

## CENTENARY OF LATVIA THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

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### **Abstract**

Article “Centenary of Latvia Through the Eyes of a Child” focuses on the recent history of Latvian cinema – programme “Latvian Films for Centenary of Latvia” (LV100) –, within framework of which 16 full-length films were made. For the first time in the history of the independent Latvia the films made in 2018 have been watched by more than half a million spectators. The main characters in several films from this programme are children and they offer a chance to view various events from the perceptual vantage point of a child. Author analyses numerous films of the programme (“Bille”, “Paradise 89”, “The Mover”, “To Be Continued”) in the context of representation of children’s experience in cinema and focuses on the different cinematic approaches used by the authors of the films to communicate stories about the history of Latvia. Does the principle of choosing a child as the central image of the film signal the desire of the Latvian film directors to observe historical processes with a child’s eyes?

**Keywords:** *Programme “Latvian Films for Centenary of Latvia” (LV100), Latvian cinema, Bille, The Mover, Paradise 89, To Be Continued, a child.*

The last year – 2018 – has been special and successful for the cinema of Latvia. For the first time since regaining independence of Latvia at the beginning of the 1990s, so many films have been made and for the first time the films have reached such high numbers of attendance. For the first time in the history of the independent Latvia the films made in 2018 have been watched by more than half a million spectators according to the statistics collected by National Film Centre of Latvia (attendance of domestic films was 560,257; which is 22.14% of market share). For a country with a population of less than 2 million it is a considerable achievement. A significant role in this process was played by the programme “Latvian Films for Centenary of Latvia” (LV100), within framework of

which 16 full-length films were made – including 6 feature films, 8 documentaries and 2 animation films. Fourteen of the Latvian Films for Centenary of Latvia that were screened till the end of 2018 have gathered the audience amounting to 370,000 (according to the statistics collected by National Film Centre of Latvia). The main characters in several films from this programme are children and they offer a chance to view various events from the perceptual vantage point of a child. Those are feature films “Bille” (*Bille*, directed by Ināra Kolmane), “Paradise 89” (*Paradīze 89*, directed by Madara Dišlere) and partly also “The Mover” (*Tēvs Nakts*, directed by Dāvis Sīmanis) and the documentary film “To Be Continued” (*Turpinājums*, directed by Ivars Seleckis). That makes one fourth of the entire film programme and at least half of the feature films included in the programme.

There is a logical question, why such intense focusing on a child as the main character in the film? Why do filmmakers present a child as the protagonist of their film? Is that a particular concept of the creators of the programme LV 100 or a significant contingency?

To answer this question, it is necessary to outline briefly the **institutional framework** of the programme LV 100. The film programme driving force, developer of its strategy and the monitoring institution is the National Film Centre. The film projects were selected by way of a competition that consisted of several stages and that began already in 2014 when an expert commission evaluated the film treatments and projects. The thematic framework was formulated by emphasizing creation of *high-quality films of variety of genres and making of films significant for society with an aim to bring into focus the themes of history of Latvia, its statehood and national identity* [NKC 2014]. The films were to be made for general audience.

From 32 projects submitted to the competition 16 were selected. The Commission assessed the quality of the projects, their thematic aspects so that in an ideal case LV 100 films would embrace various and different stages of history of Latvia. No principle of “mechanical quotas” concerning typology and genres of the films was applied. Gender quota principle was not applied either although half of the 16 programme directors were women (in the European context more and more frequently there are discussions about the gender equity in film industry). The projects for film production were selected for their quality and not as a result of applying some specific quotas (thematic, gender and so on). The first film of the programme LV100 was premiered in August 2017, the closing film – in March 2019. Until the end of April 2019, the attendance of the films of the programme reached 424,000.

