

# NATURE, MOVEMENT, LIMINALITY: REPRESENTING THE SPACE OF THE NATION IN 1960'S ESTONIAN CINEMA

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## Introduction

The first decade of the 2000s witnessed some remarkable developments in Estonian cinema. Most noticeably, during the years of recent economic boom, the number of local productions took a drastic swing upwards with considerable assistance from the remodelled system of state subsidies for film-making, peaking in 2007 when a total of nine domestic feature films premiered in Estonia (Baltic Films... 2008). More importantly, however, the numerous prizes awarded to Estonian films at distinguished international festivals have both created a growing interest towards Estonian cinema on the global level and increased its reputation among the native audiences. While some attempts have been made to generate awareness of the local “cinearcheology” on the academic arena of film studies – both abroad and at home – the broader audiences are still under a strong impression that Estonian cinema as an individual sector of national cultural production was not formed until after the Estonian state was re-established in the early 1990s. Indeed, this attitude is a clear signifier of the fact that a certain branch and period of the Estonian culture – Soviet Estonian cinema – described accurately as a “great loner” already in the 1960s (Meri 1968), has firmly main-

tained the marginal position and that Soviet Estonian cinema is still not recognised as a self-evident part of the local cultural domain, at least not in the wider, popular imaginary. Yet a closer look at the historical evidence suggests that it is entirely justifiable to trace the lineage of Estonian cinema as a “national” phenomenon back at least to the 1960s, when it (re)emerged in a situation where the Estonian nation-state had been abolished politically by the Soviet regime, which at the same time had also been responsible for establishing the fully functioning system of film-making. Thus, in a nutshell, Soviet Estonian cinema was an immanently liminal phenomenon: during the immediate post-war years it was initially found and equipped, in terms of ideology, technology and manpower, by central Soviet authorities, yet in the early 1960s local film-makers, newly graduated from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, along with Estonian writers, managed to turn it into a vehicle for producing indigenous, locally rooted culture. This transposition, however, was not entirely successful, as proposed above: because of the several Eastern (or, more precisely, Soviet) born transnational factors and influences which affected heavily the development of Soviet Estonian cinema, it remained relatively alienated from the core of the Estonian cultural body. On the other hand, the republic’s geographical location on the Western rim of the Soviet Union also introduced transnational elements of Western origin: Finnish TV and other (media) channels offered rather profound impulses to the Estonian cinematic ecology. This paper examines Soviet Estonian feature films production of the 1960s and seeks to demonstrate that while it was inseparably tied to the Union-wide, i.e. transnational, cinematic circuits, both in terms of policies and practices, themes and topics, the Estonian production nevertheless sculpted a distinctive, i.e. national, sensibility. The prevailing cinelandscape and filmic spaces of the period offer strikingly effective manifestations of these dialogues between national and transnational currents. I propose that the dominant and distinctive spatial orders of the Soviet Estonian feature films of the 1960s could be gathered under a single umbrella concept – motion. A specific sense of mobility, whether in regard to the increasing intellectual freedom and exchange, to the broadening cultural vistas or to the relative relaxing of repressive politics, indeed permeated the whole Soviet society during the “thaw” of Khrushchev’s tenure. Yet in Soviet Estonian cinema it became most apparent via two recurring and interlinked spatial motives – those of landscape and border, which, additionally, functioned as bearers and signifiers of local, i.e. national, identities and (hi)stories.

## Nature/landscape: defrosting Stalinist stasis

Evgenii Margolit, reckoning the distinctive elements of spatial representations in Soviet cinema during the Stalinist high point of the socialist realist discourse, argues that:

Cinelandscape at this time is static; it exists disconnected from the character, as a separate, and in the best cases, picturesque background. Landscapes depicting winter and summer are preferable to those that represent transitional seasons, which lack complete clarity, and are, therefore, less common. Movement is not encouraged: the world is interpreted as having attained its full realization, not as “becoming” but “has already become” to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s terminology (Margolit 2001: 31–32).

