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PhD thesis

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Miklós Barabás and Photography

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1. Subject and objective of the dissertation

In my dissertation, I examine Miklós Barabás’ complex relationship with photography as a trade, a business, and an art form. Barabás operated a photography studio between 1862 and 1864, but the works and written documents on which I base my analysis are not limited to this brief two-year period. By shedding light on his understanding of visual depictions and his ideas about the nature and function of art, the dissertation offers a broader context for a reassessment of his entire oeuvre. Most of the objects discussed in the dissertation (photographs and written documents) are found in the family bequest. On occasion, I refer to other artefacts and documents from private and public collections.

My interest in this subject goes back to the research topic of my MA thesis, which analysed Barabás’s understanding of perspective. In this earlier study, I examined two of Barabás’s lectures, investigating the written sources on which they drew and also seeking practical manifestations of his theoretical propositions in his artworks. Based on this work, I found one of the sources of Barabás’s interest in new media in his views on perspective and optics. Barabás delivered his acceptance speech, entitled *On Perspective in Painting*, at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on October 15th 1859, and it was published the following year in the *Bulletin of the Hungarian Academy*. In this speech, he addresses the question of curvilinear perspective theory and the fixed viewing point. He arrives at the following conclusion: “Those on the wrong path of curvilinear perspective believe their ideas to be confirmed by the peculiar appearance in the otherwise truthful rendering of photographs that the vertical lines of two towers standing side by side appear to be tilted and their tops to converge and their widths to diminish. (…) But the careful investigator will also notice in such photographs that the towers appear not to be upright, but that they are tilted inwards as they rise. This problem can be helped by the photographer by placing his camera at a distance and a height from which the lens is capable of taking in the entire tower and the owner of the picture hangs the image tilting away from the wall at the same angle as the angle from which the photographer’s tube deviated from the perpendicular position.” Three years later, in a submission to the City Council for the construction of a photo studio on the corner of Korona and Úri Streets, his explanation of the size of the room in which the pictures would be taken is as follows: “The width of two fathoms and three feet barely meets the requirements of many demands, such as the photographing of larger groups of officers, families, etc. The proper placement of 15 individuals in a space of this size is problematic. With such a width, it takes 26 degrees to the edge of room b., although according to the rules of perspective 22 degrees would be sufficient, and by 26 degrees spherical distortions come into play with regards to straight planes, resulting in thwarting rations, which are even noticeable in the case of landscapes, let alone in the images of figures, in which case those on the edges are not negligible.” These two quotes clearly demonstrate that Barabás’s relationship to photography, which predated his photographic output evidenced by specific works, was strongly related to the science of perspective and questions concerning optical distortions.

Barabás received little institutional education in art and has basically been considered, in the secondary literature, as having been a self-taught artist: in 1830 he attended the Academy of Vienna for only a few months. After his brief detours to Vienna, Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca), Bucharest, and Italy, he came to Pest at a young age, and in 1836, he became the first
painter to be elected a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. But even before this, he had always emphatically labelled himself an “academic painter,” using this designation when he signed his letters and submissions. In his self-portraits, as an artist who was prominent in the institutionalization of fine art in Hungary, he appears as an acclaimed member of the wealthy middle-class society. In his self-portraits in miniature, in watercolour, in oil, and in lithographs, he refers only modestly to his livelihood, and rather than paints and brushes, it is the compass and the sketchbook which are the recurring elements. In other words, in line with the hierarchy propagated by academies, he refers to the primacy of line (disegno), which was regarded as speaking to the intellect, over colour (colore), which was thought to speak to the emotions. Perspective, which was the subject of his acceptance speech, is a system of depiction built on computation and networks of lines, and for centuries, it has been considered one of the most academic areas of painting. It is therefore no accident that Charles Alphonse Du Fresnoy is the author most frequently cited by Barabás. Du Fresnoy’s treatise De arte Graphica liber, published in 1668, delimits the following order of the components of painting: invention, drawing, and colour. Barabás combined his academic approach to painting with photography without difficulty, and in fact, this view was not uncommon among his contemporaries in Western Europe. In 1859, Francis Frith (1822–1898) wrote in the Art Journal (a journal cited by Barabás), praising photography for its accuracy of outline, perspective, and light-shadow.

