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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **REDISCOVERING AND CONTEXTUALIZING BALTIC SEA REGION FILM HISTORY AND CURRENT TRENDS**

The special edition of the journal *Culture Crossroads* dedicated to film and audio-visual media comprises proceedings from two academic conferences organized by the Latvian Academy of Culture in 2020 – the 6<sup>th</sup> Baltic Sea Region Film History conference and the conference *Being Juris Podnieks* (a session of the annual research conference *Culture Crossroads*). The volume contributes to a growing body of research on the region in the field of film and audio-visual media continuing explorations and providing new topics and approaches to already previously published special issues of the journal on this field (vol. 10 (2017), vol. 14 (2019)).

The Baltic Sea Region Film History conference is an annual international event that aims to bring together film scholars and researchers who focus on film history and current trends of the audio-visual sector of the Baltic Sea region. The first conference was held in 2014 in Tallinn, Estonia. From 2019, the conference has been changing its location, Vilnius was its host city in 2019, but in 2020 it was Riga. The sixth edition of the conference was dedicated to the phenomena of genre entitled “Genres and their Transformations: Global and Local Contexts, Production and Reception” and was held in Riga on 14–15 October 2020. Genre is a frequently used term in theoretical analysis of film, and specific denominator for promoting films to the audiences. It was explored by a number of international scholars from various perspectives. In a joint effort of the Latvian Academy of Culture, in partnership with Lithuanian Theatre and Music Academy, and Estonian Film Archive, the conference was held in a hybrid form due to the Covid-19 epidemiological restrictions.

The articles published in this collection which developed from the conference papers look at the fiction films, documentaries and TV series, exploring formal qualities, production contexts, and issues of authorship from different methodological perspectives. Gunhild Agger (Aalborg University, Denmark) and Dita Rietuma (Riga Stradiņš University, Latvian Academy of Culture) analyse the phenomena of television serials, which are receiving growing audience and scholarly interest. Agger examines the dual legacy of the Nordic noir, which draws on the tradition of social realism and of Gothic thrillers, looking closely at two recent serials produced in Denmark and Sweden. The notion of quality TV serials is at the centre of Rietuma’s study. Looking back at the popularity of the serials in the 1980s Latvia, the author explores contemporary situation

and the reasons for the loss of this tradition over the recent decades. Sanda Rapa and Jana Taperte (University of Latvia) analyse the importance of speech and its absence as storytelling strategies in two Latvian films representing slow cinema. In the context of genre, documentary films are examined by Mantė Valiūnaitė (Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, Lithuania) and Zane Balčus (Latvian Academy of Culture). Valiūnaitė offers close reading of two recent Lithuanian documentary films which invite to re-evaluate the way animals are represented in cinema, whereas Balčus approaches the presence of the documentary filmmaker onscreen as a participant of the film's narrative in three recent Latvian documentaries.

The other two materials in this volume focus on the filmmaking oeuvre of the Latvian documentary director and cinematographer Juris Podnieks (1950–1992). 2020 marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Podnieks, and the day of academic and creative study *Being Juris Podnieks* was held on 4 December in the framework of the annual research conference *Culture Crossroads*. The conference consisted of academic papers, a discussion with international experts, presentation on the documentary film being produced on Podnieks (with the planned release in 2022), and screening of the Academy's film students work made specifically for this occasion. In the journal Daniela Zacmane's (Latvian Academy of Culture) article discloses the presence of melodramatic modality in Podnieks' film "Is It Easy to Be Young?" (*Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, 1986), an approach less addressed in documentary studies than fiction filmmaking.

The volume concludes with the transcript of the discussion *Juris Podnieks and the Constellations of Times*, where four international experts and film practitioners discussed Podnieks' films, especially those made in collaboration with international televisions (like "Hello, Do You Hear Us?" / *Mēs*, 1989), his stylistic approach, as well as broader issues on documentary filmmaking. "Hello, Do You Hear Us?" was a milestone work documenting the collapse of the Soviet Union in the five-part film broadcast on the UK televisions ITV and Channel 4 in the early 1990. The participation of the film's commissioning editor Richard Creasy (UK) in the discussion, as well as film's editor Antra Cilinska (Latvia) offers an in-depth look into the production context of this important film.

We hope that the materials collected in this volume will inspire other researchers to explore the heritage of film and audio-visual media of the region, as well as its contemporary developments. The possibility to familiarize with the research done in different countries within one volume is significant insight in the current interests of the colleagues from the region, and it could contribute to further exploration of related and new topics.

*PhD cand. Zane Balčus*

# **SILENCE AND SPEECH IN FILM NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: LAILA PAKALNIŅA'S "THE SHOE" AND DĀVIS SĪMANIS' "EXILED"**

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## **Abstract**

The paper deals with the importance of speech (and absence of speech) for the storytelling strategies in film, which includes verbal and non-verbal interaction between characters, as well as speech in a broader sense as part of cinematic soundscape with particular focus on the relationship between sound and image. For the analysis, Laila Pakalniņa's "The Shoe" (*Kurpe*, 1998) and Dāvis Sīmanis' "Exiled" (*Pelnu sanatorija*, 2016) were chosen. Although "The Shoe" and "Exiled" differ considerably in terms of visual aesthetics and thematic scope, both films share stylistic features of slow cinema. The significance of silence and speech in shaping film narrative (syntagms) is analyzed using narratology models; the interaction between speech and silence, as well as between sound and image is described using linguistic terms.

**Keywords:** *film narrative structure, speech in cinema, silence in cinema, interaction between sound and image, acoustic and eloquent silence.*

## **Introduction**

The idea of narrative structure as a combination of various mutually interactive components has been promoted in the very first studies on narrative. As Roland Barthes writes, "*Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances. [...] Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural*" [Barthes 1975: 237]. Since the beginnings of narratology, there have been countless attempts to identify and define these structural components. Seymour Chatman when speaking of fiction and film narrative structure introduces the notion of narrative statement:

“Narrative discourse consists of a connected sequence of narrative statements, where ‘statement’ is quite independent of the particular expressive medium. It includes dance statement, linguistic statement, graphic statement, and so on” [Chatman 1978: 31]. These narrative statements in cinema are combined to form larger narrative segments, or syntagms.

The concept of narrative statements that comprise larger structures resonates, to some extent, with the definition of narrative proposed by David Bordwell [1985: 49] who sees it as a “process which is not in its basic aims specific to any medium. As a dynamic process, narration deploys the materials and procedures of each medium for its ends.” Film narrative, specifically, differs from one of literature or theatre by being diegetic and not mimetic, namely, multimodal and accompanied with the so-called invisible observer.

Apart from the syntagmatic classification, narrative can be analyzed paradigmatically. Since the beginnings of narratology, various scholars have been attempting to define different paradigmatic narrative elements. For example, Vladimir Propp [Пропп 1998] (first published in 1928) analyzed morphological structure of folk tales and identified 31 universal themes (narratemes, or morphological elements of the narrative) which comprise broader narrative structures. Tzvetan Todorov defined five major stages that a character should go through in a story: “*Equilibrium, Disruption (of the Equilibrium), Recognition, Repair of the Disruption, and Reinstatement of Equilibrium*” [Todorov 1969]. For our analysis, we have chosen Gérard Genette’s three-tier model of narrative structure which consists of *narration*, *récit* (narrative) and *histoire* (story), since it covers both the way of storytelling (material form) and the story itself (mental concept). According to Genette, narration means *the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place*, *récit* is defined as *the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself*; finally, he defines *histoire* as *the signified or narrative content* [Genette 1972: 27].

Since it is impossible to examine the whole film soundscape within one paper, we are going to analyze speech and silence as syntagmatic components of narrative structure as well as the way these components function in paradigmatic narrative tiers. Speech and silence are two opposites, but at the same time mutually supportive and equally meaningful phenomena and significant means of communication. Before the 1980s, when Michel Chion’s seminal works “Voice in Cinema” (*La voix au cinéma*, first published in 1984) [Chion 1999] and “Audio-Vision” (*L’Audio-Vision*, first published in 1990) [Chion 1994] were issued, quite often in film criticism its aural component was considered as complement to the visual image and was somehow pushed aside and suppressed by visuality. In contrast to this rather usual practice, we would like to look at this part of cinematic medium as a self-sufficient means to



communicate a certain message – both directly and metaphorically – and to create a distinctive stylistic pattern. In our analysis, we will operate mainly with linguistic notions and terms where there is lack of respective terms in film theory. Certainly, it is also impossible to completely isolate these aural components from other elements of the film soundscape and from the image as well, but we will attempt to analyze the interaction between the sound and image as equally significant parts of the film narrative structure.

### Choice of films

For the analysis, two Latvian films – Laila Pakalniņa's "The Shoe" (*Kurpe*, 1998) and Dāvis Simanis' "Exiled" (*Pelnu sanatorija*, 2016) – were chosen.

"The Shoe" is set in Liepāja during the Soviet occupation in the 1950s and presents a version of the Cinderella story. A woman's shoe is discovered by the seaside, and this leads to the conclusion that the border has been violated, so the owner of the shoe has to be found. Four young soldiers accompanied by a dog go around the town visiting a school, slaughterhouse, factory and an apartment building.

In "Exiled", Ulrich, a German doctor, at the end of the World War I arrives to a remote asylum for shell-shocked soldiers where patients are looked after by the nurse Emma, caretaker Risak, his wife and son. The important part of the story is the relationship between Ulrich and a savage boy found by Ulrich in the woods. Another important part of the plot is the conflict between the inhabitants of the asylum and neighbourhood residents: for them, the asylum patients and the boy are the personification of evil, the Other they are afraid of and wish to destroy.

Although these films differ considerably in terms of visual style and thematic scope, they still have some characteristics in common. Firstly, both "The Shoe" and "Exiled" are debut features of documentary directors, so it is assumed that the impact of documentary aesthetics might be present in these motion pictures. Secondly, both films share, to some extent, poetics and stylistic tropes that are typical of the so-called slow cinema aesthetics – "*cinema that downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality*" [Romney 2010], such as employment of long takes, de-dramatized narrative mode, emphasis on mundanity and quietude [Flanagan 2008; 2012]. Thirdly, both features deal – although in very distinct ways – with military themes: in "Exiled", the action takes place during the World War I, while "The Shoe" is set during the Soviet occupation; because of these settings, in both films multilingualism becomes a very prominent characteristic of communication between the characters. And finally, these are vivid examples of art-house cinema, with distinctive style, and there are many possibilities for interpretation.

## Speech

The structure of soundscape in cinema is polybranched and hierarchical. Cinematic sound consists of various sub-components (e. g., voice/speech, environmental and other non-vocal sounds, diegetic and non-diegetic music, etc.). Voice – and specifically speech – seems to be the main means which helps to narrate the film story. However, even speech has its own limitations in cinema: “[...] *as long as speech forms a ‘word carpet’ or a ‘coherent sound pattern’, it is treated like a material index as properly ‘cinematic’ as the photographic frame. But as soon as it provides a linguistic act demanding comprehension in its own right, it becomes a disruptive intrusion, unessential and preferably avoided*” [Mamula 2013: 135].

According to Chion [1994], there are various possible ways of introducing voice into film narrative: intelligible speech, as well as non-linguistic vocal sounds – shouts, unintelligible whispers, murmur, singing, humming, etc. All of them can be either part of communication or aesthetic device, or both – and the same is true for silence. From the linguistic point of view, through interacting with each other, all these elements constitute discrete narrative segments which can be called syntagms, and they in turn form the syntax and discourse of a film. These linguistic terms correspond to Genette’s three-tier model of narrative structure: syntagm is narration, syntax is *récit*, and discourse is *histoire*.

We will start with the most obvious and the least contradictory part – verbal communication. As Chion puts it, vococentrism is important characteristic of the perception of cinematic sound, namely, human voice is on the top in the hierarchy of auditory perception: “*There are not all the sounds including the human voice. There are voices, and then everything else. In other words, in every audio mix, the presence of a human voice instantly sets up a hierarchy of perception. [...] Human listening is naturally vococentrist, and so is the talking cinema by and large*” [Chion 1994: 5].

There is little spoken text in both films (if we understand linear grammatically formatted expressions with the certain meaning by this). Meaningful verbal phrases make up very small part of soundtrack in “The Shoe” and “Exiled”: 83 minutes

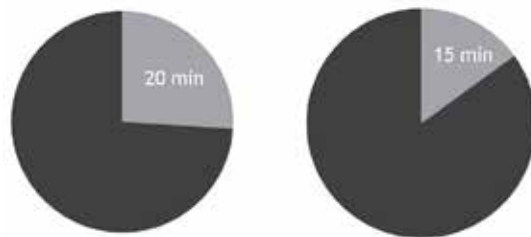


Figure 1. Speech duration in Laila Pakalniņa’s “The Shoe” (on the left; film duration: 83 min) and Dāvis Sīmanis’ “Exiled” (on the right; film duration: 90 min).

of Pakalniņa's film soundtrack comprise approximately 20 minutes of voice, and 90 minutes of Sīmanis' film soundtrack comprise approximately 15 minutes of voice (Figure 1). So, it can be concluded that the narrative, especially in "Exiled", is not primarily based on text. From the point of view of pragmatics, the lack of verbalization is one of the indicators of weak communication – sharing an impression rather than conveying a certain message [Wharton 2009: 45]. As Wharton notes, "*utterances are rarely uttered in a behavioural vacuum: they typically involve a mixture of strong and weak communication, with non-verbal behaviour generally contributing to the weaker side*" [Wharton 2009: 191–192]. This feature is also pointed out by Elīna Reitere as one of the characteristics of narration in slow cinema: "[...] *slow cinema is a case of weak communication, because the communicative acts in slow cinema are dominated by weak implicatures*" [Reitere 2015: 202].

The analysis of dialogues in both films shows that an act of verbal communication (even if consisting of just a few sentences) in film narrative can be structured differently. The following are examples of dialogues in "The Shoe" and "Exiled".

"The Shoe" begins with the fairly twisted dialogue with grammatically full sentences that explains the main problem and the main task for the further action. If the dialogue is read without seeing the image, the situation is understood easily from the text alone.

A: Comrade Sergent, there's been an infiltration of the security zone! Comrade Sergent! A woman's shoe. The border has been violated.

B: You must be crazy, Sidorov. Really.

A: Search, Vika [the dog], search. That a boy, search.

B: Calm down!

A: Mommy! Mommy! What's going to happen now?

C: That's it, Sidorov, there'll be war. The war. Attention! Our unit is coming.  
[..]

H: You're really going to get it later. You're not on vacation here. Go into the town and find me the matching shoe, and its owner. Any questions? Carry out the order.

In contrast, in "Exiled" the role of spoken text is considerably weaker: we cannot reconstruct the narrative only on the basis of speech we hear. For "Exiled", repetitions, short or unfinished sentences, and parcellation – or dividing sentences into several parts – is typical (the same is true for the further speech in "The Shoe"). Mostly pronouns are used instead of proper names, especially in "Exiled":

A: Mom!... Mom!

B: Is this the way to the sanatorium?

C: [No answer]

C: Let father deal with **them**. Kaspars, Kaspars, Kaspars... I'd better tell the villagers... In the village. **He** burned... Not me. **He's** guilty. Not me.

D: Woe to the faithless!

C: **They** are all like this here. You have to go there... Enough! Enough! I'll tell **them**... I'm sick of this...

The pronouns in this example (indicated in bold) are not associated with any particular character in the film. We do not see the visual sign of that “third” person, but we can construct the character of this invisible third person who has harmed others. Thus, the speech here is the main technique to narrativize a person.

There are two kinds of speech in the films which we call connotative and denotative speech. In connotative speech, the speaker is seen or can be imagined (because he or she is recognizable) – this is the most usual kind of speech in film (Figure 2). In denotative speech we cannot see or recognize the speaker, however the information is still accessible (Figure 3).

In both films, dialogues make an inconsiderable part of speech (e. g., the above-quoted conversation from “The Shoe” is almost the only comprehensive dialogue).



Figure 2. Examples of connotative speech (“The Shoe” on the left, “Exiled” on the right).



Figure 3. Examples of denotative speech (“The Shoe” on the left, “Exiled” on the right).

Verbal communication in the films consists mainly of imperatives, declamatory phrases and questions (without verbalized answers). The questioners often are confronted by total silence, ignorance, titter, croon or declamation. In some situations, the obvious reason for this is a language barrier between Latvians, Germans and Russians or (in “Exiled”) psycho-neurological problems of the asylum inmates. In “Exiled”, the first successful communication or at least visual interaction between speakers of different languages starts with linguistic adjustment, when the foreigner starts to speak Latvian (although broken Latvian); however, the psycho-neurological barriers in the film are not overcome.

Despite these impediments *histoire* of both films is still comprehensible. Imperatives, interjections, questions and uncompleted sentences help to create the atmosphere and demonstrate that it is not only “this story”, that is, the story which is seen and heard. This proves that speech plays a minor role in shaping the narrative syntagms (or segments) of these films – *récit* is what consolidates these syntagms; with the use of speech alone, narrative in these films would be non-linear and distorted.

### Interaction between sound and image

Now we would like to discuss the ways in which the sound interacts with the visual image. In cinema theory, two basic types of this interaction are usually distinguished: (1) visualized sound – a sound accompanied by the sight of its source or cause; (2) acousmatic sound – disembodied sound, sound that one hears without seeing its actual source [Chion 1999: 71–73]. We would like to expand this basic classification to emphasize the connection between the visual and the aural aspect of cinematic image. To characterize this interaction, we have borrowed several terms from linguistics [Васильева 2009].

Three major types of image-sound interaction can be distinguished:

- **synchronization:** image = sound;
- **anticipation:** image → sound;
- **retardation:** sound → image.

A visualized sound, when the sound and image are synchronized, is the basic element of this classification – *a sound event and visual event meet in synchrony* [Chion 1999: 58]. In both films, synchronization is used infrequently. It could be considered as a significant indicator of slow cinema.

The second type of the image-sound interaction is anticipation, which is dominant in the aesthetics of “The Shoe” and “Exiled”: in this case, an image, namely, the sound source, appears on screen first and then it is followed by sound (Figure 4 and Figure 5).

