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History in Lithuanian Women's Creative Documentaries: Critical and Personal Approach

Abstract:

Over the last two decades, documentary has become an important tool of communication for Lithuanian women filmmakers since their number and visibility on national and international screens has grown significantly. Better gender balance in documentary-filmmaking noticeably increased the exposure to greater stylistic and thematic diversity, as well as paved the way for the new cinematic approaches to national and world history, politics, warfare, collective identity, and other issues traditionally assigned to men. This article examines creative documentaries directed by Giedrė Žickytė, Jūratė Samulionytė and Vilma Samulionytė, Martina Jablonskytė and Ramunė Rakauskaitė. First, it investigates how these films combine subjective, analytical, and critical approaches to examine and mediate complex phenomena in Lithuanian history. Second, it discusses how these women documentarists engage with the past and in what ways their approaches and languages differ from conventional historical documentaries.

Key words:

History, memory, Lithuanian documentary, female filmmakers, creative documentary

Introductory remarks about intersections of documentary film and history, emotions and women's cinema

In this article, I delve into two traditionally male-dominated fields of activity – documentary cinema and history – belonging to the certain cluster of “non-fictional systems”, which according to Bill Nichols constitute “the discourses of sobriety” and have “instrumental power” and can “effect action and entail consequences” (Nichols, 1991, p. 3). Belinda Smaill has aptly pointed out that this way Nichols prioritized knowledge and education (which are associated with the public sphere) “while disavowing the importance of emotions” (Smaill, 2010, p. 5). She articulates a different point of view since “emotions are not only private matters” as they circulate in society “through specific textual practices” and thus confer “cultural meanings onto others” (Smaill, 2010, p. 3). Nichols’ characterization of emotions as inferior in rank to knowledge, is deeply rooted in the tradition of Western thought. The field of sensations is largely associated with women, “who are represented as ‘closer’ to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgement.” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 3) Several years later Nichols expanded his previous views about documentary film and the ways it engages with the audience claiming that films invite us to experience the world “emotionally” or “intellectually” and both these ways “go hand in hand in documentary” (Nichols, 2010, p. 100). A similar opinion about equal importance of emotions and “a rhetoric of cognition” has been voiced by Ib Bondebjerg (Bondebjerg, 2014, p. 14), who supported his arguments with the insights of cognitive neuroscientists. This recognition of the role of emotions in discovering documentary film meanings, mirrors a paradigmatic shift in non-fiction film production and marks an “emotive” and “personal” turn in media and culture (Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Rascaroli 2009; Smaill, 2010; Helke, 2016), which can be regarded as “an outcome of the process of postmodernisation of both the social and the artistic fields” (Rascaroli, 2009, p. 4). Another important development in the documentary milieu to be noted (especially in Europe) is the steadily growing number of women directors and producers of feature documentary films¹, which has an influence on the thematic and stylistic diversity of the

¹ In 2022 the European Audiovisual Observatory published a new report on female professionals active in the European film industry between 2017 and 2021. It revealed that women still only represent 25% of all film directors and 34% of producers working in Europe, although their presence is stronger in documentary than other film genres. For instance, women accounted for 30% of all directors of documentaries and 38.9 % average share of female producers per film. (Simone, 2022) In 2019 the European Audiovisual Observatory’s published report on Female directors in European cinema from 2003 to 2018, revealed that among the films produced in the period 2013-2017, female directors represented only 21% of all directors with at least one European feature film produced and released in the period, and on average 25% of all documentary feature films were directed by women. (Simone, 2019)

films. The new millennium has been also marked with the growth of history “consumption” and “comodification”, especially mediated in films and TV, and this new tendency in the nonfiction domain is remarkable, and has been widely discussed by nonfiction film researchers (Alter, 2002; Rosenstone, 2006; Kurz, 2008; Schwartz, 2008; Groot, 2009; Bell, 2011; Kortti, 2016, 2022; Bondebjerg, 2014, 2020; Mikonis-Railienė, Šukaitytė, 2020).

This article discusses these aforementioned tendencies and developments in Lithuanian documentary milieu by focusing on women documentarians’ works, which can be identified as “emotive”, “personal” and “historic”. The analysis explores how meaning is given to historical subjects through emotions, rhetorical, narrative and aesthetic devices in four prominent Lithuanian films, produced and distributed over the previous decade: *Kaip mes žaidėme revoliuciją / How We Played the Revolution* (2012, Giedrė Žickytė), *Močiute, Guten Tag! / Liebe Oma, Guten Tag!* (2017, Jūratė Samulionytė and Vilma Samulionytė), *Lituanie, mano laisve / Lituanie, My Freedom* (2018, Martina Jablonskytė) and *Kelionės namo / Back to the Dreamland* (2019, Ramunė Rakauskaitė). Bringing together the aforementioned creative documentaries, which look into different periods of Lithuania’s history, I argue that they suggest a range of different approaches (subjective and personal, analytical, and critical) to explaining the country’s recent and distant past. They employ miscellaneous aesthetic, rhetorical, narrative and emotive devices to (re)frame and (re)assess the history and those who built it, while being careful with binary oppositions and mythification. Despite being “liminal” and “marginal” (these terms Dagmar Brunow applies for defining small scale (minor) productions, 2015, p. 2), these films are valuable from an epistemological point of view and play a significant role in refreshing national and European collective memory by creating emotive and personal narratives about the dramatic times of post-World War I, post-World War II, and the end of the 1990s and mediating them to people who did not directly experience the actual events and situations. They are themselves “one of the loci of debates” about a nation’s heritage and history, values and identity, as national films according to Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, “do not simply represent or express the stable features of a national culture” (Hjort, MacKenzie, 2000, p. 3-4).

