

**Amateur Filmmaking in the Latvian Soviet Socialist  
Republic: Family, Nation, and Art (1955–1991)**

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PhD

I, Inese Strupule, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation is the first systematic study of the amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia. Largely sustained through a network of state-supported clubs, this movement spanned the period from the mid-1950s to 1991 and produced a highly diverse and inquisitive body of works ranging from documentary, newsreel, and educational to fictional, experimental, and animation films. Despite the fact that the films in question constitute a substantial part of the Latvian national film heritage and carry great historical, cultural, and socio-political significance, the legacy of the amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia has remained largely unexplored. Largely based on primary filmic sources held at the Latvian State Archive of Audio-visual Documents, this thesis constitutes an original scholarly contribution to our knowledge of amateur filmmaking culture in Soviet Latvia and the Soviet Union. It also endeavours to investigate this phenomenon within the context of the development of amateur film globally.

This thesis references extant amateur films, archival printed documents, and a range of periodicals, both historical and contemporary, and includes interviews conducted with Latvian amateur filmmakers active during the Soviet era. It seeks to reconstruct the history of amateur-film culture in Soviet Latvia and to offer a conceptual model based on the importance of amateur film as an aesthetic and social phenomenon. Through a variety of thematic lenses, such as family, travel and tourism, social issues, political activism, and avant-garde experimentation, this thesis investigates the broad artistic, cultural, social, and political spaces within which amateur film functioned. It situates Soviet Latvian amateur cinema within dynamic reconsiderations of film as a medium, as well as defines it as a cultural phenomenon that reflects the alternative types of discourse, knowledge, and practices that emerged during the period of late Socialism. This thesis argues that amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia was often employed as a tool for developing strategies of national self-determination: despite the fact that Latvia was arguably the most Russified and Sovietized of the three Baltic republics, Latvian cine-enthusiasts managed to produce a thematically diverse and formally inventive body of amateur films,

many of which exhibit grassroots national(ist) rhetoric. In the framework of this thesis, the case of the amateur filmmaking movement in the Latvian SSR demonstrates the regional diversity of cultural dynamics under state socialism, while being a unique case study in the sphere of amateur cinema.

## **Impact statement**

Despite its seemingly narrow subject-matter, this thesis nevertheless constitutes a significant contribution to the history of Latvian cinema and the scholarship on Soviet film culture, amateur-film studies, and global film history. It advances knowledge of an understudied filmmaking practice and draws attention to the ways in which it was shaped by different historical, economic, and geopolitical contexts. It also mobilizes a more dynamic understanding of the cultural heritage of dissent in socialist Eastern Europe by presenting an analysis of cases of resistance and opposition exercised via semi-official cultural production and everyday practices. Its prospective publication as a monograph would constitute the first scholarship in any language on the subject of amateur filmmaking culture in Soviet Latvia and would contribute significantly to the hitherto meagre academic literature on socialist-era amateur film movements.

By focusing on the particularities and idiosyncrasies of amateur film within the Soviet socialist system, this study expands and reinterprets the theoretical frameworks and conceptual models which have been developed within the sphere of amateur-film studies generally. Endeavours in this direction will hopefully promote further revision of the principles and functions of amateur cinema within the context of general film history; this, in turn, will extend the scope and reach of film studies as a discipline. By focusing on an example of a 'minor cinema', the potential impact of this thesis will be to encourage the outlining of a more nuanced and complete map of global film cultures.

This thesis for the most part draws on an extensive amateur-film collection held at the Latvian State Archive of Audio-visual Documents. It thus constitutes the first sustained investigation of a substantial and unique archival holding relating to socialist-era amateur film. The research for this thesis included an internship at the Archive, during which the author of the present study worked on the cataloguing of the amateur films which have been preserved in the collection. As a result of this collaboration, the catalogue entries of many amateur-film documents held at the Archive were updated with new relevant information. It was also possible to identify authors, years of production, and

the production studios of many films that the Archive had previously believed to be 'orphaned'. This research project thus promotes the merits of in-depth and participatory archival research as a methodological framework and offers the potential to promote the breadth and diversity of perspectives and methods employed within this academic field.

Beyond academia, this thesis aims to encourage international recognition, appreciation, exhibition, and preservation of fringe cinematic heritages and minor cinemas. In recent years, the use of digital technology and the Internet has stimulated the exploration of amateur cinema(s) worldwide. However, while digital access can undoubtedly breathe new life into long-neglected analogue and early magnetic amateur-film productions, it also has the potential of rendering them vulnerable, as it contains the risk of misinterpretation, selectivity, and loss of contexts. This thesis therefore hopes to stimulate interest in socialist-era amateur cinema(s) by providing a resource and a frame of reference to teachers, media commentators, film programmers, museum and exhibition curators, as well as to general audiences in and beyond Latvia.

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## **Note on Transliteration**

For the transliteration of Russian names and titles, the Library of Congress system (without diacritics) was used in the main body of the thesis, footnotes, and bibliography.

## Abbreviations

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| LKAB    | Latvijas Kinoamatieru biedrība (Latvian Amateur Filmmakers' Society)                              |
| LRAP    | Latvijas Republikas arodbiedrību padome (Latvian Trade Unions Council)                            |
| LVA     | Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs (Latvian State Archive)  |
| LVKFFDA | Latvijas Valsts kinofotofonodokumentu arhīvs (Latvian State Archive of Audio-visual Documents)    |
| ODSK    | Obshchestvo družei sovetskogo kino (Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema)                          |
| RKM     | Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs (Riga Film Museum and Archive)   |
| RRR     | Rīgas radio rūpnīca (Riga Radio Factory)  |
| VEF     | Valsts elektrotehnikas fabrika (State Electrotechnical Factory)                                   |
| VGIK    | Vsesoiuznyi gosudarstvennyi institut kinematografii (All-Union State Institute of Cinematography) |
| UNICA   | L'Union internationale du cinéma d'amateur (International Union of Amateur Cinema)                |

## **Introduction**

### **Amateur cinema in the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc**

By the early 1960s, amateur filmmaking had become a well-established feature of everyday life in the Soviet Union. Not only did many individuals practise this pastime, but a multitude of amateur filmmaking collectives began to appear in factories, on collective farms, in universities, and in other institutions. Conforming to the paradigm of 'cultured leisure', and actively promoted within the framework of Soviet cultural policy, creative endeavours in the sphere of amateur filmmaking quickly acquired support from the institutional networks of administered culture and professional unions. Amateur filmmakers and their associations became rapidly integrated into a Union-wide and state-supported non-professional filmmaking network that emerged with a remit to encourage amateur filmmaking activities on the basis of their presumed contribution towards the building of communism. In contrast to the state film industry, however, which was closely monitored until the formal abolition of censorship in the late 1980s, no dedicated governmental entity or mechanism ever existed with which to control the work of amateur filmmakers. Thus, although sanctioned by the state, amateur filmmaking in the Soviet Union enjoyed a degree of creative and ideological freedom that was denied to the 'professional' arts. In the case of the Soviet Union, works that dared to experiment formally and thematically emerged from the geographical periphery, where the regime never enjoyed the same degree of control. One of the citadels of the Soviet amateur filmmaking movement was the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (from here on Latvian SSR, or Soviet Latvia), which was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. Here, from the late 1950s onwards, amateur film clubs dispersed around the country and produced an exceptionally diverse and inquisitive body of works ranging from documentary, educational, and industrial, to fictional, experimental, and animation films. These works, along with their production histories and the contexts for their creation and reception, remain a significant lacuna in Latvian as well as Soviet film history.

The 1920s was the era of the first flowering of amateur filmmaking in the Soviet Union. As opposed to the early Western European and North American manifestations of cine-enthusiasm, which was principally a consumption-centric activity, Soviet amateur filmmaking endeavours of the 1920s were much more community- and collective-oriented. In addition to this, if in the West amateur filmmaking was mostly an individual and largely grassroots initiative, in the Soviet Union it was strongly integrated as part of the administrative structures and ideological agenda of the nascent socialist state. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, a proto-network of amateur filmmaking clubs under the name of the Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema (Obshchestvo druzei sovetskogo kino, ODSK) was founded in the Soviet Union in 1925.<sup>1</sup> It can be argued that the 'cells' of the ODSK that were gradually set up across the country were the prototypes of the amateur filmmaking clubs in the post-war Soviet Union. Overall, early Soviet cinematic culture was largely informed by the desire to document the emergence of a new socialist state; and in 1924, Soviet pioneer documentary and newsreel director and film theorist Dziga Vertov produced his first non-newsreel film, *Kino-glaz* (Cine-Eye), which has been described by Jeremy Hicks as 'an attempt to create a manifesto for a grassroots movement of cine-journalists'.<sup>2</sup> The movement was conceived as the cinematic equivalent of the worker correspondent (or rabkor, short for *rabochii korrespondent*) initiative, which was encouraged by the Soviet press, and extended this participatory principle of news and actuality production to cinema. A network of ODSK cells, spreading across the Soviet Union and consisting of amateur 'Cine-Eyes' documenting the world around them, was in line with Vertov's aspirations and with early Soviet doctrine in general. Despite being curbed by the restructuring and centralization of social and artistic organizations brought into being by the 1930s, this network

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Erofeev, 'Vsem druz'iam sovetskogo kino', *Kino*, 1925, no. 29, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 15.

emerged as a fundamentally different system from the amateur-film organizations that developed in the Western world.

Despite having thrived in the 1920s and re-emerging with renewed vigour by the early 1960s, the amateur filmmaking culture in the Soviet Union has yet to be systematically researched. The most recent attempt to investigate its history are the articles published by Maria Vinogradova between 2012 and 2016: these explored the history of Soviet amateur cinema and culminated in her doctoral thesis, which was defended in 2017.<sup>3</sup> Another work that has made a substantial contribution to our knowledge of the subject is Estonian amateur filmmaker Jaak Järvine's detailed historiographical account of the amateur filmmaking movement in the Soviet Union. Entitled *Vzgliad v proshloe: Istoriiia liubitel'skogo kino v byvshem SSSR i stranakh Baltii* (A Look into the Past: A History of Amateur Filmmaking in the Former USSR and Baltic Countries), this was published in 2005.<sup>4</sup> This detailed and highly informative historical record has proved to be vital for the completion of this thesis principally due to its *sui generis* focus on amateur filmmaking culture in the Baltic states as part of their shared history with the Soviet Union. In addition to this, there exists a 1964 Soviet documentary film entitled *Ja — kinoliubitel'* (I am a Film Enthusiast, directed by Fedor Kiselev and Nikolai Shpikovskii), that reviews and evaluates the current achievements of amateur filmmaking in the USSR, recognizes the roots of the movement in the 1920s, and stresses its educational importance. Beyond these sporadic insights, there has been no systematic attempt to trace the evolution of the USSR's amateur filmmaking movement since its dawn in the 1920s. Consequently, there has been virtually no attempt to produce a theoretical or conceptual framework which would allow to set it apart from amateur-film movements in Western Europe and North America.

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Vinogradova, 'Amateur Cinema in the Soviet Union: History, Ideology and Culture' (unpublished doctoral thesis, New York University, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Jaak Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe: Istoriiia liubitel'skogo kino v byvshem SSSR i stranakh Baltii* (Põltsamaa: Vali Press, 2005).

By contrast, Western amateur filmmaking practices and networks have been researched more extensively within the past three decades. In the European and North American academic tradition, amateur films first became the subject of research in the field of visual anthropology. In his seminal study of American home-movie culture, which was published in 1987, Richard Chalfen examined approximately two hundred collections of personal images made in the United States between 1940 and 1980.<sup>5</sup> He conceptualized home-moviemaking as a mode of communication with its own codes and symbols that he defined as the 'home mode', and primarily focused on the phenomenon's social functions within the domestic sphere.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, Patricia Zimmermann's 1995 study explored the ways in which the public discourse on amateur film between 1897 and 1962 in the United States gradually relocated amateur filmmaking practices within 'a romanticized vision of the bourgeois nuclear family, thereby amputating its more resistant economic and political potential for critique'.<sup>7</sup> More recently, James Moran has attempted to redefine amateur filmmaking practice(s) beyond the 'home mode' and to establish a more useful theoretical framework for their analysis, nonetheless once again directing attention to the North American amateur-film and video culture.<sup>8</sup> British scholar Ryan Shand subsequently set out to explore the possibilities for further re-definition and re-conceptualization of amateur cinema and to investigate the community aspect of amateur filmmaking by focusing mainly on the role of cine-clubs within the

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. x.

<sup>8</sup> James M. Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

British amateur filmmaking movement.<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, one can easily observe that for a number of years amateur-film studies suffered from a relatively narrow geographical range and consisted of largely Anglo-American scholars researching Anglo-American amateur filmmaking culture(s). In the last few years, however, attention has begun to shift towards amateur film as a global phenomenon. This is exemplified by the recent issue of the journal *Film History* on amateur cinema which features articles on amateur filmmaking movements in Hungary, Iran, and Brazil, among others.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from Vinogradova's body of research and Järvine's monograph, amateur filmmaking in the Soviet Union and other Socialist bloc countries has barely existed on the radar of international film scholars. These practices, however, have enjoyed artistic renderings and interpretations, albeit rare and isolated. Curiously, one of the few fictional representations of an amateur-film enthusiast in cinema occurs in the context of socialist Poland. Renowned Polish film director Krzysztof Kieślowski in his 1979 film *Amator* (Camera Buff) reflected precisely upon the peculiarities of formalization and institutionalization of amateur creative endeavours in a socialist context. In *Amator*, the management of a factory encourages its employee, who has just bought an amateur camera in order to film his new-born daughter, to establish an amateur filmmaking club on the factory premises and to film its day-to-day workings. Conflict occurs when the filmmaker's unique vision of the social life around him diverges from the polished and carefully crafted representations of reality as dictated by the system.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Ryan Shand, 'Memories of hard won victories: amateur moviemaking contests and serious leisure', *Leisure Studies*, 33.5 (2014), 471–90 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2013.798346>>.

<sup>10</sup> See the articles collected as part of the special issue of *Film History*, 'Toward a Global History of Amateur Film Practices and Institutions', 30.1 (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Marysia Lewandowska notes that Kieślowski was a frequent member of the juries at amateur-film festivals in socialist Poland. She writes: 'He used his



The early 2000s also witnessed a substantial insight into amateur filmmaking practices in the Polish socialist context, albeit in a similarly non-academic framework. 'The Enthusiasts' is an art project by London-based artists Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska that represents a curious instance in the context of rediscovery of, and access to, socialist-era amateur films. In 2002–2004, Cummings and Lewandowska visited many Polish cities in search of amateur filmmakers and their films, and as a result of these trips approximately one hundred 8 and 16mm amateur films were found and digitized with the help of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw and the Whitechapel Gallery in London. The research culminated in several exhibitions across Europe and free public access to a digital collection of films hosted online.<sup>12</sup> It is important to emphasize, however, that the aim of this art project was not to study the history, value, and meaning of the film documents encountered, but to revive these documents by recycling them as art objects and injecting them with new meanings.<sup>13</sup> Despite the non-academic nature of Lewandowska and Cummings' exploration of Polish amateur cinema, their art project and the archive they generated have sparked scholarly interest in the

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experience, as well as that of "Klaps" film club members in Chybie in southwest Poland, as the basis for his film script, which he generated following the story of one of the club's most active participants, Franek Dzida'. See Marysia Lewandowska, 'The Enthusiasts Archive: From Enthusiasm to Creative Commons', in *National Gallery of Art* <<http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/features/experimental-cinema-in-eastern-europe/the-enthusiasts-archive.html>> [accessed 4 September 2020] (para. 5 of 25).

<sup>12</sup> *Enthusiasts Archive*, online video collection, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw <<http://entuzjasci.artmuseum.pl/en/>> [accessed 6 May 2020].

<sup>13</sup> Łukasz Ronduda, 'Between Collection and Allegory: A Reservoir of Hidden Possibilities', in *Enthusiasts from Amateur Film Clubs*, ed. by Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings (Warsaw: Centre for Contemporary Art, 2004), pp. 34–52 (p. 34).

subject. David Crowley, for example, has since explored amateur filmmaking culture in socialist Poland as a result of Sovietization and examined a number of films in terms of the alternative discourses they generated.<sup>14</sup> As will be discussed later in this introduction, it is precisely the general lack of archival materials on the subject that accounts for the blind spots within the study of socialist-era amateur film productions.

In spite of this challenge, this thesis for the most part draws from an extensive amateur-film collection, acquired by the Latvian State Archive of Audio-visual Documents (Latvijas Valsts kinofotofonodokumentu arhīvs, LVKFFDA) in the mid-2010s, and thus constitutes the first sustained investigation of a substantial and unique archival holding relating to socialist-era amateur film. In addition to this, it includes an extensive array of interviews with former amateur filmmakers and other people who held positions in the institutional structures of the amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia, and were involved in assembling the collection held at the Archive. The research process for this thesis included an internship at the Archive, during which the author of the present study, together with LVKFFDA archivists, worked on the creation of an online catalogue for the amateur films held at the Archive.<sup>15</sup> This internship has undoubtedly stimulated the progress of this research project, and the catalogue entries that the author has produced greatly facilitated the completion of the present thesis.

The main objective of this thesis lies in charting the historical development of the amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia from the mid-1950s to

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<sup>14</sup> David Crowley, 'Socialist Recreation? Amateur Film and Photography in the People's Republic of Poland', in *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on the Postwar Period*, ed. by Balázs Apor and others (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2008), pp. 93–114.

<sup>15</sup> The full catalogue is entitled 'Redzi, dzirdi Latviju!' (See, Hear Latvia!) and is available online <<http://www.redzidzirdilatviju.lv/>> [accessed 24 November 2020].

1991. Its goals are three-fold. Firstly, it provides a detailed account of the amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia as a cinematic and aesthetic phenomenon, paying particular attention to its modes of production, narrative conventions, and visual language, and investigates this movement as a phenomenon with a significant historical, cultural, and socio-political importance in the context of Soviet society from the Khrushchev 'Thaw' period to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Secondly, this thesis seeks to expand our knowledge of amateur filmmaking culture in the Soviet Union and to establish its importance in a global context, and in doing so to contribute to the ongoing expansion of the ways in which the medium of amateur film is comprehended. Thirdly, it examines the ways in which the actual practice of amateur-film production in the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc challenges the existing theoretical and conceptual models which have been developed in the West during the last three decades. This thesis will therefore draw attention to the particularities and idiosyncrasies of amateur film within the Soviet socialist system and focus on broader artistic, cultural, social, and political spaces and functions it occupies. Extending its pertinence beyond film studies, this thesis also aims to identify and explore the various functions that amateur filmmaking performed in Soviet Latvia beyond its ostensible mission of transmitting Soviet ideology, and to examine its role in creating alternative political, social, and cultural meanings.

The following sections of this introduction will critically review various theoretical frameworks, approaches and definitions that have been formulated and exercised in relation to amateur cinema practices in general and socialist-era amateur filmmaking in particular. It will then discuss the role of the archival sector in amateur-film studies and briefly assess and contextualize the archival holdings of Soviet Latvian amateur film at the LVKFFDA. Lastly, it will expand upon the methodology adopted in this research project and outline the contents of each chapter.

### **Amateur cinema — approaches, definitions, and theoretical frameworks**

The study of amateur cinema(s) has remained a largely marginal undertaking within the sphere of film studies, despite the sporadic interest that it has

enjoyed during the last three decades. The pioneering attempts to investigate amateur film in the late 1980s and 1990s focused primarily on its functions within the domestic sphere and its tendency to reinforce the traditional stereotypes associated with the bourgeois (Western) nuclear family. The category of 'amateur film' thus became closely identified with unedited, non-narrative, 'point-and-shoot' scenes of family life, or what is most commonly known as the 'home movie'. When adopting this critical perspective, scholars often define amateur cinema merely as a supplementary element within the ethnography of domestic life and tend to focus solely on the social function of amateur filmmaking within the family. This was the approach adopted by Chalfen in his *Snapshot Versions of Life*, a study in which he famously coined the term 'cinéma naïveté' in order to describe the unsophisticated nature of the film language of family films.<sup>16</sup> Chalfen's monograph was followed in 1995 by Zimmermann's ground-breaking study *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, which established the foundations of the academic study of amateur cinema as a distinct form of film culture. Zimmermann nevertheless also framed the phenomenon as a domestic practice and sought to understand how consumer technologies like amateur-film equipment, given its potential for social, economic, and political resistance, ended up being utilized as a means with which to transmit bourgeois values in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Another critical perspective often adopted in relation to amateur cinema consists of its study through the prism of oppositional filmmaking practices. According to this mode of enquiry, amateur cinema is regarded as contesting the industrial model of film production with its economic and institutional incentives. This approach, however, poses the danger of equating amateurism with experimental and avant-garde filmmaking practices purely on the basis of their marginal quality and the degree of antagonism that they exhibit in relation to professional, mainstream cinema. The conflation of avant-garde and amateurism can be traced in part to the films of such experimental filmmakers

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<sup>16</sup> Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life*.

<sup>17</sup> Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, p. x.

as Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Jonas Mekas. These filmmakers treated the concept of amateurism as a challenge to professional filmmaking and its infrastructures and as a way of democratizing the means of cultural production, and at times exploited its discourses to provide a theoretical foundation for their work.<sup>18</sup> Although avant-garde in essence and intent, their films often shared visual codes with amateur cinema, primarily due to their reliance on small-gauge film formats, which in turn prompted the critics to theorize their work via the prism of cine-amateurism.<sup>19</sup>

The early academic discourse on amateur cinema tended to perpetuate this dichotomized vision. Domestic and experimental filmmaking practices were often juxtaposed with one another, the former often dismissed as a mere transmitter of bourgeois values, and the latter often legitimized as the only valid use of amateur filmmaking. By virtue of this opposition, the practices of both tendencies were regarded as mutually exclusive. In the early 2000s, however, Moran raised important questions in relation to the definition of amateur filmmaking practice(s) and observed that the home movie versus experimental film opposition was limiting for the reason that it stemmed from ‘theorizing the mode of amateur practice as a genre rather than as an economic relation’.<sup>20</sup> Moran argued in favour of a shift away from the concept of amateur as ‘a set of textual signifiers, techniques, and socio-political ideologies negating those

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Maya Deren, ‘Amateur Versus Professional’, *Film Culture*, 39 (1965), 45–46 <<https://hambrecine.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/maya-deren-amateur-vs-professional.pdf>> [accessed 2 February 2019]. Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959–1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 83. Stan Brakhage, ‘In Defense of Amateur’, in *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Film-making*, ed. by Bruce R. McPherson (New York: Documentex, 2001), pp. 142–50.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Charles Reynolds, ‘Maya Deren’, *Popular Photography*, 50 (February 1962), 83.

<sup>20</sup> Moran, *There’s No Place Like Home Video*, p. 66.

of the industrial system' in favour of 'an umbrella term describing any nonindustrial media practice independent of the market or free of commercial exchange value'.<sup>21</sup> Scholars who have approached the subject more recently also regard this attribute of existing outside the economic relations of the film market as crucial for understanding amateur cinema. Expanding upon Moran's definition, Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez characterizes amateur cinema as 'a mode of cultural production in which a direct relationship between expressive practices and individual experience replaces commercial goals, regardless of the ultimate objective (political, cultural, personal, etc.)'.<sup>22</sup> This approach has been shared by Sonya Simonyi, who argues that the understanding of the category 'amateur' in contemporary times is 'inseparable from wider concerns of noncommercial and alternative modes of artistic creation and the sociopolitical and economic systems within which they existed', despite the term's fluidity being dictated by different geopolitical and historical contexts.<sup>23</sup>

As part of his re-evaluation, Moran proposed viewing the phenomenon of amateur film as 'a mode (or modes) of practice', and claimed that by doing so we may discover 'common underlying cultural functions' that most, if not all, amateur films perform in one way or another, independent of their aesthetics, techniques, or subject-matters.<sup>24</sup> In other words, in order to construct a utilitarian taxonomy of amateur filmmaking practice and move away from the domestic versus experimental framework, it is necessary to consider external

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez, 'A Vernacular National Cinema: Amateur Filmmaking in Catalonia (1932–1936)', *Film History*, 30.1 (2018), 1–29 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.30.1.02>> (p. 5).

<sup>23</sup> Sonya Simonyi, 'Artists as Amateurs: Intersections of Nonprofessional Film Production and Neo-Avant-Garde Experimentation at the Balázs Béla Stúdió in the Early 1970s', *Film History*, 30.1 (2018), 114–37 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.30.1.06>> (p. 120).

<sup>24</sup> Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video*, p. 68.

factors, such as, for instance, the intentions of amateur cinema's practitioners and the economic, social, and historical contexts of its production, rather than examining the internal aspects of its textual signifiers.<sup>25</sup> Here Moran is indebted to Michael Renov's essay 'Towards a Poetics of Documentary', in which documentary film is conceptualized as a 'mode' of filmmaking and several of the functions that this mode can perform are described.<sup>26</sup> It is important to emphasize, however, that functional categories are not effective if viewed only as hermetic. As Moran explains, a taxonomy of amateur filmmaking practices must be informed by 'pluralization rather than polarization — a method to analyse the differential effects that competing cultural functions may precipitate within a media text and to prevent holding that text accountable to a single or "pure" intention'.<sup>27</sup>

In 2008, Ryan Shand published an article entitled 'Theorizing Amateur Cinema: Limitations and Possibilities', where, among other issues pertinent to the field, the author also criticized the domestic versus experimental dichotomy — in his view, both perspectives 'assume that amateur ciné production is an activity pursued by isolated individuals for a very small audience' — and attempted to map out a new functional theoretical framework for the study of amateur cinema by introducing the conceptual model of the community mode.<sup>28</sup> Shand describes amateur filmmakers working within the community mode as 'those who belonged to film societies and entered their group-made films into the annual film festivals that were held all around the world', producing 'films on many subjects outside the concern of home movies or the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Renov, 'Toward a Poetics of Documentary', in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. by Michael Renov (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 12–37.

<sup>27</sup> Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video*, p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Ryan Shand, 'Theorizing Amateur Cinema: Limitations and Possibilities', *The Moving Image*, 8.2 (2008), 36–60 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mov.0.0017>> (pp. 52–53).

avant-garde'.<sup>29</sup> In this way he draws attention to a relatively widespread tradition of club- and collective-based amateur filmmaking practices that was largely ignored within the critical perspectives developed for the analysis of domestic and experimental uses of amateur filmmaking. The author contends that such amateur-film production was not intended for the private use of the filmmakers, but neither were the filmmakers seeking to engage with an avant-garde subculture, or attempting entry into the professional sphere of cinema.<sup>30</sup> In Shand's view, amateur filmmakers involved in cine-club production, i.e., those practising the community mode, 'occupied an ambiguous position between public and domestic exhibition strategies', and therefore the community perspective 'addresses and acknowledges the limited public exhibition context enjoyed by [amateur] filmmakers, without implying that they are simply home moviemakers, or attempting entry into the mass mode'.<sup>31</sup>

Although Shand focuses primarily on the role of cine-clubs within the British amateur filmmaking movement, his observations are particularly relevant in the context of this thesis on a number of fronts. As geopolitical and historical contexts to the study of amateur cinema began to expand beyond the Anglo-American examples, it became clear that the theoretical frameworks developed for the analysis of domestic and experimental uses of amateur filmmaking are insufficient to account for the whole range of amateur filmmaking practices. These critical perspectives become especially problematic when examining the amateur-film tradition in the so-called Socialist Bloc. In fact, the majority of amateur films produced in the various countries which belonged to the Soviet Socialist bloc were made on diverse subjects beyond the concerns of the domestic sphere or the avant-garde. Furthermore, as will be explored in detail in due course, amateur filmmaking culture in the socialist states, including Soviet Latvia, was largely defined by

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 52–53.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 53.



its forms of community and sites of collectivity — the workplace, the House of Culture, amateur creativity clubs, and interest-based societies and networks. At the same time, however, socialist-era amateur filmmaking was primarily regarded as a leisure activity rather than a form of cultural production, and therefore enjoyed modest production resources and highly limited public exposure, as a result of which it came to be defined by ambivalent production and exhibition spaces situated between the private and public spheres.

### **Amateur cinema under state socialism**

The phenomenon of Soviet amateur filmmaking has yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves bearing in mind its political, social, and cultural importance, as well as its relationship with the workplace, professional unions, and the institutional networks of administered culture, although two studies published during the last two decades have made substantial inroads. The first is the abovementioned 2005 monograph entitled *Vzgliad v proshloe: Istoriiia liubitel'skogo kino v byvshem SSSR i stranakh Baltii* by Järvine.<sup>32</sup> This monograph strongly relies on a wide variety of primary sources, including the archival materials of the two main institutions that were responsible for amateur filmmaking in the USSR: the Central Film Board of the All-Union Central Board of Professional Unions (Tsentral'nyi Sovet po kino Vsesoiuznogo Tsentral'nogo Soveta Profsoiuzov) and the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, as well as the personal archive of Valentina Bondareva, a former member of the Committee on Working with Amateur Filmmakers of the Filmmakers' Union of the USSR (Komissiiia po rabote s kinoliubiteliami Soiuza kinematografistov SSSR). As suggested by its title, however, *Vzgliad v proshloe* aims to be more of a factual and chronologically linear historiographical account of the amateur filmmaking movement in the Soviet Union rather than a critical study. Although Järvine's monograph does not seek to trace links between amateur filmmaking and wider cultural, political, and social spheres, or offer an analysis or contextualization of amateur filmmaking practices, it nevertheless constitutes

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<sup>32</sup> Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*.

a detailed and informative historical record of the Soviet amateur filmmaking movement and its institutional ties. Furthermore, *Vzgliad v proshloe* contains a substantial section on the history of amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia, which has been extremely useful for the chronological reconstruction of the movement's organizational history presented in the following chapter of this thesis.

Another important pioneer in this regard is Maria Vinogradova, who defended her doctoral thesis on organized Soviet amateur cinema in 2017, and in doing so became the first and hitherto only academic to examine amateur-film culture in the Soviet Union through the prism of its specificities, namely its institutional affiliations and collective-based nature. In her research, Vinogradova traces the roots of the post-Second World War organized amateur filmmaking movement to the theories of proletarian culture that emerged in the 1920s, and discusses this decade as the first instance of the flowering of amateur filmmaking in the young socialist state.<sup>33</sup> The author builds her analysis upon three main elements that, in her view, shaped Soviet amateur-film culture after 1957: professional filmmakers, who advocated in favour of the mass development of amateur cinema; state institutions, which provided various kinds of financial and technical assistance; and amateur filmmakers themselves.<sup>34</sup> Vinogradova also demonstrates the ways in which the amateur filmmaking movement in the USSR was shaped by the socio-political and cultural contexts of the Khrushchev 'Thaw'. This was characterized by the

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<sup>33</sup> Maria Vinogradova, 'Between the State and the Kino: Amateur Film Workshops in the Soviet Union', *Studies in European Cinema*, 8.3 (2012), 211–25 <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/seci.8.3.211\\_1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/seci.8.3.211_1)>.

<sup>34</sup> Vinogradova, 'Amateur Cinema in the Soviet Union', p. i. See also Maria Vinogradova, 'Socialist Movie Making vs. Gosplan: Establishing an Infrastructure for the Soviet Amateur Cinema', *Iluminace: Journal for Film Theory, History, and Aesthetics*, 28.2 (2016), 9–27 <<https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/docview/1847564622>> and Vinogradova, 'Between the State and the Kino'.

move towards cultural liberalism, institutional democratization, an emphasis on cultured and productive leisure, and changing consumption patterns.<sup>35</sup> The analysis in the present study is heavily indebted to Vinogradova's pioneering endeavour to outline the workings of the Soviet state-sponsored amateur filmmaking network between 1957 and 1991.

In recent years, scholars have continued to question the established conceptions of amateur cinema by initiating discussions around various facets that shaped amateur filmmaking cultures across time and space. Technical and economic factors, historical and geopolitical contexts, regimes of community and sociality, and the institutional and civic aspects of amateur endeavours, to name but a few, have captured the attention of international scholars. As aptly observed by Fibla-Gutierrez and Salazkina in their introduction to the recent issue of *Film History* dedicated to the study of the history of amateur-film practices and institutions globally, such revision of amateur cinemas helps 'remap the [film] discipline's epistemological and historical borders by redefining not only what cinema *is* but *how* and *where* it happened'.<sup>36</sup>

This study seeks to contribute to this emerging discourse by situating Soviet Latvian amateur cinema within dynamic reconsiderations of the use of the medium of film and its aesthetics, and by defining it as a social and cultural phenomenon that reflects alternative types of discourse, knowledge, and practices that emerged in the period of late Socialism. The relevance of this dissertation thus moves beyond the sphere of film studies and contributes to the understanding of the cultural exchanges that occurred on the margins of the public sphere, as well as on the peripheries of the Soviet state. This study takes into account the independence tradition of pre-Soviet Latvia with its

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<sup>35</sup> Vinogradova, 'Amateur Cinema in the Soviet Union', p. i.

<sup>36</sup> Masha Salazkina and Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez, 'Introduction: Toward a Global History of Amateur Film Practices and Institutions', *Film History*, 30.1 (2018), v–xxiii <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.30.1.01>> (p. viii).

indigenous culture and language, and considers the complex socio-political relationships and tensions that developed between the centre and periphery of the Soviet Union. The case of the amateur filmmaking movement in the Latvian SSR demonstrates the regional diversity of cultural dynamics under state socialism, while being a unique case study in the sphere of amateur cinema.

Guided by Moran's insights, this thesis approaches amateur film as a mode of cultural production that exists outside the economic relations of the film market and is conditioned by a number of factors, reflects a variety of intentions, and fulfils a number of different functions. This thesis therefore poses the following question: how was this mode of production shaped by the socialist system? The considerations regarding the functional dimension and production contexts of the amateur-film case studies are therefore foregrounded in the course of this dissertation without abandoning the discussion of their thematic, formal, and technical aspects. Recognizing the problematics of conceptualizing amateur cinema as a home-based phenomenon or equating it with experimental filmmaking, this thesis by no means ignores domestic and experimental uses of amateur filmmaking. Instead, it attempts to expand and adjust these critical perspectives by relating them to the examples of amateur films produced in Soviet Latvia.

### **Soviet amateur cinema as social, cultural, and political phenomenon — a theoretical lens**

From the onset of the Cold War onwards, much Western academic and journalistic discourse on the history and social evolution of the Soviet Union has been organised along rigid binaries: categories such as subordination and freedom, official and underground, victims and oppressors, and the state and the people are still often used to describe Soviet reality. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, this approach started to dominate writings produced in ex-Soviet countries as well. During the last two decades, however, international scholars have begun to challenge this binary approach and to explore the plurality and ambiguity of life-experiences in the Soviet Union and the rest of the Socialist bloc. This thesis maintains that amateur filmmaking practices are

particularly revealing in terms of the blurring of the boundaries between official and underground, public and private, endorsed and forbidden, and state-supported and subversive.

The analysis in the following chapters is largely predicated on the insights of social anthropologist Alexei Yurchak in relation to the new types of discourse, community, knowledge, and everyday and artistic practices that emerged during the period of late Socialism. In *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Yurchak maintains that the socio-cultural processes of late Socialism differed greatly from those in the preceding decades, as well as in the post-1991 era.<sup>37</sup> This research project adopts Yurchak's conceptualization of the late-Socialist era as a unique socio-cultural environment, and applies it to the history of the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement. A number of conceptual models proposed by Yurchak — for instance, the concepts of authoritative discourse and performative shift, as well as the notions of *svoi* ('ours' or 'those who belong to our circle') and being *vne* ('being simultaneously outside and inside of some context') — will be employed in the analysis of amateur filmmaking practices in Soviet Latvia.<sup>38</sup> In his study, Yurchak largely focused on the Soviet Russian experience; by testing some of Yurchak's theoretical frameworks against the case studies from the Latvian SSR, this thesis aims to advance our understanding of alternative types of discourse, knowledge, and practices that emerged in the period of late Socialism.

This thesis explores the fluidity and multiplicity of Soviet amateur filmmaking practices across the categories of the individual, domestic, and club-based amateur cinema, and contends that this fluidity and multiplicity in part reflects the variable nature of public and private spheres in the late-Socialist era. In order to expand upon this idea, it has been necessary to address the

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<sup>37</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15, 103 & 127–28.

problematics of applying the notion of 'public sphere' in its classic Habermasian understanding to Soviet-style socialist societies. The observations in this dissertation, therefore, appeal to various studies that consider private and public life in the post-war Soviet Union and conceptualize the public sphere as distinct within the context of state socialism, namely those of Vladimir Shlapentokh, Marc Garcelon, and Deborah A. Field.<sup>39</sup> This study conceptualizes the amateur filmmaking network in Soviet Latvia and the Soviet Union at large as a 'public' structure created for activities that were intrinsically rooted in personal life and the pursuit of leisure and revolved in a sphere of domesticity and elective affinities. In this connection, Anne White's investigation into the sphere of cultural enlightenment and the role of the House of Culture in the development of amateur arts becomes particularly relevant for the discussion in this thesis, as the author explores the dynamic and at times contradictory nature of state policies concerned with leisure and cultural development during the Khrushchev era.<sup>40</sup>

By bringing the issue of the public/private distinction into the study of amateur film, this dissertation adopts an approach similar to the articles collected in the

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<sup>39</sup> Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People: Changing Values in Post-Stalin Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Marc Garcelon, 'The Shadow of the Leviathan: Public and Private in Communist and Post-Communist Society', in *Public and Private in Thought and Practice*, ed. by Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 303–32. Deborah A. Field, 'Everyday Life and the Problem of Conceptualizing Public and Private during the Khrushchev Era', in *Everyday Life in Russia Past and Present*, ed. by Choi Chatterjee and others (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), pp. 163–80.

<sup>40</sup> Anne White, *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture: Declining State Control over Leisure in USSR, Poland, and Hungary, 1953–89* (London: Routledge, 1990).

recent issue of *Film History* dedicated to global amateur film cultures.<sup>41</sup> Amateur-film production in Soviet Latvia is conceptualized as a cinematic public sphere existing between and overlapping with the private realm of family and close friends, and the official realm of the state apparatus. Borrowing certain aspects of the model of public-private subdivisions, where various alternative forms of cultural production operate, as proposed by Simonyi in her study of the Balázs Béla Stúdió in socialist Hungary, the Soviet Latvian amateur cinema network is conceptualized as a 'liminal' or 'parallel public sphere'.<sup>42</sup> This thesis will nevertheless expand upon Simonyi's definition by employing the term to describe a realm of alternative artistic production that embodied a variety of formal and informal interactions, including the creation and consumption of cultural production, one that, although officially sanctioned and incorporated into official state structures, at times tested their boundaries by presenting alternative political, social, and cultural meanings.<sup>43</sup>

As explained previously, this thesis draws upon Shand's revision of theoretical frameworks in amateur-film studies and his conception of the community mode.<sup>44</sup> One of the tasks of this research project has therefore been to explore the forms of community — amateur film collectives, clubs, and studios — that defined amateur filmmaking culture in Soviet Latvia. The present thesis also aims to trace the complex and paradoxical dynamics behind their relationship — both corroborating and limiting — with a variety of institutional structures and the state apparatus, as well as informal organizations and various civic formations. It focuses particularly on the paradoxes of employing amateur

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<sup>41</sup> See Blake Atwood, 'The Little Devil Comes Home: Video, the State, and Amateur Cinema in Iran', *Film History*, 30.1 (2018), 138–67 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.30.1.07>> and Simonyi, 'Artists as Amateurs'.

<sup>42</sup> Simonyi, 'Artists as Amateurs', p. 121.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Shand, 'Theorizing Amateur Cinema', pp. 52–53.

media in the interests of particular institutions and the Soviet state, and explores both its symbiotic relationships with the dominant ideological discourses and practices, and its capacity for subversion. This perspective will permit to explore such issues as cultural memberships, the interplay between public and private spheres, civic engagement, and political dissent, without abandoning the issues of aesthetic value, avant-garde sensibility, and authorship.

### **Latvian amateur film as a form of national cinema**

Throughout this thesis amateur-film production in Soviet Latvia is approached as a vernacular version of national cinema. Examples of amateur films are investigated for their grassroots national(ist) rhetoric, and amateur filmmaking practices are viewed, among other things, as tools for national identity development and national heritage preservation. Amateur filmmaking often inadvertently shaped local film cultures globally through its specialized publications, presence in formal archives and informal personal collections, participation in film clubs, societies, courses, local and international film festivals, and infiltration of television broadcasting and professional mainstream cinema. As aptly observed by Fibla-Gutierrez and Salazkina, these amateur filmmaking initiatives ‘have been creating networks that are yet to be fully accounted for, often placing their centers in unexpected locations’.<sup>45</sup>

Whereas in the early academic discourse surrounding national cinema(s) scholars predominantly focused on narrative feature-filmmaking traditions, and tended to define them in relation to, or rather as opposed to, mainstream Hollywood cinema, in recent years various non-commercial cinematic practices have begun to be framed as part of general film history alongside, and at times in lieu of, national commercial film industries, often resisting the ossified division between Hollywood and national/domestic. As noted by Liz Czach, ‘the stated importance of amateur films takes on a particularly strong resonance in countries where more mainstream forms of filmmaking [...] have

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<sup>45</sup> Salazkina and Fibla-Gutierrez, ‘Introduction’, p. xiii.



been found wanting or absent'.<sup>46</sup> Czach observes that in recent years 'countries that experienced a delayed entry into commercial filmmaking', for example Ireland and Luxembourg, have tended to 'construct an alternative narrative to that of mainstream cinema and reclaim their amateur cinematic heritage'.<sup>47</sup> It is with this purpose in mind that this thesis attempts to advance the tendency of reviewing national cinema through an amateur lens in the discourses surrounding Latvian cinematic heritage and film history. As proposed by Fibla-Gutierrez and Salazkina, 'this shift toward the expanded understanding of what constitutes a national cinema provides us with the framework to analyse geopolitical contexts previously ignored by scholarship', ones that could offer valuable insights into development of film and media cultures in spite of their lack of robust film industry.<sup>48</sup>

As will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, the development of an indigenous film industry in Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s was curbed and rerouted when the country was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. Between 1940 and 1991, the Latvian film industry acted as a regional production unit of the highly centralized Soviet film industry, one with little creative and administrative autonomy, which resulted in local film production and its representational regimes being to a greater or lesser extent controlled by Moscow. The economic shock of the 1990s that followed the collapse of the USSR significantly hindered the growth of the professedly 'non-essential' filmmaking sector in Latvia, and it was only in 2000s and 2010s that the local film industry began tentatively to adapt to the new economic and socio-political climate, relying heavily on government subsidies and EU cultural funding

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<sup>46</sup> Liz Czach, 'Home Movies and Amateur Film as National Cinema', in *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web*, ed. by Laura Rascaroli and others (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 27–37 (p. 27).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> Salazkina and Fibla-Gutierrez, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

programmes. During this same period, film scholarship actively distanced itself from the discussion of Soviet cinematic legacy in Latvia. As this research project demonstrates, the wide range of amateur films produced in Soviet Latvia are not only clearly informed by aesthetic ambitions, but also often exhibit valuable internal perspectives on the history and society of Soviet-era Latvia which are absent from the official productions of the Riga Film Studio and mainstream Soviet cinema. Soviet Latvian amateur-film production therefore conforms to both the traditional aesthetic and auteurist model of national cinema, as well as the revised notion of national cinema with focus on films as social documents with historical/cultural value. In addition to this, as will be discussed in more detail in due course, the discourses and practices of Soviet Latvian amateur cinema to a certain extent continue to shape the contemporary Latvian cinema industry and film culture.

### **The role of the archive in advancing amateur-film studies and the archival holdings of Soviet Latvian amateur film**

The crucial role played by the archival sector in the development of amateur-film studies cannot be underestimated: first and foremost, it is the ease of access to amateur-film primary materials that stimulates scholarly interest in the phenomenon. With the distribution and exhibition of amateur films predominantly in the hands of their creators, and thus largely limited to privately arranged small-scale screenings and a few festivals, archives have remained the only publicly available sources of amateur-film documents after their authors were no longer alive.<sup>49</sup> As observed by Jan-Christopher Horak, however, for many years amateur cinema was regarded as ‘neither art, nor culturally respectable’, and thus was perceived as not ‘worthy of preservation’.<sup>50</sup> Horak contends that it ‘was [an] almost revolutionary act’ for

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<sup>49</sup> Of course, this observation primarily relates to the analogue-film technology era, which is the temporal scope of the present thesis.

<sup>50</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, ‘Out of the Attic: Archiving Amateur Film’, *Journal of Film Preservation*, 56 (1998), 50–53 (p. 50).

the International Federation of Film Archives (Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film, FIAF) to dedicate one of its annual conferences to this film form in 1997.<sup>51</sup> Since then, discussions pertaining to the archiving of small-gauge cinema have regularly taken place, and in particular the historical aspect of amateur film production has been re-evaluated. This is reflected in a volume of essays entitled *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, which was edited by Patricia Zimmermann and Karen L. Ishizuka, and published in 2008. This volume is a collective attempt by international scholars, archivists, artists, and collectors to mobilize amateur films across the globe into a dialogical and dynamic relationship with history, and to transform them from inert documentary evidence into polyvocal, particularized, and active sources of historical knowledge.<sup>52</sup> Amateur films are often still not a priority on the agenda of film archivists, however, and in all likelihood this is the reason why amateur-film studies have persistently suffered from the deep gulf between the investigation of primary materials and the theoretical models within which these investigations are situated.

This issue has been addressed in detail by Shand.<sup>53</sup> The author reviews a number of recent studies on the topic of amateur cinema, and concludes that many scholars with access to primary materials, such as collections of amateur films, rarely attempt to situate their findings in relation to the theoretical debates which have developed within the sphere of film studies in general and the study of amateur cinema in particular. By the same token, ambitious theoretical claims have been made in the past in the absence of primary materials (this has occurred for number of reasons, but is primarily explained

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, ed. by Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Shand, 'Theorizing Amateur Cinema'.

by the lack of availability of primary sources to the researcher in question).<sup>54</sup> This gulf started to be bridged after the publication of Shand's article in various studies of amateur cinemas of the Western world, for example, Heather Nicholson's *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927–77*, which explored the British amateur-film movement through the prism of its societies, filmmakers, specialist publications, and films.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the primary material-theoretical divide still bedevils the research of socialist-era amateur film. Vinogradova, for example, openly admits the difficulty of basing her research on primary amateur filmic material and mentions the 'virtual absence of available copies'.<sup>56</sup> As a result of this divide, fascinating attempts, like those of Vinogradova, to discuss the social, political, and cultural functions of amateur cinema in the Soviet Union may result in somewhat ambitious theoretical claims which are only selectively supported by primary materials. In cases where the primary material appears to be available (for instance the work of Järvine), there has been little attempt to relate the findings to the broader theoretical debates within the study of amateur cinema as a world-wide phenomenon, as well as to contextualize them in larger socio-historical and cultural environments.

The lacunae in the research into amateur cinema in the Soviet Union can mostly be explained by the inaccessibility of the primary filmic sources. This, in turn, is caused by the lack of archival policies towards amateur-film production during the socialist era.<sup>57</sup> Largely dependent on the institutions that supported it, Soviet amateur-film culture could not survive the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Normally stored at the facilities of the amateur filmmaking collectives, amateur films were either returned to their creators, or

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 37–38.

<sup>55</sup> Heather Nicholson, *Amateur Film: Meaning and Practice, 1927–77* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

<sup>56</sup> Vinogradova, 'Between the State and the Kino', p. 214.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

very often discarded after the dissolution of the Soviet state.<sup>58</sup> It is only recently that we have discovered that the amateur cinema of the Latvian SSR faced a different fate. Until now held in the private collections of former amateur filmmakers, and on the premises of the Latvian Amateur Filmmakers' Society (Latvijas Kinoamatieru biedrība, LKAB), several hundred amateur films made by Latvian filmmakers during the Soviet period were handed over in the mid-2010s to the Latvian State Archive of Audio-visual Documents, or LVKFFDA.

The LVKFFDA amateur-film collection consists of some seven hundred films. In part they were collected on the archiving initiative of LKAB, which was founded in 1963 to support amateur filmmaking efforts in Soviet Latvia. The films were held in the headquarters of LKAB (in 1990, renamed the Latvian Non-professional Cinematographers' Society, or Latvijas neprofesionālo kinematogrāfistu sabiedrība, LNKS) until its dissolution in 2008. As a result of this dissolution, these films, along with some of the supporting documentation, were handed over initially to the Riga Film Museum and Archive (Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, RKM). In 2013, the films were then transferred to LVKFFDA due to the archive's better storage facilities, while the supporting documentation remained at RKM. Another significant part of the LVKFFDA archive are the Soviet Latvian amateur films which had been personally collected by former amateur filmmaker Regina Šulca during the 1990s and 2000s. After the news spread about the creation of the collection, in the mid-2010s a number of former amateur filmmakers, who had been holding a collection of their own films or films produced at the amateur film collectives with which they were associated, donated these films to the archive. Since then, LVKFFDA has undertaken the physical evaluation and cataloguing of the films, which made them more accessible for research purposes. In 2015, this research project was begun and, largely based on primary filmic sources held at the LVKFFDA, has attempted an original contribution to the knowledge of amateur filmmaking culture in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

At this juncture it is important to outline the physical quality of the primary filmic sources studied as part of this thesis because it will clarify some of the observations presented later. The majority of Soviet Latvian amateur films reviewed and analysed in this research project are 16 and 8mm originals or copies; some are VHS, Betacam, or digital transfers. For the most part, the transfers were carried out by the filmmakers themselves during the 1990s and 2000s. Almost without exception, the films consist of one reel (in rare cases two), their duration thus rarely exceeding ten minutes. In all probability this was a choice dictated by the limited resources and competence associated with amateur filmmaking, as well as by convenience: in this way, the reels did not have to be changed during projection. The overwhelming majority of films were shot in black and white. Shooting in black and white was standard practice among amateur filmmakers in Soviet Latvia and in the Soviet Union generally on account of the high cost of colour film stock, its relatively poor quality, and the complicated developing processes associated with it. For the most part the 16 and 8mm copies are either silent or have a soundtrack recorded separately on 9.5mm magnetic tape. During screenings, the soundtrack was reproduced using a tape player, and the synchronicity with the image was achieved manually by speeding up and slowing down the audio recording. This practice became routine largely due to the technological limitations faced by amateurs, the unavailability of sound-on-film technology, and the complexity of the sound-synchronization process. Only in few instances do the 16mm film copies have a soundtrack technologically coupled to the image; these were produced by the more competent amateur-film studios, i.e., ones that managed to reach production levels close to professional. These limitations largely defined the artistic style of amateur cinema in Soviet Latvia and in the Soviet Union generally, as Soviet amateur filmmakers were compelled to rely primarily on the visual aspect of storytelling. The soundscape of Soviet Latvian amateur films mainly consists of music and sound effects: if speech is used on the soundtrack, it is rarely synchronized to the image of the speaker and is mostly framed as voiceover.

## Methodology

It is important to acknowledge the potentially unrepresentative nature of the LVKFFDA amateur film collection, and the ways in which this may distort the conceptualization of Soviet Latvian amateur cinema presented in this thesis. Ultimately, LKAB was an official institution created on the initiative of the Filmmakers' Union of Latvia in order to centralize and supervise the efforts of amateur clubs and studios across the state. For this reason it may be speculated that the process of amateur-film collection conducted by LKAB was in all probability influenced by this agenda. This is why the research findings of this thesis do not depend solely on the collection assembled at LVKFFDA.

As part of this research project, a number of private collections of amateur films and the supporting documents were analysed; these collections belong to former amateur film-collective members, namely Zigurds Vidiņš, Regina Šulca, Romualds Pipars, Ingvars Leitis, Vladis Goldbergs, Viesturs Graždanovičs, Valentin Margevich, and Andrei Kashurin. Relevant documents found in the collections of museums or other institutions, such as the Riga Film Museum and Archive (Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, RKM), the Occupation Museum of Latvia (Latvijas Okupācijas muzejs), the Latvian State Archive (Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, LVA), the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (Latvijas Laikmetīgās mākslas centrs, LLMC) and the Latvian Centre for the Documentation of the Consequences of Totalitarianism (Totalitārisma Seku Dokumentēšanas Centrs), were also analysed. In addition to this, ten semi-structured oral history interviews were conducted with former amateur filmmakers and other people who held positions in the institutional structures of the amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia, namely Agris Redovičs, Aīda Zviedre, Juris Zviedris, Haralds Elceris, Ingvars Leitis, Regina Šulca,

Romualds Pipars, Valentin Margevich, Nina Margevich, Viesturs Graždanovičs, Vladis Goldbergs, and Zigurds Vidiņš.<sup>59</sup>

The method of oral history is a documentation of personal knowledge and experience in a specific area. It is particularly relevant in this research project because the institutional and historical knowledge of the phenomenon of amateur filmmaking in the Soviet Union is limited. The personal perspective present in oral-history interviews permitted a deeper understanding of the functional dimension of amateur filmmaking practices in Soviet Latvia. While one objective of the interviewing process was to gain a more nuanced understanding of the institutional history of the amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia, the central aim was to explore the personal motivations behind amateur filmmaking practices and the experience of being an amateur filmmaker in Soviet Latvia. The interviews were guided by several broad themes: the history of the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement and the experiences of being an amateur filmmaker in Soviet Latvia, touching upon subjects such as professional preoccupation, social and political engagements, the reasons for becoming an amateur filmmaker and the development of amateur filmmaking careers, the production history of particular films, and relationships with other amateur and professional filmmakers. Special attention was paid to the attitudes towards, and relationships with, the institutional structures of the amateur filmmaking movement, such as clubs and societies, as well as other institutions involved in the movement.

In this research project a case-study methodology was adopted that was composed of three stages: the collection of data; the organization of data; and the analysis of data. The author began by watching all the Latvian amateur films available, as well as by familiarizing herself with all the available non-filmic primary and secondary sources. During this stage of research, the author

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<sup>59</sup> Throughout this thesis, the interviews will be referenced by the name of the interviewee, name of the interviewer, followed by the date and place of the interview.



also conducted the interviews to complement the data available. In addition to this, she compared and contrasted the data she had gathered from institutional sources (the LVKFFDA amateur film collection, a variety of supporting archival printed documents at RKM and LVA, periodicals) and non-institutional sources (interviews, memoirs where available, and personal collections of films and documents). With a view to examining and presenting evidence gathered from the films in a systematic way, the author subjected them to an analytical framework with the following variables: thematic preoccupation, visual means of communication and narrative structure, functional dimension, reception, authorship, generic qualities, and production context. The author applied a relevant set of analytical tools of aesthetic, social, and institutional approaches to film history in relation to the films examined, and attempted to integrate her findings with existing knowledge of world amateur cinema, Soviet and Latvian official mainstream cinema, and the history of the Soviet Union and the Latvian SSR. Using thematic analysis tools during the organization and analysis of the filmic, non-filmic and interview data allowed the author to identify three major themes that evolved to constitute the Chapters Two, Three, and Four of this dissertation, namely:

- 1) family and domesticity in Soviet Latvian amateur cinema and their relationship with the aesthetic and social dimensions of amateur filmmaking;
- 2) the relationship between Soviet Latvian amateur cinema and the practices of tourism, travelling, and natural heritage exploration as a basis for socially conscious and nationally minded subjects in amateur films;
- 3) the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking scene as a source of innovative and experimental filmmaking practices.

These core themes are supported by secondary themes, concerns, and perspectives of broader relevance, such as the dynamics between the amateur and the professional filmmaking spheres, the institutional and civic aspects of

amateur filmmaking efforts, amateur cinema's role in revitalizing national cinema, and the role of audience and reception in amateur cinema.

### **Chapter outline**

As indicated above, the subject of amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia has been approached through a variety of thematic lenses, such as family, local lives and communities, travel and tourism, social issues and political activism, and experimental and avant-garde sensibilities. This is reflected in Chapters Two, Three, and Four of this thesis. Due to the largely thematic focus of this thesis, Chapter One offers a historical overview of the development of amateur filmmaking interests in pre-Soviet Latvia and of the organized amateur filmmaking movement in the post-Second World War Soviet Union with a specific focus on the Latvian SSR. In addition to this, it seeks to establish the historical and conceptual frameworks for understanding amateur filmmaking culture in a Soviet socialist context. Five periods in the development of amateur filmmaking culture in pre-Soviet and Soviet Latvia have been identified. Brief analysis of each period includes discussion of the major tendencies in terms of professional and amateur filmmaking practices, the establishment and evolution of the organizational structures of the movement, and the influential events which shaped amateur film-making practices. These periods are discussed in the context of Latvia's forcible incorporation into the Soviet Union during and after the Second World War, and the variety of cultural and socio-political factors which influenced the sphere of amateur arts, most importantly Soviet cultural policy. This chapter lays the foundation for the subsequent chapters that analyse amateur-film production in Soviet Latvia in greater detail.

The second chapter of this thesis explores the interplay between the familial and domestic uses of amateur filmmaking and the collective, club-based, and socially-oriented amateur filmmaking practices in the Soviet Union. It analyses various modes of crossover between these two strands, using examples of amateur films produced in Soviet Latvia to illustrate the dynamic. In this chapter, the Soviet cinematic culture of the 1920s is outlined as an undeniable influence on the development of amateur filmmaking in the post-war Soviet Union, both organizationally and ideologically. The ways in which its rhetoric

aided the marginalization of the domestic use of amateur filmmaking in the post-war Soviet Union is also discussed. The chapter then examines the fluidity between the domestic/individual and club-based/collective amateur filmmaking in relation to the conceptual framework of public and private spheres, and focuses on the alternative and unanticipated functions that family films can perform in a non-liberal context. It then offers an in-depth analysis of several case studies of amateur-film productions that exhibit the ways in which the focus on the domesticity and the family as a subject intersects with various aesthetic and thematic expectations for amateur films informed by film culture in general, and the Soviet organized and state-supported amateur-filmmaking culture in particular.

The third chapter of this thesis is dedicated to discussing the relationship between Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking culture and the practices of tourism, travelling, and natural heritage exploration and preservation. It examines the ways in which this relationship at times led to Soviet Latvian amateur filmmakers exploring socially conscious and nationally minded subjects in their films. Through the prism of the work of two Soviet Latvian amateur filmmakers, Zigurds Vidiņš and Ingvars Leitis, this chapter explores the ways in which the genre of tourism films evolved and began to exhibit deeper thematic significance by addressing such themes as local environmental destruction, Latvian ethnic history and culture, and even growing national discontent in Soviet Latvia. The case studies discussed in this chapter thus begin to outline the ways in which amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia became a platform for creating and articulating alternative political, social, and cultural meanings, such as, for instance, the prospects for Latvian national identity development and its political legitimacy. Furthermore, this chapter also traces the complex dynamics between amateur filmmaking clubs and institutional structures, as well as informal organizations and various civic formations during the late-Soviet era.

The fourth chapter of this thesis approaches Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking network as a platform for innovative and experimental filmmaking practices. It attempts to contribute to the broadening of our understanding of

what constitutes 'experimental cinema' under socialism. It challenges the scholarly canonization of the Soviet cinematic avant-garde by looking for traces of experimental filmmaking practices on the peripheries of the Soviet state film industry, namely, in amateur-film studios and self-organized groups of non-professional filmmakers, and compares the ways in which these experimental tendencies functioned and transformed from one decade to another. In addition to this, this chapter questions the avant-garde's supposed independence from and resistance to the industrial, institutional, and commercial aspects of cinema, as it discusses experimental filmmaking practices within Soviet Latvian amateur cinema in the context of strong affiliation with state institutions or reliance on their structures. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates that this affiliation and institutional support did at times prompt Soviet Latvian amateur-film studios to undergo a certain degree of professionalization, and discusses the relationship between the amateur and the professional filmmaking sphere in Soviet Latvia that resulted from this process.

## Chapter 1 Historical Overview of Amateur Filmmaking in Latvia

### Amateur filmmaking in independent Latvia (1918–39) and during the first year of Soviet occupation (1940–41)

The first manifestations of amateur filmmaking activity in Latvia can be traced to the country's first period of independence. This spanned from 1918, when Latvia declared independence and began the transformation from a province of the Russian empire into a modern capitalist democracy, to 1940, when the country was invaded by the Soviet Union as part of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Before 1918, Riga had been part of the international film market network, albeit mainly in relation to the importing of foreign film: Latvian film theatres were largely dominated by foreign films (Russian, American, German, Scandinavian, and French) due to the virtual absence of a domestic film industry.<sup>60</sup> The Declaration of Independence in 1918, however, and the desire to encourage a sense of national identity and arouse feelings of patriotism among the people gave rise to the development of a Latvian national film culture. By the beginning of the 1920s, the first Latvian film-production companies were creating newsreels and documentaries, and in the 1930s the country witnessed its first, albeit rare, feature-length fiction films.<sup>61</sup> It is the economic professionalization of the Latvian film industry at this point in time that permits the concept of amateurism to be introduced into the discussion. As Zimmerman notes in her discussion of amateur film in the United States, this concept emerged 'as a cultural inversion' of the development of professionalization.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Renāte Cāne, 'Latvijas Dokumentālā Kino Komunikatīvo Funkciju Transformācija' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Biznesa augstskola Turība, 2014), pp. 64–65.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>62</sup> Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, p. 7.

The category of 'amateur' is conventionally associated with the lack of vocational qualifications as part of higher education programmes or in the workplace. According to this criterion, therefore, the filmmaking enthusiasts who pioneered the first filmmaking efforts in Latvia and elsewhere, as well as the early films themselves, can potentially be categorized as amateur. Such a categorization depends very much, however, on the ways in which amateur filmmaking is conceptualized. As discussed in detail in the introduction, in the context of this study amateur cinema is understood first and foremost as a form of cultural production that exists outside the economic relations of the film market. The motivations of filmmaking pioneers in Latvia — as elsewhere — were primarily profit-driven, and their films were regarded ultimately as commodities to be sold commercially in the marketplace. At the same time, it is important to note those cases in which cine-amateurism was practised by film-industry professionals as a personal hobby or sideline. For example, among the first generation of Latvian camera operators during the 1920s and 1930s were two men, Aleksandrs Šumahers and Pēteris Miežītis, who created amateur films for personal use on the margins of their professional careers.<sup>63</sup> Šumahers's amateur films are considered lost, but part of Miežītis's amateur-film collection is now held at the LVKFFDA. It consists of both 35 and 16mm recordings of the filmmakers' family and friends, their leisure activities and travels, as well as actuality footage showing public events.

Fibla-Gutierrez has observed that with the commercial availability of the first narrow-gauge cameras — the 9.5mm Pathé-Baby, which was launched in 1922, and the 16mm Cine-Kodak in 1923 — the early 1920s 'was the first instance of wide, nonprofessional access to the means of moving-image production'.<sup>64</sup> In Latvia, the first camera to be used by cine-amateurs was the

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<sup>63</sup> Marija Miežīte and Pēteris Miežītis (junior), 'Par Pēteri Miežīti', interview transcript, 21 March 1991, Fonotēka 45, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Rīga, Latvia, pp. 8–10. Juris Šumahers, interview transcript, 27 April 1990, Fonotēka 43, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Rīga, Latvia, pp. 9–10.

