

THE AMERICAN DRIVER: THE AGENT OF “AMERICA IS A JOURNEY”

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*Abstract: The present article is part of a larger research theme, titled *The reversal of America's conceptual metaphors in Andrei Codrescu's prose* and depicts the way Andrei Codrescu relates in his prose to the traditional conceptual metaphors characterising the American space.*

We concentrate this time on the conceptual metaphor „America is a journey”, presenting some American iconic spaces as perceived through the eyes of the American driver, considered an agent of this metaphor. The majority of these spaces is brought to the reader through contemporary travel books, all of them making full use of photography as a supplement for the text and enhancement for the readers' imagination.

Key words: America, journey, driver, conceptual metaphor, Andrei Codrescu

Introduction

The present article is part of a larger research theme, titled *The reversal of America's conceptual metaphors in Andrei Codrescu's prose* and depicts the way Andrei Codrescu relates in his prose to the traditional conceptual metaphors characterising the American space.

Thus, we observed that each conceptual metaphor defining America can be found in its reversed meaning in the writer's prose or illustrated in elements that lead to its practical deconstruction. In our opinion, the writer observes the difference of mentality between America's founding conceptual metaphors and the contradictory reality that becomes more and more obvious to the American contemporary individuals.

The classic conceptual metaphors defining America are nowadays just elements of propaganda, cultural approaches to a theoretical ideal space called America. They are losing their significance once translated in reality, especially during the last decades, when American life completely changed.

Zoltan Kövecses discusses the issue of *where metaphors come from*. In our opinion, the conceptual metaphors defining the American space come from the American founding myths. Still, although adopted by each citizen, metaphors as "the American dream" or "the melting pot" are reflected in Andrei Codrescu's prose only to prove that the Americans fail to live by these metaphors. To paraphrase Lakoff and Johnson, the conceptual metaphors defining the American space are rather the "the metaphors they don't live by".

Therefore, we analyse several conceptual metaphors: “America is a melting pot”; “America is a salad bowl”; the American Dream; America is “the land of all possibilities”, and "America is a journey" – a metaphor interpreted through Andrei Codrescu's travel literature and its relation with America's "car god".

Relevant literature and interpretative connections

The conceptual metaphor begins its journey in the land of linguistics during the '80s, due to the work *Metaphors we live by*, published by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who explain this type of metaphor by showing that the metaphors have a larger than thought use in communication and, in general, in the human life. They also state that the metaphors are in close connection with the conceptual system created/known by each individual:

“The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor. But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines”. (Lakoff, Johnson, 2003).

Kövecses shows:

“Lakoff and Johnson challenged the deeply entrenched view of metaphor by claiming that (1) metaphor is a property of concepts, and not of words; (2) the function of metaphor is to better understand certain concepts, and not just some artistic or aesthetic purpose; (3) metaphor is often not based on similarity; (4) metaphor is used effortlessly in everyday life by ordinary people, not just by special talented people; and (5) metaphor, far from being a superfluous though pleasing linguistic ornament, is an inevitable process of human thought and reasoning”. (Kövecses, 2010: X)

Kövecses also shows that the conceptual metaphor can be conventional or unconventional (new). Regarding the American space, the same author writes that the American society is multi-structured and the American citizens are members of several ethnic, social, political, geographical, professional, and conventional groups, each group bringing its own set of biases. Thus, it is normal for the conceptual metaphors to vary depending on the numbers of appurtenances and divisions, which can become dimensions of the conceptual metaphors. Still, the researcher takes into consideration the second set of variables, named "alternative frames" showing that "the same event or thing may be viewed metaphorically employing alternative frames. Such alternative understandings divide large segments of American society, and may form the basis of important debates that characterize American society at any given time". (Kövecses, 2016)

Susan C. Strong, founder of Metaphor Project and author of *Move our message. How to get America's ear*, affirms that to catch the attention of the American citizens, the messages need to be delivered in positive frames, which must be related to certain themes, called "elements of the American story":

- The American dream – "pioneering, being on the frontier of something, creating the new, bright future, we invent ourselves b/c we are a 'can-do' people";
- The American nation – "a new kind of nation with a mission, beacon of hope, melting pot, the cradle of freedom, democracy's defender, champion & missionary, home of equal opportunity, fairness, and equity, of hope, choice, and power, the conscience of the world, rule of law, human rights, political rights, a classless society";
 - The freedom to succeed;
 - The continuous movement;

- The security of the small towns;
- From human to superhuman, etc.

Andrei Codrescu presents these elements of the American narration and the conceptual metaphors defining his adoptive country in a manner that often deviate from their initial meaning, in a reverse key, as intending to prove their falsity in practice, beyond their representation in the American collective consciousness. This is no novelty in the literature. The American literature knows many examples of critique of the American dream, in example to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Winter Dreams* and *Great Gatsby*, and Arthur Miller's *Death of a salesman*.

Andrei Codrescu's manner to criticize American society goes beyond the American dream, presenting his *Weltanschauung*. Ironically, he is, through his literary and social success in the USA, an embodiment of the American dream.

Our analysis starts from the idea that the writer manages so well to analyse different typologies of American citizens that the pages of his novels bring several views upon the world, all valid and, as often admitted, inspired by experienced pieces of reality.

