NEWSREELS AND CENSORSHIP IN ANTANAS SMETONA'S LITHUANIA, 1926–1940

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Abstract

December 17, 1926 marked a change for the young independent Republic of Lithuania. On that day a military coup d'état replaced the democratically elected government with the authoritarian government led by ultra-conservative Lithuanian Nationalist Union (Tautininkų sąjungos) party leader Antanas Smetona. The new government increased the control of various means of mass communication. In 1932 Film censorship law was passed, which created one centralised institution to censor all films shown in Lithuania (before this law, censorship was sporadic and done by different district officials). The same year Newsreels law was passed, which ordered that before any feature film screening, a Lithuanian newsreel must be shown. This law boosted the small Lithuanian film-making community. But not for long, by 1935 all rights to make Lithuanian newsreels were granted to one company run by filmmaker Jurgis Linartas, and old acquaintance of Antanas Smetona. From then on, only the Lithuanian newsreels produced by Jurgis Linartas could be shown in theatres. By means of censorship and control of newsreel production, Antanas Smetona's regime tried to create an alternative reality to be shown in cinemas. But the new reality not only contrasted with real life too much, its making was too much of a task to handle by the regime. Audience reaction to Antanas Smetona's period newsreels and their shortcomings, show us the construction of ideal image of Lithuania failed in interwar Lithuanian newsreels.

Keywords: Cinema, newsreels, Lithuania, Antanas Smetona, censorship, interwar.

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by the growing power of radical political ideologies and their leaders (communism and Lenin/Stalin in Russia, fascism and Mussolini in Italy, Nazism and Hitler in Germany etc.), and

the rapid development of new means of mass communications (radio, cinema, later – television). Even the smaller, newly independent, European countries, such as Lithuania, could not evade these processes. December 17, 1926 was a turning point for the Republic of Lithuania. On that day a military coup d'état replaced the country's democratically elected government with an authoritarian government led by ultra-conservative Lithuanian Nationalist Union party (*Lietuvių Tautininkų sajunga*) leader Antanas Smetona. The unpopular party, that on the eve of the government takeover had only about 2,000 party members and three seats in the parliament, managed to secure their rule of the country up till the year 1940, when Lithuania was occupied by Soviet Russia. The leader of the party, Antanas Smetona, who had served earlier as a first president of Lithuania (1919–1920), now was often regarded as a *leader of the nation* (*tautos vadas*), a hint to growing manifestations of Antanas Smetona personality-cult. The new government increased the control of various means of communication. Cinema was no exception.

In this article I will discuss the general situation of newsreels production and subjects in Antanas Smetona's Lithuania, the influence of regime control over this production, the possibilities to overcome this control, and the reception of newsreels by the viewers. All of these complex subjects deserve an autonomous article of their own. Due to the length restraints, here I could only scrape their surface. There are no English articles about interwar Lithuania's cinema, so my main task was to give a general idea about how newsreels functioned under Antanas Smetona's regime.

Only a handful of interwar Lithuanian newsreels have survived till today, most of them only partly (all of them are digitalized and available online: www.ekinas.lt). Press articles and archival documents are essential for getting a more comprehensive picture of interwar Lithuanian newsreel productions. The most helpful archival documents are the survived Lithuanian film censorship documents held by Lithuanian Archive of Literature and Art (archival fund no. 91: Kino filmu cenzūra). These documents provide us not only with the information about what was censored from one or another film, they also give us the transcripts of film dialogs/texts and summaries of film contents. These films also include Lithuanian newsreels. I'll base my research on the preserved visual and archival material, but not to overcrowd the article with numerous references to various censorship or visual documents, I'll give references only to those that I'll cite at bigger length. I'll be using these documents together with interwar Lithuanian press articles about cinema. These articles are a good evidence of public opinion about Lithuanian newsreels and their shortcomings. The references to the cited or mentioned articles have been provided, but the general statements about Lithuanian interwar cinema have been left without references, for the same reasons as mentioned above.

