

ANSIS EPNERS' FILM "ALIVE": FROM DOCUMENTARY TO FICTION

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Abstract

The first short documentary "Alive" (*Dzīvs*, 1970) is an important signifier of Latvian director Ansis Epners' (1937–2003) oeuvre both in terms of his approach to documentary film practice, and growing interest in fiction filmmaking. The film "Alive" and later idea to develop a full-length fiction film based on its main character demonstrate Epners' unconventional expression of both kinds of filmmaking, which was received with a mixed response at the time. Epners used performative elements in the documentary, and included real-life character playing himself in the planned fiction film, challenging the assumptions and conventions of filmmaking practices in Latvia at that time.

In this article I will analyse Epners' formal and stylistic choices in the film "Alive" and its reception in the early 1970s, and the script for the fiction film based on the main character of the film "Alive" Arnolds Cīrulis. The reception of "Alive" shows the contradictions between the dominant views on the documentary film form and Epners' work. The fiction film script, which was not turned into film, remains as an example of versatility of Epners' ideas on the potentials of fiction filmmaking.

Keywords: *documentary, performance, Ansis Epners, Latvian cinema.*

Ansis Epners (1937–2003) was a prolific documentary film director in Riga Film Studio. He started to work at the studio in 1969, without having professional training in film. The same year he directed several newsreels, but the following year made his first short documentary "Alive" (1970). The next year he graduated from the High Courses for Scriptwriters and Film Directors in Moscow with a short documentary "Flight in the Night" (*Lidojums naktī*) as his graduation work. He continued making short documentaries and newsreels throughout most of the 1970s, directing his first full-length documentary in 1978 – "Four Men Look for a Million" (*Četri*

meklē miljonu). Simultaneously with the documentary work, he developed various ideas for fiction films, but did not manage to make any fictional work until the early 1980s: "Ibsen's Motif" (*Ibsena motīvs*, 1984, together with stage designer and scriptwriter Viktors Jansons) was produced for television studio "Telefilma-Rīga". Much later he directed his only full-length fiction film "The Cage" (*Būris*, 1993), based on the novel of the same title by Latvian writer Alberts Bels. Among Epners' documentaries are two short films about Sergei Eisenstein ("Sergei Eisenstein. Post Scriptum" / *Sergejs Eizenšteins. Post Scriptum* and "Sergei Eisenstein. Foreword" / *Sergejs Eizenšteins. Priekšvārds*, both 1978), demonstrating his interest in editing and theoretical approaches of Eisenstein, which was not so common among his colleagues at that time.

In his early documentaries Epners did not just follow and record people or events, but intervened and on some occasions dramatized their situations, enhancing our awareness that "the dialectical relationship between the event and its representation is the backbone of documentary filmmaking" [Bruzzi 2006: 14]. The presence of the author-director (such denominator Epners also used in the credits of "Alive") historically has been seen as escalating the polarities of subjectivity and objectivity, presuming that repressing the presence of the author will imbue the film with a greater sense of objectivity [Bruzzi 2006: 198]. Epners was not concerned with a straightforward representation (which would be understood as "objective"), but similarly to Jean Rouch's manner "generates reality" instead of allowing it just to unfold [Renov 2004: xxi]. With involvement of performative elements, Epners invites "to respond emotionally and intellectually to the images in question" [Bruzzi 2006: 43–44].

Epners' first film "Alive" does exactly this – it requires viewers to respond to it both emotionally and intellectually, using the cinematic expression unlike that of his contemporaries. Also, the film's main character was important to Epners – a decade later his personality and biography still intrigued him. The history teacher Arnolds Cīrulis became a co-creator, and the main character for a fiction film that Epners together with the stage designer Viktors Jansons began to develop in 1981. Analysing both materials – the film "Alive" and several script versions of the fiction film on Cīrulis – we can trace elements of Epners' artistic expression.

Documentary film "Alive" (1970)

"Alive" is a ten-minute long black and white wide-screen film. The film's main character Arnolds Cīrulis works at Džūkste secondary school in Kurzeme region in Central-Western Latvia. "Alive" is set in the summer of 1970, but it reflects the events in Cīrulis' life in the early 1940s. Then as a young adult during the first year of the Soviet occupation Cīrulis was an enthusiastic supporter of the new regime. When

German forces occupied Latvia in 1941, he was arrested and ordered to be executed. Along with other 178 people he was brought to the forest to be executed, but he managed to escape, being the only survivor of the whole group. Nearly 30 years later, Cīrulis and his pupils re-enact those past events at the same location where they took place. They walk the same path and do it in the same way as back then: they put their hands on the shoulders of the person in front, their heads bent down not to be able to look around. When they reach the place of the massacre, the pupils are lined up as the soldiers were once standing, and Cīrulis takes the same spot as he took in 1941. He demonstrates the escape which was possible only because there was a larger gap in between two soldiers, and that he was able to pull himself together and try to run.

