

Article

War and Women in Jānis Streičs' Films



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ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the theme of women and war in the films of Jānis Streičs, possibly the most influential Latvian film director. In the course of his career, which spanned nearly 50 years, Streičs made films that were popular in Latvia, as well as throughout the Soviet Union. He is one of the few Latvian film directors who managed to continue a comparatively stable career in the newly re-independent Republic of Latvia. Streičs skilfully used the canonised means of expression of classical cinema and superficially fulfilled the demands of socialist realism to provide appealing and life-asserting narratives for the audiences. Being a full-time film director at Riga Film Studio, and gradually becoming a master of the studio system, Jānis Streičs managed to subordinate the system to his own needs, outgrowing it and becoming an auteur with an idiosyncratic style and consistently developed topics.¹ The most expressive elements of his visual style can be found in his war films, which are presented as women's reflections on war.

In this article, Streičs' oeuvre in its entirety provides the background for an analysis of two of his innovative war films. *Meetings on the Milky Way* (*Tikšanās uz Piena ceļu*, Latvia, 1985) rejects the classical narrative structure, instead offering fragmentary war episodes that were united by two elements – the road and women. In *Carmen Horrendum* (Latvia, 1989) Streičs uses an even more complicated structure that combines reality, visions and dreams. After watching this film, the only conclusion we can come to with certainty is that war does not have a woman's face and, in general, war has no traces of humanity.

1 Referring to the directors' roles mentioned in Andrew Sarris' article 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962' – 'a technician', 'a stylist' and 'an auteur' (Sarris 2004: 563), we can say that Streičs has intermittently played all of these roles, moving from a technician to a stylist and then to auteur, but sometimes also moving in the opposite direction.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how World War II, a theme stringently controlled by Soviet ideology, provided the impetus for a search for an innovative film language.

JĀNIS STREIČS: FILMS AND THEMES

Jānis Streičs, the 'patriarch' of Latvian cinema, initially gained his popularity with ironic or romantic comedies: *My Friend – A Light-Minded Man* (*Mans draugs – nenopietns cilvēks*, Latvia, 1975); *The Unfinished Dinner* (*Nepabeigtās vakariņas*, Latvia, 1979); and *Theatre* (*Teātris*, Latvia, 1978; based on William Somerset Maugham's novel *Theatre* [1937]), a film that was particularly successful throughout the Soviet Union. In *Theatre* Streičs tested a method that was unusual for both for him and classical cinema in general – he appeared on the screen as the Author who commented on the events and entered into dialogue with his characters. In this film, he did not shy away from showing London as a stylised setting closely linked to the theatrical environment of Latvia in his day.

In 1981, Streičs said the following about his films: 'It seems I have been incessantly moving into one direction. Since *My Friend – A Light-Minded Man* I've been preoccupied with one problem – the self-expression of our "Latvianness" on screen' (Putniņš 1981: 42). Indeed, one of Streičs' films, *Limousine in the Colour of a Midsummer Night* (*Limuzīns Jāņu nakts krāsā*, Latvia, 1981), has become the most prominent embodiment of national identity in Latvian cinema by featuring characters, as well as settings and relationships, that were archetypal for the national culture. This film has gradually developed into a ritual part of a major national festival – the midsummer night celebrations; its characters, situations and dialogues have turned into folklore.

During the transition from Soviet Latvia to independent Latvia, Streičs made *Son of Man* (also known as *Child of Man* [*Cilvēka bērns*, Latvia, 1991]), an affectionate and structurally subtle representation of childhood, his most harmonious film artistically. The film delved more deeply into the theme of national self-expression by turning to the director's native region – Latgale (the south-east part of Latvia) in the 1930s. It is also the first full-length feature film made in the Latgalian language.

TURNING TO THE THEME OF WAR

Yet Streičs began to develop his independent¹ directing career with the theme of war. *Shoot Instead of Me* (*Šauj manā vietā*, Latvia, 1970) focuses on the destiny of a cinema projectionist (Bērtulis Pizičs) from Latgale during the Civil War in Russia; and *Little Oriole* (*Vālodzīte*, Latvia, 1972) is the love story of an escaped Soviet war prisoner (Gennadi Korolkov) and Latvian peasant girl (Līga Liepiņa) during World War II.²

In *Shoot Instead of Me* the woman's image³ is typical of classical cinema – Irina (Astrida Kairiša), a silent cinema actress, is an idealised *femme fatale* distanced in time and space, and in the filmic reality, she is also a rather romantic image that exists in the dreams of the protagonist instead of being someone in flesh and blood. Irina

1 Jānis Streičs co-directed the first two films of his career – *Captain Enriko's Watch* (*Kapteiņa Enriko pulkstenis*, Latvia, 1967) and *The Boys of Līvšala* (*Līvšalas zēni*, Latvia, 1969) – with Ēriks Lācis.

