

THE VISIBILITY OF A CITY IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD. SCOPIC REGIMES IN THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF LAJOS ORBÁN (1897–1972) FROM CLUJ*

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ABSTRACT. *The Visibility of a City in the Interwar Period. Scopic Regimes in the Photographs of Lajos Orbán (1897–1972) from Cluj.* Lajos Orbán was an amateur photographer, whose main body of work was produced starting from the 1920s when he became the employee of a local shop specialized in photographic equipment and member in local photographic societies, e.g. the Tessar Bowling Society. His photographs were displayed at international photo exhibitions, but he was organising regional photo contests and exhibitions as well. His photographs show the influence of the pictorialist photography, but traces of modernism or the new objectivism are present as well. These pictures became archival documents, and they are also important resources to the visual culture of Transylvania, the visual literacy of the people living in the interwar years. The paper offers an in depth analysis of the scopic regimes detectable in the photographic heritage of Lajos Orbán based on the ways human figures and spatial relations are represented in his pictures.

Keywords: *amateur photography, visual culture, urban life, “flâneur”, scopic regime, landscape, human figures.*

* This article is a translated and shortened version of an article originally published in Hungarian as an introductory article to the collection of essays and photo album entitled: *Látható Kolozsvár. Orbán Lajos fotói a két világháború közötti városról*, ed. Blos-Jáni Melinda. (Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, Exit, 2018. ISBN: 9789737803870)

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The photographic image, emerging in the 19th century, entered into everyday use at the beginning of the 20th century leading to the vernacularization and democratization of the new technology (gradually getting more and more user friendly). This was a global phenomenon that reached Transylvania as well. At the end of the 19th century the city of Cluj kept up with the appearance of a new medium, photographic studios were established in the city at the same time as in other locations of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In this period photographs replaced the graphic postcards¹ of the city, and the newspapers of Cluj started to publish photographs as illustrations already in the late 1890s. Regarding the photographic culture of Transylvania, the history of photo studios and professional photographers is perhaps the most studied. Károly Szathmáry Pap (1812–1887), Ferenc Veress (1832–1916) or the Dunky brothers are the best-known 19th century Transylvanian photographers, who are nowadays considered artists rather than artisans (although they worked mostly as entrepreneurs and shop owners). Much less is known about the social and cultural acceptance of the medium at the turn of the 19th century: how it was regarded by the contemporary society, in what way it was different, what social classes are reflected in photographs, or what kind of visual literacy the studio photographers and their clients of the time must have had. Career histories and monographs² on the history of photography in Transylvania appeared scarcely, and they are rather encyclopedia like, and less concerned with the relationship between photography and society or with visual culture. The post-1918 period tends to remain a blind spot in the field of research, although the end of the First World War had been a veritable regime change, as Transylvania became part of Romania. In the interwar period the Hungarian population had to accept their new status as a minority, while the Romanians started to establish their activities. A new type of multiculturalism emerged in this region, whilst technological development was underway in the field of visual culture as well. This was the time when a more ample democratization of the technical image making apparatus

¹ The first ever postcard used as an open (not enveloped) form of written and pictorial communication was posted in 1869 in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and the popularity of this medium increased in the following years. See Keszeg Anna, "A Magyar Királyság városainak látványstruktúrái a századforduló képeslapjain", in *Médiakultúra Közép-Kelet-Európában*, ed. Kálai Sándor (Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2016), 129.

² The most impressive of these is Miklósi-Sikes Csaba, *Fényképészek és műtermek Erdélyben 1839-1918: tanulmány és okmánytár* (Székelyudvarhely: Haáz Rezső Alapítvány, 2001). The book is rich in historical source material and oral history interviews, but needs reevaluation as new data surfaced in the past decades. To be also mentioned here are the books edited by Lajos Erdélyi for the Kriterion publishing house: *Székelyföld képekben* and *Teleki Samu Afrikában*, both presenting 19th century photographers.

like film and photography occurred. This paper aims to explore the visual culture of Transylvania in the interwar period, the vernacularization of photography as a medium and the patterns of visual literacy of non-professional photographers and its beholders, drawing on the results of urban history and media culture studies. All of this will be revealed through the story of the photographs taken by a member of the bourgeoisie from Cluj called Lajos Orbán.

From the visual contemplation of *flâneurs* to urban photography

The birth of modern cities was accompanied by the appearance of a new popular culture based on spectacles – as pointed out by research on urbanization history in Hungary³ and also by the historians of visual culture.⁴ These approaches define a city as a discursive space structured from the 19th century onwards by new identities, by the emergence of a public sphere, and hence, by visibility. Then in reverse, the images mediating this 20th century urban life should be understood from the perspective of the city dweller, of an observer defined by its specific historical time, the social history of vision. The amateur photography collection created by Lajos Orbán (1897–1972) spans from the First World War's soldier's perspective to the very dedicated amateur photographer's vision of the 1940s. During this time Lajos Orbán became an adult and founded his own family, while his collection has grown from owning a single photo camera to seven-eight cameras. This article is an attempt to reconstruct his career inseparable from the history of the visual culture in Cluj and the history of everyday experience of urban life, deeply affected by its increasing visualization.

19th-century European cities not only created new spatial structures, but also a new type of dweller, in Walter Benjamin's words, a *flâneur*, who participated in this world by visual contemplation. Observation was a way of enjoying the urban environment, but also a means of communication: "the small differences in the world perceived visually, from the myriads of signs like gestures and clothing, all kinds of irreplaceable supports in information and orientation. But the success of this enterprise also requires the education of the gaze, the knowledge of interpreting the signs."⁵ The increasing value of practices of looking and

³ Gyáni Gábor, *Az utca és a szalon. A társadalmi térhasználat Budapesten (1870–1940)* (Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, 1998).

