SELECTION OF ARTICLES ON LATVIAN FILM: HISTORY AND PRESENT TRENDS

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It is a characteristic feature of small countries that the cultural processes are closely affiliated with the political and economical processes. It especially refers to such expensive and time-consuming branch of art as film. The changes in Latvian political situation in the 20th and the 21st centuries is the cause of the existence of two radically opposite systems of film production. During the years of independence of the Republic of Latvia (independence declared in 1918) – in the first two decades of the independence, as well as after the independence was restored in the 1990’s – the Latvian film industry consisted of many small-scale film production companies, lacking both substantial production equipment and their own financial resources. These small companies usually focused on a particular creative individual (during the 1920’s mostly on cinematographer, since the 1990’s – on director, seldom - on producer), who strives to bring their personal artistic interests to life. Lack of financial funds inevitably confronts the artistic ambitions with the interests of financial sponsors (either of the country, of local government, of a social organization or an individual).

The country’s interest in national films followed by a targeted support began in 1934 along with the authoritarian coup d’état. All the initiative of private film production was slowly being taken over by the government. Exactly for this reason, after the occupation by the Soviet Union, it was not particularlry difficult to include Latvian cinema into the united USSR system. The occupation period by the Soviet Union is usually associated with mass-production filmmaking period that flourished in the 1970’s/1980’s, when the Riga Film Studio managed to produce up to 10 motion pictures every year. It also produced a significant number of documentaries and newsreels. Along with the Riga Film Studio, which was monitored by the USSR State Committee of Cinematography, a comparatively small number of films was also released by the Latvian Television.

The commencement of the Republic of Latvia is closely linked to the ideas of Latvian national culture, which was built on a fundamental educational system, accessible to all. Unfortunately film, except for newsreels which was a statutory part of every cinema show, was never announced to be a part of ‘culture’, therefore it was
left for private initiative without state support. Only a few enthusiasts were engaged in filmmaking, but they did it with the conviction that cinema is a relevant tool of patriotic education and shaping of national awareness. Film had to include information about how the Republic of Latvia was formed, about the freedom fights etc., endeavouring to promulgate "nation’s aesthetic and ethical values.” This tendency became a significant feature of the films during the first period of Latvian independence. The first Latvian feature Off to War (Es karā aiziedams, 1920, Vilis Segliņš) noted the necessary aspects for the future national cinema: roots in Latvian mythology (it is indicated by the film title itself – it is a line of a folk-song) and consciousness of the national mission. It is substantial to notice that already with the first film the later important tradition of inviting famous theatre actors to play in a film was formed. Just like in Scandinavia and other Baltic countries, nature became an essential part of film narratives. National melodrama – that could be the appropriate term of the genre which dominated the interwar period. Circumstances that fatally affect people’s lives and feelings, were defined by particular or symbolic events regarding the formation of the Latvian Republic. The highest achievement of this genre in silent cinema was Bear-slayer (Lāčplēsis, 1930, Aleksandrs Rusteķis), but in the sound period the film Fisherman’s Son (Zvejnieka dēls, 1940, Vilis Lapenieks).

There are several stages of Latvian cinema industrialization, closely affiliated with the political and economical situation in the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that already in 1940 it was planned to produce 5 to 6 motion pictures a year, Latvia reaches this amount only in the beginning of the 1970’s, after that the number rapidly rocketing to 9 – 10 films a year. From 1940 until circa 1965 there is a strong tendency of talking about industrialization preliminary plans and step-by-step preparation for mass-production. The period from the middle of the 1960’s until approximately 1989 is a phase of well-organized industry, that was followed by a dramatic collapse of film production.

Regarding the united study system and Socialist Realism as the only accepted artistic method in the Soviet Union, we can speak of Latvian classical cinema as a fixed aesthetic system/stylistical tendency of a particular way of production and political structure. Artist’s individual choice when thinking about the essence and overall style of their piece of art was very limited. Within the Soviet film industry most brave innovative ideas were axed in an early development phase. The director
Rostislav Goryayev has said: "The history of that period of Latvian cinema is actually an unimplemented film history."

Aesthetics of the Soviet cinema classicism that developed from the conception of Socialist Realism, formed very slowly, and it has both national and chronological features. It is significant that development of Latvian cinema was closely related to theatre, continuous interaction between the two art branches occured in acting as well as in elements and principles of staging and also in drama. Plays became the fundamental basis for screenplays and vice versa, strengthening and connecting the classical expression on stage and on screen. A hallmark of narratives was slow concentration of action – during the post-war period plays and films used to portray several years or even decades, although from the second half of the 1950’s the scope of chronological actions significantly decreased, from an epic scanning to just one basic event, from groups of characters to only one main hero or a pair of them.

The dogmatic, rigorous period of Socialist Realism is linked with Josif Stalin’s administrated totalitarian system. In Latvia, during the so-called Stalinism small-film period only three films were released: Sons (Dēli, 1946, this film was a co-production with the production Studio Lenfilm and was completely filmed there, the only connection to Latvia was plainly within the plot); Homeward with Victory (Mājup ar uzvaru, 1947) and Rainis (Rainis, 1949). The main source of income for filmmakers during this time was Soviet film dubbing in Latvian, which was considered a very important task ideologically. Both the originally made and dubbed films had to create new – Soviet Latvian mythology. Basically a whole new system of values and timing was established, the creation of the world was equalled with the proclamation of the Soviet rule in Latvia in 1940.

A peculiar passage from the independent Latvian to Soviet ideology was presented by the film Homeward with Victory, which was originally planned to be made by Sergey Eisenstein but he turned the offer down and never returned to his native city Riga. The film was directed by Aleksandr Ivanov, a director from Lenfilm, and Eduard Tisse was charged with the duties of cinematographer, allowing the local professionals only to assist in the process.

Homeward with Victory was the first post-war film originally shot in Latvian. It seems that one of the film’s main tasks was to consolidate the conviction of Latvian troops mobilized by the Soviet Army that they really had fought for their Fatherland. A strong emphasis in the film is placed on the fact that the very land saved from chaos
was Latvia, Mother Latvia, who blesses her children. In later Soviet years such imagery was simply impossible. The symbolization in the film is very powerful, but it organically grows from the system of characters and their actions. The visual expression in the film is mainly rooted in classical style: audience is oriented in space, change of plot is gradual, compatibility of action axis, character viewpoints etc. are constantly taken in account.

Although the most important film during the Stalin era (the correctness of the film was approved by the Stalin Prize) was Rainis, which was filmed by a newcomer from „the centre” – experienced Yuliy Raizman. Rainis is a typical film of probably the most important Soviet genre of the time – biopic. The main task of the film was to portray the most famous Latvian poet Jānis Rainis (1865 – 1929) as a poet of the proletarian revolution. The film had two ideologic purposes and generally two kinds of audience: residents of Latvia were to be convinced of the deep roots of bolshevism within the Latvian culture, but refugees and exiles received the message that a human being is only valued in his own land, so to convince people from the West to return to Latvia. Rainis had a lot of screenings abroad at the turn of the 1940’s/1950’s, mainly in Displaced Persons Camps, and reports about audience and the reaction of press were submitted to the Soviet competent institutions.

After Stalin’s death, in the second half of the 1950’s began the period of Latvian national cinema rebirth that possessed the characteristics of national subjects and screenplays as well as local staff in film production. During the last years of this decade the first professionally educated Latvian scriptwriters, directors, and cinematographers (all graduates from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography) entered the industry. Return to Latvian themes and sensibilites in cinema is possible also due to adaptations of Latvian literature classics. The decade’s most impressive and powerful film was Frost in Springtime (Salna pavasarī, 1955, Leonīds Leimanis, Pāvels Armands) which was based on the novel by Latvian literature classic Rūdolfs Blaumanis, using archetypical environment and people’s characters rooted in national culture. Frost in Springtime is established as an earth film by the very first scene: the monumental posture of a ploughman against stormy skies. Earth, existence provided by it, becomes the reason of the film’s main character Madara’s tragedy – she gives up love and marries a rich owner of a household, but after his death strives to get her love back. The film involves remarkable episodes which not only visualize the spirit of Blaumanis’ novel, but are of significant value.
themselves. Madara’s offcast servant Andris and his mother’s traveling from one work place to another must be especially singled out – five years shown in only two minutes, generally picturing not only the destinies of particular people, but also those of all landless peasants of Latvia.

Madara’s inner refusal from her own child is presented suggestively, when she thinks that the child is an obstacle to her relationship with Andris. Despite the additions of Socialist Realism and softer turns of the tide, Madara is one of the few rarely tragic film characters during this period. It was also esteemed by film professionals, for example, in December 1955 at a public discussion in Moscow Cinema House Madara was compared to Lady MacBeth because of the dramatic cast and the remarkable acting performance by Zigrīda Stungure. The tragic aspect of Madara’s character is especially surprising in the Soviet film context, because it is based on woman’s unfulfilled sexuality. *Frost in Springtime*, regarding its sexual tension, actually has no competitors in the Soviet cinema, one of the rare counterparts being *Malva* (*Malva*, 1957, Vladimir Brauns) which was filmed in Ukraine and the main role was played by Latvian actress Dzidra Ritenberga.

At the turn of the 1950’s, during the ”thaw” period of the Soviet Union, which opened doors for a new wave of the Soviet cinema, the political situation of Latvia became complicated. As a result of party’s alignment inner fights an active campaign against Latvian bourgeois nationalists began, all things ‘Latvian’ were considered potentially dangerous and Latvia became the most submissive Soviet republic to colonization politics. At the end of the 1950’s Riga Film Studio had to give up almost all of their plot approved ideas – films that were supposed to be made mostly by new directors. It stroke the production and the lowest point was reached in 1962 when only one feature film and one short film was released – it meant return to the same amount of film production as it was in 1956. Once again Russian directors were invited to work here with plots sent from the *centre*. At the time when other USSR republics were re-evaluing history or analyzing today’s events, Riga Film Studio was mainly focusing on classical Russian opera adaptions. However, in a few films Riga Film Studio eventually managed to reach a style close to Western new wave aesthetics – one of the turning points was the short film *White Bells* (*Baltie zvaniņi*, 1961), Ivars Krauličis graduation work from the Moscow Institute of Cinematography. The film about a little girl in a big city is a work slightly on the edge between staging and documentary, giving a sense of freedom and reality unprecedented in Latvian cinema.
Passers-by who accidentally look into the camera or stare at the film crew, the camera viewpoint associated with the little girl, varied, dynamic urban environment (the new Riga train station and market are shown, the two places which were included in almost every city film of the 1960’s) and its colourful characters – everything in this film gives evidence of new ways of artistic expression in Latvian cinema, of new filmmakers’ ability to sense the taste of the world even behind the iron curtain.

Formally a fiction film, White Bells became the actual beginning of the so-called Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema. Quantitative and quality wave rolled where resistance was weaker – towards documentary cinema. Only feature-length documentaries had to be confirmed by Moscow, the rest was the inner issue of the Republic, the audience of these films was noticeably smaller, therefore the admissible freedom much greater.

The most important subject for the Soviet new cinema was national history, connecting public political events with the personal freedom of an individual. The brightest example of this tendency in Latvia was the film Richard, I Remember Everything! (Es visu atceros, Ričard!, 1967, Rolands Kalniņš), that went a nearly decade long path to reach a screening and the Soviet censorship watched over the production of this film very carefully. Viktors Lorencs, scriptwriter, started to put his idea into action in 1955. Forgive Me, Homeland!/Dzimtene piedod!... was originally planned as a story of one of the most complicated events in Latvian history – the Latvian Legion that was formed within the Nazi Army during the WW2. Starting with the “thaw” period many articles included stories of troops who were mobilized by force, many young people died because of lack of understanding of what was really happening. Taking into account that one or another link between the legion and German army existed in most Latvian families, it seemed self-evident to find a place for legionnaires in the mythology of Soviet History. It was important to those who were themselves mobilized and even to those who were born after the war to eliminate the mark of guilt of Nazi crimes, to present them as victims of particular historic circumstances. But those who had fought within the 43rd Latvian Riflemen Division in the Soviet Army interpreted these endeavours to justify legionnaires as an attempt to put both sides to comparison – the Riflemen were the right fighters, therefore this was an enormous insult. Filming was put off again and again until in the middle of the 1960’s Viktors Lorencs reshaped the screenplay, especially influenced by Andrzej Vajda’s film Ashes and Diamods. Accordingly, Forgive Me, Homeland!...
was changed to *Stone and Flinders* (*Akmens un šķembas*). The most memorable episode in the film – the burning of a piano at the legionnaires ball – was a reference to Vajda’s motion picture. Soon after the film’s post-production the title (referred to as too uncertain and misleading) was changed once again, and in April 1967 the film was released in Latvia under the title *Richard, I Remember Everything!*. 

Exactly a year after the release of *Richard, I Remember Everything!* in April 1968, the cinemas started showing Aloizs Brenčs’ film *When Wind and Rain Hit Against Your Window* (*Kad lietus un vēji sitas logā*), which was an adaption of Arvīds Grigulis’ documentary novel by the same title. The events in Brenčs’ film – the year of 1947, underground resistance movement against the Soviet power – is a historic continuation of the war events shown in *Richard*. National resistance during the post-war years was not a taboo subject, on the contrary, it was even expanded, of course, remaining within an ideologically correct aspect of the Soviet power. Throughout all Latvian Soviet period art the so-called class war in Latvian countryside, partisan or, from the Soviet perspective – ‘bandit’ attacks on local Soviet power structures etc. were shown with a wide amplitude and, surprisingly, created a rather deep impression of a serious and long-drawn nation war.

Harijs Liepiņš extensively and precisely portrays his character Ansis Leinasars, who has secretly arrived from Sweden as a signal man, changes of psychological state. Leinasars, a fighter certain of the idea about Latvian independece at the beginning of the film, after facing his countrymen’s selfish interests, ignorance and betrayal, slowly realizes the utopism of his own idea and eventually feels relieved when the KGB arrests him. In opposition to the Soviet tradition, national enemy Leinasars is portrayed as a very handsome, smart, active and determined person, who at least in the beginning is ready to make a sacrifice for what he believes in. These very features differentiate Leinasars in the film and Leinasars in Grigulis’ novel who is depicted as severely primitive, unsympathetic and without any ideas whatsoever. Leinasars in the film, accordingly to the spirit of the 1960’s, is a thoughtful and reflective heroe.

The changes in Leinasars’ emotional state are largely represented by the film’s environment which was created accordingly to the factual detail of the period, although in a number of episodes environmental realism gains nearly surreal and symbolic quality. The brightest example of it can be witnessed in the episode where Leinasars visits one of the possible signal men but finds him dead in a coffin – the
surroundings help the actor show the shift in his consciousness without words or dashy outer methods, as he understands his missions’ fatality.

During the 1970’s, the Soviet film system openly turns to commerce and entertainment, prevalence and cliches of particular genres become clearer, individual Soviet film studios are even related to specific genres. Crime films in the 1970’s/1980’s have a special place. It seems that the crime genre became the most gratifying screen for the real Soviet life not the one prefered, this genre could offer the widest character and psychological type diversity. Although crime films in the 1970’s/1980’s were efficiently produced by nearly all Soviet film studios, it was Riga Film Studio that during the industry’s zenith was identified with detective films.

In most cases crime film action takes place in cities, in Latvian films – in Riga. Neglected suburbs with oblique wooden houses, badly lighted streets, scary stairways, communal apartaments, the market, customer overcrowded shops and either very posh or very poor cafes etc. were often shown in criminal Riga. Just like in Hollywood, a lot of events take place at nighttime when it’s raining. Environment’s harshness made crime films distinctively different from other Latvian films where surroundings were often sterile and overly beautified.

A great significance in Aloizs Brenčs’ films is placed not only on visual roughness but also by exactness of detail and concreteness of scene. Contradictions of crime genre and Socialist Realism were to be overcome by putting a stress on the fact that any crime in the Soviet life was an exceptional and uncharacteristic phenomenon. A good example to show the Soviet system’s request for standard, for positivism is Aloizs Brenčs’ psychological crime story To Be Unwanted (Liekam būt, 1976). It originated from Andris Kolbergs novel with the same title where the main character Voldis Vitérs has actually become an unnecessary, forsaken human being, and at the moment of this tragic revelation he commits suicide. In the film we are introduced with a policeman, a contemporary of Voldis, who believes that even a recidivist can change for better. The policeman’s strand enriches the general message at the same time trivializing it, imposing humanism from the Socialist Realism point of view where an individual is only a part of society and has no rights to decide and to respond alone.

Unlike the classical Western crime film where the investigator is mostly a loner, co-operation between collegues was emphasized in Soviet films. It was rather popular to show police and prosecution staff members working in pairs. A pair could
be used as a successful drama construction, unobtrusively explaining the crime process as well as an addition to narrative – it was either friendship between two men or romantic feelings between two investigators of opposite sexes, or relationship between a mentor and an employee.

The increasing significance of the private life in cinema directly manifested in melodrama genre during the 1970’s and the 1980’s. The Soviet cinema used a particular melodrama type – collision between characters and circumstances – to present stories of the past. The most memorable example to be mentioned here is Aloīzs Brenčs’ seven-episode TV film *The Long Way Through Dunes* (*Ilgais ceļš kāpās*, 1981), widely popular in the USSR – it was one of the rare Soviet melodramas that paid more attention to fatal circumstances, in other words – historical events in Latvia from 1939 to 1960, more than romantic relationships, therefore taking after such world-renowned epics as David Wark Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, Victor Fleming’s *Gone With the Wind* and Andrey Mihalkov-Konchalovsky’s *Sibiriada* (Сибириада).