Even though Barabás ran his photo studio for a relatively short period of time, the interplay between photography and painting in the life of a painter turned photographer nonetheless offers an interesting vantage point from which to consider his oeuvre, especially from the point of view of style. The nature and extent of the influence of photography on his work as a painter, i.e. whether the proliferation of photographic-like painting from the second half of the 1860s in his oeuvre was due to the specific influence of photographs or he simply considered this style the ideal form for developments and aims already inherent in his painting, is the subject of another study. In the present analysis, I investigate Barabás’s photographic activity in the strict sense, analysing instances when these two types of picture-creating activities met, as can be proven with concrete documents.

2. Methodology

The subject of the dissertation is highly varied both with regards to its time and the materials discussed. The earliest document to which I refer in detail is from the 1840s, while the latest is from the years following Barabás’s death. In my analysis, I examine Barabás’s theoretical writings, his works of art, the operation of his business as a photographer, his studies of chemistry, as well as the images of him, both verbal and visual, created by others. The methodologies used in the dissertation are therefore also varied, though all the sections form a coherent whole as a study of Miklós Barabás and photography. I employ classical stylistic analysis (offering analyses of compositions of photographs), technical history (Barabás’s photographic process, contextualization of his photographic recipe book in light of contemporary European photographic procedures), genre theory (Chapter VII: the role of memory in photographs of paintings, in paintings based on photographs, and in one case in a painting which depicts a photograph within its composition), cultural history (Barabás’s
3. Structure of the dissertation

In the chapter following the Introduction, I discuss the role of this new medium in Barabás’s life well before the opening of his photographic studio in 1862. The events discussed in this chapter date back to the 1840s and the first half of the 1850s. In describing its relationship with the earliest version of photography, the daguerreotype, I rely on previously unpublished documents, such as Barabás’s own detailed description of making daguerreotypes, and rare artefacts, such as the daguerreotypes of Barabás and his three daughters. Chapter III covers the first years of the 1860s, detailing the location of the business, the operation of the studio, and Barabás’s work relationship with his partner, János Fájth. I argue that the incentive behind Barabás’s second turn to photography was in part a response to a suggestion made by Hugó Maszák, who, based on his previous experience with various photographic techniques, encouraged his teacher and future father-in-law to open a studio. As an explanation of Maszák’s knowledge of photography I discuss the role of Hugó Maszák in the Zeyk Circle of Nagyenyed and thereby depart slightly from the chronological order of the dissertation. This section is also based largely on previously unpublished manuscripts.

In Chapter IV, I offer an overview of the experiences of Hugó Maszák, who went to study with Ferenc Veress in Kolozsvár in order to learn the latest photographic processes. This coincides with the first period of Barabás’s photographic studio. The description of photographic procedures – ‘recipes’ – sent to Pest by Maszák at certain intervals was written down by Barabás in his own notebook and further supplemented with additional sources he happened to come by. Through this notebook, we gain insight into Barabás’s knowledge of photography and the foreign (mostly French, English, and Austrian) sources he acquired, which are exemplary of an era in which hundreds of photographers experimented with attempts to perfect the process, including some whose names are now largely forgotten.