⁴ Füzi Izabella, *A vurstlitől a moziig. A magyar vizuális tömegkultúra kibontakozása (1896–1914)* (Szeged: Pompeji, 2022).

⁵ Gyáni, *Az utca és a szalon*, 27.

seeing in the behavior of the metropolitan man already represents a kind of visual culture that anticipates the future “visual turn,”⁶ i.e. the production of cultural meaning through spectacle and image. Theorists of visual culture warn that “the disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism is best imagined and understood visually, just as the nineteenth century was classically represented in the newspaper and the novel.”⁷ Theories of visual culture argue that spectatorship, ‘visual experience’, ‘visual literacy’ cannot be fully explained in terms of a model of textuality,⁸ so we must also ask why our culture places so much importance on the visualization of experience.⁹ If visual literacy is a theoretical framework that deals with the physiology of visual perception, techniques of visual production and techniques of understanding what is seen,¹⁰ then the image interpretation and image production skills and competences that individuals may have acquired in a given period, have a strong relevance when interpreting a photographic legacy.

Although the domestication of the camera in the late 19th and early 20th century was influenced by various needs, the large number of city albums, postcards and photographs from the turn of the 19th century show that the new medium was integrated into the visual strategies developed for the reception and perception of the metropolitan space. Urban photography, as Gábor Gyáni confirms, documents the natives’ experience of the city, the culture of perceptions and sensations in a metropolis.¹¹ In this sense, amateur city photographs are not merely representations of the city, but also documents of a visual culture. That is, in addition to their denotated content (that they show an existing settlement with its well-known buildings and squares), we can also read secondary meanings from them (the worldview of a historical period, a photographic style, or the evolution of a photographer’s biography, his socio-cultural horizon), which are culturally encoded.¹²

⁶ William J. Thomas Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn,” *ArtForum* 30, no. 7 (1992): 89–94.

⁷ Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Subject of Visual Culture,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 5.

⁸ William J. Thomas Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.

⁹ “The world-as-a-text has been challenged by the world-as-a-picture.” Mirzoeff, “The Subject of Visual Culture?”, 5.

¹⁰ Keszeg Anna, “Vizuális kultúra, visual literacy, media literacy, digital literacy. A vizuális műveltség tipológiája és kontextusai,” in *Fogalom és kép II.*, eds. Egyed Péter and Gál László (Kolozsvár: Kolozsvári Egyetemi Kiadó, 2011), 267.

¹¹ Gyáni Gábor, “A reprezentatív város – a reprezentált város,” in *Terek és szövegek. Újabb perspektívák a városkutatásban*, eds. N. Kovács Tímea, Böhm Gábor, and Mester Tibor (Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2005), 232.

¹² Gayer Zoltán, “Fényképkaptusok. Amatőrképek a rendszerváltás előtt és után,” *Replika* 33–34 (1998): 90.

In this paper, I experiment with a method of image analysis that (de)codes a collection of images building on the stories of the individual who took the photographs. What becomes important for the image interpretation will be something else than what is captured by the camera lens and is usually invisible in the images: the photographer looking on from behind the lens. In this framework photographs become the primary evidence of what structured the photographer's gaze, thus describing and interpreting the visible dimension of the images has to pay attention to this aspect. In the vein of the field of the visual culture and of the "visual turn" Martin Jay (1988) introduced the term *scopic regimes* to describe the characteristics of Western modernity, and the way practices of seeing, representing and subject positioning are linked to systems of knowledge and power. Experimenting with a kind of reading that does not think of the image as a spectacle, but rather as the result of a gaze that was determined by cultural and social habits, the concept of the scopic regime seems a good methodological anchor point.

Today, we can understand the mentality and the habits of the man who photographed in the first decades of the 1900s mainly from his photographs to a lesser extent from written sources and, in a fortunate case, from the accounts of the ones who later inherited the photographs. Photographs are attractive, sensory surfaces that make visible what the photographer saw, what was visible from a possible human perspective at a given time. In other words, photography is a medium that mediates the mental image and makes it social.¹³ In fact, such an interpretative framework tries to reveal what structured Lajos Orbán's gaze: how his life, his visual literacy, and the local visual culture contributed to the final form of his photographic compositions.

Structures of photographic vision in pre-WWII Cluj

An important milestone in the history of the photographic representation of Cluj was the work of Ferenc Veress, who produced five photo albums documenting Transylvania between 1859 and 1873, two of them focusing on the city.¹⁴ In these images, landmark buildings are highlighted, but there are also street views and

¹³ Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014 [2001]), 25.

¹⁴ According to the literature, of the five photo albums, the one from 1859 was made for the Transylvanian Museum Society (Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület – EME), the 1869 one for Empress Elisabeth of Austria and Queen Consort of Hungary, while the remaining ones were made for exhibitions. Two of the five albums have been lost. See Újvári Dorottya, "Ferenc Veress, one of the Pioneers of Photography in Transylvania", *Uncommon Culture* 5, no. 9–10 (2014): 142–147 and Sas Péter, *Őnodi Veress Ferenc fényképész-műterme Kolozsvárt* (Kolozsvár: Művelődés Kiadó, 2014).

panoramic views that present Cluj as a monument of urbanism itself,¹⁵ i.e. “spectacle-type representations” of the city that emphasise aesthetic qualities.¹⁶ These early depictions correspond to the 19th-century representational habits, which presented the people populating the streets as a decorative, staffage pieces, or reduced them to a marginal spot within the field of vision.¹⁷ This scopic regime was operated by the desire to encompass the total city and preserve its image as a museological object, and it was usually performed by very skilled, awarded photographic craftsmen of that period, like Ferenc Veress – an internationally renowned photographer from Cluj. The human figures in these cityscapes are immobile, less lifelike or individualisable figures, more like shadows, which will be put into focus and brought to life by a different gaze, of amateur photographers capturing the urban bustle, sometime in the first decades of the 20th century. This resulted in a quite visible change in the visualization of urban life, it is not a bold statement that amateur photography movements created a new scopic regime. For this “survey type of gaze” the city was defined by the metropolitan crowd, by the human scale.¹⁸

