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Image and History

The Approach of Image Anthropology

It would be difficult to tell since when exactly can we talk about an age of pictorial turn (Ivins dates the beginning back to the second wave of the industrial revolution, to the previous century turn¹), however, we are aware of it for at least two decades and can also call the phenomenon by its name. Realization – as every definition able to grab the substantial developments of an age – has a great impact on science as a whole, from the abstract researches through the industrial developments to education. New approaches come into being with new, previously unknown relations.

It seems that the science of history does not easily accept this new aspect. It appears like it would retract behind the strong walls of the text and try to beat off the images loading the external world as an assault of some new barbarian horde. The situation is well depicted by the words of János Gyurgyák, historian and owner of a publisher greatly significant in Hungarian scientific publishing: “Historians – respect to the few exceptions – do not regard photos and pictorial documents in general as considerable historical sources. Texts seen as sacred are more important for them as anything else. Any sources other than texts are only secondary (or of third level importance), everything comes only afterwards.”²

At the same time, said with a new expression, image anthropological researches, initiated from the direction of the history of art that treats fine arts

¹ William Ivins, *Prints and Visual Communication*, MIT Press, 1969

² János Gyurgyák, *Magyarország története képekben (The History of Hungary in Pictures)*, Budapest, 2008

products and from the direction of art theory, have taken place for a long time and they go back as far as to the bygone days, to the ages before literacy where they analyze the social functions of pictorial representation. This is the point where we have to mention the exhibition titled History-Image organized by the Hungarian National Gallery in 2000, the material of which was processed already in that year, in an eight hundred page volume containing sixty-seven authors. However, this volume applies a different approach than the author of these lines: it examines how the past appears in the fine arts of the single ages as compared to the time of the work, how the pictorial perception of history in fine arts is changing. Besides all this, the single studies of the volume considerably exceed the fine arts approach and also bring some image theoretical considerations, for example with respect to how a people constructs the image of its own history, how those visual devices come into being with which it is possible to define this part of the identity recognizable for every member of the community.

It is evident that archeology treats pictures thoroughly, since only a few of the finds have writing on them, so the best possible reconstruction of the past can be done with the help of the representations. In addition, archeology, due its material, gives a quite wide definition of the picture as such, comes to extensive conclusions already on the basis of certain decorative motives or instrumental habits, which can give instructions for the analysis of pictorial inheritance from the age of literacy. Computer-based visual reconstruction is an exciting area for archeology, which can make things visible in previously never known ways, but it can also serve as device for the researches.

Besides the history of art, philosophy is the other discipline in Hungary which has involved image into its researches, as a means of information equal

to the text. It is the work of philosophy professor Kristóf Nyíri that we can claim to mostly exceed the new approaches of the philosophy of art. This is how he explains his idea: “the images and words are interdependent, though (...) images do not have the power of words, but the power of images”³. He believes that the pictorial turn actually replaces the image into that status where civilization was still before its linguistic turn which happened at its early stage.

On the other hand, the science of history in Hungary still owes to discover the image. This is very well characterized by the editorial practice of the most influential periodical of historian profession, titled *Centuries (Századok)*. The ten volumes of this periodical (1998-2007) makes up precisely fifteen thousand pages, which more or less is equal to the size of a great encyclopedia. On these fifteen thousand pages there are 120 visual elements all together: 52 diagrams, 37 maps and 31 pictures (out of which 31 four themselves represent written elements, fragments of codices). As an example, it is worth mentioning that study of this prestigious periodical which discusses the relation of the art of the Hungarian settlers to the Abbasid-Iraqi art on 30 pages with 211 footnotes and without any illustration.

No reason can be given to the distance historiography keeps from the image. On the contrary, acquiring and applying the approach of image anthropology is an urgent need. This device promises to bear fruits especially in such topics which have relatively few textual documents or the authenticity of those is doubtable. An evident example to this is Gipsy culture. The pictorial sources available are plenty, whereas the number of textual sources is much lower than in case of any other ethnic group, plus most of those are superficial and repeat clichés.

³ Kristóf Nyíri, *Words and Images*. In: *Világosság (Clarity)*, 2007/9, pages 3-12



Kaldera Men in Poland around 1865.
Jerzy Ficowski, *The Gypsies in Poland*, 1989, place not indicated



Tinker Gypsies.
Vasárnapi Újság (Sunday Paper), vol. 1862, page 313

Here are two examples to illustrate this. Data about the Kaldera clan are few in Hungary, mostly because when they turned up here in the second half of the 19th century, the majority society knew practically nothing about the tribal division of the Gypsies, they gave the typology almost exclusively on the basis of the external characteristics (tent dweller – settled, woodcrafter – metal crafter – musician). However, from the illustrated magazines of the time we can



Gypsy Voivode and his Family .
Magyarország és a nagyvilág (Hungary and the World), vol. 1872, page 567

clearly see that the typical Kaldera clothes (great silver buttons on men, thick silver necklaces and the use of plenty of silver in general) emerged in Hungary in the 1860s, after the Romanian Gypsy slavery had been repealed, and vanished approximately by the previous century turn. We know from other sources that this metal crafter tribe really left the Carpathian basin and migrated to the North and to the West.



Pháraó népe (The People of Pharaoh),
In: Ország Tükre (Country Mirror), vo. 1863, page 101



Wandering Gypsies, postcard, Nagyszeben, 1917

Another example is the relationship between eroticism and the Gypsies, the emerge of the idea of the beautiful, coquettish Gypsy girl. Before the 19th century we cannot find any reference to this phenomenon, neither in the pictorial, nor in the textual sources. Although some criminal documents talk about Gypsy prostitutes, but it was not regarded as ethnically determined in the time of their origin either. The textual sources are modest in the 19th century too, but the image of the coquettish Gypsy girl appears. This is not the only erotic medium of the age, classical art provides numerous representations of the beautiful female – and sometimes male – body. For instance, the idealized image of the Turkish harem, full of beautiful female bodies, reappears again and again in the illustrated magazines of the second half of the 19th century. Still, the Gypsy girl is somehow more blood-stirring

in her reality, or we could say, in her attainability.

When analyzing the photos of the time not manipulated yet with the intention of artistic representation, it turns out that the idea of the coquettish Gypsy girl is the product of a misunderstanding between two cultures not knowing each other. It is about the bare breasts, which is intolerable in most European cultures, and is the sign of becoming a prostitute, which, on the other hand, is natural in Gypsy culture. Behind this we may assume to stand the concept of cleanness-uncleanness traditional in gypsy culture: according to this, human body is unclean under the waist, thus it should be covered, whereas above the waist it is clean so there is no reason to cover that part.



Gypsy Girls. Unknown photographer, 1920s, probably in Transylvania

The members of the majority society did not sense it, only that the Gypsy girls were doing something that the women of their social circle would never do – they showed their breasts for a few cents. This erotic experience sublimed then with snow-white teeth and red lips into the stereotype of the coquettish Gypsy girl laughing to the audience, and at the same

time into a still existing and significant element of how the majority society views the Gypsies.

We could list the examples for long. New knowledge can be gained about the role of the Gypsies in social production, about how they relate to the majority society, about the tribal and family division or about the way they live. It is not at all only about the Gypsies. Pictures, sometimes independently of the author's intention, provide valuable information to written history about groups regarded for long as subsidiary, such as about children, women, or the everyday lives of citizens or peasants. The approach of image anthropology is not willing to write a new history, but enriches that to an extent we are unable to estimate today.

Translated by Edit Mester