

TEMPORAL ASSEMBLAGES: FILMMAKING AND ARCHIVAL RECONTEXTUALIZATION IN JANUARY

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Abstract

The film by Viesturs Kairiņš *Janvāris / January* (2022) presents a nuanced portrayal of Latvia's independence struggle of 1991, merging personal and political narratives through the lens of Jazis, a young aspiring filmmaker. In *January*, archival footage and fictional elements intertwine, creating a non-linear temporal experience that reimagines traditional cinematic storytelling. Using period-appropriate film stocks, the film blurs the line between past and present, encouraging viewers to experience history as a dynamic, evolving force. This paper explores how *January* recontextualizes archival material within a fictional framework, engaging viewers in a multidimensional encounter with the past. Drawing on Catherine Russell's concept of *archiveology* and Gilles Deleuze's theory of the crystal of time, this study investigates how archival fragments, when woven into contemporary narratives, transform into active agents of memory and historical reflection. Russell's *archiveology* underscores the repurposing of archival images as flexible components in new contexts. At the same time, Deleuze's crystal of time clarifies the interrelations between past and present, challenging the conventional view of time as strictly linear. In conjunction with Russell's framework, such a perspective suggests that *January* invokes a reflective treatment of memory, where history is characterized by its open-ended nature. The film's portrayal of the 1991 events in Latvia's fight for independence moves beyond a simple historical account, critiquing imperial power and its impact on

personal and collective memory. Under direction of Kairišs, archival footage comes alive in a new context, demonstrating how memory can actively shape modern perspectives through cinema.

Keywords: *Latvian film, Viesturs Kairišs, archival footage, January, Juris Podnieks*

Introduction

"History decays into images, not into stories... It is not that what is past casts light on what is present, or what is present on what is past; rather image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now in the form of a constellation" [Benjamin 2003: 461]. Here, Walter Benjamin presents history not as a seamless, linear story but as a collection of fragmented images. History comprises moments where past and present meet, which form what he describes as a "constellation" of meaning. These intersections offer insight into the layered, non-linear nature of memory, showing how the past continually shapes and redefines our experience of the present.

Building on Benjamin's idea of history as a constellation of images, film scholar Catherine Russell's theory of archiveology explores how filmmakers reconfigure and resignify archival material to create new meanings. According to Russell, this practice shifts how we engage with the past. Archival footage is no longer just historical documentation; it becomes living material, reshaping how we understand memory and time [Russell 2018: 9]. In this way, Russell extends Benjamin's insights into the world of filmmaking, where archival images become active participants in shaping the present, particularly when footage is recontextualized in new cinematic contexts.

Such a reworking of the archival image is exemplified in *January* (2022), a film in which Viesturs Kairišs presents a compelling case study on how archival material can be reappropriated within a fictional narrative to create an experience of time. The film portrays the filmmaker as a storyteller and a symbol of the creative process, highlighting how personal filmmaking shapes historical memory. Set against Latvia's fight for independence from the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, the film combines archival footage from renowned Latvian documentarians Juris Podnieks and Zigurds Vidiņš, whose materials are credited as source footage by Kairišs, with a fictional narrative about Jazis, a young filmmaker. The archival footage is not presented as a collection of past images but woven into the fictional narrative, creating a dialogue between personal memory and historical events. Jazis's amateur filmmaking functions as a tool to mediate his engagement with the events in Latvia in 1991.¹ Kairišs

¹ Juris Podnieks was an internationally acclaimed Latvian filmmaker, best known for his groundbreaking documentary *Vai viegli būt jaunam? / Is It Easy to Be Young?* (1986), which

positions the filmmaker as an active participant in constructing history rather than a passive recipient. Through the depiction of Jazis's filmmaking, *January* demonstrates that filmmaking is not merely an act of documentation but an interpretive practice that actively shapes the ways how historical events are remembered and reconfigured.

In this paper, two central research questions are addressed: How does *January* recontextualize archival material to challenge linear representations of historical time – and how do the film's fusion of fiction and archival footage engage viewers in encounter with memory, offering new perspectives on collective and personal history? These questions are explored through close textual analysis of selected sequences from *January*, focusing on scenes where archival and fictional elements converge. By analyzing visual, auditory, and narrative structures, Deleuze's concept of the crystal of time and Russell's *archiveology* are applied here to explore how temporal boundaries are collapsed, creating a layered understanding of historical memory.