The Fortepan online image archive has published a series of 15 photographs¹⁹ taken on the streets of Cluj sometime between 1902 and 1914 by an anonymous photographer, showing people walking on the street, acting like baudelaireian *flâneurs* (Fig. 1–2). The composition of the pictures indicates that the photographer’s intention was to capture the passers-by instead of the urban landscape, not posing, rather being in a rush, even causing motion blur. Full-figure portraits fill the frame, while the exact location can be inferred from fragments of inscriptions and details of buildings appearing in the background. While the subject matter of the images seems revolutionary, as if anticipating the very modern street photography in vogue to this day, the blurred figures call attention to the obsolescence of the studio photographic technique (requiring long exposure times and rigid posing).

The two types of representing the urban landscape of Cluj – the spectacle-type and the survey type of gaze – can be encountered in various genres of early 20th century photographs: postcards, private photographs, amateur photographs or press photos. Analyzing the type of gaze rather than the image of the city, one can argue that the series from the Fortepan archive is characterized by the point of view of a contemplative person who made the act of photographing part of

¹⁵ Gyáni, “A reprezentatív város,” 232.

¹⁶ Gyáni, “A reprezentatív város,” 235.

¹⁷ Gyáni, “A reprezentatív város,” 234.

¹⁸ Gyáni, “A reprezentatív város,” 235.

¹⁹ According to the website of the Fortepan archive (www.fortepan.hu) the code numbers of these pictures are: 08984, 08197, 06991, 06988, 08126, 07947, 07946, 07945, 07036, 07044, 07037, 07035, 07001, 06973.

the ways he used the urban space. The camera's exit onto the street, and its subsequent domestication, transformed it into a tool for the visual strolling of the *flâneur*. This has changed not mere the image of the city, but also the people of the street itself, as a new kind of person, the "man with the photographic camera" emerged.



Fig. 1–2. Pictures no. 7001 and 7037 from the Fortepan online archive.

Those who called themselves “amateur photographers” at the beginning of the 20th century were in fact photographers who took pictures for exhibitions, for competitions or as a leisure activity. As Miklós Peternák reminds us, this new habit also shook the society of professional studio photographers, even leading to the partial disappearance of this world in Budapest in the 1920s.²⁰ In Cluj, amateur photo culture as an alternative to studio photography emerged in the late 19th century. This is reported by Dr. Ödön Éjszaky in the pages of the tourist journal entitled *Erdély* (Transylvania): “In 1890, when I started taking photographs, there were already two amateurs in Cluj. László Bodor, a magistrate, and Kálmán Kováts, the co-owner of the still existing Kováts P’s Sons (in Hungarian: Kováts P. Fiai) photography company. There were several professional photographers and studios at that time. These were: Ferenc Veress, Ferenc Marselek, the Dunky Brothers, Császár and Meinhardt”.²¹ According to

²⁰ Peternák Miklós. “Kis magyar fotótörténet,” 1997.
<http://marcheo.c3.hu/index.php?inc=obj&id=42&oid=26&ref=sub&roid=7>, accessed February 15, 2017.

²¹ Éjszaky Ödön, “Az amatőr fényképezés kezdete Kolozsvárt,” *Erdély* 1–2 (1933): 21–23.

another source, the author of the article, Ödön Éjszaky, himself organised the Association of Amateurs in Cluj in January 1906.²²

There is not much data on the photographic associations²³ before the First World War, nor any trace of László Bodor's photographs, but the photographic activity of Kálmán Kováts and Ödön Éjszaky continued in the post-World War I period. Kálmán Kováts died in 1919, but the management of the shop on the Central square, founded by his father Péter Kováts in 1853, was passed down in the family. In the 1920s, László Schäfer²⁴ (1893–1977) managed the shop Kováts P's Sons, which by then was advertising itself primarily as a photographic speciality shop and photolab. The name of Ödön Éjszaky (1875–1944) reappears in 1928, as the artistic director of the photography section of the Cluj Athletics Club (in Hungarian: Kolozsvári Atlétikai Club, KAC),²⁵ and then as a member of the Tessar Bowling Society (in Hungarian: Tessar Teke Társaság, TTT),²⁶ which was founded in 1932 (I will refer to them by the acronym often used by them: KAC, TTT).²⁷ This society had already 53 members, quite a development compared to only 3 amateurs *flâneurs* active 40 years earlier.

Between the two world wars, it was not only amateur photographers who created competition for photo studios, since the circle of photographers had also expanded greatly: the camera was now a common accessory for scientists, hikers (Transylvanian Carpathian Association, in Hungarian: Erdélyi Kárpát Egyesület, EKE), scouts, sportsmen (KAC),²⁸ reporters, artists and soldiers. However, along with a growing demand for photographs and photography, the visual culture had changed, as reflected in the above cited article by Ödön Éjszaky. He described the state of the art of contemporary photography as follows:

²² Gaal György, *Kolozsvár a századok sodrában. Várostörténeti kronológia* (Kolozsvár: Kincses Kolozsvár Egyesület, Kriterion, 2016), 127.