Re-enacting the same event again leads to evaluation of the meaning of performance and performativity in documentary. As Bruzzi argues, “Performance has always been at the heart of documentary filmmaking and yet it has been treated with suspicion because it carries connotations of falsification and fictionalisation, traits that traditionally destabilise the non-fiction pursuit” [Bruzzi 2006: 153]. Bruzzi proposes that all documentaries are performative embodying “the performance for the camera as the ‘ultimate document’, as the truth around which a documentary is built” [Bruzzi 2006: 154]. Within this framework she distinguishes performative documentary that “uses performance within a non-fiction context to draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation” [Bruzzi 2006: 185]. Such performative element within the context of “non-fiction is thereby an alienating, distancing device, not one which actively promotes identification and a straightforward response to a film’s content” [Bruzzi 2006: 185–186]. This notion of performative is introduced in “Alive” in a slightly different manner, where re-enactment of the events takes place in a non-fiction setting and is carried out partly by real-life participants. Nevertheless, the performative aspect is present as the main character not merely orally recollects the past, but with bodily presence performs it.

The event performed by Cīrulis and his pupils intersects another realm – that of a memory. The film’s off-screen voice is that of Cīrulis who speaks in the first-person narrative, evoking the past events. Also, the film’s narrative is constructed as a transition from the present to the past. As William Guynn explains, memory refers “to two distinct concepts: memory as the (passive) presence of the image to the mind, and memory as the intentional activity of recollection” [Guynn 2006: 168]. In the film Cīrulis shares his individual memories to the group and invites children to participate in the experiment (in the over-voice he says: *let’s stand in the same way as then, when 179 prisoners were taken to their deaths and I was the only one of them who managed to escape*). The memory process is not presented as unfolding directly on screen. The returning and re-enactment of the past “aims at recovering not only truth but

also the psychological and emotional dimension of past experience" [Guynn 2006: 193].

The film "Alive" begins with a scene where Cīrulis and children gather hay in the field, the images are accompanied by a loud sound of approaching storm and the musical theme is introduced. Then it begins to rain, and they all hide in an old shed. From the image of children playing with the radio set the scene with photographs of various sorts are shown (family pictures, people lined up at the pit), and then follows a cut to a close-up of Cīrulis, as if it has been an insert of visualisation of his memories. His face is wet from the rain; he looks almost directly into the camera. It is followed by the film's titles: "history teacher Arnolds Cīrulis /cut/ and pupils of Džūkste High school /cut/ in the Riga Film Studio's film /cut/ "Alive". Such presentation resembles that of a fiction film, where the main players are named at the film's beginning.

Careful composition of the narrative ties it to the film's title: until the moment of the escape, both Cīrulis and the pupils are shown, but in the final part, when he has successfully disappeared in the woods, we see only him – alone, representing him as the only survivor. The tension in different scenes is represented also by using sound: already mentioned loud storm, but when they reach the shooting place, there is silence which is interrupted by a noise of a stork bill-clattering.

The film's editing gradually becomes faster and faster, reaching its peak during the escape scene: the run of Cīrulis is interspersed with photographs of people on the edge of the pit, right before being shot, the film's tempo presenting almost a flickering quality. And when he has demonstrated his escape and walks on his own in the woods, the rhythm slows down again. Throughout the film the camera is often flexible, moving among people, turning around in circles, shaking when the running scene is filmed. Such approach is mixed with well-balanced shots, reflecting the mood of scene. Visually there is a different black and white colour palette in the images shot in 1970 and still images from the past. Film's cameraman Valdis Kroģis¹ recollects it as a conscious choice: "In this film we experimented with a tone, black and white tone [...]. Flashback scenes differ from contemporary ones in terms of lighting, colour tone. The contrast of tones distinguishes the tension of the visual material"² [Skalbergs 1971]. Thus the building up of tension is done in many levels, trying to recreate the emotional sensation of the time of the massacre.

In subsequent years, evaluating Latvian documentary cinema of the 1970s several film critics and journalists have expressed opinions about Epnerners' use of

¹ Valdis Kroģis (1934–1994) was a versatile Latvian cinematographer, who often used shots with a lot of movement, experimenting with different devices to stress the dynamics of the scene.

² This and further translations from Latvian into English have been done by the author of the article.