The third type is retardation: in this case, the sound appears before the image. A vivid example of retardation can be observed in “The Shoe” – the director is using



Figure 4. Anticipation in “The Shoe”. A man carrying firewood is seen on the screen. When he has left the frame, the camera stops, and we can hear him speaking to a woman outside the camera’s view.



Figure 5. Anticipation in “Exiled”. Ulrich is seen on the screen, Emma follows him, the camera follows them when they disappear behind the wall, and only their voices are heard.



Figure 6. Retardation in “The Shoe”. While the camera is moving slowly along the wall, we hear men arguing. When the camera stops and the door opens, the men are frozen in tableau vivant.

it as means of artistic expression: in a long take, the camera is traveling slowly through the apartment stopping at every door (Figure 6). While the camera is moving, we can hear different sounds coming from a particular room, but the source of these sounds remains unseen. When the door opens, we can observe the source – some

people are standing motionless, frozen in tableau vivant. Sound and motion are superseded by stillness and complete silence. Mute figures, according to Chion, “refer to everything that early cinema put into play – masking, exclusion, offscreen space [...] and problematize the film narrative’s ‘final word’ that supposedly closes off the narrative system as a unified whole [...], the cinematic mute brings into play the status of language, speech, and the voice in cinema” [Chion 1999, 100].

There is a certain stylistic formalism typical for Pakalniņa’s cinematic style, and it manifests itself both visually and aurally. Speaking in Bordwell’s terms [Bordwell 1985] the narration mode in “The Shoe” can be characterized as parametric – the style dominates the story, and a disembodied sound can undoubtedly be considered a significant stylistic parameter.

In “Exiled”, in its turn, art cinema narration mode is used: the plot is less redundant as compared to classic narrative cinema, causal relationships between events are not so obvious; at the same time, expressive artistic means are employed, and characters’ subjective reality is emphasized. In this film, sonic images are particularly significant for shaping its atmosphere. In the very first sequence retardation is used (Figure 7): we see a woman being dragged by soldiers into the woods and hear a child calling for his mom. After the sound of a shoot the boy’s (caller’s) silent face is seen looking through the window.



Figure 7. Retardation in “Exiled”.

### Silence

There is a huge amount of theories of silence in different fields – linguistics, cinema and arts, psychology, anthropology, etc. [e. g., see Kenny 2011: 67–86]. It is indeed surprising, how many different silences we encounter – and communicate with. “*Helping silence to function, of course, there are usually many reinforcing nonverbal cues, such as a shrug of the shoulders, a frown, a tensed mouth, a glare, a clenched fist, or a nod of the head, but silence is still a – if not the – paramount factor in many communicative situations*” [Jensen 1973: 249]. Silence is the other side of sound in general; particularly in cinema, as Béla Balázs [1970: 205] stated, it is “*one of the most specific dramatic effects of the sound film.*”

There are various classifications for different types of silence, but the most basic one is the distinction between silence as the opposite of speech and silence as the opposite of noise. In this paper, we will refer to the first type as communicative, or eloquent silence, and to the second type as acoustic silence. It is worth noting, however, that both acoustic and communicative silence does not mean the complete absence of sound, and, in fact, it is the case not only for cinema but for the real world as well. We never experience ultimate silence. As John Cage once noted, even in an anechoic chamber it is impossible to experience complete silence, “I [...] *heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death*” [Cage 1973: 8]. In cinema therefore sometimes it is referred to as quasi-silence [Wierzbicki 2016]. As an example, let us imagine the acoustic silence – serene, silent landscape of “The Shoe” and “Exiled” which, nevertheless, instead of explicit sonic signs is accompanied by the sound of waves hitting the shore and the gulls calling, or the trees creaking (Figure 8).

### **Eloquent silence**

It should be noted that communicative silence is pragmatically significant and therefore it is an integral part of speech and dialogue. As Jack Bilmes writes, “*Where the rule is ‘speak’, not speaking is communicative*” [Bilmes 1994: 78]. In certain communicative situations, silence can substitute speech and express even more than words. To underline its significance in verbal communication, we adopt the term of Michal Ephratt [2008] – eloquent silence.

In both films, different meanings are expressed by eloquent silence, even if the situations where silence is used as a means of communication seem similar at first glance. For instance, in “The Shoe”, a similar scene of trying on the shoe is repeated throughout the film. The “Cinderellas” never speak, but in every case their silence expresses something different – surprise, perplexity or just plain indifference (the woman at the factory).

In “Exiled”, the silence of trauma and fear is constantly present. The boy Ulrich takes care of has experienced the killing of his mother and does not speak, does not answer questions and even does not use any gestures to communicate. In fact, the whole atmosphere of the asylum with its semidarkness and silence communicates fear and anxiety.

In “The Shoe” (and in some episodes of “Exiled” as well), silence is part of the sociolinguistic model of multilingualism. It is largely determined by failure to understand the question, to communicate (e. g., in “Exiled”, when Ulrich asks a local in German where the asylum is). In “The Shoe”, in many cases the addressers – Russian



soldiers – are confronted by total silence, and it is not a sign of incomprehension, but rather demonstrative disregard; for example, the woman with the brush does not even turn her face to the questioners. The addressers are almost invisible – only their shadows are present in the frame most of the time. In these situations, the silence communicates more than just neglect or incomprehension. We know that language is not just a mere tool for communication – it can also possess a strong symbolic meaning and ideological connotations, and this silence therefore can be interpreted more broadly – as a reaction to the Russian language and the Soviet regime it is symbolically tied to.

### Acoustic silence and non-speech sounds

Now a few words about the other type, which we have called acoustic silence. As we have mentioned before, no ultimate silence is possible in natural settings. Of course, in cinema a complete elimination of sound is sometimes used as an artistic device, but this silence – an utmost disruptive gesture, as Wierzbicki [2016: 137] puts it – is always artificially imposed with a certain intention, for example, as a counterpoint to the image of some kind of disaster, explosion, etc. But normally, as Chion [1999: 57] writes, *every place has its own unique silence*, which basically means its own unique set of sounds. Therefore, we would like to discuss this type of silence in conjunction with non-speech sounds – because in some paradoxical way, sound can actually signify silence. This kind of silence is important in both films, although it is employed in rather distinct ways.

In “The Shoe”, acoustic silence makes clear, salient contrast to speech and to human activity in general. For instance, the peaceful silence in the previously mentioned opening sequence (Figure 8) is interrupted by human-produced noises: at first a tractor appears, and then the silence is deranged completely by the wailing of sirens, the roar of vehicles, loud-speakers, etc.



Figure 8. Silent landscape in “The Shoe” (on the left) and “Exiled”.

In “Exiled”, in its turn, this kind silence is present most of the time – in fact, it is the basis of the film’s soundscape that is just occasionally interrupted by sudden outbursts of speech, or cries, or non-vocal sounds (e. g., in one of the first sequences, when Ulrich hears the boy crying in the woods for the first time). Both vocal and non-vocal sounds constitute this unique silence of “Exiled”, which is indeed polyphonic: these are the voices of the asylum patients, whispers, prayers, unintelligible murmur, and creaking trees.

It should be mentioned that vocal sounds can also be used as a metaphor or a pure artistic device to create some kind of formal stylistic pattern. In “Exiled”, a voice is used for unifying time and space. When Ulrich looks at an old photograph he has found in his room at the asylum, we can hear children talking and laughing from faraway – these voices signify the time and space of the photograph, not the filmic reality. Later, when the photograph is shown in the shot again, the shot is accompanied by the same sound. In this way, a specific audiovisual image is created.

A non-linguistic vocal sound can also become important part of communication. We can observe this in “Exiled” – in the scene where the boy hears music for the first time and attempts to hum along. Here, music is really a universal human language, which the boy is trying to acquire.

For “The Shoe”, a more formalistic approach is typical, as it was previously mentioned. Therefore, it is no surprise that sound in general and voice in particular is used in “The Shoe” to create some kind of audio-visual rhythmic structures. For example, the scene with the binocular, where the movement of the binocular (and, consequently, the image) is accompanied by offscreen humming.

### Conclusion

Voice and silence, as well as sound imagery as a whole are significant means of narration in “The Shoe” and “Exiled”.

The analysis of these films shows that even small amount of text can be structured in distinct ways – it can be verbalized either fully or incompletely, when speech is not composed in semantically complete utterances. Human voice becomes a part of filmic soundscape and together with other sounds and silences it creates certain ambient sound patterns. The lack of verbalization can become a significant artistic device to achieve slow cinema aesthetics. Despite incomplete verbalization, *histoire* of both films is still comprehensible. This proves that speech plays a minor role in forming film narrative syntagms, which are consolidated by *récit* primarily. With the use of speech alone, the narrative would be non-linear and distorted and *histoire* would not be recoverable.

In both films, all possible sound-image interaction techniques have been used: synchronization, anticipation and retardation. However, slowness is achieved largely

by anticipation and retardation as well as by different modes of silence – both eloquent and acoustic – and their alternation.

Although *récit* is similar for both films, *narration* (narration mode) differs considerably: in “Exiled”, art cinema mode of narration [Bordwell 1985] is of primary use: expressive artistic means are employed to emphasize the subjective, psychological reality of film characters; in “The Shoe”, a more formalistic approach is favoured, and it can be characterized as parametric mode of narration where the style dominates over the story, and image-sound interaction is especially important stylistic parameter.

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## NORDIC NOIR INNOVATIONS – “FOLLOW THE MONEY” AND “THIN ICE”

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### Abstract

The phenomenon of Nordic noir involves a dual legacy – the tradition of social realism and the tradition of Gothic thrillers. The article focuses on the following question: How do these traditions support innovation in recent Nordic noir TV series? The answer implies an evaluation of the following issues: To which degree has it been possible to develop and sophisticate the trend of social realism? Which main functions does the Gothic tradition provide? How do the two traditions relate to production contexts? The analysis is based on two cases, the Danish public service TV drama “Follow the Money” and the Swedish “Thin Ice”, produced by Yellowbird.

**Keywords:** *Nordic noir, Follow the Money, Thin ice, social realism, gothic tradition.*

### The dual legacy

The phenomenon of Nordic noir in visual fiction is characterized by a dual legacy, originating from two different spheres – the tradition of social realism and the tradition of Gothic thrillers, both rooted in modern Scandinavian crime novels. It is commonly acknowledged that the social realist tradition in visual fiction takes its point of departure first and foremost in Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö’s ten police procedurals *Roman om et brott* (“Story of a Crime”, 1965–1975) [Stougaard-Nielsen 2017, Agger 2010]. Their status as bestsellers *and* steady sellers paved the way for adaptations in cinema as well as TV, the latter in the series *Beck* (Filmlance International 1997–). They launched a strong critical tradition in Nordic crime fiction, often highlighted in Nordic as well as other international research.

This phenomenon has been labelled ‘crime fiction with a social conscience’ [Agger 2010: 19], and whether at home or abroad, it has exerted a huge impact on the understanding of the Nordic noir tradition. Typically, it focuses on abusive political

and social forces as the main reason of crimes, relating them to current affairs, be it trafficking, money laundering, racial abuse, gender inequality, terrorism or nepotism – all inextricably connected to the ways in which capitalist class society works. Its scenography is based on meticulous research. Its visual style relies on a variety of authentic spaces – from the skylines of Malmö or Copenhagen to the carefully styled homes of criminals and investigators [Garcia-Mainar 2020: 164].

Another defining aspect of social realism is the concept ‘local colour’, providing scenes of crime and other locations with the scent of authenticity. According to Hansen and Waade [2017], the use of ‘local colour’ strongly contributed to the appeal of Nordic noir. In Danish *Norskov* (TV 2 2015, 2017), the provincial town Frederikshavn serves as more than a decorative backdrop. The development of the harbour is part of the plot. Similarly, in Icelandic “Trapped” (RUV 2016, 2019), the location of Seyðisfjörður plays a prominent part as the place from which no one can escape. Besides, audience studies confirm that domestic as well as foreign audiences perceived the characters in series such as “The Killing” (DR 1 2007, 2009, 2012) and “The Bridge” (SVT, DR 2011–2018) as more realistic from the point of view of gender, than Hollywood characters that were labelled stereotypes [Hill 2018]. However, as pointed out by especially Yvonne Leffler [2013], Stougaard-Nielsen [2017] and Agger [2020], the tradition of social realism is far from standing alone in Nordic noir.

From the beginning, a Gothic tradition in crime fiction complemented the social realist tradition. Among the best examples are Kerstin Ekman’s *Händelser vid vatten* (“Blackwater”, 1993, under adaptation as a TV series by SVT 2021) and Peter Høeg’s *Froken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (“Miss Smilla’s Sense of Snow”, 1992), followed by Bille August’s international film adaptation (1997). In their contribution to *Nordic Gothic* [2020], Yvonne Leffler and Johan Höglund highlight the Gothic element as a way of combining the ‘ancient’ or supernatural and the ‘modern’ or realistic romance. Where the tradition of social realism often has been considered the main trend in Scandinavian crime fiction, the Gothic element was not recognized as a movement of significance until the late 1980s [Leffler and Höglund 2020].

In spite of different perspectives and emphases, a *critical* attitude is commonly involved in both traditions, firstly opposing prevailing economic, social and political systems, secondly warning against ruthless exploitation of nature, focusing on sustainability and the Anthropocene in politics and culture [Waade 2020: 39]. During the last decade, in the area of TV series, these main tendencies have distinctly appeared in the development of Nordic noir, in the Nordic countries as well as in the Nordic noir-inspired universe elsewhere.

Three questions are pertinent considering current ramifications of the main trends negotiating continuity and innovation: 1) Acknowledging the dominant

position of the realistic trend, to which degree has it been possible to develop and sophisticate it? Which kinds of innovations can legitimize continued – imagined or real – leadership of this tradition, if any? 2) Given that supernatural or mythological dimensions form a constituent part of the Gothic tradition, which role do such dimensions play in modern fiction? Are they primarily meant to inflict an extra dimension of horror into the plot, or is their main function to interpret and emphasize the mood of characters and the role of location? 3) Is it possible to discern a pattern in the preferences of the production companies involved, privileging social realism and the Gothic respectively?

Analysing two representative cases, the Danish “Follow the Money” (DR 1 2016–2019) and the Swedish “Thin Ice” (C More, TV 2, Yellowbird in coproduction with Sagafilm 2020), I intend to provide some answers. Both series display a critical attitude to current society evils, and both excel in using the assets of the thriller. Where “Follow the Money” aims at developing new forms of social realism thematically and stylistically, “Thin Ice” includes features from the Gothic thriller tradition – avoiding supernatural traits. In “Follow the Money”, the fiction comments financial scandals from the last decade, tracing their paths through different layers of society, from the kiosk-owner to the bank clerk and their superiors. This path is visualized in details such as the different title sequences as well as in the diversity of setting and cast. Focusing on season III of “Follow the Money” (2019), my aim is to characterize the ways in which urban realism is developed and twisted in the plot. In many ways, the location and structure of the plot in “Thin Ice” reiterates Mary Shelley’s classic “Frankenstein” (1818), pointing to a main source of Gothic inspiration. Simultaneously, the Greenland location and the presence of modern Greenlanders play a significant role in highlighting alternatives in current Arctic geopolitics. In conclusion, my intention is to frame the wider implications of these developments of Nordic noir pointing to further examples, and in doing so assessing the influence of production contexts.

### **“Follow the Money” – traditional and new forms of realism**

During all seasons of “Follow the Money” (DR 1 2016–2019), the fiction comments upon real financial scandals from the last decades, tracing their paths through different layers of society, setting up a parallel between the financial upper class and its willing helpers in the working class – and in organized criminal environments. DR launched the third season of “Follow the Money” in a way that distinctly pointed to its predecessors and their common main theme, economic crime, but also, as an innovation, stressed its connection with ordinary staff members of ordinary banks, the “seemingly respectable financial entrepreneurs” [Hansen 2018, my translation from Danish].

Seen from a superior perspective, “Follow the Money” represents a *continuation* of prevalent trends in the most illustrious Danish noir series – “The Killing” (DR 2007–2012). This goes for topicality as well as the Style noir. Just as episodes in “The Killing” seemed to comment on topical themes, for instance the war in Afghanistan, the development of the plot in “Follow the Money” seems to compete with current affairs in reality. Jeppe Gjervig Gram, the leading manuscript writer, noted this, commenting on the development of season III:

“It is as if we were writing in competition with reality in season three of “Follow the Money”. During the first two seasons, we hunted bandits in suits and business frauds in expensive CEO offices. However, there is another money circuit, I have dreamt of exploring since the first season – the money of organized crime. We had originally found inspiration for the season in a huge money laundering case against one of the world’s largest banks, which systematically laundered billions for drug cartels. And the deeper we dug into the Danish conditions, the more it dawned on us how highly topical our third season was” [Hansen 2018, my translation].

Just to mention a few striking examples of topicality, the case of *money laundering* in the Estonian division of *Danske Bank* began to appear publicly in 2017, and the embarrassing case accelerated during 2019, accompanied by spectacular firings of irresponsible leaders and charges against *Danske Bank*. The very focus of “Follow the Money” III are the circumstances under which money laundering takes place.

Another example concerns *leading criminals*. An illustrious case revolves around Nedim Yasar, who in “Follow the Money” plays the part of a gang leader. In real life, until 2013, Nedim Yasar lived as the leader of Los Guerrenos, an immigrant gang rooted in Western Copenhagen. Wishing to purvey an alternative to his son, Yasar decided to make use of the police’s exit programme. He rose to media darling commenting on gang crime – and was murdered in his car, returning from a press meeting about his book “Roots” (2018), telling his story. Similarly, Nicky (Esben Smed) in “Follow the Money” III, having wanted to make his exit from crime to make amends to his son, is killed in a car at the very end of the last episode. It is worth mentioning that this episode was shot before Nedim Yasar’s death.

Consequently, the *style* is imbued with darkness and shadows, following the tradition from “The Killing”. In the lives of police investigators and criminals alike, light has no place. The face of Alf Rybjerg (Thomas Hwan), the traumatized leading investigator, is marked by shadows even in plain daylight, just as the gang members are caught in darkness barely facing the light of day, even though they may long for it. Criminals and investigators are shot as mirrors of each other in their obsessive hunt



for money and justice, respectively. This is Style noir as we know it from the classical Nordic TV series.