2 It should be noted that the scripts of these films were part of Rīga Film Studios' production plan, not Streičs' deliberate choice.

3 For more about woman's image in Latvian cinema in the context of gender studies, see Pērkone 2008.

leaves before a decisive battle that takes place while a film is being screened and the projectionist Jezups shoots the enemies of Soviet power sitting in the cinema by firing a machine-gun from the projection room⁴. She has accomplished her main task – to inspire the male hero for a battle, after which she has no place in the war.

A similar image of a woman appears in *Little Oriole*, in which the destiny of the country girl Ilga is implicitly influenced by the war: she is taking care of a wounded Soviet prisoner of war behind the frontlines in Nazi-occupied Latvia and at the end of the war she pays for her love with her life. The script of *Little Oriole* was based entirely on the clichés propagated in Soviet war melodramas – women are the ones who love, sacrifice themselves and wait faithfully. However, the director has tried to compensate for the banality and stereotypes with expressive and intense visual imagery (cinematography by Māris Rudzītis) in which the idyllic rural Latvian landscape, which is shown in the minutest detail, plays an essential role by serving as a vigorous contrast to the brutality of the war. Later Streičs wrote: 'I wanted nature not only to be the setting, but to also play the role of the main character. Moods, changes, details' (Streičs 2006: 217).

Little Oriole demonstrated Streičs' aspirations to develop his own specific visual poetics, as well as his interest in the emotional life of an individual, and especially of women, under extreme conditions. As such, it was the forerunner of his artistically perhaps most interesting, yet controversial and far from the most popular films – *Alien Passions* (*Svešās kaislības*, Latvia, 1983), *Meetings on the Milky Way* (*Tikšanās uz Piena ceļu*, Latvia, 1985) and *Carmen Horrendum* (Latvia, 1989).

It should be noted that the director did not choose to abandon the theme of war for such a long period. Already before *Little Oriole* was produced, Streičs

submitted a proposal to the Riga Film Studio for a film called *But You Can Hear at Nights* (*Bet naktīs jau var dzirdēt*), with a script by the famous Latvian poet Ojārs Vācietis.⁵ Vācietis' screenplay quite harshly dealt with collaborationism, a theme that is painful for Latvians, by showing the attempts of a rural family to adapt and survive at the end of World War II irrespective of what occupation powers and army forces would pass through.

Between 1971 and 1975, four editions of this script were submitted and rejected by the Riga Film Studio.⁶ This was one of his ideas that was not accepted by Streičs' own peers – the Artistic Council of the studio. For example, the arguments put forward by the actress and film director Dzidra Ritenberga were quite curious:

This wavering of the main characters in an attempt to survive at all costs is a characteristic feature of our nation; therefore, I do not accept such characters [as heroes – *I. P.*]. I am against this work. The author's position is completely unacceptable for me.⁷

Although some other colleagues did defend the script, for example, the director Aleksandrs Leimanis claimed that this work promotes the Soviet power more than any other film,⁸ the decisive opinion for rejecting the proposal was voiced by Heinrihs Lepeško, the studio director, who argued that it is unimaginable to produce a film 'about the time when everyone was fighting and dying that depicts a well-off Latvian family sitting in a farmhouse, eating pork, pouring milk on the ground and arguing about whose side to take.'⁹

Alien Passions, a story of Shakespearean proportions about human relationships set in a Latvian farmstead during the first post-war years, falls somewhere between

4 Visually, this scene is a genetic predecessor of the scene of assassination of Hitler and his companions in *Inglorious Basterds* (USA/Germany, 2009) by Quentin Tarantino.

5 The script was published during perestroika in 1987 in the collection *Kino pasaule* (Vācietis 1987).

6 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.93, p. 168.

7 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.93, p. 174.

8 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.93, p. 177.

9 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.93, p. 176.

the unrealised *But You Can Hear at Nights* on the one hand, and *Meetings on the Milky Way* and *Carmen Horrendum* on the other hand. An artistically important predecessor of the latter two, *Alien Passions* presents a linear story with psychologically elaborate characters, but the old peasant head of household played by Leonid Obolensky gradually seems to 'outgrow the film', becoming a monstrous symbol of the Grim Reaper rooted in universal mythology. The film is also visually very intensive, structured like a multi-layered reflection of reflections, thereby allowing for a wide range of interpretations of the represented events and environment.

