

Brief Historical Survey

The very first attempts of making films in Latvia date back to the 1920-ies. At the end of the 30-ies Latvian film art became a significant artistic and economic phenomenon in the independent Latvia. This was made possible due to the considerable state support to the branch. The Public Culture Department was established under the Ministry of Public Affairs. This department was responsible for cultural policy in the film art sphere. During the 1930-ies films were not profitable in Latvia, even those that were successful in the box-office. However, the Public Culture Department tried to support production of significant films. Three large and technically complicated projects were initiated – “The Fisherman’s Son”, “Kaugurieni” and “The Damb”. These projects were interrupted by the outbreak of World War II. Only “The Fisherman’s Son” was finished. The film “Kaugurieni” was finished along the lines of the Soviet ideology in 1940, but the rushes of “The Damb” were lost.

The war dispersed the filmmakers of the epoch. They ended up either in emigration or in Siberia. Latvian film art started to regain its aesthetic qualities only in the 1960-ies during so-called Hrustchov’s thaw. The number of films in the Soviet Union rose from 6 to 120 per year and the ideological censorship wasn’t as strong as during the 1940-ies and 50-ies. A new generation of filmmakers entered the film art. The planners of the Soviet ideology and cultural policy understood the importance of films in creating a positive image of the state. Therefore they were generous with money and even allowed a few ideological liberties to some film directors.

In the 80-ies on average 8 features were shot per year, as well as many documentaries and popular science films. The technological and organizational level of Latvian film industry was comparatively high. Films occupied an important place in the culture life of Latvia’s society. The film industry was fully financed by the state budget. The movies produced at the Riga Film Studio were fully profitable. Often the profit several times surpassed the production costs thanks to the wide cinema network and millions of audience of the former Soviet Union.

The infrastructure of the film industry broke up during the collapse of the Soviet Union, as did almost all the branches of industry. Due to uncertain financial situation the number of films decreased dramatically - in the newly founded state there were ‘more important’ areas to allot the financial resources to.

As everywhere in the Eastern Europe, the economic crisis of the 90-ies affected Latvian film industry severely. The state financing was considerably reduced, the number of films produced diminished as well. In 1991 Latvia started to finance national cinematography again. However, everything happened very slowly and the year 1992 was critical when the overall film budget was reduced to the amount that the Soviet Latvia got for producing shorts. The production of feature films almost stopped.

Ever since then the infrastructure of the film industry has been gradually adapting itself to the newly established reality of the market economy. The former Soviet Latvia filmmakers as well as young filmmakers educated in the 90-ies have acquired basic knowledge about the notion of film producer. A number of private film production companies have been established. At the moment there are 25 active production companies working in Latvia, some of them mainly dealing with production of commercials due to the scarce financial situation in the field and the overall economic instability.

The number of films produced in Latvia:

	1980	1985	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Features	12	7	7	2	4	0	1	1	3	4	2	2
Shorts	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	0	3
Full length docs	1	1	5	2	3	5	1	1	0	1	2	1
Animation	2	2	11	10	17	25	11	7	3	3	1	4
Short docs	34	40	16	13	7	6	6	3	11	10	3	9
News-reels	48	48	48	27	9	16	11	3	0	0	0	0