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## Selfie, sex tape, 'snuff' film: Andris Grinbergs's *Pašportrets*

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### ABSTRACT

*Pašportrets*/Self-Portrait, a 1972 short film by Latvian body and performance artist Andris Grinbergs, is both a singular artifact of Cold War-era Soviet dissident culture and an addition to first-person quasi-documentary cinema's experimental vein. Hailed by filmmaker-critic Jonas Mekas as 'one of the five most sexually transgressive films ever made,' *Pašportrets* is a selfie *avant la lettre* and a prototypical sex tape – important medium-specificity considerations aside – though its greater historical significance may reside in the fact that it was essentially social media deprived of social circulation. It shares similarities, both in editing style and visual content, with certain films of the so-called American underground, Western European auteurs and various East European New Waves, although *Pašportrets* lacked their access to audiences. This predicament beset a cycle of contemporaneous, self-portrait works by members of *Birojs* (Office), a small collective of Latvian artists that included Grinbergs. Narrowly escaping confiscation by the Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti (KGB) shortly after its completion, *Pašportrets* remained hidden until 1994–1995, when it was restored and premiered at Anthology Film Archives in New York City.

### KEYWORDS

Self-portrait; nonconformist; Latvia; hippie; selfie; experimental film; dissident performance

Perhaps it is fitting to begin by stating the obvious when discussing a film both celebrated and condemned for its explicit content. The fundamental anachronism of this essay title aside, residents of Latvia 40 years ago would have had difficulty understanding the impetuses behind selfies, sex tapes and snuff films – much less today's ubiquity of the first two and relatively easy covert access to the third. Conversely, and to be fair, most people living in the West in the 1970s would have also found it challenging to comprehend how such media phenomena could attain current levels of visibility, access and banality. But more interesting, and central to the point of this essay, people of both groups, whether living in putative liberal democracies or so-called people's republics, whether watching 35 mm celluloid films in single-screen movie theaters during the 70s or digital downloads on smartphones today, would likely find Andris Grinbergs's 1972 short film *Pašportrets*/*Self-Portrait* to be a startlingly unfamiliar experience, partly because of affinities to these three spectacles, but also because, as a whole, it refused to submit to the conventions of these or most other categories of visual entertainment.

To familiarize readers with *Pašportrets* and yet preserve at least some of its extraordinary remove from its context, it seems worthwhile to revisit common assumptions about life under socialism at the time Grinbergs (b. 1946) conceived his film. Perceptions of post-Thaw Soviet popular culture as being devoid of quality and sophistication, not to mention a sense of global contemporaneity, were famously advanced by Western media stereotypes, the wittiest of which succeeded in underscoring an even more damning condition of ordinary Soviet existence: material scarcity. The effectiveness of the notorious ‘Russian Fashion Show’ television advertisement for Wendy’s Hamburgers in 1980, in which a dumpy runway model paraded the same blue-gray burlap shift, babushka and scowl variously as daywear, eveningwear and swimwear before stultified *apparatchiki*, hinged on the commonplace that, in the USSR, there were not only no consumer choices, but humor and whimsy were the scarcest commodities of all.<sup>1</sup> Yet, whimsy became the hallmark of an entire cultural phenomenon dating from the mid-1960s onward in Latvia, though one relatively unknown or misunderstood today, particularly in Western accounts of Khrushchev- and Brezhnev-era society. Evidence of the phenomenon is visible even in the opening scene of *Pašportrets*, when a sudden physical assault on protagonist Andris Grinbergs by a stranger on the street seems to be provoked by what might be construed as the equally assaultive nature of Grinbergs’s shaggy hair and attire, registered in the reactions of dozens of nonactor onlookers, unaware that their palpable dismay at this hippie in their midst (but shocking indifference to the attack itself) is being filmed from afar.<sup>2</sup>

Whether a visitor drawn to what the professional film community in Moscow referred to as ‘Rīga de Janeiro’ or a Rīga resident, one could escape drab Soviet normativity, albeit vicariously, via the city’s hippie flâneurs, who wore the flamboyant fashions and Flower Power face-painting common to hippies worldwide, spoke in brazen argot, staged their informal theatrics in public squares and cafés, held jazz jam sessions and art events in private flats, gathered in forests or on the seashore for Happenings, and attended foreign film screenings discreetly organized in canteens of the more creative vocations. The notoriety of this home-grown but internationally conversant hippie milieu was such that it soon attracted kindred spirits from across the USSR. By the late 1960s, a pan-Soviet youth counterculture began to achieve critical mass, with Rīga as its epicenter and Andris Grinbergs, trained in men’s fashion design and naturally skilled at provocation, acknowledged as its ringleader. Similar to the countercultural dynamic in 1960s San Francisco, the vital, animating social force was traceable to minority subcultures, galvanized by disenfranchisement – generational, sexual, ethnic and so on – yet more receptive to outside artistic influences and experiential novelty than the general populace. Relocated for work far from extended family in, say, Georgia, or ostracized from a nearby rural community for a non-heteronormative identity, one could conceivably flourish in that other ‘City by the Bay’ – Bay of Rīga.

