

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS' ANTI-COMMUNIST MANIFESTO. THE FILM "KULDĪGA FRESCOES" (AIVARS FREIMANIS, 1966)

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Abstract

In his book *The Communist Post Scriptum*, philosopher Boris Groys defines communism as a revolutionary project, the aim of which was to subordinate the economy to politics and to transform society from a financial medium into a linguistic medium. In order to achieve communism, it was first necessary to verbalise society.

At the beginning of the 1960s, efforts by Riga poetic documentary filmmakers to work in the *cinéma vérité* style failed because the Soviet people, having experienced a linguistic turn, clearly knew what to say and how to speak when approached by film cameras. It was one of the reasons why part of Soviet filmmakers started avoiding the spoken word in cinema in the hope of approaching truth solely through image.

In the middle of the 1960s, there were two monumental documentaries created at Riga Film Studios that were entirely based on the dramatic expressivity of image: *235,000,000* (1967) by Uldis Brauns and "Kuldīga Frescoes" (*Kuldīgas freskas*, 1966) by Aivars Freimanis. However, I believe that the films went in opposite directions. The epic documentary *235,000,000*, which was dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the USSR, actually offered an equivalent visual expression to the leading Soviet linguistic discourse, whereas "Kuldīga Frescoes" liberated visual aesthetics from the shackles of political language, "taking it to another horizon where it becomes free, a new creature in nation humanity" (Rainis). The topic of my paper will be "Kuldīga Frescoes".

Keywords: *Cinema modernism, socialist realism, Riga Style Poetic Documentaries, Communist ideology.*

Philosopher Boris Groys in his book *The Communist Post Scriptum* defines communism as a revolutionary project, the aim of which was to subordinate the economy to politics in order to grant to the power sovereign freedom of action [Гройс 2014: 8]. Groys considers that the communist revolution means a transition of society from the financial medium to the medium of language; the revolution was linked to a linguistic turn in the social practice [Гройс 2014: 8].

The communist society as a **society of word**, similarly to Groys, has been described also by Pyotr Vail and Alexander Genis in their famous research *The World of Soviet People*, claiming that from the perspective of the **word**, the communist era had started in the USSR already on July 30, 1961 after adoption of the 3rd Programme of the CPSU [Вайль, Генис 2001: 12].

In order to reach communism society had to be verbalized first. Verbalization affected all areas of soviet life. Starting from the 1930s it dominated also in documentary film in which the voice-over text of a narrator became the main source of information pushing the visual imagery into background. Verbalization is not to be understood only in its narrow sense as the power of a spoken word; verbalization by definition, namely as ideological patency, clarity of events and thought was accepted by the only artistic form of expression in the USSR – socialist realism. Every painting and every piece of music had to be *talking*.

Alongside with verbalization of society on its road to communism, the new generation of filmmakers in Eastern Europe part of whom were also *Riga style* or Riga poetic documentary filmmakers in the 1960s, tried to get rid of the power of word by giving up the narrator's voice-over and the imposed descriptive blatancy of the image, replacing it with multi-layered form of expression based on visual metaphor. Therefore Riga poetic style can be considered also as a revolutionary anti-communist movement whose goal was to deprive the political power of its unlimited freedom of action at least in works of art.

Taking a leap into future, it should be noted that after some decades the goal was achieved, and as it generally happens in history, the revolution devoured its own children. Financial medium became omnipotent again but language, including the artistic language too, to put it in Groyse's terms, functioned merely as a commodity and therefore became mute [Гройс 2014: 9]. **“Protest and critical discourse is considered to be successful if it can be sold well, and is considered to be unsuccessful if its sales go bad”** [Гройс 2014: 9].

Two monumental documentary films were made at Riga Film Studios in 1966 that were entirely based in dramatic interplay between visual images and music, both films gave up the narrator's voice-over and any other spoken text: “Kuldīga Frescoes” (Aivars Freimanis, 1966) and *235, 000, 000* (Uldis Brauns, 1967). Yet the point of departure in both films and therefore also the achieved results were opposite.

The epic *235, 000, 000* dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the USSR was based on carefully drafted and **verbally** formulated concept of the film by the script author Herz Frank, it was a set of documents called “field manual” and was distributed in the form of a **book** to all the film-crew members [Фрaнк 1975: 150].

