

# Zane Balčus

(Riga Film Museum)

## Case of an artist as a scriptwriter in the works of Latvian documentary filmmaker Juris Podnieks

Noted Latvian documentary filmmaker Juris Podnieks (1950-1992) collaborated with several scriptwriters during his rather brief career. The body of work created together with the artist, stage designer, and scriptwriter Arnolds Plaudis (1927-2008) constitute certain recurring elements and diverge from Podnieks' other more socially and politically charged films. Here disclosure of personalities and historical facts is achieved through reenactment, creating events for film's purposes, introducing elements of self-reflexivity, and others. Their collaboration is marked by another distinct feature – carefully planned scripts, illustrated with drawn schemes and graphic notes, a result of Plaudis' background in arts. A drawn scheme by Plaudis for the film *Brothers Kokari* (*Brāļi Kokari*, 1978) on the famous Latvian choir conductor brothers, illustrate this most fully. Various notes by Plaudis and Podnieks' questions to his scriptwriter while working on the film *Constellation of Riflemen* (*Strēlnieku zvaigznājs*, 1982) serve as an example of how the film's dramaturgy works and differs from the written ideas in the film's preparation stage. Necessity for putting one's ideas down on paper as schemata, representation of a symbol, or as a tool for clearer cinematic vision is a very characteristic method of Plaudis both in his work with other filmmakers and with Podnieks.

The collaboration between Podnieks and Plaudis can be traced by looking at various press materials of the time, interviews conducted in the late 1990s, in the memory of Juris Podnieks, the films themselves, and various written and drawn visual documents created by Plaudis and Podnieks during their collaboration in the late 1970s and early 1980s.



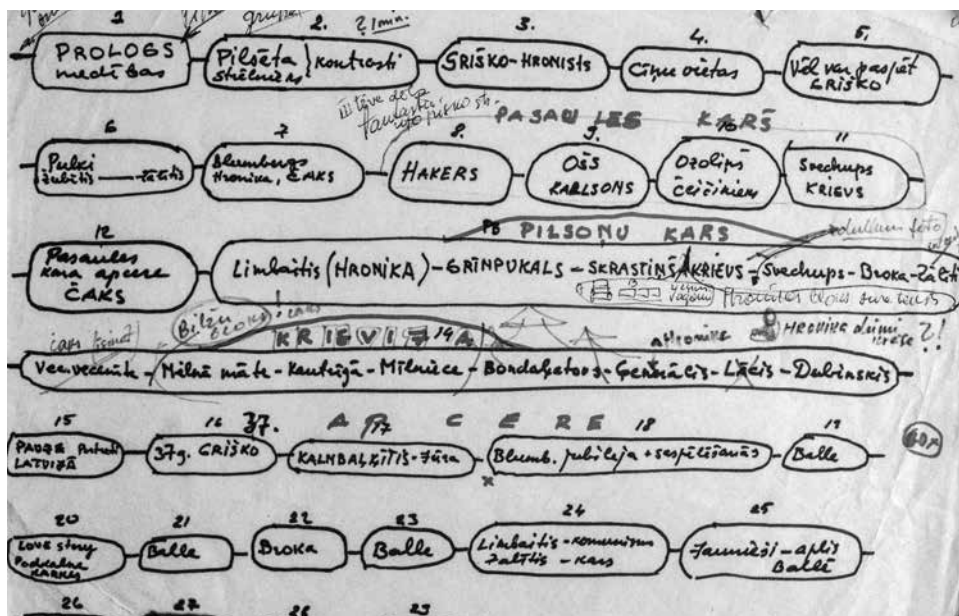


him on the film *I was, I am, I will be* he discovered that Plaudis was, “a person, who loves to tell everything in drawing, who creates visual ideas non-stop. (...) He probably can't write down everything, but he can draw his idea.”<sup>6</sup> This is an important comment, proving that visual material from Podnieks and Plaudis collaboration is a result of Plaudis' common work practice.

