

## DISCUSSION: JURIS PODNIEKS AND THE CONSTELLATIONS OF TIMES

The discussion *Juris Podnieks and the Constellations of Times* took place on 4 December 2020, in the framework of the research conference *Culture Crossroads*. Every year special thematic section of the conference focuses on cinema, and this time it was dedicated to Juris Podnieks (1950–1992), one of the most important documentary filmmakers of Latvian cinema who would have turned 70 on 5 December 2020.

Juris Podnieks began working at the Riga Film Studio at the second half of the 1960s. In 1969, he entered the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography to become a documentary cinematographer. His graduation film was Herz Frank's full-length documentary "Restricted Area" (*Aizliegtā zona*, 1975), which he filmed (together with another cinematographer, Sergejs Nikolajevs) at the youth delinquents' colony in the town of Cēsis. Soon after, in 1977 he made his directorial debut with the newsreel *Padomju Latvija* "Soviet Latvia" (No. 3, 1977, entitled "The Cradle"/ *Šūpulis*). Since the beginning of the 1980s, Podnieks directed full-length documentary films, and each of those became a notable artistic achievement and resonated in society. His first full-length film "Constellation of Riflemen" (*Strēlnieku zvaigznājs*, 1982) told the story of the Latvian riflemen who fought for their country under different regimes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the film, Podnieks introduces himself and presents the film's premise. It is still rarely used approach in Latvian documentary at the time, with the filmmaker participating and involving himself actively in the film. It was Podnieks' subsequent full-length film "Is It Easy to Be Young?" (*Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, 1986), which made his name known both in the Soviet Union and internationally, and paved the way for international assignments (covered also in the discussion below). This was an unusually honest testimony of young people of the Soviet Latvia, who dared to speak frankly and express their inner feelings and thoughts about the system they lived in. In the film history of the 1980s, this is one of the most important films coming out of the region referenced as signifiers of Gorbachev's perestroika.<sup>1</sup> The strong voice of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky *The Zero Hour. Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992; Nicholas Galichenko, *Glasnost – Soviet Cinema Responds*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991.

the filmmaker manifested in “Is It Easy to Be Young?” was the reason for receiving the commission from Central Independent Television that turned into the grand portrait of the falling Soviet Union – a five-part series “Hello, Do You Hear Us?” (*Mēs*, 1989, title in the USA – “Soviets”). The changing political landscape, fighting for freedom became the theme of Podnieks’ last films – “Homeland” (*Krustceļš*, 1990), “*Post Scriptum*” (*Pēcvēards*, 1991, which includes episodes of Barricades in Riga in January 1991, when his cameraman Gvido Zvaigzne was wounded (and later passed away in the hospital), but Andris Slapiņš killed on the spot in the attack), “The End of Empire” (*Impērijas gals*, 1991), and the last short film “The Moment of Silence” (*Klusuma stunda*, 1992, dedicated to Zvaigzne and Slapiņš). He died tragically in 1992.

Almost thirty years after Podnieks’ passing, at this discussion we aim to examine his working methods, approach to documentary, specific films, and other issues paying tribute to him and his legacy that remains.<sup>1</sup>

*Zane Balčus*

Participants:

**Antra Cilinska** (Latvia), head of Juris Podnieks Studio, film editor, director and producer, lecturer of the Latvian Academy of Culture. Cilinska has edited Podnieks’ films since 1984.

**Richard Creasey** (United Kingdom), former TV commissioning editor, producer, writer, who commissioned Podnieks to make the film “Hello, Do You Hear Us?” (1989) for ITV Central.

**Tue Steen Müller** (Denmark), documentary film consultant and expert, film critic, co-founder of Balticum Film and TV festival.

**Jānis Putniņš** (Latvia), film director and head of the National Film School of the Latvian Academy of Culture.

**Zane Balčus** (Latvia), junior research assistant of the Advanced Research Centre of the Latvian Academy of Culture, film critic, curator.

