

Peter Kerekes

## A Recipe for Visual Stories

I developed my taste for the moving images thanks to still images. My grandparents used to go to Yugoslavia for their summer holidays. In November, when the weather outside became intolerable, they would invite friends over for coffee. My grandmother made strong espresso in her small coffee-maker, and my grandfather showed his slides from their trip to the sea. In the living room of a flat in Košice, with the blinds down and a bed sheet thrown over the old pictures on the wall, we could see the image of the sea. And the slides were accompanied by stories. Holiday adventures were followed by childhood memories, memories of war, of lost loves or of friends all over the world. There was the scent of coffee and cake in the air and from the outside we could hear the ringing bells of the street cars, signaling that time was passing by. I loved that atmosphere and subconsciously, I have been trying to repeat it in my films. I like to present images and tell stories and combine them with commentaries by me and by my friends. Ideally, my films should be shown in small screening rooms with coffee and cake served to the audience.

I tried to achieve such an atmosphere in my film 66 SEASONS. I gathered private stories of visitors of an outdoor swimming pool in Košice and showed how history has passed by during sixty-six following seasons (1937-2003). By juxtaposing my 80-year-old grandmother and her friends with the good looking bodies of 16year olds I visually combined the past and the present and by doing this I stimulated memories. In the strictly limited space of the swimming pool the people in my film seemed to swim in the flow of time and their life stories seemed to be carried by the water – by the high and low tides of historic events.

### Cooking History

We usually know history as a set of dates of major battles and decisions of generals and political leaders. When I was making the film COOKING HISTORY, I was interested in the way common people may affect great events. The protagonists of my film are army cooks. For me, they embody the paradox of history, as they – seemingly unimportant – belong to the primary elements of an army. At first sight, their mission falls far behind that of fighter planes or



**COOKING HISTORY** SK/A/CZ 2009, 88 Min.

*Military cooks – they are never mentioned in history books and yet they have helped to influence the course of history. Based on the recollections and personal destinies of these people, this film takes a look behind the scenes of the <great> moments in time, otherwise known as conventional history, and introduces a new angle on twentieth century European history.*

(source: [www.efp-online.com](http://www.efp-online.com))

tanks. But their task of filling the gargantuan stomach of the always hungry army, is eventually more important, because – if failed – it would leave the giant without strength and – consequently – without purpose. And how about a moral message behind the pots and pans? – If all the cooks of the world refused to cook, would there be no more wars?

I narrowed the scope of the movie down to European cuisine because culturally, it is one region, one cuisine, which is mutually connected by the common migration of the population, shared history, and shared wars. The film is composed of twelve recipes from army cooks. It includes the German and the Russian side of the front during WW II, occupation of Hungary in 1956, the war in Algeria, the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the war in former Yugoslavia, and the war in Chechnya.

My film was not made with the purpose of looking at history from behind the kitchen table, nor did I want to focus in detail on the taste, stench and scent of the war, or introduce recipes for cooking in military conditions. I wanted to offer recipes for how to survive, and how to behave in existential situations. Thus, the twelve stories in the film not only represent stories from different times and different countries but also different attitudes of life. There are cooks who were only fulfilling orders without thinking about the fact that they were feeding murderers. There were cooks who tried to behave like the Good Soldier Svejk and avoid war. Some were collaborators, others turned out to be nationalistic heroes who wouldn't just cook but explicitly did it against the enemy.

In my film cooking became a representative element of the basic diversity of human nature. Every chef tells one story and thus gives one recipe on how to behave. And while doing that every one of them can be seen preparing a meal. I see the act of cooking as a metaphor. The result was not only a meal but also a well prepared story. For me as a director it was an important choice not to moralize on the subject and the resulting attitudes chosen by the chefs.

### The kitchen as a stage

In my film I looked for environments that corresponded with the story that was told: Either the places where the story had taken place (we were returning to the crime scene), or places closely associated with the story. The interaction between the place and the protagonist, and the place and the story



was very important to me. Most of the time I decided to place my protagonists in their natural environment, so to speak, in the kitchen. The kitchen became the stage, the cook was the actor.

In the story of the Serbian cooks, we went back to the restaurant where they used to work, located at a recreational resort place by a pond. It was destroyed in the war, reduced to its ruins. In this absurd – and somehow even beautiful – setting it's the faces of the cooking women that tell the story. Our commentary is just a small addition.

Peter Sielbernagel's story, a cook who survived the sinking of the German submarine Hai in 1963, we shot at the Sylt Island, during a slowly approaching high tide. The cooking as well as the story-telling by Sielbernagel start at low tide and the improvised camping kitchen is set up on solid ground. As the story gets more dramatic, the water level is rising, and finally the water washes away the pots, the table, the Schnitzels (the same type Mr. Sielbernagel made on the day when the submarine sunk), and everything slowly sinks to the bottom of the sea. Thus, the story changes from a the concrete to the abstract or, in other words, to a metaphor.



