

Article

Constructing National Identity in Soviet Estonian Documentary Cinema: A Case Study of the Documentary *Ruhnu* (1965) by Andres Sööt



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ABSTRACT

This article aims to find out how Soviet Estonian documentaries constructed the national discourse in the 1960s, by focusing on the case of the 10-minute documentary *Ruhnu* (1965) by Andres Sööt. *Ruhnu* was the first Soviet Estonian documentary released after World War II that romanticised Estonian nationalism. In order to narrate the national ideals considered undesirable by the official ideology, the Soviet Estonian filmmakers often chose to portray characters embedded in the national consciousness as archetypal heroes from pre-Soviet times and the landscapes associated with them. In the desire for past times, national heroes and idealised landscapes were constructed and naturalised in a contemporary context. The article raises the question – what kind of heroes, landscapes and activities were used to construct the national identity and which elements of film language were used? The research method used, critical discourse analysis, allows us to analyse the archetypes created in the documentary and the archetypal landscapes used as a framework for the narrative.

INTRODUCTION

While political circumstances in Soviet Union changed over the decades, the documentary filmmakers of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) were generally not free to express themselves in national matters. In order to communicate the Estonian national identity to the audiences, the authors chose their characters from amongst the archetypal heroes that had been solidified in national consciousness in the pre-occupation era, and depicted landscapes associated with these heroes.

The aim of this article is to explore how the national discourse was constructed in the Soviet Estonian documentaries of the 1960s. The premise is the widely-held view in Estonian film research that, despite a Soviet ideological discourse, a national

school emerged in film in the 1960s (Näripea 2011; Ansip 2006, 2013; Orav 2003, etc.).

The article poses the question: what kind of protagonists, actions and landscapes were used to construct the national identity? Answering this question will allow me to gain a partial understanding of the rules that governed the ideological-cultural game in Soviet Estonia. Secondly, I will explore the documentary mode used for conveying a national narrative.

The narrative analysis of documentary has been given new light during recent decades; at the same time, a deeper perception of the interpretative dimensions of documentary has emerged (Valkola 2002: 11). However, any artistic expression is related, to a certain degree, to other works

and aspects of the world; it does not stand apart from other experiences (Bordwell, Thompson 2013: 56). Still, we should keep in mind that 'each art form has uniquely particular norms and capabilities of expression' (Stam 2000: 12); this also applies to narration using the medium of cinema. As the structure of any documentary text also displays parallels with other texts (Nichols 1991: 22), the research of documentaries may therefore make use of the methods and conclusions employed by other disciplines of the humanities.

Jarmo Valkola has emphasised that visual interpretation deals with both the eyes and the brain. What we know or have experienced in the past and how we have made sense of these experiences and tracked them in our memory moderate what is understood. Based on this view, memory can produce images of the past, and films can produce flashbacks. Perception can unite what is apparently disparate. (Valkola 2015: 31)

Language is interpreted using discourse analysis. In this article I have chosen critical discourse analysis as my method of research, concentrating on archetypes and narrative as a framework for the action. In addition, I will be employing the spatial concept of textual analysis, since the visual imagery of landscape is a powerful device of propaganda that is easily subordinated to the service of communicating the messages of the dominant ideology (Sooväli 2008: 134).

According to Eva Näripea, national landscapes and nation-space were also used in film in the 1960s as tools for constructing national continuity by juxtaposing them to Soviet landscapes and Soviet space. Instead of depicting the contemporary life of kolkhozes, the filmmakers preferred to conjure up the semi-mythic 'ideal landscapes' of the interwar countryside. Näripea describes her methodology as 'a spatialised variant of textual analysis, open to diverse influences' (Näripea 2011: 15, 84).

The object of my research is the 10-minute documentary *Ruhnu* by Andres Sööt, released by Tallinnfilm in 1965. My

investigations of Soviet Estonian documentaries has suggested that this was the first documentary made in the Estonian SSR after World War II that romanticised Estonian national identity.¹ Previous films had abided by the canons of socialist realism that deprived nationality a central role.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON THE DOCUMENTARY FILM OF SOVIET ESTONIA

Few cultural researchers have explored the Estonian documentary output during the Soviet period. In 1977, Tatjana Elmanovitš presented her Candidate of Sciences thesis *Estonian Documentary-Journalistic Television and Its Role in the Development of Television (Direct Programming and Films for Television)* (Эльманович 1977). The same author also penned the non-academic publication *The Image of a Fact: From Journalism to Film in Estonian Television* (Эльманович 1975). These works examine the productions of Estonian Television and its sub-unit, Eesti Telefilm, established in 1965.

The documentary films produced in the republic's film studio Tallinnfilm² were regularly analysed, mostly by film critics in their reviews. Over a period of four decades, there were also some university theses written on the topic of documentary film (e.g., Mesila 1972, Teinemaa 1991).

In the current century, the period of my research has also been explored in 2006 by Karol Ansip in her MA thesis titled *An Overview of Development Trends in Estonian Documentary Film until the Emergence of Auteur Documentary Film: The Films of Andres Sööt as a Case Study of Auteur Film* (Ansip 2006). Her work presents a cohesive compilation of the reviews by film critics, but lacks a methodological treatment. In 2013, the magazine *Teater. Muusika. Kino*

1 The new way of introducing Estonia in this film was also emphasised by the Editor-in-Chief of Tallinnfilm's department of chronicles, Peedu Ojamaa, in the artistic council of the studio on 15 September 1965 (National Archives of Estonia, ERA.R-17071.874, p. 162).

2 Established by the Soviet regime to replace the Kultuurfilm studio of the Republic of Estonia, and operated, under different names, until 2001.

published Ansip's (non-academic) article 'The Story of Estonian Documentary: Main Characteristics and Distinctive Features from the 1960s to the Restoration of Independence', in which Ansip supplements the factors that influenced Estonian documentary by exploring developments in film in the world at large and in the vicinity of Estonia (Ansip 2013).