<sup>64</sup> Fibla-Gutierrez, 'A Vernacular National Cinema', p. 5.

compact 35mm Ica-Kinamo, which was produced by the German company ICA and appeared on the Latvian market in 1922.<sup>65</sup> Judging by the profusion of advertisements in photo- and cine-amateur periodicals, by the end of the 1920s the 9.5mm Pathé-Baby and the 16mm Cine-Kodak, as well as various projectors, became available at film-equipment dealerships in major cities.

Having not established an independent organization of their own, early Latvian film enthusiasts tended to cluster around the Latvian Photography Society (Latviešu fotogrāfiskā biedrība), which had been established in 1906 to facilitate the development of photography, but also played an important role in fostering amateur filmmaking in independent Latvia from the mid-1920s onwards. In 1925, for example, the Society organized courses for amateur photographers and filmmakers aimed at enhancing their technical skills. In 1929, moreover, it launched a quarterly periodical entitled *Objektīvs* which was published until 1934 and provided theoretical and practical knowledge about photography and filmmaking. It also advertised and reviewed the latest technological developments in amateur film and photography equipment.<sup>66</sup>

By the 1930s the potential of amateur cinema in relation to encouraging a nascent Latvian national film culture was recognized and discussed. Writing in 1931, for example, a reporter for *Filma un Skatuve* reviewed the state of affairs of amateur filmmaking in Latvia, and observed ‘very little cooperation’ in this sphere; in his view, ‘everyone with their own equipment works on their own, without any system or organization’.<sup>67</sup> He argues that ‘no major success is to be expected in such situation’, but that ‘given that the emergence of our

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<sup>65</sup> V. Ziemelis, ‘Amatieris un kinematogrāfija’, *Fotogrāfijas Mēnešraksts*, 1 May 1922, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Biedrības un izrīkojumi’, *Latvis*, 15 October 1925, p. 7. ‘Visiem foto-mākslas draugiem’, *Objektīvs*, 1 January 1929, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Katrs, kam vien ir savs aparāts, strādā “pats uz savu roku”, bez jebkādas sistēmas un organizācijas’. J. Aleksandrs, ‘Katram savs mājas kino’, *Filma un Skatuve*, 11 April 1931, pp. 246–47 (p. 247).

national film industry is unlikely in the near future, the only way to establish Latvian film production easily and quickly would be for cine-amateurs to come together on this matter'.<sup>68</sup> It is probably with this agenda in mind that such initiatives as the Narrow-gauge Cinema Central (Šaurfilmas kino centrāle) were attempted during the 1930s. This organization was established in 1938 on the premises of Peasant's Thoughts (Zemnieka domas), a limited company in Riga that acted mainly as a publishing house. Despite being founded on commercial principles, Narrow-gauge Cinema Central considered the state-wide promotion of amateur filmmaking for artistic, cultural, and social purposes as one of its primary aims. It planned to import and distribute the latest amateur-film equipment, to host a film laboratory which would specialize in all stages of film processing, and even to aid with amateur-film distribution, exhibition, and archiving, and eventually act as a narrow-gauge film production company.<sup>69</sup>

Despite these efforts, it would seem that amateur filmmaking in independent Latvia never achieved a significant social or cultural resonance, or indeed any considerable level of organization, and remained a hobby for the privileged few who were engaged in cine-amateurism primarily on an individual level and for leisure purposes only. It is thus safe to say that, in the 1920s and 1930s, Latvian amateur filmmaking largely developed according to the patterns that can be observed in the rest of the Western capitalist world, where it was primarily a consumption-centric activity and an individual pursuit, and where cine-amateur clubs acted as associations of individual filmmakers with an eye to the pooling of the individual resources, largely remaining a grassroots initiative. An article published in a Latvian newspaper in 1939 lamented the fact that there were only around twenty amateur filmmakers active in Latvia at

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<sup>68</sup> 'Tādā veidā, protams, lieli panākumi nav gaidāmi. Ievērojot to, ka mūsu nacionālās kinorūpniecības izveidošanās tuvākā laikā nav domājama, vienīgais ceļš, kā visvieglāk un vislētāk tikt pie latvju filmas inscenēšanas, būtu kino filmu amatieriem kopēji stāties pie šīs lietas izvešanas'. Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Kārlis Viziņš, 'Šaurfilmas kinematogrāfija', *Rīts*, 4 January 1938, p. 7.



the time, and that they [...] primarily engage in filmmaking casually, for the sake of making a short travel film or recording a seaside view'.<sup>70</sup>

These discussions, as well as practical initiatives in the sphere of amateur-film production, were suppressed when Latvia was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, and bourgeois amateur filmmakers were forced to adapt to the realities of a socialist state. Film was regarded as an important propaganda vehicle by the Soviet state. For this reason, the rapid restructuring of the nascent Latvian film industry, its incorporation into the Soviet film production system, and its transformation into an effective tool of state propaganda were viewed as crucial objectives. As part of this process, during October and November 1940, the Council of People's Commissars of the Latvian SSR (the Latvian SSR government formed after the incorporation of Latvia into the USSR on August 26) issued a number of decrees. They were aimed at the complete nationalization of the Latvian film industry and its subordination to the Chief Directorate of Cinefication of the USSR (Glavnoe upravlenie kinofikatsii SSSR, later renamed the Central Committee for Cinema Affairs) through its Latvian equivalent, the Directorate of Cinefication of the Latvian SSR, which was founded on 26 September 1940.<sup>71</sup> These decrees effectively established a state monopoly over film production, distribution, and exhibition in Latvia. In particular, they required all film industry enterprises and film equipment to be transferred to the state.<sup>72</sup> All private individuals in possession of filmmaking equipment were required to hand their property over to the

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<sup>70</sup> [...] galvenā kārtā izdara gadījuma rakstura uzņēmumus, apmierinoties ar Īsu ceļojuma filmiņu vai jūrmalas skatu uzņemšanu'. 'Skolas apgādās ar filmu aparātiem', *Rīts*, 26 May 1939, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Gints Zelmenis, 'Kultūras pārraudzība un cenzūra Latvijā padomju okupācijas apstākļos 1940.–1941. gadā', in *Latvijas vēsture 20. gadsimta 40.–90. gados*, ed. by Daina Bleiere and others, Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti, XXI (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2007), pp. 15–46 (p. 26).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Directorate of Cinefication by 5 November 1940; those who failed to do so were held responsible for illegal possession of state property.<sup>73</sup> As a result, from November 1940 onwards all filmmaking activities not sanctioned by the state, including those of amateurs, were significantly curbed. Those individuals who succeeded in retaining possession of film equipment were self-evidently not able to use it openly.

By the end of 1940, following the nationalization of the Latvian film industry, two film-production entities, subordinated to the Central Committee for Cinema Affairs, were founded in Riga.<sup>74</sup> The first, the National Film Company (Valsts filmu uzņēmums), also known as the Fiction Film Studio (Mākslas filmu studija), was awarded the task of fiction-film production. The second, the Central Film Chronicle Studio (Centrālā kinohronikas studija) was placed in charge of documentary film production and commissioned actuality materials, such as newsreels or so-called *kinožurnāli*.<sup>75</sup> Later, the two studios would merge and become the Riga Film Studio (Rīgas kinostudija, RKS), which remained the main film studio in the Latvian SSR throughout the Soviet period and in effect functioned as a production unit of the highly centralized Soviet film industry, with little autonomy in creative and administrative decisions. As observed by Latvian filmmaker and film historian Renāte Cāne, the film system based on these principles existed in Latvia for almost fifty years until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, except for the period from June 1941 to October 1944, when Latvia was occupied by Nazi German forces.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> Cāne, 'Latvijas Dokumentālā Kino Komunikatīvo Funkciju Transformācija', pp. 81–82.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

## **First clandestine amateur filmmaking collectives in post-war Soviet Latvia, 1945–55**

Despite the restrictions imposed on non-state sanctioned filmmaking activities, as well as the devastation to the film industry caused by the war, there is evidence to suggest that the first clandestine associations of film enthusiasts in Soviet Latvia appeared in the period just prior to the end of the Second World War and shortly thereafter. Due to the above-mentioned restrictions, these associations could not exist independently, and thus relied on the structures of the nationalized official film industry. The people involved in these associations were usually employed within these state structures and often possessed work or study experience in the audio-visual sphere before the Soviet occupation. This was the case of Pēteris Miežītis, for example, mentioned earlier, who after the Second World War began creating film and propaganda posters at the Riga office of Glavkinoprokat, the main administrative agency for motion-picture leasing in the USSR. Together with other creative individuals, for instance the renowned film and propaganda poster artist Simons Gūtmanis, who in 1939 had designed the poster for Latvia's first feature-length sound film, *Zvējniēka dēls* (The Son of the Fisherman), Miežītis established an unofficial amateur filmmaking workshop where, between 1945 and 1955, he made a number of short fiction and documentary films (both on 16 and 35mm film) with personally owned and borrowed equipment.<sup>77</sup> It is not known whether these films were publicly screened: it seems they were intended primarily for private screenings among the families and friends of the creators.

A more curious case is that of Kārlis Tomariņš and his underground amateur filmmaking collective. Tomariņš started his career as a sound engineer at the Central Film Chronicle Studio in Riga, where he worked at some point between 1944 and 1950. He began to experiment with film around 1944 after the Germans retreated from Riga; he claims that he and other film enthusiasts were able to recycle the film equipment and footage that the Germans had left

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<sup>77</sup> Miežīte and Miežītis (junior), interview transcript, pp. 8–10.

behind.<sup>78</sup> After the war ended, Tomariņš continued his experiments in filmmaking, mainly by recycling film footage. Using his sound-engineering skills, he designed an optical sound-recording device and used it in his amateur filmmaking efforts.<sup>79</sup> In 1947, while still working at the studio, and thus having access to its material and technical base, Tomariņš, along with other film enthusiasts, formed an underground filmmaking collective called Miniamara that was active until 1955 and produced a number of films. It is clear that Tomariņš saw these films as a form of indirect protest against the newly imposed Soviet regime and its ideologically slanted cultural products: he states that these first films ‘appeared as a reaction, as some sort of opposition to what was imposed on us’.<sup>80</sup>

Tomariņš reminisces that the first film produced by Miniamara was a travel film about Lake Alūksne in Latvia, accompanied by music composed by the Latvian composer Ādolfs Skulte. This was followed by a film called *Priecīgus Ziemassvētkus* (Merry Christmas, exact year unknown), which Tomariņš describes as being ‘[...] not about Christian, but about Latvian Christmas, because there was a desire to create something antithetical’.<sup>81</sup> It can be speculated that the film probably focused on the combination of Christian traditions and pagan celebrations of the winter solstice as part of Christmas celebrations in Latvia. Evidently, the films by Miniamara had a strong national dimension and were conceived by the authors as an alternative cultural product to what the Soviet regime was offering at that time. According to Tomariņš, *Priecīgus Ziemassvētkus* was screened for a period of time before

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<sup>78</sup> Kārlis Tomariņš, ‘Kinoamatierisms’, interview transcript, 1990s, Fonotēka 38, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Rīga, Latvia, p. 10.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Tās filmas vairāk radās kā reakcija uz to, [kā] kaut kāds pretstats tam, ko mums spieda iekšā’. Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> ‘[...] nevis par kristīgiem, bet par latviešu Ziemassvētkiem, jo taisni gribējās kaut ko pretēju’. Ibid.

the main features in one of the Riga cinema theatres as a result of a private arrangement with its projectionist, who happened to be an acquaintance.<sup>82</sup> These screenings were technically illegal, because on 4 November 1940 the Council of People's Commissars had issued a decree, according to which the repertoires of all cinema theatres in Latvia had to be approved in advance by the Directorate of Cinefication.<sup>83</sup> It was probably owing to the chaos and confusion of the initial post-war years that such incidents went unnoticed. The underground status of the collective, and hence its limited access to materials and equipment, as well as the risk involved in underground film production and exhibition, clearly limited their activities. In 1955, therefore, as Tomariņš puts it, Miniamara decided to 'become legal'.<sup>84</sup>

By the mid-1950s, Tomariņš had already taken up the position of acoustic engineer at the State Electrotechnical Factory (Valsts elektrotehnikas fabrika, VEF) in Riga, and proposed organizing an amateur filmmaking club to the factory's administration.<sup>85</sup> The aforementioned Aleksandrs Šumahers, who had been working at VEF since 1949, endorsed Tomariņš's idea, and thus the first official amateur-film club was established in 1955 on the premises of the Palace of Culture of VEF. In the press, the purpose of the VEF amateur film club was reported as being '[...] to reflect upon the technical progress of the factory, the work of factory innovators, inventors, rationalizers, and communist labour brigades, the fight against defective articles, the high quality of the products, the release of new products', and '[...] with the help of cinema, to carry out educational work, promote technology, and disseminate the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Zelmenis, 'Kultūras pārraudzība un cenzūra', p. 31.

<sup>84</sup> Kārlis Tomariņš, 'K. Tomariņa pārdomas un atmiņas par kinoamatierismu', unpublished article, June 1989, RKM-1769, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, pp. 1–2.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

achievements of pioneers and innovators in manufacturing'.<sup>86</sup> Along with other cine-enthusiasts at VEF, Tomariņš and Šumahers collaborated on the collective's first film, which was entitled *Mūsu rūpnīca* (Our Factory, 1955). The film was the first official amateur film produced in Soviet Latvia, and introduced the viewer to the factory's different departments and production facilities, and to the work and life of its model employees.<sup>87</sup> The film is now considered to be lost. Based on contemporary reviews, however, it appears to have been an enthusiastic celebration of the rapid post-war industrialization, technical and scientific progress, and rising productivity in the new Soviet republic.

### **The beginnings of organized amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia, 1955–63**

Soviet cultural policy during the 'Thaw' period promoted the social utility of leisure pursuits and incentivized collective forms of amateur creative practices. Vinogradova has argued that this 'played a crucial role in establishing an infrastructure for amateur filmmaking that enabled its mass development' from the late 1950s onwards.<sup>88</sup> The policy stimulated the growth of a network of amateur filmmaking collectives or clubs at places of work, for example factories, collective farms, research centres, or in so-called Houses or Palaces of Culture, which were usually attached to such institutions. With the passage of time these clubs became integrated into a non-professional filmmaking network with an administrative structure on local, regional, state, and all-Union

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<sup>86</sup> '[...] atspoguļo rūpnīcas tehnisko progresu: rūpnīcas novatoru, izgudrotāju, racionalizatoru un komunistiskā darba brigāžu darbu, ciņu pret brāķi, par izstrādājumu augstu kvalitāti, jaunu izstrādājumu izlaidi u. c.'. I. Fišers, 'Kinostudijas rūpnīcā', *Padomju Jaunatne*, 11 October 1959, p. 1. '[...] ar kino palīdzību veikt audzināšanas darbu, propagandēt tehniku, izplatīt ražošanas pirmrindnieku un novatoru sasniegumus'. H. Bormanis, 'Rūpnīcas kinostudija', *Cīņa*, 16 December 1955, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> Bormanis, 'Rūpnīcas kinostudija', p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> Vinogradova, 'Amateur Cinema in the Soviet Union', p. i.

levels. Within this network, the creative use of film was promoted, technical innovations and experiments were encouraged, training was provided, and a variety of amateur-film festivals was organized. Individuals who dabbled in amateur filmmaking independently were encouraged to join these collectives, as they were supported through the system of professional unions responsible for providing the material and technical base, as well as by the organizations to which they were attached.<sup>89</sup> Apart from providing access to otherwise barely affordable film equipment and stock, the collectives served as environments of like-minded people, places where collaboration and exchange of experience were possible, and where platforms for exhibiting one's work and receiving feedback could be found. Joining a collective was invariably an opportunity to improve one's filmmaking skills because the degree of interaction between professional filmmakers and the amateur filmmaking collectives was very high across the Soviet Union. Professional workers of cinema were often invited to give talks and seminars to amateurs; some took up positions in the organizational management of the amateur filmmaking movement. For some amateurs, these collectives acted as springboards for starting a professional career in film.

The appeal of collectives was based on the access that could be gained to cameras, film stock, expertise, and the networks that they provided. In turn, by joining the collectives, amateurs committed themselves to performing certain obligations as part of club work in particular, and to complying with hegemonic ideological discourses and practices in general. The amateur film clubs' funding system and their attachment to workplaces often dictated thematic guidelines for amateur films, as can be seen in the case of VEF and *Mūsu rūpnīca*. A number of films produced at VEF in the second half of the 1950s documented different aspects of the factory's work, and were even used as educational materials in various experience-exchange programmes in the sphere of engineering and technology.<sup>90</sup> A large percentage of the Soviet

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<sup>89</sup> For more on this dynamic, see Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, pp. 57–58.

<sup>90</sup> Fišers, 'Kinostudijas rūpnīcā', p. 1.

Latvian amateur films examined in the course of this research project exhibit a strong social agenda and ‘correct’ ideological inclination: they document and celebrate the work of collective farms and factories, tell stories of scientific achievements, and showcase events of public importance. It can be observed that the Soviet ideological discourse as far as amateur cinema was concerned also tended to emphasize its socially conscious uses. However, behind the façade of state-endorsed amateur filmmaking collectives producing ‘useful’ amateur films with a strong social dimension were numerous creative individuals who practised amateur filmmaking for a variety of reasons and with a range of intentions beyond utility and social purpose. These figures often used the creative, technical, material, and experiential capital of the amateur filmmaking network for more personal projects.

Following the model established by the VEF studio, numerous amateur filmmaking collectives began to emerge across Soviet Latvia at the end of 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. These were usually created on the personal initiative of cine-enthusiasts and were encouraged by the managements of the Houses of Culture. Many sprung from amateur filmmaking courses organized by more experienced photo- and cine-enthusiasts — Mečislavs Caune in Daugavpils, Herberts Dzelme and Alfrēds Dreiže in Rīga, Huberts Stankevičs in Liepāja, Pauls Zariņš in Jelgava — who taught the basics of filmmaking as part of cultural enlightenment programmes offered by certain institutions and the Houses of Culture. Thus, for instance, amateur filmmaking courses at the Riga Young Technicians’ Station (Rīgas jauno tehniķu stacija, RJTS), a youth development centre, were organized by pedagogue Herberts Dzelme in the academic year 1955–56, and later evolved into the prolific amateur filmmaking studio *Spektrs*.<sup>91</sup> In 1958, a film- and photo-club began work under the supervision of Huberts Stankevičs at the House of Culture of the city of Liepāja, from which an amateur filmmaking collective

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<sup>91</sup> ‘Rīgas JTS kinoamatieru studija “Spektrs”’, portfolio, 1975, RKM-7258, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, pp. 3–4.



named in honour of Eduard Tisse emerged shortly afterwards.<sup>92</sup> The amateur filmmaking collective of the House of Culture of the Latvian Trade Unions Council (Latvijas Republikas arodbiedrību padome, LRAP) developed from filmmaking courses organized by the House of Culture management in 1958.<sup>93</sup> Pauls Zariņš, the assistant professor of the Latvian Academy of Agriculture (Latvijas Lauksaimniecības akadēmija, LLA) in Jelgava and a cine-enthusiast, was the organizational and creative force behind a filmmaking group comprised of LLA students that began its work around 1957–58. Later, the LLA filmmaking group, as well as other cine-enthusiasts from other institutions and organizations in Jelgava, were united by Fokuss, an amateur filmmaking association that formed on the premises of the House of Culture of the city of Jelgava.<sup>94</sup>

The late 1950s and early 1960s are often characterized as a new era for cinema in Europe and North America, one that was fuelled by a variety of social and economic changes, marked by technological developments and artistic new waves, and had reverberations worldwide. In the Soviet Union, this era coincided with the period that became known as the ‘Thaw’, prompted by Nikita Khrushchev’s 1956 denunciation of Joseph Stalin and the subsequent process of de-Stalinization. This was characterized by the relative liberalization of the Soviet regime, especially in the sphere of arts and culture. The flowering of the amateur filmmaking initiative across the Soviet Union during this time was undoubtedly stimulated by these factors. Apart from this, from the late 1950s

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<sup>92</sup> ‘Liepājas Kultūras Nama amatieru kinostudijas darba atskaites’, 1958–70, RKM-7319, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Rīga, Latvia, p. 1–2.

<sup>93</sup> Ieva Viese, ‘Pirmie animācijā: Ģildes grupa’, *Kino Raksti*, 3.33 (2011), 69–73 (p. 70).

<sup>94</sup> ‘Jelgavas pilsētas kinoamatieru tautas kinostudijas “Fokuss” darba atskaites’, 1967–73, RKM-7279, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Rīga, Latvia, pp. 1–2.

onwards the Soviet Union witnessed the large-scale domestic production of 16 and 8mm cameras, projectors, and film stock.<sup>95</sup>

In Soviet Latvia, the enthusiasm for cinema was also in part fuelled by the gradual rebirth of a national film culture. As pointed out by Cāne, during the first year of the Soviet occupation, and especially after the Nazi occupation of Latvia during the Second World War, a significant number of Latvian film workers emigrated, anticipating suspicion and distrust from the Soviet government, or because they were simply unwilling to live and work under the new regime.<sup>96</sup> In order to resolve the resulting cadre problem, as well as to ensure the smooth Sovietization of the Latvian film industry, large numbers of film-industry workers of predominantly Russian ethnic origin were 'imported' into Latvia to assume crucial positions in the administrative and creative structures of the local film industry.<sup>97</sup> It was only towards the end of the 1950s that a new generation of native Latvian filmmakers began to graduate from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (Vsesoiuznyi gosudarstvennyi institut kinematografii, VGIK), returning to Latvia and taking up positions at the Riga Film Studio.<sup>98</sup>

The influx of 'new blood' into the Soviet Latvian film industry, combined with the milder political climate of the 'Thaw', gave rise to new cinematic tendencies, among them a documentary film movement that became known as the Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema (Rīgas poētiskā dokumentālā kino skola). This 'new wave' in Soviet Latvian documentary cinema was characterized by a shift in focus away from collective pathos towards the personal, subjective, and poetic, and reflected some of the

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<sup>95</sup> Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 32.

<sup>96</sup> Cāne, 'Latvijas Dokumentālā Kino Komunikatīvo Funkciju Transformācija', pp. 83–99.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 103–04.

changes occurring in mainstream Soviet cinema at this time. Many of the filmmakers who positioned themselves at the forefront of the Poetic Documentary Cinema movement, including scriptwriter Armīns Lejiņš, camera operator Ivars Seleckis, and directors Aloīzs Brenčs and Ivars Kraulītis, became closely involved in the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement: they judged amateur-film festivals, supervised work at amateur-film studios, provided training and consulting at film shootings, and even took up positions in the administrative structures of the amateur cinema network.

As cine-amateur initiatives began to grow across the Soviet Union from the mid-1950s onwards, Soviet amateur filmmaking received the formal support of the state. On 27 August 1958, the Ministry of Culture of the USSR issued a decree that the development of amateur filmmaking should be fostered through state initiatives, and that an all-Union amateur-film festival should be organized in due course.<sup>99</sup> In response to this decree, on 7 October 1958, the Ministry of Culture of the Latvian SSR passed a resolution organizing the first Republican amateur filmmaking festival to showcase the work of amateur filmmakers from across Latvia in preparation for the all-Union amateur-film festival that would take place the following year.<sup>100</sup> In preparation for and during the festival, the Riga Film Studio was ordered by the Ministry to consult amateur filmmakers on creative, organizational, and technical issues, and to provide assistance in preparing their films for the festival.<sup>101</sup> The first Republican amateur-film festival took place on 14 December 1958 and was hosted by the House of Culture of LRAP. From that moment onwards, republican amateur-film festivals took place annually in the Latvian SSR.

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<sup>99</sup> 'Biedrības hronika', 1958–79, LV-LVA-F932-A1-D205, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, p. 1.

<sup>100</sup> Prikaz Ministerstva Kul'tury Latviiskoi SSR n. 922 'O provedenii respublikanskogo smotra samodeiatel'nykh kinofil'mov', 7 October 1958, RKM-2065, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, pp. 1–3.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

The involvement of the Ministry of Culture in the amateur filmmaking movement can be interpreted as a move towards the gradual instrumentalization of amateur cinema by the state. In reality, however, as the amateur filmmaking movement began to develop momentum in the Soviet Union, its administration and management was taken up by numerous institutions, and as a result became diffused. In Soviet Latvia, the emerging amateur filmmaking movement was initially administered by the Filmmakers' Union of the Latvian SSR, namely its Section for Amateur Filmmakers' Affairs, headed by Aloīzs Brenčs, and the Latvian Republican Board of Professional Unions of the Workers of Culture. In 1960, these two organizations initiated moves to establish the Latvian Amateur Filmmakers' Society (Latvijas kinoamatieru biedrība, LKAB), which would support, centralize, and supervise the efforts of amateur filmmaking collectives across the state; this initiative was approved by the Ministry of Culture of the Latvian SSR.<sup>102</sup> At the constitutive meeting of LKAB on 30 November 1963, Brenčs was elected its chairman.<sup>103</sup> The birth of the Society in 1963 coincided with the establishment of the State Committee for Cinematography of the Council of Ministers of USSR (or Goskino), with its local branches in Soviet republics. Thus legally, as with any other filmmaking enterprise in Soviet Latvia, the Society was placed under the jurisdiction of the State Committee for Cinematography of the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR, which in turn answered to Goskino.<sup>104</sup> Despite being integrated as part of the hierarchy of Goskino *de jure*, however, the amateur filmmaking infrastructure in Soviet Latvia and the rest of the Soviet Union, albeit limited by the contours of state institutions, remained highly decentralized. Amateur cinema in Soviet Latvia continued to be funded mainly via the system of professional unions, while being creatively stimulated by the Filmmakers' Union, and overseen and endorsed by the Ministry of Culture.

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<sup>102</sup> Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, pp. 464–65.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 464–65.

## **The era of the studios and the professionalization of amateur filmmaking: the golden age of Soviet Latvian amateur cinema and its gradual decline, 1963–85**

The establishment of the Latvian Amateur Filmmakers' Society in 1963 became a watershed moment for the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement. The statutes of the Society obliged it to promote the artistic and technical training of amateurs, to facilitate the organization of amateur film collectives at places of work, to strengthen the ties with amateurs from other Soviet republics, thus encouraging the exchange of experience between them, and to archive amateur films.<sup>105</sup> In order to achieve these goals, the Society committed to organizing and holding a variety of events targeted at amateur filmmakers, to promoting the distribution and exhibition of its members' films, to facilitating the development, innovation, and production of new amateur film equipment, and to encouraging the Filmmakers' Union creative and technical workers to participate in the work of the Society.<sup>106</sup> In addition to this, with the passage of time the Society established a network of film and photo laboratories that specialized in all stages of film and photo processing and printing, thus catering to the needs of amateur filmmakers, amateur and professional photographers, and ordinary members of the public. With the approval of the State Committee for Cinematography, the laboratories functioned according to the principles of *khozraschet*, or self-financing, and the profit from film processing was used for the needs of the Society.<sup>107</sup> The cost of membership was one rouble per month in exchange for access to the Society's events programme and support; the services of the laboratory were not free of charge, but discounts for members were available. Many individual amateur filmmakers and amateur filmmaking collectives began to join the

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<sup>105</sup> 'Ustav obshchestva kinoliubitelei Latviiskoi SSR', 1962, RKM-2047, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, pp. 3–4.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. pp. 4–5.

<sup>107</sup> Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 465.

Society because it was an ample opportunity to improve filmmaking skills, to enjoy access to its laboratories, and to network with other amateur filmmakers and professional film industry workers. The members of the Society could vote and run for the Society's organizational committee, and thus had the potential to take part in decision-making processes on an administrative level.<sup>108</sup>

As a result of the creative and organizational boost given by the Society to amateur filmmaking, from the mid- to late-1960s a large number of new amateur film collectives appeared in Riga and throughout Latvia. Some emerged as a result of networking at the Society, others continued to become established at workplaces on the personal initiative of cine-enthusiasts, encouraged by the managements of the Houses of Culture. In 1963, an amateur filmmaking collective was founded at the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR; in 1964, an amateur filmmaking collective was established on the premises of the Riga Radio Factory (Rīgas radio rūpnīca, RRR); in 1967, the amateur filmmaking collective Fokuss was formed on the premises of the House of Culture of the city of Jelgava, and the collective Ortekons was founded at the Central Planning and Construction Bureau of Mechanization and Automatization; in 1968, the collective Sprīdītis appeared at the House of Culture of the city of Dobeles, and the collective Prizma was born out of amateur filmmaking courses held by LKAB.<sup>109</sup> By 1970, there were forty major amateur

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<sup>108</sup> 'Ustav obshchestva', p. 6.

<sup>109</sup> 'Zinātņu Akadēmijas tautas kinostudijas albums', 1962–72, Zigurds Vidiņš's private collection, Riga, Latvia, p. 1. 'Izraksti no A. Popova Rīgas Radio rūpnīcas kinoamatieru studijas biedru sapulču protokola, nolikumi par rūpnīcas filmu skati u.c.' 1966–71, LV-LVA-F932-A1-D79, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga, Latvia. 'Jelgavas pilsētas kinoamatieru tautas kinostudijas "Fokuss" darba atskaites', 1967–73, RKM-7279, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, pp. 1–2. 'Mehānizācijas un automatizācijas centrālā projektēšanas un konstrukcijas biroja kinoamatieru studijas "Ortekons" darba atskaites', 1969–79, RKM-7233, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, p. 1. 'Materiāli par Dobeles rajona kinoamatieru darbību', 1968–72, LV-LVA-F932-A1-D44,

filmmakers' associations working in cities across Soviet Latvia, including Daugavpils, Cēsis, Bauska, Gulbene, Jēkabpils, Jūrmala, Liepāja, Ventspils, Kuldīga, Saldus, Ogre, Rēzekne, Valmiera, Talsi, Tukums, and Saldus, among others.<sup>110</sup>

In 1963, the All-Union Central Board of Professional Unions (Vsesoiuznyi Tsentral'nyi Sovet Profsoiuzov, VTsPS) established the Central Film Board within its structure in order to regulate the relationships between professional unions and amateur filmmaking collectives, and to supervise the flow of funding.<sup>111</sup> As part of this initiative, perhaps somewhat oxymoronically, it was decided to denominate amateur filmmaking associations based on the level of professionalism that they had achieved. As a result, the status of 'studio' was awarded to those collectives that had acquired the necessary human resources and a strong technical and material base, produced films regularly, and achieved success at amateur-film festivals; the rest were designated simply as collectives or clubs.<sup>112</sup> Subsequently, VTsPS introduced another denomination in the hierarchy of amateur filmmaking associations. In an order entitled 'On the measures for the further development of amateur filmmaking activities among workers', issued by VTsPS on 14 September 1973, it was stated that 'in order to encourage the work of film enthusiasts', the most accomplished and competent amateur-film studios were to be awarded the status of 'People's Film Studio' (narodnaia kinostudiia).<sup>113</sup> Ultimately, this

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Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga, Latvia. 'Materiāli par studijas "Prizma" darbību', 1968–72, LV-LVA-F932-A1-D80, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga, Latvia.

<sup>110</sup> Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 468. 'Latvijas PSR Kinoamatieru biedrības materiāli', 1964–72, LV-LVA-F932-A1-D39–66, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga, Latvia.

<sup>111</sup> Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 36.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

classification determined the amount of financial and material support the amateur filmmaking collectives could seek. Writing in 1989, Tomariņš reflected on this hierarchy by observing that many amateur filmmakers had been ashamed of the qualifier 'amateur', and for this reason amateur filmmaking collectives often strove to acquire the status of People's Film Studio, and generally endeavoured to imitate professional film studios.<sup>114</sup> Amateur filmmakers in Soviet Latvia indeed often sought legitimization from the professional filmmaking sphere: this manifested itself in amateur filmmakers developing relationships and seeking collaboration with professional filmmakers, or pursuing employment in the professional film industry. These and other dynamics between the amateur and the professional filmmaking spheres in Soviet Latvia will be discussed in more detail as part of Chapter Four.

In part fuelled by LKAB, in part prompted by the overall maturation of the movement, the artistic and technical competence of amateur filmmakers in Soviet Latvia progressed solidly from the mid-1960s onwards. The relative creative and ideological freedom permitted by amateur status led to the cinematic output of the movement gradually becoming more sophisticated, formally inventive, thematically diverse, and at times even polemical and subversive. As an unspoken condition of the state's support of the amateur filmmaking movement, amateur cinema was expected to transmit official ideological discourse. At the same time, however, since amateur cinema, like other amateur arts, was primarily regarded as a leisure activity rather than a form of cultural production, and thus did not have clearly identifiable production centres or strong distribution networks, no specialized governmental organism existed to control and censor the output of amateur filmmaking clubs. Censorship of amateur cinema, like all other officially sanctioned cultural production, was handled by the General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, known as Glavlit. However, censorship was never exercised at the level of studios and

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<sup>114</sup> Tomariņš, 'K. Tomariņa pārdomas un atmiņas', pp. 13–14.



individual films, and was only resorted to in the process of programming large-scale amateur-film festivals and competitions that implied significant public attendance. Thus, although overseen in its totality by the state, at the grassroots level amateur filmmaking in the Soviet Union enjoyed a degree of creative and ideological latitude which arose out of its institutionally looser constitution. As will be explored during the course of this thesis, it was during this period that amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia became a platform for creating alternative political, social, and cultural meanings, such as, for example, the prospects for Latvian national identity development and national heritage preservation. In addition, it became increasingly exploited as an expressive medium and mechanism with which to explore aesthetic forms that transcended official ideological discourse and allowed for creativity and imagination without requiring either support or opposition to socialist realities.

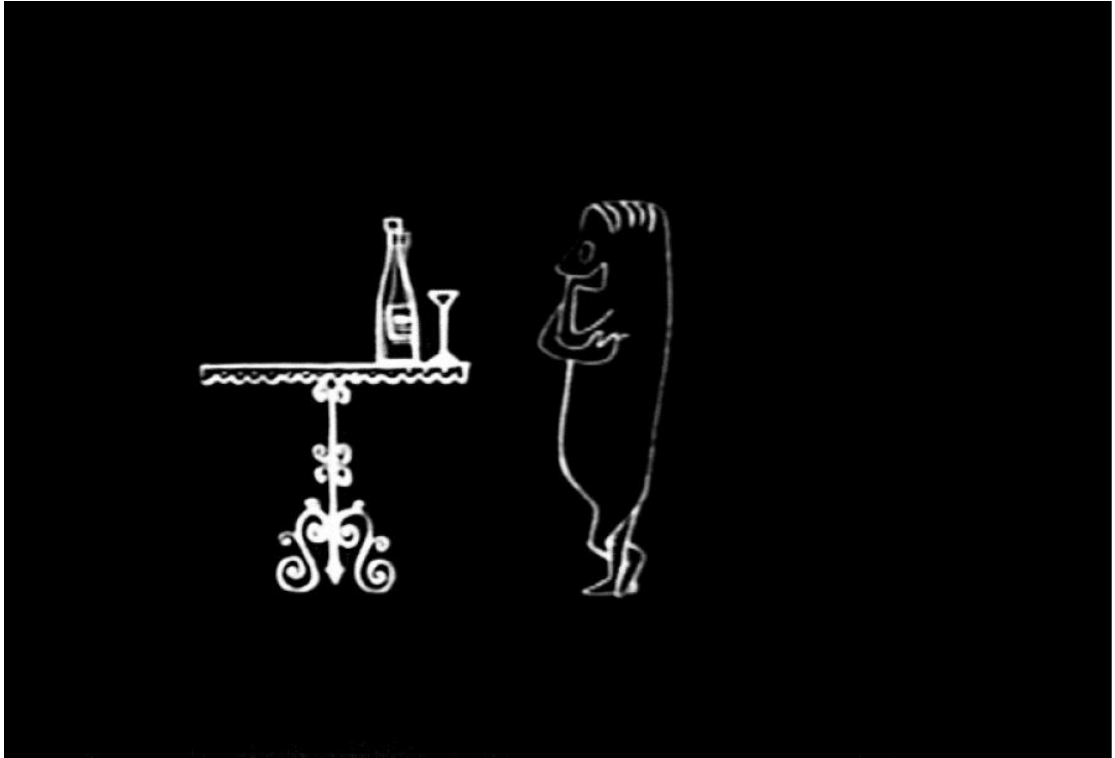
Amateur-film distribution and exhibition was mostly limited to official amateur-film festivals and less formal one-off screenings and film events. The organization of major film festivals on the republican and all-Union levels was supervised by the Ministry of Culture and its local branches. Amateur Filmmakers' Societies in the republics aided the organization of republican festivals, as well as a variety of lower-ranking festivals and thematic screenings on regional and local levels. For amateur filmmaking collectives, participation in these festivals was one of the ways of accounting to the professional unions for the funding spent. Another motivating aspect was recognition in amateur circles and monetary prizes awarded to the best films in certain instances. On the other hand, individual studios and amateur filmmakers frequently distributed and exhibited their films independently, and arranged screenings in the Houses of Culture of other institutions or cities, other interest-based societies (for instance, amateur films about tourism were popular with tourist clubs), museums, schools, universities, and at fellow amateur-film studios. After the first Republican amateur-film festival was held in December 1958, republican festivals took place annually in Soviet Latvia. These were usually organized in advance of the annual All-Union festivals, and only the best films were selected to be sent there. As more and more collectives started to appear in Soviet Latvia, and the number of amateur films

produced grew, it became necessary to select the films for the republican festivals more systematically. As a result, a top-to-bottom festival network blossomed in Soviet Latvia and other Soviet republics alike: in anticipation of the republican and then all-Union festivals, screenings and festivals were carried out first on the level of the individual collective or studio, then city level, followed by zonal or regional level.

In 1966, the Soviet Union joined the International Union of Amateur Cinema (L'Union internationale du cinéma d'amateur, UNICA), an international organization for non-commercial filmmakers, and an organizer of the annual amateur international film festival, at which the member countries competed. At the UNICA festival that year, which took place in Mariánské Lázně, Czechoslovakia, the animation film *Problēma* (The Problem, 1966, Elmārs Riekstiņš and Osvalds Dinvietis), produced by the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking collective of the House of Culture of LRAP, was selected to represent the Soviet Union.<sup>115</sup> It was the first UNICA festival for Soviet amateur filmmakers, and essentially the first opportunity for Latvian amateur filmmakers to exhibit their films on an international platform. *Problēma* was awarded the bronze medal, and thus became the first Soviet amateur film to win an international award. From that moment onwards, Soviet Latvian filmmakers and their films were frequent guests at UNICA.

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<sup>115</sup> Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 466.



1 Still from *Problēma*



2 Still from *Problēma*

In late December 1967, Riga hosted the first Baltic amateur-film festival. The festival took place annually thereafter and was devised as a platform for amateur films produced in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. From 1973, Leningrad amateur filmmakers regularly participated in the festivals, and between 1988 and 1991 Polish amateurs also presented their films.<sup>116</sup> As observed by Järvine, the Baltic film festivals ‘were a place, where, considering the conditions of that era, an atmosphere of relative freedom reigned’.<sup>117</sup> These annual festivals were regarded as a great opportunity to showcase and share the accomplishments of Baltic amateur cinema in a more relaxed environment, especially in the view of the fact that the film programmes presented at the All-Union and international festivals were strictly time-limited, as well as scrutinized for potential controversies. In due course, during *perestroika*, the Baltic amateur-film festivals became a platform for publicly raising issues concerning the national revival of the Baltic states. Apart from the republican film festivals, the Baltic and UNICA festivals were regarded as the most prestigious, and nomination for inclusion was actively sought after. As recalled by Valentin Margevich, the former head of the amateur filmmaking studio at the House of Culture of the Chemical Fibre Factory (or Khimvolokno) in the city of Daugavpils: ‘Our main goal was to get to the republican festival, and from there, God willing, to the Baltic festival, or to UNICA. But UNICA was often an unfeasible dream’.<sup>118</sup>

The year 1967 also witnessed a major overhaul in the management of LKAB. For unknown reasons, the State Committee for Cinematography of the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR pushed for the disbandment of the

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 414.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> ‘У нас была главная задача — попасть на республиканский конкурс, а там уже как Бог даст, на Балтийский, или на Унику. На Унику — это несбытнная мечта’. Valentin Margevich and Nina Margevich, interview by Inese Strupule, 13 November 2017, Daugavpils, Latvia.

organizational committee of LKAB, chaired by Arvīds Natelis (he replaced Brenčs in this position in 1965).<sup>119</sup> In his place, the State Committee strongly endorsed the nomination of Raimonds Jostsons, who at the time held a high-level management position at the Riga Film Studio. This allegedly caused great discontent among the LKAB members, as it was rumoured that Jostsons closely cooperated with the KGB.<sup>120</sup> Many members of LKAB, including the old-timers of the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement, Dzelme and Dreiže, actively opposed his nomination.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, Jostsons was elected chair of LKAB in 1967, and remained in this position even after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, heading the Society until his death in 1999.

Jostsons's election was interpreted by some, perhaps accurately, as a tightening of the state's grip on amateur cinema as a result of the political 'freeze' that followed Khrushchev's 'Thaw'. Tomariņš, for example, nicknamed Jostsons 'a dictator', and contended that his election was an attempt to 'muzzle' amateur filmmaking.<sup>122</sup> According to Tomariņš, by the mid-1960s the cinematic establishment in Soviet Latvia was threatened by amateur cinema, as it was able to offer technically and artistically accomplished films, ones which, in contrast with mainstream professional cinema, were often progressive, unconventional, and fresh, and thus more appealing to audiences.<sup>123</sup> However, in spite of this controversy, some former amateur filmmakers interviewed for this project retrospectively observe that, during his time at LKAB, Jostsons worked in the best interests of the Society and greatly

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<sup>119</sup> Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 466.

<sup>120</sup> Regīna Šulca, interview by Inese Strupule, 15 August 2017, Riga, Latvia; Tomariņš, 'K. Tomariņa pārdomas un atmiņas', p. 3.

<sup>121</sup> Šulca, interview.

<sup>122</sup> Tomariņš, 'K. Tomariņa pārdomas un atmiņas', p. 2.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

aided the development of amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia.<sup>124</sup> His elevated status in the Latvian filmmaking community and connections at the Riga Film Studio allowed him to lobby for various advantages in the interest of amateurs. In the 1970s, for instance, the LKAB's premises were renovated, and at Jostsons's bidding the Society was allotted new additional premises in the Riga city centre.<sup>125</sup> From 1970, moreover, regular 'creative camps' (*tvorcheskie lageria*) for amateur filmmakers were organized on Jostsons's initiative.<sup>126</sup> These usually took place during the summer, in picturesque small towns or villages across Latvia, and were geared towards improving amateurs' filmmaking skills and encouraging networking and creative collaborations. As part of the programme, amateurs attended lectures and workshops, usually presented by professionals, which were dedicated to camerawork, directing, and editing; a number of films were usually produced by the end of the camp.<sup>127</sup> Many amateurs recall the creative camps with great fondness, as a good way to escape the routines of daily life and enjoy some rest and relaxation.<sup>128</sup>

As in the early years of the movement, amateur filmmakers who belonged to collectives and were members of LKAB had to sustain a balance between producing 'useful' films, such as newsreels, educational, and corporate films, with a strong social agenda and 'correct' ideological inclination, and more personal projects, such as, for example, poetic documentaries, fictional and animated stories, or the occasional experimental work. Regina Šulca, for

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<sup>124</sup> Šulca, interview. Zigurds Vidiņš, interview by Inese Strupule, 22 August 2017, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>125</sup> Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, pp. 467 & 470.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

<sup>127</sup> Šulca, interview. Viesturs Mēbalts, interview by Regina Šulca, 17 December 2001, RKM-2988, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

example, an amateur filmmaker who worked at the Prizma amateur-film studio, which, after having been created at LKAB, was transferred to the House of Culture of the Workers of the Railway, has recalled that she often had to film a local Communist Party meeting or make a promotional film about the railway in order to then be able to film something 'for herself'.<sup>129</sup> At the same time, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three of this thesis, during the 1970s and 1980s the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking scene became dominated by films that focused on the theme of Latvian ethnic history, with special emphasis on material culture, ethnography, and folklore. For many amateurs, such film projects gradually became an opportunity to explore nationally minded themes and even to interrogate the political status of Latvia within the Soviet Union. As will be elaborated in Chapters Three and Four, the 1970s also witnessed instances of individuals and groups engaging in independent, semi-clandestine filmmaking. Similar to the post-war period discussed above, these non-professional filmmakers and film groups often relied on the structures of professional cinema and the organized amateur filmmaking network.

By the mid-1980s, the amateur filmmaking movement was undergoing a period of retreat. Few new amateur-film collectives appeared, and the smaller, existing ones either dissipated or were not as prolific as in previous decades. Those which were most accomplished and competent tended towards consolidation and professionalization. Some amateurs pursued employment opportunities in the professional film industry: although the transition from the amateur to the professional filmmaking sphere in Soviet Latvia and across the Soviet Union was not particularly common, it seems to have witnessed a gradual increase from the mid-1970s onwards. Despite these tendencies, the high status and prestige of some amateur filmmaking studios attracted new generations of artistically inclined cine-enthusiasts. In the case of the amateur-

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<sup>129</sup> 'Amatierkino Latvijas PSR, 70.–80. gadi' with participation of Romualds Pipars, Regina Šulca, Zigurds Vidiņš, and Ingvars Leitis, event video recording, 26 May 2017, OMF 2600/601, 602, Latvijas Okupācijas muzejs, Riga, Latvia.

film studio at the Academy of Sciences, for example, the influx of ‘new blood’, combined with its strong technical and material capital, turned the studio into a breeding ground for cinematic experiment. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four, during the first half of the 1980s the Academy of Sciences studio began to produce films that stood out among the contemporaneous Soviet Latvian amateur cinema. These films depicted non-realistic diegetic worlds, exhibited a high degree of stylization of characters and sets, probed unconventional narrative structures and storytelling methods, and relied heavily on symbolism, often using simple trick-photography and special effects. The experimental tendencies within amateur filmmaking scene would be further stimulated with the coming of *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

### **Amateur cinema during *perestroika* (1985–91) and the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR in 1991**

The political and cultural climate in Latvia and across the Soviet Union began to change radically after Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party in the spring of 1985. The introduction of *perestroika*, a radical restructuring of political and economic sectors, and the advent of *glasnost*, a move towards enhanced openness of information, including freedom of press and speech, gradually affected all spheres of life in the Soviet Union. The fields of art and culture responded enthusiastically to Gorbachev’s directives, and its institutions began to undertake structural and administrative transformations. The cinema industry was no exception: as noted by Anna Lawton, Soviet filmmakers were the first to realize the necessity to institutionalize Gorbachev’s new policies in order to ‘ensure continuity and prevent setbacks’ and ‘took a leading role in the restructuring process’.<sup>130</sup> In May 1986, the Filmmakers’ Union of the USSR underwent a significant administrative overhaul, which decreased the control that Goskino exercised over film production and distribution. This, along with censorship being ‘virtually dismantled as an institution’, increased the decision-making power of

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<sup>130</sup> Anna Lawton, *Before the Fall: Soviet Cinema in the Gorbachev Years*, 2nd edn (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2007), p. 58.



the filmmakers and led to greater creative autonomy.<sup>131</sup> Overall, the film industry of the Soviet Union was decentralized. As meticulously researched by Lawton, local branches of Goskino in the republics were abolished altogether, and ‘the republican studios were placed under the jurisdiction of the local Ministries of Culture’.<sup>132</sup> This allowed them ‘to plan their own yearly productions and to decide on scripts and shooting schedules; and, more important, to move toward self-financing’.<sup>133</sup> Gradually, the country’s cultural sphere began to move towards commercialization.

Compared to the drastic restructuring of professional artistic and cultural spheres during the Gorbachev era, amateur filmmaking in the Soviet Union was already significantly decentralized. Furthermore, the loosening of the grip of censorship that had been acutely felt by professional filmmakers was not as significant for amateur-film production, since it was never controlled as tenaciously. Despite this, however, the period of *perestroika* and the general liberalization that was encouraged under Gorbachev exerted a major influence on film enthusiasts in Soviet Latvia — if not on a structural, then on an ideological level. The individual initiative and action, independent, critical thinking, and creative blossoming that emerged as by-products of Gorbachev’s policies undoubtedly determined the nature of discourses and practices surrounding cinema and filmmaking as well as cultural production in general during the last years of the Soviet regime. Assessing the effect of *perestroika* and *glasnost’* on the Soviet film industry, many scholars, critics, and workers of cinema have observed that the projected creative revival of cinema during the *perestroika* era was hindered by the move towards commercialization and the free market. The average filmmaker was compelled to prioritize mass appeal over artistic value and cinematic ambition. In Lawton’s words: ‘One of the paradoxes of the new era is that having acquired freedom of artistic

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., pp. 60–61.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

expression most filmmakers [were] unable to bring it to fruition. The law of the market turned out to be more tyrannical than the state censor'.<sup>134</sup> In this connection, it can be argued that it was in amateur cinema that the freedom of artistic expression brought by the liberalization of the regime was unencumbered by commercial interests, because amateur filmmaking remained a 'non-profit enterprise' funded by professional unions.

Post-1985 amateur cinema nevertheless inevitably mirrored some of the tendencies of its professional counterpart. In Soviet Latvia, a significant proportion of amateur filmmakers rushed to report on contemporary social issues, and many pursued the general course of denouncing the Soviet past and Stalinist-era crimes. With the advent of *perestroika*, the ethnic strand of Soviet Latvian amateur cinema, stimulated by the national revival, became increasingly nationally minded. Furthermore, amateur filmmaking was mobilized to document the rise of the mass national movement: almost every film enthusiast in possession of a camera filmed the pro-independence mass demonstrations and political actions that began in Riga in 1987, and which lead eventually to the restoration of Latvian independence in 1991. The use of the amateur-film medium as a means of artistic experimentation also flourished during the Gorbachev era. Many amateur filmmakers began to experiment with video technology and created the first video art in Latvia; a number of amateurs would continue to create experimental video films into the 1990s. Some went back to the basics of filmic expression and created films without a camera, that is, films created by drawing, scratching, or applying chemicals on to the surface of blank film or various pieces of found footage. Overall, the last decade of the USSR witnessed a burgeoning relationship between amateur filmmaking and the unofficial art scene. This tendency manifested itself in various forms of collaboration: amateur filmmakers cast artists in their films, made documentary films about their art, or acted as videographers of their artistic activities.

In 1988, the Society of Friends of Cinema of the USSR (Obshchestvo druzei kino SSSR, ODK) was founded as an attempt to establish a more horizontal

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

system of managing amateur cinema in the Soviet Union.<sup>135</sup> This was largely a grassroots initiative coming from individual amateurs, collectives, and amateur filmmakers' societies, as a result of which various organizations that were in charge of managing the amateur filmmaking efforts in the Soviet Union were supposed to gradually relinquish their control mechanisms. Despite this initiative, amateur filmmaking collectives remained largely dependent on professional unions for funding and on networks of administered culture for premises and other kinds of support. As explained by Järvine, 'it was hard to establish a dialogue between the old and new levels of coordination of the Soviet amateur filmmaking movement'.<sup>136</sup> Retrospectively, Järvine observes that the most crucial achievement of the ODK was acquiring the right to independently select films to be entered at the international amateur-film festivals.<sup>137</sup>

The organized amateur filmmaking movement in the Soviet Union eventually suffered a devastating blow with the collapse of the professional union system and the re-structuring of the state institutions in turn brought by the dissolution of Soviet Union in 1991. LKAB, which in 1990 was renamed the Latvian Non-professional Cinematographers' Society (Latvijas neprofesionālo kinematogrāfistu sabiedrība, LNKS), continued to exist until 2008. Its work, however, was gradually paralyzed, mainly due to lack of funding. After gaining some distance from the Soviet era, some amateurs have openly lamented the collapse of the support system of amateur creative practices enacted by the Soviet state. Māris Šmits, for instance, an amateur filmmaker from Liepāja, observed in 2001 that 'The best thing about the Russian era was that [...] there were amateur-creativity clubs, and now [...] everything costs money and there is no money. [...] There were clubs, and the clubs could provide, and the Party

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<sup>135</sup> Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 113.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114–15.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

supported this'.<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, some attempts to carry on the legacy of the amateur filmmaking movement in independent Latvia were made by the most proactive amateur filmmakers in the 1990s and early 2000s. A number of Baltic and Republican amateur-film festivals were organized largely through self-funding during this period, and some Latvian amateur films were entered into UNICA competitions.<sup>139</sup> With the purpose of preserving the heritage of Latvian amateur cinema, some cine-enthusiasts, on their own personal initiative, undertook the Herculean task of collection, storage, and at times VHS or digital transfer of amateur films produced by them, their fellow amateur filmmakers, or at the amateur-film studios with which they were associated. It is partly as a result of these efforts that the amateur film collection now held at the Latvian State Archive of Audio-visual Documents came into existence, in turn facilitating the research of this thesis.

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<sup>138</sup> 'No krievu laikiem tas labākais ir tas ka [...] bija kaut kādi pulciņi, tagad [...] viss maksā un naudiņas nav [...] Bija klubi un deva, un Partijai bija tas vajadzīgs'. Māris Šmits, interview by Regina Šulca, 2001, RKM-2989, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>139</sup> Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, pp. 492–94.

## Chapter 2 Between Public and Private: Giving Domesticity an Artistic Twist

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the pioneering research attempts into amateur cinema primarily considered its role within the traditional Western nuclear family. For this reason the category ‘amateur’ became closely associated with filming scenes of family life. It was in the field of visual anthropology that amateur films about families and domestic life — designated as family films or more commonly home movies — first became the subject of research in the European and North American academic tradition. In his seminal study of American home-movie culture, Richard Chalfen examined approximately two hundred collections of personal images made in the United States between 1940 and 1980, and conceptualized home-moviemaking as a mode of communication with its own codes and symbols that he defined as the ‘home mode’.<sup>140</sup> The author identified its common topics, as well as the functions this mode of communication performs within the nuclear family, observing that the range of topics and themes of home movies tends to be quite restricted; in his own words, only ‘a narrow spectrum of everyday life is selected for recording on film’.<sup>141</sup>

Chalfen identified four key activities that take up the majority of home-movie screen time: vacation activity, holiday activity, special events in the lives of family members, and local activity or unusual events.<sup>142</sup> The author summarized his observations by maintaining that home movies do not reflect the reality of everyday life, but instead represent ‘a carefully selected repertory of highlighted times and occurrences that a family is likely to celebrate and wish to remember.’<sup>143</sup> Having analysed the predominant subject-matters,

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<sup>140</sup> Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life*.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61–63.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Chalfen identified four functional dimensions of home movies: documentation (to document and preserve elements of family life based on the evidentiary quality of home-movie imagery); memory function or aide-mémoire (to create documents that act as mnemonic devices); hedonistic function (to afford pleasure and to entertain); and social function, defined by cultural membership (to stimulate socialization within the family, but also to provide what Chalfen calls 'a model of life', to demonstrate 'appropriate models of social organization and kinship', and to maintain 'ethnocentric value schemes and ideology').<sup>144</sup>

Although being relatively hermetic in his conceptualization of home moviemaking — Chalfen, for instance, maintains that a home movie cannot be an outlet for artistic expression, — the author persuasively defines the basic substance that home moviemaking tends to share across different cultures. Indeed, our understanding of amateur filmmaking in the home has largely been shaped by these considerations. Chalfen's approach, however, in particular the social function identified by him, does not take into an account the example of a non-liberal state with a relatively low degree of individual autonomy as a backdrop to home moviemaking. For Chalfen, the home mode of amateur filmmaking exists in an apolitical private sphere, where hierarchies of value and ideologies are inherent, largely shared with the public sphere, and therefore to be maintained, not contested. Here the question must be posed as to what additional functional dimensions family films can possess in a state like the Soviet Union, where the perceptions about public and private spheres informed by Western sociological discourses are untenable, and where the dominant official ideology may differ greatly from the concerns of ordinary citizens and the everyday reality of their family lives.

As amateur filmmaking started to become an established feature of everyday life across the Soviet Union from the mid-1950s onwards, many budding amateur filmmakers began to practise in the comfort of their own homes, directing their cameras towards their domestic environments: families and friends. In 1968, Grigorii Roshal', a film director who played a significant role

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., pp. 133–42.

in the development of the Soviet amateur filmmaking movement, observed: 'The authors of the so-called family films can be counted in their hundreds of thousands, and one cannot locate, even on the largest of all geographic maps, all the cities and villages in which they live'.<sup>145</sup> However, as will be discussed below, very early on in the development of Soviet amateur filmmaking culture a strict line was drawn between the domestic and social uses of amateur filmmaking, with the domestic variety of amateur filmmaking quickly marginalized. Nevertheless, filming family members and close friends in informal and private settings is an essential part of amateur filmmaking culture everywhere. From the early 1960s onwards, this practice became common across the Soviet Union as well, primarily stimulated by the large-scale domestic production of Super 8 and 8mm cameras and projectors.<sup>146</sup>

The challenge of studying amateur filmmaking practices in the domestic sphere, be it in liberal or socialist contexts, primarily lies with the functions these films perform within the family. Akin to family snapshots, such films are usually made with the intention of documenting and preserving episodes of family history, and are kept with the purpose of accessing them in future in order to revisit the private events captured on them. As a result, it is rare for family films to find themselves preserved in film archives, and for this reason these practices are more difficult to trace and study compared to the more social varieties of amateur filmmaking activities. The primary materials on domestic filmmaking practices in post-Second World War Soviet Latvia are relatively scarce: family films constitute approximately ten per-cent of the

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<sup>145</sup> 'Авторы так называемых семейных фильмов исчисляются сотнями тысяч, и на карту, даже самую большую географическую карту не нанести всех городов и селений, где они проживают'. Grigorii Roshal', 'Cherta nashego vremeni', *Iskusstvo kino*, 1968, no. 12, 119–20 (p. 120).

<sup>146</sup> Starting in 1960, the series of Super 8mm camera series 'Sport', 'Neva', and 'Aurora' was released on to the market by the Leningrad Optico-Mechanical Association (Leningradskoe optiko-mekhanicheskoe ob"edinenie). See Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 32.

amateur-film collection held at the LVKFFDA. Some of these films were donated by amateur filmmakers directly to the archive. Others were collected by Milda Ažīte, who worked for the Riga Individual Amateur Filmmakers' Association (Rīgas individuālo kinoamatieru apvienība, RIKA). Founded in 1967, partly perhaps as a response to the institutionalization of LKAB, the purpose of RIKA was to assist individual filmmakers who were not members of clubs or studios in their filmmaking activities. With the passage of time, on the initiative of Ažīte, it also became a platform for the collection and preservation of family films.<sup>147</sup> After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ažīte kept the collected family films at her new place of work, the Riga Film Museum and Archive. In 2012, these family films were transferred to the LVKFFDA due to the archive's better storage facilities.

This family-film collection consists mostly of the family films of Latvian Television engineer Juris Stiprais, who practised amateur filmmaking individually, mainly filming at home and on vacation. Eight films can be traced back to the family of RIKA members Rita Ādamsons and Pēteris Ādamsons; they focus on unusual local events, such as public holiday celebrations, sports events, and fairs. Eleven films belong to Censonis Lakstīgala and document the author's travels and local song and dance festivals. Many of the family recordings are currently anonymous. The nature of the LVKFFDA family-film collection is therefore fragmentary, and the existence of these films in the archive is mostly the result of historical accident, rather than the product of a meticulous, nationwide collecting, studying, and archiving of home-produced filmic materials. These films can be characterized for the most part as non-narrative, unedited, 'point-and-shoot' footage; while undoubtedly possessing tremendous evidential and documentary value, they inevitably lack the cinematic and artistic qualities that form the focus of analysis in this study.

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<sup>147</sup> Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 469. For more on Ažīte's work, see Egdars Dreijers, 'RIKA: 1993./94. radošā darba gada pārskats', RKM-7278, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, pp. 7–8.



In the context of this research project, amateur films produced in Soviet Latvia are approached as a form of cultural and artistic production, rather than as anthropological documents. This thesis, therefore, is interested in examining a different subset of family films, those in which the act of filmmaking is more conscious and active than in the traditional form of family films as described by Chalfen. This chapter will focus on amateur-film productions that offer the possibility of examining the ways in which the focus on domesticity and the family as a subject intersects with the aesthetic and thematic expectations for amateur films informed by film culture in general, and by the Soviet organized and state-supported amateur-filmmaking culture in particular. The case studies presented as part of this chapter represent a variety of modes of crossover between familial and domestic filmmaking practices and collective, club-based, and socially oriented amateur filmmaking practices. It is therefore essential to discuss first the dynamics between these two strands in order to lay the groundwork for examination of the case studies.

### **Home versus club, individual versus collective**

Soviet cinematic culture of the 1920s was an undeniable influence on the development of amateur filmmaking in the post-war Soviet Union, both organizationally and ideologically. In 1925, on the initiative of the Association of Revolutionary Cinema (Assotsiatsiia revoliutsionnoi kinematografii, ARK), the Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema (Obshchestvo druzei sovetskogo kino, ODSK) was founded.<sup>148</sup> The ODSK became the cradle in which Soviet amateur filmmaking culture was born, and it can be argued that the *iacheiki*, or cells, of the ODSK were the prototypes for the amateur filmmaking clubs and studios in the post-war Soviet Union. In May 1925, an article entitled 'Kak organizovat' iacheiku O.D.S.K.?' (How to Create an ODSK Cell?) appeared in the weekly newspaper *Kino* and argued that 'the cells of the Society of Friends

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<sup>148</sup> Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 15. Erofeev, 'Vsem druz'iam sovetskogo kino', p. 4.

of Soviet Cinema need to be created everywhere'.<sup>149</sup> It listed 'clubs, factories, institutions, enterprises, universities, [and] schools' as appropriate platforms for ODSK cells, and thus emphasized the community- and collective-based nature of the movement, one which foreshadowed the organizational structure of the post-war amateur filmmaking club network.<sup>150</sup> Although the ODSK was primarily conceived as an organization responsible for bringing cinema to the masses, and amateur filmmaking was far from being its central task largely due to the scarcity of film equipment, there is, nevertheless, evidence of actual filming taking place as part of ODSK activities as early as 1925.<sup>151</sup> ODSK amateur-film production peaked in 1927 after Sovkino, the state film production and distribution organization, entered into an agreement with the Central Committee of the ODSK in relation to using amateur-produced footage in local newsreels in return for Sovkino providing material support to the ODSK. Aside from this, many filmmaking projects were undertaken in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution.<sup>152</sup>

In general, cinematic culture in the post-1917 era was the result of an overarching ambition to write the history of the nascent socialist state, and thus was largely informed by the desire for total documentation. Jeremy Hicks addresses this aspect of early Soviet cinematic culture using the example of Dziga Vertov and his documentary filmmaking theory and practice. In 1924,

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<sup>149</sup> 'Где? При клубах, фабриках, заводах, учреждениях, предприятиях, ВУЗ'ах, школах, [...] — везде надо создавать ячейки Общества Друзей Советского Кино'. 'Как organizovat' iacheiku O.D.S.K.?', *Kino*, 1925, no. 28, p. 3.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Nikolai Lebedev, 'Zadachi O.D.S.K.', *Kino*, 1925, no. 8, p. 4. Sergei Il'ichev and Boris Nashchekin, *Kinoliubitel'stvo: Istoki i perspektivy* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1986), p. 7.