The film *235, 000, 000* was supposed to have two plot lines: depiction of individual human lives and events in the country. It is interesting that the field manual envisioned maximum confrontation between the two storylines both content-wise and stylistically, emphasizing in the Human line the private, intimate and individual while the State line was to show events, massive scale, vastness and sensations and the collective [Фрaнк 1975: 151].

Yet by demonstrating confrontation, the goal was not to show antagonism between the state and the individual. The main aim was to create a **unified story**¹ [Фрaнк 1975: 176] that would enable to perceive “the image of a huge and multi-national state” as one single entity [Фрaнк 1975: 149].

Such an aspiration for monumental unity corresponded to the dominant ideological discourse and supported it. Interpretation of the story of human life was also in line with the official positivism that according to the authors was not to be defined in terms of painful and extreme milestones of human life (birth – death) but the reference points were “stepping out of the cradle” and wedding, or as Frank wrote, “pathos of happiness, eternal unity of love”.

In between these seminal points there were only light moments of human life, the tragic and the negative remained outside the film [Фрaнк 1975: 149]. Such an approach essentially distinguishes the film *235, 000, 000* from “Kuldīga Frescoes”, which does contain some episodes, characteristic of the 1960s optimism: children on a globe, children flying a kite, cliché-like contrast between the old and the new world, working tools and weapons, yet it represents also dramatic and even tragic episodes that speak about death, extinction of the existence and inevitable ruin. In this context one should particularly stress the frescoes “Twilight Hour” and “Work”. The latter can be actually perceived as an outline for Aivars Freimanis' subsequent film “Father” (1967), which was banned altogether; in the same way, the soviet cinema administration did not approve the film made by Gunārs Piesis in 1965 entitled “Memory of the Earth”, a visually poetic *monument* to the monuments at the Forest Cemetery.

It is still important to note that the idea of **unified wholeness** encoded in *235, 000, 000* (as indicated also by Herz Frank [Фрaнк 1975: 176]) was not always successfully implemented and the visual metaphors of Riga documentary

¹ Bold by Inga Pērkone.

filmmakers sometimes created undesirable associations for the discourse of power. For example, as Herz Frank wrote many years later, the authors of the film were reproached that “it is not clear where the huge plane with the inscription the USSR on its side flies [in the finale of the film]” [ФРАНК 1975: 99].

As a consequence, the 115 minute long version of the film was officially accepted in October 1967 shortly before the 50th anniversary of the USSR, with an approval “for general audience” [Latvia State Archives 142: 1] but it had to be shortened and on March 13, 1968 another act on “appropriateness of 235, 000, 000 for general audience” was signed but now the film was only 74 minutes long [Latvia State Archives 142: 216].

It is interesting that “Kuldīga Frescoes” was not made as a long-cherished idea of its authors but as a peculiar and rapidly prepared substitute connected with the filming of *235, 000, 000*. On 11 May 1966, the director of Riga Film Studios Frīdens Koroļkēvičs explained to Latvia Film Committee that their production plan for 1966 included the documentary film by Herz Frank “Youth” about the generation in their twenties. But since Herz Frank had to work on the film *235, 000, 000*, the documentary about the young people was offered to the script writer Armīns Lejiņš and the director Aivars Freimanis [Latvia State Archives 113: 94].

Both the authors initially tried to adapt themselves to Frank’s idea, merging the theme of youth with representation of a small-town life, but already from the very beginning they tried out tentative use of the mosaic structure. Yet the first version of the script written in April 1966 called “Frescoes Found in Kuldīga”. “Youth” was based mainly on *words* – empty phrases borrowed from the rhetoric of their time, without identifying the possible stylistics and atmosphere of the film: “Peaceful work, peaceful life, principles of peace in relations among nations and countries... Communism – the youth of the world... These are the notions that characterize our life” [Latvia State Archives 113: 109].

Generally, the Film Administration evaluated the idea of the authors quite favourably, but their foremost objection was to the word *frescoes*. On June 13 1966, the chairman of Latvia Cinematographers’ Committee Nikolajs Kārkliņš, publicizing the Committee’s conclusion about the second edition of the script submitted in May, 1966, admits that it has become more varied and it cannot be reproached of the lack of social generalizations, yet he emphasizes: “We repeatedly propose to consider changing the title because frescoes today can be seen in quite a few film titles” [Latvia State Archives 113: 53].

Thinking about why Nikolajs Kārkliņš did not like the word *frescoes* and looking for those allegedly numerous films of the respective period whose title contained the word *frescoes*, it was actually possible to find only one, but the

events linked with this film or to be more precise with the plans for this film, are sufficiently meaningful and disconcerting, and they could have led to Nikolajs Kārklīņš' suggestion that the word should be best avoided.

