

ACCUMULATING NEGATIVE AFFECTS: THE DIARY OF THE SOVIET LATVIAN FILM DIRECTOR GUNĀRS PIESIS

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Research interests: queer representation and masculinities in contemporary art and Soviet cinema, the historical development of narrative theories, and the archives of writer Andra Neiburga and film director Gunārs Piesis

This article comprehensively analyses Gunārs Piesis's diary, providing a complete reconstruction of its content. Historical and literary discursive practices have been employed to examine the material. The central point of the argument is that the diary illuminates Piesis's personality, his queer feelings, and mental health struggles, particularly his battle with depression, which had been previously dismissed as mere moodiness rather than a genuine disability. Furthermore, the diary confirms rumours surrounding Piesis's homosexuality, an important part of his identity, which he tried to suppress and emancipate. The diary offers valuable insights into his personal history. It serves as a testament to the controlling and repressive mechanisms employed by the Soviet authorities during that time. These mechanisms significantly impacted Piesis's sexual life and artistic freedom, and this article is the first to discover and analyse their effects.

Keywords: Gunārs Piesis, diary, queer feeling, homosexuality, Latvian film history

Introduction

In 2012, Riga Film Museum of the Latvian Academy of Culture acquired the archive of a Latvian film director, Gunārs Piesis (1931–1996). The archive was discovered by the new owner of Piesis's summer cottage in Bigauņciems,

Evija Morse-Buch's family, in its attic.¹ The museum has obtained the collection of materials that were not available in Riga Film Studio's archive. The collection includes diaries, notes, letters, scripts, photographs, film editing sheets, and other valuable materials. Despite the inadequate storage conditions and previous demolition cases in the summer house,² these materials provide an opportunity to learn about Piesis's private life and the legacy of his creative work. Previously, only Dzidra Sondore (1932–2016) had edited and published collected memories of Piesis's colleagues about him in the book titled *Talented. Interesting. Testy* (*Talantīgs. Interesants. Kašķīgs*, 2003), which was released seven years after his death.³ Piesis's colleagues' memories repeatedly emphasise his talent, untapped potential, and explosive character, which led to loneliness in his final days. However, Piesis's voice was missing, which is usually revealed in well-known creatives' diaries, letters, and memoirs. Before this accidental find, it was impossible to fully comprehend his voice and personality. Aside from the newly discovered excerpts of the diaries from 1981 to 1984 that were commented on and published in the Latvian film magazine *Kino Raksti*⁴ by Kristīne Matīsa⁵, these materials gained little resonance.⁶ The published excerpts reveal Piesis's struggle with depression, which made it possible to speculate that his grumpiness and lousy temper are a hasty and superficial judgment. There were also rumours about his

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- 1 Līva Pētersone (2012). Zudušo laiku meklējot. Atradums! *Diena*. Accessible at: <https://www.diena.lv/raksts/sodien-laikraksta/zuduso-laiku-meklejojot.-atradums-13957899> (viewed 09.05.2023).
 - 2 In the book about Piesis compiled by Dzidra Sondore, dance historian and writer Igors Freimanis describes the damage done to the archive: "After a while, Gunārs Piesis's cousin Valdis Piesis inherited the property in Bigauņciems. A couple of years ago, the neighbour's sons, unable to control their mischief, ransacked the house. From the attic, where a large collection of valuables was stored, books were tossed out of the window and burned in a bonfire. Was there an offence? Probably not. There was no crime and no punishment." (Sondore 2003, 152). I can only speculate whether the diaries, which are currently considered lost, were also burned. It is important to note that the neighbours mistreated Piesis's property during his lifetime, which he writes about in the third volume of his diary, covering the period from 1981 to 1984.
 - 3 Ibid.
 - 4 Piesis 2016.
 - 5 The editor-in-chief of the film magazine *Kino Raksti*.
 - 6 Dzidra Sondore had the last volume of Piesis's diary covering the period from 1989 to 1995. In 2001, she handed it over to Riga Film Museum. Agris Redovičs, the head of the museum and the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Kino Raksti*, during that time, published it with accompanying comments, thus making it the first publication of Piesis's diary (Piesis 2001, 104–109).

sexuality,⁷ which have not yet been contextualised concerning the films he made. Piesis has constructed the narrative of his diary exclusively about himself, writing down his thoughts and experiences, which most often reveal a gloomy picture of his life. However, the boxes of unsystematised archival materials provide unexpected discoveries, as the earliest entries from the diary date back to 1959 when Piesis studied film direction at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow.

This article presents the analysis and a complete reconstruction of Piesis's diary corpus for the first time. Historical and literary discursive practices are combined to analyse the material.⁸ The findings in the diary provide new knowledge about Piesis's mental health. They prove that his struggle with depression and bipolar affective disorder was often misunderstood as a bad temper instead of a mental disability.⁹ The diary also confirms rumours about his homosexuality that he tried to suppress and emancipate. It is important to note that his diary is not just a source of personal history but also a testimony of the Soviet authorities' controlling and repressive mechanisms. These mechanisms limited both Piesis's sexual life and artistic freedom.

Periodisation and aspects of materiality

The diary genre allows its author to decide which life events to describe in more detail. Hence, subjectivity and temporality are essential in analysing such a deeply personal “ego document”.¹⁰ Piesis was most active in writing his diary when he was forbidden to work on feature films. During this time, he expressed doubts about the creative process and his thirst for recognition and intimacy

7 The former head of Riga Film Studio, Heinrihs Lepsško (1931–2014), brings these rumours up to date in the documentary dedicated to Piesis's feature film “Blow the Wind!” *Agita Cāne-Ķīle* (Dir.) (2013). *Pūt, vējiņi! Filmas arheoloģija*. [Documentary, 68 min.] Latvia: Latvian Television. Accessible at: <https://replay.lsm.lv/lv/ieraksts/lv/89002/dokumentala-filma-put-vejini-filmas-arheologija> (viewed 09.05.2023).