The most in-depth research into the factors that shaped Soviet Estonian film has been conducted by Eva Näripea in her 2011 PhD dissertation, *Estonian Cinescapes: Spaces, Places and Sites in Soviet Estonian Cinema (and Beyond)*. Although Näripea's research focuses mainly on feature films, the dissertation also draws numerous parallels with documentary film. In the author's own words, 'filmic space and the way its denotative and connotative mechanisms work is not fundamentally dissimilar in fictional, narrative cinema and documentary film' (Näripea 2011: 13).

The emergence of a national narrative in Estonian documentary film has not been separately researched; it has only been discussed in general terms. I suggest that emphasising this aspect was frowned upon during the Soviet period, because it contradicted Soviet ideology. However, it is necessary to explore the needs and opportunities of documentary filmmakers for self-expression while taking into account the cultural-political environment.

NATIONAL CULTURE PREVAILED IN SPITE OF THE SOVIET REGIME

As documentary film forms part of the media, certain parallels with journalism are justified in researching the topic. In totalitarian societies (which the Soviet Union was without a doubt), the governing regime imposes certain discursive precepts on journalism and uses direct (control, censorship) and/or hidden mechanisms to make sure that they are fulfilled (Lõhmus 1999: 9).

Established within the dominant ideology without any kind of public debate is its conceptual part, a nucleus of the teaching, which has been defined as *telos*. *Telos* can

be compared to the grand narrative (Ruutsoo 2000: 30). Grand narratives are myths and legends originating from tribal times that have helped to legitimate the dominant social power dynamics and traditions throughout history (MIA s.a.). The grand narrative informed society about which part of the official truth could not be contradicted or contested by anyone wanting to be recognised by the official general public (Ruutsoo 2000: 30). For example, the Communist Party Congress resolutions were off limits, but the discussion and even criticism of social phenomena and the way the Party resolutions were carried out was allowed.

Marek Tamm has written that although the central idea of the concept of history in Soviet-occupied Estonia consisted of emphasising the historical friendship between the Estonian and Russian nations, in the complete denigration of the Republic of Estonia and in reducing historical processes to the model of class conflict, one cannot say that Estonian history completely disregarded the previous 'Estonian template'. The reference point for historical research was borrowed largely from the pre-war national traditions of recording history, which perpetuated the notion that the Estonian-speaking peasants were the main subjects and carriers of Estonian history. Tamm views history as a specific form of cultural memory, in which the narrative logic of Estonian cultural memory is one of the cornerstones of the idea of national continuity (Tamm 2012). 'Under certain conditions, a nation can be viewed as a "narrative community" whose identity is largely based on the "stories by which we live", or more precisely, on narrative patterns that lend coherence to a nation's past' (Tamm 2012: 52).

According to Tiit Hennoste, Estonian culture revolves around literature and all other art forms have been received through literature (Hennoste 2011: 1146). In the 20th century, the most revered Estonian writer was probably Anton Hansen Tammsaare, whose multi-volume seminal work *Truth and Justice* (*Tõde ja õigus*, first published between 1926 and 1933) helped to perpetuate

the myth of the hard-working, austere and God-fearing Estonian (Oinas 1984: 56).

THE DOCUMENTARY 'LANGUAGE'

Culture is viewed in textual terms in order to interpret the various aspects of its functioning. Thus, I will also approach film as a text with a distinctive language, in which the content and expression of each sign constitute an organised system of structural relations (Lotman 1981). Incidentally, Hennoste does not locate the foundation of Estonian culture in literature, as one might deduce from the previous paragraph, but in text and more generally, in the world of texts (Hennoste 2011: 1146).

Each text is simultaneously specifically material and abstractly mental within the culture (Torop 2011: 39). We can isolate visual and linguistic elements in a single work, but our thinking can easily move back and forth between them. Each one of the modes has something to contribute to our understanding. All in all, visual culture is a fluid structure, focused on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups (Valkola 2012: 28). The content of a film is interpreted both by the author and the viewer. The viewers' understanding of what they have seen depends on what they know or have experienced in the past and how they have made sense of these experiences and tracked them in their memory. The memories can produce images of the past, and perception can unite the apparently disparate. (Valkola 2015: 31)

One of the central theoreticians of Soviet cinema, Sergei Eisenstein, has said that film reproduces a scene with all the same methodological features that are employed for reflecting reality in the movement of psychic processes (Эйзенштейн 1964: 303). Cinematic literacy increases proportionally to the formation of experiences. When the viewers have acquired a certain amount of experience in receiving cinematic information, they compare what they see on the screen not only with life, but also with clichés in films that they already know. (Lotman 1981: 32) Valkola posits that

film is a language only in a metaphorical sense and that it is not, in essence, realistic (Valkola 2015: 38).

Throughout history, documentary film has been defined in a variety of ways.³ Despite the differences in opinion, it has been more or less agreed that documentaries are films about actual people who have actual experiences in real-life settings. The language of documentary film has developed in the same cultural and technological context as the language of film in general, while searching for its uniquely immediate 'documental' ingredient, but still taking advantage of the whole of film theory, where necessary. In documentary, the historical is represented and made meaningful with sequences of documents arranged in historiographic narratives; much like the documentary makes meaning out of the real with visual, auditive and audiovisual recordings. Through these connections, the documentary can be articulated as a discursive practice conditioned on its representative relationship to the real (Rosen 2001: 256; Valkola 2012: 46–47, 74).

