

OF STILL AND MOVING IMAGES: STYLISTICS OF HERCS FRANKS' EARLY DOCUMENTARIES

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Abstract

Latvian documentary filmmaker Hercs Franks (1926–2013) directed his first films in 1965, the two short documentaries were produced at the Latvian television's production unit Telefilma-Rīga: “Salty Bread” (*Sālā maize*) and “At Noon” (*Pusdienā*). Both films reflect an intricate practice and aesthetic element of the director – the use of still photography, which for him is both a research tool and a stylistic device present throughout his career. “Salty Bread” includes photographs as a stylistic element allowing the viewer to prolong observation of particular images, whereas in “At Noon” still photographs feature on the films' credits, but more significant is photography's use as a research tool for preparing the film.

The intermedial studies have explored the interrelationship of different media and used intermediality as a tool for close reading of specific works, among other applications. The connection of cinema and photography represent the potential of intermedial approach through the technological, aesthetic, institutional practices. Specifically documentary cinema in its relation to photography shares additional issues of the meaning of documentality and representation of reality.

Through close reading of Hercs Franks' first films, I would argue that Franks transcends normative documentary function in the use of still photographs [Hallas 2023] and demonstrates the intermedial practice in combining photography and documentary filmmaking.

Keywords: *documentary cinema, intermediality, Hercs Franks, photography, television.*

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Introduction

The intersection of film and photography has a long history, and it has been studied from the aspects of technology, practice, aesthetics, institutional framework, and other.¹ The interconnectedness of both mediums *present a challenge to homogenous and reductive notions of medium specificity* [Beckamn, Ma 2008: 3]. Intermediality has become one of the recent most productive terms for humanities, resulting in wide scope of theoretical publications and debates, which have been propelled by the multiplication of media, requiring appropriate theoretical framework for their study [Pethő 2010: 40]. For the modelling of cinematic intermediality and its rhetorics, Ágnes Pethő proposes as one of the models intermediality as a performative act or an “action”, where there exists a dialogue between different media which can also highlight their differences. Describing intermediality in spatial terms, she suggests that intermediality *appears a border zone across which media transgressions take place* [Pethő 2010: 58-60]. As Joachim Paech notes, *the film has always been a hybrid intermedial construction on its technical as well as its aesthetic level* [Paech 2011: 15].

Within the growing field of intermedial studies on film the analysis of film and photography's intermedial connections reflect the departure from the perception of medium specificity to greater self-reflexivity and intermediality challenging the traditional concepts of each medium. The role of documentary and its connection to photography as Roger Hallas notes *have long held complex intermedial relations around the concept and practice of documentary*, being perceived as evidence or actuality, among other shared meanings. [Hallas 2023: 2]. The still photographs and other non-diegetic elements within the documentary reflect the dominant narrative organization of documentary film – based on rhetorical continuity [Nichols 1991: 21]. Incorporation of still photographs within the documentary film has become common practice since the mid-20th century. The tension *between the photograph as object and as image allows it to transcend its normative documentary function as mere indexical evidence or visual illustration* [Hallas 2023: 10].

Hercs Franks (1926–2013)² artistic practice includes still photography, scriptwriting, reflections on documentary filmmaking, directing, later in his career also camerawork. Franks' passion for still photography had developed from an early age, when his father was a noted photographer in his native town Ludza and the region of Latgale in the Eastern part of Latvia. Franks called his camera a *still photography notebook* which he permanently had with him. Throughout his life, Franks continued

¹ See, for example: Stewart, G. (1999). *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Green, D., Lowry, J. (eds.) (2006). *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*. Brighton: Photoworks/ Photoforum; Company, D. (2008). *Photography and Cinema*. London: Reaktion books; Laurent, G., Lugon, O. (eds.) (2012). *Between Still and Moving Images*. Barnet: John Libbey Publishing.

² Internationally also used spelling – Herz Frank.

taking pictures, and regularly employed still images in his films¹, and, as noted by film scholar Inga Pērkone, it is possibly his most important stylistic element [Pērkone 2013: 55]. Franks has stated: *The alphabet of photography does help to learn the alphabet of cinema* [Franks 2011: 36].

Before directing his first films at the television, Hercs Franks worked at the Riga Film Studio as the photographer for fiction films from 1959, and also as a newspaper reporter. He wrote his first script “White Bells” (*Baltie zvani*) which was made into short fiction film in 1961 (directed by Ivars Kraulītis). The film was without any dialogue, and presented daily rhythm of the capital city Riga. Following narrative structure and approach of the city symphony genre of the 1920s, it portrays the gradual awakening of the city until it reaches hectic pace of midday. He wrote several scripts before directorial debut, continuing to contribute for other directors’ films.²

In an interview published in 2009, Franks has commented: *I am a photographer by profession. (...) Photography is in a sense the opposite of cinema, but sometimes it can reflect the essence of life much more powerfully than cinema. Because the photograph stops the moment in its essence and it is possible to look into it more carefully. Sometimes I stop the film on purpose so that the viewer can look into the picture* [Franks 2011: 517–518]. This is reflected in the film “Salty Bread” which includes photographs as a stylistic element letting the viewer prolong observation of a particular moment or moving the camera over the photographs to discover more details. In the film “At Noon” photography is more of a research tool for preparing the production, however also in the film itself the credits are illustrated by still images.

