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Doktori Disszertáció

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A direktoriális mód és a megrendezett fotógrafia elméleti jelentősége a fotóművészetben

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The theoretical significance of the directorial mode and staged photography for the art of photography

Theses

Gaining new impetus from the middle of the 1970s, the theory of photography saw more and more attempts to apply comparative approaches to the description and analysis of phenomena that had escaped the attention of theoreticians—techniques related to theatre and formerly considered inconsistent with photography. Discussing the work of some contemporary American photographers in 1976, Alan Douglas Coleman took notice of a new attitude, which he called the directorial mode. In his argument he contrasted this mode mostly with what was already the dominant trend at the time, “straight” photography. It was in his last book, Camera Lucida, that Roland Barthes, who looked at photography from an entirely different angle, asserted that “it is not (...) by Painting that photography touches Art, but by Theatre.” It is a claim that is important in many regards. It may neutralize the negative assessment of the heritage of photographic pictorialism, which had indeed reached a dead-end by the first quarter of the 20th century. Further, by recognizing photography as an intermedial medium of art, it provides new means for the interpretation of the rapidly changing endeavours that assumed the status of art in the 1970s and 1980s.

Barthes’s idea was sharply at odds with the trend in photographic thought that considered the photograph, on the basis of Peirce’s semiology, as indexical—a current newly intensifying in the theory and practice of the time. Barthes’s proposition was in disagreement even with the multifarious content of his own book, in which he repeatedly argued for the lexical nature of photography, its mechanical rendering of objective reality, cementing the notion in photographic thought for decades to come.

Coleman and Barthes approach photography from very different standpoints. Coleman focuses on the creator’s position in photography, while Barthes reaches his assertion from the respective vantage points of the model who “suffers” the photographic rendering and of the recipient who interprets the photographic image. These two important studies were written during a period of art history when photography, thanks to its central role in conceptual art, entered the mainstream of visual art, and the scrutiny of the medium’s boundaries brought out formerly unknown, undiscussed, or denied/unacknowledged aspects of photography.
The method of my dissertation is critical discourse analysis. In the first chapter I introduce and analyse the most important theoretical writings that discuss the directorial mode and staged photography. With subchapters dedicated to the canon-making works of A. D. Coleman, Michael Köhler and Anne H. Hoy, I examine the attitudes of the directorial mode and staged photography. For this, my main blueprint is Coleman’s study, *The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition*, which was the first to contextualize the efforts of certain photographers in the 1960s and 1970s, the endeavour Coleman called the directorial mode. As I present and analyse Coleman’s essay, I attempt a rereading of the artistically relevant periods of the history of photography—of pictorialism and straight photography—, on the basis of primary sources. I was motivated to reconsider the role and multifarious layers of the art of photography by the richness of references that *The Directorial Mode: Notes Toward a Definition* makes in connection with the history and birth of the art. In addition to categorizing the types of staged photography, Hoy’s *Fabrications: Staged, Altered and Appropriated Photographs* creates a distinction that has proved important for my paper. Hoy differentiates between those who work in the directorial mode, and artists who create staged photographs. He describes the artists of the directorial mode as late modernists, and regards those who create staged photographs postmoderns. Michael Köhler makes the same distinction in his study, “Arrangiert, konstruiert und inszeniert – vom Bilder-Finden zum Bild-Erfinden.” Köhler thinks works in the directorial mode represent a transition between postmodern staged photography and formalist straight photography, which seeks to comply with the modernist concept of art. Both Hoy and Köhler base the distinction on the artists’ choice of subject: while the artists of the directorial mode were essentially photographers who explored their own inner worlds, postmodern visual artists used photography to examine concepts of the self that arose under the influence of mass media. In the rest of my dissertation, I go on to treat this distinction with critique, if not with regard to the subject of the photos.

Köhler’s radically simplifying, though to-the-point, description of the chief characteristics of modernist photographic art and their differences from the traits of postmodern (staged) photography was a revelation for me. The precising juxtaposition showed that the extremely popular trend in photography, which was considered a model to be followed and was dominant on the institutional level as well, actually relied on the faith that the camera had the power to render reality. Also, as it is implied by Coleman
and Hoy, the sensibility that championed straight photography, also conspicuous in the position of institutions, did not brook alternative forms.

In the next chapter I introduce into the discourse Craig Owens’s concept of allegory, which is to have an important function in my paper. The concept is brought up by way of some of Walter Benjamin’s writings, which already inspired Owens’s theory. I also bring into play the concept of the symbol, the cornerstone of the modernist understanding of art, and the antithesis of allegory, which is defined as a behaviour, a technique, a form of perception and a process. The symbol, understood as an organic unity, a holistic art, and a sensuous experience, becomes useful for my analysis of such theoretical writings that support, introduce and thematize straight/purist photography. In this chapter I relate how the trend of straight photography arose, and outline the key theoretical tenets of the movement through the studies of its pivotal artists and theoreticians, such as Paul Strand, Edward Weston, and Beaumont Newhall.