The biggest contribution to the subject of Latvian history by *The Long Way Through Dunes* was indirect, shown using visual signs yet still very emotional mentioning of the holocaust, also the story of Marta’s and her little son’s exile to Siberia. Appropriately for a melodrama, Marta is sent to Siberia as a victim of fatal circumstances, while other Latvian exiles are shown as fascists whose deportation was well reasoned.

The other type of melodrama that was mostly used for modern subjects, was exploration of people’s emotions and relationships, avoiding direct description of particular social situation. Nevertheless, melodrama as a slightly derided genre, considered very primitive, was useful as a veil to carry out more serious research on human existence which rarely agreed with the optimistic standards of Socialist Realism, as well as for filmmakers to have stylistical offsets from the standard of realism as it was.

It could be manifested as, for example, depiction of action as character’s subjective emotional experience not objective reality, also resigning strict narrative logic, adding various parallel storylines, excessive to the plot. Boris Frumin’s film *Family Melodrama* (*Ģimenes melodrāma*, 1976) is a good example of such offsets. A rare occasion when a genre is mentioned in the title, but it is merely a delusion. The story in fact was not about a sensational passion but about a lonely woman’s (a
remarkable performance by Ludmila Gurchenko) life with no hope and about her teenage son (Valeriy Kargin), who his teacher is very worried about and in an objurgatory manner says to his mother: „The boy is unordinary, he stands out of the whole setting.” Both the mother and the son are people standing outside the system - becoming nearly antisocial elements. At the end of the film the mother tries to commit suicide – it is shown indirectly because suicide was a taboo subject in Soviet cinema.

Family Melodrama could have been an unfulfilled dream about a family. An essential feature of such films was ”a lonely woman” that is a common character in Soviet cinema in the 1970’s and the 1980’s. In Latvian cinema, a woman’s loneliness during the so-called developed socialism period, in other words, the time of prosperity, was portrayed in Dzidra Ritenberga’s film Three Minute Flight (Trīs minūšu lidojums, 1979). This piece of art steps over the well-known chamberstyle, typical of such stories about loneliness, because Justīne, just like Aloizs Brenčs’ Marta, is also a symbolic character whose fate shows the political events in Latvia. Ritenberga’s next film, Evening Version (Vakara variants, 1980), already was a typical story of a woman’s unfulfilled feelings, same as in Varis Brasla’s film Wish me Bad Weather for the Flight (Novēli man lidojumam nelabvēlīgu laiku, 1980), Rainy Blues (Lietus blūzs, 1982) and a few other films where the issue of loneliness appears not so directly but is hidden within stories about relationships.

One of the very few directors who were not afraid to use the name melodrama and who plainly stated their wish to work in this genre was Gunārs Cilinskis. He, together with director Varis Brasla, who admitted himself an adherent of chamberstyle and spiritual crochet, created the most distinguished piece of Latvian melodrama – the film The Lake Sonata (Ezera sonāte, 1976). Its special significance and durability in Latvian culture is achieved by balanced combination of character systems and nationally tinted archetypes with global melodrama structure and precisely used language of classical cinema. The film clearly showed that within the artistic character system in Latvian culture many universal gender constructions prevail, very little influenced by the particular socio-political situation.

As a repulse to the current colonization politics and, at some point, as a counteraction to cultural commercialization, during the 1970’s an intensified interest in Latvian identity arises, and the clearest examples of this phenomenon could be observed in Latvian folklore and etnography. Folklore in both the republics of the USSR as well as in socialist countries of Eastern Europe became the indirect
resistance form against general Russification and forceful globalization of culture. A bright example of this tendency is the so-called folksong play Blow the Wind! (Pūt vējiņi!, 1973, Gunārs Piesis) that was an adaptation of Jānis Rainis’ play of the same title. Rainis’ play as well Piesis’ film where action takes place in undefined historic times turned out to be unexpectedly topical in the 1970’s, not only regarding the etnography but also as an impetus to talk about national culture development possibilities, about changing ethical values, gender issues, alcoholism etc. Gunārs Piesis managed, it seems, to achieve the impossible – he made the national ornament melt into a realistically created story, presenting the symbolic characters as psychologically made images, heightening relationships between different classes, therefore nobody could rebuke him for sliding into modernism.

In the film The Boy (Puika, Aivars Freimanis, 1977) which was based on Jānis Jaunsudrabiniš’s childhood memory sketches, the filmmakers strived to show the event duration which would then allow the rhythm of the film smoothly blend with the rhythm of a 19th century homestead.

Although the strict production cycle typical of a study system along with the available budget and overall presumptions of dynamics necessary for films did not allow to fully bring their ideas to life, the flow of natural lifestyle is nearly physically perceptible in the film. The events’ social background was relevant to the film’s stylistically natural part that was partly required by Moscow and partly by the director’s own choice, pursuing descriptions of a servant boy’s situation in the country presented in the book.. Unlike other Latvian films about children, for example Naughty Emil (Emīla nedarbi), Child of Man (Cilvēka bērns), also the fantasy film Tom Thumb (Sprīdītis) where the perception of childhood world is largely made up by grown-up’s nostalgia, in The Boy the childhood is tougher and not only because of the boys poverty, but mainly because of his ultimate loneliness. Jancis’ only friend is lame Jurks, the rest of the adult world is comprehended relatively, without being in touch with it, often observing its manifestations with astonishment or even horror.

The ornamental part of The Boy gives the homestead a certain generalization and deepening, turning it into a myth about Home, in an even broader sense – a myth about Death and Rebirth. The mythological layer in the film is achieved by cyclic circulation of time, picturesque landscapes which now and then allow us to perceive the homestead and the boy living in it as a part of a greater Universe. A number of close-ups stand high above factuality, especially in the beginning, when in open-fire
lighting we are introduced to all of the household. The sequence of portraits is closed by lame Jurks who winks to the audience...

Jānis Streičs is considered probably the most important film director in Latvian national culture during the 1970’s and the 1980’s. Streičs’ constant directions (the first one – Shoot Instead of Me/Šauj manā vietā, 1970) coincided with the golden age of Latvian filmmaking industry. After the release of his film My Friend – A Light-Minded Man (Mans draugs – nenopietns cilvēks, 1975), Streičs became a well-acknowledged master by professionals and vast audiences, he efficiently used the means of expression canonized in classical cinema and nearly fulfilled the requests of the socialist art system to produce pleasant, life-witnessing realistic stories with a certain dose of didactics. However, after becoming a system genius, Jānis Streičs managed to learn how to subjugate this system, slowly but tenaciously, growing far beyond it and becoming an Author. Jānis Streičs is the only director who accomplished to build a relatively stable bridge from centralized cinema system to the splintered filmmaking style of the renewed Latvian Republic, consequently keeping up with developing his own style and refining his subjects.

Compared to Hollywood classical cinema, Jānis Streičs can be likened to Frank Capra whose name has an enormous echo in American culture and has become a unique mark of national consciousness and personal insight. In 1981, Jānis Streičs said: "It seems that I have constantly moved in the same direction. Since My Friend – A Light-Minded Man my mind is occupied with one issue – our Latvian self-manifestation on the big screen."

Limousine in the Colour of a Midsummer Night (Limuzīns Jāņu nakts krāsā, 1981) became the most essential national film by Jānis Streičs. The film itself has now grown into a national myth, the situations and texts present in the film have become a part of national folklore just like Casablanca in American culture. In fact, the film is a valuable metaphysical research on nation’s mentality, a kind of etnography where many ethnically dominating archetypes are used. In Limousine, just like in Noah’s Ark, many codes intrinsic to Latvian culture are assembled, but those, as in a myth, manifest not as a creative narration by author’s hand, but as a real world where every object labels itself and is easily recognizable. Limousine’s mythology has universal roots but local characteristics: specific signs of space and time, as well as movement into profundity – historically and geographically created communities deep within one’s consciousness. The films captures and at the same time communicates
with nation’s mental structure at crossroads of eras, at the time when the Soviet system has established itself and accepted relatively soft (not anymore violent) manifestations in communication with an individual, thereby unnoticeably changing the fundament of their soul. Nonetheless, outer changes still leave deep traces in every man’s soul as well as nation’s common soul.

Jānis Streičs’ film *Child of Man* (1991) became a peculiar phenomenon in classical cinema period – the production was started when the Soviet rule still existed, and was finished already in independent Latvia. The film is a story of coming-of-age and an unconditional first love during the beginning of the 1930’s in Eastern Latvia, Latgale. The structure of the film is complicated and multilayered. Objective reality that is so common in classical cinema can rarely be found in the film – mostly all the events are shown from the main character’s point of view, in his interpretation. The life in the film is created as a chain of comic gags – each of the episodes having its own drama, at times it’s internally sealed, then again it’s wide open. The realistic world in the film frankly mixes with the main character’s imaginary scenes, though they do not stop the flow of the film because of their psychological causation. The religious motives are simple yet colourful, such as they usually are in children’s illustrated Bible stories or splint pictures. The images of saints get faces of Boņuks’ closest people, even their manifestations are based on Boņuks’ daily life experiences.

On the 21st of August 1991 Latvia regained the status of an independent country. Latvian film industry had already been entitled considerable independence since the second half of the 1980’s, but, along with the collapse of the USSR, the financial resources were depleted. The 1990’s were significant with overly depressive situation within film production – it especially affected fiction films. During the first decade of the 21st century a slow increase and stabilization of film production could be observed, yet still the budget for filmmaking from public funding equalled that of a single low-budget film.

Film industry in Latvia is overseen by the National Film Centre, established on the 4th of December 1991. In 2010, the Film Law was passed, making the frame for the structure of the field and defining the principles of film funding from public treasury, yet issuing no permanent guarantee of funding for national cinema.
Dāvis Sīmanis

**Untraditional Visual Forms in Latvian Cinematography: the Soviet Period**

While most of Europe witnessed introduction of innovative filmmaking trends following World War II, contrasting sharply with former classical traditions, almost no such modernist developments could be seen in Latvia. Firstly, the extremely low cinematographic output in the Soviet Latvia – only four feature-length live-action fiction films were produced during the first post-war decade – could not provide a sufficient platform for creative experiments. Secondly, filmmakers were subject to ideological control from Soviet officials, and principles of Socialist Realism was enforced in Latvian cinema. Thirdly, the cinematographers who were responsible for the visual aspect of movies either came from the ranks of war cameramen or were extremely influenced by the glorification of Soviet armed forces that the former adhered to.

It is important to establish that the notion ‘untraditional’ in this text does not imply that the visual form in the Soviet period is not conformed or in accord with certain cinematographic tradition. In reality certain new cinematographical techniques practised by Latvian filmmakers were already approbated in European cinema. Thus the untraditional locally is traditional internationally. This is based on fact that the most of the elements that emerged as innovations of cinematographical practice in this period were defined as oppositional in comparison with the previous period. In the 1950s ad 1960s the innovations were rarely based of new technological resources but more often were result of creative idea or dramaturgical emphasis. Visual solutions were searched for to conceal or extenuate glorification of a Soviet man exercised by socialist realism. To accomplish this goal the long sequences of milieu served well as isolationistic approach of the camera, focusing on milieu as unit unaffected by the socio-political factors. Moreover the filming of milieu allowed juxtaposing a man to nature and demonstrating human non-omnipotence. In this context the relationship drama Frost in Springtime (Salna pavasarī, 1955) by Pāvels Armands and Leonīds Leimanis, based on short stories by Latvian author Rūdolfs Blaumanis, stands out. Cinematographer Emīls Guldovs accomplished extraordinary powerful visual effect by developing a distinct conflict between nature and individual, thus providing the sequences of nature to indicate the presence of human conflict. For
instance, in the sequence where the main protagonist Andris has left home un carries his ailing mother in a cart, different seasons take turns in an instant showing the length of passing time. The sequence ends with a shot where both characters disappear behind a hill crowned by one sombre tree, signifying human desperation in front of the powerful nature and at the same time notifying the death of the ailing mother.

However it is only possible to speak of the first seeds of modernist visualisation in the Soviet-era Latvian cinema starting with the latter half of the 1950s, mostly regarding the documentary genre or the so-called newsreel tradition. Much more simple means of expression were sought instead of the previous gushing heroisation to bring the subjects and their surroundings closer to the actual environment. Some of the most interesting visual approaches belonging to said new tradition of film humanisation can be found in the documentaries by Uldis Brauns and Aivars Freimanis – particularly due to the fact that both filmmakers, each in his own way, restored the emphasis on the quality of the cinematographic image, making it dominate over the narrative of the film and open new cinematographic dimensions. In White Bells (Baltie zvaniņi, 1961), an Ivars Kraulītis’ documentary stylisation featuring cinematography by Brauns, a small girl travels the urban milieu providing a contrast with the frantic movement and rush of the city; a new kind of framing emerges, no longer rooted in the principles of classical painting. The cinematographer includes symbolic urban objects – cranes, towers, building details – into the wide black-and-white shot; liberated from canons of standardised beauty, they take on a much deeper conceptual and poetic meaning. It was the experiments with framing and the black-and-white anamorphic shot that singled out other films made by Brauns already as a director – Beginning (Sākums, 1961); Construction (Celtne, 1962); Worker (Strādnieks, 1963) – from the rest of the Riga Film Studio production.

Another non-traditional cinematographic trend in the Soviet Latvian filmmaking can be traced to a figure like Aivars Freimanis. While Freimanis embraced adaptation and combination of a diversity of visual approaches, his contribution to the appearance of the caméra-stylo principle in Latvian films deserves a special mention. Transferred to the Latvian soil, the French tradition translated as a free image shot with a moving hand-held camera, constantly following the subject and aiming to keep them in the focus of attention – as seen, for instance, in Freimanis’ fiction film Apple in the River (Ābols upē, 1974) featuring cinematography by Dāvis Sīmanis. The hand-held camera
ensured the credibility of the pseudo-documentary love story and helped the viewers connect with the screen. New lighter cameras equipped with zoom options and adaptable focusing distance also helped the director Uldis Brauns in his quest for visual innovations in his fiction film debut The Motorcycle Summer (Motociklu vasara, 1975). The cinematographers, documentary filmmakers Ivars Seleckis and Kalvis Zalcmanis, made ample use of the POV shot principle, hitherto rarely seen in this part of the world; hand-held camera pan shots, as well as, thanks to the mobility of the camera, completely non-traditional high and low angles. In all, it was the uninterrupted ‘lightness’ and natural movement of the camera that allowed to create a feel of simultaneous activity and fragility of the two main characters. Footage shot with hand-held cameras were also often used, creating a presence of explosive and sporadic consciousness in the subjects of the films.

In the late 1960s and in 1970s the Riga school of poetical documentary developed and became the driving force in search for extraordinary visual forms in cinema. In this period documentaries in comparison with feature films had relatively lesser control on the material, so they strived to determine the way how to overcome the content parochialisms of the commissioned topics. Visuality became the main condition of these films; in some occasions it was even possible to completely avoid the presence of ideologically charged voice-overs. The most striking paradigm of the period’s visual Gesamtkunstwerk is 235 000 000 (1967), film created by the most significant documentalists of the era. It was shot by four different crews in the whole Soviet Union under the supervision of script writer Herz Frank and director Uldis Brauns. Film contrastingly captures various moments in the life of an individual as well as the society (rites, ancient traditions, official ceremonies, daily activities), seeking the mysterious link between individual and the masses. The cinematographers Uldis Brauns, Rihards Pīks, Valdis Kroģis, Ralfs Krūmiņš approached the event and the environment, employing all their skills to add artistic values to their realistic observation. The novelty was not solely in the fact that the film combined visual styles of different cinematographers but also in the employed techniques – the film is dominated by search for particular graphic structures in the mundane activities of individuals, as well as images of abstract industrial or urban details in order to bestow a completely new metaphorical meaning. To intensify the level of subjectivisation the camera focuses on close-up portraits and records to the utmost the minute emotional changes in the human facial expressions. In this kaleidoscopical film were are no text
but camera creates its own visual narrative, and the authors achieved to detect a different level in Soviet routine, not poisoned by the ideological elements. Experiments in visual form initiated by the school of poetic documentary were continued in works by above mentioned Frank and his collaborator, the great Latvian filmmaker Juris Podnieks. In their work it was already possible to discern certain elements of cinematographic approach typical of the modernist style, one of the most vivid examples of which is Ten Minutes Older (Vecāks par 10 minūtēm, 1978), one of the most significant short documentaries in the history of cinema. It captured a range of emotion without a word being spoken. One shot for 10 minutes, no cuts – a perfect snapshot of really observing life. Audience is drawn to watch the facial expressions of a young boy, interested in the puppet show before him. We don’t see the show itself only terrified looking child who afterwards starts to smile. Film’s key is the dramatic effect of watching somebody watching something. The always present camera thus participates in two radical modes, combining two visual problems. There is this total presence provided by the child’s close-up and the capturing of changing emotions in his facial expressions. At the same time there is the radical continuity, provided by the long take, which alters the viewer’s temporal perception allowing to fixate emotions almost as historical phenomena. Ten Minutes Older marks one of the first examples of the use of dimmer light by the Soviet Latvian filmmakers. It was done in order to provide the needed time of exposition and at the same time it emphasized the child’s unhampered concentration on the show. In this respect Frank acts as someone who predicts the future; he sets up the camera very precisely and waits for the progression of events. Accordingly this elaborated visual conception works as a layout for documentary occurrences.