What, then, is new? Inspired by Jacob Ludvigsen [2019], I would like to point out three features. Firstly, the *title sequences* are special. In season III, there is not just one common title sequence, epitomizing the whole series. The title sequences are markedly different, each pointing to the essence of the episode in question. Their function is to deliver a concentrated visual experience of the prevalent theme.



Figure 1. Screenshot from “Follow the Money” III, episode 1.  
The title sequence illustrates the money circuit.

For instance, the first title sequence starts with an anonymous grey surface. We hear the sound of clicks. Gradually the camera reveals that the sounds stem from a cash dispenser, and we watch the withdrawal of 200 kr. The banknote is transferred from hand to hand, other notes are added, the lot is counted in a machine, and suddenly the sequence ends without further notice, having illustrated the story of money circuit in one minute. Similarly, the title sequence of episode 3 follows the transport of hashish – from a car to an apartment and then on to the customers in the streets – including a politician or a journalist seen in a glimpse smoking a joint in a gateway at Christiansborg, the Danish Parliament, then approaching the main entrance.

Secondly, the *character of the female bank accomplice*, Anna Berg Hansen (Maria Rich) represents an innovation. Untraditionally for a main character, she is not introduced until the second episode. The introduction to her appearance is also rather untraditional. The location is a bank, *Kredit Nord*, we learn from the signs.

For a couple of minutes, we only see her back, while she acts as an effective helper, first for a young couple buying their first house, then for a colleague, who is not quite familiar with the IT system. Obviously, she is kind and efficient, but nobody seems to pay attention to her qualities. What is at stake is demonstrated in the following situation, where the superior bank manager from the headquarters tells her that she has not been promoted to a position for which she is more than qualified: “We simply cannot do without you at the floor.” Slowly the camera revolves, shedding light on Anna’s face. It is a scoop how she keeps up her appearances for the next moment to subdue her sobs with paper towels at the ladies’ room. Starting as a self-effacing problem solver, Anna’s character develops into an ingenious money launderer, then to total collapse and in the end a new superior position. Anna, who had anticipated imprisonment and punishment, survives – in a new unit in the bank called ‘Compliance’ – a unit dedicated to money laundry within the frames of the law. Ironically, now her qualifications are appreciated.



Figure 2. Screenshot from “Follow the Money” III, final episode, showing Anna in her new role leading ‘Compliance’.

The third major innovation is connected to the ethnically mixed cast. Other ethnicities than Danish have often been represented in Danish TV drama, but usually with a twist involving ethnic issues. In “Follow the Money” III, different ethnicities are not an issue. There is an environment consisting of young immigrant gangs, but it is paralleled by an environment consisting of criminal ethnic Danes. Alf Rybjerg is of Korean origin, which does not appear as an issue in his otherwise deeply problematic relationship with Isa (Marie Askehave). Nicky is attracted to his fellow student at Copenhagen Business School, Sahar (Özlem Saglanmak) – without a comment on different ethnicities. The reality of a culturally and ethnically mixed Copenhagen is conveyed as a matter of fact.

In this way, “Follow the Money” especially in its third season represents a blend of tradition and innovation. In Denmark, the critical reception was favourable in all the leading newspapers and magazines, the ratings were satisfactory, and the series has sold well, among others to the Nordic countries, the UK, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and the USA [Dohrmann 2019a, 2019b].

### **“Thin Ice”: Geopolitical scrambling**

Genrewise, “Thin Ice” is an eco-thriller or, as Sagafilm has it, an “Environmental Thriller”.<sup>1</sup> The political setting of “Thin Ice” is provided by the Arctic Council.<sup>2</sup> The isolated location of Tasiilaq on the eastern coast of Greenland plays a major role. In a greater perspective, the element of sustainability and the Anthropocene is closely connected to current issues of international geo-politics caused by documented climate changes in the Arctic region transforming it from a remote and inaccessible place to a possible future location for oil drilling, enterprise and trade [Mehtonen, and Savolainen 2013]. The new interest in the Arctic region was announced in 2007 when Russia spectacularly planted its flag at the bottom of the sea covering the North Pole to designate its claim of territories. This claim was met by the Ilulissat declaration 2008, signed by Russia, the USA, Canada, Norway and Denmark, an agreement to cooperate under international law in the region, re-confirmed in 2018. This, however, did not prevent the nations from divergent territorial claims during the following years. In 2019, a report from the Danish Institute for International Studies stated: “Both of the great Arctic powers, the US and Russia, and the self-proclaimed ‘near-Arctic’ great power, China, are assigning growing geostrategic and geo-economic importance to the region and are strengthening their presence” [Olesen and Sørensen 2019: 5]. In 2019, Donald Trump offered to buy Greenland from Denmark – a proposition dismissed by Mette Frederiksen, the Danish prime minister, as “absurd”. Ten years before, in 2009, the Greenlanders voted for extended home rule and gradual taking over areas administered by Denmark, the only exception being foreign policy. Search for oil in Greenland had been an issue since the 1970s [Grønlands Hjemmestyre 2008]. Due to lack of results, the international oil companies abandoned Greenland in 2014. However, as an initiative to bolster Greenland economy and obtain increasing independence from Danish block grants, the Home Rule government launched a new strategy in 2020 re-inviting international companies to find oil and gas on- and offshore in Greenland.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sagafilm.is/film/thin-ice/>

<sup>2</sup> The Arctic Council, established in 1996, consists of eight member nations – Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, the USA and Russia. Six permanent members represent the indigenous Arctic people. <https://arctic-council.org/en/about/>

Klaus Dodds and Mark Nuttall use the metaphor of ‘scrambling’ to designate the ongoing processes: “While there are plenty of actors eager to imagine the Arctic and Antarctic as ripe for further resource extraction and colonization, political appropriation and security, there are others warning about environmental scrambling” [Dodds and Nuttall 2016: 226]. An inevitable part of the scrambling is formed by ideas and imaginations. In a review of Dodds and Nuttall’s book, Aant Elzinga precisely points to “the symbolics – one might say – of positioning and posturing, opinion building and various actors’ mobilization of events of the past in their efforts to construct potentially alternative futures” [Elzinga 2016]. “Thin Ice” is an illustrative exhibition of this international positioning and posturing, opinion building and mobilization of previous events.



Figure 3. Screenshot from “Thin Ice”, episode 1. The conference venue in Tasiilaq displays the flags of the eight nations. The Greenland flag is missing.

### Frankenstein, or the modern Prometheus

As pointed out by Leffler and Höglund [2020], since the Arctic region was introduced by Mary Shelley in “Frankenstein”, it has been at the centre of intense attention from Gothic writers and directors. Creation is the overall theme of “Frankenstein” – and the question constantly asked is where the limits go between natural and artificial creation, and ultimately, which kind of responsibility humans have for inventions against the laws of nature. The novel is composed as a system of matryoshka dolls where different voices are heard in letters and notebooks, among them the voice of Robert Walton, the fictive polar explorer. He sets out with a combined geographical and scientific purpose – to find the North Pole and a passage northeast of Siberia, and to investigate the mechanisms of magnetism, as explorers have done before and after, suffice it to mention Vitus Bering and

John Franklin.<sup>1</sup> Then follows the voice of Victor Frankenstein, the scientist whose ambition is to challenge the laws of physics and chemistry by creating another human being. At the centre is the voice of the nameless creature, created by Victor Frankenstein, telling about his process of formation, his reaching out to society, his disappointments and finally his revenge and remorse.

As a thriller, "Thin Ice" is composed in a similar way. The plot opens up one matryoshka doll after another. During the first episode, the staff at a research vessel is taken hostage. Nobody can imagine by whom or why. This happens just as the Arctic Council are assembled in Tasiilaq with the purpose of reaching an agreement to ban oil drilling in the Arctic. Sweden is in possession of intelligence information and moral resources, exemplified by Liv (Bianca Kronlöf), an agent of the Swedish Security Police, SÄPO, and Elsa Engström (Lena Endre), Sweden's foreign minister. Though the latter is not impeccable, she fights for the environment – and her treaty. Even if this is the case, Sweden temporarily figures as a prime suspect for the hijacking, due to secret alliances with Russia. Contrarily to Sweden, Denmark is defined as a minor, more pragmatic doll. Martin Overgaard (Nicolas Bro), the foreign minister, as well as Katarina Iversen (Iben Dorner), the Danish superintendent, are ambiguous characters and unstable alliance partners. The Western and Nordic members of the Council are ready to blame the Russians. And the Russians naturally participate in the scrambling, playing their part as a doll.

In "Thin Ice", Victor Frankenstein, the creative mind unable to stop, is represented by the Swedish company of Ville Berger (Reine Brynolfsson), who, just as Victor Frankenstein, eventually finds himself in a position he did not wish for and cannot control. Behind Ville Berger, more powerful forces are in action, and as revealed in the end, the US have the most massive interests and the least ethical means of pursuing them. Accordingly, Berger ends as a victim to his own creation, a complex of prevailing economic interests that are part of the monster and act like a monster, killing if necessary. However, this modern Prometheus is created by human greed rather than the relentless scientific curiosity and urge to break down borders that lead Victor Frankenstein's ambitions. Ultimately, this new monster is controlled by Greenland's (and Denmark's) allies, the US government. The US is the next, but not the last doll.

Which role is attributed to the Greenlanders in this truly international scrambling of the Arctic region? To evaluate this, we must distinguish between the regional police force, represented by Enok Lyng (Angunnguaq Larsen) and his colleagues, the lost generations and the self-assured, modern politicians. Opposite the Danes, the Americans and most of the Swedes, Enok Lyng knows the country

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<sup>1</sup> Vitus Bering (1681–1741) – Danish explorer in Russian service, leader of the two Kamchatka expeditions. Sir John Franklin (1786–1847) – naval officer and Arctic explorer. Both died on expeditions.

and its challenges. He knows how to cope with isolation, deprivation and disorientation. He is self-dependent and loyal to common human values that guide him through the moral and real wilderness without superfluous fuss. Ina Lyngé (Nukâka Coster-Waldau), his wife, incarnates perhaps the darkest side of existence in Greenland. As an addict to alcohol, she cannot help neglecting her child and her own dignity. Pipaluk, the premier of Greenland home rule (Kimmernaq Kjeldsen) on the other hand, represents the self-confident openly critical voice, resenting Danish superiority in favour of a new, independent Greenland in charge of its foreign policy, even if it means giving in to US claims and interests. In their reflections on what constitutes Arctic cinemas, a guiding principle for Scott MacKenzie and Anna Westerståhl Stenport [2014] is whether Arctic scenery and culture is seen from the point of view of insiders or outsiders. In the case of “Thin Ice”, different voices are competing, following different perspectives, but the last of the dolls seems to belong to the voice of Greenland represented by Pipaluk.

Whether intentional or not, the composition of “Frankenstein” is mirrored by “Thin Ice”, linking the Gothic element to the thriller plot. Simultaneously, the mood of the characters largely depends on the isolated location and the atmosphere of Eastern Greenland. Arctic nature is exposed in a variety of scenes, embracing a tighter darkness than usually seen in Nordic noir. The wilderness is more extensive, ice and snow appear in spectacular forms and in a variety of connections with water and rocks. The in-between small houses and boats seem so tiny. In this way the tradition of rendering Arctic nature by means of the extraordinary and the sublime, pointed out by Anne Marit Waade [2020: 40] is continued. The irony in “Thin Ice” is that the leading politicians in the Arctic Council wish to make important decisions in their own interests, but with the exception of Elsa Engström, they can hardly wait to escape the awesome territory they aim to control.

Gunnar Iversen [2020: 56] has drawn attention to Nils Gaup, the Sámi director, as a person questioning traditional images of Sámi culture. In different ways, the characters of Lyngé and Pipaluk may be interpreted as an attempt to update traditional images of Greenland culture. As shown by the example of Enok Lyngé, interaction between man and Arctic nature depends on a deep practical knowledge. Experience may provide man with calmness and a chance of surviving, and – to a certain extent – mastering nature. As a talented political practitioner, Pipaluk takes advantage of the intrigues between her political partners and adversaries, finally taking control of the territory. However, the updating of independent Greenland identity has its limits. The two strong Swedish women figure as the recurrent main characters in the preceding conflicts, not Lyngé or Pipaluk. The Swedish point of view is highlighted in the poster of the production.



Figure 4. The poster of “Thin Ice”.

The two women at the top of the poster belong to different generations. The young dark-haired one with her brown eyes (Liv) is opposed to the older, grey-haired, more experienced woman with blue eyes (Elsa Engström). Their parallel positions, however, indicate that similarity outmaneuvers difference in the balance of the two characters. Via their posture, the two women mirror each other, seriously looking at the spectator. Both are strong Swedish women, inclined to impose their will on the Greenlanders – in the interest of humanity *and* Sweden. Behind them, we see the Greenland ice sheet. In the centre, an instrument with numbers, letters and abbreviations forms a circle of modernity, in which a traditionally dressed Greenland sealer is observed from the back, confronting a polar bear. Both are placed in an unstable situation on ice floes. A ship with a derrick and a helicopter loom in the



background. The precarious situation is expressed by the dark blue drops of water that form the lower edge of the poster, indicating the melting ice as a major threat. In the vein of Gothic horror movies, the black drops are reminiscent of blood as well as oil. This poster does not support any modernization of Greenland identity, but rather confirms the traditional version.

### Context and conclusion

“Follow the Money” is exclusively produced by DR, the primary Danish public service company. It is – as has become the rule – financed by classical cooperation with the Nordic public service broadcasters NRK, SVT, RÚV and YLE. Nordic Film and TV Fund and Nordvision Fund have supported the production. The conceptual director is Per Fly, known from his film trilogy “The Bench” (2000), “Inheritance” (2003) and “Manslaughter” (2005), depicting the lower, middle and upper classes in Denmark. Per Fly’s engagement of characterizing social classes in his realism may have had impact on the innovations in “Follow the Money”.

“Thin Ice” is a Swedish coproduction with European affiliations and a distinct Nordic profile. It is produced by Yellow Bird for C More/TV4 – in coproduction with Iceland’s Sagafilm, and in association with France TV, DR, NRK, YLE, RÚV, Lumiere Group in the Benelux. Nordisk Film & TV Fond has supported the production. The conceptual director is Norwegian Cecilie Mosli and the producer Danish Søren Stærmosé.

Returning to my initial three questions, I shall conclude that the trend of social realism is still going strong, following recurrent themes of topicality and darkness, but also experimenting with innovations in style, new forms of character development and a new reality in terms of mixed ethnicities, primarily in Copenhagen. The money circuit is visualized in details demonstrated by the different title sequences as well as the diversity of the cast. In “Follow the Money”, the fiction comments financial scandals from the last decades, tracing their paths through different layers of society, from the kiosk-owner to the bank clerk and their superiors. Location and ‘local colour’ are important ingredients in the style. It is not surprising that the public service company DR has been the primary production company to maintain the stout tradition of social realism. However, also TV 2, the Danish commercial public service company, has produced new TV series along this line, among others “Warrior” (TV 2 2018) thematising criminal gangs, and “The Investigation” (TV 2 2020), focusing on the investigative process in 2017 of the murder of the Swedish journalist Kim Wall in a submarine. The Norwegian series *Wisting* (Cinenord and Good Company Films for Viaplay 2019) provides another example of renewing social realism. In this case, by confronting it with an American mass murderer and American ways of investigation – in an icy Norwegian setting.



Where “Follow the Money” aims at developing new forms of social realism thematically and stylistically, “Thin Ice” combines real dilemmas from the Arctic region with features from the Gothic thriller tradition. Avoiding supernatural traits, the Gothic element inspired by Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein” forms a sounding board of ethical and Anthropocene reflections, permeating the structure of the plot and accentuating the arctic scrambling, constantly supported by images of the icy waste land. Simultaneously, the presence of modern Greenlanders plays a significant role in highlighting dilemmas in current Arctic geopolitics, be it with a tone of Swedish superiority.

As a coproduction, “Thin Ice” has been screened in the participating nations – and in Greenland. In interviews, the Greenlandic actors have positively foregrounded the revelation of prejudices in the series [Steenholdt 2019]. There has been no unanimous critical reception in Sweden and Denmark. Critics have pointed out the role of the Arctic from political and ecological points of view, but the images and the structure inspired by the Gothic dimension have been largely neglected. In other recent examples, however, the Gothic tradition is less discreetly administered.

The Gothic trend was heavily launched by the British “Fortitude” (Sky Atlantic 2015–2018) and followed up by for example French-Swedish “Midnight Sun” (SVT, Canal+ 2016) and Finnish-German “Arctic Circle” (Yellow Film and TV, Bavaria Fiction 2018–). Where “Thin Ice” uses the Gothic as an extra layer supporting the plot via the matryoshka structure, and as an extra dimension specifying the location, these examples, primarily connected to a commercial production context, provide evidence of more banal uses of the Gothic dimension.

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## THE LOST TRADITION OF MAKING QUALITY SERIES. LATVIAN CASE

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to discuss the concept of quality TV series in the context of Latvian film history and contemporary practice.

Lately, the so-called quality TV series have been extremely successful, especially when it comes to the series offered by global streaming companies. Contemporary TV series made in Latvia have not been noticed internationally yet, although there are examples in the history of Latvian cinema that confirm that Latvian filmmakers have created quality series as early as the 1980s. What is a high-quality series in the context of modern Latvian cinema and why have the traditions of making quality series been lost?

**Keywords:** *series, quality series, Latvian film, Latvian series.*

During the last five or seven years we have encountered the phenomenon that watching series from a habit that does not demonstrate cultivated intellectual taste and having high quality criteria has grown into a popular and accepted practice by intellectuals.

*“Suddenly in academic circles it seems to be chic to watch television. [...] The appropriation of TV series has become a sign of “good taste” and contributes to the social and cultural distinction of its recipients” [Kumpf 2011].*

The popularity of the series and their diverse distribution – not only on classical linear TV, but also on-line platforms – has prompted academics to define the term “quality series” as a culturally bound, discursive construct, which functions as a meta-genre with concrete implications for selection, experience, and possible effects of entertaining quality TV [Schluetz 2016].

