FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE PUBLIC:
JURIS PODNIEKS AND LATVIAN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University
2008

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2008
ABSTRACT

In recent decades and particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, cinema scholars have devoted a considerable amount of attention to Eastern European films and filmmakers. Yet, the rich film tradition of the Baltic States, particularly the thriving Latvian national cinema, remains foreign to western cinema scholars. One finds very little written in academia in this subject area, although the rapidly growing economies and the increase of the political currency of the Baltic States have sparked a new awareness of this geographical area. A fresh interest in Latvian filmmakers as the voices of their society is emerging, stemming from the country’s rich cinema history.

Within the realm of Latvian documentary filmmaking, one figure from recent years shines as a star of the genre. Juris Podnieks (1950-1992) and his films hold a privileged place in Latvian culture and history. His breakthrough feature *Is It Easy to Be Young?* (1986) heralded the advent of a new era for Latvian and Soviet documentary filmmaking accompanying the implementation of Gorbachev’s glasnost plan in the Soviet Union. Podnieks took advantage of the new policy of openness and employed *Is It Easy to Be Young?* as a vehicle for exploring the state of youth culture under a non-democratic regime. The high level of frankness of this documentary
shocked spectators across the Soviet Union, and made *Is It Easy to Be Young?* an unparalleled sensation in Soviet cinema history.

This study begins a new contribution to the understanding of Latvian cinema through an examination of Podnieks’s documentaries. My assessment of Podnieks’s documentaries entails readings of each of his films individually, as well as the identification and exploration of the main subjects and important themes of his oeuvre. Whenever necessary, I provide readers with the essential Latvian cultural and historical knowledge needed in order to access some of the meanings of Podnieks’s documentaries. This study offers one entry point into the director’s works, and invites further research on this filmmaker and on Latvian national cinema.
Dedicated to my father, Vitolds V. Vitols,
who took me to my first movie
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Just as a film requires the work of a dedicated crew, this academic project has been realized with the aid of a small army of people. First and foremost, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Professor J. Ronald Green for serving as my adviser and for providing immeasurable assistance to me throughout my graduate school career. I am also enormously thankful to Professors Lisa Florman and Judith Mayne for all of the academic support that they have provided over the years. Without the valuable assistance of these three individuals, this project would never exist.

Second, I wish to thank Antra Cilinska of the Juris Podnieks Studio (Riga, Latvia) and Valda Barone of the Latvia State Archive of Audio-Visual Documents (Riga, Latvia) for their warm help in arranging screenings for me of Podnieks’s films, procuring copies of Podnieks’s work, and for their general enthusiasm and encouragement. I would like to extend a special thank you to Inta Kanepaja, the Director of the Latvia State Archive of Audio-Visual Documents, for granting me access to the archive’s collection and to Janis Smits and Aivars Strods for patiently screening many of Podnieks’s films for me at the Archive. Laima Mincenofa at the Riga Film Museum (Riga, Latvia) also deserves my gratitude for her assistance in navigating the Museum’s video and print material collections in their storage facility.
Many thanks go to Elina Reitere, Anita Uzulniece, Agris Redovics, Abrams Kleckins, and Yuri Tsivian for taking time from their busy schedules to discuss Latvian cinema with me. All of these conversations vastly enriched my project.

At The Ohio State University, I am very grateful to present and former librarians Eleanor Block and Susan Wyngaard for their assistance in the initial research on my topic, and to Leslee Kuhn, Moni Wood, and Mary Beth Jones for helping me navigate the bureaucratic structures at the University. Their kindness and generosity sustained my project at crucial times. I also wish to thank the interlibrary loan staff at the Newton Free Library in Newton, Massachusetts for their aid in obtaining various materials on Latvian cinema.

Next, my sincerest thanks to the Fulbright Commission and the History of Art Department and Office of International Affairs at The Ohio State University for providing financial support for the nine months that I spent in Riga, Latvia during the 2006-2007 academic year. Thanks, as well, to the Wexner Center for the Arts for offering me funding through a graduate associateship while completing my coursework and conducting preliminary research for this project. I am also very grateful to the P.E.O. Sisterhood for awarding me a Scholar Award to complete my dissertation and degree.

Finally, words seem inadequate to express the profound gratitude I feel for all of the love, support, and patience that I have received from my family and friends.
They have read countless drafts, listened to numerous rants, and dried many tears. Their constant, unwavering belief in me and in my work has sustained me through more challenges than I care to remember. They have been the air in my lungs, and it is because of them that I have been able to follow my dreams. *Paldies*!!!!
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Dedication ...................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................... v
Vita ................................................................................................................................. viii

Chapters:

1. Introduction .............................................................................................................. 1
   Juris Podnieks ........................................................................................................... 30
   Podnieks’s Themes and Their Contexts ................................................................. 41
   Methodology ............................................................................................................. 44

2. The Early Films ....................................................................................................... 51
   Film Magazine Issues (kinozurnali) ........................................................................ 59
   Brali Kokari [The Brothers Kokari] ........................................................................ 80
   Puikas, zirgos! [Boys, on Horses!] ....................................................................... 84
   Baltais Ave Sol [White Ave Sol] ........................................................................... 90
   Strelnieku zvaigznajs [The Constellation of the Riflemen] ................................. 93
   Komandieris [The Commander] .......................................................................... 112
   Vel Sizifs akmeni [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone] ......................................................... 120

3. The Mature Period .................................................................................................. 137
   Vai viegli but jaunam? [Is It Easy to Be Young?, 1986] ........................................ 143
   Krustcehs [Homeland in the U.K., A Baltic Requiem in the U.S., 1990] ............. 172
   Pecvards [Postscript, 1991] .................................................................................. 190
   Imperijas gals [End of the Empire, 1991] ............................................................... 204
4. Podnieks’s Living Legacy ......................................................... 225

Bibliography ................................................................. 242
Filmography ................................................................. 267
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades and particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, cinema scholars have given a considerable amount of attention to Eastern European films and to filmmakers from this region. While much work remains to be done, a body of critical and historical scholarship exists on such national cinemas as those of Poland and Hungary. Furthermore, Eastern European filmmakers such as Krzysztof Kieslowski, Andrzej Wajda, Jan Svankmajer, Istvan Szabo, Emir Kusturica, Milos Forman, and Dusan Makavejev, among others, continue to receive well-deserved academic attention. As the works of these artists have become more accessible since the fall of the Iron Curtain, a new awareness of the complexity and depth of Eastern European cinema appears to be emerging.

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1 A current debate in cinema studies involves the question of whether one can employ the terms “Eastern European Cinema” without perpetuating a Cold-War inspired binary opposition between “East” and “West,” dictatorship and democracy, in an area featuring different cultures and diverse histories. I adopt film scholar Anikó Imre’s position within this discussion. She maintains: “In order to consider the cinematic developments of the region in their spatial and temporal continuity, it is necessary to keep the designation Eastern Europe,” even if one must do so “conditionally and contingently.” Anikó Imre, “Introduction: East European Cinemas in New Perspectives,” in East European Cinemas, ed. Anikó Imre (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), xvii.
Nonetheless, cinema scholars continue to overlook the rich film tradition of
the Baltic States, particularly the Latvian national cinema. An example of this
academic neglect can be found in *The BFI Companion to Eastern European and
Russian Cinema*, edited by academics Richard Taylor, Nancy Wood, Dina Iordanova,
and Julian Graffy (who is considered an authority on Eastern European cinema).
Published in 2000, the work offers a valuable reference resource for any student of
Eastern European cinemas and reflects the growing appreciation of the films from this
region. Nevertheless, the book presents an incomplete understanding of artistic
production in Eastern Europe. While the book identifies Polish, Hungarian, (former)
Yugoslavian, and Czech national cinemas and devotes several pages to descriptions
of their histories, there is no mention of any Latvian or other Baltic filmmaking.²
Only the Latvian directors Juris Podnieks and Hercs Franks are given modest
paragraphs briefly describing their film activity in Latvia, as if the nation only
produced a few marginal film figures in its history.³

² Co-editor Dina Iordanova has since acknowledged the serious oversights of this
work and its reflection of larger problems concerning the field of Eastern European
cinema studies in her essay: “The Cinema of Eastern Europe: Strained Loyalties,
Elusive Clusters,” in *East European Cinemas*, ed. Anikó Imre (New York and
London: Routledge, 2005), 229-249.

³ Podnieks and Franks are acknowledged as “Latvian” filmmakers in contrast to
individuals such as Sergei Eisenstein, who, although born and raised in Riga, are
considered “Russian” because of their different ethnic background. This recognition
of ethnic diversity functions as a contemporary remedy to the Soviet era’s frequent
indiscriminate amalgamation of all Eastern European filmmakers as “USSR” artists
and the West’s ignorant assumption that these filmmakers were automatically
Russian. Thus, while *The BFI Companion*, as representative of prevalent western
attitudes towards Eastern European film studies, may not yet recognize the existence
of a Latvian national cinema, at least it demonstrates a new awareness of Latvia as a
country with an identity separate from Russia.
The opposite is true. The Lumière brothers screened their films in Riga, the capital of Latvia, on May 28, 1896, and the country’s fascination with the medium has flourished ever since.\(^4\) The first known moving picture filmed in Latvia, recording the visit of Tsar Nicholas II to Riga in 1910, marked the beginning of a strong documentary practice in Latvia.\(^5\) Newsreels or “film chronicles” recorded the German fleet attacking the city of Liepaja in 1914 and reported the expulsion of the Bolsheviks from Riga on May 22, 1919.

From the beginning of Latvia’s newly acquired independence, newsreels and other documentary films offered witness to the political, social, and cultural developments in the fledgling democracy, and played key roles in nurturing and solidifying a national identity. This close relationship between politics and cinema in Latvia may be seen as partially explaining why Latvians have been particularly invested in the documentary genre as opposed to fiction filmmaking. One may even liken this approach of many Latvian filmmakers throughout the twentieth century as similar to Dziga Vertov’s philosophy of cinema. Vertov disregards fiction

\(^4\) One finds many dates given in the current literature available on Latvian cinema history. This date in May is the most common one given.

\(^5\) Film scholars Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky suggest that the strength of documentary cinema in Latvia and in the Baltic states in general derives from the temperament of the inhabitants: “The Baltic nations are composed, adamant, and rational, in contrast with the ‘ungovernable’ Georgians or the ‘slovenly’ Russians. Baltic emotions are usually hidden. […] This may explain why all three republics, not particularly outstanding in fiction film, are famous for the ‘marginal’ film arts: documentary in Latvia and Lithuania, animation in Estonia.” Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky, *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 232.
filmmaking as theatrical artifice, while documentaries allow access to a privileged, political truth. Vertov asserts: “Revolutionary cinema’s path of development has been found. It leads past the heads of film actors and beyond the studio roof, into life, into genuine reality, full of its own drama and detective plots.” Vertov further describes the mission of his filmmaking group: “We renounce the convenience of the studio; we sweep aside sets, makeup, costumes… [W e seek] the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted nonacted; making falsehood into truth.” Vertov’s belief in documentaries as inherently political and as being the only “real” cinema helps clarify why Latvian filmmakers’s championed the documentary genre from the inception of cinema in the country. Moreover, considering the strong Latvian theatrical tradition, it is not surprising that Latvian filmmakers would favor nurturing non-fiction filmmaking as the more developed and supported form of cinematic expression in the country, leaving the recounting of fictive narratives to the stage.


7 Vertov, 39-41.

8 This is not to say that fiction filmmaking did not exist in Latvia. Narrative cinema has been and continues to be a part of Latvian national cinema. However, Latvian non-fiction filmmaking is considerably more developed than its fiction counterpart. One reason for this may be that Latvians did not see the need to cultivate narrative filmmaking because they already had a well-established theatre culture. Thus, Latvian filmmakers may be understood as espousing Vertov’s dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction cinema, literally aligning narrative films with the theatre and equating “cinema” with documentary filmmaking. For more information on the Latvian theatre tradition, see Karlis Kundzins, Latviesu teatra vesture, Vol. I (Riga: Liesma, 1968); Karlis Kundzins, Latviesu teatra vesture, Vol. II (Riga: Liesma, 1972); Arturs Berzins, Adolfs Alunans (London: Latpress, 1954); I. Meinerte and T. Jansons, ed.,
One must note, however, the ideological differences between Vertov and many Latvian documentary filmmakers. While both parties may have believed in the political power of the documentary, Vertov’s enthusiastic espousal of Communism was not shared by all Latvian filmmakers. A similarity in cinematic style and technique does not necessarily involve a parallel in political convictions (although both aspects are important when analyzing any work of art, since art cannot be produced in an historical or cultural vacuum). Nevertheless, Vertov’s theories about cinema and his belief in political art offer a useful framework to today’s spectators for understanding the way Latvian documentary filmmakers envisioned their world.

Ironically, although Latvian documentary filmmakers share their beliefs in the necessity for political cinema with Vertov, it is unlikely that many of them ever screened the Soviet master’s work, particularly during the Communist era. Film scholar Annette Michelson notes:

[…T] films themselves demand a more detailed and analytical consideration than was possible [in the 1940s, when scholar Jay Leyda wrote on Russian cinema]. *The Man with a Movie Camera* was simply unavailable for concentrated study within the Soviet Union, and until 1970 it was equally unavailable, for all practical, critical purposes, in the West.”

One of the reasons Vertov’s works were inaccessible for so long may be due to his marginalization and ultimate repression by Stalin’s regime for not conforming to the
dictator’s demands for socialist realism in all art. Yet, even though Latvian
documentary filmmakers probably did not view Vertov’s films or read his manifestos
(rendering a direct influence of the Soviet master highly unlikely), their philosophical
approaches to cinema frequently align, thus offering contemporary scholars a useful
entry point into Latvian film.

During the two decades of Latvian sovereignty (i.e. from 1920-1940),
documentary filmmakers committed to celluloid the lives of famous Latvian citizens
such as Janis Rainis (playwright, poet, and political activist), and captured important
events, such as the formation of the first Latvian Parliament. *Vidzemes Sveice [The
Switzerland of Vidzeme, 1921], Iepazisti savu Dzimteni [Get to Know Your
Homeland, early 1930s], Gauja [The River Gauja, 1934], and Tevzemei un brivibai
[For Homeland and For Freedom, 1938] are among the many documentaries or
“culture films” that Latvian filmmakers created during the period from 1920-1940.10
Journalist Kristine Matisa notes:

> Documentary film developed at an intense rate in Latvia […] –
> by 1931, the most active film chronicler, Eduards Kraucs, had already
> shot 100 silent news reels, which were regularly shown in cinemas.
> With the help of the American film company, Fox Film Corporation,
> he began to add sound to the footage.11

10 The term “documentary” wasn’t employed in the Latvian language until the 1940s,
with the advent of the first Soviet occupation. Instead, Latvians distinguished
between *aktierfilmas*, “actor films” or narrative fiction films, and *kulturfilmas*
[“culture films” or films on cultural topics], *izglitības filmas* [“educational film”], and
*kino hronikas* [“film chronicles” or newsreels], all of which were what we today
would call documentaries.

11 Kristine Matisa, “Yesterday and Today of Latvian Documentaries: Looking to the
Future,” *Film News from Latvia* (Special Issue Latvian Documentaries, 2006), 1.
In fact, Kraucs’s work *Latvijas tapsana [The Birth of Latvia, 1928]* is widely regarded by scholars as the definitive Latvian documentary of the 1920s, and footage from this film has been included in many other documentaries since its release.\(^\text{12}\)

Moreover, there were also so called “educational films,” such as *Kuldīga [The Town of Kuldīga, 1922]*, *Jelgava [The City of Jelgava, 1922]*, *Papira un celulozes fabrika Sloka [Paper and Cellulose Factory in Sloka, 1925-26]*, *Skati uz universitātes dzīvi [Scenes of University Life, 1925]*, *Ligo svētki Latvija [Summer Solstice Celebrations in Latvia, 1921]*, and *Musu pelekais dargakmens [Our Grey Jewel, 1936]*, an expository work about the use of limestone in Latvia by Voldemars Puce that contemporary critics deemed the best Latvian documentary to date.\(^\text{13}\) The documentaries made during this period were usually screened before fiction films in theatres, with Latvian audiences flocking to enjoy this new, popular form of education, entertainment, and art.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^\text{12}\) For more information on Kraucs and his career, see A. Redovics, *Latvijas Kino 1920. – 1940. Iepazīšanas* (Riga: Rigas Kino Muzejs, 1990), 6-9, 26-27.

\(^\text{13}\) A. Redovics, 9. The film educated viewers on the many uses of limestone in Latvia in a didactic style similar to the techniques used by Puce’s contemporary in the U.S., Pare Lorentz, in his films *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937).

\(^\text{14}\) For more general information of Latvian spectatorship before the Soviet era, see Vents Kainaizis, *Latvijas Kino* (Riga: Zvaigzne ABC, 2005), 6, 14. The study of Latvian spectatorship is a relatively recent phenomenon, largely lead by the efforts of film scholar Inga Perkone-Redovica - see Inga Perkone-Redovica, “Filmu auditorija un kino zanru recepcija Latvija starpkaru perioda,” *Letonica* (Nr. 15, 2007), 129-155; and Inga Perkone and Agris Redovics, *Latvijas kino 1991-1993* (Riga: Nacionalais Kinematografijas centrs and Rigas Kino muzejs, 1994). While both works offer statistics about the number and types of films screened in Latvia during the 1920-1940 and the 1991-1993 periods, neither provides specific information about how many spectators attended different film screenings during these times. Meanwhile,
In addition to documentaries, Latvian filmmakers also generated a considerable number of fiction films during this period, including *Es kara aiziedams* [As I Go Away to War, 1920], *Kakisa dzirnavas* [The Little Cat’s Mill, 1932], and *Lacplesis* [The Bear Slayer, 1930].\(^{15}\) Film adaptations of Latvian literary works proved particularly popular, which is the case for the most famous Latvian film from the independence era, *Zvejnieka dels* [The Fisherman’s Son, 1940]. That work, a conventional narrative film that includes some sequences reminiscent of Soviet avant-garde features, was widely considered to be Latvian cinema’s first classic. It debuted on January 22, 1940, and received widespread enthusiasm and praise unparalleled in Latvian film history.\(^ {16}\)

Months after the debut of *Zvejnieka dels*, the Soviet army occupied Latvia, and filmmaking in the Baltic nation came under the control of the foreign forces. The newsreel series *Padomju Latvija* [Soviet Latvia] appeared, which the Soviet government used for propagandistic aims (the newsreel would reappear in 1944, and regularly produce 32-34 film issues each subsequent year).\(^ {17}\) In 1941, the German information about cinema spectatorship in Latvia during the Soviet era is currently unavailable, demonstrating the need for further research in this field.

\(^{15}\) Both *Kakisa dzirnavas* and *Lacplesis* are Latvian literary classics.

\(^{16}\) Ironically, while *Zvejnieka dels* garnered such popular praise, Vilis Lacis, the novel’s author, later drew the wrath of Latvian nationalists around the globe because of his fervent support of and participation in the Communist Party and his role in the puppet government during the Soviet Occupation.

Nazi forces seized Latvia, with the nation returning to Soviet rule at the end of World War II. By 1947, the Latvian film industry’s recovery from the wartime chaos was underway, and the Riga Film Studio produced its first post-war motion picture *Majup ar uzvaru* [Homeward with Victory], an adaptation of V. Lacis’ play *Uzvara* [Victory] directed by Russian filmmaker A. Ivanov. While the public coolly received *Majup ar uzvaru*, Latvian filmmakers quickly discovered the answer to circumventing stringent Stalinist censorship standards while simultaneously achieving their artistic expression and moving Latvian audiences: the screen adaptation of classical Latvian literary works. The 1955 film version of R. Blaumanis’ short story *Salna pavasari* [Frost in the Spring] proved successful, and spawned a lasting trend in Latvian fiction filmmaking, as Latvian audiences began returning to the cinema regularly. Journalist Elga Egle notes:

> One may say that with the film *Frost in the Spring*, the Soviet Latvian cinema phenomenon – the incessant turning to Latvian literature’s best works – was born. I call it a phenomenon precisely because the film adaptations of the classical works and, in the later years, even the work of the best Soviet era Latvian authors, are numerically and artistically significant contributions to Latvian film art. The actors … experience the joy of working, creating full-blooded … interesting roles. This joy of working cannot be ignored by the audience, and they responded with stirred emotions.18

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Tsivian. Tsivian is widely recognized as an authority on Early Russian Cinema, and currently serves as Professor of Film Studies at the University of Chicago.

Following the triumph of *Salna pavasari*, film adaptations of literary works continued to be the norm in Latvian fiction filmmaking, with the industry creating a handful of feature-length narrative films each year, at least one of which usually was an adaptation.

Among the many popular (and often controversial) Latvian fiction filmmakers throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were Janis Streics, Leonids Leimanis, Gunars Piesis, Varis Brasla, Rolands Kalnins, and Rihards Piks. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the reestablishment of Latvian independence, new fiction filmmakers came to the international media’s attention. The most notable among them is Laila Pakalnina, whose 1998 film *Kurpe* [*The Shoe*] played at the Cannes Film Festival, the Toronto International Film Festival, the London Film Festival, and the Los Angeles International Film Festival, among many others. Latvian film studios are also expanding their partnership with artists around the world.

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19 Pakalnina’s *Kurpe* was screened at the Cannes Film Festival in the “Un certain regard” category, while her film *Pitons* [*Python*, 2003] was shown at the Venice Film Festival. Elina Reitere, “Pakalnina’s World of Objects,” *Film News from Latvia* (Special Issue Laila Pakalnina/Infinity FF/Italy, 2005), 6. To date, she has made sixteen documentaries and three fiction films. For more information on Pakalnina and the making of *Kurpe*, see Dita Rietuma, “Enas un Sajutas” (*Studija, Ziemas* 1997): 86-90. Also, the National Film Centre of Latvia devoted one of its semi-annual issues of *Film News from Latvia* in 2005 to Pakalnina, with the publication containing interviews with the filmmaker and critical essays analyzing Pakalnina’s contribution to cinema history. See *Film News from Latvia* (Special Issue Laila Pakalnina/Infinity FF/Italy, 2005), 1-20.
One finds an example of this kind of collaboration in the 2003 French-Belgian-
Canadian co-production, *The Triplettes of Belleville*; a significant amount of the
animation for this award-winning film was created in the Rija Film Studio.

Latvian documentary filmmaking, as well, thrived during the post-war period,
surpassing the accomplishments of fiction film in the country. The newsreel *Padomju Latvija* resumed its activity in 1944, and new periodical documentary film series or *kinozurnali* [film magazines] appeared throughout the 1950s and 1960s, including *Pionieris* [Pioneer] in 1953, *Sporta apskats* [Sports Review] in 1957, and *Maksla* [Art] in 1963.\(^{20}\) In fact, according to Juris Civjans and Anita Uzulniece, “… almost every documentary director and many fiction film directors have also worked in the field of periodical documentary film series.”\(^{21}\) For young filmmakers, these film magazines or newsreels served as ‘proving grounds’ - a vehicle for demonstrating their talent and potential, gaining them valuable experience, and the privilege of directing future short and feature-length documentaries and fiction films within the Riga Film Studio system.

By the 1960s and 1970s, filmmakers such as Hercs Franks, Ansis Epners, Aivars Freimanis, Ivars Seleckis, and Uldis Brauns (as well as others) were producing

\(^{20}\) *Kinozurnali* were usually made very quickly and cheaply, and were shown in movie theatres before the main attraction, the feature-length fiction film. Some film magazines were created quarterly (such as *Maksla*), while others, such as *Padomju Latvija*, came out twice a week. Film magazines ceased to be made 1996, partly due to the restructuring of funding available from the government and because of a shift in production focus to documentaries made for television.

\(^{21}\) “[…] gandriz visi dokumentala un daudzi aktierkino rezisors stradajusi arī kinoperiodika.” My translation. Civjans and Uzulniece, 103.
documentaries that encouraged metaphorical readings, earning this group of artists popular recognition as members of the so-called Riga School of Poetic Documentary. This film movement profoundly transformed the face of Latvian filmmaking, so much so that film scholar Anita Uzulniec argues: “[T]his period [of Latvian filmmaking] may even be likened to the French ‘New Wave’ and to ‘New German Cinema’...”

In order to begin to fathom the importance of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary (RSPD), one must understand the historical and artistic context that gave birth to the movement.

Because of World War II, many of Latvia’s filmmakers fled from the country and continued their careers in exile. Most of those who remained were deported and/or killed by the Soviet forces, resulting in an artistic void in Latvian

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22 One must note that the labeling of this loose association of filmmakers as part of a “poetic school of documentary filmmaking” differs from the way such documentary historians and theorists as Erik Barnouw and Bill Nichols define “poetic documentary.” For Barnouw and Nichols, poetic documentary filmmaking entails a focus on form and abstraction, as well as an investigation of romantic vision and experimentation. These concerns epitomized the early films of Joris Ivens, the work of surrealists like Man Ray, and the documentaries of Arne Sucksdorff and Francis Thompson. The Latvian filmmakers, however, produced documentaries which critics labeled “poetic” because of the films’ conduciveness to metaphoric readings (see above), and not because of a sole concentration on form or experimentation. For more on Barnouw and Nichols’ views on poetic documentary, see Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, Second Revised Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 185-198, and Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 88-91 and 102-105.

To fill this vacancy, Soviet authorities sent many of their filmmakers to Riga in order to rebuild Latvia’s cinema industry in accordance with Communist ideology. Created in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s by directors H. Shulatin and M. Schneiderov along with cinematographer G. Indriksons and scriptwriters Z. Griva, J. Bencis, and V. Lorencs (among others), the documentaries made in Latvia during this time functioned as propaganda vehicles for the Soviet regime and presented their material in a didactic manner.

This ‘old guard’ of documentary cinema, however, would be challenged in the 1960s by a new generation of directors and cinematographers. Educated in Moscow’s State Cinema Institute, or VGIK, and possessing valuable work experience gained at the Riga Film Studio, these new filmmakers heralded a shift in the zeitgeist. Civjans and Uzulniec describe the change in society and film culture philosophy:

In the ‘50s and ‘60s, during the period of the building of socialism, the role of the individual in the development of society grew sharply.

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25 Scriptwriters on documentary film crews in Latvia have different roles than those commonly accepted in the West. Documentary scriptwriters in Latvia act more as researchers, exploring film and photography archives and working closely with the director and cinematographer to organize the structure and content of the film. For more on Latvian documentary filmmaking during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, see J. Civjans and A. Uzulniec, 103-108.

26 In Latvian, the VGIK is called the Vissavienibas Valsts Kinomatografitas institute, although people commonly refer to it as the VVKI.
The objective necessity to explore man in his individual expression appeared more and more frequently. Until then, this kind of mission was only within the abilities of art cinema; now documentary cinema was venturing into this territory for the first time. Even at the end of the ‘50s and on a few occasions in the early ‘60s, documentary films were ruled by a stereotypical depiction of man – man functions in the frame mostly to illustrate the text of the narrator. […] In the second half of the ‘50s, an interest in art that is based on documentary material was reborn, and the necessity to show on screen man’s interior world, his personality’s unique traits, appeared.27

What could have motivated such a radical transformation in perspective?

Parallel to the direct cinema and cinéma vérité phenomena in the U.S. and in Europe respectively (both of which grew out of synchronous-sound technological advances), the cinematic revolution that occurred in Latvia (as well as in the film industries of other Eastern Block nations) stemmed from similar developments. Civjans and Uzulniece identify various reasons for the blossoming of a new film culture in Latvia and elsewhere in the world. First, the advent of television fundamentally altered the role of documentaries in society. Previously, documentaries functioned much like the radio and the press, offering audiences ‘objective’ information, striving to efface any traces of a subjective authorship. The arrival of television effectively transferred this task of ‘objective’ information communication to television broadcasting, largely due to the new medium’s cost-effectiveness and rapid dissemination. This freed

documentary filmmakers to portray their subjects in depth in a more complex manner, both in Latvia and abroad. Civjans and Uzulniece remark:

One of the main changes in the character of documentary cinema at the beginning of the 1960s was the shift in “point of view” – documentary film changed from an impersonal relay of events to a reflection of subjective events, in which one could sense a clear authorial position. The credibility of the documentary film, which is contained in the film frame’s own “photographic nature,” now rested on other principles – truth was no longer guaranteed by the fact that what was seen and heard on screen was commonly accepted, but guaranteed instead by the author’s personal responsibility for the material. … Thus, gradually, the function and mission of documentary cinema shifted from information to art; documentary filmmakers no longer strove to show an artificially construed, ideal image in their works, but rather placed their faith in documentary truth, revealing life’s contradictions and complexities.\(^{28}\)

The second cause of the documentary cinema revolution in Latvia noted by Civjans and Uzulniece stems from the growth in importance of the roles of the film director and scriptwriter in the documentary filmmaking process. Before the 1960s, cinematographers or operatori created newsreels following conventional modes of representation. Yet, the change in mission within documentary cinema at the beginning of the 1960s necessitated the development of the director and scriptwriter’s

\(^{28}\) “Par vienu no galvenajiem dokumentala kino rakstura izmainas momentiem 60. gadu sakuma kluva ‘redzes viedokla’ maina – dokumentala filma no bezpersoniska notikuma izklasta kluva par subjektivu notikumu atspogulojumu, kura jutama skaidra autora pozicija. Dokumentalas filmas ticamiba, kas ietvera kinoattela pasa ‘fotografiskaja daba,’ tagad balstijas uz citiem principiem – patiesigumu garanteja ne vairs tas, ka uz ekrana redzamais un dzirdamais bija visparpienemts, bet gan autora personiska atbildiba par to. […] Ta pakapeniski dokumentala kino funkcija un uzdevumi parvietojas no informacijas uz makslu, dokumentalisti vairs necentas savos darbos radit makslīgi konstruētu, idealu telu, bet gan uzticeties dokumentalajai patiesibai, atklajot dzives pretunās un sarežģitību.” My translation. Civjans and Uzulniece, 109.
responsibilities. As a result, the cinematographer, the director, and the scriptwriter began functioning as a unit, a triumvirate working to “express a single conception [...]” This collaboration during the filmmaking process proved so successful largely due to the common experiences and perspectives shared by this youthful generation: most of them had gone to school together at the VVKI, they had all worked at the Riga Film Studio, and they each espoused the desire to cinematically investigate uncharted social territory. Civjans and Uzulniece explain: “[These young filmmakers] declar[ed] in their films the examination of previously unexplored problems and questions. The most ordinary people became the films’ heroes, and the filmmakers strove to reveal cinematically the unique personalities of these individuals, as well as the originality of their destinies.”

A key example of this new collaboration, and, arguably, the film that marks the beginning of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary, is the 1961 short film Baltie zvani [White Bells], directed by I. Kraulitis and featuring cameraman Uldis Brauns and scriptwriter Hercs Franks (both of whom would later become directors in their

29 Reflecting the spirit of the times, this redefining of the role of the director, cameraman, and screenwriter in Eastern European cinema coincides with the rise of auteurism in the West.

30 “Scenarists, rezisors un operators kluva par vienas koncepcijas paudejiem […].” My translation. Civjans and Uzulniece, 109. One must keep in mind, however, that the director now made the final decisions and, ultimately, was responsible for the finished cinematic product.

own right).32 In this work that contains no voice-over narration, a young girl is filmed as she wanders throughout Riga in search of a bouquet of flowers, the small white “bells” of the title. She sees the flowers in a store window, but does not have enough money to buy them. At the florist shop, the girl watches as the flowers are placed in a truck that drives away. The child is almost struck by a car as she runs after the flower truck, and a kind couple takes the girl into their vehicle. They follow the truck to the Central Market, where the young girl runs off to the flower stands and promptly hides underneath the merchants’ tables. Crawling underneath the long line of tables, the child spots the white flowers, and stretches her hand out to touch them. This act prompts her discovery by a flower merchant, and she is pulled out from beneath the table. When the flower seller turns his back, the girl grabs a bunch of the white flowers and runs away to the banks of the river Daugava where she waters her flowers before continuing back into the bustling streets of the city.

As the child crosses a busy intersection, she accidentally drops her flowers, and stands on a street corner, her face full of anguish and fear for her beloved bouquet. The camera focuses on the flowers, with audiences expecting to see the fragile blossoms being run over by passing cars and buses at any moment. Yet, all of the drivers manage to avoid hitting the flowers, preserving their blooms intact.

32 Latvian film scholars still debate whether *Baltie zvani* marks the beginning of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary or whether A. Brencis’s film *Mana Riga* [*My Riga*, 1960] is actually the first Latvian film that characterizes the new documentary movement. My study favors *Baltie zvani* for two reasons: first, Brencis includes non-diegetic narration in his film (adding a didactic quality to his work, where *Baltie zvani* offers the viewers more flexibility in interpretation), and second, the majority of the literature on Latvian film history privileges *Baltie zvani* over *Mana Riga*. For more on A. Brencis and his filmography, see Civjans and Uzulniecē, 115-116.
Tension increases as the child and the film spectators view a large steamroller making its way through the street, heading directly towards the fragile flowers. As the other traffic slows down, the steamroller comes to a halt, allowing the young girl to walk into the street and retrieve her bouquet. The film concludes as it begins, with several long shots of Riga’s streets.

Categorizing Baltie zvani has proved notoriously difficult within Latvian cinema history. Most members of the current Latvian film community treat Baltie zvani as a documentary, pointing to the significant amount of screen time devoted to chronicling daily life in Riga. Moreover, Kraulitis, Brauns, and Franks obviously staged the actions of the young girl in this film, thus linking the director to the Flaherty documentary tradition. However, the film summary submitted to the Soviet authorities for approval, as well as the resulting endorsement from appropriate Soviet officials, all clearly label Baltie zvani a fiction film.

How, then, should one categorize such a hybrid film as Baltie zvani? Documentary theorist Michael Renov offers one possible aswer. Renov reminds spectators:

“…fictional and nonfictional forms are enmeshed in one another – particularly regarding semiotics, narrativity, and questions of performance. …Indeed, nonfiction contains any number of ‘fictive’

33 For more on Flaherty’s staged documentaries (the most famous of which is Nanook of the North), see Barnouw, 33-48.

34 Baltie zvani montazas lapas [The White Bells screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.
elements, moment at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention.35

For Renov, documentary films may utilize the construction of character, high and low camera angles, close ups, rhythmic editing, and soundtrack manipulation in order to create affect and meaning.36 Consequently, he defines the documentary genre as “the more or less artful reshaping of the historical world,” with images signifying “a piece of the world plucked from its everyday context rather than fabricated for the screen.”37 In this light, one may understand Kraulitis, Brauns, and Franks as following in the footsteps of Flaherty, Vertov, Grierson, and all of the other previous documentary filmmakers who drew material from the world around them and used fictive elements in order to form films that display their particular understanding of that world.

While one layer of narrative action in Baltie zvani involves a little girl’s quest for white flowers, as described above, most of the work is devoted to the depiction of Riga and to all of the activities going on in its busy streets. Instead of presenting the female protagonist immediately, the film delays her introduction until well into the first reel, choosing in her place to offer a lengthy montage sequence consisting of various shots of city life in Riga. Kraulitis, Brauns, and Franks show the audience heavy machinery engaged in construction, workers stacking building material, cars parked in a street, Riga’s railroad bridge, cranes, the unloading of cargo, an aerial


36 Renov, 2-3.

37 Renov, 7-11.
shot of a city block, the city skyline, people leaving a glass building, passengers boarding a bus, trams and people in the street, the train station, busy intersections, and many shots of daily life in Riga. Only after this extended passage that introduces Riga as an important character in this film are spectators shown a group of children playing in the street, one of which is the young girl who will soon embark on her quest for flowers. Moreover, even after the appearance of the female protagonist, the film continues to pay considerable attention to city scenes that do not necessarily involve the child. 38

Consequently, Baltie zvani demonstrates the break from previous documentary approaches that the Riga School of Poetic Documentary epitomizes. With the shift from the documentary as the conveyor of ‘objective’ news to the documentary as a subjective art form came the opportunity to create rich films that allowed for the possibility of multiple, different readings. For example, Baltie zvani may be viewed as a film that recounts one little girl’s mission to acquire the perfect flower bouquet. The film may also be seen as a day in the life of a city, a portrait of Riga that shares certain similarities with Dziga Vertov’s portrayal of city life in Man with a Movie Camera (1929), as well as with Walther Ruttman’s work Berlin: Symphony of the City (1927). Spectators may read Baltie zvani as a celebration of the advances of technology building a modern city because of the plethora of shots

38 While one may be tempted to liken the Baltie zvani and the Riga School of Poetic Documentary to French Poetic Realism, this comparison ultimately proves unfeasible. The latter narrative films are characterized by pessimistic and fatalistic themes (as well as studio sets), while the former documentaries are more ambiguous texts shot on location, that offer the possibility for different (and often opposing) interpretations.
featuring gleaming construction equipment in motion. Yet, one may just as easily
read the film as the human spirit ultimately triumphing in a world increasingly
threatened by machines and technology through the figure of the young girl
successfully navigating the city and eventually stopping traffic. One may even see the
film as allegorical: the little, white flowers serve as a metaphor for the Latvian
culture, which has traditionally viewed the color white as a sacred symbol. While the
white flowers are not flattened by the steamroller, so, too, the Latvian culture will not
be crushed by Soviet might. Furthermore, the lack of an authoritative, ‘voice-of-God’
narration frees spectators to choose how they wish to interpret the work. Kraulitis,
Brauns, and Franks have created a film that allows viewers to interpret the cinematic
images in multiple ways, successfully surviving the rigorous screening of Communist
censors and effectively demonstrating the documentary’s new function as art.39

The film that many feel embodies the Riga School of Poetic Documentary
best is 235,000,000 (1967). Directed by Uldis Brauns, this epic documentary required
four separate film crews simultaneously filming for three months all over the Soviet
Union, including Azerbaijan, the Urals, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), and
Moscow. Everyone who formed part of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary
participated in the creation of this work, including Hercs Franks, who served as the
screenwriter, and Ivars Seleckis, who was one of the cameramen. Film scholar
Abrams Klockins stresses the importance of this film’s crew:

39 Kraulitis, Brauns, and Franks were so successful that Baltie zvani not only won
awards at the San Francisco and Oberhausen film festivals, but it also was named one
“of the ‘world’s 100 best short films’ by the film critics at the 1995 Clermoint-
Ferrand film festival.” Matisa, 1.
Everyone in Latvia’s new generation of documentary filmmakers participated in its making, and their involvement allowed them to realize their creative principles. This experience also permitted them to become, in the true sense of the word, a Latvian documentary film school, which has its place both within the national culture and within the world documentary cinema.40

Originally called *PSRS – 1966 [The Soviet Union – 1966]*, this working title was changed to reflect the number of inhabitants in the U.S.S.R. during the year the film was made. Civjans and Uzulniecze note: “Along with this [title change] the film’s accent shifted. Intended as a film about the [Communist] State’s [twenty-five year] jubilee [marking the Communist victory over fascist Germany in Moscow in 1941], it became a film which tells about the people that live in this State [i.e., the U.S.S.R.].”41

235,000,000 focuses on the inhabitants of the Soviet Union, showing spectators banal and significant events in the lives of everyday and famous people. The film begins with workers assembling and painting an airplane, and continues by presenting a funeral procession, the Supreme Soviet, a war memorial, smokestacks, a montage sequence of wedding celebrations, parents shopping for baby strollers, Valentina Tereshkova (the first female Soviet cosmonaut) at a Soviet Congress, the


printing press for *Pravda* (the U.S.S.R.’s largest newspaper), children playing on a beach, a sequence where adolescents dancing on the beach is intercut with shots of a helicopter with its blades spinning, and children at school, along with many other topics. In particular, the film repeatedly returns to the theme of the military, with the instruments of war playing a significant role in the work. The presence of the Soviet armed forces permeates 235,000,000, with one moving scene depicting families saying their emotional farewells to their sons as the young men are sent away to serve in the Soviet army. Klockins encapsulates the ultimate impression that 235,000,000 leaves on the spectator:

[…It is] an image of the Soviet Union in the fiftieth year of the revolution – an image of a terrifying, thoroughly militarized society, where even a toddler’s first attempts at standing on his own feet are viewed as a battle operation, in its own way, and where the State’s power is personified by endless military practices and by the demonstration of the possibilities of war technology.\(^\text{42}\)

By creating a film that could be read both as celebrating the humanity of the inhabitants of the Soviet Union (since it passed the censors’ review with only minor changes) and as critiquing communist power, Brauns and his crew had generated a work that fully embraced the new philosophy of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary.\(^\text{43}\) The filmmakers used individual examples to comment on larger

\[^{42}\text{[...B]ija radits padomju valsts tels revolucijas piedesmitaja gada, baismigs, caur un cauri militarizets sabiedribas tels, kur pat zidaina pirmie meginajumi patstavigi nostaties uz kajam tiek uzskatits par sava veida kaujas operaciju, bet valsts varenibu personifice nebeidzamas militaras macibas un kara tehnikas iespeju demonstresana.” My translation. Klockins, 172.}\]

\[^{43}\text{The *montaza lapas* of 235,000,000 contain the Soviet censors’ recommendations that some of the military scenes be edited out, since they felt that there were too many of them. Even in its censored version, 235,000,000 still contains a considerable}\]
social concerns - the private to communicate the public. Significantly, as in Baltie zvani, 235,000,000 does not feature a voice-over narration, instead allowing the filmed subjects to provide their own subjective, personal soundtrack. The film, like Baltie zvani, also shares some similarities with Vertov’s oeuvre, specifically with One Sixth of the World (1926), in terms of the conceptual framework. However, politically, the films of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary could not be more different from the films of Vertov, considering that Vertov’s films unequivocally endorsed Communism, while the Latvian filmmakers created works, like 235,000,000, that proved to be layered texts open to be read in multiple ways (i.e., without one clear political message).