**Zane Balčus: What is today Juris Podnieks’ legacy for you? How do you see him from today’s perspective?**

**Antra Cilinska:** Well, I think Juris would very well fit in the present-day situation, he would have some, I hope he would have some bright ideas. I think all he was

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<sup>1</sup> The transcript of the discussion is published here in a slightly condensed form than the actual talk. The discussion in full length is available online at the youtube channel of the Latvian Academy of Culture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9IddXbBeKM&t=1123s> (viewed 17.06.2021.)

doing it's because he was the type of person who was seeing things in relationship and in connection. He was seeing the big picture. And I think this is something that we maybe miss today.

**Tue Steen Müller:** I can continue and say that I'm so happy that you are doing this tribute to Juris Podnieks. I teach a lot, I go around a lot, and on every occasion, I'm always saying – Juris Podnieks, and I discover that the young generation don't know him. So, I think it is very important to introduce him to this generation, because when you look at the films "Hello, Do You Hear Us?", "Is It Easy to Be Young?" – they are so fresh. They are fresh in every way – they are so quick in editing, there is a rhythm and a passion. Everybody should know about them, that he is a very important filmmaker. This is not just in connection with the fall of the empire that he was covering, but also as a filmmaker, and I hope we can talk about it. I have made several notes on "Hello, Do You Hear Us?" and would like to bring up some examples of things that young people could study, but not only young people – also older people with grey hair should have the chance to see the films again.<sup>1</sup>

**Richard Creasey:** Obviously today, as it was when I first met him, he would be a giant among independent filmmakers. In my job at those days, I was commissioning a lot of programmes, the best programmes to be fair, we won lots of awards, and many people would bring me ideas. What was so important about my very first meeting with Juris is he proved what I felt all the time. Which is – ideas are a given, all that really matter is the passion of the filmmaker. And that filmmaker's passion comes through, and therefore the idea gets told. I think that's as true today as it was when we first met. We will come to later on the way in which he filmed, and the terms of a very big broadcasting institution. There were very definite regulations of what you couldn't do. You cannot use anything but the top-quality cameras to which Juris took no notice at all, and breezed into the studio with stuff shot on rather bad quality VHS. And often that was the very best. So, I think there are a lot of lessons that young people today can understand and see. We need that independence, not those who are doing things at the beck and call of the BBC or the other ones basically making films that they think their channel wants. The best films are not what the channels want, but what the filmmaker wants. And Juris didn't give us a chance to say what we wanted, it was completely what he wanted that's what I so loved about him for the three four-year period in fact a bit longer we worked together.

**Jānis Putniņš:** I would not be so optimistic that Juris would really greatly fit into today's filmmaking world. I think he lived at the right time at the right place. His films are very personal, very idiosyncratic, full with passion, and that is not exactly

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<sup>1</sup> DVD boxset of Podnieks' films was released by Juris Podnieks Studio at the end of 2020, for the first time making available a number of his films in one collection.

the quality that is really easy to sell in today's world. He's a truly unique personality, and his work is very distinctive if you look from a broader perspective. What you already mentioned, what makes his work so great is this intense interest, amazing ability to connect with people, connect with subject of his interest, and always have even relationship. It's not that he is ever dominating, there's a lot of empathy and humility. And that's also a very rare quality, which I would like to emphasize in regard to his work. I am convinced that his work can be very very inspiring for people who start to make films today, because of these qualities. There are a lot of great films, great stories, fantastic execution, but very very few of them have this amazing tactile quality that Juris' films have. I am completely convinced that for a true filmmaker this is an absolute necessity to make really great work.

