

HISTORY IN THE FILMS OF JĀNIS STREIČS

Dr. hist. Vita Zelče

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Latvia

Riga, Latvia

Abstract

The creative biography of the film director Jānis Streičs includes 22 feature films, 13 of which are devoted to the present day and nine are about the past. From among historical films, one depicts Latvia at the turn of the 19th century, another focuses on the Russian Civil War, two deal with the inter-war period, three depict World War II, and two are about the 1940s. These films offer Streičs' views about the past, his own interpretation of the texts of history. At the same time, events, people, environments and life situations of the past are viewed from the present-day perspective, which includes issues and values from the present day within the space of the past.

This paper examines two films made by Jānis Streičs during the Soviet era, both of them focusing on Latvian history – “The Boys of Līvšala” (1969) and “Strange Passions” (1983), and both of them are set in 1946. The films are different because of the 14 years that passed between the production of the first one and the second one, but they differ even more by the way in which the director sends messages about the past, also displaying his relationship to history and regimes. “Strange Passions” is a challenging film in terms of the history of cinema and the Soviet occupation of Latvia, bringing up the question of whether such a film could have been produced and shown in cinemas and on television. The era that is reflected in the two films is part of Jānis Streičs' own biography. He was a child in 1946, and there was a great deal of tragedy caused by the Soviet regime, its cultivated violence, and the lack of value for human lives.

The paper reviews the history interpretation in these films, and the research is based on documents from the Riga Film Studios materials that are stored at the Latvian State Archives. The conclusion is that “The Boys of Līvšala” and “Strange Passions” provide brilliant evidence of the director's “magical realist” style. They

demonstrate his great skill in transforming the childhood and youth period of his generation into a part of Latvia's cultural memory.

Keywords: *film director Jānis Streičs, film "Līvsalas zēni" (The Boys of Līvsala), film "Svešās kaislības" (Strange Passions), history, cultural memory.*

The film director Jānis Streičs' creative biography includes 22 feature films. Thirteen of them are devoted to the *present time* representing the epoch when they were made, and nine to the *past*. One of his historical films represents Latvia at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, one is about the events during the Russian Civil war, but two films are devoted to the inter-war period while three films depict World War II, two of the films are set in the 1940s. In these films Jānis Streičs offers his vision of the past, one might say – his own historical text. At the same time the events taking place long time ago, people, environment and life situations of the past are presented from his present-day perspective which incorporates into the space of the past also present day topicalities and values.

All films by Jānis Streičs have been made in Latvia but during two different forms of political existence. He made 16 feature films in the non-democratic Latvia that had been deprived of its statehood and had been illegitimately incorporated into the Soviet Union but in Latvia that had regained its independence he made six films. Examining the films produced in Soviet Latvia it is important not only to know but also to understand the "written" and "unwritten" preconditions of the functioning of the national culture at the specific period. The space of the Soviet ideology and culture was variable; it had its topical issues, political and social campaigns, technological possibilities, diverse control practices and cultural policy. An essential role in it all was played also by the position of the communist party functionaries who had the power over the specific practice of implementation of certain ideological postulates. Undeniably, the film directors like all the other individuals working in creative sectors, had to know "rules of the game" in order to successfully function in the cultural sphere of the Soviet state. "The borderlines between the permissible and impermissible were defined by interaction between creative intellectuals and the power. Either of the two were represented by specific people whose understanding of culture, courage or cowardice, personal sympathies or antipathies defined what is permitted and what is forbidden," states the historian Daina Bleiere [Bleiere 2012: 102–103]. Jānis Streičs says that he reached "the peak of his fame" during the so-called stagnation times when "there was ice on the top but beneath it life was throbbing" and in order to work successfully one had to have the command of "diplomacy" of the times. It is the same in one's daily life – when it rains you must take an umbrella along and when it's cold one must put on

boots or a fur-coat. The film director admits that if one knows the opponent then one reckons with him and acts accordingly [LTV 2016].

The present article examines two films by Jānis Streičs devoted to history of Latvia and made in the Soviet period – “The Boys of Līvsala” (1969) and “Strange Passions” (1983). They tell us about the same time in Latvia – about the year 1946. The films are separated not only by 14 year period between their making, but even more by their mode of narrating the past, the author’s relations with history and power. The film “Strange Passions” casts a challenge not only to cinema but also to the history of Latvia under the Soviet occupation by posing the question: how such a film was allowed/could be made and screened in cinemas and on TV?

History and Cinema

Discussions in the academic circles about the impact of representations of history in media, especially in film and television, have been long-standing and they always arrive at ambiguous and even contradictory conclusions. Professional historians are frequently critically minded to feature films depicting historical events since they hold the opinion that the versions of history, spaces of the past and (re)constructions of characters presented in them differ from the truth accepted in science of history and/or offer simplifications or even falsifications of history [see: Landay 2001; Cannadine 2004; Hughes-Warrington 2007; Schwartz 2008]. Especially critical reproaches have been received by Hollywood historical blockbusters that are rebuked for “stealing” and primitive representation of the national histories [Puttnam 2004: 160].

