

# ***Limina: Marginality, Memory, and Counter-Narratives in the Post-Socialist Space***

**Friday, 15 May 2026 / Room 07 - Palazzina Donne (Campus del Pionta)**

## **The seminar will be held in English**

- h. 12.00-12.15 Introduction Xu Zheng, Ornella De Nigris and Alessandra Carbone
- h. 12.15-12.45 **Girts Vikmanis**, *Limina: The film Soviet Milk* (Latvia/Belgium, 2023) as a dual narrative of different historical eras (1945–1989)
- h. 12.45-13.15 **Desirée Marianini**, *Representing Reality and Individual Memory: The Turn of Chinese Documentary in the 1990s*
- h. 13.15-13.45 Guest Lecture and Screening with filmmaker **Gu Tao**
- h. 13.45-14.30 Round table and discussion

The *Limina* seminar explores marginality not only as a geographic or social condition but as an **epistemic and linguistic position** from which to observe and challenge the hegemonic narratives of socialist and post-socialist 20th-century history. Through a dialogue between Soviet Latvia and reform-era China, the seminar focuses on **threshold spaces (limina)** where identity, memory, and language intersect. In these contexts, marginality is not only the periphery of power but also a site for producing alternative discourses, often in tension with official languages and rhetoric.

The film *Mātes piens* (*Soviet Milk*), based on the novel by Nora Ikstena, portrays the trauma of Soviet rule through a narrative where body and language overlap: silence, censorship, and the internalization of ideological discourse create a communicative fracture between generations. Linguistic marginality—between Latvian and Russian, between private and public speech—thus becomes an integral part of the colonial experience.

Similarly, Chinese documentary filmmaking of the 1990s redefined the relationship between image and language: the use of *xianchang* (“what happens in front of the camera”) reduces discursive mediation and foregrounds vernacular language, dialects, silences, and hesitation. In the work of Gu Tao, language is not only a medium of communication but also an index of belonging and marginality: the voices of ethnic minorities, often excluded from standard Mandarin, carry alternative memories and worldviews.

Across both contexts, tensions emerge between:

- official language and lived language
- institutional narration and individual storytelling
- visibility and silence

Marginality thus also takes the form of a **linguistic condition**: to speak “from the margins” often means using minority, hybrid, or non-standard languages—or resisting the dominant language through silence, ambiguity, or fragmentation.

The seminar invites reflection on key questions:

- How do linguistic and cultural policies in socialist and post-socialist contexts shape cultural production?
- What is the relationship between language, identity, and power in marginal areas?
- How can cinema preserve non-hegemonic forms of language without assimilating them into dominant narratives?

Situated at the intersection of Slavic and Sinology studies, *Limina* proposes a comparative perspective in which marginality emerges as a **critical site of resistance**—political, cultural, and linguistic—capable of challenging boundaries between center and periphery, voice and silence, history and memory.

### Program:

#### 1) *Limina: The film Soviet Milk (Latvia/Belgium, 2023) as a dual narrative of different historical eras (1945–1989)*

Based on the novel by Nora Ikstena, the film (*Mātes piens* in Latvian) tells the story of Astra, a young doctor and single mother pursuing her scientific career within the Soviet system. It is also a personal story about life under Soviet occupation, spanning from Joseph Stalin's rule to Mikhail Gorbachev's era of *glasnost* ("openness") and *perestroika* ("restructuring"). Astra refuses to breastfeed her daughter, fearing that her milk—normally a source of life—is poisoned and may contaminate the next generation. This metaphor reflects the pervasive influence of the Soviet system. The lecture will analyze the film through a decolonial lens, examining the relationship between subaltern subjects and Soviet colonial rule, its traumatic impact on individuals, and the representation of Latvian national identity, including the Third National Awakening and resistance to Soviet rule.

