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Microhistories of the *Crossroad Street* films

Abstract:

Crossroad Street (Šķērsiela in Latvian) is an 800 m long street in the suburbs of the capital of Latvia – Riga. The street and its inhabitants have been documented in three films by Latvian director Ivars Seleckis over more than two decades. They represent microhistories of people’s lives, which reflect the political and socioeconomic situation in the country over more than two decades (the films were released between 1988 and 2013). The political transformations of the country’s present and past weave through individual destinies, reflecting the deportations of the 1940s, Soviet oppressive politics, the period of *perestroika* and the awakening of independence, as well as the consequences of joining the European Union, and transiting through the economic crisis in the first decade of the 2000s.

The article looks at the characters’ lives where the individual is in constant negotiation of the normative reality as described by Giovanni Levi, and explore their representation in the framework of longitudinal documentaries. Longitudinal documentaries involve revisitations – incorporation of the previously filmed material within a new film, which present an incremental form of narrative (Kilborn), where characters’ lives become “infra-ordinary” (Miller Skillander, Fowler).

With each subsequent film, Ivars Seleckis deepens the understanding of the complexity of everyday life in the country in a specific historic period, and presents a multi-layered narrative evolving at the specific location.

Key words:

Microhistory, longitudinal documentary, Ivars Seleckis, revisitation, Latvian cinema

Introduction

The discipline of history experienced changes in the 1970s, giving space to a new term – microhistory, describing smaller scale, individual stories about people’s lives that are viewed in close detail. Interest in people’s destinies has been characteristic of Ivars Seleckis’ films throughout his career, especially since the 1970s, focusing on pressing social issues and various characters – as documented in the three films on Crossroad Street. He has returned to several topics or characters of these previous films, allowing to perceive specific issues or observe a person’s life over a longer time.

Giovanni Levi describes that a microhistorian’s “work has always centred on the search for a more realistic description of human behaviour, employing an action and conflict model of man’s behaviour in the world which recognizes his – relative – freedom beyond, though not outside, the constraints of prescriptive and oppressive normative systems. Thus, all social action is seen to be the result of an individual’s constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality which, though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations and freedoms.” (1991) Levi points to the question it rises – how to distinguish the margin between the individual’s freedom and normative systems surrounding him. The normative systems can be attributed not just to the characters whose lives are documented in films but also the filmmaking system which influences the film’s materiality.

Microhistory has close links to anthropology. Referencing Clifford Geertz’s ‘thick description’ – not to make observations and create a law-like theory, but perceive the signs and see what structure can be made of them, Levi notes: “This approach succeeds in using microscopic analysis of the most minute events as a means of arriving at the most far-reaching conclusions.” (1991) Through observing details in the characters’ everyday lives and in their biographies, three films on Crossroad Street prompts to create a sense of diversity in the society those people live in.

Katherine Miller Skillander and Catherine Fowler created the term “infra-ordinary” to describe the ordinary person who viewed longitudinally is no more ordinary but becomes “infra-ordinary”. They suggest three forms of time in longitudinal documentaries – historical, biographical and biological time. (2015)

Historical time reflects the particular historical context from multiple perspectives – political and social agendas, appearances, specific film production techniques. Biological time concerns the changing physical features of the characters, but biographical time involves the life course of the characters. With every film, we witness not an amplification of the characters but a deepening through learning new details about their biographies and their feelings, attitudes, which allow the audience to know them to a greater extent. (Skillader, Fowler, 2015)

Researching longitudinal documentaries, Richard Kilborn proposes the term ‘incremental’ form of narrative, which is a defining feature of such films. “With each successive instalment or episode of the work, the slowly unfolding text is subject to a characteristic process of expansion and consolidation.” (2010) In each subsequent film, the filmmaker needs to integrate references to the previous films and engage with already pre-existing filmic material. This reworking of the previous material Kilborn calls ‘revisitations’ that includes combining previously shot footage with the new material. (2010) The approach of integrating previous material in the new form of content is a common praxis in contemporary media, however, in the longitudinal documentaries “the idea of revisitation acquires absolute centrality” as the expectations of viewers are that they will be provided with new information on the characters since the last film. (Kilborn, 2010)

Ivars Seleckis’ three films about Crossroad Street present the “infra-ordinary” characters who can be followed through more than two decades of their lives. The film’s incremental narrative is multi-layered, becoming more extensive with each film and revealing a wider spectrum of political events. If in the first film, the events of the Awakening and their presence in society are revealed in an unobtrusive way, then in the next films the presence of the political and socio-economic details become more present.