First, it must be established what the term “quality TV series” stands for and why the author proposes to put the term “TV” into brackets. Before trying to find out how this concept of “quality TV series” applies to the past and present of Latvian cinema and film production practice, the history of development of the concept “quality TV series” has to be briefly touched upon.

In the field of film theory, “quality TV” has been a subject gaining increasing attention. As emphasized by the scholars, quality TV is complex television. It is demanding in terms of content, aesthetically ambitious and therefore attractive for certain target groups – it is both art and merchandise [Bignell 2007].

*“Quality TV is demanding on several levels: It is innovative and complex both in terms of content and form. It challenges viewing habits and genre expectations by breaking taboos, violating television customs, and expanding narrative rules. Quality TV series has high production values and a distinct visual style. [...] Quality serial television is complex in terms of storytelling, cast, narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality. [...] Moreover, they stand out because of a signature style composed of high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity. Quality serial television offers a cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with added symbolic value”* [Schluetz 2016].

The label “quality television” was coined by US-American TV-critics in the mid-1970s with regard to particular shows like “Rich Man, Poor Man” and “Hill Street Blues” which stood out next to their generic contemporaries. According to Robert J. Thompson the first phase of the quality television in the USA stretched from the debut of “Hill Street Blues” in 1981 to the cancelation of “Twin Peaks” in 1991. In early 1990s with the shows “NYPD Blue” and “ER” the “quality TV aesthetic [...] started spreading like a virus:

*“By the turn of the century, quality was busting out all over the networks. As far as hour-long dramas were concerned, it was hard to find a show in the autumn of 2000 that wouldn't have fallen into the category of ‘quality TV’ as defined in the 1980s. The Practice, Ally McBeal and Boston Public; Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel and The X-Files; Once and Again, Judging Amy and Providence; Law & Order, The West Wing and City of Angels: the quality style was everywhere”* [Thompson 2007, XVII].

Quality TV as of today marks a specific cultural status of television content as opposed to conventional television. The growth of the pay TV channels had a significant impact on the development of quality series, allowing more artistically

diverse content to appear in the offer of TV series. Namely, the rise of the pay TV channels (first and foremost HBO) was of paramount importance for the advent of quality TV productions like “The Sopranos” or “The Wire”. “The audience (or certain segments) gained autonomy in terms of time, space, and content” [Schluetz 2016].

In American TV, the development of the concept of quality series is related to the so-called post-network era (ca. 1995–2010) characterized by digitalization and media convergence. The worldwide triumph of quality series is closely linked to the development of digital technologies that “*undoubtedly blurred the boundary between film and television in terms of both production processes and technical quality of product. Thus, the former denigration of television in the face of cinema has itself been revalued and established film directors who earlier would not have worked in television, now frequently opt to do so*” [Nelson 2007: 43].

A significant milestone was the appearance and growth of online platforms, diversifying the offer of quality series. “House of Cards” (2013–2018), the first series produced by the global streaming service *Netflix*, was launched eight years ago and it started *Netflix*’s expansion into the global market of quality series. Since 2013, *Netflix* has produced approximately 400 original series and movies each year available exclusively on the online platform [Variety 2019]. Undoubtedly *Netflix* is the most powerful player in the market of online streaming platforms – both the streaming platform and the production company but there are other significant competitors such as *Amazon Prime*, *Hulu* etc.

Therefore, when speaking about the concept of “quality TV series”, one can surely put the term “TV” in brackets. Part of the audience consumes high-quality series on online platforms, enjoying watching new series and the freedom of consuming them. Online platforms created new reception mode: episodes can be viewed repeatedly, numerous times or *binge-watched*.

What does Latvia look like in this global context of quality TV series? It has to be said that the term “quality series” has appeared in use in Latvia only recently. Up to this point the term has been mainly used to describe the operation of global online platforms such as *Netflix* and is used in texts written about the products they offer and not so much about the offer of country-specific TV channels and platforms. At the moment, one of the strongest players in the production of the quality series *Netflix* does not offer any audio-visual content made in Latvia for that matter, nor any series produced in the Baltics. One can list many reasons why this is so, but the most prominent are the insignificant size of the market, the restricted language area, as well as the limited capacity of the audio-visual productions made in Latvia and, possibly, non-compliance with *Netflix* criteria.

Does Latvia have, is producing and has produced series that could meet the criteria of a quality series? To answer this, it is necessary to look back at the history of Latvian cinema and production practice in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Undoubtedly, the parallels between Latvian media history and US media history are nearly impossible to draw. This can be explained by different socio-political circumstances and a different course of history including the history of media. What is “quality TV” and “quality TV series” in the history of Latvian media is the topic of complex research.

It is important to emphasize one of the categories of a quality series – visual quality, which depends on the industrial and technological conditions of the production. Jonathan Bignell in his analyses of quality TV series made in the USA during the 1980s and 1990s states:

*“While made for television, the emphasis on mise-en-scène associated with the greater depth of colour, contrastive lighting and more elaborate camera movement of production on film is responsible for much of the aesthetic quality attributed to these programmes” [Bignell 2007].*

Before the rapid advances of digital technology in the past few decades, which have blurred the boundaries between film and high-quality TV productions, quality TV series in the USA were mainly shot on 35 mm film. It provided an image quality that is visually equivalent to that of movies. During the Soviet era, Latvian films were made in the Riga Film Studio, which was integrated into the centralized Soviet film production system. 35 mm film stock was particularly used in Riga Film Studio, which was the only studio able to operate with such high-value production. Therefore, the few examples of the quality TV series made in Latvia in the 1980s, were produced particularly in this studio. Since the 1970s, the Riga Film Studio also regularly produced two-episode and multi-episode films commissioned by Moscow Central TV and Radio. Nobody called these films series, but some were quite successful productions of the Riga Film Studio. (The term used during the Soviet era was “multi-episode feature film”.)

For example, in 1978, there was the two-episode film “Theatre” (*Teātris*) – a screen adaptation of Somerset Maugham’s “Theatre” by director Jānis Streičs. Two-episode films were made regularly also in the 1980s. The first multi-episode film produced in the Riga Film Studio that possibly meets the criteria of a quality series in a modern sense is “The Long Road in the Dunes” (*Ilgais ceļš kāpās*, 1981) by director Aloizs Brenčs. This seven-episode film was made respecting the rules of historical drama and melodrama, and it also touched on important periods of Latvian history (deportations). “The Long Road in the Dunes” became extremely popular throughout the USSR, proving the skills of Latvian filmmakers to make multi-episode films.

In 1989, Aloizis Brenčs made another historical multi-episode film – the six-episode drama “The Old Sailor’s Nest”, aka “Zītars Family” (*Vecā jūrnieku ligzda / Zītaru dzimta*). Brenčs’ three-episode film “Mirage” (*Mirāža*) also gained popularity; he used heist-movie motifs in this production. “Mirage” also fulfilled the “ideological counter-propaganda goal”, while interpreting a genre popular in both US and European film practice.

Brenčs’ multi-episode films are *continuous series* and generally meet the criteria for a quality series. Namely, they were innovative, complex, challenged viewing habits and genre expectations by breaking thematic taboos. For example, the topic – deportations – used in the series “The Long Road in the Dunes” was extremely sensitive during the Soviet occupation, even at the beginning of the 1980s. Additionally, “The Long Road in the Dunes” and two other series directed by Brenčs had high production values and a distinct visual style.

After 1991, when Latvia regained its independence, the film financing and production system changed. Films were no longer centrally funded, and the Riga Film Studio ceased to operate as a regular film production base. In the 1990s, funding was extremely limited, few films were made, and series had to be forgotten for a long time.

Since early 1990s, the production and financing of TV series in Latvia has been separated from the film production. Since 1991 the main institution for the financing film productions in Latvia has been the National Film centre – a state institution of direct administration under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, which implements the national policy in the cinema and film industry. For the last 30 years, the production of TV series has been the responsibility of TV companies – both public and commercial TVs. Unfortunately, during this period, there have been no artistically lasting productions (series) that would stand out in the offer of low-budget productions – mainly sitcoms and adapted formats.

Between 1990 and 2020, the Latvian Television occasionally produced some multi-episode films (series) that exceed ordinary TV products in terms of storytelling and visual quality. However, there are very few such examples. It’s worth mentioning the series “Rulers of Destiny” (*Likteņa lidumnieki*, 2003–2008) – 4 seasons, 56 episodes produced by the Latvian Television. However, the visual and production qualities of the series are modest in comparison with the multi-episode films made at the Riga Film Studio.

In preparation for the Centenary of Latvia additional funding (EUR 700,000) was allocated by the Ministry of Culture for the production of the historical series. In 2016 Latvian Television launched a call for the creation of TV series dedicated to the Centenary of Latvia. The objective was to create a series “with high importance for the society and emphasize the topics of Latvia’s history, statehood, culture, politics



and national identity, thus strengthening the understanding of national identity and Latvia's historical development" [NKC 2016].

The historical drama "Red Forest" (*Sarkanais mežs*) produced by *Red Dot Media* was the winner of the call announced by the Latvian Television. The twelve-episode series premiered in the spring of 2019. Its production value, theme – the resistance movement in Latvia after the Second World War and the involvement of the British secret service – as well as storytelling quality allow to describe it as probably the first high-quality Latvian series made since the early 1990s. Digital technologies allowed creating convincing visual style comparable with the production qualities of the features.

The National Film Centre (NFC), established in 1991, distributes state funding for film production through calls for applications. However, the opportunity to announce the first NFC call for applications to produce a quality series arose only recently, thanks to emergency funding to mitigate the effects of Covid-19. In 2020, for the first time, the NFC, allocating one million euro for the shooting of the series, provided funding for two quality series. The money comes from the emergency funding to mitigate the effects of Covid-19. The keywords "quality" and "multi-episode film" mentioned in the regulations of the call for applications show the efforts of officials to emphasize the connection between the present and the 1970s–1980s, when multi-episode films were produced in the Riga Film Studio [NKC 2020]. Two series received funding: "Emīlija: The Press Queen" (based on the biography of Emīlija Benjamiņa – one of the most influential Latvian publishers in the 1920s and 1930s) and the crime series *Cherchez la femme* ("Look for the Woman") in which the action takes place at the beginning of the 1990s. Both series are dealing with historical material. This can raise the question if the "quality series" is limited to only "historical series" in the realm of Latvian media? Both productions will be premiered in the end of 2021, both series are produced by independent production companies *Mistrus Media* ("Emīlija: The Press Queen") and *Red Dot Media & Kultfilma* (*Cherchez la femme*), and both will be screened on Latvian TV and local VOD companies, which contributed with co-financing of the productions. The series "Emīlija: The Press Queen" is a seven-episode drama – the final episode is a documentary about Emīlija Benjamiņa directed by Gints Grūbe, who is also the co-producer of the series, the other six episodes are the features directed by three directors Kristīne Želve, Andis Mizišs and Dāvis Sīmanis. Additionally, the team of two directors – Armands Zvirbulis and Dzintars Dreibergs – are the creators of the six-episode series *Cherchez la femme*. The extremely demanding production schedule of both series, stipulated by additional funding conditions, which required the completion of the main shooting period by the end of 2020, motivated Latvian

filmmakers to create a creative team of directors, which is not a common practice in Latvian or even European film industry.

Positive tendencies in demand for Latvian-produced content, including series, have increased rapidly in the last four years since the advent of local online (VOD) platforms. Probably this period can be called the “golden age of VOD platforms” in Latvia. Several platforms, such as *TET*, *LMT Straume*, etc. are actively purchasing local content – films made in Latvia. The competition between two telecommunication companies, trying to divide the Latvian market, has created a demand for domestic content created in Latvia, also for series that these telecommunication companies are trying to produce themselves. It is debatable whether the term “quality” can be applied to these series, but some series have been produced. For example, “There” (*Tur*) produced by LMT (dir. Uldis Cipsts, 2019) is an ambitious attempt to master the genre of science fiction, ignoring the budget constraints and the weak traditions of the genre in Latvia. Recently the competing telecommunication platform TET has offered its own detective series “Lost” (*Bezvēsts pazudušās*, dir. Vlads Kovaļovs, 2020), which premiered in the fall of 2020. It should be noted that both directors had not worked in Latvian film productions before directing these series.

The most internationally known Latvian theatre – the New Riga Theatre – has also started making a series and has filmed a ten-episode series “Agency” during the lockdown of 2020 from May to September. For his contemporary story about a Riga-based advertising agency director Alvis Hermanis has chosen black-and-white aesthetics, which, in his opinion, is reminiscent of the fragility and naivety of movies of the 1960s. All NRT actors have participated in the filming of the series and they are also co-authors of the screenplay. In the series, Alvis Hermanis uses the same method that also characterizes his theatrical productions – actors are involved in creating the dramaturgy of the play or in this case – dramaturgy of the series. It is significant that in numerous interviews Alvis Hermanis characterized “Agency” as a “multi-episode feature film” (*daudzsēriju mākslas filma*). He used the same term which was common during the 1970s–80s in the practice of Riga Film Studio, when “The Long Road in the Dunes” and other quality TV series or “multi-episode feature films” were made in Latvia.

This independent experiment also complements the understanding of the concept of “quality series” in the Latvian context: a famous director-author, popular actors, and unusual production practice.

Alvis Hermanis has refused to co-operate with TV companies and existing VODs, and the series was made available on the New Riga Theatre’s own online platform in autumn of 2020. It must be said that “Agency”, the series created by Alvis

Hermanis, received mixed reviews. The method of improvisation, which was used to create the dramatic basis of the series, hindered the development of a convincing narrative. The series was characterized by an overemphasis on fragmentation. However, in general, “Agency” can be considered a stylistically peculiar experiment both in visual style and production practice. The New Riga Theatre produced the series using their own resources, without attempts to attract additional funding from film funds, TV companies, distributors, or streaming services.

It can be concluded that the concept of “quality series” is very fragile in the context of Latvia media landscape. It is possible that tracking a quality series in the Latvian audio-visual experience is more of a desire of scholars who long to see the reflections of an internationally approbated meta-genre in the local practice. The tradition and ability to create high-quality multi-episode stories was cut short in the 1990s due to socio-political changes and lack of funding, as well as segregation of funding for TV and cinema productions. Predictable and planned funding granted to independent film production companies to make high-quality series would provide serious support for the development of this “meta-genre”. The qualitative development of series is largely related to the amount of funding, its regularity, and sources. National Film Centre of Latvia cannot currently guarantee whether and when there will be the next call for applications to support TV series. Other players with limited financial capacity such as TV companies and VOD platforms are left to take care of the development of series. The quality of series in general is related to the production value and the chance to tell complex multi-layered stories. Let us hope that the lost link between the multi-episode film/series culture of Latvian cinema in the 1980s and today will be restored.

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# CREATING NEW SENSIBILITY IN LITHUANIAN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA: “ACID FOREST” AND “ANIMUS ANIMALIS” (A STORY ABOUT PEOPLE, ANIMALS AND THINGS)

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## Abstract

This paper is an analysis of two Lithuanian documentary films – Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė’s “Acid Forest” (*Rūgštus miškas*, 2018) and Aistė Žegulytė’s “*Animus Animalis* (A Story about People, Animals and Things)” (*Animus Animalis (Istorija apie žmones, žvėris ir daiktus)*) (2018). Both of these films re-evaluate the way animals are being represented in cinema. The analysis will be conducted within three frameworks: Lithuanian poetic documentary, nature or wildlife documentaries and animal studies in the field of film studies. While both “Acid Forest” and “*Animus Animalis*” employ cinematic language that is common to Lithuanian poetic documentary, they both broaden the genre not only with their aesthetic decisions, but also by extending its thematic focus usually limited to human interest. By changing the elements of conventional nature or wildlife documentaries these films manage to question the power dynamics of different species. They create a new sensibility towards nonhuman living creatures by reorganizing the point of view usually belonging to human beings, even by limiting spatial and temporal freedom of the spectator. Interdisciplinary focus on animal studies within the field of film studies sets another important framework that helps us understand why “Acid Forest” and “*Animus Animalis*” become relevant case studies: they widen the field of documentary cinema in the local context and they are also a part of a global shift in documentary filmmakers’ approach towards nonhuman beings.

**Keywords:** *Lithuanian poetic documentary, nonhuman, animal studies, Acid Forest, Animus Animalis.*

This article focuses on two recent Lithuanian documentary films – “Acid Forest” by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė and “*Animus Animalis*” (A Story about People, Animals

and Things)<sup>1</sup> by Aistė Žegulytė. Both films were completed in 2018, premiered in A-class film festivals and travelled to numerous film events afterwards. I would like to propose that, on the one hand, these two titles continue the tradition of Lithuanian poetic documentary cinema in terms of aesthetics, but, on the other hand, they distance themselves from anthropocentric perspective. In addition, these two films emerge within the increasing global efforts of documentary filmmakers to create a nonhuman look into the environment that we live in. In this article, I will analyse "Acid Forest" and "*Animus Animalis*" within three frameworks: Lithuanian poetic documentary, wildlife documentaries, and the recent rise of interdisciplinary interest in animal studies in the field of film studies.

Firstly, I would like to introduce these films and the background of the filmmakers. Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė is a film and theatre director and also a cinematographer. "Acid Forest" is her first feature length film. She also collaborates with writer Vaiva Grainytė and composer Lina Lapelytė on creating performances. Their last work "Sun and Sea" won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Art Biennale in 2019. The film "Acid Forest" is set in an ancient pine forest in the Curonian Spit, which is being affected by a colony of cormorants – their excrement burns the trees, which eventually creates dead forest areas. Many tourists from various countries vacationing in the Curonian Spit usually stop to see this place. There is a special observation deck built for people to properly see the area where the colony of cormorants resides. The film allows us to hear a polyphony of visitors' voices commenting on the situation. We hear 11 different languages in the film, but we don't see people's faces as they are shot from a high angle.