Cinema, in the words of Ewa Mazierska, “is a part of history, namely a discourse on the past” (Mazierska, 2011, p. 1). Both history and the past have an intertextual nature, the notion of which changes according to the relation to texts produced through different discursive modes, media, languages, and value imperatives. One more thing that unites cinema and history is that cinematic

and historical works act as *cultural memory* (for term approach see J. Assmann and A. Assmann, 2008) in society, forming a national collective identity and reinforcing ideological and value attitudes. Films, especially documentaries, can serve as a source and evidence in historical research; can engage us in reflections about history and the past; or produce knowledge about social, political, cultural life in the past; even foster agency. Hayden White in his influential text “Historiography and Historiophoty” has argued “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” is vital to the historical knowledge of the society (White, 1988, p. 1193). He believes that photographic and cinematic “evidence provides a basis for a reproduction of the scenes and atmosphere of past events much more accurate than any derived from verbal testimony alone”. (White, 1988, p. 1194)

History and cinema are interlinked in many other ways. Vanessa R. Schwartz, for example, has suggested several areas of inquiry in this sense, namely “film as a historical object; film as an archival record; historical storytelling on film; and finally, cinehistory, the cinematic representation of the past and the simultaneous thought about it in film” (Schwartz, 2008, p. 200). It is this last feature that predominates the examination of the selected Lithuanian documentaries in this article as well as Schwartz’s idea about the ontological similarity of cinema and history, as they both claim a relationship with or reference to the real world and both are concerned with the problem of temporality. (Schwartz, 2008, p. 199). Historians, however, are more concerned with the stories themselves than with the way they are told, and for filmmakers the latter is always crucial. In Žickytė’s *How We Played the Revolution*, the Samulionytė sisters’ *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag!*, Jablonskytė’s *Lituanie, My Freedom* and Rakauskaitė’s *Back to the Dreamland*, the focus on the stories and the way in which they are told is evident. By combining freely in the narrative structure of the films the recorded memories and testimonies of those who directly experienced historical moments, their family members and friends; with historians’ commentaries, material from state archives and fragments of video and photo archives of private people; reflections of filmmakers themselves; and by merging essayistic or personal narrative with the language of facts, these women filmmakers bring complex moments in Lithuanian history and the people involved in them closer to the lived experiences of people of our time, encouraging them to look for parallels to the present day and to create a personal relationship with history.

“History”, according to Jukka Korti, “is the narrative construction of the human mind and cultural orientation in human life” (Korti, 2016, p. 141), just as cinema is. Documentary film is a form of public discourse and as such has a big

role in creating a sense of the experiences of the past by allowing its authors to communicate with audiences in an aesthetically pleasing, rhetorically convincing and emotive way. Behind every audiovisual representation “lies a personal value system, authorial positions and attitudes, priorities, doubts and criticisms” (Šukaitytė, 2005, p. 65). It is therefore no coincidence that European audiovisual policy makers have been encouraging countries to foster diversity and gender balance in national audiovisual industries to make sure that previously marginalized points of view (of women, sexual and ethnic minorities, people of colour) are present on the national and European screens, especially on subjects which traditionally were assigned to men’s expertise. It is worth noting that in Soviet times and the first decade after the restoration of Independence, only a few woman directors were active in the field, predominantly in creative and TV documentary. For instance in the period from 1991 to 2005 Janina Lapinskaitė was one of a few established women-documentarists, renowned for her distinct style (based on the blending of fiction and documentary components, performative, observational, interactive and poetical modes), which was exceptional in Lithuania at that time, despite the globally emerging phenomenon of *new documentary*, which Jane Chapman associates with a rejection of “the boundary distinctions of traditional documentary modes” (Chapman, 2009, p. 97), the fall of popularity of Direct Cinema and an increase in “the range of documentary possibilities and the hybrids” (Chapman, 2009, p. 18). The reason behind women’s marginalization in the film industry was quite similar to Western Countries. Betsy A. McLane explains women documentarians’ place in history of documentary cinema as follows: “Women were allowed into the ‘ghetto’ of documentary television since it was perceived as secondary to fiction and entertainment TV”, moreover nonfiction-making was a less visible, less profitable and less prestigious area (McLane, 2012, p. 350).