²³ According to Dorottya Újvári's research, a national amateur photography exhibition was held twice in Cluj: in 1905 and in 1916. The names of the exhibiting photographers reveal that amateur photographers were active at the time. See Újvári Dorottya, "Műkedvelő fényképészek és fotós társaságok a 20. század első felében Kolozsváron," in *Látható Kolozsvár: Orbán Lajos fotói a két világháború közötti városról*, ed. Blos-Jáni Melinda (Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, Exit Kiadó, 2018), 45–46.

²⁴ Péter Kováts had two sons, Kálmán and Ede. László Schäfer married Ede Kováts' daughter Irene and inherited the job of running the shop.

²⁵ Ifj. Fanta, "Figyelő," *Művészeti Szalon* 3, no. 6–7 (1928): 20.

²⁶ The acronyms of these names will be used throughout the article, as these were the names used at the turn of the 20th century.

²⁷ For more on the history of the company, see Blos-Jáni Melinda, *A családi filmezés genealógiája. Erdélyi amatőr médiagyakorlatok a fotózástól az új mozgóképfajtáig* (Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2015), 82–85.

²⁸ Killyéni András, "Manouschek Ottó, a *Sport-Világ* első kolozsvári származású tudósítója," *ME.DOK* 5, no. 3 (2010): 25–32.

Not only in equipment and materials, but even the image, its subject, its conception, its execution, was completely opposite to the current one. I could best describe the perception of four decades ago by saying that if an amateur of that time had accidentally taken an unsharp, soft, blurred, hazy picture, such as today could win first prize at a photo exhibition, the amateur of that time would have thrown it into the bin as an absolutely bad one. In those days, the sharper, the fuller of contrasts a picture was, the better and more beautiful it was. It was even a requirement that, for example, a landscape picture should cover as much as possible from the view. If, for example, the subject of a photo competition was a muddy street, the amateur from 40 years ago would take the picture of the muddy street in such a way that as much of the street as possible would be visible in the picture, with a crowd of people, perhaps with a four-ox cart in the foreground. The image is sharp, intense and contrasting. And today's amateur would want a picture with only one of the back wheels of the cart on it, not even that, and the rest of the frame would be filled with the muddy road. And the image would be soft and blurred. However, one characteristic of photography, which has changed in all its aspects over the past four decades, has remained unchanged, and that is that it can always give great pleasure and joy to those who are engaged in it.²⁹

The gaze of Lajos Orbán

The photographic activity of Lajos Orbán is in several ways connected to the grassroots amateur photographic movement that was developing in Cluj. Around 1924, he left his role as a purchaser at the Dermata leather factory and became a supplier and later a co-owner of the Kováts P's Sons until 1940, due to his friendship with László Schäfer. At the same time, he became an active participant in photography-related events in Cluj between the two world wars, organised by the Kováts P's Sons, the Transylvanian Carpathian Association or the grassroots photographic societies (KAC, TTT). In the press of the time,³⁰ his name is mentioned as a lecturer at photography courses, as a judge at photography competitions and as an exhibiting artist.

Although the Orbán family's use of everyday photography goes back several decades, and they even had a camera in the early 20th century, it was only in the interwar period that Lajos Orbán became a city *flâneur* on its own. His earliest photographs survive on glass plates from 1917, taken when he joined the army in Budapest and at the training camp in Tátra (e.g. about the Lomnici

²⁹ Éjszaky, "Az amatőr fényképezés," 22–23.

³⁰ Mainly the monthly journals like: *Erdély, Művészeti Szalon, Pásztortűz*.

Peak, the streets of Budapest). In the interwar period, several factors contributed to his becoming an avid camera user: in the 1920s and 1930s cheaper and more user-friendly technology appeared on the market,³¹ making photography an increasingly common activity. On the other hand in the early 1920s, Lajos Orbán started a family life (his marriage marked a veritable pictorial turn, as he took many photographs of his family), and around 1924 he began working as a technology supplier for a photographic shop.³² As a result of these factors, Lajos Orbán became an above-average camera user in that period: he had 8-9 cameras, maintained a photo laboratory in his home, took a large number of pictures, often exceeding the intentions of a photographer documenting his/her family. His identity as an amateur photographer, however, would develop only until 1944, when the invading Soviet soldiers temporarily turned his home into a hospital and confiscated all his cameras. Therefore, it was not his desire to take photographs that waned, but the cameras went missing, and it is likely that the new life situation and the new socio-historical context no longer favoured peacetime leisure and recreational habits.

The 300 or so photographs made available for research³³ are only a fraction of the photographer's heritage, accumulated over a 20-year period of intensive photographic practice. This set of images can be considered a random selection, which, precisely because of its fragmentary nature, is not suitable for quantitative analysis, but it does allow one to identify the subjects and compositional habits favoured by the photographer. But this is still not sufficient resource to uncover the structures of his vision.

What is it that he and his fellow photographers wanted to render visible, and how did they interpret the images captured with their cameras? To understand this, it takes more than just describing and analysing the images; it requires thematic classification of the images, reconstructing the relationship between photographer and spectacle by tracing out the photographic acts, the 'irreplaceable' statements or actions³⁴ in which the photographer has incorporated his/her personality and by which he/she has in fact shaped his/her own social relations.

³¹ Indeed, this is the turning point, when all kinds of technologies entered homes and everyday life. On this, see Jaap Boerdam, and Martinus Warna Oosterbaan, "Family Photographs – a Sociological Approach," *The Netherlands Journal of Sociology* 16 (1980): 164–167.

³² Through the photo shop he had access not only to photographic equipment, but also to the Kodak amateur film camera, launched in 1927, with which he was already shooting in the city in 1928. On the amateur filmmaking habits of Lajos Orbán, see Blos-Jáni, *A családi filmezés*, 69–99.

