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Tourist gaze as a strategic device of architectural representation: Tallinn Old Town and Soviet tourism marketing in the 1960s and 1970s

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The structure of Tallinn’s urban fabric reflects perfectly the nature of Estonian culture as that of rupture and discontinuity, which owes much to the particular geographical location, to its position as a “border state” (see Tode 2000), and to rather complicated historical circumstances. The built environment in Tallinn is defined by numerous incomplete architectural ensembles, resulting in a cityscape full of sharp contrasts and peculiar juxtapositions. In the very heart of it, however, lies the Old Town – the oldest part of Tallinn inside the four-kilometer-long limestone Town Wall, constituting an integral ensemble and displaying a well-preserved medieval milieu and structure that acquired its appearance mainly in the 13th–15th centuries. This picturesque environment has always been an attractive source of imagery for visual media, especially so, of course, in connection with, but also in opposition to, the rise and development of modern tourism practices. At the same time it has also been the place for negotiations between conflicting ideologies and (national) identities, and an important arena for (re)presentations of power, resistance, and adaptation. These processes intersected and generated a particularly complex and ambivalent configuration of representations, reflections and practices under Soviet power during the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960s, the Old Town and the broader subject of the medieval heritage suddenly became extraordinarily topical for both the academic circles and mass culture, and inspired an array of visual as well as literary texts. This somewhat nostalgic and romantic “medieval trend” materialized in countless articles of consumer goods, numerous interior designs, and in a whole range of motion pictures. This paper concentrates on a set of short films, the so-called scenics or, literally, “view films”¹ released during

¹ In Soviet Estonian cinema, the “medieval trend” spread across a whole scale of different genres and forms of filmmaking all of which don’t even have plausible terminological equivalents in English. The umbrella term “view film” (*vaatefilm*) is only partly and roughly comparable to “travel film” or “travelogue” or “scenic” in English since all those view films representing the Old Town were made by the locals and about the local surroundings, while travel film,

those decades by the two Soviet Estonian film studios Tallinnfilm and Eesti Telefilm (Estonian Television Film). I attempt to give an overview of the modes of representation of the Old Town's cityscape and landmarks, arguing that although resistance to the Soviet cultural discourse in terms of national identity was absolutely central in the field of heritage protection that, in turn, was a major force behind the initial emergence of this "medieval trend," in the sphere popular culture the dominant currents seemed to be more connected with the espousal of the Soviet-style cultural inclinations. One may even go further to claim that, in fact, this was a clever strategy of the Soviets to assimilate the occupied nation, still similar in its essence to Stalinist oppressive politics, yet much more refined in its practices. On the other hand, even in film – the most rigidly controlled art form – as well as in other areas of mass culture in the framework of this "medieval trend" the signs of differentiation and certain cautious but fundamental tactical inversions of the dominating order are also clearly discernible.

The Soviet occupation created a cultural situation which, on the one hand, allowed integrating the Old Town as an ancient German citadel into the local national identity, helping the Estonians finally to adopt the heritage of the one-time colonisers, and even to make it a *locus* of national *résistance*, as an Estonian architectural historian Mart Kalm has argued. This resistance in the form of prescribing nationalist/local cultural identity, however, took place *within* the confines of the dominant Soviet system, or, to use Michel Foucault's line of reasoning: the legal acts of the

travelogue or scenic usually denotes films shot abroad, in distant countries by people foreign to the location. Still, they are comparable to certain extent in a sense that both can (although not necessarily) convey a touristic sense of place. And, importantly, very many Soviet Estonian view films were actually commissioned by central authorities in Moscow and thus had to follow their requirements in terms of how the cityscape was shot and what exactly was shown. This, in fact, relates the view films to the travelogues/scenics also by virtue of a somewhat colonial perspective (although the Western–Oriental colonialism was in many respects profoundly different from the relations between Soviet Union and its Republics).

As already mentioned, the "view film" is an overarching notion and could, for example, also signify something remotely similar to the so-called city symphonies, or at least contain some features characteristic to this genre (most commonly the from-dawn-till-dusk structure). Moreover, the view film also has parallel (or rather sub)terms, such as "commissioned film" (*tellimusfilm*, referring, of course, to the fact that it was not initiated by the studio and could at times even contain stances not approved by the studio), "promotional film" (*reklaamfilm*, indicating clearly its propagandistic purpose), "stand film" (*stendifilm*, suggesting its use at all-Union or international exhibitions and usually implying propagandistic content), or even "souvenir film" (*suveniirfilm*). In some cases, they were called just "documentaries" or "shorts," and these terms seemed usually to denote better-crafted, higher-quality, and more intricate or even ideologically somewhat contradictory pieces.

