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Expanding Visual Portfolios
Determination of the image consumer in the context of the pictorial turn

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

1. Research purposes

The basis for my investigation is a contemporary phenomenon: a huge amount of visual information is generated and stored in connection with every action of the people. We typically not only record significant events in our lives, but everyday scenes also. The milestones of the human life are conserved in visual documentation from conception to funeral service. There has never been such a large-scale documentation before. This way, individuals weave a kind of visual portfolio around themselves, which contains the visual reflection of their life journey. More and more people add to this portfolio daily, expanding it day by day, archiving in detail where and what the subject has been doing.

I believe that the examination of the way the human life journey is reflected in a visual portfolio could provide an excellent opportunity to grasp the mode of being of people born in the postphotographic era, while enabling the complexity that has been an inescapable demand in the area of image research ever since the announcement of the pictorial turn.

The aim of my research is to list the changes affecting the images and the symptomatic, intellectual–cultural processes that can be unravelled behind them – focusing on a particular symptom present in our age: the generation of visual documentation, as well as using it as a base for it. I think that our relationship with images, the need to constantly record our everyday lives, and life's visual portfolios demonstrating redundant characteristics, tell a lot about the present age, our current mode of being. The topicality of the subject means that the outcome of these trends is still not foreseeable; assessing the symptoms has its difficulties. Working out accurate prognoses may only be possible as a long-term scientific – primarily interdisciplinary – research programme. Thus in my research I first of all wanted to provide new angles to consider about the characteristics of the being

of the people living in the postphotographic era, as well as of the change in the relationship between man and image.

Out of the immense family of images, I was primarily focusing on technical pictures and, within those, photographs taken for private purposes (hence excluding the categories of art photography and official press photography), which now typically don't exist as objects anymore but as information (digital photography). I was interested in the status and mode of being of the photos documenting the everyday life of the individual, which is determined by the fact that the majority of these photos are taken with the original intention of being published on the new public stage, the social media.

I put a special emphasis on the mediatisation process of images in my investigation, as the fact that private photos have become part of the media space and that they are looking for wide publicity – contrary to times before the emergence of new media – is decisive. We are witnessing a process during which the difference between the private/amateur photography that is still characteristic of discursive media and public/professional photography becomes blurred, and the dialogic media space opens up for images of which we have previously thought that they only hold meaning and importance for the individuals and their direct surroundings. This process of mediatisation is convergent with the expansion of visual portfolios.

2. Research methodology and approach

I was examining the visual portfolios of the human life journey from the aspect of the pictorial turn. This term became the centre of visual culture studies discourse in the '90s, based on the ideas of W.J.T. Mitchell *(pictorial turn)* and Gottfried Boehm *(iconic turn/ ikonische Wende)*. Various image research approaches inspired by the visual determination of information flow come together in this turn-model.

The pictorial turn has brought a new approach into image research, which does not define a set programme, but which requires us to step out of our roles as mere spectators and registrants of current processes that bring about the proliferation of images and the increase in their significance, and actively interpret them – as autonomous entities and as social products and constitutions that have a reflexive impact on society. The researcher is obliged by the pictorial turn to try to unravel the logic of the pictures, the characteristics of their working. It requires a flexible and open attitude that is not restricted by disciplinary boundaries and is able to distance itself from the historical embedding, or even from the concept of art.

I have reviewed and examined the symptoms and phenomena of our age detected through the construction of visual portfolios, placing them in the discourse of visual culture and media studies, comparing the literature and attempting to further develop the paths outlined by this comparison.

My dissertation first discusses various aspects of the fundamental concepts, the problems of perception, spectator and the essence of images, mostly based on the thoughts of Erwin Panofsky, Rudolf Arnheim, Ernst Gombrich, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jonathan Crary and Özséb Horányi. Then I examine the nature of images and the possible ways to categorise them, which outlines the disciplinary jurisdictional dispute surrounding images – for this, and for shedding light onto the pictorial turn I have turned to the works of Hans Belting, Arthur C. Danto, W.J.T. Mitchell, Gottfried Boehm and Horst Bredekamp, as well as the visual culture theories of Nicholas Mirzoeff and Martin Jay.

My argument regarding the road leading to the symptoms, the development of the determination by images incorporates the work of Walter Benjamin, Vilém Flusser, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, as well as Miklós Lehmann's theses on the digital picture. In my investigation of the mediatisation of images I compare statements by Lev Manovich and Roger Silverstone, and to gain a better

understanding of the relationship between media images and real images I review the findings of Walter Lippmann, Ben Haig Bagdikian, Niklas Luhmann and Benedek Tóth.