³³ The photographs, with the exception of a few images, were handed over for research purposes to the Transylvanian Audiovisual Association in the form of glass negatives by his heir, László Orbán. The Kriza János Ethnographic Society helped to digitise the negatives.

³⁴ Gayer, "Fényképaktusok."

How can one read photographs in order to disclose the relationship between the photographer and the subjects of an image (spaces, landscapes, people or objects) at the moment of taking the picture? A solution to this question could be a method of analysis that distinguishes between the ways in which space is represented. The urban space is a complex reality that is subject to constant exploration and can be as diverse as the ways in which we relate to it or want to represent it. Lefebvre uses the description of the *military gaze* and the *landscaping gaze* to illustrate the difference between modes of observation that result from different attitudes and expectations towards landscape or space.³⁵ When creating a military map, or when producing aesthetically appealing landscape views the focus of the gaze is varying and compositions emphasize different features.

Lajos Orbán's collection can be divided into three main categories based on the representation of space and man, each of them shows a unified compositional and aesthetic approach, and to a large extent they mirror the photographer's social life and his affiliations with different institutions. The first group of images is composed of photographs portraying the centre of Cluj and relates to his working time, the second captures the spaces and habits of leisure time, especially the man enjoying nature theme, and the third captures family life and its members in various spaces of their private life.³⁶

The relatively large number of photographs taken on the Main Square of Cluj could be explained by the fact that Lajos Orbán was an employee of the photo shop and laboratory of Kováts P's Sons, situated there. Some of the photos capture the shop interior, including some masterful shots of the laboratory and still life compositions in the office, but also conventional shots were taken of the staff in the interiors, or around the shop. There are also a number of images advertising the shop's photographic products, some with text and graphics or photos with an added caption. Photographs of the shop window also show that they had an original postcards series in the product offer (Fig. 5). The Kováts P's Sons had a long tradition of postcard production by this time, in the archives one can find postcards bearing their name from the late 1890s (Fig. 3–4). It is not

³⁵ Martin Lefebvre, "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema," in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), 32.

³⁶ An exhibition of photographs by Lajos Orbán entitled *Visible Cluj-Napoca* was organized by the Transylvanian Audiovisual Archive and Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, which was open to the public between 27 October and 19 November 2016 in the Sapientia EMTE building from the Turzii street. In the exhibition, the spatial grouping of the images was made perceptible by dividing the exhibition space into three spatial units: the Main Square, the Central Park and the Family House, which emphasized the differences in the visual systems of the images with explanatory inscriptions and different spatial arrangements and furnishings.

known for sure whether Lajos Orbán's photos were used to this end, only that the opportunity was given to him. He may have been well informed about the visual genre of the postcard as a condensed, stylized representation of reality,³⁷ be it a spectacle or a survey type of visual representation.³⁸

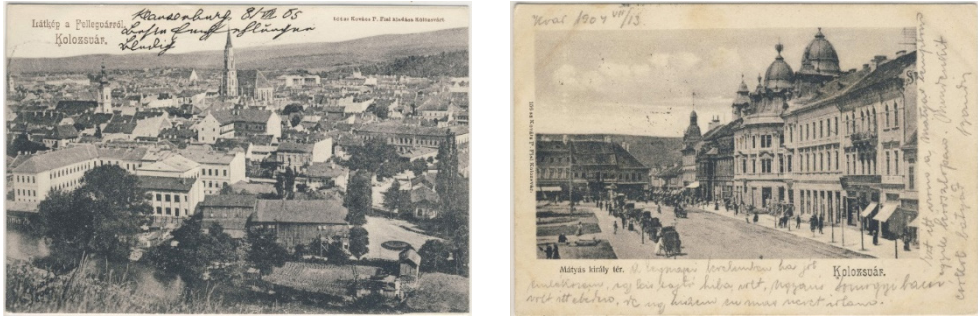


Fig. 3–4. Cluj as a monument. Vistas from the Citadel hill and from the Main Square. On two postcards published by the Kováts P. Fiai shop. (The postcard collection of Radu Lupescu)

It is not known what Lajos Orbán's purpose was when he took pictures of the city, which of them were conceived as postcards, exhibits or personal memories, but looking at the series of pictures from the photographer's point of view, an authorial attitude is detectible, an aestheticizing gaze that bears the influence of both the synthesizing visuals of the postcard and the contemporary trends of artistic photography. The personal character of the images is also evident in the choice of locations for the photographs: if we were to place the points from which he took pictures on a map, we would roughly draw the route that Lajos Orbán took every day from his home on Erzsébet út (today Emil Racoviță street) to the Kováts P's Sons shop. Pictures were taken from the balcony of their house, their garden, the Citadel, the bridge over the Someș River, the old city mill, the Franciscan Church, all four sides of the Main Square, the tower of St. Michael's Church, and the sidewalk in front of the shop (Fig. 6). In addition, small excursions were made to the Farkas Street (today Mihail Kogălniceanu street), Király Street (today George Barițiu street), Búza Street (today Inocențiu Micu Klein street), Egyetem Street (today Universității street), Jókai Street (today Napoca street), Hunyadi Square (today Ștefan cel Mare square) and Únió Street (today Moșilor street).

³⁷ Csillag Gábor, "«Képek és képtelenségek» – a valóságábrázolás határai a turisztikai képi emlékekben," in *Helye(in)k, tárgya(in)k, képeink. A turizmus társadalomtudományos magyarázata*, eds. Fejős Zoltán and Szijártó Zsolt (Budapest: Néprajzi Múzeum, 2003), 73.

³⁸ Gyáni, "A reprezentatív város," 235.



Fig. 5–6*. The entrance to the Kováts P. Fiai photshop and its window in the 1930's. Lajos Orbán is the men standing in the doorway in the first picture. The sixth image is the countershot, an image made possibly from the same doorway. There are alternate versions of this shot emphasising different actors from the scene: e.g. shoeshiners.