“provocation”, “dramatization”, “experiment”, seeing it as too challenging and different from the films of his colleagues. For example, Juris Nogins wrote: “Authors have chosen very unusual approach for our documentary filmmaking – provocation of the event” [Nogins 1973: 43].

Film critic Armīns Lejiņš surveying several of Epnerners’ films from the early 1970s, points out to another angle: “A. Epnerners first of all sets up his own author’s concept and then makes the effort to reveal it with the means of real-life material. He dramatizes life, to be able to express that what he wants to tell about certain people or occurrences. Therefore, the highest achievement in my point of view has been in the film “Alive”, where dramatization and direct intervention of the director justifies itself” (in an original form the escape of a captive during the Nazi occupation is repeated) [Lejiņš 1973].

Film scholar Viktors Djomins voices his concerns: “Craftsmanship that is turned towards **explanation** can become contradictory to the very essence of documentary cinema. [...] The director offers to a history teacher who had miraculously escaped the death by the rifles of the Nazi soldiers, to show to his pupils when and where it happened. In front of our eyes a risky, harsh, but very necessary experiment takes place. But eccentric editing, estranged poetic attributes to the filmed material so dazzling effectiveness, that the real feeling of the fact disappears, the perception of the sense of the event is encumbered” [Djomins 1977: 43].

What is brought forward here is a precaution that overt artistic expression of the film’s author overarches the actual events or characters represented. The degree of artistic expression over historical documentation doesn’t exclude the film from the non-fiction domain [Renov 1993: 35]. As Thomas Waugh states, “Documentary film, in everyday common-sense parlance, implies the absence of elements of performance, acting, directing, and so forth, criteria that presumably distinguish the documentary form from the narrative fiction film” [Waugh 2011: 75]. How contradictory and unreliable this common sense has been, can be seen by evaluating presence of documentary characters in their relation to acknowledging a camera. Two distinctions are useful here. Waugh suggests to use the word *representational* to describe the characters that *act naturally* in front of the camera, but *presentational* involves presenting oneself for the camera with full awareness of its presence [Waugh 2011: 76]. Aiming for *representational* quality which is missing in “Alive” (and other Epnerners’ films of the time) is seen as an alienating form of the Latvian documentary cinema of the time. Looking more broadly at the tradition of national documentary film, the previous decade was dominated by films of poetic style, but in the 1970s social themes began to dominate [Pērkone 2018: 20].

Epnerners’ expressivity didn’t belong to either of them. Looking back broader at the documentary film history, re-enactments that embodied *representational* quality

were part of the documentary tradition. Toward the end of the 1930s presence of documentary characters playing themselves became more widespread [Waugh 2011: 75]. Direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* triggered new enquiries into these two domains, which over the years have much increased. In the 1980s, for example, we can witness “a flourishing wave of hybrid experimentation with these presentational modes as well as with stylizations of representational modes, including dramatization” [Waugh 2011: 81].

Waugh lists several forms of *presentational* and *representational* means in the films. Among the embodiments of *presentational* style, he names *Social actors explore geographical setting of their past at instigation of filmmakers* [Waugh 2011: 82]. The film that very powerfully uses telling of the memories in the exact geographical settings by its characters is Claude Lanzman's *Shoah* (1985), made in later period and in greater scale than “Alive”. The approach to bring characters back to the place that signifies for them painful memories is the film's set-up, difference here being the use of direct interviews or voice-over. Expressivity provided by “Alive” and other Epnern's films of the early 1970s “expand our understanding of historical reality by suggesting new ways of looking at events with which we might already be familiar” [Spence, Navarro 2012: 70].

“Alive” – further development (1981–1982)

The personality and biography of Arnolds Cīrulis remained in Epnern's sphere of interest even a decade after he shot “Alive”. He invited stage designer Viktors Jansons (1946), who had just returned from Leningrad back to Latvia, to work with him on another script¹, but eventually they started to develop the script based on Cīrulis' life. It offered complexity and intriguing questions about his ideological beliefs, current life (he no longer worked as a teacher, but instead did logging), personality. Cīrulis' biography was going to be the thematic backbone of the script. The script was supposed to be handed in at Riga Film Studio at the end of November 1981, but it wasn't completed on time.² Cīrulis' unexpected death in a road accident on 13 November 1981 left its mark on the continuation of the initial idea, and these events were integrated in the script.

The four versions of the script³ (described as “libretto for a full-length fiction film”) in the length of 14–17 typewritten pages date back to 1981–1982. They have been written already after Cīrulis' death. They involve minor modifications between the versions, the main differences are in the end part. Not all of them include an

¹ The script for the film “The Cage” was not turned into a film at this stage.