Presumably the most important text written about *Alien Passions* is 'Six Characters Looking for Meaning' ('Seši tēli meklē jēgu'), an article by the Russian film scholar Mikhail Yampolsky (Jampolskis 1984). In the context of Soviet film criticism, the piece provides a remarkably complex semiotic analysis of the film. As such, Yampolsky's text contributed not only to the development of the theoretical thought of the time, but also had a deep impact on the director. Until then, Streičs had relied more on intuition than on theoretical insights. As repeatedly stated by the director himself, it was Yampolsky's article that made him revise his method and think more about the contents and style as well as philosophical concepts:

I was very inspired by friendship with Moscow film theorist Mikhail Yampolsky – he liked my film *Alien Passions* a lot, later we frequently met at my house, we met in Moscow, we talked and talked incessantly, and then it happened that I began to take these things¹⁰ more and more seriously. (Āboliņa 2016: 306)

10 In the context of the conversation the phrase 'these things' refers to the symbolic level of the film, the multi-layered semiotic structure.

Streičs did not return to the theme of war until the 1980s when he had already established himself as a widely recognised master throughout the Soviet Union. By then, it was much easier for him to push his ideas, which often stood in opposition to the accepted cinematic canons in terms of both contents and aesthetics, through different administrative and censorship institutions.

SOVIET IDEOLOGY AND WAR FILMS

It is ironic that, compared to any other historical topic, it was more difficult to get approval for films about World War II (or the Great Patriotic War, as it was called in Soviet discourse). The Great Patriotic War had become a cornerstone of Soviet ideology, and artistic culture had extremely canonised understanding of how the war should be depicted. In her fundamental study *Russian War Films*, Denise J. Youngblood indicates that with the Great Patriotic War 'the Soviet "war film" truly takes shape. Movies were a significant aspect of the Soviet war effort from the very beginning of the conflict' (Youngblood 2007: 56). Furthermore, she stresses that

Because war (and the preparation for it) became a way of life in the USSR, war was arguably more important as an organizing principle for state authority than it was anywhere else in Europe. [---]
A war film could never be "only" a movie. (Youngblood 2007: ix)

During Khrushchev's Thaw, the humanisation of the war theme became one of the most important features for a new generation of filmmakers both in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. War films formed the most prominent manifestations of the new waves in Socialist countries (for example, *The Cranes Are Flying* [Летят журавли, Mikhail Kalatozov, Russia, 1957], *Ashes and Diamonds* [Popiół i diament, Andrzej Wajda, Poland, 1958], *Ballad of a Soldier* [Баллада о солдате, Grigori Chukhrai, Russia, 1959], *Ivan's Childhood* [Иваново детство, Andrei

Tarkovsky, Russia, 1962] and others). According to Birgit Beumers,

The Thaw cinema showed images of invalids and presented heroic acts not in terms of the glorious defence of the fatherland, but as personal achievements. Individuals were once again normal people acting courageously and heroically in an exceptional and unique situation, one that could not be easily transferred on to others and thereby generalized to a universal level. In this sense, the cinema of the Thaw shows most clearly the shift from a social narrative to the individual and his fate. (Beumers 2009: 117)

Despite the expanding boundaries of the war film genre, certain untouchable values still existed. Most significantly, no doubt was to be cast on the necessity of the 'war of the righteous people' – its holiness. As the film scholar Alexander Shpagin argues, the myth about the war sent the message that the war is a great heroic deed of the Soviet people, a test of human endurance, one of the best chapters of Soviet history (Шпагин 2005: 57).

In war films, pacifism was considered to be one of the most harmful themes. From the vantage point of Soviet ideology, Streičs' *Shoot Instead of Me* treated pacifism correctly: the main character, brought up in the spirit of Catholicism who initially even refused to hold a revolver in his hand, matures ideologically and by the end of the film shoots everyone sitting in the hall, sacrificing his own life as well.

