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**Cinematic Weapons:
Subversion
and Resistance in
Juris Podnieks'
Newsreels and Short
Documentaries**

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, and particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, cinema scholars have devoted a considerable amount of attention to East European films and filmmakers.¹ While much work remains to be done, a solid body of critical and historical scholarship exists on such national cinemas as those found in Poland and Hungary. Furthermore, outstanding East European filmmakers, such as Krzysztof Kieślowski, Andrzej Wajda and Dušan Makavejev, continue to receive well-deserved academic attention. As the works of these artists become more accessible to the West, a new awareness of the complexity and depth of East European cinema appears to be emerging.

Yet, the rich film traditions of the Baltic States, among them the thriving Latvian national cinema, remain foreign to Western cinema scholars. One finds a void in academia in this subject area, although the rapidly growing economies and the increase in the political currency of the Baltic States has sparked a new awareness of this geographic area. A fresh interest in Latvian filmmakers as the voices of their society is emerging, stemming from the country's rich cinema history. Since the Lumière brothers screened their films in Riga, the capital of Latvia, at the end of the 19th century, the country's fascination with the medium has flourished. From the very beginning of Latvia's independence in 1918, documentary films have played a key role in nurturing and solidifying national identity.

Latvian documentary filmmaking blossomed during the post-World War II period, surpassing the accomplishments of fiction film in the country. By the 1960s and 1970s, filmmakers such as Hertz Frank (aka Hercs Franks), Ivars Seleckis and Uldis Brauns were producing documentaries that encouraged metaphorical readings, earning this group of artists popular recognition as members of the 'Riga School of Poetic Documentary'. Many of the members of the Riga School continued to work through the 1980s and 1990s, slowly gaining international recognition.

A new generation of documentary filmmakers came of age during the 1980s,

continuing the tradition of innovative and moving films. Among them, 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?* (*Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, 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. While censorship was not abolished, Podnieks took full 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, thus offering a powerful critique of the ruling Communist Party. It is precisely the high level of frankness of this documentary that shocked spectators across the Soviet Union and made *Is It Easy to Be Young?* an unparalleled sensation in Soviet cinema history. The contemporary Russian journalist Alexander Kiselev claimed at the time: 'Since its completion, the film has created a stir comparable to the panic a terrorist act in the heart of Moscow could cause.' (Kiselev 1994: 65.) Similarly, film scholar Ian Christie describes how the screening of *Is It Easy to Be Young?* signaled a massive cinematic and social shift in the Soviet Union. He writes:

In 1986, Yuris Podnieks' 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. [...] the demand for Podnieks' film was overwhelming. And in one of the key symbolic gestures of the glasnost period, the huge flagship cinema in Moscow's Pushkin Square switched *Boris Godunov* with *Is It Easy to Be Young?* ... giving Podnieks' urgent exploration of malaise among Soviet youth a prestige forum. In

1 A current debate in cinema studies involves the question of whether one can employ the term 'East 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' (Imre 2005: xvii).

that moment, a cinema's programming decision reflected ... 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. (Christie 1995: 42.)

Clearly, Podnieks' film caused a sensation, and he would continue to make documentaries that openly criticized Communism, such as *Home-land* (*Krustceļš*, 1990) and *End of the Empire* (*Impērijas gals*, 1991), until his death in 1992.

Yet, Podnieks' fusion of politics and poetry, creating what film scholars Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky call 'expressionistic cinema verité' (Horton, Brashinsky 1992: 75), did not suddenly appear in his documentaries upon the introduction of glasnost. Instead, one may see the nationalistic viewpoints and sharp criticism of Communism present in his mature work (i.e., beginning with 1986's *Is It Easy to Be Young?*) already taking shape in his earlier films, albeit in a more subtle manner. Through an examination of Podnieks' earlier works (three film magazines/newsreels and four short documentaries), this study aims to reveal the possibility of reading a subversive subtext in his filmic texts, a subtext that some Latvian spectators may recognize as containing both nationalistic overtones and harsh critiques of Communism.

