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DEPARTMENT OF HUNGARIAN LITERATURE**

DOCTORAL THESIS

**PHOTOGRAPHY
IN CONTEMPORARY
HUNGARIAN LITERATURE**

SUMMARY

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Keywords

contemporary literature, Hungarian literature, photography, photoliterature, medium, iconic turn, intermediality, media combination, intermedial reference, ekphrasis, city books, memory, digital modernity

Research Questions and Objectives of the Dissertation

Photography is an emblematic medium of the twentieth and twenty-first century that affects most areas of human life. Its invention and spread brought about the need to reinterpret (self)representation, memory, and thinking about time; but it also represented a turning point in the self-interpretation of fine arts and literature. Consequently, the ways in which literature approaches photography, too, are – as a sort of answer to the otherness of this specific medium – manifold. In my thesis I analyse how photography appears in contemporary Hungarian literature. From the variegated array of relationships I focus on the ones that enable intermediality as a possibility of creating artistic value: works emerging from the combination of photograph and literary text, as well as works that integrate photography into literature's system of tropes and poetic structure. My examination proceeds exclusively from the direction of literature, whereas the research objectives are: to show, by exploring as many examples as possible, how productive it can be to bring together these two media for artistic purposes; and to illustrate with case studies the foundational areas in which photography meets literature.

I am interested especially in the main medium of photography and literature, the book format. Apart from the often unintentional effects of paratexts, I examine books specifically designed as photoliterature. At the same time, it should be mentioned that in this new domain of artistic creation important works and projects are born that are accessible exclusively on internet platforms. Beyond the analysis of individual works, therefore, this thesis aims to map also the distinctive thematic and question areas in which the post-1990 Hungarian literature turns to photography. I highlight representative examples through which I point to the variety of photoliterary creations and the diverse possibilities of collaboration between the two media. In my case studies I also attempt to apply a technical terminology that can be used to interpret the image–text paradigm as a whole and photoliterary works as a specific area of intermediality.

I classify the works analysed in this thesis according to the type of photographs that appear, respectively are evoked therein. For it is significant whether photoartistic creations or rather amateur shots or private photos are associated to the text. This decision is influenced mostly by the problematic of the work, and its theme. I would like to show that photographs of different genres and types appear at the forefront of literature by way of answer to various questions, respectively of raising further questions; correspondingly, the intermediality of each work serves multiple artistic aims. When selecting works for examination, I strived to exemplify a wide range of forms of intermediality and also a great variety of the issues these works of art deal with. The analyses attempt to highlight how the different forms of photoliterature function, and how the intermedial character of the works affects the formation of meaning.

For instances that can be included in the category named by Irina Rajewsky media combination¹, the following fundamental questions can be formulated for each work: What is the purpose of combining the two media? Which photograph types are we talking about? Was the text created first, or the photograph? How does / would the two media work without the presence of the other? What extra meaning does the combined presence of the two media bring? What type of relationship can we observe; into which form, and which genre can we include the given creation?

In the case of the second category, named by Rajewsky intermedial reference, I concentrate on identifying in the given works possible medial markers and figures that bring into play the medium of photography. What could be at stake when a text turns to the medium of photography? What central question brings forth the appearance of this medium? How does the invited *other* shape language, poetic strategy, and narrative techniques?

The Structure of the Thesis

In the first chapter of the thesis I present the theoretical premises by which the connection between photography and literature can be interpreted in the broader context of image–text relationships. In the course of my research I found that the analysis of the intermedial relationships between photography and literature presupposes a scientific-theoretical paradigm that ought to build in equal proportion on the fruits of shifts in humanities defined as medial, cultural, and visual turns. As starting point for my analysis of

¹ RAJEWSKY 2005: 50–64.

the *image–text* relationships in the selected works I use W. J. Thomas Mitchell’s interpretations resulting from the humanities paradigm shift he named pictorial turn.² Wanting to go beyond the comparative analysis of literary works and artistic creations, Mitchell aims to explore the variety of image–text relationships in general, and to evaluate and interpret the quality of these relations. Correspondingly, in our case, the two media set in connection are the literary text and photography, the photographic image. Photography represents here a broad category, according to the status of the person who creates the picture (photoartist, amateur photographer, a person who takes a family picture, etc.), the theme, and the genre of the photograph; it also implies a tradition of cultural practices associated to the production and use of pictures.

