

FILMMAKERS AS ONSCREEN CHARACTERS IN RECENT LATVIAN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

PhD cand. **Zane Balčus**

Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia

Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century an increase of films with filmmakers present onscreen can be observed in Latvian documentary cinema. Their stories open up personal issues and family histories, their presence diversifies stylistic approaches to documentary apart from most often used observational form. Issues of formal elements of narrating a story, representation of filmmaker's self within the film's narrative, power relations between the filmmaker and the character are at the core of study in documentary film theory, where participatory and performative modes (Bill Nichols), analysis of performative nature of documentary (Stella Bruzzi), and character representation (Carl Plantinga, Thomas Waugh) are explored.

The three recent Latvian documentaries discussed in this article present variations of interaction of filmmaker and character/-s in telling the story of the director's father in "My Father the Banker" (*Mans tēvs bankieris*, Ieva Ozoliņa, 2015), disclosing the personality of a friend and an artist in "Forging Condors" (*Kondoru kalve*, Mārtiņš Grauds, 2018), or questioning the ethical implications of a documentary filmmaker in "Documentarian" (*Dokumentālists*, Ivars Zviedris, Inese Kļava, 2012). They present various approaches to the issues of representation, choice of formal elements, and interaction between the filmmakers and the films' characters.

Keywords: *documentary cinema, participatory mode, Latvian cinema, performative documentary, Ivars Zviedris.*

The discussion about displaying the filmmakers at the scene of a documentary film production visible to the audiences in the completed film relates most distinctly to the 1960s, and the movements of Direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*. The Direct cinema convincingly conceals the filmmakers' presence from the audience. The audience observes the events filmed, and is allowed to forget the presence of a crew,

however small, at the location. The approach of the *cinéma vérité* (or film truth) characterises a different view, where the filmmakers are active participants of the onscreen events. In his initial work, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (1991), Bill Nichols proposed four modes of documentary, which filled the necessary gap in *clear and definitive* nomenclature [Waugh 2011: xviii] of terminology for describing documentaries. Direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* thus became associated with two of Nichols' modes – the observational and interactive, respectively.

Responding to the global trend, when from the late 1980s the body of autobiographical film and video productions increased significantly all over the World [Renov 2004: 104] and more diverse stylistic approaches appeared in documentaries, also Nichols' further exploration of documentary modes corresponded with this new turn. A new mode, performative, was added, and later instead of interactive the name of participatory mode was adopted. Participatory mode, as proposed by Nichols, “*emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement. Often coupled with archival footage to examine historical issues*” [Nichols 2001: 34]. Performative mode stresses “*the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own engagement with the subject and an audience's responsiveness to this engagement. Rejects notions of objectivity in favour of evocation and affect. [...] The films in this mode all share qualities with the experimental, personal, and avant-garde, but with a strong emphasis on their emotional and social impact on an audience*” [Nichols 2001: 34]. Even though each mode has certain characteristics, they “*function as a dominant in a given film: they give structure to the overall film, but they do not dictate or determine every aspect of its organization*”, as noted by Nichols [Nichols 2001: 100].

Issue of performance and performative nature of documentary has been at the centre of Stella Bruzzi's study of documentary films and television productions. Even though Nichols and Bruzzi uses the same name, Bruzzi's approach is much more complex and instead of clear-cut descriptions as in Nichols' modes accentuates the problem of impossibility of objective representation of reality [Ros et al. 2018: 226] and does not propose specific kinds of documentaries with clear-cut set of features. In Bruzzi's view, “*documentaries are performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity*” [Bruzzi 2006: 1]. Bruzzi characterizes performative documentary, either it is with the filmmaker's active participation or centred around a character, which “*only comes into being as it is performed, that although its factual basis (or document) can pre-date any recording or representation of it, the film itself is necessarily performative because it is given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality*” [Bruzzi 2006: 186]. Bruzzi's belief that all documentaries should be perceived as performative problematizes

the possibility to distinguish and analyse certain kinds of films like first-person documentaries, as pointed out by Ros, O'Connell, Kiss, and van Noortwijk [Ros et al. 2018: 226]. Nevertheless, Bruzzi's observations of the filmmaker's direct interaction with the characters is valuable source for film analyses in the context of this article.