Significantly, despite Podnieks' importance in European and documentary cinema history, relatively few scholars in Western academia or within Latvia have examined his oeuvre. No one has yet written a book-length work analyzing Podnieks' documentaries, and in Latvian, one most often locates written material primarily intended for a popular audience. Meanwhile, many of the articles on Podnieks in English, French, German, Hungarian, Swedish, and Czech that one finds are obituaries. 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, appears in journals such as *Positif*, *La revue du Cinéma*, *merz. medien + erziehung*, *Cineforum*, *Cineaste*, *Wide Angle*, *Sight and Sound*, and *Film Comment*. Furthermore, those scholars who have analyzed some of Podnieks' films, such as Ian Christie, Michael Brashinsky, and Andrew Horton, have only

studied one or two of Podnieks' documentaries (usually *Is It Easy to Be Young?*) and solely within the context of glasnost cinema, specifically, and Soviet cinema history in general. While these approaches offer valuable insight into how Podnieks' most famous work(s) influenced Soviet audiences and filmmakers and reflected contemporary public discourse in the Soviet Union, they neglect to address Podnieks' earlier films or how these documentaries may have been interpreted by a specifically *Latvian* audience. Disregarding the ways Podnieks may have shaped his films to address Latvian spectators in favor of solely considering his work within a general Soviet context generates an incomplete assessment of Podnieks' oeuvre. For example, one would not consider an evaluation of Michael Moore's controversial documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) comprehensive if researchers only examined how the film was received in Europe or the Middle East, while dismissing the ways Moore addressed his film to Americans. This study's purpose is to complement the few existing critical analyses of Podnieks' documentaries by expanding the academic assessment of the filmmaker's work to include his earlier films, and by urging that more scholarly attention be given to how Podnieks may have addressed specifically Latvian audiences (i.e., examining Podnieks' importance in a Latvian context as opposed to a Soviet framework). It does not aspire to offer a definitive evaluation of Podnieks' complex work, nor does it assert an authoritative 'decoding' of Podnieks' filmmaking intentions. Instead, it submits a possible interpretation of these early works, and invites further exploration and discussion of the significance of Podnieks' films in documentary history.

TACTICAL APPROACHES: PODNIKES, DE CERTEAU, AND BENNETT

Film scholars Yuri Tsivian and Anita Uzulniece have both written extensively, in periodical publications and in the book *Soviet Latvia's Cinema* (*Padomju Latvijas kinomāksla*, 1989), on how the filmmakers who made up the so-called Riga School of Poetic Documentary relied on images to communicate their ideas, with the

audio track serving a secondary, supportive role (Civjans, Uzulniece 1989). Podnieks' evocation of the Riga School of Poetic Documentary through his preference for visually conveying meaning is 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 having already featured critiques of Communism and Soviet oppression. He also injects pro-Latvian, nationalistic sentiments in his films, cinematically capturing the 'tactical' eruptions of the Latvian cultural heritage under the dominant Soviet system. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, theorist Michel de Certeau examines the ways in which consumption can be exploited in order to subversively counter dominant ideological institutions. Taking a Marxist approach to cultural production, de Certeau investigates the "'contexts of use'" (de Certeau 1984: 33), exploring how '*power relationships* define the networks in which they are inscribed and delimit the circumstances from which they can profit. [---] We are concerned with battles or games between the strong and the weak, and with the "actions" which remain possible for the latter.' (De Certeau 1984: 34.) De Certeau identifies two approaches to power relationships in a society: strategies and tactics.

De Certeau defines strategies as techniques employed by the governing authorities or dominant ideologies to assert, affirm, and maintain their power. De Certeau describes a strategy as

the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as

soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats ... can be managed. (De Certeau 1984: 35–36.)

Strategies thus demarcate the boundaries between those with authority and those without, and situate the categories of 'us' and 'them'. They also place a great deal of significance on places, spaces which they create, invest with specific meaning, and impose on others. Since power is associated with its visibility, strategies also involve a 'mastery of places through sight' (de Certeau 1984: 36).

A tactic, on the other hand, forms the binary opposite of a strategy, in de Certeau's theoretical framework. The powerless within society, those without a specific place, employ tactics in order to 'make do', that is, to temporarily disrupt the dominant order. In de Certeau's words, a tactic is

a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. (De Certeau 1984: 37.)

