

THE GLASS FIGURE PROSOPOPOEIA AND MOURNING IN ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ'S POLAROIDS

A FIGURA DE VIDRO PROSOPOPEIA E LUTO NAS POLAROIDS DE ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ

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In this article, I propose to examine how prosopopeia might be identified in some of André Kertész's final photographic works, not only in the recourse of a glass figurine, that stood-in for his late-wife, Elizabeth, but also through the analysis of his choice of medium, the Polaroid: an image that holds a distinct material existence, small enough to share, and captivating in its instant development before one's eyes. Additionally, I will consider the association of prosopopeia and death, as a literary figure that gives voice to those that have lost it, but also in the very mourning process for Kertész.

Keywords: Photography; Mourning; Polaroid; André Kertész.

Neste artigo, proponho identificar e analisar a presença da prosopopeia em alguns dos trabalhos finais de André Kertész, através, não só, do recurso a uma estatueta de vidro, que aqui toma o lugar da sua falecida esposa, Elizabeth, mas também na sua escolha de formato fotográfico, a Polaroid: uma imagem que possui uma existência material única, sendo pequena o suficiente para ser partilhada e cativante na sua revelação instantânea em frente aos nossos olhos. Adicionalmente, considerarei a ligação entre a prosopopeia e a morte, enquanto figura literária que concede uma voz a quem a perdeu, mas também como elemento do próprio processo de luto de Kertész.

Palavras-chave: Fotografia; Luto; Polaroid; André Kertész.

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It was something about the curve of its neck that first drew photographer André Kertész (1894-1985) to the small glass figurine that would come to dominate his Polaroid works (1978-1985). It reminded him of his late-wife, Elizabeth Kertész (1902-1977) (*née* Erzsébet Salamon). With a faded blue sky as its background, a gently curved neck supports the rounded head that holds inside it the reflections of the New York cityscape that can be found just outside the window. It was not a city that had been particularly welcoming or admiring of Kertész's work, unlike his beloved Paris, but it was where he had made a life with Elizabeth, nonetheless. That the glass figurine would combine a resemblance to his wife and inverted images of New York could propose a reconciliation with the city in Kertész's final years; however, his careful handling of the figurine in his Polaroids marks an insistence on its connection to Elizabeth, in what could be read as a recourse to the literary figure of prosopopoeia. If traditionally, prosopopoeia "[...] consists in staging, as it were, absent, dead, supernatural or even inanimate beings [...] made to act, speak, answer as is our wont" (Fontanier, *apud* Riffaterre, 1985, p.107), the lack of speech of the glass figurine does not render it mute, its expressiveness lying in the conjuring of Elizabeth's silhouette and in its relationship to other objects featured in the Polaroids.

In this article, I propose to examine how prosopopoeia might be identified in Kertész's final work, not only in the recourse of the glass figurine, but also, later in the text, through the analysis of his choice of medium, the Polaroid: an image that holds a distinct material existence, small enough to share, and captivating in its instant development before one's eyes. Additionally, I will consider the association of prosopopoeia and death, as a literary figure that gives a voice to those that have lost it, but also in the very mourning process for Kertész. But first, I will offer an introduction to André Kertész and his works, pointing towards some recurrent themes and perspectives.

1. André Kertész: the artist at the window

Born Andor Kertész, in 1894, in Budapest, to a Jewish family, it was early-on in his youth that the artist became enthralled with photography. Although known for revisions of his early artistic intentions, Kertész asserted in 1963 that:

Instinctively I felt the desire to take photos one day. Later I decided, when I had money, that I would buy a camera and I would do what I wanted to. ... Meanwhile, when something held my attention, I would hold on to the memory, saying to myself: 'OK, later, when I have a camera, I will take a picture of it.' Instinctively I began to compose; I learned to perceive the moment. (Kertész *apud* Beke, 1994, p. 36. Ellipsis in original.)

