

Films that Gave Us Boldness: East European Documentaries Screened in Poland (1987–1993) as Reflected in the Film Press of the Time

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The symptoms of a historic turning point in politics, culture and, consequently, in documentary filmmaking appeared in Poland relatively early. In the 1980s, Polish culture was divided into two “circulation systems”, one official and one underground, and into two perspectives: “the façade” and “the back”. During the “First Solidarity”, the 16 months of freedom between August 1980 and December 1981, cultural changes accompanied political ones: there were independent newspapers (more than 2700 titles after December 13, 1981), an independent Video Studio Gdańsk (its roots go back to 1981), and the “Mistrzejowice” Independent Television station (established in 1984). Later, in the official circulation system, the Irzykowski Studio (1986) and Studio Filmowe “Kronika” (Film Studio Chronicle, 1990) also introduced new topics and new forms of expression. Also worth emphasizing here is the role of the “Film Poza Kinem” initiative (OFF-CINEMA) in Wrocław at the beginning of the 1980s, which offered a unique opportunity to see unconventional productions from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany.

Films signaling the political breakdown in the East of Europe were very welcome in the official circulation system. These films were screened not only in festival cinemas, but on TV as well, and they were discussed in newspapers and magazines. Soviet films were especially important because they were not censored and carried new information about the changes in Eastern Europe. If independent ideas appeared in a Polish film, it could be banned from screening, as censorship was sensitive to works “threatening socialism” and “disturbing the alliance”. The only country in our part of Europe

which did not need to be afraid of “disturbing the alliance” was the Soviet Union.

It was first possible to open the information barrier after the catastrophe in Chernobyl. This event could not be concealed and provoked questions about “glasnost” – the “publicness” of life, many Soviet films after 1986 seemed to open up new ways of documenting life and events in the late 1980s. These included:

1. Analyses of social life.
2. Films about contemporary threats, provoked by the Chernobyl disaster.
3. Documentaries “squaring accounts” with history, filling in so-called “blank spots”.

These Soviet films did not necessarily influence Polish filmmaking in the sense of introducing new subjects; both these and new forms were present earlier. Examples include Andrzej Domalik’s *Nie bój się tego...* (*Don’t Worry about It*, 1982), Paweł Karpiński’s *Jarocin ’82* (1982) about young people expressing their feelings during the concerts of popular groups, Andrzej Piekutowski’s *Wszystko, co żywe* (*Everything That Is Alive*, 1986) about an ecological disaster, and Andrzej Titkow’s *Przechodzień*, (*Passer-by*, 1984), ostensibly a portrait of novelist Tadeusz Konwicki that voiced criticism of the ideology the writer had believed in the past (the film won an Underground Solidarity award). New subjects – bar those connected with history, due to censorship – were widely represented in the mid-1980s. New forms were developing – paradoxically – as a result of restrictions not only on the ideological but also on the technical level. The necessity for quick recording with a hidden camera, the influence of reportage, and the inclusion of still photos, blanks, collage, and

happenings gradually changed the language of the documentary.

Films from the USSR accessible in Poland in 1987 broke the information barrier about events in the East, not only in Russia, but in some of the Soviet republics, as well. These included full-length documentaries that formulated problems from new perspectives, in new contexts, and which went to the roots of issues and phenomena. These documentaries experimented with both form and content, mixing styles and genres.

One good example is *Legko li byt' molodym?* (*Is It Easy to be Young?*) by Juris Podnieks from the Latvian SSR. For the first time, we were able to see pictures from the USSR featuring young boys in eccentric clothes, with matted hair, faces painted in garish, irregular patterns. Young people in ecstasy, demolishing a train. The same people in a courtroom, being subjected to judicial proceedings. The boy given the longest sentence is crying in shock, as militiamen lead him out. We could see an amateur filmmaker shooting an extraordinary film based on the poetics of symbols. Podnieks also shows two unremarkable young men. One explains why he works in a mortuary; the other talks about his fascination with oriental religions. We see crippled young men who have returned from Afghanistan, where they had served in the army. We could watch drug addicts using syringes and needles, as well as pupils standing as guards of honour in front of the monument to the Latvian fusiliers.

