

katalin timár

in and out of ideology: changing politics of interpretation

● In the 2001 edition of an imaginary fashion magazine of intellectual ideas and thinking the term 'ideology' would probably be permanently placed into the section 'Out', given it appears there at all. The 'stale aroma of a theoretical anachronism' - as Kaja Silverman put it some ten years ago¹ - hasn't stopped exuding from this notion which is probably due to the 'vicissitudes of Marxism', to lend Terry Eagleton's formulation² to a certain type of 20th century political thinking (and action). It seems that neither the vulgar Marxist methodology of interpretation, nor the political events that have happened under the banner of Marx's name in the 20th century have been helpful in dismantling the aversion not just to the overt usage of the term, but to any form of thinking where it may be detected as a hidden agenda. To a certain extent this overall resistance, and even paranoia, appears to be justifiable particularly in those parts of the world - like ours here in East-Central Europe - where this theory of social and political changes was directly translated into a justification of power and abused partly via the invasion of not just the political but of the everyday, too by a certain, directly politically motivated, form of this particular term (i.e. ideology).

In the 'post-Wall' era, the possibility of realizing the fantasy of ideology-free theory and interpretation seemed to be closer than ever. 'Pre-Wall' ethical resistance was thriving for a post-Wall 'reward' for the maintenance of that position under difficult circumstances. This reward has been expected to arrive partly in the form of a complete separation of the political from the everyday where the everyday is understood as anything non-party-political. But is there life outside of and beyond ideology?

In what follows now, I would like to argue for a reconsideration and the re-acceptance of the notion of ideology into the field of art theory and criticism from the position of semiotics. This position may help in avoiding to commit the 'intentional fallacy' but still be able to produce a dynamic reading and to make critical comments about the author's position as he/she is the source of the artistic utterance/statement (i.e. the work of art).

The original title of my paper is: In and Out of Ideology: Changing Politics of Interpretation, but for the sake of the present talk I would like to give it a new working title that runs as follows: In and Out of

Ideology: 17 Instances of Spring - which is an allusion to a Soviet television series from the late 1970s-early 80s.

INSTANCE 1

In 1997, the Hungarian photographer Peter Korniss held a major retrospective exhibition of the photographs he's been making in Transylvania (part of Romania) since 1967 in the Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest - the largest contemporary art exhibition space in Hungary at that time. Parallel to the exhibition, a coffee-table-like book of 160 pages was also published. Korniss has published his images in the form of monographic books since as early as at least 1975 and he cannot, by any means, be considered as a so-called "banned artist" under the socialist regime. After the political changes of 1989, his career has reached unprecedented heights and a full official recognition.

INSTANCE 3

The work of Korniss readily offers itself as a 'theoretical object' (to refer to Mieke Bal) and I, indeed, used it as one in an article I published this spring about the book containing Korniss's photographs from Transylvania. In this text, I analyzed the cultural signs - both visual and verbal - he produced in the form of this book from a postcolonialist perspective and with the critical tools of the semiotic approach to narratology.

The first and most conspicuous problem with this work is a lack of coherence that is manifested in a discrepancy between the words and the images Korniss presents. Textually he claims he documents a disappearing way of life, but visually he displays the images in an art gallery, thus using the same sign both as a metaphor and as a synecdoche. Textually he claims he documents his trips, but visually he uses black and white photography which functions as a metonymy of art in this case. Textually he claims to represent the past, visually he aims at constructing identities for an 'imagined community' (Benedict Anderson³) which is ready to accept this as its own in the present. In my view this lack of coherence serves to blur these above-mentioned boundaries, which functions as a blurring of

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¹ Kaja Silverman: *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Routledge, New York and London, 1992, p. 15.

² Terry Eagleton: *Ideology and its Vicissitudes in Western Marxism*, in: ed. Slavoj Žižek: *Mapping Ideology*, Verso, London and New York, 1994, pp.179-226.

³ Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York, 1983.

ideology and results in the naturalization of this very ideology.

On the level of rhetorics, the narratological function Korniss occupies in the narrative he created poses a dilemma *vis a vis* his subjects. Syntactically, Korniss himself is a narrator writing in the first person singular and referring to his own subjectivity with the use of this first person. Semantically speaking, however, there is also a third person singular present, whose role is to document and to show us the Transylvanian and their life 'objectively'. Moreover, there is an - unsuccessful - attempt to display a pragmatically taken second person narrative in which the 'you', the Transylvanian are supposed to be given 'voice'.

In reality, this latter level can never be realized since in the narrative structure these people do not appear as narrators, as speakers for themselves, as having their own voice, but they are bequested with the narratological position of the 'focalizer' which can be understood as the extension or doubling of the role of the narrator. They are not capable of telling any other story except the one that the narrator chooses them to do.



INSTANCE 5

The dilemma Korniss's narratological position poses is the same as the one Descartes's famous statement formulates. The Cartesian division between subject and object became the central dogma of modern epistemology.⁴ The analysis of this division from the point of view of narratological-rhetorical functions shows that the notions of objective truth and impersonal knowledge are connected to 'the third person fictional narrative', where the narrator is external and invisible, and the presentation aims to be neutral.⁵ All this becomes fundamentally contradictory when we want to position Descartes's famous statement (I think, therefore I am) in this system: his statement is based on objective knowledge and epistemology, but from the point of view of narratology, it is a first-person mini-narrative with the denotative and connotative functions of subjectivity.

