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## Representation of poverty in Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian documentary films of the post-communist period

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of poor families in three documentary films from the Baltic region, produced after the fall of state socialism: Ewa Borzęcka's *13 or Trzynastka/Thirteen* (1996, Poland), Marat Sargsyan's *Tėvas/Father* (2012, Lithuania) and Andris Gauja's *Ģimenes lietas/Family Instinct* (2010, Latvia). Each film does so by focusing on a family which does not fit the dominant notion of a normal family and instead comes across as a 'pathological' family. Our argument is that by foregrounding such a connection the filmmakers play down the state's responsibility for ensuring a decent standard of living for all citizens.

### KEYWORDS

Poverty; social exclusion; Eastern European cinema; Latvian documentary; Lithuanian documentary; Polish documentary

### Introduction

This article examines the representation of poor families in three documentary films from the Baltic region, produced after the fall of state socialism: Ewa Borzęcka's *13 or Trzynastka/Thirteen* (1996, Poland), Marat Sargsyan's *Tėvas/Father* (2012, Lithuania) and Andris Gauja's *Ģimenes lietas/Family Instinct* (2010, Latvia). Each film does so by focusing on a family which does not fit the dominant notion of a normal family and instead fits the idea of a pathological family and plays up its deviation from the social norm. The questions we pose are how the impression of the family's difference is achieved and what is the effect of such a representation on the viewer's assessment of the causes and consequences of its poverty. Before we move to films, let us explain the crucial term, used in this article, 'poverty' and briefly present the history of poverty in the three countries and Eastern Europe at large.

### Culture of poverty in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland

The meaning of 'poverty' is far from straightforward. What constitutes a poor person in one society might not fit another one. For this reason, authors differentiate between absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty is defined in terms of survival; it refers to subsistence, linked to a basic standard of physical capacity necessary for production (of paid work) and reproduction (bearing and nurturing children). Nutrition is central to such a

definition (Lister 2004, 21). Relative poverty occurs when individuals, families and groups in the population:

lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities, which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns and activities. (Townsend 1979, 31)

An important term from our perspective is also that of ‘culture of poverty’, coined by sociologist and anthropologist Oscar Lewis. Lewis suggests looking into poverty as a certain ‘design of living’ (1963, xxiv). He points to a certain pattern of beliefs, feelings and behaviour, which ‘hangs together’ and claims that, ‘it is a way of life, remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines’ (1963, xxiv). On the basis of studying lower-class settlements in London, Glasgow, Paris, Harlem and Mexico, Lewis concluded that a culture of poverty has some universal characteristics which transcend regional, rural-urban and national differences (1963, xxv). He claims that:

people in the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, of not belonging. They are like aliens in their own country, convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. (...). They are marginal people who know only their own troubles, their own local conditions, their own neighborhood, their own way of life. (Lewis 2006, 21)

Children who are born into poverty and raised by parents lacking social skills, having criminal backgrounds and suffering from dependency are more likely to experience social exclusion and marginalization. The culture of poverty naturally becomes their culture, because ‘social segregation is fostered by social (spatial) practices such as, employment, residence, services, transport and friends networks’ (Gough, Eisenschitz, and McCulloch 2005, 131).

During the state socialist period, according to the leaders of the Soviet Union and its satellite countries, poverty simply did not exist in this region, although in reality there were cases of absolute poverty, especially during the Second World War and of relative poverty, in the countryside and the provinces, when basic household goods and fresh food were considered a luxury. Mervyn Matthews in his seminal study on poverty in the Soviet Union put together the official data and outcomes of living standard surveys in the Soviet Union to grasp the specifics of poverty in this country in the 1970s and 1980s. He concluded that the majority of the Soviet people fit into category of the ‘working poor’ because of monetary poverty, severe material deprivation and low access to cultural and sport activities, especially in the countryside and the provinces. It is worth mentioning that at the time single parents (mainly women), children living in families with a history of alcoholism, orphans, handicaps and pensioners were at greatest risk of poverty (Matthews 1986, 51–53). Erich Fromm criticized the Stalinist version of socialism, arguing that ‘in spite of its state ownership of the means of production, it is perhaps closer to the early and purely exploitative forms of Western Capitalism than to any conceivable idea of a socialist society’ (2001, 241). However, it shall be emphasized that the economic inequality and social segregation under state socialist regime was relatively small, somewhat alleviating some of the effects of poverty. Moreover, poverty was not distributed evenly across

Eastern Europe, although it is difficult to establish with precision where there was the most and the least poverty. Among the three countries (two of which constituted parts of the Soviet Union), which are of interest to us, most is known about Poland, according to the rule that the more rigidly controlled states 'have consistently banned all but the most indirect reference to the problem' (Matthews 1986, 161). We know that after the Second World War Poland belonged to the poorest countries in Europe due to its pre-war poverty and devastation. By the 1970s, however, it occupied a middling position in Eastern Europe in terms of living standards. In the 1980s the situation worsened, as a result of the economic breakdown, following the disorders of 1980 and martial law problem (Matthews 1986, 161–162).