Not just the filmmaker's physical persona, but the filmmaking act is notable in these films. The filmmaker not just *plays himself*, using Thomas Waugh's expression, but is part of the filmmaking process seen by the audience. He plays a *filmmaker* and at the same time he *is* a filmmaker. Thus, in this interactive form, the documentary becomes a meta-observational film, when the participant becomes that which is being observed [Nichols 1991: 49]. We observe the filmmaker with a camera and in front of a camera lens, and at the same time recognize that there is another cinematographer behind another camera. Or we see the filmmaker in front of the camera, once the camera has been set up and left rolling. In another case, it can be a film's director seen onscreen, and not doing the filming himself, even more clearly showing the act of being in a certain role. As Bruzzi notes, "*documentary has an established tradition of the performer-director*" [Bruzzi 2006: 198]. The reason for such an act is filmmakers' interest "*in discovering alternative and less formally restrictive ways of getting to what they perceive to be the essence of their subjects*" [ibid.].

The importance of a camera or other filming equipment as a technical tool that is explicitly visible or being recognized, has been for the *cinéma vérité* practitioners. It is linked to their inspiration in the avant-garde period of the 1920s. Jean Rouch points out to Dziga Vertov's "Man with a Movie Camera" (Человек с киноаппаратом, 1929) as an example where the director's aim is to "*make the camera the principal actor, the object of this new cult of total cinema*" [Rouch 2003: 269]. Later technological advancements have allowed filmmakers to employ these technological possibilities to even greater extent. The digital video cameras, various distribution strategies, including internet, personal use filming and editing equipment, which allows for very intimate personal moments to be shot and made available *are transforming documentary practice* [Rothwell 2008: 152]. Thus, the filmmakers are there not just to embody or take part in the acts of *presentation*, but engage in *representation* through varying means of interaction on the scene of a documentary [Waugh 2011: 82–83].

Analysing depiction of characters and filmmakers as characters onscreen, Carl Plantinga suggests to discuss the distinction of *flat* and *round* characters also in the documentary context, where flat characters have only a few traits and are unchanging and uncomplicated, but round characters have many different traits, they are complex and dynamic [Plantinga 2018: 122]. As Plantinga suggests "[t]he generation of allegiances and antipathies towards various characters in any narrative film is a form of moral or socio-political judgement that is stamped on the film by the

narration's implicit approval or disapproval of one or more characters" [Plantinga 2018: 128]. Such approach can be traced in the documentary films, where the filmmakers create a connection to the characters, or her-/himself as well.

Observing the onscreen presence of the filmmakers in Latvian documentary cinema it can be traced to the early 1960s, with Uldis Brauns' short documentary "Construction" (*Celtne*, 1962), which involved the film's scriptwriter Armīns Lejiņš onscreen interviewing workers at the construction site of Daugavpils' Chemical factory.¹ However, only since the 1980s such approach has become more widespread, and involved different variations. The filmmaker's presence was one of stylistic features of Juris Podnieks' work in the 1980s. He introduced himself in the opening scene of his first full length documentary "The Constellation of Riflemen" (*Strēlnieku zvaigznājs*, 1982), he was an active interviewer in "Is It Easy to Be Young?" (*Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, 1986), and five part series "Hello, Do You Hear Us?" (*Mēs*, 1989). Self-reflexivity and the role of documentary filmmaker characterize also Hercs Franks' oeuvre, being either present as an interviewer, off-screen commentator or the main character. His subtle and sympathetic voice narrates "The Last Judgement" (*Augstākā tiesa*, 1987), "There Lived Seven Simeons" (*Reiz dzīvoja septiņi Simeoni*, 1989), but in the film "Flashback" (2002) he looks back at his own life (even showing his heart surgery). Increase of filmmakers' presence in films can be observed after the 2000s, but even more distinctly from the 2010s. It is a recurring feature of some filmmakers (like Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen, Pēteris Krilovs), or a unique approach used in one (at least at the moment) film by a certain director. These recent films tell about personal issues, involving historical periods of the family's past, friendship, profession, and other topics. Through the personal prism, they disclose issues of the past or question the truthfulness of historical facts. This corresponds to the observations about the increase of personal narratives toward the end of the 20th century.

