

The Writers' Image Photography and Literature, Alternatives and Changes

In the past decade the relationship between photography and literature can be seen as two processes parallel to and also reflecting on each other at the same time. We can witness the artistic emancipation of photography as described by the English expression of 'Visual Turn'. The expression refers to the complex interplay between the image and the word drawing our attention to the inseparable study of the two traditions.

The language of the visuals with its expressive force is influencing the comprehension of literature in the post reading era to an extent that has never before been experienced. The portraits of the writers as emblematic pieces of the writers' oeuvre seem to be a kind of introduction to literature. At the same time the writers' photos as documents of visual anthropology give away a lot about literary cults, self images and changing societal roles.

How do photographers see the 'heroes' of literature? To what extent does the use of technology define their view? In what way, if at all, do writers modify the visual documents taken of them? What does the success and publicity of the message inspired by both sides and involved in the same document depend on? Whose is the photo? Does it belong to the writer sitting in front of or the photographer behind the camera?

The ideas above were raised by Péter György as an introduction to the round table discussion organised by the Institute for Theory of Art and Media Studies of Eötvös University and the Petőfi Literary Museum. Those taking part in the discussion included Dávid Horváth, László Lugo Lugosi and Anna Cséve and Csilla E. Csorba on behalf of the museum. The summary of the themes discussed on 27th May 2008 below is supplemented by the additional thoughts of Barna Burger, who had accepted the invitation of the museum but could not take part in the discussion.

Csilla E. Csorba: The examination of the relationship between photography and literature is a theme that is closely related to our exhibition '*Writers' Portraits in Klára Langer's Studio*'. The photo exhibition is a selection from Klára Unger's legacy which has been administered by the Petőfi Literary Museum since 1975 and which comprises about four thousand master negatives of portraits taken of more than 130 writers and artists in their homes or studios. The exhibition includes photos of Jenő Barcsay, Béla Czóbel, Sándor Csoóri, István Csók, Gábor Devecseri, Oszkár Gellért, Zoltán Jékely, Ferenc Juhász, Ferenc Karinthy, Amy Károlyi, Lajos Kassák, Dezső Keresztury, Béla Kondor, Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Ferenc Sánta, György Somlyó, Károly Szakonyi, Mihály Váci, Zoltán Zelk and Sándor Weöres. Most of the photos were taken by Klára Langer and some by her trainee and then colleague, Zsuzsa Sándor between 1966 and 1969.

Dávid Horváth's career as a photographer can also be associated with Klára Langer as he was taken to Jolán Vadas's FÉNYSZÖV studio based on her recommendation. His main area is socio-photography but lately he has been experimenting with a new genre, the writers' and artists' super close-up eye-portraits. His photos titled 'Magic Eyes' were

exhibited in The Hungarian House of Photography (in Mai Manó House) in 2002 and also in the Buda Castle in January 2008. His photos were published in 2001. Lugo has also tried different genres of photography including portraits, photos of buildings and cities or artifacts. His books and publications are numerous and he is an expert of the theory and history of photography as well as an aesthete. From the photographs of Barna Burger's book *'Heads or Tails'* which contains the portraits of 92 contemporary Hungarian writers we have once organised an exhibition here in the museum.

A number of photographs by all the three artists can be found in the collection of the museum and a selection of their photos will be shown and referred to during our discussion now.

Anna Cséve: About a year ago one afternoon Péter György came up with an exciting idea of bringing about an exhibition that would explore the relationship between photography and literature or rather media and literature in general. Unfortunately, the plans for the exhibition, *'The Writers' Image – Media and Literature'* has not been materialised but we were all very pleased when he undertook the task of opening Klára Langer's exhibition 7 March 2008, which, no doubt, was very close to the original idea. The theme, therefore, has been out in the air in the museum for a while. In 2002 when I was working on the Móricz exhibition I was reluctant to use the stereotypes of literary history, which not only did not help but rather hindered the process of re-reading Móricz, a process that then had not even started yet. That was why I approached the exhibition from the angle of existing photographs. I discovered that there were photos taken of Móricz, which had never been used in course-books before, and put them together with yet unknown texts from the diaries referring to creating a self-portrait thus suggesting a new reading of the writer. For example on a photo of the smiling Móricz wearing a bow tie he looks like Kosztolányi, which made me wonder whether there are certain characteristics of the technique of photography or the studio situation for that matter that can influence the outcome or when a photo is taken of a writer to what extent the writer's or the photographer's personality is represented in the photograph. I would love to know what Péter thinks about this with special regard to the relationship between contemporary literature and photography.