Through close reading of Hercs Franks’ first films and contextualizing them within the theoretical debate of intermedial relation between still and moving images, I would argue that Franks transcends normative documentary function in the use of still photographs [Hallas 2023] and demonstrates the intermedial practice in combining photography and documentary filmmaking.

Production context of the films

Franks directed his first documentary films at the Telefilma-Rīga – a production unit formed at the Latvian television a few years after the first TV broadcast in Latvia

¹ Franks has used various archival images, his own photographs, and has collaborated with notable photographers (for example, in the film “The Last Judgement” (*Augstākā tiesa*) (1987) Franks collaborates with the photographer Vilhelms Mihailovskis (1942–2018), one of the most notable photographers from Latvia at the time).

² The largest scale work was for the film *235 000 000* (1967) (original title – “USSR – Year 1966” (*PSRS – 1966. gads*)), created together with the director Uldis Brauns and extensive production team.

took place in 1954. Firstly, the early technologies allowed only ready made films to be broadcast, and the programming included broadcasting of films a few times a week [Rikards 2009: 3]. The next stage of development came when large studio cameras were introduced, and the material shot in the studio was suitable for broadcast, however they were not appropriate for use at other locations. While the portable filming equipment was unavailable, still photographs were used to substitute non-existing moving images recorded outside the studio. Large number of still images was recorded, and broadcasted accompanied by explanatory text. In 1955, portable TV production stations became available, allowing to film and broadcast events taking place outside the studio premises [Rikards 2009: 7]. In 1957 within the television a special unit was formed called Telefilma-Rīga (Television film-Rīga) for creating original content – news stories, documentary films, musical films, and other. From very few people at its start, over the years it grew into substantial collective with almost 100 people, who worked until the Latvian independence in the early 1990s, when subsequently transformative changes in all fields of television and film took place.

Even though Telefilma-Rīga had its own staff members, there was a regular collaboration with the main film production centre in the republic – the Riga Film Studio. Some filmmakers made their debut films at the television and later joined the Film Studio, or it remained a parallel site for creating documentary productions, but in some cases it was the Film Studio where the first films were made before moving on to work for the television. Surveying the first decade of the Telefilma group, it was recognized: *Our television studio filmmakers' group has to some extent become a kind of experimental base for the documentarians of the [Film] studio* [Kalniņš 1966].

In the year 1965, when the two Franks' films were released, 10 films were produced at the television (with around 40 reels in total or 400 minutes). The output was described as dominated by the direct observation, reportage, character portraits [Kalniņš 1966]. The main differences between filmmakers' work organization at the studio and the television, was the time spent on filming each film and the planning of production output. The Film Studio had yearly production plans, but the television environment required (and allowed) greater flexibility, which also reflected in the films' form and content: *Here, plans change rapidly, life constantly brings its corrections, and sometimes it takes an hour and a half to make the next film* [Kalniņš 1966].

The two short documentaries "Salty Bread" and "At Noon" demonstrate the themes and approaches characteristic also to Franks later films, and they both have the same collaborators. The cameraman Visvaldis Frijārs was among the first Telefilma team members. He transferred to television from the Riga Film Studio, where he began to work in 1945 as a lighting specialist, later head of the lighting department. He was offered a position of an assistant cameraman at the Film Studio, which he remained at until drafting in the obligatory military service. After

discharge, instead of going back to the assistant's position at the Film Studio Frijārs joined the television, which had developed during his service years. Also for Frijārs, still photography was important creative practice even before the work at the Film Studio. His knowledge of the equipment, lighting specificity made him highly regarded lighting professional at the studio, and it later contributed significantly to his work at the television as a cameraman.

Television was also a nurturing place for sound director and composer Ļudgards Gedrāvičs, who became one of the leading talents in the documentary field in the 1960s, creating sound and music accompaniment, and original music for many films in television and at the Film Studio (including several Riga style or Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema films). He created poignant soundtracks combining realistic elements and direct sound with musical themes, also in unusual combinations.

"Salty Bread" (*Sālā maize*, 1965)

In chronological order, the first film Franks directed was "Salty Bread". It was filmed at the fishing collective "Fisherman" (*Zvejnieks*) at Skulte village. *In the beginning I had nothing else than a small camera in my hands*, Franks has commented about the film, there was no specific idea, a title or even a script [Kainaizis 1974].

