

Luncheon on the Grass: The text and the context of one animated film

Summary

Priit Pärn's 25-minute hand-drawn animated film 'Luncheon on the Grass' (1987) is one of the most significant works in the history of Estonian animation. The fierce film, a combination of a vivid existential tragedy and grave socio-political message, was received exceptionally well at a number of international film festivals, in part due to the unintentionally excellent timing of its release. It is recognised as one of the most emblematic films of the Soviet Union's 'perestroika' era.¹

The overview of the film's background in this article is based on Pärn's memories, the contemporary press coverage of his work and the history of the late-Soviet film industry. That background forms the basis for reviewing the contents of the film.

Pärn, who started his career as a director/art director in the film studio Tallinnfilm's animation department Joonisfilm in 1976, was disapproved of by the Soviet animation industry from the start. His drawing style differed sharply from the preferred Disney-influenced, smooth, three-dimensional look of the Soviet school. Pärn, a renowned cartoonist influenced by contemporary cartoon styles from Central Europe, drew flat characters in two-dimensional space, irritating the Soviet animation establishment. However, his storytelling proved to be a bigger problem than that. Instead of the preferred didactic approach and the propagandist 'black-and-white' morals, the messages of his stories tended to remain vague or ambivalent. During the late 1970s, an era of deepening bureaucracy in the Goskino, the Moscow establishment in charge of all film production in the Soviet Union, the talented but stubborn Pärn's animation career was far

from smooth and obstacle-free. He wrote numerous scripts, but struggled, usually in vain, to get the necessary production permits. Things became particularly difficult after the completion of 'The Triangle' (1982).

The film, one of Pärn's most important works, had received a production permit easily through a rather arrogant trick – the script was formally based on a famous Estonian folk tale, as the bureaucrats in the system were known to love didactic fairy tales. The finished film however was something else entirely – a decidedly adult-oriented, bitterly ironic dissection of the drabness of contemporary everyday life, and of the draining petty routines and alienation that haunt human relationships.

The obvious difference between the approved script and the completed film made Pärn's blatant disobedience very clear to film industry officials. In the end, after months of negotiations, 'The Triangle' managed to escape a complete screening ban, but its cinema run in the USSR was very limited and it wasn't sent to any film festivals abroad. However, the film received some well-deserved recognition in Estonia and also from the most important Soviet animation critic, Sergey Assenin, in his book 'Estonian Animated Films and Their Creators: In the World of Animated Films' (published in 1986 but, due to the very slow printing processes typical of the time, the contents of the book actually date from 1984).²

After 'The Triangle', Pärn's problematic relationship with the Soviet film bureaucracy

1 C. J. Robinson, *Between Genius & Utter Illiteracy: A Story of Estonian Animation*. Tallinn: Varrak, 2003, p. 145.

2 S. Assenin, *Etüüde eesti multifilmidest ja nende loojatest. Multifilmide maailmas / Estonian Animated Films and Their Creators: In the World of Animated Films*. Tallinn: Perioodika, 1986, p. 97.

evolved into open opposition. Pärn gave up his efforts to fashion his scripts to suit the taste of stagnant Goskino and, in early 1983, completed a script for 'Luncheon on the Grass', his most ambitious project to date, and presented it exactly the way he intended to make it, knowing very well it would not be accepted.³ He was told that this film would never be made in the Soviet Union.⁴

Pärn did however get a permit to make a non-controversial 'filler' film, ironically titled 'Time Out' (1984), mostly consisting of visual gags previously explored in his cartoons. In 1984 or early 1985, around the time of the completion of the crowd-pleasing 'Time Out', another attempt was made to get a permit from Moscow to make 'Luncheon...' by presenting the same script under a different title, but it was recognised and again denied a permit.

