AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FAMILY NARRATIVES ABOUT HISTORICAL TRAUMA IN RECENT DOCUMENTARY CINEMA IN BALTIC COUNTRIES

PhD **Zane Balčus**
Vilnius University

Abstract

Autobiography as a retrospective narrative authored by a real individual concerning its own existence in its literary form primarily focuses on the exploration of one's personal life. Extending beyond literature into visual arts and performance, the autobiography has also found a strong expression in documentary filmmaking. These autobiographical narratives are conveyed through a diverse mix of audiovisual materials from both private and public archives, as well as with documentary animation techniques.

The article focuses on films from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where personal memories of the filmmakers and their relatives form the foundation of the narrative about the deportations in the 1940s and Soviet occupation, presented in the first person from the perspective of the postmemory generation. The traumatic historical events of the 20th century in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania hold particular significance for these filmmakers, and their films contribute to the broader body of work narrating the historical traumas of the region.

Keywords: *autobiographical narrative, first-person documentary, Estonian cinema, Latvian cinema, Lithuanian cinema, postmemory, mediated memory, historical trauma*

Culture Crossroads
Volume 27, 2025, https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol27.537

ISSN 2500-9974

CULTURE CROSSROADS

Introduction

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the film industry transformed from a strictly regulated model with pre-approved thematic film plans and secure financing to a free-market model with competitive project funding. This transformation manifested in a broader thematic scope of films tackling previously silenced narratives, and greater diversity in formal and stylistic expression. Documentary directors began appearing on screen as characters narrating the stories, incorporating family experiences, reflections on the filmmaking process, and subjective diaries capturing personal experiences, which gradually became visible across the works of different generations of filmmakers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.[1] Among these forms of personal engagement, autobiography – despite its contested application in cinema – has emerged as a significant narrative mode in documentary films. Using this approach with particular sensitivity, filmmakers tell stories about their families and personal experiences, interwoven with historical events and the resulting traumas that affect family dynamics across generations. This group of filmmakers includes Imbi Paju, Ülo Pikkov (Estonia), Pēteris Krilovs, Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen (Latvia), Giedrė Beinoriūtė, Jūratė Samulionytė, Vilma Samulionytė (Lithuania), among others.

Michael Renov discusses the plurality of autobiographical modalities (such as the confessional mode, domestic ethnography, the essayistic form, etc.) and emphasises the presence of formal and structural variations of such films [Renov 2008: 45]. This diversity is reflected in the films selected for this article: *Memories Denied* (*Tõrjutud mälestused*, Imbi Paju, 2005, Finland, Estonia), *Grandpa and Grandma* (*Gyveno senelis ir bobutė*, Giedrė Beinoriūtė, 2007, Lithuania), and *My Favorite War* (*Mans mīļākais karš*, Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen, 2020, Norway, Latvia). The selection of films examined here covers key historical events in the region's 20th century history, focusing primarily on the loss of independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania due to Soviet occupation, subsequent deportations, and life under Soviet rule, specifically reflecting the issue of trauma inflicted from the deportations and Soviet occupation. In constructing these narratives, the filmmakers' personal memories intertwine with family members' experiences, creating a shared image of private and public memory.

[1] On self-reflexivity in Latvian documentary cinema after the 1990, see, for example, Balčus, Dokumentālais kino – studijas, autori, tēmas un stili, pp. 271–276; Balčus, Filmmakers as Onscreen Characters in Recent Latvian Documentary Cinema, pp. 55–65. On Lithuanian contemporary directors, see Šukaitytė, Contemporary Lithuanian Documentary Cinema: A Critical Overview of Main Film Directions, pp 1–23; Šukaitytė, History in Lithuanian Women's Creative Documentaries: Critical and Personal Approach, pp. 118–137.

The phenomenon of portraying subjectivity as multifaceted and interwoven with interpersonal relationships, rather than singular or solipsistic, highlights the collaborative nature of self-representation in film [Egan 1994: 593]. In the context of the films discussed here, interpersonal relationships gain even greater significance, as the filmmakers, who are central to the narrative, tell stories that encompass a broader circle of individuals – parents, grandparents, other family members, and close associates. Thus, in crafting these narratives, both personal experience and memory discourse are equally essential. The filmmakers' own memories and reflections blend with the stories of their relatives, creating a complex view of the past.

The filmmakers attain the role of postmemory narrators, as they belong to a generation that did not directly experience the historical events depicted but is nonetheless profoundly affected by them. In representing these memory narratives, access to archival materials is crucial. The proliferation of public archives, extensive digitisation of private archives, and advancements in video and digital technologies are not only instrumental in shaping autobiographical narratives; they also broaden the possibilities for constructing mediated memory for future generations.