After the introduction of neoliberalism in post-communist Eastern Europe, social segregation and poverty have been increasing, despite the growth of GDP in this region, due to relatively high unemployment rates caused by privatization of the state own industries and lack of investments in the creation of new jobs (especially in Latvia and Lithuania), absence of progressive tax system and low minimum wages, which receive around one-third of the population. According to The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, in January 2017 the statutory minimum monthly wage in Poland was 454.52 Euro, in Lithuania and Latvia – 380.00 Euro and remained among the smallest in the EU, even though positive changes in the statutory minimum wage of the three countries have been calculated (e.g. in Poland +38.3%, in Latvia +26.8%, in Lithuania +39.0%) in real terms between 1 January 2010 and 1 January 2017 (Karel 2017). The survey on *Social Inclusion and Income Distribution in the European Union -2008*, conducted in 2008 by the European Observatory, revealed that the greatest inequality in the EU, apart from Portugal and Greece, was to be found in three post-communist countries: Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, and there has been a steady upward trend in inequality in the EU since 2000 (The European Observatory 2008, 6). According to the survey, the most impoverished groups remained children, pensioners, multi-child families and the unemployed (European Observatory 2008, 40–43). The same tendency is identified in a number of other recent studies, conducted by European institutions and The World Bank. The economic and social inequalities have typically been explained by the rise of a new ideology which promotes individualism and competition. Those less fortunate were presented as victims of their own deficiencies, such as laziness and a lack of education or entrepreneurial spirit and often labelled 'homo sovieticus': relics of the old, state socialist system (Marody 2010). This way, inability to adjust to the capitalist system has simply been considered as an individual pathology. The governmental social policies, especially in Latvia and Lithuania, in fact, are influenced by these liberal ideologies and contribute to societal inequality. This is explicit in tax system, e.g. relatively high share of indirect taxes, relatively low taxes on capital and property and relatively high taxes on labour. Social aid policy is also not effective in reduction of poverty due to low social allocations and insignificant support for families. Another problem, relating high level of poverty and social polarization is the weakness of civil society and workers' syndicates, and it makes it more difficult for socially vulnerable groups to defend their interests and voice their demands to policy-makers. However, it should be mentioned that in Poland the poverty was recently tackled by the government of the conservative Law and Justice party, through introducing a benefit known as '500 plus', given to families for every second and next

child. This benefit has a double purpose – redistribute wealth towards poorer people and alleviate the low birth rate and population crisis in Poland.

In the light of the fact that poverty and social segregation is a widespread phenomenon in Eastern Europe, and especially in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, it is understandable that it became a frequent topic of documentary cinema produced in them, given that documentary cinema, more than fiction films, offers the viewers less manicured images of reality and focuses on characters whom fiction films are reluctant to represent, such as victims of adverse circumstances (Winston 2008, 46–54) or ‘others’ (Nichols 2001, 3–13), as opposed to heroes and winners. Among them we can list *Mgła/Fog* (1993), directed by Irena Kamieńska, *Ta wspaniała praca/This Wonderful Work* (1993), directed by Piotr Morawski, *Koniec epoki węgla kamiennego/The End of the Epoch of Coal* (1993), directed by Tomasz Dobrowolski, *Tārps/The Worm* (2005), by Andis Mizišs, *Keturi žingsniai/Four Steps* (2008), directed by Audrius Stonys, *Šanxai Banzai/Shanghai Banzai* (2010) directed by Jūratė Samulionytė, *Aš perėjau ugnį, tu buvai su manim/Through Fire I Went, You Were With Me* (2010) by Audrius Stonys, *Ģimenes lietas/Family Instinct* (2010), directed by Andris Gauja, *Stebuklų laukas/The Field of Magic* (2011), directed by Mindaugas Survila, *Tēvas/Father* (2012) by Marat Sargsyan, *Liza, namo!/Lisa, Go Home!* (2012) directed by Oksana Buraja, *Sėkmės metai/Lucky Year* (2014) directed by Rimantas Gruodis, *Mellenų gari/Blueberry Spirits*, by Astra Zoldnere (2016) and *Šaltos ausys/Dear Ears* (2016) directed by Linas Mikuta. It is worth mentioning that in Poland documentaries about poverty mostly were made in the 1990s and they typically linked poverty to de-industrialization, following the fall of state socialism. Afterwards their number declined and most likely in the near future this subject will appear rarely, given that the current regime put eradicating child poverty in the centre of its social programme. By contrast, in Lithuania and Latvia they peaked around 2008–2010. Although it is impossible to explain all the reasons for these different waves of films about poverty, one likely factor was the global crisis of 2008, which hit Baltic countries very strongly, while leaving Poland practically untouched.