People gain their knowledge and understanding about history from various sources – not only from history textbooks and academic publications but also from photographs, historical novels, newsreels and strip-cartoons, yet especially at present mainly from electronic media – by browsing internet. Insights and understanding of the world in which we live is like a kaleidoscope composed of very many small pieces that are organized and re-organized by our own experience, system of values and media narratives. Products of mass media industry link the personal experience of individuals whose experiential reality about the events of the past decreases as the events sink into more distant past becoming part of the historical and cultural heritage of the world. Describing this situation John Thompson uses the notion of “mediated historicity”. It includes the sense of awareness of the past formed by mass media (both on a rational and emotional level) and its visual images, the meaning of symbols and stories found in history that influence actions and values of today’s individuals [Thompson 1995: 34].

The survey done in Latvia in 2014 about the sources of knowledge of history shows that television and cinema is one of the main sources of knowledge and

understanding of history. 32.4% of the respondents admitted that their main source of knowledge is television programmes but 20% considered it was films. It must be noted that other sources (such as textbooks, research, museums, press, and radio) have much smaller significance. Only stories told face to face by parents and grandparents are a more important source of information about history than television and film. 40.1% of respondents admitted it to be their main source of history knowledge [SKDS 2014].

Films are an extremely influential medium that disseminates notions, ideas, emotions and values which are used by individuals, social groups, including also very large communities for self-defining, formation of identity-building notions about others and creating the image of the enemy. At the beginning of the 21st century the researcher of historical films Robert A. Rosenstone emphasized that the time has come for historians to accept films about the past as a particular form of historical narrative that exists along with other forms of narrating history (for example, the written history and oral history) and each has its own functionality. It is erroneous to evaluate historical narrative in a feature or documentary film according to the conventional criteria of academic research [Rosenstone 2001: 65]. The reality of the past and its reconstruction are usually strongly intermingled in film. In order to restore historical events, the documentary films mainly use archival materials, feature film makers also frequently include in their films excerpts of old footage in order to dramatize the reconstruction of the past, to create a more precise framework of the epoch or do it for some other reasons. In general feature film authors use different technical and artistic means to create landscapes and images of the previous epochs. On the one hand their use enables creating more impressive and credible (re)construction of the past, but on the other hand it also maintains a link with the present, keeps a sense of its presence in spectators who are highly aware of the modern technological achievements of their times [Morris-Suzuki 2005: 126–157]. More than other forms of art, film appeals to the audience's sense of reality, as stressed by semiotician Yuri Lotman. "Sense of reality" means that the spectator does not only become a witness of what is happening on the screen but in a way also a co-participant. Thus, even though understanding non-reality of the events, the spectator treats them emotionally as an actual event. The aim of art is not simply to depict one or another object but to make into a signifier. Sense of reality and affinity to life without which film art does not exist is both a part of the complicated process of art, as well as a link with artistic and cultural experience of certain society [Lotman 2005: 295–296].

A special term "cinehistory" has been coined to designate the film and historical research thus facilitating more in-depth revision of epistemological basis of

history, especially the relationship between history and the specific moment of time depicted in film. Representation of the mode of acting in film typical for the past and a series of characters are defined by many social, cultural and technological preconditions of the specific historical period where an essential role is also played by subjectivity and the author [Swartz 2008: 209]. The culture of the world and national culture of countries have very many films and television series about the past that have facilitated not only a change in people's relations with history but also with the present and themselves – they have broken stereotypes, promoted reassessment, caused compassion and remorse, explained the national trauma, fostered tolerance, facilitated awareness of the significance of moral values. “The history film not only challenges traditional History but helps us return to a kind of ground zero, a sense that we can never really know the past, but can only continually play with it, reconfigure and try to make meaning out of the traces it has left behind,” admits Robert Rosenstone [Rosenstone 2012: 186].

Since the very beginnings film has also served as a transcript of human lives and history. Films are also called “canned archives”, “moving image documents” and the like, what has been captured in film is used not only to illustrate the past but also to explore it. The need of storing the filmed material and founding cinematography museum or film depository was first expressed already in 1898 by the Polish cameraman Bolesław Matuszewski, being aware how important the events and images documented on the film prints would be for researchers as time goes by. Film archives and libraries were started to be established only in the 1920s and 30s, and films also gradually gained an increasingly important place in cultural heritage and are part of its true values [Fantoni 2015]. The same can be said also about films made in Latvia that are part of the “golden fund” of the national cultural heritage and are stored in the Latvian State Audio-visual Documents Archive of the National Archives, Film Museum, and Latvian TV Video Archive and in other depositories storing documentary materials.