Tactics rely on a resourceful utilization of time, instead of a definition of place, in order to counter authority. Tactics exploit the fissures in the ruling system so as to disrupt hegemony, thus making a tactic 'an art of the weak' (de Certeau 1984: 37).

To illustrate the function of tactics, de Certeau compares this practice of everyday life to poaching. Denoting an illicit activity, the term poaching assigns a predatory nature to the subordinate in society. De Certeau describes this use of tactics: '[A tactic] must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches them. It creates surprises in

them. It can be where it is least expected.’ (De Certeau 1984: 37.) De Certeau’s utilization of the word poaching thus highlights the transitory quality of tactics, underlining the tactical emphasis on temporality.

Although effective in its call to analyze consumption practices, de Certeau’s formulation of strategies and tactics proves problematic, as such cultural theorists as Tony Bennett point out. Bennett proposes that de Certeau’s theorization of resistance in terms of a binary system of power relations constructs a dichotomy between the dominant and the subordinate, thus eliminating the possibility of the plurality of positions within a spectrum of power. In doing so, de Certeau does not recognize the potential for varying degrees of agency within a society. Bennett observes:

We need a fuller and richer cartography of the spaces between total compliance and resistance, one which, in preventing these from functioning as bipolar opposites, will allow ... a ‘thicker’ description of the complex flows of culture which result from its inscription in differentiated and uneven relations of power... (Bennett 1998: 169.)

By creating such binaries, one may also add that de Certeau negates the complexity of cultural products, denying the frequently ambivalent and even contradictory meanings that a single text may possess. For de Certeau, a cultural text must either be read strategically or tactically—it does not lend itself to both. Moreover, de Certeau asserts that the holding of power is an absolute condition, claiming that a ‘tactic is determined by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power.’ (De Certeau 1984: 38.) He also maintains: ‘[A tactic] takes advantages of “opportunities” and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep.’ (De Certeau 1984: 37.) In this manner, de Certeau’s theorization participates in a strategic mobilization of dominant ideological binary oppositions—it participates in the system it implicitly seeks to subvert.

Bennett remarks that de Certeau thus deprives ‘the weak’ of any realistic capability of resistance, since subordinate groups, by definition, cannot produce any truly effective ways of opposing hegemony. They are only allowed brief moments of disrupting the system, and are forced to rely on opportune instances to produce a fleeting reorganization of dominant spaces. Bennett states:

de Certeau’s account of tactics constitutes less an exception to the bipolar logic of resistance than the extreme case of that logic, one in which it is carried to excess in the magnification of one pole of power to the point where it becomes all-encompassing and the diminution of the other to the point where it disappears entirely, becomes a zero power. (Bennett 1998: 177.)

Finally, de Certeau neglects to offer any concrete, historical account of how tactics are deployed against society. Instead, he characterizes tactics as abstract and ephemeral, their transient nature constantly eluding description and analysis. Bennett criticizes de Certeau, writing: ‘What de Certeau’s account of everyday practices most lacks ... is anything approaching an adequate sociological or historical description of those practices that would be capable of locating them within, and accounting for them in terms of, specific social milieu.’ (Bennett 1998: 174.) By doing so, one may claim that de Certeau undermines the political aim of his work, destroying the collective power of subordinate groups by describing the struggle of the weak as separate individuals fighting a spectral battle.

While Bennett’s critiques may appear rather harsh and themselves extreme in their assessment, he raises important concerns regarding de Certeau’s theorization on strategies and tactics. De Certeau’s concepts require modification: the elimination of a binary system, the granting of more agency to subordinate groups, the identification and contextualization of tactical practices, and the recognition of the ambiguity of texts—that is, the possibility that cultural texts or practices contain multiple, often contradictory, meanings. By finding a compromise

between Bennett and de Certeau with these revisions, de Certeau's theories may offer one possible approach towards understanding cultural texts such as Podnieks' pre-glasnost oeuvre.

One may see Podnieks' cinema as functioning in two ways: firstly, as depicting on celluloid the tactics employed by Latvians to disrupt Soviet control; and secondly, 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.² Yet, despite Party approval, Podnieks' subversive subtext remained accessible to Latvian spectators. One should note that, while this study focuses on interpreting the tactical approaches of Podnieks' cinema within a de Certeau framework, his films could also easily be read as expressing strategic support for Communism through their depiction of the social consciousness, responsibility, health and athleticism, and artistic abilities of Soviet citizens.

