

Hungarian University of Fine Arts Doctoral School

Faulty Tales

**On the use of complex narratives in the art of László László
Révész, Gábor Roskó, János Kósa, Csaba Nemes, and Ágnes
Szépfalvi**

Theses

DLA dissertation

Marta Czene

2024

Supervisor:

Dr habil. Miklós Peternák CSc.

My dissertation is essentially a comparative analysis of the narrative painting of László László Révész, Gábor Roskó, János Kósa, Csaba Nemes and Ágnes Szépfalvi. I examine their art through my personal filter, trying to identify the characteristics and methods of the specific kind of complex narrative painting I practice.

The shared point that caught my interest was finding works in their oeuvres that, although figurative and seemingly easily recognizable, are still very difficult to decipher or interpret the situation or the story they refer to.

In my dissertation, I search for similarities in the work, methods, and sources of these artists through a series of interlinked works across themes and several comparative analyses.

In these descriptions and analyses, I attempt to decode the components of a narrative representation designed to contradict attempts at interpretation. In the essay, I demonstrate the dialogical relationship established between the work and its viewer, as the viewer, lost between ambiguous and contradictory variations of meaning, is forced to revise her interpretative strategies.

An attempt at the interpretation that does not produce a reassuring result may seem pointless, but the purpose of my demonstration is precisely to show that this kind of art, and I think all other art, only lives through interpretation. Even if I cannot attribute a specific meaning to each painting, I can gain a better understanding of the artistic practice it came from.

1,

Even though the art of László László Révész, Gábor Roskó, János Kósa, Csaba Nemes, and Ágnes Szépfalvi is usually described as independent phenomena, there are many connections between them, not only professional and biographical connections but also similar ideas about art, similar means, methods, and sources.

Their shared ambition is to reach their works' " indecipherability, " creating uncertainty, ambiguity, and a dialogical interaction with the viewer.

Their common themes are the question of representability, spatial orientation, and the representation of the gaze, mystery, identity, and the use of media and cinematic

images. I have elaborated on their connection to these topics as subchapters in the third chapter of my dissertation.

Speaking of shared sources of biographical and human connections, the link between Révész and Roskó is evident practically throughout their careers, starting from the Indigo group and the university, yet by the 2010s, they acted in relatively distant parts of the art scene. The closeness of their relationship was perhaps only clearly revealed during their joint exhibition in Paks, *The Enormous Destiny*.

Kósa, Nemes, and Szépfalvi were classmates as well, and not only did they participate together in the artists' circle that developed after Bálint Chikán's lectures, listen to Attila Kotányi on the Situationists and the theories of Miklós Erdély and Tamás Szentjóby in the Intermedia course. They read enthusiastically Stewart Home, Jean Clair on Duchamp, and *The Death of the Author* by Barthes, and they were on friendly terms with or distant admirers of Révész and Roskó, who also thought of Duchamp, Clair, and Barthes as important points of reference. I write about these connections throughout the essay when analyzing artworks in Chapter Three and more in personal biographies in the Appendix.

2,

The interrelation of different media plays a key role in the development and interpretation of complex narratives, with a particular focus on incorporating certain elements and methods of performance, film, and caricature into the practice of painting.

In his doctoral dissertation, Révész explains the relationship between narrative painting and performance in his practice, and Gábor Bora describes the same from the opposite direction, approaching Révész's performances from a pictorial perspective. However, Révész was not only a great connoisseur of film history but a filmmaker too, and the same can be said of Csaba Nemes. Both of them also made films at the Béla Balázs Studio, where, among the many visual artist-filmmakers and feature filmmakers in Section K, the narrative form Bódy calls *new narrativity*, subverting established storytelling clichés and presenting storyless events appears in the work of many. Nemes also taught film history for a while at the University of Pécs. In their own university and post-university years, together with Szépfalvi, visiting film clubs was a dominant experience for them. They enthusiastically followed new Western

European movies (Wim Wenders, late Godard), anticipating them because, from Hungary, they seemed to be a kind of channel for the contemporary art of the West. Meanwhile, they both took on film industry jobs to make a living. I discuss the apparent impact of film on their art in the relevant sub-chapter of chapter three.

