

THE MODALITY OF MELODRAMA AND DOCUMENTARY: JURIS PODNIEKS' FILM "IS IT EASY TO BE YOUNG?" (1986)

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Abstract

Although it is common for genres to be different for fiction films and documentaries, a productive element of genres can also be identified in documentary cinema. The film "Is It Easy to Be Young?" was made at the time when historic changes in the Soviet Union were *in the air* and tension, pathos and hope were *offered* by the time itself. The main characters of the film are young, and so is Latvia, the country that regained its independence a few years after the documentary was made. The characters seek, have doubts, cross the boundaries and make choices.

Till the 1950s melodrama was treated more as a genre with its characteristic narrative and stylistic features. The main characteristics of melodrama: emotion, dynamic activities; the main goal of melodrama is to raise emotional response in the audience. In contemporary cinema theory (Linda Williams, Christine Gledhill and others), melodrama is also interpreted as a modality that permeates art forms and genres. The concept of melodrama modality gives melodrama an ontological status. That is, melodrama, if we look at it as a basic code of culture, from the aesthetic phenomenon becomes a form of existence. In "Is It Easy to Be Young?" the use of codes and artistic techniques makes it possible to analyse film as a melodrama, while melodrama modality challenges an attempt to obtain a detached view of the form of existence in which the observer is located.

Keywords: *Juris Podnieks, Is It Easy to Be Young, modality of melodrama, documentary, coming of age.*

Melodrama is usually associated with the stories that evoke an intense emotional reaction of the viewer. This emotional intensity is achieved by a specific narrative scheme. Among key features of melodrama there are: heightened affects, pathos and

fatalism. Melodramas often depict suffering of virtuous people who become victims of some insurmountable forces.

The modality of melodrama is a new paradigm that has paved the way for new research in cinema theory, meanwhile allowing to notice some vectors that lead to the roots of the concept. In his book *"Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess"* (first published in 1976) Peter Brooks describes melodrama as an essential form of expression in literature. After studying stage melodrama as the dominant popular form in the 19th century, he analyses such writers as Honoré Balzac and Henry James, revealing that their works contain features characteristic to melodrama such as the role of excess, moral dichotomy in the struggle between good and evil, punishment, and salvation. According to Brooks emotions and excess in post-sacral era are not just expression of individual feelings. *"The melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate moral occult,"* writes Brooks [Brooks 1995: 5]. Struggle with undefeatable forces and moral choices in literature and films then turns out to be imagination's answer to questions of reality. Thomas Elsaesser claims that *"Melodrama at its most accomplished seems capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society"* [...] [Elsaesser 1991: 86]. In the development of the concept of modality of melodrama it was important to "liberate" melodrama from its label as women's or family film. Christine Gledhill in her essay *"The melodramatic field: an investigation"* [1987] marks that identification with melodrama as a women's film which arises from the assumption that feelings and exaggeration are related to the feminine, while reality (down to earth) with the masculine. Melodrama, the genre which deals so much with suffering, has apparently much suffered itself. Gledhill also draws attention to relations of melodrama and realism showing that both are not in opposition, but rather one might say – in reflection.

These concepts were a new theoretical path in the film theory, that encouraged its development forward and in other directions. Linda Williams formulated that *"Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures"* [Williams 1998: 42]. The modality of melodrama, although it primarily in theory has been associated with American culture and Hollywood cinema, transcends not only genres and art, but also national borders; melodramatic modality, like American cinema, is not a local phenomenon. *"The melodramatic specificity, then, lies in its operation as modality: as a mode of aesthetic articulation distilled and adaptable across a range of genres, and across national cultures"* [Gledhill 2018: xiii]. Melodrama has been identified as the most popular form also in other fields. Elisabeth R. Anker, for example, in her book *"Orgies of Feeling Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom"* (2014) argues that melodrama is also a genre of America's national political discourse and the genre conventions are found in political rhetoric, governing processes, and

formations of national identity. Anker analyses melodramatic approaches to depiction of dramatic events of 9/11. Now, in the shadow of *Covid-19* worldwide pandemic, one can also easily recognize the patterns of melodrama in rhetoric, media coverage, etc. Gender film labels attached to melodrama seem still to be the reason why in Latvia it seems that no one makes melodrama despite films proving the opposite. According to one of the major Russian theoreticians of literature Sergei Balukhatyi (1892–1945) melodrama is a genre, the carcass of which can be hidden in any genre [Балухатый 1990: 78]. The concept of modality makes to look at it more as reality than probability or possibility.