In addition to view films, the "medieval trend" also infiltrated numerous short revue films compiled of loosely connected musical and dance numbers (especially in Telefilm productions). Finally, Tallinn Old Town appeared as a backdrop in several Soviet Estonian feature-length fiction films, notably from 1969 to 1972, including two musicals, two historical adventure films, a historical psychological drama, and a *film noir* style "thriller" (out of the annual output of circa three features!).

authorities also brought the opportunity for resistance (see, e.g. Foucault 1991, 27). This was caused by the fact that, besides building its own monuments, the Soviet power did not neglect the chance to dress up in so-called “borrowed plumes” from the history of Russia as well as of all other Soviet republics, following the Stalinist thesis “national in form, socialist in content” by craftily weaving the material crust of the seemingly ideologically conflicting heritage of the Old Town into the international cultural texture of the Soviet Union, by recoding its meanings and transforming its functions, by harnessing it into the service of Soviet propaganda.

From the late 1960s and early 1970s onward, tourism was an indispensable source for obtaining currency and an inevitable phenomenon from the viewpoint of keeping the entire economical system in the Soviet Union functioning altogether. An ever growing hard currency debt to Western financial institutions that had incurred by taking out loans for purchasing Western technologies, which were – unsuccessfully so – intended to be paid back from the profits obtained from the production manufactured on the basis of these technologies, brought about an unprecedented increase in the importance of the tourist industry in the Soviet Union, the authorities of which were otherwise notoriously cautious, sometimes to the point of paranoia, in all relations concerning foreign visitors and the world abroad. Alongside Volgograd, Novgorod, Kalinin, Zagorsk, Suzdal, Yaroslavl, Kiev, Lvov, Uzhgorod, Riga, Vilnius, Minsk, Tashkent, Alma-Ata, Bukhara, Samarkand, Tbilisi, Yerevan and many other cities, Tallinn was included to the chain of attractions that the Soviet central tourism agency Inturist marketed to foreign tourists (see, e.g., Hall 1991, 37, 81). This practical, tourism-related cause was one of the factors that contributed rather heavily to the massive popularization of medieval imagery of the Old Town.

The visual material circulating in mass media surrounded the Old Town as a product for tourism with multiple “layers of advertising,” that in addition to earlier cult values also attached market value to historical heritage, as an Estonian media critic and scholar Peeter Linnap (2003, 436) has suggested, observing it with a so-called tourist gaze. The concept of the tourist gaze coined by tourism sociologist John Urry in his seminal study *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (1990) is not only associated with the curious glance of the tourist, but has rather become a term denoting a certain universal way of perception (primarily due to phenomenological theory). In the opinion of many, it has evolved into the predominant mode of human-environment relations in the latter half of the 20th century and particularly towards the end

of the century. Among other things, it signifies a commercially motivated, hierarchized and reified view of the landscape that is more or less detached from everyday practices.

As mentioned briefly above, the socialist realist dogma of “national in form, socialist in content” was since the mid-1930s the only official artistic paradigm in the Soviet Union. Although the era of Thaw under Nikita Khrushchev brought many changes, eroding and transforming the once extremely rigorously defined regulations of representation and content, the concept itself retained its firm position both in the official discourse and actual artistic practices, especially so in provincial cinema like that of Soviet Estonia.

I believe that it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the tenets of socialist realism had quite a lot in common with touristic modes of representation. One of the most profound similarities is perhaps the creation of an illusionist, escapist, and selective dreamworld that has next to nothing to do with everyday reality and practices, neither in social nor environmental terms. “The tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them from everyday experience,” writes John Urry (1990, 3; see also Hummon 1988, 179, and Wang 2000, 165). Although the canon of socialist realism “demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development,” as stated in 1934 at the first all-union Congress of Soviet Writers (quoted in Kenez 2001, 143), the application of this requirement in artistic practice invariably meant the construction of a falsely positive pseudo-reality full of pathos and idealized imagery. This mode of representation corresponds perfectly to the way landscapes and urban environments were depicted in Western-made promotional travel films and brochures advertising tourist destinations all over the world, both in Western countries and in the Third World. Ning Wang brings out a few notions informing this “symbolic transformation of reality,” including beautification, romanticization, and idealization (Wang 2000, 165). He argues pointedly that tourism brochures tend to render prominent attractive vistas and locations and exclude unpleasant, uninteresting or unsuitable views and places in order to construct an idealized image of the advertised locale. Also, according to him, if some sights happen to be not physically straightforwardly beautiful enough, the tourism advertising may draw attention to them by means of portraying them as romantic and “idealized images,” thus transforming them into beautiful. Wang’s examples include relics and the primitive. However, all the above could just as well be detected in the representations of Tallinn’s Old Town. First, there was a strong tendency to depict mainly newly restored beautiful “gem objects,” such as the Town Hall, some old churches, and certain other buildings. Secondly, the

