

MODERNIST INFLUENCES IN ROLANDS KALNIŅŠ' FILM "FOUR WHITE SHIRTS" (ČETRI BALTI KREKLI, 1967)

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Abstract

The 1950s and 60s in European film history is considered to be modernist period that was most explicitly manifested in the cinema of West European countries (France, Italy and others). Fragmentation of the narrative, loosening of linkage between events, innovative approaches in editing, foregrounding of subjectivity are only some of formal techniques characterizing the modernist aesthetics in cinema. In the soviet period of Latvian film history there are merely a few films in which one can identify modernist features. Basically, those are films by Rolands Kalniņš and in particular his feature film "Four White Shirts" (1967). By its form this film is very unusual in the context of Latvian film history and it resonated with the dominant trends in West European cinema in the 1950s and 60s. "Four White Shirts", as well as several other films by Rolands Kalniņš, like "Stone and Flinders" (*Akmens un šķembas*, 1966), and "Maritime Climate" (*Piejūras klimats*, 1974) were banned by censorship and never got to cinema screens and were practically "erased", eliminated from the Latvian cinema processes. The present research will be an analysis of the aesthetics of Rolands Kalniņš' film "Four White Shirts" (1967) focusing on those elements in the film that are typical for European modernist cinema. The return of the film "Four White Shirts" to the world cinema context took place half a century after it was made – its restored print was included in Cannes Film Festival programme *Cannes Classics* in 2018. The international premier of the film in 2018 enabled it to become the most renowned Latvian fiction film in Western Europe by revealing the internationally practically unknown modernist period of Latvian cinema in the 1960s that culminated in Rolands Kalniņš' film "Four White Shirts". The destiny of this film, the ban to screen it publicly affirms the fact that modernist aesthetics was considered to be unacceptable within the context of the soviet culture.

Keywords: *Latvian film, modernism, art cinema, new wave, Rolands Kalniņš, Rolands Kalnins, Four White Shirts.*

The turn of the 1950s and 60s and the ensuing decade was a time of intensive search for new creative approaches in European cinema – this process took place mainly in Western European cinema, but the echoes of modernism also affected ideologically controlled Soviet cinema including Latvian film culture. So far, the effects of modernism in the history of Latvian cinema have been rarely studied. Until now, the most significant research dedicated to modernism in the experience of Latvian cinema is the collection of essays by Inga Pērkone. *Tu, lielā vakara saule! Esejas par modernismu Latvijas filmās* (*Essays on Modernism in Latvian Films*, 2013). However, fiction films made by the Latvian film director Rolands Kalniņš (1922) have not been analyzed in this study. Traditionally, modernist tendencies in Latvian cinema are associated with documentary cinema. As Inga Pērkone notes:

“In Latvia modernism found its way in the documentary cinema in the 1960s. The political censure was not interested in the documentaries, since they were in a way made for the local public, and were also not expected to bring much profit. That is why the 1960s became the era of expressive poetic films in Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Estonia and other countries, but the documentary films made in the 1960s made in Latvia launched a new school known as “Riga style Riga poetic documentary”, the influences of which are still felt in the modern filmmaking of Latvia” [Pērkone 2013: 128].

However, several fiction films by the Latvian director Rolands Kalniņš can be perceived as part of the radical searches characteristic of modernist aesthetics. Most strikingly these pursuits are manifested in his film “Four White Shirts” (1967). Modernist features can be identified also in the director’s several other films, for example, in “Stone and Flinders” (*Akmens un šķembas*, 1966) and in “Maritime Climate” (*Piejūras klimats*, 1974) – all these films by Kalniņš were banned by censorship, besides, his film “Maritime Climate” was destroyed – only 40-minute-long footage has been preserved till nowadays. In this context it would be important to highlight:

“Modernist art in Eastern Europe showed characteristics of peculiar national resistance and it was also characteristics of isolated works of Latvian cinema in the 1960–70s, which in their essence conveyed their sense of belonging to the Latvian culture, and not to the unified and russified Soviet culture” [Pērkone 2013: 128].

Given the specific social and political conditions of the time and the realities of Soviet Latvia – ideological surveillance and socialist realist cannon that everyone working in film industry had to comply with, Rolands Kalniņš’ creative work and his film “Four White Shirts” was a unique phenomenon that has no other equivalent in the film history of Latvia. After the film was finished in 1967 it was put away “on a

shelf” till the years of Awakening movement began in 1986 and when the film was screened for filmmakers in Riga Film Club. The real comeback of the film “Four White Shirts” to the culture of Latvia happened only in 2018 when after its restoring it had an international premier at Cannes Film Festival programme *Cannes Classics*. This special event made the film noticed also in the international context¹. After the comeback of the film a book (collection of articles) “*Rolanda Kalniņa telpa*” (“Space of Rolands Kalniņš”, 2018) was published (in Latvian). This was the first effort to analyze the director’s work in more detail, including in the context of modernism.

