

## CINEMATIC SHIFT FROM THE FRONT TO THE BACKGROUND. LANDSCAPE IN A POST WORD ERA

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### **Abstract** (from the editors)

With great honour to readers of “Culture Crossroads” we are offering an essay by outstanding Lithuanian documentary film director Audrius Stonys (1966), in which he shares reflections on spatial and temporal changes in documentary films within the historical context by fixating cinematic turns in elements of *mise-en-scène*, especially in the landscape representation.

The author is looking more closely at what is happening in the front and background of the documentary film “Ten Minutes Before the Flight of Icarus” (*Dešimt minučių prieš Ikaro skrydį*, 1990) directed by Arūnas Matelis (1961), a contemporary of Stonys. This particular film has been considered as a landmark which led to a shift towards a new era in Lithuanian documentary cinema.

**Keywords:** *documentary film, Lithuanian cinema, film landscape, Arūnas Matelis.*

The heritage of the Soviet regime was total distrust in any publicly spoken or written word. With the collapse of the regime a word, commentary, title left cinema space and moved the function of story-telling to the territory of visual poetry. The visual poetry becomes not a device any more, that helps to show the inner world of a character, but the main structural element of story-telling; territory where relationship with a film-viewer is born. No longer a stranger, the village artist or some wise old man is the main character of a film, but the environment, filled with signs of time, landscape and a man connected to that landscape. Or, to say more precisely, complex, multi-layered poetical image, created from feelings, memories, city streets marked by time, people passing by, sunlight and play of shadows.

If we want to understand film codes, we need to look closer at the role of the background in the structure of the story-telling. Traditionally the background serves as a passive filler of the space behind a character. Its function is usually limited to highlighting the character. The background is intentionally “cleaned” from all unnecessary details, in order not to draw attention from something that is happening in the front or, with the help of film optic, the background is pushed further away, separated from the front, “washed out” in order to create a distance between the front and the background in order to get the depth of the frame. In the post-Soviet documentary, the background gets the function of creating the meaning and gets independence. It is used as a very important medium not only to create the atmosphere of a film, but to awaken the historical and personal memory of the viewer. Film space becomes symbolic space.

My generation went through at least a few radical historical, political, aesthetical turning points. Restoration of independence, disappearance of censorship, consolidation of new structures and economic relations in cinema evolved quite far beyond the political sphere and directly influenced not only the principles of filmmaking, but also the cinema language itself.

Documentary cinema finds its internal strength from indirect hidden polemic with official narrative. During historical turning point period it lost its *source*, which nourished it in a paradoxical way. Suddenly it was possible to talk about everything and in every way. The spring of oppression, which provided creatives with internal kinetic energy, turned loose, leaving particular creative emptiness.

I perfectly recall the time when the elder generation of documentary directors at the beginning of the 1990s were tossing between recently emerged commercial cinema's temptations and official narrative, approved already by the modern times. This led to losing the internal resistance energy which distinguished and formed this generation.

I do not want to speak in absolutes or make categorical generalizations. Certainly, each artist accepted the changes personally and differently, but I think that I can talk about certain tendencies because I was a direct witness and participant of documentary filmmaking processes of that time.

Currently I am writing a thesis called “Landscape in Lithuanian Poetic Documentary”. I want to look at transformations of documentary from a political turning point perspective. Specifically, at the importance of landscape in its movement in the perspective of movie frame and the dramaturgical structure of documentary movie.

It is possible to separate movie frame into foreground, background, second background etc. of the shot. Different layers of the shot have distinct functions in the structure of a documentary narrative.

In this short paper I won't go deep into talking about what is happening in the second background of the shot and further, but I will look more closely at what is happening in the front and background of the documentary film "Ten Minutes Before the Flight of Icarus" (*Dešimt minučių prieš Ikarą skrydį*, 1990) by Arūnas Matelis. The shift from the front to the background. This tendency later became the mark of a new documentary filmmakers' generation in the 1990s.

Traditionally the front serves as a space for active narrative. It's like a theatrical foreground of the movie where the main character is acting, talking, living. In the background landscape can perform the function of creating the atmosphere by using light/darkness, light/shadows, direct light changes. The background can resonate and complement whatever is happening in the front or can create a contrast where the director wants a dissonance in that scene. Both cases, the function of landscape will remain auxiliary, highlighting or distinguishing the front.