In the literature on the problems of image and communication and of image and text, I highlight the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Nelson Goodman, Kristóf Nyíri, Søren Kjørup, Mircea Eliade, György Kepes and Áron Kibédi Varga. I formulate my standpoint regarding media manipulation, media aggression and perception determined by the media based on the thoughts of George Gebner and Albert Bandura; regarding memory and identity, based on Alan Baddeley, Jan Assman, Sándor Antik and Lewis Mumford; and regarding the discussion of the possible outcomes of the determination by images, based on the views of Umberto Eco, Herbert Marcuse, Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard.

The postphotographic era is characterised by the phenomenon that the people living in it are clinging to pictures, they try to express themselves through pictures and try to build their identities out of pictures, while simultaneously they are easily influenced by pictures. I organise the problems I examine in more detail around these characteristics.

3. Structure and areas of investigation

My paper – between an introductory and closing chapter – explores three big areas. Its structure is as follows:

I. The difficulties of a theoretical approach as relevant to the fundamental concepts

In the first chapter, I explore the fundamental concepts and place them in the discourse of visual culture studies. Following the fundamental directions of possible interpretations of an experience, I present a few trends in perception as a philosophical issue, then the various manifestations of the spectator's position.

I explore the dilemmas surrounding the ontological status of pictures and the determination of their categorisation, and define terms used in the subsequent discussion, such as biological, mental and physical image, technical image.

The exploration of the polemics present in the literature gives a clear picture of the disciplinary jurisdictional dispute that has been present in image research in recent decades, and which points to the need for a unified discipline of visual studies, as well as to the necessity for interdisciplinarity.

II. Man clinging to pictures

The first area that I examine in the context of visual portfolios is the emergence, nature and extent of the determination by images. Thus the second part of the paper explores how the relationship of image and man has changed with the emergence of photography, later the digital imaging techniques, and that of the spread of media, and whether or not the reference of images to reality was altered.

I present the specifics of the change in the attitude towards images through a simple example: the depreciation of the human portrait.

I attempt to explore the controversial behaviour and attitude that manifests in the phenomenon that people born in the

postphotographic era – seemingly – do not value pictures, but they are still dependent on the constant presence of images. To them, pictures are not just a source of joy, but also a source of experience, which sometimes holds a higher significance than natural reality. In connection to this, I examine the discourse of the dilemma in media studies, which aims to find answers to the questions of how much the reality experienced in the sphere of mediatised images corresponds to the "real" reality, and whether or not these can be regarded as two separate realities, or rather multiple dimensions of the same reality.

III. Man controlled through images

The second area can be defined as the issue of impressionability to images. Looking at the elements of the portfolio, the possibility arises that they must not solely be regarded as marks we leave behind, but also as signs of a communicational act. Based on this, I examine the chances of successful visual communication built on these signs, the things that might hinder this communicational process and the ways in which the process can be manipulated.

In the third chapter, I also look at the relations between visual media and aggressive energies, including the determination of the direction and the speed of perception by the media. I examine the opportunities for manipulation found in the evolving visual culture of new media, touching on the connections between manipulated perception and freedom.

IV. Man as a collage of images

The third big area constitutes of mediatised technical images' effect on identity, which I examine from the aspect of technical memory. The subject of my research was the way pictures conserving memories in an unchanged form affect the self-image of the individual and the identity of the community. I review the course of the emergence of technical memory, and examine the way technical images may alter the narrative of memory. Following this, I discuss

their effect on the individual and collective memories separately, and explore the possible consequences.

V. Our place among the images – guessing the chances
The final chapter of the thesis lists the possible outcomes of these processes, as well as outlining additional problems relevant to the subject.

4. Summary of the most important conclusions and results

The life journey of people born in the postphotographic era may be examined as visual portfolios composed of a multitude of technical pictures that keep expanding until we die (or even after that), and which is a kind of reflection of our being. The context of these portfolios provides an excellent setting for the examination of the relationship between the images present in mediatised–digital visual fields and the user.

These portfolios contain redundant elements, as even the smallest shift, shake or change capacitates the subject of the portfolio to make new pictures. There is also a sense of documentational need behind their creation, and the exposure to this is a characteristic trait of portfolios of the people born in the postphotographic era. There have never been documentational acts of this degree before, and the motivations behind them can only be revealed with the help of multiple disciplines.

These portfolios are mostly made up of digital images that are insubstantial, incomplete and unfinished. The picture ceases to be an image object; it is present pure information. Due to the method of image coding, their reference to reality is questionable. We cannot talk about finished pictures, only versions, and so there is ample room for manipulation, which usually does happen.

