

## Book Review

**Eva Näripea, *Estonian Cinescapes: Spaces, Places and Sites in Soviet Estonian Cinema (and Beyond)*, Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2011, ISBN 978-9949-467-15-0, 284 pp.**

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### **Traces of a Past and Echoes of a Future: Reflections on Soviet Estonian Cinematic History**

Eva Näripea's doctoral thesis *Estonian Cinescapes: Spaces, Places and Sites in Soviet Estonian Cinema (and Beyond)* deals with the experience of encountering the productions of the Soviet period in Estonia and focuses mainly on narrative cinema, since the author believes that it forms the backbone of national film culture, and the Soviet era saw the establishment of a multifaceted and advanced system of filmmaking in Estonia.

While shaped and flavored by a certain ideology, its results form a considerable part of the local film history and, importantly, of the broader domestic cultural heritage. Näripea thinks that Soviet Estonian film has been frequently and unjustly overlooked, as a "cultural orphan", leaving an enormous lacuna in the collective cultural consciousness. The main hypothesis of this research is two-fold: first of all, she embarked on her project with the objective of filling in some of the gaps by studying spatial representations in Soviet Estonian cinema, motivated by the assumption that investigating aspects of non-verbal (and thus frequently non- or loosely scripted) material might provide fresh insights into both the narrative and discursive lay-

ers of a cinema which has been too often neglected as "alien" territory.

Secondly, the initial interest in portrayals of urban and manmade environments was soon complemented by the need to look at filmic space in a much broader framework of spatiotemporal structures, in terms of city-, land- and mindscapes, scrutinizing not only aspects of setting, various cinematic techniques, narrative devices, etc., but also issues of identity and history, power and subversion, and national (and transnational) cinema.

By analyzing film settings, their relations with characters and narratives, their presentations by means of cinematic techniques (cinematography, editing and sound) and some of their extra-textual connotations, it became quite apparent for the author that Soviet Estonian film, despite its unpopular status with native audiences, was in actual fact intimately tied to the project of constructing and negotiating national/local identity, articulating collective dreams and social anxieties, and conveying intricate strategies of suppression, resistance and adaptation, although not always successfully in terms of communicating them to contemporary spectators.

Näripea focuses on transnationalism, which indicated specific conditions of the Soviet film system: multinational republican talent was trained exclusively in the metropolitan centre of Moscow; the work of republican studios was centrally coordinated in terms of ideological instruction and control, as well as allocation of finances; and the finished products, frequently made by multinational casts and crews, were distributed in the Union-wide network.

A Sovietised model of historical narrative, favoring either the environments of recently formed collective farms or urban

settings invested with progressive socialist spirit. In contrast, in the 1960s, as the first ethnically Estonian filmmakers graduated from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, a refreshing creative breeze wafted through the local filmic arena, inducing a noticeable break on both the narrative and spatial levels. These filmmakers often attempted to avoid contemporary subject matters, kolkhoz settings and the "nodal points" of the Sovietised historical timeline.

According to Näripea, we have to take into account the fact that any national cinema is deeply affected by a number of transnational factors, and that spatial analysis is a useful instrument for revealing the interplay of multiple and often contradictory aspects, including discerning "national" (or at least "indigenous" or intentionally "differential") elements in what seems like a politically correct (or socialist realist) way, from the Soviet point of view.

### **Interconnection of elements**

One of the principal aims of Näripea's work is to examine the use of filmic spaces, places and sites as figurative categories that interconnect actual spaces, their portrayals and imagined sites, different representational regimes and traditions, spectatorial perceptions and broader ideological, historical, cultural and social contexts. These are demanding and challenging underlines considered to be used in analyzing contemporary film situations in order to determine the theoretical approach and multifaceted research in various spatial practices, in terms of both manmade and natural environments, social and ideological structures.