Almost simultaneously with Streičs' film, Aloizis Brenčs made his *City Under Lime-Trees* (*Pilsēta zem liepām*, Latvia, 1971), about events in June 1941 – the beginning of the war in Liepāja, a city on Latvian coast. The Committee of Cinema of the Latvian SSR demanded several changes to the director's script; specifically, 'to omit any references to the incorrect management of the military operations from the

top', as well as to 'remove pacifist themes in Popov's statements about the war, retaining only the renunciation of fascism'.¹¹

In the early 1980s, before *Meetings on the Milky Way* was made, Brenčs became interested in Ingrida Sokolova's script that later became the basis for Streičs' film. Brenčs wanted to make a film about young women during the war:

When we started working with the author, there was an idea to make a film about an unnatural phenomenon – women in war. The question of pacifism arose. Together with the author we introduced each girl's biography, indicated when each had been killed and so on, but in Moscow they rejected it categorically.¹²

INGRĪDA SOKOLOVA AND THE SECRET OF THE SCRIPT

*Meetings on the Milky Way*¹³ and *Carmen Horrendum*¹⁴ are set during World War II and form an interesting diptych. Both films are based on scripts by the writer and literary scholar Ingrida Sokolova and contain elements from her own biography. Some of the events and characters seen in films were introduced in Sokolova's books *My Trilogy* (*Mana triloģija*, 1973) and *Biography of a Generation* (*Vienas paaudzes biogrāfija*, 1977), but also in her other stories and sketches. Supposedly, it was Aleksandrs Leimanis who suggested to Steičs that Sokolova's biography would provide compelling source material for a film:

11 Latvian State Archives, LVA.1405.1.315, p. 46.

12 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.296, p. 3.

13 World War II, Soviet Union. A senior lieutenant Astra receives permission to serve in the troops together with her fiancé. Astra has to cross the Ukrainian front to get to her new ground forces. On her way, Astra meets different people and witnesses different destinies, all impacted by the war.

14 The last year of World War II in the Soviet Union. A senior lieutenant named Inga is paralysed after being injured in the combat. Hovering between life and death, she is placed in the women's military hospital. Through Inga's eyes, we see how the war and the Soviet regime affect people lives.

She was said to have been a legendary Latvian girl who had fought at the front like crazy, ridden a horse, gathered intelligence, flown by plane over the German trenches and scattered leaflets. Then she was severely wounded and now she is a disabled war veteran with impaired mobility. (Āboliņa 2016: 303)

Sokolova, like the heroines derived from her experiences, namely Astra (Ināra Slucka) in *Meetings on the Milky Way*, and Inga (Ilona Ozola and Ligita Skujiņa) in *Carmen Horrendum*, was a senior lieutenant in the Soviet Army, organising counter-propaganda activities for the German frontlines as the head of an intelligence unit. **(Figures 1 and 2)** Sokolova was also an interpreter and in this capacity, for instance, accompanied Nikita Khrushchev to the Ukrainian front in the summer of 1943. Later she wrote in her memoirs:

He never addressed me by my officer's rank, but called me *dochka* [little daughter, lassie – *l. P.*] and at particularly dangerous moments he offered me a drink. [---] He did not love war. One day when a film crew arrived to film him, he told them: 'Even the best war films tell lies. The war is so dirty and horrible that you cannot say anything good about it'. (Sokolova 2005)

Significantly, Sokolova was born in August 1923, which means that she was only 21 at the end of the war; the heroines of her scripts are approximately the same age. Like Inga in *Carmen Horrendum*, Sokolova was wounded twice in the war; she was shell-shocked and partly paralysed. Despite that, between 1946 and 1950 she worked as an interpreter in the Soviet section of the Allied Control Commission in Vienna, interpreting, for instance, for General Dwight David Eisenhower: 'I met General Eisenhower ... in Vienna because they

needed an interpreter who could speak German, English and Russian' (Sokolova 2005).

At a meeting of the Artistic Council of the Riga Film Studio in October 1985 when *Meetings on the Milky Way* had already been finished, Sokolova thanked both Streičs and Lepeško who, despite the reproaches and objections of his colleagues regarding pacifism, had still green-lighted the production, for understanding her intentions: 'I wanted this work to be about war, and essentially it is against war. I believe the director has understood it.'¹⁵

It is important to mention that Sokolova's ideas and scripts were opposed at the Riga Film Studio not only for ideological reasons – both the Editorial Board and the Artistic Council also saw artistic shortcomings, such as insufficiently elaborated storylines and characters, etc. But the fragmentary nature of the *Meetings on the Milky Way* script that was criticised by the Editorial Board, as well as the mosaic principle integrated into the script, were most likely the elements that attracted Streičs' attention since they resonated with his creative search at the time and served as a springboard for the innovative artistic structure and expression in the context of Soviet mainstream cinema. Later, Streičs stated that

The script was really a semi-finished product, but something in it attracted me. Especially everything that had not yet been written but what had to be included, and I felt that I knew what had to be in it, I only needed to remember it! A woman alone in a borderline situation among men, yet there is also certain ethical purity, beauty; war like life, only under paradoxical circumstances. (Āboliņa 2016: 304)

15 The collection of *Meetings on the Milky Way* in Riga Film Museum, RKM.1985.



FIGURE 1. Jānis Streičs, *Meetings on the Milky Way* (*Tikšanās uz Piena ceļa*, Latvia, 1985). Photo by Džovita Grebзде. Collection of the Riga Film Museum.