Péter György: The relation to self representation of literature, or rather 'the representatives of the text' has changed dramatically in the course of the past 30 years. Some decades ago the Hungarian writers faced the camera with certain innocence and naivety. In fact they are not present in these photos or if they are they pretend as if they weren't. As if the ego did not have a self representation in such situations and the writers, like actors, perform that they are writers. It wasn't the proper thing to reflect on the situation, on the contrary, writers pretended as if they just happened to be sitting on the spot. The phenomenon has a number of exemplifications in their writings. If we decided to put together an anthology of photos of Hungarian writers accompanied with their own comments we would clearly see from Kassák through Ágnes Nemes Nagy the power of that prudery or almost compulsory visual blindness.

Looking at photos taken nowadays we can see that the writers have become aware of this exposure and reflect on the situation. They accept the photograph as their own image. They engage themselves to take part in the working process with the photographer accepting the fact of 'being presented' and at the same time having their own expectations in exchange. The writers become more and more conscious partners of the photographer today. Photographers respond to this by dimming the boundaries between so called 'big' shots and the series of studio snapshots, which I find an important move.

László Lugo Lugosi: I don't do anything like that. I just make an inventory with no special criteria whatsoever. Currently I'm in the process of taking photos of artists and their studios. I have just finished with 140 of the about 300 on my list and I am always very fond of the unexpected interfering with my endeavour. Also, the idea of the whole project came by chance. In 2004 I came across a publication of Baltus' paintings comprising a couple of pictures of the French painter's studio from the mid 30s. In one of the pictures of the studio I found that no objects otherwise so characteristic of such pictures, such as for instance the painter's main work, etc. appears on this one. What's more, Baltus took a photo of his own painting turned to the empty wall with its back to the viewer.

My inventory in progress is a proper inventory inasmuch as it has no other purpose than to be made. I don't want to express anything with my shots I just want to take them to have them. That's all and then we can go on.

The purpose of the photos taken of the writers was also to ensure that the shots are there when none of us is around any more. Ady, for instance, is still there on the photo at least. But I never aim at making a nice picture as a result, or at least I do not make efforts in that direction. In the case of Ady, as we know, Aladár Székely postured him, composed the lights, etc..I am sometime a blind photographer and tell myself that 'I have once again taken a photo of Jorgosz and the lights once again were not right on his face, how can I be like that?' Of course, sometimes I want also the lights to be perfect....

István Bart had to sit down when I was taking photos of him because exposure time was half a second. The model is sitting not because the photographer wants him or he wants to sit. It has technical reasons, i.e. to avoid moving too much. I used a film then as I do in the case of the *Artists and Studios* series, too. To make it even more surprising I also use a wooden camera.

At the editorial office of *Beszélő* I always wanted to use the flash because some time in the 80s I had the idea that they lived a life of the underworld. So I went there as a photographer of the underworld and wanted to pose the situation so that it looked like the nest of Russian rebels in 1914. There was a kitchen lamp hanging from above which I thought we would pull down and throw a strong light upon. It turned out that my new camera had a switch which did not allow me to use the flash. Those days there was a choice between standard use of flash or occasional flash which you could change by turning a switch but I did not manage to fire the flash and when I was back there for the third time they must have thought that I was a nice boy but perhaps sent by the police.

Then I simply said : 'Sit in the kitchen under the light' and took the photo of them. There was nothing artistic about it. But it is a very interesting photograph. Two or three of the people on the photo have died since then.

Péter György: You may call this inventory but I think that snapshot has become an icon. It is also an overused photograph.

László Lugo Lugosi: Exactly. I've just wanted to say the same. This has been by far my most frequently published photograph and not because it is so excellent but because nobody would dare to visit *Beszélő* and take a photo of them those days.

Péter György: And how characteristic this photo is of each of them. Ottilia Solt is stirred, isn't she? She is a real stir about. Petri is fully aware of being 'the Petri' and is sitting in the middle as he is due. Haraszti looks impertinent, as always, and in the background there are three intellectuals obviously more keen on the mission than their own egos.

So you are playing a photographer who is blind. As the agent of passing time you make inventories to preserve and maintain. In fact photos even in their most preserving role are about their own deterioration. For me the most enticing in photography is its vanishing....Nobody can be convinced to keep moving all day like in a short story and take photos at every corner at any time of the day at twelve or two or four. There may be a thousand or a hundred thousand or a million shots taken but the material world is so quickly passing on....and vanishing. Contemporary photography is accompanied by melancholy, the photo has always been gloomy ever since it was born. Can you name a photographer not deeply depressed and melancholic?

László Lugo Lugosi: I have no idea. My pictures are rarely used in publication. Sometimes I don't even show them when finished. But only because I am lazy. I know they are good photos but I am lazy. There are too many of them. It would simply take a lot of time to go back and show them. I can hardly manage with the artists, too, as it would take so much time to go back to 140 people.

