

**Babeş-Bolyai University**  
**Faculty of Letters**  
**Department of Ethnography and Anthropology**  
**Studies of Hungarology**

**The Photo in Everyday Life.**  
**Visual Anthropological Approaches to Private Photo**  
**Corpora**

**Extract**

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**Keywords:** private photo, family photos, professional – amateur – private, visual anthropology, individual and communal memory, biographical way of speaking, (auto)biography, ritualised behaviour, social positions, communication, individual history, democratisation, informalisation, conventions, Kodak culture

## Theses

Photos in the possession of people can also be read as a version of the history of personal life. This story can (and should) be compared to other biographical and autobiographical versions of history. The biography and the narrated, written life stories which can be summarised while examining private photos consort and overlap with each other in many different ways. On the other hand, reading the photos can show those levels of meanings that cannot outcrop and become explicit while using other methods.

The narrative characteristic of the personal photos can be extended to the official history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since, the private photo is linked to the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in many ways. Firstly, the medium itself is a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon; secondly, several (global/local) events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were recorded also in photos (too). The private photo corpus provides us with an insight to the social conditions of the individual. It is not only the content that carries information concerning the social context of the individual, but also the usage of the photos itself should be considered in many aspects as a social interaction.

Taking photos and using them both can be interpreted as ritualised behaviour which uses a system of norms and codes that is standardised, more or less permanent in time, explicit or implicitly accepted. Photos carry (in forms of inscriptions), or evoke and maintain (in forms of interpretation) homogeneous and coherent groups of texts. These groups of texts can undergo analysis of the content.

The photo itself can also be understood as a process of communication. It conveys several important pieces of information that can be easily decoded by those who are concerned. On the other hand, the photo creates and strengthens bounds and declares the togetherness of individuals and communities.

Involving the private photos in the dialogue of social sciences, we find new possibilities both from the perspective of the content and the methodology.

## **Summary of the Dissertation**

The aim of this discourse is to present the personal photography and the medium of the private photo; on the one hand, considering the results and the antecedents of the ethnographical / anthropological researches; on the other hand, by showing the spread of photo taking and the way it became part of the everyday life, and the analysability of the represented world with the help of three individual analyses. The three photo corpora are analysed in three different theoretical frames. These are representative from the perspective of the Hungarian society in Transylvania in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the material of my research comes from a wide range of rural and urban environment). The photo corpora also will be representative concerning the three analysed families and their micro society, and in a bigger perspective concerning the global Kodak-culture.

**Theoretical frame:** the different fields of ethnography and later the anthropology always paid attention to studying the visual aspects of culture, not only on a theoretical but also on a practical level. In this chapter I briefly go through the history of the photography. By mentioning the most important milestones, the current position and role of photography becomes transparent and understandable. After this, I discuss the role the photo plays in the discourse of social sciences. An important part of this chapter is the relevant overview of the history of science, mainly using the Hungarian bibliography and at some point the international one.

**The research:** The subject of the study is problematic from many aspects. Methodological questions, such as the relevancy and the representativity, are clarified here. The method used for the analysis is content-analysis adapted to the visual source.

**Photo corpora and contexts:** The photo corpus of the widow Kercsó Ferencné, (maiden name: Benedek Irma, later referred as B.I.) born in Gyergyószentmiklós (Gheorgheni, Hargita

County, Romania), 1925 was analysed mostly in an (auto)biographical context. Beyond the 750 photos in the possession of B.I. the research was extended with several (auto)biographical texts and interpretations connected to a part of the photos.

The examination of the corpus of the widow Horváth Erzsébet (H.E.) born in Mezőkeszű (Chesău, Mocs, Kolozs County, Romania), 1938 took place as a group research project of 2009-2010, supported by MTA HTMNTÖ. In this photo corpus I examined the social position of this person, widely considered as a specialist in singing and dancing.

The third and largest material is the photo collection (consisting of more than 2.000 photos – not fully elaborated) of the 57-year-old Steib Anna (S.A.), born in Cluj-Napoca (Romania). One of the most important factors of the analysis is that S.A. is a professional photographer. This provides us with a wide range of possibilities of research, listed in the chapter.

**Photo corpora and different interpretations:** As for the photo corpus of B.I., the written and oral stories connected to the individual life are contrasted to those manifested in the photo corpus. Both the differences and the overlaps are important to analyse. Only a version of the story about the life of the individual can be read out from the photos. This should only be perceived as one possible interpretation of the life history as the written or oral (auto)biographies. The photos show 1) the important events, 2) the festive, spectacular, ceremonial aspects, 3) the public segments of life. However, the corpus almost never tells us anything about 1) everyday events, 2) everyday routines, 3) private, intimate sphere, 4) sorrow, bereavement, disharmony, illnesses. The photo corpus records the familiar space while expending the individual space. The timing of the photos is linear (chronological) and cyclical (organised around recurring themes) at the same time.

The network analysis-research is promising for the different fields of ethnography, by opening new perspectives, while the analysis of the photos connected to the individual space of life can also give us new prospects in getting to know the individual better. The discrepancy is striking between the network of connections which can be read from the photo corpus and the actual connections of H.E. The family and the local relations cannot be perceived on the level of the photos, the maintenance of these connections are to be found on other levels. In the next section I show the narratives and the used interpretive strategies created during the research. On the one hand, my aim is to introduce the main characteristics of the content and form of the texts,

on the other hand to filter out the interpretive schemes, strategies and referential points, lurking behind the texts arouse during the interpretation of the corpus and the single photos.

Through the photo corpus of S.A., I try to identify the concrete aspects, similarities and differences of the professional, amateur and private photography through an individual photo corpus. During the analysis of the corpus, the main goal is to understand the photo taker. The camera deconstructs, takes into pieces the once complex worlds and continuous event. However, unlike the human interpretations, it does not reconstruct a new, complete world or story.

**Data to the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:** The private photo is a typical 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon. The photo corpora of the 20<sup>th</sup> century complete or shade with local alternative interpretation. My relevant questions are the following: How can the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century be manifested in the private photo corpora? Can certain events be revised if we see only their private photographic representation? Can the important events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that mainly coincide with individual lifetime, be found in the single photo corpora? To sum it up, the great events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 1) are manifested in the photo corpus through allusions, 2) are narrated, mentioned in relation to the photos taken in the given period as the important, determinative events of the life story, 3) are located in the autobiographical context, 4) function as referential points.

**Summary:** The individual photo corpus carries numerous data related to the social location of the individual. On the one hand, several pieces of information related to the individual and its social context from the visionary surface of the photo, on the other hand, the photo can be perceived in its material reality and usage as an action of communication. The private photo has found its place in time and space. Thus, undoubtedly it became part of the individual's everyday life as action and object. The photo records time quality (mainly festivals and free time). At the same time, the process of photo taking becomes a special, ritualised time quality also. In addition, the photo will not tell us much about everyday life. The private photo has become such an essential source that it is no longer enough to treat this medium only with theoretical, phenomenological approach. The method of the private should be a more or less autonomous method of the social scientific dialogue.

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