### Making films together

It is Plaudis own quote – that “a scriptwriter is born at the moment when the artist and the writer in him has died,” but we can see that both can and have co-existed within him after Plaudis became a scriptwriter, too.<sup>7</sup> Podnieks and Plaudis have collaborated on four films: short films *Brothers Kokari* (*Brāļi Kokari*, 1978), *Commander* (*Komandieris*, 1984), *Sisyphus Rolls the Stone* (*Veļ Sizifs akmeni*, 1985), and a feature-length documentary *Constellation of Riflemen* (*Strēlnieku zvaigznājs*, 1982). Structuring of the films' material and various devices of imagery in all of their films are a result of a fruitful collaboration.

Their first collaboration – *Brothers Kokari* could be considered the most traditional of them all. It is a short film of 2 reels, a portrait of famous Latvian brothers, choir conductors, Imants and Gido Kokari, who have made a significant impact on the development of Latvian choir music. The approach to the film's material is straightforward, interspersing filmed scenes with both brothers at work with their childhood pictures, allowing scarce voiceover (in just one episode), and leaving a significant part of the film's emotional appeal to its soundtrack – dialogue and songs. Episodes of choir rehearsals have been filmed over a period of time. In the



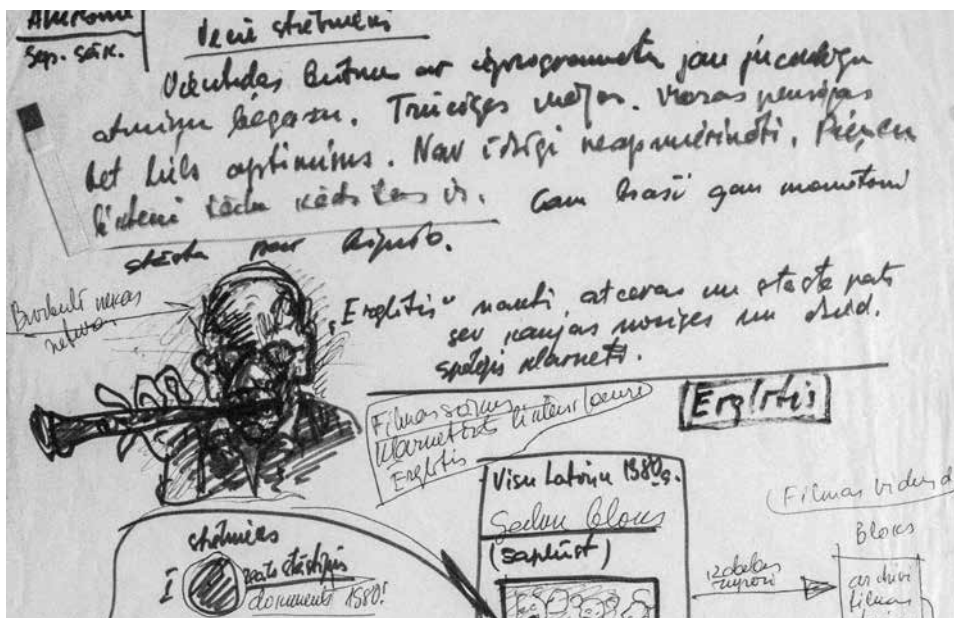
editing, short parts of every rehearsal were pieced together to create the sense of unity of a single rehearsal. It was Plaudis' wish to use imagery, and not to leave everything too realistic. From this came an episode with a symbolic image of Imants and then Gido appearing from the water on waterskis<sup>8</sup> filmed in slow motion to convey the immense strength the brothers had to have to reach a certain point in their lives. Waterskiing was the brothers family hobby and thus naturally became an integral part and very important image of the film.

*Constellation of Riflemen* was an important film at the time. The theme of riflemen was not new in Latvian documentary cinema, but its treatment was. A significant component of the film is interviews with the old men, recalling their youth and fighting. It allows memories to unfold and with them – true emotions. *Constellation of Riflemen* was a groundbreaking film in Latvian documentary cinema for another reason, as for the first time the filmmaker posed for camera and introduced his film onscreen. Documentary cinema's formal standards at the Riga Film Studio were traditional, therefore other colleagues were against such ideas, as Plaudis recalls, and even mocked Podnieks by asking if he was going to be an actor.<sup>9</sup>