In the overall context of Latvian cinema films about historical issues have an essential place both numerically, as well as by their contents and artistic value. For example, in the 1920s and at the beginning of the 1930s the filmmakers in Latvia were focusing on the recent historical events – World War I, Independence fights and founding of the state of Latvia. The most important films in this period are considered to be the ones about history, for example, “Off to War” (dir. Vilis Segliņš, 1920), “Whirlwinds of Time” (dir. Piotr Chardinin, 1921), “Bear-Slayer” (dir. Aleksandrs Rusteiķis, 1930). Within the short period of authoritarian rule when film was recognized as a significant means of propaganda and support was started to be provided for making of films, fiction films were made and prepared for production both about historical issues and the present times. One of the

tasks of these films was imposing of the ruling ideology upon the large cinema audiences [Pērkone 2008: 172–225; Pērkone 2011: 19–45].

Out of all the feature films made during the Soviet occupation of Latvia (at Riga Feature Film Studios, Riga Film and Newsreel Studios, Riga Film Studios) about 63% of the films were about the contemporary topics and 37% were about events of the past. Historical films differ by their themes and meaning. They included adaptations of the Latvian literary classics, also purely ideological films serving for the purpose of legitimizing the Soviet rule, as well as depictions of human character, motivation of action and morality during complicated and confusing turning points in history, and also entertaining musical period films with an outspoken narrative code of heroism and freedom made for large audiences. Historical themes dominated in the overall production of films made in the Latvian SSR till the beginning of the 1970s, during the last Soviet decades Riga Film Studios tuned much more actively to representation of its “present-day” issues. Yet also during this period several highly acclaimed feature films representing events of the past including films by the director Jānis Streičs were made. During the last years of existence of Riga Film Studios when perestroika policy started in the Soviet Union with its aim to implement openness (*glasnost*) and the times of Awakening movement aimed at regaining independence of Latvia began, the Latvian filmmakers made thematically and emotionally impressive films exposing the crimes of the Soviet regime, relationship of an individual with a totalitarian regime and possibilities of individual choices to be made: such as “Fortune-Telling With Lamb Shoulder-blade” (dir. Ada Neretniece, 1988) and *Carmen Horrendum* (dir. Jānis Streičs, 1989). Also after restoration of independence of Latvia, filmmakers have turned to the issues of the past on several occasions, mainly examining the pages of history concealed or falsified during the Soviet period and attempting to “awaken” collective memory and pride for history of the state and the nation. The feature films dealing with these themes are the ones that rank at the top of the list of Latvian films with largest audiences.

History of making of “The Boys of Livsala” and “Strange Passions”

The feature films “The Boys of Livsala” and “Strange Passions” are among those historical films that were made at Riga Film Studios and, as mentioned before, depict the same year – 1946. It was the first year of peace after the end of World War II, but violence was still going on, and the majority of people were still cherishing the hope that the situation would change for the better and the Western democratic powers would force the USSR to withdraw its troops from the Baltic States [Bleiere et al. 2005: 300–301]. The official Soviet policy in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia was implemented using the slogans of rebuilding economy

and strengthening the Soviet power but in actual reality it was a continuation of the process started in 1940/1941 with a purpose of dismantling the political and economic structures, way of life, traditions and value systems that had been established during independence of these states. The task of the power was to integrate the Baltic States into the Soviet system using political and repressive methods, as well as establishing certain forms of cooperation with the population. The historian Yelena Zubkova calls the period till mid-1947 “the cautious sovietisation” of the Baltic States when the Soviet occupation power tried to avoid explicitly ruthless means and at least partly took into account the local situation, namely, refrained from forced collectivization, preserved individual farms, developed a dialogue with creative intelligentsia, appointed local inhabitants to the positions of the central and local authorities, accepted the use of the national languages, limited the use of repressions by mainly targeting the armed opposition. In autumn of 1947 the sovietisation tactics of the Baltic States changed and it was implemented with explicitly forced and repressive methods in order to achieve unification with the other Soviet territories [Zubkova 2008: 128–131].

“The Boys of Līvsala” (1969) is one of the early films by Jānis Streičs. The film was made together with the director Ēriks Lācis, his friend and fellow-student at Latvia State Conservatoire. They had already co-operated while staging a play in Valmiera Drama Theatre in 1961 and in 1967 at Riga Film Studios they made together the film “Captain Enrico’s Pocket Watch”. At the time both had already been working as director assistants and as the second directors. The literary source of the film “The Boys of Līvsala” is Laimonis Vāczemnieks’ long story under the same title and the writer was also one of the script authors. “The Boys of Līvsala” is an ideologically correct narrative about the political and moral conflicts of the post-war teenagers, their teachers and parents where “truth” lies with those who are on the side of the Soviet power. It was made in the genre of adventure film. The main character of the film Mārtiņš Pūpols, a boy attending form six at school, together with his grandfather goes to live in Līvsala, an island separated by waters from the rest of the world. The adults and children of the village are divided into two political camps that are separated by the attitude to Soviet power. The war between the two parties involves weapons, fists, propaganda, as well as other means. The authority of the supporters of the Soviet power is the teacher Zemītis who had fought in the Red army during World War II. While the fighters against him are mainly from among the rich farmers and teachers, and also the pupils’ organization “Līvsala Wolves” [see more about the film in: Āboliņa 2016: 34–41].