Many of the members of the Riga School continued to work through the 1980s and 1990s, slowly gaining international recognition. For example, Seleckis’ work Skersiela [released outside of Latvia under the title of Crossroad Street] won the European Film Awards Documentary Film of the Year prize in 1990. As one of the founders of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary, Seleckis has been actively making films since the 1960s, and he recently received the most prestigious national

amount of footage of the Soviet armed forces and of war technology. 235,000,000 montazas lapas [235,000,000 screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.

44 One should note that when not employing diegetic sound, the filmmakers chose to include a jazz music soundtrack to accompany the images.

45 For more on Vertov’s One Sixth of the World, see Barnouw, 59-61, and Dziga Vertov, 95, 163-165.

46 For more information on the success of Skersiela, see J. Baltauss, “Vistituletaka latviesu filma,” Maksla, n. 5 (1990), 21-22.
award, the Tris Zvaigznu Ordenis [Three Star Medal] from the President of Latvia at the time, Vaira Vike-Freiberga. Hercs Franks, too, continues to create award-winning documentaries, and he maintains an active participation in international film workshops, festivals, seminars, and juries. Meanwhile, a new generation of documentary filmmakers, such as Inara Kolmane and Una Celma, also came of age during this period, continuing the tradition of creating innovative films.

Clearly, Latvia possesses a film history necessitating academic exploration and documentation. Yet, such a comprehensive study currently does not exist, and scholarly works outside of Latvia are even more limited. While Latvian film scholars have devoted some attention to Latvian cinema, the majority of their work originated during the Soviet Occupation period and served a propagandistic function rather than as a critical assessment. The most comprehensive work to date is Padomju Latvijas kinomaksla [Soviet Latvia’s Cinema], edited by Lilija Dzene. Published in 1989 during the glasnost period, the work offers the most complete overview available of Latvian Cinema from 1944-1984, covering fiction films, documentaries, and animated motion pictures. However, Dzene’s study is far from a thorough and critically unbiased assessment of Latvian films, since communist rhetoric both informs the inclusion and exclusion of certain films and filmmakers, and permeates the analysis of the featured works.\(^{47}\) Nevertheless, Padomju Latvijas kinomaksla is the only work to date that presents a somewhat historical overview of forty years of Latvian filmmaking.\(^{48}\)

\(^{47}\) For example, Padomju Latvijas kinomaksla completely dismisses the flourishing Latvian film industry of the independence period, 1920-1940, labeling it as a cinema
More historically accurate and analytical research has been conducted in Latvia since the reestablishment of an independent state, although much work still awaits thorough investigation. Other accessible texts on Latvian cinema include *Latvijas Kino 1920. – 1940. iepazisanas [Getting to Know Latvian Cinema 1920-1940]*, the concise catalogue on the Latvian film industry during the inter-war independence period. The Riga Film Museum produced this catalogue in 1990 in order to begin to discredit the popular, Soviet-inspired perceptions that the Latvian film industry began with the establishment of a Communist government. In addition to this important work, the Riga Film Museum has published and continues to issue new catalogues in conjunction with its various exhibits and educational programming. However, one must note that the majority of these catalogs serve more of a reference function, listing filmographies rather than offering any extensive critical assessment.

Moreover, most of the material available in Latvian has been written for a popular audience. In terms of periodicals, the journals *Literatura un Maksla [Literature and Art]* and *Maksla [Art]* regularly published critical articles on Latvian films and interviews with filmmakers. The art journal *Studija [Studio]* also consistently devotes attention to cinema, as does the weekly newspaper *Laiks [The


48 Similar rhetoric shapes the Communist era book series of the 1960s and 1970s *Runa kinematografisti [Cinematographers Speak]*, collections of essays on and by contemporary Latvian filmmakers, cameramen, and actors.
Times, published in the U.S.] and the daily newspapers Diena [Day] and Neatkarīga Latvija [Independent Latvia]. During the Soviet era, the film journal Kino [Cinema] was dedicated to publishing interviews with filmmakers, as well as some critical essays on contemporary cinema. Moreover, popular articles on Latvian cinema often appear in the journal Jauna Gaita [The New Course, published in Canada], and occasionally in now-defunct magazines such as Tilts [Bridge, published in the U.S.] and Latvija Sodien [Latvia Today, published in the U.S.]. Other resources on Latvian film include the biographies and memoirs of members of the film community, such as Leonids Leimanis and Maris Rudzitis, and reference compilations, including Kinoskatītaja rokasgramata [The Film Viewer’s Handbook] from 1980, and the three volume encyclopedia Teatris un Kino Biografijas [Theatre and Cinema Biographies] (volumes one and two published in 1999 and 2002, respectively – volume three is currently in press).

Undoubtedly, articles in newspapers and magazines abound, but one is hard-pressed to obtain academic writing on Latvian cinema. Kino Raksti [Writings on Cinema] is the only Latvian academic journal available, but its publication schedule has proven erratic and unpredictable in recent years. In the National Library of Latvia, the main card catalog reveals the lack of academic attention to Latvian cinema. While a significant number of catalog drawers are devoted to Latvian theatre (with separate sections for books on theatre actors, directors, playwrights, etc.), there is only one, half-full drawer labeled “Latvian Cinema,” with most of the contents being produced during the Soviet period.
Meanwhile, many academics outside of Latvia continue to adhere to the approach expressed in *The BFI Companion*, i.e. there may be a few interesting Latvian filmmakers but no coherent Latvian national cinema. Individual Latvian films and filmmakers also appear in works examining Soviet cinema, such as Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky’s *The Zero Hour*, but they are considered solely in a Soviet context without any regard to their place within a national Latvian cinema. Resources on Latvian cinema in any other language besides Latvian are occasionally found in more critical publications like *Cineaste*, *Afterimage*, and *Cahiers du Cinéma*. One must note that these articles frequently focus more on Baltic filmmaking or on film festival coverage, rather than concentrating on Latvian cinema alone. Latvian filmmakers also receive some mention in non-Latvian reference books (for example, in the aforementioned *BFI Companion to Eastern European and Russian Cinema*), as well as in survey works, like Eric Barnouw’s *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Barnouw briefly discusses both Hercs Franks and Ansis Epners). One finds a scattering of academic work in French, German, and English conducted on a few Latvian directors, but no substantial research on Latvian cinema is available. Latvian film production appears to receive more attention in trade journals like *Variety* and in the popular press than in academia. When asking for information about Latvian cinema in the West, one often receives the response: “Is there such a thing as a Latvian film industry?”

This lack of scholarly material on Latvian motion pictures raises the question: why have film studies neglected this country’s national cinema? One explanation

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49 See Barnouw, 322 and 331.
rests in the language barrier. Latvian, a Baltic language related to Lithuanian and Prussian in the Indo-European linguistic tree, is one of the oldest languages still spoken today. While Latvian is the official language of the Latvian State, outside of Latvia the language is relegated to the marginalized diaspora communities around the world and is rarely spoken outside of this context. The addition of English-language subtitles to Latvian films is a relatively recent phenomenon, appearing in select work since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the growth of transnational artistic collaboration.

Cultural and political obstacles also help explain why film scholars outside of Latvia have been unable to devote much academic attention to this national film culture. The development of cinema in Latvia coincided with the birth of a sovereign nation, and one may see the young art form and the new political entity evolving concurrently during this period. The brief era of independence lasting approximately two decades did not provide enough time to build a solid national cinema and to popularize it within Latvia and abroad. As World War II destroyed the independent country, the emerging national cinema was also obliterated by foreign occupation and warfare. One may now only speculate about what kind of international recognition Latvian filmmakers might have received if the country had been able to maintain its sovereignty.\(^{50}\) The Communist regime fundamentally rebuilt the industry over the

\(^{50}\) Here, one may look to the situation of Latvian painters. Having founded a tradition of painting and sculpture before the advent of cinema, Latvian Modernist painters and sculptors were beginning to attract critical attention in Paris during the interwar period, gaining the admiration of such artists as Amédée Ozenfant. See Amédée Ozenfant, “Austrumu Ainavu Portretists [Eastern Landscape Portrait-Painter],” Senatne un Maksla (No. 2, 1940), reprinted in Cela Zimes (No. 58, 1976), 209-212.
next decades, and the advent of the Cold War guaranteed that Latvian films, like the works created by many other artists living in the Soviet Union, were infrequently screened outside of the U.S.S.R. Meanwhile, within Latvia, Soviet censors would repress any writing about a Latvian national cinema, deeming it subversive and counter to international Communist beliefs. Thus, the physical inaccessibility of Latvian films contributes to the lack of scholarly writing about Latvian cinema outside of Latvia, while the strict censorship and ideological repression within Latvia prevented local academics from critically analyzing the works that formed the basis of a national cinema.

Seventeen years after the regaining of independence, Latvia and the other Baltic States are receiving increased attention in Europe and across the globe. Their growing economies and developing political currency are generating a new awareness of this region. A fresh interest in Latvian filmmakers as the voices of their society is appearing, and this study participates in the emerging academic discourse on East European cinemas. This study wishes to launch a dialogue in academia about a certain facet of a national cinema that has been absent in film studies. Through this study’s analysis, I aspire to generate a fresh discussion on Latvian cinema, and to inspire new interest in this nation’s film industry, so that the void of serious scholarship on this topic may begin to be filled.

Juris Podnieks

Within the realm of Latvian documentary filmmaking, one figure from recent years shines as a star of the genre. Juris Podnieks (1950-1992) and his films hold a
privileged place in Latvian culture and history. His breakthrough feature *Vai viegli but jaunam?* [Is it Easy to be Young?, 1986] heralded the advent of a new era for Latvian and Soviet documentary filmmaking with the implementation of Communist leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost plan in the Soviet Union. While censorship and repression still proved alive and well during this time of great social change, Podnieks took full advantage of the new Communist policy of openness and employed *Vai viegli but jaunam?* as a vehicle for exploring the state of youth culture under a repressive regime, offering a critique of the ruling Communist party. Podnieks’s film caused a sensation, earning the state much money through box office revenues both in Latvia and abroad. Audiences lined up for blocks to view *Vai viegli but jaunam?*, which addressed such taboo Soviet subjects as the war in Afghanistan and its physically and emotionally crippling effects on the young Latvian veterans of this campaign. The film also won an award from the International Documentary Association in 1987.

Born in Riga on December 5, 1950, Podnieks was a member of a well-known Latvian family. His father, Boriss Podnieks, was a respected radio announcer and the narrator for many Latvian documentaries (such as *Krasts* [The Shore], *Gada reportaza* [The Year’s Report], *Muzs* [Life], *Apcirkni* [Grain Bins], and *Sala maize*

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51 For example, although *Vai viegli but jaunam?* was chosen to be screened in France as part of the Cannes Film Festival in the spring of 1987, Podnieks himself was not allowed to accompany the film. Soviet officials claimed that, despite the great profits generated by Podnieks’ work, the state lacked sufficient funds to pay for his travel. For more on this episode, see Egle, 67-68.

52 For more on the reception of *Vai viegli but jaunam?* in Latvia, see Egle, 64-68 and below, pages 95-97.
[The Bread of Frost]). He was also the voice of many popular kinozurnali. Because his father had been employed by the Riga Film Studio since 1953, Juris most likely spent much of his childhood at his father’s workplace, gaining an early exposure to Latvian cinema. Juris himself began working at the Film Studio when he was 17, assuming the position of a primary cinematographer/cameraman in 1972 at the age of 22. At the Riga Film Studio, he had the opportunity to work with and learn from many of the Latvian filmmakers who had shaped the Riga School of Poetic Documentary, and their influence would both inform Podnieks’s future work and inspire him to develop his own cinematic style. During this period, Podnieks also pursued an education, and, in 1975, he graduated from the VGIK (the State Cinema Institute) in Moscow, receiving a degree in Cinematography.

Armed with the knowledge gained from both his formal training and his employment experience at the Riga Film Studio, Podnieks built a reputation as an exceptional cinematographer. Between 1973 and 1986, he was the cinematographer for 33 films, including 6 of his own that he directed. Beginning as the cinematographer for the multiple issues of the film magazine Padomju Latvija, Podnieks started working with filmmaker Hercs Franks in 1974, and served as the cinematographer for Franks’ 1975 documentary feature Aizliegta zona [The Forbidden Zone]. Their successful partnership not only produced a notable film about a Soviet prison for adolescent male criminal offenders, but also led to their collaboration on Franks’s influential documentary short Vecaks par desmit minutem [Ten Minutes Older, 1978]. Franks’s concept to create a film that captures the entire range of human emotion in one long take and Podnieks’s idea on how to realize
Franks’s vision resulted in a classic documentary where a ten minute long take studies in close-up the facial expressions of several children (and one boy in particular) as they watch a children’s play. This remarkable documentary, described as “a world, which can be read on the features of a human face,” not only received much contemporary acclaim, but also continues to affect cinematic practice decades after its release.

While his fame as a cinematographer was growing, Podnieks directed his first film (in 1977), the film-magazine Padomju Latvija issue Nr. 3, nicknamed “Supulis” [“Cradle”]. This short documentary won a prize at the Leipzig Film Festival, and Podnieks followed up the film by directing more issues of Padomju Latvija. He made his first non-film-magazine documentary, Brali Kokari [The Brothers Kokari] in 1978, and soon created four additional film-magazine issues and two more short documentaries in the period between 1977 and 1981. All of Podnieks’s film-magazines and short documentaries were screened before fiction films in cinemas across Latvia. In 1981 and 1982, while gathering material for a film he wanted to


54 For more information on Aizliegta zona, Vecaks par desmit minutom, and Franks career in general, see J. Civjans, 296-305; Barnouw, 331; Film News from Latvia (Special Issue, Film by Herz Frank, Flashback, 2002), 5-19; and Klockins, 170-175.

55 The film’s official title is Padomju Latvija, Nr. 3, and nowhere in the film does the title Supulis appear. However, very few people refer to this film by its official title, choosing instead to call it Supulis because of the film’s subject – an exploration of why Latvia in 1977 had one of the lowest birthrates in the world. For more on Supulis, see below, Chapter 2.
make about the Latvian Riflemen war songs, Podnieks was moved by the aging war veterans that he met, and decided to devote his first feature-length documentary *Strelnieku zvaigznajs [The Constellation of the Riflemen, 1982]* to their stories. This film, screened in cinemas as the main feature, offered portraits of men whose lives had been transformed by the choices that they made during World War I, eliciting a strong emotional response from viewers and solidifying Podnieks’s fame in Latvia.

Between 1982 and 1986, Podnieks continued creating both film magazines and documentary shorts, including the critically successful film *Vel Sizifs akmeni [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, 1985]*. This documentary, which portrays three Latvian sculptors at the mid-point of their careers, offered insight into the lives of Latvian artists struggling to negotiate between the demands of a Communist regime and their own needs for creative expression. Film historian Anita Uzulniece describes the significance of the film: “[This work] surprises one with the heroes’ unabashed self-analysis, with […] the triumvirate of prominent sculptors’ readiness to speak openly.”56 *Vel Sizifs akmeni* foreshadows *Vai viegli but jaunam?*, featuring footage that reflects many aspects of the frankness that characterized the burgeoning glasnost cinema.

*Vel Sizifs akmeni* received considerable accolades and attention, winning an award at the “Young Voices” Film Festival in Kiev, as well as the Latvian “Lielais

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Kristaps” prize in 1985. Arte Dumpe, one of the sculptors featured in the documentary, recounts the film’s impact in Latvia:

The audience members received the film with applause […]. The artist Ilmars Blumbergs said that, he hadn’t seen (for a long time, if ever) anything so powerful. Juris Podnieks’s film about three sculptors Vel Sizifs akmeni received the Big Christopher – Arnolds [Plaudis, the co-screenwriter of the film and primary interviewer] walked around proud, while Juris was happy.

Podnieks’s concern for the subjective viewpoints and feelings of his interviewees, already demonstrated in The Constellation of the Riflemen, became more evident in Vel Sizifs akmeni. Podnieks’s ability to depict his film’s protagonists’s perspectives and emotions led the film historian Anita Uzulniece to describe the director “as a sensitive seismograph, that has perceived other artists’ reflections, doubts.”

Podnieks’s next project, Vai viegli but jaunam?, would propel him into the spotlight in the arena of international documentary, and would mark the beginning of his mature works. The film follows a group of young adults for a little over a year, chronicling the challenges they face in their lives. Beginning with footage from a rock concert in Ogre (after which a train had been vandalized by some of the teenage

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57 The Lielais Kristaps, or “Big Christopher” awards are the Latvian equivalent to the Oscars in the United States.


59 “[…] ka jutigs seismografs, kas saklausijis citu makslinieku pardomas, saubas.” My translation. Uzulniece, 56.
Podnieks’s camera captures the sentencing of the handful of boys who become scapegoats for the Soviet officials. He also interviews teenagers who are aspiring filmmakers, an adolescent who works in a morgue, a group of Riga’s punks, and young veterans of the war in Afghanistan, among others. The film creates portraits of Soviet youth that openly communicate the bleakness of a life under Communism, and depict the emotions of the young adults struggling to find hope where none seems possible.

*Vai viegli but jaunam?* surprised spectators in the U.S.S.R., with cinema audiences stunned by the frankness of the interviews featured in the film. Film critic Edgars Mucenieks expounds on the importance of the feature-length documentary:

> A work like this about youth has not yet been created. Moreover, the high level of frankness that the filmmakers knew how to obtain from their protagonists during their conversations and the courage to explore painful questions which, until now, have been kept silent because people didn’t want or know how to fathom them – these things were surprising. [...] As the youth is the mirror to every society, so this film is the mirror of our lives in the future dimension.

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60 Some audiences were literally speechless after screenings. One striking example is related by film critic Lev Anninski, who describes the spectators’ reaction at a preview screening of the film in Moscow at the Kurchatov Cine-Club, after they were informed that the film had cleared the Soviet censors: “The audience members then truly froze in silence. [...] then it suddenly hit me: we didn’t even know what to say. [...] we were quiet, we were shocked and disoriented.” [“Tad gan skatitāji patiesi saspringa klusuma. [...] Es peks ni, gluzi ka zibsni, aptveru: mes tacu nemaz nezinam, ko lai saka. [...] Mes, sava apmulsuma soketi, klusejam”]. My translation. Levs Anninskis, “Vai viegli but pieaugusam?,” *Kino*, n. 4 (1987), 7.

Podnieks’s film serves as a landmark in glasnost cinema, as well as in the history of Latvian documentary filmmaking. Podnieks’s work offers an example of what film scholars Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky call “expressionistic cinema verité,” a style that Podnieks established and which influenced many new documentary filmmakers.62

With the success of *Vai viegli but jaunam?*, Podnieks embarked on a successful career as the most openly political contemporary Latvian documentary filmmaker. Podnieks believed in the ability of cinema to reveal a new world only accessible through his camera, and his passion for documenting the realities of existence under Communism took him and his collaborators and film crew directly into harm’s way.63 Podnieks and his camera operators were the last people to film the interior of the fourth reactor at the Chernobyl plant following the nuclear disaster (soon after filming, the reactor was filled and encased in concrete).64 They also traveled to Armenia and to Sumgait to document the genocide of the Karabakh committed there by Azerbaijani gangs, as well as to Uzbekistan to chronicle the

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62 Horton and Brashinsky, 75.

63 Podnieks once said: “Nav neka objektiva. Objektīvs ir tikai attels – kadr” [“There is nothing objective. The only thing that is objective is the image – the frame,” quoted in *Triju Zvaigžnu Atspidums: Atminas par Andri Slapinu, Gvido Zvaigzni, Juri Podnieku*, Anita Mellepe, ed. (Talsis: Liktenstasti Gramatu Apgads, 1994), 420]. Podnieks’ remark echoes Jean-Luc Godard’s famous statement in his 1963 work *Le Petit soldat* that “Film is truth 24 frames a second.” Podnieks’ appreciation of Godard’s philosophical approach to filmmaking would later be reciprocated when Godard participated in a film project dedicated to Podnieks (see page 39).

64 The footage of the reactor is featured in Podnieks’ film *Red Hot*, the first program in his 1989 *Soviets* documentary series that was broadcast by the BBC.
traditional abuse of Islamic women who are deemed impure, and to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) to interview Russian veterans who had fought and suffered in the war with Afghanistan.

Podnieks and his cameramen, Gvido Zvaigzne and Andris Slapins, were in Riga during the winter of 1991 to capture on film the growing protests by Latvians demanding the country’s independence. While shooting footage of the clashes between protesters and the Soviet Union Special Forces (the OMON or Black Berets), Zvaigzne and Slapins were shot by the officers, with Slapins dying on the streets within minutes and Zvaigzne passing away a few weeks later in the hospital. Podnieks and his crew were so dedicated to recording reality that Slapins demanded that Podnieks take the camera and film his death, an episode which Podnieks included in his 1991 documentary *Pecvards [Postscript]*, released as an epilogue to his 1990 film *Krustceils* [literally translated as *Crossroad*, but released in the U.K. as *Homeland* and in the United States as *A Baltic Requiem*]. As well as being screened in Latvian cinemas with short documentaries, these films from Podnieks’s mature period also were shown on television stations in Latvia (and across the U.S.S.R., in the case of *Soviets*).

Podnieks’s depictions of life under Communism won him recognition in Europe and many international awards, including the Prix Italia (1990), the FIPRESCI prize at the Cannes Film Festival (1987), and an award at the International New York TV and Video Festival (1991). His works won him the “Lielais Kristaps” award in Latvia for the best documentary feature length film four times, and he became the first Latvian filmmaker during the Communist rule to collaborate with
non-Soviet filmmakers and production companies when he partnered with Britain’s Central Television production company to create his 1989 film series Soviets. After Podnieks’s accidental death by drowning in 1992, his obituary was featured in the prominent film periodical Sight & Sound.\(^{65}\) Podnieks’s creativity has even inspired such filmmakers as Jean-Luc Godard, Bernardo Bertolucci, Wim Wenders, and Werner Herzog. These famous film artists, among others, contributed works to the 2002 compilation of films Ten Minutes Older, a collection of short works that is dedicated to Podnieks, as well as to his fellow Latvian documentary filmmaker Hercs Franks and to cinema icon Chris Marker. The short films, all created by drawing from the Franks/Podnieks 1978 collaboration Vecaks par desmit minutem for the core idea, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival to an audience of 6,000 people.\(^{66}\)

Surprisingly, given Podnieks’s significance, no thorough critical assessment of his films exists. No one has yet written a book-length work analyzing Podnieks’s documentaries. Many of the articles on Podnieks in English, French, German, Hungarian, Swedish, Czech, and Russian that one finds are obituaries. Even in Latvian, one most often locates written material primarily intended for a popular audience, such as the collection of memories about and interviews with Podnieks and


his deceased cameramen, *Triju zvaigznu atspidums: Atminas par Andri Slapinu*,
*Gvido Zvaigzni, Juri Podnieku [The Reflections of Three Stars: Memories about Andris Slapins, Gvido Zvaigzne, Juris Podnieks]*.

The literature on Podnieks shares a similar fate with literature on Latvian cinema in general. In Latvian, there currently is no single work in existence that critically analyzes all of Podnieks’s films. Abbreviated discussions of Podnieks’s films appear in *Padomju Latvijas Kinomaksla*, as well as in articles published in *Latvija Sodien, Laiks, Diena, Neatkariga Latvija, Kino, Maksla*, and *Literatura un Maksla*. He is also listed in the *Kinoskatitaja rokasgramata*. Meanwhile, in the literature on Podnieks and his oeuvre that is written in other languages, one finds mostly obituaries, as mentioned above. However, an occasional interview, a short film review, or a note on Podnieks in a larger article focused on a broader topic, e.g. a film festival, appear in journals such as *Positif, La Revue du cinéma, Medien + Erziehung: MERZ, Cineforum, Cineaste, Wide Angle, Sight and Sound*, and *Film Comment*. Podnieks also appears in reference books, such as the previously discussed *BFI Companion*, as well as in the *Encyclopedia of European Cinema*. No extensive academic work on Podnieks has been done in any language, and this study intends to begin to fill this void in film scholarship. By examining Podnieks’s documentaries, I seek to stimulate a new academic discussion and appreciation of such an important filmmaker. I concomitantly wish to initiate serious consideration of Latvian film history, specifically Latvian documentary history, in the sphere of cinema studies.
Podnieks’s Themes and Their Contexts

My assessment of Podnieks’s documentaries will entail readings of each of his films individually, as well as the identification and exploration of the main subjects and important themes of his oeuvre. Common topics that emerge in Podnieks’s work include the nature of nationalism, the relationship between art and politics, the quest for spirituality, the complexities of artistic expression, and the intricacies and vitality of youth culture under repressive regimes. All of these concerns reflect Podnieks’s preoccupation with the artificial division between private problems and public concerns in the Soviet Union. For Podnieks, personal hardships reflect the greater faults of the Communist government. Whether focusing on one of these issues or investigating various combinations of them, Podnieks addresses these topics in his films in a manner that critiques Communism.

Audiences in many nations, particularly in the countries under Communist rule, responded positively to Podnieks’s documentaries. Vai viegli but jaunam? premiered in 1986, the year after Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union. With Gorbachev’s ascension to power came an extensive reorganization of the Communist Party hierarchy, not only in Moscow and in the satellite states, but also in the Soviet Republics, including Latvia.

Along with the introduction of new, progressive personnel, Gorbachev instituted three key reforms: perestroika (the reorganization of the economy from a centrally based network to one which allowed more local and regional control), glasnost (a policy of openness that encouraged frank identification of problems and unguarded discussion of their resolutions), and demokratizaatsia (the promotion of
the political participation of everyday people instead of the privileged groups who had traditionally benefited from party connections). Historian Andrejs Plakans recounts the widespread effects of Gorbachev’s new policies:

> In Latvia, these urgings from the Kremlin leadership, combined with the leadership changes in the republic itself, reduced long-standing fears about outspokenness even among those who did not see themselves as dissidents. […] Seen from above, in Moscow, Gorbachev’s reform policies, it was thought, would produce change guided and channeled by the party and governmental institutions, resulting in an improved socialism in a stronger USSR. Seen from below in Latvia, however, the reform policies appeared to sanction challenges to those aspects of life about which resentments had been building for a long time. […] Whereas from Moscow’s vantage point, it was a perversion of glasnost and perestroika to cast reform initiatives in national terms, to Latvian activists the connection between system reform and the unmet needs of the Latvian tauta [people] seemed natural and logical.67

Gorbachev underestimated the far-reaching consequences of his restructuring, and by 1987, protests by nationalists in Latvia (among many other Soviet republics) gained momentum.

1988 witnessed the continuation of political demonstrations in Latvia and elsewhere, and the voices of dissent rapidly formed new political organizations, including the Popular Front and the Latvian National Independence Movement. The demands for sovereignty escalated in 1989, with the Popular Fronts of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia uniting approximately two million people on August 23rd to form a human chain extending from Vilnius to Tallinn. This nonviolent protest attracted the interest of western media, whose attention would continue to be focused on Eastern Europe. Hungary declared itself a multi-party democracy on October 18th,

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67 Plakans, 168-170.
while the Berlin Wall opened on November 9\textsuperscript{th}, and the Bulgarians, Czechs, and Romanians all deposed their communist governments during that same fall.

In 1990, tensions intensified as the demands for an independent Latvia increased and negotiations with Gorbachev continued to lead to an impasse. The Soviet leader began retracting his previous reforms in an effort to appease his hard-line critics. On January 2, 1991, the OMON entered Riga and captured the press building, halting all print media. Over half of a million Latvians responded by filling the streets of Riga to create makeshift barricades in order to protect important public buildings. Periodic clashes with the Black Berets resulted in death and injury, particularly on January 20\textsuperscript{th} when the OMON stormed the Ministry of Internal Affairs buildings and four civilians were killed and ten injured (cameramen Zvaigzne and Slapins were among the casualties).

The Black Berets continued their acts of Soviet-sanctioned terrorism throughout the spring, but their efforts only strengthened the resolve of the inhabitants of Latvia to continue pressing for independence. On August 19\textsuperscript{th}, the coup in Moscow placed Gennadii Yanaev as the acting president of the U.S.S.R., while Soviet tanks rolled into and surrounded Riga. Yet, as news arrived of the coup’s failure, Latvian legislators declared the country’s official independence from the Soviet Union on August 21\textsuperscript{st}. On August 24\textsuperscript{th}, Boris Yeltsin, then leader of the Russian Federation, recognized Latvia’s sovereignty, with thirty countries following
suit within a week. Less than a year later, Podnieks would drown in Lake Zvirgzdi, just two months before the first anniversary of Latvia’s reestablishment of self-government.

Podnieks’s films portray the political and cultural conflicts in the Soviet Union, with Podnieks creating his documentaries during the glasnost era and during the Communist Empire’s collapse. Podnieks and his crew recorded these events over a concentrated period, emphasizing the affect-laden experiences of the people participating in these incidents. His work thus functions as an expression of this period of transition and as a record of societies in flux, offering audiences across the world insight into a turbulent and significant historical moment. In order to appreciate the meaning of Podnieks’s films, one must understand the contemporary socio-political climate in Latvia and in the U.S.S.R. To that end, this study strives to incorporate descriptions of the historical contexts of Podnieks’s films in order to facilitate a thorough comprehension of the cultural significance of the director’s oeuvre.

**Methodology**

I will dedicate the following two chapters to an examination of each of Podnieks’s films, the first chapter focusing on the director’s early works (1977-1985) while the second chapter considers the documentaries from his mature period (1986-1992). I will investigate each film’s presentation of its subject matter and the cinematic techniques (such as the use of close ups) employed by Podnieks in order to illustrate his topics. I also intend to discuss the popular and critical reception of his

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68 For more information on these political events, see Plakans, 167-183.
work whenever possible. Throughout the next two chapters, I plan on building on the themes and techniques favored by the filmmaker to demonstrate the overarching concerns that preoccupied Podnieks during his career. In other words, I will examine how Podnieks explored the subversive expression of nationalism within a Soviet regime, conceptions about art and politics, and how Podnieks presented his views about the nature of public and private realms in Communist societies.

Since my objectives include chronicling a part of Latvian documentary film history and performing readings of Podnieks’s documentaries, I will approach my topic employing the historical and theoretical frameworks established by Eric Barnouw in his work *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, and by Bill Nichols in his many works on documentary (including *Introduction to Documentary*, *Representing Reality*, and *Ideology and the Image*). Barnouw narrates the evolution of the documentary genre through the identification of thirteen categories of documentary filmmaker, each reflecting a different philosophy of the form and function of the non-fiction film. Meanwhile, Nichols approaches documentaries by articulating the major theoretical issues concerning the genre. His work addresses such topics as ethics, rhetorical strategies, and the different modes of documentary filmmaking. Using Barnouw’s and Nichols’ concepts as tools, my study will draw from their definitions of documentary filmmaking in order to allow for a greater historical understanding of Podnieks’s oeuvre. Barnouw’s and Nichols’ conceptualizations of the documentary will allow me to situate Podnieks’s films within their historical and cultural contexts.
One challenge faced by cinema scholars is the accessibility of Podnieks’s oeuvre. For example, one may obtain only two of Podnieks’s documentaries in the United States: *Vai viegli but jaunam?* and *Mes?*. A greater obstacle that most academics must tackle, however, is the language barrier. Only five of the eighteen documentaries that Podnieks’s directed (*Imperijas gals*, *Krustcels*, *Mes?*, *Pecvards*, and *Vai viegli but jaunam?*) feature subtitles in English or a synchronous English-language dub on the soundtrack. The dominant language employed in the remainder of Podnieks’s documentaries is Latvian, an uncommon language.

In light of these difficulties, my study seeks to function as a bridge between Podnieks’s Eastern European films and cinema studies. Spending nine months in Riga allowed me to view all of Podnieks’s non-industrial films, stored at the Latvian National Audio-Visual Archive and at the Juris Podnieks Studio. As a fluent speaker of Latvian, I offer translations of much dialogue from Podnieks’s unsubtitled films, giving readers a better grasp of the subject matter of the director’s works. I have also ‘translated’ specific Latvian cultural concepts into more comprehensible terms. In order to gain a deeper understanding of Podnieks’s works, one must be aware of the basics of Latvian society. Whenever necessary, I offer readers the essential Latvian cultural and historical knowledge needed in order to access some of the meanings of Podnieks’s documentaries. Literary references, in particular, play an important role in Podnieks’s films, and I have striven to explain as many of the filmmaker’s allusions as possible.

Another key to appreciating Podnieks’s cinematic contribution rests with a familiarity of Soviet cinema history and its reception. For modern viewers in the
United States, Podnieks’s films, as well as much of glasnost cinema in general, may appear unremarkable, their formal techniques now commonplace and their subject matter banal. For example, film scholars Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky observe: “Today *Is It Easy to Be Young?* would scarcely be seen as such a courageous and ultimately truthful film, since the criteria of fearlessness and openness have advanced so much during glasnost.”\(^\text{69}\) Yet, one misses much of the significance of Podnieks’s oeuvre if it is measured by present standards. One may even argue that these techniques appear so typical now because Podnieks helped to establish their use in Soviet cinema during the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s.

While a thorough examination of all of glasnost cinema and its reception is beyond the scope of this study, it is worthwhile to note the shifting role of the documentary in the Soviet Union in the 1980s.\(^\text{70}\) Horton and Brashinsky explain:

> Soviet documentaries in the past followed, with rare exceptions, the tradition of the Nazi documentary championed by Leni Riefenstahl: they created myths that showed how the rulers wanted the times to appear. [...] The documentary became and stayed the major tool of Communist propaganda in art. Under glasnost, a switch as crucial as the change from lies to a search for the truth has been made: from a documentary statement to a documentary question. As opposed to a propagandistic exclamation mark, the Soviet documentary of the

\(^{69}\) Horton and Brashinsky, 143.

anxious era of perestroika might be symbolized by a huge question mark.\textsuperscript{71}

Horton and Brashinsky also characterize glasnost documentaries as possessing “an instant responsiveness,” “an investigative spirit and social activism,” and “an openness of discourse” which only became possible “after rejecting the past tradition shared by the documentary and the mass media under Stalin and Brezhnev – the tradition of public lies.”\textsuperscript{72} In other words, a close up of an everyday person candidly discussing her concerns about the Chernobyl disaster may seem standard and unexceptional to today’s viewer in the United States, while the Soviet spectator in 1987 would have experienced this image as an unveiling of a taboo topic in a manner previously unheard of in the U.S.S.R. Keeping these specific historical and cultural aspects in mind and using such works on glasnost cinema as Horton and Brashinsky’s \textit{The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition} as reference points, this study calls attention to the formal and thematic characteristics of Podnieks’s documentaries that drew the interest of audiences in Latvia and in the Soviet Union.

The last chapter will serve as a conclusion where I will examine Podnieks’s lasting influence on Latvian documentary filmmaking and Latvian culture, as well as the current state of Latvian cinema. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a major reconfiguration of the Latvian film industry (as it did elsewhere in Eastern Europe), since the state funding (the major source of financial support) available to filmmakers dwindled and an increasing number of artists had to compete for a shrinking pool of

\textsuperscript{71} Horton and Brashinsky, 130.

\textsuperscript{72} Horton and Brashinsky, 129.
grants. And, while rising numbers of Latvian filmmakers are gaining more international recognition for their works, the neglect of these artists in academia and criticism persists, both in Eastern Europe and in the rest of the world. Latvian popular audiences, as well, no longer flock to movie theatres to see the latest Latvian documentary, as they once did during Podnieks’s time. My study will address these issues in an effort to better comprehend the challenges facing today’s Latvian documentary filmmakers.

Sixteen years after Podnieks’s death, his work continues to inform Latvian cinema, with his film production company Jura Podnieka Studija [Juris Podnieks Studio] regularly creating documentaries about social issues such as prostitution and the current ethnic conflicts between Latvians and Russians residing in Latvia. In particular, Podnieks’s former editor, Antra Cilinska, carries on Podnieks’s documentary style, and my study will examine how Cilinska’s latest work, *Vai citi...* [released in the U.K. as *Us and Them*, 2006] features many Podnieks-esque qualities. Her film serves as an example of how Podnieks’s legacy lives on long after his death.

Finally, this study is intended as an introduction to Podnieks’s work for academic audiences. By no means should it be considered the definitive or comprehensive analysis of this Latvian filmmaker’s documentaries. Much work remains to be done on Latvian cinema in general, and specifically on Podnieks’s films, including an investigation of the particular ways in which *Vai viegli but jaunam?* influenced subsequent glasnost features. My aim is to offer one possible way of interpreting Podnieks’s films, with the hope that this study will inspire new
academic interest in Podnieks and serve as a springboard for future research on his work.
CHAPTER 2

THE EARLY FILMS

As previously mentioned, Juris Podnieks began his career as a cinematographer, and helped to create some of the most influential films in Latvian cinema history, including *Vecaks par desmit minutem.*

Although Podnieks’ impact as a cinematographer is undeniable, the director of a film possessed the ultimate authority and responsibility of the final product in Latvia. Therefore, when examining Podnieks’ prolific career (he made eighteen films before he passed away), the focus of this study will be on the films that he directed. Also, given the significance of *Vai viegli but jaunam?* (1986) within Podnieks’ oeuvre specifically and glasnost documentary film history in general, I see this film as the turning point within Podnieks’ career. Because of this, I consider all of the films Podnieks made before *Vai viegli but jaunam?* as belonging to his early work, while I see *Vai viegli but jaunam?* as marking the beginning of his mature period.

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73 See above, pages 32-33, and 39.

74 In addition to the eighteen short and full-length documentaries that Podnieks directed, he also made five industrial shorts. For more information of these commercial films, please see below, pages 78-79.
Formally, the main traits that characterize Podnieks’s early film style include the frequent use of close ups, the employment of slow motion, and a movement away from a “voice of God” narration towards allowing the selected film subjects and arranged filmic images to speak instead. Podnieks’s utilization of close ups encourages audiences to literally and metaphorically become closer to the interviewees. Podnieks’s use of close ups emphasizes the subjective viewpoints of the people on screen. It also creates the effect of film spectators gaining special access to privileged knowledge, hidden truths, and previously concealed emotion. Podnieks wishes to visually communicate the internal, viewing documentary cinema as necessarily requiring “an immersion into human psychology, not only through the subject matter (as it has been up until [1982] ) but visually.” Podnieks’s attraction to close ups corresponds to his fascination with affect, a fact he reveals in one interview from 1990 where he states: “[…] I was perhaps more interested not in the factual side of an event […] but rather in the discovery of its emotional side.”

Podnieks’s visualizing of the internal through close ups achieved an affective response from contemporary Soviet audiences. While relying on close ups, especially during interviews, to manipulate audience emotions may appear clichéd and common practice to today’s spectators, one must consider the contemporary Soviet context of

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75 “[…] iedzīvinātas cilveka psihologija, nevis tikai sūsetiski (ka tas bijis lidz sim), bet vizualī.” My translation. Sarmite Elerte, “Filmas iecere un tas vizualais risinajums” (Literatura un Maksla, 1982.g. 17. decembris), 5.

Podnieks’s work. Film scholars Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky analyze the use of close ups of interviewees (so-called ‘talking heads’) in glasnost cinema, noting:

[…T]he controversial feature of the new form of Soviet documentary: its ‘talking heads’ are no less and sometimes more exciting artistically and informationally than any newsreels. This feature is controversial because, objectively, ‘talking heads’ pull the art of documentary away from formal experiments. Many Soviet filmmakers underestimate the power of ‘talking heads’ in their search for ‘artistic qualities.’ But in Russia, the authorities have been silencing the most interesting individuals in the country for so long that nothing is more helpful today than to listen to them.77

Given the glasnost context for Horton and Brashinsky’s remarks, Podnieks extensive reliance on close ups, particularly in his early, pre-glasnost works, assumes a greater political and artistic significance. For the viewers in the U.S.S.R. in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this technique was radical within the documentary situation, thus adding to the sensational quality and distinctiveness of Podnieks’s oeuvre.

Podnieks’s use of slow motion functions as one of the most striking characteristics of the director’s expressionistic style. The slowed motion in the frame draws attention to the visual track, pointing to the importance of what the director shows on screen. The employment of slow motion illustrates one of the major themes in Podnieks’s oeuvre: the privileging of the visual over the verbal track. This is not to say that audio component does not concern Podnieks – indeed, quite the opposite proves true. However, following in the tradition of the Riga School of Poetic

77 Horton and Brashinsky, 134.
Documentary, Podnieks relies on the images to communicate, with the audio track serving a secondary, supportive role and frequently enhancing the significance of what is being seen.

Podnieks’s evocation of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary through his preference for visually conveying meaning becomes crucial for the understanding of the subversive subtext of his documentaries. Members of the Riga School recognized that they needed to find a way to be able to both express themselves in their films and to have these films seen by the popular audience, the latter requiring the approval of Soviet censors. Their solution to this conundrum came in their emphasis on the visual over the audio track. They exploited framing and editing to generate images that could be read in multiple ways by the audience. In this manner, they created works that resisted Soviet hegemony while simultaneously gaining acceptance from the Communist authorities.

In his own work, Podnieks embraces the strategies developed by his cinematic predecessors, the director’s pre-glasnost oeuvre already featuring critiques of Communism and Soviet oppression. He also injects pro-Latvian, nationalistic sentiments in his films, cinematically capturing the tactical (in the de Certeau sense of the word) eruptions of the Latvian cultural heritage under the dominant Soviet system. One may see Podnieks’s cinema functioning in two ways: first, as depicting on celluloid the tactics employed by Latvians to disrupt Soviet control; and second, as offering its own tactical moments to challenge the authoritarian ideology. Furthermore, Podnieks, like his cinematic fathers, hides all of these transgressive messages in the subtexts of his film, superficially producing films that prove
agreeable to the Soviet censors. Yet, despite party approval, Podnieks’s subversive subtext remains accessible to Latvian spectators. One should note, however, that Podnieks’s criticism of Communism grows increasingly overt with the advent of glasnost.

