

BABEŞ–BOLYAI UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF LETTERS  
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**Postcards of the imaginary.**  
**Zoltán Andory Aladics about rural life**  
**ABSTRACT**

**PhD supervisor:**

Prof. univ. dr. Pozsony Ferenc

**PhD student:**

Kedves (Horvát) Anett

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# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	7
1.1. Visual Methodological Perspectives of Critical Discourse Analysis .....	17
1.2. Context of Image Theory and Photography Theory .....	26
1.3. Context of the History of Science .....	36
1.4. Context of the History of Technology .....	42
1.5. The Genre Context .....	46
1.6. Context of the History of Style. The Hungarian Style .....	57
1.7. Historical Context. The Small Hungarian World (1940–1944) .....	62
1.7.1. <i>Tourism in Transylvania between 1940 and 1944</i> .....	68
<b>2. The First Level of Searching for Meaning</b> .....	75
2.1. The <i>Photomaginator</i> : Zoltán Andory Aladics (1899–1990) .....	79
2.2. Pictures in the Aladics Postcards .....	83
2.3. Titles of the Aladics Postcards .....	86
2.4. The Spatial and Material Elements of the Aladics Postcards .....	90
2.5. Characters of the Aladics Postcards .....	96
2.6. Examples of Postcards Made by Other Photographers in the Transylvanian and International Context <b>Hiba! A könyvjelző nem létezik.</b>	
<b>3. The Second Level of Searching for Meaning</b> .....	105
3.1. The 20 <sup>th</sup> -Century Hungarian Discourse on Tourism .....	105
3.1.1. <i>The Image of Transylvania as Viewed by the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Hungarian State</i> .....	108
3.1.2. <i>The Image of Transylvania as Marketed by OMIH [Hungarian National Office                 for Tourism]</i> .....	110
3.2. The Aladics Illustrations in OMIH's Guidebook .....	123
3.3. The Toolkit of Aladics's Manner of Visual Expression .....	126
3.4. The Relevance of an Ideology of the Past Century .....	135
<b>4. The Third Level of Searching for Meaning</b> .....	141
4.1. A Methodological Attempt to Interpret the Hungarian Style as a Photographic Paradigm .....	142
4.1.1. <i>Photographic Representational Paradigm</i> .....	144
4.1.2. <i>Competing Paradigms in the History of Hungarian Photography</i> .....	148

4.1.2.1. The Hungarian Paradigm .....	149
4.1.2.2. The Social Paradigm .....	150
4.1.2.3. The New Ways of Hungarian Photographers.....	153
4.1.3. <i>The General Characteristics of the Hungarian Paradigm</i> .....	157
4.2. The Artistic Discourse of Hungarianness.....	164
4.2.1. <i>Cross-genre Transitions in the Hungarian Artistic Expression</i> .....	171
4.2.1.1. Interpretative Repertoires.....	173
4.2.1.1.1. Photographic Repertoire.....	173
4.2.1.1.2. Pictorial Repertoire .....	176
4.2.1.1.3. Cinematographic Repertoire .....	177
4.2.1.1.4. Literary Repertoire .....	187
<b>5. Conclusions .....</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>6. Prospects of the Photographer's Copyrights and the Researcher's Right to Free Use</b> .....	<b>217</b>
<b>7. Bibliography.....</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>8. Data Repository.....</b>	<b>235</b>
<b>9. Annexes .....</b>	<b>259</b>
9.1. First Level .....	259
9.1.1. <i>Photographs</i> .....	259
9.1.2. <i>Written Sources</i> .....	261
9.1.3. <i>Transcribed Version of the Interview Conducted with Collector Bence Gál</i> ....	266
9.1.4. <i>Postcards Depicting Romanian Folk Life in Morlaca</i> .....	270
9.1.5. <i>Transylvanian and International Postcards</i> .....	272
9.2. Second Level .....	282
9.2.1. <i>Abstract of the Content Analysis of the Aladics Postcards</i> .....	282
9.2.2. <i>Abstract of the Content Analysis of the Information Booklet Titled Szállodák, penziók és villák [Hotels, Pensions, and Villas]</i> .....	290
9.2.3. <i>The Map of Transylvania in the OMIH Guidebook</i> .....	305
9.3. Third Level.....	306
9.3.1. <i>A Comparison of Photographs Taken by Famous Photographers in the Hungarian Style and Aladics's Postcards, Based on Károly Kincses's Album Titled Mítosz vagy siker. A magyaros stílus [Myth or Success. The Hungarian Style] (2001)</i> .....	306
9.3.2. <i>Examples of Interpretative Repertoires</i> .....	314