The records of Riga Film Studio Art Council show that there were no big discussions about shooting of “The Boys of Līvsala”, the largest concerns were to ensure that the negative characters (namely, enemies of the Soviet power)

would not overshadow the positive ones. The script was praised for its diligent development. The records proudly mention the fact that while looking for the players of the main characters there had been meetings with 700 children till Koknese Secondary school pupil Juris Bružiks was cast for the protagonist Mārtiņš' part. On 26 December 1968, the director of Riga Film Studios Heinrihs Lepeško signed an order for starting the filming of "The Boys of Līvšala" and the approval of the film-crew, the planned budget of the film was 283 thousand roubles. On 8 July 1969, the Art Council already watched the film and was generally satisfied with the result. Critical remarks were expressed about the finale of the film that was criticized for the lack of courageousness. The film was approved for screening under the condition that its last part was to be revised [Riga Film Studio 1968].

Reviews about "The Boys of Līvšala" published in press at the time were not particularly favourable. The film was criticized, for example, for showing insufficiently psychological motivation of actions of the main characters and the vagueness in revealing its main theme [Rozīte 1970: 14], for elements of staginess and "feeling of artificiality" when playing out dramatic situations [Augstkalna 1970: 53]. Yet "The Boys of Līvšala" was not criticized too severely either, although the critics were unanimous in their opinion that the directors' Ēriks Lācis and Jānis Streičs first collaborative effort, the film "Captain Enrico's Pocket Watch" was better. The emigré press that was not available in Latvia at the time, indicated that "The Boys of Līvšala" was a propaganda film and its authors were not able to show the actual events, for instance, deportation to "slave camps" of children and their parents who were opposed to the Soviet regime [B. a. 1969: 6].

Jānis Streičs later admitted "that this film was made by using Soviet stereotypes", that it was "a poster-like film". We were commissioned to make it and we were expected to make it like that", "a film pleasing to the party and the government". Yet its making, according to him, was a valuable lesson both by learning how to find the means of expression for depiction of the positive and negative characters, and by understanding the role of music and environment and the processes of film production at the Film Studio. Jānis Streičs also tells that many of his ideas remained unrealized. He had also bitter feelings because of rejection of the actor Edgars Gīrgensons whom he had wanted to cast for the part of the Latvian language teacher and pioneer leader Zemītis. According to the director, the delicate looks of the actor would have made the image of the positive character not so stereotypically Soviet. During the shooting, he also became convinced that the subsequent films must be made independently and the tandem with Ēriks Lācis had exhausted itself [Āboliņa 2016: 43–53].

Jānis Streičs reached another peak in his career at the beginning of the 1980s. It must be noted that during the time after "The Boys of Līvšala" Jānis Streičs

had become one of the leading film directors at Riga Film Studios, several of his films were in the list of the most prominent Latvian films and were the most loved ones by the audience. Jānis Streičs had also received several awards, among those an honorary title of the Merited Culture Worker of Latvian SSR. Riga Film Studios itself had changed during this time, already in 1970 it had become the 2nd category Studio which meant not only better salaries but also a regular film production commissions [Pērkone 2011: 87]. Remembering Riga Film Studios time in his interviews Jānis Streičs always reminds it was “a factory” with “a rigid plan”. Therefore, he had been quite frequently making films necessary for the Film Studio, its status and fulfilment of its plan, while (at least initially) artistically and thematically they were not interesting for him [Zirnis 2016: 15]. Yet becoming part of film production and fulfilment of the Studio plan strengthened Jānis Streičs’ reputation and status of a director loyal and necessary for the Studio management. The film “Strange Passions” was chosen due to Jānis Streičs’ own interest. Its literary source was the 1971 novel by the Lithuanian writer Mykolas Sluckis whose work was officially highly acclaimed during the Soviet period and had previously inspired interest among filmmakers on several occasions. The novel is set in Zemgale region of Latvia after World War II in a rich Latvian farmstead that has practically perished but keeps on existing by pure force of habit and the hope of surviving. Not only the former hierarchy and kinships have disintegrated in it but also the culture of relationship of the household and people. Under the looming threat of fear of violence and Soviet repressions, human passions are seething: love, lechery, greed, brutality, gluttony, evil and hatred. Microcosm of intensely saturated historical events and human relationships created in the novel by Mykolas Sluckis offered a rich material for film narrative.¹

The plot of the film depicts the Lithuanian girl Marite’s life and her observations in Zemgale at the Valdmanis family house. After the arrest of her uncle she goes to Latvia looking for another relative called Antans who had been a farm-hand in the Valdmanis’ farm but usurped the role of its master in the post-war Soviet political system. During the war Antans had been fighting in the Red Army therefore representatives of the Soviet power are his “own people”. The old Arturs Valdmanis has long since lost not only his physical and mental strength but also the power in his farm and family. It has been transferred into the hands of his much younger wife Anna who had married him out of convenience. The handsome Antans has been her lover for many years but now “the new master” is