POLITICAL RESISTANCE
THROUGH CINEMA:
PODNEIKS' EARLY FILMS
THE CRADLE (ŠŪPULIS) 1977

Two years after graduating from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (Всесоюзный государственный институт кинематографии, VGIK), Podnieks directed his first film, an issue for the film magazine *Soviet Latvia (Padomju Latvija)*. *Soviet Latvia's* 1977 issue no. 3, nicknamed *The Cradle (Šūpulis)*, 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 this country.

Podnieks' documentary tactically expresses a politically transgressive viewpoint. Podnieks chooses to cast the low Latvian birth-rate 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 the society as a whole. 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 a worker and not as a mother.

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 such as 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 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' beliefs appears in the image of the snow-covered wagon wheel. One may interpret the wheel as a symbol of the old Latvian culture engulfed by the modern Soviet regime. By juxtaposing images of modern life in Soviet Latvia 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 Soviet Union furthered by contemporary Communist propaganda) can not produce average proletariat couples who have the basic resources and desire to raise enough children to stabilize the birth rate.

² While beyond the scope of this study, the complex relationship between Podnieks' filmmaking practice and the Soviet censorship system (within Latvia and in the rest of the Soviet Union) merits further exploration.

Podnieks answers the question posed at the beginning of the documentary by placing the blame for the low Latvian birthrate on the Communist regime. 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. 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. Foreshadowing his future evaluation of the Soviet system during the glasnost era, Podnieks' first film may be interpreted as a critical view of Communism's detrimental effects on Latvian society.

The contemporary Latvian critical reception of the film recognized Podnieks' political project. Podnieks' Riga Film Studio (Rīgas kinostudija) 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.' (Nogins 1979: 169.)³ Nogins' comments subtly identify Podnieks' address of the nationalistic Latvian audience through the use of the Latvian word *tauta* ('nation').⁴ The term connotes strong nationalism, since it refers to a group of people who form a country or an ethnicity. Thus, Nogins' use of the word *tauta* twice in his description of *The Cradle* reflects Podnieks' efforts to rally the Latvians into action, urging them to raise more children in order to resist Soviet hegemony.

CONSERVATORIO 1979

Podnieks film magazine issue *Soviet Latvia*, no. 23 (1979), with the alternative title *Conservatorio*, offers spectators a portrait of the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music on the occasion of the institution's 60th anniversary.

Significantly, Podnieks frames the documentary with Jāzeps Vītols' famous 1899 choral work *Castle of Light* (*Gaismas pils*), using the beginning of the ballad to open the film and the end of the ballad to conclude this film magazine issue. His decision to employ *Castle of Light* to structure the film is noteworthy, given the cultural and political context of this choral work. Vītols set his music to the poem *Castle of Light*, which was written by Auseklis (a.k.a. Miķelis Krogzemis, 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.⁵ Including a choral work using the words of Auseklis indicates Podnieks' desire to remind Latvian spectators of their forefathers' struggle for sovereignty, as well as the director's wish to activate in contemporary Latvian viewers that same determination to resist the dominant Communist ideology.

The text of *Castle of Light*, accentuated by Vītols' score, relates Auseklis' 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 sinking into an abyss (in certain respects, similar to the Brigadoon legend) and the Latvian cultural heritage pushed into dormancy. The poem continues by explaining that, if someone guessed the magic word or name, the castle would rise up again into its former glory as the people's castle. The climactic conclusion of the poem and of the choral work entails Latvian sons surmising this sacred word, the men calling out for the light, and the light and the castle being resurrected. This text contains strong nationalistic overtones and functions as a call for the Latvian people to cast off the chains of their oppression and reclaim their sovereign state.⁶ Podnieks' deployment of this specific choral work by Vītols 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, given its inclusion of such a nationalistic choral work. The answer lies in the theme of the poem being adapted by another Latvian writer and politician, Rainis (a.k.a. Jānis Pliekšāns). He used this fable of the Castle of Light in his famous play *Fire and Night* (*Uguns un nakts*, 1905), adding specific characters and creating more dramatic tension. While Rainis is one of Latvia's greatest writers and 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 *Castle of Light* with Rainis, reassuring Soviet censors and allowing his work to be publicly screened.

