

# **TAVA LAIME / YOUR HAPPINESS BY ADA NERETNIECE: IDEOLOGICALLY DATED FILMS AND EPISTEMIC IMPERIALISM OF DISCURSIVE FIELDS**

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## **Abstract**

In Latvian film historiography, the feature film *Tavalaimē / Your Happiness* (1960) by Ada Neretniece is considered the worst film ever made. In order to reassess the film, it is first necessary to uncover the ideologically conditioned reception of the film in the 1960s. I will use archival research to uncover the conditions of production of *Your Happiness* and how they may have contributed to the notorious fame of Neretniece's film. Both – the history of production and the history of reception – and their respective underlying narratives belong to separate discursive fields. And both are deeply rooted in Soviet ideology. Now, sixty years after *Your Happiness* was made, we can remove it from the discursive field defined by the values of the Soviet state and establish a new reading of it by applying contemporary film theoretical concepts. With regard to the intratextual features of films made during the Soviet occupation, the concept of dated film (Jamie Baron), which encompasses cultural and aesthetic datedness, can be supplemented by ideological datedness. Thus, thanks to the digitisation and restoration activities of the archives and the updated theoretical agendas of film scholars, following the line of thought of Pamela Hutchinson, films of the Soviet period now constitute our “new cinema”.

**Keywords:** *Latvian film history, film theory, Ada Neretniece, dated film, ideological datedness, new cinema, discourse analysis*

## Introduction

In August 1960, the Latvian satirical magazine *Dadzis* published a review of the newly released feature film *Your Happiness* by the young director Ada Neretniece. The author of the review asks the rhetorical question – “*Whose happiness are we talking about here?*” and refers to a conversation he had with a friend, asking him if he had seen the film *Your Happiness*. “*No, he hasn’t. – Maybe this is his luck!*” [Strīķis 1960]. Since then, the myth that this is the worst Latvian film ever made has been quite consistent and could be found in private conversations with Latvian filmmakers. Even if this assertion lacks scholarly support from other historical sources, it is in line with such alternative forms of knowledge as rumours and gossip. Only recent works in film history have begun to acknowledge such discursive practices which are characterised by narrative unreliability and shaky epistemological status as rumours and gossip [Baer, Hennefield 2022: 8]. Queer and feminist scholarship has shown how taking these forms of knowledge seriously can disrupt the normal workings of power [Baer, Hennefield 2022: 6–7].

In a similar vein, I claim that now, sixty years later, we can reassess this particular film without the Soviet ideological overtone. *Your Happiness* stands as an example of how the cinematographic works of art need to be reassessed, acknowledging on the one hand the obsolescence of the filmic text itself, and on the other hand by revealing the changed discursive fields of the film’s reception and thus rescuing it from the imperialism of the discursive fields of Soviet ideology. The essay begins with the analysis of the film’s reception at the beginning of the 1960s, and it is supplemented by recent archival research. Furthermore, I will link the aesthetic judgement of the film to Jamie Baron’s concept of the historical datedness of films and propose to extend it to include ideological datedness as one of its aspects.

On the basis of these theories and findings, I argue that Latvian films of the Soviet period constitute our new cinema, because only now, when we have not only acquired knowledge of Western film theory, but since 1990 also new theoretical findings on art of the Soviet period have been made by Eastern European scholars, we can self-consciously uncover the entanglements of different discourses surrounding film in the 1960s.

In the search for answers to why Ada Neretnieces’ film *Your Happiness* has been called the worst Latvian film ever made, we can uncover the dated aspects of this cinematic work as well as reassess the artistic choices that have been overlooked. In doing so, I hope to describe how the film’s reception has shifted between different discursive fields.

