

THE “CREATIVE TREATMENT OF ACTUALITY”: POETICS AND VERISIMILITUDE IN LAILA PAKALNIŅA’S FILMS

PhD **Klara Bruveris**

University of New South Wales

Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Laila Pakalniņa is a contemporary Latvian filmmaker who works across both documentary and fiction film. Her films are often regarded as avant-garde, experimenting with genre conventions, challenging her audiences to reconsider their understanding of narrative and the cinematic form. Her work also pushes the boundaries between what constitutes fiction film and what constitutes documentary. This arguably occurs because of her engagement with the tropes of poetic documentary cinema, of which there is a strong tradition in Latvia due to the famous Riga School of Poetic documentary established in the 1960s. This paper examines her documentary film *Čau, Rasma* (“Hi, Rasma”, 2014) as a continuation of the poetic documentary tropes developed by John Grierson, and argues that verisimilitude can be found in her documentaries through an application of Grierson’s philosophical work. The paper aims to contribute to a broader discussion of poetic documentary practices in the current era, and how this documentary approach has developed from its modernist beginnings.

Keywords: *Laila Pakalniņa, poetic documentary, John Grierson, verisimilitude.*

Laila Pakalniņa is a contemporary Latvian filmmaker who works across both documentary and fiction film. It is often hard to distinguish between these two forms in her work [Bruveris 2016: 44]. This is because of the highly poetic nature of her documentaries, and a great sense of naturalism in her fiction films. Pakalniņa’s films, therefore, are very interesting to consider when discussing verisimilitude in film. The complex relationship between poeticism and truth in film began when British critic and filmmaker John Grierson wrote about Robert Flaherty’s work stating that his films were “documentaries” because they provided a creative

treatment of actuality. Grierson praised Flaherty for demonstrating the higher artistic capability of the documentary. He looked down upon the newsreels and educational films, which he argued were brilliant but also disengaging due to their dry observational manner [Grierson 1932: 39]. He believed that a poetic treatment of actuality footage would be more engaging and effective on an audience. The poetic framing of reality, however, renders problematic the idea of verisimilitude, associated with documentary film. The question that this paper aims to address, therefore, is where we can find verisimilitude in Pakalniņa's films, particularly her documentaries, if they engage with this "poetic treatment of actuality". First let's delve further into Grierson's treatise on poetics and documentary to see where he believed truth and verisimilitude lay.

Grierson's poetic truth

Grierson's film philosophy and practice developed through three influencing factors: the work of Robert Flaherty; the work of early Soviet filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov; and the work of Walter Ruttmann and the city symphony movement. He learnt and was inspired by each, but developed his work further in order to achieve what he believed to be was the purpose of documentary: dramatic, narrativised social commentary.

Flaherty's work, as Brian Winston argues, provided a template for Grierson's "creative" documentary [Winston 1995: 19]. This was because Flaherty was one of the first to structure the filming of "actuality" with a narrative, rather than merely providing a dry succession of facts [ibid]. But, while Grierson praised Flaherty for this aspect of his films, he believed that there was much to be improved upon in order for documentary to become a vehicle for truth. Grierson thought, for example, that Flaherty's films, and those similar in style, were too romantic for they dealt with what was considered back then to be the "romantic image" of the "noble savage" and the "changing seasons of the year" [Grierson 1966: 151]. A more realist documentary would, he believed, make "poetry where no poet ha[d] gone before", to the slums, markets, factories, exchanges and streets of the big cities [Grierson 1966: 151].

Grierson was also influenced by early Soviet filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. He admired the revolutionary documentary that they strove for, and valued the combination of art and science in their films. He was particularly enthusiastic about the Soviet concept of montage, which he considered poetic, and saw in the Soviet model a successful formula to follow in creating engaging propaganda films in Britain [Vassilieva 2014: 29–32]. Grierson focussed on the British working class, using human labour and social interaction as a source for poetry onscreen [Vassilieva 2014: 38]. Similarly, Eisenstein and Vertov looked at the proletariat and the quotidienne scenes of Russian cities. For him

truth in cinema was found not in the visceral reality, but in the cognitive reality that was created by the montage of images. This is a truth that Lewis Jacobs argues is one that “the eye alone could not perceive, but which the heart and mind could discern...” [Jacobs 1971: 8]. So, while the documentary footage may be treated with poetic license montage could highlight a more abstract truth, a philosophical truth. What lacked, however, for Grierson in this early Soviet tradition was the sense of narrative that he so praised in Flaherty’s work [Grierson 1966: 127]. Poeticism was important for Grierson both in the cinematography and narrative composition of documentary film.

The final major influence of Grierson’s work was Walter Ruttmann and the city symphony films. He praised this film movement for its rhythmic quality developed from the energies of the cities they examined. As he states: “The life of Natural cinema is in this massing of detail, in this massing of all the rhythmic energies that contribute to the blazing act of the matter” [Grierson 1966: 136]. Grierson further congratulated Ruttmann and his contemporaries on being able to find a story in the masses, rather than relying on a protagonist or hero to develop drama [Grierson 1966: 149]. There was criticism for this film style as well, for although the city symphony films were creative in their cinematography and narrative treatment of the working-class cities of Europe they lacked, perhaps most importantly, any social commentary on the subjects presented onscreen [Grierson 1966: 150]: “They present new beauties and new shapes; they fail to present new persuasions” [Grierson 1966: 152].