¹ Mykolas Sluckis novel “Strange Passions” has not been translated into Latvian. It has been published in Russian several times. For example: Sluckis, Mykolas (1981). *Chuzhie strasti*. Roman. In: Sluckis, Mykolas. *Priglasenie k tantsu*. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel. P. 241–438.

interested in Anna's adult daughter Ausma with whom he wants to form his future life. The war and Soviet occupation have completely destroyed Ausma's future. She has lost her social status, her fiancé has emigrated to Sweden, and being a daughter of a rich farmer she is not accepted at the university. Her elegant outfits can be used only on potato field and the local parties. Ausma despises her parents for their helplessness and servile complaisance: the father who is waiting for his death in an already procured coffin, her mother who tries to please the former farm-hand by giving her love and subjecting the whole farmstead to his avarice. The status of Anna and her husband as the owners of the farmstead and as dignified and respected individuals is seen only for a fleeting moment in the episode when an armed national resistance group arrive at the Valdmanis farm. Despite her family and the circumstances Ausma starts an affair with Antans, yet she does not want to link her life with him and give birth to a child. Finding out that Ausma has had abortion and his dream to become the new and genuine master of the Valdmanis' house will not come true, Antans attempts to kill the entire Valdmanis' family with a grenade. He fails and Antans gets totally wasted. Facing the extinction of his family the old master of the Valdmanis house gets up enough steam to cut off Antans' head with a scythe. At the end of the film the Valdmanis family is arrested and they embark on an unknown journey. This is the end of this family's life in their farmstead that now is to face new times, and doomed to the destiny of Soviet style extinction. These events are watched by spectators through the eyes of Marite. The entire narrative of the film is full of events, emotions, human relations and tensions [see more about the film: Augstkalna 1983: 1–5; Āboliņa 2016: 272–279].

Already on 21 July 1981, the director Jānis Streičs submitted the treatment of the film "Strange Passions". It is written in Russian, in an ideologically appropriate language. The director emphasized: "Although the novel by Sluckis "Strange Passions" is set in 1946, its ideological focus is not the past but the present. [...] Life collisions caused by the struggle of classes, the social life in the village, the atmosphere of historical change, harshness of social problems and credibility of characters are depicted with documentary precision. Due to all that, the ideological dimensions reach a stage where the topicality of the past becomes the significance of today's reality." The director also indicates that the main part should be played by Vija Artmane, mentioning her achievements, awards and their successful cooperation in the film "Theatre". The politically correctly written application makes an especial mention that the intention is to make "a class-conscious film" [Riga Film Studio 1983: 2–5]. The script written by Jānis Streičs was discussed at the meeting of the Script Editing Board on 24 February 1982. The majority of participants of the meeting were critically minded about the script because,

according to them, the scenario did not offer positive emotions expected from it. In his written reference the script-writer Viktors Lorencs made a strong point “that it is a parody about psyche of Latvian peasants, about the whole post-war period and the tragic events of those days. I assume it could be possible to find such excessively degenerative relations among people in some farmstead. But an art work has a power of generalization. And I am categorically opposed to such a generalization” [Riga Film Studio 1983: 19]. The script was not approved at this meeting; it was once again discussed on March 17. It was reminded at the meeting that this film had already been included in Riga Film Studio plans for 1983. Several participants of the meeting expressed their surprise that Jānis Streičs should make a film so uncharacteristic for him. The script-writer Alvis Lapiņš admitted “it is not characteristic of the director to look in his films for the ugly in the normality, but quite the opposite – to look for normality in the ugly” [Riga Film Studios 1983: 22]. Despite the dominant critical atmosphere at the meeting, the Script Editing Board approved Jānis Streičs’ film script and promoted it for discussion at the Art Council. On 9 April 1982, the script of “Strange Passions” was approved also by the Main Feature Film Script Editing Board of the USSR State Cinematographers’ Committee with a comment that it contained too many events and the narrative had to be made more understandable for the all-Union audiences [Riga Film Studio 1983: 161–162].

On 27 April 1982, the script of “Strange Passions” was already discussed at the Art Council meeting. Its record shows the meeting was long and heated. The numbers of speakers expressing critical opinions or at least concerns were numerous. The first person to express his anxiety was the Studio director and also the chairperson of the Art Council Heinrihs Lepeško. He noted: “I have quite big doubts about this work. Although Streičs has been talking about this film for a long time, I still do not understand what it will be about.” Cameraman Miks Zvirbulis’ opinion: “The script has been masterfully written (dialogue, environment, and characters). But I am preoccupied with the question – in the name of what? In my life I miss sources of positive emotions. I am not saying that this should be turned into a comedy, but we need films that make individual’s character stronger, that facilitate the need to resist or protect and so on.” While the playwright Vladlens Dozorcevs was convinced that “Strange Passions” inflict harm to the image of Latvia. “For those people who know Latvia this film will create confusion. While for those who do not know Latvia it will create a bad impression. There are no good or bad nations. This film presents a collection of the darkest features of human nature,” he explained. Viktors Lorencs continued expressing his indignation about the script of “Strange Passions”. According to him, “psyche of the Latvian peasants is totally different. The script demonstrates