The compositions of the photographs call for contemplation, they invite the viewer to linger over images of the city captured from novel perspectives: as seen through tree branches reaching up to the sky, or as a cityscape framed by a snow-covered tree or the wrought-iron elements of a house, or as a network of streets and houses visually echoed by the balcony railing of the tower of St. Michael's Church (Fig. 7–8). These photographs present the buildings of the city as elements of reality, structured by the spectacle type of gaze of the postcard, on the one hand, and the subjectivity of the photographer, on the other. The points from which he viewed the city, his unique visual experiences are not available to others. The way in which his gaze created connections between architectural or natural elements with the real subjects of the image - cannot be replicated by others. They are at once abstract cityscapes and romantic settings saturated with subjectivity.

Besides panoramas, there are pictures taken from the passer-by's point of view. These pictures taken from a camera held at the eye's level are also challenging perception and call for reflection. Human figures are visible, but only as contours, shown from the back, as *Rückenfigurs*, devoid of facial expressions (Fig. 9–10). These compositions lack the functions of the portrait, which does

* Fig. 5–17. belong to the photographic legacy of Lajos Orbán in the holding of the family.



Fig. 7-8. Cluj seen from the Citadel hill and from the tower of the St. Michael's Church.



Fig. 9-10. The poetry of the fog in the city. The passers-by were captured along Lajos Orbán's morning route. Several versions were taken from the same point of view.

not just depict, but also creates the subject.³⁹ People populating the streets are rather decorative, geometric shapes or visual spots creating contrast with other elements of the picture, they become components of the portrayal of the modern bourgeois city. The reflexive gestures of these photographs, that demand heightened activity from the viewer, are very well described by Ödön Éjszaky in the article quoted earlier, in which he defines the visual trend of the interwar period as a synaesthetic vision focusing on details and building, on soft focus and blurriness. It is difficult to decide whether the shadowy, yet attractive outlines of streets and buildings in the background are the real protagonists or if people are rather the real focus. By all means, they add dynamism to the cityscape, which is accessible through visual puzzles (e.g. human figures that divert attention) and through the interpretation of elements that challenge the boundaries of visibility (fog, rain, snow, sunshine).

This photographic style originates from the pictorialism that became popular in the 1900s, which sought to establish photography as art by building on new developing techniques and a specific iconography (with a preference for trees) to create painterly and sensual effects, rather than documentary records relying on optical sharpness. Lajos Orbán's photographs were taken at a time when pictorialism had already become widespread as a universal photographic movement and language, yet in Cluj in the 1920s it was a novelty and became synonymous with art photography. Lajos Orbán was probably inspired by the photographic magazine *Das Bild*, which he bought on his commercial trips to Germany, but there were other amateurs besides him, who assimilated this style. In the art journal entitled *Művészeti Szalon* (Art Salon) the review of a photo exhibition demonstrates how consciously they adapted this style:

It would be quite pointless today to take a stand as to whether we should include among works of art a photograph which is technically absolutely faultless, but its print was made using a noble technique, which could rival the wonderful tonal effects of a painting's pittoresque or etching, yet, despite all its artistic character, it does not defy its photographic nature. [...] László Schäfer and Lajos Orbán are dedicated amateurs, characterised above all by their ability to capture the moment. Movement, harmony of lines, the atmospheric beauty of rainy and misty landscapes are their themes. [...] Of Lajos Orbán's street photographs, *Morning* is definitely the most ingenious shot, a great achievement in its breath-like tones and its fortunate capture of movement, although its distribution of spots is not quite balanced. His picture entitled *Lambs* is poetic.⁴⁰

³⁹ Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Portrait* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 5–10.

⁴⁰ Finta Zoltán, "A K. A. C. fotószakosztályának házi kiállítása," *Művészeti Szalon* 3, no. 10 (1928): 10–11.

Lajos Orbán's photographs capture the ever-changing face, the ephemeral moments of Cluj. The image of older and younger women hurrying past St. Michael's Church was only momentarily in the right place, forming a shape contrasting to the New York hotel shrouded in fog. A recurring compositional element in Lajos Orbán's photographs is the long shadow of people, that he kept observing in passageways, arcades or other public spaces on the street (i.e. the spaces characteristic to *flâneurs*). The human figures shown from behind or as shadows became, in the course of time, increasingly integrated into dynamic compositions with the built environment, becoming merely outlines, like the roofs of the central houses, and therefore these pictures point towards the new direction of objectivity that replaced pictorialism, modernism.

On the other hand, in another group of photographs taken around the centre, these abstracted urban figures become the main subject of the images. Lajos Orbán also took pictures of people working on the streets: shoe shiners, wood drums, confectioners, garbage collectors, pretzel and newspaper sellers, small vendors, beggars – as if he wanted to create an encyclopaedia of the work type taking place on the main streets of Cluj. Furthermore, these photographs often reveal social differences, therefore they can be considered socio-photographs. The village people staring at shop windows, the man with the hat sitting on the pavement and looking at the Matthias statuary group, the blind old man selling newspapers or the war invalid are presented with both curiosity and the detachment that comes from observation. The photographer seems to have wanted to keep the camera a secret, not making eye contact, without any confrontation.

The gaze that emerged from the combination of a bourgeois perspective and ethnographic inquiry sometimes created thick images: people gazing at the window from the back become interesting because of their folk costumes, while looking at a glamorous window displaying crystal chandeliers and other ornaments (Fig. 11). There is no less dramatic contrast in the scene of the blind news vendor, behind whom is the well-groomed male image and text of a poster offering cosmetics for men. And the image featuring the one-legged news vendor presents the very issue of the *Friss Zeitung* that reports on the mutiny of a war invalid, with no less talkative figures appearing next to him: on the left, a rural couple, the man wearing a scrip on his back, while the woman stands barefoot, holding her boots in her hands, and to her right, an elegant city woman (Fig. 12).

