

Film Reception in Estonia in the Early 20th Century: From Fairground to Entrance Hall Entertainment

VIRVE SARAPIK

ALO PAISTIK

The following paper examines early film reception in Estonia and its transformation over the first decades of the 20th century. The discussion focuses on the aspects that influenced the notions and opinions of films and who voiced them. A lengthy article published under the pseudonym S. Culex stands out against the general background as a bright and mature exception. As Young Estonia was the most innovative Estonian cultural movement of the early 20th century, the article also concentrates on the ideas of its leading figures regarding cinema.

The Cinematograph Reaches Estonia

Tsarist Russia, contrary to the Soviet Union, was not separated from the rest of Europe through an excessively strict border regime, and films arrived in Estonia quite soon after their first appearance in European centres. Some equipment for showing moving pictures had been introduced already earlier (e.g. cinetoscope in March 1896; as announced in *Postimees* on 30 March 1896¹), but demonstrations in Tallinn and Tartu in October and November of 1896 attracted much more attention. Advertisements and notices in newspapers link the name of Edison and the cinematograph.² It has generally been supposed in Estonian film history that these films and machines had really been made by Edison.³ But in the second half of 1896 cinema was already quite regularly shown all over Europe, yet was still not entirely clear which company had actually produced these films. The films were described as depicting bathing in the sea, a Parisian street, an American express train and a speed painter.⁴ According to an advertisement, the program originated from an exhibition in Berlin (*Gewerbeausstellung* in Berlin-Treptow from 1 May to 15 October 1896). Although

1 *Postimees* 30 March 1896, no. 71. Newspapers had published notices about these novelties even earlier. For example, Johann Sepp had written on several occasions about Edison's phonograph and kinetoscope: J. Sepp, *Teadusest. Phonograf ja kinestoskop*. – *Linda* 24 November 1895, no. 46, pp. 729–730; J. Sepp, *Reisi nähtused maalt ja merelt*. – *Postimees* 12 August 1896, no. 175, p. 2.

2 *Postimees* 27 September 1896, no. 212; *Kohalikud sõnumid*. – *Postimees* 30 October 1896, no. 237.

3 See I. Kosenkranius, *Eesti kino minevikuradadelt*. Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1964, p. 8; V. Paas, *Olnud ajad*. Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1980, p. 14; *Eesti filmi ajalugu. Tähtpäevad*, <http://www.ef100.ee/index.php?page=102&> (accessed 10 October 2011).

4 E.g. *Sõnumid Tallinnast*. – *Postimees* 27 September 1896, no. 212; *Uuemad sõnumed*. – *Olevik* 5 November 1896, no. 45.

Edison indeed had had a pavilion at the Berlin exhibition, his name was already so familiar in the Estonian newspapers of the time that it rather signified the invention of things in general than a particular person. And in the Edison pavilion in Berlin the cinematograph of Lumière brothers⁵ was displayed; after that, the cinematograph could well arrive in Estonia.

In both towns the venues of film exhibition were relatively prominent: the small hall of the Great Guild building in Tallinn and Bürgermusse in Tartu. Newspapers published only a few notices – a couple of advertisements and introductions – but the attitude of the public was favourable. At first the notion of *living pictures* was used to denote films, and the words *kinematograph* and *bioscope* were used as well. More often, however, the phrase of ‘living pictures’ was reserved for short theatrical scenes and sketches that were included in party programs. This seems to confirm Yuri Tsivian’s view that the rapid spreading of cinema in Russia in the early 20th century was supported by several synchronous cultural processes, including the approach of short theatrical forms to the film.⁶

Early Writings on Film and Shifts in Their Subjects

Comparably, a slight temporal shift can be also noticed in the choice of subjects of film writings. Furthermore, it is interesting to find that film and cinema were not very often discussed in newspapers. After some initial salutations that mostly admired

the technological novelty, films were very rarely mentioned over the following years. Longer essays started to appear only after 1905 and these demonstrated a considerable change in attitudes. Due to the lack of cultural press films were talked about only in daily newspapers.