8 Ozoliņš 2020, 6–19.

9 Although I am not a qualified psychiatrist and cannot make a medical evaluation, I hesitate to dismiss this hypothesis as it is essential when analysing Piesis's diaries. Writing allowed Piesis to explore his emotions without reiterating existing notions of his bad temper. This is important because it sheds light on his artistic endeavours and can be viewed through the lens of affect theory, a concept that will be further explored in upcoming articles.

10 Hellbeck 2004, 621–629; Schulz 1996.

from friends and sexual partners. He mainly used the diary for self-motivation,¹¹ therapy, or recording new artistic ideas rather than for direct documentation of the era. However, he was aware of its potential as a testimony of personal history for future researchers.

In some cases, Piesis drafted notes that were initially intended for carefully planned entries but did not make it into the diary itself. Sometimes it is difficult to date them, making it challenging to distinguish whether it is a continuation of the same day or a new entry.¹² Piesis's diary is no exception in that it simultaneously serves as a documentary testimony and an artistic expression.¹³ It questions critics' influence on the Soviet audience's opinions¹⁴ and challenges encountered during the stages of film development and production.¹⁵ It looks at the interpersonal relations within the Soviet film industry, influenced by the political conditions of the time, and the intrigues within Riga Film Studio.¹⁶ Piesis would allude to all this indirectly, letting the reader of the diary interpret the content. Among other things, the diary reveals the diversity of lived experiences of the Soviet subject, which cannot be reduced to a simplistic dichotomy of loyalty and dissidence.¹⁷

The volumes of the diary and dated notes cover the period from Piesis's studies in Moscow to the last year of his life. The diary of 1959 is available in a separate notebook,¹⁸ while the period from 1963 to 1981 is preserved as individual blocks of pages torn out of notebooks.¹⁹ Piesis wrote a diary from 1981 to

11 "The skill to discipline myself for work, for life. Trying to have a grip on myself and continue work, work. Because in work, there is both – material and moral well-being. Prolonged inactivity degenerates. I am using the allocated lifetime extremely irrationally. The best part of my life is behind me. More foresight with the rest." Piesis, Gunārs. *Dienasgrāmata*, 1981–1984. Rīgas Kino muzejs (Rīga, hereinafter: RKM), RKM 19015, 09.08.1983.

12 A similar example, which has been a challenge for its researchers due to erratic date-keeping, is the diary of the Russian Soviet writer Yuri Olesha (1899–1960). It was not easy for Olesha to fit into the new Soviet society and literary circles, so he used his diary as a platform to start a new novel to overcome the white page syndrome (Wolfson 2004, 609–620).

13 Paperno 2004, 564.

14 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 07.10.1974.

15 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 03.03.1981.

16 Most clearly evidenced by the script and film preparation period of the children's fairy tale film "Tom Thumb" from 1982 to 1984.

17 Healey 2020, 196.

18 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20255.

19 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256.

1984²⁰ and 1989 to 1995 in notebooks made for technical notes with plastic or leather covers.²¹

Except for the Moscow period, the diary of the 1960s and 1970s has survived only as a compilation of separate blocks of pages. Piesis tore these blocks from his notebooks and left them for future generations to reconstruct his thoughts and experiences. While it is possible that Piesis destroyed a series of records related to his relationships and feelings, the remaining individual logs allow us to speculate about his intimate life.

The first volume of the diary was initially written with a pencil. In the second volume, entries were made with a fountain pen. However, starting from then on, Piesis used blue or black ballpoint pens for writing. He also used green and red colours to write individual segments. The third volume of the diary, with an inscription in Russian “Notebook for technical notes”, is voluminous and covers a period of four years. The most widely documented year is 1984, when Piesis worked on the fairy tale feature “Tom Thumb” (*Sprīdītis*, 1985). It is worth noting that the diary provides more details about the film’s pre-production period rather than the actual filming.²² Likewise, no entries have been found in the diaries about his most successful feature films – “In the Shadow of Death” (*Nāves ēnā*, 1971) and “Blow the Wind” (*Pūt, vējiņi!* 1973), which suggests that he did not write a diary during the production phase.

Apart from the pre-production of “Tom Thumb” and separate entries about the documentaries produced during the 1960s, Piesis did not maintain a diary while on the film set. He resorted to writing in his diary during the so-called idle work periods to record his inner turmoils and motivate himself to work. Riga Film Museum preserves Piesis’s employee record cards that often indicate “Idle 60%”. Although such periods were not entirely idle, the creative work on film development was inconsistent when he was not working on the set. So the diary entries reveal episodes of self-loathing in which he admonished himself for not working enough, not scheduling his time more carefully, and not fighting for his ideas to be turned into films.²³ However, the above mentioned excerpts reveal something else – the idle periods are quite extended, not only due to Piesis’s

20 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015.

21 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 10442. See also published version of this diary: Piesis 2001, 104–109.

22 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015.

23 Here and after, I give the abbreviated record with the most relevant data: Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 29.11.1982.

struggle with depression,²⁴ which affects his ability to work, but also he assumes that he is intentionally being kept away from film work. In the diary, he laments being disregarded as a director because work on a film can be suspended for several years. Despite working on multiple potential projects simultaneously, Piesis struggles to finish them and lacks confidence in their eventual realisation.

Piesis was an ardent advocate of national cultural values. Most of his feature films are based on Latvian literary classics and folklore materials. However, in the early 1960s, he often expressed in his diaries that he ceased speaking and writing in Latvian and switched to Russian as a radical protest against criticism of his creative work and the low rating of his films.²⁵ Regarding his fluency in Russian, it is worth noting that he spent his early school years in the settlement of Kstinina, Kirov region. Later, while studying in Moscow, all his notes were written in Russian, including the diary notebook of 1959.