Role of the filmmaker: Personal and historical narratives in *January*

In *January*, Kairiņš uses the lens of personal filmmaking to explore how individuals engage with moments of historical transition. Drawing from his own youth during Latvia's independence movement, Kairiņš crafts Jazis's coming-of-age story to demonstrate how filmmaking serves as both a personal outlet and a way of documenting and questioning dominant narratives [*Cinema Without Borders* 2024]. Through Jazis's coming-of-age story, the film demonstrates how filmmaking can serve both as a tool for personal expression and as a means of documenting and contesting dominant narratives. Set in 1991, *January* follows 19-year-old aspiring filmmaker Jazis (Kārlis Arnolds Avots) as political turmoil disrupts his life amidst Latvia's nonviolent resistance to Soviet efforts to reclaim power. Alongside his friends and love interest, fellow cinephile Anna (Alise Dzene), Jazis pursues filmmaking, seeking artistic expression while navigating the freedoms and uncertainties of young adulthood during the collapse of the Soviet system.²

explored the social and cultural challenges faced by Soviet youth. His later works, such as *Krustcelš / Homeland* (1990), provided a profound visual chronicle of the Baltic independence movements, highlighting the political and emotional dynamics of the period. Zigurds Vidiņš (b. 1943) began his career as an amateur filmmaker in the 1970s, working at the People's Amateur Film Studio of the Academy of Sciences. He later collaborated extensively with Podnieks and is better known for his post-Soviet professional filmmaking career. Their works, used as source material for *January*, remain vital historical testimonies of the transformative events of the era.

² The autobiographical approach of Kairiņš intertwines personal memories with Latvia's historic struggle, blending fiction with lived experiences. For more on this, see Redovičs, A. (2024), who explores the ways *January* balances personal storytelling and historical context (*Kino Raksti*).

The film opens with a close-up of a television set playing Ingmar Bergman's *Såsom i en spegel / Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) dubbed into Russian, with traces of the original Swedish faintly audible beneath. This moment sets the tone of Jazis's interest in cinema under Soviet occupation and introduces the film's central theme: the tension between cultural domination and personal agency. As the camera pulls back, Jazis appears in a work uniform and is absorbed in the film. His concentration is broken when a friend tells him OMON³ officers are attacking the Press House. They rush to leave, ignoring their employer's protests; they must film this. The scene cuts to the Press House exterior, where Jazis readies his Super 8 mm camera to capture the events. When Jazis brings the camera to his eye, the point-of-view shot overlaps the grainy texture of Super 8 mm film. The sudden change in visual register marks the intersection of subjective memory and historical documentation, where Jazis's filming turns the personal experience into a potential historical record. Kairišs, working with Wojciech Staron as his cinematographer, replicates the textures of Super 8 mm film – grain, burn marks, imperfections – to capture the medium's limitations and aesthetic.⁴ The tactile quality of the image aligns with Laura Marks' concept of haptic visuality, in which the visual experience induces a bodily connection with the materiality of the image. The textured grain and imperfections invite viewers to engage with the film sensorially, evoking memories that are felt rather than recognized [Marks 2000]. In *January*, these sensory elements collapsed the temporal boundaries. The textures and grain make the archival material a physical trace of the past and an active force in the present narrative.

³ OMON (*Otryad Militsii Osobogo Naznacheniya*, or Special Purpose Police Units) were Soviet special forces under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, known for their involvement in suppressing pro-independence movements during the late Soviet period. In January 1991, OMON forces were implicated in violent crackdowns in both Lithuania and Latvia, targeting key infrastructure and independence activists. To read more about OMON's actions in Riga in 1991, see Stukuls Eglitis, D. (2002) *Imagining the Nation: History, Modernity, and Revolution in Latvia*.