I would argue that with each subsequent film, Seleckis deepens the understanding of the complexity of everyday life in the country in a specific historic period and presents multi-layered narrative evolving at this specific location.

Longitudinal documentaries of the Eastern Block and the *Crossroad Street* films

The longest and most discussed series of longitudinal documentaries in the Eastern Block has been Winfried and Barbara Junge’s *The Children of Golzow* (1961-2007). The films follow the lives of the first generation of people brought up in socialist Germany after the wall between East and West was erected. As argued by Silke Panse, over the course of the years, films transform from the ex-

pository style to becoming more self-reflexive in presenting the stories of people who have lived through and seen the collapse of the socialist regime, as well as experienced its consequences. (2008) The transitional time of socialist Germany was documented in another project of longitudinal documentaries – Gerd Kroske's *Kehraus* trilogy (1990, 1997, 2006) filmed in Leipzig. The films document street sweepers and through these characters who are on the margins of political reforms, they challenge the “celebratory discourse of the unification”, as argued by Ilona Hongisto. (2017) Volker Koepp in his Wittstock films created an image of women in the small town of East Germany (seven films from 1975-1997).

There have been several films in Latvian cinema which fit into the longitudinal documentary approach, however, until now, except *Crossroad Street*, only one more film has seen three instalments.¹ In a similar time frame as Seleckis' work on *Crossroad Street*, Juris Podnieks' ground-breaking film *Is It Easy To Be Young?* (*Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, 1986) portrays characters from the time of perestroika until 2010. The two subsequent films were directed by Antra Cilinska, who had contributed as editor for *Is It Easy To Be Young?* and after Podnieks' passing away became head of his studio. The films *Is It Easy To Be...? After 10 Years* (*Vai viegli būt...? Pēc 10 gadiem*, 1997) and *Is It Easy...? After 20 Years* (*Vai viegli...? Pēc 20 gadiem*, 2010) returns to the same characters following up on their lives.² Since the films share a similar time frame of their production with the *Crossroad Street* films, there are recurring thematic patterns which reflect the broader changes in society.

Having finished work as a cameraman on the film shot in several USSR supporting countries,³ Ivars Seleckis described his arrival at *Crossroad Street*: “When after so much travelling around in various locations you reach such a *Crossroad Street*, then you realise that the world is becoming smaller. It's like viewing one point on the globe with a powerful zoom lens.” (Jēruma 2009) This one point was a street about 800 metres long on the outskirts of Rīga, where the film's script-

¹ Several other Latvian films should be named here: Una Celma directed two films about her classmates – *The Girls of 1960* (*1960. gada meitenes*, 1995, 2023) following several women and their destinies. Seleckis himself is in production with the second instalment of the film similar to the “7 Up” approach: the film *To Be Continued* (*Turpinājums*, 2018) presented five children in their first school year, in the second film they return to the same children seven years later (the film is planned for release in 2024, co-directed with Armands Začs, current working title: *Coming of Age* (Pieaugšana)).

² See the discussion on the filmmaking career of Juris Podnieks: Balčus, Z. (2021). ‘Discussion: Juris Podnieks and the Constellations of Times’. *Culture Crossroads*, vol. 18, pp. 75-88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol18.84>. On the production history and release of the film see: Rozenšteine, A. (2010). “‘Vai viegli būt jaunam?’ filmas vēsture. Tapšana, apstiprināšana, parādīšanās ekrānos.” In: Proskurova, O. (ed.), *Laiku atšalkas: žurnālistika, kino, politika*. Rīga: Latvijas Universitātes Sociālo un politisko pētījumu institūts. 73.-90.lpp.

³ *The Best Hours of Our Lives* (*Mūsu dzīves zvaigžņu stundas*, 1987, dir. Uldis Brauns).

writer Tāļivaldis Margēvičs once lived. This designation includes a two-fold view – a technological filming approach and an immersion in a specific event. The director writes that the idea of the film was submitted to the Riga Film Studio as focusing on typical elements of the suburbs at the time – the proletariat, the factory, and so on at the time of Gorbachev's perestroika. (Jērums 2009) None of the filmmakers had any prior intention to continue and expand the film into several parts, covering the fates of the characters over a period of almost 25 years.