Podnieks' transgressive subtext also appears in the way the director portrays the conservatory faculty and students during the 60th anniversary year. Podnieks' 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 faculty members currently, 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 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.

SPORTS OVERVIEW (SPORTA APSKATS) 1981

Podnieks created his next film magazine issue in 1981. *Sports Overview* (*Sporta apskats*), no. 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 participating athletes, conducted during the winter of early 1981. Instead of offering a straightforward chronicling of the sporting events in Moscow, Podnieks chose 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 elects to treat the summer Olympic games in Moscow not from a journalistic perspective but rather in an expressionistic style. The most obvious technique that Podnieks utilizes is the specific employment of color and black and white film. Typically, in documentaries the 'present' appears in color footage while black and white footage usually denotes the 'past'. Yet, the opposite is true in *Sports Overview*. The action, excitement, and 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 a monochrome image. 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.

3 My translation. All of the translations in the remainder of the text are mine, unless otherwise noted.

4 The word *tauta* in Latvian has a similar meaning to *volk* in German, and implies a group of people who form their own nation. For more information on the concept of *tauta*, see Plakans 1995: 77, 84, 90–92, 101.

5 For more on the Latvian National Awakening movement, see Plakans 1995: 89–100.

6 Given this context, it is not coincidental that *Castle of Light* is traditionally one of the last songs performed at the Latvian Song Festivals. For more information on the Song Festivals, see below.

Podnieks' expressionistic style in *Sports Overview* also encompasses an awareness of the film as a construct. The opening credit sequence, featuring shots of Podnieks, Seleckis, Slapins, and others members of the creative 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 in his films possesses a more 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 Avdeyev, the camera zooms back from a close up of the rower's face to reveal Avdeyev 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 Avdeyev talks about being happy with his life overall. As Podnieks' 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 under Communism.

Furthermore, one may perceive a subtle Latvian nationalistic viewpoint in this newsreel. Throughout *Sports Overview*, 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 that it 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 athlete belongs to which ethnicity through the language they choose to speak during their interviews. 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 in the documentary. All of the Russian athletes who are interviewed—Miskarov, Kuzmin, Jackevics, and Avdeyev—articulate great disappointment in themselves and bitterness about not winning gold medals in their respective sports at the Olympics. Meanwhile, the two Latvian athletes featured in the film—Pāvels Seļivanovs and Dainis Kūla—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 Kūla and his Ventspils training center, where tomorrow's athletes are being trained today. The smiling faces of the Latvian children playing on the icy ramp with Kūla end the documentary on a hopeful note, suggesting that the strength and resolve of Latvian athletes (and, consequently, 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 Avdeyev 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 the athletes assume a public significance, with

each competitor representing the traits of their respective ethnicity.

THE BROTHERS KOKARI
(*BRĀĻI KOKARI*) 1978

Podnieks made his first non-film-magazine, non-commercial documentary in 1978, receiving considerable critical recognition. *The Brothers Kokari* (*Brāļi 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 Soviet Union New Filmmakers Screening and received the Ukraine Ministry of Education Award. The film follows the twin brothers as they conduct their Latvian choir *Ave Sol*, interspersing photographs from their impoverished childhood with footage of rehearsals and performances. 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 raise Latvian choral performance to a new level.

One may also detect a pro-Latvian nationalism in the subtext of *The Brothers Kokari*. As fellow documentary filmmaker Armins Lejiņš wrote in 1981, Podnieks knew 'that it is not enough to film an etude about choral conducting, that one needs to say something more.' (Lejiņš 1981: 15.) Along with internationally known choral works, the choir featured in the documentary performs arrangements of traditional Latvian folk songs, and participates in the Latvian Song Festivals; both brothers are filmed walking in the customary festival procession, and the 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 (Plakans 1995: 97). 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 implication, film. The theme of political resistance through music will resurface in Podnieks' later oeuvre, notably in *Is It Easy to Be Young?*, *Hello, Do You Hear Us?* (*Mēs?*, 1989), and *Homeland*. Focusing on the great achievements of two Latvian artists also acts as a reminder that the Latvian people are capable of significant cultural achievements, similar to the way in which Podnieks emphasized the success of the Latvian Olympic athletes in the newsreel *Sports Overview* in 1981. Again, Podnieks illustrates how the personal accomplishments of two conductors embody the greater, public triumph of the Latvian people.