**Balčus: Antra, when you started to work with Juris, how did he collaborate with colleagues and establish a connection to work with him?**

**Cilinska:** It was just by working. He was absolute workaholic, and well there were just two options – whether you are in and devote yourself fully to what you are supposed to do, or you are out. The whole idea is based on getting the best result out of the material, and as Juris was that kind of director who was like a hunter going to the woods and bringing out the meat, and I had to cook something out of this meat. Sometimes it was things that didn't go together and you didn't have any idea how to put it all together. Story like the five-part series "Hello, Do You Hear Us?", it was like the top point of complete chaos at the very beginning. I remember the first viewing for you Richard and other commissioning editors, it took ten hours to watch, and that was the material for a one-hour programme! I started to work with him after the "Riflemen", and we did some smaller films, and I think it was already the second film, "The Sisyphus Rolls the Stone"<sup>1</sup> we did together, when I started to realize how I can participate in it. Juris needed a thinking partner with whom he could play with ideas. Once he really brought me to tears, and he said – well if you don't know how to make something out of this, then I don't need you, I don't need a person who can just stick two pieces of film together, these days we were still working on film. Ok, I felt very offended, I cried a little bit, and then I thought over and said – ok, you go home and see you tomorrow, and I spent all night fighting with this episode. Actually, it was very badly shot and Juris himself didn't know what to do with it, but in the morning, I had something to show him and he was happy. I think this was a turning point, because we have to think what are the next steps. It's like when you are making bread, you are working with the dough, getting and squeezing the best things out of it, and

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<sup>1</sup> Between feature length films "Constellation of Riflemen" (1982) and "Is It Easy to Be Young?" (1986) Podnieks directed short documentaries "Commander" (*Komandieris*, 1984) and "Sisyphus Rolls the Stone" (*Veļ Sīzifs akmeni*, 1985).

that's why actually editing took a lot of time and long, long hours. It's like you dive into the material and it takes time before you get something out of it. Yes, so I think he was demanding, and demanding till the very end until we reached the result. And sometimes even when it was finished, he came up the next morning, even cutting the negative – we need to adjust this or that, to change something. Absolute devotion to the material, to the film, to the idea I would say. He once offended the scriptwriter of “Is It Easy to Be Young?”<sup>1</sup> saying that he just read the script and left it on the shelf and went out filming. This was a way, because he had this sort of like a platform, like a basement for ideas and then he was just really gathering the material, gathering stories, and you never knew what can come out if it, and then putting them in some shape and form, I think this is how it always happened.

**Müller:** Can I ask a question?

**Balčus:** Sure.

**Müller:** Because you talked about scripts, and now we have you and Richard here. What about scripting “Hello, Do You Hear Us?” – was there any script, was there anything on paper? I'm asking this also because today whenever you want to make a film you need to write and write and write to get the funding. How was it in this case?

**Creasey:** Shall I answer that one, Antra? Let me take you back to 1986 Soviet Union, Gorbachev was just in. So, I went to Moscow with the idea of looking for a film for an extraordinary filmmaker called Ken Loach. Ken was working with me on drama documentaries<sup>2</sup>, and I thought this would be a great subject matter for Ken to see if we could find something in Moscow. I put together a small joint venture with the Ministry of Culture, which I knew would allow us to do things which most wouldn't, *Goskino*, and Lev Guschin who was the deputy editor of the very good magazine called *Ogonok*<sup>3</sup>. And he listened to me going on about what I wanted, and said – you don't know what you are talking about, you need to see a real film. So, he marched me off to a top of Arbat Street to the art cinema, which is where they were showing “Is It Easy to Be Young?”. I went in there with an interpreter, I couldn't speak a word in Russian, and I saw the first half hour of a kind of really rather bad-looking film, and I didn't know why on Earth I was here. And then it turned out that was a Soviet newsreel, and that Juris' film hadn't started. Then “Is It Easy to Be Young?” came up. And I was absolutely entranced by it, I hadn't seen that passion on the

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<sup>1</sup> The film's co-scriptwriters with Podnieks are Jevgenijs Margolins and Ābrams Kleckins.

<sup>2</sup> British filmmaker Ken Loach (1936) has worked with Creasey on the film *Gamekeeper* (1980) among others.

