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## THE POPULAR MOVEMENT AND POSTMODERNISM. REFLECTIONS ON THE CINEMA OF SAJŪDIS

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Eyewitness chronicles of the popular movement, from the first stirrings of open protest in 1987 to the reestablishment of Lithuanian independence in 1991, highlight the intense desire among people at that time to learn the “true” history of their nation. Commentators spoke of the “return of memory” – a revolution in historical consciousness – as a key factor enabling the political changes that engulfed the Soviet bloc.<sup>1</sup>

The popular movement was indeed a liminal phenomenon that ushered a fundamentally new reality into Lithuanian politics, society and culture. But while the metaphor of memory’s “return” is highly evocative, it provides little insight into the nature of the condition that is logically but inadequately described as “post-Soviet.” The dichotomy of “true” memory’s return as against the “false” memory that reigned under Soviet repression glosses over the extensive work involved in the transformation of historical consciousness. Moreover, it artificially isolates events in Eastern Europe from analogous processes that occurred elsewhere in Europe and internationally. As an alternative, this article examines the popular movement as the Lithu-

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Erich Senn’s *Lithuania Awakening* (1991) provides an accessible account that underscores the importance of the historical question to the politics of the times.

anian expression of a broader cultural phenomenon; namely, the postmodern transformation of the subject's relation to the past.

Especially in view of Lithuania's integration into the European cultural framework, the label of "post-Soviet" is increasingly anachronistic and may even pose an obstacle to the understanding of current cultural developments. Framing the popular movement not simply as an anti-Soviet political campaign, but as a deep and enduring cultural reaction to (Soviet) modernization, allows for a consideration of the ongoing influence of attitudes formed during that period, now that Lithuania, along with all other European states, faces the challenges of modernization and globalization.

A community's orientation towards the past is shaped by many sources, with television and film playing an especially influential role. Petras Abukevičius's documentary film *Lithuania between Past and Future* was widely broadcast and is representative of developments in Lithuanian cinema at that time. An analysis of this film in the context of the cinematic practice in European and American cinema suggests that during the late eighties Lithuania generated its own version of the politics and aesthetics of postmodernism.

#### POSTMODERNISM EAST AND WEST

Although Fredric Jameson was writing in 1984 about the cultural logic of "late capitalism," his celebrated description of postmodernism could serve as an accurate characterization of developments in Eastern Europe just a few years later (Jameson 1984). According to the Slovenian philosopher Aleš Erjavec, the condition of "late socialism" was quintessentially postmodern in that it marked the appearance of a vantage point on the project of modernity, in this case Soviet modernity, as a discrete episode of history with a beginning and, more importantly, with an end (Erjavec 2003). Indeed, the finality with which Soviet modernity came crashing to a close underscores the postmodern character of cultural processes in Eastern Europe even more clearly than in the West.

Abstracting from Jameson's by now familiar argument there are three moments of the postmodern orientation to the past each of which emanates from the "shallowness" of the new "culture of the simulacrum." In the first instance, one finds a popular disenchantment with the grand narratives of modernity and the enlightenment like those of reason, progress and emancipation. This disenchantment leads to a loss of "historicity," or the sense of how one's individual or collective past determines the present. For Jameson, "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (Jameson 1984: 64). Ultimately, this loss of the sense of history provokes a wave of nostalgia in the postmodern individual, an intense desire to access the lost historical real.

In terms of cultural productions, the result of this loss of historicity, combined with a growing desire for the historical real, is a paradoxical proliferation of historical images that bear an ever less satisfying relationship to the past. As Anton Kaes said about West German postwar cinema and the representation of that country's past, "the sheer mass of historical images transmitted by today's media weakens the link between public memory and personal experience. The past is in danger of becoming a rapidly expanding collection of images, easily retrievable but isolated from time and space, available in an eternal present by pushing a button on the remote control" (Kaes 1989: 198).