In Lithuania the number of documentary films whose directors were women apparently increased between 2010 and 2020, due to augmented volumes of female graduates from film directing programmes, bigger available national funding, as well as mutual support and mentorship of women producers and filmmakers, namely Janina Lapinskaitė, Giedrė Beinoriūtė, Živilė Gallego, Jurga Gluskinienė, Ieva Norvilienė, Teresa Rožanovska, Dagnė Vildžiūnaitė and Giedrė Žickytė. International film festivals held in Lithuania, particularly the Vilnius Documentary Film Festival, the Human Rights Documentary Film Festival *Inconvenient Films*, the Vilnius International Film Festival *Kino pavasaris* and the European Film Forum *Scanorama*, also did their best to provide visibility to women’s films at home and promoting them abroad. This vibrant documentary ecosystem gave stimulus for a new generation of women-documentarists to

build their profiles in the milieu (namely, Oksana Buraja, Ramunė Rakauskaitė, Jūratė Samulionytė and Giedrė Žickytė), and allowed great directorial feature-length debuts of directors such as Olga Černovaitė, Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Aistė Žegulytė, Martina Jablonskytė and Marija Stonytė, which were internationally screened at various film festivals and were well accepted at home. Better gender balance in documentary-filmmaking noticeably increased the exposure to greater stylistic and thematic diversity, as well as paving the way for new approaches to national and world history, politics, warfare and other issues traditionally assigned to men.

Women's approaches to the cinematic representation of the past

As it has been already argued, I have selected four documentary films for my qualitative analysis: Žickytė's *How We Played the Revolution*, the Samulionytė sisters' *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag!*, Jablonskytė's *Lituanie, My Freedom* and Rakauskaitė's *Back to the Dreamland* (2019), which are directed and produced by women. The sample does not represent Lithuanian history documentaries; however, the chosen films mirror vibrant trends/tendencies in global documentary filmmaking (as has been argued above) and are thought-provoking from the point of view of how they approach complicated historical subjects. These documentaries differ from a traditional history documentary (primarily aimed at TV distribution), which Nichols categorizes as "the expository" (addressing the viewer directly) in his typology of "documentary modes of representation" (Nichols, 1991, p. 32-75). The works of Žickytė, the Samulionytė sisters, Jablonskytė, and Rakauskaitė present a personal perspective on different periods and emblematic events in Lithuania's history (i.e. Lithuania's becoming an independent state after the collapse of the German and Russian empires after World War I; Lithuania's way to restoration of independence from Russia in 1988-1991; Germans' displacement from Lithuania after World War II; the connection Lithuanian World War II refugees and their children have with their homeland and returns during the Soviet occupation) and apply mixed modes of representation and emotive devices in their loosely narrated stories. Instead of reconstructing historic events, the authors (re)frame, (re)interpret and refresh them and create a space for the historical debate on the subjects of their films.

According to Ib Bondebjerg, documentaries are "important for the shaping of our sense of a historical past and for our personal and collective memory" (...), but they "cannot replace the academic discipline of history, and scientific data and arguments will always be an important background" for such works (Bondebjerg, 2014, p. 18). The films under discussion have no claims to replace histori-

cal works, however, they apply historical knowledge and use archival sources to support their arguments about events and their participants, and actual problems of those who lived in the depicted historical times. Thus, to put it in the words of Robert A. Rosenstone, they respect “the spirit of objectivity” and keep “a critical distance between the historian and his or her subject” (Rosenstone, 2018, p. 101). For the filmmakers, however, equally important are the personal traits and charisma of film characters, the testimonies and emotions of the common people who have lived through the historical events, and the personal experiences and approaches of the filmmakers themselves, or their family members or friends. This “emphasis on the personal, the intimate and the domestic” has always been according to Pam Cook “a means of self-expression for women” (Cook, 1981, p. 272). Thus, to paraphrase the historians Eileen Boris and Nupur Chaudhuri’s thoughts on the work of (women) historians, Žickytė, the Samulionytė sisters, Jablonskytė and Rakauskaitė construct historical narratives as individual subjects and members of a certain generation in their profession (Boris; Chaudhuri, 1999, p. xi). Their films reconsider the path and the cost of Lithuanian’s freedom, and from a historical perspective, they open up the micro-worlds of the individual, the family, minorities, migrants and artists in the historical change. In their historical cinematic narratives, we can recognize the different aspirations of women historians: to uncover “the truth about history”, to “make history” and to be “the historian of change” (Boris; Chaudhuri 1999, p. xi).

Martina Jablonskytė, in *Lituanie, My Freedom*, looks back to the times of post-World War I in Lithuania and Europe. She is in particular concerned with one political event – the Paris Peace Conference, held in January 1919, which was initiated by the victorious Allies in order to agree on the terms of the peace treaties to be signed by the belligerents. As this event of the diplomatic elite was to discuss and consolidate the new national borders of the European countries, the delegation of the State of Lithuania, which was restored by the Act of Independence of 16 February 1918 (but not yet recognised *de jure*), prepared for and participated in the Conference – unfortunately without an official invitation, proper funding or diplomatic and negotiating skills. At that time, Lithuania was heavily devastated by the war, had suffered an attack by the Red Army, and soon also had to repel attacks by the Bermontists and Poles. The film thus, by revealing the motives and circumstances of the Lithuanian delegation’s work at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, reveals in which complex political and economic circumstances Lithuania emerged as a new European state, and how/why this became possible. Lithuanian political scientists and historian Šarūnas Liekis shared his opinion in the film, saying that “it was a miracle that had no rational basis.” Meanwhile, French historian Julien Gueslin aptly pointed out “that nothing in

world history is predetermined, therefore every step, every personal contribution counts". It is only when small actions come together into a whole that the great events of history are born.