It would be in 1912 that his wish for a camera would be realised when his widowed-mother purchased him and his younger brother, Jennő, an Ica box camera. Using 4,5×6 cm plates, this camera was more adequate for slow, deliberate scenes, such as the ones Kertész began to capture of the Hungarian countryside, of his friends and family, but also of the locals in Budapest. He continued to photograph even as he was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army in World War One. After the War, although pressured by his family to pursue a career in business, Kertész, nevertheless, found himself a part of a dynamic group of artists who embraced a return to Hungary's folk and peasant traditions,

focusing particularly on its rural landscape.¹ In 1919, as part of this group, Kertész met an art student, Elizabeth Saly; it would be her that in 1924 would push the artist to commit to the success of his photographic work, even if that meant that he should abandon Hungary, and her:

I am tired of this situation. In the winter of 1924-25 I want to be a bride. Either this will happen, or you go away and until you establish an existence you do not come for me, and we do not even correspond. (Kertész *apud* Greenough *et al.*, 2005, p. 250)

Distraught, Kertész did follow Elizabeth's command, moving to Paris in October 1925. Even though his learning of the French language proved challenging — he would encounter the same difficulty later on with English —, the artist was lucky enough to meet a number of Hungarian artists in the city. Similarly to his circle of friends back in Budapest, Kertész was one of the few photographers in a group of painters, sculptors, writers, and dancers, and his portraits, printed as *cartes postales*, became well regarded amongst them, and beyond. Soon, Kertész would go on to photograph Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), Marc Chagall (1887-1985), Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), or Colette (1873-1954).

The choice of printing predominantly in *cartes postales*, which the artist employed between 1925 and 1928, might have been a result of his use of box-type cameras, where the 9×12cm glass plate-negatives could be printed directly onto the paper, with no need for enlargements, as its standard size was 9×14cm, but “the format was also part of a lifelong creative interest in pictures viewed up close in the hand.” (Siegel, 2021, p.22) There was an intimacy that could be achieved in handling these small works, being able to easily post them to friends and family back in Hungary, but also to keep them in his pockets; these highly-detailed images that brought him so much joy.² He would crop and reframe the printed image, highlighting a detail from the original negative, narrowing the image, eliminating any visual noise or extant information. Kertész would hardly ever occupy the full space of the *carte postale*, instead he might actually cut into the paper to make a smaller print or, on the contrary, leave a generous amount of negative space (Siegel, 2021, p.23). In a particularly dramatic use of such negative space, Kertész cropped a photograph he had taken of a string quartet in practice, *Quartet* (1926), focusing solely on the players' hands, music sheets placed in the middle of them, he moved the printing to the very top of the vertical *carte postale*, leaving close to two-thirds of the postcard blank. These disembodied hands now floated over a creamy white space.

Kertész would later claim that he had stopped printing *cartes postales* in 1928 because its manufacturers, R. Guilleminot, Boespflug et Cie, had stopped producing it, but it has been determined that the company did continue to offer his preferred paper up until 1937. (Pénichon, 2021, p.54) One could propose that, rather than a loss of working materials, the shift was, in most likelihood, due to his adoption of a 35mm Leica camera in 1928. Producing much smaller negatives, Kertész would now be forced to enlarge his images. Additionally, the photographer was at this time regularly contributing to a number of journals and magazines, not least the French-magazine *Vu* (in publication between 1928 and 1940), and exhibiting his work internationally, and such involved printing in a larger scale. 1928 also brought a different change to Kertész's life, separated from Elizabeth

¹Composed mainly of painters, the artist's circle of friends included István Szönyi (1894-1960), Vilmos Aba-Novák (1894-1941), and Károly Patkó (1895-1941).