In the 1970s there were also apparent some endeavours to conceptualize the image in feature films. One of the most impressive examples is The Boy (Puika, 1977), film by Aivars Freimanis based on the autobiographical novel The White Book by Latvian author Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš. The action takes place in Latvian countryside at the end of the 19th century. The farmhand boy Janka is confronted with the strange world of adults and he is trying to understand and come to terms with the order of things. From the very beginning the conception of the film conceived by the director Freimanis and cinematographer Dāvis Stmanis was to attach the filmed images to the painting style characteristic to the period. Thereby The Boy to a certain extent is a rehabilitation of painting and a model of cinematic neo-pictorialism. Particularly associated with
idealism, memories and spiritual retreat film works as an answer to modernizing forces which Soviet period presented as ideological restraints. Movie shows cinematographer’s favour towards a soft-focus technique and natural lighting. Reconstruction of natural light was closely associated with skilful imitation of candle light, albeit at times it was restrained by fairly dark lenses that were obtainable in the period. Filmed subjects were drawn from landscape and rural domestic life, and transformed into allegoric and symbolic entities by camera work. Pictorialism effect was also enhanced by compositions characteristic to painting, as well as slow tracking shots that almost penetrates this pictorial frame.

Since early 1970s also the use of rapid and fast motion shots becomes apparent in Riga film studio pictures. Mostly these shots were exercised in comedies in order to compress or expand time. Nevertheless it was not a widespread practice.

And yet the most significant development in the visuality of Latvian filmmaking was closely linked to the socio-political and socio-economical transformations in the Soviet Union of the 1980s. The stage in the history of the country opened with the emergence of the glasnost and perestroika concepts and came to conclusion with the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the renewed Latvian independence in 1991. The socio-political transformations meant the necessary conditions and opportunities for a new modernist reflection to be introduced into the local film industry.

At this period, it is finally possible to localise the concept of modernism in the context of Latvian filmmaking so that it would actually fit its linguistic meaning: the topical and the new, with the topical value is sharp contrast with the old one. The modernist trends in Latvian films are best described by the French post-war film theorists’ views on the emergence of a new movement centred on the dichotomy of the classical vs. the modern. The most typical features of the trend were best captured by the film theorist David Bordwell in his analysis of parametric narration: abstraction, reflection, subjectivity. Abstraction as ambiguity of interpretation; reflection as the intellectual involvement of the viewer into the construction of the storyline and subjectivity as the subjective nature of the story, as often as not connected with the character’s own mental picture of the world. The actualisation of said elements also conform to the opinion expressed by Alexandre Astruc: namely, that cinema has to offer the same intellectual expression as literature or drama, as well as the philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s view that modernist cinema is the best representation of the abstraction of modern-day thinking.
The school of modernism that applies to Latvian filmmaking during the late stages of the Soviet regime, as well as the works typical to it, does not represent the physical world, focusing on the image of the mental world instead – an approach rooted in the view that it actually is the existing world. It is a certain trip of consciousness, described by Deleuze as a mental prosthesis for the lost connection between man and the world. The narrative unfolds from the position of ‘modern alienation’ and ‘lack of faith in the world’. There is no explanatory structure, no reality-motivated episodic structure, no focusing on the character and the human condition. An ample representation of various mental states is featured instead: permanent ruptures in the narrative motivation, causal relationships, chronology and unity of space. The films are dominated by a style that produces a symbolic connection between images instead of a realistic one. These principles of forming parametric narration and parametric aesthetics actually apply to a small number of Soviet Latvian fiction films of this period: Photograph of Woman and Wild Boar (Fotogrāfija ar sievieti un mežakuili, 1987, directed by Arvīds Krievs, cinematography by Dāvis Šimanis); Happening with MZ (Hepenings ar M.Z., 1987, directed by Aivars Freimanis, cinematography by Andris Seleckis); Dear Life (Dzīvīte, 1989, directed by Aivars Freimanis, cinematography by Valdis Eglītis); Days of the Human (Cilvēka dienas, 1989, directed by Jevgēņijs Paškēvičs, cinematography by Dāvis Šimanis); Beyond (Ārpus, 1989, directed by Una Celma, cinematography by Uldis Millers); Eve’s Garden of Paradise (Ievas paradīzes dārzs, 1990, directed by Arvīds Krievs, cinematography by Dāvis Šimanis).

The objectives of cinematography have to match the director’s concept; thus we can conclude that the above-mentioned elements of separate Latvian films also manifested themselves in a very practical way in the stylistics of the cinematography. Undoubtedly, with the emergence of a new narrative and structure, the specific features of the cinematographer’s work changed accordingly. Modernism associates the collaboration between the director and the cinematographer with whole montage units (variations, permutations, combinations) instead of separate shots; however, to detect the presence of modernist trends in the work of cinematographers of the period, we have to establish the set of technical elements that define a shot.

While realistic cinematographic optics were mostly used until the 1980s, correspondingly, 18 – 75mm and, particularly, 40 – 50mm lenses that make it possible for the film shot to imitate human eyesight, new optical devices were introduced with
the need to transform the reality. Ultra-wide (12mm) lenses were used to illustrate the
deformed and metaphoric nature of the world, as well as tele-lenses (up to 200mm),
compressing space and demonstrating the fact that the subject found himself in a
physical or psychological lock-up. Optical solutions were connected with the use of
various reflections, mirror images and light refraction to construct the internal reality
of the character. The approach of using optics in conjunction with a mirror image was
well demonstrated in Photograph of Woman and Wild Boar, a detective story about a
Afghanistan war veteran and a strange relationship tangle he is drawn into with his
old time love interest – his high school teacher. In this particular film the main
character’s taking a look in a mirror signified an insight into his or her fantasies and
capture of a new, potentially non-existent social dimension. Thus the realities of the
past and the present overlap with each other and the murder mystery plotline serve
only as a Mac Guffin. The application of transfocator lenses also changed: the
modernist theory branded transfocation as a certain ‘penetration’ into the character.7
To illustrate this, a good example was the Happening with MZ fiction-documentary
film about Latvian composer and writer Marģeris Zariņš.
Frames with limited depth of focus range acquired wider application, thus detaching
the character from the rest of the world and isolating them in their own reality. The
silent close-up and back close-up were developed, in both cases observing the small
depth of focus-range and the static nature. On separate occasions, extreme close-up
was used as an abstract shot that bore no relevance to the narrative, yet enhanced
dramatic mood by accentuating a detail. Experiments with depth of focus-range can
be clearly discerned in Dear Life by director Aivars Freimanis. It is a biopic about
Krišjānis Barons, the man who collected and arranged thousands and thousands of
Latvian folksongs in the 19th century. Although the film is biographical and reveals
the protagonist’s different stages of life: becoming of age, student years, his life-work
and old age, it does it in a non-linear, floating form, also using contemporary
stylizations, folksong staging and dream sequences. Cinematographer Valdis Eglītis
complemented them with different filters, also a method typical of the period. Various
diffusion filters created the symbolism of a dream; graduated filters transformed the
colour and amount of light in various parts of the frame, also resulting in a non-
realistic image. Concerning the composition, the canted shot with a displaced horizon
was used more frequently to allude to the subject’s eccentricity, unusual mindset or
insecurity in their surroundings.
Another obvious modernist trend was the appearance of the ‘long take’ or the nothing-happens-approach in fiction films. As one of the radical continuity segments, it presumes shooting extra long footages, separating the experience of time from the development of narrative, which is typical for a depiction of an internal journey. Fine example is Beyond - film about a lone human being who wanders around post-apocalyptic world searching for possibility of love albeit everything what happens indicates only increasing social dysfunction and impossibility of communication. In elaborated black and white image cinematographer Uldis Millers merges both temporal and spatial units. Alongside other Latvian cinematographers of the time, he employs an untraditional diagonal movement of the camera and vertical movement of the camera crane, achieving an effect of parallel dimensions and making it easier for the characters to commute between them.

The use of the ‘long take’ is counterbalanced by a form of fragmented discontinuity as seen in Happening with MZ: the camera interrupts actions leaving them incomplete and carries on in a completely different environment or time, creating a general effect of nervousness and insecurity. The emphasis is on the postmodern play between different realities from which one is the reality of the filmmakers. Likewise the film’s main protagonist is not the composer Zariņš himself but an actor who is wearing a rubber mask with his face as well as cinematographer Andris Seleckis becomes one of the characters.

The principles of film lighting was also underwent significant changes. Dāvis Sīmanis, the cinematographer of a number of movies mentioned earlier (The Boy, Photograph of Woman and Wild Boar; Eve’s Garden of Paradise; Days of the Human) used the chiaroscuro principles of lighting, retaining a low general exposure yet intensifying the contrast and lighting only a few specific elements of the composition. What helped apply these principles of lighting was the – admittedly, limited – availability of film stock of the Fuji or Agfa brands, much more sensitive and nuanced than the Soviet-produced Svema film. There was a specific trend of involving unrealistically coloured filters in the lighting, completely transforming the tone of the realistic environment and making its symbolic nature more vivid. With the emergence of finer technology and chemistry, some tonal changes were also achieved at the lab. For instance, in Photograph of Woman and Wild Boar the effect of red and blue lighting filters are further enhanced by temperature changes at the lab. Thus a number of unmistakably symbolic episodes are easily discerned among the realistic
ones, immediately indicating with the help of colours that the character is now operating in the context of their memories and internal reality while the on-screen action stays realistic throughout the footage.

The use of various kinds of multiple exposure increased significantly; as often as not, however, the method was not used as an element of spatial consolidation – more as a fusion of different states of consciousness. Two, three and even more exposures were produced with the camera, using extremely exact technical calculations: creating overlapping exposures at a lab meant risking the quality of the film stock. One of the superb examples where cinematographer succeeded in this process was Days of the Human. Film is based on a story by prominent Russian writer Andrei Bitov and tells about a man in two different stages of life – in his youth and in his mature years. His mother and his older girlfriend, later his wife and daughters accompany his strange journey through life that mixes dream, awake, different levels of reality rendering the film as a constant means of subjectivization. The finale of Days of the Human saw a quadruple exposure demonstrating the unity of past and present with the psychoanalytical world of the protagonist.

At the time we are concerned with here, expanded technical means and introduction or borrowing of said filming techniques largely placed the aesthetic value of the cinematographic image on equal grounds with the narrative, perhaps even allowing it a dominant position. The stage was comparatively short, however, coming to halt with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of centralised movie production. Shortage of funding meant that movies were no longer normally shot on 35mm film; the use of video formats expanded. The introduction of video aesthetics to filmmaking made it impossible to use the previous means of expression. The old principles of lighting could no longer be used: the video formats had a small matrix; interpolations; a very limited colour range; a large depth of focus-range, etc. All of that made it very difficult to speak of the visual techniques used by the Soviet-era cinematographer in more recent Latvian films; individual cinematographers, the likes of Gints Bērziņš or Jānis Eglītis, borrowed separate techniques to create a filming style of their own.

Finally, we can safely conclude that, in all, the entrance of new untraditional visuality into the Soviet Latvian filmmaking was a slow process. Only separate early modernist attempts and the presence of abstraction and stream of consciousness in a number of movies produced during the final years of the Soviet era can be traced back to adoption of new filming techniques. Thanks to the introduction of aero filming,
nonstandard vertical and horizontal movements of the camera, a wide range of optical devices, enhanced tonal lighting and, during the post-production process, a more complex colouring and combined shots, an opportunity arose to highlight various levels of subjectivity and intensify the presence of an internal journey by the characters or the author – namely, the defining elements of cinematic modernism.

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Latvian Documentary Cinema: the New Generation

In Latvian cinema, similar to national cinemas elsewhere, the term “documentary” has served various purposes. In the 1930s, newsreels and so-called “culture films” were, in part, manifestations of state ideology of the time, enhancing the nationalistic notions exerted by the newly-formed Latvian free state.

After the World War II, starting with the Soviet occupation – official and “parade films” - documentaries and newsreels defined by the guidelines of Socialist realism, bearing a little relevance to the term “documentary”, were the only modes of documentary cinema.

In the 1960s, during the so-called thaw period of certain blossoming in social life and art, the movement of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema was characterized by a cinematographic change in vision (towards individualism) and quest for the cinematic/artistic poeticism in shooting ordinary people and quotidian life. The movement had a profound effect on the formal and ideological aspects of films of the later decades to come. In the late 1980s, director and cinematographer Juris Podnieks was one of the foremost figures to reveal the essence of the political and social friction of the society through intimate individual portraits.

Presently, Latvian documentary cinema is in a state of great diversity. Following the years of output mainly controlled at the state level, 20 years after the end of the Soviet rule, Latvian filmmakers have come to define their very own, vastly varied, subject matter and cinematic language. The films produced in the recent years – and mainly by the relatively young generation of filmmakers – could be loosely described as adhering to several thematic groups. First, there are explorations of history, conflict, World War II, and ensuing trauma: films consisting mainly of archive footage compilations, present-day research on the subject and interviews, attempting to present a multi-lateral view on the controversial historical topics. Another, slightly different, is a body of films dealing with examinations of personal histories through an individual prism, focusing on a single or several characters to convey the ways collective history has altered (and vice-versa) personal histories. The third group involves a look at contemporary social issues in Latvia, jarring political conflicts, variously deprived individuals, etc. Next, there is a kind of “exotic stories”,
portraying either places or protagonists out of the traditional bounds of “nationality”. Lastly, there are films - poetic sights transcending the quotidian life used by filmmakers as a source material, creating their very own, highly formalist structures.

Of the first group, one which achieved the highest national and international resonance, is The Soviet Story (Padomju stāsts, 2008, dir. Edvīns Šnore). The film reveals the crimes - genocides/massacres of millions of people – of the Soviet regime, equaling them to those of the Nazi Germany, also drawing parallels in regard to the structures of politics and propaganda tools of the two totalitarian powers. Its scale is vastly international indeed, tackling such issues as the Ukrainian famine extermination of 1932/33, Katyn massacre, and holocaust, as is the voice-over narration in English, however the grander historical narrative implies the effect it had on Latvia, always in the midst of the superpower collisions, victim and both willing and unwilling accomplice in the crimes. The form of the film is that of a narrative-collage – the film’s story is revealed gradually, and consists mainly of archive footage and interviews with massacre survivors and international area scholars; as such, its function and effect – apart from a few personal testimonies from the eye-witnesses - is matter-of-factly informative, despite the harrowing subject matter.

Controversial History (Pretrunīgā vēsture, 2010, dir. Ināra Kolmane) is an exploration of various viewpoints regarding the events and aftermath of the WWII and the commemoration days in Latvia associated with crucial events of the time. The controversial interpretations of history are presented through three individuals of different nationalities – a Latvian, a Jew, and a Russian. The film, by following each of the protagonists while they revisit sites of war crimes or reveal their own life stories, gives a multilateral view of the collective history, and poses such questions as why a day which for some still means glorious victory, for others is the beginning of a period of occupation and oppression, and how is the Latvian society dealing with these jarring and still very topical viewpoints on annual basis today. Children of Siberia (Sibīrijas bērni, 2001) is the first of series of films by Dzintra Geka, dealing with the Siberian deportations of 1941 and 1949, in 2011, the 9th film was released. Dealing with more recent issues of war and trauma is Debt to Afghanistan (Parāds Afghanistānai, 2008, dir. Askolds Saulītis) – a film recounting the experiences of the the Soviet war in Afghanistan, which required many lives of Latvian recruits, whose mobilization was a matter of compulsory order of the state.
The astonishing fact here is the topicality of these issues still today and the inexhaustible opportunities for yet another and another take on the past, unraveling, writing, and re-writing collective and personal histories with persistency which again and again testifies to the deep-seated sensibilities of a nation undergone decades of political, social, and individual trauma.

The second group of films also probes historical schisms dating back to the decades before, during, and after WWII, but does so through a specific character. The most intriguing here is the range of techniques used – reenactment, drawn animation, collage, and animation of photography, compilations of archive footage – are all employed in a specific way so that the techniques and aesthetics would mirror the very subject of the film. A curious film among these is the award-winning animated documentary *Little Bird’s Diary* (*Čiža acīm*, 2007) by one of the most promising Latvian animation directors Edmunds Jansons. The film is constituted by animated, authentic hand-drawn diaries by a woman who has thus documented the story of her life, from as early on as 1945. The humorous images, which could be described as a kind of naïve art, are accompanied by the voice-over narration by the protagonist, thus making the film all the more intimate and personal. Another two films, historical “reconstructions”, deal with two significant Soviet propaganda-associated figures in art, dealing with the uneasy subject of the artists’ willing or unwitting role as an accomplice in the construction of a mass ideology. *Klucis: Deconstruction of an Artist* (*Klucis. Nepareizais latvietis*, 2008) is a painstakingly elaborate film by Pēteris Krilovs, a director of the older generation of Latvian filmmakers. A vivisection of the life and art of Gustavs Klucis, the Latvian-born Constructivist avant-garde artist, who created much of Stalinist propaganda with his pioneering work in photography. As a film about an essentially modernist artist, *Klucis: Deconstruction of an Artist* is a veritable deconstruction, wearing theories of early avant-garde on its sleeve, with aesthetics mirroring the montage theories of another Russian avant-garde trailblazer – Sergei Eizenstein, as the film dissects, assembles, and reassembles Klucis’ artworks, persistently drawing movement and space out of the two-dimensional images, the collage-like principle enhanced by the layering of staged events, historical documents, archive footage, voice-over narration (partly done by the director himself), etc. Based on the diaries of Klucis and his wife, fellow artist Valentina Kulagina, official regime documents, and historical accounts, it is both an intimate story and at the same time also a dissection of the grander historical narrative, exploring the irony of the fate of
propaganda-collaborators like Klucis – to a certain extent, he was an accomplice in the atrocities of the regime which eventually turned against him, arresting and shooting him in 1938 with a charge of conspiracy against the state. These controversies, multiple layers of “truth” and “narrative”, are aptly manifested in the collage-like aesthetics of the film.

