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TASKS AND PROMISING POSSIBILITIES Comics Studies in Hungarian¹

Fredrik Strömberg's brilliant article published in 2016 offered an overview of comics studies in the so-called "northern" countries (mainly the Scandinavian ones, Iceland and Denmark).² This brings up the question what is to be said about Hungary and Hungarian comics studies. What is the situation with regards to the institutionalization of comics studies in Hungarian-speaking areas? What has happened so far, what possibilities and tasks are there for researchers in the field of comics?

HISTORY, CIRCUMSTANCES

In the past decade there has been a fortunate boost in Hungarian comics studies and an increase in the number of academic and critical works on comics. That is not to say there had been no articles and books on the topic before. There are some Hungarian examples from as early as the 1970s. The earliest piece of writing, which is often referred to, is Endre Gellért's book³ published by the Research Centre for Mass Communication of the Hungarian Radio.

- 1 This work has been supported by the Bolyai Research Fellowship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
- 2 Fredrik STRÖMBERG, *Comics studies in the Nordic countries – field or discipline?* *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 2016/2, 134–155.
- 3 GELLÉRT Endre, *A képregény története*, Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont, Budapest, 1975.

We can find articles on comics in Hungarian journals in Yugoslavia, in *Új Symposion* and in *Híd*⁴, for example Bálint Szombathy's pieces.⁵ Although these seem to be cited to a lesser extent, they appear to be more "current" and "closer" to contemporary research than Endre Gellért's book, probably due to the fact that they are free of the burden of cultural and academic legitimization that saturated academic and critical literature in Hungary – even decades after the publishing of those articles.

If the research of comics indeed started in the 1970s, it can be argued that it is relatively late, as research into crime narratives of Hungarian popular literature started in the 1920s,⁶ and North-American comics studies started in the interwar period.⁷ The first attempt to institutionalize comics studies in Hungary can be witnessed mainly in the 1980s and partly in the 1990s, in terms of published texts, specialized conferences, international networking, and it is mainly related to Kálmán Ruboszky's research into the sociology of reading,⁸ as well as to Sándor Kertész's organizational work and his interest in the history of comics.⁹

4 In the September 1979 issue of *Új Symposion* and November 1978 issue of *Híd* independent sections were devoted to comic books.

5 See SZOMBATHY Bálint, *A képregény a jugoszláviai magyar sajtóban*, *Híd* 1976/12, 1492–1499; also SZOMBATHY Bálint, *Visszapillantás a földalatti képregényre*, *Híd* 1981/2, 257–261.

6 HANKISS János, *A detektívregény: a „Népszerű irodalom” elmélete és története I.*, Csáthy Ferencz, Debrecen–Budapest, 1928.

7 MATTEO STEFANELLI, *Un siècle de recherches sur la bande dessinée = La bande dessinée: une médiaculture*, eds. Éric MAIGRET – Matteo STEFANELLI, Armand Colin – INA, Paris, 2012, 17–49.

8 RUBOSZKY Kálmán, *Apropó, comics!*, Művelődéskutató Intézet, Budapest, 1988; RUBOSZKY Kálmán, *A képregény*, Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest, 1989.

9 KERTÉSZ Sándor, *Szuperhősök Magyarországon*, Akvarell, Nyíregyháza, 1991.

The attempt for institutionalization about 25 years later, in the 2010s could not have taken place without two circumstantial factors. On the one hand, the comics scene and related institutions were reorganized in the middle of the 2000s. New types of comics, new genres, and new practices arose in terms of creation, distribution, promotion as well as reception, which may have inspired research as well. On the other hand, there was a welcoming academic environment in Hungary as well as on an international scale. A number of journals on comic studies were established in the last fifteen years,¹⁰ and the discipline of comic studies was organized in several countries (e.g. Germany, the Czech Republic, or the before-mentioned “northern” countries).¹¹

Hungarian literary culture is traditionally and mainly a “journal culture”: there is a high number of literary and cultural journals in Hungarian, there are journals in every county, in almost every town, bigger or smaller, various literary groups and cultural movements have their own journals. Some of the literary journals are open to comics studies, sometimes even to comics themselves. One can find a lot of papers, theoretical writings and analyses in periodicals on film, social sciences and media, but reviews of contemporary comics are mostly published in

10 The year of the foundation is indicated in brackets: *ImageText* (2004), *Mechademia* (2006), *European Comic Art* (2008), *Manga 10000 Images* (2008), *Studies in Comics* (2010), *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2010), *Sequantial Art Narrative in Education* (2010), *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* (2012).