“Is It Easy to Be Young?” is a documentary film and usually melodrama is not the term referred to documentaries. In the profound book “*Film Art: An Introduction*” as documentary genres have been mentioned: the compilation film, the interview, or talking-heads documentary, the direct-cinema documentary, nature documentary and portrait documentary [Bordwell Thomson Smith 2017: 353, 354]. This classification suggests the method of how the film is made, but not the emotional impact of it.

The conference in honour of Latvian film director and cameraman Juris Podnieks’ 70th birthday¹ served as a trigger to reflect, why his documentary film “Is It Easy to Be Young?” had such a profound impact, prompting that all this is related to melodrama, a genre whose main task is to raise strong emotions in the audience.

“Is It Easy to Be Young?” from the formal aspect may be described as a compilation film, although its core is made of interviews with young people. Meanwhile, judging from its emotional impact and the way it has been reached, the film can also be analysed as melodrama, especially when modality of melodrama comes into the play.

“Is It Easy to Be Young?” was shown on the big screens in 1987² and one may presume that the political situation in the Soviet Republic of Latvia (and in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe) itself set the tone in favour of melodrama. At the time the film was shot there were already certain indications *in the air*, some stirrings towards the so-called Third Awakening, the movement that led to the restoration of Latvia’s independence. Chautauqua conference in Jūrmala, foundation of Human Rights Defense Group Helsinki-86, protests against building the new hydroelectric power station on the river Daugava were some of the key events in 1986. Meanwhile other documentaries released in 1986³ suggest almost nothing similar about that time. Several of the 11 documentaries made in Latvia in 1986 focus on achievements

¹ Online scientific and artistic conference “Being Juris Podnieks” took place on 4 December 2020, Riga.

² The film started its screen life in the beginning of 1987.

³ <https://www.filmas.lv>

in national economy and address the issues such as why locally manufactured minibus RAF *skids*, how it can be achieved that everyone works at full production capacity etc. One more documentary paid attention to teenagers as well, but nothing compares to the innovative and brave mood of "Is It Easy to Be Young?" – the film which *not only tracked and immortalized a period of increasing economic and social liberalization, but actually played a part in developing it*¹.

Elsaesser explored already in the 1970s, "*melos*" is given to "drama" by means of *lighting, montage, visual rhythm, décor, style of acting, music* [Elsaesser 1991: 78]. Some of these and also other components can be referred to the documentary "Is It Easy to Be Young?". Melodramatic intonation can be identified already in the title of the film. The title, writes Sergei Balukhatyi in his monograph about melodrama "*Вопросы поэтики*", is one of the structural elements of melodrama. The title can capture the main dramatic situation, the dramatic entanglement, the environment or the scene, the dramatic nature of the fable or the author's sentiment [Балухатый 1990: 58]. Already Socrates with his own approach to philosophy proved that asking questions is more important than giving answers. In any case, the question mark as such, no doubt, gives certain intonation. Podnieks film title is a question and it asks – is it easy to be young? Nowadays many young people who are of the same age as the ones participating in Podnieks' film use questions – sentences. However, this is neither constant curiosity nor even rhetorical style. Due to huge English language culture impact a rising pitch has made many statements sound like question sentences. That was not the case in the 1980s; the question apparently was meant to be the question then. Question sentence as a choice of film title is not typical for Latvian films. Considering the fact that this type of grammar construction in Latvian documentaries is mainly used for the films made by Juris Podnieks studio "We?" (*Mēs?* 1989), "How Are You, Eidi?" (*Kā tev klājas, Eidi?* 1996), "Is It Easy to Be...?" (*Vai viegli būt...?* 1997), "Is it Easy...?" (*Vai viegli...?* 2010), we can describe it as a specific sign of style or even a tradition, set by Podnieks rather than a common symptomatic phenomenon. As to "Is It Easy to Be Young?" the question here reveals the method of the documentary, which is mainly based on the principle of interview: Juris Podnieks is asking questions, the young people are answering. There is exaggeration in some of the questions. To the young man who has been converted to Hinduism and who thinks he could kill if there would be such a command, the director asks, if he would be able to obey by the order kill all the cyclists. No, he answers. The question in general is not a melodramatic form (in comparison with exclamatory sentence!), but as melodramatic and emotionally loaded we can describe several words in the title. The adjective *easy* and the verb *to be* being next to each other