At the basic level, space provides a film part of its inimitable look, its geographical, histori-

cal, social and cultural contexts and associated details, and the physical framework within which the film's narrative proceeds. In recent years, the study of filmic space has re-emerged as a critical concern and become a crucial point in a process that one might think of as a move of film's theoretical orientation toward a more phenomenologically oriented approach. Also, architectural theory might be useful for thinking about filmic space(s) as a creator of meaning. Architectural space and narrative space form a combination in this sense. The idea of mental mapping is also related to this.

Näripea's methodology works as a variation of textual analysis connected with a spatial approach and diverse schemata with its main theoretical impetus lying in Bakhtin's concept of chronotope as a connection of temporal and spatial ideas in a philosophical context. In this way, chronotopica analysis reflects the whole work. As an underlying question in the thesis, there is an assumption to reconsider the position of Soviet Estonian cinema in relation to the "national imaginary" and to the wider socio-cultural field, not only in the local context but also as part of regional cinematic networks. Also, the investigation of spatial and temporal representations in the films of the 1960s, a period commonly acknowledged as that of the (re) emergence of national cinema is a sign for Näripea to think how it manages to illuminate some of the reasons behind its rejection by local audiences and the majority of contemporary Estonian critics alike: even though the filmmakers succeeded in constructing cinematic "nation-scapes" despite the absence of a nation-state. This brings in ideas concerning discussions on representations of urban architecture, for example, depictions

of Tallinn's Old Town in various Soviet Estonian audiovisual products of tourism marketing, made to promote Tallinn as one of the most desirable tourist destinations in the "Soviet West" to travelers beyond the Iron Curtain, thus participating in the process of generating an influx of hard currency so desperately needed to sustain the all-Union circuits of economy and ideology; and on cases where modern architecture functions as a signifier of transnationality.

This will all be achieved primarily through film analyses that explore the functions of these dimensions in the narrative output of films and the expressive meanings this analytical model is considered suitable to communicate. The questions of identification come across with these approaches. Foucault's conceptualization of heterotopias is also underlined during the research bringing larger philosophical aspects into play, and a reason to look at spaces from this angle. Cognitivist and neoformalist aspects of film studies are present in the work as well, in drawing attention to the role of formal choices and stylistic preferences in creating the meanings and messages of narration.

Because Näripea has taken her methods out of a wide perspective of theoretical approaches, she can understand how these meanings and messages depend on certain philosophical codes used to interpret it; the meaning is subject to change over time and in different interpretive communities and cultures. It is true that film has a lot of cultural associations and codes, and these methods bring in a firm ground to clarify the meanings in question. We can think that film is essentially a transitional medium, it carries fragments of social and other realities from one place to another,

and collects fictional and non-fictional evidence of experiences, and delivers them to a broader public. In film, conditions and modes of production, textual and audiovisual structure, spaces and practices of circulation and contexts of reception are all engaged. In her dissertation, Eva Näripea is working towards an understanding of how the past of Soviet Estonian cinema raised questions around the issues of the social context and cultural representation, how the inner and outer forms of this film culture actually affected each other and formed a certain process through which we can approach the cinematic spirit of those eras.

It is also evident that with cinematic meanings we are dealing with perceptual and logical schemes connected with phenomenology, lifestyle, social practices, styles and special ways to execute filmic techniques with a unique interpretation. This gives possibilities for the author to present contexts that can lead to open new and alternative analyses and interpretations in her work. This definitely works to enlarge her ideas since it brings in the idea of interdisciplinary approach in researching filmic communication.

For Näripea, this combination of various theoretical, philosophical and textual approaches gives possibilities to figure out the ambiguous nature of cinematic space and to relate her analysis of film form to wider ideological concerns and implications and to historical conditions of the particular representations. Although most of the essays consider formal aspects of the films in question, this side is especially central to film studies with a cognitive perspective together with film analysis and cultural approaches. It is also important to notice, and Näripea

does this, how the notion of the tourist gaze and its incarnations under the auspices of the socialist realist mode of representation can provide an illuminating and interesting frame of reference for scrutinizing not only these tourism-related productions but also Eastern European cinema in a more general sense.