11 In 2005 in Koblenz the *Gesellschaft für Comicforschung* was founded, which focuses on German-speaking areas, but at the same time it is most open to mangas. There is a significant research centre in Olomouc in the Czech Republic called *Centrum pro studia komiksu*. See *Studia komiksu: možnosti a perspektivy*, eds. Martin FORET – Pavel KOŘÍNEK – Tomáš PROKÚPEK – Michal JARĚŠ, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, Olomouc, 2012. About comics studies in North-European countries see STRÖMBERG, *op. cit.*

literary-cultural journals. Academic as well as cultural journals like *Alföld*, *Beszélő*, *Debreceni Disputa*, *Filmvilág*, *Filológiai Közlöny*, *Kalligram*, *Korunk*, *Mediárium*, *Médiakutató*, *Mozinet*, and last but not least *Műút* and *Szépirodalmi Figyelő* publish articles on comics, the latter two having comics as well as theoretical pieces on their pages. There have been two attempts to establish a specialized journal; one of them was *Panel* initiated by fans, and the other was *Buborékhámozó* by a publisher. These did not manage to cross beyond the threshold of Hungarian comics subculture. Internet forums and social networks seem to meet the demands of comics subculture more than cultural-critical journals. However, the majority of analyses and reviews of comics appear in journals.

The first conference on comics studies in Hungarian in the 2010s was held in Transylvania, at the Film and Television Faculty of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj (2016),¹² the second one was held at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Pécs (2016), and the third one was again in Cluj (2018).¹³ It is worth to note that there are lectures and talks on comics studies not only at university departments but at comics festivals, too. In 2011 in Szeged the two worlds actually met in the Somogyi Károly City and County Library. As part of the comics festival, there was a conference on how to develop the culture of reading with sessions

12 The programme of the conference *Tendenciák a kortárs magyar képregényben és képregénykutatásban I.* [Tendencies in Hungarian Comic Books and Comic Studies I.] is available at: <http://kepregeny.blog.hu/2016/05/01/2016.05.06-07.kepregenykonferencia.kolozsvaron>.

13 The programme of the conference *Tendenciák a kortárs magyar képregényben és képregénykutatásban II.* [Tendencies in Hungarian Comic Books and Comic Studies II.] is available at: <http://www.commonline.hu/content/tendenci%C3%A1k-kort%C3%A1rs-magyar-k%C3%A9preg%C3%A9nyben-%C3%A9s-k%C3%A9preg%C3%A9nykutat%C3%A1sban-ii>.

on comic books. The conference was organized by the Pedagogy Faculty of the University of Szeged.¹⁴

At Hungarian universities the disciplines of humanities and social sciences, literature and from the 1990s on communication and media, especially the cultural aspects of popular media and research on subcultures proved to be most open to an academic examination of comics. A decade after the comics-renaissance this openness is especially striking. The academic research on comics has been integrated into training programmes of communication and media at three universities at least (Debrecen, Szeged and Pécs). Media experts and students majoring in communication studies are examining comics. MA and BA papers are written on Asian, North-American, European and Hungarian comics, and their communicational uses. Four universities in Hungary (University of Debrecen, Eötvös Loránd University and Pázmány Péter Catholic University) have offered the possibility for doctoral research: at least seven doctoral dissertations have been written or are being written on comics at partly media, partly literature research groups or departments (in 2019).

TOPICS, CHALLENGES

Therefore, from the mid-2000s, and especially after the turn of the decade comics-related academic activities have been lively. It is worth to review the topics researchers are interested in, and the nature of the articles that are being published. Some media genres and traditions in comics proved to be more interesting for research-

¹⁴ The programme of the conference *A vonal üzenete* [the Message of the Line] is available at: <http://kepregeny.blog.hu/2011/11/09/a.vonal.uzenete.konferencia.programja>.

ers than others. For example, the Hungarian tradition of novel adaptations¹⁵ and autobiographical genres¹⁶ seem to be more popular than early comics in the nineteenth century or *Kretén* magazin that was published from 1994 until 2009, even though the genre parodies published in *Kretén* could form the basis of a comprehensive history of recent Hungarian media. In spite of its popularity and renewing impact on Hungarian comics culture, there has been no multitude of analyses on mangas and manhwas.¹⁷ The spreading and (trans) medial hybridisation of comics is just as interesting for Hungarian researchers: there are web comics, exhibitions, street art, posters and animated subjects of interest.¹⁸ The communicational use of comics is also an important field: lieux de mémoire in comics, education and journalism.¹⁹ Subjects for analysis are not just Hungarian; they

