

John Benjamins Publishing Company



This is a contribution from *Scientific Study of Literature* 5:1
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OBITUARY

János László (1948–2015)

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János László, our sadly missed colleague and friend, died in January this year after a heroic two-year fight with an illness. László has been a central, leading figure of international status and renown in Hungarian social psychology for over a generation, both as a senior research group leader at the Research Institute of Psychology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and as the Spiritus Rector and Factual Leader of Psychology Training at the University of Pécs. Most relevantly for the readers of this journal, he has also been a trendsetter for late twentieth-century international movements in the psychology of arts and cultural studies.

His professional life has been centered on two key topics both related to his eternal interest in the psychology of art. As a psychologist, he initially worked on the dramaturgical metaphor of human behavior. This is the attitude originally introduced to social science by Edwin Goffman (1959), who fundamentally sees all social life as being a series of interactions, depending on time, place, and audience, where the self is a constructed author, emerging from the scenes presented. For László, there was continuity between this dramaturgical attitude and actual drama, as he started his career as a stage person. Over his intellectual career, László moved from the dramaturgical metaphor to narrative metatheory of social life. In this later vision, introduced to psychology, chiefly by Jerome Bruner (1985, 1990, 1991), the stories told for and by ourselves are responsible for constructing a primary action, event, and agent-centered coherence of the world. For László, in his later scientific career, this approach was presented as a general framework for interpreting human behavior. However, for László, both the dramaturgical and the narrative approaches to social life were best exemplified by literary work, and in his main empirical studies, the focus on understanding social life was based on the study of actual literary works and the way social representations are built and cultivated on the basis of art. Art, for László, was both a favorite testing site for theories of social life and, also on the ontological level, one of the crucial components and building blocks of social life.

As László recounted in his life interview on his sixtieth birthday, given to a fellow Hungarian social psychologist, Márta Fülöp (2008), his interest towards the dramaturgical metaphor of social life started from his theatrical experiences. László first wanted to be a theater director, and after high school graduation, he worked as an auxiliary director and an auxiliary actor for a few years in the legendary National Theatre of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Budapest. His inspirational mentor was the controversial director of this central theater, Tamás Major. At the time, theater was a major site of cultural innovation in socialist Hungary, and its agenda was on centre stage even in political intricacy. This was shown not only by the censorship tensions and the very active critical life but also in the very literature itself. This was illustrated, for example, by the cult novel of György Spiro, *Ikszek*. The novel, published in Hungarian in 1981, was about the early nineteenth-century Polish theatrical and political actor, Wojciech Boguslawsky, who was fighting censorship while simultaneously cooperating with the Russian power. This was a historical novel with its own intricacies and scandals; in Poland, it was banned for a generation and appeared only in 2009. Furthermore, in its context of Hungary during the 1980s, one must have felt that the immediate model for the controversial Boguslawsky figure was, in fact, Tamás Major himself. László certainly had a very impressive mentor in Hungarian theater.

Being involved in theater provided rich social experiences and inspirations for a would-be young Hungarian social scientist. László hesitated between a theatrical and a psychological career. It took a few parallel years of acting and studying psychology in the early 1970s before he chose psychology. The attraction of László to the dramatic presentation and interpretation of human life became central for the young research psychologist. His first book (László, 1979, 1980) compared the emotional and cognitive dynamics as perceived by the readers and the viewers of a Molière piece, using semantic differentials as the main instrument. László made a natural, experimental controlled study, in which some of the participants first read *Amphytrion* and, thereafter, went to the theater to watch it, while the other group saw the performance before reading. He showed intricate interactions between the emotional representation of the roles in the drama, the representation of the actors, and the role as presented by the actor. Depending on the preexisting image of the actors, in some cases, the cognitive and emotional dissonance between the emotional meaning of a given role and the actors' images were resolved by changing the images of the actors, when the interpretation of the roles changed. László complained, even in his early work, about the difficulties inherent in trying to relate the situational dynamics of the drama to the psychological processes in the viewer. Though he presented detailed graphs of the action structures in different settings, he could use psychological methods only to study the emotional dynamics of the representation of the participants, and not the internal unfolding of the

situations. As a further extension of his interest towards the dramatic metaphor, László introduced into Hungarian social science the key concepts of role theory and the writings of Erving Goffman (1981).

The artistic line in the dramaturgical-interactionist interest of László was always preserved, even in his later work. As a sort of encyclopedic reminder of his broad art psychology interest, he edited an excellent international reader of the structural principles of the psychology of art, together with the Canadian art psychologist and semiotician Gerald Cupchik (Cupchik & László, 1992). The reader provided state-of-the-art survey papers on the psychology of art. It covers the field from Arnheim and Vygotsky to Martindale and concentrates on the theoretical and reception aspects of framing art into a biological and societal network. László has outlined several historical summaries on these trends as well (László, 1988a, 1992). These reviews have a double structure and a double function. During the late twentieth century, when researchers of art psychology were mainly socialized on Anglo-Saxon texts and experimental methods, László showed that there was an alternative tradition initiated by Vygotsky (1925/1971), which involves empathic, theoretical interpretation of art rather than experimentation in using psychological principles for studying art. His other underlying idea for these historical reviews was the concentration of structural principles of the organization of arts, both inherent in Gestalt approaches and in structuralist art theory. If we want to understand the psychological side of art and the reasons for its impact, we have to assume that the reader or viewer represents the structure of the piece of art as well. László replaced disembodied structuralism with psychological interpretation of structure.