Podnieks presence onscreen made the film very personal, as he addresses the audience directly, standing with the microphone in his hands and talking to the film's spectators. "I am Juris Podnieks, director of this film. I am 30 years old. This film is about how we found the last living Latvian Riflemen. Every moment another one of them is gone. Many who are in this film are no longer with us. Gone to their graves. Taking their fame and their tragedy with them. At the beginning there were 60 000. But by this spring only some 300 are left." Podnieks reads the commentary throughout the film, it is not some anonymous voice.<sup>10</sup> Presenting the film in such a personal manner would render it a personal work and exhibit a high degree of subjectivity. The notion of personal work in a studio type of production system is complicated due to the set production calendar, and in the film a device of showing himself seems just a formal technique. But it is an essential part of the film's overall organization of the material and corresponds with films with "self-inscription" in the 1980s. Michael Renov writes: "In these films (...) subjectivity is no longer constructed as "something shameful; it is the filter through which the real enters discourse, as well as the kind of experiential compass guiding the work toward its goal as embodied knowledge."<sup>11</sup> The filmmaker here doesn't tell about his (or his family's) life story, but uses the device of deconstructing the stance of the invisible author. The generational gap actually helps to relate to the rifleman's life stories, both adventurous and tragic. Staged scenes, along with Podnieks presenting the film in the studio environment with the crew sitting at the back, contribute to the autobiographical side of the filmmaker's daily routine. They show a variation on filmmaking practice and inscribe its creative nature.

*Constellation of Riflemen* features staged scenes, and if everything Plaudis wished for could be done, there would be more of them. For him, old men talking in front of the camera were not enough. He had an idea to use smoke from

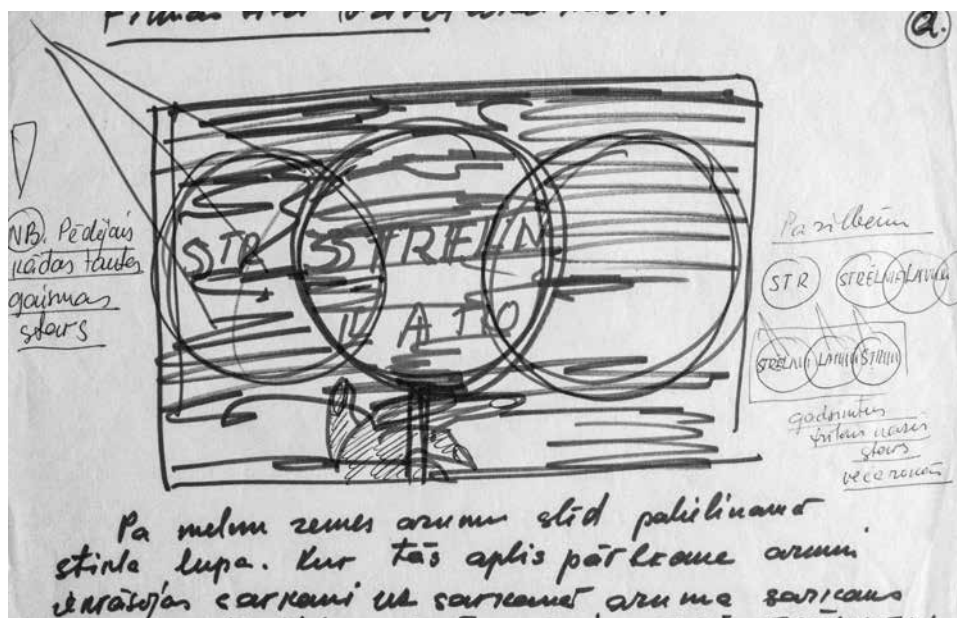
a machine and project a newsreel from Russia in the 1920s with galloping horses on it.<sup>12</sup> At the close of the film is an episode on Dole island on the river Daugava, where a ball is organized for the old riflemen. The filmmakers are among the participants of the ball too. The film's editor Maija Selecka<sup>13</sup> did not approve of this episode, she found it to be artificial, false, a big spectacle, an idea of Plaudis.<sup>14</sup> Another of his ideas was even more daring than the rest, and did not become part of the film. Plaudis' stepfather Krauklītis, also a rifleman, was selected for the film. As Krauklītis in Latvian means "small raven", he wanted to make an episode where his stepfather sits in a nest in a tree, overlooking everything from above. Plaudis' mother was against it and he thus didn't dare shoot such a scene.<sup>15</sup> This might have dissonated with the overall tone of the film, but would have proved Plaudis' desire for various unconventional approaches in showing documentary material.