In this sequence (which reminds me of Baroque theater) I wanted to disengage from a specific setting because the battle of the submarine cook is no longer a fight against a specific country or an enemy, but he is rather fighting against his own fate: Peter Sielbernagel was the only man to survive the sinking of the submarine, as he was accidentally found by a fishing boat after sixteen hours on the open sea.

### Cooking and filmmaking

In the process of cooking, the ingredients are transformed as they are mixed with other ingredients, by the effects of heat, and by mechanic interference. What is happening is a qualitative transformation of the ingredients. A similar thing happens during filmmaking: I refine the motives, cut the excess parts, I mix up stories and meanings, and even mechanically manipulate my protagonists. But what attracts me the most about filmmaking as well as about cooking is the process of transformation. Sometimes I bring together unusual raw material and I want to see what the resulting combination. For instance I brought together a warm-hearted German baker, who baked bread for Wehrmacht, and a Jewish baker, who wanted revenge and in poisoning



German officers, who were captured by the Americans at the end of WW II. Or, I let people simmer in the stew of their memories. I have them tell and retell their stories over and over again that finally the unnecessary ornaments and side motives evaporate and the only most important things remain: the thick broth (consommé), the authentic opinions about war and about their own way of surviving the war.

Just like cooking, when making a movie timing and continuity are most important. The montage of the film requires to be well timed and balanced. What is being shown and what needs to be conveyed should not be left on the cooker too long. Otherwise there is a risk of overcooking. On the other hand it also needs enough time to be well done so that the audience can digest it all well.



### Bringing memories back to life

The film is based on the narration of stories that happened in the past, in a time span of sixty years. It was my task to bring these memories back to life. When I look at the film today I realize how significant my own personal background and my childhood are for the way I narrate.

In the course of this conference I saw Hans Dieter Grabe's film *GESCHICHTEN VOM ESSEN* (2008) for the first time. I am fascinated that he uses the images in his films so sparingly and precisely. His films are built on the faces of his protagonists. He uses very little archive material or other footage. The words of his protagonists turn into images, in the heads of the spectators. His style reminds me of the simple Protestant churches, where the experience from the revelation of truth is founded on the word and on trust in the word.

On the other hand I come from a place where the Catholic Church meets the Orthodox Church and the stories are based on colorful images, intense (and at times kitschy) metaphors. I grew up during socialism, when the word lost practically all its value; at home we spoke about things that could not be discussed at school; in school we said things that we did not believe at home. As a consequence, I developed a certain reservation towards the spoken testimonies of people.

I kept this reservation when I made my graduate thesis film, *THE MORYTATS AND LEGENDS OF LADOMÍROVÁ* at film school. Based on personal stories of the inhabitants of a small village in Eastern Slovakia, I tried to tell the history of the region. The film opens with a chronicler who does not want to appear in the film and he is trying to discourage me from making it by saying: «People

never say the truth, they don't remember things correctly, they make things up because they love stories.» And so I decided in the very beginning that the image should have first priority in telling the stories of the people and the spoken word should come second.

My primary aim is to portray history. And for me that means retelling it by the means of images. But these images are not found that easily. It's not a matter of just putting up a camera and then record and show what's out there. The portrait of the world I want to show is the world that I have in my head. Unfortunately I don't have the perfect recipe for how to move the world from the inside of my head onto the screen and from the screen into the heads of the viewers. However, I can give some examples on how I worked with memories in my film.

During our extended research, while interviewing 106 cooks as possible protagonist, I was looking for images that would attract my attention. I found them in the story of an abandoned German soldier running away from Russian tanks in a corn field. I found them in the story of the Croatian specialties offered to Serbian generals, who would not touch the excellent food because they considered it an offense and an act of Croatian provocation. And I found them in Blinchiki pancakes covered in snow on the grave of a Russian pilot in Leningrad. Such images work for me on their own without oral storytelling that explains or completes them. These images were the actual building blocks of the stories in my film.

The stories of my protagonists were sometimes quite complicated and they would have been incomprehensible for an audience without further explanation. My strategy then was to look for images which could clearly express the situations of my protagonists. I changed these images into metaphors, so that the spectators would experience similar situations far from the battlefield. But of course these metaphoric images needed to be confirmed by the narration of my protagonists. Only then the images could be connected to real events in history.

The problem with telling stories in front of a movie camera is that they have been told and retold many times before to comrades from the army,



to family members, friends, sometimes even to the media. In order to avoid that the narration of my protagonist would turn out to be a mere mechanical repetition I tried to achieve that they would re-live their experiences

As for my protagonists – I like to say «my» because during the making of my film we usually develop a close relationship – I wanted to create a situation for them that would be unexpected in some way. Sometimes these were arranged situations, for instance when a group of German veterans from WW II arrives at a barrier I ask them to remove it. This leads to a reenactment of the famous photograph of German troops removing the Polish toll bar at the beginning of the Second World War. Then I used unexpected questions that they had to react to on the spot: «Are recipes the same as orders?» or: «Would it not be more efficient to eat your brothers in arms?», or the most important question of all while making a documentary: «Why?»