THERE ARE MORE WAYS THAN ONE FOR REPRESENTING THE WORLD IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

Bill Nichols has argued that every documentary has its own distinct voice with its own style or 'grain', which attests to the individuality of the filmmaker or director (Nichols 2001: 99). According to Nichols' theory, we can identify six modes of representation in documentary film, which function something like sub-genres to the documentary film genre itself: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive and performative (Nichols 2001). Consequently, the modes originated in chronological order, corresponding to the development of general filmic concepts and technical opportunities. Each new mode offered a new dominant to organise a film, a new ideology to explain our relation to reality and a new set of issues and desires to preoccupy

3 E.g., creative interpretation of reality (John Grierson); life as it is; life caught unawares (Dziga Vertov), to name just a few most important ones of many definitions.

an audience. (Nichols 2001: 102) Following this, each mode established a hierarchy of specific conventions or norms. However, these are not very strict and allow incorporating a great deal of stylistic, national and individual variation without losing the force of an organising principle. (Nichols 1991: 23)

Juri Lotman divides directors into two groups: those who believe in figurativeness and those who believe in reality. The former impose their own interpretation of the depicted events on the viewers; in their cinematography, 'the sense is not included in the shot, but arises in the consciousness of the audience as the result of montage projection'. The latter strive to register instead of construct, with the photographed object prevailing over the interpretation. (Lotman 1981: 47, 48)

The early years of documentary film were dedicated to the poetic and expository modes, joined by the observational and participatory modes in the 1960s. In 1965, when *Ruhnu* was released, the performative and reflexive modes were yet to be born. My hypothesis posits that the only way to bypass censorship in a totalitarian society was to use a mode dominated by figurativeness, hence the poetic mode according to Nichols, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Khrushchev's Thaw in the second half of the 1950s introduced a more extensive renewal of the forms of expression in the Soviet Union, and was also characterised by a preference for visual expression over narrative and sound in films. Cinematographers were often more important than directors themselves in constructing a film's meaning and creating metaphors. (Prokhorov 2001: 12, 13) And the director of *Ruhnu*, Andres Sööt (**Figure 1**), graduated from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (Всесоюзный государственный институт кинематографии, VGIK) as a cinematographer in 1963.

A clue to a wider context for *Ruhnu*, with its relative absence of verbal text, is provided by André Bazin, who equated the introduction of sound in film with the substitution of antirealism with relative realism

in film (Bazin [1967] 2004: 44). Bazin called silent film, based on the plastics of imagery and editing craftsmanship, 'expressionist' or 'symbolist', and the narrative form of sound film 'analytical' or 'dramatic' (Bazin [1967] 2004: 47). Since, in the 1960s Tallinnfilm lacked the capacity to produce documentaries with high-quality synchronised sound⁴, the authors, in a sense, resorted to the forms of expression of silent film.

DIFFERENT DEVELOPMENT DYNAMICS IN THE WEST AND THE BALTIC STATES

In the Western world, the concept of poetic film began losing its relevance in the late 1950s, with the emphasis shifting towards a more immediate recounting of events (Nichols 2001). However, in the Soviet Union, and the Baltic republics in particular, the poetic mode did not rise to the fore until the early 1960s, when native filmmakers began graduating from the VGIK and returning to their home republics to work in film studios. The Latvian national school of documentary film is even called the Riga School of Poetic Documentary Cinema. Considering the fact that Baltic and Belarusian filmmakers had annual reunions, there is no doubt that the notion of poetic film was also relevant in Tallinnfilm.

In order to understand what was meant by the term 'poetic' in Tallinnfilm, where the VGIK school of thought was predominant, it is appropriate to turn to the history of Soviet cinema. According to the Russian film historian Evgenii Margolit, the meaning of the term 'poetic film' varies, as it has been interpreted in completely contrasting terms in different years (Марголит 2012). One of the first theoreticians to discuss this term was the formalist Viktor Shlovsky. In 1927, he wrote:

There are prosaic films and poetic films, and that is the main distinction between genres: they are not distinguished based on rhythm, or

4 Author's interview with Enn Säde, sound engineer at Tallinnfilm (9 August 2012).

rhythm alone, but by the fact that (in poetic film) the technical-formal features dominate over semantic features, whereas formal features replace semantic features in creating a composition. A film without a plot is a 'poem-like' film. (Шкловский 1927: 93; author's translation)

The Latvians describe their school as follows: 'This school pays special attention to the visual language of the film, thus creating a peculiar – poetic – manner of the documentary.' They look to the 1920s for inspiration: 'One of the school's key principles was to follow the forgotten attitude of Dziga Vertov to the documentary film as a material for art.' (Riga s.a.)

Margolit offers the option of applying the term 'poetic film' to films where the metaphorical (or more accurately, meta-physical) level stands out as convincing, while the level of the mundane or prosaic is absent. In the early 1960s, the Soviet culturologist Maya Turovskaya posited that the primary principle of poetic film was the use of allusions as an artistic attempt to define, to a first approximation, things that could not be defined by logic (Марголит 2012).

According to Bill Nichols, poetic documentaries, while based in the historical world, transform the material in distinctive ways. This mode emphasises affect, mood and tone, while rhetorical elements remain underdeveloped. The dominance of poetic, associational features over the transfer of information is underlined. (Nichols 2001: 103) Nichols also suggests that participants seldom take on the full-blooded form of characters with psychological complexity and a fixed view of the world. People more typically function on a par with other objects as raw material that filmmakers select and arrange into associations and patterns of their choosing. (Nichols 2001: 102)

Sööt himself has recalled that by the mid-1960s, there was a palpable thirst among filmmakers for creating poetic documentaries, films about nature and people, some without any text or commentary, and

even if text was used, it was done without building a political platform.⁵

VIEWERS' PRIOR EXPERIENCES INTERPRET THE MEANING OF FILMIC TEXT

According to James Paul Gee, human language has two primary functions: to scaffold the performance of social activities (whether play or work or both) and to scaffold human affiliation within cultures and social groups and institutions (Gee 2010: 1). But,

making visible and recognizable *who* we are and *what* we are doing always requires more than language. It requires, as well, that we act, think, value, and interact in ways that together with language render *who* we are and *what* we are doing recognizable to others (and ourselves). In fact, to be a particular *who* and to pull off a particular *what* requires that we act, value, interact, and use language *in sync with* or *in coordination with* other people and with various objects ('props') in appropriate locations and at appropriate times. (Gee 2010: 14; original emphasis)

Gee states that the key to discourse is recognition.