Antanas Smetona's regime came to power at the crucial time for Lithuanian cinema, a time when cinema was being recognized as serious means of mass communication and legitimate form of art. Though the first film screenings in Lithuanian territory were already held by 1896, and first film shootings took place in 1908, it was in mid 1920s - early 1930s when most of the film-related initiatives were started. In 1924 the First Assembly of Lithuanian Film Workers gathered in Kaunas, in 1925 Lithuanian Society of Cinematographers was established, 1926 saw the establishment of the first Lithuanian film actors' school, and the first Lithuanian film company – Lietfilm, in 1927 Lithuanian Union of Film Artists was established, 1928 was marked by public outrage against movie theatres showing Polish film production - several theatres were vandalized, first sound films were screened in 1929, first periodical magazine for cinema - Kino naujienos (Cinema news) was published in 1931, the same year, the first (and the only...) interwar Lithuanian feature film *Onytė ir Jonukas* ("Onytė and Jonukas") was premiered. These are just the few examples, though, frankly, some of these initiatives were very short-lived and of doubtful intentions. For example, the first film actors' school was, probably, established with an intention to make some quick money from aspiring actors, the school was closed just after a year by the Lithuanian Department of Education. The Lithuanian Union of Film Artists established in 1927 had only around 40 members, the only group "trained" by the already closed film actors' school, most of these actors were never seen on the big screen [Mikalauskas 1999]. No wonder why the new cinema craze was met with some reservation from some newspapers: "By the end of 1926 there started to appear, one after another, like mushrooms after the rain, various film-art schools and film-production companies. This is, of course, no surprise. After all, we had, in our times, tried making marmalade, had a monopoly for linen, we tried exploiting the moors, made elevators and started various other enterprises. So why shouldn't we try our luck in filmmaking?" [Gejot 1927]. The later initiatives were of no big success either – the first specialized cinema magazine lasted only for two years, and there had never been any other magazine like it, the first feature film Onytė ir Jonukas, was a very amateurish work, and a financial failure for the authors. But regardless of that, these initiatives showed the growing public interest in Lithuanian filmmaking.

By early 1930s regime officials also understood the importance of film. In 1932 Lithuanian policemen were being informed that cinema was here to stay and stay strong: "A few years ago, nobody even dared to imagine that cinema would make such an enormous progress as we see it today. It is still hard to foresee the future of cinema, but one thing is clear: it will progress even more, great future awaits it" [Aleknavičius 1932]. In 1933 the first Lithuanian film censor Jurgis Bielinis pointed out the propagandistic importance of Lithuanian newsreels:

"Episodes from our nation's workers-veterans life, after some time, gain a great deal of importance – they are a vivid example of our nation's physical and spiritual renaissance <...> for our young generation it is the most picturesque tool of patriotic education" [Bielinis 1933].

In view of the growing interest in cinema, it is not surprising, that the most influential cinema laws of interwar Lithuania, were released in early 1930s, under Antanas Smetona's regime. These are:

- 1. Film censorship law, issued in July 1932. In one form or another, film censorship was active in Lithuanian already from early 1920s. But till 1932 it was chaotic, sporadic and done by different Lithuanian regional officials. The preparation of the new cinema censorship law began already in late 1920s. The 1932 law created a centralized film censorship institution, where all films to be shown in Lithuania were certified by the censors. Film import law was also changed, so even the autonomous Lithuanian region of Klaipėda could not escape the film censorship from the capital city of Kaunas [Alesika 1938]. For the first time in Lithuania the film censorship became centralized, mandatory and the same for the entire country. The film censorship was the only type of censorship in Smetona's Lithuania implemented on the legislative level, by president and prime minister signing a law. Though, obviously, there were different kinds of censorship, like press or theatre censorship, but there never was, for example, the press censorship law [Vaišnys 1998].
- 2. Newsreels law, issued in August 1932. The idea of compulsory Lithuanian newsreels screening before every feature film programme, was expressed in the press as early as 1924 [Ruseckas 1924], but this idea was met with strong opposition from movie theatre owners and filmmakers. So the idea was realized only after 8 years. The Newsreels law of August 1932 declared that the screening of a Lithuanian newsreel, at least 120 metres in length, is obligatory before every feature film screening in Lithuania. The Lithuanian newsreel was not to become outdated; it had to be changed together with the film programme (usually once every week). The law significantly boosted the small Lithuanian newsreel industry, by mid 1930s, 45–50 newsreels were made every year. But the newsreels still had their flaws. Already by the end of 1932, the press argued that Lithuanian newsreel industry was in a danger of being monopolized and that it couldn't be allowed [Ar gali būti... 1932]. So, of course, it was...
- 3. Film concession law, issued in April 1935. By this law, the monopoly of newsreel production in Lithuania, for a period of 5 years, was granted to Jurgis Linartas, and old acquaintance of Antanas Smetona. The reasons given for the need of monopoly were: Lithuanian newsreel makers were too disorganized, there was too much of the unhealthy competition among them, newsreels were technically

and artistically old-fashioned. All of these reasons were, at least to the largest extent, true. But as we'll see later, the monopoly did not resolve the problems.

As we can see, the main Lithuania cinema laws of the 1930s were of restrictive nature.