As the visual imagery of landscape is a forceful device of propaganda, easily subordinated to the service of communicating the messages of the dominant ideology (Sooväli 2008: 134), it is not surprising to discover that the above-described strategies of representation prevailed in the cinematic production all over the Soviet Union, including the imported film culture of Estonian SSR of the 1950s (in detail, see Näripea 2008). Heroic, static and monumental images of landscapes, however, disappeared gradually, first, in the mid-1950s, from the groundbreaking productions of larger (central) studios, such as Marlen Khutsiev and Feliks Mironer’s *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (*Vesna na Zarečnoj ulice* 1956), Mikhail Kalatozov’s award-winning *The Cranes Are Flying* (*Letjat žuravli* 1957) or Grigori Chukhrai’s much-celebrated *Ballad of a Soldier* (*Ballada o soldate* 1959), and then, in the first part of the 1960s, also from the more peripheral works of the new generation of Soviet Estonian filmmakers. People and their everyday lives, divorced from the picturesque landscapes in Stalinist films, were reconnected with their surroundings, the nature. In Estonian cinema, this becomes apparent, first and foremost, in pictures which demonstrate people’s close relationship with nature and the immediate reliance of their livelihood on the gifts of nature, on the productivity of their agricultural and piscatory activities (depending on the setting of particular films). Thus, films like *Fellow-Villagers* (*Ühe küla mehed*, directed by Jüri Müür 1962), *Ice Drift* (*Jääminek*, directed by Kaljo Kiisk 1962) or *Letters from Sõgedate Village* (*Kirjad Sõgedate külast*, directed by Jüri Müür 1966) show that regardless of changes in political circumstances and ideological regime the people inhabiting the seaboard maintain, at least in some scope, their customary sources of substance and patterns of existence, which rely to a great

extent upon the seasonal rhythms, as well as upon the profound respect for the elements. Notably, these representations also testify to the tendency to annul, or at least discard from the centre of attention, the immediate (Soviet) realities – a practice dominating the spatial regime of narrative cinema throughout the decade, which found its expression in a relative indifference towards depicting contemporary life of kolkhozes; instead, filmmakers preferred to conjure up the semi-mythic “ideal landscapes” of the interwar countryside, creating thus imaginary spaces of existence for the nation without a nation-state – veritable nation-scapes. Ironically, however, in a sense this tactic of ignorance also served to “normalise” these Soviet realities. At the same time, the plots of these films reveal that nature and the relationship between people and environment are also heavily invested with symbolism and allusions, which on some occasions and to a certain extent might be read as subversive of the established order. In both *Fellow-Villagers* and *Ice Drift*, for instance, nature is not merely a passive horizon, a simple backdrop; rather, it functions as an important trigger of events, an active narrative agent.

*Fellow-Villagers*, a film regarded by many commentators as the first “truly” Estonian production of the Soviet years (e.g. Elmanoviš 1995: 517–518), tells the story of a group of fishermen from a northern Estonian coastal village whose boat deviates from its course in a violent storm and drifts to the Finnish shores. The men find shelter with their Finnish peers, while also encountering a former fellow-villager Feliks Kandel, an émigré spy of an undefined “capitalist agency” who tries to induce his countrymen to stay in the West. Finally, however, despite this and several other enticements all the men return home safely. In this film, the storm is one of the main narrative mechanisms (the other being the intoxicated boat mechanic, who presumably fell prey to the corruptive influence of alcohol due to his severe conflict with the surrounding (Soviet) reality, causing the accident on the sea and setting thus in motion the entire chain of action. Facing the tempest, the men are powerless; they cannot control the nature because of the failure of the (Soviet) technology and lack of knowhow caused by the contaminative effect of the (socio-political) environment (i.e. the drunkard mechanic).

Equally crucial role of the elemental forces becomes apparent in the *Ice Drift*, a powerful film directed by one of the most important *auteurs* of Estonian cinema, Kaljo Kiisk, which owes much of its powerfully poetic imagery to the work of a Lithuanian cinematographer Algimantas Mockus. The story is about the struggle for survival of two clans, the Lautrikivis and