Film proved to be an unparalleled vehicle of such influences. At the most mundane level, infrequently shown a-day-in-the-life-type documentaries about the West, such as François Reichenbach’s *L’Amérique vue par un français/America as Seen by a Frenchman* (1960), sparked desire among Latvian youths for simple material things like chewing gum and Coca-Cola (though not jeans, which had long been *déclassé* in Rīga, given the port city’s access to contraband attire). Equally consequential and readily available, certain domestically produced documentaries ostensibly bemoaned civilizational decline among the young, yet served as tutorials for naïve viewers who had not managed on their own to

find places in the city where one might dance to rock music, strut about in striped bell-bottoms, gaze upon ribald English-language graffiti or congregate without civic-minded purpose and, apparently, monogamous relationships.<sup>3</sup> But the greatest impact was exerted by films from abroad celebrating alienated youth with commensurately alien visual tropes and narrative strategies, namely, French New Wave features and works by Antonioni, Bertolucci *et alia* (Golovsky 1986, 44–45). Budding cinephiles soon learned that quasi-clandestine screenings were organized two to three times annually in the small Rīgas Kinonams (Cinema House, now destroyed) in the medieval quarter, amid the hippies' principal gathering spots, events quietly publicized among Cinematographers Union members and their friends. These evenings featured so-called 'circle films' (*apļa filmas*), foreign films whose circulation had been limited to higher profile Soviet film festivals and nation-specific 'film days' in Moscow and Leningrad as evidence of official tolerance of liberal values. Such prints were subsequently stolen, stashed in state film repositories and circulated surreptitiously along with films deemed outright illegal within the USSR but copied during their exhibition in Bulgarian, Czech, Polish and Hungarian cinematheques, (Skanstiņš 2010, 200–201) then passed to Rīgians through unofficial channels.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, it is of little surprise that some of the most experimental cinema in Brezhnev-era Soviet Union would originate from this group of social nonconformists. At the dawn of the 1970s, a core group of Riga's hippies, already indebted to the comparatively liberal press in Poland for their fashion sense and awareness of dance fads, were inspired by the Poor Theatre ideas of Jerzy Grotowski and formed an actor's group called *Birojs* (Office). While Grotowski's methods guiding an actor's almost masochistic mastery of his or her body would seem to be at odds with a hippie's sybaritic ways, the ethical implications of *via negativa* would resonate with a person seeking 'internal passivity' with respect to a totalitarian society whose values were unacceptable.<sup>5</sup> That Grotowski urged his disciples to forsake cinema-driven criteria and cinema-derived craft in their performances (Wolford and Schecter 1997, 207–270) was ultimately irrelevant to the Rīgians. By 1972, tracing the multidisciplinary path blazed by vanguardist painters, thespians and dancers throughout America and Europe from the 1950s onward – Deren initially, followed by Paik/Moorman, Cunningham, Rainer, and others – a number of *Birojs* members and their friends were each busy devising and directing a short, autobiographically themed film. Casting themselves (of course), they improvised mise-en-scène variously elegant and tawdry, 'borrowed' camera equipment and film stock from state-owned Telefilma-Rīga and did post-production in secret at the Telefilma facilities where several members of this circle – for example, cameraman Vilnis Jānis Dumbergs (1943–2008) and editor Maruta Jurjāne (b. 1945) – held legitimate jobs.

