

PARALLEL CINEMA: EXPLORING THE SOVIET AMATEUR FILM COLLECTION OF THE LATVIAN STATE ARCHIVE OF AUDIOVISUAL DOCUMENTS

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Soviet-era amateur filmmaking is a fascinating and little researched area of film history in Latvia. Despite the huge popularity of amateur film clubs in its heyday, today the movement is all but forgotten in Latvia and virtually unknown to the world. In 2021, as our archive acquired the ability to digitize small gauge films, we set out to explore our amateur film collection, containing over 600 film titles, with the project Parallel Cinema.

In the Soviet Union, 8 mm and 16 mm amateur filmmaking gained popularity in the 1950s. Under Soviet rule, this pastime was soon formalized into a network of film clubs, organized on the premises of factories, kolkhozes, Houses of Culture, etc., and competitive annual film exhibition system. Supported through professional unions, the clubs provided access to filmmaking equipment, film stock, and professional advice. The network gave opportunities to travel and befriend amateur filmmakers from other Soviet republics, and for the lucky few – the chance to go abroad to represent the USSR at international amateur film festivals, such as the one organized by UNICA – the International Union of Amateur Cinema.

Amateur films are typically associated either with documentation of private family life or artistic experiments with the film medium. In the USSR the amateur film network was conceived to serve ideological purposes, and the participants encouraged to focus on 'socially significant' topics. However, the clubs enjoyed more freedom from censors than professional film industry, and the recommended topics could be bent and interpreted as best suited the authors. Over time, this resulted in a variety of styles and genres of expression. Former members of amateur film scene fondly remember the clubs as venues where they found likeminded people, made lifelong friends, could express themselves artistically and vent their frustration with life under Soviet occupation.

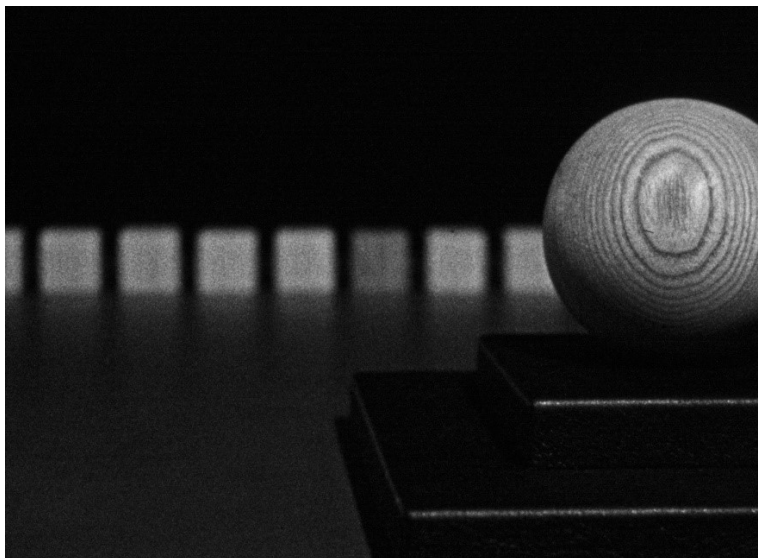


Image 1. Still from the stop-motion amateur animation film *The Career*, 1986, director Karlis Sverns, no. LNA_KFFDA_F31_1_233

Therefore, the movement was extremely popular – in the 1970s and 1980s, the golden era of Latvian amateur film, the Latvian Union of Amateur Filmmakers incorporated a few dozen film clubs and up to 3000 members in a country of 2.5 million people. The annual exhibition screenings were packed, and a dedicated TV program was broadcast regularly on the local TV channel.

A number of amateur authors were in fact professionals in other fields of art, for instance, graphic art or photography. For some, amateur filmmaking served as a springboard for their careers in professional film industry. For others, it was a safe place to practice avant-garde experiments.



Image 2. Still from the experimental film *Twilight Games with a Mirror*, 1972, director Ivars Skanstins, LNA_KFFDA_F31_1_458

In a twist of fate, amateur filmmaking went into decline as Latvia regained independence. The network's financing system collapsed in the era of rapid political and economic changes and technological advances. Majority left the hobby behind, but some of the former amateur filmmakers took care to collect, preserve, and donate their films to the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents, most notably the last head of the Latvian Union of Amateur Filmmakers, Regina Sulca.

The Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents is a structural unit of the National Archives of Latvia and the largest repository of audiovisual documents in the country. Our holdings include over 100 000 storage units of film and video documents, 1.8 million photographs and 54 000 sound recordings. For our project of amateur film exploration and digitization, Parallel Cinema, we had several aims. Firstly, we wanted to preserve this physically fragile part of Latvian film heritage and re-introduce these films to public. Secondly, we felt the need to contextualize the films, and wanted to preserve the memories of the older generation of former amateur filmmakers. And last but not least we wanted to encourage the donations of similar materials still in the wild.

To publicize the films, we had the handy Collections section on our public data base www.redzidzirdilatviju.lv (See, Hear Latvia!). Modeled after such digital repositories as Europeana, we use the section to publish curated collections of our documents.



Image 3. Screenshot of the amateur film collections on the website www.redzidzirdilatviju.lv (See, Hear Latvia!).

A selection of 56 diverse amateur films was published – while the bulk of films that have survived are documentaries, there are animation films and scripted short films too – accompanied by introduction to the history of amateur filmmaking in Latvia, plus additional collection of related photographs and other documents from various sources. We also commissioned a series of articles – a deeper dive into different aspects of amateur film to be published in a local film magazine – and organized a film screening and conversation with former amateur filmmakers and film historians.

As part of the project, we conducted 15 video interviews with the former amateur filmmakers that not only allows for further contextualization but records the personal experiences and memories of the people who made these films.



Image 4. Moment from the video interview with former amateur filmmaker Regina Sulca. July 2021, photo by Rudolfs Hencels.

While we have only just skimmed the surface of what the amateur film collection has to offer, we feel that we have ignited a spark of interest in this forgotten realm of film heritage. Since the project was launched, we have received a number of inquiries from people who want to know if our collection includes films once made by them or their family members. We have also received several donations of amateur films, including culturally valuable additions, for instance, a film that documents the creation of the last work of a renowned Latvian sculptor, made in the 1980s by her son, an amateur filmmaker.

The trove of original work created by amateur authors presents a direct, authentic look on the human experience in the Soviet system, the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of people from all walks of life, and holds many cinematic gems and surprises. Our journey of discoveries continues.



Image 5. Gena, the cheerful garbage truck driver – protagonist of amateur documentary film *The Sector*, 1981, director Daila Rotbaha, LNA_KFFDA_F31_1_219