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Economic and Social Precarity in Baltic Cinema

This article explores some of the ways in which economic and social precarity is depicted and narrated in films produced in the Baltics after the introduction of neoliberal capitalism in the early 1990s. Laura Lapinskė writes that the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by “immediate restructuring of major industries, the initiation of land reforms and privatization of state property.”¹ The period of 1991–1995/1996 is often referred to as a “post-Communist transformation” or a time of “extraordinary politics” and “radical reforms.”² The decline of the industrial sector, high inflation, weak national currencies, and the unstable banking system generated social and economic insecurity, as the rates of unemployment and poverty soared. Thus, the drastic transition from state-controlled to free-market economy “caused a shock-therapy with regular people bearing the cost of these transformations.”³ The prioritization of economic issues led to steadily increasing social and economic polarization and precarity of vulnerable groups, such as the low-educated, unskilled, low-waged, women, elderly, disabled, ethnic minorities, and migrant workers.

Although the EU accession in 2004 promoted economic stabilization and growth, the Baltic trio remained truly “neoliberal economies and even neoliberal welfare states” due to “their low public spending on social protection, high income inequality, and low social dialog.”⁴ The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 hit the Baltics hard, largely due to extensive financial vulnerability of the population and weak social systems. Moreover, the Baltic governments introduced the most aggressive austerity measures in the EU between 2008 and 2011, including cuts in social expenditures, pensions, and family and unemployment benefits.⁵ While the

1 Laura Lapinske, “Living in Precarity: Ethnography of Everyday Struggles of Single Mothers in Lithuania,” *Sociologija* 60, no. 1 (January 2018): 67.

2 Marju Lauristin, Zenonas Norkus, and Peeter Vihalemm, “On the Sociology’s Contribution to Knowledge of the Baltic Way,” *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas* 29, no. 2 (2011): 129.

3 Lapinske, “Living in Precarity,” 67.

4 Jolanta Aidukaitė and Sven E. O. Hort, “Editorial Introduction: Baltic States after the Crisis? The Transformation of the Welfare System and Social Problems,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 50, no. 1 (2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2019.1571754>.

5 Karsten Staehr, “Austerity in the Baltic States during the Global Financial Crisis,” *Intereconomics* 48, no. 5 (September 2013): 293.

economies recovered relatively quickly, this “Baltic miracle” did not produce “social security and well-being for all,” largely excluding the most vulnerable groups, such as low-wage workers or recipients of public benefits.⁶ The post-crisis period was marked by the introduction of more flexible terms of employment in all sectors, both private and public, as well as precarious contracts issued by foreign agencies for temporary work in Western countries, which fundamentally weakened workers’ financial security as well as the stability of families. Despite the steady though modest growth of the GDP, the number of people living in poverty or at risk of poverty has remained above 20 percent in all three countries. Furthermore, the majority of the Balts fit into the category of working poor, as illustrated by low minimum and average monthly wages, compared to the Western countries⁷—a factor that stimulates economic emigration to the West.

Despite the fact that precarity of working people has remained the most stable element for at least half of the Baltic population in the last 30 years, no codified or universal representations and narratives of this human condition can be observed in Baltic visual media and film, the mainstream of which prefers to concentrate on past traumas, identity politics, and images of accomplishment. This tepid interest can partly be explained by noting that the Baltic cinemas have no established tradition of the social problem film, a genre that typically focuses on workers and other precarious subjects. However, a growing body of cinematic work on precarity has emerged as (in particular the younger generation of) filmmakers confront the consequences of the neoliberal transformation, the global financial crisis, and the situation of economic migrants, ethnic minorities, and other at-risk groups. This article seeks to identify cinematic responses to the various manifestations of social vulnerability and provide an overview of some of the ways in which Baltic films represent and narrate the experiences of precarity. However, we do not aim to construct a universal precarious subject in the Baltic cinemas. Our intention is rather to make the Baltic

⁶ Aidukaitė and Hort, “Editorial Introduction,” 4.