<sup>3</sup> The joint venture was Soviet British Creative Association established in 1989 (after the fall of the Soviet Union, it was renamed East West Creative Association).

screen for such a long time! And I was at that time the boss and I could commission anything I wanted, there was no one to ask, there was no committee, just me. And I walked out and said – I'd love to meet Juris. It was Wednesday, and they said, well, we might be able to get him down from Riga, and I said – fine, if you can, I'd love it. And the first time I met Juris, I said – Juris, I'll give you a camera we'll pay for, I'll give you 80 thousand pounds, I'll give you an edit suite for as long as you want it on any subject you like. So, to answer to your question, Tue, in those particular days which were very different from now I suspect, it was just me seeing something astonishing, recognizing extraordinary filmmaker, and saying – make it. While from Juris' point of view this was quite difficult because, he'd been nudged into what he should be making I suspect by studio bosses in Riga, and the system, and then he had to find way out of this. Then three or four weeks later I came back and I went to Riga, and I went to see him at work in his Riga Studios, and he was showing me the rushes of the film he'd just made, and I suddenly understood why he was so extraordinary. Because he was using all the material he could whether it was 35 mm, 16 mm, if he could grab a VHS camera, which was very new at those days, he would shove that in and get it filmed. And so the energy made me understand that what was really needed was someone who could work alongside him. And in my experience that someone was always two. There was a cameraperson, and some really great editor. And I knew if I'd asked some other editor to do it that wouldn't work. So I asked Antra, can you come and edit, and that was how it started, with me realizing that Juris did need people around him who could do extraordinary things, but my job was to keep the kind of big bureaucracy off his back. And there were difficulties of that. I sold the idea to the people who scheduled all the films, and they were terribly excited about the big film on the Soviet Union and no one had done it before. And by the time we came up with something which was worth looking at, the BBC had won an award, the Yorkshire television had won an award, and our film hadn't even seen the screen. So there were lots of grumbles going on until there came the film and it proved to be as magic as we thought it will be.

**Müller:** And just to follow up – at what hour was it screened, and do you remember how many people watched it? Was it a big hit in the UK?

**Creasey:** The answer is on the one hand, yes, on the other hand these were very different days back then. There were only four channels, Channel 4 hadn't started, there was only BBC 1, BBC 2, ITV. ITV was meant to be a commercial one, but in the documentary area we had to make films which were going to challenge those on BBC 1 and BBC 2. So, to answer your questions, we were ITV, and ITV back then did not have much competition and we got a big audience. I think it was 9 o'clock, Antra?

**Cilinska:** Yes, I think so.

**Creasey:** I refused to look at the ratings because it seemed that they dogged all the senior people like me who got all the rating things. I'm happily dyslexic so I wouldn't need to read all the stuff and ratings are a good excuse to say I don't read those things. It got a huge response, and by this time Channel 4 had already agreed to take the next four programmes. Whether it would have done as well today when we have so many programmes and channels, I don't know, but I think we are finding the way towards niche programming which is watched. But it was immediately recognized as a force it really was that's why it won Prix d' Italia and all the BAFTAs, and everything else, because it was clearly extraordinary. Because it was extraordinary it took so long time to make, it really was very mature.

**Balčus:** **Could you please elaborate more on how you worked together – did you watch the material together, what was the process of actually creating these five episodes, and how much were you involved in making the creative decisions?**

**Creasey:** Yes, let me try. I was in a very privileged position. I was responsible at that time for about 400 programmes a year. I was perfectly involved in half a dozen, one of which was *Juris*.<sup>1</sup> And I knew that if you went down the normal way of commissioning programmes, I would be chucked out immediately. My father<sup>1</sup> was a writer, so in the very early days I decided that I had to change the attitude of commissioning programmes to that of a publisher to a writer. The most important person in the publishing is the writer and the publisher in my dad's books didn't even get a name on it. So I thought, my relationship with *Juris* was that of a publisher. All that I needed to check was that Antra and the others who were much more involved were there. And I had a very great assistant executive producer called Roger James. Roger James had gone up, very unusually, from film editing to producing, and he was a master at enabling people to do even better than they thought they would. So all I had to check was if Roger was a lot involved and he was. And I was able to be a light relief in a way, I was never the person saying you can't do this, I was the person to be a bit more like – hey *Juris* why don't we try it. So when *Juris* came and wanted to put in some VHS material in here, I was – yeah, why not, never once – you can't do that! So in a way it was unusual, but he was a magnificent person to work with.