The three recent Latvian documentaries discussed in this article, present diverse approach and connection between the filmmakers and their characters, and the way they are represented. These are more complex approaches than just an interview or guiding a story through the unobtrusive participation as an enquirer at a given situation. The autobiographical angle is most distinct in Ieva Ozoliņa's "My Father the Banker" (*Mans tēvs bankieris*, 2015). The film's narrative is based on the director's search for her missing father and through the search process their family history and

¹ The script of the film "Kuldīga Frescoes" (*Kuldīgas freskas*, 1966) also included a self-reflexive approach. The film's opening was going to include the film's cameraman walking and looking around, soon to be joined with his assistant. The film's scriptwriters were Lejiņš and the film's director Aivars Freimanis, the idea was not realized in the completed film [Pērkone 2017: 25–26].

history of Latvia in the last few decades is presented. Previous connection is there also between the filmmaker Mārtiņš Grauds and the artist, his friend, Miķelis Fišers in the film “Forging Condors” (*Kondoru kalve*, 2018), which follow their trip to South America, and the story is weaved together through a loose search narrative. “Documentarian” (*Dokumentālists*, 2012), in its turn, focuses on the relationship between the filmmaker Ivars Zviedris and Inta, a woman who lives by the Ķemeri National Park, exploring the nature and ethical issues permeating documentary filmmaking.

Through the family angle: “My Father the Banker” (2015)

A debut feature documentary by Ieva Ozoliņa “My Father the Banker” grew out of the graduation film project,¹ taking shape of a full-length personal story about the director’s father, an infamous former banker Boriss Osipovs who went missing nearly twenty years ago along with his then partner and 6 million Lats from the TopBanka. The family has had no knowledge about his whereabouts since the late 1990s, until one day many years later they received information from the police that he might have been found. His whereabouts were passed on to Latvian police from the Interpol, stating that the person matching the description of missing Osipovs had been found at the psychiatric clinic in Malaysia.

The film starts at the police department where the director has come to identify her father in the image received from Interpol. The greyscale image of a person’s face becomes a denominator for exploration of a person’s life. As Plantinga has pointed out to Béla Balázs’s explorations, “[t]he recorded image of the face reveals the outward signs of emotion, mood, intention and thought, and thus, Balázs shows, the close-up takes the spectator from the outer realm of broad physical space into the minute realm of physiognomy and the inner world of psychology” [Plantinga 2018: 129]. Along with the family, the spectators are allowed to study the image of his face, and later the face of the real person when the daughter travels to Malaysia to meet him. The picture of his face is puzzling, adding to the intrigue of what the daughter will uncover – is it really him?

The film includes different sources of visual information that enable Ozoliņa to construct the past and the present, but, as the participatory mode entails, throughout the narrative it is the filmmaker’s direct engagement with unfolding events that keeps our attention [Nichols 2001: 119–120]. The film employs different archive materials – soviet time newsreels to illustrate the time her father was growing up, and

¹ Ozoliņa’s wish to tell her father’s story was the reason for the decision to study filmmaking [Griškevica 2018].

adding them ironical tone: how people lived in the same apartments, used the same perfume, knew how to use gas masks and be ready for a nuclear attack. Home videos are perfect source for illustrating in very direct way the moments of their domestic life, including the director's wedding. The changing times can also be observed through the different formats of the archive materials – from 35 mm newsreels, to video quality ads and home videos. Apart from archival sources, the film shows the family in the contemporary setting – family has gathered to study the father's picture trying to recognize him, then discussing the situation how to help him further. Some family members and friends or former colleagues are interviewed by Ozoliņa. The setups for the interviews vary: Ozoliņa talks to her aunt in the midst of the dental procedure, as her mother's sister is a dentist, and the director has come to fix her teeth and over the pauses they are having a *casual* conversation about her father. More neutral interview spaces are also used: sometimes the interviewees are just sitters in the frame at their own apartments or workplaces, or neutral backgrounds, or at times the director and the interviewee both are filmed. Nevertheless, it is always her voice behind the frame asking the poignant questions.