Chapter V deals with the specific products of this knowledge and this enterprise, the cartes-de-visite and experimental photographic artefacts. I discuss the cartes-de-visite in part from a sociological point of view, addressing the social status of the customers and touching on images of celebrities and the socially coded system of gestures and settings. I also analyse the works from a stylistic point of view, though noting that such studios always employed several assistants, compositional models appeared in journals, and the carte-de-visite had fairly restricted potential when it came to formal deviations. Thus, one must be cautious when speaking of individual styles. Barabás played a decisive role in the studio setting and the arrangement of the compositions, and I surmise that his arrangements in effect allowed him to continue his ‘academic’ portraiture in a new medium: his compositions in oil, in watercolour, in lithographs and (especially with regards to female models) his fashion plates return in his cartes-de-visite. I understand the function of these images in the process of the visual pantheonization of individuals important from the perspective of politics, literature, and art in mid-19th century middle class society and, following the ideas of Andreas Broeckmann, in their
role in the visual economy of individuals. As such, the works in question can be seen as a continuation of the lithographic works by Barabás from the 1840s and 1850s. Ferenc Veress offered the following description of the function of the carte-de-visite in 1862 in Ország Tükre: “What a beautiful goal is achieved in society through these little pictures! This invention, so to speak, helps us acquaint ourselves with individuals who have distinguished themselves among all cultured nations of the world. Previously, portraits of outstanding individuals appeared in literary magazines or at most in steel engravings.” As an example of the level of interest in the faces of famous notables known by their names and the importance of the spread of photography in this visual economy of individuals, I offer a quote on the features of József Lévay from 1863, also from Ország Tükre. “His modesty always forced him to refuse the request of all those admirers in the literary world who had wanted to publish his portrait in journals or albums. We are delighted that on this occasion, with the aid of photography, we are granted the possibility to present his facial features, the harmony of which is the true faithful mirror of a noble poetic soul.” While in the 1850s portraits of the nation’s new politicians and prominent cultural figures became known through lithographs and steel engravings, in the 1860s photography took on this role. Thus, from a stylistic and practical point of view, the photographic endeavors of Barabás in the early 1860s should not be seen as a break in his oeuvre. At the same time, the illusionary backgrounds and the more experimental examples of his photographic output signify a media-specific approach to the new technique, which is also present in his theoretical writings. I discuss here Barabás’s and Hugó Maszák’s less conventional photographic experiments: the stereo images, the chromotypes, and the photo ceramics. Examples of the latter were created in the 1870s and should be attributed to Maszák and Ferenc Veress, although one of them was made using a negative made by Barabás in or around 1862. Among the works discussed in this chapter, which were much more expensive artistic products compared to the cartes-de-visite, there is a striking proportion of photographs of family members.

The theoretical connection between photography and perspective is discussed in detail in Chapter VI of the dissertation. In this section, I consider the Székely-Barabás-Maszák debate, which is well-known in Hungarian art and photographic historical scholarship (the essays discussed are Bertalan Székely’s article: Painting and Photography, Barabás’s Response to Székely, and Hugó Maszák’s Creative Art, Painting and Photography). Taking into consideration previous interpretations of the debate, I draw attention to new aspects of the argument in the replies of Barabás and Maszák. Four years after this debate, Barabás again expressed his views on photography when he was asked by the Hungarian Royal Council of Governor to give his opinion. The question concerned whether photography should be considered a liberal art or a trade. Alongside Barabás, Imre Henszelmann, Soma Orlai-Pétrich, and Mór Than were also asked to share their views. To my knowledge, all of these documents, which were stored at the National Archives of Hungary, were destroyed in a fire on November 6th 1956, but fortunately, the draft version of Barabás’s response has survived in the family bequest.

Chapter VII discusses the relationship between painting and photography from the perspective of larger, communal and smaller, familial remembrance through works created with an in memoriam function. Examples include photographs of Barabás’s paintings, paintings by Barabás which were based on photographs, and one example of a painting the composition of
which includes a photograph. By photographing his paintings, Barabás not only reproduced his works, but in most cases altered the function of the original: from a large, representative portrait hung on the wall, he created a small, private image which could easily be sent in the mail. Most of the time, Barabás photographed his earlier painted portraits for private familial remembrance, such as the painting of his wife, or for a broader, national remembrance, such as his painting of István Széchenyi. In addition to reducing the size of the composition, he sometimes masked and repainted them, thus further transforming the original. From the letters of grieving family members, we learn of several portraits painted from small cartes-de-visite (the works in question, however, have yet to be located). A curious but well-documented example of this method is a full-length portrait of his English friend, John Cunliffe-Pickersgill: the painting is presumed lost, but the original English carte-de-visite as well as two photographs by György Klösz of Barabás’s painting have survived. The noticeable changes between these two depictions are telling of Barabás’s art, and the correspondence between Barabás and the Cunliffe-Pickersgill family reveals the many difficulties of painting on the basis of photographs. Lastly, in this chapter I discuss a third possible relationship between painting and photography, namely when a painting includes the image of a photograph. Barabás painted a full-length portrait of Count Ilona Zichy, wife of Count Ferenc Nádasdy, in 1877, four years after her death. Her children appear in a photograph on the table next to which she stands. However, the photograph of the children depicts them at an age at which the mother could never have known them. Thus, the depiction shows a fictional scene in which the mother mourns her child (she lost her third child, Anna), while the children in the photograph, who were alive at the time the painting was executed, mourn their mother.