## Historical reception of *Your Happiness*

A synopsis of the film from old Soviet publicity material reads, as follows:

*The financial inspector of the bank, Velta Roze, with the support of her boss, advocates the reconstruction of the ship-repair factory, the project of which was developed by the foreman of the factory, Juris Egle. However, the factory's chief engineer, Gunārs Liepa, who is in love with Velta, asks her to give up the project so that he can climb the career ladder. Velta leaves Gunārs and starts a closer friendship with Juris.*

The film *Your Happiness* was released in Latvia in the summer of 1960. It was the third feature film by Ada Neretniece (1924–2008). Neretniece was one of the most prolific directors of the Riga Film Studio – she directed 16 full-length feature films (plus two more made at the AL KO studio at the beginning of the 1990s). This creative output places her alongside such giants of Latvian film history as Jānis Streičs and Rolands Kalniņš<sup>1</sup>. Only 15.21% of feature films made at the Riga Film Studio during the Soviet occupation were directed by women [Zelče 2023: 106]. Ada Neretniece was not researched at all in Latvian film historiography until 2023, when historian Vita Zelče published an article dedicated to women directors at the Riga Film Studio [Zelče 2023] and film historian Inga Pērkone organised an event at the Riga Film Museum in 2024 to mark her centenary.<sup>2</sup> The only film of Neretniece's that has been analysed in detail is her debut film *Rita*, about a girl who helps to hide partisans during the World War II, which is considered her best film [see Pērkone 2011: 164 and Pērkone 2008: 58–62].

Immediately after graduating from All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, in 1949 (specialisation – film directing), Neretniece was sent to work at the Riga Film Studio, where she directed 16 full-length feature films and more than 40 chronicles by 1990. The Riga Film Studio<sup>3</sup> was founded in 1940, and until 1990 it was the only film studio in Latvia to cover the full range of film

<sup>1</sup> Jānis Streičs (b. 1936) – one of Latvia's most prolific and influential filmmakers. Directed 22 feature films. Rolands Kalniņš (1922–2022) was a Latvian film director whose films of the 1960s and 1970s show characteristics of European modernism. Two of his films faced restrictions with distribution, proper release being possible only in the second half of the 1980s, while the production of the film *Piejūras klimats / Maritime Climate* (1974) was cancelled.

<sup>2</sup> The event dedicated to Ada Neretniece's centenary with a mini exhibition and a film programme was organised by the Riga Film Museum and took place on 18 May 2024.

<sup>3</sup> From 1940–1948 two separate studios existed for fiction and documentary films, in 1948 both studios were merged into Riga Fiction and Chronicle Film Studio, but in 1958 it was renamed Riga Film Studio.

production. During its zenith in the 1970s and the 1980s, it produced 10–15 full-length feature films a year and employed around 1000 film workers.

In an attempt to redraw the timeline of the development of the public reception of *Your Happiness*, it is first necessary to cite the letter by the Madona District Executive Secretary V. Kalējs, printed in the Communist Party newspaper *Cīņa*, No. 216, 10.09.1960, in the section *Letters from Our Readers*:

*I don't think I'm wrong when I say that the public awaits every Latvian fiction film with great interest. Unfortunately, however, it must be said that sometimes the public's expectations are disappointed. One of the last feature films, Your Happiness, also disappointed the audience. The real background of the film – the struggle to rebuild the ship-repair factory – is presented in an unconvincing way, as if in passing. Does the reconstruction of an entire factory depend only on the amount of money? A brigade fought to rebuild the factory (again, not unconvincingly), as did a few individuals. But where is the rest of the factory collective, the party and Komsomol organisations? It never happens in life that they can distance themselves from the future of the whole factory. [Kalējs 1960]*

This letter is consistent with the Soviet ideological position that the opinions of workers as representatives of the Soviet collective are highly valuable because the interests of the collective, not the individual, must prevail [Bleiere 2015, 86].