²In 1913, as he was starting to photograph Kertész had already exhibited a penchant for small works: “This afternoon we made copies from the plate successfully. They came out splendidly. Tiny pictures, but sharp. I can stare at it endlessly, and I am very happy.” (Kertész *apud* Greenough *et al.*, 2005, p. 247)

since moving to Paris, he briefly married fellow-Hungarian painter and photographer Rozsi Klein (1900-1970), who took the artistic name Rogi André in his honour, between 1928-1932. However, in 1931, he again met Elizabeth in Paris. Whether she was simply visiting the city or if she had already decided to move there as well is unclear (Greenough *et al.*, 2005, p. 281), but they reconnected and Kertész divorced Klein.

After eleven years in Paris, working closely with other artists, seeing his work be praised, having influenced other photographers such as Brassai (1899-1984) and Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) (Borhan, 1994, pp.16-7), having published his first books *Enfants* (1933) and *Paris, vu par André Kertész* (1934) to acclaim, Kertész and Elizabeth decided to emigrate to New York in 1936.³ First employed by Keystone Press Agency to produce fashion photography, Kertész found it difficult to flourish in the United States. Unlike Paris, where he easily settled into a group of fellow artists, in New York Kertész isolated himself with Elizabeth. The work he was invited to do was not artistically stimulating, and he exhibited in few shows (Borhan, 1994, p.24). In less than one year, Kertész had left Keystone, and although the couple considered returning to Europe, they also understood the foolishness of doing so for someone of Jewish heritage in the late-1930s.⁴ Eventually, the artist would go on to produce commercial work for Condé Nast Publishing, in particular for their magazine *House and Garden*, achieving some financial, if not artistic, success.⁵ Exceptionally, Kertész did participate in some engaging meetings of the Circle of Confusion⁶ in New York, a group who “enthusiastically celebrated the advantages of the 35 mm camera, [but] also embraced its limitations believing that its slightly blurry images and lack of focus helped to enhance emotional content of their photographs.” (Gurbo, 2005a, p. 150) One could propose that such addresses on technological advancements in photography might have opened Kertész to new developments such as instant photography, and Polaroid’s integral film later in his career. But to better understand this later work it is important to consider how Kertész’s tendency for isolation, particularly in New York, might have contributed for his patient captures from his window.

In 1952, with the financial security afforded from his commercial work and from Elizabeth’s cosmetics business, the Kertészs were able to lease an apartment on the twelfth floor of a building at Two Fifth Avenue. Its broad windows overlooked Washington Square Park, and allowed brilliant shifts in light throughout the seasons:

Kertész observed in all seasons the life of the neighborhood from his windows. From there (with a telephoto lens) he took his best shots, in which his architectural sense was marvelously complemented by his innate capacity for complicitous observation. There he exercised unlimited patience, waiting for just what would make the photograph unique, Kertészian — as he knew how to capture, at just the right moment, the flash that transcended sight and released vision, illuminating life. (Borhan, 1994, p.32)

³Kertész would go on to publish another nineteen books in his lifetime.

⁴Although Elizabeth’s family had converted to catholicism and Kertész was an atheist, one might propose that such distinctions would not have been made had the artist and his wife been in Hungary, or France, as the Nazi forces began deporting the Jewish population to concentration camps. His older brother Imre would write in April 1938: “What tomorrow brings, no one knows. ... now it can really be seen how right it was for the two of you to leave Europe. Paris, in fact the whole of France has undergone tremendous convulsions and anxieties in this past year and a half.” (Kertész *apud* Greenough *et al.*, 2005, p. 257)

⁵Elizabeth for her part, became a successful businesswoman, establishing a cosmetics firm, Cosmia Laboratories, with another Hungarian émigré, Frank Tamas (dates unknown).

⁶Founded in 1933 by writer Manuel Komroff (1890-1974), over its forty-years of existence, the group included photographers, but also scientists, engineers, executives of camera companies.