**Keywords:** Zoltán Andory Aladics, small Hungarian world, postcard, discourse analysis, Hungarian style, tourism development programme, vision vs visuality, individual perspective vs scopic regime, interpretative repertoire

From their early stages, the various fields of ethnography and anthropology have given primary consideration to studying the visual aspects of culture. In line with Ernő Kunt's definition, 'in the broadest sense, [culture] is the sum total of the acquired a genetic knowledge necessary for and enabling man's community existence', and visuality is 'environmental perception, knowledge acquisition realized through the eye. Additionally, it is a method of systematizing, storing, and transmitting, likewise in a manner perceptible to the eye.'<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic and anthropological literature do not take an exclusively methodological view on visuality, as the latter can make for a relevant research subject as well.

Traditionally, there are two approaches mentioned in references to ethnographic photography. In the relationship between ethnography and photography, photographs can serve either as a source or as a methodological tool. The first scenario does not involve an elaborated methodology aimed at photography for ethnographic purposes. However, the second approach may feature photography as a conscious methodological need for the ethnographer, an integral part of observation or, if you will, a research evidence. Both approaches originate from the recognition that photographs inherently carry a body of ethnographic knowledge, as we are speaking of visually recorded documentations even if the shots were not taken explicitly with ethnography in mind. Indeed, visual content conveys information in all cases: on the figures visible in the picture, on events, on the circumstances of creating the photograph. Besides, photography is a procedure specific of a certain era, which follows photo aesthetic principles characteristic of the given historical period, carries discernible stylistic features, and so on.

The research I conducted, however, follows an approach that takes a different course from the traditional ethnographic lines of interest. A novel scientific observation of topics related to visuality can be traced back to the recognition of the so-called *pictorial turn*. Stuart Hall<sup>2</sup> provided the first description of the phenomenon pointing to the changes taking place in societies following modernity. The change consists in visual content becoming part of everyday life to such an extent that individuals come to interact with the world primarily through a visual representation of things. Martin Jay's<sup>3</sup> concept, *ocularcentrism*, refers to the turn that through

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<sup>1</sup> Kunt 2003, 151.

<sup>2</sup> Hall 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Jay 1993.

this change the world becomes equal to what we see. In this new social determination, culture is not a set of things but a process: a series of social practices. As such, culture can be examined through meanings passed on among various social groups.

My study is an attempt at analysing the postcards of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century photographer from Miercurea Ciuc, Zoltán Andory Aladics. These postcards, nevertheless, represent but a small fragment of an oeuvre, amounting to four years of the photographer's lifework, limited to the period of 1940–1944. Historically speaking, these postcards are imprints of an important and defining period of time, and their closer scrutiny leads to an understanding of the particular era's scopic regime and discursive operation. All the same, it would seem important to emphasize that the manner of visual expression of the postcards presented in my paper cannot be equated with the photographer's activity. Zoltán Andory Aladics was a master photographer – as all fellow masters of his age, he practised photography as a profession, in his studio, and also worked on orders. It is not my place to judge, either as an individual or as a researcher, the artistic quality of his works, which makes a clear distinction between a personal and a researcher's attitude all the more important. In both of my capacities, I approach Zoltán Andory Aladics's work and photographic images with the utmost respect and humility. As a researcher, however, I view Aladics's postcards as the projections of cultural phenomena circulated by a given social group in a given period of time, in our case: by the élite of Miercurea Ciuc in the small Hungarian world (the historical period between 1940 and 1944 is frequently referred to as such in Hungarian historiography and in common parlance). From the standpoint of the methodology employed in my study, critical discourse analysis (hereinafter, for reasons of simplification, the abridged form 'discourse analysis' will be used alternatively in reference to the adopted methodological approach), the postcard is a unique form of representation. An analysis of the postcard corpus serves an improved understanding of the structure of the contemporary *scopic regime*.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a discussion of the cultural context defining the photographer's activity is of primary concern in the paper at hand.