The project of the film by Sergey Paradjanov (Параджанов) "Kiev Frescoes" was started at the Ukrainian Dovzhenko Film Studio in 1965 and it was terminated at the beginning of 1966, consequently shortly before "Kuldīga Frescoes" [Steffen 2009]. The scandal that was associated with this expressly experimental film that the director started shooting without official approval and was banned afterwards, apparently was too big for the film administrators of other *brotherly* republics not to have heard about it, besides Paradjanov had invited the most famous Latvian actress in the Soviet Union Vija Artmane to participate in "Kiev Frescoes", thus the information about Paradjanov's film could have reached Riga also via her.

The scholar James Steffen writes that with "Kiev Frescoes" Paradjanov who was also the script writer for this film, had hoped to strengthen his place not only among the soviet but also West European cinema modernists to rank among such directors as François Truffaut, Ingmar Bergman, and in particular Federico Fellini [Steffen 2009].

Paradjanov's "Kiev Frescoes" was envisioned as a feature film dedicated to the 20th anniversary since the victory of the USSR in the Great Patriotic War but in actual reality by its genre it was on the same crossroads of live action and documentary film as "Kuldīga Frescoes" and also the later films by Aivars Freimanis, such as "Apple in the River" (1974), "Life" (1989) and others.

The structure, themes and even captions and sequence of frescoes in Paradjanov's intended film have several affinities with the film "Kuldīga Frescoes", and this is, in my view, another piece of evidence that Aivars Freimanis belongs to cinema modernism that I have already written elsewhere [Pērkone 2013: 35–51].

Some of the literal similarities: for example, when Paradjanov explained his artistic objective to his colleagues at Dovzhenko Film Studio he indicated that the last novella (the word used apart *frescoes* also by Aivars Freimanis) will be called "Morning" – the film about Kuldīga ends with a novella of the same title. "Kiev Frescoes" was basically planned as black and white film but according to Paradjanov's concept the novella "Morning" was to be in colour [Деревянко: 1990, 60].¹

Paradjanov noted that he was looking for *frescoes of life* and wanted to make a film about Kiev, its people and their national character [Деревянко 1990: 56]. The director said that the most difficult task in the genre he had chosen – cinematic

¹ Less than 15 minute footage preserved till today is in colour and at least implicitly is connected with the themes of the film's finale.

fresco – was to find the plasticity to be shown on the screen. **The texture on which the fresco is applied had to be revealed**¹ [ДЕРЕВЯНКО 1990: 59].

Similarly to Freimanis, Paradjanov had intended his frescoes as kaleidoscopic subjective impressions about people of different classes in Kiev and the city itself. Kuldīga was captured in 19 frescoes, Kiev was to have 10; moreover, the separate frescoes were not to be tableaux made in a single shot, typical of later style of Paradjanov, but as collages saturated with various details and movement [Steffen 2009].

Incidentally, Viktor Shklovsky in one of his letters to Paradjanov in 1972 mentioned Sergey Eisenstein as a creator of film frescoes: it was important for Eisenstein to demonstrate the pictorial nature of a moving image, to solve the problems of coloured background [Параджанов I 1990: 40].

Film scholar Miron Chernenko later called Paradjanov's style *kaleidograph* [Параджанов 1990: 42]; it is a label applicable also to “Kuldīga Frescoes”.

Stylistics of Freimanis' frescoes is also diverse, the frescoes differ both by their length and tone, they extend from very brief fleeting momentous images captured by camera and concentrated gigs till dramatically and elaborately developed episodes. The authors of “Kuldīga Frescoes” wrote in their treatment: “Dramatic goals are achieved by different means: a) drama of the event itself; b) a radical shift in editing; c) anecdotal twist at the end of novella; d) contrast between image and sound and so on. (..) The sound design in the film plays a hugely important role, which is basically musical. Many novellas are accompanied by already previously existent recordings – they are popular songs by different nations (both folk and pop songs). Therefore the coloured wide-screen shot does not achieve effect designated in Russian by the word *zrelishche* (spectacle)², but each novella will convey even with greater clarity the idea that this is not the only nice town in the world and that inhabitants of any city in the world aspire for such a placid mode of life” [Latvia State Archives 113: 116–117].