The background in documentary movie can even be dramaturgically ignored by making it an anemic wallpaper behind the main character with no semantic, atmospheric or emotional charge. At the same time the narrative of the movie does not cease, it continues. Such decision is often authorized as an intention to concentrate the viewer's attention to the action happening at the front without dragging the attention to the events happening in the background and further.

In documentary movie landscape is often treated as an implicitly emerging background of action and the attempt to adjust, form, choose the landscape is considered as a deformation of documentary truth.

This function, as if secondary of a background, preserved this layer of a movie frame from an attentive glance of censors and at the same time it became a certain territory of freedom. This was a space where censor's scissors weren't flinging around meaning that it was possible to breathe more freely and talk about things with no contradictions to the creative conscience of an artist.

The idea that something can appear in the frame accidentally and unintentionally is deeply inaccurate. Each frame is the act of a director's/DOP's will<sup>1</sup>. Even the attempt to ignore the dramaturgical role of a background I mentioned and the attempt to refuse the semantic function is also an act of will, speaking about the creative strategy of a director/DOP.

Even in that case when a director/DOP concentrates all attention to the front and tries to make the background a "silent background", that "silent background" is kind of speaking about something.

The perspective of time has a quality to change the focus of meaning and signification. If a character is being filmed surrounded by urban landscape now it seems to

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<sup>1</sup> DOP – Director of photography, cinematographer.

us that the most interesting thing is what the character is saying while standing in the front; it can happen that after many years the people twinkling in the background, their dress up style, the way of walking, faces, passing cars and urban architecture that appeared there as if by chance, will become an invaluable object of investigation for cultural and historical researchers.

To make landscape the front instead of background during the Soviet period was a courageous step, placing the movie to a category of experimental poetic movie. Inevitably there was an attempt to frame the space for interpretation that appeared in such movie in order to present an official “safe” version of the movie. It was important for getting approval, state support, releasing the movie in cinema screens and avoiding censorship.

One shouldn't be surprised by the discrepancy between the official movie presentation and the internal content of the movie that often denied it. As Alexei Yurchak (Алексей Юрчак) notes in his book “Everything was Forever, Until it was No More”: “The breakdown into censored and uncensored elements would suggest that the tasks of a socialist state were clearly established, static and predictable. Anyway, in reality most of the tasks were so contradictory and inconsistent that it is impossible to reduce them into clearly formulated black and white ideology” [Yurchak 2014: 41].

Such uncertainty was caused by the fear of cultural workers to take responsibility both for what they were releasing to screens and for what they were censoring. Every valid decision would have forced to clearly set the evaluation criteria and to justify it. They knew that both the ideological malpractice and painstaking diligence could turn against themselves. In such conditions without no clear criteria the formal part of the artwork becomes more important: is the *canon of documentary movie* retained. Its criteria, of course, changed according to the period. The form starts to exist autonomously and, losing its original meaning, is filled with meanings and interpretations of an author. According to A. Yurchak, “it was more important to recreate the exact form of ideological statements and structural form of rituals than to comprehend their meaning” [Yurchak 2014: 52]. Yurchak calls this phenomenon a “performative shift”, which he defines like this: “In the context of late socialism the reproduction of ideological statement norm was dominating. In the level of form, it firstly showed up as a ritual or a symbol which caused alterations of meaning, making it different from the direct statement's meaning. This principle is described in the book as the ‘performative shift’” [Yurchak 2014: 25].

Director Arūnas Matelis comes to the field of cinema during a very diverse historical period. 1990. Censorship has vanished, the state commission no longer exists. The screens and public space are filled by the new narrative. The front of the shot

dominates telling or sometimes screaming out the stories of injustice and oppression which have been prohibited for 50 years. The background depicts depersonalised mass which became the mark of modern political will and generality.

In his movie “Ten Minutes Before the Flight of Icarus” Arūnas Matelis makes a very significant move which later will be notable in the works of the whole generation of the 1990s. He swaps the front with the background. The front shows a small mundane man Misha who is talking in short inarticulate monologues balancing on the fringe of absurdity and the whole emotional charge is being brought to the urban landscape, unfolding in the background.