*Version Vera* (*Versija Vera*, 2010, dir. Ilona Brūvere), though similar in theme, represents a radically different mode of expression – it is an impressionistic, soft-focus-shot, dreamy and very mannered version of the famous Soviet, Riga-born sculptor Vera Mukhina, possibly best known for her massive work *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*. Comprising the time period starting from the turn of the 19th/20th centuries to the 1950s, *Version Vera*, too, similarly to *Deconstruction of an Artist*, follows the protagonist’s life chronologically, in parallel to the historic events. Again, based on personal diary texts, the film consists of stylized staged action and archive footage; but the overall sentiment here is more feminine, almost naïve, there is not as much sense of tragedy and drama, and emphasis is not so much on action as emotion and reflection. If it can be surmised that the film, similar to *Deconstruction of an Artist*, portrays a character who is certain of the ideological righteousness of her and the state’s actions, and is a player the system she is living in, it certainly is almost redeeming, as if justifying Mukhina’s deeds and stressing the notion of the artist as a medium of his/her time, and thus the regime he/she is serving.

What is intriguing in regard to the last two films, similar to the group of films dealing with war trauma, is the eagerness to study grand-scale narratives and protagonists in unremitting pursuit of their relation to the national identity and culture – a task not easily accomplished, as the subject matter more often than not is too controversial to offer any unanimous conclusions.

In a similar, though less grandiose manner, Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen, an expat Latvian-Norwegian documentary filmmaker, in *My Mother’s Farm* (*Bekons, sviests un mana mamma*, 2008) tells the story of the political and social changes in the post-war Latvian society, agricultural reforms, work at collective farms, Soviet ideology and propaganda through the life of her mother, compiling personal photographs, present-day interviews, and archive footage. It is, again, a story of a single person, but, because in many ways it is a typical example of a whole generation, its properties are eventually generic and collective.
Collective fate and sentiments of a generation are also explored in Antra Cilinska’s sequels to the Soviet Union smash-hit (seen at its time by millions) documentary *Is it Easy to Be Young?* (*Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, 1986, dir. Juris Podnieks), which, in a daring approach, revealed, through previously unseen candid interviews with several young people, the hopes and anxieties of the last Soviet generation. *Is it Easy to Be...?* (*Vai viegli būt?*, 1997), *Is it Easy...?* (*Vai viegli...?*, 2010), revisit the persons interviewed in the first film after 10 and 20 years respectively, and in doing so, create a fairly accurate portrait of the social and economic changes Latvia and its society have gone through since the restoration of the independence in 1991. In its personal approach, the trilogy bears a striking resemblance, in its attempts to define the general by exploring the individual and the personal, to the famous *The Up Series* (1964 - 2012) by Michael Apted.

The next group of films, and possibly the one which should be singled out most, can be characterized as a look at the contemporary situation in Latvia, especially though the prism of socially deprived individuals and jarring political conflicts.

Andris Gauja is one of the most promising and scandalous young documentary filmmakers thanks to the controversial subject matter he chooses to portray in his films. His second documentary feature, *Victor* (*Viktors*, 2009) was a daring and poignant portrait of a dying man, offering a bleak and uncompromising look at the inevitable and not steering away from despair, anger, and pain associated with it. The following film, *Family Instinct* (*Ģimenes lietas*, 2010), went on to cause a major controversy at home and to be screened and awarded at international film festivals. It is not easy to define what is more shocking about the film – its subject or the way it is presented. A portrait of a closely-knit community in a rural Latvian village, it is, essentially, a story about incest – the film’s protagonist is a young woman living with her brother, who has fathered their two children, - heavy substance abuse, moral degradation, social ineptness, even mental disabilities; however the element of fiction is jarring. It appears that although the original situation may not be far from what is seen on the screen, most of the dialogues, monologues, or pieces of action simply cannot be referred to as “documental”, as everything seems staged, re-played, and organized, the people portrayed acting as characters in a well-structured play. Thus the question really is that of the most controversial element here – are these the degraded subjects or they way they are exposed? In this sense, the film bears a
striking similarity to an earlier film that managed to cause quite a stir upon its release – *Worm* (*Tārps*, 2005, dir. Andis Mizišs) portrayed the eccentric life of two individuals living below what would be considered a sufficient standard of living, and the unexpected tragedy of the death of their infant in the most uncanny circumstances.

*Us and Them* (*Vai citi?*, 2006, dir. Antra Cilinska) and *Homo@LV* (2010, dir. Kaspars Goba) could be called “political documentaries”, as, through exploration of several individuals and mass events, they tell a story about a bi-polar society and mass propaganda events, exacerbated by the manipulation exerted by media and political parties. Reviewing issues of conflict rooted in national affinity and sexual orientation respectively, they illustrate the fear and loathing towards “the other” and draw an appallingly radical picture of a society divided by simplistic notions of “right” and “wrong”. Certainly these films are a form of anthropological survey and possess the properties of a litmus paper used to measure the degree of democracy, be it treatment of gay rights or ethnic disagreements.

*Children of Karosta* (*Karostas bērni*, 2010, dir. Jānis Jurkovskis) and *Behind the Wire* (*Aiz žoga*, 2010, dir. Liene Laviņa), films by recent film studies graduates at the Baltic Film and Media School, also add to the trend of grueling subject matter and setting of new Latvian documentary cinema. In the first, it is the Karosta region – a former Soviet army base near one of the main port towns in Latvia, now an environmental and social disaster – barren, destroyed, unnecessary, – and its inhabitants that in a way mirror the wider socio-political crisis in Latvia at large, showing the economic recession, unemployment, depression, and the serves as a critique for social system unable to support those less fortunate. *Behind the Wire*, by taking a close look at a detention centre for young offenders, is a dissection of young adult aggressiveness, bewilderment, and ignorance, where physical confinement mirrors emotional and mental constraint.

Overall, characteristic features of these films include rough, scandalous subject matter in the present time and the young filmmakers dare and willingness to look and to see individuals, situations, and social schematas gone wrong; however one wonders if, at such an early age, they really have the capacity of understanding and tackling these kinds of topics in a way it is deserved? Certainly credit should be given for not steering away from raw, “unpretified” imagery, showing a kind of fascination with low.
Another group of films could be titled “exotic stories” – unusual either in their subject matter, attitude towards the portrayed, or both. How are You Doing, Rudolf Ming? (Kā tev klājas, Rūdolf Ming?, 2010, dir. Roberts Rubīns) is a veritable exception both in sentiment and subject. Its protagonist is a 13-year old boy, engaged quite passionately in scripting, hand-drawing, projecting, and adding his own sound effects to his own films. Despite the common bait of the “eccentric character”, this film, whose motto could be “creativity conquers all odds” is refreshingly life-affirming and naturally funny – a rare phenomenon in Latvian cinema.

Andis Mizišs, the author of the provocative Worm, has been constantly working with less than usual subjects and geographic areas. His The Church will Arrive in the Evening (Vienkārši pops, 2007), which portrayed a floating Russian Orthodox church, situated on a barge, and its journey down the river through remote villages in Russia, was followed in 2010 by Jaguar’s Corner (Jaguāra kakts, 2010), set in Rincón del Tigre, Bolivia. It’s portrayal of a Latvian Baptist missionary settlement, established in 1946, is a truly startling account of the clash between the missionaries and their cause – the native tribe of Ayoero Indians there. The film exposes the hypocritical, colonist and racist notions at the heart of the mission (at one point, one of the missionaries confesses that “all the savages should be shot dead”), and their persistence despite the fact that their attempts to “civilize” the local tribe have proved a complete fiasco. The scenes of missionaries praying are juxtaposed with indigenous people tearing up and greedily consuming pieces of meat around a fire, accompanied by sounds of a traditional instrument, thus aptly signifying the uncrossable bridge between the two cultures, with the missionaries remaining separated from the Indians as much as by their notions as the high fences and padlocks on their property, used to guard their belongings and ideas from thieves and unwelcome influences. Apparently started as a research on the ex-pat countrymen, the whole project gains an uncanny wider implications, tackling the notions of evolution, race struggle, culture, and civilization.

The last body of films could be labeled as “poetic takes on quotidian routines”, and although there are only a few filmmakers that could be related to this variety, their work has been quite resonant in the context of national documentary cinema. Laila Pakalniņa is, undoubtedly, the most distinguished and internationally acclaimed of present-day Latvian directors, the only whose films have been included in the official selection programmes of Cannes, Berlin, Venice, as well as Karlovy Vary,
Locarno, and other major film festivals. Despite having made several acclaimed fiction films, she is first and foremost known as a prolific and successful documentary filmmaker, with films characterized by subtle irony and profound social insight. Her initial international break-through, documentary trilogy *The Linen* (*Veļa*, 1991), *The Ferry* (*Prāmis*, 1994), *The Mail* (*Pasts*, 1995) (the latter two won the FIPRESCI award at the CannesIFF), and, paradoxically, even her fiction film *The Shoe* (*Kurpe*, 1998) were very much rooted in the notions of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary cinema, seeking lyricism in mundane locations – hospital premises, remote countryside, dilapidated urban suburbs, by presenting them in starkly black-and-white, carefully composed frames, static long takes, thus giving a nod to the recent movement of “slow cinema”. Her latest works, such as *Three Men and a Fishpond* (*Par dzimtenī*, 2008), *On Rubik’s Road* (*Pa Rubika ceļu*, 2010) and *33 Animals of Santa Claus* (*33 zvēri Ziemassvētku vecītim*, 2011) extend the notion of “slow” quite consistently, by making the spectator, willing or unwilling, grasp the notions of “real time” and detached, serene observation of the most quotidian of actions in our lives, be it fishing, cycling, or walking dogs.

Two very similar films by director Dāvis Šīmanis could be best described as elitist works which are best understood locally - *Valkyrie Limited* (2009) and *Sounds Under the Sun* (*Pasaules skaņa*, 2010, co-dir. Gints Grūbe) both document the fragile process of composing and performing music - *Valkyrie* follows the staging of a major opus magnum – the Wagner opera – by a locally acclaimed theatre and film director, while *Sounds* is an account of the collaboration of a distinguished Latvian choir and 17 composers from all over the world, commissioned to write “Songs of the Sun”, which are then performed by the choir. Both films expose the anguish of a creative process and the mundane actions, interiors, and conversations that pertain to it. Narrative is fragmented, elliptical, and the overall poetic sense of imagery is compounded by music, which plays the main role here, at least more important than the dialogue. Essentially, the director juxtaposes the divine act of creating or interpreting with plain, unadorned everyday settings and activities, trying to touch the divine through humble encounters, conversations, and observations, thus occasionally catching a glimpse of its manifestations.

On the whole, even if there is no single common theme or direction that could be pinpointed when looking at present-day Latvian documentary cinema, the variety of trends are there to stay, as long as the ever-topical needs of unraveling and taming
the past, looking the conflicted present boldly in the eye, or simply transforming it to fit one’s own philosophical and artistic convictions are alive.

Inga Pērkone

**Modernism and Latvian Cinema. The Case of Herz Frank**

In the 20th century, modernism entered the artistic culture as a testimony to the maturity of art, at the same time manifesting a strong opposition to the rigid classical tradition, a canon often attempting to choke all the living elements of culture.

There are three features that most often characterize the modernist form: abstraction, subjectivity, reflexivity.¹ The form of the work of art is abstracted from the traditional modes of representation of nature or reality, pertaining to conceptual structure or system. The conceptual systems are largely represented as subjective, as findings of an author. Reflexivity means the uncovering of the artificial nature of the artefact. Reflexivity becomes visible when the author comments on his/her own text. A commentary can be understood in the broadest sense here – for instance, Laila Pakalniņa expresses the artificial character of her films by making the protagonists of *Oak* (*Ozols*, 1997), *Bus* (*Autobuss*, 2004), *Papa Gena* (2001), and other films, freeze after seemingly naturally captured actions or address the camera/audience directly, reminding them of their participation in a staged, organized process. Quoting Kovacs, one can say that “Reflexivity creates a hole, so to speak, in the texture of the fiction through which the viewer is directly connected to the aesthetic apparatus of the fiction”.²

After World War II, and also in the 1960s, when modernism was particularly topical in world cinema, the aesthetics of Latvian cinema were defined by the method of Socialist realism. Socialist realism, of course, had its own, Soviet ideology driven tasks, but in its stylistic pursuits it did not differ from the classicism of Western cinema – its main objective was to present fiction as reality, to absorb the spectator into the illusory reality of the screen.

To a certain extent we can talk about the emergence of a background of modernization in Soviet - also Latvian - cinema, beginning with the second half of the

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¹ As the theoretical base of this article I have employed one of the best - in my opinion - books on film and modernism: Andras Balint Kovacs. Screening Modernism. The University of Chicago Press, 2007
² Kovacs, Andras Balint. Screening Modernism, p. 225
1950s. Instead of the imposing, heroic style a more intimate mode of expression was sought after, the characters and environment became more humane. Filmmakers tried to move closer to reality, to represent it through the subject.

At the beginning of the 1960s, trends of modernization appear in Latvian cinema, which, especially in documentary film, were manifested as pursuit of reflexivity and subjectivity. At the 1977 European Documentary Cinema Symposium film scholar Ābrams Kleckins announced that in the 1960s, especially in the films of cinematographer and director Uldis Brauns, the reinstitution of the cinematic image on screen became apparent. It was proved that the main element of cinema is image and its possibilities are truly infinite.³

At that time the young filmmakers explored the essence and possibilities of their medium – film, and were first looking for them in visuality, just like the French cinema impressionists of the 1920s. Claims to authorship emerged, emphasizing one’s personal style and perception of the world. Kleckins said: “Every frame in Brauns’ film seems to be shouting: I was shot by Brauns! Similarly, every scene in Freimanis’ films testifies: I was seen by Freimanis.”⁴⁵

Nevertheless, it is not possible to talk about conscious and fully-fledged manifestations of modernism in the 1960s Latvian cinema. A modernist was almost an offensive term in the Soviet culture of the time. The authors were not allowed to, and maybe also could not depart completely from the so-called reality of life – either reality perceived by senses or merely an ideological fiction.

One of the most influential modernism theoreticians of the 20th century, Clement Greenberg, stressed that his definition of modernism (“art as aesthetic self-criticism”) involves also the fact that the prolonged quest of keeping up the aesthetic standards disseminated and strengthened the belief that art, its aesthetic experience, is a value in itself. It does not have to teach anyone, does not have to praise, tell, or solve anything, art has to distance itself from religion, politics, and even morality. All it has to do is be good as art.⁶

This kind of concept was absolutely unacceptable to Soviet ideology as it was associated with the attempts of the bourgeois art to distract the minds of the working

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⁴ Aivars Freimanis – Latvian documentary and feature film director
⁵ Matīsa, Kristīne, Redovičs, Agris. Dokumentāls logs uz Eiropu, p. 115
⁶ [http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/postmodernism.html](http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/postmodernism.html)
people from the topical issues of life, spread the bourgeois ideals, propagate pessimism and disbelief in the powers of man, etc., while the Socialist art and Marxism-Leninism aesthetics declared that their task was to help to get to the essence of life, to affect it actively, to form a personality of wide-ranging knowledge and learning – the man of communism.

Ābrams Kleckins, too, in the 1977 symposium mentioned, deems that the main criterion in film art is its relationship with reality, which, naturally, may seem logical, provided that we accept the term *documentary cinema*. But what the young filmmakers’ did with the filmic material disclosed the fact that art cannot be documental *per se* at all. Documentary cinema particularly clearly demonstrates that “reality” is defined by an artistic concept, reality is an artistic production, subjected to the possibilities of the medium. This theory was the point of departure for director Ansis Epners’ modernist film career, but his attempts were soon stifled. As Ābrams Kleckins explains: “From the very beginning, Epners built his films as an artistic structure, his opinion was that he was free from the specific reality he shot. He created a new form out of it. (...) In this way, it was as if he destroyed the very nature of documentary cinema itself.”

In my opinion, in the Soviet period, in professional, official cinema, directors that came the closest to the aesthetics of modernism were Aivars Freimanis and Herz Frank. Further on, I will describe some of the modernist features of the works of Herz Frank.

Being a documentary cinema scriptwriter and later also a director, Herz Frank was forced to retain a relationship with *actuality*, which sometimes had a very distant connection to reality (for example, in the films *Year in Review* or *235 000 000*), in fact, it was a simulation. It is possibly why Frank’s and his colleagues’ essentially modern experiments were permitted and even highly esteemed. To a certain extent it was accepted that such postulates as friendship of nations, bloom and advancement of life could not be represented by realistic techniques.

In his book *Ptolemy’s Map*, published in 1975, Frank offers a conceptual structure, which could be called *a pulsation theory*. Frank writes that film, regardless of whether it is a fiction or documentary film, in order to stir the spectator, has to have filmpulse. The pulse is formed by symbiosis – fact/image/fact/image. “Pulsating, the

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7 Matīsa, Kristīne, Redovičs, Agris. Dokumentāls logs uz Eiropu, p. 120
8 Франк, Герц. Карта Птолемея, Москва: Искусство, 1975, p. 58-59
film moves up the spiral, gradually accumulating poetic energy, until the dramatics of the film lead to the climax in the end.”

Frank’s concept seemingly assents to the necessity of retaining a relationship with actuality, emphasizing that image is rooted in fact. However, in the films of Frank, the fact itself often turns out to be an artificial creation, an artefact. It is the case, for instance, in the film At Noon, which in Ptolemy’s Map is described as a report from the scene of the event, but the “scene of the event”, as the book reveals, is a pure result of the author’s artistic inception. Frank writes: “When dealing with an event and wishing to portray it poetically, following its natural dramatics, the task of a documentary filmmaker comes close to that of a scriptwriter in a fiction film, the only difference being that in documentary cinema the roles are written not for those to be shot but for those who will shoot, namely, cinematographers.”