Theorists have accepted the notion of “Classical Hollywood style” and have demonstrated that the mode of filmmaking by the world’s dominating film industry – the USA, Hollywood has not essentially changed since the 1920s. The classical Hollywood style both by its principles of structuring narrative and also the features of film language (editing, use of specific shots and so on) is a film language ABC with the help of which it is possible to tell the story logically and understandably, stressing the causality of events and thus addressing as large an audience as possible [Bordwell, Thomson, Staiger 1985].

The socialist realist cannon accepted in the Soviet Union, in its deepest essence was an ideologized analogue of the classical Hollywood style that did not permit any deviations from the rules of the film narrative or the use of the established film language. It did not allow any deviations from the soviet ideology standards either.

There have been several periods in the world cinema history when the classical paradigm of style has been contested, those were the 1920s and 1960s. In the 1920s expressionism, surrealism, futurism, dadaism and other trends that focused on the creative search and innovative approaches to form and experience in other arts – painting, literature triumphed in European cinema. The modernist period in cinema in the 1960s is marked by denial of the classical film language, search for new forms and explicit authorship. This period of modernism is characterized by flourishing of *auteur cinema* in Western Europe – primarily in France and Italy – but the influence of this trend left an impact also on East European cinemas despite the ideological control.

The turn of the 1950s and 60s was the beginning of the French *New Wave* in Western Europe – a generation of directors appeared in French cinema who had

¹ Since 2018 the film “Four White Shirts” has been screened in different festivals around the world. In 2021 the film “Four White Shirts” was included in the program *Baltic Modernist Cinema: Between Imaginary and Real* organised by Anthology Film Archives in New York [Anthology Film Archives 2021]. Since 2020 “Four White Shirts” is available to watch on-line worldwide at www.filmas.lv as part of the collection of the Latvian film classics offered by National film centre of Latvia.

formed their theoretical stance and stood in opposition to the classical cinema, after expressing their theories in the magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*. Jean Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Éric Rohmer formed the nucleus of the *New Wave*. With their emergence in cinema, authorship concept and *auteur* theory flourished – the originality of the directorial position, the authorial means of expression, non-compliance to the canons of classical style triumphed. Flourishing of *auteur cinema* characterized also the Italian cinema of the 1950s and 60s when Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni and others made their films. New filmmakers entered the scene also in several East European cinemas with their own deeply personal vision of the world and non-compliance to dogmas either of film language or themes of their films. Modernist films in Western Europe contested the classical film narrative mode while under their influence in the Soviet Union the most courageous authors questioned not only the classical narrative forms but also the socialist realist principles and criticized the ruling ideology.

Before the analysis of the film "Four White Shirts" one should briefly deal with the question whether and to what extent a young director working in Riga Film studios could possibly be influenced by the most topical trends of the world cinema. (Rolands Kalniņš learned film direction hands-on by doing various jobs in Riga Film studios before he became a film director (his directorial debut is the film *Ilze*, 1959)).

Were the films by Kalniņš made under the impact of the most prominent innovative foreign examples – the works by West European film directors who were his own age? (As a matter of fact, Rolands Kalniņš (1922), Jean Luc Godard (1930), Federico Fellini (1920–1993) were of the same generation and worked in cinema at the same time only separated by the ideological and political "iron curtain".)

Professionals of those times had limited possibilities to watch films by foreign directors. After World War II the soviet film distribution had a very tiny proportion of foreign films. Italian neo-realist films were screened because the themes (dramatic human destinies under capitalism and so on) did not conflict with the soviet mythology. For instance, one of the first neo-realist films *Roma, città aperta* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) was screened in Riga film theatres even several times – in 1947 and 1952. In 1950 for about a month it was possible to watch in cinema Vittorio de Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1948). Only after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 the process of liberalization started, more foreign films were screened, French and American films appeared, and Italian films were also still comparatively available. In 1957 (six years after it was made) cinemas in Latvia screened Visconti's film *Bellissima* (1951). At the end of 1959 Federico Felini's *Le notti di Cabiria* (1957) was shown. After a considerable lapse of time – only in 1965 Ingmar Bergman's film *Smultronstället* (1957) was screened, as well as Vittorio de Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952), Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954) and *La dolce vita* (1960), Michelangelo Antonioni's

Il grido (1957). In 1960 one of the first French New Wave films François Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (1959) was shown [Vitola 2011: 289–296].