Most participants recall seven such film projects, but one account holds that 10 cinematic attempts at self-portraiture were planned, although half of these were only partially realized (Gaiševska 2010, 211). Most of these moving selfies were eponymously titled: for instance, *Mudīte*, directed by Mudīte Gaiševska (b. 1935), and *Eižens*, directed by Eižens Valpēters (b. 1943), with two other films subsequently acquiring longer titles. Some were done in 8 mm, others in 16 mm. Most had a running time of approximately 10 to 15 minutes, although some are only known today through stills, while others have disappeared entirely. Without question, only two of these films have survived, one preserved unscathed – the evocatively retitled *Mijkrēsļa rotaļa ar spoguli/Twilight Plays with Mirror* (1972) by Ivars Skanstiņš (1945–2011) – and the other, *Pāšportrets*, in a restored state

that more or less captures its original character.<sup>6</sup> By 1973, less than a year later, the experiment was over. The Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti (KGB), which had begun monitoring a broad range of unsanctioned art activities, such as Biruta Delle's painting workshop unaffiliated with the Academy (Svede 2002, 204–205, 246–253), first caught sight of a cinematic representation of Mary Magdalene, allegedly offensive not only for the Magdalene's nudity but also the apocryphal depiction of her body covered with sand and dust. Purportedly, most provocative about this 10-minute 'étude,' as it has since been described by the actor playing the Magdalene, was the 'enchancing' conflation of sensuality and spirituality in the close-ups of Christ and His disciple (Gaiševska 2010, 211), although Biblical reenactments of any tenor would have gone afoul of government censors. The perpetrator of this outrage (as both director and lead of the film) was *Birojs* founding member Yuri Tsivian, now better known as a preeminent authority on Russian and Soviet avant-garde cinema but, as of 1973, simply a constituent of a renegade experimental theatre ensemble.

After state security raided an informal photography exhibit and jazz jam session organized in Grinbergs's flat on Ūnijas iela, a frequent venue for underground cultural events, most of these film materials were destroyed by their respective makers for fear of discovery. Somehow, the sole print of *Pašportrets*, the one film actually on the premises and completed just two weeks prior, escaped detection. Promptly cut into concealable fragments and dispersed among two dozen hiding places for the next 23 years,<sup>7</sup> Grinbergs's 'self-portrait' could be said to be emblematic of the entire hippie phenomenon, in so far as its elliptical narrative was less concerned with fixing a likeness of an individual than mapping constellations of affinities and appetites, its editing rhythms were erratic and organic, and its surfeit of vivid imagery served to sear an afterimage of the hippies' bacchanal on the Latvian intelligentsia's collective memory for long after the physical evidence was forced to disappear from view.

After its restoration, the film was described by Lithuanian filmmaker-critic Jonas Mekas at its 7 December 1995 world premiere at New York's Anthology Film Archives as 'one of the five most sexually transgressive films ever made,' and it arguably holds its own among works by Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol, figures whom Mekas almost certainly had in mind when issuing his imprimatur. Like these Americans, Grinbergs played the provocateur in real life, sartorially at first, then artistically, with sexual ambiguity throughout. In another categorical assessment – more of a taxonomy, really – *Pašportrets* is included in 'an incomplete list of declared self-portrait films' that confers upon Grinbergs a vague qualitative endorsement inasmuch as the list also includes Diana Barrie's *Night Movie #1* (1974), James Broughton's *Testament* (1974), Jerome Hill's *Film Portrait* (1972) and Maria Lassnig's *Self-Portrait* (1973) (Rascaroli 2013, 62) – while these other films' production dates confirm the *Birojs* filmmakers as having been *au courant*, even pioneering.<sup>8</sup>

Grinbergs's film is an exercise in dandiacal display, reveling in blatant self-contradiction: being all about clothing and wearing none at all; Grinbergs in a stylish knee-length fur coat kissing a male youth against a backdrop of grimy public urinals that merit their own medium close-up; carnivalesque rituals culminating in the comical castration of a priapic Yuri Tsivian, swiftly followed by the graphic beheading of a domesticated dove and bleeding of its flapping, spasmodic body over two naked, intertwined men; the emotional recitation of a love poem offsetting a rather clinical sex scene involving Grinbergs and his wife Inta Jaunzeme-Grinberga (b. 1955), recorded passively and lasting eight



**Figure 1.** Stills from *Pašportrets*. Yuri Tsivian in Dionysian scene.

increasingly enervating minutes. Therefore, the ethical, aesthetic and moral transgressions accrue. The visual presentation of the actors in terms of wardrobe and make-up varies widely, not unexpected given Grinberg's vocational schooling as a clothing designer. There is relatively little costuming per se beyond the foppish everyday attire of this bohemian crowd, but the visual impact of a few scenes is underwritten by particular, quixotic articles of clothing: Inta, wearing a monastic, hooded robe, descends a ravine into a group interaction with sacramental overtones; Andris crouches along a shoreline in all black, with the exception of a white tippet worn backwards and trailing behind him; and bare-chested Yuri thrusts and fellates a triad of balloons configured as male genitals and attached to his tights (Figure 1).