If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others *recognize* you as a particular type of *who* (identity) engaged in a particular type of *what* (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse. (Gee 2010: 18; original emphasis)

In recognising film form, the audience must be prepared to understand formal cues

5 Author's interview with Andres Sööt (16 July 2014).



FIGURE 1. Andres Sööt filming a newsreel in Ruhnu. 1963 or 1964. Photo by Peeter Tooming.
FIGURE 2.

through knowledge of life and other forms of artistic expression. Such features as tradition, a dominant style, a popular form, which are common to various different fields of art, are usually called conventions. Filmmakers assume that the viewers are familiar with conventions and are willing to go along with the game. (Bordwell, Thompson 2013: 56)

In order to answer the question of how the author constructed national identity, I will analyse the content of the filmic text. First, I will list the characters seen in the film, as a documentary is constructed and reconstructed by an array of discursive participants or interpretive communities (Nichols 1991: 17). Second, I will explore what kind of actions are used to portray the characters of the film. Third, I will map out the environments of the film's plot.

I will then analyse whether the characters portrayed correspond to archetypal characters familiar from literature and recorded history. I will also look out for conventions shared with other films.

EACH MODE HAS ITS OWN CONVENTIONS

Each documentary mode identified by Nichols possesses examples that we can identify as prototypes or models which express uniquely the most distinctive qualities of that mode (Nichols 2001: 99). Each mode sets up a hierarchy of specific conventions or norms. Films need not be limited to only one mode, but the characteristics of a given mode function as dominants. They give structure to the overall film, but do not dictate or determine every aspect of its organisation. (Nichols 2001: 100)

In order to be able to identify the prevailing mode, we must analyse the conventions that dominate a film. I will explore the different components of film language: image (both in terms of *mise-en-scène* and cinematography), sound and editing. I will try to establish the respective motivations behind voice-over and direct delivery. I will also analyse the use of music and sound. This will allow me to deduce whether the aim is to reflect objective reality or offer an

interpretation constructed by the author. I will explore how the logic argument impacts the spatial and temporal continuity between shots. I will analyse the way shots create meaning, which is one of the main functions of shots. Within a shot, there are, at the same time, text and metatext, life and its modelling interpretation (Lotman 1981: 82). Shot composition, i.e. the organisation and positioning of visual elements in a shot, allows conveying certain meanings to the viewers and saturating the shots with 'messages' constructed by the author as well as adding subtext (Thompson, Bowen 2009: 23). The details used in shots and the sequence of shots also carry meaning (Lotman 1981: 26). I will explain the role played by each one of these components of film language and how that fits in with the classification of documentary modes.

For example, in terms of images, the expository mode employs images as illustrations or counterpoints; the poetic mode as elements that construct the meaning of the film, and the observational mode as immediate reflections of the objective world. We already know that films need not be limited to one 'pure' mode, as the modes function primarily as dominants. There is considerable room to manoeuvre, which allows incorporating a great deal of stylistic, national and individual variation without losing the force of an organising principle. (Nichols 1991: 23)

THE DOCUMENTARY RUHNU AS A NARRATION IN FILM

The film has seven discernible scenes:

1. Prologue
2. Ruhnu – an island in the middle of the sea
3. An old fisherman
4. The parsonage
5. A fishermen's collective
6. Agriculture
7. A port under construction

First, I will explore the backdrop to the story. As the film opens, we see shots of a beach, with bodies sunbathing on the sand. (**Figure 2**) Incidentally, these three shots also

contain the only women featured in the film; women will not be seen again as the film progresses. Slowly, the opening shot begins to rotate counter clockwise in relation to the horizon.

Voice-over: 'Living in sun city, it never occurs to people that somewhere in the rough sea is a small island, Ruhnu.'

In one breath, the narrator introduces two possible living environments: sun city and a small island. The rotating horizon can be construed as a symbol of the unnatural: sun city being unnatural. This message is further emphasised by the action (or lack thereof) of the sun city dwellers: sunbathing, the most useless of them all. The opposition of town versus country (or peasants versus townies) is a narrative familiar from the works of Tammsaare and meant to guide us towards the topic of national identity. The Soviet narrative, obviously, supported the dictatorship of the proletariat, which was accompanied by glorifying urban spaces and forcing the entire population of the country to towns (an example is the nomad herders of the Far North who were forced to move to villages by the Soviet regime). It is therefore quite evident where Sööt's sympathy lies.

In *Ruhnu*, Sööt offers an alternative to urban idling. A small vessel puts to sea from the port of Pärnu. We hear a low humming, menacing melody in the background. As soon as the boat reaches Ruhnu, the music changes. The image clearly conveys to the viewers that this beach is different from the beach in the prologue. There are no naked bodies; instead, waves are rolling to the shore. Thus, we can compare the two settings: the one over there and the one over here.

In the first minutes, the viewers are presented with common conventions: we see shots of symbolic images that are sequenced based on contrast: a city and an island; sunbathers and an empty beach. When transitioning from the city beach to the remote island, we are offered shots of a port and a ship. Spatial continuity is thus honoured. The voice-over text is laconic; it does not copy the image or provide clarifying information.

In the next scene, an old man goes to an even older log cabin, where seine nets have been meticulously laid to dry under the eaves; he grabs a dip net and sets off across the field. It is clear that these images – an old man, an old house and old-fashioned fishing gear – have been removed from the actual temporal context and represent the past. In terms of space and landscape, they constitute a contrast to the favourite backgrounds of socialist realism: modern kolkhoz centres with blocks of houses and administrative buildings.

According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, shot composition is determined to a large degree by camera position, which is characterised by the angle, level, height and distance of framing. Angled shots are used for assigning unique meaning to the photographed objects. Roughly speaking, framing can present a straight-on angle, a low angle or a high angle. The angle chosen lends a subjective connotation to the shot. (Bordwell, Thompson 2013: 188–195) Sööt employs different angles in filming; particularly expressive are a low-angle shot of the fisherman (**Figure 3**) and a long shot with a white horse.