Just as in the neighbouring USSR in mid-1920s [Kenez 2001], the government wanted to both profit from the film industry, and use it as a means of propaganda without investing in it too much money. The newly created Lithuania's film censorship institution not only sustained itself from film censorship fees, but also made a nice profit. Only 1/3 of the income from censorship was needed to sustain the institution [Mikalauskas 1999]. The high taxes on cinema theatres and tickets were an object of debate throughout all the interwar period. Government gave almost no financial support for the cinema industry. Antanas Smetona preferred theatre to cinema, for example, the budget of State theatre in 1931 was bigger than that of the Lithuania Foreign Office [Mačiulis 2005]. It is also quite revealing that both Antanas Smetona and Jurgis Linartas used to act in amateur theatre plays in their younger days. Of course, it was not only the government that wanted to profit from cinema. After the declaration of Newsreels law in 1932 movie theatres tried to save money by acquiring the newsreels as cheap as possible, and after 1935 monopoly was declared, Jurgis Linartas was often accused of profiteering from it (in late 1920s - early 1930s Jurgis Linartas was in court twice, for financial scheming, both times he managed to escape from a longer sentence, though these cases had nothing to do with cinema) - cheaply making bad newsreels and selling them for high price to the theatres. Theatres had to show these newsreels, as that was demanded by law, and only monopoly holder could provide the newsreels.

Antanas Smetona's regime wanted to exploit the movies not only financially, but also ideologically. Again – the cheapest way possible – through censorship. As Philip M. Taylor notices "...censorship is the essential counterpart to propaganda. They are different sides of the same coin: the manipulation of opinion. The selective processes by which some information is disseminated and some held back is a problem facing all communicators, but where censorship operates – whether it be institutionalized or self-censorship – one needs to recognize how close one is sailing into the wind of propaganda. This is particularly true if the deliberate withholding of certain information is designed to benefit those who control the flow of information" [Taylor 2003]. Antanas Smetona's regime wanted to project the image of ideal Lithuania: a modern Lithuania in a patriotic robe – a growing, modern country with strong leadership and long-lasting patriotic agrarian culture. But without control of information this image was impossible to reach. There was no centralized propaganda institution in Lithuania. And some of the various filmmakers' newsreels just couldn't fit into Smetona's image of the country. For

example, newsreels maker F. Dunayev made one of the first longer Lithuanian newsreels in 1927, with the intention of selling his work for American Lithuanians. In Lithuanian press this newsreel was criticized for showing Lithuanian girls, not looking as they should look in the film: "But the "most beautiful" impression was left by images of "Lithuanian girls" who wish to correspond with American Lithuanians. Firstly, it seems that none of these girls appeared in national costumes. Secondly, with no insult to girls intended, it should be emphasized that, without a few exceptions, we saw on the screen only strange mannequins with their strange movements, which have nothing in common with Lithuanian type of girls. If the intention, of this strange "exhibition" was to make audience laugh, then it worked perfectly... But in this case, the object of humour is less than well selected. The same newsreel was also criticized for wrongly depicting Lithuanian sportsmen: Way worse is depiction of our sportsmen. You watch and wonder – are images like these intentionally selected... Only losses are shown. And what losses! <...> There are no images from our winning games (for example, Tallinn – Kaunas). I don't know what impression that will leave on our American Lithuanians", critical opinion was expressed also for various other "bad" portrayals of Lithuania [Mates 1927]. The film censorship law of 1932 had to put a stop for newsreel depictions of the kind. And, more or less, it did. For example, all the newsreel parts that could hint to existence of any kind of poverty in Lithuania were deleted. These included: full newsreels story Samogitia [western region of Lithuania - A.D.]. "Types of beggars" banned in 1933, an "image of a shabby house" cut from other newsreel story of 1935, or, even, "the scene showing the poorly dressed boy among the ice skaters" was deleted from one of the newsreel stories of 1939. By censoring images like that, Antanas Smetona's regime not only created a new ideal image of Lithuania, but also tried to legislate and protect their monopoly of power. The better the Lithuania looks, the better and fairer the regime is. The self-interest of regime is highly visible in their censorship of foreign newsreel productions. Any newsreel subjects that depicted the revolt against government or president were not allowed to be screened. These included the overthrow of Cuban president Gerardo Machado in 1933, or various workers' strikes in USA, so common after the economic crisis of 1929. Also, no government election by voting could be showed, probably, because there were no such elections in Lithuania after 1926, and it seemed too risky to remind the public about that.

