LATVIAN AMATEUR DOCUMENTARY FILM, 1970s–1980s: FAMILY, COMMUNITY, TRAVEL, AND POLITICS IN THE FILMS OF ULDIS LAPIŅŠ, INGVARS LEITIS, AND ZIGURDS VIDIŅŠ

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Abstract

In the 1950s, amateur filmmaking had become a well-established feature of everyday life in the Soviets Union. However, in contrast to the state film industry, no centralized governmental body existed to control amateur filmmakers. As a result, state ideology was not always the primary motivation for making amateur films. The works that dared to experiment invariably emerged from the periphery, and the Latvian SSR became one of the citadels of the Soviet amateur film movement. Drawing upon the amateur film collection held at the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents, this paper will identify and analyse the various functions that amateur documentary filmmaking performed beyond its ostensible mission of transmitting Soviet ideology, and examine its role in creating alternative political, social, and cultural meanings, and prospects for national identity development and heritage preservation. It will primarily focus on the documentaries by Uldis Lapiņš, Zigurds Vidiņš, and Ingvars Leitis made in the 1970 and the 1980s, and look at how they used everyday matters – such as family, community, and travel – to express artistically as well as to address broader social and political issues of life in the post-war Soviet society.

Keywords: *amateur film, home movie, Soviet Union, Latvia, documentary.*

The term *amateur* usually evokes two associations when applied to film. The first can be identified as non-narrative point-and-shoot scenes of family get-togethers, children, and pets, or what is most commonly known as a *home movie*. Apart from this, the term *amateur* is often associated with the examples of experimental cinema that challenge professional filmmaking and its infrastructure, in

view of the fact that the term was often used by experimental film practitioners to theorize their work [Deren 1965; Mekas 1972]. This duality has also been perpetuated in the initial academic discourse on amateur cinema, for instance, in the early writings of Patricia Zimmermann, that tended to conceptualize amateur filmmaking practices as either domestic or experimental, implying that these two are also mutually exclusive [Zimmermann 1995].

Such a theoretical framework becomes especially problematic when examining the amateur film tradition in the so-called Eastern Bloc. In fact, most of amateur films produced in various countries under Soviet-style socialism were made about diverse subjects outside the concern of the domestic sphere or the avant-garde. These films covered a wide range of topics, taking place in a variety of settings, and focusing on various people and events. Moreover, the amateur fiction films often drew on recognizable genres of mainstream professional cinema, such as drama, comedy, and fantasy, while non-fiction films developed more according to the documentary film tradition. Overall, they seem to be heavily inspired by mainstream cinematic language, thus their categorization as either domestic or experimental is simply invalid.

Maria Vinogradova is the first scholar to emphasize the difference between amateur filmmaking cultures in the socialist states and in the West in her study of the state-sponsored amateur film clubs in the post-Second World War Soviet Union. In her work, Vinogradova demonstrates that amateur filmmaking culture in the Soviet Union was the result of a state-sponsored non-professional filmmaking network, within which the creative use of film was promoted, technical experiments were encouraged, training was provided, and a variety of lectures, seminars, and amateur film festivals was organized [Vinogradova 2010; 2012]. Indeed, in the socialist states, and the Latvian SSR is no exception, it was common for amateur filmmakers to be a member of an amateur filmmaking club, a great number of which started to appear in the late 1950s, and which were supported through the system of professional unions. Thus, when analysing amateur filmmaking in the context of the Soviet Union, we have to bear in mind that socialist ideology was pushing amateur filmmaking out of the home and trying to encourage its social uses. At the same time, through various control mechanisms that were an inevitable component of state funding, its use for oppositional purposes was also limited. However, since amateur cinema in the Soviet Union had minimal distribution, no centralized governmental body existed to control and censor the output of amateur filmmaking clubs, in contrast to the professional film industry. All these factors created an ambivalent production and exhibition space situated between the private and public spheres, which in turn largely shaped amateur filmmaking practice in the socialist countries.