the Jõgels, inhabiting a small and remote Estonian island, which is taken over by a Nazi military unit during World War II. Typically, again, little attention is paid to the change of the political regime in the summer of 1940 when Estonia became, unwillingly, part of the Soviet Union. The long epilogue (just over seven minutes) introducing the families and the life on the island only casually mentions that after long years of rivalry the two kin-folks finally united their forces “when the times changed”, formed a collective household and began sharing each others’ property and expertise. The idyllic harmony, notably portrayed in the sunny and summerlike setting, is abruptly brought to an end by the sudden attack of the German troops in the summer of 1941 (which, quite tellingly, is signalled as the “beginning of the war”). After the young and able men leave the island in order to join the Soviet army, the remaining people, mainly the elderly and the women, are only protected by the island’s natural conditions: it is too small for planes to land and its rocky coastal waters are too dangerously shallow for bigger vessels to come ashore. Winter frosts, however, cover the sea with a sturdy surface of ice, creating a natural path for the Nazis to invade this last point of resistance. Winter, then, becomes a sign of hardships, as in many other Soviet films of the Thaw. According to Margolit, “Russian poetry of the Thaw legitimized in the reader’s consciousness winter and the plains as images of the State where life had become frozen” (Margolit 2001: 34). In the *Ice Drift*, the cycle of seasons is firmly intertwined with the story’s nodal points: winter signifies suffering and pain under the oppressive German rule, while the “totalitarian freeze” is followed by “the onset of spring and natural revival” (see Monastireva-Ansdell 2006: 248), which brings new hope for a better future. In the film, this is expressed literally by Laas Lautrikivi’s (the patriarchal head of one of the families) words, “Soon the ice melts and everything will rise to the surface because this is the way it has been determined”, by which he means that the Nazis will ultimately pay for the misery caused to the islanders. Visually, the hope for greater freedom is further emphasised by the (open) ending of the film: shots of foamy waves rolling over rocks imply the possibility of the villagers winning once again the liberty to earn their living by fishing and to sail the sea without restraints. The Germans are portrayed in the film as predatory and brutal lechers and drunkards, grotesquely cruel and perverse masks, rather than real human beings (also exemplified later in a TV miniseries *Dark Windows* (*Pimedad aknad* 1968) by Tõnis Kask). Their stupidity and ignorance becomes especially apparent in an episode where the old fishermen, attempting to resist the vulturine

Nazis by not catching enough fish to fill the German quotas of army provisions, are forced to go far away from the shore, despite the watery and breaking ice. The melting surface crumbles under their feet and they manage to escape the dangerous situation only by a stroke of luck.

Once again, then, nature's elemental forces function as a crucial narrative engine, and unlike the Stalinist cinema, which subordinated the nature as a landscape to the willpower of the almighty socialist realist hero, the films of the 1960s tend to emphasise the supremacy of nature over human agency. In Estonian context, one cannot but wonder if this new emphasis was perhaps perceived by the local audiences as a symbol of the unjust break of the "natural existence" of the independent nation-state. Did the contemporary audiences interpret the viciousness of the Nazis in the *Ice Drift* as a covert parallel to the repressions and brutalities of the Soviet invaders? Was the desolate and gloomy late-feudal countryside of the 1890s in *The Dairyman of Mäeküla* (*Mäeküla piimamees*, directed by Leida Laius 1965) seen as a symbolic equivalent of the "muddy roads, poverty, pilfering, alcoholism and hopelessness" (Kalm 2008: 61) of the contemporary kolkhoz landscape? Finally, when Jüri Müür declared after the first screening of the *Ice Drift* that "the sea, the heaven and the rocks play almost as important part as the human protagonists", did he latently refer to these territorial vehicles as signifiers or tokens of national cinema / local identity?

As noted by Margolit, during the Thaw the cinelandscape "became necessary for conveying and expressing man's inner world, that is, the journey of the human soul (to return to the initial meaning of the trite expression)" (Margolit 2001: 34–35). Indeed, besides the more general connotations indicated above, nature often served as a device for describing the internal universe of the characters, for conveying their emotional states and psychological conditions. For instance, in *Ice Drift*, Laas Lautrikivi's daughter Linda, who makes a desperate, yet only partially successful, attempt to save her father's life by becoming a mistress of the Nazi commander, is shown as a lonely figure standing against the background of a gigantic rock of ice when she witnesses the execution of Tõnis Jögel, the head of the other family. The ice signifies Linda's inner congealment, her symbolic death, since saving her father's life by scarifying her chastity, she betrayed her neighbours, her family and, ultimately, herself. In fact, later on Laas deems her a "cripple" and finally disowns her altogether. In *Werewolf* (*Lihahunt*, directed by Leida Laius 1968), furthermore, the character of the protagonist, Tiina, is both visually and metaphorically constructed almost

entirely on the basis of various allegories of nature: water and fire refer to her powerfully independent and allusive personality; her untamed and thus dangerous sexuality is imagined through the comparison with the wilderness of the forests.