<sup>152</sup> Grigorii Boltianskii, 'Polozhenie i perspektivy', *Kino*, 1928, no. 40, p. 6; and 'O.D.S.K.: k 10-letiiu Oktiabria', *Kino*, 1927, no. 26, p. 4.

Vertov produced his first non-newsreel film, *Kino-glaz* (Cine-Eye), which is described by Hicks as ‘an attempt to create a manifesto for a grassroots movement of cine-journalists whose purpose was to transform society, along with relations to creativity and technology’.<sup>153</sup> In Vertov’s words, a Cine-Eye movement would act as ‘[...] an army of cine-observers and cine-correspondents with an aim of moving away from a single-person authorship to mass authorship, with an aim of creating an “I see” of a montage quality — not an accidental, but a necessary and complete overview of the world every few hours’.<sup>154</sup> Hicks observes that Vertov was well aware of the worker correspondent (or *rabkor*, short for *rabochii korrespondent*) phenomenon, which was encouraged by the Soviet press; the filmmaker ‘can be seen as extending [this] participatory principle to Soviet cinema in his conception of the Cine-Eye movement, modelled on the worker correspondents’.<sup>155</sup>

As also noted by Hicks, however, ‘it is clear from his writing that Vertov thinks the participatory model of news-gathering extended to cinema would have effects far more radical than the worker correspondent movement’.<sup>156</sup> By virtue of an in-depth analysis of Vertov’s writings, Hicks demonstrates that the director’s conceptualization of the Cine-Eye essentially implied a breakdown of the private sphere because ‘there is no private sphere into which a camera has no right to intrude, and the camera therefore needs no consent on the part

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<sup>153</sup> Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*, p. 15.

<sup>154</sup> ‘[...] армия кинонаблюдателей и кинкоров с целью ухода от авторства одного человека к массовому авторству, с целью организовать монтажное “вижу” — не случайный, а необходимый и достаточный обзор мира через каждые несколько часов времени’. Dziga Vertov, ‘Tvorcheskaia kartochka 1917–1947’, *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 30 (1996), 161–92 (p. 163).

<sup>155</sup> Hicks, *Dziga Vertov*, p. 17.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

of individuals to film them'.<sup>157</sup> According to Hicks, Vertov conceived of Cine-Eye as an all-seeing eye. Furthermore, he conceptualized documentary cinema in terms of 'the gaze of the state, itself an embodiment of a scientifically founded ideological understanding, penetrating all obstacles to catch life off-guard', and envisaged his 'network of observers or reporters as also constituting a network of informers and spies'.<sup>158</sup> With these observations in mind, it becomes clear how a network of ODSK *iacheiki*, spreading across the Soviet Union and consisting of amateur Cine-Eyes documenting the world around them, is in tune with Vertov's aspirations for the Cine-Eye movement and with early Soviet doctrine in general. In this context, it seems unsurprising that during this period of upsurge in amateur activity in the Soviet Union, amateur filmmaking limited to the domestic sphere was explicitly disdained as a characteristic feature of Western capitalist societies and criticized for its lack of social consciousness. In 1926, for example, Grigorii Boltianskii, a prominent Soviet film theorist and active supporter of the amateur filmmaking movement in the early Soviet period, was vocal in his negative stance towards the domestic form of amateur filmmaking. He writes:

Our film amateur, as opposed to the petty-bourgeois foreign film amateur, should in no way get involved and excel at shooting family members and other such nonsense. [...] Everyday life, industry, public events, and socially significant phenomena — this is what the "cine-eye" of the amateur filmmaker's camera should reflect.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., pp. 35 & 38.

<sup>159</sup> 'Наш кинолюбитель, в отличие от заграничного мелкобуржуазного кинолюбителя, съемщика, никоим образом не должен увлекаться и изощряться на съемке семейных групп и на другом баловстве. [...] Быт, производство, явления общественного порядка и социально-значительное — вот, что должен отражать "кино-глаз" съемочного аппарата кино-любителя'. Grigorii Boltianskii, 'Foto-kino liubitel'stvo v klube', *Sovetskoe kino*, 1926, no. 6–7, 2–3 (p. 3).

The 1930s and Stalin's concentration of power resulted in the restructuring and centralization of social and artistic organizations that eventually culminated in the dissolution of the ODSK in 1934.<sup>160</sup> This, combined with the constant scarcity of affordable, high-quality, and easy-to-use film equipment and stock impeded the development of the Soviet amateur filmmaking movement, which was then further thwarted by the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>161</sup> Thus it is only natural that the official discourse surrounding the rise of the post-war amateur filmmaking movement largely drew its inspiration from the 1920s and openly acknowledged the importance of early Soviet cinematic culture for contemporary amateur filmmaking practices. The post-war amateur movement was also conceptualized as a continuation of that culture, and the period of the late 1950s and early 1960s was regarded as the era of realization of the unrealized ideas of the 1920s. *Ia — kinoliubitel'* (I am a Film Enthusiast, 1964), a documentary film that traces and evaluates the achievements of amateur filmmaking in the USSR, opens with a reference to Vertov and his documentary filmmaking theory and practice. This is followed by the voiceover of the narrator declaring: 'Already back then, at the dawn of cinematography, Soviet film chroniclers were dreaming about an army of news scouts — amateur filmmakers, who would film in the thick of life, in each and every corner of the country. Today this dream has come true'.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> 'Postanovlenie Politbiuro TsK VKP(B) 'O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii, 23 April 1932', in *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia: Dokumenty TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b), VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kul'turnoi politike, 1917–1953*, ed. by Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond 'Demokratiia', 1999), pp. 172–73. See also Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 18.

<sup>161</sup> On scarcity of film equipment in the 1920s, see Dalmatov, 'Dorogu foto-kino-liubitel'stvu', *Kino*, 1929, no. 35, p. 5.

<sup>162</sup> 'Но уже тогда, на заре кинематографии, советские кино-хроникеры мечтали об армии разведчиков нового — кинолюбителях, снимающих в

This rhetoric aided the marginalization of the domestic use of amateur filmmaking in the post-war Soviet Union. Thus, whereas in the West family films were mainly disdained for their perceived lack of artistic quality, within the Soviet ideological establishment amateur filmmaking in the domestic sphere continued to be burdened by its reputation as a trivial pursuit and vestige of the bourgeois past. During the formative years of the organized amateur filmmaking movement in the Soviet Union, from the late 1950s through to the early 1960s, whenever the domestic use of amateur filmmaking was mentioned in the *Iskusstvo kino* section dedicated to matters of cine-amateurism, it was routinely denounced as an unsophisticated and immature preoccupation, and was often belittled for its lack of social purpose and perspective. Soviet film theorist and scriptwriter Ramil' Sobolev, for example, in his instructive article dedicated to aspiring amateur filmmakers, entitled 'S chego nachat' (How to Begin), defines the different categories of amateur filmmaking in a condescending manner and insinuates that the makers of family films fail to appreciate the opportunities for the social functions of the medium:

There are many ways to understand cine-amateurism. There are people who buy cameras with their own savings and shoot so-called "family movies" for fun — they are also film enthusiasts. However, the vast majority of film enthusiasts believe that this activity possesses a public interest. [...] Cine-amateurism is a mighty force. [...] Even individual amateur filmmakers feel this force: many of them gradually give up their domestic filmmaking activities, join the collectives, and begin creating films that are of interest not only to their family members, but wider audiences too.<sup>163</sup>

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гуще самой жизни, во всех уголках страны. Сегодня эта мечта осуществлена'.

<sup>163</sup> 'Можно по-разному понимать кинолюбительство. Есть люди, приобретающие камеры на собственные сбережения и снимающие для собственного удовольствия так называемые "семейные фильмы", — они тоже кинолюбители. Но основная, подавляющая по численности масса кинолюбителей считает, что это занятие представляет общественный интерес. [...] Кинолюбительство — большая сила [...] Эту силу

The ideological discourse of the Khrushchev 'Thaw' era was therefore more sympathetic to amateur filmmaking in the home than the 1920s rhetoric (as exemplified by Boltianskii above), but tended to characterize it only as a stepping stone towards other goals. It was usually presented as merely the first trial for amateur filmmakers, the implication being that it should inevitably lead to engagement with topics of greater public concern. The domestic use of amateur filmmaking was identified as of practical benefit only in those cases where amateurs used domestic shoots to acquire the technical skills necessary to embark upon more socially conscious topics.<sup>164</sup> As reborn in the late 1950s, collective, club-based, and socially oriented amateur filmmaking practices have been narrated as defining the face of the Soviet amateur filmmaking movement within official discourses largely until the collapse of the USSR. The rhetoric of the club amateur filmmaker as superior, as well as the pitching of collective against individual and domestic amateur filmmaking practices, prevailed into the last decade of the Soviet Union. Writing in 1986, Il'ichev and Nashchekin, in their ideologically slanted monograph on cine-amateurism in the USSR, offered the following observation:

It has become apparent that, in the Soviet Union, cine-amateurism developed in two directions, individual and collective, the latter taking the form of amateur studios at clubs, Houses of Culture, and in the workplace, often financed by the professional unions. It is the amateur collectives that define the face of the Soviet amateur filmmaking movement. They correctly assessed the possibilities of amateur cinema in mass agitation and cultural-educational work,

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самодеятельного кино чувствуют и любители-одиночки: очень многие из них постепенно расстаются с домашними лабораториями и идут в коллективы, начинают создавать фильмы, интересные не только членам их семей, но и широкому кругу зрителей'. Ramil' Sobolev, 'S chego nachat', *Iskusstvo kino*, 1960, no. 1, 147–51 (p. 147).

<sup>164</sup> See, for instance, Grigorii Roshal', 'Moguchaia sila', *Iskusstvo kino*, 1958, no. 7, 132–39 (p. 138); and Grigorii Roshal', 'Pervye shagi', *Iskusstvo kino*, 1960, no. 2, 147–53 (p. 150).

and turned to making relevant and concerted films, related to the life and work of the workers' communities.<sup>165</sup>

According to Soviet official discourse on amateur cinema, therefore, it seems that there were two distinct amateur filmmaking strands. One can be identified as a state-endorsed club culture, supported by the institutional networks of administered culture and professional unions, and closely connected to the workplace. This type of filmmaking enjoyed a degree of distribution and exhibition, usually in the form of centrally organized amateur-film festivals. Overall, the production quality and hierarchical structure was quite close to professional cinema: in the film production process, clubs usually applied a division of labour that was akin to that adopted in professional cinema, and the 16mm film format was predominantly employed as the most 'professional' among small-gauge formats. The other strand of the amateur filmmaking movement in the Soviet Union was located within individual and/or familial filmmaking practices. This was mainly focused on documenting the intimate and private events of everyday family life, and usually intended for private use and exhibition within a close family circle. These practices usually employed 8mm film formats (Double 8 or Super 8), and were self-funded, thus they were normally 'off the radar'.

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<sup>165</sup> 'Стало очевидным, что в Советском Союзе кинолюбительство развивается по двум направлениям: одно — индивидуальное, другое — коллективное, имеющее форму любительских, чаще всего финансируемых профсоюзами студий при клубах, домах культуры, на предприятиях. Именно коллективы определяют лицо советского кинолюбительского движения. Именно они, правильно оценив возможности самодеятельного кино в деле агитационно-массовой и культурно-воспитательной работы, обратились к созданию фильмов актуальных, целенаправленных, тесно связанных с жизнью производственных коллективов'. Il'ichev and Nashchekin, *Kinoliubitel'stvo*, p. 21.



In reality, however, the distinction between the individual, domestic, and club-based amateur filmmaking was much more fluid. Individual amateur filmmaking practices were not confined solely to the domestic sphere: for instance, some Soviet Latvian amateur filmmakers chose not to be members of clubs, and produced films independently, although their films were concerned with subjects outside the domestic sphere and were very much informed by the Soviet organized and state-supported amateur filmmaking culture, both thematically and aesthetically. Kārlis Tomariņš, for instance, a prominent figure in Soviet Latvian amateur cinema, remained a maverick throughout three-and-a-half decades of the Soviet amateur filmmaking movement; after having made several films at the VEF amateur-film studio in the late 1950s, he began creating, distributing, and exhibiting his films independently. At the same time, amateur filmmakers who for the most part were preoccupied with filming in the home or on vacation at times took their cameras on to the streets to document events of great social importance: the already-mentioned Juris Stiprais, for example, whose home-movie collection is held at LVKFFDA, also filmed mass demonstrations in favour of Latvia's independence in the late 1980s. As will be explored in detail below, moreover, many active and accomplished club filmmakers occasionally made films on the subject of their families and set them in their domestic environments, often endowing their family films with artistic and even fictional elements. Others dramatized the domestic sphere and its emotional aspect, and crafted fully-fledged amateur fictional narratives using their family members as actors.

As the fluidity and multiplicity of amateur filmmaking practices across the categories of individual, domestic, and club-based flourished, so too, by the end of the 1960s, the official attitude towards the individual and domestic uses of amateur filmmaking began to shift. In Soviet Latvia in particular, individual amateur filmmakers received a boost in 1967 when the Riga Individual Amateur Filmmakers' Association was founded with the purpose of assisting non-club affiliated filmmakers in their filmmaking activities.<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, an

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<sup>166</sup> Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 469.

attempt to incorporate cine-enthusiasts' interest in the themes of domesticity and family into the organized and state-supported amateur filmmaking movement manifested itself in a series of Family Film Competitions (Ģimenes filmu konkursi), which were organized by LKAB for the first time in 1969. The manner in which the LKAB's provision for the 1975 Family Film Competition narrates filmmaking practices in the home is most curious:

The competition welcomes the participation of all the republic's amateur filmmakers with 8, Super 8 and 16mm documentary, fiction, or experimental (animated) films, in which the authors portray their family events *of wide public interest*, solve topical *household and social* problems by means of amateur film medium, and propagate the introduction of new traditions in life (emphasis added).<sup>167</sup>

Evidently the purpose of the competition was to stimulate the expansion of conventional practices of domestic amateur filmmaking. The provision places strong emphasis on the necessity of introducing the social and public dimension into family narratives, and even encourages the hybridization of filmmaking modes and methods, admitting the possibility of using families and domestic environments as subjects and sets for fictional and experimental narratives, even animated stories. In all probability, such initiatives, combined with the push for socially conscious thematic preoccupations within Soviet amateur filmmaking culture in general, encouraged some Soviet Latvian filmmakers to develop practices of domestic amateur filmmaking that differed

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<sup>167</sup> 'Konkursā var piedalīties visi republikas kinoamatieri ar 8, S-8 un 16 mm dokumentālām, spēles vai eksperimentālām (multiplikācijas) filmām, kurās autori ataino pārējo sabiedrību interesējošus notikumus savā ģimenē, ar pašdarbības kinomākslas līdzekļiem risina aktuālas sadzīves un sociālās problēmas, propagandē jauno tradīciju ieviešanu dzīvē'. '5., 6., 7., 8. Ģimenes filmām veltītā kinoamatieru filmu konkursa dokumenti (protokoli, filmu pieteikumi, aptaujas lapas u.c.)', 1973, 1975–76, 1978, LV-LVA-F932-A1-D348, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga, Latvia, p. 23.

from the traditional form of family films as described by Chalfen. It is these types of film that will be explored in detail in the sections below.

### **Amateur cinema at the intersection of public and private**

In Soviet official discourse on amateur cinema, individual amateur filmmaking (which is mostly restricted to the domestic sphere) appears to have been marginalized by virtue of being strongly associated with the concept of the private. In his examination of private and public life in the post-war Soviet Union, Vladimir Shlapentokh generalizes that Soviet society ‘expects everybody to be preoccupied with societal goals, each individual is supposed to be, especially in the workplace, a public figure and to subordinate personal interests to those of the state’.<sup>168</sup> In broad terms, individual and domestic amateur filmmaking practices largely contradicted Soviet-style socialist ideology, which privileged the public and collective over the private and individual. It can be argued that this rather simplistic and rigid dichotomy of juxtaposing club/collective and individual/domestic strands within Soviet official discourse on amateur cinema stems from the generalized perceptions of the distinction between public and private spheres. In turn, the actual fluidity between the individual and club-based amateur filmmaking and the overall multiplicity of amateur filmmaking practices within these categories in part reflects the variable nature of public and private spheres in the late-Soviet era.

Many scholars have discussed the problematics of applying the notion of ‘public sphere’ in its classic Habermasian understanding (as ‘the sphere of private people come together as a public’ to communicate societal needs with the state) to Soviet-style socialist societies.<sup>169</sup> Shlapentokh articulated the absence of a bona fide public sphere in Soviet society and noted that the Soviet organizations that ‘were formally assigned the autonomous role of being

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<sup>168</sup> Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People*, p. 3.

<sup>169</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Tomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 27

representatives of [people's] interests', such as the Party, trade unions, and the Komsomol, were in fact embedded in the state apparatus.<sup>170</sup> The author maintains that in respect to 'authoritarian societies like the Soviet Union', where 'the state controls all major spheres of life', the notion of 'public' comes to be identified with the 'official'.<sup>171</sup>

More recently, Marc Garcelon has argued that in the Soviet context the qualifier 'social' is more apt than that of 'public'.<sup>172</sup> Garcelon offers a model of Soviet society in which the social realm of 'work, routine administration, and officially sanctioned and supervised associational life' intermediates between the domestic realm of family and friends and the official realm of the state apparatus.<sup>173</sup> According to the author, the interactions within the social realm were organized both 'according to ideological, meritocratic, and authoritarian-hierarchical principles' and 'along lines of bargaining, reciprocal favors, mutual dependencies, networks of connections, dissimulation, circumvention of regulations and procedures'.<sup>174</sup> In view of Garcelon's categorizations, leisure collectives and officially-sanctioned interest-based societies and associations, including amateur filmmaking clubs and studios, belonged to the social realm; 'wedged' between the domestic and the official, they forged a variety of interactions. In the case of amateur filmmaking clubs and studios in particular, however, these interactions included creating and consuming alternative forms of cultural production that, although officially sanctioned and *de jure* incorporated into official state structures, at times generated alternative political, social, and cultural meanings that challenged the very system that enabled them.

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<sup>170</sup> Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People*, p. 9.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>172</sup> Garcelon, 'The Shadow of the Leviathan', pp. 303–32.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

One other factor to consider in relation to the public and private distinction during the Khrushchev era in particular is what Deborah A. Field describes as ‘the contradictory policies of the Soviet state, which simultaneously enacted some policies aimed at merging public and private life and others that allowed for some separation between the two’.<sup>175</sup> The contradictory nature of state policies during the Khrushchev era is crucially evidenced in the sphere of cultural enlightenment and the role of the House of Culture. In her analysis of the cultural enlightenment practices in the Soviet Union, Anne White observes that the year 1930 marked the beginning of the mass construction of ‘clubs for the population’, the primary purpose of which was the socialization and politization of the masses through amateur artistic activities and propaganda work.<sup>176</sup> During the next two decades, this state policy evolved into a system that used ‘adult education and collective amateur arts to mobilize the population to industrialize’, as well as to fight the war and engage in post-war reconstruction.<sup>177</sup> The death of Stalin in 1953 inevitably led to a modification of cultural policy in the Soviet Union. Many state policies of the late 1950s and early 1960s were still targeted at monitoring and regulating domestic life and leisure — from a series of changes in architectural planning and in the use and organization of domestic space with the purpose of reinvigorating socialist morality, to resolutions concerning political socialization at places of residence.<sup>178</sup> White, however, discovers that this period also witnessed a ‘blossoming of organized “popular initiative[s]” and the emergence of new,

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<sup>175</sup> Field, ‘Everyday Life and the Problem of Conceptualizing Public and Private’, p. 164.

<sup>176</sup> White, *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture*, p. 35.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>178</sup> See Victor Buchli, ‘Khrushchev, Modernism, and the Fight against Petit-Bourgeois Consciousness in the Soviet Home’, *Journal of Design History*, 10.2 (1997), 161–76; and A. L. Unger, ‘Soviet Mass-Political Work in Residential Areas’, *Soviet Studies*, 22.4 (1971), 556–61.

House of Culture-based forms of cultural enlightenment aimed at ‘mobilizing the whole population by giving it the opportunity to participate in creative cultural activity, rather than being totally directed from above’.<sup>179</sup> Furthermore, she notes that the period of 1955–57 was also marked by the transfer of the state amateur-creativity clubs to professional unions ‘to encourage public responsibility and participation’, which to a certain extent diffused the control exercised over them.<sup>180</sup> This development undoubtedly stimulated the growth of the network of amateur-creativity clubs at places of work and the Houses of Culture attached to them, but also inadvertently led to the diminishing of Party control and, to a certain extent, the possibility of exploring a larger world of ideological positions, albeit limited by the contours of state institutions. White notes that from the mid-1960s onwards, and especially with the onset of *perestroika*, the role of the Party in determining leisure patterns gradually but steadily diminished, and official cultural institutions such as Houses of Culture increasingly became used for personal and collective cultural and artistic initiatives.<sup>181</sup> In other words, this dynamic represents an attempt to create ‘social’ and ‘public’ structures for the ‘private’, rooted in personal life and the pursuit of leisure and revolving in a sphere of domesticity and elective affinities, and then gradually empowering these structures with a certain degree of ideological and creative freedom.

The articles collected in the recent issue of *Film History*, dedicated to the study of the history of amateur film practices and institutions globally, frame the issue of the public and private distinction as germane to amateur film studies. Some of the contributors identify considerations regarding various modes of film production as public sphere(s) as a key to analysing amateur film practices in certain contexts. Blake Atwood, for example, accurately observes that ‘amateur-cinema studies [...] grew out of a Habermas-inspired distinction

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<sup>179</sup> White, *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture*, p. 36.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

between the public and private sphere' and that 'North American scholarship on amateur cinema often locates such practices within the private sphere'.<sup>182</sup> However, as the issue's editors Masha Salazkina and Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez note, going 'beyond the model of a liberal capitalist democratic public sphere, which in fact constituted a small percentage of the everyday reality for most people throughout the twentieth century' reveals 'a different cinematic public sphere'.<sup>183</sup> According to the authors, 'in nonliberal contexts', represented in the issue by Iran, socialist Hungary, pre-Civil War Spain, and Fascist Italy, the public sphere created by amateur cinema can be described as 'a nonhomogenous and complex set of counter publics'.<sup>184</sup>

In the same journal issue, Sonja Simonyi observes that 'scholars concerned with tracing alternative cultural production within the socialist bloc have notably defined the public sphere as distinct within this sociopolitical context'.<sup>185</sup> In her analysis of the workings behind the alternative filmmaking platform Balázs Béla Stúdió in socialist Hungary, she uses József Havasréti's model of public sphere subdivisions in which various alternative forms of cultural production operate.<sup>186</sup> Based on Havasréti's conceptualized model, she proposes to refer to a realm of alternative artistic production that was incorporated into official state structures but at times tested its boundaries as belonging to 'liminal' or 'parallel public sphere'. On the other hand, the 'alternative public sphere' encompassed the 'full tuning-out of artists from socialist life, prioritizing a private, domestic realm that was turned inward and sought complete separation from all forms of official culture' (perhaps to the extent that the

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<sup>182</sup> Atwood, 'The Little Devil Comes Home', p. 141.

<sup>183</sup> Salazkina and Fibla-Gutierrez, 'Introduction', p. xviii.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Simonyi, 'Artists as Amateurs', p. 120.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

qualifier 'public' loses its substance).<sup>187</sup> The author highlights the idea that the parallel public sphere still sought to sustain the communicative functions of the traditionally defined or Habermasian public sphere, whereas the alternative public sphere 'consciously moved away from this purpose'; in addition, 'certain artists moved in and out of each category, or gradually moved away from state-funded contexts into an entirely private realm'.<sup>188</sup>

Bearing in mind these insights into the alternative forms of cultural production as public sphere(s), the remainder of this chapter focuses on case studies that represent various forms of crossover between domestic amateur filmmaking practices and collective-based cine-amateurism incorporated into official state structures. Expanding upon Simonyi's discussion of the artists 'tuning out' from socialist life and state-funded contexts, these case studies constitute examples of the reverse process, according to which amateur filmmakers sought to incorporate elements of their private, domestic realm into the state-supported structures of the amateur filmmaking movement. In the section below, the family films created by Uldis Lapiņš and spouses Imants Jansons and Rasma Jansone will be analysed: while working as part of the Soviet Latvian state-supported amateur filmmaking network, these amateur filmmakers occasionally made films about of their families and set these films within their families' domestic environments. Since these filmmakers were also actively involved in the organized amateur filmmaking movement, and gained filmmaking experience and technical skills as part of this involvement, their family films are visibly more artistic and exhibit a high level of narrative sophistication in comparison to conventional home movies. On the basis of these case studies, the rest of this chapter aims to challenge the tendency to regard family films as anthropological documents that mainly serve a social function, having little artistic motivation and commitment to filmmaking conventions. Apart from this, the remainder of this chapter will also examine the ways in which the domestic sphere and its emotional aspect were at times

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.



dramatized and crafted as fictional narratives, and will trace the intersection between the aesthetic and thematic expectations for amateur films informed by the Soviet state-supported amateur filmmaking culture and the focus on the domesticity and the family as a subject.

### **The art of the home movie: the case of Uldis Lapiņš's family films**

The scholars behind pioneering attempts to investigate amateur film in the late 1980s and 1990s defined amateur cinema merely as a supplementary element within the ethnography of domestic life as well as tended to disaffirm any artistic motivation and commitment to filmmaking conventions in family films. Chalfen, for instance, maintains that home movies are not 'outlets for artistic expression', and that the main function of the home mode is to depict reality truthfully.<sup>189</sup> For this reason he argues that 'an attempt to alter a faithful picture of reality with "art" somehow profanes the purpose of the medium and the communicative task'.<sup>190</sup> The author also observes that within the home mode 'the referential function is much more important than the expressive one, just as the phatic (or contact) function takes precedence over poetic ones'.<sup>191</sup> This approach to home movies echoes Pierre Bourdieu's reflections on amateur photography. Bourdieu maintains that amateur photography which is subordinated to a domestic function should not be defined by the subject or the object photographed, but is primarily used to communicate and sustain a set of codes, perceptions, and dispositions common to the photographer's habitus. As he argues:

[...] photography can not be delivered over to the randomness of the individual imagination and, via the mediation of the *ethos*, the internalization of objective and common regularities, the group places this practice under its collective rule, so that the most trivial photography expresses, apart from the explicit intentions of the

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<sup>189</sup> Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life*, p. 135.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

photographer, the system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to the whole group.<sup>192</sup>

According to Bourdieu, the aesthetic of amateur photography confined to the domestic sphere is determined by subjugation of form and content to function, of expression to referentiality. He concludes that ‘the feature common to all the popular arts is their subordination of artistic activity to socially regulated functions while the elaboration of “pure” forms [...] presupposes the disappearance of all functional characteristics [...]’.<sup>193</sup> The tendency to conceptualize family films as antithetical to art also dominates Zimmermann’s *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*.<sup>194</sup>

Since the mid-2000s, however, the broadening of our access to examples of amateur cinema, including family films, stimulated by the use of digital technology and the Internet in amateur-film preservation, has encouraged the further development of amateur-film studies. Amateur films began to be studied for their filmic qualities, and therefore were more often approached through the prism of the film-studies discipline and its interpretative practices. In line with these trends, scholars have started to examine more closely family films that do not correspond to Chalfen’s formulation of ‘cinéma naïveté’, ones which are clearly driven by aesthetic ambitions, and which, rather than serving merely documentative and memory functions, are committed to telling a story. Ryan Shand, for example, has recently investigated the legacy of British amateur filmmaker Frank Marshall and his comedic family films by means of

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<sup>192</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 6.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>194</sup> Zimmermann, *Reel Families*.

applying *auteur* theory and raising questions about genre.<sup>195</sup> In turn, Martina Roepke has examined a body of family films made in 1930s Germany which were crafted as fictional narratives and conformed to a whole range of aesthetic filmmaking conventions.<sup>196</sup> Family films of Latvian amateur filmmaker Uldis Lapiņš are a good illustration of this strand of home-moviemaking: they have little in common with the non-narrative, ‘point-and-shoot’ footage of everyday family life. Instead, they can be described as artful documentaries about the author’s family, in which he expands episodes captured in private family recordings into carefully orchestrated poetic narratives.

Lapiņš donated his collection of films to the LVKFFDA in 2009 and 2010 in the form of four DVD discs containing a total of twenty-nine films. Most of the films have digitally-added credits which state that the digitization and digital restoration were performed in the early 2000s by the author himself from Super 8mm originals. The fact that Lapiņš digitized his family films in the early 2000s, when DVD technology largely became available for Latvian consumers, is evidently a sign that he was keen to preserve his family films as works which possessed a strong emotional value for him. The fact that he decided to donate his family films, among his other more ‘public’ films, to the state archive suggests that he viewed them either as important and relevant historical documents, or as works possessing some artistic value, or both. The versions of Lapiņš’s family films held in the LVKFFDA collection feature many digitally-added elements, such as opening and closing credits, fades, close-ups, and musical accompaniment. Evidently, the author had taken the decision to revisit his films artistically many years after they were made, and was eager to

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<sup>195</sup> Ryan Shand, ‘The “Family Film” as Amateur Production Genre: Frank Marshall’s Comic Narratives’, *The Moving Image*, 15.2 (2015), 1–27 <<http://muse.jhu.edu/article/602748/pdf>>.

<sup>196</sup> Martina Roepke, ‘Crafting Life into Film: Analysing Family Fiction Films from the 1930s’, in *Small-Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film*, ed. by Ryan Shand and Ian Craven (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 83–101.

improve them with the digital technologies that were becoming available in the 2000s.

Lapiņš worked for most of his life as chief of the production department of the First of May fishermen collective farm (1.Maijs zvejnieku kolhozs) in the harbour town of Mērsrags, Talsi district. He was also head of the First of May amateur-film collective. From the late-1950s to his death in 2011, he made a large number of amateur films on very diverse topics, and although associated with the studio, Lapiņš developed a strongly personal filmmaking style which exhibited stylistic and thematic continuity throughout his filmmaking career. He made many films of public concern, largely focusing on work and social issues. At the beginning of his filmmaking career, for example, he dedicated many films to his colleagues working at the collective farm: *Klapkalnieši* (The Klapkalnciems Locals, 1958); *Pāri Atlantijai* (Across the Atlantic, 1969); *Kad viss ir ledū iekalts* (When Everything is Chiselled in Ice, 1970); and *Viņi ir pieci* (They are Five, 1971). Apart from being an active studio filmmaker, Lapiņš also dedicated several of his films to family and friends, among them *Čipolino* (Cipollino, 1958), *Ak, vasariņa, mīļā vasariņa* (Oh, Summer, Lovely Summer, 1970), *Vēstule* (Letter, 1972), *Lāčupīte* (River Lāčupīte, 1978), *Savam un citu priekam* (For One's Own and Others' Pleasure, 1984); and *Kad pagātne un nākotne tiekas* (When Past and Present Meet, 1985). Due to their thematic richness and high aesthetic value, *Ak, vasariņa, mīļā vasariņa*, *Lāčupīte*, and *Kad pagātne un nākotne tiekas* will be analysed in this section as examples of a family filmmaking practice that challenges the vernacular style of home movies.

*Ak, vasariņa, mīļā vasariņa* is a colour film. As the opening credit suggests, it is dedicated to Lapiņš's daughter, Gita Lapiņa. The film is the story of the author and his daughter's summer day out, and features footage of Gita making wild-flower bouquets, playing at the seaside, and swimming. At first, the film's setting (the sunny flower meadow and beach) and its subject matter (a day out enjoyed by father and daughter) signal the film's belonging to the conventional home movie as described by Chalfen; that is, it performs documentative, hedonistic, and aide-mémoire functions. Closer examination,

however, reveals that certain elements do not correspond with the conventional understanding and general expectations of a home movie. The first element that quickly manifests itself is the filmmaker's skilful use of editing techniques. For instance, the scene in which Gita is shown creating a bouquet of wild flowers is presented as a medium long shot interspersed with extreme close-ups of Gita's hand plucking the flowers. Another sequence, which shows Gita's arrival at the beach, is edited in an even more sophisticated way: the viewer is presented with an extreme close-up of her bare feet standing on a sandy surface next to a couple of pebbles, after which her hand enters the shot to pick the pebbles up. This is followed by a medium long shot of Gita throwing a pebble towards the sea and a close-up of the pebble bouncing along the surface of the water. Generally, Lapiņš endeavours to observe temporal and spatial continuity by using continuous editing throughout. For instance, Gita is shown removing her dress to reveal a swim-suit underneath as she runs towards the sea to take a dip, which is followed by several shots of her in the water wearing a swimsuit, and later a shot of her back on the beach putting her dress back on.



3 Still from *Ak, vasariņa, mīļa vasariņa*



4 Still from *Ak, vasariņa, mīļa vasariņa*

The careful editing work in Lapiņš's film can be interpreted as a manifestation of his desire to upgrade his private family recording to a coherent and aesthetically pleasing narrative, as well as to showcase his technical skills as a filmmaker, gained as part of his work at the studio. Another irregular element in this family film becomes evident after close examination of Lapiņš's skilful editing work. Bearing in mind the limitations posed by using a single camera to shoot all of the footage, it can be assumed that in order for Lapiņš to capture the source footage for this film, the shoot had to be thoroughly planned in advance, and his daughter Gita had to be directed during most of the shooting process. Planning the shooting and directing his subjects became a typical practice for Lapiņš, as his later family films, discussed below, demonstrate. This largely contradicts the typical approach of a filmmaker making a family film, as any form of planning and directing conflicts with spontaneity, which is a commonly desired feature of the home mode of communication.<sup>197</sup> As

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<sup>197</sup> Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life*, pp. 51–52.

Chalfen concludes in his study, based on feedback he received from his informants, editing in the process of creating a home movie is usually seen ‘an unwelcome intrusion of “work” into what is classified by most people as “play”’, as it does not share the social qualities that home moviemaking and watching possess, and thus is usually minimal.<sup>198</sup>

On closer scrutiny, the subject-matter of *Ak, vasariņa, mīļa vasariņa* seems to go well beyond a day out at the beach with a family member. From the opening shots of the film — extreme close-ups of a bee and butterflies pollinating flowers, and a stork flying against a clear blue sky — the natural landscape characteristic of the Latvian seaside is established as a film protagonist on its own right. The shots of nature are given almost as much screen time as Gita. Moreover, her curiosity-driven exploration of nature is emphasized throughout and reaches its climax towards the end of the film, when she finds and passionately explores a fallen tree branch covered in ladybirds. It might be claimed that the decision to shoot the film in colour underlines the importance of nature’s presence within the story. Using colour film stock was a rare practice among Soviet amateur filmmakers due to its relatively high cost and complicated developing process. Therefore, the majority of the films in the LVKFFDA amateur-film collection as well as private collections that were examined as part of this research project are shot in black-and-white. Given Lapiņš’s influential position at the collective farm, he was presumably able to afford experimenting with colour film, and in the first half of the 1970s produced several colour films, including *Ak, vasariņa, mīļa vasariņa*, followed by *Apstājies!* (Stop!, 1972). Nature also lies at the dramatic centre of *Apstājies!*, the main storyline of which features a car driving quickly past beautiful meadows of wild flowers. The film then cuts to extreme close-ups of different flowers, which are followed by the film’s title ‘Apstājies!’ (‘Stop!’) appearing in the form of the final credit. At this juncture, the main message of the film becomes clear and can be summarized as the importance of being able to find quiet moments amidst modern hectic life and appreciate the beauty of the

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

natural world. This undoubtedly can be seen as the continuation of the motif present in *Ak, vasariņa, mīļa vasariņa*. Making both films in colour was obviously a conscious artistic decision on the part of Lapiņš and a vital part of the aesthetic treatment of the concepts behind these two stories.

*Lāčupīte* (River Lāčupīte) is a family film completed by Lapiņš in 1978: it is essentially the story of his children (son Andris and daughter Gita) growing up. The formal concept behind this family film is extraordinary for an amateur in the sense that it is edited using footage filmed by Lapiņš over a period of three decades. The film is divided into three segments, the beginning of each one marked with a title denoting the year in which the footage was shot: 1978, 1968, and 1958. *Lāčupīte* opens with a title 'Veltījums dēlam Andrim un meitai Gitai' (Dedicated to son Andris and daughter Gita), which is then followed by the title '1978' and a shot from inside the car approaching a road sign that says 'Lāčupīte'. Two young adults, whom we assume to be Lapiņš's grown-up children, Andris and Gita, are shown getting out of the car and heading towards the river. They take off their shoes and sit down at the top of a sand dune. Then Gita slides down the sand dune and paddles barefoot in the water. This is followed by the title '1968': Andris and Gita are shown ten years younger, sliding down the same sand dune and then engaging in a variety of fun activities. At this point, we are invited to speculate that Lapiņš most probably directed his children in the 1978 segment for the purpose of creating a poetic effect, since Gita sliding down the sand dune in 1978 is an obvious reference to her and her brother's playful activities as filmed by Lapiņš in 1968, when they were still children. The last instalment of the film is dated '1958', in which little Andris is shown playing alone and fishing on the same riverbank (this probably alludes to his father's profession), thus prompting the viewer to assume that Gita is not yet born. A montage of family photos followed by a quote from a poem by the Latvian poet Aspazija (the pen name of Elza Pliekšāne), entitled 'Ilgu zeme' (The Land of Longing, 1910), serves as an epilogue to the film:



[...] lai ietu caur visu pasauli,

Tu nerasi vairs to zemīti.<sup>199</sup>



5 Stills from *Lāčupīte*

The poem in question was written in exile: like many other nationally oriented writers and artists, Aspazija was forced to flee shortly after the Tsarist authorities' crackdown on protesters involved in the 1905 Revolution, and lived in exile in Switzerland until 1920. The poem in all probability refers to the nostalgic feelings the poet experienced towards Latvia as a result of her exile. In the context of Lapiņš's film, who lived most of his life in Latvia, the 'land of longing', rather than a geographical location, might be interpreted as a symbolic place that communicates his family's past. Similarly, the river Lāčupīte, apart from being an authentic geographical location, is clearly an important symbolic place for the Lapiņš family, essentially a witness to the

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<sup>199</sup> [...] travelling across the whole world,

You will no longer come across that little land.

growing up of the family's next generation. Located in Engure municipality in the West of Latvia, the Lāčupīte is also part of Lapiņš's cinematic geography: in the North of the Engure Municipality is the harbour town Mērsrāgs, where Lapiņš worked and headed the amateur-film studio; and South-East of Mērsrāgs are the village of Klapkanciems and the Engure Lake, where Lapiņš filmed *Klapkalnieši* and *Kad viss ir ledū iekalts* respectively.

Lapiņš was born and grew up in Valmiera, a city in north-central Latvia, which is another significant symbolic place in the filmmaker's personal life. *Kad pagātne un nākotne tiekas* is a documentary about the author and his former schoolmates and friends, Edgars Treimanis and Reinharde Ābelis, and their visit in 1983 to the school in Valmiera which they used to attend. The film begins with a close-up of a calendar denoting that it is the month of September. Treimanis is shown taking a break from work in order to make a phone call. This sequence is followed by an episode which shows Lapiņš supervising work at the production facility of the First of May collective farm, his actual work place. An off-screen female voice notifies Lapiņš that he is getting a call. Treimanis reminds Lapiņš that they have an important anniversary today: fifty years ago, 1 September 1933, was their first school day at the First Valmiera primary school. Treimanis and Lapiņš agree that they should travel to Valmiera to commemorate this significant date. Later, we see Ābelis also receiving a call from Treimanis, and the trip to Valmiera is arranged.<sup>200</sup> This part of the film has obviously been staged: Lapiņš has resorted to the use of re-enactment or reconstruction, which is commonly adopted to aid story development in the context of documentary filmmaking practices.

The next part of the film documents the friends' arrival in Valmiera. This is communicated by means of a montage of city views — the Daugava river, the Valmiera castle, city streets — followed by exterior views of their former school. This is followed by a montage of photographs: a photograph of the three

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<sup>200</sup> Due to the complexity of the sound-synchronization process, these sequences are filmed and edited in a way that the speaker always remains off-screen.

friends taken in 1983, followed by a photograph of their class in 1933, in which all three friends are identified by means of close-ups, followed by close-ups of their primary-school graduation diplomas, and their graduation photograph, which was taken in 1939. Throughout this sequence, the viewer hears voiceover commentary by Lapiņš, Treimanis, and Ābelis talking about their experiences of going to school in Valmiera. At this point it becomes clear that in *Kad pagātne un nākotne tiekas* Lapiņš has set out to challenge our expectations of the family film mode by including community elements. In her study of the British amateur-film movement, Nicholson defines ‘community’ amateur films as those that are concerned with local people and places. They usually focus on subjects that may hold little interest to professional filmmakers, but are significant in the sense of preserving and reclaiming the memories and experiences of a given locality.<sup>201</sup> As will be explored in detail in the following chapter, in the context of Soviet Latvia many amateur films about local communities were born out of a conscious or subconscious desire to preserve aspects of Latvian national identity — which was often perceived at the grassroots level as endangered by Soviet anti-nationalism, — as well as the urge to interrogate and question the political status of Latvia as part of the Soviet Union.

This approach becomes evident in the next sequence of *Kad pagātne un nākotne tiekas*. As the image of the 1939 graduation photo gradually fades, accompanied by Lapiņš’s statement on the audio track that ‘I will never forget the years of our youth spent in Valmiera’, the film cuts to a montage of archival photos of Valmiera taken in the 1930s. This is followed by a photograph of a Valmiera street with a church in the background; this is then superimposed with the shop-signs of certain local businesses. We see the logos of the clothing and home textile firm ‘Manufaktūra J.Ustups un A. Bundže’, meat producer ‘Bērziņa gaļas un desu rupniecība’, fashion store ‘J.Dambītis modes preces’, agricultural consumer association ‘Centrālā savienība “Konzums”’, the film theatre Kino Splendid, and others. This series of logos is interrupted

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<sup>201</sup> Nicholson, *Amateur Film*, p. 118.

by the title '1940' that appears on the screen, accompanied by 'The Internationale' on the soundtrack, thus insinuating that the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940 quickly strangled a developing national economy. The title '1940' is followed by '1941', self-evidently referring to Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union and the subsequent Nazi occupation of Latvia, which in turn is followed by '1944', which marks the Soviet re-occupation of Latvia. As the titles succeed one another, the Valmiera view that served as its background gradually darkens, and 'The Internationale' is substituted by ominous organ music.

Although authorial commentary during this sequence is completely absent, a knowledge of Lapiņš's family history provides a substantial interpretative context. Lapiņš and his family were gravely affected by the Soviet occupation and the Second World War. His father was deported and later executed in Russia as an enemy of the state, and Lapiņš himself ended up joining the Latvian SS legion, which led to his imprisonment by the Soviets in 1944–1947.<sup>202</sup> With this short sequence, Lapiņš challenges the notion of the family film as an apolitical private sphere free from ideology, and introduces a narrative based on personal and local experience that subtly contests the version of history promoted by official discourse.

This brief historical intermission is followed by a sequence in which the three friends meet their former teacher, Milija Meistare, during their visit to Valmiera. We see footage of Lapiņš, Treimanis, and Ābelis spending time with Meistare in her home drinking tea, talking, and going through old photographs. At this point the film cuts back to the 1939 graduation photograph, and on the audio-track we hear a conversation between Lapiņš, Treimanis, and Ābelis as they remember some of their friends from school and ask themselves where could they be now, after a tumultuous fifty years have passed. The clash between the historical and the personal narrative is again addressed, but in a subtler way. The method of adding a historical dimension to otherwise personal or

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<sup>202</sup> Uldis Lapiņš, interview by Regina Šulca, 30 March 2001, RKM-2988, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia.

local narratives is also used in one of Lapiņš's documentary films about fishermen, *Viņi ir pieci* (1971), which tells the stories of five fishermen from the First of May collective farm. We are shown the heroes of the film at work as they experiment with different fishing techniques in the open sea, and hear the testimonies of their life and work as part of a fishing brigade on the audio-track. At some point, one of the fishermen shares his experience of how the Second World War and the Soviet occupation influenced the fishing industry.

*Kad pagātne un nākotne tiekas* ends with a sequence showing Lapiņš's grandson, Juris, as he prepares for school in the morning and then does his homework. The author's voiceover is reflective: 'Kas būs tu, un kur būs tu, Jūri Lapiņ, pēc piecdesmit gadiem?' ('Who are you going to be, and where are you going to be, Jūris Lapiņš, in fifty years?'). At the same time, we are shown a photo of Juris's class with the title '2033', that is, fifty years from 1983, superimposed onto it. The finale of the film thus invokes the theme of the passing of time and the circularity of family history, also clearly present in *Lāčupīte*. The nostalgia present in *Kad pagātne un nākotne tiekas*, however, apart from having a personal relevance, can also be interpreted as nostalgia for pre-Soviet independent Latvia.

By studying Lapiņš as an example of the amateur *auteur*, in other words, a filmmaker who exhibits stylistic and thematic continuity throughout his films, it can be argued that the themes and motifs recurrent in Lapiņš's work — the beauty of the natural world, the passing of time, sympathetic interest in the past, individualism — are infused with lyrical, almost Romantic overtones. This thematic choice is an illuminating example of Alexei Yurchak's argument in relation to the various relationships that Soviet people developed vis-à-vis dominant ideological discourse, or as he labels it, authoritative discourse. Analysing the sophisticated nature of alternative music culture in the late Soviet era, Yurchak highlights the tendency among certain musicians and music lovers to look for 'an aesthetic form that transcended authoritative discourse' and allowed for creativity and imagination without requiring either

support or opposition to the socialist realities that enabled it.<sup>203</sup> According to the author, for many musicians and music aficionados of the late Soviet era, this translated into ‘caring about “deep truths” and about “timeless” and “universal” problems of life’.<sup>204</sup> In this connection, Yurchak refers to Thomas Cushman’s sociological study of Soviet rock music culture and the words of one musician quoted as part of it: ‘We’re interested in universal problems which don’t depend on this or that system, or on a particular time. In other words, they were here a thousand years ago, and they still exist—relations between people, the connection between man and nature’.<sup>205</sup>

Lapiņš’s family films can be interpreted as the author’s search for an aesthetic form beyond authoritative discourse. Lapiņš masterfully expands private events captured in intimate family settings into cohesive narratives, and through the portrayal of family relationships addresses universal and timeless themes: the beauty of nature, the passing of time, nostalgia, the strength of family ties, the persistence of family rituals, and the interaction between the grand narratives of history and personal experiences. By placing Lapiņš’s films in Western academic contexts, — primarily Chalfen’s study of home movies, as well as later revisions of the home mode by scholars such as Shand and Roepke, — it is possible to evaluate the functional dimension of his family filmmaking practice. As has been observed, Lapiņš engaged in family filmmaking on a more basic level, looking to document and preserve episodes of his family’s history for future enjoyment. At the same time, he undoubtedly regarded the documentation of his family’s life as an opportunity for artistic expression: his family films are driven by aesthetic ambition as much as by the desire to record and preserve episodes of his family’s history. Furthermore, the examination of Lapiņš’s film *Kad pagātne un nākotne tiekas* demonstrates

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<sup>203</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 237.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Thomas Cushman, *Notes from Underground: Rock Music Counterculture in Russia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 95.

that, by introducing historical elements into the private sphere of a family film, it is possible to create a narrative that contests the dominant ideological discourse and offers an alternative interpretation of historical events based on personal and local experiences.

Lapiņš's family films can also be interpreted as an attempt to fulfil aesthetic and thematic expectations for amateur films informed by film culture in general, and the Soviet organized and state-supported amateur filmmaking culture in particular. Having produced a number of socially-oriented amateur films, Lapiņš developed an interest in family as a subject. Instead of moving away from state-funded contexts into the private realm, moreover, he sought to incorporate the elements of his private, domestic realm into the public sphere, represented here by the state-supported amateur filmmaking network. Lapiņš was a frequent participant at amateur-film festivals and received awards for his films: *Kad viss ir ledū iekalts*, for example, was awarded the best 8mm documentary film at the Sixth Baltic amateur-film festival (18–21 October, 1973) in Tallinn.<sup>206</sup> Interestingly, he sought festival exposure for his family films as well: in 1973, he entered *Ak, vasariņa, mīļa vasariņa*, along with *Čipolīno* and *Vēstule*, into the 5<sup>th</sup> Family Film Competition organized by LKAB, as a result of which *Ak, vasariņa* was awarded second place and *Vēstule* — fourth.<sup>207</sup>

In this way, family films such as those of Lapiņš illustrate the fluidity that existed between the familial and club-based amateur filmmaking practices, as they merge certain aesthetic and thematic expectations for amateur films informed by the Soviet amateur filmmaking culture with the focus on the domesticity and family as a subject. In part, they reflect the variable nature of public and private spheres in the late-Soviet era and can be seen as a product of 'social' and 'public' structures, such as the network of amateur-film clubs, that were

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<sup>206</sup> Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 485.

<sup>207</sup> '5., 6., 7., 8. Ģimenes filmām veltītā kinoamatieru filmu konkursa dokumenti', pp. 3 & 8–10.

created for the 'private', i.e., which takes place in a sphere of domesticity and personal life. They can be regarded as illustrative of the ways in which the structures and networks of the organized amateur filmmaking movement in the context of state socialism, with its avowed disdain for amateur filmmaking in the home, led to the diversification of the themes and revision of the visual codes associated with the conventional home-movie tradition and practices. The case studies discussed below will build upon these insights and examine the ways in which family films with fictional elements expand this tendency.

### **From family to fiction: the case of family films by Rasma Jansone and Imants Jansons**

Among the other Soviet Latvian amateur filmmakers who regularly made home movies are spouses Rasma Jansone and Imants Jansons, who were both members of one of Riga's largest and most prominent amateur-film studios, Prizma. Much like Lapiņš, Imants Jansons also made a number of films outside the concern of his domestic sphere and family. His filmography includes several shorts about Riga which focus on its architectural heritage. *Pacel galvu!* (Look up!, 1970), for example, tells the story of a building in the old town of Riga and the sculpture by artist Augusts Folcs that adorns it; and *Rīgas jugendstils* (Art-Deco of Riga, 1984) and *Nacionālais romantisms* (National Romanticism, 1984) are two informative colour films on the subject of architectural styles common in Riga. In 1975, Jansons made a film about the Riga Jazz Club, *Džezs — tas ir nopietni* (Jazz is a Serious Business). His 1980 film *Vai tu esi Homo Sapiens?* (Are You a Homo Sapiens?) criticizes the environmental pollution in Riga and explores the theme of the urban landscape invading nature. Like many other amateur and professional filmmakers, Jansons took to the streets in the late 1980s to document the so-called Atmoda, or Awakening, the national revival movement that led to the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991. This resulted in the documentary films entitled *Nacionālā karoga rehabilitācija* (National Flag Rehabilitation, 1988) and *Mosties, celies* (Get Up, Stand Up, 1988). These films do not mention his wife Rasma in the credits, perhaps signalling that the filmmaker drew a distinction between what he saw as family filmmaking and club-based



and socially-oriented filmmaking, and usually excluded his wife from the latter. It should be noted that overall Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking culture was clearly a male-dominated and strongly gendered sphere, one in which women rarely made films on their own or together with other women, and were frequently involved only as assistants to their husbands or partners, usually performing organizational rather than creative tasks in the filmmaking process.



6 Rasma Jansone and Imants Jansons working on a film (Regina Šulca collection)

*Paldies un piedod* (Thank You and Forgive Me, 1980) offers a good starting point from which to explore the Jansons' approach to their familial amateur filmmaking practice. The subject of the film is their daughter's school graduation. Their approach to documenting this event, however, is radically different from the usual practices of filming special family events. In this film, the daughter appears only in a couple of episodes at the end of the film, usually among other classmates, whereas the larger focus is on the school itself and its poetics as an institution and physical building. In this film, we see many shots of the school's corridors, classrooms, and staircases, a silhouette of a

couple talking in front of large window, and a sunset filmed through tree branches in the school yard. The graduation ceremony itself is intercut with footage filmed during various lessons; this signals a certain amount of planning and scripting on the part of the filmmakers. Thus, much like Lapiņš's productions, the Jansons' family films are planned and scripted, as well as highly artistic and technically sophisticated. What sets them apart, however, is the fact that the filmmakers at times introduce elements of fiction into their family recordings. The section below will explore the ways in which the Jansons' family life is fictionalized in two films made by the spouses in the 1970s: *Mazie džungļi* (Little Jungle, exact year unknown) and *Tā mēs dzīvojam* (This Is How We Live, exact year unknown). In order to establish a framework for the analysis of these films, it is essential to discuss first the dynamics between amateur cinema and fiction as a mode of film production.

In recent years, amateur-film scholarship has moved away from prioritizing the historical and evidential value of non-fiction or documentary amateur films and expanded to include consideration of the symbolic and artistic value of amateur cinema. In this way fictional narratives within the amateur-film tradition came to the attention of scholars, eventually culminating in the publication of *Small-Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film*, a volume co-edited by Ryan Shand and Ian Craven, which explores the legacy of amateur fiction cinema worldwide.<sup>208</sup> In the introduction to this volume, Shand raises important questions regarding the theorization of amateur fiction. When approaching amateur fiction-films, the author examines the manner in which a work of fiction is constructed and operates more generally, and exploits insights derived from Roger Odin's semio-pragmatic film theory, in particular a set of operations at work in what Odin defines as the fictional mode.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> *Small-Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film*, ed. by Ian Craven and Ryan Shand (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

<sup>209</sup> Ryan Shand, 'Introduction: Ambitions and Arguments – Exploring Amateur Cinema through Fiction', *ibid.*, pp. 1–33 (pp. 4–5).

In this connection, it is useful to give a brief overview of Odin's semio-pragmatic film theory. As summarized by Warren Buckland, Odin's semio-pragmatic approach to film 'is preoccupied with researching the film spectator's competence', which is defined as 'the tacit knowledge that constitutes each spectator's psychic disposition (or mode of attention) when engaged in the activity of watching a film'.<sup>210</sup> According to this theory, the ontology of film is not predetermined but defined during the process of watching a film. In the words of Odin:

The objective of a semio-pragmatics of film and the audio-visual is to attempt to understand how audio-visual productions function in a given social space. According to this approach, the act of making or seeing a film is not immediately a fact of discourse, but a social fact obtained by adopting a *role* that regulates the production of the *film text* (which means film as a construction endowed with meaning and generating affects). A role can be described as a specific psychic positioning (cognitive and affective) that leads to the implementation of a certain number of *operations* that produce meaning and affects. A priori, there is absolutely no reason for the actant director and actant reader to adopt the same role (the same way of producing meaning and affects). However, it is only when the same role is adopted by these two actants that what can be called a *space of communication* is created. A space of communication is a space in which the production of meaning and affects are harmoniously formed during the film-making and the reading.<sup>211</sup>

In his work, Odin delineates a number of filmic 'modes', including the home-movie mode and the fictional mode. Rather than being purely taxonomic, Odin's modes are employed by the addressee (the spectator) and the enunciator (the filmmaker) in the process of creating and watching a film. As elaborated by Buckland, 'the space of communication is created when sender and receiver employ the same competence — the same mode — in the making

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<sup>210</sup> Warren Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 77.

<sup>211</sup> Roger Odin, 'A Semio-Pragmatic Approach to the Documentary Film', in *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind*, ed. by Warren Buckland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), pp. 227–35 (p. 227).

and reading of a film'.<sup>212</sup> According to Odin, modes are not fixed or given in advance, and are a result of a combination of 'operations'; the different modes are not to be seen as 'mutually exclusive categories' and do share a number of operations.<sup>213</sup> What follows is a summary of the four operations identified by Odin (and summarized by Buckland) that are crucial for creating and perceiving a film text as a work of fiction, and will be particularly useful for this chapter's analysis of the family films with fictional elements produced by the Jansons. These four operations are:

- 1) Diegetization — an operation that 'involves the construction of an imaginary world inhabited by characters' and 'refers to the literal dimension of the film — the space, time, and events experienced by characters';
- 2) Narrativization — an operation that involves construction of the film's narrative structure, that is, arranging the filmic time, space, and events portrayed in a way that the final text tells a story. Odin distinguishes between the micro- and macro-narrative. Whereas a micro-narrative element, or 'the narrative effect', can be found in the most abstract or experimental films, a conventional film exhibits a macro-narrative structure. Interestingly, 'narrativization cannot operate without diegetization', as the narrative requires an imaginary world in which to function;

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<sup>212</sup> Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, p. 88. For a detailed overview of the modes and operations described by Odin, see Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, pp. 77–108. Odin published his work largely in French, and only a few of his essays have been translated into English. Thus some of Odin's theoretical considerations discussed here are sourced from the writings of Warren Buckland, who worked closely with Odin's original essays and offered extensive overviews of his ideas as part of his research.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

- 3) *Mise en phase* — an operation that involves a resonance or ‘a correlation between the film-spectator relation and the relations manifest in the diegesis’. *Mise en phase* occurs when conjunction or disjunction in the film-spectator relation is matched by a conjunction or disjunction within the diegesis. In this way the spectator is made to resonate with the events that occur in the film. According to Odin, *mise en phase* is one of the essential characteristics of the fiction film and an important operation for generating the fiction effect;
- 4) Fictivization — an operation that confers ‘a fictional status upon the enunciator and addressee of a fiction film’. Unlike the other operations, fictivization is unique to the fiction-film. As a result, the enunciator is modalized as fictive, and the addressee ‘need not take as serious (as real) the meanings articulated in the film, but comprehends these meanings in terms of non-deceptive pretense’. In the documentary mode, by contrast, ‘both enunciator and reader actant are modalized as real, with the result that the addressee must take seriously what is articulated on screen’.<sup>214</sup>

Odin also rigorously studies the phenomenon of family films. In his essay ‘Rhétorique du film de famille’ (The Rhetoric of the Family Film), Odin uses his theoretical framework of operations in order to derive several textual characteristics that signal to the spectator that he or she is watching a home movie.<sup>215</sup> Although providing a useful set of properties to describe and analyse what in the context of this chapter has been labelled a ‘conventional’ home movie, Odin’s characteristics complement Bourdieu’s and Chalfen’s relatively hermetic considerations regarding the limited thematic and functional aspects of amateur photography and filmmaking which is confined to the domestic sphere, and do not allow for unusual and creative approaches to family

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., pp. 91–96.

<sup>215</sup> Roger Odin, ‘Rhétorique du film de famille’, *Revue d’Esthétique*, 1–2 (1979), 240–73.

filmmaking exhibited by some amateur filmmakers, including those discussed as part of this chapter. Nevertheless, it is useful to present Odin's characteristics here for the purposes of contrasting them with the family-film case studies discussed in this chapter. For Odin, the following textual properties prompt the spectator to perceive a film as a home movie:

- 1) The absence of closure and a dispersed narrative. According to Odin, this property indicates that narrativization does not operate within the home mode: a home movie only contains micro-narrative elements that do not constitute a story;
- 2) Discontinuous linear temporality. A home movie usually features episodes of family life recorded in chronological order (there are no flashbacks, flash-forwards, or non-linear storytelling). However, the chronology of a home movie is indeterminate because the temporal relations between its segments are discontinuous. One has to be the creator of a home movie or its participant in order to be able to determine temporal relations between its segments. This property therefore indicates that diegetization and narrativization do not operate within the home mode;
- 3) Spatial indeterminacy and disregard for the codes of spatial coherence. The home movie does not adhere to the conventional filmic codes of spatial coherence, such as, for instance, the 180-degree rule. As with the previous property, it is often difficult to determine the spatial relation between the segments for an outside viewer. This signals the disregard for the operation of diegetization and narrativization;
- 4) Usually inaudible, variable, or absent soundtrack, one that, in conjunction with the above properties, 'only presents fragments of a diegesis', thus again signalling nonconformity to the operation of diegetization;

- 5) Certain technical imperfections, such as 'blurred images, jolting camera movements, hesitant pan shots, and so on', and the on-screen participants addressing the camera. According to Odin, these characteristics modalize the enunciator and the reader of the home movie as real.<sup>216</sup>

For Odin, therefore, in the home-movie mode 'both the enunciator and the addressee are family members', that is, real people with a strong family tie.<sup>217</sup> The author does not explore the possibility of a home movie being showcased to a wider audience, implying that the production of meaning and affects in the home mode would be disrupted if the enunciator and the addressee of a home movie do not share a family tie. The suggestion that the external spectator may feel uninvolved and disaffected by home movies on the account of the lack of personal connection to the objects filmed, as well as the absence of a coherent narrative structure and storytelling devices, is omnipresent both in Western cine-hobby literature and Soviet official discourse on amateur cinema. Besides the fact that the latter insisted on the importance of a socially conscious dimension to family stories, both discourses encouraged amateur filmmakers to invest energy in planning and basic scripting in order to construct their home movies in accordance with spectatorship expectations that are particular to film culture and thus to make the viewing experience more agreeable for the potential external spectator (for instance at a film festival).<sup>218</sup> It is no coincidence that active and experienced amateur filmmakers who had

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<sup>216</sup> Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, pp. 102–03.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>218</sup> For the analysis of the discourse of the Western cine-hobby literature, see, for instance, Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, pp. 64–72. According to the author, very early in the development of amateur filmmaking culture in the United States 'Hollywood style was lionized as the pinnacle of cinematic perfection for amateurs' in magazines dedicated to the practical aspects of amateur cinema. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

developed their technical skills and artistic inclinations as part of the club work, but who were still drawn to the themes of family, children, and domesticity, were motivated not only to plan, carefully edit, and narrativize their family recordings (as Lapiņš's case demonstrates), but also to model an imaginary world based on their domestic environments and to employ a variety of cinematic techniques in order to foster the spectator's alignment with the filmic representations of their family members.

The Jansons' *Mazie džungļi* (Little Jungle) is a noteworthy case in point which illustrates this tendency. It can be characterized as a fictionalized account of the filmmakers' two children playing in a garden of a summerhouse and then venturing on a short walk in a nearby forest and exploring its wildlife. Although the diegesis of the film is clearly based on the familiar environments of the Jansons family — in all probability, the filming took place in the garden of the Jansons' summerhouse and in the nearby forest — these environments constitute an imaginary world with its own spatial and temporal dimensions, one in which the children's adventures unfold. The filmmakers' children are presented as independent fictional characters. Moreover, their familial ties with Imants and Rasma are not part of the film's diegetic world. In addition to this, they wear costumes (something similar to cowboy attires) and are evidently being directed in their performances. Thus, although maximally based on their 'real selves', they did undergo implicit characterization, as the viewer can infer that they are playful, adventurous, curious, but careful children through their actions and reactions, physical appearance, and mannerisms.