But somehow it is the bowler hat on his head and black ribbon around his neck that confer the full force of alterity. Given no direct or even indirect mention by *Birojs* members of *A Clockwork Orange*, Kubrick's 1971 film of disaffected youth in a Slavic-inflected post-socialistic dystopia, the striking similarities between Tsivian's appearance and the Droog look – most obviously, black bowler hats and the vertical punctuation of suspenders against an otherwise monochrome outfit, but also, to a subtler degree, the codpiece effect of wearing a cricket jockstrap outside the trousers – were either serendipitous or yet another example of Latvian artists beholding photo-reproductions of Western visual tropes in publications smuggled from the West or more liberalized socialist bloc countries, and then assimilating whatever stylistic lessons they contained. Use of theatrical make-up (or its material simulation) in *Pašportrets* is infrequent but even more expressive. The face of dove-killer Ivars is bifurcated, with blackface on his left profile (matching a single black glove worn on his left hand); the avian bloodbath spatters white bedding and bodies; the feathered carcass on a platter is solicitously presented to Mudite, who is kohl-eyed and leering to an almost deranged effect (Figure 2); Andris smears egg yolks onto Inta's face and his own, their countenances suspended between solemnity and ecstasy (as the ritual itself bridges the Paschal and the pagan); and the lower half of Inta is highlighted/obliterated in successive shots with white body paint, then black.

Then there's the intermittent nudity, which is largely matter of fact, whether it occurs within contexts where people are routinely found undressed – say, in bed or in the privacy of one's flat – or where they most definitely are not – promenading through city



**Figure 2.** Stills from *Pašportrets*. Ivars Skanstiņš 'snuff' scene (left); Skanstiņš presenting dead dove to Mudite Gaiševska (right) with Tsvian's phallus at far right.

streets or performing violin solos. But nudity is also handled elsewhere in a more symbolic manner, such as the Dionysian scene that features three nude women dancing skin-to-skin, evoking the Three Graces, alongside satyr-like Tsvian. Daring allusions abound throughout *Pašportrets*. Grinbergs's incorporation of Christological motifs or a languorous male youth posed like St. Sebastian beneath an actual ecclesiastical artwork raised the stakes of the film's discovery to a jailable offence, but no more so than the naked artist entwined with another male in bed (Figure 3) or interacting with his 17-year-old bride's nude body in various other celebratory, if hegemonic, scenes. In a film synopsis, Grinbergs described the central sex act as a deliberate contrast between the 'mechanical' actions of the male and the contemplative, distant gaze of the female – representing 'soul' in this binary opposition (2010), a salutary distinction largely lost on current viewers. Indeed, this scene, with a woman's diminutive body flattened beneath a man's looming frame and her face often obscured by his leonine hair, provoked one feminist American academic to shout during a screening at the XV Baltic Studies Conference (1996), 'This explains the low birthrate in Latvia!' Yet to be fair, Grinbergs sagely distinguishes *Pašportrets*'s



**Figure 3.** Stills from *Pašportrets* with religious and homoerotic imagery. Grinbergs is bearded male in right still.



documentation of actual sex from ‘Hollywood’s prettified variants that imitate sex, displaying entire bodies but revealing nothing’ (2010). In fact, during the copulation scene, a stationary camera frames only the heads, necks and shoulders of the couple, but this discretion – or intransigence – promptly gives way to a visually striking three-shot scene of Andris washing white, then black, pigment from Inta’s precisely painted lower body as she stands on a beach, fully exposed, his fingers immodestly wiping her crotch and thighs. A few moments later, Inta plays an original violin composition – violin being her *métier* – while standing topless in a courtyard; then the nude Grinbergi pair parades briefly, hand-in-hand, down a narrow street in Vēcriģa in full-frontal splendor; and the film concludes with another extended medium-close-up shot of three nude bodies – those of Andris, Inta and cameraman Dumbergs – lying together in bed, chatting, joking and hugging. The film ends with Andris reaching out of the frame as if to extinguish a bedside lamp, while Inta’s violin composition closes with a ta-daa! sort of melodic flourish.