As Roy Thompson and Christopher Bowen state, a straight-on angle reflects the objective world without any connotations, whereas a character seen from below becomes larger, more looming, more significant, and more powerful. A person or object observed from below assumes a substantial presence, is considered larger than life and as having an upper hand in terms of the narrative. In contrast, a high-angle shot yields an understanding within the viewer of the character on the screen being smaller, weaker, more subservient, diminutive or currently in a less powerful or compromised position. (Thompson, Bowen 2009: 41, 42) In *Ruhnu*, the old fisherman is thus shown as a hero. A white horse in a field in an era where progress was symbolised by machines is a clear homage to a bygone time. (**Figure 4**) The old man reaches the beach and proceeds to check the drift nets in an old-fashioned manner in his wooden boat (notably, the boat is pushed forward

with one oar, used as a pole, like 'in the olden days'). **(Figure 5)** This is preceded by yet another rather unusual angle: a long shot of sky and a stretch of land, featuring the old man walking, with the dip net in his hand, and a lone log cabin. **(Figure 6)** The director returns to the low-angle shot for showing the fisherman going about his business with the drift net; he is photographed from below and against the sky. **(Figure 7)** As in the previous shot of the sky, we now see a shot of the sea, with the logic of the shot reversed: three quarters of the shot is filled with water, with the fisherman far off on the horizon, and a stretch of sky above. **(Figure 8)**

The camera distance determines the size of the shot and has a significant impact on the reaction of the viewers by shaping their understanding of the action/characters. As Bordwell and Thompson explain, in the extreme long shot, the human figure is lost or tiny. The long shot usually encompasses a wide stretch of space and shows the filmed object in its entirety, while the background still dominates. (Bordwell, Thompson 2013: 190) The strangely framed long shots with a lone figure in the upper section of the shot in *Ruhnu* symbolise the insignificance of man compared to nature. These could be considered shots of landscape with man as a component of landscape. This reaction opposes the Stalinist archetype of man subordinating nature. Man is portrayed as a part of the scenic nature, as enjoying an intimate relationship with it and as being dependent on its bounty. We can also easily recognise a national archetype: a hard-working man toiling in ethnic landscapes and having to get by with simple tools (a dip net, only one oar, a traditional drift net).

While there are some eels in the drift net, our attention is lured away from these fish delicacies in short supply to a close-up of the wrinkled old fisherman, also photographed from below eye level. There is no doubt about it, he embodies the Estonian national archetype: a man who does not scorn work, has spent his entire life dependent on nature and deserves the status of the hero.

Although Sööt films people going about their business as if he were merely an outside observer, it is very clear that the imagery is distinctive and completely controlled. In the observational mode, the viewer also needs to understand that the film puts forth a spontaneous observation. This is not the case with *Ruhnu*. The distinctive shot compositions in the first scene point to a poetic exposition of reality. The role of the visual image is primary in conveying the meaning. Music has secondary importance. Text is reduced to a minimum and its task is to support the image and not assume the position of the main provider of information.

Next, we see a wooden gate leading to a churchyard squeaking open. *Ruhnu* has a wooden church. **(Figure 9)** We see mossy and tattered wooden crosses. The camera cuts to a close-up of the names and dates. The crosses measure time by centuries. Then, we see an iron cross commemorating a Russian lighthouse keeper who had died in 1890. This is also a small piece of history. The 'good old Swedish era' had ended, to be replaced by the reign of the Russian Tsar. Static images in the shot convey the passage of time, which can be measured in centuries.

Voice-over: 'What compelled the ancient fishermen of Gotland to come to the barren Baltic Sea?'

The author uses montage to make a leap in space by placing a shipwreck that has run aground among the crosses. This cutaway turns the wreck into a metaphor proving that man has not always gained the upper hand with the sea.

Voice-over: 'The need to find a piece of land, an island of one's own; and once found, to conquer the sea.'

While that sentence is true to the Michurinist canons of subordinating nature and stands apart from the overall context, it is also true that the 'battle' between the sea and man is a leitmotif of the Estonian literary tradition, represented by *Rough Sea* (*Karge meri*, 1938) by August Gailit, *Windy Shore* (*Tuuline rand*, 1951–1966) by Aadu Hint, screenplay *Kihnu Jõnn or Captain from*



FIGURE 3.
FIGURE 4.



FIGURE 5.
FIGURE 6.



FIGURE 7.
FIGURE 8.

the Woods (Kihnu Jõnn ehk Metskapten, 1965) by Juhan Smuul and many others. The topic of conquering nature was familiar already before the Soviet occupation and even before World War I. We know from the classics of Estonian literature that when peasants were first given a chance to buy land in the 19th century, there was not enough fertile land to go around. Andres of Vargamäe, from Tammsaare's *Truth and Justice*, a major archetype of the Estonian man, had to dig ditches in the marshland to 'make more land'.

Voice-over: 'A man who has no faith in himself is lost at sea.'

A figure of a lone man opens the church door in the upper section of the shot. Views of the church interior. The camera sweeps over the family insignia engraved in the seats and lingers on a knight's coat of arms. It belongs to Johan Martens and dates back to 1731. **(Figure 10)** The exact age is of minor importance; it is enough that we understand that it is old and not of peasant origin. The next family insignia feature words in Swedish. In the background, we hear mumbling in Swedish, resembling incantation. Clearly, this was not feasible in reality, which means that the sound is non-diegetic. Thus, the shot does not reproduce reality the way it is, which would be the aim of observational mode, but conveys an idea by the author, which points to the poetic mode as well as a tendency for escapism. Imagine the things that church must have seen, thinks the viewer. It is obvious that this has nothing to do with the current regime.

We see the relief of the Devil on the side plaque of a chair.

Voice-over: 'In a moment of weakness, he creates God, only to be abandoned as he regains his strength.'

The next shot features the already familiar composition: a narrow stretch of land with one tree and the immense sky with an airplane, colloquially called a 'jam shelf'. An aerial shot of the meeting of sea and land. In the background, we hear radio communications, which are so poorly articulated that they function as a general soundscape.