The first and one of the last LV 100 programme films – the family film “Grandad More Dangerous than Computer” (*Vectēvs, kas bīstamāks par datoru*, directed by Varis Brasla) and the full-length animation film “Jekabs, Mimmi

and the Talking Dogs” (*Jēkabs, Mimmi un runājošie suņi*, directed by Edmunds Jansons) – could have also been included in the present report since children are the main characters in both the films. Yet we will not examine the animation film for the specificity of its genre while “Grandad More Dangerous than Computer” offers a fairly conventional plot structure typical of family films – comedies, and its setting is contemporary reality. Therefore, I will focus on these LV 100 programme films where children are used as the film protagonists for the analysis of a broader historical experience.

Many of the film projects that were implemented within the programme LV 100 have similar structural principles. The child is the main character (or one of the main characters) of these films; certain stages of Latvian history are narrated from his or her perspective. The action of the film “Bille”, as well as “Paradise 89”, and “The Mover” takes place during various historical periods and children are the central characters of these films.

An interesting experience for analyses of contemporary processes by using children as protagonists or social actors (to use Bill Nichols’ terminology) is offered by the documentary film “To Be Continued” which I will also examine in the present article [Nichols 2001].

The film selection consists of:

“**Bille**”, directed by Ināra Kolmane. A story about growing up based on an autobiographical work by the Latvian literary classic Vizma Belševica. The setting of the film is the 1920s–1930s; it is a period that in Latvian cinema is usually represented in an idealized way as the *lost paradise*. Childhood experience of Bille who is growing up in a poor family is harsh – also because of the destructive relations between her parents.

“**Paradise 89**”, directed by Madara Dišlere. A narrative about events taking place in a Latvian small town in 1989 where little Paula and her sister have been sent to spend summer holidays. The events in this little town and in lives of the girls who are spending carefree time actually without their parents’ care also reflect the events that give evidence about crumbling of the USSR and its near end. It is the year of the Baltic Way that has become a symbol of non-violent resistance of the Baltic States, marked the processes of collapse of the Soviet Union and brought nearer the independence of the Baltic States. The events of the fragmented history in 1989 are presented through the eyes of the girl Paula.

“**The Mover**”, directed by Dāvis Sīmanis. The film reflects events in Latvia, Riga in the 1940s and the theme of holocaust. Its main character is Latvia’s Schindler – Žanis Lipke who saved tens of Jews during the Second World War by hiding them in the cellar of his house. A significant role is played in the film by Lipke’s small son. The film is based on Inese Zandere’s literary work under the title “The Boy with a

Dog” – that was also the working title of this film which was changed during the shooting process.

“**To Be Continued**”, directed by Ivars Seleckis. A documentary film whose characters are five contemporary first-formers. The children represent different social groups – city dwellers, country people, Latvians and Russians, children of well-off parents and of parents who lead fairly modest lives. By following a certain period in the lives of the children, the film actually creates portrayal of contemporary Latvia, minutely representing the heterogeneous social environment in Latvia, and various social groups and their values.

### Representation of Child’s Experience

The image of a child and representation of children’s experience have strong traditions. Besides, film language possesses various tools with the help of which representation in a film can be special and expressive: “When it comes to the representation of the child, cinema, with its privileged access to the perceptual, its visual and aural richness, would seem to have the advantage: closer to perception, it can come closer to a child. In particular, the impulse and capacity to see continue to be invested as primary modes of discovering the world for infants and young children” [Lebeau 2007: 16]. During its development the film medium has emphasized the mythological aspect of childhood stressing childhood as a special time and space. Children as protagonists have a potential to create an alternative cinematic space where reality and imagination, memories and virtuality merge. Undeniably the adult spectator is ready to nostalgically identify with the young character of the film since the viewer has once been like this character. “Child as spectacle, child as subject: cinema can offer unprecedented access to both, its impression of reality combined with its capacity to deliver the points of view that help to put the (adult) audience back in the place of the child” [Lebeau 2007: 40].