**Ģirts Vikmanis** is a PhD student in Languages and Literature at Daugavpils University (Latvia) and is visiting the University of Siena Arezzo Campus this semester on an Erasmus+ doctoral traineeship. His academic interests include translation and media studies, postcolonial and decolonial paradigms, and Soviet studies. He holds Master's degrees in Written Translation and Communication Science, both obtained from the University of Latvia. He has worked in Latvian media outlets for more than 15 years, covering foreign affairs and defence topics, as well as researching and debunking disinformation.

#### 2) *Representing Reality and Individual Memory: The Turn of Chinese Documentary in the 1990s*

In the early 1990s, Chinese documentary filmmakers redefined the relationship with reality. Influenced by *Direct Cinema* and *Cinéma Vérité*, they oriented the camera toward *xianchang* ("what happens in front of the camera"), privileging non-interventionist observation. At the same time, a personal and self-reflexive cinema emerged, exploring individual memory and drawing on microhistory. By shifting focus onto individual subjects, these filmmakers reshaped audiovisual narration, moving through border spaces and marginal sites—both material and symbolic—that contribute to the construction of Chinese cultural memory in the post-socialist context. This presentation will focus in particular on the work of Gu Tao, whose films lie at the intersection of documentary cinema, visual anthropology, and cultural memory.

**Desirée Marianini** holds a Master's degree in Chinese Language from Sapienza University of Rome and completed a specialization in Directing and Project Development at the ZeLIG School for Documentary, Television and New Media in Italy. She is currently a PhD candidate at Sapienza University, where her research investigates the creative reuse of archival materials in contemporary Chinese documentary cinema. She has held teaching appointments in Chinese Language and in Languages and Literatures of China and Southeast Asia at Tuscia University (Italy, Viterbo) and LUMSA University (Italy, Rome). She has also taught Audiovisual Translation within the Second-level Master's program in Specialized Translation at Sapienza University of Rome. In addition to her academic activities, she works as a narrative translator and documentary filmmaker.

### **3) Guest Lecture and Screening with Gu Tao**

The seminar will feature a lecture and screening with the documentary filmmaker Gu Tao, focusing on excerpts from his film *Yuguo and His Mother*. The lecture will explore the origins of his long-term engagement with the Ewenki reindeer-herding community in Inner Mongolia, reflecting on over two decades of immersive filmmaking and a gradual shift from external observation to a deeply personal, participatory relationship with his subjects. Particular attention will be given to the representation of life and kinship on screen, especially the intimate mother-son relationship at the center of the film, through which themes of care, vulnerability, and emotional tension emerge. Gu Tao will also address the tensions between tradition and modernity, examining the challenges faced by reindeer-herding culture in the context of state transformation and globalization, as well as the strategies of cultural preservation and resilience adopted by marginalized communities. Finally, the session will offer insights into his documentary methodology, including long-term observational practice, non-interventionist approaches, and the ethical implications of representing marginalized groups. Through this perspective, documentary cinema emerges as both a form of memory-making and a critical tool for engaging with marginality.

**Gu Tao:** is an award-winning Ethnographic and documentary filmmaker. He was born in 1970 in Inner Mongolia, China, at the base of the Great Xingan Mountains. His works have been screened at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival and other festivals. Born in Inner Mongolia, China. Gu graduated in 1995 from Inner Mongolia Art College with a major in oil painting. When he was a child, his father was an ethnographer and photographer, and focused his time and energy documenting the nomadic tribes in the mountains near their home. Gu Tao's documentaries deal directly with minority lives in China's northeast. In 2005 he began following in his father's footsteps, traveling back to the mountains of his hometown to make a documentary about its original residents, the Ewenki people. Gu Tao's focus, however, was different from his father's, as he saw a way of life that had been severely limited by governmental intrusion and environmental destruction, since the 1970's when his father was doing his filming. He has chosen to focus his films on dying traditions and ways of life, and how marginalized groups are adapting to the modern world. Over the years, Gu Tao has completed many documentaries on the living condition of ethnic minorities in Northern China