As cultural products, the Aladics postcards have a rather complex set of meanings: some of them are explicit and conscious, while some others are implicit and unconscious. Bringing the deeper, implicit layers to the surface can help us see the specific way these postcards interpret the world. The previously mentioned scopic regime enables us to comprehend the phenomenon that the individual creating the postcards aligns himself with a system, and this system is culturally structured, constructed and designates the boundaries

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<sup>4</sup> Rose 2001.

within which the photographer was able to see certain things in a particular era. Artistic freedom is, of course, a given – however, it should be understood within the scopic regime instinctively enforcing its effects and functioning self-evidently. Through the postcards, we can create a map for ourselves of the elements of visuality that were made up of in the period between 1940 and 1944. Indeed, scopic regimes call to life different representational forms, which are interwoven with social power relations. I seek to demonstrate that this type of approach can lead to relevant results; in fact, the use of appropriate methodology can help us reveal some unique, deep layers of the images' meanings that can be the specific result of ethnographic interest.

The primary focus of Hungarian-related ethnographic writing dealing with the visual representations of the period between the two world wars turned to the Hungarian-style photographs that attracted rising attention domestically and internationally alike. At any rate, in the heyday of this photography trend, writings did deal with the subject, but this was probably just because this style was intrinsically linked to the contemporary ideology of power, to advertisements developed and marketed for tourism purposes, and to tourism itself. Ethnographers of the past few decades, however, seem to have turned away from this subject, whereas one can hardly imagine 20<sup>th</sup>-century folk life in the Hungarian context without these photographs.

During the time passed since the beginning of my research, I have become convinced that the vast literature on Hungarian-style photography oftentimes contains contingencies. Specialist writers addressed the subject from the exclusive perspective of photography and/or history of arts, and they were mostly content to attempt some sort of a stocktaking of the period by providing an analytical presentation of the most distinguished photographers of the style and their masterpieces. They were rather concerned with the design features of the style, the technical execution of the photographs, and the career of the photographers active in that period of time. These writings do not offer us any insight into the social, cultural, or power system underlying the photographs – yet all of them acknowledge the distinctive political and economic factors exerting their influence on the style.

The pun in the title, 'photomagination', foreshadows the researcher's attitude defining the interpretative intent throughout the study. Playing on the words 'photograph' and 'imagination' meant to illustrate the unique fusion of the two terms and their meanings. A photograph is the recorded and printed image of someone or something, realized optically, with some photosensitive material, by means of chemical processing, or electronically. On the other hand, imagination is the ability of forming mental images, which is not equal to perceiving and

thinking.<sup>5</sup> If photograph and imagination represent the two endpoints of the scale, then the meanings of the postcards under study are to be sought for in the field between these two endpoints. These photographs are not simple documentations but representations imbued with the deep meanings of culture and society. Throughout the entire thesis, whenever reference is made to photographs/images/postcards – except for specific sections of overviewing the history of technology and genres –, the projection of the socially and culturally defined mental image should be understood by them. Also, I wish to note here that the genres of the postcard and the photograph merge in respect of the research subject. There are some era-specific reasons behind this, which I will cover in detail where appropriate. Accordingly, the analytical part of the paper will use the terms image/postcard/photograph synonymously.

Giving further considerations to the word combination *photomagination*, this context of interpretation views the person taking the photographs as the visionary himself, i.e. the *photomaginator*: the recording person playing the role of the ‘photographer’ and the ‘visionary’ simultaneously. Thus, the visual reality appearing in the photographs is always a subjective one: the photographer visualizes a brighter, more beautiful side of the actual historical reality – the longed-for, desired, nostalgic visual world of the contemporary man in a warring era when the sense of togetherness, the ideas of an unbroken Hungarian past had become the supreme buzzwords of nation building for the Hungarian man.

Each succeeding level of the research launched in 2014 approached the Aladics postcards from a different perspective and adopted a different methodology. My doctoral dissertation is an attempt at providing a synthesis of the research, i.e. at summarizing the research results. The construction of the line of thought follows the various levels of the scientific understanding in which process we set out from a concrete case and, through the method of content analysis, we get to type I of the critical discourse analysis of the postcards and to revealing the Aladics postcards’ layers of cultural meaning. Consistent with Gillian Rose’s classification, the method employed in the paper corresponds to *type I of discourse analysis*, whose key focus is on constructing a discourse divided into the various visual images and verbal texts and which is less concerned with the institutional and power system operating the discourse.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf.: ‘*imaginatio*’ is the Latin translation of the Greek ‘*phantasia*’. In his work *On the Soul* [*De Anima*], Aristotle viewed fantasy (imagination) as the ability to form mental images.