**Cilinska:** I remember Richard was always a good cop, Richard never said no. I think you had split roles, this was our production manager Jackie<sup>2</sup> who was always worried. Actually, I have to say *Juris* had some power with his charisma. There were a lot of times really very difficult situations, complicated decisions to be made – are we going to continue, should we be closed down, should we be sent out and never

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<sup>1</sup> John Creasey (1908–1973).

<sup>2</sup> Jackie Henson.

come back, but always somehow the right decision was made. I don't remember any moment when Richard said – no, it's impossible, just do this and that. Never. I remember at one stage the project was closed, thank God it was a British project and the material was smuggled out and he wasn't stopped. We had these moments, but we always found some solution. The result was what mattered, I think for Juris that was his passion and what moved it forward.

**Creasey:** I think you are probably right, Jānis, they were particular times. It was a very very unique period in which things were happening, and I happened to be in exactly the right position and exactly the right time to be able to enable these things to happen. My background was that my father was very famous, he had written nearly 600 books, he was the world's most prolific writer, but what most people don't know, he had more than 740 rejections before his first book was published. So I was brought up knowing that you don't take "no" for an answer. And when someone says I'm going to do it you back them if you believe they really will. Every time Juris said he wanted to go back I would know that when he went, he'd come back with something which was worth doing and that heritage that I got in my blood was very much there.

**Balčus: Tue, you met Juris when he visited Balticum festival?**

**Müller:** Balticum Film and Television festival<sup>1</sup> was something that changed my professional life. We were happy to get the funding and make this festival on the island of Bornholm, and we had it for ten years and there we met filmmakers from the region. In 1992 Juris came and it was his last festival, because it was in May<sup>2</sup>. And later on, I got to know more about his work thanks to Antra. In this book that we made about the festival<sup>3</sup> there is a long article by Herz Frank, because Herz Frank was also there in 1992 and he said that this was such a wonderful time for Juris and Herz to be together for a week and talk about film. And Frank was also writing about this amazing pressure that had been on Juris making something like seven feature documentaries in two years. As you said, Antra, Juris was a workaholic, and he was also tired. He was then a star at the festival, and he was talking, "now I want to do something else." Watching the series again during the last days I'm so impressed by the films because they are not easy films, they are goddamn complicated. Yaroslavl in the first one, then there is Chernobyl, in the next one we go to Karabakh, then we

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<sup>1</sup> Balticum Film and Television festival was established in 1990, it focused on the films from the Baltic Sea region, in such format it ran until 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Podnieks died on 23 June 1992, what was to be believed a diving accident in Zvirgzdu Lake near Kuldīga due to a heart condition.

<sup>3</sup> The book was published on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the festival: *Balticum Film & TV Festival 1990–99*. Bornholm: Baltic Media Centre, 1999.



