

What Eye C Is What U Get

György Endre Szőnyi, *Pictura & Scriptura: Hagyományalapú kulturális reprezentációk huszadik századi elméletei* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2004)

György Endre Szőnyi's latest book is a paradoxical work in more than one way. While its title alludes to the controversial issue of "ut pictura poesis" in classical and early humanist traditions, the subtitle, "Twentieth-century Theories of Tradition-based Cultural Representations," directs us to the most recent past. While it is intended as a comprehensive reference textbook, it is composed in a rather mosaic-like manner from Szőnyi's insightful original research, some of his earlier articles, and his survey of various theorists. And while it is as informative as any textbook should be, its attitude is highly polemic, easily drawing the reader into the world of theoretical dialogue and controversy.

The dual aim of his book, as Szőnyi explains, is "to provide a conceptional frame and methodology to the study of culture, and, primarily, early modern European culture" (ix)¹ and to use "the most up-to-date theories available in interpreting conventional symbolization" (xi). To show how this is meant to be done, the author will add a second volume to this one, including practical case studies based on the theoretical principles outlined here – that collection, too,

will surely be a valuable addition to the "Iconology and Interpretation" series, of which *Pictura & Scriptura* is the 10th volume.

An ardent promoter of the "pragmatic revolution" (48), Szőnyi chooses the historical way of describing the development of semiotics/semiology. He starts his retrospective survey with Saussure's and Peirce's theories of the sign, continuing with Charles William Morris's synthesis of dyadic and triadic systems, which, in the United States, irrevocably established semiotics as a scientific discipline in its own right. It might be because of the historical interest that Saussure receives harsh criticism; apparently following Derrida's argumentation, Szőnyi claims that "through his rigid binary structuralism and synchronicity, he eliminated historicity" (41). While this may be true, the subsequent judgement the author passes still seems a little unfair, especially if one considers the *historical* fact that Saussure was reacting against the abuse of naive historical analogies by the early comparative philologists and the lack of a clear synchronic focus in the theories of the Neogrammarians.²

Cassirer's philosophically inclined system rounds up the section dedicated to the early evolution of 20th-century semiotics, before Szőnyi turns to the origins of (post)modern iconology.

As with most terms, Szőnyi challenges the reader with a multitude of rivalling definitions for iconography and iconol-

ogy. Though it is not quite clear why he attacks Białostocki's claim that iconology has two types, one "descriptive," the other "interpretive" (60), while he seems to accept Panofsky's very similar distinction of *iconography* as a "descriptive-identifying auxiliary science" and *iconology* as an "interpretive process based on iconographical description" (84), what really matters is that the reader is always invited to carry on with the refinement of definitions, and the dialogue with controversial theories.

Szónyi finds the key to the connection of semiotics and iconology in the oeuvre of Aby Warburg, who, consequently, also serves as a *leitmotif* in his narrative. Once again taking the historical-biographical path,³ he sets off by narrating the story of the epoch-making Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek and subsequently discusses Warburg's influence on his colleagues and followers, notably Panofsky and Gombrich. Starting with Warburg's and Panofsky's reaction to Wölfflin's theory, Szónyi elaborates both on Panofsky's warning that iconography should never fall into the trap of mere "symbol hunting" (97) and Gombrich's awareness of the "dictionary fallacy" (100). The latter implies the irreversibility of polysemous symbols such as the snake. It is on this point that postsemiotics⁴ (through the focus on 'polysemy'), Renaissance humanism (through the ambivalence of interpretations *in bonam sive malam partem*, cf. 135), and Warburg's lecture

on the Hopi Indians' snake ritual (203–27)⁵ would eventually converge in a single framework.

After laying the theoretical foundations, Szónyi enters what might at first glance appear a digression into the realm of early modern emblematics (115ff.). On second thoughts, however, one has to realize that there are few areas in which cultural representations and the 20th-century hermeneutics of iconology could meet so felicitously. Indeed, the tripartite structure of an emblem (inscription – picture – subscription) lends itself most readily to iconological analysis. The subchapter dedicated to emblematic cultural representations (129–64) refers most explicitly to both the title and the subtitle of the book. In its first, analytic-theoretical half, Szónyi outlines an overall classification of emblem types before discussing the hypothetical ways of scanning an emblem in a predominantly oral culture, and the ekphrastic problems raised by the word-emblem. The second half (148–64), a heavily revised and extended version of an earlier article by Szónyi,⁶ investigates the connection between the Renaissance emblematic theatre and Shakespeare's use of rhetoric and imagery. The author's synthesizing power is truly inspiring and his insightful survey of conventional cultural elements in Shakespeare's histrionics leaves nothing to be desired.