Similar to Lapiņš's *Ak, vasariņa, mīļa vasariņa*, the natural world is an important element in *Mazie džungļi*: the film features many well-executed extreme close-ups of flowers, insects, and a snake. Similar to Lapiņš's daughter Gita in *Ak, vasariņa*, the children's interaction with nature is communicated via many instances of continuous editing, and these episodes form a coherent narrative. Furthermore, the Jansons take the narrativization of the children's interaction with nature even further and use skilful editing to generate *mise en phase*. According to Odin, *mise en phase* implies the following mechanism: 'at every major stage in the story being told, the film



produces a relationship between itself and the spectator (an affective positioning of the latter) which is homologous with the relationships occurring in the diegesis'.<sup>219</sup> Shand unpacks this as the 'alignment of the filmic relations to the diegetic relations in such a way that the spectator is made to "resonate" to the rhythm of the events told', and explains that this describes the way fiction films draw the spectator in as their events unfold and he or she becomes 'aligned' or identified with the characters.<sup>220</sup>

In *Mazie džungli*, the *mise en phase* occurs in the segment with the snake, during which the Jansons use a recognizable technique of editing widely used in thriller and horror films. As the children carry on with their exploration of the forest's wildlife, all of a sudden the viewer is presented with a close-up of a snake approaching the camera. The film then cuts to a medium long shot of the children being unaware of the snake as they collect wild blueberries in a glass jar, and then cuts again to show the snake getting closer, and so on. The climax of the sequence is communicated with a close-up of the blueberry jar being knocked down as the blueberries spill onto the ground, followed by a long shot of the children running away. Thus, despite the fact that the film's simple plot is in all probability based on the reality of the Jansons family life (spending time in the lap of nature with their children), the filmmakers decided to craft it as a fictional narrative that acts in accordance with certain spectatorship expectations and elicits an emotional reaction, i.e., concern or even fear for the characters on the part of the external spectator, who lacks the personal connection to the Jansons family. At the same time, the spectator does not experience 'real' or serious concern for the Jansons' children, due to the operation of fictivization at work in *Mazie džungli*: thus, while the enunciator of the film is modalized as fictive, the addressee comprehends the segment

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<sup>219</sup> Odin, 'A Semio-Pragmatic Approach to the Documentary Film', p. 219.

<sup>220</sup> Shand, 'Introduction: Ambitions and Arguments', p. 5.

with the snake in terms of 'non-deceptive pretense', to use Buckland's formulation.<sup>221</sup>

In this regard, the Jansons' family film entitled *Tā mēs dzīvojam (ar spēles elementiem)* (This is How We Live (With Game Elements)) is even more curious. Interestingly, the word 'spēle' in the Latvian language can also mean acting ('spēlfilma' is fiction-film in Latvian). Thus, as the title suggests, this film is a fictionalized account of everyday life in the Jansons household. The film begins with footage of the filmmakers' two daughters playing outside on a winter's day: the girls are shown sledging and throwing snowballs. In the same manner as Lapiņš's *Ak, vasariņa, mīļa vasariņa*, such a setting and subject-matter signal the film's belonging to the conventional kind of home movie as described by Chalfen. At first sight, thematically, it falls within the category of the vacation and local-activity film, and performs documentary, hedonistic, and aide-mémoire functions. Very rapidly, however, the elements that do not correspond straightforwardly with the conventional expectation of a home movie reveal themselves in the film. As the younger daughter climbs a tree and shakes its branches, the film cuts to a close-up of the older daughter saying something inaudible, while frowning slightly and shaking her head.<sup>222</sup> This is followed by the shot of the younger daughter getting down from the tree. After this, the girls share a cookie: as one of them takes a bite and extends her arm, holding a cookie, to the left-hand side of the frame, the film cuts to a medium close-up of the other girl extending her arm to the right-hand side of the frame and taking the cookie from her sister's hand. Basic scripting, planning, and directing, as well as the use of continuous editing creates continuous linear temporality in these episodes. In addition to this, the

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<sup>221</sup> Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, p. 96.

<sup>222</sup> Like most Soviet Latvian amateur films, *Tā mēs dzīvojam* does not feature synchronously recorded dialogue, instead, music and sound effects were used to create the audio track for the film.

filmmakers adhere to the codes of construction of cinematic space, thus generating spatial determinacy and coherence.

The rest of the film unfolds at home, and the family's younger daughter becomes the driving force of the plot. The Jansons' family home becomes a kind of playground for her, as she sets out on a journey around the flat, eager to find a playmate among the members of her family. This results in her disrupting whatever her family are doing, and getting scolded. For instance, her father Imants is editing a film in his room, and when he is distracted, the girl uses his film strip as a gymnastics ribbon; the father is not amused by this and punishes the child. As in *Mazie džungli*, the fictional world of the film and the events that unfold in it are clearly based on the household environment of the Jansons family and the reality of their family life. Although based on real life, all the film's episodes are staged for the most part and edited to form a coherent narrative. This becomes obvious in the moments when the child is scolded or punished: both parents are overly harsh with their daughter, and even employ corporal punishment. Besides the fact that the child is visibly enjoying the whole process and does not appear to be upset with her parents, this kind of behaviour typically would not be caught on camera or included in a family film, which, despite its artistic ambitions in some cases, is ultimately a document created with an intention to act as an aide-mémoire and to perform a hedonistic function within a family. Both parents of the girl, although based on their real selves (the sequence showing the editing of a film obviously alludes to Imants Jansons's favourite hobby), are presented as fictional characters who are busy, a little self-involved, and unable to relate to the girl's playful mood. At some point during the episodes in which the girl attempts to attract their parents' attention and is rejected, *mise en phase* occurs and an emotional reaction in the form of pity and compassion is elicited on the part of the outside spectator in relation to the young girl. As in *Mazie džungli*, the spectator does not, however, conclude that the Jansons' daughter is a neglected child, and perceives her as a fictional character too.

In the last part of the film, after the girl disturbs her older sister, they fight but eventually make up, spending time together and engaging in a variety of

activities: looking at a picture book about breeds of dog, feeding a pet pigeon, and baking a cake for the International Women's Day celebration. Later, the whole family is shown engaging in the celebration, as the girls present the cake to their mother, and Imants appears in the shot congratulating and giving presents to his wife and daughters. It is difficult to determine to what extent these episodes towards the end of the film (especially the celebration sequence) are staged, since these activities at the time were in all probability a common occurrence in the Jansons family, as well as in many other Soviet families. As in the case of the film's opening sequence (the two daughters playing outside), these events could have taken place in the way in which they are portrayed. However, the skilful use of a variety of cinematic techniques, such as careful framing, insert of close-ups, and overall continuous editing implies that *Tā mēs dzīvojam* is the product of planning, preparation, and a creative approach to storytelling. In addition to this, the film is enlivened with another clearly fictional episode, in which the girls show each other tricks: in this segment, the Jansons use simple trick photography to make objects appear and disappear in the girls' hands. As with *Mazie džungļi*, it seems that the Jansons approached amateur filmmaking as a family activity that can be fun for everyone involved, but at the same time wished to give their family films an artistic twist, and did not hesitate to flaunt their filmmaking skills, including that of special effects, in all probability gained as part of their work at the club.



7 Still from *Tā mēs dzīvojam*

What ultimately prompts the spectator to read *Mazie džungli* and *Tā mēs dzīvojam* as fictional narratives, and sets these films apart from the other examples discussed as part of this chapter, is the fact that these films manifest the construction of ‘an absent Enunciator who functions as the fictive origin’, to use Odin’s formulation.<sup>223</sup> Odin cites the construction of an absent Enunciator as another operation crucial for creating and perceiving a film text as a work of fiction. According to the author, it manifests itself when ‘the presence of the Enunciator is both indicated and effaced in such a way that the spectator, although knowing very well that an Enunciator does exist may, however, believe that the world and events that are shown to him exist in themselves’.<sup>224</sup> Here, Odin elaborates upon the widespread application of linguistic categories (mostly derived from Émile Benveniste’s work) to film.

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<sup>223</sup> Odin, ‘A Semio-Pragmatic Approach to the Documentary Film’, p. 229.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 228–29.

In his monograph *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell identified the pairing of *énoncé/énonciation* and the distinction between *histoire* and *discours*, all borrowed from Benveniste's work in the field of linguistics, and regarded by many film scholars and thinkers, including Christian Metz, as crucial for film theory and the study of film narration in particular.<sup>225</sup> As summarized by Bordwell, *énoncé* (the utterance) is 'a stretch of text, a string of words, phrases, or sentences linked by principles of coherence and perceived as constituting a whole', whereas *énonciation* (enunciation) is 'the general process that creates the utterance', which embraces 'the whole communicative process—act, context, and linguistic forms', as well as the speaker and the listener of the utterance.<sup>226</sup> Some utterances bear more traces of enunciation than others, and this is where the distinction between the *discours* and *histoire* occurs: the mode of enunciation that 'signals the presence of a speaker, listener, and speech context' is defined by Benveniste as *discours*, whereas 'the mode which omits strong enunciative marks is identified as *histoire*'.<sup>227</sup> Applying Benveniste's concepts to film, Metz contends that, despite the fact that 'the traditional film is presented as story [*histoire*]', cinema operates as discourse, or *discours*, by virtue of 'the film-maker's intentions, the influence he wields over the general public, etc.; but the basic characteristic of this kind of discourse, and the very principle of its effectiveness as a discourse, is precisely that it obliterates all traces of the enunciation, and masquerades as story'.<sup>228</sup>

To elaborate further, Odin compares the operations at work in the fictional and documentary modes. According to the author, 'documentary is compatible with

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<sup>225</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 21–26.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. by Celia Britton and others (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 91.

the majority of the operations that intervene in the process of fictionalization'.<sup>229</sup> Most documentaries 'construct a world (a diegesis) and comply with the rules of narrative structuration'; some even employ the operation of *mise en phase* to involve the spectator in the events portrayed on screen.<sup>230</sup> Apart from this, Odin notes that 'the process that constructs an absent Enunciator is itself very frequent in the documentary': the documentary movements, such as direct cinema, or cinéma-vérité 'strive to give us a view of the things of the world as if there were no intermediaries, as if the world were there in front of us instead of the screen'.<sup>231</sup> However, Odin emphasizes that 'to make or read a film in a documentary perspective is always to construct an Enunciator who functions as a *real* origin'; in his view 'it is this operation that founds the process of *documentarization*'.<sup>232</sup> It is only when 'the (absent) Enunciator functions as a fictive origin', which is to say, 'accomplishes the act of enunciation' without 'the obligation to guarantee the truth of what is articulated, to provide proof if requested, to commit himself personally to this truth', that the space of communication is created and the fictional mode is employed in the making and reading of a film.<sup>233</sup>

Whereas Lapiņš evidently modalized himself as the real Enunciator of his family films, with the result that the addressee (be it a family member or an outside spectator) must take seriously what is articulated on screen, the Jansons chose to construct *Mazie džungli* and *Tā mēs dzīvojam* as fictional narratives (although based on the reality of their family life) by modalizing themselves as fictive Enunciators. As has been discussed above, they employed a variety of filmmaking techniques in such a way as to signal to the

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<sup>229</sup> Odin, 'A Semio-Pragmatic Approach to the Documentary Film', p. 229.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

viewer that he or she does not need to take the meanings and affects articulated in the film as real. Aside from this, the events portrayed in the two films by the Jansons are presented in a manner that obliterates all traces of enunciation and prompt the spectator to perceive them as existing by themselves. This is particularly evident in *Tā mēs dzīvojam*: the presence of the Enunciator(s) is effaced by the fact that both filmmakers appear onscreen, playing the roles of inattentive parents.

The practice of introducing the elements of fiction into family recordings can be viewed as an attempt to craft family stories in accordance with the practices developed as part of the Soviet amateur filmmaking culture. In an environment that encouraged outside-the-home socialization through amateur artistic activities, it is only natural that amateur filmmakers interested in the themes of family and domesticity were inspired to plan, script, edit as well as narrativize and fictionalize their family recordings, and thus to make the viewing experience more agreeable for the potential outside spectator. Family films such as those of the Jansons are therefore a good illustration of the overall fluidity and multiplicity of Soviet amateur filmmaking practices across the categories of the individual, domestic, and club-based amateur cinema. Another example of this crossover will be briefly discussed below by examining a film created by the artistic duo of amateur filmmakers Regina Šulca and Inga Meiere. If the Jansons chose to fictionalize aspects of their own family life, Šulca and Meiere dramatized the domestic sphere and its emotional aspect in general, and used it as a basis for creating fully-fledged fictional narratives that explore parent-child relationships, often involving their family members as actors.

Šulca and Meiere met at filmmaking courses for amateur filmmakers organized in Riga by Herberts Dzelme in the late 1950s. They first worked together independently, then at the filmmaking collective of the Riga Young Technicians' Station, joining the Prizma studio in 1968.<sup>234</sup> Beginning with their debut film *Vanadzīņš* (Fisherman's Son), based on a short story by Vilis Lācis

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<sup>234</sup> Šulca, interview.



and produced in 1961 under the supervision of Riga Film Studio's film director Aloīzs Brenčs, the two filmmakers made many amateur fiction-films on the themes of family, children, teenagers, and parent-child relationships into the mid-1980s. The Second World War was also common motif in Šulca's and Meiere's films; again, the filmmakers often took the creative decision to depict the horrors of the war as seen through the eyes of children. Šulca's and Meiere's films cannot be conveniently labelled as family films. For the most part they can be described as short fiction-films in the genre of domestic drama with a social perspective, and are often adaptations of short stories by contemporary Soviet authors. However, due to such a thematic focus, and the fact that Šulca frequently involved her own child in the filmmaking process, the duo's films will be characterized here as yet another example of the crossover between familial/domestic filmmaking practices and collective, club-based, and socially-oriented amateur filmmaking practices.

A common theme explored by Šulca and Meiere in their films are the various forms of parental neglect towards children; such is the case of *Kas? Kā? Kāpēc?* (What? How? Why?, 1974). *Kas? Kā? Kāpēc?* consists of three separate segments, all addressing the issue of parental inattention towards children and the lack of emotional connection in parent-child relationships. The film competed in the Sixth Family Film Competition organized by LKAB in 1975, and was awarded second place in the 16mm category.<sup>235</sup> Despite not conforming to the category of family film, and being a fictional narrative about family issues with a socially conscious dimension, *Kas? Kā? Kāpēc?* was in line with the festival's provision referred to earlier in this chapter, which put strong emphasis on the necessity to expand the conventional practice of domestic amateur filmmaking, as well as to introduce social purpose and perspective into family narratives. The film's three segments are named after the children who appear in them: 'Eva', 'Jana', and 'Uga'.<sup>236</sup> In 'Eva', a little girl

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<sup>235</sup> '5., 6., 7., 8. Ģimenes filmām veltītā kinoamatieru filmu konkursa dokumenti', p. 29.

<sup>236</sup> Šulca, interview.

craves spending time with her mother, who prefers to spend time in front of a mirror. In the segment 'Jana', a little girl wants to play with her father, while he ignores her and keeps reading a magazine. In 'Uga', a little boy is eager to go to a toy shop with his mother, but she is late and the trip is cancelled. Interestingly, the 'Eva' episode features Šulca's daughter, Eva Šulca, whereas the children of Šulca's acquaintances star in the other two segments.<sup>237</sup> Šulca explains:

Where would we find actors for our fiction films? Sometimes we would involve people 'off the street', but in general these were either the children of Inga's relatives, or my daughter. Later I would even film my grandchildren. [...] Everyone used to do this, everyone involved their friends and relatives and used their surroundings for making films.<sup>238</sup>

It was Šulca's and Meiere's specialized thematic focus and limited resources that prompted the filmmakers to involve their relatives in the filmmaking process, rather than the desire to document and preserve the episodes of their family life, characteristic for the home mode of amateur filmmaking. Interestingly, Šulca observed that, for her, her fiction films performed the conventional home-movie functions just as well. She claims: 'I did not have the time [to film my daughter at home], but every year she appeared in some film of mine, and as a result I could see how she had grown'.<sup>239</sup> Throughout their filmography, Šulca and Meiere successfully merged their interest in the themes of domesticity and family with fulfilling the demand for social purpose and

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> 'Bet mūsu spēlfilmām — nu kur mēs ņemsim aktierus? Bija tā, ka mēs kaut kādu no ielas uzrunājām, bet pamatā visi ir vai nu Ingas radu bērni, vai manēja, pēc meitas es savus mazbērnus vēl filmējusi. [...] To darīja visi, visi izmantoja savus tuviniekus un to, kas viņiem apkārt bija.' Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> 'Man nebija laika [filmēt savu meitu mājās], bet katru gadu viņa man bija kādā filmā, un rezultātā es jau redzu, kā viņa ir izaugusi.' Ibid.

perspective in amateur films articulated by the Soviet ideological establishment.

Taking everything into account, the case studies discussed in this chapter pose challenges to the tendency to regard family films as anthropological documents that have little artistic motivation and commitment to filmmaking conventions. They illustrate the ways in which amateur filmmakers at times effectively combined aesthetic and thematic elements, dictated by the organized amateur filmmaking culture in the Soviet Union, with domestic amateur filmmaking practices. The case studies presented as part of this chapter allowed for addressing the multiplicity and fluidity of familial filmmaking practices in Soviet Latvia and exploring their relationship with collective forms of amateur filmmaking. The family film examples analysed here began to contest the accepted notion of amateur filmmaking being practised in the private sphere and constituted cases of amateur filmmakers seeking to incorporate elements of their private, domestic realm into the state-supported structures of the amateur filmmaking movement. Examining some of the films as part of this chapter, we have begun to see the ways in which the amateur-film medium was exploited to create narratives that offer an alternative interpretation of historical events based on the personal and local experiences. The next chapter will build upon these considerations and explore the ways in which amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia became a platform for creating alternative political, social, and cultural meanings, such as the prospects for Latvian national identity development and national heritage preservation, thus introducing new and unanticipated meanings into the dominant culture.

### Chapter 3 Tourism, Nature, and Ethno-nationalism: Constructing National Identity through Amateur Cinema

Alongside family films, travel or tourism films are often characterized as a key sub-genre of amateur-film production. As observed by a newspaper reporter in 1968, in Soviet Latvia ‘tourism and panoramic films’ dominated amateur-film festival screens during the first decade of the organized amateur filmmaking movement, perhaps due to the fact that ‘one of the pioneers of Latvian cine-amateurism, Kārlis Tomariņš, was an avid tourist’, or because ‘every tourist, who purchased a not-yet-so-popular amateur camera in those days, gave it its baptism of fire right on his next trip’.<sup>240</sup> This chapter discusses the cine-amateur affinity for making films about travelling and explores the ways in which hobbies and leisure activities — travelling and tourism in particular — intersected with amateur filmmaking in the socialist context. The themes discussed in this chapter to a greater or lesser extent will be brought together by the focus on the amateur-film studio of the Latvian Academy of Sciences (Latvijas Zinātņu akadēmija) and the role it played in the development of the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement. The first decade of the studio’s output was mainly characterized by the genre of tourism film. With time, however, the support and the technical capital of the Academy enabled enthusiasts to refine their filmmaking skills; in addition to this, its stimulating environment as a research institute, combined with the relative freedom permitted by the amateur status of the Academy’s studio, prompted them to begin producing formally inventive and thematically diverse content.

The focus of this chapter will be the films created by Zigurds Vidiņš, one of the most prominent amateur filmmakers of the Academy’s studio. Drawing upon Vidiņš’s filmography as a case study, this chapter will explore the ways in which the genre of tourism films within the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking practice evolved and began to exhibit a deeper thematic significance by addressing such themes as local environmental destruction, Latvian ethnic

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<sup>240</sup> R. Riepša, ‘Mazais kino’, *Padomju Jaunatne*, 8 May 1968, p. 4.

history and culture, and even growing national discontent. This will permit an examination of the ways in which amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia became a platform for creating alternative political, social, and cultural meanings, such as, for example, the prospects for Latvian national identity development and national heritage preservation. To expand upon the relationship between tourism, amateur cinema, and the growing national discontent in Soviet Latvia, a section of this chapter will be devoted to Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaker and historian Ingvars Leitis and the politically subversive ethnographic documentaries that he produced during his trips to Siberia. Leitis's films illustrate the political uses of amateur cinema in Soviet Latvia, and demonstrate the ways in which, on occasion, amateur filmmakers articulated and promoted ideologies that conflicted with those of the state. In addition to this, the case studies presented as part of this chapter offer an opportunity to explore the relationships between amateur filmmaking studios, the creative intelligentsia, and non-governmental civil-society organizations in Latvia during the late-Soviet era.

In line with the arguments presented as part of the previous chapter, amateur-film production in Soviet Latvia will be viewed as a cinematic public space that existed on the margins of the official sphere or realm, as defined by Shlapentokh and Garcelon.<sup>241</sup> This liminal public sphere, to use Simonyi's formulation, embodied a variety of formal and informal interactions, including the creation and consumption of cultural production that, although officially sanctioned and incorporated into official state structures, nevertheless at times tested its boundaries by presenting alternative political, social, and cultural meanings. In order to examine the process of creating meanings that did not coincide with the dominant ideological discourse, this chapter will draw on Yurchak's revision of the concept of 'authoritative discourse' as borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin. Yurchak contends that after the Stalinist era the Soviet regime began to rely on an increasingly ossified system of representations — as he

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<sup>241</sup> Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People*, pp. 3–4. Garcelon, 'The Shadow of the Leviathan', p. 317.

writes: 'During the late Soviet period, the form of ideological representations — documents, speeches, ritualized practices, slogans, posters, monuments, and urban visual propaganda — became increasingly normalized, ubiquitous, and predictable'.<sup>242</sup> Borrowing Bakhtin's idea of *avtoritetnoe slovo*, Yurchak calls this newly normalized Soviet ideological discourse 'authoritative discourse'.<sup>243</sup> According to Bakhtin, such discourse has two properties. Firstly, it is sharply defined in relation to other discourses around it, often by the recognizably special script in which it is coded. Secondly, its coexisting discourses refer to and subsume themselves to it without ever being able to change or penetrate it.<sup>244</sup> Yurchak maintains that, on the one hand, this situation limited the emergence of other forms of representation, lending an air of immutability to the Soviet regime. On the other hand, however, the authoritative discourse no longer functioned at the level of meaning and began to be reproduced at the level of form, a process which Yurchak designates as 'performative shift'.<sup>245</sup> He argues that reproduction of the forms of authoritative discourse 'enabled people to engage in new, unanticipated meanings, aspects of everyday life, interests, and activities, which [...] were not necessarily determined by the ideological constative meanings of authoritative discourse'.<sup>246</sup>

According to Yurchak, this performative shift occurred in the 1950s and 1960s — thus coinciding with the formative years of the organized amateur filmmaking movement across the Soviet Union — and over the next decades prompted Soviet people 'to develop a complexly differentiating relationship to

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<sup>242</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 14.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15 & 24–26.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

ideological meanings, norms, and values'.<sup>247</sup> The present chapter attempts to demonstrate that amateur filmmaking sometimes also acted as a platform for expressing such a differentiating relationship and transmitting meanings that were not determined by the dominant ideological discourse. Yurchak chose not to include specific case studies from the Soviet satellite states, thus largely setting aside the complex socio-political relationship between the centre and peripheries of the Soviet Union, one that inevitably influenced the relationships of Soviet people living in the satellite states with the authoritative discourse. By testing some of Yurchak's theoretical frameworks against case studies from the Latvian SSR, this chapter attempts to expand upon our understanding of the alternative types of discourse, knowledge, and practices that emerged in the period of late Socialism.

Yurchak argues that, ultimately, it was the Soviet state that set 'the particular conditions of production and circulation of authoritative discourse' by using a variety of censorship mechanisms, thus 'having hegemonic power' over a 'representation of reality formulated in that discourse' and 'guaranteeing that any alternative representation or counter-representation would not acquire the same widely circulating status as a shared "public" discourse'.<sup>248</sup> At the same time, many scholars note that, having missed the chance to gain political autonomy with the onset of Khrushchev's 'Thaw' in the late 1950s, the Baltic states nevertheless succeeded in becoming more independent from the centre in the sphere of culture.<sup>249</sup> Since various control mechanisms were still imposed on official cultural output, examining the cultural exchanges that occurred on the margins of the public sphere — as well as on the peripheries

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>249</sup> For more detailed account on this dynamic, see Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence, 1940–1990* (London: Hurst, 1993), pp. 131–79.

of the Soviet state — can reveal a whole new set of alternative representations and interpretations of the dominant ideological discourse.

Yurchak’s discussion of the late-Soviet system’s internal displacements within various discursive formations is tightly linked with the conceptual models of the *svoi* sociality and the living *vne*. Yurchak describes ‘living *vnye*’, otherwise also known as ‘internal emigration’, as a certain relationship to reality and as ‘a condition of being simultaneously inside and outside of some context—such as, being within a context while remaining oblivious of it, imagining yourself elsewhere, or being inside your own mind’.<sup>250</sup> This condition may also imply ‘being simultaneously a part of the system and yet not following certain of its parameters’.<sup>251</sup> Yurchak observes that the era of late Socialism became characterized by various styles of living that can be characterized as being *vne*. In turn, these styles of living generated ‘multiple new temporalities, spatialities, social relations, and meanings that were not necessarily anticipated or controlled by the state, although they were fully made possible by it’.<sup>252</sup>

The author’s definition of living *vne* is closely linked with the concept of *svoi* (‘ours’ or ‘those who belong to our circle’). Yurchak introduces the concept when discussing the urban cultural milieu that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. According to Yurchak, ‘*svoi* was a kind of sociality that differed from those represented in authoritative discourse as the “Soviet people,” “Soviet toilers,” and so forth’.<sup>253</sup> These milieux were based on the networks of friends, common interests, shared intellectual pursuits, and practices of communication. The members of these milieux ‘thought of themselves as living

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<sup>250</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, pp. 127–28.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.



in a reality “different” from the “ordinary” Soviet world’.<sup>254</sup> At the same time, such networks were ‘never completely bounded and isolated, and were always in the process of emergence and change, with an open-ended and somewhat shifting membership’.<sup>255</sup> Within these socialities, ‘individual identities, collectivities, relations, and pursuits were shaped and normalized’.<sup>256</sup> In line with the leitmotif of his monograph, the author maintains that the meaning of this sociality should not be interpreted using binary schemes of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, ‘common people’ versus ‘the state’, or even activists versus dissidents, which was commonly employed in many analyses of Soviet society. Instead, the nature of this sociality should be understood based on its relationship towards authoritative discourse.<sup>257</sup>

According to Yurchak, Soviet people’s participation in the reproduction of authoritative discourse on the level of form enabled the widespread appearance of the communities of *svoi* practising styles of living *vne*, whereas the belonging to these communities and interactions within them prompted further reproduction of authoritative discourse and transformation of meanings associated with it.<sup>258</sup> In the course of this chapter Yurchak’s conceptual model of *svoi* will be evoked when analysing the socialities that formed as part of amateur filmmaking culture in Soviet Latvia in general, and around the institution of the Academy of Sciences of Latvian SSR, including its amateur

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>258</sup> Aleksei Yurchak, *Eto bylo navsegda, poka ne konchilos’: Poslednee sovetskoe pokolenie* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014), p. 233. In addition to the original English version of Yurchak’s monograph, its Russian version, revised and expanded by the author, is cited in this thesis when the English version is found lacking.

filmmaking studio, in particular. Moreover, by analysing a number of amateur films and their production contexts, this chapter seeks to explore the nature of the transformations of the meanings associated with the authoritative discourse that originated within these communities. Yurchak notes that, paradoxically, these forms of relating to the system's discourse sometimes emerged in groups that occupied privileged social positions, as he writes: 'even milieus of elite Soviet citizens that were institutionalized, funded, and afforded privileges and high symbolic capital by the state created styles of living *vnye*, which the system enabled'.<sup>259</sup> As examples of such privileged milieus, Yurchak mentions engineers, students, and scientists, in particular theoretical physicists, who 'developed a culture of being *vnye* enabled by the state's promotion of the values of science and knowledge'.<sup>260</sup> In the remainder of this chapter it will be demonstrated that the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR and the collectivities that formed around it, be it its academic communities, tourist groups, or amateur filmmakers, became a hotbed of alternative forms of interacting with the dominant ideological discourse and interpolating it with new meanings.

The Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR was founded in February 1946 on the crest of Soviet euphoria after the victory in the Second World War, when the prestige and importance of science — especially exact sciences — rapidly grew in Soviet ideological discourse primarily with regard to the development of nuclear weapons and, later, missiles.<sup>261</sup> Apart from this, the establishment of the Academies of Sciences in all three Baltic SSRs was in part an attempt to legitimize the incorporation of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia into the

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<sup>259</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 139.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Jānis Strādiņš, 'Latvijas Zinātņu akadēmijas pretrunīgā vēsture un nākotnes skatījums', *Zinātnes vēstnesis*, 4 (2006) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20190416151903/http://www.lza.lv/ZV/zv06040.0.htm#3>> [accessed 8 November 2020] (para. 17 of 41).

USSR.<sup>262</sup> As observed by Jānis Strādiņš, a Latvian academic, historian of science, and president of the Latvian Academy of Sciences between 1998 and 2004, the nature of the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR as an institution was to some extent contradictory and ambivalent.<sup>263</sup> In his view, the Academy 'was established as one of the instruments of totalitarian power, as an elite organization linked to the higher power structures, and was strictly controlled by Moscow (The Academy of Sciences of the USSR)'; furthermore 'its activities were largely planned top-to-bottom and imparted with content that primarily served the Soviet empire's, and not as much Latvia's interests'.<sup>264</sup> Despite this, paradoxically, Stradiņš observes that the first academics and employees of the Academy were 'mostly Latvian patriots' who were in the vanguard of restoring and transforming life in Latvia, which had been devastated by the war, by implementing the tactics of 'camouflaged resistance', notwithstanding the Stalinist dogmas that had been imposed and the unequivocal integration of the Baltic States into the USSR.<sup>265</sup>

As examples, Strādiņš mentions the brave efforts of the linguist Jānis Endzelīns to preserve and promote the Latvian language in the face of Russianization, and agronomist Paulis Lejiņš's advocacy of the development of Latvian agriculture via competition between the *kolkhozy*, or collective farms, and individual farming households.<sup>266</sup> Such efforts were often stifled by

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<sup>262</sup> The Academy of Sciences of the Lithuanian SSR was established in 1941, whereas the Estonian National Academy of Sciences emerged in 1938 as a scientists' association. It was dissolved in 1940 as a result of Soviet occupation and re-established in 1945 as the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR. Ibid., para. 18 of 41.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., para. 22 of 41.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., para. 23 of 41.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

means of dismissals or forced resignations, the banning of certain academics from conducting research, and occasional arrests. Based on Strādiņš's observations, however, it can be argued that the Academy nevertheless remained a forum for alternative forms of relating to the system's discourse throughout the Soviet era. With the onset of *perestroika*, many of its affiliated academics became associated with the national revival movement through various political actions and public debate, and certain members of the Academy played an active role in the creation of the Popular Front of Latvia (Latvijas Tautas fronte, LTF) in 1988, which eventually led to Latvia restoring its independence from the Soviet Union in May 1991.<sup>267</sup>

### **Cine-tourism at the Academy**

Amateur filmmaking at the Latvian Academy of Sciences dates back to the beginning of the 1960s, when a group of film enthusiasts and active nautical tourists employed at the Academy began to create films about their tourist activities, mainly diving, boating, and sailing, and to showcase them at amateur-film festivals. Among the first film enthusiasts at the Academy were the brothers Jānis Geistarts and Ilmārs Geistarts, who in 1963 experimented with shooting underwater. These experiments resulted in a film *Zem ūdeņu spoguļiem* (Under the Water Mirrors), which was presented at the Sixth Republican amateur-film festival in 1964.<sup>268</sup> Soon after, Jānis assumed the position of camera operator at the Riga Film Studio. He worked on a number of short documentary films and *kinozhurnaly*, or newsreels, including, for instance, many issues of the *Padomju Latvija* (Soviet Latvia) newsreel, while Ilmārs continued to foster amateur filmmaking activities at the Academy. The Academy of Sciences amateur filmmaking collective was awarded the status

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., para. 37 of 41.

<sup>268</sup> 'Zinātņu Akadēmijas tautas kinostudijas albums', pp. 1 & 26.

of studio in 1971 and was headed by Ilmārs. In 1973 it was granted the status of People's Film Studio.<sup>269</sup>

The first decade of the Academy's amateur-film studio's production was dominated by tourism films, i.e., filmic documentation of the act of travelling for the purposes of recreation, visiting places of interest, and engaging in sports. The titles found in the studio's filmography in 1962–72 speak for themselves: *Brauciens pa Japānu* (A Journey through Japan, 1962, directed by V. Baumgards); *Mēs aizējam zem līmeņa* (We Go Below the Water Line, 1964, directed by Ilmārs Geistarts and Jānis Geistarts); *Brauca, ēda, sviedrus lēja* (Travelled, Ate, Sweated Profusely, 1966, directed by Ilmārs Geistarts and Jānis Vilciņš); *Aiz Urāla akmens* (Across the Stones of the Urals, 1968, directed by Ilmārs Geistarts, Jānis Vilciņš, and Zigurds Vidiņš); *Ceļi tāles lūdz* (Far-away Paths are Calling, 1970, directed by Zigurds Vidiņš); and *Dzīve ir ceļš* (Life is a Road, 1972, directed by Ilmārs Geistarts, Zigurds Vidiņš, and Vilmārs Dumburs).<sup>270</sup> Naturally, an affinity for making films about travelling is found not only among Academy of Sciences amateur filmmakers during that decade. The aforementioned Pēteris Miežītis often documented his visits to natural monuments and places of interest across Latvia in the 1930s and 1940s, countless individual and club filmmakers filmed their voyages to the Soviet republics and Eastern-bloc countries, and, when Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* created more opportunities for travelling to the capitalist West, many film enthusiasts took their cameras on their first trips to the US and West Germany.

In all probability, tourism film was the 'go-to' genre for the first generation of amateur filmmakers in Soviet Latvia due to certain social and technological developments that occurred in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s. From the late 1950s onwards, for example, the Soviet Union witnessed the mass production of lightweight and easy-to-use amateur film cameras

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<sup>269</sup> Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 478.

<sup>270</sup> 'Zinātņu Akadēmijas tautas kinostudijas albums', pp. 26–28.

(both 8mm and 16mm); this understandably both encouraged the growth of the amateur filmmaking scene and increased the mobility of filmmaking enthusiasts. At the same time, the 1960s heralded the beginning of the rapid growth and institutionalization of Soviet tourism. According to Zhanna Assipova and Lynn Minnaert, 'from a marginal leisure pursuit, it transformed into an activity that was widespread and accessible to large sections of the population', primarily due to 'the wide range of tourism participation options' that became available to citizens 'via various councils and voucher systems'.<sup>271</sup> This is further elaborated upon by Diane P. Koenker, who writes that 'In the 1960s [tourism] finally shed its reputation as a poor cousin of the health spa and became an increasingly attractive form of active vacation, [...] offering new forms of mobility and new destinations to discover'.<sup>272</sup> Tourist routes and destinations provided an exciting backdrop for amateur film — picturesque and impossible to recreate back home. Taking the combination of these factors into consideration, it is unsurprising that travel films became a key sub-genre of amateur non-fiction film production in the early days of the organized amateur filmmaking movement in the Soviet Union, including in Latvia.

In general, there was an extensive crossover between a variety of hobbies and leisure activities and amateur filmmaking — a leisure activity of its own — during the late-Soviet era. As amateur filmmaking itself was something to be preoccupied with during one's free time, other leisure activities were often captured on film. For instance, filmmakers belonging to the amateur-film studio Fokuss in Jelgava made a number of films about antique automobile

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<sup>271</sup> Zhanna Assipova and Lynn Minnaert, 'Tourists of the world, unite! The interpretation and facilitation of tourism towards the end of the Soviet Union (1962–1990)', *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure & Events*, 6.3 (2014), 215–30 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2014.907300>> (pp. 215–18).

<sup>272</sup> Diane P. Koenker, *Club Red: Vacation Travel and the Soviet Dream* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 211.

restoration and collection. This became a popular leisure activity in Jelgava and across Latvia, leading to the foundation of the Classic Automobile Club in 1972, which began organizing nationwide shows and rallies. *Gadiem cauri* (Through the Years, 1978), for example, documents meeting that year of Jelgava's antique automobile collectors and includes footage of automobile renovation and maintenance processes; and *Tuvākais draugs* (The Closest Friend, 1978) shows a local antique automobile and motorcycle rally featuring a celebratory parade and races. Hobbies and leisure activities as diverse as fishing, motorcycling, and basket-weaving are common subjects of the amateur films held in the LVKFFDA collection and privately.

Amateur films about various pastimes, including tourism, can be viewed as testimonies to the growing consumer culture resulting from the post-war transition from a producer to consumer society in the Soviet Union, as well as a variety of social changes, such as the introduction of a shorter working week and increasing leisure hours. As the consumer culture, including leisure consumption, began to grow from the late 1950s onward, however, the Soviet authorities attempted to institutionalize certain leisure pursuits. White observes that, despite the fact that 'after the Stalinist period, cultural enlightenment lost its compulsory character', in the USSR 'totalist aspirations to "absorb" the population's time continued to be seriously discussed'.<sup>273</sup> As pointed out by Christian Noack, through the agency of Khrushchev's social reforms, 'leisure emerged as a broader social phenomenon and, subsequently, as a significant scientific issue'; sociological inquiries into Soviet citizens' leisure practices flourished in the 1960s and stimulated public debates 'over ideological guidelines and scientific norms for a purposeful pursuit of leisure'.<sup>274</sup> As a

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<sup>273</sup> White, *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture*, p. 21.

<sup>274</sup> Christian Noack, 'Coping with the Tourist: Planned and "Wild" Mass Tourism on the Soviet Black Sea Coast', in *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, ed. by Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 281–304 (p. 289).

result, much of the public discourse on leisure and free time, as well as many state policies, became aimed at making leisure more rational, productive, social, and collective-based. As explained by James Riordan, leisure pursuits needed to be able to ‘enrich the individual so that he may enrich society’.<sup>275</sup>

The Soviet ideological stereotype that juxtaposed the idle bourgeois tourist with the proletarian tourist who travelled for the purposes of education, physical fitness, and developing a deeper love for the motherland dates back to the Stalin era, but persists virtually throughout the whole of the Soviet period.<sup>276</sup> Assipova and Minnaert observe that in the post-Stalin Soviet Union, tourism was still seen ‘as a policy measure to achieve a number of benefits for the population’, with the official role attributed to tourism being ‘distinctly functional: to improve health, inculcate patriotism, develop greater knowledge’.<sup>277</sup> Koenker also notes the blend of pleasure and purpose in Soviet vacation policy and practice, and observes that ‘the productive, medical side of vacations [...] remained strongly embedded in Soviet travel culture, and the balance between pleasure and purpose usually favored the latter’.<sup>278</sup>

With this in mind, a number of parallels between tourism and amateur filmmaking can be drawn. Like tourism, amateur filmmaking is often interpreted as a form of leisure pursuit, and its rise in the late 1950s is associated with the same economic and social changes brought by the process of de-Stalinization. In a similar manner, Soviet ideological discourse surrounding amateur filmmaking tended to vindicate its socially conscious uses. Furthermore, from the early 1960s onwards various institutions encouraged collective-based

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<sup>275</sup> James Riordan, ‘Leisure: The State and the Individual in the USSR’, *Leisure Studies*, 1.1 (1982), 65–79 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02614368200390061>> (p. 71).

<sup>276</sup> Noack, ‘Coping with the Tourist’, pp. 288–89.

<sup>277</sup> Assipova and Minnaert, ‘Tourists of the world, unite!’, p. 221.

<sup>278</sup> Koenker, *Club Red*, p. 4.



amateur filmmaking practices, promoted the creative and intellectual use of film, and provided training. Similar to amateur filmmaking clubs, tourist clubs assembled people with a passion for tourism and travel, and acted as organizational units for this popular leisure activity.<sup>279</sup> As has been established in the previous chapter, individual and domestic amateur filmmaking, like independent or 'wild' tourism, was often disfavoured.<sup>280</sup>

In connection with the resemblance between the ways in which tourism and amateur filmmaking were regulated, structured, and promoted by the Soviet state, it is useful to consider Yurchak's discussion of Claude Lefort's paradox within the context of a socialist state.<sup>281</sup> Yurchak finds that one of the central contradictions of socialism is a variation of what Lefort defined as a general paradox of a modern state's ideology: 'the split between ideological enunciation (which reflects the theoretical ideals of the Enlightenment) and ideological rule (manifest in the practical concerns of the modern state's political authority)'.<sup>282</sup> According to Yurchak:

In the society built on communist ideals, this paradox appeared through the announced objective of achieving the full liberation of the society and individual (building of communism, creation of the New Man) by means of subsuming that society and individual under full party control. The Soviet citizen was called upon to submit completely to party leadership, to cultivate a collectivist ethic, and repress individualism, while at the same time becoming an enlightened and independent-minded individual who pursues knowledge and is inquisitive and creative.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>280</sup> For discussion of 'wild' tourism, see Noack, 'Coping with the Tourist', pp. 281–304.

<sup>281</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, pp. 10–14.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

Yurchak notes that this paradox was particularly present in the form taken by ideological discourse and rituals in the period of late Socialism, but its repercussions also spread in other types of discourse, knowledge, and practices: scientific, artistic, and everyday, among others.<sup>284</sup> Here it can be argued that this paradox is observed in the Soviet ideological tenets on both tourism and amateur filmmaking, and it also informed the ways in which both leisure pursuits were practised by Soviet citizens. As established earlier, a Soviet tourist was expected to travel with the purpose of enhancing their sense of patriotism and replenishing their body in order to be able to overfulfil the work norms, while expanding knowledge, developing curiosity and scrutiny skills, and socializing with like-minded individuals. In turn, a filmmaking enthusiast had to work for the greater good of society and transmit socialist values in his films, while developing his technical skills and artistic vision, and applying critical thinking and creative treatment to his subjects. Resulting from these potentially contradictory ideological instructions, both practices of tourism and amateur filmmaking, while reflecting the theoretical dogmas of Enlightenment in their socialist interpretation, therefore at times unexpectedly became platforms for creating alternative cultural, social, and eventually political meanings, such as, for instance, the prospects for Latvian national heritage preservation and national identity development. The following section will focus on the case of the amateur tourism films created by Zigurds Vidiņš and demonstrate the ways in which consumer technologies like amateur film equipment, in combination with leisure pursuits such as tourism, were adopted as a tool for artistic expression and socio-political commentary and critique within the circles of the Academy of Sciences and beyond.

Now a prominent Latvian documentary filmmaker, Zigurds Vidiņš began his career at the Academy of Sciences amateur filmmaking collective. Having received radio-technical education in Leningrad in the late 1950s, Vidiņš gained a position at the Institute of Polymer Mechanics of the Latvian Academy of Sciences soon after its foundation in 1963. Because he had been keen on

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

photography since high school, Vidiņš took the view that 'cinema was the next big step', and in 1966 he joined the Academy of Sciences amateur filmmaking collective.<sup>285</sup> Being an active nautical tourist himself, he began contributing to the collective's archive of tourism films. In 1967, together with Ilmārs Geistarts, Jānis Vilciņš, and Andrejs Pētersons, Vidiņš created *Uzmanību, Arī-Burjē!* (Attention, Ari-Bur'e!, 1967). This film launched Vidiņš's filmmaking career and put the Academy of Sciences collective on the map of the international amateur filmmaking scene by getting a special mention at the UNICA festival in Luxembourg in 1969.<sup>286</sup>

The film is now considered to be lost. Based on Vidiņš's account and contemporary reviews, however, it is possible to establish that *Uzmanību, Arī-Burjē!* was a short colour film that showed the Academy of Sciences nautical tourist group (of which the co-authors were active members) rafting on the Sayan Oka river in Siberia. The title of the film refers to Ari-Bur'e, the river's 600-metre long and most dangerous cataract. The film earned a golden medal at the Tenth Republican amateur-film festival in 1968, ostensibly for '[...] the great camera work, courage, with which the film was created, and richness of colours'.<sup>287</sup> In his 1968 article on tourism films, R. Riepša observed that the genre of tourism film entertained audiences and the jury, and thus easily received the main awards in the early years of the amateur-film movement.<sup>288</sup> However, as the amateur film culture in the Latvian SSR evolved and amateur filmmakers began to explore 'serious social and universal themes', tourism films became less popular with audiences and were mostly noted by the jury

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<sup>285</sup> Vidiņš, interview.

<sup>286</sup> Inga Jēruma, 'Runa nav tikai par Luksemburgu...', *Padomju Jaunatne*, 27 December 1969, p. 4.

<sup>287</sup> '[...] par labu operatora darbu, drosmi, ar kādu filma uzņemta, par krāsu bagātību'. J. Zaķis, 'Latvijas kinoamatieru skatē', *Dzimtenes Balss*, 26 April 1968, p. 3.

<sup>288</sup> Riepša, 'Mazais kino', p. 4.

for their secondary elements, such as the use of music or colour.<sup>289</sup> Thus, according to the author, it was unexpected for a tourism film to earn the main festival award in 1968. Riepša explained this by contending that *Uzmanību, Arī-Burjē!* was a tourist film 'of a new quality', in which a rafting trip exposes 'raw emotion associated with the human disposition', thus the film 'from a factual outlook on nature, turns into a film about human beings' and their audacity in a testing battle against the element.<sup>290</sup> In the absence of the film itself, Riepša's account in combination with the film's proven festival success allows us to suspect that *Uzmanību, Arī-Burjē!* was the first attempt to give a more artistic treatment and greater thematic significance to the genre of tourism films at the Academy of Sciences.

Vidiņš was responsible for the film's camerawork and viewed its success in part as his personal achievement; on his own admission, he was greatly encouraged by it.<sup>291</sup> Around the same time, he began to work as a freelance correspondent for a highly popular television programme, *Klub kinoputeshestvii* (Cine-travelling Club), which was broadcast on Soviet central television from 1960 to 1991 and was aimed at popularization of tourism.<sup>292</sup> As Vidiņš improved his filmmaking skills at the Academy of Sciences, as well as on his freelance assignments, while remaining an avid tourist, he became interested in creating tourism films with more sophisticated storytelling, complex narrative structures, and deeper thematic significance. As he puts it himself, he wanted to add 'some dramatization' to his tourism films, and cites *Ejiet, stāviet* (Walk, Don't Walk, 1969, Zigurds Vidiņš, Noriņa Tomariņa, Ilmārs Geistarts) as his first experiment in this direction.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Vidiņš, interview.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

*Ejiet, stāviet* is a nine-minute long black-and-white film that features Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's music on the soundtrack. The film follows a group of tourists as they are about to raft down a fast-flowing river and plays with the symbol of a walk/don't walk traffic signal. At the outset of the film, we see the tourist group on the river bank in a state of tense apprehension. In a series of close-ups their faces are revealed to be aglow with nervous anticipation and etched with concern, as they observe the tumultuous river and prepare to take up the challenge. The film cuts to a zooming close-up of a traffic signal cautioning 'Stāviet — Stoite' (Don't Walk, in Latvian and Russian), then cuts back to the tourists who determinedly put their helmets on, grab their paddles, and leave the river bank. The camera follows them into the raft and down the river. Pärt's music complements the visuals with a pulsing cello solo during the waiting sequence, and an orchestra thunders during the rafting (or, to be precise, it was Vidiņš's visuals that accompanied Pärt's composition, as Vidiņš claims that he 'edited the film to fit the music').<sup>294</sup> This segment is followed by a number of shots in which the camera mingles among pedestrians in an urban setting, avoiding their faces and pointing down at their feet tramping through street mud. This is followed by a quick montage of close-ups of traffic signals 'Stoite' (Don't walk) and 'Idite' (Walk) and pedestrians' feet; the feet are obeying the signals — walking or standing still in compliance with the traffic-light signals.

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid.



8 Still from *Ejiet, stāviet* (Zigurds Vidiņš collection)

When the newspaper *Padomju Jaunatne* reported on *Ejiet, stāviet* winning the main award of the Twelfth Republican amateur-film festival, the article claimed that the film exhibits ‘civic pathos’ and ‘philosophically depicts the Soviet people’s drive to always move forward, overcome difficulties, and win’.<sup>295</sup> However, it would seem that the film’s message was overlooked or misinterpreted: a closer examination reveals that the film depicts a *group of people’s* drive to move forward, take risks, and overcome difficulties, whereas the Soviet people *en masse*, represented by the faceless pedestrians, are shown blindly following officially prescribed regulations. In their depiction of the group of rafters, Vidiņš and his co-authors appeal to almost Renaissance values of humanism and versatility, and glorify such virtues as resilience, determination, striving for achievement, and collectivism, in all probability

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<sup>295</sup> ‘Tas filozofiskā skatījumā parāda padomju cilvēku centienus vienmēr iet uz priekšu, cīnīties pret grūtībām, uzvarēt’. ‘Tuvplānā — laikabiedrs’, *Padomju Jaunatne*, 5 April 1970, p. 8.

echoing the earlier film *Uzmanību, Arī-Burjē!*. Without the pedestrian sequence, the film would be an appropriate reproduction of the authoritative discourse on tourism as well as amateur filmmaking, but Vidiņš and his co-authors chose to contrast the group of tourists — or essentially themselves — with the ‘common’ Soviet people, and thus transformed the meaning of the film. According to Vidiņš, despite the ambiguous and possibly controversial message embedded in the pedestrian sequence, the film fell out of favour only after Pärt’s emigration to the West in 1980.<sup>296</sup>

For this reason, perhaps brazenly, *Ejiet, stāviet* can be interpreted as a visualization of Yurchak’s concept of *svoi* sociality. As cited previously, the members of these socialities ‘thought of themselves as living in a reality “different” from the “ordinary” Soviet world’.<sup>297</sup> Furthermore, as also suggested earlier, this form of relating to the system’s discourse often tended to emerge in groups that occupied privileged social positions. Interestingly, *Ejiet, stāviet* was produced at around the same time as the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio began acquiring a somewhat special status among amateur filmmaking collectives and studios in Soviet Latvia. This was mostly due to the fact that in 1969 a film, photo- and phono- laboratory was established at the Academy with the purpose of supporting its various research activities. These were as diverse as the collection of folklore, restoration of audio recordings on phonograph cylinders dating from the 1910s, and the production of popular scientific films explaining scientific phenomena. Although being two distinct establishments within the Academy’s internal structure, the work of the laboratory and the amateur studio instantly became deeply intertwined. Although the Academy’s amateur-film studio, like all other studios of this type, was funded through the system of professional unions, it also began to benefit greatly from the material and technical base that the laboratory offered, soon reaching a quality of production close to professional. Likewise, the laboratory often availed itself of the skills and expertise of the Academy’s film enthusiasts,

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<sup>296</sup> ‘Amatierkino Latvijas PSR, 70.–80. gadi’.

<sup>297</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 34.

employing them in the production of filmic materials essential for its research programme. At the same time, the amateur status of the Academy's studio allowed its members to enjoy a degree of ideological and creative freedom in their own film projects, while still being able to use the laboratory facilities to their full potential. As recalled by Vidiņš:

We had the official film, photo- and phono- laboratory that produced various films for the Academy. [...] The amateur-film studio practically lived off this laboratory. We had opportunities, [...] we had a big advantage. But again the Academy was this big monster, and we had to do things for the Academy. At the same time, at the amateur studio we could afford doing the things we wanted to do (emphasis added).<sup>298</sup>

As will be demonstrated in the remainder of this chapter, this situation prompted the amateur filmmaking studio of the Academy of Sciences to gradually develop into a privileged community of *svoi* that shared a passion for filmmaking and also enjoyed an elevated status within the amateur filmmaking community by virtue of being represented and validated by the Academy. Although the studio continued to produce formulaic tourism films and various popular scientific films to satisfy the research needs of the Academy, creative individuals and budding *auteurs*, such as Vidiņš, began to use the studio's and the Academy's technical and creative capital to produce thematically diverse and formally inventive content that often exhibited new and unanticipated meanings that were not determined by the dominant ideological discourse. The following sections will analyse the ways in which the practice of tourism and the genre of tourism film, with their focus on the exploration of natural, historical, and cultural heritage, gave rise to several tendencies in amateur filmmaking at the Academy and beyond, namely the films that addressed such themes as local environmental destruction, Latvian ethnic history and culture, and even growing national discontent.

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<sup>298</sup> Vidiņš, interview.



## Environmental damage through the amateur lens

As observed by Douglas R. Weiner, the whole of the Soviet era was marked by a variety of semi-independent social movements which agitated in favour of nature protection — despite the fact that their inspirations and motivations were often drawn from ‘quite distinct cultural, professional, and ideological traditions’, the idea of nature protection ‘as a source of symbols and rhetoric was used creatively by Soviet people to forge or affirm various independent, unofficial, but defining social identities for themselves’.<sup>299</sup> In many instances, environmental protest and activism became a tool of social resistance to the Party bureaucracy and ‘a surrogate or even a vehicle for political speech’.<sup>300</sup> Weiner points out that, during the early years of *glasnost*, ecological protest became ‘a formal banner’ under which any kind of political expression could be articulated; in his view, Soviet people almost universally focused their public dissatisfaction on environmental issues ‘because they were aware of the low risk historically associated with speaking out in that area’.<sup>301</sup>

In the Baltic region, ecological concerns first manifested itself in the mid-1950s, prompted by rapid post-war industrialization.<sup>302</sup> During the *perestroika* era ‘national discontent began to crystallize around concern over the environment’, and environmental protest became the area of the first public articulations of dissatisfaction with the status quo and tended to be closely linked to the Baltic national liberation movements of the late 1980s.<sup>303</sup> In Soviet Latvia in particular, journalist Dainis Īvans’s 1986 article condemning the construction

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<sup>299</sup> Douglas R. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 20–24.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>302</sup> Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, p. 245.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

of a hydroelectric complex at Pļaviņas on the river Daugava sparked a massive public outcry that resulted in the cancellation of the project.<sup>304</sup> The symbolic loading of the Pļaviņas victory extended beyond ecology — the river Daugava, stretching throughout the country, has been always perceived by Latvians as a powerful national symbol. Shutting down the project via civic action established a momentous precedent for successfully challenging the Soviet regime's authority in Latvia, thus fuelling popular confidence and paving the way for the overtly political and pro-independence demonstrations that began in 1987, eventually leading to the restoration of Latvian independence in 1991.

The issue of local environmental damage resonated with many amateur filmmakers from all corners of Soviet Latvia and often found expression in their films. Most of these environmentalist amateur films, however, cannot be interpreted primarily as political statements and do not exhibit national discontent. For the most part, rather, they were conceived in the spirit of *grazhdanstvennost'*, or civic-mindedness, and their authors were committed to helping solve the issue at stake, rather than using it as a tool for political expression or as an exercise in national-identity politics. Susan Costanzo discusses this tendency in depth in relation to Soviet amateur theatre in the 1960s, and defines *grazhdanstvennost'* as a civic spirit embedded in an artistic expression and committed to exposing social problems despite the risk of a backlash from the authorities.<sup>305</sup> Costanzo maintains that the concept of *grazhdanstvennost'* was at times employed to defend controversial content, but most often it was informed by 'a genuine belief that loyal criticism would benefit Soviet art and society and would be tolerated as a logical extension of Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalinist excesses and subsequent

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<sup>304</sup> For more on this, see *ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>305</sup> Susan Costanzo, 'Amateur Theatres and Amateur Publics in the Russian Republic, 1958–71', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 86.2 (2008), 372–94 (pp. 372–73).

de-Stalinization'.<sup>306</sup> These environmentalist films thus belong to the trend of exposing, problematizing, and denouncing social issues in artistic form that was tentatively launched during the Khrushchev 'Thaw', but flourished in the late 1980s with the introduction of the policy of *glasnost*'. Below, some examples of Soviet Latvian amateur films that exhibit this tendency are given.

Kārlis Jankovskis, a farm mechanic of the Jaunais Komunārs kolkhoz in the Saldus District, was a filmmaking enthusiast who diligently documented aspects of kolkhoz life in dozens of amateur films throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Jankovskis's devotion and deep respect for his kolkhoz shines through in his works, but on occasion the filmmaker did not hesitate to expose and criticize the impact of the collective farm's activities, especially woodworking, on the local environment. Both *Mani aizmirsa* (They Forgot About Me, 1976) and *Pēdas — varbūt arī tavējās?* (Footprints — May They be Yours?, exact year unknown, 1980s), for example, depict the destructive nature of human intervention in the forest ecosystem. Harijs Zālītis, the Head Veterinarian of the Dobele District, who headed an amateur filmmaking club at the local House of Culture in the late 1960s (the club would later become People's Film Studio 'Sprīdītis'), recalls that he would often film 'all sorts of swinishness' he witnessed in the local area.<sup>307</sup> He proudly notes that, on a number of occasions, his films tackling local environmental damage caused the local authorities to act in response to the issues raised and solve them promptly. He mentions his film *Ozoli, ozoliņi* (Oaks, Little Oaks, exact year unknown, late 1970s – early 1980s), which showed oak trees in his locality suffering from the proximity of a road and the heavy vehicles passing by. He claims that after he showed the film at an amateur film screening to which local officials had been invited, the road was rerouted within two weeks.<sup>308</sup> Similarly, his film *Mūsu*

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p. 374.

<sup>307</sup> Harijs Zālītis, interview by Regina Šulca, 30 March 2001, RKM-2988, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

*puses melodijas* (The Melodies of Our Corner, 1987), one which addressed the problem of waste incineration at a waste disposal site in close proximity to Dobele, prompted the chairman of the local Party executive committee to shut the site down.<sup>309</sup>

In contrast with this tendency, Vidiņš's environmental activism acquired an ethno-nationalist dimension in the mid-1970s, well in advance of the incipient Baltic independence movements; soon after, it would also find expression in his amateur films, most significantly in *Aplis pieradījumā* (Vicious Circle, 1980), discussed below. Before analysing *Aplis pieradījumā* in detail, however, it is important to mention that in 1976 Vidiņš joined the Noble Oak Tree Liberation Group (Dižkoku atbrīvotāju grupa, or DAG), founded by Latvian poet Imants Ziedonis. Love of the Latvian countryside and efforts on behalf of its environmental protection were central to Ziedonis's life and work, and DAG became a forum for like-minded people to act upon the desire to preserve Latvia's natural heritage. In their spare time, DAG members organized independent trips to Latvia's rural areas, which were rich with noble oak trees, with the purpose of keeping a record of these trees, as well as caring after them, for instance by freeing them from thickets of bushes and other trees. Because filming his tourist trips was already a hobby, Vidiņš often filmed DAG activities. In a contemporary interview filmed by Vidiņš, Ziedonis compared the activities of DAG to the leisure pursuits of regular Soviet citizens: 'One lives under his car, repairing and maintaining it, one goes to Gaiziņš [a hill in Latvia popular with skiers] to slalom, one may even go to the Carpathians, one collects stamps, and we collect oak trees'.<sup>310</sup> Although the group's objectives seem innocent on the surface (as was intended by Ziedonis), DAG clearly became a nationally minded civic social formation that did not fit into the official

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> 'Cits dzīvo zem mašīnas, remontē mašīnu, cits brauca uz Gaiziņu slalomā, cits vēl kaut uz Karpatiem, cits kolekcionē markas, mēs kolekcionējām ozolus'. This interview is featured as part of the short documentary about DAG, entitled *Mēstepatās* (We Are Here), dir. by Zigurds Vidiņš (Studija 2, 2013) [on DVD].

ideological framework. One former member of DAG, Andris Buiķis, retrospectively commented on the purpose and membership of DAG in the following manner: 'Imants [Ziedonis] felt that it was a way in which we could preserve Latvia's *latvianness*, [...] so he needed people who were, so to say, "untrustworthy" from the point of view of the Cheka, or the Corner House, because it was they who helped strengthen the group's foundation'.<sup>311</sup> In line with Yurchak's characterization of *svoi*, another former member of the group, Māra Zālīte, described its essence as follows: 'We managed to create a different society, alternative to the Soviet society that was imposed upon us from all sides. After all, not all people were Soviet people'.<sup>312</sup> In the context of this chapter, DAG is a useful illustration of the ways in which, from the ideological perspective, Soviet domestic tourism with its emphasis on productive leisure and patriotism actually facilitated the emergence of alternative socialities, identities, and pursuits.

Vidiņš's love of nature and tourism, and his interest in exploring the relationship of humanity with the natural world, so prominent in his early films of the 1960s and 1970s, acquired a novel angle from the late 1970s onwards, when it began to coalesce with the environmentalist ethos of the last decade of Soviet rule in Latvia. In 1980, Vidiņš created a rather cryptic film entitled *Aplis pieradījumā* that conflated his environmental concerns with covert national discontent.

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<sup>311</sup> 'Imantam bija sajūta ka tas ir veids kā mēs saglabājām latvietību Latvijā. Ja Imants gribēja kaut kādu tādu grupu, viņam vajadzēja šos te, nu, "neuzticamos" priekš čekas, vai Stūra mājas. Jo tie palīdzēja stiprināt to grupas satvaru'. Andris Buiķis, interview by Zigurds Vidiņš, in *Mēstepatās*. In Soviet Latvia, 'The Cheka' was a common way to refer to the KGB, whereas 'the Corner House' was a popular euphemism for the KGB headquarters in Riga that was based in a building situated on the corner of two streets in central Riga.

<sup>312</sup> 'Mēs taču izveidojām citu sabiedrību, alternatīvu sabiedrību tai Padomju sabiedrībai, kas mums tika no visām pusēm gāzta virsū. Ne visi cilvēki bija Padomju cilvēki'. Māra Zālīte, interview by Zigurds Vidiņš, in *Mēstepatās*.

Vidiņš's artistic choices in *Aplis pieradījumā* invite interpretation in the context of circumventing censorship and potential political repercussions by resorting to Aesopian language, that is to say, by rendering the meaning of the text ambiguous, so that it may seem above suspicion to outsiders, but conveyed hidden meanings to the informed addressees of the text. Discussing Aesopian forms of satire in Soviet cinema, Kevin Moss observes that an Aesopian utterance is akin to a riddle as defined by Iurii Levin — that is, 'a text whose referent is an object not overtly named in the text itself'; however, this object-referent is constructed in a way that the addressee of the text would be able to guess what it is.<sup>313</sup> According to Moss, 'the function of an Aesopian text is to make the reader name, at least to themselves, the reality to which the text does not overtly refer'.<sup>314</sup>

'Runāšana caur puķēm' — a Latvian idiomatic expression that literally means 'speaking through flowers', and is analogous to the use of Aesopian language — was often admittedly practised by Latvian amateur filmmakers. Regina Šulca, for example, describes the intricacies of avoiding censorship in her amateur filmmaking practice in the following way:

In my films, I often had to be able to bend, twist, and turn so that I could express what was on my mind at that moment, but in such a way so that no one would be able to pick on me for what was on my mind. And so, one had to think very carefully about each shot, about what to include in the film and what not to include. There were things that were better left out.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Kevin Moss, 'A Russian Munchausen: Aesopian translation', in *Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash*, ed. by Andrew Horton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 20–35 (p. 21).

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> 'Tajās filmās bieži bija jāmek izlocīties tā, lai es pateiktu to, ko es domāju tajā brīdī, bet lai man nevarēja piesieties par to, ko es domāju. Un līdz ar to par katru kadru bija ļoti rūpīgi jādomā, ko tai filmai liekt iekšā un ko neliekt. Bija jau lietas, kuras nevarēja likt'. 'Amatierkino Latvijas PSR, 70.–80. gadi'.

