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JÁNOS KASS'S LITERARY AND MUSICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

Upon managing apprehension, all humans conduct a hermeneutic activity. Moreover, even before having been declared by hermeneutic philosophers of the 20th century, the concept of man's ceaseless effort for comprehension had already been valid. Like all individuals, the artist does a hermeneutic activity when interpreting for him or herself something appearing and existing in his/her own world. Then the artist comprehends it and upon "presentation" transfers it to the language of his or her artistic world, to its medium (verbal, visual, auditive or the combination of these) and its aesthetic form of language. Within this, the artist for whom all existing objects are works of art leads a mutual hermeneutic activity, thus he or she creates either the adaptation and/or transformation and/or some sort of further thinking of an artwork. In doing so, he or she acts as the primary interpreter of the original work, however, the artists becomes the carrier, the medium of his/her own or another work's different medium and form of language. At the same time, this work of art functions as the conservator, enricher of the adapted or transformed work of art, keeping it on the move exactly by means of this correlation. However, owing to this correlation already having been formed in and inter-medium space, both works lose from their own autonomy for the benefit of this space, this inter-phenomenon, the correlation, the mutual conservation and enrichment.

The illustration as the visual interpretation of the verbal text sets remarkably diversified theoretical fields of problems. For instance, the involved relation of the creator-affiliate since the illustrator is also an interpreter affiliate and the illustration is a visual interpretation. Another important problem is the aspect of the production-reproduction as well, i.e. to what extent can we regard the illustration as an autonomous work of art.¹ Arising from this problem, the illustration can be examined in relation with translation. The primary role of the written text to the visual imagery is also a significant problem.² Besides, another question arises from the aspect of the

¹ During his research, he advocates the independence and autonomy of illustrations. STEWART Philip, *Engraven Desire: Eros, Image and Text in the French Eighteenth Century*, Durham – London, Duke University Press, 1992, 1-39.

² CARR, Stephen: Verbal-visual-relationships. *Art History*, 1980, 378.

hermeneutics of the fine arts,³ namely, how the illustrator, as an interpreter who got a primary role, ‘hits a window to the text’; what and how they interpret. The question of ‘illustration as rewriting and continuation in one’ is set from the aspect of hermeneutics that prevails through the openness and ambiguity of the text. If we have a look at the relationship between the literary work and its illustration, Áron Kibédi Varga determines it as follows: “word and picture separate from each other, however, they appear on the same side. They are in an inter-referential relation: they refer to each other.”⁴ From the 1990’s onwards, the genre of illustrations slowly overcame the category of “applied genre” subordinated to literature, since illustrator artists themselves questioned the exclusivity of this category by applying illustrations existing as autonomous images. Therefore, now, having broken with the subordination between the illustrated work and the illustration itself, we consider the genre of illustration within the reciprocal relation and its types, the reciprocal relation between the text (as a ‘pretext’) and the image. Image hermeneutic studies have revealed that translation between mediums of word and image, illustration as an intermedial phenomenon can be comprehended by means of a common basis, and understanding the relation of language and image actually relies on visibility: “Only by using a shift towards the metaphoric nature of language can the range where language and image coincide be confined.”⁵ Then, partly overwriting these aspirations, the recognition of the back-and-forth manner in illustration research has gradually become more and more emphasised, that is, the process of sense formation is not only directed from text to image, but the opposite way, too. What is more, it did even overwrite the ontological status of perceiving illustration as an autonomous image. On the one hand, illustrations are practically the referentiality formed from the combination of verbally and visually determined mediums, which only become functional within the process of reception-viewing in relation to the “other” one.⁶ Based on the relationships of semiotic code and cultural tradition illustration is, quoting György Endre Szőnyi, when “media (or the code) in the supporting role interprets and enlightens the one in the main role, thus

³ Of the semiotic, structuralist and image hermeneutic theories in illustration research the gist of this latter paradigm, that is the endeavours of Gottfried Boehm and Oskar Bätschmann is that illustrations do not function as imperfect substitutes of the literary work of art, and act not only to convert it to become visible, yet the image also possesses an “independent achievement”.

⁴ KIBÉDI VARGA Áron, *A szó- és kép viszonyok leírásának ismérvei = Kép, fenomén, valóság*, szerk. BACSÓ Béla, Budapest, Kijárat kiadó, 1997, 305-307.

⁵ BÄTSCHMANN, Oskar, *Bevezetés a művészettörténeti hermeneutikába*, Budapest, Corvina kiadó, 1998, 56.

⁶ VARGA Emőke, *Kalitka és korona. Kass János illusztrációiról*, Budapest, L’ Harmattan Kiadó, 2007, 15.

it carries certain additional information. These two codes appear together in representation, yet they do not merge entirely and are not coequal, either.”⁷ On the other hand, the practice of art and aesthetic experience tends to prove that there are cases when visual ‘achievement’ of illustration is of such a high magnitude or acts as primarily that even after leaving this visual appearance, without a text, as an image and independent visual work of art it functions as a fully-fledged work of art, thus becoming the object of aesthetic experience. In the name of and due to its establishment, illustrations are inseparable from the original work of art. Yet, often regardless of this, it can be the object of a reception approach independently from knowledge of the given text in its visuality, therefore even without this cognition and reference of its creation it is able to offer an aesthetic experience, as a fully-fledged visual work of art.

