Aesthetics in Hungary: Traditions and Perspectives

Piroska Balogh – Botond Csuka

The paper is meant to introduce a symposium on aesthetics in Hungary today. Through a brief survey of the Hungarian aesthetic tradition, which goes back to the eclectic "university aesthetics" of the late 18th century and produced a number of prominent figures such as Georg Lukács and his disciples in the "Budapest School" in the 20th century, the paper seeks to point out some key characteristics of this tradition and to reflect on the intellectual landscape of contemporary aesthetics in Hungary, diversified by many fields of study, methods and subdisciplines. | Keywords: *Hungarian Aesthetic Tradition, History of Aesthetics, Georg Lukács, Budapest School, Contemporary Aesthetics*

It is highly improbable that a brief collection of essays like the one presented here could make justice to the richness of the ongoing research in any discipline in a country at a given time. This might be especially true of present-day aesthetics in Hungary, where the various discussions are nourished by the long aesthetic tradition in Hungary – a tradition marked characteristically by transdisciplinary communication that interlocks aesthetics with various disciplines within and outside of philosophy. The present of Hungarian aesthetics as well as the novel perspectives opening into its future are shaped by this rich tradition of aesthetic communication.

The Hungarian aesthetic tradition is now nearly 250 years old. A Chair of Aesthetics was founded by Maria Theresia in 1774 at the Royal Hungarian University in Nagyszombat (now Trnava, Slovakia). The department moved to Pest (now Budapest) in 1784, together with the university, and over the next centuries, it became an important centre for aesthetic research in Hungary. We believe that surveying the development of aesthetics as an academic discipline in Hungary can reveal several characteristics of the Hungarian aesthetic tradition, which might offer a framework for the following essays as well.

In the second half of the 18th century, many departments of aesthetics were established at universities throughout the Habsburg Empire (Prague, Vienna,

Lemberg) due to the requirements of official education policy. In several cases, German visiting professors were appointed as instructors, most of whom used German aesthetic manuals as textbooks. At the department of aesthetics in Hungary, however, most of the professors were Hungarian and the German manuals were only recommended readings. The first Hungarian professor of aesthetics, György Alajos (Georg Aloys) Szerdahely (1740–1808) believed it was important that he used his own four-volume aesthetic system, one that followed, although eclectically, the Baumgartian conception of the new discipline. Other long-term professors, such as Lajos János (Johann Ludwig) Schedius (1768–1847) and Ágost (August) Greguss (1825–1882), also summarized their eclectic aesthetic views in their own monographs.

The broad, eclectic nature of these aesthetic theories, which reflects the rambunctious circulation of knowledge in 18th- and 19th-century "university aesthetics", to use Tomáš Hlobil's term, meant that from the very beginning, the Hungarian aesthetic tradition envisioned aesthetics not only as philosophy of art, but as epistemology and philosophical anthropology as well. Aesthetics was treated by Hungarian professors of aesthetics as a universal science that deals with the whole sphere of humanity – in theory as well as in practice; insofar aesthetics was expected to function as a vehicle of cultural and social improvement.

The transdisciplinary character of early Hungarian aesthetics can be also attributed to the fact that as an academic discipline, aesthetics was closely intertwined with classical philology and literature for a long time. In the first 100 years, these three disciplines were taught at the same university department, by the same professors, following the same curriculum. Accordingly, revisiting the classical tradition of European art and literature has been (and still is) significant in the Hungarian aesthetic tradition. On the other hand, it was aesthetics that helped create the framework for developing the historical concept and theoretical foundations of Hungarian literature. By the end of the 19th century, however, literary theory and literary history gained the upper hand over aesthetics. It is suggestive that after the death of Ágost Greguss in 1882 until the end of World War II when György (Georg) Lukács (1885–1971) was appointed professor of aesthetics at the University of Budapest, professors of aesthetics (e.g. Zsolt Beöthy) were better known for their work on literary history and criticism than philosophical aesthetics.

Another notable feature of the beginning of the Hungarian aesthetic tradition is that, given that the official language of higher education in Hungary was Latin until 1844, the first defining volumes of Hungarian aesthetics were written in Latin. The use of the Hungarian language only became commonplace in the second half of the 19th century. This special sociolinguistic situation led to two consequences. On the one hand, the works of Hungarian aesthetics professors became known on an international horizon: they were reviewed by European journals, referenced by authors such as Johann Georg Sulzer or, later, Benedetto Croce. On the other hand, aesthetics became an outsider or at least marginalized among the vernacular Hungarian cultural narratives that became increasingly dominant during the

19th century. This peculiar situation is clearly illustrated by the fact that the Hungarian translations of the first Latin-Hungarian aesthetic monographs, after a long time of neglect, have only recently been published.