As Annie Lebow has observed, "*First person films can be [...] autobiographical in full, or only implicitly and in part. [...] They are, very often, not a cinema of 'me', but about someone close, dear, beloved or intriguing, who nonetheless informs the filmmaker's sense of him or herself. They may not be about a person, self or other, at all, but about a neighbourhood, a community, a phenomenon or event. The designation 'first person film' is foremost about a mode of address: these films 'speak' from the articulated point of view of filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position*" [Lebow 2012: 1]. This subjective position permeates the film, as already its title indicates – with the preposition "my" directly connecting it with the filmmaker. Even though the film presents an array of very interesting details about the specific historical time, especially the 1990s, the wild first decade of the reinstated independence of Latvia, the film as the "*first-person documentaries shift the focus of their viewers from the factual details of the situation that is represented [...] towards its emotional dimensions, which are universally human*" [Ros et al. 2018: 236]. The complex relationship between the daughter and the father is foregrounded here on the backdrop of tumultuous times, sculpting an exciting narrative development.

The narration in the first person in the voice of the director stresses it, and shifts the focus towards the director as well, as this is also a story about her, and her relationship with the father. Ozoliņa is a performer-director, who is onscreen and does not fulfil the task of the cinematographer. The camera observes her in a given situation along with the other characters or just by herself in a journey to find her father.

A journey through space and art: "Forging Condors" (2018)

The film "Forging Condors" presents another kind of interaction between the filmmaker and its main protagonist. It was the initiative of the director Mārtiņš Grauds to make a film about contemporary artist Miķelis Fišers¹, who is also his friend. It was their agreement from the beginning that if such a film was made, then Grauds also had to be in it. "*It forced to reconsider the tools and approach how to tell about Miķelis and his work, and the film's focus shifted so much that became almost imperceptible*" [Anonymous 2018], Grauds has explained. The film does not involve direct interviews between both through which our knowledge is enhanced about the artist and his work. The narrative is arranged based on the trip they take together to Latin America – Peru, Bolivia, Mexico. The events are structured as the preparation for the trip, going there together and then experiencing the countries separately as if they've lost each other while travelling, and then reuniting and concluding the trip together.

"Forging Condors" correspond with Bruzzi's notion of *journey films*, where journey consists of different encounters, either between filmmaker and its subjects, or between different subjects, and often these meetings are unplanned without a preoccupation with a clear end point [Bruzzi 2006: 81]. Considering the structure of this film, the journey serves as the backbone of the narrative, which is complimented with imaginary sequences that are fragments of Fišers' artist films, exhibition documentation, and staged scenes. In the end credits specific roles are designated to several characters: Fišers is introduced as *The Lost Artist*, Grauds as *The Director*, there is also *The Shaman, Some Russian, A Quechua Woman*. The adding of roles serves as a notion of the constructedness of the narrative. Seeing Grauds onscreen when he is looking for his lost friend and spending time by himself, is clearly a construction of how to integrate both of them in the story, which was their initial agreement. The travel format allows not to focus on the argument or narrative cohesion, but "*it is simply a chronicle of events linked by location, personality or theme*" [Bruzzi 2006: 83]. Here it is linked by all three factors – specific location, a personality of an artist, the theme of the friendship between the artist and the director, and also art. Along with the principal cameraman Aigars Sērmukšs, several other cinematographers have been involved in the making of the film, including the director Grauds who shot scenes in Bolivia and Peru. In several episodes of the film, he is seen with the camera as if playing a filmmaker on the scene, once more foregrounding the element of play of himself in front of the camera.

¹ Miķelis Fišers (b. 1970) is a visual artist and set designer, using different techniques – painting, graphics, videos, installations, objects. He has had numerous solo and group exhibitions. He is a recipient of Purvītis Prize (2015), an award for the achievement in Latvian professional visual art scene.