generalizations about our peasantry that are totally fabricated. The Latvian peasant girls did not walk around with cigarettes in their hands; pregnant girls did not attend parties and so on.” Yet Lorencs admitted that the war leaves “impact on human psychology”. The theatre director Aina Matīsa was also harshly critical of the script. Written opinion about the script was sent in by the director Dzidra Ritenberga who did not participate in the meeting: “The author and director offers to me the setting of my youth and national belonging! Those should be also my passions because I belong to the branch of these ethnic origins too. And here begins my resistance to the material. I try to relate the character to myself, to my nation, my time and I don’t hear it resounding in me. I have nothing to do with these people and their passions. They really remain strange for me. [...] Reading the script I could not get rid of the stench of dung and blood. For the first time a literary work caused physical nausea. I support big humane passions. Down with temperance! The holiest task of art is to influence our brains and hearts. But not the stomach because then it is anti-art. We are familiar with Jānis Streičs’ capacity to make a film almost from nothing. This script has too much of everything. Let the director have a sharp eye and vigilant heart looking into history and characters of his nation!” [Riga Film Studio 1983: 163–173].

During the Art Council meeting the support to Jānis Streičs was not expressed. The records show it was the only time when the director was unable to conceal his bitterness. “They are not some kind of Lithuanian trash that I will have in my film because Lithuanian Film Studio invited me to make this film with them (and to work there in general). The invitation was extended before Žalakevičius came. At the time I was making “The Unfinished Supper”. After that Žalakevičius wanted to buy out screening rights from Sluckis, but Sluckis refused. The national issue was discussed here but one must talk about the class positions. I stand above whether Latvians or Lithuanians will get offended by this film. This is about the social class. Anna is not a beast. You simply see with your mind’s eyes the films that portray gloomy relations and so on,” this is a quote from Jānis Streičs as written in the record [Riga Film Studio 1983: 171]. Despite dislike expressed towards the script of “Strange Passions”, the Council approved it and allowed to begin developing the director’s script. In conclusion Heinrihs Lepeško added: “Everyone is afraid whether the director correctly assesses the significance of this film. Jānis, everybody trusts you but the doubts are big. Yet – let the screen show it!” [Riga Film Studio 1983: 171].

The director’s script was discussed at the Art Council meetings twice. On 1 June 1982, it was turned down because of a faulty footage. The members of the Art Council were still critical about Jānis Streičs’ intentions [Riga Film Studio 1983: 177–178]. On 8 June, the Art Council admitted that mistakes have been

corrected and accepted the script [Riga Film Studio 1983: 179]. On 24 June, it was approved also by the Main Feature Film Script Editing Board of the USSR State Cinematographers' Committee [Riga Film Studio 1983: 183]. During the subsequent meetings the Art Council continued expressing its concerns about the would-be film, although its members admitted that the audition results were good and approved of the players of the main parts. Heinrihs Lepeško was concerned about the possible attitude of the power to "Strange Passions" during the atmosphere when the 40th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War was to be marked. "... here a front fighter has been fighting to become a rich farmer and uses his frontman's position very well. Won't this film offer to us something that we will be unable to "stomach"?" the Film Studio director asks [Riga Film Studio 1983: 190]. Yet on 31 August, he already signed an order about starting the filming and approved its cost estimate in the amount of 364,000 roubles [Riga Film Studio 1983: 191].

On 23 December 1982, the Art Council discussed the footage of the film "Strange Passions". And again they were dissatisfied but approved of the filmed material. On 7 February 1983, the Art Council was watching the finished film, opinions differed about it. Film critic Valentīna Freimane stated that the film did not reach its goal and "there is no genuine happiness about this work". The editor Austra Zile's attitude was also critical and full of bafflement: "This debility really offends me as a human being. It is something untypical. I still don't understand Ausma. A circle of feeble characters is created: the old Valdmanis, Imants. I can more or less accept Anna and try to understand her. During the party one can see this debility of people somehow as well." A positive opinion about "Strange Passions" was expressed at the meeting by the editor Antons Broks; and film director Dzidra Ritenberga proposed that the film gets approval and "is taken to Moscow". According to the statements in the record the most memorable was the speech by the director Oļģerts Dunkers. "I am neither in the Art Council, nor a member of the Directors' Council therefore I can only speak as Streičs' colleague. I want to congratulate him on a deep and stylistically homogeneous film. This is an art work built on its own internal rules – it is a fresco. It consists of frescoes superimposed upon each other, and thus a work of art is created. It is statics. The only alive person is the girl. And the main character is lost between these two sides. It is true, he dies. The image of a road is very good in the film. Cameraman shows very well the road along which the mother leaves and along which the protagonist should have left too. Stylistically this is the best film by Streičs. I see a work of an extremely mature person. And for the first time he reveals himself as a philosopher. I like this film a lot. It gives food for one's thoughts," admitted Oļģerts Dunkers. The Art Council approved "Strange Passions" [Riga Film Studio 1983: 201–205].