- 15 For example BAYER Antal, *Az adaptáció kísértése: Irodalom és képregény*, Nero Blanco Comix, Budapest, 2013; KOMORNIK Eszter, *Adaptációs képregények Magyarországon. Zórád Ernő: Névtelen vár, Partitúra 2015/2, 61–78*; SATA Lehel, „Le az álarccal!” *Az evidentia alakzatai Arthur Snitzler Álomnovella című elbeszélésének képregényváltozatában*, *Filológiai Közlöny 2014/4, 484–501*; VINCZE Ferenc, *Egy képregény-adaptáció kiadástörténete. Az előretolt helyőrségről*, *Filológiai Közlöny 2015/2, 213–230*.
- 16 For example DUNAI Tamás, *Újraalkotott emlékek: A képregényes önéletírások jellegzetességei*, *Műút 2013/37, 44–47*; SZÉP Eszter, *Képregényes eszköztárral az identitásról – Miriam Katin önéletrajzai*, *Filológiai Közlöny 2016/3, 187–201*.
- 17 Although this turn was noted by the Hungarian literary criticism not long after the publishing of the *Árnybőr*-series (*Blade of the Phantom Master*) in 2006: NAGY Csilla, *Mangenezis. Keleti képviselő Magyarországon, avagy a magyar manga*, *Kalligram 2008/1, 91–95*.
- 18 For example DEMUS Zsófia, *Mediális környezetváltás: a webképregény*, *Medok 2016/2, 107–113*; earlier KOVÁCS Nóra, *Webcomics – on-line képregény*, *Mediárium 2009/3-4, 65–80*; MAKSA Gyula, *Változatok képregényre*, Gondolat Kiadó–PTE Kommunikáció-és Médiatudományi Tanszék, Budapest–Pécs, 2010; VARRÓ Attila, *A térré vált idő. Filmszerű ábrázolásmód a képregényekben*, *Enigma 40. (2004), 118–135*.
- 19 DUNAI Tamás, *Keretek között: a képregény mint a Kádár-kor emlékeztethelye = Kultpontok. Emlékeztethelyek a magyar populáris kultúrában*, eds. DUNAI Tamás – OLÁH Szabolcs – SEBESTYÉN Attila, Debreceni Egyetemi, Debrecen, 2012, 99–107;

are taken from various comics cultures. Sometimes Hungarian translations of foreign language analyses (English, French, German), theoretical papers are published, but there are only few of these, even though they would be an asset in education.²⁰

In the past decade there has been an unprecedented increase in research activity on comics in Hungary, but Hungarian researchers and research leaders face further challenges, and it is worth to mention these. Organised, systematic research requires databases, archives, collections and special libraries. The most important collection of Hungarian comics is probably Ferenc Kiss's private collection; the ones of public libraries are probably much less significant.²¹ Public libraries do not have many comics, even the collection of national archive libraries is rather incomplete. There are countries where comics centres help research, for example in Belgium, France and Japan. These centres often integrate collections, archives, exhibition sites, research institutes. One may not dare to dream something like that in Hungary, but the issue is worth a thought.

It is also desirable for Hungarian comics researchers to participate in the work of international networks. There are a number of examples for that, which is good news. However, there have been only very few papers on Hungarian comics in foreign languages.²²

MAKSA Gyula, *Képregények kulturaközi áramlatokban*, Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, Kolozsvár, 2017.

20 Hungarian translations of the German literature have been published in the column *Az irodalmi képregény* [Literary Comics] in the journal *Filológiai Közlöny* from 2014. The column has been edited by Lehel Sata.

21 Ferenc Kiss's compilation of a bibliography for comics is significant, and its first volume has already been published: *Füles képregény-bibliográfiája: 1957–2013*, Képregény Kedvelők Klubja – Linea Comics, Nyíregyháza, 2015.

22 Two of the rare papers in foreign languages: BAYER Antal, *La BD franco-belge en Hongrie*, *Lepetitjournal.com* 2010. 11. 16., <https://lepetitjournal.com/budapest/a-voir-a-faire/bandes-dessinees-la-bd-franco-belge-en-hongrie-quatrieme>

Consequently, international handbooks and encyclopaedias on comics usually do not include Hungarian comics (whereas there is a number of comics from countries that are far from the big comics centres represented in these books).²³