Vicky Lebeau in her study “Childhood and Cinema” offers a comprehensive analysis of this theme, including in her research the first early primitive films where children were participants (for example, Lois Lumiere’s “Feeding the Baby”/ *Repas de bébé*, 1895) that started “genre of the child” in the cinema, vitalizing the claims of the moving pictures to document the spontaneity and immediacy of “life itself” [Lebeau 2007: 13], as well as the diverse use of the child’s image in films made in different countries and at periods of time. It should be noted that in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century cinema there are many films where a child is used as a figure with the help of which the tragic historical periods can be researched. Child became a figure through which to explore the legacy of war and genocide during the twentieth century. This tradition began already after the Second World War with Roberto

Rossellini's "Rome, Open City" (1945), its continuation is Andrey Tarkovski's "Ivan's Childhood" (1962), Louis Malle's *Au Revoir, les enfants* (1987), Agnieszka Holland's *Europa, Europa* (1990) and many others.

Analysing the LV 100 fiction films whose protagonists are children it is noteworthy that both "Bille" and "Paradise 89", as well as "The Mover" are films that are set at important and complicated periods of history of Latvia. The film plots taking place at various stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are different; the dramatic intensity is different as well, not to mention the genre demarcations that range from dramedy ("Paradise 89") to intense drama with tragic accents ("The Mover").

The notion *child's gaze* can be interpreted as a metaphor and also as a cinematically purposefully structured narrative by using unique resources of film language, for example, a subjective point of view and optical focalization. Do "Bille", "Paradise 89", and "The Mover" offer some specific cinematographic techniques that emphasize the child's image, a child's gaze and whether they use some particular subjectivization strategies? Although the directors of the mentioned films have not applied radical subjectivization resources, still several of the mentioned films use similar stylistic means: for example, a dream. In the film "Bille" there are several Bille's dream and fantasy sequences, which the director singles out stylistically – they are black and white. The dream enables to feel empathy with Bille's feelings and fantasies. It is a conscious means of subjectivization that makes the spectator feel closer to the main character Bille and allows to perceive the events through the prism of her sensations. Voice-over is also used – monologues by Bille.

In the film "**Paradise 89**" similar subjectivization means are used that are similar to those in "Bille" – there are several dream sequences in the film. They have been implemented in the film narrative in a manner like "Bille", namely, the characters dream/have nightmares while being ill and lying in bed with high temperature. It is both the scene with Lenin's monument, as well as the final sequence of the film in which Paula jumps from 1989 into modern times – when Latvia has regained its independence. The film uses (although not very consistently) subjective POV that facilitates identification with one of the characters of the film. It must be noted that there is a sense of *the author's presence* in the filmic narrative – the film is the director Madara Dišlere's debut, and it represents her memories about the teenage years, childhood and 1989.

The film "**The Mover**" is a more complex and interesting example. During its making process this film underwent considerable transformations. Initially the title of the film was "The Boy with a Dog" (it is based on a literary work by Inese Zandere under the same title). The boy is Žanis Lipke's son Zigis, and at the stage of application of this project the idea was to structure the entire narrative from the vantage point of this character. Yet during the working process the adult Žanis Lipke (actor

Arturs Skrastiņš) became the protagonist of the film. The change of the narrative focus is reflected also by the title change – “The Boy with a Dog” became “The Mover”. Yet there are still some episodes that are focused on his son Zigis, and they signal that the boy could have had much larger significance in the film narration than in its final cut (for example, the episode at Žanis home when Zigis is watching through a slit of the door things he cannot understand – a discussion between his father and mother). Yet the authors of the film have made a conscious choice refusing from the child as the main narrator and possible subjectivization of the narrative. Possibly those were strategic considerations, for example, the fact that recently the world was shaken by László Nemes’ film “Son of Saul” (2015) that deals with holocaust theme by offering restricted, subjective and shocking experience of the main character in a concentration camp. Yet the change of such a narrator allows promoting a hypothesis that refusing from *a child’s gaze* the authors of the film “The Mover” have chosen both a more conventional and more complex approach. They attempt to look at the holocaust events in Latvia from the perspective of an adult and mature person’s perspective but not with *the eyes of a child* – the limited child’s understanding of the events. Yet there are still episodes in the film that give evidence of the initial intention to create a subjectivized narrative from a child’s perspective.