It is important to emphasize here the problematic aspects of Podnieks’s subversive subtext in his early works. While the director subtly expresses his negative viewpoints of the Communist regime, he neglects to acknowledge the harmful characteristics of the nationalistic perspective that his films subtextually champion. Anthropologist Benedict Anderson, in his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, defines nationalism as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”78 In an effort to support a cinematically imagined nationalistic Latvian community united in their struggle against Communist oppression, Podnieks elides differences in class, gender, political and religious identities (among others) in favor of a homogenized vision of a cohesive Latvian public. Podnieks’s embracing of Latvian nationalism also perpetuates the artificial dichotomy between the Latvians (or “us”) and the Soviets (or “them”), without recognizing that, in actuality, the population in Latvia at the time defined itself along a spectrum of frequently overlapping categories (for example, Podnieks ignores the privileged Latvian *nomenklatura*, i.e., the elite who held positions of authority within society and who enjoyed particular benefits from their support of the Soviet regime). Thus,

Podnieks’s desire to encourage resistance to Soviet hegemony through Latvian nationalism prevents him from addressing the limitations of this approach.

The political project of Podnieks’s early works also encompasses the director’s repeated investigation of a subject central to his oeuvre: the relationship between the private and the public. The long tradition of debating the definitions of what is ‘public’ and what is ‘private’ spans many disciplines and engages multiple discourses, including those of the state and of space(s). While elaborating on the history of the contestations over ‘the public’ exceeds the range of this study, for the purposes of this project, the private is defined as concerns restricted to the individual, while the public pertains to issues that involve the community and the government. Podnieks views the Soviet regime as artificially separating the personal from the collective, and he uses his films as vehicles for exploring this false dichotomy in the U.S.S.R. in the late 1970s and early 1980s. All of the other themes in Podnieks’s films involve this examination of how the ruling authorities distinguish personal problems from larger social concerns. Already in the early documentaries, Podnieks constructs his films in order to encourage spectators to understand the artificiality and fallacy of the imagined binary between the particular and the general, between a person’s problem and the concern of a society. For Podnieks, what the Soviet establishment considers a private matter frequently merits public attention, since these issues often reflect the situation of the culture at large. In other words, Podnieks strives to demonstrate, for example, how the suffering of one Latvian soldier during World War I embodies the tragic fate of many Latvians during this era.
Meanwhile, Podnieks’s self-awareness of his place within Latvian cinematic history also appears in the self-reflexivity present in his work. Podnieks breaks the illusion of cinematic suture, and purposefully wants audience members to recognize that they are viewing a work of art with a viewpoint. Podnieks places himself, his crew, and his film equipment in his films intentionally to remind spectators of his role in the presentation of information on screen, and to demonstrate his philosophy of art emerging from a dialogue between the filmmaker and the film subjects. Only by the filmmaker’s acknowledged involvement in the work, gaining the trust of the interviewees so that they are more likely to share genuine emotion and encouraging spectators to see the filmmaker and his subjects as existing on equal terms, can Podnieks effectively communicate the meaning of his work. In this regard, Podnieks’s approach to filmmaking shares similarities with the cinéma vérité philosophy of French filmmaker Jean Rouch: “Rouch maintained that the presence of the camera made people act in ways truer to their nature than might otherwise be the case. Thus, he acknowledged the impact of the camera but, instead if considering it a liability, looked on it as a valuable catalytic agent, a revealer of inner truth.”

Thus, Podnieks, like Rouch, embraces self-reflexivity in cinema in order to visualize the subjective emotions of interviewees.

In addition to the aforementioned themes, Podnieks’s films explore the difficulties of self-expression in a repressive society, and investigate the problems of youth and of artistic articulation. Podnieks sees both young people and artists facing similar challenges in their quest to define their identities, to communicate with each other and with society as a whole, and to define their social roles. Both groups struggle within an authoritarian society, fighting to negotiate between the personal and the public.

Podnieks’s work is also characterized by the slow abandoning of an omniscient, abstract, and impersonal “voice of God” male narrator in favor of allowing the film subjects to share their experiences in their own words. Podnieks’s technique reflects a greater trait of glasnost cinema, as described by film scholars Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky: a “polyphony of voices, as opposed to the entirely monologic structure of the Brezhnev-era documentary.”80 They explain:

What the late Communist leaders were afraid of most – ordinary people recalling their extraordinary past – has swept over the glasnost documentary screen at last. In the new documentaries we see people who do not want to be manipulated any longer, people who want to speak. […]These] documentar[ies…] strongly reflec[t] glasnost by allowing people to speak for themselves according to Voltaire’s formula, assumed by glasnost: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”81

What makes Podnieks’s early films different from other contemporary Soviet documentaries is that they already experiment with this attribute of glasnost cinema years before Gorbachev assumed power in the U.S.S.R.

80 Horton and Brashinsky, 137.

81 Horton and Brashinsky, 137-141.
The following examination of Podnieks’s films will show how each
documentary features to varying degrees the aforementioned formal techniques and
subject matter favored by Podnieks. My aim is to draw attention to the cohesiveness
of the body of his work, while also allowing each film to retain its distinctiveness. I
have also included relevant information about the historical and cultural contexts of
Podnieks’s films whenever necessary.

Film Magazine Issues (kinozurnali)

Two years after graduating from the VGIK, Podnieks directed his first film, an
issue for the film magazine Padomju Latvija. Padomju Latvija’s 1977 issue Nr. 3,
nicknamed Supulis[The Cradle], addresses the demographic problems plaguing
Latvia at the end of the 1970s. During this period, Latvia experienced one of the
highest death rates and one of the lowest birth rates in the world, and the short film
seeks to understand why so few children are being born in the country.

Podnieks first short documentary, which was screened in East Berlin and won
a prize at the Leipzig Film Festival, serves as an introduction to Podnieks’s directorial
career. Compared to the film magazine issues created by his contemporaries,
Podnieks’ work is sophisticated and has a distinct authorial signature, a contrast to the
propagandistic and anonymous newsreels from this period. Film critic Galina Frolova
describes the short as “a powerfully expressive and thoughtful work,” while Abrams
Klockins states that the documentary is “one of the past year’s most serious
achievements.”

82 “…[…] specigu un telainibas un domas piesatinatu darbu.” My translation. Galina
Frolova, “No tas upes, par Faktu ko sauc” (Kino, Nr. 8, August 1977), 7. “[…] viens
During the approximately ten minute long film, Podnieks demonstrates many of the techniques and topical interests that he will pursue in his subsequent work.

The most obvious and striking image Podnieks employs in *Supulis* is the wagon wheel. The wheel repeatedly appears throughout the documentary, and it is present at both the beginning and the ending of the film. During the opening sequence, the wheel is mentioned verbally in the narrator’s recitation of the traditionally Latvian lullaby as the thing the men of the family should put in trees to welcome storks to the house. According to custom, these birds represent fertility and childbirth, and are believed to bring a blessing to the house where they nest.83 With the shots of a stork’s nest, this lullaby verbally creates a link between the wheel and the stork, establishing the wheel as a sign of fecundity.

As the wheel recurs, Podnieks exploits the meanings of the Latvian word for wheel. In the plural form, ‘rati’ may signify both wagon wheel and a baby carriage or stroller. This particular link becomes even more explicit through Podnieks’ editing choices. At the beginning of the film, immediately following the passage at the 108 year-old Anna Davidsone’s home (a passage where Davidsona laments how she raised nine children, but her offspring have not reproduced at the same rate) and before the economist-demographer is shown on screen, Podnieks offers a brief montage sequence featuring infants in their cribs at a hospital, a long shot of piles of

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83 Along with the wheel, the stork as an embodiment of fertility will appear again in the film.
Podnieks’ editing choices confirm a link between babies, strollers, and wheels.

Podnieks’s attention to editing and to the relationship between image and sound communicates affect, emphasizing the emotional quality of a passage. During the sequence featuring gynecologist Helena Ozolina, Podnieks cuts from a close up of the doctor speaking to a close up of the winter landscape as seen from a window. At this moment, the soundtrack features Ozolina explaining that terminating first pregnancies frequently leads to infertility. While the audio track speaks of sterility, Podnieks presents a vision of barrenness and death, suggested by the snowy winter landscape. He immediately reinforces this association by showing a medium shot of a woman looking out at this scene from a window, followed by a close up that zooms back into a long shot of snow-covered wagon wheels. Meanwhile, Ozolina’s voice advises women who decide to have abortions to consider that they may be contributing to the extinction of the Latvian people.

Once again, the verbal discussion of death and the end of an ethnic group translates on screen as an image of frozen wheels enveloped in snow. Podnieks arranges the visual and the audio so that they function together to strengthen the meaning of each other: the verbal track emphasizes the gravity of the subject matter and encourages viewers to experience the image of the frozen wheels and winter landscape with sadness, while the visual track adds immediacy and concrete reality to potentially abstract clinical statistics. While the alignment of death and winter may seem banal to today’s spectators, this endeavor to create a poetic visual metaphor was remarkable for a Soviet film-magazine in 1977. Contemporary Latvian spectators
would have been shocked to have a film from a bi-weekly periodical documentary series strive to communicate information in an artistic fashion, instead of delivering the standard didactic Communist propaganda.

Another example of Podnieks’s attention to the interplay between audio and visual tracks appears towards the end of the film. As the Laivinieki family is toasting the New Year, Podnieks cuts to a medium shot of melted metal being poured in a modern factory, while the soundtrack presents the narrator talking about an old Latvian tradition of pouring small amounts of melted tin into a bucket of cold water on New Year’s Eve in order to foresee luck in the coming year. The verbal expresses the traditional while the visual displays the modern. The juxtaposition of these two tracks offers viewers a contrast between the past and the present, one that may suggest to contemporary spectators that the old beliefs of the Latvian culture can still survive in a modern industrial society.

Podnieks’s documentary also tactically expresses a politically transgressive viewpoint. Podnieks chooses to cast the low Latvian birthrate in subtle nationalistic terms, generating a subversive critique of Communism. Throughout the short documentary, Podnieks includes interviews with various authorities (an economist-demographer, a gynecologist, a pediatrician), all of whom frame the problem of the low birthrate as a threat to the Latvian people, not to a strong, international Communist society. The demographer-economist reminds spectators that childrearing is not only in the interests of the family but also in the interests of all society. The gynecologist warns women who have abortions to consider that their actions may be contributing to the extinction of the (implicitly Latvian) people. The pediatrician
blames the low birth rate on contemporary society’s view of woman as worker and not as mother. This moment in *Supulis* illustrates a key problem with Podnieks’s espousal of Latvian nationalism: a patriarchal view of gender roles. The Soviet woman becomes the scapegoat for the demographic problems because of her liberal attitudes towards abortion and her proletarian role in society. This implies that the Latvian woman who embraces an identity as “mother” (at the expense of her other identities) should be extolled for her support of the Latvian people.

Furthermore, Podnieks creates a binary opposition between the Latvian and the Soviet repeatedly throughout the documentary. He aligns ‘the Latvian’ with traditional lullabies, customary beliefs, folk symbols like the stork, old grandmothers as emblems of the old Latvian farm culture, and with fertility. Podnieks associates a stable birthrate with a pre-Communist era in Latvia. Meanwhile, Podnieks chooses to visually symbolize ‘the Soviet’ by identifying it with the modern, the industrial, winter, and with bareness. Podnieks shapes his film so that the Latvian always appears in a positive light, as something that is under threat and must be saved. Podnieks shows the Soviet, on the other hand, as detrimental to the existence of Latvians. Perhaps the best visualization of Podnieks’s beliefs appears in the image of the snow-covered wagon wheel. Just as the wheel is buried under snow, the old Latvian culture is engulfed by the modern Soviet regime. By juxtaposing images of modern life in Soviet Latvia, such as shots of busy streets populated by citizens and cars, with the interviews of the various aforementioned experts on the low birthrate, Podnieks questions why such a purportedly beneficial and technologically progressive Soviet culture (i.e., the image of the U.S.S.R. furthered by
contemporary Communist propaganda) can not produce average proletariat couples that have the basic resources to raise enough children to stabilize the birth rate.

Podnieks answers the question posed at the beginning of the documentary by placing the blame for the low Latvian birthrate on the Communist regime. Through his editing choices and decisions to include interviews with specific authorities and with everyday people who voice dissatisfaction with their standard of living, Podnieks uses his documentary to argue that Soviet attitudes towards gender roles and the undesirable economic conditions of life under Communism dissuade Latvian women from having more children. The film demonstrates how many women living in a Soviet country would rather terminate their pregnancies (risking their own personal health) or leave their offspring to die than to raise them in the current Communist society by including an extended sequence where a nurse graphically relates her experience of finding an abandoned infant in the snow. Foreshadowing his future evaluation of the Soviet system during the glasnost era, Podnieks’s first film may be interpreted as a critical view of Communism’s detrimental effects on Latvian society.

Podnieks’s first documentary directly confronts the relationship between the public and the private. The director frames this short film in such a way that viewers cannot continue believing that the decision to conceive a child rests solely in the realm of personal decision. The seemingly private domain of the family assumes the importance of reviving and maintaining an entire culture. Contemporary critics noted this urgency to raise a public awareness of the low birth rate.
For example, Inga Jeruma observed: “[…Y]et this film magazine issue makes us look into ourselves deeper, to think about our attitude towards children and – towards this demographic problem, as well.”84

Podnieks’s Riga Film Studio colleague Juris Nogins maintained: “There is only the artist’s deeply painful thought about the nation’s [tautas] destinies, about the nation’s [tautas] future.”85 Nogins’s comments subtly identify Podnieks’s address of the nationalistic Latvian audience in the audience through the use of the Latvian word “tauta.”86 The term connotes strong nationalism, since it refers to a group of people who form a country or an ethnicity. Thus, Nogins’s choice to use “tauta” twice in his description of Supulis reflects Podnieks’s efforts to rally the Latvians into action, urging them to raise more children in order to resist Soviet hegemony.

After the success of Supulis, Podnieks went on to direct five additional film magazine issues: Padomju Latvija Nr. 10 (1977), Maksla Nr. 3 (1978), Padomju Latvija Nr. 23 (1979), Sporta apskats Nr. 1/2 (1981), and Maksla Nr. 2/3 (1983). Padomju Latvija Nr. 10 (1977), nicknamed “Balta sezona” [“In the White Season”], offers a portrait of the Latvian seaside resort Jurmala in the wintertime in 1977. The


86 The word “tauta” in Latvian has similar meaning as “volk” in German, and implies a group of people who form their own nation. For more information of the concept of “tauta,” see Plakans, 77, 84, 90-92, and 101.
film presents interviews with various inhabitants, ranging from everyday people walking on the beach to popular contemporary Russian bard Bulats Okudzava, with each Jurmala resident explaining why he or she enjoys this summer resort in the winter season. Spectators are shown an artists’ colony hard at work, a baking competition at a local restaurant, scenes from patients receiving treatments at the local health clinic Jaunkemeri, and interior and exterior shots of the fashionable “Juras Perle” [“The Sea Pearl’”] restaurant.

_Padomju Latvija_ Nr. 10 contribution rests in its treatment of the soundtrack. While the approximately ten minute long documentary begins with the standard male voice over dominating the soundtrack, Podnieks soon eliminates this “voice-of-God” entirely, leaving only seventies music to accompany the images. The most conspicuous feature of this documentary is that the majority of the film allows the visual track to communicate meaning on its own, without a didactic voiceover instructing viewers on how to understand the significance of the images. The period music functions to further emphasize the contemporaneous quality of the subjects displayed on screen, and to encourage viewers to focus on the montage featuring images of buildings and people before them. One of Podnieks’s colleagues, Juris Nogins, even describes this short documentary as a series of film topics “organically

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87 Podnieks’s attunement to contemporary music, especially to rock music, will reappear and play important roles in Podnieks’ more mature works, such as _Is It Easy To Be Young?_ (1986).

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united in the rhythmic montage [...]. This technique, where music functions to draw spectator attention to the visual, will become one of Podnieks’ common cinematic practices.

In addition to his particular treatment of the soundtrack, Podnieks also employs his associative editing technique in Padomju Latvija Nr. 10. One notable example appears near the end of the work, during the passage filmed at the Jaunkemeri clinic. Podnieks offers two close ups of a large excavator digging up dirt outside (perhaps breaking ground for a new clinic). Podnieks then cuts to a close up of a naked woman lying on a table in the health center. As the camera zooms back to a medium shot, spectators see that she is being covered in special mud for a therapeutic treatment. Podnieks’ montage choices encourage audiences to see links between the different jobs involving soil in Jurmala – building construction and medicinal mud therapy – and point to the growing development of the city as a curative resort. Podnieks’ editing choices suggest that there are so many people who seek therapy at the Jaunkemeri clinic that new buildings must be created in order to accommodate the demand. What Podnieks communicates here visually is later confirmed by the text, which states the large numbers of visitors who seek rest and relaxation in Jurmala every year.

Maksla Nr. 3 (1978) examines the work of several artists during the summer of 1978. Sculptors Andrejs Jansons and Karlis Jansons, poet Imants Ziedonis, composer Imants Kalnins, designer Mintauts Lacis, and theatre director Raimonds Kugrens all appear in the approximately ten minute documentary, along with art

students working in various locations and actors performing the Latvian play “Skroderdienas Silmacos” [“The Days of Tailors in Silmaci”] outdoors in the countryside. Podnieks employs a male voice-over, the artists speaking about their experiences in asynchronous sound, and music to comprise the aural register.

Maksla Nr. 3 is a pre-cursor to the later film Vel Sizifs Akmeni [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, 1985]. Podnieks’ abbreviated exploration of artistic labor in Latvia in Maksla Nr. 3 anticipates his later more complex investigation of the crisis of artistic production in a Soviet state. Frequent use of the artists’ voices allows these protagonists to express themselves in their own words, foreshadowing the glasnost documentary and a component of Podnieks’s mature film style.

Podnieks next film magazine issue, Padomju Latvija Nr. 23 (1979), also titled “Conservatorio,” is a portrait of the Jazeps Vitols Music Academy of Latvia on the occasion of the institution’s 60th anniversary. The combination of a male narrator and the voices of the Academy’s instructors and librarian shape the soundtrack, along with the diegetic music performed by the conservatory’s students.

Formally, Podnieks employs many close ups to depict the Academy’s students and faculty. Close shots of the artists’ hands and faces abound in the film, comprising approximately two thirds of the entire documentary. These close ups emphasize the two parts of the body that these musicians use the most in order to create their art, and generate the impression that spectators are gaining a subjective perspective of the artistry and pedagogy at the Academy. Podnieks privileges images rather than a didactic soundtrack.
This issue of *Padomju Latvija* may be read as containing a subversive pro-Latvian nationalist subtext. Podnieks frames the documentary with Jazeps Vitols’ famous 1899 choral work “Gaismas pils” [“Castle of Light”], using the beginning of the ballad to open the film and the end of the ballad to conclude. This choice is significant, given the cultural and political context of this choral work. Vitols’ set his music to the poem “Gaismas pils” which was written by Auseklis (1850-1879), an important Latvian poet, writer, and political activist. Auseklis was a key figure in the Latvian National Awakening movement in the 19th century, his work helping to disseminate the contemporary radical idea that Latvians possessed a culture worthy of preservation and celebration – a culture that could and should form the basis of an independent Latvian nation. Including a choral work involving the words of Auseklis indicates Podnieks’ desire to remind Latvian spectators of their forefathers’ struggle for sovereignty, as well as to encourage in contemporary Latvian viewers that same determination.

The text of “Gaismas pils,” accentuated by Vitols’s score, relates Auseklis’s invented fable of a Castle of Light, the people’s castle, which existed in ancient times when the Latvian tribes were free. Foreign forces invaded the land, killed Latvian heroes, and forced the Latvian people into slavery, with the Castle of Light consequently disappearing by sinking into an abyss (in certain respects similar to the Brigadoon legend) and the Latvian cultural heritage forced into dormancy. The poem continues by explaining that, if someone guessed the special word or name, the castle would rise up again into its former glory as the people’s castle. The climactic

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89 For more on the Latvian National Awakening movement, see Plakans, 89-100.
conclusion of the poem and of the choral work entails the Latvian sons surmising this sacred word, the men calling out for the light, and the light and the castle being resurrected. This text functions as a call to arms for the Latvian people to cast off the chains of their oppression and reclaim their sovereign nation. Podnieks’s deployment of this specific choral work by Vitols as the framing device for the documentary situates his film within a patriotic and subversive discourse recognizable by any Latvian spectator versed in their cultural tradition and history.

Inevitably, one wonders how this documentary could have cleared the Soviet censors. The answer lies in the theme of the poem being adapted by Latvian writer and politician Janis Rainis. He used this fable of the Castle of Light in his famous play “Fire and Night” [“Uguns un nakts”], adding specific characters and creating more dramatic tension. While Rainis is one of Latvia’s greatest writers who devoted his life to establishing an independent Latvian state, his Marxist political leanings made it easy for the Soviet establishment to appropriate him as an emblem of Communism. Thus, Podnieks would have pointed to the associations of “Gaismas pils” with Rainis, reassuring Soviet censors and allowing his work to be publicly screened.

Podnieks’s transgressive subtext also appears in the way the director portrays the conservatory faculty and students during the 60th anniversary year. Podnieks’s editing pattern of showing the seasoned professors instructing their young students, followed by photographs of the teachers in their own youth and another shot of the

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90 Given this context, it is not coincidental that “Gaismas pilis” is traditionally one of the last songs performed at the Latvian Song Festivals. For more information on the Song Festivals, see below, page 82.
faculty member today, reminds spectators that Vitols founded the Academy during Latvia’s status as an independent nation and that many of the current Academy professors were students during this era of political sovereignty. Furthermore, by likening the past (the professors’ photographs from their youth) with the future (the current Academy students), Podnieks offers a subtle, hopeful gesture that the contemporary pupils will carry on the legacy of the Latvian cultural heritage (in this case, in the form of music) imparted to them at the conservatory. The personal careers of the Academy’s students assume a greater significance in the context of the anti-Communist, nationalistic message that the Latvian counterpublic in the audience would appreciate. Also, this emphasis on the continuation of Latvian musical excellence throughout the generations testifies to the resilience of Latvians maintaining their art in the face of Soviet hegemony.

Podnieks created his next film magazine/newsreel issue in 1981. Sporta apskats, Nr. 1/2 serves as a reflection on the 1980 Olympic games held in Moscow, offering both color footage from the competition and black and white interviews with the participating athletes conducted during the winter of early 1981. Instead of offering a straightforward chronicling of the sporting events in Moscow, Podnieks chooses to create a documentary which functions as a meditation on self-discipline, sacrifice, the passage of time, missed opportunities, and on achieving goals while also subtly criticizing the Soviet Union.

Podnieks treats the summer Olympic games in Moscow not from a journalistic perspective but rather in an expressionistic style. The most obvious technique is the specific employment of color and black and white film. Typically, the ‘present’
appears in color footage in documentaries while black and white footage usually denotes the ‘past’. Yet, the opposite proves true in Sporta apskats. The action, excitement, meaning – in other words, the real life – exist only in the colorful memory, in the past, at the special event called the Summer Olympics. The ‘now’ pales in comparison to the dreams and hopes invested in the games, the current reality of daily life occurring in monochrome. Podnieks further underlines this visual dichotomy by filming the majority of the current black and white footage outdoors in the winter landscape, aligning the present with death or dormancy and the past with a multi-colored summer.

Podnieks’s expressionistic style in Sporta apskats also encompasses an awareness of the film as a construct. The opening credit sequence, featuring shots of Podnieks, Seleckis, Slapins, and other members of the film team engaged in their occupations, displays a self-reflexivity. By beginning the film with these visual introductions of the film crew, intercut with scenes from the Opening Ceremony at the Moscow Olympics, Podnieks emphasizes how both his film and the spectacle of the games in Moscow are carefully orchestrated productions. In other words, Podnieks insinuates here that the picture that the world saw of Moscow specifically and of the Soviet Union in general during the Olympics is not necessarily the reality of the Soviet existence. Moreover, boom microphones may be seen within the frame during countless interviews with the Olympic athletes and trainers, serving as another reminder to spectators that they are witnessing a constructed work (and not a spontaneous or ‘natural’ event). Podnieks was far too experienced a cinematographer
at this point in his early directorial career to allow for such ‘accidents’, suggesting
that the visual presence of film equipment indicates a self-reflexive intention.

Beyond this critical reflexivity lies a more transgressive subtext, one that
passes a sharp judgment on the Soviet Union. During the sequence that shows the
interview with Olympic rower Avdejev, the camera zooms back from a close up of
the rower’s face to reveal Avdejev standing in the snow next to his dilapidated
automobile, complete with a broken headlight, dented hood, and shattered window.
Podnieks presents a dismal image of one of the star athletes in the Soviet Union
whose government cannot provide him with a respectable or even functional vehicle.
The shot becomes even more pathetic as Avdejev talks about being happy with his
life overall. As Podnieks’s camera zooms into a close up of one of the smashed
headlights, one cannot help but wonder about the difficult life of the average citizen
in the Soviet Union, if this is how a sports celebrity is forced to live.

Furthermore, one may perceive a subtle Latvian nationalistic viewpoint in this
newsreel. Throughout Sporta apskats, Podnieks interviews Olympic athletes from
both ethnic Russian and ethnic Latvian backgrounds. While no overt differentiation
between these two ethnicities appears in the film, given though is was made during
the Soviet era when Russia and Russian were considered superior to all other
ethnicities and languages spoken in the Union, one may still identify which athletes
belong to which ethnicity through the language they choose to speak during their
interview. The Russian athletes express themselves in Russian and the Latvian
athletes communicate in Latvian, with spectators being able to detect a noticeable
difference in the way Podnieks presents these two ethnicities. All of the Russian
athletes who are interviewed - Miskaros, Kuzmins, Jackevics, and Avdejev - articulate great disappointment in themselves and bitterness about not winning the gold medal in their respective sport at the Olympics. Meanwhile, the two Latvian athletes – Pavels Selivanovs and Dainis Kula - express happiness and optimism, having both won gold medals at the games. By portraying the Russian athletes as acrimonious and the Latvian sportsmen as modest, content, and more successful than their Slavic colleagues, Podnieks conveys the subversive message that Latvians are capable of accomplishing greater achievements than their Russian counterparts.

Podnieks concludes the film with the sequence on Kula and his Venstpils training center where tomorrow’s athletes are being trained today. The smiling faces of the Latvian children playing on the icy ramp with Kula end the documentary on a hopeful note, suggesting that the strength and resolve of Latvian athletes (and, implicitly, of the Latvian people) will only grow in the future as Latvian teamwork nurtures the next generation. Podnieks increases the optimism of this passage by showing Avdejev’s complaining resentfully about his teammates immediately before the sequence in Ventspils. In other words, Podnieks shows that the Russian athletes, as symbols of the Soviet Union, fail and are divided, while the Latvians, despite being oppressed, work together and ultimately triumph. Once again, Podnieks demonstrates how the individual lives of each athlete assume a public significance, with each competitor representing the traits of his or her respective ethnicity.

Podnieks’ final issue for a film magazine/newsreel, Māksla Nr. 2/3 (1983), explores the annual art festival that occurs in Latvia, mostly investigating the different activities that transpired in Riga but also pausing in the city of Valmiera to
consider its art-related festivities. Podnieks and his crew move through the streets of Riga to depict the art displayed in squares, to interview the artists and the everyday participants, and to capture the general spirit of the events. Through his camera work and editing, Podnieks portrays the liminal space created by the celebration of art and artists which allows for a transgressive expression of Latvian nationalism (stemming from the valuing of a specifically Latvian culture).

The first feature one notices is the lack of a “voice of God” narrator. The soundtrack features only music and sounds, such as the music and the voices of artists and the attendees of the events, recorded diegetically during the festival. Because Podnieks chooses not to include a didactic narration, the director privileges the subjective viewpoints and experiences of the people at the festivals.

This ability for the artists and the people on the street to comment on the festival activities as they unfold relates to another prominent characteristic of this documentary: Podnieks’s self-reflexivity. Podnieks, his film crew, and his film equipment all appear in the film both on the visual and aural tracks, as the director and his colleagues interview artists and festival attendees in the mode of cinéma vérité. Podnieks’s self-reflexivity situates him and his film crew among the other artists participating at the Art Days, demonstrating that, while some choose to communicate to others through painting or sculpture, Podnieks articulates himself through cinema. Here, Podnieks’s concern with artistic expression entails an open recognition of his own place within this discussion.

Podnieks’s self-reflexivity appears in the attention he pays to the act of looking, crucial to several art forms. Podnieks’s montage sequence of the faces of
people in the street contemplating artwork and their own reflections in the mirrors on
display functions as his visual meditation on the significance of this ocular act.
Podnieks’s succession of close ups and his editing choice to juxtapose images of
people gazing at art with individuals looking at mirrors likens viewing paintings with
seeing one’s reflection. In other words, Podnieks suggests that when individuals look
at art, they also gain insight into themselves.

This attention paid to the act of looking also links to a possible transgressive
nationalistic subtext. From the dominant Communist perspective, one sees the Art
Days as an event where everyone may enjoy art. As the World Peace Association
President explains on camera in Russian, the entire event is a work of art. However,
Latvian film spectators and festival participants see something different. For them,
the Art Days create a socially acceptable ephemeral space for the subversive
celebration of Latvian culture. This event, like the song festivals, provides an
opportunity to honor Latvian folk traditions in the forms of textiles, music, and dance
and to inspire unity among ethnic Latvians to resist the authoritarian Soviet regime by
highlighting what is uniquely their own.91

91 This subtle celebration of a specifically Latvian culture in Maksla Nr. 2/3 differs
from the Soviet documentary tradition because of its nationalistic focus. This
becomes more apparent when Maksla Nr. 2/3 is compared to such an exemplar of
Soviet documentary filmmaking as Dziga Vertov’s One Sixth of the World (1926).
“[…] One Sixth of the World […] acquaints us with the vast expanses of the USSR,
the peoples of the USSR, the role of state trade in drawing even the most backward
peoples into the construction of socialism […]” [Vertov, 163]. Podnieks’s film,
however, does not show the Latvian people as one ethnic group among a plethora of
others in an immense Soviet Union and it does not extol the merits of socialism.
Instead, it concentrates on the artistic accomplishments of Latvians.
Examples of the reverence shown towards Latvian society may be found throughout. During the montage sequence devoted to “looking,” Podnieks offers a close up of a painting of Krisjanis Barons. One of Barons’s great contributions to Latvian culture was his work collecting, organizing, and publishing Latvian folk songs or “dainas,” thus helping to preserve oral traditions that were many centuries old. Barons was one of the leading figures of the Latvian National Awakening in the 19th century. By including a close up of Barons’s painted portrait in a montage sequence featuring mirrors and by depicting in close ups the faces of people examining the portrait, Podnieks not only reminds film viewers of the presence of the uniquely Latvian past at the Art Days, but also suggests that contemporary Latvians must remember their forefathers and resume their work towards (re)gaining an independent Latvian nation. Podnieks continues with shots depicting traditional Latvian ceramic artwork, as well as shots of Latvian folk dancing in the Jana seta area of Riga. Almost halfway through the film, Podnieks films a children’s band playing the traditional Latvian folk song “Sesi mazi bundzinieki” [“Six Little Drummers”] on the street, and he particularly foregrounds a woman wearing a Latvian folk costume by zooming into a close up of her watching the procession from the sidewalk.

92 Barons also served as one of the editors (along with Juris Alunans and Krisjanis Valdemars) of the Peterburgas avize [Saint Petersburg newspaper], a Latvian-language periodical published in St. Petersburg beginning in 1862 that sharply criticized the claims to superiority of the Baltic German nobility. The newspaper helped to arouse nationalistic attitudes in the Latvian students attending university in the city, the influence of the periodical continuing despite the Baltic German suppression of the newspaper in 1865. For more information on Peterburgas avize and Krisjanis Barons, see Plakans, 89-91, 94, 109, 137.
Podnieks also includes several interviews with participating artists and with the people attending the festivities where the interviewees emphasize the idea of the “tauta” or “people” being together, a concept with Latvian nationalistic connotations. Professor Plotnieks, a person in the street enjoying the festival, exclaims: “You see what one really wants to see – a real folk festival. This celebration seemed to me to be a real celebration of the people [tauta], where one could enjoy all kinds of art and one could meet with the fellow men and women [cilveki].” He specifically employs the word “tauta”[“people” belonging to a nation], specifically articulating the nationalistic significance of this event. Another man in Dom Square relates how he enjoys hearing people singing and Latvian music being played in the street. Meanwhile, artist Janis Anmanis proclaims that when (Latvian) painters “paint your white soul, Land, then [they] will paint peace.” Anmanis’s invocation of the “Land” also carries significant nationalistic associations, while the mentioning of a “white soul” may be a reference to traditional Latvian folk songs and folk tales, where the color white is sacred.

Podnieks even turns the seemingly pro-Communist sequence involving a factory worker’s encounter with paintings into a subversive critique of Soviet art consumers. Podnieks portrays the proletariat as lacking the skills and education to fully comprehend and appreciate art. One female employee states: “Everything is beautiful here. There is something here for relaxation; maybe there is something here

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about the peace theme, as you are telling me […]. We also do not understand something about all of this in its entirety. We cannot understand this painting. Where is the author?”

The woman demands that art follow the Communist philosophy of Social Realism, where the meaning of a painting is obvious and unmistakable to every viewer. However, the addressed artist Karlis Dobrajs counters her insistence on Social Realism by suggesting that good art requires thought and effort, and by pointing out the flaws of her desired artistic method. He explains: “To me, it seems that there is nothing that needs to be explained, no? […] Sometimes one needs to amuse oneself, sometimes one must think […].”

This exchange acts as a harsh assessment of Communism, foregrounding the philosophy’s failure in the artistic realm.

In addition to the film magazine issues, Podnieks also directed five reklamfilmas or pasutijuma filmas, literally “commercial films” or industrial shorts: Dzied Alla Pugacova (Alla Pugacova Sings, 1982), Jaunkemeri (The Rehabilitation Center Jaunkemeri, 1982), 24 vasaras stundas (24 Summer Hours, 1983), Jurmala – 84 (The Seaside Resort Jurmala – 84, 1984), and Kaburga (1986). These films were


all ordered or commissioned by various institutions and organizations, and were intended to serve as advertisements. No positive prints of these films currently exist.96

**Brali Kokari [The Brothers Kokari]**

Podnieks made his first non-film-magazine, non-commercial documentary in 1978, receiving considerable critical recognition. *Brali Kokari [The Brothers Kokari]*, which chronicles two of Latvia’s most famous conductors, Imants and Gido Kokars, was screened in such distant locations as Toronto, New York, and Kiev, where it won the Jury Diploma at the U.S.S.R. New Filmmakers Screening and received the Ukraine Ministry of Education Award. In Latvia, film reviewers praised it as “a masterful work of art” and as a “smart, tactful portrait of the Kokari brothers.”97 The film follows the twin brothers as they conduct their Latvian choir, Ave Sol, interspersing footage of them instructing their singers with footage from performances and photographs from their impoverished childhood. This approximately twenty minute work offers viewers a portrait of two successful and driven artists whose relentless work ethic and desire to succeed have enabled them to bring Latvian choral performance to a new level.

The most prominent feature of *Brali Kokari* is the frequent use of close ups. Out of the 107 shots that make up the film, approximately 91 are close ups (static close ups, medium shots that zoom into close ups, or close ups that zoom back into

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96 The negatives may be found at the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.

medium shots). Podnieks begins with a close up of the two brothers conducting, a double-exposed image that perhaps serves as a playful reference to the brothers’ status as twins. Throughout the work, close ups of the Kokars brothers abound, creating the impression of access to the subjective viewpoints of these artists. Viewers seem to see an unmediated documentation of the Kokari Brothers. Film critic Elmars Riekstins observes: “One is charmed by the quality of an unveiling, the unforced nature on-screen that we constantly feel. At no time does one ever feel the presence of the film camera.”98 Podnieks’s employing more close ups than long or medium shots reflects his emphasis on the human subject over the surroundings. The message conveyed is that the brothers triumph over their environment, surmounting a poverty-stricken childhood to excel in their artistic communication despite living and working in a restrictive totalitarian society.

Podnieks expressively presents a visual metaphor of the individual’s successful struggle to overcome all obstacles near the end of the film. Two close ups depict Imants and Gido, respectively, emerging in slow motion from beneath the water to stand erect on their water skis. The brothers literally rise out of murkiness to prevail, making these two shots the emblematic images of the documentary. Film scholar Anita Uzulniec describes this sequence:

From beneath the water, something unclear – like a hill – forms and begins to rise and slowly grow larger until it becomes a human figure, that, with clenched teeth, tries to triumph over the water’s powerful resistance by standing up. A superbly discovered and filmed

These shots stand out from the rest of the film, both through the technique of slow motion and by the watery subject matter that does not appear elsewhere in this work.

This brief passage shows Podnieks’s privileging the visual over the verbal. Another instance occurs during the montage sequence of photographs depicting the brothers at festivals and competitions across the world. The series of images showing Imants and Gido, as well as the many choirs they conduct, receiving awards at numerous international contests illustrate the scope of their professional accomplishments, communicating visually the extent of their success without the need for a verbal description.

The primacy of the visual, however, does not imply that Podnieks neglects the soundtrack in Brali Kokari. On the contrary, Brali Kokari is the first documentary in Podnieks’s oeuvre where there is no “voice of God” narration. Instead, Imants and Gido speak in their own words, expressing their idiosyncratic traits not in an interview format but rather through their everyday interaction with their choirs, permitting the audience to observe their personalities, and to see their passion, drive, obsession, talent, and sense of humor without the need for a didactic narration. The handful of instances of non-diegetic narration involve the voices of women who know

the Kokari Brothers personally, as they relate anecdotal information about the
brothers’ childhood, birthdays, and temperament. Their detailed knowledge of Imants
and Gido cause their non-diegetic narration to be considered more as the audio track
of interviews with friends and colleagues than as the omniscient observations of an
abstract and impersonal entity.

Finally, one may detect a pro-Latvian nationalism in the subtext of Brali
Kokari. As fellow documentary filmmaker Armins Lejins wrote in 1981, Podnieks
knew “that it is not enough to film an etude about choral conducting, that one needs
to say something more.”100 Along with internationally known choral works, the choirs
featured in the documentary perform arrangements of traditional Latvian folk songs,
and they participate in the Latvian Song Festivals; both brothers are filmed walking in
the customary festival procession, and the previous close ups of men and women in
the parade are probably of choir members. Historian Andrejs Plakans notes that the
Latvian Song Festivals are characterized by “deep nationalistic overtones,” and that
the first several song festivals in the late 19th century were closely connected to the
Latvian National Awakening movement.101 By including footage of the festival
procession, as well as scenes of Gido rehearsing a folk song with the choir, Podnieks
impels Latvian spectators to recall their past and recognize that resistance to the
dominant, repressive order is possible through art, in the form of song, and by

100 “[…] ka nepietiek filmet etidi par kordirigesanu, ka vajag pateikt kaut ko vairak.”
My translation. Armins Lejins, “Mans draugs – nopietns cilveks,” Kino (Nr. 1,

101 Plakans, 97. For more information on the Latvian National Awakening, see
Plakans, 89-111.
implication, film. The theme of political resistance through music will resurface in Podnieks’s later oeuvre, notably in *Vai viegli but jaunam?* (1986), *Mes?* (1989), and *Krustcels* (1990). Focusing on the great achievements of two Latvian artists also acts as reminder that the Latvian people are capable of cultural accomplishments, similar to the way in which Podnieks will emphasize the success of the Latvian Olympic athletes in the newsreel *Sporta apskats* Nr. 1/2 in 1981. Again, Podnieks illustrates how the personal accomplishments of two conductors embody the greater, public triumph of the Latvian people.

*Puikas, zirgos! [Boys, on Horses!]*

Podnieks made two short documentary films in 1979, *Puikas, zirgos!* and *Baltais Ave Sol. Puikas, zirgos!* examines a training facility where boys are groomed for competition in pentathlons. The young men are shown learning how to fence, swim, box, ride horses, and shoot guns, while both the young men, former pentathlon athletes, and the trainers at the facility share their thoughts about the value of such experiences. Podnieks creates a portrayal of young boys struggling to become men, one of Podnieks’ more developed films from his early period.

*Puikas, zirgos!* incorporates many of the key characteristics of Podnieks’s style. The first striking feature of the film is Podnieks’s great reliance on close ups. Out of the 104 shots in the documentary, approximately 80 are close ups, with the majority of the remaining footage being filmed in medium shots. Employing so many close ups emphasizes the subjective perspectives of the young boys, emotionally depicting their personal struggle during training.
As one film critic observed: “The film Puikas, zirgos! reveals this truth [about the emotional and physical trials the boys undergo] directly and unquestionably.”

An example of Podnieks’s utilization of close ups appears in the unorthodox manner in which he begins the film. The director presents a close up of an abstract bar outdoors with a young boy eventually appearing, struggling to complete a chin up. Instead of showing this scene in a traditional establishing long shot and thus allowing viewers to learn information about the narrative’s location, Podnieks focuses on what will function as one of the major themes of the film: the struggle with oneself. Podnieks signals right away that the importance of what he strives to communicate lies with the film subjects.

Podnieks weaves the topic of one’s struggle with oneself throughout. The emblematic image of a young fencer lunging at his reflection in the mirror visually articulates this theme, while trainer Leja’s voice on the soundtrack reiterates the personal battle involved in preparing for a pentathlon. However, Leja’s words take on a more universal significance when one considers the multiple meanings of the Latvian words “cina” and “cinitajs.” One definition of “cinitajs” in the context of the pentathlon is “pentathlon competitor,” with the competition itself called “pieccina,” literally translated as “the five-battles.” However, in any other situation, the word “cinitajs” designates “someone who fights or struggles.”

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103 The word “cina” in Latvian differs markedly from the word “sacensiba,” meaning “competition.” A “cinitajs” denotes “someone who fights or struggles,” while a
the boys’ training assume greater import, reflecting his beliefs that the education his pupils receive gives them the skills and resilience to survive and even thrive in a harsh and demanding society.