¹ <https://kulturaskanons.lv/en/archive/vai-viegli-but-jaunam/>

make emotionally loaded sense. The news headlines nowadays are full of pathos: tragic, terrible, extraordinary etc. The frequent use of emotionally loaded adjectives and adverbs have diminished their effect, otherwise we should face constant affect. Meanwhile *linguistic melodrama* is not so common in the Latvian film titles; they can rather be described as metaphorical. The use of the word *easy* in this context is direct and it is not neutral, it is powerful. Melodramatic tension is also hidden in the sense of our experiences that the question is not rhetorical and it is the universal truth that the young age is by no means easy time.

Emotions in melodrama are priority, however, as Balukhatyi writes, melodrama is never limited to manipulation of emotional issues alone, “*melodrama teaches, consoles, punishes and rewards*” [Балухатый 1990: 39]. Most vivid presence of the moral aspect, crime and punishment can be observed in the so-called “courtroom dramas”, which used to be one of the Hollywood’s most popular sub-genres; the morality and power of law as its manifestation of it went hand in hand there. The struggle between the good and the evil is always very suitable for good dramaturgy. In courtroom drama there is also presence of technical principles of melodrama mentioned by Balukhatyi: principle of relief, principle of contrast, principle of dynamics, as well as such elements as complexity, possibility, unexpected turns [Балухатый 1990: 31–67]. The notion of victim, so crucial to melodrama, is also common in court terminology. In a courtroom drama, when much of the action is usually confined to one room, the melodrama clearly manifests itself, quoting film historian Thomas Elsaesser, as a *special form of mise-en-scène* [Elsaesser 1991: 75]. The courtroom dramas are also gratifying for the double-lined cut of the moral teleology of melodrama, as their narrative includes both the individual level (personal beliefs and values) and the socio-political (law as the right morality).

Court scenes in “Is It Easy to Be Young?” are particularly melodramatic. Drama is created by the situation itself and the techniques of creating the episode: angles, length of shots, use of sound, editing are used to intensify the dramatic effect. The inevitable documentary of life is that out of about two hundred vandals who wrecked the train coming from the concert of the Latvian band, seven people have been accused. One young man, Raimonds Ploriņš is in danger to be sentenced to 3 years in prison under strict supervision. The accused, his mother, the judge form an emotionally powerful triangle. The emotions during the court scene are intense, reaching the highest point at the moment when the verdict is announced. At the beginning of the court episode, we also see the filmmakers: the cinematographer Kalvis Zalčmanis, who is standing by the camera, the director of the film is also there. The term *witness* in this case acquires a cinematic meaning in addition to the legal one. When the verdict is being read, it is not the representatives of the law who are shown, but the convicts and visitors to the court: their faces are grey and grey are

their clothes. Raimonds Ploriņš (his bright orange vest stands out from the colour of the clothes of the other accused young people as if already warning that his fate will not be the same) when listening to the sentence, puts his hands tightly on the railings of the bench. He nervously slides his hands through the hair (which will soon be cut bald) and he beats his head against the wall. Each his gesture conveys despair. We also see the broken-hearted mother sitting on the bench among other visitors.

"I venture to argue that the primary work of melodrama – in contrast to the work of the "classical" as in, say, classical tragedy – had fundamentally been that of seeking a better justice," writes Linda Williams [Williams 2018: 214]. There is a double tension in "Is It Easy to Be Young?" since this is a documentary, meaning – the truth. The court episodes contain two levels of drama: individual and social. One cannot help thinking of a young man who will have to spend three years of his youth in imprisonment¹. But, if Hollywood courtroom dramas at least up to the 1960s embodied presence of justice (the law is just was an axiom), this Soviet Latvian documentary was a signal that not only a court verdict is not fair, but also the whole political system is wrong. Even though it is not said directly in the film, this is the power of melodrama – make us almost **feel** the injustice there.