For my analysis of individual works I sourced fundamental considerations and the conceptual apparatus from theories of intermediality. As Henk Oosterling and Irina O. Rajewsky notice, the concept of intermediality suggests basically a state of permanent in-between. With the media combinations presented in my thesis the attention of the receiver is constantly in motion because of the proximity of the two different media. But such an oscillation, which calls forth the receiver’s activity, can be brought about also by works that build on the actual absence of images, and on intermedial references.

The second chapter of the thesis outlines those elements of the methodology and conceptual framework developed for the study of the intermedial character of arts that can be used in photoliterary analysis. To surpass the heterogeneity of views and expressions connected to the phenomenon of intermediality, Rajewsky developed a conception of intermediality attuned to literary studies by introducing three specific subcategories (*medial transposition, media combination, intermedial reference*).³ In the analytic parts of the thesis I use the conceptual network developed by Rajewsky to reveal step by step the mechanisms of cooperation between the two media.

The third chapter aims to introduce the concept of *photoliterature*, and to present the relevant sources and secondary literature. As an expression that defines a specific area of intermediality, *photoliterature* can refer in broad sense to creations grounded in some form of cooperation between these two media. In my thesis I examine instances where we can perceive literature turning to photography. In the following sections of the chapter I also outline the traditions of photoliterary analysis to which my thesis belongs, as well as the fruits and merits this research perspective bears for Hungarian literary studies.

² MITCHELL 1994.

³ Cf. RAJEWSKY 2005: 43–64.

The fourth chapter overviews the characteristic settings in which literature encounters photography, and sets landmarks in the field of Hungarian photoliterature. I show how the works that form the object of the present research fit into the diverse category of photoliterary creations.

The fifth chapter, representing the more sizeable section of the thesis, maps the scientific, technical and social context in which this specific mode of imaging, photography, appeared; as well as the cultural and aesthetic effects the appearance of this new medium had and continues to have. This is followed by the overview of photography theory in its major lines. In the art-theoretical discourse of the second half of the twentieth century and the very beginning of the twenty-first century theory of photography is dominated by the influential writings of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag. In the chapter I overview these three writers' most defining views of photography, and I delineate the fundamental concepts they introduced. Thereafter I present briefly the theory developed in Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, which sets the medium of photography in the context of the information society of our age. In line with the considerations of these four theoreticians, I look for ways in which the medium of photography and its intermedial relationships can be described.

In the following section of this fifth chapter dedicated to researching the essence of photography I try to describe this medium by highlighting aspects through which it can relate to literature. In the first step, I try to formulate a technical definition void of value judgment, but without losing sight of the plurality of this medium, which springs from its diverse social functions. In the next step I outline the social contexts of photography, the life moments, and the cultural correlations in which this technical medium plays an exceptional role. In the following subchapters I explain the categories of photograph types, characteristic vehicles, and forms of material presentation, as well associated cultural practices, with the purpose of establishing an adequate background for the concrete analyses that will explore intermedial relations.

The next, sixth, chapter of the thesis undertakes to place photoliterary phenomena in historical context. Following this, I analyse the texts of *Fényképészeti Lapok*, published at Cluj in the second half of the nineteenth century, to show how the dissemination of the new medium shaped a type of observation and reflection we could term photographic vision, and which is a frequent element of contemporary literary works, too.