FIGURE 2. Jānis Streičs, *Carmen Horrendum* (Latvia, 1989). Photo by Guntis Grunte. Collection of the Riga Film Museum.

A brief additional comment is required here. In October 2016, at *Film Director Jānis Streičs: His Films and the Signs of the Time*, an international conference in Riga dedicated to Steičs' 80th anniversary, I delivered a presentation on Sokolova and Steičs' 'war diptych'. One of the theses that I proposed based on an in-depth study of Sokolova's writings was that Steičs' work on *Meetings on the Milky Way* and the unusual structure of the film influenced Sokolova's subsequent literary script for *Carmen Horrendum*, which is possibly her very best piece, a stylistically independent creative work, consisting of subjective visions and experiences, saturated with generalisations and symbols. Compared to the film, the script is perhaps more linear, and gradually reveals Inga's destiny (Streičs purposefully destroys the sequential temporality), but all in all it is obvious that the unique poetics of the film stem from the programme established in the script.

The excellent script of *Carmen Horrendum* was also praised by the members of the studio's Editorial Board and Artistic Council. For example, the director Varis Brasla noted:

The script has been written 'with blood' and this is how this material should be treated. How should it be filmed? The relativity of the visions and harsh realism pose a difficult task for the director. But these things are not incompatible.¹⁶

According to Aina Matīsa, theatre director and elocutionist, the script offers rough, rich and extensive material: 'One can feel the unnaturalness of women in the war.'¹⁷ Pēteris Krilovs made similar comments: 'The material ... is very powerful and interesting. Although harsh and tragic as well.'¹⁸ Tālvāldis Margēvičs even found that

For the first time since I started working as the editor-in-chief [of the studio's Editorial Board], I am confronted with auteur cinema, and for the first time, we are not simply following in someone else's footsteps. [---] This is a different kind of dramaturgy. There are many metaphors here. [---] In general, this is a script that pleased us the most during the last year.¹⁹

After the jubilee conference in which Steičs himself participated as well, the director told me that the script, while always attributed to Sokolova, was in fact written solely by him. According to Steičs, Sokolova had merely provided the idea based on her personal experiences in the women's war hospital, along with a brief draft of the script. As proof, Steičs presented Sokolova's type-written treatment entitled *Meeting under the Southern Cross* that covered 31 pages and was dated July 1986, and his own handwritten first version of the detailed literary script entitled *Send Them Greetings!* (Streičs 1987: 117; both in Russian). It is evident from these unique documents that Sokolova had envisioned *Meeting under the Southern Cross* as a direct continuation to the story of Astra, the heroine of *Meetings on the Milky Way* (Astra was to be played by the same actress Ināra Slucka). In Sokolova's script treatment, the narrative is simple and linear, the tone optimistic, in line with the tenets of socialist realism and traditions of Soviet war films. The change of the protagonist's name (Inga) and the complicated structure subordinated to the heroine's visions, dreams and memories are only included in Steičs' handwritten expanded literary script. Furthermore, Steičs' manuscript features the distinctly drawn characters of the other hospital patients, as well as the complicated mutual relationships characterised by dramatic climaxes, neither of which appear in Sokolova's treatment.

16 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.372, p. 8.

17 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.372, p. 7.

18 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.397, p. 96.

19 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.397, p. 4.

MIRROR CONCEPT

As I will demonstrate below, Streičs' war films are dominated by a female gaze. However, this gaze is not an active component of the action but only registers or reflects it. Generally, the director employs a traditional patriarchal discourse – he sees women as passive, eternal and unchanging (Johnston 2000: 23); linked to love and nature. The man always remains as a point of reference, even if one only met him in the Milky Way in the sky. But it is essential to understand that the theme of 'women in the war' has served as a stepping-stone for Streičs in his search for an innovative artistic structure and means of expression.