Aistė Žegulytė is a film director. Her feature length debut "*Animus Animalis*" follows a deer farmer, a museum worker and a taxidermist as he prepares for a taxidermy championship, Žegulytė travels with the taxidermists taking their pieces to the championship in Finland. The main criterion in the taxidermy championship is for the stuffed animals to have a good pose and a lively gaze. Along the way, Žegulytė explores the hunters' world and their rituals, and also tackles different relationships people develop both with living and non-living creatures. By showing different practices people developed when it comes to animals – preservation, hunting, farming – the director studies the cycle of life and death.

### Dialogue with Lithuanian poetic documentary

Although there are ongoing debates questioning the tradition of Lithuanian documentary cinema and the suitability of the term "poetic documentary", the term is still widely used to set common ground for some aesthetic practices in Lithuanian

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<sup>1</sup> Further in the text only the first part of the title will be used: "*Animus Animalis*".

documentary cinema during the Soviet Union, as well as just after the collapse of it. In her article “Desire and Memories of a Small Man: The Poetic documentaries of Lithuanian Filmmaker Audrius Stonys”, Lithuanian film researcher Renata Šukaitytė employs the notion of Lithuanian poetic documentary, and analyzes Stonys’ films using multiple tools proposed by Bill Nichols, Michael Renov and Stella Bruzzi. In this paper the goal is not to identify the kind of representation used by new Lithuanian documentary filmmakers, but rather, to draw on the existing research of Lithuanian poetic documentary, and then, to identify the changes that films by Žegulytė and Bardžiukaitė bring to the filmmaking tradition in Lithuania.

Documentary modes developed by Bill Nichols are widely known. Poetic mode of documentary could be useful to grasp the style of Lithuanian documentary tradition. According to Nichols, “*poetic mode emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization [...] This mode bears a close proximity to experimental, personal, or avant-garde filmmaking*” [Nichols 2001: 33]. In addition, he claims that “*the poetic mode has many facets, but they all emphasize the ways in which the filmmaker’s voice gives fragments of the historical world a formal, aesthetic integrity peculiar to the film itself*” [Nichols 2001: 105]. The poetic mode of representation thus is based on subjective viewpoint and seeks primarily express a feeling or an atmosphere rather than facts or information.

Lithuanian poetic documentaries proliferated in the 1960s and are usually associated with the names of directors such as Robertas Verba, Edmundas Zubavičius or Henrikas Šablevičius. Although they all explored different subject matter and employed different intonations, all of them were looking for ways to resist Soviet ideological framework, common to propagandic newsreels at the time. According to Renata Šukaitytė, Lithuanian poetic documentary, “*is characterized by the aesthetization of the everyday life of small “non-heroes” (ordinary people, usually old, provincial eccentrics, etc.) and a complete refusal to address contemporary issues related to the Soviet government*” [Šukaitytė 2015: 321]. They were making short documentary films without objective voice-over, without ideologically constructed messages.

It is also important to note that the generation that started to make films after the collapse of the Soviet Union, – Audrius Stonys, Šarūnas Bartas, Arūnas Matelis, Valdas Navasaitis or Kornelijus and Diana Matuzevičiai, each in their own way continued the tradition of Lithuanian poetic documentary cinema. This was done by avoiding voice-over, informative approach, cause-effect based dramaturgy, yet their topics and aesthetic decisions became more focused on temporality, marginalized groups of society, abandoned rural or urban spaces, existential topics. As Šukaitytė puts it:

*“these filmmakers openly acknowledged their interest in aesthetic and philosophical forms of filmmaking and in experimenting with documentary*

*conventions, telling small stories about the existential experience of temporality and human loneliness, about the importance and the beauty of simple and trivial things, while trying to sound sincere and present their subjects in a non-manipulative way. Their stylistic choices, like static shots, deep focus, long takes, slow camera motion, and synchronous sound (often considered traditional indicators of an indexical/realist Bazinian ontology), helped to produce such a "reality" effect* [Šukaitytė 2015: 322].

Lithuanian poetic documentary holds both aesthetic and subjective approach towards its subject matter. Nichols's poetic mode is helping to situate films made by Lithuanian directors in the 1960s and 1990s in a theoretical framework. However, Stella Bruzzi is critical of Nichols's genealogy and thinks it over simplistic. She claims that it "*imposes a false chronology onto what is essentially a theoretical paradigm*" [Bruzzi 2006: 3]. In this paper it is important to state that modes of representation do overlap and are not fixed in any period of time. Šukaitytė concludes that the two generations of the "*poetic documentary (of the 1960s and the 1990s) share the artistic strategy of an aesthete-ethnographer, documenting, revealing and analyzing marginalized cultural phenomena*" [Šukaitytė 2015: 322]. She applies Renov's poetics of documentary and grounds the legitimacy of the notion of Lithuanian poetic documentary. However, I would like to propose that both Žegulytė's and Barzdžiukaitė's films create a dialogue with the tradition of Lithuanian poetic documentary rather than continuing it. They may be situated within the poetic mode, but already exceed it, and that is precisely because of what Bruzzi states: "*hybrid, eclectic modern films have begun to undermine his (Nichols's – authors note) efforts to compartmentalise documentaries*" [Bruzzi 2006: 3].

Firstly, there is a direct influence of Stonys as he was a tutor for Žegulytė and Barzdžiukaitė while they were studying at Lithuanian Music and Theatre Academy. Secondly, they both watched and studied works of the 1960s generation, as well as the works of Matelis or Bartas. In one interview Žegulytė said that "*early films of Stonys, Matelis and Bartas gave the foundation for her own creative path*" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. These films resonate with her own resistance to narrative cinema or to the use of talking heads in documentaries. Barzdžiukaitė also mentions that Stonys's film "Earth of the Blind" made a huge impression on her. Most important for her in Lithuanian poetic documentaries is "*the sensitivity, attention to landscape, overall approach avoiding informative, journalistic way of talking in cinema*" [Valiūnaitė 2020].

Žegulytė in the film "*Animus Animalis*" uses the same pace that the films in the 1990s do – she lets the time pass through each of her shots. Slow pace and long takes which vary from 10 seconds to 2 minutes bring her close to practices used in the



works of Stonys or Bartas. She intentionally avoids interviews with her characters or any voice-over. Static camera shots combined with slow movements of camera and precise framing create poetic style of the film. However, all the aesthetic decisions of camerawork or editing are conceptually put together to raise questions or express complex ideas rather than follow the characters' everyday life or aestheticize it. In addition, Žegulytė and her film editor Mikas Žukauskas did not build a story about taxidermists or hunters, but instead avoided conventional storytelling altogether and in so doing presented a different perspective on human relationships with animals and inanimate objects. Observation and aestheticization of everyday life in this film is changed by developing abstract ideas out of everyday material.

In "Acid Forest" Barzdžiukaitė uses slow pace too and gives the audience time to look around, to linger on what one sees. But the shots, which could seem atmospheric in a poetic documentary, here become a part of a well thought through structure. To use her own words – Barzdžiukaitė tries to work on two levels: "*poetic and analytical*" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. Barzdžiukaitė's film works as a conceptual piece, where the structure of the film and its aesthetic decisions all work to question the hierarchical system of people, birds and trees – she herself calls it "*an ecological triangle*" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. The whole conflict lies within this triangle. Although one can recognize similar temporality and attentiveness to landscape which are all embedded in Lithuanian poetic documentary and might be intuitively used by Barzdžiukaitė, her aim is to awaken or even provoke the audience to think about ecological crisis, human relationship to different living species, as well as the issues of class and race. In a traditional Lithuanian documentary cinema nature is important as a landscape, it primarily serves the purpose of an environment for human beings to exist in.

Even though "*Animus Animalis*" and "Acid Forest" share the features of most of the Lithuanian poetic documentary aesthetic and avoid the informative function of documentary cinema, they turn their focus to a new topic: the relationship between different species. This dialogue between the two modes becomes prolific as it shares the sensitivity inherent in the filmmaking practice while at the same time already creating a different sensibility.

### **Trajectories of looking: in search of nonhuman perspective**

In this chapter I would like to show how "*Animus Animalis*" and "Acid Forest" create a new sensibility by developing a different perspective towards nature and nonhuman beings. For this reason, two other frameworks are necessary. Although Barzdžiukaitė's and Žegulytė's films cannot be straightforwardly put into wildlife or nature documentary categories, one of their main goals is to question the relationship between human and nonhuman beings by changing the traditional practices of

representing animals. To better understand how they create a new sensibility it is worth to look at wildlife documentary conventions and later on to bring animal studies in the field of film studies as the theoretical framework.

In an interesting study Caroline Hovanec interesting study of British natural history films, discovers that: "*Many early-twentieth-century naturalists perceived nature photography and cinematography as a nonviolent, noninterventional alternative to hunting and killing wildlife. In the camera they found hope for a way to shoot, capture, and display without hurting anything*" [Hovanec 2019]. This non-violent (at least in its intentions) way of looking at nature is common to Petras Abukevičius, who was the first filmmaker to dedicate his whole attention to nature in Lithuania. Between 1965 and 1994 he made around 40 films, mostly on local animals and birds. His short films that were made in Lithuanian film studio chose a dual approach – informative yet poetic. In one of his interviews in magazine *Kinas* Abukevičius said: "*It is not necessary to shout about preserving the nature. [...] One will learn to love nature by watching and observing it, and then one won't raise the hand against it*" [Kinas 1988]. In this quote, the main goal of Abukevičius is visible – to create such a representation of nature and animals, that would stop people from damaging it. In most of his films he shows animals speaking in human voices. Personified animals are supposed to bring them closer to human beings and to help create a stronger connection based on respect and even love. In addition, Abukevičius tries to show the beauty of nature with the help of perfect framing, shooting in beautiful light and from wide angle lenses or using zoom. However, according to Derek Bousé, "*a shroud of cinematic conventions may help us less, not more, to be sensitive to it*" [Bousé 2000: 8].

In the global context, nature documentaries or wildlife films went through big changes – from explorations of technical possibilities, to showing nonhuman realms, to scientific research, and finally – to entertaining TV programmes. In this paper, it is important to mark some of the codes and conventions that are in use to represent animals on screen. According to Bousé, "*how film and television depict the natural world often has far less to do with science or real outdoor experience than with media economics, established production practices, viewers' expectations, and the ways each of these influences the others*" [Bousé 2000: 1]. Wildlife films created for entertainment purposes have the material edited in to give the impression of a fast pace or to create dramaturgy which is similar to the way action films would be edited. Bousé claims that "*the use of formal artifice such as varying camera angles, continuity editing, montage editing, slow-motion, "impossible" close-ups, voice-over narration, dramatic or ethnic music, and the like should by no means be off limits to wildlife filmmakers, but by the same token we should not avoid critical reflection on the overall image of nature and wildlife that emerges, cumulatively, from the long-term and systematic use of such devices*" [Bousé 2000: 8]. These devices have become

conventional in portraying animals or birds on screen, and they put the spectators into superior position.

Another recent Lithuanian documentary film “Ancient Woods” by Mindaugas Survila uses varying camera angles to bring human beings to a proximity to wildlife impossible in real life. However, he avoids voice-over narration or fast-paced editing. The film has a poetic atmosphere and stands out as work that breaks the conventions of wildlife films. The main goal here is not to entertain or to inform, but to preserve the disappearing ancient woods and nonhuman beings living there.

Unlike Abukevičius or Survila, Žegulytė and Barzdžiukaitė are not trying to show the beauty of nature, instead they want to ask certain questions. However, what they do share with the Abukevičius and Survila is the quiet way of activism. Different formal and theoretical approach of Žagulytė and Barzdžiukaitė brings them closer to the growing research of animals in films. To the contrary of most wildlife or nature documentaries, “*Animus Animalis*” and “Acid Forest” seek to interrupt the superior or anthropocentric gaze towards nature. First of all, the personified voice over which is used in Abukevičius films and in other nature documentaries is annihilating animal agency. Here it is important to mark that the phrase “animal agency” has multiple theoretical interpretations, but here I would like to apply it in a way Jonathan Burt uses it, that “*in film human-animal relations are possible through the play of agency regardless of the nature of animal interiority, subjectivity or communication*” [Burt 2002: 31]. Secondly, Žegulytė and Barzdžiukaitė attempt to disrupt the spectators’ safe distance and anthropocentric position by inverting some of the cinematic techniques used in wildlife or nature documentaries.

Researchers Jonathan Burt, Anat Pick, Guinevere Narraway, Laura McMahon or Michael Lawrence amongst others bring two disciplines: animal studies and film studies closer to each other to explore the complex relations between human and nonhuman beings on screen and behind the cameras. Pick and Narraway in their introduction of *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human* argues that, “*the theoretical implications of a nonhuman or posthuman cinema to the field of film studies are profound and challenge the conventionally humanist and anthropocentric parameters of the discipline [...] By treating nonhuman environments as mere backdrop or mise-en-scène – at worst as available and expendable raw material – our thinking about cinema divides up the frame between the human and the nonhuman in ways that overlook their essential interdependence and reinforces the culture/nature dualism*” [Pick, Narraway 2013: 6–7]. In addition, there is a growing number of documentaries that try to establish a nonhuman perspective in cinema: Nicolas Philibert’s “Nénette” (2010), Denis Côté “Bestiary” (2012) or Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor’s “Leviathan” (2012) just to name a few.

"Acid Forest" and "*Animus Animalis*" are related to films mentioned above in their attempt to create a new sensibility to documentary filmmaking that would interrupt the dominant human gaze. They are questioning the hierarchy of human and nonhuman beings. One of the questions McMahon and Lawrence ask in analyses of Nicolas Philibert film "Nénette" about the orangutan in the zoo is: "How might moving images resist or refuse the objectification or anthropomorphisation of the animal and instead work to unravel hierarchies of looking and distributions of power?" [McMahon, Lawrence 2015: 2]. They show that temporality and spatial limitations might be one of the strategies. McMahon and Lawrence suggest that "the prevalence of static framing in "Nénette" means that spectatorial mobility – and the attendant consumption of species diversity – is refused" [McMahon, Lawrence 2015: 7]. Spectators in the zoo are used to wandering around freely while the animals are entrapped in cages and observed as if in a window-shop. The same effect is usually recreated in cinema – the spectator has a safe position and their eyes wander freely in the frame. Huge scale panoramic shots are conventional in most films about nature.

"*Animus Animalis*" is shot with 4:3 aspect ratio, which restrains the mobility of the spectator's gaze. Most of the time, the framing in this film is intentionally inconvenient and even feels claustrophobic at times. In an interview Žegulytė says that, together with "my cinematographer Vytautas Katkus we tried to create a nonhuman look in the film by framing shots from an angle which could be close to an animal perspective" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. I would add that not only camera position and framing work as a tool to create nonhuman point of view, but temporality and staged shots disrupt hierarchical relation between animals and human beings. As I mentioned earlier, Žegulytė uses long lasting and static shots, which evokes attentiveness. In their analyses of "Nénette", McMahon and Lawrence argue that imposing duration and "privileging dead (cinematic) time" in opposition to what conventional nature, zoo or wildlife documentaries practices, allows the film to undermine "the zoological and cinematic structures of voyeurism, fetishism and surveillance" [McMahon, Lawrence 2015: 8]. Although Žegulytė does not focus on one specific animal and the focus of film is constantly shifting from living to non-living beings, she applies temporal and spatial limitations in order to question, as Philibert also does, the power relations between different species and the dominant gaze.

As Žegulytė says, "this film started from her interest of thinking about how dead eyes affect human beings" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. In one scene Žegulytė shows a sequence of shots from a showcase in Kaunas Tadas Ivanauskas Museum of Zoology – in each shot different stuffed animals are exhibited in their natural habitat, when finally, a fox steps out from the showcase and starts wandering around the space looking at all the stuffed animals. The gaze of the spectator is disarmed by the revived fox. The ability to recognize what is real and orienting oneself in the frame is taken away with

this unexpected twist. Žegulytė plays with the trajectories of living and non-living eyes within the shot and also in the editing, thus escaping the anthropocentric gaze.

Jacques Derrida said “*the animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there*” [Derrida 2008: 29]. This idea becomes very helpful in explaining what Žegulytė is trying to achieve with the staged shots and interchanging close-ups of dead and living animal eyes. Constantly turning the animals’ gaze towards the spectator, Žegulytė succeeds in provoking thinking about the difference between living and non-living creatures and that is precisely how classic human/animal distinction is put into question. According to Matthew Calarco, “*the classic human/animal distinction serves to block access to seeing the world from the perspective of nonhuman others and seeks to limit in advance the potentiality of the animal and entire nonhuman world*” [Calarco 2011: 58]. This potential is grasped by Žegulytė. She plays with spectators’ expectations by including macabre scenes of humans hunting fake animal figures, or the process of making stuffed animals. Shifting between living and non-living creatures’ point of views, she questions “*the artificial line society has constructed between human and animal and the violent subjection that anthropocentric subjectivity has enabled*” [Freeman, Tulloch 2013: 114], to use Carrie Packwood Freeman’s and Scott Tulloch’s paraphrasing of Derrida: In addition, by constantly turning animals’ gaze towards the spectators, this “*gaze exceeds the “thingness” of a nonhuman being and penetrates the human sphere*” [Lippit 2000: 169]. Animals and human beings start to belong in one realm: that of the living as opposed to that of things.

Barzdžiukaitė in her film “Acid Forest” questions the asymmetric relationship between human beings and animals through reorganization of gaze as a tool of power, too. In the interview she says, that for her it was “*very important to invert the conventional practice of nature documentaries, where the cameraperson uses an extreme zoom lens to shoot animals from far away. The subject does not know that it is being filmed, allowing the audience to enjoy its natural behavior*” [Brašiškis, Shpolberg 2020]. In “Acid Forest” human beings are the ones being watched as the cameras were installed in the trees to observe tourists from the birds’ point of view. In this way, to quote Barzdžiukaitė: “*the usual interspecies hierarchy of the cinematographic gaze is re-organised*” [Brašiškis, Shpolberg 2020]. Freeman and Tulloch’s analysis of activists’ undercover footage is helpful here. They incorporate Michel Foucault’s panopticon theory. They argue that undercover films develop a reverse panopticon. Something similar is done in “Acid Forest”, where tourists do not know that they are being watched and listened to. According to Freeman and Tulloch, while “*the traditional structure enables the privileged gaze of one or several individuals, the reverse panopticon undermines this privileged perspective, inviting all viewers willing to bear witness*” [Freeman, Tulloch 2013: 116]. Here the witnesses are not only the spectators, but also the cormorants.