### Approaching the cultural and social meanings

To begin, the appeal of Näreipea's thesis – be it the cinematic reflections upon the spectator or the theoretical aspect that directs the work – finds a ready analogy in the reader, who essentially plays a significant part in the production of meanings. For example, during a crucial period of the 1960s in Soviet Estonian cinema, nature's elemental forces functioned as a crucial narrative power, and, as Näreipea convincingly remarks, unlike the Stalinist cinema, which subordinated nature as a landscape to the willpower of the almighty socialist realist hero, the films of the 1960s tend to emphasize the supremacy of nature over human destinies. Furthermore, in the Estonian context, one cannot but wonder if this new emphasis was perhaps perceived by the local audiences as a symbol of the unjust breaking of the “natural existence” of the independent nation-state.

Näreipea argues that liminality was an intrinsic part of local Estonian identities, whether related to national, territorial or historical tendencies. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the images of borders and edges, perimeters and thresholds, margins and fringes hold a significant position in the Estonian cinema of the 1960s. “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.”

These notions also reveal that the plots of these films are concerned with nature and the relationship between people and environment contain signs of symbolism and allusions, which, as Näreipea willfully maintains, on some occasions and to a certain extent might be read as subversive of the established order. From the Estonians' point of view, there were signs of 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. The seaside, but even more the islands, which manifested the ultimate Western frontier of the USSR, held a prominent position in the Estonian cinema of the 1960s. Several films, such as *Fellow-Villagers* (*Ühe küla mehed*, 1962, Jüri Müür), *Ice Drift* (*Jääminek*, 1962, Kaljo Kiisk), *Letters from Sõgedate Village* (*Kirjad Sõgedate külast*, 1966, Jüri Müür), *Girl in Black* (*Tütarlaps mustas*, 1966, Veljo Käsper), *Midday Ferry* (*Keskpäevane praam*, 1967, Kaljo Kiisk), *Gladiator* (*Gladiator*, 1969, Veljo Käsper), have their settings in fishing villages either on the coast or on the islands. Repeated shots of waterfronts, rocky beaches caressed by splashing waves visually emphasize the motif of the border.

Näreipea's findings through her study of spatial representations in Estonian narrative cinema of the 1960s indicate that the abolition of Stalinist and socialist realist modes of represen-

tations in the beginning of the decade resulted in a whole range of changes in both visual and narrative aspects of the local film production. On a character-level, the simplistic stories of socialist heroes, typically triumphing over the elements as well as the bygone ideologies, were replaced by more dynamic narratives creating a focus on intimate and symbolically complex relationships between an extended gallery of characters and their environments, and drawing hitherto unthinkable parallels and links between settings, historic events, past eras, and (national) identities. This all had an effect of bringing the cinematic spaces into a state of flux.

The topic of the dissertation is excellent and fascinating in all its dimensions. The author draws on a wide range of theoretical resources to interpret and expand the meaning of Soviet Estonian film and its cinematic usage. The dissertation engages with a variety of conceptualizations. At the core of this is an interweaving of various approaches. Its contribution to this field works through a detailed analysis of the film material in question to illustrate the various meaning-making activities that are likely to be relevant in other contexts as well. Näreipea's work also takes forward the field of filmic and cultural landscape through its theoretical elaboration of the various meanings of the interconnections between society and film. The text is sufficient and original in the way it interweaves cinematic structures and wider theoretical discussion.

The theoretical basis of *Estonian Cinescapes: Spaces, Places and Sites in Soviet Estonian Cinema (and Beyond)* develops progressively through successive chapters, which are themselves framed and organized carefully. This framing draws on various sources and, with its

evocation of a reliable and secure point of reference, comes to represent her search for inner direction and meaning. The theoretical background of Närepea's thesis is definitely wide. As her study demonstrates, 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, while they were still certainly discernible as evidences of a newborn cinematic culture, which was deeply influenced by contemporary filmmaking practices of its neighbor 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. One conclusion of these aspirations is that the study of spatial representations reveals in that it is entirely possible and plausible to discuss Soviet Estonian cinema as a phenomenon pertaining to the field of national culture.