At the same time, Šulca admits that it was a great pleasure for her to be able to interpolate her films with certain 'hidden' meanings that would go unnoticed by the authorities but appeal to certain audiences. She also admits that she learned and largely used this tactic at her official workplace at the local radio station:

But if that one frame, that one thought managed to go until the Republican amateur-film festival, and if I was given an award for my film — it was pure satisfaction. I learned this when I was working at the radio station — one had to be able to insert, somewhere between the lines, one or a couple of words that *everyone understood*. As if what is meant here is one thing, but there are a couple of words that *everyone understands* as it was intended. It was a great satisfaction when you could express something in such way (emphasis added).<sup>316</sup>

Another amateur filmmaker, Romualds Pipars, has also commented on the deep unspoken understanding that allegedly developed between amateur filmmakers and their audiences in Soviet Latvia. Albeit with a dose of humour, Pipars describes the curious ways in which the amateur filmmakers exploited the medium of film as a tool for coded communication with audiences:

Back then, people were able to spot everything the author wanted to say in splices of shots. Unfortunately today, these films, that we made back in the day as almost anti-Soviet, are perceived by the modern viewer as a joke. Why, the panning from the right side to the left means something bad! But indeed, if the camera is panning from left to right, [...], this is for the better, this is *right*. But panning in the opposite direction — in those days, *any viewer in Latvia* knew

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<sup>316</sup> 'Bet ja tas kadrs, vai tā doma aizgāja līdz republikas skatei, un tev vēl iedot diplomu, tas bija tāds gandarījums. Un to es iemācījos, arī apguvu radio strādājot — vajadzēja mācēt starp tekstiem kaut kur ielikt kaut vienu-dīvus vārdus kas tev... nu, ko visi saprot. It kā runa iet par to, bet ir pāris vārdu kurus atkal visi saprot tā, kā vajag. Bet tas jau bija gandarījums, ka tu vari kaut ko tā pateikt un pasniegt'. Šulca, interview.

what was meant by this. [...] We seized meanings at once (emphasis added).<sup>317</sup>

In the context of these responses, Pipars's 'any viewer in Latvia' and Šulca's 'everyone' can be understood as analogous to Yurchak's *svoi*. As the author elaborates on his concept in the revised monograph translated into Russian, he notes that *svoi* can be seen not only as a sociality, but also as a public, due to the fact that *svoi* were often formed not on the basis of social or class origin, but on the sameness of perception of the authoritative discourse.<sup>318</sup> Thus, for Yurchak, *svoi* can be defined as a public of the authoritative discourse.<sup>319</sup> Based on this idea, it can be argued that the open-ended networks of *svoi* also acted as publics of the new meanings produced as a result of the reproduction of authoritative discourse. As will be demonstrated below, close textual analysis of Vidiņš's film *Aplis pieradījumā* reveals meanings that had the potential to speak to publics of *svoi* in Soviet Latvia and beyond.

*Aplis pieradījumā* makes use of newsreels and various items of stock footage, as well as features inserts of painting reproductions and scenes from commercial films. It begins with a montage sequence featuring fragments of the reproductions of Salvador Dalí's *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* (1943) and *Tuna Fishing* (1967), and a scene from *Pumping Iron* (1977), a documentary film about Arnold Schwarzenegger, which shows Schwarzenegger flexing his muscles in front of an audience. It then features a

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<sup>317</sup> 'Tajos laikos cilvēki spēja saskatīt kadru salikumos to, ko autors gribēja pateikt. Šodien šīs filmas, diemžēl daudzas mūsu tolaik taisītas, gandrīz vai pretpadomju filmas, uztver mūsdienu skatītājs kā joku. Nu un ka kinokameras panorāma no labas puses uz kreiso nozīme kaut ko sliktu! Jo panorāma no kreisās puses uz labo, [...] tas ir uz labu. Bet panorāma uz otro pusi — tajos laikos jebkuram skatītājam Latvijā bija skaidrs. [...] Mēs no pusvārda sapratām'. 'Amatierkino Latvijas PSR, 70.–80. gadi'.

<sup>318</sup> Yurchak, *Eto bylo navsegda*, p. 251.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.



number of aerial shots of city landscapes and infrastructure, intercut with natural landscapes: waterfalls, fields, and mountains. Thus, while experimenting with narrative forms and new methods of creating film, Vidiņš begins to construct a subtle yet powerful critique of the human exploitation of natural resources. To expand upon this idea, at several points the film features graphic footage of human intervention in the salmon spawning process — salmon jump over dams and are caught, stunned with hammers, and then gutted for caviare by fishermen — that Vidiņš filmed during his trip to the island of Sakhalin, which was commissioned by *Klub kinoputeshestvii* programme producers.<sup>320</sup> On the visual level, therefore, *Aplis pieradījumā* can be interpreted as a critique of human intervention in nature. However, the film acquires a strong ethno-nationalist dimension when Vidiņš's choice of soundtrack is taken into consideration.

Vidiņš was a music aficionado who closely followed trends in contemporary music, and he decided to use Polish singer-songwriter's Czesław Niemen's rendition of the Latvian folk song 'Pūt, vējiņi' (Blow Ye Winds) that Niemen had recently performed at a concert in Latvia, to accompany the salmon-slaughter footage.<sup>321</sup> Under the Soviet occupation, 'Pūt, vējiņi', with its folk origin and neutral lyrics (it tells a story of a reckless young man who is refused marriage to his beloved by her mother), became a surrogate national anthem and overall an emotionally loaded national symbol for Latvians. It was often sung in place of the official national anthem of the first independence period, 'Dievs, svēti Latviju' (God, Bless Latvia!), which was banned after the annexation of Latvia in 1940. In addition to this, Vidiņš used the audio recording of a SOS signal in Morse code at various points of the film. In this way, Vidiņš employed the salmon-slaughter footage he obtained in Sakhalin to construct a powerful metaphor for oppression in *Aplis pieradījumā*, injecting an element of the authoritative discourse — that is, the footage that was produced to be used as part of a central television programme — with a new and unexpected meaning

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<sup>320</sup> Vidiņš, interview.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

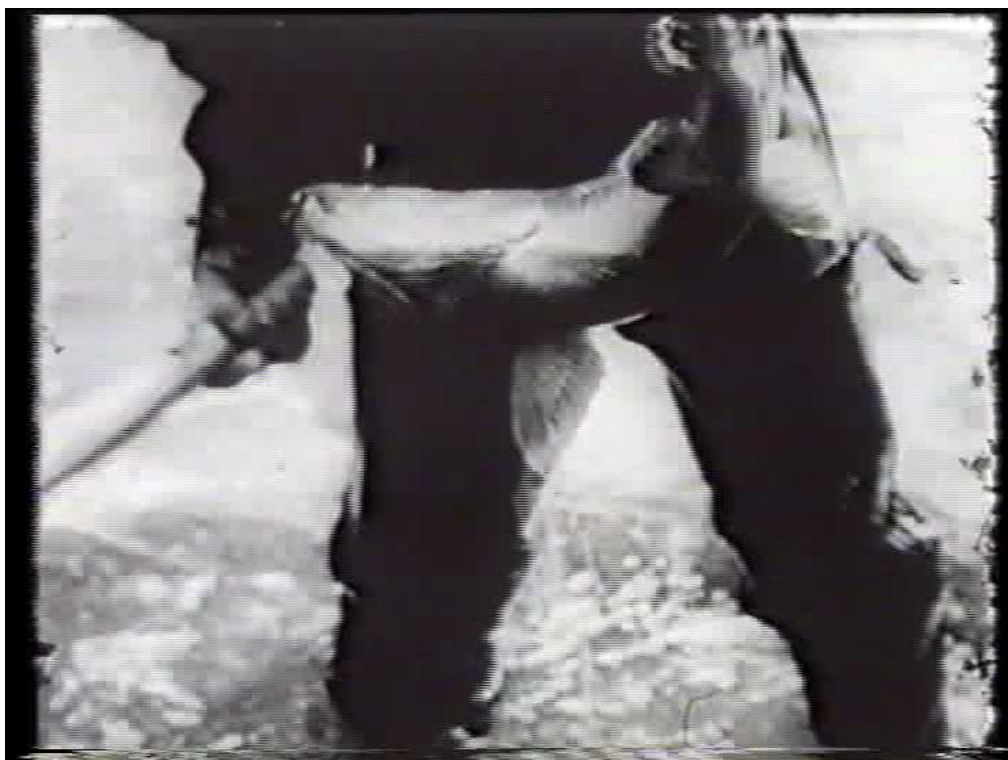
via the choice and editing of the soundtrack. In his own words: ‘In Sakhalin I filmed how salmon are slaughtered, and created that metaphor there, where ‘Pūt, vējiņi’ and the SOS signals are introduced, with such connotation that this is the situation that we live and currently find ourselves in’.<sup>322</sup> In the Baltic states, environmental damage has always tended to be perceived as a product of the unsustainable exploitation of the ‘colonized’ land by Soviet power. In the aftermath of the Second World War, intensive industrialization of the recently annexed Baltic states was indeed regarded a priority for a number of economic and political reasons. With time, the policy of overdevelopment began to cause ecological problems which, in turn, incited moderate public discontent aimed at the ‘centre’.<sup>323</sup> Vidiņš’s use of salmon slaughter as a metaphor for life under Soviet rule resonated with the Latvian audiences at home and, according to the filmmaker, ‘worked well with Latvian expats abroad’.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> ‘Un Sahalīnā es uzfilmēju, kā tiek laši sisti, kā viņi nāk iekšā, tur to tēlu uztaisīju, ar tādu asociāciju, ka tādā situācijā mēs dzīvojām un atrodamies. Kur Pūt vējiņi tiek ievesti, un beigās tiek SOS signāli’. Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> For more on this, see Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, pp. 108–10 & 241–48.

<sup>324</sup> Vidiņš, interview.



9 Still from *Aplis pieradījumā*

It can be speculated that the film's experimental narrative structure, its emphasis on ecological issues, the originality of Niemen's performance (one that made 'Pūt, vējiņi' hardly recognizable for an untrained ear), and Vidiņš long-exhibited interest in tourism films and the theme of human-nature relationship meant that its subversive message was very probably lost on many contemporary critics and amateur cinema officials. This would explain why the film was presented at the 1980 Republican amateur-film festival, earning a silver medal, and entered for a variety of thematic amateur-film festivals across Latvia, earning a second place at a festival dedicated to nature and monument protection.<sup>325</sup> In 1984, the film was entered for the UNICA festival that took place in the GDR that year and won a silver medal, earning much praise and a place in the UNICA's filmothèque in Switzerland. As a result, the film enjoyed a long festival run and was shown at many amateur-

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<sup>325</sup> 'Z. Vidiņa filmogrāfija', 1966–88, Zigurds Vidiņš's private collection, Riga, Latvia, p. 3.

film festivals around the world, including Belgium, Austria, USA, Tunisia, and West Germany.<sup>326</sup> The film went largely unnoticed in the Latvian press at first. Later, covering its success at UNICA, critics at home categorized it as ‘a philosophical reflection on the harmony of life and balance on earth’.<sup>327</sup> It is clear, however, that Vidiņš’s Aesopian message was not lost on the publics of *svoi*. Vilnis Auziņš, for example, also an amateur filmmaker at the Academy of Sciences studio, carefully noted in his 1984 overview of the previous decade of Latvian amateur cinema that ‘in this film with a rather global perspective on the problem [of the environment], a subtle national “colouring” is introduced’.<sup>328</sup> This ‘national colouring’ would become more prominent in the body of Soviet Latvian amateur films discussed in the section below.

### **The ethnic strand in Soviet Latvian amateur cinema**

Nicholson has noted that amateur films documenting local people and places are a staple of amateur filmmaking everywhere because it is natural for the amateur filmmaker to turn the camera towards the immediate world around him or her, usually starting with family recording and then moving on to wider topics.<sup>329</sup> The author observes that many amateur films in this category represent a cinematic gaze that is attached to a specific time and place, but also tie the local and the regional into wider national and global processes, and

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<sup>326</sup> Rudīte Kalpiņa and Didzis Puriņš, ‘ZA Kino tautas studija: Kur divi kaķi tup uz jumta’, *Liesma*, 1 April 1986, pp. 20–21 (p. 20).

<sup>327</sup> ‘Filma veidota kā filozofiskas pārdomas par dzīvības harmoniju un līdzsvaru virs zemes’. ‘Starptautiskās balvas — Latvijas kinoamatieriem’, *Padomju Jaunatne*, 10 December 1984, p. 3.

<sup>328</sup> ‘Filmā ar diezgan globālu problēmas skatījumu iepīts smalks nacionālais kolorīts’. Vilnis Auziņš, ‘Ar ātrumu 24 kadri sekundē: Amatierkino’, *Dzimtenes Balss*, 6 December 1984, p. 3.

<sup>329</sup> Nicholson, *Amateur Film*, p. 118.

are saturated with culturally and historically embedded meanings.<sup>330</sup> They usually focus on subjects that might not be regarded as important by professional filmmakers, but are significant in terms of preserving and reclaiming the memories and experiences of a given locality.<sup>331</sup> Soviet Latvian amateur films informed by this function often fit into the official ideological framework, or were at least politically neutral. However, although documentation and preservation is fundamental for all cinema based on the ability of the camera to record reality as it is, in the context of Soviet-occupied Latvia the impetus to document and preserve in all probability was often stimulated by the conscious or subconscious anxiety of personal, local, and above all national identities being overshadowed by the overarching Soviet identity. The theme of Latvian ethnic history, with special emphasis on material culture, ethnography, and folklore, became an active interest and common ground for the Latvian intelligentsia of the late-Soviet era. From this perspective it can be argued that for many amateur filmmakers in particular the investigation of these themes gradually became transformed into a method with which to interrogate the political status of Latvia within the Soviet Union.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the documentary film strand of the Latvian amateur filmmaking scene became dominated by films that focused on the themes of Latvian ethnic history and culture. Individual filmmakers and entire studios dedicated themselves to the exploration of these topics, and a wide array of amateur films about Latvian historic and natural monuments, heritage, traditions, crafts, and local artists and craftsmen were made during this period. Ervins Vēveris, for instance, a research fellow at the Ethnographic Museum of the Latvian SSR and a member of the VEF film studio, produced a large number of documentary films that chronicled the Museum's material-heritage preservation work and showcased its exhibits, as well as explored broader Latvian ethnography-related topics. *Jurģi* (Housewarming, 1974, co-created with Juris Klaubergs), for example, shows a day in the life of a time-honoured

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

farming household in rural Latgale. We witness cheese- and bread-making processes, sauna-going, wheat harvesting, and the construction of a wooden boat, all explained by a voiceover commentary. At the end of the film we learn that, due to its historical and ethnographic value, the household is assigned to be transferred to the Ethnographic Museum. *Pēdējais Piebalgas pumpenieks* (The Last Pumpenieks of Piebalga, 1979) is an account of the disappearing craft of making *pumpji* (logs of wood with drilled holes used in irrigation systems) and includes a portrayal of Jānis Bārzdiņš, one of the last practitioners of this craft in Latvia. *Visu mūžu un vēlreiz* (All Life Long and Again, 1980) tells the story of wooden chair master Eduards Tanne and his craft. *Pie ezera un pie jūras* (By the Lake and by the Sea, 1984) is an intricate portrait of the community of Suiti, a minority ethnic group found in Western Latvia and centred in the village of Alsunga. The film shows the work and leisure activities in the community with particular focus on rich Suiti folk-music culture and idiosyncratic wedding rituals. Slice-of-life interviews with local men and women can be heard on the soundtrack. Auziņš argues that Vēveris, with his thorough, investigative approach to his film subjects, established the ethnographic research film genre within the Latvian amateur filmmaking movement.<sup>332</sup>

This type of ethnographic film should not necessarily be viewed as an attempt to awaken national consciousness, or as an appeal for national self-determination, or as a political programme. At most, it could be viewed as an attempt to counteract assimilation (or Sovietization) which was primarily informed by a dedicated interest in the study of the national language, culture, and history. In order to understand the fascination for Latvia's ethnic past in Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking circles, it may be useful to evoke Miroslav Hroch's periodization of the national revival of small nations. Hroch argues that 'the beginning of every national revival is marked by a passionate concern on the part of a group of individuals, usually intellectuals, for the study of the

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<sup>332</sup> Auziņš, 'Ar ātrumu 24 kadri sekundē', p. 3.

language, the culture, the history of the oppressed nationality'.<sup>333</sup> According to Hroch, this concern is 'motivated by a patriotism of the Enlightenment type, namely an active affection for the region in which they lived' combined with a thirst for knowledge.<sup>334</sup> These individuals, however, did not exert widespread social influence and 'usually did not even attempt to mount a patriotic agitation' due to their isolation and lack of confidence.<sup>335</sup> When any agitation did occur, it largely remained at the individual level and lacked an organizational basis.<sup>336</sup> Hroch maintains that this phase is inevitably followed by a decisive period 'characterized by active patriotic agitation: the fermentation-process of national consciousness'.<sup>337</sup> The author describes the driving force behind this phase as a 'group of patriots who were dissatisfied with the limitation of interest to the antiquities of the land, the language and the culture, and saw their mission as the spreading of national consciousness among the people'.<sup>338</sup> This, in turn, culminates in the concluding phase of the national revival, one which is marked by national consciousness becoming the concern of the broader masses and the national movement acquiring 'a firm organizational structure extending over the whole territory'.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 22.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

Although by the time of Latvia's, Lithuania's, and Estonia's forced incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940, all three Baltic states had already undergone Hroch's three phases of the national movement, resulting in proclamations of independence and the establishment of nation states in 1918, it can be argued that during the Soviet era the countries experienced the three phases of national revival anew. Based on this paradigm, it can be argued that the period of intellectual concern for ethnic past(s) was encouraged by Khrushchev's 'Thaw', that active patriotic agitation was tentatively launched in the early 1980s, gaining momentum during *glasnost'*, and that the late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by the rise of mass national movements with a firm organizational structure resulting in the restorations of independence in all three Baltic states by 1991.

It can be further argued that the ethnic strand in Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement also illustrates the first two phases of Hroch's periodization. The early amateur films concerning Latvian ethnic history and culture, such as those of Vēveris, were informed by an affection for the native land and a passionate but perhaps not-yet-politicized interest in the study of national language, culture, and history. Their social influence was significantly curtailed by the scale of amateur-film distribution, as well as their relatively specialized thematic focus. These films were showcased for the most part at production studio-organized film evenings, a number of theme-based amateur festivals, and as part of the diverse programme of Republican amateur-film festivals, reaching limited audiences and thus failing to inspire the masses. With the onset of *perestroika*, however, this ethnic strand became increasingly politicized. Many amateur filmmakers saw amateur film as an effective medium for promoting national consciousness, and began to seize the opportunity for patriotic agitation in the climate of overall democratization. During this time, many films set out to explore Latvia's ethnic past through the prism of Soviet oppression: this tendency will be discussed in detail in the following section of this chapter, which is dedicated to a series of subversive ethnographic documentaries by Ingvars Leitis. The social influence of these amateur films was further increased by independent distribution and exhibition practised by many amateur filmmakers in the 1980s. Although during the third phase of



national revival amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia seems to have lost its appeal as far as the patriotic agitation of the masses was concerned, it was nevertheless mobilized to record and document the rise of the mass national movement: many amateur filmmakers with access to equipment were filming the pro-independence mass demonstrations and political actions that began in Riga in the late 1980s.

The ethnic strand within Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking also fits into the overall appeal to appreciation of ethnic past that emerged across the Soviet Union in the 1960s and became dubbed the ‘folklore movement’ or ‘folklore wave’. It was primarily manifested in the appearance of an overwhelming quantity of dance, music, and theatre ensembles and studios, whose repertoires largely borrowed from the folklore of the various ethnic groups of the Soviet Union.<sup>340</sup> Victoria Vasileva (Chistyakova) and Ekaterina Trushkina confirm the supposition that the interest in ethnic past(s) was in part fuelled by the Khrushchev ‘Thaw’. For instance, the authors observe that the previously unacceptable concept of ‘ethnos’ reappeared in Soviet academia in the late 1950s and was employed by social scientists and humanities scholars to discuss ethnic issues.<sup>341</sup> In addition to this, Soviet folklore studies received a major boost from a significant number of expeditions to study folklore and the resulting publications of academic papers and collections of folk recordings.<sup>342</sup> The Latvian Academy of Sciences, with its Institutes for History and Material Culture and for Language and Literature, became a perfect springboard for

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<sup>340</sup> Evgeniia Andreeva, “Fol’klornoe dvizhenie” kak kul’turnyi fenomen vtoroi poloviny XX v.’, *Istoriia i sovremennost’*, 2.18 (2013), 214–31 (pp. 215–16).

<sup>341</sup> Victoria Vasileva (Chistyakova) and Ekaterina Trushkina, ‘Visual Anthropology in the USSR and Post-Soviet Russia: A History of Festival Practices’, in *Film Festivals and Anthropology*, ed. by Aida Vellejo and María Paz Peirano (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), pp. 89–110 (pp. 90–91).

<sup>342</sup> Andreeva, “Fol’klornoe dvizhenie”, p. 216.

investigating nationally minded subjects of Latvian ethnic history and culture in a legitimate way.<sup>343</sup>

Many of the Academy's amateur filmmakers were close to the academic circles of the Academy and often shared their intellectual pursuits. They were often eager to participate in the Academy's expeditions and produce films for the Academy's benefit. On the other hand, the Academy also benefited from the amateur filmmakers' expertise and often involved the amateur studio in producing filmic materials for research purposes. As observed by Vidiņš: 'The Academy needed various materials; [for instance], we collected a lot of folklore, [...] made films on different science-related subjects. [...] But in fact, we were interested in all of this, it was not like we were forced to do this or we were doing it reluctantly'.<sup>344</sup> Vidiņš also admits that this interest was fuelled by the compelling filmmaking opportunities with which the Academy's amateur filmmakers were often presented: 'We often went on ethnographic expeditions, and we had permission to film in the Kurzeme [military] zone, along the Livonian Coast. [...] We visited places that a "normal" person could not travel to'.<sup>345</sup> For Vidiņš and many of his fellow amateur filmmakers at the Academy,

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<sup>343</sup> The Academy of Science's Institute for Ethnography and Folklore existed between 1946 and 1956. In 1956 the Ethnography sector was included in the History Institute, whereas the Folklore sector was transferred to the Language and Literature Institute.

<sup>344</sup> 'Akadēmijai vajadzēja dažādus materiālus, mēs ļoti daudz vācām folkloras materiālus, [...], taisījām filmas par dažādām zinātniskām tēmām. [...] Bet faktiski tā arī bija mūsu interese, nebija tā, ka mums tika uzspiests, un ka tas būtu tā negribīgi mēs to darītu'. Vidiņš, interview.

<sup>345</sup> 'Mēs ļoti bieži braucam etnogrāfiskajās ekspedīcijās, mums bija atļauja filmēt arī toreizējā Kurzemes zonā, pa Līvu krastu. [...] Mēs pabijām tādās vietās, kur normāls cilvēks nepabūtu'. Vidiņš, interview. During the Soviet period, the Baltic Sea coastline was an important military object and a so-called 'closed zone' (slēgta zona), restricted for civilians. The Livonian Coast is a Latvian territory historically inhabited by Livonian people, or Livs, and posing

it was these ethnographic and folklore expeditions when the Academy's needs and amateurs' enthusiasm and thematic proclivity often converged, and it was in this atmosphere that many amateur filmmakers set out to explore nationally minded themes under the aegis of Latvian ethnic history in films of their own. Because they were made outside the Academy's research programme, and therefore beyond the purview of its direct patronage, the resulting films sometimes led to frictions with the Soviet authorities which gave rise to repercussions of various degrees of severity. Vidiņš comments:

We were rather constrained in what we filmed for the Academy's needs. But here [at the amateur studio], we were much freer and many things could be done. And no problems were encountered until we began to touch upon certain *cultural* themes that could not be spoken about at the time. For instance, the granting of the title to Aglona's Basilica (emphasis added).<sup>346</sup>

Here Vidiņš refers to the film *Īstos vārdus meklējot* (Looking for the True Words, 1980), co-created with his wife Marika Vidiņa and the Academy's amateur filmmakers Rolands Ķemers and Viesturs Mēbalts. The film was made to honour the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Basilica of the Assumption in Aglona, in the Latgale region of Latvia, and the concurrent granting of the title of 'Basilica minoris' to it by Pope John Paul II. Such a gesture on the part of the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church was an act of acknowledgement and legitimization of religious culture in Soviet Latvia — more importantly, it was perceived as such by the communities of believers. Needless to say, this posed a considerable challenge to the dominant ideological discourse on

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a great ethnographic interest. It is located in Northern Kurzeme and encompasses twelve Livonian villages; most of its territory was located within the 'closed zone'.

<sup>346</sup> 'To, ko mēs taisījām akadēmijas vajadzībām, tur mēs bijām diezgan stingros rāmjos. Bet šeit varēja daudz brīvāk, daudz lietas taisīt. Un nekādas problēmas nebija līdz tam brīdim, kad mēs sākam pieķerties kaut kādām kultūras tēmām, par ko toreiz nedrīkstēja runāt. Teiksim, Aglonas bazilikas piešķiršana'. Ibid.

religion. Although the state pressure on churches in Soviet Baltic republics had begun to decline during the 1970s, and in the 1980s a number of religious commemorative festivals, including the celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Aglona's Basilica, was officially authorized,<sup>347</sup> the Pope's gesture constituted a certain inconvenience for the media (that largely ignored the news), as well as to the local officials. They were forced to interpret the event in accordance with the dominant ideological discourse on religion in spite of the overall sentiment of exaltation exhibited by the religious communities in Aglona and beyond. It is this discrepancy — the official interpretation of religious worship in Aglona and the actuality of local religious culture — that Vidiņš and co-authors set out to explore and ironize in *Īstos vārdus meklējot*.

The film features interviews with several local government officials, namely Jānis Podskočijs, the chairman of the local collective farm, Antons Bēķis, the chairman of the Executive Committee of the village of Aglona, and Valentīna Gudļevska, the deputy of the Aglona village council. All interviewees had presumably been asked to comment on the local religious culture of Aglona and to assess the importance of religion for local people, although the questions remain off-screen. The responses turn out to be contradictory: while Podskočijs observes that religion appeals to children, Bēķis claims that religious observance will continue in Aglona as long as the older generations live. At the same time, the interviewees indirectly admit the government's powerlessness in the face of religion. Bēķis, for instance, compares the popular appeal of Aglona's House of Culture and Basilica, concluding that, while everyone is familiar with the latter, the public involvement with the former is relatively insignificant. The Executive Committee chairman also mentions that there is no proper marriage registration office in the region, and admits

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<sup>347</sup> Frans Hoppenbrouwers, 'Romancing Freedom: Church and Society in the Baltic States since the End of the Communism', *Religion, State & Society*, 27.2 (1999), 161–73 <<https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/docview/194444621>> [accessed 8 November 2020] (p. 162).

that financially it is impossible to provide one at the moment. Such a statement sounds like a justification for the fact that local young couples tend to choose church marriages in place of civil ceremonies. For her part Gudļevska acknowledges that religion is deeply rooted in local people, and practically admits defeat by saying that, despite all the educational work that the local government is carrying out, it will be a long time before people stop worshipping. In her view, priests wield a stronger influence on the minds of local people than cultural workers.

In this way, through the selection and editing of the interview segments, the authorities are presented as puzzled and incompetent. This can be interpreted as a deliberate 'counter-representation' and subversion of the meanings associated with the authoritative discourse, to use Yurchak's formulation.<sup>348</sup> At the same time, the interviews are intercut with footage obtained in Aglona during various religious holidays and festivals, such as the celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Basilica and the Festival of Assumption, that takes place in Aglona annually on August 15<sup>th</sup>. Worshippers are shown arriving at the Basilica, participating in masses and celebrations, and singing hymns. The film emphasizes the dedication and respectful manner in which the churchgoers treat the sacred place and its rituals. For instance, the film opens with an old man with a cane and a backpack, presumably having travelled from afar, arriving at the gate of the Basilica. It is winter, and the man struggles to walk in the snow; before he enters the church, he first carefully cleans the snow off his shoes. Witnessing this respectful attitude and the churchgoers' genuineness, juxtaposed with the officious language of the interviewees, the viewer cannot help but identify with the believers and feel deep respect for Aglona's religious culture.

Vidiņš used a similar approach to storytelling via editing of the interviews in his later film, *Pa mūsmājas logu* (Through the Window of our House, 1984). The film is an insight into the history and the present day of a public park in Riga and features interviews with park visitors and local officials. One of the park

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<sup>348</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 27.

visitors is critical of the way the park is managed. Her interview is then followed by an interview with Parks and Gardens Renovation and Construction chief, Ēžens Bokanovs, who begins by claiming that the park is cared for very well, then contradicts himself by making a series of excuses for the poor condition of the park, and in the end blames everything on the weather. As in *Īstos vārdus meklējot*, so too in *Pa mūsmājas logu*, such a method of selecting and juxtaposing documentary evidence acts as a way of commenting on the incompetence of the local authorities, and by extension the Soviet regime in Latvia, with the critical stance of the author remaining relatively unobtrusive.<sup>349</sup>

It was not the content of *Īstos vārdus meklējot*, however, that led to frictions with the authorities for Vidiņš and the co-authors, but the fact that the film's authors distributed and exhibited the film independently in Houses of Culture all over Latgale.<sup>350</sup> Vidiņš recalls the overall interest exhibited by the locals in relation to the film. Latgalians are commonly known for being deeply religious, thus presumably the local audiences of *Īstos vārdus meklējot* had no difficulty in identifying with what they saw on the screen, detecting the contrast between Aglona's actual religious culture and its official representation, and sensing the irony embedded in the editing of the interviews with the local officials, whom Vidiņš describes as 'confused factists'.<sup>351</sup> Thus it was the independent exhibition and in all probability the positive reception of the film that generated problems for Vidiņš and the rest of the crew. As mentioned before, according to Yurchak the Soviet state ultimately exercised hegemony over a representation of reality formulated in the authoritative discourse, thus

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<sup>349</sup> For more on *Pa mūsmājas logu*, see Inese Strupule, 'Latvian Amateur Documentary Film, 1970s–1980s: Family, Community, Travel, and Politics in the Films of Uldis Lapiņš, Ingvars Leitis, and Zigurds Vidiņš', *Culture Crossroads*, 10 (2017), 63–76 <<http://www.culturecrossroads.lv/pdf/225/en>> [accessed 20 November 2020] (pp. 69–71).

<sup>350</sup> Vidiņš, interview.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*

'guaranteeing that any alternative representation or counter-representation would not acquire the same widely circulating status as a shared "public" discourse'.<sup>352</sup> Although it was quite common for amateur filmmakers, especially outside big cities, to film religious holidays and celebrations, these recordings were usually made in the format of a conventional home movie and were never intended to be shown outside the filmmaker's family circle. Aīda Zviedre, who worked as a head instructor at the Latvian Amateur Filmmakers' Society from 1979 onwards and performed a variety of organizational and administrative tasks, especially within the amateur-film festival network, has claimed in interview that 'In Latgale, people loved filming various Christian festivals, and we were told not to qualify them for the district rounds of amateur-film festivals. But people were allowed to keep [the recordings] and show them to their families'.<sup>353</sup>

The independent screenings of *Īstos vārdus meklējot* eventually attracted official attention. As a result, as Vidiņš recalls, he was summoned to the Riga KGB office and pressured into stopping the independent exhibition of his film. Furthermore, Vidiņš claims that he suspects that this incident earned him the status of unreliable person in the KGB records: despite being an avid tourist and active participant in international film festivals, he was not granted permission to travel abroad between 1980 and 1988.<sup>354</sup> In the aftermath of *Īstos vārdus meklējot*, Vidiņš would continue to participate in controversial film projects, and with the coming of *perestroika* would use filmmaking for active patriotic agitation. His films, such as *Daži stāsti bez epiloga* (Several Stories without an Epilogue, 1987–88), a two-hour documentary consisting solely of

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<sup>352</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 27.

<sup>353</sup> 'Latgales pusē ļoti mīlēja tos dažādus kristīgos svētkus filmēt, un tad teica tos uz rajona skatēm tālāk nevirzīt. Tie lai paliek cilvēkam ja viņš grib, lai savai ģimenei rāda'. Aīda Zviedre and Juris Zviedris, interview by Inese Strupule, 2 February 2018, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>354</sup> Vidiņš, interview.

interviews with four Latvian dissidents and former political prisoners, would find a sympathetic reception in the atmosphere generated by the national revival movement that emerged in 1986. To expand upon the present discussion of the relationship between tourism, amateur cinema, and the growing national discontent in Soviet Latvia, the following section of this chapter is dedicated to Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaker Ingvars Leitis and his politically subversive ethnographic documentaries. The case of Leitis's films permits examination of the political uses of amateur cinema in Soviet Latvia, and the ways in which, on occasion, amateur cinema became a tool in political activism.

### **Ingvars Leitis's politically subversive ethnographic documentaries, 1975–89: cover stories and national representation**

Between 1975 and 1989, the historian and amateur filmmaker Ingvars Leitis undertook several trips to Siberia and produced a series of documentary films on the subject of the communities of ethnic Latvians in Siberia. These communities were formed in the mid-nineteenth century, when Latvian peasants in the Russian Empire went to Siberia in search of land. With the passage of time, they were joined by a number of undesirables and convicts deported by the Tsarist authorities. As was the case with many other national minorities of the Soviet Union, the ethnic Latvians of Siberia suffered greatly during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. It was this aspect of their history that most interested Leitis. He made numerous trips to the Latvian villages of Russia between 1975 and 1989, where he filmed extensively and collected testimonies from the locals about their current life, as well as the era of Stalin's purges. These were incorporated into several documentary films that explored and condemned the Soviet-era crimes inflicted on these communities, thus articulating and promoting a narrative that was potentially disruptive to the dominant ideological discourse of the Soviet Union. This section explores the ways in which the three main concerns that defined the nature of political dissent in Latvia — human rights, religious freedom, and national self-determination — were tackled in Leitis's films. More broadly, through the prism of Leitis's life and work, this section also seeks to trace the relationships



between Latvian dissidents, the cultural intelligentsia, amateur creative organizations, and the emerging political forces prior to and during the period of *perestroika* and the overall democratization that was encouraged under Gorbachev.

Prompted by the poor socio-economic climate of the period, now labelled as the Brezhnevite 'era of stagnation', many Soviet amateur filmmakers in the 1970s began to turn their attention to social subjects, often exposing and problematizing the shortcomings of Soviet society and the economy, for example alcoholism, bureaucracy, and shortages in housing and consumer goods.<sup>355</sup> In Soviet Latvia in particular, the amateur-film studios Sintēze in Daugavpils and Ortekons in Riga frequently explored such subjects. These 'social' amateur films were often conceived in the spirit of *grazhdanstvennost'*, or civic-mindedness, and thus cannot be characterized as openly oppositional or dissident. At the same time, however, amateur film equipment was certainly used at times by Latvian dissidents with the clear political purpose of documenting the Soviet state's brutality. In the mid-1970s, for example, the Brūvers brothers, Pāvils and Olafs, together with Jānis Rožkalns, all renowned Latvian dissidents and future members of the human rights group Helsinki-86, used amateur film as a tool against Soviet oppression. On one occasion, daringly, they shot footage of KGB agents entering and leaving the KGB headquarters in Riga, thus exposing their identities. More incriminating footage was obtained when Pāvils managed to film the mistreatment of prisoners in Šķīrotava prison in Riga while pretending to be on a picnic on a nearby hill,

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<sup>355</sup> This mirrored the tendencies in professional documentary cinema in Soviet Latvia and across the Soviet Union at that time. See, for instance, Cāne, 'Latvijas Dokumentālā Kino Komunikatīvo Funkciju Transformācija', pp. 120–28.

with the camera set up amongst food and drink. The films were smuggled to the West and broadcast on television in 1975–76 in a number of countries.<sup>356</sup>

Despite the fact that Leitis also employed film as a tool in the sphere of political activism, he did not view himself as part of the Latvian dissident community, claiming that he was never close to ‘the real dissent veterans, those Helsinkinians’, and identifying more with the restrained opposition prevailing within the circles of Riga’s cultural intelligentsia.<sup>357</sup> Leitis admires what Rožkalns and the Brūvers brothers accomplished, calling their films ‘the greatest achievement of Latvian cine-amateurism’.<sup>358</sup> He, however, chose another oppositional path, undermining the Soviet regime from the inside by acting within its discursive field. Sergei Oushakine first expressed the idea that dissidents, despite being in confrontation with the official discourse, belonged to the same discursive field, drawing ‘on the same vocabulary of symbolic means and rhetorical devices’.<sup>359</sup> The author argues that dissident discourses related to the dominant ideological discourse of the state ‘intradiscursively rather than interdiscursively’, and defines such dissent as a form of ‘mimetic resistance’.<sup>360</sup> Although Oushakine suggests that Soviet dissidents were caught in the discursive web of Soviet society, it can be argued that it was Leitis’s conscious choice to carry out his investigation of the Latvian villages

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<sup>356</sup> For more information on this, see Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, p. 264.

<sup>357</sup> Ingvars Leitis, interview by Inese Strupule, 19 April 2017, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>358</sup> ‘Manuprāt, lielākais latviešu kinoamatierisma sasniegums’. Ingvars Leitis, e-mail to author, 15 November 2015.

<sup>359</sup> Sergei Oushakine, ‘The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat’, *Public Culture*, 13.2 (2001), 191–214 <<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/26243>> [accessed 8 November 2020] (p. 207).

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

within the authoritative discursive regime. As will be demonstrated below, this is evidenced both by his actions and his films.

Leitis began researching ethnic Latvian communities in Siberia in 1974 after an acquaintance told him an anecdote about a group of tourists who came across a Latvian village while on a trip to the Sayan Mountains. Being a historian by education (Leitis graduated from the Latvian State University (Latvijas Valsts Universitāte) with a degree in history in 1973), he began to research the subject of Latvian migrants to Siberia. Leitis discovered a 1928 census that recorded approximately 200,000 Latvians living in Russia: 'A huge number! A tenth of the [Latvian] nation', as he puts it.<sup>361</sup> The existence of non-Russian ethnic communities in Russia was not a taboo topic in itself. It was in fact recorded officially, and various materials concerning the subject were archived in libraries available for academic research. In 1976, for instance, one of the leading Estonian historians of the time, Viktor Maamägi, published a monograph in Russian entitled *Estoniskie poselentsyy v SSSR, 1917–1945* (Estonian Settlers in the USSR, 1917–1945), which told the story of the successful and mutually fruitful integration of the ethnic Estonians of Russia into the Soviet collective farm system.<sup>362</sup> In his work, Maamägi carefully adhered to the official Soviet line on national minorities, which presented the point of view that the aspirations of the Baltic people and other non-Russian minorities of the Soviet Union were being realized in the emancipation of the working class engineered by the Soviet regime. Leitis, however, saw the potential for fostering national remobilization through exploring the seemingly neutral subject of the ethnic Latvian communities in Russia, especially bearing in mind that many of the challenges faced by Siberian Latvians were pertinent for the Latvian SSR too. Thus, the research and amateur films that resulted from Leitis's trips to Siberia can be viewed as an attempt to uncover the

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<sup>361</sup> 'Milzīgs skaits! Desmita daļa no tautas'. Leitis, interview.

<sup>362</sup> Viktor Maamägi, *Estoniskie poselentsyy v SSSR, 1917–1945* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1976).

broader outline of the national history of Latvia in terms of an identity submerged by Soviet anti-nationalism and cultural colonization.

Leitis's film and research project does indeed seem structured by elements that invite examination through the prism of a postcolonial theoretical framework.<sup>363</sup> As Bill Ashcroft has observed, the colonial subject's engagement in the dominant culture 'becomes one in which consumption and production are deeply implicated, and the force of these processes may also lead to changes in that dominant culture itself'.<sup>364</sup> The author maintains that postcolonial resistance need not necessarily entail the utter refusal to engage with its forms and discourses, and that 'the most effective form of resistance' has always been to gain control 'over such things as language, writing and various kinds of cultural discourse', and to 'make use of aspects of the colonizing culture so as to generate transformative cultural production'.<sup>365</sup> This style of resistance is what Ashcroft calls 'interpolation', and it involves interposing, intervening, and interjecting 'a wide range of counter-discursive tactics into the dominant discourse without asserting a unified anti-imperial intention, or a separate oppositional purity'.<sup>366</sup>

Ashcroft's ideas anticipate and resonate with Yurchak's social anthropology of the long course of the Soviet system's decay. Yurchak draws on the Foucauldian thesis that the possibility of resistance to norms is embedded

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<sup>363</sup> The potential relevance of postcolonial studies to the relationship between the Baltic countries and the Soviet Union is explored in Violeta Kelertas, ed., *Baltic Postcolonialism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006); and more recently in the articles collected in an issue of *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 'A Postcolonial View on Soviet Era Baltic Cultures', 47.1 (2016).

<sup>364</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 45.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

within the structure of power itself rather than within the consciousness of an individual.<sup>367</sup> He also references Saba Mahmood's critique of the tendency to equate agency with resistance and her claim that 'agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability'.<sup>368</sup> Yurchak develops these ideas further by arguing that agency can also be implied in acts that are 'neither about change nor about continuity, but about introducing minute internal displacements and mutations into the discursive regime in which they are articulated'.<sup>369</sup> Such acts may seem inconsequential to both participants and observers, but with time lead to the regeneration of the system.<sup>370</sup> In other words, the authoritative discursive conditions and gestures of the state can be appropriated in many different ways. Based on Ashcroft's and Yurchak's observations, this section will attempt to demonstrate that Leitis's work can be interpreted as a process of developing strategies of (national) self-determination by using the Soviet regime's cultural capital and discursive tools, which prompted change within the system that provided them.

### **Riga–Vladivostok cycling tour, subsequent trips, and the first film**

Based on the data he was able to gather, Leitis calculated that the scale of Stalin's purge of 1936–38 must have been enormous in relation to the Siberian Latvians. Despite Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalin and the subsequent process of de-Stalinization, the full extent of Stalin's crimes against the Soviet people largely remained a secret and a highly sensitive topic. A case in point are the scandals and a series of criminal cases surrounding the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Arkhipelag GULAG* (The Gulag Archipelago) in the West in 1973. In spite of Solzhenitsyn's

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<sup>367</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, pp. 27–28.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*

expulsion and the widely publicized persecution of dissidents, Leitis nevertheless decided in 1975 to organize an expedition in search of Latvian villages in Russia with the purpose of learning about the life of the communities there and collecting evidence about the impact of the purges.

Due to the state-imposed restrictions on internal travel, such a journey had to be justified, officially arranged, and supported by documentation. The regime was certainly not going to support a nationally minded investigation of Stalinist crimes. For this reason, Leitis conceived of a rather brilliant cover and decided to organize a cycling trip to Siberia — as he puts it himself: ‘I came up with organizing a Riga–Vladivostok cycling tour, [...] with a completely different purpose on paper, with Soviet slogans, dedicated to some anniversary or whatnot’.<sup>371</sup> As the official press would later write: ‘The tour is dedicated to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Victory [in the Great Patriotic War]’, summarizing the tour’s aims as ‘to gain an overview of the life of the Soviet people and their achievements during the thirty years since the victory, and reflect it in photographs and descriptions’.<sup>372</sup> In other words, Leitis manipulated the state’s authoritative discourse in order to carry out an investigation into the silenced parts of the history of the Siberian Latvian villages, a purpose which, if it had been openly avowed, would have certainly barred Leitis from making any such trip. By practising this most effective form of resistance, to use Ashcroft’s formulation, Leitis added a trickster’s dimension to his work and unleashed the transformative potential of his cultural production, which will be analysed in the final part of this section.

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<sup>371</sup> ‘Tad varētu taisīt velobraucieni Rīga – Vladivostoka, [...] ar citu mērķi, ar padomju lozungiem, kaut kāda tur gadadiena, nezinu kas’. Leitis, interview.

<sup>372</sup> ‘Rīga – Vladivostoka’, *Pionieris*, 16 April 1976, p. 2.



10 Leitis and Briedis crossing the Urals, 1975 (Uldis Briedis collection)

Examining Leitis's plan further, it becomes evident that this 13,000 kilometre trip required the sponsorship of various people and organizations. The degree of their awareness of Leitis's intentions and motivations varied. As Leitis's project had a touristic and ethnographic dimension, he decided to use these aspects to provide further justification for his journey. Firstly, he sought help from the local tourist club. As has already been mentioned above, similar to amateur filmmaking clubs, tourist clubs assembled people with a passion for tourism and travel, and acted as organizational units of this popular leisure activity.<sup>373</sup> There he found support and was provided with the necessary permits to cross federal district borders. The purpose of the trip clearly could not be justified by tourism alone, as Leitis intended to collect information in Russia. In order to avoid getting in trouble, Leitis had to demonstrate just cause for this, and decided to use his academic contacts by getting in touch with Saulvedis Cimmermanis, a professor and head of research at the History

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<sup>373</sup> Koenker, *Club Red*, pp. 142–43.

Department of the Academy of Sciences. As Leitis testifies in his 2016 memoir, which documents his first trip to Siberia in great detail, he informed Cimmermanis that he had an opportunity to collect invaluable ethnographic data on Latvian villages in Russia, omitting the fact he would be cycling to get there, knowing the professor would avoid supporting anything too risky due to his status in the academic community.<sup>374</sup> Cimmermanis, reluctant at first, could not refuse the temptation of such a unique research opportunity and agreed to support Leitis's venture by providing him with materials like ethnographic research guidelines and manuals, questionnaire forms, and photo-film in exchange for access to the invaluable ethnographic data that Leitis intended to collect.<sup>375</sup> Leitis later admitted that his formal ethnographic research mainly involved the accumulation of descriptive detail of little interest, and was at best an inconvenience for him. However, it was useful as a cover story in case of an encounter with the KGB.<sup>376</sup> Here it is again evident that Leitis appealed to the discursive regime of official science in order to be able to collect and disseminate information that was potentially disruptive to the state's dominant ideological discourse.

When his idea started to take more tangible form, Leitis realized that he would need a cycling companion on such a long and exhausting trip. Leitis's acquaintance, the professional photographer and journalist Uldis Briedis, became enthusiastic about the idea and offered to join Leitis in his adventure. Briedis introduced Leitis to an old friend, Gunārs Biezis, who at that time was the editor-in-chief of *Zvaigzne*, a respectable Party-line magazine with a large circulation published in Soviet Latvia. Unlike the tourist club and professor Cimmermanis, both Briedis and Biezis were aware of Leitis's real intentions. Leitis claims that Biezis was the only official 'ready to risk', but trusted them to

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<sup>374</sup> Ingvars Leitis and Uldis Briedis, *Latviešus Sibīrijā meklējot: Veloekspedīcija Rīga – Vladivostoka, 1975* (Rīga: Mansards, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.



act carefully and without ‘creating suspicion’.<sup>377</sup> Biezis believed in the appeal factor of the Riga–Vladivostok cycling tour and offered Leitis and Briedis the official support of *Zvaigzne*. He entrusted them with the task of sending regular progress reports back to Riga in the form of photographs and articles that would be published twice a month. In *Zvaigzne*, the tour was heralded, perfectly in line with the state’s ritualized discourse, as a form of commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, with the aim of showing the progress made by the Soviet people since the victory.<sup>378</sup> In addition to this, Biezis called his acquaintances at the Harkiv Bicycle Factory and negotiated a sponsorship: the factory agreed to provide Leitis and Briedis with bicycles and replacement parts as a marketing move. In this way, the trip became a many-layered project and was carried out from May to November 1975. Briedis photographed extensively, and Leitis came back with a collection of recorded audio footage. However, nothing was filmed that year.

Encouraged by the success of his first trip, Leitis decided to travel to Siberia again in the summer of 1976, this time to the village of Lejas Bulāna. At this point, he was trying to find a way of disseminating the information he had collected in some forum in Latvia that would not alert the authorities while ‘reaching as many people as possible’.<sup>379</sup> As he puts it himself: ‘I could not publish a book, no one would read manuscripts, maybe somebody would listen to an audio recording, but I thought it would be marvellous to shoot something on film’.<sup>380</sup> Just as Leitis used ethnographic research as a cover, so too, he denies any particular interest in amateur filmmaking and talks about it merely

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<sup>377</sup> Leitis, interview.

<sup>378</sup> Leitis and Briedis, *Latviešus Sibīrijā meklējot*, pp. 9–11.

<sup>379</sup> Leitis, interview.

<sup>380</sup> ‘Es grāmatu nevarēju izdot, papīrus un rokrakstus tos arī neviens nelasīs, nu skaņas ierakstu varbūt kāds paklausīsies, bet būtu brīnišķīgi, ja tas būs uz kino tas uztaisīts’. Ibid.

as a tool: 'I took a camera in my hands for the first time in 1976 because I wanted to show what I was discovering in Siberia to people in Latvia. I was not interested in amateur filmmaking for any other reasons'.<sup>381</sup> Leitis barely had any knowledge about the technical aspects of filmmaking. Nevertheless, he had personal connections that allowed him to obtain an 8mm camera, projector, and film stock. He also asked Briedis to teach him the basic rules of composition.<sup>382</sup>

As a result Leitis managed to film salient aspects of his trip to Lejas Bulāna, and the footage was used to create a thirty-minute long film. The film also included some of Briedis's photographs from 1975 and audio recordings of interviews with locals from both trips. The recordings were both political (interviews containing testimonies about Stalin's purges) and folkloric (including segments of songs). Leitis narrated the film's voiceover, which told the story (in accordance with his cover) of his research into Latvian villages in Siberia and hinted at the overall negative impact of the Soviet regime on Siberian Latvians. Leitis protected himself from potential conflict with the law by playing by the rules of the authoritative discourse: 'The text [of my voiceover] was very aggressive and outspoken, but I adapted it to correspond to all the [legal] nuances. They could not pin [any accusation] on me. It could cause disfavour, but there was nothing criminal'.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> 'Pirmo reizi 1976.g. kameru rokā ņēmu aiz tā iemesla, lai varētu tur iegūto informāciju parādīt Latvijā. Citādi kinoamatierisms mani maz interesējis'. Leitis, e-mail.

<sup>382</sup> Leitis, interview.

<sup>383</sup> 'Bet teksts bija ļoti agresīvs un skaļš, bet arī tur tā: es jau tas lietās un smalkumos diezgan labi orientējos. Pilnīgi piesiet nevarēja. Nepatiku izraisīt varēja, bet krimināli tur tā nebija'. Ibid. Here Leitis in all probability refers to the Article 70 of the Criminal Code, 'Anti-Soviet Agitation and Propaganda', which was a criminal offence in the Soviet Union and one of the main instruments for the prosecution of dissidents.

In the autumn of 1976, Leitis started to show his film unofficially. Word travelled fast, and soon the film aroused the interest of Riga's creative intelligentsia. Professional filmmakers Ansis Eppers, Andris Slapiņš, and Vaira Strautniece, and renowned poet Imants Ziedonis all watched the film that year. Seeking to avoid the attention that would have come from a showing in a public forum, Leitis screened the film in the private flats of sympathizers. These showings were attended by poets Uldis Bērziņš, Jānis Rokpelnis, and Knuts Skujenieks, illustrator Anita Kreituse, and composer Imants Zemzaris, among others. As Leitis would later discover, one of these screenings was also attended by an anonymous KGB informant, who identified the attendees and reported on the overall atmosphere of the evening ('a spirit of nihilism and admiration for the West reigned there'), as well as on Leitis's film itself ('the film features many shots of dilapidated buildings, shows negative aspects of life; everything is presented in a tendentious way').<sup>384</sup>

Presumably it was on the basis of this report that Leitis was later summoned by the KGB and asked to present his film for examination. Leitis recalls that, before showing his film to the KGB agents, he worked all night to re-edit the soundtrack and produce a different, self-censored one, without the aggressive voiceover. In his words, the result was 'just pure ethnography'.<sup>385</sup> Here Leitis again foregrounded the ethnographic quality of his research and films in order to disguise the fact that he was essentially engaging in an act of criticizing the Soviet regime and exposing its crimes. The musical folklore he had collected came in handy here: the new soundtrack consisted solely of songs, thus radically changing the meaning of the film. Nevertheless, the KGB officers retained this copy of the film, and Leitis never managed to recover it. However, this did not discourage Leitis from continuing to research and film.

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<sup>384</sup> 'Informācija par Leiti Ingvaru no LPSR VDK informācijas analīzes daļas materiāliem', 1976, DS-63007, Totalitārisma Seku Dokumentēšanas Centrs, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>385</sup> Leitis and Briedis, *Latviešus Sibīrijā meklējot*, p. 307.

In 1977, Leitis bought a 16mm camera and travelled to Siberia in both 1977 and 1978, where he filmed extensively and recorded interviews with the locals, but also encountered more difficulties and restrictions on the part of the authorities. These trips were also officially presented as ethnographic fieldwork. This time around, Leitis reinforced his cover by obtaining a letter of support from another academic at the Latvian Academy of Sciences, Viktors Hausmanis, which stated that Leitis was carrying out ethnographic research and collecting folklore. Leitis's project fitted well within the overall atmosphere of the 'folklore movement', with its emphasis on musical folk art, that gained momentum in the 1960s across the Soviet republics. In 1972, the All-Union Commission for Musical Folk Art (shortened to the Folklore Commission) was formed.<sup>386</sup> The Commission 'provided strong support for the study of musical folklore throughout the country, helped to organise expeditions and fieldwork in many ways, and tested the boundaries of the study of musical folklore by involving a wide range of experts', including filmmakers.<sup>387</sup> This, in turn, resulted in an upsurge in ethnographic films, as the medium of film was effective in reproducing living folk musical forms. The above-mentioned filmmaker Andris Slapiņš, for example, actively collaborated with the Folklore Commission and produced a number of ethnographic films in the course of his career.<sup>388</sup>

Leitis also carried with him a tangible element of authoritative discourse, i.e., the above-mentioned monograph by Viktor Maamägi, a historian and archaeologist who at the time was vice president of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. Leitis chose the text not only because it was a useful precedent for his research, but also because, to use Leitis's words, it was 'loaded with Marxist-Leninist delusions' and helped him to produce a positive impression in

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<sup>386</sup> See Vasileva (Chistyakova) and Trushkina, 'Visual Anthropology in the USSR and Post-Soviet Russia', p. 94.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

case of encounters with local officials and the KGB.<sup>389</sup> Nevertheless, during the 1978 trip, in Rižkovo, Leitis and his travelling companion Juris Riekstiņš were detained, searched, and extensively questioned about the purpose of their travel. Their passports were confiscated by the local KGB, which prevented them from continuing the trip. Ultimately, no grounds for arrest were found, and Leitis and Riekstiņš were allowed to return to Riga. Upon his arrival home, Leitis received a serious warning from the Riga KGB office against travelling to Siberia again. This put a stop to his activity, compelling him to keep a low profile from then on. He wrote later in his memoir: 'I created a precedent within the Soviet penalty system: normally wrongdoers were sent to Siberia; I, on the contrary, was prohibited from crossing the Urals'.<sup>390</sup>

### ***Perestroika and new films***

The cultural and political climate changed drastically in Latvia and across the Soviet Union after Gorbachev became the General Secretary in 1985 and began the official promulgation of *glasnost'* and *perestroika*. Having plenty of film footage and documentation that he had collected over the years, Leitis felt that he could finally start editing and openly showing his films about Latvians in Siberia without fear of official repression. 'As soon as Gorbachev had started *perestroika*, all these things had broken the surface this instant. I was also quick, I had all the materials ready', Leitis reminisces.<sup>391</sup> In 1986, Leitis joined the amateur-film studio of Riga Radio Factory (Rīgas radio rūpnīca, RRR), an act that can also be interpreted as just the kind of semi-oppositional move that meets the criterion of Ashcroft's interpolation. Even though, in 1986, the extent to which *glasnost'* would change the orienting points of state-supported cultural enlightenment was still unclear, Leitis jumped on the changes as an early adopter. He saw that the structures of the state-supported amateur filmmaking

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<sup>389</sup> Leitis and Briedis, *Latviešus Sibīrijā meklējot*, p. 307.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> 'Tikko Gorbačovs sāka to atklātības un perestrojkas politiku, uzreiz tas viss gāja gaisā. Es arī uzreiz – man bija materiāli un viss'. Leitis, interview.

network would allow him not only to use the studio's equipment, but also give him a platform for exhibiting his work, as amateur-film studios' managers had to organize regular screenings to showcase the work of their authors. As Leitis explains, 'I was not really interested in [the studio], [...] it was not what my heart was set on. I was only interested in politics [...]. But one of the advantages was that there I could get film stock and use equipment for free'.<sup>392</sup>

Shortly after joining the studio, Leitis completed the film *Populārzinātniska lekcija par kādu vēstures tēmu* (Popular Scientific Lecture on a Historical Subject, 1986) using the photographs, film footage, and audio recordings from his 1975–78 trips to Siberia. This half-hour long film is virtually a remake of Leitis's first film on the subject, produced in 1976 and confiscated by the KGB shortly after. *Populārzinātniska lekcija* begins with a brief introduction to the history of the main Latvian communities in Siberia, with Leitis touching on the formative violence meted out by the Soviet system on them. He notes two contemporary phenomena: the decline in the population of Siberian Latvians and the sparse knowledge of the Latvian language, especially among the younger generation. We learn that both factors have many causes, among which are the relocation or repatriation of Latvians in search of better lives. The fragmentation of communities as they mix with other ethnicities, the lack of a Latvian-language literature and press, and the absence of Latvian teachers have resulted in the fact that Latvian is spoken predominantly by the older generations.

Throughout *Populārzinātniska lekcija*, Leitis mixes the historical background with contemporary concerns about the educational problem, and addresses the necessity to stimulate national culture regeneration and to ameliorate the native language illiteracy in the Latvian villages. It is clear that Leitis feels personally responsible for these issues. This is witnessed when, in a voiceover, he mentions bringing vinyl recordings of facts and information about

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<sup>392</sup> 'Un man tas īpaši neinteresēja, [...] tas nebija tas, ar ko man sirds būtu aizrauta. Man tīri bija tā politika [...]. Un kas tur bija par labumiem — ka tur varēja dabūt filmu, materiālus pa velti varēja dabūt'. Ibid.

the Jāņi, the traditional Latvian summer solstice festival, and amplifying them through the village loudspeaker in Rižkovo on the eve of the celebration, and the fact that he left a number of Latvian books at the local library with the permission of the librarian. It was with this agenda in mind that Leitis began to distribute and promote *Populārzinātniska lekcija* and his subsequent films, *Lejas Bulānas hronika* (Chronicles of Lejas Bulāna, 1987) and *Ciemošanās Balajā* (Visiting Balai, 1987), hoping to raise awareness about the issues faced by Siberian exiles through his films. He was helped by the fact that the RRR studio represented him to the community of amateur filmmakers: the films were entered into various amateur-film festivals and film programs, with *Populārzinātniska lekcija* awarded the best popular-scientific film at the 29th Republican amateur-film festival (8–11 April, 1987, in Riga).<sup>393</sup> On the initiative of the RRR studio, the film was also shown in various Houses of Culture and museums across Latvia, in the Latvian Amateur Filmmakers' Society, and even at Telefilma-Riga, a professional television-film studio.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> 'A. Popova RRR Kultūras nama kinoamatieru studijas atskaite par 1986/1987. g. sezonu', April 1987, RKM-7239, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, pp. 3–4.

<sup>394</sup> 'A. Popova RRR Kultūras nama kinoamatieru studijas atskaite par 1987/1988. g. sezonu', April 1988, RKM-7240, Rīgas Kino muzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, pp. 4–5.



11 The children of the village of Rižkovo are browsing through Latvian-language books. Still from *Populārzinātniska lekcija par kādu vēstures tēmu*

The authorial voice expressed through voiceover in *Populārzinātniska lekcija* is critical of the way active violence towards the Siberian Latvians has been succeeded by malign neglect of the national culture as a result of the Russianization imposed by the Soviet regime. At the same time, Leitis's voiceover is almost a parody of the usual practice of the Soviet documentary filmmaking tradition, thus reminding the audience of the didactic manner in which the narrator in Mikhail Romm's classic Soviet documentary *Obyknovennyi fashizm* (Everyday Fascism, 1965) comments on the atrocities of the Nazi regime. This, combined with the awkward choice of title for the film, which conveys relatively little and replicates the language of a Soviet TV program, can be interpreted as an appropriation and manipulation of the authoritative discourse by Leitis, who, either deliberately or unwittingly, inhabited Soviet cultural codes and imbued them with alternative meaning. Just as Leitis had operated under an ethnographic cover to investigate the effects of Stalinist terror on Latvians in Siberia, the title he chose was meant



to sound so innocuous and vague that it could mean anything, and thus would not attract unwanted official attention.

When it comes to addressing the more sensitive topic of human rights violations under Stalin's rule, however, Leitis refrains from voiceover commentary and lets the subjects of his documentary speak for themselves. Their openness in relation to Stalin's atrocities can be regarded as striking even in the context of *glasnost*'. In the middle of the film, for example, we are shown an interview with two women who talk about their experiences of collectivization, starvation, and the wave of arrests targeted at men in the prime of life in the 1930s. They are initially careful (one interviewee hesitantly starts by saying 'If I am allowed to say this...'), but then provide gruesome details of the Great Terror in Siberian Latvian communities, such as 'When my husband was taken, I was left alone with five little children', and 'They only took fathers and husbands — all innocent, they did not hurt a fly, never said a word against the government'. As we hear these testimonies, we are shown a travelling close-up of a document containing a long list of male names, whom we assume are the repressed men to whom the interviewees are referring.

After the success of *Populārzinātniska lekcija*, Leitis returned to Siberia in 1987, and — without interference from the KGB — researched and filmed in the village of Balai. This resulted in the twenty-minute long film entitled *Ciemošanās Balajā*. Here again the centre of interest lies in the testimonies of the locals about Stalin's genocide and repressions in its peak year of 1937. The film reflects the disinhibiting effects of *glasnost*': for instance, the interviewees do not hesitate to describe the psychological and physical tortures to which they were subjected in the forced labour camps. Leitis eliminates the authorial voiceover and instead simply splices together an edited selection of his interviews with Balaians. However, using the editing technique of juxtaposition and contrast similar to that of Vidiņš in *Īstos vārdus meklējot*, Leitis does not eliminate the contextualizing and editorializing features of his early films. Instead, he creates an audio-visual montage by cutting, for instance, from the torture testimonies to upbeat Soviet music accompanying a Soviet newspaper headline saying 'Life has become more

joyous, comrades!', a phrase from Stalin's speech of November 1935 that became a slogan marking the end of rationing and the reappearance of consumer goods in Soviet cities, just before the machinery of repression was ramped up for the Great Purges.

In 1987, apart from Balai, Leitis revisited the village of Lejas Bulāna, which resulted in the film *Lejas Bulānas hronika*. The structure and content of *Lejas Bulānas hronika* is very similar to *Populārzinātniska lekcija*. However, a new focal point, absent from *Populārzinātniska lekcija*, is introduced: the anti-religious persecutions in Latvian villages in Siberia that were part of the anti-religious campaigns of 1928–41. Recounting the repression they faced in the late 1930s, Leitis's interviewees give testimonies that collectively evoke the defiling and repurposing of the local church. Through the voiceover and close-ups of archival evidence, Leitis contextualizes this story with the broader history of the village itself, which, it turns out, was founded by Lutheran priests to congregate the Lutheran deportees from Western provinces of the Russian Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. These were, for the most part, the ancestors of today's Bulanians.<sup>395</sup> This prompts the viewer to become aware of the value that religion carries for the residents of the village.