The blurred line between "professional" photos meant for the public (press photography and photos of representational purposes) and private photos can be registered as a symptom of the path leading towards redundant visual documentation, as they all get published in one way or another. Private images making up the portfolio are increasingly aimed at the present, rather than for posterity. Their target audience now includes the wide public sphere of social media; their aim is to communicate a certain state of being in an expanded

present. It is not about *taking pictures* anymore, but about *making a picture for a particular platform*. Typically, the publishing act has become more prominent as the storing act when it comes to the pictures of our visual portfolios.

Today, images have become the basis of gaining experience, information and knowledge. At the same time, a kind of image consumerism has become dominant over the act of interpreting the visual experience of an image. It is not the reflexive experience of the spectator anymore that is in the centre of the effect an image has on the individual, but the image invading the space of the empirical experience, the image that does not refer to its being a picture anymore, but which we acknowledge as reality.

It is not only that a lot of images are created in the postphotographic era, but also the fact that the same picture is viewed several times, it appears over and over again in the digital visual fields. Simultaneously, there is a visual inflation present due to the habituation that obscures the images. People born in the postphotographic era are not only dependent on pictures, but on *constantly renewed pictures*. A given picture cannot give a significant sensation anymore, nonetheless, people insist on having them; the act of creating images is present in the lives of more and more people as a necessity. This need might be propelled by the Freudian drive that manifests in perception and being perceived as a source of joy. This experience is easier to achieve with the emergence of digital photography and new media.

It is a symptomatic phenomenon that people are more interested in recording a certain scene than actually experiencing it in the moment. One reason for this could be that people viewing the world through a digital screen do not realise that they are suffering a loss, or they might think that the experience can be recovered later on, by looking at the pictures taken; but this phenomenon can also be explained by

the plasticity of identity: for people who have nothing to hang on to it is more important to have *others* experience what they experience, as they need feedback and reactions that help them determine the way they should feel about a certain thing that they have sensed or seen.

Within the scope of dialogic, interactive media, the difference between the empirically accessible world and its presentation in the media becomes shaky, as the user himself is the one creating these descriptions. He steps out of his role of a passive receiver, and participates in a construction of reality. Although the elements of reality constructed this way are created in a virtual space, doubting their reality is problematic. Hence we do not necessarily have to talk about two realities, rather two dimensions of the same, single reality, which are interoperable, and which can be experienced simultaneously. The question remains as to how long will these two dimensions remain distinguishable, and whether or not the position or role of the picture and its subject will remain identifiable.

Part of the elements of visual portfolios have a communicative function. Individual pictures may not lead to verbal communication, but thanks to multimedia, hybrid and animated images, pictures have an increasingly significant role in communication. Nonetheless, several problems may arise relevant to this process: due to the speed of information flow, understanding visual codes is difficult, the symbols and symbology are constantly evolving, and they are exposed to commercial interests and the current of consumer society. Symbols are often used for decorational purposes, stripping them of their original meanings.

People born in the postphotographic era are exposed to the manipulative forms of expression in the media, and to the media's aggressor attitude. The attention of the receiver is controlled due to the editing of moving images setting the direction and speed. All this proposes the emergence of the freedom of perception as a need.

Visual documentation as artificial memory could have a significant influence on the self-image of the individual. The technical image is a kind of feedback, which we tend to accept as something objective. But pictures that are manipulated, edited, or just taken in an uncharacteristic moment can distort self-knowledge. While natural memory has the potential to delete, correct or balance a mental image in a beneficial way, technical images remain the same forever, reminding the subject of a momentary state that maybe was not even typical or characteristic to them. Still a snapshot may become an emblematic image of a longer period, overwriting natural memory.

A cult and anti-cult are at the same time observable with regards to images constituting visual documentation. On the one hand, a whole industry is built on it, we can print them on objects, make posters out of them. On the other hand, we are careless about them: our computers, phones and social media pages are swarming with them without any selection or order, until they get deleted intentionally or accidentally. The always increasing electronic memory capacities accommodate the storage of every version of every picture, when it would be exactly the evaluation, sorting and categorisation of pictures that could help the owners to let go of the present, connect to their pasts and think about their futures.

The large number of technical pictures effect how the past of a community is viewed by the community itself. Countless pictures are made of every significant and less significant event of our age, thus creating a thorough and diverse documentation. But this kind of perfect documentation may hinder the function of time, the sorting of memories, the possibility to gain historical perspective, the opportunity to get closure and move on. In this sense, expanding visual portfolios are a great burden for posterity, as it will not be easy to *picture* an era that is put together of a myriad fragmented pictures. Naturally, there is a connection between the existence of visual portfolios made up of digital information and digital civilisation,

latter being an essential condition that ensures the accessibility of former – as such, their conservation is questionable.

