



DOCUMENTARY CINEMA IN LATVIA

Insight into the development, activities, current affairs, and filmmakers of Latvian documentary cinema



Documentary filmmaking was introduced to the region which is now Latvia shortly after cinema emerged in Europe at the end of 1895, when the country was not yet officially established but was still part of the Russian Empire. In May 1896, cinematographers for the Lumière brothers came to Riga and screened films for the public. It is known that just a few years later, filming had taken place at various events in Latvia (e.g. in 1901, at the exhibition for the 700th anniversary of the founding of Riga); one of the oldest documentary footage that has survived to the present day is from 1910. In the 1920s and 30s, newsreel production flourished in Latvia, and the country developed its own sound recording equipment and produced

culture films. In the second half of the 20th century, when new cinematic movements and “waves” with modernist tendencies were emerging in world cinema, Latvian documentary cinema also entered a vibrant decade – in the 1960s, the Riga Style, also known as the Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema, was established. This was a new generation of filmmakers with their own distinctive vision – they abandoned the dispassionate and official tone that had dominated documentary work until then, and instead made more personal and visually expressive films. Latvian documentary cinema in the 21st century is characterised by a diversity of formal approaches as well as collaboration with filmmakers from other countries. ■

**Šķērsiela
(Crossroad
Street, 1988)**

LOOKING BACK AT THE HISTORY

1918–1990

The filming of documentary footage in the territory of Latvia had already begun with the establishment of the Latvian state in 1918 and with the recording of political and historical developments that took place in the first years of independence. In the 1920s–30s, newsreels and short films made up a significant part of Latvian cinema production. The production of newsreels was encouraged by the decree of the Interior Minister in 1922, which made it compulsory at all cinema screenings to show newsreels shot in Latvia. Chronicles of various events were filmed by small companies specialising in documentary material, which included both newsreels and short documentaries. Newsreels were produced by several local companies in Riga (e.g. *Latvju filma (Latvian Film)*, Arnolds Cālītis), by foreign companies (e.g. the *Pathé-Nord* branch in Latvia, which employed Jānis Doreds, aka John Dored, who would later go on to film important historical events and conflicts around the world, such as the Spanish Civil War and WWII, as a correspondent for *Paramount News*), and by cinematographers in other regions of Latvia. In the 1930s, Eduards Kraucs (1898–1977) was the main producer of newsreels in Latvia; in 1934 Kraucs, together with the brothers Voldemārs and Edgars Blumbergs, adapted to the new audio technology for film by developing their own sound recording equipment and establishing the newsreel brand

EDUARDS KRAUCS (1898-1977)



Eduards Kraucs was a cinematographer and photographer whose newsreel footage and photographs form an important part of Latvia's visual history. Kraucs studied architecture at the Moscow Mining Academy, with his brother founded Latvian theatre. He began filming newsreels in Latvia in the late

1920s, and during this time also worked as a press photographer. He was very active in making newsreels and also created newsreels for the German film company UFA. Kraucs' contribution in the 1930s is especially significant, when from 1931 to 1940 he made *Latvijas skaņu hronika (Latvian Sound Chronicle)*. These newsreels documented important political and social events in Latvia and filmed important people (including Latvian president Kārlis Ulmanis). The natural world of Latvia and the everyday life of its inhabitants, recorded in a poetic and ethnographic style, are a special feature of Kraucs' newsreels. In addition to making newsreels, Kraucs also participated as a cinematographer in other directors' films. During the first Soviet occupation and the following German occupation, Kraucs continued making newsreels; however, he did not stay in Latvia and emigrated, at which time he recorded the lives of refugees. In 1950 Kraucs settled in the USA, where he worked as an optical tricks specialist for an advertising film company. Kraucs' legacy is preserved at the Hoover Institution in California.

Latvijas skaņu hronika (Latvian Sound Chronicle). Along with newsreels, "culture films" (the term used at the time to describe documentary films) were also made. These were basically short works intended for schools or commissioned by various institutions, and were also shown in cinemas. Their main purpose was to record various events, developments and high-profile people in Latvia. The first feature-length films were released in the early 1930s. The first



Sākums
(The Beginning, 1961)

ULDIS BRAUNS (1932-2017)



Uldis Brauns was a cinematographer, screenwriter and director, one of the authors of the Riga Style or Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema. One of Brauns' most important early works as a cinematographer was *Baltie zvani* (*The White Bells*, 1961, directed by Ivars Kraulītis), a

short drama in which the element of staging is subtly woven into the everyday rhythms of urban Riga. It was filmed with long-focus lenses and a hidden camera to achieve unobtrusive observation of the environment and the people in it, inviting comparisons with films of the "City Symphony" genre. The trilogy *Sākums* (*The Beginning*, 1961), *Celtne* (*The Building*, 1962), and *Strādnieks* (*The Worker*, 1963), directed and filmed by Brauns, marks the presence of a new kind of documentary film in Latvian cinema – the Riga Style. Employing the advantages of widescreen film, Brauns used visual and aural techniques to create specific metaphors. Brauns' first feature-length film, *235 000 000* (1967), marks the direction in which Brauns would work in the following years: films that would be ambitious in conception and execution, and that would either cover vast territories in film-making or delve into archival material on social and political themes.