This admixture of sacred and profane visuals found its counterpart on the soundtrack, which commences 19 minutes into the 24-minute film, synced with Grinbergs’s on-screen orgasm. Ināra Eglīte (b. 1948), author of the love poem, flubs her recitation seconds into it, so the reel-to-reel tape recorder is stopped. In the instant required for Eglīte to regroup and resume, magnetic tape has slipped past the recording head assembly, leaving a remarkable trace of Cold War history: namely, a three-seconds-long fragment of a previous recording surreptitiously made from a Voice of America (VOA) radio broadcast. The music is unmistakably Michael Jackson wailing the lyrics ‘with an unselfish love I respect you’ from the Jackson Five’s 1970 hit ballad ‘I’ll Be There’ – ironic, considering Soviet prohibitions concerning Western pop music and listening to VOA, and doubling the serendipitous fact that Eglīte’s poem also speaks of a lover’s absence and death. During the restoration, Grinbergs insisted that this sonic imperfection, this poet’s momentary stumble, be left uncorrected, less as evidence of his worldly bona fides than an avant-gardist’s fusion of life and art. As an avant-gardist coming into his own in the late 1960s, he increasingly sought ways to disabuse his audience of complacencies regarding art-making or daily living, with the quintessential avant-garde goal of dismantling outdated categorical divisions segregating art from ordinary existence.

One such division tacitly subverted by Riga’s hippies was the East/West dichotomy, so limiting comparative analysis of *Pašportrets* to contemporaneous European exemplars and actually witnessed by the *Birojs* filmmakers might be better expanded to include American experimental films they had not seen but heard about, especially given how Jonas Mekas’s endorsement of *Pašportrets*’s transgressive stature serves to muddy any continental distinctions in cinematic tradition. Intuiting the identities of the correlative films implied in his praise, I would argue that the pansexual revelry in the film, its trappings of wardrobe artifice and vertiginous haptic impressions recall Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963); the reticence in showing explicit sexual detail, the solipsism, and male-focus of the act and its extreme durational aspect recall Andy Warhol’s *Blowjob* (1964); the expressions of same-sex desire, the choice of abject settings for homosexual encounters, the fetishistic use of props and ritualistic humiliation of self recall early works by Kenneth Anger; the parity of male and female nudity, playful acrobatics and sampling of a Motown standard recalls Carolee Schneeman’s *Meat Joy* (1964) and the showcasing of filmmaker and significant other in an actual sex act before an unattended camera and the intercutting of images of metaphorical abstraction, nature and explicit nudity recalls



Schneeman's *Fuses* (1964–1967). If Mekas had other films in mind, these comparisons still pertain – notwithstanding differences between directorial gazes of the bisexual male (Grinbergs), the homosexual male (Anger, Smith, Warhol) and the heterosexual female (Schneeman).

At the same time, *Pašportrets* bears iconographic kinship with contemporaneous European examples; for instance, the shots of phallus-thrusting, self-fellating Tsivian anticipate the frenzied opening credits of Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976), just as the naked youth whom Grinbergs posed languorously under an image of Christ presages *Sebastiane*'s homoerotic martyrdom scene. Or, closer to socialistic home and less mainstream in orientation, *Pašportrets* shares the psychedelic sensibility of certain experimental films from Yugoslavia's Black Wave. The absurdist mood, fluid temporality, antic overacting and prosaic nudity of *Gratinirani možgani Pupilije Ferkeverk/The Gratinéed Brains of Pupilija Ferkeverk* (1970) by Karpo Ačimović-Godina (b. 1943) resurfaces in Grinbergs's film (although the latter has none of the former's structuralist rigor). Both the Latvian and Slovenian films feature female actors swaying on swings suspended in natural settings, the pendular motion of which, in relation to the frame's edge, serves to haptically disorient the viewer. This somatic slippage is amplified in *Pašportrets* by editor Maruta Jurjāne's single, fugitive use of special effects: a reversal of the image along its vertical axis lasting a fraction of a second, followed by a worm's-eye view shot of Andris and Inta leaping toward the camera, seeming situated in an abyss that another cut reveals to be their coital marathon. Grinbergs's film is also reminiscent of *Beli ljudje/White People* (1970), made by the Slovene artist collective OHO, particularly in terms of overt visual stylizations, elemental symbolism, the inherent optimism of the hippies' free-love ethos (even encompassing queer desire), a narrative arc drawn loosely and episodically and a sense that much of the imagery materialized not as choreographed cinematic constructions but, rather, performance art that simply happened to be documented. Both films are also alike in so far as a singular directorial vision – in the case of *Beli ljudje*, the far more experienced filmmaker Naško Križnar (b. 1943) – shaped these collaborative efforts.