- *Understood. I can't say right now, roughly five tonnes of fish today. Over.*
- *A muffled answer that ends with the question: Where do you have those boats?*
- *The boats are about Südwest of Ruhnu on that new shoal. Over.*

Notably, this is the only synchronised dialogue in the entire film. The emphasis is on the last sentence: 'The boats are about Südwest of Ruhnu'. Ruhnu was a so-called outpost in the sea or a protruding border that was surrounded by the Iron Curtain. The boats being *Südwest* hints at something pertaining to the world of fantasy for the Soviet citizens of the time. While people did know that a different world existed in the West, very few could actually breathe that air. Seamen were among the chosen few. This short dialogue snippet thus constructs in the viewers' minds a momentary state that suggests that there is no Iron Curtain.

As the final sentences are uttered, we find ourselves back in a plane flying above Ruhnu. We see houses for the first time. Next a car ride, accompanied by a menacing-sounding organ. A small truck stops on the berth. We see a lone fishing boat at sea. As was the case with the journey from the city to the island, when the author used a cutaway to mark spatial progress, he now punctuates the arrival at the seashore in the same manner. Moments such as these can be considered a deviation from the poetic mode, with conventions that do not require that the verses be joined in logical sequences.

The fishing boat *Manilaid* docks. Men begin unloading the fish. The episode is composed of close-ups and uses rhythmic editing. The close-ups in motion make the viewers feel as though they are taking part in unloading the fish. Even the cigarette break comes just in time, as we are about to grow tired. There are men of all ages: from young boys to old men, with wrinkled, wind- and water-beaten faces. The accompanying piano chords are precise and in lockstep with the images.



FIGURE 9. Andres Sööt and Andres Arnover in front of the wooden church of Ruhnu. 1965. Photo by Jaak Annok.



FIGURE 10.
FIGURE 11.



FIGURE 12.
FIGURE 13.



FIGURE 14.
FIGURE 15.



FIGURE 16.
FIGURE 17.

The scene in itself portrays another day in a Soviet fishing collective, and because it is composed of close-ups, time and space lose their meaning. **(Figure 11)** Close-ups are construed as metaphors in films (Lotman 1981: 44) and also facilitate a closer, more intimate relationship between the character and the audience (Thompson, Bowen 2009: 18). As a result, Sööt's chosen mode even allows the kolkhoz workers to be associated with national archetypes. The sea and man; man and the sea. The rhythmically pulsating editing emphasises the poetic aspect; the phrases are rhymed and measured.

A cutaway with a wave washing to the shore is yet another version of the $\frac{3}{4}$ versus $\frac{1}{4}$ proportion. This time, the shot is filled by the land and the sea, leaving a narrow stretch for the sky. In the upper section of the shot we see a man working, progressing to pushing a fully loaded cart in the next shot. **(Figure 12)**

Voice-over: 'How are values born? Man transcends the border of old convictions.'

Unexpectedly, the man with a cart on the beach comes to a new apple orchard. In the next shot, he falls to his knees and starts scraping the sand around a young apple tree with his bare hands. **(Figure 13)**

Voice-over: 'The sea and sand grow apples, if man so wishes and applies himself.'

The man is shovelling the sand next to an apple tree in the upper right corner of a long shot. **(Figure 14)** An active single object in the upper right corner of a shot is a rather rare combination. The action itself is also strange, to put it mildly. It certainly does not portray an essential part of daily life on Ruhnu, but instead helps the author to construct an archetypal Estonian in a new way. It is like an adaptation of Tammsaare's *Truth and Justice*. Andres of Vargamäe fought the marsh and became an archetype for an Estonian, just as Tammsaare's work became a core text. And is it not equally stubborn and selfish to turn wetlands into arable land and to start an apple orchard in an unsuitable environment? Both are veering towards sadomasochism, but offer nourishment for the national identity.

Next, we see a young apple tree with a couple of apples swinging back and forth in the wind, photographed from below, just as the fisherman was photographed before. In the reverse shot (high-angle shot), we see a man sitting on the ground tying the wiry apple tree to a brace. The bird's-eye perspective highlights man's helplessness in the face of nature. All this is accompanied by monotonous music with two alternating chords. The episode ends by zooming out from the man, positioned in the centre of the shot, lovingly tying the young plant.

The voice-over texts are always laconic, their content philosophical, but in my view not of the best artistic quality. The text lacks the all-knowing renderings characteristic of expository mode. It constitutes a part in the poetic narrative, and the most insignificant part at that.

The cut to the next scene breeds anxiety. A flock of gulls takes flight and the music grows menacing. And we soon find out why: a truck full of rocks drives onto the jetty in the port and is being guided by a man in the upper section of the shot. The rocks are dumped into the sea.

Voice-over: 'Man learns more about himself at sea than he does on land, as the sea is more changeable than man. Land provides a sense of safety. Land offers protection from the whims of the sea.'

We are shown several shots of the load of rocks rolling off the truck, from different angles. Finally, again the lone man in the top section of the shot, throwing large cobblestones into the sea, alternating with a montage shot of waves crashing to the berth.

(Figure 15) Man and waves, man and waves...

The musical instrument of choice for this episode is the organ. Long alternating chords become accentuated with nervous notes, and when the jetty is finally complete, the music culminates in a coda.

The context of *Truth and Justice* is just as appropriate for this episode. Once again, we see the opposition of a lone man versus machines and nature. Again, man is attempting to take away from nature. There we have it, the true Estonian who works

until he dies, as there is always something more to do. Sööt is consistent in his style. Each separate character represented in the space-time continuum on the screen is conveyed as an archetype; the only group (the fishermen loading crates) is portrayed in close-up, allowing them to reach the level of a metaphor and break away from the space of reality.

The next scene opens with a long shot of a caterpillar tractor and a boat, followed by two men walking. **(Figure 16)** The boat passes the camera under different angles, with a low-angle shot being the most memorable, once again (as with the fisherman in the opening episode).

In terms of composition, the shot with the tractor, boat and two men is a particularly peculiar one. But it takes us back to the meeting of land and sea and to landscapes moulded by man.

Voice-over: 'As a point of departure, we need a port, a good port.'

A small truck 'races' by the strange procession.

Voice-over: 'Conquering the sea continues here. This is where the ships put out to sea.'