The title of the film itself, *Puikas, zirgos!*[“Boys, on Horses!”], reinforces Podnieks’s examination of the inner struggle faced by young people in their development. The image of a boy trying to mount a horse serves as a metaphor for the battle each individual faces in his or her growth. The boys strive again and again to climb up on horses, and, at the end of the film, even the youngest pupils finally succeed. Podnieks recognizes that this triumph serves only as the next step in further challenges, visually represented by the final shot of the film: the long shot depicting a young boy sitting in the saddle on a horse, trying very hard to convince the stubborn animal to move.

By exploring this theme of personal struggle and development, Podnieks furthers his interest in the concerns of youth and in the possibilities of individual expression in a totalitarian society, topics that Podnieks will investigate further in his mature work. The subversive nationalistic subtext present in most of his early documentaries may not appear as sharp in *Puikas, zirgos!* One may note, however, that Podnieks includes a subtle cutting comment on one of the products of the dominant Soviet culture – the sense of resignation to a life where fighting to achieve something is not worthwhile. Podnieks critiques this attitude by showing brief interviews with three young former pentathlon athletes who all quit the training

“competitor” would be translated as “sacensibas dalībnieks,” literally signifying “someone who participates in a competition.”
program – and they all speak in Russian, suggesting that they are ethnic Russians.

Meanwhile, all of the young boys interviewed about their aspirations at the end of the film speak in Latvian, suggesting that the Latvians are true fighters. This valorization of the Latvians over the Russians recalls the pessimism of the Russian athletes and the optimism of the Latvian Olympic competitors in *Sporta apskats*.\(^{104}\) Once again, Podnieks wishes to emphasize the spiritual strength of Latvians when compared to Russians.

While this subtle nationalism addresses the Latvian audience, supporting their contestation of Soviet hegemony, Podnieks also includes an investigation of the public and the private in *Puikas, zirgos!*, reiterating his belief that personal issues reflect the larger society, urging spectators to understand how each successful athlete’s struggle to succeed mirrors the efforts of the Latvians that resist Communism. Film critic J. Lidums, writing about *Puikas, zirgos!*, explains: “Through the prism of the individual, filmmakers try to express their attitude towards social phenomena.”\(^{105}\) In other words, Podnieks and his crew show that the experiences of one person illustrate larger issues that affect many people.

\(^{104}\) See above, pages 72-73.

Viewers gain a more complex understanding of contemporary Latvian society only through examination of the personal. As Lidums notes: “It must be true that the whole reveals itself in the nuances.”

Other elements of Podnieks’s style in the film include slow motion to create an expressionistic effect; showing the boys’ trials swimming and running from the children’s perspective; and self-reflexivity through Podnieks’s inclusion of boom microphones in many interview scenes in the film. Podnieks also breaks the fourth wall in one shot where two boys practice their fencing skills by lunging towards the camera, thus drawing the audience into the film’s action while simultaneously breaking the illusion of cinematic suture. All of these strategies point to Podnieks’s privileging of the visual over the verbal.

Perhaps the montage sequence depicting boys from the training center running, swimming, shooting guns, riding horses, and sparring with themselves in the mirror offers the best representation of Podnieks relying on images. Podnieks also presents an extended sequence set to music without dialogue. He cuts to a high-angle close up of a boy swimming in a pool in slow motion. The camera tracks with the boy as he reaches one end of the pool, turns around, and pushes off back into the water. Along with contemporary music, the soundtrack also features the electronically manipulated sound of a child breathing hard. This noise has been altered so that the sound is slowed down, extended, and echoes, creating a mechanical sound. This same sound of reverberating breathing continues as Podnieks cuts to a close up of three boys running outside in the woods in slow motion. The boys are shown in profile as

they gasp for air, and the film cuts to a close up of rows of boys’ hands holding handguns. He racks focus, beginning with a focal point on the background and the guns that are farthest away from the camera and shifting the attention to the large pistols in the foreground as several guns are fired.

Next, a close up of a horse’s head zooms back and pans left to a medium shot to show the horse and rider passing the camera, turning around, and coming to a halt beside a group of people. Podnieks follows this shot with a close up of a young man sparring with his reflection in a mirror. The camera zooms in even closer to the youth, focusing on his reflection, and the film cuts to a straight angle medium shot of the profile of a young man running in the woods. Podnieks follows the athlete for a short period, and then employs a swish pan to the right before cutting to a high-angle close up of a boy swimming the crawl in a pool in slow motion. He reaches the end of the pool, grabs the side of it to catch his breath, and then dives back underwater.

All of the images featured in this montage sequence collectively encourage viewers to appreciate the amount of energy, dedication, and persistence that the boys must invest in their training in order to be successful. The montage sequence foregrounds the difficulty of preparing for a pentathlon by presenting all of the different skills each boy must learn. The reverberating breathing on the soundtrack underlines the strain, further inviting audiences to see pentathlon training for the boys’ point of view. Podnieks demonstrates visually how one’s greatest enemy is oneself. Thus, while Leja’s words throughout the film may verbally reiterate this statement, Podnieks articulates the emotional force of this idea through images.
On the soundtrack, Podnieks again discards an impersonal “voice of God” narrator in favor of trainer Leja’s personal reflections. This decision reflects the glasnost cinema approach of presenting an everyday person communicating his or her thoughts honestly on screen – a notable decision given the pre-glasnost creation of this documentary.

At times, Podnieks’s music choices generate a new understanding of the visual track, as in the first music selection of the film, an excerpt from a musical work by V. Kaminskis entitled “Aug Dzimtenes sargi” [“The Homeland’s Guards Grow Up”]. This music is heard with the series of close ups showing boy after boy struggling to complete as many chin ups as possible. By juxtaposing this music with these images, Podnieks suggests that the boys on screen are developing into the future protectors of their country, learning to fight in order to achieve their goals. This association also conveys nationalistic undertones, implying that the young men who survive the pentathlon training will have the skills to strive to gain independence for their homeland one day. Finally, Podnieks’s expressionistic style also manifests itself in the inclusion of the electronically manipulated sound of a child breathing, a reverberating noise that adds a simultaneously familiar and alien quality to the images. In other words, the sound may be identified as a child breathing, but the noise has been altered and mechanized.

_Baltais Ave Sol [White Ave Sol]_

Podnieks’s other short film from 1979 is _Baltais Ave Sol [White Ave Sol]_, an approximately twenty minute documentary that follows the Latvian chorus Ave Sol as they travel to and perform in Spain and in the Philippines. Podnieks portrays in
color footage the chorus and their famous conductor Imants Kokars both on and off stage, relying on extended montage sequences set to the vocal music of Ave Sol to depict the choral group and to allow their music to complement the images.

Podnieks’s documentary serves as an example of the director’s early exploration of the relationship between the visual and the aural, demonstrating Podnieks’s initial experimentation with developing his expressionistic style.

As in Podnieks’s previous films, Baltais Ave Sol communicates through the visual track instead of relying on narration. The audio in the film serves a supportive purpose, adding meaning to the dominant image. Podnieks’s combination of particular sounds, especially music, with certain images constitutes an authorial intervention, suggesting how to interpret the scene.

One example appears halfway through the film, when the chorus visits the Philippines. The choral members witness a cockfight held in the street, and Podnieks films this sequence entirely in close up using a wide-angle lens. The extreme wide-angle of the lens distorts the image of the two roosters attacking each other so that the audience sees the bodies of the birds stretched across the edges of the frame, while the close ups amplify the intensity of the visible action by bringing the viewers nearer to the violence. The soundtrack at this point enhances the horror of the scene that Podnieks wishes the audience to experience, as the atonal choral music, performed in a staccato manner, creates the effect of a collective vocal expression of terror, as if the singers were screaming in dismay at the violence before them.

Podnieks’s interest in the aural aspects of cinema also appears in his other treatments of the soundtrack, which privileges choral music over an instructional
narration. During the approximately 127 shots comprising the film, only 18 feature the “voice of God” narration of a male voice. The remainder of the soundtrack consists of Ave Sol’s voices singing various choral works, along with diegetic sound when appropriate. This practice demonstrates how Podnieks progressively moves towards the glasnost cinema era, where the use of authoritative commentary in Soviet documentaries begins to disappear.

Finally, one may again read a subversive political subtext in *Baltais Ave Sol*. Podnieks devotes more than half of the film to Ave Sol’s time in the Philippines, a country with a history almost as tumultuous as that of Latvia. Colonized by the Spanish in the 16th century, the Philippine people would endure hundreds of years of war, as the English, Dutch, Portuguese, French, Chinese, and Japanese battled with the Spanish for control over Philippine territory. At the end of the nineteenth century after the Spanish ceded the region to the United States after the Spanish-American War, the Philippine-American War began and lasted until 1913. The country remained a colony of the United States until it officially became the Commonwealth of the Philippines in 1935, but Japan’s invasion and occupation of the Philippines during World War II disrupted the country’s sovereignty. The Philippines finally achieved independence in 1946, and its subsequent political life has proven somewhat unstable. At the time Podnieks filmed *Baltais Ave Sol*, Ferdinand Marcos had been the dictator of the Philippines for almost seven years. The turbulent colonial history and war-torn past of the Philippines is evoked by the violent archival footage of bombings and casualties, as well as by the scenes of the members of Ave Sol visiting a war memorial and cemetery.
Contemporary Latvian spectators may read these sequences as representing the tragedy and injustice of the kind of imperialism that has caused much bloodshed and political unrest in Latvia.

**Strelnieku zvaigznajs [The Constellation of the Riflemen]**

Podnieks’s first feature-length documentary *Strelnieku zvaigznajs [The Constellation of the Riflemen, 1982]* examines the stories of the soldiers who fought in the Latvian Riflemen corps during World War I. Podnieks interviews various veterans, asking them about their motivations for enlisting and about their experiences fighting in the Great War. Podnieks’s documentary investigates the choices these men made, capturing the tragedy of war and the devastated lives left in its wake.

Latvian audiences responded strongly to *Strelnieku zvaigznajs*, evidenced by the abundance of articles about the film in the Latvian press. Documentary filmmaker Aivars Freimanis sees *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* as epitomizing Podnieks’s credo: “[T]o address the spectator and especially – [Podnieks’s] own generation as much as possible, intimately, without even fearing familiarity, in order to draw their attention to a theme that is holy to our small nation [*tauta*]: national pride.”

Film critic Jevgenijs Abs describes the film as “organically melting” the past with the future, while journalist M. Varpina notes how the documentary “has entered our present day

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with such emotional force.” Film historian Agris Redovics even declared in 1986 that *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* is “the most significant film to address the nation [tauta] in the last five years.” The film also affected people beyond the film profession. For example, *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* so impressed one woman after a screening at Latvia’s Veterinary Research Institute that she wrote an open letter to Podnieks, describing the film as “emotional, but without sentimentality, clear, honest, optimistic. Deeply human.”

This strong spectator reaction may be attributed partly to the subject matter. World War I witnessed complicated military events in Latvia, with many Latvians drafted into the Tsar’s army (since the country was a part of the Russian empire at this time) in 1914. Historian Andrejs Plakans explains that, as the German military forces advanced farther into the Baltic States in August, 1915, “a strong argument was made to, and accepted by, the Russian high command that separate units of Latvian infantry (*strelnieki*) should be created within the Russian army. By early 1916, eight such battalions with about 130,000 soldiers had come into being.”

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111 Plakans, 115.
These troops consisted mostly of Latvian volunteers from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and were perceived by many Latvians as the foundation of a prospective national army, a fact that concerned both Russian and German military and political leaders.\textsuperscript{112} These fears were soon realized, as Latvian Nationalism gained momentum, while the Bolshevik revolution influenced impoverished Latvians. Plakans describes the zeitgeist of the period:

> In this new, heady, and rapidly changing atmosphere, all public discussion became politicized and a great variety of plans were put forward about the Latvian future. With organizational activity riding the wave, ranging from the most conservative (collaborating with the Baltic Germans to oppose the Bolsheviks) to the most radical (Bolshevik revolution). The notion of a free Latvia was conceived with many permutations: partial autonomy, complete autonomy, complete independence, all along the political spectrum.\textsuperscript{113}

The movement for self-government culminated in the declaration of an independent Latvian state on November 18, 1918. However, warfare continued in Latvia for the following two years, as the country battled against both the Germans and the Russians to maintain its new sovereignty.

This tumultuous era resulted ultimately in a fundamental schism among the strelnieki soldiers – some chose to form the basis of a Latvian national army, while others decided to fight with the Bolsheviks and support the burgeoning Communist cause. The former became known as the “White Riflemen” (baltie streknieki), while the latter were called the “Red Riflemen” (sarkanie strelnieki). Thus, brother literally fought against brother in Latvia. Latvian nationalists may be tempted to view this

\textsuperscript{112} Plakans, 115.

\textsuperscript{113} Plakans, 116.
situation as the noble freedom fighters struggling for liberty against all forms of tyranny, while Communists point to the Latvian presence in the Bolshevik revolution as proof of Latvia’s desire to unite with the Soviet Union (an argument later utilized to justify the forceful annexation of the country by the U.S.S.R.). Yet, Podnieks reveals the complexity of these circumstances, demonstrating the tragedy of the Red Riflemen’s destiny and consequently offering a scathing critique of Communism.

As in his previous short documentaries and newsreel issues, Podnieks presents a nationalistic Latvian, anti-Communist argument, concealed in a subtext accessible to Latvian spectators, while simultaneously allowing the work to clear Soviet censors. Podnieks himself describes his experience during filming:

I touched my people’s [tautas] destiny, its consciousness, at times even the soul so closely, that I am no longer free. […] In this film, one senses only the beginnings of this, the impulses and subtexts (with some hidden better than others). Does the film only deal with Riflemen? Of course not! [It addresses] the people’s [tautas] mentality, tragedy, destiny. […] I saw, I heard, I felt Latvia, Time, People […].

Podnieks clearly articulates his subversive mission to capture a specifically Latvian spirit in Strelnieku zvaigznaja The beginning of the film demonstrates Podnieks’s transgressive objective.

The first dialogue on the soundtrack are the words of Latvian poet Aleksandrs Caks (1901-1950). A male voice, which viewers will soon discover belongs to Podnieks, recites one of Caks’s most famous poems, a work that rhapsodizes the valor of the *strelnieki*. Caks rose to fame in Latvia through his lyrical odes to Riga and to the bohemian city life in the 1920s and 1930s. He also published a collection of poems about the idealism and sacrifices of the *strelnieki* entitled *Touched by Eternity* [*Muzibas skartie*], which earned him national recognition. Because of his poor health, Caks opted not to flee from his homeland during World War II; consequently, he was forced into producing propaganda for the new Communist regime in order to survive the Stalinist purges.\(^{115}\) Although Caks complied, *Touched by Eternity* was considered ‘unmentionable’ during the Soviet period. Thus, Podnieks’s choice to begin his documentary with Caks’s words indicates the director’s strong support for an icon from the short period of Latvian sovereignty. Moreover, Podnieks’s enthusiastic and open embracing of Caks, a symbol of independent Latvia, is provocative, especially considering that he made the documentary in 1982, in the pre-glasnost era.

The words of the poem themselves may be interpreted as supporting Latvian nationalism in the face of Communist rule. Caks writes (and Podnieks recites):

‘They are Latvians’ – all tongues whisper,
A new, shining tree blooms in the universe.
They are the Riflemen, who are no longer with us,
And who will never be again.

Only their eternal fame
Will passionately protect the people [tauta] like a flag.\textsuperscript{116}

While the Soviet censors may read these lines as singing the praises of the Red Riflemen units, Latvian audiences know that the author exalts the \textit{White} Riflemen.

Caks specifically chooses to use the words “Latvians” and “people” [\textit{tauta}, referring implicitly to the \textit{Latvian} people] to signal his adulation and respect for those countrymen who supported and gave their lives for an independent Latvia - not for an international Communist regime. To contemporary Latvians with a basic education in their cultural heritage, Caks’s poem resounds with a reminder of the past heroism of the White Riflemen, while also urging Latvians to maintain the struggle for sovereignty, much like the choral work “Gaismas pils” in Podnieks’s film \textit{Padomju Latvija} Nr. 23 (1979). The poem functions as a reminder that the White Riflemen’s great sacrifice was not in vain, and that, while the Latvian people may not be currently free, they must draw inspiration from the Riflemen and continue their fight to regain sovereignty of their country.

Podnieks’s greatest endorsement of Latvian nationalism and his strongest critique of Communism appears in the thoughts and emotions expressed by the interviewed Red Riflemen. Podnieks asks each veteran his reasons for enlisting in the Red Riflemen corps, and all of the answers that he receives convey a sense of disillusionment. First, Podnieks interviews a veteran named Grisko, who explains:

\textsuperscript{116} “‘Tie ir latviesi’ – cukst visu meles, Telpa izplaukst jauns mirdzoss koks, Tie ir strelnieki, kuru vairs nava, Un kuru nebus otrreiz vairs. Tikai vinu muziga slava, Tautu sargas ka karogs kairs.” My translation. \textit{Strelnieku zvaigznajs} montazas lapas [\textit{The Constellation of the Riflemen} screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.
“We were young. […] We weren’t defending the Tsar, no! We defended our land [zeme]!”

The Latvian word “zeme” may be translated as “land,” but also possibly as “homeland.” Grisko’s utilization of the word zeme implies two concepts quite antithetical to the International Communist cause: private property (“our land”) and nationalism (“our homeland”).

Next, Podnieks asks a veteran called Ozolins: “But what did you believe in during the time of the Riflemen? What were you fighting for?” Ozolins responds: “What was I fighting for? I was fighting to kill all of those Germans, to get them away, so they would not be here with us.” Podnieks counters: “Well, yes, but that Russian tsar also deceived you all and betrayed all of you with the generals.”

Podnieks makes a point that Ozolins cannot refute, and the veteran only answers:

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120 “Nu, ja, bet tas Krievijas keizars keizars ar jus piesmauca un nodeva kopa ar generaliem.” My translation. *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* montazas lapas [The Constellation of the Riflemen screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.
“When is there no betrayal involved?” Podnieks pointing out the treachery of the Russian Tsar and Ozolins agreeing that disloyalty will always be a part of totalitarian governments collectively encourages spectators to think that the contemporary Communist regime may not be as different from the previous tsarist rule.

Perhaps the most emotional veteran to speak is Limbaitis. He explains to Podnieks what motivated him to enlist in the Red Riflemen corps. His sentiments articulate the fate of many Latvians who fought with the Bolsheviks:

I really wanted to win. I wanted to pay back all of those people who enslaved the workers. When I was just a boy, my father told people how he was tortured, how the barons wanted to hit him. I thought that, when I grew up, I would repay those who tortured my father. But when I grew up and finished school? How can I get my revenge, when I can’t do anything. But when I enlisted in the Riflemen – aha! Now I can avenge my father, now I have a weapon. Now I hear what the Riflemen are saying: ‘Down with the Tsar, down with the barons.’ Aha! I really liked that! And then I thought, now I can avenge my father.122

Limbaitis’s explanation of why he joined the Red Riflemen reminds spectators of the centuries of slavery that Latvians had endured, highlighting the cruel oppression suffered under the Germans barons, who enjoyed a free reign over their Latvian serfs

121 “Kura reize nav nodevibas?” My translation. Strelnieku zvaigznajs montazas lapas [The Constellation of the Riflemen screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.

under the Russian tsars. Limbaitis’s motivation for becoming a Red Riflemen involved a longing for freedom from foreign subjugation and a personal vengeance, and not necessarily a wholehearted adoption of Communist doctrine. Limbaitis’s comments, along with the statements made by the other veterans, lead viewers to comprehend that many of the Latvians who fought as Red Riflemen did so because they believed that the Bolsheviks would help them gain freedom from tsarist rule. These youthful and idealistic men were mislead and betrayed, and have lived out the remainder of their lives forced to cope with the consequences of their past decisions. None of the veterans’s remarks convey an enthusiastic espousal of Communist ideology (not when speaking about their youth and not in the present, in their old age).

Podnieks’s criticism of Communism relates to the director’s utilization of self-reflexivity. By drawing on the methods of Vertov and Rouch, i.e., directly inserting himself into his documentary, Podnieks shapes his film so that self-reflexivity becomes a component of his work. Strelnieku zvaigznajs addresses two topics – the plight of the Red Riflemen, and the spectator’s relationship to history, to the past.

Following in the footsteps of Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera and Rouch’s Chronicle of a Summer, the cinematic apparatus and Podnieks himself dominate Strelnieku zvaigznajs. Film cameras, boom microphones, and other recording devices constantly appear throughout the work, with Podnieks never hesitating to include shots of the film crew themselves as they interact with their filmed subjects. The first shots of the film show Podnieks and other members of his crew presenting the oldest living veteran included in the documentary, Voldemars
Udris, with a birthday cake to celebrate his 101st birthday. Already in this opening sequence, Podnieks explicitly demonstrates that his film involves as much introspection and examination of his generation as it does an investigation of the Riflemen.

Podnieks announces his authorial presence by addressing spectators, introducing himself and his reasons for making the film. Following the recitation of the poem by Caks, a map indicating the locations of the Riflemen battles appears as Podnieks’s voice states: “The revolutionary Riflemen’s path in this enormous land. The Riflemen’s path in history. They are made alive by our history’s memory.”

The camera cuts to a close up of a photograph being washed, and Podnieks continues: “How precise it is, how continuous. How much do each of us need it, in order to understand ourselves.” The following long shot of the interior of a film studio zooms into a close up of Podnieks walking amongst enlarged archival photographs of the Riflemen. He directly addresses the camera, stating: “I am Juris Podnieks, the director of this film. I am thirty years old. And this film will be about the way we saw the last living Latvian Riflemen.”

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125 “Es esmu Juris Podnieks, sīs filmas rezisors. Man ir trisdesmit gadu. Un šī filma bus par to, kadus mes ieraudzijam vel pedejos dzivos latviesu strelniekus.” My
Podnieks’s self-reflexive introduction reminds the audience that they are witnessing a construction – a work of art with a particular opinion. Never before has Podnieks made his presence in his films so overt. Podnieks’s deliberate declaration as the creator of this film breaks with conventional Soviet documentary practice, pointing to his increasing espousal of cinéma vérité approaches to filmmaking. The director also departs from a documentary method that relies more on an emotionally removed relation of facts, instead striving to convey the sentiments and thoughts of the Riflemen. Podnieks explains one of his goals: “We wanted to conjure the emotional wave, that, at the time, carried the Riflemen towards victory. We strove to understand the psychological motivations of their actions, because the memory of feelings seemed to us more authentic than factual memory.”

126 This emphasis on an individual’s subjective experience as a conduit to a special understanding about a particular era, combined with Podnieks’s overt self-reflexivity, mark a transformation in Podnieks’s filmmaking, further developing his expressionistic film style.

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In an interview in 1982, the director remarks on the change in his work signaled by *Strelnieku zvaigznajs*: “I can not free myself from *Strelnieku zvaigznajs*. This film has dismantled everything that had been programmed in me.”\(^\text{127}\)

Podnieks’s increasingly explicit self-reflexivity also indicates his role in initiating a fundamental shift in the Latvian documentary. Film scholar Abrams Klockins, analyzing the new tendencies in documentary cinema in 1982, notes:

Documentary filmmakers [...] either try with all of their might to hide their presence in the filming process, or at least they strive at all costs to hide from viewers their participation in that process. […]But one] must not hide oneself or that process, since participation in that process is unavoidable. One should instead realize this and use it to explore and grasp reality deeper. From this perspective, the director’s own presence and his direct address of the spectator in *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* is very understandable (and necessary!), because it demonstrated to spectators a completely new dimension of understanding the material, inspiring them to a more active (and therefore also deeper) understanding of what has been seen.\(^\text{128}\)

Film critic Armins Lejins echoes Klockins’s sentiments, observing: “It seems that

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Juris Podnieks’s *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* truly begins a new period in our documentary filmmakers’s work. We will now expect [...] that these new [filmmakers] will go further, as one says, dig deeper.”¹²⁹

Podnieks also includes his own son in *Strelnieku zvaigznajs*, furthering his self-reflexivity. His son Davis appears in a scene where a veteran named Oss treks through some marshy land. First, a close up of a tree in the wetland appears as spectators hear Davis’s voice innocently and inquisitively asking Oss what a field full of death looks like. Oss tells the child that he wants to be left alone and does not wish to discuss such a topic. Davis persists, pressing Oss to tell him what death looks like. As Oss finally begins to relate the many dead Riflemen he has seen on the fields of the front, the film cuts to a medium shot of Oss talking to Davis in the marsh. Davis acts as Podnieks’s surrogate, appearing on screen, having his own voice heard, and interviewing the veteran. The inclusion of Podnieks’s son in the film also demonstrates Podnieks’s personal investment in the story of the veterans and in the film.

The appearance of Davis in *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* highlights another key theme: the concern with young people and their relationship with older generations. Repeatedly, Podnieks shows children and adolescents interacting with and frequently watching and listening to the old Riflemen. Near the middle of the film, a veteran called Salnais speaks about the historical significance of the Riflemen while Podnieks

intercuts shots of the old man talking with close ups of a group of children listening attentively. Spectators hear Podnieks’s off-screen voice ask: “Well, but will these youngsters understand you?” Salnais responds that since these kids will hear mom and dad mention the Riflemen they will surely know who they are (especially in Latvian families). Yet, Podnieks persists: “Yes, but will they understand that it was the spirit of the Riflemen that made the difference.” This brief passage reveals Podnieks’s concern about the way youth comprehend the acts of their elders and about the manner in which the lack of knowledge of the past shapes the future.

Another scene where Podnieks interviews both an aging veteran and his grandson demonstrates the director’s anxiety over this lack of communication and understanding between the generations. A medium shot shows veteran Zeltins discussing the locations in Latvia and in Russia where he fought in battles as a Rifleman, while Zeltins’s grandson listens attentively. When Zeltins finishes, Podnieks cuts to a close up of the little boy and asks him if he would like to be a Rifleman, to which the child responds: “I would like to enlist, if there was the possibility.” Upon hearing his grandson speak these words, Zeltins, now shown in

130 “Nu, bet vai sie jaunie sapratis jus?” My translation. Strelnieku zvaigznajis montazas lapas [The Constellation of the Riflemen screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.

131 “Ja, bet vai vini sapratis ka tas bija strelnieku gars, kas izskira visu...” My translation. Strelnieku zvaigznajis montazas lapas [The Constellation of the Riflemen screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.

a close up, states that he would not like to repeat the experiences that he has had as a Rifleman. Zeltins claims: “I would not want to enlist. I would not want, you know, this torture that I have endured. Exactly, I would not want that. He [referring to his grandson], however – when he hears someone shoot, then he would like there to be a war.” The boy has no grasp of the horrors of war and suffering, despite having heard his grandfather’s tales about digging mass graves and the daily dealings with death. The younger generation fundamentally misunderstands their history, a situation that troubles Podnieks since he states at the beginning of the film that one must understand the history of the Riflemen in order to understand oneself. After all, as philosopher A. Rubenis observes when discussing the relationship between documentaries and history:

Our relationship with history must be **dialogical**, i.e., the people in the past, with whom we are trying to establish a connection, must be viewed as equal participants in the conversation. […] We would benefit if we bowed our heads in respect much more to the past’s heroism (as does J. Podnieks’s *Strelnieku zvaigznajs*) and not boast about our own greatness, power, or achievements. The encounter with history begs the question: who are we ourselves?

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134 See above, page 101.

Strelnieku zvaigznajs concludes with the question of how future generations will grasp the tragedy of the Riflemen, especially with the remaining veterans – the living history – passing away at the time of filming. During the second-to-last sequence of the film, Podnieks offers viewers a series of close ups of young people listening to a musical group singing a song about a soldier asking his bride why she is crying. Aurally, Podnieks interjects his voice-over between fragments of the song, stating: “It is 1982. Eighteen years are left until the new, 21st century. That is exactly the age of many of them [the youth on screen] right now. So then, how will they understand the Riflemen and their fate when they are in their thirties, their forties? What will they take with them?” One may interpret the final question as asking both what will the young adults learn from the Riflemen and what knowledge will the Riflemen take with them to their graves.

Podnieks’s subversive subtext, self-reflexivity, and concern with the younger generations’s relationship with history all participate in the director’s undertaking to demonstrate how the personal shapes the public. For Podnieks, the individual experiences of each Rifleman form a collective history of Latvia and of the Latvian people, acutely reflecting the zeitgeist of the Riflemen period. Podnieks explains in an interview printed in the newspaper Rigas Balss in 1982: “In our busy everyday life, we seldom think of history’s fundamental values, which more frequently exist only in

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the form of abstract assumptions, and not as something alive, something to care for, something to preserve, something to love.” Podnieks articulates his view that these human beings embody living history, and that their personal narratives reflect a common past. Moreover, the stories of these veterans inform the present, directly affecting our collective present and future. Podnieks asserts: “The destiny of the Riflemen resonates with our destinies. Getting to know them, we gain a better understanding of ourselves. The very different accounts given by the film’s heroes reveal their era’s spirit, the shared characteristics that made them join the Riflemen [...].” Podnieks reveals in *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* how individual experiences construct the history of nations and of people.

Formally, *Strelnieku zvaigznajs*, like Podnieks’s previous documentaries, illustrates his expressionistic film style. Podnieks employs slow motion and close ups to heighten the emotional impact of his images and to encourage spectators to see the situation of the Red Riflemen through his eyes. Film critic Sergejs Muratovs explains: “[*Strelnieku zvaigznajs*] is characterized by the transformation of the newsreel: freeze-frames, slow motion, and jump cuts make us look into ourselves in order to see

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in these images that which we had not previously detected.”\(^{139}\) After the opening credits, Podnieks presents a close up of an old man’s wrinkled face. He appears to be deeply immersed in thought, as his eyes stare off into the distance. By beginning with this close up of a man that one assumes is a veteran, Podnieks encourages audiences to examine the physical character of the veteran’s face, urging these viewers to pay close attention to a senior citizen perhaps for the first time. Moreover, this consideration of the outer aspect of the veteran’s face may suggest that the film will explore the inner being of the veterans, giving the impression of accessing the subjective viewpoints of the old militia men.

After dwelling on the image of the old man, Podnieks slowly zooms back to reveal a casket being carried by pallbearers past the old man in slow motion. This camera movement recontextualizes the meaning of the previous close up. Now, with the addition of the funeral procession, spectators understand that the veteran mourns the loss of a family member, friend, or colleague (most likely another Rifleman, given the subject matter of the film). The decelerated speed of the footage generates an effect where the measured pace of the pallbearers symbolizes the march of time. Podnieks’s deployment of slow motion creates a passage that visually conveys the themes of the documentary: the relationship between the past and the present, and the losses that the Riflemen have endured in their lives. Podnieks uses both a close up and slow motion to persuade spectators to view the Riflemen from the veterans’

perspectives and to appreciate their plight. As film critic Mihails Savisko notes:

“Each one of us is invited along with the film crew to search for – to remember? – the last living Latvian Riflemen, to look into their faces, to listen to their voices.”

In the audio, Podnieks relies both on the words of the Riflemen and on his voice (both on screen and off) to articulate the themes of the film. *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* functions as another bridge between Podnieks’s first documentaries that employ a traditional “voice of God” and the director’s more mature work, which dispenses with omniscient voiceovers. As film critic Elmars Riekstins notes: “How can anyone say anything new? J. Podnieks […] found a very successful, essentially simple solution – to show on the screen the Riflemen themselves, to allow them to tell about themselves, about their colleagues […]” Podnieks used interviewees in many of his previous films; nevertheless, *Strelnieku zvaigznajs* marks the first time that interviewees speak in such emotional terms.

One difference from his previous work is that the voiceover is identified as belonging to Podnieks, a real person, and one of the ‘characters’ or ‘social actors’ of the documentary. Spectators recognize the owner of the voice that is speaking off-screen, and know that the thoughts and ideas they hear reflect the perspective of a

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specific person. This encourages audiences to acknowledge that the ‘truth’ of the documentary lies in the relationship between Podnieks and his film subjects.

**Komandieris [The Commander]**

*Komandieris [The Commander, 1984]* is a portrait of Vilis Samsons, a commander of the Latvian Partisan Brigade No.1, one division of the Soviet Latvian militia during World War II. He led his fellow Communist partisans in the fight against two groups: the Latvian national partisans who battled to regain sovereignty for Latvia, and the German Nazi army who had occupied Latvia in 1941. Screened at both the Latvian Documentary Conference in Dubulti (which occurs every other year) in 1985 and at the Fourth Annual U.S.S.R. New Filmmakers Screening in Tbilisi, where it won the jury’s prize for best documentary, the film focuses on Samsons’s memories of his wartime experiences, relying on archival footage and photographs from World War II. However, the work also intercuts the past with the present, showing Samsons in his daily life in the early 1980s while he hunts, writes, and meets with his contemporary academic colleagues.

*Komandieris* is arguably the most problematic of Podnieks’s documentaries. How should one understand the place of a film devoted to a militia leader who fought for a Communist Latvia within the context of Podnieks’s nationally oriented oeuvre? Superficially, *Komandieris* might appear to be a pro-Communist work, one that would please Soviet censors. Journalist I. Plotke’s views reflect the Soviet reception of the film: “[Vilis Samsons’s] stories and thoughts about the Soviet people’s fight for their freedom have given the film’s author[r] the opportunity […] to
dynamically show how the victory over fascism proved inescapable.”¹⁴² Yet, a closer examination of the film reveals a subtle, subversive subtext that undermines the celebration of the heroism of Communists.

The film starts with archival footage showing the public execution of Nazi leaders Friedrich Jeckeln, Siegfried Ruff, Albrecht Digone von Monteton, Friedrich Werther, Bruno Pawel, and Alexander Becking on February 3, 1946.¹⁴³ The film will feature a considerable amount of archival footage focusing on General Jeckeln, “the most senior commander of Nazi Germany’s SS and police forces in the occupied Eastern district (Ostland) and Northern Russia […]”¹⁴⁴ The Nazi officers arrive in Riga’s Uzvaras laukums [Victory Square] in military vehicles, and are led to the makeshift gallows erected in the square and hung. A superimposed title gives the date and location of the action, and identifies the scene as “The people punish the Nazis.”¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the non-diegetic male voice of the film’s narrator, actor


¹⁴³ The archival footage is an excerpt from the newsreel Padomju Latvija [Soviet Latvia], Nr .8, February 1946, Special Issue. It may be found at the State Audio-Visual Archive (Archive no. 179).


E. Pavuls, declares: “You killed our children, fathers, men. You filled all of Latvia and the land of a foreign country with their blood. You owe us that precious blood. And we will not forgive this debt.”

Immediately following this archival footage, a contemporary sequence comprised primarily of close ups and medium shots shows Vilis Samsons and his friends hunting in the snow-filled woods. The men walk through the woods with their guns, as Samsons instructs his fellow hunters on the most effective strategy for killing. The sequence ends with a long shot of the men walking through a field, with superimposed titles introducing Samsons as: “The Soviet Union’s Hero, academic, Latvian Partisan Brigade Nr. 1 Commander.”

This introduction suggests a possible subversive message of the film: the cruelty of Communists. Surely, the Nazi officers deserved severe punishment for their terrible crimes. However, the extremely violent and public manner of their executions was carefully choreographed for maximum propagandistic effect by the ruling Soviet authorities. For Soviet spectators, the film’s introduction reads as the story of a Communist hero who helped to punish the Nazis. Yet, by following the brutal archival footage of the executions with contemporary images of Samsons hunting in the woods, Podnieks encourages the Latvian viewers to see a commonality between

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the Communists’ idea of “justice” staged as a public spectacle in 1946 and the continued violence practiced by this regime thirty-eight years later. Moreover, contemporary audiences were well-versed in their Soviet history, and would have known that Communist partisans fought their battles in the woods. Thus, Podnieks links Samsons in the present hunting fauna in the woods with Samsons in the past hunting people in similar forests. For men like him, killing is a sport.

The utilization of archival footage in the opening of the film also signals Podnieks’s extensive deployment of documentary footage and photographs from World War II. Out of the approximately 142 shots that comprise the film, 96 consist of archival footage or photographs. Podnieks uses them to remind viewers of the atrocities committed during World War II that continue to inform contemporary decisions and actions. The archival footage depicts so much violence that one must consider the extent of the devastation that Latvia has suffered from a physical perspective as well as from a psychological standpoint - damage that persists to this day. Several of these sequences are shown in slow motion, extending the time that viewers must contemplate the horror of the war scenes.

This idea of the past coloring the present becomes more explicit with the frequent use of double exposures. Repeatedly, Podnieks superimposes two shots, with one of the images frequently belonging to ‘the past’ either literally, such as a photograph or footage from World War II, or more associatively, such as the image of a foggy forest where the partisans most likely fought during the war, while the other image is from the present. Near the beginning of the film, a medium shot shows Samsons sitting at his desk, looking down at his work. As the camera zooms in to a
close up of him, the image of Samsons becomes almost transparent, while a medium tracking shot of misty woods slowly materializes. Podnieks also deploys superimposition as an editing technique, frequently extending a dissolve. In the case of the previous example, Podnieks introduces the image of the woods and then shifts focus at one point, so that the shot of the forest becomes sharper as Samson’s image slowly fades out. By employing superimposition throughout Komandieris, Podnieks continues to communicate his idea that the past metaphorically and literally colors contemporary action.

This soundtrack of this film stands out in Podnieks’s oeuvre because the director uses only a non-diegetic voice-over narration and music for the audio for almost the entire film. The words the audience hears belong to Samsons, but the actor E. Pavuls is speaking them. Very rarely do spectators see (and hear) Samsons speaking in synch on screen, and both of these episodes are brief and banal (in the first instance, Samsons instructs his fellow hunters on their strategy; next, Podnieks shows Samsons answering a phone call and speaking with several colleagues in his office; finally, Samsons appears near the end of the film, once again talking on the telephone). By restricting the occasions that Samsons speaks on screen and by having those words be trivial, Podnieks visually and aurally communicates how Samsons’s words in the narration of the soundtrack are not his own, literally and metaphorically. Samsons’s words are literally mediated by Pavuls’s voice, while in another sense his thoughts and opinions are colored by the Soviet regime, since Samsons’s propagandistic narration of World War II communicates the Soviet party line, rendering Samsons a Communist mouthpiece.
Podnieks’s perpetual privileging of the visual over the verbal in his work assumes an even greater importance in *Komandieris*. In order to express a subtext critical of Communism that the Latvian audience would recognize, Podnieks aligns the verbal with the dominant Soviet power. The omnipresent narration - Samson’s words read by Pavuls – may relate the official, public Communist perspective on history and World War II in a very black and white dichotomy, but Podnieks’s visually complex images undermine that authority, demonstrating that history, war, and moral decisions are complicated, multi-faceted, and difficult. The simple and straightforward messages communicated by the soundtrack begin to lose their credibility when compared to the intricate visual register, where spectators often must work at deciphering what is being seen. For example, Podnieks includes many double-exposed images that simultaneously show Samsons at his desk and shots of woods and a puddle of water. What is initially seen here is not obvious, and viewers require some time to identify that Podnieks shows in one frame two different images that were filmed in separate locations.

Podnieks’s challenging of Communist authority appears again in a brief but notable moment. Embedded, almost hidden, towards the end of the film, one sequence features a long shot of a dark and foggy forest, followed by a medium shot of a man wearing the uniform of the Latvian Legion (the army formed by a forcibly imposed draft during the Nazi occupation) double-exposed with a close up of a body of water. On the soundtrack, music plays, as well as the quiet male voice of the Legionnaire stating:
Don’t forget us, too, Commander – those 43 Latvian boys. We were coming home from the swamps of Volhova, from that hell and shit where we got to taste the trouble stirred up by the Fritzs [...]. When we were surrounded [by Communist partisans], we tried to get away even though we should have stayed in our bunkers, but we couldn’t stand the idea of wading through the swamp with the partisans. That’s why we tried to escape from you.148

The camera then cuts to a medium shot of Samsons sitting at his desk, double-exposed with a close up of water, as the Legionnaire’s voice echoes on the soundtrack: “For that, three of us received a bullet. Now a Latvian takes the life of a Latvian. For what? Why?”149 Pavuls’s voice responds with Samsons’s words, explaining how the war was not yet over, and that there was no middle ground. Everyone had to pick a side and he could not risk having these soldiers tell the Nazis where the partisans were located.

Although momentary, this important sequence disrupts the Communist narration of history in the documentary. The image of the Legionnaire emerges from the murky depths of the forest and swampy water, while the soldier’s words draw attention to the moral tragedy of World War II – Latvians destroying their fellow countrymen. The soldier’s questions of “For what? Why?” shape the Legionnaire and this complex moral problem into a return of the repressed. Audiences wonder why


Samsons committed such an atrocity, leading viewers to ponder what other terrible acts he and his fellow partisans perpetrated. Samsons’s justifications of the murders ring hollow, since the visceral power of the Legionnaire’s image and voice encourage Latvian audiences to perceive the Commander and his partisan troops as the actual traitors to their country in this scenario.