Autobiographical documentary and first-person narrative

Changing perspectives in documentary filmmaking, particularly regarding the truth claims traditionally inherent in documentary cinema, are evident in Michael Renov's argument that autobiography fundamentally challenges the notion of documentary. When a documentary adopts an autobiographical perspective as its narrative strategy, the emphasis on factual, verifiable knowledge is destabilised. This shift introduces the filmmaker's unique subjectivity, highlighting the partial and contingent nature of self-knowledge that autobiographical films display. [Renov 2008: 41–42]

Many debates on documentary autobiography are rooted in Philippe Lejeune's research on literary autobiography. Lejeune, regarded as one of the foremost scholars in this field, defines autobiography as *"Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality"* [Lejeune 1989: 4]. Lejeune terms this interconnected set of elements the "autobiographical pact",[2] which entails a unity between the author, the central character, and the narrator [Lejeune 1989: 4].

Autobiography as a form of expression in documentary cinema has created polarized positions. Authors such as Elizabeth Bruss and Lejeune are critical and consider autobiography impossible in cinema. Lejeune has stated:

[2] The term was first used by Lejeune in 1971 and 1975 in the context of discussing the genre of the novel. Brief overview on the term see Missine, Autobiographical Pact, pp. 222–227.

> *Can the "I" express itself in the cinema?" Can a film be autobiographical? Why not? But is it the same thing as when we speak of literary autobiography? ... Is autobiography possible in the cinema? ... It is not possible to be on both sides of the camera at the same time, in front of it and behind it."* [quoted in Gabara 2016: 927]

Bruss points to similar issues regarding the feasibility of uniting the author, narrator, and protagonist in film. Language and film are more than just a difference in format of expression, as each has distinct "signifying practices". In cinema, it is not possible to achieve the same level of self-observation and self-analysis as in language and literature [Bruss 2014: 297–298]. In contrast to the views of Bruss and Lejeune, however, P. Adams Sitney highlights the close connection between literary and cinematic autobiography:

> *filmmakers resemble the literary autobiographers who dwell upon, and find their most powerful and enigmatic metaphors for, the very aporias, the contradictions, the gaps, the failures involved in trying to make language (or film) substitute for experience and memory.* [quoted from Gabara 2016: 927–928]

What Sitney illustrates is the human endeavour to capture experience, where the process of capturing and its outcome are more important than the specific means employed.

By emphasising subjectivity and its fragmentation, Rachel Gabara argues that filmic autobiographies, with their inherent separation between the director and the filmed subject, challenge traditional notions of a unified identity, as noted by Bruss and Lejeune. These films introduce new methods for exploring and depicting the complexities of fragmented subjectivity [Gabara 2016: 928]. Gabara further contends: "*Autobiography is always a locus of contact among many genres, at once representation and invention, non-fiction and fiction, in the present and in the past and in the first and third persons*" [Gabara 2016: 925].

The filmmaker operates within at least two levels of interaction: with the people who are part of their narrative circle and with the team involved in the production of the film. Consequently, the autobiographical narrative is constructed not solely from the filmmaker's perspective as an individual narrator but also reflects the influence of other involved professionals. Thus, as suggested by Gabara and Egan, this approach opens up possibilities for understanding new dimensions of subjectivity in filmed autobiography.

Egan emphasises the interactive role of the filmmaker in constructing filmic autobiography:

> *Unlike traditional autobiography, film constructs interaction – certainly between the subject and the camera, but also, it seems, for various reasons, among subjects. Technical and personal collaboration interfere with and become part of the living moment, altering perception and creating, therefore, new "realities."* [Egan 1994: 616]

The formation of these newly created "realities" also depends on the filming strategies chosen by the author, which may include filmed interviews with family members or other people, various locations, or the involvement of animation artists who contribute their artistic vision to realise the author's concept.

Jim Lane by adopting the definition of autobiographical documentaries proposed by film critics John Stuart Katz and Judith Milstein Katz, in which "*the subject of the film and filmmaker often begins with a level of trust and intimacy never achieved or strived for in other films*" [Lane 2002: 3] adds another layer of specificity and relationality, as it suggests building the trust between the filmmaker and the spectator.