BOYS, ON HORSES!
(*PUIKAS, ZIRGOS!*) 1979

Podnieks made two short documentary films in 1979, *Boys, on Horses!* (*Puikas, zirgos!*) and *White Ave Sol* (*Baltais Ave Sol*). *Boys, on Horses!* 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 the young men, former pentathlon athletes, and the trainers at the facility share their thoughts about the value of such experiences. Through his choices in editing and framing, Podnieks creates a portrayal of young boys struggling to become men, serving as an example of one of Podnieks' more developed films from his early period.

The subversive nationalistic subtext present in most of his early documentaries does not appear as sharp in *Boys, on Horses!* One may note, however, that Podnieks includes a subtle cutting comment at one of the products of the dominant Soviet culture—the sense of resignation to a life where fighting to achieve something is not a worthwhile endeavor. Podnieks critiques this attitude by showing brief interviews with three young former pentathlon athletes who all quit the training 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 in every sense of the word. This valorization of the Latvians over the

Russians recalls the pessimism of the Russian athletes and the optimism of the Latvian Olympic competitors in *Sports Overview*.

On the soundtrack, Podnieks' choices of music generate a new understanding of the visual track. An example of this may be seen in the first piece of music in the film, an excerpt from a musical work by V. Kaminskis, entitled *The Homeland's Guards Grow Up* (*Aug Dzimtenes sargi*). This music may be heard on the soundtrack as the audience sees 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.

WHITE AVE SOL
(*BALTAIS AVE SOL*) 1979

Podnieks' other short film from 1979 is *White Ave Sol* (*Baltais 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 compliment the images. Podnieks' documentary serves as an example of the director's early exploration of the relationship between the visual and the aural, demonstrating Podnieks' initial experimentation with developing his expressionistic style.

One may again see a subversive political subtext in *White 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 endured hundreds of years of war, as the English, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the

French, the Chinese, and the 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 during 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 proved to be somewhat unstable. At the time Podnieks filmed *White Ave Sol*, Ferdinand Marcos had been the dictator of the Philippines for almost seven years. The footage of the Philippines and its turbulent colonial history and war-torn past, evoked by the archival footage of bombings and casualties, may be seen by contemporary Latvian spectators as representing the tragedy and injustice of the kind of imperialism that has caused a great deal of bloodshed and political unrest in Latvia.

THE COMMANDER
(*KOMANDIERIS*) 1984

The Commander (*Komandieris*, 1984) offers viewers a portrait of Vilis Samsons, a commander of the Latvian Partisan Brigade No. 1, a 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 Soviet Union New Filmmakers Screening in Tbilisi, where it won the jury's prize for best documentary, the film focuses on Samsons' 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.

The Commander is arguably the most problematic of Podnieks' 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' nationalistically oriented oeuvre? Superficially, *The Commander* might appear to be a pro-Communist work, one that would please Soviet censors. The journalist I. Plotke's views reflect the Soviet reception of the film: '[Vilis Samsons'] stories and thoughts of the Soviet people's fight for their freedom have given the film's autho[r] the opportunity ... to dynamically show how the victory over fascism proved inescapable.' (Plotke 1985.) Yet, a closer examination of this documentary reveals a motion picture in which a subtle, subversive subtext undermines the celebration of the heroism of Communists.

Podnieks undercuts this glorification in multiple ways, beginning with the film's opening passages. The documentary 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, 1946.⁷ The film features 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' (Žvinklis 1999: 106). Viewers see the Nazi officers arrive in Riga's Victory Square (Uzvaras laukums) in military vehicles, and witness the prisoners being 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.' Meanwhile, the non-diegetic male voice of the film's narrator, actor Eduards Pāvuls, declares: 'You killed our children, fathers, men. You filled all of Latvia ... with their blood. You owe us that precious blood. And we will not forgive this debt.'