Both Révész and Roskó spoke several times about the inspiration they took from caricature. Kósa's art also shows the influence of caricature, not only in his late period. His early works had a more sophisticated humor in them, which can best be interpreted in the context of contemporary art. I discuss the significance of this in more detail in the section on art-historical references in Chapter Three and the first two sections of Chapter Four on method.

3,

The complex narrative paintings represent a localized version of postmodernism, where classical and neo-avant-garde influences, conceptualism, traditional, academic painting, performance, cinema, a desire to connect with contemporary Western trends, and doubt about all these got stacked on top of each other.

In his dissertation, Kósa describes the turn of the eighties and nineties as a real culture shock: his generation had to research the classical avant-garde, and then, from the nineties, unexpectedly, many theoretical writings, such as Stewart Home's theory of plagiarism and the writings of Joseph Kossuth, became available in Hungarian. The hope of the capitalist art market and its critique appeared at the same time.

A decade earlier, Révész had painstakingly but extensively researched contemporary theatre theory, performance, and new media from many independent sources. For him, too, the film was a source of recent trends. Meanwhile, they were all fans of Duchamp while also holding on to the tradition of classical painting, and the tension of this contradiction worked in all of them. The biographies of Kósa and Révész, in particular, provide the relevant information in the Appendix, and more information regarding this issue appears in the analyses.

4,

The complex narrative resembles trauma in its operation, which relates it to the classical means of artistic effect, catharsis, and the sublime.

Miklós Erdély, whose theories directly influenced Révész and Rosko, and through the Intermedia courses indirectly influenced Kósa, Nemes, and Szépfalvi, says about the functioning of art: '(...) *we can only have bad consciousness. My consciousness is not good either, but if I disturb it or am disturbed, it is very pleasant. So good art is necessarily able to disturb or destroy consciousness - it makes room for what one needs most.*'¹ This consciousness-destroying power accurately describes the disorientation that arises in the viewer of ambiguous, complex narrative representations. On the other hand, it is very similar to the description of the traumatic experience. Judit Nóra Pintér, in her book *The Non-Fleeting Present: Trauma and Nostalgia*, writes that the classical mechanisms of art, such as the sublime and catharsis, all function as a kind of mini-trauma modeling the experience of existential threat in a safe environment. They act as a kind of vaccination, triggering the other, less mentioned, positive effect of trauma besides post-traumatic stress: post-traumatic growth, which leads to the redefinition of mental structures and taking new meaning from the experiences.

5,

Postmodernism made narrativity, discredited by socialist realism, relevant again precisely through doubt, humor, and disorientation. At the same time, ambiguity does not open the door to solely fertile misunderstandings but can also lead to isolation.

The fragmentation and uncertainty of pictorial storytelling can be seen as a postmodern trait, an imprint of losing faith in grand narratives. In many cases, the use of postmodern eclecticism, art historical allusions, and the prominence of intertextuality made it easy to categorize artists, and other spectacular aspects such as politics or classical style categorized others. This categorization may have distracted attention from the parallels that could have been drawn to the Pictures Generation and Neo-conceptualism, for example, in using the traits of other media in painting or the focus on images and their interpretation. The debate in *Műértő* in 2003 on new figurative tendencies in Hungarian contemporary art and Kósa's appearances in it make a good example. Too many allusions and the indecipherability of narrative did

¹ Sebők Zoltán: *Új misztika felé, Beszélgetés Erdély Miklóssal*. In: HÍD (Novi Sad) 1982. 3. p.: 366.

not always lead to a liberation of thought, but in many cases, it sometimes led to a frustrated disinterest instead.

Acceptance of ambiguity is often challenging and can lead to a sense of incompetence, turning viewers uncomfortable with uncertainty away from trying to understand the artwork. In the case of contradictory works, misunderstandings are not always fertile. Some misunderstandings can also lead to unpleasant consequences, which can affect the career of artists or even isolate them.

Mysteriousness and secrecy can also be interpreted as seclusion. The communication of this kind of art is a very critical and complex question. In good cases, however, as at the turn of the millennium, they can even be discovered by the art market because, as well as a sense of exclusion, these works can even generate a sense of insider status. Perhaps this is why, at a certain point, the artists in this essay found many superficial followers.