As a result, the protagonists reacted spontaneously in front of the camera and got over their self-consciousness while thinking about a question. This is the way of filmmaking I find genuine and authentic. In contrast to that we often see films in which people act as themselves. They pretend to do their everyday work while being watched by up to ten members of a film crew. Even a simple scene like some people are having their morning coffee by the window is usually far from being true. Because – in reality - we are recording their game of how to act themselves for the camera. I try to avoid this by putting the protagonists in a situation unnatural to them. And I admit it from the very beginning. The result is, that in these unnatural circumstances, we all start to act spontaneously.

Another important thing for me is that I prefer the viewer to feel and experience the film rather than just to think about it. That is why I tried to work as much as I could with what I call Pavlovian reflexes in filmmaking, which is based on strong visuals. In the kitchen scenes I shot a lot of macro-details of food: through visual perception, the viewers' taste nerves get activated and this stimulates the memories of tastes and aromas. I believe that in this way the viewers can be touched on a deeper level, they literally smell the «stench of reality».

Most of my protagonists are sympathetic nice people, who recall their war-time memories with humor and distance. Most of the stories in my film are also close to anecdotes; I do not focus directly on descriptions of the horrors and sufferings of war. But still, pain and death are constantly present. This is necessary in order to emphasize the significance of the small human heroism of my protagonists. But when I tried to show violence with archival footage, I realized that it didn't provide the impact I was looking for. As an audience we are not really impressed by the images of Algerians being executed by French soldiers as it is just one picture more in the stream of images



depicting violence and death coming at us from the media every single day. We seem to have lost our ability to experience and to feel compassion for fear, terror, and suffering of human victims.

I then decided to include the brutal «execution» of a cow by Russian soldiers in the opening of my film. It is actually the most usual way of slaughtering practiced in rural areas: the cow is made unconscious first, then its throat is cut. The several-minute long scene, during which the blood is flowing out from the white throat of the cow, while the soldiers are looking around, bored, is literally physically painful. Due to the strong visuals and the long duration of the scene, the viewer seems to identify more with the innocent beast dying in the woods than with an executed Arab in the archival footage.

– An observation which would be worthwhile to be examined closer.



For me this particular opening of the film was important. I wanted to achieve that the viewer keeps watching the film with the experience of horror and helpless dying on his mind. I am convinced that he perceives the stories of my protagonists, even if humorous, in a different way.

What fascinated me about the German baker, a nice 90-year-old gentleman, who has never hurt anybody all his life, was that despite his good nature, he was a part of the horrible system that destroyed almost all of Europe. The problem with his story was that I did not want to force him to moralize in front of the camera about his time in the Wehrmacht. But still, I needed to show the context to which his war stories belong. As I was browsing through wartime recipes, where measurements were given in tons and hectoliters, I realized that showing the recipe for Deutsches Brot for the whole German army would provide the necessary scale and context for the story of my baker.

And so I included the following recipe:

#### Kommissbrot Bread

For 18 million German soldiers

- 4 500 tons flour
- 1 350 tons baking yeast
- 3 600 tons flour mixture
- 2 385 000 liters water
- 54 tons yeast
- 157½ tons sourdough mixture
- A pinch of salt

For me, this is also one of the main topics of the film: the responsibility of the common individual towards history. As a baker he contributed to the feeding of the army of 18-million that brought so much damage and misery

to the world. Later, I decided to use recipes in every chapter of the film. This also helped the audience to find better orientation within the historic time-frame of the wars that the stories were connected with.

## Conclusion

In my film, I did not mean to express some definite moral message. For me, filmmaking is a way to explore the world around me. Similarly, the reflections made here on my visual concepts and the portrayal of memories in my film should not be considered as a «recipe». Rather it is just one of many possible ways of making a movie. For me personally, it is important whether I managed to achieve that the viewers would be asking themselves the same questions that I have been asking myself.

## Peter Kerekes

Peter Kerekes graduated from the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava in 1998 and, after his studies, continued as a lecturer and co-founded the Department of Feature and Documentary Film along with Dusan Hanak.

His first full-length documentary as a producer and director, *66 SEASONS*, had its international premiere at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 2003. The following year, Peter collaborated with fellow filmmakers Pavel Lozinsky (Poland), Jan Gogola (Czech Republic), Robert Lakatos (Hungary), and Blijana Cekic-Veselic (Slovenia) on *ACROSS THE BORDER*, an omnibus film bringing together a series of meditations on the idea of the border.

Peter has since produced and directed the documentary *COOKING HISTORY* based on eleven recipes of army cooks in 60 years from the Second World War to the recent conflict in the Northern Caucasus republic of Chechnya. This film was presented in competition at Nyon's Visions du Réel and at the International Spectrum of Toronto's Hot Docs.

(source: [www.efp-online.com](http://www.efp-online.com))

All photographs in this article are taken from the film *COOKING HISTORY* by Peter Kerekes © 2009