### **Movement/liminality: from the centre to periphery and beyond**

While (rural) spaces of Stalinist cinema were, as a rule, highly static and relatively enclosed, functioning partly as instances of the Bakhtinian idyllic chronotope, in a sense that the “little spatial world is limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world” (Bakhtin 2004: 225), the burgeoning Thaw saw increasingly transformative and dynamic approach to both urban and rural locations. For example, Moscow, formerly the Stalinist sacred centre (Clark 2003: 14), was portrayed by Marlen Khutsiev in *Ilich's Gate* (*Zastava Il'iča* 1962/1988) and in *July Rain* (*Ijul'skij dožd'* 1966) as well as by Giorgi Danelia in *I Walk Around Moscow* (*Ja šagaju po Moskve* 1963) (see Coxe 2005, Coxe 2008, Woll 2000: 209–210) as a vibrant, “personal, intimate and lyrical” space “in flux” (Coxe 2008: 215). Estonian cinema, too, concentrating mainly on the depictions of the countryside and natural environments, surpassed the inertia of the 1950s and obtained a refreshing flow, a sense of movement on various levels. First, similarly to the Soviet cinema of the Thaw in general, the film-scapes “acquired a lost dynamic and liberated itself from the inner frame” (Margolit 2001: 35), meaning that the cinematographic techniques gained a boost of mobility. Secondly and maybe even more importantly, however, in Estonian cinema in particular this change from Stalinist stagnation to a newly found vibrancy in terms of spatial representations – “space was physically opening up” (Woll 2000: 210) – is perhaps best explained through two partially overlapping concepts: the Bakhtinian chronotope of the road and the notion of liminality.

In the context of the “new” Estonian cinema of the 1960s in general, and of the shifting spatial discourses in particular, the importance of *Mid-day Ferry*, a film directed by Kaljo Kiisk in 1967, is best revealed by adapting Bakhtin's concept of the road chronotope. This film, being often identified as the first and only “disaster movie” ever produced by the Soviet Estonian cinema, was certainly a good example of the new narrative form, which

bears certain traces of likeness to the narrative strategies of the so-called new wave cinemas in both Eastern and Western Europe (especially relevant parallels can be drawn with Roman Polański's *Knife in the Water* (*Nóż w wodzie* 1961), but any deeper analysis of these links remains regrettably beyond the scope of this paper). According to Valdeko Tobro, a contemporary Estonian film critic:

Instead of following the rules of traditional narrative form, the script [of the *Midday Ferry* – E. N.] testifies of the author's intention to observe actual, realistic characters in actual, realistic situations, that is, his desire to observe reality and give sense to its inner, latent processes. The position formerly held by carefully constructed plot is now taken over by flow of real events: the road brings people to the harbour, they embark the ferry, fire breaks out, people react to the situation according to their characters, the danger is eliminated, the ferry reaches its destination and everybody go their separate ways again. The characters have been constructed in a similar way. Although the stereotypical narrative patterns require gradual opening of characters or their changing caused by the central events, in *Midday Ferry* they enter the story as they are and remain the same throughout its course. The author is first and foremost interested in how they react to the situation; who they are is a question left for the audiences to answer. (Tobro 1967, original emphasis).

The opening tracking shot, creating a circular pan around a signpost on a rural crossroad, establishes road as the main chronotope of the film. As Alexandra Ganser, Julia Pühringer and Markus Rheindorf have observed, "In some chronotopes, mainly those of travel and uprooted modern life, time takes precedence over space; in the more idyllic, pastoral chronotopes, space dominates time" (Ganser et al. 2006: 2). Indeed, in *Midday Ferry*, time is in a way more important than space, since the apogee event of the film – the fire on the ferry in the middle of the sea – is set by one of the nameless characters, the Boy who in the beginning of the film drops, by accident, a burning cigarette bud to a truck carrying a load of cotton. The truck embarks the ferry and the audience, who is, contrarily to the characters, aware of the smouldering danger, can almost hear the time ticking away, closer and closer to the unavoidable disaster. Moreover, in relation to the road Bakhtin also describes the chronotope of chance: "Should something happen a minute earlier or a minute later, that is, should there be no chance simultaneity or chance disjunctions in time, there would be no plot at all" (Bakhtin 2004: 92). This is exactly the case in *Midday Ferry* (although the plot is relatively loose here, as demonstrated above): the Boy comes across the truck completely by accident – he and the Girl find it standing at



the crossroad and spontaneously decide to continue their apparently quite random journey as stowaways in its trailer.