As pointed out by James Moran, this limiting dual understanding of amateur filmmaking – home movie versus experimental film – springs from "theorizing the mode of amateur practice as a genre, rather than as an economic relation" [Moran 2002: 64]. Moran is inspired by Michael Renov's essay *Toward a Poetics of Documentary*, in which the author conceptualizes documentary film as a mode of filmmaking and identifies and describes several functions that this mode can perform [Renov 1993]. By analogy, Moran proposes to view amateur filmmaking as "a mode (or modes) of practice", and claims that, by doing so, we may discover "common underlying cultural functions" that most, if not all, amateur films perform in one way or another, independent of their aesthetics, techniques, or subject matters [Moran 2002: 65–66]. That is, in order to construct a utilitarian taxonomy of amateur filmmaking practice and move away from the domestic versus experimental framework, we have to consider external factors, such as the intentions of its practitioners and the socio-historical contexts of their production, rather than examining the internal aspects of amateur film's textual signifiers [Ibid.].

Basing our analysis on Moran's ideas, we will assume that amateur film is not a genre with common themes, aesthetics, and techniques, but rather a production mode conditioned by a number of factors, used with various intentions, and fulfilling a number of functions. The question here is how was this production mode shaped by the socialist system? How do we make sense of the amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Union in general and in the Latvian SSR in particular, where economy, artistic expressions, and even certain aspects of private life such as leisure were to a greater or lesser extent controlled by the state?

Conditioning factors

The nature of the post-war Soviet system shaped amateur filmmaking culture in the Soviet Union, including Latvia, in certain ways. The late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed the maturing of socialism that was manifested through development, professionalization, and centralization of all industries, including the film industry; as a result, professional filmmaking became available to relatively few. At the same time, technological developments in lightweight and amateur film equipment all over the world, including the Soviet Union, stimulated the appearance of numerous individual amateur filmmakers. This created a parallel filmmaking culture, outside the bounds of professional cinema and economic relations, and therefore outside the mass distribution network and the tight grip of the censorship.

In addition to this, the processes of de-Stalinization largely affected everyday life and leisure patterns of Soviet citizens. Many of Khrushchev's policies of the

late 1950s and early 1960s were targeted at making leisure more productive and social, which among other things led to the creation of the network of community-organized creativity clubs, or "*kruzhki samodeitelnosti*" [White 1990: 36–39]. Among various creativity clubs, amateur film studios started to appear on the premises of factories, collective farms, academies, and the so-called Houses, or Palaces, of Culture. For instance, in Latvia, the first amateur film studio was created in 1955 on the premises of the Palace of Culture of the State Electrotechnical Factory (*Valsts Elektrotehnikas Fabrika*, VEF) [Järvine 2005: 476]. Professional unions usually funded these studios; therefore, many individual amateur filmmakers were encouraged to join them to have access to expensive equipment and film stock, as well as to the environment of like-minded people, and platform for exhibiting one's work and learning from fellow amateurs.

These social, political, cultural, and economic factors shaped the functions that amateur filmmaking performed in the USSR. Thus, although sanctioned by the state, amateur filmmaking enjoyed a certain degree of creative and ideological freedom. As a result, state ideology and socialist-realist aesthetics were not always the primary motivation for making amateur films, especially in the case of the annexed states, like Latvia, where the regime never had the same degree of control.

The thematic variations of amateur films made in Latvia during the Soviet period are diverse. The majority of these films are documentaries on everyday topics that are quite neutral and ideologically correct: family, work, community, and travel. However, as suggested by Moran, we shall conceive of amateur film as a mode of practice, used with various intentions, and fulfilling certain functions, rather than as a genre. Elaborating upon Moran's and Renov's ideas cited above, and based upon my research of Latvian amateur films at the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents (*Latvijas Valsts Kinofotofonodokumentu Arhīvs*, LVKFFDA), I have identified several modal functions that Soviet Latvian amateur films exhibit, beyond their alleged mission of transmitting Soviet ideology. Below I would like to analyse three case studies that demonstrate some of these modal functions at work.