“The films that Rolands Kalniņš watched, I saw as well, and I do not remember that the French cinema dominated. It was rather post-war Italian films,” remembers the cameraman of “Four White Shirts” Miks Zvirbulis. Rolands Kalniņš mentions as his major sources of inspiration films by the Polish director Andrzej Wajda” [Rietuma 2017].

“If in the Western scene we see a move away from neorealism in order to reach a modern form, in the Soviet Union and Poland we find tendencies toward neorealism as a form of modernization. The new auteur's main goal was to move away from the dominant ideology and the heroic style of social realisms” [Kovács 2007: 282].

Modernist tendencies resonated also in cinemas of several socialist countries – most explicitly in Czechoslovakian and Polish cinema. Its features were also identifiable in films made in some USSR film studios but the majority of them were also put away “on a shelf” up to mid 1980s, similarly to Rolands Kalniņš' film “Four White Shirts”. (For example, Marlen Khutsiev's film “July Rain” / *Июльский дождь* (1966), Kira Muratova's films “Brief encounters” / *Короткие встречи* (1967), “The Long Farewell” / *Долгие проводы* (1971) and others) – the authors of these films dared to step away from the socialist realist cannon – the soviet version of the classical Hollywood style. It is notable that the film theorist Peter Wollen in his study *Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent D'Est, Film Theory and Criticism*, draws direct parallels between the films produced by Hollywood and the leading soviet film studio *Mosfilm* [Wollen 1999: 499].

Despite restrictions created by the “iron curtain” to follow meticulously the processes of the world cinema, Kalniņš' films (especially “Four White Shirts”, as well as “Stone and Flinders”, and “Maritime Climate”) mark the modernist development trend that was characteristic in East European countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Kovács considers that tendencies of mature modernism in Eastern Europe appeared later than in Western Europe, it happened no sooner than in 1962. He associates them with the start of the career of Andrey Tarkovsky, Roman Polanski and Miklós Jancsó, and the end of this period is marked by mid 1970s [Kovács 2007: 282].

“It may seem perverse to propose that films produced in such various cultural contexts might share fundamentally similar features,” David Bordwell writes. The scholar asks the question what connects the films *La Strada* (1954), *8½* (1963), *Smultronstället* (1957), *Det sjunde inseglet* (1957), *Persona* (1966), *A Popiół i diament* (1958), *Jules et Jim* (1962), *Nóż w wodzie* (1962), *Vivre La Vie* (1962), *Muriel* (1963) – films by Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Andrzej Wajda, François Truffaut, Roman Polanski, Jean Luc Godard, Alain Resnais. These films are examples of the art cinema

and are linked both by the time they were shot, – in the 1950s and 60s, as well as by innovative film language and the authorial point of view. *"The art cinema motivates its narratives by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity"* [Bordwell 1999]. Kalniņš' film "Four White Shirts" can be listed along with the films mentioned by Bordwell.

The Polish film critic Konrad Eberhardt wrote about Kalniņš' "Four White Shirts" in 1968 magazine *Ekran*, he had managed to see the film, stressing its affinity to the European *new wave* films:

"It is "an ideal new wave film (...) – it has a simple theme, a straightforward climax, loose composition – rehearsals of a band, walks in Riga, mundane scenes... All these elements create a type of a film distinctly different from the expensive productions representing predictable stories about modern youth. (...) all kinds of "new wave directors" could be proud if they would be able to create such a film. Firstly, because in particular in the West the theme about youth has been mythologized and it is very difficult to break away from established patterns and clichés. We have sufficiently many unsuccessful examples in Poland too. But Rolands Kalnins has managed to film entirely authentic young people who are carried away by their noble hobby – music and songs. (...) This film has no trace of demagogy. It even does not proceed from it that the truth lies indisputably on the side of the spiteful main character" [Eberhardt 1966].

Theme, characters

If we take the plot of the film, "Four White Shirts" tells us a story about Cēzars Kalniņš, a young and creative telephone assembler, the author of song lyrics and his confrontation with censorship system. This censoring system is personified by a middle-aged cultural worker Anita Sondore (Dina Kuple) who believes that several songs by Cēzars Kalniņš (Uldis Pūcītis) are obscene. Her destructive reviews about Cēzars Kalniņš' songs performed by the band called "The Optimists" launch repressive mechanisms of the responsible authorities. Cēzars' songs are reviewed at a meeting of a special Youth aesthetic upbringing committee that becomes a catalyst for a creative person's conformism or non-conformism.