⁴ In an interview, Kairišs shared his observations that the film's visual style came together naturally, shaped by both the story itself and his collaboration with Polish cinematographer Wojciech Staron. They experimented with a range of formats—from 8 mm film to *Betacam* video – capturing the right mix of Soviet-era intimacy and cinematic dynamism. The goal was to create a seamless visual flow that reflected the film's emotional and narrative shifts, merging different aesthetics into a single cinematic canvas. A conversation with Viesturs Kairiss about *January*, Latvia's Oscar Entry, Cinema without Borders, 2022, <https://cinemawithoutborders.com/viesturs-kairiss-january-latvia-oscar-entry/> (viewed 07.08.2024)



Figure 1: Still of the replication of Super 8 mm film texture in *January*

In the scene at the Press House, Jazis's attempt to film is interrupted by Soviet guards, and the film abruptly cuts to archival footage. This transition reveals the tension between official state narratives and personal attempts to capture the reality from below. The archival footage shows Soviet officials delivering scripted statements about restoring peace and order, in contrast to Jazis's cut-off attempt to film the events. The scene then cuts back to Jazis's home, where the sound from the archival footage overlaps with an image of his parents watching the same event on television.

The sound and image blend to blur the line between personal memory and official narratives and show how historical events are shaped by those who record them. Jazis's connection to filmmaking grows through his interactions with Anna, his friend who confidently seeks guidance from Juris Podnieks (played by Juhan Ulfšak), the renowned Latvian documentarian known for his politically provocative films. When Jazis and Anna present their footage to Podnieks, he critiques Jazis's distant, detached shots of the OMON forces, advising him to "*get as close to the event as possible so they cannot remain indifferent.*" This feedback reflects Podnieks's philosophy, which views the camera as an active instrument – a "soldier's line of fire" designed to provoke emotional engagement and make historical events resonate with viewers [Vitols 1991/1992: 198].

Anna's music videos capture the raw energy of the punk subculture through close-up shots, embodying the immediacy that Podnieks admires, in contrast to Jazis's more reflective style. Impressed by Anna's work, Podnieks offers her a job, granting her access to the institutionalized world of documentary filmmaking – a privilege that Jazis does not experience. Podnieks encourages them both to move closer to

the action to better understand how power dynamics shape historical memory. The archive, in this context, is not just a static collection of facts but an evolving construct, shaped by the intentions and perspectives of those who document history. While Anna's institutional access allows her to contribute to the official record, Kairišs shows that filmmakers like Jazis, who work outside these structures, can still influence the historical narrative through "personal archives." These archives, drawn from personal collections and often excluded from official histories, offer alternative ways of engaging with the past. In fact, Kairišs himself credits the archival footage in his film to the "personal archives" of Vidiņš, further underscoring the importance of private documentation in shaping memory. Through this, the film illustrates that even filmmakers on the margins – through both their creative decisions and their use of personal archives – actively contribute to the dynamic construction of history.

Reappropriating the archive in *January*

In *January*, archival footage takes an active role in representing the past, moving beyond the overuse of elaborate sets and special effects that feature films tend to use to recreate historical moments. This approach reflects a shift in how archives function as historical records. According to Russell, the recontextualization of archival footage allows it to transcend its original documentary intent, gaining new meanings within fictional frameworks [2018: 9]. As we see in the film, this process underscores how the archive becomes a flexible narrative agent, shaping both historical and personal memory. The archival footage shapes the characters' actions and informs the audience's engagement with historical events, inviting reflection on how personal memory intersects with the collective experience documented in archives.

The personal and collective are mediated, for example, when Jazis travels to Vilnius in search of Anna and finds himself amid the series of violent clashes between Lithuanian civilians and Soviet forces, known today as the January Events⁵. As Soviet tanks advanced, Jazis moved as close to the action as possible, embracing the philosophy of proximity that Podnieks advocated earlier in the film. Kairišs highlights this shift by contrasting the close-up of Jazis with a wide-angle shot of the tanks in the street. When the officers destroy Jazis's Super 8 mm camera, this act symbolizes the personal cost of collapsing the distance between the filmmaker and the subject. Immediately following this encounter, the film cuts to authentic archival footage of the 13 January 1991 events, preserving the raw emotional impact

⁵ The January 1991 events in Latvia and Lithuania marked a pivotal moment during the Soviet Union's dissolution, with military operations causing nearly 20 civilian deaths and hundreds of injuries. For more, see Lasas (2007, pp. 179–194).

of the historical moment. These archival images – Soviet tanks advancing, officers suppressing protesters, and a victim's body draped in a white sheet – become more than historical inserts; they serve as active narrative elements that emphasize history as a lived, immediate experience.