The question of using the first-person singular or first-person plural further highlights the inherent challenge of the "I" in audiovisual (and photographic) work, as opposed to literary autobiographies. While cinema and photography can lend a strong physical presence to auto-narratives, they often diminish the emphasis on subjectivity and identity. This raises the persistent question of how an auto-narrational discourse is attributed to a specific enunciator [Christen 2019: 97]. It could even be argued that autobiographical film necessarily implicates others in representing the protagonist, constructing this figure as constantly in relation with others – thus, always positioned in the "first-person plural" [Lebow 2008: xii]. Lebow echoes Egan's notion that relationships in autobiographical storytelling exist within interactions. Lebow suggests that first-person narration does not always, and is not solely meant to, belong to the speaking self, but "*it belongs to larger collectivities without which the maker would be unrecognizable to herself, and effectively would have no story to tell*" [Lebow 2008: xii]

Operating on the premise that crafting autobiographical narratives in film can imbue them with heightened expressive dimensions, and acknowledging the inherently collaborative nature of cinematic production, it is crucial for the spectator to engage in an active, critically reflexive relationship with the autobiographical text. Scholars of both literary and cinematic autobiography underscore this dynamic, emphasising the need for a dialectical engagement between the viewer and the work.

Historical trauma narratives from postmemory generation

The films selected for discussion in this article address the traumas inflicted on the inhabitants of Baltic region – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – by totalitarian regimes, resulting in the loss of national independence and significant demographic

upheavals. Experiencing three successive occupations – the Soviet occupation from 1940–1941, the Nazi German occupation from 1941–1944, and the subsequent reoccupation by the Soviet Union in 1944 – left indelible scars on the society of the three states.[3] The films analysed in this article focus particularly on the Soviet occupation and its repressive mechanisms, which, as historian Andres Kasekamp notes, targeted "class enemies", members of post-war resistance movements, and those affected by forced collectivization, which involved mass deportations to prison camps in the Soviet Union [Kasekamp 2018: 113].

Although the timeline and scale of deportations varied among Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the scope of repression was extensive: from 1940–1941, approximately 15 000 people were repressed in Estonia, 35 000 in Latvia, and 35 000 in Lithuania. In 1949, further deportations affected 20 713 Estonians, 42 149 Latvians, and 31 917 Lithuanians [Gūtmane 2019: 87–88].[4] Under the Soviet regime, narratives of these experiences were suppressed and restricted to private family circles, if at all shared. Those who survived deportation and returned in the 1950s faced social ostracization, which deliberately hindered their reintegration and participation in public life.

During the Perestroika period (1985–1991) and the atmosphere of national awakening (1986/1987–1991), these suppressed experiences finally began to be articulated publicly, playing a crucial role in uniting society in all three countries against the Soviet regime.[5] In the context of the independence movements, these

[3] The three countries are often termed "Baltic states", however, historically people living along the coast of the Baltic Sea have not addressed themselves as such. The term became more frequently used after World War I and was quite fluid (including in this description Finland), but after the Soviet occupation the three countries were branded in Russian as *Pribaltica*. More ground for using the common term of Baltic states again was associated with the shared path and cooperation for achieving their independence from the Soviet Union [Kasekamp 2018: viii-ix]. Employing one term for denotation might be useful from the outset, but it does not reflect the diversity pertinent to each country (language, culture, religion, etc.).

[4] The numbers in various sources differ. The McDermott and Stibbe list around 500 000 displaced people from Baltic countries [McDermott, Stibbe 2010: 13]. 1941 and 1949 were the years with the largest deportations, they were carried out also in other years, only in smaller total numbers.

[5] The *Perestroika* (reconstruction or restructuring) period described the last years of the Soviet Union when the Communist Party leader was Mikhail Gorbachev, even though initially it was referred to an effort of a small number of Communist Party leadership and political elite to reform the Soviet system and subsequently to transform it. Once these changes started and previously silenced problems began to be addressed, the gradual shift became impossible [Brown 2007: 17–18]. In 1986 and 1987, the environmental protests started, people began to commemorate mass deportation victims, and the first anti-regime demonstrations took place, which was just the beginning for aspiration to political independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which was finally recognized by the Soviet Union in 1991 [Kasekamp 2018: 147–156].

testimonies and memories garnered widespread public interest and served as instrumental forces in reconstructing national memory and identity in post-Soviet society [Davoliūtė, Balkelis 2012: 10]. The ongoing re-evaluation of these historical experiences remains relevant, a persistence that, as literary scholar Zanda Gūtmane suggests, is likely rooted in the Baltic countries' prolonged engagement with identity formation and the ongoing search for cultural sovereignty – a dynamic that aligns with the theoretical framework of postcolonialism [Gūtmane 2019: 18].