On 11 April 1961, a plenary meeting of the Latvian Filmmakers Union was held to discuss the latest Latvian films. The film that received the harshest criticism was *Your Happiness*. The prevailing opinion was that this film was a prime example of how not to make a film [N. N. 1961]. The peak of criticism was reached in September 1961, when Arvīds Pelše, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Latvian SSR, in his address at the Communist Party Congress declared:

*The film Your Happiness is considered an undoubted failure, in which the spiritual world of the Soviet man is exhausted, while the new things happening in our country are shown in a simplified and primitive way. [Pelše 1961]*

The reason why the profoundly negative opinion of *Your Happiness* has persisted over time is not only the lack of access to the film (it was digitised and made available by the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents only recently). I would argue that one of the reasons for the long-lasting prejudice against *Your Happiness* was the fact that the reception of the film was still within the discursive field of Soviet ideology.

Discursive field, according to David A. Snow, is

*a term used to conceptualise at least one component of the context in which framing and discourse more generally are embedded... [Further], the discursive fields are the contexts in which meaning-making activities such as framing are embedded; [they are] the ideational stuff that is discussed, and the rules or grammar for the discourse are contained within the field; the field is also constituted by a set of patterned relations imported from outside [Snow 2008: 7–8].*

What I found most important about Snow's theses on discursive fields is the typology of them that Snow establishes. He sees them not as fixed entities but as a system of relations of varying degrees between actors, and thus places discursive fields on a continuum from emergent fields to structured (or stable) fields, and from consensual fields to contested fields. He also stresses the dynamic nature of discursive fields.

Following Snow, the history of interpretation and reception of the film *Your Happiness* can be seen as an event (or product) that has experienced different discursive fields. In the summer of 1960, the film was considered good enough to represent Soviet Latvia at the Latvian Film Days in Azerbaijan and was also screened at the film festival celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Soviet Latvia. Soon after, however, a campaign against the film began, which Vita Zelče locates in the context of the defeat of the national communists in the Latvian Communist Party at the end of the 1950s [Zelče 2023: 116–117]. It is important to stress that the contemporaries' judgement of the film, which I have outlined above, was framed as an aesthetic judgement at the time, and it is highly likely that the perception of this particular film influenced both Neretniece's career choices and the younger generation's appreciation of her films.

Mihails Savisko, who later became a very prominent film critic in Latvia, in his review published in January 1962 in the magazine *Māksla*, drew attention to the history of the film's production: that the script was first rejected in Moscow, but was later adapted to the Latvian situation:

*Understandably, after such adaptation and localisation, the script became even worse. There was no sign of living, full-blooded characters whose clashes would reveal an assessment of the reality of life, an idea that organically arises from a work of art [Savisko 1962].*

Certainly, Savisko is trying to criticise the imperial power, expressed in the tradition of the Soviet film system, of taking scripts by Russian authors, written for other contexts, and forcing them to be filmed in regional republics. Thus, his comment can be interpreted as a gesture of resistance to the oppressive power system. But his remark also encourages us to look deeper into the history of the film's production.

## Production history of *Your Happiness* and the formation of prejudices

Another aspect of *Your Happiness* is denigrated when researching the film's production history in the documents of the Riga Film Studio. However, the rhetoric of the documents found in the archive must be read against the critical background that in 1940–1941 and 1945–1990 the Latvian film industry worked within the state-socialist mode of film production. It was controlled by a central administrative body on two levels – in Latvia and in Moscow – by the Communist Party, state censorship and bureaucratic production plans and norms [Szcepanik 2013, 15]. Inga Pērkone, in her model of Latvian classical film, which according to her periodisation lasted from the mid-1960s to 1989, emphasises that in contrast to the Hollywood economic model, where profit was central, within the Soviet film production system the central aim was to reinforce Soviet ideology [Pērkone 2011: 47–49].