In the seventh chapter I map new forms and genres, new traditions of literary culture created by the combination of literature and photography. When one scouts the literature of

the past 25–30 years, it becomes evident that the publication of photoliterary works increased in numbers at the beginning of the 2000's. In many respects, Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, as well as W. G. Sebald's novel entitled *Austerlitz*, which represent two types of intermediality I study, illustrate well the view elaborated in my thesis. At the beginning of the 2000's, a rich reception in Hungarian language grew around both works. This fact underscores their significance and their influence on Hungarian literature and literary interpretation; therefore, in this chapter I also proceed to their detailed presentation.

The eighth chapter presents works that reflect three important thematic areas of media combination. Firstly, I cover a photoliterary field with far-reaching tradition, namely city books. I analyse three Budapest books, which have in common the fact that they transcend the idealised presentation of emblematic places, destined for tourists, and present the city from the perspective of the everyday life of those who live therein. In the book of Lajos Parti Nagy and Bruno Bourel, entitled *Lightscares*, the two media become co-art. Poet and photograph create a poetic structure that not only reveals the feel of the Hungarian capital in the 90's, but also confronts the audience with the contradictions of the period following the fall of Communism, and incites to take attitude. Virág Erdős's volume of poetry entitled *Világító testek* is accompanied by photographs taken with her own mobile phone. The amateur shots and the poems form a unique poetic perspective, which presents groups that remain invisible in society, parts of the city that remain hidden. The volume of János Térey entitled *Átkelés Budapesten* is a collection of short stories in verse, alongside which we can sample photographs from the Fortepan archive. The book evokes the city's industrial zones, peripheral areas, housing estates. It reveals how the memory of past ages becomes invisible in these parts of Budapest, as well as how districts deprived of both memory and development become preservers of some withered age and, through this, the gray background of emptied lives. The inlaid photos, the cited musical pieces and the Google Maps page afferent to the book offer an alternative to pacing Budapest that, in counterpoint to the reserved narrative voice, enables the receiver's personal involvement.

The next chapter circumscribes the domain of reckoning with the historical past with reference to photoliterature. In his recent novel entitled *Természetes fény* Závada Pál writes the histories of the Second World War by lining the running text with black-and-white photographs from various archives. The volume, similar in structure to Sebald's *Austerlitz*, can be regarded as a sort of synthesis to Závada's earlier sociographic works and novels, in which photography plays equally a key role. In this work, which employs the infinite

diversity of the strategies of intermediality, the cited, thematised or inserted photographs form an organic part of the narration. At times discouraging, at times complementing one another, the two media enter into a constantly oscillating dialogical relationship. Knowing that in the narration of the past no single voice or medium holds the monopoly of credibility, this being in-between of the work can be interpreted as a new experiment in the problematisation of the possibilities of historical narration.

In the final part of the chapter I examine the question of intermediality in the context of digital modernism. Firstly, I seek to answer how this concept can be interpreted in the world of digital technology, which absorbs all other media. Then I look at new distinctive features of literature that can be delineated in the age named by Alan Kirby digital modernity.⁴ In this chapter I present the contemporary verse anthology *InstaVers* and the online project connected to it, which attempts to shape new modes of popularising literature by adapting to the image-consumer habits of digital modernism.

In the ninth chapter of my dissertation I analyse works in which intermediality occurs not through the concrete presence of images, but through evoking the specifics of this medium with the support of the strategies of intermedial reference. The works of László Márton and Gábor Schein address questions of historical and personal memory from the standpoint of photography. The *Árnyas fõutca* constructs its poetics on the analogy of album viewing, *Retus* on the analogy of picture retouching. A key device in both books is ekphrasis, which avails itself, since it does not use actual images, of the poetics of absence. The novel of László Márton is actually based on a loose fabric of image descriptions; thus, its language is shaped by characteristics that denote ekphrasis. In the volume of Gábor Schein ekphrasis appears as a genre in itself, and gains metaphoric meanings that are revealed in the nexus of the entire volume.