But in their creation of ideal Lithuanian image on film, the government did not stand alone. Actually, a lot of filmmakers were eager to help the government. Eager to make propaganda films, for the greater glory of Lithuania. In the first Lithuanian convention of sound films filmmakers, famous Lithuanian film enthusiast and promoter (though he never made a film...) Juozas Vaičkus said that:

"tonfilms [sound films – A.D.] flooded the world and made a great deal of rivalry to other art forms. That's how it is, and we must go with it, we must go with the life. Through movies you can make your country citizens as your nation wants them to be. United States of America has fully reached this goal – it changed its citizens to patriots. They see their president on screen and they applaud him, meet him with loud ovations. We must consolidate our nation into a one big family, that's why we have to take interest in making Lithuanian films – so we could express our nation's spirit" [Ar turėsim... 1932]. These thoughts were confirmed, by one of the leading interwar Lithuanian newsreels maker Stasys Vainalavičius; in the interview for the film Savo praeities beieškant [dir. Algirdas Tarvydas 2000] he remembered that while making newsreels in interwar Lithuania: "We strived to show the beauty, the beautiful Lithuania. Its lakes and forests, valleys and schools. Its beautiful youth. Everything. We wanted to show that Lithuania is going forward, that there is no place as good, as beautiful as Lithuania" [Savo praeities beieškant [film] 2000]. Of course, there was always censorship, just in case the filmmaker would have decided that there is a place better and more beautiful than Lithuania. Actually, the government officials have learned this hard-way. Back in 1928 Lithuanian army general staff ordered to make a full-length feature film about Lithuanian army. The comedy film should have depicted how Lithuanian army could make a decent soldier even from the biggest loser. Army, Lithuanian village traditions, modern cities and even president Smetona was to be filmed. But the ultimate result was unsatisfactory - the film was not allowed to be shown publicly by the army officials themselves. One of the main reasons for the ban - Lithuania looked too poor [N [alias] 1935]. The director of the film was soon to become newsreel monopoly holder, Jurgis Linartas. Probably Linartas learned from his mistake, the censorship of Lithuanian newsreels in the second half of the 1930s was very rare. Most of the newsreels were banned motivating by their low technical quality, and not their "improper" content.

As noted by early Lithuanian posters researcher Juozas Galkus, the patriotic-propaganda posters, ordered by military in the 1920s–1930s were usually of low artistic quality, even when they were painted by the talented Lithuanian painters. The painters treated these assignments as an opportunity for the quick and easy profit, they also had a very limited amount of control over their work. Most of these posters were full of exaggerated patriotic symbols, faces of Lithuanian grand duke Vytautas and Antanas Smetona (Antanas Smetona used the image of the most popular Lithuanian medieval ruler, to legitimize his own rule and policies), and patriotic catchwords. As opposed to the language of metaphors, unexpected parables and even elements of absurd, so common in the poster genre [Galkus 1997]. The posters ordered by military were uninspiring but their content was safe

both for their authors and contractors. The same could be said about Lithuanian newsreels of the 1930s. After the centralization of censorship of Lithuanian newsreels, most of the newsreel subjects were of the safe and overtly patriotic themes. The bigger patriotic victories, like the return of Vilnius to Lithuania in October 1939, could be the only subject shown in Lithuanian newsreels for more than a month, while the sad losses, like the annexation of Klaipėda region by Nazi Germany in March 1939 was not mentioned at all (the only time this subject was touched in a short newsreel depiction of Easter dinner table prepared for the refugees of Lithuania in one of Kaunas schools, all the depictions of Klaipėda annexation were censored from foreign newsreels). The most popular newsreel themes were:

- a) Official events: parades, military events, Smetona visiting places etc.
 Usually included: lots of officials, speech depictions, girls in national
 costumes, some kind of military activity (at least a military orchestra);
- b) Modernization: growing cities, new buildings, factories, technology;
- c) Agrarian Lithuania: strong national village character, Lithuania as a growing agrarian power, village traditions meet modern technology, more girls in national costumes;
- d) Patriotic youth: right-wing youth organizations in support of Antanas Smetona and *tautininkai* regime. Usually included lots of marching, flag waving, for some organizations *saluto romano*;
- e) Sporting events;
- f) Lithuanian nature, sea, resorts. These parts were usually accompanied by words "It's beautiful in our Lithuania...";
- g) Short patriotic movie posters. Usually some slogans and text urging viewers to join for one or another patriotic initiative, like: "Through donations and Lithuanian determination we have won the independence. Through consciousness and donations for Weapons fund we must save this independence. For this reason, our forefather decided to raise the Lithuanian honor under the command of Grand Duke Vytautas. Lithuanian honor and the future of nation its donations for the Weapons fund" [from *Lithuanian sound newsreel* no.153, 1938].