The idea of the film expressed the filmmakers' interest about the diversity, the contingent, the separate and also elements of subjectivity of the artist's vision, refusing from a detailed film script and rigidly defined plot lines. In his film abstract Aivars Freimanis writes: “The frescoes is the name given to 19 short stories, each of them has its own idea. (..) When the film was finished, its authors were joking that they wanted to make this film as a multi-layered pie – some people might like the surface layer humour, some others might get to the deeper and more philosophical thoughts about life” [Latvia State Archives 113: 3].

¹ Bold by Inga Pērkone.

² The document stored in the archives is hand-written in Russian.



Figure 1. Making of “Kuldīga Frescoes” (1966): on the right director Aivars Freimanis, by the camera cameraman Ivars Seleckis. Photograph by Aivars Čakste, from the collection of LAC Riga Film Museum

The script of “Kuldīga Frescoes” had also included self-reflexivity typical of 1960s film modernism which was not eventually used in the film. This intention is another affinity of “Kuldīga Frescoes” with “Kiev Frescoes”: Kuldīga was supposed to be represented through the cameraman image, while one of the main characters in Kiev was the Film director. In his director’s script Paradjanov had most probably programmed a means of expression inspired by Dziga Vertov by showing still before the title of the film the filming process – a hand in a white glove opens a box, takes out lenses, the camera moves along rails, the camera lens opens, we see the cameraman, production designer and the director... [Steffen 2009].

“Kuldīga Frescoes” was to have an almost identical beginning: “The cameraman Ivars Seleckis walks unhurriedly across bridges, looking around in a matter-of-fact way. His walk is depicted in a humorous way. (..) His assistant emerges at the right moment on a rooftop. This man is carrying a load like a pack donkey: 2–3 large boxes, 4–5 smaller boxes, a massive wooden support and a camera” [Latvia State Archives 113: 58]!

Ivars Seleckis says¹ that he has no recollection that the crew would have wanted to begin the film with the cameraman image and he believes that it would not have been possible due to the available filming equipment and the budget of the film which could not have *afforded* the second cameraman. Ivars Seleckis thinks that the dandelion seen in the first shot for whose filming in the hotel room three days were spent, is a much better opening episode. “It was a big fuss with those flowers. The close-up of the flower resembles the rising sun. We shot it in the hotel room. We covered up windows and put up lights. It is difficult to shoot anything like that in an open location because lights change, the sun and wind interfere. In one of the hotel rooms we arranged a kind of filming pavilion. We put tripods there, torch-lights, and we filmed photographs. We worked there nicely especially on rainy days” [Jērums 2009: 90–91].

The dandelion filmed by Ivars Seleckis is a truly outstanding work of art, like the quite fantastic flowers and their collages in the fresco “Gardener Tontegode”. It must be noted that flowers had a special significance in Paradjanov’s film: they served as catalysts for a fairly relative plot line and became also an expressive visual image. And yet – it is a pity that the intention to reflect the very process of filming in “Kuldīga Frescoes” remained merely on paper.

In comparison to the field manual for shooting *235, 000, 000*, making of “Kuldīga Frescoes” leaves even a flippant impression. Cameraman Ivars Seleckis remembers: “The fresco form made our hands free – we filmed as many as we wanted, one fresco more or less – no one would know that. The film was intended like a mosaic giving insight into life of the town. Something had been previously thought out, something emerged on the spot, besides the town changed as well. The idea of the white fresco appeared when we filmed the secondary school graduation ceremony – white dresses, white lilies and white clouds. Different events happened in the town as well. One day, for example, we saw a fire. Another day we were walking along the city and saw tourists walking away. One of the churches in Kuldīga resembled an Italian church; this is how the Italian fresco appeared. (..) Everybody offered ideas. The film-crew was small and everyone was tossing into that common hat of ideas whatever came in their minds. A domino principle was

¹ The author’s conversation with Ivars Seleckis, April 4, 2016.



Figure 2. “Kuldīga Frescoes” (1966).

Photograph by Aivars Čakste, from the collection of LAC Riga Film Museum

created – someone moves a piece, then the second and the third one and finally they all “fall” into a pattern no one could imagine before” [Jērums 2009: 90 – 91].

