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Faculty of Humanities

THESES OF THE DISSERTATION

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Seeing as a Border Case

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The Presumptions and Aims of the Dissertation

The aim of the dissertation titled "Seeing as a Border Case" is to give a precise, nuanced answer to the question: What is art history?

For this very reason, the dissertation does not join the movements which proclaim the end of art history or its merge into other disciplines. Even though it takes the pictorial turn into account, and through interconnections, the analytic picture theory and the German hermeneutic heritage, it does not count as a main aim to answer the problems of these immanent disciplines. At the same time, the dissertation utilizes the notion of visual culture, and it even uses its experiences on individual objects and as a method to study our culture, but still, it's not an aim to solve, or even to precisely explain the general problems of the field. This attitude toward these serious theoretical problems are not the consequence of belittling, but the rational outcome of the fact, that a detailed examination would explode the borders of the text.

The main aim of my dissertation is to show art history not just as an institution-history or as a sum of institutional impacts, but to expose it as a special, individual area. In order to study and analyze these phenomena, the confrontation with the artworks and the ekphrases make the occasion. Thus is the origin of the title: the physical/social/cultural/philosophical act of seeing is a border case, from the subject of the art historian, and through it the whole art history can be articulated and described. According to my presumptions, the art historical descriptions of the visual experience caused by the individual artworks consist clues, from which the whole art history, with its outstanding methodological diversity, theoretical presumptions and particular messages can be articulated and systematized. In order to emphasize the idea of seeing, and the non-translatable nature of visual experiences led me to edit the images next to the discussions in the text. In this way, the reader has the opportunity to judge the interpretations in the dissertation based on his/her own visual experiences. In addition, I tried to edit the images which make a particular constellation to one page, in order to highlight their inner similarities, parallel solutions, or even radical differences.

My chosen methodology is to re-read the texts answering to each other, and to collide and correct them with the visual experiences caused by the works of art, and to highlight and emphasize the negative conclusions. The theoretical base is The Pictorial Turn from W. J. T. Mitchell, especially the famous greeting scene, in which Althusser meets Panofsky, or, less allegorically, where the iconology and ideology mutually recognize each other, and the latter is embedded into a pre-structured self-reflexive science-theory. This theory is intended to refer to the subject making quality of the ideology as the social-cultural status of the thinker, or, in other words: to end the scientific objectivity claim. A parallel recognition is, that even though Mitchell's text and thoughts can be used as a starting point of

a methodological survey on the nature of art history, but they cannot be used as a whole system. Mitchell is a far too mercurial character, who, according to his own words, is an interdisciplinary thinker, who consciously aims to free himself from the disciplinary boundaries. But with the mercurial attitude comes the fast obsolescence of the thoughts: the end of the pictorial turn was proclaimed by Mitchell himself, only 19 years after coining the term.

To understand the biological status of seeing (as a symbolic act in neuroscientific terms) is a crucial point in the dissertation. The perception-theoretical and psychological surveys play an important role, because according to the methodology, their negative conclusions can be used to disaffirm the silent presumptions of art history.

The Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of two great parts, the title of the first part is *The Problem of the Pictorial Turn*, and the title of the second is *Art History as a Medium*. Both parts contain an Excuse, which do not join tightly to the main line of thought, but they can shed a new light on the main theme.

The first part tries to dissolve the art history and the art historian by the notion of ideology, in order to show art history in the fraction between the art historian and the work of art in the second part. This very fraction makes it possible to see art history according to its nature: the title of the second part is the most important claim of my dissertation: art history is a medium, in the sense of McLuhan. In order to show this, the fractures and frictions inside the discipline have to be shown (like the arguments around the pictorial turn, or the non-scientific, ideological argumentations in the art historical texts) because art history – just like the other sciences or humanities – shows itself as homogenous and complete, according to its own ideology. The basis of this ideology is the idea of scientific objectivity, or the absence of subjectivity: the ideology of the sciences is nothing more, than to hide the subject of the scientist/thinker behind the notion of science and its usual discourses. The first part of the dissertation aims to read out the subject of the thinker from the fracture-lines of the scientific objectivity, in order to lead art history back to the connection between the subject and the works of art.

The first chapter of the dissertation deals with the context and art historical consequences of W. J. T. Mitchell's *The Pictorial Turn*, in order to base its own argumentational techniques. Rorty's philosophical turns, and Kuhn's paradigm-theory will provide a solid theoretical frame, which will enable to interpret the pictorial turn. Then, a comparison based on a parallelism follows, with Gottfried Boehm's *Ikonik Turn*. This shows not just the differences between the philosophical traditions, but the nature of the source of the images too: while for Boehm, the starting points are the

images which show themselves in (mainly) philosophical texts, then for Mitchell the everyday nature of images and the evident political emphasis is important. The two philosophical traditions show two possible ways to continue the thoughts, but Mitchell's radically opened range of interest and conscious culture-critical standpoint will promise a more rewarding way in order to critically survey art history.