<sup>6</sup> Relying on Foucault’s terminology, Gillian Rose distinguishes two separate methodological foci of discourse analysis and terms them *discourse analysis I* and *discourse analysis II*. Type I of discourse analysis provides a deeper focus on the concept of discourse, divided through various visual images and verbal texts, than on the practices connected to the actual discourse. On the other hand, type II of discourse analysis pays particular regard to the practice of the institutions operating the discourse and is less observant of the images and texts produced

I take the meanings through three successive and overlapping levels. On the first level, I look for the postcards in relation to Zoltán Andory Aladics's legacy. The next level draws a parallel between the postcards and the tourism programme of the small Hungarian world. Then I examine the images of the Aladics postcards from a more distant researcher position and a broader perspective. Finally, the third level endeavours to answer the question as to how Aladics's image-creating activity can be linked to the scopic regime of his time, that is, how his oeuvre integrates into a broader social and cultural context. In order to answer this question, a comparison is drawn between the Aladics postcards and the masterpieces of the famous photographers in the Hungarian style, and then, with the intention of directing attention to the scopic regime defining the individual perspective, a presentation of various artistic representations follows, as well as an investigation into the intersections, transitions, and variations of the meanings within the discourse.

Therefore, the analytical part of the paper is divided into three major chapters. The first level dedicated to the search for meaning addresses the following fundamental questions: Who created the postcards? What can we see in the postcards? How were the subjects depicted? In what form were they published? What do postcards help us learn about past events? How should we approach postcards in the future, and what do they reveal for us – the technical apparatus, their creator's intentions, the relationship between the photographer and the subjects, or perhaps a particular point of view?

Based on the experiences gained on the previous level, the fundamental questions of knowledge acquisition on the second level are formulated as follows: How do we and how can we see the past through the postcards and beyond them? When compared to the original context of the postcards' creation, what do we know about the (textual) context into which the postcards are integrated? If examined in terms of this context, what additional meanings do postcards carry about the age itself? What subjects were omitted in the postcards?

The third level of interpretation takes a vantage point away from the postcards and looks for additional meanings in a complex historical, social, cultural, and economic context. This level and this distant viewpoint give birth to a more nuanced version of the questions arising. This chapter seeks to determine how contemporary photographic guidelines fit in with 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian artistic discourse and how the postcards, as opposed to other works of art, meet the expectations of the consumer society, the political expectations and ideology.

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by the discourse. Its methodology is highly implicit. It specifically addresses the issues of power, justice systems, institutions, and technologies.



The possible answers to the questions emerging in the successive levels of the quest for meaning and the innovative research results are summarized in the 12 theses below:

1. The postcards were created by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century photographer, the Făgăraș-born Zoltán Andory Aladics (1899–1990), who lived in Miercurea Ciuc and was active in the Szeklerland region. Of the various stages of Zoltán Andory Aladics's career, the photographs under investigation belong to the memories created in the period of 1940–1944, which can serve as a starting point for analysing a section of his life work unprocessed to date. However, we cannot and must not identify the photographer's work with the period made up of these four years. While it is true that the shots taken represent a man, an activity, an era, they still amount to a very small fraction of the overall collection, which, even if it tells us something about the mentality of a certain social class present in that period, cannot be completely identified with Aladics's life work.
2. In line with the scientific approach adopted herein, postcards are a unique form of representation – the individual perspective they materialize conforms to the scopic regime of the era. As part of the period's scopic regime, it depicts Szekler folk life in a particular manner, the boundaries of this vision being determined by the very discourse as part of which they were created. The visual world displayed in the postcards is not a perfect rendering of Aladics's way of thinking – the photographer and his work cannot be identified exclusively with the discourse of the postcards. Indeed, the photographer is part of several discourses at the same time, one or another of which prevails in a given case due to selective perception. The visuality of the postcards enabled a more accurate stocktaking of the elements of a discourse belonging to the age under study, i.e. the Hungarian discourse and scopic regime.
3. Based on the peculiarities of titling and captioning, the postcards can be divided into three periods: the captions of the *pre-1940 postcards* are Romanian, the captions of those created *between 1940 and 1944* are Hungarian, and the *post-1944 postcards* are bilingual (Hungarian–Romanian). The vast majority of the postcards are memories of the period between 1940 and 1944. The postcards forming the basis for the investigation are memories of the 'small Hungarian world' following the 1940 Second Vienna Award. By taking a closer look at the style and compositional solutions of his photography, the postcards carry the design features of the 'Hungarian' style. Therefore, under this approach, we can look at Zoltán

Andory Aladics as the representative of the afterlife of this style since, for him, it was the second third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that brought about the favourable political conditions indispensable for the reproduction of the postcards.