The subject of the final chapter of the dissertation – the persona of Barabás as seen by his contemporaries – deviates somewhat from the previous sections, but remaining with the medium of the photo, I compare visual and verbal portraits of Barabás by relying on written depictions of Barabás in daily and weekly papers as well as on photographs of the artist by his contemporaries. In these photographs, Barabás most often appears in an informal pose, and although after 1883 he is rarely photographed without the Order of the Iron Crown, we are confronted by a familiar, friendly old man who does not necessarily demand exaggerated respect from his viewer. A similar tone is echoed in the press, which, despite its glorifying words, refuses to lend the artist a mythical aura. In spite of the recognition Barabás won, including the numerous honours and celebrations, these acknowledgments were not sufficient to create a cult around Barabás, though they did in the case of Mihály Munkácsy.

The dissertation includes 10 appendices, most of which are previously unpublished manuscripts found in the family bequest. They include Barabás’s description of how to make a daguerreotype, his submission to the City Council for the construction of his photo studio, the contract between Barabás and Fájth, a short biography of Hugó Maszák, a list of recipients of Hugó Maszák’s journal Magyar Képzőművész (both those who subscribed and those who received complimentary copies), the photographic recipes in Barabás’s notebook, the poem for the so-called Matthias chalice, letters written to or by Barabás which mention photography or photographs, Barabás’s response to the question posed by the Royal Hungarian Council of Governor as to whether photography should be considered a liberal art or a trade, and a complete list of photographs in the family bequest.
4. Conclusions

Barabás's interest in perspective and optics repeatedly finds expression in his oeuvre, and one of the most telling manifestations of this is his photographic endeavours. Anecdotes in his autobiography about the deceptively true-to-life nature of his paintings (those who enter the room were apparently taken aback because his painted portraits were thought to be living people), his experiment with the panorama (a form of art associated with optical trickery), his lectures on perspective, his ideas on fixed viewing points and illusionary painted architecture (according to which “art and reality blend together nicely”), his defence of photography, and his photographic output, despite the differences in technique, size, and genre, all indicate that optical illusion, with which the border between reality and artwork is blurred, played an important role in Barabás’s understanding of the role and meaning of art. In his 1865 lecture *How Essential is the Science of Perspective for Painters*, read at the National Association of Hungarian Artists, he makes the following contention: “For what other purpose is the frame than to obscure the edges of the image and to make us forget the material existence of the planes of the image.” In his photographic works, this kind of approach is well illustrated by his cartes-de-visite, with their painted backdrops which continue in the foreground with real and artificial flora. Elsewhere, the painted architecture behind the model merges with real three-dimensional elements. I believe that Barabás, considered by his contemporaries and posterity to have been a practical and a fairly unimaginative artist, ventured into the world of photography not only for practical, i.e. financial reasons. Behind his business there was also a theoretical interest in the mechanisms and uses of the camera and in the theory of perspective and optics, as he understood the camera as a machine which functioned like the eye. In his defence of photography, Maszák wrote that the camera “records the subject just as the painter should paint it”. Barabás, when writing on perspective, cites the portraits of Joshua Reynolds as examples of how only the face should be “painted in full vision”, the rest of the figure should appear “half blurred”, as that is how “we see it”. The precise rendering of the face and hands as opposed to the model’s clothing in Barabás’s painted portraits recurs in the parts of the sitters in his photographs which were in focus or were out of focus. According to Barabás and Maszák, the camera functions like the eye, which in their view operates in a mechanical manner. Both the human eye and the camera serve as a guide for how the painter should create a correct and true depiction.