Due to space constraints, rather than discuss these waves of films about poverty, we decided to offer a close reading of only three films, one from each country, each depicting a poor family which does not fit into the societal notion of a ‘decent’ or ‘conventional’ family. We chose them not to show differences in lives of poverty in the three countries, because from this perspective the three films are remarkably similar, but to show different cinematic strategies employed by their authors and their effect on the viewers’ assessment on the causes of poverty of people shown in these films.

### **Pornographic poverty in *Thirteen* by Ewa Borzęcka**

Ewa Borzęcka, the director of *13* or *Trzynastka* (*Thirteen*, 1996) was born in 1960 and started her career in the 1980s, and her greatest successes, *Thirteen* and *Arizona* (1997) came in the 1990s. Borzęcka follows people who are in many ways unusual, or represent an extreme case of a specific phenomenon. Often Borzęcka’s films are set among communities at the end of their lives. This is the case with *U Danusi* (*At Danusia*, 2002), which presents the nearly desolate town of Julinek, in the past known for its circus and a school training circus artists, closed down in the 1990s, and *U nas na Pekinie* (*Amongs Us in*

*Pekin*, 2004), which tells a story of people in a run-down apartment bloc in the centre of Warsaw, which is about to be demolished.

The fact that Borzęcka chooses extreme cases and people living on the margin of the society makes it difficult to classify her work. Some viewers regard her as a socially concerned filmmaker who chooses such situations to illuminate more widespread phenomena, most importantly poverty, the neglect of rural communities and hardship of single parenting. Others see her intentions as less noble – stigmatizing people who live outside the mainstream and telling their stories in a way that reassures the viewers of their normality and the superiority of their position, while providing them with pleasure in seeing something unusual and kinky (on the split opinions about Borzęcka's films see Przylipiak 2003; Mąka-Malatyńska 2005, 82; Przylipiak 2015, 523). In our opinion Borzęcka leans towards the second strategy, that of 'pornographer' (Millington 2013) or 'dark tourist' (Lennon and Foley 2010), who revels in and plays up other people's misery for a stronger cinematic effect. At the same time, one cannot deny that her films, being documentaries, document something which exists in reality and this reality cannot be entirely controlled by the filmmaker with a specific agenda. In our analysis we will also draw attention to such moments.

*Thirteen* presents the life of a single mother with thirteen children. The film has no authorial commentary. Everything we hear are dialogues of its characters, mainly the mother and children, and some people with whom she interacts as well as off-screen comments of children and their mother. As with other films by Borzęcka, it is difficult to gain basic factual information about characters, namely in which part of Poland they live, what they do for a living, how old they are and why they found themselves in a particular life situation. Such knowledge can only be inferred from the construction of the mise-en-scene and scraps of dialogue. This can be regarded as a sign of Borzęcka's refusal of didacticism, of telling the viewers what to think about her characters. In our view, however, it rather serves the author to convey a specific perspective on them, namely denying them normality. For example, we know that the woman is a single mother but till late in the film we do not know who is a father of her children or whether she had them with one or more men. Seeing her early on in the company of men drinking alcohol arose suspicion that she engages in promiscuous sex. Only much later we learn that she is a widow, although the circumstances of her husband's death are never explained and hence we do not know whether the mother received any compensation following his passing away.