The art of the home movie: the case of Uldis Lapiņš' family films

When family films first became the subject of academic study, there was a tendency to regard them as documents that mainly served a social function, having little artistic motivation and commitment to filmmaking conventions. This approach is best exemplified by the work of Richard Chalfen, who coined the term *cinéma naïveté* to describe the naivety of the film language of family films [Chalfen 1987: 49]. However, as our knowledge of home-moviemaking has grown, and more examples of family films have been discovered, scholars have started to take a

closer look at family films that do not correspond with the formulation of *cinéma naïveté,* that are clearly driven by aesthetic ambitions, and that, rather than serving the function of an aide-mémoire, are committed to telling a story [Shand 2015; Roepke 2013].

The family films of Uldis Lapiņš are a good example of this home-moviemaking strand – they have little in common with the non-narrative footage of the everyday family life, and might be described as artful documentaries about the author's family, in which he expands moments captured in private film recordings into planned poetic narratives. Lapiņš undoubtedly saw the documentation of his family's life as an opportunity for artistic expression – his films are driven by aesthetic ambition as much as the desire to record and preserve fragments of his family's history.

In the post-war period, Lapiņš worked as a chief of production department of fishermen collective farm *1. Maijs* in the harbour town of Mērsrags, in the district of Talsi. He was the head of the *1. Maijs* amateur film studio, and, from the late 1950s to his death in 2011, made a large number of amateur films on very diverse topics, and dedicated several films to his family.

Lapiņš' *Lāčupīte* ("River Lāčupīte") is a family film that the author completed in 1978; it is essentially a story about Lapiņš' children, Andris and Gita, growing up. The concept behind this family film is quite extraordinary, as it is edited using the footage filmed over three decades. *Lāčupīte* starts with grown-up Andris and Gita coming to spend a day on the river bank in the present day, as suggested by the title *1978*. This is followed by the title *1968,* and we see Andris and Gita, ten years younger, having fun on the same river bank. The last instalment of the film is dated *1958,* in which little Andris is witnessed playing alone on the same riverbank and fishing (probably alluding to his father's profession); the viewer assumes that Gita is not yet born. The way this film is executed is undoubtedly a sign of thorough planning on the part of the filmmaker. Furthermore, we are also invited to assume that Lapiņš most probably directed his children in the 1978 segment for the purpose of the creation of poetic effect, as in the very beginning of the film we see a grown-up Gita sliding down the sand dune, mimicking the playful activities that Lapiņš shot in 1968, when she was a child. The poetic narrative of Lāčupīte is adorned with an epilogue quoting the poem by Latvian poetess Aspazija, called *Ilgu zeme* ("The land of longing", 1910):

> *...lai ietu caur visu pasauli,*
> *Tu nerasi vairs to zemīti.*
> [...travelling across the whole world,
> you will no longer find that little land.]

Figure 1. Shots from Uldis Lapiņš' film *Lāčupīte* (1958–78), Latvijas Valsts kinofotofonodokumentu arhīvs

The poem was written by Aspazija during exile in Switzerland; in the context of Lapiņš' film (he lived most of his life in Latvia), the *land of longing* can be interpreted as his family's past.

Lāčupīte and other Lapiņš's family films – *Vēstule* ("Letter", 1972), *Ak, vasariņa, mīļa vasariņa* ("Oh, summer, lovely summer", year unknown), *Kad pagātne un nākotne tiekas* ("When past and present meet", 1985) – exhibit a high level of sophistication of storytelling. Through the portrayal of family relationships, they tend to explore broader philosophical themes – the beauty of nature, the passing of time and nostalgia, the strength of family ties and the persistence of family rituals, and go well beyond performing the social function described by Chalfen. For this reason, Lapiņš may be studied as an example of an amateur *auteur* – that is, as a director who exhibits stylistic and thematic continuity.