⁷ In 2021, the minimum monthly wages in the EU Member States ranged from €332 to €2,202 per month. In Lithuania the monthly minimum wage was €642, in Estonia €584 and in Latvia €500. Since 2010, the minimum wages in the Baltic states have increased more than 50 percent. (“Statutory Minimum Wages,” *Eurofound*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/statutory-minimum-wages>.) In 2020, the average monthly salary in the Baltic countries was the highest in Estonia (€1,472), followed by Lithuania (€1,381) and Latvia (€1,152). (“Average Monthly Salary in European Union 2020,” *Reinis Fischer*, last modified June 26, 2020, <https://www.reinischischer.com/average-monthly-salary-european-union-2020>.)

precariat visible because, as Tom Zaniello suggests, the precariat tends to remain invisible despite being seen every day.⁸

The films discussed in this article represent some of the key motifs of precarity in Baltic cinema: systemic deprivation of the working class; domestic migration prompted by regional inequality; emigration, in particular for seeking employment abroad; and the underprivileged status of the Russophone minority that remains a thorny issue for the Baltics.

Invisible Precariat

In the Baltic countries, the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed an abrupt decline of the working class as a collective social and political actor due to the collapse of traditional industries and the socialist system. As in most neoliberal capitalist countries, the traditional working class was brutally replaced by a new social entity—the precariat. However, only a relatively small number of authors have chosen to zoom in on the social and economic dilemmas of the working poor in films that mainly target the festival circuit. Wholesale, retail, and food industry workers, cleaners, paramedics, police patrols, hotel workers, migrant laborers from the provinces, young temporary workers, and single underpaid parents are the most frequently represented fields of labor and subclasses of the precariat. Although “the precariat finds itself more and more concentrated in urban configurations”⁹ and while many Baltic films indeed represent the city as a terrain for the underpaid, underemployed, and exploited, the impoverished countryside is also a frequent trope, indicating that peripheralization and rural exodus are pervasive social issues.

2007 witnessed two feature-length fiction debuts that are central to the representation of precarity in Baltic cinema. *Sügisball* (*Autumn Ball*, 2007) by the Estonian director Veiko Õunpuu provides gripping insights into the consequences of the neoliberal transformation for ordinary Estonian people and the deterioration of social cohesion as a cost of economic growth. Employing a social realist style, *Autumn Ball* portrays a broad gallery of Estonian precarious workers whose low income and low social status cause their lack of satisfaction with

⁸ Tom Zaniello, *The Cinema of the Precariat: The Exploited, Underemployed, and Temp Workers of the World*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), x.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

their lives.¹⁰ The multi-protagonist format of the film, in combination with its setting in a Soviet prefab residential district of Tallinn, suggests that social exclusion is an omnipresent condition brought about by the desire of the neoliberal political elite to shed everything reminiscent of the Soviet period, including the safety nets that the socialist state provided. *Monotonija* (*Monotony*, 2007), directed by Juris Poškus, an established Latvian filmmaker, draws on Dogme 95 conventions by casting a mixed ensemble of young and experienced actors and non-professionals and relying on improvisation in rehearsals in order to encourage the actors to adapt real-life experiences in conceiving their roles.¹¹ This approach serves to create convincing portrayals of precarious subjects and a credible social milieu. The film focuses on Laura, a girl working on a fish farm who moves to Riga in search of alternatives to her precarious village life. However, in the city her social status does not change. The Estonian Liina Paakspuu with *Soovide puu* (*The Wish Tree*, 2008) and the Lithuanian Saulius Drunga with *Anarchija Žirmūnuose* (*Anarchy in Žirmūnai*, 2010) tell similar stories of young girls' internal migration and their precarious work experiences in the capital cities, expressing explicit criticism of the capitalist system and its exploitation of young, inexperienced workers.

Lošėjas (*The Gambler*, 2013), a Lithuanian-Latvian co-production directed by Lithuanian Ignas Jonynas and shot in the port city of Klaipėda, portrays paramedics whose meager income and financial problems draw them into the dangerous territory of gambling and dramatic life situations. Meanwhile, *Šventasis* (*The Saint*, 2016), a social problem film by Andrius Blaževičius, looks into the repercussions of the global financial crisis on workers in the Lithuanian provinces, leaving a significant part of the population, notably young people, unemployed, causing their emigration to the Western countries, and tearing families apart.

Tracing the consequences of the neoliberal transformation for the working class, the Latvian documentary *Tārps* (*The Worm*, Andis Mizišs, 2005) was one of the first films to engage both with precarious work and the politics of precarity by displaying the miserable existence of Kārlis and Inese who, after losing their jobs, moved to an illegally built shack in a garden located somewhere on the outskirts of Riga. The couple suddenly finds themselves on the margins of

¹⁰ Ūnpuu has continued to detail the plight of the working class in his subsequent films. See, e.g., Eva Nāripea, "Representing and Escaping the Crisis of Neoliberalism: Veiko Ūnpuu's Films and Methods," in *Cinema of Crisis: Film and Contemporary Europe*, ed. Thomas Austin and Angelos Koutsourakis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 119–135.