Finally, Podnieks’s critique of Communism echoes the director’s viewpoints about the public and the private in Soviet society. Contemporary film critics noted this theme, with Inta Lehmusa observing: “This two-reel film’s autho[r…] does not walk the usual path in the documentary genre, where it is completely sufficient to examine one person’s, one personality’s concrete historical situation. [This film] is an attempt to comprehend time, history’s development.”151 Journalism student Vineta Vizule also noted Podnieks’s efforts at depicting the public through the personal,

150 Samsons and his partisan troupe were responsible for the destruction of over one hundred German trains in Latvia and for the killing of scores of soldiers fighting for an independent Latvia, as well as of German officers battling on the side of the Nazi army. Samsons’s successful record of annihilation of property and human life earned him much praise from the Communist regime and status as a great Soviet war hero. One may read Samsons’s own description of his bravery during World War II in his memoirs Kurzemes mezi salc – partizanu un izluku cina kara pedeja gada Kurzeme: 1944-1945 [The Rustling of Kurzeme’s Forests – The Last Year of the Partisan and Spy War in Kurzeme: 1944-1945] (Riga: Liesma, 1974). Meanwhile, one may find personal accounts of the war crimes committed by Samsons and other partisans, such as the execution of a woman bringing food to her ill sister in the countryside, in Ivars Alkis, ed., Pretestibas kustiba okupacijas varam Latvija: Atminas un dokumentos no 1941. lidz 1956. gadam[ The Resistance Movement against the Occupation Forces in Latvija: In Memories and Documents from 1941 until 1956] (Riga: Sol Vita, 1997).

writing: “[…]n this manner, history’s scenes open up in a much more real way to our
generation.”152 Finally, film critic Galina Frolova asserted that Podnieks “weaves the
destiny of the film’s protagonist into the larger social history – war is not only every
individual’s personal drama, but also the nation’s drama, history’s drama […]”153

**Vel Sizifs akmeni [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone]**

Podnieks last film before *Vai viegli but jaunam?* is *Vel Sizifs akmeni [Sisyphus
Rolls His Stone], 1985*. This documentary, which won Latvia’s “Lielais Kristaps”
award for best documentary and best director in 1986, explores artistic creativity
under a repressive regime, focusing on three sculptors – Arte Dumpe, Aivars Gulbis,
and Olegs Skarainis – and their artistic process. Podnieks involves his friend and
colleague, artist Arnolds Plaudis, as the on-camera interviewer, engaging the
sculptors in debates about artistic expression and probing the artists about their
childhoods and careers.

*Vel Sizifs akmeni* was the director’s most overt anti-Communist work to date.
The film bridges Podnieks’s early, subtly transgressive work and his later explicitly
critical documentaries from his mature period. While the film’s primary concern is

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152 “[…]adejadi musu paaudzei daudz realakas paveras vesture ainas.” My
translation. Vineta Vizule, “Kapec skumst ‘Lielais Kristaps’?” *Padomju Jaunatne*
(1985.g. 30. janvaris), 2.

153 “[…]Podnieks] filmas varona likteni ievij plasakas sociali vesturiskas
likumsakaribas – kars ir ne tikai katra atseviska cilveka drama, bet arī tautas drama,
(Nr.7, July 1985), 4.
the meaning and function of art within society, Podnieks suggests that any such
inquiry within the context of Soviet society entails scrutinizing the role Communist
authorities play in the artistic process.

Podnieks begins with several shots at various angles of a group of people
applying plaster to human bodies in the interior of an art studio, then intercuts the
opening film titles with close ups of four faces having plaster applied to them. Once
the titles conclude, the opening sequence ends with a montage pattern of close ups
showing the plaster mask being removed from each of the four faces, followed by
images of outdoor sculptures. The faces are revealed as the four artists featured in the
film. For example, a close up depicts the plaster cast being taken off of a woman’s
face. Anonymous hands hold the plaster mask next to the woman’s face, as
superimposed titles at the bottom of the screen identify her as: “Arta Dumpe,
Sculptor, Winner of the Republic of Soviet Latvia’s State Prize.”

Afterwards, the
film cuts to one of Dumpe’s outdoor sculptures, and this pattern is repeated with each
of the artists.


155 One should note, however, that there are two exceptions in the montage pattern.
First, Arnold Plaudis’s introduction is not followed by any images of his work (here,
his plaster mask is removed and held next to his face, superimposed titles identify
him, and then the film cuts to Dumpe’s mask being removed). This may be explained
by Plaudis’s status as the interviewer and mediator in the film and not as one of the
main subjects. Second, when sculptor Aivars Gulbis is introduced, his mask is
removed and immediately taken off-screen, rendering him the only artist among the
four who is not filmed with his mask. One may understand this second deviation as
subtly pointing to Gulbis’s position as the most openly bitter and angry artist among
the group. In other words, while Plaudis, Dumpe, and Skarainis have literally and
The removal of plaster masks as the introduction to the film functions in multiple ways. The plaster casting in an artist’s studio immediately informs viewers that art, specifically sculpture, will be one of the main focal points of the film (the masks will appear again at the end of the work, serving as a framing device for the film). This introduction also signals that, during this documentary, the artists will metaphorically take off their masks, allowing spectators to experience the subjectivities of the artists and to feel the emotions involved in their artistic process. The director further underlines this special entry into the world of art through his use of close ups.

Podnieks’s choice to shoot the artists’s faces in the same frame as their masks suggests the dual identity that these artists are forced to negotiate in order to survive in a Communist society. Film critic Elmars Riekstins hints at this in his review: “It is especially difficult [to be open and truthful] in the art world, where the weight of popularity frequently makes the artist put on a mask, which sometimes cannot be removed.” On one hand, these artists must conform to Soviet doctrine in order to be allowed to work and have their art seen by the public at large. On the other hand, they desire to challenge their creativity in order to grow and to find better ways of communicating their ideas to others. Plaudis later echoes this sentiment, articulating the crisis his generation of artists faces: “[…] Of course, we were two-faced, one may

metaphorically “two faces” (the public or “official” guise and their personal face), Gulbis does not hesitate to directly communicate his “authentic” self.

say. We thought one thing, but did another. Well, today I think we’re even being invited to be open, to fight for our ideals in art, but, perhaps after all of that old inertia, we don’t want to do that.”

The rest of the film explores how Dumpe, Gulbis, and Skarainis, all arguably at the prime of their careers at the time, strive to answer this question. Plaudis functions as Podnieks’s surrogate, interacting with each artist on screen and probing their thoughts and feelings about art and the creative process. After a brief montage sequence featuring close ups of a bust of Stalin and of one of Skarainis’s sculptures of his parents, Plaudis engages in a dialogue with Skarainis as the pair walks outdoors, examining different large stones in the woods. Plaudis asks Skarainis if his mother ever had any specific wishes for her son, at which point the film cuts to an old photograph of his family as the sculptor explains: “Mother said once: ‘Son, create a cemetery memorial so that our entire family can be together in our homeland, because we couldn’t be together when we were alive.’”

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157 “[…] Protams, mes bijam divkosigi, ta var teikt. Mes domajam vienu, bet darijam otru. Nu, sodien, es domaju mus pat aicina but atklatiem, cinities par saviem idealiem maksla, bet mes varbut pec vecas inerces negribam to darit.” My translation. *Vel Sizifs akmeni*, montazas lapas [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive. Plaudis’s reference here of “being invited to be open” may be considered the first allusion to *glasnost* in Podnieks’s oeuvre, and Plaudis’s response foreshadows the new challenges that this policy of openness will soon bring in Soviet societies.

158 “Mate te teica ta: ‘Dels, uztaisi kapu pieminekli, lai visa gimene butu kopa dzimta zeme, jo dzive mes nevarejam kopa but.’” My translation. *Vel Sizifs akmeni*, montazas lapas [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.
of Skarainis’s narration of his family’s tragic history, while visually, Podnieks alternates between close ups of the sculptor talking and old photographs depicting Skarainis’s family members.

Podnieks explores the relationship between artistic production, the death of individuals, the destruction of artworks, and personal and public history present in the creative process of these three artists (and, by extension, in the practice of all artists living under Communism). Skarainis relates how his father, a devoted Communist who moved his family to Russia in 1919, was repressed and executed during the Stalin era, even though the family received news of his rehabilitation. Meanwhile, when the Nazis occupied their little city, Skarainis’s older sister was deported by the Germans. Skarainis explains that he himself was deported in 1942 and shuffled between multiple German labor camps until he ended up in a concentration camp in 1944.

As Skarainis recounts this history, images of old photographs of his father, mother, siblings, and himself as a youth appear, double-exposed with close ups of grainy rock surfaces. Since Skarainis, as a sculptor, chooses to create art in stone, merging the photographs of the artist’s family with images of stone reflects the filmmaker’s argument that politics inform art, and that the memory of events from his family’s history affect Skarainis’s sculpture, as well as the artwork of his Soviet contemporaries. Skarainis recognizes this fact, telling Plaudis: “And I have to, in some form, be able to reflect also my family’s fate and almost even the fate of the
Skarainis acknowledges the urgency he feels to work through his family and country’s painful history, responding to his mother’s wishes for her son to use his artistic talent for commemorative purposes.

Skarainis is not the only artist featured in Vel Sizifs akmeni who feels the weight of history and death on his or her art. In the second half of the film, Podnieks shows Dumpe destroying a clay model she has created, placing a human skull on the smashed mound and declaring it a sculpture. Dumpe, through her act of demolition and the deployment of the human skull, tries to illustrate the necessary ‘death’ that is required if an artist wishes to generate something new. In order to be innovative, an artist must destroy that which she has previously created. For Dumpe, the human skull symbolizes this death, both as the part of a skeleton and as part of the artist’s new art object.

Plaudis also uses Dumpe’s personal history (being a child during World War II), to point to her generation’s artistic vision being shaped by this early experience with death. Dumpe remembers: “We saw there [in Kurzeme, where she grew up during WWII] both death and suffering, but I just perceived it as a game.” Plaudis responds by stating: “All of their imaginations were formed during the war time. I think that this influenced that generation’s psychic unconscious.

159 “Un man viena kaut kada veidola jaatspogulo ari savas gimenes liktenis un gandrīz jau latviešu tautas liktenis.” My translation. Vel Sizifs akmeni, montazas lapas [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.

160 “Mes tur redzejam gan navi, gan ciesanas, bet es tik un ta to uztveru ka speli.” My translation. Vel Sizifs akmeni, montazas lapas [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.
That generation is simultaneously tragic and romantic.\textsuperscript{161} Plaudis offers one possible explanation for the idea of art and death in the work of contemporary artists.

The passing of their mentors also has influenced the careers of everyone belonging to these artists’s generation. Immediately following the sequence with Skarainis, Podnieks cuts to footage from the funeral of the famous Latvian sculptor Teodors Zalkans (1876-1972). Zalkalns was one of the first Latvian professional sculptors, and his statues of refugee women created during World War I became symbols for Latvian nationalists. Zalkalns functioned as a pioneer for Latvian sculpture, and he, along with Emils Melderis (1889-1979) and Karlis Zemdegs (1894-1963) served as Dumpe, Gulbis, Skarainis, and Plaudis’s teachers. When this group of sculptors died, their students finished the projects begun by the older generation and gained fame as a result. While footage from Zalkans’s funeral appears on screen, Gulbis’s off-screen voice describes how his death fueled the careers of his students:

“Zalkalns, Melderis, Zemdega – our teachers passed away, just when the artistic renaissance of the 60s began. And we had the chance to finish or realize their concepts. That is how we climbed on to that rising wave.”\textsuperscript{162}


dominates the soundtrack, the film cuts to photographs of Zemdegs’s model of a memorial to Rainis, Zemdegs himself chiseling away at it, and Gulbis by the same monument. This last image also implies that the new generation had to carry on the tradition of Latvian national art in the context of Soviet internationalism.

This scene foregrounds the interconnectedness of this generation’s art with death, and underlines the responsibility that these artists face. Their teachers laid the foundation for Latvian sculpture, and created artistically and culturally significant art works during the time of Latvia’s first independence. Now, Skarainis, Dumpe, and Gulbis inherit the duty of continuing their teachers’s work while appeasing Communist authorities and finding a way to develop Latvian art even further in their own unique manner. The pressure that this generation experiences, applied from many different directions, translates into feelings of frustration, ambivalence, confusion, and bitterness, with little room left for any hope that they might yet find the answers they seek.

These sentiments appear in the philosophy regarding art that the sculptors express. Gulbis explains his views on the contemporary creative process:

[…B]ut it is easy to find oneself ‘in fashion’ if we do not change. Well, I don’t want to repeat myself. But the advisers, the casters that never change – they repeat themselves. They want you to be the way you used to be. Forward, I think. It is too wasteful to be able to give in and to be able to spend one’s energy there, on something you don’t believe in right now. Yes,… one should still hold on to one’s own to the maximum, one should develop one’s own thinking or bring that concept along as completely and as far as possible.163

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163 “[…]et atrasties uz vilna viegli ir tad, ja mes esam nemainigi. Nu, negribas jau atkartoties. Bet atkartojas jau tie padomdeveji, tie lietprateji, kas nemainas, tie grib no tevis dabut ara tads kads tu esi bijis agrak. Uz prieksu, es ta domaju, tas ir par daudz izskerdigi, lai varetu piekapties, un lai varetu, nu savu energiju izlietot tur, kur tu
Gulbis wishes to rebel against the Soviet establishment’s desire to keep everyone in their proper place. Gulbis’s discussion of the problems of artistic expression in Communist society reflects his giving primacy to personal expression over conforming to political demands.

However, Gulbis pays a high price for this attitude, as Podnieks demonstrates when he chronicles the Communist attack on one of Gulbis’s monumental sculptures. The Soviet authorities had commissioned Gulbis to create colossal statues along with a sculpture of stars shooting towards the sky to adorn Victory Square, and before the statues were erected, Gulbis received news that an aspect of one of his sculptures was unacceptable. Gulbis had created a massive woman with her arms stretched upward triumphantly, surrounded by fluttering drapery and a large flag unfolding behind her. A young child appeared to fly out of the folds of the flag, symbolizing the future, but this was offensive in the eyes of the Communist establishment, which forced Gulbis to remove the aberrant baby. Gulbis elucidates what transpired:

He carried the idea of the future, in that way, yes… He was an idea, not actually something concrete, because he came from the folds of the flag. He could even be that, yes, the next one… […] The real argument, perhaps, was that he was reminiscent of a flying child that

sobrid ta nedoma. Ja,… ka vajadzetu maksimali tomer tureties pie savu, attistit savu domasanu jeb to ieceri novest maksimali cik var.” My translation. Vel Sizifs akmeni, montazas lapas [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.

164 The Victory Square complex was dedicated to the Red Army’s victory over the Nazis and was meant to commemorate the victims of the Nazi occupation of Latvia from 1941-1945. The commission and subsequent unveiling of Gulbs’s statues in 1985 celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Nazi defeat. For more information on the history of Victory Square and the unveiling of this monument in 1985, see Irena Davidsone, Rigas darzi un parki (Riga: Liesma, 1988), 147-150.
maybe called to mind old church paintings or sculptures. Well, maybe an angel or Cupid. The message was conveyed to the Ministry of Culture’s Expert Commission to write in their protocol that this figure of a child should not be included. I have lost the idea, yes, of why this monument was necessary. That future, that future which should have been in that monument, *that* would have been exactly what would have completed the upper composition. But I can’t convince anyone about this.\(^{165}\)

Gulbis’s pursuit to express himself through his sculpture and to press forward the conceptual ideas of his artwork is thwarted by Communist dogma.

The other artists featured in *Vel Sizifs akmeni* empathize with Gulbis’s frustration, although they choose to articulate their dissatisfaction with their artistic situation in different ways. Plaudis sees his generation of artists as treading the same shallow water as they always have, remaining unchanged throughout the years (a stagnation implicitly caused by the Communist government’s control of all creative output). He shares his feelings about this artistic situation on the soundtrack, while spectators see different artists taking turns unsuccessfully attempting to climb up an unruly rope ladder in the woods. Podnieks visualizes the emotion of Plaudis’s words, depicting the struggle to achieve something artistically worthwhile in a Soviet society as a constant battle with little significant progress.

Dumpe reminds audiences about the artists’ need to economically survive, reminding viewers that existing as an artist under Communism entails more than personal expression. Plaudis engages Dumpe in a debate in her studio concerning the lack of meaning in contemporary sculptural gestures. Plaudis exclaims: “We surrender too easily to the pose desired by the patron, too easily to the patron, let’s say we serve the joker.” Dumpe replies: “Yes, but without the patron, it is hard to work, too.”

Skarainis, too, speaks about the negotiation involved in the generation of new art in the Soviet Union. While sculptor Lea Davidova-Medene explains her monument of Krisjanis Barons during an art critique by the Soviet Art Council, Skarainis’s voice dominates the soundtrack, discussing the nature of the Council and its decisions on art: “I go to these art critiques everywhere, and there is only a search for compromise. […] There, when everyone began attacking Davidova for her Krisjanis Barons sculpture, then the artwork becomes worse and worse… even though the entire art council thought that the sculpture was good.”

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166 “Mes viegli padodamies pasutitaja pozai, pasutitajam, teiksim jokerim, kalpojam.” My translation. *Vel Sizifs akmeni*, montazas lapas [*Sisyphus Rolls His Stone*, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.


frustration is echoed by the sarcastic words of Davidova-Medene, spoken in synch at the end of this sequence: “Yes, thank you for the twentieth time, for the twenty-first time. To the Commission, thank you. It’s a good thing that we live in the Soviet Union, otherwise I would not be able to pay you.”

In the following sequence, Dumpe appears in a close up in her studio, working on one of her sculptural creations, followed by a close up of Plaudis reclining in Skarainis’s studio (audiences will soon see that he is listening to Skarainis speak). Skarainis off-screen voice states: “New subject matter must relate to new form, that is something everyone knows. But how to achieve that – it seems to me that no one knows that.”

Perhaps Gulbis remains the most articulate of the artists featured in Vel Sizifs akmeni. During the sequence where Davidova-Medene defends her sculpture to the Soviet Art Council, his voice dominates the soundtrack before Skarainis speaks about art critiques. Before the camera cuts to the outdoor sculpture yard where the critique occurs, the camera zooms to a close up of Gulbis speaking in his studio: “Yes, it is

169 “Ja, paldies par 20 rezi, par 21 reizi, Komisija, paldies Jums. Labi, ka mes dzivojām Padomju Savienībā, citādi es nespetu Jums samaksat.” My translation. Vel Sizifs akmeni, montažas lapas [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive. Davidova’s remarks intend to mock the Soviet Art Council’s ludicrous critiques of her work. Her comment sarcastically suggests that their criticism is so precious, that the council members would be monetarily rewarded for such analysis in a capitalist society. However, since they all live under Communism, such ‘astute’ feedback is available for free. In other words, Davidova’s sentiments express her anger and hostility at an ideological system that privileges Party doctrine and conformity over unique artistic expression.

170 “Jaunam saturam jabat atbilstosai jaunai formai, nu visi to zin. Bet ka to izdarit, ma liekas, nevien to nezin.” My translation. Vel Sizifs akmeni, montažas lapas [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.
good that a person begins to work with stone chiseling, since he chisels into the stone images and these images keep him going so that he can live his life happy, satisfied.

[Since] no one on the periphery [of society] can ever feel at ease in the skin that he had envisioned for himself.”

Gulbis’s sentiments reflect a longing for artistic satisfaction and inner peace, a desire impossible to achieve in a society under Soviet hegemony. The visual track changes to show Davidova defending her artwork, while Gulbis’s thoughts become increasingly critical:

How we are big barbarians, yes – we go to another person, assemble in a herd, each with his own idea, yes. And from that, there almost remains nothing of one’s individuality at times. We live in a social era, with social judgments, and we actually level everything down so that everything around us is equal and the same. And that which is considered the most correct is the middle ground – that which is of higher quality is bad, and that which is of lower quality is also bad.

Gulbis voices the core of the problem that artists face in a Communist society, where theoretically everything and everyone is egalitarian. How can artists achieve anything new and meaningful within this system that discourages the new and the individual, and which forbids the exceptional and inspired?

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171 “Ja, ir labi, ka cilveks sak nodarboties ar akmens kalsanu, vins akmeni iekal telus, un sie teli vinu uztur un vins nodzivo to dzivi tada prieka, apmierinatiba. [Jo] neviens no malas jau ar nevar iedzivoties ta ada, ko vins ir gribejis.” My translation. Vel Sizifs akmeni, montzas lapas [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.

172 “Cik mes esam lieli barbari, ja, - ejam pie otra, sanak, bara, katram sava doma, ja, un no ta, tas individualitates tur gandriz reizem nepaliek neka. Mes dzivojam tada sabiedriska laikmeta, ar sabiedriskam spriedelesanam, un mes faktiski nonivelejam visu, kas mums ir apkart, un viss tas pareizakais ir tas videja, - un kas ir augstak tas slikti, un kas ir zemak, tas arī ir slikti.” My translation. Vel Sizifs akmeni, montzas lapas [Sisyphus Rolls His Stone, screenplay notes], the Latvian State Audio-Visual Archive.
Gulbis, like the other artists, cannot offer any answers to this quandary, but Podnieks, through his editing, framing, and soundtrack choices, argues that eliminating Communism is the answer. In 1985, this still appeared as improbable, and the featured artists continue to struggle. The film’s conclusion encapsulates the fate of this generation. In the final sequence, Skarainis, Dumpe, and Gulbis walk through the forest at night (the same woods where they unveiled their sculpture exhibition at the beginning of the documentary). Podnieks shows each artist in a close up, walking in slow motion, until they all reach a work of art covered by a sheet. They pull off the sheet together to reveal the plaster masks of their faces, lined up in a row on the grass. One of the faces, however, begins to speak – Plaudis has covered his face in plaster and has situated himself among the artists’s masks to recite the final words of the film: “Sisyphus rolls his stone. Perhaps this stone was happiness to Sisyphus and not his punishment? Perhaps without the stone, there would be no life?”¹⁷³

In order to fully comprehend the significance of this conclusion (as well as the title of the film), one must relate the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was a clever and cunning mortal, who outwitted major gods, such as Zeus and Hades, repeatedly during his lifetime. However, once he finally passed away, the gods had their revenge and punished the mortal. Every day, Sisyphus had to push a heavy stone up to the top of a hill, and just before reaching the summit, the stone would roll back down to the bottom, forever preventing Sisyphus from completing his task.

Aside from providing a symmetrical ending to the documentary’s opening sequence, the inclusion of the masks at the film’s conclusion, coupled with the reference to Sisyphus, summarizes the crux of Podnieks’s argument in *Vel Sizifs akmeni*, while also attempting to end the film on a hopeful note. Skarainis, Dumpe, Gulbis, Plaudis, and all of their artistic colleagues, through their struggles to create meaningful art under Communism, assume the role of Sisyphus (an appropriate comparison considering the importance of stone to both the mythical figure and to the sculptor). The sculptors continue their battle despite the Communist authorities consistently rolling their metaphorical stones back to the bottom of the hill. Ultimately, the artists speak through their art - metaphorically and even literally, considering that Plaudis’s plaster-covered face blends in with the actual masks on the ground before he begins to talk. In the face of the seemingly insurmountable challenges confronting these artists, Podnieks shows that they find meaning in their life by resisting the regime through their struggle to keep creating art.

Like *Komandieris*, *Vel Sizifs akmeni* asserts that personal events and issues express the larger history and concerns of society. The individual histories of Skarainis and Dumpe illustrate the plight of many Latvians from their generation, all of whom experienced suffering and witnessed the horrors of war at an early age. Although this film focuses on only a handful of artists, film scholar Anita Uzulniece
characterizes the director as possessing a “feel for history,” while scholar Abrams Klockins states: “Within [the sculptors’s] lives, the everyday and the essence, eternity and history are all indestructibly tied.”\textsuperscript{174}

One may also understand the individual problems of self-expression faced by Gulbis, Dumpe, Skarainis, and Plaudis as reflecting the problem of many people living in a totalitarian society. Does a person articulate his or her ideas honestly and risk punishment from the authorities (for example, in the form of losing one’s employment or commission), or does an individual sacrifice the need to sincerely communicate his or her thoughts in order to survive and possibly receive party approval? How does one find an acceptable compromise? Is this even possible? The dilemmas that these Latvian artists encounter affect many in Latvia and elsewhere in the U.S.S.R., and Podnieks urges spectators to reflect on how they have negotiated these issues in their own lives by presenting the four artists of the film in a sympathetic manner, encouraging viewers to identify with their plight. Film critic Inta Lehmusa recognizes Podnieks’s effort to demonstrate the commonality of these problems: “What is shown in twenty minutes on screen tells us about art and about artists, but in actuality, it speaks about each one of us.”\textsuperscript{175}


\textsuperscript{175} “Divdesmit minutes uz ekrana mums rada un stasta par makslu un maksliniekiem, bet istoriba runa par ikvienu no mums.” My translation. Inta Lehmusa, “Sis grutais uzdevums – dzive,” Padomju Jaunatne (1986.g.4.februaris), 4.
Podnieks’s early films display many of the characteristics of glasnost cinema years before Gorbachev implemented his reforms. Within the context of contemporary Soviet society, Podnieks’s choice of formal techniques and treatment of subject matter deviated from the established Stalin-era Soviet documentary tradition. These early films form the foundation for Podnieks’s later work, work that would receive critical and popular attention in the U.S.S.R. and abroad.
CHAPTER 3

THE MATURE PERIOD

After completing *Vel Sizifs akmeni*, Podnieks commenced work on the film project that would change his career and influence Soviet documentary filmmaking. *Vai viegli but jaunam? [Is it Easy to Be Young?, 1986]* marks the beginning of Podnieks’s mature filmmaking period, which would continue until the director’s death in June, 1992. Within these six years, he worked intensely, traveling across the Soviet Union with his film crew and creating six documentaries, including the five-hour film cycle *Mes? [Soviets, 1989]*.

Podnieks’s mature film style exhibits most of the qualities and techniques apparent in his earlier work. He continues to employ frequent close ups and slow motion to depict affect and the subjective viewpoints of his interviewees, while discarding omniscient voice-over narration on the soundtrack. Now, music, diegetic sounds, and the voices of the film subjects dominate the aural register to shape the meaning of each film. Also, with *Vai viegli but jaunam?*, Podnieks begins using freeze-frames to further draw the spectator’s attention to particular images. All of these techniques continue Podnieks’s privileging of the visual over the aural in his films.
Podnieks’s self-reflexivity also intensifies, the director increasingly appearing on camera. Film cameras and other recording devices continue to invade the frame, reminding viewers that they are witnessing a construction with a particular point of view. Moreover, like Vertov in *Man with a Movie Camera*, Podnieks always presents himself and his crew as part of ‘the people’, constantly emphasizing that the interviewers exist on the same level as the interviewees. Podnieks shows himself visually and metaphorically on equal footing with his film subjects, with whom he interacts in their own environments.

This prominent interaction between the director, his crew, and the people interviewed situates Podnieks’s mature films within an amalgam of the participatory, reflexive, and performative modes of documentary cinema. Film scholar Bill Nichols defines the participatory mode as “emphasiz[ing] the interaction between filmmaker and subject.”\(^\text{176}\) The participatory mode embodies *cinéma vérité* and Vertov’s ideas about the film functioning as a conduit to a special knowledge about the world. Nichols explains:

> As ‘film truth,’ the idea emphasizes that this is the truth of an encounter rather than the absolute or untampered truth. We see how the filmmaker and subject negotiate a relationship, how they act toward one another, what forms of power and control come into play, and what levels of revelation or rapport stem from this specific form of encounter. […]If there is a truth here it is the truth of a form of interaction that would not exist were it not for the camera.\(^\text{177}\)

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\(^\text{176}\) Nichols, 34.

\(^\text{177}\) Nichols, 118.
Podnieks’s mature films employ the participatory mode to demonstrate to spectators in the glasnost context a degree of openness and honesty unknown in Soviet documentary before the Gorbachev era. As film historians Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky note: “[…T]he documentary, the only art dealing directly with reality, emerged as one of the most active expressions of glasnost.” The documentaries that Podnieks created during the period between 1986 and 1992 foreground the importance of his relationship with the interviewees, encouraging viewers to see his films as vehicle of glasnost.

Podnieks continues the idea of his documentaries embracing the new glasnost ethos by employing the reflexive mode of address. Instead of functioning as a tool of the Communist regime, Podnieks’s work breaks with that tradition of Stalinist-era Soviet documentary in order to embrace Vertov’s cinematic methodology, where the filmmaker reminds the spectators that what they see on the screen is a mediated manufacturing of reality. Nichols characterizes the reflexive mode:

[…T]he processes of negotiation between filmmaker and viewer become the focus of attention for the reflexive mode. […]e now attend to how we represent the historical world as well as to what gets represented. Instead of seeing through documentaries to the world beyond them, reflexive documentaries ask us to see documentary for what it is: a construct or representation.

Horton and Brashinsky also note Podnieks’s espousal of Vertov’s filmmaking philosophy in Vai viegli but jaunam?, writing:

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178 Horton and Brashinsky, 129.

179 Nichols, 125.
Throughout the film, we hear and occasionally glimpse the filmmaker, questioning, on the move. We feel how personal a film it is for Podnieks, and the degree to which he pushes himself, his camera, and his subjects, like Vertov before him, to create a contemporary Kino Eye [...]. One can hardly imagine, however, two filmmakers more different in ideological approach (as distinguished from cinematic style and technique) than Vertov, the enthusiastic defender of the Communist cause, and Podnieks, a sharp commentator on the flaws of the system as it relates to young people.¹⁸⁰

Horton and Brashinsky’s observation about the dissimilar political views of these two filmmakers suggests that spectators may also interpret Podnieks’s use of the reflexive mode as his commentary on the Soviet government. Utilizing the reflexive mode, Podnieks proposes that, just as documentaries manipulate images of reality, so, too, the Communist authorities project a created vision of what they want their citizens (and the rest of the world) to believe.

Podnieks also draws on the performative mode in his mature work to critique the ruling regime, as well as to investigate such topics as the concerns of the young and the problems of artistic and self-expression. Nichols identifies the performative mode as “rais[ing] questions about what is knowledge.”¹⁸¹ He remarks:

> Is knowledge best described as abstract and disembodied, based on generalizations and the typical, in the tradition of Western philosophy? Or is knowledge better described as concrete and embodied, based on the specificities of personal experience, in the tradition of poetry, literature, and rhetoric? Performative documentary endorses the latter position and sets out to demonstrate how embodied knowledge provides entry into an understanding of the more general processes at work in society.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Horton and Brashinsky, 75.

¹⁸¹ Nichols, 130.

¹⁸² Nichols, 131.
Podnieks’s documentaries during the glasnost period apply the performative mode to emphasize the subjective viewpoints of his film subjects. He foregrounds the affective elements of their experiences to show the complexity of their worlds, thus opposing the Communist regime’s traditional propagandistic vision of an existence consisting of binary oppositions (such as socialism and capitalism). Moreover, this use of the performative mode illustrates Podnieks’s project to reveal the contemporary Communist government’s dichotomy between the private and the public as a construction. Through an examination of embodied knowledge (i.e., the personal), Podnieks argues that one may gain a better comprehension of social concerns. As Nichols states: “Performative documentary restores a sense of magnitude to the local, specific, and embodied. It animates the personal so that it may become our port of entry to the political.”

While this approach may seem commonplace in today’s viewers, the focus on the subjectivity of the interviewees and of the filmmaker astonished audiences in the Soviet Union at the beginning of the glasnost era. Horton and Brashinsky clarify the Soviet reception during this historical period: “Common voices, stunning revelations; breathtaking details and unique destinies. What unites these documentaries and makes them essential works of glasnost, aside from the subject matter of the painful past, if

183 Nichols, 137.
the openness of their attitude (another dimension of glasnost).” Soviet spectators had not seen such inspiring documentaries since Vertov’s time, creating a scandal across the U.S.S.R. in the late 1980s.

The most notable change in Podnieks’s work may be seen in the director making his previously hidden subversive subtext considerably more overt, and even openly confrontational. By the late 1980s, Podnieks increasingly addresses nationalist Latvian spectators in an unconcealed manner, and even expands his cinematic rhetoric to speak to the dissidents in other Soviet republics and satellites, as well as to audiences in the western world (such as United Kingdom and the United States, where several of Podnieks’s mature documentaries were aired on television). This new frankness may be attributed to Gorbachev’s sweeping social reforms of glasnost and perestroika. Film scholar Patricia Zimmermann explains:

Glasnost’s greatest impact was not felt by taxi drivers or farmers or miners, but by documentary producers in the state-run film and television studios. It was documentary productions that advanced the openness of the new Soviet state, rummaging through repressed archives of images to excavate history, reviving memory and languages other than Russian, exploring youth and minority cultures, and searching for ways to revive a concept of individuality and selfhood seemingly exiled from the more rigid Communist regime.185

With open dialogues and candid discussions now being encouraged by the Communist leader, Podnieks’s Latvian nationalism and critiques of Communism became progressively more evident, with the director leading the way in a significant shift in Soviet documentary cinema.

184 Horton and Brashinsky, 138.

One should note the important difference in the way Podnieks champions nationalism in his mature work as compared to his support of it in his earlier films. While the director’s expression of nationalism still manifests a dichotomy between the ‘victimized Latvians’ and the ‘oppressive Soviets,’ Podnieks eventually assumes a more international perspective, expanding the category of the “victim of Communist rule” to include all of the ethnicities in the U.S.S.R. (including Russians), Russian Orthodox believers, and all women (whether factory workers, mothers, beauty queens, young brides, or political activists). However, Podnieks’s anti-Soviet views still ‘imagine’ nations of dissenters united in their fight against Communist hegemony, neglecting the multitude of differences embodied by the inhabitants of the U.S.S.R. Podnieks acknowledges the wealth of problems due to ethnic, class, gender, and religious conflicts unleashed by the collapse of the Soviet Union only at the end of Imperijas gals, hinting at the struggles that the nationalistic rhetoric previously repressed.

*Vai viegli but jaunam? [Is It Easy to Be Young?, 1986]*

When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev implemented his glasnost plan after assuming control of the U.S.S.R. in 1985, he set into motion a force of social change that would drastically alter the constitution of Soviet culture. This new policy of openness and disclosure transformed every aspect of life in the Soviet Union, including documentary cinema. The Soviet film world proved among the first to take advantage of glasnost, and *Vai viegli but jaunam?* functions as Podnieks’s answer to glasnost. In this documentary, Podnieks individually interviews a collection of adolescents from a variety of backgrounds living in Latvia, inviting them to discuss
their personal goals, as well as their hopes for the future. The teenagers respond with honesty and acumen, frequently appearing as more rational and mature than the adult authorities around them.

The frankness of this documentary shocked spectators across the Soviet Union and made Vai viegli but jaunam? a sensation in Soviet cinema history. Russian journalist Alexander Kiselev claims: “Since its completion, the film has created a stir comparable to the panic a terrorist act in the heart of Moscow could cause.”186 Never before had a film explored such taboo topics as drug abuse and the war in Afghanistan with this level of openness, and audiences filled theatres throughout the U.S.S.R. to view the documentary that dared to address the forbidden. Film critic and one of the screenwriters of Vai viegli but jaunam? Abrams Klockins noted that spectators in Moscow waited in line for 2-3 hours for the possibility of obtaining a ticket for the next day’s screenings, and that audience members applauded throughout the entire film showing.187 Meanwhile, Russian film critic Levs Anninskis captures the contemporary atmosphere of awe and excitement surrounding the work when describing a preview screening of the film in Moscow:

As soon as the film ended and the film club chairmen asked if there were any comments or questions, someone called out from the audience: “May I ask the director something? […] Do you consider yourself a naïve person? […] What are you hoping for? Do you really think that this film will ever be shown in theatres?” At this point, a

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woman, the organizer of this preview screening, who was on the stage next to Podnieks […] spoke quickly and excitedly: “Today the Art Advisory Board met! The film has been accepted! Without any objections!” Then the spectators truly froze in silence. […] I […] began to look at the faces: well, my dears! Why are you silent? […] And, while the torment-filled silence enveloped the hall, I suddenly realized, almost in a flash: we do not even know what to say. This situation for us is too unusual.188

Anninskis’s account points to the radical new social situation created by glasnost, with Podnieks’s documentary acting as a catalyst for change in both the realm of cinema and in Soviet culture. Klockins observes: “[…]ow good is our film – only time will tell; but the degree to which it corresponds to the perestroika era’s atmosphere and hopes – that we witnessed with our own eyes.”189 Film scholar Ian Christie agrees, describing how the screening of Vai viegli but jaunam? signaled a massive cinematic and social shift in the U.S.S.R.. He writes:

In 1986, Yuris Podnieks’s documentary Is It Easy to Be Young? provided a public platform for mounting concern about the generation that had borne the brunt of the Afghan war. Feature documentaries have never been any easier to show commercially in Russian than elsewhere, but the demand for Podnieks’s film was overwhelming. And in one of the key symbolic gestures of the glasnost period, the


189 “[…]ik musu filma ir laba, to paradis laiks, tacu, cik ta izradijas saskana ar parkartosanas laika atmosferu un cerībām, - par to parliecinājamies pasu acim.” My translation. Klockins, 3.
huge flagship cinema in Moscow’s Pushkin Square switched Boris Godunov with Is It Easy to Be Young?, moving Bondarchuk’s ponderous costume pic from the large auditorium to the small and giving Podnieks’s urgent exploration of malaise among Soviet youth a prestige forum. In that moment, a cinema’s programming decision reflected – perhaps even helped precipitate – a seismic swing in the national psyche. The issues were coming out into the open, and cinemas full of emotional people were very different from scattered dissidents.\(^{190}\)

*Vai viegli but jaunam?* functions as Podnieks’s most in-depth exploration of the concerns of youth to date. The title of Podnieks’s documentary poses a rhetorical question that the film seems to answer. In Podnieks’s perspective, it is not easy to be young, no matter where one grows up. Misunderstanding between different generations, lack of communication with parents, feelings of alienation and loneliness, and an intensity of emotion all characterize the developmental stages of adolescence and young adulthood, and Podnieks includes these issues in his film.

Yet, it seems to be particularly difficult to reach adulthood in a Communist society. Much like the director’s previous work, *Vel Sizifs akmeni*, the film *Vai viegli but jaunam?* investigates the problems of self-expression under the Soviets, focusing on how the oppressive regime damages the lives of many young people. The film begins with footage filmed at a rock concert in the Latvian city of Ogre on July 6, 1985. Podnieks shows the adolescent crowd enthusiastically clapping their hands and singing along, many of the attendees pressing forward to get closer to the stage. Podnieks presents the teenagers wildly dancing, experiencing a freedom that is lacking in the rest of their lives. As film scholars Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky observe:

\(^{190}\) Ian Christie, “Glasnost Cinema,” *Film Comment* (Vol. 31, Nr. 2, 1995), 42.
The opening rock concert is in itself an important statement about the increasing significance of pop music in Soviet youth culture. [...] Until only a few years ago [the Soviets] were not allowed to hold such concerts openly. To start the film with so many Latvian teenagers ‘just having fun’ at a pop concert, therefore, is significant. Podnieks succeeds in capturing these young people when they feel most ‘free,’ and he has recorded a last fling of adolescence before each is forced to choose a direction in life. 191

Later, through some trial sequences, audiences learn that after the concert, hundreds of teenagers vandalized a train car heading back to Riga. Out of the throng of adolescents, only seven were arrested and charged with the crime. At the trial, each youth and his respective parent is questioned by a panel of judges, each boy stating his guilt except for one – Raimonds Plorins. He maintains his innocence, but despite or perhaps because of this, the court sentences only Plorins to three years in a hard labor camp; the rest of the charged adolescents receive suspended sentences, probation, and a fine. As one of the judges reads the sentence, Plorins appears in a close up standing next to the other defendants, collapsing forward as he hears his fate. Podnieks films Plorins’s despair as the young man tears at his hair and tearfully waves goodbye to his mother when police officers remove him from the courtroom.

By presenting audiences with a glimpse into the judicial process under Communism, combined with the scenes of Plorins’s devastation upon receiving his sentence, Podnieks urges audiences to see the institutional injustice committed against a young man whose only actual crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Podnieks’s inclusion of the testimony and interrogation of the other arrested boys who all unpersuasively admit their guilt (i.e., articulating what the court

191 Horton and Brashinsky, 72. For more on the political significance of rock music in Soviet culture, see Horton and Brashinsky, 72-82.
expects them to express) only increases the sense that this social institution specifically targets Plorins for deviating from the implicit codes of conforming behavior. Because Plorins dares to maintain his innocence, society punishes him harshly.

Podnieks best sums up this Soviet justice by including an interview with another youth charged in the crime, Aivars. Over footage from the trial, including medium shots of the arrested adolescents, the soundtrack features Aivars’s voice offering a critique of the entire process. He states: “The first abomination took place in the train, and the second is happening here [in the courtroom]. In the first instance, the damage was material, and here the damage is moral. In both cases, the effect is irreversible.” Aivars’s words express one of Podnieks’s main themes: any physical destruction that teenagers may inflict in a moment of rebellion cannot compare to the psychic harm caused by the Soviet regime. Objects may always be replaced, but human lives cannot.

The youths in Podnieks’s documentary experience the harshness of Communism, and their comments throughout the film assume another level of meaning. What one would read as adolescent angst in another circumstance becomes a critique of the Soviet establishment here. Podnieks explores the world of the punks in Riga, engaging in a discussion with Aivars about the philosophy of this group of transgressive young people. Aivars explains that he and his fellow punks believe that “[a]ll troubles come from the adult world,” and that, consequently, he has “turned

\[192\] Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. *Is It Easy To Be Young?* English subtitled version released in the United States by International Film Exchange, LTD.
[his] back on one performance in favor of another kind of performance.”193 He continues by claiming that the punks strive to be more truthful than the authority figures in their lives who misunderstand them, and that they dress in their manner to demonstrate how they are trashy and filthy. Aivars declares: “We’re tattered, but we’re your children and you made us this way.”194 Aivars’s words illustrate his generation’s disdain for a Communist society that scorns a social group that dares to dissent. Not only do the punks challenge Communist hegemony through their provocative and deviant appearance, but their very existence boldly defies party propaganda, since their presence functions as proof that there is no Soviet utopia.