² From an interview with Viktors Jansons in August 2018.

³ The documents are kept at the Ansis Epnern's family archive.

exact date, allowing to make a clear chronology. The script had various title options: “Dr. Kant, Friday, 13th November”; “Game with Kant”; “Witness Dr. Kant”; and several other variations.

The script has an unusual form: Epnens writes it from the first-person narrative position. The first sentence of the script reads: “*Time by time he called: Hello, Ansis, I am still Alive!, sometimes colleagues at the Film Studio found me and said: That man from the woods awaits you again...*” Such intimate approach continues throughout the script: he tells about the first encounter with Cīrulis in the film “Alive”, the connection of Viktors Jansons to the story, and Cīrulis’ death. In the script, Epnens uses the characterization of the film as *a collage of Cīrulis’ life documents and staging*.

After this introductory (and documentary) set-up, the script continues with the staged scenes which will take place in the Film studio’s pavilion. Reference to the filmmaking process is an important element in the script and story’s development. One of the film’s characters is a director, another important character is a Grey woman, and, of course, Cīrulis himself.

Cīrulis’ death will be announced by the Grey woman – in the same way as Epnens had learned about it. Fragments from the film “Alive” will be significant plot-points, structuring the narrative as a string of memory fragments. The first one is about his escape in the woods, the second one reaches further back in the past. It reflects the time when Cīrulis was a pupil and had to study Immanuel Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason” at school. This episode introduces film’s antagonist – a preacher, who will cause a lot of harm to Cīrulis in the subsequent events. The plot continues with Cīrulis already as a young man playing football with border guards’ team. The evening continues with dances, and his partner there is a girl, visually very similar to the Grey woman. It is 1940, Soviet era has begun, and Cīrulis supports the new regime. Then the German army invades, and Cīrulis is arrested, he is brought to the woods, to the pit (so familiar already from the documentary “Alive”). This scene when he is so close to his death in 1941 is followed by the one of his funeral in 1981. There is a photographer taking pictures at his funeral, and this serves as another trigger point to connect the present and the past: photographs made at the pit connect with Cīrulis’ escape, and further events. After the escape, he manages to reach his parents’ house, where he will be hiding for several years. When the Soviet power is re-established, Cīrulis can finally leave his hiding place in which he used to read Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason”, trying to keep common sense in the difficult circumstances. At the very end of the script, Cīrulis goes to the house of the preacher, now already an old man, who had denounced Cīrulis. Another script version has an additional scene at the end, with the presence of a film crew, reminding once more about the staging and fictional reality created by filmmaking.

It is difficult to predict how this idea would develop and what the film would be like. The work on it was discontinued, and one of the reasons was Cīrulis' death, as initially he was going to play himself in the film. Jansons notes that Epners' scripts were more like essays than real screenplays¹, and it can be very well attributed to this work. It could be seen as too experimental for the studio type production that existed at the time.² Mixing of documentary and fictional approaches, experimental form, going outside the limitations of genres, invites to think about hybrid forms at the core of "hybrid cinema" [Marks 2000: 8]. This could be a tool for categorization and understanding of the film idea on Cīrulis, which contradict the conventional storytelling, plot development, choice of actors.

Even though looking at the realm of fiction, from the perspective of fiction film's idea, coming back to Waugh's distinctions of characters' performance in front of the camera in documentary seems relevant here. The hybrid forms of experimentation, mentioned in the context of the 1980s documentaries, are useful tool for looking at Epners' film idea described above. The suggested hybrid approaches are different: mix of professional and nonprofessional performers that construct an intertextual essay; social actors dramatize representationally their social conditions or collective history, which are contextualized presentationally, etc. [Waugh 2011: 83]. The indications of such approaches can be found in the script, making the distinction between fiction and documentary quite complex.

Conclusion

A short film which is also the first film of a director has become an important element in understanding the approach of Epners' to documentary at the beginning of his career. "Alive" has been also a tool for him searching for the entrance into fiction filmmaking. The script which was never made into a film carries in itself yet another meaning – it presents a document of an interrupted work (Cīrulis' death becomes a plot point changing the initial idea) which is transformed and turned into another, involving the unfortunate events as part of the new script.

Jansons' characterization of Epners as being like a carousel that constantly turns and creates something out of it³ seems appropriate attribution to Epners. Two quite different works analysed in this article present his attitudes towards documentary and fiction filmmaking, where the commonly understood approaches are transgressed and reinvented.

¹ From an interview with Viktors Jansons in August 2018.

² Such was the case with Epners' script for the film "The Cage" in the mid-1980s.

³ From an interview with Viktors Jansons in August 2018.

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