There is no doubt that the family in Borzęcka's film is poor. It fits the definition of relative poverty, as presented in the introductory part of this chapter and verges on absolute poverty. Their house has minimal facilities. There is no bathroom and no gas or electrical heating; the house is heated by an old-fashioned stove using wood or coal. The best indicator of their poverty is the food which they eat and their comments on food. Food is for them the most important thing in life and they divide people according to the amount and type of food they eat. One of the children says that rich people eat good food, such as meat and butter and they have plenty of it, while they eat mostly bread. At some point we see the mother buying over 20 loaves of bread, all on credit and bringing it back in large sacks. Other food we see children eating is that of home-made sauerkraut, made in the way it was done traditionally with children jumping with bare feet on cabbage so that the juice comes out. The rest of their diet is supplemented by what they catch in the wood: rabbits and fish. There is no cutlery in their home – all food is eaten with fingers. This will

be enough to see the family as reduced to a primitive, animal-like existence, but Borzęcka plays up this aspect by focusing on animals and human interaction with the animals. Even before we see the characters, when the film titles are shown on screen, we hear animals – cats meowing wildly as if they were tortured or were engaged in a fight. This is indeed the case when the sound is accompanied by image. We see the children amusing themselves by organizing cat fights in which their pets are injured. Obviously the children (all boys) find it very funny and there is nobody in the room to stop this cruel entertainment. When the fight is over they inspect the cats to check their injuries. The scene of fighting cats is repeated several times throughout the film, suggesting that this is the kids' main entertainment. We also see them fascinated by images of cats hunting for mice, a cat fighting with a dog and animals showing signs of life after seemingly being killed. Apart from showing limited opportunities for entertainment, such images encourage an allegorical reading – the family is like a pack of animals fighting for their extremely limited resources. However, by and large, the children seem to live in harmony with each other. The older children often help the younger ones. When food is brought to the table, such as baked rabbit, the older pass it first to the younger. Another context in which animals appear in *Thirteen* is when the mother talks with another family, presumably relatives or neighbours, about having her goat copulate with the neighbour's goat. These episodes showing animals give the impression that the family's existence is closer to animal than human existence, particularly given that the mother herself mentions earlier that the people compared her to a sow due to the fact that she gave birth many times.

Although it will be possible to present children as individuals, by showing how different they are from each other, this is not the case in the film. Their names remain unknown and any personal characteristics are curtailed, as encapsulated by the very title of the film. On most occasions we see the children in small groups, engaging in physical rather than intellectual activities, such as eating, cutting bread or skinning a rabbit. If they are shown individually, such as when they are washed by their mother, this is to present them as items on a conveyer belt, as one child is washed after another. There is no reference to them going to school, although the majority are of school age and school would be their main source of learning about the wider environment and an opportunity for social advancement. This adds to the sense that they are excluded from the wider world; poverty is their culture, as in the scheme described by Oscar Lewis.

There seems to be only two daughters of this single mother and they are excluded from play and have (literally) no voice. We only see them once for a short time. Such exclusion of women might be surprising in a film made by a woman, but might be explained by the fact that foregrounding girls might undermine the Darwinian vision of the family, offered by Borzęcka. For example, it is difficult to imagine that a cat fight would yield as much pleasure to the girls compared to the boys or that they will revel in the stories of burning rats' eyes.

Borzęcka not only accentuates the animal-like life of her characters, but also suggests a certain trajectory of the lives of the characters by including in the film the song *Wolność* (*Freedom*) by Polish band Boys. It is sung by children rambling through the countryside, and serves as background music. *Freedom* is one of the greatest hits of disco polo, a genre strongly identified with rural, provincial and backward Poland, especially popular among the Polish prison community. The song tells the story of a mother who wanted her son to grow up to be somebody important, but who ended up in borstal.

And yet, despite Borzęcka's attempts to render the family as both animal-like and condemned to social exclusion and possibly criminality, there are moments when the life of this family seems superior to the middle-class existence of the film's addressee. This is because the children are able to enjoy small things and capture the moment. For example, when there is snow they use any equipment available, such as a large bowl, to slide down the hill. Moreover, having so many siblings makes them immune to arguably the greatest malaise of contemporary times: loneliness. Such observations confirm the point made by Oscar Lewis that 'living immersed in the present [characteristic of poor people] may develop a capacity for spontaneity, for enjoyment of the sensual, the indulgence of impulse, which is too often blunted in our middle-class future-oriented man' (2006, 21).<sup>1</sup>

Given the consistency in Borzęcka's interest and her approach, it is natural to regard *Thirteen* as the work of a documentary *auteur*. However, it is also worth adding that the film was produced by *Telewizja Polska – I Program* – First Programme of Polish State Television, hence one can expect that it would reflect the dominant ideology, in this case the government view of poverty. And the film scores well on this account, divorcing the issue of poverty in post-communist Poland from that of the collapse of the socialist welfare state and the neglect of rural communities. Instead, it suggests that poverty is a personal problem – in this case having too many children. Moreover, it does so in a subtle way, avoiding any overt commentary from the author and seemingly only showing how things are.