The film was announced as

a sharp, dynamic and meticulously edited documentary, [which] has become one of the most significant cultural events in the Soviet Union in the last few months (along with the famous *Repentance* by Tengiz Abuladze).[1]

Is It Easy to be Young? was awarded the Grand Prix at the festival of documentary and popular science films and other honorary distinctions at the 30th All-Soviet Film Festival in Tbilisi in May 1987. The verdict received a standing ovation from the audience. The critic cited above goes on to say:

It is an extraordinary film. It poses one of the most difficult questions: is easy to be young? It shows young people of the eighties: their lives, dreams and aims. But it also shows the overwhelming loneliness and the tragedy of being at a loss. "Nobody realizes that we have put on our leather gear with metal rivets and called ourselves punks just to show that we exist. We might look grim, shabby and horrible, but we are still your children; it's you who turned us into what we are now..." says one of the film's heroes. J. Podnieks denied this interpretation of his message in an interview. The crux of the matter is not the conflict between generations, but the passing of the baton in the relay race of generations. I think that we must look for the roots of the crisis in mutual relations between young people and adults in a violation of the moral grounds for the transfer of experience. Generation bonds break because hope is lost and ideals are devaluated. Therefore, I think the episode with the guard of honour at the Latvian fusiliers' monument to be the most significant one in the film. The film does not provide an answer to the question asked in the title. It does not even suggest one in any form, it is simply a frank report of the life of contemporary young people. It is impressive, sometimes shocking and painful. It is a specific and difficult monologue of young people about their problems, and the painful search for their place on earth. It is also a warning. Every frame impresses, strikes the conscience, and touches the heart with a force that derives from the truth.[2]

Juris Podnieks started the project in 1982, as I know from an interview I conducted with him in 1987. He was interested in sociological research on different social groups, especially young people and the difficulties they faced in the process of adapting to life in society. The main idea for the film came in 1985, following the concert and its consequences for some young boys who appeared in the film. At the same time, he came up with the idea of including the theme of soldiers returning from Afghanistan. Podnieks confessed that he was worried he would be late with his documentary, as political changes were moving ever faster. Abuladze's famous film *Repentance* had just been released, one week before Podnieks finished his film.

[1] BP, *Gazeta Festiwalowa* 1987, 5, June 3, p. 3.

[2] Ibidem.

Podnieks claimed in 1987 that there were a lot of reviews of his documentary, and he gave a lot of interviews, but there was until then no serious critical study. The film won him great popularity among young viewers; he might have felt like an idol, but he was not satisfied as a film director. It is characteristic of those times that this kind of manifesto only rarely met with serious criticism and, as a result, was not properly evaluated.

According to Jolanta Lenard,[3] Podnieks's film (winner of the FIPRESCI award in Kraków in 1987) and *Predel (Borderline)* by Tatiana Skarbard (winner of the Golden Dragon in the same year) exemplify a new trend in Soviet documentary, depicting people from the so-called social margins. *Borderline* gives us a picture of social degeneration, showing a rarely portrayed side of life: the children of social outcasts.

The camera as a "cool medium" records various examples of human cruelty – the violence of a young boy against his alcoholic mother; the deformed, scarred faces of children tortured by their parents, condemned to ghastly children's homes; prisoners deprived of parental rights for victimizing their children. There is no sentimentality, no moralizing. The children do not wait for their parents' "conversion"; they are not emotional, but they accuse: "my mother is bad, she beats me", "I will become a militiaman, and I will kill all the alcoholics". Could this be the beginning of a "black series" in Soviet documentary film?, asked one film critic.

Documentaries made at the end of the 1980s represented a trend toward "social disquiet", and the "black documentary". The first series of Polish "black documentaries" from the years 1955-1958 unmasked the reality (prostitution,

alcoholism, unemployment) hidden behind the façade of official optimism, it was a reaction against propaganda films. In the late 1980s, the social context was different, and nobody was going to be shocked by such pictures. But it was the last moment to show these kinds of films. In 1992 a film critic remarked:

As late as last year, films from the East and the West seemed to come from two different planets. The East screamed about its injuries and sufferings, extreme poverty and ill-treatment; the West was busy with trifles, or made acrimonious remarks about them. Now they have problems with immigrants – the Europeans believe in human rights but are convinced that the rights belong to them only.[4]

