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Blurring the Boundaries of Verbal and Visual, Low and Elite Art. (abstract)

My paper raises questions of the relation of visual and verbal media in connection to popular and high culture in the 18th and early 19th century. The queries of the rise of popular visual culture open up a plane for the re-examination and re-evaluation of the theoretical concerns which underlie the pre-conceived ideas of both the evaluation of the pictorial versus verbal arts and the drawing of the demarcation lines between popular and high or elitist culture. The romantic "prospect" of the "mind," which reinforces the verbal supremacy can be paralleled with the idea of the non-visual, and non-sensible nature of the highest level of artistic creation. The concerns of the cultural elite in favour of the poetical expression were not independent from the ever growing interest or crave of the "publick" after novelty and visual stimulus. The aesthetic ideology of the *literati* in favour of the word define its position as "self-identical, unmarked and disembodied" (Donna Haraway). If the reinforcement of this position is seen as the reaction against the growth of the market for visual consumption it directs the attention to the beginnings of our modern popular culture. Its examination can provide new insights or aspects for how to approach the products of popular culture as "immersive" phenomena in which the wider public can with equal rights participate. These problems are presented in my paper with the help of popular and canonised media.

Blurring the Boundaries of Verbal and Visual, Low and Elite Art.

In the recent years there is a growing interdisciplinary interest in the field of the Humanities, whereby the relationship of the verbal and the visual gains a new importance. It does not only motor the re-examination of the relationship between images and texts, but also that of visuality in the formation of culture. My paper aims to reflect on the changes in visuality and in cultural production around the turn of the nineteenth century and to show its influence in Western culture and its traces in Hungary. One of my starting point is Kittler's theory, which suggests that the cultural and "discourse network of the 1800 depended upon writing as the sole and linear channel for processing and storing information".[1] If we accept his views than it can also be claimed that this "writing monopoly" contributed to the value of the written word in culture and as a part of this process it strengthened the privileged place of poetry as the

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[1] Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. xxiv.

representative of elite culture. The culture of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century however was considerably more colourful than Kittler's observation suggests. The Romantic period was culturally diverse in which a wide range of cultural products could appear and make their ephemeral success. This was the time when, with the growth the middle-class public, new forms of art and cultural devices could appear and the formation of mass culture has started. The technological and socio-economical changes also surface in the cultural scene of this period. Although the 1800 was still based on the bookish, good-natured scholarship and the good-mannered *polite* gentleman, the signs of a new paradigm were already noticeable.

The move in the direction of the visual is also noted by Kittler: his techno-materialistic approach suggests that although Romantic literature was supported by the accepted complicity between the author, the reader and the hero of the book, in fact it was the manifestation of a virtual media technology, which, despite its will contributed to the subversion of the monopoly of print.[2] In his views, the storage technology of the 1800 forms the material basis for a new, hermeneutically programmed reading technique that enables readers to experience the inner movie: hermeneutics in the final analysis means the superimposition of meaning over the materiality of letters. In other words, the hermeneutic scholar translates letters on the page into a meaning which is supposed to be there.[3] This visionary or hallucinatory aspect of reading points to the questions of visual technology, that is, to the desire to invent the new cinematographic technology that provides images for real. According to Kittler, "As long as the book was responsible for all serial data flows, words quivered with sensuality and memory. It was the passion of all reading to hallucinate meaning between lines and letters: the

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[2] Kittler. F. A. " Die Laterna Magica der Literatur: Schillers und Hoffmanns Medienstragedien," in *Atheneum: Jahrbuch für Romantik.* Pederborn: Schöningh, 1994. 219.