The notion of trauma is seeing an increased popularity; however, it is noted that attention needs to shift and turn to lesser-explored groups who were affected by the World War II and its aftermath, such as women participants of the war, veterans, civilians, defeated populations and other similar groups [Leese 2022: 9], and it can be seen in the films analysed in this article. Peter Leese notes:

> *While it is important not to underestimate the resilience effect, it is equally important to acknowledge that trauma is always mediated as memory, and that the forms by which it is transmitted also influence what stays in the mind, what is forgotten, and the degrees of recollection, amnesia or erasure.*

For subsequent generations, the past passed down from parents is often experienced through a lens of "belatedness" or a "syndrome of post-ness", concepts articulated through a range of terms including "absent memory", "belated memory", and "prosthetic memory", and others [Hirsch 2012: 3]. Marianne Hirsch, in her influential exploration of generational memory, introduced and elaborated on the concept of postmemory. This term arises from her analysis of autobiographical works by second-generation writers and visual artists, as well as her own experiences as a descendant of Holocaust survivors [Hirsch 2012: 4]. With the term, she describes the relationship that the generation, which comes after forms with

> *personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to* seem *to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.* [Hirsch 2012: 5]

As the historical distance from the traumatic events of occupation, deportation, and Soviet-era life grows, the process of remembering these experiences becomes increasingly mediated, as direct testimonies from the first-hand witnesses fade. Consequently, films on these topics can be viewed as contributors to the discourse of mediated memory, where personal memories and collective history are filtered and shaped as mediated representations [van Dijck 2007]. The memory objects, their

presence, reworking, "*raised poignant concerns about the relation between material objects and autobiographical memory, between media technologies and our habits and rituals of remembrance*" [van Dijck 2007: xii].

The mediated memory concept becomes even more poignant at the time when digital format is the norm, and the films use documentary objects as their digital reflections in the films.[6]

Narrating the past experiences through personal perspective: Case studies of films

The films selected for analysis were produced in the 21st century and constructed as autobiographical narratives focusing on the experiences of the directors and their families during World War II, Soviet occupation and deportations employing a first-person narrative from.[7] These narratives are told from the filmmaker's perspective, and present in the foreground specific events within their lives in the context of historical narratives. The films interweave autobiographical, biographical, and historical themes, where personal experience is closely connected with the collective ones. This duality is especially evident in the visual materials of the films, in which personal and private archives assume equally significant role to those of the public archives. Personal archival materials serve as foundational elements, providing a direct representation of the protagonists, while public archive sources are employed to create a visual backdrop of historical events.

In two of the films, animation serves as a prominent stylistic device, functioning as a tool for historical reconstruction and imbuing the narrative with heightened artistic subjectivity. These works can be classified as animated documentary films, created using animation techniques to depict real-world events rather than

[6] From the constant presence of mediated memory sources like fiction films, novels, newspapers, social network posts, digital images, and so forth, the term "mediated media studies" emerged already in the early 2010s. As Dagmar Brunow suggests, it stresses the importance of media for the construction of cultural memory. [Brunow 2015: 1–2]

[7] The deportations and Soviet occupation are the subject of many other films. Their narratives are presented along an already discussed first-person approach, also in observational form, essay, and other. Among the titles are: *Juoda dėžė* (*Black Box*, Algimantas Maceina, 1994, Lithuania), *Sibīrijas bērni* (*Children of Siberia*, Dzintra Geka, 2001, Latvia), *Ajapikku unustatakse meie nimi* (*Our Name Will Be Forgotten in the Course of Time*, Andres Sööt, 2008, Estonia), *Uz spēles Latvija* (*Obliging Collaborators*, Pēteris Krilovs, 2014, Latvia), *Vectēva tēvs* (*Grandfather's Father*, Kārlis Lesiņš, 2016, Latvia), etc.). Andres Sööt has directed several films about the deportations, thus relating to his own experience of being deported at a young age. However, it is Latvian director Dzintra Geka (whose father was a "forest brother" – an armed resistance fighter (see footnote 9 below) – and spent almost two decades in exile) who has created the largest body of work dedicated to deportations, since the beginning of the 2000s she has released 37 films about the topic (on Geka's films, see [Pērkone 2023]).

an imagined reality, and presented to audiences as a synthesis of animation and documentary[8] [Honess Roe 2013: 4].

These films engage with a discourse that began to dominate in the West from the late 20th century, focusing on the changing form of remembrance of historical trauma. This discourse highlights psychological suffering, and the traumas endured by individuals, drawing attention to methods of overcoming the after-effects of difficult events [Laanes 2017: 243].