*Commander* was conceived as a portrait film of the academic, historian and former partisan commander Vilis Samsons (1920–2011). The shooting process proved to be complicated. Samsons was not an expressive man and could maintain the same facial expression for a long time, thus making it difficult to film him. Therefore many superimposition shots were invented to make the film more visually appealing and staged scenes were used, involving a large number of extras.<sup>16</sup>

Of Podnieks and Plaudis' collaboration there is a film, where Plaudis too, acts as a film's character onscreen. It is their last film together, *Sisyphus Rolls the Stone*, a portrait of Plaudis' contemporaries from the art scene – sculptors Arta Dumpe,

Aivars Gulbis and Oļegs Skarainis. This film is almost a portrait of Plaudis himself, despite the announcement in the film's synopsis that it is about three sculptors, because it portrays a generation of artists in the Soviet system. Plaudis asks questions and is seen onscreen, acting as a catalyst that makes characters speak. He was close to the sculptors due to their joint studies at the Academy of Art and, as Plaudis remarks onscreen, they had fought fierce battles for all that was new in art in the 1950s. The provocative nature of Plaudis' questions and his explicit onscreen presence brings to mind an important cinéma vérité film *Chronicle of a Summer (Paris 1960)* (*Chronique d'un été (Paris 1960)*, 1961) by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin. Filmmakers participate in the film, are seen during filming and setting up various meetings between characters, thus eliciting a greater degree of truth from characters.<sup>17</sup>



Interviews with artists and episodes of their work in *Sisyphus Rolls the Stone* are interwoven with the exhibition *White* somewhere in the woods, set up by Plaudis after a plea by the sculptors. All four of them belong to the generation that experienced WWII at an early age and their memories are shared onscreen. Plaudis makes an important comment on his own *oeuvre* too – that childhood events leave strong imprints, that the war generation, to whom they all belong, is both romantic and tragic. His signature of whimsical ideas is embodied in the film's last shot where he lies naked on his belly, like an exhausted Sisyphus. Chronologically, this is the last film Podnieks and Plaudis made together. Thus the final scene with Plaudis posing as Sisyphus bears a kind of symbolic nature.

The creativity of Plaudis is recognized not just by Podnieks, but also other filmmakers who worked with him. They needed Plaudis because his essence was to align ideas, to play them out.<sup>18</sup> This essence is clearly seen in Podnieks and Plaudis' collaboration.

### Visual part of collaboration

The creative preproduction process of *Brothers Kokari* and *Constellation of Rifleman* can be seen in a version of a drawn script scheme and various notes made by Plaudis and Podnieks in the film's production phase. These materials document an important part of their collaboration and are another proof of Plaudis' strong visual thinking.

#### *Brother's Kokari*

For *Brothers Kokari*, there is a drawn scheme and a literary script, from which we can construct the process of advancement of the film's structural and thematic ideas to the final stage – the finished film.

The film's literary script includes technical visual references, corresponding to assertions about Plaudis as a person who has visual cinematic thinking. "Bright sun disc is fighting with them [spinning clouds]. With sun withdrawing in distance, unrealistically lit countryside landscape of Gulbene – Balvi trembles in the contra light. (..) On such beginning of the film, rich in impressions from contra light, scene of prologue's double exposition starts to form. Two expressive pairs of men's hands come into frame from its lower part. Hands, like silhouettes of fidgety birds, project on a fairy-tale like background in altering rhythms and configurations."<sup>19</sup> Not every page has such rich visual details, they are particularly vivid in the opening and closing pages.

The drawn circle-shaped scheme labelled "Script's scheme (version nmb. 5)" (Picture 1) shows the film's dramaturgy, including the timing of each episode, and its content corresponds to the literary script. It is possible that the circle shape was chosen to show the rite of the brothers' lives – rehearsals, performances, world travels, rehearsals, performances, etc. But I think it rather is necessary for the intended image of hands reaching out for one another. This can be shown most clearly in a circle-shaped scheme.