Seeing *between the lines* of Zigurds Vidiņš' community film *Pa mūsmājas logu* ("Through the Window of Our House", 1984)

Zigurds Vidiņš (born 1943) is better known for his professional filmmaking career in the post-Soviet period, as well as for his work with renowned Latvian documentary filmmaker Juris Podnieks. However, Vidiņš started his filmmaking career as an amateur in the 1970s, and worked at the People's Amateur Film Studio of the Academy of Sciences (*Zinātņu akadēmijas tautas kinostudija*, ZA TKS). Here I would like to examine his film *Pa mūsmājas logu* ("Through the Window of Our House", 1984).

As noted by Nicholson, amateur films showing local people and places are a staple of amateur filmmaking everywhere, because for an amateur filmmaker turning the camera to the world around him or her is a logical next step after recording his or her family. Community films in the context of amateur cinema focus on subjects that might be of little interest to the professional filmmakers, but are significant in the sense of preserving and reclaiming the memories and experiences of a given locality [Nicholson 2012: 118]. In the context of the Soviet amateur cinema, community amateur films often fit within the socialist ideological framework (or are at least politically neutral), and document local history, sports events, public celebrations, and the lives of local communities in general. However, in the context of Soviet Latvia, many amateur community films were born out of the conscious or subconscious desire to preserve certain aspects of the endangered national identity, as well as from the desire to interrogate the status of Latvia within the Soviet Union. "Through the Window of Our House" is a curious instance of implicit critique of the Soviet regime in Latvia, and at the same time a fascinating insight into the history and the present day of the Vērmane's Garden (*Vērmanes dārzs*), the oldest public garden in Riga.

The first several minutes of the film are dedicated to the garden's early history in the 1800s. However, the neutral tone of this historical insight changes as the film cuts to a newspaper clip which features a short article about the renaming of Vērmane's Garden as Kirov's park, and Kirov's bust being erected there, thus hinting at the beginning of the Soviet occupation. This is followed by an interview with a park visitor: she is critical of the way the park is managed currently, and mentions the lack of proper playgrounds for children – for example, the sandbox in the park is too small and dirty. Her interview is followed by an interview with Ēžens Bokanovs, who introduces himself to the camera as Park and Gardens, Renovation and Construction chief, stammering through his long title. He starts by claiming that the sand in the sandboxes is changed regularly and the park is cared for very well; he then contradicts himself by making a series of excuses for the poor condition of the park, and in the end blames everything on the

weather. Contrasting these two interviews is a curious way of commenting on the incompetence of the local authorities, and by extension the Soviet regime in Latvia, with the critical stance of the author remaining unobtrusive.

This sequence is followed by an interview with two old-time park visitors. One interviewee remembers: "There was a Lenin's... I mean Stalin's bust erected behind the fountains there. And then some year they removed it." The other interviewee adds: "He was already denounced then..." As they continue their conversation, we see the common photo of Stalin and Kirov in the newspaper, and thus make a mental connection that Kirov's bust probably took the place of Stalin's in the late 1950s, as a result of de-Stalinization. This sequence can be interpreted as a commentary on the Latvian people being a silent witness to the Soviet usurpation, watching one foreign cult personality replace the other (the interviewee's confusion over whose bust it was becomes quite significant in this connection).

The film finishes with footage of the park in winter, and we see a frontal shot of the Nativity of Christ Cathedral (*Kristus Piedzimšanas Pareizticīgo Katedrāle*), one of the majestic edifices that can be seen from inside the park. The Cathedral shot and the views of the park in snow suggest the holy time of Christmas, a very

Figure 2. Shot from Zigurds Vidiņš' film *Pa mūsmājas logu* (1984), Latvijas Valsts kinofotofonodokumentu arhīvs

significant period in Latvian Lutheran culture. However, this sequence is interrupted with the blasting sound of the military orchestra playing on the park's open stage as part of the New Year celebrations, the only winter holiday accepted in Soviet culture. At this point it becomes noticeable that Vidiņš is building the argument of his film through a number of contrasts on aural and visual levels: honest stories of the park visitors are contrasted with the officious language used by Bokanovs, the quiet Christmas – with military orchestra.