Crossroad Street was the street of the scriptwriter's childhood. Margēvičs describes the film's genre as unusual – proposing that it be called a "people's novel". He stresses the film's theme: "We often talk about the nation as a whole, but here we look at the destinies of individual people." (Skalbergs 1993) As Gorbachev's perestroika had begun, they thought that the title of the film could be "Searching for the Prophet". It would reflect the atmosphere of the time when there were no more strict regulations to be followed but people themselves had to find a recipe for life. They had to look for the answer and re-evaluate everything – in business, religion, human values, and so forth. The "people's novel" (Jērums 2009) that Margēvičs mentioned can be linked to the novelistic quality of documentary film suggested by Elisabeth Cowie. Documentary as a fiction film offers a spectator certain desire and imagining, in which the viewer engages fully in the moment of reality and truth. (Cowie 2011)

The three instalments of the films on Crossroad Street are each shot at a specific historical moment for Latvia. The first film *Crossroad Street* (*Šķērsiela*, 1988 (recipient of the Felix award as the Best European documentary (in 1990), among many other international awards)) was filmed at the end of the Soviet era and in the atmosphere of the soon to be independence. It portrayed several characters whose life stories reflected the tumultuous history of the country during the 20th century. The second film *New Times at Crossroad Street* (*Jaunie laiki Šķērsielā*, 1999) presented the arrival of the neo-liberal economy and the effect it had on the daily lives of the characters – the ones seen in the first film and new ones. The third instalment, *Capitalism in Crossroad Street* (*Kapitālisms Šķērsielā*, 2013) focuses on yet another momentum – the country has joined the EU, the 2007-2008 financial crisis has hit, as a consequence leaving many in a precarious situation, some joining the labour emigration flow to other European countries.⁴ The incorporation of fragments from the previous films that are used as an archive of the characters' lives, the tone of the voice-over (and choice of the narrator) and

⁴ For exploration of the representation of themes of social and economic precarity in Baltic cinema since the 1990s see: Nāriņa, E., Šukaitytė, R., Balčus, Z. (2022). Economic and Social Precarity in Baltic Cinema. In: Cuter, E., Kirsten, G., Prenzel, H. (eds.). *Precarity in European Cinema: Depictions and Discourses*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 289-302. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707816-016>

other specific elements all contribute to particular narrative construction, where private and public discourses intersect. The films on Crossroad Street reflect not just the changing features of the characters and their social and historical situation, but also shifting cinematic approaches related to technological changes. These films represent an 'arrhythmic' mode of longitudinal documentary, since they have been made not in fixed intervals, but with different periods in between them. (Kilborn 2010)

All three films employ an observational technique following the characters in their daily routines, which is combined with interviews and the voice-over commentary. The voice-over is modelled as representing a person who has lived on Crossroad Street for a long time and is familiar with its inhabitants. Sometimes the questions of the scriptwriter are heard behind the frame reaching from general topics to very personal ones (feelings, happiness, love, etc.). The technique shifts over time and in subsequent films the film's scriptwriter and also the director are visible in the frame, and audibly present more than before. With his films, Seleckis' creates a social ethnography (Redovičs 2021) allowing to witness society at close proximity.

Crossroad Street (Šķērsiela, 1988)

The film presents the location – the street – with great care and interest. It combines representation of the place, the characters, and also visual metaphors (a meteorological measuring device which is lifted in the sky over Šķērsiela at specific hours of the day to predict the weather forecast, thus the street and its inhabitants in a subtle way are presented as a micro portrait of the city.) Seleckis references the beginning of his career in the 1960s and the film *The Shore (Krasts, 1963)*, when his views on the power of the visual image were formed: "I discovered that an image does not develop evenly, but concentrates in compressions, instead of stretching out into kilometre-long sketches of nature scenes and episodes, but leans towards visual capacity." (Jasņecs 1989).

Each character is presented in their own environment and briefly introduced by the male over voice. For example, the old woman Oliņiene suffers from a heart condition, and there is no one to help, her pension is small, no aide can be hired and paid for; Osis and Osiene – another old woman and her son; Mārrutku Pēteris, who specializes in making horseradish sauce and sells it at the market, and so forth. The way of presenting them characterizes the rhythm of their daily life: Pēteris cooks horseradish with his daughter, Oliniete cooks in her tiny kitchen, Osiene works as an order patroller on streets, and so on. The character Daiga, who is expecting a child, lives in a small room in her relative's house, Aldis has a tombstone business, which causes the dissatisfaction of neighbours, Ilga and her

son Toļiks, who has had health problems from the time when he was growing up in exile in Siberia with no medical assistance available, taxi driver Jūlis and his conflict with his neighbour Aldis due to the noise in his stonemason's company. There are some joint activities on the street, such as the celebration of Midsummer night, when all the rows become forgotten, and neighbours enjoy themselves. The current historical context is introduced with a TV broadcast where the dissident Mavriks Wulfsons gives a speech and condemns Stalin's' repressions. The people cheer his speech with a chant – "Not a step back, never again".