4. The postcards' subject is Szekler folk life. An in-depth study of the photographer's work suggests that the systematic photography of folk life had become a regular feature of this profession since the 1930s, but it was not a consistent practice in the photographer's activity. Aladics used his own studio to reproduce the glass negatives created in the field and to sell them as postcards. Performing content analysis at the first level of the search for meaning, I learned that the dominant aspects of the postcards' titles are describing the regional group, the activity, the landscape, the attire, and the object(s) visible in the picture. I also learned that the postcards' titles do not always reflect the subject depicted in them. According to their age and sex profile, the photographer associates the people featured in the pictures with certain activities. The investigation has shown that those scenes of folk life make it to the postcards that comply with ideas of the aesthetic, idyllic, ancient folk life.
5. Based on the demonstrable link between the broader Transylvanian, the broader Hungarian, and the international context, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century manner of visual expression was taking shape, aimed at the depiction of genre paintings in the postcards. This manner of visual expression created its own design language, on the basis of which using elements of vernacular architecture, material and intellectual culture, and traditional costume creates the visual toolbox of cultural uniqueness.
6. On the next level of searching for meaning, a content analysis of the stock of postcards reveals that among the spatial and material elements of the compositions, depictions of *forests, churches, buildings, clouds, mountains*, and *Szekler gates* are particularly frequent. Among the Szekler people's characteristics, the various scenes associated with the characters give prominence to *denominational commitment, loyalty to values and to the community, frugality, diligence, workman's attitude*, and *working ability*. The photographic techniques of strong lighting/shading sometimes enhance the *softness* and some other times the *dramatic effect* of the scenes. The creator of the postcards depicts the Székely people as *a model to follow, as true Hungarians*.

7. The texts found in the guidebook *Erdély északi része és Székelyföld* [Northern Transylvania and Szeklerland] published in 1941 by the representative of the official tourism development programme, OMIH [Hungarian National Office for Tourism], present us a predominantly Hungarian Transylvania. As a cornerstone of the tourism development programme, the concept of national pilgrimage was born, which made the cause of discovering Transylvania a national duty and a point of honour. A content analysis of the data included in the information booklet *Szállodák, penziók és villák* [Hotels, Pensions, and Villas] accompanying the travel guide called attention to the fact that tourism directed to Transylvania in the period of 1940–1944 was primarily urging the visiting of settlements and holiday resorts in the region of Szeklerland. Aladics's postcards produced during the years of the small Hungarian world point out what efforts the Hungarian government made to implement the revisionist ideology and nation-building experiment developed by the political élite. The joint reading of the postcards and the 1941 guidebook of OMIH can help us observe how tourism as part of the nation-building programme served the interests of the contemporary political power. In this section of the analysis, we are provided a picture of how tourism made use of the national idea as an advertisement and, vice versa, how the nation-building programme exploited tourism as a tool for disseminating nation-building ideas. The tourism development programme enjoying a sudden boom in the early 1940s amplified an image of Transylvania rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and built on stereotypes. Consequently, Transylvania had become the fairyland of the ancient Hungarians, of pure Hungarian language, and folk art.
8. In the process of communication using visual language, elements representing the spatial dimension are in fact visually introduced distinctions, viz. the visual instruments of creating a boundary between the 'own' and the 'foreign' or between the 'Hungarian' and the 'non-Hungarian'. Through his image-creating activity, Zoltán Andory Aladics made an active contribution to developing the spatial structures of Szeklerland – his postcards offered preconceptions to the public that even passive consumers could incorporate in their everyday life, this way constantly reproducing the ready-made spatial structures. While using graphic communication, the photographer relates the validity of his message to its effectiveness – he is not seeking to convince us with arguments but to influence us. Hence, the photographer is the socially positioned discourse creator himself, who

creates meanings by making use of the visual elements of the pictures. On the third level of searching for meaning, I learned that Aladics's image-creating activity aligned itself to a large extent with the work of the reputable photographers in Hungary. The concept of scopic regime, i.e. a system of vision defining an entire era, can be accounted for this tendency. Aladics's individual perspective was determined by contemporary discourses. The image of the Szekler people emerging from the postcards reflects the legitimate and accepted nation-building discourse valid in that age.

