
METAPHORS AND HISTORY IN SLOVAK DOCUMENTARY

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Abstract: According to Lakoff's and Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphors, metaphors provide a partial understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience. Therefore they help us to understand our present and/or our past reality. In his *Metahistory*, Hayden White states historians often approach their topic tropologically pre-figuring it. By choosing a predominant trope they see history through, they also choose the genre for their writing. Referring to these works on tropes, we study several creative methods that appear in contemporary Slovak historical documentary. From "cans of time", a metaphorical concept of cinematographic memories, presented by Marek Šulík, through the oeuvre of Peter Kerekes in which the metaphor is used as an element of structure, to debuting Anabela Žigová or Vladislava Plančíková who use metaphors to reflect on historical research, Slovak authorial documentaries represent a very inspiring metahistorical material.

Key words: conceptual metaphor – narrative structure – documentary – Slovak history

Conceptual versus creative metaphors

In 1979, two cognitive scientists, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, came with a theory of meaning, according to which "much of our social reality is understood in metaphorical terms, and since our conception of the physical world is partly metaphorical, metaphor plays a very significant role in determining what is real for us"¹. This statement also applies for the past reality. We often conceive and understand our own history through metaphors. It is not by chance Lakoff and Johnson assert that "[t]he primary function of metaphor is to provide a partial understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience." In similar manner we read the meaning of past events through what is understandable for us now. We see analogies, resemblances, and we try to understand differences by another similarities or analogies as well.

Lakoff's and Johnson's conception rejects "the possibility of any objective or absolute truth and also supplies "an alternative account" in which objective truth is replaced by human experience and understanding.² Thanks to this, their theory of conceptual metaphors meets the premises of the theory of literature and its notions of creative metaphors that do not pre-exist in the world, but come especially from author's specific perception of it. Despite being rather subjective, new metaphors provided by artists can sometimes reshape the vision of the world we live in. From this

¹ LAKOFF, George – JOHNSON, Mark. *Metaphors We Live By*. London : The Chicago University Press, 2003, p. 147.

² Ibid.

perspective, filming or editing an existing archive footage is an act of thinking, of reflecting the world around us. Creating and/or selecting what exactly will appear in a film is a tropological operation. This statement is especially true for authorial documentaries, where the way a topic is treated is more of a manifestation of the very principle of how a filmmaker thinks than a matter of format or genre convention. Conceiving and shooting creative documentaries about historical reality reveals how filmmakers see the past, what images they attribute to it, what words they select to name it, or which affective or ideological position towards the past reality they hold. In this paper we propose to study the figures and tropes Slovak documentarians choose to present various themes related to the Slovak recent history.

Irony in documentaries after 1989

After the fall of communist regimes, in Central and Eastern European countries, in 1989, many ideas and many metaphors of the official history were rejected. Slovak documentary filmmakers challenged the past first by capturing the present. They shot mostly reportages, surveys, and interviews and did not need special metaphorical encoding.³ The dominant trope of this time was irony, leading to sharp critical and satirical representations of the communist regime, its atrocities and absurdity. The irony is present for instance in *Vedľajšie zamestnanie: matka* [Side Job: Mother, 1990] by Eva Štefankovičová. Here, the montage of newsreel propaganda from the 1950s about working mothers liberated from households is shown in a contrast to working mothers of the 1980s, poorly paid and tired after their labour day, running to their households to accomplish unpaid domestic tasks and the child care. In an even sharper yet quite similar form, the irony is used as unifying principle in *Papierové hlavy* [Paper Heads, 1995] by Dušan Hanák, a film that puts propagandist archive footage in opposition to testimonial accounts of former political prisoners and people persecuted by the regime, in order to show how propaganda lied about the bright and even brighter reality in Czechoslovakia.

Besides the ironical criticism, there were also documentaries with a form of traditional compilations of archive footage with a commentary. Their main purpose – especially after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993 – was to rewrite official history.⁴ Compared to the communist era documentaries, the poetics and rhetoric of these films did not really change. What changed was the ideology behind them. Only after 2000, when textual historiography has produced new outcomes that questioned older interpretations of the Slovak past, filmmakers joined historians and came with new images as well as with new metaphors of Slovak history.

³ See for instance the feature-length documentaries *Letová správa OK 89-90* [Flight report, 1990, dir. Ilja Ruppeldt], *Veľká škola dní* [Big School of the Days, 1990, dir. Kvetoslav Hečko] or *Na Slovensku po slovensky* [Speak Slovak in Slovakia, 1990, dir. Eva Štefankovičová].

⁴ One of the most striking example is the series of educational 20 minutes documentaries commissioned by the Ministry of Education and presenting the history from the Middle Age to the end of the 20th century from the perspective of Slavic or Slovak people living on the territory of today's Slovakia.

New tropes in Slovak historical documentary

The first film consciously working with metaphors is *66 sezón* [66 Seasons, 2003, dir. Peter Kerekes]. It is shot mostly at the public open-air swimming pool in the small formerly multicultural city of Košice. The location itself has a metaphorical meaning. According to director's intention, it is a swimming pool "where the history used to go to bath". The film consists mostly of testimonies of people who remember the first Czechoslovak republic, the Slovak State during the World War II, the communist nationalisation of industry in the 1948 and the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968. This perspective is clearly microhistorical. But that is just one layer of the film.

The second layer presents the film as a metaphor of memory and remembering. For Kerekes, shooting means engraving the vanishing moments of life into a memory, editing the film is structuring these memories, and projecting the film makes them appear again. History comes out of all these operations. Water appears here as a metaphorical element too: it is an amniotic fluid for the history. The memories, past events, or even important public figures emerge out of it. Kerekes also uses the surface of water in the swimming pool as a screen, a surface of reflexion: he projects found footage onto it and shows it shimmering but distorted, like the memory stored in the film or the historical representations might be. Kerekes doesn't ignore there are many facts hidden under the surface that are and remain forgotten. He sees the film as the medium that is able to capture the flow of time, the changing life, and therefore allows even the dead to resurrect. According to Kerekes, the memory is liquid, fluid, changing and vanishing. The film can freeze it; make it more solid and reliable. Moreover, he shows how the memory can be transformed into history.

Another relevant example of film metaphorically presenting the history is the film *Cesta Magdalény Robinsonovej* [Journey of Magdalena Robinson, 2008], a life account of a female photographer who survived the Shoah. It was made by Marek Šulík, editor of all of Kerekes' documentaries. Despite the close collaboration of the two filmmakers, Šulík uses slightly different metaphors of memory and history than Kerekes. In his wide project of collecting, digitising and reusing family archive footage, Šulík defines the film or the audiovisual medium as such as a "can of time", where fragments of past are stored, and out of which they can be brought to the light again. In "Journey of Magdalena Robinson" he is channelling the content of such a can via a television set. This helps Marek Šulík to suggest that 1) he works with footage he didn't shoot himself, 2) the protagonist of his film has already passed away and 3) the individual memory can be forgotten, lost, replaced by other messages or drowned in entropy. Therefore, he conceives history as a specific work with existing material that he contextualises and puts in relation with other material in order to provide a comprehensible account.

This conception of history is highly self-reflexive and from this perspective the image of the television set in the Holocaust Museum in Auschwitz can be seen as a metalepsis, a figure through which Šulík shows his authorial position. In a similar manner we can identify Kerekes's liquid metaphors and his creative editing that brings the past to the life again as metalepses. The two filmmakers are the first documentarians who, after 1989, openly question the methods they use. They are aware their representations of history in their films are first of all creative constructs that reflect the past.

Structuring metaphors in cooking history

In his second film *Ako sa varia dejiny* [Cooking History, 2009] Peter Kerekes goes even further in conceptualising historiography through its own creativity. The title of his film is a verbal metaphor in which he creates analogy between cooking a meal and writing history. In Slovak, the title refers directly to the title of a book by a French historian Paul Veyne *Comment on écrit l'histoire*.⁵ Used together with the concept of history, the metaphorical significant "cooking" therefore refers to a construct, a product resulting from a right use of ingredients (information, facts, sources) and a recipe (the correct scientific method). Therefore history (or historical text/historical documentary) made this way can be edible, easily digestible, or, on the contrary, way too heavy bite of a fat meal. This metaphor is exactly the same as the conceptual metaphor made by Lakoff and Johnson that ideas are actually food.⁶

The analogy between food and history in the title is connected with the main theme of Kerekes's film: "Cooking History" shows how the war or armed conflicts of the 20th and of the beginning of the 21st century (from WWII to the Chechen War) were perceived by European military cooks. But this is not the only metaphor that Kerekes is using. In the portraits of the cooks, Kerekes depicts the war like a blood-thirsty monster living out of human flesh. The war is a Moloch and the man is a prey, a victim, a mere flesh: A meat. A food. Therefore the war mows people down like wheat or it minces them like meat. Kerekes illustrates this metaphor through the recurrent images of cooks or soldiers slaughtering cows or pigs, mincing meat or kneading dough for bread. In this metaphorical field, the war is personified, while people themselves are reified, transformed to ingredients.

Besides the metaphor used as a key element of film structure, Kerekes also uses small metaphors blended with metonymies or synecdoche. Together with one of his protagonists, he creates a small landscape on a kitchen table where the rectangle of bread becomes an airport, a bowl with water the Ladoga Lake, and flour becomes snow. The motif of bread actually shows that in order to render some past events or even ideologies, Peter Kerekes uses metaphor and metonymy or synecdoche at the same time. For instance, he asks two of the protagonists which bread is the best in the world. An old German military baker answers, "German bread is the best." A Russian female cook says "bread is the same everywhere". The two protagonists do not only represent their own nations (as a synecdoche of Germany and of the former USSR), but in their utterances bread becomes a metonymical designation for ideology: the Deutschland über alles vs. communist egalitarianism.

Besides this, Kerekes plays with a metonymical idiom that the war bread is a hard bread. Here, the adjective "hard" denotes the quality of the bread, but it also con-

⁵ VEYNE, Paul, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*. Paris : Seuil, 1971. See also VEYNE, Paul. *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*. Manchester : Manchester University, 1984.

⁶ See LAKOFF, George – JOHNSON, Mark. *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 47: "What he said left a bad taste in my mouth. All this paper has in it are raw facts, half-baked ideas, and harmed-over theories. There are too many facts here for me to digest them all. I just cannot swallow that claim. That argument smells fishy. Let me stew over that for a while. Now there's a theory you can really sink your teeth into. We need to let that idea percolate for a while. That's food for thought. He's a voracious reader. We do not need to spoon-feed our students. He devoured the book. Let's let that idea simmer on the back burner for a while. This is the meaty part of the paper. Let that idea jell for a while. That idea has been fermenting for years."

notes metonymically the hard job of military cooks. At the same time hard dark bread works also as a metaphor of frozen dead bodies in snow.

Metaphors and point of view in *Felvidék*

Peter Kerekes is probably the most metaphorising documentarian in Slovakia. As he is also a teacher at the Film and Television Faculty, he has several followers in younger generation. In 2014, a young director Vladislava Plančíková made a full-length documentary *Felvidék. Horná zem* [Felvidék. The Land Behind], in which she used tropes as narration unifying principles. In the 1st grammatical person she narrates the history of Central European region in 20th century and uses playful animations to illustrate it. She works with metaphors blended with metonymies – a helmet becomes a melting pot, or a kettle of war where the beans, representing human inhabitants of the fighting countries, are muddled. The simplified historical account corresponds well with the playful maps, and the soft voice of the director in the commentary refers to a child's vision of history.

Plančíková uses this perspective to point out her subjectivity. She wants to understand her place in the family tree, the trauma of her grandmother who moved from Hungary to Slovakia during the forced exchanges of inhabitants in the 1950s, when many Czechoslovak Hungarians living in border regions of the country were expelled from their homes, and were replaced by Slovak families living in Hungary.

But here the child's rhetoric is not only attesting the subjectivity of the author but it might also be a sign of taking a position in an invisible hierarchy of academic and/or artistic milieu. Plančíková seems to be showing her subordination to the official, institutional history by presenting the film as a version of history made by a novice, a total beginner, a child.