Immediately following this archival footage, Podnieks offers spectators a contemporary sequence, comprised primarily of close ups and medium shots, showing 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, an academic, and Latvian Partisan Brigade No. 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, through his editing choices, encourages the Latvian viewers to see a commonality between 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 animals 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' extensive deployment of documentary footage and photographs from World War II. Of the approximately 142 shots that comprise the film, 96 consist of archival footage or photographs. Podnieks uses these archival films and photographs to remind viewers of the atrocities committed during World War II, which 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—

7 The archival footage is an excerpt from the newsreel *Soviet Latvia*, no. 8, February 1946, Special Issue. It may be found at the Latvia State Archive of Audiovisual Documents (Latvijas Valsts kinofotofonodokumentu arhivs, no. 179).

damage that persists to this day. Podnieks adds further emphasis on the archival footage by showing several of these sequences in slow motion, extending the time that viewers contemplate the horror of the war scenes on screen.

This idea of the past coloring the present becomes more explicit when one considers the frequent use of double exposures in *The Commander*. Repeatedly, Podnieks offers audiences two superimposed shots, with one of the images frequently belonging to ‘the past’ (i.e., 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 employs superimposition as an editing technique, frequently extending the dissolve from one shot to the next. 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 Samsons’ image slowly fades out. By employing superimposition throughout *The Commander*, Podnieks continues to communicate his idea that the past metaphorically and literally colors contemporary action.

The soundtrack of this film stands out in Podnieks’ 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 Eduards Pāvuls is speaking the sentences. Very rarely do spectators see (and hear) Samsons speaking in sync on screen, and 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’ words in the narration of the soundtrack are not his own, literally and metaphorically. Samsons’ words are literally mediated by Pāvuls’ voice, while in another sense his thoughts and opinions are colored by the Soviet regime, since Samsons’ propagandistic narration of World War II communicates the Soviet party line, rendering Samsons a Communist mouthpiece.

All of these editing, framing, and soundtrack choices function to convey one of Podnieks’ central themes in *The Commander*: the primacy of the image over the soundtrack. Podnieks’ perpetual privileging of the visual over the verbal in his work assumes an even greater importance in *The Commander*. In order to express a subtly subversive subtext critical of Communism that the Latvian audience would recognize, Podnieks aligns the verbal with the dominant Soviet power. The omnipresent narration—Samsons’ words read by Pāvuls—may relate the official, public Communist perspective on history and World War II in a very black and white dichotomy, but Podnieks’ 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 is showing in one frame two different images that were filmed in separate locations.

Podnieks’ challenging of Communist authority appears again in a brief but notable moment in *The Commander*. 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, 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—M. Z. V.], 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.

The camera then cuts to a medium shot of Samsons sitting at his desk, double-exposed with a close up of water, as the Legionnaires 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?' Pāvuls' voice responds with Samsons' 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 killing their fellow countrymen. The soldier's questions '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.⁸ Samsons' 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.

Podnieks' early films display many of the characteristics of glasnost cinema years before Gorbachev implemented his reforms. Both his film

magazines and short documentaries function as rich texts that can be read in multiple ways, giving Latvian viewers in the 1970s and early 1980s the opportunity to interpret politically subversive subtexts. Podnieks employed these early films as creative experiments in how to subtly communicate those political views that he would later overtly express during the glasnost era in his mature films, such as *Homeland* and *Hello, Do You Hear Us?*—films that would receive critical and popular attention in the Soviet Union and abroad. From the very beginning, Podnieks' film camera was his weapon.

8 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' successful record of annihilation of property and human life earned him a great deal of praise from the Communist regime and status as a great Soviet war hero. One may read Samsons' own description of his bravery during World War II in his memoirs *The Rustling of Kurzeme's Forests (Kurzemes meži šalc, see Samsons 1974)*. 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 Aļķis 1997.

FILMS

Boys, on Horses! (Puikas, zirgos!), dir. Juris Podnieks. Latvia, 1979

The Brothers Kokari (Brāļi Kokari), dir. Juris Podnieks. Latvia, 1978

The Commander (Komandieris), dir. Juris Podnieks. Latvia, 1984

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