But while the technological proliferation of images in the "capitalist" West was at the heart of the postmodern disenchantment with narrative meaning, a similar and even more pronounced effect was engendered by the ideological manipulation of representation and the suppression of history in the "socialist" East. "Long before Western video technology began to produce an overabundance of authentic images about an absent reality," writes the Russian philosopher Mikhail Epstein, "this problem was already being solved by our ideology, press and statistics, which would calculate crops that would never be harvested to the hundredths of a percentage point." For Epstein, postmodernism in Eastern Europe is essentially a reaction to utopianism, and postmodern culture reflects a fundamental reworking of the relationship between the present and the past. In Soviet utopian modernism, the "future was thought to be definite, attainable and realizable; in other words, it was given the attributes of the past. Postmodernism, with its aversion to utopias, inverted the signs and reached for the past, but in doing so, gave it the attributes of the future" (Epstein 1995: 330).

#### THE POPULAR MOVEMENT AND THE PAST

Epstein's characterization of postmodern culture as an act of reaching for the past as the new future neatly captures a crucial element of the politics of Sajūdis, which sought explicitly to turn back the historical clock to the point where the Baltic States were illegally annexed to the Soviet Union. This movement of "back to the future" found its expression not only in the politics and legislation of restoration, but also in all kinds of cultural productions and practices.

It would be a profound understatement to describe the reception of Soviet ideology and historiography in the Baltics during the 1980s as disenchantment with the grand narratives of modernist emancipation. The incredible surge of the desire for the historical real in Lithuania was marked first of all by an outright rejection of blatant Soviet omissions and distortions of

the past. Gorbachev's apparent hope that a measure of *glasnost* might serve to legitimate the regime backfired miserably in the Baltics, as any one query led to another, unwinding the ball of implausible theories and narratives concerning the "willing incorporation" of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union.

Commemorations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23 became a touchstone for the public revision of history. The first open demonstrations were held in 1987. Led by a handful of dissidents a few hundred demonstrators gathered around St. Anne's Church in Vilnius.<sup>2</sup> Just two years later, on August 23, 1989, an estimated 1.8 million people, one quarter of the entire population in the region, forged a human chain 650 kilometers long from Vilnius to Riga to Tallinn. It would be hard to imagine a greater demonstration of Jameson's "historicity" in terms of a public sense of how the past determines the present than the mass commemorations in Lithuania from 1987 onwards. Clearly, a profound reorientation towards the past and its significance had occurred, but how exactly to account for the emergence of this new historicism remains a challenge.

The circulation of previously censored or suppressed texts certainly played an essential role. Prominent examples include Aldolfas Šapoka's *History of Lithuania* (1935), long confined to the *spetsfond* of forbidden texts, or the secret protocols to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, well known in the West but suppressed in the Soviet Union, and especially the memoirs of Lithuanian deportees and other victims of the Soviet regime, such as the diaries of Dalia Grinkevičiūtė. Yet while the disclosure of such previously censored information about the past was necessary, it was probably not in itself sufficient to generate a genuine revolution in public life.

Virgilijus Čepaitis uttered a telling phrase in his address to the crowd gathered in Vilnius for the 1988 commemoration of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact: "We must know our history, and not just know it but remember that each of us is there and participating" (cited in Senn 1991: 141). For Čepaitis, as well as for the crowd of tens of thousands gathered for the commemoration, the past is understood as a place that one actually inhabits in the present. It is not simply an object for contemplation but an arena for individual and collective action. This typically postmodern conflation of the past and present, and the mixing of the dimensions of time and space, invokes an orientation towards the past that is best described as ritualistic.

Contemporary observers frequently commented on the ritualistic character of the politics of Sajūdis. Vytautas Kavolis wrote in 1991 of how the rituals of the popular movement revealed a "Baroque popular culture" and a "theatrical cast of mind": "...only in Lithuania are there processions in the

<sup>2</sup> Senn cites an eyewitness who estimates 300 people in the church, 500 demonstrators on the square, and some 2000 passersby who manifested interest in varying degrees (Senn 1991: 38).

tens of thousands carrying crosses across the country to the Hill of Crosses.... Only in Lithuania can young men in the guise of medieval knights march in to defend the Parliament building against Soviet tanks.... This occurs against a backdrop of almost daily celebrations of all conceivable memorial days, numerous re-inaugurations of destroyed monuments, reburials of exhumed bodies of Siberian deportees” (Kavolis 1991: 57-58).