¹¹ Poškus borrowed this method from Alvis Hermanis, a stage director at the New Riga Theater where a number of the film's actors worked.

society, forced to survive on meager social benefits, the vegetables they grow, and the delicacies the forest offers. The birth of a child makes their life even more complicated. *Bekons, sviests un mana mamma* (*My Mother's Farm*, 2008), a personal documentary by the Latvian-Norwegian director Ilze Burkovska Jacobsen also tells a story of the losers of the new economic and political system by observing her mother who, as a small farmer, led a precarious life till the end of her days. Meanwhile the filmmaker and her younger siblings emigrated to the West. Ivars Zviedris, another Latvian director, has portrayed people forced to live in destitute conditions in several documentary films. *Ērik, atnāc!* (*Get Lost*, 2005), for instance, focuses on an elderly man finding shelter near the Latvian-Estonian border in a container with no electricity. In *Dokumentālists* (*Documentarian*, 2012), Inta scrapes by on hardly any income in a similar living arrangement near a national park.

Transient Workers

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, and even more so after the 2004 accession to the EU, previously non-existent opportunities for travel and work abroad emerged for the Baltic people. While a deliberate quest for self-realization can prompt cross-border mobility, in the Baltic countries it has often resulted from unfavorable socioeconomic circumstances such as unemployment, low-wage poverty, or social exclusion. Furthermore, in many cases moving abroad undermines the emigrants' social condition, impairing their communal, familial, and intimate connections, and suppressing their political agency or even violating their basic human rights, especially when they are forced to work illegally.

The first wave of emigration from the Baltics took place in 1992 and 1993, when a large proportion of the Russian-speaking population returned to their home countries.¹² Although the native Balts move abroad chiefly for economic

¹² Jakub Bijak and Marek Kupiszewski, "International Migration Trends in Europe Prior to 2002," in *International Migration and the Future of Populations and Labour Force Resources in Europe*, ed. Marek Kupiszewski (Heidelberg/New York/London: Springer Dordrecht, 2013). It is estimated that around 50 percent of the Russophones left Lithuania for their original homelands after the collapse of the USSR, while in Latvia the percentage was 25 and in Estonia only 15. See: Monika Frejūtė-Rakauskienė, Andrius Marcinkevičius, and Kristina Šliavaitė, "Etninių mažumų grupės Lietuvoje: demografinė kaita ir socialinės padėties aspektai," in *Lietuvos gyventojų grupių socialinė kaita*, ed. Meilutė Taljūnaitė (Vilnius: Lietuvos socialinių tyrimų centras, 2016), 86; Pārslā Eglīte and Zaīga Krišjāne, "Dimensions and Effects of Labour Migration to EU countries: The Case of Latvia," in *EU Labour Migration since Enlargement: Trends, Impacts and Policies*, ed.

reasons,¹³ a notable difference exists in the spatial patterns of the exodus. In Estonia, the main destination of emigration (including transnational commuting) since the early 1990s has been Finland, due to the linguistic and geographical proximity of the two countries.¹⁴ Latvians and Lithuanians, however, have preferred to relocate to the United Kingdom and Ireland, which can be partly explained by the fact that these two English-speaking countries decided not to instate a transition period for opening their labor markets to the newcomers after the 2004 enlargement of the EU.¹⁵ A substantial tide of emigration followed the global financial crisis and the subsequent upsurge of unemployment. Becoming part of the labor market of another country was the only way to survive for many families. Thus, the situation of a divided family became a trait of the time, which can also be observed in cinematic representations.

In terms of cinematic geography, the Baltic films that portray the post-Soviet emigration obviously reflect these trends. Interestingly, though, the extent to which resettlement or transnational commuting has attracted the attention of filmmakers varies in each Baltic country rather significantly. For instance, migration—including job-related commuting—of Estonians to Finland, which has had a considerable impact on Estonian society, has rarely been tackled in cinematic form, and typically by early-career, or even student, filmmakers. Lithuanian cinema has also taken relatively little notice of emigration, despite the consistent increase in cross-border resettlement.