touristic imagery relies heavily on the romantic appearances of various material textures characteristic to this environment: the coarse and rustic surfaces of limestone walls, the expanses of red tiled roofs, the picturesque façades covered with rough and sometimes slightly crumbled coat of plaster and faded colors, and the winding streets covered with uneven cobblestone pavement. The romanticism of these aged features, however, was stringently controlled in order not to go beyond it to reveal the mere decay and neglect – as would have been the case if one had looked behind the freshly restored façades into the courtyards full of debris and dirt, or just turned the eye next door, to the grim everyday life of the communal apartments that so many still picturesque but usually not restored façades concealed. Very often the romantic overlook was retained by simply shooting from sufficient distance, from aerial perspective, for example.

Patricia C. Albers and William R. James, writing about travel photography and exotic ethnic representations, bring out three principal notions that characterize the dreamworld of tourist representations (Albers, James 1988, 154–155): homogenization (“features of an area and its people are stereotyped according to some dominant cultural model”), decontextualization (“involves a process whereby ethnic subjects appear in settings that lack some concrete lived-in, historical referent”), and mystification. The concepts of homogenization and decontextualization are integral to the Stalinist dogma “national in form, socialist in content” as well as, more concretely, to the majority of the films representing the Old Town. The stereotyping was, of course, one of the basic properties of socialist realism, occurring in virtually every conceivable artistic medium, for example, in the form of pseudo-ethnographical depictions of the people from all the different Soviet Republics, wearing national costumes (which is notably also an inseparable part of Western tourist images) and being surrounded by archaic artifacts. The Old Town is actually just another, slightly altered instance of that, only in this case the stereotypical was articulated as the endless repetition of the same images of certain historical buildings, details, and vistas on postcards, on souvenir items, and in films. This, in turn, is directly linked with the process of decontextualization since the representations of the Old Town in the view films consist more often than not of picture-postcard like snapshots of old edifices and artworks the real history of which is seldom explained. Additionally, from the 1960s on, every year several film crews from the “friendly sister Republics” came to shoot their historical epics in Tallinn, transforming the Old Town into a backdrop to some random historical event that actually took place elsewhere, literally loosing the environment’s genuine context. These depictional practices correspond strikingly with Wang’s (2000, 161) claim

that “[t]ourists usually see only tourist sights and attractions and the social context in which these sights appear is usually ignored,” and to his remark that the “tourist way of seeing is [---] ahistoricizing seeing [---] and simplifying seeing.” Moreover, these arguments, as well as Albers’ and James’ notion of decontextualization also refer to the lack of the sense of everyday lived-in-ness that can be detected in many view films as, for example, a tendency to exclude people from the frame, and to avoid, as mentioned above, the grim reality behind the façades.

The ahistoricizing mode of seeing and representing raises issues of history and memory. As Carol Crawshaw and John Urry (1997, 179) put it in their article *Tourism and the Photographic Eye*, “[m]uch of tourism involves memory. In a kind of way tourism is the appropriation of the memories of others.” The practice of appropriation of other’s memories, the reconceptualizing and rewriting of (other’s) history is central to the “making” of this “medieval trend.” It concerns a set of questions about theories and practices of heritage protection and restoration in the USSR on the one hand, and the approaches to these questions and practices in the local Estonian discourse on the other hand.