The long-time neglect of its historical roots in university aesthetics, albeit sad, is hardly surprising: the Hungarian aesthetic tradition was given impetus by a tide of original thinkers during the twentieth century that overshadowed its beginnings. During the intellectually, artistically and politically turbulent years of the 1910s, the Sonntagskreis held its regular Sunday meetings in Budapest, bringing together minds that later shaped the intellectual course of the century. Among the members were the soon-to-be Marxist philosopher and critic Georg Lukács, art historian and sociologist Arnold Hauser (1892–1978), and sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), as well as internationally lesser known figures such as the poet and critic Béla Balázs (1884–1949), art historian Lajos Fülep (1885–1970), writer and artist Anna Lesznai (1885–1966), and author Emma Ritoók (1868–1945). The 'symphilosophie' of the Sonntagskreis may be seen as the symbolic starting point of the close-knit 20th-century relationship between Hungarian aesthetics and other disciplines such as literary criticism, art history and, most notably, sociology.

Indeed, even though the earlier comprehensive Hungarian aesthetic tradition with an anthropological horizon, partly due to positivism, disintegrated into an ensemble of separate disciplines during the first half of the 20th century, aesthetics kept its close links with other fields of study. Lukács's influential oeuvre, which is an excellent example of this fusion, played a crucial role in this. The scope of Lukács's aesthetic thought is astounding – even the range of topics and methodology of his early works. The 'young Lukács' combines philosophical aesthetics (Heidelberger Kunstphilosophie und Ästhetik, 1912–1918 [1975]), with the sociology of art (The Sociology of Modern Drama, 1911), philosophy of history (The Theory of the Novel, 1916) or elaborates it through literary criticism and essays (Soul and Form, 1910). It was this broad scope of Lukács's early work, perhaps even more so than his subsequent grandiose Marxist aesthetics, that had the most profound impact on his disciples in the 'Budapest School' and Hungarian aesthetics in the second half of the 20th century. The aesthetic thought of Ágnes Heller (1929–2019), Ferenc Fehér (1933–1994), György Márkus (1934–2016), Mihály Vajda (1935–) or Sándor Radnóti (1946–), albeit in different ways, all preserve close links to the history of philosophy, art and literature, as well as to ethics and social philosophy.

Nevertheless, the fact that Lukács's philosophy played a decisive role in the development of 20th-century Hungarian aesthetics and that Lukács's own philosophical Marxism had a tumultuous relationship with the official Party ideology had significant consequences on the tradition and its position in the Hungarian intellectual landscape: aesthetics rose to prominence during the socialist era. On the one hand, this meant that state ideologues followed and tried to control the development in the field of aesthetics, including the work on the departments of aesthetics that were re-launched first in Budapest (1973), then in other prestigious university cities such as Pécs (1983). On the

other hand, however, aesthetics also meant an alternative, comparatively spacious intellectual space where renitent minds could feel at home: aesthetics departments, for instance, became the home of some of Lukács's earlier disciples in the 70s and 80s, who brought with them the unbridled spirit of their former teacher.

The aesthetic thought of the Budapest School also shows a kind of self-reflexivity – questions about the birth and concept of aesthetics and about the culture that produced it: that perplexing thing called Western modernity. There are many others who are driven by this self-reflexive interest: during the 1990s and 2000s, there emerged a vibrant community of intellectual historians in Hungary who seek to reconstruct the emergence of modern aesthetics in early modern Europe. Interestingly, this historical and self-reflexive orientation of the Hungarian aesthetic tradition goes back a long way: in his monograph of 1828, Johann Ludwig Schedius devoted a special chapter to the history and the development of aesthetics, organically linking it to his own theorems. In the context of Hungarian university aesthetics, this self-reflexivity characterized both the scholarship and teaching of aesthetics: professors always emphasized the concept of aesthetics, its possible definition, previous interpretations, and the importance of traditions in their lectures.

During the 1980s, when the hegemony of Marxist aesthetics began to crumble, new horizons opened up: the Hungarian aesthetic tradition was given new momentum by phenomenology, hermeneutics, post-structuralism and deconstruction. It is probably safe to say that while aesthetics in Hungary preserved its broad scope, historical interest, and self-reflexivity, it was phenomenology and hermeneutics that have shaped the bulk of novel aesthetic research in Hungary for the last couple of decades. Due to the strenuous work of professors such as Béla Bacsó (1952–) at ELTE, many of the crucial texts of hermeneutical and phenomenological aesthetics have been translated and published, their ideas widely disseminated and discussed, making this line of thought an integral part of Hungarian aesthetic communication by the dawn of the 21st century. In comparison, analytic aesthetics and philosophy of art are not in the forefront, although there seems to be a growing interest in the more recent developments in Anglo-American aesthetics research such as everyday aesthetics, environmental aesthetics or somaesthetics, while there is also thriving transdisciplinary research on, for example, posthumanism and the aesthetics of design.

The list, needless to say, could go on: all around the globe, aesthetics seems to be expanding to hitherto unknown territories, which inevitably gives novel incentives to aesthetic research in Hungary as well. The following essays, though they cannot give a representative sample, show some of the novel developments that are shaping the Hungarian aesthetic tradition today.

Piroska Balogh
Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities
Institute of Hungarian Literature and Cultural Studies
H-1088 Budapest, Múzeum blvd. 4/A.
balogh.piroska@btk.elte.hu

Botond Csuka
University of Physical Education
Department of Social Sciences
H-1123 Budapest, Alkotás út 44.
csukabotond@gmail.com