The film portrays the daily life at the village – fisherman return from the sea, life of their families on the coast, the first day at school, work on the fishing boat and other events, which are often filmed by concealed camera. Its main protagonist is an older fisherman, Jankovičs, but overarching theme of the film is time, transition between emotional states, relationships. The film was shot in spring and autumn of 1964, the time is compressed and liberated from division in particular seasons. In the episode where after long period at sea, the couples meet at the shore, he combines the shots from both seasons. This underlines the constant flow of time and the way of life for those people – regular leaving and meeting again. About the insertion of still photographs Pērkone states: *first there is the joy of the meeting, then the pain of parting, but the director stops it, splits it, editing the happy, even frozen moments of the meeting* [Pērkone 2013: 55]. Furthermore, she points out to the offscreen commentary in which the significance of the still image instead of moving image is stressed [Pērkone 2013: 55]. Film's offscreen text at this moment reads: *There are photographers in the world. Sometimes they are funny people, but they can do miracles. Even in autumn, they can give something of spring.* Thus the photographer here is attributed to as a person who can create magic and show something that has not been there. *We should remember in this context that 'stillness' is always a contrastive concept, one that presupposes a dynamic alternative against which the stillness is distinguished. If the notion of photographic stillness does not have its sense in contrast with cinematic*

motion, there must be some other dynamic dimension to underwrite its meaning [Friday 2005: 40]. The alteration between stillness and movement stresses the particular emotional charge of the moment which is depicted as a still image, letting the viewer to linger on it.

The still images are used throughout the film in different episodes. Most often they are shown for a few seconds, but in some cases, the camera moves across the still image, directing the gaze to certain element. Franks has explained, that the still images he had already shot became a key to envisioning the coherent film narrative – the stones in the sea, the old fisherman Jankovičs, and others – will be the elements that weave together moving image sequences. For Franks, who looks for metaphorical elements, the stones looked like the bread loafs which became the salty bread in the film's title [Kainaizis 1974]. *Viewing a photograph in a film is very different from viewing it directly. Film tends to overstate the photograph's difference, while presenting that difference as if it were its essence. We see the photograph exaggerated by those qualities that distinguish it from film: its stillness, its temporal fixity, its objecthood, its silence, its deathliness, even* [Campany 2008: 96]. In the context of the previously described episode, the photograph within the film is attributed a specific way of looking at it – how it is placed between other images and what meaning it represents. The moving camera across the images directs the attention and from “looking at” photographs the spectator start “watching” them, exploring the images in a duration [Azoulay 2015: 14].

The still photographs' materiality unites various images used in the film but it is possible to distinguishing two groups of these images. Contemporary photographs taken by the film's director and archival still photographs either from the private archive illustrating the life course of the character Jankovičs and more general historical images depicting the past. They demonstrate the stillness and temporal fixity, concurrently stressing the way of producing the images. *The motion picture stalls upon a glimpse into its own origin and negation at once. Such an instant is given over to that latent plangency generated in the screen's contrast between an immobile past and the passing movement that sweeps it into – and from – view. Everything stirring, elusive, and uncanny about the form of photography itself, even before the superaddition of the content (...) everything about the photochemistry of indexed presence is not simply redoubled by the submission to cinematic camerawork of such former works of still camera* [Stewart 1999: 10]. The stylistics of the still images in the film directly reflect the varying moments of their capture – the texture, the grain, the framing all signify their placement within the specific time of their production. Thus the still images of *Salty Bread* not just illustrate the past or stopping of the moment, but stress both the temporality of narrative and temporal fixity of the images within the context of their production time.

"At Noon" (*Pusdienā*, 1965)

The film *At Noon* developed from an assignment Franks received from daily newspaper *Rīgas Balss*. He had to report and take photographs of the performance of the theatre named after Yevgeny Vakhtangov visiting from Moscow and performing at different collective farms, construction sites, factories, and other venues.¹ Franks attended the performance at one of the districts of Riga at a construction site and became deeply engaged with the event: how on an empty square a stage was created, the audience gathered, the way they experienced the show, and how after the performance the audience left, the seating area was dismantled, and the square was clear again – as if nothing had happened. During the event, he was observing and taking pictures not so much of the performers, but the audience – portraits of people's faces, the expressions, emotions they had while watching the performance. This caused Franks to develop an idea that such an event could become an interesting film reportage on people at the construction site.