Perhaps the most severe critique of Communism voiced by Aivars in regards to the punk culture concerns the prevalent Soviet rewriting of history. Aivars states:

[Society] has created [the punks] by everything it has done, and now it’s trying to wipe them out. If society doesn’t change its attitude towards youth, then others will take the place of the punks. I don’t know what they’ll call themselves, Skins or something else, and then the same thing will continue only in another form. The attempt to pretend that we don’t have punks, never had hippies, never had Beatniks […] – that’s senseless! It’s an attempt to color over. We’ve already denied so much of our history. […] It’s a war against nature, like giving birth to a child and then destroying it, instead of nurturing it.195

Aivars sentiments convey a harsh evaluation of contemporary Soviet society. He highlights the fact that the regime’s totalitarian structure produced these punks – the social group functions as a reaction to Communist oppression (and not as a random set of disturbed troublemakers). Aivars also indicates that youthful opposition to the

193 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. *Is It Easy To Be Young?*

194 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. *Is It Easy To Be Young?*

195 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. *Is It Easy To Be Young?*
dominant government has always existed and will persist as long as the culture
remains authoritarian, suppressing dissent and demanding conformity to the party
propaganda, approaches which are, Aivars implies, unnatural and ultimately
detrimental. Finally, Aivars calls attention to the Party’s revision of history (through
refusal to acknowledge that dissent has always existed, that not everyone has
embraced Communism, and that the Soviets have the capacity to be fallible) and its
obvious inability to cope with the present (the government’s continued desire to crush
any and all forms of rebellion instead of addressing the cause of the problems).

The most biting condemnation of the Soviet government appears towards the
end of the film when Podnieks introduces the topic of the war in Afghanistan. Since
the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, hundreds of thousands of young men
from across the Soviet Union, including many from Latvia, had been deployed to
combat indigenous rebels of the Afghan national liberation movement. By 1986,
when Podnieks completed *Vai viegli but jaunam?*, the Communists had made little
progress in stabilizing the region, while thousands of soldiers had been killed as
others returned home severely physically and mentally injured from the war.¹⁹⁶ For
many, it appeared as if there was no end in sight for the armed conflict.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ According to some reports, the war with Afghanistan incurred more than 13,000
casualties and 35,000 wounded soldiers for the Soviet Union. Mohammad Yousaf and
Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan – The Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower* (Havertown,

¹⁹⁷ Ultimately, the Afghani rebel forces, called the Mujahideen, defeated the Soviet
army by 1989. For more information on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, see Jeri
Laber and Barnett R. Rubin, “*A Nation is Dying:*” *Afghanistan under the Soviets
1979-87* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-8; Thomas T.
Podnieks interviews several young Latvian veterans who have recently returned from their tour of duty in Afghanistan only to find themselves in an odd social limbo, unable to return to their former lives. One former soldier, Guntis, arrives back in Latvia without the use of a leg, with one of his colleagues, Vents, lamenting: “[Guntis] will never be whole. He’s young, he dreamt of dancing.” Vents, who became a firefighter after his tour of duty, appears as one of the most outspoken and critical of the veterans. He condemns the contemporary Communist propaganda and the lack of honest public disclosure by the Soviet government concerning the state of the war in Afghanistan. He maintains: “The injured, the crippled, and the dead. Nobody ever gets the real news here. Here and there, in the middle of a huge article [in a newspaper], a few spare lines [about the realities of war]. The rest [are] your victory marches.” Vents’s sentiments attack the media and the government’s insistence on perpetuating the party line while ignoring the human casualties of the Soviet military campaign. This greatly upsets Vents, since: “[F]or people like Guntis, it is damaging and hurtful. It is ok for me – I managed to get out of the lake dry. But for those like him, for them it is an abomination.”


198 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. Is It Easy To Be Young? When speaking about Guntis, Vents tells Podnieks in Latvian: “Vinam dzive ir sakroplota.” This text literally translates into “His life is crippled,” adding even more severity to Vents’s indictment of the war in Afghanistan.

199 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. Is It Easy To Be Young?.

200 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. Is It Easy To Be Young?
the way the Communist society pays no heed to the issues of the veterans: “All the
time I wanted to explain how complicated [fighting in Afghanistan] was, and how
hard it is for us now, all of us. But no – nobody wants to know. So now we’re closed
in, introverted. It’s scary to be excluded from life at 20.”

Vents analyzes the situation of the veterans who return from Afghanistan,
explaining how many soldiers experience an inability to reintegrate into society:
“Those who come back from war return to a different life, one where people go to
work and fall in love. But, after returning to that life, [the veterans] feel left out.”

Fighting in the war in Afghanistan transformed these young men to the point that
continuing their previous civilian lives is impossible. Vents himself struggled with the
repercussions of his time in Afghanistan, telling Podnieks: “First, when I got back, I
drank every day to forget, but subconsciously, you can not get away from it. And
later, I found this work [i.e., firefighting].” He explicates his new career decision,
stating: “It’s just that here it is somehow familiar, fighting the elements, the
danger.” For Vents, the only option for survival in mainstream society is to
participate in an occupation that, in certain aspects, recreates and continues the
combat experience.

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201 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. Is It Easy To Be Young?
202 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. Is It Easy To Be Young?
203 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. Is It Easy To Be Young?
204 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. Is It Easy To Be Young?
Vents is not the only veteran critical of the war and the Soviet mishandling of the conflict. Soldier Juris he feels his time in Afghanistan has left him feeling unclean: “I fear that this stain is now permanent.”\textsuperscript{205} He describes how he and his colleagues cope with the horrors they witness and with the atrocities they commit: “You bury your humanity very deeply. […] You’re left with a shell, it’s not the real you. It’s someone else doing this. There’s only one hope – to forget.”\textsuperscript{206} Like Vents, Juris cannot adjust to a ‘normal’, civilian life again because of the trauma he experienced. Echoing Vents’s sentiments, Juris explains that part of the reason reintegration into society proves impossible is the lack of governmental and community support for the soldiers. For example, Juris will not wear his medals because “[a]t the moment, I don’t see the point. People simply won’t understand.”\textsuperscript{207}

Vents and Juris are not alone in their anger, frustration, and confusion. Although Podnieks features only a handful of veterans, he encourages audiences to see these few as representing the thousands of young lives ruined by the military campaign in Afghanistan. By showing spectators these interviews, Podnieks urges viewers to understand how both the government and society as a whole choose to ignore or forget these young veterans. The director’s inclusion of these frank opinions tested the boundaries of glasnost. Film scholars Andrew Horton and Michael

\textsuperscript{205} Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. \textit{Is It Easy To Be Young?}

\textsuperscript{206} Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. \textit{Is It Easy To Be Young?}

\textsuperscript{207} Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. \textit{Is It Easy To Be Young?}
Brashinsky underline this significance of Podnieks’s interviews with the veterans by comparing it to the American context:

Afghanistan is clearly the Soviet Union’s Vietnam. But part of what is surprising in this film, especially for American audiences, is the extreme candor of such a documentary made **while the war was still being fought**. We in the United States, for instance, had no documentary of similar strength made about the effects of the war on veterans who returned home before the Vietnam War ended.208

Podnieks also demonstrates how the young adults’s critical assessments of Communism often contain nationalistic undertones, for example in the story of Stella, a sixteen-year-old girl interrogated by a group of clinicians after attempting suicide. Stella cries in front of a panel of doctors listening to one physician explain how the young woman took a costume from a local theatre in order to wear it for a photography shoot on the roof of the building. After the shoot, she discovered that the doors were locked and she was unable to return the dress. Although she did not intend to steal the dress, no one believed Stella, and, after her last interrogation when she was threatened with jail time, she threw herself out of the window. She fell into some electrical wires, after which she was taken to the hospital.

Instead of receiving counseling, Podnieks shows Stella being verbally assaulted by the people who should be helping her. In place of understanding and sympathy, the doctors tell Stella that she is only a child and does not know what it means to live or die. One physician accuses Stella of being irresponsible, and, when Stella tearfully exclaims that the interrogators “called me a whore,” the doctor dismissively retorts: “They only said that in anger […]. But let’s face it: you haven’t a

208 Horton and Brashinsky, 74.
particularly sweet character.” The sequence ends with an extreme close up of Stella’s face hidden behind her hair, sobbing and quietly saying to herself: “Leave me alone!”

This episode at the hospital is yet another instance of institutions punishing youth as symptomatic of a whole society that misunderstands the younger generation. One significant detail in this sequence adds an additional layer of meaning: the use of language. All of the doctors in this sequence speak Russian, while Stella speaks her final plea to be left alone in Latvian. Non-Latvian viewers across the U.S.S.R. could grasp the ramifications of this use of language. Even if the Soviet spectators did not understand Latvian, they would be able to distinguish Latvian from Russian, the official language of the U.S.S.R., thus potentially reading this sequence as demonstrating the repressive and inhumane methods of the totalitarian regime inflicted on a subordinate state.

Later, one veteran from the war in Afghanistan, Vents, reflects on the state of his generation, an age group that has lost its innocence and even its childhood: “If you look at my generation and how we fought, just because we had to – think of how we’d fight if it was for our homeland.”

His comment reflects an awareness of Latvia’s occupation and a devotion to his home country, a loyalty that characterizes his peers. Vents’s statement communicates the idea that if Latvian soldiers are so

\[^{209}\text{Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. \textit{Is It Easy To Be Young?}}\]

\[^{210}\text{Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. \textit{Is It Easy To Be Young?}}\]

\[^{211}\text{Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. \textit{Is It Easy To Be Young?}}\]
brave when fighting an unsuccessful war for a foreign power on foreign soil, imagine how valiant these same men would be if they were battling for a cause and a country in which they believed and in which they had a personal stake.

Podnieks continues his exploration of self-reflexivity in *Vai viegli but jaunam?*. Spectators hear and see Podnieks in the frame as he conducts interviews (the director often appears reflected in a mirror behind the interviewed subject), and holding recording equipment. *Vai viegli but jaunam?* also features a film-within-a-film, with a part of the documentary exploring the quest of young filmmaker Igors who tries to complete his experimental work.

Podnieks includes interviews with Igors, footage from Igors’s film, and images of the young filmmaker shooting and editing. When Igors first appears, he explains: “I want to show that all of our lives […] – it’s a labyrinth. […] The doors we go through just appear, and we’re thrown into total confusion. It’s been a year since I left school and until now, nothing good has happened. Sometimes you ask yourself: ‘Does anyone need me at all?’” Igors continues, showing the figure of a black monk in his film, a recurring character that represents mortality. Igors tells Podnieks: “The black monk, the man in black. This may sound naïve to you, but I wanted to show what we meet and pass by everyday. It is Death.”

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212 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. *Is It Easy To Be Young?*

213 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. *Is It Easy To Be Young?* Igors’s morbid vision of existence for his generation will immediately be reinforced as an actual reality (and not as an artistic exaggeration) by Podnieks’s editing choice to follow this statement with a sequence filmed at the local morgue where a young man, Maris, discusses his job as a mortician.
Podnieks treats Igors as a younger version of himself, a filmmaker seeking to convey his perspective of the world to others. Both directors place themselves on-camera. Podnieks shows footage from Igors’s amateur film where Igors appears as he is being led to a firing range by menacing guards. A target revolves to reveal a grown man tied to a bull’s-eye. A man (Podnieks’s friend and collaborator, artist Arnolds Plaudis, who appeared in *Vel Sizifs akmeni*) presses a shotgun into Igors’s hands, while others around Igors aim and fire at their respective marks. Igors aims his gun, but cannot fire at his human target, ultimately dropping his weapon and running away.

Both filmmakers strive to temper the difficult and often disheartening material presented in their works with hopeful conclusions. Podnieks ends *Vai viegli but jaunam?* with footage from the ending of Igors’s film. The final sequence of Podnieks’s film consists of a shot of a blue sky, which fades into a close up of a figure standing in the sea. The low-angle shot tilts up and zooms back to reveal the figure as Igors. The camera continues zooming back to a long shot, showing other individuals standing in the sea along with Igors. As the camera tracks around these people, Podnieks’s voice asks: “Igors, why did you decide to finish your film with this particular sequence?” Viewers hear Igors answer: “The color blue is the color of hope. It’s as though we’re all in the blue sea of hope. It’s the unknown, everyone has to keep searching, and there are many of us. It seems to me the whole world is hoping. You, too, I guess.”

Despite the almost impossible odds faced by the Latvian youth living under Communism, Igors and his peers still maintain a faith that

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214 Translated by Veronyka Bodnarec. *Is It Easy To Be Young?*
life will improve. Both Igors and Podnieks, through his inclusion of Igors’s ending, desire to see positive progress, and they both recognize that possessing a strong sense of hope may be the only way to survive their society’s circumstances. One also may see Igors’s reference to “the whole world” hoping as an allusion to the contemporary anticipation surrounding glasnost and perestroika. Igors’s belief that a change for the better will come may reflect the wishes of all of the inhabitants of the Soviet Union, as well as the views of those on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

In all of these episodes, Podnieks urges spectators to understand how, what superficially may often be dismissed as personal problems, actually reflect larger social concerns. The personal is always the public. Raimonds Plorins’s sentence to spend three years in a hard labor camp as punishment for a crime he claims not to have committed does not appear as an isolated, individual case of delinquency or as an exceptional occurrence of a miscarriage of justice. Podnieks does not present Aivars and his fellow punk friends dressing in outrageous clothes with wild make-up and hair as a unique expression of personal taste. Spectators do not perceive the young veterans who have returned from Afghanistan as nursing private wounds that should be of no concern to anyone else. All of these young adults represent a larger Soviet society, and Podnieks shows them all suffering because of it. Their individual pain mirrors a greater cultural anguish.

Formally, *Vai viegli but jaunam?* functions as a typical example of Podnieks’s expressionistic style. The director relies on slow-motion and freeze-frames to address his audience in a reflexive mode, drawing attention to the cinematic apparatus by manipulating the frame. Close ups literally and metaphorically move the
spectator closer to the interviewees, using the performative mode to emphasize their subjective viewpoints. Podnieks continues to reject any omniscient narrator, including only the voices of his interviewees telling their stories, with his voice interjecting questions and reactions from time to time. By allowing these young members of society to speak, Podnieks literally gives a voice to a segment of the Soviet population that had been marginalized and silenced.

Podnieks also utilizes color expressively in Vai viegli but jaunam?, in a way similar to his Sporta apskats No. 1/2 (1981). Once again, he alternates between color film stock and a black-and-white footage. While in Sporta apskats Podnieks filmed the “present” in black-and-white and the “past” in color, he uses color in a more complex manner in Vai viegli but jaunam?. The images of the rock concert in Ogre are in color, intercut with black-and-white footage of interviews with some of the concert attendees conducted months later. The somber, bleak present cannot compare to the colorful exuberance of the past.

Podnieks complicates this pattern by showing sequences in color that occur in the “present.” Vai viegli but jaunam? includes a morgue where Maris works as a mortician. Maris’s interview, filmed in black-and-white, is intercut with color shots of Maris working with cadavers, interacting with other technicians, and speaking with family members of the deceased. Maris explains that he does not enjoy working in a morgue and has almost quit his job several times. He remains because he needs the money to support himself and his parents. He finds this employment dehumanizing, since he had to learn to distance himself from emotion in order to successfully work on cadavers. Still, Podnieks films him working in color.
Color here is commentary on the harsh lives of the youth in a Communist culture. When Maris speaks about his austere existence, the black-and-white footage echoes his sentiments. When Maris is ‘in action’ during his daily life, the color footage appears almost monochromatic, suggesting how Maris’s world has been literally and figuratively drained of color. The color palette is such that one may not detect a striking difference between the color and the black-and-white footage. Podnieks demonstrates that, while there are moments of elation and excitement in the existences of Soviet teenagers (visually characterized by color, such as during the rock concert and when the punks in Riga spray paint graffiti on walls), the majority of these youths’s lives are spent in a monotone environment, almost entirely devoid of color and of hope. Given this framework, Podnieks’s choice to conclude his film with a visual and verbal reference to the color blue indicates the director’s faith that literal and metaphorical color will someday return into the lives of teenagers within Soviet society.

Russian journalist Alexander Kiselev best encapsulates the spirit in which Podnieks made *Vai viegli but jaunam?*, also verbalizing the excitement surrounding the reception of this film:

Glasnost is a process, not a result that can be acquired once and for all. Today we can speak freely about what we could not mention yesterday. And tomorrow we may have the chance to pronounce what might have choked us today. The artist’s courage is what ultimately matters. Much courage is needed for an artist to combat lies, primarily the lies hidden within ourselves. Juris Podnieks is one of those brave artists who manifests how this should be done.215

215 Kiselev, 67.
*Vai viegli but jaunam?* would prove to be only the beginning of Podnieks’s overt cinematic documentation of the flaws and ultimate deterioration of the Soviet Union.

**Mes? [Hello, Do You Hear Us? in the U.K., Soviets in the U.S., 1989]**

The success of *Vai viegli but jaunam?* brought international recognition to Podnieks, allowing him to undertake his most ambitious film project to date. Filmmakers in the United Kingdom invited him to create a series of documentaries for British Central Television to be broadcast on the BBC. The resulting film, *Mes? [Hello, Do You Hear Us? in the U.K. and Soviets in the U.S.],* evolved into Podnieks’s most epic work, consisting of five one-hour documentaries which examined the spreading unrest and chaos in a crumbling Soviet Union.

Divided into five one-hour segments (entitled *Red Hot, Awakening, Do you hear us?, The Wall, and Face to Face*), *Mes?* (literally translated as “Us?”) explores a wide-array of topics, ranging from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster to the budding nationalist movements in the Baltics to the abuse of women in Uzbekistan, offering insight into a society in crisis where a diverse international population attempts to find ways of coping as a super power collapses. The first film, *Red Hot,* serves as the introduction to the series, the first sequences elaborating the key themes in his documentary cycle.

The brief opening credit sequence begins with a close up of two male faces that dissolves into a medium shot of a group of people. This shot, then, dissolves into a series of long shots of progressively larger assemblies of people. Ultimately, the screen is filled with a great mass of bodies that forms the shape of the Soviet Union. The word “Soviets” in the version released in the United States (the word “Mes?”
appears in the Latvian version of the film) emerges from amongst these people and becomes superimposed on them. This title sequence communicates Podnieks’s approach to public and private notions in the U.S.S.R., beginning with the particular – the close-up of the two individual men – and moving to the general – the mass of bodies forming the Soviet Union. Podnieks repeatedly demonstrates this belief in Mes? by addressing questions that would be seen by some as private concerns, such as a newlywed wife’s marital discord with her husband, as a public matter that demands collective attention and action.

After the title passage, a montage sequence visually communicates the main themes in Mes?. A low-angle close up of a large church bell ringing tilts down to reveal a square full of people as seen from the belfry, followed by a close up of a fire burning in the night, the flames flickering in slow motion. Next, a close up of workers toiling in the factory appears, after which a close up of a man’s face as he screams (audiences will later learn that he is institutionalized) zooms into an extreme close up of his open mouth. Podnieks then shows a medium shot of Russian Orthodox patriarchs carrying incense during a religious procession, followed by a close up of a protestor in Riga demonstrating for an independent Latvia being arrested by Soviet officials. A close up depicts a young man’s wounded face, a soldier staring straight at the camera as he is moved away on a stretcher. Next, a medium shot presents a crowd of people marching in slow motion in the night, many of them raising their fists in the air as a gesture of political solidarity. A close up of Gorbachev is followed by a close up of Soviet soldiers’ feet as they march in unison. The last three images before the title “Red Hot” appears against a black screen include a close up of contemporary
advocate for political reform, Boris Yeltsin, walking in slow motion, a long shot of a sea of people carrying banners and flags as part of a political demonstration, and a medium shot that zooms into a close up of an old woman sitting in a hospital waiting room. During this entire sequence, the soundtrack features only the reverberation of church bells ringing loudly.

This succession of images not only visually display the literal subjects of the film series (religious believers in the Soviet Union, soldiers, the sick and elderly, political protesters, the proletariat, government leaders), but they also metaphorically (and on a visceral level) convey the themes of change, revolution, violence, dissent, and upheaval that will characterize the struggles presented in the films. The reliance on images to express affect and political meaning reflects the director’s privileging of the visual over the verbal. The lack of explanatory dialogue, narrative, or titles displays Podnieks’s belief that one may communicate more information and emotion through a specific selection of images. Podnieks continues to rely on long passages without dialogue throughout his documentary. He also relies on visual metaphors, notably with a series of close up images of gears turning in a clock before audiences hear an announcement that Boris Yeltsin (one of the greatest advocates for Soviet political reform at the time) has gained a seat in the Supreme Soviet. Podnieks cinematically envisions Yeltsin’s words from earlier in the film, when the politician tells the director that compelling the Soviet government to change is like pushing the old gears of a rusted machine. Podnieks’s brief montage sequence communicates that, indeed, Yeltsin has succeeded in pushing the metaphorical machinery of the Soviet regime into action.
The opening sequence also articulates the interconnections between art, politics, and religion – another key subject in *Mes?*. Intercutting the ringing of the church bells and the presence of the Russian Orthodox patriarchs with scenes of political protest reminds viewers that, within a Communist social context where religion is officially outlawed, having faith in something other than the state is, in itself, a subversive act. Furthermore, juxtaposing these otherwise disparate images demonstrates his desire to use art (in this case, documentary cinema) to explore politics and societal issues.

The intersection of politics, art, and religion also appears in Podnieks’s choice to structure his film around the new opera of Russian composer Alexei Rybnikov. Entitled “Holy Communion for Non-Believers,” this new composition frames the documentary cycle, setting the tone for all five films. At the beginning of *Red Hot*, Rybnikov appears in his studio, taping his voice as he recites lyrics from his opera: “Where? Where do I begin? Deep cracks are surfacing as this fragile era breaks against its close. I’m even thankful for what has been. My mistakes are there in droves: I, too, have lost the way. I’ve caught myself dreaming, when I should be walking, - but, then my weak feet are made of clay.”216 As Rybnikov repeatedly sings the refrain “Hosanna,” a montage sequence depicts an Orthodox Russian patriarch walking through the ruins of a cathedral, archival footage of a church being destroyed, contemporary footage of a patriarch baptizing a baby, and a candlelight vigil taking place outside of a cathedral. The title of Rybnikov’s musical work, his

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216 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Mes?* English voice-over translation, released in the United Kingdom and in the United States as *Hello, Do You Hear Us?* and *Soviets*, respectively, by Central Independent Television.
exaltations to God, and the images of religious ceremonies, participants, and spaces unite to evoke an emotional response from the viewer through a performative mode of address. Podnieks suggests that while the Soviets may officially be “non-believers,” everyday Soviet citizens still seek some sort of connection with God, especially during these chaotic times. The proletariat desire to believe in something, since they have lost their faith in the Communist ideology. By showing both the archival footage of the church being demolished (most likely filmed during the early Communist era when church property was confiscated by the state and religion was deemed illegal) and the present-day images of the baptism and vigil, Podnieks links the increasingly overt contemporary religious practice with political resistance to the atheist regime. The opening lyrics of Rybnikov’s opera also illustrate the period’s turmoil, with the inhabitants of the Soviet Union feeling uncertain about what the future holds.

Throughout Mes?, Podnieks shows Rybnikov both recording his opera and speaking to the camera, the composer discussing the meaning of his work and the state of affairs in the Soviet Union:

When I was young, I wrote the music to a work based on Maeterlinck’s drama *The Blind*. The play was about a group of blind people who were taken on a long walk by a monk. In a storm, the monk dies, and the blind are left alone, knowing neither what to do nor where to go. They do not know the way back to the monastery, and so they are glued to the ground. Maeterlinck’s work ends with loud and threatening footsteps. The blind, of course, do not know what they are to face. Today we can understand Maeterlinck, because we have
experienced something like this. And now, we, too, hear those same frightening footsteps. We are lost because we have lost our beliefs.217

As Podnieks stated in an interview in 1990, “[t]he pressure of totalitarianism has driven [Soviet society’s] spiritual energy into the depths [...]” The citizens of the U.S.S.R. cling to the ground like the blind men in Maeterlinck’s play, unable to move forward and evolve into a democracy or to retreat backward to Communism. The director includes the public performance of the opera as part of the conclusion to *Face to Face*, the final film in the *Mes?* documentary cycle.

Rybnikov’s assessment of the state of the Soviet Union echoes the sentiments of many people in *Mes?*, Podnieks’s first documentary that openly and aggressively critiques the Communist regime. *Mes?* also is Podnieks’s first documentary that frankly addresses and evaluates glasnost and perestroika, with many interviewees concerned that the reforms have not gone far enough. In *Awakening*, former Latvian history teacher Valdis Turins (fired from his job because of his nationalistic political activity) analyzes the contemporary cultural climate. While Podnieks shows footage of Turins protesting for an independent Latvia in front of the Freedom Monument in Riga (obviously an illegal action during the Soviet occupation), Turins’s voice explains: “It was a result of those long years of oppression. In that period, I began to understand with a degree of clarity that those years were a sort of moral suffering, a sort of consciousness that you were not free. In those years, the gun began to be

217 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Mes?* Considered a founder of Symbolism, Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) wrote his play *The Blind* in 1890. He would later win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1911.

loaded. Sooner or later, it had to be fired." After a close up of Turins’s speaking to Podnieks, the film cuts to footage of the history teacher being arrested by Soviet officers during his protest. As images of the growing unrest around the Freedom Monument appear, with policemen taking more people into custody and desperately attempting to control a rebellious crowd, Turins tells Podnieks:

At the demonstration, they literally started to pull individuals out one by one. […] The Soviet police… Soviet, yes, our police. This shows that they are not ready for the changes [Gorbachev’s reforms]. And why? Because the system is full of contradictions. Even Gorbachev says that we don’t have enough Socialism. But we not only have too little Socialism, there’s also too little democracy. […] It’s clear that they want to get ‘the show’ out of this mess […]. At this moment, I have great doubts about it, because I can see parallels between the course chosen by our establishment with that of the liberal bourgeoisie under the Tsar. […] They are interested that the process happens, yes, but they are clearly aware that the process can turn on them. […] For the powers that be, it became too much. The people had simply gone too far.

Glasnost and perestroika propelled citizens into a liminal space. Hard-line communists claimed that these modifications were too much, while activists like Turins and dissident Andrei Sakharov (who also appears in Mes?) maintained that they did not go far enough.

Podnieks echoes Turins’s critique of the Soviet government repeatedly in Mes?. He shows how the regime struggles to manage the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, neglects the Armenian earthquake which left approximately 25,000 people dead and hundreds of thousands of people homeless, ignores its veterans (many of whom have returned crippled by the war in Afghanistan), disregards the ethnic cleansing

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219 Translated by Agris Krumins. Mes?
220 Translated by Agris Krumins. Mes?
committed by the Azerbaijanis against the Armenians living in the Karabakh region, and so on. As Rybnikov asserts, it is like the fulfillment of the apocalypse in the contemporary Soviet Union. Podnieks’s *Mes?* offers viewers a five-hour indictment of Communism, demonstrating impotence, callousness, and the utter inability to negotiate the pressures of modern life.

Podnieks also displays self-reflexivity in *Mes?*, his voice audible in many sequences as he asks his film subjects questions. He appears multiple times, interacting with interviewees. For example, Podnieks and his sound crew may be seen discussing politics with Anna Zolotaryova, a young leader of the Democratic Front, in a street café, and he participates in a traditional tea ceremony with a family in Uzbekistan.

Podnieks foregrounds the important role the media play in politics and activism, most notably in *Hello, Do You Hear Us?* in the sequence filmed in the Nagorno Karabakh region. The area, home to ethnic Armenians for centuries, was forcibly annexed to Azerbaijan in 1920, and the glasnost and perestroika reforms prompted a resurgent demand by the Karabakh residents for reunification with Armenia. The Azerbaijanis met this petition with violence, embarking on a campaign to liquidate Karabakh opposition. Podnieks interviews one man, identified as A. Makerticjan, who documented the crimes committed against humanity with his home video camera. He tells Podnieks: “Although I’ve been saving for a car, I decided to buy video cassettes so that everybody in the Soviet Union could see what had been
Consequently, he copied his footage and sent it all over the U.S.S.R., in hopes that he would spur others into action after seeing the atrocities he had witnessed.

These sentiments echo Podnieks filmmaking philosophy, as he explained in an interview in 1988: “It is very important to me to capture in proportion [on film] the strength, the characters [of people], the moods, the events. This is meant for those who still are ‘observers,’ so that they will truly believe that they can and must do a lot now [...]”

Makerticjan, like Podnieks, feels a moral responsibility to use media for political activism and to help those in need. Makerticjan explains why he decided to film the violence in the Karabakh and to distribute it across the U.S.S.R., despite the great personal threat he faces for doing so: “[...] I cannot allow my children to live in fear and oppression.”

For Makerticjan and Podnieks alike, the media are their means of attack and defense, the Armenian amateur filmmaker declaring: “This television is my only weapon and it tells the truth.”

Formally, the most striking technique that Podnieks employs in Mes? is slow motion. Everyday inhabitants of Moscow walking down a street become specters, encouraging an association between a ghost-like quality and the seat of the Soviet

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221 Translated by Agris Krumins. Mes?


223 Translated by Agris Krumins. Mes?

224 Translated by Agris Krumins. Mes?
government. In *The Wall*, the anguish of a woman in Uzbekistan, who fights to clear her slandered name in order to avoid a culturally imposed death by self-immolation, affects spectators on a visceral level, Podnieks dwelling on her distraught eyes by decelerating the motion during this sequence. By utilizing slow motion, Podnieks invokes the performative mode of documentary address, emphasizing the emotional dimensions of this woman’s experience, encouraging viewers to see her subjective perspective.

Podnieks’s film moved contemporary viewers in both the Soviet Union and in the West. In the United States, journalist John Koch raved:

> [S]tructured around brilliant imagery and haunting music, ‘Soviets’ is a polemical masterwork. […] Podnieks doesn’t merely show us the awful medical and potent political fallout of Chernobyl, the fury and new self-assertion of ethnic minorities, […] and the splintering of Soviets into a host of new and often curious movements and alignments. He brings to all this, if not completely coherent vision, powerful and complex assumptions, as well as cinematic imagination. Podnieks conveys both the tragic inevitability of these events and a sense of their awesomeness, as well as the promise they hold, however dim, for renewal. […] Podnieks balances the impersonal machinery, whether of industry or war, with human faces on which his camera lingers until we can feel what they feel. […] I can’t imagine a better primer on the profound struggle taking shape in the USSR than his artful, deeply felt documentaries.225

Meanwhile, fellow journalist Walter Goodman observed:

> Discord, distress, the threat of dissolution. Such is the prevailing spirit in the Soviet Union today as vividly captured by ‘Soviets,’ the remarkably timely five-part series that begins on most PBS stations tonight. Through striking photographs and probing interviews, Juris Podnieks, a Latvian director, conveys the misery, resistance and flickering hopes of people who are demanding much more than the

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Gorbachev reforms. […] ‘Soviets’ gives immediacy to the economic, political, religious and ethnic demands now roiling the country. It offers inspiration in the form of people standing up to state power, but leaves little prospect for a quiet resolution to the clashing passions that have been unloosed by the first breaths of freedom.226


That is how one may describe this work by J. Podnieks, a work that, after viewing it, requires a long time to recover as if it has been an evil nightmare… Unfortunately, the film did not contain anything from the unreal world of dreams. […] The film eye sees […] ruins, blood, corpses. Physically and mentally crippled people. […] It is almost impossible in a single article to give a true assessment of everything that one sees and feels in this film.228

Film scholar Abrams Klockins, on the other hand, easily finds the words:

[F]irst of all, Juris Podnieks has reached a new summit in his creativity, that opens up new possibilities for Latvian documentary cinema; second, we are offered a film that is important not only as a work of art, but also as an essential investment in the Latvian people’s [tautas] process of gaining self-confidence during a decisive, fateful moment.229


Klockins’s remarks summarize the accomplishment of Mes? within Podnieks’s oeuvre. The director will return to the footage featured in this documentary in his final films.

*Krustcels [Homeland in the U.K., A Baltic Requiem in the U.S., 1990]*

Podnieks’s next documentary, *Krustcels* [released in the U.K. as *Homeland* and in the U.S. as *A Baltic Requiem*] focuses on a topic already touched upon in *Mes*? – the fight for independence from the Soviet Union in the Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. In this sixty-four minute film, Podnieks returns to another theme present in his previous works: political resistance through music. Through footage of song festivals, protests, and interviews with citizens from all three countries, Podnieks depicts the struggle of these small nations as they challenge Soviet hegemony and battle to regain sovereignty.

The opening sequence sets the tone for the rest of the work: a series of close ups depicts men and women dressed in traditional Latvian folk costumes getting ready for the Song Festival, festival participants walking in the customary parade that begins the festival, and an image of a young woman having her headdress adjusted properly. Next is a close up of a female participant’s hand, wearing the traditional Latvian “Namejs” ring and ringing a small bell, followed by a long shot of a large group of men in costume ascending the stairs in a stadium. Another close up of women in profile ringing small bells ensues, after which spectators see a long shot similar to the previous one, an image of a crowd of women in folk costume climbing stairs in the same stadium.
A close up of another woman’s hand ringing a small bell reveals that she has a pin attached to her folk costume that bears a small Latvian flag – significantly, the original Latvian national flag (maroon with a thin white stripe down the middle) used during the first period of independence from 1918-1940, instead of the official flag of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (a bright red flag featuring the Communist hammer and sickle, as well as two white and two blue wave-like stripes), in use since 1953. A slow zoom out reveals a large group of similar women surrounding her on the stadium risers. The following medium shot presents more women in folk costumes carrying flowers and walking with the soundtrack this entire time featuring the sound of the small bells ringing, as well as the musical sound of the metal decorations on the women’s costumes musically clanging and reverberating. Next, a long shot shows a sizeable group of women in their costumes standing on the stadium risers. As the camera zooms out, spectators see an enormous mass of women in costume in the stadium, with even more female participants parading past the camera in the foreground.

A sound bridge consisting of the jingling of the bells and costume decorations connects the previous shot from the stadium to a medium shot of an old man with one arm, walking in a field in the countryside. Close ups and medium shots of various women at the folk festival with their bells alternate with medium shots of this old man, whom we see entering a decaying farm house. At one point, a low wide-angle shot of the crumbling roof of the farmhouse from inside of the structure (one can see the sky through the remaining rotted rafters) tilts down to exhibit massive piles of rubble, old bricks, and fallen wooden beams scattered throughout the interior of the
The ringing of church bells and dissonant minor-key music dominate the soundtrack here, as a close up of this old man in profile depicts him standing next to a beam in the house and bowing his head.

The last four shots of this opening sequence consist of a close up of the profile of a young Latvian woman in the traditional folk costume in the stadium, followed by a straight-on close up of a male festival participant in the arena. Next, a medium shot shows the old man sitting on a beam amidst the ruins of the farmhouse, slowly looking up to the sky and closing his eyes as he appears to listen to something. The soundtrack here features wind blowing in addition to the discordant music. Podnieks then cuts to a shot of thick mist and fog, which eventually parts enough to allow a bird’s eye view of land and water. Shooting an aerial shot from an airplane, Podnieks films through clouds to present audiences with extreme high-angle views of green woods, blue water, and yellow fields. One hears a chorus of women barely singing – almost whispering – the first four lines of the song “Saule, Perkons, Daugava” [“Sun, Thunder, The River Daugava”], as the film’s title appears in white letters, superimposed over this aerial scene. The sequence concludes with clouds eventually covering the entire frame.

These first four and a half minutes of Krustcels epitomize Podnieks’s mature expressionistic cinéma vérité style. The first prominent feature of this passage is the complete lack of dialogue. No speech may be heard during this entire time, with only the very ending of the sequence featuring the barely audible lyrics of a song being
sung. As in his past works, Podnieks privileges the visual over the verbal, with the audio functioning largely to compliment the filmed images. The soundtrack, with the persistent ringing of small bells and the modern music in a minor key, amplifies the ominous quality of this passage where a mass of people dressed in costumes assemble in a stadium without saying a word.

Podnieks relies on close ups and medium shots, using long shots sparingly in order to emphasize the immensity of the crowd gathered at the song festival. The director never uses establishing shots, ignoring the rules of continuity editing and delaying the communication of information regarding setting and the spatial relations within a scene. The predominance of close ups and medium shots isolates the film subjects from their environment and focuses attention on the subjectivity of the interviewees and on their affective experience, revealing Podnieks’s utilization of the performative mode of documentary address.

The use of different camera distances, combined with editing choices, expresses the director’s ideas about the personal and the private. The filmmaker begins with a close up of a group of feet walking, continuing with close ups of hands and heads. Eventually, more of each human body appears, just as progressively larger groups of people become visible on screen. Finally, Podnieks shows a long shot of a group of costumed women and then zooms out to show that what the viewers have seen is only a fragment of an enormous whole. Podnieks starts ‘small’ - first different limbs, then separate individuals and small groups – and then moves to the ‘large’ –

\[230\] Aside from the title of the film, there are no other explanatory titles during this opening sequence. Thus, Podnieks again urges viewers to concentrate on images instead of words, whether spoken or written.
massive crowds of people all gathered together, united. Podnieks’s camera moves from the personal to the public. The audio track supports this idea, with the quiet ringing of each small bell or the rustling of each separate costume uniting to create a virtual symphony of sound.

The opening sequence of Krustcels also encapsulates the main theme of the film: the quest for freedom for the Baltic States, particularly for Podnieks’s own homeland of Latvia. The soundtrack furthers this demonstration of nationalism by including the first four lines of the song “Saule, Perkons, Daugava.” Set to music by Latvian composer Martins Brauns (b.1951), the lyrics originate from a dramatized epic poem written in 1919 by Janis Rainis called “Daugava: serdienu dziesma” [“The River Daugava: The Song of the Orphans”].

“Daugava” relates the history of Latvia, detailing the heroic struggles of all who fought over the centuries for a free Latvia. Brauns chose a fragment from this patriotic work to set to music, while Podnieks’s opening sequence features the following four lines from the composition: “The Sun sat the Latvian down/ There, where the ends meet:/ The white sea, the green land,--/ The Latvian had the key to the gates.”

Given the context of the epic poem from which these lines are drawn, this section describes the beginnings of the Latvian nation, when, in ancient times, the Sun Goddess determined that the Latvian

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231 For more information on Rainis, see above, pages 6 and 69. Martins Brauns also composed the music for Vai viegli but jaunam?, as well as the music for other documentaries by Podnieks, including Krustcels.


people should settle on the green land by the Baltic Sea (derived from the Latvian word for “white”). Thus, Rainis’s words imply a kind of manifest destiny, supporting a divinely sanctioned sovereign Latvian state and proscribing all foreign occupation. This passage in the opening sequence, accompanied by an aerial view of the things the lyrics describe, reflects the director’s desire to link his documentary to an exceptionally nationalistic literary work as he visualizes the imagery of the poem.

The beginning of *Krustcels* demonstrates what Podnieks himself was experiencing first hand at the time – the feeling that a great social change is coming. Podnieks communicates this through the final shots of the opening sequence. The old man (a representation of the generation that still remembers the “golden era” of Latvia’s independence) in the destroyed farmhouse (a symbol of Latvia’s agricultural past and traditional culture) bows his head down, as if to convey a sense of sadness and longing for a bygone time that has been damaged by the current occupation. The following close up of a young woman’s face at the song festival, her folk costume visible, signals the new hope embodied by the younger generation that embraces her Latvian roots. The next close up of a man’s face at the festival suggests the seriousness and depth of emotion that Latvians experience when dealing with matters concerning their heritage and the struggle for political freedom.

The subsequent shot depicting the old man in the rubble of the farmhouse suggests another layer of meaning within this context, since one may interpret the man’s gesture of looking up to the heavens and listening to the breeze as his metaphorically paying heed to the social and political shift that approaches. The winds of change are blowing, and the man’s looking upwards is a hopeful
counterpoint to his previous downward gaze. Podnieks furthers this idea by following this shot with the aerial view of the sea and land filmed through clouds accompanied by whispering voices, generating an almost mystical atmosphere. The barely audible voices, combined with the bird’s eye view, assume a god-like quality, as if some ancient deities had been awakened and audiences were seeing and hearing the world through the perspective of these divinities. Podnieks encourages spectators to interpret the old man listening to the wind as almost a religious experience within a nationalistic context.\(^{234}\)

Podnieks devotes the rest of his documentary to exploring the intersections of religion, politics, and art in the Baltic States during this time of great upheaval in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The title encapsulates the moment, since the word “krustcels” means “crossroad.” It also may be defined as a crucial point where a decision must be made.

Moreover, the religious aspects of this word are important, since, to this day, people place crosses and crucifixes at the intersection of roads in the predominantly Catholic Lithuania and in the Catholic regions of Latvia. Crosses appear throughout Krustcels, as when an exiled Latvian veteran visiting graves in his homeland, or when a sea of people crowding around the Hill of Crosses in the village of Jurgaiciai in Lithuania. Within the context of the Baltic States, particularly in Lithuania, the cross has nationalistic connotations, especially considering that the Communist regime

\(^{234}\) For more information on the connections between religious fervor and nationalistic passion within the Latvian community, see Maruta Z. Vitols, “In The Face of Change: Latvian-American Pilgrimages in the Post-Soviet Era,” in 2005 Edward F. Hayes Graduate Research Forum Proceedings, Vol. 5 (Columbus: Council of Graduate Students at The Ohio State University, 2005), 283-294.
outlawed religion and that practicing Christianity assumed subversive undertones.

One Lithuanian man explains this in the documentary:

> Even before Christianity came Lithuania was a country of crosses, because for Lithuanians the cross is a symbol of strength. To assemble a million crosses on a hill like this, you need not only a host of people, but also obstinacy and a searing pain. The Communists have already bulldozed these crosses twice. But each time the hill was reborn anew.²³⁵

Perhaps the most powerful expression of the meaning of the cross imagery and of the word “krustcels” appears towards the end of the film. Podnieks interviews a Lithuanian woman who creates wooden crosses for her livelihood, and she articulates the merging of the spiritual and the political in the form of a cross:

> When I realized I was a part of a nation, the gates of my own fulfillment were opened. Before that moment, I had been a cog in the machine. All the time I had felt that this system was attempting to destroy our spirit and capture our soul. [Bu]t I became depressed by the thought that […] all of my energy would be spent in finding a way to oppose this brute force that confronts us. I feared that I would never be truly myself. […] And I have come to the conclusion that at the bottom of it all is the shape of the cross. It’s not the cross as a religious symbol, but that here two forces intersect. Vertically – the spiritual, horizontally – the material. “The beginning” is the point where they meet. […] I see the very nature of our existence in the form of the cross.²³⁶

For this woman, life consists of a series of struggles, progress emerging from the tension between the spiritual and the material. Given the religious associations of her word choices (the phrase “the gates of my own fulfillment” reminiscent of the gates of heaven), one may see the woman’s spirituality in her nationalism. Thus, the

²³⁵ Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels. English subtitled version released in Latvia by Jura Podnieka studija LTD.