The playfulness, with which the film was made, emanated also from some of the frescoes, creating in the first part of the film a cheerful and happy small-town atmosphere. Most probably humour was at the basis of the box-office success of the documentary film: during two months “Kuldīga Frescoes” the numbers of audience in cinemas of Latvia reached 17,000 spectators [Latvia State Archives 113: 30]. Perhaps it was the humorous mood established at the very beginning of the film when Riga Film Studio logo was shown in a somewhat grotesque way that was the reason that at least the censor did not notice the heresy of the film crew: its introductory text which used the name of the Republic of Latvia (“The film has been made in the Soviet Union, in the Republic of Latvia, Kuldīga”).

Yet apart from the lively mood, ironic tone and sarcasm occasionally emerge in the film: both in the tragic episode *Work*, as well as in the episodes “Kisses”, “Kuldīga, Kuldīga...” and “Dog’s Life”, as well as in the compilation of frescoes about firemen (“!!!” and “???”) and others. Irony is a stylistic means of expression that by its very definition is opposite to the unambiguous clarity and optimism

required by communism. Andrey Sinavsky had written already in 1957 that irony actually is a redundant person's laughter about himself; irony is a continuous companion of disbelief and doubts. Vail and Genys indicate in their study that in the second half of the 1960s there is increasingly more irony in the works by the soviet artists [Вайль, Генис 2001: 167], and it testifies to the disappointment of society that almost nothing of the *verbal promise* made in 1961 had been fulfilled.

Yet perception of irony as the deepest reflection of one's epoch, as well as other innovative approaches used in the film "Kuldīga Frescoes" came only later. Initially the film was harshly criticized in the press and looking from today's perspective the criticism was mostly to do with non-compliance of "Frescoes" to the optimistic and impetuous future-focused sense of life existing at least on the verbal level in the 1960s. For example, the young journalist Ansis Epnars who later was to become one of the outstanding Riga style documentary filmmakers, called the film philistine and criticized not only its form but also its contents [Epnars 1967].

In 1967 the film was harshly criticized by the first "Riga style" theorist Mihails Savisko: "Despite a number of brilliant formal achievements, despite the fact that several scenes (frescoes or novellas) each in themselves seem to be even very interesting, the mood of the film causes deep concern. By dissecting the reality in accordance to their intent, the authors kill the spirit and essence of life. Instead of life we see on the screen merely petty existence" [Savisko 1967: 36].

Savisko criticized the film for the typical diseases of "lyrical style": disregard of real life whose advancement is based on the struggle between contradictions, avoiding of reflection of problems to be solved in daily life, and confining themselves within poetic generalizations. Perhaps for this very reason – as a warning and lesson – the gifted, the searching **artists' failure**¹ will be able to become a more significant contribution in cinema development than their previous highly praised success² [Savisko 1967: 37].

Yet as years went by Mihails Savisko re-evaluated the film. For example, in 1971 he wrote about "Kuldīga Frescoes" as follows: "Today it is possible to realize that departure and alienation of the artists from reality was a logical step towards its deeper understanding" [Savisko 1971].

In 1983 the film theorist perceived completely differently the same film he had called a failure: "When after brilliant manifestation of the new principles in "Reporting of the Year" A. Freimanis made the semi-live action series of novellas Kuldīga Frescoes, the author of the present lines accused him almost of betraying the ideals. It was a mistake. (Although a kind of mistake after understanding which one later feels no shame.) The desire to see direct and more in-depth continuation

¹ Bold by Inga Pērkone.

² A reference to the film "Reporting of the Year" (Aivars Freimanis, 1965).



Figure 3. “Kuldīga Frescoes” (1966).

Photograph by Aivars Čakste, from the collection of LAC Riga Film Museum

of the process started previously did not permit at the time to appreciate the need of the artist and the artistic trend for a manoeuvre, for enrichment of aesthetic experience (..) [Savisko 1983].

Mihails Savisko's gradual change of opinion is symbolic for understanding of significance of “Kuldīga Frescoes”. From a film that at the time of its release was considered almost a failure among professionals, but for general public – light entertainment – “Kuldīga Frescoes” has gradually become classics of the 1960s modernism, a brilliant gem, although made in somewhat strange Western style, in the wreath of Riga Style films.

Given the context of the present article, especially those features characteristic of “Kuldīga Frescoes” seem to be important that were in opposition to the official 1960s communist ideology and the method of socialist realism: collage as the structural basis of film characteristic of modernism, mixing of genres (“semi-live action novellas”); refusal from verbal text, completely relying on metaphoricity of visual image and non-verbal sound track; contingency as the basis of dramaturgy of the film; representation of life relying on a vast range of different tonality – from humour to irony and tragedy.

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