full-length sound film in Latvia was the scenic *Daugava* (1934, directed by Aleksandrs Rusteiķis), with a strong cultural and historical leaning. The film featured a staged storyline in a documentary setting – a rafting trip on Latvia's largest river, the Daugava, spanning from the country's eastern border to where the river enters the Gulf of Riga – and recorded the lives of people and nature scenes along the riverbanks as well as the fictional storyline taking place on the raft. A similar structure was used by the makers of *Gauja* (1934, directed by Kristaps Linde), which followed the course of Latvia's second largest river from its source to the sea. Film production was concentrated in the hands of small private entrepreneurs up until the late 1930s, when in 1938 the Ministry of Public Affairs created its Film Division. Full establishment of the division was interrupted by the outbreak of WWII, at the end of which Latvia, as a republic of the Soviet Union, now had a centralised film system in which film production, distribution and exhibition was done under state supervision. Film production in Latvia became more substantial and stable from the 1960s onwards, when a film studio was built in Riga with large sound stages, set design and editing shops, a film development laboratory, and other facilities necessary for comprehensive film production. Alongside documentaries intended for cinema screenings, commissioned, educational and



235 000 000
(1967)



Vecāks
par desmit
minūtēm
(Ten Minutes
Older, 1978)

HERCS FRANKS (1926-2013)



Director, scriptwriter – and eventually a cinematographer as well – with a strong interest in the photographic image, ethical issues, and the theoretical thought of documentary cinema. Before turning to film, Franks trained as a lawyer and worked as a press photographer, cartoonist and journalist.

Franks' first work in film was the screenplay for *Baltie zvani* (*The White Bells*, 1961). He made his first films as a director in 1965 for television, and continued to co-write for other directors as well as direct and write his own films. Franks' most notable works include *Aizliegtā zona* (*Restricted Area*, 1975), *Vecāks par desmit minūtēm* (*Ten Minutes Older*, 1978), *Augstākā tiesa* (*The Last Judgement*, 1987) and *Flashback* (2002). *Ten Minutes Older* inspired a series of ten-minute shorts, e.g. *Ten Minutes Older: Trumpet* and *Ten Minutes Older: Cello* (2002), made by internationally acclaimed directors such as Bernardo Bertolucci, Jim Jarmusch and Wim Wenders.

Franks also examined film theory, formulating his views on documentary cinema in the books *Ptolemy's Map* (1975, published in Russian) and *Uz sliekšņa atskaties* (*Look Back at the Threshold*, 2011, published in Russian and Latvian) as well as by giving master-classes abroad.

popular science works were also produced, forming an important share of production in the documentary sector. This was the model of film production in Latvia until 1990. After the occupation of Latvia in 1940, the new regime began making newsreels. During the short period of German occupation from 1941 to 1944, several propaganda-orientated documentaries were also made. After the end of WWII, several former frontline cameramen became involved in documentary filmmaking. Newsreels became an integral part of

film production, and over time they began to cover a variety of subjects. The most important of the newsreels was *Padomju Latvija* (*Soviet Latvia*), which was filmed almost every week and covered the most important events in the country. From the late 1950s onwards, the newsreels *Pionieris* (*The Pioneer*, with a target audience of children and young people), *Māksla* (*Art*, starting with 1963), *Sporta apskats* (*Sports Review*) and, later, *Gaismēnas* (*Chiaroscuro*) were produced on a quarterly basis, on average. The documentaries of the 1940s and 50s did not have strong artistic vision, but from 1960 onwards the situation at the Riga Film Studio changed dramatically. In line with developments in other parts of the world – where new generations of filmmakers with a more unusual view of the reality of the times were emerging and willing to experiment with technological possibilities and stylistic techniques – a new generation of filmmakers with an artistically subjective view also arose in Latvia. This new generation of documentary filmmakers in Latvia began to make films characterised by metaphors, a more personal tone, a highly developed visual quality, and unexpected combinations of text and image. Equally important was the innovation of deeper examination of settings and characters – exploring them and revealing them on screen. The Riga Style or Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema were the monikers for this aesthetic



Valmieras meitenes
(*The Girls of Valmiera*, 1970)

phenomenon represented by director and cinematographer Uldis Brauns, screenwriter and director Aivars Freimanis, screenwriter Armīns Lejiņš, cinematographer and director Ivars Seleckis, screenwriter and director Hercs Franks, and others. The most distinctive works of the Riga Style were created during this period: Brauns' short film trilogy made from 1961–63: *Sākums* (*The Beginning*), *Celtne* (*The Building*), and *Strādnieks* (*The Worker*); the feature-length work *235 000 000* (1967), based not on text but on music, written by Franks and directed by Brauns with the help of a large team; *Krasts* (*The Coast*, 1963), *Gada reportāža* (*The Report of the Year*, 1965), and *Lomi* (*The Catch*, 1969), all directed by Freimanis and shot by Seleckis; and short films by Gunārs Piesis.

The poetic style was also present in the following decades, but the dominant trend in the 1970s and 80s

AIVARS FREIMANIS (1936-2018)



Filmmaker and screenwriter Aivars Freimanis was one of the representatives of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema who in the 1960s, together with cinematographer Ivars Seleckis, made five films in this style. Freimanis came to cinema from a journalistic background and his first

works in the field of cinema were as a scriptwriter. He was the screenwriter for almost all of his own films and often contributed to the writing of scripts for other filmmakers. His literary talent also manifested itself in several short story collections and one novel. Freimanis' poetic films had a broad range – from careful observation of the environment that leads to imaginative revelations on the nuances of everyday life (*Krasts* (*The Coast*, 1963), *Gada reportāža* (*The Report of the Year*, 1965)), to musical interpretation of what lies beneath the text in *Lomi* (*The Catch*, 1969) and small staged elements in *Kuldīgas freskas* (*Frescoes of Kuldīga*, 1966), in which spoken dialogue is dispensed with altogether. Alongside his documentaries, Freimanis also made a number of feature films in which the documentary environment often played a key role.