But there were also possibilities for alternative images of Lithuania, for alternative subjects of newsreels. "According to them [foreign Lithuanian audiences – A.D.] almost all filmmakers who filmed in Lithuanian, and later showed these images abroad, showed them impassable roads with bogged down carriages or cars; saggy, shabby houses; legless people; types of beggars or drunks; showed them how those people are – in rags, terrible alcoholics; showed them also various other images that depicted only lowlifes, various perversions, and all the other shortcomings

that are still left in our country from older times. These images compiled in an hour-long film caused horror, nausea and outrage for profanation of Lithuania. <...> These images were used by various agitators in their slander campaigns, as an example of what is wrong in that country where "democratic order must be restored"" [Obuolėnas, 1938]. This angry rant was directed against Lithuanian emigrant filmmakers, who could come to Lithuania, shoot whatever they liked, and later show their films abroad - all without interference from Lithuanian censorship. As we could have already seen, scenes like "shabby houses" or "types of beggars" were deleted from newsreels presented to Lithuanian censorship. Though the author of aforementioned article is, probably, exaggerating the "evil" deeds of emigrant filmmakers, yet there were some emigrant newsreels that, probably, wouldn't be allowed by Lithuanian censorship. For example, filmmaker Jonas Kazimieras Milius journey from the USA to Lithuania was funded by American Lithuanian Federation of Roman Catholics, the author filmed all three presidents of Lithuania instead of one "leader of the nation", and showed various political catholic leaders who, from 1927, were in opposition to Antanas Smetona's regime [Mikalauskas 1999]. On the other hand, there were plenty of émigré filmmakers, who reinforced the ideal image of Lithuania. Their films were shown, on some occasions, in Lithuanian theatres, and were received favourably by the press. A perfect example of filmmakers like these could be brothers Motūzai from the USA. Even in their 1963 film The Tragedy of Lithuania they presented the interwar footage of the lavish summerhouse in Nida as a typical Lithuanian fisherman house. Actually it was a famous summerhouse designed by architect N. Reissman for the Nobel prize winner in literature Thomas Mann. A house that was far too expensive for any typical Lithuanian fisherman at that time.

The émigré newsreels were not the main problem for the government, the local newsreels were. Without the financial aid from the government, in the hands of shady monopoly holder, the Lithuanian newsreels did not satisfy the public. There were some compliments, but the general attitude towards the quality of Lithuanian newsreels was hostile. Newsreels were accused of being boring and repetitious, of technical and artistic backwardness, and of always being late. For example, it was impossible to convince the public about the modernization of Lithuania through newsreels. Yes, because of censorship and understanding of filmmakers, the newsreels subjects were fit for this task, but the task was ruined by poorly audible soundtrack and mediocre image quality. The deficiencies of Lithuanian newsreels became more interesting to the public than the newsreels themselves: "A lot of laughter is caused by the screening of Lithuanian newsreel. In this newsreel we see as Kaunas municipality is building a new garage in Šančiai, a garage that's already in ruins. During the screening of this newsreel the whole

theatre is laughing. It's a rare occurrence, when the audience greets Lithuanian newsreel with such a good mood" [Kauno kinuose 1937]. When in 1935 Jurgis Linartas declared that he would be showing Lithuanian newsreels in international exhibition of film and photography in Paris, this declaration was met with a backlash from public. "The consent to participate in the aforementioned exhibition is more than immodest. Till now we only had worthless, or, on the best occasions, barely tolerable newsreel productions <...> if for 3 years, up till today, we couldn't watch Lithuanian newsreels without nausea, should we show this kind of films abroad? <...> This kind of participation of our film "production" abroad, would be a great promotion for us, just with unpleasant results..." [av [alias] 1935]. It must be noticed, that here the effect of censored, local newsreels is described in quite similar terms to the effect of "purposefully evil" émigré newsreels, described in K. Obuolènas quote previously, both types of newsreels create "nausea" in the audience.

Lithuanian newsreels that should have represented the ideal, dreamlike, image of the country for the whole world became an object of shame, an image of the country that shouldn't be shown anywhere. It was not hard for Antanas Smetona's regime to control the content of the newsreels, to reject all the themes and images that could oppose the ideal image of modernising country under strong and wise leadership. This was even profitable. But it was hard to make this content look true. The regime that more or less understood the importance of cinema as propaganda medium, put all its efforts to controlling this content, but it forgot that the form maters too. Without the support for film industry, education of filmmakers, protection of film industry from financial mishandling the image of ideal cinema Lithuania just couldn't be reached.

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