Lituanie, My Freedom is an essayistic story inviting the viewer to reflect on how the idea of freedom and of Lithuania itself have changed over the past century. She raises the question of what the meaning of Statehood and Freedom to Lithuanians and Lithuania's patriots who lived in the 1910s and that of people of our times was? Its narrative is reminiscent of an avant-garde essay film, interweaving poetry, subjective and objective information, emotions, various space-times and geographies. The film opens with a poetic sequences of poetry by the Polish-born French poet and playwright Oscar Vladislav de Lubicz Miłosz (in Lithuanian Oskaras Milašius), set against the backdrop of a bird's-eye view of the Lithuanian landscape. The film includes a number of episodes shot in Paris, where researcher Akvilė Kabašinskaitė, who develops the film's narrative, interacts with French historian Julien Gueslin and artists of various nationalities. Paris in the film represents political power and freedom as the fate of Lithuania and Lithuanians was decided during the diplomatic debates in Paris in 1919. The documentary mainly hints at Milašius' contribution to the establishment of Lithuanian statehood and diplomatic history, while sidelining the chair and other members of the Lithuanian delegation. This film's style can be described with Nora M. Alter's thoughts about the essay film as a cinematic form enabling "to make the "invisible" world of thoughts and ideas visible on the screen" and as having a distinctive structure that is "transgressive, digressive, playful, contradictory, and political." (Alter, 2002, p. 8). Moreover, films of this type are often interdisciplinary and transnational, as their makers navigate across disciplines, cultures and countries and embrace broader social and political issues (Alter, 2018, p. 6).

Ib Bondebjerg claims that documentary as a cinematic form can demonstrate different approaches to reality, namely, be authoritative (use "documentation, explanation and analysis through experts and witnesses"), speak with an "open voice" (by letting the viewer observe reality and life), and finally "take dramatized or poetic approaches to reality, in which subjectivity and objectivity, the more symbolic and imaginary, the fictional and the factual meet or even clash." (Bondebjerg, 2014, p. 57) Though the form of *Lituanie, My Freedom* is essayistic, and a poetic approach to historic reality dominates in it, other approaches are employed as well. For instance, historian Vilma Bukaitė provides the audience with factual and contextual information about the complex situation in Europe and Lithuania at the time, and the work of Lithuanian diplomats and negotia-

tors in Paris in 1919, which was little known to the general public, and which led to the recognition of Lithuania's independence. The audience also sees several photographs of the Lithuanian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, found in the archives. Along with that, the film includes views of other historians, namely Julien Gueslin, Egidijus Aleksandravičius, about this international political event, the political elite of that time and the participation of the Lithuanian delegation. However, the film does not develop a coherent narrative either about the political situation at the time, or about the circumstances and the course of the work that the Lithuanian delegation carried out. Rather, it makes a nostalgic excursion into an era and years when freedom and statehood had a different meaning and significance in people's lives as past generations had to fight for it, while new generations are simply born in a free democracy and have no experience of living in another system. The film contains quite a lot of the director's own reflections on what freedom is and what it means to different people, so *Lituanie, My Freedom* clearly has the characteristics of an essayistic personal film.

Rascaroli pointed out that the concept of essayistic cinema has become expansively used to the “variety of films and cinematic forms”, thus “the essay” has almost become synonymous with creative documentary (Rascaroli, 2009, p. 1), especially those films having a strongly articulated personal perspective. She argued that essayistic films share common features such as “metalinguistic, autobiographical and reflective, they all posit a well-defined, extra-textual authorial figure as their point of origin and of constant reference; they strongly articulate a subjective, personal point of view; and they set up a particular communicative structure” to address the spectator (Rascaroli, 2009, p. 3). Of the documentaries I have selected for sample analysis, the most pronounced features of essayistic personal cinema are characterized by Martina Jablonskytė's *Lituanie, My Freedom* and Jūratė and Vilma Samulionytės' *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag!* The latter film opens up two little-discussed topics for Lithuanian audiences: suicide and the fate of the Baltic Germans after World War II. These themes stand out in the very first shots of the film, where we see the sisters cleaning their grandmother's grave and remembering the circumstances of her death, which their mother carefully kept hidden from the public. From the sisters' conversation in this and later scenes – travelling in a car on the motorway and talking to their mother about the contents of a letter that their grandmother wrote before her death – we learn that the granddaughters had little knowledge of their grandmother's private life. Attempting to understand their grandmother, they immerse into a larger story that had existed as if apart from them, but at the same time, paradoxically, it also brings to light the traumas of an individual family, linked to the time that they have lived through. Becoming the main protagonists in the film, as well as the