Barzdžiukaitė reverses the anthropocentric position towards other species. It is an ethical movement expressed within the structure of the film and carried out through precise aesthetic decisions. She is not willing to create an activist film, which would bombard spectators with big statements. However, by turning the birds' point of view towards the tourists and listening to their conversations, then structuring them with smart editing, she questions human dominance over other beings. The sound is very important in "Acid Forest", too. Barzdžiukaitė plays with the localization of sound in its relation to vision, and she manages to structure points of view and points of hearing in a precise choreography that slowly builds the impression of cormorants being the ones listening to the stories about their existence and their effect on nature. In this way, the spectators are encouraged to identify not with the tourists' voices, but possibly with cormorants or maybe even with the trees, which silently participate in this ecological triangle.

### Conclusion

Until "*Animus Animalis*" and "Acid Forest", Lithuanian poetic documentary filmmakers took as their main concern topics related to the human interest: existential questions were followed by social and historical topics. By incorporating cinematic tools that are usually associated with poetic documentary mode, Barzdžiukaitė and Žegulytė are both questioning the dominance of human beings over the nonhuman. They create a new sensibility towards nonhuman living creatures by limiting spatial and temporal freedom of spectators, or reorganizing points of view that usually belong to human beings in documentaries on nature or animals. These films bring a new topic to Lithuanian documentary – reevaluation of anthropocentrism and its role within ecological crises. These urgent topics resonate with the wider global interest of documentary filmmakers that seeks to change the arrogant and ignorant position of human beings towards other species. The global interest in "Acid Forest" and "*Animus Animalis*" affirms their interesting formal decisions and topics that go beyond the local context and tradition.

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## FILMMAKERS AS ONSCREEN CHARACTERS IN RECENT LATVIAN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

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### Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century an increase of films with filmmakers present onscreen can be observed in Latvian documentary cinema. Their stories open up personal issues and family histories, their presence diversifies stylistic approaches to documentary apart from most often used observational form. Issues of formal elements of narrating a story, representation of filmmaker's self within the film's narrative, power relations between the filmmaker and the character are at the core of study in documentary film theory, where participatory and performative modes (Bill Nichols), analysis of performative nature of documentary (Stella Bruzzi), and character representation (Carl Plantinga, Thomas Waugh) are explored.

The three recent Latvian documentaries discussed in this article present variations of interaction of filmmaker and character/-s in telling the story of the director's father in "My Father the Banker" (*Mans tēvs bankieris*, Ieva Ozoliņa, 2015), disclosing the personality of a friend and an artist in "Forging Condors" (*Kondoru kalve*, Mārtiņš Grauds, 2018), or questioning the ethical implications of a documentary filmmaker in "Documentarian" (*Dokumentālists*, Ivars Zviedris, Inese Kļava, 2012). They present various approaches to the issues of representation, choice of formal elements, and interaction between the filmmakers and the films' characters.

**Keywords:** *documentary cinema, participatory mode, Latvian cinema, performative documentary, Ivars Zviedris.*

The discussion about displaying the filmmakers at the scene of a documentary film production visible to the audiences in the completed film relates most distinctly to the 1960s, and the movements of Direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*. The Direct cinema convincingly conceals the filmmakers' presence from the audience. The audience observes the events filmed, and is allowed to forget the presence of a crew,



however small, at the location. The approach of the *cinéma vérité* (or film truth) characterises a different view, where the filmmakers are active participants of the onscreen events. In his initial work, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (1991), Bill Nichols proposed four modes of documentary, which filled the necessary gap in *clear and definitive* nomenclature [Waugh 2011: xviii] of terminology for describing documentaries. Direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* thus became associated with two of Nichols' modes – the observational and interactive, respectively.

Responding to the global trend, when from the late 1980s the body of autobiographical film and video productions increased significantly all over the World [Renov 2004: 104] and more diverse stylistic approaches appeared in documentaries, also Nichols' further exploration of documentary modes corresponded with this new turn. A new mode, performative, was added, and later instead of interactive the name of participatory mode was adopted. Participatory mode, as proposed by Nichols, “*emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement. Often coupled with archival footage to examine historical issues*” [Nichols 2001: 34]. Performative mode stresses “*the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own engagement with the subject and an audience's responsiveness to this engagement. Rejects notions of objectivity in favour of evocation and affect. [...] The films in this mode all share qualities with the experimental, personal, and avant-garde, but with a strong emphasis on their emotional and social impact on an audience*” [Nichols 2001: 34]. Even though each mode has certain characteristics, they “*function as a dominant in a given film: they give structure to the overall film, but they do not dictate or determine every aspect of its organization*”, as noted by Nichols [Nichols 2001: 100].

Issue of performance and performative nature of documentary has been at the centre of Stella Bruzzi's study of documentary films and television productions. Even though Nichols and Bruzzi uses the same name, Bruzzi's approach is much more complex and instead of clear-cut descriptions as in Nichols' modes accentuates the problem of impossibility of objective representation of reality [Ros et al. 2018: 226] and does not propose specific kinds of documentaries with clear-cut set of features. In Bruzzi's view, “*documentaries are performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity*” [Bruzzi 2006: 1]. Bruzzi characterizes performative documentary, either it is with the filmmaker's active participation or centred around a character, which “*only comes into being as it is performed, that although its factual basis (or document) can pre-date any recording or representation of it, the film itself is necessarily performative because it is given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality*” [Bruzzi 2006: 186]. Bruzzi's belief that all documentaries should be perceived as performative problematizes

the possibility to distinguish and analyse certain kinds of films like first-person documentaries, as pointed out by Ros, O'Connell, Kiss, and van Noortwijk [Ros et al. 2018: 226]. Nevertheless, Bruzzi's observations of the filmmaker's direct interaction with the characters is valuable source for film analyses in the context of this article.

Not just the filmmaker's physical persona, but the filmmaking act is notable in these films. The filmmaker not just *plays himself*, using Thomas Waugh's expression, but is part of the filmmaking process seen by the audience. He plays a *filmmaker* and at the same time he *is* a filmmaker. Thus, in this interactive form, the documentary becomes a meta-observational film, when the participant becomes that which is being observed [Nichols 1991: 49]. We observe the filmmaker with a camera and in front of a camera lens, and at the same time recognize that there is another cinematographer behind another camera. Or we see the filmmaker in front of the camera, once the camera has been set up and left rolling. In another case, it can be a film's director seen onscreen, and not doing the filming himself, even more clearly showing the act of being in a certain role. As Bruzzi notes, "*documentary has an established tradition of the performer-director*" [Bruzzi 2006: 198]. The reason for such an act is filmmakers' interest "*in discovering alternative and less formally restrictive ways of getting to what they perceive to be the essence of their subjects*" [ibid.].

The importance of a camera or other filming equipment as a technical tool that is explicitly visible or being recognized, has been for the *cinéma vérité* practitioners. It is linked to their inspiration in the avant-garde period of the 1920s. Jean Rouch points out to Dziga Vertov's "Man with a Movie Camera" (Человек с киноаппаратом, 1929) as an example where the director's aim is to "*make the camera the principal actor, the object of this new cult of total cinema*" [Rouch 2003: 269]. Later technological advancements have allowed filmmakers to employ these technological possibilities to even greater extent. The digital video cameras, various distribution strategies, including internet, personal use filming and editing equipment, which allows for very intimate personal moments to be shot and made available *are transforming documentary practice* [Rothwell 2008: 152]. Thus, the filmmakers are there not just to embody or take part in the acts of *presentation*, but engage in *representation* through varying means of interaction on the scene of a documentary [Waugh 2011: 82–83].

Analysing depiction of characters and filmmakers as characters onscreen, Carl Plantinga suggests to discuss the distinction of *flat* and *round* characters also in the documentary context, where flat characters have only a few traits and are unchanging and uncomplicated, but round characters have many different traits, they are complex and dynamic [Plantinga 2018: 122]. As Plantinga suggests "[t]he generation of allegiances and antipathies towards various characters in any narrative film is a form of moral or socio-political judgement that is stamped on the film by the

*narration's implicit approval or disapproval of one or more characters*" [Plantinga 2018: 128]. Such approach can be traced in the documentary films, where the filmmakers create a connection to the characters, or her-/himself as well.

Observing the onscreen presence of the filmmakers in Latvian documentary cinema it can be traced to the early 1960s, with Uldis Brauns' short documentary "Construction" (*Celtne*, 1962), which involved the film's scriptwriter Armīns Lejiņš onscreen interviewing workers at the construction site of Daugavpils' Chemical factory.<sup>1</sup> However, only since the 1980s such approach has become more widespread, and involved different variations. The filmmaker's presence was one of stylistic features of Juris Podnieks' work in the 1980s. He introduced himself in the opening scene of his first full length documentary "The Constellation of Riflemen" (*Strēlnieku zvaigznājs*, 1982), he was an active interviewer in "Is It Easy to Be Young?" (*Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, 1986), and five part series "Hello, Do You Hear Us?" (*Mēs*, 1989). Self-reflexivity and the role of documentary filmmaker characterize also Hercs Franks' oeuvre, being either present as an interviewer, off-screen commentator or the main character. His subtle and sympathetic voice narrates "The Last Judgement" (*Augstākā tiesa*, 1987), "There Lived Seven Simeons" (*Reiz dzīvoja septiņi Simeoni*, 1989), but in the film "Flashback" (2002) he looks back at his own life (even showing his heart surgery). Increase of filmmakers' presence in films can be observed after the 2000s, but even more distinctly from the 2010s. It is a recurring feature of some filmmakers (like Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen, Pēteris Krilovs), or a unique approach used in one (at least at the moment) film by a certain director. These recent films tell about personal issues, involving historical periods of the family's past, friendship, profession, and other topics. Through the personal prism, they disclose issues of the past or question the truthfulness of historical facts. This corresponds to the observations about the increase of personal narratives toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The three recent Latvian documentaries discussed in this article, present diverse approach and connection between the filmmakers and their characters, and the way they are represented. These are more complex approaches than just an interview or guiding a story through the unobtrusive participation as an enquirer at a given situation. The autobiographical angle is most distinct in Ieva Ozoliņa's "My Father the Banker" (*Mans tēvs bankieris*, 2015). The film's narrative is based on the director's search for her missing father and through the search process their family history and

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<sup>1</sup> The script of the film "Kuldīga Frescoes" (*Kuldīgas freskas*, 1966) also included a self-reflexive approach. The film's opening was going to include the film's cameraman walking and looking around, soon to be joined with his assistant. The film's scriptwriters were Lejiņš and the film's director Aivars Freimanis, the idea was not realized in the completed film [Pērkone 2017: 25–26].

history of Latvia in the last few decades is presented. Previous connection is there also between the filmmaker Mārtiņš Grauds and the artist, his friend, Miķelis Fišers in the film “Forging Condors” (*Kondoru kalve*, 2018), which follow their trip to South America, and the story is weaved together through a loose search narrative. “Documentarian” (*Dokumentālists*, 2012), in its turn, focuses on the relationship between the filmmaker Ivars Zviedris and Inta, a woman who lives by the Ķemeri National Park, exploring the nature and ethical issues permeating documentary filmmaking.

### Through the family angle: “My Father the Banker” (2015)

A debut feature documentary by Ieva Ozoliņa “My Father the Banker” grew out of the graduation film project,<sup>1</sup> taking shape of a full-length personal story about the director’s father, an infamous former banker Boriss Osipovs who went missing nearly twenty years ago along with his then partner and 6 million Lats from the TopBanka. The family has had no knowledge about his whereabouts since the late 1990s, until one day many years later they received information from the police that he might have been found. His whereabouts were passed on to Latvian police from the Interpol, stating that the person matching the description of missing Osipovs had been found at the psychiatric clinic in Malaysia.

The film starts at the police department where the director has come to identify her father in the image received from Interpol. The greyscale image of a person’s face becomes a denominator for exploration of a person’s life. As Plantinga has pointed out to Béla Balázs’s explorations, “[t]he recorded image of the face reveals the outward signs of emotion, mood, intention and thought, and thus, Balázs shows, the close-up takes the spectator from the outer realm of broad physical space into the minute realm of physiognomy and the inner world of psychology” [Plantinga 2018: 129]. Along with the family, the spectators are allowed to study the image of his face, and later the face of the real person when the daughter travels to Malaysia to meet him. The picture of his face is puzzling, adding to the intrigue of what the daughter will uncover – is it really him?

The film includes different sources of visual information that enable Ozoliņa to construct the past and the present, but, as the participatory mode entails, throughout the narrative it is the filmmaker’s direct engagement with unfolding events that keeps our attention [Nichols 2001: 119–120]. The film employs different archive materials – soviet time newsreels to illustrate the time her father was growing up, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ozoliņa’s wish to tell her father’s story was the reason for the decision to study filmmaking [Griškevica 2018].

adding them ironical tone: how people lived in the same apartments, used the same perfume, knew how to use gas masks and be ready for a nuclear attack. Home videos are perfect source for illustrating in very direct way the moments of their domestic life, including the director's wedding. The changing times can also be observed through the different formats of the archive materials – from 35 mm newsreels, to video quality ads and home videos. Apart from archival sources, the film shows the family in the contemporary setting – family has gathered to study the father's picture trying to recognize him, then discussing the situation how to help him further. Some family members and friends or former colleagues are interviewed by Ozoliņa. The setups for the interviews vary: Ozoliņa talks to her aunt in the midst of the dental procedure, as her mother's sister is a dentist, and the director has come to fix her teeth and over the pauses they are having a *casual* conversation about her father. More neutral interview spaces are also used: sometimes the interviewees are just sitters in the frame at their own apartments or workplaces, or neutral backgrounds, or at times the director and the interviewee both are filmed. Nevertheless, it is always her voice behind the frame asking the poignant questions.

As Annie Lebow has observed, "*First person films can be [...] autobiographical in full, or only implicitly and in part. [...] They are, very often, not a cinema of 'me', but about someone close, dear, beloved or intriguing, who nonetheless informs the filmmaker's sense of him or herself. They may not be about a person, self or other, at all, but about a neighbourhood, a community, a phenomenon or event. The designation 'first person film' is foremost about a mode of address: these films 'speak' from the articulated point of view of filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position*" [Lebow 2012: 1]. This subjective position permeates the film, as already its title indicates – with the preposition "my" directly connecting it with the filmmaker. Even though the film presents an array of very interesting details about the specific historical time, especially the 1990s, the wild first decade of the reinstated independence of Latvia, the film as the "*first-person documentaries shift the focus of their viewers from the factual details of the situation that is represented [...] towards its emotional dimensions, which are universally human*" [Ros et al. 2018: 236]. The complex relationship between the daughter and the father is foregrounded here on the backdrop of tumultuous times, sculpting an exciting narrative development.

The narration in the first person in the voice of the director stresses it, and shifts the focus towards the director as well, as this is also a story about her, and her relationship with the father. Ozoliņa is a performer-director, who is onscreen and does not fulfil the task of the cinematographer. The camera observes her in a given situation along with the other characters or just by herself in a journey to find her father.

### A journey through space and art: "Forging Condors" (2018)

The film "Forging Condors" presents another kind of interaction between the filmmaker and its main protagonist. It was the initiative of the director Mārtiņš Grauds to make a film about contemporary artist Miķelis Fišers<sup>1</sup>, who is also his friend. It was their agreement from the beginning that if such a film was made, then Grauds also had to be in it. "*It forced to reconsider the tools and approach how to tell about Miķelis and his work, and the film's focus shifted so much that became almost imperceptible*" [Anonymous 2018], Grauds has explained. The film does not involve direct interviews between both through which our knowledge is enhanced about the artist and his work. The narrative is arranged based on the trip they take together to Latin America – Peru, Bolivia, Mexico. The events are structured as the preparation for the trip, going there together and then experiencing the countries separately as if they've lost each other while travelling, and then reuniting and concluding the trip together.

"Forging Condors" correspond with Bruzzi's notion of *journey films*, where journey consists of different encounters, either between filmmaker and its subjects, or between different subjects, and often these meetings are unplanned without a preoccupation with a clear end point [Bruzzi 2006: 81]. Considering the structure of this film, the journey serves as the backbone of the narrative, which is complimented with imaginary sequences that are fragments of Fišers' artist films, exhibition documentation, and staged scenes. In the end credits specific roles are designated to several characters: Fišers is introduced as *The Lost Artist*, Grauds as *The Director*, there is also *The Shaman, Some Russian, A Quechua Woman*. The adding of roles serves as a notion of the constructedness of the narrative. Seeing Grauds onscreen when he is looking for his lost friend and spending time by himself, is clearly a construction of how to integrate both of them in the story, which was their initial agreement. The travel format allows not to focus on the argument or narrative cohesion, but "*it is simply a chronicle of events linked by location, personality or theme*" [Bruzzi 2006: 83]. Here it is linked by all three factors – specific location, a personality of an artist, the theme of the friendship between the artist and the director, and also art. Along with the principal cameraman Aigars Sērmukšs, several other cinematographers have been involved in the making of the film, including the director Grauds who shot scenes in Bolivia and Peru. In several episodes of the film, he is seen with the camera as if playing a filmmaker on the scene, once more foregrounding the element of play of himself in front of the camera.

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<sup>1</sup> Miķelis Fišers (b. 1970) is a visual artist and set designer, using different techniques – painting, graphics, videos, installations, objects. He has had numerous solo and group exhibitions. He is a recipient of Purvītis Prize (2015), an award for the achievement in Latvian professional visual art scene.

The film eschews any voice over commentary, instead involving casual interactions between the director and the artist, or either of them both with other people. Waugh's distinction of presentational and representational forms (and hybrid form as the third to describe more complex approaches) allows to see their presence as representational where, among other descriptions, *social actors role-play or dramatize improvisationally real-life situation* [Waugh 2008: 82]. Here the artist paints, or observes and experiences locations which are important inspirational source of his art, or the director is a director, in some scenes arranging a set-up of the frame, talking to people he is going to film.