The main principle of Soviet heritage protection was “scientific restoration,” which generally meant the restoration of the buildings’ authentic, original shape and the removal of all later layers. This scientific method was supposed to guarantee the arrival at the objective, necessarily ideologically suitable and administratively controlled “truth,” which, in turn, led to the denial of certain historical layers and often to the mutilation of the monuments. In the case of Tallinn’s Old Town, its medieval origin, Gothic in terms of style, was established as the dominant characteristic, especially in the popular discourse and much in spite of the local heritage protector’s research results, which suggested that although the network of streets and basic structure of the lots – features that in a way were of determinative importance in relation to the Old Town’s essential character – indeed developed in the middle ages, the statistically governing style among the edifices, however, was classicism, not Gothic. In the popular culture, much reinforced by the imagery of those numerous view films as well as by the depictions of the Old Town in other cinematographic genres (as mentioned above, often commissioned by the central authorities in Moscow), the Gothic was set as a normative style of Tallinn’s Old Town, thus in a way mutilating the real circumstances and reconceptualizing the history in the popular frame of mind. This was done very much with the help of the above-described devices resembling those characteristic to commercial tourism promotion and simultaneously distinctive to tenets of socialist realism. At the

same time, not just the visual representations but, indeed, first of all the socialist practices of heritage protection itself bore considerable resemblance to the approaches to the “tourist-historic” (see Ashworth, Tunbridge 2000) cities or districts in capitalist societies. The most striking similarity is perhaps the way the meaning of certain buildings, especially religious structures, is changed in the tourist-historic cities on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In both cases they lose the engagement in the previous everyday practices and “become objects of the tourist gaze” (Fainstein, Judd 1999, 264). And even though many religious edifices “have always been sightseeing attractions as well ..., changes in their use imply a rupture in historic continuity” (Fainstein, Judd 1999, 264). This rupture, “museumization” as Edward Relph terms it (Relph 1986: 80), is equally perceivable but far more aggressive in the case of Tallinn’s Old Town where many churches, but also numerous other buildings, were literally turned into museums. The “museumization” meant a change in the function of the city, favored by the new regime, where the everyday spatial practices were replaced by a frozen museum exhibition. The old meanings and symbolic codes were cancelled, the authentic sense of the place fell back and was replaced by placelessness; pure reactions and experiences were muted (Relph 1986: 80). This process is exemplified by St. Nicolas church, which had been severely damaged in World War II. At first, St. Nicholas was supposed to be converted into a museum of scientific atheism in the religion-hostile Soviet Estonia, but as the restoration stretched over more than twenty years, the church opened in 1984 as a museum of old art and a concert hall. In such a way, the removal of this construction from everyday use was not brought to its radical end, but it, nevertheless, did not fulfill its original sacral function any more. It was pushed into the marginal zone of the social arena, into the realm of art, which operated according to the canon of socialist realism – “national in form, socialist in content” – and should have been as such, at least in theory, controlled by the authorities. The fact that an ideological hole in this dogma proved to be bigger than the initially planned valve for letting out the steam of national tensions and in the situation where political opposition was impossible and the sphere of culture, being on a marginal position in society, enabled to organize resistance to the governing forces, is altogether another matter. Cases like that also imply that “All sorts of social groups, institutions, and societies ... develop multiple and often contradictory memory practices,” as suggested by John Urry (1999, 85).

The “museumization” contributed significantly to the way the Old Town was represented in visual media, and it had very similar results in Western tourism promotion materials as well. The tendencies of homogenization and decontextualization, the creation of ahistorical and simplified

illusionistic dreamworld have already been mentioned, and the “museumization” of the cityscape is the essential foundation to all of them. It is one of the causes for the dominant, façade-based mode of representation in the realm of tourism related visuals, which simultaneously meant fragmentation of the cityscape into stereotypical and idealized images, isolated from the organic whole of the urban texture and void of all traces of everyday life and of inevitable deterioration and decay.