To elaborate upon this point, Leitis films a sequence focusing on the matriarch of the village, an old woman called Ciņu Paulīna. On the audio track, we hear her voice describing a religious ritual performed on a child, probably an interpretation of the baptism ceremony, and reciting some prayers. The author's voiceover then interrupts Paulīna to explain that she baptized hundreds of Bulanians, as well as to tell us that she has collected and written down most of the folklore of the village. At this point Leitis again voices his concern over the issue of the disappearance of the national culture of the Siberian Latvians, reflecting upon the major anxiety behind his film and

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<sup>395</sup> For more on the history of Lejas Bulāna, see Philip Birzulis, 'Hell (and Heaven) on Earth: Latvians in Lejas Bulāna', *Latvians Online*, 23 October 2001 <<http://latviansonline.com/hell-and-heaven-on-earth-latvians-in-lejas-bulana/>> [accessed 8 November 2020].

research project. He ponders the enormous cultural and historical gap between ethnic Siberian Latvians and their 'big brothers', and places the blame on the lack of cultural exchange between Latvia and the Siberian Latvians. Leitis shows us, in close-up, a banner sent to the locals from Latvia a decade earlier — around the time that Leitis first visited the village — and laments in his voiceover the fact that '[t]his is everything that our younger brothers got from today's Latvian cultural riches'. Perhaps unwittingly borrowing Soviet official phraseology, with its emphasis on 'fraternity' among nations, the filmmaker once more demonstrates the extent to which the discourse of the opposition operated under the authoritative discursive conditions.

Due to the limited and sporadic nature of exhibition in the sphere of amateur cinema, it is challenging to assess the socio-political and cultural impact of amateur films. Nevertheless, it is clear that Leitis's films left a footprint on the life of late-Soviet Latvian society. After watching Leitis's first film in 1976, professional filmmakers Andris Slapiņš and Vaira Strautniece followed Leitis's trail and went to Lejas Bulāna, producing a documentary film entitled *Nakts pirms dziesmas* (Night Before Song, 1979). The film was certainly risky, and thus had a very limited release, but it mostly complied with official Soviet cultural policy and was not repressed, showing that, if nationally minded themes were presented in the guise of the kind of cultural enlightenment the Soviet system encouraged, such representation could be produced and shown. It was not until the advent of *glasnost'* that the historical-ethnic themes that Leitis had been exploring in his work were properly picked up and developed, often by fellow amateur filmmakers who encountered Leitis's films in screenings hosted by the amateur film network. As has already been mentioned, in 1987–88 Zigurds Vidiņš produced *Daži stāsti bez epiloga* (Several Stories without an Epilogue), a two-hour documentary film consisting solely of extensive interviews with four Latvian dissidents and former political prisoners. In this film, the already mentioned Jānis Rožkalns, as well as Bronislava Martuževa, Lidija Lasmane-Doroņina, and Elza Rūķīte-Ķeikule-Frīdlandere openly talk about the repressions they faced not only under Stalin, but also in the post-1953 era of Soviet rule. In turn, in 1989, Eliass Peisenieks and Imants Hauks of the VEF studio produced *Sīkstums* (Tenacity), a

documentary telling the life story of a woman whose whole family greatly suffered from Soviet rule. Like Leitis's films and *Daži stāsti bez epiloga*, *Sīkstums* relies heavily on first-persons account of repressions.

Once Leitis was able to exhibit his films relatively freely, they began to assume a presence beyond the sphere of amateur filmmaking. The nationally minded themes and approach of Leitis's films, as well as their recording of testimonies to state directed suppression of everyday Latvian life, found a sympathetic reception in the atmosphere generated by the national revival movement that emerged in 1986. Leitis recalls that his films were often shown at different events celebrating the Awakening throughout Latvia and set in motion many initiatives.<sup>396</sup> After having raised awareness about the issue of Siberian exiles by means of his films, Leitis was invited to organize the Siberian Latvian Support Section on the premises of the Club of Environmental Protection (Vides Aizsardzības Klubs, VAK). As mentioned previously, the issue of the environment, although relatively neutral in political terms, was the area of 'the first sustained expressions of dissatisfaction with the status quo' in the Baltic states with the coming of *glasnost*, and became closely linked to their national liberation movements.<sup>397</sup> Founded at the onset of *perestroika* in 1986, VAK was a key non-governmental participant in the environmentalist movement that helped dismantle the image of Soviet competence, and thus became a formative force behind the Awakening. The Siberian Latvian Support Section was intended to bridge the cultural gap between Latvia and its Siberian exiles: its activists were behind the educational mission targeted at Latvian Siberians, as well as the repatriation support programme.<sup>398</sup>

This dynamic was very common in the era of *perestroika*. As White has observed, the appeal to reform through democratization, which sounded with

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<sup>396</sup> Leitis and Briedis, *Latviešus Sibīrijā meklējot*, pp. 307–08.

<sup>397</sup> Misiunas and Taagepera, *The Baltic States*, pp. 304–05.

<sup>398</sup> Austra Bolševica, 'Krievijas Latviešu biedrība', *Dzimtenes Balss*, 10 August 1989, p. 5.

increasing urgency in the Socialist bloc countries from the mid-1980s onwards, was not only limited to reforms in the political sphere, but also pushed for the development of civil society. This vision gave legitimacy to various non-governmental organizations and cultural institutions as they agitated in favour of reform.<sup>399</sup> What is compelling about Leitis's ethnographic documentaries is the ways in which they demonstrate the unexpected intervention of amateur filmmaking in a society in which the state supposedly organizes the cultural education of its citizens. Leitis's amateur films intervened in the discourse of the cultural politics of Soviet Latvia at a crucial time, when the visible weakening of Soviet power intersected with the rising power of a national revival movement.

Despite the particularities of Leitis's story, and his ostensible lack of interest in amateur filmmaking generally, the Leitis case is still illustrative of certain patterns in the amateur filmmaking community in Soviet Latvia and other socialist states. For one thing, the improvisational organization of Leitis's project forced him to rely on formal and informal networks of people and organizations in order to bring it about. This was not unusual. Although the state provided a certain amount of training and equipment to amateur filmmaking organizations, filmmakers often found themselves having to use their own connections and contacts in order to obtain materials or achieve results.<sup>400</sup> In addition to this, it was common practice for amateurs to create a cover for their explorations of more controversial topics by sampling film that was made within the framework of accepted norms and forms of the authoritative discourse and recontextualizing it to bring out more subversive or critical meanings. For instance, Vidiņš's previously mentioned documentary film *Pa mūsmājas logu* is an insight into the history and the present day of a public park in Riga that, by overviewing the park's management issues in the

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<sup>399</sup> White, *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>400</sup> For more on this dynamic, see Vinogradova, 'Socialist Movie Making vs. Gosplan', pp. 22–25.

spirit of *grazhdanstvennost'*, offers an implicit critique of the Soviet rule in Latvia.

Despite the thematic controversy of some Soviet amateur films, including those of Vidiņš and Leitis, they were nevertheless largely dependent on the dominant discourse — as their production process depended on the state sponsorship — and did not constitute a self-contained oppositional purity. It is useful in this context to move away from characterizing amateur films with critical elements as anti-Soviet and purely oppositional, and their authors as intending consciously to subvert the established system, and instead to regard these critical elements as ‘internal displacements and mutations [in] the discursive regime in which they are articulated’, to use Yurchak’s formulation.<sup>401</sup> It is also important to bear in mind that even if Leitis’s position was more politically conscious and perhaps more actively aimed at prompting actual change within the Soviet system, amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia, like many other forms of cultural production, was not necessarily informed by support or opposition to the Soviet ideological system. As is demonstrated throughout this thesis, however, amateur filmmaking nevertheless became a platform for creating alternative political, social, and cultural meanings, such as the prospects for Latvian national identity development and national heritage preservation. The process of engaging with the forms and discourses of the dominant culture, and thus being able to circulate as part of a shared public discourse and to find resonance with audiences, often unleashed the transformative potential of many amateur films.

These observations open up space for debate on the role of amateur film in advancing our historical knowledge of the minoritized national cultures and arts. The next chapter will build upon the discussion of social-issue amateur cinema and its civic engagements and combine it with considerations regarding experimental and avant-garde sensibilities present in many Soviet Latvian amateur films. By looking for traces of experimental filmmaking practices on the peripheries of the Soviet state film industry, namely, in

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<sup>401</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 28.

amateur-film studios and self-organized groups of non-professional filmmakers, the following chapter attempts to challenge the scholarly canonization of the Soviet cinematic avant-garde and to contribute to the broadening of our understanding of what constitutes 'experimental cinema' under socialism.

## Chapter 4 Innovation and Experiments on the Periphery of the State Film Industry

Experimental or avant-garde cinema is customarily defined as a mode of filmmaking that challenges mainstream cinema and its established conventions, and explores alternative narrative forms and methods of creating film. Film scholars who first defined experimental cinema as a separate sphere, most notably P. Adams Sitney, tended to focus primarily on its formal characteristics, such as, for instance, the subversion of conventional representations of cinematic time and space through cinematography and editing, the use of symbolism in storytelling, etc.<sup>402</sup> As the scholarship on experimental film evolved, an approach that combines considerations of filmic form and content with production, exhibition, and reception contexts, as well as a variety of external factors, such as socio-political, economic, and institutional contexts, has broadened our understanding of alternative filmmaking modes and is arguably proving to be more fruitful. A.L. Rees, whose monograph *A History of Experimental Film and Video* embraces such a combined approach, writes that the avant-garde

[...] has sought 'ways of seeing' outside the conventions of cinema's dominant tradition in the drama film and its industrial mode of production. [...] At other times film avant-gardes emerge out of wider social movements to speak for silenced or dissident voices. [...] Their search is less for formal purity than for a new language uncompromised by the regimes they resist. [...] Whether they look to aesthetics or politics for their context, the films of the avant-garde

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<sup>402</sup> See, for example, Sitney's analysis of *Un chien Andalou* (The Andalusian Dog, 1929, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí) and *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943, Maya Deren) in P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 3–15.



challenge the major codes of dramatic realism which determine meaning and response in the commercial fiction film.<sup>403</sup>

In their introduction to the issue of *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* that explores experimental cinema in socialist Eastern Europe, Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi propose to uphold this 'hybrid' approach to experimental cinema created in the context of a socialist state.<sup>404</sup> They emphasize the necessity of broadening our understanding of what constitutes 'experimental cinema' under socialism and understand it to mean 'unconventional approaches not just to the final cinematic product, but to the many processes involved in its production, distribution, exhibition and reception, as well'.<sup>405</sup> As acutely observed by the authors, 'such alternative processes [...] in post-war Eastern Europe were likely to create experimental breeding grounds'.<sup>406</sup> In their view, such filmmaking venues as self-organized groups of artists and non-professional filmmakers, amateur film clubs, or smaller film studios, such as, for instance, those tasked with the production of educational content, differed greatly from the large, central, state, professional film studios (primarily focused on feature film-making) in their 'division of creative labour, funding sources and models, availability of technical equipment, intended audiences and expectations for (commercial) success'.<sup>407</sup> As a result, these peripheral filmmaking hubs produced works that represented an alternative to widely

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<sup>403</sup> A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>404</sup> Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi, 'Experimental cinema in state socialist Eastern Europe', *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, 7.1 (2016), 2–11 <doi:10.1080/2040350X.2016.1112499>.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*

distributed mainstream films, and hence were also at times bound to become a springboard for cinematic experiments. The necessity of examining the peripheries of film industries in search of the avant-garde is also substantiated by Rees, who elaborates upon his characterization of the avant-garde by observing that ‘...[a]s the dominant and industrial cinema achieved higher production values and greater spectacle, the avant-garde affirmed its “otherness” in cheap, personal and “amateur” films which circulated outside the cinema chains’.<sup>408</sup>

The considerations of experimental cinema under socialism inspired by this combined or hybrid approach are particularly necessary due to the fact that the cinematic avant-garde in the Soviet Union is discussed very rarely outside the 1920s avant-garde movement and the filmmaking practices and theories of Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eizenshtein, and Dziga Vertov. As aptly observed by Fibla-Gutierrez, ‘the scholarly canonization of the avant-garde as a group of well-known auteurs has obscured other radical developments in film that have greatly advanced film culture in certain contexts’.<sup>409</sup> In view of this, the present chapter attempts to broaden our understanding of the Soviet cinematic avant-garde by looking for traces of experimental filmmaking practices on the peripheries of the Soviet state film industry, namely, in amateur-film studios and self-organized groups of non-professional filmmakers. A number of case studies are therefore explored as part of this chapter; these are the innovative and experimental tendencies in film production of the amateur-film collective of the House of Culture of LRAP in the 1960s, the experimental filmmaking practices in the circles of Riga’s bohemian youth in the 1970s, and the body of experimental films produced by the new generation of the amateur filmmakers at the Academy of Sciences in the 1980s.

It is important nevertheless to bear in mind that the combined approach to experimental cinema poses the danger of equating amateurism and

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<sup>408</sup> Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, p. 2.

<sup>409</sup> Fibla-Gutierrez, ‘A Vernacular National Cinema’, p. 4.

experimental filmmaking practices purely on the basis of their peripheral nature and a certain degree of antagonism in relation to professional mainstream cinema. The potentially problematic nature of this approach is addressed at length by Moran, who claims that amateurism is often essentialized and politicized by means of 'equating its practices and texts with the avant-garde'.<sup>410</sup> He observes that since amateurism is often viewed as 'a set of textual signifiers, techniques, and socio-political ideologies negating those of the industrial system', the avant-garde risks becoming the defining essence of amateurism by virtue of 'its resistance to all things industrial'.<sup>411</sup> At the same time, any amateur filmmaking practice that 'overlaps with industrial techniques, properties, goals, or ideologies may be deemed corrupted or deformed'.<sup>412</sup> Indeed, according to this logic, family films are often condemned for 'betrayal of amateur strategies of resistance' as they usually fail to challenge the dominant ideology in any explicit manner.<sup>413</sup>

Due to its highly organized and institutionalized nature, socialist-era amateur cinema on the whole often had more in common with mainstream professional cinema than with avant-garde filmmaking practices. Nevertheless, the various crossovers between amateur and avant-garde practices occurred regularly in this geopolitical context. As noted by Shand, amateur filmmakers are often actively involved in the 'creation of an amateur film aesthetic', one that is 'both parasitic upon professional practices and innovative toward amateur practices at one and the same time'.<sup>414</sup> This is particularly relevant to socialist-era amateur-film practitioners: although extensively borrowing from official film language, mostly due to the relative absence of other cultural references in the

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<sup>410</sup> Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video*, p. 66.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

<sup>414</sup> Shand, 'Theorizing Amateur Cinema', p. 54.

atmosphere of culturally rigid socialist state, they were also more prone to experimenting with form and content due to the more relaxed control mechanisms in relation to the output of amateur filmmaking clubs when compared to the professional cinema industry. Due to their highly marginal status within the filmmaking industry, moreover, amateur studios often adopted unconventional approaches as far as the processes of production, distribution, and exhibition were concerned. Experimental tendencies in amateur cinema in the context of state socialism, however, often challenge the idea of avant-garde's independence from and resistance to the industrial, institutional, and commercial aspects of cinema. The experimental tendencies within Soviet Latvian amateur cinema explored in this chapter for the most part show strong affiliation with state institutions or reliance on their structures. Furthermore, in the case of Soviet Latvia legitimization from the professional filmmaking sphere was often sought by amateur cinema practitioners involved in experimental filmmaking. As discussed in detail in one of the sections of this chapter, this was manifested in them developing relationship and seeking collaboration with the professional filmmakers, or pursuing employment in the professional film industry.

In this connection, the assessment of experimental tendencies within Soviet Latvian amateur cinema offered by the renowned Latvian film critic and historian Agris Redovičs is particularly apt. Redovičs witnessed the evolution of the Latvian amateur filmmaking movement over a period of three decades, working in the early years of his career as an instructor at LKAB, and later as a frequent member on the juries at various amateur-film festivals. He notes that:

At amateur film screenings, [...] one could see things that were absent from official cinema [...] and observe a very rich spectrum and entirely unexpected things. You more or less knew what you could expect from professional filmmakers, but [in amateur cinema] all kinds of surprises could be witnessed. [...] It was so unpredictable and different, and offered a certain contrast to the official culture. The official culture, after all, did not seem that attractive to most people. And [in amateur films] [...] you could see something fresh and unconventional. At times, it was very boring; not all amateur films were extremely interesting. I think that for the most part amateurs made films following the examples set by the

professionals, thinking, 'this is how things need to be done, and I am going to do it this way'. Those who broke the rules, and did things differently, were a minority, an elite. However, it was they who remained in history.<sup>415</sup>

In order to provide some specificity to Redovičs's characteristics of 'unconventional', 'unexpected', 'different', and 'fresh', this chapter draws on Moran's theoretical model of modes, functions, and vectors operating within a media text. As touched upon in the introduction to this thesis, in order to solve issues pertinent to critical approaches to amateur cinema — its amalgamation with experimental and avant-garde filmmaking practices being one of them — Moran suggests conceiving of both amateurism and the avant-garde as *modes* of filmmaking practice with a variety of cultural functions they can perform. He specifies that 'functional modalities' do not generate 'uniform taxonomies of media texts' since 'several modes may operate within a single text'.<sup>416</sup> Thus a text/film can be both amateur and avant-garde, while each modality functions independently of the other and does not determine the other. As he writes:

Yet unlike a hybrid genre, in which elements may mix, we would never speak of hybrid modes; instead, modalities tend to alternate within a text, each serving the cultural function for the moment it is intended. [...] The point of functional taxonomy is not to construct arguments about purity [...] but to locate and understand the

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<sup>415</sup> 'Tās amatieru filmu skatēs [...] varēja redzēt tādas lietas, kas oficiālajā kino nebija, [...] varēja redzēt ļoti bagātīgo spektru, un pilnīgi negaidītas lietas. Un profesionāļiem tu apmērām zini kas tur būs. Bet tur varēja visādi brīnumi būt. [...] Tas tā neparedzamība, citādība, kas bija kaut kāds kontrasts ar oficiālo kultūru. Tā oficiālā kultūra tomēr vairumam sabiedrības nelikās pievilcīga. Un [amatierfilmās] [...] tu redzi kaut ko svaigu, neformālo. Reizēm ļoti arī bija garlaicīgi, nav jau tā, ka visas amatierfilmas ir baigi interesantas. Es domāju, ka tā bija lielāka daļa amatieru kas taisīja filmas pēc profesionāļu paraugiem — "tā vajag, un es taisu tā". Tie kas jau lauza to un taisīja citādāk, tad tas jau bija mazākums, tāda elite. Bet tie arī palikuši vēsturē'. Agris Redovičs, interview by Inese Strupule, 17 November 2017, Jūrmala, Latvia.

<sup>416</sup> Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video*, p. 69.

diversity of intentions criss-crossing through texts and among fields of practice, to sort out their fuzzy resemblances in order to appreciate distinctions of both/and rather than either/or.<sup>417</sup>

In addition to this, Moran specifies that each function can operate along conservative/radical and aesthetic/social functional vectors. In his view, the conservative vector defines filmmaking practices 'that seek to preserve and legitimate a set of beliefs', whereas the radical vector accounts for 'practices that challenge a system of values, seeking to extend its range or alter its basic principles'.<sup>418</sup> Rather than seeing this as a binary system in which amateur filmmaking practices either support or oppose the official ideological discourse, Moran suggests viewing it within the framework of a conservation/transformation or articulation/reformulation dynamic; moreover, both vectors may intersect within a single text.<sup>419</sup> In turn, the aesthetic vector defines filmmaking practices that foreground form, whereas the social vector defines those that foreground content. Again, a single text 'will usually be structured-in-dominance by one or the other', but both vectors can function within it.<sup>420</sup>

According to Moran, avant-garde cinema is situated at the intersection of aesthetic and social vectors with radical vectors: 'as the effect of the intersection of aesthetic and radical vectors, avant-garde formalism foregrounds gestures of rebellion against prevailing aesthetic conventions', whereas 'as an effect of the intersection of social and radical vectors, avant-garde activism foregrounds gestures of rebellion against prevailing social conventions'.<sup>421</sup> This definition echoes Rees's revised characterization of what

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

constitutes avant-garde as cited above: 'whether they look to aesthetics or politics for their context', the film avant-garde seeks to contest 'the major codes of dramatic realism which determine meaning and response in the commercial fiction film'.<sup>422</sup> Alongside exercising the above-mentioned combined or hybrid approach in relation to the examples of experimental filmmaking practices within Soviet Latvian amateur cinema, this chapter intends to adopt Moran's theoretical model in relation to these examples, and to trace the dynamic interplay among their functional vectors from one decade to another in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the ways in which experimental tendencies functioned and transformed in the context of state socialism.

### **Amateur experiments in the 1960s: Animation and photo films at the LRAP studio**

In its early days, the post-war amateur filmmaking movement in the Soviet Union largely drew its inspiration from the cinematic culture of the post-1917 era with its commitment to experimentation with filmic techniques, radical formal innovation, and overall search for new forms of cinematic expression. As mentioned previously, the official discourse surrounding post-war amateur cinema openly acknowledged the importance of early Soviet cinematic culture for contemporary amateur filmmaking practices. It also posited the post-war amateur movement as a continuation of that culture, and the period of the late 1950s and early 1960s as the era of realization of the unrealized ideas of the 1920s (for that matter, as mentioned earlier, *Ia — kinoliubitel'* opens with a reference to Vertov and his documentary filmmaking theories and practices). Indeed, the first generation of post-war Soviet amateur filmmakers, often encouraged by the rapid technological development of audio-visual equipment, did not hesitate to innovate. The amateur filmmakers of the House of Culture of VEF, for instance, endeavoured to create the first variscopic film in the USSR.

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<sup>422</sup> Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, p. 1.

Varioscopic cinematography (in Russian, *polikadrovoe* or *poliekrannoe kino*) is a term used to describe a variety of methods for creating a film print using multiple frames or projecting multiple film reels on the same screen at the same time, the most primitive being a simultaneous projection of separately made films on the same surface, using several projectors.<sup>423</sup> Emma Bramnik-Vul'fson, the then head of the VEF amateur-film studio, reminisces that around 1962 another studio member, Fredijs Kramers, had the habit of perusing foreign film magazines, and thus discovered that experiments with varioscopic cinematography were being conducted abroad.<sup>424</sup> This is how the idea for making *Net!* (No!, in other sources *Atoms — jā, karš — nē!* (Yes to Atom, No to War!, 1962) was born.<sup>425</sup> The film is regarded as lost, but based on Bramnik-Vul'fson's account and contemporary reviews, *Net!* appears to have been an anti-war collage film, edited using 1930s and 1940s newsreels, that consisted of three three-minute long segments that were intended to be screened simultaneously using three projectors.<sup>426</sup> The film was premiered in Moscow at the event showcasing Latvian amateur cinema and organized by the Organizing Committee of the Filmmakers' Union, where, despite all the

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<sup>423</sup> For more on the history of varioscopic cinematography in the USSR and Mosfil'm's artistic workshop, entitled 'Sovpolikadr', which was dedicated to this phenomenon, see Maksim Kaziuchits, "Sovpolikadr": poliekrannyi i polikadrovyyi fil'm v istorii kinematografa 1960–1980-kh', *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, 104 (2013), 288–96.

<sup>424</sup> Emma Bramnik-Vul'fson, 'Nostal'giia: VEF-film studio', *Proza.ru*, 2 June 2014 <<https://www.proza.ru/2014/06/02/1823>> [accessed 19 November 2020].

<sup>425</sup> 'Kinostudija — rūpnīcā', *Dzimtenes Balss*, 4 October 1962, p. 2.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*; Bramnik-Vul'fson, 'Nostal'giia: VEF-film studio'.



technical limitations, it was screened using three projectors as intended and was awarded the honorary diploma for innovation and experiment.<sup>427</sup>

The VEF filmmakers' work with varioscopic cinematography was path-breaking in the Soviet Union: on a mainstream scale, varioscopic cinematography was used for the first time in Rolan Bykov's musical film *Aibolit-66* only in 1966. For this reason, *Net!* can be characterized as radical in intention by reason of its tapping into the trend of continuation of 1920s avant-garde cinematic culture, as well as due to the fact that the creators of the film ingeniously used limited resources and foreign insight in their attempt to compete for innovation (although not economically) with official film production. At the same time, *Net!* explores a social subject on the distinctly conservative side of the spectrum — its anti-war theme was commonplace in the 1960s and fitted well with the official narrative — but does it with a radically aesthetic twist. A collage film that recycled old newsreels and intended to be screened using multiple projectors challenged prevailing cinematic conventions of both amateur and professional cinema of the time.

A similar direction was undertaken by the amateur-film studio of the House of Culture of Latvian Trade Unions Council (Latvijas Republikas arodbiedrību padome, LRAP), which explored the hitherto untried terrain of animation. As mentioned previously in Chapter One, the LRAP studio emerged out of filmmaking courses organized by the House of Culture management in the late 1950s. By the mid-1960s, it had become one of the leading amateur-film studios in Soviet Latvia with a strong technical base. This allowed for groundbreaking experiments with stop-motion and drawn animation, and attempts to compete with the Soviet Latvian professional film industry.

The studio of the House of Culture of LRAP was informally known as Ģilde (or Guild) because the House of Culture of LRAP was hosted in the building known as the Small Guild, which was constructed to serve as the headquarters of the eponymous organization of Riga craftsmen, active between 1352 and 1936.

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<sup>427</sup> Bramnik-Vul'fson, 'Nostal'ģija: VEF-film studio'.

The amateur film collective Ģilde was born in late 1958, when the Artistic Director of the House of Culture of LRAP, Modris Šubiņš, organized a series of lectures on the practical aspects of filmmaking, and invited professional filmmakers from the Riga Film Studio as speakers.<sup>428</sup> Šubiņš invited an acquaintance, Osvalds Dinvietis, who was a graphic artist with a strong interest in photography, to join Ģilde. Dinvietis subsequently headed the collective until the 1970s and became its creative driving force.<sup>429</sup> The collective was soon joined by a number of like-minded people from artistic and technological backgrounds, among them Elmārs Riekstiņš, an engineer at VEF, and Šarls Taics, a graphic artist and designer. This determined the collective's creative course for the years to come.

In the winter of 1961–62, Taics and Dinvietis had the idea of making an animation short film using the paper cut-out stop-motion animation technique. The result of their efforts, entitled *216. Istabas noslēpums* (The Mystery of Room 216, 1963), derived from a trial-and-error experiment (despite being familiar with graphic design, none of the Ģilde's members had experience in animation) and became Latvia's first animated film.<sup>430</sup> *216. Istabas noslēpums* cleverly combines a satirical critique of the realities of the everyday life with elements of the crime-film genre. In the film, we see a gangster who is intent on robbing a bank. After wandering down long Kafkaesque corridors, however, he faces poor customer service at a cash desk in room 216: the three women-cashiers entirely ignore him as they make personal calls, smoke, put on make-

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<sup>428</sup> Viese, 'Pirmie animācijā', p. 70.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> As researched by Ieva Viese, a Latvian film critic and historian who has investigated animation cinema in Latvia, the Ģilde collective was indeed behind the pioneering work in the genre of animation in Latvia, years before filmmaker Arnolds Burovs and his team at the Riga Film Studio produced the puppet animation film *Ki-ke-ri-gū!* (Cock-a-doodle-doo!, 1966), which is often hailed as the first animated film made in Latvia. Ibid., pp. 69–70.

up, read, and even dance. Failing to attract the cashiers' attention, the robber collapses on the floor as one of the cashiers places a 'closed' sign in front of her desk.

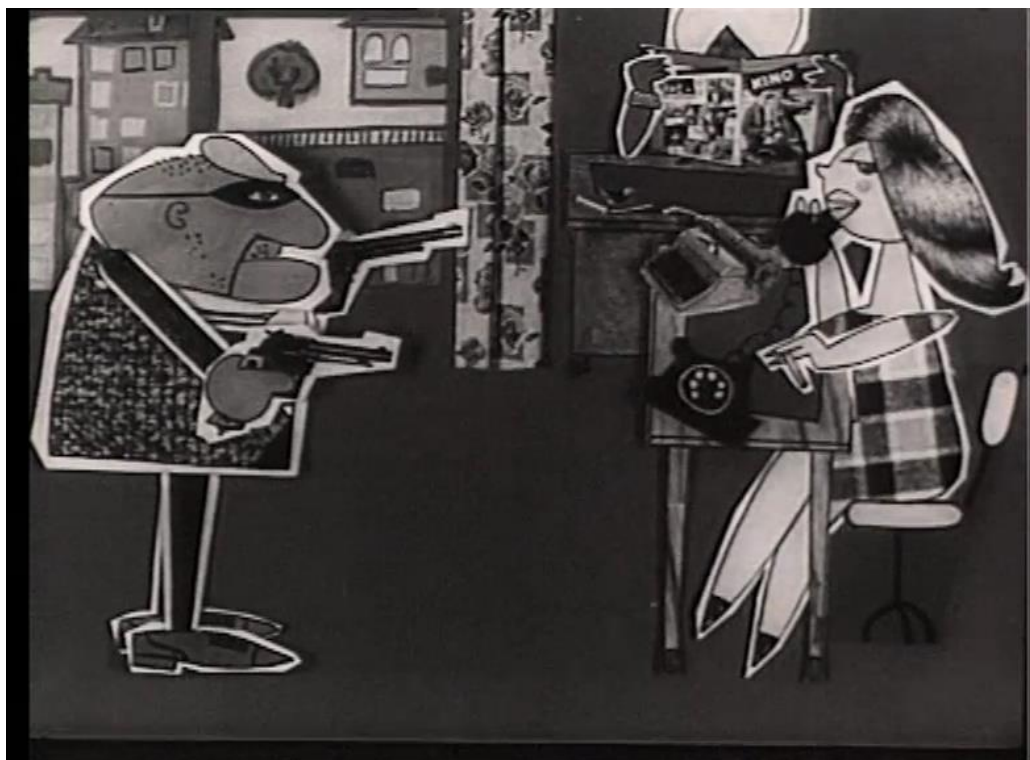
The film was awarded third place at the Sixth Republican amateur-film festival in 1964.<sup>431</sup> The festival was attended by representatives from the Filmmakers' Union of the USSR, who noted the high level of artistry of *216. Istabas noslēpums* and offered the authors the possibility of including its segment in *la — kinoliubitel'*.<sup>432</sup> This aforementioned documentary was being made at the Moscow Central Studio for Documentary Film, and was intended to trace and evaluate the achievements of the first decade of the amateur filmmaking movement across the USSR. Since the Latvian animation was shot on 16mm film, the Moscow filmmakers arranged for the Ģilde's amateurs to recreate it on 35mm film (in order to enable its inclusion in the documentary) using the equipment and facilities at the Riga Film Studio. The amateurs worked there for two weeks — mostly at night, as this was often the only time when the studio's facilities were not in use — and recreated the film on 35mm using the original cut-outs.<sup>433</sup> *216. Istabas noslēpums* was thus included almost in its entirety as part of *la — kinoliubitel'*, and significantly raised the prestige of the Ģilde studio.

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<sup>431</sup> 'Kinoamatieru filmu skate beigusies', *Rīgas Balss*, 19 February 1964, p. 7.

<sup>432</sup> Viese, 'Pirmie animācijā', p. 71.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*



12 Still from 216. *Istabas noslēpums* (Romualds Pipars collection)

The appetite for experimentation, self-taught mastery, and determination on the part of Ģilde's group attracted the attention of Riga Film Studio officials: the amateurs were invited to submit animation film proposals to the Studio's editorial board for scripts and potentially realize them at the Studio. After proposals for three short animation films were submitted, Dinvietis recalls that 'for some time we did not get any reply, and then we were told that these proposals did not look like animation film proposals, and since animation films have to be made for children, the issues we wanted to explore in them were inappropriate'.<sup>434</sup> The failed collaboration with professionals did not extinguish the inspiration and motivation of the Ģilde amateurs brought about by the success of their first film. Having had the opportunity to work with 35mm film and professional equipment at the Riga Film Studio, the Ģilde group began to

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<sup>434</sup> 'Kādu laiku mums neko neatbildēja, tad atbildēja, ka šie pieteikumi neesot multiplikācijas filmām — jo multiplikācijas filmas jātaisa bērniem, nevis par tādām problēmām, kā mēs tās taisījām'. Osvalds Dinvietis, cited in *ibid.*, p. 72.

work on their own technical base. They came into possession of an animation light table, several editing tables, and a sound-synchronization device owing to the expertise and professional connections of its main ‘technician’, the VEF factory engineer Elmārs Riekstiņš, who was able to use the factory’s resources to produce the equipment needed for his amateur studio.<sup>435</sup> The technological assistance Ģilde received via Riekstiņš allowed the studio to continue experimenting with the animation genre: in 1965, Dinvietis and Riekstiņš, assisted by their wives, Regīna Dinviete and Zaiga Riekstiņa, began the production process of a hand-drawn animation film entitled *Problēma* (The Problem, 1966).

Similarly to *216. Istabas noslēpums*, *Problēma* is also a shrewd caricature, but this time not of the bureaucracy of the public sector but of alcohol consumption. In the film, an anthropomorphic character tries to open a bottle of alcohol using a variety of tools absurdly inappropriate for this task: a hand drill, a hammer, and a chisel. In the end, the bottle is blown apart using dynamite. Making *Problēma* turned out to be a time-consuming and daunting task — the four-minute film required around 1,500 drawings and many hours of work. The filmmakers’ efforts paid off, however: after *Problēma* was shown at the Republican film festival in 1966, it was selected to represent the Soviet Union at the UNICA festival in Mariánské Lázně, Czechoslovakia.<sup>436</sup> The film was awarded the bronze medal, and thus became the first Soviet amateur film to win an international award. Alas, the Ģilde’s filmmakers were not granted permission to travel to Czechoslovakia for the awards ceremony. As Dinvietis recalls with a degree of bitterness, ‘The Soviet Union was accepted to join

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<sup>435</sup> Romualds Pipars, interview by Inese Strupule, 16 November 2017, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>436</sup> Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, p. 69.

UNICA, the Soviet Union received the first UNICA medal. [...] This medal was handed over to us only after the event'.<sup>437</sup>

Similarly to *Net!*, the themes of the animation films produced at Çilde are structured according to conservative and social vectors. Thematically, these films fit well into the trend of satire characteristic of the 'Thaw' period. With the coming of the 'Thaw' and liberalization of the regime, the social ills of Soviet society were often satirized in magazines, cinema, and on television. This trend is perhaps best exemplified by *Fitil'* (Fuse), a popular satirical *kinozhurnal* that was launched in 1962, and which sought with the help of biting humour to fight the negative aspects of life in Soviet society, for example bribe-taking, indolence at work, alcoholism, petty crime, and bureaucratic excesses. Interestingly, the script of Çilde's *216. Istabas noslēpums* was recycled in the form of a live-action vignette and included in *Korotkie istorii* (Short Stories, directed by Mikhail Grigor'ev, 1963), a three-part omnibus film mostly based on short stories published as part of *Krokodil*, a satirical magazine published in the Soviet Union since 1922.

At the same time, Çilde's animation films can be viewed as structured by a radical vector by virtue of the fact that they were responding to the new trend that gathered momentum in the sphere of animation at official film studios thanks to the 'Thaw'. As observed by Laura Pontieri, during Khrushchev's time as General Secretary animation directors 'departed from the fairy-tale worlds of Stalinist animation', and 'animation took upon itself the role of educator not only of children, but also of an older audience' as it began to explore 'serious and problematic social issues'.<sup>438</sup> Most importantly, satire, commonly resorted to by early Soviet animation directors, 'reappeared onscreen in animated films

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<sup>437</sup> 'Padomju Savienību uzņēma UNICā, un Padomju Savienība ieguva pirmo UNICA medaļu. [...] Pašiem mums tikai pēc tam to medaļu iedeva'. Dinvietis, cited in Viese, 'Pirmie animācijā', p. 73.

<sup>438</sup> Laura Pontieri, *Soviet Animation and the Thaw of the 1960s: Not Only for Children* (London: John Libbey Publishing Ltd, 2012), pp. 55 & 62.

addressed to adult audiences'.<sup>439</sup> Pontieri notes that the production of animation films with adult themes was hotly debated in Moscow's animation studio Soiuzdetfil'm: 'some traditional artists preferred to focus on animation for children, opposing [...] satirical cartoons for grown-ups'.<sup>440</sup> Hence it seems that the social concerns explored in Ģilde's animated films were deemed inappropriate by the Riga Film Studio officials precisely by virtue of being expressed via the medium of animated film. Bearing in mind that there was no established animated film production in Latvia prior to the puppet animation films made by Arnolds Burovs and his team at the Riga Film Studio in the second half of the 1960s, Ģilde's filmmakers' radical intentionality also lies in their attempt to integrate the animation medium in the arsenal of filmmaking techniques and compete for innovation with the professional film industry by using limited knowledge and resources, and relying on trial-and-error methods rather than the achievements of animation directors worldwide.<sup>441</sup>

Riekstiņš and Dinvietis, often joined by their spouses, continued to produce animated films at Ģilde into the 1970s: *Atriebība* (Revenge, 1968), *Horoskops* (Horoscope, 1968), *Hobijs* (Hobby, 1971), and *Perpendikuls* (Perpendicular, 1972), among others, were created using the cut-out stop-motion animation technique and exhibited satirical elements similar to those present in *216*. *Istabas noslēpums* and *Problēma*. In 1969, a correspondent of *Cīņa* newspaper noted that '[...] animated films are no more a monopoly of the

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>441</sup> In all probability Ģilde's filmmakers were using more complex and time-consuming animation techniques, such as cut-out stop-motion and hand-drawn animation, due to the fact that the so-called cel technique, which was widely used in Moscow and the rest of the world because it simplified and speeded up the process of animation, required more advanced technical equipment inaccessible to an amateur-film collective.

[amateur film] studio of the House of Culture of LRAP'.<sup>442</sup> Indeed, by the end of the 1960s animated films created in a variety of techniques were being made at the amateur-film studio of the House of Culture of the city of Liepāja and at the Ortekons studio attached to the Central Planning and Construction Bureau of Mechanization and Automatization in Riga. In 1967, however, LRAP began to diversify its film production, when Dinvietis and Riekstiņš created a photo film *Aptumsums* (The Eclipse). Thus a more unequivocally experimental trend emerged within the creative output of Ģilde and later became another 'trademark' of the studio alongside animation. The photo film had established itself as an experimental cinema sub-mode with Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (The Observation Pier, 1962), that tells a story of a post-nuclear war scientific experiment using the device of time travel. The film almost entirely consists of still black-and-white images with limited voice-over narration and sound effects. Closer to home, Soviet Latvian photographer Gunārs Binde also experimented with the temporality of photography, creating his first photo film *Hallo, Maskava!* (Hello, Moscow!) in 1966. This used a dynamic montage of photographs and complex soundtrack to paint a contemporaneous portrait of the city of Moscow.

Entirely in line with this trend, *Aptumsums* consists of filmed photographs which are edited together at various intervals. Dramatic zoom-ins and panning, as well as sound effects and music, are deployed to 'animate' the still images. Thematically, the film is a fierce denunciation of the US military intervention in Vietnam and, by extension, a critique of the rampant capitalism and consumerism of American society. The film contrasts images of peaceful life in America's megapolises with gruesome photographic evidence of the war in Vietnam, and juxtaposes images of military funerals of American soldiers with adverts for a variety of consumer goods. Through juxtaposition with the horrors of war, the latter acquire ludicrous overtones. The film's subject-matter complies with Soviet cultural politics during the Cold War and is evidently

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<sup>442</sup> '[...] multiplikācijas filmas vairs nav tikai LRAP kultūras nama studijas "monopols"'. 'Uz ekrāna amatieru filmas', *Cīņa*, 15 April 1969, p. 4.



structured by the intersection of conservative and social vectors. It earned praise and numerous awards at amateur-film festivals all over the Soviet Union. In 1967, the film was awarded first prize at the First Baltic amateur-film festival in Riga. The same year the film represented Latvia at the Fourth All-Union amateur-film festival in Moscow dedicated to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution, a high-profile event for Soviet amateur filmmakers.<sup>443</sup> At this festival, the film received a prestigious award issued by the State Committee for Television and Radio (Gosteleradio), which led to it being broadcast on television as part of a broader campaign of collaboration between best amateur-film studios and the Central Television of the USSR.<sup>444</sup>

As in the case of *Net!*, *Aptumsums* was commended for its experimental approach to storytelling and unusual method of filmmaking. Similar to *216. Istabas noslēpums*, moreover, it was acknowledged and appreciated by professionals within the audio-visual industry. Thus, when analysing the official reception of the 1960s amateur films that attempted to challenge prevailing aesthetic conventions, it appears that as long as the themes being explored were structured by the intersection of conservative and social vectors, articulating a set of beliefs and values that were in accordance with the official ideological discourse, the radical-aesthetic aspect of these films was not seen as problematic and was even officially encouraged by giving these films access to mainstream exhibition platforms, such as television and professional cinema.

In this context, it is worth drawing attention to another photo-film made at Ģilde, *Runājiet, kalni!* (Speak, Mountains!, 1973), which was produced by the younger generation of the studio's filmmakers: Egīls Dinvietis, the son of Osvalds Dinvietis, and the already-mentioned Romualds Pipars. The photographs used in the photo-films at Ģilde were mainly sourced from magazines: *Aptumsums*, for instance, almost entirely consists of photographs

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<sup>443</sup> Järvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, pp. 44 & 482.

<sup>444</sup> For more on this, see *ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

printed in *Amerika* magazine, a Russian-language periodical published by the United States Department of State for distribution in the Soviet Union since 1944.<sup>445</sup> However, Egīls Dinvietis's grandparents on his father's side resided in the United States, which gave the family access not only to a variety of quality consumer goods in deficit or simply unavailable on the Soviet market, but also to foreign press and music. As a result, foreign magazines, for example *National Geographic*, and music published by foreign record labels were often exploited at Ģilde as source material for its films.<sup>446</sup> Pipars recalls a curious incident that happened with the soundtrack of *Runājiet, kalni!*, which was dedicated to the military *coup d'état* in Chile in 1973 and the death of Salvador Allende, and edited from photographs published in *National Geographic*:

[...] then Allende was just shot in Chile, and Egīls's father Osvalds had just brought a record from the US, which was [Andrew Lloyd] Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*. This music somehow fascinated us, and we, naive boys — [Egīls] in the last year of school, I in the first year of university, never mind the Cheka — used this music in our film. [...] Somehow, we meshed it with Allende, with that putsch. The film was shown at many festivals, but then it was taken up by the Central Television of the USSR and broadcast. [...] Thus, for the first time Webber's opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* was heard throughout the Soviet Union. A whole year passed before [the Head of LKAB] Raimonds Jostsons was reprimanded for this, because after all there was somebody in the whole of the Soviet Union who understood what that music was. Through a chain reaction it came down to the management of our studio. And I said, 'I'm not a musician, they are singing something there, singing in English, and English I don't speak'. [...] Somehow everyone let this slide, and so eventually it settled down. [...] I had to play dumb, what else could I do?<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> M. Nechaeva, 'Zolotoe poles'e', *Iskusstvo kino*, 1969, no. 2, 111–18 (p. 118).

<sup>446</sup> Pipars, interview.

<sup>447</sup> '[...] tad tikko Allende bija nošauts Čīlē, un Egīla tēvs Osvalds no Amerikas atveda skaņu plati, Jesus Christ Superstar, Webera operu. Tā mūzika kaut kā fascinēja un mēs uz to mūziku [uzlikām savu filmu], naivie puikas — viņš

This incident once again shows that amateur filmmakers, having chosen ideologically correct themes for their films, were not only able to experiment with cinematic form, but also to inject into their film productions miniscule gestures of rebellion, such as controversial soundtracks or foreign photographic materials, that generated shifts in the authoritative discursive regime (see the discussion of the controversial soundtrack of Vidiņš's film *Aplis pieradījumā* in the previous chapter for comparison). However, these gestures of rebellion did not prevent amateur cinema practitioners from seeking the legitimization of the official film industry: as discussed in the section below, this manifested in them developing relationships and seeking collaborative partnerships with professional filmmakers, as well as pursuing employment in the professional film industry.

### **The dynamics between amateur and professional filmmaking spheres in Soviet Latvia**

As a result of the centralization and professionalization undergone by the Soviet film industry in the post-Second World war period, professional filmmaking became available to relatively few. As observed by Vinogradova, VGIK in Moscow was 'the only school that prepared film directors and cameramen for the industry' and it had highly competitive admission; this resulted in a situation in which 'some of the best amateur film studios in the

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pēdējā klasē, es pirmajā kursā, mums ne par kādu čeku pat prātā nenāca. [...]. Kaut kā sapinām to ar Allende, ar to puču. Un tā filma bija daudzās skatēs, bet to filmu paņēma PS Centrālā Televīzija un parādīja. [...] Pirmo reizi pa visu Padomju Savienību noskanēja Webera opera Jesus Christ Superstar. Un pagāja kāds gads, kad Raimonds Jostsons bija dabūjis pa galvu, jo kas tomēr bija, visā lielajā Padomju Savienība sapratis kas tika atskaņots. Tas pa to ķēdīti lielo bija aiznācis līdz mūsu studijas priekšniecībai. Un es sāku — es neesmu mūziķis, nu tur dzied, dzied angļu valodā, angļu valodu es nezinu. [...] Bet visi to nolaida tā uz grunta, un tā tas arī noklusa. [...] Nu izlikās pa muļķi, nu ko darīt.' Ibid.

Soviet Union additionally played the role of informal film schools'.<sup>448</sup> Such studios often engaged professional filmmakers to educate amateurs, and 'many of [their] participants eventually transitioned into professional work in film and television'.<sup>449</sup> Vinogradova argues that this model was usually perpetuated by larger central amateur-film studios, ones that were located in cities and not necessarily 'attached to any factory, institute or house of culture, instead playing the role of a networking agent for smaller clubs in the area and working with individual filmmakers'.<sup>450</sup> She observes that 'since these filmmakers came from a greater variety of backgrounds than that of a unified workplace, they chose more abstract subjects than those drawn from everyday life, and created films that were on the artistic side'.<sup>451</sup> This tendency can also be observed in the context of the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking scene, where larger, central amateur-film studios that achieved high levels of professionalism and at times enabled amateurs to transition to professional cinema, also often found themselves producing more creative, innovative, and experimental content compared to other amateur-film studios.

In the case of Soviet Latvia, Ģilde became one of the amateur-film studios which acted as a platform for gaining sufficient skills to transition to professional cinema. The aforementioned Romualds Pipars, for example, was an active member of Ģilde between 1971 and 1976 while pursuing a geography degree at the Latvian State University, and created a number of films there. Having finished his studies, Pipars left Ģilde and successfully applied to work at the Riga Film Studio, where he worked mainly as an assistant to documentary filmmakers. One of his first assignments was

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<sup>448</sup> Maria Vinogradova, 'Scientists, Punks, Engineers and Gurus: Soviet Experimental Film Culture in the 1960s–1980s', *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, 7.1 (2016), 39–52 <doi:10.1080/2040350X.2016.1112502> (p. 46).

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

assisting the Latvian documentary film maestro Ivars Seleckis during the production of *Slāpju spogulis* (The Mirror of Thirst, 1976), a photo-film about the detrimental effects of alcoholism (here the experience of creating photo-films gained at Ģilde was particularly useful). Pipars also directed many short documentary films and newsreels, for example a number of issues of *Padomju Latvija* (Soviet Latvia), *Māksla* (Art), and *Pionieris* (The Pioneer).<sup>452</sup> Pipars admits that his rapid transition from amateur into professional filmmaking was unusual at the time and somewhat disheartening for some; as he recalls:

If a person who finished VGIK and worked at the studio for two years, let's say, as an assistant, was to direct a ten-minute newsreel — this was a unique occurrence. I remember when I was given my first newsreel [...] in the hallways everyone hissed like snakes: 'Look at this rookie...' Many [of my colleagues] worked as camera operators for years before [getting to direct a newsreel]. I did not have such experience, I had experience as an amateur.<sup>453</sup>

The transition from amateur to professional filmmaking in Soviet Latvia and across the Soviet Union was indeed not particularly common, but seems to have witnessed a gradual increase from the mid-1970s onwards. For instance, camera operators Kalvis Zalcmāns and Egīls Ermānsons began their cinematic careers at the amateur-film club of the Riga Young Technicians' Station (Rīgas jauno tehniķu stacija, RJTS), which was founded by Herberts Dzelme in the mid-1950s and in 1972 gained the status of a studio and was given the name 'Spektrs'.<sup>454</sup> By the mid-1970s, Zalcmāns was a respected camera operator at the Riga Film Studio, having worked on films by renowned

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<sup>452</sup> Pipars, interview.

<sup>453</sup> 'Ja cilvēkam, kurš pabeidza VGIKu un divus gadus jau strādājis kinostudijā, teiksim, par kādu asistentu, lai viņam iedotu 10 minūšu kinožurnālu — tas bija unikālā padarīšana. Es atceros, kad man iedeva pirmo kinožurnālu [...] tad pa gaitenīem tā kā čūskas šņāca visi, "Šim tie idio... šitiem te iedod". Daži jau gadiem kā operatori strādāja, man tas nebija, man bija kinoamatieru pieredze'. Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> 'Rīgas JTS kinoamatieru studija "Spektrs"', p. 3.

documentary filmmaker Hercs Franks, while Ermansons was a camera operator at Telefilma-Rīga, a film-production group that was formed on the basis of the national television station in 1957.

Another case in point is Zigurds Vidiņš, who in 1978 was given the opportunity by the Riga Film Studio to direct a *Padomju Latvija* newsreel episode dedicated to the Academy of Sciences' nautical tourist group rafting on the Kizil-Hem river in Siberia. It was also around this time that Vidiņš put aside his work at the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio to produce films for the Academy's film, photo- and phono- laboratory.<sup>455</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Three, the laboratory was established at the Academy in 1969 to provide audio-visual support for its various research activities, but over time began to function as an educational and popular science film studio.<sup>456</sup> As opposed to amateur filmmakers who worked with 16 and 8mm film, and produced either silent films or recorded the sound separately on 9,5mm magnetic tapes due to the complexity of the sound synchronization process, filmmakers working at the laboratory were supplied with professional film gauge of 35mm and had the opportunity to produce films with sound technologically coupled to image. Nevertheless, Vidiņš continued to work on more personal projects at the Academy's amateur studio due to the higher degree of creative freedom that the amateur status of the studio provided.

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<sup>455</sup> Vidiņš, interview.

<sup>456</sup> Popular science, science, and educational films were viewed as a separate genre in the discourse of Soviet official cinema. These films were often produced at dedicated studios, for instance Tsentrauchfil'm in Moscow. Vinogradova notes the lower prestige of popular science film studios in the Soviet Union and describes popular science film as an 'officially sanctioned [type] of film production that fell into the more marginal segment of the Soviet state film studio system'. Vinogradova, 'Scientists, Punks, Engineers and Gurus', p. 39.

Here it is important to reiterate the fact that it was usually the affiliates of the larger, more artistically oriented, and technologically advanced amateur studios who managed the transition into the sphere of professional filmmaking. There were, of course, cases when the transition was enabled for the most part due to the individual's talent. This was the case of Ivars Seleckis, who began making films at the amateur-film club of the Latvian Academy of Agriculture (Latvijas Lauksaimniecības akadēmija, LLA), where he studied from 1952 to 1957.<sup>457</sup> In due course, Seleckis obtained a degree from VGIK and built his filmmaking career at the Riga Film Studio; he is now known as one of the most prominent filmmakers in the history of Latvian cinema. Outside Latvia, a similar path was taken by Gleb Panfilov, who in the late 1950s, having received a degree in chemistry, became a creative force behind an amateur-film studio founded on the basis of the local Komsomol in the city of Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinburg), and by the mid-1970s was directing feature films at the largest film studios in the country and earning awards at prestigious international film festivals.<sup>458</sup> Both Seleckis and Panfilov showed determination in their efforts to become professional filmmakers. This is demonstrated by their conscious decision to apply to VGIK after pursuing degrees in entirely different realms. In all probability, they envisaged their early amateur filmmaking activities only as temporary stage on the way to 'big cinema'.

For those cinema enthusiasts who were not the privileged few with access to VGIK, amateur-film studios that had undergone a degree of professionalization, be it due to the support of their 'parent' institution, or through the efforts and expertise of their individual members, did act as informal film schools, and could thus become a solid foundation for future work

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<sup>457</sup> Inga Jēruma, *Ivars un Maija: 100 gadi dokumentālajā kino* (Rīga: Neputns, 2009), p. 17.

<sup>458</sup> 'Biografiia', *Gleb Panfilov: ofitsial'nyi sait rezhissera* <<http://glebpanfilov.ru/index/biography/>> [accessed 28 November 2020].

in professional cinema.<sup>459</sup> Pipars comments on the role of the VEF engineer Elmārs Riekstiņš in the professional development of the Ģilde studio and its amateurs, and claims that without Riekstiņš's dexterity with audio-visual technology and his connections at VEF, Ģilde would not have achieved the same extraordinary results:

Elmārs Riekstiņš was the engineer of our studio, a clever pair of hands, its technical director. [...] [He] worked at VEF, [and] during working hours was able to make *Grietas*<sup>460</sup> and many other pieces of equipment needed by amateurs, without which we would not be able to produce either animation films, or photo films, that required synchronized sound. [...] If there was no VEF, where, using the factory's resources, one could make [equipment] during working hours, [...] if we did not have this 'flagman' [Riekstiņš] behind us, there would be no animation, no nothing.<sup>461</sup>

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio also benefited greatly from the material and technical base that the Academy's laboratory offered. Interestingly, the high degree of professionalism that resulted from the laboratory's patronage, combined with the relative freedom allowed by its amateur status, turned the Academy of Sciences

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<sup>459</sup> Many amateur filmmakers discussed in this thesis failed the entrance examination at VGIK, among them Zigurds Vidiņš, Regina Šulca, and Harijs Zalītis.

<sup>460</sup> *Grieta* was the name given to sound synchronization equipment that was invented within the amateur-film community in Soviet Latvia and allowed the production of 16mm film prints with sound coupled to image.

<sup>461</sup> 'Elmārs Riekstiņš, bija šīs studijas inženieris, zeltā rokas, tehniskais direktors. [...] [Viņš] strādāja VEFā, [un] varēja darba laikā taisīt Grietas, un daudzas citas amatieriem vajadzīgas iekārtas, bez kuram mēs nevarētu ne multiplikāciju taisīt, ne fotofilmas, kur vajadzēja sinhronu skaņu. [...] Ja nebūtu VEFa, kurā darba laika uz rūpnīcas līdzekļiem varēja uztaisīt [iekārtas], [...] ja ne būtu flagmanis aizmugurē, nebūtu ne multiplikācijas, nekā'. Pipars, interview.



amateur studio into a creative and intellectual hub that became attractive, not only for new generations of artistically inclined amateur filmmakers, but also for professional filmmakers at the time. As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, professional filmmakers have always played a significant role in the amateur filmmaking movement — many were at the origins of the movement and even helped launch it — but it was the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio that took the relationship between the professional and amateur filmmaking spheres in Soviet Latvia to the next level.

From around 1980–81 onwards, many accomplished Latvian film directors and camera operators, such as Juris Podnieks, Ansis Epnars, Andris Slapiņš, and Gvido Zvaigzne, were often received at the Academy's amateur-film studio and became frequent guests at the film screenings organized as part of the studio's activities. 'They would watch our films, we would watch their films, and then we would engage in discussions', Vidiņš reminisces.<sup>462</sup> These circumstances allowed the amateur filmmakers of the Academy of Sciences studio to build rapport and develop companionship with the professionals working for the Riga Film Studio. Although their relationship was mainly limited to film evenings, discussions, and exchanges of experience and ideas, at times it was elevated to the level of reciprocal practical support and certain forms of collaboration between amateurs and professionals. It was not only professionals that would do favours for amateurs, for instance by reviewing the filmed materials and giving practical advice and tips on editing, or by facilitating the use of the Riga Film Studio facilities after hours. The amateurs would at times help the professionals with projects that the Riga Film Studio was not interested in endorsing for some reason or other. As Vidiņš recalls, the laboratory's resources allowed the Academy's amateurs to reciprocate:

It was often the case that we could help [the professionals] with film stock, because at the Academy of Sciences [laboratory] we worked with 35mm. At the Riga Film Studio resources were very limited,

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<sup>462</sup> 'Viņi skatījās mūsu filmas, mēs skatījāmies viņu filmas, un pēc tam diskutējām'. Vidiņš, interview.

especially for production of short documentaries and newsreels, and we could supply some [film] rolls here and there.<sup>463</sup>

There were cases when the relationship between amateur and professional filmmakers in Soviet Latvia went beyond sharing experience, film stock, and equipment, and led to artistic collaborations and mutually inspired creative efforts. In 1982, while still actively producing newsreels and documentary shorts for the Riga Film Studio, camera operator Andris Slapiņš went on to direct a film called *Sapņu laiks* (Dreamtimes, 1982) at the Academy of Sciences laboratory. Unsurprisingly, this involved Vidiņš as one of the camera operators. The film explored the traditions of Siberian shamans: most of the footage was shot on location in Yakutia, where local shamans were interviewed and various shamanic rituals filmed. The film fitted well within the Academy's research programme, with its strong emphasis on folklore collection and ethnographic study, but there is no doubt that Slapiņš envisioned *Sapņu laiks* as more of a personal project, the work on which would give him more creative freedom compared to his work for the Riga Film Studio. Firstly, it reflected his personal fascination with folklore and ethnography — his VGIK graduation film was *Līvu dziesmas* (The Songs of Livs, 1976), which documented the folklore of the ethnic group indigenous to northern Latvia. Apart from this, independence from the Riga Film Studio allowed Slapiņš to experiment with camerawork — the film features many deliberately underexposed shots that at times result in captivating, quasi-abstract imagery.

The stimulating environments of certain institutions, combined with the relative freedom allowed by the amateur status of the studios affiliated with them, prompted amateur filmmakers to use the technical and experiential capital of these institutions to produce thematically diverse and formally inventive content. In the case of the Academy of Sciences studio, its rapid

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<sup>463</sup> 'Bieži bija arī tā ka mēs varējām palīdzēt [profesionāļiem] ar filmu, jo mēs filmējām Zinātņu Akadēmijas [laboratorijā] uz 35mm. [Rīgas] Kinostudijā bija viss tas ļoti limitēts, īpaši uz sižetiem un kinohronikām, un bieži bija tā ka mēs varējām iedot kādu [filmas] rulli'. Ibid.

professionalization and yet amateur and thus more unrestrained nature turned the studio into an exclusive clique that became attractive even for professional filmmakers of the time. This allowed the amateur filmmakers of the Academy of Sciences studio to develop reciprocal relationships with professionals working for the Riga Film Studio, which in turn facilitated a degree of mobility between the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio and the sphere of professional filmmaking. Many filmmakers working at the amateur-film studio of the Academy of Sciences in the 1980s made career transitions into professional cinema and transferred to the Riga Film Studio. As manifested by the examples cited above, it is clear that the formation of the network of *svoi* at the Academy of Sciences, with amateur filmmakers at its core, blurred the boundary between amateur and professional filmmaking spheres. Furthermore, it also allowed professional filmmakers to enjoy a degree of creative freedom and independence from the constraints of the Soviet film industry. As will be explored later in this chapter, the special status that the Academy of Sciences studio acquired by the early 1980s made it highly attractive to young amateur filmmakers, who were eager to experiment with cinematic forms and content.

As noted by Gurshtein and Simonyi, and as the abovementioned issue of the *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* demonstrates, many film scholars have been questioning the supposed independence of experimental cinema from institutional structures and its radical opposition to any institutional, commercial, or ideological interests.<sup>464</sup> The editors observe that the growing consensus in contemporary film theory is that in the post-Second World War era ‘a variety of institutional structures have shaped experimental filmmaking in the West’, and hope to promote an analogous reconsideration of the ‘independence’ of experimental filmmaking from institutions in the context of state socialism.<sup>465</sup> As has been continuously shown throughout this thesis, the

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<sup>464</sup> Gurshtein and Simonyi, ‘Experimental cinema in state socialist Eastern Europe’, p. 4.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*

institutional networks of administered culture in Soviet Latvia played a formative role in the development of the organized amateur filmmaking movement, while this chapter in particular demonstrates the ways in which various institutions in Soviet Latvia fostered experimentation and innovation within the local amateur filmmaking culture. However, amateur filmmaking hubs linked to large institutions were not the sole component in the making of experimental film culture in late-Socialist Soviet Latvia. As discussed in the following section, another ‘germinal cradle’ of cinematic experimentation in Soviet Latvia was constituted by Riga’s bohemian youth. In the 1960s, the Western world experienced the emergence of an alternative and at times rebellious youth culture that to a certain extent reverberated across the Soviet Union. Riga, alongside other major Baltic cities, was one of the most exposed spots, one in which communities of unconventional and artistically inclined young people began to flower.

### **Experimental filmmaking in alternative youth circles in the 1970s**

Do you know what Kaza is? This is a whole culture, a whole alternative culture [...] that was a strong current within the amateur filmmaking movement.<sup>466</sup>

The term used by Redovičs in the quotation above — Kaza — was the informal nickname given to a café called ‘Sputnik’ which was located in the old town of Riga and, during its relatively short existence between the late 1950s and 1970, became fabled and arguably acted as a birthplace for Riga’s alternative youth culture. Kaza was undoubtedly a kind of *tusovka* that formed part of the ‘café culture’ described by Yurchak. In his monograph, the author expands his conception of the publics of *svoi* to include various types of *tusovka*, ‘a slang term referring to non-institutionalized milieus of people with some shared interest based on “hanging out” and interacting’, that mushroomed in Soviet

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<sup>466</sup> ‘Zini kas ir Kaza? Tā ir veselā kultūra, tā ir veselā alternatīva kultūra, [...] kas bija tāda spēcīga strāva amatieru kustībā’. Redovičs, interview.

cities in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>467</sup> As observed by Yurchak, in the wake of Khrushchev's liberalizing reforms of the late 1950s and early 1960s larger Soviet cities 'experienced a cultural transformation that was minute in quantitative terms but enormous in cultural significance', one that the poet Viktor Krivulin labelled 'the Great Coffee Revolution' (*velikaia kofeinaia revoliutsiia*, by analogy with the Great October Revolution).<sup>468</sup> It manifested itself in the opening of a number of unpretentious cafés in city centres that not only provided coffee and pastries, but also 'enabled new spatial and temporal contexts for interaction among large groups of young people'.<sup>469</sup> Yurchak clearly connects this café culture with his concept of *svoi* and the practice of living *vne*, discussed in detail previously in this thesis. In contrast with his previous observations regarding these conceptual models, the author uses the example of café culture to demonstrate how the collectivities of *svoi* could emerge in much more detached connections to state institutions.