Selectis wrote about the filming routine when making the first film, that they had a daily ritual, when in the morning, together with his assistant, sound operator and lighting engineer "we took a tape recorder, a camera on our shoulder, walked around our street and looked very carefully at what was happening, to find out if something had happened. That's how we discovered that one day the trees had started to be cut, the next day something else had occurred. When we didn't appear in Crossroad Street for a week, immediately everyone asked – where were you? Has anything happened? We were like *pranksters* or *comedians* for them, who became necessary to the local community, because something was always "boiling" around us. In addition, we were harmless, because we were not interested in who was making moonshine, for example. We were not going to condemn anyone, moralize, or so on. We were also always informed about coming events." (Jēruma 2009)

New Times at Crossroad Street (Jaunie laiki Šķērsielā, 1999)

One of the last scenes of *Crossroad Street* presented a celebration on the street, the voice-over read: "Never before have the Crossroad Street inhabitants had such a desire to come together. Have new times begun?" Even though another film hadn't been foreseen, this phrase reflects the title of the second film – *New Times at Crossroad Street* (1999). It returns to some characters, whilst also introducing new ones. The film uses more interviews and in-depth character studies: the scriptwriter talks to Daiga about her family, her childhood at the orphanage, a conflict with her neighbour Aldis. Then we hear the story from the opposite side – Aldis is interviewed about the conflict. Two new characters are the businessman Guntis Plūmiņš and his wife, a textile designer Dzintra Vilks. Interviews with Dzintra are very personal – about her most happy time in life, meeting her second husband, the feeling of time slipping away. The questions are specific and direct: like when the scriptwriter asks Pēteris – "what has changed in Latvia since the Soviet times?" He and his wife say that nothing has changed, but there is less money, life is quite difficult. While the first film was mostly shot

on Crossroad Street with just a few scenes filmed in other locations, the second film more often allows to follow characters outside the confines of Crossroad Street. We see Plūmiņš' doing his job – inspecting a bar, greeting guests at the casino in Riga Old Town, interviews are also held in his office. The same goes for Aldis – he performs a baptism in the water somewhere in nature. Coming back to the scenes from the first film and incorporating them in the second film, the phrase Kilborn is used as a “time shuttle” describing transition between different moments in time in characters' lives. These are not flashbacks because they are not mere presentations of events in the past, but moving back to specific films, moments in a film. (2010) Moving between footage filmed at different periods of time, this footage is perceived as archival and presenting a specific experience for the viewer – an archive effect, as argued by Jaimie Baron. (2014) The sense of the material being “archival” for the spectator proceeds from understanding that the various footage in the film comes from another earlier context of use (or intended use). (Baron 2014) The distinction between new and previous footage is made more distinct by using it in black and white even though the first (and all three films) were made in colour.

The film also presents more public events, such as a pre-election campaign for the first time in the street. This film involves more diversity – in terms of the kaleidoscope of different characters, their lifestyles, opportunities, experiences. Overall, there are more conflicts between the neighbours. Even though the events are still organized on the street, there is some tension between the characters. The film ends with the celebration of the founding of Latvia on 18 November. The filmmakers show a dark autumn evening, some streetlights, Osis cooks milk soup, there are fireworks above the river Daugava. Even though this is a celebratory day, the mood of the last episodes does not reflect it.

Capitalism in Crossroad Street (Kapitālisms Šķērsielā, 2013)

The third film *Capitalism on Crossroad Street* (2013) – presents the time of economic crises seen through the perspective of recurring characters and again new ones. One of them is the woman taxi driver Vallija, whose three children live abroad, the main reason being labour emigration. The children are the essence of her life and them not being there makes her question what reason she has to stay. Another is a former teacher who is now homeless and lives with her partner in a self-constructed shelter without electricity or water. Energy seeps from the daily routines of another character who is included for the first time – Viktors, who kayaks, makes sour cabbage and rides a bicycle. There are also more younger generation characters, whose life prospects do not seem easy either, one of their

income sources is collecting scrap metal. There are several characters from the previous films who feature in the third instalment – Aldis, Daiga, Osis and Toļiks. Osis now lives in a care home, Daiga has a second son, Aldis still has his business. For the incorporation of the images from previous films, the film uses those shots in black and white to distinguish them from the otherwise colour palette of the new work.