In *Alien Passions*, Streičs introduces a passive observative hero (the concept of 'hero' or 'protagonist' is used quite relatively here) – the Lithuanian girl Marīte (Zane Jančevska) who arrives at Valdmaņi, a once-rich Latvian farmstead, can be perceived as the central character of the film because we observe the events from her vantage point, and yet she does not participate in the events, but consistently distances herself. **(Figure 3)** Yampolsky has described Marīte as a kind of a mirror in which the active characters of the film try to catch a glimpse of their fading spiritual faces:

Yet Marīte is an unusual mirror – it has no amalgam and does not reflect anything. The girl's reactions are timid; she constantly tries to break out of the theatre of passions into which the active protagonists want to drag her again and again. In this sense, Marīte is the central image, the optical focus: the centre, yet also a fading centre that is trying to avoid its functions. (Jampoļskis 1984: 42)

In *Meetings on the Milky Way* and *Carmen Horrendum* Streičs consciously and purposefully continues to use the hero-mirror principle, and like in *Alien Passions*, it is a woman who becomes the mirror. Thus,

the masculine action typical of war films is replaced by mediated feminine reflection. It is important to add that such a mirror function, which in classical cinema is assigned to traditionally passive characters – women or children – can also be identified in artistically more complex films, such as *Ivan's Childhood* or *Come and See* (*Иди и смотри*, Elem Klimov, Russia/Belarus, 1985).²⁰

There are several episodes in *Meetings on the Milky Way* in which a mirror dominates both as an object and a symbol. **(Figure 4)** Firstly, the epic narrative culminates in a scene that can be described as the 'crossroads of the war' – a vast Ukrainian field where Soviet troops are moving in different directions; columns of lorries and tanks are moving about; German prisoners of war are being taken somewhere; at one point, it is all bombed by the German Air Force. This is one of the largest-scale scenes in the entire history of Latvian cinema. The extraordinary scale of the events is particularly impressive because it has been edited to create a contrast with extreme close-ups of nature as observed by the heroine lying flat on the ground – the small insects, leaves of grass and flowers continue their natural life without noticing the vast global tragedy that takes place above them.

The movement on the crossroads is controlled by a young woman – very similar to Astra in appearance. Yampolsky points at the doppelgänger theme:

In fact, we see a series of doubles of the main character. Looking into their eyes, Astra seems to be trying to see herself, to solve the riddle of her own destiny. The image of the woman-double is linked to the constant presence of death. According to superstition, meeting one's double means that death is near. (Jampoļskis 1986; see also Ямпольский 1987)

20 I thank the anonymous reviewer for this reference.

The two girls look at each other as if in a mirror, Astra helps the girl straighten out her uniform cap; the girl controlling the movement looks at her pocket mirror, but when the German air raid begins, she automatically gives it to Astra. When life returns to the seemingly dead field after the air raid (Yampolsky has compared it to a resurrection), the small mirror is seen in Astra's tightly clenched fist, briefly forming a link with the universe as it reflects the sky and the stars that at that moment are invisible. But the girl who controlled the movement is dead.²¹

The second episode relates to a young girl, a sniper whose face has been mutilated by a mirror. Yampolsky describes the episode as follows:

The young girl, looking at the mirror, is trying to cover up her burns with chalky limestone, thus creating a frightening mask of death. The use of the mirror and the white makeup turns this episode into one of the emotional peaks of the film. (Jampolskis 1986)

After completing *Meetings on the Milky Way*, Streičs explained:

This film does not have a traditional narrative structure in which the plot is driven by a conflict, reaches a culmination and a resolution, and so on. The film is composed of several episodes, novellas united by the heroine's journey. [---] This film is not about war but about life. On the road one meets everything. The war in this film is just a background. The road in the war represents a journey of uncertainty with crossroads and

warnings provided by destiny. [---] I wanted to create each episode as a complex structure which would include an event, meaning, time and a woman. The main heroine Astra is a complex mirror, she takes something along with her from everything she encounters on her journey, and it is all reflected in her. (Streičs 1987: 52)

Significantly, Streičs' phrase that Astra 'takes something along with her' is not merely a theoretical concept. Indeed, almost every episode in the film is constructed according to this purpose: Astra meets somebody, parts from him or her, her journey continues, beginning a new course of events. But Astra still remembers the previous meeting and these memories persist even when the episode has already passed.