In Latvia, by contrast, the predominant trends of post-Soviet emigration have been addressed in several documentaries that focus on Latvians seeking work, higher income, better life, and opportunities in the USA and Ireland. As in other Baltic countries, these films were often made by early-career authors. Usually based on interviews with multiple characters, these works explore the

Béla Galgóczi, Janine Leschke, and Andre Watt (Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 271; Kristi Anniste, *East-West Migration in Europe: The Case of Estonia after Regaining Independence*. Dissertationes geographicae Universitatis Tartuensis 57 (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014), 18.

¹³ Mihails Hazans, “Emigration from Latvia: A Brief History and Driving Forces in the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Emigrant Communities of Latvia*, ed. Rita Kaša and Inta Mieriņa (Cham: SpringerOpen, 2019), 43.

¹⁴ Kaja Kumer-Haukanõmm and Keiu Telve, “Estonians in the World,” in *Estonian Human Development Report 2016/2017: Estonia at the Age of Migration*, ed. Tiit Tammaru (Tallinn: Foundation Estonian Cooperation Assembly, 2017), <https://www.2017.inimareng.ee/en/open-to-the-world/estonians-in-the-world/>.

¹⁵ Jakub Bijak, Anna Kincinger, and Marek Kupiszewski, “International Migration Scenarios for 27 European Countries, 2002–2052,” in *International Migration and the Future of Populations and Labour Force Resources in Europe*, ed. Marek Kupiszewski (Heidelberg/New York/London: Springer Dordrecht, 2013), 77.

reasons for leaving Latvia and the current conditions or prospects of their subjects. *Sprīdītis Amerikā* (*Does It Look Like Happiness?*, Ieva Salmane) and *Atrasts Amerikā* (*Found in America*, Sandris Jūra), both made in 2003, concentrate on Latvians in the USA and feature a wide spectrum of experiences, while *Un tad es atgriezīšos pa īstam* (*And Then I Will Return for Real*, Una Celma, 2003) and *Bēgums* (*Tide*, Ivars Zviedris, 2009) portray economic migrants in Ireland. In *Found in America*, a woman in her 40s working several odd jobs expresses her satisfaction with life in the US and conveys a belief shared by characters in all of the films—hard work abroad results in a better income than at home and secures a more carefree life. In addition to the recurring topic of earning money, which is often sent back home to support families or in some cases invested in new ventures, the films also bear witness to the emotional hardships of leaving children behind in Latvia. In *Tide*, the focus is on people gathering sea clams. They work in the wee hours during the tide; the image of the changing coastline serves as a metaphor for migration. It is reflected also in the narrative—some people come to Ireland, some leave, corresponding to the fluctuating migration statistics. In general, the films set in Ireland appear to underline pragmatic reasons for emigration, in contrast to those about Latvian expatriates in the USA, who seem to be fueled by their adventurous spirit. Ireland also features in the Lithuanian-Latvian co-production *Nerekalingi žmonės/Nevajadzīgie ļaudis* (*Loss*, Māris Martinsons, 2008), a fiction film where the paths of several characters cross, relating to the topics discussed in the documentaries.

A fair number of narrative films that tell stories of emigration revolve around children left in the care of their grandparents or other adults while the parents look for work abroad—typically in London, as in *Ūdensbumba resnajam runcim/Veepomm paksule kōutsile* (*Waterbomb for the Fat Tomcat*, Varis Brasla, 2004), a family film co-produced by Latvia and Estonia, and *Es esmu šeit* (*Mellow Mud*, Renārs Vimba, 2016), a Latvian coming-of-age drama. *Laikiniai* (*Temporary*, 2011), a Lithuanian short by Jūratė Samulionytė, even goes a step further, as a 14-year-old girl is forced to mind her 5-year-old sister Liucija without any adult supervision. *Mazie laupītāji* (*Little Robbers*, Armands Zvirbulis, 2009) introduces yet another strategy of solving the family's financial difficulties. After the father loses his job and fails to pay the mortgage, the bank confiscates the family apartment, and the children decide to rob the bank in an effort to get their former life back. All of these films present children or adolescents forced to take action and responsibilities normally in the hands of grown-ups. The Lithuanian-Irish co-production *Pilis* (*The Castle*, Lina Lužytė, 2020) also features a determined teenage protagonist, but this coming-of-age story takes place in Dublin and reflects on what migration means for different generations of Lithuanians (and Eastern Europeans in general)—for the 13-year-old