In Tallinn’s Old Town’s case, it is somewhat paradoxical that people actually accepted this socialist realist dreamworld although they had perfectly clearly seen through the previous, Stalinist forms of socialist culture. The most apparent reason seems to be the fact that while Stalinist visual culture relied heavily on obviously fake and out-of-context pseudo-ethnographical imagery and on overly optimistic depictions which were in complete dissonance with actual depressing circumstances, thus offending profoundly the local cultural sensibility and creating a distinctly Soviet realm of representations, the new imagery was far more subtle in its purely Soviet connotations (in fact, they must have been almost invisible). Secondly, it dealt unmistakably with local issues, even giving a chance to get in touch with history and traditions that belonged to the era before the cultural continuity was so violently split. Finally and most importantly, this dreamworld represented a Western cultural paradigm as opposed to eastern (=Russian) orientated traditions. And precisely this aspect of Western-ness proved to be a way of undermining the system from within, through giving a totally different reading to the same texts. (It is worth emphasizing that the three Baltic republics were commonly referred to as the “Soviet West,” which, in turn, obviously reflected also in their self-image.) While the socialist realist stylistic features were clearly inherent in those films, as explained above, as well as the markers of the progressiveness of the Soviet Union, so were the cues that allowed completely different comprehension of them. Most notably, the images and markers of consumerism represented in those films proved to be contradictory to the Soviet system since the rhetoric of the official “party line” strongly disapproved “Western materialism” and the tendency of commodification. The relative abundance of consumer goods was on the one hand a fake indicator of Soviet “progressiveness” (since very many of these films functioned, after all, as tourism advertisements for Western audiences), but on the other hand it set the local conditions apart from the common economical situation of the Soviet Union at large – the consumer items, especially the extremely valued foreign ones, were, indeed, easier to acquire in the Baltic states that were physically closer to the “free world.” And this material differentiation was perceived as a cultural one as well. This becomes especially evident on a larger environmental

scale: the beautiful and inviting, spatially coherent and complete, deeply historically rooted (Western-originated) Old Town stands in complete contrast with the ugly, dull and cold, unevenly and fragmentarily developed Soviet mass-produced residential districts, concrete projects that lacked any historical continuity or rootedness, and represented the nomadic values of *homo soveticus*.

Connected with the latter contrast stands the question concerning the essence of the tourist gaze. Especially the phenomenological theory has maintained that in modern societies people have lost “a practical engagement with their surroundings, they no longer have a meaningful relationship with their surroundings, but instead see them in an abstract way, quintessentially that of the tourist gaze” (Carrier 2003, 6; see also Relph 1986, 80–87, Norberg-Schulz 1984, Heidegger 1997a and 1997b). John Urry (1990, 82) has also expressed a similar idea in a somewhat different context:

What I have termed the tourist gaze is increasingly bound up with and is partly indistinguishable from all sorts of other social and cultural practices. This has the effect, as ‘tourism’ *per se* declines in specificity, of universalizing the tourist gaze – people are much of the time ‘tourists’ whether they like it or not. The tourist gaze is intrinsically part of contemporary experience, of postmodernism.

Thus the tourist gaze has acquired a special importance as a dominant way of perceiving and cognizing the world. In this context, the touristic representations of Tallinn’s Old Town reveal that different and even ideologically opposing systems share basic cognitive frameworks which, in turn, produce similar attitudes, practices, and imagery. They confirm yet again the oft-repeated claim that the Soviet Union was not that much dissimilar from its supposed ideological antagonist, the Western capitalist world. This, however, does not cancel the ambiguous, even somewhat elusive negotiations of conflicting identities inherent to the depictions of the Old Town because, first of all, the view films and other cinematographic genres containing representations that could be linked with the touristic mode were not the only filmic forms related to the imagery of the Old Town, and secondly, the view films themselves demonstrate different levels of tourist-ness and varying degrees of spatial sensibility, thus testifying that there exists no singular tourist gaze but rather several modes of tourist experience (see, e.g. Urry 1990, 86; Urry 1992) which engage with the environment on profoundly diverse grounds.

In sum, the modes of representation characteristic to the visual realm of commercial tourism promotion bears close resemblance to the rules of depiction set by the tenets of socialist realism. They share similar attitudes towards the objects portrayed, rendering them often in the negative

terms of homogenization, decontextualization, museumization, etc. But even in the confinement of the touristic frameworks, different approaches to the built environment can be practiced and thus detected. On the one hand, then, the motifs of Tallinn Old Town were embodied into socialist realism and the “medieval trend” reflected the ideological ambitions of the Soviet power in (re)constructing the past, heroicising the present and constituting the future; in addition, the Old Town was also dragged onto the commercial merry-go-round of the tourism industry and entertainment business; but on the other hand, enthusiasm about the Old Town also contained the local ambition of being culturally different. It attracted local people’s sincere interest, since, contrary to hollow promises of happy, but abstract communist future, it was directly related with familiar and palpable local themes, containing latent national sentiment and working to refresh the local memory. In addition to that, the medieval Old Town offered a real alternative environment to the sad monotony of new housing districts filled with anonymous industrially prefabricated mass architecture.

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