9. An analytical approach to the concept of photographic paradigm revealed that the circle of Hungarian-style photographers grouped around Rudolf Balogh was formed in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The group of photographers following the Hungarian paradigm sought to depict the positive, idyllic side of the current states of affairs. The very same period, however, accommodated a rival, opposing photographic paradigm as well, represented by the group of socio-photographers gathered around Lajos Kassák, whose members consciously set as their artistic goal the depiction of life on the periphery. The Hungarian-style photographs met the requirements of the officially marketed country image, while the state agencies of the time made every effort to marginalize the socio-photographers' works.
10. A comparison of the Aladics postcards and the masterpieces of photographers in the Hungarian style makes it possible to determine the major technical, thematic, and representational characteristics of the Hungarian-style photographic paradigm. These are as follows: *pictorialism, the chiaroscuro technique, the theme of peasantry, solemnity, distancing.*
11. Subsequent upon an analysis (performed in relation to each other) of the representational forms, i.e. interpretative repertoires that existed within the contemporary scopic regime, the following conclusions can be drawn concerning the Hungarian-style artistic expression. The subject of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian art is given: the ancient connection between folk life and nature. The comprehensive discursive formations of the artistic discourse of Hungarianness are made up of the cross-genre transitions of visual representations of the key subjects represented by *man and nature, man and work, humans and animals, and man and the transcendent* on the one hand and *man and power and nature and civilization* on the other. These discursive formations act as links between the interpretative repertoires, which, however, create their own discursive characters, reinforcing

some meanings and perceiving some other layers of meaning as partially or completely invisible.

12. Results presented in my doctoral thesis demonstrate that an interpretation of the photographs carried out using methods employed in visual culture research can lead to relevant results. The research conducted is an example of how this kind of approach can provide answers concerning the social and cultural environment underlying the photographs in the Hungarian style. While there are many who have written about this style before, only a few adopted this approach in their attempt to interpret the photographs specific of that era. As such, the paper at hand fits into the line of basic research that are able to counterbalance the overwhelmingly theory-centred nature of this field of study and that are also able to refine, tinge, and review the known theoretical frameworks.

My doctoral dissertation is a summarizing work of the results obtained from a research launched nine years ago. Many a time during the period passed since the initial phase, I have come across the phenomenon that the partial results formulated in publications and dissertations, at a given point in the research process, become accountable because they failed to fully determine, set, and clarify the exact boundaries and emphases of interpretation. Also, the ethnographically driven interest offered several possible directions for research on visual culture. Of all these, I did not opt for processing his entire legacy by throwing the main spotlight on the photographer's biography. I did not assess the relevance of the pictures in terms of the personal life story.

A definite choice needed to be made out of all the possible paths and interpretative frameworks in order to have a coherent line of thought and a logical structure emerge before the reader. At this juncture, I decided to follow the path that promised to be the most interesting and that could keep a curiosity-driven researcher going all along. I followed up on a single possible line of interpretation, that which guided me from the concrete postcards all the way to the dimension of cultural meanings. Throughout my research journey, I was trying to determine how visual meanings are nuanced on the successive levels of cognition. Specifically: how we can get from the postcards of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century photographer from Miercurea Ciuc to the contemporary tourism development and nation-building programme or, in a broader sense, to the general, dominant discourse defining the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian artists. As a result of the analysis, we could gain an insight into the process through which we can get from the visual motifs of the idyll to recognizing the mechanisms of exclusion, from a

photographer's postcards to the nation-building ideology of the small Hungarian world. Results presented in the paper confront us with how photography as a procedure, defined technologically, politically, socially, and culturally alike, has a substantial bearing on what, why, and how we remember and what we allow collectively to sink into oblivion. As a researcher, this quest for meaning has been such a tremendous excitement and an extremely insightful experience for me, with plenty of questions yet to be answered and many more layers of meaning waiting to be revealed but which were not undertaken within the framework of this study.

Finally, we must add that no single interpretative approach/criterion can be valid in and of itself! There are always many sides to truth, which is why an approach based on a single set of viewpoints will never see more than a portion of the whole picture and will, therefore, be always 'wrong'. This research/dissertation can only succeed if it can reanimate the postcards, can lend them a voice, and, at a certain point in the analysis, can urge us towards a joint, pluralistic understanding of the complex, multilayered visual content. It will have achieved its goal if it helps us learn something about how these postcards and the discourse as part of which they were brought into existence (re)shaped – and/or are still (re)shaping – our perception of the world, our view of reality.

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