In 2010, Eižens Valpēters published a book entitled *Nenocenzētie: Alternatīvā kultūra Latvijā. XX gs. 60-tie un 70-tie gadi* (The Uncensored: Alternative Culture in Latvia in the 1960s and 70s), which is a first-person account of alternative youth culture in Soviet Latvia during the said period.<sup>470</sup> It covers unofficial and underground art currents, relationships, and the everyday life

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<sup>467</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 141.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.* Yurchak focuses on the café nicknamed Saigon, that emerged in the late 1960s in Leningrad as a particularly important site for such interaction. The author mentions that it was common for these cafés, which often had no official names, apart from a generic 'kafe' signs on the doors, to acquire informal slang names among the frequent goers. Interestingly, *kaza* in Latvian literally means 'goat'; the café was referred to in such a way due to the proximity of a casino, *Kaza* being a derivative of the Latvian word *kazino*.

<sup>470</sup> *Nenocenzētie: Alternatīvā kultūra Latvijā. XX gs. 60-tie un 70-tie gadi*, ed. by Eižens Valpēters (Rīga: Latvijas Vestnēsis, 2010).

produced and shaped within this open-ended and changeable community. The book takes the form of a collection of contemporaneous photographs, drawings, letters, diary excerpts, and retrospectively written, reflexive, and short memoir-like essays and notes produced by the members of this community. The comprehensive nature of the book is due in no small part to Valpēters's access to the materials by affiliation and his insider perspective — he was a regular at Kaza, an artist and restorer by education, and an active member of a semi-official mime theatre group in the mid-1960s.

On the basis of *Nenocenzētie*, it can be claimed that the young people who gathered in Kaza evidently practised a form of living *vne* and, much like *stiliagi* (hipsters) in the post-war Stalin era, had an interest in everything non-Soviet (as opposed to anti-Soviet).<sup>471</sup> As far as was possible in the context of a relatively impervious socialist state, they attempted to acquire knowledge about cosmopolitan philosophy, visual arts, and music, and eagerly shared it with each other. Those who had an artistic and/or intellectual proclivity attempted to exercise it in underground or semi-official platforms, individually or collaboratively. Many of them also developed a passionate interest in cinema that went beyond the cinematic achievements of the Socialist bloc. Amanda Aizpuriete, for example, recalls that at one point everyone who gathered at Kaza was reading a book published in Moscow and entitled *Stsenarii frantsuzskogo kino* (French Cinema Scripts), in particular the script of Marcel Carné's youth drama *Les Tricheurs* (Young Sinners, 1958), which was included in the book.<sup>472</sup> Apparently, after the book was published in 1961, *Les Tricheurs* became a cult film among Kaza regulars — although no one had actually seen it — and many set out to mimic the lifestyle elements of the young people living in 1958 Paris based on the film's characters: '[...] in their flats,

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<sup>471</sup> On *stiliagi*, see Mark Edele, 'Strange Young Men in Stalin's Moscow: The Birth and Life of the Stiliagi, 1945–1953', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 50.1 (2002), 37–61 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41050842>>.

<sup>472</sup> Amanda Aizpuriete, 'Randiņš franču gaumē', in *Nenocenzētie*, ed. by Eižens Valpēters, p. 16.

they would put record players on the floor and the girls would dance barefoot — just like in the film; one of the girls was nicknamed Mika — after the film's main heroine'.<sup>473</sup>

With regard to film-viewing culture, Valpēters claims that back in those days for him and his peers it was '[...] important to watch what was not possible to watch officially'.<sup>474</sup> With this credo in mind, many Kazists undertook trips (usually hitchhiking) to Moscow's film festivals and attempted, by fair means or foul, to get into the screenings of the latest releases of European arthouse cinema.<sup>475</sup> Some had the fortune to watch films like Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* (The Gospel According to Matthew, 1964), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso* (Red Desert, 1964) and *Blow-Up* (1966), among others.<sup>476</sup> Camera operator Egīls Ermansons reminisces about a number of films that in the 1960s any self-respecting *neformāl*, or unconventional youngster, was expected to have seen or at least known about. Some were easily accessible in local cinema theatres, but most needed to be searched for at specialized screenings as part of film courses and cine-clubs with exclusive memberships (these are discussed below).<sup>477</sup> Among these films, Ermansons names Andrzej Wajda's *Popiół i diament* (Ashes and Diamonds, 1958), Ingmar Bergman's *Smultronstället* (Wild Strawberries, 1957), Claude Lelouch's *Un homme et une femme* (A Man and a Woman,

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<sup>473</sup> '[...] savos dzīvokļos viņi lika patafonus uz grīdas un meitenes dejoja basām kājām — tāpat kā filmā, un vienu no viņām sāka dēvēt par Miku — kā filmas galveno varoni'. Ibid.

<sup>474</sup> '[...] bija svarīgi redzēt to, kas oficiāli nemaz nebija ieraugāms'. Eižens Valpēters, 'Untitled essay', in *Nenocenzētie*, ed. by Valpēters, p. 93.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid.

<sup>477</sup> Egīls Ermansons, 'Untitled essay', in *Nenocenzētie*, ed. by Valpēters, p. 193.

1966), François Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (The 400 Blows, 1959), Federico Fellini's *Le notti di Cabiria* (Nights of Cabiria, 1957) and *La Strada* (The Road, 1954), Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (The Eclipse, 1962), Akira Kurosawa's *Akahige* (Red Beard, 1965), and Stanley Kramer's *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963).<sup>478</sup> The domestic must-watch titles included films by Mikhail Romm, Andrei Tarkovskii, Otar Iosseliani, Kira Muratova, and heavily censored, officially criticized, and 'shelved' Latvian films, such as Rolands Kalniņš's *Četri balti krekli, vai Elpojiet dziļi...* (Four White Shirts, or Breathe Deeply..., 1967) and *Es visu atceros, Ričard!* (I Remember Everything, Richard!, 1966).<sup>479</sup>

Considering the relative cinematic literacy of Riga's *neformaly*, it is unsurprising to learn that a number of independently produced experimental films originated within alternative bohemian circles in Riga in the early 1970s. This section will discuss two such films — *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi* (Twilight Plays with a Mirror, 1972), which was directed by Ivars Skanstiņš, and *Pašportrets* (Self-Portrait, 1972), directed by Andris Grinbergs. Before analysing the films themselves, however, it is necessary to discuss their production contexts in more detail.

Skanstiņš was one of the key people behind the 1970s cinematic experiments in the circles of Riga's alternative youth. After finishing school, he began studying law at the Latvian State University but quickly realized that his heart lay in acting and the art of performance. Fortunately for him, in 1965, the People's Film Actors' Studio (Tautas kinoaktieru studija) was established as part of the Riga Film Studio, providing acting training for talented neophytes. This was an ambitious project of the Riga Film Studio's then director Friden Korol'kevich and was prompted by contemporary Soviet Latvian filmmakers' search for a new film language against the backdrop of new trends and

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.



transformations occurring in the cinemas of the Western world.<sup>480</sup> As explained by Skanstiņš:

The [Riga Film] Studio needed to cultivate a new type of film actor, free from theatricalism and able to act organically and genuinely in front of the film camera. In five years' time, the acting studio was expected to evolve into a professional theatre of film actors, similar to the one that had already existed in Moscow.<sup>481</sup>

From more than one thousand applicants, approximately eighty were selected to join the acting studio, among them Skanstiņš. One of many privileges enjoyed by the acting studio members was access to screenings of the so-called *apļa filmas* (circle films) in Rīgas Kinonams (Cinema House), an exclusive film theatre and meeting place in central Riga for professionals working in the film industry. As described by Mark Allen Svede, *apļa filmas* were 'foreign films whose circulation had been limited to higher profile Soviet film festivals and nation-specific *dni kino* or "film days" in Moscow and Leningrad as evidence of the official tolerance of liberal values'.<sup>482</sup> Subsequently these film prints were stored — often illegitimately — in state film repositories and archives, and clandestinely exhibited in the Soviet Union

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<sup>480</sup> Ivars Skanstiņš, 'Būtu bijis', in *Nenocenzētie*, ed. by Valpēters, pp. 200–07 (p. 200).

<sup>481</sup> '[Kino]studijai vajadzēja izaudzināt jauna tipa kinoaktierus, kas būtu brīvi no teatrālisma un spētu organiski un patiesi darboties kinokameras priekšā. Pēc pieciem gadiem kinoaktieru studijai būtu bijis jāpārņem profesionālu kinoaktieru teātrī, līdzīga tam, kāds jau pastāvēja Maskavā'. Ibid. In all probability, here Skanstiņš is referring to Gosudarstvennyi teatr kinoaktera (The State Theatre of Film Actors) founded in Moscow in 1943.

<sup>482</sup> Mark Allen Svede, 'Selfie, Sex Tape, "Snuff" Film: Andris Grinbergs's Pašportrets', *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, 7.1 (2016), 12–24 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2016.1112500>> (p. 14).

at specialized film events.<sup>483</sup> At other times, they were films that for ideological reasons were never officially exhibited on the territory of the USSR, but were copied during their exhibition in other Socialist bloc countries and then smuggled into the Soviet republics.<sup>484</sup> These quietly publicized screenings in Rīgas Kinonams occurred two to three times a year, and were primarily intended exclusively for the Riga Film Studio workers and the members of the Filmmakers' Union. Sometimes, however, they were attended by 'gate crashers', including amateur filmmakers and cinephiles from the Kaza circles.

The scandal at the Riga Film Studio caused by the shelving of Kalniņš's *Četri balti krekli* led to drastic changes in the studio's management, including the firing of Korol'kevich.<sup>485</sup> In the climate of the political 'freeze' that followed the Khrushchev 'Thaw', the new Studio's management did not prioritize the maintenance of the experimental acting studio on its premises, and the initiative gradually lost impetus. In 1970, all the acting studio members were awarded actors diplomas and discharged. Nevertheless, Skanstiņš, along with a few other acting courses participants, including Juris Civjans — now better known in academic circles as the renowned film scholar and a professor at the University of Chicago, Yuri Tsivian — were eager to continue their acting experiments. As explained by Skanstiņš: 'Our goal was to establish a theatre troupe independent of the official structures and work on creating new theatre'.<sup>486</sup> It was at this time that Skanstiņš and Civjans became captivated by the ideas of structuralism and the semiotics of culture. With the help of connections in Estonia, they became acquainted with these intellectual trends directly from Iurii Lotman, the founder of the Tartu–Moscow Semiotic School working in the field of semiotics along with other academics at the University

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<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

<sup>484</sup> Skanstiņš, 'Būtu bijis', p. 201.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

<sup>486</sup> 'Mūsu mērķis bija izveidot no oficiālajām struktūrām neatkarīgu teātra trupu un radīt jaunu teātri'. Ibid.

of Tartu, by purchasing their publications and auditing their lectures whenever possible.<sup>487</sup> In addition, Skanstiņš and Civjans were enthusiastically studying the translated works of Marcel Proust, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung that could be found in the Latvian State Library.<sup>488</sup> It was in this informational climate that the theatre troupe entitled 'Birojs' (Bureau) was born.

Around 1970, Skanstiņš and Civjans, along with three other acting courses graduates, Ruta Broka, Gita Skanstiņa, and Vija Zariņa, began to look for two elements crucial for the existence of their independent theatre troupe: more members and a space for rehearsals. Having previously met Valpēters briefly in Kaza, and knowing about his interest in mime art, Skanstiņš decided to invite him to join the theatre troupe. Through Valpēters, other Kazists joined the troupe as well, among them self-proclaimed hippie Andris Grinbergs and Mudīte Gaiševska, who had a degree in theatre direction. The theatre troupe, thus formed from graduates of the Riga Film Studio's acting courses and *neformaly* from Kaza, became known as Birojs, or Bureau, owing to their unusual headquarters and rehearsal space. Gita Skanstiņa, who at the time held a low-level position at the Riga Bureau of Film Propaganda, managed to convince the Bureau's director to help the acting studio graduates. As a result, the independent theatre troupe was able to practise in an unused vestibule at the Film Propaganda Bureau and soon became informally known as Birojs.<sup>489</sup>

Birojs existed between 1971 and 1974 and, during their creative meetings and largely unwitnessed rehearsals and exercises, attempted to defy the principles of mainstream official theatre. The group challenged conventional notions of performance space, refrained from using plays as material, instead improvising or using prose fragments. They sought to rely on the intuition of actors and their subconscious responses, as well as the processes of

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid., pp. 201–02. The ideas of Tartu–Moscow School of Semiotics would later exert a certain influence on Civjans's academic career.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., pp. 202–03.

collective creativity in the creation of characters and representations. They were also curious to explore ceremoniality and the carnivalesque qualities of performance, as well as experiment with audience participation. As summarized by Skanstiņš, who often led the rehearsals of Birojs, 'the main purpose of the exercises that I devised was for the actors to develop the kind of inner technique that was alien to the mainstream theatre shows'.<sup>490</sup> Sadly, due to the highly experimental nature of the Birojs theatre work, it was not possible to give it deserved exposure: the first and only public performance of Birojs took place in November 1971 as part of the Student Days festival in Tartu.<sup>491</sup>

### **Birojs films**

Birojs members eventually came to the view that their rehearsals and exercises deserved visual documentation in some form or another. This gave rise to the decision to create a series of short films that together would act as a collective portrait of Birojs. Every member was invited to create 'a subjective film' which reflected their worldview and inner state.<sup>492</sup> In this way, five 'film portraits' were created, those of Valpēters, Grinbergs, Skanstiņš, Gaiševska, and Civjans. The destiny of these films turned out to be exciting and to some degree representative of the tightening grip around the Soviet dissidents in the first half of the 1970s. Civjans's 8mm film revolved around biblical themes and featured characters visibly inspired by the figures of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene (played by Valpēters and Gaiševska). In his film, according to Skanstiņš, Civjans '[...] experimented with the syntax of film language and

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<sup>490</sup> 'Galvenais manis izstrādāto vingrinājumu mērķis bija izkopt aktieros tādu iekšējo tehniku, kāda nebija pazīstama mums pieejamo teātru izrādēs'. Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

categorically did not use any music or sound'.<sup>493</sup> His film was seized by the KGB during an unsanctioned search; later, unsuccessful attempts to trump up a religious propaganda case against the author were made.<sup>494</sup> At the centre of Gaiševska's film was the character of a little girl (portrayed by the filmmaker herself) who is haunted by what appears to be the embodiments of her fears or traumas. One of these embodiments was played by Civjans, who appeared in the film completely naked. In the climate of unsanctioned searches that became more and more frequent among the people associated with the dissident circles of Riga, Gaiševska destroyed most of the film, fearing the possibility of a pornography production and distribution case being pursued against her.<sup>495</sup> In turn, Valpēters's filmed material mysteriously disappeared from his flat. However, it is known that the main character of his film portrait was a pre-school boy, representing the author's alter ego, who is shown building a shack. The boy was played by Roberts Delle, the son of the painter Biruta Delle, also a regular at Kaza, and the film featured Roberts's original drawings.<sup>496</sup> The only two films to survive in their entirety were Grinbergs's *Pašportrets* and Skanstiņš's *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi*, both of which are analysed in detail below.

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<sup>493</sup> '[...] eksperimentēja ar kino valodas sintaksi un principiāli neizmantoja ne mūziku, ne trokšņus'. Ibid.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>496</sup> Vilnis Vējš, 'Neatļauta pārgērbšanās', *Mākslai vajag telpu*, 4 February 2015 <<https://www.makslaivajagtelpu.lv/neatļauta-pargerbsanas-vilnis-vejs/>> [accessed 7 May 2019].



13 Still from the remaining fragment of Gaiševska's instalment into Birojs's film-portrait series (Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art collection)

Based on the limited information available on the Birojs films, it is clear that they are situated at the intersection of aesthetic and social vectors with radical vector, and thus, as opposed to the films discussed earlier in this chapter, exhibit the more clear-cut avant-garde characteristics as described by Moran. The Birojs filmmakers not only consciously sought to challenge the prevailing aesthetic conventions of Soviet cinema (and prior to that, Soviet theatre) by means of 'inventing shock tactics, methods of defamiliarization, and new audio-visual codes of perception' (to use Moran's formulation), but also constructed alternative representations of cultural and political identities, exploring religion, class, sexuality, and gender in their films.<sup>497</sup> This radical intentionality is also present in Grinbergs's *Pašportrets* and Skanstiņš's *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguli*. However, whereas the former is structured-in-dominance by the social vector, the latter prioritizes the aesthetic vector, as

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<sup>497</sup> Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video*, p. 72.

will be explored in detail below. In all probability, it was this distinction that determined the drastically different fates of these two films after their creation. Interestingly, despite their highly marginal status, both films relied on the structures of the state-supported media industry. Both were filmed by a Telefilma-Rīga camera operator, Vilnis Dumbergs, illicitly using the studio's equipment and leftover 16mm film stock. In addition, Maruta Jurjāne, a Telefilma-Rīga film editor, assisted in the editing process of both films. This was undertaken on the premises of the studio after hours, also without authorization. Despite sharing similarities at the production stage, however, the films took very different paths: while *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi* was eventually incorporated into organized amateur filmmaking structures, *Pašportrets* was almost lost for fear of criminal penalty and reached public attention and appreciation only after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

*Pašportrets* has been studied in detail by Mark Allen Svede, who offers not only a highly comprehensive textual and contextual analyses of the film, but also explores Grinbergs's complex artistic persona, his controversial performance and art happenings, and hippie lifestyle.<sup>498</sup> According to Svede, the film is 'both a singular artifact of Cold War-era Soviet dissident culture and an addition to first-person quasi-documentary cinema's experimental vein'.<sup>499</sup> As *Pašportrets* was Grinbergs's contribution to the Birojs series of self-portrait films, the author himself is understandably on screen for almost the entire twenty-three minutes of the film. Other members of Birojs also make their appearances. *Pašportrets* revolves around three dramatic centres structured

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<sup>498</sup> See Svede, 'Selfie, Sex Tape, "Snuff" Film'; Mark Allen Svede, 'Latvia's Hippie Auteurs', in *The Baltic Countries under Occupation: Soviet and Nazi Rule, 1939-1991*, ed. by Anu Mai Kõll (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003), pp. 341–46; Mark Allen Svede, 'All You Need Is Love (beads): Latvia's Hippies Undress for Success', in *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, ed. by David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 1999), pp. 189–208.

<sup>499</sup> Svede, 'Selfie, Sex Tape, "Snuff" Film', p. 12.

by relationships between the film's characters; namely, Grinbergs's interaction with a young man, Grinbergs's interaction with a young woman (played by his wife, Inta Jaunzeme-Grinberga), and interactions between the above pairings and a series of carnivalesque characters performing symbolic actions, played by the close circle of Birojs. Among them, for instance, Civjans appears thrusting and pretending to fellate and masturbate three balloons arranged as male genitalia which are attached to his underpants, while Skanstiņš, with the left half of his face painted black and wearing a black glove on his left hand, decapitates a live pigeon with a pocket knife.

On the basis of such scenes it is relatively straightforward to characterize Grinbergs's film as one which contains highly provocative imagery. It begins with Grinbergs passionately kissing a young man in a public toilet. This is promptly followed by a scene in which the two men are shown naked in bed in a passionate embrace, during which, in a quasi-sacrificial gesture, a dove is killed by Skanstiņš and its blood spattered on to the two men's intertwined naked bodies. A long shot reveals the image of Jesus Christ hanging on the wall above the bed. The religious leitmotifs in *Pašportrets* — at times tending towards the pagan — are sustained in the next sequence as well, one which is described by Grinbergs as 'biblical' and defined as an 'Easter ritual': in a hilly forest area, a group of clothed people are shown eating eggs as Andris, dressed in black, and Inta, wearing a white hooded robe, appear, break raw eggs against each other's faces, and kiss.<sup>500</sup> This is followed by the film's uneasy and gruelling crescendo: an eight-minute scene of unstimulated coitus between Grinbergs and his wife. The view, however, is limited to a medium close-up of the couple's heads and shoulders. Grinbergs himself has explained this creative decision in the following way: 'Both faces are very different. There is a man's mechanical movement and a woman's contemplation, her soul. It was a counterpoint to Hollywood's beautified scenes in which sexual intercourse is mimicked — the whole body is shown, but nothing happens for

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<sup>500</sup> Andris Grinbergs, 'Untitled essay', in *Nenocenzētie*, ed. by Valpēters, p. 214.



real'.<sup>501</sup> The sex scene is followed by a number of visually captivating shots that, like the rest of the film, abound in symbolic actions, and daringly merge erotic and religious imagery. In the finale of the film, we see another extended shot of Andris and Inta together in bed, this time joined by the camera operator Dumbergs. The trio are talking and smiling, and as eventually Inta slides between the two men, Andris's hand reaches out of the frame and the film fades out to white.



14 Stills from *Pašportrets* (Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art collection)

Soon after the film's completion, the ring started to tighten around the Birojs members and Grinbergs was compelled to make the film disappear, fearing accusations of pornography production and religious propaganda. Fortunately, the film was not destroyed but, as Svede and several Birojs members confirm,

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<sup>501</sup> 'Abas sejas ļoti atšķirīgas. Tur ir vīrieša mehāniskā kustība un sievietes domāšana līdz, dvēsele. Tas bija tāds kontrapunkts Holivudas izskaistinātajiem variantiem, kur imitē dzimumaktus, rāda visu ķermeni, bet nekas nenotiek'. Ibid.

'promptly cut into concealable fragments and dispersed among two dozen hiding places' around Riga.<sup>502</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the film was 'exhumed' by Grinbergs and in 1995 transported to the United States and restored with the help of Mark Allen Svede and a number of local organizations, including New York's Anthology Film Archives. *Pašportrets* had its world premiere at Anthology Film Archives in December 1995, where, according to Svede, Jonas Mekas dubbed it 'one of the five most sexually transgressive films ever made', on a par with Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (A Song of Love, 1950), Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), Andy Warhol's *Blowjob* (1964), and Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1962).<sup>503</sup> Thus *Pašportrets*, unseen by the contemporary public in 1970s Soviet Latvia, more than two decades since its creation became included in the pantheon of world avant-garde cinema.

Although *Pašportrets* shares thematic and formal features in common with many of the examples of subjective and self-portrait films created by Western European auteurs and American underground filmmakers, it lacked their access to contemporary audiences. Due to the film's controversial content and Grinbergs's lack of interest in pursuing an official artistic or filmmaking career, *Pašportrets* existed in an environment largely aseptic to the socio-cultural climate of the late-Socialist era. For this reason it had no impact on the filmmaking culture in Soviet Latvia. In the context of this study, therefore, *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguli* offers greater interest because, although it was produced 'underground', in 1978 it was 'officialized' via the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio. In 1979, Skanstiņš even began working as

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<sup>502</sup> Svede, 'Selfie, Sex Tape, "Snuff" Film', p. 15.

<sup>503</sup> Mark Allen Svede, 'Many Easels, Some Abandoned: Latvian Art after Socialist Realism', in *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Expression under the Soviets, 1945-1991*, ed. by Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 195–274 (p. 208).

assistant director at the Riga Film Studio (later promoted to the director position) having mentioned his debut film in the job application.<sup>504</sup>

In 1978, Skanstiņš briefly joined the Academy's studio — the protocol of this studio was that every newcomer was considered a candidate, and became an official member only after producing a film at the studio — and presented *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi* as his 'admission' film.<sup>505</sup> The same year the film was presented at the Twentieth Republican amateur-film festival and awarded first prize in the fiction-film category.<sup>506</sup> The review of the film that appeared in the press after the festival was favourable: the film was dubbed 'peculiar' and marked for its 'bold directing', 'expressive camera work', and 'cinematic plasticity', and its dramaturgy 'was driven by a change of mood, and on-screen events allowed many meaningful explanations'.<sup>507</sup> As opposed to *Pašportrets*, in which the radical-social and radical-aesthetic vectors can be said to alternate because Grinbergs both documents the alternative identities within Riga's underground artistic community and also celebrates its visual codes, Skanstiņš predominantly intended the radical-aesthetic vector in *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa*, thus prioritizing form over content. Compared to *Pašportrets*, the on-screen events in Skanstiņš's film can be characterized as neutral in the conservative-radical spectrum, as they primarily serve to experiment with cinema's aesthetic conventions, rather than to contest prevailing ideological conventions. It is this distinction that allowed *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa* to escape obscurity, so common for avant-garde cinemas, and to participate in the broader cultural landscape of late-Socialist Latvia. Unlike *Pašportrets*, *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa* enjoyed a limited domestic exhibition at amateur-film festivals

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<sup>504</sup> 'I. Skanstiņa personīga lieta', 1979–86, LV-LVA-F416-A11-D305, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga, Latvia, p. 118.

<sup>505</sup> Kalpiņa and Puriņš, 'ZA Kino tautas studija', p. 20.

<sup>506</sup> 'I. Skanstiņa personīga lieta', p. 123.

<sup>507</sup> Alda Saulevica, 'Skate ar pārsteigumiem', *Padomju Jaunatne*, 4 April 1978, p. 3.

and various events in the late 1970s, as well as a renewed interest with the coming of *perestroika*. The interaction between the film and the audiences, critics, and the filmmakers' community that followed its official release in 1978 gave the film a second lease of life. Indeed, it became something of a cult film within amateur-film circles. Many of those who belonged to the younger generation of filmmakers at the Academy of Sciences cite *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa* among the main inspirations for their experimental films that saw the light of day in the 1980s and are discussed in the following section. As noted by Redovičs, while the film's impact perhaps did not reach Latvia's peripheral towns, in Riga it opened the eyes of many amateur filmmakers to the fact that unorthodox approaches to filmmaking and storytelling were possible.<sup>508</sup>

The thematic and formal parallels between the avant-garde films that appeared in the context of Soviet-style socialism and those created by Western European auteurs and American underground filmmakers might invite the application of Western experimental and avant-garde film theories to experimental filmmaking tendencies within the Socialist bloc. Such a critical approach has been adopted, for example, by the Lithuanian film scholar Remigijus Venckus in his article 'The Signs of Avant-Garde Experimental Cinema in Amateur Non-professional Cinema'. In this article, the author offers a close textual analysis of a selection of Lithuanian amateur films that reveals the features of Western avant-garde cinema, and on this basis claims that these Lithuanian amateur films, similar to Western avant-garde films, can be seen as forerunners of video art.<sup>509</sup> It is important, however, to bear in mind the relative isolation of the filmmakers practising experimental filmmaking under socialism, when compared to the independent and experimental film tendencies in the West. As explained by Skanstinš, 'about the world cultural

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<sup>508</sup> Redovičs, interview.

<sup>509</sup> Remigijus Venckus, 'Avangardinio-Eksperimentinio Kino Pėdsakai Mėgėjiškame — Neprofesionaliajame Kine [The Signs of Avant-garde Experimental Cinema in Amateur Nonprofessional Cinema]', *Kūrybos Erdvės* [The Spaces of Creation], 9 (2008), 81–99.

context, in which our films came about, we learned much later'.<sup>510</sup> Only retrospectively did Skanstiņš admit that 'typologically' their films were 'akin to the new American cinema' that he exemplifies with films by Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol.<sup>511</sup> As cited above, Grinbergs only mentions the generalized Hollywood with its fake on-screen passion as a convention that his film was meant to challenge. Thus it appears problematic to apply Western experimental and avant-garde film theoretical frameworks to examples of such cinema produced in the Soviet Union before the lifting of the Iron Curtain. Drawing a direct parallel between Western experimental film practices and filmic experiments in Soviet amateur studios or self-organized groups of filmmakers runs the risk of significantly underestimating the external factors that largely conditioned the latter. Although this approach proves useful in analysing socialist-era experimental amateur films on a textual level — as will be demonstrated below in the case of the Academy of Sciences' experimental films — it largely ignores the socio-historical context of the creation of these films, and thus hermeticizes them as merely an Eastern variety of Western avant-garde cinema. It is important to remain aware of the theoretical frameworks within which the filmmakers themselves operated when making their films. *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa* in particular allows for it, as Skanstiņš has been quite vocal about his interest in semiotics and the way it shaped his debut film.

In an article published in 1986 to celebrate the achievements of the Academy of Sciences studio, *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi* was dubbed '[...] the [studio's] first serious fiction film, in which the film language is strongly *stylized*' ('nosacīts' in the original, emphasis added).<sup>512</sup> This remark reveals a great deal

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<sup>510</sup> 'Par pasaules kultūrkontekstu, kurā tapa mūsu filmas, mēs uzzinājām daudz vēlāk'. Skanstiņš, 'Būtu bijis', p. 207.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid.

<sup>512</sup> '...bija [studijas] pirmā nopietnā spēles filma, kurā kino valoda ir stipri nosacīta'. Kalpiņa and Puriņš, 'ZA Kino tautas studija', p. 20.

about the ways in which filmic experiments of the late-Socialist era were often theorized and apprehended by filmmakers, critics, and informed audiences at the time. The notion of *uslovnost'* (*nosacītība* being its analogue in Latvian) is crucial for understanding the underpinnings for the cinematic experiments in Soviet Latvia in the 1970s–80s. As observed by Daria Krizhanskaya, the term *uslovnost'* regularly appears in theoretical writing in Russia which analyses cultural forms, most notably theatre, from the Silver Age onwards.<sup>513</sup> Katerina Clark notes that '[...] *uslovnost'* eludes satisfactory translation' and is 'variously rendered as "conditionality", "artificiality", "stylization", or "conventionality"'.<sup>514</sup> The term, however, 'essentially entails a recognition of the impossibility of mimesis, of reflecting, representing, or recreating "reality" in the theater—or for that matter in any art form—and of consequent necessity for "conventions"'.<sup>515</sup>

Within the circle of Birojs, the term *uslovnost'* was undoubtedly adopted via the writings of Iurii Lotman and his fellow thinkers. As mentioned above, Civjans and Skanstiņš became captivated by the ideas of the Tartu–Moscow Semiotic School in the early 1970s by thoroughly familiarizing themselves with all issues of the journal *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (Studies in Semiotic Systems) to which they had access.<sup>516</sup> Skanstiņš openly admits that the lessons he learned from Lotman and other semioticians helped him 'understand [...] the nature of artistic conditionality [*makslinieciska nosacītība* in the original] of an artwork', and that he applied the ideas borrowed from semiotics in the making of

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<sup>513</sup> Daria Krizhanskaya, 'Meyerhold – "Revizor" – Revolution: Vsevolod Meyerhold', *Theatre History Studies*, 20 (2000), 157–70 (p. 163).

<sup>514</sup> Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 85.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> Skanstiņš, 'Būtu bijis', pp. 201–02. *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* was an academic journal on the semiotics of culture which was launched by Iurii Lotman in 1964 and published by the University of Tartu Press.

*Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi.*<sup>517</sup> In line with the Semiotic School's interpretation of art as a form of language that uses sign systems to communicate meaning, Lotman and Boris Uspenskii define *uslovnost'* in art as

the realization in artistic creativity of the ability of sign systems to express the same content by different structural means. [...] The representation system adopted in a work of art, characterized by semantics, has a certain arbitrariness with respect to the displayed object, which allows us to speak of its *uslovnost'*.<sup>518</sup>

Lotman observes that the common principle of development of human artistic creativity is '[...] overcoming the limitations that the tool imposes on the technical possibilities of the artist, and increasing likening of works of art to the phenomena of life'.<sup>519</sup> This in some cases has led to the ostensive refusal of *uslovnost'*, '[...] to the idea that artistic truth is achievable only by way of denial

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<sup>517</sup> 'Iegūtas atziņas man turpmāk ir palīdzējušas pilnīgāk izprast [...] mākslas darba mākslinieciskās nosacītības raksturu'. Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>518</sup> 'реализация в художественном творчестве способности знаковых систем выражать одно и то же содержание разными структурными средствами. [...] Принятая в произведении искусства система отображения, характеризующаяся семантикой, обладает известной произвольностью по отношению к отображаемому объекту, что и позволяет говорить о ее условности'. Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii, 'Uslovnost' v iskusstve', in *Filosofskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 5, ed. by F. V. Konstantinov (Moscow: Sovetskaiia entsiklopediia, 1970), pp. 287–88.

<sup>519</sup> '[...] преодоление ограничений, которые накладывает материал на технические возможности художника, все большее уподобление произведений искусства явлениям жизни'. Iurii Lotman, 'Problema skhodstva iskusstva i zhizni v svete struktural'nogo podkhoda', in *Iu. M. Lotman i tartusko-moskovskaia semioticheskaia shkola*, ed. by Iurii Lotman and others (Moscow: Gnozis, 1994), pp. 32–41 (p. 32).

of the “artificiality of art”.<sup>520</sup> The author exemplifies such conscious refusal of *uslovnost'* in cinema by referring to the phenomenon of Italian Neorealism and its characteristics.<sup>521</sup> In order to understand Birojs's preoccupation with the levels of *uslovnost'* in art — one that can be found in both their films as well as in the theoretical frameworks of their theatre work — the broader cultural context in which Birojs artistic practices emerged should be considered. In all probability, the Birojs group (and later, as will be demonstrated in the following section, the younger generation of filmmakers at the Academy of Sciences) were eager to move away from realism towards a higher degree of *uslovnost'* in their works, as realism in its 'socialist' variety dominated mainstream Soviet cinema and art overall. Apart from this, especially in the case of the Academy filmmakers, this artistic choice was a challenge to the amateur filmmaking culture with its long-standing focus on documentary film.

In *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi*, the members of the Birojs group headed by Skanstiņš wander through inhospitable and empty back streets of Riga and perform various symbolic actions with a mirror, an empty painting frame, white cloths and laundry lines, and a milk bottle. At one point, the group finds themselves inside a fenced yard with high brick walls towering above them. They appear lost, anxiously wander about the yard, looking for a way out, and some try and fail to climb up the fence. At a number of points the film is interrupted by full-frame newspaper collages, which were created by Valpēters specially for the film. According to Skanstiņš, it is during these interruptions that ‘the two models of the world are juxtaposed: the world model imposed by the mass media of modern society, and the world view formed by archetypes

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<sup>520</sup> [...] к представлению о том что художественная правда достижима лишь на путях отказа от “искусственности искусства”. Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.



that lie in the collective unconsciousness'.<sup>522</sup> As the film's title hints, the mirror is revealed to be a crucial element in *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi*, and is used by its characters as something of a portal into the diegesis of the film. In line with Skanstiņš's appreciation and exploration of conditionality or *uslovnost'* in art, the film is bookended by episodes in which the characters of the film use the mirror reflections to portray the entrance into and then the exit from the film's space, thus its 'artificiality' as artwork is emphasized. Skanstiņš confirms that he exploited the semiotic nature of film language in two ways: both to 'discover the possibilities of the film language and convey [a] deeply personal life philosophy'.<sup>523</sup> *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa*, along with the other Birojs films, is indeed a deeply personal work that is informed by the author's subjective vision and dominated by the group's philosophical moorings.

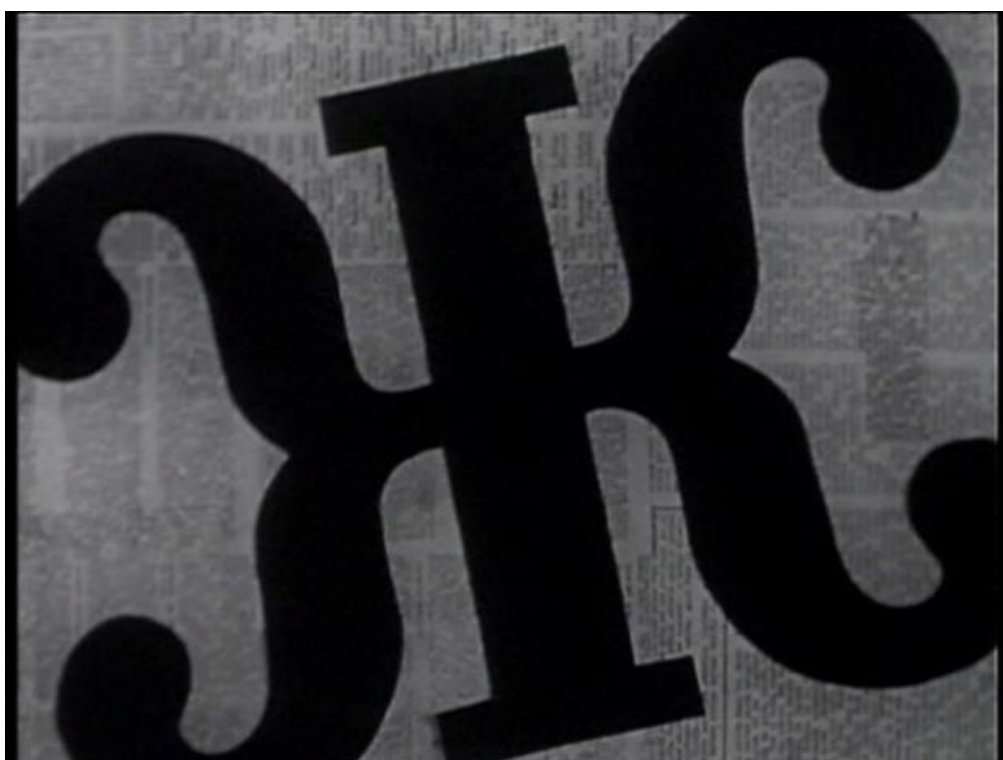
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<sup>522</sup> 'Pretstatīti divi pasaules modeļi: mūsdienu sabiedrībā valdošo plašsaziņas līdzekļu uzspiestais pasaules modelis un pasaules aina, ko veido arhetipi, kas mīt kolektīvajā bezapziņā'. Skanstiņš, 'Būtu bijis', p. 205.

<sup>523</sup> 'Spēle ar kino valodas semiotisku dabu izmantota divējādi: gan kino valodas iespēju atklāšanai, gan dziļi personīgas dzīves filozofijas izpaušmei'. Ibid.



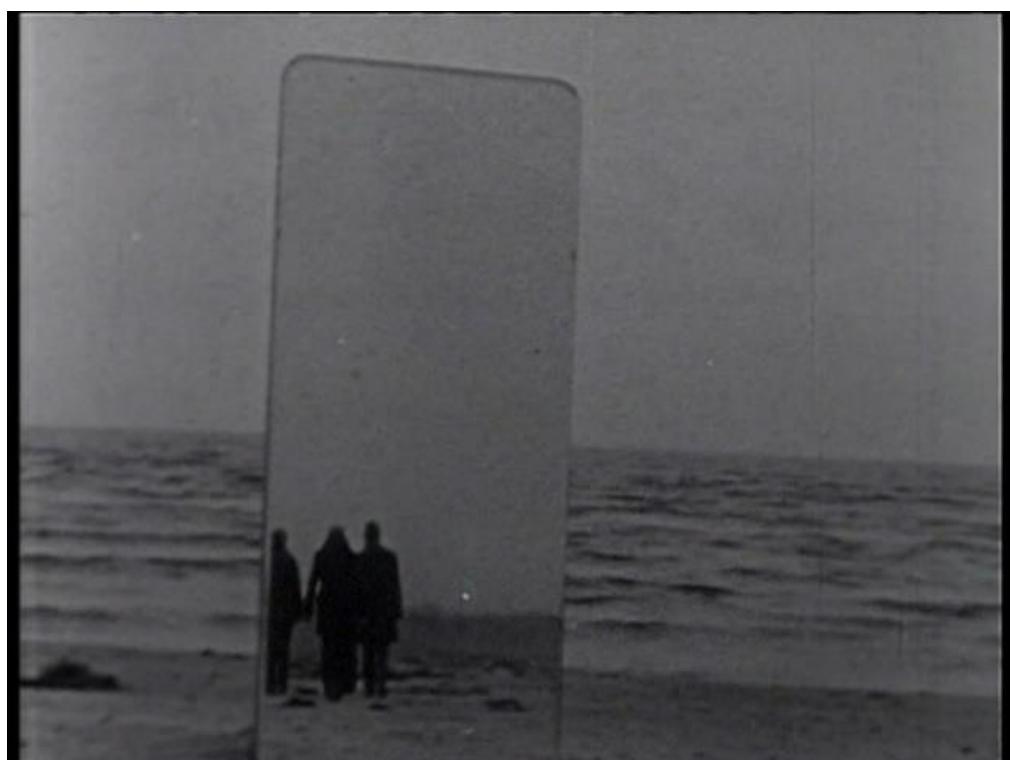
15 Still from *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi*



16 Still from *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi*



17 Still from *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi*



18 Still from *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi*

Interestingly, Skanstiņš initially intended *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi* to be varioscopic. A second 8mm camera was actually passed around all the participants during the filming of the various episodes. At several points of *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa* one can indeed see various characters operating an 8mm camera. These 'situational' camera operators were free to film whatever they wished; in this way, as explained by Skanstiņš, '[...] everyone became an assistant camera operator of [his] film'.<sup>524</sup> Skanstiņš intended this 'collective' 8mm film to be screened alongside *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa*, thus projecting the two films simultaneously onto one screen. Skanstiņš believed that the two films would complement and contrast with one other, and that the dialogue that emerged between them would generate new meanings.<sup>525</sup> This exhibition concept was apparently realized only once, in the framework of the experimental film festival *Alternatīva* (Alternative), discussed below in this chapter, which came into being through the initiative of Skanstiņš and other Academy amateur filmmakers, and took place in Riga in the late 1980s.

Taking into consideration the production contexts of *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi* and *Pašportrets*, as well as other Birojs films, it becomes clear that these films cannot be described as products of the organized amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia, unlike the vast majority of films investigated in this thesis. The Birojs films invite the qualifier 'amateur' solely by way of not being produced by professional filmmakers within the commercial film industry, and fit better within the frameworks of what the discipline of film studies defines as independent, underground, or art films. As cited before, however, the purpose behind Moran's proposed 'functional taxonomy' of modes of practice in filmmaking 'is not to construct arguments about purity', but to appreciate 'the diversity of intentions criss-crossing through texts and among fields of practice' as well as 'distinctions of both/and rather than either/or'.<sup>526</sup> He further clarifies

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<sup>524</sup> '[...] katrs it kā kļuva par manas filmas papildoperatoru'. Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video*, p. 69.

this proposition by arguing that ‘any media text is structured-in-dominance by several modalities in a mixed economy’.<sup>527</sup> In relation to the Birojs films, for example, it implies that while the avant-garde mode may dominate in *Pašportrēts* and *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi*, many aspects of these films evoke connotations that tend to be associated with amateur filmmaking *per se* and in a specific socialist context.

The filmmakers’ reliance on 16 and 8mm equipment, and the visual codes and formats integral to it, their lack of experience and dependence on the structures of state institutions during the production process, and *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa*’s relationship with and influence on the organized amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia invite us to study them in the context of Soviet Latvian amateur cinema and define them as a more independent and artistic strand of amateur filmmaking. The Birojs’s position as outsiders in relation to the official art/film scene is both an artistic concept behind the group’s body of work and a result of their exclusion — as largely untrained experimental artists — from the ‘ranking order’ of the professional art/film circuit. This exclusion, or perhaps better to say, the conscious choice of being *vne* the official art/film spaces, prompted them to gravitate towards a more loosely defined amateur creative sphere and its more concrete material support networks. As will be discussed in the following section, moreover, the films produced within the Birojs circle foreshadowed and inspired a more institutionalized strand of experimental filmmaking within the framework of organized amateur cinema in Soviet Latvia.

## **Experimental filmmaking at the Academy of Sciences in the 1980s**

Although amateur films with experimental aesthetic ambitions appeared sporadically throughout the history and geography of Soviet Latvian amateur cinema, it was the first half of the 1980s at the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio that the intersection of radical and aesthetic vectors in Soviet

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<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

Latvian amateur cinema began to acquire a critical mass. In the early 1980s, the Academy of Sciences studio began to produce films that stood out among the contemporaneous Soviet Latvian amateur cinema dominated by documentary films, often devoid of aesthetic ambitions and focused on fulfilling documentative functions. This body of films was created by a new generation of amateur filmmakers at the Academy, the most prominent among them being Vladis Goldbergs, Haralds Elceris, Ēriks Pudzēns, Žanis Krusts, Viesturs Graždanovičs, and Igors Vasiljevs (now Igors Linga). The majority of them joined the studio at the apex of its prestige in the early 1980s.

Unlike the vast majority of amateur films created within the Soviet amateur-film studio network, the films of these individuals came to depict non-realistic diegetic worlds, exhibited a high degree of stylization in the treatment of characters and sets, explored unconventional narrative structures and storytelling methods, and relied heavily on symbolism, often using simple trick photography and special effects. Furthermore, in thematic terms these films stepped away from the focus on current affairs and the everyday, and instead explored such 'eternal' concepts as the human condition, individualism and subjective experiences of the world, alienation, and spirituality. As with their predecessor *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguli*, therefore, the experimental films produced at the Academy during the first half of the 1980s can be characterized as thematically neutral as far as the conservative-radical spectrum is concerned. Their authors were predominantly committed in their works to the radical-aesthetic vector, primarily seeking to experiment with the aesthetic conventions of cinema, rather than to contest prevailing ideological tenets. As might have been expected, however, with the onset of *perestroika* in 1985 this dynamic shifted, and the radical-social vector became more prominent, not only in experimental amateur films, but also across the media landscape of the Soviet Union as a whole.

The idiosyncrasy of the Academy's experimental films in the context of general amateur filmmaking trends in Soviet Latvia is most likely explained by the special status enjoyed by the Academy of Sciences studio. As was discussed before, the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR and the socialities that

formed within this institution serve as a perfect example of Yurchak's conceptual model of *svoi*. Thus it is unsurprising that the studio became a hotbed for alternative forms of interacting with official discourse and interpolating it with new meanings. As mentioned previously, moreover, by the early 1980s this amateur-film studio had become a place where the professional filmmakers of the time could meet informally. This made it particularly attractive for artistically-inclined youth who wanted to make a foray into the art of cinema. As explained by one of the newcomers to the Academy studio, Viesturs Graždanovičs: 'This was a studio where professionals of the time gathered; [it] was different from other studios because there one had an opportunity to acquire knowledge at a professional level'.<sup>528</sup> Many of these young filmmakers were close to the circles of Riga's *neformaly*, and shared their interest in cinema beyond domestic productions, thus acquiring enough critical perspective to develop their own ideas about film. Joining the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio, and being able to rely on its technical and experiential capital, enabled them to implement these ideas in practice. It can also be argued that the experimental films made at the Academy of Sciences studio in the first half of the 1980s appeared partly as a reaction to the studio's first decade dominated by tourism films. As Graždanovičs elaborates: 'We were not interested in travel films at all; there were some kind of winds of change, as a result of which one could see that cinema could be different, not only narrative, but also experimental'.<sup>529</sup>

Just like the Birojs films, the Academy's experimental cinema of the pre-*perestroika* period had theatrical origins. In the academic year 1979–80,

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<sup>528</sup> 'Tā bija studija, kur pulcējas arī tā laika profesionāļi; [tā] atšķīrās no citām studijām, tāpēc ka tur bija iespēja iegūt zināšanas profesionālā līmenī'. Viesturs Graždanovičs, interview by Inese Strupule, 25 August 2017, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>529</sup> 'Mūs ceļojuma filmas neinteresēja nemaz, bija kaut kādas tādas vēsmas kad varēja redzēt ka kino var būt savādāks, ne tikai naratīvs, bet arī eksperimentāls'. Ibid.

Haralds Elceris and Vladis Goldbergs were studying at the Riga Polytechnical Institute (Rīgas Politehniskais institūts, now Riga Technical University, Rīgas Tehniskā universitāte) together with Miervaldis Mozers. Now a professor at the University of Latvia, as well as a journalist and public figure in Latvia, Mozers was then a student with a passion for theatre who organized an amateur student theatre group at the Institute. Being creatively inclined, Elceris and Goldbergs promptly joined Mozers in his initiative. Mozers was acquainted with Zigurds Vidiņš and invited him to attend one of their performances, which was a play loosely based on a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Blind Leading the Blind* (also known as *Blind*, or *The Parable of the Blind*). After watching the performance, Vidiņš expressed an interest in making a film based on it. Elceris recalls that the idea appealed to him and Goldbergs, but since Vidiņš was involved in many ongoing projects, and with no progress made during the following year, Goldbergs suggested to Elceris that they make the film themselves. They therefore both applied to join the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio.<sup>530</sup> As mentioned earlier, Vidiņš completed *Aplis pieradījumā*, his most formally experimental film, in 1980 (the film is discussed in detail in the previous chapter). In 1978, moreover, Skanstiņš officially released his *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi* via the Academy of Sciences studio. The unorthodox approach to filmmaking exhibited in these films inspired and resonated with Goldbergs, Elceris, and other young men soon to join the Academy of Sciences studio. As a result, the newcomers saw the studio as a safe space for their own experiments with film language.

The first film created by the new generation of the Academy's amateurs was *Aklie* (Blind, 1981), directed by Goldbergs and photographed by Elceris, which was a filmic representation of the play that Mozers's amateur theatre group had staged the year before.<sup>531</sup> The following year witnessed another

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<sup>530</sup> Haralds Elceris, interview by Inese Strupule, 9 November 2018, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>531</sup> Vladis Goldbergs, interview by Inese Strupule, 10 November 2018, Riga, Latvia.



collaboration between Goldbergs and Elceris, entitled *Ab ovo* (1982), as well as a film directed by another newcomer to the Academy studio, Žanis Krusts, which was entitled *Filma, privātā kolekcija (Pēc Miro darba motīviem)* (Film, Private Collection (Based on the Motives of Artwork by Miró), 1982). Like *Aklie*, this film was also inspired by a painting, namely Joan Miró's *Peinture* (Painting), and also photographed by Elceris.<sup>532</sup> From this moment onwards, Elceris acted as the artistic backbone in many of the new amateur films produced at the Academy, mostly employed as camera operator, but often shifting between a variety of roles, such as assistant director, script advisor, editor, and even actor. Around the same time, the studio was joined by a Liepāja art school graduate, Ēriks Pudzēns, who had been entertaining the idea of making a possibly autobiographical film about a misunderstood and unappreciated artist. Pudzēns approached the bohemian-looking Elceris with the offer of playing the role of the artist. As a result, the collaboration extended to Elceris being an assistant director and even a secondary camera operator for Pudzēns. The film, entitled *Aizmigt nomoda sapnī* (Dreaming a Waking Dream), was completed in 1983.<sup>533</sup> In 1984, Krusts began making his second film at the Academy studio, entitled *Akmens debesīs* (Stone in the Sky), which was completed in 1985, also with the help of Elceris.

At this point it is important to emphasize that, despite this body of films justifiably being characterized as 'experimental' in this thesis, examination of the contemporaneous public discourse surrounding experimental tendencies within Soviet Latvian amateur cinema reveals that the term 'experimental' was scarcely ever used to describe this strand of films prior to *perestroika*. In Soviet Latvian public discourse concerning amateur cinema in the first half of the 1980s, the Academy's new generation films were referred to exclusively as *spēlfilma* (fiction film), or *aktierfilma* (also fiction film, literally actors' film). In 1982, for example, the Riga Film Studio director Viesturs Alksnītis classified the first films created by Goldbergs, Elceris, and Krusts as *aktierkino*, or fiction

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<sup>532</sup> Elceris, interview.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

cinema, and compared them with the documentary films traditionally dominating Latvian amateur cinema throughout the decades of its existence.<sup>534</sup> In the interviews conducted by the author of the present thesis, Vidiņš, Elceris, and Goldbergs also noticeably preferred to refer to the experimental films produced at the Academy as *spēlfilmas* or *aktierfilmas*, perhaps out of habit. It seems that both filmmakers and critics attempted to avoid using the adjective 'experimental', perhaps due to its radical and progressive connotations.

In the Soviet official discourse surrounding film culture, the term 'experimental' was often used inconsistently and mostly disconnected from its international and historical usage. The elusiveness of the term when applied to amateur film is also manifest in the evaluation system of officially organized amateur-film festivals. 'Experimental' was often employed as an award category at amateur-film festivals, as in 'best experimental film of the festival', along with 'documentary', 'fiction', and 'animation'. As if to contribute even more confusion, such categories as 'popular scientific', 'musical', and even '8mm' and 'films produced by young people' were at times added to this mixture. In this way, such heterogenous categories as filmmaking modes, genres, film gauges, and filmmakers' ages were incorporated as part of a single evaluation system. Examining the array of films awarded in the category of 'experimental' also does not produce much in the way of clarity: at times animation films were awarded in the experimental category, and experimental films in the fiction category.<sup>535</sup> At the same time, the qualifier 'experimental' in public discourse was more readily applied to the amateur filmmaking trend discussed in the beginning of this chapter, since the experiments with filmic techniques and forms practised by the first generation of the post-war amateur filmmaking

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<sup>534</sup> Viesturs Alksnītis, 'Divi kino vienā laivā', *Padomju Jaunatne*, 5 October 1982, p. 4.

<sup>535</sup> For an overview of Soviet Latvian amateur films awarded at a variety of amateur-film festivals between 1967 and 2004, see Jārvine, *Vzgliad v proshloe*, pp. 482–94.

movement in the Soviet Union were largely inspired by the cinematic culture of the post-1917 era, which seemed to be the only officially accepted artistic avant-garde in Soviet ideological discourse. Even in these cases, however, the word 'experimental' seems to have been used with caution. In an article that discusses one of the Ģilde's later photo-films, *Siseņu lietus* (The Locust Rain, 1978), which was created by Dinvietis, Riekstiņš, and Pipars, the author observes that the film continues the studio's established pattern of experimental photo-films that started with *Aptumsums*, and poses a question: 'Is it necessary to use the word "experimental"? The authors' collective has worked well together and found its signature line, therefore now the experiment is replaced by conscious purposefulness'.<sup>536</sup>

Interestingly, aside from disassociating the Academy's new generation films from the term 'experimental', Goldbergs sets them apart from the vast majority of Soviet Latvian amateur films. In his perhaps slightly patronizing view, the distinction lies in the fact that the majority of amateur filmmakers, with the exception of a few, 'were imitating the "big" cinema' that they saw on film-theatre screens at the time, which was mostly limited to mainstream Soviet films, whereas the Academy's new generation of filmmakers were striving to produce what he describes as 'alternative professional cinema', taking advantage of the lack of centralized censorship and their independence from Moscow to experiment with various aspects of cinematic forms of representation and to produce content that was different from both professional mainstream as well as amateur cinema of the time.<sup>537</sup> Undoubtedly, one should take such self-praising claims of uniqueness with a dose of scepticism. Nevertheless, examination of these films reveals that the younger generation of filmmakers at the Academy of Sciences were indeed eager to move away from the realism that dominated both mainstream Soviet

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<sup>536</sup> 'Bet vai šajā gadījumā jālieto vārds "eksperimentāls"? Autoru kolektīvs taču ir labi sastrādājies, savu rokrakstu atradis, tagad eksperimentu aizstāj apzināta mērķtiecība'. Saulevica, 'Skate ar pārsteigumiem', p. 3.

<sup>537</sup> Goldbergs, interview.

cinema and contemporary amateur cinema, and, following the precedent set by Birojs, to move towards a higher degree of *uslovnost'* in their works. As confirmed by Elceris, their films were marked 'by a different degree of stylization' (*'nosacītība'* in the original).<sup>538</sup>

With Skanstiņš's *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguli* and its semiotic underpinnings functioning as a precedent, the Academy filmmakers were encouraged to approach filmmaking from a semiotic perspective. Civjans, who at the beginning of the 1980s was a doctoral candidate at the Leningrad State Institute of Theatre, Music, and Cinema, and was also working at the Academy's Language and Literature Institute, contributed greatly to this creative and intellectual atmosphere. As part of his research at the Academy, Civjans often gave lectures on film, in which he applied his long-standing interest in structuralism and semiotics to the art of cinema. This resonated positively with the new generation of the Academy's filmmakers. In the interviews conducted by the author of this thesis, both Goldbergs and Elceris drew attention to a variety of cinematic exercises that were undertaken as part of the activities at the Academy's amateur-film studio in the 1980s. Among them were the first experiments with video equipment and simultaneity of recording and playback; multiple simultaneous film projections (see the previous section of this chapter on the special screening of Skanstiņš's *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguli*); group exercises dedicated to creating a reel-long film in one take; and even injecting film into other art forms, for example installation and performance art.<sup>539</sup> Goldbergs comments as follows on these exercises and the resulting films produced at the Academy: 'We were trying to look at cinema from a semiotic point of view. [...] We were thinking about cinema; we were semiotically dissecting it'.<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>538</sup> Elceris, interview.

<sup>539</sup> Goldbergs, interview; Elceris, interview.

<sup>540</sup> 'Mēs uz kino mēģinājām skatīties no semiotiska viedokļa. [...] Mēs domājām par kino, mēs to semiotiski ķidājām'. Goldbergs, interview.

Apart from the self-proclaimed fascination with semiotics, the new Academy filmmakers were aesthetically influenced by the European avant-garde movements of the 1920s–30s and their legacies. Curiously, it was predominantly surrealist painting (and to a lesser extent literature) rather than surrealist cinema that influenced the aesthetics of the 1980s Academy's films.<sup>541</sup> Goldbergs's film *Ab ovo*, for example, features inserts of reproductions of paintings by Paul Delvaux, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and Yves Tanguy, whereas, as mentioned earlier, Krusts gave his film the sub-title 'Based on the motives of artwork by Miró'. Interestingly, as recalled by Elceris, who photographed both films, the resemblance between *Ab ovo* and *Filma, privātā kolekcija* and examples of Western European surrealist cinema was noted by judges at the amateur-film festivals where the films were screened:

The most beautiful thing 'pinned' on us was the French poet Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un poète* and Luis Buñuel's first two films, *Un chien Andalou* and *L'Âge d'or*. We were accused of having watched them and produced imitations. The hell we had, we hadn't seen those films back then, we could only watch them later.<sup>542</sup>

Although parallels might indeed be drawn between the Academy's experimental films and the paragons of experimental and surrealist cinema of

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<sup>541</sup> As opposed to surrealist cinema, with which Goldbergs, Elceris, and others became acquainted later, surrealist painting was accessible to them via reproductions in art catalogues and similar publications. As testified by Gaiševska, in Kaza circles reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, and Joan Miró, and Eugène Ionesco's plays had been circulating since the early 1970s. Mudīte Gaiševska, 'Untitled essay', in *Nenocenzētie*, ed. by Valpēters, pp. 24–26 (pp. 24–25).

<sup>542</sup> 'Kas ir pats skaistākais ko mums piešuva, franču dzejniek[a] Žan[a] Kokto *Dzejnieka asins* un Luisa Bunjuela pirmās divas filmas: *Andalūzijas suns* un *Zelta laikmets*. Mums piešuva ka mēs esam noskatījušies un taisām pakaļ. Figū, mēs toreiz tās filmas nebijām redzējuši, mēs tās vēlāk noskatījāmies'. Elceris, interview.

the 1920s and 1930s — especially in their use of symbolic devices chiefly through photographic illusionism and montage discontinuity — the filmmakers themselves deny having seen these films at that time. Here it is important to reiterate once again the danger of drawing a direct parallel between Western experimental film practices and filmic experiments in Soviet amateur studios or self-organized groups of filmmakers. Although at times this approach proves to be viable in analysing socialist-era experimental amateur films on a textual level, providing useful terminology and theoretical models, it does not account for the external factors pertinent to the creation of these films, as well as the theoretical frameworks within which the filmmakers themselves operated while making their films.

The body of films discussed in this section do resort to some of the methods pertinent to the ‘subjective’ tendency within avant-garde film history as described by P. Adams Sitney. The author labels the tendency ‘subjective’ in order to distinguish it from ‘graphic cinema’, which he argues ‘arose from a desire to temporalize pictorial strategies by Cubist, Futurist, and Dadaist painters’, and is best exemplified by *Rhythmus 21* (Rhythm, 1921, Hans Richter), *Diagonal-Symphonie* (Diagonal Symphonie, 1924, Viking Eggeling), *Ballet mécanique* (Mechanical Ballet, 1924, Fernand Léger), and *Anémic cinéma* (Anemic Cinema, 1926, Marcel Duchamp).<sup>543</sup> In turn, subjective avant-garde films raise ‘a series of questions about the character of cinematic representation while operating within the spatial and temporal conventions of the dominant cinema, often to subvert them’.<sup>544</sup> According to Sitney, subjective cinema ‘draws its model from oneiric activity’, or dreaming, hence it relies on ‘photographic illusionism’ and ‘discontinuity of montage’ to constitute its

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<sup>543</sup> P. Adams Sitney, ‘Introduction’, in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), pp. i–xxv (p. x).

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

'essential moments'.<sup>545</sup> Sitney identifies a number of early avant-garde films that, in his view, exemplify the 'subjective' tendency — *L'Étoile de mer* (The Starfish, 1928, Man Ray), *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (The Seashell and the Clergyman, 1928, Germaine Dulac), and *Un chien Andalou* — and cites Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *At Land* (1944), as well as Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un poète* (The Blood of a Poet, 1932) as later developments within the subjective cinema tendency that resonated with its early examples.<sup>546</sup>

Analysing these examples of Western European experimental cinema, Sitney identifies several recurring themes and characteristic methods that can be similarly observed in the 1980s Academy's films. Sitney notes, for instance, that 'the relationship between the film experience and dreaming, as well as the privileged access of cinema to representing the dream work, are persistent themes of the avant-garde film'.<sup>547</sup> The narrative of Pudzēns's *Aizmigt nomoda sapnī*, as the title overtly suggests, is built around the model of oneiric activity and driven by sequences of waking dreams, memories, and visions. Furthermore, analysing *Un chien Andalou*, incidentally one of the films that Goldbergs and Elceris were accused of imitating, Sitney observes that 'strategies of metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy [...] become the structural models of the film's formal development'.<sup>548</sup> The tendency towards symbolism and the cinematic application of devices borrowed from literature, such as those mentioned by Sitney in the quotation above, are also clearly manifest in the Academy's 1980s films. This, in all fairness, ought to be attributed to their fascination with signs and sign systems and their overarching desire to step away from realistic forms of representations as much as to their interest in Western European avant-garde art. In addition, Sitney notes the

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<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid., pp. xvii-xxii.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid., p. xvii.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

'manifestly reflexive theme' in Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un poète*, and elaborates that 'in many of the American [avant-garde] films of the 1940s the reflexive relationship between the authorial subjectivity and Selfhood represented in the film was mediated simply by the film-maker's crossing over to become his own central actor'.<sup>549</sup> In Goldbergs's *Ab ovo*, the filmmaker doubles as the film's protagonist, whereas *Aizmigt nomoda sapnī*, made by the recent art school graduate Pudzēns, follows a misunderstood and unappreciated artist as he struggles to find his place in the world, thus revealing a manifestly self-reflexive theme.

Despite the traits in common, the Academy's films also exhibit certain characteristics that contradict one of the most important aspects of Western avant-garde cinema as defined by its theorists. The rejection of linear narrative and the disruption of mainstream cinema's spatial and temporal conventions are overwhelmingly accepted as the defining features of experimental cinema. It seems that exploring unorthodox approaches to cinematic storytelling was not a priority for many of the Academy's filmmakers of the new generation. For the most part, the narratives of their films are linear, perhaps due to lack of filmmaking experience. Goldbergs, for example, has lamented his own lack of imagination in the editing room: 'When I look at [*Ab ovo*] now, I am hugely ashamed of the way it is edited, [...] how narratively primitive it is, one scene simply follows another; it could have been edited in so many ways...'.<sup>550</sup> However, the linearity of narrative is explained by the thematic structure that many of the Academy's films share: for the most part, they can be described as subjectivist films in which the protagonists embark on a transcendental journey. As they move through various, often menacing, spaces and

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<sup>549</sup> Ibid., pp. xx–xxi.