It involved a strict preparation for shooting: camera locations, tasks for cameramen, calculation of time for each stage of the events. *When you are confronted with an event and want to tell it figuratively, following its natural dramaturgy, at that moment, it seems to me that the work of a documentary filmmaker becomes like the work of a scriptwriter of fiction films. There is only one difference – in a documentary, roles must be designed not for those who will be filmed, but for those who will be filming – so cameramen* [Franks 2011: 73]. Franks created a still photo script – like an album of a photo film, as he already had images from the performance. *Where, in which construction site and with what theatre troupe it will be possible to make this still-photographed film?* [Franks 2011: 69], he reflected on the unknown elements of the future film. He recognized the complexity of the work – as it required at least three cameramen (also important question for him was – who will they be?), what will be the program of the performance? The dramaturgy was planned to be very clear: prologue (mounting of the stage), and three episodes: creation of amphitheatre, concert and clearing of the performance area [Franks 2011: 69].

The opportunity emerged a year later, when the Small Theatre (*Malij Teatr*)

¹ The article "Ķengarags aplaudē. J. Vahtangova teātra aktieri viesos pie celtniekiem" [Ķengarags applauds. The actors from Y. Vakhtangov theatre visit the builders] was published in *Rīgas Balss*, Nr. 142 (17.06.1964.), p. 4. It included the description of the performance and three photographs which present a close resemblance to the film's images: a group of spectators watching the performance pictured in medium close ups (titled: "Dress circle"), a wide shot of the stage and the seating area already full with the audience and performers on the stage (titled: "After the third bar bell ring..."), and the third depicts two performers on the stage and the audience is seen behind them (in this case, the title gives the names of the performers and the title of the sketch they are performing).

from Moscow came for guest performances to Riga. Franks arranged all the permits to film the performance at Olaine chemical factory building site on 6 August 1965. Telefilma assigned for the film four cameramen, and the main cameraman was Visvaldis Frijārs. The tasks were distributed very clearly – each cameraman received a photo layout of the planned film. They used three mobile cameras and one synchronous steady camera placed on the tripod at the stage [Franks 2011: 74]. Franks has described the preparation work in detail and putting at the centre the focus not on the performance, but everything around it. For shooting, they chose several performance pieces including the poetry reading and comical sketches, and the footage represents the reaction of the audience.

As Franks later wrote: *In this way, we were prepared for what Vertov called editing during filming, which is now constantly used by television to film live sports, mass events and demonstrations. It would be worth remembering the words of the well-known French director Jean Rouch here. He believes that there are two methods of making a documentary film. One means putting down the camera and waiting for something to happen, and the other is putting down the camera and waiting for what we expect to happen* [Franks 2011: 75].¹

Filming was completed in one and half an hour – exactly the time from the preparation for the performance right until its end and clearing the area. The dramaturgy was created in the structure mentioned previously: the prologue (mounting of the stage), and three acts: creation of amphitheatre, concert and leaving of the area.

The film in itself consists of moving images, but still images are used only on the film's titles in the beginning (one image) and at the end credits (four images) as the background. In fact, these are not five images, but only one image which is shown in different fragments. The whole picture depicts two girls on the concrete blocks, the one on the right is standing and facing the camera, looking slightly to the left side, but the one on the left is captured in mid-air caught on camera when she jumps off the block. Her feet are in the air and the image reflect her in the moment of transition between the surfaces. This still image testifies to the transformed nature of the photographic image within the moving image who turned *its stillness into* arrestedness [Campany 2008: 12]. These still images present a contrasting temporality to the rest of the film. This intermedial temporality involves the arrested moment of the still image and the duration of its representation and in the same time its presence in front of the camera as an object [Hallas 2023: 9].

¹ Dziga Vertov and his filmmaking approach was important to Franks. For the film *235 000 000* an instruction manual was prepared and distributed to the filming teams. It included fragments from Vertov's diaries.

Conclusion

The films “Salty Bread” and “At Noon” demonstrate the use of still photography as a stylistic element and also a research tool for creating a moving image work. The role of photography as a stylistic element is applied differently in each film. In “Salty Bread” it is reflecting the metaphorical visual thinking of the director seeing bread loafs in the stones in the sea or depicting specific emotional moments of the characters, their environment and the past. In the film “At Noon” only several still images are used over the film’s credits, which depict place where the main action is taking place and the children that are seen at the end of the performance. The production backgrounds of both films depict the importance of still photography for the creation of the films – characters, environment, planning, or meticulously prepared shooting plan.

The television production group provided an additional ground for creating documentary films, offering more flexible approach. In Franks’ case, his interest in specific themes and use of certain stylistic approaches translate across different production environments – either it is film or television and reoccurs in his subsequent films. The moving camera and fragmented presentation of images can also be read as his reflection on an artistic practice pertinent to interwar avant-garde practices, where the fragmentation of objects, multiplication of points of view are present [Guido 2012: 19].

In his application of still images in the films “Salty Bread” and “At Noon” Franks transcends normative documentary function of the use of still photographs and demonstrates the intermedial practice, where the notion of temporality, stillness and movement of the images and “watching” the still images within the moving image realm.

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