

Introduction

CINEMA OF THE BALTIC SEA REGION: FIRST INSIGHT

The articles in this special edition of *Culture Crossroads* devoted to film have been inspired by reports presented at two international academic conferences held in Riga in 2016 organised by two institutions functioning under auspices of Latvian Academy of Culture: Riga Film Museum and Scientific Research Centre. The aim of the conference *Baltic Sea Region Documentary Cinema: Social and Aesthetic Phenomena* was to examine the documentary film of the Baltic Sea Countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Russia, and Germany), to study the main trends and authors, looking at specific narrative and formal manifestations of the films. While the conference *Film Director Jānis Streičs: His Films and the Signs of the Time* was devoted to the classic of Latvian film Jānis Streičs, marking the director's 80th birthday. The series of articles whose authors are experienced scholars and young researchers embraces a wide scope of themes which is a significant step in bringing into the focus of attention the regional documentary and feature films in the first special edition of *Culture Crossroads* dedicated entirely to cinema.

The seminal period for the Baltic States documentary film is 1960s and the documentary filmmakers' generation that started working at this time. The authors were notable by their innovative use of film language, more personal themes that re-echoed the trends of the new cinema in the world. Inga Pērkone in her article *Documentary Filmmakers' Anti-Communist Manifesto. The Film "Kuldīga Frescoes" (1966)* analyses the documentary film by one of the most significant film directors of *Riga style* Aivars Freimanis (1936) made in the form of collage about the Latvian town of Kuldīga. The author advances a thesis that the film by Freimanis which was received by critics without any enthusiasm, was made by giving up verbalization that had been introduced in all the strata of soviet life, including documentary films which had been dominated by word since 1930s. "Kuldīga Frescoes" is based on contingency, relying on means of expression that emerge in the interaction between the image and the sound-track, thus working against the conventional approach.



Camerman Ivars Seleckis (on the left) and director Aivars Freimanis (behind the camera) during production of “Kuldīga Frescoes” (1966). Photograph by Aivars Čakste, from the collection of LAC Riga Film Museum

The link between documentary film with feature films is the focus of several articles included in the volume, and they examine works by specific authors who use dramatized sequences in their documentaries or, quite on the contrary, insert documentary footage capturing reality in their feature films. The worker’s image created by the Polish film director Wojciech Wiszniewski (1946–1981) in 1970s is the central theme of the article by Eva Mazierska. Providing several film examples, Mazierska interprets them in the ideological and aesthetic context of those times.

The Latvian film director Laila Pakalniņa (1962), one of the most recognizable Latvian film-makers internationally, is equally active in documentary and feature

film genre. Pakalniņa's documentary "Hi, Rasma" (2015) about the ship that sank in the 1940s by the coasts of Estonia has been chosen as the film through the prism of which Klara Bruveris examines the poetics of the director's film language and its correlation with John Grierson's ideas. Marija Weste analyses documentary film inserts in several Latvian fiction films. By applying the notion of "connectivity" the author examines how inclusion of documentary footage dramatizes feature films not only adding additional visual value but becoming meaningfully significant in the overall imagery of the film. The selected films have been made in the 1960s–1970s, and they have been made by different authors (Mihail Bogin, Rolands Kalniņš and Aivars Freimanis).

Parallel to professional documentary film, a strong amateur film-making movement existed in Latvia since the end of the 1950s. Amateur filmmakers could experiment more freely with themes and means of expression in films, compared to those who worked within the professional film production system. Inese Strupule examines films made in 1970s–1980s by three authors – Uldis Lapiņš (1925–2011), Zigurds Vidiņš (1943) and Ingvars Leitis (1943). The films that are about everyday events in family, travelling and public events offer not only a captivating material for the analysis of their artistic means of expression but also provide perception of political and public events captured from amateur film perspective.

Newsreels that capture everyday events from a certain ideological position have always played an essential role under conditions of different powers and in various territories. Audrius Dambrauskas has researched film situation in Lithuania during the authoritarian regime of Anatanas Smetona (1926–1940), under whose leadership the film censorship law and law on newsreels were adopted (providing that a newsreel is to be screened before every film at the cinema), but a few years later he ruled that the rights of newsreel production are to be delegated to one single person (Jurgis Linartas). Dambrauskas analyses what image of the state these newsreels created, how they were perceived and what is the general evaluation of the fact that film gets under control of the state.

Jānis Streičs (1936) has directed 22 feature films, he has written scripts for his own and other filmmakers' films, and he has appeared as an actor or performed episodic parts in films. The director is characterized by distinctive authorial style marked by irony, hyperbolization of everyday life events, philosophical interpretations, references to the world heritage and visual theatricality. Historical themes in Streičs' films are examined by Vita Zelče, choosing two of his films – "The Boys of Līvšala" (1969) and "Strange Passions" (1983) that are both set in the same year, 1946 shortly after the war had ended, even though both the films were made in different decades. Using archival materials, the author examines

the process of making of both the films, their themes and interpreting the film director's own experiences during the post-war years as representation of cultural memory in film.

We hope that this first issue of *Culture Crossroads* offering a deeper insight into history of the regional cinema and the topical issues will inspire new research, conferences and mutual co-operation to provide grounds for subsequent special editions about film.

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