

VISUAL AESTHETICS OF JĀNIS STREIČS' FILMS

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Abstract

Jānis Streičs is one of the key figures in the Latvian film history. His Soviet period films (13 feature films) are distinguished by a certain visual style, as well as by technique and aesthetics of creating characters, sets and the on-screen world. The 1970s and 80s was a prolific time for the director both in terms of genres and subjects covered in his films. Films of this period serve as evidence to Jānis Streičs' strong authorship, as well as give grounds for further research into aesthetic canons, technical possibilities and visual aesthetics of the Soviet period films.

Keywords: *Jānis Streičs, visual aesthetics, cinematography, Soviet cinema.*

The aim of the present report is to analyse visuality of Jānis Streičs' films – what visual aesthetic and technical means are used to construct characters, sets and the on-screen world. The period selected for the analysis – 1970s and 80s – is characterised by a variety of themes and genres of creative activity of the director. By choosing this specific time-span it is possible to examine the visual aesthetics of Jānis Streičs' films both in the context of the soviet period film structuring, aesthetic cannon and technical possibilities, as well as (and mainly) as evidence of his authorship.

Despite diversity of themes and genres, the director's films are united by a visual (and thematic) technique – grotesque. In films by Jānis Streičs not merely a satirical or comic exaggeration is encoded already in his literary film scripts and played out on the screen but also a visual means of expression – unexpected and abrupt contrasts are used in the films that bear additional significance and meaning (henceforward the text will examine his films “My Friend a Light-Minded Man”, “Strange Passions” and “It's Easy to Fall into an Overgrown Ditch”). Besides, in several films by the director the contrast is not only created within the film but

also by confronting the on-screen reality with the reality of soviet life. In the films examined later in the report “Theatre” and “Unfinished Dinner”, with the help of set design, colours, rhythm and camera movement the director has managed to conjure up a visually utopian on-screen world (practically unattainable for soviet man), and at the same time to “destroy” this utopia by showing with the help of story and acting the anti-utopian “substance” of this utopia – the destructive passions, vice and crimes. Thus, the director has fulfilled the spectator’s dream for “something better and more beautiful” (the entertaining function of films – a chance to forget themselves [Dyer 2002: 20]) and at the same time he has skilfully integrated grotesque elements in the visual narrative.

The first independently made film by Jānis Streičs “Shoot Instead of Me” was made in 1970, at the time which is commonly called “the golden age” of Latvian cinema [Pērkone 2011: 258]. It is a time of change for the soviet cinema – more comedies, musicals and adventure films (especially crime films) were made, and a large number of the entertaining or “lighter genre” films were screened at cinemas. Apart from “replacement” of the topical genres, the contents of films changed as well in the 1970s, the social and collective values dominating in the 1950s and 60s were gradually replaced by interest about the personal and emotional themes; from an embodiment of ideals, the actor on the screen became a living being.

This change can be easily detected in the film “My Friend a Light-Minded Man”, whose script Jānis Streičs managed to transform from an ideologically programmatic one into a life asserting, always topical and empathetic story “from life” – with authentic and precise heroes whose characters and mutual differences are well-shown also in visual dimension of the film. It is significant that the positive character (Arvīds played by Jānis Paukštello) is not “a flawless man” any more, as it was in films of the 1950s and also 60s; he is simple and humane and appears on the screen in yellow socks with holes. While the setting signifying all dreams come true (the house of Ciekurs, the fiancé of the mother-in-law) turns out to be much less hospitable than the flooded basement flat of Čakāns crammed with paintings and wood-carvings – practically the only place where one can feel free.

Not only the contents of the films changed but also filming technology and its application. Cameras become lighter hence also more mobile but one of the “signs” of those times were *long focus* lens and *transfocator* that was used very often in films of the 1970s. Choice of such equipment provides an opportunity of getting closer to what is filmed without changing of camera position, which means one could remain at an unobtrusive and non-disturbing distance and at the same time make truthful and emotionally expressive close-up.

The use of *transfocator* is a typical “feature” of the 1970s films and one can see it often in films by Jānis Streičs. The first *transfocator* lenses immediately became

“items of fashion” when in the 1960s they were received at Riga Film Studios [Zapāne: 2010]. Due to their use it was possible to give up or diminish the use of rails and crane. The *transfocator* in Jānis Streičs' films was almost an invincible part of visuality – by its application it became possible to show in a single and unedited shot a long-shot of the setting and also to highlight its separate details (human face, an object important for the dramaturgy and so on). The use of such means of expression quite often indicates a dramatic moment of tension, emotional suspense, and events essential and decisive for the story of the film – it guides the spectator's gaze and emotions into trajectory intended by the director. Cameraman Harijs Kukels has claimed that “Jānis Streičs belongs to those film directors who senses the *transfocator* as an organic necessity” [Līce 1995: 124].