researchers and narrators of the life story of their grandmother Elė Finkytė (Ella Fink), a woman of German minority in Lithuania, they involve historians and their own parents and other family members living in Lithuania and Germany, thus obliging them to remember something which is painful and which people hardly talk about, even in narrow family circles. The filmmakers feel intrigued by the fact that their grandmother was the only one in the family to return to Lithuania after repatriation to Germany. After the return she married and lived an isolated, reserved life, which she herself lived to a ripe old age. As Natalija Arlauskaitė noted, “the attempt to understand her is accompanied by a review of the family archive, primarily related to the life of the Lithuanian German family during the war and post-war years, and is supplemented with material preserved by relatives in Lithuania and Germany, stored in state archives and in open circulation” (Arlauskaitė, 2020, p. 225).

In the film *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag!* the personal perspective of the authors’ is particularly pronounced, as the Samulionytės sisters patiently and thoroughly investigate their family, using the narrative structure of a road movie and “the construction of a new family archive” (Arlauskaitė, 2020, p. 225). By travelling to the places where their grandmother spent her childhood and post-marriage life, visiting her cousins in Germany and collecting new pieces of information during the journey, they enrich the narrative with new information, which they reflect upon and ventilate right away under the camera’s gaze. Thus, the film’s shots communicate strong emotions – which are live, not staged – in order to pursue a close emphatic relationship with the viewer. Some scenes in the film are highly sensitive and carry great emotional “charge”, such as the sisters’ conversations with their mother about the suicide note that their grandmother left behind, and the dialogue between the shocked sisters on the ferry from Germany to Lithuania, having learned about their grandmother’s father’s suicide. Obviously, they discover some of the dramas in the life of their German family at the same time as the viewer, so the sincere astonishment and sadness of the sisters/directors is particularly moving.

According to Scott MacDonald, “personal film documentarians allow male and female viewers to experience what the characters in their films – certain people – were going through at a particular time, and to make sense of these experiences”, this way the audience is “*experiencing* these cinematic versions of the subjects’ experiences” (MacDonald, 2013, p. 9). The Samulionytė sisters let the viewer feel their pain and sadness even after their father (who had been one of the social actors in the film) passes away during the shooting of the film. They immediately decided to share this information with their audience in a very restrained way, with a black frame and a white caption “In the course of the

filming, our Dad has passed away of his own free will” integrated in the narrative. In this way they subtly send a message to the viewer about the need to talk over one’s experiences with one’s nearest and dearest. Lithuanian film directors are generally reluctant to open up their lives and emotions to viewers, preferring rather to provoke/stimulate the feelings of their characters (social actors) and expose these to the audience. In this respect, the Samulionytės’ documentary is innovative and encourages other filmmakers to delve deeper into the ethical aspects of filmmakers’ sincere communication with their audience. They also show that documentary film can be used therapeutically in several ways. First, as a form for personal-discovery and personal-therapy for the filmmakers. In the film the camera “plays the role of an objective therapist and an unobtrusive listener” (Wan, 2023, p. 3) when the directors share their feelings and family secrets with the viewer. Second, this film can be a tool of “experiential education” (Wan, 2023, p. 3) for other filmmakers or viewers with similar experiences and family stories. At the end of the film, for example, we see the directors having a sensitive conversation with their mother after the screening in the cinema, along with the shots they make of taking photos in Vilnius by the Neris river. In the latter, both the directors and their mother look happy and relaxed. These episodes reveal the therapeutic effect of the film: to reflect on painful experiences and thus heal individual and collective traumas.

Although the film is dominated by the authorial (personal) narrative perspective, we can also hear an expert voice: the commentary by historian Norbertas Černiauskas, who spices up the personal narrative with a scholarly perspective. The historian’s interjections help us comprehend the history and fate of the Germans who lived in Lithuania (and other territories occupied by the soviets): at the outbreak of World War II, they were displaced to Germany (under the USSR-Germany Population Exchange Treaty), and those who had stayed behind secretly, or who had returned to Lithuania after the German occupation of the country were discriminated against and deported, so they were forced to conceal their identity. We also learn how uneasy living in Soviet Lithuania was for those with German roots from the childhood memories of the directors’ mother and her brother, as well as the tragic fate of their grandmother. Thus, the film, even though personal and biographical, opens up the contexts of international politics and history, making us rethink the impact of totalitarian regimes on nations, ethnic groups and individuals. Thus, it is not accidental that the film premiered at the Lübeck International Film Festival and is a co-production between Lithuanian and German film companies.

