings of photography, it presented only an idyllic version of the war, as opposed to the violent perspective revealed by the two representatives of the written text?

It has to be said that for the analysis of this case, one has used the following bibliographic resources: Michael Kunczik, *The saved war: communication during wars*, InterGraf Publishing House, Reșița, an author who indulges in the study of the war correspondent activity of William Howard Russell and with the contextualising of the the forms of censorship promoted by the political and military establishment in the Crimean War. For the activity of the British correspondent one has gathered information from the website. As far as the argumentation of the point of view of Leo Tolstoy one has used his work *Sebastopol Sketches*, translated into Romanian by Ion Frunzetti and E Antonescu, Tineretului Publishing House, Bucharest, 1955. In order to describe the activity of the British photographer Roger Fenton, one has consulted the following documentary and electronic sources Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of the other*, translated from English by Laura Cruceru, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011, Roger Fenton [Letter from 24 April 1855 to Grace Fenton](http://rogerfenton.dmu.ac.uk/), in <http://rogerfenton.dmu.ac.uk/> (accessed on 08/01/2011) the link which enabled one to read the chronological correspondence of Roger Fenton, Morris, Errol, *Which came first, the chicken or the egg?*, in <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com> (accessed on 08/01/2011), a study which discusses the most famous photograph of Roger Fenton, *The valley of the shadow of death*. The photographic activity of Carol Szathmari has been closely followed by analysing the studies of Adrian Silvan Ionescu, *Cross and the crescent: the Russo-Turkish War of 1853-1854 in faces and images*, Biblioteca Bucureștilor Publishing House, 2001, and *The Crimean War: 150 years since it ended*, Istros Publishing House, Braila, 2006, respectively.

With regards to the political image, the purpose of this research wishes to evaluate the image of the Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza, created by Carol Szathmari, an image previously unexplored in the studies and researches of the Romanian researchers preoccupied with the life and activity of the artist from Transylvania.

One of the objectives strived for is to evaluate the image created by Carol Szathmari compared to the one created by his contemporaries. While the author situated himself above his countrymen by his creations, the comparison has been extended to the works of the foreign authors (Jean Marie Alophe) published in French illustrated magazines. Debated will be the elements connected to the composition of the political image and to the defining characteristic of each portrait, which renders the identity of Alexandru Ioan Cuza. In addition to the comparison with other works, one will also highlight the role of the message of the creations of Szathmari and the power of expression of the portrait of Cuza and that of Carol I, whose image creator he would continue to be.

Another secondary objective is connected to the perception of the popularity of Szathmari, both in the contemporaneity and for the posterity. How can it be explain that only in the case of Carol Szathmari one can speak of the the posthumous image of Prince Alexandru Iona Cuza, which remaind in the memory of the collective mind, but not that of his contemporaries? These are the research questions by means of which the identification of the eloquent answers of the experts is attempted:

- What is the feature brought about by the artist Carol Szathmari in the creation of the Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza?
- What image strategies make the creations of Szathmari so remarkable?
- How can one explain the popularity and the mediatisation of the sathmarian portrait in the socialist and post-socialist period, inspiring the political leaders of the two political leaders?

One will not insist so much on the causality or the effects of the the political image as on studying the image itself as a product of the creation of reality, which has become a media construct.

The interview was administrated to a number of twelve people of various professional backgrounds: history, visual arts, sociology and journalism. While it was initially planned to select an equal number of respondents from each field, one has encountered the problem of refusal and therefore the field with the highest number of respondents is history (5 people),

followed by visual arts (4 people, 3 photographers and 1 sculptor), sociology (2 respondents) and a journalist (1 respondent).

RESULTS

After the identification of the elements of censorship in the visual language of photography one has noticed that there have been three forms of of military and political censorship during the Crimean War (1853-1856):

- on the language level, so that everyone, from general to the foot soldier, regardless of the military rank, would refer to the war ironically, calling it a “walk”, a “short trip to the countryside”, or by using of the French term “bataille”, thus referring to the war as a match between two sports teams.
- legal, by applying the “general order” law, which marked the advent of military censorship in the history of world press, which required that the journalists subject to the military might, otherwise they be expelled or sanctioned with a penal fine.
- the dispatching to the conflict area of documentarists, artists and journalists under the direct control of the political establishment, accompanied by officers who would offer them protection.