The poetic documentary, according to Grierson, should not only capture reality, but treat it creatively. Furthermore, truth is not hindered by this poeticism; rather it is heightened if this creativity is used in a manner so as to provide social commentary on the subject being presented.

Pakalniņa and Poeticism

The contemporary Latvian filmmaker Laila Pakalniņa fits within this Griersonian poetic tradition. Grierson idolised early Soviet filmmakers, but in the 1960s the Soviet filmmakers of the Thaw came to idolise Grierson. As Julia Vassilieva states Soviet film historians at the time praised him for the “poetic, loving and respectful representation of ordinary people and workers” and how his films brought attention to social problems [2014: 38]. This influenced the work of emerging Soviet filmmakers, and in Latvia could be considered to be partly behind the development of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary (RSPD), who as Maruta Vitols states also “drew material from the world around them and used fictive elements in order to form films that display their particular understanding of the world” [2008: 19]. The similarity between the RSPD and Grierson’s poetic

documentary tradition is further supported by Līva Pētersone who highlights that both Grierson and the Riga documentarists shared a common goal; to film ordinary people with artistic poeticism [Pētersone 2012]. They also, I would argue, attempted to provide social commentary.

The similarities between Grierson and the RSPD are clear when examining one of the most seminal films from this movement; “The White Bells” (*Baltie Zvani*, Latvia, 1961, directed by Ivars Kraulītis). The film combines actuality footage of Riga in the 1960s with a narrative of a young girl and her journey through Riga to buy some flowers known as “white bells”. The film is considered a documentary due to the footage of the city which was shot with no alteration, manipulated only in how the director montaged the different city scenes together, not dissimilarly from Vertov’s “Man with the Movie Camera” (Russia, 1929). Not only is there creative treatment of actuality in the montage, but also in the narrative of the film. This comes with the parallel story of the young girl who wanders through the streets of Riga in search of the white flowers. The social commentary is also evident in this narrative as the girl’s search for the flowers is said to represent Latvia’s search for freedom from Soviet occupation. In this description it seems clear how this film, representative of the RSPD movement, shares similarities with Grierson’s poetic documentary. Verisimilitude is found in the locations captured in the footage and in the higher truth presented through the girl’s allegorical journey through the streets of Riga in search for her flowers and Latvia’s freedom.

The RSPD tradition and Grierson’s poetic documentary manifesto are continued in contemporary Latvia through the work of Laila Pakalniņa. Take for example her 2014 documentary *Čau, Rasma* (“Hi, Rasma”). In this film Pakalniņa goes in search of the sunken cargo ship *Rasma*, which sank off the coast of Estonia 70 years ago near Mohni Island. Rumour has it that as it sank many local Estonians pilfered cargo from the ship, mainly bicycles and Singer sewing-machines. Throughout the film Pakalniņa gently probes the Estonians that live on the coast near the shipwreck to see if these rumours are true. This is not the investigative documentary that you would expect, but demonstrates Pakalniņa’s poetic treatment of the lives of those in the small coastal town.

“Hi, Rasma” is not dissimilar from one of Grierson’s first films “Drifters” (1929). This film is also set in a coastal town and examines the turbulent life of fisherman working in the North Sea off the coast of Scotland. There is no one protagonist in “Drifters” rather the narrative is built around the men who make their living from the sea as well as the sea itself. It was, as Grierson, himself states a study in movement, with each chapter leading to an event [1966: 135, 205]. And, of course, the film provided social commentary on the “the ardour and bravery of common labour” [Grierson 1966: 205]. Pakalniņa also develops a rhythm in “Hi,

Rasma". Interviews are edited together so that the original question is obscured, but a pattern of responses forms that not only highlights the unsure nature of the local Estonians, but captures the monotonous energy of daily life in rural Europe.

Pakalniņa's documentary is also quite symbolic, operating similarly to Grierson's "Drifters". While filming this film Grierson's crew were lucky enough to come across a whale that swam alongside one of the fishing vessels. He decided to include this footage not only to show the audience the impressive creature and its relationship to the working harbour, fisherman and their industry but also in a poetic manner, "as a ponderous symbol of all that tumbled and laboured on that wild morning" [Grierson 1966: 137]. This symbolism is evident in "Hi, Rasma" in Pakalniņa's footage of the sunken cargo ship. The shipwreck is impressive in itself, covered in seagrass that dances through the currents of the Baltic Sea. It is a reminder of the industrial Soviet past that shaped the coastline of the Baltic region and impacted on the development of towns not only along the coast, but generally throughout rural areas. Lastly, the sunken ship is a symbol of the mystery that shrouds its disappearance and what happened to its pilfered cargo, unwilling to share its secrets with those above the water. It could also be read as a symbol of the silent existence of those living in the coastal Estonian town of Mohni, forgotten by the progress and development of modern European Estonia, stuck like *Rasma* in the past.

Conclusion

The analysis of Grierson's "Drifters" and Pakalniņa's "Hi, Rasma" highlights a number of similarities that are based in poetic documentary tropes. If there is a stylistic likeness between the two then perhaps verisimilitude in Pakalniņa's poetic documentary style can be understood correspondingly as well. Truth is not to be found in undoctored, unedited footage, but in the way that a creative use of montage and narrative delivers a higher truth about the subject being filmed. "Hi, Rasma" is about the rumours linked to the disappearance of a cargo ship off the coast of Estonia. It is, more importantly, a film that provides astute social commentary on the rhythms of life in forgotten rural towns. Even though the documentary footage is treated poetically the footage nevertheless attests to the physiological existence of the town and its people in historical time.

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