JURIS PODNIEKS (1950-1992)



Director, cinematographer and producer Juris Podnieks was an important figure in documenting the times of change in the 1980s and early 90s – up until his tragic and untimely death. Podnieks initially worked as a cinematographer – e.g. he made several films with director Hercs Franks, including *Vecāks*

par desmit minūtēm (*Ten Minutes Older*, 1978) – but soon began making films independently. Focusing on sports, history and strong personalities, his camera sensitively captured people and events, and the films he directed managed to speak about the essential – searching for evidence of Latvia's past in *Strēlnieku zvaigznājs* (*Constellation of Rifleman*, 1982), listening to the feelings of young people in the atmosphere of reconstruction in *Is It Easy to Be Young?* (1986), capturing the collapse of the Soviet empire (*Hello, Do You Hear Us?*), and taking a closer look at the time of change in the Baltics in *Krustceļš* (*Homeland*, 1990) and *Pēcvārds* (*Post Scriptum*, 1991). Podnieks' ability to find a personal connection with the people he filmed, as well as his ability to perceive and express the era with sensitivity, made him an important public figure whose opinion was listened to. Podnieks' colleagues continued his work in the studio named after him.

was towards films with social themes in which the filmmakers focused on certain issues. Ivars Seleckis' *Valmieras meitenes* (*The Girls of Valmiera*, 1970), *Sieviete, kuru gaida?* (*The Woman Who is Awaited?*, 1978) dealt with the family and the role of women in society, while *Apcirkņi* (*Corn Bins*, 1973) looked at life in the Latvian countryside. Hercs Frank's films not only dealt with social and economic issues but also with ethical ones, and touched upon moral choices and responsibility (*Aizliegtā zona* (*Restricted Area*, 1975), *Augstākā tiesa* (*The Last Judgement*, 1987)).

One of his most striking works was the short film *Vecāks par desmit minūtēm* (*Ten Minutes Older*, 1978), which Franks made with cinematographer Juris Podnieks; the film explores the gamut of emotions a child experiences while watching a play in which good and evil battle it out. Laima Žurgina created eloquent portraits of personalities, Ansis Epnars worked in an expressive manner, and Juris Podnieks made his directorial debut. In the 1980s, Podnieks' films, especially *Vai viegli būt jaunam?* (*Is It Easy to Be Young?*, 1986), had a very wide resonance and revealed his ability to sensitively capture his own era – the period of reconstruction and its aftermath. In this film, for the first time, young people representing different social groups (Afghan War veterans, punks, etc.) openly expressed their thoughts – what worries them, what displeases them, what they expect from life, and what they expect from the state. This film made Podnieks known beyond the borders of the Soviet Union, creating the possibility of cooperation with British television. The resulting five-part film *Hello, Do You Hear Us?* (1989) documents events in the Soviet republics in the second half of the 1980s, including the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident, tensions between different nationalities, the quest for independence, and the gradual disintegration of the Soviet Union. Ivars Seleckis' *Šķērsiela* (*Crossroad Street*, 1988; winner of the 1990 FELIX award for Best European



Vai viegli būt jaunam?
(*Is It Easy to Be Young?*, 1986)

ACCESS TO LATVIA'S DOCUMENTARY FILM HERITAGE

The main film repository in Latvia is the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents, which is part of the National Archives of Latvia and holds the majority of Latvia's film heritage. Thanks to increasing digitisation and restoration resources, the archive, in cooperation with other partners, is gradually digitising and restoring the classics of Latvian cinema. An important resource is the archive's website www.redzidzirdilatviju.lv (due to copyright restrictions, the audiovisual content is accessible only within Latvia).

The National Film Centre of Latvia is an important partner in promoting this heritage. The website www.filmas.lv, created and managed by the National Film Centre, is a database of Latvian films, a platform for film screenings, and an educational resource. Although most of the audiovisual content is accessible only within Latvia, programmes with broader accessibility are regularly produced. The *Latvian Film Classics* section, which contains feature film, documentary and animation classics with subtitles in several languages, is permanently available worldwide.

Documentary) became an equally important expression of the era in Latvia and won international acclaim. The film observes the everyday life of the inhabitants of a small street in Riga, and through their relationships, fates and life stories, it reveals the complex twists and turns of Latvian history.

The end of the Soviet-era film system came in April 1990, when the Riga Film Studio was reorganised to create several film studios, and what remained as the Riga Film Studio was only a technical base for film production. Other film companies were formed in parallel, employing both experienced filmmakers who had worked at the Riga Film Studio as well as a new generation of people who wanted to work in filmmaking. ■

DOCUMENTARY FILM TRENDS

The late 20th and early 21st centuries

As Latvia was regaining its independence in the early 1990s, the country's single film production centre dissolved and independent film studios began to emerge. The first decade of restored independence was difficult for Latvia's filmmakers: the industry was underfunded, technologies were changing, the film exhibition and distribution environment was transforming, and the filmmakers had to learn how to integrate into the international documentary film industry – a sector that had been hidden to them behind the Iron Curtain of the Soviet system. Important to this integration were Danish initiatives regarding film screening, funding and networking – e.g. the 1990 Balticum Film & TV Festival in Bornholm, and the Baltic Media Center Fund (BMC); the latter was established in Denmark in 1994 and, among other activities, included the organisation of various professional qualification courses. Funding from the Interreg programme led to a variety of cooperative projects involving Denmark and the Baltic States. One of these was the Baltic Sea Forum (now known as the Baltic