The circle has several layers: descriptions in the inner layers are shorter, this information is explicated in the outer layers. For example, Prologue (episode I) includes the following information: closest to the middle of the circle several visual details are described – "title/ hands", "brothers' hands" + "background is changing/ landscape". Then in the next layer of the episode's title and number it says: "(vision about brothers) title-hands-sun/ culmination, retro/ to the rehearsal." Above the episode's number in brackets the overall meaning of the episode is given, and it is "generalization". On the outside of the circle it is explained in greater



detail. Once more it is asserted that this is a generalization (by using exclamation marks). Then there are numbered thematic propositions: “1) contralight hand-sun struggle; 2) bi-polar idea twins; 3) vision of choirs; 4) singers of choirs “Ave Sol”, “Daile”, “Beverīna”; 5) vision of fame → Goricia; 6) vision “childhood”: a father with a pig, naked boys, horses, hut (brief retro images).”

The scheme is an illustration of the literary script, but does not correspond to the finished film. Hands are a strong symbol for the film’s idea, therefore they are used in the opening episode of the film in the literary script. Run time for this sequence of generalization is 2 minutes, as seen in the script scheme. Instead, the film’s opening passage before the title comes on offers a superimposition of both brothers conducting, facing the camera in a medium close-up, implying that both brothers exist like one in what they do, and asserting their close ties and determination. This takes up around one minute of the film. The literary script offers more dynamic actions – Imants Kokars who is also the dean of the Academy of Music meets his colleagues, discusses administrative matters, talks on the phone with the choir “Beverīna” in the town of Cēsis, drives in a car to Cēsis. It includes reference to the studies period, when both brothers were students at Cēsis Schoolteacher’s Institute. This time is presented in the form of photocollages. However, around the 7th minute, the film turns to the brothers’ childhood as a source for their characteristic traits, using photographs and voiceover to explain their roots and family, similarity to their mother, who had had a headstrong, fighting character.

Just around one minute before the film’s end an image of the brothers, first Imants and then Gido, coming out of the water on waterskis, is used. This very brief scene (lasting only slightly over 30 seconds) is edited in between scenes of hard work at the rehearsals. The scene is accompanied by a choir singing in the soundtrack. Their faces reflect a struggle with the resistance of water and afterwards a joy of conquest; it is a symbol of their overall hard work, determination and rewarding emotions for it. In the scheme a scene with the brothers’ leisure activities is included in the middle of the film and is supposed to last for a minute (from 10-11th minute). Here they are seen with their families at the riverbank, family members are shown waterskiing, members of the choir are also present showing that they all have close ties. The waterskiing image used in the film does not include any reference to the fact that this is their actual hobby and therefore gains another meaning.

After *Brothers Kokari* Podnieks recognized that Plaudis was “the grandest master of film attractions, at least I don’t know any other who senses cinema as a visual spectacle that well” and knew that he could help Pondieks more than anyone else due to his inexhaustible imagination.<sup>20</sup> This remark confirms the scene in the film described.



tion, idea, Lenin, to the end“. These themes are shown graphically as a wave that starts from the top on the left hand side, then goes down, then up and then again moves downward, on the right hand side of the picture ending with words “believe in oneself and nation in eternity”.

Another document offers a suggested succession of the film's episodes (Picture 3). They differ significantly from the film. Important here is the question of temporality. Carl R. Plantinga regards it as one of the most important relationships between the discourse (how the story events or the projected world are communicated<sup>23</sup>) and the projected world.<sup>24</sup> Comparing the suggested succession of episodes to the film, they offer a different order of episodes. For example, the very last episode in the document (No. 29) is the 101st anniversary of rifleman Ūdriitis. However in the film it is the opening episode before the film's title comes on. The next one in the film (funeral) has also been included toward the end in the scheme (No. 26). What has remained unchanged in the written document and in the finished film is the placement of the episode of the ball toward the film's end. In the planning stage of the film, celebration of life (the ball, with young people present, thus creating a tie between the past and the present), death (funeral, cemetery) and tough character of the riflemen (101st anniversary of Ūdriitis) were going to be the last episodes of the film. In the film, Podnieks dances with a woman who was actively involved in the war, this is followed by a return to some of the film's characters – the scenes with one of the film's characters are used to integrate the young generation, as they all walk by the seaside and listen to the old rifleman. Podnieks addresses the generations, asking: what will they look for in the history of riflemen when they are in their 30s, 40s, and 50s?