Jablonskytė's *Lituanie, My Freedom* and Jūratė and Vilma Samulionytės' *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag!* are Lithuanian examples of a tendency in documentary film culture, which Susanna Helke has described as "the emotively personal" and prevailing in Finland and Scandinavia. According to her "instead of the traditionally historical, societal or political observations, more and more films – in terms of their perspective, approach and topic – have dealt with the area of emotions, family relations, questions of identity and individual growing pains" (Helke, 2016, p. 185). Scott MacDonald noticed a similar trend in American documentary cinema and indicated the following types of personal films: "the cinematic chronicling of the filmmaker's personal and/or family life"; experimental "psychodramas"; "personally expressive"; and "diaristic" works. Though *Liebe Oma, Guten Tag!* deals with historical and social subjects, an "emotive" and "personal" approach to reflecting on these subjects is strongly expressed as in the documentary the viewer observes "the personal lives of the filmmakers during which family members, friends and others are recorded in sync sound, or with the illusion of sync sound, interacting conversationally with the filmmaker" (MacDonald, 2013, p. 4). Unlike the Samulionytė sisters, Jablonskytė does not appear in the film, however, when watching the film, audience members come to certain generalisations about what the subject of the film means to the filmmaker through an essayistic form and emotive narrative. I argue that both of the above discussed Lithuanian films belong to the co-called "intellectual cinema" tradition, to which, according to Scott MacDonald, belongs personal documentary cinema.

It is worth pointing out that in Lithuania only a few personal essay films reflecting on the history of Lithuania have been produced. One of the most remarkable in this category is Algimantas Maceina's *Juoda dėžė / Black Box* (1994). It is a very personal and sensitive film, made in a style close to Jonas Mekas' film and video diaries. The director uses a subjective video camera to document the journey of his grandfather's remains from Siberia (where he was deported during Stalin's rule of the USSR) to Lithuania, a journey he embarked on together with his father in October of 1998. Another striking example of this type of film is the intimate video portrait *Visa teisybė apie mano tėvą / All the Truth About My Father* (2003) by Vytautas V. Landsbergis, which reveals to the audience the multifaceted personality of Vytautas Landsbergis, a prominent Lithuanian politician, professor, and musicologist (the filmmaker's father). It is a personal and emotive film that subtly combines various means of audiovisual expression (voice over, emotion-building illustrative music, photographs and video records from the family archive, observations and panoramas) into a single story. One of

the first female directors to create a personal essay documentary on a historical topic is undoubtedly Giedrė Beinoriūtė. Her 2007 short film *Gyveno senelis ir bobutė / There Lived a Grandfather and a Grandmother* employs a child's point of view on one of the most tragic phases in Lithuania's history: the genocide of the Lithuanian nation by the Soviets in 1944–1953 (when the people of Lithuania were being imprisoned, murdered, and deported to the USSR's labour camps). The narrator in the film is a little girl, who comments throughout the film on the experiences of the director's grandparents in inter-war Lithuania and later in exile in Siberia. The director incorporates memories of beautiful and tragic life experiences that her grandmother and mother told to her during her childhood. She combines very heterogeneous visual material (i.e. family photographs, animation, shots from newsreels, exile files, drawings, etc.) to illustrate the period of that time, how people felt. These three films share essential features of essayistic documentaries such as "reflectiveness, subjectivity, transgressiveness, personal, autobiographical, which Laura Rascaroli indicated in *The Personal Camera. Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (Rascaroli 2009).

In Giedrė Žickytė's *How We Played the Revolution* and Ramunė Rakauskaitė's *Back to the Dreamland*, the features of essayistic films (as described by Alter and Rascaroli) are less obvious, but these films demonstrate their directors' strong relationship with the issue that they are examining, which they have also articulated in the metatexts of the films – interviews with journalists and film critics. These documentaries contain the features of personal cinema singled out by Alistair Fox, such as the clear articulation of a personal vision, the fusion of subjective and objective narrative styles, the focus on family members, friends, professional expression, feelings, and similar (Fox, 2011). They also expose the coherence between the personality and the filmmaker and their individual relationship to the material, even autobiographical elements or individual experiences in the making of the film. Both film directors – Žickytė and Rakauskaitė – tell their audience about events and situations of which they and their family members were observers and/or participants.

Giedrė Žickytė's *How We Played the Revolution* and her other documentaries (*Baras* (2009), *How We Played the Revolution*, *Meistras ir Tatjana / Master and Tatyana* (2014), *Šuolis/The Jump* (2020)) clearly directs her focus on the late Soviet era, where her parents lived and she spent her own childhood. Another element that connects all of Žickytė's films is personality type of the main characters. These are bright, gifted, brave and nonconformist personalities, mainly of the Lithuanian art and culture scene of the late Soviet era, whose creative practices and lifestyles were an expression of their resistance to the regime. One can

describe these films as “montage cinema” or “archive-based documentary”, for montage plays an important role in constructing the narrative from various archival materials (TV footage, video materials of independent cinematographers, personal records of the film’s characters, etc.) along with on-camera recollections of the artists, cultural figures and people from the main characters’ inner circle and expert commentaries.

With her film *How We Played the Revolution*, Žickytė became known as a talented storyteller of intriguing stories, who is capable of establishing a great bond with Lithuanian and foreign audiences of all ages. As Lina Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė has specified, one can consider this work “exceptional, because it brings to light previously unseen footage from personal archives or emphasises footage that “publicists” have overlooked” and “one should consider it attractive to the younger generation, because it uses a simplified cinematic language and a playful form to tell the same story that their parents have repeatedly rhapsodized, in which the latter are not only unconditional patriots, but also “rocking” young people – and to the older generation, too, because the story has not been forgotten” (Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė, 2011).

Employing the phenomenon of the cult rock band *Antis* and its leader Algirdas Kaušpėdas, the film playfully reveals the course of Lithuania’s Singing Revolution and its achievements. The band’s theatrical, grotesque performances at the *Roko maršas / The Rock March* rock music festivals in 1987–1989, their easy-to-remember melodies and witty lyrics criticising the Soviet system attracted the young and the old, the provincial and the urban population. When the Sąjūdis reform movement of Lithuania invited the band’s leader to become a member of their initiative group founded in 1988, *Antis* became a phenomenon and a *soft power* (a term coined by Nye, 1990). “As the founders of Sąjūdis recall, they made efforts to elect people to the Initiative group whom the authorities could not so easily arrest or otherwise deal with”, and those were known to the public as “prominent scientists, artists, journalists or leaders of informal organisations” (Laurinavičius; Sirutavičius, 2008, p. 78). The film reveals that the involvement of *Antis* and Kaušpėdas in the political transformations and revolution was spontaneous, playful and quite unexpected, and that the line between political and artistic events can be quite thin. It is no coincidence that the film opens with a fragment of *The Rock March* of 1988, in which we see the performers of *Antis* and members of Sąjūdis on stage together singing the National Hymn and holding interwar Lithuania’s tricolour flags in their hands. According to Gintautas Mažeikis, “the <R>rock marches demonstrated not only a revival and a singing revolution, but also the rise of subcultures”, which one can associate with “fluc-

tuations, ruptures and mimicry”, a process necessary for the revision, critique and creative interpretations of the colonial condition, and these “transformations of consciousness” that the subcultures generated reinforced and complemented the activities of Sajūdis from 1988 to 1991 (Mažeikis, 2016, p. 68).

Žickytė constructed the narrative of the Singing Revolution from carefully selected archival footage with a strong emotional charge, representing the economic stagnation, the political farce and the alleged reorganization of the time, the vacuum in social and cultural life and the musical subcultures that filled the void, the civic movements and the political events that they triggered, which brought society into a new epoch. The dynamic puzzle of archival images includes comments and reminiscences by active members of the Sajūdis movement (such as Arvydas Juozaitis), organisers of *The Rock Marches* (such as Margarita Starkevičiūtė and Gintautas Babravičius), architect Algirdas Kaušpėdas, who was the leader of the band *Antis*, as well as his wife Audronė Kaušpėdienė, who was actively involved in the band’s organisational work. That which also galvanizes the narrative is *Antis*’ frequently performed hits.

The film’s narrator and commentator on the epochal transformations is the philosopher Leonidas Donskis, a neutral observer of the events of the time, whose calm narrative manner, reminiscent of reading a fairy tale, allows the viewer to immerse deeply into the history of *Antis* and the epoch of the Revival. The viewer watches Donskis sitting in a car driving round the streets of Vilnius, and listens to his perceptive insights into the cultural and political context of the time, as well as the relationship between the artist and the audience, which the philosopher has called “a silent conversation”, made possible by people’s ability “to comprehend the ambiguities” and “to be able to read the language of the equivokes”. Kaušpėdas was indeed proficient at playing games of ambiguity with the audience, which were difficult for the Soviet political bosses to grasp, and this made Kaušpėdas and his colleagues even more passionate. This is perfectly captured in the scene in which *Antis* performs live on the popular USSR music show *Ring* and its leader answers questions from the audience, which they formulate as a joke and provocation for a segment of Soviet society that is unable to react adequately. At the end of the film, the director cleverly deconstructs the protagonist, who wore the “intelligentsia grimace” during the Soviet era, was the “flag bearer” of Sajūdis, and was the head of Lithuanian television on the fateful night of the Soviet military attack on January 13, 1991. *How We Played the Revolution* is a personal work of creative documentary, with a playful structure that encourages the viewer to create an individual relationship with history, politics and heroes. It is one of the most popular historical and political documentaries in

Lithuania and has been shown at international festivals in Rotterdam, Warsaw, Sheffield and other prestigious festivals.