Péter György: And what are you doing with the photos then?

László Lugo Lugosi: Just collecting them for the time being.

Dávid Horváth: I don't think publication is that important either. The photos I have brought are close-ups start almost as eye photos then the scope widens and includes the nose, the mouth or half the face. In 2001 at the event of '*Photography for the Next Milleneum*' organised by the museum I had the idea of focusing very closely on the eyes. I looked for the people who either as persons or authors had a magic influence on my life. The photo of Ottó Orbán was taken here as well, it features only his eyes and nose but not the mouth. In the process I started to ask myself if my super close-up aspect was valid in terms of a truthful description of the personality of the model through the only medium of the eyes. I had to realise that the answer was no. Durin my '*Magic Eyes*' exhibition I found it very disturbing that the writers cannot be recognised on the basis of the eye

portraits. The audience could recognise neither Ottó Orbán or Péter Esterházy as the eyes were reflected in glasses blown up from an unusual angle. I suddenly knew that I should step back and get detached from my models. I agreed that it is more advantageous to include the mouth in the composition as without it the person is maimed and the personality is unrecognisable. I stepped further back then and exposed from farther away so that the personality of the model can be seen better. Sometimes the hand appears as in Zsófia Balla's photo, but this is just another symbolic element of the composition like a high forehead or eyes wide open that like a most truthful mirror give away everything about the spiritual and human depths of the model.

The most essential about these close-ups is that they are not documentary photos but carefully posed portraits.

Earlier on I was mainly engaged with taking socio-photos and after a while I noticed that the strength of every single picture of mine is the way my models look at me. I don't think I have a photo without an intensive eye-contact between myself and the model. I was less interested in the environment but keen to find out if there was any human relationship possible between myself and the people I was taking the photos of. At first, when taking photos of gipsy kids my models were suspicious. The people I have taken eye portraits of must have trusted me as they stepped in front of my camera following their own free will after our preliminary discussion. They do so in spite of the fact that they have to be motionless during exposure as I go so near with the distance ring.

Péter György: This close-up vision has two sides to it. One is that of the dermatologist's in terms of presenting the human skin simply and as a matter of fact element of most of the photographs. The other, if I may say so, is looking into the eyes of our lover or child. In other words there are very very few exceptional people we feel so close to. This is far within the proximity decent civil behaviour allows when we look at each other in the face. Therefore, I think this implies either a cool medical distance or a mental state of a deep running love affair. If I am right the photos are a mixture of the two entwining both sides with elaborate refinement.

Dávid Horváth: They are 'spiritual photos' that enlarge the gaze. That's why I used a special technical approach by which, through the distortion of the face using unusual cuts, I could make the essence of the inspired personality more visible.

I am sure that one can sense a relationship between the photographer and the model when looking at these sometimes shockingly powerful photos; I am part of the portrait I have taken of the writer.

Although writers and poets as well as the audience usually like my photos the magazines are not interested. Publications need photos of standard sizes mostly. But I don't mind it. I don't take photos to get them published. For me it is rather an exciting experiment: how can communication be brought about between two people without any words through the mere medium of the visual.

László Lugo Lugosi: Once I took a horrible photo of Klári Tolnay I wish now were never seen by anybody.

Péter György: Where did it come out?

László Lugo Lugosi: Poor Klári Tolnay was very old when I entered the empty dressing room, where there was really nothing but herself sitting in her wrinkles looking into the mirror. Well, it wasn't published anywhere, oh no, it was, yes, it came out once.

Péter György: The problem of the writer's vulnerability and exposure we have mentioned already can also be tackled in relation to the publication of the photographs. I think it is interesting to see what kind of visual images were used to underpin our literary texts in the past decades. We can see the formation of the history of Hungarian literature or politics for that matter from a new perspective by comparing the different Babits, Ady or Attila József faces used at different times. The photos that got overused at certain periods of time have eventually lost their visual power. However, it remains an important issue to find a matching portrait for a publication. Literature experts and editors as copy right owners feel free to handle photos as illustrations. In the case of any festive occasion the media keep selecting photos randomly from the archive to put them against texts changed, cut or mixed as needed to fit the remaining space. One funny magazine, perhaps Kalligram published a photo taken of Kriszta Bódis. The photo was taken more than ten years before and she did not even remember it. She almost fell of the stairs when she saw the photo in the magazine. She had not even been told about it by the magazine. While they carefully consider the publication of a text in the case of photos it does not occur to them to ask for the writer's agreement and the photographer's permission.

