

## Book Review



### Scandinavian Perspective: Towards a Baltic Film Industry

**Jan Erik Holst (ed.), *Stork Flying over Pinewood: Nordic-Baltic Film Cooperation 1989–2014*, Oslo: Kom forlag, 2014, ISBN 978-8293-191-27-8, 158 pp.**

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The idea of Baltic cinema has been standing on unstable if not shaky ground for almost 25 years. Like one of those temporary buildings that often are erected out of necessity to fill an immediate demand, the concept of Baltic cinema seemed to be something evident and natural, but only gradually was it filled with meaning. And now, we finally can reasonably ask, what is Baltic cinema? Where has it come from? And how was the concept created? *Stork Flying over Pinewood* tells the story of how Baltic cinema developed during the very vulnerable 1990s and became more than just a sum of three small national cinemas. Or has it really?

The book, which is edited by Jan Erik Holst, collects various

articles on cinema in the Baltic region. Some of them have been published before. The list of writers includes renowned film researchers, cultural and film industry professionals from the Baltic countries and Scandinavia. However, the key to understanding the problems and approaches is the editor and writer, Jan Erik Holst. Having worked for several decades at the Norwegian Film Institute, he embodies a large part of Nordic-Baltic relations related to film from the 1990s onward. His personal and well-informed interviews provide insight into the lesser known branches of the Baltic film industry. The interviews with key persons in the Baltic film industry fill the gaps left by the different focuses of the writers. The book covers the development of film culture, the coproduction and distribution models in the region, the role of the Nordic countries and the current situation in the film culture.

The first chapter describes the reestablishment of Nordic-Baltic relations starting in the late 1980s, under the shadow of a disintegrating Soviet Union. The huge interest in the Nordic cultures seemed to surprise the first pioneers who came to Baltic capitals in the early 1990s. Richard Baerug describes the daily life of the Nordic Information Office in Riga, which had to balance innocent cultural representation with the active promotion of Western values. The second chapter provides rather short histories of film production in the three countries. Although the common historic and economic background, the mixture of entrepreneurial and political interests in the creation of more or less stable film production before the World War II are quite similar, nuances of differences are already visible then. All three national cinemas

have their own roots, tastes and preferences, be it an emphasis on literature and pure visuality in Lithuania or the role of historical traumas of identity-building in Latvia and Estonia. Articles also focus on Baltic animation, documentaries and on selected directors. The introductory nature of articles sometimes creates more questions than it answers, and this can be interpreted as the strength of the book. For this actually is the first time that films and processes in the Baltic region are dealt in such an integrated way thereby making the common threads visible. Further research on the emerging national filmmakers of the 1960s, most of whom were educated at the same university in Moscow, may open up new perspectives on the differences between the national cinemas of the Baltic region today. It may be a revealing paradox that Baltic cinema in the 1970s and 1980s, which were perhaps the most stable and prolific decades, receive less attention than they deserve from the writers in film history section. Given the context of the book, the emphasis on more recent history is justified, but also overshadows the formation of the Baltic cinematic identity within the Soviet Union.

*Stork Flying over Pinewood* is also a success story of Nordic values. Having started as the receivers of development aid, the Baltic countries have now become equal partners and independent players in the international coproduction environment. The creation of strong and gradually growing film festivals is also a part of this story. While one of the oldest and most unique festivals in the region, Arsenals in Riga, did not survive the recent crisis, younger festivals in Tallinn and Vilnius have confirmed the potential and curiosity of the audiences, which was so common at the time of the reestab-

ishment of independence.

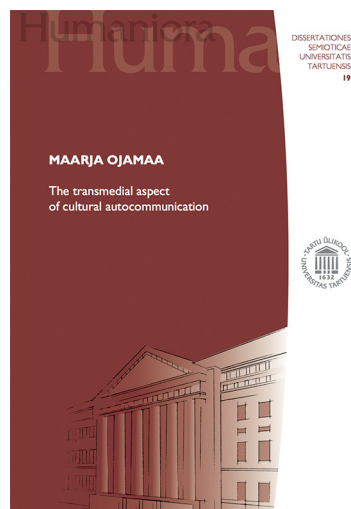
The book ends by presenting visions for new films and short 'greeting cards' from the Nordic countries. The cooperation between Baltic and Nordic countries might not be overwhelming, but certainly more common than between the Baltic countries themselves. The relations between the Nordic and Baltic region are not as special as 25 years ago when both sides were rediscovering their historical and cultural ties. However, Finland and Estonia have reached a new level of film coproduction with works like *Purge* (*Puhdistus*/*Puhastus*, directed by Antti J. Jokinen, Estonia/Finland, 2012) and *Fencer* (*Miekkailija/Vehkleja*/*ENDEL – Der Fechter*, Finland/Estonia/Germany, directed by Klaus Härö, 2015), both of them Finnish majority co-productions focusing on Estonian history.

*Stork Flying over Pinewood* provides an insight into the Nordic dimension of the Baltic film industries. It not only reflects on, but also recreates, the concept of Baltic cinema. In the national languages there is hardly any discussion about the Baltic dimension of the national film industries apart from the evident need for cooperation. Jan Erik Holst's focused vision renders the deeper shared structures of Baltic cinemas visible, based on historical experiences as well as similar understandings of the concept of nationalism and culture. As probably the first book on Baltic film culture to be written in English, it serves its purpose well. The fragmented structure of the book, which constantly requires assistance, explanation and additional interpretation from the editor, reflects the nature of Baltic cinema itself.

The question of the meaning of 'Baltic' in the cinemas of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia remains a question about shared identity. Perhaps this identity is

as fragmented as the film histories of the three countries – with friendly personal relations, clear similarities, evident gaps and few co-productions. This shared identity is like a boat that we have suddenly found ourselves in, but which we initially did not intend to board.

## Book Review



### Transmediality and Cultural Semiotics

**Maarja Ojamaa, *The Trans-medial Aspect of Cultural Autocommunication*, Dissertationes Semioticae Universitatis Tartuensis 19, Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2015, ISBN: 978-99-493280-4-8, 173 pp.**

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In May 2015 I was invited to the University of Tartu by Prof. Peeter Torop and the Department of Semiotics. I was asked to discuss a thesis by Maarja Ojamaa titled *The Transmedial Aspect of Cultural Autocommunication* for a PhD in Semiotics and Cultural Studies. Let me quote from Ojamaa's summary where she explains that her thesis publication consists of five papers and a survey article, which outlines three possible complementary approaches to transmedia: