

UNIVERSITY OF THEATRE, FILM AND TELEVISION DOCTORAL SCHOOL

**Theoretical Questions of Nonfiction Cinema  
and Hungarian Documentaries of the 20th Century**

summary of the DLA thesis

Dr. András Szekfü Ph.D.

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Instructor: Professor Dr. György Báron

1., By the end of the 20th century, the situation of documentary films and filmmakers has changed radically. The film industry itself has changed, the television industry has changed, and the Internet, not long ago a playground for specialized scientists, became – among others – an important distribution channel of audiovisual productions. While during most of the 20th century an average citizen hardly met a film camera during her/his life, with the advent of cheap video equipment and the inclusion of video recording into mobile phones, today (at least in the developed world) almost everybody can see her/himself on the screen. With the new video technologies, the technical side of making a documentary became „transparent”, and the authenticity of a documentary image became a question of social consideration. In my DLA thesis I analyze the theoretical reaction to this new situation. My examples will be taken mostly from the Hungarian documentaries of the 20th century.

2., From the 80s a new upswing can be felt in the theoretical literature of the documentary. Barsam, then Ellis and McLane have published new overviews of the global history of documentary filmmaking. Other authors have shed new lights on the theoretical definition and ramifications of nonfiction. Some prominent names, most of which turn up in the text of my thesis: Bruzzi, Carroll, Nichols, Odin, Plantinga, Renov, Rothman, Vaughan, Ward, Warren, Winston. These authors often disagree with each other, sometimes in a harsh voice, but always with concrete arguments.

As usual, most new theoreticians begin with the critique of the founding fathers: Flaherty, Grierson and Vertov. In my overview I tried to capture the present meaning of their formulations with the conclusion that they are far from outdated. Specially in the case of Grierson it is striking how a sideline remark (like „the creative treatment of actuality”) can lead to interesting and wide-ranging conclusions.

The overview of the cinema vérité and direct cinema movement has led to other conclusions. Here we can see how the innovation of the sixties became in a few years industry standard and aesthetical commonplace. No one can doubt that the observational cinema has changed the way how documentaries are made. However, the starting beliefs („Everything else is fiction.”) have proved overshoot.

3., A basic assertion in early film theory is the indexical nature of the photographic image, and the resulting realness of the documentary shots. Later this assertion has proved not false

but insufficient, and the differentiation between fiction and nonfiction became a social issue, something determined by the films' pre-premiere marketing communication, the generic of the films and of course the signals within the films themselves. In my thesis I propose an explanation for this turn beyond the changes in filmmakers' styles and working methods. A photographic image is a true record – not of reality, but of the visual aspect of reality. However, reality has several other important aspects – to name but a few: biological, psychological, social. There are aspects of time and space in reality which also can hardly be recorded by pure visual indexicality. Conclusion: of course a film can depict those aspects of reality too, which are not immediately visual by nature. But by referring to these, film has to cease claiming exclusive indexical truth.

4., What then will determine whether a film will be viewed as a documentary or as a fiction? Noël Carroll in a seminal study (1983) proposed the term „indexing” for the actions through which the producers, directors etc. „mark” a film. Dai Vaughan wrote about a „documentary response”. Roger Odin used the French term „lecture documentaristante”. Plantinga in 1997 referred to Carroll and spoke of a „social contract”. Stella Bruzzi (2006), who regards documentaries mostly as „performative acts”, refers to a „pact” between documentary, reality and the viewer. Going further in this line I refer to the „metalingual” function of language by Roman Jakobson. This function refers to the code, to language itself, ensuring unambiguous, smooth communication. All kinds of films use their own metalinguistic, unwritten „basic contracts” by which the viewer gets instructions how to interpret the film in question. There is a basic contract for feature films, there is another for documentaries and so on. The basic contract of documentary films specially has two sub-contracts: one between filmmaker and film-subject person, the other between film provider and viewer. Based on what the viewer perceives as the actual contract will s/he decide whether the actual film is fiction or non-fiction.

5., Throughout the thesis I have used outstanding Hungarian films to test the usefulness of the theoretical concepts. In Hortobágy (1936) we find an early amalgam of nonfiction and fiction. In *Ne sápadj!* (Don't Pale!) and *Pócspetri*, both from 1982, the directors' strategies proved remarkable. In the films of the docufiction movement of the 1970s (sometimes referred to as „the Budapest School”) I analyzed the consequences of two possible approaches: there are films which „could have happened” to the civil actors, and there are others, where the subjects of the film „live their own lives”.

6., Three film of the last decade of the century show us hitherto untypical approaches, they overwrite the rules of the then documentary. „Dusi és Jenő” (1989) is a poetic reappraisal of found amateur footage from the decades between 1936 and 1966 of a talented family filmmaker. The director does manipulate the raw material, but (to my mind) does not destroy the basic indexical values of those shots, only transforms them. „Above” the original amateur movie shots new filmic structures emerge, but these are still documentary structures. „Leptinotarsa” (1966) is a scientific-historical documentary about the appearance of the Colorado potato beetle in Hungary after WW II. At the same time, it is an elaborate post-modern parody of that kind of filmmaking. The key of the film’s success is the loving, playful, co-operating relationship between the filmmakers and the villagers they interview. „The János Brothers” (1999) show two elderly men, living in a very distant corner of Transylvania. The two are visibly handicapped and maybe mentally impaired too, to a certain degree. The film initially starts as a „normal” documentary, but then successively breaks almost all the rules of the documentary trade and „derails” the stereotypes about the handicapped. At the end we see the two men as able to converse with angels...

7, The central conception of this thesis is about the transcendence in documentary filmmaking. Based on the indexical value of the photographic image, documentaries at their best can build complicated meta-structures upon the images of the physical world. There can be less and less indexical guarantee for the truthfulness of the film as we climb higher and higher on these structures. But the best documentary directors can build and maintain a documentary basic contract with their viewers.