Already the first films by Jānis Streičs were marked by the aesthetic means of expression that were developed in his subsequent films. Casting is always done with great care – the actors in films by Jānis Streičs are often given similar roles (for example, the positive characters played by Jānis Paukštello in the films “My Friend a Light-Minded Man”, “Strange Passions”, and “It's Easy to Fall into an Overgrown Ditch”). The clothes for the characters are selected with utmost care (the authentic, crumpled and even dirty clothes in “Meeting on the Milky Way” or “western-type”, fashionable outfits in “Unfinished Dinner” – besides the hot day is conveyed in this film not only by the ever-present props – the fans but also the make-up and the inspector Per Monson's (played by Uldis Vazdiks) sweat-drenched T-shirts. Great role is allocated to props that not only help to reveal the character of the heroes but even advance the action of the film.

In his first films Jānis Streičs worked with different cameramen – “Shoot Instead of Me” (1970, camera: Rihards Pīks), “Little Oriole” (1972, camera: Māris Rudzītis), “My Friend a Light-Minded Man” (1975, camera: Miks Zvirbulis), during later years the director had long and almost constant creative co-operation with the cameraman Harijs Kukels. Their co-operation has resulted in films of diverse genres and themes, and the search for new visual plasticity is always derived from the film contents. Whether those are the modern and “Scandinavian” interiors in the film “Unfinished Dinner” (1979) or the narrow and dark farm house rooms on the Valdmanis' farm in the film “Strange Passions” (1983) – the cameraman's work is purposeful yet unobtrusive and does not draw unnecessary attention. Harijs Kukel's camera most often remains loyal to the qualities called by Leo Baudry as film heritage from Renaissance painting – classical composition of frame, “normal” perspective, harmony of rhythm and academic lighting [Baudry 1985: 534]. While every deviation from this “norm” emphasizes the position of the author Jānis Streičs validating the view expressed by Patrick Ogle: Technologies become supplements of art form only if used wisely. [Ogle 1985: 76]. Images



Figure 1. Shot from Jānis Streičs' film "My Friend a Light-Minded Man" (1975)

captured by Harijs Kukels are a means of telling the story of the film and never an aim in itself.

Making films of a "lighter" genre, such as – "My Friend a Light-Minded Man" – a more radical positioning of the camera helped to bestow comic effects on the episode. Low camera angle, fairly common for visual aesthetics of the 1950s and 60s even depicting everyday situations, had lost its significance – people were usually shown in films without mannerism, by shots composed in a veritable way. Therefore, in the film "My Friend a Light-Minded Man" the comic effect is achieved by the use uncommon and unnatural for its time positioning of the camera – the manager of the factory comrade Jēkabsons standing at the top of the staircase and talking to his subordinates resembles a monument (see figure 1).

It is significant that almost every film by Jānis Streičs has its "framing". Quite often his films are introduced with a dynamic opening; most often it is arrival of the main character in a *new* place. *Protagonist* of the film "Little Oriole" Fiodor arrives to Latvia by bus, the hero of the film "The Master" Artūrs arrives in Riga after his military service by taxi, Sancho's family goes to the Soviet Union by plane ("The Trustworthy Friend Sancho"), Zane Jančevska's Marite in the film "Strange Passions" goes to Valdmanis' house on foot, the main character Artūrs in "My Friend a Light-Minded Man" goes by bicycle but the protagonist of the film "It's Easy to Fall into an Overgrown Ditch" the Komsomol organization secretary Vitolds arrives at his new work place by motorbike. The characters in the film "Limousine in the Colour of a Midsummer Night" following the temptation of the limousine arrive at the main setting of the film – aunt Mirta's house – "each in their *own way*". The film "Theatre"

has a different framing, it is announced as a play within a play; first the spot-lights go up and then the director and the actress announce in the film that is about to be “played”. The second part of the film ends by the spot-lights being switched off thus indicating the end of the play (performance).

In Jānis Streičs' films both the documentary setting is designed with great accuracy (the film “Limousine in the Colour of a Midsummer Night” was shot near Cēsis town in a real country house), as well as then the little known “Western world” (the films “Theatre” and later “Unfinished Dinner”). At the opening of the film “Theatre” the director announces that the title of the film has been chosen “because we know so little about England” [Streičs 1978]. But the wittily and deftly designed and constructed setting in the Studio pavilion allows us to believe in the on-screen world forgetting that this TV film's budget was considerably smaller than for the feature films and that Latvia and England are separated not only by thousands of kilometres but in those days also by the “iron curtain”.

The interior spaces in the film “Theatre” are characterized by draperies of different colour and texture, luxurious furniture, typical lighting objects (spotlights) and frames – window, painting and mirror frames. It is mirrors and reflections in them that create the visual imagery and multi-layered features of the story-line. Mirror is a recurrent image in the film “Theatre”, it appears in different forms and with different frames, and more importantly, does not only allow to show the characters and their “various faces” (symbolically – to contrast life and “theatre”), but also offers wide possibilities for interpretation.

Beginning to make the next film – “Unfinished Dinner” – the director and his crew already had an experience in creating “foreign” setting; this time the action takes place in Sweden and (similarly to draperies and fabric in “Theatre”) shutters of different form and colour become an essential interior element (see figure 2). Skilfully designed “Scandinavian” interiors (attention was paid also to minute details, objects and shop signs) but the true shooting location was betrayed only by the locally produced telephones, city panorama and the recognizable car racing facility.