Considered comprehensively, there are strong, extended parallels between Grinbergs's life project and that of Croatian body/performance artist Tomislav Gotovac (1937–2010), who made experimental films, interacted with the fashion world on a rarified, conceptual level, and staged street performances, actions and Happenings – three of which were homages to acclaimed Western films,<sup>9</sup> an intertextual strategy used by Grinbergs two years after *Pašportrets*. However, the more germane linkage between Gotovac and Grinbergs may well be their shared attitudes about visibility of the male body and the erasure of barriers between public and private experience, perhaps most evident in Gotovac's sexually explicit home movies *Obiteljski film 1/Family film 1* and *Obiteljski film 2* (1971–1973), shot by Serbian Slobodan Šijan, whose own experimental oeuvre played with cinematic language, film conventions for (auto)biography, and the limits of official tolerance of artistic exploration.

Like *Birojs* filmmakers, Black Wave artists ran afoul of the regime and were suppressed in the early 1970s, an episode vastly more publicized because, of course, the Yugoslav film phenomenon had been attracting worldwide attention for years. In the sense that Grinbergs *et alia* had never reached a film-going audience by the time their creative efforts were destroyed or forced into hiding,<sup>10</sup> a more apt Eastern European parallel for *Pašportrets* may be the early cinematic works of Romanian Ion Grigorescu, filmed in

secret and only belatedly exhibited. Certain examples of Grigorescu's work address themes aligned with those of Grinbergs's – use of the artist's naked body as medium, the body as a site of ideological resistance, dichotomous gender play, retention of Christian motifs – although the Romanian's acute technological focus and hermitic working methods distinguish him from the ensemble nature of the *Birojs* projects.<sup>11</sup>

Grigorescu's methods aside, the making of most films, even those amateur and auteur projects that might seem to preclude group contributions, requires collective labor and collaborative creativity. Despite the fact that the *Birojs* films were nominally self-portraits, the stochastic creative process evident in many of *Pašportrets*'s scenes reveal its ostensibly first-person subjectivity as beholden to the self-representations of others and contingent upon their autonomous actions. There is almost nothing of the solitary, introspective focus typical of a painted self-portrait, [although it is also true that, within social networks of centuries past, many such paintings served as sales prospectuses for artists seeking commissions and thus were only nominally eremitical (Rascaroli, 63)]. Despite Grinbergs's infamous handling of associates as adjuvants (or, worse, his wife as scenery) in a performance career spanning five decades, here the star of the show, present in every scene but one, is primarily limned through others' interactions and reactions, while the timbre of his voice is constituted by a poet's, a violinist's and a soul singer's acts of ventriloquy. By contrast, anyone watching the other surviving *Birojs* 'self-portrait' – that of Skanstiņš – but having no idea what the director actually looked like, would find it impossible to discern which of the males in the ensemble is, in fact, the subject. If one hazarded a guess, it would likely be the man mugging and clowning before a framed mirror that traverses all the film's scenes, but, tellingly, this would not be Skanstiņš but Grinbergs. Perhaps the greatest cost incurred by the destruction of the majority of *Birojs* films is posterity's inability to fix, conclusively, an image of that group's overall dynamic and, equally important, how it shaped the individuals' senses of self in front of the camera and, more critically, when they were directing it.

Provisionally granted the status of an egalitarian group portrait, then, *Pašportrets* forsakes formal coherence for unbridled energy and insubordinate desire, and while this has mostly positive, liberative associations for this assembly of social nonconformists, this unbounded condition also descends into chaos and darkness, whether in the form of physical assault by a stranger on the sidewalk, the barbaric killing of the dove, a severely underexposed scene showing two actors in the shadows of an aviary cage in the Rīga Zoological Garden or, much later in the film when Eglīte's lyrics turn to the subject of death, Grinbergs and four others seen in a sequence of close-ups, their expressionless faces behind chain-link fencing, distorted, dissolved and displaced by a superimposed shard of glass (Figure 4). However, for all these anarchical elements, *Pašportrets* is not a nihilistic vision in any cumulative sense: Even the unmotivated discontinuities seem to mark a vague progression of emotional fulfillment and individual agency against a background of dehumanizing urban spaces and depressing private quarters. At this point, the ideological stakes of the project appear foregrounded as an indictment against social conformity, wholly irrespective of political system; the film comes into focus perhaps as a clearer portrait of a particular time and place than of any specific participant.