The final words are again accompanied by an aerial shot of the port facility built by man. The stone jetties form a regular geometric image in the sea. **(Figure 17)** The flight continues, until only the sea remains in the shot. End credits roll over the final image.

A YEARNING FOR BYGONE TIMES

According to Näripea, the filmmakers who emerged in Soviet Estonia in the 1960s managed to separate the national identity from the Soviet identity with the help of landscapes and spaces:

These filmmakers often attempted to avoid contemporary subject matters, kolkhoz settings and the 'nodal points' of the Sovietised historical timeline. Instead, they frequently sought to construct 'nation-spaces'

that consciously dissociated themselves from the immediate Soviet surroundings and realities, generating a somewhat nostalgic, escapist atmosphere [---] Instead of the spaces appropriated by the mechanised and gargantuan Soviet 'agrocraacy', they provided a mnemoscape of the pre-war countryside, intimate, tender and familiar. (Näripea 2011: 12)

Näripea has observed that repeated shots of waterfronts, rocky beaches caressed by splashing waves visually emphasise the motif of a 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. (Näripea 2011: 92) This could be the reason why the Soviet institutions approached such tendencies in Estonian film leniently.

More than half of the feature films directed by Estonian directors in Tallinnfilm in the early 1960s portrayed the coast or islands in particular.⁶ Considering the fact that the author of a work of art belongs to a certain era and represents certain ideas, perceptions, intentions and psychology (Лотман, Цивьян 2014: 12), it is not surprising that Sööt portrays the world in such a manner.

Andres Sööt was the first director in the Estonian SSR to reflect on national identity in documentary film. He takes the viewers to a small island in the Gulf of Riga, which was populated by the Swedes before World War II. This place was the furthest from the urban environment glorified by Leninist party politics. A true periphery in every sense. We are generally shown only fragments of this confined space, save for some aerial shots. The presence of the Soviet regime is not discernible in these fragments.

Näripea has used the term illusionary 'ideal landscapes', which represented a longing for bygone times, particularly the

6 *Fellow Villagers* (*Ühe küla mehed*, 1961) and *Letters from Sõgedate Village* (*Kirjad Sõgedate külast*, 1966) by Jüri Müür; and *Ice-Drift* (*Jääminek*, 1962) and *Traces* (*Jäljed*, 1963) by Kaljo Kiisk.

lost independence (Näripea 2011: 92). I agree with this wholeheartedly. Sööt introduced this trend in documentary film and there were many others who passionately shared his vision.⁷

Raimo Jõerand has observed that 'in terms of spatial memory, the space that carries the strongest meaning in Estonian film is the seaside, as a last frontier' (Jõerand 2014). *Ruhnu* contains more shots of the sea and land coming together than there are episodes in the film.

Similarly to the fragments of landscapes, *Ruhnu* also emphasises the lone man who operates in that space. We never see women on Ruhnu Island. This is a rather obvious reference to the middle of the 19th century, when national awakening began in Estonia and the basis for a national narrative was established. The Estonian family was patriarchal, where the father figure was almost equated with God. As mentioned above, the most monumental literary work written in Estonia before the Soviet occupation was Tammsaare's *Truth and Justice*. The Protestant-minded sentence uttered in its final tome by the protagonist, Andres of Vargamäe, which read 'Work hard and love will follow', became rooted in the consciousness of Estonians as a proverb of sorts. The few actions portrayed by Sööt in *Ruhnu* can almost all be compared to the toiling of Andres of Vargamäe. Sööt keeps coming back to a lone man and contrasting him with machines and nature. Man's constant striving to take away from nature. A true Estonian works until he dies, as there is always something more to do.

Assuming that the key to a discourse lies in its recognisability, Sööt successfully constructs a clearly recognisable Estonian identity and creates a discourse with his 10-minute documentary. For Tammsaare, the values of Estonian identity were borne by peasants, whereas Sööt attributes this role to islanders, whether they are seamen or farmers.

It is easy to find similar discourses elsewhere in the world history of documentary film. *Man of Aran* (UK, 1934) by Robert Flaherty celebrates island life, the tenacious struggle of man in taming the harsh nature, selflessness and a sense of community. Flaherty's mode was clearly poetic, with the image as the main element for conveying his message. Granted, Flaherty's constructs were not impacted by the loss of independence or ideological watchdogs in the form of censors.

Reflecting a sense of community plays an important role in constructing a national identity. A sense of community is created by shared values and beliefs. According to Nichols, a sense of community often seems like an 'organic' quality that binds people together when they share a culture, traditions and a common goal. As such, it may seem far removed from issues of ideology, where competing beliefs struggle to win our hearts and minds. (Nichols 1991: 142)

The socialist realism prevalent in post-war Soviet Union was extremely ideological, using undeniably rhetorical means and a style that manipulated viewers. Obviously, the conventions of socialist realism were not suited for constructing national identity.

THE POETIC MODE ALLOWED FOR CONVEYING A NATIONAL NARRATIVE

Sööt chose the poetic mode because he was drawn to the romantic idealism that was practiced by Flaherty and pays homage to a lost world. In the Soviet Union, the poetic mode was the only ideologically acceptable way for an author to find artistic expression for something that, if put into words, would result in political persecution.