In the cultural context of postmodernism, where every attempt to provide a comprehensive account of history falls short, the historical rituals of Sąjūdis were highly effective. They imbued the referent of the past with a palpable reality and a concrete, meaningful relationship to the present that could inform and drive political action. Instead of attempting to rewrite history the emphasis was on investing specific symbols and sites with a deeply felt, personal meaning through commemorative rituals. In a different context, the French historian Pierre Nora described the emergence of such places over time as *lieux de mémoire*, the historical significance of which is measured in both cognitive and, more importantly, affective dimensions (Pierre 1989: 7-25).

These sites of memory fed the popular desire for the historical real not by offering an alternative grand narrative or interpretation of the past, but by incarnating specific facts or experiences of the past. Places associated either with Lithuania’s medieval grandeur or its modern experience of victimhood were given the greatest prominence. Such sites represented history in the form of a trace, serving as indexical pointers to a glorious and/or traumatic past, to the absent cause of a present seething with emotion.

The *sodyba* or farmstead of Vilius Orvidas (1952-1992) is perhaps the clearest manifestation of a *lieu de mémoire* and postmodern sensibility in Lithuania. This estate-museum is located in Western Lithuania (Samogitia) not far from the town of Salantai. Orvidas, on his own initiative, started gathering stones and trees from villages destroyed during the times of forced urbanization and arranging them into free-flowing art forms.

The place can be interpreted as a sanctuary, a museum, or as an absurdist archive of a lost way of life. He hung trees upside down, carved stones, and arranged relics to make the farmstead into a kind of installation. Word of this place quickly spread among individuals who were discontent or looking for alternatives to the mainstream: from intellectuals to drug addicts, from monks to artists, it became a meeting place, a destination for pilgrimages. His estate became a monument to the trauma of collectivization and the destruction of the traditional way of life.

The example of Orvidas’s museum shows that such sites of memory may indeed have been exploited for political purposes during the popular movement, but they emerged independently of one another during the period of so-

called stagnation under Brezhnev. They represent a broad cultural phenomenon influenced by a profound sense of disenchantment with the present and a postmodern nostalgia for a lost past felt to be the only source of authenticity.

#### POSTMODERN DOCUMENTARY WEST AND EAST

According to Linda Williams, an editor of *Film Quarterly*, the postmodern documentary in Europe and America adopted several techniques to address the prevalent skepticism towards the truth-value of visual images of the past. Throughout the 1980s the “loss of the referent” and the sense of disconnect with the past reinforced a desire for the real, leading to an outpouring of historical films with a more reflexive, self-critical stance towards the “reality” of their representations than before. Far from abandoning the pursuit of truth, she says, the postmodern documentary represents an engagement with “a newer, more contingent” truth that “still operates as the receding horizon of the documentary tradition” (Williams 1993: 11).

For Williams, rather than representing in a realistic fashion the events of the past postmodern cinema is concerned with new ways of historicizing the past, of representing the present in relation to the past: “Each of these documentaries digs towards an impossible archeology... The past events examined in these films are not offered as complete, totalizable, apprehensible. They are fragments, pieces of the past invoked by memory, not unitary representable truths but, as Freud once referred to the psychic mechanism of memory, a palimpsest” (Williams 1993: 15). In this manner, one might describe the postmodern documentary as a film focused on memory rather than history.

As such, the postmodern documentary deals with history in the traumatic sense of traces of the past, signs that are inaccessible to the traditional *cinema vérité* that aims to capture action as it simply “happens” before the camera. Thus, the emphasis in postmodern documentary is on the recording the testimony of witness/actors as they perform onscreen the act of recollecting the past. The “moment of truth” in the postmodern documentary thus occurs when the past “repeats” itself on screen in the act of recollection: “We thus see the power of the past not simply by dramatizing it, or reenacting it, or talking about it obsessively... but finally by finding its traces, in repetitions and resistances, in the present. It is thus the contextualization of the present with the past that is the most effective representational strategy” (Williams 1993: 15).

The very title of Petras Abukevičius’s documentary captures the essence of the political culture of Sajūdis as geared towards the generation of a specific vector of historical consciousness. As Williams said of the postmodern

documentary, the focus of *Lithuania between Past and Future* is not to present an objective account of the past or engage in polemics with established Soviet interpretations, but rather to contextualize the present in relation to specific, highly symbolic and emotionally evocative relics that can be seen, touched and filmed in the present.