Scholars of contemporary literature and theory may find the next chapter,

“Poststructuralist Iconology” (165–202), particularly stimulating. Dialogue is the guiding principle here. On the one hand, different theories and theorists converse (or, rather, argue) with one another; on the other, Szőnyi invites the reader to active participation in the discussion, as well as providing his own personal stance in these matters.

The point of departure is Colin Cherry’s information theory, which defines a (correlational) code as a mutually reversible, two-way transformation (165) – and immediately runs into the problem of the irreversibility of metaphor. After several stages of refinement, Umberto Eco came up with definitions of coding, overcoding, and undercoding, from which follows the need for extra-coding in the interpretation of any message (168). Whereas coding proper makes grammatical understanding possible, over- and undercoding leaves space for literary and other metalinguistic purposes. It is on this point that Eco has to contend with Culler’s deconstructionist and Rorty’s pragmatist extremes; the main thrust of their argument is one of the most exciting passages in Szőnyi’s book. The conclusion, which Szőnyi quotes in a slightly inaccurate translation, is a synthesis of Culler’s and Eco’s views: “[The] lack of limits to semiosis does not mean . . . that meaning is the free creation of the reader. It shows, rather, that describable semiotic mechanisms function in recursive ways, the

limits of which cannot be identified in advance.”⁷

Another controversy is that between Gombrich and, chiefly, W. J. Thomas Mitchell. Szőnyi contrasts Gombrich’s idea of an evolution towards the completely objective, value neutral representation of photographs with Mitchell’s view of the political-ideological nature of all representation, regardless of the medium. Mitchell’s cyclic system of “iconophobia – iconophilia/fetishism – iconoclasm – idolatry” provides, on the one hand, a forceful tool for the interpretation of many events of cultural history, and on the other, a possible way out from Western logocentrism (177ff.).

In the following, Szőnyi positions himself in relation to the sources he quotes and he points out that the most important criteria for scholarly work are the familiarity with the most up-to-date trends of theory, and the *critical* use of all available developments and methods. It is in this critical spirit that I will enter a *dialogue* with the author in the paragraphs to follow.

Szőnyi’s reliance on secondary materials seems a little too heavy. This is especially evident in his treatment of Panofsky, which at times appears almost a reverberation of Białostocki’s very thorough and useful assessment. It is also interesting that in challenging Sándor Radnóti’s critique of Panofsky (86ff.), the author draws so heavily on Białostocki that at certain points it is difficult to dis-

cern who is actually arguing. In the introductory part to the chapter on poststructuralist iconology, Winfried Nöth's *Handbook of Semiotics* seems similarly overrepresented. And the technique of indirect citation presents more severe dangers as well. In discussing Albrecht Schöne's definition of tropological sense, Szőnyi quotes Tibor Fabiny's translation. Not only is one page reference in the footnote erroneous, but in this 'third remove' the statement's meaning actually turns into its exact opposite, inevitably leading to a false conclusion.⁸

Otherwise, the author has very conscientiously enumerated what he considers the shortcomings and imperfections of his book (254f.), so there remains very little room for criticism. One formal aspect I have found doubtful is the selectiveness in specifying the translators of various bibliographical items. It is difficult to explain why Barthes's translators are named, whereas Saussure's is not, though she undeniably had great impact on the Hungarian terminology of general linguistics. There are also some painful absences; though the text refers to Genette, Rorty, and Harold Bloom, none of their works have found a way into the bibliography. The Hungarian translations of Walter Benjamin's works are also missing, and so is Henri Bergson, whose aesthetics might have had more impact on the development of early-20th-century semiology than is obvious at first sight. The welcome reference to useful internet

links, on the other hand (e.g. the full-text version of Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, 58) shows a possible way forward for 21st-century publications.