Grinbergs makes little distinction between forest or flat, city or seaside, as preferred precinct for his self-actualization in film and performance. In this expansive regard, he revives the early Soviet avant-garde notion wherein reality at large was conceived of as a



**Figure 4.** Stills from *Pašportrets*. Close-up obscured by chain-link and distorted by glass shard.

‘spontaneous’ cinema, the actual presence or absence of cameras being quite irrelevant. This so-called ‘cinefication’ of life originated in the revolutionary aim to universalize the means of cinematic production, distribution and exhibition – the filmic counterpart, if you will, to the electrification of the USSR – but it was soon theorized into theatrical applications by Stanislavsky and others (Levi 2012, 78–83).<sup>12</sup> According to Levi’s larger argument, the ‘rampant carnality of the cinematic apparatus’ can be embodied in nonfilm forms, and Grinbergs’s subsequent performances, mixed-media collages and manipulated photographs often constituted film surrogates for an artist prevented from making films for 31 years. From the mid-1960s onward, Grinbergs has indiscriminately regarded his surroundings as an unbounded soundstage, a limitless opportunity for direction (blocking, art, wardrobe and otherwise), which is an ambitious, audacious and difficult-to-realize attitude even when one is not operating under the repressive social, material and political conditions of totalitarianism. Nonetheless, in this personal attempt to expand the ideological field, even self-possessed Grinbergs was not exempt from stage direction from beyond. Edgar Morin’s anthropological studies of the 1950s demonstrated how cinema, so pervasive in our experience, infiltrates and restructures – pre-structures, more precisely – lived experience. While Morin explored this on the most mundane levels, such as manners of comportment inflected by cinematic memories, one can trace a similar sort of infiltration in Grinbergs’s life and art. Bo Widerberg’s 1971 film *Elvira Madigan* inspired the 1973 Happening *Green Wedding*, which, occurred in the months following the temporary (yet, from that vantage, possibly permanent) dismantling of *Pašportrets*. I would argue that *Green Wedding* was conceived as an unfilmable film, staged as much for photographic stills as for an expanded sense of life for its participants, all of it informed by prior consumption of cinematic spectacles by, most directly, Widerberg, but also Fellini, Antonioni and other figures of European art cinema.

Just as significant, but harder to explain, is the influence of films *unavailable* in Rīga at that time, particularly those of Warhol – but, then, if any artist arrived osmotically in Eastern Europe via hearsay and delivered the gospel of public image to Grinbergs, it was Warhol, the ultimate panderer of hearsay. Historian David Thomson’s characterisation of Warhol’s status as one of the most influential American filmmakers speaks indirectly to *Pašportrets*:

Warhol made the great deadpan eye-ronic thought bubble of the '60s—just in time to ruin film theory and film crit, but not soon enough to slow film's march into academia. Film is stupid. Anyone can do it. Turn the camera on and go to lunch. Find depraved versions of beautiful people. Have them take clothes off and improvise. Call them stars. He screwed the camera back to the floor—as in the 1900s—and took no interest in the result, but called it 'A film by Andy Warhol.' His basic rules: if the exposure came out OK, they will watch; if they are arguing over what it means, it's a movie. (Thomson 2006)

Warhol's confidence that 'they will watch' presumes, of course, an audience — legal challenges to public screenings notwithstanding — but *Birojs* filmmakers could not assume that their insular social and artistic circles would have continued access to foreign 'circle films,' much less their own experiments. Given that the dissemination of nonconformist culture in Soviet-era Latvia, whether *samizdat*, abstract art or rock music, was facilitated through elective, personal networks, rather like today's Twitter or Instagram accounts with their followers, it seems worth considering *Pašportrets* as a prefiguration of contemporary media, especially given certain similarities of content and facture.

Returning to the frankly anachronistic title of this essay, I propose that Grinbergs's film, and perhaps some of the other *Birojs* films lost to self-censorship, anticipated today's self-representational paradigms. A group selfie *avant la lettre* and a prototypical sex tape — or at least approximations of them in spirit — *Pašportrets* was social media deprived of social circulation. (The graphic beheading and bleeding of the pet bird for sensationalistic effect raises ethical issues not unlike those of snuff films, the transgression amplified by the perverse theatricality of a Flower Child killing a dove.) Of course, such comparisons elide particularities of mediums and technologies, but irrespective of whatever limitations or possibilities of editing/distribution/replication/etc., are specific to 16 mm film, videotape and digital imaging, what remains constant over time and between cultures are the users' do-it-yourself sensibilities, recourse to the prevalent technology and self-affirming motives — especially when creating erotica or documenting a moment with one's likeness (with that likeness becoming the principle content). The inherently unstable distinction between creator and subject in selfies and sex tapes — and, for that matter, between creator and the creator's pathology as a tacit subject of snuff films — finds similar slippage in *Pašportrets* when the director, the camera operator and the actors all find themselves within the same scene, the same frame and, quite literally, the same bed. Considered en masse, the *Birojs* films feature the same cast and even many of the same characters, given that most everyone played him- or herself repeatedly.