Memories Denied (2005)

In *Memories Denied* (*Tõrjutud mälestused*, 2005, Finland, Estonia), Estonian director, journalist, and writer Imbi Paju narrates the story of her mother and her mother's twin sister, who were deported to a prison camp in Arkhangelsk in 1948, accused of assisting the "forest brothers",[9] just as both young women had turned 18.[10]

The film is created from the director's perspective, using her childhood memories as a starting point – specifically, memories of her mother's nightmares, in which she cried out for help. In these dreams, Paju's mother returned to the repressed past, reliving the conditions of the labour camps, haunted by images of Soviet soldiers who threatened her life. As a child, Paju felt a sense of anxiety; the reality of the labour camps seeped into her subconscious through her mother's dreams. In her commentary, the director explains that she was unaware her mother was tormented by memories; as a child, she only felt helpless. Thus, her mother's experiences entered her daily life, while the cause of these anxieties remained concealed for years.

In the film, Paju strives to articulate this silenced past – experiences that are difficult to discuss and sometimes remain unspoken by choice. The director's presence is more audible than visible; she appears visually only in a few scenes, yet her presence is palpable through the deeply personal perspective of the narration. This approach underscores the intimate and psychological dimensions of addressing trauma, positioning her as a reflective observer, who channels the memories and emotions that her mother's experiences have passed down to her.

---

[8] Animated documentaries became more widespread in the 1980s, but the boom of animated documentaries has been recognized since the 1990s [Honess Roe 2013: 11]. Christina Formenti notes that animated documentaries created after 1985 often tend to be first-person stories imbued with subjectivity, and this also reflect the turn to more personal stories in documentary film proper [Formenti 2022: 228].

[9] Armed resistance against the Soviet regime was present in all three Baltic countries. "Forest brothers" in Estonia and Latvia were organized in small autonomous bands, but in Lithuania itevolved into an organized structure and in 1949 the Council of the Lithuanian Freedom Fighters was established [Kasekamp 2010: 128].

[10] The book with the same subject and title was published in 2007 in Estonian, and later was translated in other languages (Finnish, Swedish, German, English, and others).

The primary theme of the film is the narration of these past events from a distinctly female perspective. The director's mother and her twin sister are the central figures, around whom other characters are structured to provide a broader narrative. The film includes interviews with other women who share similar fates, specialists working on these historical issues, a psychologist who himself lost family members, was deported and, after Estonia regained independence, provided psychological support for other survivors during the period of regained independence. There is also an interview with one of the perpetrators. These stories are complemented by archival materials from historical events, as well as everyday rural life in Estonia, evoking an image of harmonious life before the Soviet occupation and illustrating its devastating effects.

The film held particular significance within the context of memory culture due to its focus on women's experiences. Although many women were sent to labour camps, and many survivors were women, Estonian memory culture in the 1990s, as Laanes notes, was male-centred, emphasizing resistance against Soviet power, men's involvement in the German army, and the movement of "forest brothers" [Laanes 2017: 249]. Paju's film seeks to highlight the violence specifically inflicted upon women, including sexual violence and humiliation, which broadens the narrative about the past. However, this subject is only sparsely addressed in the film, as it remains too painful to verbalize directly.

To illustrate this violence, the film uses drawings by NKVD prison guard Danzig Baldaev, who, due to his position, travelled across different parts of the USSR and bore witness to scenes within the Gulag.[11] His drawings reveal the treatment of women, showing, for instance, women being interrogated while naked or the scars left after interrogations. In the film, Paju takes several of the female protagonists, who had been detained and interrogated, back to the NKVD basements where they were once held. Their stories, together with these illustrations, create a powerful space for the viewer's imagination to envision the suffering they endured.

Grandpa and Grandma (2007)

Grandpa and Grandma (*Gyveno senelis ir bobutė*, [12] 2007, Lithuania) is a short film by Giedrė Beinoriūtė that recounts her grandparents' exile to Siberia. Presented as a fairytale, the film adopts the perspective of a young girl narrating her grandparents' story. This documentary animation reflects the historic turn in Lithuanian cinema in the 2000s, when directors, often women, increasingly focused on exploring historical narratives through a personal lens [Šukaitytė 2021: 15].

[11] Baldaev's drawings have been published in a book *Drawings from Gulag*, London: Fuel, 2010.

[12] The direct translation of the film's original title is "Once there lived grandpa and grandma", mirroring the fairytale style of the film and its narration.

The fairytale format is introduced in the opening line: "*Once there lived a grandpa and a grandma – my grandpa and grandma*," accompanied by a photograph of the director's grandparents followed by an image of her childhood self. Then a sequence of rapidly changing photographs of people in different ages follows accompanied with a text – "*as once lived all of our grandpas and grandmas*," thus expanding the subject from individuality to collectivity, since this is a story connecting many Lithuanian families.