In the 1980s, László's interests moved gradually towards narratives. A sort of transmission point from the dramaturgical metaphor towards the narrative metaphor was his work on script theory. Script theory, as proposed by Schank and Abelson (1977), claims that human social cognition uses pre-packaged higher order information units that help, for example, to understand events happening in a restaurant by invoking the script of restaurant with its expected roles (waiter, consumer, cook) and actions (order, serving, consuming). László (1986a; Pléh et al., 1983) started to study these scripts using the methods of empirical social psychology, looking for recall, rearrangement and reconstruction of interpersonal and physical scripts. The study of interpersonal scripts opened the way towards his interest in social representation and also towards turning narratives into a central, organizing force for these social representations.

By the 1980s, the ice of the Cold War, especially that of the intellectual Cold War, had started to melt (see his interview with Fülöp, 2008). As part of this process of softening, American/Hungarian cooperation began to take place in the humanities. As part of this wider process, together with László Halász, János László

was the moving force of a group of American and Hungarian psychologists engaged in a joint work on short-story interpretation. As part of the work, youngsters in both cultures read short stories by authors as varied as Jack Kerouac, one of the leaders of the American beat generation, and István Örkény, a cult figure of Hungarian absurd drama and short stories in the 1970s. The basic aim of the cross-cultural literary project was to find out the relative impact of cultural background knowledge and the message and structure of the work itself in the organization of literary experience (Halász, 1987; Halász, László, & Pléh, 1988).

János László was also one of the founding members of IGEL, to which he belonged ever since the founding event in Siegen (László, 1987b). He was president of the society between 2000 and 2002, and in 2002, he organized the Eighth Conference of the International Association of the Empirical Studies of Literature at Pécs, Hungary. This conference gave birth to a special issue of *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, volume twenty-one, edited by László and Cupchik (2003). The papers collected deal primarily with empirical cross-cultural studies of narrative reading patterns and the theoretical issues of universality in narrative structures.

László connected his work on literary narratives to his interest in social representation. In this process, he highlighted the role of the interaction between cultural knowledge and reading literature (Larsen & László, 1990; László & Larsen, 1991). He interpreted cultural knowledge as being one of the main background variables where social psychology and the psychology of literature interact (László, 1988b). Reading literary narratives showed for László the interplay of image-like processes and online emotion activation while processing literature (Cupchik & László, 1994; László, 1987, 1989). This complex vision of the literary reading process was summarized in his monograph (László, 1999), where the cognitive and social representation aspects of literature are presented as an example for the narrative mode of thought. Following Moscovici (1988), László became convinced that a crucial element in restructuring social psychology was to work on systems of representations that are, by their nature, tied to social groups. He edited a theoretical volume on these issues (László & Wagner, 2003), but, most importantly, the narrative frame became, for László, an integrative surface, where social representations and social action schemata are mapped into each other.

During the past twenty years, the joint treatment of literary and social schemata, including social representations, and interest in the complex frames of literary understanding, led to László becoming a leader of the *narrative psychology* movement, both internationally and within Hungarian social science. Highlighting narrative patterning meant for him a combination of four traditions in humanities and the social sciences (László, 2008). The first is the structuralist/poststructuralist treatment of literary narratives; the second is the schematization tradition of cognitive psychology; the third is the different attempts to tie social

identity to social and individual narratives, in the work of literary philosophers, like Ricoeur (1992); and the fourth is the self-narrative anchoring of self-related concepts (László, 2003; László & Cupchik, 2003). In the synthetic vision of László (2014), storytelling tied to events and heroes is one of the central integrative meta-schemata of our life (László, 2008).

Following his earlier work on the role of cultural knowledge in processing literature, László developed a method of narrative content analysis applied to folk narratives, literary narratives, and tales of personal and historical relevance. He developed different computer-assisted modules of textual analysis to reveal fluctuations of narrative identity, changes in time perspective, and role tensions. The basic method collected many linguistic features into clusters of agency criteria. These methods helped him to uncover typical schemata both in popular Hungarian literary narratives and in textbooks of history. Some of these typical patterns of Hungarian identity-serving narratives are the revolt of the oppressed, the victory of the poor, and the immorality of the rich (László, 2014; László & Vincze, 2004; László, Vincze, & Köváriné, 2003). Hungarians present themselves as the narrative vision of self-identity that goes back to the study of literary texts, which became a tool for him to understand the narratives of everyday people. Narrative analysis helps to identify attachment patterns in life stories (László & Fülöp, 2007). What we learned from the analysis of characters in literary studies can be used as a tool to understand the life dynamics of patients as well (Péley & László, 2010). It is, in fact, the study of the psychology of literature that has led László to a constructionist image of a man that interprets each of us as narrative heroes. The road of János led him from the playful recognition of human drama to the never-ending story of the narrating and narrated humans.

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