are talking about Afghanistan<sup>1</sup> and so on. But in some way or the other it all goes together. I think that young people today can be inspired as you said, Jānis. Inspired that you can construct a film in a way which is not like many films today built according to the three-act structure, going from one to two to three. It's possible to make different things, and it demonstrates of course how fantastic he was to get close to people, and in the way he was a brilliant journalist. He could really ask questions in a warm and good way so that people could say something which made sense. I'm especially very fascinated by the Afghan war veteran, the young man who has lost his foot or leg.<sup>2</sup> He's interviewing him in the courtyard where some kids are playing football, and he's playing the ball with them. Then he sits down and Juris starts asking him – what do you think about Afghanistan, and he starts talking and says I don't want to talk about it because it can be used against me. And by saying this he has already said what he thinks about it. Then Juris cuts to something else, and then comes back to the courtyard where he is playing football, and then he is saying something like “sacrifice in vain, we were deceived” etcetera very openly. In that respect Juris is demonstrating how he can get close to people and film them in a very warm way and understanding way, and this is one of the big qualities, I would say. There are so many other things! And the films are very timely – all this material from Karabakh, it's happening again now. And Afghanistan – also, the Russians in Afghanistan then, but now the Russians are in Syria. It's the same story. It has a current appeal in a very strange way. But talking about this complicated structure – putting in the scene with Rybnikov<sup>3</sup> is fantastic. By having this guy in his studio, composing the music and you see him talking, and he is also the one who gets the last word. It gives a total new layer in the film, it's not just reportage on what's happening in Karabakh, in Armenia, and so on. It's also bringing in humanistic, existential aspects to the films which are fantastic.

**Creasey:** When I decided to set up a joint venture with *Goskino*, I also needed a really great independent anarchist, a real person, so I got Rybnikov to become one of the founding members of that joint venture. And I didn't say to Juris – you will have to use Rybnikov. It was simply putting them in one room together and it was from my point of view inexorable that these two masters of their own areas would work. So that's one of the great benefits that we had.

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<sup>1</sup> The film documents different events in various republics of the Soviet Union, among those the strike in the Yaroslavl factory in Kirishi in Russia, which occurred after the people of the town experienced consequences of corrosive pollution; the blast at the Chernobyl Nuclear Reactor in Ukraine was one of the most severe nuclear catastrophes, ethnic conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Soviet war in Afghanistan, and many others.

<sup>2</sup> This sequence is included in the third episode of the film “Hello, Do You Hear Us?”.

<sup>3</sup> Alexey Rybnikov (1945) is a Russian composer of musicals, operas, film scores etc.

**Cilinska:** I think for us the biggest problem, the new thing number one was – working for television. Because here back at home working for television that was nonsense. People doing films for television, well that wasn't serious. Another problem was how to put all those bits and pieces together into something which makes a story, and a story with a continuation. Actually, Rybnikov was a great solution, because it was a process which you could expand and come back to. Rybnikov's philosophy and his looking inside and asking these big questions, I think it coincided with Juris' point of view, his aims and what he believed in. And then we really started thinking about these stories, how we could come from one to another just to make this big picture. It wasn't easy and it took time. We had 300 hours of sound, and over 100 hours of film. And from the beginning it was meant for a one-hour film. I think it took half a year to sync it up and look through, at least to have an idea what's in it.

**Balčus:** **Antra, could you comment more on how you worked with this amount of material – did you only edit when the shooting was completed, did you look it all through, and made notes, please tell us more about it.**

**Cilinska:** I remember when I arrived in the UK and Juris brought me to Birmingham where we were editing, the next day he left. He left me on my own, and I started to work with the material. I had two British guys, Steve Barkley and Mark Steve who were helping me, but of course they didn't have much knowledge of Russian language or other languages that were up there on screen. We used these little yellow post-it notes, and the house we were living in then was covered in these yellow notes describing different episodes. Each evening when we came home and we had made some changes in the editing, we rearranged the notes. It's a shame I didn't film or photograph it, it is just in my memory.

**Balčus:** **Podnieks has said that for him the poetical tradition of Latvian documentary filmmaking was of great importance. How do you see in his films the interpretation of it, what was his poetic language?**

**Putniņš:** There is no question that his filmmaking style is very poetic. He has this uncanny ability to see amazing things in the images, poetic things, small details that become very powerful when you put them together. They may seem insignificant looking from a semantic narrative point of view, but there are these glances, some umbrellas opening, or gait of a person, or how he stands or leans, Juris sees these things and it creates a layer in his films, which is impossible to describe in very strict, precise terms. This is poetry of life that find expression in Juris' films. And of course, the editing, the way he puts images together. Antra, maybe you can say more about that, on how it happened, I'm really curious. In some decisions that were made you can see how the structure is being created, how it jells together with the previous or

the next episode, but sometimes they are truly very intuitive and quite amazing, and I cannot see how can you come to this decision.