Additionally, Bakhtin proposes that the chronotope of the road (“the open road”) is closely connected with the “motif of meeting”, especially important being the accidental encounters of people who are otherwise “separated by social and spatial distance” (Ganser et al 2006: 3), or, in Bakhtin’s words, “any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another” (Bakhtin 2004: 243). A local critic K. Riik has counted that *Midday Ferry* presents altogether 38 characters, “none of whom is the protagonist” (Riik 1967: 17), and, even more importantly, none of whom has a name. All of them are people from strikingly diverse backgrounds, they have different personalities and various, sometimes severely contrasting, world-views: e.g. a curvy blonde hairdresser, a divorcee and a single parent, who after working in a cheap railway salon has managed to seduce and marry a respectable, if somewhat spineless, professor; a disabled war veteran with a little girl whose mother is more interested in men than her offspring; a party of young “beatniks”; a group of female linguistics students; a couple of fishermen; a pair of pilots; the nameless couple – the Boy and the Girl – who sneak onboard as stowaways, etc. Their only common denominator is the fact that they are on their way from the mainland to an island, Muhu, to celebrate the summer solstice. According to the chronotopic classification of road movies proposed by Ganser, Pühringer and Rheindorf *Midday Ferry* belongs to the category of “road as setting”, which “charges the road with the function of a meeting place for characters who would otherwise perhaps never meet” (Ganser et al. 2006: 7). In the “course of travelling the roadies’ personalities, stories and backgrounds are revealed”, “their fates are intertwined, if only for a short while”. However, no “change of personal development ... triggered off by a fellow traveller” (Ganser et al. 2006: 7) occurs in the *Midday Ferry*; quite the opposite, as witnessed by Riik, “No-one transforms from Saul to Paul or vice versa, nobody changes or grows, by the end of the film everyone remains as they appeared on the screen in the beginning. Only we know them better now – the danger of fire has shed a revealing light on them, one by one” (Riik 1967: 17).

*Midday Ferry* is thus a good example of one successful strategy for setting the spatial inertia of the Stalinist socialist realism into motion again. However, its youthful buoyancy, accentuated by a jazzy musical score, remained a relatively exceptional case, and it was unquestionably the purest

manifestation of the road chronotope in the Soviet Estonian cinema of the 1960s. Still, many other films, too, contained journeys between different times and/or spaces, inviting the introduction of the concept of liminality into the discussion at hand. Estonian territory, forming alongside the other two Baltic countries on the westernmost rim of the Soviet Union, is due to its distinctive geographical properties – its area of 45,228 square kilometres is outlined by 23,794 kilometres of coastline and contains, in addition to the mainland, about 1,500 islands and islets – especially susceptible to interpretations relating to borders, frontiers, a particular kind of in-between-ness and transitions. Liminality, one could argue, is an intrinsic part of local Estonian identities, whether national, territorial or historical. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the images – whether literal or symbolic – of borders and edges, perimeters and thresholds, margins and fringes hold a significant position in the Estonian cinema of the 1960s. Naturally, these images were directly and closely connected to the geographical, but also political realities, and in the 1960s they were not a novelty as a subject of cinematic representation. Yet while the films of the 1950s were eager to mask this liminality, to connect the periphery strongly with the umbilical cord of the central, Muscovite authorities, in the 1960s the liminality became to function as an existential attribute of a local territoriality and identity. In what follows I will attempt to consider some of the most apparent manifestations of this phenomenon.

In terms of spatial representations, borders were one of the most vivid symbols throughout the Soviet Estonian cinema: it could occur as the line of the impenetrable Iron Curtain, carefully guarded by military forces (*Yachts at Sea* (*Jahid merel*, directed by Mikhail Egorov 1955), or as a porous division between two worlds through which the capitalist spies, Western consumer goods and alien ideologies infiltrate the Soviet Union (*Uninvited Guests* (*Kutsumata külalised*), directed by Igor Eltsov 1959; *Underwater Reefs* (*Veealusel karid*), directed by Viktor Nevežin 1959; *Fellow-Villagers*, etc.). The topic of borders came especially to the fore from the mid-1950s on, indicating a shift towards Khrushchev's "thaw" that was characterised by a slightly more diverse, although no less slanted spatial model, compared to the socialist realist discourse of space, which had been mainly based on the following notions: 1) "tourist gaze", designating a static, hierarchical, tamed and reified view of landscape; 2) conquest of territory – influencing not only the actual terrain but also penetrating the lives and minds of people inhabiting them (both the tourist gaze and the conquest of territory

are theorized in the context of Soviet cinema by Emma Widdis; see Widdis 2000, 2003a and 2003b); 3) binary spatial patterns (above all, center versus periphery), and closed and static “sacralised” space, as suggested by Katerina Clark (2003). While in the films of the late 1940s and early 1950s (and in Soviet Russia already during the 1930s) the border had become “an increasingly important symbol of might and security, a protective divide from the encroaching evils of the Capitalist West” (Widdis 2003: 402), since the mid-1950s it doesn't seem to hold that tightly any more, and the seductive ooze of subversive Western influences is particularly strong on the Baltic hem of the USSR: spies, tantalising capitalist commodities and dissident ideologies penetrate the Iron Curtain (even though not yet very successfully) in films like *Uninvited Guests*, *Underwater Reefs* etc.