The documentary *Back to the Dreamland* by Ramunė Rakauskaitė also opens up episodes of Lithuanian history that have been little known to the public. Her film tells a melancholic and ironic story about the memories of Lithuanians who emigrated to the USA after World War II and the Soviet occupation, about their first journeys to Soviet Lithuania, their experiences in refugee camps, and about the division of the Lithuanian community in the USA and cooperation with the Lithuanian resisters. Through vivid recollections of the film's social actors (Kornelijus Jazbutis, Henrieta Vepštienė and her daughter Indrė, Birutė and Vytautas Zalatorius, Petras Vytenis Kisielius, Daina Čyvienė, Teresa Boguta and J. Kimo Arbas, amongst others), the documentary vividly recounts memories of the Lithuanian people in the US, showing the rapid and brutal transformation of Lithuania into the unrecognisable Soviet Lithuania, and of the Lithuanian nation to the Soviet people. The film uses authentic stories and memories, but also video and photographic material from the characters' first visits to Lithuania, making it a film of great lasting epistemological value. The director clearly avoids a biased view of "Soviets" and "displaced persons" and their ethnographic exoticization: "<My>intention was to tell the story of our war refugees, whose fate is no less painful than that of those who were deported to Siberia. I wanted to recall the absurdity of Soviet Lithuania, and by telling about a rather narrow period of Lithuanian-American life – the journeys to Soviet Lithuania – I wanted to invite the viewer to generalise the picture of that generation" (Radzevičienė; Rakauskaitė, 2019).

The documentary does not immediately reveal the director's personal relationship with the film's subject, but one can feel her very close relationship with the film's social actors – Lithuanians who fled the Soviet occupation to the USA and their offspring – as well as her great orientation in the Lithuanian-American cultural environment and knowledge of the psychogeographical impact of being in a culturally and ideologically alien space. From the information about the film presented in the press and the interviews with the director, we find out that she interned at the Lithuanian-American Television in the USA while still a student in 1997, and after her studies she lived and worked in Chicago for several years, where she was involved in Lithuanian community activities. It was there that the idea of making a film about Lithuanian-Americans was born (Radzevičienė; Rakauskaitė, 2019)¹. An important factor was the memories of her uncle living in Canada about his first visits to Lithuania. As Rakauskaitė says in one of her interviews, "a couple of times my uncle came to Lithuania, we all

went to Vilnius airport to meet him, all dressed up, with flowers. There was that extraordinary atmosphere. Those meetings are still some of the most memorable moments of my childhood. Like the chewing gum, the badges he gave us, or the bright checked trousers my uncle wore.” (Rakauskaitė 2019)². Interestingly, the film uses visual (photo, video, and film) footage from the archives of the Lithuanian Research and Studies Centre, private Lithuanian-American foundations, and even some of the film’s characters’ comments (e.g. by Petras Vytenis Kisielius, Daina Čyviėnė, and J. Kimo Arbas) to visualise the director’s recollections of her visits to her uncle. Although, as I have mentioned, the film avoids stereotyping or exoticizing those who lived in conflicting geopolitical camps, this was not entirely avoidable due to the emigrants’ nostalgic relationship with their lost homeland, the drastic policy of Sovietisation in Lithuania at the time, and the propaganda about the USSR’s competitive economy and a bright tomorrow.

The film reminds us of the collective trauma that Lithuanians living in the diaspora experienced, revealing the community’s internal confrontations over their relationship with Soviet Lithuania, their belief in the possibility of a different Lithuania, and their systematic assistance to the underground fighters against the totalitarian regime. Rakauskaitė’s film demonstrates that collective identity is created and reconstructed through various cultural acts of loss and discovery which are captured on film and in the memories of private individuals.

Conclusion

The four documentaries by Giedrė Žickytė, sisters Jūratė Samulionytė and Vilma Samulionytė, Ramunė Rakauskaitė and Martina Jablonskytė, which this article has discussed, suggest the formation of a vivid tendency in Lithuanian documentary culture to talk about historical and political subjects by employing a personal and unconventional style as opposed to the traditional “expositional” documentary style. By choosing an emotionally sensitive, playful and, at times, ironic tone for talking about dramatic historical events and personalities, these women filmmakers bring the serious and complex issues discussed in the films closer to the lived experiences of people of our time and encourage them to create a personal relationship with history. Although their films use quite varied narrative, aesthetic and rhetorical devices and work structures to create meaning, they share the following key features of essayistic cinema: reflexivity, subjectivity, the personal, the autobiographical and the political. They clearly articulate a personal artistic vision, blend subjective and objective narratives, talk about historical subjects and personalities through the facts, testimonies and feelings. The filmmakers boldly break societal taboos and deconstruct the characters, adding new

narratives to national collective memory. Their films are interdisciplinary and transnational, as their makers navigate across disciplines, cultures and countries, and embrace broader social and political issues when (re)assessing and (re)framing Lithuanian history and those who constructed it.

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(Endnotes)

- ¹ Ramunė Rakauskaitė interview with Laisvė Radzevičienė, Rakauskaitės istorijos apie dipukų keliones į sovietmečio Lietuvą, Bernardinai, 2019 07 25, <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2019-07-25-rakauskaites-istorijos-apie-dipuku-keliones-i-sovietmecio-lietuva/>
- ² Režisierė Ramunė Rakauskaitė: siuntiniai iš Amerikos buvo geriau nei Kalėdų dovanos, 15 minučių, 2019 07 24, <https://www.15min.lt/kultura/naujiena/kinas/rezisiere-ramune-rakauskaite-siuntiniai-is-amerikos-buvo-geriau-nei-kaledu-dovanos-4-1178644> (Viewed: July 11, 2020)