Plaudis tries to define the essence of the old riflemen. “Lonely creatures with set memory stories. Destitute homes. Small pensions, but large optimism. Not grumpily disaffected. Except destiny as it is.” (Picture 4) What the whole film's material will be can be found in another document: “Naked truth in a new monoform. An essence of psychological monologues.” (Picture 5) Almost all the documents reference the film's thematic and conceptual ideas. There is only one document focusing on visual representation, it is about film's opening credits. The idea was to use red letters and a magnifying glass: “Magnifying glass slides over black plowed land. Where the glass circle crosses plowed land, the spot turns red, on the red plowed land red font RIFLEMEN, LATVIAN RIFLEMEN.” (Picture 6) In the film it is shown differently – the title appears on a black background. Its letters become light from the candle light from Ūdriitis' 101st birthday cake.

It is interesting to see what questions Podnieks has asked Plaudis (Picture 7). He is looking for the best visual solution that would be like a “hook”, giving meaning to certain visual representation, and thus making episodes more complex. For example, under No. 1 is a question about the image of a leader, a commander (episodes with Jukums Vāciētis – would it be better done through one or several riflemen's stories?). No. 2 – what would be elements of their [riflemen's] time in the film (letters, photographs, objects). Then Podnieks suggests (No. 3), by means of

lighting, an image of confession (using airbrush light, needles, fireworks). What would be the best way to show a Latvian outside Latvia („hook“?). It also offers Podnieks' graphic drawing of the film's thematic order with winter as an image both in the film's opening and closing part. The ending part includes both the former ideas as shown in the document and in the finished film – the ball, the funeral, the 100th anniversary, the New Year's; the final theme is “confession”.

The visual documents from Plaudis and Podnieks' collaboration are invaluable evidence of a creative filmmaking process. They can tell a lot about the development of ideas and actual work on the films, they testify to Podnieks and Plaudis' personalities as filmmakers. The films they made together broadened the standards of documentary cinema in Latvia at the time. Plaudis even considers him and Podnieks to have been a kind of Sisyphus, rolling the stone.<sup>25</sup> A colleague of them both, Latvian filmmaker Ansis Epnars has characterised their need for each other very aptly – Podnieks needs Plaudis and couldn't be left without him, because “Arnolds does not care about facts. He explores documentary cinema by the principles of art, everyday experiences only provokes him. Podnieks, like any other director, constantly tries to find that Procrustean bed for life's material, but Plaudis constantly beats him out of the habitual balance.”<sup>26</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> A. Burve, *Slēpis divdesmit gadus*, *Diena*, 25.10.2004, pp. 14.
- <sup>2</sup> Portrait films include *Raimonds Pauls* (1977, on famous Latvian composer), *Fourth Dimension (Ceturrtā dimensija, 1977*, on the poet Ojārs Vācietis), *Imants Ziedonis. A Portrait through Grammar Cases (Imants Ziedonis. Portrets locījumos, 1979*, on the writer Imants Ziedonis, all three films directed by Laima Žurgina).
- <sup>3</sup> A. Tifentāle, *Viņš dzīvo fotogrāfijā. Gunārs Binde*, “Studija”, Nr.1 (34), 2004, pp. 22.
- <sup>4</sup> Photo films: *Hello, Moscow! (Hallo, Maskava!, 1966*, dir. Gunārs Binde, photoartist), *I was, I am, I will be (Newspaper „Cīņa“)* (*Es biju, es esmu, es būšu („Cīņa“*, 1973, dir. Ivars Seleckis, scriptwriter together with Gunārs Binde), *Fireworks (Salūts, 1975*, dir. Gunārs Binde, scriptwriter), *A Mirror of Thirst (Slāpju spogulis, 1976*, dir. Ivars Seleckis, scriptwriter). Documentary film: *Journey through the Baltic Republics (Ceļojums pa Baltijas republikām, 1977*, dir. R.Elksnis, scriptwriter together with S.Milbrets).
- <sup>5</sup> As a scriptwriter Plaudis worked together with Ivars Seleckis on following films: *I was, I am, I will be (Newspaper „Cīņa“)* (*Es biju, es esmu, es būšu („Cīņa“*, 1973, scriptwriter together with Gunārs Binde), *A Mirror of Thirst (Slāpju spogulis, 1976)*, *Homecoming (Pārnākšana*, TV film, 1984, also stage designer).
- <sup>6</sup> I. Jēruma, *Ivars un Maija. 100 gadi dokumentālajā kino*, Rīga: Neputns, 2009, pp. 147.-148.
- <sup>7</sup> D. Rietuma, *Rīgas Kinomā... , Literatūra un Māksla*, 17.10.1986, pp. 14.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with film's editor Maija Selecka, 22.12.1999., from private archives of Z.Balčus.
- <sup>9</sup> From a portrait film of Arnolds Plaudis *With a Bee in His Bonnet*, Latvia, 2001, 25', directed by Ivars Zviedris.
- <sup>10</sup> Podnieks appearance is an itegral part in his next feature-length film *Is It Easy to Be Young?* (1986).
- <sup>11</sup> M. Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, Minneapolis 2004, pp. 176.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Maija Selecka, 22.12.1999., from private archives of Z.Balčus.
- <sup>13</sup> Maija Selecka worked with Juris Podnieks also on his graduation film *Restricted Area* (1975).
- <sup>14</sup> I. Jēruma, *Ivars un Maija. 100 gadi dokumentālajā kino*, Rīga: Neputns, 2009, pp. 225.