The diary is a testimony to intense emotional turmoils that became stronger over the years, documenting a personality that accumulates negative affects²⁶ and emotional outbursts. These are exacerbated by the suppression of his artistic freedom and the fear created by the political system. They contribute to conflicts with colleagues, isolation, passivity and inability to work, persecutory delusion, and depression. As the diary entries show, these emotions become more intense towards the end of his life. Contemporaries described him as intolerant, hysterical, and despotic. Piesis most likely suffered from bipolar affective disorder, evident in the larger volume of the diary from 1981 to 1984.²⁷ During the time period in which he lived, he did not have access to the advantages that are available today, such as therapy, appropriate medication, and the understanding that

24 In the diary, Piesis records his struggle with depression in 1984, which might have been the most challenging year for him emotionally.

25 Such reflections occurred to Piesis after his first failures in feature films, after 1963, when he turned to the documentary genre.

26 In this article, negative affects are discussed which include various adverse emotional experiences, such as anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, fear, and nervousness (Koch, Forgas, Matovic 2013, 326–334). A recent scholarly examination of negative affects in the work of Latvian filmmakers has been authored by a prominent film scholar and professor Inga Pērkone, with whom I have studied film history. In the second chapter of her book *Affects and Memories: On Feelings and Latvian Cinema (Afekti un atmiņas: Par sajūtām un Latvijas kino, 2023)*, she focuses on the analysis of negative affects and draws upon the categorisation put forth by the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1911–1991) (Pērkone 2023, 38).

27 “I constantly dwell on the theme of my insignificance and helplessness. Hard-heartedness in this regard has already become traditional. I am inexorably sliding down, losing more and more importance and authority in those around me.” Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 30.10.1983.

mental health can be very fragile. Therefore, within these limitations, Piesis used the diary to study his personality and monitor himself, particularly focusing on self-discipline and self-motivation. There is also no doubt that Piesis wrote the diary assuming that others would read it in the future, so he cyclically reevaluates his films in each decade of his life. Piesis, like many artists, has always been egocentric, which has manifested in his relations with colleagues and film reviewers. In his opinion, critics are too harsh and ruthless towards the films produced by Riga Film Studio compared to criticism of other forms of Latvian art. He is particularly bitter about how critics and the public reacted to his films “Your Son” (*Tavs dēls*, 1978) and “Twists of Eras” (*Laikmetu griežos*, 1981), which, in retrospect, can be considered creative failures in his filmography.²⁸

Piesis ended his creative endeavours with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the closure of Riga Film Studio, unable to enroll in the new film project system. The collapse of the film industry also meant that many veteran filmmakers failed to adapt, while some established industry professionals continued their work. Due to Piesis’s mental health issues and damaged relationships with his contemporaries, he could not build new work relationships within artistic circles. Instead, he sold antiques, and vegetables and flowers from his greenhouse to earn some income in addition to his small pension. His last fairy tale film for children was made in 1990. The last diary entry in the shortest volume is dated 20 August 1995. On 9 February 1996, Piesis died of lung cancer.

Notably, the diary does not contain any reflections on the political changes and historical events of the Third Awakening,²⁹ except for the observations of social reality connected to his poverty and efforts to survive by buying and selling antiques. The fourth volume of the diary is the shortest one. It starts with a synopsis from the creative plenum but then continues as a diary with separate entries about the reality of the early 1990s. During this period, Piesis earned money by buying antiques and selling them not only in Riga but also in Moscow and Leningrad, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union.³⁰

Apart from the filming process and inner mental turmoils, Piesis mentions the deaths and funerals of known cultural personalities that were close to him, such as actress Anta Klints (1893–1970) and poet Ojārs Vācietis (1933–1983).³¹ Some of his diary entries reveal Piesis’s suspicion that they were read by

28 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 22.11.1978 and Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 10.–11.03.1981.

29 The movement led to the restoration of Latvia’s independence, sometimes called the “Singing Revolution”, from 1987 to 1991.

30 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 10442, 23.12.1990 and 01.05.1991.

31 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 29.11.1983 and 02.01.1983.

“supervisors”, and thus, he did not record topics related to ideology and politics. He writes: “Even diaries are subject to secret scrutiny. The mood is probed, subject matter checked (doesn’t matter – guilty or innocent, preventive control, so to speak).”³² Piesis’s diary serves as a portrait of his inner world, with little focus on the external world unless it impacts criticism, colleagues related to the creative process, and in some cases – intimate partners, about whom the reader is informed fragmentarily and elliptically. Between 1981 and 1984, Piesis censored his diary entries by tearing out individual pages about his private life. Several records reveal that he was paranoid about certain men he met, thinking that they were reporting on him to the Committee for State Security (KGB).³³

Relations with colleagues and reaction to criticism

Throughout his career as a director, Piesis faced criticism for his creative work on films, which occasionally had certain consequences. He wrote: “It remains only to apologize that I have worked so poorly. Finally, under the blessed influence of criticism, I have understood the gravity of the irresponsibility with which I create all my projects. It is so good that now there are these diligent debunkers. Criticism is aiming to antagonize us with the audience.” [Underlined by Piesis.]³⁴ Piesis was offended by accusations that Latvian film professionals, having been trained in Moscow, did not live up to the expectations placed on them. It was difficult for him to accept that state theatre actors and directors were also employed in film production at the Studio. When working on documentaries, Piesis realised the advantages of television. The programmes on TV are an hour or an hour and a half long, which provides more opportunities for narrative development: “The form of the film chronicle is outdated and useless as a source of information.”³⁵

In his diary, beginning from the 1960s, Piesis frequently expressed his feelings on the situation at Riga Film Studio. He complained about the poor quality of criticism and took personally the harsh tone with which the films were evaluated. He states: “I do not believe that the press has any influence on our work and actions. That is why I remained silent for years; my very subjective, emotional expressions

32 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 1982, entry without date, also 21.11.1983.

