

Book Review



Jaan Ruus, *Eesti filmi täheatlas. Intervjuud eesti filmi-, teatri- ja elukunstimeistritega* [The Map to Estonian Stars: Interviews with the Masters of Estonian Film, Theatre and Life], Tallinn: Hea Lugu, 2013, ISBN 978-9949-489-87-9, 415 pp.

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With this long overdue review, *Baltic Screen Media Review* pays tribute to Jaan Ruus, one of the most significant film critics of Estonia. Since the publication of *Eesti filmi täheatlas* in 2013, Ruus is no longer with us; he passed away on 30 January 2017. Death always tends to come unexpectedly, and, initially, the book was meant to be followed by two others – one dedicated to Ruus' 100 favourite films and the other consisting of his memoirs (Kaalep 2017).

Ruus dedicated most of his adult life to writing about film, which he did regularly from 1961

onwards. In 1993 he founded the Union of Estonian Film Journalists (Eesti Filmiarjajir-janike Ühing), an organisation uniting Estonian film critics. The union is a member of FIPRESCI, the International Federation of Film Critics. Since 1994, the union has annually acknowledged one Estonian film with an award called Virgin Maali (Neitsi Maali). The award was designed by Estonian animation artist Priit Tender and is Estonia's oldest film award. The organisation is called the Union of Estonian Film Journalists because Ruus always preferred the term 'film journalist' to 'film critic'. He introduced the term in 1975, when he used it to describe himself in an encyclopaedia (Ranne 2013). Ruus also introduced several other film related neologisms to Estonian, such as, *märulifilm* ('action film') and *kobarkino* ('multiplex cinema'), both of which are now widely used (Viilup 2017).

Despite preferring the more neutral term of 'film journalist' to the more subjective and potentially caustic 'film critic', Ruus was not shy in expressing his opinions and has compared a film critic to a vulture that should pick clean the bones of a film (Ranne 2013). At the same time, Ruus was never unjust or hurtful towards filmmakers in his commentary and would often remain silent in response to questions about films he did not consider to be well-made (Kaalep 2017). Ruus has also described critics as high-wire artists who should be able to balance the needs of a film (-maker) and the audience (Ranne 2013).

Turning to the book, *Eesti filmi täheatlas* consists of five sections – 'Play, Human' ('Mängi, inimene') is comprised of interviews with actors; 'Life Must Be Lived with the First Take' ('Elu tuleb elada esimese duubliga')

features interviews with narrative film directors; 'The Art of Ethical Choices' ('Eetiliste valikute kunst') has discussions with documentary directors; 'When Thought Comes to Life' ('Kui mõte ärkab ellu') presents interviews with animators; and interviews with the directors that we could assume Ruus valued most highly are included in 'The Ones Who are Irreplaceable' ('Filmitöö ainukesed asendamatud'). Most of the interviews in the book originally aired in the mid-1990s on Raadio 2. Some of the interviews, which date back over thirty years, were first published in a cultural magazine *Teater. Muusika. Kino*.

Eesti filmi täheatlas is clearly an important book in the Estonian context for several reasons. It includes thirty interviews with some of the most recognised Estonian actors and directors, thus serving as an invaluable resource and reference point for Estonian culture. It provides a closer, behind-the-scenes look on how some of Estonia's most beloved films were made. The book also includes some theoretical discussions on cinema and acting as several directors analyse important aspects of film, such as close-ups, and actors discuss the differences between acting in the theatre and the cinema. In addition, the book provides detailed portraits of Estonian filmmakers and actors – some of who are rather shy about their work and downplay their accomplishments, and others with a more pompous attitude towards their occupation. This allows the reader to distinguish many actors from their screen personas and provides an opportunity to learn more about the thoughts of directors whose films have been seen repeatedly by most Estonians. Lastly, it should be said that the book is almost flawlessly edited and copy-edited, which is not always a given in the Estonian

context, thereby making it an enjoyable reading.

In addition to serving as both a valuable resource to Estonian (film) culture and as good pastime reading, from the very beginning the book also provides a historical reading. After a brief acknowledgements section, the introductory chapter 'Anniversaries as Memory Banks' ('Jubelid kui mälupeegeldus') contextualises Ruus' work in the mid-1990s. In this chapter he describes how the British Film Institute created an anthology *World Cinema. Diary of a Day: A Celebration of the Centenary of Cinema* (Cowie 1995) for the 100th anniversary of the cinema, in which different film-related people describe one of their regular workdays. Ruus' description of his day was also selected for the anthology and it details one of his days in the summer of 1993. The chapter not only provides an in-depth look at a day in the life of a film critic (or a film journalist) but provides a sense of the social context of the early 1990s, a period during which Estonia was rapidly transforming from a former Soviet republic to a market-based economy. From the description, which focuses primarily on film-related activities, one also gets a sense of the great role that politics played in people's everyday life back then. Estonia had only recently redeclared its independence and the times were chaotic, but also full of hope for building a better state. The social, economic, political and cultural establishments had yet to be consolidated. One is reminded of the little things that we tend to take for granted in the West today, such as communications and, for instance, how expensive and difficult it was in a post-Soviet state in the 1990s to send a fax to another country. Ruus' own interview that ends the book takes the reader even further back in

history to 1988, just prior to the regime change and to the time when Ruus had switched from the position of a film journalist at the Estonian cultural magazine that he helped to establish (*Teater. Muusika. Kino*) to take on the role of vice-chairman at the Estonian Filmmakers' Union (Eesti Kinoliit). In order to provide some context for the interview, it begins with the editorial staff of *Teater. Muusika. Kino* asking Ruus about his memories of Leonid Brezhnev.

This is the most obvious way that the book serves as a historical document – it describes past events and captures the thoughts of many interviewees who have since passed away. Yet, another way in which the book serves as a reminder of the times, is that the interviews mark a larger discursive change in Estonian society. Perhaps the occasional tabloid-style questioning – questions such as 'if you were to be reborn who you would like to come back as' – could be associated with Ruus' quirky nature. But there are several other traits that clearly serve as indicative of their time because they not only emerge from Ruus' questions but also from many of the answers. For instance, Ruus uses a much lighter tone of discussion with beautiful female stars than with their male colleagues (see, for instance, the interview with Eve Kivi). Today such questions, particularly for a cultural programme, would be considered inappropriate, if not outright insulting, since the female stars are not only asked about the importance of their looks for their career, but also about their weight, marital status, number of children, and so forth. By mentioning this I am not so much condemning Ruus from a contemporary perspective, particularly as some of the interviewees also exhibit such

biases, e.g. by considering themselves as females to be intellectually inferior or by engaging in homophobic slurs (see pp. 44 and 68), rather I wish to highlight the rapid transformation of norms that has taken place over the last couple of decades since these interviews were conducted. If *Eesti filmi tähtsatlas* is to be considered a historical document, in addition to its being a film resource, then it should be recognised that the book, as is true of all great sources of (cultural) history, offers an array of different interpretations and has the potential to spark extended debate.

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