During the first decades of the 20th century film was still presented as a charming form of entertainment, although descriptions of fictional films were occasionally given as well.⁷

The writings published before 1905 presented three main functions of cinema. First, there was cinema as a technical invention: people should study its principles (this was recommended even by the daily newspaper *Postimees*, which adopted quite a critical attitude towards cinema in subsequent years), and it should even be regarded as science. The second function was an opportunity to learn about phenomena that would otherwise remain inaccessible to people (distant lands and historical events), i.e. the communicative and educational function of films. This is of course linked with the documentary function, which was however not mentioned in the brief news items. Thirdly, film as a means of entertainment became increasingly important. It was generally viewed with benevolence and curiosity.

More critical notes appeared in 1908–1909, when attention had already turned to the supposedly frivolous and immoral content of the films and their effect on the most enthusiastic part of the audience – children – came under critical observation.

⁵ See H. H. Prinzler, *Chronik, 1895–1993. Ereignisse, Personen, Filme. – Geschichte des deutschen Films*. Hrsg. v. J. Wolfgang et al. Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 1993, p. 519.

⁶ Y. Tsivian, *Russia, 1913: Cinema in the Cultural Landscape. – Silent Film*. Ed. R. Abel. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996, pp. 194–198.

⁷ E.g. Teadus. Kunst. Seltsielu. – *Eesti Postimees* 22 May 1902, no. 21; Tallinna Uudised. – *Teataja* 18 September 1902, no. 233.

One of the important subjects of discussion was the relationship between theatre and cinema: the first was considered 'art', while movies had a reputation for being nothing but inconsequential entertainment.

The year 1910 witnessed the appearance of entirely negative writings, for example, 'Do not let your children go to cinematograph theatres!'⁸ The author of this article thought that films were dangerous primarily for physiological, not moral reasons, emphasising that they weaken the eyes and the whole organism, and that too rapid changing of impressions causes inattentiveness and superficiality. The educational effect, generally recognised by critics, was also an incorrect conception according to this author. On the other hand, several quite exhaustive writings explaining the technical aspects of filmmaking were published in the same year, such as *Secrets of Cinematography*, analysing pictorial effects of *Princess Nicotine* (1909, directed by J. Stuart Blackton).⁹

The most important discussions of film were published in 1912, demonstrating a wide range of opinions and examining the functions and possibilities of cinema, as well as its negative aspects. The style of these writings was also much improved, leaving aside the earlier feuilleton approach. The most important writings were published under the pseudonyms of P. O. Rolf and S. Culex.¹⁰ Both authors

published in the daily *Tallinna Teataja*, which was the arena for the most serious film discussions before World War I.

In his two-part article,¹¹ P. O. Rolf called for discussing films, clearly representing the more critically minded camp. His pieces offered plenty of valuable information, facts and economic data on filmmaking in different countries and mentioned a number of well-known productions. His critiques proceeded from two perspectives. First, Rolf found the film programs, based on commercial interests, negative and subjected to the 'demands of the market', corrupting the taste of the audience. While many other authors still recognised, despite the criticism, the remarkable educational potential of films, Rolf did not support this opinion. His criticism mostly concentrated on dramas, where he distinguished between two possibilities: first, purely cinematic films, specially made for cinema; and second, dramas made for the stage and adapted for screen. He declared most productions of these two types unfit. The adaptations of books and plays were slightly better in his opinion than the original screen plays, but as the films were silent – that is, lacked words – the adaptations were still an act of brutality against the original works, chaining them into a Procrustean bed. At the same time, as there were no means for restricting the proliferation of cinema, it was still better to discuss its problems since 'silence would be wrong'.¹²

A few months later S. Culex published a response to Rolf, and his eight piece essay can be considered the most advanced local writing on cinema of the period before the

8 Äрге laske oma lapsi kinematografiteatrisse! – Virulane 14 October 1910, no. 234.