Documents show that work in the Riga Film Studio took place under harsh conditions. In 1960, only two full-length feature films were released – *Your Happiness* and *Storm* (*Vētra*, dir. Varis Krūmiņš, Rolands Kalniņš). The minutes of the Community of the Communist Party of Latvia at the Riga Film Studio reveal that the film *Your Happiness* was a great test for the studio, which failed. [LVA 416/9/10]. Other misfortunes also befell the film crew: most of the footage shot on both expeditions turned out to be camera malfunctions [LVA 416/2/49]. It was also revealed that the assistant producer had extorted money from members of the film crew during the expeditions [LVA 416/1/22]. In its report for 1960, the Riga Film Studio admitted that the misfortunes of *Your Happiness* were due to the weak, very schematic script, the director's lack of self-confidence and creative maturity, and the wrong choice of actors [LVA 416/2/53]. The film industry throughout the Soviet Union was in desperate need of films that represented young contemporaries, and *Your Happiness* should have helped to fill this gap, but due to the film's poor artistic quality, "*we are indebted to our viewers*", the Riga Film Studio said in its annual report [LVA 416/2/53].

Coming back to the question of whose happiness it should be, the answer can be found in the dialogue sheets of the promotional reel for the film *Your Happiness*. It shows young people dancing the samba, enjoying life, and the film's leading couple talking about love in their rendez-vous. The promotional reel for *Your Happiness* does not advertise the film as a production drama, but judging by the episodes included in the reel, audiences will be treated to a melodrama directed by a female director – Ada Neretniece – and starring leading Latvian film star Dzidra Ritenberga [LVA 678/2/250].

We have no explanation as to why the publicity for *Your Happiness* should mislead the public about what they could expect in the film. Meanwhile, it helps to

understand why the love scenes in *Your Happiness* are staged with great attention to detail and tenderness towards the characters – Neretniece seems to be more interested in the private moments of her characters than in the party meetings depicted in the film. In comparison, even judging by the staging, these seem like an unavoidable must. However, the duty of film was to show contemporaries with their everyday problems, which in Soviet ideology meant the problems of building a better Soviet society, not those of an individual. This explains why, in 1960–1961, when *Your Happiness* was screened, no one recognised the film's merits as a solid melodrama.

Another aspect of *Your Happiness* that has been completely neglected, even after the film's premiere, is its rather formalist aesthetic. As the action takes place in the shipyard, film's cinematographer Jānis Celms regularly uses extreme camera angles that are repeated in several shots of the film. When staging the mise-en-scène, Neretniece prefers to arrange the figures in space along the diagonal line, thus revealing a depth of field of several layers. One can also point to the plasticity of the way the camera and mise-en-scène resolve the filmic spaces and the empathy for Velta. Watching it again today, it seems quite obvious that the love story has received much more care and nuanced attention from both the director of the film and the cinematographer. None of the contemporary reviewers of *Your Happiness* addresses the film's aesthetic merits. Thus, the discursive fields of film production and reception in Soviet Latvia at the beginning of the 1960s contributed to resignation of the artistic merits of Neretniece to oblivion, but the neglect of another – the discourse of formalist aesthetics – helped to reinforce her image as an untalented filmmaker.

From today's perspective, however, the ideological power of the discourses of the Soviet period has disappeared. Nowadays, Neretniece's more formalistic approach to the staging of the film helps to appreciate her directorial efforts. At the same time, the obsolescence of the film's ideological qualities, which greatly influenced its reception, comes to the fore.

### Concept of a dated film

Film theoretician Jaimie Baron distinguishes between two types of dated film. There is ethical datedness – when some aesthetic choices seem outdated because technology or artistic styles have evolved. In either case,

*it is more likely to produce a nostalgic or kitschy mode of spectatorship that enjoys the pastness of the text but does not find it disturbing or offensive* [Baron 2023: 3].

Another form of datedness that Baron identifies is cultural datedness. We encounter this phenomenon in films that depict situations or lines of dialogue that have been culturally acceptable some time ago, but are no longer tolerable today.