[3] Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. "Faust translates according to the spirit and not the letter, but he does translate". 17.

visible and audible world of Romantic poetics".[4] In other words, poets aim to describe the hallucinated "picture of the mind",[5] which motors the change "from image- based literature to the mass media of photography and film."[6]

The realisation of this desire however threatens with the dissolution of the Romantic "Innerlichkeit" [inwardness] on which in fact Romantic poetry depends. It is very much the interest of Romantic ideology and primarily that of poetry that the inner movie should not be representable. Since Romantic poetry is suggested to be the expression of the poetic intellect and imagination or *inventio*[7], poetic achievement should derive from the power of the verbal expression and from the "obscurity" of words[8] and as a consequence it should never be realised, let alone be made tangible in any way. The poetic image implicitly suggests the ultimate unrepresentability as well as the incomprehensibility of the image that should be evoked.[9] Poetry and imagination mutually support each other.

In Kittler's view "poetry as the universal art, was permitted to reign over the universal medium of the imagination".[10] But he also notes that poetry "lost its special role circa 1900 in the interest of thorough equality among materials".[11] I will present a medium that can be seen as the metaphor of this parergonal relationship and show that the tendency to shift to visual media which could present the immediacy of poetic vision was there in Romantic times in the literal sense: the wish for representing the visionary or hallucinatory images of the poetic imagination is present in the invention of the panorama painting.

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[4] Kittler, F. A. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. 10.
[5] See, Wordsworth, William. *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*.
[6] Kittler. F. A. " Die Laterna Magica der Literatur", 219.

[7] Compare, Gombrich, E. H. *Gombrich on the Renaissance. Norm and Form*. Vol. 1. London: Phaidon Press, 1985.

[8] Compare, Burke, Edmund. *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990

[9] Kermode, Frank. *The Romantic Image*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1957. and Krieger, Murray. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1991.
[10] Kittler, *Discourse Networks,* 249.
[11] Kittler, *Discourse Networks,* 249.

Panorama paintings were popular visual entertainment of the nineteenth century. They belonged to a set of new visual and optical phenomena at the turn of the century. The panorama as a visual device did not only provide an alternative mode of visual experience, but, corollary, a different experience of the subject's position to the established or ruling visual order of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The previously ruling model of vision that was based on linear perspective was conceived as the one which corresponded to the scientific order of the unified, monocular observant eye.[12] The monadic eye of mathematically organised space designated the place of the observer in relation to the observed image which guaranteed a more or less unified position for the observing subject. The panorama was, however, the manifestation of an alternative mode of vision: according to Crary "it clearly broke with the localized point of view of perspective painting or the camera obscura, allowing the spectator an ambulatory ubiquity."[13] The panorama—along with the multitude of divergent optical inventions of the age—was the symptom of the "uprooting of vision from the more inflexible representational system of the camera obscura."[14]

The camera obscura as a "philosophical metaphor"[15] can be brought into close propinquity with the disembodied poetic overview (or sightless vision). The privilege of the elevated point of view—the eagle-eye perspective in Donna Haraway's[16] terminology—was ideally that of the poetic mind contemplating over a sight seen. The panorama made this elevated position accessible for the masses without the poetic surplus value.[17] Contrary to the Burkean idea of the sublime unity of apperception, the viewer of the panorama was at a loss of the detailed depiction of the painting, its attention was not directed at the wholeness of the

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[12] Compare : Harraway, Donna. „Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective". In. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* London. 1991

[13] Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*. New York: MIT Press, 1991. 113.

[14] Crary, *Techniques of the Observer,* 113.

[15] Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 28.

[16] See, Donna Harraway, „Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* 183-201.

[17] The sublime experience of vast fields or prospect sights was at once in front of anybody with a penny to spend, in a mode of representation, which puts more emphasis on the minute details of verisimilitude than on the representation of the idea or the ideal.

picture. These paintings aimed at the illusion of verisimilitude. Although the effect of verisimilitude was constructed on the model of the camera obscura image, the actual result that was gained fulfilled a very diverse function from that of the singular one-eyed perspective which the camera obscura entailed. The aimed reality effect was raised by the loss of any unifying principle of these images and the overabundance of minute details. Panorama paintings were constructed from several juxtaposed pictures so as to form a circular 360 degree image. They *derived not from apperception*, not from the intellect (that is, the inner light of the "poetic" mind or from the shaping power of the imagination) but from the urge to copy, to give back what the eye perceives, in other words to create only sameness without difference. In the pictures every minute detail were worked out in order to provide a perfect simulacrum of the represented scene. Thus its "microscopic vision" threatened the viewer with the loss in the details without the intellectual grasp of the whole, even if it promised a prospect view.