### **Family Instinct by Andris Gauja as drama-documentary**

*Family Instinct* is the third and the most distinctive of Andris Gauja's films, which received Grand-Prix at the *AFI Fest (Silverdocs)* and was nominated for best mid-length documentary at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (2010). In 2014, Gauja debuted with feature fiction *Izlaiduma gads/The Lesson*. After studying film and television screenwriting in the Latvian Academy of Culture and working in press journalism and TV production, Gauja developed skills for finding appealing and provoking subjects and characters for his movies and learned to experiment with documentary and fiction conventions.

The protagonist of *Family Instinct* is Zanda who lives together with her brother Valdis and raises two of their children on her own while he is in prison for domestic violence. Zanda and Valdis are settled in the Latvian countryside where they share a small house with their biological mother, her boyfriend and his adult sons Andulis and Janis. Worth noting is that Valdis and Zanda were not brought up together as siblings because the right to raise her 10 children was taken away from their mother. Most likely the fact that they were brother and sister had for them no significance and did not prevent them from engaging in sex and having children together. In a conversation with Paul Zbrizzi, Gauja explained the incest with a psychological term 'genetic magnetism/attraction', which the separated siblings experienced when they met for the first time as adults (2011).

The family in *Family Instinct* features all the markers of poverty and social exclusion, characteristic of a culture of poverty, as described by Lewis. All the characters live in poor housing and share a strong feeling of helplessness, dependence and marginality. It is obvious that none of them had a happy childhood. As mentioned earlier, Zanda and Valdis were taken away from alcoholic parents and put into special boarding schools for orphans

and children taken away from families ‘at risk’. In these institutions children grew up in poor material conditions, and were often maltreated by teachers and administrators as they were considered a ‘social pathology’. In the Soviet Union it was common to separate orphans and children of ‘problematic’ parents (mainly having substance dependences) from the rest of society. After graduation from these schools the young people had to live on their own without being helped to integrate into society. So, only the strongest and those who were helped by relatives had a chance to attend a college and build a decent life, while the vast majority became alcoholics and multipliers of the ‘culture of poverty’. For example, in the film we see other characters, namely Andulis, Janis, Oscars, who also grew up without experiencing parental care in the special boarding schools, and as a result now live on the edge of society, being unemployed, frustrated and dependent on alcohol.

*Family Instinct* includes a powerful scene in which Zanda and her mother are having a conversation, pointing to the inheritance of poverty and misfortune:

*Zanda:* Don’t you feel a bit guilty about all of this, mom?

*Zanda’s mother:* About what? That you have your brother’s kids? I did the best I could for my kids.

*Zanda:* Would anything be different if you had brought us up yourself?

*Zanda’s mother:* What do you mean? The others turned out normal.

*Zanda:* But what if you brought us up yourself?

*Zanda’s mom:* I don’t know. I’m not sure if I could have coped by myself.

*Zanda:* Aren’t you even a bit sorry?

*Zanda’s mom:* Yeah, I am sorry that I had so many kids. I wish, I hadn’t had any of you.

*Zanda:* Don’t you love us?

*Zanda’s mom:* Why should I? What’s there to love?

*Zanda:* So why keep on living?

*Zanda’s mom:* What else can we do?

The camera carefully follows this conversation between the daughter and the mother, which reveals how important it was for Zanda to get confirmation that she was/is loved by her mother. Yet, the truth is disappointing, however, predictable to the viewer. Later in the film we find out that Zanda is also at risk of losing her own children because of her lack of parental skills and sexual relationship with her abusive brother. This shows how the poor are ‘caught in a pathological cycle of ritual social crises’ (Smith 2017, 1).

The misery in which Zanda and her children live is presented in an observational mode. The images of the exterior and interior of the house reveal that the living conditions are below the average of a ‘decent’ quality of life. The house has no bath as we discover from the scene of children bathing; the furniture and kitchen appliances are worn out and probably collected from a dump. We see few children’s toys – some blocks and a dirty teddy bear lying on the floor. Even the Christmas tree the children decorate just with paper sheets as the adults cannot afford Christmas decorations or presents for the kids. However, the audience gets no information about Zanda’s income and can only guess that she is on welfare. The lack of relevant information, as in Borzęcka’s film makes it difficult to assess how much the wider socio-economic conditions affect the situation of the characters.