9 Kinematografia saladustest. – Päevaleht 15 February 1910, no. 37; 16 February, no. 38.

10 One of the two could well have been Paul Olak, a writer of a broad frame of mind and a later dramatist and theatre director, who worked for the *Tallinna Teataja* at that time. The use of pseudonyms was a rule rather than an exception in the Estonian press of the time and a person could easily use a number of them.

11 P. O. Rolf, Kinematograf. – Tallinna Teataja 28 April 1912, no. 97 [I]; 2 May, no. 100 [II].

12 P. O. Rolf, Kinematograf [II].

World War I.¹³ According to Culex, cinema can be approached from three aspects: (1) as a tool for preserving the past; (2) as a possible new branch of art; (3) as a means of extracting as much money from the pockets of the audience as possible over a short period of time. The second point is most noteworthy here, since so far nobody in the Estonian press had discussed film from this perspective. The authors supporting cinema had so far emphasised three moments: film as an educational tool; or as an entertaining medium; or, less often, as a means for recording events.

Regarding the first option Culex first pointed out its cultural and national importance, but in the end he agreed that in the future film could also be a means of recording people's private events. 'Another and much more complicated question is ... whether cinema could be able to create serious works of art?' He believed that the most programmatic dispute would focus precisely on this question. His own answer was affirmative, but he conceded that at first the notion of art should be specified. Culex admitted that he had found aesthetic satisfaction, above all visual pleasure (faces, landscapes) in several films, and compares the medium with the art of dance. Obviously, these ideas were of an absolutely pioneering nature in the Estonian context, but surprisingly they also ran in parallel with some rather rare opinions in the rest of the world.

Further, Culex examined the narrative aspect: it had been stated that because of lack of words a drama shown in the cinema could not be as valuable as a

drama seen on stage. He agreed with the opinion that, compared with theatre, the cinematic drama stands on a lower level (like a woodcut compared to a painting). 'But still, it is an art in its own right. And what's more, a skilled artist could compose even such dramas where lack of words wouldn't be so acutely felt, but where an interesting plot and beauty can be revealed in appearances visible for the eye. Art is restricted within its abilities and means, and it has to attempt to make an effect just by using its strong points.' Thus, cinema has plenty of such visual opportunities that are missing in the theater, primarily in representing fantastic stories. 'This is a real theater of smokers of opium and hashish....'¹⁴

In the case of S. Culex, the issue of authorship inevitably arises. No other equally thorough and insightful treatments were published in Estonia before or immediately after World War I. However, it evoked no response; the local film discourse continued with the same topics. This might have been a matter of translation, but even then the choice of topic and attitude was exceptional in the Estonian context. These ideas quite obviously did not originate from an empty place, and the author or compiler had to rely on texts published elsewhere, and probably on a different cultural experience as well.

Young Estonia and the Cinema

Young Estonia was the most innovative Estonian cultural movement of the early 20th century, and therefore it is worth examining the response of the leading figures of Young Estonia to cinema. Traditionally, in addition to manifested

13 S. Culex, *Veel kord kinematografist*. – Tallinna Teataja 20 August 1912, no. 187 [I]; 22 August, no. 189 [II]; 23 August, no. 190 [III]; 25 August, no. 192 [IV]; 30 August, no. 196 [V]; 31 August, no. 197 [VI]; S. Culex, *Veel kinematografist*. – Tallinna Teataja 6 September, no. 202 [VII]; 7 September, no. 203 [VIII].

14 S. Culex, *Veel kord kinematografist* [III].

attempts at cultural innovation, Young Estonia had been associated with the appearance of urban culture in Estonia.

A phenomenon that left only a few, yet telling traces during the ten-year existence of Young Estonia, is cinema which was, as mentioned earlier, certainly not classified as art in Estonia at that time. However, the Young Estonians held a totally negative view of cinema, as can be deduced from the few existing references.

