

The Death of Dark Animation in Europe: Priit Pärn's *Hotel E*

ANDREAS TROSSEK

This article examines how the trend toward more socio-critical, 'dark' or artistically pretentious films, which developed in the Soviet Union more generally during the years of Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to power, essentially culminated and also came to an end in Estonian animation with Priit Pärn's animated film *Hotel E* (1992). The article is based on a specific case study, an analysis of the film and the surrounding events, first by endeavouring to map out the broader historical and cultural context around *Hotel E*, and secondly by demonstrating the fact that the film can be viewed as the finale of many cultural processes that had been unleashed earlier: in the film, criticism of the powers-that-be of the late or 'mature' socialism, which was typical of the former Eastern Europe, is combined with the longing for the always virtually perceived West.

This discussion is based on the Estonian animated film director Priit Pärn's technically complex half-hour animated film *Hotel E* (1992). According to its completion date, it can be considered to be the last film critical of the socialist system that was created under the conditions that existed in the Soviet Union's film production system, which collapsed as a repercussion of perestroika. Paradoxically, it can also be considered to be the first film which was unambiguously critical of capitalism in an Estonia that had regained its independence in August 1991. The trend toward more socio-critical, 'dark' or artistically pretentious films that developed in the Soviet Union more generally during the years of Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to power essentially came to an end in Estonian animation, after the film *Hotel E*, as if it were the culmination of everything that had preceded it.

Actually, several *auteur* films were produced by Estonian animators in the early 1980s, and they challenged the conventional concept of animation as a television entertainment genre directed mainly at children and young people: for instance, Rein Raamat's *Big Tõll* (1980) and *Hell* (1983), epic and nationalistic hand-drawn animated films with pretensions of being 'high art'; or Priit Pärn's collage-like satire *The Triangle* (1982), to mention only the more outstanding examples. However, in the middle of the decade, an extensive change in the personnel of the highest Kremlin ranks took place and, under the banners of perestroika and glasnost, the cultural sphere was suddenly given a green light for moderate social criticism, which, in the Soviet Union, had previously been confined to 'dissident discourse'. One after another, a series of films was completed as Soviet movie censorship relaxed: Priit

Pärn's politically allegorical *Breakfast on the Grass* (1987), Rao Heidmets's dark anti-authoritarian puppet films *Papa Carlo's Theatre* (1988) and *Noblesse Oblige* (1989), Rein Raamat's anti-urbanization film *City* (1988), Riho Unt's and Hardi Volmer's historical-allegorical puppet film *War* (1987), Riho Unt's cartoon mocking totalitarianism *Culture House* (1989), Heiki Ernits's film about the mass deportations to the Soviet hinterlands, *Departure* (1991), Avo Paistik's philosophical and religious cartoon *Noose* (1990), Hardi Volmer's social satire *Incipit Vita Nova* (1992), produced in mixed techniques, Mati Kütt's darkly surrealistic *Sprat Taking the Sun* (1992) and many other auteur animations and films that were non-commercial and targeted mainly at narrow festival audiences. At the same time, there was no follow-up to this quantitative 'explosion' during the 1990s, although the Soviet Union had collapsed by that time, Estonia was free and censorship no longer shackled the creator. Why?

The question seems important because, in retrospect, Priit Pärn himself has called the period from 1986 to 1992 the 'golden age of Estonian animated film'¹, thereby seemingly classifying his own directorial work in *Hotel E* as some kind of apogee, as a work of the transitional period, after which Estonian animation as a whole gradually became de-politicised and started to adapt to the levelling realities of the free market. In addition, during those years, the stable financing of the films made at the Tallinnfilm studio was guaranteed by the USSR State Committee for Cinematography (Goskino) in Moscow, which, at the same time, no longer

interfered in the content of the films. First, ideological censorship dimmed and then it disappeared completely – unfortunately, along with the old financing schemes.

Background systems

According to the director, *Hotel E* is about existing between two systems.² The film has a relatively complicated composition – with two short introductions and a double ending for the plot. The thematic focus of the film is also divided in two. On the one hand, it depicts the totalitarian socialist East and, on the other, the capitalist West, while the film's main character, the director's apparent alter ego, cannot find a place for himself in either. When he's in the West, the obligations of his homeland, which seem annoying and pointless, beckon him; while in the East, his soul craves escape to the West, where everything seems brighter than at home. Therefore, what predominates is a feeling of being out of place and detached.