Monika who dreams of becoming a singer; for her mother Jolanta, a professional pianist working in a fish factory; and for Monika's highly demented grandmother. *Emigrantai* (*Emigrants*, Justinas Kriščiūnas, 2013), a Lithuanian low-budget drama, presents a broader picture of Lithuanian emigrants from the point of view of social class and age, analyzing the effects of emigration on both those who leave and those who stay behind. The harshest look on the downside of labor migration in contemporary Latvian cinema is *Oļegs* (*Oleg*, Juris Kursietis, 2019). Based on real events, the film follows a young Russian-speaking resident of Riga who, seeking work in Belgium, falls victim to a modern-day slavery circuit run by Polish emigrants. He finds himself in a desperate situation without knowing the language, stripped of his passport, with no protection from authorities, and no money to return home. Although somewhat lighter in tone, the immensely popular 12-part Estonian TV series *Kalevipojad* (*The Sons of Kalev*, Ergo Kuld, 2011) powerfully summarizes the collective experiences of thousands of Estonian men forced to seek low-skilled employment in Finland, often in humiliating conditions, and the dire consequences of this on their personal lives and families.

“Miserable” Minority

As a legacy of the Soviet industrialization program, the Russophone community forms the largest ethno-linguistic minority in Estonia and Latvia.¹⁶ In 2009, Russian-speaking people made up 29 percent of the Estonian and 34 percent of the Latvian population.¹⁷ The majority of them are migrants (and their descendants)

16 Enforced industrialization and the accompanying influx of migrants affected Lithuania to a smaller extent as the country remained more agricultural than its northern neighbors and was able to fulfill the required economic targets largely without recruiting labor force from other republics, while the increasingly national orientation of the Lithuanian communist party also provided certain protection against migration, cf. Kjetil Duvold, Sten Berglund, and Joakim Ekman, *Political Culture in the Baltic States: Between National and European Integration* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 7. As a result, the Russophones only accounted for 12.3 percent of Lithuania's population in 1989, cf. Mare Ainsaar and Vlada Stankūnienė, “Demographic Costs of Transition and the Future of the Baltic States,” in *Estonian Human Development Report 2010/2011. Baltic Way(s) of Human Development: Twenty Years On*, ed. Marju Lauristin (Tallinn: Eesti Koostöö Kogu, 2011), 45 (table 2.2.1).

17 In addition to ethnic Russians, these figures include Ukrainians and Belarusians, Ainsaar and Stankūnienė, “Demographic Costs,” 45. In 1939, the titular ethnic group constituted 88.2 percent of the population in Estonia and 75.5 percent in Latvia, cf. Duvold, Berglund, and Ekman, *Political Culture*, 7.

who were brought to the two annexed Soviet republics to man the newly established large factories and the military industrial complex. Compared to the native population they enjoyed “a higher than average status, income and better access to services,” regardless of their rank or skills.¹⁸ After the USSR ceased to exist and the nation states were reinstated, these people were stripped of their former privileges and social status, as well as their de facto homeland. The Russophones in Estonia probably fared the worst. Unlike in Estonia, the share of Russian-speaking immigrants in Latvia constituted the majority not only of blue-collar workers but also of the higher ranks of professionals, many of whom switched to business, forming up to 80 percent of the new entrepreneurial class in Latvia by the mid-1990s.¹⁹ In Estonia, however, the access of the typically unilingual settlers, even those with higher education, to white collar positions was significantly inhibited for many years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁰ In addition to the neoliberal “shock therapy” conceived by the right-wing political elite that undermined the social security of the best part of the population, the social exclusion of the Russophones was aggravated by major structural reforms that disproportionately burdened the Russian-speaking manufacturing labor force. Finally, both Estonia and Latvia, unlike Lithuania, opted for restitutionist citizenship laws. As opposed to the descendants of the citizens of the inter-war republics who were automatically offered citizenship in 1991, Soviet immigrants had to undergo a cumbersome naturalization process, including successfully taking compulsory tests on language proficiency and citizenship law. As a result of this divisive policy, the non-citizens in both countries still constitute around 15 percent of the population in 2020.²¹ Hence, perhaps in Estonia in particular, under the rule of the right-wing parties that combine extreme neoliberal market ideology with populist nationalist sensibility, the Russophone community has been deeply marginalized—politically, economically, as well as socially and culturally.