However, "*Felvidék*" is far from being just an animated documentary. Plančíková combines talking heads of people who went through the "exchange of inhabitants" with compilation of archive footage, and she is also using the method of survey or interview together with staged, or animated family stories. Yet, the way she uses the voice over commentary in animated sequences reveals the way she thinks about history. She wants to connect all the separate parts (testimonies of survivors, young generation's opinions, collected family stories) and make them fit into a big, more general history. She sees the history as a pyramid: on the top, there are few "gentlemen with cigars" who have the power to muddle the beans in the war kettle or push them out of one country into another. At the bottom, there are the "beans" with their individual experiences. In the same way, Plančíková traces her family tree and explores how the members of her family perceive their mixed Slovak-Hungarian identity. She finds hope in the united Europe: traumas of the past can disappear with the new generation (metaphorically represented by the young leaves of grass) that does not know any boundaries.

Tropological pre-figuring

Such a mental construction in which all separate parts create a meaning together, can be studied from the perspective adopted by Hayden White in his famous book

*Metahistory*⁷, where he is analysing the historical texts through their mode of emplotment (that leads to a specific genre) 2) the mode of argument, 3) ideological aspects of the account, and 4) last but not least tropological pre-figuring, i.e. general way of connecting data that appear in historian's writing. In "Felvidék", but also in "Cooking History" we clearly see how their directors think, how they organise material and how they put various data into relation. Plančíková is trying to explain and sometimes even generalise individual experiences. White calls this mode of argument idiographic, or formist, and referring to the works of Northrop Frye, he associates it with the mode of emplotment typical for the romance, with its arsenal of heroism, honour, love, war, duty and redemption at the end, and with metaphor as the dominant trope.

The same mode of argumentation, of emplotment and dominant trope is used in "Cooking History" where military cooks are often suspended between the duty and the desire not to obey. Also here the individual stories are autonomous and tend to be generalised according to metaphors "cooking is fighting" and "writing history is cooking the past". Individual heroism and rising high out of ashes appear also in "Journey of Magdalena Robinson".

It might be tempting to presume Slovak filmmakers tend to shoot documentary romances based on metaphors. However, not all new Slovak documentaries use metaphors as an element of structure. The film *Salto Mortale* by Anabela Žigová, is a documentary portrait of a woman (director herself) trying to understand what led her father, a known psychiatrist, to collaborate with communist state security, a fact she learnt only after her father's death. Here, the metaphor – the salto mortale – appears only as a leitmotif and means the process of thinking, mental acrobatics that might be risky or dangerous. The recurring motive of gymnasts making flips on a trampoline or in the street therefore refers to the impossibility to know the past or to understand someone's past decisions. The archives of the state security were partly destroyed in November 1989, and the file of the psychiatrist is almost empty. Therefore the director's investigation reminds us of a pointless flipping... Despite the metaphoric title, *Salto Mortale* is built on a metonymy. As the director does not find enough proofs of her father's collaboration with state security, she decides to make a portrait of this state security, its actors and its crimes. Despite that she is not able to explain her father's involvement in state security, she tries to establish logical bonds between the communist regime, its institutions and individuals. From this perspective, with the main question – that of the father's guilt – unanswered, the film depicts a society that is not able to deal with its own past, with skeletons in cupboards and daughters vainly leaping in their effort to find the truth.

Ignorant historians

Many other Slovak documentarians consciously or unconsciously choose metonymy as the dominant trope. To depict a phenomenon, they study its symptoms, and they try to establish causal or logical relations between events.

Yet, the filmmakers whose films I chose to analyse in this paper have in common the will to reflect on the way they conceive history and to reveal their own relation to

⁷ WHITE, Hayden. *Metahistory*. Baltimore & London : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

the past. However, it does not only unfold the manner of their thinking and producing historical meaning, but also their attitude and knowledge of Slovak and European historiography. They are not professional historians but they try to bring a new content, new perspectives, and new questions in the field of history. If they question a method, it is not the method professional, institutional historiography may adopt, it is their own, creative, genuine method. They are „ignorant historians“, to paraphrase the concept of ignorant schoolmaster developed by French philosopher Jacques Rancière⁸: Despite their historical ignorance, they teach us a lesson in thinking about the history. That is why the analysed documentaries represent a precious metahistorical material that invites specifically historians, to revisit their own methodology, to their own mode of argument and tropological pre-figuring that, in Slovak historiography, is rarely the object of research and analysis.

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⁸ RANCIÈRE, Jacques. Le spectateur émancipé. Paris : Éditions de la Fabrique, 2008.