The storyline spans Lithuania's initial independence, its subsequent occupation by the USSR, and the family's forced deportation alongside roughly 48 000 other Lithuanians in 1948.[13] Following Stalin's death in 1953, the family seeks permission to return home, which is finally granted in 1957. The film begins and ends with family portraits, underscoring the cyclical narrative from exile to eventual homecoming.

Beinoriūtė's goal was to connect younger generations with the personal stories behind the statistics of exile and trauma, using the child's perspective as an empathetic bridge. The fairytale form and the child's viewpoint introduce a playful approach, enabling creative visual interpretations that transcend the stark historical facts [Tuzaite 2020]. The idea for the film developed from the recollections of the director's mother of her childhood in exile. Family photographs alone could not fully capture these memories, so Beinoriūtė supplemented them with archival material from the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania. Some photographs featured faded ink sketches drawn by children, inspiring the film's narrative strategy – a child's viewpoint, enhanced by illustrations [Kanopkaite 2008].

Visually, the film blends family photos, archival footage, and animation. Animation adds imaginative elements, adding movement to the static images and blending reality with fantasy. For instance, a "forest cat" (a tractor) is associated with actual cats, while crosses "look" towards Lithuania – with eyes drawn on the photographic image of a cross, capturing the child's imaginative interpretation. Sound complements and extends the visual imagery, inviting viewers to imagine the scenes evoked by still images.

Beinoriūtė employs a subjective animated documentary style,[14] blending visual and audio elements to challenge traditional objectivity and highlight larger social issues through personal expression [Honess Roe 2013: 19]. Although the film does

[13] The 1948 deportations in Lithuania were largely connected to the partisan activity which was the most pronounced and active in the Baltic states after the end of the War. 18 May 1948 deportations targeted 48 000 people, of which almost 40 000 were deported. [Purs 2010: 31]

[14] Honess Roe references the modes of documentary animated films devised by Paul Wells, who creates them on the basis of the documentary categories proposed by Richard Barsam. Wells's modes are imitative mode, subjective mode, fantastic mode, postmodern mode. [Honess Roe 2013: 19–20]

not strictly adhere to the autobiographical pact (the director does not narrate in her own voice), Beinoriūtė's authorship shapes the story of her grandparents.

My Favorite War (2020)

The film *My Favourite War* (*Mans mīļākais karš*, 2020, Norway, Latvia) by Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen is the most explicitly autobiographical of the three films discussed, purposefully delving into the director's own biography and her personal lens through which she perceives the world. The title's reference to "war" is both metaphorical and ironic, alluding to World War II, a historical event that deeply impacted the director's life despite her not experiencing it directly. As a result of World War II, Latvia was occupied and became a Soviet republic, which profoundly influenced various aspects of Burkovska-Jacobsen's life, shaped family dynamics, and formed a key reference point for her worldview, which she reflects upon in the film.

The film's narrator is the director herself, recounting her experiences of growing up during the Soviet era, specifically in the Cold War period, in western Latvia. Western Latvia became a significant location for the Soviet Union as its westernmost border, leading to heightened surveillance. It had been an important strategic location also during World War II, as it was the site of the Courland Pocket, where the German army managed to hold its position for nearly a year while encircled by the Red Army, until Germany's capitulation, thus leaving many casualties. The director's maternal grandfather was exiled to Siberia in 1949 for owning a mid-sized farm, only returning to Latvia in the latter half of the 1950s – like the experiences of the relatives of other filmmakers discussed.

The director reflects emotionally on her grandfather, who felt constrained within Soviet Latvia due to his past deportation. He was an amateur painter and each of his exhibition requests were denied without explicit reference to his past, however, the reason was clear to the family. The opposing positions of her grandfather and father regarding the Soviet regime fostered family tensions, as her father had a state job, consequently, she grew up caught between two conflicting worldviews. She was cautioned against mentioning her grandfather or deportation, forcing her to navigate childhood in an atmosphere of silence, where open discussions about family members and their experiences were fraught with difficulty. Her father's untimely death in his youth meant she could never directly address the questions she longed to ask in freer times – what he believed in, and why he joined the Communist Party [Bruggeman-Sękowska 2019].

The film employs documentary animation to present a narrative that resonates with both younger local viewers and an international audience, offering a broader historical context while depicting everyday visual nuances and situations. These elements reflect personal memories and have also become part of the collective memory.

This aligns with Cristina Formenti's observation that contemporary animated documentaries, while personal and subjective, can be perceived as representatives of a broader category of people, and "*universality is conferred to the vicissitudes narrated and, thus, a (latent) generalizing synecdoche is activated*" [Formenti 2022: 241].