In some sense, *Hotel E* is just a travelogue, an *auteur* travelogue. Pärn's previous socio-critical animated film, *Breakfast on the Grass*, achieved great success at film festivals in the Soviet Union and at international festivals throughout the world. Therefore, at the end of the 1980s, he had the opportunity to travel between the East and the West more than the average citizen of Soviet Estonia did. Apparently, this is also why there was such a long pause between the completion of *Breakfast on the Grass* and *Hotel E* – more than four years. Moreover, this was already the second film, along with *Breakfast on the Grass*, after which Priit Pärn declared in interviews to

1 H. Jokinen, Little Big Estonia: The Nukufilm Studio. – Animation World Magazine 1998, issue 2.11, <http://www.awn.com/mag/issue2.11/2.11pages/2.11jokinennuku.html> (accessed 17 October 2011).

2 S. Teinemaa, Tumedanimatsiooni surm Euroopas. Intervjuu Priit Pärnaga. – Teater. Muusika. Kino 1992, no. 7, p. 45.

journalists that animation had exhausted itself for him (again), and he would not be producing any more animated films, seeing his future, rather, as a free-lance graphic artist. The project, which had started in the mid-1970s, with Priit Pärn who was still working full-time as a biologist at the Tallinn Botanical Garden at the time, producing pop caricatures for the animated films *The Gothamites* (1974, directed by Rein Raamat) and *Sunday* (1977, directed by Avo Paistik) on a contractual basis, was therefore finished for the author with the completion of *Hotel E*.

On the border between East and West

While the events in *Breakfast on the Grass* take place within the borders of the Soviet Union, *Hotel E* expands to the Western bloc; it is almost an epistemic model of the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Of Pärn's films, *Hotel E* is the most centred on 'high art'. While the sketchiest summary of *Breakfast on the Grass* would be that the characters from Édouard Manet's painting *The Luncheon on the Grass* (1862–1863) have been transported to the Estonian S.S.R. of the 1980s, the dominant figurative language of *Hotel E* clearly and directly alludes to pop art, and includes a series of other references to well-known works of art, from the Renaissance through 20th century modern art. The film is actually comprised of episodes that are executed in very different techniques, whose logical extremes are (black-and-white) line-based graphics and (vivid) colour-based painting elements.

The key phrase 'Iron Curtain' seems significant since only a few months had passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall when the director started to plan his film, and the production phase of *Hotel*

E actually ended only a few days before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Quite meaningfully, the initial working title of the film was *Border*³ and the much more localised image of the hotel was arrived at in the course of the later working stages.

Endgame

In 1992, immediately after the completion of *Hotel E*, Priit Pärn answered the question 'What will your next animated film be, and when will it be completed?', with a response that indicates that perhaps one more independently existing key, a final etude might exist for *Hotel E*:

My last film was not *Hotel E*. The last animated film was made this March at the Stuttgart Festival, which was also a performance. As we drew a large picture on the wall, every five seconds the camera took a shot. This resulted in a film called *The Death of Dark Animation in Europe*, which is 40 seconds long. The film was shown at the end of the festival, when the awards were distributed.⁴

Today there is actually a film cassette in the Eesti Joonisfilm archive with the laconic label 'Pärn's happening' (no. 215), which contains a short video documentation of this event. It turns out that it was sort of a duration performance that lasted for four hours, during which a group of artists, slowly drawing as they gradually moved from left to right, created a black and coarse array resembling an electrocardiogram by collectively scrawling, striping and scribbling. Initially,

³ Animated film *Hotell E*, contracts, documents. Estonian State Archive, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 3033, l. 1.

⁴ S. Teinemaa, *Tumeda animatsiooni surm Euroopas*, p. 48.

this dark and coarse ‘line’ very slowly descends downward, only to suddenly become thinner and make a ‘leap’ upwards. However, this only lasts for a moment, because it immediately ‘falls’ back and ‘fades out’ at the bottom. As an animated film, *The Death of Dark Animation in Europe* was screened at the international Stuttgart Festival of Animated Film, where *Hotel E* received the Baden-Württemberg Prize. In the context of the festival, the short and simple etude inevitably seemed like an obituary for the best years of artistic or ‘serious’ animation in the Eastern bloc:

The most important thing that has occurred during the last few years is the disappearance of the former socialist countries from the arena. [...] I think that, in a very short time, European culture has lost something very significant – serious animated films. [...] If you wanted to make a film like *Hotel E* in Finland, Sweden or England ... the revenues would almost cover the costs. Therefore, I do think that *Hotel E* may be the last such film.⁵

Translated by Juta Ristsoo

⁵ S. Teinemaa, *Tumeda animatsiooni surm Euroopas*, pp. 46–48.