Any quality research on Hungarian comics, any composition of its history cannot be imagined without an exchange of ideas on a regional level, as a significant part of Hungarian comics was published in neighbouring countries, in a system of media that is different from that of Hungary's. Therefore, a comparative study of various European, Central and Eastern European comics and their history is highly desirable. That could be seen at the academic discussion section organized for the Freiburg opening of the South-Eastern European comics exhibition *comiXconnection*,²⁴ where it turned out that the comics-related relevance of *Új Symposion* is a shared field of interest with Serbian researchers, just as Lívía Rusz's work is an important chapter in the history of both Hungarian and Romanian comics.²⁵ The question of pre-comics of the nineteenth century, the contemporary "alternative" comics or oriental comics, as well as the depiction of so-called 'socialism' in comics are all potential grounds for comparisons on a European scale.

partie-70204; KACSUK Zoltán, *Subcultural entrepreneurs, path dependencies and fan reactions: The case of NARUTO in Hungary = Intercultural Crossovers, Transcultural Flows: Manga/Comics*, ed. Jacqueline BERNDT, International Manga Research Center, Kyoto, 2012, 17–32.

- 23 For example Claude MOLITERNI – Philippe MELLOTT – Laurent TURPIN – Michel DENNI – Nathalie MICHEL-SZELECHOWSKA, *BD Guide 2005. Encyclopédie de la bande dessinée internationale*, Omnibus, Paris, 2004.
- 24 The programme of the conference *Comics Connected. Transnational Comics Art and Comics Scenes* in Freiburg is available at: <http://comixconnection.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Symposium.Programm.pdf>.
- 25 See Dodo NIŢA – Alexandru CIUBOTARIU, *Istoria benzii desenate româneşti (1891–2010)*, Vellant, Bucureşti, 2010; Dodo NIŢA – Kiss Ferenc, *Rusz Lívía monográfia*, OZ-Print, Budapest, 2010.

It is worth to consider the possibility of digital comics studies in the future – following the example of digital anthropology. Within media and cultural studies, the area of independent comics studies is emerging, while the medial environment, the channels of comics, their production, consumption and use are changing – due to the spreading technological innovations. Change impregnates all the major aspects of media (creation, distribution, texts, channels, audiences, uses). In terms of the creation of comics, the tradition of representing by a movement of the hand seems to be transforming in the digital age, and the matter of authorship and the re- and deterritorialization of the creation process appear in a new light. The distribution, spreading, collecting and archiving of comics is changing as well – online distribution networks, communities, databases and archives are formed. A transformation of cultural texts and their channels can be seen: the form of comics encounters new technologies, modes and scenes: webcomics, mobile comics, digital comics etc. The possibility for critical editions emerges in the new, medial environment. The transformation of texts and modes has an impact on how audiences use them, for example in terms of the transformation of comics-related subcultures or as a result of Instagram. The question arises, what possibilities, tasks and means comics studies, this specific variation of media and culture studies, have to explore these changes.

AN ATTEMPT TO RISE TO CHALLENGES

In December 2017, as a result of a decision by the Faculty Council, the Comics Studies Research Centre was established at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pécs. The aim of the Comics Studies Research Center (in French: Centre de Recherche pour

l'Étude de la Bande Dessinée, in German: Forschungszentrum für Comicwissenschaft) is to have an internationally acclaimed academic centre at the Institute of Social and Media Studies at the University of Pécs, which integrates comics studies in Hungary, all the research on comics, contributes to training academics who examine and archive comics. It organizes conferences, provides an academic background to any published material on comics studies and to comics exhibitions and helps to realize aims of Hungarian researchers of comics by applications and grants.

The Department of Communication and Media Studies of the Institute of Social and Media Studies at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pécs seemed to be the appropriate location for the coordination of the Comics Studies Research Centre. The educational and research activity of the department provides excellent academic background, the library, gallery and the laboratory provide suitable infrastructure for work. Besides, researchers from the University of Debrecen, the University of Szeged and Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary have been involved in the activity of the research centre. The Szépirodalmi Figyelő Foundation is a partner of the centre in terms of publishing and organizing conferences. The international academic relationship capital of the members (Zsófia Demus, Attila Doboviczki, Tamás Dunai, Eszter Komornik, Gyula Maksa, Lehel Sata, Sándor Trippó and Ferenc Vincze) helps the work. One of the long-term aims is to establish a close cooperation with Hungarian and international research centres.