The choice of the narrative form from the part of the narrator cannot, by any means, be considered as a merely formal element, but as a decision that bears severe

consequences which directly touch upon the question of epistemological competence and indirectly raise questions of power. In Korniss's case, these can be summed up in three main points: 1/ The photographer's problematic and to a certain extent abusive relation to the subjects of his images, 2/ the viewers' connotative and fantasmatic relation to the images and to the reality these images are meant to denote, 3/ the association of these images to the proliferation of Hungarian political propaganda of the 1990s, which is related to symbolic territorial claims, directed towards our neighbouring countries.

INSTANCE 7

The subsequent controversy that was stirred by the publication of this essay was univocal and mostly oral, except one short text that was published in a weekly political and cultural paper almost two months after my text came out (!).⁶ The author of this text, Sandor Radnoti, a professor at the Department of Aesthetics at the (ELTE)

1. *Katalin Timar - The indispensable*

⁴ Mieke Bal: *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996, p. 59.

⁵ Mieke Bal: *Double Exposures*, op. cit., p. 171.

⁶ Radnoti Sandor: *Adaptacio*, ES 2001. aprilis 20, p. 14.

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University in Budapest uses various discursive strategies to refute my arguments by discrediting me as a person. To illustrate my point I would like to mention one example: at the beginning of his text I'm called as a 'young art historian', but later I'm referred to as a 'woman art historian', and a 'critic woman' which are Radnoti's neologisms for the occasion and sound equally strange and suggestive in Hungarian.⁷ The question is whether I will respond to this interpellation (to use Althusser's concept) and create my subjectivity by accepting the discursive space I am allotted with.

Most of the text's arguments are based on a total misreading of my essay in the first place, but I will identify here only four of these, all having a relevance for the topic of our conference. According to Radnoti 1/ I fail to give an aesthetic analysis and evaluation of these images, 2/ my approach is governed by hermeneutic suspicion which is considered to be the most serious crime one can commit in hermeneutics, 3/ I dismiss the utterly innocent authorial intention and good will, 4/ my anthropological knowledge about Transylvania is appallingly limited and therefore I cannot judge the transparently documentative quality of these images. At the end he says: "The philosophy of these images is that life is not such a big drama, it has its own simple joys and beauty. [. . .] Korniss is a master of sober and calm beauty."⁸

INSTANCE 11

Not all these arguments and positions could be labelled as modernist *per se*, but they all serve for Radnoti to argue against a poststructuralist reading, an ideological/political critique of these 'visual signs' that he so much opposes. He cannot see that the ideology his position can be associated with has long been naturalized to the extent that it is taken as non-ideological. It is the incoherence and the contradictory character of the Cartesian dilemma, among others, that can be taken as an indication to the impossibility of a complete subject/object division and therefore the impossibility of totally impersonal and objective knowledge.

INSTANCE 13

In was in the original, late 18th century understanding of the term 'ideology' where epistemology was closely related to it.⁹ The most influential development of ideology, however, can be found in Marxist theory, when he tried to articulate the relationship between politics, economy, and culture. The term comes back when we would least expect it: with New Criticism of the 1940s and 50s. The New Critics opposed ideology as being an irrelevant aspect of the work and even detracting from its aesthetic value. In the past 50 years 'ideology' has been used as a synonym with politics to designate an especially coherent and rigidly held system of political ideas.

The semiotic understanding of the notion of 'ideology' makes some radical break with most previous definitions and usage on the basis of "a conception of sign [that is] as permeable and open both to the sign systems that surround it and to the circumstance in which it is articulated. [. . .] A semiotic view of ideology allows us to define the political interests of all social groups as ideologically motivated."¹⁰ This does not only mean that there is no privileged class or social group which can exclusively be associated with ideology, but also that as much as the production of signs is incoherent, no ideology can be total and coherent either.

Another question that the semiotic approach to ideology has posed is related to the ways in which ideology is responsible for the formation of human subjectivity. To quote Robert Scholes: "The producers of literary texts are themselves creatures of culture, who have attained a human subjectivity through language. Through them speak other voices - some cultural and public, some emerging distorted from those aspects of private need repressed as the price for attaining a public subjectivity in language. An author is not a perfect ego but a mixture of public and private, conscious and unconscious elements, insufficiently unified for use as an interpretive base."¹¹ Interpretation cannot exist out of ideology, but together with ideology can "explore and exploit the gap between representation and responsibility."¹² ●

⁷ This is also noted by Ban Zsófia: A szabadság fantomja, ES 2001. június 1., p. 10. A subsequently published text/review by Radnoti underlies the same tendency: Radnoti Sandor: Mi, kritikusok [We, critics], *Holmi* 2001/szeptember, pp. 1263-1268.

⁸ Sandor Radnoti, *Adaptacio*, op. cit.

⁹ Late 18th century French rationalist philosophers used it to designate the 'science of ideas', or the 'philosophy of mind' as opposed to older metaphysical conceptions. See James H. Kavanaugh: Ideology, in: eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin: *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2. edition, The Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995, pp. 306-320. Also: W. J. T. Mitchell: *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986, pp. 164-168.

¹⁰ Keith Moxey: *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca and London, 1994, p. 43.

¹¹ Robert Scholes: *Semiotics and Interpretation*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven and London, 1982, p. 14.

¹² W. J. T. Mitchell: *Picture Theory*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, p. 421.