We observe lots of frustrations and violence in the movie, especially in drinking partying scenes. For instance, in the episode of Zanda's birthday party there is a scene of her younger brother having an argument and later a fight with a male guest. In another scene the camera shows the outbreak of Zanda's violent behaviour when she knocks down Andulis (who is actually the only truly peaceful character in the movie) and starts beating and kicking him while reminding him about debts for electricity (the motif of un-paid bill recurs several times in the movie). In a state of uncontrolled anger Zanda rolls the man towards the fire shouting 'I will kill you'. And finally, while calming down she desperately screams 'I am alone! I am all alone!' It is difficult to image a more poignant accusation of society for the misery of an individual and yet, such scenes also demonstrate how difficult it is to help people like Zanda who are their own worst enemies.

Neither does the return of Valdis promise any positive changes in her life as we learn from the letters she receives from the prison and other situations. For example, in the scene of Zanda's preparations for Valdis's return, she warns her brother Maris and his girlfriend Inga, who moved in after Valdis's arrest, to move out of the house because 'if Valdis gets drunk he will kill you!' Later she asks the couple: 'Aren't you afraid?' and claims 'I am. He will be really pissed!' In the day of Valdis return, we observe the change in Zanda's mood, as she became worried and stressed. The children are also quieter than usual. Valdis comes home drunk very late that day. It is obvious that he did not miss his family.

Unlike *Thirteen, Family Instinct* shows that poor people are not completely left to their own devices; the state is trying to help them to overcome their predicament. However, people who are supposed to help Zanda, social workers and the bureaucrats of the municipality, are not capable of doing that, as they mainly care about formalities and speak a jargon Zanda does not understand. We follow several of Zanda's meetings with social workers. From them we learn that she is at risk of losing her children if she continues to live with Valdis in a violent environment. The film also includes an episode of Zanda and her children's visit to their new home, a social apartment in a block somewhere in the middle of the fields, from which they quickly escape as if they were unable to improve their lot, even when given a chance.

Gauja applies a different strategy than Borzęcka for telling the story of this family. He puts the bits of one year in Zanda's life (documentary content) into a dramatic framework (fictional form). The story starts with a brief text on the screen informing about the setting of the movie – 'The following takes place in a village six kilometers away from a major port town in Latvia'. Later we see Zanda commenting on her incestuous relationship followed by episode of Valdis's arrest. In the background we hear a conversation between Zanda and a woman (probably a neighbour) about the arrest. These scenes stimulate the curiosity of the spectator and introduce the protagonists and their life drama. The film ends up with an intriguing note: – 'Zanda ran away from Valdis with Andulis and her two children five months after he returned home from prison. They moved to a secret location in another part of Latvia to try and start a new life together as a family'.

Gauja skilfully combines observational and performative modes of representation, staged scenes and raw documentary materials in *cinema verité* style. He makes the type of movies which Stella Bruzzi describes as '(...) a negotiation between filmmaker and reality, and at heart, a performance' (2006, 186). In an interview with Zbrizzi, Gauja claims that for him:

the story is everything, and we did everything to organize the story, to structure it, to have the focus on the main paradox, and the focus on the main protagonist; (...), and whenever we felt there was a hole in the story we tried to fill it with the necessary things, and one thing which is very important is the dialogue, because without these dialogue episodes, I don't think the viewer could actually read the story. So we started to construct these dialogues, and the characters actually started to feel good about it, they started to like to play out their lives. They became almost like actors, but anyway, everything they did was based on their experience, on their lives. (Zbrizzi 2011)

However, although the director admits that there is an element of fiction in his film, an inexperienced spectator would not even notice these fictional 'improvements' of the documentary material, because they are so perfectly integrated into the tissue of films.

Despite its apparent good intentions, the movie received lots of criticism at home (Zbrizzi 2011). The drastic images of absolute poverty and social exclusion raised objections against the ethics of the filmmaker. This reaction is understandable, as the movie is certainly shocking and in the scenes of violence, drinking parties and intimacies we get an impression of mistreatment of the characters due to using a voyeuristic and exoticising approach. For instance, the scene where Janis strikes himself with a knife and falls down on the floor in front of Zanda, her two little children and Andulis had to be stopped being shot due to a possible negative effect on the small children. We can see how they were scared. The same can be said of the scene of naked Andulis and Janis dancing and afterwards hugging on the bed. In a conversation with Zbrizzi, Gauja acknowledged that these scenes were provoked by him and re-enacted by the characters and he admitted that he had to make moral compromises for the sake of the story (Zbrizzi 2011). Paul Ward claims 'in the documentary field, ethics commonly falls almost entirely onto the shoulders of the filmmaker' (2008, 193) and on this occasion the filmmaker did not adhere to a high standard, while succeeded in telling a very powerful story.