Frank also makes a reference to the French director Jean Rouch, who has said there are two modes of shooting: 1) to set up a camera and wait for something to happen; or 2) to set up a camera and wait for something we expect to happen. In regard to the film At Noon Frank chose the second option, and in fact he has done so in the majority of his films, as the stunning moments of truth captured by his cinematographers (the famous tear of Edgars Kauliņš and the like) to a great extent is the result of the director’s masterful, pre-conceived conceptual artistic structure.

Thus, probably without the knowledge of the spectator, the world which is offered to him/her is essentially subjective and has an Author.

The films of Frank also reflect on art as such, analyze it aesthetically and critically, explore its reception. In 1968 in the Kuibisheva studios, together with Aloīzs Brenčs and Aleksandr Sazhin, Herz Frank made a film titled Without Legends (Bez legendām) – for its time, an unusually scathing, and, most significantly, equivocal cross-section of the Soviet mythology – a film on how the nation is given a specifically created idol, a living monument – “the hero of work”, whose heroic life is largery a fiction. The structure of the film is multi-layered, too – the complex personality and fate of the excavator operator Boriss Kovaļenko is not merely presented to the viewers in a new version, but is revealed gradually, making also the spectator a participant in the open filming process.

9 Франк, Герц. Карта Птолемея, p. 59
10 Франк, Герц. Карта Птолемея, p. 143
11 Франк, Герц. Карта Птолемея, p. 144
Later on, similar discoveries (participation in the creation of a work of art and simultaneously a cross-section of a myth) are exhibited by Herz Frank’s film *Awakening* (*Atmoda*, 1979), which documents sculptor Igors Vasiljevs hewing a monument out of a wooden log – the head of Sergei Eisenstein. Here, however, Herz Frank has declined a direct relation to the fact, choosing a generalization, a parable instead. In essence, Herz Frank goes down the road of depsychologation and dehistorization taken by the Western cinema from the 1940s to the 1960s. Roland Barthes defined modernism as a refusal of the psychological portrayal. Andras Balint Kovacs also claims it is an overall human condition, rather than a separate individual and a specific environment, which is the subject of interest for modern fiction films.\(^{12}\) The more radical an individual’s detachment from specific time, space, and relationships, the more radical narrative’s modernism.\(^{13}\)

It is characteristic that in the socialist countries particularly parables, allegories was the mode of expression through which modernism sometimes managed to break through to the audience after all. Fables, fairytales, also poetry could be less specific, less “realistic“, they were allowed a higher degree of abstraction and subjectivity.

Therefore it is not surprising that the film *Ten Minutes Older* (*Vecāks par 10 minūtēm*, 1978) is thoughtfully supplemented with a sub-title *A Story of the Good and the Evil*, thus warning of a possible indefiniteness beforehand. However, this indefiniteness evolves into abstraction, as no specific information on this “fairytale“ is given. It unfolds as a mental experience or a mental journey, described by Kovacs as the favourite “genre“ of modernism. The only traditional element in the film is the use of music, which aids the emotion of the image and also illustrates it.

*Ten Minutes Older* is a veritable classic – the ten-minute film contains a wide range of typical characteristics of modernism, discarding traditional modes of filmmaking and at the same time reflecting on the possibilities and meaning of cinema, mainly analyzing film as the art of time and space.

When talking about this Frank’s film, usually its radical continuity is brought up first, namely, the authors of the film do not use editing at all. It is a dismissal of a technique which has traditionally been considered to be the essence, the basis of cinema. Not forgetting that the “event“ is created by the author’s concept and

\(^{12}\) Kovacs, Andras Balint. Screening Modernism, p. 65

\(^{13}\) Kovacs, Andras Balint. Screening Modernism, p. 66
meticulous technical preparation, the authors, however, capture a real event happening in real time. Nevertheless, they reject the classical art, also the classical principle of film space, emphasizing the screen as a framed plane and preventing the audience from being absorbed into illusory reality. The real time is confronted with openly artificial space, thus surprisingly becoming unusually capacious. Ten minutes become infinite. (Whereas in *Awakening* Frank employs an opposite principle – that of a pronounced discontinuity, by compressing time and devising an artistic image by means of editing, thus not only presenting an event – the creation of a sculpture, but also giving an indirect commentary on Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of montage.)

*Ten Minutes Older* also does not allow to identify with the main character, as the camera is occasionally pulled away from his face, thus reminding of the presence of the others. In classical cinema, we not only see how the character watches, but also what he is watching. However, to watch in a “modern” way is even harder than to shoot, as the audience is nevertheless inclined to identify with one, apparently the main character. Almost every article on the film says it features a little boy who watches a stage performance, despite the fact that he is not the only one on the screen. Moreover, it is usually pointed out it is a puppet show – information not present in the film, confirming the audience’s wish to “narrativize“, explain, normalize abstraction. The uniqueness of the film even in the modernist context, in my opinion, is in the consistency of its stance – essentially, we do not see as much an individual observing art as art observing an individual. We are (probably) where the stage is and where the camera is. Here the spectator has the opportunity to identify with art as such, it is the challenging interplay of modernism - spectator at its peak.

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Towards modernist manifestation

After World War II the aesthetics of Latvian cinema was defined by the rules of Socialist realism. To a certain extent we can talk about the emergence of a background of modernization in Soviet - also Latvian - cinema beginning with the second half of the 1950s. Instead of the imposing heroic style, a more intimate mode of expression was sought after. Filmmakers tried to move closer to reality and represent it through the subject, characters and environment became more humane. At the beginning of the 1960s, trends of modernization in Latvian documentary cinema manifested as pursuit of reflexivity and subjectivity. Young documentary filmmakers started to explore the essence and possibilities of their medium first of all researching visuality. Claims to authorship emerged, emphasizing one’s personal style and perception of the world. Today films made by Ivars Seleckis, Aivars Freimanis, Ivars Kraulitis, Uldis Brauns and Herz Frank in the 1960s are known as Riga poetic documentary cinema. Gesamtkunstwerk „235 000 000” stands out of this group by its epic scale and mixture of heroical pathetics with intimate lyricism. It is an essentially modernist experiment, a simulation that retained a close relationship with actuality. Herz Frank, a scriptwriter of this and other documentary films and later also a director, writes: “When dealing with an event and wishing to portray it poetically, following its natural dramatics, the task of a documentary filmmaker comes close to that of a scriptwriter in a fiction film, the only difference being that in documentary cinema the roles are written not for those to be shot but for those who will shoot, namely, cinematographers.”

14 Франк, Герц, «Карта Птолемея», Искусство, 1975, р. 143
It all started once in a public sauna when Uldis Brauns noticed a man with a peculiar tattoo on his chest – mountain Ararat placed between the portraits of Lenin and Stalin.\textsuperscript{15} After graduating VGIK cinematography department he got a chance to go to Ararat and it’s sight fueled desire to make a film about the changes of the mountain’s landscape brought by a 24 hour light cycle. During the rest of his trip Brauns realized that Ararat gave enough inspiration for a film about the whole USSR and started work on a script and budget plan together with Herz Frank. GOSKINO officials were skeptical about the idea to assign an expensive and complicated project to young people from a small non-fiction department of Riga Film studio. At first application was declined, but after a while Moscow changed its mind and filmmakers got the money and a generous amount of film stock (1 to 13) accompanied by the rule that the film has to be ready for the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of USSR.\textsuperscript{16}

Brauns intended to use documentary observation in search for the characters able to gain emotional response of the wide range of spectators. Visual material was accompanied by the musical motives of Time, Love and Road\textsuperscript{17} replenished by noises recorded on locations (industrial and military noises, festive bustle, Kremlin clock beats etc). A crucial stylistic device was avoiding such distinctive feature of the Soviet non-fiction cinema of that time as the didactic voice-over commentary - „if something would have been said it would turn into a propaganda film.”\textsuperscript{18} Herz Frank wrote that events and rituals that are important for human beings (wedding, making the first steps, education, going to army etc.) were filmed throughout the Soviet Union and organized in the order of the human life.\textsuperscript{19} It was a way to create a story about one united destiny and establish a universal Human character.\textsuperscript{20}

Film also differs from the esthetics of the Soviet newsreels by distinctive camera work. Uldis Brauns directed cinematographers to look for the shots with high

\textsuperscript{15} Portraing Stalin together with Lenin was popular in the time of Stalin’s personality cult (1930ties – 1940ties) to illustrate that they fought for the same cause. Ararat is a symbol of eternity and power, so this tatoo refers to the founders of the Soviet Union and basis of the empired they established. Stalin’s regime and cult of personality was officially critisised on 20th reunion of Communist party in 1956, when Khruschew denounced Stalin's dictatorial rule and started a comparatively liberal period of a Khruschev’s thaw. This is period Brauns started to film and photograp Soviet reality.
\textsuperscript{16} Author’s interview with Uldis Brauns, 23.08.2011, unpublished.
\textsuperscript{17} Composed by Raimonds Pauls
\textsuperscript{18} Author’s interview with Uldis Brauns, unpublished
\textsuperscript{19} Франк, Герц, «Карта Птолемея», p. 148
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, pp. 148 - 149
emotional temperature that would be comprehensible without special explanation. For instance, to film a girl who is writing a letter to her beloved soldier, assistant cameraman Mikola Gnisuk (Микола Гнисюк) spent several days in a post office often visited by soldier’s brides waiting for the expression that would be able to transmit the mood of this situation. Collective analysis of the photographs from the exhibition “Family of man” helped camera men and assistant directors to understand the concept of the emotional temperature. This exhibition was curated by Edward Steichen. It was first shown in Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955 and travelled all over the world. Exhibition included 503 images made by photographers from 68 countries. Most of the images were dedicated to universal human experiences like birth, life in different age groups, love and joy.\textsuperscript{21} In Braun’s opinion most of them were boiling with passion and artistry that is an opposition to cool and impersonal approach of “factual documenting”. Exhibition catalogue was multiplied and given to the members of the filming group who were supposed to look for the events able to arise common humane emotions (like feeding an ice cream to the baby or cutting long hair) and characters that one could easily associate with surrounding people (when filming the guard of the grave of the Unknown soldier it was important to capture a personal essence of this young man so that he could remind spectator of a brother, fiancé or friend).\textsuperscript{22} Initial intention to create a panoramic overview of the country transformed into a group portrait. It is also evident from the metamorphosis of the film’s name. In the early documents it is called a documentary art film “49\textsuperscript{th} step”.\textsuperscript{23} During the conceptual stage it was renamed in “USSR – year 1966,” later in “235 000 000 faces” and finally it became „235 000 000.” This number refers to the population of USSR at that time.

A minor story line that depicted actual collective events (also known as Sensation line) was interwoven between the episodes of human life. It supposed to illustrate a link between people’s private life and common national events. “Story of a Human is film’s spine, Sensation – an insertion. Cameras have to look for a maximal distinction between the expression modes capturing intimate, sensual and personal issues of

\textsuperscript{21} See official website of the „Family of man“ exibition at http://www.family-of-man.public.lu/
\textsuperscript{22} Author’s interview with Uldis Brauns, unpublished
\textsuperscript{23} Record of the meeting of the creative comitee of Riga Film sutdio issued on 22nd of December 1965 testifies that application of Uldis Brauns and Herz Frank non-fiction „49th step” (Худжественно – документальный фильм «49 шаг») was approved.
human life and sensational, wide-ranging and collective aspects of the state’s life.”

Synthesis of these narrative lines had to create a character of the huge and multinational Country and be suitable to represent life in the USSR to the foreign spectator. This way of narration was more closely related with Soviet montage cinema than with its contemporaries. Notion that such actual ideological concepts as “friendship of nations”, “bloom and advancement of life”, “unity of the individual and state” etc. could not be represented by completely realistic techniques stimulated an official support of this project.

**Working process**

Four groups that consisted of cinematographers and an assistant director (Camera 1, Camera 2 etc.) were sent to expeditions around the vast area of USSR including distant Chucotka peninsula, Kirgizia etc. Shooting was covered by press and readers were invited to propose places, people and events that could be filmed. Herz Frank emphasized that it was possible to coordinate the work only because of military disciplined organizational structure and practical use of Vertov’s working method of simultaneous script writing, shooting and editing.

Detailed indications of what and how should be filmed, timeline, necessary phone numbers and excerpts from Vertov’s diary were written in “Combat manual” (Боевой устав) that was a working notebook of all the crew members.

An assistant director Biruta Veldre remarked that cameraman’s intuition for the decisive moments and ability to react in unexpected situations were crucial because actual work with reality differed from any plan drawn beforehand.

A lot of effort was put in selecting visually attractive and well situated locations and characters leaving all the unsound aspects of reality outside the frame. Assistant director Laima Žurgina remembered that their group used staging when it was necessary. For the episode of Georgian wedding they had to find a young and beautiful couple that would be eager to get married. Search was long and tormenting. Instead of promised atmospheric traditional wedding they found a rich elderly groom.
with golden teeth, crying bride and tables placed under the rubber shelters. So they persuaded parents of another couple to allow their children to get married soon although they were supposed to do it only after bride would graduate from university.\textsuperscript{28}

Editing was done by director and script writer.\textsuperscript{29} Final version of the film corresponded to initial conception and had thirteen parts. It was screened at the film theatre „Rossija” during USSR anniversary celebration, at Leipzig film festival and served as Brauns graduation project for Highest Courses of Film Directing. After a while USSR Film Committee requested to re-edit the film. Brauns had to cut out De Gaulle’s visit to Moscow, earth quake in Tashkent, some too naturalistic episodes of human life etc.\textsuperscript{30} Documents available at Riga Film Museum’s archive testify that length of the original version was 3495 meters. After first re-editing it got shortened to 3155 meters. Length stated in the official film rent and screening permission issued by USSR Film Committee on the 13\textsuperscript{th} of March 1968 was 2033 meters. Film Committee was not eager to give information about the distribution of the film and director never got a chance to learn also about the ways of his first short films and fiction feature “Motorcycle summer” (1975).\textsuperscript{31}

**Frank, Brauns, Vertov**

Herz Frank (1926) wrote that Uldis Brauns (1932) introduced Vertov’s poetics into Latvian non-fiction cinema through his approach towards capturing reality. Unexpected casual details make his films *alive* and function in recreation of facts into characters.\textsuperscript{32} Brauns assured that back in sixties he knew about Vertov’s personality and films, but never had a real chance to see them.\textsuperscript{33} Although, Frank’s own contribution to introduction of Vertov’s esthetics in “235 000 000”\textsuperscript{34} can’t be underestimated. In published excerpts of Vertov’s diaries, texts, schematic drawings and creative ideas (that also served as a base of the “Combat manual”) several aspects

\textsuperscript{28} Author’s interview with Laima Žurgina, 16.02.2011, unpublished
\textsuperscript{29} Франк, Герц, «Карта Птолемея», p. 43
\textsuperscript{30} Author’s interview with Uldis Brauns, unpublished
\textsuperscript{31} „Motociklu vasara” (1975)
\textsuperscript{32} Франк, Герц, «Карта Птолемея», p. 43
\textsuperscript{33} Author’s interview with Uldis Brauns, unpublished
\textsuperscript{34} Starting from the level of basic film’s conception.
used in “235 000 000” can be found. It concerns conception (creating an emotionally conceivable story about human being and the country) and scope of the project, as well as treatment of the documentary material, organization of shooting process, editing, soundtrack design and tendency to create generalized characters (Human instead of human). „235 000 000” could be considered as an interpretation of several unrealized Vertov’s idea. For many years Vertov unsuccessfully strived to get a permission to make films about real living people of his time that could be combined into a portrait gallery of Soviet people. He also wanted to establish a permanent creative laboratory with collaborators united by common goals and working methods.

Brauns directed and filmed his first short films. Creation of synthetic universal characters out of the documentary shots is his essential practical method. For instance, universal character of Worker in his dynamically narrated short “The Worker” (1963) is made out of the shots of welding, melting metal, sparkles, workers and objects of various industries combined with poetic text narrated by pathetic voice over. Film’s musical accompaniment varies between vigorous hymnal intonations and subtle lyricism combined with industrial sounds (noises of machines and railways, alarm signals etc). Similar soundtrack pattern minus voice over is used in “235 000 000.” Although, in Brauns opinion short film “Construction” (1962) is conceptually closer to “235 000 000” first of all because it deals with filmic interpretation of a huge space with almost no people in it – only roof of Daugavpils synthetic fiber factory construction area occupied 24 ha. Furthermore, there is a strong poetical character of an orchestra conductor formed from shots of a young man who is regulating uplift of building materials, shots where pipes are moved in a way that they resemble organ keys and organ music. Brauns says that poetical character is a God’s gift because it impossible to compose it mechanically, one can only notice it while observing life.

35 Frank, Brauns and other young people of that time could access texts of Vertov that were published in 1962 in a book Абрамов, Н. П. "Дзига Вертов," Издательство Академии наук СССР, Москва, 1962
36 This topic is often mentioned in his diary entries between 1935 and 1950. See.: Дзига Вертов: Статьи. Дневники. Замыслы. Москва: Искусство, 1966
37 „Strādnieks,” Uldis Brauns (1963)
38 „Celtne,” Uldis Brauns, 1964
39 Author’s interview with Uldis Brauns, unpublished
“235 000 000” is inhabited by objects and mise-en-scene geometry that has migrated from Brauns first shorts. For example, first frame with the image of kids sliding over the sand dunes is taken from the short film „Summer”\(^{40}\) (1964), second frame with a similar image comes from „235 000 000.”

Third and fourth frames refer to tank’s deconstruction in “Worker” and to military maneuvers in “235 000 000”. Next pairs of frames belong to the same films – fifths and sixth depict welding episodes, seventh and eighth – a modern way of shooting factory chimneys with a wide angle lens.