Sea Forum for Documentaries / Baltic Sea Docs), which launched in 1997 as a platform for presenting project ideas to representatives of international foundations and television broadcasters. In 2002 Latvia joined the MEDIA programme, which made the programme's funding available to Latvian filmmakers for the development and production of their films (through 2020, 39 Latvian documentaries have received support). In the same year, Latvia became a member of Eurimages, thereby providing another point of international financial support for Latvia's filmmakers. The National Film Centre currently has a special support programme for international co-productions that actively encourages the creation of international projects. The 1990s were characterised by a branching out of the documentary film scene in Latvia – many new film studios emerged, screening conditions changed, and new filmmakers entered the playing field. Several significant films marked this new era through revealing historical and political dimensions of the times. Ansis Epnars' full-length documentary *Es esmu latvietis (I am Latvian, 1990)* recorded the Latvian diaspora communities that had formed from the large emigration wave at the end of WWII as the Soviets began to occupy the country. Filming began in the second half of the 1980s, and when the film was finally finished, Latvia was newly independent and the film's



release wholly captured the mood of the times by presenting a wide-ranging portrait gallery of Latvians living on several continents. Current events continued to be recorded by Juris Podnieks, who made several films about the agonising collapse of the Soviet Union in the Baltics and other former Soviet republics. In *Homeland (1990)*, the unifying motif for the three Baltic States were their unique Song Festivals. Shots of choirs singing in Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian were interspersed with the story of the three countries' tragic history – the deportations and oppression that the people of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia had endured under the Soviet system. Shortly after

the release of the film, the January 1991 barricade events took place in Latvia, during which two cameramen on Podnieks' filming team, Andris Slapiņš and Gvido Zvaigzne, were killed. Podnieks covered the events in the film *Post Scriptum (1991)*. The shots of the cameramen being wounded are a chilling direct representation of death and/or its imminence. The scenes that Zvaigzne continues to shoot after being hit (having slumped to the ground and slowly crawling with camera still in hand), and Slapiņš's words shouted in the dark after having been shot: "Film me!" – are testimonies both to the specific events of that fateful January and to the documentary

NATIONAL FILM CENTRE OF LATVIA

National Film Centre of Latvia is the institution which implements the national policy in the cinema and film industry. The Film Centre was established in 1990 and among its main functions are administering the funds from the State budget intended for film industry, promoting sustainable development and competitiveness of film industry of Latvia, nurturing the creation of films, as well as the availability and distribution of audiovisual heritage in Latvia and around the world.

**Krustceļš
(Homeland,
1990)**

cameraman's mission to be at the epicentre of historically important events.

The depiction of social conditions in the 1990s is revealed in the works of various filmmakers who used differing formal and narrative elements. The communal apartment as a reminder of everyday life in the Soviet era is accurately captured in the short film *Kas dzīvo komunalkā?* (*Who Lives in a Communal Apartment?*, 1993) by Askolds Saulītis. Using the "character" of a communal flat, Saulītis captured the aura of a bygone period and the present through depicting the experiences of the inhabitants of communal flats: challenging living conditions, the unknowns that come with the denationalisation of property in a newly independent country, and the fate of people who have been left on their own. Rural life at this time, for its part, can be seen in the film *Nāc lejā, bālais mēness!* (*Come Down, Pale Moon!*, 1994) by Ivars Seleckis. This film also depicts the denationalisation of land and property as well as the difficult conditions for farmers. It features a series of vivid characters with differing fates, but they are united by their love for the countryside and their desire to find and keep their place there. (Seleckis returned to the theme of rural people in his films *Zem ozola kuplajiem zariem* (*In the Shade of the Oak Tree*, 2007) and *Zemnieki* (*The Land*, 2022)).

Among the young filmmakers with a distinct style, director Laila Pakalniņa

stood out with several short films in the early 1990s. The black-and-white films *Veļa* (*The Linen*, 1991), *Prāmis* (*The Ferry*, 1994) and *Pasts* (*The Mail*, 1995) reveal an observation of the environment and events with precisely composed shots and authentic sound design but without additional commentary. Developing this style even further, Pakalniņa continues to regularly make documentaries of various length, the number of which have received international acclaim (*The Ferry* and *The Mail* were presented at the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival, where they both received FIPRESCI awards; *Leiputrija* (*Dream Land*, 2004) was nominated for a European Film Award; and a retrospective of her films was held in 2019 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris). Portrayal of the times is also prominent in the films made in the first decade of the 21st century, when many filmmakers addressed various socio-economic issues. Films reflecting the theme of emigration offer a kaleidoscope of human stories in which emigrants reveal their motives for leaving, their hopes, and their worries about everyday life abroad. In the film *Atrasts Amerikā* (*Found in America*, 2003) directed by Sandris Jūra, the filmmakers document Latvians in various cities in the USA by listening to their stories of wanting a better life and a more cosmopolitan environment, or of wanting to fulfil their dream of living in America, or some other



Pasts (The Mail, 1995)



Atrasts Amerikā (Found in America, 2003)

**Bekons,
sviests
un mana
mamma (My
Mother's
Farm, 2008)**



dream. More pragmatic motivations characterise the protagonists of the films featuring emigres who have gone to Ireland as migrant workers. Una Celma's film *Un tad es atgriezīšos pa īstam (And Then I'll Return for Real, 2003)* interviews Latvians who left for Ireland before Latvia joined the EU, a theme continued by Ivars Zviedris in *Bēgums (Tide, 2009)*, which already offers an imaginative perspective with its title – the ebb and flow of water symbolically describes people moving and leaving their country. This is also in line with the characters' occupation – picking cockle shells from the sea. In his characteristic way of managing to be inconspicuous but intimately present

in the lives of his subjects, Zviedris has deftly captured the migrant workers on film, both at work and at play. Zviedris' films are characterised by a focus on characters who are usually invisible – his talent lies in highlighting not only their specific personalities but also the social, political and economic background in which they live. Especially after 2000, an important form of expression for filmmakers became self-reflection – i.e. autobiographical stories or varying degrees of declaration of personal agency – in the hopes of offering a more subjective representation of reality in their films. Ilze Burkovska Jacobsen unravels her family's experience in