### **The ethnographer's gaze in Marat Sargsyan's *Father***

Marat Sargsyan debuted with the short fiction *Lernavan* (2009), which was his BA in film and TV directing graduation work at Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. The film reflected the importance of the national roots of those who live in emigration as Sargsyan's family moved to Lithuania in 1994 from Armenia. *Father* is his second work, and his debut in the documentary genre. The film portrays glimpses of the more joyful life of a poverty-stricken family than Borzęcka and Gauja in their respective films. The protagonist Vidas Antonovas (the oldest father in Europe and a retired criminal) as well as the other characters (his wife and children) are granted more respect than the parents in *Thirteen* and *Family Instinct*. However, the intention to show something bizarre is also noticeable.

The images of the poor and their milieu seem to be filtered through the eyes of an ethnographer, who translates and embodies 'emotional, daily complexity of bizarre ordinary life that he/she was within' (Schlunke 2008, 222). In fact, Sargsyan applies the 'old' paradigm of ethnography by treating his characters as an exotic 'Other' and a distant object of observation. This cinematic approach can be explained by the fact that before starting his career in cinema, Sargsyan had been working at regional and commercial TV channels, where the work was governed by the search for bizarre stories and unusual

characters. In an interview given in 2013, he mentions that it was his former colleague from Šiauliai regional television who told him about a retired criminal, known for bank and aircraft robberies, a pioneer in body-building and the oldest father in Lithuania (at the time of shooting, and subsequently in Europe at large), who might be an interesting subject for his diploma film (Maldeikytė 2013). However, from all intriguing chapters of Vidas Antonovas' life, Sargsyan chose the current one – of a family man, even though the portrait of Antonovas as a criminal could be more intriguing.

It is worth mentioning that Lithuanian documentaries made during Soviet times and after the collapse of the Soviet system often depicted countryside residents as bizarre creatures living in a small alternative world. This attitude is still common for contemporary filmmakers of middle (e.g. Janina Lapinskaitė, Audrius Stonys, Julija Gruodienė and Rimantas Gruodis) and younger (e.g. Oksana Buraja, Linas Mikuta) generations. Local media also often pick unfortunate villagers for creating sensational stories to their readers and viewers; thus, Marat Sargsyan's movie is not exceptional. Indeed, it is easy to find a suitable character for a story about an unfortunate villager, as one-third of the Lithuanian population live in rural areas where poverty is more than 50% higher than in the cities. According to Dovilė Barčiukienė, in Lithuania this gap exists because of a lack of actions to tackle poverty in rural areas, especially addressing the needs of the most vulnerable groups, such as multi-child families, children, old, handicapped and low educated citizens, who are concentrated in rural areas. She indicates low employment opportunities, poor infrastructure for child education and leisure, poor housing and large emigration of young people to the cities or abroad as the biggest maladies and disadvantages of rural areas (Barčiukienė 2007, 132). Other Lithuanian researchers also argue that poverty remained a serious problem in Lithuania after joining the EU even in times of economic growth, especially for the residents of rural areas and families with two and more children (Tamutienė 2005; Kšivickienė 2006; Keršienė 2011). Lithuanian social policy foresees smaller social assistance for children than adults and thus increases the risk of poverty of multi-child and single parent-families (Tamutienė 2005). This creates a vicious circle of poverty as most children who grow up in poverty once being grown up lead the same life as their parents (Kšivickienė 2006, 85).

In Sargsyan's documentary we see an impoverished family raising six children and planning to have some more. The family's income consists of the retirement pension of the father, who at the time of shooting was 73, and welfare payment for the unemployed wife and their children. The 'observational' camera carefully records signs of extreme deprivation: broken windows and dirty unpainted walls and floor of the house, bunk beds in which there is straw instead of mattresses and the kids' worn-out clothes. At the same time, Antonovas is pictured as a relaxed father enjoying his life with a much younger woman, who, as he says, 'shares a similar philosophy of life'. The couple considers kids as the joy of life and want to have as many as possible despite health problems, old age and material deprivations. The man believes that he can prolong his life if he exercises, enjoys life and reproduces.