At that point, Pärn's career prospects in animation seemed so desperate to him that he decided to quit filmmaking and focus on freelance printmaking. But on March 11, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected the leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The changes, popularly called 'perestroika', that he initiated started bearing fruit for Pärn in the same year, as 'Time Out', with Pärn in tow, was suddenly sent to international film festivals, where it won several awards. This, with the progression of perestroika, encouraged another effort to get the permit to make 'Luncheon on the Grass' in the summer of 1986. As a result of the staff changes that had taken place in Goskino with perestroika, this time around the script was deemed to be brilliant and the film went into production in the autumn.

'Luncheon on the Grass' was completed in September 1987. Priit Pärn himself describes it as an intentionally serious work, saying 'For me, this was an attempt to make a drawn animation that would speak to the

audience about the world we live in, not about fantasies.'⁵ The film is no less than an analysis of the possibilities of life in the totalitarian Soviet society. The subject matter is seen through metaphors and grotesque exaggerations but, despite its occasional humour, it is first and foremost a serious film on a grave theme. This is emphasised by the bleak greyish colour scheme and Olav Ehala's angst-inducing score.

The film opens with an ironic dedication: 'To the artists who did everything they were allowed to' – meaning, didn't do everything they could have because of cowardice. The story consists of five episodes: each of the first four introduces a character, two women, Anna and Berta, and two men, Georg and Eduard. The fifth episode unites the foursome in a slightly bizarre joint effort: they recreate Édouard Manet's painting 'Luncheon on the Grass' (*Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1862–1863). This, in hindsight, gives meaning to all their efforts seen in the previous episodes.

The first episode's Anna is a martyr-like character. In addition to posing in the background, she needs to get the props for the still life in the foreground of the painting. She wakes up too late in the morning and rushes out to the dreary, hostile city with a shopping list. It is desperately hard to find apples in the Soviet-style grocery stores and markets, and Anna's pursuit leads to her getting caught in a downwards spiral of bad luck, insults and humiliation.

The second episode begins in Georg's home, which seems to be a highly civilised

3 The author's interview with Priit Pärn, August 18, 2006.

4 Interview with Priit Pärn in Hardi Volmer's documentary 'Pärnography' (Acuba Film, 2005).

5 The author's interview with Priit Pärn, August 18, 2006.

place of beauty and overall well-being, but soon enough the reality of the surrounding world brutally tears this mirage apart. Georg hasn't got the outfit he needs to pose in the picture, an elegant suit consisting of a black jacket and white pants, and he heads out to the hostile city to find them. He also experiences insults and even direct violence, but his journey is seen from an anecdotal perspective and the city space around him, showcasing the everyday irrationalities of the Soviet economy, comes across as playfully absurd.

The third and most delicate episode covers several years in time and presents Berta, a young mother raising a child. Her role in the picture is to pose as the smiling woman in the foreground, but she has – physically – lost her face and is unable to make her features reappear. She sinks into depression and can barely relate to her daughter. However, her features and her smile suddenly reappear when she finally has something to give to the child.

The fourth episode, also the sharpest in tone and most obviously political, focuses on Eduard, who travels to a big city in order to get a permit for their picture re-enactment. His story is told as an absurd anecdote, with many visual gags. At the beginning of his journey, Eduard is a giant, but his body shrinks, along with his self-assurance, the closer he gets to the bureaucratic institution he's heading to. He is a terrified midget by the time he enters the Kafkaesque office building, and his pursuit seems hopeless, but an obnoxious, patronising female bureaucrat takes pity on him. Her help and some blind luck enable Eduard to get the signature and stamp of approval against all odds.

The fifth episode takes place after all four characters have managed to find what they need, and captures the brief moment of accomplishing their goal. They present their

permit and get the key to the park that will serve as the setting of the picture. Once there, they arrange everything and strike their poses. The image suddenly comes alive in colourful brushstrokes, the score hits a crescendo and the viewers catch a glimpse of Manet's painting. But it only lasts for a brief moment and, once it's over, everything morphs back into dreary reality.