²³⁶ Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.
woman finds salvation in her patriotism. Significantly, these prove to be the last spoken words in the film, the remainder of the soundtrack consisting of a chorus singing the Lord’s Prayer in Latvian, with organ music accompanying the end credits.

The connections between religion, politics, and art continue to preoccupy Podnieks throughout Krustcels. As a result of glasnost, his investigation explicitly attacks Communism. Podnieks focuses on the choral singers and conductors participating in the Baltic song festivals, depicting them as exemplars of passive resistance. This resurgence of nationalism in the Baltic States in the late 1980s and early 1990s has been called “the singing revolution.” Sociologist Daina Stukuls Eglitis explains:

What happened in this region of the world has been called revolution in both popular and theoretical literature, though the term is often paired with adjectives like ‘velvet’ and ‘gentle.’ In the Baltics, the events are popularly called the singing revolutions. Although they had powerful domestic and international effects like earlier revolutions, these qualifying adjectives suggest that the events that transpired in the Eastern European and Soviet space were not revolutions in the style of the great revolutions: they were largely without both the utopias and the violence that permeated earlier revolutions, like those in Russia and France. 237

Podnieks’s film illustrates the singing revolution, where music becomes a political weapon that mobilizes massive crowds into action.

Several sequences in Krustcels explicitly link music, politics, and religion.

After the opening sequence, an elderly man in his apartment plays the piano and sings. Audiences soon learn that he is an Estonian conductor who has spent his career

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leading choirs at Estonian Song Festivals. He tells Podnieks that he has conducted at song festivals “under the czar. Then in a free Estonia. Then under the Germans and the Soviets.” He shows Podnieks old black-and-white photographs of himself and of his former colleagues, stating: “Music is my politics and my God. Today, I am probably the oldest conductor alive in the Baltic. Looking at this picture, there’s nobody else alive. The twentieth century almost succeeded in wiping us out. Some escaped to America, some were deported.” This elderly man’s statement reflects the important role of art in the struggle to survive for the inhabitants of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. When everything else had been taken away – freedom, homeland, livelihoods, religion, property, friends, family – people found refuge and a means for political and religious expression in art. Their cultural identities would be preserved through music.

Another example appears later in the documentary during the sequence filmed at the Latvian Supreme Soviet. The delegates debate about whether to hold a vote on declaring independence from the U.S.S.R., while both pro-Communist and pro-independence protesters rally outside of the Supreme Soviet building in Riga (today, home to the democratically elected parliament or “Saeima”). Podnieks films both from within the crowd of demonstrators and above them, including footage of a Soviet policeman covering Podnieks’s camera with his hand to prevent him from recording the demonstration. At one point, a high-angle long shot shows the crowd of protesters surging towards the building’s entrance, only to be pushed back by Soviet

238 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.

239 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.
policemen and militia. The hand-held camera moves up and to the left to reveal the independent Latvian flag flying from the balcony of the building. In addition to the diegetic noise of the protesters, one may detect the barely audible, quiet staccato singing of women. Echoing the almost whispering voices singing during the opening sequence, these female voices also sing a fragment from the song “Saule, Perkons, Daugava,” chanting: “Water of life, water of death/ All flowed into the River Daugava - / I soaked my finger in it,/ I felt both forces in my soul.”

As the female voices softly and slowly sing these lines, Podnieks cuts to a long shot of a sea of women dressed in folk costumes standing up in the risers at the song festival arena, then to the high-angle long shot of the crowd outside of the Supreme Soviet, zooming in to a close up of several militiamen clubbing and beating unarmed civilians. Next, a close up of a woman singing at the song festival in her folk costume appears, while the soundtrack features the same song, “Saule, Perkons, Daugava,” but now it is being sung loudly by a chorus. The hand-held camera tracks right to reveal more faces singing this song at the festival, followed by close-ups of conductors leading the chorus. Podnieks intercuts images of the delegates debating in the Supreme Soviet with close ups of participants at the song festival, the soundtrack consisting of two layers: the roll call within the Supreme Soviet as each delegate votes on whether Latvia should declare its independence and the festival chorus singing “Saule, Perkons, Daugava” with increasing intensity and volume. A title appears on screen that explains: “131 votes are needed in order to pass the

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Independence Declaration,” and soon, audiences hear the sound of demonstrators counting the votes for independence loudly outside of the government building: “113….114… 115…”241

This sequence culminates with a long shot of the interior of the voting hall, displaying the delegates standing and applauding – the necessary votes for declaring independence have been attained. A medium shot shows hundreds of arms clad in white blouses intertwine and then wave in the air at the song festival, followed by a hand-held close up of two women tearfully hugging each other in front of a man holding a poster in English that reads: “Red Army – go home!” The women separate to reveal that they are wearing signs around their necks, including one that begs: “Help us, God!”242 The camera tracks through the crowd of cheering people, showing flags from all three Baltic states waving in the air, a woman crying, and the delegates flashing the peace and victory signs as they leave the government building. This sequence concludes with a high-angle long shot of the Latvian Song Festival venue, the camera craning up into the sky to show the enormous group of people in attendance as the soundtrack features the climactic conclusion of the song and audience applause.

Key to this sequence is the escalating choral song heard on the soundtrack. The music of “Saule, Perkons, Daugava” begins softly with the whispering voices, paralleling its use at the beginning of the documentary. During both of these moments, this choral work sung softly may be interpreted as embodying the quiet

241 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.

242 “Palidzi Dievs!” My translation.
renaissance in the Baltic States, and the desire for independence from the U.S.S.R. The drive for freedom that has been softly bubbling underneath the facade of Soviet society finally penetrates to the surface in this sequence, prompted by the violence inflicted on unarmed Latvian citizens by the Communist militia. This unleashed force grows more and more powerful, illustrated by the increase in volume and intensity of the choral work. Song festival participants now sing openly and loudly, reflecting the empowerment felt by Latvian. The volume of the singing corresponds to the vote for independence at the Latvian Supreme Soviet. As the loudspeaker registers each additional vote for independence, the singing becomes louder, further reinforcing the triumph of Baltic passive resistance. Podnieks employs music to demonstrate how art may function as an effective (and affective) political tool.

Religion subtly permeates this sequence through the song lyrics and through mise-en-scène choices. The words sung by the chorus narrate the story of how Latvia came into existence, specifically relating how the ancient pagan dieties of the Sun and the Thunder, as well as the greatest of them all, simply called “Dievs” or “God”, cared for the Latvian people in their time of need: “The Sun sat the Latvian down/ By the edge of the white sea:/ The winds blew the sands around,/ What shall the Latvian children drink?/ The Sun bade God,/ To dig the River Daugava - / Animals dug, God poured/ The water of life from a cloud.”243 By including these lyrics describing the gods assisting the Latvian people when they have needed it the most as the Latvian Supreme Soviet votes on independence, Podnieks encourages Latvian spectators, who

would be familiar with this choral work, to see that moment when the votes were tallied as an instance where a higher power has once again come to the aid of the people. Podnieks furthers this notion by including the shot of the two women hugging each other when the news arrives that independence has been declared. As they separate, viewers may read the poster that one of the women wears, which reads: “Help us, God!” This woman’s sign explicitly links the struggle for political freedom with religion.

Podnieks also emphasizes the connection between art, politics, and religion in the song selections from the festival that he chooses to include. Customarily, Latvian song festivals feature performances of a variety of music, ranging from traditional folk songs to new, modern choral compositions by contemporary Latvian composers. Podnieks highlights only three songs for the duration of the film: “Saule, Perkons, Daugava,” “Dievs, sveti Latviju” or “God, Bless Latvia” (the Latvian national hymn from the first period of independence), and the Lord’s Prayer set to music. All three works refer to God or gods, while the first two compositions are highly nationalistic.

Podnieks investigates these interconnections between music, nationalism, and spirituality with a frankness that was controversial even for glasnost cinema. An Estonian woman describes how she was deported to four different prison camps and even sarcastically jokes: “I shouldn’t whine. A free trip to Russia and still alive!”244 A Lithuanian man travels to Siberia to recover the remains of his mother, who perished in a gulag. He tells Podnieks: “Mother was a midwife. She helped anyone in need,

244 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.
whether Communist or guerilla. For that crime they forced her into a freight wagon – for good.”245 A Latvian woman openly confronts a Soviet soldier during a demonstration against the war in Afghanistan, asking the young man who tells her to be quiet: “You’ve occupied us, but why did my son have to die in your army?”246 Another protester at a different march describes another Communist guard: “He’s a typical Soviet product. For parents, he has the Party and his medals.”247 Even Communist officials themselves in Krustcels admit that their government rules with violence. When the delegates in Latvia’s Supreme Soviet debate on whether to vote for independence, one Soviet representative exclaims: “Our utmost need is for control. Otherwise the Soviet President can enforce martial law. It’s clear what that will mean. Our past already has too many precedents that are bloody.”248 Podnieks includes montage sequences of photographs and archival footage from Siberian labor camps, as well as graphic images from the exhumation of Lithuanian corpses in a Siberian prison camp graveyard.249 He also shows footage of a giant sculpture of Lenin’s head being dismantled and taken away, visualizing the revolution sweeping the U.S.S.R.

245 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.

246 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.

247 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.

248 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.

249 The bodies are exhumed in order to be returned to Lithuania for a proper, Catholic burial, an action only possible because of Gorbachev’s liberal regime.
All of these examples of critiques of Communism again reflect Podnieks’s opinions about the relationship between the private and the public within Soviet society. Podnieks includes the stories of individuals, all of whom have suffered in some way because of Communism, in an effort to demonstrate how their personal pain expresses the greater anguish of the people of the Baltic States. One contemporary film reviewer articulates one mission of the film, namely to show “[o]ne person’s death as the destruction of one world [...]”. Podnieks’s interview with an old Latvian man (the same man featured in the opening sequence) is one example among many in Krustcels of the private revealing the public. Podnieks asks the elderly man, who has been living in exile in America for forty-seven years: “But has your fate always been at the mercy of others?” The man answers yes, and explains that he served in four armies as a young man. First he was a member of the independent Latvian army: “Then the Russians came and we were renamed the Popular Army. After that, I was in the Red Army for eleven months. Then the Germans occupied. Again, I was drafted against my will. I was mobilized and so I had to go.” His life illustrates the fate of the Baltic people, who fought for their freedom only to be subject to the force of larger occupying nations.

In terms of film form, Krustcels features the techniques that Podnieks typically employs in his mature style. As in previous works, he relies on a

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251 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.

252 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.
performative mode of address, using close ups and slow motion to draw attention to the subjective and affective dimensions of the film subjects. He also continues his investigation of self-reflexivity, appearing on screen (most notably, when assisting the former Estonian beauty queen with her award sash from 1931) and leaving his voice on the soundtrack as he interviews.

Characteristic of Podnieks’s expressionistic style, Krustcels lacks an omniscient narrator, instead allowing the interviewees to express themselves in their own words. However, audiences hear relatively little dialogue, Podnieks once again privileging the visual over the verbal. This is exemplified by a sequence that transpires at an Estonian Song Festival.

After an interview with a former Estonian beauty queen who survived four different Soviet labor camps, Podnieks presents a long shot of tanks rolling through a field as the woman’s voice states: “All the islands around here had villages which the Soviets razed to the ground to make way for the military.” Another long shot shows soldiers firing missiles from trucks, while the subsequent shot displays the projectiles exploding in a field of flowers. Following more footage of the Estonian woman’s interview, a long shot depicts the Song Festival participants singing joyfully and walking hand in hand. Next, two medium shots depict soldiers launching missiles and a tank firing, as smoke from the explosion wafts among wildflowers and brush in the foreground. This editing pattern continues, alternating between shots of the participants singing and images of tanks rolling on the beach past civilians in bathing

253 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.
suits, military helicopters, and a hovercraft on a shore with armored vehicles speeding away from it. The sequence ends with Podnieks asking the Estonian woman if she thinks the Russians will ever leave, as an image of soldiers walking in a field appears. As a close up of a young boy zooms back to a long shot revealing the youth and his peers riding in the back of a truck, dressed in folk costumes, audiences hear the woman’s voice answering: “It’s only a matter of time and of our patience. The Czars and the Soviets have tried to annihilate us. But we’re stuck to these stones.”

While this sequence begins and ends with dialogue, most of it consists of images and music that strengthen what the Estonian woman states. The editing generates a visual counterpoint between the shots from the song festival and the images of military equipment and ammunition. Journalist Walter Goodman observes:

Podnieks gets at the heart of the resurgent nationalism of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. […] The patriotic songs, banned for half a century, the flowers, crosses, candles, costumes and high emotions of the festival are contrasted with the grayness imposed by the guns and tanks of the Soviet Union.

Moreover, the shots of the military engaging in their war games offer their own contrasts within the frames, juxtaposing the tank with a woman in a bikini and missile explosions with wildflowers. The viewer experiences these contrasts in a jarring manner, viscerally feeling the violence inflicted on the Estonian people and land. Moreover, these juxtapositions frame the Communist military as unnatural and inorganic, at odds with the beaches and wildflowers.

254 Translated by Agris Krumins. Krustcels.

Meanwhile, the soundtrack supports the meaning of the images. Throughout this passage, the Estonian Song Festival chorus sings the same refrain repeatedly: “Through the telescope’s eye, my bride can be seen in Saaremaa [an island in Estonia]. The world has no place better than Saaremma in summer.”

Whether seeing shots of costumed festival participants rhythmically swaying in the stands of the arena or a Soviet tank rolling through sand, audiences hear the happy song on the soundtrack during this sequence, even when it is layered with the diegetic sounds of explosions during the shots where soldiers fire missiles. This music not only offers a counterpoint to the military equipment noise, but also aurally emphasizes the strength and determination of the Estonian people (echoing the final words of the Estonian woman). No matter what may be seen and no matter how the Soviet regime oppress them, they will always keep singing in order to triumph.

**Pecvards [Postscript, 1991]**

Created as an addendum to *Krustcels*, *Pecvards [Postscript]* depicts the violence that Podnieks’s previous film foreshadowed. Focusing on the events in Riga during January in 1991, this short documentary includes interviews with Podnieks himself, reflecting on the political upheaval in the Baltic States and the murder of his cameramen, Andris Slapins and Gvido Zvaigzne. Podnieks also presents highly disturbing footage showing the film frames captured by Zvaigzne and Slapins while they were shot and dying, making *Pecvards* one of Podnieks’s most visceral works.

*Pecvards* chronicles the brutality that transpired in Vilnius and in Riga in the span of one week, from January 13th through January 20th, 1991. During this intense

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256 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Krustcels.*
time period, the Soviet regime attempted to reassert control over these two Baltic States in order to quell the mounting rebellion. Historian Andrejs Plakans describes the contemporary political climate:

In the early weeks of 1991, with the attention of the United States and other Western countries focused on the war in the Persian Gulf, the press in Latvia noted that the 1940 Soviet occupation of Latvia had happened precisely when the Western democracies were otherwise occupied. But the crackdown in the Baltic and in Latvia never materialized as a single act. Rather, there was a series of relatively small-scale but violent actions against institutions and civilians, with the authorities in Moscow either apologizing or denying responsibility. […] In Riga, […] some 700,000 persons […] form[ed] hastily constructed barricades around the most important buildings. […] The barricades] symbolized the will to resist, an element, some said, that had been missing in 1940 when the Soviet armed forces moved into Latvia without any noticeable resistance from the Ulmanis government or the general population.

Podnieks documents the bloody encounters between the Baltic people and the Soviet Black Berets, depicting the determination of the Lithuanians and the Latvians to regain freedom, and the sacrifice that many, including Podnieks himself, made.

_Pecvards_ is one of Podnieks most self-reflexive films, with the director directly addressing spectators repeatedly throughout the work. Podnieks candidly shares his emotions with audiences, communicating his fears, his sadness, his nationalist feelings, and his anger. Podnieks’s frequent appearances, as well as his voice-over commentaries, signal to viewers the director’s direct and personal

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258 Plakans, 178-179.
involvement in the events that transpired that week in January. His explicit visual and audio presence in *Pecvards* utilizes the participatory mode of documentary address; Podnieks assumes the role of the researcher, investigating the circumstances of an event and “mak[ing] his own personal involvement in the story central to its unfolding.”

Podnieks frames his documentary with his on-screen appearances. *Pecvards* begins where *Krustcels* ended: at the venue in Riga where the Latvian Song Festivals are held. Yet, instead of seeing masses of people united in song, audiences view a long shot of an empty site, snow and ice covering the audience benches. As the camera slowly pans left across the vacant space, the soundtrack features the same whispering female voices that audiences heard in the opening sequence of *Krustcels*. The barely audible women softly sing a few lines of the song “*Saule, Perkons, Daugava,***” as the title of the film appears. Podnieks then dissolves from this long shot of the amphitheatre to a medium shot of the icy benches, the camera panning left until it stops on a medium shot of the director sitting on the bench. He addresses the camera, stating:

> I have always come to this Song Festival site with a certain amount of dread. Always, I wondered how full it would be, how many would come, how many of us were left. After the last Song Festival, we could call it ‘Our place of prayer, our site of faith in ourselves.’ But then I never thought that this film could meet with such an ending.

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259 Nichols, 119.

260 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Pecvards*. English subtitled version released in Latvia in conjunction with *Krustcels* by Jura Podnieka studija LTD.
As soon as he finishes speaking, the film cuts to a soldier climbing on a tank, followed by footage of Gorbachev and his wife outdoors, surrounded by a crowd of protesters.

This beginning of *Pecvards* functions as a bridge between the material covered in *Krustcels* and what the viewers are about to witness in this addendum. The exuberance of the summer’s Song Festival has dissipated, replaced by an atmosphere burdened by the blood spilled in the struggle for independence. The location and Podnieks’s words reference the song festivals, one of the epicenters for the Baltic passive resistance, with the director’s sentiments linking religion, art, and politics – one of the central themes explored in *Krustcels*. Podnieks’s statement that he never envisioned “such an ending,” followed by the cut to the image of the tank, communicates the imminent violence that was to follow the peaceful demonstrations – aggression that was foreshadowed in *Krustcels* (specifically in the Soviet militia beating Latvian protestors outside of the parliament building). This Communist brutality comprises the subject matter of the remainder of the documentary.

Meanwhile, after the footage of Zvaigzne and Slapins being shot, Podnieks concludes *Pecvards* with a sequence which begins with footage of song festival participants passing wreaths made out of oak leaves over their heads through the crowd from *Krustcels*. Podnieks’s voice states on the soundtrack: “When guns are fired at journalists it is above all a sign that the attackers fear the truth.”  

Next, a close up of Podnieks sitting at a desk with a television set visible on the left side of

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261 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Pecvards*.
the frame appears, showing the director gesturing with his hands as if he were sharpening a blade. He tells the camera: “I do not know if the threats to us will end, but I do know that time certainly has turned us from a blunt stick into a sharp stake. And if somebody now does try to destroy us, they will find themselves severally injured. For no longer are we the same as we were five years ago.”262 A medium shot of a demonstration march shows people carrying the independent Latvian flag, as well as flower wreaths, candles, and a large wooden cross. As organ music begins to play on the soundtrack, Podnieks’s words provide the last dialogue of the film: “We have become a fine and sharpened pike.”263 The final three shots of the film consist of a clip from the conclusion of Krustceils (when all spectators see is a sea of candles flickering in the dark song festival arena), a close up of Slapins in slow motion as he rides on a boat in the sea and smiles at the camera, and a close up of Zvaigzne with three colleagues as they laugh, the image stopped in a freeze-frame which eventually fades into black.

Podnieks’s editing choices for the ending of Pecvards communicate the resolve of the Baltic people to continue their struggle for freedom. Exploiting the participatory mode of address, Podnieks’s speech, a personal testimonial, reminds viewers that five years before the making of this film (1986, the year glasnost and perestroika began taking effect in the U.S.S.R.), the Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians would not have had the ability to openly resist Communist hegemony. Podnieks’s inclusion of images from demonstrations and song festivals (representing

262 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

263 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.
the growing political activism), combined with his words on the soundtrack, convey that the citizens of the Baltic States are determined to regain independence, despite Soviet aggression. Presenting the two shots of Zvaigzne and Slapins signifies the loss of life already incurred by the movement for political freedom, and the last words on the soundtrack, Podnieks’s allusion to sharpened spikes and pikes, reinforce the meaning of the images: the previous passive resistance will no longer be peaceful.

Podnieks’s remarks in the concluding sequence, about the Communists killing journalists in an effort to silence the truth, reflects another layer of self-referentiality: the role of the media in politics and social revolution. Podnieks includes footage of cameramen and photographers present at major events – events that may be seen as personal tragedies that have assumed a public meaning. Podnieks films the funeral procession of murdered taxi driver Roberts Murnieks, an innocent bystander who was shot by the Black Berets as they passed over a bridge in Vecmilgravis (an area of Riga). Viewers witness Murnieks’s body in a coffin carried through a mass of people, where one sees almost as many photographers and men with video cameras as one sees mourners. One man’s death at the hands of the Soviet Special Forces becomes a national cause, and Podnieks shows the media present to capture every second of it.264

Later, when Podnieks’s cameraman Gvido Zvaigzne is injured, the director presents a hand-held tracking shot of Zvaigzne carried off on a stretcher, the people

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264 One may see a parallel here between Pecvards and Sergei Eisenstein’s The Battleship Potemkin (1925), where the murder of unarmed civilians by the Tsar’s troops provokes the 1905 Revolution in Russia. However, Pecvards is a documentary that features raw footage from an event as it occurs, while Eisenstein’s film is a staged reenactment (film historian Erik Barnouw describes it as a “drama [... that] ‘looks like a newsreel of an event.’” Barnouw, 61). Also, The Battleship Potemkin celebrates Communism, while Pecvards attacks it.
holding up the stretcher and racing through the dark streets of Riga to get Zvaigzne to an ambulance. The entire time, viewers see people with cameras running alongside the stretcher, snapping photographs of the bleeding cameraman, as someone persistently tells the journalists to leave him [Zvaigzne] alone. Again, one man’s personal pain attains the status of a national symbol of Soviet aggression towards Latvia, an association that would only strengthen after Zvaigzne’s death two weeks later.

For Podnieks, the media’s presence at these important historic moments emphasizes his philosophy that everyone working in the fields of television, the press, radio, and cinema have a moral obligation to document the injustices occurring in the world and an ethical responsibility to fight for democracy. After the sequence of the bloodshed in Vilnius, Podnieks appears in a close up of his face in the outdoor setting of the Song Festival venue, addressing the camera: “At five in the morning, I left for Riga with a video cassette which I know I had to get to the nearest television station. I drove for five hours trembling with a memory of that blood bath.”

Podnieks’s anxiety reflects his appreciation of the power his footage possesses, of the need to have it broadcast, so that as many people as possible would witness the atrocities committed against the Lithuanian people, and of the peril he faced if the Communist authorities caught him with this evidence.

265 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.
Podnieks’s work here embodies film scholar Bill Nichols’s description of Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov’s film philosophy: “Cinema and revolution go hand in hand.”

When Podnieks discusses his return to Riga after the carnage in Vilnius, he explains: “Riga had changed. People started building barricades. I don’t think that it was fear that made people go to the defense of the Parliament or the TV station. Rather, it was a need to unite and form a living barricade, a wall, which would protect those small islands of democracy that we still possessed.” As Podnieks presents viewers with images of the makeshift barricades erected in the Dom Square, his voice on the soundtrack states: “I met the rest of our [film] team on the barricades. […] We didn’t separate throughout this period. We didn’t leave as we, too, had to be on the barricades.” Podnieks and his film crew recognize their political and artistic obligation to be at the site of struggle. As Podnieks stated in an interview published in 1991/1992: “The film camera is my weapon and I feel like a soldier, who searches for the most advantageous line of fire.”

From the beginning of the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Communist regime mastered the deployment of cinema as an ideological tool, and exploited it in

266 Nichols, 143.

267 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

268 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

reinforcing popular support for the new government. Given this historical context, the Soviet Black Berets’s attack of the radio, television, and press buildings in Vilnius and Riga is unsurprising, since the obvious approach towards suppressing a popular rebellion would be to regain control of these media outlets. Finding a way to broadcast the footage of the slaughter in Vilnius becomes crucial for Podnieks. The presence of international journalists in Riga during the time of the barricades assumes even greater import, because this group, like Podnieks, seeks to publicize to the influential western world the violation of human rights by the Communists. Thus, Podnieks includes a long shot of a satellite dish set up in the midst of the barricades, which reads: “CNN & Sky News THANK YOU!”

Podnieks’s condemnation of the Communist regime continues with the video record of the OMON opening fire on a crowd of peaceful protesters singing in front of the Lithuanian Parliament building. Several shots include mutilated bodies of the OMON victims, some bodies appearing in close up. Later, Podnieks exposes the hypocrisy of the Soviet authorities by presenting images of Gorbachev addressing the citizens of U.S.S.R., comparing his public statements to the interviews with the OMON soldiers stationed in Vilnius. Gorbachev appears repeatedly throughout the

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270 For more information on the utilization of cinema as propaganda in the early period of the Soviet Union, see Barnouw, 51-71.

film, with Podnieks initially showing the Soviet leader and his wife in a crowd. Demonstrators chant “Lietuva” or “Lithuania,” as Mrs. Gorbachev turns to a reporter and asks what these people desire. The journalist responds: “They want a free Lithuania,” and the President reacts: “Ah! So, Lithuania…well…” Gorbachev does not know how to react, and Podnieks underlines the President’s inability to cope with this situation by freeze-framing this image of him at a loss for words.

In a sequence filmed at the Vilnius Black Beret Base, the director interviews several OMON soldiers regarding the contemporary situation in the Baltic States, specifically in Lithuania. One soldier tells Podnieks: “We are reprimanded for obeying orders.” Another officer explains: “It could only happen here, where the army is seen as a group of bandits, working under its own initiative. Then the President and the Defense Minister say they know nothing.” Hearing this statement, the other soldier retorts: “They should be replaced by somebody who knows. The centre gives us orders, but when we carry them out, they wash their hands of us.” Podnieks demonstrates the validity of these statements later, when a close up shows Gorbachev on the television addressing the Supreme Soviet in Moscow, stating: “The Balts are currently governing with no constitutional authority. I would like to underline that the events in the Baltic occur without the knowledge of the

272 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.
273 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.
274 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.
275 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.
Podnieks then cuts to a close up of a soldier looking serious, the camera panning right to reveal another grim officer standing next to him while the soundtrack features Gorbachev’s voice exclaiming: “And a careful examination of these events is necessary.” The soldiers’s grave countenances may be read as a reaction to their plight, where they fulfill their orders (in this case, to attack innocent civilians), but those in power deny responsibility. Podnieks’s editing denounces the Communist regime that perpetrates crimes and rejects accountability.

Podnieks critiques the Soviet regime by breaking from his usual rhythmic editing patterns to incorporate the existing footage of the murders of Slapins and Zvaigzne in its entirety. He includes the film that Zvaigzne was shooting in one long, continuous take, first depicting the Ministry of the Interior under siege by the OMON and then showing the shots fired at Zvaigzne and his camera. Sparks fly in front of

276 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

277 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

278 Podnieks’s filming at the OMON base in Vilnius received scathing criticism in Latvia, with some journalists accusing Podnieks of making friends with murderers. Podnieks, however, justified his actions in an interview from April, 1991, explaining that he recognized the complexity of the situation and did not want to “be blinded by my Latvianess, by our idea for independence” [palikt akls ar latvietibu, ar musu neatkaribas ideju]. He continues: “[…] I have always been afraid of blindly saying: ‘Look, they are murderers!’; while I myself am not convinced of it. That is why it was important for me to be there, to see what was inside of them [the OMON], to see what was in their eyes, to keep myself from the need to grab an automatic weapon when going to see them and to take my film camera instead” […] Man vienmer ir bijis bail akli pateikt: ‘Luk, vini ir slepkavas!’; kamer es, es personiski, par to neesmu parliecinats. Tapec man bija svarigi tur but, redzet, kas ir vinos, kas viniem acis, nobidit sevi no vajadzibas pakert automatu un, braucot pie viniem, automatā vieta panemt kinokameru]. My translation. Ingus Josts, “Ar noplestu adu,” Sestdiena, Dienas pielikums (1991.g. 20. aprilis), 1.

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the camera lens, after which audiences see the apparatus falling to the ground. Repeatedly, the camera moves in a jerky motion, as its operator struggles to lift himself up off of the snow-covered ground. Viewers hear the sound of heavy breathing of the cameraman, and another male voice calls out: “Come on, help, Gvido is injured!” More shots ring out, while Zvaigzne’s colleague asks the cameraman if he should try to get emergency assistance to him. Zvaigzne answers: “I want to get out of here,” and his companion tries to comfort the wounded cameraman. More gunfire and shouting dominates the soundtrack, as Zvaigzne’s associate frantically calls out for help again. This sequence exploits the performative mode of address to stress Zvaigzne’s subjective experience. The lack of editing mimics Zvaigzne’s subjective perspective visually by showing footage from his point of view, while the soundtrack registers his expressions of pain and the fear of his companion. The resulting passage is affect-laden, inviting spectators to feel what it was like to be Zvaigzne as he struggles in the snow while mortally wounded.

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279 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

280 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

281 Zvaigzne’s on-screen murder shares some similarities with the fatal shooting of an Argentinian journalist filming an aborted military coup in Patricio Guzmán’s The Battle of Chile, Part Two (1976). In both films, spectators never see the victims, but view their perspectives as they fall to the ground wounded. However, there are major differences between these two sequences. The Argentinian journalist films the soldier who shoots him. Afterwards, viewers briefly see the sky that the camera filmed as the journalist fell down, followed by Guzmán cutting to another shot of a tank in the street. This passage lasts for seconds, with a male narrator warning viewers beforehand that an Argentinian journalist films his own death. In Pecvards, no one sees who shoots Zvaigzne – the camera only films flashes of light as bullets are fired in the darkness. Once Zvaigzne is hit, the sequence lasts minutes as the cameraman tries to move from the ground. Pecvards also does not feature an omniscient narrator.
Slapins’s death, though presented in less film time and with more editing, evokes equal, if not more, visceral reactions from spectators. Right after a hand-held close up of Zvaigzne exclaiming “Many more will be shot!” as he holds his head on a stretcher in the ambulance, we see a long shot of the government buildings under attack, filmed from the Bastejkalns park. Viewers see more flashes of light as the OMON continue to fire, and the film cuts to a hand held medium shot of Podnieks himself running towards the camera, shouting: “Careful, Andris, careful!” Podnieks freezes this frame of himself moving towards Slapins’s camera, as shots ring out, ending with a very loud blast. After a brief cut to footage from Krustcels where a close up reveals a young woman in folk costume singing the word “Latvia” with the chorus, Podnieks shows a black screen, the soundtrack featuring gunfire, Podnieks’s voice pleading: “Hold on, old man!” and Slapins ordering: “Film me!” A black screen at this moment signals to viewers that they must focus on the aural, contrary to the director’s usual privileging of the visual. This sequence concludes with the camera being picked up (showing a black night sky and a single illuminated lamp in the Bastejkalns park), and pointed at the dying cameraman on the ground. Grainy and unclear, the damaged video footage outlines Slapins’s upper body in a close up. The

to alert viewers to the upcoming violence. Guzmán’s film cautions the spectator about the imminent murder and when it occurs, it is shocking, but brief. In Podnieks’s film, Zvaigzne’s shooting occurs suddenly, and the sequence focuses on Zvaigzne’s suffering from his point of view.

282 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

283 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

284 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.
aural register expresses the meaning of this scene, with Slapins, blood audibly gurgling in his throat and mouth, crying out: “Bastards! So it hit me… in the heart…”

Podnieks employs the participatory and performative modes of address here to communicate that the public and the private cannot be separated. Nichols explains that the participatory mode “can stress the actual, lived encounter between filmmaker and subject […]. The filmmaker’s presence takes on heightened importance, from the physical act of ‘getting the shot’ […] to the political act of joining forces with one’s subjects […].” Podnieks’s appearance shows his engagement with the events in a cinéma vérité manner, encouraging viewers to believe that what they see is the ‘truth’ of Slapins’s murder only accessible through his camera. The act of filming assumes political significance for both Slapins and Podnieks, since Slapins is killed while documenting Soviet military action and Podnieks records his cameraman’s final moments to illustrate the brutality of the troops.

Podnieks simultaneously utilizes the performative mode to emphasize the affect in this sequence, stressing Slapins’s experience by showing hand-held footage filmed from his perspective and by focusing audience attention on his audible pain as he dies. Nichols observes: “[P]erformative documentaries try to give representation to a social subjectivity that joins the general to the particular, the individual to the

285 Translated by Agris Krumins. Pecvards.

286 Nichols, 117.
collective, and the political to the personal.”

Podnieks’s aim in *Pecvards* to demonstrate the fallacy of the public/private dichotomy. Podnieks’s personal loss assumes public importance, because the deaths of Zvaigzne and Slapins signify all of the losses (both human and material) incurred by the Baltic people at the hands of the Soviet regime. As Nichols notes: “The expressive dimension may be anchored to particular individuals, but it extends to embrace a social, or shared, form of subjective response.”

*Imperijas gals [End of the Empire, 1991]*

The traumatic events of January 1991 resulted in consequences that would ultimately lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union by the end of that year. The deaths of the victims of the Barricades spurred an increasing number of citizens in the Baltic States into political action. Historian Andrejs Plakans explains:

The January events had demonstrated that large numbers of Riga residents – Latvians and non-Latvians alike – would rally around the republic’s political leaders, who also took comfort from the rapidity with which the Vilnius and Riga attacks had become known to the Western world and condemned by it. This reassured the Latvian government that a serious crackdown would not go unnoticed. The willingness of the Moscow authorities to permit military and police actions in which civilians were killed, wounded, or maimed had caused widespread revulsion among the non-Latvian populations in the Baltic and in other republics as well; leading Russian intellectuals, as well as Boris Yeltsin, who was now president of the Russian Federation, had condemned them as a blow against emerging democracy. All this strengthened the independence movement.

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287 Nichols, 133.

288 Nichols, 133.

289 Plakans, 180.
Power struggles within the Latvian government (between the growing number of nationalists and the established Communists) and between the Latvian Republic and the Soviet authorities in Moscow continued for months. Plakans notes: “The Latvian press voiced the public’s dissatisfaction at the pace of reform but pointed out that elsewhere in the Soviet Union there was only deterioration.” Few expected to wake up on the morning of August 19, 1991 to discover that their world had radically changed.

On that day, a coup lead by the hard-line Communist members of the Soviet regime removed Gorbachev from power (effectively holding him prisoner in his vacation home in the Crimea), declaring a state of emergency and placing Soviet vice president Gennadii Yanaev as acting president of the U.S.S.R. Tanks and other armored vehicles rolled into Moscow as the “Emergency Committee” (lead by Yanaev) took over or shut down all forms of media. In Latvia, the Latvian Supreme Council president Anatolijs Gorbunovs declared the coup illegal and asked all Latvian citizens to protest and resist this takeover, while Soviet tanks and troops seized control of Riga, Latvian radio and television, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. During the tense days that followed, Yeltsin rallied Russians in Moscow to reject the new government, urging the military not to support the coup d'état and rallying the people to defend the Russian White House from attack. The putsch leaders attempted to invade the White House, but failed largely due to the efforts of

Plakans, 181.
the local Russian population. Recognizing their setback, the coup leaders ordered the withdrawal of troops from Moscow on August 21st, and sent a delegation to the Crimea to negotiate with Gorbachev, who refused to meet with them.

The coup lasted until August 22nd, when Gorbachev returned to Moscow, had the remaining members of the putsch arrested (some had committed suicide by this point), and nullified all of the declarations from the past three days. Yet, everyone realized that there would be no return to the previous order. The people in Moscow, led by Boris Yeltsin, had experienced first hand their power when they successfully defended the Russian White House. They would no longer tolerate the piecemeal reforms of the Soviet regime. Instead, they supported Yeltsin, as the U.S.S.R. officially disintegrated. Already on August 24th, the Russian Federation recognized Latvia’s independence, while the next week witnessed the members of the European Union (formerly known as the European Community), Belarus, Georgia, and the Ukraine all recognizing Latvia’s independence. The United States followed suit on September 2nd, and a sovereign Latvia obtained a seat at the United Nations General Assembly by the end of the month. Meanwhile, Yeltsin officially disbanded the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on November 6, 1991.291

These days in August form the subject matter of Podnieks’s next film, *Imperijas gals* [*End of the Empire*, 1991]. Podnieks closely chronicles the coup in Moscow, including footage from his Russian colleagues who were filming from within the Russian White House as it was under siege. By employing amateur video,

291 For more information on the August coup, see Plakans, 182-183.
broadcasts from local television stations, and his own material (as well as that of professional Russian filmmakers), Podnieks explores the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union.

*Imperijas gals* is divided into three topics: the coup in Moscow, the crises in the Soviet Union that led to the coup and the downfall of the U.S.S.R., and the post-revolution situation in Eastern Europe. Instead of chronological narration of these events, Podnieks begins with scenes of the coup, then alternates between the occurrences in Moscow in August of 1991 and sequences that depict the unrest in the Soviet Union between 1986 and 1991. For the latter, Podnieks uses footage from his previous three films *Mes?*, *Krustcels*, and *Pecvards*, condensing the salient points from these works, as well as some amateur footage from people across the Soviet Union to explain why the U.S.S.R. was experiencing political turmoil.

According to Podnieks, Gorbachev’s new atmosphere of openness led to the ability of Podnieks and his Soviet colleagues to document such subjects as the disaster at Chernobyl, the failed war in Afghanistan, the Soviet mishandling of the earthquake in Armenia, the demand for independence in the Baltic States, and the massacres committed by the Communist troops in Georgia, Latvia, and Lithuania (among other countries). All of these reflect the Soviet regime’s increasing inability to cope with the problems of its citizens. Describing the cause of the violence in the
Soviet Union, one old man that Podnieks interviews in the streets of Dushanbe, Tajikistan, explains: “It’s the leadership’s fault – they didn’t want to listen to the people.”

Podnieks employs the visual and aural motif of church bells ringing to signify the end of an era and to mark the beginning of a new period in the societies of the former Soviet Union. At the end of the opening sequence, we see a close up of one of the Soviet delegates held hostage in the White House in Moscow during the coup as he speaks into a telephone and into a microphone held up by an off-screen journalist: “The actions of the junta will be like a bell awakening the whole of Russia. This is their death knell.” Next, a close up shows an image of the red Communist flag flying upside down on a flagpole at night, while the sound of church bells ringing resonates on the soundtrack. The camera slowly zooms back to reveal that spectators had been looking at this flag, flying on the top of a dome in the Kremlin, reflected in a puddle in the street as the title of the film appears in red letters on the bottom of the screen.

This combination of the Soviet delegate’s use of the term “death knell,” the church bells on the audio track, and the image of the Communist flag flying upside down (traditionally a sign of distress) in a puddle all communicate the impending demise of the Soviet regime. The flag flying upside down may be read as a reference

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292 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Imperijas gals*. English subtitled version released in the United Kingdom by Central Independent Television and Jura Podnieka studija LTD.

293 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Imperijas gals*. 208
to the naval tradition of flying flags in this manner to signal danger to other ships. This metaphor of the Soviet Union as a giant vessel in distress will be articulated by Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, who, in a recycled clip from Mes included later in Imperijas gals, tells the director: “The system [Communism] cannot be saved in parts. Either we save the whole ship or all of it sinks.” The theme of the bell appears again with footage of Gorbachev taking his oath of office, and near the end of the film, after the coup has been defeated, the Communist government has collapsed, and the people across the Soviet Union celebrate their new freedom. After a long shot of the victorious Yeltsin waving a Russian flag, footage from Mes depicts a group of men ardently ringing church bells as the diegetic sound reverberates on the soundtrack.

Podnieks continues his critique with the footage from Pecvards that depicts Zvaigzne and Slapins being shot by the Soviet Black Berets. Scenes from Pecvards depict the carnage in Vilnius in January of 1991 when the OMON attacked Lithuanian demonstrators and amateur footage depicts the bloodshed in Georgia in 1989 when Soviet troops attacked unarmed civilian protestors, killing 19. Images of Slapins dying on camera and a close up of the stack of mutilated corpses in Georgia are graphic reminders of the victims of Soviet aggression.

Other criticisms of Communism appear both visually and aurally, including a huge protest in the Cathedral Square in Vilnius, where one close up presents a demonstrator holding a poster that reads in English: “Bye, bye USSR.” The two “s” letters appear elongated and with sharp angles, made to resemble the Nazi SS

294 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.
insignia. Throughout *Imperijas gals*, audiences witness shots of people climbing on an enormous sculptural head of Lenin or hooking a massive metal torso of Stalin to a crane, with, near the end of the film, a moment in Riga when a mass of people rush to stand on top of a toppled statue of Lenin. In Moscow during the coup, Russian citizens attack the Soviet army by climbing up on moving tanks and setting them on fire in a successful effort to protect the White House. Earlier in the film, at a demonstration in Moscow’s Red Square, protestors wave a Communist flag with a giant hole where the hammer and sickle would be located.