**Cilinska:** I think the main thing was that it was important not to lose the audience. The main task was to keep the viewer informed, attracted, to stay there, to create the flow of thought. Sometimes you make an abrupt sound or noise or music or cut, and it helps you to get rid of that information to be able to continue. I think that Juris had this poetic tradition of documentary filmmaking very deep in him, but he also managed to add this publicity and topicality, this present-day situation nerve and thoughts people were thinking at that moment. I think this is something that made his films special. It's not just a current affair film but it's something more, it's a bigger topic. One more thing to add – it always happened through some personal experience and personal story. We never used any voice over, which was also a challenge for Richard and John Willis<sup>1</sup>, because at that time for British television it was always a voice over. And it's much easier to work, you simply adjust shots and someone tells you the story. But we took another path. And I remember very well, I think it was with "The End of Empire" it was Julian Ware<sup>2</sup> at that time, when we showed the first cut, we had to put the film together pretty quickly, I remember, there was a list of approximately 80 questions which were not clear. Because for us seeing Brezhnev, seeing someone else or seeing this or that, it's already clear. When you lose the audience, they will not watch the film. They said – Juris, for this film we definitely need voice over, but what we did, we were sitting and trying to understand where the problem was and what was not clear and how to make it clear. It also happened when Roger James was coming to the cutting room of "Homeland", and we were really testing Roger – tell us what you don't understand, where the problem is. And then we try to make the story so that it becomes clear, and we don't have to use voice over.

**Balčus:** I would like to turn to Richard. Antra already told us about how they tried making the film so that everything was clear through the images. In one of the interviews to a Latvian newspaper, a journalist told Juris that for him the film seemed too journalistic. Juris replied that for him – maybe, but for the British television it was probably too poetic. How did you find common ground on this, how did you let Juris translate his vision?

**Creasey:** It's a good question. I think it goes back to confusion in my days when I was involved in commissioning programmes and today. This confusion between a really great documentary and a really important current affairs programme. And there is a massive difference. And I think the audience is often confused about that. The biggest difference which the BBC hates but which I really loved is that

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<sup>1</sup> Programme director of Channel 4.

<sup>2</sup> Producer at ITV.

a true documentary is not balanced, it is subjective unbalanced passionate story of that person's point of view. Broadcasters find it very difficult because they want to balance all their programming. And Juris was an opinion writer, this was his, so the important thing was allowing Juris to say what he wanted to and what he needed to say. As Antra says, Juris' job was not to let you take your eyes off the screen, Juris' job in documentary was not to give you all the information, Juris' job was to say when you've finished watching the film, then you go and find out more. And in a way that's a job of a really great documentary.

**Balčus:** Tue, maybe you have something to add?

**Müller:** This confusion between current affairs and documentary, it still exists. When I've been to some film schools, the students they – no, no, I don't want to film faces, I don't want to film faces, because then it's not a documentary. Which is absolutely nonsense. And I always say – it depends on the face, it depends on what the people are saying. I think what also people can get out of watching Juris' films is – fuck the rules. There are no rules, if something works like he's sitting and talking to a man in a veranda in one of his films<sup>1</sup>. It is so natural, it is a good conversation, and it is so nice to see him. In film schools, students sometimes say – no, no I don't want to be in the picture, it shouldn't be like that. It's like there are still some rules. I think it's getting better, because television is not so important any longer. And British television, I think Richard you will agree with me, there are not many strong filmmakers coming out of from England any longer, I'm afraid. Channel 4 was very important, maybe it still is for some filmmakers, Kim Longinotto<sup>2</sup> or some, I don't know, but it's very difficult, because the rules are very strict. Am I right or not, Richard?