The most prominent example is the shift in cultural perception of various sexist jokes or situations that are no longer acceptable following the #metoo movement. Baron stresses that it is not the function of the text itself to be dated. "*A particular film seems dated to a particular audience at a particular time*" [Baron 2023: 3]. Meanwhile, from the perspective of a scholar analysing a film made during the Soviet occupation in Latvia, I would like to propose that the list of forms of datedness be extended to include ideological datedness, which I believe cannot be covered by the notion of cultural datedness, because ideological datedness is not only the relationship between the film and its audience, but between the film and the political system and the state in which it was made. During the fifty years of Soviet occupation, the ideologically wrong messages or aesthetics of their films (or if something was interpreted as such by the authorities) could determine the careers of filmmakers. Today, however, these ideological messages of films have become outdated, although this is not always apparent to younger audiences, for example, those who are not familiar with Soviet history or the discourses of the Soviet period. Hence, it may be that film critics and film scholars are of paramount importance when it comes to discovering the ideological cringe, as opposed to the aesthetic and cultural cringe.

When working out the ideological datedness of an audiovisual work of art, it is not so much the temporal disparity as the intentional disparity that should be consulted. Both of these phenomena have been defined in Baron's most influential theoretical book to date – *The Archive Effect: Found footage and the audiovisual experience of history* (2014). Baron defines temporal disparity in relation to *appropriation* films: it has to be visible either on the level of the protofilmic object or on that of the film strip itself [Baron 2014: 36]. It forms the basis to the archive effect [Baron 2014: 32]. However, temporal disparity is not the most crucial reason for films to be perceived as ideologically dated. Rather, it is the intentional disparity. It is produced when "*the previous intention of the document is inscribed within the archival document*" [Baron 2014: 39]. Our filmic experience of intentional disparity is defined by the fact whether we belong to the intended audience and whether we accept the intended context of the reception [Baron 2014: 113]. For recognizing intentional disparity and thus, the ideological datedness, our extratextual knowledge has to be consulted [Baron 2014: 39].

As mentioned above, the ideological messages within the filmic texts were a crucial factor for film's evaluation during the period of the Soviet occupation. Curiously, in case of *Your Happiness*, the artistic failures of the film were perceived as a sabotage to the ideological undertone of the story, whereas today, following the line of thought of Baron, the intentional disparity can offer us a voyeuristic joy, because it reveals something we are not **meant** to see [Baron 2014: 110].



Baron emphasised that datedness is not about the superiority of the present moment of interpretation over the reception of a film in an earlier period. For her, datedness is

*a matter of “preceding” a particular transformative moment, whether this is a shift in esthetic norms or cultural values, and – crucially – of betraying that precedence to the audience.* [Baron 2023: 3]

The period of the Soviet occupation, its political and social structures and the principles of evaluating works of art is a historical period – 1940–1941 and 1945–1990. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the decisive moment that transformed a considerable part of the films made during the Soviet period into ideologically obsolete objects, characterized by temporal, but foremost – by their intentional disparity. *Your Happiness* is just one case study that could be followed by many others.

### **Old films constitute our new film history**

The famous British film historian Pamela Hutchinson, speaking about silent films made by women filmmakers, wrote in

*Feminist Media Histories: Let us curate not old films, but young cinema, those films made in a period of exploration, when the medium was new and its possibilities had not been fully mapped out. In this conception, films released in the first quarter of the twentieth century are young, which means, conversely, that films released in the first quarter of the twenty-first century are old. Young films have no history, but they are brimming with possibilities – with faith in the future of the medium, its untapped treasures and its unmapped landscape.* [Hutchinson 2024: 161]

I would like to claim that Latvian films made during the Soviet occupation are our new cinema. Because now, thirty-five years after Latvia regained its independence, these films have been digitised and restored; new generations of film scholars have been trained; we have not only appropriated Western paradigms of film theoretical thought, such as feminism, postcolonial criticism, queer theory, but over the years colleagues from other Eastern European countries have developed new approaches and carried forward our research, which can be used when analysing Latvian films of this period.

The layered gaze is one of the core concepts when Jamie Baron discusses the reuse, misuse and abuse of archival materials by contemporary filmmakers [Baron 2021: 16]. A layered gaze is needed when carrying out research on Latvian films of the Soviet period. However, identifying the ideological datedness and intentional disparity of the newly digitized films could be only one of the tasks. There are various new discourses and framings of these films now possible. For example, *Your Happiness* also

belongs to the corpus of films with actors from other Baltic states, which is common not only in Neretniece's films, but also in other films made during the Soviet occupation.