At the Department of Communication and Media Studies there have been courses on comics in every semester since 2007, and as a result a number of seminar papers have been written both on BA and MA levels. There is doctoral research in comics studies at the department: in the Language and Communications Doctoral

Programme two students are doing their dissertations at the moment (2019): Zsófia Demus and Eszter Komornik. Tamás Dunai is writing his PhD thesis with supervision from the department at the Doctoral Programme of Literary Studies at the University of Pécs. Gyula Maksa, tenure of the department received habilitated doctoral qualification on 2017 with a thesis in comics studies.²⁶

Conferences on media studies organized at the department included sessions on comics studies in 2014 and 2016. As mentioned earlier, the second comics studies conference was held here, organized together with Szépirodalmi Figyelő Foundation: *Tendenciák a kortárs magyar képregényben és képregénykutatásban II*. [Tendencies in contemporary Hungarian comics and comics studies II]. The first one was held a year before at the Faculty of Theatre and Television of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, the lectures at the conference edited by Ferenc Vincze (*Képregényen innen és túl*)²⁷ was the first book to start a series for which the research centre provides an academic background. It is worth to mention that in the past half-decade the gallery of the Department of Communication and Media Studies, RE:PUBLIC was the venue for five comics exhibitions: *A svájci képregény: a képek csúcstalálkozója* [The Swiss comics: a summit of images] (2013), *5Panels alkotócsoport kiállítása* [Exhibition of the creative group 5Panels] (2016), *Asztalfióktól a megbízásig – ismeretterjesztő és edukációs képregények* [From drawer to assignment – educational comics] (2017), *István Csillag – Ferenc Vincze: Helikoni tárcaképregények* [Short comics in Helikon] (2017), *Kép – regény – történet* [Image – novel – story] (2018).

26 MAKSA Gyula, *Képregények kulturaközi áramlatokban*, Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, Kolozsvár, 2017.

27 *Képregényen innen és túl*, ed. VINCZE Ferenc, Szépirodalmi Figyelő Alapítvány, Budapest, 2017.

In recent years the founding members of the research centre have managed to build international relationships: there were lectures on comics studies at professional events, universities and research institutions in Belgium, France, China, North Macedonia, Germany, Romania, Sweden, Slovakia, and they could connect to the *comiXconnection* network initiated by the Museum of European Cultures in Berlin, which gathers experts on South-Eastern European comics from Bosnia, Croatia, Hungary, Germany, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia. In 2016 the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Pécs hosted a student from Turkey within the Erasmus+ trainee programme who was doing research in comics studies. The comics studies-related research of the founding members of the centre was supported by a number of Hungarian and international grants.

In the memorandum of the association the planned activities of the Comics Studies Research Centre are as follows: collecting and archiving comics and literature on the subject for the department library and medialab, creating comics databases; conferences in Hungary and abroad, organizing exhibitions and book readings, applications in Hungary and on an international scale, participation in publishing our own research, translations, study materials and conference talks; organizing and teaching at workshops for students; organizing and supervising workshops for artists, educational work, workshops for secondary school students; assisting academic and educational work at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pécs from comics studies point of view; creating and managing our own website; compiling a comics studies handbook, coordinating curatorial activities, creating curatorial curriculum; providing professional background for the book series *Képregénytudomány* [Comics Studies], edited by Ferenc Vincze and Gyula Maksa.

The research outlined in the memorandum of the centre (part of which has already been conducted) cover the following areas: writing a history of Hungarian comics, creating a directory of Hungarian comics, collecting and archiving comics, designating areas for discussion in the language of the theory and criticism of Hungarian comics, possibilities of the integration of comics into the methodology of primary and secondary education, the role of comics in higher education and academic communication; research on comics from comparative cultural studies and trans-cultural media studies point of view (e.g. Hungarian-Romanian, Hungarian-German, Hungarian-Francophone relations); the use of comics media in terms of social communication; geopolitics of comics media; comics-based media (fresco comics, comics statues, webcomics, motion comic, photobooks, comic boards and calendars) as well as researching related areas like use of photos, video games and street art from comics media point of view.

Since its foundation in 2017 the research centre has been organizing seminars on comics studies in Hungarian, English and French for the students of the University of Pécs, with the titles *Képregények tanulmányozása* [Studying Comics], *Introduction to Comics Studies* and *Etudes de la bande dessinée*. These courses are available for any students of the university. The seminars can be characterized by an exchange of ideas and intercultural and interdisciplinary discourse due to the linguistic-cultural differences of participants and their various academic backgrounds. There have been students at the seminars from more than ten countries of Asia, Africa and Europe, bringing along their own media cultural practices, knowledge, embeddedness as well as various aspects, ways of thinking and attitudes of their academic or artistic creations. Besides students of communication or media studies, students of

humanities, linguistics and literature, of film, of human resource management, ceramists, economists, as well as students of geography, information technology and history participated in these seminars, sharing their interests and curiosity.

Translated by Borbála Mariska