### Experiencing the nature of documentary filmmaking:

#### "Documentarian" (2012)

The film "Documentarian" does not present a character connected to the filmmaker prior to the filming. As Carl Plantinga has observed, "*While fiction filmmakers cast actors with the right qualities to play specific characters, documentary filmmakers apparently carefully choose those people who offer the right raw material to enable them to construct a fascinating and memorable character*" [Plantinga 2018: 125]. Inta is specifically this type of character, which can have a memorable image, and be a catalyst for complex set of questions unfolding during the filming. At the same time, she is not just a character, but a medium for telling a story about a filmmaker.<sup>1</sup> Zviedris states that "[t]his is a film about the mission of a documentary filmmaker and his relationship with the character" [Anonymous 2012]. The film has two directors – Inese Kļava and Ivars Zviedris, but it is only Zviedris who is present onscreen.

The longer quote from Nichols is important here: "*Participatory documentaries [...] involve the ethics and politics of encounter. This is the encounter between one who wields a movie camera and one who does not. How do filmmaker and social actor respond to each other? How do they negotiate control and share responsibility? [...] What responsibility does the filmmaker have for the emotional aftermath of appearing on the camera? What ties join filmmaker and subject and what needs divide them?*" [Nichols 2001: 116]. This can be continued with further questions, addressed when discussing the interactive mode – how far can the filmmaker go, and how do they negotiate the limit beyond which it is impossible to go? [Nichols 1991: 45]. These are exactly the questions that both directly and indirectly are and can be addressed in "Documentarian".

The film presents full spectrum of an encounter between a documentary filmmaker and a character – from the initial approach to parting their ways once the

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<sup>1</sup> Zviedris maintained connection with Inta also after the film was finished up until her death in 2017.

filming is finished. This is a truly dramatic story, which includes love/hate relationship, care, tenderness, and sadness from understanding that their ways should part. Their interactions are constructed through interviews, conversations, and monologues conducted in various *mise-en-scènes* underlined by range of emotions.

The question of power and authority is especially present in “Documentarian”, as the interaction deliberately focuses just on the film’s co-director (at the same time also a cinematographer), and the character thus yielding more instruments at the hand of one. In the films, “*the relationship between one and the other has traditionally assumed an unequal distribution of authority, with the documentary maker enjoying the greater share*”, as noted by Spence and Navarro [Spence, Navarro 2012: 73]. This recognition in the film is also with the presence of the camera and the fact of filming. To allow Inta to understand better what he is doing, in one episode Zviedris asks her to come and look into the camera and see for herself the frame composition and how the person in front of the camera is seen. He goes even further in another episode at the grocery store, where Zviedris gives the camera to Inta and let her film while he goes to pick up his wallet from the car. At that point, towards the end of the film, they have already formed a close connection, and the previous quarrels are in past. This is not often used approach in recent Latvian documentary when the character is asked to film, and the material is used in the final cut. At the same time this encounter stresses the film’s central theme – the interaction between the filmmaker and the character, where the filmmaker (in this case the co-director and cinematographer in one person) is being the one constantly with a camera as a technical instrument by his side.

The film has no voice over commentary, but it consists mostly of interviews, conversations or monologues. The serene location of the marshes, and the spot of Inta’s house serves for a remote and peaceful location on whose backdrop the dramatic, melodramatic, or even crime elements are being experienced. Even though the camera mostly is put on a tripod and the frame is set, at times it is used in other approaches. Apart from already mentioned direct involvement of Inta behind the camera, in a few scenes Zviedris is running with the camera in his hands – either running away from Inta chasing him ready to hit, or playfully avoiding her chasing him in almost a romantic scene. She is very susceptible towards the camera, and she enjoys being filmed. Thus, it is more difficult to denominate the right approach – is it *presentational* or *representational*, as it can be one or the other in different scenes with Inta who specifically plays for the camera at times, but on other occasions does not notice the camera at all.



## Conclusion

The tree films discussed in this article show diverse approaches of representation of the character through the interaction with the filmmaker. As Bruzzi notes, the filmmakers “*have sought to accentuate, not mask, the means of production because they realise that such a masquerade is impossibly utopian*” [Bruzzi 2006: 187]. When formulating the participatory mode, Nichols proposes that these films “*can stress the actual, lived encounter between filmmaker and subject [..]. The filmmaker’s presence takes on heightened importance, from the physical act of “getting the shot” [..] to the political act of joining forces with one’s subjects*” [Nichols 2001: 117]. The stance the filmmaker takes can be important to stress the alliance with the character and the views it represents. At the same time filmmaker also keeps the position of being one of the characters and thus it is also her or his position we are witnessing.

In the notion of *journey film* Bruzzi has involved also an encounter between the spectator and the film [Bruzzi 2006: 81]. In that respect, “Documentarian” is also a journey of making a film, or “My Father the Banker” – a journey of looking for something lost. The versatility of using different audio-visual materials and having various means of interaction, these films demonstrate looking for *film truth*. “*As film truth, the idea emphasizes that this is the truth of an encounter rather than the absolute or untampered truth*” [Nichols 2001: 118]. Therefore, the encounter itself has an important meaning for understanding the whole story of the film. Varying documentary film examples in recent Latvian cinema, in addition to the above discussed titles, show different variations of unmasking the presence of the filmmaker and the forms how it is performed.

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## 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 1991: 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 2008: 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 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’ 70<sup>th</sup> birthday<sup>1</sup> 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 1987<sup>2</sup> 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 1986<sup>3</sup> suggest almost nothing similar about that time. Several of the 11 documentaries made in Latvia in 1986 focus on achievements

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

<sup>2</sup> The film started its screen life in the beginning of 1987.

<sup>3</sup> <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*<sup>1</sup>.

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

<sup>1</sup> <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 imprisonment<sup>1</sup>. 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*<sup>2</sup>.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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*<sup>1</sup>. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> <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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## DISCUSSION: JURIS PODNIEKS AND THE CONSTELLATIONS OF TIMES

The discussion *Juris Podnieks and the Constellations of Times* took place on 4 December 2020, in the framework of the research conference *Culture Crossroads*. Every year special thematic section of the conference focuses on cinema, and this time it was dedicated to Juris Podnieks (1950–1992), one of the most important documentary filmmakers of Latvian cinema who would have turned 70 on 5 December 2020.

Juris Podnieks began working at the Riga Film Studio at the second half of the 1960s. In 1969, he entered the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography to become a documentary cinematographer. His graduation film was Herz Frank's full-length documentary "Restricted Area" (*Aizliegtā zona*, 1975), which he filmed (together with another cinematographer, Sergejs Nikolajevs) at the youth delinquents' colony in the town of Cēsis. Soon after, in 1977 he made his directorial debut with the newsreel *Padomju Latvija* "Soviet Latvia" (No. 3, 1977, entitled "The Cradle"/ *Šūpulis*). Since the beginning of the 1980s, Podnieks directed full-length documentary films, and each of those became a notable artistic achievement and resonated in society. His first full-length film "Constellation of Riflemen" (*Strēlnieku zvaigznājs*, 1982) told the story of the Latvian riflemen who fought for their country under different regimes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the film, Podnieks introduces himself and presents the film's premise. It is still rarely used approach in Latvian documentary at the time, with the filmmaker participating and involving himself actively in the film. It was Podnieks' subsequent full-length film "Is It Easy to Be Young?" (*Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, 1986), which made his name known both in the Soviet Union and internationally, and paved the way for international assignments (covered also in the discussion below). This was an unusually honest testimony of young people of the Soviet Latvia, who dared to speak frankly and express their inner feelings and thoughts about the system they lived in. In the film history of the 1980s, this is one of the most important films coming out of the region referenced as signifiers of Gorbachev's perestroika.<sup>1</sup> The strong voice of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky *The Zero Hour. Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992; Nicholas Galichenko, *Glasnost – Soviet Cinema Responds*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991.

the filmmaker manifested in “Is It Easy to Be Young?” was the reason for receiving the commission from Central Independent Television that turned into the grand portrait of the falling Soviet Union – a five-part series “Hello, Do You Hear Us?” (*Mēs*, 1989, title in the USA – “Soviets”). The changing political landscape, fighting for freedom became the theme of Podnieks’ last films – “Homeland” (*Krustceļš*, 1990), “*Post Scriptum*” (*Pēcvārds*, 1991, which includes episodes of Barricades in Riga in January 1991, when his cameraman Gvido Zvaigzne was wounded (and later passed away in the hospital), but Andris Slapiņš killed on the spot in the attack), “The End of Empire” (*Impērijas gals*, 1991), and the last short film “The Moment of Silence” (*Klusuma stunda*, 1992, dedicated to Zvaigzne and Slapiņš). He died tragically in 1992.

Almost thirty years after Podnieks’ passing, at this discussion we aim to examine his working methods, approach to documentary, specific films, and other issues paying tribute to him and his legacy that remains.<sup>1</sup>

*Zane Balčus*

Participants:

**Antra Cilinska** (Latvia), head of Juris Podnieks Studio, film editor, director and producer, lecturer of the Latvian Academy of Culture. Cilinska has edited Podnieks’ films since 1984.

**Richard Creasey** (United Kingdom), former TV commissioning editor, producer, writer, who commissioned Podnieks to make the film “Hello, Do You Hear Us?” (1989) for ITV Central.

**Tue Steen Müller** (Denmark), documentary film consultant and expert, film critic, co-founder of Balticum Film and TV festival.

**Jānis Putniņš** (Latvia), film director and head of the National Film School of the Latvian Academy of Culture.

**Zane Balčus** (Latvia), junior research assistant of the Advanced Research Centre of the Latvian Academy of Culture, film critic, curator.

**Zane Balčus: What is today Juris Podnieks’ legacy for you? How do you see him from today’s perspective?**

**Antra Cilinska:** Well, I think Juris would very well fit in the present-day situation, he would have some, I hope he would have some bright ideas. I think all he was

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<sup>1</sup> The transcript of the discussion is published here in a slightly condensed form than the actual talk. The discussion in full length is available online at the youtube channel of the Latvian Academy of Culture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9IddXbBeKM&t=1123s> (viewed 17.06.2021.)

doing it's because he was the type of person who was seeing things in relationship and in connection. He was seeing the big picture. And I think this is something that we maybe miss today.

**Tue Steen Müller:** I can continue and say that I'm so happy that you are doing this tribute to Juris Podnieks. I teach a lot, I go around a lot, and on every occasion, I'm always saying – Juris Podnieks, and I discover that the young generation don't know him. So, I think it is very important to introduce him to this generation, because when you look at the films "Hello, Do You Hear Us?", "Is It Easy to Be Young?" – they are so fresh. They are fresh in every way – they are so quick in editing, there is a rhythm and a passion. Everybody should know about them, that he is a very important filmmaker. This is not just in connection with the fall of the empire that he was covering, but also as a filmmaker, and I hope we can talk about it. I have made several notes on "Hello, Do You Hear Us?" and would like to bring up some examples of things that young people could study, but not only young people – also older people with grey hair should have the chance to see the films again.<sup>1</sup>

**Richard Creasey:** Obviously today, as it was when I first met him, he would be a giant among independent filmmakers. In my job at those days, I was commissioning a lot of programmes, the best programmes to be fair, we won lots of awards, and many people would bring me ideas. What was so important about my very first meeting with Juris is he proved what I felt all the time. Which is – ideas are a given, all that really matter is the passion of the filmmaker. And that filmmaker's passion comes through, and therefore the idea gets told. I think that's as true today as it was when we first met. We will come to later on the way in which he filmed, and the terms of a very big broadcasting institution. There were very definite regulations of what you couldn't do. You cannot use anything but the top-quality cameras to which Juris took no notice at all, and breezed into the studio with stuff shot on rather bad quality VHS. And often that was the very best. So, I think there are a lot of lessons that young people today can understand and see. We need that independence, not those who are doing things at the beck and call of the BBC or the other ones basically making films that they think their channel wants. The best films are not what the channels want, but what the filmmaker wants. And Juris didn't give us a chance to say what we wanted, it was completely what he wanted that's what I so loved about him for the three four-year period in fact a bit longer we worked together.

**Jānis Putniņš:** I would not be so optimistic that Juris would really greatly fit into today's filmmaking world. I think he lived at the right time at the right place. His films are very personal, very idiosyncratic, full with passion, and that is not exactly

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<sup>1</sup> DVD boxset of Podnieks' films was released by Juris Podnieks Studio at the end of 2020, for the first time making available a number of his films in one collection.

the quality that is really easy to sell in today's world. He's a truly unique personality, and his work is very distinctive if you look from a broader perspective. What you already mentioned, what makes his work so great is this intense interest, amazing ability to connect with people, connect with subject of his interest, and always have even relationship. It's not that he is ever dominating, there's a lot of empathy and humility. And that's also a very rare quality, which I would like to emphasize in regard to his work. I am convinced that his work can be very very inspiring for people who start to make films today, because of these qualities. There are a lot of great films, great stories, fantastic execution, but very very few of them have this amazing tactile quality that Juris' films have. I am completely convinced that for a true filmmaker this is an absolute necessity to make really great work.

**Balčus: Antra, when you started to work with Juris, how did he collaborate with colleagues and establish a connection to work with him?**

**Cilinska:** It was just by working. He was absolute workaholic, and well there were just two options – whether you are in and devote yourself fully to what you are supposed to do, or you are out. The whole idea is based on getting the best result out of the material, and as Juris was that kind of director who was like a hunter going to the woods and bringing out the meat, and I had to cook something out of this meat. Sometimes it was things that didn't go together and you didn't have any idea how to put it all together. Story like the five-part series "Hello, Do You Hear Us?", it was like the top point of complete chaos at the very beginning. I remember the first viewing for you Richard and other commissioning editors, it took ten hours to watch, and that was the material for a one-hour programme! I started to work with him after the "Riflemen", and we did some smaller films, and I think it was already the second film, "The Sisyphus Rolls the Stone"<sup>1</sup> we did together, when I started to realize how I can participate in it. Juris needed a thinking partner with whom he could play with ideas. Once he really brought me to tears, and he said – well if you don't know how to make something out of this, then I don't need you, I don't need a person who can just stick two pieces of film together, these days we were still working on film. Ok, I felt very offended, I cried a little bit, and then I thought over and said – ok, you go home and see you tomorrow, and I spent all night fighting with this episode. Actually, it was very badly shot and Juris himself didn't know what to do with it, but in the morning, I had something to show him and he was happy. I think this was a turning point, because we have to think what are the next steps. It's like when you are making bread, you are working with the dough, getting and squeezing the best things out of it, and

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<sup>1</sup> Between feature length films "Constellation of Riflemen" (1982) and "Is It Easy to Be Young?" (1986) Podnieks directed short documentaries "Commander" (*Komandieris*, 1984) and "Sisyphus Rolls the Stone" (*Veļ Sīzifs akmeni*, 1985).

that's why actually editing took a lot of time and long, long hours. It's like you dive into the material and it takes time before you get something out of it. Yes, so I think he was demanding, and demanding till the very end until we reached the result. And sometimes even when it was finished, he came up the next morning, even cutting the negative – we need to adjust this or that, to change something. Absolute devotion to the material, to the film, to the idea I would say. He once offended the scriptwriter of “Is It Easy to Be Young?”<sup>1</sup> saying that he just read the script and left it on the shelf and went out filming. This was a way, because he had this sort of like a platform, like a basement for ideas and then he was just really gathering the material, gathering stories, and you never knew what can come out if it, and then putting them in some shape and form, I think this is how it always happened.

**Müller:** Can I ask a question?

**Balčus:** Sure.

**Müller:** Because you talked about scripts, and now we have you and Richard here. What about scripting “Hello, Do You Hear Us?” – was there any script, was there anything on paper? I'm asking this also because today whenever you want to make a film you need to write and write and write to get the funding. How was it in this case?

**Creasey:** Shall I answer that one, Antra? Let me take you back to 1986 Soviet Union, Gorbachev was just in. So, I went to Moscow with the idea of looking for a film for an extraordinary filmmaker called Ken Loach. Ken was working with me on drama documentaries<sup>2</sup>, and I thought this would be a great subject matter for Ken to see if we could find something in Moscow. I put together a small joint venture with the Ministry of Culture, which I knew would allow us to do things which most wouldn't, *Goskino*, and Lev Guschin who was the deputy editor of the very good magazine called *Ogonok*<sup>3</sup>. And he listened to me going on about what I wanted, and said – you don't know what you are talking about, you need to see a real film. So, he marched me off to a top of Arbat Street to the art cinema, which is where they were showing “Is It Easy to Be Young?”. I went in there with an interpreter, I couldn't speak a word in Russian, and I saw the first half hour of a kind of really rather bad-looking film, and I didn't know why on Earth I was here. And then it turned out that was a Soviet newsreel, and that Juris' film hadn't started. Then “Is It Easy to Be Young?” came up. And I was absolutely entranced by it, I hadn't seen that passion on the

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<sup>1</sup> The film's co-scriptwriters with Podnieks are Jevgenijs Margolins and Ābrams Kleckins.

<sup>2</sup> British filmmaker Ken Loach (1936) has worked with Creasey on the film *Gamekeeper* (1980) among others.