During the meeting on February 22 by a unanimous vote it was decided that Jānis Streičs' film should be granted the first category.

The file on the film "Strange Passions" stored at the archives demonstrates very clearly the working practice of Riga Film Studio in those times – internal political, thematic and artistic control mechanism, as well as the already mentioned daily practice of the Studio, even its routine – the planned films had to be made by all means. That made the film "Strange Passions" possible. Jānis Streičs facilitated it himself, working according to the so-called soviet-time rules of the game, for instance, by reminding at the meetings of the Art Council that this was a class-conscious film which meant it was ideologically appropriate. Later the director admitted that he intentionally made "Strange Passions" initially in Russian because in Latvian it would most probably would not have reached the screen [LTV 2016].

Critics were quite favourable towards the film and yet also confused. Like the audience. Spectators expected from Jānis Streičs optimism, good-natured self-irony, sincerity, a film permeated with Latvianness instead of harsh self-revelation about the hardest occupation years which in those days were covered by a veil of silence. The culture press emphasized the artistic means of expression of "Strange Passions". For example, Mikhail Yampolsky analysed representation of the film's images and their relations, structuring of episodes, metaphorical images and symbols. He indicated that "Strange Passions" is one of the few recent Soviet films that consciously, peculiarly and deeply puts forward the issue of the personal meaning as an issue via which the spectators' attitude towards the cinematic material is formed. [...] By making his film, Streičs took into consideration that the meaning of the film is inferred by the spectator, yet at the same time the filmmaker determines the strategy of spectators' perception" [Jampolskis 1984: 60]. "Strange Passions" received also a special jury award at the All-Union Film Festival in Kiev in 1984. The jury diploma was awarded also to the actor Algirdas Paulavičius for the role of Antans.

Jānis Streičs considers his film "Strange Passions" among his best achievements and one of his artistically the most powerful films. In his interviews he is usually very passionate about its making – about finding the locations, the work of the cameraman Harijs Kukels and the production designer Gunārs Balodis, the outstanding actors, choice of costumes, shooting of many episodes [Streičs 2016; Āboliņa 2016: 261–290]. In 2016 the film "Strange Passions" was remastered at the studio "Lokomotīve". The restored version had its premiere at the Latvian National film festival "Lielais Kristaps" opening night on 5 March 2017; it was shown also on Channel 1 of Latvian National TV [Kuške 2016; National Film Centre 2017].

Cultural memory and understanding the past

Both films by Jānis Streičs “The Boys of Līvšala” and “Strange Passions” are a cinematic reconstructive transcript of post-war Latvia. In 1946 Jānis Streičs was 10, the co-director of the film “The Boys of Līvšala” Ēriks Lācis was eight. Also the members of the Art Council of Riga Film Studio, who critically discussed both the script and the film “Strange Passions” itself, had themselves experienced the 1940s in their childhood, adolescence or youth. For example, Viktors Lorencs, in 1946 was 26 and had served in the Latvian legion, Dzidra Ritenberga – 25, Valentīna Freimane – 24, she is survivor of the Holocaust who had lost many of her kin, Antons Broks was 17, Heinrihs Lepeško and Austra Zīle were both 15, Oļģerts Dunkers – 14, Miks Zvirbulis was a bit younger (nine years) and Vladlens Dozorcevs too (7 years). For the players of the main parts 1946 also had a certain significance in their lives: the Latvian film and theatre diva Vija Artmane turned 17 in that year, while Leonid Obolensky, a Soviet home-guard who was taken captive by Germans and later became a soldier in the auxiliary units of the German troops was sentenced to 10 years “for treason” [Kapkov 2007].

The period of time depicted in the films “The Boys of Līvšala” and “Strange Passions” was very well known to its authors, it was part of their own experience and life. From theoretical perspective of memory research, the making of both films is part of social memory that includes the experience of the contemporaries and also their closest generation’s attitude to the past. Memory about it is formed and maintained via social communication, as well as preserved in the media of the respective times, symbols and public commemoration. Being observers, participants or victims of the events, individuals are always included in the dynamic context of the historical process. Every person is formed under the influence of certain key historical experiences, and irrespective whether they hold the same opinion as other contemporaries, they use in their life the models of the world outlook, conviction, social values of their generation. It means that the individual memory is determined not only by the personal temporal horizon but by wider horizon of generational memory that is part of or opposite to the grand narratives of society. Sometimes it is stated that generational identity, once formed, is unchangeable [Assmann 2016: 17]. Social memory is a collective memory that is secured by people’s conversations, discourses and common life while its transfer to materials and formats that are not so ephemeral as human life (for example, manuscripts, books, films and monuments) creates already a different form of memory – cultural memory. It confers to the individual and social memory a lasting, inter-generational form. Cultural memory includes texts, images and rituals that can be recurrently used and whose usage grants and forms identity of the society, as well as generates solidarity and self-reflexivity [Erl 2011: 28–30].