Yet whatever Astra 'takes along' does not essentially change her as a character, and that is a principle that Streičs already declared while writing the director's script: 'The girl comes through everything as pure as the Madonna.'²² As a typical modernist, Streičs rejects psychologism²³ – a move that certainly did not comply with the canons of socialist realist cinema and was not welcomed by the audience because it hampered identification. For this reason, it was regarded as a weakness both by Streičs' peers at the studio and later by the critics. Alvis Lapiņš, a colleague and scriptwriter, was already sceptical during the script's development: 'In *Alien Passions* young people had no one with whom to empathise. And Astra is no more interesting than Marīte. There is even less emotional experience here.'²⁴

21 Interestingly, a similar idea of a mirror as a reflection of the world appeared in Streičs' script of *Carmen Horrendum*, in the episodes showing Inga being taken to the hospital on a train. Unable to move her body, Inga uses a mirror to see what happens outside and inside the train. However, in the final version of the film these episodes were cut to a minimum.

22 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.297, p. 3.

23 See, for example, the definition by András Bálint Kovács: 'Concentration on the characters in modern cinema does not involve psychological characterization. It is the general "human condition" of the characters that becomes the focus of interest of modern art films rather than the encounter of a particular character and a particular environment' (Kovács 2007: 659).

24 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.297, p. 11.



FIGURE 3. Jānis Streičs, *Alien Passions* (*Svešās kaislības*, Latvia, 1983).
Collection of the Riga Film Museum.

FIGURE 4. Jānis Streičs, *Meetings on the Milky Way* (*Tikšanās uz Piena ceļa*, Latvia, 1985).
Photo by Džovita Grebзде. Collection of the Riga Film Museum.

The process of making the film and getting it distributed was complicated. The studio's Editorial Board rejected Streičs' script several times, until the studio director decided to intervene personally – in fact, he made a unilateral decision to start production. Lepeško's resolution is surprising and it also reveals the paradoxical character of the Soviet system:

Nothing tragic has happened. Only that which should have happened in our studio. A director who does not agree with the studio dictum has appeared. [---] If auteur cinema has appeared in the studio, it cannot be produced without conflicts.²⁵

When the film was almost completed, Lepeško was not terribly happy about it but still said: 'This is our first genuine film about the war.'²⁶

Immutability or the element of permanence essentially distinguishes Streičs' film from *Come and See*, which was made almost simultaneously and premiered shortly before *Meetings on the Milky Way*. Both films were dedicated to the 40th anniversary of the victory of the USSR in the Great Patriotic War, but only Klimov's film is mentioned in Western film histories. Youngblood, for example, considers it 'the only important anniversary film'²⁷ and 'the most powerful anti-war film in Soviet cinema. [---] There is not a single hero to be found – nor any glory' (Youngblood 2007: 197).

In Klimov's *Come and See*, the protagonist, a teenager Florian (Aleksii Kravchenko), also goes through the war observing the events rather than influencing them. However, the horrors of war leave quite a physical imprint on his face and body, gradually turning an adolescent into

an old man. By the end of the film, Florian has become a kind of 'picture of Dorian Gray' – a precise image of the war.

Another peculiarity of both *Meetings on the Milky Way* and *Carmen Horrendum* in the context of war films is that women dominate in the events that Astra and Inga reflect upon. As Yampolsky has written about *Meetings on the Milky Way*:

Opposite to anything that we know about the war, it is a women's world. Astra keeps meeting women on her way. [---] Women definitely stand out for their tragic experiences and powerful personalities in the indifferent sea of men. Even more – women feel hopelessly lonely in the roaring and intense world of men. (Jampolskis 1986)

Streičs as if refutes the assumption that 'war has an unwomanly face' – a phrase that quickly became folklore in the Soviet culture after a documentary series *The Unwomanly Face of War* (*Увайны не жаночае аблічча*, Belarus, 1981–1984) was made by writer Svetlana Alexievich and director Viktor Dashuk. In *Carmen Horrendum* the war has an almost exclusively womanly face since the film is set in a military hospital for female soldiers. The film also enables the face metaphor to be extended because one of its most expressive images is a girl with no face at all – the war has robbed her of it. In other words, we can say that the war has no face; there is nothing humane about it.

Each woman in *Carmen Horrendum* is not only a striking individual with tragically rich experiences resulting from the war, but also represents a different ethnic minority that has been forcefully thrown into the Soviet melting pot of nations. As a result of Gorbachev's Glasnost Streičs was able to refer to the political and ethnic cleansing of 1937, as well as the KGB's activities among the frontline fighters and the wounded (in the film, the paralysed Inga is interrogated after she naively mentions that her friend lives in the US), and the ludicrous

25 Latvian State Archives, LVA.416.4.296, p. 7.

26 Riga Film Museum, RKM.1985.

27 Unfortunately, foreign scholars continue the Soviet tradition of making generalisations based only on 'Russian' films, i.e. those made in the central film studios, and they typically neglect the production of the studios in the Soviet Republics. Therefore, Streičs' films have also remained unnoticed.

ensorship that banned *In a Dugout* (*В землянке*), a song that was popular at the front.²⁸ Singing this song in the military hospital becomes a peculiar sign of mutiny among the women.