It is then perhaps surprising to find that the plight of this community has earned plenty of screen time in Estonian cinema of the past three decades, principally in documentary form. The discourse of these titles is generally sympathetic toward the Russophones, especially the most disenfranchised among them—the elderly, the unemployed, the addicted—, as opposed to the mainstream Estonian

18 Avo Trumm, “The Socio-Economic Situation of Non-Estonians,” in *Estonian Human Development Report 2007*, ed. Mati Heidmets (Tallinn: Eesti Koostöö Kogu, 2008), 47.

19 Zenonas Norkus, “Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Post-Communist Development in the Comparative Perspective,” in *Estonian Human Development Report 2010/2011. Baltic Way(s) of Human Development: Twenty Years On*, ed. Marju Lauristin (Tallinn: Eesti Koostöö Kogu, 2011), 30.

20 Trumm, “The Socio-Economic Situation,” 49–50.

21 Duvold, Berglund, and Ekman, *Political Culture*, 8–9.

press, which reproduced the toxic revanchist paradigm for many years.²² The darker side of this mode of representation, of course, lies in normalizing the Russian-speaking minority as the miserable, pitiful Other. While films like *Jõulud Leninita* (*Christmas without Lenin*, Andres Sööt, 1994) and *Äraneetud linn* (*Accursed Town*, Andres Sööt, 1996), and especially *Pronksiöö: Vene mäss Tallinnas* (*Bronze Night: The Russian Riot in Tallinn*, Urmas Eero Liiv, 2007) lean towards group-based portrayals that are particularly prone to sweeping generalizations, most documentary-makers increasingly focus on individual subjects and protagonists. This is perhaps most evident in the films of the younger-generation, Russian-speaking documentarists, such as Alyona Surzhikova with her *Generatsioon 0* (*Generation Zero*, 2008), *Laulev Nadežda* (*Singing Nadezhda*, 2011), and *Poissmees ja Volga* (*The Bachelor and Volga*, 2014). While Surzhikova tracks the rather ordinary, although sometimes financially strapped, everyday life of the “little people” among the minority community, thus bridging the cognitive gap between the different ethnic groups, the most poignant cinematic representations of the Russophone people come from two Estonian auteurs, Meelis Muhu and Sulev Keedus. Muhu’s *Aljoša* (*Alyosha*, 2008) observes the escalation of the single most serious inter-ethnic crisis in post-Soviet Estonia, related to a Soviet war monument in central Tallinn, an anchor for Russian identity and a sore spot for Estonian nationalists, that was removed by the authorities in 2007 just weeks before the annual celebration of the end of World War II (or the Great Patriotic War, as it is known among the Russians). Street riots broke out as a result, fueled by far-right factions of both communities. Muhu’s film brilliantly highlights the embarrassing fact that “during the 15 years of independence [the Estonian majority’s] desire for revenge, indifference and ‘forceful integration’ has created a social stratum in Estonia whose attitude towards their country of birth is estranged and hostile.”²³ Meanwhile, Keedus’s much-polemicized *Varesesaare venelased* (*The Russians on Crow Island*, 2012) presents a series of heart-breaking testimonies by the “wretched of Narva,” drug addicts from a predominantly Russian-speaking industrial town on the Estonian-Russian border that acutely suffered from the post-Soviet structural changes. Although in an extreme manner, the film summarizes with great empathy the existential condition of many post-Soviet Russophones:

²² See, e.g., Piia Tammpuu, “Construction of the Russian-Speaking Minority in the Estonian Press,” in *Estonian Press about Integration: Media Monitoring of Integration of Russian-Speaking Population 1999–2001*, ed. Ragne Kõuts (Tartu: Mitte-eestlaste Integratsiooni Sihtasutus, 2002).

²³ Jaak Allik, “Annaks jumal, et järke ei tuleks,” *Teater. Muusika. Kino*, no. 7 (July 2008): 88.