The analysis of Krisztina Tóth's volume of short stories, *Pixel*, places again the domain of intermediality on the horizon of digital modernity. The title of the book refers to the fundamental unit of digital imaging, the pixel, and can be interpreted as a metaphor for the narrative strategy of the short story cycle and its narrative methods. In my analysis I argue that the volume functions according to the model of photomosaics, where independent small units can combine into a larger whole, provided we look at them from the right distance. Krisztina Tóth creates the in-between characteristic to intermedial texts with the poetics of the change of pace, and with the continuous movement of approaching-distancing.

⁴ KIRBY 2009.

In the last chapter of the thesis' analytical part I study the volume *Polaroidok* of Márton Simon. The volume brings into play a technique that can be regarded as transition between traditional technologies of producing pictures on paper and digital imaging: the Polaroid. I analyse the poet's monostichs as short poems that strive to transcend traditional structures and genres, but without renouncing or definitively rejecting them. Thus, the polaroid appears in the volume of Márton Simon as an experiment to create poetic language and structure, as a possible new genre.

Conclusions

In the course of my research it was made clear that in situations where certain issues are tackled, the photograph, by virtue of its medial characteristics and its functions in culture, becomes a medium emphasised almost by necessity in literature. Works that bring up questions of historical and personal memory turn to photography as the *other* of verbal expression when considering, among others, the possibilities and questionability of referentiality, experience of time, objectivity, and narration of history. Here photography can work as a partner; it can carry the function of accreditation or discouraging; and it can be the source of unity, as well as fragmentation. In works that circumscribe the domain of personal identity, photography can appear as a particular reflection, as the metaphor of the self or even of alterity, but also as an instrument to create language. In very many cases city books result from the collaborative handwork of a photoartist and a writer / poet. Photography represents for literature a cognitive structure and a world-view that are in many aspects akin, but fundamentally still offer new possibilities, and new receptive and auctorial methods. With the figures of intermediality, literature dons in many cases this specific view. In the age of picture and digital media photography becomes in certain situations the mediator of literature; it constitutes an interface that paves the way, and creates a connection between work and receiver. It can also be stated, of course, that in many cases these recurrent topics constitute overlaps between the structural categories presented above.

The visual, easy and quick to reach by masses given the increasingly renewed technologies of picture production, dissemination, and consumption, became at the end of the twentieth century the reigning medium of communication and knowledge. Although essential concerns connected literature to the domain of the picture even before photography appeared, the question of its relation to other media – so, too, the new media of the picture – emerges in new form and sharper focus in the age of multimediality and digital modernity. As Walter

Benjamin, Susan Sontag as well as Vilém Flusser formulated concerning the massification of photographs, the man of our age needs a new kind of knowledge, visual literacy, and critical view to be able to navigate this world. In the creation of this critical view, this self-reflective relationality a key role is played, I think, by literary works that transcend the competition between the two media, and bring about a fruitful dialogue between pictures and texts. Such works react against the passivity of the receiver (consumer), and create through their intermedial character and their being in-between the reflection of both media.

After analysing the works by close reading it can be stated, therefore, that these works no longer display the medial competition between picture and text, neither do we see attempts to defeat with linguistic instruments fears against the power of images. By surpassing the opposition of medial power between image and language, the contemporary photoliterary works presented here offer potential answers to foundational questions of the age of the Image: What can we do with the inherited pictures amassed in archives? What do these pictures tell about our individual and collective past? How is it possible that, in the golden age of the easy and quick manipulation of photos, we still allow for the illusion of verisimilitude promised by them? In a world of shocking images and definite linguistic aggression, what pictorial and linguistic instruments do we still have for authentic (artistic) expression?

A further fruit of the thesis can be considered the overview construed from thematically diversified sources of secondary literature, which in its synchronic and diachronic description of the photograph as a medium maintains its focus throughout on research lines that interest literary studies.

My dissertation attempted to present, to map in a comprehensive way a larger field of photoliterary works. As a next step, I believe deeper research insights that specialise in individual thematic areas (city books, photoliterature and remembrance, photoliterature in digital modernity, travel literature, etc.) should be brought to fruition.

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