The authorial voice in this film is subdued. However, it can be seen to be critical, especially in view of Vidiņš' personal life and the other amateur and professional films he made. Vidiņš is known as a prominent environmental activist, and the issue of the environment became the area of "the first sustained expressions of dissatisfaction with the status quo", and especially in Latvia tended to be tightly linked to the national liberation movement of the late 1980s [Misiunas and Taagepera 1993: 304–305]. This motive is clearly present in *Pa mūsmājas logu*, and is even more pronounced in other Vidiņš' films, both amateur and professional.

Politically subversive ethnography: Ingvars Leitis' documentaries about Latvian communities in Siberia

Ingvars Leitis joined the amateur film club of Riga Radio Factory (*Rīgas Radio rūpnīca*, RRR) without specific interest in the art of filmmaking, but with the intention of filming the communities of Latvian peasants living in Siberia. These communities were formed in the mid-nineteenth century and consisted of Latvian peasants who went to Siberia in search of land, as well as the *undesirables* deported by the Tsarist authorities [Birzulis 1999]. Leitis describes his case in the following way:

> "[My filmmaking experience] was limited to a very narrow field: documenting lives and histories of Latvians in Siberia. I took a camera in my hands for the first time in 1975 with this specific purpose; I wanted to show what I was discovering in Siberia to people in Latvia. I was not interested in the amateur film movement for any other reasons" (my translation – author).[1]

In 1975, Leitis organised and undertook a 13,000 km cycling trip from Riga to Vladivostok. On paper, he was undertaking an ethnographic study, but the underlying intention of his project was to visit and document fifty Latvian villages in Siberia. *Populārzinātniska lekcija par kādu vēstures tēmu* ("Popular Scientific Lecture on a Historical Subject", 1975–1978) is Leitis' first film on this topic. He attempted to edit and show this film in the 1970s, when the footage was shot.

[1] Ingvars Leitis, email to the author, 15 November 2015.

However, the copy of the finished film was confiscated by the KGB [Briedis and Leitis 2016: 175]. Only in 1986, with the onset of *perestroika* and *glasnost* was it finally possible to complete the film and show it sporadically. It was also the time when Leitis went to Siberia again, which resulted in more films on the same topic: *Ciemošanās Balajā* ("Visiting Balai", 1987), *Lejas Bulānas hronika* ("Chronicles of Lejas Bulāna", 1987), and *White Christmas – 2000* (1989).

Throughout *Popular Scientific Lecture on a Historical Subject* we hear Leitis' didactic voiceover, commenting, for instance, on the scarce use of the Latvian language in these communities. His commentary is of course full of disdain towards Soviet power, so the critical authorial stance is more vocal than in Vidiņš' film. However, at times Leitis, like Vidiņš in *Through the Window*, lets his subjects and the evidence speak for themselves. Mid-film we hear a number of interview segments he recorded during his trips, the most shocking being the interview with two women about the 1937 Stalin's purges. The women talk about their experiences of famine and the arrests of male family members. They are at first careful (one interviewee hesitantly starts by saying "If I'm allowed to say this..."), but then provide gruesome details of the Great Terror in Siberian Latvian communities, such as "They were not taking people without someone telling on them. People were betraying their own"; "When my husband was taken, I was left alone with

Figure 3. Shot from Ingvars Leitis' film *Populārzinātniska lekcija par kādu vēstures tēmu* (1975–78), author's private document archive

five little children", and "They only took fathers and husbands – all innocent, they didn't hurt a fly, never said a word against the government". As we hear these heart-breaking testimonies, we see a travelling close-up through a list of male names, the ones we assume are the repressed men the interviewees are talking about. This sort of openness about Stalin's atrocities was unthinkable in the mid-1970s, when Leitis conceived of this film, but even in the second half of the 1980s, when the film was finally shown, this treatment of the issue can be still seen as daring.