Revisitations or “reworking material already collected” and revisiting people already shown before (Kilborn 2010) are incorporated in the third film less than in the second film. There are scenes with Osis at the Midsummer night celebrations on the street, which is Daiga’s son Toms’ 10th birthday celebration. In the new film it is again his birthday celebration, and the shots of him as a 10-year-old boy are shown, and now his brother is about the same age as he was in the previous film. Daiga is the granddaughter of Latvian writer Jānis Veselis, whose name was forbidden during the Soviet period as he left the country. The filmmakers along with Daiga travel to her mother, who wasn’t with their children when they were young. One of the new characters is Kurts, representing Latvians who left the country because of the Second World War. Kurts has returned to Latvia after 60 years, the picture of him as an 18-year-old is shown at the time when the German army capitulated in the Kurzeme cauldron, and Kurts ran away. He was imprisoned in a Russian prisoner of war camp, built in Riga. We see some of his photos, the newsreels from the archive reconstructing visually the past. When visiting Latvia now in old age, Kurts has met his love from his youth and they are now part of the community of the street.

It is Aldis and Daiga, who are neighbours, whose stories weave through all three films to the greatest extent. Aldis, from a young man enrolled in a spiritual seminary in the first part of the film, who started his tombstone business, has become a spiritual leader, continuing the tombstone business, in which one of his sons has now also joined the father’s work. Daiga’s story is disclosed from many respects – her childhood in the orphanage, her grandfather as if erased from Latvian literature, her brother, her sons and private life. In the interviews she often stresses that she can only rely on herself, disclosing also different details about the precarious situation she has to go through time and again. As observed by Kilborn “projects which start life with a distinct sociological orientation have a habit of slowly transmuting into works with a far more biographical inclination.” (2010)

In *Crossroad Street* interviews in the first film are introductory – about the characters’ lives, relationships between the neighbours, plans and hopes for the future, but the two following films provide a slightly different approach, as

there is already information available for the spectators – or material for the filmmakers to employ. As Kilborn notes in the context of linking longitudinal documentarians work with that of oral historians – generally oral historians will allow informants to freely wonder in their recollections, but “sometimes such historians will feel the need to provide their subjects with certain prompts in order to trigger the memory flow.” (2010) In the second and third film the filmmakers prompt specific topics from their characters, which continue the themes of their life stories seen in the previous films. These stories and the overall context of their situations allows to observe the society of the time and specific historical moments.

Conclusion

The three films on Crossroad Street and its inhabitants present changes in socioeconomic and political life in Latvia for more than two decades, seen from the perspective of specific people. Starting from the end of the 1980s and the atmosphere of the awaking of the independence movement, the films represent the history of Latvia and its society in the transformative moments of recent decades. “By tracing the manner in which subjects, over an extended period, respond to the demands of the changing times, long docs supposedly not only give us insight into how adept individuals are at adjusting to new situations; they also provide a socio-political record of the times themselves,” as reflected by Kilborn (2010).

Revisitations of footage from previous films – using interviews, biographical documents, and strong presence of voice-over, the film uses formal voice where the filmmakers have a specific position on the events and characters portrayed (Plantinga 1997) – has been employed with a specific purpose. As the film’s director Ivars Seleckis recollected: “Learning from similar examples, we realized that a film cannot be made from quotes – in the past and now, then it has no development. Foreigners also asked – how will those who have not seen the first film watch it? Of course, a standalone film should be made, regardless of the first one. In the end, the decision crystallized that we are making a film about people today who have had something in the past. Retrospection deepens it, but the film is about today, and it was the right way to go.” (Jēruma 2009)

Each film has a strong presence of music expressing a certain mood or presenting in the lyrics an extra meaning. The choice of the music shifts throughout all the films, but keeps the notion of supplementing the visual material. The tone is also important in the voiceover commentary’s sound. It is sympathetic, sometimes soothing, as if being another distinct character of each film. Apart from

the strong textual and musical layer, the films employ certain visual symbolism – the meteorological device, a cat, a crow. The cat and the crow are addressed almost as if being characters of the film, who also have their place on the street.

The look at the people's lives presents the viewer with microhistories which create an understanding of society at a specific time.

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