While working on another article in the summer of 2024, I happened to learn that Ada Neretniece was considered a lesbian by her contemporaries [Reitere 2024a]. We have no testimony from Neretniece herself on this matter. The scientific archive of the Riga Film Museum's collection holds an interview from 2013 in which Zigfrīds Kravalis (1929–2019), production manager and long-time manager of the Latvian branch of the Propaganda Bureau of the USSR Union of Cinematographers, recalling Vadims Mass<sup>4</sup> collaboration with the director on the set, mentions Ada Neretniece's "*disease* [*sic* –in Latvian original – *slimība*] *with women*" [Balčus, Mincenofa 2012].<sup>5</sup> Several film workers of the younger generation who worked at the Riga Film Studio in the 1980s confirmed to me that everyone at the Studio knew about Neretniece's girlfriends [for example, Krilovs 2024]. Here, once again, we encounter the realm of rumours and gossip concerning Neretniece, although from another perspective. Yet, if we take them seriously as a source of historical knowledge (see, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who when writing about queerness, considers gossip as pivotal in "*helping discern what kinds of people there are to be found in one's world*" [Sedgwick 1990: 23]), they encourage us not only to look at the cinematic work of Neretniece in a new light in the future. For example, more research should be done on how her queerness and the prejudices of her colleagues about it affected her career. Furthermore, when conducting research on Latvian history during the Soviet occupation, we must acknowledge rumours and gossip as credible epistemic tools, given that official historical resources on the period are shaped by those in socially and politically dominant positions.

## Conclusion

Although Ada Neretniece received the National Film Award in 1988 for her film *Divination on a Lamb's Shoulder* (*Zilēšana uz jēra lāpstiņas*) about deportations, the discursive field in which she has been located for the last thirty years is that of oblivion. But thanks to the digitalisation of the films, *Your Happiness* has been shifted into several discursive fields, all of which are more or less still emerging (using David Snow's typology) within Latvian film historiography.

Using archival records of Riga Film studio in this article, I showed how the stereotypical reception of Neretniece's film *Your Happiness* as the "worst Latvian film ever made" might have come into being. On one hand, the problems during the film's production and its obviously weak script contributed to it. On other hand,

<sup>4</sup> Vadims Mass (1919–1986) – director of photography and film director.

<sup>5</sup> Presumably, this is the film *Pieviltie* / *The Deceived* (1961), as Kravalis and Neretniece worked on it together.

due to its artistic weaknesses, *Your Happiness* was an easy target for the campaign against national communists in the Latvian Communist Party at the end of the 1950s. Meanwhile, this discourse has completely ignored the staggering staging strategies of the film that echoes formalist aesthetics. I would like to claim that Neretniece's film is an example of Latvian films made during the Soviet period that for us now constitutes our new cinema. Because the newly digitized films can now be analysed using new theoretical approaches and new paradigms of film theoretical thought. In doing so, the ideological datedness of them comes to the fore.

Jaimie Baron, who defines dated film as a phantom genre, also acknowledges that “by encountering these ghosts we can experience our distance from them [...] dead tropes that no longer have ideological power over us” [Baron 2023: 8–9]. Thus, by uncovering and analysing the dated films and the old discourses in which they were received during the Soviet occupation and by establishing new ones, we free ourselves from the epistemic imperialism of the Soviet period. With such handling of audiovisual texts we not only “take responsibility for our relationship to historical knowledge and its production” [Baron 2014: 227]. We continually co-constitute our past. [Baron 2014: 227]. It is our duty, more than thirty years after Latvia regained its independence from the Soviet Union to finally reassess these fifty years of our film history.

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*This research is funded by the Latvian Council of Science, project Navigating the Latvian History of the 20th–21st Century: Social Morphogenesis, Legacy and Challenges (No. VPP-IZM-Vēsture-2023/1-0003)*