33 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 29.11.1982 and 19.07.1983. (It is possible that the entry in green ink was made impulsively, undated, between 19 July and 4 August 1983.)

34 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 10.–11.03.1981.

35 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 18.12.1962.

at various meetings or congresses have never left the slightest impression. (...) I think the press is guilty of intentionally antagonising the Studio employees. Whatever microclimate we create, it makes us feel ourselves accordingly. A lot of different assessments [are expressed]. A good hardworking employee uses to get a more cruel beating.”³⁶ Piesis experienced the mechanisms of oppression and retribution of the political system, leaving an indelible trauma that escalated in his behaviour and communication with colleagues and closest friends. It was difficult for him to find protection because Piesis was not a member of the Communist Party, unlike the majority of his fellow film directors. Living in a constant state of melancholia, he came across as grumpy, hysterical, and lacking self-control. Still, the real cause for his behaviour lay in his depression, which was triggered by the Soviet system’s restrictions and his repressed sexuality, which Piesis tried to bring to life in artistic images in a unique way. They are boys and young men who, through their idealism try to find their place in the world (Kārlēns, Gatiņš, Kurt fon Brimmer, Sprīdītis), they are emotional, which makes them appear feminine in the eyes of others. There are also young girls whose desires go unfulfilled (Zane, Amālija, Paija). Likewise, among his characters, an important place is assigned to pure-hearted young maidens (Baiba, Lienīte, Maija), whose fate is resolved both positively and negatively, depending on the setting of the literary source, and authoritative stern stepmothers (in the movies “Blow, the Wind”, “Tom Thumb”, and “Maija and Paija”). The maidens are usually offered lessons from dramatic life events or through the intervention of mythological deities. However, Piesis mostly worked with adapting literary classics, including the fairy tale genre. The cinematographic images he created have significance in Latvian folklore. It is worth noting that even before they gained popularity in the 1980s, ethnographic ensembles and dance groups were already featured in his films. One of the first examples is the movie “Blow the Wind”.

The ratings of Piesis’s film adaptations of literary classics, except for “Twists of Eras”, were higher than those of his films depicting the present day. This trend began with his debut film “Gray Willows in Bloom” (*Kārkli pelēkie zied*, 1961), followed by the short film “No Need to Go Anywhere Else” (*Nekur vairs nav jāiet*, 1963), and the drama “Your Son” made in 1978.³⁷ Regarding the classics, Piesis emphasises that he is interested in the author’s temperament and the way their

36 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 07.10.1974.

37 Observing the work of his colleagues and the critics’ harsh reviews of “Twists of Eras”, Piesis considered turning to the problems of his time, abandoning his favourite approach of adapting the works of Latvian literary classics. Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 29.11.1982.

emotionality manifests itself in the age-old opposition of love and hate.³⁸ When defending his artistic vision, Piesis always refers to the stylistics of the screened work and its author, including “Twists of Eras”.³⁹ It should be noted that among the Soviet critics, when evaluating adaptations of literary works for the screen, one of the criteria was the movie’s accuracy to the source material and its previous interpretations. It is not surprising in the context of the Soviet period, but it seems absurd now because such an approach hinders the creation of any new interpretations. Piesis’s writing about the influence of critics on the audience comes across as point on and bitter: “And so we have to start again with [self-]justification because by using the right to be the first to view [the movie], [the critics] impose an early judgement on those who have not seen [the movie] yet, fostering a negative, critical attitude in advance.”⁴⁰ A year later, Piesis is looking for a contemporary literary source to avoid interpreting the works of the classics. One of the solutions he mentions is getting to know the writer Ēriks Hānbergs (1933), who, in his opinion, deeply understands rural people.⁴¹ Another option he considers is using observations gained in the courtrooms as a source material.⁴²

Piesis holds idealistic and romantic views and seeks similar qualities in his preferred audience. His reaction to the critics is connected to his personal traumas and his discontent with their voicing publicly their opinion before the audience has had the chance to view the film. According to Piesis, the critics thus maliciously exercise their right to see the movie first and deny the audience the joy of discovering it for themselves.

Social conditions

In his diary, Piesis frequently writes about poverty that arises from the imposed idleness. Even if he receives a higher fee, he struggles to manage his money and often spends it on gifts for “small gestures of attention”. Sometimes,

38 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 14.03.1981.

39 In February and March 1981, Piesis recorded in his diary about the critics’ reaction to the film “Twists of Eras”. Some of the entries express resentment and contain anti-Semitic accusations. For example, he describes the opinion of the critics from *Kino* magazine as “pro-Semitic”. Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*, RKM 19015, the introductory text of 1981 without date, as well as 02.03.1981 and 03.03.1981.

40 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 14.03.1981.

41 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 29.11.1982.

42 Ibid.

he lends it out with the understanding that he may never get it back.⁴³ But Piesis needs money not only to maintain his appearance, which he feels has deteriorated over the years, but also for taking care of his mother⁴⁴ and renovating his summer cottage in Bigauņciems, which he bought after shooting “In the Shadow of Death”.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the upkeep of the house is not going well. The neighbours steal flowers grown in the greenhouse, firewood, and planks. They also break window panes of the house and possibly set up a dump on the side of the road leading to the cottage.⁴⁶ The conflict with the neighbours escalates to the point of systematic theft from their part. Piesis believes that the root cause of this is his lost authority, which has led to a rude attitude from those around him. The diary presents the reader with the author’s subjective viewpoint of the events, which may not always indicate the true extent of the conflict. However, he cares a lot about the property’s condition, even though he may sometimes find it difficult to manage.⁴⁷

Piesis lived in a communal apartment in Riga for a long time. In his diary, he blames himself for lacking the same entrepreneurial spirit as other film directors, such as Jānis Streičs (1936), Olģerts Dunkers (1932–1997), and Gunārs Cilinskis (1931–1992), possessed to get his own living space and improve his living conditions.⁴⁸ Towards the end of his life, when he got a more spacious apartment, Piesis did not hide his struggles with keeping it clean. In his final years, he wrote very few entries and instead focused on tracking his expenditures and trades related to collecting and reselling antiques.⁴⁹

43 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 09.08.1983.