**Versija Vera
(Version
Vera, 2010)**



**Uz spēles
Latvija
(Obliging
Collaborators, 2014)**



Bekons, sviests un mana mamma (*My Mother's Farm*, 2008) and *My Favorite War* (2020), an animated documentary; Ieva Ozoliņa reveals her father's fate in *Mans tēvs banķieris* (*My Father the Banker*, 2015); Pēteris Krilovs adds elements of animation to his complex narrative about the relationship between the repressive Soviet system and art in *Uz spēles Latvija* (*Obliging Collaborators*, 2014). Analysis of the documentary filmmaker profession is particularly vivid in two films: *Flashback* (2002) by Hercs Franks, and *Dokumentālists* (*The Documentarian*, 2012) by Ivars Zviedris and co-directed by Inese Kļava; both films were made with very different approaches, yet share the use of precise descriptors in their respective titles. *Flashback* presents

a look into the past; the director analyses his films and the most important motif of his work – people in decisive situations, his own roots, and the profession of documentary filmmaker. Zviedris, on the other hand, focuses on the relationship between the documentary filmmaker and the film's protagonist – and the resultant issues that invariably arise: questions of ethics, the creation and maintenance of the bond that forms between the filmmaker and the protagonist, and what happens after the film has been made. Along with using classical narratives in representing historical stories, filmmakers are increasingly experimenting with historical material and personalities through using a wide range of means of expression and



blurring the boundaries between staging and documentation. Director Dāvis Sīmanis' *Escaping Riga* (2014) is about two famous people who were born in Riga – the film director Sergei Eisenstein and the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Episodes from their lives reveal the time and environments in which their views were formed, professional lives were lived, and personal trials were endured. By forgoing archival material and instead creating reenactments on 8 mm film stock, Sīmanis created

a docudrama based on historical material with a fine visual texture, restrained black and white images, and an interesting cast of characters. Likewise, Ilona Brūvere has challenged the boundaries of traditional documentary cinema with her films dedicated to historical figures: *Versija Vera* (*Version Vera*, 2010) about the sculptor Vera Mukhina; *Ievainotais jātnieks* (*The Wounded rider*, 2017) about the sculptor Kārlis Zāle, and others. By choosing to portray these historical figures with actors and

BALTIC SEA FORUM FOR DOCUMENTARIES

Baltic Sea Forum for Documentaries (Baltic Sea Docs) is an international co-financing pitching forum in Riga, Latvia, focused on documentary projects from the Baltic Sea region, Eastern Europe and Caucasus, and other countries if the project relates to the region. It gathers around 150 film professionals from Europe and other parts of the world every year in September in Riga. The event consists of preparatory workshop, pitching sessions and individual meetings, as well as seminars, masterclasses, and a film program of recent international documentary films. It is the only pitching forum in the Baltic region focused only on documentaries and an important platform for promoting documentary cinema. The forum was established in 1997 in Denmark, but since 2006 it is held in Latvia.

combining the reenactments with archival material, Brūvere creates works in which historical testimonies are interwoven with staged scenes – a decidedly hybrid genre.

In an era of creative synergies, co-productions are essential. By involving foreign filmmakers in films made with Latvian production companies at the helm, or by Latvian film professionals engaging in collaborative projects with filmmakers from other countries, works of artistic and thematic appeal are created. The VFS Films studio produced *Liberation Day* (2016), a musical documentary film co-directed by Norwegian director Morten Traavik and Latvian

director Uģis Olte about the Slovenian band *Laibach's* concert in North Korea. By contributing a Latvian cinematographer Valdis Celmiņš and co-writer Dāvis Sīmanis to the Italian production *The Rossellinis* (2020), VFS Films was involved in the creation of this film about the family of the famous Italian film director. The studio Mistrus Media, for its part, produced *Spiēgs, kurš mans tēvs* (*My Father the Spy*, 2019), a collaboration between Estonian director Jaak Kilmi and Latvian director Gints Grūbe (a Latvian, German, Czech Republic and Estonian co-production).

Filmmaker Vitaly Mansky has been a part of the Latvian cinema scene since 2014; many of his films are also multi-country co-productions and have been widely acclaimed at festivals.

A little more than thirty years of Latvian documentary filmmaking boasts a wide variety of thematic and stylistic films, thereby demonstrating the industry's ability to adapt to different conditions. The presence of documentaries made by Latvian filmmakers at leading international festivals is a testament to the uniquely both specific and universal vision of documentary filmmakers. ■

DOCUMENTARIANS SPEAK



Uldis Cekulis, producer, cinematographer (VFS Films)

Films: *The Rossellinis* (2020), *Laika tilti* (*Bridges of Time*, 2018), *Ukrainu šerifi* (*Ukrainian Sheriffs*, 2016), *Klucis. Nepareizais latvietis* (*Klucis. The Deconstruction of an Artist*, 2008), *Leiputrija* (*Dream Land*, 2004)

I can divide the motivation and interest behind co-production into three parts – and this applies to me as both a producer and as a person because one

cannot be separated from the other. Co-producing is like being friends; it's like having a family for the duration of making a film, from development to