It is a great pity that the quality of illustrations has not only not improved since the "Iconology and Interpretation" series was launched in 1986, but it has actually deteriorated with the introduction of digital publishing, so much so that certain pictures (e.g. Figure 59) scarcely fulfil their purpose (to illustrate, that is); at best, they move one's inner eye, or their source specification helps one find a better reproduction in another volume.

These, however, are minor regrets in view of Szőnyi's achievement in creating a comprehensive reference book summarizing the multitude of theories of cultural representation and thereby giving a useful tool to scholars investigating different eras and areas of human culture. One can only hope that the publication of the prospective "sequel" will add a practical handbook to the theory outlined in the present volume. The standard set by *Pictura & Scriptura* certainly bodes well for the future.

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Notes

1. All quotations from Hungarian sources are my translation.

2. Cf. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1986), p. 5. It is also regrettable that Szőnyi uses the 1967 edition of Éva B. Lőrinczy's translation; from the new, re-

vised edition (collated, by Sándor Kiss, with the critical edition of Paris, 1978), it turns out that the notorious tenet attributed to Saussure (“the only true object of study in linguistics is the language, considered in itself and for its own sake,” *Course*, p. 230) was added – quite contrary to Saussure’s own beliefs and convictions – by his editors (cf. József Herman, “Az új magyar kiadásról,” in Ferdinand de Saussure, *Bevezetés az általános nyelvészetbe*, trans. Éva B. Lőrinczy [Budapest: Corvina, 1997], 373–9, p. 375n4).

3. This method is one of the common features of this book and Szőnyi’s previous volume in the same series, “*Exaltatio*” és hatalom: *Keresztény mágia és okkult szimbolizmus egy angol mágus műveiben* (Szeged: JATEPress, 1998); see also Gábor Zemplén’s review, “An English Magus Comes at Last to Hungary,” *The AnaChronisT* [5] (1999) 244–52, pp. 245f.

4. Szőnyi attributes this coinage to Attila Kiss (199). See also Attila Kiss, “*Cloud 9*, Metadrama, and the Postsemiotics of the Subject,” *The AnaChronisT* [9] (2003) 223–232, which shows how similar principles can be applied to the contemporary stage.

5. The discussion of Warburg’s lecture and its poststructuralist reception elaborates on Szőnyi’s “Warburg’s Intuitions in Light of Postmodern Challenges,” *Umeni* (Prague) 49 (2001) 2–9. It runs to an entire chapter and is probably one of the strongest and most unified sections of Szőnyi’s book; it is here that all threads seem to be tied up, while the structure of the “case study” anticipates the critical stance that will presumably dominate the “sequel” to this volume. The last chapter, dedicated to Eco’s *Kant and the Platypus*, informative and useful as it is, lacks the sizzling intellectual energy the penultimate chap-

ter abounds in. (For lack of space, I also had to condensate my allusion to the chapter on Eco’s Alpha and Beta modalities into the title of this review.)

6. “Vizuális elemek Shakespeare művészetében: A ‘képvasdászattól’ az ikonológiáig,” in *A reneszánsz szimbolizmus: Ikonográfia, emblematika, Shakespeare*, ed. Tibor Fabiny, József Pál, and György Endre Szőnyi (Szeged: JATEPress, 1987), 67–90.

7. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation: Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brook-Rose*, ed. Stefan Colini (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 121.

8. It is, in fact, Peter M. Daly who translated Schöne’s definition into English, but he duly provided the German original as well. It is both fascinating and instructive to observe this transformation: “[Der sensus tropologicus] meint die Bedeutung der Realien für den einzelnen Menschen und seine Bestimmung, für seinen Weg zum Heil und sein Verhalten in der Welt. In solchem Sinne versteht die Emblemantik noch immer das Seiende als ein zugleich Bedeutendes” (Peter M. Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979], p. 199n114); “[the *sensus tropologicus*] refers to the significance of things and facts for the individual and his destiny, for his path to salvation and his conduct in the world. In this sense, the emblematic mode still conceives of all that exists as at the same time embodying significance” (Daly, p. 42); “A *sensus tropologicus* a dolgok és a tények jelentőségére vonatkozik, amely az egyén számára nyer jelentést az életvezetésben és az üdösségre való elkészülésben. Az emblematikus gondolkodásmód számára minden létező dolog egyidőben nyer jelentőséget” (Fabiny quoted 134–5).