During his trips to Siberia, Leitis also collected a lot of folklore of Siberian Latvian communities, primarily songs. Some of them had never been heard in Latvia and can be assumed to have originated within those communities. Many of these songs were moulded by Latvian traditions as much as by the recent history of Siberian Latvians [Ibid.: 103–104]. The songs featured in the film include *Ne gadiņu nedzīvoju, sola kungi karā dot...* ("I haven't lived there a single year, and the lords send me to war..."), *Aizjāja latviets pa pasauli tālu...* ("The Latvian rode away into the far world..."), and *Uz Sibīrij man jāaiziet* ("To Siberia I must go") cited here in full:

Man kājas rokas saslēgtas
Es guļu cietumā
No galvas man bij nodzīti
Pus mati dzeltainie.

Uz Sibīrij man jāaiziet,
Kur augsti kalni ir,
Tur būs man ogles jāsijā
Līdz pašai miršanai.

Uz Sibīrij man jāaiziet,
Kur aukstie vēji pūš,
Tur izzudīs un pazudīs
Mans vārds no dzimtenes.

[My arms and legs are tied,
I sleep in prison.
My blonde hair
Has faded on my head.

To Siberia I must go,
Where high mountains are,
There I will be sifting coal
Until the very moment I die.

To Siberia I must go,
Where cold winds blow,
There will fade and disappear
My name from my homeland.]

In the context of the Soviet occupation of Latvia, the songs collected and recorded by Leitis can be seen as yet another element in this film, one that balances the political and the ethnographic. Leitis openly admits the plurality of functions performed by his films and is quite open about how he used the premise of an ethnographic study to disguise the act of political resistance. It becomes evident in Leitis' recollection in his memoir of an episode when the KGB inquired about his film:

> "The Cheka *asked* to *take a look* at my film. [Before showing it to them] I managed to change the soundtrack for a different, self-censored one, without any anti-Soviet stuff, just pure ethnography" [Ibid.: 175] (my translation – author).

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of Leitis' films on late Soviet Latvian society; however, their theme and approach resonated well with the national revival movement, now labelled as the Third Awakening that started in the late 1980s and eventually led to the restoration of independence of Latvia in 1991. Leitis recalls in his memoir that his films about Latvians in Siberia were shown throughout Latvia at different events celebrating the Awakening [Ibid.: 176]. Leitis' interest in Latvian communities in Siberia also went beyond filmmaking: he was behind the creation of the Siberian Latvian Support Section at the Club of Environmental Protection (*Vides Aizsardzības Klubs*, VAK)[1], and was active participant in an educational mission targeted at Latvian Siberians that was launched amidst the heat of perestroika [Ibid.].

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As has been demonstrated, the functions that Latvian amateur documentary films performed stemmed in general from the traditions of documentary filmmaking practices – the desire to record, to promote, to analyse, and to interrogate – but were also largely shaped by their amateur status, as well as by Soviet social realities. By briefly examining these three films, we have seen that

[1] This can be seen as another instance of overlapping between the activism behind environmental protection and national revival, already mentioned in relation to Zigurds Vidiņš' work.

amateur filmmaking in Latvia during the Soviet period was at times a curious practice of using the state resources to produce a cultural product that was not necessarily in line with Soviet ideology. It could be creation of art documentary films about one's family, criticizing the Soviet regime through documenting a local park's history, or exposing Stalin's crimes in the framework of an ethnographic study. It has to be emphasized that these three case studies are not absolutely representative of the whole of the amateur filmmaking movement in Latvia. However, their existence testifies to a curious parallel filmmaking culture. In the context of the Soviet regime in Latvia, it served to preserve the personal, local, and national histories and identities, to interrogate and challenge contemporary Soviet social realities, and to artistically express in a freer way, outside the bounds of the professional, the official, and the prescribed.

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