<sup>550</sup> 'Tagad kad es skatos, man ir patiešām milzīgs kauns, kā tas ir montēts, [...] cik tas ir naratīvi primitīvi, vienkārši viens kadrs pēc otra; tur varēja dažādi veidot...'. Goldbergs, interview.



landscapes, they encounter characters performing symbolic actions, or perform them themselves, in the end reaching an epiphany of sorts.

Goldbergs's second film, *Ab ovo*, follows this structure in the most obvious manner. Even the film's title suggests linear temporality of narrative: 'ab ovo' is Latin for 'from the beginning' (literally 'from the egg'). The film begins with a close-up of two hands peeling a boiled egg and then extracting the yolk with tweezers as the title *Ab ovo* appears on-screen. The title sequence is followed by a long shot of a lone figure in a snowy landscape moving towards the camera. The figure is revealed to be Goldbergs, thus establishing him as the author-hero of the film. Interestingly, a similar framing of the protagonist features at the beginning of *Filma, privātā kolekcija* and the finale of *Aizmigt nomoda sapnī*, and is in all probability a visualisation of the theme of alienation and estrangement pertinent to this body of films. The character of Goldbergs is portrayed in a frenzy of rage. He is waving a tree branch and 'attacking' the air around him; he then holds it like a spear and attempts to pierce the ground with it. Subsequently, he approaches a tree; attached to its branch is a sheet of paper, which a close-up shot reveals to be a page of script. Goldbergs picks it up, and we hear the voiceover narrator reading what appears to be a page from the script of the very opening sequence of *Ab ovo* as it is unravelling before the spectator's eyes:

The world tree. Exterior. Day. The man-demiurge is reading a script page with the description of the fourth shot. Having read it, he turns the page. The world tree. Exterior. Day. He is reading the description of the third shot, then turns his head to the left and sees himself walking alongside a city wall.<sup>551</sup>

Thus, apart from providing clues for the symbology of the film, the voiceover exhibits blatant self-reflexivity aimed at making the viewer aware of the

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<sup>551</sup> 'Pasaules koks. Daba. Diena. Cilvēks-demiurģs lasa scenārijā lapiņu ar ceturtā kadra aprakstu. To izlasījis, viņš pagriež lapiņas otru pusi. Pasaules koks, daba, diena. Lasa trešā kadra saturu, pagriež galvu pa kreisi un redz sevi ejam gar pils mūri'.

filmmaking process: this emphasizes the artificiality — or *uslovnost'* — of the film as art work. In this regard, Goldbergs's directorial choice is similar to the way in which Skanstiņš uses mirror reflections to establish the limits of the film's diegesis in *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguļi*, as discussed above.

In the interview conducted by the author of this thesis, Goldbergs explains the idea behind the film in the following way: 'A young man wants to get to know and at the same time to transform the world, so he, as in a parable, has to go through seven levels of cognition and revelation'.<sup>552</sup> Seven distinct episodes can indeed be identified within the film; these are marked by Goldbergs moving from one space to another and separated by full-frame inserts of reproductions of surrealist paintings.<sup>553</sup> The film can be interpreted as depicting a journey on the quest for spirituality. The opening lines of the film's script, cited above, reveal the protagonist to be a demiurge, which in most theological systems and schools of philosophy is a figure responsible for creating and maintaining the material world, and is often described as antagonistic to all that is purely spiritual. The opening sequence of the film represents a certain disbalance, as the demiurge-Golbergs is shown attacking the world tree (*pasaules koks* in Latvian), a crucial mythological symbol in Baltic folklore which is analogous to the archetypal tree of life, or tree of knowledge, in world mythologies, and one that is believed to connect the kingdom of heaven, the earthly world, and the underworld. As Goldbergs travels through the 'seven levels of cognition and revelation', represented by highly stylized sets, he persistently encounters a

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<sup>552</sup> 'Jauns cilvēks vēlas vienlaikus iepazīt un pārveidot pasauli, tāpēc viņam, kā līdzībā, nākas iziet cauri septiņiem izziņas un atklāsmes līmeņiem'. Goldbergs, interview.

<sup>553</sup> The paintings featured in the film are Paul Delvaux's *L'Appel de la nuit* (The Call of the Night, or Night Visit, 1938), Max Ernst's *La Toilette de la mariée* (Robing of the Bride, 1940), Joan Miró's *El Carnaval de Arlequín* (The Harlequin's Carnival, 1924–25), Max Ernst's *Celebes* (1921), Yves Tanguy's *Maman, papa est blessé!* (Mama, Papa is Wounded!, 1927), and Max Ernst's *Von diesem wissen Männer nichts* (Men Shall Know Nothing of This, 1923).

female character who appears before him in different incarnations. As explained by Goldbergs, this woman represents ‘an opponent to the demiurge’ and ‘a sexual symbol’, one who is there ‘to allure him, and draw his thoughts to herself, and make him search for her further’.<sup>554</sup> At the same time, it appears that the woman is designated as a carrier of the spiritual through the symbol of a bell: after their first encounter, demiurge-Goldbergs finds a bell in the pocket of her robe, at one point in the film she is shown ringing the bell to attract his attention, and in the finale of the film the woman and the demiurge are shown hanging the bell around the trunk of the world tree and walking away towards the horizon together. The film thus culminates in the symbolic reunification of the masculine and the feminine, the material and the spiritual.



19 Still from *Ab ovo* (Viesturs Graždanovičs collection)

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<sup>554</sup> ‘Bet sievietē kas paradās, kā mana demiurga pretinieci, kā seksuālais simbols, ka mani iekārdina un liek man visu laiku par to domāt un meklēt viņu tālāk’. Goldbergs, interview.



20 Max Ernst's *Robing of the Bride in Ab ovo* (Viesturs Graždanovičs collection)

The surrealist paintings featured in the film thematically mirror the episodes they introduce to a certain extent. Ernst's *Robing of the Bride*, for example, features 'a large central female figure wearing a brilliant red robe that separates to reveal her body'; it is inserted before the episode in which the demiurge's female opponent appears for the first time, wearing a red robe over her naked body.<sup>555</sup> The idea of amalgamation of the masculine and the feminine in the finale is supported by another Ernst painting, *Men Shall Know Nothing of This*, which shows 'a sexually united couple formed by fused floating legs joined vertically in the center of the canvas', and is inserted just prior to the film's final episode.<sup>556</sup> Goldbergs uses the reproductions to establish visual parallels with his film in a similar way to Vidiņš's deployment of Dalí's

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<sup>555</sup> M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. 164.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

*Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* and *Tuna Fishing* in the opening sequence of his *Aplis pieradījumā*, as discussed in detail in Chapter Three. In this regard, the connection between Krusts's *Filma, privātā kolekcija* (*Pēc Miro darba motīviem*) and Joan Miró's art is less thematic and more tokenistic. As hinted by the sub-title of the film, and confirmed by Elceris, the film's title, *Filma, privātā kolekcija*, refers to Miró's *Peinture* (Painting, 1927). Elceris explains that Krusts came across Miró's painting in an art catalogue, where the title of the work was followed by its current location, a private collection (although now the painting is part of the Tate collection, it was previously owned by the artist's friend, Tristan Tzara), and decided to name his film in an analogous way.<sup>557</sup> Apart from this, naming his film *Film*, i.e., after what it is, can be again interpreted in terms of foregrounding the artwork's *uslovnost'*.

Similarly to *Ab ovo*, *Filma, privātā kolekcija* portrays a journey and is laden with Christian symbols. In this film, two young men embark on a transcendental journey during which their faith is tested. One of the protagonists is depicted as a carefree young man who, after trying an apple at a market stall, one that within the storyline acts as a modern version of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, is faced with numerous trials and tribulations. The hero encounters his dark doppelgänger, who then, through the use of trick photography, turns into a mirror that is shattered into multiple pieces. Later, he is shown attempting to rescue some fish — similar to the apple, the fish also a Christian symbol charged with complex meanings — only to discover that the water in the bucket he uses to carry them is frozen. At one point, when he enters a cosy room with a bed laid out and sees an image of a nude woman depicted on the wall, he is faced with temptation. As he is overwhelmed with desire, the image turns into a woman of flesh and blood — interestingly at this point colour is introduced into the film's black-and-white imagery as if to heighten the 'realness' of the woman. However, the woman turns out to be a vision, having appeared real only in the hero's imagination. The finale of the

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<sup>557</sup> Elceris, interview.

film is ambiguous in relation to whether the young man acquires faith through these trials: in the final sequence, the hero faces the man at the market stall from whom he acquired the apple in the beginning with an expression of awareness on his face. At this moment, the film cuts to 'The End' title.

The other hero of *Filma, privātā kolekcija* is characterized as a man of God from the outset — the first time he appears on screen he is framed by a door opening that reveals two crosses behind him. In a series of sequences replete with symbolic elements, he is shown gradually abandoning his faith. This first becomes apparent in an episode during which he is shown preaching to a group of women in an auditorium. At one point, he is distracted by one of the women and leaves, and the book from which he was preaching suddenly catches fire. Later, in a rather straightforward metaphorical gesture, he is shown exchanging some eggs, again a distinct symbol in Christian tradition standing for new life, rebirth, and resurrection, for a pouch with the number thirty scribbled on it, obviously referring to the thirty pieces of silver that Judas received for betraying Jesus. Anticipating one of the main motives of Igors Vasiljevs's film *Sāga*, discussed below, *Filma, privātā kolekcija* introduces the theme of nuclear threat in the episode with eggs. As the eggs are exchanged for the silver pieces, the film cuts to a metaphorical embodiment of a nuclear threat, represented by a person wearing a rubber decontamination suit who is meticulously breaking the eggs one by one and collecting empty shells. The finale of the film is more transparent regarding the fate of the second protagonist: he is shown sitting down motionlessly amidst a snowy landscape with false eyes painted on top of his eyelids, potentially representing the delusive nature of his ability to see after he has abandoned his faith.



21 Still from *Filma, privātā kolekcija* (Viesturs Graždanovičs collection)

Pudzēns's *Aizmigt nomoda sapnī* is the most technically and narratively elaborate film among the experimental body of work produced at the Academy in the first half of the 1980s. As its title — *Dreaming a Waking Dream* — overtly suggests, it is driven by sequences of waking dreams, memories, and visions. The film tells the story of an artist (played by Elceris) struggling with his mental health. Unusually for this body of films, which for the most part adopts linear narratives, *Aizmigt nomoda sapnī* begins with the artist's funeral, and the story is then told via a series of flashbacks to real or imaginary episodes from his life. While at a mental institution, he fosters fond memories of his childhood, his relationship with his grandmother, his wife and child and their lovely family home, and his success and prominence in the art world. However, the sequences of these pleasant memories are contrasted by portrayals of traumatic events from the artist's past: his grandmother, for whom he felt deep affection, passing away from an illness; his wife leaving him; and his art being rejected. At this point, it is insinuated that the pleasant memories are in fact waking dreams that his mind has generated in order to cope with the loss and rejection that he faces in reality. As these traumatic episodes are introduced,

both the artist's waking life and oneiric activity become interspersed with symbolic visions of death that are embodied by a dark-haired woman with her arms stretched out in front of her and a repeating shot of a dying bird on the ground flapping its wings in agony.

The film ends with a visually sophisticated and emotionally moving montage sequence in which the artist takes his own life. Through the artist's point of view, we see a flashback/memory of his grandmother reclined in her favourite chair, his mother hugging him as a little boy, and a flashforward/premonition of his wife at his funeral (the same shot is used in the opening sequence of the film). This is followed by a close-up of the artist's face as he emits a tortured laugh, and a close-up of powder (presumably poison) being poured into a glass of water. As we see a shot of the female death-figure from his earlier visions with her arms stretched towards the camera, beckoning, the hero drinks the poisoned water as an ambulance siren blares through the audio-track of the film. At this point the film cuts to the end credits, which are followed by a post-credit sequence in which the artist walks in the snow-covered landscape with his back towards camera as we hear a church bell on the soundtrack. As he turns back and looks directly into the camera, the film cuts to its final shot, which is a close-up of a broken glass in spilt water.

### **Experimental amateur film during *perestroika* and the case of *Sāga***

The political and cultural climate began to change radically in Latvia and across the Soviet Union after Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party in the spring of 1985 and began implementing the policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*'. The liberalization encouraged under Gorbachev caused a major upheaval in cultural life. Among other tendencies, the radical-social vector became more prominent across the media landscape in the Soviet Union. Along with filmmakers across the Soviet Union, Soviet Latvian amateur filmmakers rushed to report on contemporary social issues. At times, these social-issue films contained a dose of sensationalism and also exhibited outright criticism of the Soviet system and its administrative structures. Thus, for instance, *Esi sveicināta, māt!* (Hello, Mother!, 1987), produced by Vladislavs Vojevoda at the amateur-film studio Sintēze in Daugavpils,



investigates the effects of alcoholism on child development and features graphic documentary footage of children with various disabilities recorded in a local orphan asylum. *Mijkrēslis* (Twilight, 1985), made by Rauls Šēnbergs, Aldis Šēnbergs, and Jānis Redlihs at the amateur-film studio Lielupe in Jūrmala, is an observational documentary set in juvenile detention centres and correctional facilities. In turn, Imants Jansons's *Ekskursija pa Bauskas ielu* (Excursion along Bauskas Street, year unknown, late 1980s) openly criticizes the work of the Executive Committee of one of Riga's districts by exposing a variety of issues related to the management of its buildings and public spaces. In addition to this, many Soviet Latvian amateur filmmakers pursued the overall strategy of denunciation of the Soviet past and explicit criticism of Stalinism and its crimes; such is the case of Vidiņš's *Daži stāsti bez epiloga* and Hauks and Peisenieks's *Sīkstums*, discussed in Chapter Three. In turn Egons Ķerūzis's *Zemnieks* (Peasant, 1989) is a poetic sketch about the fate of an individual peasant household under the Soviet rule which makes explicit reference to the devastating effects of collectivization. As discussed previously, during the 1970s and 1980s the Latvian amateur filmmaking movement became dominated by films that focused on the themes of Latvian ethnic history and culture. With the coming of *perestroika* the 'ethnic strand' of Soviet Latvian amateur cinema, stimulated by the rise of the national movement, became increasingly nationally orientated.

Unencumbered by commercial interests, and still funded by professional unions, the amateur film medium during the Gorbachev era was unambiguously exploited as a means of artistic experimentation. During the last years of the Soviet Union, experimental films began to appear at amateur-film studios across Latvia. In Daugavpils, for example, Aleksandrs Ozerkins created a series of experimental films at the studio Sintēze, including *Pere...* (1988) (the title refers to *perestroika*), *P.S.* (1988), *Sapņu paralēle* (Dream Parallel, year unknown, late 1980s), and *Ēna* (Shadow, 1990). In Jelgava in the years 1988–89, Kaspars Roga and Raivis Zigmunds engaged in film and video experiments at the Laisma studio. At the Eduard Tisse amateur-film studio of the House of Culture of the city of Liepāja, amateur filmmakers Māris Viģelis and Egons Ziverts were behind the experimental film *Hiperdroms*

(Hyperdrome, 1989), which was made with the participation of the underground artist and poet Jānis Viņķelis.<sup>558</sup> Overall, the last decade of the USSR saw growing relations between amateur filmmaking and the unofficial art scene. This tendency manifested itself in various forms of collaboration: amateur filmmakers cast artists in their films, made documentary films about their art, or acted as videographers of their artistic activities. Zigurds Vidiņš, for instance, documented numerous performances by the underground performance artist and musician Hardijs Lediņš and his collective entitled *Nebijušu Sajūtu Restaurēšanas Darbnīca* (Workshop for the Restoration of Unfelt Feelings) between 1982 and 1989. Haralds Elceris's friendship with Matti Milius, a Tartu-based poet, 'happening' artist, and a collector of contemporary Estonian, Baltic, and Russian art, resulted in a documentary film entitled *Matti Miliusa nepratīgais manifests* (Matti Milius's Insane Manifesto, 1986), which showcased Milius's extraordinary personality, art, and unorthodox approach to art collecting.

Experimental amateur films continued to be made in Riga at the Academy of Sciences studio by Haralds Elceris, as well as numerous newcomers, among them Viesturs Graždanovičs, Arnis Redovičs (now Rītups), Dainis Kļava, Andrejs Ēķis, Askolds Saulītis, Valdis Poikāns, and Juris Poškus. Many of them experimented with video technology and created the first video art in Latvia. If in the sphere of professional film production and distribution, the spread of video technology was a matter of concern due to the intense competition that it created, in the sphere of amateur filmmaking video was viewed as another tool in the filmmakers' creative arsenal.<sup>559</sup> Apart from

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<sup>558</sup> Raitis Strautiņš, 'In memoriam: Jānis Viņķelis (1968–1994)', *Neatkarīgā Cīņa*, 4 July 1994, p. 7.

<sup>559</sup> For many filmmakers, as well as general public, video was a source of information about the world of Western (mostly American) cinema; this is because the repertoire of state-owned and especially independent video salons was much more diverse (and often more titillating) than that of movie

experimenting with new technologies, some amateur filmmakers went back to the basics of filmic expression and created films without a camera, that is, films created by drawing, scratching, or applying chemicals onto the surface of blank film or various pieces of found footage.

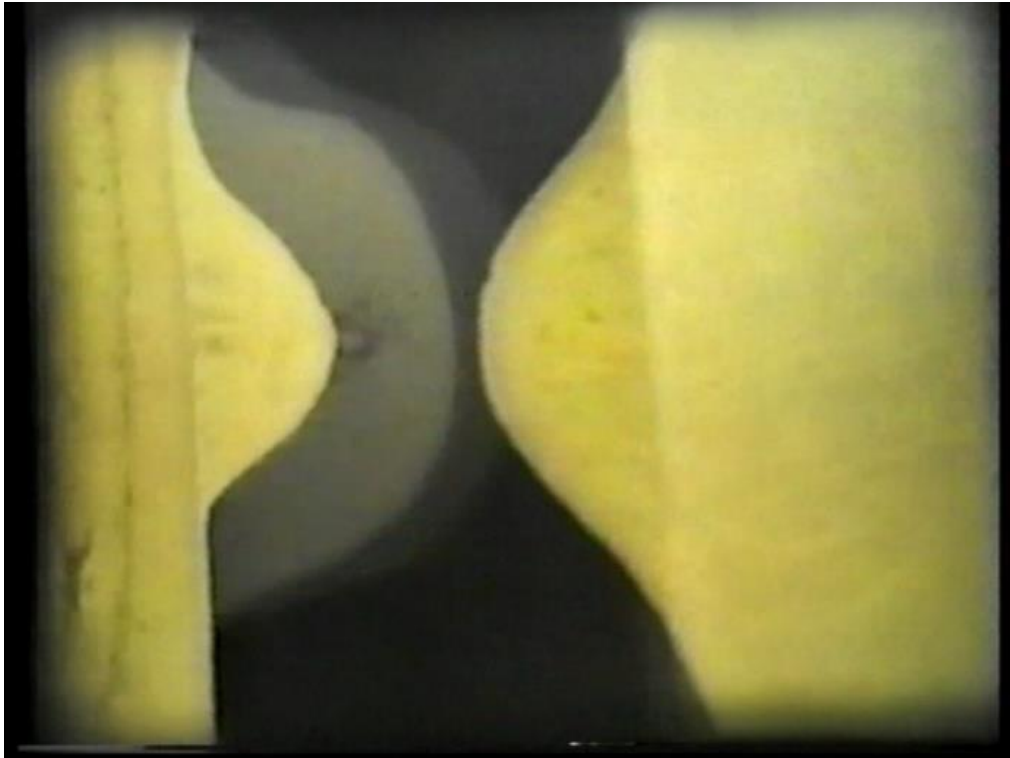
In 1989, joined by Arnis Redovičs, Elceris made a series of films without a camera, the most prominent examples being *Coitus* (which was later ironically renamed *Coitus interruptus* because the authors had to shorten it for a screening at an amateur-film festival to comply with the festival regulations), *Trīs dunča dūrieni miskastes vākā* (Three Knife Punctures in a Trash-Can Lid), and *Septiņi pirdieni zem vienas sēgas* (Seven Farts under One Blanket). If *Coitus* is a succession of rapidly transforming colourful abstract shapes, and was made by applying potassium dichromate onto discarded overexposed film, the other two films push the boundaries of the film medium even further. *Trīs dunča dūrieni* simply takes the form of three successive holes in a fragment of film; and *Septiņi pirdieni* contains no actual image and only features noises on the soundtrack corresponding to the film's title against a black screen.<sup>560</sup> In this regard, Askolds Saulītis's film entitled *XXX* (1989) is remarkable. In this film Saulītis recycled found footage documenting the official side of life in the Soviet Union, such as recordings of public speeches, parades, and demonstrations, combined it with largely unscripted and spontaneous footage he filmed in the circle of his friends and fellow amateur filmmakers, and then added an extra layer of meaning by colouring fragments of certain shots and scratching various images and words on the surface of the final edit of the film. The scratches added by Saulītis form imagery that varies from unashamedly childish drawings of bodily fluids escaping military officials to openly political messages — at one point in the film, Saulītis's scratches take

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theatres. For more on the coming of the video era, see Lawton, *Before the Fall*, pp. 110–18.

<sup>560</sup> Elceris, interview.

the form of letters which spell the word 'Interfront' bookended by the symbols of swastika and hammer and sickle.<sup>561</sup>



22 Still from *Coitus* (Viesturs Graždanovičs collection)

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<sup>561</sup> Interfront was a political movement that attempted to preserve the Soviet Union as a unified state and strongly opposed the pro-independence movements in the republics, including Latvia.



23 Still from XXX (Viesturs Graždanovičs collection)

The *glasnost*' era opened up new avenues for amateur-film exhibition. In response to the numerous experimental films being made at the Academy of Sciences, as well as by other amateur-film studios and individual filmmakers from across the Soviet Union, Vladis Goldbergs, Ivars Skanstiņš, and Viesturs Graždanovičs felt the necessity to launch a film festival in Riga that would offer exposure to alternative currents within contemporary Soviet cinema. The festival became known as Alternatīva (Alternative) and took place in 1988, 1989, and 1990. It also doubled as a contemporary arts exhibition. Graždanovičs actively documented the Alternatīva festivals, including the opening and closing ceremonies, post-screening discussions, and question-and-answer sessions, as well as recorded interviews with the organizers and participants. On the basis of this footage, it becomes clear that the festival's *raison d'être* can be summarized in terms of the dismantling of the legacy of Socialist Realism in cinema and art, and the search for new cinematic forms. At the opening ceremony of the second instalment of the festival, for example,

Goldbergs addressed the participating filmmakers and the public in the following way:

For you, and for cinema, it is time to realize that the principles of Socialist Realism are absolutely untrue and unfit. I categorically reject that content should be primary, and form — subsidiary. I think that you will have the opportunity to found a group, an association, that will be engaged in the search for forms, the search for film language.<sup>562</sup>

These ideas and directives self-evidently stemmed from the theoretical considerations behind experimental cinema born with the Birojs group and the 1980s generation of the Academy of Sciences filmmakers, but in no sense were they unique as far as Riga's alternative filmmaking circles were concerned. As discussed by Lawton, the prominent film critic Viktor Demin proposed amending the statute of the Filmmakers' Union of the USSR and removing the clause that cites Socialist Realism as the official style of Soviet cinema during the Union's VIII Plenum in May 1989. Demin's proposal was eventually upheld in June 1990.<sup>563</sup>

In addition to the emerging film-festival circuit, Soviet Latvian experimental cinema made its way onto television screens in 1989 in the form of a four-part TV series entitled *Ciklops* (Cyclops). Created by rising TV producer and advertising professional Gintars Kavacis, *Ciklops* was dedicated to showcasing examples of the film and video avant-garde that was emerging in Soviet Latvia and abroad, and featured interviews with filmmakers, discussions

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<sup>562</sup> 'Для вас, для кино, пришло время осознавать, что принципы соцреализма абсолютно не верны и не пригодны. Я отрицаю это категорично, что содержание должно быть примарным, а форма — потом. Я думаю, что у вас будет возможность создать группу, ассоциацию, которая будет заниматься поиском новых форм, поисками языка в кино'. 'Alternatīva – 2', video reportage, 1989, RKM-2986, Rīgas Kinomuzeja arhīvs, Riga, Latvia.

<sup>563</sup> Lawton, *Before the Fall*, pp. 102–03.

pertaining to the relationship between art and cinema, and naturally the films themselves.<sup>564</sup> Needless to say, the films and video art by Graždanovičs, Elceris, Kļava, Poškus and other young amateur filmmakers accounted for most of the screen time. Evidently, the political and cultural climate of *perestroika* and *glasnost'* greatly affected the nature of discourses and practices of Soviet Latvian film culture, and overall prompted perceptions surrounding filmmaking and spectatorship to alter. In those years, experimental and non-industrial 'amateur' cinema was becoming an established part of national film culture.

At the same time, the democratizing policies of the authorities brought about by *perestroika* seem to have initiated a degree of horizontalization as far as the film industry in Soviet Latvia was concerned. For one thing, more and more amateur filmmakers were able to make career transitions into the professional sphere. As mentioned earlier, the professional film industry and its networks have always played a significant role in the amateur filmmaking movement in the Soviet Latvia and the rest of the Soviet Union, but in the 1980s the relationship between the two spheres occasionally went beyond sharing experience, film stock, and equipment, and gave rise to cases of artistic collaborations and mutually inspired creative efforts. Here it is worth examining one such case, which brings together the themes explored in this chapter thus far. The film *Sāga: Pēc mana laika motīviem* (Saga: Based on the Motives of My Time, 1987), made by the creative duo of amateur filmmakers Viesturs Graždanovičs and Igors Vasiļjevs, both contributes to the discussion of experimental filmmaking practices and combines it with a focus on the dynamic between the amateur and professional film spheres. This is due to the crucial role played by this amateur film in Juris Podnieks's pivotal documentary film *Vai viegli būt jaunam?* (Is it Easy to Be Young?), which was produced in 1986 at the Riga Film Studio.

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<sup>564</sup> Pārsla Mežciema, 'Kā sagraut frančus ar viņu ieročiem', *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 13 November 1993, 'Pavadonis' section, p. 3.

A recent graduate of the Riga Applied Arts School (Rīgas Lietišķās mākslas vidusskola, now the Riga Design and Art School, Rīgas Dizaina un mākslas vidusskola), Graždanovičs joined the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio in 1986 and completed his admission film, *Aizejot nodzēsiet gaismu* (Switch the Lights off When Leaving), the same year. The film starred Graždanovičs's friend and fellow Applied Arts School graduate, Igors Vasiljevs. Having joined the Academy's studio after Elceris, Goldbergs, Krusts, and Pudzēns had made names for themselves in amateur filmmaking circles with their experimental films, Graždanovičs openly acknowledges that the Academy's films of the early 1980s motivated him to join the studio and influenced his method of filmmaking. He claims: 'It was a big shock for me when I first saw the Academy's movies. [...] It was shocking that such films existed at all, that such films were being made. This really inspired me to start filming myself'.<sup>565</sup> As opposed to his 'gurus', who carried out their cinematic experiments largely outside international and historical contexts, Graždanovičs knew his filmmaking references. He reminisces about the creative process behind *Aizejot nodzēsiet gaismu*:

At that time I watched a lot of cinema: surrealism, Buñuel, let's say, more experimental cinema, and then I just decided to try for myself... [...] And then, using abstract, *conditional* [*nosacīta* in the original] film techniques, I decided to portray perhaps a day in a man's life, perhaps his whole life (emphasis added).<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>565</sup> 'Man bija liels šoks, kad es pirmo reizi redzēju arī Zinātņu Akadēmijas filmas. [...] tas bija tāds īstenībā šoks, ka vispār tādas filmas pastāv, un ka tādas filmas ir uzņemtas. Tas īstenībā man arī ļoti iedvesmoja sākt darboties'. Graždanovičs, interview.

<sup>566</sup> 'Tobrīd es skatījos daudz kino: sirreālisms, Bunjuels, teiksim tādu vairāk eksperimentālo kino, un tad es vienkārši pats mēģināju... [...] Un tad es iedomājos attēlot, izmantojot abstraktus nosacīta kino paņēmienus, vai nu cilvēka vienu dzīves dienu varbūt visu mūžu'. Ibid.



*Aizejot nodzēsiet gaismu* turned out to be a ten-minute long film that takes place in a single confined space; it is the first Academy film that openly disrupts the conventions of cinematic space and time throughout. The main character of the film is a young man (played by Vasiljevs), who is surrounded by various objects with which he interacts during the course of the film: the objects include a light switch, a standing clock, and a dead bird. The hero himself and the objects around him are in a constant state of transformation: at one point in the film, the hero's face begins to metamorphose as he appears wearing different wigs, beards, and even earrings and make-up, while the standing clock turns into a woman, who then turns into a skull, and the dead bird transforms into a pack of live mice. In order to achieve these effects, Graždanovičs relied on simple trick-photography, using the dissolve technique via controlled double exposure from frame to frame. Along with the evident inspiration of early Western European avant-garde cinema, Graždanovičs's tendency towards symbolism also stems from his fascination with semiotics and rejection of realistic representations in cinema that prevailed in the Academy's filmmaking circles (note the use of the term *nosacītība*, the analogue of *uslovnost'* in Latvian, in the quotation above).

After having starred in *Aizejot nodzēsiet gaismu*, Vasiljevs soon started work on his own film. The result, known as *Sāga: Pēc mana laika motīviem* and completed in 1987, was directed by Vasiljevs and photographed by Graždanovičs. Although at the beginning of the film the mise-en-scène is realistic — its starting point is a school graduation ceremony, after which a group of friends and schoolmates go on a walk around the city in celebration — in visual and formal terms the film closely resembles the Academy's earlier experimental films. The dramatic centre is the hero (portrayed by Vasiljevs himself), who, along with the group of friends, travels through what seems to be a network of underground passages and encounters a variety of symbolic spaces. In these spaces, one by one, he loses his friends as they are drawn away by different 'deviations'. One of the friends quite literally gets 'swallowed' by the gates of a church, and later appears in the shot wearing a nun's dress, holding her hands in prayer, and unable to see or hear her friends calling to her. Others are shown joining a gang, succumbing to drugs and alcohol, or

becoming blinded by fame. As described by Vasiljevs: 'The most crucial trial for my hero is that he lost all his friends in this [...] maze of challenges. And it is as if they are still there, but it is no longer them'.<sup>567</sup>

The hero-Vasiljevs is himself consistently tested and portrayed resisting what can be interpreted as metaphorical representations of disciplinary power, to use Foucault's language, namely an educational institution and the military. In one of these sequences, Vasiljevs's character joins a group of artists during a life-sculpting session and attempts to create his own vision of a model in clay. The artists are supervised by an uptight older artist, who reprimands them for not following his instructions and insists that his vision is the only correct one. The artists' sculptures turn out to look exactly the same and do not resemble the model in the least, being just identical arrangements of geometric shapes, while Vasiljevs's work begins to take the shape of the model's body. The teacher examines the hero's sculpture, and shakes his head, saying: 'It's no good, it won't do'. As he forcefully reshapes it to resemble those of the others, Vasiljevs leaves in annoyance. Later in the film, Vasiljevs is captured by two people wearing clothing that resembles Soviet military fatigues and is taken to a shooting range. He is handed a shotgun and, along with other shooters, forced to take aim at a person tied up at the target line (a cameo by Goldbergs). As others fire, Vasiljevs drops the gun and storms out.

While Vasiljevs was working on this film, he himself became one of the characters in the now seminal Soviet Latvian documentary film *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, created by Juris Podnieks. As an honest portrayal of contemporary youth, Podnieks's film not only 'collected rave reviews and irate criticism, and served as a prototype for many films to follow', but also 'had a great deal of resonance abroad, where the fact that it had been released was seen as

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<sup>567</sup> 'Manam varonim vislielākais pārdzīvojums ir tas, ka [...] šajā piedzīvojumu labirintā [...] viņš pazaudēja savus draugus. Un it kā tepat viņi ir, bet tie vairs nav viņi'. Here and subsequently, Vasiljevs is quoted from the interview featured as part of the documentary film *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, dir. by Juris Podnieks (Riga Film Studio, 1986).

concrete evidence that glasnost was “for real”<sup>568</sup>. The film’s starting point is a concert given by the Latvian hard-rock band Pērkons in the town of Ogre, after which youthful energy turns into aggression — on their way back to Riga, some of the young people who attended the concert damage a train car’s interior and windows. The incident caused a stir and was interpreted as a possible germination of civil disobedience. A show trial followed, as a result of which several youngsters faced serious charges disproportionate to the crime committed.

The documentary is a patchwork quilt of footage from the trial, the concert, and sessions at the prosecutor’s office, as well as episodes involving young people that Podnieks and his crew filmed in police stations, sobering-up rooms, hospitals, workplaces, and on the streets. These representations are combined with many intimate interviews with the young people who, to a greater or lesser extent, were involved in, or affected by, the train-car incident, and others — among Podnieks’s heroes are a morgue employee, a converted Krishnaite, an Afghanistan war veteran, and the amateur filmmaker Vasiļjevs. These interviewees talk about their attitudes, values, fears, and hopes for the future, or lack thereof. The film answers the question posed in its title negatively, as it paints a hopeful yet bleak future for Soviet youth. The blame for this situation is deliberately laid at the door of the Soviet system and the indifference of Soviet society. Tatjana Fasta, Podnieks’s close friend and a journalist who interviewed the filmmaker in the summer of 1986 during the editing stage of the film, writes about his intentions in the following way:

It was clear that Juris intended to make not a political, but a confessional film, he just wanted to understand how young people lived, wanted to enter their world, music, interests, and look at everything with their eyes. But when he started to dig, he came across such thorny issues — both social and political — that he decided to trust the material and follow it. In 1986, the explosion took place in Chernobyl, zinc coffins were coming back from Afghanistan, drugs were spreading from hand to hand... Stories that he came across turned out to be filled with such drama, that when he was watching the film draft on the editing table, he saw it was turning into a real indictment — not just of schools and the

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<sup>568</sup> Lawton, *Before the Fall*, p. 192.

Komsomol, but also against the regime, the Soviet power, the dictatorship...<sup>569</sup>

Despite touching upon delicate subjects — for instance, before *Podnieks* nobody dared to portray Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan without pathos — *Vai viegli būt jaunam?* withstood the onslaught of criticism from officials and censors, was accepted by Moscow's Goskino without cuts or corrections in December 1986, and released in January 1987. By the end of 1988, the film had received numerous international and domestic awards, including the highly prestigious USSR State Prize, which was essentially a seal of approval of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Council of Ministers of the USSR.<sup>570</sup> The timeliness of the film was crucial for its success; as Ābrams Kleckins, the writer of the original script for the film, comments:

If the film had appeared half a year earlier, it would not have been released, it would have been 'shelved' [...]. If it had happened half a year later, it would no longer have had any impact. We drew

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<sup>569</sup> 'Bija skaidrs, ka Juris gatavojas veidot nevis politisku, bet grēksūdzes filmu, viņš gluži vienkārši gribēja saprast, kā dzīvo jaunie, gribēja iekļūt viņu pasaulē, mūzikā, interesēs un palūkoties uz visu ar viņu acīm. Bet, kad sāka rakt, sastapās ar tādiem ērkšķiem — gan sociāliem, gan politiskiem —, ka nolēma uzticēties materiālam un sekot tam. 1986. gadā notika sprādziens Černobiļā, no Afganistānas pienāca cinka zārki, no rokas rokā ceļoja narkotikas... Stāsti, ar kuriem viņš saskarās izrādījās piepildīti ar tādu dramatismu, ka, skatoties filmu uz montāžas galda, viņš redzēja, ka lente pārvēršas īstā apsūdzībā — ne tikai skolai, un komjaunatnei, bet arī režīmam, padomju varai, diktatūras valstij...'. Tatjana Fasta, *Juris Podnieks: Vai viegli būt elkam?* (Rīga: Kontinents, 2010), p. 125.

<sup>570</sup> For more on the history of the making of *Vai viegli būt jaunam?* and its reception in the Soviet Union, see *ibid.*, pp. 117–36.

ahead of everyone, at the time when they were still afraid of such openness. That is why the film caused such a stir.<sup>571</sup>

Graždanovičs reminisces that at the time when *Sāga* was already in production at the Academy of Sciences studio, Podnieks, like many professional filmmakers close to Academy circles, was using the facilities of the Academy's laboratory for some of the work on *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*. In this way Podnieks became aware of Vasiļjevs's film, and, having watched some of the filmed material for *Sāga*, decided to include the storyline in his documentary.<sup>572</sup> Thus *Vai viegli būt jaunam?* features an interview with Vasiļjevs and includes a number of sequences from *Sāga*. To be precise, the episodes of *Sāga* that feature as part of *Vai viegli būt jaunam?* do not form part of the actual footage of *Sāga*, but were filmed by Podnieks (who often assumed the role of a camera operator in his films) with a 35mm camera alongside and at the same time as Graždanovičs filmed the same sequences with a 16mm camera.<sup>573</sup> The reason for this was the complexity and time-consuming nature of transferring 16mm film footage into a 35mm format for inclusion as part of the film.

In his interview as part of *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, Vasiļjevs claims that in *Sāga* he wished to communicate the sense of anxiety experienced by him and many of his peers as they faced the uncertainty of the near future. In his own words: 'I tried to show that the whole life is a narrow corridor where you cannot see what is coming, you do not know what awaits you around the next corner, [...] you open doors and [behind them there are] only surprises, ceaseless fear,

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<sup>571</sup> 'Ja filma būtu parādījies pusgadu ātrāk, tā nenonāktu uz ekrāniem, būtu palikusi gulēt "plauktā" [...]. Ja tas notiktu pusgadu vēlāk, nebūtu vairs tā efekta. Mēs paguvām agrāk par visiem, tieši tajā laikā, kamēr pārējie vēl baidījās no tādas atklātības. Tāpēc arī filma izraisīja tādu sajūsmu.' Ābrams Kleckins, cited in *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>572</sup> Graždanovičs, interview.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*

and ceaseless horrors'.<sup>574</sup> As noted by Lawton, the theme of contemporary youth had already become a trend in Soviet cinema in the mid-1970s thanks to the films of Dinara Asanova, which explored 'the world of adolescents, with all the uncertainty and uneasiness of a time of transition, and their troubled relations to adults'.<sup>575</sup> Later on, fuelled by *glasnost*, the trend gained a more emotive and at times sensationalist character, as many films began to explore youth problems in tight conjugation with widespread social diseases such as drugs, alcoholism, sex trafficking, organized crime, and violence. In this regard, *Sāga* is a unique portrayal of contemporary Soviet youth because it was actually produced by the same demographic it seeks to portray. Graždanovičs argues that, despite the fact that the film is a work of fiction, he and Vasiļjevs attempted to portray youth issues in their film 'truthfully, without embellishment'.<sup>576</sup> In turn, Vasiļjevs comments on the subjective and self-reflexive nature of the film: 'I will not have time to wait until I am thirty so that I can say something, something I have to say now. [...] And I decided to try to say exactly what I am thinking now, what my peers and other twenty-year-olds are thinking'.<sup>577</sup>

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<sup>574</sup> 'Es centos paradīt filmā ka visa dzīve ir šaurs koridors kurā tu neko neredzi uz priekšu, tu nezini kas tevi gaida aiz nākošā pagrieziena, [...] tu taisi vaļā durvis un [aiz tām ir] vieni pārsteigumi, nemitīgās bailes un nemitīgās šausmas'. Vasiļjevs in *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*.

<sup>575</sup> Anna Lawton, 'Toward a New Openness in Soviet Cinema, 1976-1987', in *Post New Wave Cinema in the Soviet Union*, ed. by Daniel J. Goulding (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 1–51 (p. 14).

<sup>576</sup> Viesturs Graždanovičs, 'Ekspresintervija: "Sāgas" panākumi', interview by D. Iljins, *Rīgas Balss*, 7 September 1987, p. 3.

<sup>577</sup> 'Man nepietiks laika gaidīt kad man pienāk trīsdesmit gadi un es varētu kaut ko pateikt, kaut ko to, kas man jāsaka tagad. [...] Un es nolēmu pamēģināt tieši pateikt to ko es pašlaik domāju, ko domā mani biedri un divdesmitgadīgie'. Vasiļjevs in *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*.

Although visually and thematically *Sāga* is clearly a continuation of the experimental filmmaking practices that took shape at the Academy in the early 1980s, the radical-social vector, mostly absent from these early films, assumes a prominent position in Vasiljevs's film. Vasiljevs took the 'eternal' themes that his predecessors addressed, such as the human condition, individualism, and alienation, and to a certain extent placed them in the social context of contemporary Soviet youth. Drawing parallels between *Sāga* and Goldbergs's *Ab ovo* as an example of the Academy's early experimental filmmaking reveals this shift towards the social-radical vector. Like *Ab ovo*, *Sāga* begins with a long shot of a lone figure in a snowy landscape moving towards the camera. The figure reveals itself to be Vasiljevs himself; in this way, he establishes himself as the author-hero of the film, similar to the directorial choice made by Goldbergs in *Ab ovo*. The heroes of both films are faced with a variety of trials: whereas the nature of those in *Ab ovo* is highly symbolic and almost ahistorical, *Sāga* constantly refers to the dire straits of life in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, if *Ab ovo* ends on a positive note with the couple walking 'into the sunset', *Sāga* ends quite literally with nuclear disaster: in the finale of the film, death is personified by a black-cloaked figure in a gas mask (a similar image was used by Krusts in *Filma, privātā kolekcija*) who is walking towards the camera among multiple dead bodies, including the hero-Vasiljevs, lying on the ground.

Vasiljevs comments on the motive of nuclear threat in his film in the following way: 'What frightens me most is that everything is so horribly tense right now — and this is really the leitmotif of my film — that, look, some cretin can push a button and everything can blow up, and it will be us who will be blown up and us who are helpless'.<sup>578</sup> Interestingly, it was initially planned for *Sāga* to end in a radically different way. This is reflected by Podnieks in his documentary, the

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<sup>578</sup> 'Galvenais man ir bail ka visi tik šausmīgi notrunējusies — un tas tieši manā filmā viss skan cauri — ka tur lūk, kāds kretīns var nospiegt pogu un kaut kas var uzsprāgt, un tas ir mēs kas uzsprāgsim un mēs esam bezpalīdzīgi'. Vasiljevs in *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*

finale of which features shots that Vasiļjevs was intending to use in the finale of *Sāga*. The original finale of *Sāga* (featured in *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*) was supposed to be a crowd scene shot at the seaside, in which the film's main characters and numerous extras are standing knee-deep in water against the background of a blue sky. On the soundtrack we hear Podnieks asking Vasiļjevs: 'Igors, why do you want to end your film this way?', to which Vasiļjevs replies: 'Blue means hope. We are all standing enveloped in blue, we are standing in the sea of hope'.<sup>579</sup> Thus, after *Sāga* had provided *Vai viegli būt jaunam?* with its hopeful ending, Vasiļjevs ultimately pushed the social-radical intention of his film even further by choosing to materialize on film the nuclear anxiety experienced by many in the Soviet Union at the time.



24 Still from the opening sequence of *Sāga* (Viesturs Graždanovičs collection)

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<sup>579</sup> '— Igors, kāpēc tu gribi nobeigt savu filmu tieši šādi? — Zils tas ir cerība. Mēs visi stāvām iekš zila, mēs stāvām cerību jūrā'. Vasiļjevs and Podnieks in *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*.





25 Still from the finale of *Sāga* (Viesturs Graždanovičs collection)



26 Still from the opening sequence of *Ab ovo* (Viesturs Graždanovičs collection)



27 Still from the finale of *Ab ovo* (Viesturs Graždanovičs collection)

Testing Moran's theoretical model against the experimental filmmaking practices that developed as part of the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement enables a better understanding of the ways in which experimental tendencies developed, functioned, and transformed from one decade to another in the context of state socialism. This understanding has demonstrated the necessity of continuing to reconsider the analytical categories, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual models that are used to investigate experimental filmmaking practices in general, and highlighted the deficiency of the framework of art, aesthetics, and avant-garde sensibilities for their analysis. As part of this reconsideration, this chapter has highlighted the problems of applying Western experimental and avant-garde film theory to examples of such cinema as produced in a different geopolitical and historical context. By drawing upon the combined or hybrid approach to experimental cinema, this chapter has highlighted the importance of looking beyond the formal characteristics of experimental films in the context of state socialism and investigating various other processes involved in their production, distribution, exhibition, and reception.

The case studies analysed in this chapter reflect the often symbiotic relationship between experimental and avant-garde sensibilities in amateur cinema and the professional filmmaking sphere and various official institutions. It thus questions the ostensible independence of experimental film from institutional and professional structures and challenges the perceived antagonism between the two. As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, a number of institutions in particular, most notably the Riga Film Studio, the Academy of Sciences, and the VEF factory, in some form or another contributed to the formation of experimental and innovative strands within Soviet Latvian amateur cinema. Interestingly, it was not only the formal amateur-film collectives and studios, but also independent and semi-clandestine groups of non-professional artists and filmmakers, who relied on the institutional networks of administered culture and professional filmmaking sphere for various forms of support. As the cases of the Academy of Sciences amateur-film studio and the Ģilde studio demonstrate, moreover, larger, central amateur-film studios, ones that with time achieved high levels of professionalism, also found themselves producing more creative, innovative and experimental content compared to other amateur-film studios. Overall, this chapter has sought to provide compelling testimony to the diversity and heterogeneity of experimental film culture in Soviet Latvia. As observed by Vinogradova, such heterogeneity can be viewed as a characteristic feature of experimental film in the context of a socialist system, 'where state monopoly on cultural production, on the one hand, excludes that which does not fit into the official ideology and, on the other, nurtures cultural phenomena that could only develop in a situation where they are free from the economic pressure imposed by the free market'.<sup>580</sup> Acknowledging this diversity is another step along the path of moving beyond the binary categories scrutinized by Yurchak in his monograph.<sup>581</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> Vinogradova, 'Scientists, Punks, Engineers and Gurus', p. 50.

<sup>581</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 5.

## Conclusion

Amateur cinema in Soviet Latvia was the product of interactions between individual amateur cine-enthusiasts, semi-clandestine non-professional filmmaking groups, and state-supported amateur-film studios and associations. During the several decades of its existence it proved to be a highly diverse and heterogeneous phenomenon. The emergence of amateur filmmaking practices in the independent Latvia in the 1920s was prompted by the growing consumer culture and the development of the film-equipment market, as a result of which the lighter 35mm cameras and the first narrow-gauge cameras became commercially available in 1922. Thwarted by the Second World War and the Soviet occupation in 1940, Latvian amateur cinema was reborn in the mid-1950s, now as part of the organized Soviet amateur filmmaking movement, and was actively promoted and supported by state cultural organizations and professional unions. From then on, its evolution was shaped by Soviet cultural policies and the ideological doctrines permeating the public sphere. A greater attention to family, domesticity, and leisure during the period of Khrushchev's 'Thaw' in the Soviet Union did not focus amateur filmmaking activities on the home and the nuclear family. Instead, post-war Soviet amateur cinema came to be defined by its forms of community and sociality. Amateur filmmaking associations, clubs, studios, and societies began to emerge across the Soviet republics, including Soviet Latvia, becoming widespread both as a result of the funding system, based on professional unions, and as an extension of the developed sense of community in the context of state socialism.

The present thesis explores the particularities and idiosyncrasies of amateur filmmaking practices within the Soviet socialist system with specific focus on the Latvian SSR, and investigates the broader artistic, cultural, social, and political spaces and functions that they occupied during the period of late Socialism. In doing so, it has investigated the ways in which actual amateur filmmaking practices in the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc contest, expand, and reinterpret the theoretical frameworks and conceptual models which have been developed within the sphere of amateur-film studies hitherto.

This research project thus constitutes an attempt to draw upon some aspects of amateur-film theory but at the same time to reassess the phenomenon of amateur cinema in the context of the socialist system by engaging with wider theoretical debates on Soviet ideology.

The first chapter of the present thesis has offered a chronological timeline of the evolution of the organized amateur filmmaking movement in Soviet Latvia, and thus has provided the necessary historical background and conceptual contexts for a broader understanding of amateur filmmaking culture in the socialist context. Referencing the example of Soviet Latvian amateur 'auteurs' interested in the themes of family and domestic life, Chapter Two has explored the ways in which the structures and networks of the organized amateur filmmaking movement in the context of state socialism reshaped and transformed the thematic conventions and visual codes associated with the home-movie tradition and practices. In a similar vein, Chapter Three has investigated the trajectory of the genre of travel or tourism films within the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement and demonstrated the ways in which the genre was adopted as a vehicle for social commentary, as well as political speech and activism. In turn, Chapter Four has expanded our current understanding of the cinematic avant-garde in the context of state socialism by bringing into discussion Soviet Latvian amateur films with experimental and avant-garde sensibilities. It has also analysed the ways in which institutional structures and the professional filmmaking sphere converged with experimental filmmaking practices in Soviet Latvia.

One tension that permeates this entire dissertation lies in the boundary between independence and control that cine-enthusiasts in Soviet Latvia were required to navigate throughout the existence of the movement. Soviet Latvian amateur filmmakers working as part of collectives and studios were expected to comply with hegemonic ideological discourses and practices, and their films — to transmit the values, virtues, and legacy of the Soviet state. It is no accident that in the statutes of the Latvian Amateur Filmmakers' Society, published in 1962, amateur filmmaking was dubbed '[...] a means of aesthetic education of workers that develops in a Soviet man the qualities of a builder of

communism'.<sup>582</sup> At the same time, however, amateurs often enjoyed a degree of ideological and creative latitude in their filmmaking projects. Deviations from otherwise strict ideological tenets were usually permitted because of the low prestige granted to 'amateur' status, while the relative artistic freedom was fuelled by the creative, technical, and experiential capital that the state-endorsed amateur filmmaking network possessed. This network was therefore often put to uses beyond utility and social purpose, such as, for instance, documenting personal experiences, searching for new aesthetic forms, experimenting with different means of artistic expression, providing social commentary and critique, communicating political opinions, reaching out to communities and the wider public, and arousing interest or concern in certain topics, among other diverse intents and purposes. These circumstances prompted the production of technically sophisticated, formally inventive, thematically diverse, and at times even polemical and subversive films.

Another key argument of this thesis is that many of the films examined in the preceding chapters represent a 'native' cinematic gaze. They address the themes of Latvia's ethnic past and culture, largely absent from the official productions of the Riga Film Studio and mainstream Soviet cinema, preserve and reclaim the memories and experiences of local communities, offer invaluable internal perspectives on the Soviet-era Latvian society, present alternative interpretations of historical events, and document otherwise invisible facets of everyday life in Soviet Latvia. These films are often informed by aesthetic ambitions, create unusual diegetic worlds and compelling characters, experiment with cinematic representational regimes, and inspire a love of film in younger generations of filmmakers and overall enrich the cinematic experiences of the region. This thesis has sought to demonstrate that amateur filmmaking in Soviet Latvia developed as an alternative film culture to official Soviet cinema — not necessarily in opposition, often

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<sup>582</sup> '[...] средство эстетического воспитания трудящихся, развивающего в советском человеке качества строителя коммунизма'. 'Ustav obshchestva', p. 3.

borrowing from it, and at times even enjoying a symbiotic relationship with it — and acted as a form of surrogate national cinema.

In the case of a country like Latvia, where the national film industry was set against a tumultuous historical backdrop and thus had little chance to blossom during the first half of the twentieth century, disregarding such a substantial part of the national film heritage would be highly detrimental to the scholarship and discourses surrounding not only Latvia's cinematic heritage and film history, but also the country's cultural history in general. The present thesis, therefore, is part of the larger tendency that has recently manifested itself in film studies, which constitutes a re-examining of national cinema(s) through an amateur lens, especially in case of countries where a robust national commercial film industry is found lacking.<sup>583</sup> Efforts in this direction will hopefully encourage a reconsideration of the purpose and function of amateur cinema, a phenomenon that still remains a largely fringe topic within the discipline of film studies, within the context of general film history.

### **The legacies of the Soviet Latvian amateur cinema in the aftermath of the Soviet era**

The organized amateur filmmaking movement in the Soviet Union, including in Soviet Latvia, eventually suffered a devastating blow with the collapse of the professional union system and the re-structuring of the state institutions brought about by the dissolution of Soviet Union in 1991. Latvian cine-enthusiasts were compelled to adapt to the commercialization of the film industry and the move towards the free market. The majority eventually abandoned amateur filmmaking. Some, however, continued to create films independently, which was facilitated by the growing availability of magnetic and digital film technologies. Uldis Lapiņš, whose body of work has been analysed as part of Chapter Two, for instance, created a number of films using VHS and later digital media in the post-Soviet period. He also undertook the digitization of his Soviet-era Super 8mm films in the 1990s and 2000s; in

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<sup>583</sup> Czach, 'Home Movies and Amateur Film as National Cinema', p. 28.

addition to digitizing his archive, he revisited his old films artistically by adding elements digitally, such as opening and closing credits, fades, close-ups, and musical accompaniment.

Other former cine-enthusiasts set out to approach the phenomenon of amateur cinema in Soviet Latvia through artistic and curatorial interpretations. Romualds Pipars, who made the transition into professional cinema in the 1970s and continued to make films professionally after the collapse of the USSR, collaborated with the renowned film editor Maija Selecka on a film that consists entirely of authentic home-movie footage shot in Soviet Latvia. In the first half of the 2000s, Pipars and Selecka collected and reviewed 450 hours of 8mm footage filmed locally from the 1950s through to the 1980s.<sup>584</sup> The vast majority was provided by more than seventy family-film enthusiasts; the remainder was anonymous 'found footage'. Using this private footage, the filmmakers created a 100-minute film entitled *Monētas dubultportrets* (The Flipside of the Coin, 2008). The film is imprecisely divided into thematic blocks and features personal and intimate scenes of everyday life: children's first steps, weddings and graduations, days-out and holidays, parties and celebrations. Overall it is a valuable insight into the otherwise obscure history of post-war home-movie culture in Soviet Latvia. Pipars and Selecka undertook the painstaking task of sound reconstruction from contemporary sound recordings. They also studied the footage and interviewed its authors (where known) in order to produce an informative audio commentary to the family-scenes shown in the film. *Monētas dubultportrets* thus attempts to reconstruct personal and intimate scenes of everyday life in Latvia under socialism — or, as the title suggest, the 'flipside' of life in the Soviet Union. The film also features episodes from official newsreels and professional films for the purpose of creating contrasts with the amateur footage.

Other Latvian cine-enthusiasts continued the legacy of Soviet Latvian amateur cinema through the collection and preservation of amateur films. After the dissolution of the Soviet state had resulted in the collapse of the support

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<sup>584</sup> Pipars, interview.



system for amateur filmmakers, some of them, mindful of the precarious situation in which the legacy of Soviet Latvian amateur cinema found itself, undertook the laborious task of collection, storage, and magnetic and digital transfers of amateur films. On their own personal initiative, Regina Šulca, Romualds Pipars, and Viesturs Graždanovičs, among others, collected the amateur films that had been produced at the amateur-film studios with which they had been associated. Motivated to preserve the history of the amateur filmmaking movement in Latvia in a more comprehensive form, Šulca went a step further and began collecting amateur films created across Latvia, making numerous trips across the country in search of rarer Soviet Latvian amateur films that had not received widespread exposure on the amateur-film festival network. On her own testimony, Šulca focused primarily on collecting films that had been made in remote and rural parts of Latvia, as well as those made by amateurs who, for a variety of different reasons, preferred to maintain their distance from the institutional structures of the organized amateur-film movement and kept their films in private hands.<sup>585</sup> As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, a significant part of the LVKFFDA amateur-film collection consists of the films which had been personally collected by Šulca during the 1990s and 2000s. In addition to the collection and archiving of amateur films, Šulca, Pipars, and Graždanovičs also invested their own time and funds in order to create Betacam, VHS, and digital transfers of the 16 and 8mm originals in order to preserve them in a more durable medium.

A number of Soviet Latvian amateur filmmakers pursued relatively successful careers in professional cinema after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For instance, the LRAP amateur-film studio was reborn as an independent film company run by the LRAP's former amateur filmmaker Pipars, and actively produces films to the present day. In 1991, Zigurds Vidiņš, together with Juris Podnieks, established a film company entitled Studija 2 that continues to produce documentary films about Latvia with a focus on its political history. Between 1998 and 2005, Šulca ran a television production company called

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<sup>585</sup> Šulca, interview.

Prizma Prim (as homage to her amateur-film studio Prizma) and created diverse content for local television channels. Many filmmakers who constellated around the amateur-film studio of the Academy of Sciences during the late 1980s made career transitions into commercial cinema after Latvia regained its independence from the Soviet Union. Dainis Kļava has become a prolific documentary filmmaker, largely working for the Riga-based film production company Vides Filmu Studija; Juris Poškus wrote and directed *Kolka Cool* (2011), an internationally acclaimed film drama which enjoyed a successful festival run; Andrejs Ēķis is the producer behind many domestic box-office records, such as, for instance, *Rīgas sargi* (Defenders of Riga, 2007). In addition to this, some other Latvian film initiatives sprang in part from Soviet-era amateur filmmaking culture. For instance, Graždanovičs is currently working as a filmmaking instructor at the creative learning centre for children and young people in Riga that offers filmmaking courses among other things. Graždanovičs is also the founder and the current director of the Riga International Film Festival 2ANNAS (Rīgas starptautiskais filmu festivāls 2ANNAS), an annual short-film festival that took place for the first time in 1996.

In the light of these tendencies, it can be argued that the discourses, practices, and networks of the Soviet Latvian amateur filmmaking movement exerted substantial influence not only on the shaping and evolution of the local cinematic identity during the Soviet era, but also on the re-emergence of a national film industry in post-Soviet independent Latvia; this influence can be traced back to its cine-amateur origins behind today's news headlines covering various film initiatives and projects. The legacy of the Soviet-era amateur filmmaking movement permeates the fabric of contemporary Latvian film culture and is inseparable from today's Latvian cultural identity. In broad terms, this kind of awareness has the potential of contributing to a more profound-reaching understanding of the many socio-cultural processes that lie behind local and global cinematic phenomena, tendencies, and innovations in historical and contemporary perspectives.

As proposed by Salazkina and Fibla-Gutierrez, and as the present study has endeavoured to demonstrate, the study of amateur cinemas permits us to

place 'an equal focus on small nations and the superpowers of cinematic productions' and resist the solidified divisions which pervade the film scholarship, whether they be between the West and the non-West, the North and the Global South, or Western and Eastern Europe.<sup>586</sup> Such an approach facilitates the outlining of 'a more complex map of global film culture and circulation'.<sup>587</sup> This perspective foregrounds 'the transnational circuits and geographic fluidity' of film-related practices 'while simultaneously anchoring them in 'local, culturally specific contexts with distinct historical forces and geopolitical configurations'.<sup>588</sup> In turn, this prompts a reconsideration of the geopolitical and historical contexts of film history 'in a way that also alters our understanding of the role of the [film] medium in global developments socially, culturally, and politically'.<sup>589</sup>

### **The future of the LVKFFDA collection and potential avenues for further research**

The present thesis for the most part is predicated on the amateur-film collection held at the Latvian State Archive of Audio-visual Documents. The collection is a substantial holding and consists of approximately seven-hundred films that explore a diverse range of topics and themes and belong to a variety of modes and genres. The qualitative approach has significantly limited the number of case studies included in the present thesis. As a result, only a relatively small cross-section of the collection has been discussed in this thesis: twenty-two films are analysed in detail, whereas another sixty-five are discussed briefly or simply mentioned. The films presented as case studies have been selected for their exceptional aesthetic qualities and thematic resonance and value. This, however, by no means signals the artistic inferiority of the ones that remained

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<sup>586</sup> Salazkina and Fibla-Gutierrez, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

outside the scope of this thesis. There can be little doubt that the great diversity and range of the films preserved in this collection has the potential to fascinate scholars across a variety of disciplines, including and possibly not limited to Soviet historical and cultural studies, Baltic studies, global film studies, cultural anthropology, and the sociology of culture.

In 2018, the Latvian State Archive of Audio-visual Documents finally made the decision to start digitizing its holdings and was successful in securing funding from the Latvian Ministry of Culture for this purpose. In the same year the digitization of the earliest film documents found in the Archive was begun. Even though it is still a long way from completion, once the amateur-film collection has been digitized in its entirety, it will significantly facilitate wider access to socialist-era amateur films and certainly encourage their rediscovery. The policy of the Archive envisages hosting some of their digital materials online for free public access. The use of digital technology and the Internet in amateur-film preservation has already given a new lease of life to many amateur-film productions; Lewandowska and Cummings's project 'The Enthusiasts', discussed in the introduction of this thesis, presents an important example in this regard. Such a digital repository of Soviet Latvian amateur films will certainly serve as a valuable resource for scholars, museum and exhibition curators, artists, and media commentators, as well as to the general public both within and beyond Latvia's border. It would be reasonable to predict that it will uncover new perspectives on Latvia's cinematic heritage and history and open up new avenues of investigation.

In the course of this research project Soviet Latvian amateur cinema has been primarily studied as a form of cultural and artistic production. When analysing its case studies, the present thesis has largely adopted a classical film studies approach and relied on its interpretative practices. At the same time, the films examined as part of this thesis, combined with the rest of the amateur-film collection held at the LVKFFDA, undoubtedly possess immense evidential and documentary value, which opens up possibilities for social, anthropological, and historical approaches in relation to the films in question. Amateur cinema can function as a non-traditional or unorthodox historiographical resource and

be studied as visual historical evidence. As observed by Zimmermann, in recent decades history as a discipline has shifted its focus from grand narratives to micro-historical analysis, as historians have begun to appreciate the importance of documents surrounding everyday life and personal experiences, especially when studying localized and minoritized cultures.<sup>590</sup> The result of this approach has been the formation of what has been dubbed 'history from below'.<sup>591</sup> According to Zimmermann, the study of amateur cinema resonates with this revised notion of the historical and is crucial for advancing our knowledge of the dispersed, localized, and minoritized cultures.<sup>592</sup>

The examination of visual documents testifying to the everyday lives and personal experiences of those living on the periphery of the Soviet system can contribute significantly towards the de-Russianization and de-Sovietization of the cultural history of the post-war Socialist bloc. Such an avenue of investigation has only been enhanced by the revelation, announced during the course of the present research project, that the national film archives of Estonia and Lithuania hold amateur-film collections that are similar (albeit less substantial) to the one assembled at the LVKFFDA. Combined with the Lewandowska and Cummings's digital archive of Polish amateur films, and Vinogradova's contribution to the field with her study of the Soviet Russian amateur filmmaking tradition, this revelation invites further examination and offers the prospect of comparative research. Along with the present thesis, the existence of these sporadic insights and sources signal the necessity to continue to investigate the significance and place of amateur cinema in the

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<sup>590</sup> Patricia Zimmermann, 'Introduction. The Home Movie Movement: Excavations, Artifacts, Minings', in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, ed. by Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 1–28 (p. 2).

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

cultural life of the region, as well as to analyse the ways in which it challenges the notions that have been established within both film studies and the scholarship on Soviet-style socialism.

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