44 See entry without date (from the context, it can be concluded that it is probably 1982): “To organise the apartment to have the necessary workplace. Take care of my mother who can’t handle her affairs.” Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015.

45 “I am the only one who is burdened with a lot in this battle, at least for external appearance and modest decency in the garden in Bigauņciems, the condition of the houses, the cleanliness of the Riga apartment, etc. It is difficult to deal with all this without direct assistants, without relatives and even just sympathizers.” Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 10.08.1983.

46 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, entries of 29.11.1982, 24.08.1983, 30.10.1983, 09.11.1983, 30.11.1983, RKM 19015.

47 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 09.08.1983.

48 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 10.05.1983.

49 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 10442.

The subjectivity of the Soviet homosexual

Piesis's homosexuality is probably one of the reasons why film historians in Latvia were uncomfortable with him. This is because his films do not fit into traditional interpretations unless viewed from the perspective of queer theory, which would bring him closer to other queer film directors behind the Iron Curtain.⁵⁰ While Armenian-born director Sergei Parajanov (*Sarkis Hovsepi Parajaniants*, 1924–1990) was openly caught in a same-sex relationship, Piesis avoided sexual contacts in public space. However, his homosexuality was rumoured. In the documentary “Blow the Wind! The Archeology of the Film” (*Pūt, vējiņi! Filmas arheoloģija*, 2014), it was also confirmed by the former director of Riga Film Studio, Heinrihs Lepeško (1931–2014). He mentions that The Corner House (i.e., the KGB headquarters⁵¹) was also informed about it.⁵²

Evidence of Piesis's intimate life is revealed through the narration of his inner experiences. The diary provides scant and limited information, which is sometimes censored by tearing out individual pages or even blocks. It does, however, reveal details about his relationships with partners to whom he was attached, those with whom he had casual encounters, and also those who most likely reported on him. Piesis was aware of the latter, experiencing fear, anxiety, and self-reproach, which often bordered on persecution mania.

When Piesis, on occasion, opened up about his sexuality, he did not deny it, but he did not openly express it either. Being in the “closet” depressed him, but in his diary entries, he never condemned or denied his sexuality. Piesis knew that his writings were being secretly read to uncover his political views and thoughts. Therefore, in some places, he openly employs irony and indirectly addresses the secret reader when more sensitive posts are published. Unlike Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996), Piesis does not advocate for decriminalisation or

50 I have planned several publications on this, focusing on camp aesthetics and the resulting adaptations of literary works.

51 From 1940 to 1941 and from 1946 to 1991, the building located on the corner of Lenin (now Brīvības) and Friedrich Engels (now Stabu) Streets (the address now is 61 Brīvības Street) served as the headquarters of the USSR State Security Committee. Because of its location, people named it The Corner House. Today, the building serves as a part of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, where the exhibition “KGB in Latvia” takes place.

52 Cāne-Ķīle 2013.

normalisation of homosexuality in his diary.⁵³ Information about the discussions on the decriminalisation of homosexuality between 1965 and 1975 was not publicly available, therefore, neither Irbe nor Piesis were aware of this debate.⁵⁴ Piesis worries about his loneliness, not having a stable relationship, and about wasting his time and resources. Piesis was never caught in sexual activities and punished for them, which suggests, among other things, that his intimate life was very private. He is also not mentioned in Irbe's diary, which often records cultural figures. Since he lived with his mother in a communal apartment until her death, he likely hosted his partners in the summer cottage in Bigauņciems. We learn from Piesis's diary entry on 31 December 1968 that he celebrated the New Year's Eve alone at the summer cottage, expressing sadness that his partner did not visit.⁵⁵ He would socialise with other homosexuals from the art world in cafes and bars that were popular among intellectuals.⁵⁶ Only one recorded instance describes a date; it was with a 23-year-old man in the hotel "Rīdzene" in 1991 when Piesis was 60.⁵⁷

Self-censorship in the diaries is manifested by his tearing out individual pages, using initials when writing about his partners, or not naming them. In two cases, the partners' names are known. They are Jānis from Strenči, also called Jancis or Janka,⁵⁸ and Aigars or A., which most likely was Liepāja Theatre actor Aigars Birznieks (Krupins).⁵⁹ The latter played the leading roles in Piesis's two films – "Your Son" (1978) and "Twists of Eras" (1981). Based on the diary entries, Piesis's partners have always been younger men. At the age of 38, he fell in love with Jānis, who was about 20 years his junior. The record mentions that the young man was drafted for compulsory military service.⁶⁰ Piesis, who was 47 years old at

53 Piesis's diary is not the only such source in which the discourse of homosexuality has been brought up. The discovery of the diary of Kaspars Aleksandar Irbe by the historian Ineta Lipša is an important turning point in researching the history of sexuality in the Soviet period. The diary covers the period from 1927 to 1996. Of course, this is only a factual coincidence, but Irbe and Piesis lived near each other – in Jūrmala and Bigauņciems. Both men passed away in 1996. Commenting and publishing Irbe's diary is an ongoing process, and of the planned four volumes, the first volume covering the period from 1927 to 1949 is currently available. See Irbe 2021; Lipša 2021, 415–442; Vērduņš 2022, 315–317.

54 Alexander 2018, 30–52.

55 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 31.12.1968.