The use of windows has prevailed in art, be it in the history of painting or more recently in photography. Windows can work as framing devices or as light sources. One might look through a window at the outside landscape or, on the contrary, look indoors, into the home. Artists might focus on the texture and surface of the windowpane, or similarly use the glass as a reflective area, light bouncing on it or traversing it. As Rosalind Krauss (2011) has proposed, “[a]lmost from the first, painters imagined piercing the ‘luminous concreteness’ of the canvas by likening it to a window, the view both opening the picture surface and returning depth to its plane. After the invention of perspective, the window frame came to be the signifier of painting itself.” (p.106) Upon the early development of photographic techniques, windows not only validated the medium as an art form by providing a connection to painting⁷, they were crucial in reducing exposure times; as one might find in one of Henry Fox Talbot’s (1800-1877) first successful attempts in the capture of an image through light: *Latticed Window at Lacock Abbey* (1835). For Kertész, “[b]ecause it was a middle space, the frontier that articulated the interior and exterior.” (Baqué, 1994, p. 89), the window gave him the opportunity to:

communicate with the world without losing himself in it, of being in it, without being ‘of it’. But because it also functioned as a frame of vision, because it is a part of the visible, the window anticipated his photographic framing, preceded it, and made it possible. Thus, at the heart of Kertész’s work, in the very principle of his method, is inscribed separation, distance. (Baqué, 1994, p. 89)

Thus, what we find in Kertész is a dual push between his need for distance, standing patiently outside the frame for the perfect shot, and his wish for intimacy, placing, through his zoom lens, the camera eye inside the action. His Polaroid works, published in book form under the title *From My Window* (1981), would prove to perfectly combine these separate, if not opposing, desires. Moreover, the small scale of these images might be reminiscent of his experience with *cartes postales*, where, in the handling of the small scale photographs, they become objects, with a physical presence, rather than just images.

If artistic acclaim had been difficult to obtain for most of his years in New York, after being hospitalised in late 1961, Kertész’s decision to abandon his commercial work at Condé Nast and invest solely in his art from 1962-onwards proved to be successful, as he finally began to encounter worldwide recognition, being featured in multiple exhibitions in quick succession. But as his creative work rose, his health, and Elizabeth’s, declined. In October 1977, little more than one year after being diagnosed with lung cancer, Elizabeth died.

2. “It was Elizabeth...”: Prosopopoeia and mourning

I was very touched [...]. The neck and shoulder ... it was Elizabeth. I went in, and I looked and looked and decided: ‘Don’t buy.’ I didn’t want to see this always before me, you understand. But after three months ... it was a horrible day: March, cold, nobody on the streets. I went over. I was alone in the store. And ‘May I help you?’ ‘Yes, I want this.’ ‘It’s beautiful.’ ‘I know. I have been looking for a long time. I want to buy.’ (Kertész *apud* Lifson, 1981, p. 23. Ellipsis in original.)

It was in 1978 that the glass figurine first made an appearance in Kertész’s work, on top of another glass object featuring a hollowed-out heart, as if on top of a plinth. The figurine was centred in the Polaroid’s square frame, as its background it had the New

⁷As Martha Langford explains, “[r]eferences to the Albertian window have been made to raise the status of photography by tracing its pictorial pedigree to the Renaissance.” (2007: 34)

York sky as the sun sets. There is here an obvious reference to Elizabeth as the loved one, in the figurine and in its combining with the heart motif. Similarly, if the glass objects are sturdy enough to be assembled over each other they are nevertheless delicate and easily broken, and thus one might attribute to them some symbolic meaning: “glass's fragility has symbolized the whims of fate ever since Horace”. (Riffaterre, 1985, p. 112) Yet, one could propose that in taking the glass figurine for Elizabeth, Kertész was resorting to *prosopopoeia*, the act of giving voice to, of finding something living in, an inanimate object. The glass figurine does not utter any words — on any brief appearances of the written text on Kertész's Polaroids it is only the artist's name that is shown, and not in connection to the figurine —, but it is, in its relation to other objects, or to light and shadow, expressive. Indeed, even when isolated, the glass surface reflects its surroundings, taking some of the city sky for its head, a city that had been more welcoming of Elizabeth than of Kertész.