While the Soviet Russian cinema of the Thaw often abandoned the iconic and sacral centres (e.g. *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*; see, e.g. Margolit 2001: 35, Woll 2000: 45–50), and focused its attention to the periphery, which, unlike the centre, was not “corrupted by totalitarian culture” (Prokhorov 2007: 127), then the already peripheral cinema of Soviet Estonia – spatially or otherwise – went to further (spatial) extremes, and sometimes crossed the (state) borders altogether, as, for example, in the *Fellow-Villagers* where most of the story is set in Finland. The border, then, which had been “a protective divide” as proposed by Widdis in Stalinist years, became – as in the avant-garde and revolutionary Soviet Union of the 1920s – a “point of transition or contact with the world beyond”, “a metaphorically fluid and breachable frontier” (Widdis 2000: 403). But unlike in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, in the 1960s Estonia this was not an act of reaching out to the international proletariat, rather, from the Estonians' point of view, it signalled re-emerging contacts with the Western world, which was seen as the genuine “home” of the local culture. In fact, it is highly likely that the slight opening of the Iron Curtain, via Finland to the rest of the West, had a considerably positive effect on the “rebirth” of the Estonian national culture on the brink of the 1960s.

As maintained by an Estonian artist Enn Põldroos, even the most trivial signs from the world outside the iron cage of the USSR, “some empty foreign cremetube washed ashore from the sea, became a mysterious envoy generating fantasies from another universe”:

One had a weird feeling that Russia and all what belonged to it remained outside the notion “world”, “humanity”, “world culture”. The world was all that “Other” that was outside, hidden by the present and a devotedly studied past. It was

a world that sometimes sent us messages, some plastic things floated in the sea, some interrupted piece of melody (Pöldroos 2001: 99).

The seaside, but even more so the islands, which manifested the ultimate Western frontier of the USSR, held a prominent position in the Estonian cinema of the 1960s, as already demonstrated in the discussion above. Several films, such as *Fellow-Villagers*, *Ice Drift*, *Letters from Sõgedate Village*, *Girl in Black* (*Tütarlaps mustas*, directed by Veljo Käsper 1966), *Mid-day Ferry*, *Gladiator* (*Gladiiaator*, directed by Veljo Käsper 1969), are set in fishing villages either on the coast or on the islands. Repeated shots of waterfronts, rocky beaches caressed by splashing waves visually emphasise the motif of border. At the same time, though, these images mask and distort the actual situation of life in border zones, which were in fact carefully guarded by the Soviet army. In reality, the authorities imposed rigorous restrictions to both the native inhabitants of the coastal regions and visitors to seaside areas, while, as a complete contrast, the cinematic representations of the seaside function as illusionary “ideal landscapes”, the ultimate objective of which is to re-assure a certain continuity of the ideologically charged notion of homeland and the sustainability of the (local/national) identities connected to it. These filmic coastal images could be easily read as full of longing for opportunities lost in the turmoil of history, which, for instance, becomes especially apparent in the epilogue of the *Ice Drift*, the opening sequence of *Letters from Sõgedate Village* and in the extremely poetic cinematography of *Girl in Black* (see Unt 1967). Latently, then, the images of open, apparently freely accessible sea actually emphasise a sense of enclosure, the painful awareness of virtually overwhelming restrictions. Tiina Peil argues pointedly that:

The sea that had been open and wide was closed off and became the sea that separated as a result of the Second World War. <...> The contacts with other coasts were reduced to a minimum for several decades. The seashore turned into a place for dreaming, into a place where it was possible to let your thoughts fly in solitude, even if people were confined to never leaving for the other shores (Peil 1999: 445).

In addition to these depictions of divisions between land and water, manifesting the separation of East and West, history and present, the cinematic representations of liminality also appear on other levels and different frameworks, both in terms of general conceptual/symbolic structures and particular territorial configurations. For example, in *Werewolf*, the border runs between the forest and the village, between the freedom of the former