For example, in 1912 one of their leaders, the poet Gustav Suits said: 'The culture of each nation primarily needs creative actions. The pleasures of a truly national culture cannot be satisfied through the lowest level of civilisation. [...] In the interests of Young Estonia we should remind ourselves as often as possible that the whole cinematography, all the hullabaloo around a talented filmmaker ... and his work is temporary, whereas the work itself survives and has a lasting effect on people for centuries to come....'¹⁵ In his theater review, Bernhard Linde used cinema as a synonym for everything bad, low or farcical.¹⁶ Only the linguist Johannes Aavik mentioned in his letters to Friedebert Tuglas in 1910 that he occasionally goes to the cinema in Helsinki, to ward off boredom and seek entertainment.¹⁷ These are practically the only neutral observations from that time.

After World War I, several members of Young Estonia who had so far been living in exile, returned to Estonia and gained

key positions in the cultural life of the time. The film reception of the immediate post-war period was characterised by a standstill, or even a noticeable step backward. Even in 1924, some people were quite seriously discussing the possibility of banning cinema in order to save culture. The mid-1920s marked, however, a breakthrough concerning more serious film writing as well as the development of the Estonian film scene on the whole. Cinema was thus first properly acknowledged in Estonia only in the 1920s.

Conclusion

Thus, we could say that nothing unusual happened in Estonian film writing in the first decades of the 20th century (circa 1901–1924) in comparison to other European cultures. In the early 20th century, cinema enjoyed huge popularity among the audiences. However, early history of Estonian film contains an interesting contradiction: films were eagerly watched but it was not considered suitable to talk or write about them. At best, newspapers printed short notices about films, but did not analyse cinema as such, criticise them or make recommendations; film was initially regarded as an entertaining technical novelty. Soon enough, worries emerged about the corrupting influence of cinema on people's cultural consumption.

Serious film discussion began in 1912, examining the characteristics and opportunities of the emerging field of art.

The heyday of pre-World War I film discussion in Estonia in 1912–1913 coincided with similar processes elsewhere in Europe. Although it was not yet supported by local film distribution, and film production was taking its first steps, the set of problems

15 G. Suits, 'Noor-Eesti' lähematest ülesannetest käesoleval ajal. – Eesti Kirjanikkude Seltsi 'Noor-Eesti' Aastaraamat I. 1912. a. Tartu: Noor-Eesti, 1913, p. 44.

16 E.g. B. Linde, Teatri-märkused. Vanemuine ja Estonia 1910/1911. a. – Noor-Eesti 1910/11, no. 5/6, p. 597; B. Linde, Linde, Meie teater ja meie aeg. – Noor-Eesti IV. Tartu: Noor-Eesti, 1912, p. 201.

17 Kultuurilugu kirjapeeglis. Johannes Aaviku ja Friedebert Tuglase kirjavahetus. Ed. H. Vihma. Tallinn: Valgus, 1990, pp. 32, 37.

was the same, focusing on the three main functions of cinema: entertainment/industry, education/propaganda and aesthetic value and singularity.

The chief issues of the early film writings were not typical of Estonia alone: the moral standard of films and impact on children were considered bad (i.e. there was a need for censorship), and it was felt that cinema lured audiences and financial backing from the theatre, thus enriching foreign cinema businessmen at the expense of national culture. The first two topics were international and discussed everywhere, whereas the last problem arose in tsarist Russia, but certainly not, for example, in France or Germany.

The painful reaction of Estonian theatre people is perfectly understandable: at the time when cinema started to triumph and spread rapidly, theatre was only finding its feet: the first professional troupes had just been assembled and new buildings completed. As theatre stood at the centre of Estonian national culture, while cinema was the first field of culture to be connected with international capital, the conflict was inevitable. It is significant that this position of cinema being something alien remained unchanged for a long time. The same discussions again arose in the 1920s. And although nobody doubted the existence of cinema in the 1930s, the 'position of an alien' was still perceptible and paved the way for the Soviet-era 'great loner'-attitude.