The articulated and the non-articulated antecedents of the pictorial turn are in the focus of the next subchapter. The early Panofsky text of Perspective as a Symbolic form is interpreted, comparing Mitchell's text with the original, showing the subjectivity of Mitchell's representation.

The main question of the third subchapter is that How and why Gombrich's oeuvre is missing from The Pictorial Turn? The text collides Panofsky's and Gombrich's notion of Perspective on the basis of Mitchell, and in order to nuance the problem, it tries to interpret the term based on its philosophical meaning and on the transitivity of projective geometry. In addition, it analyses Mitchell's earlier writings, especially the main chapters of Iconology, in order to expand the historiographical and image-theoretical element remaining silent in The Pictorial Turn.

The subchapter titled Absences Serving the Ideological Contours is trying to read John Berger's The Way of Seeing as a prelude to The Pictorial Turn, not just because its main theme, but its unusual technical solutions (A TV program addressing frontally the viewer) it could have been used as a reference point for The Pictorial Turn's radical present analyzing and politically, ideologically charged attitude. The second aim of the subchapter is to serve as a guideline to the other, articulated prelude of Mitchell: to interpret Jonathan Crary's The Techniques of the Observer.

The subchapter titled The Pictorial Turn and Althusser's Ideology-Theory consists summarizing and definitive parts. It analyses Mitchell's great recognition scene, the meeting of Panofsky and Althusser, based on the latter's oeuvre, in order to read the precise notion of the ideology back to art history through the text of The Pictorial Turn. In this way, the text continues and widens the original thought of Mitchell (the ideological nature of iconology) in order to apply it to all of the art historical methods and themes. The last theme of the subchapter is the analysis of Panofsky and Gombrich, to emphasise their different approaches toward art history. The subchapter ends with two problems: the first one is the relation of the ideological "me" and art history based on the notion of seeing, the other is the consequences of the psychological and neurological survey of seeing for art history. These are the themes for the following two chapters.

The chapter entitled Subjectivity in Art history deals with the occurrence and reasoning techniques of the previously analyzed ideology idea of Althusser in art history. In the first subchapter, the simplest examples are shown, as the emphasized and self-reflexive "me" notion is highlighted in the famous texts, while in the second, the exact opposite, the "other" – the usually homogenous scientific

community) is shown. The third subchapter shows the most powerful – and the most eccentric – examples. The last subchapter deals with the problem of the deixis. In this subchapter the object of the survey is the classical, canonical art history, through its primary act: to refer to a work of art. The text tries to interpret this act through Althusser's notion of the subject, as a personal, individualized experience. It is important to show this, in order to highlight the ideological subjectivity's effect-mechanism in the seemingly objective and nonpersonal art historical discourse.

The next chapter is titled: The Problems of Interpreting the Visuality, and it answers the question raised at the end of the chapter titled: The Pictorial Turn and Althusser's Ideology-Theory, as it tries to connect art history with the psychological and neurological surveys of seeing, connecting to the perspective theories of Panofsky and Gombrich. But, unlike them, here the main question is not to describe the beholder's cognitive processes, or in other words to correspond the experience and the reality, but to highlight the experiments showing the difference between the visual experience and the visual stimuli. According to this, the main theme of the chapter is to present and describe the seeing as a psychological process, and the connecting nerve-routes.

The main theme of the second subchapter is the primary object, or the primary recognizable characters and objects. The visual experience will be analyzed here according to the preliminary knowledge, or in other words the art historical corpus on the work of art. In the second subchapter, the intended and non-intended multi-interpretability in art history will serve as an example to show the diverging qualities of the stimuli and the experience.

The Effects of Interpretation is the next chapter, which investigates the negative consequences of the connection between the work of art and the art historical text. The previously analyzed examples of the changing experience with stable stimulus leads to a conclusion where the losses in the experience-change have to be dealt with. The chapter tries to connect the bi-or multi-stable pictures to Mitchell's philosophy.

The last subchapter of the chapter investigates the connection between the art historian's ekphrasis and the work of art through the conclusions of the previous chapters, showing art history's power to change the visual experience, connecting the chapter with the subjectified deixis, explained in the last chapter.

The first part of the dissertation ends with an excursus, which investigates the male gaze, the dominant and active gaze of the white, heterosexual males, according to the feminist critical literature. The aim of the excursus is to highlight the sexuality of the gaze, and in the same time investigate the gender roles and power structures in the 21st century. The chapter builds the man/woman visual relation in art history on Kenneth Clark's classic *The Nude*, in order to read the male gaze and the pictorial turn

back to the contemporary context of gender and visibility. For a methodological basis, it uses Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto and the contemporary body aesthetics and male-photography, in order to rephrase them in a general gender-critical environment. The main aim of the chapter is to interrogate the previously analyzed art historian subject in the context of gender and contemporary feminism.