**Creasey:** I would agree with you. I think it's the individualism which makes the creativity, which makes it work is no longer apparent. Everything is commissioned by a committee, the rough-cuts are shown to a committee, on that committee people will look after budgets, and so it goes on. I absolutely agree.

**Müller:** Everything is topic, topic, subject, subject, and you have to explain as you said, the audience will not understand. Another very good thing about some of "Hello, Do You Hear Us?" episodes, sometimes there are long silent sequences – this is very good. I remember one of my other heroes Sergei Dvortsevov<sup>3</sup> he made

<sup>1</sup> Reference to an episode in "Is It Easy to Be Young?".

<sup>2</sup> Kim Longinotto (1952) – British documentary director who often focuses on different female charactres.

<sup>3</sup> Sergei Dvortsevov (1962) – Russian director of documentary and fiction films. "Bread Day" (Хлебный день, 1998) tells about a small village whose inhabitants have to push a train cart off from the main tracks to their village to provide people with bread.

the film called “Bread Day”, and it starts with four or five or six minutes when nothing is being said. And he was fighting with Channel 4 to keep it. The television said they cannot show this, but they replied – then you can’t have the film. At the end luckily Dvortsevoy won, and there is an episode of a long silence in the film where people are pushing a train cart and nothing is being said. But I don’t know how it is today. I’m afraid that in many cases today watching on television sequence like that people would think that there is something wrong with their television set, the same goes if its black and white. Television is not so important, and that’s another little side thing I’m so happy about that the Baltic countries have their own film funds, film institutes, with limited money but they are there to support their documentary film as an art form. Am I right, Antra?

**Cilinska:** Yes, you are. It made me remember the case with “Homeland”. The beginning of the film is also quite slow, the film was shown on the PBS channel in the States. They said we are going to show the film, but we are going to change the beginning. Juris said that he was going to go to the States and he could come and help them with it, but they said – no, no, we know better. And it was like a shock – how can you know better what to change?

**Creasey:** I think it is really important point. And I think that it is so difficult to ignore the people who have commissioned it and the others, because every time someone looks at the film like Juris and each person will have their own opinion. And the only opinion that matters is Juris’ as long as you’re sure he has really thought through all the consequences like people switching off if there are long silences. But we have to trust the filmmaker more, which goes back to – we need to become more like publishers.

**Balčus:** **As we have to conclude, maybe there is a topic or burning question I didn’t address? So please the floor is yours.**

**Creasey:** Can I just be slightly optimistic for the future, just because I can’t not be optimistic. I think that the great trouble we’ve got today is the committees we talked about and the commissioning, and therefore the need to write scripts. But I always say to myself, that the one thing we know is that everything goes round in the circle. Like we have winter, and spring, and summer, and then autumn, and then we’re back and it goes round in very big circles. So, keep on going and I think we’ll keep on going round the circle and there will come time when individuals like Tue and me will just be able to say – yes, do it, I trust you. So that competence I’m sure will come around. And if you don’t have any money, you use the tools you’ve got, smartphones or whatever, so when the opportunity arises, you take that opportunity, but you need to continue working.

**Cilinska:** Don’t lose faith in yourself.

**Müller:** There are so many good films being made. What Richard was saying, I think it was *camera-stylo*, now it is *i-phone-stylo*. The technical development allows you not to wait for the money in your bank account, you can just go and film, but you should know what you are filming of course.

**Creasey:** Yes, you need your passion.

**Müller:** Absolutely.

**Putniņš:** Yes, I totally agree with Tue. There are so many good films being made despite all the committee stuff, councils, and so on. Many of them are made without waiting for money but just by doing. And that's how they should be made. First of all, there should be passion and if someone gives you money – fine, great, but passion should come first.

(Prepared for publication by Zane Balčus)