This abrupt narrative transition invites the audience to shift their focus from Jazis's personal struggle to the broader historical context captured by archival footage. Building on Russell's notion of the archive as a flexible narrative agent, Baron's concept of the archive effect highlights the viewer's recognition of archival material as distinct from the fictional, creating a temporal tension that disrupts narrative continuity [Baron, 2014: 13]. Baron notes that the archive effect disrupts a seamless narrative, compelling viewers to critically engage with the constructedness of historical memory [2014: 15]. This shift between fiction and non-fiction footage bridges personal action with larger issues, reframes the audience's relationship with the past, and reflects on how historical events are documented—and how they can be reused, and reinterpreted.

Moreover, the archival footage embodies what Baron [2014: 18] describes as its evidentiary value, reinforcing the authenticity and immediacy of the film's narrative. By integrating archival footage rather than recreating these moments, *January* grounds its story in historical truth while challenging the audience to question how memory is shaped through mediated images. As Baron observes, this recontextualization creates new meanings that compel viewers to grapple with the gaps and tensions between archival records and their use in contemporary narratives [2014: 22].

In this sequence, Jazis's decision to adopt the Podnieks's style of close physical proximity to the event marks personal growth, as he realizes that filmmaking requires risk in a particular historical context. His shift to an engaged filmmaker aligns with Podnieks's belief that the distance between observer and subject must be collapsed to fully capture the urgency of events. Through the integration of archival footage, *January* reimagines the role of the archive in contemporary filmmaking. As demonstrated in the Vilnius sequence, by carefully selecting and recontextualizing historical materials, the film explores the intricate relationship between individual and collective memory. In foregrounding the archive's active agency, *January* prompts viewers to question the nature of historical truth and the filmmaker's role in shaping public memory.

Shaping narrative through the crystal image

In *January*, viewers encounter a layered temporal structure where past and present coexist, challenging linear understandings of history. This temporal complexity aligns with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the crystal of time, which captures how the actual (present) and the virtual (past) exist simultaneously, reflecting and refracting one

another without merging into a single truth [Deleuze 1989]. The crystal of time presents a fluid view of memory and time, where moments influence one another across temporal boundaries, continuously reshaping the present.

Building on Henri Bergson's philosophy, Deleuze says the virtual past is not just a passive recollection but an active force that shapes the present [Deleuze 1989; Bluemink 2023]. *January* uses archival material as a narrative agent, weaving it with fiction to show how personal memory and collective history evolve. This interplay demonstrates how the virtual past, embedded within the narrative, continuously informs the characters' actions and influences the audience's understanding of Latvia's struggle for independence. Time is "crystallized" in the Deleuzian sense towards the film's end, culminating in the sequences depicting the Riga barricades.

A striking example first occurs during the daytime barricade sequences, where shifts in perspective blur the boundary between Jazis's subjective viewpoint and the viewpoints of other documentarians filming the same event. This cinematic device immerses viewers in multiple perspectives that shaped historical documentation during this tumultuous period. By alternating between these viewpoints, the film highlights how historical events are inherently collaborative and open to reinterpretation through multiple lenses. Including archival footage, such as the bride and groom walking through the barricades (Figure 2) illustrates how *January* layers personal and collective memory. By juxtaposing this image with Vidiņš's archival perspective (Figure 3), the film engages viewers in a reconfiguration of historical narrative, where memory is shaped through repetition and reinterpretation.



Figure 2: A still of documentary footage included in *January*



Figure 3: A still of documentary footage of the same couple in *White Bells* by Zigurds Vidiņš

A striking example occurs during the barricade sequences, where shifts in perspective blur the boundary between Jazis's subjective viewpoint and the viewpoints of other documentarians filming the same event. This cinematic device immerses viewers in the multiplicity of perspectives that shaped historical documentation during Latvia's fight for independence. For instance, the bride and groom walking through the barricades appear in both Kairišs's film and Vidiņš's documentary *Balti zvani / White Bells* (1991), but from different vantage points. This repetition emphasizes how archival material evolves with each retelling, becoming a vital part of Latvia's collective memory. The interplay of these perspectives invites viewers to see historical events not as fixed narratives but as open to reinterpretation through multiple lenses.