Nichols believes that the poetic mode gives an impression of honesty, despite the fact that the effect of the final work of art is problematic and ambiguous. The poetic mode has many facets, but they all emphasise the ways in which the filmmaker's voice gives fragments of the historical world aesthetic integrity. (Nichols 2001: 103–105)

Documentary film helps give tangible expression to the values and beliefs that

7 *Home Village (Koduküla)*, 1969) by Peep Puks and Peeter Tooming; *Storm Day Off (Tormipüha)*, 1972) and *Three Winters (Kolm talve)*, 1973) by Peep Puks; *Kassilaane* (1982) by Peeter Tooming, etc.

build or contest social belonging or specific forms of community at a given time and place (Nichols 2001: 142). Sööt succeeds in providing an intense portrayal of national narrative in ten minutes because he makes use of means of filmic expression; first and foremost, he selects his characters carefully, represents action in a fragmentary manner and makes use of controlled shot compositions. The film mainly celebrates a stubborn work ethic and the coexistence of man and nature. The author manages to convey such a concentrated message in only ten minutes because the informativeness of an artistic text is greater, and the text is always smaller in volume than an equivalent, non-artistic text (Lotman 1981: 50). In addition to the standard rules of grammar, poetry is guided by some additional rules; rhyme, meter, style, etc. (*ibid.*)

Three types of narration are simultaneously present in film: visual, verbal and musical (audial). Interrelations of great complexity can rise among them. (Lotman 1981: 69) In *Ruhnu*, the dominant type of narration is visual narration. Music only accentuates the mood and the verbal portion is minimal. Voice-over text does not inform or manipulate, as was customary in the Soviet documentary film of the 1960s. Rather, the voice-over becomes a part of the soundscape, aimed at emphasising the poetry and lending rhythm to the verses.

SHOT COMPOSITION IS INTEGRATED INTO THE TEXT

In the long shots, Sööt makes use of unusual shot compositions, primarily by ignoring the standard rule of thirds. Usually, the image field of a shot is divided into three horizontal and vertical parts, with points of visual interest placed in the intersections of two lines. Sööt has divided his shot in four and positioned visual points of interest according to an unorthodox logic. The share of the sky in a shot is very erratic: in one instance it is merely a narrow stretch above the sea, and in another, a vast expanse above a narrow stretch of land.

Sööt himself has attributed this kind of shot composition to a poetic aspiration:⁸ to emphasise a tiny piece of land in a vast sea. The intermittent aerial shots serve the same function. We see an island completely surrounded by sea.

Another important element for assigning meaning to a shot is angle. Here, the author also tends to dispense with the standard, 'neutral' representation of the world and instead opts for expressive low-angle shots. Sööt also uses one high-angle shot – for conveying man's insignificance compared to nature.

Near the very end, we learn from the aerial shot that there are dozens of houses on the island. Until that moment, we have seen a fisherman's hut, a kolkhoz administrative building, the port and the church. All are depicted separately and there is no way of knowing how they are positioned in relation to each another.

An important character in *Ruhnu* is the church, while churches were generally scorned in Soviet film. We know of a case from a later period where just including a long shot of a church in a film made its official approval problematic (*Entering the Organ [Orelis sisse minek]*, Enn Säde and Olav Neuland, Eesti Telefilm, 1974).

Maybe Sööt managed to 'legalise' the church episode by adding the voice-over text: 'In a moment of weakness, he creates God, only to be abandoned as he regains his strength.' This sentence suggests a sceptical attitude towards faith, which sat well with the Soviet discourse. It was also ideologically convenient to show an empty church as an abandoned museum item.

However, the Swedish family insignia in the same church, accompanied by sentences uttered in Swedish in audio, was complete escapism. The Estonian viewers did not need to understand the sentences; it was enough for them to know that this was Swedish language and that there was a church that was Swedish through and through on the island of Ruhnu in the

8 From a conversation with the author (1 December 2014).

Estonian SSR. The Kingdom of Sweden constituted a symbol of freedom that was virtually unreachable in 1965. But *Ruhnu* could reach out and touch Sweden.

CONCLUSION

In the early 1960s, the Soviet Union was still in the process of distancing itself from the Stalinist reign of terror. This was accompanied by a significant increase in the freedom of speech. As the arena of culture had been waiting for that moment for a long time, innovation began immediately in literature, theatre, recording of history and film. In Estonia, cultural thought was mainly shaped by literature and the recording of history, and as of the 1960s, also film. In the early 1960s, many filmmakers graduated from VGIK and after having joined the Tallinnfilm studio, began adapting national literary classics for film. Documentary film also underwent a shift: Estonian crews began shooting stories on ethnic topics, along with socialist realism.

Turning to the poetic mode was the only way to cater to a national sense of unity without opposing the dominant telos. The poetic mode rejected the hyperrealist representation of the historical world and instead opted for imagery, archetypes and allusions. In the Estonian SSR, this meant that the heroes and landscapes used to represent national identity were highlighted, albeit in the form of contemporary equivalents who conveyed the same principles as best they could. As a result, directors turned to locations that the official ideology considered abandoned back-country and whose appearance had remained unchanged by the Soviet regime. The new heroes were men stubbornly struggling with land or the sea, but at the same time, living in harmony with nature. In *Ruhnu* by Andres Sööt, these men were old and certainly had first-hand memories of the age of lost freedom.

While Tallinnfilm had produced poetic films before,⁹ *Ruhnu* by Sööt was the first documentary to idealise the Estonian

national identity. Sööt creates meaning in *Ruhnu* with the help of particular filmic elements, such as shot composition and sound, but also by building on the viewers' knowledge of literature and history. The particular historical context also played a role: the feature film department of Tallinnfilm was adapting literary classics and our Latvian neighbours were churning out poetic films. Documentary filmmakers from the Baltic republics and Belarus had annual reunions where they showed each other their films, and the different departments of Tallinnfilm were also familiar with each other's work. Sööt thus made creative decisions, while being a part of an operating discourse and creating one himself.

It is paradoxical that while this was happening, documentary film in the West was leaning towards what was called a more realistic way of representing reality. The poetic and expository modes were considered too removed from life and/or didactical. The engineers were challenged to come up with portable sound recorders that could be synchronised with the camera. This resulted in the birth of Direct Cinema and *cinéma vérité*, where text and diegetic sound played a very important role. Meanwhile, the poetic films created in Soviet Estonia followed the conventions of silent film to a certain degree. The main emphasis was on imagery, and films could convey messages without any sound at all. On the one hand, this can be explained by the limited technical capacity, but on the other, by the skill to hide messages between the lines and convey ideas without any words, which the filmmakers had developed within the system.

9 E.g., *Goodbye, Swamp Bogys (Hüvasti, sookollid!)* by Hans Roosipuu and *Stoney Lullaby (Kivine häällaul)* by Valeria Anderson, both in 1964.

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