

Animated Films of Rein Raamat and Priit Pärn in the Discourse of Soviet Power: Ambivalence as the dominant cultural code of the oppressed in totalitarianism

Summary

The aim of this article is to examine selected Estonian animated films of the 1980s as wider cultural signs of the Soviet era in Estonia, using the methodological aid of generative terms borrowed from the interdisciplinary research field of post-colonialism. The examples here are one of Priit Pärn's most celebrated films, 'Luncheon on the Grass' (1987), and Rein Raamat's 'Big Töll' (1980, artist Jüri Arrak) – animated films with a serious political undertone. Both Pärn's painful irony and Raamat's epic morality operated in a specific cultural system of the Soviet Estonian context, where allegory became a certain form of 'straightforwardness' and its decoding in the reception of the public became the dominant means of comprehension. Thus a situation emerged where an animated film, for example, was not just a film, but also something else – a cultural sign quite dangerous and meaningful for the existing power discourse. These films are simultaneously restless, cruel, emphatically serious and parodic, because what 'speaks' in them is an empire.

The Estonian animated films of the 1980s and the local art life were closely connected – even more than the superficial art history of exhibition halls and galleries may indicate. At close quarters, people's behavioural formulae seem surprisingly similar. The general Estonian art public followed many films with keen interest, and both the local animation and the whole Estonian art scene were characterised by a certain cultural bilingual-

ism and ambivalence. A truly intriguing example of this was the effect of the Estonian slide painting: it functioned in the already quite flexible Socialist Realism canon all over the Union and, more narrowly, it worked as well in the local context as an ideologically opposing 'western Hyperrealism' (which, in addition, via Pallas-School style elements paid homage to the lost independent Republic of the 1920s–1930s). A similar playfulness on several levels is also typical of the best animation output of the decade, which, with its local national/political connotations, did not cease to be understandable (although in different background systems) and appreciated/awarded throughout the whole Union. The ball was seemingly kicked into two goals at the same time.

In the academic environment of the western world, no direct correlation is ever drawn between the post-colonial and post-communist/socialist situations. The post-socialist political space falls outside the sphere of interest of the key theoreticians of the post-colonial research: Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as the Soviet Union is not seen as an 'empire' in the classical sense of the word. However, the Soviet influence was not dominant in the Estonian cultural space during the decades under observation here. Besides conservative national cultural elements and the colonising Soviet standard, there was, in fact, a third significant factor shaping Estonian culture: the acceptance of European, Western values without much criticism. Describing the Soviet Estonian cultural space today, this fact makes it impossible to employ the binary treatment of colonisers and colonised. Therefore, Estonian cultural space can be seen as the centre of the above-mentioned three main factors, where the one cardinal point 'West' quietly stands for something innovative and

positive, and the other 'East' for something negative, signalling stagnation. The central point between them, or the self-position, has national-conservative/restraining connotations: something harrowing, a wishing-to-get-away-from-here and at the same time possessing historical memory, which could be described with a pun 'local ill-locality'.

However, besides various means of arranging daily life, each alien power also brings to occupied territories its own official language usage, the speech of the conqueror, which corrupts the local culture. The colonised feels the need to lie within his 'contaminated' language, use quotation marks and stay vague throughout. The much-discussed Soviet 'reading between the lines' in literature, art, cinema, theatre and the press means that people do not actually read the text but, instead, the reader's expectations are projected between the characters. As Soviet film censorship, which regulated everything, sought ideological errors in films almost until the late 1980s, the authors inserted these in their works, either intentionally or unintentionally – as a perverse paradox, there is actually no more attentive reader to evaluate an author's work than a censor. Such equivocal mimicry, or body of 'presentation rules' acquired by an author in the course of the 'hide-and-seek' game played with the censors for many years, naturally favoured the more superficial reception of the audience, where social criticism could resonate in the minds of the viewers only by actively analysing/interpreting the film experience. It is, thus, logical that animated films with a political undertone vanished from Estonia as soon as the social situation 'producing' such films changed from the present into the recent past, when the Soviet Union collapsed.

Against the background of the era's cultural signs, the crumbling of the Soviet Un-

ion and the emergence of the newly independent Estonia constitute processes that cannot be adequately described only by the fixed dates when the empire's supremacy 'snapped' and the democratic republic 'was born'. A not-fully-functioning machinery can work for years before collapsing, before various friction factors cause total burnout, and thus it is 'in the interest of the machine' to localise the threatening friction surfaces in time and ease the pressure between them. While admitting the risk of upsetting the gradual, logical and easily periodised view of history, one can at least make more visible the actual force factors that caused inner fomentation and contradictions inside the colonial power itself.

Soviet-era figurative art, animation, art and film politics, and therefore the Party power apparatus that inevitably emerges as the main discourse, are therefore inseparable areas: this is the presumption that must be accepted if we want to try to adequately reconstruct the fields of meaning of artworks from the recent past in writing. Ambivalence and cultural bilingualism form the dominant cultural model in the art and film heritage of the ex-Soviet republics, including Estonia. Its prevaricating character is difficult, but necessary, to acknowledge, in order to avoid the free fall to the heedless level where explanatory models in the style of 'dissidents versus *nomenklatura*' prevail. Nevertheless, each study in a post-colonial key in Estonian circumstances is inevitably accompanied by the danger of adopting the 'external glance of a tourist', which bestows on the globally forever-peripheral Baltic peoples some charitable enlightenment from the centrifugal Central European and American metropolises. However, regarding many cultural signs of Soviet Estonia, it would still be more truthful to focus on their inner, immanent scale-

style attitude in their relationships with Party politics, their flexible playfulness and, paradoxically, their freedom-flavoured thinking.

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