The centerpiece of this strategy lies in how the film represents some of the central political rituals of the era, like the procession of crosses and the reconsecration of the remains of deportees brought back from Siberia. There is no explanation of what is happening on screen, no discussion of the illegality of the deportation or of the inhuman conditions under which the prisoners lived and died. Instead, scenes of people digging up graves in Siberia and the return of coffins draped in Lithuanian flags at the airport in Vilnius are framed by an extended discussion by the ethnographer Norbertas Vėlius on the mythology and culture of the ancient Lithuanians.

Pointing to the murals in the Department of Philology at Vilnius University as a visual guide, he notes that “our ancestors” have lived on the same territory for over four thousand years,” and how the symbol of the world as a tree symbolizes the rootedness of the Lithuanian nation to the earth. As the film shows crowds of people watching a procession of coffins to Cathedral Square for re-consecration in the church, the sacred heart of Lithuania where the ancient dukes and kings are buried, Vėlius comments “Lithuanians are inseparable from their land. Even after death they return to their homeland... And they could never understand a person who voluntarily chooses to live outside of their home country.” This ritual of return is thus contextualized not so much in terms of a contingent historico-political argument, but in the framework of the most ancient and deeply rooted Baltic myths and beliefs.

The film goes on to visit several sites of memory, places imbued with historical significance that testify to some event of the past that continues to hold meaning to the present. It gives a high profile to Orvidas’s estate, which the narrator describes as a “museum of the absurd” that is simultaneously the very face of contemporary Lithuanian culture: “neglected and fading, but paradoxically alive, producing new meanings in the form of relics sacralized and made into symbols. Looked at from the outside it’s just a dump, a chaos of garbage, the ruins of buildings, accidental sculptures, household utensils and stones, but as an ensemble it acquires a unique meaning crystallized into organic forms in which life becomes ritual and ritual becomes life.”

Perhaps most importantly, the film reflects a poetics typical of Lithuanian culture of the times, which emphasizes the special relationship between the individual and the native landscape, which views the landscape as a repository of memory, and which scours this landscape for the “little dia-



monds” or *deimančiukai*, that is, individuals who have a “special relationship” to the land and thus are the carriers of its memory.

The vocabulary of “little diamonds” was developed by Motiejus Valančius who encouraged Lithuanian intellectuals to search for unique individuals among simple country folk preserving in their memory what was best in the Lithuanian nation. His call was taken up by other Lithuanian documentary filmmakers during the late eighties such as Henrikas Šablevičius, Kornelijus Matuzevičius, and Vytautas V. Landsbergis.

This cinematic aesthetics was clearly influenced by Lithuanian literature, which is also strongly focused on the special relationship between the individual and his or her native land, memory embodied in the landscape, and the traces of historical trauma like scars on the native landscape.

In the opening scene the viewer is treated to a spectacular panorama of the Kuronian Spit (*Kuršių Nerija*) and its sprawling sand dunes by the lagoon. The location itself is highly symbolic – the spit is a natural reserve and the lagoon itself is dying out, shrinking, its flora and fauna becoming extinct. The landscape recalls the lot of the Kuronians, a Baltic tribe assimilated by the Germans in the Middle Ages, who left their toponyms behind as a historical trace of their culture. The figure of an elderly woman emerges from the dunes, walking and singing a folk song – her motion is slow, peaceful, the landscape is beautiful. She then turns towards the camera and, pointing at the sand hills, bears witness to the disappearance of olden settlements: “I am standing here now... and here is the second Nida covered by sand... over there is first Nida... and I still live in the third Nida. Everything is under the sand... I am the last survivor who still remembers a bit.”

This motif continues in the film with an interview with Justinas Mikutis (1922-1988). His discourse in the film is fragmentary and more expressive than logical: “I came out alive from the grave. I was alive in the grave... And I was suffering there I cannot describe how. I do not want to present myself as a martyr, but you know, I could not breathe there...” He says that he did not want “to go with the Russians or Prussians,” that “I would rather be a Lithuanian pea.” For the popular movement Mikutis was a sort of Socratic figure or an itinerant sage, a friend of poets and intellectuals who considered him the very incarnation of Lithuanian history because he hid from the Soviet authorities in the basement of his house for 27 years.