and the trammels of civilization of the latter, or, according to Mardi Valgemäe who draws pertinent parallels with ancient Greek mythology, between darkness and light, between the Dionysian ecstasism of the former and the Apollonian serenity and the equilibrium of the latter (Valgemäe 1995: 69). The story, set in the early 19th century, is about Tiina, a girl whose mother had been accused of witchcraft and burnt on the stake. Orphaned and lonely, she sought refuge with a family in the village, the Tammarus. They took her in and she grew up with their son, Margus, and another adopted daughter, Mari. Reaching adolescence, Margus fell deeply in love with Tiina's vibrant, passionate and attractive personality, and decided to marry her. His parents, however, taken aback by Tiina's untamed character, suspecting her of having inherited her mother's supernatural powers and being convinced that she is a werewolf, forced him, instead, to marry Mari, the blonde and gentle, yet somewhat insipid and cold stepsister. Tiina, overwhelmed by the betrayal, then ran away to the woods. Years later, wolves came to the farm and howled near the barn. Margus, attempting to scare them off by shooting at them, discovered to his horror that, instead of the wolves, the bullet had fatally wounded Tiina. Thus, the film is not only about the borders and oppositions between the wilderness of the woods, which stands for Tiina's unhindered and bold strive for personal freedom (and which, historically, was known to protect the last remaining point of resistance of the pre-war republic – the guerrilla forces of the so-called Forest Brothers), and the superstitious and ultra-conservative village, which symbolises the repressive and subjugative order of the "civilized society" (cf. Remsu 1986) – an opposition which so easily lends itself to interpretations such as individual versus collective, and thus, by extension, Estonian/local versus Soviet, Us versus Them; its importance to the discussion at hand lies also in Tiina's figure as a liminal character *par excellence* – the werewolf is a transitory, unstable creature, an outcast of the society whose danger in this particular instance is first and foremost associated with her sexuality. Since in the Soviet society the latter was carefully controlled by the mechanisms of approved codes of morality (but also legally, as homosexuality, for example, was considered a criminal offence), Tiina's character can also be seen as subversive towards the ruling political regime, even if at the moment of the film's premiere (January 1969) the system was still flexible enough to accommodate this digression. Moreover, Laius's *oeuvre* in general is important as marking the appearance of clearly gendered and sexualised identities in Estonian cinema, expanding thus the representational range of cinematic identities.

Similar contacts with otherworldly locations and characters, as well as leaky borders between different orders of existence can also be found in *The Misadventures of the New Satan* (*Põrgupõhja uus Vanapagan*, directed by Grigori Kromanov and Jüri Müür 1964), an adaptation of a novel from 1939 by an Estonian literary classic A. H. Tammsaare, which in its turn is based on figures and tales from Estonian mythology. It is a story about the Devil himself coming to Earth to investigate if a human being is capable of leading an honest life and earn his/her place in the Heaven. The greater portion of the film is set on a farm, hidden deep into the woods, where the Devil works hard and tries his best to be a good Christian. Being lamentably outsmarted by Kaval-Ants (Clever-Hans), he finally returns, beaten, to Hell. The doors to the metaphysical realms of Heaven, shown in the opening sequence, the earthly countryside with fields and woods, standing for the eternal cycle of life and death, the sacral space of the vicarage, the bureaucratic domain of the community office, the space of science represented by a doctor's office, and Kaval-Ants's ample household, signifying the power of money/capitalism, constitute a spatial universe decisively different from the Soviet realities and symbolising the local idiosyncrasies, identities and territorialities. *Madness* (*Hullumeelsus*), on the other hand, Kaljo Kiisk's much-celebrated "Dürrenmattian political model drama" (Kärk 1995: 115) from 1968, employs the liminal world of a madhouse in order to present a strikingly sharp criticism of totalitarian system. Conceived and presented to the institutions of censorship as an antifascist work, its subversive Aesopian language was not subtle enough to deceive the ideological wardens, and it was immediately denied a screening license outside the Estonian SSR.

Finally, liminality does not have to appear as only or particularly a spatial phenomenon; it can also manifest itself in temporal forms. In Estonian films of the 1960s, it might thus additionally be recognised as the in-between-ness of historical situations, whether real or imagined. First and foremost, it is exemplified by the numerous representations of war, mainly World War II, which must have been felt by the Estonian people as an unreal time of dramatic shifts and immense trauma, overshadowed by suspense and uncertainty for future. Secondly, the latently present past of the previous era of independent statehood, discernible in so many films of the decade as argued above, provides another case of temporal liminality, functioning as an example of imaginary border-crossing.