The film includes minimal live-action footage, captured during production, showing the director in various scenarios. Among the most significant scenes are the opening and closing sequences, which link the past and the present. These scenes involve the sea, a motif imbued with profound significance within the narrative. The sea, symbolising both literal and metaphorical borders, represents Soviet-imposed constraints and the potential for connection with others. At the film's beginning, the sea is a restricted area, secretly observed by the director from a distance with her parents (in an animated sequence). By the film's end, however, she is free to wade into the sea with her own teenage children.

Conclusion

Although these films do not always strictly adhere to the conventions of the autobiographical pact, they can be considered autobiographical in the sense that they convey not only the authors' life events but also their experiences and reflections, which are integral to their processes of self-realisation. The approaches to expressing these personal experiences are diverse, yet they are unified by the authors' subjectivity and their choices of artistic methods. Films can be autobiographical in a broader sense by showcasing the authors' cinematic vision and their artistic personalities, which become integral parts of their autobiographical selves as artists.

These films exhibit the stylistic fluidity in their filmmaking strategies while adhering to the first-person mode of narration. They employ various approaches, visual forms, and genres. Documentary animation is one of the chosen mediums, as

> *animation is a fruitful means of documentary representation in part because it creates a conflation of absence and excess. That is, the expected indexical imagery of documentary is absent, and in its place is animation, which can take multiple forms, all with a materiality, aesthetics, and style that goes above and beyond merely 'transcribing' reality.* [Honess Roe 2013: 14]

Thus, the expressive choices facilitate reflexivity and referentiality, allowing the filmmakers to connect to their immediate environments and ground their sense of belonging in specific social and historical contexts.

As Efren Cuevas has noted, autobiographical documentaries – particularly those constructed through interaction with family members and forming part of public discourse – contribute to the shaping of collective memory. In this social dimension of autobiography, the family provides a fundamental context for socialisation, which

autobiographical films vividly represent [Cuevas 2022: 37]. The films discussed in this article highlight both the central role of family in the authors' self-construction and the shared historical traumas among filmmakers from the Baltic states. During the independence movement, the traumas experienced during the Soviet era, especially those related to deportations, began to be articulated, and they were portrayed in films especially by those filmmakers who had a direct connection to them, and/or were in a formative stage of life during that time. Psychological portrayals of trauma, which had become a dominant mode of representation since the 1990s, became especially prominent.

The films discussed in this article present very personal stories, which contribute to the formation of a collective image of this shared past. They also reveal that the scope of this subject is much broader and merits further exploration, particularly in relation to the representation of women's narratives, as evidenced by the identities of the filmmakers and their family members.

Sources

Gyveno senelis ir bobutė / *Grandpa and Grandma* (2007). Directed by Giedrė Beinoriūtė. Lithuania: Monoklis.

Mans mīļākais karš / *My Favorite War* (2020). Directed by Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen. Norway: Bivrost Film, Latvia: Ego Media.

Tõrjutud mälestused / *Memories Denied* (2005). Directed by Imbi Paju. Finland: Fantasiafilmi, Estonia: Allfilm.

Balčus, Z. (2021). Dokumentālais kino – studijas, autori, tēmas un stili. In: I. Pērkone, D. Rietuma, (eds.). *Latvijas kinomāksla. Jaunie laiki. 1990–2020*. Rīga: Dienas Grāmata, Latvijas Kultūras akadēmija, pp. 231–285.

Balčus, Z. (2021). Filmmakers as Onscreen Characters in Recent Latvian Documentary Cinema. *Culture Crossroads*, No. 18, pp. 55–65. https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol18.85

Brown, A. (2007) *Seven Years that Changed the World: Perestroika in Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bruggeman-Sękowska, B. (2019). "How to become one person without double identities and lies to yourself." *Communications Unlimited*. Available: https://www.communications-unlimited.nl/how-to-become-one-person-without-double-identities-and-lies-to-yourself/ (viewed 03.11.2024)

Brunow, D. (2015). *Remediating transcultural memory: documentary filmmaking as archival intervention*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter.

Bruss, E. (1980). Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film. In: J. Olney, (ed.). *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Christen, M. (2019). Media Studies. In: M. Wagner-Egelhaaf, (ed.). *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter.

Cuevas, E. (2022). *Filming History from Below: Microhistorical Documentaries*. New York: Columbia University Press/ Wallflower.

Davoliūtė, V., Balkelis, T. (2012). Introduction. In: V. Davoliūtė, T. Balkelis, (eds.). *Maps of Memory: Trauma, Identity and Exile in Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States*. Vilnius: Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore.