<sup>3</sup> The joint venture was Soviet British Creative Association established in 1989 (after the fall of the Soviet Union, it was renamed East West Creative Association).



screen for such a long time! And I was at that time the boss and I could commission anything I wanted, there was no one to ask, there was no committee, just me. And I walked out and said – I'd love to meet Juris. It was Wednesday, and they said, well, we might be able to get him down from Riga, and I said – fine, if you can, I'd love it. And the first time I met Juris, I said – Juris, I'll give you a camera we'll pay for, I'll give you 80 thousand pounds, I'll give you an edit suite for as long as you want it on any subject you like. So, to answer to your question, Tue, in those particular days which were very different from now I suspect, it was just me seeing something astonishing, recognizing extraordinary filmmaker, and saying – make it. While from Juris' point of view this was quite difficult because, he'd been nudged into what he should be making I suspect by studio bosses in Riga, and the system, and then he had to find way out of this. Then three or four weeks later I came back and I went to Riga, and I went to see him at work in his Riga Studios, and he was showing me the rushes of the film he'd just made, and I suddenly understood why he was so extraordinary. Because he was using all the material he could whether it was 35 mm, 16 mm, if he could grab a VHS camera, which was very new at those days, he would shove that in and get it filmed. And so the energy made me understand that what was really needed was someone who could work alongside him. And in my experience that someone was always two. There was a cameraperson, and some really great editor. And I knew if I'd asked some other editor to do it that wouldn't work. So I asked Antra, can you come and edit, and that was how it started, with me realizing that Juris did need people around him who could do extraordinary things, but my job was to keep the kind of big bureaucracy off his back. And there were difficulties of that. I sold the idea to the people who scheduled all the films, and they were terribly excited about the big film on the Soviet Union and no one had done it before. And by the time we came up with something which was worth looking at, the BBC had won an award, the Yorkshire television had won an award, and our film hadn't even seen the screen. So there were lots of grumbles going on until there came the film and it proved to be as magic as we thought it will be.

**Müller:** And just to follow up – at what hour was it screened, and do you remember how many people watched it? Was it a big hit in the UK?

**Creasey:** The answer is on the one hand, yes, on the other hand these were very different days back then. There were only four channels, Channel 4 hadn't started, there was only BBC 1, BBC 2, ITV. ITV was meant to be a commercial one, but in the documentary area we had to make films which were going to challenge those on BBC 1 and BBC 2. So, to answer your questions, we were ITV, and ITV back then did not have much competition and we got a big audience. I think it was 9 o'clock, Antra?

**Cilinska:** Yes, I think so.

**Creasey:** I refused to look at the ratings because it seemed that they dogged all the senior people like me who got all the rating things. I'm happily dyslexic so I wouldn't need to read all the stuff and ratings are a good excuse to say I don't read those things. It got a huge response, and by this time Channel 4 had already agreed to take the next four programmes. Whether it would have done as well today when we have so many programmes and channels, I don't know, but I think we are finding the way towards niche programming which is watched. But it was immediately recognized as a force it really was that's why it won Prix d' Italia and all the BAFTAs, and everything else, because it was clearly extraordinary. Because it was extraordinary it took so long time to make, it really was very mature.

**Balčus:** **Could you please elaborate more on how you worked together – did you watch the material together, what was the process of actually creating these five episodes, and how much were you involved in making the creative decisions?**

**Creasey:** Yes, let me try. I was in a very privileged position. I was responsible at that time for about 400 programmes a year. I was perfectly involved in half a dozen, one of which was *Juris*.<sup>1</sup> And I knew that if you went down the normal way of commissioning programmes, I would be chucked out immediately. My father<sup>1</sup> was a writer, so in the very early days I decided that I had to change the attitude of commissioning programmes to that of a publisher to a writer. The most important person in the publishing is the writer and the publisher in my dad's books didn't even get a name on it. So I thought, my relationship with *Juris* was that of a publisher. All that I needed to check was that Antra and the others who were much more involved were there. And I had a very great assistant executive producer called Roger James. Roger James had gone up, very unusually, from film editing to producing, and he was a master at enabling people to do even better than they thought they would. So all I had to check was if Roger was a lot involved and he was. And I was able to be a light relief in a way, I was never the person saying you can't do this, I was the person to be a bit more like – hey *Juris* why don't we try it. So when *Juris* came and wanted to put in some VHS material in here, I was – yeah, why not, never once – you can't do that! So in a way it was unusual, but he was a magnificent person to work with.

**Cilinska:** I remember Richard was always a good cop, Richard never said no. I think you had split roles, this was our production manager Jackie<sup>2</sup> who was always worried. Actually, I have to say *Juris* had some power with his charisma. There were a lot of times really very difficult situations, complicated decisions to be made – are we going to continue, should we be closed down, should we be sent out and never

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<sup>1</sup> John Creasey (1908–1973).

<sup>2</sup> Jackie Henson.

come back, but always somehow the right decision was made. I don't remember any moment when Richard said – no, it's impossible, just do this and that. Never. I remember at one stage the project was closed, thank God it was a British project and the material was smuggled out and he wasn't stopped. We had these moments, but we always found some solution. The result was what mattered, I think for Juris that was his passion and what moved it forward.

**Creasey:** I think you are probably right, Jānis, they were particular times. It was a very very unique period in which things were happening, and I happened to be in exactly the right position and exactly the right time to be able to enable these things to happen. My background was that my father was very famous, he had written nearly 600 books, he was the world's most prolific writer, but what most people don't know, he had more than 740 rejections before his first book was published. So I was brought up knowing that you don't take "no" for an answer. And when someone says I'm going to do it you back them if you believe they really will. Every time Juris said he wanted to go back I would know that when he went, he'd come back with something which was worth doing and that heritage that I got in my blood was very much there.

**Balčus: Tue, you met Juris when he visited Balticum festival?**

**Müller:** Balticum Film and Television festival<sup>1</sup> was something that changed my professional life. We were happy to get the funding and make this festival on the island of Bornholm, and we had it for ten years and there we met filmmakers from the region. In 1992 Juris came and it was his last festival, because it was in May<sup>2</sup>. And later on, I got to know more about his work thanks to Antra. In this book that we made about the festival<sup>3</sup> there is a long article by Herz Frank, because Herz Frank was also there in 1992 and he said that this was such a wonderful time for Juris and Herz to be together for a week and talk about film. And Frank was also writing about this amazing pressure that had been on Juris making something like seven feature documentaries in two years. As you said, Antra, Juris was a workaholic, and he was also tired. He was then a star at the festival, and he was talking, "now I want to do something else." Watching the series again during the last days I'm so impressed by the films because they are not easy films, they are goddamn complicated. Yaroslavl in the first one, then there is Chernobyl, in the next one we go to Karabakh, then we

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<sup>1</sup> Balticum Film and Television festival was established in 1990, it focused on the films from the Baltic Sea region, in such format it ran until 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Podnieks died on 23 June 1992, what was to be believed a diving accident in Zvirgzdu Lake near Kuldīga due to a heart condition.

<sup>3</sup> The book was published on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the festival: *Balticum Film & TV Festival 1990–99*. Bornholm: Baltic Media Centre, 1999.

are talking about Afghanistan<sup>1</sup> and so on. But in some way or the other it all goes together. I think that young people today can be inspired as you said, Jānis. Inspired that you can construct a film in a way which is not like many films today built according to the three-act structure, going from one to two to three. It's possible to make different things, and it demonstrates of course how fantastic he was to get close to people, and in the way he was a brilliant journalist. He could really ask questions in a warm and good way so that people could say something which made sense. I'm especially very fascinated by the Afghan war veteran, the young man who has lost his foot or leg.<sup>2</sup> He's interviewing him in the courtyard where some kids are playing football, and he's playing the ball with them. Then he sits down and Juris starts asking him – what do you think about Afghanistan, and he starts talking and says I don't want to talk about it because it can be used against me. And by saying this he has already said what he thinks about it. Then Juris cuts to something else, and then comes back to the courtyard where he is playing football, and then he is saying something like “sacrifice in vain, we were deceived” etcetera very openly. In that respect Juris is demonstrating how he can get close to people and film them in a very warm way and understanding way, and this is one of the big qualities, I would say. There are so many other things! And the films are very timely – all this material from Karabakh, it's happening again now. And Afghanistan – also, the Russians in Afghanistan then, but now the Russians are in Syria. It's the same story. It has a current appeal in a very strange way. But talking about this complicated structure – putting in the scene with Rybnikov<sup>3</sup> is fantastic. By having this guy in his studio, composing the music and you see him talking, and he is also the one who gets the last word. It gives a total new layer in the film, it's not just reportage on what's happening in Karabakh, in Armenia, and so on. It's also bringing in humanistic, existential aspects to the films which are fantastic.

**Creasey:** When I decided to set up a joint venture with *Goskino*, I also needed a really great independent anarchist, a real person, so I got Rybnikov to become one of the founding members of that joint venture. And I didn't say to Juris – you will have to use Rybnikov. It was simply putting them in one room together and it was from my point of view inexorable that these two masters of their own areas would work. So that's one of the great benefits that we had.

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<sup>1</sup> The film documents different events in various republics of the Soviet Union, among those the strike in the Yaroslavl factory in Kirishi in Russia, which occurred after the people of the town experienced consequences of corrosive pollution; the blast at the Chernobyl Nuclear Reactor in Ukraine was one of the most severe nuclear catastrophes, ethnic conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Soviet war in Afghanistan, and many others.

<sup>2</sup> This sequence is included in the third episode of the film “Hello, Do You Hear Us?”.

<sup>3</sup> Alexey Rybnikov (1945) is a Russian composer of musicals, operas, film scores etc.

**Cilinska:** I think for us the biggest problem, the new thing number one was – working for television. Because here back at home working for television that was nonsense. People doing films for television, well that wasn't serious. Another problem was how to put all those bits and pieces together into something which makes a story, and a story with a continuation. Actually, Rybnikov was a great solution, because it was a process which you could expand and come back to. Rybnikov's philosophy and his looking inside and asking these big questions, I think it coincided with Juris' point of view, his aims and what he believed in. And then we really started thinking about these stories, how we could come from one to another just to make this big picture. It wasn't easy and it took time. We had 300 hours of sound, and over 100 hours of film. And from the beginning it was meant for a one-hour film. I think it took half a year to sync it up and look through, at least to have an idea what's in it.

**Balčus:** **Antra, could you comment more on how you worked with this amount of material – did you only edit when the shooting was completed, did you look it all through, and made notes, please tell us more about it.**

**Cilinska:** I remember when I arrived in the UK and Juris brought me to Birmingham where we were editing, the next day he left. He left me on my own, and I started to work with the material. I had two British guys, Steve Barkley and Mark Steve who were helping me, but of course they didn't have much knowledge of Russian language or other languages that were up there on screen. We used these little yellow post-it notes, and the house we were living in then was covered in these yellow notes describing different episodes. Each evening when we came home and we had made some changes in the editing, we rearranged the notes. It's a shame I didn't film or photograph it, it is just in my memory.

**Balčus:** **Podnieks has said that for him the poetical tradition of Latvian documentary filmmaking was of great importance. How do you see in his films the interpretation of it, what was his poetic language?**

**Putniņš:** There is no question that his filmmaking style is very poetic. He has this uncanny ability to see amazing things in the images, poetic things, small details that become very powerful when you put them together. They may seem insignificant looking from a semantic narrative point of view, but there are these glances, some umbrellas opening, or gait of a person, or how he stands or leans, Juris sees these things and it creates a layer in his films, which is impossible to describe in very strict, precise terms. This is poetry of life that find expression in Juris' films. And of course, the editing, the way he puts images together. Antra, maybe you can say more about that, on how it happened, I'm really curious. In some decisions that were made you can see how the structure is being created, how it jells together with the previous or

the next episode, but sometimes they are truly very intuitive and quite amazing, and I cannot see how can you come to this decision.

**Cilinska:** I think the main thing was that it was important not to lose the audience. The main task was to keep the viewer informed, attracted, to stay there, to create the flow of thought. Sometimes you make an abrupt sound or noise or music or cut, and it helps you to get rid of that information to be able to continue. I think that Juris had this poetic tradition of documentary filmmaking very deep in him, but he also managed to add this publicity and topicality, this present-day situation nerve and thoughts people were thinking at that moment. I think this is something that made his films special. It's not just a current affair film but it's something more, it's a bigger topic. One more thing to add – it always happened through some personal experience and personal story. We never used any voice over, which was also a challenge for Richard and John Willis<sup>1</sup>, because at that time for British television it was always a voice over. And it's much easier to work, you simply adjust shots and someone tells you the story. But we took another path. And I remember very well, I think it was with "The End of Empire" it was Julian Ware<sup>2</sup> at that time, when we showed the first cut, we had to put the film together pretty quickly, I remember, there was a list of approximately 80 questions which were not clear. Because for us seeing Brezhnev, seeing someone else or seeing this or that, it's already clear. When you lose the audience, they will not watch the film. They said – Juris, for this film we definitely need voice over, but what we did, we were sitting and trying to understand where the problem was and what was not clear and how to make it clear. It also happened when Roger James was coming to the cutting room of "Homeland", and we were really testing Roger – tell us what you don't understand, where the problem is. And then we try to make the story so that it becomes clear, and we don't have to use voice over.

**Balčus:** I would like to turn to Richard. Antra already told us about how they tried making the film so that everything was clear through the images. In one of the interviews to a Latvian newspaper, a journalist told Juris that for him the film seemed too journalistic. Juris replied that for him – maybe, but for the British television it was probably too poetic. How did you find common ground on this, how did you let Juris translate his vision?

**Creasey:** It's a good question. I think it goes back to confusion in my days when I was involved in commissioning programmes and today. This confusion between a really great documentary and a really important current affairs programme. And there is a massive difference. And I think the audience is often confused about that. The biggest difference which the BBC hates but which I really loved is that

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<sup>1</sup> Programme director of Channel 4.

<sup>2</sup> Producer at ITV.

a true documentary is not balanced, it is subjective unbalanced passionate story of that person's point of view. Broadcasters find it very difficult because they want to balance all their programming. And Juris was an opinion writer, this was his, so the important thing was allowing Juris to say what he wanted to and what he needed to say. As Antra says, Juris' job was not to let you take your eyes off the screen, Juris' job in documentary was not to give you all the information, Juris' job was to say when you've finished watching the film, then you go and find out more. And in a way that's a job of a really great documentary.

**Balčus:** Tue, maybe you have something to add?

**Müller:** This confusion between current affairs and documentary, it still exists. When I've been to some film schools, the students they – no, no, I don't want to film faces, I don't want to film faces, because then it's not a documentary. Which is absolutely nonsense. And I always say – it depends on the face, it depends on what the people are saying. I think what also people can get out of watching Juris' films is – fuck the rules. There are no rules, if something works like he's sitting and talking to a man in a veranda in one of his films<sup>1</sup>. It is so natural, it is a good conversation, and it is so nice to see him. In film schools, students sometimes say – no, no I don't want to be in the picture, it shouldn't be like that. It's like there are still some rules. I think it's getting better, because television is not so important any longer. And British television, I think Richard you will agree with me, there are not many strong filmmakers coming out of from England any longer, I'm afraid. Channel 4 was very important, maybe it still is for some filmmakers, Kim Longinotto<sup>2</sup> or some, I don't know, but it's very difficult, because the rules are very strict. Am I right or not, Richard?

**Creasey:** I would agree with you. I think it's the individualism which makes the creativity, which makes it work is no longer apparent. Everything is commissioned by a committee, the rough-cuts are shown to a committee, on that committee people will look after budgets, and so it goes on. I absolutely agree.

**Müller:** Everything is topic, topic, subject, subject, and you have to explain as you said, the audience will not understand. Another very good thing about some of "Hello, Do You Hear Us?" episodes, sometimes there are long silent sequences – this is very good. I remember one of my other heroes Sergei Dvortsevov<sup>3</sup> he made

<sup>1</sup> Reference to an episode in "Is It Easy to Be Young?".

<sup>2</sup> Kim Longinotto (1952) – British documentary director who often focuses on different female charactres.

<sup>3</sup> Sergei Dvortsevov (1962) – Russian director of documentary and fiction films. "Bread Day" (Хлебный день, 1998) tells about a small village whose inhabitants have to push a train cart off from the main tracks to their village to provide people with bread.

the film called “Bread Day”, and it starts with four or five or six minutes when nothing is being said. And he was fighting with Channel 4 to keep it. The television said they cannot show this, but they replied – then you can’t have the film. At the end luckily Dvortsevoy won, and there is an episode of a long silence in the film where people are pushing a train cart and nothing is being said. But I don’t know how it is today. I’m afraid that in many cases today watching on television sequence like that people would think that there is something wrong with their television set, the same goes if its black and white. Television is not so important, and that’s another little side thing I’m so happy about that the Baltic countries have their own film funds, film institutes, with limited money but they are there to support their documentary film as an art form. Am I right, Antra?

**Cilinska:** Yes, you are. It made me remember the case with “Homeland”. The beginning of the film is also quite slow, the film was shown on the PBS channel in the States. They said we are going to show the film, but we are going to change the beginning. Juris said that he was going to go to the States and he could come and help them with it, but they said – no, no, we know better. And it was like a shock – how can you know better what to change?

**Creasey:** I think it is really important point. And I think that it is so difficult to ignore the people who have commissioned it and the others, because every time someone looks at the film like Juris and each person will have their own opinion. And the only opinion that matters is Juris’ as long as you’re sure he has really thought through all the consequences like people switching off if there are long silences. But we have to trust the filmmaker more, which goes back to – we need to become more like publishers.

**Balčus:** **As we have to conclude, maybe there is a topic or burning question I didn’t address? So please the floor is yours.**

**Creasey:** Can I just be slightly optimistic for the future, just because I can’t not be optimistic. I think that the great trouble we’ve got today is the committees we talked about and the commissioning, and therefore the need to write scripts. But I always say to myself, that the one thing we know is that everything goes round in the circle. Like we have winter, and spring, and summer, and then autumn, and then we’re back and it goes round in very big circles. So, keep on going and I think we’ll keep on going round the circle and there will come time when individuals like Tue and me will just be able to say – yes, do it, I trust you. So that competence I’m sure will come around. And if you don’t have any money, you use the tools you’ve got, smartphones or whatever, so when the opportunity arises, you take that opportunity, but you need to continue working.

**Cilinska:** Don’t lose faith in yourself.



**Müller:** There are so many good films being made. What Richard was saying, I think it was *caméra-stylo*, now it is *i-phone-stylo*. The technical development allows you not to wait for the money in your bank account, you can just go and film, but you should know what you are filming of course.

**Creasey:** Yes, you need your passion.

**Müller:** Absolutely.

**Putniņš:** Yes, I totally agree with Tue. There are so many good films being made despite all the committee stuff, councils, and so on. Many of them are made without waiting for money but just by doing. And that's how they should be made. First of all, there should be passion and if someone gives you money – fine, great, but passion should come first.

(Prepared for publication by Zane Balčus)