The use of *prosopopoeia* has been particularly related to death and mourning; the very use of epitaphs became a type of speech from beyond the grave (Riffaterre, 1985, p.113). But in these cases, what they speak of is, for the most part, of death itself: “*Prosopoeia [sic]* does not create a mouth here so much as reanimate one: rhetorically, the dead come alive, and the talking grave reverses the progress toward death. The deceased is animated, however, only to warn the traveler of mortality.” (Johnson, 2008, p.14) Indeed, one might question if for an object to gain the ability to speak, death must first occur.⁸ One could imagine that for Elizabeth, the glass figurine, to occupy the leading position in Kertész's works, Elizabeth, the person, must no longer be; her presence shifting from flesh to glass by use of a literary figure. One could similarly suggest, that the finding of his late-wife's silhouette in the figurine was key for Kertész's mourning process:

I began shooting slowly, slowly, slowly. But soon, going crazy. I worked mornings and late afternoons. [...] I would come out in the morning and begin shooting, shooting, shooting; no time to eat. I discover the time has gone, and no breakfast. The same in the afternoon ... I forget my medicine. Suddenly, I'm losing myself, losing pain, losing hunger, and yes, losing the sadness. (Kertész *apud* Gurbo, 2007, p. 21. Ellipsis in original)

Perhaps for some, obsessively photographing the quotidian, capturing a figurine or a space in every possible angle, might work as a stabilising force in the face of traumatic change.⁹

After some time, the artist purchased a second bust, pairing the glass couple in such a way that their heads might touch. It was a way of inserting himself into the frame, and recreating his relationship with Elizabeth. In one particular image, Kertész places the original figurine next to a metal statuette of a photographer, the oversized camera obfuscating the upper torso of the statuette, making it look almost like a camera with legs. It is clear that this is Kertész, an artist that lived for the photographed image, turning its lens

⁸As Michael Taussig explains, “How is it that the distinction between subject and object, between me and things, is so crucially dependent on life and death? Why is death the harbinger and index of the thing-world, and how can it be, then, that death awakens life in things?” (2001, p. 305)

⁹Two other photographers that have produced series of works devoted to photographing the same space, particularly windows, are Josef Sudek (1896-1976) and Daniel Blaufuks (b.1963). Between 1940-54, Sudek photographed the windows of his studio in Prague, in what became known as *The Window of My Studio*. Initiated as the Nazis occupied Bohemia and Moravia, this photographic sequence might be read as a way for the artist to mourn the loss of his city. Blaufuks, for his part, began photographing his kitchen window in 2009, in what would become his *Attempting Exhaustion* (2017) project, transforming the space into a kind of shelter, an always changing, and yet ever constant, that could ground the grandchild of exiles into one spot.

towards its glass muse. Here we might find again a type of prosopopoeia, not necessarily in the statuette of a photographer, but rather in its interweaving of the camera's and the photographer's body. As Dominique Baqué (1994) writes, “[t]he photographic apparatus [...] formed a ‘body with the body.’ It was less an external technology than an extension of the body, a supplement of the eye.” (p.89) Kertész was used to “extending” his body through the eye of a camera, he had been doing so ever since he had purchased his telephoto lens. No matter what type of technical apparatus he had applied before, he had been able to capture the image he composed in his mind, however, the Polaroid camera seemed to have, initially, a mind of its own.