The Rossellinis (2020)

distribution. Subsequently, this stage can last for more than five years – it's very serious. At least for me personally, this collaboration is important, first and foremost, so as to have as interesting a time together as possible, and not for the money. And that's knowing that co-productions, by definition, mean that there will be wars and exchanges of different opinions, different mentalities coming together and “kneading” the film. I don't want to say we adapt to one another because it really is like kneading dough – like in editing, when you start editing a film and suddenly realise that the result is not what you had in mind. At that point it's good to have a co-producer come in and say: *This dough needs to be re-kneaded*; they are like a fresh eye that allows you to look at the project from the sidelines. Of course, there's also the financial aspect, and at all levels – development, production, and

raising funds in the respective country. There's also the travel aspect – the co-producer can do a lot for you on the ground, and we can also split up attending film markets and forums. The third thing is the distribution of the film, when we agree who will be offering the film to sales agents. If you manage to find that “caring mother” in time to take your project around the world, that is very important for the film. The first thing I check that a potential co-producer has is a sense of humour, because that's the ticket to a successful collaboration. Humour saves you from crisis situations and balances them out when there are production disputes, or when there is no money, or when one of the parties is late, or when the editing is not on time – we have to solve problems because there's never a project where everything goes like clockwork. ■



Gints Grūbe, producer, director (Mistrus Media)

Films: *Zemnieki (The Land, 2022)*, *Spiēgs, kurš mans tēvs (My Father the Spy, 2019)*, *Turpinājums (To be Continued, 2018)*, *Mans tēvs bankieris (My Father the Banker, 2015)*, *Escaping Riga (2014)*

The Mistrus Media production company's profile in the field of documentary film has been developing for more than a decade now. Mistrus Media works with stories of socio-political relevance that focus on current cultural and historical narratives in a

European context. The studio develops comprehensive documentary stories that have international distribution potential, and has worked on successful multi-country co-productions with experienced filmmakers such as Ivars Seleckis, Dāvis Sīmanis,



Jaak Kilmi and Viesturs Kairiņš. We also partner with the newest generation of directors and emerging talent. It is important for us that the non-fictional story is rooted in the history, events and people of Latvia or the surrounding region, yet also has a storyline that is understandable and interesting to people around the world. In recent years, this has been the case with the Cold War spy documentary *My Father the Spy*; directed by Jaak Kilmi and Gints Grūbe, the film premiered at Sheffield DocFest. The studio's key representative of Riga poetic documentary cinema is director Ivars Seleckis, whose recent works,

To Be Continued and *The Land*, were screened internationally (premiering at Visions du Réel and IDFA, respectively). The studio's main producers, Gints Grūbe and Elīna Gediņa-Ducena, largely focus on creative production, i.e. the producers come up with ideas for films and then look for directors with whom to further realise the film. In recent years, the studio has been producing documentaries by a new generation of directors – Armands Začs, Kārlis Lesiņš and Pauls Ķesteris – who have chosen socially divisive yet important topics such as mental health, the LGBTQ community, and the environment. ■

**Escaping
Riga (2014)**



Ieva Ozoliņa, director

Films: *Mana māte valsts* (*My Mother the State*, 2022), *Dotais lielums: mana māte* (*Solving My Mother*, 2017), *Mans tēvs baņķieris* (*My Father the Banker*, 2015)

For me, documentary cinema is the key to a room that can only be entered through film. The mysterious rooms that attract me are the ones that hold the answer to a question that is very important to me. It may be a question that is twenty years old, but the protagonist who can answer it has only shown up now because only now

am I ready to go into the ring with them. I am interested in the places inhabited by people who say they absolutely do not want to be filmed, yet in their eyes, I can see that this is what they really want. They have their own long-held story and my camera becomes their mouthpiece. I find the protagonists for my films – they



come into my life in all sorts of ways, yet I am the one who comes forward first. They are people with very strong convictions about the way life is ordained and about what is fair. They put their beliefs above their daily routines, even though this often requires sacrifice. Our relationship builds slowly; we play a game of “proximity ping-pong” – getting a feel for the boundaries, finding out what it is that we need from each other, and how we can best get it. With each film I learn to increasingly observe myself, to feel what it is that changes me in the process of making a film, and to give myself new eyes with which to look at myself. That’s where my cinema is. ■

**Mans tēvs
baņķieris** (*My
Father the
Banker*, 2015)



Laila Pakalniņa, director, producer, scriptwriter (Kompānija Hargla)

Films: *Mājas* (Homes, 2021), *Karote* (Spoon, 2019), *On Rubik's Road* (*Pa Rubika ceļu*, 2010), *Leiputrija* (Dream Land, 2004), *Prāmis* (Ferry, 1994)

What does auteur documentary film-making mean to me? Actually, both as a viewer and as a maker of my own films, I don't use the term "auteur cinema". There is Film. There is a failed (bad) film. And there is a television film or product (even if it wasn't meant for television but was made that way).

These products also tend to be either good or bad. Their characteristics are: almost always – narration; almost always – interviews (talking heads); and the manipulative use of music. Multiple layers of perception are never present. The main sign of a bad film is that it has no soul. But I don't define for