Only the history version accepted by the power existed in the Soviet public space. This area was under absolute political and ideological control and was full of falsifications about the past because its task was to grant legitimacy to the postulate that the Soviet Union is the world's most progressive, just, humane and best state [Heller & Nekrich 1986: 294–296]. In many works of art human destinies, diverse relationships, the environment, alternative qualities of interpreting of the past were conveyed implicitly by using subtext and other means of artistic expression, and this approach was appreciated by the audience and became part of social memory. The Soviet filmmakers of the stagnation period were sometimes called dissident in thought but conformist in behaviour; they did not openly call into question the ruling ideology in their works, but offered a critical vision of society thus facilitating opposition to the Soviet reality [Shlapentokh & Shlapentokh 1993: 149–150].

Contemporary research and memory stories show that perhaps the majority of Latvians chose not to talk about history of their country, parents too often preferred not to discuss with children the past to make their life easier in the Soviet regime. Jānis Streičs speaks about it repeatedly in his memories. The director admits that during the Soviet rule he had not believed in a possibility of renewal of independent Latvia within his life span and that there had been little information about history of the independent state [Streičs 2012: 550–551]. As for the study of historical impact of Stalinist crimes initiated by Gorbachev during perestroika, Jānis Streičs writes as follows: “It turned out that before that I had been living in darkness with artificial light. Red like in the dark room for developing photographs” [Streičs 2006: 443].

Yet not only “Strange Passions” but also “The Boys of Līvšala” emanates a sense of presence of the bleak 1940s reality created by the film-crew relying on their personal experiences from childhood instead of the ideologically biased history dominating in the public space. In his interviews and memory stories the director always stresses the role of his childhood, the lasting impact of its experiences that left traces in his whole life. Jānis Streičs in his childhood experienced many tragic events caused by the occupation power, its cultivated violence and worthlessness of human life [Streičs 2006: 9–41; Zirnis 2016: 15; Bykov 2016; LTV 2016]. These themes, the visual images of those times, but even more importantly, the atmosphere of the period have been captured in both films. In “The Boys of Līvšala”, for example, one must mention the setting and society: children with no parents, mended clothes made of various pieces of fabric or articles of clothing, a cold class-room, cartridges in the school stove and forests, weapons in the hands of children and adults, scanty meals and dreams about journeys to far-away lands. This film made in the 1960s already conveys a sense of pending fear of deportations to

Siberia, a desire to achieve security and stability. Melody of the folk song “Where are you flying, little hawk/With your wax wings...” in the composer Raimonds Pauls’ arrangement, contributes to the futureless atmosphere. A flight with wax wings can never be far and safe the same as life under Soviet rule.

The music in “Strange Passions” (composed by Uldis Stabulnieks) from its first moments creates in the film narrative an undertone of anxiety, crumbling of the traditional order of life and lives of people although on the screen we see an excerpt from the official Soviet newsreel: the Soviet troops enter cities and towns of Latvia and crowds of German POWs are on the roads. Atmosphere of fear and mutual distrust enters the film from its first episode: Marite’s fear of people met on the roads, suspicious and inquisitive gazes. A truly critical assessment of the Soviet power is expressed also directly – it is advice given by Antans and Anna to Marite, who has remained without her passport, how she should behave and answer not to attract attention of the authorities, and also threat of Siberia, as well as of the people who go to their daily business with weapons. The epoch is characterized also by daily consumption of large quantities of alcohol, a fleeting mention of the Roma tragedy during the Nazi occupation, exaggerated cheerfulness and conflicts at the local party where songs from the independent Latvia can still be heard, the “new life” as shown on the screen at the local cinema, the grotesque trip of the local peasants with the red Soviet flag to the point of delivery of grain, the background sounds – mooing of livestock, dog barks occasionally intertwining with the main musical score of the film. Anna’s statement characterizes the times when she says: “Brother kills brother, son fights with father, infants are killed, houses burnt, others’ property is coveted, – is that not a sin?” While Ausma says: “The world has turned upside down.” Certainly this world too has still values (and/or their deficit) – God’s scripture, awareness of sin, respect and compassion. The films “The Boys of Līvšala” and “Strange Passions” create a sense of 1946 reality that enables/makes one perceive the “mediated reality” as seen on the screen as real events of the past and empathise with them. Both films also distinctly characterize the film director Jānis Streičs’ “magic realist” film style showing his skills of turning the time of childhood and adolescence of his generation into cultural memory of Latvia. It should also be noted that the film “Strange Passions” is an impressive example of Jānis Streičs’ ability of creating an artistically remarkable work of art, despite complying to the Soviet “rules of the game”, a work of art that outplays the ruling regime and thus also provides to spectators a possibility of gaining rational and emotional awareness of Latvia as it was in 1940s.

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