The vision of the panorama painting can be seen as the early manifestation of the virtual technology Kittler talks about. It does not only present a new form of vision, or viewing technique, but the image of elevation which is so much present in Romantic literature. Panorama paintings depict landscapes, city-scapes or battles from an elevated position. The position of the observing subject (in this case the visitor) corresponds to the imaginary prospect of the poetic mind, who contemplates over a sight, usually from a mountain top. There are innumerable examples for this prospect in English or German literature, but it is present in Hungarian poetry as well, moreover this prospect position is also characteristic of Romantic paintings.[18] These paintings show the landscape from the position of the observer, Caspar Friedrich's "Traveller Looking over a Sea of Fog" (1818) is one of the best known examples. This imaginary sight of the poet is appropriated and made visible by

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[18] Compare, Gombrich, E. H. *Gombrich on the Renaissance. Norm and Form*.

the panorama painting. The controversy of these paintings is that they are not considered to be an art in the West. However, it is not primarily the medium, which defines the value of this art form. In Hungary there are two examples, both with the intention of artistic achievement. The one which is not well-known was an attempt by Miklós Barabás, a famous and acknowledged painter to depict the "View of Bukarest" in the form of the panorama.[19] Barabás was interested in new visual media of his age (also in photography). He also made sketches of mountain peaks as it was widely practiced under the influence of the "picturesque".[20] The viewing figure was also depicted in the painting similarly to Friedrich's work. But there is a crucial difference between these landscapes and the depiction of the panorama, which probably contributed to the derision of the panorama, and which is also its revolutionary aspect in representation: this mode of depiction is immersive.[21] The viewer is not in front of the painting as in traditional perspectival depictions, but he or she is situated within the rotunda building and the image itself surrounds him or her. The body's participation dissolves the possibility of the all-embracing, *unmarked and disembodied* position of the poetic intellect.[22] The several juxtaposed images and the position of the viewer in relation to the whole panorama painting thus results in the destabilisation of the traditional perspectival codes. Barabás' experimentation with the panorama was not independent of this aspect of the painting. The body's role entailed a multiple-perspective instead of the singular Cartesian one, which interested Barabás because it called attention to the problems of perspective and because it provided a means for a new depiction of special proportions. Unfortunately, his

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[19] I cite all the data on Barabás from the Thesis of Szegedy-Maszák Zsuzsanna. Barabás Miklós és a perspektíva. ELTE, 2004

[20] Gilpin, William. *Essay on the Picturesque Beauty.* Farnborough: Gregg International Publishers, 1972.

[21] Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion.* Camridge: MIT Press, 2003.

[22] Compare , Donna. "Situated Knowledges". In. *Simian, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.*

painting was never exhibited, and was never completed due to the financial aspects of such projects.

Norman Bryson reflects on the limits of traditional painting in similar terms to Donna Haraway's claim of the eagle-eye perspective: he claims that the body's role in visuality is one of the most fundamental experiences which the canonical tradition of Western painting aims to oppress. In his view Western painting escapes the burden of the body in its approximation toward and away from the "real" to an interpretative, hermeneutical mode of art production. The hermeneutical effort of depiction grounds the belief that "meaning can inhere in an objective world", and in the reflection of social constructs, or better to say in a "socially constructed consciousness". [23] This veiling of social constructions lies at the basis of transforming the viewer into a disembodied gazer, who in turn is endowed with an ideal omniscience. In Bryson's theory the gaze coincides with the Cartesian perspective: the viewing body is reduced to one point only, namely to the retina of a single eye, a single point of view.[24] In this terminology the gazing the subject is united with the "Founding Perception", which allows for the viewer a disembodied God-like, coherent subject position. This mode of representation seeks to bracket out the process of viewing in order to create a synchronic instant of viewing, thus reducing the image to an ideal, but frozen moment. The panorama partly breaks away from this mode of looking towards an immersion that is even closer to the experience of Vitrual Reality than to film.[25] The illusion of the viewer is supposed to be as perfect and the depiction as real as possible. Although the image was