56 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 21.12.1983.

57 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 10442, 06.08.1991. In printed version: Piesis 2001, 108.

58 The person cannot be identified, but the diary entries, in which Piesis wrote about this partner are quoted in the article.

59 Aigars Birznieks, previously with the surname Krupins, later worked in Liepāja Theatre.

60 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 01.09.1964.

the time, cast Aigars in his movies when the latter was still a high school student. The relationship continued for at least three more years, during which Piesis lent Aigars a large sum of money for that time – 960 rubles.⁶¹

However, in his diary, Piesis did not pay much attention to short-lived casual connections unless they involved people he suspected of being informants for the KGB. Piesis often regrets his wasted time and blames himself for not being careful in detecting traitors earlier.⁶² The incident at “Rīdzene” hotel reveals Piesis’s attentiveness and paranoia. If his partner opens up too fast or starts prying, Piesis becomes anxious.⁶³

When describing closeness and intimate relationships, Piesis used euphemisms, putting them in quotation marks, such as “fun”. The terms “homosexuality” and “homosexual” are not used in his diary.

Still, little is known about Piesis’s study years in Moscow from 1956 to 1961. The only document that has survived is his diary from 1959, which mainly contains reflections on the assignments that he had to complete for his studies. There might be some evidence of his friendships in the letters written to him in Russian, which still need to be studied.⁶⁴ Due to the lack of information about this period, it is unclear whether Piesis was aware of the Moscow cruising grounds and whether he visited them and met other men there.⁶⁵ It is worth noting that Piesis attempted to build a relationship with the above mentioned Jānis from Strenči upon his return to Riga in the early 1960s. He also reflected on his sexuality in his diary and with his girlfriend, Zinta. This suggests that he had gained some experience during his time away from Latvia.

61 Birznieks’s request for a loan for the first time was recorded on 04.08.1983. In the entry, Piesis lends the mentioned amount five days later. Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*, RKM 19015, 09.08.1983.

62 A striking example is the conversation with the two dancers of the national dance ensemble “Daile”. Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 19015, 21.12.1983.

63 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 10442, 06.08.1991. In printed version Piesis 2001, 108.

64 I have separated the letters into a set of archival materials worthy of a separate publication to provide more information about Piesis’s studies in Moscow.

65 Healey 2017, 99–100; Healey 2014, 90–108; Healey 1999, 38–60; Essig 1999, 87–89; Clech 2017, 91–110; Clech 2018, 6–29; Roldugina 2019, 16–31; Aripova 2020, 95–114; Schluter 2002, 89–94; Fiks 2013.

In the 1960s, Piesis was supposed to participate in the first Komsomol wedding⁶⁶ at Riga Film Studio. The bride was also from the Studio.⁶⁷ In any case, Piesis desires to establish a relationship with a woman, as throughout the diary he frequently worries about loneliness in old age. The diary entries of 1964 mention Zinta. It can be understood from the context that Piesis was open to her about his private life, including his relationship with Jānis from Strenči:

With Zinta, we have known each other for a long time; [it] could be said that we are good friends. I am open with her; I do not bicker with her as I do with others. We have never quarrelled. I am more and more convinced that cohabitation [with her] is possible. She is a person who can understand everything and not blame one for his past, not even to mention other important and outstanding qualities in her – she is easygoing, sociable, and prudent! Only after everything that has happened and still is happening, will she agree [to marry me]? This time, only someone like her, who knows everything about me, can help me. Loneliness is unbearable even for Mum. She has longed for a close person for ages. The curse will be at least partially lifted. This is no longer bearable. Should I talk about everything today with the doctor? The important thing is that if I am healthy, everything will be fine. There are different ways that people can meet. This will be a rather dreadful way of dating, yet it is the only way we can get out of all this terrible endless monotony and loneliness. Taking care of [my] peace of mind and old age will begin. Public opinion? After all, think what you want, say what you want. And I think there may even be a child. (...) If you don't turn your lifestyle around by 180 [degrees], all of this can drag on, spiral down, and eventually lead to a miserable, terrible, slow death of a useless person.⁶⁸

Piesis views this relationship as an opportunity to organise his life and have someone close to him who supports him in his profession. However, it is apparent

66 Komsomol wedding was an attempt made in the 1950s–1960s to introduce a Soviet tradition: wedding without the presence of an authorised minister of the Church and religious ceremony. It was a wedding ceremony organised by institutions, enterprises, factories, collective farms as well as trade union, Communist Party or Komsomol organisations for their most exemplary Komsomol members and workers. The celebration was sometimes attended by as many as two hundred guests. The respective institution or organisation covered all the costs and the newly-weds received a multitude of gifts that helped them to set up a new household.

67 Cāne-Ķīle 2013.

68 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 15.04.1964.

that he has internalised the medical discourse, and he perceives his sexuality as a curse that is difficult to bear and is affecting his health. Therefore, he thinks he should seek medical consultation with a doctor. He desires to change his life, but the exact opposite becomes a reality in his future. This destructive scenario intensifies his inner experiences and leads to even greater isolation from those around him. However, although the intended marriage does not occur, he continues maintaining good relations with Zinta, as evidenced by further diary entries.⁶⁹ Two years later, in July 1966, Piesis writes in his diary: “Janka dropped by. We have become very close without realising it. Without this friendship, everything would be unfathomably difficult.”⁷⁰ In an entry dated 1 September, we learn, among other things, that “Janka is in ‘exile’ – [he has] a good internship, an adequate, furnished room. He can be drafted at any time.”⁷¹ Despite the distance and separation, their friendship lasted at least two more years since Piesis dedicated a long and open entry in his diary on New Year’s Eve to their relationship:

The boy has exhausted [all opportunities] he could and is now moving to the next stage. Frustrating, yes, but in the end – it’s consequentiality. To see a grumpy, unkept, overly concerned, considerably older person and having to deal with him, if, instead, you can have “fun” and everything else “frisky”, as [actress] Ferda would say in Daile Theatre dance class. The boy is clever, rational, and knows how to become attached, but he also deftly shakes himself free. Everything else is left at the disposal of the “ridiculed”. But the lad should have sensed that the defeaters and passers-by “swallow” it quickly, however, there was something genuine [between us]. It will remain a memory. Feelings are short lived, then indifference [sets in]. (...) Jancis also left in one of the most excruciating moments [of my life]. (The film has not been wrapped, and it will be difficult to finish [it] for various reasons; my head is splitting.) And to convince the boy that in life, just like in the army, you sometimes should visit [the other person] during difficult moments [in their lives]. Exactly at that very moment, the trip from Skrīveri to Riga appeared to be longer than the many previous roads. But that’s just acknowledging facts. It would be ridiculous and unnecessary to blame the youth. Now for myself. Zinta laughs at [my] pessimism. But what exactly is that for a 38-year-old man?⁷²

69 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, entries 25.07.1964 and 08.11.1968.

70 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 27.07.1964.

71 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 01.09.1964.

72 Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 31.12.1968.

Piesis admits that he is too proud to show his affection, but he does not hide that he had made preparations for celebration and welcome of a much-awaited guest, who never arrives. On New Year's Eve, his loneliness manifests more acutely as he reflects upon it in his diary from that moment on.⁷³ Significantly, Piesis describes his longing for intimacy in his diary just before he was given the opportunity to direct his second feature film, "In the Shadow of Death". This film became the highest achievement of his creative career, following his successful work in documentary filmmaking during the 1960s. In the film, homoerotic motives are also evident in the portrayal of the relationship between Karlēns – a sixteen-year-old boy, and Birkenbaums – a middle-aged married man.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Gunārs Piesis's diary is a unique "ego document" that sheds light on his personality, revealing aspects that were unknown even to his closest colleagues. He wrote in notebooks and on separate pages, creating drafts for planned entries, often leaving out important details that were not included in his chronologically organised "intimate archive". Although this habit made it difficult for us to reconstruct the diary, it allowed the author to conceal certain events in his life. As seen from the torn-out pages in the diary volumes, Piesis reread and censored his writing, destroying several essential pieces of his private life. His intention was to meticulously document, review, and evaluate his personality, creating an image of himself as a sensitive, talented, and misunderstood person for the future reader. However, the diary reveals a far more complex picture than the author intended.

The diary confirms his colleagues' rumours about his homosexuality but lacks any reliable evidence since he was never caught in public places. Still, Piesis mentions some partners in the diary, naming those with whom he formed an emotional connection. The diary was where Piesis revealed his awareness of his homosexuality, although in a censored way. He wanted to leave a testimony about himself and, on the pages of the diary, did not hide his sexuality. The desire to be open coexists with wanting to remain silent, but his loneliness pushes him towards sharing more about himself. The terms "homosexual" and

73 "For a long time, but not until the end, one can endure a friendship while hiding." Piesis. *Dienasgrāmata*. RKM 20256, 01.01.1969.

74 It is worthwhile to quote a recollection from the painter Boris Bērziņš's memoirs that Piesis liked the actor Gunārs Cilinskis, who plays Birkenbaums in the film, during auditioning because of his dry, chapped lips (Sondore 2003, 16). I plan to analyse the film in a separate article.

“homosexuality” do not appear in his writings. Instead, Piesis used the euphemisms “friendship” and “fun” to describe his relations with men, leaving out further descriptions of contact.

An important discovery, evidenced throughout the diary, is Piesis’s struggle with depression and, very likely, bipolar affective disorder, which even his closest friends and colleagues did not know about. These potential disorders could explain his mood swings and verbal attacks on his colleagues, who interpreted his behaviour as an expression of Piesis’s explosive character rather than a mental disability. The symptoms of it were exacerbated by loneliness, repressed sexuality, and the oppressive political regime. Manic episodes reinforced his feelings of being controlled, restricted, and monitored, which resulted in isolation from the environment. This was particularly evident as of the early 1980s when Piesis experienced two creative failures. Along with the internalisation of medical discourse, certain character traits like ego-centeredness, self-love, pride, and ambition cannot be dismissed, as Piesis himself admitted in his diary. This affective background forms a complex and multidimensional portrait of the artist who lived and worked under communist ideology and repression.

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AKUMULĒJOT NEGATĪVOS AFEKTUS: PADOMJU LATVIJAS KINOREŽISORA GUNĀRA PIEŠA DIENASGRĀMATA

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Zinātniskās intereses: kvīru reprezentācija un maskulinitātes mūsdienu mākslā un padomju kino, stāstījuma teoriju vēsturiskā attīstība, rakstnieces Andras Neiburgas un režisora Gunāra Pieša arhīvu izpēte

Rakstā pirmoreiz analizēts Gunāra Pieša dienasgrāmatas korpuss pilnā apjomā, veicot pilnu dienasgrāmatas rekonstrukciju. Materiāls raksturots, apvienojot vēsturiskās un literatūrzinātniskās diskursīvās prakses. Rakstā apgalvots, ka dienasgrāmata sniedz jaunas zināšanas par Pieša garīgo veselību: cīņu ar depresiju un, iespējams, bipolāri afektīviem traucējumiem, kas līdz šim skaidrots kā neciešams raksturs, nevis invaliditāte (*disability*). Tāpat dienasgrāmata apstiprina baumas par Pieša homoseksualitāti, kuru viņš centies gan apspiest, gan emancipēt savā dzīvē. Raugoties plašāk, šī dienasgrāmata ir ne vien personīgās vēstures izziņas avots, bet arī laikmeta liecība, kurā nolasāmi padomju varas orgānu lietotie kontrolējošie un represīvie mehānismi, kas Pieša gadījumā ierobežoja gan viņa seksuālo dzīvi, gan māksliniecisko brīvību.