Just as panoramas, cityscapes made in a pictorialist or objective style present the urban space as a landscape, which in Martin Lefebvre's terms is autonomous, as it is independent of human figures and events.⁴¹ Unlike postcards, in artistic projects the city is not presented as a monument, but as a set of sensory, optical impressions registered by the observer.

⁴¹ Martin Lefebvre, "On Landscape in Narrative Cinema," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011): 63.

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Fig. 11–12. The first picture is a scan of a paper print made with noble techniques in order to achieve softness and a painterly blur. Fig. 12 is a scan from a glass negative, characterized by documentary rawness.

In contrast, in Orbán’s survey-type images of the activities and typology of the people walking the streets, the city almost disappears, the man himself becomes the subject, not as a face or an individual, but as a social type, like an emblematic figure who fits in or stands out in various ways in the urban landscape. The city appears in these pictures more as a setting,⁴² a functional landscape in which the various social actors perform, play themselves out, and the visible world is subordinated to their presence. However, this is also based on passive observation, the photographer’s gaze lingers, selects the decisive moment, or captures the subject in a characteristic setting. The subject is objectified and aestheticised by this gaze. On the whole, the images of the city centre are mainly characterised by a landscaping gaze.⁴³

⁴² Lefebvre, “On Landscape in Narrative Cinema,” 64.

⁴³ Lefebvre has modelled this term based on Gombrich, distinguishing land from landscape (Lefebvre, “On Landscape in Narrative Cinema,” 47–48), and landscape as a genre, autonomous in itself, from landscape sensibility, or from the landscaping gaze. According to him, this concept is needed in order to see landscape not only as a genre, as a set of formal principles, the product of a process of perception, but also to distinguish it from the case where the viewer

A different structure of spatial perception can be observed in the images about leisure time. Here, Lajos Orbán is no longer the solitary photographer on the way to his workplace, but a member of the bourgeoisie who spends his leisure time having fun and taking photographs, and a person who pursued his hobbies in the social framework of associations and clubs. Articles sometimes refer to the activity of amateur photography as a photographic sport. According to family members and newspaper articles published in Transylvania, Lajos Orbán was not only a member of such societies, but was also active as an instructor and exhibition organiser.

The most important institution behind the leisure time pictures was the Tesser Bowling Society, which was partly made up of members of the KAC's photo circle. The group, which ironically described itself as a "society of those who rarely take photographs and often go bowling", was not all about photography. Although Dr. Ödön Éjszaky, Gabriella Hintz, István Fanta and Béla Pohl were acknowledged amateur photographers, some of the members of the group were members through family connections and belonged to the group for the sake of socialising and entertainment. The main document of the association's existence is a yearbook, which commemorates their meetings between 1932 and 1941. For 10 years they met every Thursday to bowl and sometimes to take photographs, but the yearbook does not explicitly mention this. The drawings illustrating the yearbook (mostly the work of Dr. Ödön Éjszaky) are more indicative of the relationship between photography, nature and the idea of the picturesque than the written entries.

One could easily predict that the photographs of a man who goes hiking with his camera would be landscapes, nature itself will become a subject. Yet there are far fewer images in Lajos Orbán's collection of images whose primary subject is nature as landscape than one would expect from the landscaping gaze of his cityscapes. Although the undisturbed landscape also appears within the city boundaries (e.g. in pictures of the Botanical Garden of Cluj, where there is no trace of human presence), the sensitivity to the landscape is often mixed with a different kind of curiosity. If landscape pictures are statements about space through the gaze,⁴⁴ landscaping gaze is also a positioning of the point of view in relation to space (being in it or outside it). In Lajos Orbán's photographs we can recognize traces of the landscaping gaze, but the photographer's gaze is more concerned with the human narratives and events that were taking place in the landscape. On these walks, which sometimes led to the meadows surrounding

sees in, projects the idea of the landscape on the scenery she/he is looking at. Lefebvre uses this distinction to explain how (background) spaces that function as narrative spaces in feature films, i.e. as set pieces, can still be perceived as landscapes too. The sensitivity of the beholder's gaze toward landscape is thus not only a matter of composition, but also of cultural knowledge.

⁴⁴ Martin Lefebvre, "On Landscape in Narrative Cinema," 65–66.

the town and the Someş river bank, sometimes to more distant attractions, several photographs were taken, whole series of which only 2–3 photos were about the landscape per se, while the other photos represent people walking, working or playing sports in open air.

The most represented leisure activity captured on images is photography, the landscape as an object of interest is disturbed by a man walking around with his camera. The coexistence of action and contemplation can be interpreted as an autobiographical moment,⁴⁵ a reflection on the artist's concerns, but they also evoke the genre of landscape and the topos of contemporary visual culture.⁴⁶ The aesthetic pleasure of the landscape is inseparable from the act of observation, these images suggest. Indeed they are compositions that can be read as both landscaping gaze and setting. People walking into the landscape are aware that they are being photographed, sometimes posing. In these images, the human figure is included in the frame, as an internal aperture (Fig. 14), or appears in the central plane of the image, foreshortened in perspective and therefore occupying only a small fragment of the frame.