The film eschews any voice over commentary, instead involving casual interactions between the director and the artist, or either of them both with other people. Waugh's distinction of presentational and representational forms (and hybrid form as the third to describe more complex approaches) allows to see their presence as representational where, among other descriptions, *social actors role-play or dramatize improvisationally real-life situation* [Waugh 2008: 82]. Here the artist paints, or observes and experiences locations which are important inspirational source of his art, or the director is a director, in some scenes arranging a set-up of the frame, talking to people he is going to film.

Experiencing the nature of documentary filmmaking:

"Documentarian" (2012)

The film "Documentarian" does not present a character connected to the filmmaker prior to the filming. As Carl Plantinga has observed, "*While fiction filmmakers cast actors with the right qualities to play specific characters, documentary filmmakers apparently carefully choose those people who offer the right raw material to enable them to construct a fascinating and memorable character*" [Plantinga 2018: 125]. Inta is specifically this type of character, which can have a memorable image, and be a catalyst for complex set of questions unfolding during the filming. At the same time, she is not just a character, but a medium for telling a story about a filmmaker.¹ Zviedris states that "[t]his is a film about the mission of a documentary filmmaker and his relationship with the character" [Anonymous 2012]. The film has two directors – Inese Kļava and Ivars Zviedris, but it is only Zviedris who is present onscreen.

The longer quote from Nichols is important here: "*Participatory documentaries [...] involve the ethics and politics of encounter. This is the encounter between one who wields a movie camera and one who does not. How do filmmaker and social actor respond to each other? How do they negotiate control and share responsibility? [...] What responsibility does the filmmaker have for the emotional aftermath of appearing on the camera? What ties join filmmaker and subject and what needs divide them?*" [Nichols 2001: 116]. This can be continued with further questions, addressed when discussing the interactive mode – how far can the filmmaker go, and how do they negotiate the limit beyond which it is impossible to go? [Nichols 1991: 45]. These are exactly the questions that both directly and indirectly are and can be addressed in "Documentarian".

The film presents full spectrum of an encounter between a documentary filmmaker and a character – from the initial approach to parting their ways once the

¹ Zviedris maintained connection with Inta also after the film was finished up until her death in 2017.

filming is finished. This is a truly dramatic story, which includes love/hate relationship, care, tenderness, and sadness from understanding that their ways should part. Their interactions are constructed through interviews, conversations, and monologues conducted in various *mise-en-scènes* underlined by range of emotions.

The question of power and authority is especially present in “Documentarian”, as the interaction deliberately focuses just on the film’s co-director (at the same time also a cinematographer), and the character thus yielding more instruments at the hand of one. In the films, “*the relationship between one and the other has traditionally assumed an unequal distribution of authority, with the documentary maker enjoying the greater share*”, as noted by Spence and Navarro [Spence, Navarro 2012: 73]. This recognition in the film is also with the presence of the camera and the fact of filming. To allow Inta to understand better what he is doing, in one episode Zviedris asks her to come and look into the camera and see for herself the frame composition and how the person in front of the camera is seen. He goes even further in another episode at the grocery store, where Zviedris gives the camera to Inta and let her film while he goes to pick up his wallet from the car. At that point, towards the end of the film, they have already formed a close connection, and the previous quarrels are in past. This is not often used approach in recent Latvian documentary when the character is asked to film, and the material is used in the final cut. At the same time this encounter stresses the film’s central theme – the interaction between the filmmaker and the character, where the filmmaker (in this case the co-director and cinematographer in one person) is being the one constantly with a camera as a technical instrument by his side.

The film has no voice over commentary, but it consists mostly of interviews, conversations or monologues. The serene location of the marshes, and the spot of Inta’s house serves for a remote and peaceful location on whose backdrop the dramatic, melodramatic, or even crime elements are being experienced. Even though the camera mostly is put on a tripod and the frame is set, at times it is used in other approaches. Apart from already mentioned direct involvement of Inta behind the camera, in a few scenes Zviedris is running with the camera in his hands – either running away from Inta chasing him ready to hit, or playfully avoiding her chasing him in almost a romantic scene. She is very susceptible towards the camera, and she enjoys being filmed. Thus, it is more difficult to denominate the right approach – is it *presentational* or *representational*, as it can be one or the other in different scenes with Inta who specifically plays for the camera at times, but on other occasions does not notice the camera at all.