In the film we see Antonovas regularly exercising, playing guitar and singing, and having fun with the children. He always looks relaxed and happy. Children are having fun in bed before going to sleep, running and screaming inside the house, reconstructing arrest scenes of their father and bathing in the lake, but in none of them do we see children playing with fashionable toys or enjoying videogames, which would be common in most

families these days. We also never see children doing homework, having hobbies or interacting with children from other families. The family comes across as isolated from the rest of society, and in Lewis's words 'immersed in the [happy] present' (2006, 21), which more affluent people are unable to appreciate. However, seeing the humble diet of the children (plain rice for lunch, for snack one cookie and a cup of chocolate milk, etc.), their bald heads (most likely because of unsanitary conditions), sleeping conditions (they do not have decent beds, mattresses and bed sheets) and tears after not receiving Christmas presents which they expected suggest that life in a culture of poverty will have destructive consequences for these children as it had for the characters of *Family Instinct* and *Thirteen*.

The viewer has to construct the story and portrait of the protagonist from the puzzles of his life, captured in the pictures from his personal photo album (youth and pioneering in bodybuilding in Lithuania), the video footage from the prison and newspapers headlines (story of a criminal and the third marriage), Antonovas' memories and confessions addressed to the camera (memories of a criminal life and thoughts about his family, marriages and children) and observations of current everyday life in the family circle (happy fatherhood and relaxed retirement). Due to diverse documents presenting different chapters of Antonovas' life, the spectator gets a rich picture of the character, however, is not encouraged to question why he made specific choices and what connects his different facets.

The shooting took almost two years, which provided time to build trust and friendship with the Antonovas family. *Father* is an example of participatory filmmaking in which the role of the filmmaker, as Jerry Rothwell puts it, is 'to enable someone to articulate their experience through a filmmaking process' (2008, 155). Sargsyan revealed that he opted for minimal interaction with their characters during shooting: not to interfere in their everyday activities and not to tell them what/how they should perform in front of the camera. However, this task was not easy to fulfil as Antonovas wanted to present his philosophy of life directly to the camera, rather than merely being observed (Maldeikytė 2013). It is noticeable that the characters feel very comfortable in front of the camera and demonstrate confidence in the film director and cinematographer. Vidas Antonovas, his wife and children obviously enjoyed being in the movie and contributed to it with performative playfulness. For instance, in one episode Vidas re-enacts one of his arrests after robbing a bank. His children are instructed to play the authorities, and to repeat certain rude commands, like 'eat soil bandit' or 'show us where you hide the money'. Although the game is not suitable for small children, it gives them much fun. In other scenes we see the father exercising and boxing in order to keep himself fit and thus to challenge time and age. With pleasure he demonstrates his trained body and flexes muscles in front of the camera. It should be noted that certain scenes give a feeling of being staged. For instance, at the beginning of the movie we observe a scene of small children sitting in beds and reading aloud old newspaper articles about their father's arrest, the love story of their parents and the birth of their first children. Moreover, observation is disrupted by interweaving archival material.

Ultimately, by creating an idealized image of the family who live in extreme deprivation the director moves attention away from wider social and political circumstances which affect its material position and relieves the society, politicians and public institutions aimed from their responsibility for fighting poverty and inequality.

## Conclusion

The three documentary films examined in this article use different authorial strategies to represent poverty and social exclusion in rural areas of Poland, Latvia and Lithuania and to engage the audience with such a bleak topic. In the case of *Thirteen* this is the strategy of a pornographer, who plays up the shocking aspects of her characters' existence. In *Family Instinct* a story of miserable life is told in a melodramatic way by employing some conventions of a fiction film. *Father* applies an ethnographical approach to exploring its subject. Despite these different strategies, the overall result is similar – the sense of observing an 'exotic' phenomenon and being puzzled by choices made by the characters. While the makers of these films deserve praise for broaching a topic which is barely tackled in narrative cinema in the respective countries, their value as social intervention is limited. This is because they focus on families which, apart from being poor, come across as very unusual, even pathological and suggest that their poverty and marginality has more to do with their specific circumstances, such as having many children, old age, crime and pre-modern outlook, than with wider social conditions, in which they operate, most importantly neoliberalism, adopted by Poland, Latvia and Lithuania after the fall of the Berlin Wall. By the same token, while eliciting sympathy for their characters, they suggest that the problem of poverty is marginal rather than widespread and even absolve the state from transforming conditions under which poor people live.

## Note

1. One wonders if such an opinion does not help to normalize poverty by underscoring its alleged beauty, but considering this problem is beyond the scope of this article.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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