Egan, S. (1994). Encounters in Camera: Autobiography as Interaction. *Modern Fiction Studies*, No. 40 (3), pp. 593–618.

Formenti, C. (2022). *The Classical Animated Documentary and Its Contemporary Evolution*. New York; London; Oxford; New Dehli; Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic.

Gabara, R. (2016). Mixing Impossible Genres: David Achkar and African Autobiographical Documentary (2003). In: J. Kahana, (ed.). *Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Gūtmane, Z. (2019). *Totalitārisma traumu izpausmes Baltijas prozā*. Rīga: LU Literatūras, folkloras un mākslas institūts.

Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Honess Roe, A. (2013). *Animated Documentary*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kanopkaite, R. (2008). Moteris šiandieniniame lietuvių kine – ne papuošalas. *Delfi*, 19.11.2008. Available: https://www.delfi.lt/gyvenimas/istorijos/moteris-siandieniniame-lietuviu-kine-ne-papuosalas-19337972 (viewed 22.10.2024)

Kasekamp, A. (2018). *A History of the Baltic States*. 2nd ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Laanes, E. (2017). Trauma keelde tõlgitud. Kultuurideülesed mäluvormid eesti laagrija küüditamismälestustes. *Keel ja Kirjandus*, No. 4, pp. 241–257. https://doi.org/10.54013/kk713a1

Lane, J. (2002). *The Autobiographical Documentary in America*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Lebow, A. (2008). *First Person Jewish*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Leese, P. (2022). The Limits of Trauma: Experience and Narrative in Europe c. 1945. In: V. Kivimäki, P. Leese (eds.). *Trauma, Experience and Narrative in Europe after World War II*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lejeune, P. (1989). *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McDermott, K., Stibbe, M. (2010). Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe: problems, perspectives, interpretations. In: K. McDermott, M. Stibbe, (eds.). *Stalinist terror in Eastern Europe: Elite purges and mass repression*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press.

Missine, L. (2019). Autobiographical Pact. In: M. Wagner-Egelhaaf, (ed.). *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter.

Pērkone, I. (2023). Aizturēto asaru eposs. Dzintras Gekas esejas par genocīdu. *Kino Raksti*. Available: https://www.kinoraksti.lv/domas/latvijas-filma/aiztureto-asaru-eposs-dzintras-gekas-esejas-par-genocidu-1113 (viewed 14.02.2025)

Plakans, A. (2014). *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975370

Purs, A. (2010). Soviet in form, local in content: elite repression and mass terror in the Baltic states, 1940–1953. In: K. McDermott, M. Stibbe, (eds.). *Stalinist terror in Eastern Europe: Elite purges and mass repression*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press.

Renov, M. (2008). First-person Films. Some theses on self-inscription. In: T. Austin, W. de Jong (eds.). *Rethinking Documentary. New Perspectives, New Practices*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Šukaitytė, R. (2021). Contemporary Lithuanian Documentary Cinema: A Critical Overview of Main Film Directions. *Apertúra*, Fall, pp. 1–23. https://doi.org/10.31176/apertura.2021.17.1.9

Šukaitytė, R. (2023). History in Lithuanian Women's Creative Documentaries: Critical and Personal Approach. *Panoptikum*, No. 30, pp. 118–137. https://doi.org/10.26881/pan.2023.30.07

Tuzaite, E. (2020). Kolektyvinė sovietmečio atmintis iš meno sociologijos perspektyvos: Giedrės Beinoriūtės ir Jūratės Kluonės atvejai. *Filosofija. Sociologija*. No. 31 (2), pp. 117–127. Available: https://www.lmaleidykla.lt/ojs/index.php/filosofija-sociologija/article/view/4230/3213 (viewed 22.10.2024)

Van Dijck, J. (2007). *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Zane Balčus, PhD, is a post-doctoral researcher at Vilnius University (Lithuania). Balčus has contributed to several books on Latvian cinema (*Latvijas kino: jaunie laiki. 1990–2020* (*Latvian Cinema: Recent History, 1990–2020*, Riga: 2021), *Rolanda Kalniņa telpa* (*Cinematic Space of Rolands Kalniņš*, Riga: 2018), *Inscenējumu realitāte. Latvijas aktierkino vēsture* (*Reality of Fiction. History of Latvian Fiction Film*, Riga: 2011)), published academic articles, she is a freelance film critic and curator.

This project has received funding from the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT), agreement No. S-PD-24-103.
Project title: Baltic Documentary Cinema: Modalities and Challenges of First Person Filmmaking.