In the following nighttime barricade sequences, archival and fictional perspectives intertwine even more fluidly. Jazis is depicted wandering through the barricades in the night. Upon hearing gunshots, he grabs his camera and runs toward the action, disappearing into the darkness. Extradiegetic sound – a mix of gunfire and ambient noise – builds tension. Modern cinematography suddenly shifts to grainy VHS footage, recognizable as the archival material filmed by Podnieks during the January 1991 events. This footage is presented with low resolution and handheld camerawork and captures chaotic moments in a series of cuts: a man running, fires in the street, civilians shouting, and officers advancing. The sequence grows increasingly intense as the archival and fictional elements intertwine. Jazis is seen from multiple angles in multiple shots: filmed by an anonymous camera, framed against streetlights, and through close-ups of his

eye and camera lens. These layered perspectives mirror the real-life multiplicity of documentarians, such as Podnieks and Andris Slapiņš, who were actively filming the events. The sequence culminates with the actual footage from Slapiņš's camera, capturing his fatal shooting as he lay in the snow, uttering the haunting words, "Keep filming." Another member of Podnieks crew, Gvido Zvaigzne, died as a result of the attacks that night on January 20–21, 1991 by Soviet OMON officers in Riga.



Figure 4: Jazis, captured by an anonymous camera, during the sequence depicting the January events in Riga



Figure 5: A still of the footage from Andris Slapiņš's camera after he was shot by OMON forces included in *January*

This sequence in the film is an example of the crystal of time: the archival footage functions as both a historical trace and an active presence, shaping the fictionalized narrative while remaining independent of it.

By intertwining Jazis's fictionalized perspective with archive footage, *January* underscores the nature of memory and its role in shaping the historical narrative in the archive. Deleuze's crystal of time is not just a theoretical framework in this instance but a method of storytelling, where the past and present coexist and reshape one another. As a fragment of the virtual past, archival footage influences the narrative's construction and the audience's interpretation. At the same time, fictionalized scenes offer a lens through which to imagine the personal stakes embedded within historical events. In *January*, history is not presented as a linear or fixed narrative but as a process shaped by those who document it and those who interpret it. The crystal of time structure challenges the audience to see the past as an active force in the present, emphasizing that memory and narrative are constantly in flux. This layering of temporalities encourages viewers to consider how personal and collective experiences continuously shape and reshape the understanding of historical events.

Conclusion

The resonance of Kairiš's *January* goes beyond Latvia's 1991 struggle for independence. It showcases the ways how contemporary films engage with archival material to reshape understandings of history and memory. Rather than directly critique imperialism, *January* recontextualizes archival footage from past struggles within fictional storytelling to address present realities. This approach illustrates memory's role as a dynamic force, shaping personal identity and collective experience over time.

By integrating archival footage and fictional elements, *January* reframes the archive as an active participant in storytelling, making the past feel immediate and relevant. Using Russell's concept of archiveology, it has been explored how archival material gains new meaning when recontextualized, transcending its traditional documentary role and interacting with the present. Jazis's story, alongside his interactions with the fictionalized figure of Podnieks, highlights the filmmaker's dual role as a witness and interpreter, connecting past events with their reinterpretation in the present.

Deleuze's crystal of time adds to the analysis of how the temporal interplay in *January* collapses the boundaries between fact and fiction. The archival footage operates as a virtual presence, shaping the narrative even as the characters are unaware of its influence from their position in history. This temporal structure emphasizes the filmmaker's responsibility to engage deeply with history.

Ultimately, *January* demonstrates how contemporary films can engage with archival material to challenge traditional historical narratives and offer new perspectives on the dynamics of power and memory. By transforming archival footage into a narrative force, the film dismantles hierarchies of historical authority, resisting imperial narratives and inviting viewers to see history as an evolving, participatory process. This recontextualization empowers both filmmakers and audiences to question dominant perspectives and explore alternative ways of understanding the past.

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