The next important subject which emerged in 1987 was Chernobyl and its consequences in every sphere of life, including filmmaking, as illustrated by the following comment:

In the course of years, a whole series of films on the Chernobyl incident appeared (so far over 20 such films have been made in the Ukraine). [...] The picture *Nevidany albom (An Unpublished Album)*, dir. by Viktor Kripchenko and Volodymyr Taranchenko, also touching upon these issues, was awarded the Silver Dragon at the International Short Film Festival in 1992, in Kraków. Indubitably, this must have been a subject of great consequence for the Ukrainian film makers, as none of the documentary studios operating in the 1980s and 1990s ever dared to miss out on it.

One might venture an opinion that the Chernobyl incident could, to a certain extent, be construed as having actually brought about a real mental breakthrough in Ukrainian society at large, irrespective of all the attendant constraints imposed on it by Soviet rule. A veritable sign of the times, now truly embedded in the very fabric of everyday language through these popular clichés: 'after the Revolution' (1917), 'after the war' (1945), 'after Chernobyl' (1986), 'after regaining national sovereignty' (1991). It goes without saying, however, that the Chernobyl theme, despite its symbolism and powerful imagery (i.e. Ukrainian documentaries had already dealt with almost any angle and aspect of the tragedy, e.g. environmental impact, legal implications, demography, psychology, national, political and geopolitical considerations, etc.), was at the time just one of many topical issues that documentary makers would tackle in their quest for a good story to build on.[5]

[3] J. Lenard, "Zadyszka", *Kino* 1987, no. 9, pp. 6-8. (translation mine - J.H.)

[4] B. Janicka, "Pożar pożar coś nareszcie dzieje się", *Film* 1992, no. 26, pp. 4-5. (translation mine - J.H.)

[5] V. Voytenko, "Ukrainian documentaries: a 'microphone' gained and lost" in: *Zooming in on history's turning points. Documentaries in the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. J. Głowa, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Cracow 1999, pp. 95-96. (translation - Jacek Kołtąj)

In an article about Volodymyr Shevchenko's documentary *Chernobyl: Chronicle of Difficult Weeks*, the Polish critic Maria Malatyńska suggested that whatever opinion was voiced, it would not be appropriate, not suitable. Viewers were surprised to see for the first time footage shot from inside the crater. The film

intimidated and blackmailed with the information about the recent death of its director, resulting from radiation sickness, it shocked with the view of the hopelessly run-down state of the power station. In the event of a nuclear explosion, we can only seek recourse in the dedication of people who are doomed to die. But perhaps for all these reasons the film was out of bounds for discussion.[6]

In 1991, *Poligon (A Range)* by Aleksandr Sidelnikov was screened in Poland. It shows a radiologist reflecting on the history and the current state of atomic energy in the Soviet Union as well as tragic events related to its development. However, the most important film about Chernobyl to date is *An Unpublished Album*, mentioned above, which remains the fullest visual documentation of the disaster. The commentary to the film is given by its authors, as well as by the well-known Moldavian press photographer Igor Kostin, who took thousands of pictures of the site. The Chernobyl catastrophe made us aware of other threats, and was merely a starting point for a comprehensive critique of the Soviet system.

A survey of public opinion carried out in 1988 showed how acutely Poles felt the consequence of the information void under the communist regime. One-quarter of adult Poles who were polled said that they were not satisfied with what they knew about Polish history, especially about those events that were connected with the Soviet Union. The most frequently cited example was the Katyń massacre. Only in the 1990s was it possible to start making films that helped fill in "blank spots", such as *Las Katyński (Katyń Wood)* (1990) by Marcel Łoziński, an Andrzej Wajda-inspired documentary about the murder by the NKVD of Polish officers interned in the Soviet Union in September 1939. The film denounces attempts at hiding the truth about the

murders. *Ojczyzna (Father 1991)*, by Janusz Zaorski (with music by the bard Przemysław Gintrowski), one of the earlier films on the topic, takes us along the tragic road to Katyń as seen today, to Kozielsk, Ostaszków, and Starobielsk, detention camps that were the final destination for thousands of Polish officers murdered by the Soviet security police.