The most outstanding illustrator of the contemporary Hungarian fine arts is János Kass who was born in Szeged. He illustrated something like 400 books, classical novels and children's stories, among them Madách's 19th-century drama *The Tragedy of Man* (1957, 1966) Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1980). The famous musical illustration series: Bartók's opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (1960), *Cantata Profana* (1966), Kodály's *János Háry* (1981) and *Psalmus Hungaricus* (1977). He won Hungary's highest artistic award, the Kossuth prize, and was an elected member of the Széchenyi academy. At the 1973 Leipzig book fair, his work was awarded the title of best illustrated book at the fair. While spending some months in London during 1980, working on one of the earliest, fully digitised computer-animated films, *Dilemma* (1980), with John Halas. The 11-minute *Dilemma* was nominated at that year's Cannes Film Festival for the Golden Palm for Best Short Film, and is considered the first fully digital animated film.⁸

Kass made the famous literary illustration series for the *The Tragedy of Man*, which was published along with Madách's main opus in 1966, then separately a year later, and several other times, too, both in Hungary and abroad. The antecedent of the series that was issued later, the first series, can be regarded rather as a sketch. The basic difference between the two series in case of the one made in 1980 is the framing. Besides, this framing is the feature whereby the illustration series of János Kass is fundamentally different from all of the *Tragedy* illustrations. Besides the main topic of the pictures, this framing (more, smaller, simply structured pictorial units can be found in

⁷ SZÖNYI György Endre, *Pictura & scriptura: Hagyományalapú kulturális reprezentációk huszadik századi elméletei*, Szeged, JatePress, 2004, 19.

⁸ MÁTÉ Zsuzsanna, *Madách's vision has worked within me" – János Kass's Dilemma, animated film, and The Tragedy of Man, Docere*, 2017/1-2. 59-67.

the frame) not only makes it possible but also involves (multiplies) the motive richness of the series within itself, the multi-level inter-reference of the verbal and visual code and making the narrative style of the visual sign system poly-semantic. The Adam of János Kass shows the one who questions God. He is almost an equal conversation partner of the Lord, in terms of his posture, dignity and self-consciousness, however, his muscles are tight, his palms are strained by perplexity, questioning and the tension waiting for the answer. His look and head turns towards the divine light. The inter-reference of the text and the picture can be seized in the series of questions which is the first sound of Adam towards the Lord. This human figure is desperate to the utmost. He does not look at the ground, to his feet, however, the future appears there: as a recurring motive, in the middle of an elliptical net there is the human embryo as the symbol of the existence of humanity, on the other hand, as the shadow of Adam: Lucifer. This illustrational interpretation, by the figure of Lucifer appears as the shadow of Adam, refers to the words of the Lord, the authorized functionality of Lucifer.

Verbal (Balázs's textbook *Bluebeard's Castle*), musical (the musical material of Bartók's opera) and visual (illustration series of János Kass) mediums, and particularly the opera genre, which combined all three mediums, eventually create a complex multimedial and intermedial compound. The musical structure of Bartók's opera, in addition to the foreplay, is also divided into seven scenes, in accordance with the seven doors „the symbolic location, Bluebeard's castle, the symbol of man's soul, the seven doors of the castle conceals separate and relevant parts of the soul, a feature of man's character, a part of man's life”.⁹ It can be observed to take place likewise in János Kass's series of illustrations, where the doors are placed into a dramatic and meaning constituting function. As János Kass writes: „I conceived the pages of the book as doors, and this structure follows the events. The doors, as dramatic intersections, straddle the psychological process going on between the two characters.”¹⁰ Five of Kass's 17 illustrations refer indirectly to the denotations behind the doors, to the visualization of the torture chamber, the house of weaponry, the flower garden and the old women. Six pictures of the series illustrate only Judith. In the first one's background, the first door's „glowing crimson rectangle in the wall” is seen (as an extended rectangle), then in the other four the excited and dynamic Judith hurrying to open some of the doors

⁹ KROÓ György, *Bartók-kalauz*, Budapest, Zeneműkiadó Kiadó, 1980, 63.

¹⁰ KASS János, *Gondolatok a könyvillusztrációról = Szemiotikai szövegtan 7. A multimediális kommunikátorok szemiotikai textológiai megközelítéséhez*, szerk: PETŐFI S. János – BÉKÉSI Imre – VASS László, Szeged, JGYTF Kiadó, 1994. 13.

is portrayed. As for the last picture, it shows the „most beautiful woman” wearing a mantle and a diamond crown, with the door being shut behind her. The tracing and colour dynamics of Kass’s pictures (blue, red, white and black, or any of them combined), the gestures and mimics of the characters on the one hand indicate the dramatic actions, psychological processes and motivations, while on the other hand they overwrite, emphasize or compress them. Thus they not only stand in an inter-referential relation with the text, but the pictures also establish relations with each other that carry a meaning-constituting function, regardless of the text, existing separately. János Kass’s symbolics, quoting the artist is „the non-eternal struggle between the opposite sexes, black and white, positive and negative. The conflict rooted in the ultimate distinctness of man and woman is fate (...) It has been clear from the very first moment that emotions must be expressed with the use of colours. The contrast of blue, red, white and black builds up the rhythm of consecutive sheets.”¹¹

Kass made illustrations for Mozart’s opera *Thamos, King of Egypt* (Drawings, 1971); illustrations for Bartók’s *Cantata Profana*, Kodály’s *János Hány* and Kodály’s best-known pieces, *Psalmus Hungaricus*. As János Kass writes from *Psalmus Hungaricus*: „The radiance of the work inspires us to action, the anger and energy of David multiplies within us! *Psalmus Hungaricus* is living fire, it doesn’t give off heat it scorches, burning its message into our flash!”

¹¹ BALÁZS – BARTÓK 1979. – BALÁZS Béla – BARTÓK Béla, *A kékszakállú herceg vára*, (Kass János rajzaival, Kroó György utószavával), Budapest, Zeneműkiadó Kiadó, 1979, 13.