Conclusion

The tree films discussed in this article show diverse approaches of representation of the character through the interaction with the filmmaker. As Bruzzi notes, the filmmakers “*have sought to accentuate, not mask, the means of production because they realise that such a masquerade is impossibly utopian*” [Bruzzi 2006: 187]. When formulating the participatory mode, Nichols proposes that these films “*can stress the actual, lived encounter between filmmaker and subject [..]. The filmmaker’s presence takes on heightened importance, from the physical act of “getting the shot” [..] to the political act of joining forces with one’s subjects*” [Nichols 2001: 117]. The stance the filmmaker takes can be important to stress the alliance with the character and the views it represents. At the same time filmmaker also keeps the position of being one of the characters and thus it is also her or his position we are witnessing.

In the notion of *journey film* Bruzzi has involved also an encounter between the spectator and the film [Bruzzi 2006: 81]. In that respect, “Documentarian” is also a journey of making a film, or “My Father the Banker” – a journey of looking for something lost. The versatility of using different audio-visual materials and having various means of interaction, these films demonstrate looking for *film truth*. “*As film truth, the idea emphasizes that this is the truth of an encounter rather than the absolute or untampered truth*” [Nichols 2001: 118]. Therefore, the encounter itself has an important meaning for understanding the whole story of the film. Varying documentary film examples in recent Latvian cinema, in addition to the above discussed titles, show different variations of unmasking the presence of the filmmaker and the forms how it is performed.

Sources

- Anonymous author (2012). Režisors Ivars Zviedris: “Es nebaidos izskatīties pēc muļķa”. Available: <https://jauns.lv/raksts/sievietem/164293-rezisors-ivars-zviedris-es-nebaidos-izskatities-pec-mulka> (viewed 10.02.2021.)
- Anonymous author (2018). Māriņa Grauda “Kondoru kalve” – citāda filma par mākslinieku Miķeli Fišeru. Available: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/kultura/kino-foto-un-tv/martina-grauda-kondoru-kalve--citada-filma-par-makslinieku-mikeli-fiseru-un-vina-darbiem.a300391/> (viewed 10.02.2021.)
- Bruzzi, S. (2006). *New Documentary*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Griškevica, U. (2018). Kinorežisore Ieva Ozoliņa: Dokumentālais kino pats visu pasaka priekšā. Rīgas aprīņa portāls, <http://www.a.aprinkis.lv/kultura/item/42937-kinorezisorie-ieva-ozolina-dokumentalais-kino-pats-visu-pasaka-prieksa> (viewed 20.05.2021.)

- Lebow, A. (2012). Introduction. In: A. Lebow, (ed.) *The Cinema of Me*. London, New York: Wallflower Press.
- Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Pērķone, I. Documentary Filmmakers' Anti-Communist Manifesto. The film "Kuldīga Frescoes" (Aivars Freimanis, 1966). *Culture Crossroads*, 2017, vol. 10, pp. 25–26.).
- Plantinga, C. R. (2018). Characterization and Character Engagement in the Documentary. In: C. Brylla, M. Kramer (eds.). *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 115–134.
- Renov, M. (2004). *The Subject of Documentary*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ros, V., O'Connell, J. M. J., Kiss, M., van Noortwijk, A. (2018). Toward a Cognitive Definition of First-Person Documentary. In: C. Brylla, M. Kramer (eds.). *Cognitive Theory and Documentary Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rothwell, J. (2008). Filmmakers and Their Subjects. In: T. Austin, W. de Jong (eds.). *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill Open University Press, pp. 152–156.
- Rouch, J. (2003). *Ciné-Ethnography*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Spence, L., Navarro, V. (2012). *Crafting Truth*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press.
- Wagh, T. (2011). *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.