It needs to be stressed that Polish documentaries related to the recent past, in this case the years 1980-1981, abandoned a martyrological perspective. This new tone is well illustrated in *Parada wspomnień (Parade of Remembrance)* by Bohdan Kosiński, a film made in the late 1980s, and finished in 1990, outside official filmmaking institutions. The documentary recounts the most spectacular events related to the activity of Solidarity in Warsaw, during and after Martial Law, without being exaggeratedly serious, and maintaining a distance. This sort of tone was absent in Russian films of the time.

In 1988 Janina Kumaniecka noted:

Events in the Soviet Union are at the centre of public attention. Although Russian documentaries sometimes left a lot to be desired as far as narration and composition went, they were full of fascinating material and provoked reflection on the shadows of the past. We need to add that most of them were debuts and differed in their brave and sharp observation from the documentaries of more experienced filmmakers.[7]

Kumaniecka offers an example: in her opinion Marina Babak's film *More Light* was more cautious in showing the truth than the more direct *Raskinulos morie široko (The Sea Spilled Over Wide)* by Nikolai Makarov. The latter is a documentary about the building of "Volgostroy", which was one of the first building enterprises in the Soviet Union. Makarov talks about the costs of such huge projects, about the people employed there, about hundreds of thousands of prisoners who lost their lives on the building site. *The Sea Spilled Over Wide* is also a lyrical story

[6] M. Malatyńska, "Dokumenty czasu", *Życie Literackie* 1987, no 24, p. 1, 7. (translation mine – J.H.)

[7] J. Kumaniecka, "Spotkamy się za rok?", *Ekran* 1988, no. 28, pp. 14–15. (translation mine – J.H.)

about the inhabitants of the town of Vologda, which is now at the bottom of a lake, about the houses and churches in which they had prayed, about the abandoned graves of their relatives. Kumaniecka observed in her commentary that the changing situation in the USSR made most contemporary problems comprehensible in the context of the past. This was certainly the case with Mikhail Pavlov's *Zona BAM. Postajennyje zhitieli* (*The BAM Zone: Permanent Residents*). We can once again catch sight of wasted efforts, a lack of logic, terrible conditions which have not changed since the building of the first BAM. The third documentary mentioned in Kumaniecka's article is *Voskriesienie rano...* (*Sunday Morning*) by Murat Mamedov about a group of old women clearing the forest. The filmmaker allowed them to tell their own stories. "It is a sad picture of life and the heritage of a cruel and ruthless time with which the Soviet cinema is today squaring accounts."^[8]

[8] Ibidem (translation mine – J.H.)

[9] M. Małatyńska, "Dokumenty między i chwały", *Życie Literackie* 1989, no. 24, pp. 1, 5. (translation mine – J.H.)

[10] To the author of the article *Ukrainian documentaries: a 'microphone' gained and lost*, this is a story: "almost bordering on the bizarre, meticulously documented by Mamedov, renowned in the Ukrainian film trade for being one of those documentary makers that would adopt an almost pious approach to their screen characters, cunningly using the expressive properties of the camerawork and imagery to bring out the true personality in their protagonists; this in turn imposing the need for certain simplifications and fairly laconic style in the storytelling itself. The film is an account of a woman who spent 18 years of her life as a political prisoner in the Gulag camps. On the day preceding her release, she was told that throughout all those years she had been there not as a political prisoner but in the capacity of "an employee who had signed up for the job on her own accord", and that her "contract of employment would not be due for an extension." V. Vojtenko, op. cit, p. 100.

[11] T. Sobolewski, "Cała prawda o krótkich filmach", *Kino* 1991, no. 9, pp. 19–21. (translation mine – J.H.)

Polish filmmakers are said to be more efficient in making political syntheses.^[9] This kind of synthesis is absent in *Corvus Cornix* (*White Crow*) by Zanna Romanova, awarded the Grand Prix in Kraków in 1989. It is the story of young girl who wants to work efficiently and protests against the bureaucracy and poor organization in her workplace. The management punishes her by subjecting her to psychiatric examinations. Her colleagues are aware that she is perfectly healthy, but they do not want trouble at work and neither protest against such injustice nor feel any remorse.