## Conclusion

This initial and introductory investigation of spatial representations in Estonian narrative cinema of the 1960s indicate that the abolition of Stalinist and socialist realist modes of representations in the beginning of the decade resulted in a whole range of changes in both visual and narrative aspects of the local film production. The simplistic stories of socialist heroes, typically triumphing over the elements as well as the bygone ideologies, reducing both rural and urban settings into static, illustrative backgrounds, and often brought to the silver screen under the direction of centrally delegated filmmakers from Russia, were replaced by narratives and devices of representation displaying more dynamic, intimate and symbolically complex relationships between an extended gallery of characters and their environs, and drawing hitherto unthinkable parallels – weather overtly or covertly – between settings, historic events, past eras, and (national) identities, bringing thus the cinematic spaces into a state of flux. Subtly shifting emphasis from centre to peripheries, evoking borders and even the world beyond them, drawing attention to transitions and in-between spaces, margins and liminal spheres, the work of Estonian filmmakers in the 1960s conceived a universe which was in synch with wider social and cultural transformations of the region. Although the changes in visual and narrative form of Estonian films were probably not as dramatic as in other Eastern European cinemas or even in the production of major Soviet studios, they were still certainly discernible as evidences of a newborn cinematic culture, which was deeply influenced by contemporary filmmaking practices of its neighbouring countries in both socialist and capitalist domain, but which nevertheless developed a distinctive voice and look of its own, perhaps most noticeably by means of its characteristic spatial configurations.

As hopefully demonstrated above, the study of spatial representations reveals in relief that it is entirely possible and plausible to discuss Soviet Estonian cinema as a phenomenon pertaining to the field of national culture. The portrayals of Estonian territory, its characteristic land-, sea- and mnemoscapes as seen in the cinema of the 1960s provide a reasonably strong case for arguing that despite the lack of nation-state on the one hand and the rigorous regulations of Soviet cinema authorities on the other hand, the local cultural agencies managed to establish a specific representational order which bears clear traces of local idiosyncracies. Even though not always recognised by contemporary audiences and critics as such, and re-

ardless of its close ties with regional/Soviet/transnational ideologies and cinematic practices (links to which the essay at hand has managed to refer only briefly), Estonian cinema of the 1960s constitutes the beginnings of a distinctively local, although by no means isolated, tradition which continues, albeit in variations, throughout the rest of the Soviet period and even beyond it, and which deserves much more academic attention than has been paid to it thus far.

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## Abstract

The recent upsurge of Estonian cinema, characterised by an increased number of productions as well as by the remarkable success of these productions both at international film festivals and in the domestic box-office, has left the broader audiences with a strong conviction that Estonian cinema as a national cinema was not born until after the Estonian state was re-established in the early 1990s. This reflects eloquently the fact that a whole branch and period of the Estonian culture – Soviet Estonian cinema – is to this date not recognised as a self-evident part of Estonian national culture, at least not in the wider, popular imaginary. This paper examines Soviet Estonian narrative cinema of the 1960s and seeks to demonstrate that while it was inseparably tied to the Union-wide, i.e. transnational, cinematic circuits, both in terms of policies and practices, themes and topics, Estonian cinema still succeeded in sculpting a distinctive, i.e. national, sensibility. This dynamic, in my opinion, is manifested in a strikingly clear manner through dominant spatial representations of the period's production. The portrayals of Estonian territory, its characteristic land-, sea- and mnemoscapes as seen in the cinema of the 1960s provides a reasonably strong case for arguing that despite the lack of a nation-state on the one hand and the rigorous regulations of Soviet cinema authorities on the other hand, the local cultural agencies managed to establish a specific representational order which bears clear traces of local idiosyncrasies.

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## Santrauka

Dabartinis Estijos kino pakilimas ir pasiekimai tarptautiniuose kino festivaliuose bei populiarumas Estijoje įtvirtino tam tikros visuomenės dalies nuostatą, kad Estijos kinas, kaip nacionalinis fenomenas, nebuvo susiformavęs iki 1990-ųjų, kai Estija vėl tapo nepriklausoma valstybe. Tai byloja, kad išsisa Estijos kultūros šaka ir laikotarpis – sovietinės Estijos kinas – iki šiol nėra pripažintas kaip integrali Estijos nacionalinės kultūros dalis, bent jau plačiuosiuose visuomenės sluoksniuose. Straipsnyje analizuojamas septintojo dešimtmečio sovietinės Estijos kinas siekiant parodyti, kad nors ši kultūros šaka buvo stipriai susaistyta tarybinių reikalavimų, ji vis dėlto sugebėjo reprezentuoti ir įkomponuoti nacionalinius bruožus. Autoriaus nuomone, ši dinamika pirmiausia atsiskleidžia per erdvės pristatymą to meto kinematografijoje. Estijos teritorijos vaizdavimas, jos bruožų, kraštovaizdžio, jūros pabrėžimas, kaip matyti septintojo dešimtmečio kine, suteikia tvirtą pagrindą argumentuoti, kad, nepaisant nepriklausomybės praradimo ir griežtų sovietinio kino cenzorių reikalavimų, šalyje sugebėta sukurti specifinę kinematografijos kalbą, aiškiai pabrėžiančią Estijos savitumą.