Dingy smoke pipe, lightly yellow Belarusian cauldron with a wine bottle cork squeezed in the handle of the lid in order to prevent from burning hands, a teapot which used to be white some time ago, blackened grater hanging on the nail, cast iron furnace, the power cord roosted by flies – all these are the inseparable attributes of post-war homes.

Director creates a strong emotional load of memory by intervening them in the material of the movie. It provokes a whole system of memories and associations. The viewer starts seeing not only the views, surroundings that are not in the movie but also hearing voices, smelling scents. We enter into this space of a foreign apartment as into something very familiar, homey.

The viewer’s consciousness provoked by the recognition all alone creates spaces of home that were not in the movie. This is more a sensual, emotional action than intellectual. The movie penetrates into deep layers of associative memories, turning alien images into their own. As if it would fill foreign homes with images of our own homes from the memories.

Užupis street of the old Vilnius. Through a dark crackling arch, we see a brightly sun-lit courtyard. Young men and girls are chanting worshipping songs repeating *Vilnius will be saved, believe in God’s word...* Camera focuses from here, from the “home” point to that sun-lit, alien space, to these young people who obviously are not from “here” and behind whom in the distance we see a totally different, modern city full of traffic. The promise of salvation itself speaks about some kind of change. Something will certainly be different.

A separation is being drawn up visually by dividing the space lit by the sun and the shadow. The main character of the movie Misha is sitting on the bench; behind him white laundry is moving in the wind. It is wavering like wings of an angel, more deeply reinforcing the impression that all this world with this strange old man, his pre-war shoes, wooden lumber rooms will take off from the ground and rise up. And next to him young people are singing about salvation of Vilnius in the sun-lit area. Two such different worlds meet in one frame that it seems as if the action were taking

place in two different spaces and two different periods of time. Misha is watching the singers as a distant mirage, scarcely related to him.

The city reveals itself through movement. While the camera watches a lost dog wandering through Užupis street, we see facades, windows, damaged rainwater pipes of ragged and worn-out houses passing by. Everything whiffles indescribable cosiness. The city is waking up. It doesn't try to be more beautiful, cleaner, younger than it is.

People and cars are passing by. Everything is happening as usual. The city in the morning – familiar and recurrent. There are no strangers here. All the people, kids and cars become a part of recurrent action.

The space of a city as a home is revealed through a ritual of routine actions. A woman climbs down the stairs with a bucket in her hand audibly tapping with her shoes. A man pours out the water. Another neighbour passes by.

Even the slightest sounds are audible, even such silent ones like creaking of a bucket's handle or steps of people in a closed space of a courtyard.

The cinematic poetry of A. Matelis lets in its territory the coarsest textures – blackened streets, worn-out houses, smoky dirty kitchens, people, battered by passing time – and creates poetic images out of them, which radiates the light of primordial innocence. The people shown in the movie are not very pretty or heroic, more pitiful and ridiculous, but they all radiate the inner light which exposes itself in monochromaticity of shadows even more.

In the movie "Ten Minutes Before the Flight of Icarus" A. Matelis chooses a path where no other Lithuanian documentary has walked before. Having refused to use the classic storytelling of a documentary movie with almost no words he speaks the poetic movie language about the forgotten and neglected neighbourhood of Užupis – the shelter and homes of the poor and the outcasts.

The director is just observing the silent residents of this strange world, enabling houses, walls with signs of passing time, slanting windows, curved wooden balconies, the lost dog in the street and the contrasts of a sunlight to speak. The landscape in the movie becomes the main character, creating the semantic material of the movie.

The dialogue between the houses and territories of light and shadow helps to understand and feel the inner tensions of time and a man in that time. It creates a feeling of waiting for something to come.

It is interesting to observe in the movie of A. Matelis how the new cinema of the independent generation takes over the cinematic way of speaking through the background from the elder generation.

Wide shot became an inseparable mark of documentary genre. It is a shot where the main character of the movie leaves the front giving way to the dialogue between a landscape and a viewer.

The motion of semantic focus from the front to the second during different periods of time confirm that there is a vital need to creatively oppose the official narrative opening up a space not only for the characters living in the marginal zone but also giving back the status of a dramaturgical story participant to the landscape, bringing out the meanings hidden there.

### *Sources*

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