- <sup>15</sup> From a portrait film of Arnolds Plaudis *With a Bee in His Bonnet*, Latvia, 2001, 25', directed by Ivars Zviedris.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with film's production manager Baina Urbāne, 02.12.1999., from private archives of Z.Balčus.
- <sup>17</sup> E. Morin, *Chronicle of a Film*, [w:] *Ciné-Ethnography: Jean Rouch*, ed. S. Feld, Minneapolis 2003, pp. 263.
- <sup>18</sup> D. Rietuma, *Rīgas Kinonamā...*, *Literatūra un Māksla*, 17.10.1986, pp. 14.
- <sup>19</sup> Literary script of the film *Brothers Kokari*, 1978, p.1., Riga Film Museum collection.
- <sup>20</sup> A. Redovičs, *Strēlnieku zvaigznāja gaismā, Rīgas Bals*, 01.06.1982., pp. 5.
- <sup>21</sup> Documents are from LAC Riga Film Museum collection.
- <sup>22</sup> A. Redovičs, *Strēlnieku zvaigznāja gaismā, Rīgas Bals*, 01.06.1982., pp. 5.
- <sup>23</sup> C. R. Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-Fiction Film*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 85.
- <sup>24</sup> C. R. Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-Fiction Film*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 88.
- <sup>25</sup> Interview with Arnolds Plaudis, 11.12.1999., from private archives of Z.Balčus.
- <sup>26</sup> D. Caune, *Viņš ir arvien tuvāk, Liesma*, 1987, Nr.11, pp. 1.

### **Przypadek scenarzysty jako autora w filmach litewskiego dokumentalisty Jurisa Podnieksa**

Oryginalne studium poświęcone współpracy mało znanego na zachodzie litewskiego dokumentalisty Jurisa Podnieksa i scenarzysty Arnolda Plaudisa. W swoim artykule Zane Balčus wykracza poza tradycyjną analizę skoncentrowaną na opisie stylu i interpretacji, badając zróżnicowany materiał obejmujący szerokie spektrum materiałów wizualnych (ilustrowane scenariusze) odzwierciedlających w oryginalny sposób proces powstawania dzieła realizowanego przez dwie niezwykle osobowości. Autorka rekonstruuje obraz ich wspólnej pracy sięgając po materiały prasowe, wywiady, teksty i szkice.

### **Case of an artist as a scriptwriter in the works of Latvian documentary filmmaker Juris Podnieks**

Original study devoted to the collaboration between little known Latvian documentary filmmaker Juris Podnieks, and scriptwriter Arnolds Plaudis. Zane Balčus goes beyond traditional analysis focused on film style and interpretation, taking into account wide spectrum of visual documents (illustrated scripts), reflecting in an original way the process of developing an artwork by two creative personalities. The author reconstructs the image of their collaborative work following press materials, interviews and other written and drawn data.