“Theatre” is not the only film by Jānis Streičs in which mirror reflection is allocated a big role. This image is used also later in “Strange Passions” (see figure 3) – Antans brings a large mirror from the town, Antans congratulates his own mirror image with his would-be baby, the old Valdmanis breaks a mirror shortly before killing Antans. But the rhythm and drama of the film is created by camera movement that is combined with *transfocator* movement and the light filters – in particular the red one that instantly changes tonality and atmosphere of the shot (an example – Antans slaughters a cow, the old Valdmanis kills Antans).



Figure 2. Shot from Jānis Streičs' film "Unfinished Dinner" (1979)

The second method frequently used in films by Jānis Streičs is inclusion of screen shots or photos, and it has been done almost in all the films, starting with "Shoot Instead of Me". The occupation of the main character Jezups is screening of silent films – he is a film projectionist. In this film, a film screening becomes a deadly weapon in the hands of the protagonist (and he wins the evil). In the detective film "Unfinished Dinner" *freeze frame* is used as circumstantial evidence (the film is stopped for a moment and the voice-over comment explains whether the person or object seen in the shot has a decisive role in the subsequent investigation). In the film "Strange Passions" a white sheet is hung up in the dancing room and a



Figure 3. Shot from Jānis Streičs' film "Strange Passions" (1983)

film is screened (Ausma ironically says that they should watch “the new life”). TV is watched both in the film “The Trustworthy Friend Sancho”, as well as by Arvīds’ wife who takes the opportunity of mentioning her mother’s new dress while watching a fashion show (in “My Friend a Light-Minded Man”). In the film “Carmen Horrendum” the hospital female patients watch Grigoriy Alexandrov’s film “The Light Road” (the on-screen world is more beautiful than the one they inhabit). But photos are used already in the film “Little Oriole” (Fiodor finds out he has a daughter), as well as in “Theatre” and “Limousine in the Colour of a Midsummer Night”; the different post-cards sent to Mirta by Pīgalu Prīdis show the flow of time but in a photograph the director has seated Marta again next to Jānis.

The third visual means of expression frequently employed in films by Jānis Streičs is a contrast or opposition by the use of which it is possible to achieve comic or dramatic effect. In the film “Meeting on the Milky Way” (camera: Valdis Eglītis) such a contrast is formed by the bleak war setting and the white lace dress received as a present by the character called Astra who is played by Ināra Slucka. In the film “Strange Passions” a strong contrast is sustained between the exterior of the Valdmanis’ house (which creates an impression of a light and spacious impression of the building) and the narrow, low key lit and gloomy interior. While a comic but no less oppressive contrast is engendered by “the order” established in the courtyard of the “shock workers” of the collective-farm (the film “It’s Easy to Fall into an Overgrown Ditch”). In one of his interviews the cameraman Harijs Kukels admitted that it has always been important for him to show relations between nature and man: “Nature, like objects, is an extension of a person and help to reveal the character who is either united with nature or contrasted to it” [Līce 1995: 132]. In this sense, the way symbolic character of colour and nature imagery is used, the film “Little Oriole” presents a particular interest – the most memorable scene is one of the last sequences in which the character Ilga played by Līga Liepiņa is killed but the camera moves away from the heroine to show little, red aspen leaves trembling in the wind.

It is interesting that in films by Jānis Streičs the visual imagery is frequently replaced (or supplemented) by a characteristic sound track. In the film “Little Oriole” the army planes are not shown but their presence is heard. But the accompanying sign of the protagonist of the same film Ilga (Līga Liepiņa) is the song that she sings. Voice-over (the conversation between the taxi driver and Artūrs) alternately edited with images of the city replace the necessity to have a long series of shots to explain from where and where to the main character of the film “The Master” goes. Another type of shot “economy” are captions identifying the on-screen location (road signs that indicate the place of location – the border

sign “Latvian SSR” in the film “Little Oriole”, the road sign “Cēsis” in the film “Limousine in the Colour of a Midsummer Night”, border sign “Rosme” in the film “It’s Easy to Fall into an Overgrown Ditch” or inscriptions on the glass phone booth in the films “Unfinished Dinner” and “The Master” (“International phone calls” on the glass behind which Artūrs’ military service mate is standing).

In several interviews Jānis Streičs has mentioned that while making the film “My Friend a Light-Minded Man” he started paying attention how with the help of the screen it is possible to show the national self-expression [Cāne 2004]. Yet this film is also significant by the fact that it demonstrated the director’s capacity to subordinate the canons and requirements of the soviet aesthetics to his own artistic needs and raise them to a new level. The film contains a number of means of his visual expression that is typical for many of his later films; among the most essential ones are carefully developed visual images of the characters (and by all means also their character features). With the film “My Friend a Light-Minded Man” the director asserts himself as an *author* and in his later films he consolidates this status by using consistent series of visual imagery in his films.

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