This image of the old woman testifying the extinction of Lithuanian villages, or of the small man telling how he hid from the authorities, evokes the prototype of the historical actor who is abandoned and crushed by history. Left alone to bear historical injustice, she or he mistrusts and negates historical discourse and relies only on his or her own memory. Romualdas Granauskas provides a well-known literary example of such a character in



*Homestead Under a Maple Tree*, where an old woman named Veronika testifies the extinction of her native village. She is the last survivor, and the names and life stories of her former neighbors exist only in her memory. The story of her life and of the lives of her neighbors does not fit into large historical narratives and thus can live only in the stories that she tells to herself.

The visual narrative of the film charts a path from the Kuronian peninsula to Vilnius, interviewing witnesses and surveying various other sites of memory such as Orvidas's estate, the Hill of Crosses, a typical country farm, and then returns to the Kuronian peninsula. This circularity makes the viewing of the film into a ritual act, taking the viewer on a symbolic pilgrimage across the landscape of Lithuania, charged with symbolic meaning, and in this process the film transforms the landscape into a sacramental realm.

#### LEGACY OF THE POPULAR MOVEMENT

As a mirror of the times and as an expression in its own right of the cultural climate of the popular movement *Lithuania between Past and Future* suggests a mixed legacy for current cultural developments. The film was a response to a postmodern nostalgia for the historically real; it imbued certain sites of memory with a deep, affective resonance through the enactment and representation of powerful political rituals. It undoubtedly helped to mobilize Lithuanians to act in concert to reject the Soviet rule, but it also reinforced a model of national identity based on a sense of collective trauma and deep attachment to the sacred soil of Lithuania.

This highly affective mode of self-understanding may prove to be somewhat out of step with the globalizing impetus of European integration. If one interprets the postmodernism of late socialism as a reaction against the perverse model of Soviet modernization, then it follows that the cultural legacy of this period could work against the modernizing demands of labor mobility, multiculturalism and free market exchange now emanating from Brussels.

Having rejected one model and embraced the new European model of modernization Lithuanians are forced to confront again many of same challenges to their traditional ethnic identity and way of life. While there are no clear-cut answers to these challenges, it may be helpful to realize that the situation in the "post-socialist" space is not fundamentally different from that elsewhere in Europe. Postmodernism is indeed a pan-European reaction to the global processes of modernization, and while its cultural expression may differ from place to place many of the same essential features are in evidence.

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SAJŪDŽIO JUDĖJIMAS IR POSTMODERNIZMAS.  
SAMPROTAVIMAI APIE SAJŪDŽIO LAIKŲ KINĄ

## SANTRAUKA

Sovietiniam režimui besipriešinantis Sąjūdžio judėjimas, ėmęs ryškėti Lietuvos politiniame gyvenime devintojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje, turėjo ir platesnio kultūrinio fenomeno – postmodernizmo – bruožų. Petro Abukevičiaus dokumentinis filmas „Lietuva tarp praeities ir ateities“ atskleidžia pokyčius, žyminčius Lietuvos visuomenės orientaciją į praeitį, ir šiuo požiūriu gali būti lyginamas su postmoderniu kinu, kuriamu Vakarų Europoje ir Amerikoje. Postmodernios tendencijos, pastebimos Sąjūdžio judėjime, turi rimtų pasekmių ir dabartiniams Lietuvos integracijos į Europą procesams. Atmetusi sovietinį modernizacijos modelį ir siekianti naujo, europietiško modelio įgyvendinimo, Lietuva priversta susidurti su tais pačiais pavojais, kurie išskyla tradicinei etninei tapatybei bei gyvenimo būdui. Kadangi nėra aiškių atsakymų kaip šių pavojų būtų galima išvengti, verta įsisąmoninti, kad „posocialistinės“ erdvės situacija nėra iš esmės skirtinga nuo kitų Europos šalių situacijos. Postmodernizmas yra paneuropietiška reakcija į globalius modernizacijos procesus, ir nors jo kultūrinė raiška skiriasi, bendri bruožai taip pat yra akivaizdūs.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: postmodernizmas, praeities reprezentavimas, Sąjūdis, dokumentinis kinas.