Manet's 'Luncheon on the Grass' is one of the most significant works in the history of modern art, but the film doesn't touch on that aspect at all. In the film, the painting represents an image of an unreachable, paradise-like state, and its colourful painterly freedom is in sharp contrast to the look of the rest of the film. Pärn came across this painting by chance while working on the script and realised it would suit the story perfectly, as it is universally known and depicts four people, two men and two women. He intended to make a film about an artist's life in a totalitarian society and interpreted them as four aspects of one person and his/her experiences. The four aspects are divided by genders that are intentionally presented differently: the men are laughable, involved in grotesquely ridiculous situations; the women are seen suffering, in order to evoke sympathy in the audience.⁶ All the characters' stories are built up around quests to get something needed for the picture through a process of degradation and humiliation. In order for this to work, the surroundings of the four characters, including the rest of the people, must be presented as unlikable and hostile. However, considerable effort went into presenting the depressing subject material in a way

⁶ The author's interview with Priit Pärn, August 18, 2006.

that would be exciting to watch, to keep the visual aspect of the film from falling into boring heaviness and to make it multi-layered, rich in different moods and ironic. The story of Pärn's film is similar to a live-action drama, blending different storylines with plenty of background details, gags and characters.

The final outcome and the message of the film are ambivalent and slightly sad, as in most of Pärn's works. Despite its strong critique of totalitarian society, 'Luncheon...' doesn't quite work as a protest film. It might rather be described as a kind of post-modern, deconstructive anti-totalitarian propaganda film. It was made during the unpredictable times of perestroika, and in the autumn of 1987, when the film was finally completed, the team were expecting a scandal and possibly a screening ban. Instead, the film proved to be just what the Soviet film bureaucracy was looking for at the time: Pärn himself was careful not to promote the film as openly political, but the message got across, and in accordance with the Soviet Union's new-found sense of self-critique, Goskino immediately started to promote the film and send it to festivals all over the world. The timing turned out to be perfect: it was 1988 and anything coming from the Soviet Union was met with friendly curiosity. 'Luncheon on the Grass' reached the international film festival circuit at the height of this wave of interest; it was received spectacularly well and gathered an impressive number of awards.⁷

Pärn, in turn, became a star in international animation circles and made good use of his new-found opportunities. He spent most of 1988 and 1989 travelling the world, presenting and promoting his works, and receiving due recognition. Soon after, when the collapsing economy and changes in the audience's tastes brought a devastating crisis to the Soviet film industry around 1990, animation pro-

duction in Estonia managed to stay afloat independently, largely due to Pärn's fame and the contacts he had made abroad.

*Summary by Mari Laaniste
proof-read by Richard Adang*

⁷ The awards received by 'Luncheon on the Grass' in chronological order: Grand Prix of XVIII Tampere Short Film Festival, Finland, 1988; Grand Prix, best film in (length-) category C and the critics' prize, VIII Animated Film Festival in Zagreb, Croatia, 1988; third audience prize, Short Film Festival in Bonn, Germany, 1988; first prize in category C, I Animated Film Festival in Shanghai, China, 1988; Grand Prix, Cinanima Festival in Espinho, Portugal, 1988; first prize, XXI USSR Film Festival, Baku, Aserbajjan, 1988; best animated film award, Melbourne Film Festival, Australia; 1988; third prize, VIII Odense Film Festival, Denmark, 1989; Nika award (USSR's/Russia's Oscar) for best animated film, 1989. In Estonia, the film won the audience award at Tallinn's Polytechnic Institute's Film Club's film festival.



1.
Anna ostunimekirjaga
oma korteri lukus ukse
taga.



2.
Anna filmi kõledas ja
vaenulikus linnakesk-
konnas.



3.
Peategelaste fooniks on
eemaletõukav mass.



4.
Georg oma meelepette-
lises kodus.

“Eine murul”
stsenarist ja režissöör Priit Pärn
kunstnik-lavastajad Priit Pärn, Miljard Kilk
“Tallinnfilm”, 1987



5.
Näo kaotanud Berta.



6.
Kääbus-Eduardi
alandamine
ametiasutuses.



7.
Maaliks
kehastumine.



8.
Filmi lõpukaader
“Picassoga”, kes
vaatab igatsevalt
taevas lendavaid linde.

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