There is one final possible concordance between *Pašportrets* and the selfie, the sex tape, and (for want of a third term as a matter of habit) the sexy selfie that snuffs careers of politicians — or boosts careers of nobodies — whose sexting goes viral, and that is the issue of intended audience. It is difficult to imagine what the *Birojs* filmmakers might have even remotely hoped for in terms of exhibition at the time. Were their films made primarily for self-consumption, for private delectation by a modestly expanded circle of followers, or for like-minded viewers throughout the global hippie community, a community experienced by the Latvians in only a virtual sense? As they documented behavior that would assuredly run afoul of Soviet censors and likely earn the disapproval of parents, neighbors and such, did they believe they could control the circulation of these sensational images, short of destroying them altogether? In the same way that a college or job applicant might reasonably fear an admissions or HR officer rifling through Facebook postings of youthful

indiscretions, would Yuri Tsivian have wanted his PhD committee in Leningrad to have seen *Pašportrets* footage of his mock self-fellatio? Would it have hastened his academic tenure in America? Depending on the moment and the viewing context, one's association with this film was the stuff of incrimination or defiance, disavowal or ownership, shame or pride, Anthony Weiner or Paris Hilton. In the intervening years, Andris Grinbergs has repeatedly invoked the Warholian mantra of 15 minutes of fame, which seems outrageously modest for his immodest work. But now this essay has given him 20, 30 more minutes of attention – another reposting, reblogging or retweeting, as it were.

## Notes

1. Often misdated, the commercial is perennially accessible on YouTube. For a fuller unpacking of this caricature and an account of the counter-cultural environment that occasioned *Pašportrets*, see Svede (2001).
2. The assault was, in fact, staged, with the attacker played by fellow amateur filmmaker Ivars Skanstiņš, author of an equally remarkable, though vastly different, experimental short titled *Mijkrēšļa rotaļa ar spoguli / Twilight Plays with Mirror* (1972).
3. Kinostudija Riga's *Sejas/Faces* (1971), directed by Imants Brils, was a particularly well-known example. In late socialist society, however, one person's denouncement was another's tutorial, often by design.
4. For the direct effect these films had, see Svede (2000, 189–208).
5. Informing Poor Theatre as it did, Eastern mysticism in general was popular among *Birojs* members, and to much the same end.
6. One thirty-three-second fragment of the original film remains missing, replaced by black leader in the restored version (from approximately 19:49 to 20:22), a suggestion offered by restorer Julius Ziz to Grinbergs and me, in my capacity as producer, at Anthology Film Archives, New York City, winter 1994. Post-production/restoration decisions regarding soundtrack, titles and such were mutually decided and are reported here (and below) as witnessed by the author.
7. These events, first recounted anecdotally by Andris and Inta Grinbergi as they showed me recovered fragments at Jura Podnieka studija, Vēcrīga, in June 1993, have since been corroborated in conversations with other *Birojs* members, some of whom conspired to hide the film.
8. That said, it is unclear whether taxonomer Rascaroli has actually seen Grinbergs's film.
9. Gotovac's 1981 action *Šišanje i brijanje u javnom prostoru III/Haircut and Shave in Public Space* referenced Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928); his action *Ležanje gol na asfaltu, ljubljenje asfalta (Zagreb, volim te!)/Lying Naked on the Asphalt, Kissing the Asphalt (Zagreb, I Love You!)*, Hawks's *Hatari!* (1962); and his 1996–2000 collaborative action/documentation *The Weekend Art: Hallelujah the Hill!*, Adolphas Mekas's *Hallelujah the Hills!* (1963).
10. The fate of the other surviving film was less problematic. Despite modernist elements and allegorical references to social imprisonment, Skanstiņš's film was quietly screened and well known in Riga. For a discussion of *Pašportrets* and *Spogulis* as competing visions of avant-garde expression, see Svede (2003, 341–346).
11. Grigorescu ingeniously compensated for the solitary nature of his casting with the use of double-exposure images in *Box/Boxing* (1977), mirrors in *Masculin/Feminin/Male and Female* (1976), and a mask in *Dialog cu Ceaușescu/Dialogue with Ceaușescu* (1978).
12. Levi cites Tsivian (1991, 9) regarding Stanislavsky's 1899 appropriation of the term 'sinematograf' to describe a sequence of fragmentary theatrical excerpts instead of a single action.

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