Dávid Horváth: Tibor Zalán, on the contrary, happened to like my portrait of the intensive look to the extent that no sooner than I had sent him the photo he rushed to the printing house to get the photo he had submitted exchanged and had mine published in the latest edition of *Szép versek*. He did not remember to make my name appear, did not ask for my permission and I did not get any honorarium either. Despite all the above I was pleased that he liked the portrait and it came out at least....well, just a story. Honestly, I don't care if my photos are used or if they come out. But I think it is humiliating when the photographer's name is omitted...

Péter György: Although I like the idea that the photograph will create its own life but I think this is far from societal reality. What extremely delicate an issue is a writer's visual representation in a context. Apart from the intended essential message of the portrait the photo might also be bearing additional information. The photo that has been taken of me belongs to the heritage of another person but can make or break me. In this respect I claim that I have never seen so many vulnerable people like the writers. I write a diary, my name is Attila József, the text of my diary is unacceptable and cannot be published according to the standards of my time but at another point of time it becomes deeply and movingly dramatic. Thirty five years go by, there is an ongoing hassle about the publication and doing away with taboos. Yet the diary is written by the same Attila József, isn't it? Or what would have happened if Kafka's friend had acted as been told by Kafka and had burnt the manuscripts? Then there would be no Franz Kafka today. As the last will was written by Kafka, too. Something similar is happening to the photographs. If after the death of a writer it turns out that a series of photos were taken of him....the photos get published and ruin the writer. That's why I said at the beginning of the

converstaion that writers have started to pay attention to photos and portraits and know very well what they want to do with them.

László Lugo Lugosi: As a photographer I am the author of the photograph but the content does not belong to me.

Dávid Horváth: I claim that the content is mine. The content of my photograph belongs to me absolutely and has nothing to do with the person I am taking the photo of.

Péter György: The part of the sentence 'this is mine', this is my photograph, is very risky. There are two things we can state about the writer's photograph. Both the author of the photograph and the author the photo is taken of belong to our cultural heritage. Whether you like it or not, this is the case.

Dávid Horváth: The lens of the camera manipulates. I manipulate the lights and through almost every technical means. During the process of taking a photograph I cannot pay attention to the writer's personality. That is important for me before the process starts. I don't want to and I cannot express his thoughts on the photograph. I don't know if he is thinking about his grandmother during the process I just want to take a suggestive photo knowing that his personality will surface anyway as these people have charismatic personalities anyway. I just want to take a photo using my professional knowledge and technical equipment to come up with a good portrait. There are good and bad photos. The bad photo does not express anything while the good one renders an authentic image of the self and is expressive. If the writer does not like the portrait, I will not publish it.

Péter György: This is what I am talking about. That there are bad photos...and although they are not published succeeding generations handle them careless flexibility.

Csilla E. Csorba: This viewpoint could be changed and turned the other way round. A photographer's legacy may include a number of negatives he never enlarged because he never wanted to make them public. But now they all become a sensational novelty as yet unknown photographs and they will sooner or later get publicity. This raises exactly the same moral problem. And not only because of the person the photos are taken of but because of the photographer who for whatever reason never wanted to enlarge them.

Péter György: I'd like to tell you a story that makes the ambivalence of the relationship between the photographer and the writer clear. Isaac Bashevis Singer the well known American writer had a problem to solve. He was a Yiddish writer for a while and then started to write in English In itself it is a strange social status to live as a survivor of a disapearing culture in New York. Singer's invention was that for decades he did not allow photographers to take a picture of him. Until one day his novel, '*Shadows*', the Hungarian title is *New York árnyai* was translated into English and the New York Times magazine made an interview with him. This all happened about twenty years ago in the last great period and golden age of printed media. A published photograph in that magazine at that time would mean a rising career for any photographer. When Singer

appeared in the studio of the New York Times magazine the photographer had dropped the camera. Instead of an old man there was a gagman sitting in front of him wearing an orange shirt, pink trousers with spotted light blue braces, white socks and flowery tennis shoes and a hat. I have never seen such a talented person in my life.

Csilla E. Csorba: This relates to identity..... meaning that the photo can show one's identity.

Péter György: That's it exactly, Csilla. I agree with you.

Csilla E. Csorba: Anyway we are pleased to receive writers' portraits of any kind. We take stock of them, get them archived and prove passing time.

Péter György: In this respect a most sacred mission of the Literary Museum is to widen the concept of literature and make it explicit that the image is quite as much part of literature as the text. The writer writes and the photographer takes shots but they both belong to the same literature contributing to the same corpus. The photograph, like the interview itself, is part of a conversation although it is not textualised in words but materialised in snapshots. This is the reason why textual and audiovisual traditions need to be interpreted together.