Atslēgas vārdi: Gunārs Piesis, dienasgrāmata, kvīru jūtīgums, homoseksualitāte, Latvijas kino vēsture

Kopsavilkums

Gunārs Piesis (1931–1996) visaktīvāk rakstījis laikā, kad viņam tika liegts strādāt pie spēlfilmām, atklājot gan šaubas par savu radošo darbību, gan alkas pēc atzinības un tuvības ar draugiem un intīmajiem partneriem. Dienasgrāmatu viņš galvenokārt izmanto sevis motivēšanai un terapijai vai jaunu māksliniecisko ieceru fiksēšanai, mazāk – nepastarpinātai laikmeta dokumentēšanai. Pieša dienasgrāmata ir ne vien dokumentāla liecība, bet arī mākslinieciskās prakses izpausme, uzdodot jautājumus par kritikas ietekmi uz padomju skatītāja viedokli, grūtībām filmas izstrādes un ražošanas posmos, cilvēku savstarpējām attiecībām padomju kino industrijā, ko ietekmējuši ne vien politiskie apstākļi (par tiem Piesis ļauj dienasgrāmatas lasītājam noprast vien netiešā veidā), bet arī intrīgas Rīgas kinostudijas iekšienē. Cita starpā tā parāda padomju subjekta pieredzes dažādību, kas nav skatāma vienkāršotā lojalitātes un disidentisma pretstatījumā.

Dienasgrāmata ir liecība pārdzīvojumiem, kas gadu gaitā pieņemtas spēkā, dokumentējot Pieša personību, kas akumulē negatīvus afektus un emocionālos izvirdumus, kurus saasinājusi mākslinieciskās brīvības apspiešana un politiskās iekārtas radītās bailes. Tas veicina konfliktus ar kolēģiem, norobežošanas, pasivitāti un nespēju strādāt,

vajāšanas māniju un depresiju, kas piemeklē mūža nogalē, kā apliecina dienasgrāmatas ieraksti. Piesis, kuru laikabiedri raksturojuši kā neiecietīgu, histērisku un despotisku, visticamāk, sadzīvoja ar bipolāri afektīviem traucējumiem, īpaši tas manāms apjomīgākajā dienasgrāmatas sējumā, kas aptver laiku no 1981. līdz 1984. gadam.

Zīmīgi, ka līdz šim atrastajās Pieša dienasgrāmatās nav pārdomu par politiskajām pārmaiņām un vēsturiskajiem notikumiem Atmodas periodā, izņemot ikdienas dzīves realitāti, kas saistīta ar nabadzību un centieniem izdzīvot, pērkot un pārdodot antikvārus priekšmetus. Dažos ierakstos atklājas Pieša nojauta, ka viņa dienasgrāmatas lasa arī “uzraugi”, varbūt tāpēc viņš nav rakstījis par jautājumiem, kas skar ideoloģiju un politiku.

Pieša homoseksualitāte, iespējams, ir viens no iemesliem, kāpēc kino vēsturniekiem Latvijā viņš ir bijis neērts. Viņa filmas nepadodas tradicionālām interpretācijām, ja tās neaplūko no kvīru teorijas pozīcijām, meklējot atslēgu estētikai, kas viņu tuvina citiem režisoriem – kvīriem Padomju Savienības telpā. Lai gan sniegtā informācija ir skopa un vietumis arī cenzēta, tā dod ieskatu attiecībās gan ar partneriem, kuriem viņš bija pieķēries, gan tiem, ar kuriem viņam bija gadījuma attiecības un kuri, visticamāk, par viņu ziņoja. Brīžos, kad Piesis atļāvās būt atklāts par savu seksualitāti, viņš to noliedza, taču neizvirzīja arī priekšplānā. Būšana “skapī” viņu nomāca un pastiprināja depresijas izpausmes, taču nevienā no dienasgrāmatas ierakstiem viņš savu seksualitāti nav nedz nosodījis, nedz noliedzis. Fakts, ka Piesis nekad nav pieķerts seksuāla rakstura darbībās un par tām sodīts, cita starpā liecina, ka viņa intīmā dzīve pamatā norisinājās privātā telpā. Publiskās vietas, kur viņš satika citus mākslas vides homoseksuāļus, bija intelektuāļu iecienītās kafējnīcas un bāri. Vienīgā epizode, kurā aprakstīts gadījuma rakstura sakars ārpus privātās telpas ar 23 gadus jaunu vīrieti viesnīcā “Rīdzeņe”, ir fiksēta 1991. gadā, kad Piesim ir 60 gadi.

Gunāra Pieša dienasgrāmatas ir unikāls “ego dokuments”, kurā atklājas viņa personība, kas nebija zināma viņa tuvākajiem kolēģiem. Savu dienasgrāmatu viņš rakstījis gan burtnīcā un kladēs, gan uz atsevišķām lapām, veidojot uzmetumus plānotiem ierakstiem, kas nereti nav iekļauti hronoloģiski organizētajā “intīmajā arhīvā”. Šāds ieradums apgrūtināja dienasgrāmatas rekonstrukciju. Kā redzams no vietumis izplēstajām lapām dienasgrāmatas sējumos, Piesis to pārslasīja un cenzēja, iznīcinot vairākas būtiskas liecības par savu privāto dzīvi. Tas saistāms ar viņa ieceri iespējami rūpīgi dokumentēt, pārskatīt un izvērtēt savu personību, lai nākotnes lasītājam radītu priekšstatu par sevi kā jūtīgu, talantīgu un nesaprastu personību. Taču dienasgrāmata atklāj daudz sarežģītāku ainu par paša autora ieceri.

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