Lajos Orbán's portrayal of the landscape photographer is very similar to Ödön Éjszaky's drawings from the TTT yearbook, which show the figure of a skier or hiker with mountains and hills in the background. One of the illustrations shows a signpost with the words "TTT members not allowed" in front of a picturesque background. Besides its playfulness and humour, the sign can be read as an indication that to see the landscape proper, a certain distance must be maintained, that the men populating the picture are less in focus, that the real subject of the picture is the landscape revealing itself to the photographer (somewhat similar to the passer-by as *Rückenfigur* in urban spaces). The study of the painterly effect of fog and other elements is not absent in these photographs, and reflective surfaces are a recurring theme: rivers and lakes duplicate the surrounding landscape (Fig. 13). To sum up, based on the themes and visual style, landscaping gaze is dominant in this visual regime, even if these are not fully autonomous landscapes, as they envelop the human figure. The individual images, the photographic series, are structured in such a way that the landscape becomes visible behind and around the people, allowing a kind of double vision.

⁴⁵ Besides being a member of the TTT, Lajos Orbán often gave lectures at the request of the Transylvanian Carpathian Association (EKE) to help hikers take better photographs. EKE also supported amateur photography by setting up a free photo laboratory. Lajos Orbán did not become an EKE member, he only collaborated with the association. A film of his 1931 photography course was made, for an analysis of which see Blos-Jáni, *A családi filmezés*, 92–94. The film can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVDZTM5SMKo>.

⁴⁶ Similar visual elements (mountains, forests, skiers) can be found, for example, in the graphics of contemporary posters made to promote Transylvania. See Sümegi György, "Erdélyi plakátok 1940–41," *Székegyföld* 15, no. 2 (2011): 143–147.



Fig. 13–14. A tree and its reflexion. To the right: a photographer, probably László Schäfer taking similar pictures at a lakeside.

The third group of images is less structured by aesthetic experience or the narrative experience of social events, and more by personal space and identity. The family photographs encapsulate the phenomenology of a lived and inhabited space and the identity of the people depicted in the photographs. The majority of the photographs were taken in Lajos Orbán's home and garden, and less frequently on the street or in public spaces (e.g. church celebrations, school ceremonies, on the way to the Central Park). The family members in front of the photographer's camera are usually aware of the picture being taken, and their gestures, postures and symmetrical formations of the subjects in the group shots reveal their cooperation. The faces and life situations revealed to the lens are composed to capture real identity, to create the subject,⁴⁷ or the sense of connection between the subjects of the image. Therefore, standing side by side or placing a hand on a shoulder becomes as important as the gaze directed towards the camera.

In contrast to the previous group of pictures, here human figures fill most of the frame: they are placed in the centre of the picture or slightly to the left. The thematic diversity of the images and the different occurrences of the subjects are beyond the scope of this study, but the relationship between man and space should be mentioned. In these photographs, people are not only the centre of the composition, but also the space seems to gravitate around them. The house, the garden is no longer interesting for its appearance, for the way it looks, but appears as an inner space, an experienced space. Lefebvre (2006) describes the totality of relations with the environment as a kind of possessive relationship, as a territory, which stands in contrast with the aesthetic experience of the person who contemplates space from afar.

⁴⁷ Nancy, *Portrait*.

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In the spontaneous snapshots, the objects and spaces that can be observed in the background show the living spaces of the family, while in the staged images we can witness the photographer's imagination and associations. Throughout the collection, one can observe several topos in the representation of different people, for example, children are mostly photographed in natural settings, among trees, on a haystack, in the snow, in a pond, in the company of animals or inside a room, playing, reading, using different tools (e.g. a photo camera). It is as if the photographer has not only staged the children's place within the home, but has also marked out the place of childhood in his imagination (Fig. 15, 17, 18). In the photos, childhood is depicted as an intermediate state between nature and culture. Young children are often depicted together with older family members or siblings within a picture, as if forming a genealogical branch. Similar figures can also be seen in images of adults and the elderly. These backgrounds seem to be arbitrary, but to a certain extent the bourgeois values and family traditions dictate the possibilities of variation (Fig. 18). In this collection, sitting in an armchair



Fig. 15–16. The living room of the family home located on the Emil Racoviță street. On picture no. 15 Lajos Orbán the elder is depicted with his granddaughter, while no. 16 is a group photo with Lajos Orbán and his wife together with their friends.

or chair, the swing, the window, the pictures on the wall, the table or the desk are recurring habitats, places in which the characters are at home (Fig. 16), they do not feel the need to adjust their pose to render visible the space of the home, as they are the protagonists, they can block out the space. One could say that the representation of family photographs is mostly determined by the family institution, with all its historical or ideological overtones, of which the family home itself is a symbol. In these photographs, Lajos Orbán depicted his family first and foremost, not the home as a landscape. This group of photographs shows anthropologised spaces, inhabited environments.



Fig. 17. László, the son of Lajos Orbán reading a magazine.

Fig. 18. Childplay in the garden. Several shots were taken on the same spot.

Conclusions

On postcards, cities are transformed into media spaces, but in a some respect the process of urbanization is most evident in the new kinds of spectacles, in the media practices of the everyday life. The apparatus of the photographer “immortalizes the gaze of the city dweller”, writes Gábor Gyáni.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Gyáni, “A reprezentatív város,” 235.

By way of conclusion, the gaze of Lajos Orbán was influenced by the visual literacy and visual culture accessible in Cluj in the interwar period. He was surrounded by photography related objects and activities at work, he socialized with people who shared his passion for photography in their free time, and he had a routine in taking pictures in his private sphere, his home. The visual regimes described in the article indicate that the perception of space, the structuring of the visual field, could reveal the photographer's biography, his conception of the world and his visual literacy. In Lajos Orbán's photographs, space is not a predetermined structure, but is constantly being recreated according to the photographer's intentions, knowledge and connections. The collection of photographs presents Cluj as a landscape, as a setting and as a territory, and through them an idiosyncratic filter: the gaze of the amateur photographer.

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