One of the most interesting articles about documentary films from Eastern Europe is concerned with *Skasuvannia dohovoru* (*Termination of an Agreement*), dir. by Murat Mamedov, awarded the Golden Dragon at the International Short Film Festival in Kraków in 1991. The film tells the quite incredible story of a woman who, as a member of Komsomol, volunteered for work in Siberia, and as a result spent 18 years in a Stalinist labour camp.^[10]

Referring to the documentary, Tadeusz Sobolewski raised the question about the contemporary meaning of sacrifice:

The "System" was built on the giant lie, but to call it today, after all that has happened, "a lie" – is not enough. Even the word "crime" does not hit the nail on the head, because people had to co-exist with that lie and that crime. For the "idealist" that the woman in the film talks about even the forced-labour camp had a redemptive sense. She used to carry heavier loads than she was ordered, quite like Catholic women mortifying the flesh. She was a believing Communist.^[11]

Sobolewski analyses the motif of dance as one of the possible answers to the question posed in the film on the meaning of sacrifice:

The woman's tale alternates with fragments from a 1930s newsreel. Kolkhozniks dance in the shadow of a big tree. The dance is accompanied by a propaganda song in which a choir of women sing at the top of their voices about how splendid it is to live in the USSR. At the beginning we treat that dance as an ironical counterpoint to the tale from the Gulag; we can see only the testimony of contemporary propaganda. But later, when the dance scene

returns in the most dramatic moments of the story, its meaning changes. We discover the specific truth of the documentary: the whole tale about the ordeal lasts as long as it takes the dancers to complete a full circle round the tree. Mamedov's film gives in the end an answer to the question about the assessment of life in the USSR. It is comprised in the fragment of Achmatova's *Requiem*, unexpectedly quoted by the narrator:

I have so much to do today
I have to kill memory completely
Turn my soul to stone
I have to learn to live anew.[12]

Reviewing films from the USSR was by critics as a pretext for expressing their own political opinions, more or less radical, about the role of documentary in the political changes. According to Janina Szymańska, what is important in Marina Goldovskaya's film *Vlast' Solovetskaya. Svidel'stva i dokumenty (Solovki Power)* about a Gulag on an island in the Solovetsky archipelago is the capturing of the slow process of losing illusions by an entire generation of builders of a new Soviet life.[13]

Critics compared the situation of Polish and Russian or Ukrainian filmmakers and their efforts in filling so-called "blank spots". Incidentally, in 1990 Janusz Zaorski made in Russia the documentary *Białe plamy – czarne dziury (Blank Spots – Black Holes)*, a report from the Third Symposium "on the so-called "blanks" in our history and in our filmmaking", which was held in Moscow in January 1990 with Polish and Russian filmmakers, critics, and historians as participants.

The opinion that Polish film directors were more experienced, that they left Soviet filmmakers lagging behind, dominated among critics:

In East Bloc countries some subjects were banned, so now we have only simple "negatives" of past films. So we are richer than our Soviet colleagues "by several years". Maybe when they reveal thousands of mistakes made by the administration in their country they will discover their own "documentaries about the level of social consciousness"[14].

But in the 1990s, Polish film critics were lavish in their praise of films from the Soviet Union:

"However, the most interesting and most important were films from the USSR; that's the way things are now...: *Dien odkrovienij (Revelation Day)* by Aleksander Kibkala and *Tales of Mother Frosia about the Divejevsky Monastery* by Siergiej Baranov." [15] The first documentary is a kind of political essay about the Communist party and its roots in the Russian political tradition of the 19th century and the contemporary context – defenders of democracy are brutally arrested by KGB agents. Baranov's film is about the destruction of churches and monasteries in the USSR.

Critics underscored the importance of the historical context in the documentary *Repe-tycyja (Test)* by Aleksey Geleyn, made after the massacre on April 9, 1989 in Tbilisi. The filmmaker used amateur camera shots and video materials made by the KGB. It is not known how he accessed them. The film also talks about the Red Army in Budapest in 1956, in Prague in 1968, and in Afghanistan. This uncompromising documentary, sharp in its message, was produced by "Nerv", the first independent studio in the USSR. It premiered in Kraków in June 1990.[16]

In the context of bold films about events of the moment (such as *Gaid-park po kiivski (Hyde-Park Kiev Style)*, Soviet Union, 1990 by Giorgi Szklarevski, ph. V. Kukorienczuk about demonstrations in front of the Ukrainian Parliament during the summer of 1990, and *Take Ours Tears Too* by Jarosław Kamiński, Malhaz Bahtadze, ph. Leon Kotowski, a film made in Tbilisi a year after the bloody suppression of a patriotic demonstration by inhabitants of the capital of Georgia *Sovetskaya elegiya (Soviet Elegy, 1989)*, a documentary made by Alexander Sokurov, was considered controversial:

[12] Ibidem (translation mine – J. H.)