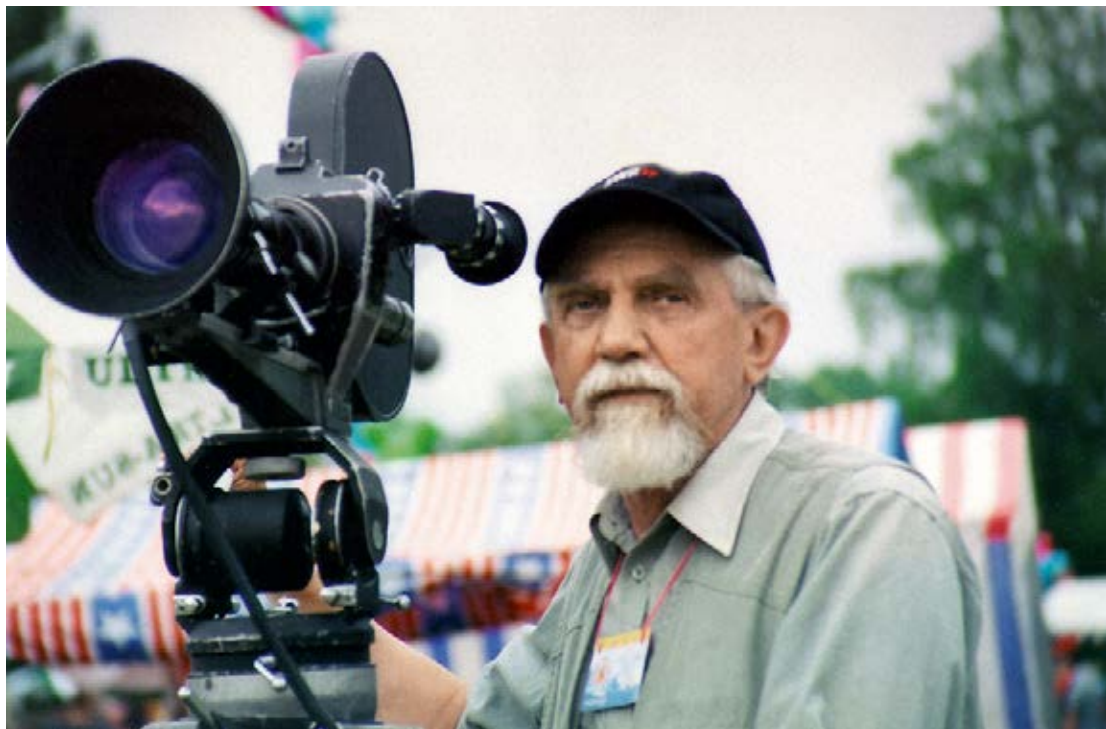


Leiputrija
(Dream Land,
2004)

myself what a Film is because, for me, it is something beyond the rational. As a viewer, I feel the Film. As a director... I don't know; maybe for me, making a Film is something akin to swimming or flying. And there's this feeling that you can only make Films with the very, very tips of your fingers – I just realised in writing this that fingerprints are unique. And then, of course, for me, documentary cinema is about looking and seeing. That's why I hope that by giving the viewer a chance to enter the Film (i.e. without imposing what and how they should be understanding it because there is nothing to understand), they not only look but see. ■



Prāmis
(Ferry, 1994)



Ivars Seleckis, director, cinematographer

Films: *Zemieki (The Land, 2022)*, *Turpinājums (To be Continued, 2018)*, *Jaunie laiki Šķērsielā (New Times at Crossroad Street, 1999)*, *Šķērsiela (Crossroad Street, 1988)*

Poetic cinema and 21st-century Latvia? The situation when there was a need for such a language of cinema is gone – it has remained in the 20th century; it no longer exists. That generation of filmmakers is no

longer here. This era has different demands on how an auteur expresses himself. And the audience of this era no longer understands the meaning of these metaphors. However, I feel that something of it has remained in the



**Šķērsiela
(Crossroad
Street, 1988)**

air. It has remained as a possibility – as a fact that can provide interesting solutions if there is a suitable idea that needs it. In the past it was so organic – the finding of images, details and metaphors that are so handy when making a film about people; this kind of expression is more philosophical. Associative montage is more suitable for poetic cinema. I personally feel that I am connected to this cinematic language, and it still influences my cinematic language and way of expressing myself. ■



**Turpinājums
(To be
Continued,
2018)**



Ivars Zviedris, director, producer, cinematographer (Dokumentālists studio)

Films: *Bahs pret Covid* (*Bach vs Covid*, 2022), *Valkātājs* (*Latvian Coyote*, 2019), *Dokumentālists* (*Documentarian*, 2012, co-director Inese Kļava), *Bēgums* (*Tide*, 2009), *Atnāc, Ērik!* (*Get Lost*, 2005)

Cinema can start when the protagonist lets me into the bedroom, both literally and figuratively. Here in Latvia, that letting-in is still done very civilly, and not through data protection rules and regulations. Documentary film as such, not just the

observational kind, could become if not quite an impossible mission then close to it, because anyone who doesn't want to be filmed can refer to these regulations. I'm often told that my protagonists live on the margins of normalcy or something, which I



don't think is quite the case. But on the other hand, it may well be true. Why do I have protagonists like that? Because the people who let me into their bedroom – they want it. For example, the person I'm currently filming – she had a pair of scissors in her abdomen for 30 years – she volunteered herself. She came up to me while I was filming, showed me a newspaper with a story about her, and asked me if I wanted to make a film about her. The fact that the subjects themselves want it is a big part of the victory. They want to get something like a free psychotherapist who will communicate with them and make life interesting for them. Observational documentary is almost a kind of psychotherapy, and that's

where our game starts – that's why they let me in. My session as therapist lasts for three years and beyond. I think that's why they let me in – of course, it's just one of the reasons and there are probably others. Actors are taught how to exit a role, but what role can you exit as a documentary filmmaker? As Inta from the film *The Documentarian* said [about me]: *He wants to make friends, the monkey; when he no longer needs to film, he no longer needs your friendship.* I always remember that, and I probably will until my last day. It's a very fragile boundary. On the one hand, it's a terrible side effect; on the other hand, the life of a documentary filmmaker is interesting – you get to live different lives. ■

Dokumentālists (Documentarian, 2012)



Kārlis Lesiņš, director

Films: *Vējtore* (*Windkeeper*, 2021), *Apgāztā mēness zīmē* (*Under the Upturned Moon*, 2018), *Vectēva tēvs* (*Grandfather's Father*, 2016)