These and other findings clarify the direction and intention of the dissertation, namely to consider the range of ways in which to give meaning to Närepea's work, which is explored empirically and theoretically throughout the text. If we turn to phenomenological fields, say to the area of phenomenological description, we would discover that Närepea's *Estonian Cinescapes: Spaces, Places and Sites in Soviet Estonian Cinema (and Beyond)* fulfills many of its original promises and functions to establish and disclose important elements of Närepea's filmic ideas. The relation between drama and film is very close in this work. It is helpful that the author speaks of artistic text as a complexly constructed meaning, and this is why the presumptions of codification and of interpretation are inseparable

from this concept. Furthermore, an important vision is Närepea's suggestion that analyses the kinds of expressive meanings possibly communicated in film through reading the images and speech as activators of cinema's semantic potential, or by reading film as if reproducing the already existent meanings.

Related to this, we could speak of cinematic semantics, by which we can understand the exploration of cinematic meanings, concentrating on specific cinematic things like exploring the meanings of moving images, succession, montage-combinations and camera-effects. So, in this connection the interest is focused on all kinds of visual and stylistic meanings of cinema. Theoretically speaking, it would have been possible to enlarge the cognitive perspective and bring in ideas of more subtle views of how our perceptive apparatus responds to different stimuli within a framework of schemata that guide perception. Consequently, cognitive research could be brought into line with phenomenological notions relating to a reality beyond the immediate field of perception and experience.

### Revealing the structures

The readings in Närepea's text are remarkably consistent, insofar as they repeatedly return to notions of Närepea's thesis. We can state that the author traces convincingly the cinematic attributes concerned with the thesis. In general, Närepea's notions remain fixed in the way in which she is able to present scholarship and explication of the work along a line of thought that is established in the introduction's thesis statement, its premise, maintained throughout the body of the dissertation with scholarly evidence gained through explication as well as reference to others' works, and strongly

reiterated in her conclusion, which receives the needed nuance. The analyses of individual films are well handled, neatly packed interpretations, which bring in many essential ideas. I would not call Närepea's notions coded speculation: they are more like semantic remarks between images, and the unfolding drama to reveal the essence of the language of cinema in question. These films clearly played a considerable part in articulating the times and shaping the national project at a time when the nation-state as a political reality was absent, providing filmmakers an arena for contesting questionable cultural policies and giving them a voice, although frequently muffled or eventually silenced, as the author makes clear, to express their own concerns, ideas and critiques. Evidently, these pages witness an attempt to find out that these aspects were present not only in many celebrated films (*Madness (Hullumeelsus)*, 1968, Kaljo Kiisk) or *The Last Relic (Viimne reliikvia)*, 1969, Grigori Kromanov)) but find their way also in apparently more "conformist" productions, which, according to Närepea, have been largely "wiped out" of the memory of the audience.

Especially interesting is Jaan Tooming's small yet radically experimental filmic legacy, which broke completely new ground in the Soviet Estonian cinema of the 1970s, running – as Närepea clearly demonstrates – into serious problems with authorities. In his films in general, but especially in the infamously banned *Endless Day (Lõppematu päev)*, filmed in 1971, completed in 1990, the rebellious audiovisual form expresses the rejection of the 'zero point of cinematic style' and the Lefebvrian abstract space it produces; it undermines and questions the premises of both the Soviet- and nation-scape,

proposing in their stead an uncompromisingly fragmented regime of space-time and identity, promoting openness and variety, although retreating later into the depths of metaphysics, says Närepea.