The film “**To Be Continued**” became one of the most popular documentary films of the LV 100 programme, and it was also nominated from Latvia for the Academy film award *Oscar*. “To Be Continued” presents a different approach to the theme of *the child’s gaze*. The difference is certainly determined also by the means of expression and narrative strategies characteristic for a documentary film that are different from fiction films. The film “To Be Continued” uses the classical observational strategy. At the beginning of the film the director Ivars Seleckis’ narrator status is emphasised. The film begins with his voice-over narrative about his school years, but the director does not appear in the subsequent part of the film, except some conversations with the children and Seleckis stays out of the frame. The consistent and very precise selection of the characters of the film, use of the Latvian poetic documentary tradition that in this case has been done by one of the founders of this tradition in the 1960s, have resulted in a documentary film in which observational strategy has been used quite consciously. Camera work (to be more precise – the work of the cameramen team) by filming for a prolonged period of time five children in their environment and their relations with their parents and peers, creates a particular sense of closeness, the trust in the characters – we are allowed to enter their subjective space by using the observational strategy unique for documentary film yet avoiding radical means of subjectivization that are sometimes used in live action – fiction films.

What is then the answer to the question why the film programme LV 100 marks a particular desire of the directors to use children as protagonists and the main

characters? Is that a childhood myth and an opportunity to create specific “childhood space”, as well as a potential for the spectator to identify with the character of the film? One should also remember that representation of specific historical periods plays an essential role. The fact that several filmmakers of the LV 100 programme have used a child as the protagonist of their film is to be assessed from various aspects.

The strategy to look at the historical processes with *a child's eyes* has its definite advantages, for example, in attracting larger audiences. The films about and with children can be offered to the family audience. This was certainly one of the arguments why the LV 100 programme films made such a box-office success. “Critics often agree that the cinematic ‘value’ or function of the child-protagonist is to permit adult spectatorial movement: the possibility of a flexible or perhaps fractured spectatorial position – in space-time, between past and present, or self and other – the child’s view thus allowing for a defamiliarization or a shifting between the familiar and the unfamiliar, a flexible, heterogeneous or mobile spectatorship” [Delgado, Hart, Johnson 2017: 188].

Yet the choice of a child as a protagonist for representation of history enables the director to avoid a comprehensive narrative and the analysis of a specific historical period in all its broadest aspects. The child’s experience is limited, his or her understanding about the historical events and calamities is much more fragmented than that of adults. The principle of choosing a child as the central image of the film signals the desire of the Latvian directors, the authors of these films to represent pure and innocent childish experience, a wish to observe historical processes with a child’s eyes without offering a comprehensive narrative and analysis of these processes.

Perhaps the dominant choice in the LV 100 programme to represent history from a child’s perspective gives evidence also about certain problems of maturity of the film industry. Funding of cinema in Latvia has been modest since the beginning of the 1990s, while this special programme that provided the possibility of making a large number of films in Latvia was both an opportunity and challenge for the film industry. It also became an implicit impulse to use for the representation of history one of the emotionally most effective ways of narrative construction by using children as protagonists.

By analysing the global cinema trends, researchers have identified an interesting tendency – a particular interest about films whose main characters are children who become catalysts of various historical processes, is characteristic for cinemas that have undergone deep crisis (political, economic). For example, Latin American, and especially Argentinian cinema experienced such a boom at the beginning of the 2000s [Garibotto 2019: 140–143]. A similar tendency can be observed in Latvia as well, although we cannot talk about political crises because Latvia is an independent country since the beginning of the 1990s that supports development of national cinema.

Yet funding for cinema since regaining of independence has always been limited. LV100 programme and additional funding for cinema (about 8 million EUR for four years) helped to overcome the shortage of financing at least in short-term period and helped to ensure generally diverse film production. And still – several of these films have similar trends – a wish to look at the processes of the present-day and the past with a child's eyes.

“How does cinema refract the image of the child across different genres, across national borders, across moments of time?” [Lebeau 2007: 20] This is the question asked at the beginning of her book by Vicky Lebay. Insight into the recent Latvian cinema experience – in the film programme LV 100 offers an answer in a specific national and historical context.

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