Jonathan Charteris-Black writes on the critical analysis of the conceptual metaphor: "Without the ability to discuss issues according to the metaphors of our choice, we are limited in our means of persuading others how we see the world. Without the ability to be critical of metaphors, the only alternative would be bland acceptance of the metaphors of the others. (...) Metaphors both reflect and determine how we think and feel about the world and, therefore, understanding more about metaphor is an essential component of intellectual freedom". (Charteris-Black, 2004).

In an interview for "Steaua", Andrei Codrescu answered to several questions related to the significance of spaces in his creation. Related to the American space and its conceptual metaphors, the interview notes for the question "Do you consider that the American space, as described in your essays and novels, can be attributed with metaphors as Land of Unlimited Opportunity, Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave, etc.? Which is the America you do prefer?" the following answer: "These are all clichés, futile, useless, belonging to a language related to the communist propaganda, disseminated in brochures for tourists. One, with only half of sense, can only laugh when hearing them. The Americas I describe has nothing to do with these silly things. My literature refuses any type of province biases *a priori*" (Vănoagă, 2013).

„America is a journey”: „Oh, Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?"

The car is one of the gods of the American dream. The identity of each American citizen starts with the driver licence, obtained as soon as turning 16 years old. This act is by excellence accepted as an identity card in any official context.

Susan Sontag considers the photograph as a proof: "Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we've shown a photograph of it. [...] A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened". (Sontag, 1990) Full of humour, Andrei Codrescu recounts how, without a driving licence, after his emigration in the USA, he presented to a policeman his photograph from the cover of a poetry volume instead of a driving licence.

This autobiographical event is present by Codrescu in two texts: the essay *Against photography* and the travel book *Road Scholar*, where he also writes: "An American without a car is some kind of sick animal, a snail without its shell. Living without a car is the most pathetic form of

poverty, even more, disgraceful than not owning a house. A car-less person is a stationary object, a prisoner, a non-adult". (Codrescu, 2005).

„Oh, Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?" is part of the lyrics of a well-known song belonging to the iconic singer Janis Joplin; the lyrics are inspired by a poem written by Michael McClure, a representative poet of the Beat generation, powerfully influencing Andrei Codrescu. The car-god becomes the pretext of the travel book *Road Scholar*. Contacted by the TV producer Roger Weisberg, Andrei Codrescu is proposed to make a travel through America and to video document his ride around Florida. The interest in making a movie was older, but the future traveller/writer had no driving license and the project was suspended for two years. Later, Weisberg came with a more interesting proposal: driving classes paid by the studio and the filming of the classes and travel. *Road Scholar* becomes not only a revealing journey around the American territory but also an initiating journey, aiming to approach the car-god, using the most accurate honouring instrument – the driving license.

At the beginning of his adventure, Andrei Codrescu humorously presents some of his attempts to learn how to drive, right after arriving in the States, each time in the company of his wife. The first attempt was in an old Ford automobile, still a very resistant car, apparently endowed with eternal life, since it survived almost falling into an abyss. The second attempt took place in the yard of a church, in the presence of another car belonging to the pastor. Andrei Codrescu hit the pastor's car and concludes in his text using biblical meanings: "I think I was possessed by something. That's the only reasonable explanation. The devil likes cars and is usually in love with beginners. The devil even has an orgasm if he meets a beginner driving in the yard of a church". (Codrescu, 1993). The last attempt was before the journey that became the pretext for the movie and later the volume *Road Scholar*. This last attempt ended in a bath in a river, without stepping out of the car.

As the car receives existential valences in Codrescu's adoptive country, the explanations for his failure in the relation with the car are searched concerning the author's parents, following a Freudian approach. On one hand, the writer's mother is presented. She became a driver after emigrating in America. She was a terrible imprudent driver, but very sure on her abilities, giving chills on the spine to any person travelling in her car. Even if the mother was a small woman, under the impulse of the car-god, she became able to intimidate even the most experienced male drivers. On the other hand, the father is presented in a Freudian manner, as a reason for jealousy and competition. Andrei Codrescu's father is described as an experienced driver, owning a luxurious Packard, in communist Romania, during the times when this car was mentally assimilated to the car of the political police, which took people from the streets and made them vanish forever. The writer's father used to let his son alone in the car for hours when the father visited his mistress. One of these times, the little boy used the keys of the car, started the engine and drove the car right into the windows of a store.

Presenting the parents' behaviour when driving, the writer disguises, in fact, his real trauma - the divorce of the parents during his childhood. All the photos sent by the mother from America to the Romanian relatives present her next to her big car, as a revenge for the years of marriage.

Conclusions

"America is a journey" appears with a double meaning: knowing America and knowing the self, involved in an initiating journey. Andrei Codrescu uses this metaphor to describe America, to depict

his American transformation and also as a motif in novels as *Wakefield*. The present article presents only partially the dimensions of this conceptual metaphor in the writer's prose and strict relation with the role of the driver, without taking in consideration the social and spiritual dimensions of the journey, which will be further discussed in other studies.

The car-god in relation with space is described by Andrei Codrescu as follows: "These old cars are terribly looking like America, as I imagined it before getting there - a country in construction, where the distances and the oddities cannot stand against youth and desires. Long, insolent, shiny, rapid...". (Codrescu, 1993)

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