\(^{40}\) „Lero”, Uldis Brauns, 1964
Calligraphy of camera

Brauns chose young, but experienced cinematographers who already had their own approach. Variety of their filming styles creates a nuanced atmospheric visual interplay that is one of the most fascinating aspects of the film. Although, in Brauns opinion imagery of “235 000 000” is well amalgamated and leaves an impression that it was made by one hand/eye. He said that it would not be possible to achieve such uniformity of the visual stylistics if they would not practice poetic filming approach that entered Latvian documentary cinema several years before. Also collective viewing and critical analysis of material each time when groups returned from expeditions helped.41 Let’s take a closer look on camera-writing styles of the main cinematographers of the film!

Ralfs Krumņš (1934) filmography consists of more than 70 non-fiction films and cine journals. He learned his craft on sets: „I did not have time to go to VGIK because I needed to work.”42 In his opinion non-fiction

41 Authors interview with Uldis Brauns, unpublished
42 Author’s interview with Ralfs Krūmiņš, 18. 02. 2011, unpublished
cinematographer gains professional skills and ability to work in the natural light conditions through experiencing life and different filming situations. Krūmiņš assisted Brauns in his first shorts and considers him to be his teacher. In „235 000 000” he collaborated with assistant director Biruta Veldre. She noted that Ralfs posses a rare skill to start camera only after filmed person opens up and to wait as long as it is necessary for this to happen. Krūmiņš visualizes space and action through expressive details. For example, while shooting at the oil pumping tower in Azerbaijan a small accident happened. It gave a chance to capture unexpected anxiety (frame 9 - 14).

Frame 9

Frame 10

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43 Ibid.
44 Author’s interview with Biruta Veldre, unpublished
45 Author’s interview with Ralfs Krūmiņš, unpublished
To transmit plastics and rhythm of the traditional Koryak dance “Norgali” and capture close ups of hands, faces and eyes (frames 15 - 20) Krūmiņš moved together with dancers in different ways.
Zane Balčus
Narrative Trends in Recent Latvian Fiction Film

Introduction

Narrative is generally accepted as possessing two components: the story presented and the process of its telling, or narration, often referred to as narrative discourse. To refer to the components of narrative, Vladimir Propp’s formulated fabula and syuzhet has been elaborated to include three categories, whose names differ with various scholars. I will further employ following definitions as used by Mieke Bal: narrative text, story and fabula. With narrative text Bal describes „a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee a story in a particular medium“, which can either be language, images, sounds, etc. A story is a content of this text, but fabula is „a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors.“ (Bal 2009: 5) Term events is used as a change from one state to another, but actors are agents that perform actions. (Bal 2009: 6) I prefer to use the word character instead of actor to avoid confusion. What is said in the text can be classified as narrative, descriptive, or argumentative and we have to bare in mind how this is narrated, presenting events in particular duration and spacial sphere that is fundamental to narrative discourse. Survey of the narrative trends of recent Latvian fiction film will include films made from the beginning of 2000 up to late 2011 and I will look at them from the standpoint of content and narrative discourse and how this relates to Gilles Deleuze’s notion of movement-image and time-image.

What stories are being told?

Since the middle of 1980s tightly controlled Soviet production system losened, giving greater freedom for filmmakers to create films with more critical stance for contemporary reality. However it required longer period of time for more significant shift to happen. This is closely tied also with change of generations of filmmakers. Just very few of those who made films in Soviet Latvia managed to accustom to the new system (or more precisely lack of it), thus in 1990s, 2000s and now have witnessed new generations of filmmakers to emerge with more personal approach to filmmaking and stories they tell. Two extremely opposite ends are represented in the films of the period covered in this article. Big budget productions and mass appeal films stand at one end, and arthouse films on the other, former of which is aimed at
large audiences, latter concentrating on filmmaker’s artistic expression. Most of the films have been made with original scripts, but just a few are literary adaptations.

Chosing historical subjects, filmmakers are looking at historical events from the first half of 20th century – announcement of the independent Republic of Latvia in 1918 (*The Only Photograph* (*Vienīgā fotogrāfija*, 2008, Brigita Eglīte)), fighting for maintaining the independence of Latvia just after 1918 (*Defenders of Riga* (*Rīgas sargi*, 2007, Aigars Grauba)), Soviet military crossing the borders of the country in 1940 (*Dangerous Sumer* (*Baiga vasara*, 2000, Aigars Grauba)), forming special Latvian soldier unit during World War II (*Threesome Dance* (*Dancis pa trim*, 2011, Arvīds Krievs)). Just one film tells about the Soviet times, and not from historical, but perspective of hyperbolized absurdist viewpoint (*The Last Soviet Movie* (*Pēdējā padomju filma*, 2003, Alexander Hahn)).

*Dangerous Summer* and *Defenders of Riga* has been aimed at a mass appeal, striving to create a local example of mainstream cinema (similarly like *Names in Marble* (*Nimed marmortahvlil*, 2002, Elmo Nüganen)) was for Estonians. Especially the latter film has been made with considerable budget, and it is reflected in the special effects, computer generated images (like the panoramic view on burning Riga across the river Daugava, which divides the city in two parts). Spectacle has been one of the main ambitions of the filmmakers, as well as the patriotic look at our past. The time after the indepence of Latvia in 1918 was a complicated moment in the history of Latvia with Russian, German, Latvian sides involved and it presents spectator with considerable level of difficulty to follow what is going on at which moment. Even for Latvians it can be puzzling and more so for foreign audiences, especially that there is insufficient nondiegetic information during the unfolding fabula. Not all of the historical events have been represented accurately and this is one of the reasons why historians distrust historical films. We live in a postliterate age, where books cannot compete in popularity with films, as noted by historian Robert A. Rosenstone. Thus it is easy to fictionalize, trivialize, romantisize events, people and movements of history. (Rosenstone 2000: 50) He proposes three broad categories for representing history in films: history as drama, history as document, and as expriment, most common of whom is history as drama. (Rosenstone 2000: 52) Historical film on any period it is made represent ideas and feelings of the filmmakers of the current production moment of time. Thus *Defenders of Riga* can be looked at as the case study for the current state in Latvia, where from filmmakers’ (director Aigars Grauba and producer
Andrejs Ėķis) standpoint there is a longing for heroism and trust in an individual. It is a romantic view towards the past, when courage of individuals could change the course of history. Such stance complies precisely with one of the points put forward by Rosenstone, how mainstream film creates its world: “The mainstream film tells history as a story, a tale with a beginning, middle, and an end. A tale that leaves you with a moral message and (usually) a feeling of uplift.” (Rosenstone 2000: 55)

Other films with historical subjects does not strive for mainstream, therefore their scope is not as grand. More recent film on historical subject has been *Threesome Dance* by director Arvīds Krievs. Based on a novel, it is a love story that takes place during World War II in 1944/45 in Western Latvia, where Latvian soldiers form a special unit to fight for regaining the freedom of the country. Love triangle presents a young woman torn between two men – a German officer and a Latvian soldier. Both films – *Defenders of Riga* and *Threesome Dance* – are disclosing complicated topics and in the same time telling stories of individuals. They fail to present clear cut and concrete understanding of historical events, thus making the significance of events not eligible at all times.

Humane instead of heroic view on the war time is represented in the film *The Mistery of Old Parish House* (*Vecās pagastmājas mistērija*, 2000, Jānis Streičs). Even half a century after the war, one of the film’s characters cannot relieve himself from the sense of guilt of killing a German during wartime. Despite the long years in between, the sense of guilt is still there, causing hallucinations and drawing him almost to insanity. This is much more personal approach to the issues of history, questioning the motives of individual in a particular circumstances and putting forward moral dilemmas.

How sensitive the filmmakers are in disclosing the contemporary reality? Most of the stories take place in current time, but just part of them include certain references to important topics of the time. Children’s films have responded most sensitively to social and economic situation of the time, depicting certain elements in their stories. *Waterbomb for the Fat Tomcat* (*Ūdensbumba resnajam runcim*, 2004, Varis Brasla) illustrates the problem of disjointed families, when parents leave their children behind to go and work either to another city or even a country. In *Waterbomb* two little girls from a small town find themselves in the care of a nanny while their mother goes to work in the capital as there are no vacancies in their town. But their father is in London and works at a construction site. These details show the
typical realities of the time and this problem still persists. Some years later with the credit crunch in site the film *Little Robbers* (*Mazie laupīāji*, 2009, Armands Zvirbulis) uses as one of the plot points a situation when an urban family with two small kids can’t pay their mortgage and is forced to leave their city apartment and move to grandparents in the countryside. It gives an idea to children that they can take everything in their own hands and steal the money from bank, enabling parents to get their home back.

Migrant workers problem is also included in the film *Lost* (*Nevajadzīgie laudis*, 2008, Māris Martinsons), where a woman goes to work to Ireland. Not further than just talking about going to work in London gets a character Cracker in the film *People Out There* (*Cilvēki tur*, 2011, Aiks Karapetjans). Another film whose characters are leaving their homes is *Monotony* (*Monotonija*, 2007, Juris Poškus), urban environment and even work in Ireland seems attractive to several protagonists of the film.

The film dealing with leaving, but this time in the sake of education is *Amateur* (*Amatieris*, 2008, Jānis Nords). Studying abroad has become popular for many young people in the country, since Latvia is a member of EU and tuition fees does not differ much in Latvia or abroad, as well as there is a lack of certain study programms. *Amateur* also deals with another actual topic that has grown in popularity in the last decade – drug problem. Here the main character Victor is selling marijuana to earn sufficient funds to follow his girlfriend to Amsterdam where she is about to study.

*Monotony* and earlier film *Handful of Bullets* (*Sauja ložu*, 2002, Una Celma) shows an interesting view on a dichotomy between rural and urban environment. The subject is topical issue in Latvia as more and more young people leave countryside and move to cities, mainly Riga (and now, as mentioned above, also abroad). So far last harmonious picture of the family life in rural area has been a film *The Child of Man* (*Cilvēka bērns*, 1991) made in early 1990s by Jānis Streičs, who has been a significant author in disclosing Latvian mentality onscreen. There a patriarchal family’s life in 1930s at the Eastern part of Latvia is depicted through the eyes of a small boy. The conflict between rural and urban space does not exist. But rural environment as a resort and place to return to is in the film *Handful of Bullets*. After troubled time in the city Ivars (Jānis Mūrmieks) returns back to his mother’s house in a small town. The city in a way has been like an initiation for him – a girl, drugs,
stealing, poverty, etc., after which Ivars takes a shelter in the country. And at closing scenes of the film he manages to stop his younger sister from following in his footsteps and going to the city. Even if the decision of leaving the city for good does not come just from the free will of Ivars, country is safer, more stable place to live in. More dubious about this issue are characters in Monotony. The departure point of the fabula of Handful of Bullets is already the city, where Ivars has moved in with his uncle, but events in Monotony start in the countryside from where the characters want to escape. They are tired with the dullness of the rural place and look at the city as their hope, where things happen in more unexpected ways and cause greater excitement. Borders of the city are not enough for them, and some are also looking to the foreign countries, Ireland respectively. Typical approach to representation of urban versus rural space has been that the rural environment is safer and with no temptations as opposed to the urban space, and Handfull of Bullets and Monotony support this view.

Crossing unmarked borders within the city is reflected powerfully in the film People Out There, which is the first fiction film of director Aiks Karapetjans. It is so far the only film that tells about the Russian speaking community living in apartment blocks in the suburban districts of Riga. It is also a single example where all the characters living in Latvia are Russian speaking and this is the intention of the director not the result of dubbing as was the practice in the Soviet Latvian cinema. The film has a main character Yan (Ilya Scherbakov) whose will is not strong enough to resist falling in a bad company of friends. We see that there is a craving inside of him to change and get out of the doomed surroundings, but he is not strong enough to do so. Together with friends Yan steals goods from people and from cars, cars when needed, fight, even use a gun just to get some money to spend later on drinks or drugs. As opposed to multistorey Soviet time apartment buildings where Yan and his friends live and hang out, we are presented with new luxury housing projects, which were built in Riga during economic boom at the second half of 2000s. The film includes many aerial shots with view on the suburban houses. They look all the same, nevertheless representing the geometrical planning of Soviet architecture and partly still reflecting the dream home status they once embodied, as there was a lack of housing in Riga during Soviet time and getting a new apartment in suburbs was an aspiration for many. Now they have turned into a grim place, which seems dangerous to live in.
Urban existentialism from *People Out There* has a counterpart in rural existential themes in films by director Viesturs Kairišs – *Leaving by the Way* (*pa ceļam aizejot*, 2001) and *The Dark Deer* (*Tumšie brieži*, 2006), where rural scenery serves as a backdrop for personal dramas of characters. Inner struggle between faithfulness to her dead husband, duty towards the family, or passion makes the central storyline of *Leaving by the Way*. However *The Dark Deer* mixes past rivalry among two friends for attention and love for one woman with their present status. What unites *People Out There* with other two films is also their particular visual attentiveness towards the representation of environment that carries a symbolic meaning and underlines human relationships.

These films do not offer a clear way out of the situation the characters are in. Safe place to escape from society can be found in the film *You’re Sexy when You’re Sad* (*Man patīk, ka meitene skumst*, 2005, Arvīds Krievs) and that place is a mental hospital. The director Arvīds Krievs continues the themes taken up in his previous works, exploring complexes of man’s psyche. The film begins and ends in the mental hospital, where two of the film’s characters are inmates. Homosexuality, obsession with death and blood, autopsy of a skull, taking photographs of a dead man at his funeral (the film’s main character is a photographer) signals, as described by Inga Pērkone, „quite intrusive didactics that all the society is sick; not those who we consider to be maniacs, but the very norms of society are perverse.“ (Pērkone 2007: 4) The film includes some of the most gruesome images from the films of this period. It denies the meaning and necessity of being a member of society and complying with the rules of normalcy.

With completely opposite stance is the film *Rudolf’s Gold* (*Rūdolfa mantojums*, 2010) by director Jānis Steičs. *Rudolf’s Gold* is one of the rare examples with distinct main character and also one of the few films that use as a source material for screenplay a work from Latvian literature – here the stories of the writer Rūdolfs Blaumanis. Films and novels or other literary sources made into films should not be compared on faithfulness to the source text, as suggests Bal. „Rather, taking novel and film as equally embedded in the culture in which they function, the comparison can help to articulate what they each, through their own narratological make-up, have to say to their audiences. Their relationship is an intertextual as well as an interdiscoursive one.“ (Bal 2009: 170) Drawing inspiration from several of Blaumanis’ stories, film tries to reconstruct the flair of the time – early 20th century,
when some Latvian people could manage with hard work to establish their own farms and get independence from barons. The film’s main character Rudolph (Romualds Ancāns) is such a person and his character is designed to demonstrate the self-awareness of the nation and increase our self-esteem. In Rudolf’s Gold, Dangerous Summer and Defenders of Riga can be traced efforts to create new national mythology, as if returning to the stance of 1920s utilisation of cinema as a means of transmitting human and patriotic values and unifying the nation.

**Narrative discourse**

Period of Soviet Latvian film production can be described as classical both from production system model and narrative discourse. Movement-image (l’image-mouvement) characterized pre-war classical cinema, which in post-war years gradually turned into time-image (l’image-temps) in Deleuzian classification. Deleuze attributes notion of time-image to European modernist cinema that began with Italian neorealism. Similar shift is seen in Latvian cinema and since the second half of 1980s we can talk about the crisis of movement-image. Objects and settings have an autonomous reality, which is material and gives them an importance in themselves. And it is also essential that not just the viewers, but protagonists have to see and hear in order for action (events) or passion to be born. A situation does not extend into action directly, but is invested by the senses from optical and sound situations. (Deleuze 2005a: 4) This is reflected in Latvian films not only in character modalities, either single or multiple, and narrative structures.

In the beginnig of 2000 appear films with complicated narrative structers as opposed to linear narratives in the previous decades. The Mystery of Old Parish House by Jānis Streičs is made as a film in film and offers several thematic layers – reflexion about filmmaking process, capitalism in contemporary society (the one who pays is the one who dictates the rules) and prosecting sense of historical guilt. The film is constructed in three parts, blending events that happen in the film The Mystery and the film, which is being made onscreen. The film Hide and Seek (Paslēpes, 2001, Jānis Putniņš) also is a story with complicated narrative structure. The story evolves in several layers of the main character’s consciousness. There have been exploited a popular manner of modernist cinema, where police is investigating a crime and in the course of investigation events do not get disclosed or solved, but complicate even more. In the story about a woman who is found murdered, the police suspect her
husband, whose personality is divided. In Chatman’s observation „[t]he contemplation of character is the predominant pleasure in modern art narrative. It depends on the convention of the uniqueness of the individual, but that is a convention no less than the older insistence on the predominance of action.” (Chatman 1978: 113)

Majority of the films employ the structure with telling the story in linear time, only a few examples show scenes with imaginary events and/or flashbacks. Leaving by the Way combines events from past, present and imaginary domain. Character who is linked closest with the imaginary events is little boy Dauka, who longs for his missing father. Grown ups refrain from telling the truth to the boy that his father has died in the sea. He also experiences flamboyant flashbacks or they could also be imagined scenes with all the family together again in a picnic on a bright sunny day. Using many deviations from film’s present time, boy’s thoughts and feelings are reflected much more intensely than they would have been using just linear time.

Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes two broad categories of narratives – plot-centered or apsychological, and character centered, or psychological. As for psychological narratives, actions are „expressions“ or even „symptoms“ of personality and hence they are „transitive“; but for apsychological narratives they exist in their own right, as independent sources of pleasure and are „intransititve“. (Todorov 1977: 66; 68-70) Last decade of Latvian cinema has seen only a few examples of films telling stories with distinguished main characters (like Good Hands (Labās rokas, 2001, Peeter Simm), Amateur, Rudolf’s Gold, People Out There), mostly the focus has been on a group of characters. This is a trait found not just in Latvian films. Almost last two decades has seen the rise of films with a so-called „contiguous approach“, as noted by Peter Verstraten. They „offer a mosaic of widely diverging characters. What connects the characters is often little more than that they (temporarily) reside in the same place, which enables them to cross paths for a short time. These ensemble films are based on a narrative structure that also differs from classic narration in that coincidences now take precedence over causal relations: something might happen out of the blue, and events do not require a thorough introduction.“ (Verstraten 2009: 5) This correspond to Deleuze’s observation about the crisis of classical cinema (movement-image), which emerged in post-war years: „In the first place, the image no longer refers to a situation which is globalizing or synthetic, but rather to one which is dispersive. The characters are multiple, with
weak interferences and become principal or revert to being secondary. It is nevertheless not a series of sketches, a succession of short stories, since they are all caught in the same reality which disperses them." (Deleuze 2005: 211)

With films like Never, Never, Ever! (Negribu, negribu, negribu!..., 2001, Lauris Gundars) in early 2000 up to end of the decade with Defenders of Riga, Loss, Hunt (Medības, 2009, Andis Mizišs), Return of Sergeant Lapins (Seržanta Lapiņa atgriešanās, 2010, Gatis Šmits) and others we are presented with multiple characters who share the same fabula space and are connected in various degrees. Historical epic Defenders of Riga has at the story’s center a group of friends who experience the years of fighting that brings with it personal dramas, and it also presenting historical figures to illustrate the story. More emphasized, but not exactly the main characters, are a couple Jānis (Jānis Reinis) and Elza (Elita Kļaviņa), whose engagement is about to be announced in the church at the opening of the film when the war brakes out. Seemingly part of the film’s events is shown through their perspective, when offscreen Elza’s voice reads letters from Jānis she had received from the front. However focus from the couple shifts away to display episodes from fighting and return to other characters. Unifying element of the characters in the film’s story is particular historical situation.

Telling a story about group of people who are closely interrelated is not the most often used form of character representation. Mainly these are people whose paths cross at some point, either it is their first encounter or repeatedly. The film Midsummer Madness (Jāņu nakts, 2007, Alexander Hahn) presents a concrete timeline – Summer Solstice, which is one of the main festivities in Latvia. Several foreigners (played by some popular European actors – Maria de Medeiros, Dominique Pinon, Tobias Moretti among them) arrive in Latvia at this particular time without knowing what day it is. Fabula is created intercutting several stories with the comical approach to certain stereotypes about nationalities and socioeconomic events, or just character types.

In the film Hunt a bar near the railroad is a place where all characters crisscross during the film. This place is just a formal element allowing to connect various characters, combinations of characters, situations, events or memories triggered that evolve the fabula events. Separate character stories are disclosed, but they don’t become entities, just the elements of a schematic building up of the fabula, whose focal point is place – the bar. Similarly a concrete place as a point of departure for
fabula events is in the film *Return of Sergeant Lapins*. A rented appartment where Lapins (Andris Keišs) stops after leaving the rehabilitation centre becomes the place where at some point all the main characters meet. Even though there is a single character depicted in the film’s title, he is just one of the larger grouping of people who form the film’s story. Avoiding concrete reference, but we can presume that Lapins has served in Afghanistan, he has to find again his place in the society. The film presents a cluster of characters with different social status, aspirations, private problems. And Lapins, out of circumstances, becomes a mediator or discharger for complications in the lives of the other protagonists. Planning of the appartment accords to the unstable mental state of Lapins and offers greater freedom for filmmakers to use the place when there are more than one character in it. It helps building up comic situations between characters who encounter each other there. Here a place becomes a space, from topological location where events happen, it becomes a space with special look and feel of this place. (Bal 2009: 178) Despite similar schematic approach to space as it is in *Hunt*, here film centers on the characters and the space serves as as focal point in which tragicomic situations are bound to happen. Thus it avoids mechanical repetitiveness.

Multiplicity of characters nevertheless allow certain films to be psychological, and certain apsychological or at least they incline to fall in either of categories. Like *Return of Sergeant Lapins* draws more towards psychological film, but *Hunt* apsychological, as in *Sergeant Lapins* events are character expresions, but in *Hunt* and some other films they exist in their own right. Distinctly apsychological are director Laila Pakalniņas’s films *The Python* (*Pitons*, 2003) and *The Hostage* (*Ķīlnieks*, 2006). Both films already in their titles include the starting point of the fabula. A python escapes from its owner at a school, where it’s been taken to a photo session with pupils. In the second film a boy is kept hostage in the plane earthed in Riga Airport. Participating characters are going about in their own routines who in most cases has no direct relation to the core event of the film’s story. They are there to participate in a web of paralel events. Character-bound focalization here is shifting from one person to another and we are shown the same facts from various standpoints. This technique, as notes Bal, „can result in neutrality towards all the characters.“ (Bal 2009: 151-152) It has been the intention of the director – to shift the attention from concrete personages to the total picture of the events. Slow and long camera movements make this style equal with description in literature, where
description is in the same time narrative’s ‘other’ and integral part of it. (Bal 2009: 39) Pakalniņa’s previous film *The Shoe* (Kurpe, 1998) made in late 1990s employed similar technique and reached even more filigran result.

The subject of focalization (the focalizor) is the point from which the elements are viewed, and it can lie with a character or outside it. When focalizor coincides with the character, this personage will have an advantage over the others. Thus the events will be perceived as from the vision of this character. (Bal 2009: 149-150) When the vision is not connected to any character, like in above mentioned films by Laila Pakalniņa, the neutrality occurs. Focalizors as characters have not been many in this decade, already mentioned *Amateur*, *Rudolf’s Gold*, as well as *People Out There*. We could also consider the film *Vogelfrei* (2007, Jānis Kalējs, Gatis Šmits, Jānis Putniņš, Anna Viduleja), which tells a story about one person – Teodors, depicting particular situation in his life in four different periods: childhood, teenage years, adulthood and older age. The chosen moments carry an important personal value for him, especially sensitive is part of Teodors as a teenager. Character-bound focalizors are also in the film *Good Hands* whose fabula’s central characters are pickpocket Margita and a little boy who comes with her to Estonia. An example of the film whose story has a central character, but the fabula events allow neutrality is *Gulf Stream under the Iceberg* (*Golfa straume zem ledus kalna*, 2011, Jevgēņijs Paškēvičs). The film, whose story takes place in three different geographical locations and time periods – 17th century Eastern Europe, 19th century Russian Empire, and 1990s Riga – has a character who links all three parts. The immortal woman Lilith, Adam’s first wife causes destructive passion in the men she meets. In the fabula events have more significance than the characters involved, and apsychological approach is reached.

Bal separates characters (*actors* in her definition) who has to be taken into consideration and who can be left out. It is done on a basis of their function – if they have functional part in the fabula events, they need to be considered. (Bal 2009: 201) Offscreen character who has a functional role in fabula is a naratee in the film *Rudolf’s Gold*. The voice for those familiar with will be recognized as belonging to the film’s director Jānis Streičs. The commentary compliments the events and in the same time deprives full fledged development of the characters onscreen, asserting to audiences the correct reading of character’s actions and motives. The other film but with onscreen narrator is *Threesome Dance*, which is told from the contemporary perspective and the events shown might not be real, but imaginary and they can be
read as projected through the narratee’s imagination. *Threesome Dance* is constructed as a personal journey from present time to past, as the main character tries to find out about his ancestors.

*Midsummer Madness* endows the role of narrator to one of the characters – taxi driver Oskars (played by Gundars Āboliņš), who establishes at the beginning of the film the events, which will unfold, giving information on himself, his car and the special day it is in Latvia. Throughout the film with several parallel stories taking place, he himself is not a main character. Nevertheless in terms of his story’s content we could allocate him more significant place in the fabula than other characters, which is due to the second character involved in his story. This concerns Curt (Orlando Wells), Oskar’s passanger who has just arrived in Riga Airport and whom Oskar’s has to deliver to a certain destination. Curt’s presence in Latvia has a personal motive and also a goal, thus allowing greater identification with him than others. Most of other characters also has some kind of goal or destination, but reaching it does not have as much significance as Curt’s story. Even more manifested role of a narrator is in the film *Monsieur Taurins* (2011), directed by the same director as *Midsummer Madness* – Alexander Hahn, and with the same actor Gundars Āboliņš. Tauriņš has gone to France and is being payed to find a property for a buyer in Latvia. He travels around the south of France, encountering different people on his way, and filming what he sees as well as himself. Camcorder is used as a medium through which he adresses the spectator and transmits fabula events.

Film as a visual media offers narration through images. Films *Leaving by the Way* and *The Dark Deer* especially work as a visual experience. In both films nature and landscape is as important element as personages, making a dramatic setting for fabula events. Landscape serves as a contiuation of emotional state of characters, but does also not just that. Important meaning is in their living in those surroundings. Like Michael Toolan has noted: „relation between setting on the one hand, and character and events on the other, may be causal or analogical: features of the setting may be (in part at least) either cause or effect of how characters are and behave; or, more by way of reinforcement and symbolic congruence, a setting may be like a character or characters in some respect.“ (Toolan 2001: p. 92) The setting has been chosen to support and underline psychological traits of the characters. In *Leaving by the Way* Ilga (Elita Kļaviņa) and Viktors (Ēriks Vilsons) secretly meet at a forest surveilance tower during the night to indulge in the passionate love affair. They are
high above the ground with surrounding endless landscape below them as if they have become invisible for those living on the ground. Another character Ruta (Guna Zariņa) is picking different herbs and they can obtain special powers when Ruta on a certain night walks naked among horses in the field. Long shots endow these images with a scope and majesty. In *The Dark Deer* one of the main characters, a girl Ria (Kristīne Krūze) is particularly attached to deers and they symbolize her vulnerability towards cruel real world, where deers are just money making objects. In the films *People Out There* and *Amateur* also has a lot of landscape shots, in their case it is urban landscape, but their meaning is not to support traits of the characters.

Dispersive fabula events, deliberately weak links between characters, voyage form, consciousness of cliches, and deprecation of the plot describes the new image. (Deleuze 2005: 214) Emergence and existence of movement-image and time-image depends on particular circumstances of the concrete time period, but they can also exist side by side as can be seen in clasically constructed films at one end and modernist artfilms on the other. However neither of those has a dominant position in recent Latvian cinema and the definition of time-image has not yet been found.

Works cited


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INTRODUCTION

Widescreen is one of the most important technical innovations that were introduced to cinema in the middle of 20th century. Producers, directors of photography, critics and theoreticians – filmmakers as well as film buffs all over the world – were looking forward to it both with doubt and incredulity, big hopes and expectations. Opinions differed considerably – some claimed that the only value of widescreen was a sensational one, that it was self evidently inartistic, whereas others saw it as a harbinger of new cinematic aesthetics, amplification of filmic language and expression. In the long run, widescreen proved to be more convenient and economically expedient than other inventions – 3D and Cinerama – that were also introduced in mid-1950s; Peter Lev marks out that widescreen technology patented by Fox was “attempt to create 3D without glasses and Cinerama without high costs”.

In the USSR widescreen become one of the most important goals in the technologic competition with film manufacturers in the West; in late 1950s USSR had finally set an ambition of quantity – to reach the indices that were already achieved and boasted of in the West where the widescreen films comprised about a half of the film repertoire. Respectively, in order to achieve the goal, widescreen facilities were supplied in national film studios all over the USSR.

In the context of the cinema of Latvia, among all the notable technical innovations of the 20th century filmmaking – sound, colour and widescreen – the most important changes and individual aesthetics were brought by the latter one. Widescreen in Latvia is, primarily, characteristic as an important and inherent mean of visual expression in the so far only school developed in this region – Riga school of poetic documentary cinema. It is a rather important circumstance at the Riga Film Studios, where most of the cinematographers gained their first experiences and skills in the documentary film section, and made the use of their mileage to create the language and visual expression of their own at the fiction film section.

46 Barr, C. (1963), p. 4
TRADITION OF VISUAL AESTHETICS OF FILM IN LATVIA

It is possible to descry signs of common aesthetics in the visual expression of pre-war films in Latvia; while most of the Latvian pre-war cinematographers were educated as still photographers (respectively – proficient as masters of whether portraits and lighting, or landscape framing), visuality of pre-war films in Latvia stem from fine arts, portrait and landscape photography. Taking the screen version of Vilis Lācis’ novel Fisherman’s Son (Zvejnieka dēls, 1940, Vilis Lapenieks) as an example, we see the work of the well-known Latvian portrait photographer Alfrēds Pole and recognize the aesthetics and techniques of still photography. Most of the shots are static and classically composed, with depth of field, relation between foreground and background and other characteristic traits of photography in mind. The dominating camera movement in film is an illustrative pan.

Māris Rudzītis, the prolific Latvian cinematographer and film director, author of a number of theoretic articles on film, argues that, up until the late 1950s, it is not possible to talk about a persistent aesthetic tradition or a rooted school of cinematography in Latvia. Judging from his comments, the skill of cinematography is a specific art, closely related to dramaturgy and screenwriting: “Searching for the roots of the culture tradition of the images captured by Latvian cinematographers, it is hard to find them at our own home. Not because the Latvian fine arts would lack an interesting history and manifold achievements. Simply the specific skill of a cinematographer does not derive from fine arts”.


The impact of painting on the visual aesthetics of Latvian-made films still continued in the first post-war years – the decade in the film history of Latvia that is sometimes being called the low-film period. At that time the visuality of film was directly influenced by the Soviet school – by the VGIK (All-Union State Institute of Cinematography) graduates who had mastered the mandatory aesthetic canons, coming from the examples and clichés of the 19th century painting. Also the front cameramen, bringing the spontaneous documentality of font-line into the visual expressivity of fiction films, had their impact on the visual aesthetics of the 50s.

The film The Clouds Pass by Like White Swans (Kā gulbji balti padebeši iet, 1956, Pāvels Armands) show the typical signs of the film aesthetics of the 50s –
properly lit portraits, precise compositions, use of the depth of field, dramaturgically justified dynamics, achieved by movements within a frame, as well as by textures and graphic elements. The chosen camera angles are representative and bring conventional message; f. ex. in the episode where a crowd of workwomen listen to an allocution (picture no. 1 and 2), disposition of the characters within the frame hint at their hierarchical relationship. This manner of story-telling does not offer psychological portraits – the characters embody general notions, not individualities. It is of importance that, also, in the films of 1950s a greater emphasis has been put on the spoken text – information.

Historically, it is only possible to start the discourse on the work of Latvian cinematographers and development of national cinema from the moment when an organized and regular filmmaking is set about, and when the first professionally educated cinematographers start their work. This process is marked by the second half of the 50s, as Māris Rudzītis, along with the director Varis Krūmiņš graduate from the VGIK in 1956, hence becoming the first Latvians with a professional degree in filmmaking.

IMPLEMENTATION OF WIDESCREEN TECHNOLOGY AND ITS VISUAL AESTHETICS IN LATVIA

The influence of technology on the artistic expression of film as a separate and specific form of visual art was not a topical issue among the documentary and fiction film cinematographers of the Riga Film Studios up until the 60s. Māris Rudzītis remembers that at the time the aesthetic taste of a cinematographer was measured by the “instilled concepts of long-shot, medium-shot and close-up, and the inner balance of a shot”. In the 50s, a cinematographer was expected to deliver a schematic (and schematized) presentment of life events, therefore neither his artistic qualities, nor ability to create a cinematic image was of a determinative value. The only criteria applied in order to evaluate the artistic qualities of a cinematographer’s work, were those categories known since the dawn of painting and named by Māris Rudzītis.

All in all, in the period between 1956 and 1959 the rate of film production in the Soviet Union rose significantly, a number of novel technological equipments and devices were created, introduced and brought into regular use. In the field of cinema the Soviet Union took pride in several technological achievements – the technology of

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50 Rudzītis, M. (1968), p. 88-89
magnetic recording of the sound was introduced, a novel type of colour film was created. However, the most important and significant technological innovation was the wide screen, which was brought into use just when in the Western countries.

In 1950 and 1960s widescreen technologies used in the USSR and the Western countries were not identical – in the USSR only anamorphot was used, whereas in the Western world also the masked (flat) widescreen technology had gained its popularity, i.e. the negative was shot exposing the Academy Ratio, but the top and bottom of the picture was hidden (masked off) by a metal aperture plate whether during the shooting or the projection. While only a part of the negative was used to capture the image, a loss of quality (when compared to anamorphot system) was experienced by mechanically expanding the image during the projection. The most common proportions, used with the masked widescreen technology were 1:1,66 and 1:1,85.

Although the initial reason for using the widescreen technology in the film studios all over the USSR was not a choice dictated by visual style and aesthetics, rather a technological competition with the Western manufacturers, it still became a significant means of visual expression and an element of cinematic language that, with its specific qualities, had a great influence on the visual expression of that time.

By the end of the 50s, widescreen films in the Western countries made up more than 50% of the cinema repertoire, however in the USSR this number could barely measure up to the mark of 5-7%. At the Riga Film Studios, where the anamorphot technology was introduced in early 1960s, transition to the new system happened quickly and at one go.

In 1964, the first widescreen fiction films at the Riga Film Studios were shot, and already three out of four full-length films completed that year were shot in this format. In the coming years, the amount of widescreen films completed in Riga remained stable, or even grew. As of 1968, five widescreen full-length fiction films were completed each year, and in 1977 – the anniversary year of the USSR – even 7 new widescreen films reached the screens. Topicality of the singular technological competition receded only in the 1980s, that is at least when the number of widescreen films shot in Latvia shrank. In 1984, only one out of eight films completed at the Riga Film Studios was a widescreen production – i.e. Soloist Wanted (Vajadzīga soliste), directed by Gennady Zemel.