Regarding the future operation of visual portfolios, there are too distinct possibilities. If they are preserved and the trend continues, the options to interpret the past, get closure or correct our mistakes will become questionable. But if they happen to be erased due to some kind of a disaster striking the digital civilisation, it would mean that the most characteristic features of our era become invisible for future generations. The solution would be if people learned to review their pictures, exercise control over them, and consciously design the set of images that they leave behind.

5. Publications

Publications relevant to the topic of the doctoral dissertation:

Az emberi arckép devalválódása. Docere, az SZTE JGYPK TOKI tudományos folyóirata. 2108/1-2. 55-66 p.

Közösségi emlékezet és identitás a vizuális média hatóterében. Létünk, társadalmi-, tudományos- és kulturális folyóirat, XLVIII., 2018/1.

Emlékezet a média béklyójában. Inflálódó és manipulálódó emlékek a vizuális média hatóterében. Laczkó Sándor (szerk.): *Lábjegyzetek Platónhoz 15. Az emlékezet*. Pro Philosophia Szegediensi Alapítvány, Magyar Filozófiai Társaság, Státus Kiadó, Szeged, 2017. 407-421 p.

A vizuális média és az agresszív energiák relációi. Látásunk irányításának és sebességének média általi meghatározottsága. Laczkó Sándor (szerk.): *Lábjegyzetek Platónhoz 14. Az agresszió*. Pro Philosophia Szegediensi Alapítvány, Magyar Filozófiai Társaság, Státus Kiadó, Szeged, 2016. 96-108 p.

A látás szabadsága mint a XXI. század elején előtérbe kerülő igény. Létünk, társadalmi-, tudományos- és kulturális folyóirat, XLIV., 2014. Virtuális szekció, 41-53 p.

Mivel jár a képek diadala? Fejtegetések a vizuális információk felértékelődéséről és napjaink vizuális kultúrájáról. Agria, irodalmi, művészeti, kritikai folyóirat VI., 2012/2., 228-232 p.

Other publications:

A televíziós műsorgyártás és műsorszerkesztés gyakorlati alapjai. Szegedi Egyetemi Kiadó, Juhász Gyula Felsőoktatási Kiadó, 2017.

Médiaelmélet. Elektronikus jegyzet és digitális tananyag. Készült a Szegedi Tudományegyetem megbízásából, a TÁMOP 4.1.2. B.2-13/1-2013-0008 projekt, Mentor(h)áló 2.0 program keretében. SZTE, 2015.

Értékalapú televízióműsor-gyártás a változó nézői igények közegében. Háttértanulmány. Készült a Szegedi Tudományegyetem megbízásából, a TÁMOP-4.1.1.C-12/1/KONV-2012-0004 azonosítószámú projekt képzésfejlesztés alprojekt keretében. Szeged, 2015.04.15.

A Tragédia szimbólumainak leképeződése Jankovics Marcell rajzfilmjében. Bene Kálmán, Máté Zsuzsanna (szerk.) XX. Madách Szimpózium, Madách Könyvtár 78., Madách Irodalmi Társaság, Szeged-Balassagyarmat, 2013. 86-96. p.

Új kihívások a vizuális nevelés terén. Fordulópont, pedagógiai folyóirat, XIV. 56., 2012/2., 91-102. p.

Válságjelenségek a vizuális kultúrában, kihívások a vizuális nevelés terén. Vár, irodalmi, közéleti folyóirat, VIII. évfolyam 2012/1., 103-107 p.

A meggyőzés és befolyásolás eszközeinek változása a magyar, politikai témájú plakátokon. SzegediLap, kulturális és művészeti portál, 2011.12.27.

Recensions:

Ahogy a madarak látják… Légifotók a szegedi szecesszióról. Szeged, várostörténeti és kulturális magazin 30.évfolyam, 3. szám, 40-43 p.

Rejtekhelyükről előbújó kincseink. Albumban a Csongrád Megyei Önkormányzat képzőművészeti gyűjteménye. Szeged, várostörténeti és kulturális magazin 29.évfolyam, 8. szám, 51-52 p.

Relevant films directed or edited by the author in the National Audiovisual Archive:

A Duna-menti Hollywood megálmodója: Bosnyák Ernő. Dokumentumfilm. https://nava.hu/id/1615680/; Duna TV 2013. július 21.

Magyarul a Dráva mentén: Az eszéki magyar média. Dokumentumfilm. https://nava.hu/id/1569936; Duna TV 2013. május 25.

Az Északi Magyar Archívum Stockholmban. Dokumentumfilm. https://nava.hu/id/1331048; Duna TV 2012. február 18., Duna TV

A vajdasági magyarság hétköznapjainak krónikása: Hét Nap. Dokumentumfilm. https://nava.hu/id/1318828; Duna TV, 2012. január 28.