They are not needed in Russia and Estonians do not want to embrace them. The country they once came from no longer exists on the world map, and the country they are in would like to deport them to non-existence. They are a homeless mass of people that was supposed to vanish together with the Soviet empire; children stillborn in the shadow of capitalist society, no longer needed by anyone.²⁴

In contrast to Estonia, filmmakers in Latvia have largely overlooked the Russo-phone minority. Russian-speaking characters are rare and they usually do not take a central place in the narrative. In addition to the above-mentioned *Oleg*, the title character of which is a Russian-speaking non-citizen, Aik Karapetian's drama *Cilvēki tur* (*People Out There*, 2012) is one of the very few Latvian films to take an immediate interest in this minority community.²⁵ It is the first state-funded film in post-Soviet Latvia that features Russian as its main language of dialogue. The protagonist Jan, trying to find his place in life, drifts between his neighborhood—a drab multi-story residential district from the Soviet era—and a new high-rise estate that promises a getaway from his lack of steady income and prospects for the future and his environment of crime, bullying, alcohol, drugs, and pornography.²⁶

All ethnic minorities are underrepresented in Lithuanian cinema, primarily because Lithuanians make up 84.2 percent of the country's population. However, multiethnic subjects are treated in many documentaries that focus on social-risk families, poverty, and unemployment, such as *Romano vaikystė* (*Roman's Childhood*, 2020) and *Pietūs Lipovkėje* (*Dinner*, 2013) by Linas Mikuta and *Stebuklų laukas* (*The Field of Magic*, 2011) by Mindaugas Survila. The precarious Russophones and their problems are made visible by Oksana Buraja and Olga Černovaitė, documentarists of Russian origin. For instance, Černovaitė's *Drugelio miestas* (*Butterfly City*, 2017) investigates the situation of Visaginas, a predominantly Russian-speaking city, after the Ignalina nuclear power plant was closed down in 2009. Visaginas was built in the 1970s for the immigrant workers recruited from other republics of the USSR to serve the plant. It used to be a wealthy city, but became impoverished after 2009. The majority of its inhabitants do not feel at home in Lithuania and are nostalgic about the Soviet past, although the young try to build their lives in a new reality.

24 Marianne Kõrver, "Kaotatud paradisi," *La Strada: Kinoleht*, no. 2 (2012): 2.

25 Karapetian was born in Armenia (1983), raised in Latvia, and studied filmmaking in Latvia and France. *People Out There* was his feature debut.

26 Even though the film's producer Roberts Vinovskis has stated that their goal was to avoid any political statements, it has proved difficult not to read one into it, cf. Kristine Matīsa, "In-tuicija bez vizijām," *Kino Raksti*, no. 35 (Spring 2012): 7.

Conclusion

Our study on precarity and social exclusion in Baltic cinema suggests that only a small number of filmmakers deal with the new precariat as a social class. Narratives explicitly focusing on precarious experiences remain rather peripheral, especially considering the high relevance of the problem in the region, while the mainstream of Baltic cinema is largely made up of films that examine the historic traumas of the three nations, engaging in identity politics, or that celebrate the entrepreneurial spirit of the new era of restored statehood. Moreover, stories of precarity tend to be found in documentaries rather than narrative films, and the plight of the marginalized groups principally attracts a younger generation of auteurs who are inclined to value social consciousness over popular success. Precarious workers with a low level of education dominate as subjects of both fiction and documentary films in all three countries, while other at-risk social groups seldom take the central stage. While precarity is often represented by Russophone characters in Estonian cinema, this is rarely the case in Latvia and Lithuania. At the same time, Latvians and Lithuanians appear to be more attentive to the predicament of migrant workers and the concomitant issue of dysfunctional families, while the dilemma of cross-border flows of labor earns far less screen time in Estonian cinema.

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- Bēgums (Tide)*. Dir. Ivars Zviedris. Latvia/Ireland, 2009.
- Bekons, sviests un mana mamma (My Mother's Farm)*. Dir. Ilze Burkovska Jacobsen. Latvia/Norway, 2008.
- Cilvēki tur/Lyudi tam (People Out There)*. Dir. Aik Karapetian. Latvia, 2012.
- Dokumentālists (Documentarian)*. Dir. Ivars Zviedris, Inese Kļava. Latvia, 2012.
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- Pietūs Lipovkėje (Dinner)*. Dir. Linas Mikuta. Lithuania, 2013.
- Pilis (The Castle)*. Dir. Lina Lužytė. Lithuania/Ireland, 2020.
- Poissmees ja Volga (The Bachelor and Volga)*. Dir. Alyona Surzhikova. Estonia, 2014.
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- Sūgīsball (Autumn Ball)*. Dir. Veiko Ūnpuu. Estonia, 2007.
- Šventasis (The Saint)*. Dir. Andrius Blaževičius. Lithuania/Poland, 2016.
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- Tārps (The Worm)*. Dir. Andis Mizišs. Latvia, 2005.
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