Particular attention is devoted in this chapter to an analysis of the concept of transparency, which is considered the essence of straight/purist photography, as well as to an examination of the theories of Roland Barthes and Roger Scruton, which have many similarities and also rely on the transparency of photography’s medium. After a look at the ontological writings of John Szarkowski and André Bazin, who also discuss what they consider the significance of transparency, in the subchapter called The Photo as Mirror I challenge the idea that the alleged transparency of the medium makes the photo act like a window or a mirror. For this, my starting point is John Szarkowski’s Mirrors and Windows, in which he calls photos whose character is provided by the moment of exposure windows, in accordance with the modernist understanding of photography. By contrast, the photos he thinks belong in the other category, that of the mirror, attribute less significance to the segment of reality rendered, and more to the fact that the photograph reflects, as it were, the personality of its maker, his or her state of mind at the moment of exposure.

One of the central parts of the chapter is dedicated to Barthes’s argument for a clear distinction between the interpretative possibilities of photographs and texts, on account of the formers’ transparency.

The third chapter concerns itself with postmodern analyses of photography. I rely on Frederic Jameson’s concept of pastiche, a key term of his book, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. The concept helps Jameson to differentiate modernism and postmodernism. In his turn, Andy Grundberg employs the term to analyse
the work of photographers he considers postmodern. Among other things, here I question the distinction between the directorial mode, which is considered late modernist, and postmodern staged photography, by identifying the pastiche as a creative method in the work of Arthur Tress and Leslie Krimms. As an identifiable technique in the photos analysed, pastiche shows how the photographers of the directorial mode not only lost interest in recording the “decisive moments” of what they found to be a humdrum reality, but went against the dictate of representing it artistically, and used the camera to create artificial, inorganic compositions from the latent images of their own imagination and personal experiences. By assuming the formalist guise of straight photography, they also offered a critique of its “window concept.”

In the third chapter’s subchapter, Deep in the Photograph, I take a new look at the problem of the mirror, present in photography from the start. The chapter reveals the presence of Craig Owens’s as-yet-unproclaimed allegory concept in another study of his, “Photography En Abyme.” Unlike Szarkowski, who as an author and curator sought to gain recognition for photography in its own right, without any external influence, Owens in this essay does not consider the mirror quality of the photograph as a superficial phenomenon, but examines it as its structure, or inner phenomenon, by drawing on the methodology of literary theory. Owens employs the method necessary for the deciphering of the palimpsest, an impulse of the allegory – the latter not yet named in the study –, as an interpretative technique. He adds his allegorical reading to the works after his analysis, as a “rhetorical ornament” or “embellishment.” But since interpretation cannot “insert” allegory into a work that does not have it structurally, Owens enables me to draw a parallel between his observation and Coleman’s suggestion that the directorial mode pervades even the work of artists who would answer to the formalist criteria of straight photography. Owens deconstructs, or disturbs the regular operation of, a method of interpreting a photograph – that of addressing the compositional order of the things visible in it, their tonal transitions, or historical relevance –, and underpins with precise theoretical work the possibility and validity of reading photographic images through literary theory.

In the fourth chapter I analyse attempts on the part of photographers of the directorial mode to break with the imperative of reality. I already perform this by referencing Owens’s theory of the allegory, and by describing Duane Michals’ oeuvre and types of works, I attribute significance to the characteristic image types of the directorial mode and the concept of theatricality.
In the subsequent chapters of my dissertation I analyse various works. I point out traits of the directorial mode in Bálint Flesch’s oeuvre, and demonstrate what an important role this mode plays in contemporary Hungarian photography. Thereafter, I offer a critique of related discourses with a modernist or postmodernist disposition so as to show how the theoretical discourse of post-photography, the period since the appearance of Photoshop, the essential software for digital image-making, is marked by the same dichotomy that fuelled the tension between modernist and postmodernist theories of photography. This dichotomy is most conspicuous in theoretical works that discuss the dependence of the medium of photography on reality. When it comes to discourses on post-photography, however, what is at issue is not only the evaluation of (the art of) photography, but the legitimacy as well of photography’s very medium in the digital age. In my view, most of the art-theoretical problems that were given prominence by digital photography were already sounded in the 1980s, mostly in theoretical writings on art that drew on the apparatus of deconstructive literary theory, and consequently what the post-photographic period highlights more than anything is the – always existing – susceptibility of the medium of photography to manipulation, which is, or can be, now evident on the side of the recipient as well.