[13] J. Szymańska, "Wyspa śmierci", *Kino* 1991, no. 6, p. 48. (translation mine – J.H.)

[14] M. Malatyńska, "Głodnym okiem", *Życie Literackie* 1988, no. 24, pp. 1, 11. (translation mine – J.H.)

[15] B. Janicka, "Trzęsienie ziemi i święty spokój", *Film* 1990, no. 25, pp. 4–5. (translation mine – J.H.)

[16] *Gazeta Festiwalowa* 1990, no 5, June 2, p. 1. (translation mine – J.H.)

at first, long sequences of cemeteries (old ones and new ones), later portraits of all the members of the PolitBureau from the last 73 years and (for dessert?) a seven-minute-long (!!!) close-up of Boris Yeltsin – who knows – thoughtful or napping. Viewers in Kraków chose napping.[17]

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Polish critics and researchers on documentary film have been employing the metaphor of “a broken mirror” to attempt to convey the diversity of films describing the political breakdown in the former East Bloc countries.[18] I think that as late as the 1990s, the documentaries from those countries provide a crucial source of information about the world and about its people, thus participating in the process of enriching society’s knowledge of itself. The inability to use objective sources of information makes one escape into the land of someone else’s

[17] P. Obuchowski, “Z festiwalowego kina”, *Gazeta Festiwalowa* 1990, no. 4, June 1, p. 4. (translation mine – J.H.)

[18] Wiesław Godzic used it in a different sense: “What I want to say is that the common conviction that nonfiction film presents the truth (in contrast with propaganda newsreels and TV reports) has no validity any more. Documentary as a mirror reflecting reality has been broken into a thousand pieces. [...] What is even more significant is the consequence of the above – a communicative breakdown between the sender and the receiver in the process of filmic communication. Both should communicate on the basis of common values and it would mean a complete failure of film subculture if filmmakers’ and viewers’ values were different.” “HOW DO WE LOOK IN A BROKEN MIRROR? Polish Documentary in the 1990s.”: <<http://www.yidff.jp/docbox/9/box9-3-e.html>> [accessed: May 2nd, 2014]

[19] L. Julai, “Experiencing reality (The Russian cinema of the 1990s)”, in: *Zooming in on History’s Turning Points...* p. 21.

problems, into an artificial reality. Such a situation is more probable today than in the past, because of the activity of some of the epigones of Sokurov. Recognizing reality is a necessary condition for the effective functioning of culture as a whole. Otherwise its other functions are stunted.

There is another problem with the documentary in the 21st century: does cinematography sponsored by the state or a documentary “mega-production” remain independent in the process of enriching society’s knowledge? Let’s listen to the voice of a critic:

...the documentary output of the *perestroika* period, especially in its initial phase: 1985-87, despite the prevalent pathos in addressing the burning social issues, essentially remained the statehood-oriented cinematography, maintaining a proper balance between the vital social interests and those of the individual film makers. At this point, the concept of statehood comes to the fore as a value in its own right, as a creative tradition.

The national cinematography has been clearly granted a new lease on life in the newly emergent political circumstances; its revival is clearly manifested in an eagerness to prove its usefulness and significance in the democratic process. The films made by Stanislav Govoruchin (*One Just Can’t Go On Living Like That*), and Yuris Podniyek, on the death of his cameramen while on assignment in Vilnius, and a documentary account of the nighttime provocation in Tbilisi, proved particularly expressive in this respect.

The popular belief that the revolution eventually was brought about and sparked by Yeltsin must have long been germinating in the corridors of the Film Makers Association building, and is therefore not without reason. The Russian documentary makers then set out to expose and help to bring down the Soviet political system with a truly Bolshevik zeal. (As it later transpired, thus helping to undermine the very foundations of their own existence).[19]