Only a few years earlier Streičs would certainly not have been allowed to show that the paralysed heroine does not want to live – she tries to commit suicide twice in the film, and the obtrusive idea about death influences her visions that take up a large part of the film. It is important to add that in Sokolova's treatment the sentiments are quite the opposite: the girls discuss whether they, being disabled, are useful any longer, or perhaps it would be better to take a deadly dose of sleeping pills. But Astra shouts: 'I want to live, to live!'

The structure of *Carmen Horrendum* is more complex than that of *Alien Passions* and *Meetings on the Milky Way*. The stream-of-consciousness, or more precisely stream-of-memories, structure of *Carmen Horrendum* is also highly unusual in the context of Latvian cinema. Streičs explained: 'By focusing on memory and consciousness, an entire gallery of almost symbolic characters was formed' (Kāla 1989).

Different aspects of memory are represented in the military hospital ward: Inga's tormenting and incessant flow of memories, which leads beyond the physical boundaries of her existence; her roommate Lida's forbidden memory of denying her ethnicity and biography – the fact that she is a Latvian whose father was shot in 1937 is only revealed at the end of the film. There is also a woman who has created an imaginary memory (that she is loved by a battalion commander). There is a woman who struggles to forget young son who was burnt to death, but the memory prevails and she loses her mind. And there is a girl with no memory at all; her consciousness is like a blank sheet. 'The lucky one' – the others tell her... But it is she who becomes a

traitor and a thief because there is no morality without memory.

Despite the fact that the heroine of *Carmen Horrendum* is a passive observer of the events taking place around her (her passivity is physically determined because she can only move her head and hands), she still lives an intense mental life in which imagination and reality merge, blurring the line between the two realms for herself and the spectators. The point of departure of the narrative coincides with the final point, and possibly everything that we are seeing is life after death, the memories of a dead person. Inga is played by two actresses, Ilona Ozola and Līgita Skujiņa, embodying the two possible resolutions of a single destiny: a suicide or departure from the hospital in the arms of her beloved.

It is interesting that the final scene of *Carmen Horrendum*, which depicts a man carrying his paralysed beloved in his arms, is more likely a dream in the film, a legend of the military hospital, but in actuality was a fact from Sokolova's life. In her memoirs she recalls:

They kept shooting from midnight on. The flares blazed. Lying in the ward, we could not understand what was happening. An attack? Paratroopers? 'We' includes a woman, a member of a tank team with no legs, a doctor with no right arm and me – paralysed after being severely shell-shocked on the border between Romania and Hungary. The senior doctor rushed into the ward: 'Girls – peace, peace, peace!' She hugged all of us. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. And we started crying as well. It also happened on the day when, being shell-shocked himself, my husband arrived from remote Vienna to carry me down the hospital stairs... (Sokolova 2005)

28 Characteristically of the Soviet system, the ban of the song was unofficial and unexplained – more likely it was associated with the song's quiet intimate mood and words about death: 'It is not easy for me to get to you/And there are four paces to death.'

CONCLUSION

Representations of World War II in Latvian cinema have not been researched much, probably because the authors and audiences of the war films perceived them to be mandatory tributes to Soviet ideology, something that is not essential for the national culture but rather something that is a shameful manifestation of collaboration. *Streičs' Meetings on the Milky Way* and *Carmen Horrendum*, both of which were made during the Soviet period, do not represent any radical changes in terms of the ideological assumptions of who was 'good' or 'bad' during World War II. Yet it can be argued that, particularly in *Carmen Horrendum*, *Streičs* abandoned the primitive oppositions altogether, revealing instead the inhuman essence of the war by examining human feelings and mutual relationships in an extreme border situation. In contrast to the Latvian self-expression that *Streičs* aspired to reveal in his romantic and folk comedies, his war films transcended ethnic and national borders, turning to the representation of the human condition in general. The director considered female characters as the most suitable ones for performing this task – in *Streičs' films* they are the observers who reflect on the events taking place around them, as well as the expressive and active characters whose destinies have been determined by the events of Soviet history. In exposing the war, *Steičs* used a film language that was innovative for him and for Latvian cinema in general.

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