The young people of "Is It Easy to Be Young?" often mention time. *"Time suspended, time resumed, time manipulated are all basic ingredients of the strong emotions generated by melodrama because melodrama, most fundamentally, wants to care about their protagonists,"* writes Linda Williams in her essay about melodrama and series [Williams 2018: 177]. The pressure of time, though sometimes only in verbal form, is present to a great extent in the film. The historically complicated time coincides with the complicated age of the protagonists; youth is also a borderline situation. If anything truly important can happen to a person, then it is in his/her youth, later many choices may be too late. The young people themselves talk a lot about time; this is clearly also suggested by the director's questions. *"Don't you think you can waste time?"* asks Juris Podnieks. *"It seems to me that I use my time, maybe not as I should, but I use it, I don't sit at home,"* as if to justify himself, the young man explains. There is also a statement: *"I don't have enough time to wait for me to say something that I have to say now"* in the film. The words said by the young film director Igors Linga sound like melodrama motto in general: *"You have to emote all the time, you have to worry all the time. Fight."* The question of time is closely linked to the question of sense. The sense sort of justifies the time, but lack of it on the contrary – it makes the time empty and valueless. *"There is nothing to fight for, die, live,"* says a guy who *wants a comfortable life*².

¹ In the sequel *Is It Easy to Be ...?* we learn that he spent there a year.

² Till recently he was CEO in one of the largest Latvian business companies.

Unexpected twists and sharp reversals in the story line are among the elements Balukhatyi mentions when describing melodrama. Sudden turns are also present in this film, and they as well are connected with the time, sometimes even – falling out of time. Genady's dream is to become a doctor and Podnieks questions him, where he could be found in a couple of years. "I wish I could be found in a hospital ... as a doctor, not a patient," Genady jokes. Later, when he visits Genady, the director meets his mother and learns that he is dead. I don't want to be curious and think whether the director really found out the fact at the moment we see in the film, or he knew it before. This kind of questions is small in contrast to the fatal fact that this young man is gone. Meanwhile there is also Agnija in the film with her newborn baby. She seems to be the most down to earth person in comparison to others since she clearly knows her task now. Agnija also shares worries about the political (and ecological) situation in the world. Life is full of contrasts and Juris Podnieks does not hesitate to capture it with his camera.

Some of the young people depicted in the film face not external incommensurable forces, but inner conflict. Confusion and constant anxiety are usual parameters that characterize the protagonists of modern melodrama; unhappiness and loneliness is a common state how they feel in the world. Subjectivity, passive and mental response and fatalism are typical to heroes of melodrama, which András Bálint Kovács in his comprehensive study of modernism described as modern melodrama [Kovács 2007: 86–89]. "Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here at all," says a guy in the film as if summarizing the feeling of so many young people despite their looks and social status. The labyrinth is a powerful metaphor for the trap of time and space, and it appears in an episode with the young director Linga filming in narrow and dark corridors. "I tried to show in the film that all my life, it is a narrow corridor, where you do not see anything ahead of you, you do not see what is waiting for you after the next turn, who are the people you see in front of you," explains the young film director to the director of this film.

It is said that: The impact "Is It Easy to Be Young?" had when it appeared in cinemas in January 1987 has been compared to *a bomb going off*, and it has been estimated that *the film was eventually seen by 28 million viewers and shown in 85 countries*¹. Film researcher Miriam Hansen in her essay about vernacular modernism writes about cinema as "the single most inclusive, cultural horizon, in which the traumatic effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated" [Hansen 2004: 341, 342]. Many other republics of the Soviet Union and also Eastern European countries shared similar political and economic instability as Latvia, and many young people apparently shared the same doubts and efforts.

¹ <https://kulturaskanons.lv/en/archive/vai-viegli-but-jaunam/>

Meanwhile the ability still to move emotionally viewers after almost 40 years after its release is a sign that the film is more than the time that has been reflected there; the film rather than the mirror is the door leading from the past to present experiences with the help of melodrama modality.

"Is It Easy to Be Young?" ends with the young film director Igors Linga who is shooting the last episode of his own film. There are several young people standing in the sea and looking at the horizon. Linga explains to Juris Podnieks that blue is the colour of hope and we all are standing in the sea of hopes. The meta-film episode may also be the way to tell us that it is not the blue sea of hope that will save us, but cinema. The one that resonates with what is going on in ourselves. The one that serves as a horizon of common experience. The sea can also be treated as the melodrama modality from which we can no longer get out, because we have always been there.

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