Even from today's perspective, *Endless Day* seems to be an interesting and provocative vision in the artistic field of its times. It suggests a refreshing and oppositional stance with the mainstream conventions of filmic representation. Tooming creates a specific cinematic and cultural power, and creative activity associated with modernist structures and artistic turns in the spirit of Expressionist, Cubist, Constructivist, Dadaist and Surrealist impulses. It is also an examination of film's formal characteristics, ultimately opening the door for avant-garde practices. Its radical edge relies on heavy montage attractions, collage, and shaky, hand-held camerawork, while its narrative echoes traces of slapstick-comedy and parody. *Endless Day* is a landmark of its own stylization, its significant use of the medium as a force of representation during those particular historical circumstances.

Also important is the aspiration to demonstrate that the overall picture is not sufficient without the more "Soviet-minded" films, which offer a necessary centre of gravity for a well-balanced explanation of the era's filmic ecology, as well as of culture in general. Just as auteur cinema can be fully appreciated, understood and critiqued only in juxtaposition with popular genre cinema (and vice versa), the specific characters of nation-scapes can be properly carved out only in correlation with Soviet-scapes. In her thesis, Närepea is talking about Nationscapes and Soviet-scapes as functional abstractions, which evolve over time and are influenced by a

constant interplay of their constituents. Närepea traces the identifiable characteristics of this transnationalism. A history of Soviet Estonian cinema written from this perspective approaches the roots of Estonian film, its roots, and its story because it views the past from a certain standpoint concerning the phenomena of those days. Närepea approaches cultural, social, and in some cases psychic reflections of the past, forming a kind of cinematic mentality towards it. An interesting point of view is Närepea's effort to use Raul Tammet's short films *Solo* (*Soolo*, 1979) and *Wedding Picture* (*Pulmapilt*, 1980) as case studies for Estonian science fiction to explore how popular cinema engages with narratives of national history and identity. This period brought in new potentiality for Estonian cinema, According to Närepea, Tammet's films were bound with Estonian landscape: they employ a contemporary rural setting, manifest spaces of the imagined national community, addressing doubts and anxieties of the time. They also had a relation to broader postmodernist discourse with multilevel frame of references. Närepea's approach is eclectic in referential level crossbreeding various cultural and political connections and image-making structures.

### **A wide-ranging account**

The subtlety of Närepea's work lies in the delicate way she appropriates her insights into a structural analysis and interpretation of the materials at hand. She describes different systems of meaning-making in Soviet Estonian film and manages to locate the cultural form and spirit of those times. Just as myths might reconcile the unconscious needs and contradictions of a society, cinema can offer similar reflections. The polemic thrust of

Närepea's approach is evident in these articles. Her use of theory and terminology indicates that meanings are being produced in a number of ways by different combinations of elements, and these are essential meanings to be uncovered. The idea is that underlying structures of these eras can be more or less objectively revealed through a specific codification and associative approach, which creates sites for the production of meanings.

Seen in this light, Eva Närepea's doctoral thesis *Estonian Cinescapes: Spaces, Places and Sites in Soviet Estonian Cinema (and Beyond)* provides a useful and thoughtful attempt to many theoretically challenging questions, and a wide-ranging account to verify the existence of these multiple trends and phenomena appearing in Soviet Estonian cinematic past. Närepea's work contains polyphony of voices interacting with external and internal forms of images and sounds. This produces a specific dialogism in the sense of meaning-construction and its referents. She carefully explores the elaboration of time, space, and plot structures creating a work of synthesis to these specific ideas. She determines the modes of production, and the general social, political, and cultural processes that constitute the existence, the epoch's ruling ideas, and forms a genuine base for further aspirations.

The symbiotic relationship of cinematic storytelling and filmic space is established in her work with a re-assertion of the importance of screen space and place, and their contribution to the multidimensional range of meanings in film alongside the elements of narrative progression. While outlining some of these functions of Soviet Estonian film, Närepea's thesis also makes inter-connections with filmic space more under-