Following this sequence illustrating the protest in Red Square, footage from another anti-Communist demonstration includes a close up of a man addressing a crowd: “For forty years I’ve been in a Party that’s full of murderers. No longer!” The man then tears up his Party membership card and throws it down, after which Podnieks films a close up of a pile of red Party membership cards, all discarded by disgusted former constituents. This shot is followed by a sequence of close ups and medium shots depicting other men at the protest ripping apart their Party cards and tossing the remains into the air, after which audiences see a long shot of a sea of people all cheering as they throw paper above their heads, suggesting that political dissent in the U.S.S.R. is no longer limited to the rebellious Soviet republics.

Podnieks emphasizes the deceptiveness of the Soviet government. A close up of dissident Andrei Sakharov shows him standing at a podium, addressing the off-screen Supreme Soviet: “From Stalin, we inherited the principle of ‘Divide and Rule.’

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295 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Imperijas gals.*
The small republics and regions were sacrificed for it. Their borders were forcibly changed and today they still face oppression.” A voice that will be identified as Gorbachev’s in the next shot, exclaims: “That’s all! You’ve got to finish!” A high-angle long shot shows Gorbachev sitting at a long desk with other Soviet leaders behind Sakharov, as the dissident turns around and tells the Soviet leader: “My speech is important and I’ll continue.” A close up of some of the serious faces of the delegates in the audience is followed by a close up Sakharov and another long shot of the Supreme Soviet panel; before his microphone is silenced, the dissident states: “The increasing tension among the minorities…” Gorbachev’s voice demands: “Comrade Sakharov, take your papers. That’s enough! Finish!”

This episode at the Supreme Soviet in Moscow illustrates the hypocrisy of Gorbachev and his Communist regime. His government instituted the glasnost and perestroika reforms, supposedly encouraging open dialogue and frank discussion about the Soviet Union’s flaws. This passage exemplifies how, when confronted with the blunt expression of ‘truth’ (verbalized by Sakharov), Gorbachev cannot tolerate this critical articulation and literally attempts to silence Sakharov by shutting off his microphone (though this gesture does not stop the dissident from continuing his speech).

The deception of the Communists also manifests itself when Vice President Yanaev holds one of many press conferences during the coup. He tells reporters and

296 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.

297 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.

298 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.
the Soviet people: “You have no need to worry about Mikhail Gorbachev. He is safe and under no threat. He simply needs time to rest and recuperate. Ladies and gentlemen, you must understand that the pace of the President’s workload could not last. The human body is frail.”  

Gorbachev contradicts this on Moscow television:

> All of my telephones have been disconnected. I have no outside contact. It’s a coup d'état. I made this secret recording after seeing the junta’s press conference. The Vice-President says that due to the President’s illness, he had to take over Presidential powers. But I am well, even though I continued to work on holiday. The Vice-President is lying… it’s an act of high treason.

As the videotape footage indicates, Gorbachev appears physically healthy and lucid, thus exposing Yanaev and the Emergency Committee who attempted to frame a political putsch.

The Soviet government lying to the public may not be new, but what is innovative in this context is the role the media play in exposing the faults of the regime and in rallying the Soviet masses into action, which Podnieks foregrounds. Journalists, microphones, cameras, and video cameras appear everywhere in *Imperijas gals*, from the hallways of the White House to the streets of Moscow. Yanaev and his Emergency Committee convene several press conferences, while Yeltsin speaks with reporters as much as possible during the coup. The Soviet delegates under siege in the White House communicate with the outside world by radio addresses conveyed through the telephone and by speaking into the microphones of nearby press officers, while Gorbachev ensures that his “secret”

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299 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Imperijas gals*.

300 Translated by Agris Krumins. *Imperijas gals*. 212
video recording is broadcast. A group of people intently listening to a BBC news transmission detailing the coup events in English on a radio stand outside of the White House in Moscow.

Perhaps the most striking assessment of the failure of Communism appears in the middle of the film (literally and metaphorically at the center of the documentary). A close up of people in the street as they walk through Moscow is followed by a long shot of individuals moving past the exterior of Lenin’s mausoleum in the rain, with Soviet guards visible within the frame. A woman’s voice declares: “Moscow is the red heart of the Soviet Union. In the heart of this heart is Lenin’s mausoleum, and, at the heart of that, there’s a corpse.” Podnieks asks this woman in Russian: “Has the time come to bury him?” and the woman answers: “He’d only thank us for that.” A few shots later, the female owner of this voice appears and explains that the turmoil offers only two possibilities for the Soviet Union: “[E]ither we go into the next century together with the democratic and civilized world or we empty our stomachs, take an axe, and begin a new and final conflict with the civilized world.” This brief sequence encapsulates the main thrust of the film and one of the crucial themes in Podnieks’s work: Communism is a non-functioning, effectively ‘dead’ political system whose historical time has passed. The utopian vision of Communism, embodied by Lenin, lies in state at the Kremlin, enshrined as an icon visited by tourists while no longer present or ‘living’ in the actions of the current government or

301 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.

302 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.

303 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.
in the daily lives of Soviet citizens. Such a claim, attacking the symbolic core of Communism, was radical, even within the context of the contemporary glasnost cinema.

Podnieks compares this contemporary sweeping social and political upheaval with the Bolshevik Revolution and the ascendance of the U.S.S.R. earlier in the century. After the opening passage of the documentary, Podnieks presents a montage sequence without any dialogue. A slow motion close up of flames burning in the night is followed by a close up of a person hitting a huge Soviet statue with a sledgehammer, also in slow motion. Archival footage shows Lenin in a close up addressing a crowd, then people grabbing rifles. A close up returns to the man hitting the Soviet statue with a sledgehammer, and then archival footage illustrates a giant wood cut-out of Stalin’s head being lifted into the air by a crane. More archival footage ensues, depicting three prisoners blindfolded and tied to wooden stakes in front of a wall. They are shot by a firing squad, a close up of one of the dead bodies slumped over followed by a close up of Stalin waving to an off-screen crowd.

Podnieks then includes archival footage of the proletariat marching, then gates to a complex being shut by Soviet guards and images of people digging ditches. A close up of a present-day man wearing a red bandana with a hammer and a sickle over part of his face is followed by a close up of a factory worker wiping the sweat from his brow. Archival footage of Nikita Khrushchev waving his hand is followed by more archival film of armored vehicles rolling down a street in a military parade. Viewers then see old footage of delegates in the Supreme Soviet applauding, with a reverse shot of Leonid Brezhnev at a podium. This sequence concludes with archival
footage of a medium shot of Gorbachev standing amidst other high-ranking Soviet delegates in the crowd near Brezhnev, followed by a contemporary shot of a military parade, the soldiers marching in the snow and saluting an off-screen Soviet leader. Podnieks takes the last image of this sequence from Mes?, an extreme close up of man crying out in a hospital. During this entire passage, the soundtrack consists of synthesizer music in a minor key, encouraging spectators to interpret what they see in a negative and threatening light.

These images reflect Podnieks’s argument that a revolutionary spirit, similar to the one experienced at the turn of the century, has once again appeared. A similar fervor and need for change exists, yet the root of the contemporary revolt lies in a profound dissatisfaction with precisely the same ideology and political system that the supporters of the first revolution believed would be their salvation. Stalin, the terror he spread in the U.S.S.R. (represented by the executions), and his legacy of uncompromising and forceful Communist leaders have destroyed Lenin’s utopian vision, and now the people of the Soviet Union appear poised to challenge the current regime in the way that their ancestors overthrew the tsar.

This sequence also demonstrates Podnieks’s privileging of the visual over the verbal. The lack of dialogue or narration allows Podnieks to communicate his argument through editing, framing, and music. The director encourages audiences to view Communism in the Soviet Union (characterized by this montage of important Soviet leaders through history) as a failure using purely visual and musical means. Another example of this technique occurs later in the film, when Podnieks films the last Soviet troops returning from their tour of duty in Afghanistan. A close up of a
woman’s face in profile tracks with her as she moves forward. The camera zooms back to reveal the woman searching for her loved one through several units of soldiers standing in formation. While spectators hear military music on the soundtrack, the contrast between the woman’s delicate pink and white dress as she moves among the stark severity of the battle-worn and drab soldiers communicates the desperation and horror of war in solely visual terms. For Podnieks, the visceral (and, through that emotional path, “truth” or “reality”) resides in the visual as captured by his camera.

Finally, the conclusion of *Imperijas gals* demonstrates Podnieks’s recognition of the multitude of new challenges facing post-Communist countries. His previous work, in its espousal of nationalistic viewpoints, omitted any discussion of the gender, ethnic, religious, and political contestations that would exist with or without the Soviet regime. Instead, Podnieks cinematically ‘imagined’ the common citizens of Latvia and of the U.S.S.R. united in their disillusionment with and hostility towards the Communist government. In other words, Podnieks depicts the Soviet populace as believing that if Communism were eliminated, then life would improve. At the end of *Imperijas gals*, Podnieks shows his realization of the nationalism rhetoric as utopian and flawed.

Following images of euphoric crowds celebrating in the streets the collapse of Communism, Podnieks presents a medium shot of utility workers dismantling a brick roadway near the Kremlin in Moscow, a visual metaphor for the contemporary disintegration of the U.S.S.R. He then cuts to a close up of black and white photographs of the former leaders of the Soviet Union, the camera tracking and
zooming back into a medium shot as a man’s voice appears on the soundtrack, stating: “Predictions can be made from an analysis of former empires.” Podnieks cuts to a close up of a bearded man sitting in an office, a professor, explaining: “Plato hated the idea of democracy. He thought that total freedom turns into total slavery. He was right about that. Yet, unlike the Ancient Greeks we haven’t defeated the enemy, nor the bureaucratic and military order.”

Following this statement, viewers see a series of close ups of men holding their heads in despair and walking around a desert-like landscape with automatic weapons, while the professor’s voice continues speaking: “Already we are divided believing that democracy has arrived. But this is only the illusion of democracy.”

Next, a montage sequence depicts angry men and women shouting at each other in the streets, unrest in parliamentary halls, mass riots, and violent conflicts between crowds and policemen. At one point, a subtitle is superimposed over the demonstrations: “After the defeat of the coup new internal conflicts surface in many republics.” At the end of the sequence, as riot police battle angry citizens in a

304 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.
305 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.
306 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.
307 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.
square, the professor’s voice returns: “For 40 years, Moses led his people through the desert, waiting for everyone, who could remember that he had been a slave, to die. For democracy to root here, we, too, have to die.”

The professor reappears on screen for the last time, informing spectators that: “We will not be forgiven if we don’t begin the road to democracy.” Podnieks then cuts to a close up of a toppled statue of Lenin, the hand-held camera tracking along the body to the metal head as the director’s voice asks the professor: “But isn’t the problem that we don’t want to contribute ourselves because we won’t reap the benefits?” The camera tracks into a close up of the statue’s head, followed by several more close ups of other toppled Soviet statues, and the professor replies, the final words of the film: “There again we show ourselves as true Soviets. Ancient societies resolved the question of immortality by recourse to future generations.”

The film concludes with a brief montage sequence depicting different people walking in the street, including a medium shot of a woman with machine gun slung over her shoulder as if it were a purse, a medium shot of a homeless man ignored by passer-bys, and a long shot of two life-size cut-outs of Yeltsin and Gorbachev standing on a sidewalk. Podnieks chooses a long shot of a ‘graveyard’ of dismantled Communist statues as the final shot of the film.

308 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.

309 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.

310 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.

311 Translated by Agris Krumins. Imperijas gals.
Podnieks decision to feature these images of unrest, accompanied by the professor’s warnings, as the last approximately five mintues of the film reflects his acknowledgement of the struggles that the countries of the former Soviet Union now face. Once the dreams of freedom and the formation of sovereign nation-states have been realized, the ‘imagined’ community ironically begins to dissolve as the previously elided different identities enter into open conflict with one another. The removal of the Soviet regime foregrounds the complexity of challenges of a post-Communist world – a world which cannot be understood in terms of dichotomies.

*Klusuma stunda* [Moment of Silence (In Memoriam), 1992]

Podnieks’s final film, *Klusuma stunda* [Moment of Silence (In Memoriam)], is a tribute to the director’s two friends, the cameramen who were shot and killed by the OMON during the days of the barricades in the winter of 1991. The approximately 20 minute documentary features clips from Andris Slapins and Gvido Zvaigzne’s work as both cinematographers and directors, exploring the personal and professional lives of these two artists. Although featuring some uncharacteristic techniques, *Klusuma stunda* is still recognizable as Podnieks’s work.

The opening sequence sets the tone for the rest of the documentary, and encapsulates the main theme of the film. White titles on a black screen announce the birth of Andris Slapins, Jr., on September 18th, 1991. A close up of a full moon in a black night sky zooms back and tilts down to a long shot of an outdoor stage with a group of performers singing before a large crowd. This is the memorial concert marking the one-year anniversary of the shooting of Slapins and Zvaigzne, held in Dom Square in Riga on a makeshift stage. The musicians sing a work specially
composed by Martins Brauns called “Klusuma Stunda,” a musical composition set to words written by Slapins. Next, a low-angle close up shows a naked infant boy (presumably Slapins’s newborn son) being lifted into the air, followed by a long shot of the crowd in attendance at the memorial concert with some people waving the Latvian flag. A medium shot of a young girl stepping off of a train followed by a woman holding an infant appears, as the hand-held camera tracks along with their movement and into a close up of the woman’s face as friends and relatives move around her. The woman is Slapins’s wife, and the camera reveals both her joy of having a new baby and her grief that her children no longer have a father.

The film then dissolves from the image of Mrs. Slapins weeping with an infant in her arms to footage from one of Slapins’s films depicting a tree filmed from a very long distance and a sunset over the sea. Another dissolve connects this footage with a black and white photograph of Slapins, the camera zooming in to a close up of his eyes. This photograph then dissolves into footage from another of Slapins’s films, illustrating the traditional celebration of “Martin’s Day” in the Latvian countryside. The occasion, somewhat similar to the Anglo-Saxon “Halloween” and usually observed in November, involves groups of people called “budeli” who dress up as animals, birds, gypsies, witches, and the like, and parade from one country house to another, demanding food and beer to ensure good luck for the host. The clip included here portrays the budeli dancing in their costumes through a rural snow-covered landscape. Next, a series of dissolves links a black and white photograph of Zvaigzne, footage of people huddling around a bonfire at night during the barricades, and a
close up of two faces in front of the fire, then cuts to footage from another of
Slapins’s experimental films before the screen goes black and the film’s title appears.

This opening sequence communicates the subject of *Klusuma stunda*: a
celebration of the lives of Slapins and Zvaigzne. It also creates an editing pattern that
Podnieks will employ throughout the remainder of the documentary, a rhythm that
alternates between the ‘private’ (the birth of a baby, a mother’s sorrow that her child
is fatherless) and the ‘public’ (the memorial concert, people gathered at a bonfire
during the barricades). As demonstrated in Podnieks’s previous documentaries,
private problems become public concern. Podnieks’s editing choices draw parallels
between the private pain of Slapins’s family and the collective mourning of the crowd
who gathered in the Dom Square to commemorate a man who sacrificed his life for
the greater good.

*Klusuma stunda* is Podnieks’s (and his film crew’s) memorial to their
colleagues, with Slapins and Zvaigzne’s cinematic methods mixing with some
elements of Podnieks’s film style. The end titles credit *Klusuma stunda* to “Andra un
Gvido kinogrupa” or “Andris’s and Gvido’s film crew,” and not to the Juris
Podnieks’s Studio. The film is an amalgam of styles, recognizable as Podnieks’s work
because of the performative mode of address, focusing on communicating affect and
the subjective viewpoints of Slapins and Zvaigzne through the inclusion of interviews
with them, footage from their home videos, and the reading of their poems and letters.
Sequences from Slapins and Zvaigzne’s films, and their approach to documentary
cinema influence the way Podnieks presents their work. Both Slapins and Zvaigzne
created documentaries that used the expository mode of address. Nichols describes
expository documentaries as relying “heavily on an informing logic carried by the spoken word. [...] The commentary is typically presented as distinct from the images of the historical world that accompany it. It serves to organize these images and make sense of them [...].” The result of this fusion of the performative and the expository modes is best illustrated by Podnieks’s treatment of the audio track.

The soundtrack, aside from the choral work sung at the memorial concert and synthesizer music in a minor key, consists of a male voice (identified in the end credits as belonging to actor Janis Paukstello) reading letters and poetry by Slapins and Zvaigzne. This deviates from Podnieks’s usual choice to forgo an anonymous male narrator. Though Paukstello’s voice assumes the role of the omniscient commentator, still, the performative mode appears through Podnieks’s decision to have Paukstello read the cameramen’s poetry and personal reflections. Instead of receiving an authoritative narration that provides instruction on how to interpret the images, viewers hear Slapins and Zvaigzne’s affect-laden subjective experiences. This allows the cameramen to posthumously express themselves in their own words, a technique consistent with glasnost cinema.

Much of Klusuma stunda consists of clips from the ethnographic and experimental films made by Slapins and Zvaigzne, including “behind-the-scenes” footage and production stills of each director on location. Podnieks also incorporates sequences from his own documentaries Strelnieku zvaigznajs, Mes?, Krustcels, and Pecvards, that his two cameramen filmed, and photographs and video footage of

312 Nichols, 107.
Slapins and Zvaigzne as they were working with Podnieks. These images reflect the professional and public lives of the cameramen, and supplement the private aspects of the personal photographs and home video footage.

In particular, clips from one of Slapins’s films *Latviesu folklora* [Latvian *Folklore*, 1983] appear throughout *Klusuma stunda*, suggesting that this film embodies key characteristics of his two friends. All of the footage from *Latviesu folklora* depicts the *budeli* from the Martin’s Day celebration dancing outside in the snow. During the opening sequence of *Klusuma stunda*, Podnieks includes a brief passage of the *budeli* moving through a winter landscape. Later, these same people sled in the snow and dance outside of a traditional Latvian farmhouse. One of the ritual’s participants grabs the camera and spins it around with her. Podnieks concludes *Klusuma stunda* with a clip from *Latviesu folklora* that shows the *budeli* walking in a snow-covered field, freezing the frame so that spectators may contemplate this last image before the screen goes black and the end credits appear.

These excerpts from *Latviesu folklora* visually communicate several ideas. First, the exuberance conveyed by the *budeli*. It is this joy that Podnieks saw in Slapins and Zvaigzne, and the director urges viewers to remember it. The passages from *Latviesu folklora* also signify the important political point that Slapins and Zvaigzne’s lives embodied the interconnection between art and politics. Podnieks shows Slapins addressing the camera in Berlin as people all around him in the streets celebrate the unification of Germany on October 3, 1990. Later, Slapins discusses the reasons for making another documentary – he wanted to demonstrate how in 1940 and 1949 [two horrific years of Communist brutality in the Baltic States, which saw
the deportation and murder of tens of thousands of people], it seemed as if nothing
was left, as if “[…] the Latvian nation had sunk to the bottom of the sea.”313 While
archival footage shows injured soldiers and wounded civilians writhing in agony,
Slapins’s voice relates how he wanted to show the state of Latvia immediately after
World War II: “[…] when brothers fought brother, when one part of Latvians were in
exile, another part were in Siberia, and the third part lived in fear of being
captured.”314 Photographs and video show Zvaigzne filming on location in volatile
areas such as Chernobyl after the nuclear disaster in 1986 and in Armenia after the
earthquake in 1988. These passages in Klusuma stunda illustrate how these
cameramen and directors chose to devote their art to an exploration of politics.

Podnieks’s mature films embraced glasnost and joined other contemporary
Soviet documentaries in openly criticizing the Communist regime. Employing
participatory, reflexive, and performative modes of address, Podnieks used his films
to emphasize the subjective and affect-laden experiences of his interviewees and to
call attention to the role of art, media, and documentary cinema in the political unrest
in the U.S.S.R. Viewed by audiences in the Soviet Union and abroad, Podnieks’s
documentaries from this period display the director’s belief that he could use his
camera as a weapon to produce social change.

313 “[…] Latvijas valsts ir nogrimusi jura.” My translation. Klusuma stunda, released
in Latvia by Jura Podnieka studija, LTD.
314 “[…] kad brali karoja pret brali, kad viena dala bija trimda, kad viena dala bija
Sibirija, tie tresie dzivoja bailes par to, ka vinus sanems gusta.” My translation.
Klusuma stunda.
CHAPTER 4

PODNIEKS’S LIVING LEGACY

Podnieks’s death on June 23, 1992 coincided with radical changes in Latvian politics, culture, and economics. While he lived to see the Soviet Union collapse and Latvia regain its sovereignty, he did not witness the reorganization of Latvian society, which significantly affected the Latvian film industry. As Latvia abandoned Communism and returned to a politically democratic government, Latvia’s formerly socialist economy began its metamorphosis into a capitalist financial system. Once well-funded by the state, the Latvian film industry curtailed its film production due to lack of monetary resources while the new administration began reconstructing the infrastructure of the country. In 1991, 10 fiction films were made and released in Latvia, but only 5 in 1992 and 4 in 1993. While fiction filmmaking suffered the most, animation and documentary also decreased between 1991 and 1993 (15 animation films were made in 1991, 9 in 1992, and 13 in 1993; 41 documentary films were made in 1991 and 1992, while 33 were made in 1993). 315

As the political and economic situation in Latvia began to stabilize during the 1990s, the Latvian film industry slowly began to recover. Both old and new

filmmakers resumed working, gradually learning to adapt to the new funding situation where, instead of giving ample money to most film projects, the government now provided a limited amount of financial support for which the increasing number of artists had to compete. Today, filmmakers annually must present their latest film project to a panel of judges at the National Film Center, the governmental institution that administers state funding for cinema, in order to have the opportunity to secure funding for their cinematic endeavors, whether they are fiction, documentary, or animation films. In February and March 2007, the National Film Center held three days of proposal hearings in order to select the recipients of the year’s annual state film budget worth 1.017 million lats (approximately 2.034 million U.S. dollars).316 For that year, the National Film Center received funding applications requesting almost 4.5 million lats (or 9 million U.S. dollars), creating a competitive atmosphere.317 Latvian filmmakers and critics alike protest that the Latvian government is not investing enough in the film industry, noting that the government gave 1.1 million lats (or 2.2 million U.S. dollars) to the Latvian National Theatre Company [Latviesu Nacionalais Teatris] alone (one major acting company among five in Riga) while the entire Latvian film industry received less than that.318


317 Rietuma, 1.

318 Rietuma, 1.
Funding problems are not the only challenges. Film viewing conditions in the post-Communist era have undergone a drastic change, as well. The number of functioning movie theatres in the country (and particularly in Riga) continues to diminish. In 1994, Riga featured 12 movie theatres.\(^{319}\) In 2007, one finds only four. Meanwhile, these venues show fewer Latvian films, most likely due to the lack of interest of the local audiences. As in many countries, indigenous filmmakers cannot compete with imported Hollywood blockbusters. In 2006, the top three highest grossing films in Latvia were *The Da Vinci Code* (with 97,450 tickets sold), *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (91,206 tickets sold), and *Ice Age 2* (81,125 tickets sold), with other American productions dominating the remainder of the top twenty list.\(^{320}\) No Latvian-made production can be found in this inventory. This situation is not new – American-made films dominated Latvian film screens during the collapse of the Soviet Union and at the beginning of the post-Communist era, making up 40.6%, 42.1%, and 42.6% of all film showings in 1991, 1992, and 1993, respectively. During this same period, Latvian films made up 6% of all films shown in Latvian cinemas in 1991, 3.7% in 1992, and 9.1% in 1993.\(^{321}\)

Despite the limited financial resources and the competitive conditions, Latvian filmmakers have continued to create a variety of noteworthy films since 1991. Documentary cinema remains strong, and Podnieks’s impact on contemporary non-fiction films is apparent in the work created by Antra Cilinska. Currently the

\(^{319}\) Perkone and Redovics, 92-93.


\(^{321}\) Perkone and Redovics, 95-96.
managing director of the Juris Podnieks Studio in Riga for more than a decade, Cilinska worked closely with Podnieks as his film editor, beginning with *Komandieris* (1984) until Podnieks’ final film in 1992, *Klusuma stunda*. Since Podnieks’s passing, Cilinska has assumed the roles of director, producer, and writer for over a dozen films, all of which address various aspects of Latvian culture and contemporary politics. Her latest film, *Us and Them* (2006, released in Latvia as *Vai citi…? [Are They Different?]*) epitomizes how Cilinska and her colleagues at the Podnieks Studio maintain his memory by making documentaries that utilize his film techniques and explore similar subject matter.

*Vai citi…?* examines the current ethnic tensions in Latvia between the Latvian and Russian inhabitants. Since the regaining of Latvian sovereignty in 1991, the new Latvian government denied automatic citizenship to Russians living in the country, instituting legislation requiring the successful completion of a Latvian language exam and of a Latvian history exam in order to become a “legal Latvian.” The new government also made Latvian the official state language, and mandated that all public school instruction be conducted in Latvian. These changes generated and continue to produce much resentment and anger from the Russian residents of Latvia, who assert that Latvians violate their rights by imposing these laws that they consider unfair, and who argue that Latvia was not occupied but liberated by the Soviet forces at the end of World War II. Through interviews with various Riga residents such as a Russian taxi driver, a Latvian language teacher, and a young Russian actress, among many others, Cilinska follows Podnieks by demonstrating how these fundamentally different understandings of history inform politics in Latvia today.
The most obvious connection between Cilinska and Podnieks lies in the choice of themes investigated in their work. Both filmmakers express a concern with youth, recognizing that the young people represent the future and often experience the turmoil of contemporary politics. The film centers on them and explores how they are caught in the middle of heated and often violent debates. The first sequence features a sporting event where a Latvian team plays against a Russian squad. She exclusively films fans instead of the actual game to suggest that the drama and competition occurs off the field. Outside of the stadium, Latvian fans wearing the colors of their country’s flag beat drums and chanting “Victory for Latvia!” while Team Russia supporters do the same for their country. Cilinska interviews several groups of young men, all of whom are ethnic Russians who have been born and raised in Latvia. All of them state that they are cheering for the Russian squad because, as one youth declares: “Russia is better. We don’t like Latvian politics. There’s no respect for Russia – our big brother!” Another young man responds to Cilinska’s question about who will support the Latvian team by saying: “Those from the other side.” These two comments from the boys reveal their entrenchment in the political tensions, the younger generations articulating ethnic conflicts and a discourse of the “Other.” Cilinska further underlines this atmosphere of ethnic division and hostility with a low-angle long shot of the row of armed policemen standing in the aisle of the stadium, presumably in attendance to ensure that no violent encounters occur between

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322 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. Vai citi...? English subtitled version entitled Us and Them released in Latvia by Jura Podnieka studija LTD.

323 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. Vai citi...?
the Latvian and Russian fans. By showing the police presence, Cilinska establishes an image of the division within the contemporary society in Latvia, visually articulating the Russian youth’s comments about “us” and “them” and literally displaying how the younger generations in Latvia are caught in this political and cultural battle.

Adolescents appear again in the sequence featuring the Russian celebration of the end of World War II at the Victory Monument. Not only are they a part of the crowd, spectators see them handing flowers to former Soviet army veterans while journalist Natalija Vasiljeva’s report of the event draws attention to this aspect on the soundtrack: “There are a lot of youngsters, even though they should be in school.”324 The event organizers are aware of the importance of a youthful presence at the rally, with one Soviet veteran booming through a loudspeaker declaring: “We need to stand united, the veterans, but first of all the youth [my emphasis], in the fight to protect world peace and against the aggressive politics of NATO and the U.S.A.”325 The veteran’s words recognize the need to involve younger generations in these events in order to ensure that their political views will survive into the future.

This strategic mobilization and exploitation of the youth for political gain disturbs Cilinska, with the Russian School Reform protests representing the epitome of this manipulation. Cilinska films the first meeting of the “Save Russian Schools” campaign on September 4, 2003 in Riga in the Esplanade Park, where a mass of people have gathered, armed with posters featuring children’s faces, to protest the Latvian government’s law that requires all public school education to be conducted in

324 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. Vai citi...?

325 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. Vai citi...?
Latvian. Medium shots and close ups reveal smiling adolescent girls in the crowd, oblivious to the political significance of the red ribbons in their hair and of the red scarves reminiscent of Communist Youth uniforms that they wear around their necks. Cilinska zooms out of close ups of young children’s faces to reveal the youngsters wearing protest t-shirts and holding banners written in Cyrillic. One young man ascends the makeshift stage and speaks on behalf of his classmates in the ninth grade, complaining that he and his peers must study primarily in Latvian. He thinks that children and parents should be able to decide what language to use for their education. Cilinska films the boy in a slightly low-angle close up, as he speaks in a stunted, monotone manner as if reciting a memorized speech. Indeed, it seems unlikely that any of the children present at the rally are there because of a deep understanding of or a passionate belief in their cause. Rather, the younger generation emerges as a mouthpiece for the adults.

Cilinska continues to illustrate the school reform debate by including clips of the music video made by the “Save Russian Schools” campaign. A group of young male actors dressed in black clothes, trench coats, and army boots sport short haircuts and resemble fascist supporters. They wear red, black, and white armbands with the word “Reforma” arranged in a pattern to look like a swastika, and the group appears strutting down a manufactured darkened alley on a soundstage. They throw Russian books off of shelves, while Pink Floyd’s classic rock song “Another Brick in the Wall, Part II” plays on the soundtrack with the English words replaced by the organization’s own Russian lyrics. Another clip from this music video depicts the same young men on a platform, yelling and inciting the black-clad crowd gathered
below them in a manner reminiscent of a Nazi rally. The “Save Russian Schools” campaign directors utilize potent iconography, deploying the media of rock music and video technology to target a youthful audience. The music video proposes that those who support the reform of the school system (i.e., conducting public education in Latvian) are fascists who do not respect Russian culture, and encourages adolescent viewers to protest this development in their schools.

Vladislavs Rafalskis, an ethnic Russian living in Riga who works as a teacher and participates actively in the “Save Russian Schools” campaign, acknowledges the strategic instruction of youth. After the campaign fails to muster enough votes to change Latvian legislation, Rafalskis explains: “I think our fight was not in vain. We won a lot of votes on the Riga City Council. I even ended up there, which was unexpected for me.” When asked whether his students ask him any political questions, he responds:

The kids are fine. They are not really interested in politics. Yes [the kids protested against the reform] and this shows us that we have strong reserves and opportunities for a stand-off even with the state. They supported the cause, but I think for them it was more a kind of entertainment than anything else. […] But I don’t see anything wrong with so many school children taking part in the protests.

Rafalskis’s admits that politics do not appeal to the youth involved in the protests, but this is insignificant since they are useful as long as they can be mobilized for “the cause.”

326 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. *Vai citi...?*

327 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. *Vai citi...?*
Russian actress Jana Sekste illustrates Rafalskis’s thoughts, sharing her views about Russian School Reform and the uncritical acceptance of the campaign ideology by the younger generation. She relates her encounter with a group of young supporters of the “Save Russian Schools” organization. One afternoon, after a matinee performance of Chekhov’s play “The Cherry Orchard,” Sekste walks home, dejected because “there were more actors than audience members” at this performance, and several youngsters run up to her, asking her to sign the petition to protect Russian schools. Sekste refused, asking them: “When was the last time you went to Russian theatre?”

They didn’t even seem to understand the question. I told them that one of the things they are fighting for is Russian culture, the freedom to speak Russian. But they don’t need this Russian culture! Why don’t you come to the only Russian theatre in town? Come and show everyone that you need this theatre. But I understand, they have no time, they protest all the time. They are busy.

Sekste’s anecdote exemplifies the unawareness of the younger generation – they do not grasp the complete meaning of their actions. Instead of critically evaluating the mission of the school campaign, the youth blindly accept what they are told, becoming ideological tools without realizing the contradictions in their deeds.

In contemporary Latvia, children become the site of political and ethnic contestation, both on a larger, public scale with the school reform debate and on a smaller, personal level, as demonstrated by the interview with Biruta Murniece in Daugavpils. She relates how the father of her son is a Russian native of her city, who,

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328 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. *Vai citi...?*

329 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. *Vai citi...?*
upon hearing of his girlfriend’s pregnancy, told Biruta how they should name their child: “I was silent for a while. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t want a Russian name. Now, two years later, he can’t even pronounce our son’s name. He couldn’t pronounce the names of my friends. That was really hard.”

When Cilinska asks if the couple, who are no longer on speaking terms, was able to find any common ground, Biruta answers: “No, I wanted my son to have a Latvian name, and I couldn’t accept his suggestions.” Biruta summarizes the ethnic conflicts that currently plague Latvia (and many of the former Communist republics):

We can say a lot of beautiful words about tolerance, but my personal view is that a Latvian should live with a Latvian and a foreigner should live with a foreigner. Because embracing two cultures, two faiths, is a very big art. It’s always a real wonder when both cultures are successfully integrated within a single family. Based on my experience, I can say that one culture always loses in a mixed family.

During the interview, Cilinska shows Biruta speaking in both medium and close up shots, as well as several photographs of her little boy, visually emphasizing the tragic situation where a union of the Latvian and the Russian produces a child who will grow up without a father because of the inability of adults to resolve their linguistic and cultural disagreements (since the father of the child is absent from both the boy’s life, he is also not included in the film).

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330 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. *Vai citi...?*

331 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. *Vai citi...?*

332 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. *Vai citi...?*
Just as she adopts Podnieks’s preoccupation with the problems of youth, Cilinska also employs a reflexive mode of address in *Vai citi...?*. Just as Podnieks included microphones and cameras in his earlier films and regularly appeared on camera in his mature work, Cilinska shows the interviewers as they talk with their interviewees. Audiences also see her interacting with the film subjects towards the end of the documentary. Images of cameramen, cameras, and their shadows abound, breaking the ‘fourth wall’ and prompting audience members to be aware of their film-viewing experience. Cilinska also investigates the role of the media, probing how television, journalism, and film shape the discourse of self-representation and identity formation.333

Cilinska, like Podnieks, incorporates archival documentary footage in her film. The old Soviet newsreels serve as a ‘voice from the past’, demonstrating one particular vision of history. These documentaries also represent the Communist propaganda machine that “turned even the most challenging filmmakers […] into obedient though enthusiastic chroniclers of a nonexistent reality.”334 The inclusion of

333 Cilinska reflexive mode of address may superficially appear to share similarities with television journalism, where reporters and microphones appear as people are interviewed. Cilinska’s work, however, exhibits an awareness of its subjective viewpoint and of the role it plays in the production of knowledge. Television reporters espouse an expository mode of address, where they purport to deliver ‘objective’ information. Yet, through her interviews with journalist Natalija Vasiljeva, Cilinska foregrounds the subjective quality of all media. In particular, the sequence where Vasiljeva remarks on the “two parallel fields of information in Latvia,” embodied online by the news portal Delfi.lv. She points out that the Russian version frequently contains different headlines than the Latvian version, suggesting that the news company, though reporting on events in Latvia, filters its information according to ethnicity.

334 Horton and Brashinsky, 130.
Soviet newsreels that glorify the Communist postal system, a workers’ club where the proletariat play chess and learn Russian in a home formerly owned by a bourgeois Latvian family, and the building of a new factory in Daugavpils foregrounds the role cinema played in the dissemination of ideology (all of the newsreels celebrate the accomplishments of Communism). Consequently, the black-and-white archival documentary footage may remind spectators that films, as well as other forms of media, continue to express political viewpoints.

Both Cilinska and Podnieks conclude their films on an optimistic note, offering viewers some hope in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Soviets ends with a crowd of people swaying in slow motion with their fists up in the air in a gesture of solidarity. The final frames of *Vai viegli but jaunam?* feature the footage of a teenage filmmaker filming his actors standing in the beautifully blue calm waters of the Baltic Sea – the teenage director’s “blue sea of hope”. For Cilinska, optimism appears in the form of Russian construction worker Jaroslavs Baturovs exclaiming: “We live today, not yesterday. We have to think about how we co-exist […]. We are a society, we can’t be divided. […] In the end, we are all people, we are men and women. Most important in our lives is love.”

While it may, at first, seem like a somewhat simplistic and rather inadequate solution to the enormity and complexity of the ethnic conflicts in Latvia, Baturovs sentiments nevertheless maintain that, at the core of social change, one finds the necessity to recognize the qualities that all humans possess.

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335 Translated by Pavels Gognidze and Sarma Gaide. *Vai citi...?*
Formally, Cilinska shares fewer similarities with Podnieks, her previous body of work exploring social issues in a more conventional manner. For example, in *Girls from Caka Street* (1998), Cilinska begins with an establishing long shot of Caka Street, the location in Riga where prostitutes solicit. After several images of the women negotiating prices with clients, an impersonal, omniscient narrator begins informing audiences about the plight of prostitutes in Latvia, and about the contemporary socio-economic status of the post-Communist state.  

With *Vai citi...?*, Cilinska shifts towards Podnieks’s style in the way she visually communicates her argument. She relies on close ups, filming all of the interviewees at close range, either beginning in a close up or presenting a medium shot that zooms into a close up of the interviewee’s face. As in Podnieks’s films, Cilinska employs the performative mode, utilizing close ups to emphasize affect and the personal experiences of her subjects. Cilinska furthers this sense of audience members gaining an ‘authentic’ insight into the thoughts and feelings of the interviewees by abandoning the standard “Voice of God” narration customary in the expository documentary, to permit the people on camera to express themselves in their own words.

Cilinska, like Podnieks, also utilizes slow motion to emphasize particular sequences. In *Puikas, zirgos!*, Podnieks uses slow-motion to highlight the affective quality of the pentathlon trials. At the end of Cilinska’s documentary, the soundtrack features Baturovs singing and playing a guitar, while medium and long shots show

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336 One must note, however, that the narrator’s voice is *female*, reminding viewers that a woman shapes and controls this film (despite the degree of powerlessness that some women experience in contemporary Latvian society).
people in the streets of Riga. Cilinska alternates regular speed with slow motion to extend the time that audiences see the faces of the city’s inhabitants, perhaps urging spectators to seek out the similar qualities in all as a step towards the resolution of the ethnic conflicts.

In *Vai citi...?*, Cilinska begins to follow in the footsteps of her former colleague and friend in her investment in social concerns and in her filmic expression. Nevertheless, Cilinska and her contemporary Latvian documentary colleagues find themselves in a different film world, in many ways exemplified by a difference in the reception. Podnieks’s documentaries, especially his mature work, received wide distribution in the Soviet Union and some of his films were even screened in Western Europe and the United States. 28 million people in more than 80 countries viewed *Vai viegli but jaunam?*.²³⁷ Twenty-one years after its first screening in Riga, Latvians still regularly publish articles about *Vai viegli but jaunam?* in the popular press.²³⁸ Yet, not a single article regarding *Vai citi...?* (released in November 2006) has appeared to date in the Latvian press. The media attention that Cilinska receives generally centers around her efforts to maintain Podnieks’s memory and around her past collaboration with him – not on her own work.²³⁹ Other present-day Latvian filmmakers fare marginally better (notably Cannes film festival veteran Laila Pakalnina), but their


²³⁸ See Beinerte, 14-17. This is the most recent article to have been published in Latvia that discusses Podnieks’s important documentary.

²³⁹ See bibliography. All of the interviews with Cilinska address Podnieks’s oeuvre exclusively and do not discuss Cilinska’s films.
films remain largely restricted to film festivals and special screenings instead of receiving regular distribution. Today’s films made in Latvia share a similar fate with Balkan cinema, where, as film scholar Andrew Horton observes, “its talent, innovation, and insight into the human condition are at the same time both well recognized [by international awards] and thoroughly ignored.”

Why such a difference in reception? Podnieks’s career began the process of bringing critical and popular attention to Latvian cinema within the borders of the Soviet Union and in the western world. The disintegration of the U.S.S.R. initiated a new wave of attention devoted to films from the former Soviet Bloc countries. Horton explains the situation of Balkan films, although his ideas can apply to Baltic cinema as well: “The 1990s saw a minor explosion of interest in Balkan film from festivals. The decade was potentially a period of promise for the region following the collapse of communism […]” Given these auspicious circumstances, why are Latvian films, particularly documentaries, still so neglected both in Latvia and abroad?

In Latvia, the dominance of Hollywood blockbusters and the valorization of the ‘West’ may be the answer. Additionally, the excitement surrounding glasnost cinema has dissipated, since many filmmakers by now have explored the topics once considered taboo on screen. As Brashinsky and Horton note:


341 Horton, 48.

342 See above, 226.
Since the end of the USSR, the enthusiasm for films that tell the truth and the flood of independent films that reached a level of about 400 features in 1991 appears to be over. In 1992, fewer than a hundred feature films were made and few of those made it to the Russian screens, which have become crowded with cheap American, Indian, and European films.\textsuperscript{343}

Outside of Latvia, the lack of attention to Latvian cinema reflects a problem faced by all East European cinemas. Film scholar Anikó Imre explains:

> The loss of interest in East European films has been a part of a more general loss of interest in the Second World in the aftermath of the post-Berlin Wall euphoria. The celebration engendered by the end of socialism failed to create an equal ground on which to integrate Eastern Europe in the global circulation of ideas.\textsuperscript{344}

Yet, scholarly attention to the film industries from this geographical area is increasing, evidenced by the publication of \textit{East European Cinemas}, a collection of essays dedicated to exploring these cinemas with new theoretical and historical frameworks. In Riga, the University of Latvia will host an international conference entitled “Baltic Cinemas, Past and Present” in September 2008. This study participates in the evolving awareness of East European cinemas. Imre identifies many areas within East European cinemas that merit more investigation, remarking that the “Baltic successor states [possess] cultures that remain invisible without an updated post-Cold War affiliation, and [have] cinemas [that] routinely remain left out of considerations of both Russian and East European film.”\textsuperscript{345} This study begins a


\textsuperscript{344} Imre, xv.

\textsuperscript{345} Imre, xxii.
new contribution to the understanding of Latvian cinema through an examination of Podnieks’s documentaries. It offers one entry point into Podnieks’s works, and invites further research on this director and on Latvian national cinema.


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248


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