I think the long-held assumption that documentary filmmaking is simply about observing reality and capturing it on video has created a misconception of how complex and challenging the genre really is. It involves almost all the same conditions as the fictional genres – script development, location selection, framing, working with characters, etc. – but with one big unknown: unpredictability. When

working on documentary material, it is almost impossible to predict what the final result will be because there are always natural elements that can influence the content – disagreements with the protagonist, the non-disclosure of sensitive content, weather conditions, changes in topicality, the absence of a compelling narrative, and more. Yet these are the challenges that attract me to the



genre and, of course, also make me despise it when it is impossible to realise my intentions. This “love and hate” relationship is like a gambling adventure every time I decide to tackle the next story. And that’s why it’s never boring – you can never fall into a routine or relax because you have to be constantly ready to adapt, improvise, and accept. That’s why I don’t have just one single approach to documentary filmmaking. Its versatility and the overwhelming abundance of subjects make it necessary to look for new ways and methods in terms of transferring these stories into the language of cinema as well as conveying them to the audience in an

interesting and comprehensible way. In my opinion, fictional cinema does not have as much scope as documentary cinema; in the latter, you can stick to a classical approach with an unobtrusive observational style, or, do the extreme opposite with staging and acting. For me, personally, the most important thing is that documentary cinema allows me to give reality context – something that often gets lost or becomes one-dimensional in our everyday lives. Without context, we can’t really know ourselves or those around us; context allows us to delve into issues and events that affect us all and, often times, are hiding much more than meets the eye. ■

**Apgāztā
mēness zīmē
(Under the
Upturned
Moon, 2018)**

Austrumu fronte (Eastern Front, 2023), co-directors Vitaly Mansky and Yevhen Titarenko



Vitaly Mansky, director

Films: *Austrumu fronte (Eastern Front, 2023, co-director Yevhen Titarenko)*, *Gorbačovs. Paradīze (Gorbachev. Heaven, 2020)*, *Putina liecinieki (Putin's Witnesses, 2018)*, *Radinieki (Close Relations, 2016)*, *Saules staros (Under the Sun, 2015)*

Before explaining how I came to be working in Latvia, I would like to say that I left Ukraine to study at the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Russia. After graduating, I stayed in Moscow to live and work. In 2014 my wife and I emigrated from Russia to show our opposition to the annexation of Crimea.

We had experience in co-producing with Latvian filmmakers even before our move to Riga, for we had been involved in the production of the last film of my friend, the great Hercs

Franks – *Beyond the Fear* premiered at the opening of the first Riga International Film Festival in 2014. After that, we presented a documentary programme at Riga IFF for several years in which we showed films that had been subject to enormous pressure and censorship in Russia at the Artdocfest film festival.

At the same time, my wife Natalia Manskaya (who is also my producer) and I closed our studio *Vertov* in Russia and registered it in Latvia. In our Riga studio I then continued to work on the



film *Under the Sun*, which was shot in North Korea. Given that Russia officially withdrew from the film, *Under the Sun* represented Latvia at hundreds of international film festivals, winning dozens of awards. In addition, *Under the Sun* received two Latvian National Film Awards. This, perhaps, is how I became part of the Latvian cinema community. At the same time, I was accused of anti-state activities in Russia, criminal cases were brought against me, and I was practically banned from working in my profession in Russia. Even before the Korean film was finished in 2014, I had started making a film in Latvia with producer Guntis Trekteris about the war that Russia had started in Ukraine. In *Close Relations*, I told the story of my Ukrainian family, some of whom had found themselves on opposite sides of the barricades

on the eve of war. This film became a co-production with Estonia and Germany, and my first completely Latvian film. Then came the films *Putin's Witnesses* and *Gorbachev. Heaven*. All of these films have been successful – prestigious festivals, distributed and screened on TV in many countries, awards... After the state's systemic destruction of Artdocfest in Russia, in 2020 my Latvian colleagues and I founded IDFF Artdocfest / Riga. At the 2023 Berlinale we present *Eastern Front*, which was filmed during Russia's war in Ukraine. It is a co-production between Latvia and Ukraine with the participation of the Czech Republic and the USA. This very important project for us was only possible because in 2014, a free and independent Latvia accepted us and became our home. ■

Gorbačovs. Paradīze (Gorbachev. Heaven, 2020)

PRODUCING DOCUMENTARIES IN AND WITH LATVIA

The main funding bodies

National Film Centre of Latvia is responsible for administering the state funding for film production. The funding programmes for filmmaking include funding for the development, production and marketing of films. To encourage and support co-production, there is a minority co-production funding programme. The development and production programmes have calls once a year. The co-production projects must have a local partner who can submit the project at the Film Centre.

A public agency State Culture Capital Foundation supports different strands of culture, including audiovisual sector. Among many other types of projects, the fund allocates money for both short and feature length documentary films.

There are also two production incentive programmes. Cash rebate scheme Latvia Co-financing programme for foreign production is administered by Investment and Development Agency of Latvia. The programme is a production incentive supporting the incoming productions of full-length feature films, documentaries and animation films, TV films, which can be either

service projects or co-productions. Similar scheme is available at The Riga Film Fund of the Council of Riga, which administers Cash rebate scheme Riga Film Fund co-financing programme. It is also designed for supporting the incoming productions of full-length feature films, documentaries, and TV films. ■

Co-productions

Latvian production companies regularly engage in co-productions both as lead producers or minority co-producers with partners in many European countries and beyond. Several production companies have a strong record in co-productions like VFS Films, Mistrus Media, Vertov, Ego Media, and others. Among the latest co-production countries are Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, France, Ukraine, Iceland, Georgia. ■

INFORMATION ON THE FILM STUDIOS:

<https://www.nkc.gov.lv/en/film-producers>





National
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Cover images from the films (clockwise from top left corner): *Ten Minutes Older* (1978),
On Rubiks' Road (2010), *Is It Easy to Be Young?* (1986), *The Rossellinis* (2020)