Cēzars Kalniņš can be considered to be spiritually akin to the characters of the French New Wave – the outsiders, personalities conflicting with the society norms. (For example, with characters from F. Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups* (1959), Jean Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1960) and *Pierrot le Fou* (1965).)

The leitmotif of the "Four White Shirts" (creative process) has a remote affinity with one of the themes favoured by *auteur cinema* – the *fundamentals* of the creative process, crisis of an individual. (An example is Fellini's *8 ½* whose main character film director Guido faces a crisis of personal and creative life.) Cēzars Kalniņš is forced to

fight both with his own personality crisis and also confront the external conditions interfering with his life and yet elaborate study of the creative process in the film is close to the West European film directors of the 1960s.

Looseness of narrative and subjectivization

Films made during modernist period display an unequivocal resistance to the classical narration. *The art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode, and especially against the cause-effect linkage of events.* The linkage become looser, more tenuous [Bordwell 1999]. Narrative looseness, and fragmentation are characteristic also of “Four White Shirts”. Kalniņš deliberately avoided intensity of events, he also used music – songs by Imants Kalniņš with a purpose of adapting the editing of the film to the music rhythm.

For instance, in the grotesque scene of the council meeting during which the works by Cēzars are *being judged*, scenes from Riga townscape are edited into the episode. Such an approach loosens up the chain of events, breaks the cause-effect linkage and the unity of space that are the basic principles of the classical film narrative. The structuring of the episode by the director can be explained with subjectivization of the narrative, enabling the spectator to empathize with Cēzars’ feelings, to follow his stream of consciousness when he dissociates himself from the closed space of the meeting room and the absurd speeches of the functionaries and wanders off in his thoughts into “another space”.

Narrative subjectivization is one of the favoured techniques by Western European modernists. (See, for example Fellini’s *8 1/2*, in which the subjective point of view of the main character who is a film director in a state of crisis, is emphasized – his dreams, stream of consciousness.) There are several episodes in “Four White Shirts” when elements of subjectivization are used.

Parallels with films by Antonioni and Godard

The similarity of “Four White Shirts” with Western cinematic examples, was stressed as its drawback by the authority of the film criticism of those times Rostislav Yurenev who after reviewing the script of “Four White Shirts” saw its similarity to Michelangelo Antonioni’s films. In his critical review he suggested that the film script should be rewritten by elaborating the characters of the film and improving its dramaturgy:

“One should not watch so many boring films by Antonioni in which nothing happens. The form characteristic of his films perhaps can reveal the emptiness of West European bourgeois characters and morals but not the essential features of a telephone assembler from Riga who composes lyrical songs. There is one song in the script. It has the following lines: “...You cannot demand that everybody knows what

the naive sound of "cuckoo" means! I disagree with that. I want everything, even the naive scripts and their meaning to be clear to everyone" [Yurenev 1966].

"Four White Shirts" itself creates stylistic associations with films by Antonioni. Antonioni who places and dramatizes his film characters as tragic and alienated individuals within the aesthetic landscapes of his own epoch and space, is one of favourite film directors of Rolands Kalniņš although his acquaintance with the films by the Italian film director was very scarce in the 1960s. "Yes, I have certainly watched films by Antonioni and I perceive him as a master of observation. But I got to know his work later. I have never tried to copy anything – never," says Rolands Kalniņš [Rietuma 2017].

Similarity to Antonioni's films is manifested by the use of white background characteristic of Antonioni's films (for example, in *Blow-Up*, 1966), and also by the principles of framing that defy the classical rules of composition. The film "Four White Shirts" has an episode with mimes that resonates with the final scene from Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) in which the mimes are playing tennis without a ball.

It is worthwhile to analyse the unusually constructed opening episode in "Four White Shirts" – it is a band rehearsal scene in which the soloist (Pauls Butkēvičs), Bella (Līga Liepiņa) and Cēzars (Uldis Pūcītis) introduce the audience to the band called "The Optimists".

The episode has been filmed as one long single shot, camera is panning from right to left and back. Medium shots are used and with the help of camera movement and framing parts of the body of the band members *are visually cut off* focusing on the background featuring Bella and Cēzars.

The episode has affinity with the concert scene from Jean Luc Godard's film *Le mépris* (1963) that has been filmed as one long shot using the camera panning from right to left and back. The theme of *Le mépris* is also the essence of creativity – it depicts the process of filmmaking.

City

An essential element of the film "Four White Shirts" are scenes from the city of Riga the use of which is reminiscent of the French New Wave films. Beginning from the very first New Wave films *Les 400 coups* (1959) and *À bout de souffle* (1960) the streets of Paris create a special atmosphere and realistic texture, a documentary character of the events.