Kertész had already attempted to work with a Polaroid SX-70 camera¹⁰ in 1974, having been gifted one by his friend and collector, musician Graham Nash (b. 1942). Since 1939, he had been diagnosed with Meunier's disease, which had caused him to have dizzy spells and vertigo, exacerbated by darkroom red lights, such meant that for many decades the artist had had to collaborate with professional printers, losing some of his previous independence in cropping and reframing images. Polaroid's instant integral film, would, in theory, be able to offer a return to some autonomy over the final image, however, as Kertész soon found, it was a medium that could be unpredictable and finicky:

Nothing comes out the way you want. You take two pictures, and the blue is different each time, after one minute, after five minutes. You can't treat the film the way you want; it does exactly what it wants. If I open the lens a little more, everything if bad. And with this ridicule thing I tried expressing myself. (Kertész *apud* Gurbo, 2005b, p. 212)

Nonetheless, such difficulties would be surpassed, or at least embraced,¹¹ by Kertész and one could propose that the intimacy and fragility of the Polaroid made it the ideal medium to reflect on the ephemerality of life and on the loss of a loved-one. As Dominique Baqué has advanced, the connection between photography and death that has been frequently remarked upon¹² lies also in its capacity to capture the very essence of life: “The fragility of things, human vulnerability: happiness lies in the precarious. It is this very precariousness, this beauty of the ephemeral, that only photography can save.” (1994, p. 93) Moreover, Polaroids, in the development of their image, carry a distinctly ghostly effect, as each figure gradually emerges from the initially white surface.

As Kertész continued to explore and push the limits of the Polaroid medium, he took the opportunity to revisit some of his earlier works. The optical distortions caused by the glass figurines called back to experiments the artist had undertaken in 1933 with the human nude and fun-house mirrors, his *Grotesques* (later renamed *Distortions*). In another reformulation of an earlier piece, Kertész re-took his 1927 *Self-portrait, Paris*. If the original image featured his shadow in profile, sharing the frame with the shadow of his camera — a precursor to human-camera hybrid statuette, perhaps —, in the 1979 Polaroid, his aged-shadow seems to be looking over the two glass figurines as they embrace. This embrace itself, reminiscent of one he had captured with Elizabeth.

¹⁰Polaroid's SX-70 camera was a folding single lens reflex machine that was in production between 1972 and 1981. After being exposed, its film was ejected from the camera through two rollers, this would cause the chemical pods to burst and spread the chemistry, initiating the development process. Although outlines of the image would quickly emerge, the process would only be fully completed after approximately 10 minutes.

¹¹Kertész would say: “You have to learn the limits of the medium, [...] and then learn to work on the edges of those boundaries.” (Kertész *apud* Gurbo, 2005b, p. 212)

¹²Not least by thinkers such as Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida* (1980), and Susan Sontag, in *On Photography* (1977).

In 1931, as they reconnected, Kertész had taken a photograph of himself with Elizabeth, *Elizabeth and I*. The original, full frame image, featured Kertész with his arm around Elizabeth's shoulder, half-turned away from the camera, looking towards his future wife, Elizabeth, for her part, stared directly into the lens, folding her arms on herself. One might read in this image an over-protective embrace on the photographer's part, as if the woman he is holding might easily slip away from his grip. Kertész produced a number of crops of this negative, reframing the image to focus solely on the two faces in one case. More dramatically, in the 1960s, he cut Elizabeth's face in half, removing himself out of the picture, but for his hand over her shoulder, he would explain that, for him, this version "bears the connotation of the Hungarian word for a wife, 'feleség'. This would correspond with the English words 'better half.'" (Kertész *apud* Gurbo, 2005b, p. 201) As the artist revisited some of his past works with the Polaroid camera, he, again, examined this double portrait. In 1981, Kertész placed a print of the 1960s crop on a flat surface, on top of his hand he positioned a crown of thorns. It was perhaps a reflection on Elizabeth's beliefs as a Catholic, but one might propose that it symbolised something of the pain of her loss.

3. Final remarks

In this article I have aimed to examine how prosopopoeia might have been used by Kertész, not as a literary recourse, but as a visual one. The artist closely associated the glass figurine to the image of his late-wife, and the, almost, obsessive photographing of the statuette might have worked as a stabilising force in a work of mourning. The employment of Polaroid photography might similarly convey a fragility, and intimacy, to the images that augment the ghostly presence of Elizabeth throughout the series.

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