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[23]Bryson, Norman. *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983. 87-131.

[24] Compare, Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*. Binocular disparity was technically not taken into account of visuality before the eighteenth century.

[25] Hillis, Ken *Digital Sensation: Space, Identity and Embodiment in Virtual Reality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 44-49.

motionless and therefore showed a frozen moment, the visitor's role in the viewing process was more active in the physical sense.[26]

The body's involvement in the illusion and the circumstances of the exhibition were also the part of the effect it was supposed to achieve: it counted on the physical involvement of the visitor and played on the physiology of the body. This can be well observed in a later and better known Hungarian representative of the panorama. The exhibition building was a circular room as it was usual for such depictions. There was only one entrance to it, and the visitor had to walk through a badly lit corridor to ascend the staircase to the circular platform of the rotunda. When the visitor arrived to the platform his or her eyes were exposed to the light which lit the painting through a top-glazing from above and a shade of roof was placed on the inclosure to prevent the observer seeing above the painting. The platform was placed in a certain height and into a relative distance from the canvas. The reality effect of the painting was further enhanced by a foreground setting, which means that figures or objects were placed in front of the painting so as to make it even more difficult to predict where the actual canvas begins, and to raise the feeling that one is actually looking at a real and not a depicted scene. The Feszty-panorama did make a good use of all the possibilities of the panorama building and its mode of depiction. The disorientation of the viewer and its bodily participation was supposed to make him or her believe that the scene was the historically trustable representation of the settlement of the Hungarian tribes. The project was a mixture of a profit oriented enterprise which attracted the public and the transmission of the touched up image of the 19th century ideal of history: in fact the painting seemed to be more of the illustration of Jókai's (his father in law) ideas on the event and Jókai's play, entitled "Levente" than a historical documentation. Feszty claimed that the painting was of real

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[26] Compare Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003. 108.

artistic merit, yet it deployed all the elements of the mass medial features of the panorama painting.

The immersion of the visitor was just as problematic point as the mode of depiction. These painting did not aim at representing the vision of the artist (or the poet), but at the perfect simulacrum of the sight. According to Willcox, "in the panorama the deception was supposed to be complete and sustained [...] For the illusion to be successful, it was necessary that during the experience of viewing the panorama, the presence of the artist should not be felt at all."[27] The illusion was the result of the technical code: the patent had to be kept by those who used this mode of depiction, thereby it left little place for the artist's vision. The boundary-crossing position of the panorama is manifest in these respects. While its creators emphasised its artistic values, it functioned as a show for the public. The visitor's participation had a dual importance: on the one hand, its multiple-perspective that the rotunda entailed did undermine the primacy of the traditional viewing position, and thus the concept of the disembodied gazer, which at the same time reflects on the verbally grounded imageless "vision" of the poetic intellect. On the other hand, the visitor was part of the show and the success of the enterprise: the paintings' design had to respond to public needs to produce profit. The panorama according to Oetterman was the first true mass medial device: the Feszty panorama was not different from its Western counterparts, it was a mixture of "academic" painting and mass entertainment in which nevertheless the public could better participate than in the exclusive space of the exhibition room.

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[27] See in Hyde, Ralph. *Panoramania!: The Art and Entertainment of the 'All-Embracing' View.* London: Trefoil Publications, Barbican Art Gallery. 1988. 32.