Although "Four White Shirts" was not filmed only in real locations, it was partly made in Riga Film studio pavilions, the portrayal of Riga has been granted special attention. The city scenes in the film possess contingency, spontaneity – there are details that have been captured creating a sense of documentary character when shooting Riga cityscape. Documentary character of several episodes in "Four White Shirts" evokes

affinity with the greatest achievements of Riga poetic documentary film (for example, Ivars Kraulītis, Uldis Brauns and Herz Frank's film "The White Bells" (1961)).

In the 1960s lighter and more mobile cameras appeared that were used by the authors of documentary and fiction films. The use of hand-held cameras emphasized the documentary character also in the films by the French New Wave directors.

City scenes in the films of classical style fulfil the functions of constructing the space, their purpose is to specify the setting of the action. In "Four White Shirts" the scenes from Riga city do not function as the traditional establishing shots. They are used as essayistic inserts, as in the episode of the council meeting during which the subversive impact of the songs by Cēzars is discussed. The eloquent speeches of functionaries sitting around a long meeting table are "interrupted" by editing into the sequence scenes from Riga city.

Alienation effect

In his "Four White Shirts" Rolands Kalniņš uses also the New Wave directors' frequently used principle of *eliminating* the fourth wall, creating an estrangement effect by making the actors speak looking straight into the camera. In Kalniņš' film this principle can be observed in the episodes when Bella introduces the spectators with the members of the band "The Optimists". The same technique is used by Godard in his film *À bout de souffle* making the character of Belmondo look on several occasions straight at the spectator.

Cameo

The film "Four White Shirts" has acquired also the value of a document – cultural personalities of the 1960s Latvia have been filmed in it. Stage director and actor Arnolds Liniņš, director Oļģerts Kroders, script-writer and critic Armīns Lejiņš, composer Imants Kalniņš and his brother, the writer Viks (Viktors Kalniņš), as well as the manager of *Riga pantomime* Roberts Ligers and his mimes and others.

The desire to film actual cultural personalities was characteristic also for the directors of the French New wave, for example, Jacques Rivette's film *Paris nous appartient* (1961) has brief appearances of his colleagues, film directors, including Jean Luc Godard. Godard in two of his 1960s films has filmed cinema classics – the German expressionist working in Hollywood Fritz Lang (in *Le mépris* (1963)) and the American genre film director Samuel Fuller (in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965)).

Socialist absurdity

"Four White Shirts" can be compared not only to films by West European authors but also to the films that were made in the countries whose daily realities were closer to those of the Latvian SSR, for instance, with films of the Czech New wave. The affinity between the films by Kalniņš and Czech New wave authors is defined



Figure 1. Poster of the film “Four White Shirts” created in 2018 for the film’s international premiere in Cannes Film Festival more than 50 years after the film was made.

by the grotesque, socially critical element, the ability to bring the daily events to absurdity. An explicit example is Miloš Forman’s *Hoří, má panenko* (1967) in which a fire brigade’s ball is transformed into absurd and chaotic mess. Both Kalniņš, as well as Forman use elements of grotesque and absurdity, filming vivid characters who have a peculiar manner of speaking.

The culmination of the absurdity is the meeting scene in “Four White Shirts”. To create the impression of absurdity, a specific filming technique is used – the functionaries are filmed from low, non-complementary angles, creating the sense of distortion that is in particular contrast to the officious portrait of Lenin on the wall and his slogan: “Art belongs to people.”

The open ending

An essential feature of modernist cinema is an open ending. Classical examples when the plot remains open permitting several different further alternatives is, for example, Truffaut’s *400 Les 400 coups* (1959), Antonioni’s *L’eclisse* (1962) and others. It is used also by Rolands Kalniņš in “Four White Shirts” – in the final scene set against white background we see a microphone on the left side of the frame, Bella goes up to it in order to announce the band and leaves the frame. The credit “The End of Film” follows. Whether Cēzars and his band played at the concert or it was banned remains an unanswered question – the ending of the film is open.

Summing it all up – Rolands Kalniņš’ film “Four White Shirts” has many typical features that link it to the work of essential Western and East European modernist film directors. Unfortunately, the director’s creative freedom and intuitive affiliation to the most essential modernist trends of the 1960s turned out to be a too radical

challenge for the functionaries who watched over the soviet cinema life. Because of this reason the fate of “Four White Shirts” was complicated but the use of modernist techniques in cinema under conditions of Soviet Latvia was deemed to be unacceptable precedent that was to be banned.

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