The main problem of the second part of the dissertation is the definition of art history. But, in order to clearly articulate its own definition, in the first three chapters it has to leave the notion of seeing, in order to re-read and collide the traditional definitions with the conclusions of the first part.

The first chapter shows the existing definitions of art history, in order to conclude that they are not capable to define the whole field. The theme of the subchapter entitled *Around the Borders* is the excentric art history, and the art historical texts outside the canon, so it investigates the borders of the discipline and the definitions using this term. The second subchapter is *The Example of History*, and it shows the connection between art history and the positivist historical studies, and the possible definitions, so it still examines art history from the outside, from the co-studies. The next subchapter deals with the notion of style as a principle, and the definitions coming from this idea. So this subchapter is the reverse of the last one as it tries to define art history from inside out, from one of its main concept.

The subchapter *Art History and the History of Sciences* is interpreting Panofsky's definition relating to natural sciences, regarding the connection between relativity theory and the historical relativism in art history. The last subchapter deals with the lexical definitions of art history, as they are simple lists of methods and special areas of interests. This diverging approaches lead us to the next chapter, dealing with the problems of paradigms in art history.

The chapter is based on András Rényi's theory of art historical paradigms. In the first subchapter, hermeneutics, as an art historical method is shown, as it widely differs from the other approaches like iconology and style criticism, and this means the end of Rényi's triangulate system. The second subchapter investigates the normal-science state of art history, which is necessary in order to use Kuhn's paradigm, and it shows that art history can never achieve the normal science state, because it cannot be comprehended as a puzzle. In the *Diverging Paradigms* subchapter, art history is reconstructed as a theoretical continuation of Rényi's triangular system, with feminism and Foucault's sexual history. The last subchapter deals with the exterior effect, especially the ones risking the autonomy of the discipline, or, in other words, it asks that how can art history articulate itself as an autonomous study, detached from philosophy, aesthetics, or feminist perspectives.

The most detailed answer for the question “what is art history?” is the next chapter. Art history is a medium – according to McLuhan’s definition – so it is a special extension of the human brain and nervous system, which enables us to deal with the incapable quantity of works of art and the texts on them. The first two subchapters of the chapter try to characterize notion of medium based on Mitchell’s *Addressing Media*. In the next subchapter, McLuhan’s definition of medium and his connection ideas are being interpreted, in order to highlight the medium-quality of art history based on Mitchell’s 10 point on media.

The last chapter tries to shed light on the hidden or unexplicated fractures in art history based on the notion of art history as a medium. The first example is anachronism, based on Hans Belting and Daniel Arasse, or, in other words, even the most rigorous art historical interpretation will still be anachronistic, because of the theoretical utensils: these were formed in the 19th century. The second problem is the ekphrasis in art history, which I show at the interpretation of Michael Ann Holly’s Heinrich Wölfflin essay. The aim of this subchapter is to highlight the transmitting quality of art history, as it is between the beholder and the work of art, and it constructs both of them. The third subchapter deals with the details, or, how the singular visual experience and the contradictory elements construct the scientific field of art history.

The second excursus interprets a work of art: Rosaire Appel’s comic: *Untranslated*, from the perspective of the pictorial turn, McLuhan’s medium theory, and comic studies, in order to try out the methods and previously stated consequences on and individual artwork.

The last chapter summarises the previously stated consequences and tries to strengthen the bond between the medium quality of art history and the subjectivity of Althusser, in order to highlight once again the frictions in art history, and the ideologies hiding them.

Previous Publications:

A képregény metamédiума in: Székely Miklós (szerk): Kóstolni a szép-tudományba, CENTRART 2014

Művészettörténet a képi fordulat után in: ELTE-BTK doktorandusz tanulmánykötet, ELTE 2014

Mitchell, Panofsky és Gombrich találkozása a perspektívikus térben, in: Nagy Edit (szerk.): Fiatal kutatók Magyarország megújulásáért 2/1, PEME Budapest 2011

Egy megfigyelő eszközkészéte – McLuhan Hot és Cool fogalmaihoz in: Replika 2011/3

Art History after Mitchell's Pictorial Turn in: prof. Ding Ning (szerk.) I. Gradual Conference of Art History, Peking University press, Peking 2011)

Conferences:

A képregény metamédiума, Fiatal Művészettörténészek IV. konferenciája, CentrArt & Pécsi Tudományegyetem, Pécs, 2013

Reconsidering the Logic of Interpretation, AHGSA Conference, Santa Barbara, CAL, 2013

Addressing the Untranslated, Lex-ICON, Université de Haute-Alsace, Mulhouse 2012

An Allegorical Debate, Performing Art History II Courtauld Institute of Art, London 2012 (Nyisztor Szabolccsal közösen)

Mitchell, Panofsky és a perspektíva, PEME III. PhD konferenciája, MTA, Budapest, 2012

Addressing Art History, McLuhan Messages, ELTE-BTK, Budapest, 2011

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