Around the turn of the 20th century, the US mail service received an unprecedented flood of lynching postcards for delivery. While the photographic images on these commercial postcards typically displayed the remains of victims of (mostly racially motivated) “vigilante justice”, oftentimes they also included views of the attending public and even personal messages written on the cards, attesting to their modes of circulation and social attitudes towards lynching. As such, these postcards provide invaluable visual source material for the social history of the practice and perception of lynching in turn-of-the-century US as well as for the visual culture of the period and photography as a social practice. Although the sheer volume of such postcards in circulation suggests a wide social acceptance of the practice of lynching, there is evidence for a growing resistance to the diffusion of such images on diverse fronts, attributable to a number of causes and social changes. Among the different relevant factors to this effect, the present talk investigates the apparent legislative attempts of the US Congress to censor the circulation of such postcards through issuing specific postal laws that banned the delivery of “indecent material”. Hence, these lynching postcards provide an interesting case study of the social construction of the meaning of photographs in their double aspect: as photographic images (i.e. visually represented information) and as photographic objects that, in facilitating specific modes of material circulation (and specific modes of censorship as well), construct certain aspects of the social meaning attributed to those images. On the other hand, from a methodological point of view, this talk delves into the issue of the use of photographic objects as visual source material for historiography, considering in particular the integration of visual and other (textual, statistical, etc.) sources in historical research.

Piroska Csúri (PhD, Brandeis University, USA) Hungarian of birth, currently residing in Buenos Aires (Argentina), her research extends to the diverse uses of photography as a social device, the social construction of photographic meaning in a variety of social spheres, and the impact of photography on visual culture in general. Her main interest lies in the construction of the evidential status of photography (as related to different notions of objectivity) in natural sciences as well as in social sciences, with a strong focus on the methodological issues related to the use of photographic source material in historical research. At present, she is a professor at Universidad de San Andrés (Buenos Aires, Argentina), while she teaches doctoral courses at other institutions such as Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina). In the past she has taught courses at Brandeis University, Boston College, Harvard University, New York University in Buenos Aires, as well as several other Argentine universities. She has been granted research fellowships by the Fundación Antorchas (Argentina) and Princeton University Library. Currently she is editing a special issue of the journal Nuevo Mundo / Mundos Nuevos on the topic of photography and violence.

2014, January 20, Monday, 17:30
Nádor 11, Hanák Room