Thus, the censorship imposed by the executive was supposed to hide the reality of the war. It meant publishing information, either textual or visual, which would lead to the character of the war, i.e. towards the patriotism of the soldiers and not to their suffering. The different information which came from the war correspondents demonstrated the subordination or the lack of it to the perspective drawn by the military and political power. William Howard Russell and Leo Tolstoi would also mention in their writings the version unacceptable for the establishment, while Carol Szathmari and Roger Fenton would offer only the idilic version of the war, the only one which was convenient to to the executives of the great monarchs, who would bestow distinctions upon tem. The distinct features of the message of the message of the two writers who vehemently opposed censorship were:

- the transparency towards the horrors of the war regarding the amount of damage and the presentation of the situation of the wounded. The carnage of the battles, the terror and many of the dramatic aspects were rendered by the vivid power of the word. For Tolstoi was not the expression of the patriotism, but *a house of pain, a terrible place*, wherefrom the individual, once liberated, feels a mixture of relief and fear generated by the memory which cannot be erased.

- the harsh criticism of the officers for the hazard they had created. William Howard Russell did not hesitate for a second to incriminate the inefficient measures taken by (the British general) Lord Raglan, considering him an incompetent military leader.

- the promotion of the concept of civic press which fights for the rights and liberties of man. The articles of William Howard Russell generated a public protest, which determined the government to change its attitude, giving permission to Florence Nightingale and to a group of 38 nurses to offer medical assistance in Turkey. His reports produced serious attacks in the government voiced by the liberal John Roebuck who asked for an inquiry which resulted in the resignation of the Earl of Aberdeen from the position of Prime minister.

The censorship had an effect on the work of the two photographers sent and protected and decorated by the military and political establishment, in as much as the content of their photographs render only the image of a domestic and penny dreadful war. The features of their message are:

- the immortalisation of a war without the dead. The well-known photograph of Roger Fenton *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* is a portrait of its absence of a war without the dead (Susan Sontag 2011: 52), thus obeying the order of the imperial family "No dead bodies".

- Photographing the officers, the soldiers, the encampments of the fighting troops as an expression of patriotism. The political establishment was interested in approving and rewarding only the photographs which promoted the support towards the sacrifice of the soldiers, based on honour and patriotism, while the images of the dead soldiers were considered taboo. The war seen by the two photographers may be defined as *an open air picnic of the soldiers* (Michael Kunczik 2002: 74)

- the artistic presentation of the war as far as the romantic artist Carol Szathmari was concerned. His interest was focused on the freshness of life, on the living movement concentrated in the harmony of the smartly matched details. He was interested in the frames depicting life, organisation and strength.

In conclusion, the journalistic message, conditioned and rendered by the photographs from Crimea, did not have the desired effect on the perception of the onlooker. Even if the photograph had managed to double the real object, its message is evaluated according to the credibility of the source text. The realism of William Howard Russell and Leo Tolstoy eclipses the idealism of Carol Szathmari and Roger Fenton. The text has demonstrated that it outclassed the photography, for it was the first to offer real information, while photography offered only familiar information. Military photography had a lot to wait in order to achieve its goal of illustrating the written text and to acquire the value of photo reportage. Szathmari

cannot be justified solely for he assumed the artistic perspective as he was rewarded by Queen Victoria who had ordered him to avoid taking photographs of dead bodies. Thusly, one is bound to subscribe to the hypothesis that the Romanian artist was aware of the preferences of the crowned heads of Europe, and he therefore conceived his album according to their expectations. No evidence that any was subjected to any pressure has ever been found, but his desire to make a name for himself, facilitated by the royalty of the European powers, was enough to subordinate the manner of thinking of the artist.

A century and a half later, the image of the prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza, created by the painter-photographer Carol Szathmari, still enjoys the attention of the Romanian public, without having lost any of its appeal. Following a detailed debated, and with expert help, the images of the artist have been evaluated in terms of their creativity and mediatisation. The superiority of the work was supported by the following explanations:

- The use of a complex image campaign, to render the image of a leader, which was required by the representation of the artist and the representation received by the public sphere.
- The highlighting of an image which reflected the greatness of the head of state and the synchronisation of the mechanisms of conception and reception promoted by the actors of the political image. The performance he achieved places him not only above the representations of the other artists, but well above that of his other representations, thus recommending him as the first image creator of the Romanian culture. His oeuvres have become forms of propaganda and persuasion.
- The mixing of all means of visual representation, from photography, through lithography and on to painting, exploring all their technical advantages in order to create an image, on one hand, and to answer the desire to promote an image by all means from the institutions of the state to the average citizen, on the other hand. Szathmari proved to be a great thinker in the management and distribution of light, in the use of rich symbolic elements and in the assignment of a typology which turned the political leader into the benchmark of political legitimacy.
- The mediatisation of the image is due to the process of composition and the image campaign of the totalitarian political leader. The association of the image with the illustrious figures of the Romanian rulers have served as a reference in the search of the altered legitimacy of post-socialist the political leader.
- According to the interviewed experts, the image of the prince created by Carol Szathmari, will always be just as appreciated both for the creative means and for the impact of Prince Ioan Alexandru Cuza in the Romanian politica

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