51 Eglītis, V. (2003), p. 35

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Widescreen format of the frame was organic to the visual aesthetics of the Soviet cinema. On one hand, it reinforces the dominant of horizon and props monumental compositions, amplifies the traditional eyeshot of the 4:3 format landscape known from the painting and photography. On the other hand, it mimics the angle of human eyesight more than the Academy Ratio could ever do, wherewith enabling a more realistic image of the reality, serving as a visual medium between the audiences and the screen world. If a landscape could be defined as a complex structure of objects and their interaction, then this definition is also applicable when talking about the widescreen frame, where the visible objects stand in the same plane of time, interact and retain an equal importance. Visual aesthetics of the 1960s’ cinema can be characterized by the following mise-en-scène of the screen, initiated by the scale of a widescreen frame – a medium shot where either shows two, three equally important figures simultaneously, or one figure and the environment surrounding it, furthermore, the space of the frame (or – the social context) around a human being plays a role as important as the human inserted in it.

In the early 1960s when anamorphot appeared at the Riga Film Studios, the first ones to make use of its advantages were filmmakers in the closest connection with the everyday reality – documentalists. Director and cinematographer Uldis Brauns remembers that it all started with the film Beginning (Sākums, 1961), however, the symbolic title is just coincident – once, while having a smoke by the elevator of the studio, director Ivars Kraulītis came up with it, hence helping out the cinematographer of his thesis film White Bells (Baltie zvaniņi, 1961), who was now in anguish of inventing a title for his own debut film.  

There were two widescreen cameras at the Riga Film Studios yet “nobody had the guts to touch them”, even though five years had already passed since the introduction of the new format in the Soviet Union. Cinematographer Uldis Brauns got the brand new, still unwrapped apparatus just because the more experienced documentalists did not show any interest in the matter. This was a crucial point in the development of the poetic language of cinema – young cinematographers of the Riga Film Studios were the first ones to start shooting widescreen films at the documentary

53 Ibid.
film section of their studio, hence obtaining a characteristic means of expression and making it an original sign of Riga school of poetic documentary cinema.

In 1968, Māris Rudžītis described the widescreen technology as an important means of expression in a cinematographer’s arsenal: “Now it is beyond debate: with the wide screen, the role of a cinematographer as a dramatist in creating a film has grown considerably. In a single unit of filmic time, the wide screen holds more substance, provides more information on the filmed environment and does not struggle to isolate the character from it – that is how we could formulate the nature of widescreen. Still we have not yet managed to grip its facilities: formal changes of the screen are too fresh in our consciousness. Its is clear that the search for self-ambitious pulchritude will soon be as dead as a dodo; for decades the regular screen embodied outspoken dimensions of a ‘bull's-eye’, a ‘viewfinder’, however the widescreen can be considered a medium between the nature and film print, between the film print and the viewer. Although it might sound peculiarly, the change in dimensions of the screen embraces a deep meaning common to all mankind, and it has not yet been fully interpreted and appreciated.”

In order to come to this conclusion, cinematographers at the Riga Film Studios had been practically worming out and creatively experimenting with the widescreen format for 7 years, hereto the younger generation of the Riga Film Studios’ cinematographers, just coming from the VGIK, showed the most interesting and remarkable results in the search for a new cinematic language and an individual handwriting of the national cinema of Latvia.

VISUAL AESTHETICS OF WIDESCREEN FILMS IN LATVIA, 1960s

The first widescreen fiction film completed at the Riga Film Studios was Captain Zero (Kapteinis Nulle, 1964, Leonīds Leimanis). And it serves as a graphic illustration to the impact of technology on cinematic visuality. In this case the technology has been dominant over the aesthetics – the novel, specific and yet not adopted format become a major challenge for the cinematographer Miks Zvirbulis, a VGIK graduate of 1961. Aesthetically, the film shows both the advantages of the widescreen technology, as well as its main flaws.

The widescreen format has served well to the visuality of Captain Zero, providing it with spectacular, interesting and thought-out long-shots, also the dynamic

54 Rudžītis, M. (1968), p. 90
camera movements are rather impressive, and therefore the marine landscapes and the manifold nature of the sea sinks into viewers’ memory. Yet there are only a few original close-ups that have been so characteristic to director Leonīds Leimanis’ style in his previous films; mise-en-scènes of the screen seem to be too schematic, episodes consist of uniformly composed shots. In those episodes it becomes evident that cinematographer Miks Zvirbulis has met the main disadvantages of anamorphot – the unhandy equipment, the off-grade optics and the necessity of different planning of shot compositions, especially when it comes to close-ups. Also the the cinematographer Mārtiņš Kleins claims that anamorphot optics would distort margins of the frame and only let create a rather shallow focus, moreover, in order to work with the wonted aperture of 5,6 a stronger than usual lighting was required. That added extra inconveniences – heat at the studio and a need for artificial lighting and electric generators when filming on location, which caused a high level of engine noise and made a direct sound recording impossible. In addition, the anamorphot optics was almost twice the size of the regular optics – more heavy and unhandy, and pushed the cinematographers to invent their own adjuvants and shoulder rigs.55

The initial attitude to composition that a cinematographer had to note when filming in this system was – to keep the camera back from the actors (in order to avoid distorted close-ups, while the image seems to be a little poky), to set compositions that are centered around the middle of the frame (to lessen the conspicuous distortion on the edges) and still to keep in mid that compositions in a widescreen frame might sometimes lack height and leave disproportionally much empty space around figures in close-ups. It is common to think that, with the introduction of anamorphot, the average length of shots increased.57 This tendency can be explained with the urge, and quite often also with a necessity dictated by the plot, to show the mise-en-scènes in detail. Because of the characteristics of the anamorphic optics, the depth of field in a shot was rather shallow, a part of the shot was always out of focus. In order to keep the viewer informed on the location of action, whether long takes and a moving camera, or long takes and moving actors with a respective shift of focus was needed; another option was a more often cutting of the film.

56 Salt, B. (1992), p. 246
57 Ibid.
In took time to discover and learn the aesthetic possibilities of widescreen, and even more time to fix its imperfections, until the cinematographers mastered various optical methods, including the light and colour accentuation, that by the 1970s had become an integral part of visual aesthetics.

One of the most interesting and exciting examples is a short film *Two (Divi)* directed by Michail Bogin and completed at the Riga Film Studios in 1965. It marks most of the means of visual expression, characteristic for widescreen frame. Cinematographers Rihards Pīks and Heinrihs Pilipsons joined the crew with the experience of documentary cinema, and made use of the widescreen – still a new technology at the Riga Film Studios – with confidence and understanding of both composition and movement. Interestingly, in spite of the documentary film experience, documentary stylistics can not be found among the visual images of *Two*, and the use of technical equipment, characteristic for fiction films – crane and dolly – is proficient and well-grounded.

Widescreen functioning as an imitator of human eyesight and angle, or as characterized by Francois Truffaut “[..] demolishing the arbitrary boundaries of the screen and replacing them with the almost ideal – panoramic vision,” 58 expresses itself already in the prologue of the film. The eye of the camera is pointed at a building, and it travels from one open window to another in horizontal, vertical and diagonal pans, until a bunch of young people exit the door and head into the park across the street. Introduction, captured in a single shot and durating one and a half minutes, approves widescreen as a powerful tool in creating the impression of space and in abating the need for editing.

Unostentatious yet visually significant is the first encounter of the main characters – a boy and a girl – while walking the street he accidently barges into her shoulder, walks beside her and then continues following her in a few step distance; camera mimics his actions to a nicety – it lets the main characters come closer to the lens, frames them in a closer shot, then follows them until they are let out of the frame. In the next long-shot camera continues following them with a horizontal pan. The last mise-en-scène of this tiny etude is built in a very shallow space, on a pavement; from one side it is delimited by a curtained window-case, from the other – by the pedestrians walking by. Although this staging is so tiny in depth, the mise-en-scène does not become claustrophobic – mostly because of the screen ratio and the

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horizontal pan; Jacques Rivette once, analysing a film, saw that the sign of maturity and mastery does not hide in the depth of staging, he claimed that “extreme use of the breadth of the screen, the physical separation of the characters, empty spaces distended by fear or desire, like lateral movements all seem to be [...] the language of true filmmakers.”

In order to illustrate what David Bordwell has named the widescreen ability to “contribute to producing symbolic and expressive meaning”\textsuperscript{59}, another episode of the film Two would serve well. This etude, by means of visual elements, show an attempt to approach and a mumming resignation: the boy continues to follow the girl trying to start a conversation, while she moves forward, without paying any attention to the follower. In a medium shot, the camera on dolly has dynamically captured their walk through a bus terminal; in this unedited episode, owing to the screen gauge, the boy freely moves from the right side of the image where a pylon of a pavilion stands as a vertical barrier between him and the girl (picture no. 3), to the left side – closer to the object of his interest (picture no. 4).

Before the widescreen was introduced, margins of a frame served as limitative barriers, confines creating a narrow viewfinder to the filmic reality. With the new format the cinematic frame suddenly gained both its physical gauge (the characters in it – the freedom of movement) and a symbolic, notional amplification for an additional point. Eric Romehr pointed out that in the era of Academy Ratio only the great filmmakers had managed to loosen the screen by a certain obscure magic; the introduction of widescreen has given the cinema the only palpable element it lacked – “the air, the divine ether of the poets”\textsuperscript{61}. In the late 1950s and early 60s this ‘air’, the symbolic and notional amplification of the screen, turned out to be of importance to the young artists on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain; the \textit{thaw} time generation showed a unitary inclination in their creative work – a tendency to suppress the stereotypes and traditionalism of the art, offering an utmostly authentic and subjective view on the real-life comings and goings.

Over the time the anamorphot system was replaced with the already-mentioned masked widescreen technology. While the anamorphot system was known for its heavy and bulky cameras, off-grade optics and distorted images, and the fact

\textsuperscript{59} Rivette, J. (1985), p. 278
\textsuperscript{60} Bordwell, D. (1985), p. 20
\textsuperscript{61} Romehr, E. (1985), p. 280
that the image in the viewfinder only gave a rough impression of what really stood in front of the lens, cinematographers’ work became easier again. Mārtiņš Kleins remembers: “I got used to the images of incredibly tall and thin people in the viewfinder, still the compositions were not easy to weight.” 62 By taking over the masked widescreen technology, one could return to the regular devices, with the only difference being the aperture plate confining the frame.

It is of importance that the widescreen system, which was introduced at the Riga Film Studios in early 1960s, not only created a momentary perplexity among the filmmakers, but also became one of the characteristic signs and inherent means of visual expression of the Riga school of poetic documentary cinema, and inspired many filmmakers for further search in the visual aesthetics of fiction films.

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Antra Cilinska

Making Films In Latvia: Producer's Challenges

If we speak about making films in Latvia, there is always place for the famous question: “To make, or not to make?” But if you are a devoted filmmaker, and, of course, we all are, you just can’t imagine your life without doing it. At the same time, you are aware of all the consequences you are trapped in as soon as you fall in love with a certain project and decide to produce it. The strangest thing is that any producer anywhere will say the same thing. That means that we are not aliens, and this helps to move ahead and be extremely creative to make your project happen in Latvia.

Latvia is the central country of the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and is located in North-eastern Europe on the east coast of the Baltic Sea. Its 500 km of sandy beaches are easily reached from historical towns, where medieval hanseatic foundations support baroque and art nouveau buildings.

We went through big changes in film industry, which followed the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. The shift to a market economy affected every level of the film industry from its basic infrastructure to its mode of financing and administration. The pattern of changes was similar throughout all East European countries: a sharp decrease in state funding, empty studios looking to attract foreign crews, the disappearance of domestic films from the circuits, armies of idle film professionals, and the redefinition of concepts like “copyrights”, “entertainment” and “audience”

Reflecting on the situation of Soviet and Eastern European film-makers in 1990, Graham Petrie and Ruth Dwyer asked: “Is there any place any longer, even in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, for films that put artistic requirements ahead of commercial ones? All these countries, and even the Soviet Union, needed desperately to sell their films abroad if their industries are to survive”. 63 And this was absolutely true and still is. Now for twenty years we are trying to say that we can make films and we want to make films.

The first independent film studios in Latvia began to appear in the end of 1980s and beginning of 1990s since before all the film production was located at one local state film studio and state television. The first film studios were founded by film

directors or, in individual cases, other creative of technical filmmakers without any or with minimum experience in film production and company management at the conditions of market economics. With the lapse of time film people perfected their knowledge and established relationships with film studios and professionals abroad. Consequently, in all of the Baltic States several leading film studios were established and operate up to now, which during the last twenty years have completed full-length feature, documentary and animation film projects, as well as created a number of short films and other audiovisual media projects. Mostly these are the studios, which actively participate also in coproduction of films and render production services for foreign film projects.

Simultaneously, several film studios operate in Latvia, which can still be regarded as one person’s studios, i.e., the studio is run by its owner who is a producer, director and often performs also other functions. During the last five years most of these studios have carried out only one full-length feature film project, which is often the only source of the studio income. Bigger funding not only allows producing more films but also increase the number of film studios involved in production, including the studios, which during the last five years have produced only one full-length film.

So, what are the options for a producer in Latvia? Firstly – national support which is available in the form of applications once or twice a year at National Film Centre and three or four times a year at Culture Capital Fund. The rest is up to the knowledge and pure creativity of the producer – attraction of all sorts of investment (including your own private), and looking for cooperation internationally.

If we would like to look for the support and cooperation in the direction of TV stations, there is not much support possible financially. In all of the Baltic States national TV channels offer full-cycle film production services but mostly these resources are used for making of their own TV products. Still several projects have also been carried out in Latvia in co-operation with state TV channel or two existing commercial TV channels. With the appearance of various new digital platforms we might also expect the increase in possible new business models between film producers and these new digital TV stations. Latvian TV is a great support for film projects in all the other ways than financies, e.g. a letter of interest for the Media Development applications, promotion of Latvian films with a support from National Film Centre, etc.
During the last decade a number of coproduction projects in Latvia has increased. It is connected with several factors: creative coproduction, availability of Media and EURIMAGE funding, possibility to participate in various international forums, meetings and festivals. Latvia has joined EURIMAGE in 2001 and MEDIA Plus in 2002. The policy of the National Film Centre is to support co-productions, which makes collaboration with Latvian filmmakers very welcome.

Globalization of film production allows ensuring income not only to local studios, which render film production services, but also create added value in the export of services provided by the country. Riga Film Fund has launched a new filming incentive scheme that will entitle eligible productions to a rebate of up to 15%. Productions spending at least EUR700,000 may become eligible for the support when half of their funding has been confirmed. Features, television films and documentaries that use Riga as itself can claim the full 15%, while a reduced 13% rebate may be available if the main cast and crew are Latvian nationals. Qualifying productions that double Riga for elsewhere in the world will be entitled to a 10% rebate, while projects filming anywhere in Latvia but using the services of a company based in Riga will have access to a 7% rebate.

It is advantageous to shoot in Riga because the costs of location rent are low, only few locations require additional rent payments, permits can be obtained within 24 hours, numerous locations that resemble or look alike places in other European countries (e.g. stadiums, churches, mansions etc.), numerous places that still have not been filmed and may become a refreshing novelty for audiences around the world, management here is flexible and fast. A great variety of architecture, castles, churches, airports, towns and villages, fountains, lighthouses, manors, factories, castle mounds, garrets, mills, exterior design is available in Latvia. Lots of professional filmmakers that have gained high approval in many international film festivals are open for cooperation.

Now, a bit of the figures and money, which is, well, I have to say – a very important part of making a film project happen. Here are the figures of the National State support for the whole film industry during the last four years.
As one person in my film “Is It Easy...? After 20 Years” said: “There was business until 2008, and something completely different after that.” We can see it also from the Latvian film support figures. The money we can expect to receive for our film productions is extremely limited, but nevertheless, the figures show that we manage to make films even with such a funding. In 2010 there was a release of 35 films: 3 feature films, 3 shorts, 10 animations and 19 documentaries. I have to admit that it took much longer time for these films to be finished just because the producer had to wait in the line for money.

To sum it, the following should be said. The state budget is still a very important part of our production money. A part of the studios has managed to get adjusted to lots of the changes successfully and has been participating actively in coproduction projects and rendering production services to foreign film productions, thus providing not only bigger budget for their film projects but also achieving a larger potential audience and possibilities to participate at film festivals. But this means that we need more support to become better partners in international coproductions.

It is possible to refer to development of the sector of animation in Latvia. Since the beginning of 1990s private animation studies were founded, which were the successors of the historical traditions, together with several new studios. Most of the animation studios in the Baltic States produce their own animated films as well as coproduce at international and coproduction projects. In Latvia mainly short animated films are made, thus they are widely represented at international film festivals of

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>National Film Centre (EUR)</th>
<th>Culture Capital Fund (LVL)</th>
<th>TOTAL (EUR)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>1 515 381</td>
<td>342 924</td>
<td>1 858 305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1 515 381</td>
<td>370 425</td>
<td>1 885 807</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2 519 158</td>
<td>656 915</td>
<td>3 176 073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>4 614 476</td>
<td>1 527 676</td>
<td>6 142 152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2 219 957</td>
<td>1 511 098</td>
<td>3 731 055</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
different levels as well as receive significant awards by the festivals. However, over
the recent years and, prospectively, also later, several full-lengths animated films have
been produced, a number of which made as coproduction films of different countries.
Also Latvian documentaries have achieved wide recognition on international level
starting from Cannes to Hot Docs, IDFA and many others.

Nevertheless, there also exist several relevant problems, which hinder
development of the industry, like, insufficient state funding, which cannot fully
finance coproduction projects, overly fragmented usage of the funding, poor
cooperation among TV channels and film studios, lack of professional producers and
managers, etc.

So, in the end I would say that if you are a really devoted producer, you will
manage to make a good film even in Latvia!